Three cases of critical engagement of Sufis with modern Islamic trends

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This article focuses on the topic of Sufi intellectual resistance through some emblematic case studies of Sufi authors in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. First, it analyses *Fitna al-Wahhabiyya*, a treatise that was written by Aḥmad Zaynī Daḥlān (1817–1886) in 1878, which proved to be a seminal work for later Sufi authors, and shows that some of the issues addressed in this text are recurrent ones in anti-Wahhabi polemics. Indeed, the cultural resistance of Sufism from the 19th century to the present day has been primarily directed against the doctrines of Wahhabism, the first current of Islamic thought to be structurally anti-Sufi. The fact that Aḥmad Zaynī Daḥlān was the Mufti of Mecca and a recognised scholar shows that these polemics were fully integrated into the scholarly religious debate of official Islam, in which Sufism and its doctrines occupied a prominent position. Furthermore, some Sufi masters set themselves the goal of refuting the theories of materialism and rationalism that were in vogue in the Islamic world in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The work of the Egyptian Sufi master Sīdī Salāma ar-Rāḍī (1866-1939) entitled *al-Insāniyya*, published in 1938, is a polemical treatise against materialism, atheism and spiritualism that probably reflects the influence of René Guénon. The third case study examined is that of the Sudanese master Muḥammad ʿUṯmān ʿAbduhu al-Burhānī (1904-1983). The latter is an exemplary case of Sufi resistance in the second half of the 20th century, both in the face of censorship and in the face of the attempt to bring Sufi brotherhoods under government control.

Keywords: Sufism; Wahhabism; Modernism; Aḥmad Zaynī Daḥlān; Sīdī Salāma ar-Rāḍī; Muḥammad ʿUṯmān ʿAbduhu al-Burhānī.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to highlight the role of Sufi cultural activism between the late19th and early 21st centuries. As various Islamic trends emerged that challenged traditional Sufism from different perspectives, scholars affiliated with it were not passive recipients of criticism, but participated in an active exchange of ideas that contributed to the making of “modern Islam.” This article builds on De Jong and Radtke (1999) to argue that the debate surrounding Sufism, especially in the modern age, intersected with a variety of issues: theological purism; the meaning of modernity;

and the power of new states to control the religious sphere. The three cases discussed below are examples of Sufi engagement in polemics related to these three aspects. In the first case, we will examine Aḥmad Zaynī Daḥlān's theological arguments against the "Wahhabi" school. The latter, in its essence, cannot be considered a product of Muslim encounters with modernity; rather, it built on and expanded pre-existing anti-Sufi trends within the Sunni tradition. Nevertheless, because of its opposition to long-established and quasi-universal practices of intercession, as its opposition to reliance, in jurisprudential matters, on the opinions of the "four schools" of Sunnism, "Wahhabism" was initially perceived by many Sunni theologians as a "modern deviation," and it is this image of it that is reflected in Daḥlān's writings. The second case is Sīdī Salāma ar-Rādī's rejection of scientific positivism and "spiritualism:" ar-Rādī (possibly under the influence of the French intellectual René Guénon) built his case for a defence of the Muslim tradition as a whole, in both its exoteric and esoteric aspects, seen as two sides of the same coin. The third case is Muḥammad ʿUṯmān ʿAbduhu al-Burhānī's resistance to the state censorship of selected "Sufi innovations:" in arguing for the autonomy of religion from the political sphere, the case of the Burhāni order contributed to what was rapidly becoming one of the most challenging instances of Muslim engagement with modernity.

2. The defence of Sufism by a Meccan scholar: Aḥmad Zaynī Daḥlān

Historically, Wahhabism was the first Islamic religious movement to be structurally defined as anti-Sufi and, due to its puritanical and activist nature, as a forerunner of contemporary Islamic radicalism. Its founder, Muḥammad Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb (1703-1796), a Salafi theologian from Naǧd, a region of present-day Saudi Arabia, was a proponent of a simplified version of Islam whose primary aim was to abolish certain Islamic practices and doctrines that had become entrenched over the centuries and replace them with a literal interpretation of the Koran and the Sunna.

