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Sufism in the United Arab Emirates

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Abstract This essay aims to provide a brief overview of Sufism in the United Arab Emirates, both in its historical and contemporary contexts. Consideration has been given firstly to the increasing support of local leaderships for the Sufi orientation of Islam as an antidote to the spread of Salafism and political Islam; and secondly to the unfortunately scarce written documentation of the presence and revival of the schools to date. In many cases, the contribution of daily press and social media has proved crucial.

Foreword

For more than two decades, there has been a noticeable re-emergence of Sufism in some Arab states bordering the Persian Gulf. Spiritually-minded scholars from other Muslim countries have moved to the region and disseminated knowledge of *taṣawwuf* through teaching, publicity and the media, including some satellite TV channels. This phenomenon seems to stem from a precise political pattern on the side of local leaderships, aimed at countering the spread of fundamentalist thought and preventing extremist drifts. With regard to the United Arab Emirates in particular, the commitment of this country to supporting the Sufi movement as an effective instrument of a 'balanced Islam' (*islām mu'tadil*) is quite clear.*

* I would like to express my gratitude to prof. Omar Bortolazzi (American University of Dubai) for his precious remarks.

1. *A liberal-traditionalist Islam*

A recent paper by Tunisian researcher Sihām al-Darīsī, entitled *Al-mu'assasāt al-ṣūfiyya fī l-Imārāt. Al-tawzīf al-siyāsī al-ġadīd* [Sufi institutions in the Emirates. The new political investment] (al-Darīsī 2021), captures an interview given on 6 February 2019 to Radio Monte Carlo by the Permanent Representative of the UAE to UNESCO, 'Abd Allāh al-Nu'aymī.¹ In his speech, this high-ranking official attacked Saudi Wahhabism as the source of extremism in the region. Instead, he praised Sufism, which was widespread and dominant in the Arabian Peninsula before Wahhabism made its appearance. Sufism is described as a spiritual doctrine (*madhab rūḥiyya*) highly regarded by the younger generations, and which is now reflected worldwide in the general interest in spirituality.

In the words of al-Nu'aymī, as in those of other government spokesmen, Sufism stands out not only as the best antidote to Salafism² and radicalisation, but also as a manifestation of 'true Islam' (*al-Islām al-ḥaqīqī*), an Islam characterized by peace, tolerance, and a considerable distance from the revolutionary upheavals that have historically shaken various countries, particularly since the 'Arab Springs' of 2011. This quietist Islam, focused on the inherent and ritual aspects of religion, is confidently juxtaposed, in the public speeches of political representatives, with 'enlightened Islam' or 'liberal Islam' (*islām tanwīrī, islām libirālī*) without this being perceived as contradictory. A model of a balanced Islam that represents a powerful instrument of soft power for the UAE (Brignone 2019), together with the obvious solidity of the economy, state-of-the-art technology and strong values. This version of Islam is also embraced by Western countries. While it remains non-political, politicians effectively employ it with positive outcomes. Thanks to the efforts of rulers, this version of Islam has gained rapid prominence.

¹ Available in [com/story/1157784/المسؤول-إماراتي-يبتغزل-ب-الصوفية-ويهاجم-الوهابية-شاهد](https://www.com/story/1157784/المسؤول-إماراتي-يبتغزل-ب-الصوفية-ويهاجم-الوهابية-شاهد). All websites mentioned in this article have been consulted on 28 August 2023.

² On the Sufism/Salafism opposition in modern and contemporary thought, see Ahmed El Shamsy, "Sufism, Ethics and the Muslim Modernist Project". Bilal Orfali, Atif Khalil, Mohammed Rustom (eds), *Mysticism and Ethics in Islam*, Beirut: American University of Beirut Press (Shaikh Zayed Bin Sultan al Nahyan Series), 2022, pp. 389-403.

According to the adversaries, this represents a ‘do-it-yourself’ form of Islam, which never existed and was prepared *ad hoc* for convenience and advantage. Along these lines, a scathing article published by al-Jazeera.net in February 2019 by Kawthar Abū Sa‘da, eloquently titled *Kayfa taṣna‘u al-Imārāt nusha islāmiyya hāṣṣa bi-hā?* [How does the UAE realise its own version of Islam?] (Abū Sa‘da 2019); the author reduces the religious model adopted by the country to a merely strategic choice, functional to expansionist and imperialist aims, and pro-American.³ However, Kawthar Abū Sa‘da also insists on the Sufi component of Islam in the Emirates, whose uncritical condescension to any government decision is mocked.

