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# Disorienting “Western” Viewers with Nacer Khemir’s *Desert Trilogy*

## Abstract

In this essay, I explore tensions that arise when creating alternative cinematic visions of Muslim life, specifically frictions emerging from the goal of shifting public perception of the community and patterns of self-orientalization. Here, I complicate assumptions about the representation of Islam by looking at a self-articulated presentation of Muslims through the narrative feature series the *Desert Trilogy*, by Tunisian director Nacer Khemir (born 1948). I argue that Khemir is ensnared by ahistorical Islamic nostalgia and largely reinforces romantic orientalist aesthetics in his films. While his portrait of Muslims is much more “positive” than those in the broader archive, it is just as skewed and incomplete as stereotypical images of Muslims as violent terrorists. Ultimately, it seems that he fails to offer a coherent and stable locus for Islam that can dispel misconceptions and mitigate the heavy liability of the “Hollywood Muslim” in Western social consciousness. Khemir’s desire to submit an alternative portrait of Muslims rooted in esoteric Sufi traditions of Islam in combination with his allegorical and anti-realist film style leaves the viewer with a synthetic and saccharine impression of Muslim experience.

## Keywords

Islam, Sufism, Orientalism, Tunisia, Morocco, Nacer Khemir, *Desert Trilogy*, WANDERERS OF THE DESERT (Nacer Khemir, TN/FR 1984), THE DOVE’S LOST NECKLACE (Nacer Khemir, TN/FR 1991), BAB’AZIZ: THE PRINCE WHO CONTEMPLATED HIS SOUL (Nacer Khemir, TN/IR/FR/CH 2005)

## Biography

Kristian Petersen is an Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy & Religious Studies at Old Dominion University, Norfolk, USA. He is currently working on a monograph entitled *The Cinematic Lives of Muslims*. He is the editor or co-editor of *Muslims in the Movies: A Global Anthology* (2021), *New Approaches to Islam in Film* (2021), *Digital Humanities and Research Methods in Religious Studies: An Introduction* (2021), *Bloomsbury Handbook of Muslims and Popular Culture* (2023), and *Muslim Horror Film & Media* (forthcoming). He also serves as the book review editor for the *Journal of Religion & Film*.

## Introduction

The uneven and distorted representation of Muslims in Western cinema is well documented.<sup>1</sup> The effect is that Muslims are largely understood in stereotypical ways by many Euro-American audiences, who go on to support policies and practices that harm Muslim communities and individuals.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, the majority of these representations do not reflect the issues or concerns of average Muslims. However, while, as Hussain notes, “there has been a clear and lengthy history of misrepresentation of Muslims and Islam in film”, we should not assume that non-Muslims have been the only culprits.<sup>3</sup> In this essay, I explore tensions that arise from creating alternative cinematic visions of Muslim life, specifically frictions that emerge from the goal of shifting public perception of the community and from patterns of self-orientalization. Here I complicate assumptions about the representation of Islam by looking at a self-articulated presentation of Muslims through the narrative feature series the *Desert Trilogy*, by Tunisian director Nacer Khemir. I argue that the distortion of Muslim social experience in film is possible on both sides of the representational spectrum. Khemir is ensnared by an ahistorical repertoire of Islamic nostalgia and largely reinforces romantic orientalist aesthetics in his films. While his portrait of Muslims is much more “positive” than those in the broader archive, it is just as skewed and incomplete as stereotypical images that depict Muslims as violent terrorists. At the same time, I acknowledge, Khemir’s attempt to disrupt dominant Western representational patterns is both logical and admirable. The undue burden of representation falls on anyone who takes on the task of smashing harmful constructions of themselves or their community. However, Khemir’s desire to submit an alternative portrait of Muslims that is rooted in esoteric Sufi traditions of Islam and in his allegorical and anti-realist film style leaves the viewer with a synthetic and saccharine impression of Muslim experience.

