DIGEST OF WRITINGS FROM THE IDRĪSĪ TRADITION


This digest of a number of writings from the Idrīsī tradition is a very welcome and necessary contribution to the deepening of our understanding of the intellectual history of Islam in the nineteenth century. It has grown out of an encounter of a kind that, alas, appears to happen too seldom in our compartmentalised universities: that of a renowned specialist of classical Sufism soundly trained in the German scholarly tradition with the latterday world of African historians which is still very much on the periphery of the majority of those involved in ‘Oriental research’.1

Radtke demonstrates the importance of paying attention to the contents of the texts. This sounds more trivial than it really is; too often, scholars have simply spared themselves the trouble of trying to locate and then wade through the mass of writings produced by the subjects of their studies. Here, Radtke has done this for us. The result of his reading will certainly remain useful even after the bibliographical part of it is superseded by The Writings of Eastern Sudanic Africa2 to which he himself is a contributor.

The influence that Ibn Idrīs, his students and ‘grand-students’ had across large parts of North and Northeast Africa, but also in peripheral regions of Arabia, Southeast Asia, or the Balkans, is too well known to be recapitulated here. Sufi brotherhoods in the Arab world and Africa have frequently become mass movements with widespread social and political influence, and it is this aspect that has attracted most of the attention of

1 Oriens is the “Journal of the International Society for Oriental Research”.
colonial politicians, historians, and anthropologists so far. The thought and teachings of the leading exponents of these Sufi movements have been studied to a much lesser degree. Radtke emphasizes that this lack of sound knowledge of the ideas behind the movements has seriously hampered much of the current discussion about the intellectual history of 18th and 19th century Islam and led to a number of questionable generalizations and clichés (‘neo-Sufism’, ‘reformed Sufism’ and ‘Islamic Enlightenment’ are not named directly, but clearly intended here). To put the discussion on a sounder base, Radtke stresses the need of preliminary studies with detailed attention to the texts. The aim of his article is to contribute to establish the ‘material’ foundations necessary for a more general reflection by presenting a substantial body of writings that has remained ‘almost unknown’ to the scholarly community so far.

Radtke gives a digest of many larger and smaller works by Ibn Idris (1/2 p.), Muḥammad ʿUthmān al-Mīrganī (5 pp.), other members of the Mīrghānī family and the Khatmiyya brotherhood (2 1/2 pp.), Ismāʿīl al-Walī (14 pp.) and two of his sons (1/3 p.), plus a note on a work by Aḥmad al-Salāwī in praise of Ismāʿīl which is preserved in Bergen. The distribution of pages is thus inverse to what one might have expected, the teacher receiving least, the ‘grandstudent’ most attention. It is therefore not a proportionally representative study—even though Ibn Idrīs comes back in at the end where several beautiful passages by him on the universe, man, and the principles of mystical life (the Risālat al-qawāʾid) are translated, along with two more technical notes by Ismāʿīl (on the rules of entering the ṭariqa, dhikr, and khalwa).

The picture that emerges from this survey is, in Radtke’s own words, ‘that of a scholarly Sufism living within tradition and combining classical and post-classical elements’ (p. 121). Continuity is perhaps what Radtke emphasises most (cf. his footnotes), refusing to recognize a purported break with tradi-

tion when the texts show so obvious parallels with earlier writings in content and style and liberally refer to authors such as ˘akım Tirmidhī (Nawādir al-uṣūl), Qushayrı (al-Risāla), Ghazālī, Ibn al-‡Arabī (‘Anqā’ mughrib, Bulghat al-ghawwās, al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya, Mawāqi’ al-nujūm), Ibn ˘Aṭā’ Allāh (Hikam), Ibn al-Fāriḍ, ˘Alā’ ad-Dawla-i Simnānī, Kubrā (Fawā’ih), Jīlī (al-Insān al-kāmil), Shaﬁn, and finally, Muṣṭafā al-Bakrī. One of the most interesting of all the texts presented here is Mashārīq shumās al-anwār, Ismā’īl al-Wāli’s major work, a long book describing his mystical worldview in terms that are at times reminiscent of Persian illuminationist thinking.

