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SUFISM IN CONTEXT (CONTRIBUTION TO A RELIGIOUS HISTORY OF EGYPT IN THE OTTOMAN ERA)

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KONTEKSTDƏ SUFİLİK (OSMANLI DÖVRÜNDƏ MİSİRİN DİN TARİXİNƏ TÖHFƏ)

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Xülasə. Məqalədə müəllif Osmanlı dövlətinin Misiri fəth etməsinin dini mədəniyyətə, dini təlimlərə və ibadət qurumlarına necə təsir etdiyi barədə məsələləri araşdırır. Müəllif Osmanlı Misirinin din tarixinin yazılma üsullarına diqqət çəkərək qeyd edir ki, Fransa elmi ictimaiyyətində müqəddəs kitabların tədqiqi İslam dininin iki fərqli rakursdan araşdırıldığını üzə çıxarmışdır: bir tərəfdən islam alimləri tarixi konseptuallaşdırma olmadan filoloji və doktrinal yanaşmaya üstünlük verirlər, digər tərəfdən isə siyasi alimlər və antropoloqlar hakimiyyəti və inancları rədd edirlər.

Açar sözlər: din, İslam tarixi, Quran, mədrəsə, məscid, Osmanlı Misiri.

СУФИЗМ В КОНТЕКСТЕ (ВКЛАД В ИСТОРИЮ РЕЛИГИИ ЕГИПТА В ОТТОМАНСКУЮ ЭПОХУ)

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Резюме. В статье автор задаётся вопросом, как повлияло Оттоманское завоевание Египта на религиозную культуру, религиозное учение и институты богослужения. Автор указывает на методы написания истории религии Оттоманского Египта и замечает, что изучение священных книг во французской научной среде обнаружило именно два подхода или две стороны в исследовании Ислама: с одной стороны, исламоведы, предпочитающие филологический и доктринный подход без исторической концептуализации, и с другой стороны, политические ученые и антропологи, отвергающие представительства и верования.

Ключевые слова: религия, история ислама, Коран, медресе, мечеть, Оттоманский Египет.

Abstract: What impact did the Ottoman conquest of Egypt have on its religious culture, that is on institutions for worship and religious learning, the social status of religious scholars, writings and their diffusion, scholarly debates and polemics and, finally, on rituals and celebrations? Before we begin to answer a question that has been little-explored and yet has broad ramifications, let us indicate our methods and stake out the territory we are examining: how to write a religious history of Ottoman Egypt? Religious history is not a well-developed domain in Egypt; some work has been published on Sufism in the Ottoman period, but all of this adopts an ideological reading of the religious beliefs and practices of that period, described in terms of decadence in comparison to an ideal dating back to some original time or golden age 1.

This stance is contrary to historical method, the aim of which is not to apply a value judgement, but to read the texts in the light of their social context. Reading the Quran and the Sunna is not the same today as it was during the Ottoman period; these experiences of reading bring about interpretations that are coloured by the social and political contexts in which they occur. As a result,

everything connected to the sacred must be studied in a manner that is at once synchronical – as an ensemble of ideas and practices – and diachronical, reading all of the ideas from a historical viewpoint, each moment according to its social and political contexts within human groups. For a long time, orientalists in France worked on texts only, preferring the medieval period and considering anything that happened later, especially in the ottoman era, to be just a pale imitation of an earlier, classical, age. Some of them placed the beginning of this notional long and inexorable decline in the thirteenth century, while others dated it as far back as the eleventh century (I can refer you, for example, to the collective volume published in French in 1957, Classicism and cultural decline in the history of Islam).

During the 1980s political scientists, ethnologists and anthropologists sought to study Islam from the point of view of the social sciences and in opposition to the orientalists, who had understood it purely through the study of sacred texts. And ultimately, in the French academic milieu, we have found ourselves in a situation where Islam has been studied from two distinct angles, to the detriment of religious history. Islamologists, on the one hand, prefer the philological and doctrinal approach, with no historical contextualisation, whereas political scientists and anthropologists put politics, structures and institutions first, neglecting representations and beliefs. Real advances were brought about by historians who chose to learn Arabic in order to write specialist histories. During the 1950s and '60s, while orientalists were debating the decline of Islam with a capital[27], Claude Cahen (d.1991), a renowned French specialist in the economic and social history of the medieval Muslim world, instigated a changed approach that sought to break with orientalism. In 1955, in the journal Studia Islamica, he published a methodological manifesto on 'The Economic and Social History of the Medieval Muslim Orient', in which he underlined the extent to which Arabists and Islamicists were unprepared to practice correctly as historians within the new perspectives that had been opened up by l'École des Annales: rather than focussing on dates and events l'École des Annales sought to move the attention of historians towards economic, social and cultural phenomena studied over the historical longue durée.

