

neo-Sufism: A Case Study of the San]s\yah Order of North Africa and Sahara

Yousef Bennaji*
Ghulam Shams-ur-Rehman**

Abstract

Reform and renewal is considered one of the most celebrated characteristics of the Islamic intellectual thought of the early eighteenth century which gave an impetus to the subsequent revival movements. Sufism also passed through that transformative phase where some doctrinal and puritanical changes had been observed in Sufi doctrine and rituals. On the basis of this shift, the term 'neo-Sufism' was devised to study it systematically and to differentiate it from the traditional classical Sufism. Fazlur Rahman claims that the San]s\yah Order of North Africa and Sahara, "both in its organization and aims, is a representative

* PhD Scholar, Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, University of Exeter, UK

** Assistant Professor, Department of Islamic Studies, Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan

par excellence of neo-Sufism".¹The present study, in this perspective, endeavours to present and evaluate the concept of neo-Sufism and to analyse that how much its application on the San]s\yah is pertinent and convincing.

Background and Introduction

It is not easy to define Sufism in specific terms because it contains divergent and multi-dimensional metaphysical, socio-political and anthropological elements. All eminent Sufis claim that Sufism purifies hearts and directs intentions towards God.² All Sufi orders have certain specific rules and regulations to achieve this realisation, and there are particular spiritual states and stations in Sufism that may be attained by performing certain practices and rituals. The struggle of Sufis for the purification of intention towards God leads them to formulate specific practices, and over time these become an indispensable part of Sufi teachings. Esoteric realities and spiritual subtleties are perceived through the performance of these rituals.

The different Sufi orders and traditions have many divergent rituals, and every order has its own distinguishing practices, according to the requirements of specific time and space. As Arberry writes: "Each Order is marked by its particular rituals, far more than by discrimination of

1 Rahman, Fazlur, *Islam* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), 207-208.

2 Zarr]q, A+mad, *Qaw[id al-Ta~awwuf*, ed. Zuhr\ al-Najj[r (Cairo: Maktabat al-Azhar\yah 1989), 3.

doctrine."³ However, there are certain practices and rituals common to all Sufi orders, such as initiation, liturgy, *fikr*, *mur[qbah*, *mush[hidah*, *wird*, *~u+bah*, *dikr* and *sam[<* (Sufi audition), and these play a significant role in Sufi life.⁴

From the late eighteenth century a significant change was observed in the Sufi thoughts and methods that was partly a response to the corrupt authoritarianism of Sufism and partly a response to anti-colonial resistance and modernism.⁵ Reformist Sufi trends that showed a similar pattern were also evaluated by H. A. R. Gibb as well as by J. Spencer Trimingham. Gibb observed that there were Sufi revival movements across the Muslim world from India to Central Asia, and to most of the outlying lands during the nineteenth century and "the most striking of these newer developments was the formation of reformist missionary congregations on a strict orthodox basis, but organized on the lines of the Sufi *tariqas*."⁶ Similarly, Trimingham, one of the prominent scholars on North African Sufism, also noted the development of reformatory, activist, Sufi movements in the late

3 Arberry, A. J., *Sufism* (London: Berne Convention, 1950), 89.

4 cf: for the Ni<matullah\ and Naqshaband\ rituals, Netton, Ian Richard, *Sufi Ritual: The Practical Universe* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000).

5 Rahman, *Op. Cit.*, 203-204; Dallal A+mad, "The Origins and Objectives of Islamic Revivalists Thought, 1750-1850" in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* (American Oriental Society, 1993), 113: 341-359.

6 Gibb, H. A. R., *Mohammedanism, An Historical Survey* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), 130-131.

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁷ Voll commented:

It is important, in the context of such analysis, not to lose sight of the antecedents of the neo-Sufi orders of the eighteenth and specially the nineteenth century. They did not represent a sudden emergence of a new form of Islamic organization so much as they appear to be a stage in the long evolution of various style of Islamic organizations. In the emerging eighteenth-century organizations, there is a combination of themes that provides a basis for at least some revivalist spirit and action.⁸

Voll also argues that Western scholars of the late nineteenth century such as Louis Rinn, A. Le Chatelier, and the co-authored volume by Octave Depont and Xavier Coppolani, examined some important activist styles of Sufi brotherhood. They identified them as adherents of pan-Islamism. These pan-Islamist Sufi movements were later identified as "Neo-Sufi". Voll also refers to the work of Lothrop Stoddard to show the historic link of pan-Islamic thoughts and neo-Sufism. He analyses that Stoddard "identified "Pan-Islamism" as an important element in world affairs in the 1920s, when the major movements opposed to European imperialism were being defined. In his view, "Pan-Islamism" had been uncoordinated during the early nineteenth century, but the "beginning of self-conscious, systematic Pan-Islamism dated from about the middle of the nineteenth century" when the movement was shaped by the effective organization of

7 Trimingham, J. Spencer devoted a chapter of his book to "Nineteenth-Century Revival Movements". cf: *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).

