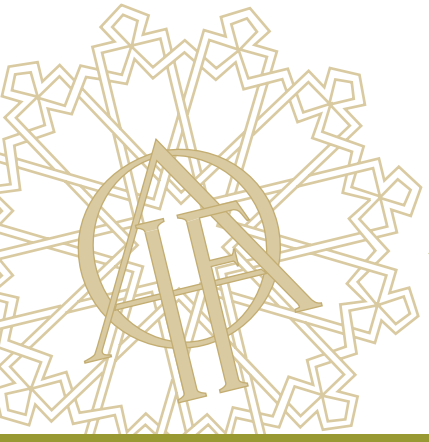
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SOME ASPECTS OF THE *ZĀWIYA* IN EGYPT AT THE EVE OF THE OTTOMAN CONQUEST

Leonor FERNANDES

The study of sufi institutions and the place they occupy within the structure of the Mamluk society has been neglected by most scholars. In fact most studies on the Mamluk period have ignored the crucial role which sufism and sufis played in the integration of the society at the time. Indeed, it appears that from the 14th century onwards, any attempt to maintain an internal balance between the military ruling group and the rest of the population had *a fortiori* to be based on sufi institutions.

Whether they sheltered « institutionalized sufism » or an independent form of « popular sufism », sufi institutions had their role to play in Mamluk society : a society where the indigenous elements blended with the foreign at times, but also sharply conflicted with them at others. The complexity of the society called for the need to find a suitable mode to integrate the two opposing interests — those of the civilian population and those of an alien military ruling group, thereby establishing a *modus vivendi* acceptable to both parties.

The ingenuity of the Mamluks lay in their ability to organize and put at their disposal an effective channel through which they could control at the same time, both, the religious groups and the masses of the population : sufi institutions. By manipulating the various sufi groups, they managed to maintain an internal stability, which, although frail, may have helped preventing major social upheavals in times of political turmoil and economic hardship.

A closer look at the role played by the various sufi institutions will undoubtedly provide us with a deeper insight on the way the Mamluk rulers could, and did manipulate them to serve their own interests. Conversely, it will show how sufi *šayḫ*(s) could stand up to the rulers to promote their own interest or support the cause of the common people.

The present paper will limit itself to the study of the role played by one of those sufi institutions : the *zāwiya*. The latter's loose organization and relative independence from the ruling class allowed it to perform various roles at different periods.

In order to understand the importance of the *zāwiya* at the end of the Mamluk period, it would perhaps be appropriate to give a brief account of the active roles it played in the Egyptian society prior to that period.

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Since the period of their inception, *zāwiya*(s) — whether conceived as independent structures or part of an existing building — were called upon to perform a variety of roles, the most important of which was directly concerned with the proselytization of the masses i.e. that section of society which could hardly be touched by the intellectual dogmatic form of Islam preached by the doctors of law.

From the scanty information that sources give us on *zāwiya*(s), we can surmise that in the Ayyūbī period, they were looked at by the rulers as one of the most effective channels for the diffusion of Sunni ideas. Accordingly, they had their role to play in the political scheme of the new Sunni rule [1].

The overthrow of the Fāṭimī Šīʿī rule by the Sunni rulers was accompanied by a strong will to uproot Šiʿism from the lands of Egypt and Syria. In order to reach their goal and consolidate their hold on the empire, a series of strong measures that aimed at the training and realignment of religious groups had to be undertaken by the new rulers. Hence, shortly after he had seized the power, Ṣalāḥ al-dīn [2] engaged himself in the foundation of a number of *madrasa*(s) whereby a new group of *ʿulamā'* and *fuqahā'* trained in the Sunni schools of law, was created.

Whereas *madrasa*(s) were left to operate within the urban circles of the literate, mosques to a lesser degree were used to convey the same message to the wider section of the population. Ayyūbī policy about rural areas were also directed toward the same goal, however in Upper Egypt where the concentration of Copts was still substantial, their concern must have been even greater. It is with regard to those remote areas that the Ayyūbī had to find a channel through which they could operate indirectly, i.e. an institution which, due to its close association with local folklore and pragmatic Islam could attract the confidence of the masses. Such a role befell on the *zāwiya*(s) and their *šayḫ*(s).

