Review:

“***Religious Authority in Transnational Sufi Networks: Shaykh Nazim Al-Qubrusi Al-Haqqani Al-Naqshbandi* ”**

by

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The article is a case study of the methods Skaykh Nazim al-Qubrusi, the spiritual leader of Haqqaniyya, a transnational Sufi network of the Naqshbandiyya tradition with disciples of multiple ethnicities, and was written before Shaykh Nazim’s death in 2014. The reading demonstrates the relationship between religious authority, corporate identity and network structure, whereas the emphasis of the article is the way Shaykh Nazim managed to structure his network and introduce innovative techniques and methods so that he will keep the number of his disciples great, and as such legitimise his religious authority. Although at the beginning conveys the sense that is a paper that aims to promote or praise Shaykh’s lifelong work, at the final pages it takes an interesting twist of emphasising on aspects that could be considered as criticism. Other elements related to Sufism that was present in the paper are the difficulty of constructing a historically accurate biography of Shaykhs, and the detail that, like other Sufi orders, Naqshbandiyya is not of Arabic origin (Chib, 2007, p.23).

The emphasis of Shaykh Nazim’s legitimisation was based on his lineage back to Sufi orders and acceptance by his disciples, and the structure of his order was very similar to this of a political organisation. The elite disciples are of religious background, ulama or Sufis themselves and the ordinary disciples, whereas the ordinary disciples are converts without knowledge of spiritual and religious matters. Moreover, there were three categories of followers according to how “connected” they are with the Shaykh, Mubtadi(a), Murid(a) and Muhibb(a). This demonstrates that he incorporated both the element of the educated elite and the masses, whereas other Shaykh’s traditionally chose one over the other (Chib, 2007, p.26). Rituals are serving as means to establish, bolster and maintain his authority in the structure of the order. The official character of a disciple’s initiation, rabita, worked as both the sealing of the Shaykh’s religious legitimacy and the disciple’s spiritual dependence on the Shaykh (Chib, 2007, p.22). For the disciples, was a way to be protected and privileged by his supernatural abilities, whom himself claimed that had been revealed to him, an idea that made sure to promote carefully, often via his disciples’ accounts. According to his narration, these abilities that legitimised him as a Wali, allowed him to “work” even without his physical presence and even after his death. To an extent the Shaykh, alive or after his death, posed to be the sole entity to which the disciples bestow obedience, ask guidance and follow instructions, in the hope/expectation that he will guide the disciple closer to Allah. Although this appears not to be in accordance with the Islamic tradition that urges the believer to connect directly with Allah via prayers and deeds, it is in absolute accordance to the Sufi tradition (Muedini, 2015, pp.27-30). Knowing though that in the past, in fear of evoking criticism against Sufism, some Sufi Shaykhs abstained of direct claims of sainthood and supernatural powers, Shaykh Nazim’s ease to do so can be seen as another merit of modernity which is more tolerant to such claims (Chib, 2007, p.25). Finally, he appears to have designated two Arab disciples as his successors, but further research shows that in 2011 he appointed his eldest son, Shaykh Mehmed Adil, as leader of the Order.[[1]](#footnote-1) This action of appointing a successor is considered part of a Wali’s duty.

The striking differences in Shaykh Nazim’s case, though, are the several innovations he introduced. The driving force that led disciples to Shaykh Nazim’s path was a “spiritual” thirst, and they acted as both consumers and instruments of his organisation. As every intelligent marketing director would do, Shaykh Nazim made sure that access to his “product” of spirituality had no specific requirements and the obligations were to be kept in necessary minimum, contrary to other orders (Chib, 2007, p.27-28). Many of his disciples were what we could call “part-time” disciples, absolutely integrated into an active and productive social life, with others not speaking Arabic or even having much knowledge of Islam. He reached out to a multinational, multilingual audience of disciples, which inevitably presented technical difficulties. Some of the innovations he used to overcome these difficulties were mass rituals, recorded and distributed initiations etc. These modernisations unquestionably enhanced his position without threatening the spiritual importance of his Shaykhdom. The final part of the paper and more specifically the Shaykh’s attitude and mindset towards women, including his wife, was a part that could outrage many women and make someone wonder how and why so many women followed him as their spiritual leader. The fact that himself accepted many women in his order, despite his stagnant traditional mindset, could be seen as another indication on how he could adjust between the traditional and the modern, depending on the situation.

Finally, the mobility of both Shaykh Nazim, and Shaykh Khalid al-Naqshband in late 18th, early 19th century CE, confirm the idea that the objectives of Sufism do not include isolation and exclusion from the world, as “cultivation of the soul over social interaction” or the rejection of the material world as many scholars have claimed in the past. Characteristic of that is the occasion where Shaykh Nazim was sent to “*spread Islam to the West*” by his own master, Shaykh Abd Allah, contrary to his wish to settle near the Prophet’s tomb. Shaykh Gumuqi’s case, with the initiation of guerrilla chiefs, with some of his disciples running a military campaign and his ties with the Ottoman Sultan in the late 19th century, proves that other than extensively travelling the world, Sufis also had an interest in politics. This was also the case with other Sufi orders of the 19th and 20th century CE, in several Middle Eastern and African countries (Muedini, 2015, pp.35-40). However, Shaykh Nazim’s lifetime does not indicate any affiliation to political parties, leaders or any involvement to politics, perhaps due to different times and as such different needs.

To conclude, this case study demonstrated the flexibility a Sufi order has, to adjust to social and political needs of its time, with primary focus its survival and expansion, without any impact on its legitimacy.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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1. <https://cyprus-mail.com/2014/05/08/turkish-cypriot-sufi-shaykh-nazim-buried-update/> accessed 11/12/2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)