8 Voll, John Obert, *Islam: Continuity and Change in the Modern World* (Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 1982), 55.

major Sufi brotherhoods, especially the Sanusiyya, which was one of the most visible orders at the time because of its resistance to Italian imperialism in Libya".⁹

On the basis of this shift, the term 'neo-Sufism' was devised to differentiate it from traditional classical Sufism, and its revivalist and socially activist forms of networks and communities, which were more organised than those of the earlier Sufi orders and became a salient feature of neo-Sufism. Fazlur Rahman, a prominent figure among the scholars who initiated the concept of neo-Sufism, explained some of the common characteristics of this new phenomenon.¹⁰ He observed that during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Sufi reform movements greatly resembled orthodox puritanical movements and that their reform programmes were based on turning towards the primary principles of Islam, i.e., the Qur'an and Sunnah, and on stripping away reprehensible innovation and heresy from the society. This common fact was illustrated by the term '%ar\qah Mu+ammad\yah'.¹¹

9 Voll, John Obert, Neo-Sufism: Reconsidered Again, in *Canadian Journal of African Studies* (Canadian Association of African Studies, 2008) 42: 314-330 at 316.

10 Rahman, *Op. Cit.*, 206; Lapidus, Ira M., "Islamic Revival and Modernity: The Contemporary Movements and the Historical Paradigms" in *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* (Brill, 1997), 40: 444-460.

11 On the relationship of the %ar\qah Mu+ammad\yah to neo-Sufism, see, Bredford, G. Martin, *Muslim Brotherhoods in Nineteenth-Century Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 71-72, 106; Radtke, Bernd, Between Projection and Suppression: Some Considerations Concerning the Study of Sufism; in *Shā' Islam Sects and Sufism*, ed. Frederick de Jong (Utrecht, 1992), 70-82.

A number of other reform movements also used this term for the expansion of their reform programmes. For instance, the anti-Sufi Wahh[b\s and the movement of Sayyid A+mad Baraylaw\ in India adopted it for their missions,¹² and the renowned Sufi A+mad Ibn Idr\s who founded his order in Arabia, also used the term %ar\qah mu+ammad\yah. Rahman also asserts that %ar\qah mu+ammadiyah was the most prominent feature of Islamic revivalism during that period of history. As mentioned above, and as the term itself illustrates, it was a concept shared by all Sufi and anti-Sufi movements. To vindicate his argument Rahman gives the example of A+mad Ibn Idr\s (d. 1837) and his followers, whose mystical orientation was different from that of medieval Sufism, being to some extent analogous to the anti-Sufi Wahh[b\ movement. On the basis of their difference from traditional Sufism, they were named 'neo-Sufis'.¹³ Rahman claims that Ibn Idr\s "rejected the idea of a union with God and postulated instead a union with the spirit of the Prophet Mu+ammad as the only possible and legitimate goal for the Sufi."¹⁴ He further argues that this reformative impulse brought orthodox-Sufi movements on the scene of nineteenth century in North Africa and India.

12 Bari, M.A. "A Nineteenth Century Muslim Reform Movement in India." in *Arabic and Islamic Studies in Honour of Hamilton A.R. Gibb*, ed. G. Makdisi, (Cambridge, Mass. Harvard University Press, 1965), 84-102; Khan, Muin-ud-Din Ahmad, ^ar\qah Mu+ammad\yah Movement: An Analytical Study, *Islamic Studies* (Islamabad: Islamic Research Institute, International Islamic University, Islamabad, 1967), 6: 375-388.

13 Rahman, *Op. Cit.*, 206.

14 *Ibid.*

Besides the changes wrought in the doctrine and practices of the old established Sufi orders through this new development, certain new brotherhoods with an entirely fresh orientation came to be formed in the nineteenth century, such as the Sanusiya in North Africa and the Muhammadiya in India, which were strictly orthodox in spirit and practice and differed radically from the traditional objectives of the old orders.¹⁵

It can therefore be concluded that puritanical reformism was a pervasive and common phenomenon in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Islamic movements. Rahman further argues that the change in Sufi methods represented a response to orthodox pressure and criticism:

The reform of Sufism under orthodox pressure - both from within and from outside Sufism - resulted in a phenomenon wherein Sufism was largely stripped of its ecstatic and metaphysical character and content, which were replaced by a content which was nothing else than the postulates of the orthodox religion. This fact can't be over-emphasized, since through it Sufism was made to serve the activist impulse of orthodox Islam and is a ubiquitous fact in all the major forms of pre-Modernist reform movements.¹⁶

O'Fahey and Radtke also evaluate the concept, development and usage of the term "neo-Sufism". They identify Fazlur Rahman as the originator of this term¹⁷ who employed this term to "Sufism reformed on orthodox lines and interpreted in an activist sense".¹⁸ O'Fahey and Radthe produced

15 Rahman, *Op. Cit.*, 202.

16 Rahman, *Ibid*, 205.

17 O'Fahey, R. S. and Radtke, Bernd, "Neo-Sufism Reconsidered" in *Der Islam*, (1993) 70: 52-87 at 55.

18 Rahman, *Op. Cit.*, p. 254.

Note: Rahman argues: "the moral motive of Sufism was emphasized and some of its techniques of *dhikr* or *mur[qba]* "spiritual concentration" adopted. But the

valuable critique of Rahman's understanding of neo-Sufism and its application on the San]s\yah. They concur with him that there were significant innovations in the organisational structure of neo-Sufis. However, they criticise Rahman's assumptions regarding the doctrinal change in neo-Sufism. They affirm Rahman's claim that al-San]s\ organised "in Cyernaica a network of institutions which in design and function were totally new to the society in which they were implanted".¹⁹ Kunt Vikør, a member of O'Fahey's academic circle, also asserts that "al-San]s\ set out from Mecca to realize an organizational ideal; although the spiritual contents of the ideal were to spread the teachings of Ibn Idr\s, not his own, he was looking for geographical space to establish something new in terms of institutions."²⁰ As for as, change in Sufi doctrine is concerned, such as the rejection of Ibn al-*Arab*'s *wa+dat al-wujjd* (the unity of being) and annihilation in the Prophet, O'Fahey and Redtke criticise Rahman and argue "the idea that Ibn Idr\s substituted union with the Prophet for union with God is nonsense. For him, as for Sufism since its inception, the *imitation of Muhammadi* was a means, a way to the union of

