The second half of the nineteenth century witnessed marked social and economic transformations in rural Transjordan with the gradual reintroduction of direct Ottoman rule. Concerned primarily with increasing its tax base, the Ottoman administration provided few public services in the region, however, and demonstrated little commitment to public charity. Jordanians relied, instead, on traditional mechanisms for charity that are deeply rooted in Islamic society: the social, political, and economic activities of local Sufi tariqas (brotherhoods of Muslim mystics). Sufi networks functioned as conduits of charity, as local sheikhs opened and taught at Quranic schools and, in their role as traditional healers, provided the only public health care that most villages knew before the 1920s.

As the Ottoman state certainly gained from the public service activities of such networks, dervishes in turn benefited in their own ways from Ottoman rule. Tanzimat-inspired registration of rural land in this period created an indigenous propertied class for the first time in hundreds of years. Families of Sufi sheikhs, the representatives of popular religion in Jordan since the Mamluk period, were conspicuous beneficiaries of the new system: co-opted by the Ottoman administration, they were able to gain title to some of the most lucrative agricultural land in what is today northern Jordan, translating their social collateral into property-building and consolidating their political power. In their combined roles as spiritual guides, teachers, healers, and landowners, Sufi sheikhs thus both contributed to and benefited from the modernizing trends of the late Ottoman and early Mandate periods.

This paper explores the contribution of one family of Sufi sheikhs in public service in northern Jordan during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, highlighting their role in the education of boys from rural areas. It considers traditional forms of education and health care as forms of charity because of their service to the poor, independence of state control, and low cost. Because such services were imbedded in
multi-layered social networks, the study relies on a variety of documentary sources, including Ottoman and Mandate-period land registers, written records of interviews, the personal memoirs of former students, and secondary studies based on the records of government educational agencies, Ottoman yearbooks (salnames), and early textbooks. The results of archaeological survey of Sufi establishments in the region will also contribute to the analysis. The paper concludes with an assessment of the role Sufi teachers played in creating a public education system and their singular impact on the lives of young boys living in rural Jordan. We will begin with a review of the socio-political circumstances in Jordan in the nineteenth century.

*Nineteenth Century in Context*

Today’s Jordan had been free of direct government control for nearly three hundred years when the Ottoman state asserted itself in the region in the second half of the nineteenth century. The series of administrative, legal, and economic reforms of the period, collectively known as the Tanzimat, had its greatest impact on Greater Syria with the 1858 Land Code, which required individuals to register land in their names and pay taxes on it. This legislation was applied in Jordan only ten years later: the earliest official land registers date to 1876 C.E. (1292 mamluk/1293 A.H.) and were applied first in the Irbid District of northern Jordan, which belonged administratively to the qada of ’Ajlun in the sancak of Hawran (Mundy 1992: 217). This act of “modernization” by the Ottoman state had many consequences in the region, including the creation of a new land-owning elite, transforming the traditional system of group-ownership of land (musha’), and the successful co-option of traditional elites by the Ottoman state in the process.¹ In Northern Jordan, these “traditional elites” were made up largely of the Sufi brotherhoods, and particularly descendants of Sufi holy men (walis), as was the case throughout Syria.

Sufism, or Islamic mysticism, exists side-by-side with “orthodox” Islam in most regions of the Islamic world today. Emerging in the early

¹ There is a debate in the scholarship about the degree to which communal landholding was impacted by the Land Law country-wide. For a systematic discussion of this issue, see Palmer 1999.