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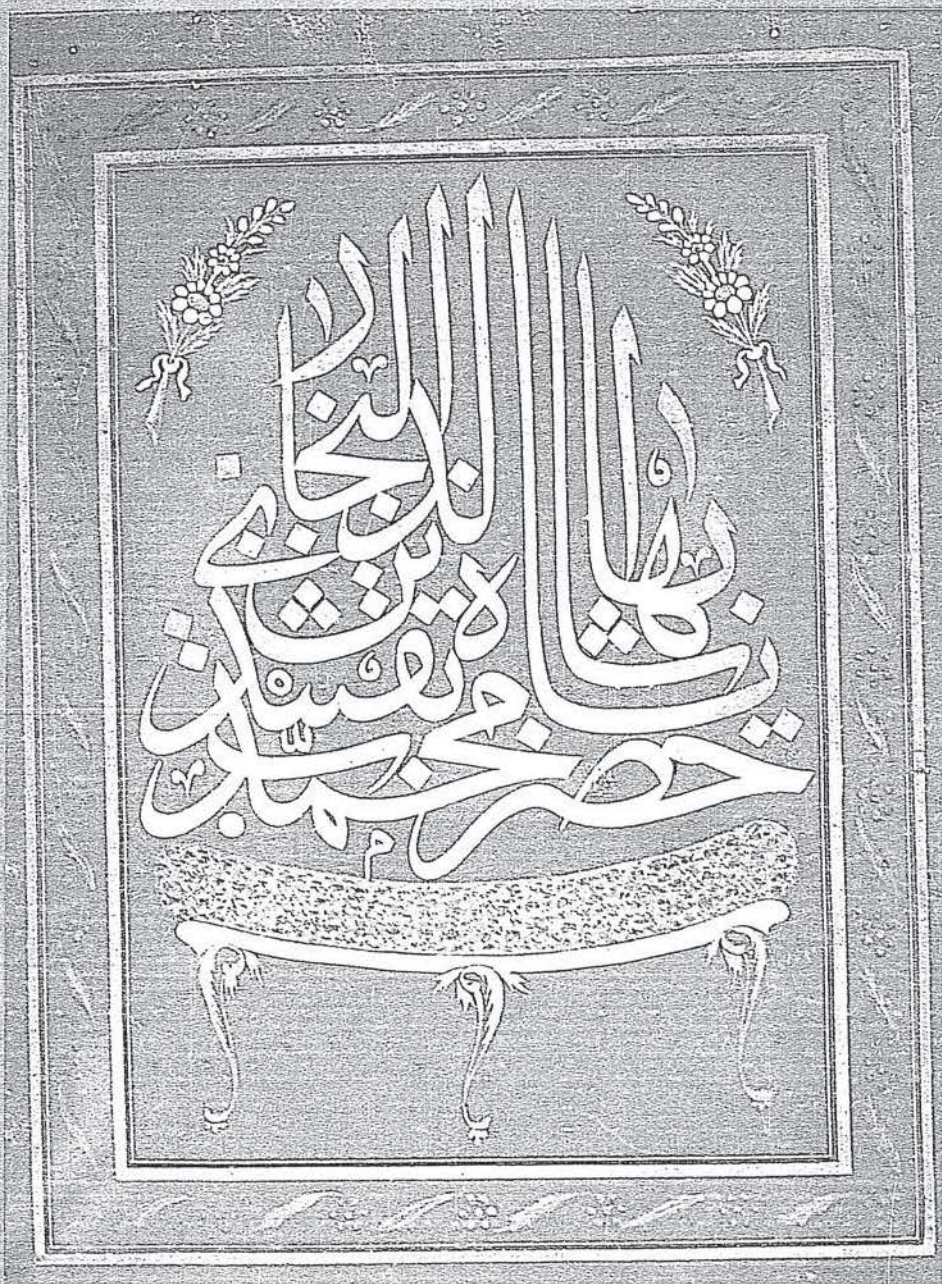
Naqshbandiyya in Damascus: Strategies to Establish and Strengthen the Order in a Changing Society

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NAQSHBANDIS

IN WESTERN AND CENTRAL ASIA



Edited by Elisabeth Özdalga

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NAQSHBANDIS IN WESTERN AND CENTRAL ASIA CHANGE AND CONTINUITY

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Naqshbandiyya in Damascus: Strategies to Establish and Strengthen the Order in a Changing Society

LEIF STENBERG

On a warm evening at the end of April 1995, I found myself in a beautiful house in the old quarter of Damascus. I was in the home of one of the younger members of the Naqshbandī order, sitting on the floor of one of the rooms in the house. The light was dim. Around me sat some twenty young men, all of them members of the order. They were performing a religious ritual within the mystical tradition of Islam called *mawlid*. They were listening to a recitation, singing in honor of God and were meditating silently. After the ritual, we sat together around a table, discussing the relationship between Christianity and Islam, as well as between the Muslim world and the so-called West. During the discussion, it turned out that one of the young men spoke Swedish. He worked as a civil engineer and had studied at Chalmers Polytechnic in Gothenburg. The others were also professionals: dentists, doctors and pharmacists. During our conversation, they told me that most of them had grown up in modest circumstances, and their parents had all been affiliated with the Naqshbandiyya order. The order had promised to take care of the children's education and would in exchange give them religious instruction in the tradition of the order, making pious members out of them. As a consequence of this conversation, I undertook to study the social reproduction of this religious order - the strategies the order has adopted in order to respond to the development of modern society and thereby establish its position in Syria. Since that meeting in 1995, I have been collecting information about the Naqshbandiyya, primarily on the present state and status of the order in Damascus. I have also maintained contact with the order and recently, in May 1997, I was the guest of the Abu al-Nur Islamic Foundation (*majma' Abī al-Nūr al-Islāmīya*) in the Rukn al-Din-area, a northern part of the city.¹ The Abu al-Nur Islamic Foundation is a trust that has its headquarters in the Abu an-Nur mosque, and at this mosque the elderly sheikh Ahmad Kuftaro, head of one branch of the Naqshbandiyya in Damascus and the Grand mufti of Syria, performs once a week. He presents his *dars* (an informal sermon explaining the significance of a Qur'ānic text) every Friday morning in front of about 7000 people.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to outline how a branch of the Naqshbandī order in Damascus confronts social change in the late 20th century. I want to focus in particu-

¹ The visit was supported by a generous grant from the Swedish Council for Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences.

lar on how a Sūfī order acts to establish and strengthen its role by presenting an image of stability and traditionalism in a world of change. At the same time I want to highlight how Islam is interpreted to avoid marginalization. This includes additional attention to the social organization of the order and its relation to the political and economic life of Syria, as well as the everyday conduct of life by Syrians.

