

An Introduction to *Inshad* in the Arab World

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Inshad is the style or way of chanting religious and spiritual poetry addressing Divine love, praise of the Prophet, and faith; it is mostly done in *Dhikr* circles (remembrance of Allah) or *Hadra* (ritual gathering) whether they are public or private. The art of *Inshad* depends mainly on the strength and delivery of the *Munshid's* (reciter or chanter) voice, its range, mastery of Arabic *Maqam* (mode), and choice of the *Maqam* that suits the poem. It is an art form that relies solely on the human voice, with minor accompaniments by some musical instruments, mostly percussion from time to time. Musical instruments can only be used to add a fine touch, intertwine with the human voice, and be subject to the chanter's voice and poems, allowing for a space for creativity that takes the chanter and the audience to a pure spiritual state of great depth of enchantment.

The term *Inshad* which is derived from the derivatives *Nashada*, *Anshada*, *Yonshid*, *Nashdan*, and *Nashed* which mean seeking something which makes a person a seeker. The linguistic meaning of the word *Inshad* is calling upon and it developed in different societies according to their own styles, beliefs, and juristic rulings. What elevates the status of *Inshad* is its relation to the word *Duaa* (invocation) in the Islamic Arabic use such as saying "*Nashadtuka billah*" which means "I ask you by Allah". This form of beseech can be seen as a way of requesting to fulfill a promise to the extent that the word "*Nashada*" has become to mean "promised" or "gave his word". *Inshad* is also an Arabic rhyming religious poem or set of poems composed according to the traditional Arabic style using different poetic *buhūr* (meters) such as *bahr* (sing.) *al-Basit*, *al-Tawil*, *al-Wafir*, *al-Kamil*, *al-Razaj*, *al-Hazaj*, and many other *buhūr* from the rest of the sixteen famous meters.

Inshad in the Muslim World is one of the rituals that appeared since the advent of Islam. It was said that it started with Bilal ibn Rabah, the Prophet's Muezzin (n. caller for the prayer), since the beginning of Islam. The practice continued through the Umayyad, Abbasid, and Fatimid dynasties, to the Andalusian dynasty, until the modern day. In essence, they are praise poems describing the Prophet (peace be upon him), his traits, teachings, and biography and can extend to describe and praise the Prophet's family members and companions. Praise poems or *Nashid* are among the most important spiritual and emotional ways of expressions after the *adhan* (call for prayer) and religious chants. The first and most important *Nashid* that appeared in the beginning of Islam was that recited by the people of Al Madinah Al Munawwarah when they received the Prophet who escaped the oppression in Mecca. The people welcomed him and chanted a poem accompanied by the sounds of the *duff* (frame drums) chanting:

<i>Tala'a al Badru 'Alayna</i>	<i>Min Thanyyat al wada'</i>
The full moon rose over us	from the valley of Wada'
<i>Wajaba al Shukru 'Alayna</i>	<i>Ma Da'a Lillahi Daa'</i>
We must be thankful	as long as anyone supplicates to Allah
<i>Ayuha al Mab'outu Fina</i>	<i>Ji'ta Bil Amer al Muta'</i>
Oh our Messenger	who comes with commands to be heeded
<i>Ji'ta Sharrafta al Madina</i>	<i>Marhaban ya Khaira Daa'</i>
You honored this city	Welcome to the best caller to Allah

Music was composed to this *nashid* or poem in our modern time based on different Arabic *maqams* (modes) according to the country it was composed in. For instance, *maqam Siga* accompanied with *Ayyub* rhythmic mode (simple 2/4 beat) are used in the Levant area and *maqam Rast* accompanied with *Haj' Kabir* rhythm was used in al-Maghrib al-Arabi or North African parts of the Arab World.

Then it developed by *munshideen* (pl. *munshid*) in the Levant, Egypt, Iraq, and other countries and had various forms and methods.

History books stress that *inshad* was developed by some of the Companions during the lifetime of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and was carried on by some of their followers. The poems of Hassan ibn Thabit, the poet of the Prophet (peace be upon him), are considered the basis for many *Munshideen*, for example:

My eyes have seen none better than you
And women have given birth to none more beautiful than you
You are free from all faults
As if you were meant to be

A Prophet who came to us after a long time of despair
After people kept worshipping idols for a while
He became a beacon and a guiding light
Flashing like a sword
He warned us from hell and promised us with heaven
He taught Islam and we thank Allah for that!

Chanters then turned to poems by other poets who wrote about different topics, such as calling to worshipping one God, holding *fast* to the Islamic values, and fulfilling obligatory acts of worship like prayer, paying *Zakah*, performing *Hajj*, and so on.

