The Enduring Mystical Path: Kurds and Sufism Through History and Modernity

I. Introduction: Sufism and the Kurdish People

Sufism, known in Arabic as *aṣ-Ṣūfiyya* or *at-Taṣawwuf*, represents a mystical dimension of Islamic religious practice. It is characterized by a profound focus on spiritual purification, esoteric spirituality, distinct ritualism, and asceticism.[1] Often described as the inward or spiritual aspect of Islam, Sufism's ultimate aim for the believer is to achieve a state of oneness with the Absolute Truth, which is God, or *Haqiqa*.[2] This spiritual path emerged early in the history of Islam, partly as a response to perceived worldliness and formalism. It emphasized the internalization of Islamic teachings and the emulation of the Prophet Muhammad's way of life.[4] The legitimacy of Sufism is traditionally grounded in the foundational texts of Islam, the Qur'an and the Sunna (Prophetic traditions), which call for practices such as asceticism (*zuhd*) and profound piety.[5] This foundational understanding is crucial for appreciating Sufism not as an peripheral development but as an integral, albeit distinct, dimension of Islamic practice, which in turn is essential for understanding its deep and enduring roots within Kurdish society.

The history of Islam in Kurdistan is inextricably linked with the pervasive influence of Sufism. Two *tariqas* (Sufi orders), the Naqshbandiyya (particularly its Khalidiyya branch) and the Qadiriyya, have historically been the most prominent.[6] The broader spiritual significance of Sufism is reflected in its consideration as a key component of regional identity, for instance, in Jordan.[5] Within Kurdish society, Sufi *shaykhs* (spiritual masters) have historically wielded considerable influence, serving not only as spiritual guides but also as influential community leaders. Their roles have extended into the political sphere, with some *shaykhs* even leading political rebellions against ruling powers.[6] This dual spiritual and socio-political role is a recurring motif throughout Kurdish history. The majority of Kurds are Sunni Muslims who predominantly adhere to the Shafi'i *madhhab* (school of Islamic jurisprudence). This adherence distinguishes them from many of their Turkish and Arab Sunni neighbors, who largely follow the Hanafi *madhhab*.[6] This distinction in legal schools sometimes intersects with and influences Sufi affiliations and practices in the region. The deep historical penetration and institutionalization of Sufism in Kurdistan set the stage for its multifaceted roles in shaping Kurdish religious, cultural, and political life.

The prevalence of the Shafi'i school of law among most Kurds, contrasting with the Hanafi school common among many neighboring Sunni populations, may have cultivated a unique religio-legal environment. This environment could have been particularly conducive to the flourishing of certain Sufi orders, especially those that demonstrated adaptability to or resonance with Shafi'i jurisprudence. For example, Sheikh Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani, the founder of the Qadiriyya order, though Hanbali, accorded Shafi'i jurisprudence equal standing and

issued *fatwas* (legal opinions) based on both schools.[8] Furthermore, Kurdish Islamic scholars were historically sought after by students from as far as Southeast Asia, partly due to a shared Shafi'i legal tradition and a perceived deeper spiritual affinity, especially in the realm of mysticism.[9] This suggests that the common Shafi'i identity might have facilitated distinct Sufi networks and intellectual exchanges, potentially shaping the development of Kurdish Sufism in ways different from Hanafi-dominant regions and contributing to the prominence of orders like the Qadiriyya and Naqshbandiyya.

Moreover, the early and profound integration of Sufism into Kurdish society suggests that its mystical interpretations of Islam, often characterized by greater adaptability and emphasis on inner experience, may have resonated more effectively with pre-existing Kurdish spiritual frameworks and social structures. This resonance could have facilitated a comparatively smoother and more organic process of Islamization than a purely legalistic or dogmatic approach might have achieved. The Islamization of Mesopotamia and Iran, including Kurdish lands, was a prolonged endeavor stretching over centuries and, in some perspectives, remains incomplete.[6] Indeed, some Kurdish nationalist narratives have historically viewed Islam as an external imposition.[6] However, Kurdish society's documented openness to Sufi thought allowed both Sunni and what were later termed heterodox movements to spread.[10] Sufism itself emerged in historical periods often marked by social upheaval and spiritual crises, offering a path of personal piety and asceticism.[5] As Martin van Bruinessen has argued, Sufi orders in Kurdistan provided mechanisms for social integration that operated independently of, and sometimes bridged, tribal structures and state apparatuses.[11] Consequently, Sufism's emphasis on inner spiritual experience, the charismatic authority of *shaykhs*, and the communal life fostered in *tekkes* (Sufi lodges) might have aligned well with, or offered a compelling alternative or complement to, existing Kurdish tribal loyalties and perhaps older, indigenous spiritual beliefs. This dynamic likely played a crucial role in the gradual and complex tapestry of Islamization in Kurdistan, offering a counter-narrative to the view of Islam solely as an externally imposed system.

II. The Historical Tapestry of Sufism in Kurdistan

The process of Islamization in Kurdish regions, as part of the broader Islamization of Mesopotamia and Iran, commenced in the 7th century CE. However, this was not a swift or monolithic conversion but a protracted process that unfolded over centuries.[6] Sufism, emerging as a distinct spiritual current within Islam, played a significant role in this historical development. It began as a spiritual revolution focused on the purification of the individual self (*nafs*), drawing its legitimacy from the Qur'an and the Sunna. Initially an individualistic phenomenon in the 7th century, Sufism evolved into a more popular and social manifestation by the 11th century. By the 17th century, organized Sufi *turuq* (orders) had taken firm root amongst the masses, often receiving support and patronage from ruling authorities, such as the Ottoman Empire.[5] Kurdish society proved to be particularly receptive to the institutionalization of Sufism through these *tariqas*. This receptive environment allowed not only Sunni Sufi orders but also various movements sometimes labeled as heterodox to

flourish.[10] The development of written education among Kurds, dating back to approximately the 10th century, with *madrasas* (Islamic schools) serving as the primary institutions of learning, provided a scholarly infrastructure that could interact with and contribute to Sufi intellectual traditions.[12]

Several early and formative figures in the history of Sufism have notable connections, either by lineage or influence, to Kurdistan, underscoring the deep historical roots of Sufism in the region. Sheikh Junayd al-Baghdadi (d. 910 CE), a pivotal master in classical Sufism whose teachings profoundly shaped later developments, is mentioned as having Kurdish ancestral links, with his lineage traced back to Nahavand, a city in present-day Iran.[13] Perhaps the most widely recognized Sufi figure associated with the Kurds is Sheikh Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani (also Gilani, 1077–1166 CE), the eponym of the Qadiriyya order, one of the most widespread *tariqas* globally.[14] While many scholarly sources point to his birthplace as the Persian province of Gilan, a strong and persistent claim within Kurdish tradition holds that he hailed from a district also named Gilan in southern Kurdistan, west of Kermanshah.[11] Historical accounts note that in Baghdad, al-Jilani was referred to as an '*ajami*' (non-Arab) and may have spoken Persian.[8] Regardless of the precise details of his ethnic origin, his spiritual legacy has had an immense and undeniable impact on Kurdish Sufism. Furthermore, historical connections exist: Saladin, the renowned Kurdish Muslim leader, was reportedly strongly influenced by al-Jilani and his disciples.[17] Van Bruinessen also notes that the teacher of al-Jilani's own teacher was a Kurd named `Ali Hakkari.[11] The very existence of this debate and the strong Kurdish claim to al-Jilani are significant. This claim can be understood as more than a simple historical assertion; it functions as a powerful act of identity construction. In a culture where, as noted by Amir Hassanpour, the search for "origins" is indispensable for *Kurdeyeti* (Kurdish national identity) [6], rooting one of the most influential global Sufi orders firmly within Kurdish heritage serves to legitimize and elevate the status of Kurdish Islam and Sufism on the broader Islamic stage. It is an assertion of Kurdish agency and historical significance within a central Islamic tradition, countering narratives of cultural or religious marginalization.