A second purpose of this paper is to elucidate the complex relationship between different forms of "Islam," especially the relation between Sufism and interpretations of "Islam" as generally seen by the traditionally educated Muslim scholars. The latter connection is particularly important, since the understanding of "Islam" and Sufism is often founded on simplistic stereotypes. In a place like Damascus it is obvious how different interpretations of Islam compete and a diversity of opinions exists among the traditionally educated Muslim scholars on the "true" meaning of Islam or the interpretation of Islamic terminology selected from a Quranic context. Accordingly, throughout this discussion "Islam" is viewed as an on-going discourse where different trends are engaged in struggle, and where the successful contender becomes, for the time being, the established tradition, until it is challenged by yet another trend.² This is a situation where many "Islams" fight to become the One Islamic Tradition.³ A presupposition for such a view is the idea that contemporary religious scholars in general, irrespective of their position in society and their standards as scholars, in most cases do not acknowledge the existence of contending positions, each striving for symbolic dominance. Instead, their interpretations of the Qur'ān and *sunna*, their work as Muslim scholars, are reflections of debates, discussions and developments in the society at large.⁴ Religion is in such an understanding intimately related to - and part of - society. Toward the end of this paper, I will offer some reflections on the ideas of modernity and globalization in relation to this branch of the Naqshbandiyya and the attempt to carve out a space for the order in contemporary Syria. One interesting question in this context is whether or not this particular branch is undergoing change from a religious organization to an economic, political and social organization with strong religious underpinnings.⁵ In a Turkish setting it has been noted that such a transformation can lead to the decline of branches or entire orders. For example, in a situation where the order becomes more of a commercial network than a spiritual fraternity, there is a risk that the bonds that tie the organization together are lost.⁶ Yet, the role of Sufism can be one of combining the

2 Daniel Brown expresses it in a similar way stating that in this process Muslims "are engaged in an ongoing process of *rethinking* the traditions in which they participate. Some, of course, deny any connection with the tradition, and others deny that their activity can be called 'rethinking,' preferring to see it as the revival or preservation of some ideal and unchanging model. Nonetheless, even the most radical opponents of tradition are not departing from the tradition, but molding it and seeking to lay claim to the authenticity it bestows. Likewise, even the most conservative defenders of tradition cannot help but reshape the very tradition that they seek to preserve unchanged." See Brown, 1996, p. 3f.

3 For a development and usage of this idea on a larger material, see Stenberg, 1996. From a believer's perspective one can always argue that this is an expression of the complexity of monotheism having to do with a unity and a plurality that always exists in a religion.

4 That the view of Sufism as strictly organized forms of mysticism is outdated has been pointed out by many, for example by Jo-Ann Gross (1988), and the need for studies of other roles of Sufism in society has been stressed by Annemarie Schimmel (1975). In the case of *Naqshbandiyya* Hamid Algar (1990) remarks that most earlier work on the order has been historically and philologically oriented. Therefore, the present article can be seen as an attempt to view Sufism and religion as a part of society in a sense that can be seen in Gilsenan, 1973; and Johansen, 1996.

5 For a similar process among Naqshbandiyya in Turkey, see the article by Hakan Yavuz in this book.

6 This possibility of decline has also been pointed out by Hakan Yavuz. It can also be noted that Peter Beyer in his *Religion and Globalization* (1994) views the transformation of religious organizations and movements in general into mainly commercial and/or political networks as a problem undermining their legitimacy, see Beyer 1994, pp. 97-109.



Sheikh Ahmad Kuftaro, Damascus (Jonas Otterbeck, 1997).

various opportunities at hand while prospering in the contemporary society. For example, the Naqshbandiyya stress both the importance of piety for the individual as well as the need for modern education.⁷ It should be noted by the reader that my presence among the Naqshbandis probably affected their responses, since I am a European outsider. This paper is also the result of preliminary research and it is primarily based on a reading of literature on the *Naqshbandiyya* and conversations with members of one particular branch of the order in Damascus. Consequently, the character of the piece is impressionistic.⁸ In addition my interaction was entirely with men. How female members of the order react to current trends is outside my purview.⁹

The Setting

During the 20th century, Syria has been ruled by various groups of elites such as landlords, a merchant class and a military establishment. Each of them has acted in consent with a hierarchical and patriarchal power structure based on belonging to a certain family and/or a religious organization. According to Volker Perthes, it was after the takeover of the former defense minister Hafiz al-Asad in 1970 (he assumed presidential powers in 1971) that political institutions developed and a stable political structure emerged.¹⁰ It was maintained, one could add, by an enormous security

⁷ Sufism, and mystics in the history of Sufism, can also play a role in which it reminds Muslims of the true path. In *A Woman and her Sūfīs* (1995) Fedwa Malti-Douglas analyses a book by the Egyptian television personality Kariman Hamza. In Hamza's personal religious revival a set of historical mystics play a distinctive role in guiding her.

⁸ The relationship between the researcher and the researched has been much discussed, particularly in the field of anthropology. I am aware of the fact that this relation may need more attention in this particular paper, but due to the limits of space I leave that discussion out here.

⁹ It is appropriate to express my gratitude to the people I have met in Damascus for their help and hospitality, but also for the fruitful discussions we have had of which I hope there is more to come.

¹⁰ Perthes, 1995, p. 3. Another study of the politics of Syria is Nikolaos van Dam's *The Struggle for Power in Syria. Politics and Society under Asad and the Bath Party* (1996).

apparatus. Since al-Asad seized power, the country has been going through a set of economic as well as political changes. Economic success in the first part of the 1970s was followed by recession and a general dissatisfaction with corruption, economic disparities, repression, alienation from power, etc. This led to political unrest that culminated in the infamous Hama massacre of 1982. The period between the mid-1960s and 1982 is sometimes portrayed as a power struggle between the old Sunni establishment and the relatively new group of 'Alawī elite.¹¹ Throughout the 1980s, the country had severe economic problems. The downfall of important trading partners such as the Soviet Union and the Socialist countries of Eastern Europe forced the Syrian government to change its economic as well as political policy. Of course, changes of economic and political policies are also influenced by the concerns of the Syrian government regarding its relations with neighboring countries. Furthermore, it should be noted that although Syria is a parliamentary democracy, according to the constitution, the country has never carried out any form of free elections or allowed for an open public debate on political issues.¹² Yet, decision-making in general in Syria appears to be carried out relatively independently and is not influenced by foreign actors in the same way as in many other countries in the region.¹³ Hence, a critique of the statement of Perthes above on stable political structures concerns the absence of a political debate and the impossibility of establishing political parties. The value of stable political structures maintained by a strong security apparatus can, I think, be questioned, when politics in a wide sense is practiced by informal networks outside the formal structures. In this context, the Naqshbandiyya have an opportunity in Syrian society to act as a channel of political and/or economical action.