object and content of his concentration were identified with the orthodox doctrine and the goal redefined as the strengthening of faith in dogmatic tenets and moral purity of the spirit. This type of neo-Sufism, as one may call it, tended to regenerate orthodox activism and re-inculcate a positive attitude to this world. *Ibid.*, 239.

19 O'Fahey, and Radtke, *Op. Cit.*, 76, 79.

20 Vikør, Knut S., *Sufi and Scholar on the Desert Edge: Mu+ammad b. <Al\ al-San]s\ and his brotherhood* (London: Hurst, 1995), 144.

God — not a substitute."²¹ Vikør also elucidates that al-San]s\'s works do not suggest any special union with the Prophet. He writes:

It is also clear that there is no question of a union with the Prophet in the same way as one experiences union with God. The text [of *al-San]s*] clearly and repeatedly refers to meeting the Prophet, standing face to face with him as it were, in the most physical sense. It even refers to the *muhammadi* asking the Prophet for guidance, thus bringing the encounter on to a completely different level to that of the mystical union with the divine.²²

Moreover, dismissal of the hierarchical mystical Way for illumination, and denial of the strict master-disciple relationship were regarded as a salient feature of neo-Sufism. The neo-Sufis parted from the medieval concept of the 'invincible master', emphasizing instead initiation through dreams and visions by the saints, and directly by the Prophet Mu+ammad himself. They therefore stressed the notion of annihilation in the Prophet (*fan[> f\ al-ras]l*) by reciting prayers for the spirit of the Messenger. Another characteristic of neo-Sufism was the elimination of antinomian trends, reprehensible innovations and submission to the 'Mu+ammadan way'. Hoffman, too, analysed neo-Sufi trends and explained how %ar\qah mu+ammad\yah affirmed the significance of meditating on the Prophet in the hope of achieving a state of annihilation within him. She notes that according to the experts of neo-Sufism, this

21 O'Fahey, and Radtke, *Op. Cit.*, 70.

22 Vikør, *Op. Cit.*, 234.

is a significant change in Sufi devotional life.²³

Hoffman quotes Jonathan Katz, another important scholar of Sufism who considered neo-Sufism to be a process of the 'democratization of sanctity'.²⁴ Neo-Sufi orders shared certain fundamental issues with the orthodox anti-Sufi movements, such as rejection of antinomian Sufi trends and condemnation of heresies and religious innovations. Similarly they endorsed the idea of reformation. However, the neo-Sufis differed from them in spiritual dimensions. While they accepted the prominence of classical Sufis, they nevertheless reformulated their ideas according to contemporary requirements, and is a matter for further investigation to ascertain the extent to which the neo-Sufi orders rejected the metaphysical teachings and spiritual methods of medieval Sufism, and to establish how much the Sanls\yah Order was influenced by new trends of this sort. Voll is also among the scholars who revisited neo-Sufism and argue that the Sufi organizations of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are observed as being "new". "In terms of content, certain aspects of the "neo-Sufism" conceptualizations are confirmed, but in ways that requires modifications of both the relatively simplistic early descriptions in the so-called consensus and the stark lines of the critique"²⁵. For a better

23 Hoffman, Valerie J., "Annihilation in the Messenger of God: The Development of a Sufi Practice" in *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (1999) 31: 351-369 at 362.

24 *Ibid.*, 360.

25 Voll, *Op. Cit.* 314-315.

understanding of neo-Sufism and its correlation with the San]s\yah, it is necessary to present a brief introduction to the important ideologues and leaders of the Order.

The San]s\yah

The San]s\yah Order, regarded as one of the most influential movements in Cyrenaica, was founded by Sayyad Mu+ammad b. <Al\ al-San]s\ (1787-1859), an expert in Islamic sciences who responded actively to the challenges of his time and was a highly influential religious leader in nineteenth-century North Africa. He created a reformist programme to address contemporary issues, and his message combined different and divergent elements of Islamic knowledge. Emphasizing the need for *ijtih[d*, he established his revivalist movement on the basis of Islamic *shari<ah*, integrating it with other branches of Islamic doctrine.

Differently from Wahh[bism, al-San]s\ and his adherents accommodated Sufism and tried to fuse Sufi piety and passion into exoteric Islamic law. In its origin and essence the San]s\yah was a Moroccan Sufi order which flourished in Cyrenaica and various regions of Sahara. Mu+ammad al-San]s\ himself set up his movement on the basis of the teachings of A+mad Ibn Idr\s, founder of the Idr\s\ Order and after Idr\s's establishment of %ar\qah mu+ammad\yah.

