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## *Sufism, Moral Performance and the Public Sphere in Syria*

**Résumé.** *Soufisme, pratiques morales et espace public en Syrie*

Cet article propose d'analyser le Sufisme en tant que cadre religieux de l'action sociale en Syrie contemporaine. Le Sufisme en Syrie est en progression depuis les deux dernières décennies, en réponse à une demande croissante de formes islamiques des pratiques religieuses personnelles. La tradition soufie, basée sur la réforme morale de l'individu et la reconfiguration de soi-même selon des principes religieux, génère des facteurs sociaux ancrés dans la religion. Dans l'espace public, l'identité soufie s'exprime par diverses formes de pratiques morales, c'est-à-dire par l'application de principes religieux au cadre de la vie sociale. Cette mobilisation permanente par les adeptes du soufisme des principes religieux appliqués a pour effet de les inscrire dans le processus de formation de l'espace public syrien. Les données ethnographiques analysées ici ont été recueillies au cours de travaux sur le terrain parmi les communautés sùfies d'Alep et du Kurd-Dagh entre 1999 et 2001 puis en mai 2002.

**Abstract.** This article aims to analyze Sufism as a religious framework for social action in contemporary Syria. Sufism in Syria has been on the rise during the last two decades, in response to a growing demand for Islamic forms of personal piety. The focus of the Sufi tradition on the moral reform of the individual and on the reconfiguration of the self according to religious principles generates religiously informed social agents. The expression of Sufi identities in the public sphere is done through various forms of moral performance, i.e. the enactment of embodied religious principles as the framework for social practices. This continuous mobilization by the Sufis of embodied religious principles has the effect of inscribing them in the processes that shape and constitute the Syrian public sphere. The ethnographic data analyzed here was collected during my fieldwork among Sufi communities in Aleppo and the Kurd Dagh between 1999 and 2001 and again in May 2002.

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The social expression of Islam in Syria is marked by a plurality of traditions, interpretations and practices, which range from text-centered Salafi Islam to the mystical rituals of Sufism. Amidst this range, the various expressions of Sufism enjoy considerable prestige and authority as individual and collective forms of piety. While Sufism faces strong competition and, sometimes, criticism from other understandings and practices of Islam, such as Salafi or modernist Islam as well as from secular Syrians, it continues to enjoy a significant presence as a source of meaning and identity in Syrian society.

In general, it can be said that Sufism in Syria has been on the rise during the last two decades, in response to a growing demand for Islamic forms of personal piety. This phenomenon is noticeable in the conspicuous displays of signs of individual piety, such as veiling for women, the use of beard for men and mosque attendance for both sexes. It can be said that the affirmation of Islam as a normative framework for the public sphere in Syria shifted from a state-centered project, which was expressed in the confrontation between the Ba'athist regime and the Islamic opposition (Abd-Allah, 1983; Van Dam, 1996: 89-117), to one focused on moral reform of the individual as the mean to achieve the construction of an "Islamic society".

The appeal of Sufism in this context resides in its capacity to combine the collective performance of rituals with individualized religious experiences. The contemporary expansion of Sufi communities was accompanied by a growth in personal adherence to a particular set of Sufi rituals, doctrines and forms of authority as the defining elements of one's religious identity. The process of personal identification with Sufism as a framework for religious identity combines the mobilization of emotional motivations, embodied dispositions and conscious choices in a context of religious plurality.

The recent expansion of Sufism in the religious scene of Syria produced new kinds of religiously framed social agents, as well as new forms of personal and collective morality in the public sphere. The impact of the normative framework of Sufism on the social practices and trajectories of its adepts depends on the insertion of the individual in a particular Sufi tradition and the degree of engagement of the self in its disciplinary practices<sup>1</sup>. Also, the normative power of a particular interpretation and practice of Sufism over the practices and ideas of its adepts is shaped and constrained by its interaction with other Islamic traditions as well as other forms of subjectivity beyond religion, such as ethnicity, social position or family ties.

Finally, in order to understand the social and political effects of Sufism in contemporary Syria, we must analyze the way in which the various expressions of Sufi identities, values, concepts, and rituals are articulated with the discursive traditions, social practices and power relations that constitute the public sphere. This article aims to analyze Sufism as a religious framework for social action in contemporary Syria. The ethnographic data analyzed here were collected during

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1. For the notion of disciplinary practices see Asad, 1993: 125.

my fieldwork among Sufi communities in Aleppo and the Kurd Dagh between 1999 and 2001 and again in May 2002.

## The Religious Debate: Islam and the Common Good

The religious debate in Syria serves as an important forum for dispute and discussion about the common good and its relation to individual and public forms of morality. This opportunity to express and mediate divergent opinions in the public sphere takes on an added significance in Syria where other instances of public debate are tightly controlled by the Ba‘thist regime<sup>2</sup>. The rise of Bashar al-Asad to the presidency after the death of his father Hafiz al-Asad in 2000 unleashed a short-lived wave of liberalization. Political prisoners were released, control of the press was loosened, and discussion forums and clubs (*muntadayât*) created to address social and political issues were allowed to function in various contexts, from professional organizations to private homes. The collapse of this liberal experiment in 2001 in the face of repressive measures taken by the regime against those who publicly expressed their criticisms reinstated state control over national debate (George, 2003).