More specifically, here I explore the ability of Nacer Khemir’s *Desert Trilogy* and its self-orientalizing portrait of Muslims to interrupt Western stereotypical tropes, a stated goal of the filmmaker. Khemir claims that his work provides a real image of a living Islamic tradition and is needed to

1 Shaheen 2009.

2 Alsultany 2012.

3 Hussain 2009.

challenge the global representation of Muslims in the media. I focus on the three narrative feature films that compose his *Desert Trilogy*: *LES BALISEURS DU DÉSERT* (WANDERERS OF THE DESERT, TN/FR 1984), *LE COLLIER PERDU DE LA COLOMBE* (THE DOVE'S LOST NECKLACE, TN/FR 1991), and *BAB'AZIZ: LE PRINCE QUI CONTEMPLAIT SON ÂME* (BAB'AZIZ: THE PRINCE WHO CONTEMPLATED HIS SOUL, TN/IR/FR/CH 2005).<sup>4</sup>

The films act as a self-assertion of the Islamic tradition in the contemporary world, even as Western media renders Muslims silent in their own representation. Khemir's films are beautiful expressions of how many Muslims view and understand their tradition, and they muddle the public-media persona of Muslims. However, we must ask if Khemir's imaging of the symbols, themes, and practices of Islam are similarly constructed. Ultimately, he fails to offer a coherent and stable locus for Islam that can dispel misconceptions and mitigate the heavy liability of the "Hollywood Muslim" in Western social consciousness.<sup>5</sup> His attempt to dismantle negative stereotypes simultaneously constructs an essentialized formulation of Islam and Muslims, or more succinctly, Khemir's anti-stereotyping is still stereotyping.<sup>6</sup>

## Nacer Khemir and the *Desert Trilogy*

Nacer Khemir was born in 1948 in a small village outside Tunis, Tunisia, but he was French educated and has resided in Paris for many years. Khemir is an artist, author, director, and storyteller. He has explained, "I consider myself a *hakawati*, a storyteller, not only of stories and narratives but also that

4 Suzanne Gauch (Gauch 2016) offers a more granular analysis of the narrative and formal aspects of these films. Roy Armes (Armes 2010) contextualizes Khemir's narrative films within his overall cultural production and political vision.

5 I do not hold an essentialized understanding of Islam as a static and stable tradition. I support Shahab Ahmed's (Ahmed 2015) contention that Islam is both coherent and contradictory and employ Caner Dagli's (Dagli 2024) theoretical rubric for understanding Islam as a "metaphysical institution". My own interpretation of Islam as a dialogical exchange can be found in my study of Chinese language Islamic scholarship (Petersen 2017). We might think of Khemir's own configuration of an idealized Islamic past as more mythological, as it forms a pastiche of an ahistorical and decontextualized tradition rather than a historical and/or sociologically rooted heritage that is easily delineated, recognizable, or graspable by the viewer.

6 I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for this phrasing of a key argument of the essay.

of a culture.”<sup>7</sup> His films reflect this narrative quality and are reminiscent of classical tales, such as those from *1,001 Nights*. However, Khemir pushes at the boundaries of fantasy and reality in his stories. His use of symbolism is evident from his employment of images, architecture, and landscapes throughout all of his films.<sup>8</sup> He utilizes these to evoke what he understands to be the true or inner meanings behind concepts of love, myth, and tradition. Many intertwined tales challenge the viewer to reevaluate their understanding of these themes. A recurring objective of Khemir’s work is to examine the relationship between modernity and the golden era of Islamic culture. This partnership is never fully resolved in his films but its exploration provides a continuing rumination on the modern condition and the role of cultural memory in defining identity.