Mu+ammad bin <Al\ al-San]s\, also known as the Grand al-San]s\ (*al-san]s\ al-kab\r*) was born at W[si%a, near Mustagh[nim in Algeria, his father died when he was very

young.²⁶ Through tribal membership he was a descendant of Fatima, daughter of the Prophet Mu+ammad. After his early education, al-San]s\ went to Fez in Morocco to join the famous Qarawiy\n University which was the centre of excellence under the encouraging patronage of Sultan S\d\ Mu+ammad. He was the pupil of such famous scholars as Mu+ammad al-^ayyib b. K\r[n (d. 1227/1812) and Hamd]n b. al-|]jj (d. 1232/1817), and remained an associate of Mulay Sulaym[n and the renowned Sufi A+amd Ibn <Aj\bah (d. 1224/1809).²⁷ Because of his abilities, Mulay Sulaym[n wanted al-San]s\ to serve at his court.²⁸ In Fez al-San]s\ also joined many Sufi orders, in particular the N[~iriyah, the ^ayyib\yah, the Darq[w\yah, and the Tij[n\yah.²⁹

He arrived in Cairo in 1238/1823 and settled in the Riw[q al-Maghr[b\yah at al-Azhar University, where he stayed for two and half years.³⁰ Among his Egyptian teachers were Thu<aylab al-šar\r al-Mi~r\³¹, <Al\ al-

26 al-San]s\, A+amad al-Shar\f, *Al-Anw[r al-quds\yah f\ muqaddimat al-šar\qah al-San]s\yah* (Istanbul, 1329/1920), 3; al-Sa<d\, Mu+ammad b. <Is[, *Al-Maw[hib al-jal\la f\ al-ra<rif bi im[m al-šar\qa al-San]s\yah* (Cairo: Maktabat al-|ij[z\, 1357/1938).

27 al-Katt[n\, *Fihris al-Fah[ris*, 2:854-855; Zirkil\, Khayr al-D\n, *al-A<l[m: Q[m]s Tar[jim li-Ashhar al-Rij[l wa-al-Nis[> min al-<Arab wa-al-Musta<rib\n wa-al-Mustashriq\n* (Beirut: D[r al-<Ilm lil-Mal[y\n, 1984) 1: 245.

28 Ziadeh, Nicola A., *Sanusiyyah: a study of a revivalist movement in Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1958), 37.

29 Vikør, *Op. Cit.*, 49-60.

30 P[sh[, <Al\ Mub[rak, *Kit[b al-Khu% al-jad\daj al-tawf\q\yah* (Bll[q: 1886-8, reprinted from Cairo in 1980-7), 6: 53.

31 al-San]s\ , *Op. Cit.*, 28; al-Katt[n\, *Op. Cit.*, 2: 113.

M\l\ al-T]nis\, and A+mad al-@[w\. Al-San]s\ then moved to the East and settled in |ij[z where he became, and remained, a loyal disciple of A+mad Ibn Idr\s. In addition to Ibn Idr\s, he also studied under the M[lik\ Muft\ of Mecca, Mu+ammad al-Bann[n\, Mu+ammad <Abid al-Sind\, and others.³² Later he spent a period of time in Mad\nah, as well as in Yemen, studying with various eminent scholars.

But, as noted, his most important teacher was A+mad Ibn Idr\s. On one occasion Ibn Idr\s said to him: "You are we and we are you", to which al-San]s\ replied: "Oh, Master! What has the best mansion of the moon in common with the midday sun?" Ibn Idr\s replied: "This is a favour from God, who disposes as He sees fit."³³ A+mad Ibn Idr\s (d. 1253/1837) was the founder of %ar\qah mu+ammad\yah which was an extension of the Sh[dhil\yah Sufi order, considered as one of the main reformist and revivalist orders of the eighteenth century. His teachings had a tremendous influence on later Islamic reformist movements, particularly the Sufi orders of North Africa.³⁴

Al-San]s\ remained in Mecca in the company of Ibn Idr\s and after the latter's death was appointed his deputy or *khal\fah*.³⁵ He continued to live in Mecca for some years but in late 1255/1840, travelled with his

32 *Ibid.*, 35.

33 *Ibid.*, 68.

34 Vikør, *Op. Cit.*, 113.

35 *Ibid.*

scholars and students to Cyrenaica³⁶ where he focused his attention on the education of the Bedouins and nomadic tribes of Cyrenaica (in what today is Libya). Initially, observing the decadence of Islamic teaching and understanding in the nomadic societies of the Sahara and Cyrenaica, he conducted a very vigorous campaign to educate these populations in the traditional Islamic manner and to win them back to the teachings of classical Islam based on the Qur'an and Sunnah. Al-Sanusi established many Sufi lodges (*zawiya*) across the desert areas from Egypt to Tunisia, and these played an authoritative and important role in the resistance to the French in the Sahara and the Italians in Cyrenaica.³⁷

A prolific author, al-Sanusi produced valuable works in *fiqh*, Islamic law, history, and Sufism, and his writings were gathered into a collection called *Al-majma'at la-mukhtarah*, which constituted the philosophical and intellectual foundations of his Order. The Grand Sanusi died in 1859 but his Order flourished under the leadership of his son Sayyid Muhammad al-Mahdi, who, having received his early education in Mecca, had then joined his father at al-Jaghbub in 1858-59.³⁸ Sayyid al-Mahdi focused mainly on educating and training the Bedouin tribes of the region, and helped by his nephew Ahmad al-Sharif, he also established many Sufi *zawiyas* (lodges). He remained the head of the Sanusi Order

36 Shukri, Muhammad Fawzi, *Sanusiyyah, dawlat wa-dawlah* (Cairo: Dar al-Fikr al-Arabi, 1948), 27, 28.

37 Ziadeh, *Op. Cit.*, 46.

38 al-Ashhab, Ayyub, *Barqah al-Arabiyyah* (Cairo: n.d.), 29, 30.

until his death in 1902. Ziadeh notes that: "during his period the order reached its zenith in both the number of z[wiyas and influence."³⁹ As a result of the decadence of Ottoman rule and the domination of European nations in the region, the order became a central and powerful force in the struggle against colonization. This was a very important period in the formation of Sufi z[wiyas and of propagation of the resistance movement.

