

Sufism in Islam is a widespread popular form of mystic or esoteric Islam, in which adherents hope to gain a “realization of the Oneness of God.”¹ Throughout the history of Islam, Sufism, in its many forms, has played an important role in the spread of the religion to both Arab and non-Arab lands. One of the great branches of Sufism is the Khalwatiyya, which gained prominence in Anatolia, Egypt, Syria, and Azerbaijan. This tariqah, or path, is one rich in history, having many influential sheikhs and intricate practices. In order to best understand the Khalwatiyya, it is necessary to investigate early Sufism and the rise of tariqahs.

A Sufi is “anyone who believes that it is possible to have direct experience of God and who is prepared to go out of his way to put himself in a state whereby he may be enabled to do this.”² Sufism derives its doctrines and methods for the Quran and revelation of the Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him). It is a spiritual experience that often comes into conflict with mainstream Islamic consciousness because it infers that Knowledge cannot be gained only through the traditional means. It is, however, ultimately in coherence with orthodoxy because it depends on the framework of traditional Islam.³ The fourth caliph, Ali, is widely regarded to be the original pioneer of Sufi Knowledge. Another widely regarded teacher of Sufism is Hassan of Basra who has been greatly respected worldwide by Sufis since the early days of its formation.

“Early Sufism was a natural expression of personal religion.”⁴ The tariqahs formed on the basis of the relationships between the sheikhs and their disciples. The sheikh or director was known as the murshid and the disciple became known as the murid. Two main ways emerged. The Junaidi, was a more restrained form and, thereby, gained the approval of the orthodoxy. The founder of this way was Abul-Qasim al-

Junaid came to be known as “the Sheikh of the Way”. The second way was the Bistami and was based on intoxication of the soul and the expression of that intoxication.

Originally, in the 8th century A.D., the groups were loose and mobile but came to have foundations based around sites of retreat or rest-houses known as ribat. By the 11th century these ribat had become organized and companionship (suhba) rules emerged. As Turks gained dominance in the Arab world in the 11th century, they discouraged Sufism and regarded it with suspicion due to its appearance as a form of Shi’ism, to which they, as Sunnis, were obviously opposed. Institutional development of ribat coincided with the development of madrasas (schools) that taught traditional Islam, which allowed for divergent paths to emerge. By this time, however, Sufism was still only appealing to the few because it was more highly regarded as a philosophical way to God than a popular expression of religion.

At the beginning of the 13th century the emergence of tariqahs came into being when a murshid’s circle of disciples became intent on perpetuating his name, teachings, mystical exercises, and rule of life.⁵ This was continued down the generations and with each successive generation it was not uncommon for a new tariqah to form with a new founder and slightly differing practices to obtain Truth. Although they differed in their beliefs, founders of the tariqahs maintained links w/ traditional Islam as they still believed in the formal duties of Islam.

The emergence of tariqahs was also aided by the Sunnis winning battles against Shiite dynasties (e.g. Buyids 1055, Fatimids 1171, and Mongols in Baghdad 1258) and the spread of Sufism through migration. Another important factor in this change to the formation of tariqahs was the adoption of the Shiite custom of bai’a (initiation w/ oath of

allegiance to the sheikh). This perpetuated each sheikh's name and practices and was important in the passage of the tariqah down generational lines.

There have been three main stages of the development of Sufism. The first was the spread of the khanaqah, which constituted a place for retreat and learning for the Sufis from the 8th to 11th century A.D. Tariqahs were then established from the 11th to 14th century A.D. The ta'ifa, in the 15th century then became a popular movement, whereby new foundations for tariqahs began to branch out and become "fully incorporated with the saint-cult."⁶ This was a natural progression based on the veneration of the sheikhs that formed the tariqahs and pilgrims often fled to the sights of their tombs to pay homage, much like what is done in other religions. This type of worship, however, is generally condemned by orthodox Islam as it is just once step away from polygamy. As such, it is no wonder why many orthodox sheikhs protested the existence of Sufism. Nonetheless, Sufism gained widespread popularity among common people in the Ottoman Empire and beyond.

