Sufism among the Kurds in Syria

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Sufism has a pervasive presence in the religious and cultural life of the Kurds in Syria. The vast majority of them are Sunni Muslims and their Islamic practices and beliefs are marked by a strong influence of Sufism. Many Kurdish Sufi shaykhs and their disciples see Sufism as a Kurdish “school” (madhhab) of Islam, claiming that ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Jailani, the founding saint of all Sufi orders, was a Kurd. The Sufi communities in the Kurdish areas of Syria usually use Kurmanci as a liturgical language and incorporate several Kurdish cultural elements, such as songs, music and dances, in the performance of their religious rituals.

Sufi communities are spread throughout the rural areas of the Northern Syria, such as the Kurd Dagh, as well as among the large Kurdish population of Syria’s main urban centers, such as Aleppo. The main Sufi orders among the Kurds are the Qadiriyya and the Naqshbandiya. Nevertheless, in both the Kurd Dagh and the Kurdish community of Aleppo, the Rifa’iyya also has a strong presence.

The Kurdish town of Afrin, located in the Kurd Dagh (Mountain of the Kurds), in the northern Aleppo province. It is the most important Kurdish town in that area and an important center of olive production.

The rural Sufi zawiyas (lodges) usually accompany the migration of their members to Aleppo, creating branches or, simply relocating the whole community there. These zawiyas serve as cultural references for the new migrants, creating spaces of solidarity and channels for their integration in the urban universe. At the same time, the connection with the rural world is maintained through the continuous allegiance to the shaykhs who lead zawiyas located in their village of origin, or through pilgrimages to the holy sites (tombs of saints or prophets) in the countryside.

1 The only non-Sunni religious group among the Kurds in Syria is the Yezidi community, which has approximately 15,000 members spread in the Jabal Sinjar, the Kurd Dagh and Aleppo.
The new Sufi communities that developed in the last decade among the Kurdish population of Aleppo tend to be less closely identified with any specific tariqa. These new zawiyas are better defined by the charismatic figure of their shaykh, as it is not uncommon for the shaykh to claim affiliation to two or more tariqas in order to legitimize the particular mystical path embodied in his religious persona.

While many Kurdish zawiyas in Aleppo are simple urban extensions of rural zawiyas, they must be analyzed within the context of Aleppine Sufism. The limited capacity of the traditional Sufi structures of Aleppo to incorporate the Kurdish migrants, despite the fact that many religiously observant Kurds are attached to Sufi forms of piety, concurred to create a social and religious context favorable to the emergence of new Sufi zawiyas in the Kurdish neighborhoods.

Some of these zawiyas may foster the creation of an “Aleppine” Kurdish Sufism. The performative affirmation of Islamic piety that derives from the affiliation to a Sufi zawiya constitutes a valuable cultural idiom that can be used by the Kurds to negotiate their insertion into the Aleppine society as Muslims, for Islam is an important element in the construction of Aleppo’s urban identity.

On the other hand, many Sufi zawiyas also connect Aleppo with the Kurdish areas of northern Syria, adding a religious dimension to the multiple links that exist between these areas. In rural areas the Sufi shaykhs tend to have their authority fully recognized by the community where they reside, but in the villages and urban centers of the Kurdish-majority areas of Northern Syria there is a plurality of competing shaykhs who try to gather followers across tribal or class divisions.

Some shaykhs manage to become religious leaders in a regional or even transnational scale, as the Naqshbandi shaykh Ahmad Khaznawi of Tall Ma'ruf who had followers throughout the Jazira and the Turkish Kurdistan. His Sufi networks of followers and disciples were inherited by his sons and grandsons, including the late shaykh Muhammad Mash'uk Khaznawi, who became a symbol of Kurdish resistance to the Ba'thist political order.²

An important feature of Sufism in the Northern Syria is the cult of saints organized around the tombs of dead shaykhs or prophetic figures that dot the countryside. The cult of saints allows the fusion between religious, cultural and territorial identities. In the areas of high density of Kurdish population, the saints’ tombs give an Islamic identity to the landscape, constructing a “sacred geography” of the territory by connecting Islamic practices and beliefs with natural or social landmarks, as well as integrating into the realm of Islam the remnants of pre-Islamic sacred landscapes. The tombs of saints are located in rural cemeteries, on hilltops, near water springs, or even in pre-Islamic ruins or holy sites.

The best example of the Sufi appropriation of pre-Islamic sites is Nabi Huri in the Kurd Dagh, which consists of a lavishly built Roman tomb dating from the second century CE, which has been venerated since the fourteenth century as the burial place one of the prophetic predecessors of Muhammad.³ The

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² Shaykh Muhammad had had good relations with the Ba'thist regime. However, after meeting with the leader of the Syrian Muslim Brothers in exile in Europe, he was kidnapped and murdered. His death, in which many saw the dealings of the secret services (mukhabarat), triggered a cycle of revolts and state repression in the Kurdish majority areas of Northern Syria. Jordi Tejel, *Syria’s Kurds: History, Politics and Society* (London, Routledge, 2009), 101-102.

³ Many informants told me that Nabi Huri was Uriah from the Old Testament. It is important to note that Uriah was not a prophet in Judaism and, therefore, is not recognized as such by the mainstream Islamic tradition. This example shows the multiple articulations between local religious practices and the Islamic tradition that serve as basis for the cultural and intellectual elaboration of what is defined by many Kurdish Sufi shaykhs and their disciples as “Kurdish Islam.”
The cult of saints anchors Islam into familiar places where one can seek the help and, even, the contact of holy figures that have the power of mediating between local ordinary life and the universal abstract doctrines and practices sanctioned by the Islamic tradition.

Finally, the *mawlids* (saint feasts) that are celebrated at the tombs of the saints are the occasion for large pilgrimages and tomb-visitations (*ziyara*), attracting individual devotees or entire Sufi communities from all over northern Syria. These Sufi pilgrimages produce a sacred territory, which is delimited by the various paths that link distant communities to the saint’s tomb. The celebration of collective rituals during the *mawlids* also creates forms of solidarity and identification that reach beyond the local community, producing a broader framework to Kurdish religious identities.

According to what was presented in this short overview of the role of Sufism among the Kurds in Syria, it is possible to say that Sufi communities and holy places constitute social spaces where discrete articulations between Muslim identities and Kurdish ethnicity emerge. This allows the Kurds to mobilize in each context various forms of affirming cultural distinctiveness and negotiating their insertion in the Syrian society.

**Bibliography**


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