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Doctrines and Practices of the Burhaniya Sufi Order in the Arab World and in the West Between 1938 and 2012: A Decolonial and Transdisciplinary Analysis from an Insider Perspective

par

Jason Sparkes

Faculté de Théologie et de Sciences des Religions

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Résumé

Ce mémoire présente une exploration décoloniale et transdisciplinaire des doctrines et pratiques de la confrérie soufie transnationale Burhaniya, dans le monde arabe et en Occident. Il traite principalement de la période s'étendant de la fondation de la confrérie en 1938 jusqu'en 2012. Pour bien contextualiser les particularités de l'émergence de cette confrérie moderne, ce mémoire présente tout d'abord son ancrage historique par l'étude de ses racines en lien avec l'histoire du soufisme en Afrique du Nord et en Asie de l'Ouest. Puis, ce mémoire offre une analyse comparative de certains des principaux contextes nationaux où s'est disséminée cette confrérie, à partir du Soudan, vers l'Égypte, la France, l'Allemagne, les États-Unis et le Canada. Suite à ses recherches, l'auteur conclut que les cheikhs de la Burhaniya ont facilité l'expansion de la confrérie en occident et ont perpétué un héritage soufi plutôt traditionnel au sein du monde moderne. Ils ont su le faire en préservant les doctrines fondamentales de leur tradition tout en adaptant leurs pratiques à divers contextes.

Mots-clés : islam, mysticisme, soufisme, Soudan, Burhaniya, modernité, mondialisation, post-colonialisme, décolonialisme, transdisciplinarité

Abstract

This thesis presents a decolonial and transdisciplinary examination of the doctrines and practices of the transnational Burhaniya Sufi order, in the Arab World and in the West. The main time period under consideration is from the foundation of the order in 1938 until 2012. In order to contextualize the particularities of this modern order's emergence, this thesis begins by presenting its historical roots related to the history of Sufism in North Africa and West Asia. Then, the thesis offers a comparative analysis of certain national contexts in which the order was disseminated, from Sudan to Egypt, France, Germany, the United States, and Canada. The author concludes from his findings that the sheikhs of the Burhaniya have facilitated the expansion of their order in the West, and perpetuated a fairly traditional Sufi heritage in the modern world. They have done so by combining strong commitment to core doctrines and adaptability to contexts of practice.

Keywords: Islam, mysticism, Sufism, Sudan, Burhaniya, modernity, globalization, post-colonialism, decolonialism, transdisciplinarity

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For Sheikh Muḥammad

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All thanks and praise belong to Allah, who placed such wonderful teachers upon my path. I would be lost without the constant support of my spiritual guides, my academic mentors, my family, and my friends.

Notes on Language Usage

As is common practice in Quebec, citations in French are not translated in this thesis. Every other foreign term is a transliteration of Arabic, which is translated the first time it appears in the text. When the spelling of certain names varies in Arabic, preference is given to the most common usage in the primary Arabic corpus of the Burhaniya. All Arabic terms are transliterated into roman characters, in italics, using the Library of Congress System (Chart 1 below). However, proper names are given without italics, and words now incorporated into the common English lexicon are spelt using their English form. This also applies to certain proper nouns that are commonly transliterated differently. For example, I write 'Burhaniya' rather than '*Burhâniyyah*', to respect the spelling used in official communications by this Sufi order in European languages. In this way, I hope to avoid misleading those readers who would like to consult such writings, like those presented on the order's website (Tariqa Burhaniya 2011a). For the same reason, when citing an author, I favour the transcription used in the official citation—e.g.: 'Zakia Zouanat', not 'Zakiyyah Zuwânât'.

Because the Qur'an is considered by Muslims to be the word of God in its original Arabic version, all direct quotations from it are provided in Arabic first. The translation used is that of the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought (*The Holy Qur'an: A New English translation of its Meanings* 2012) with the chapter and verse indicated between parentheses, separated by a colon. No in-text citation is given for these translated verses. In the case of hadiths, since they come from a variety of sources, a regular citation is provided for each translated passage. This is also the case for other translated passages of Sufi authors.

However, I have found it difficult to use the official translations provided on the Burhaniya website for the yearly speeches of the order's sheikhs (Tariqa Burhaniya 2012c). These translations contain many grammatical mistakes and are often unidiomatic. I have edited the passages I quote, using the original Arabic as an indication. The final result is very close to the official translation but hopefully a little smoother to read.

I would also like to point out that I enthusiastically endorse the general trend to favour gender inclusive language in academic writing. For instance, referring to Allah as 'Him' could be considered problematic. However, in Arabic, Allah is a masculine proper noun and to my knowledge is never referred to in the feminine. This does not imply any anthropomorphic depiction of the Supreme Being as gendered, just as referring to the sun (*shams*) in the feminine and the moon (*qamar*) in the masculine does not attribute anthropomorphic gender to celestial bodies. Therefore, my intention has been to use gender-inclusive language at all times, except when it would seem to distort the subject matter. My own decolonial approach also leads me to be as respectful as I can to the conventions used by Muslims for centuries, while being sensitive to the multiple layers of meaning behind their language constructions.

One linguistic convention important to Muslims is the traditional practice of including a prayer for the prophet Muḥammad every time his name is mentioned, even in writing. As a Muslim, this practice is dear to me. However, I am aware that for non-Muslim readers, it could be perceived as a formalism that weighs down the text and makes it less pleasant to read. Therefore, the reader will find in this thesis the result of my own personal compromise on this point: I pray here once that the blessings and peace of Allah be upon the prophet Muḥammad every time his name is mentioned in this document and elsewhere. Furthermore, may these blessings and peace be bestowed upon all other holy women and men in all times and places. My intention being clear, I hope my Muslim readers will accept, or at least tolerate, the omission of such explicit prayers in the rest of this thesis.

Chart 1 – Overview of the Library of Congress Transliteration System (Congress 2012)

Consonants

Arabic	Roman	Arabic	Roman	Arabic	Roman	Arabic	Roman
أ	omit	ب	b	ت	t	ث	th
ج	j	ح	ḥ	خ	kh	د	d
ذ	dh	ر	r	ز	z	س	s
ش	sh	ص	ṣ	ض	ḍ	ط	ṭ
ظ	ẓ	ع	' (ayn)	غ	gh	ف	F
ق	q	ك	k	ل	l	م	m
ن	n	ه ة	h	و	w	ي	y

Vowels and diphthongs

Arabic	Roman	Arabic	Roman	Arabic	Roman
◌َ	a	◌ِ	i	◌ُ	u
آ	â	◌ى	á	و	û
ي	î	◌ْو	aw	يَ	ay

INTRODUCTION

In this thesis, I examine the doctrines and practices of the transnational Burhaniya Sufi order based in Khartoum Sudan. The main time period under consideration is from the foundation of the order in 1938 until 2012. In order to contextualize the particularities of this modern[1] order's emergence, this thesis begins by presenting its historical roots related to the history of Sufism in North Africa and West Asia. Geographically, two vast areas are covered here: the Arab world and the West. This is because my primary research material is written documents, generally intended for transnational audiences—in Arabic for the Arab speaking world and in several European languages for the West. Moreover, these areas are not simply geographical or historical. The West and the Arab world can be considered epistemic regions in today's globalized world. Such regions are not contained by or limited to the physical areas with which they are traditionally associated. Their borders have been qualitatively transformed by phenomena like the Internet, satellite television, cheap air travel, and massive international migration. Regions and borders have not disappeared; they have become more complex. For example, is someone in Montreal reading the Burhaniya webpage in Arabic situated in the Arab world or in the West? I do not try to provide simple answers to such questions. Following the example of Sufis who recognize multiple layers of reality and meaning, I seek to describe, analyze, and explore multiple layers of reality and meaning in the world of the Burhaniya, not to define it or reduce it in one way or another. Certain national contexts are discussed in greater detail. In the Arab world, I focus on Sudan and Egypt, where membership to the order is greatest. In the West, I focus on the countries in which I have had most direct contact with the members of the Burhaniya, namely France, Germany, the United States, and Canada. The cradle of the Burhaniya is the Nile Valley. The order was founded in 1938 in Sudan as a contemporary manifestation of the path started in thirteenth century northern

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[1] [1] By calling the Burhaniya a modern order, I am simply referring to the time period in which it has arisen., and not attempting to evaluate its teachings and practices as modern or modernist in any ideological sense.

Egypt, by Sheikh Ibrâhîm al-Dusûqî (d. ca. 1296). By the 1970s, the Burhaniya had millions of disciples in Sudan and Egypt, and was spreading into neighbouring Arab countries. Later that decade, communities were born in Europe and North America. Today, although communities outside the Nile Valley are much smaller, the Burhaniya is a cosmopolitan transnational order, evolving in a globalized world. It attracts adherents from a variety of social classes, cultural backgrounds and age groups, particularly youth. The rapid expansion of the Burhaniya into new social, geographical, and cultural contexts has provided the impetus for my research into how the order and its leaders are managing this change.

Objectives

My aim is to distinguish elements of continuity and adaptation in the doctrines and practices of the spiritual way of Sheikh Ibrâhîm al-Dusûqî, by the sheikhs of the Burhaniya, over the last century. After an overview of the order's spiritual genealogy in the rich heritage of previous Sufi orders, I focus on the period of its emergence between 1938 and 2012. In my research, I have comparatively examined how Sufism is presented and practiced by the Burhaniya in the Arab world and in the West. I have analysed texts from the Burhaniya to see how it positions itself towards issues like modernity, coloniality, globalization, religious extremism, and intercultural relations. Moreover, I have considered elements of continuity and adaptation between past and present doctrines and practices.

My findings reveal that the sheikhs of the Burhaniya have facilitated the expansion of their order in the West, and perpetuated a fairly traditional[2] Shâdhulî heritage in the modern world. They have done so by combining strong commitment to core doctrines and adaptability to contexts of practice. Actually, this is precisely the attitude that has facilitated the expansion

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[2] Words like 'traditional' are used in a variety of ways, often abusively. In this work, I use this term and related ones (e.g. tradition) to refer to cultural or religious currents that develop in continuity rather than rupture with the past (Nasr 1987; Nasr 2010). I view traditions as dynamic and changing, not static (Graburn 2000). On the other hand, untraditional or anti-traditional currents seek to break with the past. In some cases, this rupture with the immediate past is accompanied with a desired return to the state of affairs in a much earlier period (e.g. the first generations of Islam).

of Sufi orders in Africa, Asia, and Southeastern Europe for centuries (Chittick 1994, 3; Traoré 1983, 15-16; Trimingham 1998, 232-233). For Sufis, adaptability and continuity are complementary—practical adaptation allows doctrinal continuity, and vice-versa (see section 4.5).

Literature Review

A number of academics have written excellent introductions to Sufism that have been useful to me in providing basic references and a bird's eye view of the general theme. Some recent publications have been of particular interest, such as those by Ernst (Ernst 1997), Chittick (Chtiick 2000), Karamustafa (Karamustafa 2007), Nasr (Nasr 2007), and Geoffroy (Geoffroy 2009). However, some earlier scholarship has also been invaluable to me, such as the classic presentation of Sufism by Schimmel (Schimmel 1975), as of yet unrivaled for its encyclopedic detail. Trimingham (Trimingham 1998) is another such basic reference for anyone studying the complex constellations of institutional Sufism.

Of course, fewer pages have been written specifically about the Burhaniya order than about Sufism as a whole. To my knowledge, the Burhaniya has been the object of academic articles and book chapters, but never of a complete book or thesis. Hoffman (Hoffman 1995) devoted a chapter to the order in her book on contemporary Egyptian Sufism. She noted the immense popularity of the Burhaniya founder, Sheikh Muḥammad 'Uthmân 'Abduh al-Burhânî (d. 1983), as well as the controversy surrounding him in Egypt in the 1970s. According to her, this controversy was mainly caused by mid-level bureaucrats and representatives of 'official' Egyptian Sufism, who felt threatened by this charismatic foreign sheikh. Hallenberg (Hallenberg 2005) published her 1997 doctoral thesis about the 'invention' of Dusûqî as a saint, exploring the origins of the Burhaniya, but not the contemporary order itself. Such detailed historical considerations seemed secondary to Frishkopf (Frishkopf 2001), whose fascinating article focused on greater historical trends as well as how Burhanis (as they

call themselves in English) understand their heritage[3]. For Frishkopf, Dusûqî represents a historical current of Sufism that is quite real and has a tangible impact on those who see themselves as his continuators today, regardless of the historical accuracy of his hagiographies. Whereas Liguori (Liguori 2005) and Frishkopf (Frishkopf 2001) devoted only part of their work to the social aspect of the contemporary Burhaniya in the West, this was the prime focus of Lassen (Lassen 2009a, 2009b). All three authors agreed that the Burhaniya in Western Europe and North America has preserved its orthodox Islamic character while adapting efficiently to new environments. Lassen observed, for instance, how the children of German and Danish Burhani Muslim converts seem comfortable dealing with multiple identities as European Sufi Muslims.

Although more explicitly decolonial, my analysis in this thesis is very much indebted to Frishkopf (Frishkopf 2001). He purported that the globalization of Sufism, which began in the pre-modern period, has gone through three main phases. In the pre-modern period, Sufism was embodied by a multitude of local communities linked to decentralized transnational networks. Starting in the eighteenth late 18th century, centralized Pan-Islamic[4] reformism appeared as an organizational type inside and outside of Sufi circles. Then, in the late twentieth century, another phase began, in which Sufi orders developed transnational networks centered in the West. Using the Burhaniya as a case study, Frishkopf argued that all three modalities in Sufi globalization exist simultaneously today. New phases have come in addition to—not replacement of—old ones. Moreover, in the case of the Burhaniya, Frishkopf observed that these organizational transformations have not affected the doctrinal core. For my research, the solid theoretical base provided by Frishkopf has been invaluable. However, the greater length of a thesis compared to an article has allowed me to explore doctrinal and epistemic aspects in more depth. Also, I have considered texts produced in the past decade.

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[3] I should add for the purpose of full disclosure that, as a member of the Burhaniya, I was one of Frishkopf's sources for this article.
[4] See section 3.1 below for a discussion of how Frishkopf uses terms like 'globalization' and 'Pan-Islamic'.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework within which I have organized my research has been a combination of decolonialism and transdisciplinarity. Since these academic theories are relatively recent, and may be perceived as marginal and even, for some, as radical, I must present them in some detail before discussing more specific methodological issues that arise from this particular combination of two theoretical choices.

Decolonialism is an intellectual current critical of modernity as a Western-centric colonial world-system. It is represented by authors such as Enrique Dussel (Dussel and Ibarra-Colado 2006; Dussel 1995, 1996) and Ramón Grosfoguel (Grosfoguel 2004; Grosfoguel 2009, 2010; Grosfoguel 2011; Grosfoguel and Mielants 2006)[5]. For them, modernity began in 1492 with the defeat of Granada and the initial European expansion into America. At that time, Europe was beginning to become the centre of a world order. Decolonial theorists see modernity as the fruit of the dialectic between the colonial Western centre and its global peripheries—a dialectic in which progressive liberalization and emancipation at the centre is somewhat proportionate to coercion on the periphery. The decolonial project seeks to transcend postcolonialism and postmodernism. Indeed, both these intellectual currents are rooted in Western theoretical models. They are Eurocentric critiques of Eurocentrism (Grosfoguel 2011, 3). In contrast, decolonialism proposes a 'transmodern' utopia in which the West is decentred without being destroyed or replaced by a new hegemon (Dussel and Ibarra-Colado 2006; Dussel 1995, 1996; Grosfoguel 2011).

Of course, it should be recognized that over time the West has become more than the western extremity of Eurasia. Today, it is also what could be called an epistemic space. As inheritors of the modern colonial epistemology born in Western Europe, Westerners need not be of European ancestry. They can be found on every continent. Likewise, many people living

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[5] Although critical of the left for being historically as Eurocentric as the right, the intellectual roots of authors like Dussel and Grosfoguel are clearly in leftist movements. With a strong background in European philosophy, Dussel is also inspired by Marxism and liberation theology. Grosfoguel, who is based in the United States, is also influenced by world systems analysis, cultural studies and postcolonialism as well as Black and Latina/Chicana feminism.

in Western Europe and North America represent peripheral perspectives, and can actually be considered colonial subjects (Grosfoguel 2004; Grosfoguel 2011).

Academically, decolonialism entails producing knowledge *from* peripheral epistemologies rather than *about* them (Grosfoguel 2010; Grosfoguel 2011). This is precisely my intention. As an academic and a member of the Burhaniya, I have attempted to produce pertinent knowledge *from* the Sufi worldview of the Burhaniya, rather than *about* it. Therefore, the insider perspective I present in this thesis is couched within this decolonial theoretical framework. I should add, to be perfectly clear, that for me decolonialism is not primarily a political project, but an ontic and epistemic one with political implications among others. In fact, since the end of most colonial administrations in the twentieth century, it has become increasingly clear that coloniality can survive colonialism. Terminology is crucial here. Whereas colonialism is an administrative system of foreign occupation, coloniality is a hegemonic system that supports total domination of subaltern peripheries by a colonial centre (Grosfoguel 2011, 14-15). From these peripheries, what has come to be known as 'globalization' appears as a process incorporating all peoples into a system centered on Western power. This system is totalitarian in that it encompasses all aspects of human existence, including politics, economy, education, art, language, and of course epistemology. Academic systems of knowledge (i.e. disciplines) centred in Western modernity are deeply colonial (Grosfoguel 2010), having been conceived and developed as part of the Western hegemonic project. Therefore, academic decolonialism requires taking a critical stance towards modern disciplinary configurations, perhaps not to destroy them, but to attempt to radically transcend their limitations. In this regard, transdisciplinarity can be a useful theoretical framework, complementary to decolonialism.

As stated in article 3 of the *Charte de la transdisciplinarité*, transdisciplinarity is:

> …complémentaire de l'approche disciplinaire; elle fait émerger de la confrontation des disciplines de nouvelles données qui les articulent entre elles; et elle nous offre une nouvelle vision de la nature et de la réalité. La transdisciplinarité ne recherche pas la maîtrise de plusieurs disciplines, mais l'ouverture de toutes les disciplines à ce qui les traverse et les dépasse. (Morin, Nicolescu, and de Freitas 1994)

Without deconstructing modern science *ad nihilum*, transdisciplinarity allows the academic to approach reality from a variety of epistemic angles. Modern academic disciplines can thus contribute to the pursuit of knowledge alongside other intellectual tools like art, literature or spiritual intuition.

Methodology

Within the decolonial/transdisciplinary framework, I have made use of several methodological tools provided by phenomenology of religion, epistemology and history, but also metahistory, which I understand as narratives that seek to transcend historical facts in order to give them a deeper meaning. For example, Islamic metahistory begins before the creation of the universe and continues after the apocalypse. Modern secular science proposes a narrative of perpetual evolution through increasing complexity, culminating in the human organism. Such examples of metahistory situate history within a totalizing context. In this thesis, I give a central position to Islamic metahistory as presented by the Burhaniya, complementing it by—not subordinating it to— research by modern academic historians. These diverse interpretive tools have allowed me to approach my textual corpus from a plurality of angles.

My conceptual framework has not only helped me choose my methodological tools for this thesis' comparative textual analysis; it has guided me in selecting my corpus as well. Practically, methodological decolonialism begins with a bibliography representing plural perspectives. I have consciously included texts by women, Latin-Americans, Africans, Asians, and of course Muslims and Sufis. All these texts are divided into a primary and secondary corpus. My primary corpus is composed of literature from the Burhaniya. My secondary corpus is divisible into five categories: (1) academic research about the Burhaniya; (2) writings by other past and present Sufis; (3) general academic literature on Islam and Sufism; (4) academic literature on specific Sufi lineages other than the Burhaniya; and (5) texts about colonialism, coloniality and decolonialism.

Then, in my comparative analysis of these documents, I have tried to avoid the epistemic racism that places modern Western scientism above mythology, religion, and any other category used to devalue peripheral epistemologies (Grosfoguel 2010; Grosfoguel 2011; Mignolo 2002, 2007). For instance, I have not rejected miracles attributed to Sufis as impossible simply because they contradict 'modern science'. Instead, I have found it more useful to adopt a phenomenological interpretive model that avoids reductionism by focusing primarily on individuals' perceptions and descriptions of particular human experiences of what they call, directly or indirectly, the sacred. Moreover, the transdisciplinary perspective has proven ideal since, as stated in article 9 of the *Charte de la transdisciplinarité,* "la transdisciplinarité conduit à une attitude ouverte à l'égard des mythes et des religions et de ceux qui les respectent dans un esprit transdisciplinaire" (Morin, Nicolescu, and de Freitas 1994). This flexible approach has enabled me to choose specific methodological tools for each major theme I cover in this thesis. For the history of Sufism and of the Burhaniya, I have combined phenomenology, academic history, and Sufi metahistory. When comparing various worldviews, epistemology has been most useful. To analyse the contemporary doctrines and practices of the Burhaniya, I have used a combination of epistemology and phenomenology.

Overall, I have not hesitated to draw upon my subjective and experiential knowledge of the Burhaniya. Personal observations are intertwined with outsider references throughout the thesis in the hope of providing a fuller multilayered account. While at times this insider knowledge is simply complementary to the knowledge provided by the textual sources I survey, it plays a more central role at other times. This is particularly true when discussing issues that have been discussed very little in the primary and secondary literature. For example, sections 3.3 and 3.4 examine the lives of the two most recent sheikhs of the Burhaniya order. Much less has been written about them than about their predecessor, the founder of the order. Yet, having met both men and been a member of the order under their leadership, I am able to discuss some aspects as of yet unexplored elsewhere.

Plan of Thesis

In order to examine the contemporary doctrines and practices of the Burhaniya, it is necessary to consider greater historical trends. Therefore, this thesis examines the order's intellectual and social roots before addressing contemporary issues. It proceeds from the general to the specific.

The first chapter presents the Burhaniya within the context of the important Islamic spiritual, intellectual and social current known as Sufism (1.1). This chapter proposes an overview of doctrine and methodology from a Sufi perspective, as well as some theoretical contributions from Western academia. Then, it explores particular manifestations of Sufism in the North African context (1.2). Although there are many similarities in the way Sufism has manifested itself throughout Islamic time and space (i.e. history and culture), regional and local particularities are also significant. Finally, this chapter introduces the Burhaniya as a particular and unique manifestation of universal Sufism (1.3).

The second chapter delves deeper into the genealogy of the Burhaniya starting in the seventh century. It presents a survey of Burhaniya metahistory, based on internal documents and complemented by findings from external academic research. Like most Sufi orders, the Burhaniya sees itself as a legitimate inheritor of an initiatory science transmitted through a long chain of masters, starting with the prophet Muḥammad. This chain of masters provides the backbone to the narrative of chapter 2. Each person in this chain represents an important aspect of the order's heritage. Their sayings and writings, as well as hagiographical and biographical anecdotes concerning them, provide a wealth of information about the roots of the contemporary Burhaniya. These saintly figures embody history as human symbols in which complex trends converge. As such, they provide meaning for the contemporary members of the Burhaniya and can also provide meaning for academic research, offering a privileged vantage point to observe the passage of time, especially when completed by historical information about each epoch. The narrative of these saints is a journey through the early Islamic period (2.1), the period of Sufi institutionalisation (2.2, 2.3), and the modern

period that culminated with the all-out invasion of most Islamic societies by Western colonial powers (2.4).

The third chapter completes the narrative begun in chapter 2, by presenting the history of the contemporary Burhaniya from its foundation in 1938 until today. Once again, the lives of the spiritual masters (sheikhs) of the order provide the backbone of the story. Sheikh Muḥammad ʿUthmân (d. 1983) presided over the birth and initial expansion of the order (3.1), primarily in the Arab world. His son, Sheikh Ibrâhîm (d. 2003), consolidated the order's organisational structure, and furthered the expansion into Europe and North America (3.2). Sheikh Muḥammad, the current leader, is guiding the community through a period of increasing globalization and cultural crossbreeding (3.3). Whereas the colonial presence of the West inside Muslim-majority societies was already an inevitable issue for his predecessors to deal with, the current sheikh increasingly has to address the issue of Islam as a minority religion in the West.