In today's Syria, societal change takes place on several planes. The country has during the last decade entered the "global village," as values and norms which previously were held to be self-evident in Syrian society came to be questioned. One example is the remodeling of family structures. Womens' ascribed roles are less clear-cut than they used to be. There is also a gap between generations in terms of values and aspirations in life. Changes have also taken place very concretely in the Syrian economy. The Soviet Union, previously Syria's main trading partner, no longer exists. The Syrian economic model, whereby the state exercised far-reaching control and directly owned major companies, is now undergoing a major restructuring. Syria is trying to establish ties with Europe, North America and some South East Asian countries. Likewise, transnational companies are playing an ever greater role. For example, the cars in Damascus have changed in recent years from old American cars to new and mostly Japanese cars, and companies like Benetton have established shops in the heart of the city. Advertising billboards for a mass of different products compete with posters of Hafiz al-Asad and his son Basil.¹⁴ A new entrepreneurial class is amassing considerable wealth and spending it on new Mercedes automobiles, at luxury hotels, or at the few night clubs in the center of Damascus. At the same time, a large number of people live in poverty, and are forced to have several jobs to make ends meet. In this process of massive change, traditionally educated religious

11 Throughout this paper, I will use the term 'Alawī to designate the group that seized power in the coup of 1970. The group is sometimes called *Nusayrīa*, a term which places it outside the Muslim community. I have no intention here of taking part in the debate surrounding these two terms. For a short, general introduction to the history of the group, see Pipes, 1990, pp. 159-188.

12 For an amusing description of how Syrians far away from the power struggles in Damascus view the elections to the People's Assembly of the country, see Rugh, 1997, pp. 110f.

13 Perthes, 1995, p. 3.

14 Even the cult of Basil has been the subject of a recent governmental decree. The message of the decree is that the cult of Basil who died in a car accident in 1993 has gone to far and has to be, at least, limited.

leaders, such as sheikh Ahmed Kuftaro,¹⁵ who like to present himself as the highest representative of the Naqshbandī order in the Syrian-Lebanese region, attempt to establish their position and that of their order. Nevertheless, discussions of the effects of modern phenomena is not new in Syria. It has been going on for many years and the introduction of the telegraph, railway and telephone was discussed and seen by some as dangerous. Yet, I consider the recent technological and economic developments to be of a more radical character, changing the structure of the society deeply and involving a larger part of the population than was the case with the earlier technological innovations.

Naqshbandiyya - a Religious Order in Syrian Society

Many directions within Islam are, of course, represented in Syria. Approximately 75% of the population are Sunnī Muslims.¹⁶ From a historical point of view, Sunnī Islam has for centuries been associated with political and economic power in Syrian society. Within the Syrian Sunnī community the Naqshbandiyya - the order from the East - and Shadhiliya - the order from the West, have been the largest Sūfī orders throughout the 20th century. In the case of Naqshbandiyya, the presence of the order in Greater Syria, according to Frederick de Jong, goes back to the 17th century when a *zāwiya*, dervish lodge, was established in Jerusalem. De Jong also states that the order was introduced in Syria proper in the end of the 17th century.¹⁷ The most important historical figure in the history of the order in Damascus was sheikh Khālid (d. 1827), and all contemporary branches of the Naqshbandiyya in the city have sheikhs with a *silsila* going back to Khālid.¹⁸ His tomb is relatively close to the Abu an-Nur mosque in the Rukn al-Din area of Damascus. Much closer to the mosque is the tomb of Ibn 'Arabī and one supposes that sheikh Ahmed Kuftaro chose to stay at this less fashionable mosque in order to control the tombs, especially the latter one. Another reason is that the Rukn al-Din area has a Kurdish heritage.

In the recently published edition *Les Voies d'Allah* (1996) Pierre-Jean Luizard states that the Kaftāriyya branch was founded in the 1960s.¹⁹ This date is not supported by any reference, but presumably Luizard's understanding of the Kaftāriyya is built on de Jong's idea about when the branch was established.²⁰ In the historiography of the branch itself it seems to be important to highlight that the spiritual legacy is much older and in the biography of sheikh Ahmed Kuftaro it is said that he took over the role of head of the Naqshbandī order after the death of his father in 1938.²¹ During my last visit in the Abu al-Nur mosque, I was shown the tomb of the father of sheikh Ahmed Kuftaro. Sheikh Muhammad Amin Kuftaro, the father, was buried in one of the six burial-places in the tomb. Three places were empty, and in the other

¹⁵ I am here using the spelling of sheikh Ahmed Kuftaro's name that to my knowledge is the one he uses in English and other European languages.

¹⁶ All figures of this kind are unreliable due to the political sensitiveness of the numbers and the fact that no reliable consensus exist. Different religious communities frequently adopt figures that are most positive to themselves.

¹⁷ de Jong, 1990, p. 592.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 594.

¹⁹ Luizard, 1996, p. 364.

²⁰ See de Jong, 1990, p. 600.

²¹ The long history of the Kuftaro family in Damascus can be read in the bibliography on the life of sheikh Ahmed Kuftaro of which the first edition was published in 1992. Unfortunately, it is not of my knowledge how sheikh Kuftaro received his permission to be a leader of the branch. This is to say that I don't know if he is both the highest representative and the spiritual leader.

two the son of sheikh Ahmed Kuftaro, sheikh Zahir, and the first wife of Ahmed Kuftaro are buried. The fact that sheikh Amin is the subject of a religious cult, especially when it occurs in the Abu al-Nur complex, appears to fit well with the historiographical ambitions of the order. Of course, it may be obvious that the specific branch, Naqshbandiyya-Kaftāriyya, was established as an independent sub-branch in the 1960s and that the Kuftaros earlier belonged to another branch. However, in the historiography of the order itself the order appears to be deliberately unclear on this point in order to give their branch legitimacy and status. In any event, it is clear from sheikh Kuftaro's biography that it was he who developed a small mosque in what was the outskirts of Damascus into a large mosque complex containing a library, reading rooms, classrooms and offices. This is to say that even though the father sheikh Amin is upgraded in terms of status, the Naqshbandiyya-Kaftāriyya is extremely focused on the person sheikh Ahmed Kuftaro.

