



Ca' Foscari  
University  
of Venice



CENTRO STUDI  
DI CIVILTÀ E SPIRITUALITÀ  
COMPARATE  
*fondazione* ONLUS  
**GIORGIO CINI**

Program of the Conference

## Sufism and Gender in Contemporary Societies



“Sound 6” @Maimouna Guerresi

Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Venice, 03-04 December 2021

## Friday, 03 December 2021

09:00 - 09:15 **Welcome greetings**

- **Francesco Piraino**, Director of the Centre for Comparative Studies of Civilisations and Spiritualities / Ca' Foscari University
- **Feyza Burak-Adli**, Northwestern University
- **M. Shobhana Xavier**, Queen's University

09:15 – 10:45: FEMALE NAVIGATING STRATEGIES IN CENTRAL ASIA

- **Razia Sultanova**, University of Cambridge, “Otin-Oy Malika and Central Asian Sufi rituals performance”.
- **Annika Schmeding**, Harvard University, “Navigating Access – (De)gendering Sufi Authority in Afghanistan”.

10:45 – 11:00 Coffee break

11:00 – 12:30: CONTEMPORARY SUFISM AND GENDER IN TURKEY

- **Hande Gür**, University of Alberta, Female Dervishes of Mevleviye in Turkey: “What is Piety Anyway?”.
- **Ezgi Guner**, Boğaziçi University, “Veiling the African Female Body: Tesettür as a raced and gendered problem in Turkey”.

12:30 – 14:00 Lunch

14:00 – 14:45 Guided tour of the Cini Foundation

14:45 – 17:15 HISTORICAL AND LITERARY DISCOURSES ON FEMALE PARTICIPATION IN SUFI MILIEUES

- **Brett Wilson**, Central European University, “Orgies on the Bosphorus: Sexual Deviancy and Gender in Modern Critiques of Sufism”.
- **Feyza Burak-Adli**, Northwestern University, “Agent of Change or Guardian of Tradition?: Sufism, Gender, and Nationalism in Cold War Turkey.”
- **Brittany Landorf**, Emory University, “The Wayfaring Madwoman” (al-Majdhūba al-Sālīka): Articulations of Gender in Moroccan Hagiography.

## Saturday, 04 December 2021

09:00 – 11:15 CONTEMPORARY SUFISM AND GENDER IN FRANCE

- **Hajar Masbah**, Écoles des Hautes en Sciences Sociales – Paris, “Feminine Sufi dance in France: New appropriations and boundaries”.
- **Francesco Piraino**, Ca’ Foscari University of Venice, “A Female Imam in Paris: From Sufi Humanism to Islamic Reformism”.
- **Marta Dominguez-Diaz**, University St Gallen, “Mothering him: gender, love, feminine suffering and the maternal in French Sufi autobiographical writings”.

11:15 – 11:30 Coffee break

11:30 – 13:00 UNCONVENTIONAL BEKTASHI SHAYKHAS

- **Gianfranco Bria**, University of Roma La Sapienza, “Sufism, cosmic energy and universalism in a post-socialist realm: Misioni Shenjtëror Eleonorë’s case”.
- **Sara Kuehn**, University of Vienna “Bektashi female leadership in a transnational context: the spiritual career of the only contemporary female dervish”.

13:00 – 14:30 Lunch

14:30 – 16:45 FEMINISM, GENDER EQUALITY, AND SEXISM IN WESTERN SUFI TRADITIONS

- **Rose Deighton**, Emory University, “Gender, Moral Agency, and the Co-Constitution of Authority in Two Contemporary Sufi Communities”.
- **Nadège Chabloz**, Écoles des Hautes en Sciences Sociales – Paris, “Is there a “Sufi feminism” in France?”.
- **Hasnaa Mokhtar**, Clark University, “Maryam and the Maryamiyya/Maryami tariqa: Re-reading gender, patriarchy, and oppression”.

