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Contemporary Transnational Sufism in Central Eurasia: hierarchies and charisma

This paper aims at analyzing contemporary development of Sufism in Central Eurasia within the context of several major transnational Sufi orders i.e. Naqshbandiyya-Haqqaniyya and Rifa'iyya (al-Ahbash). My work is still in progress and I will limit my focus mainly to two regional cases, i.e. Ukraine and Germany.

This Sufi networks that originated in 70s-80s in West Asia (specifically in the broader Levant (al-Mashriq) region and later spread across the globe through migration routes, missionary activities and conversions are contextualized in the Western socio-cultural milieu in terms of discourses, practices and institutionalization. I argue that Naqshbandiyya-Haqqaniyya and al-Ahbash in the Western socio-cultural milieu could be regarded according to Marcia Hermansen's categorization, as representing two respective 'ideatypic' Sufi communities: 'hybrids' and 'transplants'.

Paraphrasing Hermansen's definition, we can designate 'hybrids' as those Sufi movements that identify themselves with an Islamic tradition in general and discourses and practices of their founders in particular, but are to a large extent contextualized and transformed in the Western sociocultural milieu as this allows them to recruit significant numbers of native western followers. Meanwhile 'transplants' are groups of Shari'a oriented diasporic Sufis, who imitate and reproduce their native Sufi traditions (Hermansen 1997, 2000, 2013). At the same time, 'transplants' do not simply duplicate these traditions but renegotiate them in the different socio-cultural settings into which they have expanded.

Institutional structure of Sufi communities encompasses initiative hierarchies of dominance and collective solidarities. The typical model of leadership in Sufi communities is charismatic authority, when religious authority is derived from charisma of Sheikh (Werbner 2003: 282). The concept of 'redemptive sociality' regarded here in line with Pnina Werbner's conceptualization of it as a form of collective solidarity based on allegiance to a charismatic Sufi Shaykh (Werbner 2001).

Sufi hierarchical link can be extended to transcend the life of the Sheikh and become institutionalized and thus serve to attract and guide followers long after his death (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996: 73). These spiritual ties are thought to be everlasting and oriented towards afterlife, at the same time the 'bonds of spirit' between disciples have effects on their life trajectories beyond the Sufi community. Spiritual genealogies (salasil) of Sufi turuq, which incorporate Shaykhs (Shuyuh) representing different historical periods and regions, clearly display ideas of their imagined origin, historical development and geographical expansion, like

that of Naqshbandiyya-Haqqaniyya encompassing Mawarannahr and Punjab, Shahrazur (Iraqi Kurdistan), Northern Caucasus and Levant. Therefore, the Sufi silsila is a clear indication of the concept of transnational network but distinctive in the sense that it "incorporates those still alive as well as those who have died, whether at home or away" (Bang, 2014, 8).

Historically trans-regional Sufi cults mediated connections between the different parts of the Islamicate World. Nile Green presents a very fitting description for these trans-regional Sufi cults as "cultural technology of inter-regional connection and exchange" (Green, 2012, 12, 44). Sufi networks continue to perform some of these functions today in the Muslim diasporas located in the West, maintaining for example "complex relationships with homeland societies while simultaneously developing global contacts crossing the ethnical links and thereby becoming the channels of the cultural flows" (Raudvere, Stenberg 2009, 5).

Let's turn to the Naqshbandiyya-Haqqaniyya and al-Ahbash. The summary of their beginnings and early history is outlined in the PowerPoint presentation[1].

In 1973 Shaykh 'Abd Allah appointed Mehmet Nazim Adil his successor. Since that time, he became known as Shaykh Nazim al-Qubrusi al-Haqqani (1920/22 – 2014). Shaykh Nazim harboured aspirations to settle in Medina, near the Prophet's grave, but instead was ordered by his Master to go to London every year during the month of Ramadan to "spread Islam in the West" (Böttcher, 2006, 245).

In the following decades Shaykh Nazim visited Western and Central-Eastern Europe, North America, Central, South and South-Eastern Asia and his visits facilitated development of local communities. Shaykh Nazim's and his senior representatives' (like Kabbani brothers and others) travels facilitated the transnational expansion of the Naqshbandiyya-Haqqaniyya network (Nielsen et al. 2006, 103-114). The tariqa also established presence in Russia, especially in Bashkortostan and Dagestan among local kumyk population. Through these efforts the network received "a global presence that superseded previous distinctions between Sufism in the Muslim world and Sufism in the West" (Sedgwick, 2016, 247). When Shaykh Nazim passed away in 2014 his elder son Shaykh Mehmet Adil became his successor.