In the *Desert Trilogy* Khemir reveals how love, knowledge, and contemplation have been highly valued throughout Muslim history and continue to be revered today. Khemir’s depiction of common Muslim practices and beliefs is situated primarily in the introspective and transcendental Sufi tradition and exhibits some of the diversity and multiplicity of Muslim populations, countering common extremist characterizations of Muslims. However, the potential of Khemir’s films is offset by obfuscating cinematic choices. Being an unhurried storyteller could be Khemir’s most substantial shortcoming. The lack of contextualization and the intentional mystique of his tales may leave those not well acquainted with the symbols or references confused at best and irritated at worst. Khemir’s work is therefore most productive for a Western audience when the substance of these allusions can be teased out for the viewer. Before exploring such obstacles in greater detail, I briefly recount the main narratives of the three films that make up the *Desert Trilogy*.

## WANDERERS OF THE DESERT (TN/FR 1984) – A Synopsis

WANDERERS OF THE DESERT begins with the story of a young man, Mr. Abd al-Salam, who is assigned to be the new schoolteacher in a forgotten village on a Tunisian desert road. As he enters the isolated village, its inhabitants welcome him and he begins to realize it has a unique aura. One of the strange features of the village is that it has no young men. We find out that

7 Khemir/Khayati/Awadalla 1995, 255.

8 See Barzegar/Gholami 2024.

the villagers believe that they are cursed, because all their young men are lured into the desert to become the wanderers of the title. This piques Abd al-Salam's curiosity, and he seeks out the local religious leader, Hajj, for answers. Bits and pieces of the curse are revealed throughout the film, and eventually Hajj solicits the teacher's help in trying to bring the wanderers back to the village. The teacher is given a book about the curse, reads a short passage that warns him that a woman, pictured in a miniature painting, will arrive and escort him to the garden of his beloved in three days. While the villagers perform a local pilgrimage, an old woman enters the courtyard and leads the teacher into the desert, never to be seen again. Concurrent with this main story are other mysterious events and curious characters, none of which are fully explained in the narrative. There is the mischievous orphan Hussein, who leads the other boys in building a garden of mirrors and takes his direction from a *jinn* named Mr. Hassan who lives in a well; an elderly man, Assam, who is searching for buried treasure and digs in the desert; an officer and his scribe who come to investigate the teacher's disappearance; the Sheikh's silent daughter; Sinbad's ship; and the angel of death. The personalities, soliloquies, conversations, architecture, and landscapes are at the forefront of the movie, rather than a linear narrative with a clear conclusion. Khemir's poeticism is reminiscent of classic Arab literary culture but will likely struggle to appeal to the average Western viewer. Much of his imagery is steeped in symbolism from Arab and Islamic culture, with little to no contextualization to explain Khemir's intended meaning or message.

## THE DOVE'S LOST NECKLACE (TN/FR 1991) – A Synopsis

In his second film, *THE DOVE'S LOST NECKLACE*, Khemir is able to maintain much of the mystique of his message while creating a more developed storyline. It begins with Hassan, a young man studying calligraphy with a local master, who is consumed with his quest to find all the words for love. He believes that once he knows all the words for love, he will understand its true nature. This obsession is galvanized when Hassan obtains a fragment of a book that was saved from being burned for its poisonous or inappropriate content. The snippet contains an image of the Princess of Samarkand and a bit of poetry which reads: "The beginning of love is light, but its ending is hard. One night I had this vision; two women are throwing water in an empty field as if trying to quench the field's thirst. And at the edge of

the empty field sat the Princess of Samarkand staring with her big eyes at a red pomegranate.” We find out that this poem records the dream of an unknown man who asked a local named Jafar to burn his books so no one would learn of his vision. Hassan becomes infatuated with the Princess and sets out to find her and the remainder of the book, both of which, Hassan is convinced, will reveal love’s true meaning. While trying to locate the original text, Hassan starts a fire in the bookshop and is forced out of his village. During his quest, an unknown traveler named Aziz appears and reappears and ultimately joins Hassan in his journey. Hassan suspects that Aziz is actually the Princess of Samarkand in disguise, but they are torn apart before he can discover Aziz’s true identity. Ultimately, Hassan never finds the Princess, the book, or the true meaning of love and returns to his war-torn village to find it ravaged. Again, Khemir incorporates various peripheral stories and peculiar characters and twists, such as Prince Harun, the monkey; Zein, whose father is a *jinn*; a tailor who makes a cloak of death for the Prince; and an ecstatic dervish. The moral and the various messages are neither fully developed nor explained, and viewers are left to decipher Khemir’s meanings on their own. Overall, however, *THE DOVE’S LOST NECKLACE* seems more coherent and satisfying to the viewer.