## Abstracts

*Sufism, cosmic energy and universalism in a post-socialist realm: Misioni Shenjtëror Eleonorë's case*, Gianfranco Bria, University of Roma La Sapienza

“Lady of the Spirit is the title held by the individual who possesses: the Divine Code, the spiritual body above the ordinary, the spatial transcendence to work in people through Her cosmic and dynamic communication” (Bregu 1995).

The “Spirit Lady” (*Zonja e Shpirtit*) is Eleonorë Bregu (1953-2015), leader and founder of Misioni Shenjtëror Eleonorë (“Elenora’s Holy Mission”), a Sufi-grounded sect founded in Albania in 1987. In that year, Eleonorë initiated her first communication with the “Entities of the Divine League” (*Entitetet e Lidhjes Hyjnore*) to restore the “Balance on Earth” (*Ekulibrimin e Tokës*) damaged by the last Missionary (according to the Divine Order). In 1988, the Lady of the Spirit began her missionary activity in her family home in Tirana where she began to operate as *Bektashi Tekke*, since she belonged to a *Bektashi* family. Her missionary activity was hidden until 1990 because of the religious ban imposed by the socialist regime. After the collapse of the regime, Eleonorë began to preach openly, involving believers of various social and religious backgrounds: Christians and Muslims met her in search of blessings and healing. Some of them became members of the Missions, i.e. initiates into “the process of assimilating Cosmic Energy (*Energjia Kozmike*) from the psychic energy of the person, which is crucial in his or her biological function”. In various publications, Eleonorë developed her metaphysical doctrine by mixing *Bektashism*, parapsychology, astrology and astronomy. She also elaborated a complex set of practices and rituals with water (similar to Christian baptism), required to establish the process of capturing Cosmic Energy. Through donations from the faithful, the Misioni expanded its properties, establishing a headquarters in Tirana, and other missions throughout Albania in the form of *vakëf*. Eleonorë was the only Sufi-trained woman to lead a religious community in a society in which religious activities are highly patriarchalised. While never directly addressing gender issues, she proposed a universalist model of authority and doctrine – mostly elaborated from *Bektashism* – that aimed to transcend any distinction of gender, sex, religion or race. However, this model was never recognised by other Sufi authorities because of its syncretic nature and the fact that she was a woman. Based on this premise, this paper aims to examine Eleonorë’s metaphysics as a form of re-elaboration Sufi authority and doctrines in a universalistic light within a post-socialist (see post-secular) and patriarchal context.

*Agent of Change or Guardian of Tradition?: Sufism, Gender, and Nationalism in Cold War Turkey*, Feyza Burak-Adli, Northwestern University

The *Rifaiyye* is a gender-mixed, upper-class Turkish Sufi order founded in the late nineteenth century by Kenan Rifai and currently led by an unveiled female shaykha named Cemalnur Sargut. The Rifais reformed Sufism by divorcing its ethical-spiritual foundation from its institutional structures like the Sufi lodge, and its ceremonial practices like *dhikr* and *sama*. They have also transformed the Islamic gender discourses by recognizing the ontological egalitarianism of the sexes in Islam and women’s greater capacity for spirituality. They have disrupted Islamic gender norms by discarding bodily modesty codes, such as veiling and gender segregation, and by extending women’s public participation

to the level of community and spiritual leadership. Women have always been at the forefront of the Rifai movement. One of them, Samiha Ayverdi, inherited the order in 1950 upon Rifai's death.

Ayverdi was not only the first female Sufi master who led both men and women in Turkey, but also a renowned novelist, poet, and public intellectual of the Turkish conservative Right during the Cold War era. She was formally recognized both by the state and many civil society associations. She published over 40 books. She also founded several prominent civil society associations dedicated to the preservation of the classical Turkish-Islamic heritage in literature, fine arts, music, and architecture. In 1966, she established one of the first associations for women in Turkey named the Turkish Women's Cultural Association (TURKKAD) with an aim to mobilize elite women to become active social agents in the public sphere.

