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SUFISM IN YEMEN: A STRUGGLE FOR PURITY AND AUTHENTICITY

Alexander KNYSH*

An Historical Preamble

Little is known about the fortunes of Sufism in Yemen and South Arabia¹ prior to the Rasulid epoch (626/1258-858/1454). Evidence from the pre-Rasulid era consists of references to individuals, usually male, but occasionally also female, of exceptional piety. These references are scattered throughout Yemeni historical chronicles and biographical collections and are not always easy to find.² In the northern areas of Yemen the activities of popular and influential Sufi masters, such as Abu al-Ghayth ibn Jamil (d. 651/1253) and Ahmad ibn ‘Alwan (d. 665/1266), coincided with

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¹ The region of Hadramawt, currently a southern province of the Republic of Yemen, historically it has been part of the Indian cultural and economic sphere, which made it quite distinct from both the Shafi‘i-Sunni Tihama region of North Yemen and the Zaydi-Shi‘i Yemeni highlands (the Sa‘da region that borders on the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia). At the same time, the inhabitants of Hadramawt have maintained strong economic and cultural ties with the coastal area of South Arabia stretching from Aden to Mahra. In other words, Hadramawt is a historical and cultural area with a distinctive social structure and historical experience that only partly overlap with those of the northern regions of Yemen.

² Such as, Ibn Samura’s (d. 586/1190) *Tabaqat fuqaha’ al-Yaman*, al-Janadi’s (732/1332) *al-Suluk fi ṭabaqat al-‘ulama’ wa-’l-muluk*, al-Burayhi’s (d. 904/1499), *Tabaqat sulaha’ al-Yaman*; al-Sharji’s (d. 893/1487) *Tabaqat al-khawass*.

the last decades of Ayyubid and the beginning of Rasulid rule.³ Sufis from that epoch claimed affiliation with *silsilas* (chains of spiritual initiation and transmission) originating outside Arabia, especially the Qadiriyya, Rifa‘iyya, and Shadhiliyya. The same is largely true of Sufi masters who resided in villages and towns along the South Arabian coast. Chronicles and biographies from the provinces of Hadramawt and Zafar (South East Arabia) mention of Sufi *awliya’* (“friends of God”, usually rendered into European languages as “saints”), who come from the famous *sada* and *masha’ikh* families of the region.⁴ The first Sufi masters (*shaykhs*) of Hadramawt claimed dual affiliation with the Qadiri and Shadhili *silsilas*. Eventually, they formed a distinctive spiritual genealogy known as *al-tariqa al-‘Alawiyya*.⁵ As I have argued elsewhere,⁶ the emergence of this *tariqa*, which combined the teachings and practices of eastern and western Sufism,

³ Muhammad ‘Aziz, *Religion and Mysticism in Early Islam: Theology and Sufism in Yemen*, London, I. B. Tauris, 2011, 1-50.

⁴ Throughout Yemen and South Arabia the collective noun *sada* (sing. *sayyid*) refers to the descendants of the Prophet (usually, of the Husaynid branch of the ‘Ali-Fatima line). While in North Yemen the word *masha’ikh* usually designates tribal chiefs, in South Arabia it denotes former tribal clans whose members have distinguished themselves as religious scholars and leaders of local communities. In the north, such clans are referred to as *qudat*; for the *sada* see Alexander Knysh, “The *sada* in History: A Critical Essay on Hadrami Historiography”, in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 9/2 (1999), 215-222.

⁵ For a concise statement of its principles see Muhammad ibn Husayn ibn ‘Abdallah al-Habshi (al-Hibshi), *al-‘Uqud al-lu’lu’iyya fi bayan tariqat al-sada al-‘alawiyya*. It was published by the author’s son Ahmad ibn Muhammad al-Hibshi (al-Habshi) in a book entitled *al-Majmu‘ al-latif* (Cairo, Bulaq, 1910); ‘Aziz, *Religion and Mysticism*, 196-199; for a recent academic study of the spread of this *tariqa* in Indonesia see Ismail Alatas, “Aligning the *sunna* and the *jama‘a*: Religious authority and Islamic social formation in contemporary Central Java, Indonesia”, Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Michigan, 2016.