Chapter 4 departs from the narrative form to address the main theoretical issue of this thesis: doctrinal continuity and practical adaptability in the contemporary Burhaniya. Yet, it is precisely the backdrop provided by the previous chapters that permits this comparative analysis. The chapter begins by discussing ontological and epistemological issues (4.1). These have a deep impact on the doctrines (4.2) and practices (4.3) of the Burhaniya, as well as how its leadership responds to contemporary challenges like coloniality, globalization, religious extremism, and intercultural relations (4.4). Then, the chapter concludes by examining, from the viewpoint of the Burhaniya, how submitting totally to the specific conditions we face here and now is the door to spiritual realization beyond time and space (4.5). From this standpoint, continuity and adaptability appear as a complementary pair rather than opposite forces.

CHAPTER ONE – CONTEXTUALIZATION OF THE BURHANIYA

The Burhaniya is a transnational Sufi order with historical roots in North Africa and West Asia. This chapter offers a brief introduction to the Burhaniya, contextualizing it geographically, historically, and doctrinally.

1.1 Brief Introduction to Sufism

Given that the Burhaniya identifies itself as a Sufi order, it is appropriate to begin by asking what Sufism is and who the Sufis are. My answer will first make use of Sufi sources and then Western academic ones.

The original Arabic terms, *taṣawwuf* (Sufism) and *ṣûfî* (Sufi), derive from the same grammatical root. Classical codifiers of Sufism, like Kalâbâdhî (d. ca. 990) (Kalabadhi and Deladrière 2005, 25-31) and Hujwîrî (d. ca. 1072) (de Vitray-Meyerovitch 1995, 21-22) explored various etymologies for these terms proposed by earlier scholars. One possible root is *ṣûf* (wool), since early Sufi ascetics were known to wear simple woolen garments. Another suggestion is that Sufis are of the first or highest rank (*ṣaff*) among believers. Maybe Sufis have been named after certain companions of the prophet Muḥammad known for their piety and asceticism, known as *ahl al-ṣuffa*. This expression, sometimes translated as 'the people of the bench' is also relatively mysterious. A *ṣuffa* is a section of a building covered by a roof but open in front, and may refer to a section of the inner courtyard of the prophet's mosque in Medina, where these people lived (Lane 1984, 1694). Perhaps, there was even a bench in this section for them to sit on. Yet another suggested etymology for the terms *taṣawwuf* and *ṣûfî* is *ṣafâ* (purity). Kalâbâdhî and Hujwîrî do not make any definitive choices among these possibilities. They offer approaches to meaning rather than definitions. This is quite typical of Sufis, who recognize multiple layers of meaning in religious language, just as they recognize multiple layers of reality in the universe. In fact, Hujwîrî suggests that this etymological

mystery, in which none of the explanations provided are fully satisfactory, reflects the mysterious and sublime nature of Sufism itself. However, not all minds are as supple. Detractors of Sufism, who see it as an innovation not rooted in authentic Islam, are quick to mention the absence of the terms *taṣawwuf* and *ṣûfî* in the Qur'an and hadiths.

No doubt partly in response to such detractors, Sheikh Muḥammad 'Uthmân 'Abduh al-Burhânî, the founder of the Burhaniya order, also discussed these terms (Tariqa Burhaniya 2012a). He explained that the rightly guided among the first three generations of Islam should not properly be referred to as Sufis. Since they are considered incomparable, specific terms are used to refer exclusively to each of these generations. Those living at the time of the prophet are called *ṣaḥâbah* (companions). The next generation, called *tâbi'în* (followers), are followed by the third generation called *tâbâ'-al-tâbi'în* (the followers of the followers). *Ṣûfî* is a term that only appeared after the political tribulations of the early generations, in reference to those who focused on preserving and cultivating their faith despite the corruption of society. Moreover, the sheikh suggested that other terms can be used, such as *ahl Allâh* (the people of Allah), or more explicitly *ahl al-ishtighâl bi Allâh* (the people busy with Allah).

Sheikh Muḥammad 'Uthmân further proposed that *taṣawwuf* and *ṣûfî* can be substituted by terms found in scripture (Al-Burhânî 1974, 260). For him, Sufis are referred to directly in the Qur'an (25:59):

<div dir="rtl">

[...] الرَّحْمَنُ فَاسْأَلْ بِهِ خَبِيرًا.

</div>

[…]The Compassionate One. So ask about Him anyone who is well aware.

Actually, the Arabic word *khabîran,* translated here as 'anyone who is aware', is more commonly used to refer to someone with experience or expertise (*khibrah*) in a given field. The sheikh considered this verse an injunction to consult qualified experts about *al-Rahmân* (the Compassionate One), which is one of the names of God. According to the sheikh (Al-Burhânî 1974, 256), Sufis are also referred to in the Qur'an (16:43):

<div dir="rtl">

فَاسْأَلُوا أَهْلَ الذِّكْرِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَ.

</div>

So ask the followers of the Remembrance if you do not know.

The term *ahl-al-dhikr* translated here as 'the followers of the Remembrance' is understood to refer to people who remember and invoke Allah constantly. Indeed, Sufis are reputed for their constant practice of *dhikr Allah* (remembering and invoking Allah). It should be noted that, although I use the term 'Sufi' in its usual English acceptance as any practitioner of Sufism, within Sufi circles it is understood to technically apply only to saints, and not to those simply aspiring to spiritual enlightenment. This is why the injunction to consult an expert can be interpreted as scriptural validation for asking a Sufi about Allah and the appropriate way to invoke Him—which leads us to the question of methodology.

For Sheikh Muḥammad 'Uthmân (Al-Burhânî 1974, 255-300), Sufi methodology is based on the science of those supererogatory acts of worship (*'ilm al-nawâfil*) that allow a believer to become a saint. From this perspective, attaining sainthood means becoming a true Sufi whose faculties are replaced by divine ones, as described in the famous hadith:

> Allah the Almighty has said: Whosoever shows enmity to a friend of Mine, I shall be at war with him. My servant does not draw near to Me with anything more loved by Me than the religious duties I have imposed upon him, and My servant continues to draw near to Me with supererogatory works so that I shall love him. When I love him I am his hearing with which he hears, his seeing with which he sees, his hand with which he strikes, and his foot with which he walks. Were he to ask (something) of Me, I would surely give it to him; and were he to ask Me for refuge, I would surely grant him it. (Nawawi, Ibrahim, and Johnson-Davies 1977, 118)

The supererogatory acts of worship referred to in this hadith are the extension of the mandatory ones, namely: the profession of faith (*shahâdah*), the five daily prayers (*ṣalât*), the fast during the month of Ramaḍân, the yearly *zakât* charity, and the pilgrimage to Mecca during the period of Ḥajj. These obligatory acts are known as the five pillars of Islam. The most important is the first, which consists of bearing witness that there is no divinity but Allah (no god but God) and that Muḥammad is the messenger of Allah. Recognition of Allah and His messenger is the essence of the other pillars, since it is the way in which one becomes

Muslim. In the Burhaniya order, the main supererogatory practices are linked to this first pillar. They consist of invoking Allah (*dhikr Allâh*) and invoking divine blessings on the prophet Muḥammad (*ṣalât 'alâ al-nabî*) through a series of specific litanies (*awrâd*), to be recited individually or in a group.

Sufis like Sheikh Muḥammad 'Uthmân propose methods to progress from the five mandatory acts of worship to a state of spiritual excellence, or sainthood. They ground their doctrine of spiritual progression on the three stages of religion described in the famous Gabriel hadith related by the prophet's companion 'Umar. Here is the first part of this hadith:

> One day while we were sitting with the Messenger of Allah (may the blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) there appeared before us a man whose clothes were exceedingly white and whose hair was exceedingly black; no signs of journeying were to be seen on him and none of us knew him. He walked up and sat down by the Prophet (may the blessings and peace of Allah be upon him). Resting his knees against his and placing the palms of his hands on his thighs, he said: O Muḥammad, tell me about Islam. The Messenger of Allah (may the blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: Islam is to testify that there is no god but Allah and Muḥammad is the Messenger of Allah, to perform the prayers, to pay the *zakât*, to fast in Ramaḍân, and to make the pilgrimage to the House[6] if you are able to do so. He said: You have spoken rightly, and we were amazed at him asking him and saying that he had spoken rightly. He said: Then tell me about *îmân*[7]. He said: It is to believe in Allah, His angels, His books, His messengers, and the Last Day, and to believe in divine destiny, both the good and the evil thereof. He said: You have spoken rightly. He said: Then tell me about *iḥsân*[8]. He said: It is to worship Allah as though you are seeing Him and while you see Him not[9] truly He sees you. (Nawawi, Ibrahim, and Johnson-Davies 1977, 28-33)

Later in this hadith, after the mysterious guest leaves, the prophet informs his companions that they had been visited by the angel Gabriel, who had come to teach them their religion. Sufis refer to such texts to legitimate their methodology for progression from physical acts related to the stage of submission (*islâm*), followed by deepening of faith (*imân*), and culminating in a state of excellence (*iḥsân*). Excellence is a state of being, aspired to by those who wish to

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[6] This refers to the black cubicle structure in Mecca known as the ka'bah.
[7] This term is usually translated as 'faith' or 'belief'.
[8] This polysemic term can be translated as 'excellence'.
[9] A more literal translation would be 'if you see Him not'.

become true Sufis by following the recommendations of those who, having already attained this state, may be considered spiritual experts. Realizing this state gives its deepest meaning to worship and belief.

One American scholar who takes into account the doctrinal and methodological aspects of Sufism we have discussed is William Chittick. He has described Sufism as "a strand of Islamic thought and practice that emphasizes direct experience of the objects of faith" (Chittick 1994, 3). In other words, it is a traditional Islamic science among others. Like jurisprudence and theology, it is rooted in the teachings of canonical Islamic texts, but has developed and expanded over time. Moreover, like all other aspects of Islamic thought and practice, Sufism is by no means homogenous. It manifests in a plurality of ways across time and space. In the West, academic approaches have been used to better understand this diversity, including philology, history, anthropology, and sociology.

In the nineteenth century and for much of the twentieth, Western Orientalists tended to see Sufism as a fascinating yet unorthodox current within Islam. In fact, the view that Sufism was the result of foreign influences upon Islam remained dominant until the mid-twentieth century, although scholars like Louis Massignon (d. 1962) worked hard during that period to debunk this notion. Massignon's position eventually won the day with later scholars such as Anne-Marie Schimmel (d. 2003). Her most famous work, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Schimmel 1975), convincingly depicted Sufism as deeply rooted in Islam. Today, few academics would disagree. Of course, Sufism influences other traditions and is influenced by them. Moreover, it is not universally accepted by Muslims. But it cannot seriously be understood outside of the greater Islamic context, nor should Islam be seriously considered without some discussion of Sufism.

Like all other endogenous currents of thought and practice, Sufism has its enthusiasts and detractors within Islam. As a traditional science concerned with spiritual enlightenment, it has produced specialists, much like the other traditional sciences. Specialists from various fields have not usually rejected other disciplines, though they may have been critical of certain developments. For instance, some Sufis have been criticized by other scholars, including other

Sufis, for controversial ecstatic utterances. Some have even been put to death, like al-Ḥallâj (d. 922) who famously proclaimed "*Anâ al-Ḥaqq*", "I am the Truth." Since *al-Ḥaqq* is one of the names of God, Ḥallaj's statement was provocative to say the least. Yet, such scandals have not traditionally led to a generalized rejection of Sufism, just as the excessively legalistic positions of certain scholars have not led to a rejection of Islamic law. Unfortunately, this epistemic plurality has been weakened in the modern period as will be discussed below (section 2.4 as well as chapters 3 and 4).

In this brief introduction to Sufism I have perhaps provided more questions than answers. It is true that understanding Sufism requires an acceptance of complexity, nuance, and even mystery. But my aim is to elucidate the issue, not confuse it. So, I will once again quote William Chittick, who summarized the issue brilliantly in a 2003 lecture, saying:

> What then is Sufism? There is no simple answer. It is certainly not a sect within Islam. It has nothing to do with the two major denominations, Sunnism and Shi'ism, since it has been found in both from earliest times. Both men and women engage in Sufi practice, and it is common for some members of a single family to be Sufis, and for others not to be. A husband may be a Sufi, while his wife may not, or vice versa. Certainly, not every Muslim is a Sufi, but Sufism has been present wherever there have been sizable Muslim populations. This is especially obvious from about the thirteenth century, when clearly defined institutions associated with the word came to be established. (Chittick 2003)

Chittick offers a broad view of Sufism as Islamic spirituality. I would simply note that in Shia circles the term '*irfân* (gnosis) is usually preferred to *taṣawwuf.* This nuance has more than linguistic significance as there are important differences between how Sunnis and Shias approach spiritual enlightenment. (Geoffroy 2009, 41-47) My focus in this thesis is on the Sunni perspective of the Burhaniya lineage.

1.2 Sufism in North Africa

The heartland of the Burhaniya is the Nile valley of Egypt and Sudan. Although in North Africa, this region has generally been considered as part of the Eastern Islamic world (*Mashriq*). The Western part, known in English as the Maghreb (from the Arabic *Maghrib*) is

commonly understood to begin in Libya. But the Nile valley is in many ways a crossroads between regions, influenced by and influencing both Africa and Asia. As for Sufism, various orders born in the East and in the West are active in Egypt and Sudan. For instance, prominent groups like the Rifâ'iyyah and Qâdiriyyah were born in Iraq. Others are deeply rooted in North Africa, such as the Aḥmadiyyah (or Badawiyyah), and the Shâdhuliyyah to which the Burhaniya traces its spiritual lineage. This genealogy (see chapter 2) is actually the story of people who across centuries have formed a spiritual network centered in North Africa, but with ramifications in Iberia, Sub-Saharan Africa, Southwest Asia, and beyond. For over thirteen centuries, these pious men and women have constantly moved back and forth throughout the region. They have produced a wealth of spiritual, intellectual and cultural contributions to Sufism, including the formidable literary corpus from which I have chosen many of the works consulted for this thesis. Throughout the pages of these books, one can discover a distinct manifestation of Islamic spirituality.

Actually, few major literary works were produced by North African Sufis before the twelfth century. In contrast, Sufis from Asia wrote the innumerable treatises, maxims and poems that form the classical Sufi corpus usually focused on by Western academics. Nonetheless, some scholars have demonstrated that Sufism was present in North Africa from the outset of the Islamic period. One needs to be sensitive to regional particularities to discover how in many times and places Sufis were more interested in practice than theory. Writing about early Sufism in the Maghreb, Mackeen (Mackeen 1971, 408) noted, "here was a society eager to practise Islam rather than formulate it." More recently, Masatoshi (Masatoshi 2008) observed that, although loosely linked to transnational currents, Sufism in the Maghreb tended to be mostly local at the time. Greater integration into transnational orders began with figures like Abû Madyan (d. 1197), Ibn 'Arabî (d. 1240), and Abû al-Ḥasan al-Shâdhulî[10] (d. 1258). Yet this integration did not erase the regional particularities of Sufism that are still

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[10] In different sources, his last name also appears as Shâdhilî. I have based my transliteration on the Arabic documents of the Burhaniya, as I have for other names with variant spellings.

observable today. Elements that are found throughout the Muslim world, such as veneration for the prophet Muḥammad's family, take on a particular flavour in North Africa.

From Egypt to Morocco, Sufism is intimately linked to the veneration of the descendants of the prophet Muḥammad, referred to as noble (*sharîf* singular, *shurafâ'* plural). Such veneration is often considered suspect in modernist and reformist Sunni circles, because it seems to contradict the strict monotheism of Islam, and because it is associated with Shia doctrine. However, this critique is not shared by vast numbers of Sunni Muslims throughout the world who continue to venerate the prophet's family. Basically, they differentiate between veneration and worship. 'Veneration', which can be translated into Arabic as *iḥtirâm* or *tabjîl,* means immense respect. It need not even be inspired by religious sentiment. Worship (*'ibâda*) on the other hand is strictly reserved by Muslims for God. Considering certain things, places or people sacred need not entail attributing them divine status or worshipping them. Yet, in the modern period an increasing number of Muslims have come to reject such nuances as sophistry concealing idolatrous beliefs. Such hardline positions, which were less prevalent in pre-modern times, are indicative of a deep epistemic shift linked to modernity and coloniality.

Although expressions of love and respect for the prophet's family have been observable throughout Islamic history and around the Islamic world, North Africa presents some historically distinct characteristics. From the seventh to the ninth century, numerous descendants of the prophet emigrated from Southwest Asia to North Africa (El Sandouby 2008, 37). This migration was related to early Islamic political strife. In the year 680, only 48 years after the death of the prophet Muḥammad, his grandson Ḥusayn was killed along with most of his family and closest supporters, during an unsuccessful insurrection against the caliph Yazîd (d. 683). This event marked the culmination of tensions in the early Muslim community between political rulers and the prophet's family. Widespread veneration of the prophet's family among Muslims was often perceived as a political threat by those in power. It is true that many Muslims felt that descendants of the prophet were particularly well suited to lead the community both spiritually and politically. Facing persecution, some descendants of the prophet chose to stay in the Muslim heartland and avoid political confrontation. This is the

case of Imam Ja'far al-Ṣâdiq (d. 765) revered by Shias and Sunnis alike as a great legal scholar and spiritual guide (Geoffroy 2009, 42). Others were actively involved in the political struggles of the day, like Muḥammad al-Nafs al-Zakiyyah (d. 762), who led an unsuccessful insurrection in Medina and was killed in the process. His brother Idrîs Ibn 'Abd-Allâh (d. 791) left Medina for North Africa. In 789, Berber leaders from central Morocco swore allegiance to him, thus establishing the Idrîsî dynasty that was to reign until 974. King Idrîs I is not only remembered by Moroccans as a worldly ruler but also as a spiritual leader—an early North African Sufi saint (Skali 2007, 23-26). Remarkably, over 1300 years later, the king of Morocco is still a *sharîf*, as are a great number of Moroccan Sufis.

Of course, Idrîs is only one of the many descendants of the prophet who settled along with other Arabs all across the Western Islamic world, from Egypt to Morocco, and into Andalusia. Coming from the east into North Africa, the first land Arab immigrants entered was Egypt. Many Egyptians believe that their intense love for the prophet and his family explains why their land has been blessed by many of his descendants (Hoffman 1992, 626). Throughout the country, great numbers of people respectfully visit the mausoleums of figures such as the prophet's grandson Ḥusayn and his granddaughter Zaynab, as well as many other Islamic figures from inside and outside the prophet's physical lineage.

It is important to note that not every *sharîf* is considered a saint; nor is every saint physically related to the prophet. Saints in North Africa are primarily spiritual inheritors of the prophet. However, descending from the prophet both spiritually and physically is an auspicious double blessing. There is a beautiful little tale concerning the two types of noble inheritance. It concerns Sheikh Yâqût al-'Arsh (d. 1307), initially a black slave, who became leader of the Shâdhuliyyah Sufi order in Egypt. In 2007, the current sheikh of the Burhaniya related this story he heard from his grandfather, Sheikh Muḥammad 'Uthmân:

> One day, our master Yâqût al-'Arsh was riding on horseback in a procession while onlookers celebrated his presence by banging drums. One onlooker, who was from the household of the prophet, said to himself, "If these people knew that I'm from the household they would leave this slave and celebrate me instead." Master Yâqût al-'Arsh approached him, stepped down from his horse, and kissed his hand

saying, "whereas you have grown distant from your ancestor by disobeying him, I have grown nearer to him by my obedience." (Tariqa Burhaniya 2012c)

Notice the manners of the sheikh, who respectfully got off his horse and kissed the hand of the *sharîf* before revealing to him that he had heard his thoughts and teaching him the pre-eminence of noble character over noble blood[11].

In North African Sufism, nobility needs to be understood through the key concept of inheritance (*wirâthah*). As sheikh of the Shâdhuliyyah order, Yâqût al-ʿArsh is considered the spiritual inheritor of the prophet himself. Many of the sheikhs in his lineage are physical descendants, including the founder of the Shâdhuliyyah, Sheikh Abû al-Ḥasan al-Shâdhulî. Yet, Sheikh Yâqût is proof that noble status can be inherited by one without blood ties to the prophet. This differentiation between physical and spiritual inheritance also appears in the only written legacy of an earlier sheikh in the same lineage, the Moroccan ʿAbd al-Salâm Ibn Bashîsh (d. 1207)[12]. In the Prayer of Ibn Bashîsh (*Ṣalât Ibn Bashîsh*), he wrote in reference to the prophet, "Oh Allah, join me to his lineage [*nasabihi*] and confirm me as counted with him [*ḥasabihi*]" (Tariqa Burhaniya 2005, 36 my translation). Actually, the expression 'ḥasabihi' (counted with him) is difficult to translate. The best phrase I can think of to express its meaning is with the expression 'he is one of us'. To be counted as such, if the group being referred to is prestigious or influential, implies privilege. Similarly, to be counted with the prophet is considered an immense privilege prayed for even by Sheikh Ibn Bashîsh, a confirmed *sharîf* in the lineage of King Idrîs I.

While veneration for physical and spiritual descendants of the prophet is widespread throughout North Africa and beyond, practitioners of Sufism express their affection with particular intensity (Hoffman 1992). For this reason, they are frequently compared to Shias, who are similarly known for their strong attachment to the prophet's family. It is often remarked that many Egyptian mausoleums for the prophet's family were erected during the Shia Fâṭimî dynasty (969-1171), and the Idrîsî dynasty is referred to by most historians as

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[11] Although not my focus here, this tale alludes to racial dynamics in Egypt.
[12] Also known as Ibn Mashîsh.

Shia. In the now overwhelmingly Sunni North African region, such assertions can be quite uncomfortable. But it is anachronistic to project into the past the rigid sectarianism of later periods, such as that of the contemporary Shia regime in Iran and the Wahhabi regime in Saudi Arabia.

Allegiances were much more nuanced in the first centuries of Islam (Hodgson 1974). Sufis and Shias should be seen as drawing from common early Islamic currents (Geoffroy 2003, 41-44). For instance, Imam al-Mâlik (d. 795), who founded the first of the four most recognized Sunni schools of jurisprudence, supported the insurrection of Nafs al-Zakiyyah against the 'Abbâsî dynasty and encouraged Idrîs to leave Medina. Was he secretly Shia? If so, what of his Sunni legal school that is the most widespread in North Africa? And what of another important legal school in the region, founded by Imam al-Shâfi'î (d. 819), who died in Cairo and whose mausoleum is still an object of popular veneration? This major Sunni imam was known for his enormous respect for the prophet's family. For instance, he became very close to Sayyidah Nafîsah (d. 823) who had immigrated to Egypt from Mecca. An early Sufi *sharîfah* (feminine for *sharîf*), she is considered one of the patron saints of Cairo. Shâfi'î used to consult her on religious matters and ask her to pray for him when he was sick (Geoffroy 2012). It should also be noted that she had studied with Imam al-Mâlik before moving to Egypt.

Recognizing how widespread veneration of the prophet's family was in the early Islamic period allows for a more nuanced understanding of Sufism in North Africa. It has allowed historians like El Sandouby (El Sandouby 2008, 53) and Taylor (Taylor 1992) to interpret the building of mausoleums by the Fâṭimî dynasty as representing continuity with earlier manifestations of Egyptian saint veneration rather than Shia innovation. Similarly, Skali (Skali 2007, 24) has questioned the view that the Idrîsî rulers were rigidly Shia and suggests that early support by Mâlik for their cause is indicative of a 'Medina consensus' that cannot be fit into later sectarian lines. Of course, Muslims were divided early on concerning succession to the prophet, but Shias are not alone in considering themselves the inheritors of those who expressed support and reverence for the prophet's family in the first centuries of

Islam. Similar claims are made by Sunnis—notably North African Sufis. Their historical opposition to Shias is based on a different attitude, not towards the prophet's family, but towards his companions. For instance, in marked contrast with Shias, Sunni Sufis from North Africa revere the first three caliphs of Islam as legitimate heirs to the prophet. This reverence is based on an inclusive understanding of inheritance that can be physical, spiritual, or both.

