Valerie J. Hoffman-Ladd

DEVOTION TO THE PROPHET AND HIS FAMILY IN EGYPTIAN SUFISM

Scholarly works on Sufism have been almost entirely concerned with the classical textual tradition and have given scant attention to the contemporary practice of Sufism. Such studies as have been done in Egypt inadequately reflect actual popular beliefs and practices by exhibiting tendencies either to interpret contemporary Sufism in light of classical Sufism,¹ to dismiss popular Sufism as a degradation of “true” Sufism,² or to conclude, in light of the presentation of Sufism propagated by the Supreme Council of Sufi Orders, that there is nothing that distinguishes contemporary Sufism from any other branch of Islam.³ Contemporary Sufism must be studied as a complete system, not merely a degradation of another system. It developed from classical Sufism but is not identical with it, and offers a world view and rituals that distinguish it from other Islamic currents. The centrality of devotion to the Prophet and his family is one aspect of Egyptian Sufi religious life that distinguishes it from that of other Egyptian Muslims, and bears interesting parallels to Shi’ism, perhaps providing evidence for what Marshall Hodgson called “the moulding of Islam as awhole in a Shi’itic direction.”⁴ This article will document and analyze devotion to the Prophet and the ahl al-bayt and its associated beliefs in Egyptian Sufism, and compare them with their analogues in Shi’ism.

There is no doubt that the forces of reform, which since the 18th century have frequently made Sufism a target, have affected Sufi life in the contemporary world. Rather than opposing the Sufi orders to official or orthodox Islam in contemporary Egypt, it would be more appropriate to distinguish between official Sufism—which is sponsored and endorsed by the government—and popular Sufism—which persists as a hidden undercurrent and remains, for the most part, untouched by authorities and unknown to outsiders. The Supreme Council of Sufi Orders, the government-sponsored body authorized to supervise the activities of the orders, is very conscious of public perceptions of Sufism as the deviant religion of the ignorant masses. In their monthly magazine, Majallat al-tasawwuf al-Islāmi, there is marked emphasis on the compliance of Sufism with the shari‘a and the heritage Sufism shares with other aspects of Sunni Islam. However, on a number of issues—such as the relationship of haqīqa (transcendent reality) to the

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shari'a, the role of gnosis and inspiration, and the use of musical instruments—many orders that are registered with the Supreme Council of Sufi Orders pursue practices and teachings that are not in line with those espoused by the council. In addition, there are many sheikhs who have established orders that are not registered with the council, and others who have a large following but have not established an official order. Sufism in Egypt is a complex phenomenon that cannot be reduced to the position of a government-sponsored body. Here I focus not on the official doctrine of the council but on popular Sufism as expressed in the prayers, songs, and words of Sufis from the major orders of Egypt. Popular Sufism forms a subculture within Egyptian society, with its own doctrines, rules, hierarchy, and world view. The doctrines of the school of Ibn al-'Arabi (d. 1240), whose work is suspect in reformed circles, are extremely influential in popular Sufism, as are the poems of Ibn al-Farid (d. 1235).

I spent nineteen months among the Sufis of Egypt, visiting the saints’ shrines where they congregate, moving with them from one mawlid (saint’s day celebration) to another, recording their teachings and ceremonies, collecting their literature, and interviewing Sufis of all types, from great sheikhs to everyday housewives. Early in my research I was fortunate to become a quasi-disciple of a Shadhili sheikh in Cairo who had extensive contacts with Sufis around Egypt, especially in Upper Egypt, and by virtue of his endorsement I was quickly accepted among the Sufis, often as if I were one of them. This sheikh did not try to monopolize me or expose me to only a single type of sheikh or doctrine, but realized that I needed to be exposed to the full spectrum of Sufi personalities, ideas, and activities.

I traveled the entire length of Egypt, often with groups of Sufi pilgrims and sleeping in Sufi hospices. I would often begin my interviews by asking members and affiliates of Sufi orders what Sufism (taṣawwuf) was. Sometimes, particularly among illiterate Sufis, the term taṣawwuf was not understood, or was understood to mean “fanaticism.” But most respondents defined Sufism as purification of the heart, sincerity of worship, and renunciation of fleshly passions. These ends were largely met through practices of devotion to the Prophet, his family, and one’s own sheikh. “Sufism,” said one Rifa‘i wakil, “means love for the family of the Prophet” (ahl al-bayt). While others did not necessarily define Sufism in this way, most Sufis felt that one of the things that defines them and sets them apart from other Muslims is their devotion to the Prophet and his family. This devotion entails not only practices of shrine visitation, but also doctrines regarding the cosmic significance of the Prophet and his family.

Although the prayers (awrād) of most of the major orders reveal the pervasiveness of these doctrines, they are considered secret, and are not normally published for an audience wider than the members of the order, because such doctrines are strongly criticized by outsiders. This is particularly evident in the controversy that erupted over the Burhaniyya in 1976, following the publication of Ṭabrib al-dhimma fi nuṣḥ al-umma by Muhammad ‘Uṭhman ‘Abduh al-Burhani, the Sudanese sheikh of the Burhaniyya. This book, which was published for the edification of members of the order, came to the attention of the Ministry of Awqaf when a sheikh of the order in Minya decided its doctrines were dangerously unorthodox. The book, its author, and his order were strongly criticized in the Egyptian
press, particularly on the subject of its glorification of the Prophet and his family, and the introduction of ideas that were regarded as Shi'i and extremist. This subject is, in fact, a watershed issue in the distinction between reformed/official and popular Sufism. Although the Burhaniyya came to be widely regarded even among Sufis as extremist because of the media attacks, the doctrines of the Burhaniyya do not differ significantly from those of most of the major Sufi orders in Egypt. The book, in fact, contains hardly anything original to Muhammad Ḥūthman, but consists mainly of long portions quoted verbatim from the writings of al-Yaḥyā b. ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd al-Yahyā (d. 1367), Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505), ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz al-Jili (d. 1402–3), and Ibn al-ʿArabī, in addition to various hadīths that are common among the Sufis. The fact that this book, which expresses a popular “extremist” doctrine, is based on medieval texts that find broad acceptance among Sufis, indicates that it is not possible to separate entirely the popular religion from the Islamic textual tradition.

The criticism that the glorification of the Prophet and his family reflects Shi'i influence raises another important question. Sunni-Shīʿite differences are normally explained in terms of their political origins and Shi'i theory regarding the imām. At the level of popular devotion, we tend to distinguish Shi'ism from Sunni Islam primarily by the centrality of devotion to the ahl al-bayt in Shi'i piety. Among the Shīʿites, salvation itself is guaranteed by their love and devotion to the ahl al-bayt, and this is thought to be a distinctly Shi'i trait, despite the admission that devotion to the ahl al-bayt exists in the Sufi tradition as well. While Sufis do not practice their devotion to the ahl al-bayt in precisely the same manner as the Shīʿites—in particular, there is little expression of grief over their martyrdoms or desire to participate in their sufferings—many Sufis in Egypt also believe that their salvation is predicated on the strength of their love for the Prophet and their devotion to the members of his family whose shrines are in Egypt. An analysis of devotion to the Prophet and his family in Egyptian Sufism therefore also raises questions about the distinctions between Shi'ism and Sufism on the popular level and the nature of Shi'i influence in Egypt, which is an entirely Sunni country. By Shi'ism I mean the broad features of the main Shi'i movements, the Twelver Shi'ites, and the Isma'iliyya, not any specific sect. The similarities between Sufism and Shi'ism have long been observed, but they have usually been spoken of in terms of esotericism and gnosis, not the exalted position of the ahl al-bayt, although many hadīths concerning their special status are accepted by both Sunnis and Shi'ites.

To return to the words of the previously mentioned Rifaʿī wakīl:

Sufism means love for the family of the Prophet (ahl al-bayt). The Prophet is our intercessor and the one who brings us close to God, and it is through his family that we come close to him, just as the Prophet said, “Husayn is from me and I am from Husayn. Whoever loves Husayn loves me.” It is love for the family of the Prophet that causes us to be purified. This is why we come to the shrines of the family of the Prophet. Whoever loves the family of the Prophet is accepted by God, because the saints of God are close to God. You love the family of the Prophet, so you are accepted by God. God listens to everyone who calls on Him, and we call on Him through our Prophet and through his family. Why else would I leave my comfortable bed and come sleep on the pavement? [He was spending the entire week at the khidma, day and night.] I wouldn't be able to sleep on the pavement if it weren't for my
love for the Prophet and his family. It is this love which purifies us and brings us close to God. That is why we do dhikr here. That is why we come here to serve people.

This statement clarifies the motivation for a primary activity of the Sufis. Many Sufis spend a great deal of time traveling from mawlid to mawlid. Scholars writing on mawlids and saints’ shrines emphasize that people go to mawlids to have a good time or to gain blessing or obtain some other tangible goal by means of the saint's intercession. But such scholars do not seem to be describing the life of many Sufis, who spend an entire week or more at the shrine. Not only pilgrims but even residents of the town spend the night sleeping near the shrine. The mawlids are joyous and blessed occasions, but more fundamentally, many Sufis conceive of their entire service to God in terms of their service to the family of the Prophet—through dhikr at their shrines and through mawlids, where they offer food to passersby and live in the remembrance and blessings of the saint who is present among them. Although moral purification, knowledge of esoteric spiritual truths, and annihilation of the ego in God continue to be major concerns of contemporary Sufism, the average Sufi hopes by means of devotion to the Prophet and his family to be purified and ultimately allowed into the presence of God.

