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ARTICLE

The Portrait of an *Alla Franca* Shaykh: Sufism, Modernity, and Class in Turkey

Feyza Burak-Adli

Department of Anthropology, Boston University, Boston, MA, USA
Email: feyza@bu.edu

Abstract

This paper illustrates the heterogeneity of Islamic publics in early 20th-century Turkey by examining the life and thought of Ken'an Rifai, a Sufi shaykh and high-ranking bureaucrat in the Ottoman Ministry of Education. It argues that Shaykh Rifai endorsed state secularization reforms on religious grounds and shows how he reformulated Sufi Islam by imbricating Sufi ethics with other social imaginaries of the time through the lens of an upper-class bureaucrat. This paper contributes to Turkish studies by highlighting the previously overlooked role of elite Islamic groups who collaborated with the early republic. It also challenges the dominant paradigm of a binary opposition between the secular ruling elite and pious masses. Additionally, this paper offers insight into broader anthropological and historical Islamic studies by demonstrating the diverse ways Sufi traditions adapted to modern governance.

Keywords: Sufism; modernity; Westernization; secularization; class; Turkey

> We belong to neither that nor this/ Yet we belong both to that and this.
> (*Biz ne ondan bundanız/ Hem de ondan bundanız*)
> Shaykh Ken'an Rifai
> "The Turkish Republic cannot be a country of shaykhs, dervishes, and disciples.
> The best, the truest order is the order of civilization."
> Mustafa Kemal Ataturk

Shattering the conventional image of the early Turkish Republic as anti-Sufi and the Sufis as anti-republic, four Republican female intellectuals published *Ken'an Rifai and Islam in the 20th Century*, the biography of the late Sufi shaykh.[1] With his embrace of both secular modernity and mystical Islam, Ken'an Rifai (Büyükaksoy) (1869–1950) defied easy categorization. He was not just a shaykh of esoteric tradition; he was also a high-ranking bureaucrat, the director of education (*maarif müdürü*) in the Ottoman Ministry of Education. This put Rifai in a unique position of authority in both modern education and traditional religious education – two fields increasingly seen as incommensurable. Rifai actively participated in the Ottoman modernization of national education. Intriguingly, he also endorsed key Republican secularization reforms, including the proscription of Sufi orders. Despite this, he held onto the mystical worldview of *waḥdat al-wujūd* (unity of being), promoting a non-dualist ontology,

[1] Samiha Ayverdi, Nezihe Araz, Safiye Erol, and Sofi Huri, *Ken'an Rifai ve Yirminci Asrın Işığında Müslümanlık* (Istanbul: Kubbealtı Neşriyatı, 1951).

an enchanted perception of the universe, and a direct experiential relationship with God. Further blurring the lines, Rifai was also a Sufi shaykh with a Westernized lifestyle typical of Turkey's secular elite. He enjoyed being a Francophone, wearing European suits and hats, playing the piano, frequenting theaters, and studying Western philosophy. Yet, his connection to Ottoman-Islamic traditions remained strong. Fluent in Persian and Arabic, he continued preaching from the *Masnawi* of Jalal al-Din Rumi, playing the *nay* flute, and penning mystical poems. He even composed devotional hymns for the Prophet on the piano.

Illustrating the complicated lifeworlds of late Ottoman and early Republican elites, this paper examines the life, career, and Islamic thought of Ken'an Rifai. How does he nuance our understanding of Sufi involvement in the Turkish modernization processes? How did he reformulate Sufism for the modern sensibilities of intellectual elites? How did he reconcile the epistemologies of mystical Sufism with the politics of rational modernity? Demonstrating how his pro-secularization stance was grounded in "Islamic reasoning," I argue that Shaykh Rifai represents the much-neglected Sufi traditions that aligned with the early Republican regime. Furthermore, I unpack how Rifai's religious thought was shaped by the complex interplay between Sufi discourses, his ethnic and upper-class social *habitus*, and the "modern social imaginaries" bourgeoning in the political context of early 20th-century Turkey.[2] I maintain that, by recasting Sufism as an intellectual and ethical tradition of self-formation and disregarding its mystical-magical popular practices, Ken'an Rifai offered his elite followers an Islamic way of life compatible with the new moral order of the modernizing state. In exploring the entanglements of religious ethics, state politics, and social aesthetics underlying Sufi reformism, this paper contribute to broader ethnographic, historical, and religious studies inquiries on the varied adaptations of Sufi tradition to secular modernity in different contexts (Fig. 1).

Turkish Secularism and Heterogenous Muslim publics

The early historiography of Turkish secularism propagated a master narrative of an enduring power struggle between a unified secular front of Kemalist state elites and a monolithic traditional Muslim society.[3] Although an increasing number of scholars began challenging the secularization thesis in Turkey, the narrative of fissure between the secular and Islamic publics has mostly persisted.[4] For instance, while mapping the rift more aptly onto class-based divisions between urban state elites and countryside folks, Carter Findley still identified elites with "intellectual secularists" who owed their success to print capitalism, and the countrymen with conservatives who found "their cultural outlet in religious movements, such as the *Halidiye-Nakşibendiyye.*"[5] Şükrü Hanioğlu also resorted to the image of "a chasm between the secular elite and the pious masses" waging a "perennial tug-of-war between modernity and tradition."[6] While employing a center/periphery dichotomy to

[2] Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

[3] Deniz Kandiyoti, "The Travails of the Secular: Puzzle and Paradox in Turkey," *Economy and Society* 41, no. 4 (2012): 513–31. For early historiographies, see Niyazi Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1964); and Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961).

[4] For critical studies, see Kemal Karpat, *The Politicization of Islam: Reconstructing Identity, State, Faith, and Community in the Late Ottoman State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Nazım Irem, "Turkish Conservative Modernism: Birth of a National Quest for Cultural Renewal," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34, no. 1 (2002): 87–112; Brian Silverstein, *Islam and Modernity in Turkey* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Andrew Davison, *Secularism and Revivalism in Turkey: A Hermeneutic Reconsideration* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998); Birol Başkan, *From Religious Empires to Secular States: State Secularization in Turkey, Iran, and Russia* (New York: Routledge, 2014); and Murat Akan, *The Politics of Secularism: Religion, Diversity, and Institutional Change in France and Turkey* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

[5] Carter V. Findley, *Turkey, Islam, Nationalism, and Modernity: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 122–23.

[6] Şükrü Hanioğlu, *Atatürk: An Intellectual Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 12, 26.

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Figure 1. Ken'an Rifai as an Ottoman shaykh, Ottoman bureaucrat, and later Republican gentleman. Photos courtesy of Cemalnur Sargut.

examine the rifts between the state and society, Şerif Mardin, too, bypassed the internal diversity of the "center" that included not only secularists but also conservative Muslim modernizers.[7]

Increasingly, more scholars challenged this binary and addressed the religious establishment's formative role in state modernization efforts.[8] Driven by internal efforts to preserve the Muslim polity, not external colonial forces, Ottoman modernization earned `ulama' support in establishing Islamic grounds for reforms. Identifying the state with religion, the Ottoman ideology of *din-u-devlet* (religion and state) legitimized efforts to save the state's declining power through the Islamic concepts of *zaruret* (necessity) and *maslahat* (public good). Hence, Brian Silverstein argued that "there is an Islamic genealogy to the secularization" in Turkey.[9] This genealogy revealed the continuities between Ottoman and Republican governmentalities.[10] Building on these studies, I demonstrate here how Ottoman Sufi elites

[7] Şerif Mardin, "Center-Periphery Relations: A Key to Turkish Politics?" *Daedalus* 102, no. 1 (1973): 169–90. For Republic conservatives, see Nazım Irem, "Undercurrents of European Modernity and the Foundations of Modern Turkish Conservatism: Bergsonism in Retrospect," *Middle Eastern Studies* 40, no. 4 (2004): 79–112.

[8] Kristin Fabbe, *Disciples of the State? Religion and State- Building in the Former Ottoman World* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Markus Dressler, *Writing Religion: The Making of Turkish Alevi Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Butrus Abu-Manneh, "The Islamic Roots of the Gülhane Rescript," *Die Welt des Islams* 34, no. 2 (1994): 173–203; Amit Bein, *Ottoman Ulema, Turkish Republic: Agents of Change and Guardians of Tradition* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011); Amit Bein, "A 'Young Turk' Islamic Intellectual: Filibeli Ahmed Hilmi and the Diverse Intellectual Legacies of the Late Ottoman Empire," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 39, no. 4 (2007): 607–25; Uriel Heyd, "The Ottoman Ulema and Westernization in the Time of Selim III and Mahmud II," in *The Modern Middle East*, 2nd ed., ed. Albert Hourani, Phillip Khoury, and Mary C. Wilson (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 29–59; Şerif Mardin, "Turkish Islamic Exceptionalism Yesterday and Today: Continuity, Rupture, and Reconstruction in Operational Codes," *Turkish Studies* 6, no. 2 (2005): 145–65; and Andrew Hammond, "Muslim Modernism in Turkish: Assessing the Thought of Late Ottoman Intellectual Mehmed Akif," *Die Welt des Islams* 62, no. 2 (2022): 188–219.

