

4 The Esoteric Culture in the Islamic Middle East

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4.1 Brotherhoods and Esotericism in the Classical Ages

When Europeans in the eighteenth century introduced Freemasonry into the regions south of the Mediterranean, no equivalent organisations existed there; however, as will be seen, the history of Islamic orders which grafted their activity onto ethical, spiritual and esoteric dimensions shows certain interesting elements of contiguity.

To look first at the ‘operative’ context in the Muslim world, the organisation of labour had found specific forms – only partially comparable to European guilds –¹ which had developed along certain main paths, integrated into the religious, cultural, social, economic and political dimension of Islamic societies. Studies on urban institutions in the Middle East have cast a light on many peculiarities and expressions, but the vast extent of the phenomenon, which emerges with different and often contrasting aspects in different ages and geographical areas, has not made it easy to provide a unique

1 “Ottoman guilds had certain features in common with their much more fully researched counterparts in western, central and southern Europe. In both these places artisans attempted to limit the exercise of their crafts to those men [...] that they themselves had selected for membership in their associations. To defend this right to regulate access to artisan life, the heads of guilds or perhaps even the entire group employed a whole array of social and economic pressures not excluding violence [...] In this respect there was no great difference between the guilds of Bologna, Amsterdam and Bursa”. Faroqhi, *Artisans of Empire*, pos. 246-53.

and clearly delineated interpretation: especially, the *asnāf* (sing. *sinf*, 'guilds') sometimes overlap with other organisms, often with a mystic vocation, of a varied nature, such as the *tariqāt* sufi (lit. mystic ways, brotherhoods), the *futuwwa* (knightly congregations) or the Akhi (brotherhood deriving from or blending into the *futuwwa* in Anatolia)² with dimensions which are often confused with each other or mixed together, making it difficult and uncertain to decode their social functions.

The earliest guilds probably dated back to the ninth century, but they cannot be identified as firmly structured institutions before the fourteenth century.³ The Islamic *asnāf* (both Sunni and Shiite) used to organise themselves in the *suq* each according to their profession, in any case following the layout of the marketplace: shops were set out along the same street, depending on the kind of goods they sold or produced. They safeguarded their professional interests, while also providing administrative and tax functions, without neglecting professional ethics. Trade secrets were handed down orally (*dustūr*), to preserve the integrity of tradition through three consecutive degrees, which any free man could achieve: apprentice (*muta'allim*), worker (*sani'*) and master (*mu'allim*).

In terms of their 'code of behaviour', the *asnāf* merged with another important community body, the *futuwwa*.⁴ The charters and by-laws of the guilds progressively developed elaborate initiation rites and mystic doctrines, in fact the collections of traditions which have reached us deal above all, if not exclusively, with the spiritual aspect of ritual organisation of the *asnāf* and tell us nothing about professional issues. This kind of ritual finds its most complete representation in the *Fütüvvvet-nāme-i-kebīr* (Great Eulogy of the Futuwwa), by Sayyid Mehmed b. Sayyid,⁵ dated 1524, composed in an Ottoman context and with Shiite tendency. It accurately describes the initiatory degrees, nine in all, of which the first three seem to correspond to the degrees of a craft. This work of a general character was authoritative in the Arab provinces of the Empire, but it seems that each *sinf* drew up its own 'guild charter' drawing from the *Fütüvvvet-nāme* and adapting it to its own needs.

² The Akhi, whose features vary and are often hard to define, appear as a guild with social and economic purposes, bringing together craftsmen and professionals, as a political lobby or as a mystical brotherhood. Observers in the past, including Ibn Battuta, agree in emphasising their strict ethics and extraordinary generosity - putting into practice the principles exposed by Sulamī. Arnakis, "Futuwwa Traditions", 234-40.

³ Cf. Massignon, "Sinf"; Vercellin, *Istituzioni del mondo musulmano*; Baer, *Egyptian Guilds*; Faroqhi, *Artisans of Empire*.

⁴ Cahen, Taeschner, "Futuwwa"; Aldeeb Abu-Sahlieh, *La chevalerie musulmane*; Irwin, "Futuwwa: Chivalry and Gangsterism"; Arnakis, "Futuwwa Traditions".