Another article, authored by Egyptian Aḥmad Samīr and published in December 2018 on the independent digital platform al-Daraj based in Beirut, continues the discourse on Sufism while describing and analysing the ‘Emirati version’ of Islam. It is entitled *Islām imārātī fī muwāḡahatal-Islām al-qatarī wa-l-sa‘ūdī* [An Emirati Islam in the face of Qatari and Saudi Islam] (Samīr 2018). In this columnist’s understanding, Emirati Islam - to which the latest Saudi vision is being aligned⁴ - is based on the unprecedented alliance between liberalism and traditionalism. This alliance effectively counters not only the modernist aspirations of the Islamic Brotherhood, but also the Salafist universe. It is an inclusive model, likely influenced by the positions of the Lebanese academic Riḍwān al-Sayyid (b. 1949), trained first in Tübingen and then in al-Azhar, currently head of the Mohammed bin Zayed University for Humanities (MBZUH), based in the emirates of Abu Dhabi and Ajman. According to this scholar, in fact, the only religious option currently sustainable by an Islamic country is the one that associates enlightened intellectuals, capable of making young people absorb modernist ideals through the educational system, and traditional institutions, capable, on their part, of finding a large audience among the broadest sections of the population (al-Sayyid 2015 e 2014).

³ Equally polemical Aḥmad Ramaḍān in “Darāwīš ibn Zāyid”, also on Aljazeera.net, 6 December 2018; according to the author, this overt promotion of Sufism is just a way to make people forget the UAE’s political misdeeds, from supporting the coup in Egypt to military intervention in Yemen.

⁴ Especially after the appointment as prime Minister of Muḥammad ibn Salmān Āl Sa‘ūd.

2. *The political investment*

Undoubtedly, the Arab Emirates have so far invested considerable resources to consolidate this model of liberal-traditionalist Islam internally and for external observers. This model expresses the country's identity within the regional context and is well reconciled with the universal values of peace, tolerance, and freedom of religion. Among the methods employed are: the organisation of initiatives with a high cultural profile and at the same time maximum visibility; the creation of institutions and research centres dedicated to the study of religion and active in terms of publishing and the media; and renewed attention to the presence of Sufism in the country, attracting scholars and prominent figures from the rest of the Muslim world.⁵

Among the cultural initiatives that have garnered significant media, the most notable was in 2019: the declaration *Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together* signed by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of al-Azhar Aḥmad al-Ṭayyib, a major event sponsored by the current President of the Arab Emirates Muḥammad ibn Zāyid Āl Nahyān. The anniversary of this Declaration has since been celebrated worldwide every year on February 4th as the 'International Day of Human Fraternity'. As a direct consequence of this, a grandiose project, announced the very day after the signing of the Declaration – the establishment of an 'Abrahamic Family House' (*Baytal-ʿāʾila al-ibrāhīmiyya*), inaugurated in Abu Dhabi in 2023, bringing together the temples of

⁵ In a highly polemical vein, the voluminous doctoral thesis by the Saudi 'Abd al-ʿAzīz ibn Aḥmad al-Badāḥ insists on the allogenic provenance of Sufism in the Emirates, *Ḥarakatal-taṣawwuf fī l-Ḥalīġ al-ʿarabī, dirāsa taḥlīliyya naqdiyya*, Madīna: al-Ġāmiʿa al-islāmiyya fī l-Madīna al-munawwara, 1436 [2015]. According to this scholar, the Emirates, like other Gulf countries, have excessively opened the doors to migrants, in all fields and at all levels and also in the educational context. He cites among others the Albanian Wahbī Suleymān al-Ġāwġī (Vehbi Sulejman Gavoc̣i, d. 2013) who moved to Dubai in 1986 to lecture at the Faculty of Arab and Islamic Studies (pp. 127-138); Maḥmūd Aḥmad al-Zayn from Aleppo (d. 2013), since 2007 researcher at the Dār al-buḥūt li-l-dirāsatal-islāmiyya wa-ihyāʾ al-turāt in Dubai (p. 145); the Omani Muḥammad al-Ḥazrāġī (d. 2006) who is said to have contributed to the spread of Sufism while he was Minister for Justice and Islamic Affairs, in particular by publishing for the same Ministry a volume on the benefits reserved for those who visit the Prophet's tomb, i.e. the *Ṣifaʾ al-fuʾād bi-ziyārat ḥayr al-ʾibād*, Abū Zabī: Wizārat-al-ṣūʾn al-islāmiyya wal-awqāf, by Muḥammad ʿAlawī, a Saudi of North African origins (p. 156).

the three monotheistic religions in a single urban plot. Significantly, the same space also hosts a shared cultural centre whose management involves religious institutions, intellectuals, media professionals and artists of different traditions or faiths (Zilio-Grandi 2022).