Meanwhile today al-Ahbash runs branches in South, South-eastern and Central Asia, Middle Eastern Europe, North America (Ibid, 523-524). Its main centre in Western Europe is Germany while in Eastern Europe its base is in Ukraine[2]. The Ukrainian branch (headed by Shaykh

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[1] See: Microsoft PowerPoint presentation.
[2] The *al-Ahbash* communities are present at least in 15 countries in Europe. Some of its largest communities in the region are located in France (Montpellier) and Germany (Berlin). The community in France was created in 1991 by 'Abdel Nasser Tamim, from the Lebanese family of Palestinian descent, whose brother Ahmed Tamim is a *al-Ahbash* leader in Ukraine.

Ahmed Tamim al-Ashari) could be considered as a hub institution for the networking in Central Eurasia i.e. Central Russia, Volga Region, Northern Caucasus, Crimea and Central Asia. Therefore, we could characterize al-Ahbash as a transnational Islamic movement driven by strong opposition towards Islamism and Salafism that originates from the regional conflict between different Islamic movements in Levant and then became a part of their defining discourse and global mission. Sufi discourses and practices are embedded in the movement but they are less explicit compared to the other Sufi movements in Europe. As Simon Sorgenfrei indicates in his report on Sufism in Malmo, Sweden, where a large al-Ahbash congregation Islamiska Fatwabyrån (Islamic Fatwa committee) is centered, out of 1000 active members, only 250 regularly participate in dhikr ceremonies (Sorgenfrei, 2016, 56-57). One of his interlocutors described their collective dhikr as more 'meditative' compared to traditionally 'ecstatic' Rifai'yya ceremonies.

I focus here on two local cases representing the Naqshabandiyya-Haqqaniyya and al-Ahbash respectively, namely 'Sufi Centre Rabbaniyya' in Berlin and Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Ukraine (SAMU) in order to find out how 'redemptive socialites' are constructed and localized within these particular Sufi communities in Central-Eastern Europe.

The 'Sufi Centre Rabbaniyya' (previously called Sufi Centre Berlin - European Centre for Inter-spiritual Encounters) existed in 2003 – 2014 in Berlin's borough Neukölln. It was opened by Shaykh Eşref Goekcimen in 2003 in Berlin's borough Neukölln, the biggest multiethnic district in the capital, which is a home for significant Muslim (predominantly Turkish) diaspora.

In October 2010 Shaykh Nazim declared the "servanthood to God" (Rabbaniyya) as a global solution for humanity, meaning that all believers shall unite as "servants of God" on this way which aims to abolish all divisions in Muslim community (ummah) worldwide. As a response to this declaration Shaykh Eşref ordered that the name of Sufi Centre Berlin be changed into Sufi Centre Rabbaniyya.

At the end of November 2014 it was officially closed by the order of the current Grand Shaykh Mehmet Adil. This was a transitional period when succession of leadership from Shaykh Nazim who passed away on May 2014 to his elder son Mehmed Adil took place. The official reason for the Centre closing was a complaint from the Turkish part of the community about the situation in the Sufi Centre Rabbaniyya, where many women were uncovered and mixed with men during Sufi gatherings. Shaykh Eşref moved to 'Sufiland' centre located in Eigeltingen-Reute, a town in the district of Konstanz in Baden-Württemberg.

Meanwhile German part of former Rabbaniyya community in Berlin changed its location to the Culture Centre "ufaFabrik" at Tempelhof district, where Sufi gatherings and dhikr are held on Fridays evenings. At the end of May 2016 in Berlin the 'Ottoman Sufi Center' was officially

inaugurated by Shaykh Bahauddin Adil, younger son of Shaykh Nazim. Shayk Eşref 's brother Ayberk is in charge of this community as Shaykh Bahauddin's representative (vakil). Turkish followers make the majority of this community.