Ayverdi may have been seen as a progressive modern Muslim woman thanks to her status as an unveiled female Sufi master and public intellectual leading educated middle-class men and women (Ayturk 2019, Ayturk and Mignon 2013). However, I complicate the picture of women's empowerment mapped on her female leadership by closely examining Ayverdi's oeuvre and civic activities. Strongly refuting feminism and the Western discourse of women's rights, Ayverdi valued women not as autonomous individuals, but as a class of mothers tasked to reproduce the ideal nation and rehabilitate Turkish-Islamic culture. Hence, she echoed the early Republican illiberal "state feminism" which emancipated women in public while simultaneously deflecting feminist consciousness and independent activism. In this paper, I will historically and socio-politically situate Ayverdi's ideological thought in Cold War Turkey. I will demonstrate how she co-imbricated Sufism with the Right-wing anti-communist and nationalist values by tying the idea of serving God into the idea of one's duty and obligations to the nation. I will finally examine how her nationalist conservatism, elitism, and etatism prevented her to endorse the feminist ethics of gender equality since she associated the empowerment of women only with a public mobilization for a greater cause of national defense against communism, westernization, and cultural alienation.

### *Is there a "Sufi feminism" in France?*, Nadège Chabloz,

In an exploratory way, this contribution proposes to discuss the emergence, notably in France, of discourses and practices that identify themselves or can be identified with a "Sufi feminism."

First, it will analyze how this new sub-category of "Sufi feminism" is added to the controversial "Islamic feminism" or "Muslim feminism," which aims to change the relationship between men and women within the Muslim religion and is based on the study of sacred texts (Koran and Sunna) to assert gender equality. This feminism, whose discourses, practices, and objectives differ according to the world's regions, has been well documented since the 1990s, especially by English-speaking researchers. The "Sufi feminism," which has not yet been studied and which this contribution proposes to describe and define, is included in the "Islamic feminism" while having its specificities linked to the way Sufism is perceived, represented, and practiced today by a marginal part of the French and, more broadly, Francophone population. This contribution will focus on describing the arguments used in certain speeches and publications that assert that the principle of gender equality is constitutive of Sufism and that this religious current can even be defined as an "Islamic theory of gender equality" (Dialmy & Clément 1997). The analysis will be based primarily on the case study of two French Sufi women, Anne-Sophie Monsinay and Kahina Bahloul, who have become imams and recently founded their mosques (Simorgh and Fatima). Interviews with these women who advocate gender equality within the Muslim religion and the study of their publications will allow us to understand how they define their feminist discourses and actions in relation to Sufism. Observation

of ten prayer sessions (one of which was observed "in person" and the others online since the beginning of the health crisis) at the Simorgh Mosque will also reveal what practices promote gender equality within this mosque (mixed prayers led by women, freedom to wear the veil or not) and what themes and aspects of the khutba deal with sex and gender equality in Islam. The observation will also reveal the nature of the corpus of texts mobilized (Koran, Sunnah, Fiqh, and also texts by Sufi thinkers, anthropologists, Islamologists, philosophers) during these khutbas and the questions and answers with the participants. The analysis will also focus on the way these texts are interpreted by the two founders of the Simorgh mosque (Anne-Sophie Monsinay, Sufi, and Eva Janadin, Mutazilite) and on their deconstruction and contestation of the patriarchal social order and of the "religious institutions" that pervert the meaning of the original spiritual message, in order to disassociate them from Islam in general and Sufism in particular.