⁵ Breebaart, "The Fütüvvvet-nāme-i kebīr".

Futuwwa, which defines the esoteric, initiatory side of professional guilds, is quite a multifaceted phenomenon. As we shall see, it does not refer so much to groups of different nature or purpose (whether guilds, bands of brigands, armed militia, knights or Sufi congregations) as to the moral qualities needed to belong to them. Unknown in the pre and proto-Islamic times, the term *futuwwa* comes from *fātā*, a word indicating a young man gifted with *muruwwa* (sense of honour). In early Abbasid times, the term *fityān*, plural of *fātā*, was used to indicate groups of young men, or armed militia, at times engaged in banditry, and it is in the same period that the term derived from it, *futuwwa*, began to be used. The growing importance of youth *futuwwa* also attracted the attention of the well-off and educated classes, interested in the values which were being proposed. The change took place under the caliph al-Nāsir (1181-1225) and the so-called aristocratic *futuwwa* which arose from this new process spread especially in Egypt and Syria.⁶ Al-Nāsir changed and disciplined the *futuwwa* of Baghdad, encouraging religious, military and administrative leader to join it, and trying to regulate what arose in it and around it in the context of the *sharī'a*, the Islamic law. He transformed 'chivalry' from a differentiated and local experience into a pan-Islamic institution, driving the princes of the Muslim empire to organise *futuwwa* each in their own domain, introducing privileges to attract the nobility, such as the exclusive practice of certain 'chivalrous' games.

At the same time, Sufism (*tasawwuf*) was developing and trying to give a community organisation to mysticism and asceticism.⁷ The first Muslim anchorites already appeared in the times of the Prophet. The phenomenon took on an important institutional dimension in ninth century Baghdad, and then extended well beyond the borders of the Abbasid empire, giving rise to different schools which preached specific esoteric and spiritual approaches, moving from a 'hidden' interpretation of the Qur'an (*'ilm al-bātin*). The *tariqāt* diverged in several aspects, sometimes giving rise to antinomic mystic behaviour, strongly evolving through time and under the influence of the various local substrates: affiliation, determined by the chain of transmission of the tradition; specific initiatory elements, such as listening to music and poetry (*samā'*) which produced ecstasy, or repetition of sacred formulas (*dhikr*); they also differed in terms of conditions for being admitted to the orders and everyday practices. Sufi orders must not however be assimilated to Christian monastic confraternities: although they might include experiences of spiritual isolation or hermit-

⁶ Cf. Cahen, "Note sur les debuts de la futuwwa".

⁷ Bibliography on Sufism is vast. Cf., among others, Chittick, *Sufism*; Schimmel, *Mystische Dimensionen des Islam*; Trimmingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam*; Anawati, Gardet, *Mystique musulmane*.

age, Sufi adepts did not practice celibacy, but were men (and sometimes women) whose spiritual vocation also implied an active role in the community, and the different orders, which spread throughout the Islamic world, had important social, cultural and political functions. In the early stages, it was difficulty in collective organisation which brought some Sufi groups, especially the Malāmātiyya order, close to the experience of *futuwwa*. The most ancient treatise in this field to have survived was the *Kitāb al-futuwwa* (The Book of Futuwwa) by Ibn al-Husayn al-Sulamī (932-1021), one of the great figures of Islamic spirituality. In the introduction to the text,⁸ the sufi master defines *futuwwa* as a Way that God has opened and “which leads to the most beautiful form of the fulfilment of our duties to Him”. The first to ‘follow the call’ was Adam, who handed it on through the generations: Seth, Idris,⁹ Noah, Abraham, the Qur’anic prophets Dhū al-Kifl and Shu’ayb, David, Solomon, Jonah, Jesus¹⁰ and finally Muhammad and three caliphs who followed him, Abū Bakr, ‘Umar and ‘Alī, were the main transmitters of the Way. The author then continues providing over one hundred and fifty definitions of *futuwwa* to indicate a spiritual path of inner fulfilment. Among other things, *futuwwa* means: “following the ordinances of perfect devotion” and among its imperatives: “respond to cruelty with kindness, and do not punish for an error”; “above all, be generous”; “care for your brethren more than you care for your own family”, “be truthful”; “keep your word and what is entrusted to you”; “remember that you are a servant of Allah and should not regard yourself and your actions highly, nor should you expect a return for your actions”; “do not be idle, but work in this world until you reach the definite state of trust in Allah”; “strengthen your outer self with prayer and your inner self with remembrance of Allah”; “seek a humble life and poverty, and be content and happy with it”; “in this education you must learn to feel joy in the privilege of serving your master”.¹¹