The love that Egyptian Muslims, and indeed all Muslims, have for their Prophet is obvious to any observer; it is evident in everyday expressions and in the blessings chanted on the Prophet at the end of the call to prayer, sometimes at great length, especially in Upper Egypt. But Sufis consider themselves set apart by the intensity of their love for the Prophet, and they call themselves “those who love the ahl al-bayt.” What follows is an outline of the popular Sufi doctrine concerning the Prophet on which this devotion is based.

THE MUHAMMADAN LIGHT

The Qur’an says, “A Light and a clear Book have come to you from God” (5:17). Sufis believe Muhammad is the light that clarifies the truths for all creatures. Furthermore, Muhammad’s light predates and informs the rest of creation. According to the doctrine common among Sufis, the first thing God created was the light of the Prophet, which He made from a handful of His own light. In a popular hadith, Jabir, a companion of the Prophet, asks him what was the first thing created. Muhammad replies, “The light of your Prophet, Jabir.” In some versions, Muhammad asks Gabriel how old he is. Gabriel replies that he doesn’t know, “but in the fourth veil there is a star that would appear once every 70 thousand years, and I saw it 70 thousand times.” This star was Muhammad. In another version, the Prophet continues, “I was a Prophet while Adam was between water and clay.” From this primordial Muhammadan light all other things were created: the pen, the throne, the chair, the heavens, the earth, and all that is on the earth are an extension of that light. As Sheikh Ahmad Radwan of Luxor (d. 1967) said, “God has ennobled the whole world with this light,” which is of divine origin. The fullest manifestation of the divine light is in Muhammad, but ultimately it pervades all creation.

This belief is reflected in the prayers and songs of many of the major Sufi orders in Egypt. In the prayer of Ahmad al-Rifa’i (d. 1178), founder of the Rifa’iyya order, Muhammad is described as
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the pre-existent (asbaq) light of God, . . . the dot of the bā' of the primordial sphere, the secret of the secrets of the pivotal (qutbiyya) alif, by which the turbidity of existence was clarified. . . . He is Your primordial, pervading secret, and the water of the essence of flowing essentiality (jawhar al-jawhariyya'l-jārī) by which You gave life to the existents, be they mineral, animal or plant. He is the heart of hearts, and the spirit of spirits, and the knowledge of the good words, the first highest Pen, and the encompassing Throne; spirit of the body of both worlds, boundary of the two seas, the second of two, the pride of both worlds, Abu'l-Qasim, our lord Muhammad Ibn 'Abdallah ibn 'Abd al-Muttalib, Your servant, Your prophet and Your apostle, the illiterate prophet.’

In the hizb of Ahmad al-Badawi (d. 1276) that is recited by his order, the Ahmadiyya, which is strongly represented in the Delta of Egypt, Muhammad is described as “tree of the luminous origin, the brilliance of the handful of the Merciful, . . . mine of the divine secrets . . . owner of the original handful . . . ”

In the prayer of Abu'l-Hasan al-Shadhili (d. 1258)—founder the Shadhiliyya order, which is represented by many branches and derivative orders throughout Egypt—Muhammad is described as “most noble of beings, the secret penetrating all the names and attributes.”

The prayer of his teacher, ‘Abd al-Salam ibn Mashish (also known as Ibn Bashish), which is included in the prayer books of the Shadhiliyya orders and some of their derivatives, describes Muhammad as the one “from whom the secrets burst forth and the lights emanated . . . he is Your comprehensive secret who gives evidence of You, and Your greatest veil standing between Your hands.”

Ibn Mashish (d. 1228), whose tomb in Morocco is an object of visitation and veneration, was a disciple of Abu Madyan al-Tilmisani (d. 1197), who was also a teacher of Ahmad al-Rifa'i—great-grandfather of Ahmad al-Badawi and spiritual grandfather of ‘Abd al-Rahim al-Qenawi, the famous saint of Qena, in Egypt—and of Abu'l-Hajjaj al-Luqsuri, the equally famous saint of Luxor. Ibn Mashish was allegedly recognized as qutb of his age by Abu'l-Fath al-Wasiti, the disciple of Ahmad al-Rifa'i who was responsible for introducing the Rifa'iyya into Egypt in 1237, and who was also the maternal grandfather of Ibrahim al-Dasuqi, founder of the Burhamiya order, which is also strongly represented in the Delta. The Moroccan and Iraqi influences on Egyptian Sufism, and the connectedness of the orders in their origins, argues against overemphasizing the local character of Egyptian Sufism.

The cosmic significance of the Prophet expressed in these prayers, which many Muslims find blasphemous, is nonetheless represented even in orders that are known for their adherence to the shari'a and their appeal to intellectuals. One of the more respected such orders today is the ʿAzmiyya, an offshoot of Shadhiliyya. Although the main articles of their magazine, al-Islām waṭan, are scrupulously orthodox and aimed to appeal to reform-minded Muslim youth, in its November 1988 issue in commemoration of the birthday of the Prophet, it employed the hadith, “I was the first of the prophets in creation, and the last to be sent,” and reproduces lines of poetry by Sayyid Muhammad Madi Abu'l-ʿAzaʾim (d. 1937)—founder of the order and former professor of Islamic law at Khartoum University—which describe Muhammad as leader of all other prophets, made from the light of providence, the secret of existence, light of God, secret of the beginning, from whom the angels, prophets, and rational beings were formed and obtained their knowledge. A sermon by Sheikh al-Sayyid ʿAbd al-Hamid al-Sayfī reproduced in the same issue.
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says that God created all things for Muhammad, who is the first intellect to illuminate the worlds of luminous spirits by the light of his preexistence. Some Sufis go even further. Contrary to the orthodox view of Muhammad as passive recipient of divine revelation they believe he is the manifestation of the divine as well as both transmitter and receiver of divine revelation.

Although the Prophet is the “beautiful model” (uswa hasana, Qur’an 33:21) that Muslims are to follow, the ordinary believer is not able to be like him. Not only is he believed to be sinless, but some Sufis also believe that his physical attributes are beyond the realm of ordinary human life. His disciples wanted to engage in the continuous fasts that he made, but he rebuked them, saying, “Are you like me?” For his body was luminous like the people of paradise, and he ate and drank of the food of paradise. Even his urine was pure enough for Umm Salama to use to perform her ablutions. His uniqueness is emphasized in the story of his ascension through the heavens to the throne of God; no other creature, not even the angel Gabriel, could approach God’s throne, but for Muhammad the veils of light surrounding God were raised. According to the popular poem, the Burda by al-Busiri, possibly the most frequently chanted poem of praise to the Prophet, he surpasses all the prophets in both physical aspects and moral excellence; they do not approach his knowledge or generosity. He is the one “whose form and essence are complete,” and “he is beyond having partners in his good qualities (munazzah ‘an al-sharik fi mahāsinihi).” His description in such divine terms (for it is God who is beyond comparison, to whom no partner should be ascribed; He is the one who, according to the Qur’an, is unlike any other thing) is paralleled by Sufi songs of the attributes of the Prophet, corresponding to the chanting and singing of the attributes of God.

THE PROPHET IN THE LIFE OF THE SUFI

In classical Sufism God was the Beloved, whose presence was sought, in whom one hoped to achieve the annihilation of one’s separate identity (fanā’) and permanent endowment with the divine attributes. Today Muhammad, the Beloved of God, is the one whose presence (hadra) is desired and celebrated. He is the one in whom the Sufi must have fanā’; he is the gateway to God, because God has made his throne in the heart of the Prophet. As one sheikh said during a Sufi hadra:

God said to Muhammad, “If all the peoples came to me and tried every door, they will never come to me unless they come behind you,” because the heart of the Messenger of God, blessings and peace be upon him, is the locus of the manifestations (tajalliyāt) of the Real (al-haqq). “The heavens and the earth cannot contain me but the heart of my believing servant contains me” [hadith qudsi]. One servant. Only one is meant. . . . Because God created him and poured out His manifestations upon him and placed him on the Throne of Unity and looked at him and created the creation from his light. . . . No one can have contact with God except through the heart of the Messenger of God. God the Exalted reveals Himself to the hearts, that is true, but through the heart of the Beloved. . . .

Muhammad is not sought by the Sufis in a functional way, however, but in a deeply personal way. The Sufis love him passionately, long for his presence, and in the end may be endowed with a vision of their Beloved. He is not just a model or a hero, but the object of their longing and love. Countless songs are sung to praise and honor him, and though most are not models of grand composition, they
reflect great intensity of love and longing for the Prophet and describe him as the best and most perfect of God's creatures. Singers address the Prophet as “my love,” express the desire for union (wasl) with him, to be firmly rooted in his presence. One song tells the Prophet, “You are my goal, my love, you are the light, you are the religion,” while another asks, “Are you a man or an angel?”

The Sufi debate over the relation of haqiqa to shari'a becomes resolved in a religion of love. As another song exults, “Love of the Beloved is my haqiqa and my Shari'a.” Sufis believe the Qur'an commands Muslims to love the Prophet in this way when it says, “The Messenger is more worthy of the believers than themselves” (33:6). “Increase your love for him,” Sheikh Ahmad Radwan advised his disciples, “and love him more than yourselves and your wealth and your children, and be excessive in this (taghalaw fi dhāl ik kathirān), for it is better for you than nightly devotions. Do we have anything other than his love?” The Prophet is filled with concern for his people: “He is the first to open Paradise, but he doesn’t enter it, because he is running here and there until he is sure of the salvation of his nation.”

Love for the Prophet is the Muslim’s hope of salvation: “Love him and God will love you and forgive your sins.” The prophetic light is the qibla of both the upper world and the lower world. “Tāhā is the greatest Ka‘ba around which the lofty ones circumambulate.”

