

## Sufi Sounds

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Over the last forty years there has been a growing interest among European and American scholars and seekers in Sufism, the mystical dimension of Islam. In particular, many musicians and music-lovers have drawn inspiration from the musical rituals that serve as roadmaps for the many Sufi paths to enlightenment. Today, for example, recordings by artists like the late Pakistani Qawwali singer Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, the Al-Kindi ensemble from Syria, or the Turkish Mevlevi Order (the world-famous Whirling Dervishes) find homes in many eclectic record collections, and are name-checked by artists from Eddie Veder of Pearl Jam, Robert Plant of Led Zeppelin, to free-jazz drummer Hamid Drake. The many musical manifestations of Islam found throughout Africa, however, remain off the beaten paths of most 'World-music' bushwhackers.

In the remaining days of Ramadan I thought I'd feature some of the more interesting recordings of African Islamic sounds in our collection. These recordings vary from praise songs for the prophet, Dhikr (ritualized ceremonies including recitation, singing, and often instrumental music), to songs for venerated 'saints'. Some of the artists I'll feature are professionals who sell thousands of cassettes and others are amateurs who only participate in religious ceremonies in their neighborhoods. I am not qualified to enter the debate on whether or not these 'Islamic sounds' should be classified as 'music' or rather 'religious devotional exercises'.

I can say, however, that all of these recordings are essential parts of the aesthetic 'sound worlds' of their cultures. And just as a familiarity with Gospel music can deepen your appreciation for everything from Deep Soul to modern R&B, or knowledge of Catholic ritual can provide a more nuanced listening of Bach's masterpieces, these recordings, are part of the creative universes of many of Africa's most loved popular musicians. And as in other parts of the world, there is a lot of feedback between secular and religious expressive forms throughout Africa (in both Christian and Muslim communities), and many popular artists have been influenced by and influenced Islamic 'artists'.

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Our first stop is Morocco, where around 98% of the population is Muslim (the once considerable Jewish population has dwindled, in the last several decades, to about 7,000 persons), and where there is an often-confusing diversity of Sufi paths and musical traditions. The Aissawa brotherhood was founded in Meknès, Morocco by Mohammed Ben Aissâ in the 15th century. The spiritual and organizational center of the Aissawa remains in Meknès and the city continues to draw devotees from throughout Morocco. Over the last several decades recordings of Aissawa cassettes, and now VCDs, have spread interest in their musical rituals throughout the country. Today, different Aissawa groups are often invited to perform in private homes for baptisms, marriages, or graduation ceremonies, participate in music festivals (for e.g. the Fès Sacred music festival), and appear on national television (especially during Ramadan).

El Moqaddem Ben Hamou and his group have released at least a half-dozen cassettes of Aissawa songs. He is one of a growing number of professional Aissawa bandleaders, who have branched out from their purely ritual responsibilities into commercial activities. This cut is part of a longer suite that features songs and rhythms that, in a ritual context, ease listeners into a spiritual trance.

### ◀ El Moqaddem Ben Hamou & Ensemble

The Naqshbandiyya, formed in 1380 by Bah-ud-Din Naqshband Bukhari, is one of the oldest and most widespread Sufi brotherhoods. From its roots in Persia, the Naqshbandi path has spread throughout the world. Today there are Naqshbandi communities in Pakistan, Poland, Afghanistan, Australia, Chechnya, and California.



Here is a track by one of the several Moroccan Naqshbandi groups that have released cassettes. This volume features praise songs for the prophet. Their arrangements, singing styles and compositions draw on Andalusian classical music.

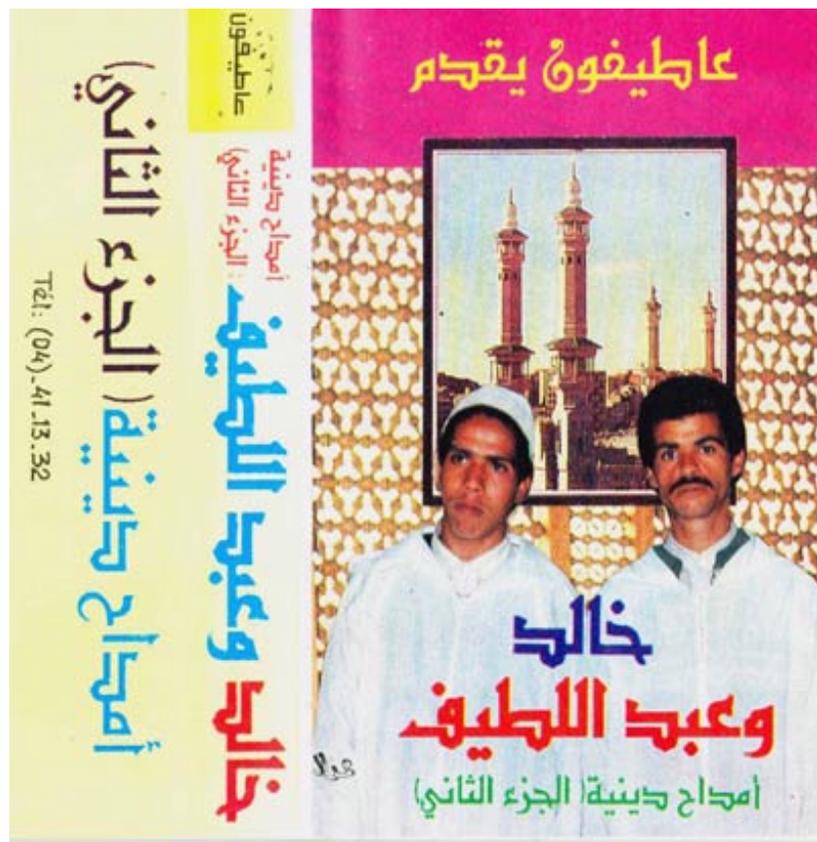
### ◀ Al Farqa Naqshbandiya

This next cassette features song to accompany 'El Hadhra Rahbani'. A 'Hadhra' is another term for 'Dhikr', and refers to the series of recitations, supplications, religious exhortations, sermons, and collective chants that make up the rituals of many Sufi brotherhoods.



↳ [Majmou'at Assafaa](#)

While the previous three cassettes are part of a musical universe that intersects with Andalusian classical music, this next recording is rooted in Moroccan popular music. The duo of Khalid and Abdelatif has released at least three cassettes.



Rhythmically and melodically their music has much more in common with the songs of Nass el Ghiwane, Lemchaheb, and Jil Jilala, and I would guess this recording dates from sometime in the 1980s.

↳ [Khalid & Abdelatif](#)

If you know anything more about any of these particular groups please share your wealth!! I called every single phone number on these cassettes and (so far-i'm still working at it) they were all dead ends, either the production companies couldn't tell me anything about the groups, or the numbers were disconnected. Our next stop will be in Senegal where Sufi brotherhoods are very active in most parts of life, and where there is a vibrant Sufi cassette culture (we have over 100 titles in our collection).