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Cyber-Sufism

Stéphane A. Dudoignon

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Among widely circulated misconceptions of Sufism are imaginations of this ensemble of initiatory traditions as a form of social withdrawal, encouraging people to turn their backs on social responsibility and commitment, in order to retreat into a private world of devotion (e.g., Algar). However, the expansion of Sufism in cyberspace from the mid-1990s onwards suggests the ability of Sufis to utilise increasingly multidirectional media for the reinvention of gnostic practices and sociability, while showing themselves intensely active on the socio-cultural, educational if not even political levels — within either Muslim-minority or majority societies, and against very diverse socioeconomic backdrops. Conversely, the Internet’s very evolution, especially after the irruption of the social media (alias ‘social networks’) since the mid-2000s, has exerted, together with the continuing demographic changes of this period, a deep impact on the ongoing transformation of Sufism itself (on the significance of this historical moment for the Middle Eastern internet in general, see Gonzalez-Quijano, *Communautés Virtuelles*, 196).

Three different types of historical factors have favoured these phenomena. The first is socio-industrial; it is linked to the combination of labour migration with the redeployment, through emerging electronic media, of social networking in diasporic contexts, as well as with the development of diasporic public spheres. In what follows we shall see how several *turuq*, including the most influential, have tried to adjust to these new global circumstances. The second type of factor springs from the very nature of the Internet and of the web 2.0, as well as from the influence that both have exerted on the evolution of Sufism in two quite different geopolitical contexts — namely, before and after the Maghreb-Mashreq revolutions and upheavals of 2011 and thereafter. In retrospect, rapid changes in attitudes towards authority and in methods of mobilisation were obvious and undeniable. Factors of the third type pertain to the special interactions developed in cyberspace between Sufis and widening ranges of cultural and religious practice, Muslim or not. Here, emulation between Sufis and Salafis — and, more largely, the proliferation of modern forms of proselytizing (e.g., El Naggar) — highlight the need for panoramic approaches that take into account the sum total of the practitioners’ changing relationship to the media.

The main question is, ultimately: has the spread of the Internet and of the web 2.0 been as revolutionary, for the growth and dissemination of Sufism, and for the virtualisation of Islamic spirituality, as the diffusion of the printed matter had been during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (see Sedgwick in this volume)? Once again, the medium is, in part at least, the message. It paves the way, this time, to a new religious public sphere juxtaposing innovatively confessional issues with trade, entertainment and professional life, multiplying horizontal relationships and promoting new hierarchies substituting webmasters for headmasters (cf. Campbell, 312; Hackett, 73; Eickelman and Anderson, 14–16). Commodification through the spread of the market principle of supply and demand also raises issues pertaining to the very meaning of initiation, membership and hierarchy, as well as the place of e-Sufism within the context of the much-debated advent of ‘post-Islamism’. If confirmed, how will such trends, all highlighted by social science research since the mid-1990s, affect our global understanding of this multidimensional socio-technological change and its challenges, notably, of sociological categories such as community and virtual experience?

Socio-Industrial Legacies and Backdrops

The height of social reach had been achieved by the Sufis in the years following WWI. Since then, they had to face a succession of challenges, from Muslim reformist critique to state regulation and loss of their socioeconomic power. Towards the middle of the twentieth century, the propagation of movable-type printing and the opening up of schooling to the masses generated, already, an unprecedented pluralisation of religious authority and doctrine, emphasised by new media technologies and forms of association (e.g., Eickelman, *Clash of Cultures*, 290-95). The influence of Sufism continued to decline, alongside the social significance of early modern agro-pastoral landholdings on which its social force had long relied, in spite of state support of certain *turuq* in certain areas at certain times, against rapidly mushrooming Islamist organisations (e.g., Weismann; Sabra in this volume).

Some Sufi traditions, however, could be passed on, albeit in modern shapes and forms, or through commodification, e.g., by music recordings. In Europe, North America, Japan, Australia, Sufis came to appeal to audiences in the ever-growing labour and trading diasporas, in new English, French or Russian cultural idioms. And at the turn of the 2000s, with the exile of a number of leading *shaykhs* from their countries of origin, new forms of Sufism appeared, in the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries primarily, though in ever closer interaction with the traditional abode of Islam (Green, 214-15). The enlargement of Sufism's territoriality itself had been largely prepared by the massive migrations, both rural/rural and rural/urban, which began in the last quarter of the twentieth century (even in such a polity as the USSR: cf. Shikhaliev). Among other features of this evolution, one can mention the increasing appeal to urban educated middle classes, stimulated by *shaykhs* henceforth equipped with science or medical degrees and/or allied with pious industrialists; and the blurring of boundaries between religious and academic discourses — the result of frequent partnerships between sacred lineages and university teachers for the re-designing of rural traditions and of saint cults (e.g., Dudoignon, *A Surrogate Aristocracy*).