Although Maqrīzī does not mention among the 26 *zāwiya*(s) he lists in his « *Ḫiṭaṭ* » the ones located outside Cairo, we know from the work of al-Udfūwī [3] that sufi institutions were founded in Upper Egypt, and that sufi *šayḫ*(s) played an active role in the diffusion of orthodox Islam. Even if the author of the *Ṭāliʿ* does not use the term *zāwiya* to refer to those foundations, as noted by Garcin [4], it is possible to infer from

[1] For comparative material on the role played by a sufi foundation — the *Ribāṭ* — in Baghdad, cf. Jacqueline Sublet, « La fonction du Ribat à Baghdad du Vᵉ au début du VIIᵉ siècle », *REI*, 1974, 101-121.

[2] Cf. Ibn Šaddād, *Kitāb Sīrat Ṣalāḥ al-dīn al-Ayyūbī*, Cairo 1964.

[3] al-Udfūwī, *al-Ṭalīʿ al-Saʿīd al-Ǧāmiʿ li Asmā' al-Fuḍalā' wa'l-Ruwāh bi Aʿlā al-Ṣaʿīd*, Cairo 1914.

[4] J.C. Garcin, *Un centre musulman de la Haute-Egypte médiévale : Qūṣ*, Cairo 1976, 309-310.

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the text of his biographies that the foundations he mentions are nothing but what we refer to as *zāwiya*(s).

The Mamluk period saw the rapid spread of sufism, and the diffusion of sufi ideas culminated in the writings of Ibn ʿAṭāʾ Allah (d. 709/1309), a Šaḏili Sufī and strong opponent of Ibn Taymiyya. As a result, a number of *zāwiya*(s) built for sufi *šayḫ*(s), mostly refugees from foreign lands, were founded. It is also during that period that we see the growth of « institutionalized sufism » sponsored by the state and embodied in the *ḫānqāh*. Both types of sufism were intentionally left by rulers, to operate within two different spheres. The first-popular sufism-appealed to the masses, the second-institutionalized sufism-attracted the intellectual *ʿulamāʾ* and *fuqahāʾ* in search of fame, power, and the material security which an appointment to a royal or emirial foundation could provide.

From the third quarter of the 15th century, the importance of « institutionalized sufism » had started to dwindle while that of « popular sufism » as well as that of its foundations — the *zāwiya* — was rising. The end of the century saw the final disintegration of the state-sponsored foundations — the *ḫānqāh*(s) —, which had no longer a « raison d'être ». The economic hardships and political instabilities that affected the life of that official institution did not threaten the *zāwiya*(s) whose looser internal organization and financial independence from the ruling class enabled it to survive the chaos which befell most of the other institutions at the time. Moreover, the flexible internal structure of the *zāwiya*(s) allowed them to perform a number of functions according to the needs of the society they were part of.

A quick survey of *waqfiyya*(s) shows that some *zāwiya*(s) of the 15th century had taken over the functions of *ribāṭ*(s) or *ḫānqāh*(s) [1]. Moreover, Maqrīzī mentions that the *ḫuṭba* had been introduced in a number of them [2]. The ambiguity in the function of the *zāwiya* was noted by a 16th century Faqīh al-Hayṭamī who wrote : « ... (*ribāṭ*) that which is built to provide housing for the needy it has been known under the name of *zāwiya*, it (the *zāwiya*) takes after (resembles) the *masǧid*, or it takes after the *madrasa* or the *ribāṭ*, (one) acts in it according to the usage of its location » [3].

The rise in importance of the *zāwiya* was accompanied by an interesting development of the institution which evolved in two different directions. On one hand, there was the traditional *zāwiya* built by a *šayḫ* with his own money or a donation from a member

[1] Cf. « Three Sufi foundations in a 15th century Waqfiyya », *Annales Islamologiques* XVII, 1981, 149, by the writer.

[2] Maqrīzī, *Ḫiṭaṭ*, Būlāq II, 331.

[3] Ibn Ḥaǧar al-Hayṭamī al-Šāfiʿī, *Tuḥfat al-Miḥtāǧ bi Šarḥ al-Minhāǧ*, Cairo, II 494.

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of the ruling « class » and founded for a particular order. Such *zāwiya*(s) regardless of their architectural shape (some were domed-structures, others were *riwāq*-type or even complexes) were associated with the ruling « class », and had their share in the social and political life of the « elite », as did the *ḫānqāh*(s) in earlier decades.

On the other hand, a second type of *zāwiya* evolved. It was conceived as a *zāwiya-masǧid* or *zāwiya-ribāṭ* and was relatively independent from the ruling class. Such *zāwiya*(s) adopted a type of orthodox sufism which transcended the pettiness of the *ṭarīqa*-centered foundations. Most of them embraced Šaḏilism or one of its branches, an order which as Garcin puts it was polymorphous [1]. Its teachings [2] advocated the return to orthodox sufi practices based on the Quran and the Sunna of the Prophet, a point which was at the center of the sufism practiced in *ḫānqāh*(s).

