

A CUP FOR YOUR TEA

What would happen if someone tried to pour tea for you to drink, but you had no cup?

No matter how sweet that tea is, it's going to be an unpleasant experience. In fact, it will burn you.

When drinking tea, a cup is necessary.

And what kind of cup? Isn't it true that the colour, design, and quality of the cup either enhance or detract from the experience?

Think of a Japanese tea ceremony, or the way that Moroccans serve tea. The experience of drinking tea from a round clay cup that fits perfectly in the palm of the hand, or from decorated hand-blown glass - is vastly different from that of drinking it from a styrofoam cup.

Culture is to the Revelation like a cup is to tea.

Just like tea, Divine Revelation needs a vessel into which to be poured, for it to be served to the human being and imbibed safely and with satisfaction.

Traditional Islamic cultures were those tea cups, holding the Divine Revelation. The principles and concepts delineated in the Revelation found their expression in the unique cultures of Islamic societies. It was through this process that messages from God could be woven into the fabric of earthly existence.

From the first "Islamic" song – *Tala al Badru Alayna*, on down through the centuries, Islamic sacred cultures allowed people to imbibe the Revelation in ways that met their capacities and needs and were appropriate for their circumstances. Remember, the cup doesn't distort the tea, it simply holds it in a way that is most convenient and helpful, even beautiful.

Likewise, Islamic cultures did not distort the Message. For centuries, they actually preserved and served it up to Muslims. Culture served to cement traditions that in turn kept the revealed teachings safe from extreme interpretation, and easy to transmit to the next generation. These traditions were able to protect the inner meanings of faith from the trends of the day, from the winds of time, and from the erosion that a daily routine made secular wrecks on faith. These traditions kept faith present in all contexts.

Through song and poetry of a religious nature, recited at weddings and celebration of a new birth, even the illiterate and those who had no access to circles of learning could learn about their faith. Even those who were not extremely devout could get a share in the realization that God is Present in all we do. The presence of a cup for tea makes all the difference in your ability to drink the tea, in your safety from being burnt. It also makes all the difference in the pleasure and nourishment you take from that tea. That is culture.

When things fell apart

Post-colonial thinking in the Muslim world held that pre-colonial Muslim culture was backward and the cause of the lack of “development” – according to western definitions, of Muslim societies. It was held that culture was in fact the reason Muslims were vulnerable to invasion and occupation of colonial powers: myths abounded that the Mughal emperors had been too busy playing chess to notice that their empire was falling down around them.

In the sixties and seventies, Muslims were taught that culture was something suspect, not to be trusted as an authentic carrier of Revelation. People were told: all you need is the Quran and Hadith - you are Muslim, not a member of any culture.

And yet, even though this movement stripped Muslims of our traditional songs, dances, and the organic expression of the faith, it failed in doing away with culture altogether. In the place of these ancient sacred customs, the modern Muslim ended up with a pastiche of the worst aspects of western culture: tinny synthesizer-harmonized *nasheeds*, borrowed wedding customs with white wedding dresses and limousines, massive conferences that stood in for traditional festivals and fairs, and, all around, styrofoam cups for tea.

In reality there is no way to remove culture from our lives. When we remove centuries-old culture that is sacred in its orientation, we end up forcing people, especially our youth, to turn to whatever is available around them to fill the vacuum and provide means of expression for their human experiences of joy, sadness, and longing, and to mark the passage of important life events such as marriages and births.

Why does this matter? Because the kinds of cultural forms – the kinds of cups – we end up with are those that were not meant to hold the Divine Message. They are more like pint glass, meant to hold something quite different than tea.

Sanad Collective's Response

One of the most important missions of Sanad Collective is to *revive* the sacred culture of our Pious Predecessors, and make new cultural traditions that are suitable to hold the Message of Revelation.

When we talk about Pious Predecessors, we speak not only of our forefathers and mothers from centuries ago, but even the generation of our grandparents. If asked, very few of us would say that we are better people than our grandparents were. And yet, few of them had formal classes in the religion or the level of “activism” many of us have.

Rather, they experienced their faith through the everyday culture that surrounded them. This culture held up the cup of revelation to their lips on every occasion, at every turn, and they became imbued with its deep meanings.

The Mawlid gathering is a prime example of culture supporting and carrying Revelation. It holds the secrets of what was Revealed in a format in which they can be accessed by a wide range of people within a society: children, adults, the educated, the illiterate. There are so many ways the Message is expressed in this one gathering - from the service people offer each other during the time spent together, to the words recited about the Prophet (S), to the being together in sisterhood and brotherhood as we worship. Some of our Teachers

say: if a person cannot benefit from the talk given at a Mawlid, they will benefit from the songs sung, and if not from the songs sung, then from the food served.

There is blessing in all of these things, because they are fully in synch and in harmony with the Message – they are carried out and they carry meanings of: kindness to one another, reminding the believers, loving for your brother what you love for yourself, and what the Prophet peace be upon him said: Verily, in poetry, is wisdom. How many a time one is not in the state to concentrate on a spoken talk, but the heart takes flight when a song is sung that tugs on its strings, with exquisite wording, on just the right notes, that pulls it from its slumber. All of this is not merely empty cultural artifact; it is all heavy with messages that draw one not to the worldly realm like a regular song would, but to contemplation of the other world.

We believe that when we take cultural practices such as the Mawlid away, the majority of the *Ummah* is denied a beautiful means of accessing the sacred - and this is the crisis we are seeing today. Our youth believe *intellectually* in Islam, but their daily lives - their culture - everything they do to relax, to hang out, to show joy or to show love - has almost no trace of Revelation in it.

Rather, the music they listen to, the dances they dance, the things they do to relax - are cups carrying messages other than the Revelation, messages about this temporal life here on earth.

Let us revive the sacred traditions of our blessed ancestors. Support our mission to give vitality sacred cultural practices such as the Mawlid, and develop new ones such as the Letters to the Beloved (S) Writing Competition, that will increase the ability of future generations to drink from Revelation, to understand it, to hold it in their hands and to pass it around.

Would you like to join Sanad Collective or take part in these activities? Contact us at info@sanadcollective.org