

# ACCOMMODATING MODERNITY AND SUFISM: TRANSFORMATION OF THE SHEIKH-DERVISH RELATIONSHIP IN CONTEMPORARY TURKEY\*

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## Abstract

Sufi orders, established in the 12th century, are mystical brotherhoods in Islam focused on cultivating the “mature self”. A fundamental element of these orders is the relationship between the sheikh (master) and the dervish (disciple), as spiritual progress in Sufism is considered unattainable without the guidance of a spiritual mentor. This paper explores how the sheikh-dervish relationship is experienced in contemporary Turkey. Drawing on data from in-depth interviews with thirty members from three Sufi groups (the İskenderpaşa and Erenköy branches of the Naqshbandi

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order and the Mevlevi order), the study addresses the following questions: (1) How do individuals establish and maintain relations with their sheikhs? (2) What traditional and new methods are used to sustain these relationships? (3) How do they legitimize and relate their sheikh-dervish relationships to tradition? (4) What ideal sheikh-disciple relationship do they envision?

Using a comparative and historical approach, along with descriptive analysis and partial discourse analysis, the research reveals key strategies within the sheikh-disciple relationship: (1) prioritizing face-to-face interactions, (2) maintaining communication with elders through texts, (3) emphasizing the bond or spiritual union, (4) utilizing modern communication tools such as radio, streaming, television, and books, and (5) incorporating family relations. The paper highlights how modernity and political processes have influenced and diversified the sheikh-dervish relationship, offering an empirical contribution to contemporary studies of Sufism in Turkey.

**Keywords:** Sufism, Sheikh-Dervish relationship, Religion in Modern Turkey, Sheikh, Dervish.

## INTRODUCTION

The relationship between the Sufi sheikh (a charismatic religious teacher and leader) and the dervish (disciple and follower of a Sufi sheikh) forms one of the fundamental issues of Sufism.<sup>1</sup> The sheikh is believed to have some special knowledge, which he must somehow convey to his disciples so that they can improve spiritually. The main source of legitimacy of *tariqats* and Sufism is that they have purportedly unbroken chains of transmission starting from the Prophet Muhammad.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, some special spiritual information has been transferred from the Prophet to the present through these lines. For many Sufis, this transfer of information can only happen from person to person.<sup>3</sup> For this reason, this one-to-one relationship constitutes one of the foundations of Sufism. On the other hand, this special sheikh-dervish relationship has been diversified due to the rising number of followers in some Sufi tariqats, the interventions brought by socio-political processes, and the effects of modernity, technological development, and individualization.

In this study, I problematize the changing sheikh-disciple relationship in contemporary Sufi experiences in Turkey. A relatively common organization in Ottoman society, Sufi orders were officially banned in 1925, shortly after the establishment of the Republic of Turkey.<sup>4</sup> However, these groups continued their activities secretly. Since the 1980s, they have become more visible in the public sphere through the NGOs they established.<sup>5</sup> These socio-

1 Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam, Volume 2: The Expansion of Islam in the Middle Periods*, vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Carl W. Ernst, *Sufism: An Introduction to the Mystical Tradition of Islam* (Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 2017); Alexander Knysh, *Sufism: A New History of Islamic Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

2 Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 216; Mustafa Aşkar, "Bir Türk Tarikatı Olarak: Halvetiyye'nin Tarihî Gelişimi ve Halvetiyye Silsilesinin Tahlili," *Ankara Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 39, no. 1 (1999): 551; Joseph Hill, "Sufism Between Past and Modernity," in *Handbook of Contemporary Islam and Muslim Lives* (2021): 55-80.

3 Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*; Köstendilli Ali el-Halveti, *Telvihat: Bir Osmanlı Şeyhinin Dilinden Tasavvuf* (İstanbul: Dergah Yayınları, 2016); Ethem Cebecioglu, "Psiko-Tarih Açısından Farklı Rûhî Tekâmül Mertebelerinin Mevlânâ'nın Anlaşılmasındaki Rolü-Methodolojik Bir Yaklaşım," *Tasavvuf: İlmî ve Akademik Araştırma Dergisi* 6 (2005): 29-54.

