Egypt

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Saints and Sheikhs in Modern Egypt

Belief in the existence and powers of 'saints' or 'friend of God' (*wali,* pl. *awliya*) is pervasive throughout the Muslim world. Such individuals are often associated with Sufism, or Islamic mysticism, though the notion of human perfection probably developed first among the Shiᶜa.

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According to some branches of the Shiᶜa, the imams inherited from the Prophet a spark of divine light granting them a perfection and sinlessness denied to ordinary human beings. The perfection of the saints in Sunni Islam is also a divine grace, and is often also associated with putative inheritance from the Prophet, though it usually also derives from the arduous disciplines of self-denial and devotion that are peculiar to the Sufi way. A true Sufi sheikh, or spiritual master, should be a friend of God, one who by virtue of his closeness to God may see by the light of God what no ordinary person can see, and who is therefore qualified to give each disciple the discipline and instruction that befits him or her. Nonetheless, not all those who are recognized as saints are followers of the Sufi path, and not all those who function as sheikhs are commonly recognized as saints.

Since there is no body in Islam authorized to canonize saints, as there is in Catholicism, the process by which sainthood is recognized is entirely informal and necessarily a matter of contention. Typically, disciples regard their masters not only as saints, but usually as the greatest of all saints, the *qutb* (axis) or *ghawth* (help). Nonetheless, the problem of unqualified individuals being granted a certificate to function as Sufi sheikhs has been broadly recognized by Sufis themselves. So who is a saint, and how is he or she recognized?

The qualities typically deemed mandatory for saints include piety, observance of the Shariᶜa, knowledge of God, and the performance of miracles – typically miracles of knowledge, such as the ability to 'read hearts' and to communicate mind-to-mind with other saints or one's own disciples, breaking through barriers of time and space, and providing spectacular assistance to those in need. Yet this inventory of attributes is deceiving, for the experts on Muslim sainthood also tell us that sainthood (*wilaya*) is by definition hidden among God's creatures, especially the saints of the highest rank. So the person who is serving tea to the guests may in fact be of a higher spiritual rank than the sheikh who is revered by his disciples. There is hierarchy among saints, with a diversity of spiritual types, habits and functions. The q*utb*, or axis, is said to be hidden and largely unrecognized. Even a child might be a saint. In Cairo there is a tomb for a boy who, after his death, identified himself as a saint by means of a dream given to a person who had never known him. Nonetheless, the man built a shrine over the place where the dead boy was buried, and his tomb is visited by people seeking his *baraka*.

Some saints ought not to be taken as sheikhs at all. These include the people of *jadhb*, the *majadhib*, who are violently 'attracted' to God, leaving their minds bewildered by the shock of sudden mystical illumination and incapable of carrying out legal obligations. Such people indeed have a sound spiritual state with God, but should not be followed or imitated. An Egyptian sheikh, Ahmad Radwan (d. 1967), warned his followers not to ask the *majadhib* to pray for them, 'because they will pray that you have poverty and illness, since by these God makes the Muslims enter paradise.'[1] Nonetheless, a Sudanese sheikh living in Cairo said that the *majadhib* serve as God's policemen; though they appear to engage in bizarre and meaningless behaviour, they report any misbehaviour among the Sufis to the heavenly court.[2] Often those with mental illness are perceived as *majadhib*, and their presence is seen as a blessing, a notion that has caused some outsiders to ridicule the Sufis, but which allows such individuals to be accepted into society, rather than shunned as they are in the West.

