CONTEMPORARY SUFISM: TARIQA 'ALAWIYYA IN ZANZIBAR, TANZANIA

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Abstract

This paper explores the survival strategy of the Tariqa 'Alawiyya, a Sufi order in Zanzibar, Tanzania. Some scholars believe that Sufis played a major role in the Islamisation of East Africa, and the Tariqa 'Alawiyya was the earliest Sufi order introduced to the region. Originally led by Sharifs, descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, the order was established in the Hadhramaut region of Yemen, which is on the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula. Today, many Zanzibaris participate in the activities of the Tariqa 'Alawiyya and other Sufi orders. Meanwhile, many Muslims around the world are pursuing a more disciplined form of Islam, and some who practice this trend have criticised the tariqa activities as deviating from the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad. Such criticism has also been raised in East Africa. International Sufi orders, such as the Qadiriyya and the Shadhiliyya, are attempting to overcome this crisis by strengthening their organisations through the promotion of centralisation, a strategy that has been taken up in their Zanzibari branches. These orders have structures that separate their members and non-members through strict membership management and have established a command system that includes a headquarters and multiple branches with leaders and ordinary members forming a pyramidal hierarchy at each branch. However, rather than strengthen organisational power, the Tariqa 'Alawiyya is parrying this global trend in the opposite direction. Their approach to Sufism blurs organisational boundaries via the flexible operation of their membership and neatly merges their activities into the daily lives of common Zanzibaris. Yet, this approach is incompatible with the traditional view of tariqas as religious brotherhoods. The approach to tariqas they embody goes beyond the simple understanding that a tariqa is simply a Sufi order.

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1. The Islamic Revival

Today is a time of tribulation for tariqas. The awakening of a new Islamic consciousness, known as the Islamic revival, and the consequent change in Muslims' social behaviour is certainly depriving tariqas, which are Sufi orders, of their place in the societies in which they root.

Those at the core of the Islamic revival consider various religious practices that did not exist in the time of the Prophet Muhammad to be *bid'a*s, or deviations from what Islam was originally meant to be. They regard the ideal Islam as that realized in the era of their early Islamic predecessors, called Salafis, and these believers identify as Salafists[5] because they aim for an ideological return to that era.

However, Salafists are not alone in the basics of their complaint. Indeed, every Muslim is aware that aspects of contemporary Islam are out of order, even if they do not propose ideas that are as reformist as those of the Salafists. This situation has spawned a social movement calling for a return to correct teachings and leading to revivalist phenomena, such as stricter religious practices and conservative approaches to the way women dress, and these appear to those of us in the outside world as re-Islamisation. Just what constitutes the correct form Islam depends on the person advocating it, but the common view among Muslims, whether Salafists or not, is that elements absent from early Islam must be eliminated.

This view has brought criticism to Sufi orders. There are various theories as to when individual Sufi activities were organised into brotherhoods, but it is certain that they did not exist in the Prophet Muhammad's time. In addition, zikr, a Sufi practice in which worshippers repeat Allah's name, experience divine euphoria, and sometimes enjoy the music, has drawn much criticism from those who believe in the ideals of early Islam (Takahashi, 2014, 47-51).

This paper focuses on a Sufi order called the Tariqa 'Alawiyya[6], which operates in Zanzibar, Tanzania, East Africa. In the tide of the Islamic revival rising in various parts of the Islamic world, this tariqas' reason for being is now threatened, and many Sufi orders are taking various measures for their own survival. Therefore, this study examines the characteristics of the 'Alawiyya's survival strategy by comparing it to other Sufi orders.

2. The 'Alawiyya

The 'Alawiyya has its origins in the Hadhramaut region, located in Yemen, which is on the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula. The Arabs from this region, known as Hadhramis, have migrated over the centuries to various regions along the Indian Ocean, including Southeast Asia, the Indian subcontinent, West Asia, and East Africa. The Sharifs, descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, founded the 'Alawiyya among the Hadhrami and spread it to the rim of the Indian Ocean via their migratory activities. It is now possible to see the 'Alawiyya's activities in Zanzibar and other places where Hadhrami communities exist.