Claude Cahen[28] was the thesis supervisor of André Raymond and the mentor of Jean-Claude Garcin. Though there were many historians who were trained or influenced by Claude Cahen I mention these two specifically, not so much because I attended their courses at the University of Aix-en-Provence, but because their pioneering work on Egypt's economic, social and urban history, followed by the work of their students and disciples, of Nelly Hanna and of a whole historical school in Egypt[29], focusing on the ottoman period, has opened up completely new perspectives for religious history. As for the Anglo-Saxon historical trend of global history, or connected history, which studies the modes of interaction and interdependence between societies across state boundaries and on different scales, this has also produced a new historiography of the Arab provinces during the ottoman period, in which the focus is placed on circulations, contacts and exchanges within and beyond the Empire[30]. Demonstrating the links between the local, regional and international conditions that affect religious culture allows the historian to show the specific factors at play in each country – for these do exist and relate to the differing socio-cultural contexts in place.

[27] Al-Tawīl, T., Al-Sha'rānī imām al-tasawwuf fī 'asri-hi, Cairo, 1945; Al-Tawīl T., Al-Tasawwuf fī Misr ibbāna al-'asr al-'uthmānī, Cairo, 1946; Sabrī, M., Dawr al-mutasawwifa fī tārīkh Misr fī-l-'asr al-'uthmānī, Cairo, Dār al-taqwā, 1994.

[28] Cahen, C., « L'histoire économique et sociale de l'Orient musulman médiéval », Studia Islamica, 3 (1955) 93-115.

[29] Garcin, J. C., Un centre musulman de la Haute-Égypte médiévale: Qūs, Cairo, Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 1976; Garcin, J.C., 'Pour un recours à l'histoire de l'espace vécu dans l'étude de l'Égypte arabe', Annales ESC, 35, 3/4 (1980), pp. 436-451; Garcin, J. C., 'Les soufis dans la ville mamelouke d'Égypte. Histoire du soufisme et histoire globale', McGregor, R., Sabra, A. (eds.), Le développement du soufisme en Égypte à l'époque mamelouke, Cairo, Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 2006, pp. 11-40; Raymond, A., Artisans et commerçants au Caire au XVIII e siècle, Damascus, IFEAD, 1973; Cairo, IFAO-IFEAD, 1999.

[30] Hathaway, J., 'Rewriting Eighteenth Century Ottoman History', Mediterranean Historical Review, 19, 1 (June 2004), pp. 29-53; Philipp, T., 'Early Modern History of Ottoman Bilād al-Shām', Arabica 51, 4 (2004).

It is now just a question of broadening the amount of space that we are observing, as suggested by Nelly Hanna in her book, Ottoman Egypt and the Emergence of the Modern World[31]. Having put forward these methodological considerations, let us now approach the crux of the subject. Jacqueline Chabbi, a historian of the beginnings of Islam whose teacher was Claude Cahen, said during a conference: 'For the study of history the method is simple; one requires three essential elements: a time (a chronology), a well-delineated space, and a society in which human beings think, act, represent themself and believe.'

Keywords: religion, history of Islam, Koran, Madrasas, mosques, zâwiyas, Ottoman Egypt.

Chronology and Spaces In 1517 Cairo lost its status as the capital of the medieval great power of the Mameluks, and Egypt under the Ottomans became a far-flung province of a vast empire with its own capital, Istanbul. We have not yet established a fine-grained chronology of religious history in Egypt for this lengthy period, which lasted several centuries. Religious history rarely follows the rapid twists and upsets of political history; this is a history that is situated in the long term and seeks out transmissions, exchanges, interactions, accumulations, 5 acculturations and, finally, re-appropriations. The arrival of the Ottomans does not instigate a rupture in this religious domain; the Ottomans continued the politico-religious approach of the Mameluks, with some new developments, linked to novel factors that we will examine.

I wrote a book about Sufism in Egypt during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the subheading of which is 'Circulation, Renewal and Authority[32]. My choice to focus on these two centuries was guided by the source that served as a departure point for my research: a manuscript in three volumes on the history of Jirjâ in Upper Egypt, written by a native of the town, Muhammad al-Marâghî, and called Ta'tîr al-nawâhî wa l-arjâ' bi-dhikr man ishtahara min 'ulamâ' wa a'yân madînat al-Sa'îd Jirjâ (The regions and lands embalmed with the memory of the ulemas and notables of the town of Jirjâ in Upper Egypt)[33].

