A Sudanese Sufi Order in the Digital Age

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The spread of Sufi brotherhoods and ideas through the Web is the last stage of a course in progress in the Muslim world that lasted for the last 150 years, allowing the divulgation of a number of former esoteric Sufi teachings[1].

Carl Ernst has called this phenomenon *the divulgation of the secret.* The expansion of the press in the 19th century first, and of the recent advent of the Internet, has permitted the diffusion of Sufi thought on a much larger scale compared to the former handwritten production or the oral teachings given by a *shaykh* to his followers

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There are different kinds of websites referable to Sufi groups: from the accurate ones which describe in detail history and characteristics of single brotherhoods, to the *new age* ones, where Sufism is associated with the most diverse forms of esotericism.

The Sufi order I will deal with is the *Burhaniyya,* a Sudanese *tariqa* revitalised by *shaykh* Muhammad 'Uthman 'Abduhu (1904-1983), an expert in classical Sufi doctrines, who extended his order primarily within Sudan and Egypt. He owned a rich library and his two books, *Intisar awliya' al-Rahman 'ala awliya' al-Shaytan* («The victory of the Merciful's friends over Satan's friends»)*,* published in 1970, and *tabri'at al-dhimma fi nush al-umma wa tadhkirat uli al-albab li-l-sayr ila al-sawwab* («Purification of the conscience in admonishing the religious community and warning the talented ones toward rectitude»), published in 1974, contain references to the classical Sufi texts written by Ibn 'Arabi (1165-1240) and 'Abd al-Karim al-Jili (1366-1424) and Jalal al-Din Suyuti (1445-1505) some of the main figures of Arabic Sufism.

The *Burhaniyya Dusaqiyya Shadhiliyya* is a *tariqa* which in recent years has aroused the interest of some researchers for its ability to attract members of the Egyptian and Sudanese higher classes. This order was revitalised by a Sudanese, *shaykh* Muhammad 'Uthman 'Abduhu al-Burhani (1904-1983), and represents a case unique for its quick diffusion outside the national borders, particularly in Egypt, where today it is one of the most widespread Sufi orders.

On the doctrinal side its main characteristic is the integration of the teachings and of the *awrad* (litanies) of Abu l-Hasan al-Shadhili (d. 1258). Al-Shadhili a Moroccan master of great influence on Egyptian Sufism, together with Ibrahim al-Dusuqi (d. 1228), a *šhaykh* from the Delta Nile region, are considered among the four most important Sufi masters of the Egyptian tradition. On the social side it has provided an alternative for the

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many Egyptians who were dissatisfied by the fundamentalist movements and attracted by the tolerance and open-mindedness of this *tariqa*. After its growth in Egypt, where they counted about 3 million members during the Nasser period, it has been spreading in recent years into the neighbouring Arabic countries.

The *tariqa Burhaniyya* website, http://www.burhaniya.info/, was created in 1999. Its material is available in different languages: English, German, French, Italian, Dutch, Russian, Swedish, besides of course, Arabic.

The website is divided into different sections: *Stages of Religion*, *Sufism*, *Burhaniya*, *Gallery, Sound & Video*, *News*, *World of Burhaniya*, *Shop, Service.*

In the section titled *Stages of Religion* the traditional subdivision of religion into *islam*, *iman* and *ihsan* is presented. In the section *Burhaniya* one can find the *silsila*, the spiritual chain of the *tariqa* itself. It is an essential element because it legitimates the order, pointing out its link with the Sufi tradition, back to the Prophet.

On the websites of all the orders that refer to a traditional spiritual teaching, a section like this is present, and it is fundamental to distinguish these websites from those which have a syncretistic character.

In this section *shaykh* Muhammad 'Uthman's biography is quoted, through some of the main episodes of his spiritual mission. One may find esoteric contents, such as references to the *shaykh*'s visions and miracles. Material that until a few years ago had been restricted to a narrow circle of disciples is now available to everybody, albeit in limited quantity. In the section titled *Sound & Video* it is possible to download files and *hadhrat*, while

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in *News* one may find the dates of the *mawlid* of the most important Sufi saints, as well as the speeches made on the occasion of the *mawlid* celebrated in Khartoum in honour of *shaykh* Muhammad 'Uthman.

Shop is the most strictly propagandistic section. Here you can buy *qasa'id* compact discs and videos.

An important feature of this website is that its contents in the Arabic version are not paralleled in the other languages.

For example the section titled *Sirat al-shaykh* ("Life of the shaykh") is available only in Arabic. Here you can find the extracts of some of the books which collect the transcriptions of *shaykh* Muhammad 'Uthman's oral teachings. Before their publication, just a few years ago, his lessons had been available only through handwritten documents or recorded material.

The comparison of the contents in the different languages points out the different users targeted. In fact the Arabic version, richer and more detailed than the other ones, deals with topics which are well-known/familiar to Sufi Internet users, like the lawfulness of the *inshad*, the chanting of sacred poems about the Prophet, the recitation of the *award* (collections of litanies) specific to Sufi orders, and the *sibha* (the rosary).

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Sufism, whose origin is traced back to some Koran verses (VII: 205; XXIX: 45), is defined as "*the inner dimension of Islam*" . The possibility of practising Sufism even in western countries is underlined as a place where the disciples of contemporary brotherhoods should fully integrate. Great emphasis is placed on the fact that the followers of the *Burhaniyya* order do not have to wear particular clothes that render them distinguishable from other people. This aspect makes the *Burhaniyya* different from the other orders that have spread in western countries in the last few decades, such as the Cypriot *Haqqaniyya Naqshbandiyya* whose followers wear green turbans and long cloaks, traditional Turkish clothes. In this section, emphasis is also placed on the open-minded attitude of this order towards women.

In fact in Germany, the western country where this brotherhood is most widespread, half of its members are women. In the same country the current *shaykh* of *Burhaniyya*, the grandson of its founder, attended university and now lives with his wife, a German disciple of the order.

The *Burhaniyya* order, taking advantage of the new technologies, is attempting to create an international network within which its members can be kept up to date regarding the activities of the brotherhood and organise their participation in its most important celebrations. The main celebration, held in Khartoum every April for the *mawlid* in honour of *shaykh* Muhammad 'Uthman, attracts members of the *Burhaniyya* from all over the world. Another important

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event takes place in summer in Schnede, near Hamburg, where a large country house is used as a *zawiya* (sufi lodge). This incidentally is the largest in Europe.

It is on occasion for the Burhani who live in Europe, to meet their *shaykh*, to attend lectures on Sufism, to share community life for a few days with the disciples coming with their families from other countries. It also offers an opportunity to perform the ritual prayers together and to take part in the crowded *hadhrat*.

This global dimension is evident on the *Burhaniyya*'s website, as well, where its open-minded and transnational character is stressed even more than its Sudanese origins. By emphasising that the geographical element loses importance when the religious aspect is dominant. In fact all *murid*s are united, beyond their ethnical or national origins, by the love they bear for their *shaykh* and the specific ritual practice he advises to them.

Notes

1. Carl Ernst, 2003. "Il sufismo nel mondo musulmano contemporaneo: 'la divulgazione del segreto'", in *Sufismo e confraternite nell'islam contemporaneo: Il difficile equilibrio tra mistica e politica*, edited by Marietta Stepanyants (Torino: Edizioni della Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, 2003), 301-324. See also Carl Ernst, "Ideological and Technological Transformations of Contemporary Sufis", in *Muslim Networks: Medium, Metaphor, and Method*, edited by Miriam Cooke and Bruce B. Lawrence. Islamic Civilization and Muslim Networks. Series 2. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 224-246.