Vol. XVII

Tayfun Atay

A Muslim Mystic Community in Britain

Meaning in the West and for the West

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To Mesude and Meltem Can

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Foreword (by Nancy Lindisfarne)

This is an important book. It is a scrupulous ethnography of a London-based community of Naqshbandi Sufis in the early 1990s. Beyond its enduring archival value, it offers a unique perspective. It allows us to consider how and why the place of Islam, in Turkey and elsewhere, changed so radically in just two decades.

The book offers us an intimate account one Naqshbandi community just as the precepts and practices of the order have come to the fore on a national stage. In 1990, secularism in Turkey seemed as secure and uncompromising as it ever had been throughout the previous sixty years history of the Turkish Republic. Four years later, Recep Tayyip Erdogan was elected Mayor of İstanbul. In 2003 he became Prime Minister of Turkey. It is widely known that Erdoğan, and some of his closest political allies, have had a long association with the Naqshbandi order. There can be no doubt that such ties have been of the greatest importance in present day politics in Turkey. Erdoğan's Islamist government has challenged both the state-led capitalism and the military oligarchy which dominated most of republican history. And in 2011 Turkey emerged as a preeminent Middle East power through its response to the Arab Spring and the Israel-Palestine conflict.

The Naqshbandi order comprises distinct communities following different sheikhs. The disciples of the London Naqshbandi community are of both Turkish and non-Turkish origin. The community's cosmopolitanism compliments the long-history and trans-national character of the order itself. Certainly these global connections are of great interest. However, it makes better sociological sense to study a social movement by 'starting from below'. Tayfun Atay's account does just that. He offers us the opportunity to learn about the disciples' religious beliefs and practices and understand how their religious commitment and aspirations fit with other aspects of their everyday lives. But we do also meet Sheikh Nazım of Cyprus, the leader of the London community, first through the eyes of his followers, and in conversations with the sheikh himself. The sheikh is a

man of deep scholarship who travels widely to stay in close contact with his disciples and further their religious education.

Through Atay's fine-grained ethnography we learn much about both contemporary Sufism and our present world. Indeed, a good ethnography is like an album of photographs, snapshots which are rich with insight into the zeitgeist of a particular time and place. And like a photograph album, an ethnography tells us not only what mattered then, but also, inadvertently, about things whose import only becomes clear later on. And in this play on time, we find clues into processes of social change.

Serious ethnographic study is never easy because of the demands of the method of participant-observation per se. The fieldworker is asked first to unsettle his own deeply held convictions and then to learn from the new, often surprising and sometimes very shocking ideas which creep into his head to fill the gaps. Raymond Firth, the eminent British anthropologist, once called anthropology 'the uncomfortable science'. To which we might add: if it's not uncomfortable, you are probably not doing it right. Tayfun Atay's fieldwork caused him acute discomfort for three quite different reasons: first, the precarious history of Sufism in Turkey; second, his own family background; and third, the sweeping political changes which were taking place at the end of the 20th century.

In 1925, the new Turkish state declared all forms of Sufism illegal. They had cause. Sufism had been implicated in the recently suppressed Kurdish Sheikh Said rebellion. The Sufi establishment was seen as a threat to state authority and to Turkey's new, emphatic secular modernism. For more than sixty years, the state scorned Sufism as backward and as pure superstition. It criminalized adepts, disrupted meetings and destroyed the property of Sufi orders. The hostility was part of a systematic process whereby Islam in Turkey was 'modernized' and thereby utterly transformed.

In Eğirdir, the small Anatolian town where Richard Tapper and I did ethnographic fieldwork in the late 1970s and early 1980s, older people described how Muslim sensibilities had altered and atrophied over the years. As they explained, religious observance for many townspeople had become individualized and channelled into acts of private worship. For many townspeople, the Muslim past had become largely irrelevant; few

remembered much about the local Sufis or local shrines. Civil servants, teachers and other prominent townspeople were keen secularists and actively hostile to most forms of religious observance. And it was the same with most of our social scientist colleagues; they were often bemused, and sometimes even repelled, by our interest in Islam.

Over time however, we learned that there were people in the town who lived active religious lives, though they did so with circumspection and no little fear. One such group included some thirty or so elderly woman who met weekly for Friday prayers. Their prayer leader was local woman who was well-liked, knowledgeable and a committed Naqshbandi Sufi. The congregation of elderly women had kin and neighbourhood ties with almost everyone in town, but others were unconcerned with what they got up to. 'It's unlikely that such old women will be bothered nowadays', people said, from which we understood that decades earlier, in the face of state repression, these now elderly women had become the custodians of the Sufi traditions of the town.

Growing up in a family of republican secularists, Tayfun Atay was a party to the same dismissive attitudes that the elderly women of Eğirdir met. Only later Atay wrote, 'The most problematic implication of this 'antitheist' discourse is the restraint it produces on what can be asked about religion' (Atay 2008: 50). In an admirable, and painfully honest, account, he describes how he worked to unlearn the ingrained hostility to religion which was part of his upbringing and education. Acquiring a religious education was also hard work, but with it came new understandings about religious observance which are the great virtue of his study. But in turn his new religious sensibilities brought with them new dilemmas and contradictions. Almost immediately he encountered derision from secularists for his own interest in religion. At other times such prejudice turned ugly: his London fieldwork coincided with the new styles of Islamism – and racism and Islamophobia – that were then taking shape.