[9] Silverstein, *Islam and Modernity*, 11.

[10] Eric-Jan Zürcher, "The Ottoman Legacy of the Turkish Republic," in *The State and The Subaltern: Modernization, Society, and the State in Turkey and Iran,* ed. Touraj Atabaki (London: I.B.Tauris, 2007): 95–100; Selim Deringil, *The Well-Protected Domains* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1999); Şükrü Hanioğlu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008); Karpat, *The Politicization of Islam*; Michael E. Meeker, *A Nation of*

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also partook in the national cause of modernization and later extended support to the new nation-state.

Class, Islam, and Modernity

One often overlooked aspect shaping high-ranking religious authorities' responses to state-centric modernity was their upper-class social status and modernized cultural *habitus*. It is not a coincidence that `ulama', shaykhs, and Muslim intellectuals who did not see modernization as a threat to their Islamic way of life shared a similar background with educated bureaucrats. Such intellectuals surely benefitted from modernization reforms in terms of educational and professional opportunities. However, the implications of their social status were more complicated than merely material class interests.

Ottoman elites owed their class status to the modernizing state. That is, unlike in some Western countries, where independent aristocratic and bourgeois classes existed in juxtaposition to the royal class, there was no independent elite in the Ottoman Empire until it created its own class of bureaucrats through modern education. Due to the peculiarities of their formation, as Kemal Karpat stated, Ottoman elites showed "a marked lack of class consciousness in the Marxist sense" because of their "identification with the ruling order."[11] This signifies that the Ottoman state tradition further shaped the moral and political worldviews of the bureaucrat-*cum*-intelligentsia. According to Şerif Mardin, conservative state values are what differentiated Ottoman elites from their Western counterparts, leading Ottoman elites to display "a profound and sincere devotion to the Ottoman State" and "willingness to sacrifice one's interests to that of the state's."[12] In other words, late Ottoman elites were socialized through state values, including the sacred conception of the state as *din-u-devlet* and *nizam-i alem* (guardian of the order). As Muslim bureaucrats, they inhabited statism and elitism as prestigious social capital. These conservative state ethics partly informed Rifai's positive responses to Republican reforms.

Besides, in contrast to the imaginary of "a unified Muslim *habitus* entering into conflict with Western modernity" reified by the master narrative of secularism, most Ottoman elites did not perceive modernity as external to the Islamic tradition but instead as a "universal civilizing process." Western civilization invoked refinement and sophistication in resonance with "the classical Islamic notions of civility, chivalry, and social ethics."[13] As imperial bureaucrats occupying European territories, they simply "did not see themselves as belonging to a world different from the one they sought to emulate."[14] For instance, sultan-caliphs such as Abdulmecid I (r. 1839–61) and Abdulhamid II (r. 1876–1909) enjoyed European operas and Western-style clothing. Since the 1840s, imperial and upper-class households had been Europeanized, which extended to the new middle class in the 1920s.[15] These Muslim elites simply accommodated *alla franca* and *alla turca* eclectically in their lifeworlds.[16] Hence, it was not as paradoxical as it sounds for Ottoman `ulama', shaykhs, and Muslim intellectuals to selectively incorporate Western intellectual thought, material culture, and modes of sociality without a sense of betraying Ottoman-Islamic tradition.

Empire: The Ottoman Legacy of Turkish Modernity (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002); Findley, *Turkey, Islam, Nationalism*; and Christine Philliou, *Turkey: A Past Against History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2021).

[11] Karpat, *The Politicization of Islam,* 91.

[12] Şerif Mardin, *The Genesis of Young Ottoman Thought: A Study in the Modernization of Turkish Political Ideas* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 105.

[13] Kandiyoti, "The Travails of the Secular," 515; Cemil Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia: Visions of World Order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 21, 23.

[14] Çağlar Keyder, "Whither the Project of Modernity? Turkey in the 1990s," in *Rethinking Modernity and National Identity in Turkey*, ed. Sibel Bozdoğan and Reşat Kasaba (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1997), 37–51.

[15] See, Alan Duben and Cem Behar, *Istanbul Households: Marriage, Family and Fertility, 1880–1940* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

[16] Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar, *19. Asır Türk Edebiyat Tarihi* (Istanbul: Çağlayan Kitapevi, 1988).

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The Legacy of Ottoman Reform on the Republican Ban of Sufi Orders

Although being a Republican shaykh may sound like an oxymoron due to the well-documented opposition between the state and Sufi orders, Shaykh Rifai was not necessarily a marginal figure in his milieu. Late Ottoman elites knew the exigencies of their time that would determine the fate of the orders. After all, the Republican proscription of Sufi orders in Turkey in 1925 was the culmination of a complex historical trajectory leading to increasing state control of Sufi institutions.

As part of broader state modernization and centralization processes, the Ottoman state had already initiated a reform program for Sufi orders since the early 19th century.[17] Sufi orders were first put under the Directorate of Imperial Foundations (Evkaf-ı Hümayun Nezareti) in 1812, and thus lost their financial autonomy.[18] In 1866, when the state established the Assembly of Shaykhs (Meclis-i Meşayih) under the office of the Şeyhülislam, the orders lost their administrative autonomy.[19] The Assembly of Shaykhs restructured all Sufi orders under central lodges in Istanbul and started to inspect them regularly. One of the assembly's major concerns were unqualified "cradle shaykhs" (*beşik şeyhliği*), whose hereditary status, not spiritual competence, guaranteed their inheritance of an order.[20] The assembly addressed this by overseeing the appointment of new shaykhs and subjecting the sons of deceased shaykhs to examination before confirming their succession. Plans to establish a school to train shaykhs' sons, "Medresetül Meşayih," remained unrealized due to lack of funding.[21] The state's structural reforms – centralizing lodges, standardizing practices, and bureaucratizing shaykhs – gradually reshaped Sufi tradition per the state's *raison d'état*, rather than the tradition's peculiar mystical logic of *walāya* (sainthood).[22]

Particularly during the Second Constitutional Era (1908–18), Sufi orders faced harsh criticism from both sides of the political spectrum. Westernist and Islamist intellectuals alike viewed Sufi practices akin to the veneration of saints and ecstatic rituals as outdated and hindering social advancement. They condemned Sufi lodges as backward institutions, labeling them dens of laziness, charlatanism, and mendicancy.[23] The Ottoman Parliament, which had several Sufi shaykhs among its deputies, openly discussed radical reforms including the possibility of abolishing the lodges. It was argued that the modern state needed active citizens who would work, produce, and contribute to society rather than being taken care of by state funding.[24] Besides, Sufi elites were equally concerned about the decay of Sufi institutions. To regain their social and spiritual vitality, Sufi elites pushed the agenda of reform by establishing a civil society association (i.e., *cemiyet-i sûfiye*) and publishing new journals (i.e., *Ceride-i Sufiyye* [Sufi Newspaper], *Tasavvuf* [Sufism], and *Muhibban* [The Lovers]) to discuss solutions to the orders' degeneration.[25]

[17] İrfan Gündüz, *Osmanlılarda Devlet-Tekke Münasebetleri* (Ankara: Seha Neşriyat, 1983), 127–234; Zekeriya Işık, *Şeyhler ve Şahlar: Osmanlı Toplumunda Devlet-Tarikat İlişkilerinin Gelişim ve Değişim Süreçleri* (Konya, Turkey: Çizgi Yayınları, 2015), 129–355; Muharrem Varol, *Islahat, Siyaset, Tarikat: Bektaşiliğin İlgası Sonrasında Osmanlı Devleti'nin Tarikat Politikaları* (Istanbul: Dergâh Yayınları, 2013), 185–275.

[18] Varol, *Islahat*, 91–127.

[19] For *Meclis-i Meşayih*, see Bilgin Aydin, "Osmanlı Devleti'nde Tekkeler Reformu ve Meclis-i Meşayih'in Şeyhülislamlık'a Bağlı Olarak Kuruluşu, Faaliyetleri, ve Arşivi," *İstanbul Araştırmaları Dergisi* 7, no. 1 (1998): 93–109.

[20] The term "cradle shaykh" refers to the successor sons of deceased shaykhs. Reformist Sufis scapegoated the figure of the cradle shaykh as the leading cause of the decline and corruption of Sufi orders. See Mustafa Kara, *Metinlerle Günümüz Tasavvuf Hareketleri* (Istanbul: Dergah Yayınları, 2014), 60–61.

[21] Ibid., 59.

[22] Işık, *Şeyhler ve Şahlar*, 261.

[23] For an Islamist critique, see Şemseddin Günaltay, "*Zulmetten Nura*," in *Metinlerle*, ed. Mustafa Kara, 62–64. For a Westernist critique, see Kılıçzade Hakkı, "*A Very Vigilant Sleep*," in Şükrü Hanioğlu," Garbcılar: Their Attitudes toward Religion and Their Impact on the Official Ideology of the Turkish Republic," *Studia Islamica* 86, no. 2 (1997): 133–58.

[24] Ismail Kara, *Din ile Modernleşme Arasında Çağdaş Türk Düşüncesinin Meseleleri* (Istanbul: Dergah Yayınları. 2003), 358–60.