This is at once a work of historical topography (Khitat) and a biographical dictionary: its author presents the history of the foundation of religious edifices in the town, the political elites that financed these foundations, the local ulamas who were educated there and who undertook work of various sorts there, and the holy men around whose tombs ancient or recent pilgrimages were established. The manuscript covers a period extending from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries, drawing on archives that have now disappeared. On reading the manuscript one can observe that there was an increase in building construction in Jirjâ during the seventeenth century, and to a lesser extent in the eighteenth. Edifices were founded by emirs who had taken up residence in Jirjâ and invested a part of their wealth in the construction of mosques, zâwiyas, sabil-kuttâb (public fountain/elementary school) and public baths.

During the eighteenth century the names of local ulamas who were responsible for the foundation of more modest edifices, mostly zâwiyas, appear. Before al-Marâghî, 'Alî pacha Mubarâk (d.1893) had counted twenty ottoman-period mosques in Jirjâ, 'that resemble those of Cairo', he writes. In Asyût, the biggest town in Upper-Egypt, during the same period there were only half a dozen mosques offering teaching that, for some, was a preparation for entry into al-Azhar[34].

The mosques of Jirjâ trained the ulamas that every town needed: the long lists of names furnished by al-Marâghî (in 455 notices) shows what an impact these mosques had on all of the surrounding countryside; many of the names listed indicate tribal or village origins.

[31] Hanna, N., Ottoman Egypt and the Emergence of the Modern World, 1500-1800, Le Caire, New York, AUC Press, 2014.

[32] Chih R., Sufism in Ottoman Egypt: Circulation, Renewal and Authority in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries, Abingdon, Routledge, 2019.

[33] Al-Marâghî, Muhammad, Ta'tîr al-nawâhî wa l-arjâ' bi-dhikr man ishtahara min 'ulamâ' : its author wa a'yân madînat al-Sa'îd Jirjâ, Ms. Dâr al-kutub, târîkh, 5517.

[34] 'Alî pacha Mubârak, Al-Khitat al-tawfîqiyya, Al-Hay'at al-misriyya al-'āmma li-l-kitāb, 1981, XII, 103-104.

These mosques and zâwiyas provided positions for men of religion, from the most modest in functions and pay, requiring minimal instructions, such as those of muezzin, imam and Quran reader, to the most prestigious, such as positions for teachers, the judiciary and preachers in the town's largest mosques; these positions were monopolised by a few families, among whom they were transmitted in a quasi-hereditary fashion. These same families sent their children to study at al-Azhar. The movement of provincial students towards the capital city was observed by Jean-Claude Garcin to have begun as early as the fifteenth century; whereas during the time of the madrasas culture and teaching were dominated by foreign students and teachers (Syrians, Iraqis and Iranians...), the 'ruralisation' of the city of Cairo and its new openness to provincial people, especially those from the Delta, resulted in the welcoming of an increasing number of Egyptian students at al-Azhar. Jean-Claude Garcin, when speaking of al-Azhar mosque, refers to a 'figure of Egyptian-ness' that will influence vast swathes of the Muslim world during the ottoman period[35].

The ottomans continued the religious politics of the Mameluks and attributed to the university of al-Azhar numerous waqfs, which confirmed its international status and permitted it to continue attracting students – from other countries but also more and more often from rural parts of Egypt. In the middle of the eighteenth century, the emir 'Abd al-Rahmân Katkhudâ al-Qazdughli (d. 1776) founded the first college (riwâq) for students from Upper Egypt, who had previously been lodged in the maghrebi riwâq.

In Cairo as in the provinces, religious edifices were built by the ottoman elites, but also by tribal chiefs and ulamas, for purely economic reasons, and for reasons relating to social promotion and integration, prestige, legitimacy and piety. This proliferation of private mosques and zâwiyas (edifices that were not sponsored by the state) was to have consequences for religious life. One must now ask what these spaces were for, that is, what one did inside them.

Defining religious spaces and their functions: Madrasas, mosques and zâwiyas The distinctions that existed between madrasa, mosque and zâwiya in Egypt during the Mameluk period disappeared as early as the fifteenth century; little by little the Sufism of the zâwiya penetrated the madrasa and the mosques This phenomenon continued and became more wide-spread throughout the ottoman period[36].

Under the Ottomans, with the decline of the Mamluk madrasa, all forms of religious activity were concentrated in the mosque and (to a lesser extent) the zâwiya: worship, teaching, and sufi practices such as the dhikr (collective remembrance of the names of God) were supported by the waqfs assigned to these edifices.

