
A Muslim Mystic Community in Britain: Meaning in the West and for the West

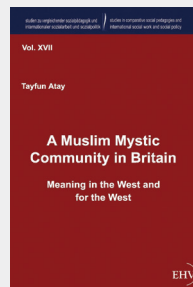
By Tayfun Atay

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THE NAQSHBANDIYYA is perhaps one of the widest-spread Islamic religious brotherhoods due to its active involvement in political affairs. Its ‘strength’ comes from the fact it could trace the sheiks of the order as far back as to the Prophet of Islam through his companion Abu Bakr. The *silsila* (the chain of transmission) of the order also contains some very important figures in Islamic history, like Salman al-Farisi and Bayazid al-Bistami. Despite the importance of the order and its worldwide expansion, the published works on the subject could fill only a small shelf. The order also has a great number of followers in Turkey, including some prominent political figures. Since Shah Bahauddin Naqshband, the founder of the order, the succeeding sheiks of the Naqshbandiyya *tarikat* (religious order) have currently been handed to Sheikh Nazim al-Kibrisi al-Haqqani, a Turkish Cypriot. The Sheikh has been given the task of expanding the order to the West, and as a result of arduous efforts he has been able to establish some centers in various European and American cities, with the biggest one being in London. Author Tayfun Atay studied this center for his Ph.D. thesis submitted to London University.

It is unfortunate that this beautifully written and ethnographically rich monograph took so long to be published in English, though it was published in Turkish in 1996. Atay spent a year among the disciples of the Sheikh from



1991-92. As a result of his fieldwork through participant observation, readers learn about the political and cultural aspects of the Sufi group living in a Western setting. Their daily lives are mostly spent struggling to cope with their surroundings, but the moderate approach of their Sheikh toward this world

facilitates their lives of *mürids* (disciples) in modern London setting. The ethical dimension of Sufism especially through training, or rather, breaking the pride of self or ego, that is, their *nefs*, helps them to overcome the difficulties they may encounter in their everyday lives. After providing some background information on the history and conceptual framework of Sufism and the context of Naqshbandiyya in Islamic history, the monograph goes on to describe the mystic community and their Sheikh Nazim al-Kibrisi. Atay enriches this section with his interviews and personal life stories from Turkish and non-Turkish *mürids*, and even from the Sheikh himself. This method allows readers to truly hear the voices of the subjects in this anthropological work; it brings to life the *mürids* and the Sheikh. It is revealed that the author had difficulties, constraints, and pressures due to his personal background, which helps explain the polarization of Turkish society between secular and conservative camps. Yet, throughout the course of his fieldwork, Atay admits he came to accept and appreciate the different “ways of lives” of “other” people. This shift

was perhaps facilitated by the ethnic diversity of the followers of the Sheikh. As one who has experience researching different cultures, it is easy to appreciate the steps Atay took to become involved with his study, and to look beyond the subjects' differences. This personal account and reflection makes the monograph of Atay even more impressive, as he was an insider and an outsider at the same time.

In the chapter four we learn the rituals of the community; the *zīkr* (remembrance) ceremony is described in great detail, and it is explained how it differs from other Sufi orders as well as from other branches of Naqshbandiyya. This ceremony gives the *mūrīds* a sense of belonging to the *tarikāt*, and acts as a way of communicating with Allah directly, and most important, it distinguishes the Naqshbandiyya from other forms/*tarikats* of Islam.

In later chapters Atay shows us how Sufism is a discipline that adjusts the lives of individuals in a 'modern world' by way of denying the self through eschatology. The London-based community is described as a new religious/social movement with its emphasis on the idea of a *Mahdi* (Messiah, awaited leader). This aspect of the community could be dealt with more elaborately since it helps the *mūrīds* to assimilate into the modern world by giving them millenarian/cargo cult-style expectations for a redeemer and a better future. The community's hopes for the future (especially the Turkish *mūrīds*) made them engaged in a political discourse that aims to change the then-secular aspect of the Turkish Republic for a more acceptable position for conservative Muslims of Turkey. The book also deals with the rivalry between Sufism and Wahhabism, a puritan movement that emerged in Arabia in the late 18th century. As we understand from the text, the Sheikh and his fol-

lowers ceaselessly defend themselves against the (imaginary or real) accusations from the Wahhabis that they were engaging in innovation in Islam law (*bidā*), which is strictly forbidden.

This monograph definitely reflects the need for detailed community studies in order to understand many "modern (mis)representations" of Muslims – particularly as a way to evaluate such questions as whether Muslims would be able adapt to modernity (the Western notions of democracy, multiculturalism, etc.), especially in a world that had suffered the trauma of September 11. This book will definitely contribute toward understanding the life-world of Muslims as they navigate their religion through the ever-expanding globalization and Westernization (as the subtitle of the book suggests). However, the author himself admits that this scholarly work could have included more about the gender roles within the community. He could easily have expanded on this topic, since the Sheikh tolerates the practice of mixed gatherings more than the usual, especially compared to other Sufi orders in Islam that command a strict segregation of sexes. Yet, this is an issue we encounter in many anthropological works on Islam: they are always lacking ethnography on the opposite sex of the fieldworker. Still, this monograph is an important work, but is only an introductory contribution, and it would be better to include an index section in the end of the book. It could encourage future researchers to work on a comparative study of different branches of Sufism and different religious/social movements in the modern world, as the Sheikh Nazim still influences the non-Muslim world through his inspirational interventions – as seen in his spiritual support of the Chilean miners during their captivity for more than two months after a collapse in 2010.