

Mystic States, Motherly Virtues, Female Participation and Leadership in an Egyptian Sufi Milieu

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Abstract

Sufi rituals have historically been more open to women than other Islamic religious practices such as prayer in the mosques, legal scholarship, and preaching. While the past decades have seen some, albeit modest, opening of the latter fields for female participation, even leadership, in the Sufi milieu, the participation of women has been subjected to strong criticism and pressure at the same time. Two interrelated yet contradicting trends, one of a moralist opposition to women's public participation in religious rituals, and another of increasing female presence in the professional and public sphere on the condition of a moral and civic discipline, shape the possibilities of action for Sufi women. Highlighting the importance of class distinctions for the relationship of gender and religious practice, this article traces the styles of leadership and participation that make a significant presence of women possible, the factors that make it precarious, and the strategies that women in position of authority employ to justify their role.

Introduction

Given the large number of studies on Sufi orders on the one hand, and on Muslim women's agency on the other, the participation of women in contemporary Islamic mysticism has remained relatively understudied. Studies on pilgrimage sites often give considerable attention, even focus to the role of women, most notably so Nadia Abu-Zahra's¹ study of the sanctuary of al-Sayyida Zaynab in Cairo. They leave most active Sufi women out of the picture, however, because their activities are usually not restricted to one particular shrine. As far as the Middle East is concerned, the participation of women in Sufi groups has largely been a blind spot with few exceptions, most notably Willy Jansen's and Sossie Andezian's studies on Algerian Sufi women.² A notable exception with regard to Egypt is Valerie Hoffman's ethnography of Sufism, which also discusses the role of women and sexuality.³ There is more research on women in Sufi milieus in the Indian subcontinent,⁴ and a growing body of studies on women in Sufi orders in western Africa.⁵ While West Africa

¹ Nadia Abu-Zahra, *The Pure and Powerful: Studies in Contemporary Muslim Society* (Berkshire: Ithaca Press, 1997).

² Willy Jansen, 'Het offensief tegen de Zusters van de Broederschap: Vrouwen in de Algerijnse Islam', *Amsterdams Sociologisch Tijdschrift* 15 (December 1988), 3, pp. 507-27; Willy Jansen, *Women without Men: Gender and Marginality in an Algerian Town* (Leiden: Brill, 1987); Sossie Andezian, 'Sufi Women in an Algerian Pilgrimage Ritual', in David Westerlund and Eva Evers Rosander (eds.), *African Islam and Islam in Africa: Encounters between Sufis and Islamists* (London: Hurst, 1997), pp. 193-213.

³ Valerie J. Hoffman, *Sufism, Mystics, and Saints in Modern Egypt* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), pp. 227-54.

⁴ See, e.g. Pnina Werbner and Helene Basu (eds.), *Embodying Charisma: Modernity, Locality and the Performance of Emotion in Sufi Cults* (London: Routledge, 1998); Kelly Pemberton, 'Muslim Women Mystics and Female Spiritual Authority in South Asian Sufism', in Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern (eds.), *Contesting Rituals: Islam and Practices of Identity-Making* (Durham, North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press, 2005), pp. 3-39.

⁵ See, e.g., Christian Coulon, 'Women, Islam, and Baraka', in Cruise O'Brien and Christian Coulon (eds.), *Charisma and Brotherhood in African Islam* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 113-33; Eva Evers Rosander, 'Going and not Going to Porokhane: Mourid Women and Pilgrimage in Senegal and Spain', in Simon Coleman and John Eade (eds.), *Reframing Pilgrimage: Cultures in Motion* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 69-89; Codou Bop, 'Roles and the Position of Women in Sufi Brotherhoods in Senegal', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 73, 4, 2005, pp. 1099-1119; Alaine Hutson, 'African Sufi Women and Ritual Change', in Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern (eds.), *Contesting Rituals* (Durham, North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press, 2005), pp. 111-21.

so far has been the clear focus of the study of the role of women in Sufi movements, the concentration on few hegemonic groups (notably Mourides and Tijānīs), and the recurrent idea of an 'African Islam' as distinguished from a supposedly more universal 'Arab Islam' have unnecessarily narrowed their focus.⁶ Also, the relative blindness of Middle Eastern studies on Sufi women can be partly attributed to their tendency to interpret the often publicly marginalised status of women's activity as constitutive of something like a women's popular Islam as opposed to men's official one.⁷ More importantly perhaps, most of the studies on Sufism in Egypt, notably those by Michael Gilsenan, Fred de Jong, Pierre Luizard, Julian Johansen, Michael Frishkopf, and Rachida Chih,⁸ focus on Sufi orders with a reformist and modernist orientation and a formal, bureaucratic organisation where (formal) participation by women is very limited.

And yet much, if not most, of mystical Islam in contemporary Egypt takes place in much more informal groups that are not officially registered, and often have little in the way of organisation beyond the commitment of a group of followers to a spiritual leader.⁹ Furthermore, the followers' commitment is often not exclusive, and many Sufis frequent gatherings

⁶ See Benjamin Soares, 'Notes on the Anthropological Study of Islam and Muslim Societies in Africa', *Culture and Religion* 1, 2, 2000, pp. 277-85.

⁷ See, e.g., Nancy and Richard Tapper, 'The Birth of the Prophet: Ritual and Gender in Turkish Islam', *Man* 22, 1, 1987, pp. 69-92.

⁸ Michael Gilsenan, *Saint and Sufi in Modern Egypt: An Essay in the Sociology of Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973); Frederick de Jong, *Turuq and Turuq-Linked Institutions in Nineteenth Century Egypt: A Historical Study in Organisational Dimensions of Islamic Mysticism* (Leiden: Brill, 1978); Idem, *Sufi Orders in Ottoman and Post-Ottoman Egypt and the Middle East: Collected Studies* (Istanbul: The Isis Press, 2000); Pierre-Jean Luizard, 'Le rôle des confréries soufies dans le système politique égyptien', *Monde arabe Maghreb Machrek*, 131, 1991, pp. 26-53; Julian Johansen, *Sufism and Islamic Reform in Egypt: The Battle for Islamic Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); Michael Frishkopf, *Sufism, Ritual and Modernity in Egypt: Language Performance as an Adaptive Strategy* (PhD thesis, Los Angeles: UCLA, 1999); Rachida Chih, *Le Soufisme au quotidien. Confréries d'Égypte au XXe siècle* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2000).

⁹ One study that is written from this perspective is Valerie J. Hoffman, *Sufism, Mystics, and Saints*.

of different groups without paying exclusive allegiance to any *sheikh*. Such fluid, dynamic and loosely organised groups are much more difficult to study and also do not quite so nicely meet the researcher's expectations of what a mystical order should look like. The emphasis on bureaucratically organised orders has not only contributed to a misrepresentation of the Sufi milieu in general, it has also made the participation of women largely invisible. Not only are the informal groups probably the most dynamic form of Sufism in Egypt (after all, many of the currently most prominent formally registered orders have become so only in a later stage after a period of informal activity); it is also in these groups that women have the strongest presence and the greatest opportunities for participation and leadership.

Looking at the role of women in these informal groups, I attempt to offer here some preliminary analysis and ethnography to help fill this gap. Originally an offshoot of a wider study on Islamic saints-day festivals (*mawlid*s)¹⁰ as a subject of contestation in contemporary Egypt, this study focuses mainly on people attending public or semi-public Sufi gatherings at *mawlid*s, and leaves out of focus people participating primarily in activities and gatherings of a more private nature.