There were no institutions specific to Sufism, and the zâwiya in Egypt was in this respect completely unlike the Maghrebi zâwiya, which was given its generic name by historians and anthropologists of the Maghreb, who used it to refer to a complex religious and social phenomenon that spread out across space and time. In Cairo as in the provinces, the zâwiya was generally a space for prayer, quite small and sometimes having lost its status as a mosque (jâmi') when the revenues accrued were no longer sufficient to employ an imam/preacher (imam/khatîb). In a rural setting the zâwiya is a simple space for prayer, dedicated to a saint whose tomb it shelters, comparable to the country oratory in modern France[37].

Sufism was integrated socially and religiously in Egypt between the end of the Mameluk and the beginning of the Ottoman period, as demonstrated by Éric Geoffroy. It penetrated into mosques and zâwiyas, as into salons of private houses[38].

[35] Garcin, J-C., « Les soufis dans la ville mamelouke d'Égypte», 24 and 39.

[36] Berkey, J., The Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval Cairo, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1992, pp. 49-50 and pp. 56-59.

[37] Cousin, B., Ex-voto de Provence. Images de la religion populaire et de la vie d'autrefois, Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, 1982.

[38] Geoffroy, É., Le soufisme en Égypte et en Syrie sous les derniers Mamelouks et les premiers Ottomans, Damascus, Institut français d'études arabes de Damas, 1995.

But what exactly is one to understand by sufism in the ottoman period? For an anthropological approach to the sacred in ottoman Egypt Sufi Islam is thus a major player in ottoman Egypt: scholarly milieu were deeply penetrated by the ideas of the greatest of Masters (Shaykh al-akbar), Ibn ʻArabî (d. 1240), whose work was popularised in part by the Egyptian sufi scholar ʻAbd al-Wahhâb al-Shaʻrânî (d. 1565) in his many writings[39].

As for the Sufi brotherhoods that claim descent from the four saints of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Ahmad al-Badawî (d. 1276), Ibrâhîm al-Disûqî (d. 1296), Ahmad al-Rifâʻî (d. 1182) and ʻAbd al-Qâdir al-Jilânî (d. 1166), that is, the Ahmadiyya, the Burhâmiyya, the Rifâʻiyya and the Qâdiriyya, they wove a dense network of mosques, zâwiyas and small domed shrines (qubba) over the entire Delta region thanks to the attribution to them of agricultural lands that were not liable for land taxes (rizaq ihbâsiyya)[40].

The common thread running through my book on Sufism in Egypt is the expansion of a Sufi brotherhood that was latecomer in Egypt, the Khalwatiyya. I had studied the spread of this Sufi Path in the nineteenth and twentieth century Nile valley for my doctoral thesis[41].

The impulses behind this expansion, rooted in the university of al-Azhar, go back to the eighteenth century when this Sufi Path, originating in Turkey, was brought to Egypt by a Syrian Sufi, Mustafâ al-Bakrî (d. 1749)[42].

During a stay in Cairo, al-Bakrî initiated an azharî, Muhammad al-Hifnî (d. 1767). Eight years later, the latter became Shaykh of al-Azhar. Al-Hifnî was a master proselytiser. He initiated the students of al-Azhar and sent them back to their hometowns or villages to spread the Path, which expanded very rapidly and had particular success in Upper Egypt. This success was directly linked to the nomination of a close disciple of shaykh al-Hifnî, Ahmad al-Dardîr al-ʻAdawî (d. 1786), to be dean of the college of the students from Upper Egypt, and Malekite muftî after the death of ʻAlî al-Saʻîdî al-ʻAdawî (d.1775), who was a follower of the Ahmadiyya Sufi path. During the nineteenth century the Khalwatiyya supplanted all the other Sufi Paths of the region[43].

Still today, the shaykh of al-Azhar, Ahmad al-Tayyib (b. 1946), is a khalwatî from Upper Egypt. Thus, the expansion of this ottoman Sufi brotherhood was made possible because the provincial towns contained teaching institutions that offered young boys and men a basic training sufficient to enable them to pursue higher education at al-Azhar; because al-Azhar was transformed afresh under the Ottomans and could therefore welcome these students and continue to be an instrument of education for rural people; and finally, because Cairo attracted numerous foreign scholars, especially from the near east and the Maghreb, whose knowledge and company were sought out. Mustafâ al-Bakrî travelled to Cairo in the company of Raghîb pacha (d. 1763), who was governor of Egypt in 1746 and then Grand Vizier of the ottoman Sultan and an intimate of the Sufis. The Yemeni of Indian origin, Murtadâ al-Zabîdî (m. 1791), wanted to travel to Cairo after having heard the praises lavished on Cairo's political elite and their patronage of scholars, its prestigious mosques and great mausoleums of saints and of members of the Prophet's family (Ahl al-bayt), by his master, also a Yemeni, ʻAbd al-Rahmân al-ʻAydârûs (d.1778).