Muḥammad Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb soon distinguished himself among his contemporaries for his ideas, which drew the firm condemnation of many *ʿulamāʾ*—including his father and his brother Sulaymān b. ʿAbd al-Wahhāb, the author of the first refutative short treatise on Wahhabism, written around 1753 (ʿAbd al-Wahhāb 1888-1889; Traboulsi 2002)—in the Ottoman world and the Indian Subcontinent.

In particular, Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb and his disciples were blamed for having launched an anathema, *takfīr* (literally an "accusation against someone of being an unbeliever—*kāfir*"), against those who did not abide by the rigorist interpretation they advocated. This anathema was directed against the representatives of certain currents of Islam, particularly the Sufis, who were accused of having

introduced reprehensible innovations (*bidʿa*) into Islamic practice, which from the Wahhabi point of view was evidence of deviation from the correct doctrine of the oneness of God (*tawhīd*).

Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb essentially proposed to abandon the various recognised theological and juridical schools (*maḏhabs*)[1] in favour of a theologically and doctrinally simplified version of Islam that was literalist in the interpretation of the Koran and the Sunna and puritanical in its practice: an Islam which totally rejected the doctrines—starting from that of *waḥdat al-wuǧūd*—and the methods of Sufism, such as intercessory prayer (*šafāʿa*) and *ḏikr* gatherings (*ḥaḍra*).

Despite the small following enjoyed by Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb among his contemporaries, Wahhabism was long considered a heresy on a par with Kharijism, by which it was in many ways inspired to which it was in many ways related. Wahhabi doctrine only succeeded in asserting itself thanks to its partnership with the Saudi family, a bond destined to last until today in memory of the pact made in 1744 with the Emir Muḥammad Ibn Saʿūd (d. 1765).[2]

It should also be noted that, until pre-modern times, Sufism had been one of the disciplines recognised by official Islam, as it enjoyed the general favour of *ʿulamāʾ* and rulers. Before the spread of Wahhabi theories, anti-Sufi criticism had concerned only specific practices or doctrines adopted by individual brotherhoods and exponents, without ever resulting in a general condemnation of Sufism (Radtke 1999).

Aḥmad Zaynī Daḥlān (1817–1886) was one of the so-called "scholars of the age," the most prominent theologians and jurists of the Arabian Peninsula, who taught according to a fixed schedule at the al-Ḥarām Mosque in Mecca and at the Masǧid al-Nabawī in Medina. Born in Mecca, Daḥlān became the Shāfiʻī *mufti* of Mecca from 1871 after studying with a number of ʿAlawīs from Ḥaḍramawt, which put him in contact with East Africa and a wider Indian Ocean *ʿulamāʾ* circle (Bang 2003; Bang 2014: 27-28).

Daḥlān was a prolific writer: not only did he cover the traditional Islamic sciences that were the subject of study in Mecca, but he also distinguished himself as the only 19th-century historical writer in Mecca, producing a number of treaties on controversial issues.[3] His most influential work is *Fitna al-*

[1] The abolition of law schools is visually evoked by the disappearance of the representative pavilions of the four law schools in Mecca. Present for centuries in the inner courtyard of the Great Mosque of Mecca (*al-masǧid al-ḥarām*) in the place where pilgrims perform their ritual circumambulation (*ṭawāf*), they were demolished by Saudi-Wahhabi rulers as early as the 1950s. See Hurgronje (1880), Peterson (1996: 180), Sardar (2014: 313-342) and Wheeler (2006).

[2] For an historical overview of Wahhabism, see Algar (2002), Delong-Bas (2004), Commins (2006) and Lauzière (2016). On the development of Wahhabism in the contemporary era, see Ventura (2006: 17-35) and Bori (2009).

[3] For a biographical overview of his figure, see Schacht (1991). On Aḥmad Zaynī Daḥlān's career as a "historian" and his role in the religious milieu of Mecca, see Sharkey (1994) and Freitag (2003).