4 Brian Silverstein, *Islam and Modernity in Turkey* (Springer, 2011), 65.

5 Brian Silverstein, "Islam and Modernity in Turkey: Power, Tradition and Historicity in the European Provinces of the Muslim World," *Anthropological Quarterly* 76, ••

political processes of legal ban and the NGOization of Sufi orders in response to the state repression have had various effects on the functioning of religious orders.<sup>6</sup>

## Methods

This study discusses the transformation of the Sufi orders, focusing on how the sheikh-dervish relationship has changed. To do this, I benefit from both the theoretical texts written by the experts in the field on the sheikh-disciple relationship and the 30 in-depth interviews I have conducted as part of my fieldwork. I preferred semi-structured interviews rather than a structured one. I had specific questions, but I occasionally had to pose them differently based on the flow of the conversation or to avoid interrupting the interviewee when there were other important issues they wanted to discuss. In this paper, I have analyzed the results based on the answers to two of the 62 questions I asked in these interviews for my broader PhD project: how they joined that Sufi order and how they communicate with their sheikhs. My analysis will allow me to devise current models of a sheikh-dervish relationship in the three groups.

Within the scope of the study, I aimed to have meetings with the dervishes of the Erenköy and İskenderpaşa branches of the Nakşibendi order and the Mevlevi order. The reasons I chose these groups are as follows: (1) While the Mevlevi have a harmonious and apolitical appearance, the Nakşibendis are considered more political and take an effective role in the Islamist movement,<sup>7</sup> and therefore, I want to compare the different strategies they follow. (2) The Nakşibendi order in Turkey is very large, and since it would be insufficient to be represented by a single group, I have picked two groups from them. (4) I wanted to choose among the main

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no. 3 (2003): 497-517; Ezgi Guner, "NGOization of Islamic Education: The Post-Coup Turkish State and Sufi Orders in Africa South of the Sahara," *Religions* 12, no. 1 (2020): 24.

6 Guner, "NGOization of Islamic Education: The Post-Coup Turkish State and Sufi Orders in Africa South of the Sahara," 24.

7 M. Hakan Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey* (Oxford University Press, 2003), 140; Evrim Gormus, "The Invisible Hand of Islam: Islamic Business and State Relations in Turkey and Egypt," PhD diss., 2014, 78; Omer F. Erturk, "The Myth of Turkish Islam: The Influence of Naqshbandi-Gümüşhanevi Thought in Turkish Islamic Orthodoxy," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 49, no. 2 (2022): 223-247."

Nakşibendi-Halidi groups (İskenderpaşa, Erenköy, Süleymançılık, İsmailağa, Menzil), which have been frequently shown in various studies to be Turkey's the most politically influential Nakşibendi groups.<sup>8</sup> Here, Süleymançılık is considered a neo-Sufi community, while İsmailağa and Menzil are considered more conservative and rural tariqats;<sup>9</sup> in terms of comparability, İskenderpaşa and Erenköy tariqats, which have more characteristics similar to the Mevlevi, are urban, highly educated, and have many middle and upper-middle-class members.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, I thought that the differentiation and transformation of urban and highly educated groups could be better observed, and also having the headquarters of these groups in Istanbul would make it easier for me to reach the interviewees. I have interviewed a total of 30 members, 10 from each group. I have used snowball sampling to reach dervishes who would volunteer to be interviewed. The snowball technique allows a sample to be created by asking initial participants (seeds) to serve as references for other potential participants.<sup>11</sup> This may cause selection bias by allowing us to access similar respondents only. Although it is a technique with risks of bias, it is the most preferred sampling method when working with sensitive groups.<sup>12</sup> Since Sufi groups are currently banned in Turkey and are "hidden" from the state's gaze and thus are difficult to access, snowballing proves to be a most helpful technique for this study. To avoid possible sampling bias, I have increased the number of initial participants as much as possible and reached members from various sub-groups with different features. For instance, I have tried to increase options for a balanced gender and age distribution. Demographic information of the sample is given below (Participants are coded ac-