Certainly, by the early 1990s, many people were engaged in new forms of devotional practice. There were also many new religious organizations. They were attractive to ordinary people because they offered much needed social as well as spiritual support. And it was a time when new religious

ideologies would work profound changes in the world. This sharp turn toward religion is not easy to understand. It seems to have happened very quickly, yet in puzzlingly complex, embedded social forms. In this respect, Atay's ethnography offers invaluable comparative material.

The turn to religion took place rapidly and had clear connections with other seemingly rapid changes in global economics and politics. From the end of World War Two through the optimism of the 1960s, secular liberation movements and the world economy grew apace. During this period, socialist ideologies, and others focused on development and modernization, dominated many peoples' hopes and expectations for their lives. Then in the 1970s, quite unexpectedly, the balance of forces in world politics changed.

First there was the acute economic crisis of the early 1970s. To counter the threat of world depression, leaders in Europe and America turned to the new economics of neo-liberal capitalism. This attempted to restore the profitability of the economic system, but it also greatly increased social inequality around the globe. For ordinary people, the problem became how to express their opposition to the new, ruthless and unrelenting economic pressure. Western leaders were implacably hostile to left-leaning political opposition which they saw as part of the Cold War. As secular resistance movements were being broken, in Turkey and elsewhere, a new space opened for populist opposition cast in religious terms.

Second, there were the events of 1979. The Islamic Revolution in Iran disposed the dictator and American client and nationalized oil reserves, while young women in black veils were the most visible actors in the American embassy siege in Tehran. American power was significantly challenged in the name of Islam. But confusingly, also in 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in support of Afghan communists, and in the logic of the Cold War politics of the time, the United States supported the Afghan mujahidin, a coalition dominated by Islamist parties.

The consequences of these momentous events now shape our world. Old forms of organization, like the Sufi brotherhoods, have taken on a new life, the Muslim Brotherhood has re-emerged as a significant force and we have seen the appearance of many new political parties of the religious centre

and right. Meanwhile, the Islamist revival has been mirrored in the rise of Christian and Hindu fundamentalisms elsewhere. A few of those who have turned to religion are hate-filled and deadly. Most, however, are ordinary people who are ecumenical and moderate in their thinking. They are people seeking solace, social justice and economic security through their beliefs and practice. And for them, the turn to religion is a form of resistance and a way to express their opposition to the present status quo.

The scale of changes since the 1990s is enormous. Though the changes colour completely our understanding of our world, they are difficult to comprehend. Our best hope, perhaps, is to learn the hard way, through vicarious participant-observation. This ethnography which touches on so many of the salient questions of our time is a good place to start. Its great strength is that it introduces us to decent men and women who have chosen to make religious commitment a central part of their everyday lives. Seeing the world through their eyes brings with it an intimacy of understanding from which sympathy, and perhaps empathy, can flow.

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September 2011

Preface

This book examines the practices, teachings and organization of an Islamic mystic community based in London, a branch of the Naqshbandi Sufi order. It analyses Naqsbandi perspectives on modernity, millenarian themes in the Naqsbandi worldview, and the Order's political perspectives on modern Turkey and other contemporary Muslim countries such as Iran and Saudi Arabia. It pays attention to the Naqshbandi critique of non-Sufi, orthodox Islam, and the tensions and cleavages within the community itself. Of particular interest are the chapters which deal with the ethical, political and cultural aspects of the group: the investigation of the ethico-religious notion of *nefs* (lower self) in the discourse of the Order; the profound hostility to many aspects of what is identified as 'western' and 'modern', to the secularism, particularly, of the Turkish state, and to Wahhabism, a term used in the Order to cover an extremely wide range of those who see themselves as Muslims but are seen as opponents of the 'true' Islam by the Naqhbandis, often in terms of virulent condemnation and exclusion. The awareness of the problems of my relations as a researcher/anthropologist to the leader and members of the community is self-reflexively contextualized in a chapter.

The book derives from my doctoral thesis submitted to the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) of the University of London. The PhD study was based on the anthropological fieldwork that I conducted between August 1991 and August 1992. I used participant observation to collect the information that consists of serial diary notebooks, extensive tape and video recordings, photographs and numerous written and printed materials which are related to the communal activities of the Naqshbandis.

Nearly two decades have passed since the information and data were collected for the study the end product of which is this book in hand. No doubt, many things have changed from that time to present. Some members who had been informants or 'cultural consultants' to me in the time of the research passed away. The leader of the community, Sheikh Nazım Kıbrısi, who was in his early seventies in those days, is now ninety and not taking

part in the activities in London any more, maintaining instead a secluded life in his home/lodge in the Lafka province of Cyprus. There are now new personages who, with the Sheikh's permission, are leading the community in many parts of the Western world, including Britain. So, the integrity of this community has significantly changed from the time I conducted fieldwork, today. In this sense, the book appears as much a historical as an ethnographic record and offers an account of a 'life-world' that has, to a certain extent, disappeared.