Wahhābiyya, published in 1878, a booklet where Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb is described as a reformer repudiated by his family for a number of controversial opinions not shared by contemporary jurists and theologians.

Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb is stigmatised for having defined the pious visit (*ziyāra*) to the Prophet's shrine and the request for intercession (*tawassul*) as *širk* (idolatry or polytheism). According to Aḥmad Zaynī Daḥlān, the pious visit to the tomb of the Prophet Muhammad in Medina or to those of other prophets, saints and their successors is to be considered legitimate, as is the request for their intercession. As a matter of fact, Aḥmad Zaynī Daḥlān accuses al-Wahhāb of creating a new school of jurisprudence that actually accuses all previous generations of Muslims of idolatry. «Al-Wahhab claimed that the intention behind the *maḏhab* he invented was "to purify the *tawḥīd*" and "reject *širk*." He also claimed that people had been following *širk* for six hundred years and that he had revived the religion for them» (Daḥlān 2012: 4).

Daḥlān considered Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb's intention to purify Islamic beliefs the result of an erroneous interpretation of the Koran. In particular, Daḥlān accused Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb of taking some Koranic verses (Q. 46: 5; Q. 10: 106; Q. 39: 3; Q. 31:25; Q 39:38) addressed to hypocrites (*munāfiqūn*) and applying them to believers (*muʾminūn*). According to Daḥlān, it is misleading to compare hypocrites who deify their own idols with believers because «the believers do not believe that the prophets or the "saints" (*ʿawliyāʾ*, the "friends of God") deserve to be worshipped or to be ascribed divinity, nor do they exalt them as one would exalt God. They believe that these people are good slaves of God, and that through their blessings (*baraka*) God bestows His mercy on His creation. Hence, when the slaves of God seek the blessings (*baraka*) of the prophets and saints, they seek these blessings as a mercy from God» (Daḥlān 2012: 4). In his treatises against the Wahhabis, Daḥlān views the practice of visiting holy men's graves (*ziyāra*) or the recitation of *ḏikr* as Islamic devotional acts in accordance with *šarīʿa*.

Daḥlān therefore stigmatises the selective use of some decontextualised Koranic sources, emphasising that the *ziyāra* and *tawassul* are fully justified by the Koran and the *Sunna*. Daḥlān compares the Wahhabis to the Kharijites, defining them, on the basis of a *ḥadīṯ* as those who took the verses revealed about the hypocrites and applied them to the believers.

Fitna al-Wahhābiyya is not only a doctrinal but also a historical text. It briefly reconstructs the history of Wahhabism in the Arabian Peninsula from the various occupations of Mecca and Medina to the Ottoman intervention through the Khedive Muḥammad ʿAlī and his son Ibrāhīm (Sardar 2014: Ch. 7). During the periods of Mecca's occupation, the population had to abide by Wahhabi doctrine and pious visits to the tombs of the saints were forbidden (1803). During the second occupation (1805), the population was even forced to eat dog meat due to a lack of food supplies (Daḥlān 2012: 10). In 1805 the