[25] For a comprehensive survey of critical debates and activities, see Mustafa Kara, "The Social and Cultural Activities of the Dervishes Under the Second Constitution," in *Sufism and Sufis in the Ottoman Society*, ed. Ahmet

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However, this self-critique could have been restricted to Sufis belonging to the class of educated modernizers.

Following the Second Constitutional Era, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk initially collaborated with Sufi orders during the Turkish Independence War (1919–23). He welcomed shaykhs as deputies in the first parliament in Ankara in 1920. However, the outbreak of the Kurdish Shaykh Said rebellion in June 1925 re-ignited debates on the compatibility of Sufi orders with the modern state. As such, the orders were decried as a significant threat due to their power to mobilize the "ignorant" masses. In November 1925, law number 677 abolished all Sufi orders.[26]

Given this historical background, it was not unprecedented for Ottoman `ulama' and shaykhs – such as Rifai – to endorse the subsequent Republican reforms. However, except for a few Turkish works, scholarship has largely bypassed the wide spectrum of Sufi responses to modernization reforms.[27] The few groundbreaking studies that exist show that Sufi reactions included outright enmity, silent opposition by declining jobs offered by the new state, qualified acceptance by accepting jobs as staffers of the Diyanet (Directorate of Religious Affair) or mosque imams, and active endorsement by sending celebratory letters to Atatürk and publicly legitimizing reforms on Islamic grounds.

Many educated Sufi elites opted to collaborate with the state, enabling them to carry the tradition forward in reformist ways.[28] Following the ban, Shaykh Rifai "sought a wider role for Sufism in connection to higher education and culture, at the same time expanding the participation of women in parallel with contemporary social transformations."[29] As such, he attempted to translate "timeless Sufi teachings in a way that is timely for the contemporary world" by anticipating that Sufism would eventually transfer from the institution of traditional lodges to modern academia.[30]

However, Shaykh Rifai's pro-reform views were not welcomed by all in Sufi circles. Cemal Server Revnakoğlu (1909–68) was one such detractor, who documented chronicles on the decline of Sufi culture. In one of his essays, Revnakoğlu mentioned Shaykh Rifai without naming him:

> In a Rifai dervish lodge in Istanbul, which was the last to open and dwelt on the power of money, a man enjoyed all kinds of material and spiritual sovereignty. He was held in high esteem until his death. Emboldened by this, he elevated himself to the rank of sainthood. But, in reality, he had never been initiated into the *seyri suluk* (spiritual journey) and had never been recognized by the authorities. He had instead donned the mantle of a shaykh with an *icazetname* (authorization) he had obtained abroad.[31]

Lacking traditional lifelong training in a lodge, Rifai's Ottoman-issued *ijaza*s held little weight with Revnakoğlu, who further ridiculed Rifai's "staged performance," such as his

Yaşar Ocak (Ankara: The Turkish Historical Society Publication, 2005), 531–44; and Ismail Kara, *Din ile Modernlesme*, 345–70.

[26] Kara, *Metinlerle*, 83–91, 151.

[27] Kara, *Metinlerle*; Kara, *Cumhuriyet Turkiyesinde*; Rüya Kılıç, *Osmanlidan Cumhuriyete Sufi Gelenegin Tasiyicilari* (Istanbul: Dergah Yayınları, 2009); Hülya Küçük, "Sufi Reactions Against the Reforms After Turkey's National Struggle: How a Nightingale Turn into a Crow," in *The State and The Subaltern: Modernization, Society and the State in Turkey and Iran,* ed. Touraj Atabaki (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007). Also, see Silverstein, *Islam and Modernity*.

[28] More research with a prosopography needs to be done on other shaykhs allied with the republic, including Halveti Hüseyin Küçük Efendi, Mevlevi Veled Çelebi, Kadiri-Halveti Safvet Yetkin, Halveti-Melami Amis Efendi and his successors Abdülaziz Mecdi Tolun, Süheyl Ünver, and Osman Nuri Ergin. There were also Sufi scholars in academia such as Mehmet Ali Ayni, Ferit Kam, Mehmed Fuad Köprülü, Abdülbaki Gölpınarlı, Hilmi Ziya Ülken, Ismail Fenni Ertuğrul, Ibnülemin Mahmud Kemal İnal, and Saadettin Nüzhet Ergun.

[29] Carl Ernst, "Preface," in *The Door of Mercy: Ken'an Rifai and Sufism Today, May 29–31, 2015* (Istanbul: Nefes Yayınevi, 2017), 11.

[30] Omid Safi, "Timeless Sufi Teachings Made Timely for the Turbulent World," *The Door of Mercy*, 146.

[31] Cemal Server Revnakoğlu, *Eski Sosyal Hayatımızda Tasavvuf ve Tarikat Kültürü,* ed. Doğan Bayın and İsmail Dervişoğlu (Istanbul: Kırkambar Kitaplığı, 2003), 205.

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"pompous walk up the pulpit" before a Masnawi lecture. Revnakoğlu disparaged Rifai's reliance on outsiders for the *dhikr* ceremony, highlighting his shortcomings conducting traditional rituals as a shaykh. Revnakoğlu also scorned women's carrying of Rifai's pictures in their necklaces in the lodge as a violation of Islamic principles against idolatry. He even mocked Rifai's removal of the title "shaykh" from his wife's tombstone, reflecting his disapproval of Rifai's adaptation to the secular state. Revnakoglu's speculations illustrate the tensions among Sufis around the tradition's modern adaptations to Turkey's sociopolitical changes, including the new public visibility of women.

Interestingly, such reservations were also adopted by anti-Sufi secular novelists such as Yakup Kadri Osmanoglu, Resat Guntekin, and Peyami Safa, who portrayed Sufi shaykhs in a negative light. As Brett Wilson observed, "by casting the aspersion of sexual debauchery" in mysterious lodges, these authors expressed modernist anxieties about not only Sufi tradition but also women's increased freedoms and public roles.[32] Rifai's large female following also attracted controversy in a scandalous novel by Refik Halit Karay, entitled *Kadınlar Tekkesi* (Women's Lodge).[33] Despite Karay's denials, the novel's setting sparked public suspicion that the protagonist was based on Rifai. In short, for some Sufis and anti-Sufis alike, Shaykh Rifai was a polemical figure. His unorthodox path to becoming a shaykh, embrace of modern ideas and practices as a religious authority, inclusion of women in his circle, and alignment with the secular regime further fueled this controversy.

A Cosmopolitan Sufi Bureaucrat: Life and Career of Ken'an Rifai

Shaykh Rifai did not intervene in these public debates by publishing his political thoughts.[34] To retrace his approach to Islam, Sufism, and reform, this article relies primarily on his spiritual discourses (*sohbet*).[35] While most of his discourses were posthumously published as a single volume, *Sohbetler* (Spiritual Discourses), others are included in the second half of his biography.[36] Rather than a didactic exegesis of a Qur'anic verse or hadith, Rifai's *sohbet*s were mostly anecdotal. Neatly contextualized in specific moments and spaces, their memoir-like style offers more than Islamic lessons. They also serve as a source of oral history, revealing important clues about the conflicted lifeworlds of the pious Turkish upper class.

[32] M. Brett Wilson, "Putting Out the Candle: Sufism and the Orgy Libel in Late Ottoman and Modern Turkey," *Culture and Religion* (2024): 11.

[33] Refik Halit Karay, *Kadınlar Tekkesi* (Istanbul: Cağlayan Yayınevi, 1956).

[34] His publications: Ken'an Rifai, *Mukteza-i Hayat* (Istanbul: Karabet, 1891), a science textbook; *Rehber-i Salikin* (Istanbul: Cenan Vakfi, [1909] 2019), an *adab* manual; *Tuhfe-i Ken'an* (Istanbul: Cenan Vakfi, [1910] 2019), an exegesis of hadiths; *Seyyid Ahmed Er-Rifai* (Istanbul: Cenan Vakfi, [1922] 2008), a hagiography of the founder of the Rifa`I order; *Ilahiyat-i Ken'an* (Istanbul: Cenan Vakfi, [1923] 2013), composed hymns; *Mesnevi-i Serif* (Istanbul: Kubbealti, 2000), exegesis of *Masnawi*; and *Sohbetler,* 3rd ed. (Istanbul: Kubbealti, 2009) (recorded spiritual discourses).