The religious debate is not the only form of public debate in Syria that has some autonomy in relation to the state, but it does offer a broader range of possibilities, even if indirect, for public expression of dissent and discontent. Moral commentaries focusing on the Islamic legitimacy of beliefs and practices have clear implications for the definition of the common good, including acceptable or desirable forms of governance (Pinto, 2004). On the other hand, religious debate is a key element in the elaboration and circulation of the interpretations of Islam that are favored by the Ba‘thist regime. The production of a set of religious discourses that can be defined as “official Islam” (Böttcher, 2002) comes about less by the imposition of consensus than by the establishment of limits of debate in which different actors can present competing visions.

Therefore, the “official Islam” fostered by the Syrian government is less a coherent corpus of doctrines and opinions than what Pierre Bourdieu has defined as a “field” or “universe of possible discourses” (Bourdieu, 1997: 167-171), as it disciplines public discourse by establishing the issues to be debated and the terms of debate. The Ba‘thist regime is able to influence the production of public discourses on Islam by giving key religious figures easy access to media (radio, television, and internet) or simply by tolerating their public activities. Beneficiaries of this policy do not necessarily have direct links to the regime and may even express their criticisms of it; rather, their role in the production of “official Islam” is played out in their positioning of themselves and in their mutual disagreement.

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2. The concept of public sphere was taken from Habermas (1989 [1962]), taking into account its critical reappraisal for the context of Muslim societies by Eickelman & Salvatore (2004: 10-15).

The main actors in this field of debate have included *‘ulamâ* connected to Sufism, such as the deceased Aḥmad Kuftârû, long-standing Mufti of Syria, and Muḥammad al-Ḥabash, currently a member of the Syrian parliament. It also has included moderate Salafi figures, such as Muḥammad Sa‘îd Ramaḍân al-Bûṭî, who is widely popular for his lectures, writings, and television program; and lay Muslim intellectuals, such as Muḥammad Shaḥrûr, well-known for his modernistic reading of the Islamic tradition (Shaḥrûr, 1990 and 1999). All the main participants in the public religious debate intensely use the modern media, which allows them to give a national and international scope to their discourse and polemics.

Although not all participants in the public religious debate are affiliated with Sufism, it is a constant explicit or implicit presence in the discourse of most of them<sup>3</sup>. For example, *shaykh* Bûṭî, who is known for his sympathy for moderate forms of Salafi Islam, accommodates Sufism in his writings as a religious discipline based on moral reflexivity within the limits of the *sharî‘a*<sup>4</sup> (Bûṭî, 1998). However, not all forms of Sufism are recognized by the public discourses on Islam as legitimate frameworks for Muslim identities in Syrian society. A consensus exists among those participating in the public religious debate about the higher value of spiritualized and rationalized scriptural Sufism. An example of this were the efforts of the late *shaykh* Aḥmad Kuftârû (d. September 2004), who combined the functions of Mufti of Syria and *shaykh* of the Kuftârîyya Sufi order, to transform Sufism into the moral consciousness of the *sharî‘a* by limiting the technical vocabulary of Sufism to quranic concepts (Geoffroy, 1997: 14).

However, despite their role in shaping text-oriented forms of religiosity, the participants in the public religious debate show the limitations and contradictions in their own religious discourse once they act as religious leaders. Both *shaykh* Bûṭî and *shaykh* Kuftârû constructed their religious authority as charismatic leaders, attracting devotees to their *persona* as much as followers of their message. This was even more evident with *shaykh* Kuftârû, who had his authority as Sufi *shaykh* linked to his ability to embody *baraka* (blessing/ divine grace/ mystical power). Even Muḥammad Shaḥrûr presides over a group of “disciples” who adopted him as religious master and gather regularly to hear his lectures as both a pedagogic practice and a form of initiation into his circle of Islamic intellectuals.

Notwithstanding the importance of public religious debate in shaping shared understandings about Islam and its role in society, the discourse of leading religious figures at a national level must always be locally appropriated if it is to be effective in shaping the religious consciousness and the social practices of

3. Muḥammad Shaḥrûr is a notable exception to this trend, as he simply dismisses the esoteric interpretations of Sufism as irrelevant to his rational and formalistic approach to the Islamic textual tradition (Interview with the author, Damascus, 1999).

4. Bûṭî’s relation to both Sufism and the Salafîyya is very complex, as he mobilizes elements of both traditions in order to address specific issues. For an analysis of Bûṭî’s religious message, see Houot, 1999.

individuals. This analysis would therefore be incomplete if it did not take into account the variations between the religious discourse at the national level and the local production of meaning and behavior in the Sufi communities.

The main figures participating in the debate at the national level are also recognized locally, but they do face strong competition from local or unofficial religious leaders and intellectuals. One example of a local reference in the religious debate as it takes place in Aleppo is the Shâdhilî *shaykh* ‘Abd al-Qâdir ‘Îsâ. His book *Ḥaqqâ’iq ‘an al-Taṣawwuf (Truths about Sufism)*, which presents a systematic exposition of the principles of Sufism, is widely read by Sufis and non-Sufis alike. The readers of ‘Îsâ’s book are usually literate, middle-class professionals, who seek a modern form of Sufi spirituality in harmony with the Qur’ân but do not identify with the textual formalism of the dominant views on Sufism that circulate in the religious debate.