Zanzibar, the site of this study, is an archipelago of islands located 70 kilometres off the coast of Dar es Salaam, a Tanzanian port city off the Indian Ocean. A number of Islamic cities have been built along the East African coast, and their construction has been attributed to the human relations between the Middle East and East Africa, which historically took the form of a maritime trading

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[5] People who distance themselves from Salafist activities call themselves Wahhabis, a designation taken from the name of an 18th Century Islamic reformist, but with the critical connotation that they are exclusive and dangerous activists.

[6] In English, the word 'tariqa' is often omitted when referring to a specific order, so from here on, I will refer to Tariqa 'Alawiyya as 'the 'Alawiyya'.

network situated on the waters of the Indian Ocean. Among other things, Zanzibar attracted large numbers of Arab immigrants because it was the economic centre of the Western Indian Ocean until the modern era. Sufis and their cult are believed to have played a major role in East Africa's process of Islamisation (Farsy & Pouwels, 1989: xvii-xviii), and Ibn Battuta, a great traveller born in 14th Century Morocco, visited the region and noted that a Sufi from Yemen was present (Ibn Battuta & Yajima, 1998: 147-148).

In modern Zanzibar, there are several Sufi orders, and many Zanzibaris are involved in their activities. Among the major Sufi orders are international tariqas, such as the Shadhiliyya and the Qadiriyya, which have branches around the world. Historically, the Shadhiliyya's Sufi teachers came from Comoros (Boulinier, 1987: 15), while the Qadiriyya's came from Somalia (Martin, 1976: 152). They spread their influence throughout the region in the 19th Century, a history that is relatively recent, particularly as it pertains to Zanzibar. On the other hand, the 'Alawiyya, which was associated with the Hadhrami migration, is thought to be the oldest Sufi cult in the region, having been introduced to Zanzibar several centuries before the other tariqas (Farsy & Pouwels, 1989: xvii).

3. Methods

This study is based on the results of intermittent fieldwork conducted in Zanzibar from 2006 to 2019. Its method was based on participant observation of the activities of the 'Alawiyya. For comparison, I conducted a similar survey of the activities of the Shadhiliyya and the Qadiriyya in Zanzibar. Several semi-structured interviews were also conducted, and participants ranged from Islamic intellectuals (including the leaders of each tariqa and teachers of Islamic schools) to ordinary Muslims who participated in the activities of Sufi orders. In addition, the materials related to doctrine and practice that successive leaders of each order wrote were also collected and analysed to corroborate the content of the interviews.

4. Sites and Rituals

As revealed by participant observation, the major differences between the 'Alawiyya and other tariqas in Zanzibar are the bases of their activities and the content of their collective rituals. The 'Alawiyya does not have its own base; rather, the order uses mosques that are closely connected to Hadhrami immigrants and graveyards where Hadhrami saints are interred. Usually, Sufi orders use their own facilities as bases of their operations, and they call these 'zawiya'. Indeed, the Shadhiliyya and the Qadiriyya have zawiyas in multiple Zanzibari locations. Figure 1 shows one such Qadiriyya facility in Zanzibar. Figure 2 shows members of the 'Alawiyya performing a ritual called Uradi in a mosque.

Figure 1. A Zawiya of the Qadiriyya

Figure 2. The 'Alawiyya Performing *Uradi*

 '*Uradi*' is a derivation of the Arabic word '*wird*', which refers to the recitation of certain formulaic phrases, such as Quranic verses and *du'a'*,[7] and the practice of zikr. The texts used in *Uradi*s are compiled under the name '*Ratib*', and there are several types depending on who compiles them. The 'Alawiyya's *Uradi* is closely related to the ideas of Ghazali, an 11th Century Islamic philosopher. In Zanzibar, *Uradi*s are held three times a week, and the text used for recitation is set according to the day of the week the ritual is held on. Additionally, different mosques are chosen as venues depending on the particular day of the ritual.

Zikr is a central practice in tariqas, and it is practiced by all the tariqas in Zanzibar as well, though the styles of the 'Alawiyya and other tariqas differ greatly. Zikr was established within each Sufi order as a practice for experiencing the mysteries of oblivion through the repeated recitation of God's name in an act of single-minded remembrance. In the Qadiriyya, zikr is a regularly practiced group ritual that combines strenuous body movements with unique breathing techniques. 'Alawiyya members, however, only repeat fixed phrases of praise to God in a very restrained tone while sitting quietly and counting the prescribed number of recitations with prayer beads; body movements and breathing techniques are not incorporated, thereby making the ritual more publicly accessible.

