



# Transnational Communities

An ESRC Research Programme

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## **Ethnicity, Politics and Transnational Islam: A Study of an International Sufi Order**

### **Principal Investigators**

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### **Aims and objectives**

The main aim of this project has been to broaden our understanding of how Islam functions across boundaries of states, communities and ethnic groups. While contemporary research attention on Islam has concentrated on its political expressions, the Sufi tradition continues to be important for the majority of Muslims. Through a hierarchical chain of adherence to the spiritual leader, or shaykh, the Sufi orders (tariqas) link local communities across many different regions. One of the more ubiquitous of such contemporary tariqas is that led by Shaykh Nazim al-Qubrusi al-Haqqani. With roots in the Ottoman empire and especially in the Caucasus, it now has centres in North America, Britain and most of western Europe, the Middle East and South and Southeast Asia. The tariqa has had particular success in attracting converts from outside Islam and among young educated professionals in the Muslim world. Communications play a significant role in maintaining the cohesion of this transnational network and the tariqa makes extensive use of all forms of media publication, including a notable presence on the Internet managed from the US. Through fieldwork and a detailed analysis of texts the project has aimed to develop an understanding of how, and with what degree of success, a form of Muslim organisation, which is central to traditional Islam, is able to adjust to rapidly changing contemporary environments, to establish the significance of modern electronic communications relative to more traditional media, and to up-date and refine our knowledge of how Sufi forms of Islam function locally and transnationally.

### **Duration of research**

October 1998-March 2001



## Methodology/study design

The project has been based on ethnographic and anthropological fieldwork in three locations. In parts of the northern Caucasus, the tariqa exists in a more or less traditional form, which is now relating actively to the post-Soviet weakening of the central state and general economic and political instability. In Lebanon, the tariqa has grown significantly in the years following the end of the civil war and, with fast-growing telecommunications links, could be seen as being in a state of transition. In Britain, the tariqa has a number of centres some with a mainly ethnic minority following, others with a multi-ethnic composition including significant numbers of converts. Texts in a variety of media forms have been gathered in the three locations together with a regular survey and recording of materials on the Internet. These have been analysed in terms of content, audience and the circumstances of their production and in relation to the fieldwork results. Field work took place from October 1998 till March 2001 and was conducted through interviews, conversations and participant observation. The research team included members who were already familiar with the areas in question and therefore had comparatively easy access.

## Academic and policy implications

The interdisciplinary nature of such a study of religious organisation has raised a number of theoretical issues to do with the interaction between ideas and organisation and how far a shared community can function with different discourses. The project contributes to a broadening of our understanding of contemporary transnational Islamic organisations and thus assists policy makers, the media, and agencies working with Muslim communities in reaching better informed policies and practices.

## Some Research Findings

◆ The Sufi order being researched was that of Shaykh Nazim al-Qubrusi al-Haqqani. Originating in northern Cyprus his particular branch of the major Naqshbandi order can be traced back through Dagestan to Central Asia. Having preached first in parts of the Middle East, Shaykh Nazim started a mission in Britain in 1974, soon attracting followers of various ethnic origins. Of several groups now in Britain, the largest are in London, Birmingham and Sheffield. During 1999 a new centre was established in Glastonbury which has especially attracted white converts. Having set up branches in Lebanon through the 1970s and 80s, Shaykh Nazim neglected the country for a decade until he resumed visiting in 1998.

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◆ Groups in Tripoli and Beirut were led by local leaders of the elite Sunni Qabbani family, especially by the brothers 'Adnan (shaykh in Tripoli) and Hisham, who married Shaykh Nazim's daughter and in 1992 started a mission in the US. The only visit to Dagestan came in 1998, leaving a small group of followers in a country characterised by ethnic and political fragmentation. This gave space for the insertion of the group, but its alliance with a losing political campaign served to marginalise the order.

◆ Overall the order shows little cohesion beyond the common loyalty to Shaykh Nazim. The teaching tends to avoid doctrine but instead centre around the talks of the Shaykh

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circulated in print, on audio and video tapes and on the Internet. Both Shaykh Nazim and his followers often take part in or incorporate the practices of Sufi traditions other than the Naqshbandi.

◆ Membership of the order is difficult to assess, as the very concept of membership is nebulous, and declaration of adherence (bay'a) at a meeting led by Shaykh Nazim is easy, as distinct from most other Sufi groups which require an often lengthy initiation process.

◆ Membership can be seen as in three circles. The smallest is an inner core of activist who attend meetings and the ritual dhikr regularly. A large second circle consists of those who acknowledge some kind of association but who are only active when Shaykh Nazim visits. A much smaller third circle is made up of individuals who regard Shaykh Nazim as a spiritual guide and will approach him individually but not take part in collective activities. Finally, it should be noted that Shaykh Nazim is widely regarded as a 'holy' man with whom contact is desirable, even if one is not a follower.