The public, one of the key analytical categories of this study, is a complex and tricky category. On one level, 'public' (in the sense of doing something 'in the public') implies presence and visibility as opposed to intimacy and invisibility. On a more abstract level – and closer to the sense in which the term is commonly used in the social sciences – 'public' implies involvement in issues and presence in sites that are considered to be relevant for the common interest as opposed to the private, domestic realm. In the way I use the term 'public', it does not, however, imply open access. Following a critical line of thought in the current debate on the public sphere,¹¹ I look at 'the public sphere', or 'the public' (the latter being the more personified, the first the more spatialised way of speaking about something which is neither a thing nor a place but a

¹⁰ *Mawlid*s in Egypt are better known and pronounced as *mūlid*s.

¹¹ Especially Harold Mah, 'Phantasies of the Public Sphere: Rethinking the Habermas of Historians', *The Journal of Modern History*, 72, 2000, pp. 153-82.

mode of political imagination) mainly in the sense of the hegemonic definition of the normal, common point of view as opposed to particular interests.

Based on interviews with women who participate in public gatherings at Muslim saints-day festivals (*mawlid*s), this study focuses on those women whose participation in Sufi groups is visible beyond domestic or exclusively female settings, and who therefore, partly in a conscious effort to gain recognition and support among the upper and middle classes, are confronted with complex categories of class, orthodoxy, and female respectability. These largely habitus-based categories mark the access to the hegemonic field of religion and civility that following Harold Mah¹² can be described as 'the public' as opposed to what are represented as particular interests and marginal positions. The relevant distinction here is thus not a liberal opposition of the public and the private, but the two parallel distinctions of protected (*mastūr*) and visible (*makshūf*) spaces and social roles on the one hand, and on the other, the political and cultural hegemonies that mark the difference between 'civilised' middle- and upper-class habitus and publicness, and 'simple' or 'backward' lower-class milieus that are excluded from an active role as participants in the public sphere.

While many recent studies on Muslim women's religious practice do note the importance of class,¹³ it does not feature in the analysis as centrally as it perhaps should, especially regarding a strongly stratified class society like Egypt, and such class-sensitive religious movements as the Salafiyya which, at least in large parts of the Middle East and Africa, has an intimate relationship with middle-class aspiration.¹⁴ Being

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ See, e.g., Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005). While Mahmood does locate the piety movement in different neighbourhoods and class milieus, her analysis focuses primarily on the enactment of an Islamic tradition in the pious self-discipline project and does not problematise the significance of class.

¹⁴ Samuli Schielke, *Snacks and Saints: Mawlid Festivals and the Politics of Festivity, Piety and Modernity in Contemporary Egypt* (PhD thesis, University of Amsterdam, 2006), pp. 128-35.

an orthodox Muslim and a civilised citizen, that is, being a part of 'the public' and potentially having access to participation in the public sphere, is to a great extent dependent on class. In fact, much of what at first appears as gender-based exclusions is in fact class and gender based, and successfully embodying the right kind of class habitus can allow women to overcome many apparently gender-based limitations. This, as we will see further below, implies that for women in public roles, class habitus is an especially crucial and fragile issue.

Rather than simply juxtaposing female to male participation in Sufism, this article looks at the enactments of female roles and virtues in their complex relationship to publicness, class, and Islamic reformism. This, of course, implies that by focussing on what may have been blind spots for the study of women's religious agency in earlier research, this study has blind spots of its own, of which the reader should be aware. Since many Sufi women do not frequent *mawlid*s, fieldwork carried out in a different context (for example, in all-female gatherings of large, established Sufi groups) might provide a significantly different picture. Furthermore, gender-specific standards of modesty and privacy make it relatively difficult for a male researcher to study women's practices and experiences, and this is also reflected in the empirical data on which this paper is based. While I can refer to a wide spectrum of observations and encounters to describe the presence and practice of women in the Sufi movement, the number of female Sufis whom I know well and with whom I have had the possibility to conduct longer in-depth interviews, is very small. In this study, I can thus only offer some glimpses of a complex issue which future research will hopefully be able to map and analyse in more depth.

In this article, I try to trace the specific styles of leadership (not so much trying to fit them into Weber's ideal types of authority, however, as looking at the socially specific patterns of authority that can be found at work) and participation that make a significant presence of women possible in the first place. I will also take the factors that make their participation problematic or even unacceptable from the point of view of so many middle-class modernists (many of whom are women) into

account, as well as considering the strategies that women in positions of authority employ to find balance in an often precarious field between devoted followers and a sceptical, even hostile public. Starting with the observation that it is the kind of presence rather than presence itself that makes Sufi women's position precarious, I will first try to sketch different forms of presence and participation, looking at the factors that possibly contribute to their marginalisation. Doing so, I will also highlight that there are, in fact, very different forms of participation that may be more or less problematic for very different reasons, just as there can be different successful strategies for solving these problems.

Styles of participation

People of very different styles – be it regarding class habitus or forms of socialising, ritual and festive practice – gather at a Muslim saint's festival. These festivals, known as *mawlid*s in Egypt, are the main occasion for Sufi groups and individuals of Sufi orientation to gather, and many devoted Sufis spend much of their free time travelling to festivals around the country. Open to everyone, these festivals tend to attract a very heterogeneous and often rather eccentric mixture of people. One group of participants at the festivals are active Sufi women, some of them individual pilgrims to the saint's shrine, others members of a Sufi group, yet others standing out as spiritual leaders. The class habits they express vary from poor peasants to sophisticated urban bourgeoisie, but the most visible – and in the eyes of many, the most scandalous – among them are those who exhibit the eccentric styles of a *darwīsha* (a woman fully devoted to a Sufi path, often to the degree of departing from common conventions of dress and behaviour). The male form is *darwīsh* (pl. *darāwīsh*) or a *ma'allima* (a woman from a traditional urban milieu who runs a business of her own and takes over male roles, such as sitting in a café and smoking). Often wearing colourful dress and make-up, smoking, participating in public gatherings of Sufi *dhikr* (collective meditation based on the repetition of names of God and – commonly but not necessarily – rhythmical movement to the tune of music), and engaging in conversations with strangers and relatives alike,

they display a habitus in certain ways different from the standards of modesty and subordination that usually guide the behaviour of women in urban and rural contexts alike. Many of them are unmarried or divorced, and a certain air of scandal often surrounds them. For the *darwīshas*, the commitment to mystic love offers a framework where pious commitment, rather than being a form of discipline, legitimises a counter-normative lifestyle. Not surprisingly, many people also in the Sufi milieu disagree with this and view the *darwīshas* with ambiguity if not suspicion. Many other Sufi women, as I will show here, are very concerned with keeping mystical love in line with their reputation and habitus of being respectable and cultivated.

The mystical tradition offers women various forms of participation, as well as normative precedents to legitimise them. While the majority of the participants of a *mawlid* are men, the conventions regarding gendered spaces are significantly relaxed during the festival. Women are welcomed as customers in cafes that usually prefer to serve men only, while mosques and shrines where spatial separation of men and women is observed for most of the year become mixed spaces during the festival. At *khidmas*,¹⁵ tents where tea and food are served free of charge and where pilgrims gather, sleep and celebrate *dhikrs*, women usually share the space with men. The mixing at *mawlid*s does, however, follow certain unspoken conventions of respect and proper behaviour: Women are usually seated together and men usually avoid sitting amongst them. In most Sufi groups there is generally a wide acceptance for women who take up the spiritual path, and Islamic traditions offer several normative precedents to legitimate an active or even leading role of women in religious life. The mystics Rābi'a al-ʿAdawīyya (d. ca. 185 H/801 A.D.)