## **BAB’AZIZ: THE PRINCE WHO CONTEMPLATED HIS SOUL (TN/IR/FR/CH 2005) – A Synopsis**

In Khemir’s third film, *BAB’AZIZ: THE PRINCE WHO CONTEMPLATED HIS SOUL*, we follow an elderly blind dervish named Bab’Aziz and his granddaughter, Ishtar. Together they travel through the desert in search of a reunion of Sufis that occurs only once every thirty years. To entertain his granddaughter, Bab’Aziz relates the tale of a prince who became captivated by the inner contemplation of his soul as he stared at his own reflection in a pool of water. Khemir’s enthusiasm for storytelling is conspicuous throughout the film as the audience learns what has drawn successive characters to this journey. Osman is searching for a beautiful woman he encountered in a palace when he fell down a well, which some of his companions believe to be an event unveiling God’s divine power. Zaid is in search of a woman whose father drew him to her through his mystical poetry. A young man searches out a red-headed dervish who killed his brother, one of the twins Hassan and Hussein, who are diametrical opposites. All those traveling along the path ultimately

reach their goal and are confronted with the ways in which they experience the divine: Bab'Aziz welcomes death and his return to God; Ishtar is embraced by various Sufis who inspire love in her heart; Zaid finds his beloved; and the brother cares for Bab'Aziz in his final moments of life. The numerous characters' travels are better integrated than in Khemir's other films, and each personality is related to the others in some way. However, as in the case of the first two films in the *Desert Trilogy*, the audience is simply along for the ride, unaware of where they are going. The interweaving storylines add depth to the narrative but often leave the viewer bewildered about the intended messages of Khemir's frequent symbolism. BAB'AZIZ is Khemir's most obvious attempt to reveal the practices and beliefs of Islam's mystical tradition, and it often seems he is trying to display Sufi customs and traditions for an audience familiar with only stereotypical images of Muslims.

## Representing Sufism to Rectify Media Representation of Muslims

Khemir's counter-imaging is a noble goal in and of itself and could undo harm if embraced and reproduced by more Muslim artists. Showing another face of Islam may eliminate preconceived notions about Muslims that are based on inaccurate or incomplete knowledge. Khemir believes cinema can shift public perceptions of Muslims: "We are required to create a new image and show this not to just one country but to the whole world."<sup>9</sup> He holds Sufism to be the antithesis of radical fundamentalism and the heart of the Islamic tradition. In his opinion, "Sufism is the Islam of the mystics; it is the tenderness of Islam. [...] One could also say that Sufism is the pulsating heart of Islam. Far from being a marginal phenomenon, it is the esoteric dimension of the Islamic message."<sup>10</sup> He has therefore made Sufism the crux of his presentation, most notably in BAB'AZIZ. The storyteller Khemir explains his motivation by explaining that Islam is like his father and has fallen and landed in the mud. His goal with his films is to help Islam get back up, find its footing, and clean off its face. While his filmmaking is firmly rooted in non-Western aesthetic and philosophical traditions, he recognizes that his cinema has greater impact in shaping Western sentiments: "I believe I have

9 Agency 2017.

10 Khemir/Omarbacha 2005, 12.

more influence on the Occidental side of the world than the Oriental side of the world.”<sup>11</sup> Khemir attempts to speak for his tradition and rectify what he sees as numerous biased depictions that have rendered Muslims mute.<sup>12</sup> This strategy has been taken up by other filmmakers who, like Khemir, portray alternative Muslim modalities where “Sufism is also employed as a political corrective”.<sup>13</sup>