***Gender, Moral Agency, and the Co-Constitution of Authority in Two Contemporary Sufi Communities***, Rose Deighton, Emory University

Since 2017, several organizations addressing spiritual abuse in Muslim communities have emerged in the United States and Europe.<sup>1</sup> These organizations acknowledge the gendered nature of spiritual abuse and indicate that abusive spiritual authorities often try to usurp the individual moral agency of their students. This new discourse challenges some of the major scholarly assumptions about the Sufi teaching relationship. We often assume that the complete submission of a student to a shaykh al-tarbiya (Sufi training guide) is a requisite for spiritual growth. We often treat this dynamic as a positive or benign feature of the Sufi tradition. However, contemporary women Sufi authorities are addressing the reality of spiritual abuse and more general asymmetries of power in their articulation of their roles as Sufi guides and community leaders. This paper examines the ethics of the Sufi teaching relationship in two contemporary communities. Shaykha Fariha al-Jerrahi of the Nur Ashki Jerrahi community in New York and Shaykha Fawzia al-Rawi of the Shadhuliya community in Vienna have cultivated an ethics of Sufi teaching rooted in three shared characteristics: 1) an identification of patriarchy as problematic and oppressive; 2) the value of individual moral agency (khalifah) and the inviolability of the individual conscience (ḍamīr), and; 3) the co-constitution of authority through shared ritualistic and organizational functions among their students. This paper draws from ethnographic research and interviews with the Shaykhas as well as analysis of their organizations' founding documents. I suggest that they are modeling a new paradigm in the organization of Sufi communities that considers gender and social positionality in its power arrangements. In their efforts to articulate an ethical paradigm for Sufi teaching, they emphasize feminist values such as consent, choice, and agency. Even more, they root these values, which inform their roles as teachers and community leaders, in theological principles surrounding the divine-human relationship.

***Mothering him: gender, love, feminine suffering and the maternal in French Sufi autobiographical writings***, Marta Domínguez Díaz, University St Gallen

Motherhood has historically been a key trope in the cultural construction of the feminine. In patriarchal religious traditions, the image of the mother has been used to evoke ideals of unconditional love, and the virtues of physical and moral nourishment. By contrast, feminist critique has habitually conceptualised motherhood as an institution of male control at the core of the social contract. Sufism which has historically had multiple ways of reading gender has accordingly developed a plural and often ambivalent relationship to motherhood, and the maternal has sometimes served Sufis as a domain from where traditional gender roles could be questioned, challenged or at least reimagined.

Some modern European forms of Sufism have specially built a fame for allowing new enunciations of gender that challenge sexism, yet most of these ways of approaching gender are voiced by people who often suffers discrimination on the basis of their gender and/or sexual identity, i.e. women, the non-binary and/or queer. By contrast, in this paper, I will explore how the maternal is constructed by a Sufi version of the heteronormative with the goal of ultimately scrutinising how gender is understood in those European Sufi religiosities. I will use two French autobiographies in which their born non-Muslim (male and heterosexual) authors decide to convert to Islam in order to become disciples of the Moroccan Sufi leader Ḥamzā al-Būdshīshī (d.2017). The works studied are *Qu'Allah bénisse la France* (2004), by hip-hop singer Abd al-Malik, and *Scribe de Dieu* (2019), by the psychoanalyst Jean-Bruno Falguière. I argue that the mother's experience of suffering, much of which is caused by sexism, is an important trigger in the religious journey of these authors. I inquire whether becoming a Muslim is in those cases related with learning to understand gender in new ways so that the feminine suffering can be somehow symbolically repaired, exploring how conceptualisations of religion and gender intertwine. I make sense of how (and if) a particular Sufi ethos animates a critique on sexism, and question how much of this religious construction is informed by a narrative produced by the Sufi group they have decided to join (i.e. the Sufi order Qādiriyya Būdshishiyya) and/or it is the product of a distinctively individual process of spiritual enunciation.