[39] Chodkiewicz, M., 'La réception de la doctrine d'Ibn ʻArabī dans le monde ottoman', Ocak, A. Y. (ed.), Sufism and Sufis in Ottoman Society, Ankara, Türk Tarih Kurumu (Turkish Historical Society), 2005, pp. 97-120.

[40] Mayeur-Jaouen, C., Michel, N., « Cheikhs, zâwiya-s et confréries du Delta central : un paysage religieux autour du XVI e siècle », dans Afifi, M., Chih, R. et alii (éds), Sociétés rurales ottomanes/Ottoman Rural Societies, p. 139-162.

[41] Chih, R., Le soufisme au quotidien. Confréries d'Égypte au XX e siècle, Paris, Actes-Sud, 2000.

[42] The Khalwatiyya first arrived in Egypt at the end of the fifteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth centuries.

[43] De Jong, F., Turuq and Turuq-Linked Institutions in Nineteenth-Century Egypt: A Historical Study in Organizational Dimensions of Islamic Mysticism, Leiden, Brill, 1978, p. 124.

These foreign scholars, al-Bakrî, al-'Aydarûs and al-Zabîdî, received their numerous visitors in their own homes. Al-Zabîdî had a salon in his house in the Khân al-Khalîlî quarter, near al-Azhar; he was at the centre of a book culture that extended as far as the Maghreb[44].

The transmission of the science of Islam was not attached to a specific institution, but to a master/teacher who was at the centre of a larger or smaller circle of students/disciples. Thus it was not only at al-Azhar that meetings occurred and knowledge was transmitted – on the contrary, it was most often in the majlis (salons) held in private homes that people heard the masters/teachers. Nelly Hanna, in her article "Culture in Ottoman Egypt" has already underlined the necessity of avoiding limiting oneself to the study of institutions, particularly al-Azhar, when one wants to examine culture in ottoman Egypt; this culture is transmitted through many channels[45].

Sufism, like all the 'isms' invented by orientalism, sounds like an ideological current, but being a Sufi was neither a status nor a title, but rather a way of reading and interpreting sacred texts, and of putting into practice one's faith, a faith that impregnated the society of the period at all its levels. Sufism (tasawwuf), for those that followed it, represented the superior science, that of the acquisition of spiritual values that came to crown the knowledge of the sharî'a.

It was not acquired by study, as was the case for the law (fiqh), but inspired by God in those who approached Him through their actions (a'mâl) and their virtues (akhlâq). In manuals of Sufi ethics (âdâb) from all periods, this intuitive science is not defined by a single term but in various ways: the science of spiritual wayfaring ('ilm al-sulûk), the science of the acquisition of noble virtues ('ilm al-akhlâq), the science of disciplining the ego ('ilm âfât al-nafs), and of its spiritual training ('ilm al-riyâda), the science of realities, of the stations and of spiritual states ('ilm al-haqâ'iq wa l-manâzil wa l-ahwâl), the science of hearts ('ilm al-qulûb), the science of inner knowledge ('ilm al-ma'ârif), the science of secrets ('ilm al-asrâr), the science of allusive signs ('ilm al-ishâra)[46].

Following this Path towards God leads one to a spiritual openness (fath) and to an inner understanding of revelation, including its legal dimension. This being the case, one can understand the opposition to Sufism among jurists (fuqahâ') who are attached to a literal understanding of the Quran and the Sunna; inspiration is considered by Sufis to have a legitimate and superior role in knowledge and the ever-renewed understanding of the revelation and the laws it contains. This manner of reading and interpreting the sacred texts impregnated the major religious sciences, such as dogmatic theology (tawhîd), which was revitalised in the eighteenth century because of Sufi influence. In his study on the professions of faith taught at al-Azhar during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Jacques Jomier observes that many authors of glosses on the professions of faith ('aqîda) were Sufis[47].

This was also the case in the legal domain: the jurist Ibn Hajar al-Haythamî (d. 1567), a disciple of Suyûtî (d.1505), went even further than his master in using Sufism in the field of legal opinion (fatwâ); in the same way as did Sha'rânî, at the beginning of the ottoman period, who showed his originality in this domain with his theory of the equality among the four schools of jurisprudence, developed in the framework of Sufism[48].

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[44] Atiyeh, G., 'The Book in the Modern Arab World: The Cases of Lebanon and Egypt', in Atiyeh, G. (ed), The Book in the Islamic World: The Written Word and Communication in the Middle East, New York, SUNY Press, 1995, pp. 233-255.