Khemir reconstitutes the Islamic tradition by providing an alternative view of what is important for Muslims. He does this through his rich use of allusion, metaphor, and symbolism. Roy Armes explains, “This world is created through precise camerawork, sumptuous colour imagery, a multitude of expressive faces and exquisite costumes.”<sup>14</sup> Each image or line of dialogue that Khemir includes is used to evoke certain emotions related to idealized concepts such as love, tradition, or the written word. Thus Emily O’Dell describes *BAB’AZIZ* as “an audiovisual tapestry of Sufi cultural heritage from around the world” and records that the “screenplay is a palimpsest of verses from the Qur’an, and Sufi poems by Rumi, Attar, Ibn Arabi, and Ibn Farid”.<sup>15</sup> Khemir explains, “[n]arrative, for me, is transcendent. It becomes transcendent through abstraction. It’s a kind of Islamic thought, too. When I point to something, I am indicating 10 times that thing, but nine out of 10 parts of the whole remain invisible.”<sup>16</sup> What Khemir is pointing to exists in parallel spaces in the great Islamic past and in modern Muslim societies, which enables the viewer to reexamine the signaletic material from multiple registers. The ambiguity of his iconic imaging requires viewers to generate meaning based on their own understanding and position in the world. Khemir tells us:

As for characterization, it exceeds its social frame to become a sign of various significations both within and outside the film. The viewer, who relates to and is sensitive towards this Arab-Islamic culture, can reread the film several times, each time in a different manner; since each viewing will be a renewed discovery of the film’s specificities. The object is static in its essence, but transformative in its signification.<sup>17</sup>

11 Arsiya 2017.

12 Khemir/Omarbacha 2005, 11–12.

13 O’Dell 2023, 98.

14 Armes 2006, 129.

15 O’Dell 2023, 99.

16 Rakha 2006, 2.

17 Khemir/Khayati/Awadalla 1995, 256.

Khemir's powerful imagery and stark dialogue are intended to take the viewer through various levels of understanding and thought. Khemir serves as our guide and leads us, like novice Sufis, to unveilings of his imagination. He advises us, "concerning the structure of this movie [BAB'AZIZ], I think it helps the spectator to forget about his own ego and to put it aside in order to open up to the reality of the world. It borrows the structure of the 'visions' usually narrated by dervishes, and the structure of their spiraling and whirling dances."<sup>18</sup> Overall, each film revolves around aspects of the Sufi path, including poetry, calligraphy, music, dance, and illumination.<sup>19</sup> Since Khemir models his cinematic journeys on the mystical tradition, his presentation of Sufism merits closer examination.

## Self-Orientalizing Images of Islam and the Problem of Interpretation

Through the *Desert Trilogy* Khemir attempts to naturalize a version of Islam that resonates with his political commitments. One of the limitations of Khemir's work is that, just like the work of the many Western image-makers who present a distorted portrayal of Muslims, his films fail to provide a full picture of Muslims: in this instance we get only a partial glimpse of the Islamic mystical tradition and the practices that accompany it.<sup>20</sup> We could even go as far as to say that Khemir presents a self-orientalizing image of Muslims in that he paints a fabricated image of Islamic culture based on nostalgic reflections of an utopian past. Like many early Western scholars of Islam (and especially Sufism), Khemir dehistoricizes his characters, landscapes, and themes, removing them from any specific time and place. History determines what a particular concept meant at a given time, on the basis on the individual circumstances that created the understanding of that idea. The romantic orientalism of European linguists saw the essence of Islam's universal truths captured in the literary products of its spiritual authorities. Social expressions of Sufism were seen as exotic and supersti-

18 Khemir/Omarbacha 2005, 12.

19 Syed Haider (Haider 2021) has shown how some Bollywood films similarly deploy a set of established visual and sonic traits that make up a particular "Sufi aesthetic".

