



SUFI SHRINES AND POLITICS OF NEOPATRIMONIALISM: ANALYSIS SINCE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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Abstract

Since the inception of Sufi fraternities, the political elite sought patrimonial relations with them due to their socio-religious prestige, but the twentieth century witnessed the transformation of these relations from patrimonial to neopatrimonial, based on the exchange of services. This paper develops its argument further that sajjadah nashins or care takers of Sufi shrines gave their support in exchange to politico-economic benefits with taking the examples of African and Asian Muslim countries. This research is a qualitative analysis of this mutual exchange based relations of services and benefits, as an impact of growing consumerism in the countries under colonial rule, since the twentieth century. Based on historical empiricism this research finds that those states where political elite saw Sufi fraternities as a potential threat also went through a transformation after the incident of 9/11, for Sufism was categorized as a tolerant side of Islam in contrast to intolerant Islamic militant groups.

Key Words: Colonial, exchange of services, neopatrimonialism, *sajjadah nashins*, Sufi shrines.

Introduction

Sufi shrines are one of the most significant and frequent socio-religious entities as any other institution of Islam, i.e. mosques, because both the institutions promote the idea of Muslim brotherhood. Although the fraternities emerging out of both the institutions have been associated to a dichotomous relation of *shari'a-tasawwuf* binary, (Ewing, 2020) popularly reflecting contradiction to each other, even so firm in their socio-political stature. *Tasawwuf* or Sufism is a truly popular form of Muslim devotion, as every believer can approach some aspect of the ideal by leading a pious life, by following the teachings of a personal *Shaykh*, and by participating in rituals at the *khanqah* in villages and towns. The Sufi fraternities spread ever more widely over the Muslim lands. The interactions among Sufis soon involved the more structured relationship of master and disciple. Moreover, in the course of time the stabilization of Sufi institutional structures took place so that by the thirteenth century many Sufi groups became self-perpetuating social organizations whose central focus was the founder and his teacher.



Apparently there seems no connection between Sufism and politics, but the development of Sufi brotherhoods and fraternities under the influence of these Sufi saints gave them the highest possible social status, which even sometimes was more in authority than the political elite. Sufism, besides being the esoteric dimension of Islam that deals with the spiritual aspect of human life, is intricately associated to power and politics. History is evident of such relations of the Sufis and their *sajjadah nashins* with power, legitimacy and authority. They have close interactions with the custodians of political powers, i.e., the Caliphs, Emperors, Sultans, rulers and their subordinates. In the whole Muslim world, Sufism since its inception got some connection with the state and authority but with the advent of Seljuqids in the Abbasid Empire during eleventh century, *madrasahs* and *khanqahs* became significant stakeholders of popular support to gain political power. (Anjum, 2006) This set the examples for the later Zingid and Ayyubid dynasties to patronize the Sufi *khanqahs*. The Sufi hospices of *Shaykh* Najib al-Din Abul Qadir Suhrawardi and *Shaykh* Shihab al-Din Abu Hafs Umar bin Muhammad al Suhrawardi are the examples of cordial terms between the Abbasid rulers of Baghdad and Sufis. (Nizami, 1961) Caliph al-Nasir was the founder of at least six *khanqahs* in Baghdad. (Berkey, 2003)

Mamluks in the twelfth century Egypt appointed *Shaykhs* (heads) of *khanqahs*, while the head of various *khanqahs* were entitled as *Shaykh al-Shuyukh*. (Anjum, 2006) It was the common practice in the Muslim world to officially support the *khanqahs* or appoint their heads who were not necessarily Sufis, i.e. Ibn-i-Khaldun was appointed the head of *khanqah* Baybars in 1392. (Muedini, 2015) These Sufi *khanqahs* were in fact *Auqaf* endowments, therefore former *wazirs* were also appointed as heads. But this does not mean that state and Sufis were on good terms always. We found many names like Hasan al-Basri, Malik ibn Dinar, Fudayl ibn Ayad, Shaqiq al-Balkhi, Imam Ghazali, Hussain ibn Mansur al-Hallaj, Ayn al Qudat Abul Maalik Abd Allah bin Muhammad Hamdani, Shihab al-Din Yahya bin Habsh al-Suhrawardi al-Maqtul, Yahya bin Habsh al Suhrawardi and many more who were not on good terms with the ruling elite of their times and were executed or sentenced to death.