While ‘Îsâ stressed the importance of having the Qur’ân and the *sharî‘a* as the normative framework for Sufism, he never denied the religious legitimacy or the reality of sainthood (*walâya*) or miraculous deeds (*karâmât*, sing. *karâma*) (‘Îsâ, 1993 [1961]: 460-470). In reality, ‘Îsâ considered the *sharî‘a* and the ritual rules of Islam as part of the *ẓâhirî* aspects of the religious truth, while the superior *bâtinî* divine reality could only be accessed through the engagement in Sufi devotional practices in order to reach an experiential connection to God (‘Îsâ, 1993 [1961]: 474). ‘Îsâ’s portrait of Sufism as a form of self-discipline and asceticism allows him to generalize it as the moral solution for what he referred to as the “subversion” and “depravation” that threatened the Muslim community (‘Îsâ, 1993 [1961]: 8).

Throughout his book, ‘Îsâ elaborated an interpretation of the Sufi tradition engaged in social change for the sake of achieving a just social order as defined by the principles of Islam. ‘Îsâ wanted to guarantee a central social and religious role for Sufi *shaykhs*, saying that “the legalistic scholars (‘ulamâ al-ẓâhir) are to guard the borders of the *sharî‘a* and the Sufi scholars (‘ulamâ al-taṣawwuf) its morals and its soul” (‘Îsâ, 1993 [1961]: 476-477). He thus presented a view of Sufi spirituality as engaged in social action, which is very different from the abstract spirituality fostered in the dominant views in the public religious debate.

Another important reference in the religious debate in Aleppo is Sa‘îd Ḥawwâ, former leader of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and a Sufi himself. In his book *Tarbiyyatu-nâ al-Rûḥiyya (Our Spiritual Education)*, he defends a form of Sufi spirituality committed to social change through respect of the principles of the *sharî‘a*, affirming the role of Sufi *shaykhs* as moral and spiritual guides of the Muslim community (Ḥawwâ, 1979: 17-18). Ḥawwâ accepted the Islamic legitimacy of miraculous deeds (*karâmât*), even in their corporeal expressions such as the *ḍarb al-shishb*<sup>5</sup>, as proofs of the reality of *baraka* as a form of divine power embodied in the Sufi *shaykhs* (Ḥawwâ, 1979: 217-218). Ḥawwâ’s discourse on

5. The *ḍarb al-shishb* is the ritual perforation of parts of the body with iron skewers without causing any bleeding or physical harm to the performer. It is seen as a proof of the power of the *shaykh*’s *baraka*. Salafi Muslims and Secularists criticize this ritual practice as either a form of un-Islamic magic (*sifr*) or just a backward superstition.

*karâmat* implies that power and authority must be embodied in those who can perform it through miracles or privileged knowledge (Ḥawwâ, 1979: 220).

The main point of divergence between the major participants in the public religious debate in Syria and those who have a local or regional expression is the definition of religious authority and its social roles. The participants in the debate who are linked to the discursive field of “official Islam” tend to define sacred power as something enshrined in the religious texts. To these actors, even those affiliated with Sufism, religious authority derives solely from the capacity in producing legitimate interpretations of the Islamic textual tradition. This view about sacred power and religious authority bodes well with the religious policies of the Ba‘thist regime, as it implies that religious sources of power can be tamed through control of the interpretive regimes that produce religious discourses. Indeed, the Ba‘thist regime has heavily invested in the control of religious education and public discourse (Böttcher 1998; 2002; 2002b).

On the other hand, the works of Ḥawwâ and ʿĪsâ presented views that contradicted the “official” consensus about sacred power by affirming that it can be embodied in select religious leaders, who can demonstrate the legitimacy of their religious authority through the performance of *karâmât*. These discourses pose challenges to the authoritarian order of Syrian politics, as they dislocate the sources of authority from discourse to embodied forms of performance. The views expressed by these authors also have greater resonance with local forms of religiosity, which, at least in Aleppo, are shaped by beliefs and practices related to the notion of *baraka*, such as the cult of saints (Pinto, 2004b). Therefore, religious discourse can act as a vehicle of public dissent, with potential political effects, not so much by carrying an explicitly political content as by defining how power is to be legitimately claimed and exercised.

## The Social Organization of the Sufi Communities

The Sufi communities in Syria have personal and devotional links between *shaykh* and disciple (*murîd*) as their main structuring principle, thereby maintaining a charismatic character despite their formal “institutionalization”. The local community, which is usually named after the *zâwiya* (ritual lodge), is the basic unit of a system that produces identities and power relations through the engagement of social actors in ritual performances, doctrinal discourses and disciplinary practices under the guidance of a Sufi *shaykh*. The local communities can be inserted in three types of institutional arrangements in Syria: centralized Sufi orders; decentralized Sufi networks; and autonomous *zâwiyas*. This is not to suggest static categories, but rather different forms of equilibrium in a dynamic system.