1.3 Presentation of the Burhaniya

Sheikh Muḥammad 'Uthmân 'Abduh al-Burhânî is presented (Tariqa Burhaniya 2012b) as a physical descendant of the prophet Muḥammad whose genealogy includes the imams recognized by most Shias, such as Imam al-Ḥusayn and Imam Ja'far al-Ṣâdiq. The Sudanese sheikh revered his ancestors, but as a resolute Sunni. In fact, he can be considered a prime representative of North African Sufism. His ancestors came from a larger regional network of pious figures from as far as Morocco. Yet, his order was to spread much beyond North Africa.

The Sufi order founded by Sheikh Muḥammad 'Uthmân is formally called the Tariqa Burhaniya on the English website (Tariqa Burhaniya 2011a). In Arabic, 'ṭarîqah' (plural ṭuruq) means 'path' whereas 'Burhâniyyah' means 'of Burhân', in reference to Egyptian Sheikh Ibrâhîm al-Dusûqî [13], also known as Burhân al-Dîn, the proof of religion. He is one of the important predecessors to which Sheikh Muḥammad 'Uthmân traces back his spiritual lineage.[14] The longer version of the order's name on the English website is Tariqa Burhaniya Disuqiya Shaduliya (*Al- Ṭarîqâh al-Burhâniyyah al-Dusûqiyyah al-Shâdhuliyyah on the Arabic site)*. '*Shâdhuliyyah*' refers to Sheikh Abû al-Ḥasan al-Shâdhulî, a famous Moroccan Sufi who travelled much before passing away in Egypt in 1258. Like Sheikh Muḥammad 'Uthmân, Shâdhulî and Dusûqî are also descendants of the prophet. All three are North African Sufis, considered custodians of a double physical and spiritual inheritance from the prophet Muḥammad.

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[13] Sometimes spelled Dasûqî or Disûqî.
[14] This lineage is of course different from his ancestry referred to above.

However, the regional dimension of the Burhaniya should not be overemphasized. For a more nuanced view, its local and transnational dimensions must also be considered. For now, suffice to say that the order is present in over 50 countries, as affirmed by the sheikh of the order in 2002 (Tariqa Burhaniya 2012c), although only 24 countries are listed on the official Burhaniya website (Tariqa Burhaniya 2011a). This discrepancy seems due to the fact that in many countries the order does not yet have official recognition and its presence remains discreet. As for the 24 countries officially listed, they include 5 in Africa[15], 7 in Asia[16], 10 in Europe[17], and 2 in North America[18]. The exact number of adherents is hard to determine since membership is informal and no official registry exists. However, while estimated membership in Egypt and Sudan is in the millions, it is considerably smaller in the rest of the world. For instance, in Canada there are about a hundred active members, and membership in the United States is also relatively low.

Although the North African heritage is recognized by Burhanis, they perceive themselves as belonging to a pan-Islamic community. For them, Sufism is a universal dimension of Islam, present around the world. They understand their own lineage as one of many legitimate expressions of Sunni Islam, albeit uniquely blessed. In contrast to the universal aspect of their doctrines and practices, they are keenly aware of the necessity to fit into local and regional communities (see chapters 2 and 3). Even universal spirituality is mostly experienced locally. To use a neologism, Burhani Sufism is 'glocal'. One might be tempted to attribute this glocalism to the contemporary context of globalization. However, it must also be remembered that Sufism has been glocal for centuries. It has produced a multitude of famous figures in Africa, Asia, and even Europe, who have travelled far and whose books have been read across the Islamic world.

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[15] Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Sudan, and Tunisia.
[16] Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and the United Arab Emirates.
[17] Britain, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Luxemburg, Holland, Russia, Sweden, and Switzerland.
[18] Canada and the United States.

Conclusion

In this chapter, the Burhaniya has been situated within its specific spiritual, intellectual, and social context. After a quick survey of common Sufi doctrines and practices, particular manifestations of Sufism in North Africa were discussed. It was argued that for a nuanced appreciation of the Burhaniya, it is important to approach it as a simultaneously local, regional, and transnational manifestation of a greater phenomenon named Sufism.

At the local level, this chapter has demonstrated how Sufism involves individuals engaged in personal and collective acts of worship, under the guidance of mentors who are sheikhs or representatives of sheikhs. The relationship between practitioners and mentors is usually one of emotional intimacy. Moreover, a sense of deep kinship usually characterizes relations among active members of local Sufi communities. They consider themselves children of the same spiritual parent—the sheikh—and form close personal ties that go well beyond the context of devotional acts. Friendships are developed among individuals and families, often formalized through intermarriage. My personal experience as a member of the Montreal community of the Burhaniya, as well as independent academic fieldwork (Lassen 2009a, 2009b) shows that local Burhaniya communities are often quite closely knit.

Moreover, these local communities are joined in greater regional and transnational networks. As we have seen, Sufis have travelled far and wide from earliest times, forming personal ties across vast regions, but also sharing oral and written teachings. Specific currents of thought and practice have become more prominent in certain regions. In North Africa, the historical development of Sufism has been intimately linked to veneration of saints as spiritual and often physical descendants of the prophet Muḥammad. Similar currents exist throughout the Muslim world, but expressed in a variety of regionally-specific ways. The Burhaniya is very much the inheritor of a long tradition developed in North Africa, but also influenced by developments in Southwest Asia and beyond. Its heartland being the Nile Valley of Sudan and Egypt, this order is in many ways at the crossroads of Africa and Asia. In fact, the territory of Egypt crosses over from Africa into Asia.

Finally, the Burhaniya has been presented in this chapter as one expression of a greater pan-Islamic spiritual current. Indeed, Sufism is more than an eclectic variety of local and regional practices. It is a traditional Islamic science concerned with spiritual enlightenment. This science also involves a methodology proposed by spiritual experts (saints). Its purpose is to lead practitioners from simple adherence to the formal aspects of Islam to realization of the complete exoteric and esoteric potential of the tradition—in other words becoming a Muslim saint. Although this general objective has manifested itself in a variety of ways in Islamic societies, there is also remarkable continuity in the doctrines and practices of Sufis everywhere. Over the past century, pan-Islamic Sufism has found favourable conditions in the tremendous acceleration of globalization[19]. The Burhaniya has followed this trend evolving into a transnational organization.

From the perspective of a practitioner, the Burhaniya is simultaneously personal, local, regional, transnational, and universal. All of these levels interact experientially. The comparative analysis I am attempting in this thesis allows for nuance in deciphering elements of continuity and adaptation in different contexts. This analysis begins in the next chapter with an exploration of the order's origins.

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[19] One indication of this is the appearance of international Sufi festivals showcasing Sufis from around the world, like *World Sufi Spirit Festival* in India, and the Moroccan *Festival de Fès de la Culture Soufie.*

CHAPTER TWO – GENEALOGY AND ORIGINS OF THE BURHANIYA

Contemporary members of the order see themselves as perpetuating an ancient tradition. They feel involved in a metahistorical drama of cosmic and metaphysical significance. Humans play a central part in this drama, especially prophets and saints. Their lives are considered more significant than any other events in the cosmos since through them the will of Allah is most perfectly revealed. Of course, stories of the prophets form a major part of scripture for Muslims as well as Christians and Jews. They represent a rich repository of traditional knowledge and wisdom to which billions of people turn for inspiration. While variations exist in the way these stories are presented in the three Abrahamic faiths as well as within each tradition, even greater diversity exists around the lives of saints and their significance. Since the great majority of Muslims believe Muḥammad sealed the cycle of prophecy, there is some debate as to the function of subsequent holy people within the community. Sufis see these saints as continuators of the prophets in many—but not all—ways. Comparing prophets and saints is a complex topic dealt with in a variety of ways by Sufis. Without delving into this subject, it is sufficient to mention that there is relative consensus that one must clearly distinguish between them to remain orthodox. This chapter explores the metahistorical drama of prophets and saints from the Burhani perspective, complemented by academic sources.

Sufis consider the divinely inspired esoteric teachings of the prophet Muḥammad to have been transmitted through time by a series of initiatory chains whose links are spiritual masters. Most major Sufi orders draw legitimacy from such a chain (*silsilah*). In the following chart, the *silsilah* of the major sheikhs as presented in the Burhaniya order (Tariqa Burhaniya 2005, 124):

Chart 2 – Abridged *Silsilah* of the Burhaniya
The prophet Muḥammad (d. 632)
Imam ʿAlî Ibn Abî Ṭâlib (d. 661)
Imam al-Ḥusayn (d. 680)
Sheikh ʿAbd al-Salâm Ibn Bashîsh (d. ca. 1207)
Sheikh Abû al-Ḥasan al-Shâdhulî (d. 1258)
Sheikh Ibrâhîm al-Dusûqî (d. ca. 1296)
Sheikh Mûsa Abû al-ʿUmrân (d. 1339)
Sheikh Aḥmad ʿArabî al-Sharnûbî (d. 1586)
Sheikh Muḥammad ʿUthmân ʿAbduh al-Burhânî (d. 1983)
Sheikh Ibrâhîm (d. 2003)
Sheikh Muḥammad (—)

Obviously, many links are missing in this abridged *silsilah* that only includes the major sheikhs. However, it seems to me that these eleven figures provide an acceptable sample for the present thesis. The rest of this chapter is devoted to situating the first eight masters in their historical and metahistorical context. The last three masters will be presented in the next chapter.

2.1 From the prophet Muḥammad to Sheikh ʿAbd al-Salâm Ibn Bashîsh

The first three names of the *silsilah* are those of the prophet Muḥammad, his son-in-law ʿAlî and his grandson Ḥusayn. For Burhanis, they represent the first three *sharîf* generations, and the pioneers of early Sufism. Then, the abridged *silsilah* skips ahead about five centuries to Ibn Bashîsh. He lived at a transitional time between early Sufism and its later institutionalization. His legitimacy as a major figure in Sufism comes from his being both a physical and spiritual descendant of the prophet. It is debatable to what extent the writings of these four early Islamic figures can be historically proven to be authentic. Therefore, it is

necessary to rely on Muslim tradition, partly historical and partly hagiographical (the difference between both being impossible to disentangle), in order to reconstruct briefly here the reasons for their respective importance at the start of the Burhaniya *silsilah*, as is the case for most other Sufi orders.

Appropriately, the prophet Muḥammad is the most central human figure in the Islamic tradition and the first master in the *silsilah*. For Muslims, Allah has praised the prophet for his incomparably great character and manners (Qur'an 68:4) and entrusted him to transmit the final divine revelation to humanity, the Qur'an. Apart from the words of Allah spoken through him, the prophet's own sayings are recounted as well as his actions in the sacred corpus of hadiths, which are the secondary Islamic scriptural source for Muslims after the Qur'an. Thus, Muḥammad is considered the exemplary human being—a model for all Muslims to follow. His name is mentioned in the most important Islamic act of worship, the profession of faith, in which all Muslims must declare that "there is no god but Allah and that Muḥammad is the messenger of Allah." Reverence for him is therefore common among all Muslims. Yet, nowhere has this reverence been more systematically developed than in the Sufi tradition of the Western Islamic world.

The most exhaustive elaboration of the metaphysical and cosmological role of the prophet Muḥammad was written by the Andalusian Sufi Ibn al-'Arabî (d. 1240). Known as *al-sheikh al-akbar* (the greatest sheikh), this incredibly prolific writer is widely considered the most influential Sufi metaphysician as well as one of the most controversial. He held that the historical prophet was but a manifestation of the greater Muḥammadan reality (*al-ḥaqîqat al-Muḥammadiyyah*). In his essence, the prophet is the first creation of Allah, the timeless intermediary between the Creator and the cosmos. Such notions already existed in the greater Islamic tradition, but Ibn al-'Arabî developed them so explicitly that he provoked great controversy. Since then, many have accused him of heterodoxy and idolatry for, among other reasons, attributing too great a status to the prophet Muḥammad. However, many other Muslims consider Ibn al-'Arabî to be utterly orthodox if somewhat difficult to understand. For his supporters, those who accuse him of apostasy simply display their own intellectual

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limitations or, worse still, irreverence towards the prophet. This was the position of the founder of the Burhaniya, who frequently cited Ibn al-‘Arabî in his own writings (e.g. Al-Burhânî 1974). In harmony with Ibn al-‘Arabî, Sheikh Muḥammad ‘Uthmân saw the prophet as a cosmic reality, a historical figure, and a beloved ancestor. As the first creation, the Muḥammadan light was entrusted to the first prophet, Adam, and then transmitted through a holy bloodline until the central event in cosmic metahistory, the birth of the prophet Muḥammad[20]. Since then, it has continued to be transmitted by the prophet's descendants. Contemporary members of the Burhaniya have inherited this understanding of the Muḥammadan reality, in which love and reverence for the prophet entails love and reverence for his family, known as the people of the house (*ahl al-bayt*).

One Western academic who has explored the role of devotion to the prophet's family in Sufism is Valerie Hoffman. In a ground-breaking article (Hoffman 1992), she noted that numerous hadiths, recognized by Sunnis and Shias alike, state that love for the prophet's family is a duty for Muslims. Here are some of the hadiths she cited:

> I have left you two things which will keep you from going astray if you cling to them: the book of God, a rope extending from heaven to earth, and the people of my house. The Gentle, Wise One informed me that these two will never be separated until they are returned to my pool, so take care how you behave toward them when I am gone.

> Whoever prays a prayer in which he does not bless me and my family, it will not be accepted.

> The people of my house are like the Ark of Noah; whoever rides it is saved, and whoever stays behind is shaken by hellfire.

> Place the people of my house among you as the head is to the body and the eyes to the head; the head is not guided without the eyes.

> Love of my family for one day is better than a year's worship. Whoever dies in this love enters paradise.

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[20] Although it could be said that the other Abrahamic prophets in particular also constituted major events, the birth of the prophet Muḥammad is clearly presented as central by the Sufi authors referred to here.

None of you believes until I am loved by him more than his own self, and my family is more loved by him than his own. (Hoffman 1992, 623)

Although the prophet had no sons, he held that his lineage went through his daughter Fâṭimah and her husband ʿAlî—a couple most revered by Muslims. Imam ʿAlî is actually the prophet's cousin and the fourth caliph (*khalîfah*)[21] of Islam, in addition to being his son-in-law. Sunni and Shia sources (e.g. Balagh 1993, Suyûti and Jarrett 1881) depict him as an exemplary warrior, statesman, husband, and father, as well as a great mystic and a scholar of incomparable eloquence. Fâṭimah is also generally remembered with great reverence and affection. However, the focus here is on her husband, as the second figure of the Burhaniya *silsilah*. This is actually his position in the majority of Sufi initiatory chains since most orders consider him an inevitable link in the transmission of esoteric knowledge.

Third in the Burhaniya *silsilah* is Imam al-Ḥusayn, the younger brother of Imam al-Ḥasan. Considered sons by their grandfather the prophet, these two brothers had numerous other siblings. Imam al-Ḥusayn's presence in the *silsilah* indicates his special role in the genealogy of the Burhaniya, although Burhanis revere his entire family. Moreover, he is a central figure in the Sufism of the Nile Valley since his mausoleum is the most famous shrine in Cairo. Right next to the main door of his mosque, a large plaque reminds visitors that the prophet said "I am from Ḥusayn, and Ḥusayn is from me." For Burhanis, this hadith confirms the sacred Muḥammadan trust transmitted through their *silsilah*.

History books primarily mention Imam al-Ḥusayn in relation to his martyrdom during the battle of Karbala in the year 680. He was massacred along with most of his family by the troops of the infamous caliph Yazîd. Among the survivors were Imam al-Ḥusayn's sister Zaynab and his son Imam ʿAlî Zayn al-ʿÂbidîn. Both reportedly immigrated to Egypt soon after. Their mausoleums are also in Cairo, along with those of many other famous descendants of the prophet. While the history books commonly associate all these figures with Shiism, Hoffman reminds us of the intense devotion to the prophet's family by Sunnis in Egypt and

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[21] A caliph is a successor to the prophet at the head of the Islamic community. Some understand this succession to be solely political, but Sufis and many others attribute great spiritual relevance to it (Saeed 2007, 113-128)

elsewhere, particularly in Sufi circles. In comparison to Shia displays of deep sorrow in remembrance of the martyrdom of Imam al-Ḥusayn, Hoffman (Hoffman 1992, 625) observed that Sufis "express their love for Husayn and other members of the *ahl al bayt* not through grief, but through joyful songs and expressions of devotion." This is certainly the case in the Burhaniya.

Although the *sharîf* branch through Imam al-Ḥusayn plays a special role in the Burhaniya as well as other Sufi orders based in the Nile Valley, descendants of Imam al-Ḥasan are also revered. As mentioned in chapter 1, descendants of both Imams migrated to North Africa and Andalusia in considerable numbers following their political trials in the Islamic heartland. King Idrîs I, who established the first Muslim dynasty in Morocco, was a descendant of Imam al-Ḥasan. The fact that most *sharîf* families in the Maghreb trace their lineage back to this monarch has had important social and political repercussions on the region, but also spiritual ones. For instance, a number of great Sufis from the region belong to this lineage, including the fourth figure of the Burhaniya *silsilah*, Sheikh ʿAbd al-Salâm Ibn Bashîsh.

According to Moroccan anthropologist and specialist of Sufism Zakia Zouanat (d. 2012), Ibn Bashîsh[22] was a pivotal figure in Moroccan Sufism and later in pan-Islamic Sufism. She wrote:

> ʿAbd al-Salâm Ibn Mashîsh jouit de deux identités : il est soufi confirmé et *sharîf* incontesté. Il réalise pour la première fois dans l'histoire du Maroc la confluence des deux courants qui ont constitué l'histoire spirituelle et culturelle du pays : le *tasawwuf* et le *sharaf*. (Zouanat 2005, 55)

The Moroccan master embodied and synthesized two major religious currents present in the Western Islamic world for centuries. He inherited and transmitted both the spiritual teachings and the noble bloodline of the prophet Muḥammad.

At the end of the twelfth century and beginning of the thirteenth, at the time of Ibn Bashîsh, ancient Sufi lineages in the Maghreb had already begun transforming into informal

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[22] She uses the more common appellation, Ibn Mashîsh.

orders such as the Shu'aybiyyûn and Sanhâjiyyûn (Zouanat 2005, 54). During this period, Ibn al-'Arabî wrote the biography of dozens of Andalusian saints in response to a friend who claimed that great Sufi saints no longer existed as they had in the past (Ibn al-Arabi and Austin 1971). This text, like the writings of Ibn al-'Arabî, attests to the presence of well-implanted and ancient Sufi networks across the medieval Maghreb, of which Andalusia was the extremity. One of the Sufis frequently cited by Ibn al-'Arabî was Abû Madyan Shu'ayb (d. 1198), another famous Andalusian who lived and travelled extensively throughout the Maghreb. Sheikh Abû Madyan initiated numerous disciples and encouraged practicing Sufism within society (Abu Madyan and Cornell 1996).

Yet, Ibn Bashîsh practiced Sufism in isolation. He is said to have been initiated to Sufism at the age of seven. For the next sixteen years, he peregrinated in solitude, experiencing major spiritual unveilings. His master was Sheikh 'Abd al-Raḥmân al-Madanî al-Ḥasanî al-Zayyât (d. ?). The name al-Ḥasanî indicates that this sheikh was a descendant of the prophet through Imam al-Ḥasan, like Ibn Bashîsh. What is exceptional about the relation between the two Sufis is that one lived in Morocco while the other lived thousands of kilometres away in Medina, on the Arabian Peninsula. Thanks to their spiritual powers, they were able to visit one another by compressing the earth, which allowed them to travel this enormous distance in very little time (Zouanat 2005, 56). Later in life, Sheikh Ibn Bashîsh settled with his family on the top of Jabal 'Alam, a remote mountain in Northern Morocco. Despite his noble pedigree, he does not seem to have been well known by his contemporaries. His only disciple was Sheikh Abû al-Ḥasan al-Shâdhulî.

2.2 Sheikh Abû al-Ḥasan al-Shâdhulî and Sheikh Ibrâhîm al-Dusûqî

In the Burhaniya initiatory chain, the next two names after Sheikh Ibn Bashîsh are Sheikh Abû al-Ḥasan al-Shâdhulî and Sheikh Ibrâhîm al-Dusûqî. Shâdhulî received initation from Ibn Bashîsh and gave it to Dusûqî. They lived at a time of great change in the Islamic world. To the West, the Christian armies of Ferdinand and Isabella were moving rapidly across the Iberian Peninsula. By 1265, Muslims were left ruling over only the small southeastern

kingdom of Granada. To the East, the Mongols were sweeping across Muslim lands, terrorizing local populations. In 1258, the same year as Shâdhulî's death, they captured and destroyed Baghdad, the seat of the Muslim Caliphate. This date is remembered as one of the most tragic days in Islamic history by Sunni Muslims. Yet, in the midst of this chaos, Egypt was prospering under the Ayyûbî (1171-1250) and Mamlûk (1250-1517) dynasties. Along with its growing political clout, it was becoming an important centre for Sufis, who benefited from increasing elite patronage. Sufis flocked to Egypt from Andalusia, the African Maghreb and Iraq. One of them was the founder of the Shâdhuliyyah path.

Many pages have been written about the life of Sheikh Abû al-Ḥasan al-Shâdhulî. The third sheikh of the Shâdhuliyyah order in Egypt, Ibn 'Aṭâ' Allâh (d. 1309) included a chapter on Shâdhulî in his book *Laṭâ'if al-Minan fî Manâqib al-Sheikh Abû al-'Abbâs al-Mursî wa Shaykihî Abî al-Ḥasan* (Subtle Graces in the Saintly Lives of Abû al-'Abbâs al-Mursî and His Master Abû al-Ḥasan) (Ibn 'Ata Allah and Roberts 2005; Ibn'Ata' Allah and Geoffroy 1998). Another important source is the *Durrat al-Asrâr wa Tuḥfat al-Abrâr* (Pearl of Mysteries and Treasure of the Righteous) (Ibn al-Sabbagh, Douglas, and Abu-Rabi 1993) written about sixty years after Shâdhulî's death by a Tunisian disciple called Ibn al-Ṣabbâgh (d. 1320). Shâdhulî is also said to be a descendant of Imam al-Ḥusayn through his mother and, like Ibn Bashîsh, of Imam al-Ḥasan and King Idrîs I through his father. Moreover, he and Ibn Bashîsh were both from the Ghumara region of Northern Morocco, near Tetouan.

The beautiful tale of how the two men met is a classic portrayal of Sufi initiation. As a young man, Shâdhulî travelled eastward from Morocco in search of the greatest saint of his day, called the *quṭb* (pole or axis) in Sufism. The pole of each time period is considered to have a central (axial) position in the cosmos as the fullest inheritor of the Muḥammadan trust—the true spiritual successor to the prophet. Already a scholar in the exoteric sciences of Islam, Shâdhulî now sought spiritual initiation. He travelled all the way to Iraq, meeting numerous Sufi masters, none of whom were the *quṭb*. Finally, in Iraq he was informed by a saint that the greatest master of his day was to be found in Shâdhulî's own homeland of Northern Morocco. Ibn al-Ṣabbâgh quoted Shâdhulî as saying:

When I drew near him, while he was living in Ghumara in a lodge on the top of a mountain, I bathed at a spring by the base of that mountain, forsook all dependence on my own knowledge and works, and went up toward him as one in need. Just then he was coming down toward me, wearing a patched cloak, and on his head a cap of palm leaves. "Welcome to 'Ali ibn 'Abd Allah ibn 'Abd al-Jabbar," he said to me, and repeated my lineage down to the Apostle of God. Then he said to me, "O, 'Ali, you have come up to us destitute of your knowledge and works, so you will receive from us the riches of this world and the next."