Those who love him and long for him may be granted a vision of the Beloved: He is at this time present and visible, and no servant who has attached himself to God is veiled from seeing him, and no one who longs to see him in this world is prevented. He is present, traveling as he likes through the universe, and attending any assembly. But God has hidden him in the presence of His familiar companionship these days as a test for servants who have attached themselves to something else. Sidi Ahmad al-Rifa'i said, “The Messenger travels as he pleases, and appears whenever he wishes in the form he used to have. Whoever has not seen him should try to heal his spirit, because if he is sick in his spirit, he will be veiled from him.”

Indeed, concluded Sheikh Ahmad Radwan, whoever lives in this world without seeing him or meeting him has cause to fear at death. Sayyid al-Mursi Abu'l-'Abbas, who allegedly became qutb after Abu'l-Hasan al-Shadhili, declared, “If I am veiled from the vision of the Prophet for one second, I do not consider myself a Muslim!” The believers are assured of the reality of their visions, even in sleep, for a hadith tells them “Satan does not imitate me.” Islamic tradition has innumerable tales of visions of the Prophet to believers in their sleep, especially to give advice or correction—even al-Ash'ari allegedly attributed his conversion from Mu'tazilism to Sunni doctrine to such a vision. Sufis believe the Prophet continues to appear to Muslims today, especially to the gnostics whose hearts have been purified and who have been granted the favor of looking into the hidden world through visions of deceased saints, prophets, and angels. It is the role of the sheikh to lead the Sufi into the Prophet’s presence (hadrat al-nabi); once the disciple has established contact with the Prophet, he has no further need of his sheikh.

**THE AHL AL-BAYT AND THE SAINTS OF GOD**

Egyptian Sufis believe the Muhammadan light was not taken away when the Prophet died, but was passed on to his heirs and their successors, both his natural
descendants and the saints of God, generation after generation. While the Sufi must love and respect all the companions and saints of God, the people of his house (the *ahl al-bayt* or *āl al-bayt*) command special reverence and love. It is likely that there is not a single Muslim in Egypt who would say he does not love the Prophet or his family, but there is a strong enough current in the modern period placing the Prophet’s family on a par with other pious Muslims and denying that they have any special status to prompt a new literature extolling their virtues and uniqueness.37 One such book promises that the reader who takes to heart its message and reads it often will find his heart opened to the love of the *ahl al-bayt* and spiritual rewards will result:

If you read this book often and arrive at the rank of love, you will enjoy intimate companionship, and the veils will be withdrawn from you, and you will be given the eyes of inner vision (*baṣira*) and enter the ranks of the people who witness the secrets of God (*ahl al-mushāḥada*), and then the spirit will be elevated to the rank of contentment and nearness and acceptance. . . . The *ahl al-bayt* are the clear proof in the Book of God and with God. They are the way that the servant reaches his Lord well-pleased and well-pleasing, God willing. They are the clear exegesis and true translation of the Book of God in their life, character, morals, asceticism, and struggle, because they inherited this truly from our lord the Messenger of God.38

The Qurʾānic basis for the special status of the *ahl al-bayt* is found primarily in two verses. The first of these is 33:33: “God only wishes to remove all filth from you, people of the house, and to purify you completely.” This verse appears in the context of admonitions to the Prophet’s wives, but whereas the pronouns of the sentences before and after this are in the feminine plural, the pronouns in this sentence are in the masculine plural. This indicates that individuals other than the Prophet’s wives are included in this divine purification, which, according to common interpretation, was not only wished for but accomplished. Who are the people of the Prophet’s house who have been purified? The context is given in the hadith of the cloak (hadith al-kisāʾ or hadith al-ʿabāʾ), available in a number of versions. In this hadith the Prophet wraps his cloak around ʿAli, Fatima, Hasan, and Husayn, and announces that these are the people of his house, and prays that they might be purified, at which point the above verse is revealed.39 Some Sufis believe that this hadith and the verse to which it gives the context indicate that ʿAli, Fatima, and their descendants have been purified by God and therefore share in the Prophet’s immunity from sin.

Virtually all Sufi teachings, whether in oral or written form, are filled with quotations from the Qurʾān and hadith. Although the exact source of a text is not always provided, especially in the case of hadith, there is a clear consciousness that their beliefs have firm textual authority. The Qurʾānic verse commanding Muslims to love the Prophet’s family is 42:23: “I do not ask you for a reward (for delivering the revelation) except the love of those who are near of kin (*al-mawadda filʿl-qurbā*).” While some interpret this to mean that the Prophet is pleading with his own relatives not to persecute him for delivering the message,40 or that the kin referred to are not the Prophet’s—for that would mean that the Prophet is in fact asking some reward41—the most common interpretation is that although the Prophet
asks nothing for himself, his family is to be loved by the Muslims. As is commonly
stated, he who loves God must love God’s Messenger, and he who loves God’s
Messenger must love his family; and conversely, he who hates the ahl al-bayt hates
the Messenger of God, and he who hates the Messenger of God hates God.42

There are a number of hadiths accepted by both Sunnis and Shi‘ites that extol
the status of the ahl al-bayt and the duty of Muslims to love them. Most of these
exist in more than one version, so what follows is only a sample of a few of them:

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 Gen-
tle, 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.43

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 en-
ters Paradise.

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.

Attaching oneself to the ahl al-bayt secures redemption from hellfire, according
to a hadith from Abu Bakr al-Khwarizmi’s book, al-Manāqib: The Prophet came
in laughing, his face full of light, having been told that all those who love ʿAli and
Fatima will be given a leaf from the tree of Tuba which is situated in Paradise,
and this leaf will redeem them from hellfire. The Prophet exults, “So my brother
and cousin ʿAli and my daughter have become the redemption of the men and
women of my nation from hellfire.”44 Other hadiths indicate that whoever opposes
the ahl al-bayt will be opposed by God, and those who love them are loved by
God. Therefore, Ibrahim Ramadan ʿAli, known as Sheikh Faris, wrote:

The ahl al-bayt are faith indeed, and they are the path to God and to His pleasure. They are
the most trustworthy hand-hold (al-ʿurwa ʿl-wuthqā)45 for those who want to be saved by it.
They are the Ark for those who want to be saved from every evil God has created in this
world. They are the good tree whose roots are firm and whose branches are in heaven, giv-
ing its food in all seasons by God’s permission. Whoever takes hold of one of its branches
is truly saved and becomes one of the victorious.46

These hadiths indicate that the popular Sufi devotion to the ahl al-bayt has a basis
in the broader Islamic textual tradition. The impact of Shi‘itic veneration of ʿAli and
his family on the Sunni world has frequently been noted, and it is reflected in these
hadiths. The considerable influence of Jaʿfar al-Sadiq on the nascent movements of
Shi’ism and Sufism and his importance as a transmitter of hadith in Sunni as well as Shi’ic collections have already been indicated, but that alone does not account for the impact of Shi’ism on Sunni Islam, which is too complex a subject to deal with in an article of this size. What concerns us here is the fact that there is textual endorsement for the popular devotion to the *ahl al-bayt*, and that Sufis appeal to the authority of these texts to defend and promote their practices.

The Twelver and Isma’ili Shi’ites believe that Muhammad passed on to ʿAli an esoteric knowledge and specified that ʿAli was the *waṣī*—inheritor of his spiritual legacy, who was to have guardianship (*wilāya*) over the Muslims. The Sufis likewise acknowledge ʿAli’s spiritual succession to Muhammad’s esoteric knowledge, learned both through Muhammad’s instruction and by direct divine inspiration. ʿAli reportedly said, “I have learned one thousand things from our lord the Messenger of God, and for each of them God inspired in me knowledge of one thousand other things.” And in a hadith popular among the Sufis, Muhammad says, “I am the city of knowledge and ʿAli is its gate” and “ʿAli is the one among you with the keenest judgment (ʿAli *aqdākum*).” Many stories indicate the special status of ʿAli and the love the Prophet had for him. Nonetheless, most Sufis in the Sunni world, constrained to honor all the Prophet’s companions, do not share the Shi’ic view that ʿAli was intended by Muhammad to be caliph after his death and that the first three caliphs were usurpers. The first two caliphs, Abu Bakr and ʿUmar, represent the laudable qualities of asceticism and intellect respectively, but it is ʿAli who represents esoteric knowledge.

In the period 1000–1500, so pivotal in the formation of the major Sufi orders in Egypt and the rest of the Muslim world, the trend of praising ʿAli and denouncing Muʿawiyah and Yazid became more pronounced among Sunnis, without rejecting the first three caliphs or exaggerating the position of ʿAli and the imams. But in his book about the virtues of the *ahl al-bayt* Sheikh Faris goes beyond the customary Sufi attribution of spiritual vicegerency to ʿAli and asserts that Abu Bakr and ʿUmar wrongfully defrauded ʿAli of rule while he and his family were busy with the Prophet’s funeral. His perspective, which is not typical among Egyptian Sufis, is hardly to be distinguished from that of the Shi’ites, for he accuses the Muslim community as a whole of a conspiracy, generation after generation, that deprived the *ahl al-bayt* of their rightful rule:

. . . until the rule of the Fatimids, who relieved the distress of *āl al-bayt* and returned their honor to them. The affictions of *āl al-bayt* were not recorded in the old books because of the harshness of the Umayyads and ʿAbbasids; anyone who wanted to write about the virtues of *āl al-bayt* would be killed or expelled or driven away. . . . I believe many of the hadiths honoring *āl al-bayt* have been lost or perhaps burnt or buried in the ground because of the prevalence of hatred, envy, scheming and deceit.

