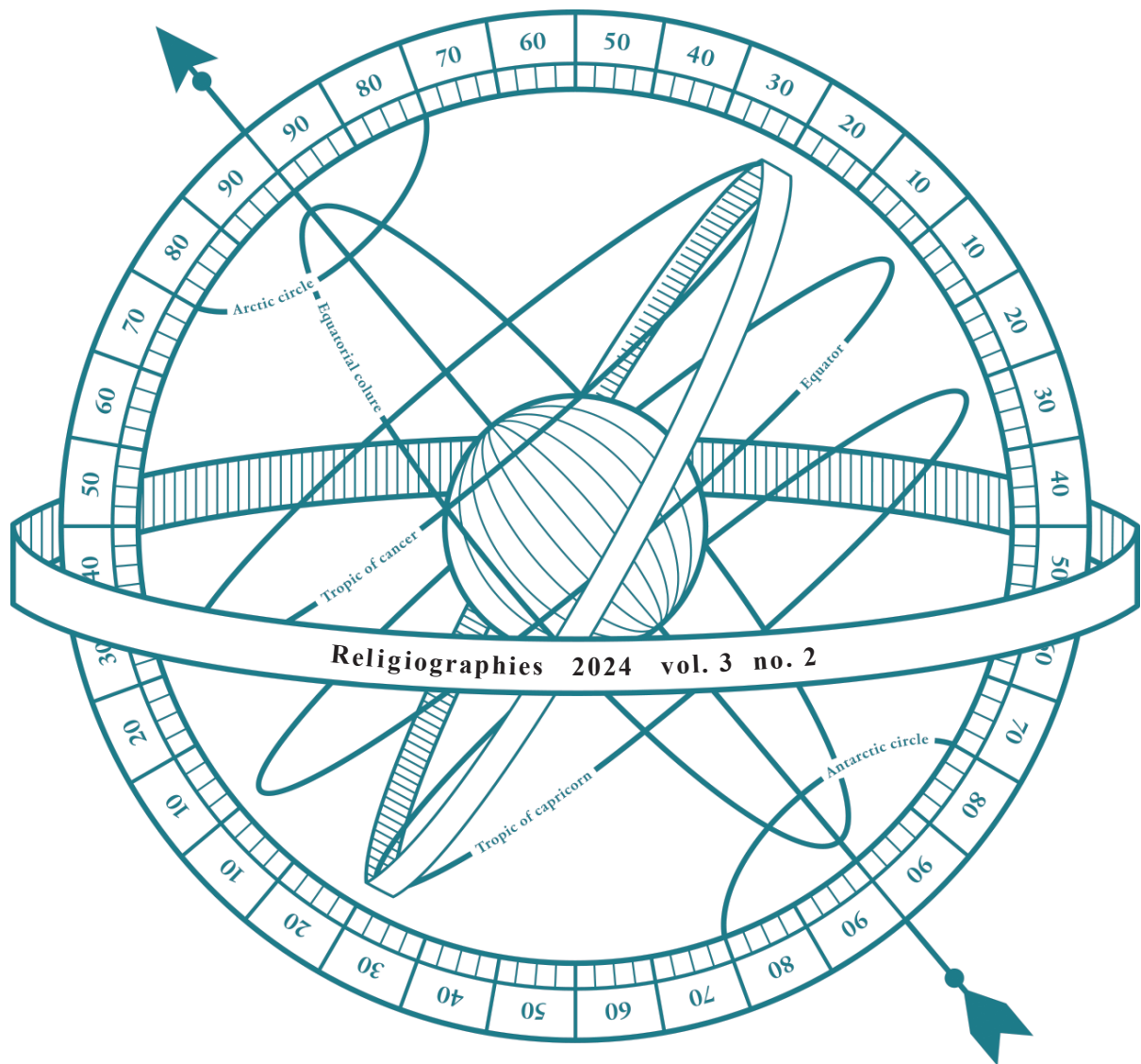


Religiographies



Special Issue

“Reviving Muhyi al-Din: Contemporary Uses of
Ibn ‘Arabi’s Thought and Reinventions of Islam”

edited by

Mark J. Sedgwick and Gregory Vandamme

Heterography 1:

“Looking for Muhyiddin” Nacer Khemir

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.69125/Religio.2024.v3.n2.128-136>



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With *Looking for Muhyiddin* (2013), Khemir delves into the life and work of the mystic Ibn 'Arabi through a deeply personal journey woven into daily life. The film tells the story of a man who must return to his homeland to bury his mother. The protagonist makes a promise to his father, which leads him on a journey in pursuit of a certain Sheikh Muhyiddin. Through this quest, he encounters people who introduce him to Ibn 'Arabi's teachings. Guided by his master, the protagonist travels from Oxford to Granada, Seville to Fez, Murcia to Istanbul, Cordoba to Konya, New York to Sanaa, and finally from Tunis to Damascus. At each stop, he meets friends of the Sheikh, who speak of him in their own languages. Thus, the film flows seamlessly from Arabic to Spanish, English to French, Italian to Turkish. This documentary, blending history and spiritual pursuit, reflects Khemir's profound admiration for the great Sufi masters. In this heterography, the filmmaker recounts how the film came to be.

"My homeland is a suitcase... My suitcase, my homeland"

Mahmoud Darwich, Palestinian poet



Click on the image for the trailer.

My suitcase is a red suitcase, which I drag like a thread through my film *Looking for Muhyiddin*. The first time I left Tunisia by boat, I carried with me a large red suitcase. In my first film, *L'histoire du pays du bon Dieu*, the young man who wished to leave his country also had a suitcase, but back then, it was made of wood. Today, my old wooden suitcase is where I keep all my correspondence.



It all began one afternoon in a Parisian café. My wife and I were seated at a sunlit table. Since my arrival in Paris a few years earlier, sunny days had become a true blessing for me. During the winter months, the city was often shrouded in a gray veil for weeks. Between the subway and the absence of light, I felt as though I were living underground. For years, until I adjusted, I noted in a small notebook the cafés that had sun in the morning and those that did in the afternoon. The sun, and especially light, was for me a precious gift. I come from a country where the light is so exceptional that it inspired the great painter Paul Klee, who once declared in front of the city of Kairouan: “Color and I are one; I am a painter.” So there I was, sitting in the sunlight one winter afternoon in 2006, with a depressed look on my face after nearly all the European festivals had declined to screen my film *Bab’Aziz*, as if they had coordinated their rejections. My wife, noticing my state, asked me what my deepest desire was. Without hesitation, I replied: to change career. She then said:

– You don’t want to be a filmmaker anymore?

– I do, but I no longer want to spend ten years begging for money to produce a film, like *Bab’Aziz*, only for no one to see it in the end!

– You’re exaggerating, she said. Let’s make a list of films you’d like to create, but on a smaller scale, within our means, with resources we can gather ourselves.

I had almost always filmed on celluloid, mostly 35mm. I thought to myself that maybe it was time to switch to digital . . .

So, we made a list, and she asked me:

– Which film would you like to start with?

– The one about Ibn ‘Arabi.

That’s when I found out there was a symposium on Ibn ‘Arabi in Cairo. She said:

– Let’s get tickets and go!

It was expensive for my budget, between the flight and accommodation!

We eventually found an affordable place to stay at the Dominican friars’ convent, which carried a particularly meaningful connection: Osman Yahia had spent fifteen years there working on the text of *al-Futuh al-Makkiyya*, the central work of the Great Master. The coincidence was a remarkable one to note. During my stay, with my small camera, I filmed a few scenes in the room where he had worked all those years, guided by the elderly caretaker who had known him.

