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- 1 THE KURDS ARE the largest ethnic group in Syria after the Arabs, constituting approximately 8% of the total population¹, which means a community of 1,2 to 1,5 million people [van Dam 1996; McDowall 2000; Courbage 2007; Pinto 2007; Tejel Gorgas 2009]. There are three regions in northern Syria where the Kurds constitute the majority of the population: the Kurd Dagħ (Mountain of the Kurds) and the plain of 'Afrin², which comprise an area between Aleppo and the Turkish border; the area around 'Ayn al-'Arab; and the region along the border with Turkey between Ras al-'Ayn and Qamishli in the northeastern part of the Jazira. There are also significant Kurdish communities in Damascus and Aleppo [McDowall 2000].
- 2 Kurdish ethnic identities in Syria are articulated into various forms of group affiliation, such as "tribe", "locality" or "class", depending on the social context in which they are produced and expressed. Nevertheless, there is a shared sense of belonging to a broader Kurdish community defined as a cultural community with a common history, which articulates the various social and cultural realities of the Kurds in Syria. The collective emphasis on the maintenance and public expression of certain cultural diacritics, such as the use of Kurdish language, aims to mark the ethnic boundary³ that defines Kurdish identities in relation to other ethnic groups in Syria.
- 3 The Kurdish population of both 'Ayn al-'Arab and the Jazira is mainly rural. However, the intensification of the rural exodus in the last two decades has swollen the population of regional urban centers such as Qamishli and Hasake. As tribal identity remains an important source of social insertion among the Kurds of the Jazira, the ties of tribal affiliation are reproduced in the patterns of urban settlement and tribal hierarchies are translated into political power and social prestige [Darwish 1996].
- 4 The Kurd Dagħ, which is a region that extends north of Aleppo until the Syrian-Turkish border, has its economic and administrative center in the town of 'Afrin⁴. It became fully integrated into the economic sphere of Aleppo due to its geographical position. Its main economic activities are olive harvesting and olive oil production, both of which

have their products traded in Aleppo's markets. Tribal identities are quite weak in the Kurd Dagħ and have not played any relevant role in the local social or political organization since the French Mandate [Lescot 1988]. Most men go to Aleppo to work as manual laborers throughout the year, returning regularly to their villages during the weekends and for the harvest season of the olives. Due to this continuous flux of people, the Kurdish community of Aleppo and the Kurd Dagħ are united not only by economic ties, but also by cultural habits and social imaginaries.

- 5 With more than 2 million inhabitants Aleppo is Syria's second largest city after Damascus. Aleppo's role as the center of Syria's private industrial enterprises makes it the main urban center for the Kurdish-majority regions in northern Syria attracting a large influx of migrants, which created a populous Kurdish community connected to its rural origins. The size of Aleppo's Kurdish population is hard to evaluate, as it does not appear in the official statistics and is affected by both cultural arabization of the new generations born in the city and the influx of rural migrants, probably ranging between 300,000 and 600,000 of its inhabitants.
- 6 The center of Kurdish cultural and social life in Aleppo is the neighborhood of 'Ashrafiyya, which is located northeast of the city center. Kurds of different social strata live there and Kurdish music and conversations in *Kurmanji* set the rhythm of social life. Despite its mixed social setting, the 'Ashrafiyya is perceived by most middle class Kurds as a desirable neighborhood to live, for it has good urban services and a dynamic commercial section within a Kurdish cultural environment. To the northwest of the 'Ashrafiyya there is a string of Kurdish neighborhoods, such as Sheikh Maqṣud and Sha'r, which were settled mostly by poor rural migrants without close connections in Aleppo.
- 7 As one goes west these neighborhoods become poorer and ethnically mixed, with Kurdish migrants from the Jazīra settling among Arab migrants from the Euphrates region or the rural areas west of Aleppo. Migrants from the Kurd Dagħ tend to have family members, friends or connections with religious networks already established in Aleppo what allows them to settle in better neighborhoods. South of the 'Ashrafiyya and not connected to it, there is the neighborhood of Hamdaniyya, which is looked after by more affluent professional middle-class Kurds for its location and better urban services.
- 8 Even though most Kurds in Aleppo usually belong to the lower strata of society, since many of them are recently urbanized rural migrants employed in unskilled or manual labor, there is a significant Kurdish middle-class of professionals, businessmen and members of the state bureaucracy, which invests heavily in education as an asset for social mobility [Bottcher 1998; McDowall 2000]. Cultural arabization becomes more conspicuous as one moves upwards socially. However, even more privileged Kurds tend to live in neighborhoods with a large Kurdish population, showing the persistence and importance of ethnic identity and solidarity beyond individual social mobility.
- 9 The vast majority of the Kurds in Syria are Sunni Muslims. The Islamic practices and beliefs among the Kurds are marked by a strong influence of Sufism, the mystical trend in Islam. Historically, Sufism was codified into discrete ritual and textual traditions that are usually called "orders" or "mystical paths" (*tariqa*), which are acquired and transmitted by its religious leaders: the sheikhs. The main *tariqas* among the Kurds are the Qadiriyya and the Naqshbandiyya. Nevertheless, in the Kurd Dagħ and the Kurdish

community of Aleppo, the Rifa'iyya also has a strong presence. The Sufi communities are organized in ritual centers or lodges called *zawiyas*.

- 10 The Sufi *zawiyas* usually accompany the migration of their members, creating branches in Aleppo or, simply relocating the whole community there. These *zawiyas* serve as cultural references to the new migrants, creating spaces of solidarity and channels for their integration into the urban universe. At the same time, the connection with the rural world is maintained through the continuous allegiance to the sheikhs who lead *zawiyas* located in their village of origin, or through pilgrimages to the holy sites (tombs of saints or prophets) in the countryside.
- 11 In order to show how discrete articulations between rural and urban universes are created and lived in the Sufi *zawiyas*, I will analyze two Kurdish Sufi communities that have their religious universe linked to both Aleppo and 'Afrin. The data analyzed here was collected during the ethnographic research that I have been doing among Sufi communities in northern Syria since 1999.⁵ This research included participant observation in the communities analyzed here with participation in their religious and non-religious activities, as well as interviews and informal conversations with the sheikhs and their followers in various settings inside and outside the *zawiyas*.
- 12 First I will expose the importance of Sufism among the Kurds in Syria. Then I will analyze Sheikh Mahmud al-Husayni's *zawiya* in 'Afrin and its role in the local social dynamics and as a space of establishment of symbolic and economic relations with Aleppo. After that I will analyze Sheikh Muhiy al-Din's *zawiya* in Aleppo as a space where the relations between Aleppo and its rural hinterland are continuously negotiated and renewed with the incorporation of rural migrants into the urban life, and the insertion of urban Kurds into rural religious and social networks. Finally I will conclude highlighting the main issues that emerged from the analysis of these two *zawiyas*.