Among the research centres, the keystone of the Emirati-supported communication plan is the ‘Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies’ (*Muntadā taʿzīz al-silm fī l-muḡtamaʿ ātal-muslimā*) chaired by Mauritanian ‘Abd Allāh ibn Bayya (b. 1935).⁶ Since establishment in 2014, the Forum has brought together in Abu Dhabi hundreds of scholars, thinkers, representatives of different religions and civil society actors on an annual basis around various topics related to the renewal of Muslim discourse and peace between cultures.

Similar in intentions but focused on the fight against religious extremism and terrorism, we should mention ‘Hedayah’ [*Hidāya* or Guide]. Operational since 2012, and also based in Abu Dhabi, it is a declaredly apolitical study centre. It was created in response to a growing desire on the part of the international community and members of the Global Counterterrorism Forum⁷ to establish a ‘think and do tank’ dedicated to countering violent extremism - as its institutional website states.⁸

Notable is the ‘Council of Elders’ (*Maḡlis ḥukamāʿ al-muslimīn*), founded in 2014, also in the capital Abu Dhabi. This Council’s primary mission is to spotlight the shared and unifying values within contemporary Muslim societies while promoting interfaith relations.⁹

Also worth mentioning is the ‘al-Mesbar [*Misbār* or Probe] Centre for Studies and Research’, founded in Dubai in 2007. Through the monthly publication of Arabic-language studies and dossiers by international researchers, the Centre documents the presence of Muslim cultural movements both within and outside the Islamic world. Among the topics, extensively covered is historical and contemporary Sufism, in the Muslim world and beyond.¹⁰

⁶ On this interesting figure I would refer once again to my previous *La tolleranza non basta, serve un’alleanza di virtù*, “Oasis”, 3 October 2018.

⁷ www.thegctf.org/

⁸ www.hedayah.com

⁹ www.muslim-elders.com/ar e www.muslim-elders.com/en

¹⁰ *Markaz al-Misbār li-l-dirāsāt wa-l-buḥūūl*, www.mesbar.org Al-Mesbar has devoted to Sufism the following studies: *Al-taṣawwuf al-muʿāṣir. Afḡānistān, al-Sūdān, al-*

Alongside, yet equally significant, is 'Believers without Borders' (*Mu'minūn bi-lā ḥudūd*), a body established in 2004 with its headquarters in Rabat but largely financed by the Arab Emirates. Through a considerable number of publications and events, it promotes critical thinking on Islamic tradition and the intersection between Islam and the public sphere.¹¹

Particularly interesting here is the 'Tabah Foundation' (*Mu'asasat Ṭāba li-l-dirāsatal-islāmiyya*), established in Abu Dhabi in 2005, which organises public events on historical as well as contemporary topics, with a focus on interreligious dialogue and youth.¹² Founder and director is Yemeni 'Alī Zayn al-'Abidīn al-Ġifrī (b. 1952), a prominent figure in the current Islamic landscape,¹³ belonging to a family of intellectuals and political activists with direct descent from the fourth caliph 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib. Very active on social media, a constant presence in newspapers and satellite

Mağrib, al-'Irāq, July 2011; *Al-taṣawwuf fi l-Ḥaliğ*, August 2011 (on this last volume see also below); *Al-taṣawwuf wa-l-ḥadāṭa fi duwal al-Mağrib al-'arabī*, April 2012; *Al-islām al-nā'im. Al-taṣawwuf fi bilād al-Šām*, July 2012; *Al-taṣawwuf fi l-'Irāq*, December 2012; *Al-taṣawwuf al-akbarī. Ibn 'Arabī. Al-tārīḥ, al-naṣṣ*, November 2017; *Al-Naqšbandiyya. Al-naṣṣ, al-tārīḥ, al-aṭar*, February 2018; *Al-islām al-ša'bi. Al-īmān, al-tuqūs, al-namādiğ*, June 2018; *Tašakkul al-ṭuruq al-šūfiyya al-Ifriqiyya al-maḥallīyya*, January 2023.

¹¹ Giving voice to those 'new thinkers' who have been proposing a re-reading of the Qur'an on the basis of modern textual criticism for several decades. To 'Believers without Borders' we owe, for example, the publication of the complete work of Egyptian Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, known for his historical hermeneutics of Islam's Holy Book. Michele Brignone, "Qatar and Emirates: The Conflict Between Islams". *Oasis*, 19 June 2018.