¹⁵ A *khidma* (literally 'service', derived from *al-khidma li-llah*, 'a service for the sake of God') is organised and funded by a Sufi leader or a Sufi group. The services of a *khidma* are always free of charge. The physical shape of a *khidma* can range from a simple carpet to a lofty tent with different sections for general public and the closer circle of friends and guests. It is either here or at the mosques and shrines that Sufi pilgrims spend most of their time, and people usually have their standard *khidmas* that they frequent.

and al-Sayyida Nafisa bint Ḥasan al-Anwār (d. ca. 200 H/815 A.D.), and most importantly the Prophet Muḥammad's wives Khadīja and ʿĀ'isha and granddaughter Zaynab, are regularly referred to as examples of Muslim women playing an active and public role. Al-Sayyida Nafisa and al-Sayyida Zaynab are also among the most important Muslim saints of Egypt. Furthermore, the mystical distinction between exoteric (*zāhir*) and esoteric (*bāṭin*) aspects of religion allows for the inclusion of people of very different styles: respected members of established Sufi families, poor women who either work for their living or depend on the charities at *mawlid*s, eccentric *darwīsh*as. Following the logic of *zāhir* and *bāṭin* the appearance of a person, and according to some even her observance of the exoteric judgements of the religion, do not tell anything about her true spiritual status. Consequently, appearance, gender and class cannot be criteria for exclusion. Even the role of a spiritual guide, as a male Sufi, a surgeon by civil profession, pointed out to me, is not bound to male gender and male-gendered virtues the way exoteric religious scholarship and leadership are, but to spiritual qualities that men and women can equally possess.¹⁶

This does not mean, however, that women would act on an equal base with men. Nor do they generally lay claim to such equality, convinced as they seem to be about a reasonable degree of natural distribution of roles and responsibilities between men and women. Most forms of women's participation follow conventional gender-specific roles. Following the common sense of protection (*sitr*) that women are believed to require, much fewer women than men participate in public rituals like *dhikrs*, and during their stay at the *mawlid*, women are often more confined to the space of their *khidma* than men are. Female saints are almost invariably associated with motherly virtues (and therefore often referred to as 'Mama' in devotional poetry), and while the wives, daughters, and female followers of Sufi sheikhs often play an important role in their groups, there is usually a gendered distribution of work whereby women take over 'female' tasks such as organisation and

¹⁶ Dr. Muṣṭafā, interview in Alexandria, 24 November 2006.

upkeep of the temporary dwelling, cooking, and the reception of guests from the closer circle of friends and relatives, while men lead and organise the rituals, receive visitors, and represent the group to the outside.

Nevertheless, these gender-specific roles do not prevent women from assuming more male roles – most notably those of the *darwīsha* and of the organiser and leader of a *khidma*. But women in these roles do step out of the customary gendered roles, and while the mystical tradition allows for them to do so and the Sufi milieu often shows great respect for them, they do appear as extraordinary characters much more than male Sufis do (although the character of the male *darwīsh*, too, is extraordinary by definition). It is also not easy to become a female Sufi leader – most of them are daughters, wives or widows of Sufi sheikhs, and much fewer have reached a position of authority 'from scratch'. But while descent is a crucial condition for spiritual leadership, it alone is not sufficient. It must be accompanied by particular, individual qualities.

While female Sufis are always tolerated and often respected, they do face opposition in the Sufi milieu, notably so from other Sufi women. So it is for example for Nafisa, the wife of a Sufi sheikh who travels to *mawlid*s with her husband but always stays at the *khidma*:

I don't believe in the women (*sittāt*) at *mawlid*s, and I avoid their company. There should be no women at *mawlid*s. That does not go along with the commandments of religion. Women should preferably stay at home - even the voice of woman is *ʿawra* (nudity, a private part). The women at *mawlid*s, they put kohl on their eyelids, and sit with men, and a man gives them light for a cigarette, and they make themselves pretty and flirt. [...] A woman shouldn't leave her house without her husband's consent - I wonder where their husbands are.

S.: But you do come to the *mawlid*, and you are very respectable and not like that at all...

But you see me, I don't put kohl in my eyes and make myself attractive, I always wear this black dress and headscarf, and I have never participated in the *dhikr*, I

would be ashamed. I have never become friends with the people [many of whom are women] who come to our *khidma*; I have always kept a distance from them, only see them at *mawlid*.¹⁷

Nafisa's critique of women at *mawlid* is, obviously, a moralistic one, attacking women who in her view step out of the limits of female modesty. But at the same time, it is an indirect justification of her own role, setting herself apart by stressing her respectability and (in the further course of the talk) her social commitment in offering hospitality and helping the needy. As such, it is telling of an important point: While women do have a range of possible ways to participate in Sufi gatherings, their participation requires justification more often than that of men. Their position remains precarious, the more so the further they step out of typically female roles.

In the Sufi milieu, justifications can be found, and the precarious position of women can be strengthened because the tradition of mysticism offers alternative standards of respectability:

You must distinguish between the meaning and the appearances. Like in case of mixing (*ikhṭilāt*) [of men and women]: In *dhikr* the mixing is not an occasion for temptation, so it's not objectionable.¹⁸

In the end, the true (and, following the logic of esoteric truth, hidden) intention is what counts, as is pointed out by Ruqayya, Nafisa's daughter. Although she, like her mother, observes a very conservative style of dress and does not participate in *dhikrs*, she does not categorise female pilgrims to the *mawlid* according to moralist criteria but according to their spiritual intentions:

¹⁷ Interview in Disūq at the *mawlid* of Sīdī Ibrāhīm al-Disūqī, 16 November 2006.

¹⁸ Thana'ullāh, a male Pakistani PhD student at al-Azhar, interview in Cairo at the *mawlid* of Sīdī 'Alī Zayn al-'Ābidīn, 31 August 2002.

As you know there are many different kinds [of women at *mawlid*]: There are those who come to our *khidma* for [the Sufi singer] Gum'a - they all come from al-Maḥalla al-Kubrī, they know nothing about Sīdī Ibrāhīm (the saint at whose festival this interview took place), they only come for Gum'a. [...] And others come for work, like Umm Ashraf who works in the kitchen [of our *khidma*] throughout the *mawlid*, and in the end of the *mawlid* we give her food and pay. And then there are others who come only with Sīdī Ibrāhīm in their mind and care about nothing else. Many of them you find sitting in the mosque. Some of them may be putting on make-up but that doesn't tell about their intentions.¹⁹

In the eyes of a critical public discourse on Sufism and *mawlid*s, however, inspired by a modernist concern for order and rationality, a Salafi-inspired reading of religion stressing the exact fulfilment of exoteric commandments, and a strong moralist focus on the discipline of women, these justifications do not count. Women who are visibly present at *mawlid*s and other public gatherings are often strongly the focus of critical opinions on Sufism and the cult of saints, expressed both in press articles and in the comments of bystanders. People critical of Sufism regularly refer to the presence of women in mixed gatherings as especially scandalous proof of what they see as an immoral and un-Islamic nature of these gatherings.

'Mixing' (*ikhṭilāt*) is the keyword of this discourse. There need not be any actual immorality taking place (as there usually is not) to make a mixed gathering appear fundamentally immoral in the eyes of the critics. This point of view is rooted in a well-established Islamic tradition that perceives women as a source of sexual temptation and prescribes home as the proper place and subjection to male domination as the proper position of women. In the course of Islamic reform in the 20th century and the Islamic revival since the 1970s, a concern for a moral, religious and civil discipline over women's bodies has become a leading tone in

¹⁹ Interview in Disūq at the *mawlid* of Sīdī Ibrāhīm al-Disūqī, 17 November 2006.

religious discourses, and is today shared not only by Salafi and Islamist critics of Sufism, but also by parts of the reformist-oriented Sufi establishment.