Sufism in Kurdistan evolved within the context of various empires, most notably the Ottoman Empire, and interacted in complex ways with pre-Islamic Kurdish beliefs and other religious currents. The Ottoman state, for strategic and ideological reasons, often internalized and adopted Sufism. The flourishing of Sufi orders was frequently linked to state patronage, as Sufi institutions and leaders could serve as intermediaries and sources of social stability.[5] A key motivation for Ottoman support of Sunni Sufi orders, particularly in border regions like Kurdistan, was to counter the political and religious influence of the Shi'a Safavid Empire in Iran and, later, the spread of Wahhabism from the Arabian Peninsula.[13] This imperial patronage, however, was a complex dynamic. While it fostered the growth of Sufi institutions and endowed *shaykhs* with resources and influence, it also meant that Sufi orders were sometimes instrumentalized for state purposes. This could shape their political trajectories and social influence in ways that sometimes aligned with local Kurdish interests but at other times diverged, particularly when state policies clashed with Kurdish aspirations for autonomy. The fluctuation of Sufi orders between postures of loyalty and opposition to ruling authorities is a documented historical pattern.[5] The eventual rise of influential Khalidiyya *shaykhs* as

political leaders in Kurdistan, partly filling a power vacuum left after the Ottoman dissolution of autonomous Kurdish principalities, exemplifies this complex interplay between Sufi authority and state power.[10]

The interaction between Sufism and pre-Islamic or non-orthodox Kurdish beliefs is another significant aspect of its historical tapestry. Mehrdad Izady, for instance, proposed the concept of a proto-Kurdish religion he termed "Yazdanism," elements of which he perceives in later syncretic faiths found among Kurds, such as Yazidism, Yarsanism (Ahl-e Haqq), and Alevism, as well as in some Sufi groups. This suggests a degree of syncretic interaction and mutual influence.[6] The nationalist impulse in modern Kurdish thought has sometimes propelled a search for a purely pre-Islamic Kurdish religious identity, viewing Islam itself as a "suspicious colonial import".[6] However, even traditions like Yazidism, often posited as an ancient Kurdish faith, demonstrably absorbed influences from Sufis, particularly during the 12th century.[6] This highlights a long history of dialogue, adaptation, and fusion between incoming Islamic mystical currents and indigenous spiritual sensibilities in the Kurdish regions.

III. Major Sufi Orders (Tariqas) among the Kurds

The landscape of Sufism among the Kurds has been dominated by two principal *tariqas*: the Qadiriyya and the Naqshbandiyya, particularly its Khalidiyya branch. These orders have profoundly shaped the religious, social, and political life of Kurdish communities for centuries.

A. The Qadiriyya Order

The Qadiriyya *tariqa* is one of the oldest and most widely disseminated Sufi orders in the Islamic world. It traces its spiritual lineage (*silsila*) back to the Prophet Muhammad through its eponym, Sheikh Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani (also referred to as Gilani, Geylânî), who passed away in 1166 CE.[14] By the end of the 15th century, the Qadiriyya had established distinct sub-orders and its influence had spread across vast territories, including Morocco, Spain, Turkey, India, Ethiopia, Somalia, and present-day Mali.[14]

In Kurdistan, the Qadiriyya has a deep-rooted presence, often maintained and propagated through influential families who have inherited spiritual leadership over generations. The order is particularly prominent in Iranian Kurdistan (Rojhelat), where the Kasnazani branch holds significant sway.[15] Sheikh Mohammed Kasnazani is recognized as the current head of the Qadiri Kasnazani *tariqa* [15], an order that also enjoys a widespread following in Iraq.[20]

Historically, the Barzinji family has been a major representative of the Qadiri Sufi tradition in the city of Sulaymaniyah and its environs.[10] The Talabani family, with their central *takiya* (Sufi lodge) in Kirkuk, is another influential Qadiri *shaykhly* lineage.[10] Further north, the Nehrî family, who trace their descent to Sheikh Abdülaziz (a son of Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani), were historically influential among Kurmanji-speaking Kurds in the Hakkari region, as well as in parts of northern Iraq and northwestern Iran.[10] It is noteworthy, however, that some traditionally Qadiri families, such as the Nehrî and Arvasî, later embraced the Khalidiyya branch of the Naqshbandiyya order.[10]

The devotional practices of the Qadiriyya are characterized by their vibrancy and emphasis on communal participation. Central to their worship is *Dhikr* (remembrance of God), which often

involves devotional acts such as the rhythmic chanting of divine names or phrases like 'Hey Allah'.[15] These sessions are frequently accompanied by the resonant sound of the *daf* (a large frame drum), creating an immersive spiritual atmosphere.[15] *Dhikr* is considered by adherents to be the "food of the soul".[15] These gatherings typically take place in *Takiyas*, which serve as Sufi lodges or mosques; the town of Mariwan in Iranian Kurdistan, for example, is home to ten such *Takiyas*.[15] The Kasnazani order, specifically, maintains a tradition known as *Dayara*, where groups of dervishes (Sufi devotees) travel through villages to disseminate Islamic teachings and the principles of their *tariqa*.[15] The spiritual leader of the ceremony, known as the Caliph (*Khalifa*), guides the proceedings, often chanting religious slogans in praise of God and revered spiritual figures.[15]

A particularly distinctive, and sometimes controversial, aspect of certain Qadiri branches, notably the Kasnazani and the Rifa'iyya order (which shares some ecstatic practices or historical links with the Qadiriyya), involves dramatic displays of self-mortification. These can include acts such as piercing the body with sharp objects, licking red-hot iron, eating glass, or handling snakes and fire.[11] Adherents often view these practices as *karamat* (miraculous graces or wonders), demonstrations of divine protection and the spiritual power of their *shaykh*.[20] Such rituals are typically performed to display the dervishes' courage, unwavering loyalty, and the *shaykh*'s spiritual authority, and are often framed within the community as acts that bring about communal healing or spiritual blessing.[21] Traditionally, members of the Qadiri order may also be identified by a rose emblem worn in their caps.[14] The ecstatic and sometimes startling rituals of branches like the Kasnazani underscore a performative and deeply experiential dimension of Sufism that has historically held a strong popular appeal and fostered intense communal bonds.

B. The Naqshbandiyya Order (Khalidiyya Branch)

The Naqshbandiyya *tariqa*, named after Khwaja Baha' al-Din Naqshband Bukhari (d. 1389 CE), is another major Sufi order with a profound impact on the Kurdish religious landscape. It distinguishes itself by tracing its spiritual lineage to the Prophet Muhammad through the first Caliph, Abu Bakr as-Siddiq.[22] A hallmark of the Naqshbandi way is its strong emphasis on adherence to the *Shari'a* (Islamic sacred law), a principle consistently highlighted by major Naqshbandi scholars throughout history.[23]

The most significant development for the Naqshbandiyya among the Kurds was the emergence of the Khalidiyya branch (often referred to as Khalidism), founded by Mawlana Khalid al-Baghdadi (also known as al-Shahrazuri or al-Kurdi, 1779–1827 CE). Mawlana Khalid, a Kurd from the Shahrazor region near Sulaymaniyah, was a distinguished scholar and Sufi master who, after travels and study in India, returned to introduce this potent new spiritual force into Kurdistan in the early 19th century.[10] Sulaymaniyah, at that time an administrative center and a hub of learning, became a crucial launching point for the Khalidiyya.[10] Mawlana Khalid's profound scholarly background, charismatic personality, and his innovative approach of integrating Sufi spiritual discipline with the existing *madrasa* culture were instrumental in his success.[10] He was a figure of immense spiritual authority, revered by his followers as the "Reviver of the 13th Century of the Hijra".[24]

The Khalidiyya's spread was remarkably rapid and extensive. Mawlana Khalid adeptly attracted numerous Kurdish scholars (*`ulama*) and even members of established Qadiri *shaykhly* families into his fold, appointing many of them as his *khalifas* (deputies) to propagate the order.[10] These deputies established a vast network of *tekkes*, with over twenty founded in Northern Iraq, Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia, and parts of Iran.[10] Abdülkerim Müderris documented at least 34 Kurdish *khalifas* appointed by Mawlana Khalid.[10] Such was the depth of its penetration that regions like Eastern Anatolia came to be referred to as "Naqshbandistan," signifying the order's pervasive influence.[10]

The rise of Khalidism inevitably led to complex interactions with the pre-existing Qadiriyya order, which had hitherto been the dominant Sufi influence in many Kurdish areas. While Khalidism came to share the social ground with the Qadiriyya, by the mid-19th century, the balance of influence had often shifted decisively in favor of the Khalidiyya, particularly among major Kurdish tribes in Northern Iraq and subsequently in Iran and Anatolia.[10] The reactions of established Qadiri families to this new spiritual force varied considerably. Some, like Sheikh Ma'rûf an-Nudehî of the influential Berzencî family in Sulaymaniyah, vehemently opposed Mawlana Khalid and his teachings, viewing them as a threat to their own authority and leading to Mawlana Khalid's exile on two occasions.[10] Other Qadiri families, such as the Tâlebânîs of Kirkuk, adopted a stance of neutrality, continuing their own Sufi activities without direct confrontation.[10] A third response involved integration or outright conversion: some Qadiri *shaykhs* incorporated Naqshbandi-Khalidi teachings into their existing practices, while prominent families like the Nehrî and Arvasî in Eastern Anatolia completely adopted Khalidism, transforming their Qadiri *tekkes* into Khalidiyya centers.[10]