It is perhaps not surprising that Sheikh Faris acknowledges the Twelver line of imams as the heirs of the Muhammadan light and the rightful rulers over the Muslims, and identifies the future Mahdi as the twelfth imam, the son of Hasan al-ʿAskari. He identifies al-Ḥasan, son of ʿAli, as the fifth Rightly Guided Caliph, whose caliphate was allegedly acknowledged by the Muslims for a period of six months before he abdicated to the rule of Muʿawiyah. He feels the inclusion of
al-Hasan among the Rightly Guided Caliphs is necessary to complete the thirty years of the caliphate predicted by the Prophet after his death, to be succeeded by worldly kingship (the Umayyad dynasty).\textsuperscript{52} Whereas many Egyptian Sufis associate Shi‘ism with extremism\textsuperscript{53} and fail to see the proximity of the Shi‘itic position to their own, Sheikh Faris says that, although some Shi‘ites have exaggerated the position of the ahl al-bayt, many of them “have followed the path of sound love for the Prophet’s family and have been with the victorious.”\textsuperscript{54}

The suffering of the ahl al-bayt, says Sheikh Faris, has an external aspect (zāhīr) and an esoteric aspect (bātin), for by their suffering the ahl al-bayt are refined, magnified, elevated, honored, and chosen. When the heads of Husayn and his comrades were brought to the palace of Yazid, he saw at night the Prophet sitting on a pulpit of light, while the prophets came to congratulate him on the high rank of his family.\textsuperscript{55} In Egypt Husayn is sometimes called by a title more common among the Shi‘ites, “prince of martyrs” (sayyid al-shuhadā‘). The tradition regarding the martyrdom of Hasan, who was poisoned by his wife at the instigation of Mu‘awiya, is commonly acknowledged.\textsuperscript{56} According to a hadith transmitted by al-Tabarani and al-Tirmidhi, the Prophet called Hasan and Husayn lords of the youth of paradise (sayyīd shabīb ahl al-janna).\textsuperscript{57}

Perhaps what is most significant at the level of popular devotion is a comparison of the Shi‘itic concept of the redemptive suffering of the imams, especially Husayn, with the Sufi understanding of the redemptive quality of their love for the ahl al-bayt. According to Twelver Shi‘ite belief, “just as Christ sacrificed himself on the altar of the cross to redeem humanity, so did Husayn allow himself to be killed on the plains of Karbala to purify the Muslim community of sins.”\textsuperscript{58} According to a tradition from the eighth imam, ‘Ali al-Rida, “If you wept for Husayn until your tears rolled down your cheeks, all your sins, whether major or minor, will be forgiven.”\textsuperscript{59} The public display of grief for Husayn, actively promoted first by the Buyids and later by the Safavids,\textsuperscript{60} is a distinctly Shi‘itic act of devotion and has no parallel in contemporary Egypt, although early in this century Zaki Mubarak witnessed recitations of Husayn’s passion on the day of ‘Ashura,\textsuperscript{61} accompanied by much weeping, and processions of youths cutting and whipping their own bodies out of grief for his death and the desire to redeem themselves by sharing in his passion.\textsuperscript{62}

The Sufis, however, express their love for Husayn and other members of the ahl al-bayt not through grief, but through joyful songs and expressions of devotion. The love Egyptian Sufis have for Husayn springs from his close relationship with the Prophet, affirmed in many sayings, as well as by adoption, for the Prophet declared Hasan and Husayn to be his own sons. After the Prophet, the person who inspires the greatest love among Egyptian Sufis is Husayn. His shrine-mosque in Cairo, which allegedly houses the noble head, is enormous and beautiful, and his mawlid is the largest one of all.\textsuperscript{63} His name frequently comes up in Sufi songs, and on the outer wall of his mosque hangs a large, illuminated plaque bearing the saying of the Prophet: “Husayn is from me and I am from Husayn.”\textsuperscript{64} The Egyptians do not dwell on Husayn’s martyrdom,\textsuperscript{65} but sing joyfully of their love for him and for the other great members of the ahl al-bayt whose shrines are in Egypt: Sayyida Zaynab, his sister and the heroine of Karbala; his son ‘Ali Zayn al-‘Abidin;
Husayn’s daughters Fatima al-Nabawiyya and Sayyida Sukayna (Sitt Sekina); Ali al-Rida’s daughter, Sayyida Ruqayya; and the great-great-great-granddaughter of Hasan, Sayyida Nafisa, renowned for her great knowledge. Some Egyptians say that so many members of the ahl al-bayt took refuge in Egypt because it was well known that Egyptians had a special love for the ahl al-bayt. From their perspective, love for the Prophet’s family has nothing to do with Shi‘itic influence, but sprang spontaneously from the essential goodness of the Egyptian character. Sufis exult in the light, healing, and love they enjoy in the presence of the members of the Prophet’s family who are buried in Egypt. Husayn is called bābā, and his sister Zaynab is called māmā, and they figure as the spiritual preceptors of many Sufis, as well as the joy and refuge of many pious visitors to their shrines. Along with the legal scholar al-Shafī‘i (d. 819), who is also buried in Cairo, Husayn and Sayyida Zaynab are believed to sit on the “hidden court” (maḥkama bāṭiniyya), which determines the affairs of humans. Although many Egyptians who are not Sufis visit the shrines of the ahl al-bayt in time of need in order to obtain their blessings and intercession, for the Sufis love itself is the goal. As one Sufi expressed it in a popular pamphlet devoted to the life of Sayyida Zaynab, “Loving them is the basis and foundation of the way to God. All the spiritual states and stations are degrees of love.” A very popular Sufi song, frequently heard spontaneously sung by Sufis as they sit at the mawlids or en route to a saint’s shrine, says, “Love for them is the best worship.”

The devoted cry out to the ahl al-bayt, as to all the saints, for madad, help or blessing. According to Sheikh ‘Izz al-Hawari, real help comes only from God, who alone has real power to benefit or harm. The madad one might receive from the Prophet is love or help in knowing how to solve a particular problem, and the help of the saints and the ahl al-bayt is only love. But love, he elaborated on another occasion, is the foundation of all other things, for without love, there is no faith. Sufis believe that the first ones the believer should love are the Messenger and his family. There are hadiths that indicate that one enters paradise not by virtue of good works but by virtue of this love. A popular hadith from the Sahih of Muslim says, “A man is with the one he loves (in Paradise) (al-mar‘ ma‘a man yuhibb).” Therefore, says another writer, “Love in God is one of the best ways to attain Him. The one in this rank enters Paradise with the one he loves, even if he does not equal him in deeds. This is because every good deed may be seen except those of the heart.” And in this world, God gives true revelation (kashf) to the people of love, a divine overflowing, so they may see angels or prophets, or something else, whether asleep or awake.

Therefore the Sufis devote themselves to the ahl al-bayt and cultivate a relationship that is both deferential and familiar, in hopes that by virtue of their love they will be healed—of sin or psychic ills or even physical illness—and purified. With some, a kind of adoption occurs with the saint, particularly as a result of the saint’s intervention in the Sufi’s life through visions or help in a time of crisis. Some Sufis claim that their sheikh is none other than Husayn, who personally appeared and taught them in visions. Some claim to be able to see the saints and converse with them when they visit their shrines, for according to popular belief the saint remains alive in the tomb: the bodies of those who are unattached
to material things while alive do not decompose, but remain alive, and the spirit is free to roam at will.74 Evidence of the graces of the saints is seen in the mundane events of daily life.

The *ahl al-bayt* are venerated not only as objects of love and examples of piety, but as sources of wisdom and possessors of esoteric truth. Abu 'Alam, author of a series on the *ahl al-bayt* published by a respectable Egyptian publishing house, describes them as “the tree of prophecy, the repository of apostleship, a spring of mercy, a mine of knowledge, fountains of wisdom, the treasures of the Merciful. Whoever helps them and loves them may expect God’s mercy and graces, and whoever hates them will encounter the wrath of God. By them we are guided from the shadows. They are the repository of the secret of the Chosen One.”75 This belief in the esoteric knowledge of the *ahl al-bayt* and the expectation of guidance from them presents perhaps the most direct parallel between Sufism and Shi'ism, although Sufis do not restrict this knowledge to an official line of imams descended from 'Ali. The similarities between Sufism and Shi'ism are usually unknown in Egypt, where Shi'ism is popularly understood to be the Islam of the Islamic Republic of Iran and, hence, violent and extremist. However, Dr. Ahmad al-Tayyib—a professor of Islamic philosophy at al-Azhar University and the son of a famous, recently deceased Khalwati sheikh in Gurna, across the Nile from Luxor—affirmed the close relationship between Sufism and Shi'ism. With the disappearance of the last imam of the Shi'ites, he said, the Sufi sheikhs and saints have inherited their role as repositories of the secrets of God.77 Both Sufism and Shi'ism admit the necessity of obedience to a man who has divine knowledge—in the case of the Shi'ites their imam, whom they claim to be *ma'sūm* (immune from error), in the case of the Sufis, a sheikh who is a gnostic and who is said to be *mahfūz* (preserved from major error). Sufi belief in a single living paramount saint who administers the graces of God, the *qutb* or *ghawth*, is also closely parallel to Twelver and Isma'ili Shi'ite belief in the imam.