He (al-Shadhili) continued,

Awe of him seized me. So I remained with him for some days until God awakened my perception, and I saw that he possessed many supernatural powers (*kharq al-'adat*). For example, one day as I sat before him while a young son of his played with him on his lap, it came into my mind to question him concerning the greatest name of God. The child came to me, threw his arms about my neck, and shook me, saying, "O Abu al-Hasan, you desired to question the master concerning the greatest name of God. It is not a matter of importance that you should ask about the greatest name of God. The important thing is that you should be the greatest name of God, that is to say, that the secret (*sirr*) of God should be lodged in your heart." When he had finished speaking, the sheikh (Ibn Mashish) smiled and said to me, "Such a one has answered you for me." (Ibn al-Sabbagh, Douglas, and Abu-Rabi 1993, 15-16)

This encounter, also described by Ibn 'Aṭâ' Allâh (Ibn'Ata' Allah and Geoffroy 1998, 103-104), illustrates some key elements of Sufi doctrine and epistemology. The superiority of spiritually inspired knowledge over rational erudition is made clear by the necessity for Shâdhulî to empty himself of all his knowledge and works as a precondition to being enlightened by his sheikh. Spiritually inspired knowledge once again manifests itself when the young boy who has just read his thoughts gives the adult and scholar Shâdhulî a profoundly sophisticated explanation about nothing less than the greatest name of God! That scene also reveals something else about the transmission of spiritual secrets. In the same sources that describe Shâdhulî as the only disciple of Ibn Bashîsh, we learn that the latter has clearly also transmitted secrets to his child. These dual modes of transmission—through blood lineage and through formal initiation—are embodied by Shâdhulî and the boy. The boy received the

Muḥammadan trust through being the immediate physical heir to the sheikh. Although Shâdhulî is a *sharîf* like Ibn Bashîsh, he received the trust through formal initiation.

Shâdhulî stayed with his master for many days, until Ibn Bashîsh told him to travel once again to Tunisia and beyond. The sheikh told his protégé of the great destiny that awaited him. Like his master, Shâdhulî was to become *quṭb*. However, in contrast to his teacher, he was to guide multitudes of disciples and become quite famous in his time. After many years in Tunisia, Shâdhulî moved to Alexandria in Egypt. From there, he travelled frequently. In fact, he died en route to Mecca and Medina during one of his many pilgrimages. The famous Sufi rests in a remote quarter of the Southern Egyptian desert called Humaithara. Although he did write some letters and litanies, Shâdhulî did not write any books. He claimed that his disciples were his books (Ibn al-Sabbagh, Douglas, and Abu-Rabi 1993, 4). Indeed, many of his followers went on to become sheikhs themselves, forming the multiple branches of the Shâdhuliyyah Sufi way.

The Burhaniya is one of the contemporary orders linked to the Shâdhuliyyah. In the narrative presented on the official website of the Burhaniya (Tariqa Burhaniya 2011a) and other hagiographical sources (Hallenberg 2005)[23], Shâdhulî had a servant and companion by the name of 'Abd al-'Azîz, also known as Sheikh Abû al-Majd. He married Shâdhulî's sister, known as Our Lady (*Sayyidâtuna*) Fâtimah al-Shâdhuliyyah. They moved from Alexandria to a remote area of the Egyptian Delta called Dusûq (also Dasûq or Disûq according to alternate spellings). A son was born to them who was to become known as Sheikh Ibrâhîm of Dusûq (al-Dusûqî). When Shâdhulî saw his nephew, he took the newborn aside and initiated him onto the path. The baby had also fasted on the first day of his birth, which coincided with the first day of Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting. Tales of Dusûqî's extraordinary life, filled with miracles, depict him in a way that seems quite realistic to believers, but mostly fictitious to many others.

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[23] However, the numerous sources collected and analysed by Hallenberg present a variety of genealogies and family relations, sometimes without reference to Shâdhulî. My aim is to present the version that fits with the metahistorical narrative of the Burhaniya.

The most thorough study of Sheikh Ibrâhîm al-Dusûqî by a Western academic was conducted by Finnish scholar Helena Hallenberg (Hallenberg 2005), and entitled "Ibrâhîm al-Dasûqî (1255-1296): a Saint Invented." She extensively surveyed all the major textual sources concerning the saint, from the thirteenth to the twentieth century, presenting the first detailed portrait of his life for Western readers. However, despite its methodological rigour, her work seems problematic to me on the deeper levels of intent and purpose. She wrote:

> In my study, I have examined the process of how he became a saint – or rather, how he was made into a saint during the seven centuries of saint-making; therefore, the title of my book reads "a Saint Invented". By inventing, I mean fabricating, making up something that does not necessarily base on facts – and what is invented, is the image, not necessarily the man. (Hallenberg 2005, 11)

After carefully analysing and comparing all the major writings by "Arab authors, Sufi biographies and pamphlets, and also fragments of the teachings, odes and prayers ascribed to al-Dasûqî" (Hallenberg 2005, 23), the Finnish scholar came to the conclusion that would seem both astounding and deeply offensive to all the hagiographers whose texts she examined: that their revered saint is in fact a fictional character of their own invention. Of course, Hallenberg had the merit of making her perspective clear from the outset, writing "since I am not a believer in the saint, at least not in the sense the followers of *sîdî* Ibrâhîm are, my perspective has been academic and, methodologically, related to the History of Religion" (Hallenberg 2005, 11). Yet, from a decolonial perspective, the author's unquestioned certainty of what constitutes facts is problematic. It seems to indicate that she is operating within a Eurocentric epistemology in which the scientific worldview of Western academics is seen to enable them to understand other worldviews better than those who hold them. Hallenberg's understanding of historical reality leads her to undermine the epistemic foundation of the worldview held by those she studies. She thinks her knowledge is real and theirs is not—it is invented fiction. Nevertheless, Hallenberg's work has been quite useful to me in that it provides a central reference in which to find all the major sources on Sheikh Ibrâhîm al-Dusûqî to present his life story and his teachings. Moreover, her analysis clearly demonstrates how diverse, even contradictory, various narratives constructed around one person's life can be.

The sources inform us that in the rural backwaters of the Egyptian Delta, one man led an extraordinary life. Yet, without the powerful spiritual insight and countless miraculous events attributed to him, Dusûqî's life was actually fairly uneventful. He does not seem to have travelled much, or to have been sufficiently involved in society to capture the attention of contemporary writers. According to Hallenberg, no mention is made of the saint in the historical sources until approximately a century after his death (Hallenberg 2005, 29). Actually, the same can be said of Ibn Bashîsh. According to Zouanat, it took about a century for him to be mentioned in writing, and at first only by Tunisian and Egyptian sources, all in connection to Shâdhulî (Zouanat 2005, 53-54). Of course, it is possible that earlier written sources might have disappeared. In any case, it should be remembered that whereas Shâdhulî was socially active and well-known, Ibn Bashîsh and Dusûqî were hermits. They spent most of their lives far from any urban centre, and dispensed their wisdom to relatively few people. It is conceivable that tales of their miracles and teachings may have existed orally long before they appeared in writing.

Although I would have liked to devote more pages to the numerous miracles attributed to Sheikh Ibrâhîm al-Dusûqî, I am more interested in his teachings. Sufis generally believe in miracles that interrupt the normal course of events (*kharq al 'âdah*). Yet, Sheikh Ibn 'Aṭâ' Allâh reminds us that the people of God consider the grace of faith, spiritual insight and proper conduct more miraculous than walking on water or flying through the air (Ibn'Ata' Allah and Geoffroy 1998, 69). Even in tales involving physical miracles, there is always a deeper lesson to be learned about reality. Such lessons abound in the sources on Dusûqî. They reveal what Hallenberg calls his 'supernatural dimension' (Hallenberg 2005, 170-202).

When we approach the sheikh as a legitimate source of knowledge, we learn that the human being and the universe, as microcosm and macrocosm, are much more complex and fantastic than we can imagine. In often ecstatic verses, Dusûqî teaches us that each person is truly a multileveled unfathomable mystery within an equally multileveled unfathomable universe. The ego (*nafs*) is a veil that prevents us from reaching our full potential at the centre of creation, in full communion with the will of the Creator. Without an ego, the human being

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is capable of miraculous deeds, but more importantly, becomes a receptacle for deep divine knowledge. Some exceptional beings are born into this elevated state. The first among them is the prophet Muḥammad, described in the Qur'an (21:107) as follows:

وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَاكَ إِلَّا رَحْمَةً لِلْعَالَمِينَ.

We did not send you, except as a mercy to all the worlds.

Inheritors of the Muḥammadan trust participate in his mission of mercy and guidance. In the words of Sheikh Ibrâhîm al-Dusûqî, "Who does not lose control of himself, or step out of himself and become without self, will not be able to find himself any more. I have exhausted myself in advising you this, and if you follow, you will reach salvation" (Hallenberg 2005, 5).

The knowledge claimed by Sufis like Dusûqî and his uncle Shâdhulî is at once ancient, and perpetually contemporary. As a prophetic heritage transmitted from generation to generation it is ancient, but as direct experience of the divine, Sufi knowledge is paradoxically at once contemporary and timeless. To use a metaphor, Sufis draw from a well at the intersection of timeless reality and human experience, allowing them to simultaneously preserve the Muḥammadan trust, and adapt it to various contexts. The ultimate truth is one, but there are multiple ways to approach and apply it. For instance, while Ibn Bashîsh is described as wearing a patched cloak and a cap of palm leaves, Shâdhulî was known to wear fine fabrics. This is because their context was different. Ibn Bashîsh, like Dusûqî, lived in isolation from society. Shâdhulî was constantly surrounded by people of every social class.

The lives of Ibn Bashîsh, Shâdhulî and Dusûqî represent different sources from which the contemporary Burhaniya draws inspiration. Whereas most famous Egyptian saints are foreign-born, Dusûqî spent all his life in Northern Egypt. He is in many ways the patron saint of Egypt. Similarly, Ibn Bashîsh, the hermit from Northern Morocco, can be considered the patron saint of his land. Both men represent a trend in Sufism that can be considered rural, ascetic and ecstatic. On the other hand, Shâdhulî evolved in a mostly urban cosmopolitan setting, teaching how to live a spiritual life in the midst of society. He was a sort of bridge between the Sufism of the Western and Eastern Arab worlds, perpetually travelling and

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meeting new people. For Burhanis, these sacred biographies are part of a rich heritage that is at once intellectual and popular, urban and rural, sober and ecstatic, local and universal.

2.3 Institutionalization of the Shâdhuliyyah

Shâdhulî initiated numerous disciples, many of which went on to become sheikhs themselves. Several famous orders branched out from his Alexandrian community, such as the Wafâ'iyyah, Bakriyyah, and Ḥanafiyyah (Geoffroy 2005, 521). In fact, followers of Shâdhulî spread throughout North Africa and beyond to become one of the major Sufi families, regrouping a huge number of orders. All these groups have existed as separate entities organizationally despite their common heritage. Decentralizing and branching out, which allows for rapid growth, is also characteristic of other major Sufi families like the Rifâ'iyyah and the Qâdiriyyah. However, the way of Dusûqî, known as the Dusûqiyyah, has followed a much different course, as will be discussed after having examined the early Alexandrian Shâdhuliyyah.

Sheikh Abû al-'Abbâs al-Mursî (d. 1287) was the first successor to Shâdhulî in the Alexandrian community. As his name (Mursî) indicates, he was from Murcia in Andalusia. He travelled to Tunisia as a young man, where he met Shâdhulî, became his disciple, and followed him to Alexandria. In Egypt, these two men were expatriates from the westernmost parts of the Islamic world. Like Ibn Bashîsh, they embodied a Sufism of discipline and proper conduct, not inclined to theoretical expositions. They wrote very little. However, Ibn 'Aṭâ' Allâh, the next sheikh in this lineage after Mursî, was a native Alexandrian scholar who taught at the prestigious Al-Azhar University in Cairo. His prolific writings represent the first exhaustive doctrinal corpus of the Shâdhuliyyah. When he became the disciple of Mursî, Ibn 'Aṭâ' Allâh thought he should follow the example of his masters and devote himself entirely to spirituality by leaving university. He sought divinely inspired knowledge and wished to flee the prestige associated with vain erudition. Yet, Mursî instructed him to pursue his studies and become an authority in both the exoteric and esoteric religious sciences (Ibn'Ata' Allah and Geoffroy 1998, 135-143).

Thanks to scholars like Ibn 'Aṭâ' Allâh, the classical Shâdhuliyyah is perceived by many, such as French scholar Pierre Liguori, as 'sobre and learned', in comparison to the 'exuberant' Sufism of the Dusûqiyya (Liguori 2005, 334). However, this is somewhat of a false dichotomy. Much of what might be termed exuberant Sufism was actually defended by an important early Shâdhulî sheikh, Ibn 'Aṭâ' Allâh against the sharp criticisms of his contemporary, the legal rigorist Aḥmad Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328) (Shoshan 2002, 67-68; Northrup 1998, 266-268). They debated the orthodoxy of controversial metaphysicians like Ibn al-'Arabî, as well as practices associated with popular Sufism, like visiting the tombs of saints (Kabbani 1996, 367-379). The rivalry between these two brilliant scholars has become famous, as both men epitomize two competing trends within Islam: Sufism and legalism. Their writings remain major references to this day.

In contrast to the Shâdhuliyyah of Mursî and Ibn 'Aṭâ' Allâh, which became progressively institutionalized, the Dusûqiyyah remained more informal. Sheikh Ibrâhîm al-Dusûqî transmitted his sacred trust to his brother, Sheikh Mûsa Abû al-'Umrân, a scholar and Sufi like Ibn 'Aṭâ' Allâh. Due to Dusûqî's asceticism, his brother is considered the true organizing force behind the early Dusûqiyya. Moreover, since Dusûqî never married, Abû al-'Umrân is the link for the continuation of this important *sharîf* bloodline. The closeness of these siblings is reflected in their burial place, side by side in the great mosque of Dusûq. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, as the Shâdhuliyyah gained increasing momentum and recognition throughout the Islamic world, the mausoleum in Dusûq was attracting more and more pilgrims in search of *barakah* (spiritual blessings), but initiation was reserved for a select few. In fact, it is somewhat surprising how by the sixteenth century major Egyptian scholars were describing Sheikh Ibrâhîm al-Dusûqî, as a saint of tremendous importance. Authorities like the famous Sufi saint and scholar 'Abd al-Wahhâb al-Sha'rânî (d. 1565) must have seen something that has escaped those Western historians of Sufism who consider Dusûqî a local saint of relatively minor importance. Hallenberg (2005) wrote:

Al-Dasûqî was an obscure figure, originally supported by local people, most likely by his own family, who for some reason or another propagated the idea of his sainthood. This skeleton of an image starts to have some flesh only in the

> 16th century, when a wealth of writings concerning Ibrâhîm al-Dasûqî emerges, as if he had been discovered anew. This is even more astonishing, since there was nothing to base it on, at least that we know of [.] (p. 40-41)

Among the sixteenth century figures whose writings astonish Hallenberg is the eighth sheikh of the Burhaniya *silsilah*, Aḥmad ʿArabî al-Sharnûbî. Like Ibn ʿAṭâʾ Allâh, he was both a Sufi and a scholar from the prestigious Al-Azhar University. The doctrine of the four poles of Sufism, which is central to the worldview of the contemporary Burhaniya, can be traced backed to Sharnûbî (Al-Sharnûbî 1889). He wrote that there are four grand poles in Sufism to whom all subsequent orders are attached. They represent a higher level in the spiritual hierarchy of Sufi metahistory than the pole who is the greatest living saint at any given time. These four major poles are in a way the greatest of the great. They are Aḥmad al-Rifâʿi (d. 1182), ʿAbd al-Qâdir al-Jilânî (d. 1166), Aḥmad al-Badawî (d. 1276), and Ibrâhîm al-Dusûqî (d. ca. 1296)[24]. According to this doctrine, they founded the four main Sufi paths from which all other orders branched out as ramifications. Dusûqî is presented by Sharnûbî as the greatest of the four, the pole of poles[25].

Interestingly, the four poles all lived in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, at the time when Sufism was beginning to become institutionalized into formal orders. By the sixteenth century, the process of institutionalization was fairly complete, and there existed a multitude of Sufi orders linked to one another in a complex web of lineages. By going back to the four poles, Sharnûbî offers an esoteric explanation of this institutionalization. Astonishing as it may seem for an outsider, this explanation is rooted in Sufi epistemology. Moreover, other Western scholars, such as Trimingham (1998, 14), have also attempted to trace Sufi orders back to central trunks.

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[24] These sheikhs are presented in this order, which is not quite chronological by year of death, because of the order in which their orders are considered by Burhanis to have known a major expansion after their deaths. This consideration is developed below in this section.

[25] It is quite common for members of an order to consider their founding sheikh to be the greatest of all sheikhs and their order to be the best of all orders. What is harder to determine is whether one believes this because he or she is from the same lineage or whether she or he has entered the order after becoming convinced of its excellence.

In the worldview of the Burhaniya, each of the four central ways, related to the four poles, was destined to be dominant for a time (Frishkopf 2001, 20-21; Liguori 2005, 346-350). Orders linked to Aḥmad al-Rifâ'i were to spread massively for a period. Then, orders linked to 'Abd al-Qâdir al-Jilânî were to become prominent until the time of Aḥmad al-Badawî. While one pole is dominant, the others continue to guide souls, but in smaller numbers. Although the four poles lived their earthly lives long ago, they have survived in the spiritual world, and continue to actively participate in the lives of their followers. Burhanis believe the way of Ibrâhîm al-Dusûqî came last and will dominate until the end of time. Before the twentieth century, this path was known to very few. It existed in relative obscurity in order to allow the other poles to serve the Muslim community. Moreover, although not one of the four poles, Sheikh Abû al-Ḥasan al-Shâdhulî has a special status. The branches of his path were allowed to dominate for a time, before the mid-twentieth century when the Burhaniya, which unifies the Shâdhuliyyah and Dusûqiyya, began to spread. But this is the subject of chapter 3. For now, the point is to understand the importance of Sharnûbî and his predecessors in establishing the foundations of the contemporary Burhaniya.

The doctrine of the four poles needs to be contextualized within its broader metahistorical framework. In this symbolic scheme, other groups of four also serve an important function (Liguori 2005, 348-350). For instance, there are the four messengers of God: Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. The prophet Muḥammad is unique and is not traditionally included in such lists. However, his first successors at the head of the Muslim community, the rightly guided caliphs (*khulafâ' al-râshidîn*) form a major group of four: Abû-Bakr (d. 634), 'Umar (d. 644), 'Uthmân (d. 656), and 'Alî (d. 661). Under their rule, Islam went from being an Arabian phenomenon to a world religion practiced throughout an immense empire. Sunnis also trace their major legal schools back to four Imams, believed to have been crucial in explaining and preserving sacred law in the early Islamic centuries. They are Mâlik Ibn Anas (d. 795), Abû-Ḥanîfah (d. 767), Al-Shâfi'î (d. 820), and Ibn-Ḥanbal (d. 855). During this time, new generations of Muslims were being born in places and times increasingly removed from the Arabian world of the first generation. Many did not speak Arabic, and even

those who did were developing new regional dialects. This is simply the way languages evolve. Many of the doctrines and practices of the early community were in danger of being lost forever, were it not for the work of men like the founders of the great Islamic legal schools. Similarly, Sufis believe that the spirituality that infused early Muslim societies was in danger of being lost. The often implicit doctrines of early Sufism needed to be made explicit and clear by writers like al-Ghazâlî (d. 1111) and Ibn al-ʿArabî. More importantly, the initiatory context in which these doctrines were applied needed to be formalized. This was done by the founders of major orders. In the metahistory of the Burhaniya, the arrival of the four poles of Sufism completed the slow process of normalization and institutionalization of Islam. Believers now had all the resources they needed to face the troubled final centuries leading up to the day of judgement. The creative groundwork having been done, the basic doctrines and practices of the Islamic tradition now needed to be perpetuated and creatively adapted to new contexts.

2.4 Progressive modernization

If we date modernity from a decolonial perspective, Sharnûbî is the first modern figure of the Burhaniya *silsilah*. After him, the next major sheikh in the lineage is the founder of the contemporary Burhaniya, over four centuries later. During the period that divides the two saints, the different regions of the world became increasingly interconnected. To understand the context in which the Dusûqiyyah discreetly evolved from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, it is useful to examine modernity from a global perspective.

Building on world systems analysis (Wallerstein 1974; Wallerstein 1991), decolonial theorists situate the start of modernity in 1492 with the convergence of the Inquisition, the Reconquista, and the military conquests of Ferdinand and Isabella in Spain and in America (Dussel 1995; Grosfoguel 2010; Grosfoguel 2011). From this symbolic moment, white men gradually placed themselves at the centre of a globalizing system with dehumanized others at the periphery. Modernity was produced by the dialectic between the global colonial West and

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the peripheral 'rest' (Hall 1996). Racist colonialism of historically unrivalled proportions ensured an equally unrivalled transfer of resources to the centre from the peripheries. After two centuries of conquest, colonial self-confidence allowed Western thinkers to imagine a world in which everything was possible for them—a world of freedom. A decolonial reading of history sees the seventeenth century Enlightenment as liberalization at the centre of the world system, resulting from coercion on the peripheries. This project was conceived for white men, not colonial subjects. According to Dussel (1995):

> Europe's centrality reflects no internal superiority accumulated in the Middle Ages, but it is the outcome of its discovery, conquest, colonization, and integration of Amerindia – all of which give it an advantage over the Arab world, India, and China. Modernity is the result, not the cause, of this occurrence. (p. 11)

However, in the early modern period, the rise of the West was not perceivable in all parts of the world. For instance, Asians and Africans were hardly aware of events in America that were slowly shifting the economic centre of the world from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic. The massive influx of Amerindian gold and silver and the huge increase in demand for African slaves was changing the global balance of power in a way few non-Europeans could fathom (Gelvin 2008, 35-46). In fact, Africans and Asians did not become fully integrated as colonial peripheries of the modern world system until the nineteenth century. Since modernity became an inevitable fact for them well after the seventeenth century, many of these new colonial subjects bought into the Eurocentric narrative that modernity is the fruit of the European Enlightenment. This narrative is harder to believe for those colonial subjects in the Americas and their descendants who take a close look at their history. That probably explains why so many decolonial thinkers come from Latin America, which is the other West— the peripheral West. Their region was the first to be entirely colonized by Europe. Yet, a few months before Native Americans, the first peoples to have experienced the violence of modern coloniality were the Muslim and Jewish victims of the Spanish Inquisition and imperial wars. Those who survived massively fled to North Africa. 1492 is remembered as a traumatic year for Muslims, particularly in the Western Islamic world. In fact many Muslims consider it the

turning point at which Islamic civilization entered into a long period of decline. Innumerable Western Orientalists also share this decline narrative. However, this simplistic reading of history is problematic (Quataert 2003).

It is inaccurate to portray the immense and plural Islamic civilization as having been wholly decadent between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. First, as previously discussed, the gradual loss of power of Muslims to Westerners should not be attributed solely to internal causes, since the same process happened to all other non-Western peoples (Gelvin 2008, 35-46). What was exceptional was not the weakness of Muslim powers but the growing strength of Europe. Second, while much of the Arab world had been in political turmoil since at least the thirteenth century, many Islamic empires were on the rise in the sixteenth century. For instance, the Ottoman Empire stretched into three continents, including much of Southeastern Europe. It seemed stronger than its Western European rivals at the time (Gelvin 2008, 35, 47-49). Third, during this period Islam went from being the religion of the ruling minority to the majority religion in numerous parts of Asia, Africa, and even in a few regions of Southeast Europe. Sufi orders actually played a major role in this second major expansion of the faith (Traoré 1983, 15-16; Trimingham 1998, 232-233), notably in the homeland of the contemporary Burhaniya, Sudan (Frishkopf 2001, 11-12).