8 Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey*; Mehmet Ali Büyükkara, *Çağdaş İslami Akımlar* (Klasik, 2015); Ruşen Çakır, *Ayet ve Slogan: Türkiye'de İslami Oluşumlar* (Metis Yayınları, 1990); Hulusi Şentürk, *Türkiye'de İslami Oluşumlar Ansiklopedisi: İslamcılık* (Çıra Yayınları, 2019); Mahsum Aytepe, "Doğuşundan Günümüze İslamcılığın Türkiye Seyri: Bir Sınıflandırma Denemesi," *Anemon Muş Alparslan Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi* 4, no. 1 (2016): 169-199.

9 Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey*, 140; Gabriel Piricky, "The İsmailağa Community: Shifting Religious Patterns in Contemporary Turkey," *Russia and the Muslim World* 11 (281) (2015): 28-70.

10 Şentürk, *Türkiye'de İslami Oluşumlar Ansiklopedisi*, 124; Çakır, *Ayet ve Slogan*, 44, 63.

11 Charlie Parker, Sam Scott, and Alistair Geddes, "Snowball Sampling," in *SAGE Research Methods Foundations* (2019).

12 Jean Faugier and Mary Sargeant, "Sampling Hard to Reach Populations," *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 26, no. 4 (1997), 792.

ording to their groups' initials [I for İskenderpaşa, E for Erenköy, M for Mevlevi] and interview order):

**Table 1:** Some demographic features of the sample of the study

Participants	Gender	Age	Marital Status	Education	Occupation
I1	Female	29	Married	Undergraduate	Teacher
I2	Female	46	Single	Master's	Senior manager
I3	Male	32	Married	Undergraduate	Teacher
I4	Female	30	Married	Master's	Clinical psychologist & Student
I5	Female	25	Single	Undergraduate	Teacher
I6	Male	34	Married	Undergraduate	Publishing house coordinator
I7	Male	45	Married	Master's	University lecturer
I8	Male	31	Married	Master's	PhD student
I9	Female	31	Single	Undergraduate	Teacher
I10	Female	58	Married	Primary School	Cook
E1	Female	34	Married	Undergraduate	Quran course instructor
E2	Male	35	Single	Undergraduate	Editor-in-chief & Student
E3	Male	28	Married	Undergraduate	Civil engineer
E4	Male	25	Married	Undergraduate	Social media content creator
E5	Female	24	Single	Undergraduate	Private tutor & student
E6	Female	52	Married	Middle School	Housewife
E7	Female	33	Married	Undergraduate	Housewife
E8	Female	65	Married	Vocational school	Housewife
E9	Female	59	Widow	High School	Business owner
E10	Male	24	Single	Undergraduate	Sales representative
M1	Female	32	Married	Undergraduate	Editor & student

<b>M2</b>	Male	30	Married	Master's	Merchant & student
<b>M3</b>	Male	32	Married	Master's	Semazen (Ministry of Culture)
<b>M4</b>	Male	40	Married	Undergraduate	Semazen (Ministry of Culture)
<b>M5</b>	Female	29	Single	Master's	Coordinator at a production company
<b>M6</b>	Female	43	Single	PhD	Medical doctor
<b>M7</b>	Male	63	Married	PhD	Retired university professor
<b>M8</b>	Male	29	Married	Undergraduate	Civil servant & musician
<b>M9</b>	Male	63	Married	Undergraduate	Retired Religious Affairs official
<b>M10</b>	Male	43	Married	Master's	Engineer

The education level in the three interview groups is quite high, as every one has received higher education except for a primary school graduate from İskenderpaşa, a secondary school graduate, and a high school graduate from Erenköy. All three were female participants over the age of 50. In the Mevlevi group, two participants had a doctoral degree, and everyone else had a bachelor's or master's degree. This is because these three Istanbul-based tariqats contain many people with high levels of education. It may also indicate that people from low-education groups may be unwilling to participate in academic research. Some members refused my interview requests because they were "not knowledgeable enough to talk." Additionally, because I reached most of these people through my contacts, who generally have a high level of education, I may have reached people mostly with higher education levels due to snowball sampling. As mentioned, selection bias is always a risk with the snowball sampling method.