Born as a reaction to the social, economical, and political illnesses of the period, this new orthodox sufi trend led to the rapid spread of Šaḏilism and the foundation of a number of *zāwiya-masǧid* both in rural areas and in urban centers. Interestingly, such foundations attracted, mainly, indigenous sufis observant of orthodox Islam. In fact many of them had been instructed by prominent *faqīh*(s) under whose supervision they had started their careers. Šaʿrānī himself had been trained by about 60 masters many of whom were Šāfiʿī *faqīh*(s). Moreover in the introduction to his *Ṭabaqāt* he mentions that most sufis of his time had become *faqīh*(s) [3].

Even if we have reservations about Šaʿrānī's assertion, we still have to admit that, at least as far as the occupation of the sufis within the foundations is concerned, members of the *zāwiya-masǧid* were not involved in many of the practices judged unorthodox by the doctors of law. After his visit to Cairo, Mustafa b. Ahmed of Gallipoli (d. 1600) wrote [4] : « Another point is that in our times the (religious) orders followed by the pious, the so-called Sheikhs of Egypt, are not in harmony with the approved ways of the sheikhs of the Khalvetiye and Zeyniye orders and the heads of the Nakhshbandiyi order of the land of Rum. For they do not put their dervishes into cells and order them to exercise themselves in gradually increasing ascetic discipline, everyday interpreting the dreams they have ». The preceding comment refers to the lack of ḫilwa (retreat) practice, a practice which was often condemned by orthodox men of religion [5].

[1] Garcin, *op. cit.*, 319.

[2] For some information on Šaḏilism, cf. ʿAlī Safī Ḥusayn, *al-Adab al-Ṣūfī fī Miṣr*, Cairo 1964, 41-43.

[3] Šaʿrānī, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā*, Cairo n.d., I 4.

[4] *Mustafa Ali's Description of Cairo of 1599*, tr. Andreas Tietze, Wien 1975, 47.

[5] Cf. Michael Winter, « Sheikh Ali ibn Maymun and Syrian Sufism in the sixteenth century », *Israel Oriental Studies* 7, 1977, 297 note 82.

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Under the influence of Šaḍilism, sufis of orthodox *zāwiya*(s) had been sensitivized to the problems of the masses among whom they lived. Furthermore, they took upon themselves the moral duty to reform the society, setting for their guideline the dictate « al-amr bi-l-maʿrūf wa'l-nahiy ʿan al-munkar ». Accordingly, it was the sufis responsibility to urge the people and the rulers to return to the orthodox behaviours preached by Islam. Some of the *šayḫ*(s) saw it as their duty to incite the rulers to return to the long forgotten idea of ğihād. As a result, more than once, the position of the *šayḫ*(s) of the *zāwiya*(s) antagonised that of the ruling class. However, on the whole, the relationship between sufi *šayḫ*(s) and the military « elite » was characterised by dualistic behaviour; *šayḫ*(s) would, at times, oppose rulers and side with the people and, at others, they would simply use their influence to obtain material gains for the oppressed masses. Interestingly, the rulers themselves adopted the same attitude with *šayḫ*(s), threatening them at times but more often seeking their help to overcome the discontent of the military « class » or that of the masses. They also turned to these *šayḫ*(s) in times of financial trouble to ask for their aid. This dual relationship was mainly imposed by the ever-growing role *zāwiya*(s) and the *šayḫ*(s) came to play in a rapidly changing society [1].

In order to understand the social role of the *zāwiya* at the eve of the Ottoman conquest, one has to look at the changes which had affected the society itself during the last decades of Mamluk rule. The end of the 15th century was characterised by a general socio-economic decline which slowly militated against the Mamluks. Evidently, such a decline, which caused the disintegration of certain institutions and affected the values of society, had its roots in earlier periods. This is apparent from the writings of jurisconsults and theologians among which one can single out Ibn Taymiyya's (d. 728/1328) book *al-Siyāsa al-Šarʿiyya.*

During the 15th century, it had become possible to purchase most positions in the state, including religious ones. Hence, a butcher could become vizier and an illiterate person could obtain the position of *qāḍī.* The gradual appointment to religious positions of people who were judged unworthy, soon affected the military « class » itself. By the end of the Mamluk period, and more specifically during the reign of al-Ġawrī, the poor management of the finances of the state had called for a series of oppressive measures which took the form of new taxes imposed on the poorer strata of the population, as well as the small merchants.

