Preface

Kei TAKAHASHI*

This special issue discusses the features of and the situation surrounding Sufism and saint veneration in modern contexts, by focusing on their expressions in public spheres.

Given that these phenomena derive their authenticity from Islamic traditions while being generally regarded as popular aspects of Islam, they have also been accepted, if not always supported, by elites and have contributed to the legitimacy of Muslim rulers, often functioning as points of contact between the ruler and the ruled in traditional Muslim societies.

However, the transformation of Muslim dynasties into modern nation-states and the contestations among intellectuals regarding the interpretations of Islamic traditions in modern times undermined the authenticity of these phenomena. Sufis and saints, whose conventional authority now in question, had to reconsider their relationship with the government and the public, and tackle emerging issues such as secularization, the politicization of Islam, and globalization.

With complete cognizance of the situation surrounding contemporary Sufism and saint veneration, each paper, in its case studies, deals from the viewpoint of “public expressions.” Although this is a vast and complicated topic requiring the accumulation of further research and more elaborate theorization, we believe that our attempt will shed new light on the studies on the “modernity” of Sufism and saint veneration.

This special issue is based on the works of a series of two panels organized by Professor Masayuki AKAHORI (Sophia University, Japan) at the Third World Congress for Middle Eastern Studies (WOCMES-3), which was held in Barcelona, Spain, on July 19–24, 2010. This series of panels was also used as a platform to showcase some of the achievements of a joint research project—called “The Joint Research on Sufism and Saint Veneration”—which has examined diverse cases relating to Sufism, tariqa, and reverence for saints and the prophet’s family in different regions and time periods. These panels were

*Research Fellow, NIHU Center for Area Studies/Visiting Fellow, Institute of Asian Cultures, Sophia University
organized as part of a five-year joint research project (2006–2010) conducted in association with the National Institutes for the Humanities (NIHU) by a network of research centers in Japan called the “NIHU Program Islamic Area Studies.” In addition, these panels also comprised a larger panel-groups called “Meeting Place of Two Oceans (Majma’ al-Bahrayn): Multi-dimensional Understanding of Middle East” organized by the Japan Association for Middle East Studies (JAMES).

In these two panels, the following six papers were read:

1. Kei TAKAHASHI (NIHU/Sophia University, Japan), “Revaluating Ṭarīqas for the Nation: Muḥammad Tawfīq al-Bakrī (1870–1932) and his Ṭarīqa Reform.”
2. Daisuke MARUYAMA (Kyoto University, Japan), “Sufism and Tariqa Facing the State: A Case Study of the Contemporary Sudan.”
4. Kazuhiro ARAI (Keio University, Japan), “The Media, Saints and Sayyids in Contemporary Indonesia.”
5.Kenichiro TAKAO (Doshisha University, Japan), “Shaykhs Facing to Orthodoxy and ‘Aggiornamento.’”

The discussants were Sanaa MAKHLOUF (The American University in Cairo, Egypt) and Yasushi TONAGA (Kyoto University, Japan). Masayuki AKAHORI chaired the discussion.

All the papers in this special issue are revised editions of the papers discussed in these panels. In editing this special issue, I placed each paper into one of three categories, in accordance with that paper’s main focus; this allows readers to consider the subject in a more systematic manner.

The first two papers discuss the politics of Sufism, while focusing on its relation with contemporary secular regimes.

MARUYAMA deals with the relationship between tariqas and the government of contemporary Sudan. Based on field research, his study illustrates how politically unaffiliated tariqas in actuality exert their influence in Sudanese politics, and how this constitutes one of major supports for the current regime.

TOUTANT’s paper analyzes scholarly discourses on ‘Ali Shīr Nawā’ī (1441–1501), the great poet and Naqshbandī Sufi of Central Asia—in particular,
focusing on the discourses that took place in Soviet Uzbekistan. By examining scholarly works on Nawâ’î from this period, he reveals how Soviet authorities attempted to locate him within the framework of the Soviet materialist ideology.

The major focus of the next two papers is on the aspects of Sufis and the saints’ relation with the modern public.

ARAI’s paper discusses the role of print media in the promotion of Sayyids in Indonesia, through the analysis of a magazine called alKisah. alKisah is one of the most popular Islamic magazines in Indonesia, and gained commercial success by featuring the ulama and saints of Sayyid origin in its articles and supplements. Using an analysis of its content, its operation, and the readers’ reactions, ARAI considers how alKisah provides the people with a popular image of Sayyids in contemporary Indonesia.

TAKAHASHI focuses on the Tariqa reform, which was conducted in Egypt from 1895 to 1905 under the initiative of Muḥammad Tawfīq al-Bakrī (1870–1932), who supervised Egyptian tariqas. The Tariqa reform can be considered a response to the criticism of tariqa that had been intensifying in Egypt since the 1890s. Analyzing Bakrī’s thought as reflected in his reform plan, TAKAHASHI explores the reasoning and strategies used by Sufis to defend tariqas against such criticism.

The last two papers examine the mystical aspects of Islam, while paying attention to modern expressions that go beyond the conventional Islamic context.

TAKAO’s paper points to a particular dimension of contemporary Sufism by tracing the Sufi thought and social activities of Aḥmad Kuftārū (1915–2004), the Naqshbandi Shaykh and ex-Grand Mufti of Syria. TAKAO clarifies the logic of Kuftārū’s evaluation of Sufism, in which Sufism is dissolved into Islamic orthodoxy, and his unique activities in which interfaith dialogues with other religions—including Christians in Syria, the Roman Catholicism, and new religions such as Oomoto in Japan—was promoted.

MISAWA’s paper addresses the unique manifestation of Islam in interwar Japan. As in the case of Toshihiko IZUTSU—who conducted a series of excellent academic studies on Sufism, the Japanese intellectuals in the interwar period were concerned about Islam due to its contrast with Oriental religions and ideas. Taking up two Japanese Muslim figures—Ippei TANAKA (1882–1934) and Bunpachirō ARIGA (1868–1946)—as examples, MISAWA elaborates on the unique ways in which Islam was received by the Japanese while aiming for the syncretism of Islam and Shintoism.

Finally, I would like to conclude the preface by remarking that this special
issue is one of the outcomes of our joint research project—The Joint Research on Sufism and Saint Veneration—which has yielded many remarkable works on the subject. This joint research project was inaugurated in 1997 under the initiative of Yasushi TONAGA and Masayuki AKAHORI, and counts the editor as one of the participants. Apart from the works attributed to individual members, the joint research has published the following works as products of its research activities: