



# MUSIC, CULTURE AND IDENTITY IN THE MUSLIM WORLD

Performance, politics and piety

Edited by Kamal Salhi

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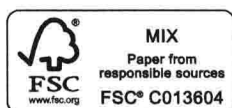
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# Music, Culture and Identity in the Muslim World

In contrast to many books on Islam that focus on political rhetoric and activism, this book explores Islam's extraordinarily rich cultural and artistic diversity, showing how sound, music and bodily performance offer a window onto the subtleties and humanity of Islamic religious experience. Through a wide range of case studies from West Asia, South Asia and North Africa and their diasporas – including studies of Sufi chanting in Egypt and Morocco, dance in Afghanistan, and 'Muslim punk' online – the book demonstrates how Islam should not be conceived of as being monolithic or monocultural, how there is a large disagreement within Islam as to how music and performance should be approached, such disagreements being closely related to debates about orthodoxy, secularism, and moderate and fundamental Islam, and how important cultural activities have been, and continue to be, for the formation of Muslim identity.

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Performance, politics and piety

*Edited by Kamal Salhi*

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*Journal of Algerian Studies* (2000); 'Slimane Benaïssa from Exile in the Theatre to Theatre in Exile: Ambiguous Traumas and Conflicts in the Algerian Diasporic Drama', in *Journal of North African Studies* (2006); 'Religion in the Francophone Postcolonial Word', in the *Historical Companion to Postcolonial Literatures: Continental Europe and its Empires* (2008).

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This book is in memory of Mohammed Arkoun (1928–2010) who gave the inaugural lecture of the project.

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# Introduction

## The paradigm of performing Islam beyond the political rhetoric

*Kamal Salhi*

This book addresses the importance of music, culture and identity in the Muslim world through the study of performance, politics and piety, and in a timely fashion, offers a theoretical basis for the understanding of the pleasures and politics of Muslims worldwide. Today, within stereotyped characterizations of Islam, pleasure, debate and performing creativity find little place. Rather, mainstream discourses' strongest signifiers of Islam are violence, fundamentalism, repression and joylessness. Such simplifications are misleading. Across the world, diverse communities of Muslims live their collective identities in dialogic interaction with various social forces: the legacies of colonialism, the imperatives of globalization, the pressures of diaspora, the demands of modernity, the pull of sacred pan-Islamic radicalism, and the perceived injustices of the 'war on terror'. The criss-crossing axes of the global, the local and the transnational impel them to consolidate collective identities, confirm their historical legacies and look forward to the future. Like all human beings in all societies, they also engage in enjoyable and pleasurable expressive acts while doing so, in particular, by making, listening to and being emotionally sustained by music.

Music and performance have been an important issue in Islamic thought from the start of Islam. For some time in the history of Islam there was a controversy surrounding the role of music within the religion. This was followed by a general consensus about two possible theories of music, one initiated by al-Farabi and ibn Sina and the other by the Brethren of Purity (Ikhwan al-Safa') and al-Kindi. One approach is about what music reflects, the other concerns what it does for us, though they are complementary. This theoretical genesis situates the Pythagorean approach becoming the reasoning behind Sufi and other Muslim-influenced music, which sees itself as doing more than just producing pleasure in its addressees.<sup>1</sup> The movements in Muslim-influenced dance and music are designed to reproduce the basis of reality and to worship God by using the body in ways that are not customarily parts of prayer. Our interest in the studies gathered together in this book, as the result of a research network project funded by the British Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Economic and Social Research Council, is not primarily musicology but rather the aesthetics of performance and



the culture and identity subsequently engendered. As reflected in the chapters of this book, the contexts of Islam and performance encompass a wide range of events, manifestations and behaviour patterns which display local conceptions and articulations of aesthetics. Although the term aesthetics remains vague at best, its appropriation and redefinition in the light of non-Western cultures show that performative or ritual contexts assume varying awareness of the aesthetic.

In one way or another, the contributors to this volume make aesthetic evaluations of performance which flow well with the combination and integration of various performative elements of sound, movement, interaction and meaning. The politics of sound is approached as an integral complex involving the visual or iconic, gestural, verbal, vocal, corporal and instrumental. In the case of the visual, the mediums of sound (i.e. musical instrumentals) are crafted with specific materials, symbols and designs to conform to aesthetic and performance expectations. In fact, in some contexts showcased in the various chapters, they are formed and manipulated according to musical, symbolic decorative or abstract considerations. I would therefore argue that aesthetic forms of structured music, dance and other performative elements link the inner experience of the subject with the objective structure of the performance, which satisfies the fundamental condition of piety. However, it is important to distinguish that Muslims do not always use the generic term 'music' in the same way it is employed in the English language or in other Western/European languages. The Arabic term for music, *musiqa*, for example, does not apply to all types of artistic vocal and instrumental arrangements of sounds, tones and rhythms. In more specific contexts Arab Muslims might use the idiom *handasat al sawt*, the art of sound. *Musiqa*, or music, applies more to particular genres of sound art, and for the most part it has been designated only for those that have a somewhat questionable or even disreputable status in Islamic culture (al Faruqi 1986). *Handasat al sawt* is a recently invented term used by Arab Muslims to separate their Muslim conception of 'music' from that held in the Western and non-Muslim world, which often contrast in quite critical ways. It is therefore the aim of this volume to look at the influence of Islamic religious beliefs on the role and realization of the art of sound and its manifestation in the Muslim world and its diaspora. Without engaging in a comparative study, it is worth highlighting here that many similarities exist between *handasat al sawt* and various examples from contemporary Western art music, and also certain forms of jazz. Such comparisons might make the art of sound of the Muslim world more accessible and understandable, not only to specialists but also to those more familiar with developments in the musical world of the West and Europe.

For clarity and simplicity the terms 'music' and 'performance' are used throughout this book, and in reference to Muslim culture the term music is used precisely to mean *handasat al sawt* rather than the Arabic *musiqa*. What should be noted here is the polyvalent and multi-generic nature of the former, which leaves room for artistic and theoretical creativity, particularly in light of