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Remembrance and Repetition: Spiritual Foundations of Islamic Art

BY JAMES W. MORRIS

God is Beautiful, and He loves beauty... (Hadith, recorded by Muslim, Ibn Maja, Tirmidhi)

Surely hearts find peace in remembrance of God: ...joyful bliss for them, and a beautiful returning! (Koran 13:28-29)

The best approach to appreciating any of the Islamic visual arts, for someone encountering them for the first time, is to begin by listening attentively to the sacred music (whether popular or learned) of almost any traditional Islamic culture. It might seem strange to learn to look by listening, but Islamic art, in all its expressions, is above all a highly refined visual music. So if we begin to approach that art as a special sort of visible music, we are more likely to understand it on its own aesthetic terms, as it was experienced by its original creators and patrons. And at the same time we will avoid the many extraneous aesthetic standards and assumptions of 'representation', 'originality', 'self-expression' and the like which modern viewers tend to carry over unconsciously from the context of Western (European) visual arts.

In fact the 'outsider' or naive 'beginner' in this situation may be uniquely capable of seeing how the Islamic humanities, in cultural settings extending from West Africa to China and Indonesia, still share certain common forms and presuppositions—esthetic and metaphysical foundations that stand out all the more clearly in contrast to the habitual assumptions of contemporary mass culture in any part of the world. For whether it be in the distinctive patterns of these tribal and courtly carpets; the styles of Arabic calligraphy adapted for so many Islamic languages; the ornamental interplay of 'arabesque' and geometric elements in all the visual media (ceramics, wood, leather, textiles and metalwork); the architectural layout of fountains and gardens, tombs, palaces, or urban markets and religious complexes; the multiple perspectives in classical schools of miniature painting; the repertoire of symbolic themes in mystical lyric poetry; or the intricate formulae of social etiquette (adab), ritual and polite speech: in all of these forms of the classical Islamic humanities, no matter what their original culture and period, one inevitably encounters recurrent elements of repetition and rhythm intended to evoke an inner harmony and balance integrating and transcending the momentarily visible tensions and emotional expressions of their constituent parts. Uninitiated modern observers of each of these artistic forms, of course, have often mistakenly perceived precisely these same shared aesthetic qualities and expectations as representing qualities of repetitiveness, 'formalism', 'decorative' superficiality, and an apparent lack
of originality or truly 'authentic' expression. For as with any traditional art or ritual, it is certainly true that only long personal apprenticeship can reveal the heights of individual creativity and mastery that can be realized within the formal constraints of each of those fields.

However, one essential key to penetrating this mysterious aesthetic unity and 'musicality' of the Islamic humanities can be found simply by asking traditional Islamic musicians (or their audience) what it is they are actually doing. For more often than not, they would describe their performance—or their listening—not as 'music', but rather as an act of 'intimate prayer' or 'remembrance' of God, using the central Koranic term *dhikr*. How that fundamental religious concept and its related Koranic context actually came so thoroughly to inspire and pervade the Islamic humanities in all their manifold creative expressions is a story that has yet to be written. But for our purposes here, it is sufficient to describe as succinctly as possible the fundamental spiritual role of the Islamic humanities as *dhikr*—as both...
cultural 'reminders' and repeated individual 'invocations' of the archetypal divine Qualities, the 'Most Beautiful Names'—within the broader Koranic vision of human being and the world.

To begin with, in order to grasp the primordial 'musicality' of Islamic art, it is essential to recall that the Koran, both in its origins and as it is experienced in the daily ritual and prayer life of most Muslims through the centuries, has always been primarily an aural, musical reality. In fact the Arabic term qurān originally meant 'recitation,' and within the revelations to Muhammad eventually assembled as a written text, that expression and related terms are also applied to the divine Archetype of all revelation and creation. In fact the most fundamental Koranic image for God's ongoing creative relation to the world is that of Speech—and that divine Music is said to be directly reflected in the response of all the creatures, even if we too often remain spiritually 'tone-deaf' to that Symphony: the seven heavens and the earth, and all who are in them, are singing His praises: there is no thing but that it is singing forth with His praise—and yet you-all do not grasp their song-of-praise! (16:44).