⁶ Alexander Knysh, “The *sada* in History: A Critical Essay on Hadrami Historiography,” 215–220.

is traditionally associated with the names of the pious *sayyid* Muhammad ibn ‘Ali Ba ‘Alawi of Tarim, Hadramawt – better known as “preeminent jurist” (*al-faqih al-muqaddam*, d. 653/1256) – and *shaykh* Sa‘id ibn ‘Isa al-‘Amudi of the town of Qaydun in Wadi Daw‘an (d. 671/1272), Hadramawt.⁷ As just mentioned, these individuals gave rise to the famous ‘Alawiyya *tariqa* whose very name is indicative of its intimate link to the Hadrami *sada* of the Ba ‘Alawi clan. Moreover, the leaders of this Hadrami *tariqa* insist that no member of this noble clan should join any other Sufi lineage (*silsila*).⁸ They also insisted that it was “the best *tariqa* [ever] based on the Qur’an and the Sunna, and the beliefs of the Pious Ancestors (*al-aslaf*).”⁹ Ba ‘Alawi *sada* actively propagated its teachings among the Muslims of South and South East Asia and East Africa, where it has gained wide popularity. Today, as in the past, the leadership of the *tariqa* consists almost exclusively of the members of the Ba ‘Alawi clan.¹⁰

In the Sunni areas of North Yemen, the *silsilas* of the Qadiriyya, Rifa‘iyya, and Shadhiliyya Sufi brotherhoods were predominant¹¹ with the Naqshbandiyya making inroads into the coastal cities of the Tihama during the 11th-12th/17th-18th centuries, probably from India via Mecca.¹² In the

⁷ Affiliation with this *silsila* was claimed by a few lesser families of the Hadrami *masha’ikh*.

⁸ Robert Serjeant, “The Sayyids of Hadramawt,” inaugural lecture delivered on June 5, 1956, at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1957 (offprint), 20.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁰ Alexander Knysh, “The *tariqa* on a Landcruiser: The resurgence of Sufi movement in Yemen.” In *Middle East Journal*, vol. 55/3 (Summer 2001), 399-414.

¹¹ ‘Abd al-‘Aziz al-Mansub, *Al-‘Arif bi’llah ‘Abd al-Hadi al-Sudi* (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr al-Mu‘asir, 1995), 56.

¹² John Voll, “Linking Groups in the Networks of Eighteenth-Century Revivalist Scholars: The Mizjaji Family in Yemen.” In Nehemiah Levtzion and John Voll

same region, as well as in the port city of Aden, we find the Ahmadiyya *tariqa* that represents the influential Idrisi tradition named after the Maghribi Sufi Ahmad ibn Idris (1253/1837). Viewed by some sympathetic Muslim and Western scholars as reformist and sober,¹³ the Ahmadiyya's rituals in Hodeida, which included collective recitations of mystical poetry by men and adolescents, were condemned by some Salafi-minded Yemeni observers as immoral, scandalizing and conducive to sin.¹⁴ All this fact tells us is that in different historical, social, regional and cultural environments members and leaders of the same Sufi *silsila* behaved differently, and there is no uniform and universal pattern of Sufi behavior.

From the 7th/13th century on, Sufi lodges (*zawaya*; *arbita*), which had formed around popular Sufi masters and, after their death, their graves, became part and parcel of the local religious and social landscape both North Yemen (with the exception of the Zaydi-dominated areas) and in the south, especially in Hadramawt and Zafar. The lodges and tombs of popular "friends of God" (*awliya* ') and memorial mosques associated with them served as sites of weekly spiritual "concerts" (*sama* ') during which Sufi poetry was recited, in a local vernacular to the accompaniment of drums and other musical instruments. Such Sufi "concerts" are frequently mentioned in Yemeni chronicles from the 13th/19th centuries C.E.¹⁵ They took

(eds.), *Eighteenth Century Renewal and Reform in Islam* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1987), 69–92; Muhammad 'Aziz, *Religion and Mysticism*, 193–194.

¹³ See, for example, Rex O'Fahey, *Enigmatic Saint: Ahmad Ibn Idris and the Idrisi Tradition* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1990), 1–26.

¹⁴ Muhammad 'Aziz, *Religion and Mysticism*, 200–201; cf. 'Abdallah al-Muslih, *Al-Sufiyya fi Tihamat al-Yaman* (Cairo: Dar al-safwa, 2006), 63–65 and 95–102.

¹⁵ Robert Serjeant, *South Arabian Poetry. Vol. I. Prose and Poetry from Hadramawt* (London: Taylor's Foreign Press, 1951), 40; cf. 'Abd al-Rahman Ja'far

place in towns and villages, both in the north and in the south of the country, despite their occasional condemnation by those local scholars, who considered such activities to be a blameworthy innovation (*bid'a*) in religious practice.¹⁶ Classical Sufi manuals of al-Qushayri (d. 465/1074), al-Ghazali (d. 505/1111) and al-Suhrawardi (d. 635/1234) gained wide circulation throughout Yemen alongside the writings of local Sufi teachers. Also popular were mystical poetic collections of Ibn 'Arabi (d. 638/1240), Ibn al-Farid (d. 633/1235), and al-Tilimsani (d. 690/1291), although they seemed to have been primarily appreciated and transmitted by the Sufi intellectual elite. The same applies to Ibn 'Arabi's mystical masterpieces *Fusus al-hikam* and *al-Futuhat al-makkiya*, as well as their later interpretations by his followers such as 'Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulusi (d. 1143/1731).¹⁷

One should point out that in Yemen Sufi communities were relatively small and have not produced the elaborate institutional and economic structures and hierarchical organization that were typical of the large, ramified Sufi orders (*turuq*, sing. *tariqa*) in some areas of the Muslim world,

ibn 'Aqil, *'Umar Ba Makhrama (884-952): Hayatuhu wa-tasawwufuhu wa-shi'ruhu* (Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, 2002), 77–82.