The Naqshbandiyya order is generally characterized by its practice of silent *Dhikr* (remembrance of God), as opposed to the vocal *Dhikr* common in many other orders, and by its emphasis on the principle of *khalwat dar anjuman* – "solitude in the crowd," meaning to maintain inner spiritual focus while outwardly engaged in worldly affairs.[22] The order adheres to eleven foundational principles, the first eight formulated by Abdul Khaliq Ghijduwani and the final three added by Baha al-Din Naqshband himself.[22] The Khalidiyya branch, in particular, maintained and reinforced the Naqshbandi tradition's strong orientation towards the *Shari'a*.[10] Prominent Khalidiyya *shaykhs* who were instrumental in disseminating the order across Kurdistan included Sheikh Osman Siracüddin et-Tavîlî, Seyyid Abdullah Şemdinî, and his nephew Seyyid Taha Hakkarî, who established the influential Nehri Tekke.[10] Mawlana Khalid himself was renowned as *Dhu-l-Janahayn* ("He of the Two Wings"), signifying his mastery of both external religious sciences (like *Shari'a*) and internal spiritual knowledge (Sufism), and his teachings consistently emphasized self-denial and strict adherence to Islamic law alongside Sufi practice.[24] This emphasis on *Shari'a* compliance likely appealed to the orthodox *`ulama* and provided a framework that could be readily integrated with existing *madrasa* education, thereby contributing significantly to its widespread acceptance and transformative impact on Kurdish society.

The contrasting modes of expansion and leadership succession between the Qadiriyya and the Naqshbandiyya-Khalidiyya had significant long-term implications for their respective

societal penetration, political influence, and adaptability within Kurdistan. The Qadiriyya, as van Bruinessen notes, was often characterized by hereditary leadership and family-based networks, with prominent families like the Barzinjis and Talabanis virtually monopolizing the order in southern and eastern Kurdistan.[11] This model fostered strong, localized power bases and deep loyalties within those dynastic lines. In contrast, the Naqshbandiyya-Khalidiyya, under Mawlana Khalid's direction, adopted a strategy of appointing influential local *`ulama* and even members of other Sufi families as his *khalifas*.[10] This "franchise-like" model of expansion allowed the Khalidiyya to disseminate its teachings and establish its presence across diverse Kurdish regions and tribal landscapes with remarkable speed and effectiveness. It created a widespread, interconnected network that could be mobilized for broader social and political action, contributing to the emergence of what some termed "Naqshbandistan".[10] While the Qadiriyya's family-centric structure ensured enduring influence for specific lineages, the Khalidiyya's more decentralized yet ideologically unified approach arguably provided greater adaptability and a wider reach, enabling it to become deeply embedded within various local power structures and scholarly circles throughout Kurdistan.

C. Other Sufi Orders and their Influence

While the Qadiriyya and Naqshbandiyya have been the most dominant Sufi orders among the Kurds, the religious landscape of Kurdistan has also been touched by other *tariqas*. The Rifa'iyya order, founded by Sheikh Ahmed ibn Ali al-Rifa'i (d. 578H/1182CE), is one such example. It is known for devotional practices that can include ecstatic elements similar to those found in some Qadiri branches, and it has a presence in Iraq, Syria, and Turkey.[20] Earlier in Kurdish Sufi history, the Nurbakhshi order, associated with Baba Ali Hamadani, reportedly played a role in unifying various *tariqas* in Kurdistan before later differentiations and the rise of other dominant orders.[26] Additionally, sources occasionally mention the presence or influence of other classical Sufi orders such as the Chishti and Suhrawardi in the broader Kurdish cultural sphere, though their institutional footprint appears less significant compared to the Qadiriyya and Naqshbandiyya.[15] Acknowledging these other orders, even if their direct influence on the majority of Kurds was less pronounced, provides a more complete and nuanced understanding of the diverse currents of Sufi thought and practice that have historically flowed through Kurdistan.

Table 1: Major Sufi Orders Prominent Among Kurds

Order Name	Key Founder(s) / Major Figures in Kurdistan	Core Tenets / Distinctive Practices	Primary Regions of Influence in Kurdistan
Qadiriyya	Sheikh Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani / Barzinji Family, Talabani Family, Kasnazani Shaykhs, Nehrî Family (historically)	Vocal *Dhikr*, *sama* (spiritual concerts), use of *daf* (drum), ecstatic rituals, belief in *karamat* (miracles), some branches with controversial practices (e.g.,	Historically strong in Southern and Eastern Kurdistan (e.g., Sulaymaniyah, Kirkuk); Iranian Kurdistan (Kasnazani); parts of Hakkari, Northern Iraq, NW Iran (Nehrî).

		self-mortification). Rose emblem.	
Naqshbandiyya-Khalidiyya	Baha' al-Din Naqshband (original order); Mawlana Khalid al-Baghdadi (Khalidiyya branch) / Sheikh Ubeydullah Nehri, Sheikh Said Piran, Barzani Shaykhs.	Silent *Dhikr*, strong emphasis on *Shari'a* adherence, *khalwat dar anjuman* (solitude in the crowd), eleven foundational principles. Integration with *madrasa* culture.	Widespread across all parts of Kurdistan (Turkish, Iraqi, Iranian, Syrian Kurdistan) following Mawlana Khalid's revival in the 19th century. Described as "Naqshbandistan" in Eastern Anatolia.

IV. The Socio-Political and Cultural Dimensions of Kurdish Sufism

Sufism in Kurdistan has never been a purely contemplative or otherworldly phenomenon. Its institutions, leaders, and cultural expressions have been deeply interwoven with the social, political, and cultural fabric of Kurdish life, shaping identity, mediating social relations, and fueling political movements.

A. Sufi Shaykhs and Institutions (Tekkes, Zawiyas, Khanqahs)

Sufi lodges—known variously as *tekkes*, *zawiyas*, or *khanqahs*—have historically served as far more than mere places of worship. They functioned as vital centers of learning, social cohesion, and even economic activity within Kurdish communities. In regions like Northern Syria, these institutions played a crucial role in mediating between urban and rural spheres, facilitating the circulation of people, goods, and ideas.[27] Historically, *zawiyas* often accompanied the migration of their members, establishing branches in urban centers like Aleppo or sometimes relocating entirely. For new migrants, these lodges served as important cultural reference points, providing spaces of solidarity and practical channels for integration into the urban environment, such as finding employment and housing.[27] For instance, Sheikh Muhiy al-Din's *zawiya* in Aleppo was a key networking hub for rural newcomers, connecting them with established community members and economic opportunities.[27]

Beyond social integration, these institutions could also be centers of economic influence. Sheikh Mahmud al-Husayni's *zawiya* in the 'Afrin region, for example, accumulated economic capital through donations (including agricultural produce like olives) from its followers. It then organized commercial channels to transport and sell these goods, particularly olive oil, in Aleppo's markets, sometimes bypassing state cooperatives and private middlemen through partnerships based on Sufi affiliation.[27] This demonstrates how religious networks could translate into tangible economic power and provide alternative economic pathways.

Historically, *khanqahs* were designed to house Sufi communities, providing food, lodging, and spaces for communal devotional exercises (*dhikr*, *sama*), as well as for the transmission of

religious and mystical knowledge.[28] Some *khanqahs* received endowments or sponsorship from rulers, further cementing their societal role.[28] The revivalist efforts of figures like Mawlana Khalid al-Baghdadi saw a conscious integration of Sufism with the existing *madrasa* (Islamic school) culture.[10] Later, Naqshbandi leaders like Sheikh Omar of Biara actively built numerous *khanqahs* with adjacent mosques specifically dedicated to the dissemination of *Shari'a*-based knowledge alongside Sufi teachings, thereby expanding their educational and religious influence.[26]

The mediating role of Sufi *zawiyas* between rural and urban Kurdish life is particularly well-documented in Northern Syria by Paulo Pinto.[27] These Sufi communities and their lodges created vital connections, facilitated the complex process of migration, and helped maintain strong rural ties for urban Kurdish dwellers. Pilgrimages to rural *zawiyas* and the tombs of revered saints also played a significant role in reinforcing emotional and symbolic attachments to these rural landscapes, contributing to the construction of a "sacred geography" that intertwined religious devotion with a sense of Kurdish territorial belonging.[27]

B. Sufism, Kurdish Identity, and Political Mobilization

The intersection of Sufism with Kurdish identity and political aspirations is a prominent and recurring theme in Kurdish history. Sufi *shaykhs*, leveraging their spiritual authority and extensive networks, have often stepped into leadership roles during times of political upheaval and have been central figures in Kurdish uprisings and nationalist movements.[6]

