

The Underground Friends of God and Their Adversaries: A Case Study and Survey of Sufism in Contemporary Yemen



Introduction

Sufism in many areas of Yemen today has been driven underground because of recent and past economic, political and religious opposition. As a result, Sufi orders, ideas and practices are hidden but alive throughout Yemen. Adherents of these orders and non-Sufi Muslims who practice Sufi rituals are declining in number. There are three main reasons for the decline. First, Zaydism — an important Shiite group in the Northern Highlands — and the recently formed, and extremely powerful, Islamic political party of Islah, along with the extremist Muslim sect of the Salafis, all view Sufi ideas and practices as unIslamic, sometimes violently opposing saint veneration and other Sufi rituals. Second, Sufi orders are not producing great leaders to propagate their teachings. Third, young people living under current economic hardships are attracted to political Islamic movements which promise outward action and material benefits. The apolitical, inward turning teachings of Sufi orders and practices which promise closeness (*qurb*) to God, beauty (*ihsān*) of character, and sincerity (*ikhlas*) in religion hold little economic promise for many young Yemenis.

However, while the fires of Sufism and Sufi practice are in some places being put out by lack of both interest in the youth or strong leadership among the elders, its flames are still burning bright within the hearts of impassioned adherents in small pockets throughout Yemen. One can still find non-Sufi Yemenis who are lovers of saints (*muhibbin*) carrying out Sufi devotions privately and at the tombs of deceased holy men and women. The current situation of the Shadhiliya/Alawiya Sufi order of Ṣan'a' is a typical case in point of the problems facing Sufi orders in Yemen where covert but commanding devotion to the saints and Sufi shaykhs of Yemen can still be found.

Before going any further it is important to say something about the usage of the English word "saint." It has been common practice in Islamic studies to use the English word "saint" to render the Koranic *awliya'* *Allāh*. However, this expression is more literally translated as "friends of God," and both Sufi masters and holy people (*ṣālihin*) are called

God's friends. Many Yemenis claim that they venerate living Sufi masters and dead saints in order to obtain God's blessings. Some ask the saints to intercede with God on their behalf. The assumption is that God is more likely to listen to someone close to him, his friends, than to someone who is not. Such friends act as channels for divine help through sincere supplication.

Fieldwork: Data and Methodology

The research for this paper was carried out from September 1995 to March 1996. The bulk of this time was spent as a participant observer among the Shadhiliya/Alawiya Sufi order of Ṣan'a', Yemen. During that time I attended the twice weekly gatherings of this order, tape recorded the religious lessons and rituals that went on during these sessions, accompanied the members on a dozen visitations (*sing.*, *ziyāra*) to saints' tombs, and attended ten celebrations of saints' day ceremonies (*sing.*, *mawlid*). Forty members of this order were informally interviewed; twenty were semi-structured interviews during which life histories and interpretations of Islamic and Sufi teachings were recorded.

In November 1995, three of the advanced disciples of this Sufi order volunteered to accompany me on a one month survey of Sufi orders and saints' day celebrations in the following Shafi'i areas of Yemen: the Red Sea coastal district called the Tihāma, the city of Aden, and the southern mountains of the Highland region which includes the city of Ta'izz and its surrounding districts of Mount Ṣabr and al-Ḥujjariya. We visited five Sufi masters (*mashā'ikh*; *sing.*, *shaykh*) and a dozen advanced disciples (*muqaddamun*), and we located the tombs of numerous highly venerated saints (*awliya'*, *sing.*, *wali*).

The members of the Shadhiliya order were extremely helpful in my research enabling me to make the necessary contacts and gain access to the mosques and saint tombs. Without their influence, I would not have been allowed to enter the places of worship nor meet the many people I did

during the survey.

