

DIGEST OF WRITINGS FROM THE IDRĪSĪ TRADITION

‘Lehrer—Schüler—Enkel: Aḥmad b. Idrīs, Muḥammad ʿUṭmān al-Mirḡanī, Ismāʿīl al-Walī’ by Bernd Radtke, in: *Oriens*, xxxiii, 1992 (Festschrift für Fritz Meier zum achtzigsten Geburtstag), 94-132.

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 The result of his reading will certainly remain useful even after the bibliographical part of it is superseded by *The Writings of Eastern Sudanic Africa*² to which he himself is a contributor.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”.

2 R.S. O’Fahey, *Arabic Literature of Africa*, I: *The Writings of Eastern Sudanic Africa to 1900*, Leiden: Brill, 1994.

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).³ 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 Idrīs (1/2 p.), Muḥammad °Uthmān al-Mīrghanī (5 pp.), other members of the Mīrghanī family and the Khatmiyya brotherhood (2 1/2 pp.), Ismā'īl 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 Ismā'īl 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-qawā'id*) are translated, along with two more technical notes by Ismā'īl (on the rules of entering the *ṭarīqa*, *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-

3 For a more general survey of these issues, *cf.* R.S. O'Fahey and B. Radtke, "Neo-Sufism Reconsidered, with special reference to Aḥmad ibn Idrīs", in *Der Islam*, lxx, 1993, 52-87.

tion when the texts show so obvious parallels with earlier writings in content and style and liberally refer to authors such as Ḥakīm Tirmidhī (*Nawādir al-uṣūl*), Qushayrī (*al-Risāla*), Ghazālī, Ibn al-ʿArabī (*ʿAnqāʾ mughrīb*, *Bulghat al-ghawwāṣ*, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, *Mawāqīʿ al-nujūm*), Ibn ʿAtāʾ Allāh (*Ḥikam*), Ibn al-Fāriḍ, ʿAlāʾ ad-Dawla-i Simnānī, Kubrā (*Fawāʾiḥ*), Jīlī (*al-Insān al-kāmil*), Shaʿrānī, and finally, Muṣṭafā al-Bakrī. One of the most interesting of all the texts presented here is *Mashāriq shumūs al-anwār*, Ismāʿīl al-Walī’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 Ismāʿīlī section: defense of a quietist political attitude (p. 106); ‘history’ of the Ismāʿīliyya (pp. 111-12); differences and rivalries between Ismāʿīl and al-Mīrghanī (pp. 106-7, 110-11 contain some very interesting indications of the problems Ismāʿīl had in setting himself up as an independent shaykh); Ismāʿīl’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 (*ṣaḥābī*) (p. 108, *cf.* p. 117); different classes and personal moulds of *awliyāʾ* (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

4 R.S. O’Fahey, *Enigmatic Saint*, London: Hurst, 1990.

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 *‘Iqd al-naḥīs*, 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, *ḥaṭḥ*, 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‘īlī’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

5 To gain an impression of how Ibn Idrīs interacted with his students, cf. *The Letters of Aḥmad Ibn Idrīs*, ed. Einar Thomassen and Bernd Radtke, London: Hurst, 1993.

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: ‘aṭ-Ṭayyib aus der āl al-Mumarrahī’ (*al-Hibāt al-muqtabasa*, p. 26) whom al-Mīrghanī names as one of his best students at the time, is most likely Aḥmad al-Ṭayyib w. al-Bashīr (1742-3—1824) who introduced the Sammāniyya in the Sudan and established his centre at Umm Marriḥ. Al-Mīrghanī tried to gain followers among the Sammāniyya during his visit to Sinnār. Thus, he succeeded in converting Aḥmad w. ʿĪsā 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-ʿUhūd al-wāfiya* was written in 1824; in fact, 1824 is the year when Ismāʿīl was asked to compose his *tawassul*, printed at the end of *al-ʿUhūd*; the *ʿUhūd* itself, where the *ṭarīqa 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

6 Ali Salih Karrar, *The Sufi Brotherhoods in the Sudan*, London: Hurst, 1992.

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-ʿIqd al-naḥīs* (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.

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