
Scholarly studies of contemporary Islamic movements and the writings of Muslim activists leave the impression that Sufi orders became a backwater of the religious imagination after the sixteenth century. Fazlur Rahman, for example, has characterized the leaders of popular Sufi orders as "charlatans" and "spiritual delinquents". O'Fahey's *Enigmatic Saint* serves as a vigorous antidote to such dismissal of Sufi orders. It suggests that "the nineteenth century saw the emergence of mass Sufi brotherhoods on a scale hitherto unseen" (p. 6), and notwithstanding his protestations that the "sources scarcely permit sociological analysis" (p. xi), offers tantalizing explanations for why "neo-Sufi" movements achieved political and religious prominence in certain regions of the Muslim world in this period.

The recondite sources for the study of Ahmad ibn Idris (c. 1750–1837) would discourage less persistent scholars. Neither Ibn Idris's teachings nor the details of his life are well-known. Born in Larache of sharifian descent, Ibn Idris pursued religious studies at the Qarawiyn in Fes at a time when its intellectual life was dominated by two learned rulers with strong religious convictions: Mawlāy Muhammad (ruled 1757–90) and Mawlāy Sulaymān (ruled 1792–1822). Thus Ibn Idris' balance of "exoteric" and "esoteric" practices appears to have been against prevailing intellectual and political currents in Fes.

Ibn Idris left for the Mashriq, possibly under duress, in 1799–1800. He remained in the Hijaz, attracting disciples from such disparate places as Afghanistan, Kurdistan, India, the Sudan, and North Africa. In 1825, he appears to have been obliged to leave Makkah—some Western sources suggest that he was expelled—and spent the last years of his life in the Yemen, where he attracted a following and served on occasion as a mediator in tribal disputes.

The sources for understanding Ibn Idris's doctrines are unpromising: O'Fahey writes that the best source "was compiled by an Afghan from Kabul from the lecture notes of a Sudanese from the remote western sultanate of Darfur" (p. 5) (which suggests the intricate and extensive networks of Sufi scholars and activists). Nonetheless, Ibn Idris' teachings have influenced
religious movements in Kelantan, Somalia, North Africa (through his student, al-Sanusi), the Sudan, and Eritrea.

Despite such significance, Muslim and European commentators often pass over his life and influence in silence. O'Fahey suggests that one reason for this omission might be that established religious scholars in centres like Fes and Cairo often made accommodations with European colonial rule or Western-influenced rulers (p. 16). The Idrisi “movement”, in contrast, inspired resistance to foreign encroachment and values. Moreover, Ibn Idris’ doctrines fit into few ready-made categories. He was not a Salafi thinker, although he encouraged reforms; neither was he a tariqah shaykh (p. 25). Even when teaching in centres such as Makkah, Ibn Idris’ most influential disciples appear to have been from the African and Asian “frontiers” of Islam. Perhaps because they were uncomfortable with Ibn Idris’ activism and popularity in these regions, men of learning in the established centres marked his teachings and practices by silence. European sources, especially during the colonial period, were equally unfriendly to a Sufi leader whose followers led holy wars and established religiously oriented states. Significantly, the second edition of the Encyclopaedia of Islam merely reprints a brief entry on ibn Idris from its first edition.

O'Fahey objects to describing religious orders of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century as “neo-Sufi”, because scholars have neglected the intellectual and organizational innovations introduced by Sufi thinkers like Ibn Idris. He suggests, however, that the term can acquire renewed utility by exploring the characteristics common to some religious movements of the period—an appeal to communities in the Muslim “periphery”, a family-based and often hereditary leadership, a more hierarchical and centralized organization than older Sufi orders, and a conscious break with “traditional” Sufism.

The strength of O'Fahey's monograph lies in its careful presentation and interpretation of the life and significance of Ibn Idris and his critique of existing understandings of “neo-Sufism”. The author considers this monograph a first step in understanding the significance of Ibn Idris, but it is unlikely to be surpassed for some time and suggests a number of general issues for other scholars to explore in reconsidering the creativity and dynamism of Sufi movements in the early modern era.

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