Having said that, I believe this twenty-year-delay in publication does not diminish the relevance of the book, as there have apparently been continuities as well as changes in the makeup of this community of mystics during this period of time. Any anthropological and sociological attempt to look at the contemporary situation of the Naqshbandi circles affiliated with Sheikh Nazım in the West can benefit from the present volume in connection with the issues of historical comparison and cultural change. Above all, the book carries a certain value in terms of being a record of a unique way of life lived in a particular time and space, without which our knowledge and experience of human cultural diversity would have been poorer.

Note on Transliteration

Since the leader of the community on which I conducted my fieldwork and many of its members are Turkish, I have opted for the modern Turkish spelling of words which have Arabic and Persian origins. Thus, *evliya*, instead of *awliya; zikr*, instead of *dhikr; bereket*, instead of *baraka*. All these words are italicized in the text, the overused term of *zikr* excepted. Words that can be found in the Oxford Shorter English Dictionary, such as sheikh, Sharia, ulema, Sunna, Mahdi and Koran, appear in these forms and have not been italicized. Exceptions include the names of the Sufi orders, particularly the overused 'Naqshbandiya', and Islamic movements, such as Wahhabism or Jama'at al-Islami: These are not given in Turkish transliteration, nor are they italicized, for there is by and large a convention on these forms of spelling in the relevant literature. The names of persons present or historical, which are particularly connected with Turkish/Ottoman environment, are given in Turkish transliteration (ex. Ziyaeddin Gümüşhanevi); others are transliterated in the International Journal of the Middle East Studies convention (ex. Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani).

Some Turkish letters unusual to English speakers are pronounced as follows:

İ: Capital i in Turkish is with a dot.

c: 'j' as in jacket.

Çç: 'ch' as in church.

ı: This undotted i is a peculiar Turkish vowel and pronounced as 'e' in other.

Öö: as in German.

Şş: 'sh' as in shop.

Üü: as in German.

Introduction

The character of Islam in the modern world has been a matter of continuing debate. Following the Iranian revolution of 1979, the self-assertion of Muslims has been variously labelled by non-Muslims as 'Islamic fundamentalism', 'Islamic revivalism' or 'Islamic resurgence'. Yet the constant use of these notions creates stereotypical and essentialist images of Islam in the minds of many people, and the multiplicity of Islamic expression is consequently ignored.[1]

To overcome generalised depictions of Islam as a single and monolithic entity requires a focus on the variety of Islamic discursive traditions (Asad 1986: 14), and the distinctive ways in which these deal with the contemporary world and its dominant principles and institutions.

Central to the discussion of Islam in the contemporary world is the argument that Islam stands as a force of 'traditionalism' against modernity. Analyses of Islamic social realities in terms of a dichotomy between 'tradition' and 'modernity' and placing Islam in the domain of the former, have been quite common and characterise many scholarly studies conducted by both Muslim/Islamicist and Western/Orientalist scholars (see particularly Nasr 1987 and Watt 1989). The difficulty of defining what is 'tradition' and what is 'modern' aside, both terms are often treated as generic, 'tradition' referring to the continuation of the past experience in the present, and, 'modern' referring to a new sort of experience which breaks with the past.[2]

From this point of departure, it is argued that Islam as a particular, 'traditional', worldview and way of life is inconsistent with the dominant modes of life and thought in the world today. Briefly, Islam is defined in opposition to the 'modern world': at worst, it is a challenge or threat to the foundational claims of modernity; at best, it is a civilization, indeed the only one, which has been able to survive in the face of the disruptiveness of modern civilization and, therefore, the only viable alternative to the hegemonic discourse of modernity which offers hope of bringing humanity peace and security in the world (for modernity and related issues, see

Chapter 6). Irrespective of their orientations and conclusions, all these arguments suggest that the encounter of Islam with the modern world is a problematic process.

One way of situating Islam among dominant contemporary ideological currents, is to focus on Islamic groups and communities living in Europe or America. Various Islamic movements and organisations which appeal to Muslim immigrants in Western countries have recently become more active in these countries and begun to make a direct impact on Western social and political processes.

Another significant aspect of the appearance of Islam in the West is the increasing number of Western people who convert to Islam. Having become a 'Third-worldist' ideology of opposition to Western domination and hegemony in the Islamic world, Islam in Western countries is seen by some Westerners as a remedy for the social ills of the modern, or better to say 'postmodern', world. Thus today in the West, one can see Western/European people as well as immigrants from many different ethnic, national and cultural backgrounds, all of whom come together as Muslims within the circle of an Islamic organisation or community. Such a setting is an appropriate arena for exploring questions of the kind Rippin raises: 'what it means to be Muslim in the modern world' and 'how are the values and demands of Islam enacted within the modern context' (1993:3).

This study is an investigation of the discourse and practice of one Muslim community operating in the West, namely, the mystical (Sufi) Naqshbandi community of Sheikh Nazım in London. Sheikh Nazım is a man of Turkish-Cypriot origin (born in 1922) who visits Britain every year to meet his followers living in this country (see Chapter 2). The study mainly focuses on the members' definitions of and reflections upon themselves and the world outside their close-knit community. Sufism, as a major strand of Islamic tradition, emphases spirituality and is primarily concerned with the spiritual and moral improvement of individual Muslims. It is generally held that it was through the activities of the Sufi circles that Islam spread to areas outside the central Islamic lands (see Chapter 1). Sufism now seems to play a similar role in the spread of Islam in the West, especially in the conversion of Westerners to Islam. As described in the following pages,

among the members of Sheikh Nazım's Naqshbandi community in London and elsewhere in Britain, there are significant numbers of Westerners (most of them British) who form a substantial part of this distinctively heterogeneous community.