Like al-Sulamī, other Sufis were also masters of *fityān*, such as Hasan al-Basrī (d. 728), Abū Hafs al-Nishāpurī (d. 878), founder of the *Malāmātiyya*, Nūrī (d. 908) and Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 1240).

According to art historians, the influence of Sufism and of *futuwwa* left a clear trace, especially in ceramics. An example is a twelfth century pitcher, now in the museum of Tbilisi, which bears a long poem expressing, in partly personal and partly mystical terms, the artist’s love for the object he has created and his appreciation of

8 Al-Sulamī, *The Way of Sufi Chivalry*, 33-4.

9 Prophet of Islam, identified with Hermes and the Biblical Enoch.

10 The Qur’an acknowledges the main Biblical prophets, including Jesus, to whom however a divine nature is not attributed.

11 Al-Sulamī, *The Way of Sufi Chivalry*, 37-63.

its use. Oleg Grabar believes that this is not by chance and insists on the presence of *futuwwa* and mysticism in urban culture.¹² Even more exemplary of the close relationship between professional and mystic brotherhood is the case of weavers of *peştamal* (canvas and aprons) of Istanbul associated with the Melâmiyya order, active until the early twentieth century. This brotherhood, which kept its ceremonies secret, was lodged in a caravanserai, where the adepts put together the practice of their craft and mystic contemplation, synchronizing recitation of the *secret dhikr* with the everyday gestures of weaving. It was said that they appeared to weave, but in the depth of their hearts, they read the name of God.¹³

What was said about brotherhoods in the classic Islamic age confirms how difficult it is to interpret specific features of different organisms, beyond contacts and contaminations; however, and for the same reasons, it allows to point out the high degree of intercommunication, which appears more explicitly in intellectual and spiritual experiences. Orders of various kinds - whether related to craftsmanship, chivalry or Sufism - were an integral part of the Islamic social fabric and involved a wide range of social ranks and classes, from subversive bands to craftsmen, from the literati to mystics and to aristocrats. They certainly define the most esoteric aspects of Qur'anic religious contents,¹⁴ but also show more or less marked features which are not always of Islamic origin.

The formidable military expansion of Islam out of the Arab peninsula in the seventh century did not annihilate the civilisations it met with along its way but incorporated them through a process of assimilation in Islamisation. These cultures included other religions, such as Christianity, Judaism, Zarathustrianism, later Hinduism. Those believers who refused to convert acquired a new citizenship accepting Islamic political authority, preserving their specificity in a subordinate status of protection (*dhimma*); but the cultures integrated into the Islamic *civitas* also included elements of spirituality foreign to the institutional orthodoxies of the many confessions of the Middle East. These elements of 'heterodox' spirituality¹⁵ filtered into the Islamic world, defining some fundamental features of its esotericism.

¹² Grabar, *Cities and citizens*.

¹³ Zarcone, *Secret et sociétés secrètes*, 61.

¹⁴ Al-Sulami, *The Way of Sufi Chivalry*, 21-4.

¹⁵ In terms of principle, Islamic law acknowledges citizenship in subordination (*dhimma*) exclusively to the faithful of so-called 'revealed' monotheistic religions, the *ahl al-kitâb*, or people of the book (Jews, Christians, Zarathustrians and by extension, Hindus). Other beliefs are associated with paganism and their devotees may be put to death.

4.2 The Islamic Hermetic Tradition

In a previous chapter, dealing with Egyptosophy's roots in Europe, I illustrated how the rediscovery of Hermeticism by European humanism owed much to the transfer of esoteric knowledge from the Arab world to the northern shores of the Mediterranean, beginning in the Middle Ages.