Kurdish Sufism in Northern Syria

- 13 Sufi communities are spread throughout the rural areas of the northern Syria, such as the Kurd Dagħ, as well as among the large Kurdish population of Syria's main urban centers, such as Aleppo.⁶ It has been stated by some scholars that the *tariqa* (Sufi order/mystical path) Naqshbandiyya is dominant in Kurdish-majority areas, and that the only other to have had a significant presence is the *tariqa* Qadiriyya [van Bruinessen 1992 and 2000; McDowall 2000]. However, the religious landscape of northern Syria offers a more complex picture of Kurdish Sufism, for other *tariqas*, in particular the Rifa'iyya, have an important presence in the Kurd Dagħ, in the Jazira as well as in Aleppo.⁷ Furthermore, the new Sufi communities that developed in the last decade among the Kurdish population of Aleppo tend to be less closely identified with any specific *tariqa*. These new *zawiyas* are better defined by the charismatic figure of their sheikh, as it is not uncommon for the sheikh to claim affiliation to two or more *tariqas* in order to legitimize the particular mystical path embodied in his religious persona.
- 14 While many Kurdish *zawiyas* in Aleppo are simple urban extensions of rural *zawiyas*, they must be analyzed within the context of Aleppine Sufism. Aleppo has been an important center of Sufism in the Arab world since the 13th century [Geoffroy 1995]. In the 19th century some Sufi traditions of Aleppo, such as the Qadiriyya and the Rifa'iyya, passed through a process of hierarchical organization under the authority of Sheikh Al-

masha'ikh.⁸ The remnants of this centralized and hierarchical organization, which still remain in place for the Qadiriyya, constitute the core of the traditional Sufi establishment of Aleppo.

- 15 The limited capacity of the traditional Sufi structures of Aleppo to incorporate the Kurdish migrants, despite the fact that many religiously observant Kurds are attached to Sufi forms of piety, concurred to create a social and religious context favorable to the emergence of new Sufi *zawiyas* in the Kurdish neighborhoods.⁹ These *zawiyas* can be classified as: a) new urban Sufi communities created around local charismatic sheikhs; b) the extension of rural *zawiyas* created by sheikhs who followed the migration of their followers, or sent their deputies (*khalifas*) to Aleppo in order to create urban *zawiyas* subordinated to their own; c) branches of Sufi networks centered around one sheikh who has both hierarchical and horizontal connections with other sheikhs over a vast territory. While the first kind of *zawiya* may foster the creation of an "Aleppine" Kurdish Sufism, the other two connect Aleppo with the Kurdish areas of northern Syria, adding a religious dimension to the multiple links that exist between these areas.
- 16 These different types of Sufi organization should not be seen as static structures, but rather as possible configurations in an ongoing process of production and reproduction of Sufi communities. So, if a sheikh has *khalifas* (deputies) in different locations, his religious authority may acquire a translocal dimension. Later on, his *khalifas* may create new *zawiyas* and he may become the central link in a Sufi network. On the other hand, if a network becomes too large it may not be possible to control all the subordinated sheikhs, who may break up from it, creating smaller networks. Similarly, if the main sheikh dies or loses his power, the Sufi network may fragment into unrelated local communities. These local communities may remain as such, start new independent processes of expansion, or, eventually, disappear.
- 17 In rural areas the Sufi sheikhs tend to have their authority fully recognized by the community where they reside, and affiliation to their *zawiyas* is usually inherited as part of family tradition. However, but in the villages and urban centers of the Kurdish-majority areas of northern Syria there is a plurality of competing sheikhs who try to gather followers across tribal or class divisions, and affiliation to their *zawiyas* is a matter of personal choice. Some sheikhs manage to become religious leaders in a regional or even transnational scale, as the Naqshbandi Sheikh Ahmad Khaznawi of Tall Ma'ruf who had followers throughout the Jazira and the Turkish Kurdistan. His Sufi networks of followers and disciples were inherited by his sons and grandsons, including the late Sheikh Muhammad Mash'uk Khaznawi, who became a symbol of Kurdish resistance to the Ba'thist political order.¹⁰
- 18 The most important center of Qadiriyya in the Kurdish regions of northern Syria was 'Amuda, where no less than 30 Qadiri sheikhs had their *zawiyas* in the 1930s [van Bruinessen 1992]. While the number of sheikhs in 'Amuda was much reduced throughout the years, it still is an important religious center for the Qadiriyya and attracts pilgrims and visitors from all northern Syria. Another important religious center is 'Afrin, where is the *zawiya* of Sheikh Hassan al-Naqshbandi, the sheikh *al-masha'ikh* of the Naqshbandiyya in the Kurd Dagh.
- 19 An important feature of Sufism in the northern Syria is the cult of saints organized around the tombs of dead sheikhs or prophetic figures that dot the countryside. The cult of saints allows the fusion between religious, cultural and territorial identities. In the areas of high density of Kurdish population the saints' tombs give an Islamic

identity to the landscape, constructing a “sacred geography” of the territory by connecting Islamic practices and beliefs with natural or social landmarks, as well as integrating into the realm of Islam the remnants of pre-Islamic sacred landscapes. The tombs of saints are located in rural cemeteries, on hilltops, near water springs, or even in pre-Islamic ruins or holy sites. The best example of the Sufi appropriation of pre-Islamic sites is Nabi Huri in the Kurd Dagħ, which consists of a lavishly built Roman tomb dating from the 2nd century a.d., which has been venerated since the 14th century as the burial place of one of the prophetic predecessors of Muhammad.¹¹