In particular, this study aims to answer the following set of questions: How and in what ways do the members of this community constitute their Islamic identity and distinguish themselves from other Islamic groups? That is, what are the distinctive aspects of their religious worldview and practice? In what ways and to what extent is the Naqshbandi community constructed through its accommodation to the Western setting? In what ways does the Naqshbandi discourse challenge the worldview and dominant values of the modern world? What are the inner dimensions of conflict and competition within the community and how do they reveal themselves in the communal practice? How are competing interpretations of Islam experienced by community members?

The first two chapters of the book provide background information on the Naqshbandi order. In the first chapter, I sketch the emergence and development of Sufi mysticism in Islam and the crystallization of its institutionalized forms in the Sufi orders, and go on to outline the history and main characteristics of the Naqshbandi Sufi order of which Sheikh Nazım's association is a part. In this chapter, I also elaborate the key terms and concepts which are used in Sufi circles and constitute part of the distinctive discourse of the Sufi tradition in Islam. A brief review of the anthropological literature on Sufism is also included in this introductory chapter. The second chapter introduces the community which is the main focus of this study. First, I give a biography of the leader, Sheikh Nazım, including his followers' views of him and a character sketch. Then I describe in detail the distinctive features of the community in London, focusing particularly on the major sub-groups and providing biographies of some individual members, as well as describing the settings in which the members of the community come together to perform their ritual activities.

Chapter 3 is an extended account of my fieldwork experience. On the one hand, I highlight the methodological procedures I followed in the fieldwork and, on the other, I attempt what has been called a 'narrative ethnography'

(Tedlock 1991). For nearly three decades, there has been a methodological reorientation in social anthropology: rather than being merely representations of 'other' cultures, the focus of anthropological inquiry has shifted to include a reflection upon the 'self", i.e., the anthropologist's position in the field. This new anthropology calls into question the making of ethnographic texts; that is, the writing of the results of fieldwork observations (see Clifford and Marcus 1986). Also questioned is the authority of the ethnographic work itself which, notwithstanding the banner of objectivity, is indeed the personal and partial product of the researcher who may have a dominant, powerful and subversive position *vis-à-vis* the people s/he studies (*ibid.*) What is suggested is that, rather than pouring her/his seemingly 'disinterested' observations into the text s/he writes, the researcher should take into consideration her/his own experience in the field and construct the text on the basis of her/his reflection upon these experiences as a product of interactions with people in the field (Crick 1982; Tedlock 1991).[3]

Given that my position as a researcher in the field affected and was affected by the ethnographic endeavor, I agree that anthropological self-reflexivity is crucial to good ethnography. In the third chapter, I attempt to accommodate this central concern of the 'new wave' in anthropology; describing the circumstances and conditions under which I conducted the fieldwork, and the constraints, pressures and worries which inevitably affected the ways in which I collected information and constructed the knowledge presented here. In this personal narrative, I seek to actualize what Tedlock calls 'the observation of participation' (1991).

Chapter 4 is a detailed account of the Naqshbandi ritual ceremony, the zikr. Zikr ceremonies are the main occasions for social interaction in the community. The chapter provides an extended description of the performance of the ritual and the participants' reflections on it. It also examines how the performance of the ritual in this particular Naqshbandi community shows distinctive characteristics and deviates from what have been understood as the conventional ways of performing the zikr in the Naqshbandi tradition.

Chapters 5 to 9 constitute the main body of the book. These five chapters are closely linked thematically, insofar as they all reveal important aspects of Naqshbandi discourse in a Western setting. Chapter 5 deals with the key notion of *nefs* (loosely, lower self) which is widely used to interpret behavior within a moral framework. The notion is particularly used to explain the sources of evil feelings and conduct in a person, and how evil can be avoided. Chapter 5 draws attention to the ways in which the concept of *nefs* is also manipulated to justify one's own position *vis-à-vis* others.

In chapter 6, the Naqshbandi approach to what they call 'the modern world' is described in detail. The Naqshbandis disapprove of 'modernity' or 'the Western way of life' and dichotomize the world into two opposing camps: the world of Islam and the world of unbelief (*küfr*) which denotes what is modern, Western, European or Christian. The chapter also compares the Naqshbandi perspective on modernity with those of other Islamic circles and tries to locate the Naqshbandi refusal to subscribe to the values and mentality of the modern world among other Islamist rejections of modernity.

Chapter 7 focuses on another important aspect of Naqshbandi discourse related to eschatology. The Naqshbandis wait for a redeemer, the Mahdi, who, they believe, will deliver them from what they see as the impasses of the modern world. The chapter reveals aspects of Naqshbandi millenarianism centered on the expectation of the coming of the Mahdi and the implications of this notion in social practice.