During such difficult times of social injustice, the only institution towards which the layman could turn his eyes for help was the *zāwiya.* Indeed, it was hard for the masses

[1] For an interesting analysis of Egyptian society based on Šaʿrānī's work cf. Michael Winter, *Society and Religion in Early Ottoman Egypt,* N. J. 1982.

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to identify with the military « elite » still very much foreign, or even with the religious « class » of *ʿulamā'* and *fuqahā'* who were mostly drawn from foreign lands and/or who had been seriously corrupted by the lure of their positions.

It is against this background that one has to look at the rise of the type of *zāwiya* which was, first, oriented toward an orthodox sufism and, second, which set as one of its major goals to alleviate the pains of the masses.

Since the *šayḫ*(s) had to operate among the masses, most of them chose to build their *zāwiya*(s) outside the center of al-Qāhira proper, which had been reserved for official religious institutions or commercial centers. Their foundations were located in heavily populated urban centers at the periphery of the city, and served to integrate the life of the community built around them or in which they had been implanted [1].

The *zāwiya*(s) thus founded provided a social framework through which *šayḫ*(s) could operate and meet the needs of their respective quarters. Moreover, as noted by Garcin [2], they had become the channel through which the sufis coming from areas outside the city could be integrated gradually in the Cairene society.

Among some of the most important functions of the *zāwiya*(s) was that of providing shelter and food for the needy. As early as the 15th century some of the *zāwiya*(s) which had been founded as *ribāṭ*(s), were to provided residence for poor Muslims living around them; however during the 16th century, this provision was extended to all the needy. It was also the *šayḫ*(s) who protected the masses against the injustices of the military « class ». One of the most interesting activities taking place in the *zāwiya*(s) was the education of women, a matter which attracted the criticism of the *ʿulamā'*. Moreover, since they lived and worked among the people, sufi *šayḫ*(s) had come to share all their domestic problems, and in times of disputes between people or families they were called to play the role of peacemakers. Finally, one can note that it was towards the *zāwiya*(s) and their *šayḫ*(s) that people of ranks and creeds turned for help, for indeed, thanks to their *karāmāt* (supernatural power), *šayḫ*(s) transcended social divisions and « sectarianism » [3].

[1] During the 16th century many *zāwiya*(s) had been the core of villages which started to form around them. Cf. al-Šiblī al-Yamānī, *Takmilat al-Nūr al-Sāfir fī Aḫbār al-Qarn al-ʿĀšir*. Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya Ms. 1586 folio 293. The same phenomena was taking place in N.A., cf. Muḥammad Ḥağğī, *al-Zāwiya al-Dalā'iyya*, Rabat 1964, 30-34.

[2] Garcin, « L'insertion sociale de Shaʿrānī dans le milieu du Caire », *Colloque International sur l'histoire du Caire*, Cairo 1969.

[3] Šaʿrānī, *Ṭabaqāt* II, 61, 77-80, 81, 100, 125. al-Ġazzī, *al-Kawākib al-Sā'ira bi Aʿyān al-Mi'ah al-ʿĀšira*, Beirut 1979, I 97-98, 197-207, 298, II 85. Ibn Iyās, *Badā'iʿ al-Zuhūr*, Būlāq 1312 H., III 75.

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It is worth observing that such supernatural powers as had the *šayḫ*(s), were by no means a new phenomena since they are often mentioned by chronicles of earlier periods. However, by the 16th century, the nature of the *karāmāt* and miracle reported by the sources seems to have a new social dimension attached to it. Indeed, rather than report the dazzling fantastic performances of *šayḫ*(s), sources inform us of the ways they solved people's problems. For instance, we are told how a *šayḫ* fed a large number of poor people, during a period of starvation just by performing a miracle, how another one delivered an innocent man injustly imprisoned, or even how some *šayḫ*(s) used their supernatural powers to relief people from a natural catastrophe. The ultimate picture one gets from the reading of biography works, such as the ones written by Šaʿrānī, al-Ġazzī, or al-Munāwi, is that in the long-run sufi *šayḫ*(s) had come to represent people's salvation.

The attribution of *karāmāt* to the *šayḫ*(s) increased their control over the masses and posed a real danger to the central power which they could oppose at any time. The increase of the *šayḫ*(s)' power was accompanied by an interesting social phenomena which was taking place at the time, mainly : the transfer of allegiance of the masses from the charismatic person of the ruler, to that of the *šayḫ*(s), who came to be regarded as their sole defender, protector, and provider.

