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Sufi Festivals as a Social Movement: Spirituality, Aesthetics, and Politics

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Abstract

This article analyses the emergence of a transnational network of Sufis, composed of intellectuals, artists, politicians, and religious authorities, which emerged thanks to the cultural festivals in Morocco and later in France. It will show that the approach adopted by social movement theory is particularly effective in describing this Sufi network, connected by a collective identity and a political-cultural struggle. Unlike other forms of transnational network based on ethnic ties and/or imagined communities, this network focuses on Sufism, conceptualised as a heritage meant for all humankind, addressing both Muslim and non-Muslim publics. This network presents itself as a moralising force capable of tacking Islamophobia, Islamism, and some negative trends in globalisation and Western modernity.

Keywords: Sufism; Islam; network; social movement.

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1 Social Movements and Contemporary Sufism

Despite a long debate that started in the 1970s and several calls for collaboration, the relationship between social movement studies and religious studies is still problematic (Zald, 1982; Zald & McCarthy, 1987; Hannigan, 1991; Kniss & Burns, 2004). Alain Touraine distinguished these two fields by identifying religious movements as anti-movements, "often closer to waiting for the Day of Judgement than to strategy and negotiation" (1981, p. 98). Similarly, Alberto Melucci considered religious movements to be characterised by "regressive utopia[s]" (1992, p. 59) focused on the revivification of a glorious past rather than on tackling the issues of contemporary societies.

Other scholars have explored the boundaries between social movements and religious phenomena, implying the importance of intermingling social movement theories with the sociology of religion. This interdisciplinary approach favours treating (religious) values and political action not as separate exogenous causes, but as interlaced variables (Hannigan, 1991; Emirbayer & Goodwin, 1994; Kniss & Burns, 2004).

Within the frame of Islamic studies, social movement theories and methodologies have been mainly applied to describing Islamist and Salafist movements in opposition to Western modernity and secular states (Mandaville, 2011; Wiktorowicz, 2012). Another path has been taken by Asef Bayat, following Melucci's approach (Melucci, 1989, 1992), by showing social change in everyday life and in cultural production (Bayat, 2005, 2013a, 2013b). Bayat's social change did not fit within the mainstream categories of Islamism, secularism, and liberalism; in fact the protagonists of his research inhabited different social, political and religious spheres, invoking both secular and religious narratives.

To my knowledge, Sufism — the spiritual dimension of Islam — has never been studied with the social movement approach. This is probably due to the focus on the main social manifestation of Sufism — the Sufi order (*ṭarīqa* in Arabic, *ṭuruq* plural), which has a rich and complex history dating from the 12th century (Trimingham, 1971; Veinstein & Popovic, 1996; Green, 2012). A Sufi order implies specific organisational structures, rituals, hierarchies and practices, but, as has been argued, Sufi orders are shapeshifting phenomena that change according to the socio-historical context (Sedgwick, 2000).

Furthermore, Sufism cannot be identified exclusively with the Sufi order; in fact, several Sufi phenomena have crossed over from the different forms of the *ṭarīqa* in contemporary societies, becoming public devotional practices (Howe, 2019), embodying feminist and LGBTQ claims (Piraino & Zambelli, 2018; Kugle, 2011; Shaikh, 2012), and merging with forms of contemporary popular culture such as rap (Bourderionnet, 2011; Brigaglia, 2019).

Since the later part of the 20th century, Sufism has been experiencing a period of renewal; new charismatic leaders have energised old Sufi orders or founded new ones (Quinn & Quinn, 2003; Bruinessen & Howell, 2007; Dominguez-Diaz, 2014). Sufism has also spread into Europe and North America, as shown by numerous studies (Westerlund, 2004; Geaves et al., 2009; Raudvere & Stenberg, 2009; Geaves & Gabriel, 2013; Malik & Zarrabi-Zadeh, 2019; Piraino & Sedgwick, 2019), due to migration fluxes (Kane, 2011), the encounter with Western esotericism (Sedgwick, 2004a; Bisson, 2013; Piraino, 2016, 2019a), and the New Age culture (Sedgwick, 2016).

In this article, I will describe the emergence of a network composed of Sufi religious leaders, scholars, intellectuals, and artists, coming from different Sufi orders, often in competition. This network has flourished starting with the *Festival des Musiques Sacrées du Monde*[1] (World

1. https://fesfestival.com/2019/fr/.

Sacred Music Festival) founded by Faouzi Skali in the 1990s in Fez (Morocco), and it is now diffusing thanks to several Sufi cultural events, foundations, festivals, exhibitions, and lectures. These Sufi events are mainly based in Morocco and in France and the main languages are Arabic and French, even if the participants come from the entire Mediterranean region.

Unlike other forms of transnational network based on ethnicities and/or "imagined" or "real" Islamic communities (Mandaville, 2001; Saint-Blancat, 2004; Schmidt, 2005), this network focuses on Sufism, conceptualised as a heritage meant for all humankind, addressing both Muslim and non-Muslim publics. This Sufi legacy (religious, intellectual, and aesthetic) aims to have an impact on contemporary societies.

For these reasons, I consider that this Sufi network could be efficaciously described using the toolkit of social movement studies,[2] rather than using the framework of (new or old) religious movements. In fact, the Sufi network here discussed is not a religious movement nor an organisation, but it could be described as having: 1) "informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organisations, engaged in political or cultural conflicts" (Diani, 1992, p. 2); "clearly identified opponents"; 3) a "collective identity" (Della Porta & Diani, 2006, p. 20) or a "solidarity" (Melucci, 1989, p. 29) that goes beyond Sufi affiliation and doctrines; 4) profited from the "political opportunity structures" (McAdam et al., 2001) offered by nation state powers interested in displaying a pluralistic and tolerant Islam.

I will illustrate how this network fosters religious pluralism, human rights, and intercultural dialogue, presenting itself as a moralising force capable of tackling Islamophobia, Islamism and some negative trends in globalisation/Western modernity. This could be considered to be an example of the "rebuilding of the public sphere on the basis of a notion of intercultural civility" (Salvatore, 2004, p. 1029), merging philosophies, social sciences, natural sciences, and Islamic and Sufi sources.