"Reformist Sufism" is in many ways an awkward term, as in practice mystics who emphasise discipline and the purification of rituals do not constitute a separate bloc, but instead act in the same Sufi milieu and attend the same sites and celebrations as people whose notions of mysticism and piety are more ecstatic and inclusive. There are some important and influential groups, however, which consciously engage in a polemic against Salafi reformists in order to prove that Sufis are in fact the better Salafis, and which by means of distinctive ritual and ideology take some (although never definitive) distance to the more inclusive Sufi milieu. Hardly by coincidence, these are also the groups most intensively studied in the past decades. In their gatherings, there is a strong tendency to separate men from women, and some of the most outspokenly reformist urban middle-class-based Sufi orders, notably the Ga'fariyya and the Hāmidiyya al-Shādhiliyya (as represented in the following quote), even take special pride in excluding women from their group activities:

Women *ḥarīm*²⁰ are strictly forbidden [from participating in our gathering].

S: Of course the Sufi way must be open for ladies (*sittāt*), too?

The ladies sit in the tent behind, completely secluded. Anyway, they don't have anything to do here, this order (*ṭarīqa*) is based on this conduct: the disciple (*murīd*) educates his wife at home. The presence of women is forbidden, and musical instruments and the presence of children are forbidden as well.

S.: But shouldn't the ladies also be able to find the way to God?

²⁰ Referring to women with the term *ḥarīm* (which in its contemporary sense cannot be accurately translated with 'harem') carries a strong connotation of the need to protect and to seclude women from contact with men who are not kin.

They have their way, namely by the guidance by their husbands. The husband is responsible in the *sharī'a* for the intellectual and moral education of his wife. And if she is educated and cultivated, and has any questions she wants to ask from the sheikh, it will be through the mediation of her husband; there is no way that a woman would ask the sheikh directly. That is strictly forbidden. This you won't find in any other order (*ṭarīqa*).²¹

It is important to note that it is precisely the modernist groups aiming to mobilise an urban middle-class constituency that display the most hostility towards a public role of women. They in fact proudly display this as a distinctive sign of their belonging to the field of modern culture and orthodox Islam. This tendency towards exclusion of Sufi women from the field of communal religious practice stands in striking contradiction, however, to the increase of women's participation in the professional and public spheres during the past hundred years.

Similar tensions between a public presence of women and their confinement to specific virtuous roles in a conservative gender ideology are discussed by the other contributors to this issue. On the one hand, the visibility and participation of women in group activities and the public sphere goes hand in hand with forms of discipline and exclusion that limit both the scope of and the access to active participation. On the other hand, as the contributors to this issue argue, the aim of pious and civilizing discipline can have unintended consequences that run counter to the aim of establishing clear gender hierarchies. These often puzzling juxtapositions make it necessary to take a closer look at the complex interplay of presence, competing forms of piety, class, distinctions, and the criteria of exclusion and inclusion in the hegemonic public.

Historically, Sufi groups and the cult of Sufi saints have offered a field of religious activity that has been more easily accessible for women than other fields such as prayer in the mosques, legal scholarship, and

²¹ A member of the *ṭarīqa* al-Hāmidiyya al-Shādhiliyya, interview in Alexandria at the *mawlid* of Sīdī al-Mursī Abu l-'Abbās, 24 November 2003.

preaching. Today, it has become possible for women to become professors at al-Azhar University (Egypt's supreme institution of Islamic learning) and to issue *fatwās*. Girls' education has become fully acceptable in most parts of Egypt, and in the public sphere women self-consciously act as professionals, academics, and politicians. But curiously enough, while the past century has witnessed a gradual opening of many public fields for female participation, even leadership, at the same time the participation of women in Sufi milieu has become subjected to strong criticism and pressure.

And yet it is often the same people who live and work in the mixed environments of offices, universities, work floors, up-market clubs and coffee-shops, who strongly object to mixed Sufi gatherings, viewing them as expressions of backwardness, immorality, and un-Islamic innovations. Why is the presence of women such a problem at Sufi gatherings while it is not so, for example, at universities and workplaces? To understand this we have to take a closer look at what the issue of 'mixing' is really about. The problem is not simply with the presence of women, but the kind of presence they have. This issue is not restricted to gender; it is related to the habitus and class distinctions that are constitutive of the hegemonic images of modernity, morality, and religion which, among others, make it possible for women to enter the professional and public spheres in the first place.

These distinctions are an especially sensitive issue for young women who do not have access to motherly authority and therefore must manoeuvre in the shallow waters of female civilised habitus even more carefully than older women do. Strikingly often, young women present themselves as the most class-conscious modernists and the most orthodox believers, often in stern opposition to forms of sociability and agency practised by the generation of their mothers.

During the 20th century, the role of women in Middle Eastern societies underwent complex changes that cannot be depicted as a straightforward path to emancipation. As Afsaneh Najmabadi, writing about Iran, and

others (e.g. Abu-Lughod and Moors) have argued,²² the increasing possibilities for women's participation in professional and public life in the 20th century have been connected to new forms of disciplining, be it religious or secular. Being a part of the public and entering a professional career require the exercise of moral and civic virtues that are taken to be 'modern', 'cultivated', and 'civilised'. These virtues are all based on a specific understanding of religiosity and modesty that significantly differs from the mystical tradition. Religion, in the currently hegemonic understanding propagated by the projects of modernity and Islamic reform, is a purified, comprehensive system that is essentially defined by rationality and discipline. It is for this reason that in the reformist and modernist view, mixing in religious occasions and spaces is categorically different from mixing in the profane sphere. The field of religion, in this understanding, must be kept absolutely pure from any ambiguous elements (and women count as such), while in the field of profane everyday life, moral and religious discipline enters in the form of a civic virtue that enables women with the right style and resources to take over certain public roles.²³

Rationality and discipline are not only seen as attributes of religion, however. They are also seen as the key virtues that modern society needs in order to develop and flourish. For one thing, this view of religion and society implies a systematic, functional order of society in which everything (including religion) has its place and everything serves a

²² Afsaneh Najmabadi, 'Veiled Discourse - Unveiled Bodies', *Feminist Studies*, 19, 3, 1993, pp. 487-518; Lila Abu-Lughod, 'Feminist Longings and Postcolonial Conditions', in Lila Abu-Lughod (ed.), *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 3-31; Annelies Moors, 'Representing Family Law Debates: Gender and the Politics of Presence', in Birgit Meyer and Annelies Moors (eds.), *Media, Religion and the Public Sphere* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

²³ It is important to note that the question about what exactly makes up these civic virtues has been subject to great contestation. While in the liberal and socialist periods from the turn of the century until the 1960s, religion was one but not a key civic virtue, in the past 30 years religiosity has become an increasingly important albeit heavily contested core civic virtue.

clear function. Furthermore, and most crucially, this order is seen as embodied and habituated at once, with people's appearance and practice being constitutive of their ethical dispositions, and their dispositions being, in turn, embodied in habitus. Habitus, then, becomes both the measure-stick and the instrument of modernity and orthodox religion linking speech, dress, class, forms of sociability, and styles of worship directly with the destiny of the nation and its faith.²⁴

With my emphasis on habitus I partly follow the argumentation of Talal Asad, Charles Hirschkind, and Saba Mahmood²⁵ who emphasise an understanding of habitus as a consciously practised disposition with the aim to turn virtuous practices into internalised ethical states. My emphasis is somewhat different from theirs, however, focusing more on the contested and political nature of habitus, namely, the competing ways in which habituation and embodiment are understood, and the ideological meanings given to and produced by these.²⁶ Like Mahmood, I look at the way women in a religious movement attempt to cultivate pious virtues in a precarious situation, but unlike Mahmood, who places this attempt in the opposition of secular-liberal ideology and an Islamic discursive tradition, I look at the intertwinement, contestation and daily remaking of social ideologies and traditions. The question for me, thus, is less about "living piously under conditions that have become increasingly ruled by a secular rationality"²⁷ than about the intertwinement of Islamic revivalist and modernist notions of morality, subject, class, and public with which Sufi women have to struggle.