- 20 The cult of saints anchors Islam into familiar places where one can seek the help and the blessing of holy figures that have the power of mediating between local ordinary life and the universal abstract doctrines and practices sanctioned by the Islamic tradition [Gonnella 1995]. This is done among the Kurds by claiming that prophetic figures or major leaders of Sufism, such as ‘Abd al-Qadir Jeilani, were ethnic Kurds. By embodying abstract doctrines into concrete and accessible figures and places the cult of saints also allows the local communities to incorporate the Islamic tradition into the dynamics of their power relations [Pinto 2004].
- 21 Finally, the *mawlid*s (saint feasts) that are celebrated at the tombs of the saints are the occasion for large pilgrimages and tomb-visitations (*ziyarat*), attracting individual devotees or entire Sufi communities from all over northern Syria. These Sufi pilgrimages produce a sacred territory, which is delimited by the various paths that link distant communities to the saint’s tomb. The celebration of collective rituals during the *mawlid*s also creates forms of solidarity and identification that reach beyond the local community, producing a broader framework to religious identities. The territorial basis of these supra-local religious communities can be re-signified as the political basis of religious versions of Kurdish nationalism.¹² However, it is important to have in mind that the ethnic and national identities that were developed in the Kurdish Sufi communities in Syria vary according to the larger social context in which they are inserted.

Creating a Rural Elite: Sheikh Mahmud al-Husayni’s *Zawiya in the Kurd Dagħ*

- 22 The *zawiya* of Sheikh Mahmud al-Husayni is the major Rifa’i community in the region of ‘Afrin, which recruits its members among the town inhabitants and the villagers from the surrounding rural areas.¹³ The community had around 200 members, of whom 20 were disciples initiated in the mystical path by Sheikh Mahmud.¹⁴ The religious prestige of Sheikh Mahmud attracted followers among the migrants to Aleppo or Damascus, or their descendants who maintained the ties with his *zawiya* as part of their identities as Kurds from ‘Afrin. Sheikh Mahmud’s followers were all Kurds, mainly peasants, agricultural workers or shopkeepers from ‘Afrin. Sheikh Mahmud himself had an orchard from where he harvested olives to make olive oil, which he sold in Aleppo. Nevertheless, the charismatic nature of his religious authority also attracted state employees and school-teachers.
- 23 Sheikh Mahmud’s land was not much larger than the average property size in the area, but his economic situation was better off than that of his disciples as well as of the majority of the inhabitants of ‘Afrin. This was the result of the large amount of gifts

and services that he received from his followers and disciples (*murids*). It was not uncommon for Sheikh Mahmud to receive gifts in goods – such as clothes, food, agricultural tools, etc. – from the merchants of 'Afrin as a retribution for the favors, such as the cure of illnesses or good luck in business, which they believe that were delivered by his baraka (divine grace).

- 24 He also received donations from his *murids*, from whom he also expected to receive free services (*khidma*) such as working on his land or in the maintenance of his *zawiya*. To serve one's sheikh is considered to be part of the mystical initiation in the Sufi tradition, and nobody in Sheikh Mahmud's *zawiya* thought about these activities – which fell somewhere between voluntary and compulsory work – as a form of economic exploitation. These services were rather seen as gifts in return for the baraka received from the sheikh. Besides that, Sheikh Mahmud expected a percentage of the income of his followers, which was justified as a form of *zakat* (tithe) and was sometimes imposed even to peasants who were not affiliated to his *zawiya*.
- 25 These economic resources in money and material goods were partially redistributed among his followers according to the logic of charity, privileging those perceived as in being in a state of social vulnerability, such as the unemployed, widows, sick people, etc. The constant flow of money and goods from the sheikh diluted the possible social tensions existing around him. It also created public support for his image as generous (*karim*) and detached from material riches, which was put forward by his followers despite the obvious accumulation of goods and capital that resulted from his social position as a Sufi sheikh.
- 26 Sheikh Mahmud legitimized his religious authority through his baraka, which was attributed by his followers to his claimed genealogical descent from Ali, as well as by a chain of transmission of mystical knowledge (*silsila*) that included Ahmad al-Rifa'i. He said that his family descended from Sheikh Salim, a grandson of Ahmad al-Rifa'i who introduced the *tariqa* Rifa'iyya among the Kurds.¹⁵
- 27 Interestingly these claims had a more profane, but equally prestigious, counterpart in the “bureaucratic genealogy” expressed by the official documents dating from the Ottoman era and the French Mandate, which recognized the sheikh of this *zawiya* as the head of the Rifa'iyya for the whole region. These documents, which were proudly displayed on the walls of the *zawiya*, revealed a tradition of mediation between the local community and the state that was continued with Sheikh Mahmud.
- 28 The main mechanism of production and display of identities and collective solidarity in the Sufi community led by Sheikh Mahmud was the weekly *hadra* (ritual gathering) that took place in his *zawiya*. The central element of the *hadra* was the ritual of the *dhikr* (divine evocation), during which the sheikh displayed publicly his baraka through the performance of *karamat* (miraculous deeds) by him or his disciples. Among these there are the *darb al-shish* (body piercing with skewers), such as piercing the abdomen with a sword (*darb al-saiyf*), walking over burning coals, or eating glass. All these deeds are considered by the members of this *zawiya* as miracles (*karamat*) produced by Sheikh Mahmud's baraka.
- 29 By enduring these ordeals, the disciple advances in the hierarchy of the *tariqa* (Sufi order/mystical path), at the same time that he presents public and material evidences of the mystical power of the sheikh. Beyond that the *dhikr* in this *zawiya* aims to produce mystical experiences in its participants which are evaluated according to the models of the Sufi tradition as it is defined and transmitted by Sheikh Mahmud. This

experiential framework is a powerful mechanism of embodiment of the Sufi tradition as a constitutive part of the religious selves of the members of this *zawiya*.

- 30 The Sufi identities produced at Sheikh Mahmud's *zawiya* are marked by a strong ethnic framework, which defines Sufism as a form of "Kurdish Islam". For example, when I asked about his *zawiya*, Sheikh Mahmud answered:

The most important thing is that we are Kurds.

- 31 These words were followed by statements which I often heard in Kurdish *zawiyas*:

We Kurds have the true Sufism. 'Abd al-Qadir Jeilani was a Kurd. Sufism does not exist among the Arabs.