In Cairo, I met around ten specialists, including Denis Gril and others. It was then that I realized the complexity of making a film about *shaykh al-akbar*. I didn’t want to create a study, a popularized explanation, or a lecture. For me, this had to be a true film. I was convinced that the best approach was to interview those who had dedicated themselves to his work, especially since each person had their own unique way of approaching Ibn ‘Arabi, as if he were a precious diamond with countless facets, each one unveiling a hidden meaning.

I realized that I, too, needed to find the particular facet that would guide me to him as a filmmaker. Each person had their reasons for loving the Master; it was enough to ask them a single question: how did they discover Ibn ‘Arabi, and what had they found in that encounter? I didn’t want to simply string together interviews but to engage in a genuine exploration. It was well known that the Master was deeply elusive, difficult to access.

I wanted to convey the feeling that the Master was still with us, alive, especially since I wasn’t searching for him in the past but in our present. This wasn’t just an idea; it was the sensation I experienced myself while reading his texts in the present. However, as with any narrative, I had to begin with myself to embark on the journey. At the time, my mother had recently passed away, a loss that had deeply affected me. I decided to start from that point to build the story. The chance encounters and opportunities that each day brought played a crucial role.

The film required four years of intermittent shooting. We had no production support or budget, so we had to seize every opportunity that arose. For instance, when I was invited to Spain to present my film *Le Collier perdu de la colombe*, with travel and hotel expenses covered by the event organizers, I took a small crew along. This allowed me to film the segment set in Granada while fulfilling my speaking engagements and hosting conferences. In this way, the film gradually came together, shaped by invitations and opportunities. I often set aside part of my time in a country or city to film a few sequences.

The film was truly pieced together with scraps and threads. During a symposium in Oxford, the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society invited me to present my film *Bab'Aziz*. This opportunity also allowed me to film James Morris, Stephen Hirtenstein, and others. I remember approaching James in the garden of one of Oxford's colleges, asking if he could talk to us about Ibn 'Arabi. He replied that he only had about half an hour before speaking at the symposium. So, I had to film him immediately, right there in the garden. But as soon as he began speaking about the Master, time ceased to matter. . .

Each person carried within them a treasure, a secret love for Ibn 'Arabi. The challenge was to find a cinematic way to capture all that love, to make it palpable and, above all, to quietly transmit it to the audience. It was essential to move beyond the traditional concept of interviews and intermediaries, to transform the viewer into a privileged witness of this encounter, like a gesture of hospitality, a yearning, a reunion with the Master. In this way, narration needed to fade into the background, allowing the audience to experience the desire to approach him.

As I journeyed through the film, dragging my suitcase, I became nothing more than the thread connecting all these stories, transforming them into a living, non-explanatory discourse. I had to make myself nearly transparent, creating a sense of tension, like an arrow whose only purpose is to move toward its target, even if it remains unaware of it. And that target was the Master. This is why I introduced a fictional concern for my character—the worry about waiting for his father's response regarding the sale of the family home.

When I first considered how to make a film about Ibn 'Arabi, the question of *amāna* (trust or responsibility) quickly came to the forefront. It was crucial to avoid creating a film that would betray the complexity and vastness of the Master's vision. I did not want to depict the classic image of a *murīd* (spiritual disciple) in search of his master. This is why, from the very beginning of the film, I established a certain distance between the character and the quest. It was as though I were saying: *I am not undertaking this journey for my own interest in Ibn 'Arabi, but out of loyalty to a promise made to my father in a dream*, as he had passed away long ago. Thus, I made the journey without being directly invested in the subject, thereby bridging the gap between the audience and the voices of those who recount the Master. This approach created such tension that, during discussions after screenings, some audience members asked me about the sale of the family home and whether I had finally received an answer from my father!

This perfectly illustrates that the journey I undertook had achieved its purpose. A small motif transformed into a grand quest, and the man with the red suitcase was merely a pretext, unaware of the significance of his own journey. He became, for many viewers, a mirror of themselves, enabling them to move step by step toward the center—like concentric circles drawing closer to their core. These circles evoke the dance of the whirling dervishes. . .