¹⁶ For details see Alexander Knysh, *Ibn 'Arabi in the Later Islamic Tradition: The Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 233; cf. chapter 1 of Mark Wagner's "The Poetics of Humayni Verse: Language and Meaning in the Arab and Jewish Vernacular Poetry of Yemen" (Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, NY, 2004).

¹⁷ Muhammad al-Ḥabashi (al-Hibshi), *Fihris makhtutat ba'd al-maktabat al-khassah fi 'l-Yaman*; Alexander Knysh, "A Tale of Two Poets: Sufism in Yemen During the Ottoman Epoch," in Rachida Chih and Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen (eds.), *Le soufisme à l'époque ottomane/Sufism in the Ottoman Era* (Cairo: Institut Français de Archéologie Orientale, 2010), 337–367.

especially Egypt, North and West Africa, Anatolia, Iraq, Iran, and India.¹⁸ This peculiarity of Yemeni Sufism may be attributed to the lack of resources on the part of Yemeni ruling elites and the general population. As we know, elsewhere in the medieval and early modern Muslim world rulers, military commanders, courtiers and their wives lavished substantial resources on Sufi communities and individual Sufi leaders. By patronizing them, these members of medieval Muslim ruling elites wanted to assert their status in the eyes of their Muslim subjects as supporters of Islam, its institutions and its authoritative representatives. The practice of generously endowing Sufi lodges and shrine complexes created a solid material foundation for the growth and flourishing of *tariqa* Sufism throughout the Muslim world.¹⁹

Whereas the Sunni rulers of Yemen were definitely eager to pay homage to popular Sufi *shaykhs* and use their spiritual authority (*jah*) to their advantage, they did not possess enough resources to endow and sustain large-scale Sufi institutions similar to those of Egypt, the Ottoman lands, and India. To be certain, kings and princes of Yemen did make donations to individual Sufi *shaykhs*, lodges and Sufi shrines, but such donations were meager and barely sufficient to keep them afloat.

Other factors may also have been at play, including the intrinsic political instability and fragmentation of the region and the resultant inability of local rulers to establish and maintain a powerful, prosperous and durable state capable of efficiently taxing its population. Wealthy private benefac-

¹⁸ For a classical study see Spencer Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); see also Alexander Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism: A Short History* (Leiden and Boston: E.J. Brill, 2000).

¹⁹ Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism*, chapters 8 and 9.

tors (merchants, governors and their wives) seem to have been few and far between. To these factors one may also add the presence in the highlands of North Yemen of a politically and militarily active Zaydi community, whose scholars and rulers opposed Sufism for doctrinal reasons.²⁰ Whereas this opposition was not uniform and relations between individual Zaydi scholars and Sufi *shaykhs* fluctuated over time, in the end the rationalist and Shi‘i tendencies of Zaydi Islam had prevailed, leading to condemnation and occasionally physical persecution of Yemeni Sufis by Zaydi state authorities.²¹

Our discussion of the vicissitudes of Yemeni Sufism in more recent times would be incomplete without mentioning the presence along the country’s borders of the Arabian tribes that had embraced the puritan anti-Sufi teachings of Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1206/1792). The Wahhabi state, which in the 20th century emerged out of the alliance between the physical descendants of Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab (and their ideological soulmates), on the one hand, and the ruling Sa‘ud clan, on the other,

²⁰ As do the Twelver Shi‘is, the Zaydis consider Sufi claims to a superior, divinely inspired knowledge to be an illegitimate encroachment on the prerogatives of the ‘Alid *imams* of the Prophet’s family. They also resent the unquestioning obedience that Sufi teachers (*shaykhs*) demand of their followers (*murids*). Such obedience, in their view, is due exclusively to the members of the Prophet’s family (*ahl al-bayt*). Furthermore, being adherents of the rationalist Mu‘tazili doctrine in matters of theology, Zaydi divines deny the reality of saintly miracles (*karamat*) and revealed knowledge (*ma‘rifā*) that Sufis attribute their *awliya*. These supernatural abilities, the Zaydis believe, are also confined exclusively to their *imams*. See Wilferd Madelung, “Zaydiyya.” Online publication: <https://iis.ac.uk/encyclopaedia-articles/zaydiyya>. (accessed on January 11, 2020).