Although it is commonly asserted that in Sufism it is a spiritual line of descent (the *silsila*) not a physical line of descent from the Prophet that matters,78 in popular Sufism in Egypt the distinction is not so clear. In fact, most Egyptian Sufis see it as perfectly natural for a son to inherit the position of sheikh from his father, because it is expected that the sheikh’s spiritual “secrets” are passed on at least partly among one’s physical descendants, although they may also be passed or “inherited” by others.79 This does not exclude the possibility that a daughter might inherit a greater portion of her father’s secrets than a son, although women do not become sheikhs, or that a son might rebel and choose a worldly way of life and become necessarily unqualified to be sheikh.80 But in general, it is expected that spiritual essence will be passed to one’s physical descendants. So it is no accident that so many of the sheikhs and saints of Egypt claim to be descendants of the Prophet (*ashraf*), and a sheikh from the province of Qena claimed that a large number of *ghawths* came from that province because of the large concentration of *ashraf* in that region.81 When the biographies of Sufi sheikhs are read, their noble ancestry is given as much prominence as their *silsila*, and in most saints’ shrines there is a plaque denoting the ancestry of the saint, which usually leads back to the Prophet.
The close affinity of Sufism and Shi'iism led Ibn Khaldun to say that the later Sufis mixed with the Isma'iliyya, and each group learned from the other. Amir al-Najjar believes Shi'iitic influence on Egyptian Sufism is weak and relates mainly to the position of Ali as spiritual ancestor of all the major Sufi orders in Egypt. He comments, “If love for Ali and his family represent Shi'i influence, this is something shared by all Muslims.” Sayyid Ahmad al-Badawi, founder of the Ahmadyya order, has been accused of being a Fatimid propagandist operating under the cloak of Sufism. In 1927, Mustafa 'Abd al-Raziq wrote that 'Alids and propagandists for the ahl al-bayt entered the Rifai order in Iraq and al-Wasiti brought it to Egypt in 1223, but when Wasiti died prematurely, the 'Alids drafted Ahmad al-Badawi to their cause. Al-Badawi is thought to have developed the idea of the eternal Muhammadan Reality, which some authors see as an entirely Shi'iitic belief. Contemporary Sufi scholars reject the idea that Sufis were ever Shi'iites in disguise, although they readily acknowledge the 'Alid lineage of the major saints of Egypt and the profound love the Sufis have for the ahl al-bayt.

Since the Sufi gnostics inherited a portion of the divine light that Muhammad passed on to his descendants, Sufis believe it is incumbent on those who hope to attain the presence of the beloved to attach themselves to a gnostic, who alone will be able to provide him with what he needs in his journey toward God. According to a popular saying, “He who has no sheikh, Satan is his sheikh.” Therefore, one must be exceedingly devoted to one's sheikh and, by virtue of love for one's sheikh, achieve fanā in him before one can go on to fanā in the Prophet and ultimately fanā in God. Even a non-Muslim, through devoted attachment to a Muslim gnostic, may enter into the divine presence through Muhammad. Without the presence of a gnostic, even the prayers and dhikr of the believer do not reach God, said Sheikh 'Izz al-Hawari, although exception is made for the five obligatory daily prayers, because the spirit of a gnostic must initially carry the spirit of the uninitiated to the throne of God. Therefore the Prophet said, “It is better for you to sit with a gnostic of God the length of time it takes to milk a ewe than to worship for sixty years.”

So it is not just a matter of saving knowledge that is gained, but of saving association. In fact, according to Sheikh Ahmad Radwan, so necessary is it to follow a spiritual teacher, that the Prophet said, “Whoever dies without an oath to an imam dies the death of the jahiliyya.” One can hardly avoid noticing the similarity to the Shi'iitic hadith, “Whoever dies without knowing the imam of his age dies the death of an unbeliever.” As the latter hadith indicates, the saving knowledge is not knowledge learned from the imam but knowledge of who the imam is. Likewise in contemporary Sufism, knowledge of the secrets is reserved for the elite (al-khawass). All that is expected of the mass of Sufis (al-'awamm) is emotional devotion to the Prophet, his family, and their sheikh. That is the saving knowledge and association. It is a matter of being near the source of blessing and knowledge. Most people attach themselves to a sheikh for his baraka, and because he can perform miracles, and because he stirs their hearts with love and devotion. They hope that by attaching themselves to a sheikh and devoting themselves to the saints they will be accepted by God. What they seek is not to know secrets but to attach themselves to the chain of blessing.
Here, then, is another point on which popular Sufi devotion is similar to popular Shi‘ism. Al-Ghazali, in his _al-Munqidh min al-dalāl_, ridiculed the Nizari Isma‘ili Shi‘ites for spending all their lives searching for the source of knowledge, but failing to derive any benefit (i.e., any knowledge) from that source (the imam) once they find it. “They are like a man smeared with filth, who so wears himself with the search for water that when he comes upon it he does not use it but remains smeared with dirt.”91 Hodgson speculates that Ghazali’s questions were “unreal” to the Nizaris, “having to do with difficulties not arising within their authoritative system.”92 But for the great intellectual for whom the spiritual quest is a search for knowledge, what distinguished Sufism from Shi‘ism, though both claimed esoteric knowledge, is that “the mystics were men who had real experiences, not men of words,”93 whereas the Shi‘ites were obsessed with mere knowledge of who is the perfect guide, but remain themselves barred from access to real spiritual experience.94 Nasr’s discussion of Sufism and Shi‘ism gives a more exact parallel of the imam’s and the sheikh’s functions as spiritual guide.95 According to Nasr, there is a Shi‘itic elite that makes claim to knowledge of divine mysteries, though the mass of people do not attain to it. Among the Sufis of today one might say very much the same thing.

CONCLUSION

Too often Islamicists have failed to take into account the currents of contemporary popular piety. The field has remained tied to classical texts, which, while rightfully taking precedence in scholarship, should not be followed to the exclusion of fieldwork, particularly if this results in our defining Islam in a manner that does not reflect the perspectives of its adherents.

In the case of contemporary Sufism, published studies too often reflect shallow penetration into the world of popular Sufism, which is either misunderstood or dismissed as irrelevant and in decline. The contention of this article is that an essential component of contemporary popular understanding of the meaning of Sufism among its adherents is devotion to the Prophet and his family and belief in their cosmic significance. In Egyptian Sufism, devotion to the Prophet and his family forms an essential focus of piety, to the extent that, if one is to believe the poetry, songs, and sayings of the Sufis, they hope for forgiveness of their sins on the basis of their devotion to the Prophet’s family. The very thing that allegedly distinguishes Shi‘ism from Sunni Islam at the level of popular piety—devotion to the family of the Prophet as the focus of religious life and hope of salvation—is very much present among the Sufis. Both Sufis and Shi‘ites express their devotion to the _ahl al-bayt_ by visiting their tombs and cultivating a personal relationship with them. However, the passion motif so intrinsic to Shi‘itic devotion to the _ahl al-bayt_ is largely absent among Egyptian Sufis, and constitutes the single greatest difference between them.

Similar to a common Shi‘itic conception of gnosis (‘ilm), Sufi gnosis (ma‘rifa) is conceived in terms of a light passed from Muhammad to his descendants; although in theory it may also be inherited by saints who are not of the _ahl al-bayt_, in fact almost all saints claim descent from the Prophet, and this greatly enhances
their legitimacy. Although there is no shortage of gnostics, one generally attaches oneself to a sheikh not to gain esoteric knowledge or subject oneself to rigid disciplines, but to be in contact with that divine light that has been passed down from the Prophet, to receive some of the overflow of the baraka that has been passed down through the chain of blessing, and to find acceptance with God. One attaches oneself to a sheikh because a sheikh is regarded as a necessary guide in one’s spiritual life, for, as the saying goes, he who has no sheikh has Satan for a sheikh. In practice, Sufism means primarily love and devotion to one’s sheikh, the saints, and the Prophet. The visions one receives are not visions of God’s glory but of one’s sheikh, the saints, and the Prophet. For some Sufis, to fail to receive such visions should make one doubt one’s salvation, for they are proof of the saving attachment.

My description of contemporary Sufi doctrine and practice indicates two important points on which popular Egyptian Sufism overlaps with Shi‘ism: devotion to the ahl al-bayt as the basis of salvation, and the soteriological quality attached to association with the heir of the prophetic light—in the case of the Shi‘ites, the imam, in the case of the Sufis, a sheikh. Although previous scholars have noted the influence of ‘Alid loyalism in Sunni Islam, particularly among the Sufis, the central and redemptive role of devotion to the ahl al-bayt in Sufism in a Sunni country has not previously been noted. Likewise, although the parallel of sheikh to imam as recipient of divine secrets has frequently been asserted, the importance among the Sufis of physical descent as a means of receiving the prophetic light and the fact that among the Sufis, as among the Shi‘ites, for the masses it is a saving association with the bearer of divine secrets, not esotericism, that is central, have not previously been made explicit. Although devotion to the ahl al-bayt is not uniform in all Sunni countries, Egyptian Sufism cannot be isolated from Sufism in other countries, given the fact that it is derived from Moroccan and Iraqi Sufism, and has not developed in isolation from currents elsewhere. Indirect Shi‘itic influence on Egyptian Sufism during the crucial period of the formation of the major orders from the 12th through 15th centuries remains a distinct possibility, especially as this was an age when Sunnis were wont to endorse moderate Shi‘ism in the form of veneration for ‘Ali and other members of the Prophet’s family. The extent to which Sufism in other countries also reflects these features must be discovered through fieldwork. Nonetheless, this study of contemporary Egyptian Sufism should prompt us to reconsider the basis on which we describe contemporary Sufism and distinguish between Sufi and Shi‘itic piety.

NOTES

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1The most recent and faithful study of contemporary Egyptian Sufism (Earle H. Waugh, The Munshidin of Egypt: Their World and Their Song [Columbia, S.C., 1989]), says that the goal of the individual in dhikr is fanā‘, which he interprets as trance, a highly individualistic striving for union with God, whereas contemporary Egyptian Sufism is much more communalistic in its interpretation and goals, and associates fanā‘ with love and identification, not with trance.
This tendency, extremely common among Muslim authors, is also reflected in Western writings, such as L. P. Elwell-Sutton, “Sufism and Pseudo-Sufism,” in *Islam in the Modern World*, ed. Denis MacEoin and Ahmed al-Shahi (New York, 1983), 49–56.


