The impact of Sufism on social life in Algeria during the Ottoman era

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Abstract

This study addresses the phenomenon of Sufism, focusing on how it shifted from the religious and political framework, which many researchers confined it to, to a social and spiritual one, with an emphasis on the contributions of the Sufis to the lives of Algerians. Sufism in Algeria is considered a "state within a state," representing a way of life and a social method for many individuals and communities. Sufi orders were used as a means of resolving conflicts and disputes between individuals, groups, clans, and tribes, contributing to the promotion of social peace. Moreover, the zawiyas played an important social role by providing shelter for wayfarers and the needy, helping to address issues of poverty and unemployment. They also contributed to preserving the Arab-Islamic identity by educating new generations. These Sufi institutions made Sufism an integral part of cultural and political life in Algeria during the Ottoman period. Due to the importance of this phenomenon, the Ottoman authorities worked to get closer to the Sufis and win their loyalty, supporting them and helping them build zawiyas and ribats to solidify their relationship and ensure political and social stability in the country.

Keywords: social life, Sufism phenomenon, Ottoman Algeria, endowments, zawiyas in Algeria.

1. Introduction:

The phenomenon of Sufism is one of the social and religious phenomena that left a clear mark on the history of Algeria, especially during the Ottoman period. Sufism became an essential part of the daily life of Algerian communities, where its impact extended beyond the religious aspect to include social, cultural, and political dimensions Sufi orders are characterized by flexibility and the ability to adapt to various social conditions, which allowed them to contribute to resolving conflicts and uniting different tribes and clans Sufi zawiyas also played an important role in strengthening and preserving the Arab-Islamic identity by educating new generations and providing shelter for the needy and the poor Additionally, the zawiyas were considered social and cultural institutions that contributed to providing social and economic support for individuals in the community. The Ottoman authorities recognized the importance of this phenomenon, so they worked to win the

loyalty of the Sufis by supporting them in building zawiyas and ribats. This study aims at exploring the impact of Sufism on social life in Algeria during the Ottoman period and how it contributed to shaping the Algerian identity.

Sufism has terms that are expressed through words and phrases, each with its own specific meanings What a group agrees upon in terms of terminology can only be fully understood by those who have a close knowledge and understanding of Sufism. A reader might come across a Sufi book or letter and encounter words whose meanings are unclear to them, causing confusion and leading them astray. Furthermore , due to their lack of knowledge, they are unable to grasp the true essence of these terms, and thus cannot reach the meaning that would make them familiar with the way of the Sufi order[1].

Many people talk about the zawiyas and have developed the idea that the zawiyas are linked to superstitions, ignorance, and the practice of rituals and innovations performed under the guise of religion, in the name of noble lineage, miracles, and blessings Scholars and historians have disagreed about the concept of Sufism, its reality, and the origin of this description. However, there are some indications that point to the concept of Sufism.

2.Linguistically:

 there is considerable disagreement about this term Some say it is derived from "suf," meaning the wool that is found on the skin of sheep[2]This is because the Sufis differed from people in wearing luxurious clothes; they wore wool as an expression of austerity and renunciation[3].

From the above, it is clear that there is a difference in the term "Sufism" It has been stated that there is no such word in Arabic in terms of derivation or analogy. What confirms this is the statement of al-Qushayri al-Naysaburi, who said that the term became associated with a group of people It is said that someone is a "Sufi" and the plural form is "Sufis" Those who adopt this way are called "mutasawwifah" (Sufis), in the plural form "mutasawwifah" Therefore, it becomes clear that it is like a title Just as someone who wears a shirt is called a "shirt-wearer," so too is someone who wears wool called a "Sufi" However, the Sufis were not exclusively defined by wearing wool[4].

It is said that the term "Sufi" is attributed to the first row in prayer, while others claim it is derived from the word "sifah," which refers to a corner in the back of the Prophet's mosque where the poor used to gather Some have described it as a Greek word "Sophia," which means divine wisdom, and "Sophos," meaning love of wisdom[5].

As a result of these origins, it is said that the correct terms are "Sufi," "Safai," or "Safawi," and not "Safawi" Therefore, these are weak statements[6].

3.Sufism in terminology:

According to Ruwaym, Sufism is based on three qualities: adherence to poverty and dependence, realization through giving and selflessness, and abandoning desire and personal choice[7].