[35] Except for a few Turkish dissertations, articles, encyclopedic references, and memoir entries, there is not much scholarship on Rifai. While most of these relied on the same biography, Eylül Yalçınkaya also published Rifai's records in the Prime Ministerial Ottoman Archives (hereafter BOA). All the archival documents in this paper are cited from her work. For cursory mentions in scholarship, see Kara, *Metinlerle Tasavvuf,* 154; Ismail Kara, *Cumhuriyet Türkiye'sinde Bir Mesele Olarak Islam 1,* 7th ed. (Istanbul: Dergah Yayınları, 2016), 258; and Şerif Mardin, *Turkiye'de Din ve Siyaset* (Istanbul: Iletisim, 1993), 34. For his biographies, see Ayverdi et.al., *Ken'an Rifai*; Samiha Ayverdi, *Dost* (Istanbul: Kubbealtı Neşriyatı, 1980); Ismet Binark, *Dost Kapisi* (Istanbul: Cenan, 2005); and Mehmet Demirci, "Ken'an Rifai ve Çevresi," *Demokrasi Platformu* 2, no. 6 (2006): 68–71. For published dissertations and theses, see Eylül Yalçınkaya, *Ken'an Rifai: Hayatı, Eserleri, ve Tasavvuf Anlayışı* (Istanbul: Nefes Yayinlari, 2021); Can Ceylan, *Dergah'tan Akademi'ye Rifailik ve Ken'an Rifai* (Istanbul: Akademi Titiz, 2014); and Kerim Güç, *Ken'an Rifai'nin Dervişlik Anlayışı* (Istanbul: Nefes Yayinlari, 2020). For encyclopedic references, see Hüseyin Vassaf, "Şeyh Ken'an Bey," in *Sefine-i Evliya* (Istanbul: Seha Neşriyat, 1990), 227–9; Nezihe Araz, "Ken'an Rifai," in *Meydan Larousse,* vol. 7 (Istanbul: Meydan, 1972), 168; and Mustafa Tahrali, "Ken'an Rifai," in *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı Ansiklopedisi* 25 (Istanbul: Diyanet Vakfı, 2002), 254–55. For conference proceedings, see *The Door of Mercy*. For mentions in memoirs, see Mahir Iz, *Yılların Izi* (Istanbul: Irfan Yayınevi, 1975), 161; Mustafa Özdamar, *Celal Hoca* (Istanbul: Marifet Yayınları, 1993), 34–35; and Ertuğrul Düzdağ, *Üstad Ali Ulvi Kurucu: Hatıralar 5* (Istanbul: Kaynak Yayınları, 2007).

[36] Rifai, *Sohbetler.*

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This article's second major source is Rifai's most expansive biography, written by four female writers.[37] The first part of this work, written by Samiha Ayverdi and Nezihe Araz, details his life story, while the subsequent parts, written by Safiye Erol and Sofi Huri, explore Sufism in the 20th century with reference to Rifai's thought.[38] For instance, in her essays "*Homo Mysticus*," "*Homo Sapiens*," and "*Murshid-i Agah*" (Sage Shaykh), Erol not only narrates her own spiritual self-transformation but also tackles the enduring relevance and legitimacy of esoteric thought in modern society. To make it compelling to modern readers, she draws on a wide range of philosophical sources, including Greek thinkers such as Thales, Pythagoras, Plato, and Aristotle; Indian sources such as the Upanishads, Vedas, and Bhagavad Gita; and Western philosophers such as Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Fichte, Schelling, and Kant, among others. In the same erudite style, she traces the sociological evolution of religion, highlighting the common human quest for the divine as expressed in diverse forms, from totemism to Islam. In weaving Sufism into modern thought through erudite discussions of philosophy, sociology, and psychology, she may have aimed to elevate the status of Sufi epistemology.

I maintain that Rifai's biography by his female disciples primarily reflects the concerns and aspirations of his elite followers, as spiritual seekers, and how they perceived Rifai as a moral exemplar (*insān al-kāmil*). Unlike traditional hagiographies, the biographers did not underscore Rifai's status as a Sufi master based on his asceticism, public piety, mastery of rituals, metaphysical powers, or supernatural miracles. Rather, they focused on his practical ethics to unite (*birleştirmek*) the secular and Islamic visions of modernity. Despite lacking archival historical precision, the biography-*cum*-hagiography provides important insight into how Sufi tradition was reformulated by the pressures of Turkish modernity. By offering a socially resonant reformulation of Sufism, Shaykh Rifai appears to have positioned himself to intellectually and spiritually connect with the educated elites of the late Ottoman and early Republican eras, who sought a modern interpretation of Islam that aligned with the state's vision of the new modern nation (Fig. 2).

The preface of the biography displays how its elite authors perceived the turbulent sociopolitical context within which they situated Shaykh Rifai as the savior society needed. They especially accentuated his ability to navigate the shifting boundaries of the world by "sacrificing neither his Muslim selfhood nor his modern lifestyle":

> This biography is written to reflect on a social cause beyond the treatment of an individual. Today, the world is polarized with conflicting currents to solve the material and spiritual problems of mankind. While striving to balance spiritual and material life, the modern man is exhausted. But Kenan Rifai achieved joy and inner peace by accomplishing harmony.... He was the most qualified man for reinterpreting Islam and its new forms in the light of the twentieth century.

Rather than focusing on Sufi practices in the confined space of the *tekke* (Sufi lodge), the biographers conceived Sufism as a way of being and doing in the world. Hence, they reflected on his entire life, "down to the littlest detail," as "a supreme book [of Sufism] to be read." According to them, his "greatest achievement" was his reinterpretation of Islam by way of "taking the substance of religion accumulated since the dawn of humanity and filtering it through his personality and the critical eye of the twentieth century."[39] Here, they hinted at how his Islamic thought was historically situated. To grasp his modern reconceptualization of Sufism, I next examine how his life trajectory equipped Rifai with a certain lens through which he reinterpreted Sufi Islam.

[37] Ayverdi et. al., *Ken'an Rifai*.

[38] For biographical details of Ayverdi, Araz, Erol, and Huri, see the section below, titled "Divine Feminine and State Feminism." All four women were among the renowned first-generation of female Republican writers and public intellectuals.

[39] Ibid., 7–8, 146, 150.

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Figure 2. Rifai's four biographers. From right to left, Safiye Erol, Nezihe Araz (in the back), Samiha Ayverdi, and Sofi Hori, with conservative writer Nihad Sami Binarli. Photo courtesy of Cemalnur Sargut.

Childhood and Education

Rifai was born in 1869 in Salonika to an Ottoman Balkan family belonging to an *`ayān* (propertied notable) dynasty of Plovdiv.[40] Growing up in the Balkans' multi-ethnic and multi-faith urban centers, such as Plovdiv and Salonika, which emerged as modern European cities at the end of the 19th century, Rifai was exposed to Ottoman cosmopolitanism.[41] As members of the early modernizing and Westernizing Tanzimat elites, Rifai's grandfather and father held high-ranking positions in the modern Ottoman administration. His grandfather, Haci Hasan Bey, was the district governor (*kaymakam*) of Alaiye and a country notable with a large estate in Plovdiv.[42] Rifai's father, Abdülhalim Bey, was a bureaucrat – a district director in various cities – in the nascent Ministry of Telegraph and Post. He moved his family from the Balkans to Istanbul during the Ottoman-Russo War of 1877–78. Rifai's mother, Hatice Cenan Hanim, belonged to an elite Caucasian family and was Rifai's first Sufi master (*murshid*), until introducing him to her civil shaykh, Qadiri Ethem Efendi.[43] Rifai seemed very attached to his mother throughout his life. Grounded in the old Ottoman elite establishment, his family background shaped his life trajectory by socializing him, on the one hand, with modernizing Tanzimat ideologies and upper-class Balkan cosmopolitan social norms, and, on the other, with the mystical way of life.

As a child of an *`ayān* family, Rifai received the best education available at the empire's new modern schools.[44] In Plovdiv, he attended the Greek `Idadi School and Alliance Israélite Universelle, which was founded by French Jews and attended by Muslim children in the absence of alternative Ottoman public schools.[45] He learned Bulgarian, Greek, and Hebrew in Plovdiv. When the family moved to Istanbul, he enrolled in Galatasaray

[40] See, BOA: DH.SAID., 72.405 (29 Zilhicce 1286/April 1, 1870) in Yalçınkaya, *Ken'an Rifai*, 496–7.

[41] Hanioğlu, *Atatürk*, 25.

[42] BOA: DH.SAID., 1.37 (29 Zilhicce 1252/April 6, 1837) in Yalçınkaya, *Ken'an Rifai*, 495.

[43] Ibid., 52–57. Civil shaykh refers to Sufi masters who trained selected people without leading an official Sufi lodge.

[44] The literacy rate was 5–10% in the early 1900s. See Carter V. Findley, *Ottoman Civil Officialdom: A Social History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 139.

[45] For Rifai's schooling details, see Ayverdi et al., *Ken'an Rifai*, 24–34; and Yalçınkaya, *Ken'an Rifai*, 59–67.

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Lyceum, or the Imperial School, the most prestigious Francophone boarding school. He had both famous modernist teachers such as Recaizade Mahmut Ekrem and Munif Pasa, and renowned conservative teachers such as Muallim Naci and Mehmed Zihni Efendi. Rifai also had French and Armenian teachers. In Istanbul, he learned French, Arabic, and Persian.

