Sufism plays an important role in shaping contemporary Muslim religiosity in Syria. In order to understand the impact of the normative framework of Sufism in the social practices of its adherents we have to look at the processes of embodiment of its symbols and values as the forms of religious subjectivity that constitute the basis of Sufi identities. The enactment of these embodied principles as moral performances allows the emergence of new circuits of solidarity, moral authority, and social distinction in the Syrian public sphere.

The religious landscape in Syria encompasses a plurality of interpretations and practices of Islam, ranging from text-oriented Salafi religiosity to Sufi mysticism, which are experienced and expressed in a context of enhanced public display of individual and collective piety. Islam as a lived and/or idealized religious tradition constitutes a major source of meaning and identity in the Syrian society, providing the individuals with both collective support and moral justification for their social practices. Therefore, there is a constant expression and affirmation of various Islamic symbols, practices, and values as the normative framework for participation in the public sphere.

The establishment of particular interpretations and practices of the Islamic tradition as public norm in the Syrian society is done less by the elaboration and circulation of discourses aiming to inscribe Islam in the political institutions of Syrian society, than through the continuous enactment of embodied religious dispositions in the ordinary practices of Muslims in their social interactions. The overtly political interpretations of Islam that were fostered by the Muslim Brothers gained social appeal as a form of opposition to the Baathist regime during the 1970s and 1980s. However, Islamist discourses declined as a factor of mobilization in the Syrian society since the military confrontation between the Islamic opposition and the Syrian army in the city of Hama in 1982. On the other hand, the strength of Islam as a symbolic and normative framework for social practice remained unaltered and actually increased during this same period.

The conspicuous public display of signs of individual and collective Muslim piety—such as veiling for women, wearing a beard for men, and mosque attendance for both sexes—became a common sight throughout Syria, constituting both an affirmation of religious identity and a particular form of participation in the public sphere. While these religious identities are clearly connected to various forms of idealization and imagination of an “Islamic society,” they do not amount to an integrated and coherent project with a clear plan of action in the realm of formal politics. In general, we can say that the efforts in affirming Islam as the normative framework for the Syrian society shifted from an overarching Islamist vision to an organized and coherent project with a clear plan of action in the realm of formal politics. In general, we can say that the efforts in affirming Islam as the normative framework for the Syrian society were focused on the moral reform of the individual.

Sufism has an important role in channelling and shaping the growing demand for religious knowledge and Islamic forms of personal piety that characterize contemporary Muslim religiosity in Syria. The charismatic character of the Sufi communities allows them to spread their influence over a large social spectrum. Reformed forms of Sufism that try to limit the mystical path to Quranic principles, such as the one proposed by Shaykh Ahmad Kufaru (d. 2004), who combined the functions of Mufti of Syria and head of the Kuftariyya Sufi Order, have a strong influence among middle-class Muslims in Damascus. On the other hand, most Sufi communities in Aleppo and, also, Damascus have their religious practices and power relations shaped by shared understandings of baraka (grace/sacred power) and its expression in karamat (miraculous deeds) performed by the shaykh and his disciples. Reformed and traditional forms of Sufism are often combined in the discourses and practices of Sufi shaykhs and their disciples in Syria.

Ritual and embodiment: Sufi constructions of the self

In order to understand the impact of the normative framework of Sufism in the social practices of its adherents we have to look to the processes of embodiment of its symbols and values as mystical experiences and forms of religious subjectivity, which constitute the basis of Sufi identities. The Sufi communities in Syria have the nabīs (personal and devotional link) between shaykh and each disciple as their main structuring principle. This personal relation of murshid (master) and murid (disciple) can be lived as an intense reorganization of the disciple’s self if he/that enters the process of tarīkh (mystical initiation) in tariqa (Sufi path) under the shaykh’s guidance, or in more a diffuse way through the attendance of the collective rituals of the zawiyas (ritual lodge).

The disciplinary practices that constitute Sufi initiation aim to control and reshape the nasīf (self) of the disciple, so as to detach it from the material universe of worldly appearances and direct it towards the esoteric universe of haqīqa (divine reality/truth). The Sufi initiation varies greatly in content, length, and elaboration, but my ethnographic observations in zawiyas linked to the Qadiriyya, the Rifaiyya, and the Shadhiliyya in Aleppo revealed an overall structure that starts with the memorization and recitation of the Qur’an, proceeds to the study of fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence), and continues with the study of classical and modern Sufi texts. As the disciple moves further in the initiation path the shaykh assigns him more complex and exterminating mystical exercises.

These exercises can range from the silent recitation of the names of God with the help of a misbahah (prayer-beads) to a period of complete khāla (reclusion), which takes place in some Qadiri and Shadhili zawiyas in Aleppo in order to make the disciple engage his whole self in the practice of meditation and the dhikr (mystical evocation of God’s names). These mystical exercises allow the disciple to embody religious values and moral dispositions as body positions, corporeal sensations, and physical abilities. The passage from textual study to mystical exercise symbolizes for the Sufis the progression from the zāhiri (exoteric) intellectual understanding of religious truths to the batṭini (esoteric) experiential apprehension of the divine reality.