The Hermetic substrate of Hellenistic-Ptolemaic origin, in fact, found a way of its own also in the Orient, first Christianised and then Islamised,¹⁶ and affirmed itself with special vitality in the Muslim context, also thanks to identification of Hermes with Idris, acknowledged to be a Prophet in the Qur'an.¹⁷ Especially in the Abbasid epoch, Greek philosophy and sciences became known in translation, mediated from the Syriac and carried out by the Christian communities of Syria; Alexandrian, Neoplatonic and Hellenistic doctrines had another important centre of diffusion at Gondeshapur, in Persia, famous above all for its school of medicine. Hermeticism began to spread in the eighth century, through translation into Arabic of Greek works, partly mediated through the Persian world, and thanks to the pagan community of Harran.¹⁸ Hermetic wisdom nourished a philosophical and esoteric culture circulating from Andalusia to India, where Gnostic¹⁹ and Zarathustrian elements merged with others stemming from the ancient astral religion of Babylon and yet others from Persia and India, giving rise to hundreds of works, mainly dealing with alchemical disciplines or with astrology, magic and talismans - to a lesser degree, spiritual or philosophical writings - which guaranteed acquisition of occult powers deriving from a wisdom held to be very ancient.²⁰

Considering the number of works and their diffusion from the farthest eastern and western ends of the Islamic empires, and the number of Muslim scholars who quote Hermes as an authoritative refer-

16 Cf. Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity*; Van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes*; El-Daly, *Egyptology*; Fodor, *The Metamorphosis of Imhotep*; Massignon, "Inventaire de la littérature"; Plessner, "Hermes Trismegistus".

17 Erder, "The Origin of the Name Idris".

18 Though it is unclear what the beliefs and cults of the Sabians of Harran actually were, the Arabs of the times considered them to be followers of Hermes (Idris), and it was as such that they presented themselves in the ninth century. Reference to a prophet mentioned in the Qur'an was fundamental for obtaining the status of a protected religious minority (*dhimmi*). Cf. Van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes*, 64-103; Fahd, *Sabi'a*; Green, *The City of the Moon God*; Hjäppe, *Analyse critique des traditions arabes*; Tardieu, "Sabiens coraniques".

19 Blochet, "Études sur le gnosticisme musulman".

20 As Van Bladel specifies (*The Arabic Hermes*, 10): "There are probably more works attributed to Hermes surviving in Arabic than in any other language, and the majority of them are still unknown and unpublished". He is speaking of texts derived from pre-Islamic works, or unpublished Arab productions in the same spirit (237).

ence (not only alchemists and astrologers/astronomers or Sufis, but also historians, philosophers, physicians, secretaries, merchants of the most varied cultural orientation), one has an idea of how truly influential they must have been.²¹

This composite esoteric universe influenced many Sufi masters, from Dhū'l-Nūn al-Misrī (d. 861), to Suhrawardī (d. 1191) to Ibn Sab'īn (d. 1270), leading to a progressive evolution in metaphysical approach. While Sufi practices found their spiritual source in the Qur'an and Sunna, from the ninth-tenth century on, Sufism began to introject these heterodox elements which were coming together from various horizons in the Islamic world. While Ibn al-'Arabī introduced the Gnostic and Neoplatonic system – especially emanatism which culminated in the principle of Unity of Being (*wahdat al-wujūd*) –, Suhrawardī introduced the mystic experiences of ancient Iranian tradition; and from Asia to North Africa, many brotherhoods introduced elements of Animism and Shamanism into their practices.²² Especially, Shamanism integrated Alevism, which in Anatolia was the background to the beliefs of Islamised Turkic peoples, and permeated the majority of mystical brotherhoods, including the *futuwwa* and later the Bektashiyya.

But what best represents the mix of scientific, philosophical and esoteric elements which runs through the classic epoch of Islam, defining its features in the initial phases, is certainly the *Kitāb Ikhwān al-safā* ('Encyclopaedia of the Brethren of Purity'),²³ a work composed around the tenth century in Basra, which expounds on topics involving all the knowledge of the times, distributed in 52 treatises sharing the theme of the substantial unity of microcosm and macrocosm. The anonymous authors of the *Encyclopaedia* incorporate the many components of the cultures mentioned above into a monotheism of Shiite – if not Ismailite – tendency: "Babylonian, Indian and Iranian astrology, Indian and Persian narrative, biblical quotations and cabbalistic influences, references to the New Testament and Christian gnosis",²⁴ in what is considered the *summa* of knowledge of the civilisation of the times. The *Ikhwān* were judged heretics²⁵ or semi-heretics, but their writings had a considerable influence on Islamic esoteric culture.