In the data analysis phase of my research, I adopted a comparative approach to see the group patterns in my interviewees' discourses. I used the qualitative description method, which has been

identified as suitable for research questions focused on exploring events and situations and gaining insight from informants about a poorly understood phenomenon.<sup>13</sup> I used the qualitative description method to interpret my interview data. Descriptive analysis is often used to describe various features of a data set in quantitative research.<sup>14</sup> Though this is qualitative research, I will summarize the different features of my interviewees below. Discourse analysis is “the analysis of relationships between concrete language use and the wider social and cultural structures.”<sup>15</sup> According to Fairclough, discourse is a social practice embedded in the contextual situation.<sup>16</sup> Critical discourse analysis highlights the historical context of the discourse and the power relations that produce it.<sup>17</sup> I will make partial use of discourse analysis by revealing the unspoken assumptions of and by discussing the practices informing their discourses and highlighting the discursive strategies they employ. Discursive strategies are part of what Foucault calls “discursive formations,” which are patterns of statements that define a particular domain of knowledge.<sup>18</sup> Discursive formation is a set of consistent expressions with certain rules and is defined relationally. Discursive strategies are the units of discursive formations. Discourses regarding the nature of the sheikh-dervish relationship exemplify the discursive formation inside the Sufi group’s structure, and discursive tactics construct this formation. Based on this, I have discerned the following discursive strategies: emphasizing face-to-face relationships (1), highlighting texts (2), stressing the importance of *rabıta* (spiritual connection to the sheikh) (3), spreading

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13 Hyejin Kim, Justine S. Sefcik, and Christine Bradway, “Characteristics of Qualitative Descriptive Studies: A Systematic Review,” *Research in Nursing & Health* 40, no. 1 (2017): 23-42.

14 Margarete Sandelowski, “Whatever Happened to Qualitative Description?,” *Research in Nursing & Health* 23, no. 4 (2000): 334-340.

15 Stefan Titscher, Michael Meyer, Ruth Wodak, and Eva Vetter, *Methods of Text and Discourse Analysis: In Search of Meaning* (Sage, 2000), 149.

16 Norman Fairclough, “Critical Discourse Analysis and the Marketization of Public Discourse: The Universities,” *Discourse & Society* 4, no. 2 (1993): 133-168.

17 Ruth Wodak, *Disorders of Discourse* (London: Longman, 1996); Tugay Sarıkaya, “The Effects of Interactions in Virtual Communities on Social Media in the Shaping and Reproducing of Cultural Memory, Neighborhood Identity, and Culture,” *Communication Papers: Media Literacy and Gender Studies* 12, no. 24 (2023), 73.

18 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, translated from the French by A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).



the Sufi message through communication tools (4), family and kinship as an important basis of Sufi identity (5).

Here, my informants' discursive practices are seen as components of whole cultural formations of the current Mevlevi tariqat and two Nakşibendi tariqats. Also, their discursive practices result from contextual factors and positioning due to political restrictions on Sufism by the Turkish state and aspects of modernization processes such as rising urbanization and individualization in Turkish society. I have also made two comparisons: one is to see the temporal change, and the second is to see the discursive differences. The first compares the sheikh-dervish relationship before the ban in 1925 and the relationships I have observed today. The second compares the members' discursive differences in sheikh-dervish relationships in the three groups I examined. Historical social scientists may compare cases "to highlight the particular features of each case."<sup>19</sup> In this study, the three cases are exposed to the same conditions but follow different strategies and have different results. My hypothesis is that the strategies they follow both ensure the survival of these institutions and inevitably lead them to a religious change, doctrinally and practically.