An incubator for the new political elite, Galatasaray was founded in 1868 as the first modern school with students and teachers of various ethnic backgrounds.[46] However, as Sultan Abdulhamid wanted to reverse the Westernist Tanzimat legacy, he appointed Ali Suavi – a Young Ottoman Islamist activist – as Galatasaray's new director, who revised the curriculum to balance its European content with Ottoman-Islamic courses. While still boosting sciences, Suavi also added courses including Islamic law (*fiqh*), literature, Arabic, and Persian language. Aimed at training "a loyal and competent state elite, which would be thoroughly imbued with the values of the center," Hamidian education policy strongly propagated the ideal of mastering both Ottoman-Islamic and European traditions.[47] Coming of age under the Hamidian period, Rifai graduated from Galatasaray in 1888 equipped with expertise in both traditions of knowledge and a moral sense of loyalty to the state.[48]

Dual Career

Before launching his career in the emerging field of national education, Rifai attended law school while working at the Ministry of Post and Telegraph-Foreign Affairs.[49] Starting in 1889, he worked for the Ministry of Education in various capacities, such as the city director of education, inspector, teacher, and school principal in the empire's major territories, from Eastern Anatolia to the Balkans and Hijaz. He taught various subjects, including biology, physics, geography, and French, in the newly established *`idadi* (middle) schools. He wrote a biology textbook entitled *Mukteza-i Hayat* (The Essentials of Life) by translating French science books.[50] He also penned several newspaper articles for *Tercüman-i Hakikat* (Interpreter of Truth) on the emerging field of pedagogy.[51]

During the reign of Abdulhamid II, education became a crucial battleground for modernization. The rise of well-funded foreign schools, offering high-quality modern education, increasingly attracted Muslim students and threatened the sultan.[52] To counter this, Abdulhamid adopted a "*ghaza* ethos" (holy war) by deploying inspectors, building an extensive network of modern *`idadi* schools, procuring funds through the Education Tax, and mobilizing new local councils of education (*meclis-i maarif*).[53] Rifai's bureaucratic responsibilities included the typical tasks of Hamidian policies, from overseeing *`idadi* constructions to raising local funds and inspecting foreign school licenses and curriculum.

Rifai's biographers cast him as a modern-day "wandering dervish," traversing the empire as a reform-minded bureaucrat. In their view, his actions reshaped Sufism from a secluded tradition practiced by an exclusive brotherhood in a lodge into a capacious moral tradition guiding everyday life. They portrayed his administrative experiences as a series of challenges he overcame through his Sufi ethics, and his conflicted encounters as mostly shaped by the political climate at the turn of the century. As a high-ranking Ottoman official representing the central government in the peripheries, he encountered various forms of local resistance

[46] Benjamin Fortna, *Imperial Classroom: Islam, the State, and Education in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2002), 99–112; Frederick Frey, *The Turkish Political Elite* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1965), 35–37; and Selçuk Akşin Somel, *The Modernization of Public Education in the Ottoman Empire 1839–1908* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 52–53.

[47] Deringil, *The Well-Protected Domains,* 96.

[48] For his Galatasaray diploma and transcript, see Binark, *Dost Kapisi,* 41.

[49] BOA: DH.SAID., 72.405.

[50] Rifai, *Mukteza-i Hayat*.

[51] Ayverdi et al., *Ken'an Rifai*, 110.

[52] Fortna, *Imperial Classroom,* 87–129; Somel, *Modernization,* 202–4; and Deringil, *Well-Protected Domains,* 93–111.

[53] Fortna, *Imperial Classroom*, 89.

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to state modernization and centralization efforts. I contend here that, by reframing his reformist work ethics as an extension of his practice of Sufism, the biographers attempted to subvert the stereotypical image of Sufis as idle mendicants.

Rifai's first post was in Balikesir, where he directed the new *`idadi* school.[54] Meanwhile, his mother's *murshid*, Qadiri Shaykh Edhem Efendi, began Rifai's spiritual training in person, residing with him in Balikesir. The biographers narrated how Rifai faced low enrollment at the new school due to both Muslim and non-Muslim parents' religious anxieties.[55] They described how he went door to door to convince both sides of the necessity of modern education grounded in Ottomanism. As such, the biographers portrayed Rifai as a duty-bound Sufi who sought to "uplift" the nation regardless of ethnic origin. Seeing his actions as fulfilling the Sufi tenet of "serving people is serving God," they neatly mapped his religious ethics onto the politics of state ideology. They also further linked his ethics of pluralism (unity in diversity) with the state ideology of Ottomanism.

In 1890, Rifai became the city director of education in Adana.[56] Similar to his other posts, Rifai socialized mostly with modernist administrative elite (i.e., governors, commanders, etc.) in intellectual and musical salons during his time in Adana.[57] His biographers recounted how he was not welcomed by some conservative locals, who sent reports to Abdülhamid questioning Rifai's visits to a Jesuit church, where he conversed with French clergy and read French newspapers. He was soon exonerated.

In 1891, Rifai was transferred to Manastir, near Plovdiv, and, in 1893, to Kosovo, where the previous directors of education had been fired by the Hamidian regime.[58] Before his passing, Shaykh Edhem visited Rifai in Manastir and endowed him with an *ijaza* (license) of the Qadiriyya order. Rifai's term in the Balkans coincided with the alarming 1894 field report by the minister of education, Zühdü Pasha, on the competing nationalist interests of foreign-funded schools.[59] Rifai's appointment to such a politically sensitive position may suggest that he had earned the palace's trust as a loyal state agent.

In 1897, Zühdü Pasha personally referred Rifai for the position of principal at the esteemed Numune-i Terakki high school in Istanbul, following the former principal's exile due to his conspiratorial Young Turk activities against the sultan. According to his biographers, although Rifai was content in Istanbul, he requested a transfer to Medina after receiving a mystical call in a dream.[60] In 1900, Rifai became the director of the new *`idadi* school in Medina. Several anecdotes in which Rifai mediated between the Bedouins and Governor Osman Pasha further illustrate the rising tensions between the center and multi-ethnic peripheries of the empire.[61] During his time in Medina, 1900–1904, Rifai also became a disciple of Shaykh Hamza al-Rifa`i and received the *ijaza* of the Rifa`iyya order.[62]

Rifai returned to Istanbul in 1905 and began working at Dersaadet Darulmuallimin-i Aliye (Istanbul Teacher's Training School) and the council of inspectors. Meanwhile, he became a civil shaykh, hosting Sufi literary and musical salons in his *konak* (mansion). One day, however, Hamidian forces raided his *konak* due to suspicions of secret Young Turk activities. In order to expel the sultan's doubts, according to Rifai's biographers, he had to build a *tekke* and register it officially with the National Assembly of the Shaykhs (Meclis-i Meşayih) under the office of Şeyhülislam. Ironically, by the time Rifai's lodge, Ümmü Ken'an Dergahi, was ready to launch in 1908, Abdulhamid had been recently overthrown. According to his

[54] BOA: DH.SAID., 72.405.
[55] Ayverdi et al., *Ken'an Rifai*, 35–36.
[56] BOA: DH.SAID., 72.405.
[57] Ayverdi et al., *Ken'an Rifai*, 37–40.
[58] BOA: MF.MKT.,127.42 in Yalçınkaya, *Ken'an Rifai*, 76; and BOA: MF.MKT.,165.52., in ibid., 81.
[59] Fortna, *Imperial Classroom,* 68.
[60] Ayverdi et al., *Ken'an Rifai*, 57.
[61] Ibid., 89–103.
[62] Ibid., 99.

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biographers, Rifai had yearned to establish a modern institution for the teaching of Sufism, an "academy" rather than a traditional lodge, if the political climate had allowed.[63]

In his lodge, Rifai delivered weekly *sohbet*s (spiritual discourses) on Rumi's *Masnawi* followed by musical performances, *dhikr,* and *samā`* rituals performed by dervishes.[64] In other words, as a lodge shaykh, he started to observe the traditional Sufi rituals that he would later discard. His order appeared to be a microcosm of cosmopolitan upper-class Ottoman society. Among regulars at his multi-ethnic, multi-faith, and mixed gender Sufi meetings were state elites, academic scholars, musicians, artists, poets, and doctors. Religious authorities such as former Ottoman Şeyhülislams,`ulama', a Chaldean priest, and Catholic priests also frequented his circle.[65] Notably, his biography included letters from two French priests, Andre Duchemin and Theophile Sargologo, detailing instances in which Rifai had assisted them in their spiritual quest and highlighting his "soul-penetrating" charisma and gnosis.[66] Approaching Sufism as "a genealogy of mystical thought and experience, not limited to a single tradition," Rifai seemed to be a perennialist, maintaining that all moral traditions contained the same absolute essence, known as *Hakikati Muhammedi* (Muhammadan Truth), until finding its perfected form in Islam.[67]

In 1908, the new Young Turk government appointed Rifai as the director of the prestigious Darüşşafaka Boarding School. Rifai took a paid medical leave in 1911.[68] In 1920, before formally retiring in 1921, Rifai was assigned to the Scientific Research Council (Tedkikat-i Ilmiye Encumeni).[69] His followers' accounts claim that Atatürk offered him a position in the new government, but Rifai reportedly declined involvement in national politics.[70]

Instead, he spent thirteen years (1929–42) teaching at the Fener Orthodox Greek High School.[71] This period coincided with a rise in nationalist policies targeting Greek minorities, including the population exchange program that led to the expulsion of approximately 1.2 million Greek Orthodox citizens. It appears Rifai maintained his ideology of Ottomanism and ethics of Sufi pluralism during the republic. His biography contains testimonial accounts from Greek students, who described him as a fatherly figure. Even today, his portrait hangs on the wall at Fener.[72] Rifai passed away in Istanbul in 1950.