After the death of Sayyad Mu+ammad al-Mahd\, his nephew A+mad Shar\f al-San]s\ became the leader of the Order. He had been fighting practically all his life against invaders in the region, and for much of this period the San]s\yah Order had found itself mainly on the battlefield. In 1918 A+mad al-Shar\f abdicated and took refuge in Turkey. Therefore, he appointed his cousin (and the son of Mu+ammad al-Mahd\) Mu+ammad Idr\s as chief of the San]s\ Order responsible for religious training, while <Umar al-Mukht[r was appointed as a military leader of the Order.⁴⁰ A+mad al-Shar\f died in Mecca in 1933. Announcing his death, the Italian Minister of Colonies remarked that "with his death all our fears in Africa passed away."⁴¹

Unlike A+mad al-Shar\f, Mu+ammad Idr\s (1890-1983) was not a warrior; rather, he believed in mediation, and successfully

39 Ziadeh, *Op. Cit.*, 52.

40 Horeir, Abdulmola S., *Social and Economic Transformation in the Libyan Hinterland during the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century: The Role of Sayyid A+mad al-Shar\f al-San]s* (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, USA. 1981), 294.

41 Ziadeh, *Op. Cit.*, 71.

negotiated many agreements.⁴² He tried to maintain the unity of the order after Ahmad al-Sharfi and Umar al-Mukhtar (d. 1931). The Order remained popular among the masses, and the adherents of the movement took over the governing authority following the withdrawal of the Ottomans from the region. After years of colonial domination and two World Wars, Muhammad Idris continued his negotiations for independence for Cyrenaica, and eventually began the process of uniting Libya into a single monarchy and Cyrenaica, Fezzan and Tripoli were united in a single political unit. Ghazi notes: "On the political front, the Sanusiyyah role was of immense significance. It was first time in the history that the people of Cyrenaica, Fezzan, and Tripoli were united as a single political unit in a single sovereign state. No doubt, territorial, lingual or racial considerations had no place in Sanusi scheme of things, yet there was a need of a separate geographical unit to bring into play its programme of socio-religious reforms."⁴³ The Sanusiyyah played a vital role in the integration of separate geographical units and developed a sense of a national cohesion among the Bedouin tribes of the region. Libya achieved independence in 1951 and Idris, the grandson of the Grand Sanusi, was proclaimed King of Libya in 1951, and as head of the Sanusiyyah, established a Libyan Federal State. This was the climax of the

42 Evans-Pritchard E. E., *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica* (London: Oxford University Press, 1949), 145.

43 Ghazi, Mahmood Ahmad, *The Sanusiyyah Movement of North Africa: An Analytical Study* (Islamabad, Shariah Academy, International University, Islamabad, 2001), 46.

Sanjs\yah period. In 1969 King Idr\s I was no longer able to maintain his rule and was deposed by the Libyan army under the leadership of Colonel Muammar Qaddafi.⁴⁴

neo-Sufism and Sanjs\yah

The details above concerning the concept of neo-Sufism and the brief sketch of the Sanjs\yah Order and its intellectual and political contribution help in understanding the position of the Sanjs\yah and its correlation with neo-Sufism. Mu+ammad al-Sanjs\ was a traditional scholar who not only believed in the orthodoxy of Islamic teaching but was also highly entrenched in its mystical teachings. On the other hand, however, he was an ardent critic of religious innovations, heresies and antinomian Sufi trends. He also tried to revitalise the Islamic jurisprudence re-establishing the *ijtih[d* theory. The notion that 'the door of *ijtih[d* was closed'⁴⁵ is properly challenged in the writings of al-Sanjs\. He criticised the blind conformation and adherence to a particular *madhhab* which, according to him, leads towards division in the Muslim community. Though, he follows the M[lik\ rite, but in principle, he favours the opinion that the contemporary issues should be resolved directly in the light of Qur>[n and Sunnah. He presents his *ijtih[d* theory in his book *Iq[& al-wasn[n fil-<amal bil-+ad\th wa-al-Qur>[n* [The Waking of the Sleeper by Following Tradition and Qur>[n] and

44 al-Sal[b], <Al\ Mu+ammad, *Tar\kh al-+arkat al-Sanjs\yah f\ Afr\qa* (Beirut: D[r al-Ma<rifah, 2005), 599.