[45] Hanna, N., 'Culture in Ottoman Egypt', Daly, M. W. (ed.), The Cambridge History of Egypt, vol. 2, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 87-112.

[46] Al-Khânî, Qâsim, Al-Sayr wa l-sulûk ilâ malik al-mulûk, edited and annotated by Ibrâhîm Shams al-dîn, Beyrouth, Dâr al-kutûb al-'ilmiyya, 2005, introduction.

[47] Jomier, J, 'Un aspect de l'activité d'al-Azhar du XVIIe aux débuts du XIXe siècle : les 'aqâ'id ou professions de foi', Colloque international sur l'histoire du Caire, Cairo, Ministry of Culture, 1969, p. 251.

[48] Geoffroy, É., 'Le soufisme au verdict de la fatwâ, selon les Fatâwâ hadîthiyya d'Ibn Hajar al-Haytamî', in Chih, R., Mayeur-Jaouen, C. (ed.), Le soufisme à l'époque ottomane, pp. 118-128 ; Pagani, S., 'The Meaning of the "ikhtilāf al-madhāhib" in 'Abd al-Wahhāb al- Sha'rānī's "al- Mīzān al-kubrā" ', Islamic Law and Society, XI, 2 (2004), pp. 177-212.

The ideal scholar, as put forward by the chronicle of Jabartî and the biographical dictionaries of that period, is the one who makes the link between exoteric science and mysticism. There are differences among ulamas between those who are essentially inclined towards the law and those who are inclined towards the spirit, but these differences tended to diminish, without altogether disappearing, with the influence of the great Egyptian Sufi jurists of the fifteenth century[49].

Any distinction between the group consisting of ulamas, trained by jurists, and Sufis themselves makes little sense for this period. In fact, one can certainly ask oneself whether use of the term 'Sufi' has any pertinence here. In my book I prefer to speak of men of religion, sufi scholars, or simply of ulamas (alongside the juridical and sufi affiliations that make up parts of their names).

Sufism also impregnated popular piety, which tended towards devotion to the Prophet and the saints. The doctrinal concept at the heart of sufi reading on the Prophetic revelation is that of walâya ('God's friendship and divine protection'), translated into English as 'sainthood', 'holiness'. Every Sufi is a walî ('God's friend'). The first known to us to undertake an elaboration of the concept of walâya was al-Hakîm al-Tirmidhî (d. 879), during a period of weakness for the Abbasid Caliphate: Tirmidhî assigned the walî prerogatives similar to those of the Prophet, of whom he was the heir on earth. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Ibn 'Arabî developed this concept into a hierarchical system of sainthood at the apex of which is the supreme pole, the qutb, additionally called the recourse (ghawth)[50].

In an article published in 2006 Jean-Claude Garcin attempts an approach to a global history of Sufism[51].

He notes the presence of Sufis in the city of Cairo during the medieval period and attempts to evaluate their qualitative and quantitative importance by looking at the built environment and the sometimes monumental constructions that are reserved for them (ribât, khânqâh and zâwiya). Jean-Claude Garcin also observes that Sufis are more visible in later periods when they often appear as a recourse against an unjust system; he asks whether there is a link between Sufism and political evolution. The abandonment of the land and the mass arrivals in fifteenth century Cairo of rural people, who brought with them their more demonstrative forms of piety and their genealogical families of saints, had important consequences that were felt in a cultural life that had been characterised by a greater openness to the provinces and the countryside. This was the beginning of the mass movements of large numbers of urban people at the time of pilgrimages and mawlid around rural sanctuaries: the work of C. Mayeur-Jaouen on Ahmad al-Badawî, confirms that devotion to this great saint of the Delta increased in importance in the first half of the fifteenth century. 'Alî bey al-Kabîr, who ruled over Egypt from 1760 to 1772, built a mosque near the tomb of Ahmad al-Badawî, thus increasing the legitimacy of pilgrimage to the saint of Tantâ and giving it a near-national amplitude[52].

The medieval concept of 'invisible government' (dawla bâtiniyya) – the hidden hierarchy of saints that presides over the destinies of the world – takes on a growing importance during the ottoman period in many parts of the Muslim world, from the Maghreb to central Asia, and attests to the very concrete power that saints had acquired in society[53].

[49] Éric Geoffroy described this in outline in his thesis; Le soufisme en Égypte et en Syrie sous les derniers Mamelouks et les premiers Ottomans.

[50] Chodkiewicz, M., Le Sceau des saints. Prophétie et sainteté dans la doctrine d'Ibn 'Arabī, Paris, Gallimard, 1986 (English translation, The Seal of the Saints. Prophethood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn 'Arabī, Cambridge, The Islamic Texts Society, 1993).