Zaydis, Islahis, and the Shadhiliya/Alawiya Order of Şan'a'

For close to a thousand years Yemen has been religiously divided into two regions: the Shiite Northern Highland areas of Zaydism and Ismailism and a Sunni Shafi'i region consisting of the Red Sea coast, the southern mountains of the Highlands, Aden, and the Ḥaḍramawt. Sufi practices, ideas, and social organizations have found the soil of the Shafi'is – who follow Ashari dogmatic theology (*kalām*) – more fertile than the rational Zaydi Highlands – where Mu'tazilite theology is followed. A well-known contemporary Yemeni historian, 'Abd Allāh al-Ḥibshī, has traced the existence of Sufi ascetic practices in Yemen as far back as the first century of Islam and has listed major Sufi orders in both regions existing since that time. Some orders that al-Ḥibshī mentions and that we found during our survey are Ba-'Alawi, Idrisiya, Hassaniya, Qadiriya, Naqshbandiya, Tijjaniya, Rifa'iya, Burhaniya, and Dandarawiya.

In general, Zaydi scholars have found Sufi ideas absurd. Sufi notions such as journeying (*sulūk*) to God and the ability to obtain divine knowledge (*ma'rifa*) directly in one's heart (*qalb*) are illogical to Mu'tazilism. Mu'tazilite theology maintains that God is totally incomparable (*tanzih*) with the world and would argue that the human rational faculty (*'aql*) is the only reliable means of obtaining knowledge from divine revelations. Hence, while Sufi shaykhs and disciples have existed in and around Zaydi regions, such as Şan'a', they have always been few compared with the Shafi'i areas.

In addition to Zaydi disagreements with Sufism, we find a new adversary in the recently formed political party of Islah which consists of various factions some following Wahhabism, others the teachings of the Muslim Brothers. Islah is influential in both Zaydi and Shafi'i regions of the country. Most factions within this political party promote anti-Sufi interpretations of Islamic teachings. Different groups within Islah have varying levels of anti-Sufi aggression. Those who forcefully opposed such beliefs and practices are usually the followers of the Saudi-based Wahhabism. Those more moderate against Sufism take their teachings from the Egyptian-based Muslim Brotherhood. Some Islahis have called Sufi ideas and practice a form of unbelief (*kufr*) or associating others with God (*shirk*). This later accusation is the most serious sin a Muslim could commit because God does not forgive *shirk*. Certain groups within the Islah party have condoned and encouraged the most extremist Muslim organization in Yemen, the Salafis, to use violence in opposition to Sufi practices.

Although the situation of the Shadhiliya/Alawiya Sufi order under consideration is typical of Yemen's Sufi orders, it is also unique in that it has experienced both Zaydi and Islahi opposition. This double adversity exists mainly because the order is situated in Şan'a' which is both a center of Zaydi learning and home to important Islahi leaders. This antagonism caused the shaykh of the order to leave Yemen,

the head disciple to be removed from his post as an imam of a mosque, and the closing of their meeting place in Şan'a'.

The Sufis of the Shadhiliya/Alawiya Sufi order of Şan'a' consist of about 50 Shafi'i males ranging in age from 15 to 80 years old, all of whose place of birth is Ta'izz, a major city south of Şan'a' and the surrounding regions of al-Ḥujjariya and Mount Şabr. None are Zaydi. These fifty are among the 100,000 males, dispersed throughout the Shafi'i regions of the country, which the shaykh of this order claims are his disciples.

I was unable to determine the relationship between women and the Sufi orders in Yemen because of the stringent separation between male and female domains, especially in Şan'a'. The only female disciples of the Shadhiliya order in Şan'a' are three wives of the members. They have no separate gatherings in the city, and inquiring about female participation in the order was considered shameful. According to the men, the shaykh has only a handful of female disciples, and they did not know of female shaykhs or female orders in their villages.

