197384 - Moving and swaying whilst remembering Allah (performing dhikr) is an innovation (bid‘ah)

the question

I saw a group of people performing dhikr whilst moving around. I assumed it was not permissible; then one of the people who supported it sent me this:

"As for dancing, Imam Ahmad relates from Anas (Allah be well pleased with him), with a chain of transmission all of whose narrators are those of Bukhari except Hammad ibn Salama, who is one of the narrators of Muslim, that the Ethiopians danced in front of the Messenger of Allah (Allah bless him and give him peace); dancing and saying [in their language], “Muhammad is a righteous servant.” The Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) said, “What are they saying?” And they said, “‘Muhammad is a righteous servant’” (Musnad al-Imam Ahmad. 6 vols. Cairo 1313/1895. Reprint. Beirut: Dar Sadir, n.d., 3.152)."

How was this hadith understood by the ahlus-sunnah?

Does this hadith support the claim that it is okay to move around with dhikr?

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

Firstly:

Imam Ahmad (12540) and Ibn Maajah (5870) narrated that Anas said: The Abyssinians gave a display with their weapons in front of the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) and danced, saying [in their own language]: “Muhammad is a righteous slave (of Allah).” The Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: “What are they saying?” They said: They are saying: Muhammad is a righteous slave (of Allah).

The commentators on al-Musnad said: Its isnaad is saheeh according to the conditions of Muslim.

According to a version of this hadeeth narrated by Ibn Hibbaan: The Abyssinians were giving a display with their weapons in front of the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) and saying words that he did not understand. The Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: “What are they saying?” They said: Muhammad is a righteous slave (of Allah).

Ibn Muflih (may Allah have mercy on him) said in al-Adab ash-Shar‘iyyah (1/381): Its isnaad is jayyid.

In fact this hadeeth does not offer sound evidence for what this person says about it being acceptable to dance and sway when remembering Allah (performing dhikr). That is for a number of reasons:

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The Abyssinians’ intention was not in fact to remember Allah (perform dhikr) and dance whilst doing so. Rather they were playing in the mosque of the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him). Some reports specify that this play was an expression of their joy at his coming to Madinah. An example of that is the report narrated by al-Bukhaari (454) and Muslim (892) from ‘Aa’ishah, who said: I saw the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) one day standing at the door of my apartment, when the Abyssinians were playing in the mosque, and the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) was covering me with his cloak as I was watching them play.

Muslim (892) narrated that ‘Aa’ishah said: Some Abyssinians came to give a display with their weapons in the mosque on the day of Eid. The Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) called me and I put my head on his shoulder and started watching their display, until I was the one who decided to stop watching them.

Al-Bukhaari (2901) and Muslim (893) narrated that Abu Hurayrah (may Allah be pleased with him)

said: Whilst the Abyssinians were playing with their spears in the presence of the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him), ‘Umar came in, and he bent down to pick up some pebbles to throw at them, but he (the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him)) said: “Let them be, O ‘Umar!”

Ahmad (12649) and Abu Dawood (4923) narrated that Anas said: When the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) came to Madinah, the Abyssinians played for his coming out of joy, and they played with their spears

Its isnaad is saheeh according to the conditions of al-Bukhaari and Muslim.

Ahmad (25962) narrated from ‘Urwah that ‘Aa’ishah said: The Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said one day – i.e., on that day when the Abyssinians played in the mosque and ‘Aa’ishah watched them – “The Jews should know that in our religion there is time for relaxation; I was sent with a monotheistic and easy path.”

Classed as hasan by al-Albaani in as-Saheehah (1829)

The one who contemplates these hadeeths will realise that the situation was one of play, celebration and joy, not one of dhikr (remembrance of Allah) and of ecstasy and swaying in a dhikr circle. Hence the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: “The Jews should know that in our religion there is time for relaxation.” Such a thing could only be said in a situation of relaxation and fun, not in a situation of dhikr and humble focus in worship.

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What is meant by dancing as mentioned in this report is not what the Sufis understand of dancing and swaying when reciting their adhkaar and awraad. Rather what is referred to is their playing and making a display with their spears, as is indicated by the other reports quoted above.

An-Nawawi (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

The scholars interpreted it as referring to their leaping with their weapons and playing with their

spears in a manner similar to dancing, because in most of the reports it says that they were playing with their spears. So this wording (dancing) is to be interpreted in a manner that is in accordance with the other reports.

End quote from Sharh Muslim by an-Nawawi (6/186)

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There is nothing whatsoever in the actions of the leading scholars and narrators of hadeeth or in the manner in which they classified the hadeeth to support the idea of dancing when remembering Allah (performing dhikr); rather they all included this hadeeth under headings such as “playing on Eid” or “relaxation in Islam” and so on.

Al-Bukhaari included the hadeeth of ‘Aaishah in a chapter entitled “Chapter on those who played with spears in the mosque”

He included the hadeeth of Abu Hurayrah in a chapter entitled “Chapter on playing with spears and the like”.

Abu Dawood included the hadeeth of Anas in a chapter entitled “Chapter on the prohibition on singing”

An-Nasaa’i included the hadeeth of ‘Aa’ishah in a chapter entitled “Playing in the mosque on the day of Eid, and women watching that”

An-Nawawi included it in a chapter in Sharh Muslim entitled “Chapter on the concession allowing play in which there is no sin on the days of Eid.”

Thirdly:

More than one of the scholars have stated that moving and swaying whilst reciting dhikr is a kind of innovation and that dancing when reciting dhikr is one of the misleading Sufi innovations.

The scholars of the Standing Committee were asked:

Is the dhikr that some people in Egypt and some rural areas do in accordance with Islamic teaching? For example they stand and sway right and left, whilst reciting the name of Allah.

They replied:

We do not know of any basis for this action in the religion of Allah; rather it is an innovation and is contrary to the laws prescribed by Allah. Those who do it should be denounced, especially when one is able to do that, because the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: “Whoever introduces into this matter of ours something that is not part of it will have it rejected.” Agreed upon.

End quote from Fatawa al-Lajnah ad-Daa’imah (2/521)

see also the answer to question no. 143924

And Allah knows best.