45 cf. Hallaq, Wael B., "Was the Gate of Ijtih[d closed?", *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, (1984), xvi, 1, pp. 3-41.

devotes over a third of his book to explain his *ijtihād* insights. He admires the works of leading legalists of the four Sunn\ Schools of Law, and believes that it is not possible that the early scholars had intentionally held any opinion that contradicted the Sunnah, nor can anyone deny what is valid in the Qur>[n and Sunnah and vice versa.⁴⁶ Actually their differences of opinion were because of the unavailability of the whole *ʿadāth* corpus.⁴⁷ Therefore, according to al-San]s\, following the opinion contrary to the sound *ʿadāth* is prohibited even though it is validated by pious ancestors. Furthermore, he argues that *taqlīd* [blind following] is also invalid.⁴⁸ San]s\ knows the standard argument for the permissibility of *taqlīd* for common men, and argues that there was no commandment to follow a particular school of law, even for a common man. Nor could anyone make an act obligatory that was not commanded in the divine rule.⁴⁹ Dallal points out that:

In response to the criticism that common people are not capable of recognizing the exact meaning of *ʿadāth*, San]s\ argues that potential for error created by relying on a derived ruling far exceeds the error in relying on the evidence upon which the ruling is built. San]s\ pushes his idea further and asserts that every Muslim is obliged to exercise a measure of *ijtihād*, or at least try to do so.⁵⁰

46 al-San]s\, Mu+ammad, *Iq[ā al-Wasn[n f\ al-ʿAmal bi al-ʿadāth, wa-al-Qur>[n*, in *Majmuʿa al-Mukht[rah*, ed. Mu+ammad ʿAbdu Ibn Ghalb]n, (Manchester, 1990), 36.

47 *Ibid.*, 15.

48 *Ibid.*, 19, 21.

49 *Ibid.*, 85-97.

50 Dallal, *Op. Cit.*, 357-358.

As mentioned above that Al-Sanjs\ follows the M[lik\ rite but he criticises *qiy[s* which, according to Ghazi, "represents the culmination of |anbal\ influence on M[lik\ jurisprudence through the indomitable personality of Ibn Timiyyah".⁵¹ Al-Sanjs\ not only formulated a way of *ijtih[d* but also utilised it in his book *Shif[> al~adr bi-r[yy al-mas[>il al-<ashar f\ raf< al-yadayn f\ al~al[t wa-ghayrihi* [The healing of the bosom by the honey of the ten matters, on the correctness of lifting two hands in prayer and others].

On the basis of his reformist ideas and the participation of later Sanjs\s in the resistance movement, some scholars perceive the Sanjs\yah as a manifestation of neo-Sufism. Rahman, for instance, considers Sanjs\yah as the best example of neo-Sufism, remarking that:

The Sanjs\ Order, both in its organization and aims, is a representative *par excellence* of neo-Sufism. It is thoroughly activist in its impulse with a purely moral-reformist programme, issuing in political action. On the purely doctrinal side Mu+ammad ibn <Al\ al-Sanjs\ claimed the right of *ijtih[d* and part of his thought was thereby dubbed as infidelity to Islam (*kufir*) by a M[lik\ Shaykh at al-Azhar, and because of orthodox opposition he was forced to leave Mecca in 1259/1843. On the practical side, although he inculcated in his followers a kind of liturgical practice (*dhikr*), his overall teaching was geared to practical ends based on the orthodox tenets of Islam.⁵²

Rahman further notes that al-Sanjs\ established different Sufi lodges (*z[wiyas*) where people were not only instructed in the faith but were also trained in arms, as well

51 Ghazi, *Op. Cit.*, 232.

52 Rahman, *Op. Cit.*, 207, 208.

as in other professional activities like agriculture and trade.⁵³ Contrary to Rahman's understanding of Sanj\yah, Vikør rejects the idea of al-Sanj\'s relationship with neo-Sufism. He argues that in order to determine the correct position of al-Sanj\ it is necessary to look at al-Sanj\'s works where he seems to be "a proponent of reform, but within a tradition."⁵⁴ Furthermore, maintains Vikør:

He was a Sufi as well as a scholar in the exoteric sciences of Islam. He was a Sufi in his organisational work, but in most of his writings we meet a traditional scholar concerned with different branches of Islamic science. Perhaps most remarkable is his discussion of the principles of Islamic Law, where his views were in sharp contrast to those of the leading circles in Cairo and other centres of Islamic learning.⁵⁵

Vikør asserts that al-Sanj\ prohibited innovations and excesses and endorsed "fairly conservative" forms of ritual. Nor should it be forgotten that he was the heir of Ibn Idr\s, who was also a reformist. But both Ibn Idr\s and al-Sanj\ venerated the ideas of Ibn <Arab\, and his *F]~]~ al-|ikam* was on Ibn Idr\s's reading list of books for his students.⁵⁶

According to Hoffman, the Sanj\yah and Mirgh[n\yah both emphasized meditation on the Prophet through visualization in order to achieve union with him. On this basis, Gibb, Trimmingham, and Rahman concluded that mystical union with the Prophet was a substitution for mystical union with God,

53 *Ibid.*, 208.

54 Vikør, *Op. Cit.*, 2.

55 *Ibid.*, 2, 3.