²¹ Wilferd Madelung, “Zaydi Attitudes to Sufism”. In Frederick de Jong and Bernt Radtke (eds.), *Islamic Mysticism Contested* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1999), 124–144; ‘Aziz, *Religion and Mysticism*, 165–182.

was implacably opposed to Sufism in all its forms and shapes.²² The political and military ascendancy of Wahhabism in Arabia may have been an impediment to the growth of institutionalized Sufi *turuq* during the time that is sometimes referred to as the “Sufi century” in neighboring Africa (namely, from the late-eighteenth to the late nineteenth centuries C.E.).²³

This conspicuous absence of Sufism’s resurgence in Yemen during that epoch is particularly striking if we recall the relatively long sojourn in the city of Sabya²⁴ of the aforementioned Sufi preacher Ahmad ibn Idris. It is widely known that during his stay in that town Ahmad ibn Idris actively disseminated his interpretation of Sufi teachings through public preaching and in the course of debates with local opponents of Sufism from among Wahhabi-leaning local ‘*ulama*’.²⁵

Nevertheless, Ahmad ibn Idris’ activities did not result in the emergence of powerful and politically active Sufi orders similar to those established in Africa by his disciples al-Sanusi (d. 1276/1859), al-Mirghani (d. 1268/1852), and Ibrahim ibn Salih al-Rashid (1291/1874). In stark contrast to Yemen, these African Sufi institutions were remarkably successful in spreading Ahmad ibn Idris’ teachings and spiritual lineage (*silsila*) across the eastern and northern regions of Africa.²⁶

²² See Alexander Knysh, *Sufism: A New History of Islamic Mysticism* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017), chapter 6.

²³ Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism*, 251.

²⁴ Presently in Saudi Arabia, but formerly in ‘Asir, an area which prior to the Saudi annexation (alongside Jizan), was part of Yemen historically, culturally and geographically.

²⁵ O’Fahey, *Enigmatic Saint*, 98–106.

²⁶ Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism*, 250–251.

So, what was it about Yemeni society and history that precluded a simultaneous development in Yemen and South Arabia as a whole? More research is needed to answer this intriguing question.

**Sufism in Yemen Today:
Between Dar al-Hadith and Dar al-Mustafa**

The unification of North and South Yemen in May 1990 resulted in a dramatic resurgence of Islam as the primary source of identity for the country's population as well a powerful political and social force. The role of Islam was particularly strong in South Yemen that, unlike its northern counterpart and occasional enemy, had for several decades experimented with Socialist ideology imported from its former sponsor and protector, the Soviet Union.²⁷ With Soviet-style socialism reviled and discredited, the ideological void left by the collapse of the pro-Soviet regime was filled by Islamic rhetoric and slogans.²⁸

Among the numerous Islamic movements and parties that flourished in the 1990s, we find a conservative version of apolitical missionary Salafism (*al-salafiyya al-daw'iyya*) that is sometimes called "scholastic" Salafism (*al-salafiyya al-'ilmiyya*). It is exemplified by the preaching of Shaykh Muqbil al-Wadi'i (d. 2001) who hailed from the Sa'da region of

²⁷ "The Cult of Saints in Hadramawt: An Overview." In *New Arabian Studies*. Ed. by R. B. Serjeant, R. L. Bidwell, and G. Rex Smith, Exeter University Press, vol. 1 (1993), 137–152; cf. Miriam Müller, "A Spectre is Haunting Arabia: How the Germans Brought their Communism to Yemen." In *Political Science*, vol. 26. Bielefeld, Germany, 2015.

²⁸ Alexander Knysh, "Contextualizing the Sufi-Salafi Conflict (From the Northern Caucasus to Hadramawt)." In *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 43/4 (2007), 503–530; see also Laurent Bonnefoy, *Salafism in Yemen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 229–232.

North Yemen.²⁹ A graduate of the prestigious Islamic University of Medina in Saudi Arabia, he propagated his own version of apolitical Islam through a network of educational institutions named “Abode or House of Hadith” (*dar al-hadith*). His apolitical stance probably goes back to his Saudi teachers Nasir al-Din al-Albani (d. 1999) and Rabi‘ ibn Hadi al-Madkhali (b. 1931), although Shaykh Muqbil himself tended to deemphasize his Saudi connections.³⁰ In the words of a major French expert on Shaykh Muqbil and his apolitical interpretation of Islam, one of its hallmarks was his appeal to his followers to purify Islam from “[popular] superstitions, celebrations and beliefs,” including veneration of Sufi shrines and adulation of living Sufi *shaykhs* by their credulous and misguided adherents.³¹

To wean the Yemeni masses away from such transgressions against the Muslim doctrine of divine oneness (*tawhid*), Muqbil and his Salafi followers³² encouraged them to undertake a diligent study of the sound prophetic *hadith* that represent the gold standard of correct Muslim doctrine and practice.³³ In other words, for the Yemeni Salafis who follow Muqbil, the correct belief and practice of the pious forebears of Islam (*al-salaf al-salih*) were enshrined in a limited body of prophetic sayings that should be authenticated not by their historical context, rational criteria or references to relevant Qur’anic verses, but by the moral-ethical qualities and piety of

²⁹ For details of his biography, educational activities and teachings see Bonnefoy, *Salafism*, 54–69.