On the other hand, this attempt does not come without a cost; it implies a negotiation with secular, religious, and national powers, interested in controlling the Islamic field, and in promoting a tolerant and apolitical Islam, compliant with national powers. These negotiations imply a "consensual politics", which means that Sufi leaders try to find a precarious balance between opposing ideas and practices, by focusing on abstract concepts such as justice and human dignity and avoiding complicated issues such as social injustice in Morocco or secular normativity in France. This politics is well represented by Faouzi Skali's enigmatic motto: "we have to spiritualise politics, and not to politicise spirituality."[3]

2 Methodology

I reconstructed this Sufi network starting from the *Festival des Musiques Sacrées du Monde* and the *Festival de Culture Soufie*,[4] both based in Fez, which I attended in 2016, 2018 and 2017, 2018 respectively. I noticed that these festivals were connected to other Sufi festivals and organisations in Europe and North Africa, sharing the same nucleus of keynote speakers. Following the snowball qualitative approach, I discovered and studied the *Fondation Conscience*

2. As has been argued by several authors, social movement studies are better understood as a loose federation of approaches than as a social theory or an epistemology (Burt, 1980; Diani & McAdam, 2003; Emirbayer & Goodwin, 1994).

3. https://maroc-diplomatique.net/il-faut-spiritualiser-le-politique-et-non-politiser-le-spirituel/.

4. https://www.festivalculturesoufie.com.

Soufie[5] and the *Festival Soufi de Paris*,[6] both based in France, and the NGO *Mouvement Cercle souffles*.[7]

During the ethnographic fieldwork on Sufi festivals and other Sufi cultural events, I interviewed the main actors of this network: such as the intellectuals Faouzi Skali, Salamatou Sow, Mohammed Ghani, Éric Geoffroy and Abderrahim Hafidi, Courtney Erwin; the artist Rachid Koraïchi; the politician Bariza Khiari; and the religious leaders Hassan Dyck, Abdellah Ouazzani and Khaled Bentounes. Finally, my previous fieldwork in Europe and in North Africa with Sufi orders between 2012 and 2018 allowed me to grasp the differences between this public Sufi network and the Sufi orders (in particular Būdshīshiyya, ʿAlāwiyya, Tijāniyya, and Naqshbandiyya Ḥaqqāniyya).

3 At the Origins of the Sufi Network: The Festival of World Sacred Music

The Festival of World Sacred Music (*Festival des Musiques Sacrées du Monde)* was founded by the intellectual Faouzi Skali and the politician Mohammed Kabbaj in Fez in 1994. At the beginning of the 1990s this festival hosted a few concerts playing sacred music from all over the world. Over the years the festival grew in importance, and from the 2000s it gained an international reputation, attracting famous musicians[8] and thousands of international visitors, which has strongly contributed to the touristic development of the city of Fez, Morocco (McGuinness, 2012).

The dissemination of sacred music was not the only aim of this festival. The Festival fostered interreligious dialogue by inviting musicians and intellectuals coming from different religious traditions; for example, in 1996 the Philharmonic Orchestra of Sarajevo played their first concert after the Bosnian war in Fez (McGuinness, 2012). Furthermore, the Festival fostered a discussion and critique of globalisation, as regards neo-liberal politics and neo-colonialism, critiques that did not reject modernity *per se*, but called instead for pluralism, ethics, and spirituality.

This cultural-political engagement flourished from 2001, with the establishment of the Forum "giving globalisation a soul" (*donner une âme à la mondialisation*), a set of conferences given during the days of the Festival, which appeared as an edited book in 2003 (Eersel, 2003). The United Nations declared Faouzi Skali and his Festival "[u]nsung heroes of dialogue", for their engagement in intercultural dialogue (Kemp & Kemp, 2010). We should bear in mind that in those years the "clash of civilisations" (Huntington, 1996) was a mainstream narrative, and the wars in the Balkans and in Iraq were raging: "we [the Muslims] were the radical alterity", comments Abderrahim Hafidi, professor at INALCO[9] and key figure of this Sufi network.[10] In this Festival an open and pluralistic image of Islam was presented as the "true Islam" (McGuinness, 2010).

5. https://consciencesoufie.com.
6. https://www.festivalsoufideparis.com.
7. https://www.facebook.com/MouvementCS/about/?ref=page_internal.
8. For example: Joan Baez, Patti Smith, Björk, Ben Harper, Paco de Lucia, Ravi Shankar, Sabah Fakhri, Kadhem Saher, Archie Shepp, Randy Weston, Youssou N'Dour. See https://fesfestival.com/2018/fes-et-son-festival/.
9. National Institute for Oriental Languages and Civilizations, based in Paris.
10. Abderrahim Hafidi interview, Fez, June 2018.

This cultural-political engagement is comprehensible only if we contextualise it within the Sufi frame. In fact, Skali explained that the Festival was possible only thanks to its Sufi background,[11] in particular thanks to his *shaykh*, Hamza al-Qādīrī al-Būdshīshī (1922-2017), who led the Sufi order Būdshīshiyya from 1972 to 2017. The Būdshīshiyya became in a few years one of the most important North African Sufi orders, with a global diffusion (Chih, 2012; Dominguez-Diaz, 2014; Sedgwick, 2004b). Many Moroccan and European Būdshīshī disciples describe a "Sufism for everybody", due to a teaching focused on love and compassion rather than on ascetic practices and dogmas. This doctrinal openness allowed the spectacularising of Sufi practises, in fact the sacred ritual of *samā'* (Sufi music) crossed over from the *zāwyas* (Sufi school) to jump onto the Festival scene. This process was facilitated by the Moroccan nation state, which has close links to Sufism in general (Tozy, 1990; Cornell, 1998) and in particular to the Būdshīshiyya (Chih, 2012). The Moroccan state promotes Sufism and Sufi culture as a part of Moroccan cultural heritage, and as a tolerant Islam respectful of the King's religious and political role.[12]

Having said that, Faouzi Skali's cultural and political engagement cannot be reduced to the Sufi frame. Skali, born in Fez in 1953, has followed a heterogenous path. His grandparents were professors at the prestigious Islamic University of al-Qarawiyyīn and also Sufi local leaders. However, Skali neglected the Sufi path during his years of education in Paris, focusing on Sartrean existentialism and rediscovering Sufism only later, during his Ph.D in the anthropology of religion at the Sorbonne University. The connection between his spiritual quest and his intellectual scientific research is so profound that he started having spiritual dreams that led him to the Būdshīshiyya during his reading of the Orientalist (and Protestant) Henry Corbin's book *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabi* (1977).[13] Skali represents a transnational Islamic humanism, merging different languages and epistemologies (Piraino, 2019b, 2022).