A Reformist Sufi: The Islamic Thought of Ken'an Rifai

According to his spiritual discourses, three Sufi teachings influenced Ken'an Rifai's Islamic thought: the monist ontology (*waḥdat al-wujūd* of Muhyiddin Ibn al-ᶜArabi, d. 1240), the love ethics of Mawlana Jalal ad-Din Rumi (d. 1273), and the virtue ethics of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111). As such, Rifai seemed to approach Sufism as a tradition of *irfān* (divine gnosis), *akhlāq* (morality), *adāb* (good manners, etiquette), and *'isqh* (love). He defined Sufism in ethical, intellectual, and spiritual terms: "Sufism is *makarim-i akhlaq* (moral excellence), *makarim-i akhlaq* is *adab*, and *adab* is to see nothing but Allah." Rooted in Ibn al-ᶜArabi's nondualist worldview, Rifai's concept of *irfān* emphasized that all existence was a manifestation of God. He argued that a true understanding of *tawḥīd* must be based on realizing God as the only true agent (*fa'il*) and source of being (*mawjūd*) in the world, which, in turn, guides daily actions. For Rifai, Sufism was not necessarily about performing ceremonial rituals: "*ṭarīqa* is

[63] Ibid., 105, 110, 112.
[64] For details on his lodge activities, see Yalçınkaya, 136–58.
[65] Ayverdi et al., *Ken'an Rifai*, 114.
[66] Ibid., 346–51.
[67] Ibid., 221.
[68] BOA: DH: SAID., 72.405.
[69] BOA: MF.MKT., 1241.83 (November 30, 1920).
[70] Personal interviews with several contemporary Rifai disciples.
[71] Ayverdi et al., *Ken'an Rifai*, 334.
[72] For the original picture, see Ceylan, *Ken'an Rifai*, 443.

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the school of *irfān*, not the performance stage of *hā* or *hū* (invocations of God's names in *dhikr*)."[73]

While keeping *irfān, akhlāq, adāb,* and *'isqh* as core tenets, Shaykh Rifai seemed to approach Sufi Islam as a dynamic tradition conducive to social change. He maintained that, as a "liberal, capacious, and malleable" tradition, Islam historically "embraced every new move," and therefore stood "against dogmatism, fundamentalism, and backwardness (*gericilik*)."[74] He legitimated Islamic reform by emphasizing Prophet Muhammad's role as a "reformer" of his age. As such, Rifai strategically drew on the genealogy of Islamic tradition, rather than the new discourses of modernity, to rationalize renovation in Islam. Likewise, in his Sufi discourses, Rifai justified modern social transformations by resorting to historical Islamic parables. For instance, to convince religious authorities to familiarize themselves with the laws of both the physical and metaphysical worlds (*mana ve madde*), Rifai stated that they "should be like Solomon speaking the language of all." To encourage them to learn the new "languages of modernity," he drew on the Sufi allegory of prophet-king Solomon, who could speak the language of all birds. Like most state elites, Rifai appeared to be highly critical of the lower-rank, reactionary religious establishment for "anchoring in dogmatism" and "harming" Muslim society.

> If you are a spiritual guide who wants Islam to advance (*yükselmesi*), you would be a sinner if you prevent Muslims from gaining scientific knowledge (*maddi ilim*).... How dare you discourage the modern seekers with your unenlightened, stern behavior? How can you tell them things like "be ashamed of your modern clothing," "take off those tight pants and wear the attire of the *zaman-i saadet* (the times of the Prophet)," "those places called theater, cinema will render you an infidel," or "do not put a gold tooth cap"? Why don't you tell them instead to embrace the morality of the Prophet rather than his clothing? Do you think the Prophet was sent to humanity to regulate fashion or morality?[75]

By strategically juxtaposing fashion and morality, gold tooth and spirit, and headgear and heart, Rifai distinguished here between the religion's "contingent" social aspects and its "essential" spiritual core. He reiterated that Islam owed its vitality to its flexibility in reformulating shari`a per the needs of the time:

> This flexibility allowed the relinquishing Islamic social rules (*mu`amalāt/nas hükümleri*) shaped by old cultural customs and social structures while preserving its immutable essence. Thereby, Islam has historically been a reformist movement conducive to social progress.[76]

Categorizing Islam into the two spheres of humanities (*beseri*) and divinity (*ilāhī*), Rifai underlined the flexibility of shari`a, which could adapt to any temporal and spatial circumstances if the universal, esoteric, and divine core was sustained.[77] As such, he may have provided his followers with a formula to cultivate modern subjectivities as upper-class Westernized Muslims.

[73] Ibid., 220, 222, 223, 101.
[74] Ibid., 177.
[75] Ayverdi, *Dost*, 97–99.
[76] Ayverdi et al., *Ken'an Rifai*, 179.
[77] For other reformers who searched for the "essence" of religion, such as Muhammad Iqbal, as opposed to focusing on "social function," such as Muhammad Abduh, see Abdulkader Tayob, *Religion in Modern Islamic Discourse* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

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Authorizing Secular Reforms as a Religious Authority

Based on his speeches and biographic anecdotes, Rifai seemed to employ his two-fold characterization of Islam, composed of the essential/divine and the contingent/social, in his endorsement of Republican secularization reforms. For instance, in the early years of the republic, a *hodja* (religious authority) refused to get a headshot photo and wear a European hat, as he believed these practices contradicted the Prophet's sunna. This defiance cost him his official position. Rifai responded to the incident:

> Photography did not even exist in the time of the Prophet, but it is a demand of this century. The reason why the Prophet was against pictures was due to the Arab's past of idolatry.... This *hodja* has lost his job, which means he cannot take care of his family now. Does he not know that attending to your family is *ibāda* (religious practice), too? ... His headgear and photo will not go with him into his grave. They will remain above the ground. Therefore, why does he even care about such non-essential issues like wearing a hat?[78]

I suggest that Rifai's reaction effectively linked historical Islamic ethics with contemporary state politics. By elevating work to a sacred duty, Rifai challenged the *hodja*'s neglect of this essential religious practice. Trivializing new Western clothing norms, Rifai not only questioned the *hodja*'s priorities but also implicitly endorsed state reforms through an Islamic lens.

Rifai consistently supported the Republican ban on Sufi orders, closing his *tekke* "without any reluctance."[79] A multilayered analysis of Rifai's response to the ban reveals a complex imbrication between Islamic discourses, Sufi ethics, historical context, political climate, and his background as an upper-class bureaucrat. To begin, Rifai justified obeying reforms as an Islamic duty, declaring the rule of law as a legitimate substitute for shari`a. He maintained that *ulu'l emr* (submitting to the rulers) was the sacred duty of Muslim subjects: "Shari`a does not merely regulate the forms of worship (*ibāda)* but also encompasses law and order. The state law that maintains the social order (*niẓām*) is a part of shari`a."[80] In this statement, he intricately enmeshed his loyalty to the rule of law with Islamic moral principles. His biographers narrated with awe how "he never accepted any illegal activity even in a small room with three people."[81] For instance, in 1929, one of his close friends, Server Hilmi Bey, was moved by a Sufi song and started to whirl (*sama*) in the house. Rifai stopped him and said: "No way, sir, because it is forbidden, you can no longer do it. We obey the orders of the state authorities (*ulu'l emr*) because we know that the one who speaks from there is God."[82] As this anecdote demonstrates, bridging the political and spiritual, Rifai interpreted the Republican ban through the lens of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, according to which there is no agent/doer other than God (*la fa'ila illa-Allāh*).

Rifai viewed the state's action as an expression of divine will, stating "the voice of the people is the voice of God" (*Halkin sesi, Hakk'in sesi*).[83]

> Directly or indirectly, what is manifested in everything is God. Therefore, you cannot talk against the ban of the Sufi orders. It is God who made it happen. God is the planner, the organizer, and the doer, and there is always wisdom (*ḥikma*) behind His actions. To

[78] Ayverdi et al., *Ken'an Rifai*, 469.
[79] Ibid., 120.
[80] Rifai, *Sohbetler*, 103. *Ulu'l emr* refers to the ruling class in a Muslim society. In a Qur'anic verse, Muslims are commanded to obey Allah, the Prophet, and *ulu' al-amr* (Surat al-Nisa' 4:59). https://islamansiklopedisi.org.tr/ulul-emr.
[81] Ayverdi et al., *Ken'an Rifai*, 124.
[82] Ibid., 124.
[83] Ibid., 120.