³⁰ On these scholars see Bonnefoy, *Salafism*, 54–56, 95–96, 102 and 160; see also the relevant chapters of Roel Meijer (ed.), *Global Salafism: Islam’s New Religious Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

³¹ Bonnefoy, *Salafism*, 45, 98 and 226.

³² Listed in *ibid.*, 59.

3their transmitters. Screening their biographies constitutes an important part of the science of hadith (*'ilm al-hadith*) taught in the educational institutions established by Shaykh Muqbil. His approach to hadith as the second (after the Qur'an) foundational text of Islam implies that the quotidian elements of worship (*'ibadat*), such as prayer, ablution, ritual purity and fasting, as well as the sound creed (*'aqida*), must grounded in the carefully screened and selected *hadith* designated as "sound" (*sahih*). Departure from their literally understood injunctions is unacceptable and detrimental to one's faith. Fighting for broader mundane and ideological concerns, such as social justice and resistance to oppression, are seen by Shaykh Muqbil as part of politics that inevitably result in divisions, trials and anarchy (*tafarruq, fitna; fawda*) within the Muslim community (*umma*).³⁴ Consequently, the Yemeni branch of Salafism exemplified by Shaykh Muqbil can be described simultaneously as literalist, quietist and purist.³⁵ Its followers are anxious to detach themselves from the social and political struggles raging around them, while at the same time preserving the right to criticize the instigators and perpetrators of these struggles, especially the Muslim Brothers, whom Muqbil deridingly nick-named "the Failed Brothers" (*al-ikhwan al-muflisun*).³⁶

The *ahl al-hadith* movement of Shaykh Muqbil and his followers is commonly seen as the exact opposite of a socially and culturally conservative religious and educational movement launched in Hadramawt by several members of the Ba 'Alawi *sada* families. Its charismatic founder and lead-

³³ Ibid., 45–46.

³⁴ Ibid., 46.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 56 and 101–102; Knysh, *Sufism*, 212–216.

er, Habib ‘Umar bin Hafiz (b. 1963), in 1993 established a religious educational institution in the quaint city of Tarim, Hadramawt, that he named the “Abode of the Elect One [i.e., the Prophet]” (*dar al-mustafa*). The legitimacy of this ambitious educational project with its wide-spread international network of followers is based on the claim of its leaders to be restorers and promoters of an unalloyed, traditional religiosity that they presented as indigenous to Yemen and South Arabia.³⁷ In Hadramawt, where Habib ‘Umar’s religious project originated, “traditional” implies a meticulous observance by the denizens of Dar al-Mustafa of the ritual calendar that contains the dates of pilgrimages to local shrines of “pious friends of God” (*awliya’ Allah al-salihun*), most of whom come from the ranks of the local *sada* clans. The curriculum of Habib ‘Umar’s Dar al-Mustafa features, in addition to the classical Sufi works of al-Harith al-Muhasibi (d. 243/857), Abu Talib al-Makki (d. 386/996), Muhammad al-Ghazali (d. 505/1111), ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani (d. 561/1166), and of the revered local religious scholar ‘Abdallah b. ‘Alawi al-Haddad (d. 1132/1720), a daily recitation of *mawlid* poetry,³⁸ especially, al-Busiri’s “Poem of the Mantle” (*qasidat al-burda*), as well as odes in honor of the Prophet composed by local *sada* scholars.

While, as the author himself discovered during an interview, the leaders of Dar al-Mustafa are often uneasy about being called “Sufis,” they, nevertheless never tire of emphasizing the special merits of the spiritual method of the ‘Alawiyya *tariqa*, whose Sufi beginnings and doctrinal and practical foundations are impossible to deny because they are confirmed by

³⁷ For details see Knysh, *Sufism*, 215–216.

³⁸ That is poetry devoted to the praise of the Prophet and is usually recited during his birthday on the 12th of the lunar month Rabi‘ al-awwal.

major *sada* historians.³⁹ As has already been mentioned, it is named after the common ancestors of all local *sada* of the “Banu ‘Alawi” or “Ba ‘Alawi” clan, it combines two spiritual genealogies – that of the Shadhiliyya of North Africa (going back to Abu Madyan Shu‘ayb, d. 594/1197) and that of the Qadiriyya of Iraq (going back to ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani, d. 561/1166).