Over four years of traveling, I filmed in fragments, taking advantage of “accidents” that, to me, were not accidents at all but winks from *shaykh al-akbar* himself. One such moment occurs near the end of the film: a little boy climbs the steps in front of the Zitouna Mosque in Tunis, chanting, “*bayt Allāh, bayt Allāh*”—“House of God, House of God.” The child unknowingly crossed the frame during a take and continued on his way without noticing us. Each time something like this happened, I felt as though the Master was sending us small signs.

One notable anecdote took place while we were filming at Ibn 'Arabi's tomb in Damascus. A group of Turkmen pilgrims, led by their sheikh, bypassed security, pushed open the door, and sat around the tomb without noticing that we were filming. These little winks, these unexpected gifts, enhanced the feeling that *shaykh al-akbar* was with us throughout those four years of shooting. Often, we filmed without any permits, always afraid of having our equipment or camera confiscated. We lacked the time and resources for costly administrative procedures, making production almost entirely improvised. I opted for a small semi-professional camera to pass as a tourist shooting discreetly at the Alhambra or the Great Mosque of Córdoba in Andalusia.

We also had some wonderful encounters, such as with the late Gabriele Mandel Khan. While we initially proposed filming him in Milan, where he lived, he preferred to shoot in Istanbul, Bursa, and Konya. He even secured the funding for the trip to Turkey and covered the expenses of a small filming crew. That experience felt like a moment of grace, where *shaykh al-akbar*'s presence infused every conversation, guiding us step by step and, perhaps, opening doors that might otherwise have remained closed.

Thanks to the intervention of Mahmut Erol Kiliç, the former director of the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts in Istanbul, we filmed in the museum on a Saturday—a day it is usually closed. He was passing through Istanbul and had only that morning available to discuss Ibn ‘Arabi. We were determined to capture the manuscript of *al-Futuhāt al-Makkiyya* with him. As he held the manuscript, written by the Master’s own hand, he was deeply moved. He confided that it was the first time he had ever held it in his hands. Moments like these were nothing short of extraordinary.

In Konya, thanks to Gabriele Mandel Khan, we spent nearly an entire night alone in the mausoleum of Mawlana Jalal al-Din Rumi, filming together. For me, it was a profoundly initiatory journey, especially as I had to be both in front of and behind the camera. In the end, this dual role turned out to be the simplest solution. I found a way to move beyond mere commentary by embodying the figure of the traveler. Hiring someone to play this role was out of the question due to the unpredictability of the shoot, so I had only myself to rely on to carry the character for four years. Throughout the film, I was accompanied by the small red suitcase that made me instantly recognizable, even in a large crowd, and infused the story with a touch of fiction. It was precisely this liminal space between reality and fiction—what might be called the *barzakh*—that brought us closest to the Master. I also followed Ibn ‘Arabi’s method of using dreams to transcend reality. This was the narrative structure I chose for the film, invoking my long-deceased father to entrust me with the *amāna*—a sacred trust—thereby initiating my journey out of love and loyalty to him.

Making a film is, above all, about encounters. Yet, I was unable to film everyone I hoped to meet. Some didn’t respond, others declined, believing it impossible to make a film about the Master. A few were hindered by circumstances, and certain appointments fell through. Over time, I came to believe that the Master himself chose who would speak about him. . .

At times, his presence seemed to guide us, even through unexpected turns. One day, Denis Gril and I were stuck in front of the mosque in Tunis because we hadn’t obtained filming permission in time. In a last-minute effort, we sent someone to the ministry. By a providential twist, this person ran into someone in the hallway who, after hearing about our situation, immediately issued the permit. That man turned out to be the minister himself!