The 'Alawiyya presents other activities to the public sphere as well. Figure 3 depicts the ritual *Hauli*, the name of which is derived from the Arabic word '*hawl*'. Originally, it meant circulation or year, but in the 'Alawiyya order, it refers to a festival held to honour Sufis and the saints associated with the order. Therefore, the venue for the ritual is the grave of a saint. Once, there were a number of places in Zanzibar where Hadhrami saints were buried, but only a few can be identified today, as many of them were destroyed during the Zanzibar Revolution in 1964. One surviving site, called Habib Zayn Mausoleum, is depicted in Figure 3.

Figure 3. The 'Alawiyya's *Hauli* at Habib Zayn Mausoleum

Haulis have a lot in common with *Uradi*s. They centre on the recitation of fixed phrases and prayers to God, but there are also other texts recited, and these are called *Maulidi*. That word originally

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[7] *Du'a'* is a supplication to God. It is chanted before and after rituals during religious activities, such as grave visits, and even at meals. Depending on the scene, the content of the prayer will vary.

refers to the Prophet Muhammad's birthday, and the texts recited on his birthday are likewise called *Maulidi*. These are now recited on various occasions, such as *Hauli*, because they represent a congratulatory way of obtaining God's grace.

The largest religious celebration of Zanzibar's Muslim society is the *Maulidi*, the birth of the Prophet, mentioned just above. It was also introduced to the coastal areas of East Africa as a collective ritual of the 'Alawiyya and is now a popular festival that has permeated the entire archipelago. It is comprised of two festive weeks beginning on the twelfth day of the third month of the Islamic calendar, which is said to be the Prophet Muhammad's birthday. The details of the *Maulidi* have already been described in a previous essay (Asada, 2018), but briefly, the celebration is primarily defined by the recitation of *Qasida*s, which are poems praising Muhammad, and of prose that narrates events in his history. While *Hauli* is held in the graveyard of the saints, *Maulidi* is held in Zanzibari mosques, rental halls and open squares. Not only do members of the 'Alawiyya play a central role in the celebration, residents living around the site participate as well.

5. Discussion

5.1. Membership

That all Zanzibaris participate in the 'Alawiyya's activities is unusual. This is because the activities of a Sufi order are essentially for Sufis, and ordinary Muslims outside the confines of its membership are not inherently subject to it. Also, Muslims are not born as members of a tariqa. They voluntarily choose membership at any given moment. The key to this membership is the idea of *ijaza*.

'*Ijaza*' is an everyday term used to refer to a license or permission, such as a car license, but in the Islamic context, there are two types *ijaza*. First, an *ijaza* is issued when a person joins an organisation or group. Second, an *ijaza* is issued when a certain level of academic knowledge or technical skills are recognised. In either case, the person issuing the license must be in possession of an *ijaza* himself. In the case of tariqas, *ijaza*s play two roles. In general, when a Muslim wishes to join a tariqa, a rite of initiation is performed, and the initiate must receive an *ijaza* from the Shaykh, the leader of the order. Then, as one progresses through the various disciplines of tariqa activities and the study of Sufism, one is issued an *ijaza* by one's instructor within the scope of what one has mastered. A person who holds an *ijaza* may educate and instruct other practitioners and may issue the same *ijaza* to them.

In Zanzibar, non-'Alawiyya tariqas are very strict about who joins their activities; a member of an order is defined as someone who has performed the ritual of joining, i.e., a person with an *ijaza*. For example, in the case of the Qadiriyya and the Shadhiliyya, when a new member joins, a symbolic ritual is performed in front of the other members, such as a handshake between the Shaykh and the initiate or a drink of water or milk given by the leader. The purpose of this is to impress the tariqa with his joining; the act itself has no special significance. In the case of a large number of entrants, the Shaykh tells them that he would like to give them their *ijaza*, and they respond by saying they would like to receive it.[8] There is no room for the public in this ceremony because the ritual of joining implies a contract between the entrant and the leader of the order.