20 Lloyd Ridgeon stresses the diversity of the medieval Sufi tradition and highlights "the heterogeneous nature of Sufi ontological and mystical beliefs" to critique the notion of a single Sufi tradition (Ridgeon 2014, 126).

tious by orientalist Christian missionaries and colonial administrators. Orientalists understood both the intellectual teachings and material exercise of Sufism as anti-modern and as enabling Muslims to tap into some ultimate truth that “modern” Europeans had lost as a result of their disenchantment. This peculiar combination props up the essentialized interpretation of Islam through Sufi thought and practice as spiritually authoritative but obtuse to outside interpretation.

Through his films’ conjuring of symbolic hidden meanings of an inner truth, Khemir upholds orientalist logics and mimics their static signifiers in his self-representation. Unfortunately, the instrumentalization of ahistorical and transhistorical visions of modern Muslim life, a dominant position in orientalist thought, reinforces Western assumptions about Muslims that place them in a subservient primitivism compared to their Euro-American peers. For example, Khemir explains that in *BAB’AZIZ*, “I did not want to address the different [Sufi] brotherhoods, but I wanted to give an idea of what seems alive in the Islamic-Arab culture: this endless quest for the Absolute and the Infinite.”<sup>21</sup> The problem is that Khemir does not provide any of the details on how this quest is performed. Trekking through the desert, dancing to *qawwali* music, or spinning in a circle with one’s eyes toward the sky does not necessarily lead to illumination and the unveiling of the mysteries of the universe. Khemir extracts the meaningful signifiers of various historical Sufi contexts (calligraphy, poetic recitation, musical ecstasy, etc.) from the referents that imbibe them with particular signification (i. e. society, culture, community, etc.). The orientalist tendency to focus on perceived essences of the tradition is mirrored by Khemir, and we are therefore given only a shell of this mystical aspect of Islam. The details of this spiritual quest depend on locale, historical time, and the spiritual status of the individual. Khemir goes on to tell us, “[o]ne cannot understand the aesthetics of Islamic Culture without studying Sufi texts”.<sup>22</sup> This attitude is incorporated into Khemir’s dialogue, which often emulates the writings of several great Sufis. But relying on texts alone detaches this tradition from the people that drove and developed it. Texts are also in constant dialogue, and the themes that run through them are historically based and not universal.

While beautiful and engaging, Khemir’s films do not fully demonstrate the diversity or complexity of the Sufi tradition. Overall, as Viola Shafik

21 Khemir/Omarbacha 2005, 12.

22 Khemir/Omarbacha 2005, 12.

notes, “the fairy tale-like images are neither related to the present nor to the specific historical period that can be recognized from the details of the costume and the setting. Thus, cultural history is reduced to a diffuse, remote, though highly aesthetic, formula.”<sup>23</sup> Further, the viewer is presented with a depiction of Muslim life that is just as partial as the “Hollywood Muslim”. Wandering Sufis or scholar calligraphers are as small in number as modern jihadists. While Khemir’s illustration of Muslim life is much more appealing for a responsive Western viewer, these imagings need to be historically grounded and supplemented with other source materials in order to make the mystical life of Muslims that he presents comprehensible.