At times, the *šayḫ*(s) supernatural powers were doubled by their ability to generate some economical outlets for the people in their quarters by initiating *mawlid*(s) (festival) which took place at regular periods of the year. Such *mawlid*(s) which usually took place in the *zāwiya*(s) attracted people from all part of the country. There, a sort of market was set around the *zāwiya,* and small merchants could display and sell their goods to the visitors.

Some of the 16th century *šayḫ*(s) had gained so much power that they represented a threat to the stability of the government [1]. Such was the case with *šayḫ*(s) like Abū-l Suʿūd al-Ğāriḥī, al-Dašṭūṭī, or Zakariyya al-Anṣārī who had the title of Ṣāḥib Miṣr. These *šayḫ*(s) formed a sort of state within the state, and their opposition to the ruler was regarded as fatal to the latter. This view was shared both by the ignorant « classes » of the population, as well as by prominent *faqīh*(s). In an interesting comment in his book on *fatwā*(s), the 16th century Muftī al-Hayṭamī [2] makes a digression to explain how the defeat of sultan al-Ġawrī by Sultan Selim was due to his opposition to a sufi

[1] Garcin, « Deux saints populaires du Caire au début du XVI[e] siècle », *BEO* XXIX, 1977, 131-144.

[2] Ibn Ḥağar al-Hayṭamī, *al-Fatāwa al-Ḥadīṭiyya,* Cairo 1889, 38.

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šayḫ. According to him, al-Ġawrī's stubborness and his refusal to act upon a *fatwa* by Šayḫ Burhān al-dīn b. Šarīf attracted him the wrath of the sufi who put a curse on him and ultimately caused his death.

Although the *šayḫ*(s) represented a real threat to the central power, there is no evidence to sustain the fact that they had plans to take over the authority of the state. In fact their lack of political ambition allowed them to retain their relative freedom, even after the Ottoman conquest. What *šayḫ*(s) did, was to use their control over the population to maintain their influence on government officials, a matter which allowed them to proceed with their social activities in their *zāwiya*(s).

The question remains as to what were the decisive elements which favoured the involvement of the *zāwiya* in social activities? In fact, social problems were ever-present even if not on the same scale as in the early Mamluk period. However, no visible effort was undertaken by *šayḫ*(s) to involve themselves actively in the problems of the masses. Moreover, the *zāwiya*(s) activities were focused on the diffusion of the ideas of their respective *ṭarīqa*(s) (orders), and on gaining new disciples. Even after the Ottoman conquest, the type of *ṭarīqa*-centered foundations [*zāwiya*(s) or *takiyya*(s)] which were reserved for foreign sufis (*aʿǧām*) continued to exist.

The rise of the *zāwiya-masǧid* which stressed the lack of focus on one *ṭarīqa* and the return to orthodox sufi practices of the classical period as dictated by the teachings of Šaḏilism must have re-oriented the activities of the *zāwiya*(s) towards the outside. Secondly, in contrast to the *ṭarīqa*-centered foundations which were closely associated with the ruling class, and whose members were living on fixed salaries from the waqfs, members of the *zāwiya-masǧid*(s) had to earn their living and thus became actively involved in the daily life of their respective quarters. Thirdly, and perhaps most important, the *zāwiya*(s) and their *šayḫ*(s) had to gain control over the greatest number of people in order to be able to fight back the infiltration of foreign sufis and heterodox dervishes into Egypt.

It was obvious by the 16th century that the clashes between the *'ulamā'* and the sufis, which were so frequent and severe during the early Mamluk period, had made place for more violent clashes between dervishes and orthodox sufis [1]. The tiny place that Šaʿrānī reserves to some prominent Ḫalwātī sufis, or the total absence of reference to some others, in his *Ṭabaqāt*, must certainly be interpreted as contempt for unorthodox sufis, or simply reflects his dislike for those who had penetrated Cairo from foreign lands, and whose protection was secured by the ruling class.

[1] Michael Winter, « Sheikh Ali b. Maymun and Syrian Sufism in the 16th century », *op. cit.*, 302.

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Finally, one can conclude that the ever-growing power of the *zāwiya*(s) and their *šayḫ*(s) was the direct result of a number of problems the most important of which were : the rising social injustices caused by the bad management of the finances of the « state », the growing gap between the masses and the military « elite » absorbed in its own problems, and the lack of any formal association with which the masses could identify.

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