The Khalwatiyya is an important early foundation for unique tariqahs, different in thought and exercises which carried the message of Sufism throughout the Islamic world.⁷ The Khalwatiyya is a tariqah of the Junaidi Way and claimed itself to be Sunni. This allowed for its spread to be less contested than other tariqahs in the Middle East. The name of this tariqah stems from the Arabic, khalwa, meaning retreat or isolation in a solitary place.⁷ The founder of the Khalwatiyya is widely regarded to be Umar al-Khalwati who died in 1397. His master was Mohammed ibn Nur al-Balisi and was known as al-Khalwati because of his frequent spiritual retreats and some regard him as the first pir (master). Yahya al-Bakubi is generally regarded as the 2nd pir and died in

1464. His importance stems from his authorship of the Wird al-Sattar, which is an important devotional text, whose recitation is obligatory for members of this tariqah.

During this early period, the Khalwatiyya spread first in Ardabil region, then spread to Shirwan, and then into Azerbaijan. It was transmitted to Anatolia by Muhammad Shams ad-din, into Turkey and Syria by Hajji Bairam and Umar Rushani. It was also spread into Egypt by Ibrahim Gulsheni who was a disciple of Umar Rushani and died in 1354. He was an especially prominent sheikh who was popular among the Turkish soldiers under Ottoman occupation and when summoned to a trial for charges of heresy he was absolved and helped spread the Khalwatiyya tradition in Turkey. The Khalwatiyya had little impact on eastern Turks and spread into eastern Iran from Tabriz by wandering dervishes. The spread of the Khalwatiyya was greatly aided by the Mongol invasions in the 13th century, whereby, Sufis began to seek refuge in remote locations such as Anatolia and Hindustan because these areas were less impacted by the Mongol take-over.⁸ The Khalwatiyya gained much importance early in the years of the Ottoman Empire.

Chelebi Khalifa, also known as, Mulla Ala al-Din Ali was a Khalwati Sheikh in the 1470s. He went to Istanbul in late 1470s and was feared by Mehmet II (Ottoman Sultan) and was asked to leave. He had strong ties, however, with Bayazid (son of Mehmet) who was also not favored by his father. After Bayazid learned that there was a threat of him being killed so that his brother, Jem, would take the throne upon Mehmet II's death, Bayazid asked for Chelebi Khalifa's help. Through his powers of seeing into the future, he predicted Mehmet II and Jem's moves and upon the sudden death of Mehmet II, Bayazid won and took the throne. Bayazid's reign (1481-1511) was the

height of the Khalwatiyya in Ottoman Turkey. Bayazid participated in Khalwati exercises and as such attracted many to the tariqah, especially from the higher classes. He let his son, Ahmad, be taught by the Khalwatiyya, furthering their influence in the empire. Cheb Khalifa died in 1500 and after the death of Bayazid, the Khalwatiyya were in trouble from Selim I and the orthodoxy. They tried to remove the Khalwatiyya from Istanbul but, upon failed attempts, Selim and Sunbul Sinan (successor of Chelebi Khalifa) reconciled and the political influence of the order was recognized.

Orthodoxy disapproved of Khalwatis because of their loose affiliation with Shi'ism, their distance from the shari'a, and a general distaste for the way of life of the order. Since the Khalwatiyya was now a politically viable entity in the Ottoman capital they found it necessary to back away from their affiliations with the common folk and increasingly became an order for the higher class.⁹

Under Suleiman the Magnificent (1520-1566) and Selim II (1566-1574), the Khalwatiyya were once again in favor w/ the rulers but were careful not to tie themselves too closely with any one ruler for fear of falling out of favor with the successor. During the time of these two rulers, the Khalwatiyya experienced an expansion throughout the Ottoman territories. The Khalwatiyya became especially popular in Egypt during this time period. Unlike, the Khalwatis in Istanbul, however, the Khalwatis in Egypt were more affiliated with the common people, they did, however, have members of the higher classes.

The first important Egyptian Khalwati was Sheikh Damirdash al-Muhammadi. He was very generous and pious, his mosque and zawiya (institution) still exist and his tomb lies within in it and his mawlid (birth) is recognized every year. Tombs came to

serve important functions in the order especially by commoners in Egypt such as pilgrimage, rituals, and dhikr. This sheikh was among the first for which pilgrimages took place in Egypt. Sheikh Ibn Ahmad bin Muhammad Karim al-Din (Karim al-Din) who lived from 1485-1578 was an expert singer and magician/astrologer. He became the successor of Damirdash and was hugely popular with the common people

Sheikh Ibrahim bin Muhammad Gulshani was probably the most famous of the Egyptian Khalwati sheikhs. He lived from 1430-1534 and attracted many Janissaries and cavalry to the tariqah. He was disliked by viceroy in Egypt but upon trip to Istanbul gained favor and formed a branch of his order in Turkey. After the death of his son Ahmad Khayali (1569) the influence of the Gulshaniyya branch of the Khalwati tariqah deteriorated but was still functional until the 1880s.