¹² www.tabahfoundation.org Prominent international personalities sit on the Foundation scientific committee, such as the aforementioned 'Abd Allāh ibn Bayya, 'Alī Ġuma', Grand Mufti of Egypt from 2003 to 2013, Yemeni Al-Ḥabib 'Umar ibn Ḥāfiğ, founder of the Tarim-based Dār al-Muṣṭafā Islamic University (Ḥaḍramawt). The Foundation has established numerous partnerships with international institutions; these include the Dār al-Muṣṭafā in Tarim, Yemen, and the Centre El Hikma (La Sagesse) in Brussels. It also participates in the satellite channel 'El Medina TV' based in Nouakchott, Mauritania.

¹³ Among other things, he is one of the signatories of *A Common Word*, the open letter sent in 2007 by the main religious leaders of the Muslim world to their counterparts in the Christian world; the document is available in <https://www.acommonword.com/the-acw-document/> A 2009 study by the Saudi Islamic portal 'Al-Islām al-yawm' included al-Ġifrī among the 500 most influential Muslim personalities in the world, <http://islamtoday.net/albasheer/artshow-12-123051.htm>

channels throughout the Arab world, al-Ġifrī is a representative of the ancient *ṭarīqa* Bā 'Alawiyya dating back to the Ḥaḍramawt of the 12th century.¹⁴ Among the foreign intellectuals welcomed by the Emirati leadership to locally consolidate Sufism, al-Ġifrī plays an important role. His openness to interlocutors and his kindness in addressing them made him a role model for many.

He is also credited with the impetus given to Sufism in the main emirate through wide-ranging cultural initiatives: first and foremost, the 'Mantle Prize' (*Ġā'izatal-burda*), launched in 2004, recalling the famous 'Ode of the Mantle' (*Qaṣīdataal-burda*) by the Egyptian mystic al-Būṣīrī (d. 1294) who was an exponent of the *šādīliyya* school. The prize provides for an international competition in the fields of poetry, calligraphy and ornamental arts every year on the Prophet's birthday or *mawlid*.¹⁵ Al-Ġifrī is the promoter of the 'Festival of Love' (*Mahraġān al-mahabba*) as well. Since 2006 it celebrates all forms of creativity connected to love for the Prophet by awarding the best works in the following categories: song, advertising, film, television and documentaries, books, photography, drawing, media and personality of the year. This festival emerged in response to the satirical cartoons published the year before by the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten.¹⁶

In addition to the interest in Sufism on the part of state organisations and research centres, there is also growing interest from the daily press.

3. Sufism in the Arab Emirates

The presence of Sufi movements in the Emirates, as in the rest of the Gulf countries, is rarely documented in written sources. Among the most obscure periods in the history of the entire region is the one that goes from the mid-16th century - when the Jabrite Sultanate, then the most powerful Sunni state in the eastern Arabian Peninsula and patron of Sufism, fell - until the entire 18th century (al-Muhayrī 2019, p. 5). Publications related

¹⁴ On the spread of the Bā 'Alawiyya in the Emirates, see below.

¹⁵ <https://burda.ae/awards/ar>

¹⁶ <https://www.arabnews.com/node/311161> On the cartoons, see Jytte Klausen, *The Cartoons That Shook the World*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009.

to this subject remain quite limited. The most notable is a study by the Emirati Rāšid Aḥmad al-Ġumayrī (b. 1984) (al-Ġumayrī 2011, pp. 11-37), focused on Sufism in his country and in particular in Dubai, where the Malikite orientation of the rulers played favourably given the openness of this legal school to the spiritual dimension of Islam. This study is found in the collective work *Al-taṣawwuf fī l-Ḥalīġ* [Sufism in the Gulf], published in Dubai in 2011.¹⁷

Al-Ġumayrī initially presents a historical excursus, and reminds us that the roots of Sufism on the coast of Oman, the present-day United Arab Emirates, lie in the area of al-Šīr, corresponding today to the small northern emirate of Ra's al-Khayma. This is where the *ṭarīqa 'alawiyya* was established. Originally founded by the Yemenite Muḥammad ibn 'Alī Bā 'Alawī (d. 1232), this school - closely aligned with the principles and practices of *ṭarīqa qādirīyya* - had been widely disseminated thanks to the reformist interpretation of another Yemenite, the celebrated 'Abd Allāh ibn 'Alawī al-Ḥaddād (d. 1720), a prolific author despite early blindness, belonging to a family of *sāda* or descendants of the Prophet who had long dominated studies in the Ḥaḍramawt region (Freitag 1999). He had set aside the original elitist orientation and reduced the emphasis on individual devotional practises (*riyāda*) and renunciation of the world (*'uzla*). As a result, he transformed the Alawite method into a spiritual path that could be pursued by all, through the application of certain moral guidelines that would also apply at a social level. The *ṭarīqa 'alawiyya ḥaddādiyya* thus presents itself as a codified set of ethical teachings, recommending personal commitment to the creation of a better society founded on the principles of *šarī'a* and economic stability (Alatas 2012).