city of Medina was also conquered and the two holy cities were under Wahhabi control for seven years. Aḥmad Zaynī Daḥlān describes this historical phase as a period of isolation in which people were forced to adopt Wahhabi religious practices. According to the author of *Fitna al-Wahhābiyya*, it was in those years that the custom of sewing *kiswa* on a black cloth was introduced in Mecca and the consumption of tobacco was banned. Furthermore, the pilgrim caravans from Egypt and Bilād al-Šām were forbidden to enter Mecca; they carried the *maḥmal,* the ceremonial palanquin mounted on a camel, which was the symbol of the Ottoman Sultan's authority over the holy places.[4] Aḥmad Zaynī Daḥlān then reconstructs the military clashes of the Wahhabis, first with Muḥammad ʿAlī and later with Ibrāhīm, up to the victory over the Wahhabis (1812-1813) in Mecca and Medina and, eventually, in Daʿriyya (1818), followed by the execution or deportation to Istanbul of some members of the Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb and al-Saʿūd families, and finally the restoration of Ottoman authority over these holy places. Aḥmad Zaynī Daḥlān also reports that during the Wahhabi occupation the domes on the tombs of the saints were destroyed (Daḥlān 2012: 10), as in the case of the cemetery of al-Baqʿī in Medina, which was demolished in 1806, while the recitation of the prayers contained in *Dalāʾil al-khayrāt* was prohibited (Daḥlān 2012: 14). The reference to this work, without naming its author, gives us an idea of how widespread its knowledge and recitation were among the Muslims of Mecca. *Dalāʾil al-khayrāt wa šawāriq al-anwār fī dhikr al-ṣalāt ʿal alā al-Nabī al-mukhtār* («Waymarks of Benefits and the Brilliant Burst of Lights in the Remembrance of Blessings on the Chosen Prophet») is a collection of prayers for the Prophet written by the great 15th-century Moroccan Sufi master Abū ʿAbdallāh Muḥammad al-Ğazūlī (d. 1465), whose fame spread thanks to this work (Cornell 2021; Abid 2021). *Dalāʾil al-khayrāt* testifies to the love of the believers for the Prophet Muḥammad (Ventura 1997), seen as the "Perfect Man" (*al-insān al-kāmil*), the intercessor (*šafīʿ*) of his community, the mediator par excellence between God and man, and the synthesis between the totality of the human race and the divine. For the Sufis, Muhammad ultimately personifies the reality or eternal light of the verb, the Muhammadian truth or light, *haqīqat muhammadiyya*, *nūr muhammadī* (Ventura 2017).

In the conclusion to his treatise, Aḥmad Zaynī Daḥlān defines Wahhabism as a movement that shed blood and plundered the two holy cities, "a *fitna* for the people of Islam" (Daḥlān 2012: 14).

The influence of Aḥmad Zaynī Daḥlān was far-reaching: he was an acknowledged Sunni scholar who held the position of Shāfiʿī *mufti* of Mecca and influenced the networks of the ʿAlawīs from Ḥaḍramawt. This family Sufi brotherhood is also called the ʿAlawīyya *ṭarīqa*, because they claim descent from both the Prophet and a Sufi order established in Ḥaḍramawt from the chain of transmission

[4] For an overview of the material culture and visual arts related to pilgrimage to Mecca, see Porter (2012).

(*silsila*) going back to the teachings of the Andalusian-Maghrebian Sufi master Šuʻayb Abū Madyan (d. 1197). The ʿAlawīs from Ḥaḍramawt spread Shāfʿī-Sunnism around the Indian Ocean and among the Swahili-speaking populations of East Africa (Bang 2003). In the 19th century, the ʿAlawīs disseminated the teachings and treatises of Aḥmad Zaynī Daḥlān, with whom several of them had studied in Mecca.

The treatises of Aḥmad Zaynī Daḥlān achieved great popularity. In particular, *Fitna al-Wahhābiyya* enjoyed enormous circulation in the 19th and 20th centuries, even outside of the networks of the ʿAlawīs, and established itself as the starting point for any anti-Wahhabi theological debate, as it remains today. It has been reprinted by various publishers, such as the Turkish Hakikat Katebi of Istanbul, a publisher associated with the İklas Foundation which was established in honour of Hüseyin Hilmi Işık (1911-2001) a disciple of Abdülhakîm Arvâsî (1865-1943), a renowned master of the *ṭarīqa* Khālidiyya Muğaddidiyya Naqšbandiyya. Hüseyin Hilmi Işık himself wrote a series of treatise against Wahhabism and can be seen as an heir to the anti-Wahhabī genre inaugurated by Aḥmad Zaynī Daḥlān.[5]