During the Umayyad dynasty, *inshad* became an established art form with its own basics, rules, forms, and rhythms. Many chanters and others interested in this art and those composing melodies for it gained great fame such as Ibrahim ibn Al-Mahdi, Abdullah ibn Musa Al-Hadi, Al-Mu'taz and his son Abdullah, Abu 'Isa ibn

Al-Mutawakkil, Abd Al-Malik ibn Marwan, and many others among those who chanted or composed religious poems. The art of *inshad* developed further during the Fatimid dynasty due to the great importance given to social celebrations. The Fatimids were the first to celebrate the Hijri New Year, the Prophet's birthday, the first night of Rajab, al-Isra and al-Mi'raj Night, the first and middle nights of Sha'ban, the first night of Ramadan, Eid Al-Fitr, Eid Al-Adha, the Spring Holiday, and many other religious occasions. Religious *anashid* were at the center of all of these celebrations, which encouraged the appearance of many styles and groups like Dervish and Sufi orders (such as Qadariyya, Rifa'iyyah, Shadhliyyah, Mevlevi, Naqshbandi...etc). Each group had its own chanters, poems, rhythms, and music, stressing the importance of the spiritual and emotional aspects of music and using the art as a mean of expressing emotions and getting closer to Allah, the Almighty.

Later on, *nashid* diversified according to place, nature of the country, and variation in dialects, music, and rhythms. For example, *anashid* in the Levant and Egypt were marked by a huge variety of styles, including lyrical conversations between the lead chanter and the backup vocals surrounding him. The lead chanter sits in the middle and the rest of backup chanters sit in a half a circle around him. The chanter would choose couplet from the poem to be the main lines, to which all backup chanters reply and repeat after the chanter. The chanter or Sheikh would choose a certain *maqam* to the first movement like *rast*, *bayati*, or *hijaz* and then start showing off his singing talents, mastery in modulating from the original *maqam* to other related *maqams* and ability to stress the dynamics. After that, the backup chanters would repeat the main couplet. Then comes the second movement, for which the Sheikh chooses another *maqam* while the beats of the *duffs* starting to get faster and faster to ensure the listeners are reaching a high level of enchantment.

During that period, *inshad* was performed or recited without the accompaniment of any musical instrument but sometimes with only the sound of striking *Misbaha* (rosary) on an empty glass of water to produce a sweet high tone melodious rhythm. Soon after, it developed to be an art form that has its own rules and forms. It started to depend on innovative themes and the use of refrains, which act like bridges connecting sung lines of poetry with rhythms that suit their essence. That is how the musical ensemble appeared to accompany the Munshid. It was called *Takht* or the musical quartet or quintet depending on the size of the ensemble and number of instruments. Main instruments used in a *takht* included Oud (lute), Qanun (zither), Nay (reed flute), violin, and percussion. The munshid and musicians would sit in the middle of the podium forming a semi-circle and the rest of chanters around them.

With the passage of time, *Inshad* moved from just improvisation to adopting innovations that affected Arabic Music in general and its main influencers such as Arabic Music ensembles which present musical and vocal heritage in new styles and forms. This approach is marked by an orchestral style characterized by

expressiveness, color, and simple harmony, the use of various musical instruments, in addition to introducing new themes, rhythms, and dialogues between different instruments and chanters.

A new form emerged from the whole new experience called supplication. Supplications were recited either in the classical or colloquial Arabic and took only few minutes to give the listener a short intensive spiritual experience. Then appeared another form known as folk religious singing which depended on vocally presenting a dramatic account in an epic-like form, where the chanter would relate the stories of historical heroes or praise the Prophet (peace be upon him) and narrate his biography. Among the most famous performers of this dramatic form are Sheikh Muhammad Abdul Hadi and Sheikh Abdul Rahim Dwidar.

The beginning of the twentieth century witnessed increasing importance of *Inshad*, with many famous Sheikhs and chanters performing during the month of Ramadan and in other religious occasions.

Many *munshideen* appeared during the twentieth century; among them sheikh Muhammad Al-Warraaq, one of the most famous *munshids* from Aleppo, Syria who mastered *muwashshah* “*Isq Al-Itash (Quench the Thirsty)*” and gave it its final form:

Mawlaya Ajfani Jafahunna al Kara Wal Shawqu La'ijhu bi Qalbi Khayyama
My Lord! My eyes cannot sleep and my heart yearns to You

Mawlaya li 'Amalun wa Lakin Muwjib L'Oqubati Fahnun 'Alayya
Takaruman
Some of my deeds entail punishment Have Mercy on me, My Lord

In the Arabian Gulf area, *inshaad* became popular in the last twenty years due to the proliferation of technology. Despite the advancements, the majority kept the simple old traditional style based on a group of *munshideen* using only human voices accompanied with frame drums. They chant in religious circles, in sacred and secular ceremonies stimulated by the burning of incense. While sharing many musical traditions with those from the rest of the Arab World, the Gulf tradition is highlighted by using traditional *Khaliji* (Gulf) rhythms in their repertoire and also chanting using the distinct modes familiar to that part of the world heavily influenced by the fishermen's singing as can be seen in the performance of *Malid* (celebration the birth of the Prophet).

In Oman, many groups of young *munshideen* emerged to perform in religious occasions and many other celebrations like the Prophet's Birthday.

Inshad went through a huge revival phase since the beginning of the 21st century with the help of video clips which receive the highest ratings inside the Arab World and outside it. Modern *Inshad* is influenced by the spread of satellite channels and video clips and many special channels are dedicated to this purpose. It is an art that includes various styles and forms, attracting a wide audience base in the Arab and Muslim World, and keeps evolving.

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