Within that metaphysical context, the ultimate purpose of the Koran—as with all the earlier divine revelations, and with all the later artistic attempts to further that same purpose—is simply to help 'remind' or awaken human beings to an active realization of their unique role and special responsibility in that larger cosmic chorus. In that regard, the key Koranic root dh-k-r beautifully expresses several equally essential aspects of that all-encompassing divine Concert. (Those unfamiliar with Arabic may not know that the consonantal roots of the Koran, like the chords of musical leitmotifs or traditional Chinese ideograms, typically express a broad range of polyvalent meanings and intricate semantically connections that cannot be adequately 'translated' or otherwise reduced to written or conceptual form. Thus in the prayerful re-creation of the Koran, those Arabic roots are both literally and figuratively the 'notes' for each new recitation and genuine realization of that constantly recurring Revelation.) Hence the various forms of the word dhikr may convey simultaneously—and almost always from both the divine and the individual human point of view—the related meanings of (a) a reminder (in which sense the Koranic revelation itself is repeatedly called the divine 'Reminder' par excellence); (b) the act of remembering or recollecting; (c) mentioning or repeating something; and (d) even more specifically, the process of 'invoking' or prayerfully reciting (whether silently or in audible chanting or rhythmic song) the divine Names, those archetypal Attributes or Qualities of the all-encompassing divine Essence that are made manifest through the Spirit in creation and 'returned' to their divine Source through our individual acts of prayer and recollection.

Thus from the divine perspective, the Koran portrays all of manifest existence as an ongoing, timeless Act of divine dhikr, stressing in particular the instantaneous, ever-renewed repetition of that creative process of divine Self-manifestation: God begins the creation, and then He repeats it again, and to Him you are all returned (30:11). According to the Koranic account of the pre-eternal Covenant of Adam and all souls with God (at 7:174), all human beings were originally aware of that Reality and constitutive relationship through their common root in the divine Spirit: Remember God's blessing on you—all by which He bound you, when you said: "We hear and we obey!", and be mindful of God... (5:7). So in reality, all the realms of existence and experience alike are the constantly repeated divine 'Signs' (ayāt) and archetypal 'Likenesses' (amāthāt) constituting God's creative Act of Remembrance: "We shall show them Our Signs on the horizons and in their souls, until it becomes clear to them that Hū (the divine Essence) is the Truly-Real..." (41:53). Indeed there is nothing at all that is not part of the 'Words' of this ongoing divine Concert: "Even if all the trees on earth were pens, and the sea (were ink), with seven more seas replacing it, still the Words of God would not be used up" (31:27).

From the human point of view, of course, few could argue with the Koran's repeated observation that "no one really remembers, but the people of Hearts" (2:269, 3:7, etc.). In response to that most usual human condition of spiritual 'deafness' and heedlessness, few themes are more frequently stressed in the Koran than our uniquely individual responsibility for constantly 'remembering' God and 'mentioning' or invoking the divine Names, not simply through the prescribed forms of ritual prayer, but at every moment of life: "...remember God while standing, and sitting, and (lying) on your sides..." (4:103, 33:191), "and remember your Lord in your soul, humbly and in awe...in the morning and in the evening..." (7:205), "...and remember/mention your Lord, whenever you have forgotten!" (18:24). Thus the imperative of dhikr, in this broader sense of all awareness, all recollection and realization of the divine Presence, extends far beyond the dozens of explicit Koranic references to include ultimately every facet of the practical spiritual role of the Koran, the earlier divine revelations, and the divine messengers, teachers and spiritual guides who are the present living embodiments of this divine 'Reminder'. The very essence of this inner movement of 'remembrance', and the true goal of human existence, is the soul's constant 'returning' from the transient forms and events and 'tests' of this world to their true realities (the divine 'Names') and meanings in the 'unseen world' (al-ghayb) or the 'next life' (al-akhira) of the Spirit. And the inner, spiritual focus of that movement is of course most clearly reflected in the nearly intangible states and rhythms of traditional Islamic music (including lyric poetry). Within that practical spiritual
context it becomes easy to recognize the inseparable connections between each of the Islamic arts, as well as their integral ties to the wider complexes of the local Islamic humanities and ritual in every domain of pre-modern life.