Among the subjects that are elaborated on in some detail in the digest are:

(a) in the Khatmī section: the different kinds of shaykhs (pp. 102-3); the two (p. 99) or elsewhere four (p. 104) meanings of khatm; introduction to the path for Sufi novices (p. 105 and passim);

(b) in the Ismā’īlī section: defense of a quietist political attitude (p. 106); ‘history’ of the Ismā’īliyya (pp. 111-12); differences and rivalries between Ismā’īl and al-Mirghānī (pp. 106-7, 110-11 contain some very interesting indications of the problems Ismā’īl had in setting himself up as an independent shaykh); Ismā’īl’s prayer of intercession (tawassul) and the cosmology that it comprises (p. 107–9); everyone who sees the Prophet—even after his death—is a Companion (ṣāhābī) (p. 108, cf. p. 117); different classes and personal moulds of awliyā’ (pp. 109, 112-13, 116-17); different kinds of karāmāt (p. 114); the three kinds of khilāfa (p. 115); the rules of khalwa (pp. 112, 119); the stages of spiritual development and their correspondence to cosmology (pp. 116–9); different kinds of tajallī (p. 116).

The two main shortcomings of the present study are, in my opinion, due to Radtke’s overly self-restrained approach. Ibn Idrīs may have been the subject of a recent monograph,4 and his ideas mostly preserved only in student’s notes (two reasons

Radtke gives for dealing with him so summarily), but I certainly do not think that his chief works are better known than those of the other two protagonists. A more detailed presentation of the ‘Iqād al-nafīs, the Risālat al-radd, and the Kunūz al-jawāhir would have been at least as welcome as the summaries given for Khatmī and Ismā‘īlī works. Fortunately, Radtke and O’Fahey are preparing editions and translations of the latter two texts, which will help to fill in this lacuna.5

The other major desideratum remains a comparative analysis. ‘The time for this seems not to have come yet’, says Radtke (p. 94). However, a few more elaborate reflections on the ideas behind the texts, and some comparison with earlier writers, would have been useful and possible even on the basis of the present material alone; and Radtke’s thorough knowledge of classical Sufism would appear to make him better suited for such an undertaking than most (for example, I would have appreciated a brief discussion of the term, fath, in the light of pp. 129–30).

Equally important (but admittedly more difficult and more prone to gross misinterpretation) it would be to relate text to context, and to ask what possibly different meanings are given to the same old words when they are used in different contexts. This is the area of pitfalls in the current debate on ‘neo-Sufism’, and Radtke is probably right in calling for restraint here; but it is also, in the opinion of the reviewer, the area where an eventual solution is likely to emerge, and which therefore calls for imaginative suggestions. Linked to this complex is the question for whom these texts were primarily intended, and who actually read them. Radtke does not give a reason for his guess that Ismā‘īl’s ‘theosophical and esoteric’ Mashāriq al-shumūs was written for a broader public (p. 120). My own research rather suggests that such ‘theoretical’ literature was read only by the élite few, and that it was the sung poetry that exerted a much greater influence on the masses. Radtke stresses the need for a

special study of this poetry (p. 98). One can only hope that this plea will be taken up soon.

A few minor points:

• On p. 100: ‘at-Ṭayyib aus der āl al-Mumarraḥi’ (al-Hībat al-muqtabasa, p. 26) whom al-Mīrganī names as one of his best students at the time, is most likely Ḍāmīd al-Ṭayyib w. al-Bashīr (1742-3—1824) who introduced the Sammāniyya in the Sudan and established his centre at Umm Marriḥ. Al-Mīrganī tried to gain followers among the Sammāniyya during his visit to Sinnār. Thus, he succeeded in converting Aḥmad w. Ḍāmīd w. fiʿs al-Anṣārī (1737-8?—1826), one of the most influential teachers of the area, together with several of his students, and it may well be that the Sammānī grand shaykh took the Khatmiyya too (if only ‘for the blessing’) from the travelling Meccan sharīf.

• Ismāʿīl is stated to have been asked to write his tawassul on 17 Ramaḍān on p. 107, but on 27 Ramaḍān on p. 112.

• Inconsistencies in dates occurring in the manuscripts are sometimes noted but not discussed (they seem to reflect the fact that many of the texts went through various revisions, often not by the author himself; and a thorough historical analysis would have to take into account the different layers).