Maybe the best example of a centralized Sufi order is the Kufîrîyya, a branch of the Naqshbandiyya that was headed by *shaykh* Aḥmad Kufîrî until his

death in 2004 and that is currently under the leadership of his son Şalâh al-Dîn Kuftârû<sup>6</sup>. *Shaykh* Aḥmad used his connections with the Ba'ῥhist regime in order to transform his Sufi community into a transnational Sufi order. However, despite the common interests shared the Kuftâriyya and the Ba'ῥhist regime, the former has always expressed some degree of autonomy from the state in its religious activities as a Sufi order, what increased after the death of *shaykh* Aḥmad Kuftârû.

The Kuftâriyya has its center at the Abû Nûr Islamic Foundation, a religious complex that includes "Islamic schools, four universities, the mosque's main prayer hall, offices, a library, apartments, meeting rooms, and the headquarters of the Ansâr charitable organization" (Böttcher, 2002: 11). It also has branches in the major cities of Syria, as well as in Lebanon, the United States, and many European countries.

Until the late 90s, the organization of the Kuftâriyya had a clear charismatic character, as its communities were led by *shaykhs* or *shaykhas* who were connected to *shaykh* Aḥmad Kuftârû by institutional, personal and spiritual links. However, with the physical decline due to the advanced age of *shaykh* Kuftârû there was a move towards the "routinization" of Kuftârû's charisma into the bureaucratic framework of the Abû Nûr Foundation, renamed in 2002 as the Shaykh Aḥmad Kuftârû Islamic Foundation (Stenberg, 2005: 72, 85-86). After the death of *shaykh* Aḥmad Kuftârû in 2004, his son and successor *shaykh* Şalâh al-Dîn Kuftârû started to promote a greater autonomy of the Kuftâriyya in relation to the state through the development of its connections with religious educational institutions in other countries, such as Al-Azhar University (Stenberg, 2005: 69).

There are also Sufi networks without central leadership, organized on the basis of personal relations connecting the *shaykhs* of each local community. These relations can be horizontal, based on ties of friendship, brotherhood, and marriage; or hierarchical, based on ties of descent and mystical initiation. Most networks usually combine both kinds of relations. Such networks are based on the flow of texts, goods, and people and not on an overarching organizing principle or structure. Sufi networks may cover vast regions across international boundaries and embrace *zâwiyas* linked to distinct Sufi orders, allowing the emergence of shared forms of discursive and ritual communication between them. These networks tend to be organized on ethnic lines as a way to enhance stability. For example, there are networks linking Kurdish Qâdirî *zâwiyas* in Aleppo to Kurdish Naqshbandî *zâwiyas* in the Syrian Jazîra and Turkish Kurdistan.

Finally, while local autonomous *zâwiyas* exist in both urban and rural Syria, they constitute an unstable equilibrium in the system that results from the breakup of previously existing Sufi networks or the appearance of a newly created

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6. The Kuftâriyya was founded by Aḥmad Kuftârû's father, Muḥammad Amîn Kuftârû. *Shaykh* Aḥmad Kuftârû succeeded his father as leader of the order in 1938 and was elected Mufti of Syria in 1964 (Böttcher, 2002: 9-12).

Sufi community. In the long run, as the local *shaykh* establishes personal links with other *shaykhs*, there is the tendency of pre-existing networks to incorporate these local *zâwiyas*. Also, new networks can spring from autonomous *zâwiyas* as the *murîds* of local *shaykhs* become themselves the *shaykhs* of yet other communities.

## The Religious Dynamics of Sufi Religiosity

There are several forms of participation and insertion in the religious universe of Sufism, which range from a complete re-organization of the self according to the normative principles of Sufism to the pragmatic use of religious powers culturally attributed to Sufi *shaykhs* for achieving personal or collective goals. One can become a disciple (*murîd*) of a Sufi *shaykh* by taking an oath of allegiance (*bay'â*) to him and, thus, entering the process of mystical initiation (*tarbiya*) in the Sufi path (*tariqa*) under his guidance. The experiential character of Sufi identity is structured in the process of mystical initiation, which includes the acquisition of esoteric knowledge and body techniques<sup>7</sup> through both doctrinal lessons (*dars*) and spiritual exercises.

The disciplinary practices that constitute the Sufi initiation aim to control and reshape the self (*nafs*), so as to detach it from the exoteric (*zâhiri*) universe of worldly appearances and direct it towards the esoteric universe (*bâṭini*) of the divine reality/truth (*ḥaqîqa*). Those who commit themselves to such a full extent to the teachings of a Sufi *shaykh* usually define their religious identities in relation to the Sufi tradition embodied in his religious *persona* and constitute the stable “core” of the Sufi community led by him.

During my fieldwork in Syria, my informants would qualify their adherence to Sufism in terms of their affiliation to a certain *shaykh* or to a particular *zâwiya*. The Sufi orders<sup>8</sup> (*tariqa*, pl. *turuq*) never appeared in the discourse of my informants as a defining element in their religious identity, but they were rather vaguely defined as textual and ritual traditions that delimit different mystical paths within Sufism. Concretely speaking, the Sufis who I encountered during my fieldwork would not define their Muslim identity by saying “I am a Shâdhilî” or “I am a Naqshbandî”, but rather by claiming to be the disciple of a certain *shaykh* or affiliated to a particular *zâwiya*<sup>9</sup>.