Faouzi Skali directed the Festival for more than 20 years, but nowadays the Festival is led by Abderrafih Zouitene. We do not know the causes of this separation; they could be related to artistic, religious, or political disagreements or to organisational factors. What is evident is that the new *Festival des musiques sacrées du monde* without Faouzi Skali (from 2014 onward) is less focused on the spiritual dimension and more on the spectacular dimensions of music. For example, during the lectures in the Festival's Forum in 2018, most religious interventions were performed by the French philosopher Edgar Morin (born 1921), who evoked the sacred and the universal, while the Moroccan intellectuals gave lectures focused on scientific subjects related to their field (architecture, history, anthropology, cognitive sciences). This renewed Festival is described by Moroccan intellectuals close to Skali as a "socialite event" and "like a machine,"[14] underlining how both the cultural-political and the spiritual engagement are waning.

The spiritual dimension moved to another festival: the Festival of Sufi Culture (*le Festival de la culture soufie*) founded in 2007 by Faouzi Skali, held in the medina of Fez. Like the previous festival, the Sufi festival is committed to the diffusion of Sufism to the Moroccan public and to fostering another image of Islam for the international public.[15] The difference concerns the stronger focus on the intellectual debates, which are held for 7 days, from 10am to

11. Faouzi Skali at the Festival du soufisme de Paris 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rbnk7gqE4hE.
12. In Morocco the King is considered the *Amīr al-Mū'minīn*, the Commander of the Faithful (Wainscott, 2017).
13. Faouzi Skali interview, June 2018, Fez.
14. Abderrahim Hafidi interview, Fez, June 2018.
15. http://www.festivalculturesoufie.com.

6pm. Renowned scholars from Europe, the MENA region and Sub-Saharan Africa are invited to discuss religious, political, and scientific matters. The music is less present, there are not the big stars that attracted thousands of visitors, but Sufi poetry readings and Sufi concerts are performed during the evenings.

Among the participants in these Festivals are some prominent intellectual and religious figures who have started to organise new Sufi festivals in Europe and Africa, following the aims and structures of these Sufi Festivals in Morocco, inviting the same key figures, and creating *de facto* a network of Sufis. The Tijānī anthropologist Salamatou Sow organised a Sufi Festival in Niamey (Niger) in 2011; the Naqshbandi leader Abdelhafid Benchouk and the artist Amel Boutouchent organised the *Festival soufi de Paris*[16] in 2017, 2018, and 2019. One of the Tijānī religious leaders (*khalīfa*) Ibrahim Tijānī founded the NGO *Mouvement Cercle souffles*[17] (Circle of breath or spirit), based in Morocco, but with different branches in Europe and in West Africa. This NGO organises the Sufi Forum Festival and it is working for the creation of a museum of Sufism in Senegal.

Other organisational forms complete this Sufi network, such as the associations *Fondation Conscience Soufi* (Sufi Conscience Foundation) founded in France in 2016 by the ʿAlawī historian Éric Geoffroy, and the *Rābiṭa majmʿa sālaḥ* (Association for the common good or good government), founded in Morocco by the Sufi Shaykh Abdellah Ouazzani. Finally, many of the protagonists of this network participate in the events organised by the *Institut du Monde Arabe*[18] (Paris) and *Institut des Cultures d'Islam*[19] (Paris).

To give an idea of the intertwined relations in this Sufi network, the Sufi leader of the Moroccan order Ouazāniyya is responsible for the training of Imams in France (in the area of Marseilles), in West Africa, and in Morocco. Furthermore, he is a key figure in the Sufi festivals previously mentioned, and he participates in the activities of the French *Fondation Conscience Soufie* and in the Moroccan *Rābiṭa Muḥammediyya ʿulamāʾ* (League of Theologians), and is the founder of the *Rābiṭa Majmʿa Sālaḥ* (Association for the common good or good government).

4 Conflict and Social Change

If conflict is considered a main characteristic of social movements, its definition is far from being univocal. Some scholars conceptualise conflict as the clash of historicities, the "overall system[s] of meaning which set[s] dominant rules in a given society" (Touraine, 1981, p. 81), while others consider conflict only among actors in the public sphere (Tilly, 1989), and others argue that conflict has shifted towards cultural change (Melucci, 1989). More recently, contemporary academic literature on social movements considers also "personal change" as a field for conflict, not limiting it to the realm of political actions (Della Porta & Diani, 2006, p. 23).

The conflict that characterises the Sufi network here discussed concerns Islamism and globalisation/modernity, which are regarded as strictly intertwined by these Sufis. If the first may be clearly identified by detecting movements and actors, the latter is more a generic critique against some trends of Western modernity.

16. https://www.festivalsoufideparis.com.
17. https://www.facebook.com/pg/MouvementCS/about/?ref=page_internal.
18. https://www.imarabe.org/fr.
19. https://www.institut-cultures-islam.org.

The activities planned in order to counter Islamism and the negative trends of globalisation/modernity are related to the Sufi presence in the public sphere. These Sufis organise festivals, conferences, concerts, and exhibitions, and write books and articles. As *shaykh* Ibrāhīm Tijānī claims, they "fight extremism through art."[20] These Sufis believe that these events can raise awareness of what they consider the correct interpretation of Islam and the danger of some trends in globalisation.

As regards the conflict with Islamist movements, there are different approaches within this Sufi network. Some prefer a strong opposition to Islamism, which they describe as "cultural emptiness" and "cultural uprooting,"[21] while Sufism, to them, represents the traditional Islam. In other circumstances, some Sufi leaders prefer to avoid a direct confrontation with Islamism, remarking instead on the responsibility of each Muslim.

> Sufism is not there to fight against this other Islam, which is developing from a cultural loss and denaturation accomplished by Wahhabism. Our Islam exists since the beginning, an Islam of the origins that we need simply to recover. (Zouari, 2005)

Contemporary Sufi orders have been often the place for eschatological narratives which describe Western modernity as the final phase of the end times. This eschatology is based on both Islamic narratives and exogenous narratives drawing from Western esotericism and New Age culture (Nielsen et al., 2006; Piraino, 2020b). On the other hand, the attitude towards globalisation and Western modernity is more nuanced in the Sufi network.