²⁴ Schielke, *Snacks and Saints*, pp. 96-9.

²⁵ Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1993); Charles Hirschkind, 'Cassette Ethics: Public Piety and Popular Media in Egypt', in Birgit Meyer and Annelies Moors (eds.), *Religion, Media, and the Public Sphere* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), pp. 29-51; Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*.

²⁶ This aspect has been elaborated by Gregory Starrett, 'The Hexis of Interpretation: Islam and the Body in the Egyptian Popular School', *American Ethnologist*, 22, 4, 1995, pp. 953-69.

²⁷ Saba Mahmood, 'Rehearsed Spontaneity and the Conventionality of Ritual: Disciplines of *Ṣalāt*', *American Ethnologist*, 28, 4, 2001, p. 830.

Because the discourse on religion and society currently hegemonic in Egypt takes ethical dispositions and embodied appearances to be interdependent, even identical, the public presence of Sufi women in mixed gatherings – often characterised by a familiar and liberal atmosphere, and symbolically (although often not actually)²⁸ embedded in a lower-class milieu style – is not only opposed to middle-class standards of religiosity and modesty; under circumstances it can actually be perceived as a threat to them. The two currents of increasing professional and public presence of women with the appropriate habitus and education, and of an increasing moralistic discipline over the bodies of women, are in fact interdependent. They sanction a certain kind of presence as the correct and legitimate one, and marginalise and stigmatise others as immoral, backward, un-Islamic, and vulgar. Other methods of public participation by women, and especially lower-class women, therefore come to stand for a different, competing set of female agency, criteria of inclusion, and moral and pious subjectivity that threaten to relativise the distinctions of class, education and style that legitimise the (also in many ways precarious) presence of middle-class women in the professional and public spheres.

There is, indeed, a great deal of resentment in the public sphere about the idea of lower-class women representing Egypt or Islam.²⁹ But generally, the styles of presence and participation of Sufi women are not perceived as a threat in public debates as long as they remain in a marginalised, invisible (invisible for those who do not go to *mawlid*s and Sufi gatherings, that is) position. The problem, however, is that many of the Sufi women – especially those in positions of authority – are not lower class at all, and do not want to be stigmatised as such by protagonists of Salafi piety and middle-class modernity. While some of

²⁸ The symbolical suspension of class distinctions is an essential part of Sufi gatherings at *mawlid*s, and the participants often prefer to wear traditional styles of dress regardless of their class status. Furthermore, even *khidmas* organised and frequented by members of the upper and middle classes usually remain open, nevertheless, for publics of all kinds.

²⁹ Reem Saad, 'Shame, Reputation and Egypt's Lovers: A Controversy over the Nation's Image', *Visual Anthropology*, 10, 1998, pp. 401-12.

them opt to act primarily in the milieu of *mawlid*s where their publicly marginalised position does not constitute a problem, others consciously aim to attract a constituency of followers that includes middle and upper classes and people who otherwise may not frequent Sufi gatherings or *mawlid*s. Their position is the potentially most precarious of all. The mystical tradition of female authority both assists and hinders them. While it offers them certain well-proven and recognised roles to act within, these roles carry a lower-class connotation and a scandalous reputation in the public sphere, and acting them out publicly can be highly controversial or even dangerous.

A strong example for the risks involved in the public enactment of spiritual leadership by women is the story of Sheikha Manāl who, after the death of her *sheikh*, founded a new group that stood out with lavish *khidmas* at *mawlid*s and a veneration of the deceased sheikh, that allegedly went as far as comparing him to the Prophet Muḥammad. Sheikha Manāl gathered followers from the affluent segments of society, and her group soon drew the – generally unfriendly – attention of the press and the government. In November 1999, she and her closer circle of followers were arrested, and in 2000 she was sentenced to five years in prison on the grounds of “denigrating Islam by claiming prophecy and using the Islamic religion to propagate extremist ideas”.³⁰ She denied the allegations. Remarkably, there are some other Sufi groups whose teachings also seriously challenge the hegemonic interpretations of Islam. These groups, however, have never been targets of criminal prosecution. It is quite likely that what really landed Sheikha Manāl in trouble was her combination of strong public visibility, affluent followers, and her association with a title of formal religious leadership (*sheikha*),

³⁰ Ibrāhīm Khalīl, ‘Inshiqāq al-shaykha Manāl ‘alā t-ṭarīqa al-bayyūmiyya’, *Rūz al-Yūsuf*, 3 February 1997, pp. 80-3; John Iskander, ‘State vs. the Sheikha’, *Cairo Times*, 27 July 2000; Heba Mustapha, ‘Cairo Court sends Sufi Sheikha to Jail’, *Middle East Times*, 37, 2000; ‘al-Sijn 5 a’wām li-al-Shaykha Manāl al-miṣriya ‘al-mutajalliya wa-bi-muḍād mukhtalifa li-atbā’iha’, *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 6 September 2000, <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=31&issue=7953&article=72871>.

which presented an open challenge to the hegemonic (and class-sensitive) sense of orthodox Islam on the one hand, and the male authority of the Sufi establishment on the other.³¹

Virtues of leadership

Many Sufi women, especially those in positions of authority, are well aware of their precarious position and are careful to establish and to uphold their respectability and credibility. Their presence at Sufi gatherings is not counter-normative from their point of view; on the contrary, they generally see themselves as committed Muslims, mothers, wives, and citizens. They carefully and consciously describe their beliefs and practice as orthodox Islam in opposition to what they see as misguided Wahhābi extremism. In consequence, they attempt to act out what they see as a correct and respectable habitus of a mystic and a woman. There are many different forms and styles of female participation and authority, depending on the social background of the women, the roles they enact, and the kind of public they interact with. In the following, however, I will focus on only one case, that of al-Ḥāgga Rihām who very consciously – and successfully – is attempting to overcome the contradictions of middle-class virtues and mystical tradition, combining them in an innovative form of social and spiritual leadership.

Al-Ḥāgga Rihām, also known in her circle as al-Sharifa (referring to her Prophetic descent) or as Mama, is the daughter of an established bourgeois family from Alexandria. Tracing its descent to the Prophet Muḥammad, the family’s wealth and status used to be based on land ownership and spiritual authority. After the land reform in the 1950s, the family lost most of its land property, and today the wealth of its members is mainly based on free professions. Her mother’s grandfather has a

³¹ Manāl was released in November 2004 after serving her full prison term. Still under surveillance by State Security, her group has not yet reappeared at *mawlid*s, although one of her male followers did tell a friend of mine that they were planning to do so as soon as they had raised the necessary funds. For details about her release, see *Amnesty International*, ‘Appeal for Action: Egypt: Prisoners of Conscience Sentenced after Unfair Trials’, <http://www.web.amnesty.org/web/www.nsf/41c3ff3c0a005c9380256771004eca4c/3f9a150d0233689b802569d2005eba1e!OpenDocument> (viewed 6 December 2006).

shrine and is venerated as a saint in a village in the Nile Delta. She received her education in a French missionary school and has a BA in interior design. She has three children, the older two (both in their late twenties and married) from her first marriage. After her first husband's death, she married al-Ḥāgg Aḥmad, like her a Sharīf by descent. From the second marriage she has her youngest son Maḥmūd, by now approaching his early teens. Together with her family she lives in the house where she grew up. With her husband she runs a shop selling toiletries and beauty products. She is not rich, but earns enough to provide an acceptable middle-class standard of living for her family, good schooling for her children, and to finance her activity as a Sufi leader.