The anecdotes are countless, but here’s another: in Damascus, we almost didn’t receive permission to film in the tomb of the Master. Despite being co-produced by the Syrian Ministry of Culture’s cinema organization, we were required to meet the official in charge in person. During this meeting, he explained that he had “withheld” the authorization deliberately to ensure we would come see him. He was intrigued by these people who had traveled so far to make a film about Ibn ‘Arabi. He also revealed that his own name was Muhyi al-Din and that his father had spent his entire life serving as the caretaker of the Master’s mausoleum!

There were also situations that seemed impossible yet somehow materialized—like filming in Fez, Morocco. It was too expensive, and obtaining filming permits seemed unfeasible. I still believe in the unseen intervention of the Master. Armand Amar, the musician for my film *Bab ‘Aziz*, contacted me urgently. He was preparing to open the Fez Festival of Sacred Music with an oratorio titled *Layla and Majnun*. Facing a significant issue with the performance, he asked me to rewrite the libretto and begged me to perform as the storyteller during the festival’s opening night in the presence of Morocco’s queen! And so, I found myself in Fez, almost as if summoned. Once there, I hired a cameraman, and we began filming in search of the mosque where Ibn ‘Arabi had once resided. But soon, the police arrested me. Luckily, I was set to perform that very evening before the queen, and that fact got me out of trouble!

Later, Stephen Hirtenstein told me he was going to New York to organize a symposium on Ibn ‘Arabi—at Riverside Church! At the time, I was filming *Shéhérazade ou la parole contre la mort* in southern France. By reallocating part of that film’s budget, I managed to finance my trip with a small team, allowing me to capture footage in New York as well!

Another coincidence: a friend of mine was appointed Tunisia’s ambassador to Yemen. I asked if he could host me and my cameraman in Sanaa, and with just the two of us, we managed to film the entire Yemen sequence, including the bustling market and the mosque. I carried my red suitcase in front of the camera while also handling the sound recording myself!

Much like filming in the garden of an Oxford college, it was a matter of reacting and improvising on the spot, all while maintaining a connection to the overarching narrative. Time was always against us, and

the biggest challenge was chasing the light, especially since we didn't use a single artificial lamp throughout the entire shoot. I relied solely on natural light, carefully positioning the camera to make the most of it. Whether it was the soft glow of a library where I was accompanied by a great poet or the breathtaking interior of the mosque in Sanaa, I adapted to the ambient light. Occasionally, we had to stop filming as night fell and the light was no longer sufficient.

The entire three-hour film was made with a small semi-professional camera and a Zoom recorder for sound. Whenever possible, and when I could afford it, I hired a cameraman and a sound engineer. At times, I took on the role of either sound recorder or cameraman myself. For the rest, instead of asking for payment for my appearances—whether at the University of Granada or during presentations of *Bab'Aziz* at Sufi gatherings—I requested coverage for two team members: one for image and one for sound.

There were also setbacks. For instance, we had barely two hours of daylight to film Pablo Beneito in a cloister, and we were constantly interrupted by the noise of a jackhammer nearby!

This is how *Looking for Muhyiddin* came to life—four years of improvisation and resourcefulness. I'm not even talking about the editing process or the revolving door of editors. In the end, I hired an assistant editor and took on much of the editing myself.

One of the great difficulties was the six languages in the film: Arabic, Turkish, Spanish, French, English, and Italian. These mixtures were a real challenge. In addition, it was even more complicated to move from one place to another, since I had filmed in ten countries and more than fifteen cities. I was also evolving with a narrative that did not take into account reality, moving from the city of Cordoba to that of Fez, then to New York. All this complicated the apparent logic of the editing work; it was like a game, both visible and invisible, to maintain the presence of Ibn 'Arabi throughout the film.

Finally, regarding the length of the film, I wondered who would want to watch three hours of footage. In the end, I convinced myself that the Master deserved much more, and that those who wanted to approach him should at least make the effort to spend three hours in his company. Later, during the screening, I realized that these three hours had passed quickly. Some spectators remained in the room, as if the film had to continue, for them, beyond the end of the screening.