The 'Alawiyya has a very different view of membership than other tariqas. As mentioned above, it is customary for those who perform the initiation ritual and obtained an *ijaza* to become members of a tariqa, and Bang's research (Bang, 2003: 13-14) on the family histories of a 19th Century

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[8] Based on an interview with Khalifa Ali conducted on 25 April 2007.

'Alawiyya leader found that his tariqa required initiates to wear a coat that the Shaykh called a '*khirqa*' as a rite of initiation. However, in contemporary Zanzibar, the 'Alawiyya employs no such procedure. As long as residents are Muslim, they can participate in the 'Alawiyya's activities without the ritual of joining or obtaining an *ijaza*.

As mentioned in the previous section, the 'Alawiyya regularly gathers in a mosque to perform *Uradi* and recite the *ratib*; these activities are open to the public. In fact, participants do not often recognise that what they are doing is an 'Alawiyya practice. The *Maulidi*, which the 'Alawiyya introduced to Zanzibar, has become such a popular event that all the people of the archipelago participate in one way or another. Moreover, those who do not have *ijaza*s are unaware that they are participating in tariqa activities, but if they are performing the 'Alawiyya's rituals, they are considered to be members anyway.[9]

The 'Alawiyya does have a leader, but he does not represent the entire order. He is a leader in the sense that he has a teaching qualification—an *ijaza*—regarding a particular discipline or book. Therefore, there are many leaders within the 'Alawiyya. Indeed, when different texts are recited at different mosques on different days of the week, different instructors oversee the different sessions. These differences in each tariqa's membership mindset have had significant impacts on the organisational structures of Sufi orders.
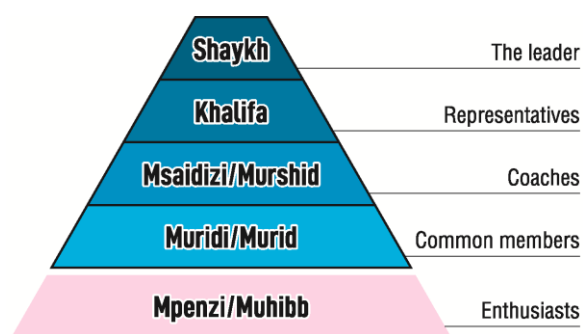
5.2. Organisational Structure

Today, a pyramidal hierarchy is observed in tariqas across the Islamic world. This is also the case with Zanzibari branch of the Qadiriyya,[10] which is headquartered in Arusha, a city in mainland Tanzania. The Qadiriyya has become so highly centralised and organised that it has established secretariats in every major city in Tanzania. At each site, the relationship between leaders and members is governed by a top-down organisational structure (Figure 4). At the top is the Shaykh, who inherits the dynamic of the *Silsila*, which is the mentor-disciple relationship. The Shaykh possesses the *ijaza* to instruct disciples and is the representative of the order. However, in a tariqa as large as the Qadiriyya, which often has multiple bases and zawiyas across a wide area, a single Shaykh cannot lead all his disciples. Therefore, at each site, a *Khalifa* is dispatched from the centre or appointed locally to serve as the area's leader. Within each zawiya, people called '*Msaidizi*' or '*Murshid*' guide various rituals. They must also possess an *ijaza* obtained from a person qualified in guiding the rituals they oversee. Finally, initiates called '*Muridi*' or '*Murid*' are the ordinary members training under these leaders. At the bottom of Figure 4, a category called '*Mpenzi*' or '*Muhibb*' is placed outside the confines of the tariqa. These individuals are a group of enthusiasts who flock to the activities of the massively popular tariqa, and although they are sometimes involved in the order's rituals, they are not considered regular members because they have not obtained a joining *ijaza*. This is understandable if we consider the *ijaza*'s aforementioned role as a contract between members and the leader. The organisational structures of Zanzibari tariqas vary somewhat in terms of size, but they generally follow a pyramidal hierarchy similar to that of the Qadiriyya.

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[9] Based on an interview with Muhammad Idris conducted on 4 April 2007.

[10] The description of the organisational structure of the Qadiriyya is based on an interview with Khalid Muhammad conducted on 5 May 2007. The internal structure of the organisation is described in detail in *Katiba ya Jumuiya Zawiyatul Qadiriya Tanzania*, a manual published by the tariqa for the leaders of its branches.