Also, the Sufi *shaykhs* mediate between the dominant discourses in the public religious debate on both the national and local levels and the religious practices of their community. They classify the public religious discourses as part of the

7. For the concept of body techniques see Mauss, 1995 [1934].

8. In Arabic, the same word (*tariqa*, pl. *turuq*) is used to designate a Sufi order and the mystical path of Sufism.

9. This pattern of definition of Sufi identities by the charismatic *persona* of the *shaykh* or the local community also appears in recent ethnographies of Sufi groups in Egypt. See Chih, 2000; Hoffman, 1995.

exoteric (*zâhiri*) tradition of Islam and the discourses and practices prevalent in their community as part of the Islamic esoteric (*bâṭini*) tradition. Therefore, the Sufi *shaykhs* use the traditional Sufi hierarchy of religious knowledge in order to articulate and harmonize elements of the text-oriented public religious discourse and the religious practices on which their religious authority rests. Usually, the dominant themes in the public religious debate are only evoked in the Sufi community when someone who is perceived as both religiously and socially connected to them (*i.e.* from literate, urban and upper middle-class background) happens to be present in their activities.

For example, in the occasion of a visit of a professor of the University of Damascus to the main Rifâ'î *zâwiya* in 'Afrin, in the Kurd Dagħ, the *shaykh*, who was literate and came from a family of local modest landowners, delivered a speech in which he said that Sufism was nothing more than a devotional aspect of the *sharī'a*. This evocation of such a common theme in the discourse of reformist Sufi *shaykhs*, sounded quite incongruous to the visitor, as that night's *dhikr* ritual had included the exorcism of *jînns*, religious healing and several performances of *ḍarb al-shīsh*. However, the disciples with whom I spoke saw no contradiction in the *shaykh's* words. For them, the words of the *shaykh* showed the strength of his *baraka* and the miraculous nature of his knowledge, as he could master the "official" religious discourse and reveal that their religious practices were in accordance with the "essence" of the *sharī'a*.

This kind of articulation between elements of the public religious discourses and shared understandings about Sufi practices within the community are restricted to the Sufi religious activities that are open to public participation. These activities include the weekly ritual gatherings (*ḥaḍra*), the performance of mystical evocations of God's names (*dhikr*) and reading circles dedicated to the recitation and study of the Qur'ān and Sufi texts. Those who are regular participants of these rituals and have a special personal and religious attachment to the *shaykh* tend to consider themselves as Sufis. These regular participants of the religious life of the Sufi communities also tend to define their religious identities through their affiliation to a particular *zâwiya* or their personal devotion to its *shaykh*. This group constitutes the majority of members of Sufi communities, as the disciples of a *shaykh* usually range between twenty and a hundred, while the number of regular members of a Sufi community can reach thousands.

In addition to the regular members there is always an "outer-circle" of visitors and occasional participants in the rituals, which works as a liminal zone that gives a porous and fluid character to the boundaries that delimit the Sufi communities in relation to other forms of Muslim religiosity. The members of this temporary group usually do not define themselves as Sufis, but often express sympathy towards Sufi rituals and Sufi-framed religious practices, such as the cult of saints, or justify their presence in a Sufi ritual setting by referring to the religious authority or the *baraka* of the *shaykh*. To search the power of the *baraka* (*tabaruk*) embodied in the Sufi *shaykhs* in order to solve personal or practical problems, such as illness or economic difficulties, is a common practice in Syria.

Sometimes this shared cultural belief in the power of *baraka* takes the form of services regularly performed by the Sufi *shaykhs* for both Sufis and non-Sufis, such as religious healing or mediation of conflicts.

The Sufi *shaykhs* are seen by their followers as embodying notions of justice that are articulated to other elements that compose their charismatic *persona*, such as their knowledge of both the *sharī'a* and the esoteric truths of divine reality. In Aleppo, a large number of people from popular social strata, as well as members of the middle and upper classes, see the kind of justice dispensed by the *shaykhs* as more legitimate and fair than that dispensed by the Syrian legal system. Even non-Sufis in the popular milieu of Aleppo resort to the mediation of Sufi *shaykhs* in order to settle their disputes. Another feature that attracts people to submit their disputes to the judgment of Sufi *shaykhs* is that the *shaykhs* take into account the social *persona* of those involved, always trying to prevent or compensate any harm done to the social identity of the parts, in particular when it involves issues of honor, rank or modesty<sup>10</sup>.

For example, in the popular neighborhood of Bâb al-Nayrab in Aleppo a Qâdirî *shaykh* from the Badinjî family, which is a wealthy traditional family of Sufi *shaykhs*, is often requested to mediate conflicts. The popularity of this *shaykh* is linked to his fame as someone who tries to compensate social disadvantages and offer conciliatory middle-of-the-road propositions in order to allow all parts to save face in the process. An example was the case that was brought to him, which involved a widow who could not pay the debt that she had contracted with the baker of her neighborhood. The *shaykh* decided that her adolescent son should work as an assistant to the baker for a salary lower than average. Therefore, as the *shaykh* explained to me in a later conversation, the amount of money would be gradually paid, while the boy would earn some money and learn some working skills for his future.