5It is significant, I believe, that Sufis all around Egypt frequently expressed, either to me or in conversations with each other in my presence, their contempt for the supreme council, and their belief that its leaders were men whose knowledge of Sufism was derived entirely from books, not from genuine spiritual experience.

6As Marshall Hodgson wrote, the Shi’ites “believed that their love for the suffering imams would win them forgiveness for their own sins and a share in the victory of the righteous in the end,” *The Venture of Islam* (Chicago, 1974), 1:378. Further down on the same page, Hodgson notes that the Sunnis, while rejecting major aspects of Shi’iitic devotion, did respond to the glorification of its main figures: “‘Ali became a major hero and Muhammad was given metaphysical status, while Husayn has been bewailed by many Sunnis almost as much as by Shi’is.” For a glimpse at the variety in popular understanding and acceptance of the redemptive quality of love for the imams in Twelver Shi’ism, see Reinhold Loeflter, *Islam in Practice: Religious Beliefs in a Persian Village* (Albany, 1988).


8The word khidma, which literally means “service,” signifies here a place where people sleep and serve food and drinks at various mawlids. The khidamat are often in special tents set up for the mawlids, but they may also be set up on the sidewalk or in a building.


12*Al-Nafahat al-rabbāniyya* (a collection of the sayings and teachings of Sheikh Ahmad Muhammad Radwan), 3rd ed. (Kom Ombo, 1986), 177. Ahmad Radwan was particularly respected by Gamal Abdel Nasser, who visited his sahha and built the Radwaniyya train station nearby.

The four recognized qutbs (founders of the Sufi orders in Egypt) are Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani (d. 1166) of Iraq, founder of the Qadiriyya; Ahmad al-Rifa'i of Iraq, founder of the Rifaciyya; Ahmad al-Badawi of Morocco, founder of the Ahmadiyya; and Ibrahim al-Dasuqi, from Dauq in the Egyptian Delta, founder of the Burhamiyya. Equally important in the history of Egyptian Sufism is Abu '1-Hasan al-Shadhili of Morocco, founder of the Shadhiliyya. Amir al-Najjar outlines the interconnectedness of the Orders in their origins, and comments that one cannot speak of a local Sufism in Egypt until Dasuqi.


14Najjar, Al-turuq al-sufiya, 282.
15Ahmad ibn Muḥammad ibn ʻIsā ibn ʻIyād, Al-mafākhir al-ʻaliyya (Cairo, 1961), 105, quoted in Najjar, Al-turuq al-sufiya, 200.
16Ibid., 200–201.
17The Qur’anic verse, “Do not hasten to deliver the Qur’ān before its revelation to you is completed” (20:114), was taken by Muhammad ʻUthmān al-Burhānī (d. 1983), who, according to an internal census in 1976, claimed three million followers in Egypt, to indicate that Muhammad had the Qur’ān before Gabriel brought it in detailed form. Indeed, according to a hadith, he is the source of the revelation transmitted by Gabriel. Tabrī‘at al-dhimma fi nush al-umma (Khartoum, 1974), 10–17. ʻAbd al-Karim al-Jili, citing the hadith, “The Qur’ān was revealed to me in one piece,” had previously written that the perfect man, or Muḥammād reality, is coequal with amm al-kitāb, the archetype of the Qur’ān, since both are manifestations of the divine essence. Al-ʻInsān al-kamīl: fā ʿirfāt al-awākhir wa ʻl-awādīl (Cairo, 1988), 1–94, cited in Vincent J. Cornell, “Mirrors of Prophethood: The Evolving Image of the Spiritual Master in the Western Maghrib from the Origins of Sufism to the End of the Sixteenth Century” (Ph.D. diss., University of California at Los Angeles, 1989), 573.

18Al-Ibriz, a collection of the teachings of Sidi ʻAbd al-ʻAzīz al-Dabbagh of Fez as written by Ahmad ibn al-Mubārak al-Sijīlmašī (Cairo, n.d.), 54. This book is well known among educated Sufis in Egypt, and was recommended to me by a sheikh in the province of Qena as the best introduction to Sufism. This was also preached in a Friday sermon in a village in Asyut by Sheikh ʻIzz al-ʻArab al-Hawārī.

19All of these statements are taken from public addresses given at mawlids or other Sufi gatherings.

20Zaki Mubarak, Al-maddī‘ih al-nabawiyya fi ʻI-adab al-ʻarabī (Cairo, 1935), 154–55. Al-Busrī was an Egyptian of the province now known as Beni Suef, who lived 1211–94.

21Māʻs taḥyīyat al-tariqa ʻl-jazuliyya ʻl-husayniyya ʻl-shadhiliyya, a small handbook for members of the Jazuliyya Husayniyya Shadhiliyya order founded by Sheikh Gabīr Husayn Ahmad al-Jazuli, 169.

22Fānā 2 is rarely discussed openly, and it was only my association with a sheikh that encouraged other sheikhs to speak of this subject with me. In the works of Dr. ʻAbd al-Halīm Mahmūd and other recent Egyptian scholars of Sufism, fānā 2 is discussed only through the definition found in classical Sufi writings, but in contemporary Sufi practice one rarely hears of fānā 3 in God; instead, one speaks of fānā 2 in one’s sheikh and fānā 3 in the Prophet. J. Spencer Tringham believes that the concept of annihilation in the Messenger, and spiritual concentration upon the Prophetic essence as regular discipline for Sufi disciples, emerged in what is known as the “Muhammadan Path” (al-tariqa ʻl-muhammadiyya) in the teachings of Ahmad al-Tijānī (1737–1815) in the Maghrib (which were also influential in Sudan) and of Ahmad ibn Idrīs (1760–1837), the influential teacher in Mecca from whom sprang a number of different orders. As he put it, “The two Ahmads both stressed that the purpose of ḍhikr was union with the spirit of the Prophet, rather than union with God—a change which affected the basis of the mystical life”;

23The Sufi Orders in Islam (Oxford, 1971), 106. Vincent Cornell attributes the emergence of this trend to the Moroccan sheikh, Muḥammad ibn Sulaymān al-Jazulī (d. 1465), whose popular devotional handbook, Dala‘īl al-khayrāt wa-shawārīq al-anwār fī ḍhikr al-ṣalāt ʻalā ʻl-nabi al-mukhtar, a guide to the invocation of blessings on the Prophet and his family, became widely used throughout the Muslim world. However, he acknowledges that a similar book by the same title was said to have been written in Iran at about the same time, indicating the currency of his ideas; “Mirrors of Prophethood,” 477–479, 507. In Tabrī‘at al-dhimma fi nush al-umma, 36–57, Muḥammad ʻUthman reproduces a lengthy segment of al-Jili’s Al-nāmus al-a‘zam wa ʻl-qāmus al-aqdam fi mā ʻirfāt qadr al-nabi sallā Allāhu ʻalaihi wa-sallam. This text was allegedly in forty parts, but Muḥammad ʻUthman says he found only pts. 10–12. He reproduces pt. 10, entitled Qāb qawṣayn wa multaqāt ʻl-namūsāyn, based on three different manuscripts—in Medina, Cairo, and Aleppo. In this text, Jili says that by loving Muḥammad one enters the secrets of existence and enters annihilation (fānā 3). “The Messenger is in you as a substitute for
you, so you may take on the disposition of his noble reality.” Annihilation in the Prophet is the way to true mystical experience. Jili ends with instructions concerning the manner of concentrating on the Prophet, picturing him before the eyes, as the means to this end. If this text is genuine, meditation on the Prophet as a mystical experience predates the Muhammadan path, and predates Ibn Idris, Sanusi, and Tijani, by several centuries.

25 This hadith qudsi has usually been taken to mean that the hearts of all believing servants contain God.

26 Ma’a tahiyāt al-ṭariqa ‘l-jāzuliyya, 118.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid., 118.

29 Ibid., 206.

30 Al-Nafahāt al-rabbāniyya, 178.

31 Ibid., 183.

32 Ibid.

33 Poem quoted by Sheikh Ahmad Radwan, Al-nafahdt al-rabbdniyya, 185.


35 Al-Nafahāt al-rabbāniyya, 180.


37 Recent books on the special status of the ahl al-bayt include: Abd al-‘Aziz al-‘Ayidi al-Tijāni, Ahl al-qurba hum ahī Allah wa-khāṣṣatuhu (Cairo, 1984); Ibrāhīm Ramaḏān ‘Alī [Sheikh Fāris], Min faḍā’il wa-khaṣṣa’īs al al-bayt (Cairo, 1985); and many books focusing on individuals in the Prophet’s family, e.g., Tawfiq Abū ‘Alam, Ahl al-bayt: Fāṭima al-Zahrā (Cairo, 1972), the first of a series of books on the Prophet’s family; and Mūsā Muhammad ‘Alī, ‘Aqilat al-ṭurāh wa-l-karam, al-Sayyida Zaynāb, raddiya Allāh ‘anhu (Cairo, 1984). Muhammad Zaki Ibrāhīm, sheikh of the Muhammadīyya Shaykhīyya order and founder of the large voluntary association, al-‘Ashira ‘l-Muhammadiyya, is a respected “reformed” Sufi sheikh who has nonetheless spent a good deal of energy defending the Sufi practices of saint shrine visitation and veneration of the ahl al-bayt. See Al-taṣīr bi-mushāhid shahīrat al al-bayt bi-l-Qāhira, 2nd ed. (Cairo, 1980).