**Figure 4. Organisational Structure of the Qadiriyya**

Shaykh	The leader
Khalifa	Representatives
Msaidizi/Murshid	Coaches
Muridi/Murid	Common members
Mpenzi/Muhibb	Enthusiasts

The 'Alawiyya, however, has a completely different organisational structure. The first peculiarity is that there are no upper and lower levels.[11] Unlike other orders, the 'Alawiyya does not use a Shaykh to represent the entire tariqa. This means that although there are *'ulama'* (intellectuals) who are respected as Shaykhs (old masters), there is no Shaykh in an organisational position. However, outstanding teachers are referred to by the title of '*Sahib al-Maqam*'. Much as there is no Shaykh, there can be no substitute for him, including a Khalifa or the branch president. Whereas zawiyas are the Qadiriyya's bases in various places, the 'Alawiyya does not have a permanent building for training. Rather, it uses mosques and the mausoleums of saints. Therefore, there is no *Msaidizi* to guide members in a zawiya.

In the 'Alawiyya, in which there are no Shaykhs or Murids, the relationship between teachers and students is the only one that can be established (see Figure 5). Students study the teachings of the 'Alawiyya under various mentors, and they discipline themselves. The bond between them is strictly personal; it is not organisational. A teacher is a student under another teacher, and if there is any hierarchy among them, it is only respect for those who are older and have learned more. *Muhibb*s surround the relationship between teacher and disciple, and they too participate in the learning through occasional rituals. The difference between *Muhibb*s and disciples relates to whether the latter intend to obtain an *ijaza* as a diploma; therefore, no special permission is required to participate in the rituals. Within the 'Alawiyya, there are a number of colony-like units in which teachers are the core and students gather around them like satellites; these units are interconnected. Students do not just learn with a single teacher; they access these networks and move to other colonies as needed. Since there is no contract among them, and they consider all those who participate in the order's activities to be members, what separates people inside and outside the organisation is difficult to identify. It can be said that the ties of the 'Alawiyya as an organised body are much looser than those envisioned by the term 'Sufi order'.

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[11] The content of this section is primarily based on interviews with Yunus Sameja, conducted on 9 April 2007, and Muhammad Ba'abdeh, conducted on 16 and 30 April 2007.

Figure 5. The 'Alawiyya's Network
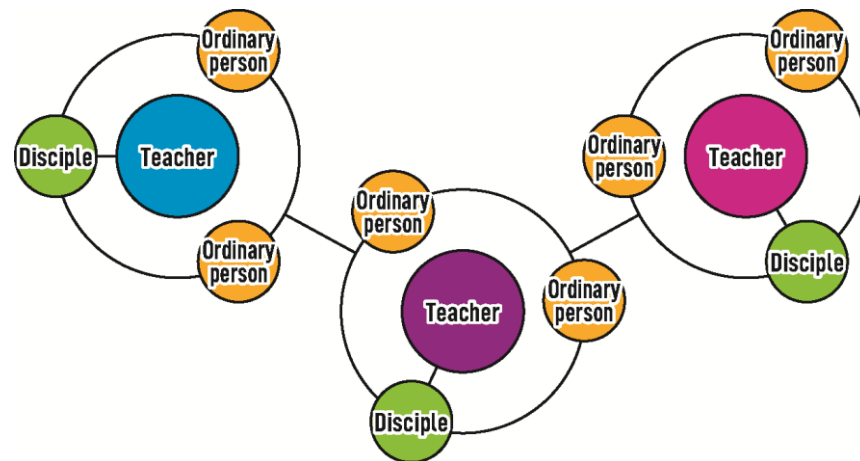
5.3. Transformation of Tariqas