One challenge is that Khemir takes up the dominant representational forms, both intellectual and visual, of traditional Western takes on Sufism, as opposed to sociologically informed or realist approaches to Tunisian society. Khemir’s “trans-Islamic spiritualism”, as Kamran Rastegar dubs it, detaches his film’s subjects from the circumstances that shape and give localized meaning to their ideas and routines.<sup>24</sup> Robert Lang excludes Khemir from his study of “new Tunisian cinema” because the filmmaker does not address his national context in any direct or clear manner. While Khemir is certainly a product of the influences of his local industry, he does not tackle questions of the nation head on. Lang notes, “more obviously than most, his films are allegories. But what are they allegories of?”<sup>25</sup> Films produced in Muslim majority industries are often rooted in the interpretive framework of the given nation state. Muslim norms and values represented in films are usually implicit in national cinemas, and the everyday experiences and socio-political circumstances that shape the narrative and characters are often left to be known by the local film spectator. It is difficult to view Khemir’s films in terms of a national cinema model, because he strives to produce an ahistorical essentialized portrait of a perceived Islamic essence. His films do not account for or speak directly to a Tunisian social or political context. It is only through allegory that Khemir alludes to the centering of mystical and esoteric interpretations of Islam as a remedy for the ills of the current world. But the metaphorical narratives and contemplative visuality that point to the unseen realm of mystical truth are both impenetrable for the uninitiated viewer and require complex commentary and

23 Shafik 2017, 196.

24 Rastegar 2015, 398.

25 Lang 2014, 13.

explanation.<sup>26</sup> This dynamic may make these pictures less able to generate a diverse portrait of Muslims for non-Muslim Western viewers.

While Khemir's films are not located in a specific social context, history and tradition are integral to his artistry and expressivity. His engagement with tradition and modernity and their own relationship are significant throughout his films. He imitates or replicates traditional narrative structures while also creating totally new arrangements that evoke nostalgia and challenge notions about the present. While the elaborate costumes and scenery suggest his films are traditional, the formulation of his various tales flouts traditional forms, in which conflicts arise and are resolved. Instead, Khemir intertwines linear journeys of searching that generally remain unresolved at the end of his films, reminiscent of modern literature and cinema.<sup>27</sup> As in his depiction of the Sufi tradition, Khemir picks and chooses what he wants from his Islamic tradition more generally. For example, he tells us, "The idea of the 'Prince' came to me from a beautiful plate that was painted in Iran in the 12th century."<sup>28</sup> *THE DOVE'S LOST NECKLACE* was inspired by classic texts on love, such as Ibn Hazm's *Ṭawq al-Ḥamāmah* (*The Dove's Necklace*) and Ibn al-Jazzar's *Zād al-Musāfir* (*Provisions for the Traveler*). These phantom presences haunt the films' narratives.<sup>29</sup> The ancient city of Bam, today in Iran, plays a significant role in *BAB'AZIZ*, as the destination and location of the Sufi gathering. Repeatedly, Khemir is influenced by classic Islamic culture but reinvents it for a contemporary interpretation of its meaning and role by modern individuals. He explains,

what I am trying to do today is to tell a new story, one of authentic components but used in a new and different manner, making the introduction to the culture simpler and more accessible to us than it is now, closer to both the Eastern and the Western audience, making it become a mirror that reflects both inwards and outwards, at the same time.<sup>30</sup>

His films are inspired by classical ideas, but they challenge traditional concepts with the filmmaker's own ideas about traditional concepts and how one should embrace them.