The religious experiences that are lived by the Sufis as both mystical states and stages in the Sufi path are not purely subjective phenomena, as they must be expressed and validated within the normative framework of the Sufi tradition. The achievement of a certain degree in the Sufi initiation must be constantly proved through the performance of ordeals and the public expression of mystical states in the collective rituals of the Sufi communities. These rituals are usually open to anyone who wants to participate, gathering the shaykh’s disciples, members of the community, occasional participants in the ritual, and visitors.

Therefore, the hadra (ritual gatherings) of the Sufi communities constitute arenas of production, expression, affirmation, and dispute of mystical experiences and the religious identities that they ground. The main Sufi collective ritual is the dhikr. It varies in content and style of performance not only between different Sufi orders, but also among zawiyas that are linked to the same Sufi order. The dhikr enacts ideas of order, both social and mystical, and power as they are embodied in the religious persona of the shaykh who presides it.
This is well expressed in the dhikr of the two main zawiyas of the Qadiriyya in Aleppo, the zawiya al-Hilaliyya, and the zawiya al-Badinjkiyya. The dhikr of these zawiyas have almost identical symbolic content, but differ greatly in terms of their ritual performance. The dhikr of the Hilalyya enacts an ideal of harmonious articulation of the individual mystical experiences within the religious and social order framed by the Sharia and embodied by Shaykh Hilali. The dhikr of the Badinjkiyya emphasizes emotional intensity in the performance of mystical states. The individual mystical experiences achieved in this ritual are hierarchically ordained as effects of Shaykh Badinjki’s baraka, which is constantly expressed in the performance of miraculous deeds, such as religious healing.

The influence of Sufism in the Syrian society extends beyond the Sufi communities via services performed by the Sufi shaykhs for a wider audience, such as the dispensation of religious knowledge, religious healing, conflict mediation, and charity. In addition to that, various forms of individual piety or pragmatic religiosity are also channelled into the religious framework of Sufism through the use of amulets, the cult of saints, and the reading of mystical texts.

Social practice as moral performance: Sufism in the public sphere

The process of mystical initiation as well as the ritual socialization in the Sufi communities aims at embodying the symbolic, practical, and normative framework of Sufism as a set of moral dispositions that guide the social practices of its adepts. This embodied sense of morality is usually referred to the term adab, which in its Sufi usage means more than the simple compliance with rules of civility or social behaviour, as it is a practical expression of inner qualities of the self in their posture, gestures, glances and emotional states. It is thus not by chance that the acquisition of adab is usually coupled with the notion of akhlaq (morals) in the discourse of the adepts of Sufism. The centrality of the notion of akhlaq for the definition of Sufi identities can be seen in the frequently repeated Sufi adage, “all Sufism is akhlaq (morality), so those who advance in terms of morality are also advancing in terms of Sufism.”

The acquisition of adab has to be constantly proven and validated through moral performance in the public sphere, creating a framework of individual exemplarity upon which are built social evaluations and expectations about the proper social behaviour in the public sphere. It is common that the disciplinary reconfiguration of the self within a Sufi framework also leads to the reorganization of the social relations of the individual and gives an exemplary character to the individual performance in various social settings.

An example of this kind of “inner conversion” was the case of a young engineer in his thirties from a very secular and rich family who became a disciple of Shaykh Nadim, a Shadhili shaykh of Aleppo. He not only adopted a very strict moral behaviour, growing a beard, stopping to drink and to intermingle freely with women, but also gradually reshaped all his social relations according to the moral principles preached by his shaykh. It is interesting to note that this man presented both his religious piety, such as regular mosque attendance and participation in the Sufi hadra, and his “modern asceticism,” such as the practice of sports and a strong work ethic, as complementary parts of his moral performance.

Sometimes this process can create challenges to shared assumptions about the common good social practices that are culturally legitimate can be abandoned or changed as a result of the moral performance of individuals grouped together by their affiliation to a Sufi shaykh. For example, three disciples of Shaykh Nadim who owned shops in the district of Bab al-Faraj in Aleppo decided to abandon the practice of bargaining and haggling over prices in their commercial activities, as they felt that it was contrary to the Sufi principle of sidq (correctness). When asked these disciples whether this was not bad for their business, one of them answered, “We have good people who buy from our shops because they know they can trust us. More than that, our master (pointing to Shaykh Nadim’s picture hanging on the wall of his shop) is ever protecting us from temptation.”

The meaning of the principle of sidq was shaped by an experiential universe defined by a strong sense of personal and public morality combined with trust and respect towards the shaykh, which was enacted by the moral performance of the disciples in their ordinary practices. While other merchants criticized this methodical moral performance as excessive and exhibitionistic, the organization of a moral space for economic exchange, symbolically demarcated by Shaykh Nadim’s picture, attracted a regular clientele. Therefore, this orchestrated collective moral performance created the possibility of the emergence of stable circles of shared anticipation and trust even in a public arena as volatile as the marketplace.

This emergence of new circuits of solidarity, moral authority, and social distinction can bring about the re-signification of social practices and the redistribution of prestige, power, and authority in the public sphere. The processes of social change and reconfiguration generated by the performative mobilization of Sufi subjectivities and embodied principles in the public sphere constitute important elements to understand the constraints and possibilities present in the Syrian society, as Syria faces serious political and economic challenges in the international arena.

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Notes

1. The ethnographic data analyzed here were collected during my fieldwork in Sufi communities in Damascusk, Aleppo, and the Kurd Dagh from 1999 to 2001 and again in May 2002.