

Binding with a Perfect Sufi Master: Naqshbandī Defenses of *rābiṭa* from the Late Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic

M. Brett Wilson
Central European University, Dept. of History
wilsonb@ceu.edu

Abstract

This article explores debates surrounding the controversial spiritual exercise of *rābiṭa* – the binding of the disciple with a Sufi master by envisioning the image of the master in different parts of the body. Despite being criticized as a non-Qur'anic practice and as a form of idolatry, *rābiṭa* was made a ritual of prominence among the Khālīdī-Naqshbandī suborder which took shape in early nineteenth-century Syria and spread throughout the late Ottoman Empire. Tracing defenses of the practice from Arabic sources in the early nineteenth century to Turkish language treatises in the twentieth century, I argue that the Sufi *ādāb* manual *al-Bahja al-saniyya* composed by Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh al-Khānī (1798-1862) established a repertoire of arguments that have been adopted and reused in Turkish language treatises until the present with little variation, revealing a remarkable continuity of apologetics over nearly two centuries. Additionally, the article considers the role of this ritual in defining the nature of master-disciple relationships and establishing hierarchies of Sufi devotion and obedience.

Keywords

Sufism – Naqshbandī – Ottoman Empire – Mysticism – Turkey – Syria – Ritual

Debates about ritual practice in Sufi orders are often related to the nature of interpersonal relationships, the structures of power, and the modes of succession within a given lineage. As such, changes in ritual can be entangled in internal debates in ways that unite concerns about piety, community, and leadership. A case in point is the controversial practice of *rābiṭa* – the binding

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of the heart of the disciple with a Sufi master by envisioning the shaykh and mediating upon this image in different parts of the body.¹ This spiritual exercise has long been denounced as a non-Islamic practice and a ritual innovation by reformist critics, but within the Naqshbandī order it has been a central practice and a focal point of the master-disciple relationship. However, due to interventions by Shaykh Khālīd al-Baghdādī (1776-1827) that altered the practice, *rābiṭa* has fueled an internal debate within the Khālīdī-Naqshbandī suborder going back to the early nineteenth century.

This article examines defenses of binding following a major reordering of the Naqshbandiyya-Khālidiyya Sufi order in late Ottoman Damascus and traces the legacy of such defenses into the Turkish Republic. The following pages explore selected Arabic, Ottoman-Turkish and Turkish treatises on this contentious ritual. I focus on the Sufi *ādāb* manual *al-Bahja al-saniyya* composed by Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh al-Khānī (1798-1862), closely examining its defense of the practice and its relationship with Abdūlhakim Arvasi's (1865-1943) Turkish-language treatise *Rābiṭa-i Şerife*. I argue that al-Khānī's arguments form the main textual basis for debates over *rābiṭa* in the Turkish Republic. Despite political and legal transformations affecting the operation of the Sufi lodges, one can observe a remarkable continuity of argumentation from empire to republic surrounding this contentious spiritual exercise.

The Khālīdī-Naqshbandī Order and Shaykh Khālīd

The Khālīdī branch of the Naqshbandī order became influential in the early nineteenth century and continues to hold an important position in modern Turkey and Syria, with branches fanning out around the globe.² Well-known for its role in anti-colonial jihad and its influence on the formation of political Islam in modern Turkey, the Khālidiyya has roots in late Ottoman Damascus, where the Sufi teacher Shaykh Khālīd al-Baghdādī had his most enduring base of operations. In his lifetime, Shaykh Khālīd amassed a large number of disciples, made strategic contacts with members of the Ottoman ruling class, and propagated a particular political vision of the Naqshbandī path – one that prized active opposition to European imperialism, pledged allegiance to the Ottoman caliphate, and endorsed vehemently anti-Shi'ī views. Khālīd also

1 On the general concept of *rābiṭa*, see: Fritz Meier, *Zwei Abhandlungen über die Naqshbandiyya* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1994); B. Abu Manneh, "Khalwa and Rābiṭa in the Khālidi suborder", in *Naqshbandis*, ed. Alexandre Popovic, Marc Gaborieau, Thierry Zarccone (Istanbul-Paris: Editions Isis, 1999), 289-302.

2 Thierry Zarccone, "Les Nakşibendi et la république turque", *Turcica* 24 (1992), 133-51.

MADDE
SONRA GELEN DOKÜMAN
57
MAN

0840
Diyanet Vakfı
Kütüphanesi
T.C. Cumhurbaşkanlığı
İnceleme ve Araştırma Merkezi

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MADDE YAYIMLANDIKTAN
SONRA GELEN DOKÜMAN

Rabiṭa
170057
Halid el-Baghdadi
080307
Nakşibendiyye
140098