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> be able to see this truth, you must attain the knowledge of *tawḥīd*. Once you achieve to see God everywhere, you will let go of your vices. Without *tawḥīd*, your heart is simply a temple of idols, even if you claim to worship only God.[84]

Here, I suggest that Rifai perceived opposition to the state ban as almost akin to blasphemy. However, I do not think that his allegiance to the state was merely a product of timeless Islamic precepts, but in fact closely linked to his class status. He had a day job as a state bureaucrat, and thus the social cost of the ban was not as colossal for Rifai as it was for most shaykhs.[85] But, more importantly, his class status provided Rifai with a certain moral lens aligned with the state tradition. As he actively partook in the state's modernization processes as a bureaucrat in modern education, he was familiar with the exigencies of his time and the limits of resources. Rifai, therefore, echoed the widespread rhetoric on the lodges' deterioration and shaykhdom's long-lost spiritual merit and competence when becoming a hereditary post and routinized office.[86] He lamented that the lodges had been reduced to a mere "performance stage."

> In the assembly of shaykhs, I hear things like "so and so shaykh was the best at conducting *Bayyūmī dhikr*, and another at leading *Kayyūmī dhikr*." The quality of a shaykh is judged by his expertise in rituals. However, Sufism means *adāb* (good manners), *irfān* (gnosis), and *insānlik* (humanism).[87]

Rifai's dismissal of proficiency in ceremonial practices might hint at his own lack of ritual competence, as Rifai did not practice Sufism as a dervish in a lodge all his life. He was always more interested in the intellectual and aesthetic expressions of Sufism. Rifai further stated that the lodges' traditional function were lost when they "diminished to empty formalism and ceremony." By divorcing his Sufi tradition's ethical-spiritual foundation from ceremonial ritual practices (e.g., *dhikr*) and traditional institutional structures (e.g., *tekke*), Rifai refashioned his Sufi tradition in parallel with Republican reforms. For him, *tekke* was only a contingent means, not the end, in the Sufi path. While these institutions were once the "hearth of knowledge" (*irfān ocağı*), uplifting society through spiritual, ethical, aesthetic, and cultural schooling, Rifai believed that they were no longer capable of meeting modern society's needs. When a journalist asked for his criticism of the ban, Rifai instead endorsed it, saying: "only a few out of around 300 *tekke*s in Istanbul were still serving *irfān*." He even scorned *Mawlawi* Shaykh Baki Efendi for complaining about the ban: "Nothing changed; we are still what we are, oh holy man. We used to be *demsaz* (confidant) in the external abode of the lodge; now, we are *dilsaz* (who restores hearts) in the internal abode of the heart. Today, the body is the lodge; the heart the post."[88] For shaykhs like Rifai, it was essential to "keep the gate of the heart open, not the gate of a building."[89] Their new form of "post-*ṭarīqa* Sufism" was considered as a recourse to pre-institutionalized "authentic" Sufism.[90]

Sufi Ethics and State Politics

As most of his followers were state elites, they seemed to appreciate Rifai's alignment of Sufi ethics with national politics. His biographers argued that, for Rifai, "employing politics as a

[84] Rifai, *Sohbetler*, 214.

[85] As state-funded endowments, Ottoman *tekke*s provided shaykhs with a rent-free residence and salaries. Their lack of formal education severely limited shaykhs' employment options after the ban.

[86] Ayverdi et al., *Ken'an Rifai*, 122.

[87] Ibid., 122.

[88] Ibid., 120–21, 123–24.

[89] Kara, *Cumhuriyet Türkiye'sinde*, 257–61.

[90] Carl Ernst, "Kenan Rifai's Teaching Method and the *Masnawi* Commentary," in *The Door*, 158.

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tool in the service of his cause would have been the ugliest assault to the honor of his cause."[91] Adding that, since "sustaining the political order was the task of experts," Rifai was "the last person who would attempt to shape state politics."[92] These strong statements signal Rifai's alignment with the secular order that rendered religion and politics two separate fields of respective expertise. Moreover, such statements suggest that, unlike the Naqshbandi shaykhs, Rifai was not interested in Islamizing the state. As Butrus Abu-Manneh shows in his studies of the Naqshbadiyya, "the foremost duty of the *Naqshbandi-Mujaddidi* shaykhs [was] to seek influence upon rulers and to bring them to follow *sharia* rules"; such shaykhs "regarded the central part of [their] mission to be sure to secure the supremacy of *sharia* in society and state."[93] However, what the Naqshbandis saw as religious duty was deemed "the ugliest attack" on Rifai's cause. The divergence between the two traditions attests to the diversity of Sufi responses to state secularization reforms.

Befitting the sensibilities of a modern upper-class man, Rifai adjusted the Sufi self-formation in ways non-threatening to the modern nation-state's new moral order. For instance, I argue that his discourses on Sufi subjectivity (*insān al-kāmil)* resonated with state ethics of "industrious, frugal, and obedient" citizens.[94] Whether they were Westernist, Islamist, or Turkist, most late Ottoman and early Republican bureaucrat-*cum*-intellectuals uniformly perpetuated the image of an ideal society collectively built by moral (*seciyeli*), hard-working, and cultured individuals equipped with modern knowledge and skills.[95] These nationalist vanguards embodied a conservative "moral elitism," portraying themselves as "moral servants of the nation... who displayed unconditional sacrifice, humility, and selflessness."[96] Many intellectuals, such as Ziya Gökalp (1876–1924), repudiated the idea of liberal individualism and constructed a moralistic conservative discourse of modernity in which one's "duty and obligations" were prioritized over "rights" and "self-interest."[97]

I maintain that Rifai's spiritual training (*irshād*) was similarly aimed at disciplining the self into a socially responsible moral agent motivated by an internalized divine love. For instance, his Sufi discourses supported these ideal "qualities of national character, moral integrity, and patriotic feelings."[98] He preached that Sufism demanded moral excellence cultivated through constant ethical reflection and selfless service. Accordingly, a Sufi seeker should be saved from his "little weaknesses and pleasures" so that he could "sacrifice his interest for the greater good" and become of "distinguished value" (*başarılı bir değer)* and "a man of stature" (*iyi bir cemiyet adamı*) in society.[99] Merging the ethics of the nation-state with spiritual-moral Sufi precepts such as "self-sacrifice," "selfless service," and "man of duty" might have further helped Rifai distinguish his Sufi order from the stereotypical image of lower-class lodges condemned as centers of ignorance, obscurantism, laziness, and passivity.

While echoing the communitarian ethics of nation-building, Rifai's *irshād* style also seemed to be informed by his personal and affective relationships with his disciples. His biographers stated that his religious authority partly stemmed from "his ability to

[91] Ayverdi, et al., *Kenan Rifai*, 108–9.

[92] Ibid., 63.

[93] Butrus Abu-Manneh, "The *Naqshbandiyya-Mujaddidiyya* in the Ottoman Lands in the Early 19th Century," *Die Welt des Islams* 22, no. 1 (1982): 14–15.

[94] M. Alper Yalçınkaya, "Science as an Ally of Religion: A Muslim Appropriation of 'the Conflict Thesis,'" *The British Journal for the History of Science* 44, no. 2 (2011): 164.

[95] Mustafa Gündüz, "Son Dönem Osmanlı Aydınlarının Yeni Birey ve Toplum Oluşturma Düşünceleri," *Erdem* 51 (2008): 166.

[96] Yasemin Ipek, "Autobiography and Conservative-Nationalist Political Opposition in Early Republican Turkey," *Turkish Studies* 19, no. 1 (2018): 141.

[97] Taha Parla, *The Social and Political Thought of Ziya Gökalp 1876–1924* (Leiden: Brill, 1985).

[98] Ipek, "Autobiography," 152.

[99] Ayverdi et al. *Ken'an Rifai*, 128–30.

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Figure 3. Ken'an Rifai with Samiha Ayverdi. Photo courtesy of Cemalnur Sargut.

identify potential," empower individuals, and cultivate their unique contributions to society, "all without suppressing their personalities." The focus on individual needs resonated with his educated modern followers: "He would neither tamper with the individual personalities nor would he force people to go against their natures... He never intended to fabricate a single mold of personhood in which individual nuances were ignored."[100] The biographers' reflections on individual distinctions and personal growth can also be seen as forms of Sufi apologetics, a counterpoint to modernist critiques that portrayed Sufism as incompatible with modern subjectivity.

Divine Feminine and State Feminism

Rifai's elite Sufi circle included a large group of first-generation unveiled Republican women who challenged the uniform image of educated Republican women as staunch secularists. Shaykh Rifai's gender-progressive interpretation of Islam was a radical move in a context where new gender norms marked "the deepest intellectual and emotional chasm between the modern West and Islam."[101] He reformed Islamic gender norms by not only discarding modesty codes, such as veiling and gender segregation, but also by extending women's public participation to the level of community and spiritual leadership. Challenging the patriarchal leanings of Sufi brotherhoods, he opened spaces for female leadership in the Sufi tradition (Fig. 3). Since Rifai's death, his order has continued under the authority of female shaykhs such as Samiha Ayverdi, Meskure Sargut, and Cemalnur Sargut.

Rifai's spiritual journey began under his mother's guidance, a fact reflected in his unorthodox dedication of his *tekke* to her: "The Lodge of Ümmü Ken'an." The first chapter of his biography detailed her profound influence on him. His first lesson, as recounted, was the transformative power of unconditional love: "An infinite love of humanity...This is the gate

[100] Ibid., 129, 131–32.