The Naqshbandi order, in particular its Khalidiyya branch, has been notably active in the political domain. A significant number of leaders in modern Kurdish revolutions and nationalist movements were affiliated with the Naqshbandi *tariqa*. These include figures such as Sheikh Ubeydullah Nehri, who led a major Kurdish uprising in 1880 aiming to establish a degree of Kurdish autonomy, explicitly fusing Islamic revivalist ideals with nascent Kurdish nationalism.[11] Sheikh Said Piran, another Naqshbandi *shaykh*, headed the 1925 rebellion in Turkish Kurdistan against the secularizing policies of the newly established Turkish Republic and its denial of Kurdish rights and identity.[13] The Barzani tribe, a powerful force in Kurdish nationalism, converted from Yezidism to Naqshbandi Sufism in the 19th century. Their *tekke* in Barzan became a significant center of both spiritual and temporal power, serving as a focal point for claims of greater autonomy.[34] The Sufi lineage of the Barzani family has continued to influence their leadership role in Kurdish politics, with Mullah Mustafa Barzani himself reportedly taking over the leadership of the order for a period until the late 1970s.[13] Even Qazi Muhammad, the president of the short-lived Republic of Mahabad in 1946, hailed from a respected family of religious jurists, and his government included figures like Haji Baba Sheikh as Prime Minister, indicating the continued relevance of religious figures in Kurdish political endeavors.[36] While Qazi Muhammad's direct *tariqa* affiliation is not always explicitly detailed, some sources list him among Naqshbandi-affiliated leaders of Kurdish revolts [13], and he worked closely with Mustafa Barzani, whose family had strong Sufi ties.[39] Sheikh Mahmud Barzinji, a Qadiri *shaykh*, also led significant uprisings in Iraqi Kurdistan in the early 20th century, even proclaiming himself "King of Kurdistan".[13]

This pattern of Sufi *shaykhs* assuming prominent socio-political and even military leadership

roles, especially during periods of weak state control or in direct opposition to central authorities, points to a unique characteristic of Kurdish socio-political organization. Religious legitimacy, embodied by the *shaykh*, often translated directly into worldly power and influence. These leaders could mobilize diverse groups, transcending purely tribal loyalties, due to the cross-cutting nature of Sufi affiliations.[11] This deep entanglement of Sufi networks with political action meant that, for a significant period, Kurdish nationalism itself was often expressed through a Sufi religious idiom and spearheaded by Sufi religious authorities.

The relationship between Sufism and the broader concept of "Kurdish Islam" or Kurdish national consciousness is complex. While some modern Kurdish nationalist narratives have viewed Islam, particularly in its state-imposed forms, as an external or even colonial influence [6], Sufism has often played a contrasting role. It has been instrumental in preserving a sense of Kurdish identity and social cohesion, particularly when Kurdish language and culture were suppressed.[13] The fact that the leadership of many Sufi orders in Kurdistan was Kurdish served as a significant unifying factor for the Kurdish populace.[13] In Northern Syria, for example, Sufi *shaykhs* actively formulated discourses that re-signified their power within a framework of Kurdish religious nationalism, fusing local ethnic cultural values with what they perceived as "true Islam".[27] In the broader quest for *Kurdeyeti* (Kurdish national identity), where the search for authentic "origins" is paramount [6], Sufism, with its deep historical roots in Kurdish lands and often indigenous leadership, provided one such potent source of authenticity and a distinct expression of Kurdish spirituality.

Table 2: Influential Kurdish Leaders with Sufi Connections

Leader's Name	Sufi Affiliation (Order/Branch)	Period of Influence	Nature of Socio-Political/Religious Role
Sheikh Ubeydullah Nehri	Naqshbandi-Khalidi	Late 19th Century (d. 1883)	Led 1880 Kurdish uprising; sought Kurdish autonomy, fusing religious and nationalist aims. [11]
Sheikh Said Piran	Naqshbandi-Khalidi	Early 20th Century (d. 1925)	Led 1925 rebellion in Turkish Kurdistan against the secular Turkish state and denial of Kurdish rights. [32]
Sheikh Mahmud Barzinji	Qadiri (Barzinji family)	Early 20th Century (uprisings 1919, 1922, 1931)	Led revolts in Iraqi Kurdistan; proclaimed "King of Kurdistan." [13]
Barzani Shaykhs (e.g., Sheikh Ahmed Barzani, Mullah Mustafa	Naqshbandi (Barzani lineage)	19th-20th Centuries	Hereditary shaykhs leading the Barzani tribe; central to

Barzani)			Kurdish nationalist movement in Iraq. Mullah Mustafa led the order for a time. [13]
Qazi Muhammad	Family of religious jurists; Naqshbandi affiliation suggested by some sources and associations.	Mid-20th Century (d. 1947)	President of the Republic of Mahabad (1946). Prime Minister Haji Baba Sheikh was a religious figure. [13]

C. Cultural Expressions of Kurdish Sufism

Sufism's influence permeates Kurdish culture, finding rich expression in its classical and contemporary literature, distinctive musical traditions, and enduring oral folklore. These cultural forms have not only served as vehicles for transmitting Sufi ethics and philosophical concepts but have also become integral components of Kurdish identity itself.

Kurdish poetry, in particular, stands as a testament to the deep imprint of Sufi thought. Sufism is considered one of the most important subjects in both world literature generally and Kurdish literature specifically, often employed as a means of purifying the heart and mind.[40] Several towering figures in classical Kurdish poetry were themselves Sufis or profoundly influenced by Sufi mysticism. Melayê Cizîrî (c. 1570–1640), born Ahmad Nîşanî, is celebrated for laying the foundations of classical Kurdish poetry. A Sufi himself, he wrote primarily in the Kurmanji dialect. His poetry, influenced by the Naqshbandi order prevalent in his time, eloquently explores themes of "pure love, the wine of ecstasy, metaphysical rapture, and the joys and sufferings of mystical love".[11] Cizîrî adopted pen names such as "Nîşanî," which carried distinct Sufi connotations, indicating his deep immersion in the mystical path.[43] Feqiyê Teyran (1590–1660) is another pioneer of Kurdish Sufi literature. His works, written in a plain yet evocative language, drew heavily on folklore and mysticism, addressing themes of divine love, knowledge, wisdom, female beauty, nature, and the Sufi doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd* (the Unity of Being).[11] Feqiyê Teyran was notably influenced by the Sufi philosophy of the Persian poet Fariduddin Attar, particularly his "Conference of the Birds".[46] Perhaps the most iconic work in Kurdish literature, *Mem û Zîn*, penned by Ehmedê Xanî (1650–1707), is widely regarded as the Kurdish national epic. Beyond its nationalist interpretations, *Mem û Zîn* is deeply imbued with Sufi mysticism. The tragic love story of Mem and Zîn is often read as a profound allegory where unfulfilled human love (*'işqê mecazî*) symbolizes the soul's yearning for union with the Divine Beloved (*'işqê heqîqî*).[47] Specific episodes, such as Mem's imprisonment, are explicitly likened to a Sufi's spiritual retreat (*çillexane*), a period of intense devotion leading to mystical stages of unity (*meqâmê wehdet*) and self-annihilation (*meqamê mûtû*) in God.[48] The emergence of this epic from the milieu of rural Kurdish *madrasas*, rather than courtly circles, further highlights the grassroots penetration of Sufi thought within Kurdish scholarly and popular culture.[48] The enduring power of *Mem û Zîn* lies in its capacity to hold these multiple layers of meaning. The Sufi framework of longing, separation, and the arduous quest for union provided a potent symbolic language that was readily adaptable to express the political and national desires of the Kurdish people. This has made it a

cornerstone of Kurdish cultural and national identity, resonating across both religious and secular nationalist spectrums by allowing its Sufi spiritual concepts to be remapped onto national aspirations—the yearning for a unified, free Kurdistan mirroring the soul's yearning for the Divine.