Institutional Sufism was a great success in the early modern period, when a multitude of local orders, loosely affiliated to transnational ones, spread rapidly throughout the Muslim world. Sufis had already established vast transnational networks in the medieval period, often along commercial routes. These networks were utilized by the orders to reach more deeply into regions mostly inhabited by non-Muslims. The initially decentralized structure of the orders facilitated their adaptation to a plurality of cultures. Moreover, Sufis generally presented to converts a soft and tolerant reading of Islam (Chittick 1994, 3), encouraging them to reject only those aspects of their culture that were incompatible with Islam. Consequently, a great diversity of artistic and literary forms became vehicles for Islamic teachings.

Paradoxically, although crucial to institutional Sufism's success in expanding the reach of Islam, cultural adaptability was seen with some suspicion by some in the Arabic heartlands.

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A particular elitist and urban view of orthodoxy often inspired the feeling that Sufism was becoming too permissive. It is true that throughout the Islamic world some Sufis were accused of corruption and charlatanism. And these charges were not new. Ibn Taymiyyah was already highly critical of Sufi orders in the fourteenth century. An increase in reported abuses was probably to be expected as an inevitable secondary consequence of Sufism becoming democratized. Yet, a growing number of critics came to perceive all of Sufism as decadent. They saw it as a major factor in the weakening of Islamic societies in relation to Western Europe. A wind of reform started to blow in the Muslim world. At the end of the eighteenth century, Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Wahhâb (d. 1792), a legal rigorist from the conservative Arabian Najd province, set out to purge Islam of all deviant practices. He was inspired by the teachings of Ibn Taymiyyah, but was much more extreme. By his definition, most of his coreligionists were in fact apostates, and Sufis were at the top of his long list of offenders. ʿAbd al-Wahhâb was one of the main disseminators of stereotypes portraying Sufis as decadent and unengaged in the bettering of Islamic societies.

Yet, many Sufis did engage in religious reform combined with social and political activism, including resistance to European colonialism. Two famous examples are the Algerian prince (*amîr*) ʿAbd al-Qâdir (d. 1883), and the Caucasian Imam Shâmil (d. 1871). The former led his troops in an armed struggle against French occupation from 1832 to 1847, before accepting rendition and being sent into exile as an unexpected result. He was not only a political leader, but also a Sufi sheikh inspired by the teachings of Ibn al-ʿArabî and eventually attached to the Shâdhuliyyah. His writings bear the stamp of an inspired Sufi and remain surprisingly relevant today (Geoffroy 2010). His contemporary, Imam Shâmil from the Sufi Naqshabandiyyah order, led the Caucasian resistance to Russia from 1834 to 1859.

Another Sufi sheikh, who lived in the borderlands of present-day Mauritania and Mali resisted French colonialism in his own way. Sheikh Hamahoullah[26] (d. 1943) tried to avoid all contact with the French colonial regime and lead a traditional spiritual life. Although completely passive, this resistance proved intolerable to the regime, which reacted violently by

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[26] This is the way his name is spelt by West Africans, who are generally not native speakers of Arabic.

exiling the Sheikh, executing many of his followers, including two of his sons, and sending numerous others to French concentration camps. Today, the sheikh is an inspirational figure for people such as Mauritanian historian Alioune Traoré (Traoré 1983), for whom Hamahoullah's life demonstrates how Sufism can be a vector for liberation, cultural pride, and resistance to oppression.

Three years before Hamahoullah was born, another great African leader died on the other side of the Sahara. Muḥammad Aḥmad (d. 1885), better known as al-Mahdî, led his Sudanese followers in a ferocious armed struggle against the British and their Egyptian vassals from 1881 to 1885. Shortly after defeating the British army in Khartoum, this religious and political leader passed away. Although he had eventually come into conflict with many Sufi orders, he was initially attached to the Samâniyyah order. Firmly set in his Islamic worldview, the Mahdî fought Western colonialism physically and spiritually. In the modern dialectic between centre and periphery, he was a symbol of decolonialism from the Sudan. His name is even mentioned on the official website of the Burhaniya, in a passage describing how the founding sheikh of the order "discovered books which had been buried in pots by his grandparents during the period of Mahdi in which many books were burnt. They enclosed the entire *awrâd* of his *Tariqah,* which Mohamed Osman immediately put to use for his followers" (Tariqa Burhaniya 2012d). The *awrâd* refered to in this passage are the spiritual litanies of the combined Dusûqiyyah and Shâdhuliyyahh path, containing the secrets of Sheikh Ibrâhîm al-Dusûqî transmitted from person to person for six centuries. They are believed to have travelled many times across North Africa all the way to Morocco and back to the Nile Valley (Hoffman 1995, 302; Liguori 2005, 336-337, 342-345). In the end, they were preserved in a time of great unrest by the grandparents of Sheikh Muḥammad 'Uthmân 'Abduh al-Burhânî, founder of the Burhaniya and ninth sheikh in the abridged *silsilah.*

Conclusion

In this chapter the metahistory of the Burhaniya, represented through the lives of saints, has been explored and contextualized within greater historical currents, such as the early Islamic

period, the period of institutionalisation and the early modern period. It has been shown that the Burhaniya sees itself as a legitimate inheritor of an initiatory science transmitted through a long chain of masters, starting with the prophet Muḥammad. These figures represent human embodiments of complex historical, intellectual and spiritual currents. Approached in this way, these saintly lives offer a privileged vantage point to understand the epistemology of contemporary Burhanis, who consider themselves inheritors of these ancient sciences.

From the narrative presented in this chapter, it can be surmised that in the Sufi epistemology of the Burhaniya, limited human beings can have access to limitless divine knowledge and be utterly transformed by it. This divinely inspired knowledge is seen as a trust given by Allah to the first creation, the Muḥammadan reality. The prophet Muḥammad revealed the exoteric sciences he received to everybody, but reserved certain sciences for a select few. These esoteric sciences were transmitted down through every generation and will continue to be until the end of time. It is a trust passed on from master (sheikh) to disciple (*murîd*). As spiritual and physical descendants of the prophet, the great masters of the Burhaniya initiatory chain (*silsilah*) act as mercies in the midst of humanity. Muḥammadan masters preserve and perpetuate the prophetic trust, making it accessible to the people of different times and places by adapting their pedagogy to them. The variety of life stories and teachings of these saints are indications of the limitless wealth of the knowledge they carry. In Sufi epistemology, the plural dimensions of knowledge do not contradict its unique essence—they confirm it. From this plurality, contemporary members of the Burhaniya can draw examples on how to adapt their practices to the context of their time and place. They do not understand this adaptation to betray the essential core of the Muḥammadan trust being fed to them gradually and patiently by their sheikh, through the process of initiation. To use a Sufi metaphor, this Muḥammadan trust is a shoreless ocean of knowledge from which individuals draw according to their own capacity—some with spoons and some with buckets. The next chapter explores how the leaders of the Burhaniya have worked to preserve and perpetuate the Muḥammadan trust since the early twentieth century.

CHAPTER THREE – BIRTH AND EXPANSION OF THE BURHANIYA

The narrative begun above in chapter 2 unfolds in this chapter with the birth and expansion of the contemporary Burhaniya. A number of issues that were important in previous eras continue to be crucial to this day. These include the rivalry between Sufi sheikhs and ultra-legalist scholars; controversies surrounding the orthodoxy of certain complex esoteric doctrines on the one hand, and popular Sufi practices on the other; as well as reformism and adaptation to colonial modernity.

In the twentieth century, the Dusûqqiyyah underwent a process of formal institutionalization similar to those of other Sufi groups in the past. After the twelfth century, Sufism became increasingly institutionalized and popularized, including most of the lineages linked to Sheikh Abû al-Ḥasan al-Shâdhulî (see sections 2.3 and 2.4). However, the Dusûqiyyah remained quite informal and discreet, much like the lineages of the early Islamic period, until it developed into its modern branch, the Burhaniya. Then, it underwent in decades a process of transformation that had taken other orders centuries. In the Burhaniya, as in other orders, institutionalization has been intimately linked to the increasing interconnectedness of the world. Although globalization had begun before the modern period (Frishkopf 2001), it has increased considerably since 1492. This process has tended to consolidate institutionalization in some communities or encourage it in informally organized ones. Modern globalization has affected the way communities around the world organize themselves at different paces and in a variety of ways. It is important to recognize that the impact of modernity has in no way been homogenous. Whereas some may be tempted to view modernity as a singular phenomenon, others speak of multiple modernities (Eisenstadt 2000). It seems to me that a more supple approach, open to global and specific realities, is to consider multiple aspects of modernity. One of these aspects is the emergence of the contemporary Burhaniya under the leadership of the last three sheikhs of the *silsilah*.

3.1 Sheikh Muḥammad 'Uthmân

The ninth master in the abridged Burhaniya *silsilah* is Sheikh Muḥammad 'Uthmân 'Abduh al-Burhânî. He was born in Halfa, Sudan in 1902 and passed away in 1983 (Tariqa Burhaniya 2012d, 2012e). This period coincides with a tumultuous turning point in Islamic history, much like those in which the previous masters of the *silsilah* lived. While in the first half of the twentieth century most of the world lived under some form of colonial regime, in the second half most of these colonies gained formal independence. In response, Western powers[27] changed strategies to maintain global hegemony. This is what decolonial theorists refer to as the passage from colonialism to coloniality (see Introduction, above). Fundamentally, colonial modernity remained intact throughout the century, as did the dialectic between the West and its global peripheries.

Sheikh Muḥammad 'Uthmân was born into the periphery of this colonial world order. As the nineteenth century breathed its last gasp in 1899, the British and their Egyptian vassals regained control of Sudan. It was fourteen years after their defeat in Khartoum. Situated at the political periphery of a political periphery, Sudan was directly affected by relations between Britain and Egypt. Young men growing up in Sudan like Sheikh Muḥammad 'Uthmân were necessarily affected by events happening abroad[28]. For instance, although Egypt was granted conditional independence from Britain in 1922, continued anticolonial unrest within Egypt prompted London to expel all Egyptian officials from Sudan in 1924. The British changed their minds in 1936, and allowed Egyptian officials back into Sudan. Other events less close to home also affected Sudan, like the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire after World War I that led to the abolishment of the caliphate in 1924. This had an enormous impact throughout the Muslim world and beyond. From the ashes of the old empire was born the secular Turkish

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[27] Although geographically part of Europe and Asia, Russia should be considered a Western power in this period because of its dominant Eurocentric worldview, its internal power dynamics, and its position in the global system.
[28] It should be noted that people on the periphery cannot avoid dealing with colonial power dynamics although many in the West can avoid facing them—ignoring events on the periphery or viewing them through the distant lenses of civilization, progress, and eventually international development. The dominated party in a power dynamic — in this case colonial subjects—must always take position on how to best adapt to the situation or struggle to change it.

republic founded by Mustafa Kemal "Atatürk" (d. 1938). It embodied the radical Westernizing current with Islam. But not all Muslims wished to adapt to the West so wholeheartedly. Entities that resisted Westernization were also born during the same period, including the Muslim Brotherhood, established in Egypt in 1928, and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, founded in 1932.

Westernization became a major polarizing factor among Muslims after World War I. Energized by these tensions, competing fundamentalisms were to plague Muslim societies for the rest of the century. To be fully understood, such developments need to be situated within the world-system framework. As Grosfoguel (2010) explained:

> If we define fundamentalism as those perspectives that assume their own cosmology and epistemology to be superior and as the only source of truth, inferiorizing and denying equality to other epistemologies and cosmologies, then Eurocentrism is not merely a form of fundamentalism but the hegemonic fundamentalism in the world today. Those Third Worldist fundamentalisms (Afrocentric, Islamist, Indigenist, etc.) that emerge in response to the hegemonic Eurocentric fundamentalism and that the 'Western' press put in the front pages of newspapers every day are subordinated forms of Eurocentric fundamentalism insofar as they reproduce and leave intact the binary, essentialist, racial hierarchies of Eurocentric fundamentalism. (p. 31)

Leading up to the foundation of the Burhaniya order in 1938, these ideological and political divisions were spreading throughout the world, including Sudan. Although doubtlessly conscious of these issues, the future sheikh Muḥammad 'Uthmân was not involved in the political struggles of the day, nor was he attracted by the new conflicting fundamentalisms seeking to radically change societies like his. Instead, he was immersed in an inner quest that took him to the depths of his traditional worldview. On the official website of the Burhaniya, his early life is described as follows:

> Sheikh Mohamed Osman Abduh al Burhani was born in Halfa in Sudan at the turn of the century. At the age of 10 his uncle initiated him into the order of Burhaniya after Mohamed Osman had pleaded for it for a long time. But he could find no teacher in the outside world which meant he could perform no spiritual exercises nor receive any instruction. He held long nightly vigils in prayer during which he had visions wherein he was visited by some of the great saints. During these visions and in his dreams he learned some parts of

the awrad - the special prayers of the Burhaniya. After many years had passed, he finally found a teacher, a blind stranger who had been sent to him by Sayyidi Ibrahim Disuqi, the original founder of the order. (Tariqa Burhaniya 2012d)

Then, the future sheikh inherited the rest of the *awrâd* from his grandparents (see section 2.4 above). But the great masters of the past did not simply want to initiate him for his own benefit. They wanted to entrust Sheikh Muḥammad ʿUthmân with what the website calls his 'lifelong mission' as founder of the Burhaniya. This process of establishing a new Sufi order is colourfully described on the website, alternating between direct quotations by the sheikh and narrative explanations in the third person:

> "During sleep and during my visions I saw a locomotive with only one wagon coming towards me and stopping right in front of my feet. I discovered that the train came from Disuq, the home of my Sheikh. This dream repeated itself for forty days. After that the vision became more tangible and I could enter it. I opened the wagon and found a coffin inside. I opened the coffin and found a corpse wrapped in white cloth. I lifted the white cloth and found a green cloth underneath. I lifted the green cloth and found a yellow cloth beneath it."
>
> These are the three colors of the Tariqa: the white color is the one which the Messenger of Allah, the Prophet Mohammed (s)[29], had given to Sayyidi Ibrahim. It symbolizes the Islamic law - the Sharia. The color green stands for Sayyidina Hussain and the color yellow for Sayyidi Abul Hasan al Shadhuli. Yellow symbolizes the conquest of the seven egos progressing upon the path.
>
> After he had lifted all three cloths, Mawlana Sheikh Mohamed Osman saw the feet of the corpse and he was highly astonished to discover that they resembled his own. Then he discovered the presence of the sheikh Sayyidi Abul Hasan al Shadhuli and many other saints. "Who is this deceased?" he asked. "It is Ibrahim Disuqi", was the answer. Mawlana broke into tears believing that all his efforts and many prayers had been in vain since his Sheikh had really died. But then Sidi Ibrahim Disuqi appeared to him in person. "The dead man stands for my Tariqa", he said, "and you have been chosen to bring it back to life". Mawlana refused to take on this task for two months. Then the saints appeared to him once more, this time in the company of Sayyidina Husain. It is said that one cannot refuse a request from him. He said, "My son, do not hesitate. Those who receive a burden, also receive support. Shoulder this responsibility and ask

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[29] The 's' is an abbreviated indication of a prayer (*ṣalâh*) upon the prophet.

for whatever you need. It will be granted you. "Mohamed Osman posed many conditions, including the condition that his followers are not allowed to go mad (majzûb) and that they need not perform the spiritual retreat (khalwa). Sayyidi Ibrahim and Sayyidina Husain signed a contract including 60 conditions. This contract is still in the possession of the Sheikh of the Tariqa, Mawlana Sheikh Mohamed Sheikh Ibrahim Mohamed Osman. (Tariqa Burhaniya 2012d)

The Tariqa Burhaniya was intended as a continuation of the Dusûqiyyah. Sheikh Muḥammad 'Uthmân negotiated with past masters the conditions in which to perpetuate their heritage and adapt it to the modern world. His disciples were to progress without asceticism and without the risk of becoming spiritually intoxicated to the point of madness—a well-known condition in Sufi circles. Ecstatic states and supernatural visions, exemplified by the sheikh's own hagiography, remained possible within a protected framework. Thus, the Burhaniya presented itself from the outset as a grand way combining spiritual sobriety and ecstasy. In the following years, this synthesis of past Sufi currents proved to be quite attractive to vast numbers of people inside Sudan and beyond its borders.

Within a few decades, the Burhaniya changed from a small local order into a larger transnational one. Its initial organizational structure corresponded to the pre-modern phase of Sufi globalization described by Frishkopf (Frishkopf 2001, 3-4). By globalization, Frishkopf is not referring to an organization being present everywhere around the globe, but being increasingly connected to larger regional and global networks. In earlier periods, these networks were so loose that people from different regions were largely unaware of their interconnectedness. Frishkopf described Sufi globalization in the pre-modern phase as small numbers of disciples gathered around local sheikhs, and usually linked to a vast decentralized network such as the Qâdiriyyah or Shâdhuliyyahh. Then, in the late eighteenth century, a new phase of Sufi globalization began with the appearance of orders that were centralized, reformist, and pan-Islamic. Frishkopf's description of pan-Islamism is open, similarly to his understanding of globalization. A group can be described as pan-Islamic without being present everywhere in the Islamic world, as long as it is significantly connected to larger currents. I would add that this connection is often perceivable on the level of self-representation and

intent—a movement is pan-Islamic if it presents itself and acts as such. In the Burhaniya, Frishkopf observed a transition towards a centralized pan-Islamic organizational mode, prompted by the rapid expansion of the order.

Starting in the 1950s, the first major expansion of the Burhaniya outside Sudan was in Egypt. This was a very significant event in the development of the order. First, it meant the return of the Dusûqiyyah, in a new form, to the land of Sheikh Ibrâhîm al-Dusûqî. Second, it coincided with a period in which Egypt was extremely influential across the Arab world, the Islamic world, and indeed the whole periphery of the colonial world system. In the 1950s and 60s becoming famous in Egypt nearly guaranteed some form of international exposure. Indeed, the whole world watched as the pro-Western monarchy was ousted by a military coup in 1952. Among the young officers who led the coup was Jamâl ʿAbd al-Nâṣir (d. 1970). This charismatic leader ruled as prime minister from 1954 to 1956 and as president from 1956 to 1970. In 1956, a year after Sudan gained formal independence, Nâṣir nationalized the Suez Canal, which at the time was managed by foreign interests—principally British and French. In response, Britain, France and Israel attempted unsuccessfully to invade Egypt. Victory during the Suez War increased Nâṣir's already significant fame. He became an international anticolonial hero—or villain, depending on one's position. Until his defeat in the 1967 June War, during which Egypt lost the Sinai to Israel, Nâṣir led his country through something of a golden period. Egypt became the home to a huge number of artists, intellectuals, and leaders of all kinds from throughout the Arab world. Thanks to the president's pan-Arabic socialism, millions of poor Egyptians gained access to education, health care and basic necessities they could not have dreamed of previously. However, his regime was extremely harsh with opponents, and had little consideration for their human rights. Paradoxically, the influential international role of Egypt benefitted even Nâṣir's dissenters in disseminating their ideas internationally—the Muslim brothers are a case in point.

During this period, Sheikh Muḥammad 'Uthmân gained a considerable following in Egypt, and to a lesser extent in other countries in the region. Nâṣir's regime did not attempt to stop him since it did not seem to consider the Burhaniya a threat. Actually, Nâṣir probably

considered the apolitical and pan-Islamic Burhaniya a welcome alternative to groups like the Muslim Brothers (Frishkopf 2001, 20; Hoffman 1995, 301). When Anwar al-Sâdât (d. 1981) took power after Nâṣir in 1970, the regime initially continued to allow the Burhaniya to prosper freely in the country. Such favourable conditions helped the order become a major social force in Egypt. Coordinated by an administrative centre in Cairo, branches of the Burhaniya spread across the country. By the middle of the decade, Sheikh Muḥammad 'Uthmân had millions of Egyptian followers (Hoffman 1995, 14; Tariqa Burhaniya 2012d). Yet, this phenomenal expansion provoked the suspicion and eventually the opposition of many Egyptian officials.

In time, Sâdât's regime turned against the Burhaniya. Unlike his predecessor, who had vast pan-Arabic, pan-Islamic, and even 'Third-Worldist' ambitions, Sâdât was developing a policy in which the national interest of Egypt trumped all other considerations. In such a political climate, suspicions naturally arose concerning a pan-Islamic organization with millions of Egyptian disciples led by a foreign sheikh, even if the group was clearly apolitical. Hostility towards the Burhaniya principally came from institutions mandated to manage the religious affairs of the country, like the Supreme Sufi Council, Ministry of Religious Endowments, and Al-Azhar University. Employees of these organizations seemed unsettled by their incapacity to fully control the foreign-led Burhaniya. In the mid-1970s, a number of accusations were launched against Sheikh Muḥammad 'Uthmân and his order by Egyptian officials and pro-government journalists. The sheikh was accused of holding heterodox views, particularly in his book *Tabri'at al-Dhimma fî Nusḥ al-Umma wa Tadhkîrat Ûlî al-Albâb li al-Sayr ilâ al-Ṣawâb (Relieving the Conscience by Advising the Community and Reminding the Wise About the Right Path)* (Al-Burhânî 1974).Yet, this book is primarily a collection of excerpts from well-known classical Sufi authors like Ibn al-'Arabî. Since these sources are officially uncensored in Egypt, it seems safe to conclude, as did Hoffman (1995, 308-319) and Frishkopf (2001, 27-34), that officials were disturbed more by the size of Sheikh Muḥammad 'Uthmân's following than the actual content of his teachings.

Another aspect to consider in government opposition to the Burhaniya in Egypt is a general shift in how Sufism was presented by its 'official' representatives in Egypt. They were increasingly prone to play down the esoteric and ecstatic aspects of Sufism to avoid controversy at a time when exoteric and legalistic interpretations of Islam were gaining in popularity across the Islamic world. Indeed, in the 1970s Saudi Arabia gradually replaced Egypt as the most influential promoter of pan-Islamism, in a radically exoteric and legalistic form[30]. In a climate that was increasingly hostile to Sufism, Egyptian officials seem to have felt they could only tolerate esoteric or ecstatic manifestations of Sufism in small gatherings of initiates, or even in large popular gatherings of 'un-influential' lower class enthusiasts. However, only 'sober' Sufism was officially promoted. Sheikh Muḥammad 'Uthmân was saying aloud, to people of every social class, teachings officials preferred to be kept discreet. In the words of Frishkopf (2001)

> A transnational neo-Sufi group led by a charismatic foreign sheikh would have been bad enough, but the Burhaniyya also featured overtly esoteric interpretations of Islam and ecstatic practices with a massive following, which served as a lightning rod for accusations against Sufism generally. Criticism of the Burhaniyya would naturally be reflected also against the responsible regulatory agency, namely the Supreme Council. The Burhaniyya thus threatened to undermine the success of the Council's mission. If the Sufi establishment did not distance itself it too would be attacked. (32-33)

After a number of official condemnations by the Supreme Sufi Council of Egypt, the order and its books were officially banned in 1979. It is true that this ban was not followed up by a massive crackdown, and that Burhanis continued their activities relatively freely. However, Egypt was no longer a favourable base of operations for the transnational order.