> We do not refuse globalisation, unlike others. This is an historical fact. But there are different kinds of globalisation [...]. There are some things to globalise and other to de-globalise. We cannot let this globalisation monopolise us.[22]

Unlike other Islamist groups (Wiktorowicz, 2012) and many Sufi orders (Sedgwick, 2004a; Damrel, 2006), the Sufi network does not intend to reject globalisation and Western modernity as a monolithic whole, but rather to take what is considered useful and limit what is considered dangerous and immoral. A common narrative in this network is that the Sufi is the "son of his time" (*ibn al-waqt*), which does not mean modern, but capable of addressing the challenges of his time (Geoffroy, n.a.).

This Sufi network presents itself as a "moralising force [...]. We as citizens, as Sufi leaders, it's us that have to start the reconciliation" between Islam and modernity, the Moroccan Shaykh Ouazzani argues.[23] A Moroccan professor working in Paris, Abderrahim Hafidi, describes Sufism as an "ethical *magisterium*."[24] If human rights and democracy are regarded as positive aspects of modernity and globalisation, there are also some negative trends, such as individualism, neoliberal politics, pollution, consumerism, and identarian politics, negative trends that can be tackled only through a spiritual regeneration.

These Sufis do not acknowledge the supposed "clash of civilisations" described by Huntington (1996) between Islam and Western modernity, as they consider that the clash is between

20. Shaykh Ibrahim Tijānī at a seminar at the EHESS, Paris, January 2020. https://enseignements-2019.ehess.fr/2019/ue/3645/.

21. French senator Bariza Khiari at the Festival Soufi de Paris, November 2018.

22. Abderrahim Hafidi interview, Fez, June 2018.

23. Abdellah Ouazzani interview, Casablanca, June 2018.

24. Abderrahim Hafidi fieldwork notes, Fez, June 2018.

a decadent Western imperialism and a void religious form — Islamism. "It is not a clash of civilisations, it is a clash of non-sense [*conneries* in the original]."[25]

5 Sufi Network Collective Identity: Narratives and Practices

With the category "collective identity", Alberto Melucci (1989, 1992) emphasised the process of negotiation of ideas and practices within a group or movement. Collective identity cannot be reduced to the "logic of a means-ends calculation, or of a political rationality, but always carries with it margins of non-negotiability in the reasons for and ways of acting together" (Melucci, 1992, p. 49), and represents what creates a "we". Similarly, Della Porta and Diani underlined how the collective action cannot be reduced to a set of specific goals, but happens when a group think about themselves "as elements of much larger and encompassing processes of change — or resistance to change" (Della Porta & Diani, 2006, p. 22).

The narratives and practices common to all the activities analysed in Europe as in North Africa that underpin the "collective we" of this Sufi network, are: 1) the universal message of Sufism and at the same time its Islamic-ness; 2) the necessity of going beyond the Sufi order structure; 3) the fundamental importance and Islamic-ness of religious pluralism; 4) the fundamental importance and Islamic-ness of democratic engagement and human rights; 5) the merging of Sufi-Islamic hermeneutics with social, human, and natural sciences; 6) the merging of artistic performance with religious rituals.

5.1 The Universal Message of Sufism and at the Same Time Its Islamic-ness

The development of a de-Islamised Sufism present in the European and North American contexts (Dickson, 2016; Irwin, 2019; Sedgwick, 2009) pushed these Sufis to clarify their difference, affirming the Islamic-ness of Sufism, and distinguishing their religious pluralism from the eclecticism of New Age movements.

The French historian and Sufi Denis Gril underlines the importance of both esoteric and exoteric principles, clarifying that there is no Sufism without *sharīʿa*. The Turkish musician living in France, Kudsi Ergüner, explains that the best seller Jalāl ad-Dīn Rūmī[26] can be read only with the Qur'ān open; while the French Sufi artist Carole Latifa Ameer warns of the "mirages of New Age Sufism or self-made pseudo Sufi masters" (Ameer, 2017). This distinction is not made in order to identify a specific and common orthodoxy (which could hardly be found among them, due to their heterogenous origins, cultures, and approaches), but it re-marks the strict relation between Islam and Sufism, and the importance of personal commitment in the Sufi path, which implies rituals, practices, and norms.

This Islamic-ness does not preclude the universal value that Sufism assumes for all humankind. According to the protagonist of this network, Sufi poetry, music, and narratives contribute to the flourishing of human beings, because "the beauty of Islam is universal."[27]

25. Slimane Rezki, fieldwork notes, Paris, February 2018.

26. Jalāl ad-Dīn Rūmī (1207-1273) was a Sufi theologian and poet, and is now having a global success, beyond the boundaries of Sufism and Islam.

27. Carole Latifa fieldwork notes, Fez, October 2018.

5.2 The Necessity of Going beyond the Sufi Order Structure

Another common narrative is the necessity to distinguish their activity from the Sufi orders, even if the majority belong to a Sufi order. Some actors, like Éric Geoffroy, describe the "illness" of the Sufi orders (Geoffroy, 2009, p. 187), accused of being too focused on themselves, each often claiming to be superior to other Sufi orders. According to Geoffroy this competition has blinded many Sufis so that they have failed to grasp the challenges of contemporary societies. The Sufi network does not want to replace the Sufi orders, because it has a different aim: the social change previously described. This commitment requires "the conscience of the universal,"[28] which not all Sufi disciples share.

> It is important that they exist [the Sufi orders], but it is important that at the same time we go beyond them.[29]
>
> Our goal is not to replace them [the Sufi orders], but to create connections.[30]
>
> This is a platform that does not belong to us, but to all the world. In order to create a dialogue, going towards the other, without diminishing him or putting him aside.[31]
>
> [The Sufi Foundation] considers that it is time to offer this wisdom to the world, beyond the circles of the Sufi orders that sometimes privatise it. This activity deploys on several axes: teaching and transmission, expertise and mediation, research and translation, sacred arts and spiritual trips.[32]

Other intellectuals, like Hafidi, go further, challenging the same value of the Sufi order:

> I've never had a *ṭarīqa* [Sufi order] and I've never felt the need nor the desire. Because it is not, if you belong in a *ṭarīqa* that means that you're a good Sufi. I would even say that if you are in a *ṭarīqa*, you have inevitably a bias.[33]

5.3 Islam and Religious Pluralism

One of the most significant narratives in this Sufi network is the importance of religious pluralism and cultural diversity. Several verses of the Qur'ān[34] are cited in order to show that religious pluralism is part of the Islamic orthodoxy and civilisation.