When asked about the place of Sufism in their doctrine and practice, the denizens of Dar al-Mustafa would identify it as those of the ‘Alawiyya (Ba ‘Alawiyya). They would then describe them as a spiritual method based squarely on the Qur’an and Sunna and the interpretations of these two sources of Islamic faith by the foremost Ba ‘Alawi *sada* theologians and jurists of the previous centuries. It is noteworthy that the leaders of Dar al-Mustafa and its branches in Hadramawt avoided calling their spiritual method and moral-ethical instruction as “Sufism.” Instead, they would use the phrase *tazkiyat al-nafs* (cleansing or purification of the soul) – a practice the validity and legitimacy of which no Muslim dares to challenge or deny. Clarifying his position on the issue of Sufism, Habib ‘Umar says the following:

“If what is meant by the word ‘Sufism’ is the desire to purify the heart and perfect one’s following of the Prophet (may God bless him and grant him peace), then its usage is only positive. We should not, however, allow a word to become a barrier preventing people from knowing its true meaning... Call it by any other name if you do not like the word ‘Sufism’, call it ‘Ihsan’⁴⁰ or ‘knowledge of the inward’ or ‘purification of the soul.’ Call it what you will, but the concept remains the

³⁹ For example, Muhammad al-Shilli Ba ‘Alawi, *al-Mashra‘ al-rawi fi manaqib al-sada al-kiram Al Ba ‘Alawi*, 2 vols. (Cairo: al-Matba‘a al-‘Amirah al-Sharafiyya, 1901).

same and we will not allow a mere word to become a cause of conflict or something, which prevents people from knowing the reality of the concept.”⁴¹

While the followers of Habib ‘Umar have some reservations about being seen as Sufis, neutral observers, however, almost invariably refer to them as such, using terms like “Sufis” (*al-sufiyya; ahl al-tasawwuf*) or somewhat less complimentary, those “who look like and behave like Sufis” (*al-mutasawwifun; al-mutasawwifa*). Their detractors (who are quite numerous outside the headquarters of the Habib ‘Umar’s compound in the city of Tarim), however, mockingly designate them as “grave-worshipping Sufis” (*al-quburiyun al-sufiyun*) or “purveyors of Sufi superstitions” (*ashab al-khurafat al-sufiyya*).⁴² The disparity of perspectives on Sufism among different groups of Yemeni Muslims is significant. What is obvious is the fact that the opprobrium of Sufism disseminated by various Salafi groups in the area (not just the followers of Shaykh Muqbil al-Wadi‘i, but also by the local groups of the Muslim Brothers), has penetrated deeply into the collective psyche of the population. As a consequence, Habib ‘Umar and his retinue have to conceal their Sufi convictions and practices under various euphemisms, including those mentioned in the quotation above.

Among the most vocal critics of Habib ‘Umar and his Dar al-Mustafa are the followers of Shaykh Muqbil who designate themselves as “supporters of the teachings of the pious forebears of Islam” (*al-da‘wa al-*

⁴⁰ Literally, “making something beautiful or perfect.”

⁴¹ Habib ‘Umar bin Hafiz, “Responding to Critics of Sufism.” May 1, 2013; online publication: <https://muwasala.org/2013/05/page/8/> (accessed on January 12, 2020). I have kept the wording and punctuation of the original.

⁴² Knysh, *Sufism*, 218; Bonnefoy, *Salafism*, 239.

salafiyya). The principal target of their drive to purify Islam of illicit accretions and innovations (*bida'*) are vestiges of polytheism (*shirk*) that they find in visits by the populace of local saints' tombs in quest of blessings (*baraka*) and intercession (*tawassul*) of the *awliya'* buried therein.⁴³ Known locally as “supporters of [prophetic] hadith” (*ahl al-hadith*) or “supporters of the [Prophet’s] Sunna” (*ahl al-sunna*), they insist that their Sufi opponents are heretical foreigners with no roots in Yemeni society. According to Shaykh Muqbil,

“The people who follow Sufism come from outside, from foreign lands: Indonesia, America, France—but they are following a wrong path and everyone knows it. That’s why the people here, from Yemen, are instead affiliated to the *ahl al-sunna*.”⁴⁴

Elsewhere, the founder of Dar al-Hadith claims that Yemen was the cradle of Salafi Islam because it was where the most revered members of the first Muslim community, such as Abu Musa al-Ash‘ari, ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib and Khalid ibn al-Walid, spread Islam during the prophetic epoch. Therefore, the emergence of the movement of *ahl al-sunna* in Yemen under his leadership was “a kind of return to the [very] sources [of Islam].”⁴⁵

In response to their anti-Sufi rhetoric, the followers Habib ‘Umar, in their turn, accuse the partisans of Shaykh Muqbil of being a foreign merchandize smuggled from Saudi Arabia, in other words, “Wahhabis” or even

⁴³ Bonnefoy, *Salafism*, 231–232; for parallels with other areas of Yemen, especially Tihama in North Yemen, see ‘Abdallah al-Muslih, *al-Sufiyya fi Tihamat al-Yaman* (Cairo: Dar al-safwa, 2006), 34–38 and 67–101.