The Sufis are a group of ascetics and worshippers who subdue the body and elevate the soul to connect with God From them, various sects have emerged[8]It is said that Sufism is the abandonment of all base qualities and the adoption of virtuous ones .It is also said to be adhering to the outward and inward observance of Islamic etiquette Some say it is the surrender of the soul to God as He wills Others describe it as holding fast to poverty and humility, realizing through selflessness and giving, and abandoning seeking and testing Some define it as dedicating oneself to worship, seeking what is best, and striving for excellence[9].

When Junayd was asked about Sufism, he said: "It is to be with God Almighty without any attachment, to own nothing and to be owned by nothing."
Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani said: "Sufism is being truthful with the Truth (God) and having good character with the Creator."
Ma'ruf al-Karkhi said: "Sufism is grasping the truths and despairing of what is in the hands of creation"[10].

Due to this difference, Abu al-Fath al-Busti composed the following verses:

"People disputed over the term 'Sufi' and differed about it,
They assumed it was derived from 'wool.'
But I do not grant this name except to a youth,

Pure and sincere, thus he is called a Sufi"[11].

From the above, it becomes clear that Sufism is not a sectarian group like Sunnism or Shiism, but rather a spiritual path that spread among the people Sufism has several characteristics, including solitude, tranquility, love for others, purification of the heart and soul, and sincerity in servitude to God[12].

All definitions of Sufism suggest that it is the result of personal experiences, which vary from one Sufi to another Therefore, it is classified into two areas: knowledge and practice As for its definition in terms of knowledge, it is the knowledge of principles that guides the righteousness of the heart and all the senses; it is the path of spiritual conduct In terms of practice, it involves adhering to the obligatory commands, avoiding prohibitions, and limiting oneself to the necessities of what is permissible This is the realm of worship[13].

Sufism has two qualities: uprightness with God Almighty and serenity with creation Whoever is upright with God and treats people with good character, exercising patience and forbearance, is a Sufi Uprightness means sacrificing one's own desires for the sake of God's command Good character with people means not imposing your own desires on others, but rather accommodating their needs, as long as they do not contradict Islamic law[14].

4. Evolution of Sufism:

Since the guidance of Islam, Muslims were ascetic worshippers who did not distinguish themselves by their clothing or any special insignia, and they remained united in speech and action. However, by the end of the second century, a group of ascetics emerged under the name of the Sufis. They developed their own customs and manners that set them apart from

the general Muslim community New sayings, actions, and acts of worship arose among them that were not previously known to the broader Muslim population. As a result, many people began to follow them and were influenced by their words and deeds[15].

Sufism initially emerged as an individual practice, but over time it became a requirement, transforming into a path of spiritual discipline . It then evolved further, focusing on documenting the sayings of the spiritual masters, their journeys, and enumerating their miracles The early stages involved intellectuals and religious figures who followed the prophetic tradition Later, it developed into a popular form of Sufism, centered on spiritual devotion, visiting saints and shrines, and seeking closeness to them through offerings. As a result, there was an increase in domes, zawiyas, and Sufi orders, particularly in rural areas where official authority was absent Sufism thus became a collective practice, spreading among the general public and gaining the loyalty of the authorities[16].

As a result of these movements, there emerged groups of followers who remained with the shaykh, guiding, instructing, and disciplining them. This led to the creation of several Sufi orders such as the Qadiriyya, Shadhiliyya, Ahmadiyya, and others Despite differences in their origins and methods, these orders all share the common goal of guiding people, directing them, and helping them find the right path[17].

The life of the disciple was limited to receiving the litanies of the order and performing rituals such as the gathering (ḥaḍrah), Sufi listening (sama'), chanting, and recounting the miracles of the saints. This was in contrast to their earlier practice of striving to purify the soul and acquiring religious knowledge Over time, each Sufi order adopted its own distinctive banner, either red or green[18].

Despite the slogans of the founders of Sufi orders, which emphasized following the Book of God and the Sunnah of the Prophet, they did not hesitate to spread teachings that were far removed from the religion They exploited the common people and used Sufism as a means for bribery, corruption, and the spread of innovations. They also profited by practicing rituals that deviated from the true spirit of Islam[19]Sufism gradually transformed into charlatanism, mysticism, and seeking intercession at tombs One historian mentions that the religious practices of the Murabitun in Algeria shifted toward paganism[20].