As stated above, the grand mufti, sheikh Ahmed Kuftaro, is an influential Sunni Muslim in contemporary Syria.²² The grand mufti holds the highest official religious positions in the country, and it should be noted that he can be described both as a traditional religious authority and as the leader of a sufi order. This is certainly not unique and there are many examples in the history of Sufism where sheiks have been part of a formal religious hierarchy as well as taking an active part in public life in general.²³ Another contemporary and neighboring example within the Naqshbandiyya is sheikh Muhammad Nazim Adil al-Haqqani an-Naqshbandī. He is a Naqshbandī sheikh, but also a scholar in *shari'a* and he claims to be the mufti of Turkish Cyprus. Sheikh Nazim al-Haqqani spent some time in Syria and both of them are very active in presenting themselves on the Internet and both have started institutes, or claim affiliation to institutes, in the U.S. During one of my visits to Damascus, during the spring of 1995, I had the opportunity to see how these roles could coexist without sharp boundaries. During a *dars* held by sheikh Kuftaro before the Friday prayer in his "own" mosque, many visitors from Lebanon were present. As Naqshbandī members, they had specifically come to hear sheikh Kuftaro speak. Many of them were moved to tears by hearing him expound on the meaning of Qur'anic verses. His speech concerned the relationship between religions, especially Christianity and Islam, and what attitude Muslims should take toward natural sciences. Sheikh Kuftaro's speech was marked by a rhetoric usually associated with Sufism, but was presented in a traditional mosque setting. When he had entered the mosque as well as when he left the room, many of the listeners tried to touch him and then pass their hand over their mouth and heart. That is a way of transferring sheikh Kuftaro's power, his *baraka*, to their own bodies. Later, after the prayer and the *khuṭba*, guests were gathered in a room to enjoy the company of the sheikh and a cup of tea. The young men from Lebanon looked very happy. They smiled and sometimes they seemed to be moved to tears again by the words of their sheikh. All this appeared to be commonplace and natural to the adherents. In this way, the boundaries between the official position of grand mufti and the function as the leader of a mystical fraternity were effaced. Apart from this more obvious role as a spiritual leader sheikh Ahmed Kuftaro and his foundation have other interests of social, political and economic character.

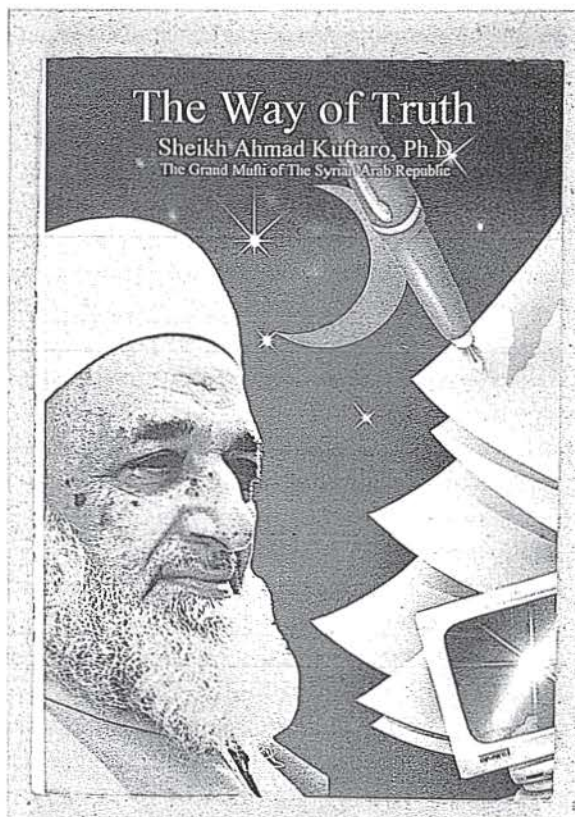
In general, the Naqshbandiyya order is described as having a great interest in poli-

22 In 1946, at the age of 31, sheikh Kuftaro was a founding member of the League of Muslim scholars. He was appointed Mufti of Damascus in 1951 and in 1958 he became the first mufti of Damascus and a member of the supreme council of *fatwā* (*majlis al-iftā*). Sheikh Kuftaro was elected grand mufti in 1964. He is also a member of the supreme council of *waqf* (*majlis al-awqāf*).

23 See, for example, Gross, 1988.

tics and in secular power. In the Syrian context, the interpretation of de Jong is that the support from the government of the Kaftāriyya branch has to do with the regime's interest in undermining the influence of local Naqshbandī leaders in various parts of the country.²⁴ In his double role as grand mufti and sheikh of a Sufi order, sheikh Kuftaro wields political influence. He can influence people and his support is important when the government wishes to impose a controversial decision. Sheikh Kuftaro may be allied with - or even controlled - by the Syrian regime, but he can also influence the political leadership through his position as the highest religious authority of a large religious movement. In the same way, his support of a Sunnī Muslim opposition would give that opposition considerable legitimacy. However, the latter is unlikely.

In general, the informal networks of Sufism is sometimes seen as a problem by various regimes. The support of one specific branch can be utilized in order to undermine other branches. It is a well known fact that a sheikh has vast influence among members of the order. Should this influence translate into political activity, it can become a direct threat. This has indeed occurred in the past, yet the orders usually confine their activities to an apolitical arena. Their political activities seem tied to economic issues. Sufi orders exchange goods and services and this Syrian Naqshbandī branch administrates a trust, the Abu al-Nur Islamic foundation, established in 1971. Yet, trusts have been set up under various names since the beginning of the 1950s. In all probability, the income seems to come primarily from private donations. The trust offers courses in Arabic for foreign students. Many of the foreign students are from Central Asia and presumably many of them are related to various Naqshbandiyya branches in their home countries. In such a way, an international network is maintained. However, one of the foremost ambitions of the foundation is to become an established and recognized center of Islamic learning in general, and Abu al-Nur is developing its educational connections with different universities in the Muslim world, such as universities in Lebanon, Pakistan and Sudan, but also in North America.²⁵ In general, education at Abu al-Nur is free of charge. Another example of



Cover of Sheikh Ahmad Kuftaro's bestseller from 1997.