Growing up in a combination of Sufi tradition and bourgeois modernism, Rihām was nevertheless not an active Sufi in her younger years. She became active only some years ago, but in this time she has managed to establish a small circle of devoted followers, a wider group of supporters who see her as a spiritual authority, and a recognised position in the Sufi milieu of Alexandria. The smaller circle of followers refer to Rihām invariably as Mama, and Rihām considers them her children-in-spirit.³² Most of them are in their twenties and thirties and have middle-class jobs and lifestyles. Their relationship to her is so close that it took me a long time to realise that she actually only has three biological children. They frequent her house, follow her to gatherings, and take over practical matters of organisation such as transport and the distribution of tea, snacks and food to the people at the gathering. Beyond the devoted core, there is a wider circle of friends and supporters whose allegiance to Rihām is not exclusive. While they recognise her as an authority, often call her Mama, and attend her

³² The relationship of the spiritual guide and her/his follower is often expressed with metaphors of kinship. The spiritual guide is commonly referred to as 'uncle' (*amm*), and devoted members of a Sufi group often describe themselves as children-in-spirit (*abnāʾ fi llāh*) of their guide. Often the relationship of children-in-spirit with their spiritual guide is as strong, or stronger, than that with their biological parents. Especially for orphans and children of broken families, being a son/daughter-in-spirit often offers an alternative form of family and identity.

gatherings, this does not prevent them from following other leaders simultaneously. Most of Rihām's supporters represent the intellectual and middle-class segment of the Sufi milieu in Alexandria. But she also has many supporters from popular working-class milieus due to her social engagement. Her social engagement is probably one of her main sources of authority and a strong means of recruitment. She is active in supporting working-class families, especially assisting with the marriage of girls (and the related expenses) and solving family conflicts. Since religious commitment is one of the key solutions to conflict that she proposes, she sees her engagement as religious and social at the same time.

As far as I can assess it, her success and charisma appear to be attributable to a combination of descent, social engagement, and a careful ambiguity between a distinctively bourgeois habitus and openness towards a working-class milieu. The key quality, however, seems to be her personal charisma that centres around the virtues of motherly and mystical love. Elegantly yet conservatively dressed in white headscarf and robe and wearing large sunglasses (she has light-sensitive eyes), al-Ḥāgg Rihām immediately stands out from her surroundings. While she speaks little, when she speaks out she does so with a tone of authority about the example of the Prophet, about virtues and qualities, about visions she and others have had, and about herself. In an interview I conducted with her, she attributed the beginning of her spiritual career to dream visions of Virgin Mary and the Prophets Jesus (*ʿĪsā*) and Muḥammad she had as a teenager. According to Rihām, this and other visions, the success she has experienced in assisting people in their everyday problems, and the love she feels endowed with, are what made her choose the mystic path and what draw people to her:

Later I have seen other visions and many secrets, and they have brought me very much love, and this has allowed me to spread the love in the Way (*ṭarīq*) and collect so many children in love, and people sometimes wonder how I can have love for so many, but it comes from the light that has come to my heart.³³

³³ Interview in Alexandria, 22 November 2006.

Rihām's activity is concentrated in Alexandria, the second-largest city of Egypt reputed for its cosmopolitan bourgeois tradition. Today largely populated by migrants from rural areas in northern Egypt and a stronghold of the Muslim Brotherhood, Alexandria is not a 'typical' site of Sufism the way the old quarters of Cairo and the rural regions of southern Egypt may be. However, the relatively liberal and bourgeois tradition of the city offers her and other women a somewhat wider field of action than they would have elsewhere, and the nature of Alexandria as a large city means that there is more space for new and unconventional groups than there would be in rural milieus and small towns.

Rihām's most important field of social and spiritual activity is the community of the late Sheikh Abū l-Ikhlāṣ, a mystic and an Azhari scholar of Islamic sciences who died in 1979. Instead of founding a conventional Sufi order, Sheikh Abū l-Ikhlāṣ organised his community as a civil society association, and consequently left behind no formal successor. In consequence, his community has fragmented into competing groups, but in the absence of the position of a *khalīfa* (successor) to compete for, it has not split into separate branches as most Sufi orders do. In fact, it has managed to continue to recruit followers and to maintain a clear identity in spite of or perhaps thanks to the lack of a clear leader. Today, most of the members of the community are too young to have known the sheikh personally, and while their allegiance to Sheikh Abū l-Ikhlāṣ is primary, they do gather in various groups around spiritual leaders within the community, all of whom have their different spaces in the *zāwiya* and mosque of Sheikh Abū l-Ikhlāṣ.

One of these groups is that of Rihām, and while she does not have a space of her own in the *zāwiya*, she uses the room of Sheikh 'Abduh, an aging man who in the sheikh's lifetime belonged to his closest circle of followers. Rihām entered this community at the beginning of her spiritual career, and although she did not know the sheikh personally, she sees herself in his spiritual tradition, and has become an influential figure in the community. With its intellectual and middle-class background and style, her group stands somewhat apart from the otherwise more popular milieu of the community, but it has never developed a socially exclusive

character – on the contrary; her emphasis on her and her closer circle's good education and social status appears to work in a complex way, making her group more attractive to middle-class followers without making class a condition for participation.

Rihām's most visible form of activity is gatherings she organises at *mawlid*s in Alexandria. In the two annual celebrations in memory of Sheikh Abū l-Ikhlāṣ, she is always present with a gathering in the room of Sheikh 'Abduh. At the *mawlid* of Sidī al-Mursī Abū al-'Abbās – the biggest in Alexandria – she holds a gathering in a tent in a prestigious location in front of the mosque. At other *mawlid*s in Alexandria, she does not hold formal gatherings but meets with members of her group in a more informal way. She always attends the gatherings in the company of her husband, youngest son and a handful of her children-in-spirit. The gatherings she organises combine in an innovative way elements of more traditional ecstatic gatherings with reformist tendencies to create disciplined and purified rituals. Much in the way of traditional Sufi gatherings, they are always characterised by a familiar and informal atmosphere. People come and go, exchange greetings and sit down for a talk. Tea, sweets and sandwiches are served to the guests, and the programme consists of spontaneous speeches, invocations, and performances of mystical poetry. Similar to reformist groups, Rihām's gathering is dominated by an intellectual emphasis on learning and a constant concern on her part to uphold a degree of discipline and control. Although spontaneous and familiar, her gatherings never witness the ecstatic outbreaks of emotion that are common at other gatherings. They are usually characterised by a calm atmosphere and often set apart from the crowds in the mosque and in the streets by their spatial layout. And while at some of her gatherings a *dhikr* is held, she never participates in these but remains seated all the time. Following conventional standards of modesty, she does not smoke as many other female Sufi leaders do – in fact, her gatherings are strictly non-smoking events. While her gatherings are always mixed, women are usually seated in one group (mostly around or next to her) and Rihām is careful to arrange the celebration so as to avoid any kind of contact that may be interpreted as

immoral. Mixing, she argues, is in no way objectionable as long as decent bodily distance and good manners (*adab*) are observed.

But there are some aspects to Rihām's gatherings that are rather unusual. One is the complete absence of loudspeakers. While Rihām would never criticise other, louder and more ecstatic styles of Sufi gathering, she stresses that she prefers to keep her gathering 'calm' and constantly to maintain good manners (*adab*). Second is the absence of any visible reference to the organiser of the *khidma* or its affiliation to a Sufi group. Usually *khidmas* always have a large banner showing the name of the organiser and the *ṭarīqa* he represents, but at Rihām's gatherings the only sign of affiliation is a framed photograph of Sheikh Abū l-Ikhlās. Finally, although Rihām is the uncontested leader of her gatherings, deciding about the programme, greeting guests, requesting people to speak and asking them to be silent (and she is always obeyed), she does not lead the rituals, nor are the *khidmas* officially held in her name. These roles are invariably taken over by her male followers.