3. An Anti-Modern Sufi stance: Sīdī Salāma ar-Rādī

The roots of 20th- and 21st-century Islamism can be traced back to the religious revivalist movement of the late 19th and early 20th century, generically defined as Islamic reformism (*iṣlāḥ*). This movement spread through the works of a number of Muslim intellectuals with different orientations, including Ğamāl al-Dīn al-Afġānī (1838-1897), Muḥammad ʿAbduh (1849-1905) and Rašīd Riḍā (1865-1935). In order to reaffirm the centrality of Islam in colonised Muslim societies, they emphasised its political function, reinterpreting the faith from a rationalist and modern perspective (Hourani 1962: 103-244; Kedourie 1966; Sedgwick 2009). This movement was born to counterbalance the ongoing racialisation process against Muslims (Aydin 2017: 37-64), as a result of the contemptuous judgements of some Orientalists, including Ernest Renan (1823-1892), about the incompatibility of Islam with progress (Renan 1889: 375-401). In this context, the first structural attack on Sufism, its doctrines, practices and brotherhoods emerged. While up until then the criticism, however heated, had remained limited to specific doctrines or personalities, (with the exception of the structurally anti-Sufism doctrine of Wahhabism), at the beginning of the 20th century Sufism and its brotherhoods suffered for the first time a sort of general excommunication (*takfīr*).

[5] For an analysis of the cultural role of the Naqshbandi order in modern Turkey and of Hüseyin Hilmi Işık's publications, see Algar (1985) and Peskes (2000).

From a reformist point of view, the Sufi doctrine, centred on an esoteric interpretation of the Koran, was seen as antithetical to modernity; consequently, since the Sufi masters perpetuated religious traditions incompatible with the rationalist vision, they were singled out as the main culprits for the backwardness of Islamic societies. The same internal organisation of the brotherhoods represented an obstacle to state centralisation, almost a "parallel" power.

Another form of Sufi-inspired cultural resistance can be found in the works of a contemporary Egyptian Sufi master, Sīdī Salāma ar-Rāḍī (1866-1939). His figure is associated with the establishment and affirmation of the Ḥāmidiyya Šāḏiliyya brotherhood in a historical context of social and political changes hostile to Sufi brotherhoods, when, according to some researchers, traditional brotherhoods had proved incapable of attracting new disciples. In their analysis, the precise internal regulations (*qanūn*) of the Ḥāmidiyya Šāḏiliyya made it an exception and an exemplary case of so-called *reformed Sufism* (Gilsenan 1973). On the contrary, for other scholars, the success of the Ḥāmidiyya Šāḏiliyya was to be found in the patronage of the state, which made it a model brotherhood, rather than in its internal organisation (De Jong 1974; Luizard 1990: 27; Luizard 1991).

According to Paul Chacornac, Sīdī Salāma ar-Rāḍī had an intellectual relationship with René Guénon (1886-1951) during his stay in Egypt. Chacornac confined himself to the brief observation that "Guénon went to his meetings for a while, discussing religious problems with him" (Chacornac 1958: 95). It is not unlikely that some of the "religious problems" to which Chacornac alludes concerned the intrusion of the modern world and certain Western *deviations* into Egypt, which in those years was witnessing the introduction of scientific, spiritualist and occultist doctrines that had already become widespread in Europe a few decades earlier. In addition to being a spiritual master of great renown, Sīdī Salāma ar-Rāḍī was also well known for his interest in what he called (probably under the influence of his exchanges with Guénon) "modern deviations" and for denouncing the damage that the scientistic view of Western origin was doing to Egyptian culture. His most important work, from this point of view, is a book entitled *al-Insāniyya* ("Humanity"), probably first published in 1938, in which the author criticises from a traditional point of view the biochemical, medical, evolutionary and spiritualist conceptions of the physical, psychic and spiritual constitution of the human being. The general tenor of this work is highly critical of modern Western civilisation and represents an attempt to propose a traditional Islamic vewpoint.