¹⁷ Very interesting in this volume are the studies devoted to Saudi Sufism: the 'Sufi Salafist' Manšūr al-Nuqaydān (*Wahhābiyyūn mutaṣawwifūn*, pp. 57-84) recounts the five years he spent among the 'Iḥwān Burayda' movement; Maḥmūd 'Abd al-Ġanī Šabbāġ (*Al-šūfiyya wa-l-maġālis al-'almāniyya fī l-Ḥiġāz al-ḥadīth*, pp. 115-180) documents the spread of *taṣawwuf* in the Hijaz from the 19th century to the present, including the presence in today's Medina of the *sammāniyya*, *šādīliyya* and *rifā'iyya* schools; Yāsir ibn Muḥammad Bā 'Āmer (*Al-šūfiyya al-sa'ūdiyya wa-ī'adat taškīlati-hā fī l-dāhil*, pp. 183-208) discusses the relationship between Saudi Sufism and local politics. In turn published by Markaz al-misbār is Haytham Mouzahem, *The Return of Sufism in the UAE*, 16 April 2018.

Written accounts of the presence of the ‘Abd Allāh al-Ḥaddād school in the Emirates are almost non-existent, either from local sources or from foreign visitors, be they Portuguese, Dutch or English. Apart from the negative account of the British diplomat John Gordon Lorimer (d. 1914) - who, in his gigantic work entitled *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, Oman and Central Arabia* published in two volumes between 1908 and 1915, declared the absence of Sufi aggregations in the region (al-Ġumayrī 2011, p. 14) - all that remains is a document by a Yemeni traveller at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He was a great-grandson of ‘Abd Allāh al-Ḥaddād named ‘Alawī al-Ḥaddād, who had travelled to al-Ṣīr to visit the tomb of one of his relatives and meet the local followers of the *ḥaddādiyya* school (al-Ġumayrī 2011, p. 15).¹⁸

This brief travel account clearly shows that, among the Sufis of the area, the practice of *ziyāra* (visiting the tombs of deceased masters) was well established, and attests to the vitality of the *ṭarīqa ḥaddādiyya* at that time. The author also hints that al-Ṣīr was an important spiritual centre and an international crossroads. He mentions encountering there several Sufis from other Muslim countries, including one ‘al-Bahlawī al-malāmātī’ – a descendant of ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Ġilānī (d. 1166) – known for his prodigies and for being one of the ‘men of the footstep’ (*riġāl al-ḥaṭwa*), i.e. who, thanks to God’s favour, was able to cover enormous distances with a single step and thus be present in several places simultaneously (al-Ġumayrī 2011, p. 16). The interchange of personalities naturally led to the presence of other confraternities besides the *ḥaddādiyya*. This is documented in *nabaṭī* Arabic - the language of ancient Central-Arabic oral poetry - by the first poet associated with the history of the United Arab Emirates, al-Māġidī - or al-Māyidī - ibn Zāhir, who lived at an unspecified time between the 17th and 19th centuries, when he compares the palm trees moving in the wind to the swaying of the Sufis of the *badriyya* and *rifā’iyya* schools (al-Muhayrī 2019, pp. 26-27).¹⁹

¹⁸ The edition of the manuscript, with a rich introduction, was published by the Emirati Aḥmad Rāšid Tānī (m. 2012), a dedicated heritage scholar as well as a celebrated poet and playwright; see Aḥmad Rāšid Tānī, *Riḥla ilā al-Ṣīr ‘an ziyārāt ‘Alawī ibn Aḥmad Husayn al-Ḥaddād ilā Ra’s al-Ḥayma fī l’qarn al-tāmin ‘ašar al-milādī* [...], Abū Zābi: Hay’at Abū Zābi li-l-ṭaqāfa wa-l-turāt, 2007.

