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The Message Has to Be Spread: On the Character and Significance of Media in the Dissemination of Sufi Content in the Turkish Republic

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The four articles in this special issue were written as part of the ANR-DFG Neoreligitur research programme,ⁱ in which research was conducted on various periods and themes related to Sufism. Cultural encounters of Sufi intellectuals with India, Hinduism and Buddhism, in the late Ottoman Empire and during the republican period, have been analysed by some researchers' articles that are part of an upcoming publication of the Neoreligitur programme.ⁱⁱ The programme also led to research on so-called Sufi Music, using aesthetics as a substitute for spirituality, but also on recent developments of psycho-Sufism. Sufism as a tool in expressing a secularised and spiritualised form of the religious has also been analysed in Republican Turkey as a political exotericisation of esoteric references. In parallel with this research, we intend through these four articles to make a contribution to the enhancement of the integrated and embodied dimension of the media in the dynamics that affect some forms of Sufism in the history of Turkey, and the way in which those embodiments may produce disconnections in the ways of living Sufism. We hope to develop this research by later focusing on other processes of mediatisation related to Sufism in different periods.

- 1 This issue aims to question the place of media in the process of producing and disseminating artistic expressions, ideas and messages related to the Sufi realm of modern Turkey. Focusing here on a few examples illustrating academicisation, literary fiction and music teaching, it is intended to be supplemented by complementary research. Publishing a thematic issue which approaches Sufi objectivations from a

religio-media theoretical perspective,¹ amounts to turning the perspective of many other works on Sufi culture around. Whilst developing the concept for this issue, we wished to stress the indispensable nature [*Unabdingbarkeit*] of a/the media for the very existence of religion, and its impact on the same. The articles in this issue do not discuss the conformity to the internal logic of contents presented as a Sufi approach. Rather, to differing extents, they debate forms of mediation, mediatisation and medialisation as we encounter them in great variety in religious culture, teaching and practice generally; and particularly in the field of Islamic mysticism. The articles debate the role of those processes and the corollary of its encoding of Sufi “messages” that preexist only insofar as they are defined in terms of heritage (literary, cultural, religious, ritual and mystical) and classical transmission. The codifying of transmission through *icazet*, rituals and hierarchies, coupled with the relative invisibility of the world of brotherhoods for several decades of Turkish Republican history, had effects on Sufi expression, which was impacted because of the secularisation of religious sciences and their quasi-disciplinary patrimonialisation, which produced changes to its performance, teaching and the more contemporary media of its expression.

- 2 There is no universal consensus of understanding of the aforementioned terms mediation, mediatisation and medialisation. However, we find it meaningful to use them, based on Hubert Knoblauch’s “communicative constructivism”² which relates mediatisation to communicative action: “While mediatization is a general feature of communicative action, it is the forms of communication ... which are subject to change. The study of mediatization is, therefore, the study of the changing structure of communicative action”.³ In a more general sense, as used throughout the publications of different disciplines, mediatisation refers to the influence of “media networks” or “systems” which render our society and lifestyles compatible with and commensurable to the structure and constrictions of mass media. “Mediation” is, according to Knoblauch, roughly speaking, another element of communicative action. It is more than the use of technical means for mediating a message across a spatial distance; it mediates “social communication”,⁴ it relates body and body-external means (objectifications), and it contributes to the emergence of social structures such as the development of means of transportation or communication, allowing for the emergence of complex societies. The third term, medialisation, can be understood as a key concept in Cultural and Literary Studies. As Nünning and Rupp demonstrate, (literary) narration is closely related to the media context and the historical change of the mediascape.⁵ As a consequence, the structure of a text (in a broad sense) can implicitly or explicitly mimic the aesthetics and structure of non-literary media⁶ – most likely the structure of a media which was of great significance during the time when the work was written or during the time period which the story refers to. As will be outlined below, the articles of this issue apply the aforementioned concepts to a variety of media and medialised media. While most of these media are related to textual production such as novels or academic writing, *talking* or *writing* about Sufism more often than not implicitly or explicitly includes references to established media from the Sufi realm, such as musical instruments, garments and places, and finally the Mystical guide who epitomises the mediator between the adept and the divine truth, and the path to the same, respectively.
- 3 Differences in spatial scale (rural/urban, local/transnational), discursive variations of Sufi expressions (emotional, codified, theoretical, or fictional literature), and the