21 Van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes*, 239.

22 Zarcone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 1-60; Massignon, "Tasawwuf".

23 Cf. Bausani, *L'Enciclopedia dei Fratelli della Purità*; Baffioni, *L'Epistola degli Ikhwān al-Safā* and "Ikhwān al-Safā"; Netton, *Muslim Neoplatonists*; El-Bizri, *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity*; Marquet, *La philosophie des Ihwān al-Safā*; Marquet, *La philosophie des alchimistes*.

24 Baffioni, "Ikhwān al-Safā".

25 In 1150, the Caliph al-Mustanjid ordered the copies in circulation of the *Encyclopaedia* to be burned, but the work was saved and later translated into Persian and Turkish.

In the cradle of Hermeticism, Egypt, the interest for the secrets of Trismegistus reached its peak under the Fatimids (973-1171) – who encouraged profanation of Egyptian temples and tombs, in the quest for treasures but also for alchemical, magical and astrological texts –,²⁶ and it was probably on the banks of the Nile that Hermeticism and Islamic Sufism came together thanks to Dhū l-Nūn al-Misrī. Born in Upper Egypt, Dhū l-Nūn lived most of his life in the Egyptian temple of Akhanim, and according to Arab men of learning of his times, he was able to understand many of the sciences of the temple where he lived and had mastered the art of alchemy, which he acquired from a monk.²⁷ His thinking also influenced those who were probably the two most learned Sufis, “pervasively influential”²⁸ on all Islamic esoteric expressions. Ibn al-‘Arabī (who, as has been seen, was also a master of *futuwwa*) wrote a book on his virtues, and the most important mystic poet of Persian literature, Jalāl ad-Din Rūmī (d. 1273), founder of the *tarīqa* of the Mevlevi – known as the ‘whirling dervishes’ – considered himself to be his disciple.²⁹

As late as the sixteenth century, to quote Michael Winter: “The number of Sufis who practised occult sciences at that time was legion”,³⁰ especially alchemy, the kabbalistic arts of divination, magic and astrology, practised more for material than spiritual purposes.³¹ Such practices were not however approved by all Muslim mystics or by the more orthodox Sufi schools and, of course, even less by the official institutions based on the madrasas, the Islamic universities, who also opposed popular rituals belonging to such tradition.³²

Among the works which best reflect popular Hermetic imagination in the land of Egypt is the text commonly known as *Hermetic History* and the *Sira of Sayf*. The *Hermetic History*, translated in 1898 by Baron Carra De Vaux under the title *L'abrégé des merveilles*,³³ is a pot-pourri of materials, probably dating back to the eleventh century, and traces the history of Egypt from antediluvian times, paying special attention to the building of the Pyramids, mixing astrology,

26 El-Daly, *Egyptology*, 34-44.

27 El-Daly, *Egyptology*, 51, 163-4.

28 Massignon, “Tasawwuf”.

29 El-Daly, *Egyptology*, 164.

30 Winter, *Society and Religion*, 173.

31 Winter, *Society and Religion*, 172-6.

32 Maqrīzī (*Description topographique*, 352-3) says how, around 1378, Sheikh Muhammad Sā’im al-Zāhir, of the Sufi order founded by Sayyid al-Sa’āda, mutilated the face of the Sphinx, destroying its nose because farmers used to bring it offerings.

33 The origins of the text are obscure. Michael Cook light on Oriental elements as well as elements from Andalusian Spain, without finding an answer to the question, but rejecting with certainty the hypothesis of a Coptic origin. Cook, “Pharaonic History”.

magic, priests, talismans, treasures, fantastic buildings and ancient wisdom. As Cook puts it: “the dominant note is one which a European audience can readily associate with the *Magic Flute*”.³⁴ The text became an indispensable reference for later Egyptian historians, such as al-Maqrīzī (d. 1442), whose history of Egypt is equally full of references to the Hermetic tradition³⁵ and shows the fecundity of magical and astrological thinking in the culture of his age.