¹⁹ The author draws this quotation from Sulṭān ibn Baḥīt al-‘Imīmī, *al-Māġidī ibn Zāhir; sratu-hu wa-aš‘aru-hu wa-qaṣā’id tunšaru li-awwil marra*, Abū Zābi:

Sufism in the Emirates had the endorsement of the ruling families, among them the Āl Qāsimīs, still ruling Ra's al-Khayma and also Sharjah. And it is precisely the current ruler of Sharjah, Sulṭān al-Qāsimī (b. 1939), an esteemed historian, who has recently published a booklet dedicated to his ancestor Rāšid al-Qāsimī, ancient ruler of both emirates, entitled *Al-šayḥ al-mutašawwif Rāšid ibn Maṭar al-Qāsimī* (Āl-Qāsimī 2023). It recounts an incident that occurred in Ra's al-Khayma in 1782, the demolition of the dome over the tomb of Ḥasan al-Madanī (1693), a sufi of Iraqi origin, revered by the local community and highly regarded by the ruling house. Rāšid al-Qāsimī immediately had that dome and the other tombs that had suffered similar damage rebuilt, returning them to the original state.

The fortunes of the *ḥaddādiyya* and the other confraternities situated in the al-Šīr area came to an end with the preaching of the ḥanbalite Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb (d. 1792) and with the establishment of Wahhabism in the region through the alliance with the Āl Sa'ūd. The military expedition of 1799 (or 1800) and the subsequent siege of Ra's al-Khayma by the Saudi general al-Muḥayrī (d. 1807) forced the Āl Qāsimīs to ban all Sufi practices, and in particular the veneration of deceased masters. The peace treaty imposed by al-Muḥayrī obliged them to demolish the shrine of Ḥasan al-Madanī with their own hands (al-Ġumayrī 2011, pp. 16-17).

4. From al-Afġānī to 'Abd al-Raḥīm al-Murīd

Sufism reaffirmed itself in the Arab Emirates at the end of the 19th century with the arrival of Muḥammad 'Umar al-Afġānī (d. 1918), a follower of the *ṭarīqa qādirīyya* who devoted himself diligently to the spread of his school. Detailed information about this individual and his origins remains elusive: according to some, he arrived from Mecca together with pilgrims from Dubai; according to others, he came from Bahrain accompanying people from the Bānū Yās tribe;²⁰ while others believe that he arrived from Egypt

al-Imāratal-ʿArabiyya al-Muttaḥida, 2004, p. 320. This songbook is now available in an English translation: al-Māyidī ibn Zāhir, *Love, Death, Fame: Poetry and Lore from the Emirati Oral Tradition*, trans. Marcel Kurpershoek, foreword by David Elmer, New York: New York University Press, 2023.

²⁰ The ruling families of Abu Dhabi and Dubai belong to this tribal confederation of Central Arab origin, which has long been settled in the present-day UAE.

after completing his studies at al-Azhar, a stop on the way with the intention of then travelling to Baghdad to visit the tomb of ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Ġilānī (d. 1166), the founder of the *ṭarīqa* to which he belonged. In any case, al-Afġānī received a warm welcome in Abu Dhabi, where he held the position of imam in the main mosque, and also in Dubai, where he lived until his death with the favour of the rulers, the Āl Maktūm, which allowed him to preach undisturbed despite the opposition of some ḥanbalites in Dubai itself and in neighbouring Sharjah (al-Ġumayrī 2011, pp. 23-25). Although he did not interfere directly with local politics, he gained strong credibility with influential and powerful figures of the time, such as the then ruler of Dubai Ḥāšir ibn Maktūm (d. 1886), and the Omani sultan Fayṣal ibn Sa‘īd (d. 1888) who travelled to Dubai specifically to seek his advice and support (al-Ġumayrī 2011, p. 21).

Al-Afġānī’s presence prompted a revival of certain abandoned practices, in particular the celebration of the Prophet’s birthday or *mawlid*. While this celebration had been a topic of ongoing debate among Muslim scholars, it gained increasing popularity throughout the Islamic world from the 19th century onwards.²¹ Together with his main follower, the Persian ‘Abd Allāh al-Murīd, who belonged to the *ṭarīqa rifā‘iyya* and arrived in Dubai from Oman in 1880, al-Afġānī revived the ceremony of ‘*mālid*’ - so in the local vernacular language - in the form of a collective liturgical exercise regularly organised on the Prophet’s birthday in the month of *rabi‘ al-awwal* and also for other festivities, such as weddings, births or funerals (Jordan 2023, p. 426). These celebrations, known as *fann al-mālid* or “art/technique of the *mawlid*”, were prevalent until the late 1980s. They represent a collective religious art form, a unique blend of music, song and dance, and a real pillar in the national heritage of the Emirates. This event was even presented by their national pavilion in the context of the universal exhibition known as Expo Dubai 2020.²²

²¹ As extensively proven by Marion Holmes Katz, *The Birth of The Prophet Muhammad. Devotional Piety in Sunni Islam*, London: Routledge, 2007.