In summary, *Looking for Muhyiddin* is a three-hour documentary-fiction that offers an investigation in the footsteps of *shaykh al-akbar*. During this almost initiatory journey, the character crosses a dozen countries and stops in nearly fifteen cities, including Murcia, where the Master was born in 1165; Cordoba, Granada, and Seville in Spain; Fez in Morocco; Tunis in Tunisia; Istanbul, Konya, and Bursa in Turkey; Damascus in Syria; Sanaa in Yemen; as well as London and Oxford in England; not to mention New York in the United States and a few cities in France.

But all this filming and all these words were not easy to gather. It was necessary to find another way to do the editing. Here, I would say it is rather a weaving, because each of these words represents a thread, a color of the Master's thought. It was necessary to intertwine them, to interweave them to create the image of a carpet, that is to say, a garden.

You know, in the Eastern tradition, the carpet makes you travel, like Aladdin's flying carpet. But originally, the carpet symbolized a garden. In the desert, when the nomad unrolls a carpet, it is a garden that he unfolds, based on this symbolic language of Arab culture.

So I wove the film instead of editing it, the difference being that the threads overlap, intertwine, mingle, disappear, and reappear, all the while trying to remain clear. I didn't want a film that was only for believers, but for everyone, for everyone. This editing-weaving gave *Looking for Muhyiddin* such fluidity that some even told me they felt the three hours were still too short to talk about the Master. It's true, my project was not to lock him in a film, but to approach his essence. It was not a question of asserting a truth, but of making one feel a certain taste that the Sufis call *dhawk*.

Sufis taught me not to try to touch things with the mind, but with the heart. The representation is not that of the visible, but of the invisible. This is why I chose for my film to wear my father's burnous, thus symbolizing the presence of the Master, without resorting to an actor who would lend his body and face. Indeed, writing will always be a screen, a form of theatrical play at best, but it will never be able to embody the Master.

This notion of abstraction implies the presence of someone we cannot see. He is there, on the screen, but he transcends the decor; because he is before our eyes, we feel his presence without seeing him. This feeling, reinforced by this abstraction, makes his presence exceed that of a figure borrowed from an actor or another person. In this way, we preserve the right distance that makes this presence possible, while abolishing the game.

One of the questions that touched me the most in the debates after the screenings was: is the Master alive? Where does he live? Have you met him?

To cite this

Khemir, Nacer. "Heterography 1: 'Looking for Muhyiddin.'" *Religiographies*, vol. 3, no. 2 (2024): 128–136. <https://doi.org/10.69125/Religio.2024.v3.n2.128-136>.



A few words about Nacer Khemir

Nacer Khemir is a multidisciplinary Tunisian artist renowned for his poetic and spiritual works. Born in 1948 in Korba, he stands out as a filmmaker, writer, storyteller, and calligrapher, infusing each of his creations with a deep sensitivity to Sufi tradition and Islamic cultural heritage. His films, such as *Les Baliseurs du désert* (1984) and *Bab'Aziz* (2005), offer visual and narrative explorations of a world where mysticism, inner quests, and poetry intertwine. His distinctive style, often described as dreamlike, echoes the aesthetic of *One Thousand and One Nights* and initiatory tales.

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Filmography

1972 - "Le Mulet." Short animated film.

1975 - "Histoire du Pays du Bon Dieu." Télévision français, Antenne 2.

1977 - "L'Ogresse." Télévision Suisse Romande.

1984 - "Les Baliseurs du Désert." Feature film. Grand Prix du Festival des Trois Continents, Nantes, France. Palme d'Or du Festival Méditerranéen de la Mostra de Valence, Spain. Prix de la première œuvre au Festival de Carthage, Tunisia.

1990 - "Le Collier Perdu de la Colombe." Feature film. Prix Spécial du Jury, Festival de Locarno, Suisse. Grand Prix du Festival de Belfort, France. Prix Spécial du Jury, Festival francophone de Saint-Martin.