The *Sīra of Sayf*,³⁶ on the other hand, is a popular epic – also a potpourri,³⁷ probably composed in Egypt in the Mamlūk epoch, between the fourteenth and the sixteenth centuries – which recounts the adventures of the Yemenite ‘white’ prince, Sayf Ibn Dhī Yazan in his war against the ‘black’ Ethiopian emperor, Sayf Ar‘ād (actually Sayfa Ar‘ād, d. 1372). Unlike other epic Arab cycles or better known popular narratives, such as *The Thousand and One Nights* (where magic does play an important role), the *Sīra of Sayf* is set in a supernatural universe where men and *jinn*³⁸ live together with magicians and wizards who fight for power or for the control of natural forces.³⁹ Though one should not rule out interpretations which refer to the social and political situation of the times,⁴⁰ it comes as a surprise that no scholar appears to have noticed the manifest alchemical symbolism of the work. The trials the main character has to go through to become the hero of his age (discover the secret of his birth, win back his father’s throne, wed his beloved and, last but not least, find again the *Book of the History of the Nile*), reveal an initiatory path where the fight between the two Sayfs represents the struggle of Man against his own dark side: the black Sayf can be seen as the alchemical stage of *ni-*

34 Cook, *Pharaonic History*, 71.

35 Maqrīzī, *Description topographique*.

36 For a partial translation: Jayyusi, *The Adventures of Sayf Ben Dhi Yazan*.

37 In this epic, Aboubakr Chraïbi (“Le roman de Sayf Ibn Di Yazan”, 120-1) identifies Biblical, Iranian, Indian and Greek elements, besides folk literature, but Joseph Chelhod (“La geste du roi Sayf”, 184, 201) believes the atmosphere, steeped in magic, to be authentically Egyptian, and many episodes appear to be taken from popular Egyptian tales, with the basic inspiration being of Egyptian-Hellenistic origin. For Harry Norris (“Sayf b. Di Yazan and the Book of the Nile”, 128, 143) too, the story has an Egyptian background and was composed in Egypt.

38 *Jinns* are Supernatural creatures of the Arab folk tradition, also mentioned in the Qur’an.

39 Chelhod, “La geste du roi Sayf”, 182.

40 The epic has often been interpreted as an allegory of the Islamic conquest of Africa, grounded on the liberation of Yemen from the Abyssinian yoke at the end of the sixth century, but it has also been interpreted as probably reflecting conflict between Christian Ethiopia and the Mamluks in the sixteenth century. Norris, “Sayf b. Di Yazan and the Book of the Nile”, 130-1; Garcin, “Sira(s) et histoire”, 41 et “Sira(s) et histoire II”, 230.

gredo, the mortal physical component, associated with Saturn (Sayf⁴¹ Ar'ad in the *Sīra* is a worshipper of Saturn), against whom the white Sayf fights in order to achieve *albedo*, the reawakening of the soul which alchemy associates with the element of *water* (and the crowning achievement of Sayf will be to give the Nile to Egypt).⁴²

Hermetic writings continued to be mentioned in the Arab tradition at least as late as the eighteenth century, and manuscripts were copied into the nineteenth.⁴³ The tradition disappeared progressively during the colonial phase, as the scientific and positivist spirit began to prevail, also weakening or modifying the role of Sufi orders. But when Freemasonry began to settle into the Middle East, starting in the nineteenth century, brotherhoods of a wide variety of orders were still an element of everyday Egyptian life, and astrological, alchemical and magical or ritual practices associated with ancient cults were still widespread.