[101] Nilüfer Göle, "The Quest for the Islamic Self within the Context of Modernity," in *Rethinking Modernity and National Identity inTurkey*, ed. Sibel Bozdoğan and Reşat Kasaba (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1997), 86.

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of salvation for human beings to reach God."[102] Aside from his mother, the most revered Rifai disciple was Semiha Cemal (1906–36), to whom the biographers dedicated a chapter entitled "Ken'an Rifai's View of Womanhood and Semiha Cemal." The relationship between Rifai and Semiha Cemal was told as an epic story, akin to the relationship between Shams and Rumi. Stating that Semiha Cemal became the "mirror in which he witnessed his reality," the biographers cited this relationship as another indicator of the high value Rifai gave to women:

> One may ask why Kenan Rifai chose a woman for this highest form of spiritual exchange. He understood that women are a more suitable medium and a more fertile ground than men for an exchange of ideas, feelings, and faith. He owed his subject formation to his mother. As such, spiritual maturation should also be done through women who can reproduce not only biologically but also psychologically. Semiha Cemal is essentially a symbol. Kenan Rifai valued women as formative agents in determining the future of humanity.[103]

The biographers credited Rifai's influence for inspiring Cemal to abandon her self-centered lifestyle of leisure, return to academia, and become the first female scholar of philosophy in the early Turkish Republic.

I observe that, by emphasizing women's public participation, Kenan Rifai's gender discourse aligned with Republican gender reforms. Unlike traditional Sufi guidance, he encouraged women to use their education to serve the nation, reflecting the republic's "state feminism," treating women as the mothers of nation-building.[104] For instance, Semiha Cemal translated Greek philosophical works such as Plato's *Apology* and *Crito*, and Stoics such as Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, into Turkish. Her "service" to the nation combined modern educational values with the discipline and work ethic of classical dervishhood, blurring boundaries between secular and religious practices.

Uncoincidentally, it was Rifai's female followers who decided to write their master's biography and continue his legacy. Given his in-person style of *irshād*, these women seemed to have unmediated access to their *murshid*, enabling them to closely observe him as an exemplar. These four urban, educated, professional women were among the Republican women intellectuals with a record of literary, historical, and political publications. Samiha Ayverdi (1905–93) was a poet, novelist, civil society entrepreneur, and conservative-nationalist intellectual of the Right.[105] She published over forty books primarily dedicated to the rehabilitation of classical Ottoman-Muslim heritage in historiography, arts, letters, music, and architecture. She was both an anti-communist and anti-Islamist writer. Nezihe Araz (1920–2009) was a Kemalist journalist and prolific writer. The daughter of a Republican MP from Ankara, Rifaz Araz, and close friend of Atatürk, Araz was expelled from her PhD program for participating in Leftist activism. Her oeuvre was unusually diverse, including books on the saints of Anatolia, Fatih Sultan Mehmed, Prophet Muhammed, and Rumi as well as three major books on the "heroic" life of Atatürk. She was also the co-editor of the *Encyclopedia of Meydan Larousse*.[106] Sofi Huri (1897–1983) was an Orthodox Christian born in Ottoman Syria, the daughter of an Arab Orthodox priest.[107] She graduated from Cambridge University and became the director of the American Board Bible House and the editor of the Redhouse dictionary in Turkey. She wrote several

[102] Ayverdi et al., *Ken'an Rifai*, 18.

[103] Ibid., 245.

[104] Jenny White, "State Feminism, Modernization, and the Turkish Republican Woman," *National Women's Studies Association Journal* 15, no. 3 (2003):145–59.

[105] İlker Aytürk and Laurent Mignon, "Paradoxes of a Cold War Sufi Woman: Samiha Ayverdi Between Islam, Nationalism, and Modernity," *New Perspectives on Turkey* 49. no. 49 (2013): 57–89.

[106] Hakan Aslanbenzer, "Nezihe Araz: From Communism to Sufism," *Daily Sabah*, August 18, 2018, https://www.dailysabah.com/portrait/2018/08/18/nezihe-araz-from-communism-to-sufism.

[107] Mustafa Tahrali, "Sofi Huri," in *Islam Ansiklopedisi* (Ankara: Türk Diyanet Vakfı, 2019), 515.

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books, mostly on past mystics, from Jesus to Rabi`a al-`Adawiyya (d. 801), and translated works by writers such as Tolstoy, Jack London, Tagore, and Muhammed Iqbal. Safiye Erol (1902–64) was a famous Republican novelist with a doctorate in philology from the University of Munich.[108]

While endorsing the Republican ban on lodges, Dr. Erol asserted the enduring value of Sufism as a philosophical thought, way of life, and form of art. After defining *adāb* as the expression of ethics in the field of aesthetics, she continued:

> My teacher Ken'an Rifai says: "put the crown of *adāb* on your head, and go wherever you want".... Ethical principles are *interprété* according to the times, that is, various aesthetic versions are derived from them. Until recently, a woman's modesty was expressed with a headscarf and face veil. Today, the equivalent is to dress modestly without denying world fashion but without attracting attention and arousing sexual excitement. Today's woman wears her own personality as the new headscarf and pulls her dignity over her face as her veil.[109]

In the context of the new Republican gender regime encouraging women's unveiling and public participation, Erol drew upon Sufi interpretations emphasizing *adāb* in place of the veil. It seems that, within Sufism, these erudite writers discovered an "enlightened" Islam, compatible with their modern values.

Conclusion

In analyzing how Rifai's life experiences shaped his approach to Islam and modernity, this article demonstrates that the modalities of Islamic reasoning employed by high-ranking religious authorities, such as Rifai, were not divorced from their social realities or abstracted from their intersectional identities. Such religious authorities' affiliation with the state, access to higher education, and exposure to diverse viewpoints contributed to their ability to engage with modern ideas and reinterpret religious discourses in ways that aligned with the state's projected social advancements.

By prioritizing the "formation of moral character," Rifai represented what Şerif Mardin termed "*entellektüel* (intellectual) Sufism," standing apart from more popular Sufi orders.[110] But, Rifai was not alone in foregrounding "Sufism's theological and philosophical dimensions as its 'true essence.'"[111] Against the "objectionable" practices of folk Sufism, such as occult sciences, saint worship, and thaumaturgical practices, modern educated Sufis promoted "spiritual and intellectual pursuit innocent of beliefs or practices commonly considered 'irrational' or 'vulgar.'"[112]

This resonated well with not only the state's vision of a modern Muslim national identity, but also the upper-class lifestyles of Rifai's followers, who found a community of like-minded people within his circle. Unable to connect with traditional religious people or positivist secularists, Rifai's followers found solace in his reformulated Sufism. While they viewed Rifai as a moral exemplar, it was not for his asceticism, deep knowledge of shari`a, or miraculous signs of holiness, but rather for the path he offered for navigating conflicting ways of being in times of social transition.

The portrait of Rifai as a Westernized state elite and religious authority reveals the limits of the Islamic/secular binary as "the two competing currents of change" in Turkey.[113] Shaped by his European-Balkan upbringing and education in both Islamic and Western

[108] Mehmet Nuri Yardım, *Safiye Erol Kitabı* (Istanbul: Benseno Yayınları, 2003).
[109] Erol in Ayverdi et. al., *Ken'an Rifai*, 318.
[110] Mardin, *Türkiye'de Din,* 32.
[111] Alexander Knysh, *Sufism: A New History of Islamic Mysticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 52.
[112] Ibid., 48.
[113] Findley, *Turkey, Islam, Nationalism*, 20–21.

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traditions, Shaykh Rifai challenged the notion of a monolithic Islamic public in the early 20th century. I maintain that the Islamic/secular binary not only obscured the continuities between the empire and the republic but also concealed a crucial but overlooked dimension, the role of class, in interrogating late Ottoman and early Republican religious authorities' responses to the secularizing state and modernizing society. In my analysis of Shaykh Rifai, I drew critical attention to his sociocultural *habitus* as the son of a Balkan Ottoman *`ayān* dynasty and an educated high-ranking bureaucrat in shaping his approach to Sufism as a reformist shaykh.

Lastly, Sufi alliances with secular elites also suggest that the republic's founders were not as rigidly secular as portrayed. Atatürk, for example, welcomed Sufi shaykhs such as Veled Celebi and Safvet Yetkin into the parliament.[114] He also endorsed Sufi intellectuals who wrote treatises on Sufi philosophy, aiming to demonstrate the compatibility of Islamic humanism with Western thought. Mehmed Ali Ayni dedicated his book on Ibn al-ʿArabi to Atatürk, who reciprocated by purchasing 500 copies.[115] Even staunch secularists such as Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoglu displayed a conflicted "combination of moralistic critique and romantic fascination"; that is, while critiquing decadent orders, they retained a nostalgic appreciation for Sufism "as a disembodied philosophy or set of ideas" connected to Turkish folklore.[116]

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[114] Kara, *Metinlerle*, 104–6.

[115] Kara, *Din ile Modernlesme Arasinda,* 367.

[116] Brett Wilson, "The Twilight of Sufism: Antiquity, Immorality, and Nation in Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoglu's *Nur Baba,*" *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 49, no. 2 (2017): 234.

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