Ar-Rāḍī lashes out against atheists as follows: "Those who have lost the light of reason and have called themselves materialists. They have denied the existence of the Creator and God has blinded them to the marvellous miracles, the extraordinary composition and the surprising organisation, which neither leaves nor animals escape; indeed, all this derives from a Wise Regulator" (Ar-Rāḍī 1938: xx).

Ar-Rāḍī thus criticises those scientists who deny the existence of *ğinn*s and demons, “arguing that they do not really exist and ridiculing those who speak of their existence.” At the same time, he denounces those who spread “spiritism.” The combination of a critique of the Western materialistic worldview with a critique of “spiritism” is extremely rare among Muslim theologians of the time, and it is here, in particular, that the traces of ar-Rāḍī’s exchange with Guénon are most visible. Ar-Rāḍī writes: “In our time, some people have wanted to demonstrate the effects of spiritual powers. They have conversed with spirits and this phenomenon has been called the «science of spiritism» or «hypnosis.” This science is considered to be part of the magic, which is forbidden by *šarīʿa*, since it is not devoid of demonic influences. Some of them have become so immersed in this study that they speak of a real evocation of spirits, and this science continues to spread at the hands of the wicked and the non-religious. These are simple prodigies and not true spiritual charisms, for indeed we are dealing with magic, turpitude and deception!” (Ar-Rāḍī 1938: xx).

Al-Insāniyya represents a different kind of intellectual resistance from *Fitna al-Wahhābiyya*, a polemic against Western scientific ideas as well as what were considered fashionable spiritual practices at the time. Unlike Aḥmad Zaynī Daḥlān’s treatise, which reflects a debate within the Muslim world, namely that between the Sufi religious establishment in Mecca and emerging Wahhabism, Sīdī Salāma ar-Rāḍī’s book attacks aspects of European positivism that attracted and influenced some exponents of Islamic reformism, such as Muḥammad ʿAbduh (Hammond 2022).

4. Sufi resilience against state censorship: Muhammad ‘Uthmān ‘Abduhu al-Burhānī

Another example of intellectual resistance is provided by Muḥammad ʿUṯmān ʿAbduhu al-Burhānī (1904-1983), a Sudanese master who, with the introduction of his own brotherhood, the Burhāniyya, in the second half of the 20th century, began to find a large following in Egypt. The aspect that I would like to underline here is that through his Sufi teachings, which conflicted with the reformist demands promoted by the Egyptian state, Muḥammad ʿUṯmān represented an emblematic case of resistance to an “official” and “reformed” form of Sufism promoted by the state.

Muḥammad ʿUṯmān had introduced his *ṭarīqa* into Egypt in the 1930’s, but by the 1950’s his disciples still numbered only a few dozen people. During the following years it expanded, thanks not only to the strong charisma of its founder (Mayeur Jouen 2009), but also to the policies of the Nasser government (1956-1970), which allowed and encouraged the activities of Sufi orders, while at the same time exercising strict control over them (De Jong 1983).

A new religious policy emerged under President Sadat (1970-1981). Under pressure from radical Islam, the regime brought the *al-mağlis al-aʿlā li ’l-ṭuruq al-ṣūfiyya* (“Supreme Council of Sufi Orders”)—

established as the *mağlis al-ṣūfī* ("Sufi Council") as early as the late 19th century (De Jong 1978)—under its strict control and adopted a literal reading of the Koran, promoting a kind of state fundamentalism. The new political atmosphere was very difficult for the Sufi orders and especially for the Burhāniyya.

By the 1970's, the Burhāniyya had reached about three million followers. When Muḥammad ʿUṯmān travelled to Egypt in 1974, the train he took from Khartoum to Cairo was greeted at every station by a celebratory crowd who greeted him as if he were a statesman.