The Ottoman era was marked by the widespread spread of Sufism, where knowledge, ignorance, and superstitions blended, influencing and directing social life in unprecedented ways Since the 15th century, the common people embraced Sufism, largely due to the services provided by the zawiyas to the community, their popular discourse, and the simplification of knowledge to attract followers. As a result, the geographical expansion of the zawiyas led to a loss of intellectual depth, leaving the intellectual life in a state of stagnation and scientific decline[21].

As mentioned earlier, it is clear that Sufism in Algeria during the Ottoman period was an extension of the Islamic movements that emerged in the 10th century Hijri, initiated by prominent Sufi figures. Therefore, the Sufi movement, both within the Islamic world and in the Maghreb, had flourished even before the Ottomans arrived in Algeria[22].

5.History of Sufism in Algeria:

Most historians believe that it is difficult to pinpoint the exact beginning of Sufism in the Islamic Maghreb. They argue that Sufism appeared during the Islamic conquests and became more defined with the travels, scholars, writings, and trade Among the earliest figures who spread Sufism in Algeria were Sheikh Abdul Salam al-Tunisi and Abu Madian al-Gawthi. One of the social reasons that contributed to its spread was the growing extravagance and luxury due to vast wealth, alongside the decline in religious and moral values[23].

The Sufi orders or Sufism, which was a general social and civilizational phenomenon in the Islamic society, had preceded the Ottomans in Algeria The ideas of Ibn Arabi had spread there before the Ottomans, in addition to those of Sheikh Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani Sufism became widespread in Algeria thanks to the influence of figures such as Abdul Rahman al-Thaalibi, Muhammad bin Yusuf al-Sanusi, Ahmad Zarruq, and others[24].

No one can deny that the Quranic zawiyas (Sufi centers) represent an important historical chapter in Algeria and have played a significant role in spreading religious and cultural awareness in Algerian society Algeria did not know the zawiyas until after the 11th century The oldest zawiya established in Algeria was the Zawiya of Sheikh Saada, located near Touggourt in the 13th century Afterward, zawiyas spread throughout the country[25].

According to the narration of Abu Madian Shaib, he said: "This path of ours we received from Abu Yazid, through his chain of transmission from Junayd, from Sari al-Saqti, from Habib al-Ajami, from Hasan al-Basri, from Ali (may Allah be pleased with them), from the Prophet (peace be upon him), from Jibril (Gabriel), from the Lord of the worlds"[26].

It is worth noting that Sufism in Algeria took the form of a clear social phenomenon, and its influence was so strong. Several factors contributed to this, the most important of which was the presence of Sufi establishments such as zawiyas and palaces in both urban and rural areas. These establishments played a variety of social, educational, and religious roles, nurturing the soul and manifesting their effects on the individual's behavior with all people, including those closest to him[27].

One of the main tasks of the Sufi orders was to work towards social unity, a goal to which they dedicated all their material and human resources. They aimed to bring unity among the members of society, regardless of their dialects, languages, social ranks, or occupations, in order to establish a strong social bond that sought to eliminate social disparities. This approach brought together the rich and the poor, the scholars and the illiterate, placing them all in the same social sphere. Furthermore, all the zawiyas across different regions united in their efforts to reconcile those in conflict. The spiritual status of the shaykh in society was significant For example, the family of the noble Sidi Hamu Belhaj occupies an important place among the Tuat families, due to the esteemed position of the sharifs in Tuat, as well as the social role they played[28].

In this regard, the zawiyas served as a refuge for the people to resolve their disputes. It is mentioned that the zawiyas were considered centers for judicial matters, specializing in civil

and criminal cases, which were resolved by the shaykh due to his esteemed scientific and social status, as well as his reputation for justice and wisdom The resolution could be through mutual agreement, compensation, or ransom, particularly in matters such as inheritance disputes or crimes, with clans sometimes intervening for vengeance. The zawiyas also functioned as venues for conducting marriage contracts and organizing collective marriage assistance[29].

Social welfare, which involved providing shelter and food for the poor and guests, as well as taking care of widows, orphans, and travelers[30].