[51] Garcin, J-C., « Les soufis dans la ville mamelouke d'Égypte : histoire du soufisme et histoire globale», op.cit.

[52] Mayeur-Jaouen, C., Histoire d'un pèlerinage légendaire en islam. Le mouled de Tantâ, Paris, Aubier, 2004, p. 141-144.

[53] Amri, N., « Le pouvoir du saint en Ifrîqiyya aux VIII e -IX e /XVI e -XV e siècles : le « très visible » gouvernement du monde », in H. Besc, G.Dagher et C. Veauvy (eds.), Politique et religion en Méditerranée, moyen âge et époque contemporaine, Paris, Éditions Bouchène, 2008, 165–96; Geoffroy, É., Le soufisme en Égypte et en Syrie, 11-112.

Hagiographies refer to this occult assembly (dîwân), the composition of which varies across different regions of the Muslim world. In the seventeenth century one characteristic of Egyptian Sufism was put into writing, the legendary hierarchy of the four poles (al-aqtâb al-arba‘a); in transhistoric hagiographical tellings the two Egyptian patron saints Ahmad al-Badawî and Ibrâhîm al-Disûqî are placed alongside the Iraqi saints ‘Abd al-Qâdir al-Jîlânî and Ahmad al-Rifâ’î in the celestial assembly that governed the world at the moment when their brotherhoods were sharing out Egyptian territory among themselves. These four saints were said to have been present throughout eternity, as shown by their cosmic and eschatological roles[54].

The hagiography of Shaykh al-Hifnî which was written during his own lifetime, and possibly under his supervison, responded to specific social and religious needs and motivations: it was a question of embedding the social and religious legitimacy of the Khalwatiyya, which was a new feature in the ancient brotherhood landscape that had been stable since the middle ages; it was also necessary that the Khalwatiyya and its shakh, Ahmad al-Hifnî, impose themselves in the face of Egypt’s greatest saint, Ahmad al-Badawî. Al-Hifnî’s hagiography essentially reconstitutes the sacred history of the brotherhood through the descent of its founder from the Prophet and the great saints of Islam. The life and destiny of Shaykh al-Hifnî are based on those of the Prophet whose model he embodied – a saint from birth, founder and saviour, he was confirmed in his status as supreme pole by the Messenger of God and by Egypt’s greatest saint, Ahmad al-Badawî.

Sufi sociabilities Like all hagiographies, that of Shaykh al- Hifnî shows that men accept submission to the saint less for the model of moral perfection that he represents than for his baraka, the divine benediction given to those who have followed the Path towards God and come back down to human beings to guide and intercede for them. The saint as earthly patron and messenger of eschatological hope was a collective creation, an image, a model that was fully integrated into history – knowing what mankind was seeking in his company tells us much about the hopes and expectations of his contemporaries, and also about their fears[55].

One must recall the flexibility and adaptability of the modes of sufi sociabilities in order to understand their success throughout their history: the peasant or the city-dweller could simply participate in the daily dhikr sessions, or choose to follow the more serious spiritual discipline, or else merely to attend the saints’ festivals (mawlid). The people around the shaykh follow a code of behaviour towards him the rules of which have been put into writing in the manuals of âdâb; this ancient literary genre underwent a renewal in the ottoman period, a phenomenon that helps explain the reproaches sometimes cast by orientalists on Sufi scholars for not having produced any original doctrinal material. It is more important to ask oneself why Mustafâ al-Bakrî, a lettered and cultured man of his times and a great connaisseur of the works of Ibn ‘Arabî, wrote almost nothing except manuals of âdâb[56].

In Egypt as in the whole ottoman and Moghul empires and the lands beyond, Morocco and Central Asia, the great Sufi brotherhoods such as the Naqshbandiyya in Central Asia and India and the Khalwatiyya in Anatolia and the Balkans were spreading thanks to military conquest and the patronage of the political elites; one should also mention the Chistiyya in India, the Mawliyya (Mevleviyye) in Anatolia, and the Shâdhiliyya in Morocco. This fresh Sufi expansion had an effect on their organisation: the masters were aware of the need to integrate a growing number of affiliates. The contents of these manuals of âdâb do indicate a greater codification, along with increases in hierarchies and an affirmation of a specific identity and a certain exclusivism among these great Paths. But the rules of sufi ethics, which had been set in the medieval period, did not change: as a counter to their respect for, and submission to the authority of, the Shaykh: he must protect and assist

[54] Mayeur-Jaouen, C., « La vision du monde par une hagiographie an-historique de l’Égypte ottomane », dans Chih, R., Mayeur-Jaouen, C.(éd.), Le soufisme à l’époque ottomane, p. 129-150.

