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Exil and tradition. Transnationell sufism in Sweden

In contemporary religious life, Sufism and Sufi ritual practices are one of the few areas where Islam has had an influence on late modern spiritual expressions. Compared to elements from Christianity, Judaism (kabbala), Hinduism (ayurveda medicine) or Buddhism (zen and other forms of meditation) that have been adapted and developed in groups outside the traditional religious institutions, Muslim beliefs and ritual practices are usually not shared in present-day trends of private religiosity and spirituality with their little or no interest in established networks and authorities. Hence is it not uncommon to come across the notion of Sufism as something associated with Muslim traditions, but not necessarily with Islam.

Idealised presentations of Sufism as the history of pious mystics and orders more or less separated from society in a world of beautiful poetry and rituals, or as abstract outlines of universalist and essentialist mysticism, have played a vital role in the history of Orientalism. As a consequence, many surveys still transmit an image of Sufis as estranged from other Muslims and as generally to be regarded as a challenge to Islam and Muslims. In particular has it been attracting to place Sufis in the dichotomy between orthodoxy, purism and radicalism on the one hand and liberal interpretations on the other. In some accounts Sufis are more or less understood as detached from everyday life in a manner in which they also appear almost at odds with the world. Sufism and Sufis with their sometimes intense rituals can appear exotic, but also by definition connected to something spiritual and otherworldly. Viewing Sufism as exotic and sacred is not only a historical phenomenon linked to the Orientalism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it is very much a viewpoint reproduced today. An outlook of this kind exists in many presentations of Sufism on the Internet and in the influential writings of thinkers like Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Frithjof Schuon, Mircea Eliade and William C. Chittick.

These issues constituted the platform for the project “Exile and Tradition”, which was run in co-operation between Copenhagen University and Lund University in 2005–2007. One aim of the project was to document and analyse how Sufi groups in Scandinavia develop and change in diaspora while maintaining their links with Sufi orders in Muslim countries.

The comparative focus of the project “Exile and Tradition” was initially mainly on North-Western Europe and with a particular interest in analysing Muslim everyday religious practices in diaspora. Within the framework of the project the editors of the present volume organised an international workshop in September 2006 on the theme

“Exile and Tradition: Transnational Contemporary Sufism” with a broadened regional perspective. Transnational is in this respect not only a condition for work-migrant and refugee Muslims who practise Sufism in the margins of European plurality, but has to an increasingly extent impact on ways in which women and young people organise their Muslim activities.

The larger Sufi organisations with their many branches have long been transnational within Muslim societies. The flow of people, commodities, cultures and ideas can be understood as important for the spread of Sufism over the centuries and over the continents. Mass migration after World War II resulted in a significant increase of global contacts, and the exchange in the late modern diaspora has led to growing religious engagement for many individuals. These continuous processes transform local contexts, small groups and associations. In this perspective transnational refers not only to the flow of humans and commodities per se, but also has an impact on social, political, religious, cultural, and economic conditions worldwide. This exchange has been nurtured by recent developments in communications like the Internet as well as by urbanisation, international migration and economic globalisation. Sufism and orders are today under the influence of urban lifestyles. Transnational Sufi groups constitute the backbone of political parties and international business life. Throughout history Sufi revivalism has had apparent political goals. Sufism was also a source of inspiration for the way in which Hasan al-Banna organised and structured the Muslim Brotherhood. A similarity in terms of structure between Sufi orders and political parties has also been noted in Morocco. In Morocco’s political life, historical as well as contemporary, notions on sainthood have played an important role for how to create worldly authority. In Kurdish politics, transnational Sufi orders like the Naqshbandiyya and the Qadiriyya has played the role of being the backbone of liberation movements and political parties. For European Muslims the British Sufi Muslim Council (SMC) established in 2006 and supported by the government is one way of how Sufis, or people attached to Sufi movements, participate in the public debate. The SMC also has the political aim to enhance the situation of Muslims in Britain.

The very number of labour migrants and refugees in the world today makes it possible to discuss in more concrete terms the transnational contacts and exchange among Sufis on a global scale.

In the present context everyday Islam refers to the interpretations and practices carried out in the drudgery as well as the fluidity of humans’ daily existence: more or less routinely performed daily rituals as well as non-ritual actions consciously or unconsciously linked to religion. The practice of everyday Islam may vary in different groups, but it is always connected to an interaction between religious and social practices to an extent that it is not only problematic, but also unnecessary to separate

between the two. From this perspective religion cannot be separated from culture and society in a realm of its own. Rather, from a constructivist perspective (in the most common sense of the concept) religion in all its varieties is always an outcome of specific cultural and social contexts. Religion is not isolated from the routines and actions that life in general comprises. However, religious symbols, idioms, rituals and theologies may be differently interpreted, understood and utilised than in the theologies of formally educated religious scholars. From a theoretical perspective everyday Islam signifies varying, developing and sometimes creative and innovative locally centred discursive practices founded on how Islam is commonly conceptualised, practiced and shared. In sum, a starting point for the perspective of “Islam” as lived experience is a view in which the context is an important foundation for making sense of the processes that produce Islam.