Chapter 8 is concerned with the political ideas of the Sheikh and his followers. Although the community does not see itself as actively political, current political developments in the world are taken up and elaborated by the Sheikh in rather distinctive ways which deserve particular attention. The major part of the chapter examines the Sheikh's criticism of the secular Turkish regime and his alternative, Islamic political agenda for Turkey and Cyprus. The chapter also considers the Sheikh's assessment of the predicament of Muslims and the contemporary political situation in the Islamic world, including his approach to so-called Islamic fundamentalist trends.

The rivalry and opposition between different Islamic groups or movements has been a neglected dimension in studies of Islam. Yet such rivalries often transcend the united opposition of different Islamic groups to forces outside the domain of Islam. Chapter 9 describes the well-established antagonism in the Naqshbandi discourse against the Islamic stance of Wahhabism. The chapter draws attention to the fact that the construction and maintenance of a particular Islamic tradition is in part related to the denunciation of 'an Islamic other'.

The last chapter of the book moves from the issue of intra-Islamic rivalries to the rivalries within the Naqshbandi community. Although the members of the community seek to give an impression that they are in harmony with each other, there are degrees of conflict and competition between both individual members and sub-groups of Sheikh Nazım's Naqshbandi community in London. On the basis of case studies, the chapter shows how ethno-national differences, the dichotomy between the Islamic scholar (*âlim*) and the mystic (Sufi), and socio-economic position and status based on education and profession, all relate to degrees of discord and contestation between the members of the Order. Chapter 10 also describes how Islamic knowledge is essential to claims of power, authority and influence over the others within the community.[4]

One shortcoming of the study is its 'deliberate' neglect of the representation of women. The thesis is biased towards the world of men and does not cover aspects of gender relations in this particular Sufimystic community, though it is potentially one of the most provocative dimensions of studies on Islam in the contemporary world. My neglect of questions of gender has a practical explanation. I spent most of my time in the field among male members of the community or in gatherings organized primarily for men, though women were not always absent. Compared with many other Islamic communities or associations, Sheikh Nazım's Naqshbandi community is much more open and tolerant with respect to gender separation, and women engage in a range of religious dialogues and activities. Yet it was not as easy for me to enter the domain of women as that of men. This does not mean that I had no access to female members of the community nor opportunity for communication with them. I was able indeed to talk to some

prominent women; I visited their homes and had fruitful conversations with them, and I have included in the book some of the insights which emerged from these encounters. However, there are also separate and exclusive gatherings of women and I was not able to attend any of them, except on those very rare occasions when the Sheikh himself took me to the gatherings of women in which he led a zikr ceremony. I believe that without an intensive study of these women's gatherings, an account of gender relations in the community must remain incomplete. For this reason, I did not deal with gender relations as such.

A final word, before starting a journey to the world of the Naqshbandis in a Western setting: I must clarify what I mean by two terms which would constantly appear throughout the text: 'community' and 'discourse'. I refer to the followers of Sheikh Nazım in London as the 'Naqshbandi community' in the same rather loose sense as the usages of 'BIack community', 'Jewish community', 'Indo-Pakistani community' or 'Gay community'; that is, a set of people living within the wider societal framework who feel, in one way or another, a sense of primordial belonging to each other and a degree of distance from others in the wider society.

I use the term discourse to refer to a particular way of thinking and talking about 'life-world' or, following Mardin, 'a language for life, a set of structured concepts for grasping and manipulating the phenomenal world' (1991: 138). In this sense, I consider the discourse of the Naqshbandi community of Sheikh Nazım as one particular version of what Talal Asad calls 'Islamic discursive tradition'. Concerning Islam, Asad argues that it is the form of discourse that makes a particular practice 'Islamic': 'A practice is Islamic because it is authorised by the discursive traditions of Islam, and is so taught to Muslims – whether by an *âlim*, a *khatib*, a Sufi shaykh, or an untutored parent' (Asad 1986: 15). Asad suggests that the fund which nurtures every distinctive Islamic discourse is the founding texts of this religion, namely, the Koran and the Hadith literature (the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad).

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[1]   This stereotypical image of Islam is inherently negative. As Eickelman points out: 'Islam is associated [in the West] with fanatical opposition, aimless revolution, anti-Westernism and anti-

modernism, so that the widespread evidence of interpretations of Islam … is downplayed or ignored' (Eickelman 1987: 15).

[2] Needless to say, these two terms are highly variable in content. As far as Islam is concerned, Gilsenan draws attention to how the struggle over the meaning of tradition is a crucial element in what is called Islamic fundamentalism (1982: 15). For Asad, Islam is a tradition as such, which he defines, rather broadly, as follows: 'A tradition consists essentially of discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice that, precisely because it is established, has a history. These discourses relate conceptually to a past (when the practice was instituted, and from which the knowledge of its point and proper performance has been transmitted) and a future (how the point of that practice can best be secured in the short or long term, or why it should be modified or abandoned), through a present (how it is linked to other practices, institutions, and social conditions)' (1986: 14).

[3] For an entertaining example of ethnography of this kind, see Barley (1986). An important early contribution to this innovation in anthropological writing comes from my area of specialisation, i.e., anthropological studies of Muslim societies: Rabinow(1977).