- 32 These statements were received with signs of approval by the rest of the members of the *zawiya*, who proudly confirmed that their religious identities as Sufis were necessarily linked to their Kurdish ethnic identity. This discourse also affirms the power of the Sufi sheikhs as local authorities in the rural areas of northern Syria in detriment of the Syrian state.

- 33 The self-image of this Sufi community shows how claims to religious distinction – in this case the purity of their mystical tradition – allow the definition of Kurdish ethnic boundaries in opposition to the religious practices and identities of the Muslim Arabs. The claim "'Abd al-Qadir Jeilani was a Kurd" pushed further the religious character attributed to Kurdish identity, for it made the Kurds not only the holders of the Sufi tradition, but also those who transformed it into a major force in Islam. The logical consequence of this affirmation is that if the Arabs received the divine revelation the Kurds were the ones who kept its soul alive. Therefore, a religious distinction between Kurds and Arabs was established despite the fact that both are Sunni Muslims in their majority.

- 34 The definition of the Kurds as the holders of "true" Sufism also reverses in moral terms the material and cultural hierarchies that concur to create the subordination of the Kurds in the Syrian political and social order. Therefore, the moral community and the religious identity created in Sheikh Mahmud's *zawiya* allows its members to negotiate a privileged insertion in the various social contexts present in the symbolic, political and economic pathways that connect the Kurd Dagħ to Aleppo passing through 'Afrin.

- 35 The religious construction of Kurdish ethnic identity in Sheikh Mahmud's *zawiya* finds echo in the political and social role of the Sufi sheikhs as mediators of conflicts. Therefore, the Sufi sheikhs are the responsible for maintaining the local social and moral order and establishing limits to the capacity of the state in arbitrarily intervening in the local community. These activities make the Sufi sheikhs to be perceived by many people as the defenders of Kurdish cultural and social autonomy and, therefore, as Kurdish leaders in a non-Kurdish state.

- 36 Sheikh Mahmud's political role as mediator between the Syrian state and his community allowed him to formulate a discourse that re-signifies his political and religious power within the framework of Kurdish religious nationalism. For example, once he told me in his *zawiya*:

Here ['Afrin] is Kurdistan. This is not the [Syrian] government's land. It belongs to the Kurdish nation. Here the only law (*haqq*) is our law, not the way of the Arabs, but our customs and our respect to the *shari'a*.

- 37 This speech shows how the normative framework of cultural values, which are linked to ethnic identities, can be fused with the moral system of the "true Islam", as the

Kurds consider to be their Sufi traditions, in the process of construction of Kurdish religious nationalism.

- 38 Sheikh Mahmud often led his followers in processions across the village, during which his disciples carried the banners of the *zawiya* and of the *tariqa* Rifa'iyya, while some of them performed the *darab shish* and other *karamat*, displaying publicly the power of the sheikh's baraka. These performances impose a symbolic and physical control of the public space by the members of the *zawiya* creating among the other villagers a mixture of fear and respect towards Sheikh Mahmud and his followers. The articulation of religious and ethnic discourses in Sheikh Mahmud's rhetoric of religious nationalism is coupled with the establishment of hierarchical social relations between his religious community and the rest of members of the local society, be they Kurds or not.
- 39 In a certain measure, the political horizon of this hierarchical construction of religious nationalism is the traditional pattern of Kurdish leadership, which aimed local political and cultural autonomy in order to maintain its leadership based on links of patronage and clientele. Therefore, while Sheikh Mahmud fiercely defended Kurdish religious and cultural distinction, he aimed at the establishment of favorable relations with the web of political and bureaucratic clientele that structures the capillarization of the Ba'thist regime into the local instances of power [Perthes 1995].
- 40 Sheikh Mahmud sees his social authority as resulting from the embodiment of religious virtues, such as moral superiority and baraka, in both his religious persona and his community. These embodied virtues are publicly expressed as the capacity that Sheikh Mahmud and his disciples have to perform various miraculous deeds (*karamat*). The idea of religious distinctiveness is part of the self-image constructed by the Sufi tradition, which claims that the Sufis constitute the *khassat-al-din* (religious elite) in relation to the other Muslims. The transposition of the Sufi concept of *khassat-al-din* into the realm of social organization allowed Sheikh Mahmud and his followers to create and legitimize social hierarchies based on their capacity of performing embodied religious virtues. Thus, the process of "imagining Kurdistan" in Sheikh Mahmud's *zawiya* is informed by the intellectual and practical adaptation of concepts and power relations taken from the Sufi tradition into the realm of social relations.
- 41 The group solidarity that is created among the members of Sheikh Mahmud's *zawiya* through the rituals and their shared identity as some sort of "religious elite" allows them to function as a corporate group for the acquisition of social and economic capital. Sheikh Mahmud himself accumulates wealth through the donations of cash and/or olives that he receives from his followers and disciples. Beyond that, those among the members of his *zawiya* who have olive tree orchards usually commercialize their harvest of olives or production of olive oil through the commercial channels organized by the *zawiya*.
- 42 Besides their own production, the members of the *zawiya* use the social status granted by their religious skills in order to regularly extract *zakat* (tithe) from peasants who are not affiliated to the *zawiya*. One peasant told me that when he was harvesting olives in his property a group of Sheikh Mahmud's *murids* came and, in his words:
One of them grabbed the skin of my neck and the other pierced it with the *shish* (skewer) while saying "*bismillah*" (in the name of God). I was very scared and I gave them half of the olives that I had harvested.

- 43 This accumulation of marketable goods in the name of the religious community allows even the members of the *zawiya* who have no rural properties to benefit from the economic connections that it organizes between 'Afrin and Aleppo.
- 44 The olive oil is pressed in the mills of the peasant cooperative and, then, taken to the *zawiya*. Both the olives and the olive oil are taken to Aleppo, where a network of merchants and middlemen who are originally from 'Afrin or its rural hinterland do their commercialization in the city's markets. These merchants and middlemen are all connected to the *zawiya*, being disciples and followers of Sheikh Mahmud and paying periodic visits to him in order to get blessings and participating in the mystical rituals of the *zawiya*. In Aleppo, they were organized around Husayn, Sheikh Mahmud's elder son.¹⁶ He distributed the olives and the olive oil among the traders; gathered the profits that came from the marketing of these commodities; calculated and distributed their shares in the profits; and sent the *zawiya*'s share to Sheikh Mahmud, who would take his part and distribute the rest among his followers.
- 45 Thus, we can see how Sheikh Mahmud's *zawiya* provided its members with symbolic and economic forms of capital [Bourdieu 1997] which allowed them to negotiate a privileged social insertion in both rural and urban contexts. In 'Afrin the followers of Sheikh Mahmud have established themselves as a group with distinctive symbolic and political positions in the local society. The economic networks that spring from the *zawiya* into Aleppo also allowed the members of the *zawiya* to have an insertion in the markets of the regional metropolis without having to necessarily go through the experience of migration to the city.