Indeed, when he passed away in 1983, Sheikh Muḥammad 'Uthmân presided over a transnational organization far more complex than the initial community he had founded in Sudan half a century before. Although the bulk of Burhanis remained in Sudan and Egypt, a

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[30] This is a complex process linked to a variety of historical trends, such as Saudi policy, business interests, and the exposure to Wahhabi religious interpretations by Muslims from around the world working within the kingdom.

number of smaller communities were appearing in other Arab countries, as well as in Europe and North America. Increasing flows of international migration and travel facilitated the continued expansion of the Burhaniya. To understand the perpetual growth of the order from 1938 to 1983, it has been useful to consider various contextual factors; but, it is also important to understand the central role played by the sheikh himself. By all accounts he was an exceptional man. Although I never met him, a clear picture has come to me both from the literature cited in this research and conversations with people who did know him. He was affable and communicative. Reportedly, he devoted part of every day to teaching, both to small circles of disciples and to large assemblies. Moreover, he demonstrated a great capacity to perpetuate his heritage by adapting it to the reality of his day. In the words of Frishkopf (2001):

> Under Sheikh Muhammad, the Burhaniyya effectively fused medieval Egyptian ecstaticism and esotericism, Sudanese Sufi individualism, and the centralized organization, revivalist spirit, and proselytization of neo-Sufism. While upholding veneration for Sidi Ibrahim and Sidi Abu al-Hasan al-Shadhili, he also embodied such veneration in his contemporary saintly person, and offered a systematic, organized, and expanding mystical way. In this potent new form, the Burhaniyya offered broad geographic and multi-class appeal. (19)

3.2 Sheikh Ibrâhîm

The son of Sheikh Muḥammad ʿUthmân, Sheikh Ibrâhîm, led the Burhaniya from 1983 until his death in 2003. He is the tenth figure in the abridged *silsilah*. Under his guidance, the expansion of the Burhaniya outside the Nile Valley continued. But Sheikh Ibrâhîm had a different leadership style from his father. I spent some time with him, once in 1994 and once in 1998. My first impression was of a large impressive man. Little prone to long esoteric discussions, he preferred to sit in silence or talk about practical matters. As I sat with him some more, I also discovered that he enjoyed joking and small-talk. He smiled frequently, especially with children. Many of those who knew him well have explained to me that he considered the teachings of his father to be complete, and that his role was to build upon this foundation. The time was for action, not theory. Whereas his father had never left the Nile

Valley, Sheikh Ibrâhîm travelled throughout the Arab world, Europe and North America to meet his followers. He consolidated the centralized structure of the order, and adapted it to benefit from the possibilities offered by its presence in the West. Frishkopf labelled this second structural transformation of the Burhaniya a "transformation from a pan-Islamic to a Western mode of globalization" (Frishkopf 2001, 34). He added:

> By this term I mean expansion through a global network of political, economic, and communications links, extending throughout the world, but densest in the West, where its power and control centers are primarily situated, and which is the primary beneficiary (in terms of wealth, power, or information) of its operations. Outside the West, benefits are skewed towards narrow elites, links are less plentiful, and flows are frequently impeded by state control. (Frishkopf 2001, 34)

From a decolonial perspective, the move to the West described by Frishkopf can be explained in part by the increasing desire for people in the periphery to benefit from the better conditions at the centre of the global order. As huge numbers of migrants have left the peripheries for the centre, the borders between the West and the rest have become increasingly blurred. In the past very few people from the peripheries had access to the centre although the centre was represented in the peripheries by colonial settlers as well as local Westernized elites. Despite the breathtaking resources attributed to sealing off the West/centre from the periphery through a huge international apparatus of repressive controls on migration, the doors to the West/centre are now open much wider than ever before. Of course, Western societies need immigrants for a variety of practical reasons. Still, those who espouse non-Western epistemologies remain colonial subjects even in the West, just as most peripheral elites represent the epistemology and interests of the centre. Epistemic borders remain less porous than physical ones.

For the Burhaniya, adopting a Western mode of globalization has not meant a rupture with the past. Access to Westernized global networks has allowed the order to escape the political tensions of the Arab world, and benefit from new material infrastructures as well as greater freedom of expression. Nevertheless, Frishkopf (Frishkopf 2001, 2) considers that these structural adaptations have not changed the doctrinal core of the Burhaniya. Moreover, the three modes of globalization described by Frishkopf—pre-modern, pan-Islamic and

Westernized—continue to exist within the order. The newer modes are simply layered upon the older, adding new possibilities of action. For instance, members of rural communities in Sudan and Egypt continue to gather as in pre-modern times in close contact with the local representatives of the Burhaniya. At the same time, disciples of many classes and origins gather in urban centres like Cairo, Dubai, or Mecca, where the pan-Islamic character of the Burhaniya is more evident. Finally, small Burhani communities of Muslim immigrants and converts are spread across Europe and North America. This most mobile and eclectic category benefits from the greatest access to resources and freedom. They can, for example, travel freely to most destinations without restrictive visa requirements, allowing them to visit a variety of holy places, shrines and Burhani centres.

The Western expansion of the Burhaniya has had an important impact on the order at large. Communities were established in the United States (1977), France (1980), Germany (1981), and Canada (1984) as well as in eight other Western countries[31]. Since no formal registration is required to belong to the Burhaniya, it is very difficult to give exact numbers for membership; but, it is safe to say that membership in the entire Western world can be counted in the low thousands, whereas there are millions of Burhanis in the Arab world. There are also Burhanis in the non-Arab Muslim world, but the only centre formally mentioned on the Burhaniya website is in Pakistan (Tariqa Burhaniya 2011b). In any case, although the number of followers in Europe and North America is small, their very presence enhances the overall prestige of the order, and they are actively involved in the organizational aspect of the Burhaniya.

For the Burhaniya to take root in the West, much adaptation was required. People in the West cannot usually be approached in the same way as those in the Arab world. In the Arab world, most of those interested in Sufism are already firmly rooted in the Islamic tradition. Whether they are practicing Muslims or not, they are immersed in an Islamic epistemology. They generally expect Sufism to respect their understanding of Islamic orthodoxy, and if they recognize the esoteric dimensions of Islam they expect them to be an

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[31] These are Denmark, England, Holland, Italy, Luxemburg, Sweden, and Switzerland.

extension of its exoteric doctrines and practices. This is not generally the case for Westerners interested in Sufism, especially those who are not already Muslim. The challenge for an order like the Burhaniya is to shift its discourse to emphasize those aspects of its teachings that are most easily accessible to Westerners, without compromising doctrines and practices it deems fundamental. This delicate task was a main concern for Sheikh Ibrâhîm. In addition to differences between the Arab world and the West, Sheikh Ibrâhîm had to manage the internal variety in both.

The first Western Burhanis were an eclectic bunch. In Germany, they were often middle-class natives sensitive to 'New Age' currents in which 'Oriental' religions are often represented as vehicles of an ancient and universal spirituality. When they approached the Burhaniya, Islamic orthodoxy and respect for sharia were not major preoccupations. In the United States, the first Burhanis were mostly African-Americans from New York City. Islam was already present in their milieu, where it was often presented as an alternative to the racist Eurocentric worldview of the white majority. The African (rather than 'Oriental') origin of the Burhaniya must have been an asset. In France, most of the early Burhanis were Muslim immigrants living in Paris, despite the presence of some converts. Some of them were already Burhanis before leaving their homelands. Others became Burhani in France. The Burhaniya offered them a spiritual path rooted in Islam but flexible enough to be practiced in the West. However, as a microcosm of the overall Muslim community in France, the Burhaniya group also had to manage great cultural and social diversity internally. Doubtlessly, maintaining cohesiveness within the group was a challenge. Members had to be adaptable to fit into their own spiritual community as well as society at large.

In Canada, the situation was similar to the one in France. The Canadian community was founded by Aḥmad Farag, an Egyptian man who had become Burhani in Cairo in the 1970s. After spending some time in the French community, he moved to Montreal and began initiating new members into the Burhaniya as of 1984. When I joined the Burhaniya in 1994, the Montreal chapter counted less than a hundred regular members, and a greater number of loosely affiliated people who frequented the community only occasionally. In any case, the

group was quite small then as it is now. At the time, it was mostly composed of first generation immigrants from the Nile Valley, West Africa, and the Maghreb, as well as a few French Canadian converts. Relations among members were generally warm and personal. In fact, the impression that the group was like a big multicultural family was very appealing to me. This atmosphere must have also been quite comforting for many of the immigrant members.

Cultivating a sense of belonging on a larger scale, among the various Burhani communities living in radically different contexts, was important for Sheikh Ibrâhîm as his order expanded. He worked to preserve overall unity while allowing individuals and groups to adapt to their particular contexts. No easy task. On the one hand, he reinforced the role of Khartoum as the centre of the transnational Burhaniya by inaugurating a yearly festival there to commemorate Sheikh Muḥammad 'Uthmân. I first attended this festival in 1998 and was able to witness firsthand how effective such an event can be in strengthening ties among followers from different countries. On the other hand, the Sheikh created a second administrative centre for Europe in 1992, in a large manor situated in Schnede, Germany. This small municipality in Lower Saxony is home to one of the many Burhani centres in Germany. Indeed, while in other Western countries there are only one or two official centres, Germany boasts eight. Schnede also hosts a yearly festival, established by Sheikh Ibrâhîm, and loosely patterned on the Sudanese one. Moreover, the official multilingual website of the Burhaniya (Tariqa Burhaniya 2011a) is hosted in Germany. Sheikh Ibrâhîm also seems to have confirmed the importance of Germany in the Burhaniya when he sent his son and eventual successor there to study medicine in 1990.

While managing the Western expansion of the Burhaniya, Sheikh Ibrâhîm also continued to be involved in the Arab world. He travelled frequently across Egypt and Sudan as well as to other countries in the region to visit local communities and settle various administrative issues. For instance, he worked hard to obtain official recognition for the order by governments. Whereas in Sudan, Sufi orders have an extremely wide popular base which makes it difficult for political leaders to interfere in their affairs, this is not the case in most

other Arab countries. Although more research would be necessary to provide details about these efforts, I know that in many countries the order is tolerated at best, without being fully recognized. This is probably why many of the communities I know of in the Arab world are not listed in the official website of the Burhaniya (Tariqa Burhaniya 2011b). As for Egypt, the official ban on the Burhaniya was reaffirmed in 1994. This resulted principally in closing the administrative centre in Cairo and suspending the huge weekly ceremonies in the neighbouring mosque that houses the mausoleum of Imam al-Ḥusayn. In other parts of Cairo and the rest of Egypt, activities continued throughout the 1980s and 90s fairly unimpeded. Nevertheless, it is difficult to estimate how much more the order would have grown within Egypt without the controversies of the 1970s and the ongoing ban. Following the injunction, it is true that some Burhanis left the order to create splinter groups, join other orders, or reject Sufism altogether. Actually, it must be said that the overall reputation of Sufism among Muslims was increasingly suffering during this period.

Once again, larger trends within the world-system played an important role in the increasingly negative perception of Sufism among Muslims in the 1980s and 1990s. Muslim societies were increasingly polarized between modern Eurocentric fundamentalism and its subordinate Islamist variety (see section 3.1 above). This binary dynamic evolved in the context of the Cold War, itself a schism within Eurocentric fundamentalism. During this war between left and right, imposed upon the entire world-system, the old centre of the colonial world order lost some influence as the United States became the new hegemon of the west, rivalled by the Soviet Union to the east. This superpower rivalry may have seemed cold in the centre of the world system, since they never directly fought a war, but not in the 'Third World' periphery, where they fought a number of horrific proxy wars. There was nothing cold about these wars. The superpowers fought hard to impose a choice on every country in the world between some form of socialism, which signified alliance with the Soviets, and some form of liberal capitalism, which signified alliance with the United States. Islamic societies were no exception. Within the context of the Cold War, various forms of Islamist fundamentalism were

mobilized to serve the interests of their colonial sponsors. Sufism was stuck in the midst of these fundamentalisms, attacked on all sides.

To illustrate the negative impact of the Cold War on Sufism, I will refer to the work of a political scientist, Mahmood Mamdani from Columbia University. In his book *Good Muslim Bad Muslim* (Mamdani 2004), he discussed US policy towards the Islamic world from the beginning of the Cold War until September 11, 2001. He devoted much of his book to America's proxy war in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union (1979-1989). He wrote: "this was the moment America tried to harness extreme versions of political Islam in the struggle against the Soviet Union" (Mamdani, 2004: 119). Assisted by Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, the United States financed, trained, recruited, supplied and supported ultraviolent, often foreign Muslim fighters to fight an anti-Soviet proxy in Afghanistan. In the process, they marginalized nationalist militia led by local Sufis and Islamic legal scholars, deeply rooted in historically decentralized and pluralistic Afghan society. The CIA did not consider them ideologically strong enough to defeat the Soviets in comparison to hardline Sunni fundamentalists (Mamdani 2004, 153-154). Supporting radical forms of Sunni Islam also served a secondary purpose of countering the influence of the 1979 Shia revolution in neighbouring Iran. Initially a marginal force within Afghanistan, Sunni extremists soon played the central role in fighting the Soviets. Mamdani revealed how they were trained to become ruthless radicals whose violence against civilians, including the kidnapping and raping of women, were "a direct consequence of something the CIA manual called training in 'strategic sabotage'" (Mamdani 2004, 169). After the departure of the Soviets, these CIA-trained fighters spread out across the world and continued using indiscriminate violence against civilians in a variety of forums, including Algeria, Bosnia and, of course, the United States in 2001.

For Mamdani, the genesis of 9/11 is to be found, not in some essential religious or cultural trends in Islam, but in the politics of the Cold War. The prototype for the 9/11 hijackers is the warrior from the Afghani jihad described by President Ronald Reagan in 1985 as "the moral equivalent of America's founding fathers" (Mamdani 2004, 119). Current Islamic terrorism is a modern political phenomenon, "not a leftover of traditional culture"

(Mamdani 2004, 175). Mamdani wrote, "I know of no one inspired by Osama Bin Laden for religious reasons. Bin Laden is a politician, not a theologian" (Mamdani 2004, 253-254). Yet, this political reality is linked to cultural perceptions, in particular those of certain Western experts whose "demonizing point of view questions whether a historically grounded modernity is even possible in the postcolonial Islamic world. Best identified with Bernard Lewis, it equates modernity with secularism, secularism with Westernization, and Westernization with subjugation" (Mamdani 2004, 169). It should be noted that Bernard Lewis was a prominent advisor to the second Bush administration. In the end, the essentialist view of Islam present by pundits like Lewis has been a self-fulfilling prophecy. It has justified cultivating violence among Muslims on the presupposition that Islam is inherently violent. A vicious cycle has been unleashed: terrorists provoke violent repression from governments, whose populations grow increasingly frustrated with the police states in which they live, and so forth.

Mamdani's work raises a number of questions related to the overall state of Sufism from 1983 to 2003, when Sheikh Ibrâhîm led the Burhaniya. What if American policymakers had chosen to support insurgents from traditional pro-Sufi circles in Afghanistan? What if they had not allied themselves with Wahhabi Saudi Arabia to create an international anti-Soviet jihad during the Cold War? The conditions that led to 9/11, as described by Mamdani, would not have been in place. The way Muslims perceive themselves today, as well as how they are perceived by non-Muslims, would surely be quite different. The fact is that during the Cold War and after, American foreign policy favoured regimes whose policies corresponded to the right end of the political spectrum in the modern Eurocentric worldview. People with radically exoteric interpretations of Islam, invariably intolerant towards those with different world views, have rarely been the main target of the United States and its allies. In fact, they have usually been seen as supporters against the true enemy to the left. The only time Muslim extremists have been considered enemies is when they act against the interests of the American hegemon and its allies. For this reason, Shiite radicalism couched in a discourse that borrows freely from the revolutionary left has placed Iran at odds with the United States and

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its allies since 1979. Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia has remained a staunch ally of the United States despite being the main ideological breeding ground for Sunni exoteric extremism. It espouses a neoliberal economic worldview and serves the interests of the colonial world order. Through its alliance with the United States, Saudi Arabia has found itself in the international geopolitical arena largely on the same side as ostensible ideological enemies like Israel and pre-2011 Tunisia, where fundamentalist Sunnis were violently repressed.

Once again, the point here is to analyse the context in which the Burhaniya was evolving under the leadership of Sheikh Ibrâhîm. Although the Cold War ostensibly ended in the early 1990s, its dynamics did not end with the fall of the Soviet Union. Multiple global networks of complex interests and alliances could not simply disappear overnight. Among the extremists who had been encouraged by the binary logic of the Cold war, many were galvanized by the fall of the Soviets. In Sunni-majority societies, such as the heartland of the Burhaniya along the Nile Valley, both Westernizing liberals and Islamists could claim victory after the Cold War. In the 1990s, both these radicalized factions suddenly found themselves face to face without a common enemy. There was no American-backed jihad in Afghanistan anymore. The only way left to channel the violence to which these extremists had become accustomed was to confront one another. Both sides fed off one another as two extremes of the same modern colonial continuum. Without a rival to confront, neither of their positions would have made sense anymore. Their confrontation manifested itself in a variety of ways. The most visible consisted of terrorism and state repression. The civil war in Algeria (1992-1999) is a case in point. However, in a subtler way, the conflict played itself out daily in small clashes that divided families, neighbourhoods, schools and every other basic social institution. A general climate reigned in which many felt it was necessary to choose between some form of Islamism or Western liberalism. Sufism had no place in this dichotomy[32]. It contradicted the shared epistemic foundation of both sides by accepting multiple layers of exoteric and esoteric meaning to religious texts as well as multiple levels of reality and truth. Therefore, Sufism was

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[32] I am referring to general trends. However, some people refused this binary opposition, such as the important Moroccan thinker, 'Abd al-Salâm Yâsîn (d. 2012) whose Islamism was openly Sufi inspired.

viewed by both sides with suspicion at best, hostility at worst, and was increasingly marginalized by reformers of all stripes, be they in Cairo or Montreal.

Yet, despite this difficult context, the Burhaniya was able to mature and even continue to expand under Sheikh Ibrâhîm. In April 2002, seven months after 9/11, the sheikh commented publicly about this situation in a public allocution:

> I am talking to you tonight about one of the major phenomena in the world, if not the most important and dangerous one: the phenomenon of religious extremism. The world has suffered a lot from it during the past fifty years. However, recent international developments have contributed to crystallizing this problem and revealing how dangerous it is. This extremism leads to terrorism, killing of innocent people, and destruction of the world instead of its development.
>
> […]This disease of the era has been intensified, as the Islamic world enters the age of cultural globalization and confronts the dangers of Western cultural invasion. Moreover, poverty is wreaking havoc on the social structures of a considerable part of the Islamic nation. This threatens Islamic culture, behavior and civilization. (Tariqa Burhaniya 2012c)

Clearly, the sheikh saw a connection between Islamic extremism and Western coloniality. He added that his father Sheikh Muḥammad ʿUthmân had drawn "the world's attention, more than six decades ago, to the dangers of cultural globalization and religious extremism" (Tariqa Burhaniya 2012c), and that he had devoted his lifetime to building a systematic method to rebuild Muslim societies. This method started by reforming the behavior of the individuals who compose these societies. Sheikh Ibrâhîm specified that states in the Islamic world should remain in charge of regular academic education (education of the rational mind) while leaving spiritual and ethical education to Sufis. He explained that as a channel of communication between the earth and the heavens, sent by Allah, Sufi saints should play an essential role in civil society as sources of guidance. According to him, the Burhaniya is "a model of Sufi Islam" that has "carried out, in a practical way, the process of globalizing Islam" in over fifty states worldwide (Tariqa Burhaniya 2012c). This has been achieved through "kindness, gentleness, ease, and love", even in the West despite diverse "environmental circumstances,

massive technological developments, and a variety of accents, languages, customs and traditions in these areas of the world" (Tariqa Burhaniya 2012c). Moreover, "the city of Khartoum has become a centre, base and substantial reference for dialogue between nations of the world" (Tariqa Burhaniya 2012c). However, he warned that it will be illogical if "Sudan and the Islamic world do not benefit from this unique experience" (Tariqa Burhaniya 2012c). In 2003, a few weeks after the invasion of Iraq by the United States and its allies, he specified that Wahhabis were the most dangerous source of Islamic religious extremism (Tariqa Burhaniya 2012c) and that "the Islamic World has become the principal target of colonial powers" (Tariqa Burhaniya 2012c).

The excerpts cited above are from the speech the sheikh of the Burhaniya gives during the festival (ḥawliyyah) in Khartoum, every April. Sheikh Ibrâhîm died in 2003. The 2002 and 2003 speeches represent a sort of final testament. He touched on many of the themes discussed in this thesis, including coloniality and Islamist fundamentalism. A close reading of the excerpts quoted above reveals that the sheikh was perfectly aware of the different modes of globalization in the Islamic world and in the West, referred to by Frishkopf as pan-Islamic and Western. Furthermore, the sheikh expressed his concern that the Sufi legacy he represented be simultaneously preserved and adapted to the variety of circumstances of the modern world.

3.3 Sheikh Muḥammad

After the death of Sheikh Ibrâhîm in 2003, his son Sheikh Muḥammad became head of the Burhaniya—a position he still holds today. Since then, the Burhaniya has become increasingly centralized in an organizational structure that attempts to benefit fully and consciously from the advantages offered by the West as well as the Arab world. Without disappearing, the borders between these two worlds are becoming blurred by a new generation of Burhanis that are increasingly cosmopolitan (or globalized) in their outlook.

Sheikh Muḥammad, the eleventh and latest figure in the abridged Burhaniya *silsilah*, embodies this cosmopolitan renewal. After having studied medicine in Germany, he is the first in his physical and spiritual lineage to have lived outside the traditional Arab world. He also

broke with custom by marrying a native German Muslim woman in 2006. The couple now has three children—two girls and a boy. If leadership in the Burhaniya continues to follow the same patrilineal model it has for three generations, the next sheikh will probably be half German and half Sudanese. Although increasingly common in contemporary societies, particularly in urban centres, intercultural and interracial marriages still raise eyebrows in many circles, both in the West and in the Arab world. Yet, they are a sign of the times.

On a global level, the context in which the Burhaniya has been evolving since 2003 has undergone some fundamental transformations which have inevitably impacted the order. The last Western hyperpower has lost considerable influence in the world after a series of fiascos in foreign and internal affairs. After quick military victories in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003), the United States became entangled in the two countries, losing enormous human, military, political and economic resources as it attempted to manage and rebuild those nations. It has yet to fully quell the military insurrections and social chaos that followed the invasions. Moreover, old allies like France and Canada have become increasingly independent from Washington, even refusing to partake in the assault on Iraq. At the same time, old rivals like Russia and China have become emboldened to challenge the United States more openly than ever in the international arena. To make matters worse, an international financial crisis hit the world in 2008 like a massive earthquake whose epicentre was in New York City. The Western world has been hardest hit by the ongoing economic woes provoked by this meltdown. Meanwhile, not a day goes by without innumerable pundits commenting in the Western media about the rise of China and other Asian nations. Since 2011, a series of uprisings in Southwest Asia and North Africa have led to the fall of staunch pro-Western regimes in the region, such as the Mubârak regime in Egypt. Important protests have also taken place in Western nations, such as the Tea Party movement to the right, and the 1% movement to the left in the United States. It is much too early to speak of the end of over five centuries of Western colonial dominance in the world, but Western hegemony is being increasingly challenged in all spheres of human activity, including politics, economics, art, and of course science. In the midst of these global transformations, the Burhaniya has undergone major internal changes as a second

generation of Burhanis has reached adulthood in the West while third and fourth generations come of age in the Arab world.

Perhaps change has occurred most rapidly in the European and North American Burhaniya. Whereas the first generation was composed mainly of immigrants and converts, the second generation includes a number of people born into the Western Burhaniya. Some are born of immigrant parents, others of converts, and others of mixed couples. All manage mixed identities. Of course, this generational transition is not always smooth. Inevitably, some children are in partial or total conflict with the worldview of their parents. In minority contexts, these tensions can be particularly challenging. However, my observation is that most members of the second generation have become active members of the Burhaniya. In general, they would not think of making a choice between being Burhani Muslims on the one hand, and citizens of a Western country on the other. Nor would they reject the numerous ties that attach them to Arab countries like Sudan and Egypt. My impressions are confirmed by Lassen (Lassen 2009a, 2009b) who conducted academic research precisely on generational change in the Burhaniya of Germany and Denmark.