⁴⁴ Quoted in Bonnefoy, *Salafism*, 236.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

“rebels” (*khawarij*) whose teachings go against the grain of the doctrine and practice of the authentic, traditional Yemeni Islam.⁴⁶

If we, for a moment, detach ourselves from these derogatory labels, self-designations and mutual recriminations, we will see commonalities between the two movements that their polemic tends to obscure. For one, the emphasis on *hadith* in the very designation of Shaykh Muqbil’s movement implies that their opponents, the ‘Alawiyya Sufis, ignore or downplay *hadith* in their teachings and practice, which they certainly do not. The *hadith* are taught in both Dar al-Hadith and Dar al-Mustafa, because they serve as the textual foundation of the prophetically sanctioned faith and practice for members of both groups. It is true that they emphasize different sets of sayings attributed to the Prophet and companions. For example, the “Sufis” privilege those that describe the blessing (*baraka*) of the Prophet himself as well as that of certain places, objects, and individuals. The denizens of the Dar al-Hadith, on the other hand, focus on those *hadiths* that condemn magic and occult activities and encourage meticulous, even punctilious uniformity and decorum in worship and quotidian practices. They are also interested in the *hadiths* that prohibit the worship of or graves, holy groves, springs and other objects and may be construed by the unwary as mediators between God and human beings.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, the commonality of their respective dedication to imitating the Prophet and his companions on the basis of *hadith* is impossible to deny.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Knysh, *Sufism*, 220–221.

⁴⁷ Knysh, *Sufism*, 212–216.

⁴⁸ The very designation of the Sufi compound in Tarim and its branches elsewhere contains an honorific title of the Prophet (*al-mustafa*, that is the “elect one”), indicating the group’s commitment to imitating his ways as described in the *hadith* corpus.

Besides the two groups' common reliance on *hadith*, they invariably position themselves as faithful adherents of the pious ancestors of Islam (*al-salaf; al-aslaf*), although they disagree as to who should be included into this venerable category. Whereas the followers of Shaykh Muqbil restrict it to the first three generations of Muslims, for the *sada* leaders of Dar al-Mustafa and its local branches, this notion comprises their own genealogical forebears, that is, the *sada* of the previous generations, whom the Ba 'Alawi historiography of South Arabia portrays as paragons of piety and lofty moral-ethical values as well as peacemakers and benefactors of unruly and often mutually hostile local tribes and village communities.⁴⁹

The final and critical commonality lies in the ultimate goal that the two parties and the educational institutions associated with them strove to achieve. Like the "Sufi" teacher Habib 'Umar, his Salafi opponent Shaykh Muqbil saw his main task in forestalling the religious and moral "decay" of Yemeni society (that is, its progressive westernization and secularization). This goal was to be achieved not through political participation or armed struggle, which both Yemeni leaders flatly rejected, but through a patient and deliberate inculcation in their followers of "authentic" and "primeval" Muslim doctrines and practices in a virtuous, sin-free environment (usually remote from large cities that are seen as "nests of sin and corruption"). This shared dedication to missionary activity and "struggle with the pen and tongue, not the sword" has logically led the leaders of these seemingly incompatible and often mutually hostile communities to denounce any political activity in the name of Islam. Yet, upon closer examination, their shared and vocally declared apolitical stance turns out to be deeply and irredeema-

⁴⁹ Knysh, "The *sada* in History," *passim*.

bly political.⁵⁰ It is but politics in disguise reminiscent of the professed apolitical stance of some other Islamic movements, for example, that of Fethullah Gülen.⁵¹

What is at Stake in the Salafi-Sufi Confrontation in Yemen?

At stake in the Salafi-Sufi polemic and occasional confrontation between the two Yemeni movements housed respectively in Dar al-Hadith and Dar al-Mustafa, is the issue of authenticity and nativism. Each party claimed to be uniquely and exclusively authentic and native to the Yemeni religious scene, while dismissing the opponent as a foreign implant, a poacher intruding onto this scene without license, as it were. For the “Sufis” of Habib ‘Umar, the Salafis-Wahhabis of Shaykh Muqbil were but the poachers who have infested the pristine soil of Yemeni religiosity with a pernicious foreign (Saudi/Wahhabi) doctrine.⁵²

From this vantage point, Habib ‘Umar and his *sada* companions at the head of Dar al-Mustafa could present themselves to the state and the populace as protectors and disseminators of the pure and unadulterated Islam of *al-salaf al-salih*, that is, their own genealogical ancestors, who, for their descendants, embodied the gold standard of authentic, native Yemeni (and Hadrami) Islam. In this endeavor the *sada* leaders of Dar al-Mustafa were helped by the ubiquitous shrines containing the sanctified remains of the prominent *awliya*’ of the Ba ‘Alawi stock.⁵³ Because the most distinc-

⁵⁰ As demonstrated in Bonnefoy, *Salafism*, 97–107.

⁵¹ Hakan Yavuz and Bayram Balcı (eds.), *Turkey’s July 15th Coup: What Happened and Why* (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2018).