***Veiling the African Female Body: Tesettür as a raced and gendered problem in Turkey***, Ezgi Guner, Boğaziçi University

With the growing interest in Muslim Africa as a result of state policies in Turkey, there has lately been a preoccupation with the veiling practices of African Muslim women. Defining these practices as a failure to comply with the rules of *tesettür*, or properly covering the female body, Turkish Muslims have been developing ways to fix this perceived problem. The Encyclopedia of Islam published by Turkey's Diyanet (Religious) Foundation explains African women's assumed non-compliance with *tesettür* with the historical development of Islam in Africa as an urban religion. The article on "Islam in Africa" argues that blending with pre-Islamic local beliefs and practices, Islam remained weak in rural areas where Muslims continued to violate Islamic law. Others have tied non-compliance with *tesettür* to climatic and/or economic reasons and have suggested fixing it by donating proper clothing and teaching women how to veil. A Turkish NGO launched a sewing training course in Niger with sewing machines and models for proper women's clothes brought from Turkey. Islamic schools established by Naqshbandi communities from Turkey have stressed *tesettür* as an important part of educating students across Africa south of the Sahara. Based on a multi-sited ethnography in Turkey, Tanzania and Senegal, this paper examines the intersectionality of race and gender through the Turkish discourses about and interventions into African Muslim women's veiling practices. It does so, however, not by centering on African Muslim women's subjectivities, but by critically examining the discourses and practices around Turkish humanitarianism, Islamic schooling, and other forms of religious engagement with the continent. Analyses of African Muslim women's veiling practices are dominated by binaries of Sufi vs. Salafi and African vs. Middle Eastern normativities, the former being associated with a lesser degree and the latter with higher degrees of concealment. While analyzing how the Turkish Naqshbandis complicate this simplistic picture, this paper at the same time provides new critical insight into the transnational racial and gender regimes across the Middle East and Africa.

***Female Dervishes of Mevleviye in Turkey: "What is Piety Anyway?"***, Hande Gür, University of Alberta

This research project is an ethnographic study of the rise of Sufi practices among mainly young, middle-class women in Turkey. Although social theories have often assumed that modernization would necessarily bring “secularization” or “disenchantment” from religious practice, I observed an opposite trend as many largely secular Turkish people rediscovered Mevleviye (Gür, 2018; 2020), a Sufi order established in Anatolia after the passing of Mevlana Celaleddin-i Rumi in the 13th century. Based on research between 2016 and 2018 among three Mevlevi communities in Istanbul and Konya, this paper aims to explain women’s growing interest and inclusion in Mevleviye as disciples (mürid) by exploring how they perceive their spiritual quests and practices and how these practices support the formation of eclectic Muslim identities.

A growing anthropological literature on women in “piety movements” has shown a growing number of women who participate visibly in spiritual communities (Mahmood, 2005; Deeb, 2006; Huq, 2008). However, as some recent studies argue, many modern Muslims do not relate to Islam primarily through the idiom of “piety” and indeed might be seen as impious (Schielke and Debevec, 2012; Bayat, 2013; Ozyegin, 2015). Still, both these approaches tend to overlook women who actively participate in Islamic communities yet do not assume a timeless ideal of piety. This paper will point to a relationship to the Islamic tradition that is active but that conceives of itself as neither traditionally pious nor impious. It seeks to cut through widespread dichotomies of “pious” versus “everyday” Muslims in the literature.

***Bektashi female leadership in a transnational context: the spiritual career of the only contemporary female dervish***, Sara Kuehn, University of Vienna