²⁴ de Jong, 1990.

²⁵ The Abu al-Nur foundation hosts four branches of four foreign universities. They also have a four year education - *Kullīya Da'wa al-Islāmiyya* - was established in 1982. This was followed by the establishment of the *Kullīya Uṣūl al-Dīn* in 1992. Today the latter have more than 100 students for M.A. degree and recently the first students have started their education for a Ph.D. in Islamic law. In 1993 or 1994 sheikh Kuftaro opened the Abu al-Nur Institute for Islamic Studies and Arabic Languages in Baltimore, Maryland.

how the foundation is developing in areas not commonly related to Sufism is the travel agency operated by one prominent member. The foundation has developed a very effective organization in various fields such as economics, social activities and politics. In relation to politics, members of the Syrian parliament have been clearly linked to sheikh Kuftaro. He has managed to develop the Kaftāriyya branch into a powerful position in Syrian society, especially since he is the representative of official Islam in the country. This is a work impossible to carry out without a political talent. The policy of the regime, to favor one of the Naqshbandiyya branches in the country, has been effectively used by the Kaftāriyya, a situation emphasized by sheikh Kuftaro's role as mufti. Sheikh Kuftaro is also seen as constituting a balance towards a Wahhābī influence in Syria. Moreover, the interpretation of Islam made by sheikh Kuftaro fits very well with the political aims of the al-Asad government and it is possible that the "ecumenical" aspect of his interpretation has been emphasized since he was chosen as grand mufti.²⁶ The "ecumenical" aspect refers to the sheikh's perception that the three Abrahamic religions stem from a common ground, a view commonly found among contemporary liberal Christian theologians. In a larger context he appears to view all religions as just different traditions of the one universal religion, and he tries to avoid making value judgments on the different religions. Yet, his presentations of Islam in texts and in lectures reveal that his idea is that Islam is the final and most perfect tradition. One consequence of this understanding is that it legitimizes current Syrian rulership by an 'Alawī president, since it includes that specific tradition in the framework of Islam.²⁷ Seen from this perspective the generalizations by de Jong, but especially Luizard, on the position of sheikh Kuftaro in Syria seem simplistic. Accordingly, he is, in my opinion, more than a puppet in the hands of the government even if he enjoys little credibility among many Sunni Syrians.

Ritual and Islamic Terminology

In terms of religious rituals - mainly *dhikr* - the Kaftāriyya are arranged in a hierarchy of circles. The most prominent ones cannot be visited by non-Muslims. Every circle contains a sort of internal hierarchy and there is mobility upwards. Some people in the order, like some of the persons who are close to sheikh Kuftaro, move around and visit the different circles. Their task is to control, advise and inspire younger members of the order. On some occasions there have been conflicts between leaders of various circles and other leaders have to act as mediators.

In general, sheikh Kuftaro utilizes the Islamic terminology in a fashion common to religious leaders in many Muslim societies - among Sufis as well as Islamists. One example, taken from his lectures, is his conceptualization of *hidjra*. He states that the term has to do with the choice human beings have in the modern world. One has to make a choice between the good and the evil (on this point sheikh Kuftaro refers to

²⁶ The ecumenical theme is stressed in the collection of speeches published in English, see Kuftaro, 1993, as well as in his Friday lectures. It is a possibility that the ecumenical theme was further emphasized after the takeover of Hafiz al-Asad in 1970.

²⁷ The matter of whether or not the 'Alawīs are Muslims is, of course, important to Hafiz al-Asad and the 'Alawī elite. The ruling of the famous classical scholar Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) saying that the 'Alawīs are heretics has caused the regime problems. In the beginnings of the 1970s the government tried to change the constitution to a text which allows Syria to have a non-Muslim as president. After massive protests this was withdrawn. In addition, in 1973 the regime asked the famous Lebanese *Shi'a* scholar Musa Sadr for a *fatwā* on the status of the 'Alawīs as Muslims or not. Not very surprisingly he ruled in favor of the 'Alawīs and declared them to be in the mainstream of *shi'ism*. The Syrian president also takes part in the sermons in the Umayyad mosque in the center of Damascus or in a mosque close to the presidential palace, particularly on religious holidays.

Cain and Abel). Humanity should do a *hidjra* to Allah and not between geographical places like Mecca or Medina. Therefore, *hidjra* means, according to sheikh Kufaro, to turn to Allah and follow the example of Muhammad. To conceptualize well known terms such as *hidjra* as a state of mind or principle instead of a specific historical event is a method used by Muslim scholars. In recent times the many different Islamist trends as well as others taking part in the present search for the "true" nature of Islam utilize this method in constructing interpretations.

The many references to Biblical stories seems to be part of a lifelong project of sheikh Kufaro to be part of the Muslim-Christian dialogue. A key element in his references to the Bible is the idea of the three monotheistic religions as derived of a common origin. On one occasion I, therefore, asked sheikh Kufaro somewhat naively if it was possible for me as a nominal Christian to study the spiritual guidance of Islam at the foundation and thereby receive the same education as the young men taken care of by the order. His answer, taken from a text by Ibn 'Arabi, contained two parts: The first was that Muhammad was only one brick, the last brick, in a large building; the second was that religion is like a large table and God serves a variety of dishes. The duty of sheikh Kufaro is to serve humanity the dishes. These answers contain somewhat cryptic messages. My interpretation is that it is possible for me to take part in the education, but only to a certain extent.

"Strategies" for Spreading the Message of Islam²⁸

The Abu al-Nur foundation also has its own security organization linked to certain branches of the Syrian security apparatus and the members are very careful with the information they hand out to people not involved in the order. This caution takes many forms. In a bookshop, I asked a member of the order who accompanied me about a song which was performed during a ritual and he quickly replied, that we (members of the branch) don't talk about such things in public. Another example, concerns the history of the order. We were in a house in the Rukn al-Din area and we were standing on a balcony of an apartment on the 8th floor. Our view was fantastic. We overlooked the Abu al-Nur mosque, but also the tombs of Ibn 'Arabi and sheikh Khālīd. I asked a young member of the order about the history of the Kufaro family and their relation to sheikh Khālīd. He answered that he did not know at what time the Kufaro family came to Damascus and he had nothing in particular to say about the relationship between the Kufaros and Khālīd. I continued on the subject and reflected on the meaning of history and asked him if he thinks it is possible that one can learn from history and/or specific persons in history. He answered that of course one can learn from history, but mostly in terms of ethics. He stressed, in the same manner as sheikh Kufaro usually does in his lectures at the mosque, the importance of interpreting Islam in relation to the present. For example, historical persons, such as sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi, can give us guidance and inspiration in mostly ethical and moral matters and are not to be followed - so to speak - down to the last letter. The point, often repeated by sheikh Kufaro and his followers, is that Muslims should not be locked into a specific interpretation of Islam. Instead they should be guided by reason, and, my friend told me, sheikh Kufaro often says that religion is "mature reason."