The Sufi zawiyas practiced this role and continue to do so in many areas This is not exclusive to Algerian zawiyas, as zawiyas, regardless of their name or location in the world, have always taken care of this aspect. This social function had a significant impact in attracting many people to the Sufi orders, as they were provided with food and shelter, along with the spiritual practices that possess a special attraction. As a result, those being cared for often became followers, whether consciously or unconsciously[31].

Dr Abdul Latif Al-Shazli mentioned the long-standing relationship between Sufism and social solidarity, stating that the act of providing food and shelter is a fundamental element in the Sufi system. It is a voluntary, mutual solidarity system based on reciprocal treatment, which ensures that every traveler among the Sufis can benefit from hospitality wherever they go. This role is well-known and widespread. The zawiyas receive all kinds of people, even the mentally ill, to care for them or employ them in the many tasks of the zawiya, or to eventually have them become followers of the specific Sufi order to which the zawiya belongs[32].

In addition to education, the zawiyas provided the followers and devotees with religious rituals and prayers that were believed to bring happiness in both this world and the hereafter Through this, the student gains patience, asceticism, respect for others, refinement of morals, and punctuality[33].

The zawiyas relied on donations, endowments, zakat funds, and gifts offered by visitors seeking blessings from the shrine. They also designated land whose proceeds were allocated to the zawiya. This land was typically situated around the zawiya, worked by its members, and was considered sacred, with no one daring to encroach upon it[34].

6. The impact of zawiyas and Sufis on social life in Algeria:

The architecture of the zawiyas and their construction included facilities and structures that served the community and met its needs. There was a designated area for the memorization and recitation of the Qur'an, as well as for performing the prayer, which served as the zawiya's mosque. Another area was dedicated to study, in addition to a guesthouse, rooms for accommodating students, and a building to receive visitors and guests Close by, there were necessary services such as a kitchen, stables, storage for provisions, a mill for grinding grain, an oil press, and others[35].

Each facility in the zawiya had a specific role. One of the most important activities carried out by the zawiyas was providing food Every Friday night, and during special occasions, food was distributed to the poor and needy Often, donors would stipulate that a portion of their endowments be dedicated to feeding and distributing bread to the poor[36] Each year, couscous with meat is prepared to celebrate the Prophet's birthday or to mediate peace between individuals or tribes. The zawiya often took on the role of arbitrating disputes, imposing what they deemed a fair resolution. In many cases, it acted as a substitute for the judge in settling conflicts over authority. This function played a significant role in maintaining social stability and security, putting an end to feuds and civil wars, and preventing bloodshed Feasts were also organized to commemorate the birth or death of a righteous saint[37].

The zawiyas played a significant role in distributing alms to the poor, with these charitable acts ranging from giving direct money to providing food weekly or during special occasions Waqfs (endowments) played a key role in funding the zawiyas for their charitable work As a result, the zawiyas allocated a portion of their income for acts of charity. This practice became widespread among the poor, who would ask for charity in the name of a righteous saint, often appealing to people's compassion with such expressions[38].

The zawiyas also played a role in celebrating occasions and carrying out various activities, often seizing the opportunity to engage in charitable work, particularly through alms and communal feeding. These events were marked by the recitation of poems and praises, with significant funds being allocated for such celebrations, as well as the provision of cooking supplies for the meals. Regarding shelter, the zawiyas took on the responsibility of addressing the accommodation needs of the poor and the homeless They built refuges, with one section designated for poor students and travelers, and another for grave diggers and visitors. These zawiyas were often referred to as "Dar al-Dhiyafah" (House of Guests) and also "Dar al-Karamah" (House of Honor)[39].

It is undeniable that the zawiya institution played a significant role in preserving Islamic identity by adopting a unified method of education across all the zawiyas, known as the method of "loah, qalam, and diwan" (tablet, pen, and ink). This system focused on teaching through rhymes and memorizing texts, ensuring the structured acquisition of knowledge and skills One of the scholars from the Shinqit region praised the traditional zawiya method with the following verse:

"O my son, perfect your tablet,
The tablet is the origin, while gold and wealth are transient
The origin of the sons of the zawiyas is always the tablet,
If it is abandoned, there is no honor or dignity
My friend, waste not your life on what is fleeting,
To be stingy with time is to be disgraceful, and if you find it, use it well"[40].