26 See, for example, Khan 2025; Öztürk 2019; Papan-Matin 2012; de Souza/Alves 2023.

27 Shafik 2017, 97.

28 Khemir/Omarbacha 2005, 12.

29 Mahamdi 2014.

30 Khemir/Khayati/Awadalla 1995, 255.

A counter example to Khemir's viscous and dream-like cinematic portrait can help illuminate how his film diverges from a more metered and proportional production that is invested in using Sufi experiences as a means of understanding Muslims communities. Farida Benlyazid's film *BĀB AL-SAMĀ' MAFTŪH* (A DOOR TO THE SKY, MA 1988) places the idealized mystical arts and values within postcolonial subjectivity and the social and historical context of late 20th-century Morocco. The film is focused on a young Moroccan, Nadia, who has spent many years in France but returns to Fez before her father's death. The dichotomy between "traditional" life in Morocco and the "Western" modernity of European life is communicated to the viewer via Nadia's siblings and divergences in clothing, eating habits, language use, and values. After her father's death, Nadia decides to dedicate the family home as a *zāwiyah*, a Sufi settlement and refuge, in this case created specifically as a shelter for Muslim women. Nadia eschews the seeming chasm between her own and her kin's experiences and pursues a spiritual path. The film, like Khemir's productions, infuses the narrative, dialogue, and visuals with texts or images from prominent Sufi figures, such as Ibn Arabi.<sup>31</sup> By contrast with the *Desert Trilogy*, Nadia's reflections on womanhood, family, secularity, and religion throughout her journey are tethered to the postcolonial dichotomies that emerge from the clash of modernity and tradition. Nadia's ritual practices, communal discussions, and social interactions in the *zāwiyah* are embedded in the pressures and problems of local life, including employment, marital life, and domestic violence. These types of inquiries arise from Benlyazid's own spiritual and social life.<sup>32</sup> While Khemir's vision of life bubbles with Sufi intoxication from the divine, Benlyazid shows meditative solace and mystical fortitude arising out of communal practice and spiritual accountability. Where Khemir's simulated universal Sufism exists beyond time and space, Benlyazid's subjects experience doubt, strife, and challenges that are rooted within the contemporary subjectivity of Moroccan communalism, transnational identities, and cosmopolitan social pressures. Released during a moment of significant reconceptualization of women's place and social role, both in Morocco and around the globe, Benlyazid's film does not shy away from exploring a rooted social world.<sup>33</sup> She reveals how the construction of social space enables women's practice that may not be pos-

31 Martin 2007; Martin 2011, 81–84.

32 Martin 2011, 64; Martin 2024, 27–52.

33 Moody 2021.

sible in the broader patriarchal society but still has boundaries, as shown when the women of the shelter do not want someone who does not fear God to enter. In contradistinction, Khemir's idealized Sufi experience is not limited or burdened by class, gender, or racial or ethnic identity. Altogether, instead of presenting practices and values that are plucked from an ahistorical essence, *A DOOR TO THE SKY* shows them being contested, debated, and negotiated within communities of people. The film reveals how the magnitude of one's religiosity is often related to social structures or pressures that limit and shape the possibilities within a given time and space. And while Benlyazid has stated that she did not intend her film to transform global non-Muslim perceptions of Muslims, it illustrates the diversity of Muslim experience.<sup>34</sup> Its more realistic blending of traditional Maghrebi storytelling, Sufi customs and beliefs, and creative reimaginings of classical Islamic aesthetics has the potential to disrupt Western stereotypes about Muslims and expand on-screen possibilities.

## Conclusion

Each film in Nacer Khemir's *Desert Trilogy* presents an idealized Islamic society that celebrates the intellectual or spiritual history of a Muslim golden age but laments its loss and the disconnect between this high culture and modern society. Khemir's self-orientalizing depiction of Sufism tries to provide the contemporary viewer with a path back to the essence of what made the past excel. However, it shows only an essentialized version of what Sufism developed into, based solely on an ahistorical understanding of texts, music, and dance. Khemir's version of this mystical aspect of Islam may eliminate Western misconceptions of Muslims, but his illustration is still disorienting, just like stereotypical media more generally. Certainly, we should acknowledge Khemir's stated goal that "it is a duty nowadays to show to the world another aspect of Islam, otherwise, each one of us will be stifled by his own ignorance of 'the other'",<sup>35</sup> and from a purely artistic standpoint, the *Desert Trilogy* is a gorgeous and stimulating creative accomplishment of contemplative cinema. But his films require their audience to create meaning to a much greater degree than most Euro-American audi-

34 Gauch 2016, 16.

35 Khemir/Omarbacha 2005.

ences are able, which makes it harder to disrupt the viewer's established and preconceived notions. In order for his films to be effective in displaying another face of Islam, they must be thoroughly contextualized and clarified, which undermines his overall objectives. Even after a Western audience has viewed his films, Muslims will likely remain an abstract and unfamiliar presence in their Western imagination.

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