Sufi writings on sainthood assure us that saints exist in all countries and will continue to exist as long as the world exists; indeed, they are essential for the well-being of the world. The Sufi disciple can derive benefit from nothing more than sitting at the feet of a 'knower' (ᶜ*arif*, often translated as 'gnostic'), one who knows God and who knows what medicine will successfully heal the disciple's spirit. This benefit is not limited to explicit teaching, for Ahmad Radwan says that the gnostics 'pour out the bounty of God which He has bestowed upon them onto those who sit with them in the assembly'.[3] In modern and late medieval Sufism, Sufis become saints at least partly by inheriting the *asrar* – spritual essences or 'secrets' – of their masters. This occurs upon the latter's death. Appointment as sheikh in theory ought to follow this inheritance, but clearly this is not always the case. In Egypt, the son of a sheikh inherits the position of his father, which is not seen as a corrupt practice, as often the physical heir is also the spiritual heir. But daughters may inherit as well as sons, though Egypt's Supreme Council of Sufi Orders does not recognize the membership of women in the Orders, much less their leadership. There is also no guarantee that the son of a sheikh will follow his father's inclinations or inherit the full measure of his father's gifts, which may be distributed among a number of the latter's disciples.

Throughout the Muslim world, the presence of saints has been a source of comfort to people. The mere presence of a saint's tomb in the neighbourhood is thought to confer blessings, protection and prosperity. This is a theme that was touchingly interpreted in a novelette written in 1944 by Yahya Haqqi, describing the devotions of the Egyptians to the shrine of the Prophet's granddaughter, Sayyida Zeinab.[4] The oil from a lamp in the saint's shrine was thought to have curative powers, especially for eye diseases. The protagonist, Ismaᶜil, is raised near the shrine. His father sacrificially sends his son to England for medical training, where he becomes an ophthalmologist. When he returns to Egypt he scorns what he now regards as the ignorant superstition of his family and countrymen who venerate Sayyida Zeinab and employ oil from the saint's lamp to try to heal the eyes of his cousin, Fatima. Ismaᶜil tries in vain to heal his cousin using modern Western techniques, and in desperation turns again to the oil of the saint's lamp, which, combined with Western techniques, successfully heals his cousin's affliction. The book beautifully evokes the reverence of the Egyptians for the saint as well as the need for Westernized youth to find their roots in faith while learning the science of the West.

In Egypt, there are occasional newspaper editorials condemning the 'superstition' of the people that drives them to venerate the saints, but visitors to the tombs include the well-educated and politically powerful. The saints are deeply loved and celebrated in annual festivities, the *mawlids* (locally called *moulids*), that sometimes draw pilgrims from very distance provinces. The *moulids* include songs, the performance of *dhikr* (rituals of 'remembrance' of God) and hospitality as well as the compulsory visits to the tombs of the honoured saint. People may be recognized as saints in their lifetimes, and a few even had *moulids* celebrated for them before their deaths. Parents bring their children's school books to living saints so they will lay their hands on them and bless them. Former President Gamal Abdul Nasser constructed a railway station near the remote retreat of Ahmad Radwan in Upper Egypt and sought his advice on political matters. This relationship was not without controversy for both Nasserites and Sufis,[5] but illustrates the continuing relevance of such individuals to public affairs. One of Radwan's disciples, Sheikh ᶜIzz al-ᶜArab al-Hawari, is proud to have a letter from the current President, Husni Mubarak, thanking him for his role in bringing about reconciliation between Muslims and Christians in the Imbaba district of Cairo after fighting broke out between the two communities in 1991.[6] Regardless of the efforts of reformers of both fundamentalist and modernist persuasion to undermine Sufism and faith in saints, belief in the powers and moral authority of God's friends remains deeply rooted among the people. ✦

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Notes

1. Ahmad Radwan (1986), *Al-Nafahat al-rabbaniyya*, 3rd ed. Kom Ombo, Egypt: Yusuf Ja'Lus, pp.242–243.
2. Valerie J. Hoffman (1995), *Sufism, Mystics and Saints in Modern Egypt*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, p. 209. An extended discussion of *jadhb* and *majadhib* is on pp. 208–13.
3. *Nafahat*, p. 39.
4. *Qandil Umm Hashim*, translated by M.M. Badawi as *The Saint's Lamp*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1973.
5. Hoffman, *Sufism, Mystics and Saints in Modern Egypt*, pp. 266–7.
6. Personal communication. Sheikh 'Izz's life is described in *Sufism, Mystics and Saints in Modern Egypt*, pp. 270 – 5.