Music and ritual performance are also integral to many Kurdish Sufi practices, offering an experiential and emotive pathway to spiritual connection. Sufi music, in general, is devotional, often inspired by the works of Sufi poets.[52] While Qawwali is a well-known form in South Asia, music is also central to the *Sama* ceremony of the whirling dervishes (Mevlevi order) and other traditions like the Gnawa of North Africa.[52] *Sama*, meaning "listening," is a Sufi ceremony frequently incorporated into *Dhikr* (remembrance) practices. These performances often include singing, the playing of specific instruments, rhythmic movement or dance, recitation of poetry, and prayers, all aimed at inducing a state of spiritual ecstasy (*wajd*) and fostering an experience of divine love.[53] In Iranian Kurdistan, Qadiri *Dhikr* sessions are famously accompanied by the rhythmic beating of the *daf*.[15] Instruments like the *ney* (a reed flute), symbolizing the human soul emptied of ego and longing for its divine origin, and various types of frame drums (*daf*, *bendir*), used to create powerful, often trance-inducing rhythms, are common in Sufi musical traditions across the Islamic world, including those with a Kurdish presence.[4] Melayê Cizîrî's poetry, for instance, contains references to musical instruments and to *sema* as the mystical dance of the Sufis, a means to experience divine rhythms within the heart.[43]

The rich oral culture of the Kurds has served as a natural and potent vehicle for the transmission of Sufi ethics, narratives, and wisdom. Kurdish Sufism itself has produced distinctive folkloric stories, such as the aforementioned *Mem û Zîn* (which also exists in oral versions) and tales like "the Basket Seller." These stories remain highly popular among Sunni Kurds and are credited with providing strong folkloric and spiritual foundations that have, in some contexts, helped prevent the spread of more rigid or extremist Salafist ideologies.[51] Storytelling, often carried out by traditional narrators known as *akhoonds*, is a key tool in preserving Kurdish collective memory, cultural values, history, and heritage.[58] Sufi stories more broadly, frequently taking the form of parables and fables attributed to saints and scholars, are designed to convey profound metaphysical insights, moral values such as truthfulness, humility, love, and justice, and practical spiritual guidance. These narratives often transcend purely religious boundaries, appealing to universal human experiences.[3] Through these oral and literary traditions, Sufi ethics and ideals have become deeply embedded within popular Kurdish consciousness and cultural identity.

V. Intersections: Sufism and Other Religious Traditions in Kurdistan

The religious landscape of Kurdistan is notably diverse, characterized by the presence of ancient faiths and syncretic traditions that have interacted with Sufism in complex ways. Among these, Yarsanism (Ahl-e Haqq/Kaka'i) and Alevism stand out as significant ethno-religious communities with historical and conceptual links to Islamic mysticism, even as

they maintain distinct identities.

A. Yarsanism (Ahl-e Haqq/Kaka'i)

Yarsanism, also known by its adherents as Ahl-e Haqq ("People of Truth") and sometimes referred to as Kaka'i in Iraq, is a syncretic religion primarily found among Kurdish populations, particularly the Guran, Sanjabi, and Kalhor tribes in western Iran and parts of Iraq.[60] Founded by Sultan Sahak in the late 14th to early 15th century, Yarsanism possesses a unique set of beliefs and practices.[60] Core tenets include the belief in successive divine manifestations (*mazhariyyat*) in human form, the transmigration of the soul (*dunaduni* in Kurdish), and a worldview that distinguishes between an external, apparent world (*zāhirī*) and an internal, essential reality (*bātinī*) that governs it.[60] Their primary sacred text is the *Kalâm-e Saranjâm* ("The Discourse of Conclusion"), believed to contain the teachings of Sultan Sahak and other important figures.[60] The *tambur*, a long-necked lute, is a sacred instrument used in their religious ceremonies.[60]

Yarsanism is often identified as a form of Kurdish esotericism that emerged under the profound influence of *Bātinī*-Sufism (esoteric Sufism).[60] This connection is evident in its emphasis on inner meaning and hidden truths. However, Yarsanis generally believe that the cycle of *haqiqat* (Ultimate Truth), manifested in Sultan Sahak, has superseded previous religious dispensations, including Islamic *Shari'a* and even mainstream Sufi *tariqat* teachings.[60] Consequently, Yarsanis do not typically observe common Muslim rites such as daily prayers or Ramadan fasting, and their theology and sacred spaces differ significantly from orthodox Islam.[60] While some scholars, like Jean During, have viewed Ahl-e Haqqism as an offshoot of a type of Sufism adapted to Kurdish customs, others consider it a fundamentally non-Muslim faith that has incorporated an Islamic veneer, particularly through the reverence of Ali ibn Abi Talib as a divine manifestation.[61]

B. Alevism

Alevism is another complex religious tradition with a significant presence among Kurds, particularly in Turkey, where Kurdish Alevis (often historically referred to as Kizilbash) are concentrated in regions like Tunceli (Dersim), Elazig, and Mus.[62] Alevi beliefs emphasize ethical values such as kindness, generosity, and social justice, often conceptualizing Paradise and Hell as states experienced in this life based on one's actions.[63] They place a strong focus on the inner, spiritual truth (*batın*) rather than outward religious forms (*zahir*) and hold nature as sacred.[63] The central communal worship ceremony of Alevis is the *Cem*, which involves sacred music (often played on the *baglama* or *saz*), ritual dance (*semah*), and the guidance of a spiritual leader (*pir* or *dede*).[63] Alevis revere Ali ibn Abi Talib and the Twelve Imams of Shi'ism, but their practices and theology differ significantly from mainstream Twelver Shi'ism.[62]

The historical origins of Alevism are multifaceted, appearing to be a syncretic blend of ancient Anatolian and Mesopotamian beliefs, Zoroastrianism, Shamanism, various currents of Sufi mysticism (particularly heterodox ones), and gnostic interpretations of Shi'ism and even Christianity.[62] Kurdish Alevi tribes historically aligned with the Kizilbash movement, which supported the Safavid Sufi order in Iran, partly because Alevi beliefs and practices were much closer to heterodox Sufism than to orthodox Sunni Islam.[62] Following Ottoman persecution,

many Alevi communities retreated into remote mountainous areas, which allowed them to preserve their distinct traditions in relative isolation from both the increasingly conservative Safavid Shi'ism and the dominant Ottoman Sunnism.[62] While Alevism shares mystical leanings with Sufism, it is generally considered a distinct religious identity that is typically entered by birth rather than by joining a *tariqa* through initiation.[63]

The existence and persistence of these distinct esoteric traditions like Yarsanism and Alevism within the broader Kurdish socio-cultural sphere, both demonstrating clear historical interactions with and influences from Sufism while also charting their own unique theological and ritual paths, suggest that the Kurdish spiritual landscape has long been a fertile ground for syncretism. It appears to have fostered an environment where mystical and gnostic interpretations of reality, emphasizing inner meaning (*batin*) over external form (*zahir*), have found enduring appeal. This may reflect a deeper cultural inclination within parts of Kurdish society towards more experiential and esoteric forms of spirituality. Concepts like Mehrdad Izady's "Yazdanism" [6] and Martin van Bruinessen's analyses of heterodoxy in Kurdistan [11] point to this broader pattern of syncretic religious formation. Thus, "Sufism" in Kurdistan should not be viewed monolithically but as part of a wider spectrum of mystical and spiritual expressions, some of which, while sharing common roots or influences with mainstream Sufi *tariqas*, have evolved into unique and resilient esoteric traditions.

The historical trajectories of groups like the Yarsanis and Alevi Kizilbash further illustrate how socio-political factors and geographical context can significantly shape religious evolution. Both groups, which initially had arguably closer ties to broader Sufi or proto-Shi'a mystical movements, developed into distinct, often endogamous communities with unique practices that frequently diverged from Shari'a-centric Islamic norms.[60] Periods of persecution by orthodox states, political conflict, and the relative isolation afforded by Kurdistan's mountainous terrain likely contributed to the crystallization of these distinct religious identities. These historical contingencies fostered internal cohesion and a divergence from larger Islamic mainstreams, including some forms of institutionalized Sufism, leading to the unique religious mosaic observed in Kurdistan today.

VI. Women in Kurdish Sufism

The role of women in Sufism, including within Kurdish contexts, presents a nuanced picture that often challenges monolithic perceptions of female participation in Islamic religious life. While historical records and contemporary observations may not always provide exhaustive details specifically for Kurdish women within mainstream *tariqas*, broader trends in Sufism and related traditions in Kurdistan offer valuable insights.