Pathways into the City: Sheikh Muhiy al-Din's *Zawiya* in Aleppo

- 46 Sheikh Muhiy al-Din leads a Qadiri *zawiya* in the mixed Arab and Kurdish neighborhood of Sheikh Maqsum in Aleppo. While his *zawiya* is not a mere extension of a rural Sufi community, it functions as part of a larger Sufi network that has its center in the *zawiya* of Sheikh Hassan al-Naqshbandi, the sheikh *al-masha'ikh* of the Naqshbandiyya in the Kurd Dagh. Sheikh Muhiy al-Din is a former *murid* (disciple) of Sheikh Hassan and, while he was also initiated in the Qadiriyya tradition, which became the main mystical reference of his community, he continues to see Sheikh Hassan as his spiritual master.
- 47 The connections between the Sufi communities led by Sheikh Muhiy al-Din and Sheikh Hassan exist not only in the symbolical level, as disciples, money and ideas circulate between them. Often Sheikh Muhiy al-Din sent his disciples to Sheikh Hassan's *zawiya* in 'Afrin for them to get baraka and religious knowledge from the old Sufi master.¹⁷ This flux of disciples allows the establishment of personal ties between the members of the two *zawiyas*.
- 48 The organized movement of disciples to Sheikh Hassan's *zawiya* in order to acquire religious knowledge and blessings is accompanied by another flux of members of this *zawiya* towards Aleppo, which is triggered by the quest for better jobs and economic opportunities in the city. The dislocation of the members of Sheikh Hassan's *zawiya* to Aleppo is more fragmented and uneven than the one in the other direction and do not have Sheikh Muhiy al-Din's *zawiya* as an explicit destination. Nevertheless, many of them end up becoming members of this religious community as they had already

personal relations with Sheikh Muhiy al-Din's disciples and see his religious authority as legitimated by Sheikh Hassan.

- 49 The religious community of Sheikh Muhiy al-Din had around 300 members. The great majority of them were Kurds, while there were some Arab residents of the neighborhood who became members of the *zawiya*. Sheikh Muhiy al-Din had 25 disciples, all Kurds. The members of the *zawiya* were mainly unskilled workers, who had menial jobs in construction sites or in the commercial establishments of the *suq al-medina*, Aleppo's main bazaar. The charismatic leadership of Sheikh Muhiy al-Din attracted also some merchants and, even, professionals, such as lawyers and university professors. Therefore, Sheikh Muhiy al-Din led a community with a small, but significant degree of social and ethnic mixity.
- 50 As in Sheikh Mahmud's *zawiya*, the main instance of production of collective identity and group solidarity is the public ritual session known as *hadra*. Its main ritual is the *dhikr*, which has a similar structure to the one performed in Sheikh Mahmud's *zawiya*. The *dhikr* consists of the singing of songs praising the Prophet, as well as describing God's love and mercy. Some songs are chanted only by the sheikh's disciples, while others are chanted by all participants, who also perform specific body movements for each song, such as rocking the body back and forth or turning it from the right to the left.
- 51 The *dhikr* dramatizes several features of Sheikh Muhiy al-Din's community. First of all it consecrates through the ritual performance the power of the sheikh as the center and source of order and identity. It also reinforces the hierarchical separation between the sheikh's disciples and his followers, as the former ones are those who interpret the sheikh's gestures and transform them into songs, movements and rhythm, and, thus, become the leaders of the ritual performance. Finally it allows the participants in the ritual to construct and communicate an individualized religious self within the hierarchical symbolic order of the Sufi community.
- 52 The ritual performance of the *dhikr* also communicates cultural elements that refer to the construction of Kurdish identities and their correlated ethnic boundaries in the urban context of Aleppo. The main cultural diacritic that allows the configuration of Sheikh Muhiy al-Din's *zawiya* as a religious community with a clear Kurdish character is the use of *Kurmanji*¹⁸, Turkey in the songs chanted during the ritual. Almost all songs that deal with God's love and mercy are sang in *Kurmanji*, while most songs related to the Prophet and his family are sang in Arabic.
- 53 This ritual allocation of the linguistic registry allows an interesting configuration of Kurdish identity in the Aleppine context. The cultural hierarchies dominant in Aleppo – which put classical Arabic on the top of the civilization scale and *Kurmanji* at its bottom, often together with other “ethnic” languages or local dialects – are symbolically reversed in the religious hierarchy, as *Kurmanji* is associated with God and Arabic with his envoys. However, if *Kurmanji* deals with the individualized experience of the sublime presence of God or his esoteric truth, the ritual performance reminds the audience that Arabic is necessary to deal with the humane dimension of his power, in a metaphoric reference to the religious and political elites that does not escape the participants of the ritual.
- 54 In Sheikh Muhiy al-Din's *zawiya* Arabic is an important contrastive cultural element used for the definition of the ethnic boundaries of Kurdish identity. However, it is also presented to his disciples and followers as a linguistic capital whose acquisition and

mastering is fundamental for a successful individual and social trajectory. While *Kurmanji* is the preferred linguistic context for informal or individualized interactions in the *zawiya*, the *dars* (lesson) proffered by Sheikh Muhiy al-Din after the *dhikr* is done in colloquial Arabic, in the Aleppine dialect.