[4] My endeavour to conduct research on Sheikh Nazım is not the first one in the field of social anthropology. Another Naqshbandi community of his followers was researched in another setting, and the results were presented in a PhD thesis submitted at the LSE (Habibis 1985). In this study, Daphne Habibis attempts a comparison between Sheikh Nazım's Naqshbandi circle in Tripoli, Lebanon, on which she conducted six-month's research in 1980–1981, and the community of another Naqshbandi Sheikh active in London, who was a British convert to Islam: Sheikh Abdullah Sirr-Dan al-Jamal. Habibis herself is also a convert to Islam and a member of the second Naqshbandi community she described, namely Muridu–l Haqq; further, she is married to its leader, Sheikh Abdullah. Thus, being an insider anthropologist (see chp. 3), Habibis seems not to have had any serious difficulty in getting access to the worlds of these two Naqshbandi communities; or, if she had any, we do not know this, for she is silent in regard to her own story in the field. In the present study, I do not provide a comparison of my findings about Sheikh Nazım's community in London with that of Daphne Habibis's in Tripoli. Such an attempt would endanger the proper presentation of my ethnographic material, many parts of which are not covered by Habibis, while I have dealt cursorily with the practical aspects of communal life with which Habibis is mainly concerned. The only meeting point between Habibis's study and mine is the theme of millenarianism, which both of us have paid particular attention to and discussed broadly.

1. Historical and Conceptual Framework: Sufism, Sufi Orders and the Naqshbandiya

Mysticism in Islam: Sufism

Sufism (*tasavvuf*) can be briefly defined as 'Muslim mysticism' and refers to the quest, in the Islamic context, for personal-spiritual contact with the Divine Reality (Allah). As an alternative Islamic tradition to the formalism of orthodoxy, which asserted itself as a legal and moral system, Sufism was, from its early beginnings as a distinct Islamic tradition in the 8th century, concerned with the spiritual development and asceticism.[5] In the search for God in their hearts, the Sufi mystics renounced the world and withdrew themselves from worldly affairs. Instead, they moved towards spiritual activity and experience, aiming at 'self-abandonment into God' (the Sufi notion of *tevekkül*) (Trimingham, 1971: 312; Schimmel, 1976: 17; Rahman, 1979: 130).

The word Sufi is most probably derived from the Arabic word, *suf*, which means 'wool' and refers to a person who wears woolen garments. The word tasvvuf (Sufism) stems from *suf* and means 'wearing wool'. In early Islamic times, wearing woolen clothes was a sign of asceticism and 'abstinence from worldly wealth and enjoyment' (*zühd*) (Kara, 1990: 27). Indeed, there was an association of woolen dress with spirituality which dated to the pre-Islamic times (Lings, 1977: 46).

Although the meaning of 'sufi' as wearing wool is etymologically the most acceptable one, nevertheless, there were other suggestions about the origin of the word. Among them were the Arabic root *sfw* ('pure') which Sufis mention quite frequently since it was related to the purity that they assert in their Islamic religiosity. When he was asked, once, what was the origin of the word 'sufi' Sheikh Nazım, after mentioning the debate on the issue, answered that the most probable source was the word *sfw* (Turkish. *saf*), since it referred to the very characteristic of Islam on which the Sufis have always laid particular emphasis, that is, 'cleanliness'.

The effect of other mystical traditions on the formation of Sufism has been a focus of constant debate. The question in this respect is whether Sufism is essentially an indigenous movement arising from within Islam, or the manifestation in the Islamic frame of an independent and universal mode of human experience, namely, mysticism. For the actual practitioners of the tradition such as Sheikh Nazım and his mürids, the authenticity of Sufism as the essential part of Islam is beyond question (see 'Self Identification' in [ch. 2](#)). However, I am more persuaded by the mainstream view which is adopted by many scholars both Muslim and non-Muslim. That is, although it is undeniable that Sufism emerged within a milieu of a blend of several religio-mystic traditions, such as Neoplatonism, Buddhism, Gnosticism, Zoroastrianism, and was affected by them, 'it was really an inner phenomenon which took its roots from the mystery of the Koran' (Trimingham, 1971: 2).

The emergence of Sufism in Islam is related to two interconnected factors (see Trimingham 1971: 2; Schimmel 1976: 176; Rahman 1979: 131). First was the resentment of some Muslims towards the luxurious life and worldliness of the ruling Umayyad dynasty of the time (between 661 and 750) in Damascus (see also Gölpınarlı 1985: 26). Secondly, there was a reaction against the legalistic and normative Islam represented by the body of Islamic scholars, the ulema, who allied themselves with the Umayyad court. The main concern of the ulema was to regulate people's conduct as proper members of the Muslim community. As against the 'communal' stress in this legalist trend of Islam, Sufi Islam focused primarily on the private aspects of religious life among which was spiritual experience, a dimension lacking in the legal concerns of the ulema. The esoteric knowledge (*marifet* - gnosis) of 'spiritual' access to God's divine essence, which was possessed and taught by the early Sufi masters, became an alternative to the formal knowledge of Islam (the Sharia) articulated by the Islamic scholars who were concerned, more than anything else, with regulating the Muslims' behaviour towards God and the community of believers (*ümmet*). In a way, Sufism produced a different body of religious specialists who, in practice, gave the impression of being as close to God as the Prophet had been, without denying, however, the latter's supreme

position. Thus, as Gilsenan states, 'if the gate of Prophecy was shut, the path of sainthood was open' (1973: 11; see also Brinner 1987: 37).