From that comprehensive metaphysical perspective, it is hardly surprising that the ongoing creative expressions of this same process of spiritual 'reminding' throughout the later Islamic arts and humanities have been profoundly influenced by the aesthetic model of the Koran on many different levels. Eventually the religiously and ritually central role of the Koran in Islamic life helped to mold the implicit canons and ideals of aesthetic expression and appreciation alike in at least the following fundamental ways. First and perhaps most fundamentally, on a very basic formal and structural level, each of the Islamic arts (whether musical, visual or literary) has typically come to reflect the Koran's distinctive musical qualities of rhythm and constantly interwoven symphonic repetition and subtle elaboration of its central themes. Second, and even more obviously, the concrete selection of 'visual iconography,' of the basic themes and formal elements represented in the Islamic visual arts from the very earliest period, has continued to be drawn from the three basic symbolic families of visual images of the divine Presence, of the transcendent Reality revealed through all the appearances of this world, that constantly recur in the Koran itself: namely, (a) the Arabic calligraphy of the divine 'Words' themselves; (b) the paradiacic symbols of the 'Other World' (the 'Gardens', fountains and flowing water, the celestial 'banquet', the divine 'Court', and birds, greenery, fruits and vegetal life of every sort); and (c) the mysterious divine order of the heavens, celestial bodies, the four elements and the geometric and mathematical patterns underlying their creation and harmonious combinations. The third basic aesthetic feature reflecting the Koranic model—and again in the musical, visual and literary arts alike—is the essentially contemplative aim of each of these artistic forms: what is essential in these arts is always what goes on inside each viewer or auditor, the mysterious inner shift in awareness from the sensible material, temporal forms in 'this world' (al-dunya) to their transcendent Source and Reality among the archetypal divine Names. In this respect, as we have already mentioned, the endlessly varied musical forms of dhikr—whether chanted, sung, or with more elaborate instrumental accompaniment—most clearly illustrate the 're-creation' of essential Koranic structures and intentions that takes more palpable form in the visual or literary arts.

The fourth essential principle of traditional Islamic aesthetics, following from its contemplative aim (and likewise clearly mirroring its Koranic model), is the assumption of the actively transformational or participatory nature of the spiritual relationship between the 'creator' (or performer) and their 'audience'. An art whose purpose is the movement from 'this world' to the next, from spiritual unconsciousness to a heightened awareness of the divine Spirit and the particular divine Attributes and Actions constituting all our experience, is not likely to work in a passive or demanding fashion. Such a radically spiritual and participatory conception forces us to enter a very different world from the widespread contemporary notions of the artist's work as some kind of mediatic 'production' (whether ideological or economic) or simply as another distracting 'entertainment'. As preeminently with the Koran itself, the adequate appreciation of any of the classical forms of Islamic art inevitably requires us to cross (or at least temporarily erase) the imagined boundaries between what modern culture has come to construe as separate realms of religious, aesthetic, ethical, intellectual, personal and communal activity and experience. In all honesty, few of us today
are really used to thinking of—much less actually living—embroidery, or weaving, or gardening or everyday conversation and storytelling as integral acts of prayer. One striking indicator of this very different understanding of the spiritual role of both ‘artist’ and audience in traditional Islamic cultures is that the closest expression one could find for the humanities or fine arts in many Islamicate languages, *adabiyat* is simply the plural of *adab*, a term that could be very roughly translated as “the spiritually and ethically appropriate attitude and its harmonious expression in right action in each particular situation.” From this point of view, the very act of artistic creation and appreciation necessarily requires an unsettling and demanding kind of inner surrender, before one can discover the underlying peace of the deeper, divine harmony to which it leads: in fact those two inseparable aspects of this experience of the artist’s transforming intention—contemplative surrender and the resulting spiritual peace—together are the original literal meaning of the Arabic word ‘islām’.