> The diversity principle is something that in my opinion is inscribed in the same Qur'ānic text.[35]

28. Abdelhafid Bencouk at a seminar at the EHESS, Paris, January 2020. https://enseignements-2019.ehess.fr/2019/ue/3645/.
29. Faouzi Skali fieldwork notes, Paris, November 2018.
30. Faouzi Skali fieldwork notes, Fez, October 2017.
31. Abdellah Ouazzani interview, Casablanca, 2018.
32. http://www.fondationconsciencesoufie.com/home/.
33. Abderrahim Hafidi interview, Fez, June 2018.
34. For example, 16:93: "And if Allah had willed, He could have made you [of] one religion, but He causes to stray whom He wills and guides whom He wills. And you will surely be questioned about what you used to do". 49:13: "O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted".
35. Faouzi Skali interview, Fez, June 2018.

> [The Sufi pedagogy] places diversity and universality at the heart of its path, as a catalyst for living together. Through multiple disciplines, ethical and cultural, this edition [of the Sufi Festival of Paris] will show us the pluralism which transcends both the sensitive and the intelligible. [This] will try to restore a part of the broken mirror where the dualities are absorbed to reveal the path of unity which is held by each being.[36]

According to these Sufis, religious pluralism is rooted in the history of Islam. The "*Convivencia*" (coexistence) of the Andalusian period is one of the best examples, along with the Ottoman empire, the first years of the Abbasid rule in Baghdad, and of course the revelation period of the prophet Muḥammad in Arabia in the 7th century. The same Qur'ānic school 'Abū'ināniyya (see Fanjul, 2014) where the Festival of Sufi Culture takes place is described by Faouzi Skali as an expression of the Islamic cosmopolitanism, where the Jewish philosopher Maimonides (1135-1204) studied, as did the Christian mathematicians Leondardo Fibonacci (1170-1240) and Gerbert d'Aurillac (962-1043), later known as Pope Sylvester II.

The (allegedly) peaceful coexistence of Muslims, Jews and Christians under the Islamic rule of Andalusia in the Middle Ages is described as a cultural matrix of living together, and as a model to follow in contemporary societies characterised by identarian politics. It is interesting to mention that when during a conference the historical accuracy of this image of the *Convivencia* (which for some historians is overrated; Niane, 2017) was challenged, *shaykh* Khaled Bentounes argued that even if this was the case, the Andalusian myth could be used in order to imagine a better future.[37]

The rebirth of a mother society has been described by Melucci and Touraine as a main characteristic of religious movements, but on the other hand this myth of the past is not used in order to justify a "totalizing legitimacy" (Melucci, 1992, p. 58), nor could it be labelled as a "regressive" strategy (Touraine, 1981, p. 98), on the contrary it functions as a legitimisation narrative to justify the Islamic-ness of pluralism and tolerance.

Furthermore, many Sufi intellectuals claim that the understanding of alterity and diversity are key factors in the path of spiritual purification, because for them the love of God corresponds to the love of humankind.

> If our heart is not full of unconditional love for the Man [humankind], vicar of the Merciful on earth and the one to whom He did the honour of infusing him with his creative Spirit... Without this love for Man, our prayers are only movements, our fasts only tortures that we impose, our pilgrimages to Mecca only tourist trips emptied of any spiritual substrate. (Niane, 2017)

The Moroccan poet and politician Touria Iqbal described how her Sufi commitment arose thanks to "the gaze of the Other" (*Il a fallu le regarde de l'autre*),[38] while the Nigerian anthropologist Salamotow Soe says "we do exist in the relation to the Other" (Festival Soufi de Paris, 2017).

The religious pluralism narrative is also a practice, in fact, the cultural events organised by the Sufi network are almost always occasions for interfaith dialogue. The Jewish singer

36. http://www.festivalsoufideparis.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/web-Programme-du-Festival-Soufi-de-Paris-2018.pdf.

37. A historical Quranic school funded in 1350-1355 by the Marinid ruler Abū 'Inān Fāris.

38. Touria Iqbal fieldwork notes, Fez, June 2017.

Françoise Atlan is a regular guest at the festival, as is the rabbi Gabriel Hagaï. Priests and monks are also invited to these events to discuss universality, religious pluralism, and the challenges of living together.

5.4 Democratic Engagement and Human Rights

Another fundamental narrative in the creation of a collective identity is a democratic and human rights narrative. For example, the Sufi festival of Paris clearly states its civic vocation:

> Sufism, an antidote to deadly identities [*identités meurtrières*[39]] and to the culture of resentment. There cannot be peace on the collective level if the person is not at peace himself. [...] The wisdom and the love which animate it must from now on radiate in a broader way. [These values have to] impose themselves in active citizenship to constitute an alternative to radicalism.[40]

> The Quranic school is the first democratic school.[41]

A democratic engagement that remains generic, without tackling specific issues, but focusing on the spiritual dimension. Skali, for instance, describes a qualitative democracy based on ethics and shared values, and a quantitative democracy based on procedures (Espace Magh, n.a.). Many protagonists of this network argue for a "spiritual democracy", where religious values contribute to the betterment of contemporary society (Abd al Malik, 2013).

5.5 Merging Epistemologies: Between Social Sciences and the Qur'an

Another element of the Sufi network collective identity is the merging of Islamic-Sufi hermeneutics with social, human, and natural sciences. Many of these Sufi spokespersons work in universities or have obtained doctorates. The Sufi physicists Abdalhaq Guiderdoni and Inès Safi, both working at the CNRS (French National Centre for Scientific Research) and regular hosts at the Sufi festivals, remark how Islam is not in opposition to natural sciences, and discuss epistemological boundaries among religion, philosophy and science in the wake of systems theories (Guiderdoni, 2012).

Similarly, the social scientists Faouzi Skali, Salamatou Sow, Mohammed Ghani, Éric Geoffroy, Leyli Anvar and Denis Gril, in their presentations often shift from religious discourses to philology and social sciences. Natural, human, and social sciences are considered important for the understanding of the Islamic message, but also for the understanding of humankind. The epistemological syncretism professed by these Sufi intellectuals does not imply the process of de-sacralisation of the Qur'ān which we can find among some modernist intellectuals (Bidar, 2016); in fact, the historical dimensions of the Qur'ān are considered complementary to its divine nature.