In the 17th century, the only sheikh that really stands out was Sheikh Niyazi al-Misri (1617-1694). He was very famous in Anatolia. He was much like early sheikhs in his speech and ties with common population and was most known for his Sufi poetry. In addition, he was politically controversial and was exiled from Istanbul twice. By the end of the 17th century, the Demirdashiyya branch in Cairo was not dominant because it was very demanding on those desiring membership. The Gulshaniyya branch also in Egypt, was of limited importance because its liturgy was in Turkish and Russian and, therefore, the majority of the common people could not access it. Despite weakening in some areas at least twenty branches existed in the Ottoman Empire at this time.¹⁰

In the middle of the 18th century the Khalwatiyya again came to be prominent in Egypt and in fact, became the most important order in Egypt.¹¹ Mustafa Kamal al-Din al-Bakri was one of the most important sheikhs during this period and is regarded as the

main instigator in the renewal of the Khalwatiyya in Egypt and beyond. During this time in Egypt, political problems were occurring as Mamluks sought power and terrorized the Egyptians. The Khalwatiyya were trusted by the people and helped them where they could, thus, further propagating their influence in the region. They used this period to extend their influence to Arabia, northern and western Africa.

Mustafa Kamal al-Din al-Bakri was a student of Abd-al Ghani al-Nabulusi. He was initiated into the Naqshabandiyya, Qadiriyya, and the Khalwatiyya. His sheikh in the Khalwatiyya was Abd- al-Latif al-Halabi who followed suluk of Qarabashiyya (Khalwati branch). He gave al-Bakri authorization to initiate and appoint khalifas, thereby, making him the successor. After his death: Muhammad Salim al-Hifini who lived in Cairo took over as Sheikh and his khalifas spread Khalwatiyya in the Arab east (especially Egypt). The revival of the Khalwatiyya in the 18th century, thus took place. Some scholars, however, question this revival of the Khalwatiyya quoting that as far as geographic extension and the number of adherents went the stretch of Khalwatiyya influence did not increase dramatically. Furthermore, scholars believe that during this period the Khalwatis were politically uninvolved.¹² Where scholars do agree, however, is that al-Bakri had a very large number of writings and inspired writings of other sheikhs. His most notable contribution was the addition of prayer litanies (e.g. Wird al-sahar), which increased reading task by requiring the Wird al-sahar, to be recited at different times on different occasions. Over the course of development of the Khalwatiyya, many practices have been added and many branches have broken off the main Khalwatiyya tariqah.

The principles of the tariqah have remained in place since the Khalwatiyya's inception in the 1300s. The main focus of this Sufi way is on individual asceticism (zuhd) and retreat (khalwa). It is generally regarded as a "popular order based on reverence for the leader with power, a reputation for strictness in training its dervishes, and, at the same time, its encouragement of individualism."¹³ Due to this nature it has experienced much splitting through its history. The Khalwatiyya is based on the Mamati tradition, whereby adherents conceal their spirituality and try to free themselves from worldly matters while living amongst them. This is a basic principle of most Sufi orders in that the followers of the tariqahs do not live in permanent seclusion, though they do perform yearly retreats.

The Khalwatiyya originally had strong ties with the Twelver Shi'ites as proven by Umar al-Khalwati fasting a twelve-day fast in honor of the twelve Imams. With the Sunnis taking power in Anatolia, however, Khalwatis were forced to keep their Shi'ite practices within the tariqah's secret teachings. The main principle of this order are: voluntary hunger, silence, vigil, seclusion, meditation, commitment to dhikr, a permanent state of ritual cleanliness, and having the heart tied to that of the master.¹⁴ One of the most important and most strict aspects of the Khalwatiyya and what separates it from other orders is that of the initiation of a brother.

The initiation ceremony is known as ahd and the most important part was the bai'a (the vow of allegiance to the murshid). This ceremony begins with prayer. The mursid then promises to recite the dhikr as dictated by the sheikh. This is followed by dua'a. After this is completed, the sheikh accepts him as a son, and the mursid drinks from a cup of water. The ceremony ends with the sheikh giving the murid his personal

dhikr and closing prayers are said. This process was essential to the maintenance and propagation of the order.¹⁵ This is not, however, the end of the initiation process.