Since the founding of the Bektashi Sufi order, bacılar (literally, sisters; female members of the order) have been accepted as initiated members who participate in secret Bektashi ritual ceremonies (attended exclusively by the initiated members of the order) in the company of male initiates (canlar, or ‘souls’; a term also used for a group of Bektashis collectively). This is due to the important role of Kadıncık Ana (also known as Fatma Hatun), the woman considered to have been the first to recognize and support the thirteenth-century ecstatic holy man Hacı Bektaş-I Veli. A leader, or ‘mother,’ of the itinerant religious group bacıyan-ı Rum (‘women/sisters of Rum’), Kadıncık Ana was considered to be Hacı Bektaş’ designated spiritual successor. According to the Ottoman chronicler Aşıkpaşazade (1400–1484), she founded the order that bears his name with the help of her disciple Abdal Musa. The descendants of Kadıncık Ana’s children are said to be bel evlatları, the ‘children of the sperm [of Hacı Bektaş]’. In spite of the legacy of this female Bektashi spiritual master and the tradition of Hacı Bektaş that “there is no difference between man and woman,” namely that both men and women have the same spiritual potential to become a perfect human being (İnsan-ı Kamil), women were, and still are, mostly confined to the lower ranks of the order, as aşıks (sympathisers with the order who cannot participate in Bektashi ritual ceremonies) or muhibs (lay members who took their first vow). Only few women rose to the rank of a fully initiated Bektashi derviş (dervish) and, except Kadıncık Ana, no other woman ever became a Bektashi spiritual leader, usually referred to as baba (literally, father). Today there is but one female Bektashi derviş, Gülizar Cengiz, who since the mid-1980s is based in Germany. The paper sheds light on her spiritual career during which she founded an (Alevi-)Bektashi cultural institute in Cologne and opened a Bektashi dargah (lodge) on a hill between Cologne and Bonn which, tellingly, is named ‘Kadıncık Ana’. How does this female Bektashi dervish negotiate her Sufi tradition in a transnational context?

***“The Wayfaring Madwoman” (al-Majdhūba al-Sālīka): Articulations of Gender in Moroccan Hagiography***, Brittany Landorf, Emory University



Written by the 19th-century Moroccan historian and Sufi Muḥammad Ja‘far al-Kattānī, the hagiographic biographical dictionary *Salwat al-anfās wa muḥādathat al-akyās mi-man uqbira min al-‘ulamā’ wa sulahā’ bi Fās* documents the lives of the important pious folk, scholars, mystics, and friends of God buried in and around the city of Fez. While scholars have examined the significance of al-Kattānī’s discursive construction of the authority of Moroccan sainthood during a time of encroaching French colonialism and shifting political power, little attention has been given to its noteworthy inclusion of fifty entries devoted to female-gendered scholars, saints, and mystics. These entries differ from other Sufi ṭabaqāt texts which place the biographies of female saints as appendixes—afterthoughts—to the central discussion of male saints. Instead, entries of female saints and religious figures are interwoven in the text, demonstrating the significance both male and female religious authority played in the author’s understanding of Moroccan sainthood. In this paper, I translate these entries in order to examine the gendered construction of sainthood in al-Kattānī’s *Salwat al-anfās*. I focus specifically on those saints who are described as majdhūba or as a mad female saint, intoxicated with love for God. What are the attributes and virtues of the majdhūba? How might hagiographic depictions of the majdhūba reinforce or subvert norms attributed to the righteous female Sufi (ṣāliḥa) and to the learned religious woman (‘ālimat)? In what ways do representations of the majdhūba differ from or resemble that of the mad male saint, the majdhūb? I suggest that the gendered construction of the majdhūba acts both as a literary foil for the appropriately gendered behaviors and attributes of “sober Sufis” as well as gestures to the articulation of non-binary gendered Sufi subjectivities in Sufism in Morocco and throughout the Islamic world.

***Feminine Sufi dance in France: New appropriations and boundaries***, Hajar Masbah, EHESS - Paris

Since the end of the 20th century, the whirling Sufi dance has become a visual symbol of Sufism. This dance-Prayer, initiated by Rumi, was traditionally presented by men in Dhikr ceremonies and limited to private spaces for women. In France, however, many female Sufi dancers give shows for a large audience. They produce dance performances on stages, diffuse it in media and present themselves as Sufi artistes. Some of them propose workshops to a mixed public and transmit this practice outside the landscape of traditional tariqa. This paper intends to shed some light on the artification of Sufism by Sufi dancers who produce whirling dervishes in France. How do they appropriate Sufism? Do they innovate in their choreographies or respect the traditional rites? How do they deal with the religious and cultural boundaries about gender and bodies exhibition?