- 55 Also, the *khutba* (sermon) that he delivers before the Friday prayers is done in a mixture of classical and colloquial Arabic. Therefore, the Kurdish rural migrants find in Sheikh Muhiy al-Din's *zawiya* a cultural configuration that allows them to negotiate their ethnic identity in the cultural environment of Aleppo, while dealing with the dominance of Arabic language and Arab cultural identities in the institutional and public instances of urban life.
- 56 Beyond the symbolic mediation between a Kurdish rural cultural environment and the predominantly Arab multicultural universe of Aleppo, Sheikh Muhiy al-Din's *zawiya* works as a space of intense socialization and networking between the rural "newcomers" and those who are already inserted in the urban economic and social contexts. After the *hadra* and the *dars* almost all participants stay in the *zawiya* chatting over the coffee and tea that are prepared and served by the disciples. This is the occasion of the integration of the newcomers into one of the networks that are organized around the members of the community who are better-off economically. As many rural newcomers had ties with Sheikh Hassan in 'Afrin, they usually arrive in Sheikh Muhiy al-Din's *zawiya* through one of the disciples of the latter who they eventually met in the *zawiya* of the former sheikh. Usually this first contact introduces the newcomer to one of the networks, where others can help him find a job in commerce or construction.
- 57 These networks reinforce the importance of the affiliation to the Sufi community, as it becomes the source of possible pathways into Aleppo's economic and social life for Kurdish rural migrants. Furthermore, beyond the economic benefits that can be tackled through membership in Sheikh Muhiy al-Din's *zawiya*, the performative enactment of piety and religious devotion that he requires from his followers constitute a valuable symbolic asset in a city such as Aleppo, where Islamic religiosity is an important element of its urban identity [Pinto 2008-2009].
- 58 The ideal of Muslim piety associated to membership to Sheikh Muhiy al-Din's *zawiya* provides its members with a cultural and linguistic capital that the rural migrants can use to negotiate their insertion into various social arenas of Aleppo. An example of this was the trajectory of Lukman, who migrated to Aleppo in 1997, when he was 19 years old, coming from a village on the outskirts of 'Azaz, near the border between Syria and Turkey. After spending a year going through underpaid temporary jobs, he started to come to Sheikh Muhiy al-Din's *zawiya* brought by a fellow worker who he befriended in one of his jobs.
- 59 Lukman was always very religious and very soon he became a devoted follower of Sheikh Muhiy al-Din. His enhanced religiosity allowed him to create new friendships among the other members of the *zawiya*. One of them, after knowing the hardships through which Lukman, who was unemployed at the time (2000), was going, decided to introduce him to his boss in a factory that made traditional Aleppine silk scarves. The owner of this factory, located near Bab al-Hadid in the Old City, belonged to a traditional Aleppine family of merchants. He was a member of a Qadiri Sufi *zawiya* in the Old City and I knew him from there, where I also did fieldwork. He affirmed his Sufi identity through overt Islamic religiosity in the public space and insisted that all

employees in his factory, who were twelve at that time, were pious Muslims. They prayed together at the appropriate times, and their conversations and linguistic interactions were punctuated with Quranic references and religious expressions.

- 60 Lukman's connection to a Sufi *zawiya* together with his apparent religiosity were important assets in his acceptance by the new boss and in little time he was seen as part of the small "community" that fused work relations with moral imperatives and personal relations in the factory. In this factory the wages were seen by both the owner and employees as the share that everyone must pay to the wellbeing of the community, with the former insisting that they should not be defined by greed and the latter insisting that they should assure a decent living to the workers. The religious references given by Lukman's socialization in Sheikh Muhiy al-Din's *zawiya* provided him with a cultural language that allowed him to negotiate his relation with his boss and his insertion in the factory in terms of mutual belonging to a moral community rather than in terms of unequal positions and opposed interests in the economic universe of the factory.¹⁹ With his stability in the job and situation in Aleppo apparently assured, Lukman started to think about getting married with a girl from his village, which he did two years later.
- 61 Notwithstanding the importance of Sheikh Muhiy al-Din's *zawiya* in the socialization of Kurdish rural migrants into the cultural and economic universe of Aleppo, the mediation that it creates between the urban and the rural worlds in northern Syria works both ways. While this Sufi community allows Kurdish rural migrants to integrate into various spheres of the Aleppine urban life, it also provides the occasions to fully urban or urbanized Kurds to create or renew their personal connections to the Kurdish rural hinterland of Aleppo.
- 62 Every year, during the period of the *Mawlid al-Nabawi* (Birthday of the Prophet) there is a pilgrimage of a group of Sheikh Muhiy al-Din's disciples to Sheikh Hassan's *zawiya* in 'Afrin, as the latter is seen as his master in the esoteric knowledge of Sufism. Usually the group consists of five to ten disciples and they stay around a week in Sheikh Hassan's *zawiya*, where they are lodged. During this period they are treated as disciples of Sheikh Hassan, following the *dars* (lesson) that he delivers to his own disciples and taking part in the spiritual exercises that are part of the mystical education (*tarbiyya*) in this *zawiya*. They also take part in the services of maintenance and the public rituals of the *zawiya*.
- 63 As Sheikh Muhiy al-Din's disciples are mostly urban Kurds, born and raised in Aleppo, this is an occasion for them to get in contact with a rural or semi-rural universe that is constructed in the Kurdish nationalist discourse as the center of Kurdish life in Syria. While some of them have family connections in the countryside, many do not have or do not maintain contact with their rural relatives. In contrast, Sheikh Hassan's disciples are almost all rural Kurds who, while living in 'Afrin or in its outskirts, do work as peasants or small agricultural entrepreneurs.
- 64 As the activities in the *zawiya* become more intense during the religious feasts, the degree of interaction between the pilgrims from Aleppo and Sheikh Hassan's disciples is very high during the period of their stay. During this time, the cultural differences between the Aleppine Kurds and their counterparts in 'Afrin are often acknowledged, expressed and evaluated according to the perception of Sheikh Hassan's disciples, who are in the dominant position of holders of a "higher" esoteric teaching and "truer" Kurds than those exposed to the Arab culture of Aleppo.