This research paper is demonstrating its argument not through generalizing the cordial relations between Sufis and state throughout the Muslim world but instituting it on the general strategy of the political elite and states of developing good term with the Sufi fraternities in the Muslim world, primarily during and after twentieth century under the framework of neopatrimonialism.

From Patrimonialism to Neopatrimonialism

After having a brief overview of the correlation between Sufism and politics in medieval Muslim empires, it will be interesting to see into the nature of Sufi politics during and after twentieth century in the countries that remained under these empires. The ruling elite in medieval Muslim World provided numerous resources to these Sufi fraternities to receive their religio-political support in warding off political revolts. Through patrimonialism these states developed or nourished many local Sufi groups. (Bellin, 2004) Patrimonialism, as described by Bellin, is



conferring certain advantages on the ruling elite that help them prolong their rule, i.e. demobilizing opposition, constructing a loyal base with the help of favoritism and patronization. Although Sufi fraternities also provide the loyal base to the ruling elite but this relation can be better explained through the idea of neopatrimonialism. Neopatrimonialism is one step ahead from simply providing allegiance to the political leadership, in the way that this allegiance is not based on certain values or norms, but rationally driven exchange of interests between the state and the Sufi groups. (Ilkhamov, 2007) This particular relation between Sufi fraternities and state is different from other such relations for in this the government has to seek its religious or political legitimacy from the Sufi brotherhoods, unlike secular groups, religious networks or business sectors who sought for governmental validation.

Neopatrimonialism and the Sufi Shrines of Muslim African States

The rationally driven exchange of services under neopatrimonialism varies for and within the different state leaders and the Sufi brotherhoods. (Loimeier, 2007) In the case of African Muslim countries this relation was continuously negotiated from being in power to striving for power, from being accommodated through cooperation to political withdrawal or resistance to the state. An example of such relationship between the state and the Sufi fraternity is Murid Sufi order in Senegal. In exchange of tolerating the French colonial rule the Murid Sufi order was given autonomy in their religious affairs and development projects. This cooperation was beneficial for both the stakeholders; the French colonial rulers got the legitimacy to rule and in response Murid Sufi order received their support in education and economic independence in peanut production. (Galvan, 2001) *Marabouts* became elite rural peanut farmers, with full market access, infrastructure and security provided by the French administrators. Because of these economic benefits Murid Sufi order was helping the French colonialists in touting the democratic system and minimizing the chances of political challenges to the state. This exchange of services continued even after the colonial rule, as after the French departure in April 1960, the later political leadership developed relations with the *marabouts*. In exchange for political support they were provided by all the economical support. (Galvan, 2001)

Another such example of mutual cooperation was from Sanusi order in Libya, helping the British to fight against Italy in World War II. (John, 2008) (Hamzeh & Dekmejian, 1996) Sanusi order was established by Sayyid ibn-i-Ali al-Sanusi in the city of Cyrenaica in 1837, and advocated to traditional lifestyle of Muhammadan period. (Cleveland & Bunton, 2008) But after the military coup of Muammar Qaddafi against King Idris al-Sanusi in 1969 the political activities of this Sufi group significantly reduced. The shift in Qaddafi's policies regarding Sufi orders was observed after the increasing threat of radical Salafis and increase in Wahabi Islam in Libya. (Wehrey, 2011) This is similar to the cases of Algeria, Morocco, and Egypt where the governments transformed their policies of resentment towards Sufi groups into cordiality to counter the increasing extremist hold of the Salafi and Wahabi movement. (Brien, 2011) (Glover, 2007) After the incident of 9/11 the need to promote the soft image of Islam was only possible through Sufi orders promoting harmony, brotherhood and tolerance based on humanity. (Werbner, 1996) This shift of policies was



actually the exchange of services; in response to promote tolerant Islam. the Sufi groups were given their religious freedom.

Exchange of Services between Sufi Shrines and State in Muslim Asia

Before the British arrival in India, the networks of Sufi shrines connected within the Sufi orders spread throughout the country developing new shrines and Sufi cults. These new shrines had their own *sajjadah nashins* and separate following or *murids*. (Gilmartin, 1998) These shrines while maintaining their separate identity were linked to each other. Each shrine had its own annual *urs*, (Anjum, 2017) the festival celebrated annually as the memory of the Sufi who's lying buried in the shrine. These festivities made the shrines the centre of socio-economic activities and hub for political power in the rural societies. (Eaton, 1984) Donations and offerings were made for the *sajjadah nashins* which was reciprocated through free community kitchens (*langar*) or organizing magnificent annual '*urs* celebrations. These activities in fact depicted the shrine's prestige in the society resulting in increased political influence.