5.6 Between Sufi Rituals and Performance

Among the elements that form a collective identity there are not only ideas, but also practices. In the case of this Sufi movement, the merging of religious rituals with artistic performances

39. Salamtoe Sow fieldwork notes, Fez, June 2017.

40. http://www.festivalsoufideparis.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Dossier-de-presse-Festival-Soufi-de-Paris.pdf.

41. Salamatoe Sow fieldwork notes, Fez, October 2017.

is a fundamental common element. Sufi Festivals host not only Sufi concerts and dances but also exhibitions of calligraphy, paintings and plastic arts. A good example of this artistic and religious hybridisation is the performance of the German Naqshbandi *shaykh* Hassan Dyck and his group The Caravan of Love. *Shaykh* Hassan Dyck, a regular host at these Sufi events, mixes Sufi *dhikr* (recitation of God's names) with Arabic-Islamic melodies, and with Indian music and with rock and blues. The Parisian artistic group Dervish Spirit[42] is another good example; in 2018 I attended a performance presented by the association *Conscience soufie*, during which Jalāl ad-Dīn Rūmī's verses were recited while a violinist played music by Bach and a shirtless dancer completed the performance. Another example is the theatrical spectacle *Soufi mon amour*,[43] a monologue inspired by Rūmī's poetry and accompanied by Turkish Sufi music.

There are a variety of socio-anthropological lenses that we could use to analyse this complex phenomenon (which would require a dedicated article). I will discuss the "aestheticisation of religion" and the "aesthetics of religion", but conclusively I consider more effective in this case the concept of "artification".

The process of "aestheticisation of religion" (Løvland & Repstad, 2016; da Silva Moreira, 2018), inscribed in a larger "aesthetic turn in a globalised market culture" (da Silva Moreira 2018, p. 126), describes a strategy of religious movements which aims to intensify emotions and perceptions, to enhance religious experiences, making them sensory and enjoyable. This process often happens "at the expense of its doctrinal content and ethical implications" (p. 138). Similarly, Løvland & Repstad described a process of aestheticisation of religious movements that put the accent on emotional and aesthetic aspects to the detriment of "dogmatic and cognitive dimensions" (2016, p. 118), which facilitates "handling plurality" (p. 193). If, without a doubt, Sufi orders have been influenced by the process of aestheticisation of religion, adapting their different strategies (Piraino, 2020a, 2020b), I consider the case of the Sufi Festivals to be different. In fact, the key actors of this movement are not religious authorities who modify their "marketing planning", to use Moreira's words (2018, p. 138), but Sufi intellectuals, scholars, artists, and politicians who create new social spaces and opportunities. In other words, if Moreira (2018) and Løvland & Repstad (2016) described the spectacularising of churches, in this case the founding element is not the mosque, but the cultural festivals.

The "aesthetics of religion" is a fast growing field of studies within sociology, anthropology, and religious studies which emphasises the materiality of religion, in the forms of bodies, gestures, and senses, challenging the monopoly of texts and doctrines which often characterises the field of religious studies (Grieser & Johnston, 2017, p. 5). Following this perspective, considering the aesthetic dimensions of religion does not concern only arts and beauty, but all human senses in the religious experience. The senses are indeed the "skin of religion" (Plate, 2012). As argued by Birgit Meyer, this perspective has to be understood not as privatised, depoliticised or in opposition to rational thinking forms of religion, but "as central to the formation of personal and collective modes of being and belonging" (Meyer, 2010, p. 759). This intriguing perspective would be useful in analysing Sufi disciples' experiences and in particular Sufi artistic content, but in this article my aim is different, focusing on Sufism as a social movement.

The process of "artification" described by Shapiro (2019) should not be regarded as a marketing strategy, but a theory on how art becomes art, how it is socially constructed. In our case, how Sufi rituals and practices become art forms displayed in cultural festivals. Shapiro identifies 10 or 11 microprocesses that constitute the macroprocess of artification. I found several of

42. Faouzi Skali fieldwork notes, Fez, October 2017.

43. https://www.theatre-contemporain.net/spectacles/Soufi-mon-amour/.

them. The first is "displacement", the separation of the object from its environment. The Sufi music moves from the mosques to the stage, as the calligraphy moves from paper to the walls of Bab al Makina during the Festival of Sacred Music in 2018, where Rachid Koraïchi's artistic calligraphy and paintings were projected. The displacement process also entails a process of "renaming"; the Sufi ceremony of *samāʿ* becomes a Sufi concert, as the Koraïchi calligraphies became plastic arts.

Another element is the "redefinition of time". Sufi concerts do not have the same duration and structure of the *samāʿ* which is part of other Islamic rituals in specific time and date, rather the *samāʿ* here obeys the timing of a concert. The process of artification implies also a "reshuffling ranking"; in fact, if, in the frame of Sufi orders, every activity, including leading and teaching music and calligraphy, needs a permission — *ijāza* — from the *shaykh*, artists respond to other forms of legitimisation, coming from public success and the critics. All these elements involve other kinds of "organisational and intuitional change" and "patronage", which we described in the passage between the Sufi order and the Sufi festival, and will discuss with reference to the relation between nation state and this Sufi movement. Finally, the process of artification favours the creativity of the artist over the traditional practices. Hence, Sufi rituals and aesthetics can be merged with plastic arts, theatre, rock music, etc.

6 Contextual Factors, Opportunity Structures, and Political Opportunity

In order to frame the development of a network, we need also to understand the "contextual factors" and political opportunities which "facilitate and constrain [its] emergence and operation" (Snow et al., 2004, p. 12). One of the most important is the cultural trendiness of Sufism, which has become a cultural product, thanks to the process of artification employed by these Festivals, but above all thanks to the globalisation and sometimes de-Islamisation of Sufi literature (Irwin, 2019; Sedgwick, 2009), which has made Sufism interesting not only for Muslims, but also to spiritual seekers.