4.3 Islamic Esotericism in Ottoman Environment

In the Middle East, the aristocratic *futuwwa* declined until it disappeared in the fourteenth century, continuing in its popular form as the basis of guilds, but also identifying forms of banditry until recent times.⁴⁴ However, when Freemasons began to found their lodges, Sufi orders, whether of an erudite or popular tendency, were common,⁴⁵ while society was still steeped in beliefs and superstitions tied to magic practices. The British traveller Edward William Lane, who spent the years between 1825 and 1828 in Cairo, blending in with the Egyptians and taking note of various aspects of local life, dedicated three chapters of his *Manners and Customs of Modern Egyptians* to the magic practices of the times, providing a colourful picture of the everyday relationship of Muslims with the invisible. Lane first of all noticed how deeply rooted the 'darweeshes' were (placing them, not in the chapter on 'Religion and Laws' but in the first devoted to the 'Superstitions'), naming several Sufi orders, with their various sub-orders. The most widespread *tariqāt* were the Rifa'iyya,

⁴¹ The name of the historical character Sayfa As'ad was probably deliberately misspelled in order to indicate the specular nature of the clash.

⁴² The spiritual struggle of Man is also represented by the black and white chequerboard pattern on the lodge floors. This reading would provide an answer to Norris' question ("Sayf b. Di Yazan and the Book of the Nile", 131): "What is puzzling is why this duo, Sayf Ar'ad and Sayf b. Dhi Yazan, should have been especially selected".

⁴³ Van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes*, 238.

⁴⁴ Jacob, "Eventful Transformations".

⁴⁵ Cf. De Jong, *Turuq and Turuq-linked Institutions*; Winter, *Society and Religion*; Goldziher, "Le culte des saints chez les musulmans"; Lane, *Manners and Customs*.

the Qadiriyya, the Ahmadiyya and the Burhamiyya, the Khalwatiyya and the Malāmatiyya.⁴⁶ Lane describes only a few of their more eccentric public rituals, such as exhibitions with sharp blades or fire or snake handling, since:

It is impossible to become acquainted with all the tenets, rules, and ceremonies of the darweeshes, as many of them, like those of the freemasons, are not to be divulged to the uninitiated.⁴⁷

The pages of the British scholar take us into a Cairo atmosphere which seems to be still immersed in the magic universe of the *Sira of Sayf*, describing an everyday life marked by definitely heterodox beliefs, though covered with a veil of Islam; fears were quelled using amulets - bearing Qur'anic formulas - which all seem to protect against the evil eye; astrology was practised by a great many people, as was alchemy; the arts of divination were based on tables called *zāirgeh*, designed using orders of letters attributed to Hermes,⁴⁸ and magic was divided into 'spiritual' (divided again into divine and satanic) and 'natural', with the use of drugs. Egyptians believed that a person expert in divine magic, by simply pronouncing certain formulas, could bring the dead back to life, kill the living, 'teleport' himself or carry out any other miracle.⁴⁹ Lane himself was participant witness to a (successful) magic ritual, which he described in detail, and which clearly left him somewhat disconcerted.⁵⁰

Moving on to Anatolia, in the nineteenth century, like the *futuwwa*, the Akhi too were by now a remote memory. Arnakis believes that, during the phase of late fourteenth century decadence, remnants of the Akhis found "their way into various guilds of craftsmen, while the main body of their religious tenets was perpetuated by the dervishes of the Mevlevi, Khalaveti and Bektashi orders".⁵¹ This took place especially in Bursa, at that time the capital of the new born Ottoman sultanate, in a religious climate largely dominated by Shiite ulama from northern Iran and Turkestan, where for centuries they had been exposed to a religious syncretism created by Buddhist, Zoroastrian, Manichean, Gnostic, Christian, and Moslem elements. Among the *tariqāt* which probably inherited part of the esoteric tradition of the Akhi, placing themselves at the most heterodox extreme of mystic tradition, the Bektashi order is especially important for this study

⁴⁶ Winter, *Society and Religion*.

⁴⁷ Lane, *Manners and Customs*, 250.

⁴⁸ Lane, *Manners and Customs*, 266-7

⁴⁹ Lane, *Manners and Customs*, 270-1.

⁵⁰ Lane, *Manners and Customs*, 275-82.

⁵¹ Arnakis, "Futuwwa Traditions", 235.

because of the role it played in the Ottoman Empire and because of the special relationship it would develop with Freemasonry.