²² See www.youtube.com/watch?v=QaPUxx8xn6k e www.facebook.com/uaeatexpo/videos/ المالد-هو فن إماراتي تراثي يحثني بذكرى المولد النبوي الشريف ويجسد الإرث-[1180814120335941/?locale=ms_MY](https://www.facebook.com/uaeatexpo/videos/1180814120335941/?locale=ms_MY).

Returning to ‘Abd Allāh al-Murīd, his spiritual and cultural legacy was picked up and passed on by his son ‘Abd al-Raḥīm al-Murīd (d. 2007), a cherished figure in the local memory, who also enjoyed significant recognition beyond the UAE. His activity as a master in *mālid* celebrations and in ‘composing and singing poems about mystical love’ or *naẓm* is recounted by the Emirati filmmaker and poet Nuḡūm al-Ġānim in the documentary film *Al-Murīd* (2008). This film pays tribute to the spiritual dimension of Islam in the country and emphasizes the central national value of tolerance.²³

Under the leadership of ‘Abd al-Raḥīm al-Murīd, Sufism in the Emirates, particularly in Dubai, experienced an extremely vibrant period. In his house, located in the Rashidiya district, the *ḍikr* or remembrance of the divine Name was officiated at, the *mālid* or birthday of the Prophet was celebrated, and the principles of *naẓm* were taught; to some particularly gifted disciples, ‘Abd al-Raḥīm granted the licence of ‘*naẓīm*’ i.e. composer-singer. Among the regulars at the house was Aḥmed ibn Ḥāfiẓ (m. 2008), a *naẓīm* famous for his splendid voice and extraordinary memory. In the 1960s, given the success of the ceremonies presided over by ‘Abd al-Raḥīm, Aḥmed ibn Ḥāfiẓ founded, again in Dubai, a second group of *mālid* officiants known as *fīrqaṭ ibn Ḥāfiẓ li-l-mālid*. On important occasions, such as weddings involving high-ranking families, the two groups performed together.²⁴

The formula of the *mālid* varies according to groups and occasions. What remains constant is the alternating recitation of rhythmic poetry or prose (*šī‘r*, *nathr manẓūm*) with chanting (*tawāših*) to the rhythm of tambourines. The officiants are always arranged in two parallel rows, facing each other, seated, kneeling or standing; in one row they beat the tambourines synchronously, swinging their shoulders to the right and left in rhythm, while in the other they accompany the voice of the main singer, the *munshid*, who must be a person of recognised religious culture and spiritu-

²³ Screenwriter of the film is Ḥālid al-Budūr (b. 1961), himself a poet and an important figure in the cultural scene of the Emirates. An English version of the film is also available under the title *Al Mureed*, 2008.

²⁴ I owe this news to a lecture by Rašid Muḥammad ibn Hāšim, an Emirati scholar of local heritage, taken up by Aḥmad Yaḥyà for the daily newspaper “al-Bayān”, 3 January 2015, www.albayan.ae/across-the-uae/news-and-reports/2015-01-03-1.2279741

ality. The ceremony lasts about two hours, divided into four or five segments. In the past, *mālid* celebrations were held outdoors, so that women could also attend, separated from men by a curtain.²⁵

The celebration of the Prophet's birthday includes, in the United Arab Emirates as elsewhere, the recitation of the poetic biography of Muḥammad composed by the Malikite *qāḍī* of Mecca Ġa'far al-Barzanġī (d. 1764), the *Mawlid al-Barzanġī*, a work that still enjoys wide circulation in the Arabian Peninsula and East Africa (Jordan 2023, pp. 425-426). Other recitations may include the previously mentioned *Ode of the Mantle* by the Egyptian al-Būṣīrī, and *The Way of the Mantle* or *Nahj al-Burda*, a poem praising the Prophet, composed by another celebrated but modern Egyptian, Aḥmad Ṣawqī (d. 1932); along with other compositions by famous Sufi poets.²⁶