²⁸ I am fully aware of the methodological questions that can be raised concerning many of the statements made in this part. It is, of course, difficult to make general statements on the basis of answers that may have been delivered with a certain intention. However, I refer to the idea of this article as impressionistic and reflecting my personal impressions.

The openness towards interpretation, the emphasis on ethics and morality and the idea of religion as mature reason was the most common theme in my discussions with young members of the order. This reflected their understanding of religion as partly "lost" in modern society. This was supplemented by statements that says that if we look at things scientifically we will understand that Islam is the true religion. Naturally, the themes reflect the teachings of sheikh Kuftaro. In discussions ranging from the moral decline of the so-called West to the relation between Islam and science, I was nearly always able to come up with a quotation or a slightly modified interpretation of sheikh Kuftaro. This caused amusement, but also some reflection and respect that I was able to express myself by the help of the words of sheikh Kuftaro.

The conversation on a balcony at the home of one of my hosts in Damascus, also revealed a part of the organization of the Abu al-Nur foundation. It is my impression that the foundation has a very active *da'wa* department. They have different strategies to receive various types of visitors and even assign a host to guide visitors. Persons that are judged as presumptive converts to Islam appear to be treated according to a certain scheme which encourages them to take the final step and convert.²⁹ The schemes appear to be tailor-made for the different individuals. I have been approached and put under some pressure to take part in *dhikr*. My host at one time told me that it is just a matter of meditation and I accepted. We gathered early one morning in the house of one of the spiritual guides close to sheikh Kuftaro. After the session, that went on for about half an hour, the person who led the *dhikr* asked me how I felt. I answered that I felt relaxed, but nothing more. He then asked if I experienced anything particular at the time during the *dhikr* when he laid his hand on my shoulder. I answered no and he explained to me, and to the others, that although I had not experienced anything a flower had been planted in my heart and now it was a matter of cultivation. He added, that I was now personally responsible for continuing the cultivation of the flower and he recommended half an hour of meditation everyday. His instructions to me were that I should practice a silent *dhikr* in which I should focus on silently repeating the name of Allah in my heart.³⁰ He invited me to contact him at any time in order to receive consultancy on personal experiences in relation to *dhikr*. Thereafter, he quickly served coffee and showed us his new TV and all the cable channels he could tune in. We watched a news program broadcasted by an Israeli channel. After this occasion I refused to take part in any form of ritual. That decision was clearly disappointing to some of my young friends in the order. Naturally, this is not stated publicly, but to me it is clear that the *da'wa* department of the foundation is very well aware of how to develop psychological strategies promoting the individual to convert.

On a larger scale the *da'wa* department works with the specific message of sheikh Kuftaro. The intent of this activity is to present the sheikh to a larger international audience. This is done by printing his lectures in English. A book was firstly printed in 1993, but was recently reprinted and enlarged.³¹ In general, the book is focused upon three interrelated themes; the first concerns the "ecumenical" character of sheikh Kuftaro's message mentioned above. He often refers to the Bible and Qur'an

29 The classical Sufi idea is that the spiritual path of a particular order is presented to the newcomer and it is up to him or her to accept the path. Hence, persons are not, at least ideally, encouraged to take the final step and become a member of the order.

30 Many symbolic meanings are attached to the heart. Within the Naqshbandi order in general, the heart of a disciple who reaches a higher knowledge of God as the only reality is united or linked to the heart of his or her sheikh. In the case of sheikh Kuftaro, his followers believe that he can grant them entrance to the Paradise.

31 I received some chapters of the new edition during my visit in Damascus in May 1997 and the finished book in November.

to point out the common history of Muslims, Christians and Jews. For instance, the shared history and historical figures are a foundation for cooperation between believers of the three monotheistic religions. Secondly, he stresses that the predicaments of the contemporary Muslim world are to be blamed, at least partly, on false interpretations of Islam.³² If people interpreted Islam in a correct manner - guided by reason - the problems of the world will be solved.³³ The latter is a classical statement in the history of Islam and emphasized among contemporary Islamists. Thirdly, the understanding of Islam in relation to the society must be understood, and this would enable us to understand it differently in different times. The latter interpretation appears as a way of using *ijtihād* (here in a general meaning of reinterpretation) in order to adapt to the changing realities of Syrian society. The fact that the book was first published in English can be seen as a part of a mission to establish sheikh Kuftaro as an authority on Islam on the global level. His followers are also active, for example, in Muslim student organizations in North America and try to propagate their understanding of Islam.³⁴ Since his first visit in 1966, sheikh Kuftaro has toured the United States on several occasions and recently lectured there. However, he recently took a decision not to travel any more due to his poor health.

Creating an Organization for the Future

One strategy, which has been mentioned above, is to financially support talented young men. The Kaftāriyya allows female membership and children to enter the order. However, I am not aware of any systematic effort to sponsor education of young women. On the male side, however, the branch will pay for education, but will also endeavor to inculcate its religious values, so that these young men will become new - or so to speak "better" and active - members of the order. This method of enrolling young men and paying for their education is designed to create a network of highly educated individuals who belong to the branch and who will "combat," or control, change in Syrian society.³⁵ It is at least a conscious strategy to create new members, who are able to handle the encounter with modernity. One symptom of this is the fact that the Kaftāriyya chooses to finance modern, professional education, for example, in medicine, dentistry, engineering and pharmacy - which lead to professions with high status in Syrian society and which in themselves imply an acceptance of modernity and its new ways of thinking. At the same time, this in some ways implies a change in the interpretation of what constitutes tradition and cultural heritage. An example is the fact that sheikh Kuftaro's sermons are filmed and that the Abu al-Nur complex contains recording facilities. Subsequently, the lectures can be purchased on videotape or on audio cassette. Another example is the position of some of the close relatives of sheikh Kuftaro. They are not traditional religious scholars, but, for example, are engineers who have received their education in Europe or North America. They are nevertheless active members of this Naqshbandi branch and are

32 Another theme in the lectures of sheikh Kuftaro is his discussion of environmental issues.

33 The term reason (*'aql*) has a wide range of meanings. In this context the term should be understood as the understanding of Islam presented by sheikh Kuftaro. Hence, two important elements in the teachings of sheikh Kuftaro related to the meaning of the term are his stress on the possibility of reinterpreting Islam and on non-violence. The latter can be seen as a critique of Islamists.