The most important factor that favoured the development of the Sufi network is the collaboration with Moroccan state power. The political and religious legitimisation of the *makhzen* (the state power composed of the monarchy, notables and top ranking military personnel in Morocco) has been closely connected with Moroccan Sufi orders since the Middle Ages (Cornell, 1998). In contemporary Morocco, the relations between the former king, Ḥasan II, and Sufi orders were tense (Sedgwick, 2004b), probably due to their political and religious authority, which he regarded as a possible threat. Furthermore, the main Islamist movement opposed to the King, *Al-ʿAdl wa al-Iḥsān* (Justice and Spirituality), was founded by a former Sufi disciple (Belal, 2006).

In the 2000s King Muḥammad VI inaugurated a new era, stating that Moroccan Islam was imbued with Sufism and therefore moderate and tolerant (Wainscott, 2017). This relationship was sealed by the appointment of many Sufis among the Moroccan political elite, including the Minister of Religious Affairs Ahmed Toufīq (Chih, 2012; Muedini, 2012, 2015). Furthermore, Sufism has been used by the *makhzen* as a form of soft power to expand its control in West Africa (Lanza, 2012; Sambe, 2010; Wainscott, 2018). Finally, King Muḥammad VI opened a discussion about religious freedom and democracy, even if, as has been argued by some scholars, these reforms remained trapped in a security dimension (Maghraoui, 2009), and did not address the social injustices present in Morocco (Madani, 2011; Maddy-Weitzman & Zisenwine, 2012).

The collaboration between the Sufi network and the Moroccan nation state does not imply a homogenous political position among these Sufis, nor that they are passive in negotiating with national powers. This network gives more power to the Sufis to influence the social context, countering its opponents (Islamism), but also influencing its allies (state powers).

> If I can influence I do it, I say it sincerely. Every time that I have the opportunity to be with politicians[...] I try to influence them and help them in adopting an ethical and moral position in their everyday life practices of politics.[44]

Another good example of the political heterogeneity among these Sufis is the discussion that I witnessed in 2018 at the Festival of Sufi Culture, where the French politician Bariza Khiari and the Moroccan scholar Abderrahim Hafidi clashed in discussing the political role that Sufism should play. For the French senator, Sufism was the antidote to Islamism, and she remarked how Moroccan Sufism saved the monarchy and democracy from the dangerous Islamists who protested on the 20th of February 2011 in Casablanca. Hafidi had a different point of view; Sufism should be an ethical substratum, not an antidote, and it should not intervene in political matters. Furthermore, he did not consider the protests of 20th February to have been composed only of dangerous extremists, but recognised the social inequalities that moved Moroccan people to demonstrate. The Festival host Faouzi Skali tried to mitigate the discussion by using his catchphrase: "we don't have to politicise spirituality, but spiritualise politics,"[45] leaving unanswered the dilemma of the political role of Sufism, and the paradox of a Festival that promotes religious pluralism and human rights being financed by a state that is struggling between democratic reforms and repressive politics.

Another important factor that favoured the development of the Sufi network is the collaboration with French secular state power, interested in promoting a liberal Islam in opposition to Salafism. In particular, in 2016, the French Minister of the Interior decided to influence the Islamic field, by founding the *Fondation Islam de France* (Foundation for French Islam).

> The Foundation for French Islam (FIF) is born from the will to oppose the Salafist ideology with knowledge, [Salafist ideology] that nourishes the violence of extremist jihadists. The aim of the Foundation is to respond to an emergency: consolidating the national harmony. It contributes to the construction of a French Islam, rooted in French society, in its principles and in Republican values.[46]

Among the activities that are promoted by the FIF there are several events organised by this Sufi network,[47] which promote an Islam aligned with "French Republican values", and do not challenge the normative French secularism.

The relationship between the French secular normativity and this Sufi network is as problematic as the relationship with Moroccan state power. A good example of this precarious equilibrium is expressed by what happened in 2019 at the Festival of Sufi Culture, where a participant congratulated the Muslim activist Asma Lamrabet on her decision to remove her

44. Abdellah Ouazzani interview, Casablanca, June 2018.

45. Faouzi Skali, fieldwork notes, Fez, June 2017.

46. https://fondationdelislamdefrance.fr/. I noticed that in 2021 the FIF's mission description was changed, removing the references to "fighting Salafism". On the other hand, this narrative is present in other articles such as: https://fondationdelislamdefrance.fr/tribune-de-ghaleb-bencheikh-pour-le-quotidien-lopinion-le-7-avril-2021/.

47. https://fondationdelislamdefrance.fr/nos-partenaires/.

hijab,[48] implying all the negative stereotypes of veiled Muslim women. Another participant strongly criticised this statement, assuming that it was an attack on all Muslim women who do wear the hijab. Skali stifled the heated discussion by stating that the Festival does not produce *fatwā*,[49] preferring to avoid sensitive topics, such as the value of the Islamic veil, and the problematic laws in Europe concerning the ban on religious symbols in public places,[50] probably disappointing both parties.

The legitimisation of this network is not limited to nation state powers, but comes also from other religious authorities who attend these events, such as Rabbi Gabriel Haggaï, and the Catholic monks of Tibhirine, Algeria (who escaped the massacre in 1996). It is more difficult to evaluate the relations between this Sufi network and the population. For example, in Morocco, the expensive tickets discourage the participation in the Festival of people coming from the working class. *De facto*, the Festivals are reserved to Europeans and the Moroccan middle and upper classes. The intellectual Hafidi confirmed that this is a raw nerve, and that he would like to involve Moroccan students in the forthcoming editions of the Festival. The situation in Paris is completely different; at the Festival of Sufism many people of different cultural backgrounds and socio-economic status participate, contributing to legitimising this network from the bottom. These differences between Fez and Paris, together with the fact that we are discussing a newly formed network, discourage me from assessing whether this network represents only a small elite of Sufi intellectuals or if it embodies the ideas and wishes of a wider part of the population.

Finally, we have to consider the "opportunities structures" that the social context offers (Melucci, 1992, p. 67) to its Sufi participants. The opportunities that this network offers to its actors are not limited to the negotiation with nation state powers, nor to the legitimisation in the public sphere implied in participating in prestigious international events. Another opportunity offered by this network is reaching potential new audiences, such as lifelong Muslims who are interested in spirituality and arts, but might have prejudices against Sufi orders — the anti-Sufi bias is still quite widely diffused in Morocco, due to Islamist, modernist, and nationalist opposition to Sufism (Sirriyeh, 2014). Non-Muslims as potential new converts to Islam are another public reached by this network; as we have seen, these Sufi festivals are open to everybody beyond religious differences, but at the same time promote "the beauty of Islam". However, one could wonder if and how proselytism is possible in the frame of the religious pluralism professed by these Sufis. Hence, I would define it as a sort of "soft proselytism".