The Sufi Centre Rabbaniyya was an example of the 'hybrid' Sufi community. Its 'inner circle' is composed of Shaykh Eşref, his brother Ayberk, and some senior members who are ethnic Turks. They are sometimes addressed by the followers as "Shaykhs" but do not possess this spiritual rank officially, nonetheless they are referred by the community members in private conversations as 'awliya' (saints). The "core membership" consisted of 50 followers (approximately half of them are women) who regularly attend Sufi gatherings and participate in the ceremonies on Friday and Saturday evenings. This group is ethnically mixed and includes born Muslims i.e. Turks, Kurds, Arabs, Kazakhs and African nationals, as well as German, Polish, Russian and American converts and could be regarded as an epitome of the Sufi-mediated transnational connectedness. Germans constitute the major ethnic group in the community. It also includes a number of 'awkward converts', those who converted not by ritual, but by behavior (Taylor 1999: 44). The Rabbaniyya faith community had a very inviting attitude towards newcomers and accepted everyone without any formal precondition and all visitors were allowed to attend the Sufi gatherings and to participate in the ceremonies.

During this transitional period it was possible to observe how particular charismatic patterns both general and locally constructed affected the Rabbaniyya community. Spiritual authority of the deceased Shaykh Nazim was still undisputed and he was referred by the followers as the one who directs and instructs them from al-Ghaib (unseen, hidden realm). To his authority as a founder the Sufi Centre Rabbaniyya appealed those followers who advocated retaining of the Rabbaniyya community. Some of them even claim his superiority over Shaykh Mehmet that was allegedly based on the later own words. One of the female followers described to me Shaykh Mehmet Adil as manifestation of Divine Majesty (al-Jalal) unlike Shaykh Nazim who was manifestation of Divine beauty (al-Jamal), explaining their different attitudes toward Islamic normativity. Those followers also have strong personal attachment to Shaykh Eşref as a charismatic leader who attracts people from different ethnic and social background.

Unlike Naqshbandiyya-Haqqaniyya that develops its networks in the Muslim-minority countries through the communities established around local dergah connected to the mother lodge in Lefke, al-Ahbash usually adopts institutional patterns typical for the particular region. In Eastern Europe al-Ahbash implements an institutional model of muftiate based on bureaucratic leadership typical for the former Russian Empire and its contemporary successor states (Račius and Zhelyazkova, 2017). The largest organization in Eastern Europe connected to al-Ahbash network is located in Ukraine, where its supporters had created one of the leading Islamic

organizations in the country, namely the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Ukraine (SAMU) established 1992.

The SAMU is a typical 'hub' institution that facilitates expanding of al-Ahbash network across the CIS countries i.e. Russian Federation, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan. The Chairman of the Spiritual Board of Muslims of Ukraine Mufti of Ukraine Shaykh Ahmed Tamim al-Ashari was born in 1956 in Lebanon. In 1976 he came to Ukraine, where he studied at the Faculty of Computing Technology of the Kiev Polytechnic Institute and graduated in1982 with a master's degree in IT[3]. He also received Islamic theological education at the Religious School 'Darul-Arqam bin Abil-Arqam' in Manbij, Syria in 1992 and at the Theological Faculty of Imam al-Ouza'i at the Arab University of Beirut, Lebanon.

al-Ahbash leaders and followers promote purist vision of Sufism rooted in their perceptions of Sunni orthodoxy and refuting controversial from their point of view doctrines. Following Shaykh 'Abd Allah they regard Sufism as a 'good innovation' (bid'ah hasanah). According to Shaykh Ahmed Tamim Sufism first and foremost means moral perfection, purity of life when someone's external aspects fully correspond to his innermost being[4]. This perfection is based on fear of God and acquired through supplementary acts of worship and good deeds and is an imitation of Muhammad[5]. He also distinguishes between the authentic and corrupted Sufism. The last one is based on the philosophical speculations about substantial unity between man and God.

Shaykh Ahmad at-Tamin al-Ashari claims to have ijazah from Rifai'ya silsila, as well as from Qadiriyya and two branches of Naqshbandiyya (Brylov 2009: 196). It is very difficult to trace his first Naqshbandiyya affiliation, the second one as it seems points to Pakistani Naqshandiyya-Mudjaddidiyya Shaykh Zulfiqar Ahmed who in his travelogue describes encounters with Shaykh Tamim during his visiting community in Kiev in 1992.

Böttcher argues that in small networks, a member has a direct link of loyalty with the network leader (Böttcher, 2003,49). However in the transnational networks this link is mediated by his local representatives with the exception of when ordinary members visiting the mater lodge where the Shaykh resides surrounded by his most devoted disciples.