The Sufi Tradition in the First Internet Revolution

The advent of the Internet in the 1990s was instrumental in strengthening several features of this modernity. Early websites, in fact, used new ways of broadcasting information, thereby prolonging the letterpress revolution, with analogous effects on the further diversification of written production (e.g., Gonzalez-Quijano, *La Renaissance Arabe*; Chih *et al.*, 13-16), and on the general evolution of spiritual authority (e.g., on Twelver Shī'a *marja'iyyat*, Rosiny; on Alevi *dedes*, Sökefeld; Dressler). Innovation itself directly resulted from socio-demographic changes in evidence since decades. It was spurred on in the 2000s by new feelings of insecurity among children of first-generation migrants (e.g., Bunt and Cheruvallil-Contractor, on Sufism in Great Britain; Rytter, on South Asian Muslim practitioners in Denmark). Diaspora contexts proved decisive through the action of Sufi groups either imported, deprived of a pre-existing migrant community, or involving actors raised in the West (Green, 221; Piraino, 97-99). Helping the spread of Sufism to the former colonial metropolises, the Internet came to fulfil three different functions: providing information regarding Sufism while also enhancing its visibility; transcending distances between disciples and itinerant masters or marabouts, operating from a sacred city such as Touba for Senegalese and Guinean Mourides; offering a space where religious experiences could be reaffirmed, for example through video-shared rituals (cf. Milani & Possamai 2013 and 2016 on several branches of the

Ni‘matullāhiyya between Iran and Australia; Traoré and Bondaz on the Mouride segment of the Tijāniyya between Francophone West Africa, Western Europe and Canada).

Occasionally participating in the introduction of computer science and information technology into the ‘Third World’, a number of *ṭuruq* increased in size, again, while acquiring a new territoriality after a century of gradual decay with their *shaykhs* and *khalīfas* recovering lost positions of influence. Displaying digital versions of the Qur‘ān and the *ḥadīth*, undertaking digitalisations of Islamic literature for the public, the sites, sometimes unofficial and requiring account numbers, of such diverse Sufi organisations as the Algerian-born ‘Alāwiyya, the cross-border Senegalese and Guinean Mourides, the varied branches of the Iranian Ni‘matullāhiyya and the Italian Aḥmadiyya Idrīsiyya Shādhiliyya were resorting to the Internet, at the same time, to keep ranks closed. Such services as mailing lists, contact details of *zāwiyas* and of *dargāhs* worldwide, even Sufi dating websites as to the Naqshbandiyya Khālidiyya Ḥaqqāniyya, increased *communitas* — that is, a sense of belonging further deepened by the confidential sharing or by the collective hearing of non-public *shaykh* teachings or group chants —, as well as by access to charismatic counselling or to dream interpretation upon e-mail request. Discourses of cultural resistance against diverse hegemonies, varying with the audiences targeted, have helped fuel, too, a sense of community, as used to do the defence of Persian cultural legacy (*farhang*) widespread among modern Ni‘matullāhīs (van den Bos, 62-65). Pioneer also, in the preservation and dissemination of tradition through globalisation has been the Moroccan-born Qādiriyya Būdshīshiyya which, since its reform by Shaykh Ḥamza (d. 2017) in the 1970s, has become appealing, in France, Belgium and Canada, to French-speaking educated urbanites, men and women, triggering the construction of a transnational Francophone community (Haddad, 204-6; Dominguez Diaz, 62-77). As we shall see in the next paragraph, some, however, within the universe of the *ṭuruq*, would build up new relationships to the medium, passing from Sufism online to online Sufism, as it were, helped by the boom of the social media as for the mid-2000s.

The *Fuqarā’* in Command? The Web 2.0 and Its Irregular Impacts

The first social media/networks appeared worldwide in 1997, followed in the early 2000s by the web 2.0. The Wikipedia model revealed the dominance of users, rather than professional content producers, over the medium. Indeed, cable TV in the 1960s-70s had already opened the way for expressions of non-mainstream voices, before passing under control of larger companies. It is around 2004 only, however, that could be observed the quick expansion of ‘peer-driven’ platforms relying on individual computer users to upload the bulk of their content, and on readers to filter the information conveyed. Half a decade later, a new generation of low-cost PCs flooded the international market, followed since 2013 by the mass diffusion of 4G smartphone applications that opened the era of ‘micropreneur’ activity (cf. Ryan, 181): developing digital skills was no longer the preserve neither of rich countries nor of upper classes.