Rihām, in fact, systematically avoids claiming any male titles of authority. She makes a clear point about her right to take a leading role in religious activities,³⁴ referring to the examples of the daughters and granddaughters of the Prophet Muḥammad to prove her point. But all the titles she uses are unequivocally respectable female ones: al-Ḥāgga, emphasising her piety, al-Sharīfa, emphasising her Prophetic descent, and Mama, emphasising her motherly authority and virtues. She never uses the title of Sheikhha, and she never claims formal positions of leadership. By delegating formal religious authority to men and framing her authority and presence in terms of motherly and saintly virtues, she makes use of precisely those forms of authority that are considered the most acceptable for women: motherhood and sainthood.³⁵

³⁴ It is worth noting that much of the opposition against her comes from women in the community of Sheikh Abū l-Ikhlās who object to her taking a role of leadership. Rihām explains this as arising from a misunderstanding, even envy, based on those women's lack of an experience of active participation.

³⁵ For the latter, see Pemberton, *Muslim Women Mystics*.

Based on a combination of personal charisma, Prophetic descent, and social engagement, Rihām develops a form of authority that not only avoids running into a conflict with male forms of power, but also combines civic and mystical virtues in a way that allows her to avoid the stigma of lower class without resorting to exclusive distinctions that would limit her activities to a middle-class milieu. The two key virtues she employs are love and *adab*, roughly translatable with good manners, but implying a more complex set of morality, civilised manners and elegance.

In the Sufi tradition, love is probably the most important virtue that prescribes the mystic's relationship with both God and the people. The power of love as a virtue – and its subversive nature from the point of view of the Salafi movement that sees true religion in the exact realisation of the Prophet's way in every detail – lies in its inclusive nature. Not bound by exclusive criteria such as the fulfilment of religious norms or the display of moral and civic virtues, love appears instead as a motivation and starting point in moving people towards a more pious and virtuous life:

Sometimes families may have problems with a daughter who moves in bad company, takes opinions from her friends, doesn't pray nor believe in Sufism, and the families may ask me to talk to them. And thank God, [my success with] that has been one of my early experiences that have perhaps brought me to this path. I go to them, and talk to them in the tone of love and friendship. I talk with them first about anything, whatever they like to talk about. If they like music, we talk about music, if they like to talk about make-up, I from my profession understand a lot about make-up and can talk about it, and only towards the end of the talk I enter to talking about *ḥijāb*, prayer, and religious commitment (*iltizām*). I approach them with love, love is the way I bring them towards *iltizām*. My relation with them [i.e. her wider circle of supporters and friends] is entirely based on love (*maḥabba*). I'm not a *sheikha*, and I'm not a *faqīha* (scholar of Islamic law), and I am not specialised in religious studies - all that I have is love and

sincere devotion (*ikhhlās*). [...] I am not into politics at all, and I am also not acting in the field of pure religion - there are other Sufis who are concerned with religion only. My activity is social. [...] Another point is that we are not only from the family of a *pasha*, we are also from the line of al-Ḥusayn who is from the line of our lord the Prophet. And as *ashrāf*,³⁶ we have to be a moral example (*quḍwa*) for Muslims. None among us [i.e. her family and closer circle] sits around drinking alcohol or drugs, they study and live a committed life. But I do not favour narrow-minded bigotry (*tazammut*) like the Salafis who say *ḥarām* to everything. We have nothing against music, cinema, and television, as long as it does not go beyond the limits [of morality and religion].³⁷

Open and inclusive though it is, love does not serve as a general licence. Love in the way Rihām employs it is a guiding virtue in a project of moral and pious discipline. As such, it is intimately related to the more exclusive virtue of *adab* which, unlike love, must be cultivated. *Adab* is a key virtue she always emphasises in her gatherings, and it is also the possession of *adab* more than anything else that she sees as the distinctive characteristic of her group as compared to other, more 'popular' (*shaʿbī*) ones. Her emphasis of *adab* draws very clearly on modernist middle-class notions of the civic virtues that are required for the participation in the public and professional spheres. In her reading, however, it is combined with the mystical view giving intentions priority over appearances. Here, for example, she discusses a verse of mystical poetry authored by Sheikh Abū l-Ikhlās where he compares himself with the *Kaʿba*.³⁸

³⁶ Plural of *sharīf*.

³⁷ Interview in Alexandria, 23 November 2006.

³⁸ All the saints claimed together / You are a pole (a supreme mystical authority) for all people / I replied: enough, now hear my speech; / The pole is my servant and slave / Every pole circles around the House (i.e. the *Kaʿba*) seven times / While I am the House, circling around in my tent.'

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|--|--|
| <i>Qālat al-awliyāʾu jamʿan bi-ʿazami</i> | <i>Anta qutbun ʿalā jamīʿ il-anāmi</i> |
| <i>Qultu kaff thumma ʾsmaʿu nassa qawli</i> | <i>Innamā l-qutbu khādīmī wa ghulāmī</i> |
| <i>Kullu qutbin yaʿufu bi l-bayti sabʿan</i> | <i>Wa anā l-baytu ʿāʾifun bi Khiyyāmī.</i> |

Taken at face value, the meaning of the verse would be in clear contradiction with religion; but the verses describe the experience of a higher mystical experience of the sheikh, the feeling of being an *ʿabd rabbānī*.³⁹ It is a higher spiritual experience of inspiration that cannot be expressed directly, only symbolically by means of verse. But that does not mean that you, after the spiritual experience, can let yourself go in this world, like becoming dirty and not caring about your appearance. Sheikh Abū l-Ikhlās was himself a man of the greatest elegance and taste, always with the cleanest and finest clothes – it does not have to be expensive clothes, but clean and well-tended. *Wuḍūʾ* (ritual ablution before prayer) is an example of how the religion of Islam lays high value on cleanliness and teaches the value of cleanliness through practice. At the same time, we do not judge people by their appearances.

Ayman (one of Rihām's children-in-spirit):

You see this disabled man who is helping and also sitting in the *khidma*; he hears and sees badly, and his speech is hardly understandable. You cannot know what his status is with God. We do not know, but he may stand higher than any one of us, appearances do not tell it. There is a correct *ḥadīth* from the Prophet saying that a man like him, disabled or otherwise mentally limited, still may ask something from God in a prayer, and God gives it to him immediately.⁴⁰

With a certain ambiguity, Rihām manages to hold to an inclusive esoteric view which states on the one hand that people's spiritual status cannot be judged by their appearances, and on the other, to a refined and class-conscious view that makes the command of *adab* a requirement for being part of her group. This ambiguity is resolved (to a significant degree at least) with the help of another important mystical tradition that

³⁹ A worshipper endowed by God with quasi-divine qualities.

⁴⁰ Interview in Alexandria at the *ragabiya* (small *mawlid*) of Sheikh Abū l-Ikhlās, Alexandria, 22 November 2006.

distinguishes between spiritual elites and commoners. Rihām does not require perfection from her wider circle of supporters, but she and her smaller circle of followers are obliged to stand as moral examples.