56 *Ibid.*, 271.

which changed the entire basis of Sufi devotions.⁵⁷ Rahman argues that Idr\s\ Order and his descendants particularly the San]s\yah showed an example of social activism against the colonialists. In order to achieve their goal, they introduced the concept of the union with the Prophet in place of traditional Sufi concept of union with God. O'Fahey and Bernd Redtke have convincingly criticised Rahman's standpoint and proved its fallacy. Through a meticulous investigation of Idr\s\ writings, they suggest that the union with the Prophet is considered only one step before the union with God. This concept is clearly derived from Ibn <Arab\'s doctrine of Mu+ammad as the Primal Light "n]r Mu+ammad or +aq\qah Mu+ammad\yah. They also analyze Ibn Idr\s\'s letters and concluded that he too was very much influenced by the writings of Ibn <Arab\. Moreover, his lectures on the *Fu~]~al-+ikam* (Bezels of Wisdom) in his inner circle of disciples gave approval to the *wa+dat al-wuj]d*.⁵⁸

Not only did al-San]s\ count the order of Ibn <Arab\ among the most important Sufi orders in the history of Islam but he also considered him as his own *shaykh*.⁵⁹ He considered that Ibn <Arab\ took spiritual inspiration directly from the Prophet whom he consulted in intellectual matters.⁶⁰ Al-San]s\ described some of his dreams in which he met his *shaykh*, A+mad al-Madan\ and

57 Hoffman, *Op. Cit.*, 361.

58 O'Fahey and Radtke, *Op. Cit.*, 70.

59 al-San]s\, Mu+ammad, "al-Salsab\l" in *Majmu+a al-Mukht[rah*, ed. Mu+ammad <Abdu Ibn Ghalb]n, (Manchester: 1990), 6.

60 al-San]s\, *Iq[& al-Wasn[n*, 130.

renewed his Sufi initiation (*bay[<]ah*), recounting how 'my *shaykh*' had received spiritual initiation directly from Ibn [<]Arab[\].⁶¹ Actually, al-San]s\[\]'s opinions were based on the ideas of his master Ibn Idr\^s, according to whom there were different and divergent opinions about Ibn [<]Arab[\] and the best way was to think well of people. Ibn Idr\^s wrote:

This Ibn [<]Arab[\] died in the year 736 AH, and his time and yours are more than five hundred years apart, so did he speak to you in person with such expression that you can discover the charge of unbelief of a Muslim that God, Most High, has forbidden for you?... Rule against these words of Ibn [<]Arab[\] being a *k[^fir* if the ways of seeing it as unbelief are confined for you; do not judge Ibn [<]Arab[\] as an unbeliever, because this is not clear for you in a *shar[<]* manner.⁶²

Similarly, Hoffman analyses this subject in detail and argues that according to Ibn [<]Arab[\]'s school of thought, annihilation in the Prophet had not yet been seen as a substitution for annihilation in God but was a means to this end.⁶³ She further emphasises to trace the roots of Idr\^s\ tradition from the medieval Sufi tradition. She argues that the Idr\^s\ tradition is not the rejection of metaphysical teachings of medieval Sufism or Ibn al-Arab\[\]'s thoughts, rather it is strong continuity with the form of *fan[[>] f\[\] al-ras]l* described in the writings of al-J\[\]l.⁶⁴

61 al-San]s\[\], al-Salsab\[\]l, 33.

62 Vikør, *Op. Cit.*, 115.

63 Hoffman, *Op. Cit.*, 362.

64 As Hoffman notes: "In the case of the Idr\^s\ tradition, therefore, it appears that despite the social, moral, and political reformism of such orders as the San]s\[\]yah, union with (or annihilation in) the Prophet is not intended as a substitute for annihilation in

There is not sufficient evidence in this regard to prove Fazlur Rahman's idea of neo-Sufism concerning the San]s\yah. Therefore, the roots of the San]s\yah should be traced from the medieval Sufi tradition.

Rahman is also criticised for his endeavour to equalise *wa+dat al-wujjd* with pantheism and his presupposition that *wa+dat al-wujjd* leads towards moral decadence and social inactivity. Wand Daud writes:

Rahman does not appear to see that those who clearly understand the nature of *wa+dat al-wujjd* affirm that Real Existence belongs only to God, yet they all... affirm the relative yet sufficiently practical reality of their selves and all the created universe.⁶⁵

Contrary to Rahman's standpoint, Ibn <Arab\ is also one of those scholars who have great concern regarding exoteric aspect of Islam and Islamic law.⁶⁶ Mujiburrehman rightly noted in his critique of Rahman's standpoint:

God. It also appears that whatever organizational innovations neo-@]f\sm might have introduced, it did not involve a rejection of medieval @]f\sm's metaphysical goals or the teachings of Ibn <Arab\, but represented strong continuity with the form of *fan[> f\ al-ras]l* described in the writings of al-J\l\ (Hoffman, *Op. Cit.*, 361, 362."

65 Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud, "Islamization of Contemporary Knowledge: A Brief Comparison Between al-Attas and Fazlur Rahman", in *al-Shajarah*, Vol. 2, No. 1. (1997), 16.

66 Hossein Nasr is among the scholars who refuse the equalization of *wa+dat al-wujjd* with pantheism. cf. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages: Avicenna-Suhraward\-Ibn <Arab* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1964), Chapter, 3; Eric Winkel, *Islam and the Living Law: the Ibn <Arab\ Approach* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1997); Michel Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean Without Shore: Ibn <Arab\, the Book and the Law*, (Albany: State University of New York, 1993).