What impact did this new turning point exert on the *fuqarā’*’s role in the practice and diffusion of Sufism? Granted with a hermeneutic dimension of orality suitable to contestation of authority and expression of alternative voices, the web 2.0 has led to a fragmentation of the canon, which resulted itself in a challenge to the traditional figures of authority and in the development of mechanisms of confrontation (Varlik, 50-1, 60-1). Globalisation, however, proceeded diversely, sometimes paradoxically. Telling illustrations of this complex, sometimes hardly predictable evolution are provided by three *ṭuruq* of diverse origin, all of which maintain a strong global presence, especially in cyberspace — viz., the Tijānī Mourides, the

Naqshbandiyya Ḥaqqāniyya and certain branches of the Ni‘matullāhiyya. Among the Naqshbandīs and the Ni‘matullāhīs, the *ṭarīqa* itself has come to coexist with new non-initiatory trends and traditionalist discourses often neighbour today with services available to wider audiences. The Ḥaqqānīs’ web representation, especially, has grown during the 2010s thanks to its multiplication of Youtube channels and Google groups, its presence on Twitter, LinkedIn or Instagram, the development of iPhone applications (Piraino, 100-3). Besides, the relative young age of the disciples of the Ḥaqqāniyya, the authoritative role that *khalīfas* play in the Naqshbandiyya and this organisation’s structural fluidity have allowed its *murīds* to develop blogs and websites of their own. Moreover, not content with disseminating knowledge, the Mourides, the Ḥaqqāniyya and the Ni‘matullāhīs have displayed online supernatural powers based on images endowed with *baraka* of their respective *qutbs* and reformers since the late nineteenth century, namely Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba, Shaykh Nāẓim of Cyprus and Shaykh Javād Nūrbakhsh. They also used music and videos subtitled in several European languages, rather than written documents in the classical Islamic idiom — the former’s U.S. sites offering the opportunity to take the *bay‘a* (oath of allegiance) online (Nielsen *et al.*; Haddad; Milani & Possamai, *The Nimatullahiya*; Bondaz, 261-64; Piraino).

From Sufism Online to Online Sufism?

Making smartphone applications (Facebook, especially) ‘a place to live religion’ (Piraino, 103), the Ḥaqqānīs and Ni‘matullāhīs have gone farther than most other *ṭuruq*, for which sharing by telephone emotions experienced in the framework of Sufi sociability remains a disputable deed. Such an evolution has multiple implications for the farther development of Sufism of course, but also of the Internet itself in its interactions with religion. Actually, as we have seen, Sufism online remained confined within a limited set of functions: providing basic information about and defending the *ṭuruq* (against growing anti-Sufi currents); organisation of events; facilitating master/adept contact; there was little space for individual initiative or prospects, save for the selective discovery of texts and participation in discussions about orthopraxy. Traditional *ṭuruq*, from this viewpoint, were making the most of the new industrial asset, as were certain madrasas at the same time after half a century of parallel decline, the internet contents of both institutions differing not so much, after all, from those given by them within the real world (including fundraising campaigns for Islamic aid organisations: e.g., Eickelman, *Madrasas in Morocco*, and on Deobandi madrasas in South and South-West Asia: Zaman, 77-81; Dudoignon, *Sunnis Online*, 48-52; on the Muslim Brother movement: Gonzalez-Quijano, *Communautés Virtuelles*, 204). For the *ṭuruq*, as for diverse madrasa networks, online communication has in many instances strengthened centralist tendencies (on marabouts operating from Touba, in Senegal: Traoré, 65; and more generally Howell and van Bruinessen, 11-12). Online Sufism, however, as dispensed by the Naqshbandiyya Ḥaqqāniyya and by diverse branches of the Ni‘matullāhiyya, has opened different perspectives, due to the specific openness of these different traditions to diverse audiences (and to the Ḥaqqānīs’ particular leniency regarding the initiation process, the *murīds*’ observance and conduct, the definition of membership and, overall, the hierarchy — apparently threatening the *ṭarīqa* with dissolution).