Historically, Sufism has been recognized as a domain within Islam that provided avenues for female spiritual expression and even leadership, more so than some other, more rigidly structured aspects of religious life.[64] Early Sufi history includes accounts of prominent women mystics. For example, the 10th-century scholar Al-Sulami documented the lives of 231 women Sufis, and figures like Unayda in the early 10th century are reported to have guided hundreds of male and female students.[64] The renowned Andalusian Sufi master Ibn al-'Arabi (d. 1240 CE) believed that women could attain the highest ranks of sainthood and is said to have

bestowed the *khirqa* (the patched frock symbolizing dervishhood and spiritual lineage) upon fourteen women.[64] As Sufi orders became more formalized and institutionalized, women's roles often became associated with their male relatives (husbands or brothers). However, dedicated women's circles, often led by women, continued to exist within many *tariqas*, and distinct institutions such as *ribats* (in North Africa) or *khanqahs* (in India and elsewhere) sometimes developed as refuges or centers for female Sufis.[64] The presence of female Sufi leaders, or *shaykhas*, is attested both historically and in contemporary times, though their roles could be precarious and often depended on endorsements from male authorities within the community or their own advanced age and recognized piety.[64] In a modern Iranian context, for instance, Parvāneh Hadāvand is noted as a spiritual leader of a predominantly female Sufi group in Tehran, actively challenging androcentric paradigms within her religious sphere.[69]

Identifying specific Kurdish women who were prominent *shaykhas* within the major Naqshbandi or Qadiri orders in historical records can be challenging, partly due to historical biases in documentation which often centered on male figures. However, figures like Mastoureh Ardalan (1805-1848), an Iranian-Kurdish poet and the first known female historian in the Middle East, offer glimpses into the intellectual and spiritual lives of Kurdish women. Ardalan, whose father was Abolhassan Beig Qadiri (a name potentially suggesting a link to the Qadiriyya order), was learned in Kurdish, Arabic, and Persian, and wrote extensively, including over 20,000 lines of poetry in Persian and the Hawrami dialect of Kurdish.[70] Her poetry is distinguished by its open expression of love and femininity, which in the context of her time, can be seen as a form of revolt against patriarchal norms.[71] While the direct Sufi content or influence in her surviving poetry is not explicitly detailed in the provided sources beyond general mystical themes common in Persianate literature [72], her intellectual stature and expressive voice are significant. Other notable Kurdish women are mentioned in historical accounts, such as Lady Adela Jaff, a tribal chief, and Hafsa Khan, an advocate for women's education [70], but their specific roles within Sufi orders are not clearly defined in these particular snippets. Asenath Barzani (1590-1670), sometimes considered the first female rabbi, was a prominent Kurdish scholar, though her Sufi connections are not specified.[73] Malak Jân Nemati (1906-1993) is listed as a mystical writer and poet from southeastern Kurdistan, indicating a continued tradition of female engagement with spiritual themes.[74]

Regarding participation in rituals and community leadership, women have historically been involved in Sufi practices. For example, women in the Mevlevi order (associated with Rumi) participated in *sema* ceremonies, sometimes having their own separate gatherings or occasionally joining men.[64] Pilgrimages to the tombs of saints (both male and female) and the performance of *dhikr* in these sacred spaces or in domestic settings are common practices for women in various Sufi-influenced regions, such as Chechnya and Dagestan.[64] Within some of Kurdistan's distinct religious traditions that share historical or conceptual links with Sufism, female participation is notable. In Alevism, for instance, women are generally considered equal to men, play essential roles in *Cem* ceremonies, and participate alongside men in ritual dances and prayers.[63] In Yarsanism, Khatun-e Rezbar, the mother of Sultan Sahak, is revered

as one of the *Haft Tan* (Seven Persons, or secondary divine manifestations).[60] General historical accounts of women's interactions with Sufism show them offering gifts and support to Sufis, sometimes critiquing them, narrating their miraculous deeds, and exerting influence as wives, mothers, or sisters of male Sufis.[65] While the provided materials do not offer extensive details on women's specific roles within the main Kurdish Naqshbandi and Qadiri orders compared to, for example, Alevism, the broader Sufi tradition's capacity for female spiritual authority, combined with the agency of women in related Kurdish spiritual contexts and the intellectual contributions of figures like Ardalan, implies that Kurdish women likely found diverse avenues for spiritual expression and influence within Sufism. These roles might have been more pronounced in women's own circles, as teachers of other women, or as influential matriarchs within *shaykhly* families.

The poetry of Kurdish women like Mastoureh Ardalan, by "openly expressing her love and femininity against the norms of her time" [71], can be interpreted as a form of spiritual agency. In a society with patriarchal constraints, the culturally accepted and often Sufi-influenced language of poetry could become a powerful, albeit sometimes indirect, medium for articulating female subjectivity, experience, and spiritual yearning. This act of authentic self-expression, seeking truth in personal experience, resonates with the core of the Sufi quest. Ardalan's work, viewed in this light, transcends mere literature; it becomes a testament to female spiritual resilience and the articulation of a distinct feminine voice within a mystical tradition.

VII. Contemporary Kurdish Sufism: Challenges, Adaptations, and Global Presence

In the contemporary era, Kurdish Sufism navigates a complex terrain shaped by diverse political realities across the fragmented Kurdish homeland, the pressures of modernization and secularization, the rise of competing religious ideologies, and the dynamics of a globalized diaspora.

A. Current Status in Various Parts of Kurdistan

The status and expression of Sufism vary significantly across the different regions of Kurdistan, largely influenced by the policies and ideologies of the states that encompass these areas.

In **Turkey**, Sufi orders, including the prominent Naqshbandiyya, were officially banned during Atatürk's secularization reforms in the early 20th century, which aimed to remove religion from the public sphere.[75] Despite this, these orders gradually re-emerged and have, particularly the Naqshbandi-Khalidi branch, exerted considerable influence on Turkish society and politics, with various Naqshbandi-affiliated groups becoming active in economic, political, and intellectual life.[76] However, popular piety, which includes Sufi traditions, often coexists with strong secular nationalist sentiments among many Kurds in Turkey.[51] For Kurdish Alevi communities in Turkey, contemporary challenges include state-promoted Sunnification and Turkification efforts, particularly through the education system, which aims to foster a "pious and vindictive generation" loyal to a Turkish-Islamic national identity.[78] Alevi identity itself

remains a subject of debate—whether primarily religious, cultural, or political—and Alevi communities continue to struggle for full legal recognition and equitable treatment.[79]

In **Iran**, where the majority population is Shi'a, Sunni Kurds constitute a significant minority. Among them, some adhere to the Qadiriyya and Naqshbandi Sufi orders, which are often characterized by a tendency to de-emphasize strict interpretations of *Shari'a* and may stand in contrast to more literalist Islamic viewpoints.[80] Concurrently, Salafist ideas have also gained some traction among Iranian Sunnis in recent decades.[80] Sunni Kurds in Iran often reside in economically underdeveloped regions and face systemic underrepresentation in state structures.[80] The particular expression of "Sufi Islam" in Iranian Kurdistan has prompted scholars to propose new analytical frameworks that move beyond simple dichotomies of "popular" versus "official" Islam.[81] The Qadiriyya-Kasnazani order, known for its distinctive practices, maintains a notable presence in Iran.[20]

In **Iraqi Kurdistan (Kurdistan Region of Iraq)**, Sufism, especially the Qadiriyya and Naqshbandiyya orders, retains a visible and often vibrant influence.[11] Popular piety, which includes adherence to Sufi traditions and reverence for *shaykhs*, is deeply embedded in the social fabric.[82] Orders like the Rifa'iyya and the Qadiriyya-Kasnazani are known for their public presence at religious festivals and for their sometimes controversial ecstatic rituals.[20] While some Naqshbandi groups in Iraq (such as the Army of the Men of the Naqshbandi Order) have been involved in armed insurgency promoting a Sunni Arab Islamic identity, these are generally distinct from the historically Kurdish Naqshbandi lineages.[20] Islamist political parties, some of which may have historical links to Sufi networks or appeal to conservative and Sufi-practicing populations, generally struggle to secure more than 15% of the vote in regional parliamentary elections but maintain a consistent level of support in more religiously conservative areas.[82]

In **Syria, particularly in the Kurdish regions of the northeast (Rojava, now part of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria - AANES)**, Sufi *zawiyas*, predominantly of the Qadiriyya and Naqshbandiyya orders, historically played a crucial role in social life, mediating between rural and urban communities and serving as centers of religious and cultural activity.[27] The current status of these traditional Sufi orders under the AANES, which espouses a secular, democratic confederalist ideology, is not extensively detailed in the provided sources focusing on its political structure.[83] However, some analyses suggest that the historical role of Sufism, alongside secular leftist political traditions and more recent experiences of repression under extremist groups, has contributed to a tendency among Syrian Kurds to separate religious ideology from their political projects, although Sufism itself may persist as a cultural and personal spiritual practice.[85]

The varying contemporary status of Sufism across these different parts of Kurdistan directly correlates with the specific state ideologies and nation-building projects of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria (and the AANES). Secularist but controlling states (like Turkey), Shi'a-dominant theocracies (like Iran), federal but conflict-ridden autonomous regions (like Iraqi Kurdistan), and newly autonomous, often secular-ideology-driven zones (like AANES/Rojava) each create distinct sets of pressures and opportunities for Sufi orders. This has led to diverse trajectories

of partial decline, dynamic adaptation, political engagement or disengagement, or cultural preservation and reinterpretation, demonstrating that there is no single, uniform "contemporary status" of Kurdish Sufism.