Furthermore, various forms of individual piety or pragmatic religiosity are channeled into the religious framework of Sufism through the use of amulets, the cult of saints, and the reading of mystical texts. Sufi texts and manuals circulate among various religious audiences, both Sufis and non-Sufis, carrying Sufi concepts and symbols into individualized contexts of religious reflexivity. There is a renewed interest in Sufi literature as a form of intellectual spirituality among members of the middle and upper strata of Syrian society. There are also many books that present Sufi forms of religiosity to a larger popular audience.

One of the most widely read religious texts in Aleppo is *Dalâ'il al-Khayrât*, a Sufi manual written by the fifteenth-century Moroccan mystic Muḥammad Ibn Sulaymân al-Jazûlî. This text is sold in bookstores and street-stalls in a cheap reprint of an Ottoman edition and is composed by collections of prayers, mystical formulas, and litanies, which are systematically organized in order to faci-

10. The construction of justice upon an evaluation of the rights and obligations due to each individual according to his/her social position is a traditional practice in the realm of Islamic law (Rosen, 1996 [1989]: 43-57 and 68-79).

litate their daily recitation according to weekly calendar of personal devotions. This text rationalizes a vast Sufi devotional material into doctrinal and ritual units that are distributed across the temporal units of everyday life, providing the reader with intellectual tools and religious framework necessary for solitary performance of simple mystical exercises. The methodical performance of the mystical or devotional exercises is also an exercise in religious individualization as it embodies the religious norms and values of the Sufi tradition as the practical and emotional dispositions that constitute the “moral self”.

## **Sufi Identities, Moral Performance and the Religious Reconfiguration of the Public Sphere**

The processes involved in constructing Sufi identities are as varied as the forms of insertion in the Sufi communities, ranging from regular or occasional participation in the ritual gatherings to the full initiation in the mystical path under guidance of the *shaykh*. Many participants in the activities of the Sufi communities become permanent members and adopt their affiliation to Sufism as a defining element of their identities as Muslims. These new members usually couple the adoption of a Sufi identity with some form of “internal conversion” (Geertz, 1973), actively reshaping their selves according to the normative principles of the Sufi tradition as it is defined by their *shaykh*.

However, the multiple texts, rituals and disciplinary practices that compose Sufism were never fully systematized into a unified, coherent and objectified “tradition”. The various traditions that constitute Sufism are constructed in a highly contextual way, with each *shaykh* selecting and combining elements from the doctrines and rituals that were historically systematized as the various Sufi orders. The experiential character of Sufi identities also creates a broad gamut of variation in the outcome of the process of internal conversion, as each member of the community is not only differently positioned in the web of power relations that organizes it, but also differently equipped in terms of the concepts, values and body techniques that constitute its religious tradition.

The scope of the reorganization of the self according to the normative principles of the Sufi tradition depend on the degree of insertion of the individual in the disciplinary practices, such as the ritual performances and the mystical initiation, as well as the intensity of the emotional ties that connect him to the *shaykh* and the community. Furthermore, the process of “subjectification”, as we can define the production of social actors through internalization and embodiment of the normative framework of the religious tradition, which accompany the adoption of Sufi identities is informed, enhanced or, even, contradicted by its articulation with other sources of identity, such as ethnicity, class, status or family ties.

In general the adoption of a Sufi identity goes together with the public display of signs of religious observance or devotional piety. Thus, it is very common for members of a certain *zâwiya* to display the symbolic markers of their affiliation to Sufism, such as having a portrait of the *shaykh* in the “public” areas of the house or in the working-place. The personal engagement in Sufi religiosity can be expressed through the adoption of general public signs of Muslim piety, such as veiling, the use of beard or mosque attendance, or can be marked with elements specific to Sufi religiosity. Very often these signs are combined in order to present a performance of the self, in Goffman’s sense (1959), which conveys an image of both conformity to moral ideals and religious distinction.

Sometimes the disciplinary framework that sustains the Sufi identity has its scope limited to a particular set of values, practices and behaviors as it is articulated with other forms of subjectification. For example, Sherwan, a young Kurdish man from a lower middle-class secular family, became the follower of a Rifâ’î *shaykh* after the latter guided him through a personal crisis. He was 22 years old and was doing his military service in Aleppo, where he was born and where his family lived. According to him, he was having serious conflicts with his father and was having many other problems in his personal and professional life. While he was not religious at that time, as he was a militant of the Marxist-inspired PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party), he followed the advice of a friend and went to talk to this *shaykh*. The *shaykh* belonged to a family of rural Rifâ’î *shaykhs* from Râjû and migrated to Aleppo. After a few years working as a merchant, he started to preach and perform miraculous deeds and founded a *zâwiya* in the working-class neighborhood of Bab al-Maqam.