variability of experiential techniques that are supposed to induce Mystical experience (as in music) reveal a moving object in which the intentions of the performers and the notion of “media” are not additions which merely vary the expression of a closed set. The pragmatic engagement with the legal, cultural, social, and gendered environments of Sufi experiments – whether they be collective or individual – concomitantly constitute the Sufi message and its medium. In parallel, the exotericisation resulting from mediatisation is present in all corporeal, geographical, and literary explorations of expressions considered as Sufi. When talking of media, it is possible to refer to forms of expression ranging from body language to electronic media and to teaching, which exceed the forms taken into account in this issue. In many contemporary forms of Islam, it is often possible to observe the use of multiple forms of media, many of them being perceived as aesthetic productions rooted in corporeal senses (images, dances, music). Parallel to the use of the concept of “corpothetics” presented by Christopher Pinney⁷ for the analysis of religious images, aesthetics will thus be understood here in a twofold sense as both the product of aesthetic creation and corporeal sensuality, for example in the case of popular variations on Sufism which are integrated into daily social life. The question of sensuality and bodily experience, traditionally regulated and codified in Sufi and brotherhood rituals, is constantly reiterated in processes of dissemination to a wider social environment – even to some that may at first seem unrelated. As a form of expression, fictional literature produces its own imaginary discursive mode based on narrative genres, but it cannot be dissociated from other modes of incarnation/incorporation of Sufi expression. The academicisation of Sufism as a codified whole, while implying patrimonialisation and potential reification through mystical concepts, is also a matter of media dynamics: its constitution as a discipline in the eyes of its actors, whether at the end of the Ottoman Empire or in more recent periods, produces particular effects on the modes of its teaching and its perception as an intellectual set, and more generally on the secularisation of the religious through the highlighting of a mystical dimension.

- 4 Much writing and research on Sufism⁸ analyses the reconfiguration of brotherhoods and Sufism in different spaces and contexts,⁹ in terms of revival, promotion, diffusion, adaptation to modernity and transformations.¹⁰ Some focus on segmentation (between local and national, rural and urban) and the paradigm of expression in modes that would be considered “modern”, or analyse Sufi experimentations through migrations as transnational parameters from above and/or from below,¹¹ as well as through work on literary production.¹² Our aim here is not to bring additional elements to those works that are deployed in several contexts and periods, reflecting on different scale dimensions that alter the historical forms of Sufi expression. Disconnecting from the environment of the brotherhoods and their specific practices, we would like to focus more on a few alternative and more diffuse experiments in Turkish history claiming links with “Sufism”, thereby witnessing the primacy of the mediatisation of the “message” and its codification through examples of diversely semanticised Sufi expression in Turkey: academicisation, literary fiction and music teaching. If the codification we can observe effects a stabilisation or reification with regard to which new repertoires of Sufi expression are to be found, the potential *epistemic conflict* is relative to the perception of the actors: producing differentiations, it explains the varied forms and the mediators that take on expressions considered as Sufi. In many cases, the intimate correlation between the production of a theoretical and practical codified set by certain actors of this mediatisation on the one hand and the increase of

the master's religious authority on the other testifies to the dynamics that link the matter of occupation with religion, for example.

- 5 Religious authority incarnated in the mastery of a mystical dimension makes the master the one who has access to hidden worlds and who performs this access for his disciples. Thus, the power of the master who is not only the one who knows but also the one who experiences spreads to the disciples.¹³ In this regard, some of those media may carry such transcendental roles of linking with the Truth: academic Sufism, which benefits from the scientific value conveyed by the university context, concomitantly enhances the power of the academy, as a projected image of the master.
- 6 By studying these modes of differentiation and actualisation of a ritualised heritage whole, this issue proposes to decenter the object of "Sufism" and its potential for capturing percepts and affects through the use of media operating emotional registers. It also sets out to question the very notions of channels, mediators, media, and their conceptions as techniques of discourse and expression – where they actually form the possibility of embodying the expression of Sufism –, as well as its transformations, and finally its efficacy. The included articles will test our hypothesis that the expression of Sufi experience is not only a contradiction in terms (the greatest Sufi authors in history were aware of this, and tried to tackle the impossible task by a kind of meta-narrativisation) but that both the experience itself and the aesthetic form by which it becomes expressed are a product of the historical, social, cultural and technical environment. The accelerating media changes of our times allow us to directly observe the relationship between content and media, and changes in methods of experience and expression. While the development of the mediascape is a global phenomenon, the situation in Turkey depicts a peculiar framework for religious affairs. Here, given that the articles tackle issues located in the geographies of the Turkish Republic, we observe not only media changes and the effects of a global rise in religiosity, but also a steady political influence on religious affairs which makes the Religious a public and political issue, to the extent that the population of Turkey can hardly escape its influence on their individual religious positions. The question therefore arises of how producers of Sufi aesthetic content move and create inside this extremely dynamic field of technical, cultural and political constraints and opportunities.
- 7 Based on the aforementioned considerations connected to the broad field of those elements from the realm of Islamic mysticism which are conceived to build the core, the essentials or the content of Sufism into transferable, audible, visible, comprehensible utterances, the articles included in this thematic issue cover a small, yet heuristic variety of ways to produce, externalise, and communicate the message, which are destined to be enriched. The respective authors have chosen different approaches and paths; they differ in their perspective, that is, in their position of observation and distance to the media and messages; in the sheer number of specific media they treat in each paper; and finally in which function they ascribe to their media, respectively.
- 8 Writing about media means repeating and duplicating the mediatizing move of "real" media in the "real" world. In the articles in this issue, the complexity increases in those cases where the media which is the focus of the study itself reflects on media or uses strategies of art and literature in order to imitate other media. The reader of a book or the audience of a movie is tempted to ignore the first media, the material book or the movie theatre, and to take the screened story for an unmediated "reality". So, the