This paper is based on thick and grounded data collected in a fieldwork at four workshops of Sufi dances. I participated in two artistic residencies for a week with Rana Gorgani (an Iranian Sufi dancer) in October and December 2020; a workshop of dance with Dervish Omar (Naqshbandi disciple) in August 2020, and another meditation atelier with Ali Alexander ACHEMOUN (psychotherapist) in February 2021. In these activities, the participants were majority feminine, with European origins, and many non-Muslims. The program was composed of different subjects such as Zikr, Sufi songs, Sufi dance, and the transmission of spirituality through mystical poetry. I will present in my proposal, an ethnographic description of the corporeality of Sufi dance and the gender bodies expressions and examine the discourses about Sufism and feminine Sufi dance and their theological and artistic boundaries.

***Maryam and the Maryamiyya/Maryami tariqa: Re-reading gender, patriarchy, and oppression***, Hasnaa Mokhtar, Clark University

Sufism as the preoccupation with the nature of reality, and the inner path (tarīqa) that enables human being to cultivate their ethical and spiritual potentials (Shaikh 2012, p. 10), has allowed feminists to investigate “the relationship between gender and ontology” and “unpack various narratives of “masculinity” and “femininity”” within Sufi texts (Shaikh 2012, p. 11). Employing Shaikh’s methodology, in this paper I trace the origins of the “Divine Feminine” (Schuon 2003) Maryamiyya/Maryami tarīqa or Sufi order founded by Shaykh 'Isa Nur al-Din (Swiss-German metaphysician Frithjof Schuon) and its contemporary, traditionalist, non-Western evolution instituted by Nur al-Din’s follower Seyyed Hossein Nasr. Utilizing a decolonial feminist lens, I unpack narratives of masculinity and femininity within the Maryamiyya/Maryami tariqa. I illustrate how both the Western and non-Western Maryamiyya/Maryami Sufi orders have reinforced the sexism regime and how Sufi leaders continue to act as the guardians of a patriarchal Islamic tradition within the Sufi brotherhoods. Through a decolonial feminist re-reading of Maryam’s story and legacy, I utilize Zainab Alwani’s methodology to investigate the Qur’an as a “structural unity” combined with Azizah al-Hibri’s framework of the Iblisi (Satanic) logic to conceptualize gender, patriarchy, and oppression. Just as Schuon “legitimated his teaching authority through four figures: Shaykh Ahmad 'Alawi, Rene Guenon, al-Khidr, and the Virgin Mary” (Halman 2009), I validate my re-reading of gender in Maryam’s historical narrative on account of the figures of Pharaoh, the Angels, and Satan as symbols of state, societal, and domestic patriarchal oppression of women. By presenting this framework, my goal is to offer Islamic feminist counternarratives that challenge the hegemonic sexist regime within these Sufi orders.

*A Female Imam in Paris: From Sufi Humanism to Islamic Reformism*, Francesco Piraino, Ca’ Foscari University of Venice

... Abstract needed...

*Navigating Access – (De)gendering Sufi Authority in Afghanistan*, Annika Schmeding, Harvard University

The intense politicization of the “women’s question” in Afghanistan draws on a long genealogy of state interventions (both Afghan and foreign) throughout the twentieth century. The rhetoric of the “liberation” of ‘oppressed Afghan women’ was used to support the military invasion of the country and subsequent post-2001 reconstruction era. Underpinning the development rhetoric is the assumption that presumes ‘Islamic’ and ‘traditional’ practices as limiting women’s subjective agency. In most writing on women in Afghanistan, Islam and Islamic cultural traditions are either a backdrop to the lives of the actors - sometimes unobtrusive, at other times patriarchally oppressive - rather than an active dimension of social life that women could also creatively engage with or lead. The proposed paper offers the case study of contemporary female Sufi leadership and teaching within a branch of the Qadirriyah Sufi order originating with pir Allama Faizani. Based on ethnographic participant observation and oral history interviews, it traces the development of female inclusion within spiritual practice and religious leadership in urban Afghanistan. The article considers how women’s participation in institutional Islamic settings was facilitated by ways in which the founding pir became a moral exemplar for gender inclusive conduct, inspiring a community ethos of male allyship. The Faizanis discursively legitimize women’s participation through recourse to the spiritual psychophysiological organ of the heart, rendering Divine connection as a non-gendered endeavor which transcends social categories. In addition to the discursive erasure of gender, the community navigates restrictive environments and expectations as well as the post-2001 urban public sphere. saturated with non-governmental organizations through practical adaptations such as new cultural