Through this local political influence the Sufi shrines were significant for the pre-British rulers and later for the British colonial rulers. *Sajjadah nashins* whose honor was based on hereditary rather personal piety were often quick to accept imperial offers of prestigious political positions, and lands. This patrimonial relation was usually based on the expectation of prayers from the *sajjadah nashins* for the prosperity and sustenance of the Mughal Empire.(Eaton, 1978) In some cases the *sajjadah nashins* were given administrative posts, i.e. the descendants of Pir Musa Pak Shahid served as the governors of Multan during Mughal Emperors Shah Jahan and Jahangir's regimes. (Griffin & Massy, 1910) Primarily, these incentives were given in response to the religious support that helped to legitimize the foundation of the state. (Habib, 1963) Through patrimonialism the *sajjadah nashins* were helping the Mughal rulers to connect with the rural societies.

The British colonial rulers were quick to understand the socio-religious significance of these Sufi shrines, because they needed it the most then the previous Mughal rulers for being completely alien to the culture. For this purpose the British had dual policy of rejection and approval; their official policy was to reject religion as the cultural foundation for the state's authority, but unofficially they supported certain *sajjadah nashins* and developed cordial relations with them. (Appadurai, 1981) (Kerr, 1976) After the annexation of Punjab with British rule in 1849, many *sajjadah nashins* became politically more powerful. Their power survived those situations that caused the collapse of Mughal power and *sajjadah nashins* grew actively in the local power politics. (Murray, 1970) Baba Fariduddin Ganj Shakar's descendants at Pakpattan, is an excellent example of the *sajjadah nsahins* asserting power and fighting against local tribal and Sikh chieftains in the mid-eighteenth century, gaining political control in substantial area. (Montgomery District Gazetteer, 1933) This power and prestige in politics and society was difficult to ignore on the behalf of British rulers who were foreigners to the local culture of politics.



The succession disputes soon provided the British, the loop to enter into neopatrimonial relation with the *sajjadah nashins* of these shrines, which they exploited through the Court of Wards. Through this institution the rights of estate ownership of the *sajjadah nashins* who were supporting British administration were preserved, whether their families were facing financial crisis of indebtedness or succession conflicts. For instance, the property of the family of *sajjadah nashins* of the Bahawal Haq's shrine in Multan came under the court in 1890 because of heavy indebtedness. The properties of many other *sajjadah nashins* from southwest Punjab went under court's control at various times. (Griffin & Massy, 1910) The shrines or estates under the control of court of wards didn't mean to shift the administration of religious ceremonies under the British control, because they usually avoided from administering such ceremonies. But in some cases like *sajjada nashins* of Jalalpur Pirwala and Pakpattan, this distinction between the estate and the religious administration became very hard to maintain.

The introduction of the Punjab Alienation Act 1900 was the continuity of neopatrimonial relations of British rulers to indulge *sajjadah nashins* directly into the administrative framework. In South Asia most of the *sajjadah nashins* belonged to the casts of Sayyids and Qureshis, who were declared as 'agricultural tribes' and their lands were given protection from expropriation. These agricultural tribes were rewarded more abundantly several years later under the landed gentry's grants introduced by the British. The irony of the grants given to these tribes was hidden in the British policy that barred the distribution of land grants to the religious institutions. These landed gentry grants benefitted the Muslim families of religious influence in Montgomery, Muzaffargarh and Multan districts of southwestern Punjab, where they comprised one third of the locally influential families. Till the late twentieth century, the neopatrimonial policy of British rulers has incorporated the majority of the *sajjadah nashins* into landed class in response to their support in running the British administration smoothly.