No sooner had the Sufi tradition developed in Islam than a confrontation began between the Sufi ascetics and the Islamic scholars, the ulema. The established body of the Islamic scholars did not welcome Sufism. The idea of reaching knowledge of God through mystical-spiritual experience, which the Sufi circles called *marifet*, was unpalatable for the ulema who contended that 'knowledge of God came through the study of the Koran, the *Hadith*, the sharia and theology, with the aid of the weighty tools of Islamic scholarship which they had developed' (Robinson, 1988: 31). The ulema saw in the position and activities of the Sufi mystics a threat to their authority over the Muslim masses, which had been exclusive until the emergence of the Sufi tradition. Besides, the potential in Sufism for charismatic leadership was not missed by the rulers of the Islamic community and came to be a reason for political suspicion of Sufi masters (Eickelman, 1989: 201).

Although the ulema's discouragement and denunciation of the activities of the Sufis had started towards the late 9th century, it certainly gained momentum following the extreme Sufi notions such as that of Hallaj al-Mansur who was executed by the ulema of his day for saying *En el-Hak*, meaning, 'I am God' (Arberry, 1990: 59–60; Kara, 1990: 23). What Hallaj meant was in fact, as Arberry (1990: 59–60) points out, not a personal claim for his own divinity, but his supreme mystical experience of 'reunion' in God. It was the manifestation of the feeling of 'passing away from self (*fena*) into the consciousness of survival in God (*beka*)' (*ibid*., 14).[6]

However, towards the end of the eleventh century, the attempt to find reconciliation between the legalistic/normative Islam of the ulema and the mystical Islam of the Sufis was brought to a workable conclusion, particularly with the great effort of the celebrated figure of mediaeval Islam, Imam al-Ghazzali (d.1111) who was both an *alim* and a Sufi.[7] Through the intellectual formulation by Ghazzali, Sufism gained a position complementary, rather than contradictory, to the Islam of the ulema. From then on, the difference between these two strands of Muslim devotion came

to be conceived rather as a matter of emphasis on different components of the Islamic faith. As Hodgson elegantly puts it:

> …the usual justification of Sufism with regard to the Shari'ah did … depend on … a frank division of labour … The Sufis dealt with the inward side (*batin*) of the same faith and truth of which the Shar'i ulema scholars were concerned with the outward side (*zahir*) … The Ulama looked to the prophethood (*nubuwwah*) of Muhammad because they were concerned with outward law; the Sufis looked to the sainthood (*wilayah*) of Muhammad because they were concerned with inward grace. The ulema taught Islam, submission of humans to God's majesty (*jalal*), which is perfected in *tawhid*, the profession of God's unity; for the Sufis this was essential but only a first step; they taught the way to *ishq*, love of God's beauty (*jamal*), which is perfected in *wahdah*, the experience of God's unity (or even of unity in Him) (Hodgson 1974: 219).

Thus, from then on, an intense interaction began between the representatives of the two trends of Islamic religiosity, namely the ulema and the Sufis. At best, the ulema recognized the authority of the Sufi masters on the life cycle of the Muslims, while the Sufis took the sharia knowledge of the ulema as the primary stage on the way to the inner experiential knowledge (*marifet*). Sometimes, there happened fusion between the two traditions when some distinctive figures carried in their person the qualities of both a scholar and a mystic. The Sufi masters, generally called sheikh (see the next sub-section), performed the duties of the ulema in various regions of the Islamic world. In other situations, some eminent scholars could be found as members or, even, leaders of the Sufi institutions:

> …in Duru Şêx [sheikh] Osman has many mullas [Islamic jurists] around him, and the village is a centre of orthodox learning as well as of mystical practice. Several Qadiri Sheikhs also double as ulama … These Sheikhs have among their followers some rigidly orthodox as well as people who worship them as saints and hold heterodox beliefs about them (Van Bruinessen 1978: 313).

Also an equally important but converse example comes from Gilsenan who points out that:

> …the Azhar University of Cairo itself, a bastion of orthodoxy, has from the sixteenth century been a centre of Sufism and it appears quite clear that in succeeding centuries there was a high level of overlapping between the Sheikhs of the Orders and the 'ulama' and legal officers (Gilsenan 1973: 12).

However, in settings where the controversies persisted, due particularly to the competition for power and influence, the rift between the formal/legalist Islam of the ulema and the mystical Islam of the Sufis continued to exist. As a matter of fact, the ulema never tolerated the excessive theosophical speculations of some leading Sufis, such as the celebrated Ibn al-Arabi, and the extreme ecstasy of some Sufi circles, nor did the latter give up their primary claim to 'holy agency' through which an ordinary Muslim can reach God's essence (Trimingham 1971: 10; Van Bruinessen 1978: 258). Therefore, over a hundred years after Ghazzali, Ibn al-Arabi, whose doctrine of *Vahdet-i Vücud* (Ar. *Wahdat al-Wujud*) came to be taken as pantheistic and monistic by many representatives of mainstream Islam, was being called *Şeyh-i ekfer* (the sheikh of unbelievers) by many ulema, while he himself, on the other hand, was calling the ulema 'the pharaohs of *ümmet* [community of believers] or the *deccals*[8] of the pious people' (Kara 1990: 23). Likewise, centuries after the execution of Hallaj, one can still find Sufi dervishes in the Ottoman period, who were executed according to the *fetva* given by the ulema of their times (*ibid*.).