Sherwan told me that the *shaykh* wrote the name of two of his friends. Then the *shaykh* told Sherwan that they were doing magic (*sibr*) against him. The *shaykh* made a *hijâb* (amulet/charm) writing verses from the Qur’ân on a piece of paper, which was folded and given to him as protection against all evil. After that, Sherwan ended his relations with the two friends and, according to him, his personal problems were gradually solved. After that, he became a follower of this *shaykh* going regularly to the *dhikr* in his *zâwiya*, always wearing the *hijâb* and constantly performing silent *dhikr*. Sherwan told me that the *dhikr* consisted in the mental repetition of God’s names with the help of a *masbaha* (prayer beads), while trying to feel the presence (*hadra*) of the *shaykh* in his heart.

Sherwan told me in a conversation that the *shaykh* helped him to evaluate people according to their “heart” and to reorganize his relationships with family and friends according to the principles of trust and correctness. He also said that he became a better person and a better Muslim after he discovered Sufism and that he convinced his parents and some of his friends to become followers of his *shaykh*. However, when I asked if this meant that he regularly performed the general religious duties, such as mosque attendance, he answered that:

“Not really... the shaykhs in the mosques are ignorant and only want to exploit people. Islam must be in my heart and in my actions (bi-qalbî wa ‘amâlî) [...] I do not need to go to a mosque in order to do that”.

We can say that the *shaykh* framed Sherwan's personal problems in terms of Sufi concepts and values. The *shaykh* also offered him a set of moral and practical principles, which allowed him to both discipline and evaluate his social relations. The *shaykh's* guidance also allowed Sherwan to establish clear and fixed criteria to differentiate between friends and enemies in a situation that he described as being of strong emotional and personal "closeness" between him and his friends. This is a very important skill in the Syrian society, where individual trajectories are shaped and supported by the capacity of establishing and mobilizing reliable personal relations. The social relations that supported Sherwan's individual trajectory in private and public settings were reshaped according to Sufi principles embodied as the senses of trust and moral correctness, but this process was accommodated with his political ideals and previous dislike of the religious establishment through the development of an inward form of religiosity focused on the religious *persona* of the *shaykh*.

Those who enter the Sufi path pass through a deeper reorganization of their self, which is defined in terms of the Sufi tradition as the acquisition of *adâb* (rules of behavior) in their quest for achieving the "perfect self" (*al-nafs al-kâmil*). However, the Sufi understanding of *adâb* does not imply simple compliance with rules of civility or social behavior, but is rather the expression of inner qualities of the self. It must be embodied as guiding disposition of all concrete actions and choices of the *murîd*, expressed in his posture, gestures, glances and emotional states. The *murîd* must behave with humility, always casting his eyes down when interacting with his *shaykh*, in expression of respect, or with unrelated women, in order to avoid lust. He must be restrained in his gestures, never raising his voice or expressing uncontrolled emotional states. On top of all this, he must always have love (*ḥubb*) in his heart for God and for his *shaykh*, as well as being aware of his actions to ensure that they be honest and righteous.

Therefore, the acquisition of *adâb* must be constantly proven and validated through moral performance in the public sphere, creating a framework of individual exemplarity upon which social evaluations and expectations are built in regards to proper social behavior in the public sphere. It is thus not by chance that such enactment is usually coupled with the notion of *akhlâq* (morals). The centrality of the notion of *akhlâq* for the definition of Sufi identities can be seen in the Sufi adage, "all Sufism is morality (*akhlâq*), so those who advance in terms of morality are also advancing in terms of Sufism" commonly heard in discourses and read in books of both traditional and reformist Sufi *shaykhs* (Ḥawwâ, 1979: 202-231; ʿĪsâ, 1993 [1961]: 1; Hilâlî, 2001: 3).

It is common that the disciplinary reconfiguration of the self within a Sufi framework also leads to the reorganization of the social relations of the individual and gives an exemplary character to the individual performance in various social settings. An example of this kind of "web of conversions" was Mustafa, a young engineer in his 30's from a very secular and rich family who became a disciple of *Shaykh* Nadîm, a famous Shâdhilî *shaykh* of Aleppo. *Shaykh* Nadîm comes from a family of merchants and religious scholars in Aleppo. He is respected as

an *'alim* and is also the preacher in a middle-class mosque neighborhood in the Sabil, where he presides over the religious activities of his Sufi community.

After becoming a Sufi, Mustafa adopted a very strict moral behavior, ceasing to drink and to intermingle freely with women, and growing a beard. He also engaged in a gradual reshaping of all his social relations according to the moral principles preached by his *shaykh*. As a result, he “converted” his whole family, convincing his mother to veil and his father and brothers to attend the mosque, and limited his friendship to religious people. Mustafa also articulated several disciplinary mechanisms of religious and non-religious character in the performative configuration of his moral and social self. He combined the public performance of religious piety – such as regular mosque attendance and participation in the weekly *ḥaḍra* – with the individual performance of mystical exercises as part of his initiation in the Sufi path. More surprisingly, he also saw the practice of sports, such as handball, and his successful performance in his studies and work activities as expressions of moral commitment, inscribing his middle-class culture of nurturing the self and the body into the disciplinary practices of Sufi asceticism.