During the Ottoman period, Algerian society was in a state of need and poverty, with deteriorating conditions. Superstition spread among some who claimed to follow Sufism The spread of innovations, belief in superstitions, and the dominance of Sufi orders led to a

backlash from a group of Muslim scholars and Sunni Salafis. They were deeply troubled by the prevailing situation, the deterioration of social life, and the growing misconceptions and deviation towards ignorance. These scholars became the pioneers of the religious, moral, and social reform movement in Algeria, which aimed to combat the spread of such beliefs. As people turned to Sufis and religious leaders for guidance, divination, and assistance, many social beliefs and practices gained popularity, contributing to the widespread influence of superstitions in society[41].

Some believed that the sky rejoiced or mourned for certain individuals. It is reported that when a righteous person passed away, extraordinary events occurred, such as thunder, strong winds, and the sky darkening, which was interpreted as the sky mourning their loss. These occurrences were seen as signs of the saint's elevated status. The miracles attributed to the saints were often considered comparable to the miracles of the prophets. Followers would claim that such miraculous events were a result of their adherence to the path of the prophets[42].

The general public believed that the saint (wali) was exempt from religious obligations, thinking that they could do whatever was forbidden and be relieved from what was commanded. This belief led to moral corruption, as some individuals started to engage in sinful behavior, justifying it as a form of divine grace or miracles. Their actions were often misunderstood or excused by others, who saw their misdeeds as part of their saintly status When these individuals appeared in the markets, crowds of people would flock to them, kissing their hands and feet, believing that such actions would bring them blessings[43].

Sufism in the Maghreb saw significant development during the 16th century AH, with a large number of the general public and disciples joining Sufi orders The interest in Sufism grew, and it became a widespread phenomenon that attracted various social groups and individuals from different cultural backgrounds. This led to the spread of Sufism within the middle layers of society[44].

One of the positive aspects of Sufi orders was the establishment of a sense of love, camaraderie, and companionship among the members of the same order. It helped bridge the gap between different social classes, as the rich would sit alongside the poor, and the learned would share knowledge with the unlettered in gatherings of study, dhikr (remembrance of God), and Sufi listening sessions Specific terms became part of their language: the greatest prayer or practice was called "Wazifa," a fellow disciple was referred to as "Akhouna" (our brother), and the speaker would be called "Al-Faqir" (the poor one) If someone asked a favor from another, it was customary to begin the request with "Yes, my master" The leader of the gathering was called "Al-Muqaddam" (the appointed one) While some of these terms are still used today, others have faded over time[45].

The zawiyas (Sufi lodges) in the Islamic world played significant educational and religious roles, making a substantial contribution to the spread of the Qur'an through teaching, memorization, and study. They also had a profound impact on the upbringing of the youth, instilling religious values and ethics. The design and structure of these zawiyas provide a comprehensive understanding of the functions they served Although the specifics of their

layout and components varied from country to country, and from region to region, they all shared the same fundamental objectives for which they were established[46].

Although Sufism in Algeria contributed to spreading and preserving religious teachings through mosques and zawiyas, which became beacons of light throughout Algeria, it is important to acknowledge the prominent role played by Sufi orders Their leadership, exemplified by the efforts of their sheikhs, served as a model of commitment to virtues, focusing on both social and religious life They emphasized a balance between knowledge and practice, and called for the purification of Sufi practices from innovations and superstitions However, some Sufi orders deviated from the right path, contributing to the destruction of society rather than its development Therefore, it can be said that for Sufism to remain an effective phenomenon, it must find a balance between excess and neglect[47].

7. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the most notable results regarding the position of Sufism in Ottoman Algeria are:

- The status enjoyed by the Sufis was not the result of political power but rather stemmed from their own qualities and Sufi philosophy, such as humility and renunciation of worldly life.
- The care provided for the community, offering protection to the public, and alleviating the burden of poverty through activities like feeding, sheltering, and giving alms.
- The zawiyas were able to participate in social welfare, acting as charitable institutions through the endowment of income from religious endowments, particularly in the absence of a strong state presence.
- Sufism had a strong connection with society, with the zawiyas playing a positive role in education, reducing class distinctions, preserving libraries of knowledge in various fields, and fostering Islamic brotherhood, particularly among the tribes of the Algerian highlands Additionally, they played a crucial role in promoting moral guidance and spiritual leadership, spreading and memorizing the Qur'an, and combating ignorance[48].

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