1991 - "À la Recherche des Mille et une Nuits." Telefilm, Télévision Française, FR3.

2001 - "Contes Soufis." 15 telefilms for the Tunisian television.

2005 - "Bab'Aziz, le Prince qui Contemplait son Âme." Feature film. Prix Henri Langlois, France. Golden Dagger, Muscat, Sultanat d'Oman.

2007 - "Voyage à Tunis." Feature film in the footsteps of the painter Paul Klee, by Bruno Moll with

Nacer Khemir.

- 2008 - "L'Alphabet de Ma Mère." Medium-length film, Jeonju International Film Festival, South Korea.
- 2010 - "En Passant, avec André Miquel." Feature film.
- 2011 - "Shéhérazade, ou la Parole Contre la Mort." Feature film.
- 2012 - "Looking for Muhyiddin." Feature film. Prix Barzaj, Spain.
- 2013 - "Yasmina, ou les Soixante Noms de l'Amour." Feature film.
- 2014 - "Par Où Commencer?" Feature film.
- 2017 - "Whispering Sands." Feature film. Best Film Award, Delhi International Film Festival.
- 2019 - "Loving Wallada." Feature film.
- 2022 - "Le Nuage Amoureux." Short animated film.

Bibliography

- 1975 - "L'Ogresse," Edition Maspero puis Editions La Découverte, reprint Syros 2001.
- 1978 - "Le Soleil Emmuré," Editions La Découverte.
- 1984 - "Le Conte des conteurs," Editions La Découverte, reprint Syros 1997 and 2001.
- 1985 - "Grand-père est Né," Editions du Mascaret.
- 1986 - "Le Nuage Amoureux," texts by Nazim Hikmet, Editions La Découverte.
- 1987 - "Chahrazade," Editions du Mascaret.
- 1988 - "Le Chant de l'Amour et de la Mort du Cornette Christophe Rilke," illustrations of the texte de R. M. Rilke, Editions La Découverte.
- 1995 - "Paroles d'Islam," Albin Michel
- 1998 - "L'Alphabet des Sables," Editions Syros, reprint 2006.
- 2000 - "J'avale le Bébé du Voisin," Editions Syros.
- 2000 - "Le Juge, la Mouche et la Grand-mère," Edition Syros.
- 2001 - "Le chant des Génies," Editions Actes Sud.
- 2002 - "Le livre des Djinns," Editions Syros.
- 2003 - "Le Voyage de Hassan de Samarkand," Editions Actes Sud.
- 2019 - "Le Livre des Marges," Editions De L'œil.
- 2021 - "Ichk, ou les 60 noms de l'amour dans la langue Arabe," self-publication Nacer Khemir.

Exhibitions

- 1976 - Musée d'Arts Modernes de Paris.
- 1980 et 1987 - Beaubourg Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France.
- Between 1992 and 1998 - "Les 60 Noms de l'Amour" in Grenade, Milan, Avignon, Genève etc.
- April 2002 - Musée de la Ville de Tunis, Palais Kheir el-Din, Tunisia.
- January 2003 - Musée de Clermont-Ferrand, France.
- May 2003 - Palais Landzi, Florence, Italy.
- 2003 - Galerie Amar Farhat, Sidi Bou Said, Tunisia.
- 2005 - Festival International du Film d'Amour de Mons, Belgium.
- 2006 - Tiroler Landesmuseum Ferdinandeum, Innsbruck, Austria.
- 2007 - Painting exhibition, Carthage, Tunisia.
- 2009 - Exhibition "La Mort Bleue," Palais Abdalya, Tunisia.
- 2011 - Exhibition "Le Burnous," Palais Abdalya, Tunisia.
- 2013 - Painting exhibition, Galerie de la Médina, Tunisia.
- 2023 - Musée de la Ville de Tunis, Palais Kheir el-Din, Tunisia.
- 2023 - Exhibition "Ichk," Galerie Alain Nadaud, Tunisia.