Insofar as we consider the Haqqaniyya a 'hybrid' tariqah, community's structure is fluid and has little homogeneity, however following patterns of belonging can be traced: mubtadi/mubtadi'a (novice), murid/murida (advanced follower) and muhibb/muhibba (non-connected 'sympathizer') (Böttcher, 2006, 258). The most heterogeneous and weakly structured is the last group of followers.

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[3] Notably, the *al-Ahbash* leader in France Walid Dabbous is a professor of information technology. (Roy, Sfeir, 2007, 27). It could indicate overleaping of professional and religious networking within the al-Ahbash movement.
[4] Minaret TV program. 09.08.2012
[5] Minaret TV program. 29.01.2017

al-Ahbash is not a typical Sufi tariqah but an Islamic activist movement with a Sufi 'core'. I would argue that al-Ahbash's global network is held together by the normative religious discourse that appeals to 'Sunni orthodoxy' as it is expressed in the works and lectures of its founder. On the other hand, the collective identity of al-Ahbash is reinforced by the strong opposition towards other Sunni trends and groups that in turn strengthen their external lines of exclusion. Therefore, general charismatic appeal or foundational charisma doesn't directly affect social bounding in its particular communities and traditional authority and locally constructed charisma largely matter here.

Shaykh Tamim in the first instance positions himself as a leader of one of the biggest Islamic institution of Ukraine, so his role is not limited to leadership inside Sufi community associated with SAMU. When I asked him about his position in the Sufi circle, he replied: "I do not instruct anyone, I simply give tariqah". This approach doesn't imply individual step-by-step spiritual mentoring of disciples but connection (nisbah) with a tariqah trough the special spiritual practice (wird) in order to obtain blessings from the saints and righteous people (at-tabarruk bil-awliya' was-salihin).

Although Shaykh Tamim doesn't seek to be seen as murshid (spiritual mentor) and charismatic leader, whereas some rumors about his supernatural powers are circulating not only among his followers but between ordinary believers inside community as well. Shaykh Tamim also practices ruquah or spiritual healing and protection against jinns, evil eye and black magic. In some cases he also provided 'treatment' for non-Muslims i.e. a Christian women allegedly possessed by a jinn.

Sufi group associated with SAMU consist of its 'inner circle', composed of Shaykh Tamim's relatives and most trusted followers, who occupy official positions in the muftiat, converts, followers of other Sufi turuq (Naqshabandiyya, Shadhiliyya) of Northern Caucasus origin, who also attend collective dhikr that is being usually held on Thursday after the evening (maghrib) prayer. By claiming possessing ijazah in Naqshabandiyya and other Sufi turuq Shaykh Tamim consolidates his authority among those followers form the Dagestan and Chechnya who do not formally belong to Ri'fayya that is a mainstream tariqah within the network.

Membership in this Sufi group and even participation in collective dhikr is open only for those, who formally embrace Islam. The second precondition is having 'correct belief', therefore seeker firstly should have a month-long course of basic religious training with one of the officially appointed teachers and only after that he is allowed to enter Sufi circle. Its activities and rituals are usually hidden from the public eyes. Shaykh Tamim used to say: "We are Sufis and we want keep our secrets".

Conclusions

With gradual territorial expansion and institutionalization of these transnational networks, patterns of belonging based on direct link of loyalty with the network leader have been replaced by mediated connection through his local representatives. The ordinary members, with the exception of his relatives and other most senior and devoted members from the close circle, can visit their master only occasionally.

Social solidarity or 'redemptive sociality' (Pnina Werbner) in these communities is based on collective allegiance to charismatic Sufi Shaykh. Here I introduced a distinction between the general or founding charisma of silsila represented by its founders and spiritual leaders, and locally constructed charisma negotiated by local Sufi community and its spiritual leader.

As far as al-Ahbash isn't a typical Sufi tariqah, general charisma is less important for its particular communities and its social solidarity is based on recognition of the local leader's charisma in a first place by the 'Sufi core' inside community who is largely responsible for its management. I would argue that al-Ahbash in Ukraine gave birth to a trans-regional network that is held together by the normative religious discourse and recognition of Shaykh Tamim as an Islamic scholar and charismatic leader.

On the other hand, we can observe conflict around allegiance involving recognition/misrecognition of general and locally constructed charisma like in Berlin's Rabbaniyya community that undermine collective solidarity and can result in a split along the allegiance lines. The last point is that 'hybrid' communities that are more socially inclusive and thus heterogeneous became more prone to internal cleavages, than exclusive ones, whose collective identity is to a larger degree defined by the normative religious discourse.