34 The Homepages on the Internet presenting sheikh Kuftaro are controlled by the order in Damascus, but it is monitored from Websites in the U.S.

35 Yet, it is not entirely new and, for example, the above mentioned sheikh Nazim al-Haqqani has an M.A. in chemical engineering from Istanbul University. At the same time as he was studying chemical engineering he was studying *shari'a* and the Arabic language.

well versed in the teachings of it, holding high positions in the hierarchical system. My hypothesis is that they constitute a new generation of leaders, and that they are the driving force in the endeavor to send young men to Europe and North America. It should be noted that this is done at a time when foreign influence and so-called Western culture is condemned by many people in the Middle East in general, especially in the rhetoric of Islamist movements. As a parallel to the more worldly or secular education, the young men are also given a religious education at the Abu al-Nur foundation. The result is that most of the students have a double competence. They have degrees, on one hand in civil engineering and on the other an M.A. in *shari'a* law or in the Arabic language. As noted above, the foundation has recently started a Ph.D. program in Islamic law. However, the courses given at Abu al-Nur foundation give the student a master's degree in either religious subjects or in the Arabic language. Once their education is completed, some of these men enter key positions, or they have the potential to do so in the future, especially in Syrian society where highly educated professionals are scarce. Yet, during my visit in 1997 some of the young men complained about the inadequate possibilities for working as civil engineers or pharmacists. One of them, a pharmacist by training, had instead set up a computer business. He was economically supported by the order. Talented young men can also be sent for further education abroad, either to specialize or receive a Ph.D. They are then, on their return to Syria, able to work for their order, and they can all be mobilized in a crisis situation.

Naqshbandiyya - Modernity and Globalization

In Syria, as in many other countries in the Middle East, processes of modernization are sometimes perceived as threats to Islam. The first steps towards a stage of modernity was related to the ideas of, for example, the national state, technical modernization, industrialization and a state based on stable values and norms. In a later phase, the process of modernization portrays a society undergoing rapid change, where no values remain constant - a mobile world with unclear norms, where the traditions and models to follow are diffuse. The possibilities of communication and the development of transnational companies also undermine earlier ideas of a stable and secure world.³⁶ Within the Naqshbandiyya-Kaftariyya it is common to describe this fragmented mode of existence as devastating, as a situation where the social equilibrium is threatened. For the members of the order, the solution lies in a return to re-ligion and to the firm values and norms represented by religion. As has been stated above, a common statement is that Islam represents the natural order of things and this fact can be understood in a scientific manner. Despite members' perception of their order as stable and immutable, it is clear that the Naqshbandis reinterpret Islam to confront change in society. The aim appears to create what Anthony Giddens has described as an ontological security.³⁷ Various events, local as well as international, affect the way the Naqshbandis interprets the Islamic tradition in order to support its claim of representing stability. At the same time, modern technology - the Internet - is used to present sheikh Kuftaro's understanding of Islam. The modern communications systems make it possible for the head of a local Naqshbandiyya branch to be part of a global discourse on the function of Islam. The possibility of presenting Islam on a

³⁶ For a thorough discussion on the modes and levels of modernization, modernity and modernism, see Fornäs, 1995, pp. 38ff.

³⁷ Giddens, 1991, pp. 92ff.

global level has been noted by many as a new phenomenon, impossible a century ago, and this may have a unifying effect. Yet, the paradox is that Muslims are also exposed to a variety of local Muslim cultures and to the cultures of North America and Europe.³⁸ To a certain degree, it appears that several global Islamic messages are competing for influence in the contemporary world. Hence, the idea of a single normative Islam seems to be as unreachable as ever. It is not unimaginable, however, that the message of sheikh Kuftaro, trying to bridge a perceived gap between religions sharing a common ground, will have some success. One can argue that the Naqshbandiyya-Kaftāriyya represents a new trend in which traditionally educated scholars and their movements use the means of modern society to regain influence among those who interpret Islam, but also among Muslims in general. Their main target is, of course, the interpretations of Islam made by various Islamist groups.

On a local level, social and economic conditions in Syria can be frustrating. A high school teacher may have to have a second job, e.g., as a fruit juice vendor, to be able to support his family. Many educated people leave Syria in order to begin a new life in North America or Europe. There is a widespread dream of a better material life in Europe or the US, and the European visitor is often approached with requests to help Syrians emigrate. The chances of getting married are for many young men rather slim, especially for those who are not the eldest son in their family, the son for whom the family can afford to pay a dowry. Girls study at the university, not primarily to get an education or to find a suitable marriage partner, but to postpone marriage. Naqshbandī leaders are aware of these facts and they use all possible means to take an advantage of the situation. People also come to the branch of a combination of reasons and some of them has nothing to do with piety. One example of a strategy developed to strengthen the branch is that one of the relatively young leaders of the order is responsible for a project designed to develop an Internet in Syria and he is the producer of the Homepage on sheikh Kuftaro. Another example is sheikh Kuftaro's idea that he would like to start a satellite channel in order to compete with all the different channels available to Syrians. In a conversation with sheikh Kuftaro he expressed this as an interest of vital concern.³⁹ He considers the dissolution of traditional society to be the root cause behind much of this social frustration, and he claims that the reason for this dissolution is the loss of the influence of Islam. It appears that in the view of sheikh Kuftaro a TV channel can be an important instrument in getting society and individuals back on the straight path. Another way of increasing the role of Islam relates to the social organization of the branch. In my opinion, the picture of some orders as a body of men - a club - can be a way of trying to imagine how the Kaftāriyya establishes an environment for their young members,⁴⁰ a milieu with sometimes a highly boyish atmosphere. The latter was especially clear to me in my personal interaction with the young men of the order. In any circumstance the proposed solution to problems in society is to create a truly Islamic society - a different one, however, than called for by the Islamists. Yet, there are similarities in interpretation and usage between Islamists and Sufis. One example concerns the texts they read. Among the young men of the Kaftāriyya the ideas of, for example, Ḥasan al-Bannā or the Yemeni sheikh al-Zindhānī are very well known.⁴¹ In a Syrian context

³⁸ This has been noted by, for example, Turner, 1991, p. 171. One interesting example is that the legal cultures of North America and Europe have influenced contemporary interpretations of *sharī'a*.