B. Modern Challenges: Secularization, Political Conflicts, State Policies, Rise of Salafism and Radical Ideologies

Kurdish Sufism today confronts a range of formidable challenges stemming from modernization, political instability, state policies, and the rise of competing religious ideologies.

Secularization processes, particularly as implemented by modern nation-states, have had a profound impact. In Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's sweeping secular reforms in the 1920s led to the official abolition of Sufi orders, the closure of *tekkes* and traditional *madrasas*, and a concerted effort to remove religion from the public sphere.[75] Although Sufi orders gradually re-emerged and adapted, the Turkish state continues to exert significant control over religious affairs.[75] Moreover, Kurdish nationalism itself has often embraced secular leanings, with some nationalist narratives viewing established forms of Islam as external impositions rather than integral parts of Kurdish heritage.[6]

Political conflicts and state policies continue to shape the environment for Sufi orders. Historically, these orders have navigated a complex relationship with ruling powers, sometimes aligning with them and at other times finding themselves in opposition.[5] In contemporary Turkey, Kurdish Alevi communities face state-sponsored Sunnification policies, particularly in education, which aim to assimilate them into a dominant Turkish-Sunni national identity.[78] In Iran, Sunni Kurds, including those affiliated with Sufi orders, experience discrimination and political marginalization within a Shi'a Islamic Republic.[80] In Iraqi Kurdistan, Islamist parties, which may draw some support from Sufi adherents or conservative populations, operate within a political landscape largely dominated by secular nationalist parties, leading to ongoing negotiations of influence and identity.[82] The Syrian civil war and the subsequent establishment of the AANES have introduced new political dynamics and uncertainties for traditional religious institutions in Kurdish areas of Syria.[83]

The **rise of Salafism and other radical Islamist ideologies** presents a significant challenge to traditional Sufi practices and authority in Kurdistan. Salafist ideas, emphasizing a literalist interpretation of Islamic texts and often rejecting many traditional Sufi practices as innovations (*bid'a*) or even polytheism (*shirk*), have gained a foothold in some Sunni Kurdish communities, for example in Iran.[80] In Iraqi Kurdistan, extremist Salafi-jihadist factions like Ansar al-Islam emerged in the past, representing a radical departure from mainstream Kurdish Islam.[82] The rise of transnational jihadist groups like ISIS also profoundly impacted Kurdish political priorities, leading many to rally around nationalist parties for security and diminishing the appeal of certain forms of Islamist discourse.[82] Sufi teachings, with their emphasis on mysticism, tolerance, and the veneration of saints, are often seen as a direct counter-narrative to the rigid and exclusivist interpretations of Islam promoted by Salafist and other radical groups.[86] Indeed, the rich folkloric traditions associated with Kurdish Sufism have been credited in some areas with preventing the widespread dissemination of Salafist ideas.[51]

Historically, the established role of Sufism has also been cited as one factor contributing to the general Kurdish resistance to political Islam in regions like Syria.[85] This confrontation is not merely theological; it is also socio-political. Salafism's often iconoclastic stance against local traditions and its promotion of transnational Islamic identities can directly threaten the culturally embedded forms of Sufism, the authority of traditional *shaykhs*, and the historically significant Sufi-inflected Kurdish nationalism. In this context, Sufi practices, local saints' shrines, and unique rituals become important markers of distinct Kurdish religious and cultural identity.

C. Resilience, Adaptation, and the Evolving Role of Sufi Orders

Despite these manifold challenges, Kurdish Sufism has demonstrated remarkable resilience and a capacity for adaptation. This is consistent with broader trends observed in other parts of the Muslim world, where Sufism, rather than simply fading away, has often found ways to engage with modernity and maintain its relevance. For example, in Indonesia, Sufism has become an integral part of 'modern' Islam, with Sufi teachings being adapted to address contemporary societal issues such as radicalism, social fragmentation, and interfaith tensions.[86]

Sufi orders like the Naqshbandiyya have historically shown considerable flexibility and an ability to adjust to changing social, economic, and political conditions. This includes engaging in modern enterprises, establishing educational institutions, and utilizing new forms of communication.[77] Sufi leaders often continue to play important roles as mediators in inter-religious or inter-ethnic conflicts, leveraging their spiritual authority to foster dialogue and reconciliation.[86]

The continued appeal of orders like the Qadiriyya-Kasnazani in Iraqi Kurdistan, even in the face of controversies such as alleged corruption among its leadership, suggests that these groups fulfill significant spiritual and social needs for their followers. This persistence may be linked to deeply embedded cultural concepts of power, masculinity, and healing that are expressed and reinforced through their distinctive piety and rituals.[21] The very practices that appear controversial to outsiders, such as ecstatic self-mortification, are often interpreted by adherents as powerful demonstrations of the *shaykh's* spiritual grace (*karamat*) and serve to solidify communal bonds and advertise the order's unique spiritual potency.[21] This indicates that Sufism's relevance is not solely dependent on doctrinal purity or conformity to external expectations, but also on its ability to provide meaningful experiences and a sense of belonging.

D. Kurdish Sufism in the Diaspora

The migration of significant numbers of Kurds to Europe and other parts of the world has led to the establishment of diaspora communities where Sufi traditions continue to be practiced and adapted. Germany, for instance, hosts a large and diverse Kurdish diaspora, with waves of migration occurring since the 1960s from Turkey, Iran (particularly after the 1979 revolution), and more recently Syria due to the civil war.[88]

Transnational Sufi orders, especially the Naqshbandiyya and Qadiriyya, which historically formed the backbone of Kurdish liberation movements and political parties, have networks that naturally extend into these diaspora communities.[89] In the diaspora, Sufi groups navigate

a dynamic between maintaining traditional practices and adapting to new cultural norms and societal contexts. They can serve as important vehicles for preserving cultural heritage and providing a sense of connection to the homeland, traditional authority structures, and revered shrines, even while demonstrating an openness to global cultural influences and new modes of communication.[89]

Sufi gatherings, with their tangible rituals and informal social networks, often hold greater significance for the everyday religious lives of many European Muslims than abstract theological debates or global political issues.[89] In some cases, Sufi communities in the diaspora may offer an alternative to more strictly ethnically defined congregations, particularly for younger generations seeking spiritual belonging.[89] International workshops and academic interest in the management and significance of Sufi shrines and lodges also suggest ongoing engagement from diaspora communities in maintaining or reconnecting with these sacred sites.[90]

The diaspora experience presents both challenges and opportunities for Kurdish Sufism. Challenges include the risk of assimilation into host societies and the potential dilution or loss of direct connection to traditional centers of learning and authority in Kurdistan. However, opportunities also arise for new forms of organization, engagement with global spiritual trends, the reinterpretation of tradition in diverse cultural contexts, and the potential for Sufi teachings to reach new audiences. Transnational Sufi networks can become vital for maintaining Kurdish cultural and spiritual identity for those living outside the homeland, potentially leading to new and evolving expressions of Kurdish Sufism in a globalized world.

VIII. Scholarly Discourses on Kurdish Sufism

The study of Sufism among the Kurds has attracted significant scholarly attention, leading to diverse perspectives on its historical role, theological characteristics, and socio-political impact. Key academics have explored its complexities, debated its relationship with orthodoxy and heterodoxy, and offered critical analyses of its practices and leadership.

Key academic contributions have been pivotal in shaping our understanding of Kurdish Sufism. The work of Martin van Bruinessen stands out as particularly influential. He has extensively argued that Sufi orders, especially the Qadiriyya and Naqshbandiyya, and their *shaykhs* played crucial social and political roles in Kurdish society. These roles often operated independently of, and sometimes in opposition to, both tribal structures and state apparatuses. Van Bruinessen has highlighted the leadership of Sufi *shaykhs* in early Kurdish nationalist uprisings.[11] His research also emphasizes the characteristic tension in Kurdistan between mainstream Shafi'i Sunni orthodoxy and various forms of religious heterodoxy, such as Yezidism and Ahl-e Haqq (Yarsanism). He has further analyzed how the hereditary nature of some Kurdish *shaykhdoms*, particularly within certain Naqshbandi branches, could lead to what he terms "relapses" into heterodox beliefs or messianic claims.[11] His seminal works, including *Agha, Shaikh, and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan* and *Sufism and the Modern in Islam*, are foundational texts in the field.[91]

Another important contribution is Kamal Rouhani's Persian-language book, *Tarix-e Jame'-e Tasavvof-e Kordestan* (Comprehensive History of Sufism in Kurdistan). This work examines the

historical development of Sufism in Kurdistan, focusing on the Naqshbandi and Qadiri orders, profiling prominent figures, and discussing differing perspectives on Sufism within the Kurdish context.[92] Scholars like Mehrdad Izady have also offered broader frameworks for understanding syncretic Kurdish faiths with links to Sufism, proposing concepts such as "Yazdanism" as a hypothetical proto-Kurdish religious substratum.[6] More recently, *The Cambridge History of the Kurds* has dedicated attention to religion in Kurdistan, exploring the emergence of vernacular religious learning in Kurdish and the significant spread of the Khalidiyya branch of the Naqshbandiyya. This work aims to counter a perceived scholarly bias that has historically favored the study of religious minorities and heterodox groups over the examination of mainstream Sunni Islam as practiced by the majority of Kurds. It also critically examines how categories like "orthodoxy" and "heterodoxy" are constructed and have evolved over time.[93] This evolving scholarly focus suggests a move towards understanding the depth and specificity of "orthodox" Sufi expressions among Kurds, recognizing that Sufism itself has served as a vehicle for both maintaining Islamic orthopraxy *and* fostering unique local interpretations that often blur these conventional lines.