In her particular version of spiritual authority, al-Ḥāggā Rihām draws upon Sufi traditions of spirituality and inclusiveness, but she reshapes them to better suit urban middle class and reformist sensibilities. The virtues of love, mystical spirituality, and *adab*, combined with an intellectual and bourgeois habitus, make Rihām and her group open and distinguished at the same time, respectable in the eyes of urban middle classes and yet close to the traditional Sufi milieu. This attempt is remarkably successful, and in certain ways more so than the more exclusive approaches taken by groups like al-Ḥāmidīyya al-Shādhiliyya (see above), which is often cited as an example of a group that has been particularly successful in adapting to the discourse of modernity and mobilising middle-class followers.⁴¹ For one thing, she manages to combine those elements of the mystical tradition and middle-class modernism that favour an active role of women, which makes her position much less precarious than that of many other Sufi women, and offers her a significant potential of recruitment among women who either belong to or aim to enter the middle classes. Furthermore, by the informal and open character of her group, she (as well as the wider community of Sheikh Abū l-Ikhlāṣ with which she aligns herself) avoids the constraints and conflicts that arise from hierarchical bureaucratic organisation which, despite its higher public prestige, in practice often stands in the way of the dynamics of a spiritual movement.⁴²

Conclusion

While the mystical tradition offers normative precedents and realistic albeit not equal possibilities for the participation and leadership of women, their position in relation to the public sphere is made precarious by two interrelated trends, one of a moralist opposition (expressed not

⁴¹ See, e.g., Frishkopf, *Sufism, Ritual and Modernity*.

⁴² For the latter point see Michael Gilsenan, *Recognizing Islam: Religion and Society in the Modern Middle East* (revised ed., London: Tauris, 2000), pp. 236-40.

only by men but also by many women) to women's public participation in religious rituals, and another of increasing female presence in the professional and public sphere on the condition of a refined habitus and a moral and civil discipline.

The responses to these conflicting demands cannot be described in terms of either adaptation or marginalisation, nor can either of these demands be seen as clearly repressive or emancipatory, as is also shown by Marloes Janson and Dorothea Schulz in their contributions to this issue. The different trajectories, resources, and scopes of action of an ecstatic *darwīsha*, of a *sheikh*'s wife keeping her distance from the crowd, of a female leader, and of her followers aspiring for social ascent, all show various degrees of negotiation, balancing, and ambiguity, often with somewhat surprising consequences. This is not to say that they would be free to choose the balance of their liking. The contradictory demands of modernity, education, pious discipline, domesticity, and, especially for young women, attractiveness, often make it very difficult to find an acceptable balance.

In her particular style, Rihām is part of a wider trend among female Sufi leaders who, each in her individual way, attempt to build their authority primarily on female virtues and avoid challenging the male hegemony over formal titles of leadership. In fact, the title of a *sheikha*, a common honorific of female Sufis in earlier times, has today all but disappeared except among female Sufi singers,⁴³ for whom it is a professional title parallel to that of male Sufi singers and Qur'ān reciters, who are always called *sheikhs*, and does not imply a claim for formal religious authority. Her ambiguous union of openness and middle-class cultivation, spontaneous familiarity and reformist discipline through the virtues of love and *adab*, is not available for nor aspired to by everyone, however.

While some female Sufis who have access to the same intellectual resources and class habitus as Rihām (and in many cases to significantly

⁴³ See Wendy Dunleavy, *Munshidāt: Female Sufi Performers in Egypt* (PhD thesis, London: The School of Oriental and African Studies, 2006).

more money than she has) consciously choose to act in a popular milieu, with a strong emphasis on charity and more ecstatic gatherings to attract a wider public, for others this is not a matter of choice but of resources. Rihām's style of authority would not be possible without her established family background, her Prophetic descent, and her high standard of education and cultivation. Women from more marginal milieus have narrower sets of choices, varying from the liberal but marginalised style of the ecstatic *darwīsha*, to a stress on morality and respectability along the lines of commonly accepted gender roles.⁴⁴ Nafisa's moralist criticism of women at *mawlid*s must be understood in this context, but it is notable that her daughter Ruqayya, holding to a somewhat different set of prospects (most notably that of a professional career), does not share her mother's need to distinguish herself through critique. In a way similar to Ḥāgga Rihām – although not in a position of authority – she commands means of distinction that allow her to hold to a more inclusive view of women's participation.

This, of course, brings forth the question whether the projects of middle-class modernity and reformist Islam really are as exclusive as I have claimed above. While in practice they often are, they obviously do offer potential solutions of a more inclusive kind, and it is this potential that female Sufis like Rihām, Ruqayya and many others successfully exploit. There is a deep ambiguity to the projects of modernity and middle-class aspiration: their promise of inclusion and success goes hand in hand with strategies of distinction and exclusion. The discipline-oriented project of reformist Islam is more straight-forward on the surface, but when it comes together with the tradition of mystical Islam, it can often take surprising turns, both to the more restrictive and to the more inclusive directions.

Returning to the critical discussion of earlier research that opened this study, it becomes clear that even the very limited research presented here compels us to look for new ways to think about Muslim women's

⁴⁴ It must be noted that these roles are largely available to middle and upper-class women as well, although the role of *darwīsha* obviously does seriously break with class-specific ideas of cultivated habitus.

participation in Sufi groups and the religious life in general. For one thing, as the case of al-Ḥāgga Rihām and the community of Sheikh Abū l-Ikhlās shows, it is necessary to move from the study of Sufi 'orders' towards the actual practice of individual Sufis and the informal relationships in which their spirituality and practice are embedded.⁴⁵ Neither Rihām's circle of followers nor the larger community she acts in are 'orders' in the usual sense, and yet they are very dynamic and successful forms of collective mysticism. The 'order' as the central category of contemporary Sufi practice must be relativised in favour of a more flexible focus on the various articulations of the mystic Path (*ṭarīq* – as opposed to *ṭarīqa* as the particular way initiated by a particular *sheikh*) and the complex relationships of initiation, friendship, and authority that make up a mystical community.

If we want to reach a better understanding of (not only) women's religious practice, it will be necessary to devote much more research to the complex interrelationships of class hierarchies, competing forms of piety, and socially available forms of agency and authority. Just as looking at models of piety through such simplified oppositions as reformist Salafi versus popular Sufi piety or revivalist vs. secularist subjectivity can make us easily overlook the innovative articulations of religion that people like Nafisa, Ruqayya, and Rihām undertake, so also looking at authority from the vantage point of Weberian ideal types can become an analytical short-cut that misses some of the crucial issues at stake with authority and leadership. Certainly it would be possible to describe the authority Rihām exercises as a charismatic one in the Weberian sense.⁴⁶ But this would not yet tell us wherein her charisma

⁴⁵ The historians Mayeur-Jaouen and Sedgwick, in particular, have taken the concept of 'order' under close scrutiny and show that rather than a clear organisation, a *ṭarīqa* is a very flexible network of communities that often share little more than the common allegiance to a founding *sheikh*. See Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen, *Histoire d'un pèlerinage légendaire en Islam: Le mouled de Tantā du XIII^e siècle à nos jours* (Paris: Aubier, 2004), pp. 87–116; Mark Sedgwick, *Saints and Sons: The Making and Remaking of the Rashī dī Ahmadi Sufi Order, 1799–2000* (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

⁴⁶ See Max Weber, *Schriften zur Soziologie* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1995), pp. 271–80; p. 312.

lies, neither why she has chosen a particular style of authority, nor explain the complex negotiation with male-gendered forms of authority she is engaged in by delegating formal functions of leadership to men and developing her own role through the (potentially) more female virtues of love and cultivation. What we have at hand here are socially available types of presence, virtue, social status, authority, and leadership which themselves are subjected to constant reinvention and reconfiguration.⁴⁷ It is precisely the often conflicting character of the different virtues and demands that offer spaces of negotiation and innovation but at the same time also limit the scope of (especially but not only) women's action and choices.

⁴⁷ By describing them as socially – rather than culturally – available I distance myself from a culturalist interpretation of such types as being determined by the scope of a cultural or discursive tradition. Instead, I highlight the equally great importance of class divisions and global trends. In an urban Muslim bourgeois/middle-class setting in northern Egypt, such socially available types of authority can include, among others, the demonstrative modesty of revivalist piety and the valorisation of motherhood as well as the professionalism of female executives and the elegance of female pop and movie stars.