⁵² Bonnefoy, *Salafism*, 203–206 and 234.

⁵³ Alexander Knysh, “The Cult of Saints and Religious Reformism in Early Twentieth-Century Hadramawt.” In *New Arabian Studies*, vol. 4 (1997), 139–167.

tive feature of this “traditional” Yemeni Islam was visits to and worship at the tombs of departed “friends of God,” we can tentatively designate the version of Islam advocated by Habib ‘Umar as “shrine” or “pilgrimage” Islam. As was shown, the Salafi critics of Dar al-Mustafa found this Islam unacceptable, if not outright heretical (“polytheistic”).⁵⁴

From the viewpoint of the Salafis of Dar al-Hadith, it is Sufism that is an alien implant grafted surreptitiously by the denizens of Dar al-Mustafa onto the primeval Islam of its venerable founders (*al-salaf al-salih*). In Shaykh Muqbil’s view, the “Sufi” or “shrine” Islam of Habib ‘Umar is but a grievous deviation from the founders’ prophetically endorsed and therefore inerrant beliefs and practices. Moreover, in polemicizing with his opponents and critics Shaykh Muqbil depicted Yemen itself as the cradle of the pure, original Islam of the first generation of Muslims by virtue of its being the arena of their proselytizing activity.⁵⁵ Based on this idea Shaykh Muqbil and his followers saw their goal in restoring this original, Salafi Islam to its rightful status in contemporary Yemeni society.⁵⁶

In their struggle for Yemeni authenticity acceptance by the country’s masses the two competing leaders and their followers have given their respective religious persuasions and practices (that is, Salafism and Sufism) a distinctly Yemeni face. In the process, they had to make some significant compromises and adjustments. Thus, Shaykh Muqbil’s Salafis took on

⁵⁴ This perception of Sufi Islam is not confined to Hadramawt, but is also in evidence in other regions of Yemen; see al-Muslih, *Al-Sufiyya*, 62.

⁵⁵ Bonnefoy, *Salafism*, 235–249.

⁵⁶ Shaykh Muqbil used the same line of reasoning in countering the claims to authenticity made by the leaders of the Zaydi leaders; see Bonnefoy, *Salafism*, 226–229.

board and condoned some local popular practices that their stricter counterparts in Saudi Arabia would have found objectionable.⁵⁷ Habib ‘Umar’s followers, for their part, had to sacrifice their Sufi credentials and affiliations in order to alleviate the suspicions of those local Muslims who had internalized the anti-Sufi rhetoric of the neighboring Saudi Arabia and the Arab Gulf states with which Yemen is closely connected. Each in its own way, the two communities with extensive transnational connections and coteries of foreign students strove to assert themselves as the sole legitimate protectors and promoters of the authentic, native Yemeni religiosity and, by extension, also of Yemeni nationhood as a whole.⁵⁸ Both communities justified their endeavors by invoking *al-salaf al-salih*, although their interpretations of this category were quite distinct and even outright incompatible. This strategy was essential for each party in order to counter accusations of being agents of alien influences: of the West, Malaysia and Indonesia in the case of Habib ‘Umar’s “Sufis,” or of Saudi Arabia with its Wahhabism in the case of Shaykh Muqbil’s *ahl al-hadith*.

Conclusion and Epilogue

Despite their doctrinal and practical differences and mutual rejection, the two communities examined in the present chapter found themselves in the good books of the Yemeni regime headed by ‘Ali ‘Abdallah Salih, who ruled the country from 1990 until his forced resignation in 2012. As we have seen, what the followers of ‘Umar bin Hafiz and those of Shaykh Muqbil al-Wadi‘i (and his successors) share in common is political quietism. While their apolitical stance itself is implicitly but undeniably

⁵⁷ Bonnefoy, *Salafism*, 237–239.

⁵⁸ Bonnefoy, *Salafism*, 237–241.

political, it is exactly what state authorities want of a religious movement within the country's borders, especially when they lack legitimacy and are vulnerable to political unrest and economic instability. This fact explains why both educational projects were given support and free hand in disseminating their respective (and, on the face of it, starkly incompatible) versions of Islam under the country's previous leadership.⁵⁹

Today, Yemen, especially its northern areas, lies in ruins. The miraculous powers (*karamat*) of its numerous saints and the eloquent missionary rhetoric (*da'wa*) of its preachers have failed to protect it from the devastation of the civil war and aerial attacks by the Saudi-led coalition that is set on destroying its Houthi-Zaydi opponents at all costs. Against the background of a savage proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran, Yemen's religious debates outlined in this essay have grown irrelevant and insignificant in comparison to the unimaginable sufferings of the country's population. As the war rages on, survival is the only pressing preoccupation of the Yemenis today, whether pro- or anti-Sufi. For "when the cannons are heard, the muses are silent."

⁵⁹ Ibid., 229–234.

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