Yet another fundamental feature of the traditional Islamic arts and humanities—implicit in each of the points mentioned above—was the typical anonymity of their creators and the pervasiveness of those cultural forms precisely among the most ‘popular’ and ‘uneducated’ elements of society. (As a visible emblem of this reality that once encompassed every area of social and communal life, one need only think of the countless masterpieces of carpets and textiles woven by women from the most diverse tribal and village settings:) One striking indication of the deeper truth of the Koranic perspective is the way that the actual concrete realization of these essential spiritual virtues, whether in the ‘arts’ or any other area of human life, seems to have remarkably little to do with the formal learning and ‘official’ religious ideologies of the past or present.

The Arabic language has a singularly expressive term, *ibsān*, for describing this unique God-given capacity for actually perceiving, and then bringing into existence, what is beautiful—and at the same time truly good: a single word conveys the inner unity of that living awareness. In the Koran, that rare spiritual virtue is connected above all to God’s special love for the prophets or the most accomplished saints, in a way that may inevitably seem far removed from our own ordinary, socially constructed conceptions of either good or beauty. But in a famous Prophetic hadīth that is still widely used as a sort of catechism in many parts of the Islamic world today, Muhammad describes the true nature of *ibsān* in terms that clearly suggest the most characteristic principles of Islamic art: the harmonious marriage of aesthetic, ethical and intellectual perceptions and demands within their unifying spiritual Source and Aim.

The hadīth itself recounts the Messenger’s replies to three questions posed by a mysterious white-robed stranger, who he eventually identifies for his companions as the angel “Gabriel, who came to teach the people their Religion” (*Dīn*, the primordial relationship between the soul and its Creator). Nothing more clearly highlights the culminating and guiding role of aesthetic perception and creation—and the essentially spiritual understanding of the artist’s activity—within this tradition. The stranger’s first two questions are about the intellectual and ethico-ritual dimensions of religion, which the Prophet answers by summarizing the objects of faith and the essential religious obligations of monotheism, prayer, charity and fasting. Then Gabriel asks him “What is *ibsān*?”; the perception and realization of what is truly beautiful and good. Muhammad’s reply is usually translated as “To serve God as though you see Him; and even if you did not see Him, surely He sees you.” But the last part of his reply can also be translated even more revealingly: “...and if you are not, then you do see Him...” This art has accomplished its purpose when its viewer (or listener) disappears in the contemplation of that divine Beauty.

The Islamic arts and humanities have their genesis, in every cultural and social setting, in the ongoing spiritual obligation to communicate the primordial message of the Koran (including that of all the earlier prophets and messengers) in ways that can *effectively* touch and transform the lives and souls of each human being. From that perspective, the recorded teachings of the Prophet and the Imams (including the hadīth we have just recounted) are really the first Islamic exemplars of that necessarily ongoing creative process of teaching and transformation. An awareness of the fundamental spiritual necessity of that process, and of its indispensable preconditions at any time, suggests rather different perspectives and agendas from those so loudly and vociferously proclaimed by the modern ‘defenders’ (and detractors) of religion.

Another way of opening up those forgotten perspectives is to reflect more deeply on just what it was that enabled the master of Shiraz to compress everything we have discussed—and so much more—into these few lines:

The Musician/Composer of Love has a wondrous instrument and song:
The impression of each chord (S)he strikes has its way to a Place.

May the world never be with out the lament of lovers—Such a beautifully harmonious and joy-giving melody it has!

Notes
1. Also: “each *neil* (S)he removes/sets up...
2. Alsoq: ‘intention’ and ‘air, atmosphere’.