SUFISM AS AN EXPLANATORY PARADIGM:
THE ISSUE OF THE MOTIVATIONS OF SUFI RESISTANCE
MOVEMENTS IN WESTERN AND RUSSIAN SCHOLARSHIP

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Over the past four decades Western experts on the Middle East and Islam have spilled much ink in accounting for the political role of those Islamic “revivalist,” “resistance” and “opposition” movements of the 18th and 19th centuries that seemed to derive their vitality from “reformed” Sufi ideologies and institutions.¹ According to many Western scholars, these ideologies and institutions arose in response to the new political and economic realities of the modern epoch that was characterized, first and foremost, by the growing ascendency of Europe and the perceived decline of the Muslim world.² Many

¹ As I try to show in my Islamic Mysticism: A Short History, E. J. Brill, Leiden, 2000, pp. 326-327, the notion of Sufism is often applied to vastly disparate intellectual and spiritual trends and institutions in the Muslim world to the extent that the word “Sufism” sometimes becomes all things to all people. In this article I identify as “Sufi” any trends and institutions of the Islamic tradition that were recognized as such by the authors of the studies analyzed herein. This does not mean that I agree with their definitions of Sufism. For me, Sufism is a product of continual reinterpretation, reconfiguration and reapplication of the ideas and practices that their followers identify as being “Sufi.” This interpretative process, in turn, is always conditioned by a broad range of subjective and objective factors some of which I will highlight in this article.

recent Western studies of these phenomena have relied for their “empirical” data on the littérature de surveillance\textsuperscript{3} that was produced by European and Russian colonial administrators who presided over the conquest and “pacification” of indigenous Muslim populations. The heavy dependence on this literature on the part of Western Islamicists today is not without a cost as the data that its authors perceived to be “authentic” and “objective” is, in fact, permeated by underlying colonial and imperial assumptions and stereotypes about the Muslim societies in question, such as Islam’s innate hostility to “progress,” the “irrationality” and “blind fanaticism” of its followers, the “superiority” of European civilization vis-à-vis the “decadent” and “corrupt” Middle Eastern societies, and so on.\textsuperscript{4} It is now clear that these colonial assumptions and stereotypes determined, often decisively, many later Western interpretations of the historical evidence and political and social developments in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century Muslim world. As one critic of colonial scholarship on French North Africa has persuasively argued,

“To deconstruct even a single product of this tradition in the hope of arriving at the bedrock of solid fact beneath the tissue of ideology that surrounds it, is to engage in a monumental self-deception. For no such bedrock exists, and if we pursue this line of questioning, it is doubtful that a single fact will remain unscathed.”\textsuperscript{5}

One issue that has preoccupied Western Islamicists over the past decades is the cause and motivation of revivalist and resistance

\textsuperscript{3} In his Sufi and Scholar Knut Vikør dismisses the French historiography of North African mystical orders as ‘police report scholarship,’ see p. 11.


\textsuperscript{5} Burke, “The Sociology of Islam,” p. 87.