These members met twice weekly in the *dīwān* of a private home of one of the wealthier disciples to carry out religious lessons and rituals. They gathered on Thursday and Friday afternoons for about five hours to chew *qāt* leaves – an endemic social and private custom among Yemenis. During these sessions informal lessons on law (*shar'ia*) and theoretical Sufism were conducted, and group religious rituals such as the *dhikr* – the group repetition of divine names – and *samā'* – the group singing of Sufi poetry – were performed. In August 1996, the shaykh ended these meetings because local Zaydis and Islahis were disrupting the sessions.

There is no formal organization to this order. Membership is based solely on becoming a disciple of the shaykh. There are no lists of members and no central office nor meeting place specifically built for the order. As for the weekly meetings, attendance would vary from 10 to 50 participants. Any Yemeni could attend the sessions and participate freely in the religious rituals. As a non-Muslim I was allowed to participate in the rituals without due concern.

As mentioned, the current shaykh of this order left Yemen in 1995 because of local opposition to his teachings. He now resides in Dubai and works in the Ministry of Awqāf. He tried to establish a Sufi order in Dubai, but met with no success. He has five disciples there and no funding or time to establish a meeting place. During an interview there, he told me that he does not expect to return to Yemen soon because of the current anti-Sufi bias and the poor economic situation. If such resistance subsides and the economy improves he plans to return to his country and establish a large, well-organized institution. His disciples in Şan'a' eagerly await his return; some believe that under his leadership there will be a major revival of Sufism throughout the country.

This shaykh took over from the previous spiritual master who died in 1990. In addition, this shaykh professes the shaykhhood of two other late Yemeni Sufi masters, one from the same order, the other from the Ḥaḍrami order of Ba-

'Alawi. Hence, he declares to have inherited the 100,000 followers of the former three shaykhs. Disputes have arisen over his claim, especially among the disciples of the deceased masters. Presently three young *muqaddams* – representatives of the shaykh – are in Yemen, one in Ṣan'ā', one in Ta'izz, and one in al-Ḥujjariya. Each *muqaddam* has about fifty disciples; therefore of the supposed 100,000 men only about 150 are actually accountable to this shaykh.

The core group of people that met in Ṣan'ā' remain closely attached to their home villages in and around the city of Ta'izz. They do not consider themselves "tribal" (*qabīlī*) like the Northern Highlanders, and they do not identify themselves strongly in terms of their family lineages. The lack of concern for family name may be twofold: firstly, their life in the urban center of Ṣan'ā' does not require them to identify themselves in terms of their family name, but rather only in terms of their home region; second, the teachings of the order mitigate against such kin-tied self identity, where self worth is seen more in purity of heart than family origins.

The common reasons given for moving to urban centers such as Ṣan'ā' and Ta'izz are for greater education and business opportunities. Most say their families in the villages are farmers, merchants and craftsmen. A strong attachment to their villages does remain as almost all members return to their villages at least once a year, at which time they are expected to bring money to their extended families.

While members of this Sufi order in Ṣan'ā' have similar origins, their current means of employment varies. Some are government employees in the Ministry of Finance and the President's office, some are self-employed merchants and a handful are professionals such as medical doctors, engineers, lawyers, college professors, plumbers and auto-mechanics. The young people attend the state run high schools and universities. Many find it difficult to make ends meet, so under the shaykh's instructions the wealthier disciples are providing financial aid to the poorer ones.

The status hierarchy within the order is determined by four factors: the shaykh's prerogative, length of time in the order, knowledge of the religion and age. What is interesting to note is that the *muqaddam* of the order is only 29 years old, yet when there is a gathering he sits in the most honored seat as would be expected for his position but not his age. The reason for this distinction is because the shaykh has appointed him as his representative, so most treat him as though he were the shaykh himself. During the weekly sessions, the young *muqaddam* leads the prayers and the religious rituals, despite the presence of older Yemenis and those with many years in the order. Being a member of the Prophet Muḥammad's family does not automatically give anyone a high status in the order, but rather emphasis is placed on religious vocation.