• Problems directly related to the text could have been discussed where appropriate. For example, it has become common consensus to date the first mentioning of the Khatmiyya to the year 1824; but this is apparently a misunderstanding by Karrar6 who states that Ismāʿīl’s al-ʿUḥūd al-wāfīya was written in 1824; in fact, 1824 is the year when Ismāʿīl was asked to compose his tawassul, printed at the end of al-ʿUḥūd; the ʿUḥūd itself, where the ʿtarīqa Khatmiyya is mentioned, was written only in 1260/1844 (see Radtke, 111-12). In general, the layout of the text makes it rather difficult to locate a particular title.

All this is in no way meant to diminish the value of Radtke’s study; if we had only a dozen more of this kind for other contemporary traditions, our efforts at arriving at a sound intellectual history of 18th and 19th century Islam would be

much facilitated. The reward earned by sweat and labour may point beyond scholarly literalism to a more human horizon, as is shown in this beautiful passage translated by Radtke (123) from Ibn Idrīs’ *al-‘Iqd al-nafīs* (pp. 187-8):

The Prophet has two aspects [*wijhatān, not wajhān*]: One is turned towards God […]. The other […] is turned towards creation […]. He is the reality of being, like a tree which has leaves, [twigs], branches, veins, roots, blossoms, and fruits; the reality of the whole, however, is the tree.

Albrecht Hofheinz
What about the tradition of seeing my extended family on Boxing Day? I enjoy it because it’s something I look forward to, being with all of my cousins and their kids and my aunts and uncles. And the tradition of a walk through the countryside on Good Friday? I enjoy it for the fresh air, and because I get to be with my family and friends. Certainly no more than, say, someone wanting to do a raid in an online game with their friends. Traditions give us something to hold on to from our past, and offer us hope that whilst things may change around us, we have some con

The Emergence of Historiographical Tradition in China. Journal of History Culture and Art Research, 8(3), 389-396. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.7596/taksad.v8i3.2254. From Myth to History: The Emergence of Historiographical Tradition in China. Rustem Ravilevich Muhamezyanov. 1. A mythology and the emergence of historiographical tradition. But that is a rather lengthy process. The final phase of transformations of the Chinese myth belongs to the Axial Age (5th â€“ 3rd centuries BC). (Bichurin, 1842). A worship of history, historical writing, and documental texts something which is so characteristic for the many centuries of Chinese tradition. In V. V. Malyavinâ€™s opinion, the same manticism was at the core of the written practice of Ancient China (Jiachen, 2017). This digest of a number of writings from the Idrâ€™s tradition is a very welcome and necessary contribution to the deepening of our understanding of the intellectual history of Islam in the nineteenth century. It has grown out of an encounter of a kind that, alas Radtke demonstrates the importance of paying attention to the contents of the texts. This sounds more trivial than it really is; too often, scholars have simply spared themselves the trouble of trying to locate and then wade through the mass of writings produced by the subjects of their studies. Here, Radtke has done this for us. The result of his reading will certainly remain useful even after the bibliographical part of it is superseded by The Writings of Eastern Sudanic Africa. 2. to which he himself is a contributor. Writerâ€™s Digestâ€™s Self-Published Book Awards is currently accepting submissions. This is the only Writerâ€™s Digest competition exclusively for self-published books. By Tara Johnson. May 4, 2021. WD Poetic Form Challenge. WD Poetic Form Challenge: Awdl Gywydd. The WD Poetic Form Challenge is your opportunity to write and share a poem (awdl gywydd this time around) for a chance to get published in the Poetic Asides column in Writer's Digest. By Robert Lee Brewer. May 3, 2021. The Writer's Digest team has witnessed many writing mistakes over the years, so we started this series to help identify them for other writers (along with correction strategies). This week's writing mistake is revising while writing. By Moriah Richard. Traditions matter. As leaders, role models, and parents, we must utilize every opportunity to reinforce the values that we hold dear. The truth is, many holidays are becoming so commercialized that our proud traditions are in danger of becoming trivialized. Many of us canâ€™t even remember the true meaning of the holidays. Memorial Day has morphed from remembering our fallen soldiers to the unofficial beginning of summer. Labor Dayâ€™s role in recognizing the achievements of organized labor now just marks the end of summer and a return to school. Veterans Day is honored as a day off from work.