Such tendencies have led, of course, to an extreme diversification of Sufi practices and discourses, sometimes within one and the same tradition, with strong oppositions between countries with old, structured and hierarchized Muslim communities and those deprived of them (e.g., Haddad 2002:202, on the Ḥaqqāniyya and the Būdshīshiyya between Paris and

Montreal). In the diaspora, high turnovers of disciples, growing numbers of syncretistic believers and the adoption — at least vis-a-vis part of the *ṭarīqa*'s audience — of a consumerist discourse on religion have transformed some Sufi spiritual lineages into marketing brands. In this way, religion has evolved into a client/healer therapeutic relationship embodied, for instance, in 'psychological Sufism' as it has been practiced by the psychiatrist Javād Nūrbakhsh (on the 'MacDonaldisation' of the online Ni'matullāhiyya in Australian context, cf. Milani & Possamai, *The Nimatullahiya*, esp. 61). De-Islamised, fusion Sufism, influenced by the post-1960s stress on spirituality, was a response to the eclecticism of the global religious marketplace. As a result, this "neo-Sufism" has become central in debates over the phenomena of post-Islamism and secular religion. However, from a top-down viewpoint at least, what we deal with here is perhaps, a two-dimensional (or multidimensional) Sufism characteristic of modern-day spiritual entrepreneurship on the one hand and, on the other hand, within the Sufi tradition proper, of a rapidly growing inventory of globalised, multi-audience *ṭuruq*. A distinctive feature brought about by the proliferation of hybrid forums is the further blurring of boundaries between religious officialdom, the universe of the *ṭuruq*, the academy, the media and the public — the Internet being sometimes perceived as a mere instrument of verification and approval.

Some Conclusions

Participants and Internet audiences in the old and new worlds of Islam, especially those of generations X and Y born with the Internet and with social media, show an increasingly eclectic, flexible and practical relationship to belief, knowledge and belonging within the context of electronic *taṣawwuf* as well as in their overall participation in other spiritual e-sociality. The global challenge that this phenomenon represents for the long-term viability of the *ṭuruq* requires a truly multidisciplinary study of Sufism as the distinct site of varied online communities. It cannot be dealt with simply through the institutional and content analyses that still prevail in the field. A combination of global social science approaches is necessary to comprehend not only the religious uses of this multidimensional technological revolution, but also the religious perceptions of this new medium, with particular care for the audience/viewer usage and practice. The Internet *per se* subverts such categories as 'minority religious group', while also questioning the distinction between public and private, central and marginal, orthodox and heterodox, religious and secular, confirming the more general ambivalence of the phenomenon of religion (Hackett, 73). The flexibility of the information conveyed via web 2.0 has resulted in a form of return to orality and in a new stage in exegetic competition, simultaneously accentuating the symbolic significance of orthopraxy (e.g., Ryan, 138-39). In spiritual life as in the political sphere during the 2010s, the new technologies of communication have exerted a liberating action concurrently in documentation, coordination and mobilisation. In this context, the flexible affiliations of e-Sufism allow for the creation of a wide public sphere that can escape, eventually, the logics of both the state and marketplace (Gonzalez-Quijano, *Arabités Numériques*, 95-96; Dagnaud, 57).

In the meantime, one can state that Sufism has survived against all odds, managing to 'preserve much of its charm' (Weismann, 280), and maintaining a viable stake in the global religious market through adjustment to new technologies and organisational formats. After cable TV and cellular telephony in the last third of the twentieth century, cyberspace has widely carried out the task of preserving religious rituals and traditions. Enabled by the web 2.0 with an oral character suitable to contest authority and to express alternative voices, the Internet, simultaneously, has been strengthening the masters' control over their pupils by

means of an inner normalisation that may stifle, sometimes, initiatives (Gonzalez-Quijano, *Communautés Virtuelles*, 203). The Internet, at the same time, was operating as a sacred space and as a vector of new or reinforced sacred territorialities (as we have seen, through the development of identities specifically Persian, for part of the Ni‘matullāhiyya, or Francophone for certain Būdshīshīs and Ḥaqqānīs; see also Hermansen; Werbner). In a parallel development, the social media have, since the mid-2000s, facilitated connection to wider, more amorphous communities for discussing matters seen as out of place in wider society, in quest for mentors and justification of the orthopraxy of their chosen lifestyles. If the development of cyber-Sufism remains as unpredictable as the whole Internet’s, and if the individual has tended to become its primary agent, it is in complex interaction, sometimes even in increasing competition with a typology of more traditional and traditionalist institutional actors.

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