At the time of 'Abd al-Raḥīm al-Murīd, a practice survived that was widespread among Sufis throughout the Islamic world:²⁷ the piercing of the body with swords, daggers or large iron needles, known as *ḍarb al-ḥadīd* or *ḍarb al-šīš*. This was done without bloodshed, and during a *dīkr* or remembrance of the divine Name ceremony. In 1958, the magazine *National Geographic* documented this practice for the general public through a photo taken in Dubai by the British Ronald Codrai, an employee of the 'British Petroleum' oil concession, an amateur but decidedly gifted photographer.²⁸ Codrai commented on the photo, noting that among the numerous celebrations he had witnessed in the country, this one was the most bizarre. It took place at night and was led by an elderly *šayḥ* with a thick henna-dyed beard - probably 'Abd al-Raḥīm al-Murīd himself.²⁹ The participants were sitting on mats spread out under

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

²⁶ So reads an article by Mar'ī Ḥilyān, which appeared in "al-Bayān", 28 April 2007, on the occasion of the death of 'Abd al-Raḥīm al-Murīd, www.albayan.ae/sports/2007-04-28-1.768031#google_vignette

²⁷ For a recent example from Egypt, performing 'Alī al-Sibsībī al-Rifā'ī, see www.youtube.com/watch?v=N5nlhzKZGJw

²⁸ The photo was reprinted by the Arabic edition of *National Geographic* in 2010. Ronald Codrai collected an impressive number of evidence between the 1940s and 1950s; a selection of the shots in Abu Dhabi was recently published under the title *Abu Dhabi. An Arabian Album*, Dubai: Motivate Publishing, 2011.

²⁹ So claims the aforementioned Mar'ī al-Ḥilyān in "al-Bayān", 11 April 2009, www.albayan.ae/paths/books/2009-04-11-1.423257

palm trees, lined up in two opposite rows; in front of them, a sword and some daggers. With a slow but loud rhythm, all the bystanders began to chant, looking up as if they were addressing the sky; at a certain point they took each other by the hand, first kneeling and then standing, and in the meantime the *šayḥ* conducting the ceremony was striking the ground with the sword. Suddenly he directed it towards one of the devotees, a young boy who could have been 14 years old. The boy swayed to the rhythm of the chanting, and approached the old man, who took a dagger and plunged it into his shoulder. The boy continued swinging back and forth for several minutes until the *šayḥ* drew the dagger, without a single drop of blood being shed. The shaykh then pointed to another participant, who plunged the dagger into his own shoulder, withdrew it, raised it above his head and stabbed himself in the back; after which he grasped the sword holding it by the edge and began to pierce his naked belly (Al-Ġumayrī 2011, pp. 30-31).

In 2007, the practice of *ḍarb al-ḥadīd* was banned by Muḥammad ibn Rāšid Āl-Maktūm (b. 1949), the current ruler of Dubai. In the same year ‘Abd al-Raḥīm al-Murīd died, reportedly aged over 100 years. Since then, there has been a period of stagnation due to disagreement over the appointment of his successor. Some followed the school of ‘Abd al-Raḥīm’s main pupil, the Omani Ḥamdān al-Ma‘marī al-Murīd.³⁰

Conclusions

It is difficult to outline the history of Sufism in the UAE, ancient and more recent, given the almost total absence of written sources. Nonetheless, the limited available documents allow us to verify the existence of a ‘alawiyya ḥaddādiyya community in the 18th century, along with potentially other confraternities in the region of al-Šīr — today the Ra’s al-Khayma emirate. This region served as a gathering point for spiritual individuals from across the Muslim world.

After a period of major decline following the rise of Wahhabism in the region, Sufism found new life in the UAE at the end of the 19th century. This revival was attributed to the arrival of some masters on site, in particular Muḥammad ‘Umar al-Afġānī, a

³⁰ I could not trace his date of birth.

follower of the *ṭarīqa qādiriyya*, and two Omani masters, father and son, ‘Abd Allāh al-Murīd and ‘Abd al-Raḥīm al-Murīd, affiliated with the *rifa’iyya*. All of them were active in the country with the favour of the rulers. Their presence brought back the *dīkr* sessions and the celebration of the *mawlid* or birthday of the Prophet (*fann al-mālid*), the latter still considered a fundamental element of the Emirati cultural heritage. The practice, now banned, of the *ḍarb al-ḥadād* or *ḍarb al-šiš*, the piercing of the body without bloodshed, is attested at the beginning of the 21st century.

Taṣawwuf still enjoys the growing favour of the local leadership, as manifested by the excellent reception accorded to representatives of the Islamic mystical movement from abroad, with the numerous foundations and research centres they established and direct. Part of a religious vision that we can describe as liberal-traditionalist, it is openly considered a valid antidote to the expansion of political Islam and Salafism, and an instrument of a ‘true Islam’ (*al-Islām al-ḥaqīqī*), balanced, enlightened and liberal (*mu’tadil, tanwīrī, libirālī*).

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