The origin of the Bektashi is controversial,⁵² but documentary sources show they already existed in the thirteenth century and spread rapidly. Their doctrine was a synthesis of heterogeneous elements: they took their teachings from the Akhi, but also from the Qalandariyya order which had grafted strong Buddhist and other influences onto a Malāmāti doctrinal core.⁵³ The Bektashi orders, who kept the books containing the old regulations of the *futuwwa*, represent the most syncretic brotherhood of the Ottoman Empire: they interpreted the religious Texts allegorically, preaching the Unity of Being and the identity of the external and internal world, practicing a general tolerance and a special syncretism with Christianity (sharing places of worship, stories of miracles, venerating the same saints or loosely identifying 'Alī with Christ). Analysing such ancient Bektashi texts as *Menākīb-i-Hācī Bektaş-ı Velī* by Hācī Bektaş and the *Saltuk-nāme* by Ebül Hayr-i Rūmī, one can find traces of animism (e.g. cults of nature, worship of hills, trees, rocks, stones), shamanism (e.g. magical practices, healing, clairvoyance, control over fire and the forces of nature, the capacity of bringing the dead back to life, ceremonies in which both sexes took part); Iranian and Far Eastern traditions (e.g. metempsychosis, incarnation, transformation into animals, the theory of the four elements, the cult of fire) as well as Judeo-Christian traditions (ascent to the sky, transformation of water into blood, sending calamities against human beings, reproducing food in large quantities, fecundation by the spirit, opening the seas or rivers to cross them, walking on water).⁵⁴ The Bektashiyya also received elements from the Hurūfiyya order, the founder of which, Fadl Allāh, had developed a doctrine based on a kabbalistic combination of letters, before declaring himself a divine manifestation, greater than the Prophet, and being executed as a heretic in 1394.⁵⁵

A specific feature of the order was secrecy, which involved both the mystery of the Sufi spiritual quest (*the unspeakable secret* of a merely esoteric and individual order, by its very nature *bātin*, interior, occult), and - unlike other Sufi orders - 'accessory' secrets associated with practices and rituals. Secrecy was first of all associated with the various initiatory levels which coincide with mastery of spiritual practices or stages and states of mystical experience, but equally secret were the rituals which marked the Bektashi experi-

52 Cf. Arnakis, "Futuwwa Traditions"; Zarccone, *Mystiques, philosophes*; Birge, *Bektashi order*; Brown, *The Darvishes*, 140-74.

53 Yazıcı, "Qalandariyya".

54 Zarccone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 5-8; 61-72; 87-118.

55 Bausani, "Hurūfiyya".

ence, especially the initiatory ceremonies, with the tying of a belt to the neophyte's waist - a practice already to be found in the earlier *futuwwa* - (tied to the neophyte's neck when he was presented to the assembly) or the use of alcoholic beverages, as well as the mixing of sexes during prayer - something which marks a clear distance from orthodox Islamic brotherhoods. Unlike other Sufi schools, only members of the *tariqa* could take part in Bektashi ceremonies.⁵⁶ It comes as no surprise that during the initiation ceremony, the guide of the neophyte would warn him with the following formula: *Sakahüm sırrını söyleme sakın!* ("Beware, do not reveal the secret of Sakahüm!").⁵⁷

The Bektashi had an immense popular following (it has been estimated that they had over seven million followers in the Asiatic provinces of the empire, of which 120,000 in Istanbul alone),⁵⁸ until they were outlawed in 1826, together with the suppression of the Janisaries of whom they were the spiritual guides. In the following years, they underwent a harsh repression (their masters were driven into exile and their *tekkes*, 'convents', handed over to other orders), but the Bektashi survived in hiding, also in the ranks of other Sufi orders, and reappeared at the end of the following decade, in 1839, when, with the favour of Sultan Abdülmecid I, several *tekkes* reopened and began spreading publications about the *tariqa*. Their influence remained significant enough for them to play a role in the revolt of the Young Turks, when a large part of the leadership and activists of the movement belonged to Sufi orders, especially to the Bektashiyya.

⁵⁶ Zarccone, *Secret et sociétés secrètes*, 41-55 e 309.

⁵⁷ Zarccone, *Secret et sociétés secrètes*, 51.

⁵⁸ Arnakis, "Futuwwa Traditions", 244.