This power and resources under the control of the shrine cult motivated the British ruler to ordain a ban on private ownership of *waqf* with declaring shrines as public property. Although Jinnah succeeded in getting this law nullified through *Muslim Waqf Validating Act 1913*, but most of the ulema were against the private ownership of *waqf*. After the creation of Pakistan once again the need for regularizing the power and resources under shrines, was felt and in 1960 under the *West Pakistan Waqf Properties Rules* the power of *sajjadah nashins* was curbed through regulating the endowments. According to the rule now endowments were to pass into the hands of state and the central and provincial governments were now empowered to look after the neglected institution. (Malik, 1990) Apparently it seems to be limitizing the role *sajjadah nashins* or Sufi shrines in the Pakistani society, but actually the establishment of Auqaf department has increased this role. The *sajjadah nashin* families of South Punjab and rural Sind are active in Pakistani politics as always, (Malik & Mirza, 2015) (Malik & Malik, 2017) while the shrines with less influential *sajjadah nashins* are providing the stage for political parties and state's official Islamic narrative. (Ibad, 2019)



The case of Iran was different in Sufi experience due to the dissimilar religious demand under the Pahlavi regime and the Islamic Republic. Reza Shah Regime (1921-41) advocated state led modernization along with promoting Sufi spiritual progress leading to education and national development. (Boss, 2002) The modernizing state under Reza Shah accommodated Sufi orders and nationalist co-opted them to enhance relations. The policy of Muhammad Reza Shah regime (1941-79) was to integrate Sufi orders into elite circles supported by the state's ideological and royal patronage. But the needs of Islamic Republic Iran were different from the Pahlvi regime, as they cut the state ties with Sufi orders and separated spirituality from *Sharia*. The Iranian Sufi orders, especially the biggest Sufi order the Ni'matullahis, were under intense state pressure as they do not endorse the Islamic state's theocratic notion of jurist governance, but followed their own spiritual head. But the relations of Sunni Qhaderi dervishes were different with the government. They are mostly in the Sunni-populated areas of the country and are considered as allies of the government against terrorism of Al-Qaeda.

Ottomans were more organized in administering the Sufi lodges through financing their activities and appointing their heads after the establishment of Meclis-i-Vala in 1854. In 1860 the Ottoman state tried to regulate the shrine visitation through maintaining the records of visitors who stayed or just visited casually. (Omiir, 2009) In 1866 a Council of Sheikhs was established with the power to regulate the Sufi activities at the lodges. After the Ottoman caliphate ended and Modern Turkey was established the state's policy to regulate Sufi lodges intensified and 677 laws to control the Sufi lodges were passed in 1925. (Buehler, 2016) Mostly the lodges were closed, the titles of sheikhs and disciples were prohibited and Sufi performances and special costumes were banned. Around 773 Sufi lodges and 905 Sufi-tombs were closed and their resources confiscated by the government. These restrictions mostly affected Mevlevis and Bektashis who needed Sufi lodges for their elaborate rituals, while Naqshbandis and Qadiris simply went underground. A large faction of the Turkish society felt abandoned because one out of every eight people in Istanbul belonged to Sufi lodges. (Ernst, 2014) (Lifchez & Algar, 1992) In Turkey, this policy is also under shift like the rest of Islamicate world after the increasing influence of Salafi extremism. (Ayata, 1996) Under the neopatrimonial policy of the Turkish government Sufi brotherhoods are again active in religious education and economic success resulting in the increasing membership and influence throughout the country.

Conclusion

Sufism and Sufi shrines possess an important and significant place in all the classes of Muslim culture and society not only because of its religious status but also because of its socio-political and economic connotation since medieval times. The social stature of these shrines have provided them with enough power to become considerable for rulers and political leaders but this is not just a one sided affair because the political elite has also used the popularity of the Sufi shrines for their political gain and legitimacy. Initially, the relation between the Sufi shrines and state was patrimonial in the sense that the state patronized them for *Baraka* or religious legitimization in response to waqf land grants or financial benefits for the shrines. But gradually the relation



transformed into neopatrimonial alliance in which the *sajjadah nashins* provided political or administrative support in response to financial or other benefits. This pattern of exchange of services under a rational choice can be observed throughout the Islamicate world since twentieth century. There could be multiple interpretations of the development of neopatrimonial relations between *sajjadah nashins* and the ruling elite or state since twentieth century, i.e. the political background of the colonial rulers since industrial revolution was different from the indigenous power structure of the Muslim societies which lead to the religious commercialism.; significance of *sajjadah nashins* for the foreign colonial rulers was different from the pre-colonial indigenous rulers.; and last but not the least the incident of 9/11 transformed the worldview of Islam and Sufism emerged as a tolerant and soft side of Islam as compared to the hard core Islamic militant groups. This transformation resulted in the increased patronization of Sufis, their shrines and fraternities throughout the Islamicate world.

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