I think his staunch critiques of *wa+dat al-wujjd* in particular and of Sufism in general were strongly motivated by his observation of the reality of the Pakistan and Indian Muslim religious life, especially in relation to the Hindu tradition. Rahman grew up in this social environment and to a certain period was involved in the attempts for its reformation and modernization through his activities at the Institute of Islamic Research in Karachi.⁶⁷

Social and *jih[d* activism is considered another important feature for the inclusion of the *San]s\yah* as a neo-Sufi movement. According to Rahman, social activism is one of the most important components of neo-Sufism. He argues that some scholars within Sufi circles attempted to unify the exoteric science with the esoteric subtleties and then initiated a reform programme in the masses. He refers this kind of transformed Sufism as "neo-Sufism because, according to him, the original Sufism is based on the piety and orthodoxy as a protest against the luxurious life of the ruling class of the Umayyad's in order to pursue them on the observance of *shar\<ah*.⁶⁸ Mujiburrahman rightly notes that "neo-Sufism in Rahman's theory is a Sufism that is principally based on the orthodox tents".⁶⁹ On basis of the *San]s\yah's* social activism, Rahman considers it "a representative *par excellence* of neo-Sufism".⁷⁰ As the *San]s*

67 Mujiburrahman, Fazlur Rahman's Critiques of Sufism, in *El-Sufismo y las normas del Islam*, ed. Alfonso Carmona (Spain: Editora Regional de Murcia, Coleccion Ibn <Arab\, 2006), 419-444 at 442.

68 Rahman, *Op. Cit.*, 129.

69 Mujiburrahman, *Op. Cit.*, 436.

70 *Ibid.*, 3.

z[wiyahs played a vital role in peace-keeping effort and in resisting the colonial forces in Cyrenaica and Sahara. The San]s\yah undoubtedly launched well-organised resistance movement against the colonialists and integrated the people of Cyrenaica, Fezzan and Tripoli in to a single political unit, and invoked a spirit of nationalism among the divergent Bedouin tribes of the region. Differently from Rahman, many scholars argue that social activism was not the part of the reform programme of Mu+mmad al-San]s\, rather it was a later phenomenon. Vikør observes that basically the San]s\yah aimed to teach the Bedouin people of the Sahara in an organised way, because Mu+ammad al-San]s\, like his master, was "principally a teacher, or perhaps rather a guide."⁷¹ However, the involvement of the Order in jih[d\ activism was a later phenomenon. The decadence of Turkish rule in the region and the dominance of the colonialists gave space to the San]s\yah in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to represent the Bedouin society and preserve their heritage from the colonialists. As Vikør noted:

The San]s\ya was at the outset a new Sufi Order that settled in a desert region previously untouched by organized religion, but it was not aiming at setting up an Islamic state, or opposing the Europeans, or escaping the Turks, or harnessing the Arab will to fight or other fanciful expression of political purpose.⁷²

71 Vikør, *Op. Cit.*, 272, 273.

72 Vikør, Knut S., "Jih[d <ilam and Ta~awwuf: Two Justifications of Action from the Idr\s\ Tradition", in *Studia Islamica*, (2000), 90: 157.

Nevertheless, it is not sufficient to prefix the term 'neo' to the Order and neglect its basic traditional thoughts. As Ziadeh concluded that "the San]s\yah was traditional and conventional."⁷³ Therefore, the application of term neo-Sufism on the San]s\yah is not pertinent. As for as the social activism is concerned, there are many Sufis in the early and medieval history of Islam who participated in the *jihad* and other social activities, for instance, Shaykh Ab] al-Hasan al-Sh[dhil\ (d. 656/1228), the founder of Sh[dhil\yah Order, participated in the Battle of al-Man~]rah in Egypt, which stopped the Seventh Crusade headed by Saint Louis of France in 646/1262.⁷⁴

Conclusion

We have observed throughout our discussion the concept and scope of Fazlur Rahman's theory of neo-Sufism and its correlation with the San]s\yah. On the basis of the San]s\yah's reformative approach, Rahman refers it as a neo-Sufi order. Rahman's assumption regarding the San]s\yah is contrary to his own theory in which he claims that neo-Sufism contains some distinctive doctrinal and organisational changes from its traditional classical paradigms. On doctrinal basis, for instance, in neo-Sufism, Ibn <Arab\'s concept of unity of being (*wa+dat al-wuj]d*) and annihilation in God (*fan[> f\ All[h*) are rejected and postulated instead the concept of unity of appearance (*wa+dat al-shah]d*) and

73 Ziadeh, *Op. Cit.*, 134.

74 Danner, Victor, 'The Sh[dhiliyyah and North African Sufism', in *Islamic Spirituality: Manifestations*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (London: SCM Press, 1991), 28, 29.

annihilation in the Messenger of God (*fan[f\ ras]l*). As we discussed in the case of Mu+ammad al-San]s\, he never rejected the concepts of Ibn <Arab\ nor criticised him, rather he considered him as his own spiritual master and counted his order among the best forty rightly guided Sufi orders. Similarly, the concept of annihilation in the Messenger is not a substitute of annihilation in God but a step towards the final stage of *fan[> f\ All[h*, and its origin can be traced out in Ibn <Arab\'s writings, and is evident in the writings of al-J\l\. Secondly, we should not forget that Mu+ammad al-San]s\ was an eminent scholar of Islamic law and his *ijtih[d* works demonstrate his ability to revitalise Islamic jurisprudence which should be evaluated accordingly rather than linking it with the theory of neo-Sufism. As for as the San]s\yah's organisational structure is concerned, we argued that they were not primarily organised for the purpose of *jih[d* or social activism but after the withdrawal of Ottomans they had to resist against the colonialist, otherwise their *jih[d* activism was not the part of their reform programme. On the basis of this study, my contention is concluded that some of Rahman's assumption of neo-Sufism regarding the San]s\yah are not convincing, even then his scholarly contribution to understand the contemporary Islamic reformative movements cannot be denied.