Debates concerning orthodoxy, heterodoxy, and the distinctiveness of Kurdish Islam are central to the academic discourse. Kurdistan is often described as a paradoxical region: a historical center of strict Shafi'i Sunni orthodoxy, yet simultaneously home to some of the Middle East's most resilient heterodox communities, including the Yezidis and the Ahl-e Haqq.[11] *The Cambridge History of the Kurds*, for instance, challenges the notion of static definitions for "orthodoxy" and "heterodoxy," viewing these categories as historically contingent and shaped by evolving power dynamics.[93] It argues for the existence of specifically Kurdish forms of orthodox Islam that go beyond the study of minority faiths, with the Khalidiyya Naqshbandiyya being a prime example.[93] The very concept of "Sufi Islam" in Kurdistan is being analyzed as a distinct phenomenon that may require new theoretical approaches, moving beyond simpler formulations of "official" versus "popular" Islam that might apply elsewhere.[81]

Critical analyses of Sufi practices and leadership also form an important part of the scholarly landscape. Certain Sufi practices, such as the ecstatic and self-mortifying rituals observed in some Qadiri Kasnazani circles (e.g., self-piercing, fire-walking), have drawn considerable attention and are often described as controversial.[20] Academic presentations, such as Dr. Laleh Behzan's research on the Kasnazani order discussed by Dr. Deina Abdulkader [21], examine issues like the alleged corruption of some Sufi leaders and explore how such controversies do not necessarily undermine their charismatic authority among followers. These analyses often link the persistence of such orders to deeply embedded cultural concepts of power, masculinity, and communal healing, suggesting that self-mortification rituals can function as public inscriptions of the *shaykh's* spiritual power upon the bodies of his devotees.[21] Kamal Rouhani's work also explicitly addresses perceived "shortcomings of the Sufi school in Kurdistan and its shaykhs in relation to Islam and the tradition of the Prophet".[92] Van Bruinessen, too, has noted the potential for hereditary *shaykhdoms* to deviate into heterodoxy or for individual *shaykhs* to make messianic or even divine claims.[11] It is important to recognize that such critical analyses of Sufi leadership and practices do not inherently

negate the profound spiritual meaning, sense of community, and social cohesion that these orders provide for their adherents. Rather, they highlight a persistent tension often found within charismatic religious movements—a tension between lofty spiritual ideals, the complexities of human fallibility, the dynamics of power, and the diverse socio-cultural functions that rituals and religious institutions fulfill. For many followers, the perceived spiritual benefits, the strong sense of belonging, and the *shaykh's karamat* may coexist with, or even outweigh, an awareness of worldly imperfections or practices deemed controversial by outsiders. The resilience and "success" of a Sufi order may, therefore, depend as much on its ability to meet the multifaceted spiritual and social needs of its followers as on its doctrinal purity or the conduct of its leaders when viewed from an external, critical standpoint.

IX. Conclusion: The Enduring Legacy of Sufism among Kurds

The historical and ongoing relationship between the Kurdish people and Sufism is a rich, complex, and deeply influential one. From the early centuries of Islamization in the mountainous regions of Kurdistan to the contemporary challenges of globalization and political strife, Sufism has remained a resilient and adaptive spiritual current, profoundly shaping Kurdish religious identity, social structures, political movements, and cultural expressions.

The historical landscape of Kurdish Sufism has been predominantly characterized by the Qadiriyya and Naqshbandiyya (particularly its Khalidiyya branch) *tariqas*. These orders, through their charismatic *shaykhs* and networks of *tekkes* or *zawiyas*, became integral to the fabric of Kurdish society. These institutions served not merely as centers of worship and mystical instruction but also as hubs of learning, social mediation, economic activity, and communal solidarity, often bridging rural and urban divides and providing alternative frameworks of social organization to tribal structures. Sufi *shaykhs* frequently rose to positions of significant socio-political leadership, acting as intermediaries in conflicts, protectors of communities, and, notably, as figureheads and mobilizers in numerous Kurdish uprisings and nationalist movements throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. This deep entanglement of Sufi leadership with political assertion underscores a unique feature of Kurdish history, where spiritual authority often translated directly into temporal power and a potent force for collective action.

Culturally, Sufism has been a wellspring of inspiration for Kurdish literature and arts. The poetry of classical masters like Melayê Cizîrî, Feqiyê Teyran, and Ehmedê Xanî is suffused with Sufi themes of divine love, mystical yearning, and esoteric wisdom. Ehmedê Xanî's *Mem û Zîn*, revered as the Kurdish national epic, masterfully blends a tragic romance with profound Sufi allegories, allowing it to resonate as both a spiritual text and a symbol of Kurdish national aspirations. Sufi musical traditions, including *Sama* and *Dhikr* rituals accompanied by instruments like the *daf* and *ney*, have provided powerful experiential pathways to the divine. Furthermore, the rich oral folklore of the Kurds has served as a vital medium for transmitting Sufi ethics and narratives, embedding them deeply within popular consciousness and cultural identity.

Sufism in Kurdistan has also interacted dynamically with other religious traditions present in the region, such as Yarsanism (Ahl-e Haqq) and Alevism. These syncretic faiths, while developing distinct theological frameworks and practices, often bear the imprints of historical engagement with Sufi mysticism, reflecting a broader Kurdish cultural inclination towards esoteric and experiential forms of spirituality. The role of women within Kurdish Sufism, though historically less documented in formal leadership positions within the major *tariqas* compared to men, reveals participation as disciples, poets, scholars, and influential community members, with traditions like Alevism showcasing more explicit gender egalitarianism in ritual.

In the contemporary era, Kurdish Sufism faces a confluence of challenges, including the pressures of state-led secularization, ongoing political conflicts, the rise of competing ideologies such as Salafism, and the complexities of globalization. Yet, it continues to demonstrate resilience and adaptability. Sufi orders navigate these challenges by reinterpreting traditions, engaging with modern societal issues, and maintaining relevance for their adherents, both within Kurdistan and in the growing Kurdish diaspora. The varying political contexts across Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria (AANES/Rojava) have led to diverse trajectories for Sufi communities, ranging from state control and assimilationist pressures to relative autonomy and public visibility.

The enduring legacy of Sufism among the Kurds lies precisely in this remarkable adaptability. It has served as a conduit for Islamization, a framework for social and political organization, a profound source of cultural and artistic creativity, a basis for nationalist mobilization, and an enduring wellspring of spiritual solace and identity, particularly in times of adversity and rapid change. Its future will undoubtedly be shaped by its continued capacity to reinterpret its rich traditions in response to new global and local challenges, while continuing to meet the spiritual, communal, and cultural needs of the Kurdish people.

A defining characteristic of Kurdish Sufism, and one that will likely continue to shape its trajectory, is the creative tension between its universalistic mystical claims—the soul's yearning for oneness with God, the ethics of love and compassion for all creation—and its particularistic expressions deeply embedded within Kurdish culture, language, and historical experience, including its role in shaping and supporting Kurdish nationalism. How these two dimensions—the universal and the particular—are navigated, reconciled, or prioritized by future generations of Kurds, both in their homeland and in the diaspora, will be critical in determining the evolving relevance and form of this ancient mystical path in the 21st century. Further research into the theological nuances of "Kurdish Islam" as expressed through its Sufi dimensions, comparative studies of Kurdish Sufi practices across different state boundaries and in diaspora communities, and a deeper exploration of the historical and contemporary roles of women within specific Kurdish *tariqas* would greatly enrich our understanding of this vital aspect of Kurdish heritage and Islamic mysticism.

X. Works Cited

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