organizations. The article examines ways in which the community builds female spiritual authority against a backdrop of an otherwise predominantly male Sufi sociosphere.

*Otin-Oy Malika and Central Asian Sufi rituals performance*, Razia Sultanova, University of Cambridge

Female Sufis are not a rare case in Central Asia. Otin-Oy Malika, born in 1955 in the Ferghana Valley, is one of them. During the Soviet era, Malika learned the skills of ancient Sufi devotional poetry recitation from the last local female teacher, visiting her at night to avoid strict state control and punishment. She has since become a local Sufi authority in the village of Durdur. Her large repertoire consists of 12th-Century Sufi poems by Khoja Ahmad Yasawi, 14th Century Baha-ud-Din Naqshband Bukhari, 19th Century female Sufi poet Uvaysiy and many others. She adds to the genre by also creating poems herself. So, how does it come that this woman, a widow and mother of two children, has become the main religious person in her local area? How did it happen that she is invited to every family event to lead the religious rituals, such as birthday celebrations, weddings or funerals? How is it that her highly prestigious status of female Mulla -- Otin-Oy -- has overcome all others in the local social hierarchy? Central Asia is the native home of a rich Islamic culture where four different Sufi orders were born: Naqshbandiyah (a major Suni order), Yassaviya, Mawlawiyya, and Kubraviyya. However, the 20th-Century Soviet Union's ideology of banning all religions created a reactionary heritage that attempted to stop centuries-long local Sufi religious traditions. When the majority of male religious leaders were arrested, imprisoned in Gulags, or shot dead, local women had to take care of the continuation of the Sufi tradition and learn how to practise and perform the rituals of devotion. My presentation includes my video recording of Otin-Oy Malika's performance and will focus on the theme of gender within the contemporary Sufi traditions, showing how the Central Asian resistance versus subordination enriched Muslim women's lives with a new role in Sufi heritage history.

*Orgies on the Bosphorus: Sexual Deviancy and Gender in Modern Critiques of Sufism*, Brett Wilson, Central European University

Modernist critics of Sufi lodges in the twentieth century are well-known to have attacked Sufi orders, shaykhs, and communities as being lethargic, anti-rational, hierarchical, idolatrous, non-sharia compliant, and representative of backward societies. This paper aims to explore a lesser-known side of such critiques, namely, the sexual and gender-oriented elements of anti-Sufi discourse. While such elements sometimes appeared in medieval or early modern attacks on Sufi orders, the twentieth-century context allowed them to evolve and develop within new genres and media, such as the novel and the newspaper, at a time when women's roles and Sufism's place in society were dramatically changing. In Turkey, women began to have more public roles in society, enhanced mobility, and new legal rights, whereas the Sufi orders' prestige was declining. As such, the critique of Sufi lodges was often combined with anxiety about women leaving traditional roles in households. Literature or popular writing often leveled accusations of sexual impropriety – either between a shaykh and his female disciples or between adult men and teenage boys. Even the revered Mevlevi Sufi order was accused in national newspapers of committing pederasty within its lodges. The most influential anti-Sufi novel of 20th century Turkish literature, *Nur Baba*, depicts a Sufi shaykh seducing his entourage of wealthy, elite women and ruining their lives. Throughout, it reveals a deep anxiety about the agency of women in a modernizing society. This paper will explore these themes in twentieth century works

critical of Sufi lodges and attempt to assess their nature, variety, and role within the broader enterprise of banning the Sufi lodges in modern Turkey.