Furthermore, the network is a space of intellectual, artistic, and religious freedom for Sufis, who are free to discuss delicate topics that otherwise would not be accepted in many Sufi orders. Themes such as gender equality, human rights, epistemological hybridity, which are commonly discussed in this network, like the artification of Sufism, would not be accepted by all Sufi disciples in the frame of the Sufi orders. In fact, contemporary Sufi orders are shapeshifting and heterogeneous phenomena which can harbour both progressive and conservative positions on politics and morality.

As we have seen, the Sufi Festivals — the Sufi network — is not meant to replace the organisational structures of the Sufi orders. The Sufi actors here described, such as intellectuals, politicians, artists, and to a lesser extent religious leaders, do not want to create a new religious

48. https://www.h24info.ma/maroc/voici-pourquoi-asma-lambaret-a-ote-son-voile/.

49. A non-binding legal opinion on a religious matter produced by a jurist.

50. This anecdote was related to me by the Ph.D student Amina Mesgguid, who is conducting research on contemporary Sufism in Morocco at the International University of Rabat.

movement, but a new space for internal and external dialogue. One could wonder if this Sufi network offers opportunities within the structures of the Sufi orders: "is there a strategic gain in participating in this network?" one might ask. I think that in the well-structured Sufi orders, such as ʿAlāwiyya, Būdshīshiyya, and Tijāniyya, the internal hierarchies are not influenced by belonging to this network. In fact, local leaders are indicated by the *shaykhs*, and consequently, disciples' roles and responsibilities are decided by local leaders. In this frame, to my knowledge, famous Sufi disciples do not climb the hierarchies of the Sufi order. Slightly different is the case of Sufi orders, such as the Naqshbandiyya-Ḥaqqāniyya, which have a fluid organisational structure (Damrel, 2006; Nielsen et al., 2006). In this case, local leaders have an entrepreneurial role, promoting and shaping their *zāwiya*, and are often in competition to attract more disciples (Piraino, 2020b). Hence, participating in this Sufi network could contribute to legitimising Naqshbandi local leaders, both within and outside this Sufi order.

7 Conclusion

Contemporary Sufi orders led by charismatic leaders have attracted many scholars, artists, politicians, and journalists, both in North Africa and in Europe. These intellectuals, both lifelong Muslims and converts to Sufi-Islam, have organised several cultural events, festivals, associations and exhibitions, and they write articles and books about Islam and Sufism. These cultural events have led to the formation of a network of Sufis, affiliated to different orders.

In this article, which represents the first attempt to describe this new phenomenon, I have showed how this network could be viewed through the lenses of social movement theories, using the categories of Melucci, Della Porta and Diani. Despite some tensions that I have described, the network shares a "collective identity" based on: 1) the universal message of Sufism and at the same time its Islamic-ness; 2) the necessity of going beyond the Sufi orders structure; 3) the fundamental importance and Islamic-ness of religious pluralism; 4) the fundamental importance and Islamic-ness of democratic engagement and human rights; 5) the merging of Sufi-Islamic hermeneutics with social, human, and natural sciences; and 6) the merging of artistic performance with religious rituals.

This network presents itself as a moralising force capable of tacking Islamophobia, Islamism, and some negative trends in globalisation, by raising awareness among Muslims and non-Muslims through the publication of books and the organisation of cultural events.

The development of this network has been facilitated by the process of artification of Sufism, which has become a fashionable topic even among non-Sufis and non-Muslims. This has meant a bigger audience and also better funding for developing these Sufi cultural activities. Furthermore, this network was facilitated by the collaboration with national powers.

This precarious but pragmatic balance between different competing ideas and powers is not new in the history of social movements, which are often described as a form of "hetereogeneous and fragile" mobilisation (Melucci, 1989, p. 4). The conciliatory approach of this network resonates well with Peter Mandaville's concept of "pragmatism".

> This is not a pragmatism defined in terms of short-term tactical compromise, a willingness to negotiate on strategy and a privileging of practical outcomes over theory, ideology and even principle — but rather a notion of the pragmatic that derives from the more literal roots of pragma as ''deed''. In other words, a movement premised on the idea that social vision is expressed through the everyday activities that characterise a particular way of''being in the world", rather than through ex-

> ternal organisation towards the achievement of political power or a national consciousness (Mandaville, 2011, p. 13).

On the other hand, this pragmatism implies some shortcomings; in fact, it has to be stressed that if this network promotes religious pluralism, democratic participation and justice, without touching on delicate topics such as the violation of human rights in Morocco or French secular normativity, it risks reducing its credibility and in some cases reproducing the stereotype of the "Good Sufi" versus the "Bad Muslim" (Safi, 2011).

To conclude, I would like to briefly discuss the Sufism here analysed within the frame of the so called "spiritual turn" in contemporary societies. Since its founding fathers, such as George Simmel (1968) and Ernst Troeltsch (1912), the sociology of religion has described the increase in individual religious experiences to the detriment of participation in institutional religions, which were supposed to decline. These authors described the prominence of mystical experiences and fluid religious organisational structures in the developing modernity. Today, several sociologists still agree with this analysis, even if they prefer to use the category of spirituality instead of mysticism (Houtman & Aupers, 2007; Woodhead et al., 2005). Following this perspective, one could ask if the Sufism presented in this article corresponds to the spiritual turn described by many sociologists. I think that there is no single answer. On the one hand, the Sufi Festivals, thanks to the intellectual debates and rituals performed onstage, offer to spiritual seekers the opportunity to live the "experience of Sufism", its beauty, without belonging to a Sufi order, and even without being a Muslim. Attending these Festivals would be a surrogate of the Sufi religious experience, what Stark and Bainbridge would call an "audience cult" (1979, p. 126). On the other hand, spiritual seekers are not the only participants in these Festivals, where there are several practicing Sunni Muslims, who find in this social movement not a way to challenge Sufi orders, but a place for creating new synergies among Sufi orders, exploring ideas and aesthetics, and implementing politics. Following this perspective, the Sufi Festivals — the social movement — are not just another expression of an individualistic spirituality, but another way of living and embodying Islamic spirituality, both in the private and in the public spheres.

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