[55] Dupront, A., Du sacré. Croisades et pèlerinages, Paris, Gallimard, 1987.

[56] Elger, R., Mustafa al-Bakri: zur Selbstdarstellung eines syrischen Gelehrten, Sufis und Dichters des 18. Jahrhunderts, Schenefeld, EB-Verlag, 2004.

them in this world and the next. The three terms of the Master/disciple relationship, ṣuhba (companionship), khidma (service) and shafâ'a (intercession/mediation), are polysemous concepts whose contents refer to social, political and religious relations. The hagiography of Shaykh al-Hifnî shows the master at the head of his own household, where he establishes patron-client ties similar to those that exist in the households of the military elites[57].

Some elements of the hagiography of Shaykh al-Hifnî provide clues about the social structure of his clientele, which contains a mixture of different identity, brotherhood and corporatist ties (belonging to the azharî institution). Al-Hifnî's network was formed first of students and professor at al-Azhar. For students arriving from their native towns the Shaykh's protection, acquired through affiliation to his Sufi Path, the Khalwatiyya, provided a powerful social resource for solidarity and integration into the university and the city. In return, these students became genuine propagators of the Path throughout the country. The Shaykh's personal ties with his disciples/protégés were built on confidence, friendship and loyalty: the part of the meaning of the 'ahd, or pact of allegiance, is unbreakable allegiance; a disciple does not leave his shaykh once he has engaged with him for initiation and guidance. As a very young Copt, al-Mahdî was 'entrusted' to Shaykh al-Hifnî by his father; al-Hifnî took charge of his Muslim education until he had become, like his Master, a great scholar (âlim), occupying an important position at al-Azhar. There is a strong parallel here with the practices of military households in which young boys who had been bought as slaves were brought up in the palaces of the emirs and sultans whose faithful servants they became; some of them later acceded, like their masters, to the rank of emir. Elsewhere, Jabartî uses the terms tâbi' and muntamîn (clients, protégés) to speak of those who frequent the household of Shaykh al-Hifnî: 'He supported the families of his protégés (Kâna yasrifu 'alâ buyût atbâ'ihi wa l-muntamîn ilayhi)'[58].

In his study of society and the holy in late antiquity, Peter Brown shows that the ties that existed between the 'patron' saint (the holy man) and his community were more than a projection of the clientelism that structured the society of those times; the saint was an intercessor with God, 'the patronus, the protector, with whom it was desireable to establish a client relationship'[59].

There is at once a proximity and a distance between the authority figure as represented by the sufi saint in his community and the figure of temporal power incarnated by the chiefs of the military households (bayt) that form the political structure of the country. We do not know the details of the constitution of al-Hifnî's fortune, nor its extent, apart from the fact that 'he had received gifts of land from emirs and governors'. Whatever the forms of enrichment, for his hagiographer, and for his disciples, the real capital of Shaykh al-Hifnî is not material but symbolic: to borrow from the terminology of weberian sociology, it is his charisma. He is rich because he shares divine protection (walâya) and benefits from the baraka, from God's goodwill for him. Jabartî writes, 'His subsistence is a gift of God'. And it is because of this charisma that the elites and the people alike call on him to resolve their conflicts.

Conclusion History does indeed allow us to avoid falling into anachronism, and to avoid looking at the past in the light of current events in the Muslim world, or from a point of view that is broadly inherited from European orientalism. Religious culture in ottoman Egypt was not in decline; on the contrary, it benefited from a period of great mobility and many exchanges.

Chronicles and travellers' accounts describe milieu of sufi scholars, all in contact with each other in this intellectual and commercial crossroads of a city that was Cairo under the Ottomans: in spite of distances and ethnic, regional, or juridical differences, men were engaged in debates, discussions and scholarly exchanges. They often knew of each other before even having met, having read the various writings that circulated in greater numbers in Cairo, prefiguring its status as the biggest centre for Arabic printed books when printing arrived in the nineteenth century. This religious

[57] Chih, Sufism in Ottoman Egypt, chapter IV.

[58] Al-Jabartî, I, 290 ; 'Alî pacha Mubârak, Al-Khitat al-tawfîqiyya, X, p. 168-170.

[59] Brown, P., La société et le sacré

life must be re-situated within a cultural life the increasing dynamism of which was linked to a certain freedom of expression. Orientalists reproached this cultural production for its lack of originality. But writings are always intended for a public; their authors' ambition was not to display their originality, but, as the inheritors of a medieval culture, to transmit it and, via their glosses and commentaries, make it accessible to the growing number of students who had been educated in the kuttâbs and mosques that were expanding at a rapid rate during the ottoman period.