Everyday religious life, such as Sufi gatherings with their tangible rituals and informal networks, is of greater importance to the majority of individual European Muslims than suicide bombings, female circumcision or overthrowing a regime in the name of Allah. The everyday practice of Islam and the organisation of Muslim communities are connected to daily life in a sense that make the catering for informal networks more essential to the individual than power politics on a global level. From this point of departure the project “Exile and Tradition” studies Sufism as everyday Muslim practice and piety and investigates the importance of its transnational and translocal nature. Peter Mandaville underlines the dimensions of human activity: “the translocal as an abstract category denoting sociopolitical interaction which falls between bounded communities; that is, translocality is primarily about the ways in which people flow through space rather than about how they exist in space. It is therefore a quality characterised in terms of movement” (Mandaville 2001:6). This outlook contests concepts of state, community and identity as closed entities. In the context of contemporary Sufism it is apparent that Sufi orders are becoming translocal in Mandaville’s understanding of the concept, far from restricted to a single state only. Not only are various Sufis “flowing through space”, so too are ideas and economies deeply linked to Sufism. The global flow does not mean that all hierarchies are emptied. On the contrary, Sufi communities show many examples of how the conventional tariqa structure provides a mode of organising transnational lives. In the wake of migration and globalisation, religion in general is characterised by substantial deterritorialisation. Following Olivier Roy’s depiction of militants and their relation to a specific country of origin, it can be argued that a Muslim community is more constituted by a shared background of (theological) notions and rituals than merely a lifelong connection to a particular place (Roy 2004).

Sufi organisations have always developed through migration and may be observed from the perspective of translocality and deterritorialisation.

One of the ambitions of “Exile and Tradition” has been to provide a study of Scandinavia’s Sufi-oriented organisations and communities and to prompt analyses of their relationships to other Muslim groups. The aim of this data collection was to attract attention to otherwise less noted aspects of Muslim life in Europe. Some of the shared fields of study in the project were connected to practised piety: informal groups and the mobility in between them, how conventional social and theological hierarchies are contested in diaspora, the variety of prayer meetings in terms of character and context, social memory and legendary history within the groups. One hypothesis was that these today informal, and sometimes marginalised, networks in a near future will have a substantial impact on the development of Islam in Europe. In an everyday world of social conflicts at many levels, the Sufi communities often appear to stand out as an alternative to more ethnically defined congregations and especially to younger people an alternative arena.

Communities, fellowships and networks seem to be the social hallmark of Sufism throughout history. The Sufi orders constructed identity with reference to the discourses on a blend of hierarchy and belonging expressed in significant rituals. In the contemporary world, Sufi groups have navigated between defence of tradition and readiness to adapt to new cultural norms. The establishment of a local community can therefore function as norm keeper as well as norm breaker. Communities form strong links between individuals at a concrete or everyday level (family or formal membership), but also in terms of more emotionally founded religious fellowships. Sufi groups therefore seem to be useful vehicles when moving in translocal circumstances. Community is one of the most frequently used categories when the Muslim diaspora is studied, and then most often it refers to ethnic fellowships of more or less formalised organisations. Sufi communities in diaspora are interesting as they tend to break away from these stable categories.

The last domain, institutions, can be more or less formal and therefore serve a regulating, conserving, modifying or disciplinary function also in local life. Sufi orders are examples of, at least ideally, very formalised institutions whose sub-branches can serve as the very condition for transnational contacts along the liaisons of the tariqa. In practice, however, they also generate a web of informal connections between various groups of other Sufi followers, whether they are defined as youth, women or business people.

Diaspora groups are always vulnerable. Both islamophobia and internal power structures can make individuals suspicious of academic studies. As the two parts of the project “Exile and Tradition” were clearly defined within local contexts and aimed at analysing how individuals participate in networks and groups it has been of

importance to emphasize the agents as active interpreters and not as victims of globalisation, transnationalism and other macro processes. Featherstone's notion of 'third cultures' as platforms for cultural flows that in combination with Brubaker's of the three aspects of diaspora identify the spaces for moving, merging and mobilising Sufi groups (1990). Even if informal, Sufi communities offer a connection between home and diaspora; on the one hand are the links to conceptions of homeland, traditional authority and shrine devotion, on the other hand do many of them show an openness to global cultures and new modes of communication.