38 Sheikh Fāris, Min faḍā’il wa-khaṣṣa’īs al al-bayt, 6.

39 According to one version of the hadith, this event occurred in the apartment of the Prophet’s wife Umm Salama, and she reportedly asked if she were not to be included in this. In most versions the Prophet affirms that Umm Salama also has her special status as his wife, but she is not included in the ahl al-bayt; one version implies that the wives of the Prophet are also included. For a discussion of some of the versions of this hadith accepted in Sunni Islam, see Ibrāhīm, Al-taḳṣīr, 5. Ibn Ṭaymiyya wrote that since hadith clarifies and explains the Qur’ānic text, although the context of the Qur’ānic text would seem to imply that the ahl al-bayt include Muhammad’s wives, for they are indeed of his house, the hadith specifies that only ‘Alī, Fatima, Hasan, and Husayn are meant, “for the bond of kinship is stronger than the bond of marriage.” Huqūq al al-bayt bayn al-rusul wa-l-imām ‘alā ‘l-Qāhira, 2nd ed. (Cairo, 1980).

40 For example, the commentary given by A. Yusuf Ali in his translation of the Qur’an, The Meaning of the Glorious Qur’an (Cairo, n.d.), 2:1312, n. 4560.

41 Ibn al-Khāṭīb, Awdah al-tavafṣīr (Cairo, ca. 1935), 594, says that although love for the Prophet’s family is an obligation on all believers, this is not implied by the verse because it would imply a reward for delivering the message.


43 This is known as hadith al-thaqalayn, various versions of which may be found. See Ibrāhīm, Al-taṣīr, 37–39.

44 Sheikh Fāris, Min faḍā’il wa-khaṣṣa’īs al al-bayt, 24.

45 Al-‘urwa ‘l-wuthqā, here translated as “most trustworthy hand-hold,” is found in two verses in the Qur’ān: “Whoever rejects evil and believes in God has grasped the most trustworthy hand-hold that never breaks” (2:256), and “Whoever submits his whole self to God is a doer of good has indeed grasped the most trustworthy hand-hold” (31:22). Although there is nothing in these verses to indicate this, the ahl al-bayt are frequently called al-‘urwa ‘l-wuthqā.
It has often been asserted that the mawlids have their origin from Fatimid times, because the Fatimids celebrated the anniversaries of the Prophet, ʿAli, Fatima, and the ruling imam. Although the Fatimids may in fact have initiated this observance, H. Fuchs points out that the Fatimid mawlids took place only at the court in broad daylight and bore little resemblance to the contemporary nocturnal carnivals (“Mawlid,” EI 1, 3:420). Of these four mawlids, the only one that continues to be observed is that of the Prophet, which is, despite considerable official support, the least spectacular of the major mawlids, since it is celebrated all over the country in various locations and even on different dates, rather than being concentrated around a shrine-tomb like the other mawlids. The physical presence of the saint's body is vital, and has contributed to the importance of the mawlids of Husayn, Sayyida Zaynab, ʿAli Zayn al-ʿAbidin, Fatima al-Nabawiyya, and other members of the ahl al-bayt allegedly buried in Egypt, and the complete absence of the celebration of mawlids for ʿAli and Fatima. Sunni historians and theologians trace the origin of the mawlid to a Prophet's birthday celebration in Arbela, southeast of Mosul, in 1207, arranged by Muzaffar al-Din Kūkūrī/Kūkūrū, a brother-in-law of Saladin. This celebration, influenced by Christian rites, bore many of the features of the modern-day mawlid (Ibn Khallikān cited in Fuchs, “Mawlid,” 420). Gustave E. von Grunebaum, in Muhammadan Festivals (New York, 1951), p. 73, says that with the growth of Sufism in Egypt under the Ayyubids, the mawlid took root there and spread from there throughout the Muslim world. This would seem to indicate that Fatimid influence on the popular religion of the Egyptian masses was limited.

The glorification of the Prophet, resulting in the doctrines of the eternal Muhammadan reality, has a very long history, culminating in the teachings of Ibn al-ʿArabī and ʿAbd al-Karim al-Jili. The influence of Ibn al-ʿArabī on popular Sufism across the Muslim world is still quite palpable. Concerning Ibn al-ʿArabī’s deep knowledge of Shiʿism, see al-Shaybānī, Al-Ṣīla bayn al-taṣawwuf waʿl-tashayyuʿ, 377–78. Cornell attributes the mystical version of the imitatio Muhammadi to both Shiʿī antecedents and the pre-Islamic Arab and Berber tendencies to venerate tribal ancestors and heroes, which had become projected onto the Prophet’s family (“Mirrors of Prophethood,” 557–59). Some scholars have suggested that the strongly ʿAlid leanings in the Sunni world can be partially attributed to the growth in urban areas, often in association with the trade guilds, of the ḥanafī orders, for whom ʿAlī was the exemplary faṭḥā, or brave young man, Louis Massincong, “ʿṢin,” EI 1; Hodgson, The Venture of Islam, 2:130, 283–84; Momen, Introduction to Shiʿī Islam, 90.

One anonymous reviewer of this article asked whether the Sufis are, in Hodgson’s terms, textualists or traditionalists (Venture of Islam, 1:63–66). They are not exclusively one or the other. Many of their teaching stories and poems are left entirely vague as to their origin, but on the other hand the authority of the Qurʾan and hadith is brought to bear, especially on controversial issues. The reformers have forced the Sufis to become more “textualist” than they would otherwise have been.

Momen, Introduction to Shiʿī Islam, 96. On the amorphous nature of political and dogmatic boundaries in the region from Anatolia to Iran at this time, see Mazzauout, The Origins of the ʿṢafawīs. 51Sufi veneration of the twelve imams is not uncommon in certain orders, such as the Bektashīyya of Turkey and the Chishtīyya and Qadīrīyya of India, despite antagonism between Sunnis and Shiʿītes in those countries.

This last point of view is also shared by Ibn Taymiyya, Huqūq al-āl al-bayt, 19. 52Muslim extremists in Egypt are often called suʿnīyyīn in popular usage. Given our tendency to see the Muslim world as comprised largely of Sunnis and Shiʿītes, it is amusing for the outsider to hear Egyptian Muslims denouncing both al-suʿnīyyīn and al-shīʿa.

Ibid., 103. 54Hamid Enayat, Modern Islamic Political Thought, 2nd printing (Austin, Tex., 1988), 183.
Devotion to the Prophet and His Family in Sufism


60Enayat, Modern Islamic Political Thought, 181.

61Mubarak, Al-madd'ih al-nabawiyya, 55. He describes his own incredulity when, as a student at al-Azhar, he heard that these processions took place in Cairo. He normally went to his home village during 'Ashura', but one year he remained in the capital specifically to observe these ceremonies, and found that they did indeed occur. He calls those who engaged in these practices Shi'ites.

62With the possible exception of the mawlid of Sayyid Ahmad al-Badawi in Tanta.

63There is a similar saying of the Prophet pertaining to 'Ali, but the proximity of Husayn's shrine and his special position as martyr no doubt contribute to make the saying with regard to Husayn the more frequently quoted in Egypt.

64In fact, Sheikh 'Izz al-Hawari denied altogether the reality of Husayn's martyrdom, in a teaching spontaneously given in a tent during the mawlid of Husayn in December 1987, before a small audience of about twenty men, who joyfully embraced this new teaching. According to Sheikh 'Izz, Husayn, like Jesus, had a body of pure light, so, like Jesus, Husayn's death was an illusion. The proof that Jesus was of light was that the Qur'an says God purified Mary over other women, and ritual purity entails an absence of menstrual and postpartum blood. Hence, the child she bore could not have been flesh and blood. Likewise, Fatima is said to have prayed the maghrib prayer directly after giving birth to Husayn, which implied that she had no postpartum blood. Husayn, therefore, could not have been flesh and blood. On the correspondence of Fatima to Mary and Husayn to Jesus in popular Shi'ism, see Ayoub, Redemptive Suffering, 35–36. According to a hadith, 'Umar asked the Prophet why he called Fatima and Mary batul (virgin), and the Prophet replied that the batul is she who has never seen any blood. In another hadith, the Prophet calls Fatima a "human houri," Abu 'Alam, Abl al-Bayt: Fāṭima 'l-Zahrā', 72–73. I have not heard any sheikh other than Sheikh 'Izz deny the martyrdom of Husayn, and he says this is acknowledged by only an elite among gnostics. The denial of the martyrdom is consistent with Sunni expectations of the victory of the righteous, but is not consistent with Twelver Shi'ite piety.


66For example, Ibrahim, Al-tabṣir, 9. Tales concerning the jubilant welcome accorded to Sayyida Zaynab and Sayyida Nafisa indicate the veneration of the ahb al-bayt in Egypt.

67Sayyid 'Uways, Al-Ibdā' al-thaqafi 'ald 'l-tarlqa 'l-misriyya: dirdsa can bacd al-qiddisin wa 'l-awliyd fi misr (Cairo, 1980), 22–23.

68Ali, Aqilat al-tuhr, 8.

69This particular expression, taken literally, might lead to a disregard for a Muslim's obligatory acts of worship, and Sheikh Ahmad al-Sharqawi of Najj Hammadi—son of the famous Khalwati sheikh, Abu 'l-Wafa' al-Sharqawi (d. 1961)—gently expressed his disapproval of this line during an interview (April 1988), for it might promote extremism. Lines of poetry or song, however, frequently express levels of love and devotion that exceed what might be expected from theological discourse. I have not heard any sheikh condone abandoning one's religious obligations for the sake of devotion to the saints. Rather, devotion to the saints should cause the devotee to imitate their lifestyle, which was typically one of great piety and correct religious observance.