As the world in which the Burhaniya has changed, so has its organizational mode. While his predecessors adopted a fairly informal style of leadership, Sheikh Muḥammad openly borrows from formal management techniques common in the West. His familiarity with the West has offered him tools to rationalize the organization with the intent of facing the needs of an expanding transnational community. He has spoken of the strategies required for Muslim communities to become solidly implanted in the West (Tariqa Burhaniya 2012c). Moreover, he has shown himself to be quite sensitive to the needs of Muslims minorities, which are quite different from the needs of those living as majorities in places like Sudan. Of course, he is concerned with the conditions of Burhanis in Europe and North America, but also in other areas where the Burhaniya seems to be expanding. For instance, in 2006 I witnessed the sheikh authorize a delegation to open a centre in Hong Kong. Since they have not appeared on the official listing of centres on the official Burhaniya website (Tariqa Burhaniya 2011b), I gather that they are still establishing the administrative groundwork for formal recognition.

Conversations with many people who know the sheikh well inform me that respecting national laws and regulations is extremely important to him. Of course, adapting to a variety of contexts requires more than respecting administrative requirements; it requires an attitude of openness and compassion to others.

One occasion in which Sheikh Muḥammad demonstrated a positive attitude towards alterity was during his yearly speech in April 2006. In the previous year, an important controversy had arisen that added to rising international tensions between the West and Islam[33]. Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten published a series of caricatures of the prophet Muḥammad on September 17, 2005. Muslims throughout the world largely interpreted this as yet another Western attack on Islam. Anger grew, and many of the numerous protests that erupted around the world turned violent. In the West, public opinion was divided. While some considered the caricatures regrettable and tasteless, others thought it was an important opportunity to defend the democratic rights to freedom of expression and freedom of the press. While some media made it a point of honour to reproduce the controversial drawings, others refused to do so.

The Danish cartoon controversy put Sheikh Muḥammad in somewhat of a delicate position. As a Muslim sheikh and descendant of the prophet Muḥammad, he could not be indifferent to attacks on the dignity of his ancestor. Also, since many Muslims believed that the ongoing War on Terror led by the United States and its allies was in fact a new Western colonial war on Islam, the time was not ripe for a serene dialogue concerning the delicate balance between freedom of expression and respect for others. On the other hand, the sheikh represented a long tradition of tolerance and compassion, based on self-improvement rather than confrontation with others. Moreover, there are no clear borders between Islam and the West, and many of the sheikh's own disciples are at once Muslim and Western. In fact, it is difficult to situate the sheikh himself within one fixed identity. Is he a Sudanese sheikh or a doctor trained in Germany? Is he Arab, African or European? What about his German wife?

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[33] Of course, this binary conflict between two largely essentialized cultural spaces is mostly a mental construction. Yet, it remains quite real insofar as it is shared by a large number of people around the world and informs their conduct.

What about their children? Clearly, reductionist identities would not respect the complex realities embodied by the Sheikh. A person like him with different identities is expected to show solidarity towards multiple communities of belonging. In situations like the cartoon controversy, meeting all these expectations was quite a challenge.

On the night of April 12 2006, as I sat down to listen to the sheikh's yearly speech in Khartoum, I was expecting him to make some reference to the Danish cartoon controversy. I wondered how he would handle this sensitive issue. In the audience, there were many people who had never had any close contact with the West or Westerners. There were also some Westerners, like the group of Danish Burhanis who had previously been invited to the stage to speak about the activities of the group in Denmark. The sheikh began to speak. Most of his speech concerned the importance of good manners and virtuous conduct. For instance, he spoke of withholding rage and of good conduct towards enemies, including forgiveness. Then, about three quarters of the way into his allocution, the sheikh tied what he was saying into the topic of the Danish cartoons, saying:

> These cartoons, if they indicate anything, clearly indicate the ignorance of the organizers and participants of the contest. We will not say that they did not know what Muslim scholars have written about the Prophet (may the prayers and peace of Allah be upon him), but we will say that they did not even read the writings of their fellow scholars and intellectuals. A number of just Western scholars have written about the Prophet (may the prayers and peace of Allah be upon him). Some have presented him as a great person, while others consider him to be the greatest person who has ever lived. (Tariqa Burhaniya 2012c)

Sheikh Muḥammad then proceeded to quote a number of Westerners who have praised the prophet. Using Western sources to eulogize the prophet appeared to me the most appropriate way to defend his honour while simultaneously working to appease tensions and avoid conflict. I was actually moved to tears, knowing that one misinterpreted word by the sheikh could have aroused the passions of the numerous fervent disciples in the audience. At the same time, he was a few days away from marrying a German woman. It seemed to me for a moment that East and West had disappeared, leaving only human beings faced with the choice between

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love and hatred. This is the perspective promoted within the Burhaniya—the very insider's perspective I have chosen to share with the readers of this thesis.

The reaction of the sheikh to the Danish cartoon controversy is an example of his broader teachings. Like his predecessors, he promotes virtuous conduct and compassion for all people, regardless of their race or religion. He presents a vision of Islam based on love for the divine Creator, and by extension for all creation, including all humankind. However, love for others should not be confused with moral relativism. The sheikh insists that Islam's doctrinal heritage, including Sufism, must be preserved and defended against those who would attack it from the outside (e.g. Western imperialists) or from the inside (e.g. Wahhabis and other extremists). For the leader of the Burhaniya, love and compassion are both a way of being and a weapon against hatred and violence.

Conclusion

Since the foundation of the Burhaniya in 1938, its leaders have worked to simultaneously preserve their heritage and adapt it to the constantly changing circumstances of the modern age. The heritage they wish to perpetuate is nothing else than the Muḥammadan trust, transmitted by a long chain of saints, whose main figures are the eleven sheikhs of the abridged Burhaniyah *silsilah*. Today, as in pre-modern times, the saints who inherit this trust perpetuate it by adapting it to contemporary realities. This adaptability is a manifestation of a deeper respect for alterity, itself rooted in a worldview with love at its core. Preservation of this worldview is understood to be a precondition to successfully perpetuate the Muḥammadan trust through diverse times and in different places. Such preservation requires intransigent refutation of ideas that attack the very ontic and epistemic premises of Sufism, like Eurocentric fundamentalism and its subordinate extension, Islamism. The relation between these ontic and epistemic foundations, and their relation to the contemporary doctrines and practices of the Burhaniya, is the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR – DOCTRINAL CONTINUITY AND PRACTICAL ADAPTABILITY

So far, this thesis has explored the origins, birth and development of the modern Burhaniya. From the historical and metahistorical narrative of the previous chapters, it is possible to observe how the order's contemporary doctrines and practices are grounded in a distinct ontology and epistemology deeply rooted in fourteen centuries of Southwest Asian and North African spirituality. Yet, neither these doctrines and practices nor their ontic and epistemic foundations have so far been systematically explored as they will in this final chapter.

4.1 Ontology and epistemology

For centuries, Sufis from across the Muslim world have shared a remarkably similar worldview based on a common understanding of what is real (i.e. ontology) as well as how reality can be approached and known (epistemology)[34]. To understand Sufi epistemology, it is perhaps best to begin by explaining the ontology upon which it is based.

Sufis share the basic ontology of all Muslims, as described in the Qur'an and hadiths. Reality in these texts is presented as a creation of Allah. Among the many names and attributes given to Allah in scripture is *al-Ḥaqq* (the Real, the Truth). Thus, only Allah is true and real in absolute terms. While the Real is absolute, reality is relative. Reality, or existence (*wujûd*), is utterly dependent on the Real. It is composed of an indefinite multitude of divine creations. Another point to consider is that Allah is also referred to in scripture as *al-Ḥayy* (the Living), indicating that, just as all things are only real in relation to the Real, they are only living in relation to the Living. In the Islamic worldview all things are alive and real, in a relative sense. Nothing is absolutely unreal or dead. Moreover, as stated in the Qur'an (17:44) all of these living creations praise their Creator:

تُسَبِّحُ لَهُ السَّمَوَاتُ السَّبْعُ وَالْأَرْضُ وَمَنْ فِيهِنَّ وَإِنْ مِنْ شَيْءٍ إِلَّا يُسَبِّحُ بِحَمْدِهِ وَلَكِنْ لَا تَفْقَهُونَ تَسْبِيحَهُمْ إِنَّهُ كَانَ حَلِيمًا غَفُورًا.

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[34] Of course, this is not to deny a plurality of perspectives within Sufism, but simply to state that some fundamental principles can be observed in Sufi texts written from various times and places.

The seven heavens and the earth and all that is therein praise Him, and there is not a thing but hymneth His praise; but ye understand not their praise. Lo! He is ever Clement, Forgiving.

Among the multitudes of beings that share the universe with humans are notably angels and jinn. In the Islamic worldview, humans were created from clay and have freewill, while angels were created from light to serve Allah unquestioningly. Jinn, who were created from smokeless fire and have freewill like humans, come in a variety of forms, inhabit the earth, and are able to see and hear humans. Some jinn are good and some are evil. Evil jinn can harm human beings in a number of ways, including inhabiting their bodies and influencing their thoughts and feelings. Although most humans are considered incapable of perceiving jinn and angels, conscious interaction and communication is possible in some circumstances. This is also true for interaction between living and deceased humans, who are considered to be consciously awaiting the day of judgement in their graves. Yet, some deceased humans are not depicted in scripture as confined to their graves, such as prophets and martyrs who have been killed on the path of Allah (Qur'an 3:169).

Fundamentally, Islamic ontology presents a universe filled with life and conscience. It is what Max Weber would have called an enchanted worldview (Weber and Parsons 1963); even more so for Sufis whose purpose is to intensify their practice of Islam to the point of attaining enlightenment. As discussed earlier (chapter 1.1), this refers to an excellent state of being in which submission to the Real (*Al-Ḥaqq*) is so complete that the divine takes over the human conscience. For Sufis, greater consciousness of the Real entails a heightened sense of reality, which explains their claim that saints can communicate with angels, jinn, and deceased humans. Sufi enlightenment is in fact a conscious realization (making real) of the relationship between relative human beings and the absolute Being—a meeting of reality and the Real. Such realization is true knowledge, which leads us to epistemology.

Epistemology is the realm of human inquiry whose object is knowledge itself. Various epistemologies differ about what can be known, what should be known, and how it can be

known. Usually, an epistemology includes several sciences that deal with particular objects of knowledge. Technology is science applied to a specific purpose. Modern Western-centric science deals only with understanding the material world, and technologies are meant to serve practical objectives within this world. However, traditional Islamic epistemology is based on the very different presupposition that the best knowledge/science is religious knowledge/science, since it leads to eternal—rather than ephemeral—well-being. Muslims have a variety of opinions about what can be known within this category of religious knowledge, and how it should be known. However, it is generally agreed that in order to be considered legitimate, a person's religious knowledge must lead to better, more virtuous conduct. If not, it does not deserve to be called knowledge. From this epistemic perspective, acts of worship can be considered technological applications of religious science.

Over the ages, innumerable Islamic scholars have dealt extensively with epistemology, including several famous Sufis, such as al-Ghazâlî (d. 1111) and Ibn al-'Arabî (d. 1240). Once, a disciple asked Al-Ghazâlî which avenues of learning to pursue. He responded in a now-famous letter (Al-Ghazali and Omar 2004) advising his disciple to seek only that knowledge he would wish to acquire if he only had one week left to live. Any other knowledge would be futile. Similarly, epistemology is a central theme throughout the prolific writings of Ibn al-'Arabî. He considered nothing superior to the pursuit of knowledge (Chittick 2006). However, like Al-Ghazâlî, he differentiated between futile and beneficial knowledge:

> The intelligent person should not seek any knowledge save that through which his essence is perfected and which is carried along with him wherever he may be taken. This is nothing but knowledge of God in respect of bestowal and witnessing. After all, you need your knowledge of medicine, for example, only in the world of diseases and illnesses. When you are taken to a world in which there is no illness or sickness, whom will you treat with this knowledge? . . . So also is knowledge of geometry. You need it in the world of spatial area. When you are taken elsewhere, you will leave it behind in its world, for the soul goes forward untrammeled, without taking anything along with it. (Chittick 2006, 129)

The deep spiritual knowledge referred to by Ibn al-ʿArabî cannot be acquired solely through rational inquiry. It requires other faculties like intuition (*firâsa*), inspiration (*ilhâm*) and spiritual unveiling (*kashf*). Such faculties are developed through constant worship and proximity to God, not erudition.

Humans and jinn were created to worship God (Qur'an 51:56). Since Allah prescribes good actions, and forbids evil ones, all virtuous conduct is sublimated by one's intention to obey the Creator. When one is constantly aware of the divine presence, all actions become a form of worship, including eating well, working, studying, and spending time with loved ones. But constant awareness of the divine presence is easier said than done. That is why the very function of Sufi theoretical teachings is to encourage practitioners to increase mandatory and supererogatory acts of worship in the hope of attaining a state of spiritual excellence (*iḥsân*). Then, theoretical knowledge is completed by direct experiential knowledge. Knowledge, being and action become one. At this point, it seems pertinent to repeat the famous hadith, cited in the introduction, which eloquently summarizes this spiritual process:

> Allah the Almighty has said: Whosoever shows enmity to a friend of Mine, I shall be at war with him. My servant does not draw near to Me with anything more loved by Me than the religious duties I have imposed upon him, and My servant continues to draw near to Me with supererogatory works so that I shall love him. When I love him I am his hearing with which he hears, his seeing with which he sees, his hand with which he strikes, and his foot with which he walks. Were he to ask (something) of Me, I would surely give it to him; and were he to ask Me for refuge, I would surely grant him it. (Nawawi, Ibrahim, and Johnson-Davies 1977, 118)

From this perspective, the true person of knowledge is not a bookish scholar, but a person invaded by the divine presence. Experiential knowledge of the absolute is in a way absolute knowledge. It even offers the knower deep insight into the relative reality that depends on the Real (*al-Ḥaqq*). Yet, such knowledge is ineffable. Language and symbols can only allude to it. That is why the science of Sufi saints cannot operate within the rigid parameters of rational discourse. As a bridge between reality and the Real, it is neither fully absolute/divine nor fully relative/human. Once expressed in human language, it necessarily becomes allusive. Yet, it

can transform a person's epistemology. For instance, the work of contemporary Saudi scholar of psychology Amal Elyas (2005) is deeply embedded in the Sufi epistemology of the Burhaniya path she follows. She wrote, "[m]y view of knowledge is characterized by two main beliefs. First, all human-made knowledge is perspectival. Second, human-made knowledge is generated and received through the mind, body, and heart" (Elyas 2005, 33). For her, Sufi epistemology is nothing else than the core of Islamic epistemology. It leads to a nuanced worldview in which an obstinate focus on the absolute Real is correlative to a flexible understanding of reality as relative and plural.

4.2 Doctrines

Burhanis do not perceive Sufi doctrines as separate from the basic teachings of Islam. Rather, they are meditations that explore the deeper meanings and ramifications of these teachings. For instance, the famous Gabriel hadith discussed earlier (see above, section 1.1) enumerates six fundamental articles of faith, namely, "[i]t is to believe in Allah, His angels, His books, His messengers, and the Last Day, and to believe in divine destiny, both the good and the evil thereof" (Nawawi, Ibrahim, and Johnson-Davies 1977, 30). This concise list is the basic doctrinal credo accepted by most Muslims. Islamic texts providing further doctrinal commentaries, be they Sufi or not[35], can be considered explorations of these basic tenets. For this reason, the doctrinal corpus to which Burhanis have access is extremely vast. The writings of their own sheikhs insert themselves within this wider corpus.

As a major component of Islamic doctrine, Sufism has produced countless texts. Yet, within this multiplicity it is possible to find some common themes that can be examined and to a certain extent classified. Swiss scholar and Sufi Titus Burckhardt (d. 1984) observed that several branches of Sufi doctrine generally deal with metaphysics or virtue. He defined

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[35] It should be mentioned that many scholars specialized in other Islamic sciences than Sufism are nevertheless considered saints. Since all those who have realized a state of spiritual excellence are considered true Sufis, it is possible to be a Sufi whose social function has nothing to do with Sufism. Sufis include legal scholars, judges, mathematicians, and local imams, but also street vendors, peasants, and beggars.

metaphysics as "the science of principles, or of the Principle", and virtue as "the science of the soul" (Burckhardt 2003, 16). He continued:

> Needless to say these two domains are not in watertight compartments. Metaphysics by definition includes everything, but in Sufism it is always linked to spiritual realization. Cosmology, which is derived from metaphysics, applies to both macrocosm and microcosm. Thus, there is a psychology which has a cosmic application and a psychology which, by analogy, applies to the soul or inward constitution of man. (Burckhardt 2003, 16)

Having added cosmology as an intermediary third domain between metaphysics and spiritual psychology, Burckhardt commented:

> These correspond to the ternary: 'God, world and soul' (Metacosm, macrocosm, and microcosm). Cosmology can thus be conceived both as the application of metaphysical principles to the cosmos (this is the contemplation of God in the world) and, analogously, as the application of metaphysical principles to the human soul." (Burckhardt 2003, 16)

As products of divinely inspired experiential knowledge (Burckhardt 2003), Sufi doctrines are far from cerebral abstractions. The knowledge they present does not draw its legitimacy simply by meeting the standards of rational discourse. Rather, it must be compatible with revealed prophetic knowledge, which is superior to it just as prophecy is superior to sainthood. Furthermore, it should be conducive to spiritual progress. Without being accompanied by virtue, knowledge is spiritually illegitimate, inspired either by the ego or Satan. Burckhardt explained that in Sufi doctrine egocentric inspiration can be recognized as aiming to satisfy some human desire. It is consistent and focused on that desire. However, satanic inspiration is much more shifty and confused. It troubles the human conscience, seeking not satisfaction of a particular human desire, "but negation of spiritual reality" (Burckhardt 2003, 18). People who are divinely inspired should normally manifest qualities such as compassion, sincerity, generosity, courage, and humility. Burckhardt wrote that "the science of virtues, which applies Divine Truth to the soul, directly concerns spiritual realization. Its criteria are exceedingly subtle; it cannot be summarized in a moral code, and its formal fixations are no more than paradigms" (Burckhardt 2003, 19). In other words, as we will discuss below (see section 4.3),

applying spiritual principles as virtuous conduct in specific situations requires extreme adaptability and openness to inspiration. Burckhardt further commented:

> Spiritual virtue is not necessarily a social virtue in a direct sense, and the external manifestations of one and the same virtue may differ according to circumstances. Thus some Sufis have shown their contempt for the world by wearing poor and tattered garments; others have affirmed the same inner attitude by wearing sumptuous raiment. In a Sufi of the latter kind, the affirmation of his person is in reality a submission to the impersonal truth that he incarnates; his humility lies in his extinction in an aspect of glory which is not his own. (Burckhardt 2003, 19)

Burhanis can look to the life stories of the saints in their own lineage for examples of how transmitters of the same essential doctrines can live extremely different lives. For instance, Ibn Bashîsh the hermit authorized his disciple Shâdhulî to mix with princes and paupers alike and make his teachings accessible to the masses. On the other end of the spectrum, the more prolific writings of a saint like Ibn al-ʿArabî delve into complexities and subtleties that make them far from accessible. Such theoretical expositions of doctrine can be quite bewildering for readers since they deal with realities considered beyond the scope of the rational mind. When approaching them, one should remember that Sufis commonly refer to their science as a taste. Trying to describe the taste of, say coffee, to someone who has never tried it is hard enough. Using language to allude to ineffable metaphysical truths is even more difficult. Yet, as we have seen, that is in large part the role of Sufi doctrine. The theory is meant as a springboard for practice, which is in turn the inevitable prerequisite for fully understanding the theory. In his excellent introduction to this subject[36] renowned scholar of Sufism, Seyyed Hossein Nasr described the circular relation between doctrine and practice as follows:

> Sufi doctrine is in a sense both the beginning and end of the Sufi path. It is the beginning because it presents to the seeker, before he or she undertakes the spiritual quest, the basic truths concerning the nature of reality, and finally the crowning Truth concerning Ultimate Reality as such. It is the end because the goal of Sufism is the attainment of that gnosis or *maʿrifah*, described

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[36] Although the present thesis is not the appropriate forum to go into greater detail than I have concerning theoretical Sufism, I recommend this introduction (Nasr 2007, 33-58) to those who wish to pursue the topic.

theoretically in texts of Sufi doctrine but now realized with one's whole being. (Nasr 2007, 33)

4.3 Practices

As technological applications of a spiritual science, Sufi practices aim to take the disciple from theoretical knowledge to the experiential knowledge necessary for enlightenment and realization. The supererogatory practices related to the Sufi path (*ṭarîqah*) lose their efficaciousness if detached from the framework of sharia (*sharî'ah*) of which they are an extension. Sufism proposes a refined understanding and intensified experience of the core principles embodied in the basic Islamic prescriptions for individual worship and social interaction

In the Burhaniya, the most important supererogatory acts of individual worship are invocation (*dhikr*) of Allah as well as prayers upon the prophet Muḥammad (*ṣalât 'alâ al-nabî*) and his family (see section 1.1 above). These practices are extensions of the first pillar of Islamic worship, the profession of faith. *Dhikr* is the extension of the first section of this profession, which consists in attesting that there is no god but God. Prayers upon the prophet and his family are an extension of the second section of the profession, attesting that Muḥammad is the messenger of Allah. Indeed, among the countless scriptural references to *dhikr*, there is the following injunction:

<div dir="rtl">وَاذْكُرِ اسْمَ رَبِّكَ وَتَبَتَّلْ إِلَيْهِ تَبْتِيلاً.</div>

Mention the Name of your Lord, and devote yourself [exclusively] to Him with complete devotion. (Qur'an 73:8)

And among the numerous scriptural references concerning prayer upon the prophet and his family, there is the following:

<div dir="rtl">إِنَّ اللهَ وَمَلائِكَتَهُ يُصَلُّونَ عَلَى النَّبِيِّ يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا صَلُّوا عَلَيْهِ وَسَلِّمُوا تَسْلِيماً.</div>

Indeed God and His angels bless the Prophet. O you who believe, invoke blessings on him and invoke peace upon him in a worthy manner" (Qur'an 33:56).

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The sheikh, or more frequently his local representative (*murshid*), gives each disciple a specific number of litanies (*awrâd*) to read daily. Written by previous sheikhs like Ibn Bashîsh, Shâdhulî and Dusûqî, these include repeating certain names of Allah a precise number of times, and various forms of blessings upon the prophet and his family. They also include supplicatory prayers for health, forgiveness of sins, guidance of loved ones and other requests for well-being in this life and in the hereafter. Disciples are given a book of litanies (Tariqa Burhaniya 2005) and a rosary to keep track of their recitations. What each person should recite is determined on an individual basis, taking into account situational aspects such as availability, ability to read Arabic, age, and gender.

For communal worship and social interaction, Burhanis meet in a local centre called *zâwiah*. Generally, this place is not a traditional mosque in which an imam leads the five daily prayers (*ṣalâh*). Like other practicing Muslims, most Burhanis frequent local mosques for this purpose. Of course, since it is possible to perform *ṣalâh* at home or elsewhere, Burhanis may also perform some mandatory prayers in a *zâwiah*. Yet, the main purpose of the *zâwiah* is to gather for supererogatory activities including lessons on Islamic topics ranging from sharia to metaphysics, meetings to discuss the affairs of the local community, and singing spiritual poems written by Sufi saints. However, the most important activity in a *zâwiah* is the weekly communal ritual called *ḥaḍrah*. This intense ceremony incorporates *dhikr*, prayers upon the prophet and his family, supplications, reading of verses from the Qur'an, and singing of Sufi poetry. Although women are encouraged to follow the ritual with intense concentration, they do not as a rule participate actively in the *ḥaḍrah*. While Burhanis consider the loud chanting and choreographed body movements conducive to awakening spiritual fervour in men, women are not understood to require such measures. It is believed that participating in such a powerful ritual could actually have too strong an impact on women since they are considered generally more sensitive and receptive to spiritual influences. It should be noted that women participate in communal *dhikr* sessions in certain other Sufi groups. However, each order has a different methodology.