In that same year, however, controversy and subsequent censorship erupted over his work, *Tabriʿat al-ḏimma fī nuṣḥ al-umma wa taḏkirat ūlī al-albāb li-l-sayr ilā al-ṣawwāb* ("Purification of Conscience in the Admonition of the Religious Community and a Warning to Those Endowed with Intellect towards Righteousness"). His previous book, *Intiṣār awliyāʾ al-Raḥmān ʿalā awliyāʾ al-Šayṭān* ("The Triumph of the Friends of the Merciful over the Friends of Satan"), published in 1970, had instead gone unnoticed, partly because it was only intended for circulation within the brotherhood. Although *Tabriʿat al-ḏimma* was mainly addressed only to the disciples of his *ṭarīqa*, a group of Salafists sent copies to al-Azhar University and the Ministry of Religious Affairs, labelling its contents as heretical. The investigation conducted by the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Ministry of the Interior led to the confiscation of the book in 1975 (the same year as the beginning of the controversy over the reprinting of Ibn ʿArabī's *Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, which lasted until 1979). All activities of the brotherhood were banned and a violent press campaign was launched against Muḥammad ʿUṯmān and his *ṭarīqa*.

The campaign was mainly conducted by certain periodicals, such as *Taṣawwuf Islāmī*, which had also published articles by members of the Muslim Brotherhood, and *al-Aḥrām*, which published many defamatory letters against *šayḫ* Muḥammad ʿUṯmān and his disciples in the following years. Among the many reports that circulated about him was a recurring one, according to which the Sudanese master lived in a luxurious residence, near which he had built a large *zāwiya*. The controversy that erupted over *Tabriʿat al-ḏimma* was a true example of anti-Sufi censorship. Muḥammad ʿUṯmān's work was only an anthology of Sufi texts and did not present any original ideas, limiting itself to recurring themes in Sufism, such as the hidden meaning of the Koran, the importance of inspiration (*ilhām*) in its interpretation, the figure of the Prophet and the *ahl al-bayt* (the family of the Prophet).

The volume was essentially a collection of several authors divided into four parts: in the first, Muḥammad ʿUṯmān dealt with the Prophet and the pre-existence of the *nūr muḥammadiyya* ("Muhammadian light"), faithfully reporting the writings of ʿAbd Allāh Abū l-Barakāt al-Yafʿī, Aḥmad al-Salawī, Ğalāl al-Dīn Suyūṭī and the *Qāb qawsayn wa multaqà al-nūmāsayn* ("At a Distance of Two Arcs and the Meeting between the Two Laws") by ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Ğīlī. The second part dealt instead with *miʿrāğ* (the celestial journey of the Prophet) and the hierarchies of the saints: *quṭb*, *awtād*, *nuğabā'* and

abdāl. The third part contained quotations from parts of *Ǧawāhir al-Biḥār* by Ǧalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī and of fragments of *Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* by Ibn ʿArabī on the *ḥaqīqa muḥammadiyya* ("Muhammadian truth") and the *ahl al-bayt*. Finally, the fourth consisted of the writings of Muḥammad ʻUṯmān himself on the path to be followed for spiritual realisation. Following the controversy surrounding *Tabriʿat al-ḏimma*, the *ṭarīqa* Burhāniyya in Egypt did not obtain official recognition from the Supreme Council of Sufi Brotherhoods. It is therefore believed that the case erupted because some Sufi doctrines, which should have remained secret, were made public (Hoffman 1995: 300-327; Leccese 2017).

Muḥammad ʿUṯmān was able to spread his brotherhood in a historical context that was unwilling to accept Sufi thought. In his preaching, he actively worked to counter the false beliefs that in his opinion had been introduced by Wahhabism and in which he identified a degeneration of Islam using the same arguments that Aḥmad Zaynī Daḥlān had used a century earlier.

The case of Muḥammad ʿUṯmān ultimately reveals the paradox of the Muslim states that have set themselves the goal of regulating Sufism and censoring classical Sufi treatises, which to this day continue to be the intellectual heritage of a Sufi tradition that has regenerated itself over the centuries through its most charismatic Sufi masters.

5. Conclusion

While the three authors proposed as case studies differ profoundly from each other, they are equally representative of a form of Sufi intellectual activism that is characteristic of Islamic societies: each of them not only contributed to the religious debate in his home country and historical era, but went a step further by criticising attempts to modernise Islam in his writings.