70Nonetheless the madad of the saints is thought to produce tangible results, for God helps those who love His saints and fights those who hate them. When we were visiting the shrine of Abu 'l-Hasan al-Shadhili on the Red Sea with an excursion of the followers of Sheikh Ahmad Radwan, my fifteen-month-old daughter had severe diarrhea, a problem exacerbated by the lack of water. Sheikh 'Izz rebuked me, saying, "If you had said, 'Madad, Sidi Abu 'l-Hasan al-Shadhili,' she would not have had diarrhea."

71Tijāni, Ahl al-qurbā, 80, 89.

72Ibid.

73This occurs with non-Sufis as well as Sufis. Among the many stories I heard while in the field, one of them stands out as an example of the seriousness of spiritual adoption. A Coptic woman who was unable to bear children was taken by a Muslim neighbor to the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab, after which she conceived and bore a daughter. Later, however, the child became inexplicably paralyzed, and the physicians were unable to help her. The woman's Muslim neighbor said that since the child had been given by Sayyida Zaynab, she was the daughter of Sayyida Zaynab, and must be taken to her regularly.
The woman took her daughter to the shrine, and the girl was healed. After the girl was fully grown and married, by virtue of a series of visions and miracles, she converted to Islam.

According to one such story, a man who was especially devoted to Sayyida Zaynab became angry when during one of his visits to her shrine she did not return his greeting as usual. He left like a spurned lover, vowing never to return. But she appeared to him in a dream to tell him that behind him she had seen the Prophet, in whose presence she dared not speak, and this is why she had not returned his greeting. So they were reconciled.

As Goldziher noted, “In Muslim belief [according to hadith] ‘God forbade the soil to consume the bodies of prophets buried in it,’ i.e., to let them decay, and this belief was extended to the bodies of martyrs, theologians and muezzins”—and saints. “Veneration of Saints in Islam,” Muslim Studies, trans. C. R. Barber and S. M. Stern (London, 1971), 2:286. He goes on to say that legends abound concerning saintly prevention of people from exhuming their bodies in order to transfer them to new graves, as this was considered a desecration, but I heard many stories of successful recent exhumations, among both Muslims and Copts, upon which the saint was discovered still alive, “asleep,” after hundreds of years. The Copts have a particularly grisly custom of preserving the “living flesh” of dismembered martyrs from the Roman era; the receptacles containing these fragments are sometimes opened during the mawlid of the saint for public view.


Interview with the author, July 1988. His perspective largely conforms to what Seyyed Hossein Nasr calls the Shi‘itite point of view: “From the Sunni point of view,” wrote Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “Sufism presents similarities to Shi‘ism and has even assimilated aspects thereof. . . . From the Shi‘i point of view Shi‘ism is the origin of what later came to be known as Sufism. But here by Shi‘ism is meant the esoteric instructions of the Prophet, the asrâr which many Shi‘i authors have identified with the Shi‘i concealment, taqiyya,” “Shi‘ism and Sufism,” 102. Henry Corbin went even further by saying, “True Shi‘ism is the same as tasawwuf, and similarly, genuine and real tasawwuf cannot be anything other than Shi‘ism.” “Sîh guftar dar bab-i tarikh-i ma’nawiyyat-i Iran,” Majalla-yi Dánishkada-yi Adabiyyât 5 (1959): 46–51, 52–57, 58–63; cited in Mazzauoi, The Origins of the Şâfawids, 83.

E.g., Najjâr, Al-turuq al-sûfiyya, 213. Throughout his book, Najjâr defends Sufism from accusations of Shi‘itic influence, and claims that blood descent is irrelevant in Islam, as proven by the fact that many foreigners, especially Moroccans, were recognized as saints in Egypt. However, he fails to consider the importance of the claim by most or all of these saints of descent from the Prophet, which outweighed their status as non-natives.

Sidi 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Dabbagh gives a long list of sheikhs whose secrets he claimed to have inherited, Al-Ibriz, 8–14.

Samîya, daughter of the Burhami sheikh Abu 'l-Ma‘âti, and Fatima, known as Haggâ Layla, daughter of Sheikh Ibrahim of the Musallamiyya Khalwatiyya, are two examples of women who are acknowledged by the order as having inherited a greater share of the spiritual secrets of their fathers than their brothers, although the brothers inherited the position of sheikh.

Abd al-Wahhab al-Shârâni, the 16th-century Egyptian mystic, argued that the ashrâf should be venerated, without fear of creating suspicions of being Shi‘ite. The ashrâf were highly respected on a popular level in his time, but later in the 18th and 19th centuries acquired as a class great wealth and power. Michael Winter, Society and Religion in Early Ottoman Egypt: Studies in the Writings of 'Abd al-Wahhab al-Shârâni (New Brunswick, 1982), 278–82. Already in the last quarter of the 14th century, the Mamluk sultan ordered the ashrâf to wear distinctive clothing. Sheikh 'Izz al-Hawari claimed that once while he was approaching the tent of the Burhami sheikh, Abu'l-Ma‘âti, at a mawlid in the Delta, the latter rose to greet him despite his infirmity, telling his disciples, “I will not sit when the grandson of my lord the Prophet approaches.” Since he had never previously met Sheikh Abu'l-Ma‘âti, and since the ashrâf no longer wear distinctive dress, Sheikh 'Izz sees this as indication of the sheikh's spiritual insight. The story also indicates the extreme veneration given to descendants of the Prophet in Egyptian Sufi piety.


Najjâr, Al-turuq al-sûfiyya, 44.

Article in Al-Siyasa 'l-usbuiyya, quoted in Muhammad Fahmi 'Abd al-Latîf, Al-Sayyid al-Badawi aw dawlat al-darâwîsh fi miṣr (Cairo, 1948), 45. Dr. 'Abd al-Ḥalim Maḥmûd defended Ahmad al-
Badawi against accusations that he was Shiʿite in Al-Sayyid Ahmad al-Badawi, radiya 'Ilāhu ʿanhu (Cairo, 1969), 30, 32. Najjar points out that Badawi lived for forty years in Egypt without ever being accused of being a Fatimid propagandist, and says that contemporary historians suspect him because nine of the twelve imams were among his ancestors, Al-ṭuruq al-ṣūfiyya, 163.

Najjar, Al-ṭuruq al-ṣūfiyya, 32; al-Sayyid Muhammad Midi Abū ʿl-ʿAzāʾīm, sheikh of the ʿAzmīyya, Mudhakkirat al-murshidin wa ʿl-mustarshidin, 2nd ed. (Cairo, 1983), 57; Al-Nafahat al-rabbāniyya, 181–82.

This statement might appear controversial to some, but this was affirmed repeatedly in my presence by sheikhs from various orders, including Shadhili, Khalwati, and Rifaʿi orders.

I was assured of this by various Sufis regarding my own attachment to a sheikh, despite the fact that I had not converted to Islam. My sheikh also said, regarding a living Coptic woman saint who was known for her miracles of healing, that she had entered into the Muhammadan presence by virtue of her belief in and attachment to a Sufi sheikh. She herself denied this.

These remarks were made during an interview in a village in Qena province with Sheikh Wafī Muhammad Wafī, head of the Rifaʿiyya in Asyut, Suhaq, and Qena, 25 May 1988. It is interesting that Sheikh Wafī, a Rifaʿi, asked Sheikh ʿIzz, a Shadhili, to elaborate to me the concept of fanda in the sheikh as a prerequisite of fanaʿ in the Prophet. Sheikh ʿIzz considers himself a Shadhili because his “inner oath” (Cahd bdtini) was to Abu ʿl-Ḥasan al-Shadhili through visions, although his original teacher, Sheikh Ahmad Radwan, was a Khalwati. He later studied under Dr. Abd al-Ḥalim Mahmoud, a Shadhili. There is no real difference in Sufi doctrine among the main Sufi orders, only a difference of mashrâb (“drinking place”), that is, source of guidance in a chain leading back to the Prophet, and a difference in the daily recitation of prayers (awrād) and dhikr.

Al-Nafahat al-rabbāniyya, 181.


Watt, Faith and Patience, 54.

Nonetheless, Ismaʿili teaching did involve tutoring in hidden truths, which were intended, like Sufi teaching, to result in spiritual purification and refinement. S. M. Stern, Studies in Early Ismaʿilism (Jerusalem, 1983), 60–61.


Considering the importance of the tomb-shrine of saints in popular devotion in Egypt, we might hypothesize that a similar devotion to the family of the Prophet would be more likely to occur in Sunni countries that possessed such shrines. In Iraq, the most likely candidate, Sunni–Shiʿite antipathies in the context of a strong Shiʿite population appear to suppress ʿAlid enthusiasm among Sunnis, according to a member of the audience at the annual MESA meeting in Toronto where I presented an original version of this paper (November 1989). Another person said that in Turkey devotion to the Prophet is strong, but not in his family. B. G. Martin, however, attests to the strength of ʿAlid sentiments in the Turkish Khalwatiyya, an order with strong Shiʿite connections in its origins. “A Short History of the Khalwati Order of Dervishes,” in Scholars, Saints, and Sufis, ed. Nikki R. Keddie (Berkeley, Calif., 1972), 275–305. In Pakistan and India, there appears to be a strong devotion to the ahl al-bayt among Sunni Sufis, similar to what I have documented for Egypt, according to Vernon Schubel, in personal communications as well as in his presentation at the November 1989 meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Anaheim, California, “Narrative and Ritual in Sufi Pilgrimage.”