The talqin ceremony is that through which a mursid may gain acceptance as a full brother. It is begun by the sheikh whispering into the mursid's ear, "la illaha illa 'llah" (no god but God) and tells him to repeat it many times per day. The mursid then goes into retreat and reports to the sheikh the dreams and visions he experiences. After he passes this stage, he continues and the sheikh gives the subsequent 6 statements of different names of Allah as the mursid progresses. The process may take six months to a year and once completed he is admitted as a full brother of the order. The importance of zealously practicing dream interpretation was particularly emphasized in the writings of Ibn al-Arabi who wrote that the decisive stages in his life were all denoted by dreams.¹⁶

Ibn al-Arabi was perhaps, the greatest writer of the Khalwatiyya. He prescribed how rituals would be performed, the relationship between murshid and murid, and the fundamental principles of the Khalwati tariqah. Through his writings, the tariqah was able to become more systemized and fluid throughout the different khanaqahs in the Middle East. He influenced many that were to follow him and his theology can be recognized in all branches of the Khalwatiyya.

The structure of the order cannot be maintained without the communal dhikr. It is the framework of the tariqah.¹⁷ Controlling breath is important in the recitation of dhikr. In traditional Islam music is not accepted, but in the Sufi tradition, music was deeply integrated into dhikr and was supposed to help bring upon ecstasy. In each branch of the Khalwatiyya there was a unique ritual, through which ecstasy could be attained. Group dhikr sessions were known as hadra and consisted of the readings of the sheikh and other

prayers. Dhikr typically took place on Fridays or Thursday nights or on special occasions. At the start of the hadra, the Wird as-Sattar was recited. The sheikh is seated in the middle of the circle, surrounded by the musicians, and around them, the disciples. The mawlid an-nabi (birthday of the Prophet) is another important facet of the hadra gatherings. The first mawlid was written by a khalwati, Suleiman Chelebi (d.1421) and was recited within Sufi circles. It was generally not pompous, like some celebrations endorsed by the government, but was fairly simple and filled with happiness and zealously.

Another aspect of the Khalwatis that distinguished them from other tariqahs was their clothing. The adherents generally wore a khirqah (dress given to those wishing to become initiated), sirwal (pants), a hizam (girdle), a pishtimal (waistband), and taj (headdress). Many traditional Muslims found such clothing to be uncouth, and furthered their dislike within orthodox circles. Nonetheless, Khalwatis like most other people of Sufi orders were humble, God-fearing, and law abiding citizens of the Ottoman Empire, whom did their best to spread their beliefs to the farthest reaches possible.

In the past century many branches of the Khalwatiyya have been shutdown due to conflicts between political and religious beliefs. After the revolutionary actions in Turkey in the 1920s, the Sufi orders were abolished and all institutions were shutdown. A similar action took place in Egypt in the late 1880s, though now there are active Khalwati branches such as al-Dawmiyya, al-Judiyya, al-Fu'adiyya, al-Haddadiyya and others. Ethiopia currently has an active branch known as the Samaniyya. Branches are strong in Lebanon as well. Branches in eastern Europe are also active. In Albania, the cultural revolution in 1967 brought an end to the existence of much of the branches in

that country. Many branches in Kosovo and Macedonia were known to be still functioning as of 1939. Greece also contains several active Khalwati branches. It is, thus, safe to conclude that the Khalwatiyya had great influence during the Ottoman Empire. It was able to hold root in non-Arab regions that may not have otherwise accepted Islam. The Khalwatiyya, therefore, was an important part of the spread of Islam especially from the 14th through 19th centuries.

The Khalwatiyya has had strong educational and political roles throughout its history. It has aided the development of popular literature and has linked theology to the people on a level they could understand and appreciate. In addition, it helped foster popular music in the Middle East. The political role of the Khalwatiyya stemmed from the Ottoman attempts at controlling the order while still holding respect for it. The acceptance and tolerance of the Ottomans, thus, contributed to the spread of the Khalwatiyya. The history, personalities, and practices of the Khalwatiyya all distinguish it as a great Sufi order in Islam that cannot go without recognition for its contributions to the society and spirituality of the people under the Ottoman rule and beyond.

End Notes

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