Aḥmad Zaynī Daḥlān (1817–1886) was presented first among the three authors analysed because of his crucial role in influencing the teachings of the Sufi masters of the following centuries and their apologetic literary works, and thus in defending Sufism. Daḥlān's critical approach reflects a historical period in which Sufi practices were popular and still fully accepted by the religious establishment. The fact that Aḥmad Zaynī Daḥlān was the Mufti of Mecca and a recognised scholar shows how these polemics were fully integrated into the scholarly religious debate of official Islam, in which Sufism and its doctrines occupied a prominent position. *Fitna al-Wahhābiyya* thus became a reference work in the Sufi networks of Daḥlān's time, as well as those of the following centuries. The popularity of this work is evidenced by its numerous reprints and translations into different languages. From a Sufi perspective, the Wahhabi movement, which claims to return to the origins of Islam by rejecting practices that have become entrenched over the centuries, actually embodies an early form of modernisation of Islam.

The second author, Sīdī Salāma ar-Rādī (1866-1939), exemplifies the intellectual climate in Egypt in the late 19th and first half of the 20th century. The increasing encroachment of European colonialism, both economically and culturally, exposed Muslim intellectuals to the influence of the values established in Europe since the Enlightenment (Leccese 2023). Influenced by the French intellectual René Guénon, ar-Rādī devoted one of his works, *Al-Insāniyya*, to the refutation of positivism and "spiritualism," the latter of which was particularly in vogue in France at the beginning of the 20th century and had been introduced into cosmopolitan intellectual circles in Cairo.

The third and last author examined is the Sudanese Muḥammad ʿUṯmān ʿAbduhu al-Burhānī (1904-1983), an exemplary case of the Sufi masters' claim to autonomy in a historical context characterised by attempts to "govern" Sufism. In particular, at the beginning of the 20th century, the Egyptian authorities supported the development of a "reformed" Sufism, i.e. one that would be highly regulated and would promote "sober" practices and doctrines under government control. Muḥammad ʿUṯmān ʿAbduhu al-Burhānī, a charismatic Sudanese master with a large following of disciples, represented a danger in the eyes of the state authorities. The incompatibility of his teachings with the canons of reformed Sufism and the great popularity of his confraternity, the Burhāniyya, led to an emblematic case of anti-Sufi censorship that began with the banning of one of his works, *Tabriʿat al-ḏimma*.

Our analysis allows us to argue that Sufism—with its doctrines and rituals—still represents the beating heart of Islamic culture today. While it is true that its involvement in intellectual debate is not always manifest, the mediating function of Sufism is still active and relevant today both in the life of contemporary Muslim societies and in globalised Western ones,[6] bringing with it signs of a richness intrinsic to its long cultural production.

[6] A significant example of the contribution of contemporary Sufis to this kind of debate is given by the very concise but effective article *How Would You Respond to the Claim that Sufism is Bidʿa?*, originally published on the Web in 1985 and republished on various websites (Keller 1985), by Nuh Ha Mim Keller, an American convert who after training at the University of Al-Azhar, has lived in Jordan since 1980 with a small community of disciples. Another example of this Sufi intellectual activism is the book entitled *Refuting Isis* (Al-Yaqoubi 2016). This refutation of the religious and ideological foundations of ISIS, first published in 2015 by Muḥammad al-Yaʿqūbī, a Syrian Sufi master belonging to the Šāḏiliyya, must be counted among the most noteworthy documents in the panorama of the Sufi doctrinal-political engagement in recent years to counter the spread of Islamic radicalism. The work follows a twenty-eight-page document written in Arabic and published on 19 September 2014, entitled *Open Letter to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi*, initially signed by one hundred and twenty Islamic authorities—many of them Sufis—from around the world. In both texts, the ideological and doctrinal principles of Daʿish are challenged, according to the classical instruments of Islamic doctrine.

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