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◆ The Internet has become a significant means of communication within the network, especially in Europe and the US. It was via the Internet that in 1999 preparations for the end of the world and the coming of the Mahdi were called for. This scenario included the expected collapse of computer networks due to the 'Y2K bug', and the Turkish and Greek earthquakes and other natural phenomena were interpreted as warnings. Followers who obeyed the call to assemble in a village in Lebanon caused local consternation. When nothing happened, followers were confused, many finally accepting that Shaykh Nazim's prayers had averted the disaster.

◆ Another continuous theme has been support for the political authority. In Britain Shaykh Nazim supported Prince Charles against Princess Diana, while in the US Shaykh Hisham

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Department against Muslim extremism in US Islam. The order has received financial support from royalty in Malaysia and Brunei, and Shaykhs Nazim and Hisham have since 1999 co-operated with the Uzbek government in its campaign against Islamic 'fundamentalists'.

◆ Is this very disparate network a community with a common character and cohesion? Traditionally, a Sufi tariqa existed primarily as a local group, adapting to and taking on the character of the locality in which it was integrated, the Haqqani order is no exception. Its recruitment, membership, public profile and activities reflected the local environment. What held it together with other local groups of the same tariqa was certain shared teachings and rites, an expectation of hospitality when travelling and, above all, adherence to the commonly acknowledged Shaykh and his spiritual inheritance and guidance.

◆ Those contemporary Sufi groups which function coherently under a central directive leadership resemble certain modern Islamist political parties more than traditional Sufism. This traditional nature of the Haqqanis is evident both in the enormous local variety and in the central esteem given to Shaykh Nazim. As we have observed around the visits of Shaykh Nazim to Britain and Lebanon, the order only fully exists where Shaykh Nazim is.

◆ The Haqqani tariqa clearly has a transnational presence. But unlike in many current studies of transnationalism, this community is only very marginally constructed around migration. The network has clearly not expanded with migration, and the movement of people within the network is determined by the network, not by migratory links. At all normal times, i.e. when Shaykh Nazim is not visiting, it is the autonomy of the local group which is most characteristic of the order. At the level of ideal construction, therefore, the order is transnational, while at the level of existence in society it is local. 'Translocal' might be a more appropriate term.

## Publications

### J.S.Nielsen

Ed. with A. Zhelyazkova, *Ethnology of Sufi orders: theory and practice*, Sofia: IMIR, 2001.

"Orientalism and anti-orientalism: is there a middle way?" in J.S.Nielsen and A.Zhelyazkova (eds.), *Ethnology of Sufi orders: theory and practice*, Sofia: IMIR, 2001, pp.337-351.

"Postscript: tensions between the local and the global in Islamic revival", in J.S.Nielsen and A.Zhelyazkova (eds.), *Ethnology of Sufi orders: theory and practice*, Sofia: IMIR, 2001, pp. 622-628.

"Transnational Islam and the integration of Islam in Europe", S.Allievi and J.S.Nielsen, *Muslim networks and transnational communities in and across Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), pp. 28-51.

### G. Yemelianova

"Sufism and politics in post-Soviet Dagestan", in J.S.Nielsen and A.Zhelyazkova (eds.), *Ethnology of Sufi orders: theory and practice*, Sofia: IMIR, 2001, pp. 444-460.

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### M.Stringer

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### M.Draper

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### **M. Roshchin**

"Sheikh Abdulwahid of Khabshi: a practical experience of Sufism as Islam' peacemaking branch" (Russian), in *Non-violence as Weltanschauung and way of life*, Moscow: Institute of World History, 2000.

"Dagestan and the war next door", *Perspective* (Boston University Institute for the Study of Conflict, Ideology and Policy), vol.11, no.1, Sept-Oct 2000.

"Dagestan: un enigma dei tempi postsovietici", in P.Sinatti (ed.), *La Russia e I conflitti nel Caucaso*, Turin: Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, 200, 115-133.

**Website:** <http://artsweb.bham.ac.uk/mdraper/transnatsufi>

## Transnational Communities Programme

On the programme's website (<http://www.transcomm.ox.ac.uk>) you will find contact details for all the project teams, guidance notes for would-be authors in the book series', information about past and forthcoming events, downloadable working papers, a searchable bibliography of world diasporas and links to related sites. An on-line news digest, TRACES aims to make sense of the human dimensions of globalisation by monitoring news items from around the world and presenting them in summary form. You can register on-line to receive hard copies of newsletters, reminders of website updates and information about related events.

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