- 65 Thus, those among the pilgrims who speak broken or arabized *Kurmanji* are constantly teased and corrected in their speech. The local form of *Kurmanji* is presented by Sheikh Hassan's disciples as the "correct" way of speaking. Those who eventually use Arabic to express themselves receive remarks full of contempt and, even, hostility. The process of linguistic improvement in the local form of *Kurmanji* goes together with the acquisition of Sheikh Hassan's esoteric knowledge, as all his *dars* are delivered within that linguistic framework, with Arabic being used only for citations from the Qur'an.
- 66 Therefore, while Sheikh Muhiy al-Din's *zawiya* emphasizes the acquisition of Arabic as a cultural tool for insertion of rural Kurds in the urban universe in Aleppo, the experience of his disciples in Sheikh Hassan's *zawiya* stresses the importance of mastering *Kurmanji* to the full participation in the mainly rural Kurdish universe of northern Syria. The frequent interactions of the pilgrims with Sheikh Hassan's disciples in the religious and profane activities of the *zawiya* favors the establishment of personal relations among them.
- 67 The personal relations with Sheikh Hassan's disciples that were created during Sheikh Muhiy al-Din's disciples stay in their *zawiya* was reinforced by the shared esoteric knowledge that they received from the sheikh's teachings, which made them see themselves as participants into the same moral community. Sometimes these religiously-based personal relations developed into more mundane partnerships.
- 68 For example, when I was accompanying the pilgrims to Sheikh Hassan's *zawiya* in 2002, two of Sheikh Muhiy al-Din's disciples had established a partnership with some of Sheikh Hassan's disciples.²⁰ The latter bought olives directly from the peasants during harvest time and transformed them into olive oil using various private and collective presses in 'Afrin. Then, the two ones, who were small merchants in Aleppo, owning shops in the poorest section of the 'Ashrafiyya, would transport the olive oil and sell it to other merchants in the city. This partnership generated good profit to both parts, as it allowed them to avoid both the state cooperatives and private middlemen. Part of the profit was donated to their respective sheikhs as *zakat* (tithe), emphasizing the moral basis of their economic enterprise.
- 69 For what interests us in this article, this Sufi-based partnership created channels for the economic insertion of the Aleppine merchants of Sheikh Muhiy al-Din's *zawiya* in the rural universe of olive harvesting and olive oil production, in tandem with the economic insertion of the rural entrepreneurs of Sheikh Hassan's *zawiya* into the urban markets of Aleppo. In this sense, the economic frontiers between urban and rural markets, which are usually controlled by state institutions, such as the peasant cooperatives, or private middlemen, usually connected to state officials, were bypassed through the establishment of religiously based personal relations between the agents involved in the trade.
- 70 The connections between Aleppo and the Kurdish regions of its rural hinterland that are created through the religious and ethnic networks which spring from the Sufi *zawiyas* that frame the Kurdish religious life in northern Syria are not limited to economic ties. The pilgrimages and visitations (*ziyara*) to saintly or prophetic tombs in the countryside also produce symbolic and emotional attachments to these rural areas, which are re-signified as not only an ethnic territory but also a sacred land.
- 71 Every year many *zawiyas* from allover northern Syria make pilgrimages and they celebrate the *mawlid* at the tomb of Nabi Huri, who is seen as a Kurdish prophet who

lived in the time of the Old Testament. The disciples of both Sheikh Muhiy al-Din and Sheikh Hassan performed this pilgrimage. Besides this pan-Kurdish pilgrimage, during their stay in Sheikh Hassan's *zawiya* the disciples of Sheikh Muhiy al-Din perform the visitation to the tomb of Sheikh Hassan's grandfather, who was also a sheikh and is considered to be a saint, in the village of Kafar Jinna.

- 72 One of Sheikh Muhiy al-Din's disciples explained to me the importance of paying the respects to the saintly sheikh during the visitation in which I took part in 2006:

To visit Sheikh Ahmad [Sheikh Hassan's grandfather] is very important to us. It brings us close to the *baraka* (divine grace) that springs from our sheikhs and is present in this land. This land is blessed and we are the keepers of its holiness through Sufism (*tassawwuf*), which is the *madhab* (ritual-legal religious school) of the Kurds. Here we see how the power of our sheikhs is connected to this land, which is ours [as Kurds].

- 73 In this speech we can see how the territory delimited by the saintly and prophetic tombs is constructed as a sacred land that grounds and empowers the combination of Islamic and Kurdish identities that are lived by Sufi Kurds even in urban settings as Aleppo.
- 74 These pilgrimages and tomb visitations produce a sacred geography that connects Kurdish identity with a certain territory delimited by holy places shaped by Sufi religious imagination. In this sense, the religious circuit created by Sheikh Muhiy al-Din's *zawiya* connects Sufi and Kurdish identities as they are lived in Aleppo with a rural territory in northern Syria that is defined as "holy" in the religious discourse of Sufism as "Kurdish Islam" that is enacted in the holy sites that dot this territory.

Blurring the Boundaries: Sufi *Zawiyas* as Spaces of Mediation of the Rural-Urban Divide

- 75 Both Sheikh Mahmud's and Sheikh Muhiy al-Din's *zawiyas* produce and articulate various levels of connection, as well as various instances of mediation, between the urban context of Aleppo and the rural universe of 'Afrin. This shows how the Sufi communities and the networks that spring from them have a fundamental role in the integration of the discrete social and cultural universes of the Kurds in northern Syria, in particular in Aleppo and its rural hinterland.
- 76 Sheikh Mahmud's *zawiya* provides its members with a kind of religious and economic capital that allows them to occupy a privileged place in the political and social life of 'Afrin. Through the *zawiya* Sheikh Mahmud's disciples and followers can benefit from economic and cultural links to Aleppo without having to go through the experience of migrating to the city. In this sense, urban and rural cultural and social dynamics are condensed in the religious life of the Sufi community, which becomes a space of mediation between these universes.
- 77 Sheikh Muhiy al-Din's *zawiya* also connects Aleppo with its rural hinterland albeit in a very different way. The key elements here are mobility and the acquisition of cultural capital. While rural migrants are socialized on the cultural universe and integrated in the economic networks in the *zawiya*, urban or urbanized disciples are sent to acquire religious knowledge as well as develop personal and emotional attachments to the rural areas that are seen as an ethnic homeland by the Kurdish secular nationalist discourse and as a sacred territory by the Kurdish Sufi discourse.

- 78 Beyond the variation in the way that these Sufi *zawiyas* create connections and mediate the cultural and social differences between Aleppo and its Kurdish hinterland, they help to blur and dissolve the boundaries between urban and rural life in northern Syria. The possibility of maintaining symbolic and practical connections to the rural world also makes migration to the city, at least in northern Syria, to be a continuous process of circulation of people, goods and ideas rather than a definitive rupture with a previous social and cultural universe.
- 79 Therefore, the analysis of how urban and rural connections were played within Sufi communities in Aleppo and in 'Afrin shows us that the urban and rural social universes in northern Syria cannot be treated as fully separated. They should be rather seen as connected through social networks and processes of cultural hybridization created by the continuous circulation of people, ideas, goods, patterns of consumption and lifestyles.

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NOTES

1. The population of Syria reached 17,980,000 inhabitants in 2004 [Courbage 2007].
2. The Arabic words are written according to a simplified version of the transliteration system of IJMES.
3. Cultural diacritics are cultural elements objectified as markers of ethnic boundaries between discrete social groups. See F. Barth [1998].
4. 'Afrin has around 20,000 inhabitants.
5. From 1999 until 2001 I lived in Aleppo doing ethnographic research among the Sufi *zawiyas* in the city and in the Kurd Dagħ. I also did several other periods of fieldwork research in Aleppo and the Kurd Dagħ until 2010.
6. The Kurds of Syria are all Sunni Muslims, with the exception of the Yezidi community, which has approximately 20,000 members in the Jabal Sinjar, the Kurd Dagħ and Aleppo [Pinto 2007; Tejel Gorgas 2009].
7. The presence of the Rifa'iyya in the Kurd Dagħ is documented since the beginning of the 20th Century [Lescot 1988].

8. This process, as I could reconstruct it from interviews with the sheikh *al-masha'ikh* of the Qadiriyya in Aleppo, happened simultaneously to the centralization of Sufi orders for administrative purposes of the Ottoman state [de Jong 1986; Luizard 1996].
9. It is interesting to notice that the Naqshbandiyya Kuftariyya has had a very limited success in Aleppo, despite the fact that its late leader, Sheikh Ahmad Kaftaru, was the mufti of Syria and a Kurd [Bottcher 1998]. The close connections between this Sufi order and the state seems to explain its lack of appeal in a city traditionally opposed to the Ba'th regime, such as Aleppo.
10. Sheikh Muhammad had good relations with the Ba'thist regime. However, after meeting with the leader in exile of the Syrian Muslim Brothers in Europe, he was kidnapped and murdered. His death, in which many saw the dealings of the secret services (*mukhabarat*) triggered a cycle of revolts and state repression in the Kurdish majority areas of northern Syria [Tejel Gorgas 2009].
11. Many informants told me that Nabi Huri was Uriah from the Old Testament. It is important to note that Uriah is not a prophet in Judaism and, therefore, is not recognized as such by the mainstream Islamic tradition [Fartacek 2002]. This example shows the multiple articulations between local religious practices and the Islamic tradition that serve as basis for the cultural and intellectual elaboration of what is defined by many Kurdish Sufi sheikhs and their disciples as "Kurdish Islam".
12. Religious nationalism is a form of imagining the nation as a moral community defined by religious affiliation. See B. Anderson [1991] and P. van der Veer [1994].
13. Sheikh Mahmud died on May 2000, being succeeded by his elder son as the head of the *zawiya*.
14. In this analysis I differentiate between "followers", who I define as those who participate regularly in the religious community organized in a Sufi *zawiya* but are not passing through the process of initiation in the mystical path, and "disciples", who are those who are passing through the process of initiation in the mystical path.
15. It is important to notice that the claim of descent from al-Rifa'i through a grandson is an ingenious strategy to avoid the fact that al-Rifa'i had no living male descendents [al-Samara'i s.d.].
16. After the death of Sheikh Mahmud in 2000, Husayn became the new sheikh of the *zawiya* in 'Afrin. His move to 'Afrin unleashed a crisis in the whole religious and economic system of the *zawiya*. His absence from Aleppo left the economic networks without a centralized organization. In the other hand, his lack of charisma and absence of ritual skills created a major religious crisis, with many members abandoning the community. While the crisis started to be overcome after 2003, the remaining community was very much weakened and the economic networks much less organized and effective.
17. Sheikh Hassan died in 2005. The links between his *zawiya* and Sheikh Muhiy al-Din's community, although weakened, remain until today.
18. Kurdish dialect spoken in Syria, Turkey and Iraq.
19. Jocelyne Cornand showed how Islamic practices and values are used to create bonds of solidarity among employers and workers in the textile industries in Aleppo [1994].
20. This partnership still existed in 2006, when I visited again the *zawiya*.

RÉSUMÉS

Résumé :

Les communautés kurdes soufies fonctionnent comme des espaces de médiation entre les univers urbain et rural du nord de la Syrie, permettant la circulation des personnes, des biens et des idées à travers leurs réseaux religieux. Cet article montre comment deux communautés soufies, l'une à Alep, principale ville du nord de la Syrie, l'autre à 'Afrin, ville située dans une zone rurale au nord d'Alep, organisent, dans cette région, des formes de connection discrètes entre la ville et la campagne. Tandis que la communauté d'Afrin mobilise ses réseaux religieux pour se rattacher à l'univers économique et culturel d'Alep, celle d'Alep fournit à ses membres des références culturelles pour leur permettre de passer facilement du contexte urbain-arabe au contexte rural-kurde. Par conséquent, les communautés soufies sont des espaces de circulation culturelle et sociale qui estompent les frontières entre l'urbain et le rural dans le nord de la Syrie.

Sufi communities function as spaces of mediation between the urban and rural universes among the Kurds of Northern Syria, allowing the circulation of people, goods and ideas through their religious networks. This article analyzes how two Sufi communities, one located in Aleppo, the main urban center of northern Syria; and the other located in 'Afrin, a Kurdish town in a rural area north of Aleppo, create discrete forms of connection between city and countryside in this region. While the community in 'Afrin mobilizes religious networks in order to connect the community with the economic and cultural universe of Aleppo, the one in Aleppo provides cultural references to their members that enable them to navigate in both Arab urban and Kurdish rural contexts. Therefore, the Sufi communities are spaces of cultural and social circulation that blur the boundaries between urban and rural in northern Syria.

INDEX

Mots-clés : Kurdes, Alep, Syrie, soufisme, connections urbain-rural, circulation culturelle

Keywords : Kurds, Aleppo, cultural circulation, Syria, sufism, urban-rural connections