As a result, despite all the efforts made to resolve the tension between the two traditions, the divergence between the formalism of the ulema and the mysticism of the Sufis has been maintained until now. I will try to demonstrate the traces of this tension in the case of Sheikh Nazım's Sufi circle which is considered as the closest to the scholarly sharia Islam of the ulema (Algar 1976).

Some significant phases, or turning points, can be distinguished in the historical development of Sufi mysticism in Islam. In the initial phase which took place in the eighth century, Sufism was essentially an individual phenomenon concerned with asceticism. From the ninth century, it came to be an intellectual activity led by urban elite which flourished in Baghdad, and then began to be taught publicly in the urban areas (Arberry 1990: 45; Eickelman 1989: 290–1). In this period, there occurred an apparent shift from an emphasis on the fear of God (*takva*), which was the primary

concern to early ascetics who reacted against worldly wealth and ambition, to an emphasis on the love of God (*muhabbet*) on the basis of which the Sufi mystics turned Sufism into a system of theosophy (Arberry 1990: 43–5). This period, which seems to have lasted to the eleventh century, marks the beginning of the systematization of Sufi mystical thought on the basis of the master-disciple relationship (Hodgson 1974: 204; Schimmel 1976: 55). From the eleventh century, the Sufi masters located in the urban centers started wandering around the countryside and spreading their teachings to a larger audience of Muslims. (Trimingham 1971: 9). The process continued until the emergence of the Sufi orders, which signified the most advanced stage in the popularization of Sufism (Hodgson 1974: 217–8).

The Sufi Orders and the Sheikhs

From the 13th century, several Sufi centres led by Sufi masters developed into the schools of 'esoteric knowledge' which aimed to provide the pupils who attended them with spiritual access to the Divine Truth. Different teaching methods, mystical exercises and rules for living gave each centre a distinctive shape, and the Muslim lands, both urban and rural, were covered with the multiplicity of 'paths', the *tarikats*, which took their followers to the divine presence of God. The Arabic word *tariqa* or *tariq* literally means the 'path' and refers, actually, to a particular mystical method, system and guidance which is ordered by a master and followed by a group of novices to experience the esoteric knowledge of God.

The Sufi orders (the English translation of the word *tarikats*) are, therefore, the institutional manifestations of this mystic tradition in Islam which emerged probably towards the late 12th century and, from that time onwards, spread widely, particularly into regions where Islam had recently expanded. In fact, Islam penetrated into Central Asia, the Indian subcontinent, South-East Asia, Anatolia and Africa largely through the activities of the Sufi orders. In this process, the religious cults and belief systems prevalent in these areas before the arrival of Islam were assimilated with the latter.[9] In a short period of time, the Sufi orders merged with the life and culture of the different peoples in the various parts of the expanding Muslim world. They became, as Vergin (1985) puts it, 'the mass organizations of Homo Islamicus'.

Notwithstanding their achievements among the masses in the rural areas, the orders did not become associated with only one type of social setting. Their impact on the social life of the Muslims showed, and still shows, a significant diversity in social, economic and geographical terms:

> Some [orders] were aristocratic, favored by the court and the ulama, like the Suhrawardiyya in the Sultanate of Delhi in the thirteenth century and the Mawlawiyya in relation to the authorities of Seljuk and Ottoman states. Others had a popular following, as with the contrasting types of Bektashiyya and Khalwatiyya in Turkey. They might be urban (Mawlawiyya) or rural (Bektashiyya) or occupational (according to local circumstances like the association of fisherman in Egypt with the Qadiriyya), linked with trade-guilds or the military class, like the relationship of the Janissary corps and the Bektashiyya (Trimingham 1971:233).

The activities of a Sufi order are realised around the axis of the master-disciple relationship and generally centered in a lodge, *tekke* (also known as *zawiya, ribat, khanigah* or *dargah* in various parts of the Islamic world). In the lodge, the master of the *tarikat*, who is often called sheikh, teaches the doctrine and principles of the order to his disciples who are called *mürids*, and guides them in their worldly and ethical conduct. Within a Sufi lodge, relations between the sheikhs or their deputies/successors, who are called *halife* (Arabic. *khalifa*), and the followers of the order are constructed, maintained and perpetuated. The lodges are, in most cases, also the residences of the sheikhs or their descendants.

Apart from these primary functions, the Sufi lodges sometimes develop into places in which local-level social, political and economic activities take place. In Senegal for instance, the 'Sufi *zawiya* in local terms amounts to a Muslim welfare state, organizing not only devotional activity but also agricultural production and marketing, distribution of charity and hospitality, and representations to state authority' (O'Brien 1988: 131).

The words used to refer to the masters in the *tarikats* are various. The most common one is the Arabic, sheikh, which literally means 'old man'. The Persian word *pir* which also means 'old man', is used generally in the Islamic lands where Persian is the main or more influential language. Originally, however, the word *pir* was applied to the founder of a particular *tarikat*, while the word sheikh was used for the leaders of the Sufi orders at