question of the relation between “message” and “media” arises each time we thematise media: Does the media directly evoke or produce the utterance, does it medialisise the same, does it comment on it, or does it, on a secondary level, reflect or mimic the medialisisation and the means of medialisisation?

- 9 Words, texts, and literature are the most prominent means of communicating the Sufi expression. The articles of Hendrich, Mignon and Sarmis analyse texts and intellectuals in their efforts to mediate their meta/message. At the same time, a broad range of non-textual media can be found in (Sufi) culture. Şenay’s article focuses on the erudite traditional media of Sufi expression from the perspective of the media-user.
- 10 The four articles cover a historical span between the end of the Ottoman Empire, at the beginning of the 20th century, and the present day. With these differences between the settings of each article in mind, one might wonder if any significant comparisons can be made. As the articles impressively demonstrate, they can. This is not the argument that at a superficial glance, “everywhere is Sufism” in these times of a global rise in religiosity. It is for example the observation that Sufism which is located in a Turkey-centered framework inescapably has to contend with the political backdrop. The last years of the Empire and the first years of the Republic, with the nationalisation of *tasavvuf* and the ban on Sufi communities, have particularly left their mark on the Sufi discourse. Even the popularity of the *Mevleviye*, and more precisely of “Rumi”, which is discussed in Hendrich’s and Şenay’s articles, has its roots in the dislocation of the public centre of Mevlevi Sufism caused by republican politics.
- 11 Dilek Sarmis’s article focuses on an intellectual (re)construction of Sufism as an academic object in Turkey through a particular historicisation of the *tasavvuf*, a term referring to the Islamic mystical tradition. Academicism presents interesting characteristics since it articulates a heritage with wider issues, dealing with semanticisation and mediatization dynamics that are not rooted in brotherhood or initiatory practices and rituals.
In 1924, Mehmet Ali Ayni (1868-1943), a major Turkish academic and intellectual, published a pioneering book entitled *Tasavvuf Tarihi*, (*History of Mysticism*), where the “mysticism” [*tasavvuf*] is delocalised both historically and conceptually. At the crossroads of several dynamics, this work responds to the proliferation of university chairs and knowledge over the last two decades, the complex historicisation and objectification of religion, and the nationalisation of religious references. The universalisation of mysticism operates on the basis of a parallel with so-called “Western” traditions – partially inherited from scholarly Western orientalism – that is found in his other works, that claim conceptual identities between Islamic thinkers and Western philosophers. Yet it takes place in the historical context of a peculiar republican institutionalisation of scientific theology since 1924, that accompanies dynamics of epistemological confusion between philosophy, psychospiritualism and mysticism. Illustrating the fundamental ambiguity of secularised religious knowledge, this academic knowledge, a tool for the academic mediation of Sufism, seems logical as compensation for the brotherhoods and ritual practices which were rendered invisible; but mediated Sufism also works, in reverse, as inter-mediation between the political and academic fields.
- 12 Connecting the issue of building spiritual authority as a Sufi master with fictional skill, Laurent Mignon elaborates on Sâmîha Ayverdi (1905-1993), a “non-classifiable author” of fiction and nonfiction, and adept of the Sufi order of the *Rifaiyye*. In his article « Du

mysticisme au nationalisme religieux: Les ambiguïtés de Samiha Ayverdi (1905-1993) », Mignon focuses on the content of her works and examines the incompatible aspects in her œuvre: the mystical dimension of her novels, and the xenophobic, anti-semitic and anti-occidental tendencies in her later writings. In her novel *Son Menzil*, (*The Last Step*), she overcomes both established moral standards and gender roles, by making a “platonic adulteress” find divine love. This however unintendedly “revolutionary” approach towards moral and mystic standards gives way to the religious nationalism of the said character after her acquaintance with Kenan Rifai, the head of the *Rifaiyye* in Istanbul. One may wonder, Mignon writes, if Ayverdi never stumbled herself over the discrepancy between her universalist Sufi love, and her political denunciations. The Janus face of Ayverdi still affects the public reception of her work. Neglected by the Kemalist critics of Turkey for decades, she has been rediscovered by the new Islamist elite, not for her universalist message, but for an Ottomanist xenophobic novel like *İbrâhim Efendi Konağı* (*İbrâhim Efendi's mansion*). Since the non-conservative but Mystically-inclined portion of the Turkish readership does not cherish these “recovered” writings, they will continue to miss the still conservative but intriguing novels of Ayverdi’s earlier period.