The concepts or, in Sufi vocabulary, the “states” (*aḥwâl*, sing. *ḥâl*) – such as *tawba* (repentance), *muḥâsaba* (self-discipline), and *ṣidq* (correctness) – frame the main disciplinary practices through which Sufi notions of morality are grounded as embodied practical, emotional, and conceptual dispositions. These states, however, are not framed by purely subjective elements, for they must be expressed in deeds and actions (*'amal*) in order to be recognized as legitimate grounds for Sufi identity. The necessity of proving the reality of mystical states through deeds ranging from the performance of miracles to the practical enactment of *adâb* as moral performance is a recurrent theme in the Sufi tradition (Hilâlî, 2001: 5-7). The *shaykh* of the main Rifâ'î *zâwiya* in Afrîn, who presided over a community composed mainly by peasants, merchants and local bureaucrats, summarized the connection between faith, knowledge, and deeds in the following words: “Science (*'ulum*), faith (*imân*), and [religious] knowledge (*'ilm*) with deeds (*'amal*) result in heaven, but faith and religious knowledge without deeds result in burning in the fire of hell”.

The mystical state that is most directly related to the affirmation of Sufism as a normative framework for social action is that of *ṣidq*. According to my ethnographic observations in the Sufi *zâwiyas* in Aleppo, the legitimization of the religious *persona* and the status related to the attainment of the state of *ṣidq* requires the objectification and rationalization of social practices within the conceptual and normative framework of the Sufi tradition. This process can create challenges to shared assumptions about the common good. Thus, social practices that are culturally legitimate can be abandoned or changed as a result of the systematic enactment of embodied correctness by Sufi agents in the public sphere.

For example, other three disciples of *Shaykh* Nadîm, all of whom owned shops in the commercial neighborhood of Bâb al-Faraj in Aleppo, decided not

to engage in the traditional practice of bargaining and haggling over commodity prices. When asked the reason, one of them said,

“We do not do it [bargaining] because it would be very bad. When you tell the client a price higher than what you would take, this means you have an evil intention in your heart and are also forcing him to do the same by offering a price lower than the one he would pay”.

When asked if this would not be bad for his business, he answered,

“What good is it to be rich if God is not in your heart? Thank God we all live well. We have good people who buy from our shops because they know they can trust us. More than that, our master [pointing to shaykh Nadīm’s picture hanging on the wall] is ever protecting us from temptation”.

The meaning of the principle of *ṣidq* was shaped by the Sufi discipline imposed by *Shaykh* Nadīm and enacted by the moral performance of the disciples in their ordinary practices, which constituted an experiential universe defined by a strong sense of moral duty towards the community and trust and respect towards the *shaykh*.

While other merchants criticized this methodical enactment of embodied correctness, the organization of a moral space for economic exchange, symbolically demarcated by *Shaykh* Nadīm’s picture, attracted a regular clientele. Therefore, the practical enactment of embodied correctness creates the possibility of the emergence of stable circles of shared anticipation and trust even in a public arena as volatile as the marketplace. The importance of the notion of *ṣidq* in the constitution of Sufi subjectivities and networks also opens possible connections and zones of overlapping with networks framed by other interpretations of Islam, such as the Salafiyya or militant Islamism, which use this notion as a central tool for the constitution of religious subjectivities and forms of intervention in society<sup>11</sup>. This emergence of new circuits of solidarity, moral authority, and social distinction can bring about the re-signification of social practices and the redistribution of prestige, power and authority in the public sphere.

This analysis has highlighted ways in which Sufism gives expression to various arenas of power and social participation in contemporary Syria. Sufi public discourses on both religion and society contribute to the constitution of a sphere of public debate, offering channels for expression of disputes over forms of the common good in Syrian society. The Sufi-framed moral performances create circles of communication, trust, and shared expectations, which demarcate multiple arenas of solidarity and participation in the public sphere.

The circles of communication created by the various instances of moral performance by adepts of Sufism are also shaped and delimited by the public display of Sufi symbols, such as the presence of Sufi books or the portrait of one’s *shaykh* in a commercial establishment. The relations of trust and solidarity produced

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11. For the connections between Sufi and Islamist milieux in Syria see Geoffroy, 1997.

in these arenas allow for social circulation of Sufi doctrines and conceptions of authority, providing its participants with shared conceptual tools for the understanding and evaluation of the common good. The transformation of the Syrian public sphere within an Islamic framework follows the logic of what Asef Bayat defined as the “quiet encroachment of the ordinary” (Bayat, 1997: 7-21), as it is based in the continuous production of shared normative understandings and practical standards through mobilization of embodied moral principles in the various practical and discursive arenas where the Sufis participate.

The social imaginary (Taylor, 2004: 3-23) carried by Sufis in the public sphere does not aim to change society through an ideological confrontation in the political realm, but gradually produces and shapes social processes and creates arenas of moral order through the enactment of embodied religious principles in everyday life. The convergence of discrete Islamic social imaginaries through the practical enactment of shared concepts, such as *ṣidq*, as framework for individual and collective moral performance also allows the articulation of disparate religious and social contexts into a moral vision of the Syrian society. This process can also mobilize Sufi, Salafi or, even, Islamist networks, circuits and forms of authority into religiously-framed channels of social intervention and participation that have an important role in shaping the dynamics of the Syrian public sphere.

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