Religious education differs among members. Most have gained their basic knowledge of Islam through their families, Koran schools, and the mandatory government run schools which have classes on elementary law and belief (*i'tiqād*). No one has a formal degree in Islamic studies from a university. Their advanced religious education comes from infor-

mal learning sessions at mosques and private homes. Their interpretations of Islamic teachings and practices have been prominently determined by the instructions of the shaykh, the reading of classical Sufi texts and the practice of Sufi rituals.

Results of Sufi Survey

As mentioned, a survey was conducted in November 1995 in the Tihāma, Ta'izz and Aden, in order to establish the general status of Sufism in these regions. A number of tentative conclusions were reached.

During our travels we found daily, weekly, monthly and yearly gatherings of non-Sufi Yemenis performing as least one of the following four rituals important to Sufi practice: *dhikr*, the repetition of divine names; *samā'*, the singing of Sufi poetry in groups; *mawlid*, the celebration of the birth and/or death of a prophet or saint; and *ziyāra*, the visitation to the tombs of saints. Most Yemenis we spoke to agreed that these practices are performed less today than in the past. Young people, we were told, are reluctant to continue these rituals.

Our travels confirmed their statements. "Al-Ḥujjariya is sewn together by the saints," said a caretaker of a saint's tomb in Turba, the judicial and administrative capital of the district of the al-Ḥujjariya. Indeed, you can not pass a village without seeing a white dome of a saint's tomb. However, we found that many of the practices at these smaller tombs are not being continued by the younger Yemenis. The caretaker in Turba, who was an advanced disciple, alluded to the loss of Sufis by responding to my question about the number of people at his Sufi gatherings, saying that, "If there are five people saying the group *dhikr* sincerely, it is like five thousand."

While daily veneration practices at tombs do not attract many people, yearly saints' day celebrations of highly venerated Sufis could attract whole villages to gravesites. For example, last year thousands of Yemenis attended the two-day *mawlid* ceremony at the tomb/school (*madrāsa*) complex built around the grave of the great medieval Yemeni Sufi poet Aḥmad Ibn 'Alwān (d. 1267AD/ 665 AH) in Yafrus, near Ta'izz.

What is interesting to note is that most of the devotees to saints are not in Sufi orders. Most attendees to *mawlids* are known as lovers of the saints (*muḥibbīn*). They see these celebrations as a cardinal means to ask the saint to intercede with God on their behalf for blessings. Veneration of saints is an essential aspect of their Islamic belief and practice, but to follow a Sufi shaykh is not.

As mentioned, the Sufi orders we encountered were extremely low key, loosely organized, and fragmented throughout Ṣan'ā' and the region surveyed. Like the Shadhiliya/'Alawiya order of Ṣan'ā', the Sufi orders in the areas surveyed are serious in their faith and practice, but they are also extremely cautious in advertising themselves to non-Sufi Yemenis. For example, we met three Sufi shaykhs who did not claim leadership of a Sufi order, yet had followers and weekly gatherings.

Tentative reasons for the present state of the Sufi orders

could be the following. Most of the powerful shaykhs have either died or left the country. When a great shaykh passes away without appointing someone to take over his duties, which is common among the Sufi orders we encountered, fragmentation occurs among his disciples. No one person is strong enough to bring together the disagreeing factions on leadership issues. Smaller gatherings form under the authority of the advanced disciples of the late shaykh. To conserve peaceful relations among members, these advanced disciples do not claim the shaykhhood for themselves, but rather keep their assertions hidden from those not belonging in their group.

Another reason for the decline and elusiveness of Sufi orders and ideas is due to the spread of the religious doctrines of the political party of Islah, which find Sufi practices and beliefs unIslamic. In cities and villages, young Yemenis are not interested in Sufi shaykhs, saints' tombs and the apolitical stance and loose organization of the orders. Rather, they prefer politicized religious organizations such as the newly created Islah party. For many Yemenis, Islamic teachings and practices are supposed to guide their behavior in life and to answer basic questions on the meaning of existence. However, many know only the rudiments of Islamic law and faith and are uneducated in the other dimensions, interpretations, and aspects of basic religious teachings.