We have seen the model of the centralised tariqa represented by the Qadiriyya and the networked tariqa represented by the 'Alawiyya, and the former structure has been considered to be that of traditional Sufi orders. In the past, Trimingham attempted to divide the development of tariqas into a *khanqa* (*khanaqa*) phase, a *tariqa* phase and a *ta'ifa* phase (Trimingham, 1971: 103). According to him, the *khanqa* phase was a state in which the leader and disciples lived and travelled together with few rules governing their behaviour. The *tariqa* phase, which occurred from the 13th Century onwards, was a formative period in which doctrines and practices were handed down rather than from one generation to the next. This was followed by the *ta'ifa* phase, which ran from the 15th Century onwards and saw the Sufi brotherhood split into innumerable sects; during this phase, the worship of saints became popularised. Seen this way, tariqa became Sufi orders in the 13th Century; as a result of their repeated divisions in the 15th Century, they spread across and penetrated Islamic society. However, citing Geoffroy (Geoffroy, 2000: 243-246), Horikawa pointed out that the organisation of tariqas in classical Islamic studies has not been well traced in historical studies (Horikawa, 2005: 162-163). Takahashi also noted that the hierarchical structure consisting of the *Shaykh*, *Khalifa*, and *Murid* is idealistic, and 'on the whole, many of the pre-modern orders were decentralised organisations' (Takahashi, 2014: 24).

At what stage, then, did the structure of the tariqa as we see it today come into its definitive form? Although it is difficult to provide a concrete answer, there were at least two modern events that shook Sufi activities. The first was that the Muhammad Ali dynasty of 19th Century Egypt decreed that all tariqas fell under the control of the Shaykh of the Bakriyya, a prominent Sufi family in the region. In Egypt, at least, this system led to the development of a pyramidal hierarchy and organisational management system for tariqas (Tohnaga, 2010: 83-84). The second was a series of Islamic revival phenomena, beginning with the Islamic reform of the 19th Century and continuing to the present day. In the pre-modern era, the Islamic world was forced into a subservient position by European powers that used their overwhelming military power to advance colonialism. Those who attributed the weakening of their society to a false understanding of Islam pushed for an ideological return to the time of the Prophet Muhammad. This movement led to the contemporary phenomenon of Islamic revival, which, inevitably, has been accompanied by criticism of what its advocates regard as the un-Islamic practices of modern generations, including tariqa activities (Takahashi, 2014: 51-56). During such a trend, it is highly possible that organisational changes may have taken place in the tariqas in order to ensure their survival. At the very least, the appearance of

a tariqa as a well-organised order is a 'relatively new product of Islamic history' (Tohnaga, 2010: 82).

6. Conclusion

This study has shown that most Zanzibari Muslims approach tariqas with an organisational perspective that is likely the result of modern changes. The high degree of organisation found in the Qadiriyya and the Shadhliyya can be seen as in accordance with the Islamic reform movements and the innovations of tariqas in other parts of the Islamic world.

In such a situation, how should the 'Alawiyya, which has a network-type organisation, be positioned? If what has happened to other tariqas is considered innovation, then the 'Alawiyya appears to be an old-style tariqa that has not been institutionalised as an organisation. However, in the context of Trimingham's three stages of development, the 'Alawiyya appears to be an outlier, as it is not reflected in any of the stages. It is also inconsistent with the decentralised approach to tariqas common to the pre-modern era that Takahashi described. The decentralised tariqa he referred to was modelled on the ways of *Khalifa*s who had completed their training under the Shaykh before dispersing into a wider area and forming their own orders (Takahashi, 2014: 24-25). This is different than the interconnectedness of the teacher-centred circles in the 'Alawiyya, the organising body of which constitutes a rhizome-like network. In other words, it is different than and alien to the tariqas of the past.

In summary, the 'Alawiyya's inclusive approach to rituals and its network structure are its defining characteristics, and one could say that the advantages of these features is that they can penetrate society in a natural way. In fact, in Zanzibar, as can be seen in the cases of *Uradi* and *Maulidi*, the masses participate in rituals without being deeply aware of whether they belong to the Sufi order, and the 'Alawiyya's activities exist as a matter of course in the general population's religious life. By not having a mechanism for defining the boundaries of its tariqa, the 'Alawiyya has either not been exposed to the attacks that other Sufi orders are subject to or has been unable to accommodate them while remaining active.

I would like to conclude with a word about the future. Looking at the state of the 'Alawiyya, I wonder if understanding tariqas as Sufi orders is appropriate. In other words, can a tariqa really be called a Sufi order if it does not have an outer edge as an organisation? In the future, it will be necessary to delve a little deeper into the meaning of the seemingly self-evident term 'tariqa'.

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