- 13 Turkish fiction writing is also at the core of Béatrice Hendrich’s article „Träume, Reime, Laptops. Die Medialisierung religiöser Erfahrung in drei türkischen Romanen“. Focusing on Ahmet Ümit’s novel *Bab-ı Esrar*, (*Mystery Gate*), she interrelates religious experience, literary strategies which make the otherwise unsayable experience into an object of communication, and the intertextual use of media. The religious or mystical experience has always been intriguing for literary authors; either because as mystics they felt the coercion to share the experience with their contemporaries and adepts, or because as fiction writers they were attracted by the task of creating the appropriate language for the externalisation of the unspeakable. Turkish novel writers, however, possess a further incentive for treating the realm of *tasavvuf* and Sufis, which is the strong impact of Sufi culture on the Islamic world, the peculiar relationship between Sufism and the Turkish state and society, and the figure of the religious specialist in Sufism, the ideal sheikh, who, conceived as a dominant and somehow uncanny male character, is the perfect pattern/model/sample for the main character of a novel. Hendrich demonstrates how a contemporary author such as Ümit structures a detective novel in accordance with the path of spiritual awakening which consists of steps and states. His female main character reaches worldly and spiritual maturity by passing the thresholds and confronting a variety of dominant male figures. The structure and literary use of media in Ümit’s novel has been compared to two earlier novels from Halide Edip Adıvar and Refik Karay. From a literary-historical perspective, it becomes evident that the cultural heritage of writing about Sufism and using Sufism in (fictional) writing has never lost its significance in the Turkish literature. When it comes to the use of media as a literary strategy, the sheikh, as a dominant media for both worldly and mystical experience, defends his position while all kinds of technical and cultural media, from letters to laptops, are added and strengthen the idea that although the distance between experiencing and writing can never be deleted, the obsession with diminishing the gap as much as possible continues to produce attractive possible worlds.
- 14 From one perspective, Banu Şenay’s article is also related to the recent popularity of Rumi and the *Mevleviye*. However, the media of interest in “Rethinking Spirituality through Music Education in Istanbul” is neither intellectual pondering nor literary

fiction but the reed flute, and the teaching and learning of the same. The author sheds a critical light on the fashion of learning the *ney* as a shortcut to the “spiritual”; on the taking over of Sufi music by the Turkish music industry; and on the activities of the Turkish state in fostering “faith tourism”, of which the reed flute is a major lucrative component. Şenay contrasts these recent forms of misuse and misunderstanding with the well-established tradition of teaching Sufi music in general and the *ney* in particular, which is based on a close master/student relationship and a readiness on the student’s behalf to perform according to the pattern set by the master, to repeat and to memorise the standards of a certain artistic lineage. From this perspective, the “spiritual experience” is neither the outcome of an individual endeavour nor a reward for the devotion to the “spiritual message”. It is not even the goal of learning Sufi music. In fact, the spiritual experience is, according to Şenay, “grounded ... in learning the art in a certain way” and includes the overcoming of a self-centeredness which is likely to lead the seeker of the Sufi message down the wrong path. The essential relationship between student and master, which includes submission and humility on behalf of the student, epitomises the opposite of this widespread momentum among the contemporary “Sufi Lovers” – the quest for a handy way to self-awareness – which makes them efficient clients and consumers of spirituality. Şenay’s article finally reveals the existence of different “Sufi scenes” or practices and perception of Sufism in Turkey today. As much as the learning and teaching of the *ney* is connected to a variety of incentives and expectations, Sufi practice in general is based on a broad variety of approaches and principles. These differences can be related on the one hand to the aforementioned particular status of Sufism in Turkey, which includes the emergence of a new perception and structure from the ashes of the former tradition; and, on the other hand, to the global interest in a complacent form of religiosity or spirituality which does not ask too much humility and can be practiced in accordance with the requirements of the capitalist regime of work and (free) time.

NOTES

1. The term *Religionsmedienwissenschaften* was coined by Hubert Mohr, a Swiss scholar of Religious Studies. Mohn, Jürgen; Mohr, Hubert (eds.) (2015). *Die Medien der Religion*, Zürich, Pano.
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ENDNOTES

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ii. Some of those works are presented in the upcoming publication of the program: Luge T., Sarmis D. and Toumarkine A., (2018). *Indian Spiritualities in Turkey: an East-East Encounter ?*, London, I.B. Tauris.

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