

A MYSTERIOUS CULT

BY PAUL SIMPSON McELROY

I HAD long heard about the extraordinary observances of the religious orders of Mohammedans, known as the dervishes, but their practices seemed so impossible that I doubted their genuineness. It was not until I had spent three years in Egypt that I was privileged to see one of their incredible performances.

Through the courtesy of a Moslem friend, the staff of the American University at Cairo was invited to attend one of the regular meetings of the Rifa'iyah order of dervishes; it was during Ramadan—the Mohammedan Lent—near the night known as Al-Kadr when the angels are believed to descend to fix the fates for the coming year that we went to visit this oriental prayer meeting.

We met in the home of a venerable sheikh (not the movie type) who lived in a crowded native quarter of Old Cairo. There we were ushered into a large, high-ceilinged room, noticeably void of decorations. When seated the guests were served with delicious cinnamon tea with floating nuts or with that universal beverage of the Near East—Turkish coffee. The room was, indeed, a scene of contrasts: oriental and occidental, old and young, uneducated and highly cultured, stiff-bosomed gentlemen and flowing robed pashas, and brown and white skinned—all were mingled; the harsh, nasal, chattering English phrases were in striking dissonance to the smooth, deep, guttural Arabic.

Ere long we heard voices approaching, chanting to the beat of tom-toms and cymbals; presently, a leery-eyed, emaciated group of twenty-one fellahin filed into the room. Without awaiting formalities they advanced to the center of the large reception room and stood in a large circle around their leader; shoes were removed for the ground on which they stood was holy ground.

Instead of wearing the customary black turbans and the green and black mantles which characterize this fraternity of dervishes, they came in ordinary working clothes. Apparently, membership in the order does not necessarily depend upon the leading of an ascetic life, for the men were of the laboring rather than the leisure class. Most of them looked undernourished and dissipated, but in spite of their unhealthy appearance, their dreamy eyes were aglow with a mystic radiance and once their turbans were removed and

their long, straggly hair allowed to fall down on their shoulders, they presented a most saintly appearance.

Accompanied by an improvised orchestra of a shrill reed flute, a thumping tom-tom, tinkling tambourines, and metallic cymbals, the dervishes began their *sikr* or religious exercises. First, they recited in unison the ninety-nine names of God, then followed various canticles in praise of Allah—the Compassionate, the Merciful, the All Powerful. At a certain signal, the tune was suddenly changed and the chorus, led by the sheikh, began reciting the *tariq*, which is the succession of sheikhs from Ahmed el Rifai, the founder in 1182 A.D. until the present day.

After this was over the group squatted on the floor as only orientals can squat, arranging themselves in an oval formation according to seniority: the oldest sitting next to the sheikh or leader.

With arms reverently folded the slow, rhythmic chants began again. First the heads began to nod slowly from left to right with each beat, then as the tempo was increased the bodies gradually began to sway faster from side to side until they were bobbing back and forth in dizzy cadence. Abruptly the music and swaying stopped. Although the group had apparently worked themselves into a frenzy they were sufficiently composed to be reverent while the incantations and several more prayers were recited.

As soon as the cacophony subsided, the dazed group rose to their feet and mingled freely with one another. A lamp chimney was produced and broken in the hollow of one of the brass cymbals. All of the dervishes scrambled to get a piece of the shattered glass and began eating it eagerly. That this was no illusion was proved by the fact that these mesmerized dervishes sat on the floor in front of us visitors, let us examine the glass and even put the broken bits into their mouths. They would sit in front of us, crunch the glass between their teeth until it was powdered: then swallow the pulverized glass and show us the open mouth emptied afterward. The glass had not even cut their mouths.

I thought that perhaps the chimney had been made of some especially prepared glass, but on a later occasion a chimney was used which was brought by an American staff member expressly for this purpose.

As soon as all glass had been consumed, the group reassembled in their oval formation, offered a few more incantations and sat in their places while one of the men began the famous fire-eating stunt.

He first dipped each of his four torches into benzine, then lighted them all and flourished them about with the grace of a fancy dancer. Leaning backward he put one of the lighted torches in his mouth and quenched the flame by closing his mouth. This he repeated with three of the torches; with the fourth he kept his mouth open so that the flames ignited the benzine that was lining his mouth and throat. Removing the fourth torch still lighted, he proceeded to blow fire from his mouth; so deep did this go that it seemed as though his very vitals were aflame.

One spectacular stunt, now common among fakirs and magicians in this country, was to pierce the body with needles. The dervishes doubtless originated this sensational practice. It is an anguishing sight to see a man with needles and skewers stuck through his arms, his cheeks, his eyelids, his shoulders, and even through his tongue. We were allowed to jab these needles through their bodies and strangely enough when they were withdrawn only a hole was left which rapidly closed up.

For those who could not participate in this, candy that had been sprinkled with benzine was lighted and eaten.

What seemed to me the most fascinating and amazing feat was the one which followed. The leader took a pair of heavy sabers which had been heated to a dull red glow on a charcoal brazier and began passing them across his tongue. A sizzling, sputtering sound was made at each contact until the irons had become too cool to do it. Yet after all this mutilation, the man's tongue was not even blistered.

Even this was not the end of their repertoire. Unless one has tasted the green, a succulent desert cactus, he can not appreciate its gall-like bitterness. I barely touched my tongue to a piece of the cactus and its acrid taste stayed with me for several hours. Try as I might, I could not get rid of it, yet the dervishes chewed it with apparent delight and relish.

The climax of the evening came when the leader whose face was alight with ecstasy called for three swords. Stripped to the waist to show that he wore no protecting armor, he placed the scimitars on top of each other with the middle blade pointing outward. Grabbing them by the ends he hoisted them above his head and while thus suspended, prayed fervently; he then flung them against his abdomen with a terrific thrust. The flesh was so curled around the

blades that the swords could be extricated only by pulling them off lengthwise.

The blow alone was strong enough to have "knocked a man out," and yet these sharp swords had not even cut the flesh. Only a flushed streak across his waist line indicated where the swords had struck.

Before I had witnessed a performance I had viewed these stunts as just bits of marvellous oriental magic, but now I am convinced that they are genuine feats and not faked.

Were it a mere trick they would doubtless try and capitalize on it by going on the stage. But this they refuse to do because the acts to them are part of their religious ceremony and to commercialize them would be a sacrilege. Ever since the days of Sheikh Ahmed-el-Rifai, dervishes throughout the entire Near East have been seeking a mystic union with the divinity in this way. These are holy and long-established exercises that have been recognized for centuries.

They serve no political or social purpose whatever, but are strictly disciplinary and devotional. The mysteries are revealed to others only through oral instruction and solely by the leader. Only after the power has been granted by the leader in this way can one do these exotic and mystifying accomplishments.

Just what spiritual values or how these spiritual values are obtained in these mystic orders is puzzling. According to some, the repetition of names somehow incites the Presence of the Deity, and His Presence in turn produces ecstasy and through that ecstasy comes the coveted illumination and union. The sign of ecstasy among the Rifaiya order is manifested in the ability to eat fire and glass and afflict the body without harm or injury. We from the West have much to learn from these oriental customs which we, through ignorance, have so long ridiculed; we are indebted to these modest leaders of occult science.

The dervishes dispersed as informally as they had entered singing in receding mournful rhythmic monotone that oft-quoted passage from the Koran:

La Illaha ill Allah. . . .

"There is but one God, and Mohammed is the prophet of God."