The term *ḥaḍrah* is also used by other groups in the Nile Valley to refer to communal *dhikr* sessions. It literally means 'presence'. This is because it is believed that during the ritual the presence of Allah's mercy descends upon the participants, also attracting the presence of various spiritual beings, like saints, angels and even prophets. Michael Frishkopf has dicussed *ḥaḍrah* and other Islamic rituals involving sound in a number of fascinating articles (Frishkopf 2001, 2003, 2005). He is particularly sensitive to this aspect of Sufism thanks to his being at once a specialist of Sufism, an ethnomusicologist, and a musician. More specifically, he is well acquainted with the Egyptian context, having done fieldwork there from 1992 to 1998 (Frishkopf 2001, 8). One of his articles, that addresses the poetic aspect of *ḥaḍrah,* offers a profound examination of the ritual's ontological aspects (Frishkopf 2005, 91-95). First, it discusses how the saintly authors of poems sung in *ḥaḍrah* generally claim inspiration from various visible and invisible beings, including deceased saints. Second, during Sufi ceremonies, ritual singers add to the meaning of these poems by choosing which ones to sing and in which sequence, occasionally adding a few exclamations of their own. They further affect the meaning by the way they sing the words. Indeed, they are free to select the melody, repeat certain words, sing loudly or softly, and use other musical devices to convey meaning. Third, participants and spectators affect the meaning of the texts through exclamations and movements. The belief that both visible and invisible beings are present makes the experience all the more intense for everyone involved. Clearly, traditional Islamic ontology is the framework in which such an intense ritual can occur.

According to Frishkopf, the *ḥaḍrah* of the Burhaniya, compared to that of other Sufi orders in Egypt, is particularly striking. He wrote:

> Burhaniyya performances I attended were always intoxicating. The space was packed with rows and rows of members all chanting and moving in unison; the lights were turned off to enable deeper concentration, as a multicolored hadra lamp of esoteric significance was illuminated at the centre of the hadra. Beautiful pentatonic[37] melodies wafted forward and mixed with the deep and

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[37] Sudanese music uses a five-tone (pentatonic) scale, rather than seven-tone scale more commonly used in Egypt.

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guttural chants of inarticulate dhikr al-qalb[38], soon becoming purely expressive breath. Often, one member used a microphone to chant interstitially, raising the emotional level even further by creating a call-response dhikr texture. Yet despite its high emotion, the hadra was well-organized, the product of a carefully structured social movement, unlike the freer ecstatic hadras of many loosely organized traditional orders, or the free-wheeling hadras of saint festivals. Again it appears to be precisely this balance of traditional and reform features that enabled the tariqa to grow so rapidly.

This exotic, ecstatic, and esoteric flavor of the Burhaniyya hadra performance was further intensified by the presence of many Sudanese members at the Cairo hadra, with their beautiful dark skin, speaking a distinctive Arabic dialect, and garbed in flowing Sudanese dress. (Frishkopf 2001, 6)

Frishkopf went on to explain how the Sudanese presence in the Egyptian Burhaniya evoked the transnational character of the order. My own experience in Egypt concurs with his. However, I would add that within the same ceremony, singers frequently go back and forth between Sudanese and Egyptian melodies. This creates an original texture to the ceremony which is at once foreign and local. In fact, having visited the Burhanis in many countries and participated in their ceremonies, I have heard melodies from across the Arab world in the *ḥaḍrah*, although Sudanese melodies dominate. This cosmopolitanism is particularly striking in Europe and North America where local communities comprise of Burhanis of many origins.

Other communal rituals in which Burhanis participate include visiting saints and participating in yearly saint festivals. Since saints are considered to be alive and conscious even after their physical death, visiting their mausoleums to benefit from their spiritual presence is a common practice among Burhanis and other Sufis, as well as many other Muslims. Although this practice has been attacked by modern reformists of the pro-Western as well as Islamist type, such mausoleums remain crowded with visitors of many social classes to this day. In addition to visiting mausoleums, Burhanis often get together formally or informally with members of other Sufi orders. This frequently happens during the yearly saint

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[38] This refers to an invocation of Allah using the heart, since '*qalb*' means 'heart'.

festivals. These festivals are usually organized around mausoleums in the Islamic world. The April gathering of the Burhaniya takes place in Khartoum around the joint mausoleum of Sheikh Ibrâhîm and Sheikh Muḥammad ʿUthmân ʿAbduh al-Burhânî. However, in recent years, it has become common for Burhanis to choose a period to celebrate a given saint in their local *zâwiah*, including in Europe and North America. For instance, the New York Burhanis organize a yearly celebration of Imam al-Ḥusayn on Memorial Day weekend, the last weekend of May.

But beyond practices clearly identifiable as rituals, Burhanis consider virtuous conduct in general to be a form of worship, or spiritual practice. This includes demonstrating good manners and kindness to family members, neighbours, colleagues and members of society at large. Yet, it can involve much more. In his 2012 April speech (Tariqa Burhaniya 2012c), Sheikh Muḥammad encouraged his followers to develop a general conscience of civic and environmental issues. He encouraged volunteering for charitable work and contributing to society by helping the sick, the poor and the disenfranchised. Interestingly, a substantial part of his allocution was devoted to promoting the education of women.

4.4 Contemporary issues

Sufis like Sheikh Muḥammad offer a unique perspective on the modern world. Most contemporary Western scholars of Sufism have described it as a mystical current with numerous adepts throughout the Muslim world. Moreover, they have generally portrayed Sufis as tolerant, respectful, and open to others. For instance, Chittick (1994) presented Ibn al-'Arabi as a timeless master whose teachings should serve as an inspiration in contemporary debates about religious pluralism. Valerie Hoffman (1995) wrote that Sufism is "a nonviolent, apolitical alternative that is culturally authentic, promises profound moral change, and carries with it the proof of power through healing and changed lives "(p. 377). French scholar Éric Geoffroy asserted that Sufism was nothing less than "un antidote aux divers intégrismes" (Geoffroy 2003, 8).

Yet, these specialists who consider Sufism an important component of Islam, also observe that it is frequently marginalized in official representations of the religion by Westerners as well as Muslim elites. Such representations confuse orthodoxy and legalism. Most Muslim scholars throughout history have understood their faith to include both an esoteric (*bâṭin*) aspect, which is the domain of Sufism, and an exoteric (*ẓâhir*) aspect of which Islamic law is but one area of specialization. Orthodoxy has generally consisted of balancing both esoteric and exoteric aspects. William Chittick commented on this situation, writing:

> Sufi teachings are often looked upon as a departure from 'orthodox' Islam, but this view typically rests upon a misuse of the term *orthodox* and an ignorance of the exact contents of the teachings in question. More careful examination suggests that the specifically Sufi explanations of Islamic teachings are not made to subvert the dogma but to support it and open the way to faith for those individuals who find the unidimensional explanations offered by theologians and jurists intellectually and spiritually stultifying. (Chittick 1994, 97)

However, as discussed earlier (see above section 3.1), two trends dominate discourse in contemporary Muslim societies: rationalist Eurocentric fundamentalism, and its subordinate reactionary counterpart, ultra-legalist Islamic fundamentalism. Both sides of this colonial dialectic agree that Islam is primarily a set of rigid rules to be followed through fear of punishment. And both sides object to Sufism, which has preserved so much of its pre-colonial Islamic epistemology. Hoffman (Hoffman 1995, 18) noticed this negative perception of Sufism as being particularly prevalent among the elite in a Muslim-majority society like Egypt. Frishkopf observed it among Muslim minorities living in the West, such as the Muslim community in Edmonton Canada, where he lives. He wrote:

> Accordingly, in this era and an immigrant social context – to draw upon an established Islamic triality – it is "*islam*" (outward ritual performance) that prevails over "*iman*" (inner faith) and "*ihsan*" (the continual awareness of God), or (to draw upon a duality in the ladder of Sufi *maqamat* – spiritual stations) – it is "fear" that prevails over "hope". This attitude of social fear accentuates the external (*zahir*) – precisely the contrary of the Sufi emphasis upon the internal, the batin. Fear creates a vicious cycle whose logical endpoint is a retreat to literalism, the relative safety of certainty in canonical texts,

according to maximally conservative interpreters, denying the Islamic cultural heritage which is solidly rooted in oral tradition. (Frishkopf 2005, 54)

It should be no surprise from a decolonial standpoint to observe the most negative attitudes towards Sufism among Muslims most in contact with the West. Elites in Muslim-majority countries and Muslim minorities in the West are penetrated most deeply by modern Western colonial epistemology. Fascination with the West by pro-western Muslims, and anti-Western opposition by Islamic fundamentalists are reactions to the same problem: coloniality. Ostensibly opposed, they share the same anti-traditional reformist mindset.

Nevertheless, Sufis have adapted to the contemporary world fairly well despite their detractors. Although their ideas might be under attack, they tend to blend discreetly into all levels of the societies they inhabit. Whereas Eurocentric and Islamic fundamentalists have attempted to reform Muslim societies by breaking with centuries of tradition, Sufis have continued to adapt to new circumstances as they did before the modern period. Reform being a perpetual affair for most Sufis, it need not take the form of a violent break with the past. In fact, being solidly rooted in an ancient epistemology centered on the inner realities of the human, seems to predispose them to successfully adapt to changing exterior circumstances. Of course, we are dealing here with general trends, observable at a distance. At the micro level, much more fluctuation and variety can be observed. For instance, there are Sufi groups that have become decreasingly relevant in the modern world as they have become ossified in folkloric structures, often close to corrupt political regimes. Moreover, modern fundamentalists also draw inspiration from minority trends in pre-modern Islam, and cannot be said to be in total rupture with the past. But it seems clear to me that colonial modernity has had a major impact on Islamic epistemology, and that Sufis have fared relatively well in comparison to other Islamic currents in adapting to modernity without breaking with tradition. Ironically, the racist Western-centric stereotype that Islam is extremist and inherently hostile to non-Muslims is a self-fulfilling prophecy that harms Westerners as well as Muslims. This illustrates how coloniality ultimately damages the centre as well as the periphery. Europeans and their descendants across the world are limited by the colonial worldview. By

dehumanizing or sub-humanizing others on a global scale, racist Westerners dehumanize themselves first, and also harm all those in the West and elsewhere who are anti-racist. Fuelling extremist factions among Muslims, be they pro-Western or Islamic fundamentalist, eventually destabilizes Europe and North America. There are now many Muslims living throughout the Western world. When surrounded by a climate of fear and hostility, they are more prone to fearful and hostile interpretations of their faith. Like other Sufis, Burhanis propose a vision based on hope and love that has the potential to break this cycle of hostility.

This Burhani vision is manifest in the yearly speeches given in Khartoum by the sheikh of the Burhaniya in April. Although these allocutions contain a large amount of timeless themes related to proper conduct, religion, and spirituality, they are also a forum for the sheikh to discuss current events that affect Muslims. Indeed, the speeches are presented as addressing the entire Muslim nation; so, they do not simply concern the Burhaniya community, nor are they primarily intended for non-Muslims. Having closely read through the speeches from 2002 to 2012 for this research, I have identified a number of contemporary issues addressed by Sheikh Ibrâhîm (2002-2003), and by his successor Sheikh Muḥammad (2003-2012). There are numerous warnings concerning two major problems facing Muslims: religious extremism of Wahhabi influence, as well as Western expansionism and cultural invasion through colonial globalization (i.e. coloniality). Facing these two problems is made more difficult by a third problem mentioned in the speeches: growing poverty in Muslim societies. The speeches present a bottom up solution to the aforementioned societal challenges, starting with spiritual reform of the individual, as the basic unit of the community. By improving themselves, Muslims will be better able to face internal problems (e.g. extremism and poverty) and external ones (e.g. Western expansionism). The role of Sufism in this scenario is precisely to rebuild Muslim individuals ethically and spiritually, giving them the inner strength necessary to reform society.

For Sheikh Ibrâhîm and his successor, this reform based on the individual is no small matter. It is the requirement to revivify Islamic civilization. Indeed, the sheikhs consider the true foundations of a civilization to be ethical and not material. From their perspective, a

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community demonstrates that it is civilized through refined conduct more than technological prowess and material wealth. Consequently, the sheikhs have proposed time and time again in their speeches that governments of Muslim-majority countries should allow Sufi orders to take charge of educating the youth spiritually and ethically. States could then concentrate on basic academic education. As for Muslim relations with the West, the sheikhs promote intercultural dialogue based on love and compassion. Muslim minorities in the West should adapt to their societies and contribute positively as model citizens. Burhanis and other Sufis should play a special role in what could be an Islamic renaissance in the Arab-Muslim world, in the West, and elsewhere. They should be at the forefront of spreading a non-violent, compassionate, spiritual form of Islam in the age of globalization. Rather than retreat from society, they should engage modernity, countering its ills and building on its merits. Actually, Sheikh Ibrâhîm criticized extremists in 2002, saying they present Islam "as a backward religion with no room for science, technology and development; moreover they present Islam as a religion with no respect for human rights" (Tariqa Burhaniya 2012c).

4.5 Reaching beyond time and space to live well here and now

Sufi orders like the Burhaniya are simultaneously traditional and contemporary. They present themselves as entrusted with ancient teachings, transmitted for centuries by a long chain of saints. However, they also hold that direct experience of transcendental truths leads to an inspired life here and now. Actually, there is no contradiction. The very aim of these ancient teachings is to show people how to totally submit to God as the absolute Real (*Al-Ḥaqq*), thereby accepting to deal with relative reality manifested in time and space. To sum it up, submitting to the timeless with the help of an ancient science allows one to become enlightened in the present. Such spiritual realization includes knowledge of what is changeless and what is not.

In his 2011 April speech (Tariqa Burhaniya 2012c), Sheikh Muḥammad explained that while the articles of faith are unchanging, religious practices must adapt to time and place. In other words, the beliefs on which doctrines are elaborated are stable, but actions must change

according to context. The sheikh discussed how even mandatory acts of worship are performed differently in various times and places. Performance of the five mandatory daily prayers changes depending on circumstances: people who are travelling can shorten the prayers; certain adjustments can be made to make it easier for ill people to pray; and ablutions before prayers can be performed without water when there is none available. Fasting is not obligatory for people who are travelling or physically incapable of it. Moreover, since the Islamic fast is from dawn until sunset, its length differs from region to region across the globe. Adjustments need to be made, for example, in places where the sun does not set or does not rise at certain times of the year. How much people must give as charity, if anything at all, depends on their financial situation. Also, the Hajj pilgrimage is only mandatory for those who are physically and financially able to perform it. Basically, the sheikh argued that if mandatory acts of worship are performed differently in different situations, the supererogatory acts which are the expertise of Sufism, need to be all the more adaptable.

In the same 2011 speech, Sheikh Muḥammad added that prescriptions about how to deal with others are also subject to adaptation. He gave the example of slavery having disappeared, suggesting it seems that jurisprudence concerning this institution was obsolete. Then, he challenged the applicability in this era of the notion that jihad is obligatory for all Muslims. "Against whom?" he asked, and "under the flag of whom?" Another example he provided is the acceptability of lying, which is usually forbidden, when captured by an enemy. To give even greater weight to his general argument, the sheikh mentioned the case of Imam al-Shâfiʿî, the founder of one of the main schools of Sunni jurisprudence, who rewrote his body of legal opinions after moving from Iraq to Egypt, in order to adapt to his new context.

Nevertheless, adaptability is an extremely delicate issue. If we start from the understanding that religious doctrines and practices are rooted in divine revelation, as Muslims do, it is very tricky to know how to adapt to new circumstances without straying from what is acceptable in the eyes of God. One does not want to throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater. From the viewpoint of Sheikh Muḥammad and his predecessors, attempting to reform Islam using only one's rational mind represents an enormous danger. Warnings to this

effect are constant throughout the yearly speeches, as is the argument that proper adaption of religious practice to new circumstances requires divine inspiration.

From a Sufi perspective, preserving Islam in its tolerant, compassionate and spiritual form is the mission of saints. Sheikh Ibrâhîm spoke in 2002 of the "virtuous saints of Allah who have His permission to lead created beings, teach them their religion, and educate them" (Tariqa Burhaniya 2012c). Modern readers accustomed to egalitarian ideologies will probably feel uncomfortable with such traditional elitism. Of course, uncritical surrender to others makes one vulnerable to abuse of power. Since such abusive situations certainly exist in Sufi circles, maintaining critical reasoning skills is a protection against charlatans who would take advantage of others under the guise of religion. Sheikh Ibrâhîm would not disagree. Actually, in his 2002 speech he warned that "those, among Sufi Muslims, who have turned away from reciting their *awrâd* and are only engaged in developing virtues, are no longer receiving spiritual support. Although they carry the names of their forefathers, they lack their inheritance" (Tariqa Burhaniya 2012c). Accepting that certain individuals have developed supra-rational faculties does not require becoming irrational. Yet, such faculties fall completely outside the realm of the modern rationalist epistemology shared by most contemporary Muslim reformers, be they religious or not. Ironically, it seems that extreme rationalism can lead to irrational results. Indeed, among those who claim to be simply applying rational thinking to religious texts are many fundamentalist reformers promoting fanatic and authoritarian interpretations of their faith. This is not the case with most Sufi orders, despite their hierarchical aspects.

Perhaps a story can best illustrate how supra-rational inspired knowledge is understood to guide saints to make appropriate religious judgements. In his 2008 April speech, Sheikh Muḥammad related such a story about 'Abd-Allah Ibn 'Umar, the son of the third Muslim Caliph 'Umar:

> When a man came to him asking if a murderer could be forgiven, Ibn 'Umar answered no. Then, another man walked in and asked the same question. This time, Ibn 'Umar replied "how can one close a door opened by Allah?" The attending students were surprised because he gave opposite answers to the

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same question. He replied to them in his knowledgeable and enlightened way that "the first one *intended* to commit murder, but the second one had already *committed* a murder and was looking for forgiveness." Hence, anyone speaking in the name of religion must be very accurate in his judgment and base his advice upon comprehensive knowledge of the science of Qur'an and Sunna[39]. (2008 speech)

This story illustrates how supra-rational knowledge allows the saint to act not simply rationally, but wisely. Legitimate science, from a Sufi perspective, must include a supra-rational spiritual dimension. Progressing along the Sufi path under the guidance of a knowledgeable saint is a way for an individual to reach beyond time and space in order to become fully realized here and now. Only such an enlightened individual can be expected to know how to adapt to any situation and act appropriately—i.e. virtuously.

Conclusion

Since 1938, the Burhaniya has been led by sheikhs for whom virtuous conduct in Khartoum or Cairo will necessarily be different in some ways than in Berlin or Montreal, yet should be rooted in the same principles. These sheikhs promote continuity and stability when it comes to ontological, epistemic and doctrinal issues. Any ideology that attacks this essential core is seen as an existential threat to be repelled. That is why, from the time of Sheikh Muḥammad 'Uthmân (Al-Burhânî 1970, 227-239), the Burhaniya has fought Wahhabism and other similar trends of Sunni fundamentalism. Although rooted in certain marginal ultra-legalistic Islamic currents in pre-modern times, such as the school of Ibn Taymiyyah, these ideologies have been transformed by colonial modernity. Today, Islamic fundamentalism is embedded in the same rationalist epistemology as Eurocentric fundamentalism. Ostensibly opposed, these two forms of modern fundamentalism attack the ontology and epistemology in which traditional Islamic sciences like Sufism are rooted. At the same time, they fight one another. When officially commenting on the events of the last decade, the sheikhs have shown themselves to be acutely aware of these problems. Nevertheless, rather than attacking Westerners and extremists, they

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[39] Actions and words of the prophet, as well as, according to many, his family and companions.

have focused on challenging Western-centrism and extremism as ideologies. From a decolonial perspective, I would argue that they challenge Eurocentric fundamentalism and its subordinate variety, Islamic fundamentalism, at the deepest epistemic level. Of course, as a science and method for spiritual realization dating back at least thirteen centuries, the goal of Sufism is not to fight the modern colonial world-system. Yet, judging from the teachings of the Burhaniya sheikhs, it can certainly be a vector for liberating individuals and their societies from many ills, including coloniality.

By following the advice of their sheikhs to take a step away from the colonial dialectic of competing fundamentalisms, Burhanis follow a more peaceful path. They attempt to fit into their societies by respecting local customs and habits that do not contradict basic Islamic prescriptions, like the prohibition of consuming alcohol or pork. My experience with Burhanis in the Arab world and in the West concurs with the observations of other academics (Frishkopf 2001; Hoffman 1995; Lassen 2009a, 2009b): Burhanis have been successful overall in their attempt to fit into a variety of contexts without abandoning core Islamic and Sufi principles.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

Members of the contemporary Burhaniya draw upon fourteen centuries of intellectual, historical, metahistorical and symbolic heritage as they attempt to perpetuate what they consider a timeless science while remaining engaged in the affairs of the contemporary world. They understand Sufism as a universal dimension of Islam of which their own order is a distinct manifestation. For them, Sufism is the science that leads to spiritual realization through perpetual consciousness of the divine. Moreover, this realization is necessarily accompanied by virtuous conduct. This science, entrusted by the prophet Muḥammad to certain family members and companions, has been transmitted to this day through numerous chains of saints. Many of these saints claim to be the inheritors of both this science and the sacred blood of the prophet. The Burhaniya *silsilah* is one such chain, whose first links are the prophet's immediate descendants on the Arabian Peninsula, followed by a long list of North Africans. Burhanis believe that as their modern order has spread outside North Africa into other continents, so has this initiatory science.

Like most other Sufis across the Islamic world and throughout Islamic history, Burhanis consider it important to adapt their teachings and practices to constantly changing historical circumstances. Actually, they consider that in order to be preserved these essential doctrines need to be expressed in a variety of ways. Moreover, the current sheikh has explicitly stated that while articles of faith must remain timeless, worship and virtuous conduct must adapt to circumstances. This adaptability is exemplified by the extremely diverse life stories of the saints in the Burhaniya *silsilah*. From the epistemic perspective of Burhanis, their hagiographies, sayings and writings represent multiple manifestations of spiritual realization stemming from one source. To use an image, these saintly lives are like the multiple appearances of sunlight as it encounters different environments and surfaces: simultaneously one and plural. They are both a testimony to timeless spirituality and a commentary on different places and times.

As a modern expression of an ancient tradition, the Burhaniya interacts with history. It provides a unique vantage point on issues such as modernity, coloniality and globalization; pluralism and intercultural dialogue; as well as Eurocentric fundamentalism and its subordinate Islamist counterpart.

Since its foundation in 1938, when it was a small Sudanese community, the order has expanded into numerous countries, primarily in the Arab world and in the West. Guiding this expansion, the sheikhs have constantly restructured the organization to adapt to new circumstances. Today, Sheikh Muḥammad confronts a period of increasing globalization and cultural crossbreeding. Relations with the West are more important to address than ever before, as relations between Muslim-majority countries and Western countries continue to be tense, but also as Islam becomes solidly implanted as a minority religion in Western countries. In fact, the gradual blurring of conceptual and physical borders between the West and Islam seems to have hardened the positions of those extremists who want to perpetuate an endless conflict between the two sides of this reductionist binary. The sheikh proposes a way out of this dialectic, through spirituality and virtuous conduct, based on values of love and compassion. However, such problems cannot be wished away, and the sheikh remains highly critical of trends that threaten the very ontological and epistemic core of his tradition. Eurocentric and Islamist fundamentalisms represent such a threat.

Sufism would no longer be an operational force in today's world if Sufis ceased to preserve their doctrines and, perhaps more importantly, the ontology and epistemology in which these teachings are rooted. There would no longer be anything left to adapt. Historically, most Sufis seemed to have understood that their challenge is to wisely adapt to different circumstances, without abandoning core principles. When they have met this challenge successfully, Sufis have helped take Islam into vast territories such as sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and Southeastern Europe. Today, the Burhaniya is striking that balance. As the order expands across the Arab lands and beyond, particularly Europe and North America, it is adapting to local customs and ways of thinking while perpetuating a fairly traditional Shâdhulî heritage in the modern world.

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