Simultaneously Yemen is experiencing economic difficulties. During the Gulf War a flood of Yemeni emigrants returned home thereby cutting off an important source of foreign remittances. As a result, Yemeni currency has been devalued, unemployment has risen, and the level of government salaries makes it difficult to support families. There are many young, unemployed, poor Yemenis who are anxious to improve their material circumstances. These people, though poorly educated in Islam, have a passive but deeply imbedded religious worldview. The Islah party is attractive to them because it offers the jobless and needy a means to enhance their financial status through joining a political party whose platform is based on religious principles. Such principles, however, are anti-Sufi and go against the Islam of their parents. As a result many young people who join this party reject and sometimes violently oppose the practices of saintly patronage and following shaykhs. For example, Ta'izz was one of the largest centers of Sufism in Yemen since medieval times, but now devotees in Sufi orders there are diminishing while the growing party affiliation makes this city a major center of Islahi support.

Another reason for the attraction of Islah amongst the youth is because Islah controls the curriculum of the government-run religious educational institutions and the appointment of imams at government-run mosques. Hence, young people attending these schools, especially in rural areas, who would normally follow the traditions of their parents, are taught that Sufi related practices are unIslamic. As a result, many Sufis of the Shadhiliya order in Şan'a' refuse to send their children to the Islah-run Quran schools at mosques because they do not want their children learning anti-Sufi interpretations of the holy text.

One result of Islah control of imam appointments has directly affected the *muqaddam* of the Shadhiliya/Alawiya order of Şan'a'. Once it was discovered that the imam was the *muqaddam* of a Sufi order, members of Islah had him removed and replaced with a member of their party. He was removed from his position as imam of the mosque of Shaykh 'Abd Allāh al-Aḥmar, the leading political figure in Yemen and one of the heads of the party of Islah.

An extreme result of this growth of opposition to Sufi orders and ideas has culminated in the eradication of saints' tombs and the banning of veneration practices there. The shrines of al-Ḥāshimī and al-Aydarūs, two important places of saint veneration in Aden, were destroyed two years ago by the extremist Islamic sect of the Salafis. The members of the Shadhili order and numerous locals around the al-Ḥāshimī mosque believe that this could only have happened with the tacit approval of the Wahhabi branch of the Islah party.

However, in response to this violence, a type of Sufi opposition is forming. The destroyed tombs are being rebuilt and a Yemeni scholar of law (*faqih*) from the Sufi family of Ba-'Alawi, educated in Saudi Arabia, has returned to Aden to take over the weekly Friday sermons at al-Aydarūs. At the same time, he and other pro-Sufi politicians are reviving the veneration practices at these sites. Recently, a saints' day celebration, not held for five years, was performed there. The members of the Shadhili order, along with other Adenese Sufis we spoke to, are skeptical of such renewals saying that the only true growth in Sufism can come from great shaykhs whom, they say, have yet to appear.

Conclusion: Hiddenness and Patience

Like many Sufi orders and lovers of saints in Yemen, the members of the Shadhiliya/Alawiya order continue to carry out their rituals and defend, at least among themselves, their religious practices and beliefs in light of Zaydi and Islahi criticism. While this paper presented only a brief survey of the situation of Sufism in certain regions in Yemen, with special reference to the Shadhiliya order in Şan'a', future research will explore how these Sufis defend their beliefs and practices in light of Zaydi and Islah opposition.

It is sufficient to say at present that the Sufis of this Shadhiliya order are indicative of many Sufi organizations in Yemen: they remain small, dispersed, loosely organized social entities, with declining memberships. With the exception of the activities in Aden, most orders are, like the saints they venerate, going underground by concealing themselves from political and social exposure. They wait patiently for the arrival of God's friends, whether from Dubai or the next world, to help fight against their current religious adversaries.

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