³⁹ In comparison Turkish Naqshbandīs publish magazines, owns radio stations and have a TV-channel.

⁴⁰ Hourani, 1981, p. 93.

⁴¹ Due to my interest in the relationship between Islam and modern science (see Stenberg, 1996), I was given videos containing speeches by al-Zindhānī.

one of the leaders of the local Muslim Brotherhood is often said to have a Naqshbandiyya background. Yet, his name, Said Hawwa, was never mentioned to me. One reason could have been the political sensitivity involved in discussing him. However, a general note is that many religiously motivated and justified movements among Muslims react to what is perceived as a problem, that is the marginalization of their religious tradition. Of course, the young men might have been attracted by the mystical elements in the writings of al-Bannā. Yet, their reading of his texts also suggests that the analysis of the problems within Muslim societies in movements forming a sort of political Sufism and moderate forms of Islamism is not that large. Both movements promote modernity in the form of a stable state and stable values and norms. In some sense the ideal seems not to be far from the models of a welfare state developed in many western European countries. However, the consequences of their analysis differ, that is they differ in how to put their religious interpretation into action.

Final Note

The young men I communicate with often return to the term *mujaddid* or renewer when they describe their idea of Islam. This is, of course, something they have been taught by sheikh Kuftaro, and he often refers to this term.⁴² As conceptualized by him and his disciples, the term means to return to Qur'an and *sunna* in order to renew or recreate Islam. However, in sheikh Kuftaro's understanding, the term relates not only to a renewer. It also means the person who reactivates and authenticates the truth in conformity with the contemporary world. Islam cannot be connected to a specific time or place in history, but must develop in accordance with the society. This can be seen as a critique of the opinion of many religious scholars - '*ulamā*' - that sheikh Kuftaro considers to be firmly riveted in a particular interpretation of Islam. The method of carrying out this interpretation of Islam - *ijtihād* - means to re-read the Qur'an and the *sunna*, that is, to go back to the authentic sources of Islam. The use of *ijtihād* also enables sheikh Kuftaro to exercise influence on his followers' understanding of Islam, and especially in his *dars*, he interprets Islam in a flexible manner that serves to show that Islam is the ultimate order for the human being. His critique is not only directed towards various brands of '*ulamā*' and Islamists. In, for example, relation to other Sufi orders he says that they sometimes go too far in various rituals. His general idea of Sufism is to go back to the term *tazkiya*, purification. In his translation the term means the purification of hearts and he states that this is the original term denoting the practices that are today described as Sufism. He also uses *zakāt*, usually understood as alms tax, in its meaning of purification. Both his understanding of *tazkiya* and *zakāt* are commonly held ideas by many other Sufis. In this manner he connects his form of Sufism with Qur'anic terms in order to create another form of legitimization besides the *silsila*.

The emphasis the Kaftāriyya put on social, economic and political activities strengthens the position of the branch in society. Yet, the organization is facing many threats. Sheikh Kuftaro and his followers are disliked by many Syrians, mostly because they have a strong relation to the Syrian regime. In a way they have also been copying methods used by the 'Alawīs to gain influence, primarily education as a tool for power. The argument that they are foreign, that is that they have a Kurdish descendency, is also used in the rhetoric of their opponents. But the greatest threat is

⁴² The earlier mentioned sheikh Nazim al-Haqqani is often referred to as the *mujaddid* of this century by his followers.

the fact that sheikh Kuftaro is 82 years old and after his death there is no clear successor. His leadership is charismatic in the Weberian sense, and he functions as a lens for his community, interpreting and explaining the outside world.⁴³ It is interesting to note that although the role of the Sufi sheikh and the role of the mufti is mixed in the mosque setting, the charisma of sheikh Kuftaro may have avoided institutionalization due to the possibility of keeping the charisma attached to his role as a sheikh. Yet, one effect of his charismatic status is that the institutionalization of his leadership has not been carried out, and one can easily imagine that after his death there will be a power struggle within the branch that may lead to a split among different less charismatic leaders. Of course, sheikh Kuftaro is well aware of the situation and the strategies needed to build up influence in many fields of society to keep his followers together. To my knowledge, sheikh Kuftaro has not written a will and he has not written any substantial text that can serve as an ideological guideline for the branch after his death. Yet, many people takes notes on the *dars* every Friday and they are recorded both on video and audio cassette. His speeches from various conferences and public meetings are collected in a new and enlarged edition of *The Way of Truth* (1997). My interpretation is that the work to collect his sayings carried out primarily by some of the younger leaders is done in order to create a corpus of statements on Islam that can be used after the death of sheikh Kuftaro. The corpus of statements will have a unifying purpose. However, one can also interpret the uncertainty as something desired by sheikh Kuftaro. There are examples in the history of Sufism in which the sheikh supports a split. Usually, the reason is that the sheikh wishes to abolish the bad parts of the order and make a prosperous ground for the survivors.

Despite the belief that the order represents stability and traditional piety, the Kaftāriyya does in fact adapt to modernity, especially through its use of technology and modern forms of education. In the encounter with modernity, Islamic tradition is also reinterpreted. If we return to the conversation on the balcony, it is obvious that a young, but relatively prominent member of the branch knows the *silsila* and the history of his sheikh. The legitimization of the sheikh is usually maintained through the *silsila*, and the young man probably just kept this as a secret from me. The reason for this is difficult to understand, but one can easily imagine that the many years of living in a repressive state make people suspicious in general. In the end, one can also add that it would not be inconceivable to think that if the Kaftāriyya transform socially the branch will also transform its rituals and ideas. In the case of sheikh Kuftaro it is my impression that his authority is connected to his message, that is the ideas he expresses, especially in the *dars*. This is also manifested by the young men who in conversations with me are very focused on the words of sheikh Kuftaro and they quote him at length. Perhaps this is a sign of how authorization and ways to legitimate leadership change in a changing society. This change takes place when spiritual loyalty is justified by the help of "new" phenomena such as reason and modern education and, therefore, Sufism can serve as the vehicle for transformation in general, especially in a society in which there are few other vehicles of change.

43 The idea of the sheikh of an order functioning as a lens is taken from Gilsenan, 1982.

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