During my research, I asked the dervishes how they met their sheikhs and how they communicate with them today. To observe a change and a historical differentiation in the sheikh-dervish relationships here, it is necessary to first look at how the relationship was established and carried out. Therefore, in the following section, I will explain the importance and dynamics of this relationship using texts written on the historical foundations of the sheikh-dervish relationship.

## 1. RELIGIOUS CHANGE AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF SHEIKH-DERVISH RELATIONSHIP IN THE HISTORY OF SUFISM

Religions undergo various transformations in their practices, doctrines, and sometimes institutional structures under the influ-

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<sup>19</sup> Theda Skocpol, "Emerging Agendas and Recurrent Strategies in Historical Sociology," in *Vision and Method in Historical Sociology* (1984), 370.

ence of major social transformations and inner dynamics of religious communities. While there are studies on the phenomenon of ‘religious change’ as an immanent dimension of secularization,<sup>20</sup> it is also possible that it may lead to or result from desecularization.<sup>21</sup> Some religious practices may become more private or public according to socio-political transformations and to the extent their doctrinal potential allows.<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, we see that different features, practices, religious concerns, and thoughts of religious groups come to the fore in different periods. Interpreting this change as secularization or desecularization varies depending on the level of accommodation of religion with worldly affairs. At this point, I will first look at one aspect of the historical transformation of Sufi experiences.

Many historians of Sufism have stressed the transformation of the sheikh-dervish relationship in the history of Sufism.<sup>23</sup> According to Hodgson, though experienced as an individual mysticism in the first centuries of Islam, Sufism became more organized from the 11th century onwards, which was made possible by developing “an elaborate lore and custom based on the relation of disciple and master.”<sup>24</sup> Hodgson calls this relationship “pîrî-murîdî” and defines it as “a needed discipline and a vehicle for public outreach.”<sup>25</sup> This new form of sheikh-disciple relationship was more hierarchical and based on the dervish’s submission to the sheikh. Ira Lapidus explains this transformation in terms of formalization, too:

A developing concept of the relations between masters and disciples paved the way for a more formal organization. In the ninth and tenth

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20 Karel Dobbelaere, “Trend Report: Secularization: A Multi-dimensional Concept,” *Current Sociology* 29, no. 2 (1981): 3-153; Olivier Tschannen, “The Secularization Paradigm: A Systematization,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (1991): 395-415.

21 Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, “The Dynamics of Religious Economies,” in *Handbook of the Sociology of Religion* (2003): 96-109; Philip S. Gorski, “Historicizing the Secularization Debate: Church, State, and Society in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe, ca. 1300 to 1700,” *American Sociological Review* 65, no. 1 (2000): 138-167; José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (University of Chicago Press, 2011).

22 Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*.

23 Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 204; Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 138; Knysh, *Sufism: A New History*, 151-152; Fritz Meier, “Khurāsān and the End of Classical Sufism,” in *Essays on Islamic Piety and Mysticism*, ed. Fritz Meier (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 189-219.

24 Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 204.

25 Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 209.

centuries a Sufi novice took lessons from his master. By the eleventh century he was a disciple who owed total obedience, just as any man owes obedience to God. By then, the master was considered a teacher, a healer of souls, and a repository of God's blessing. These new and deeper bonds were the basis of a more lasting loyalty of disciple to master and for the perpetuation of the authority of miraculous teachers over the generations.<sup>26</sup>

Sufi tariqats began to be founded in the 12th century, with several tekkes (lodges) opening, leading to a more institutionalized form of Sufism.. During this period, the followers of the great sheikhs came together in lodges. They made one of their most competent students the new leader after the death of their teachers, and these leaders continued to collect donations and do charity on behalf of their sheikhs. This organizational, economic, and spatial change made the sects increasingly systematic. Also, Sufi doctrines became more sophisticated with the contributions of scholars such as al-Qushayri, al-Ghazzali, and Ibn al-Arabi, and their understanding of sainthood (*wilaya*).<sup>27</sup> Their works paved the way for a new understanding that accepts complete submission to the sheikh as a condition of Sufism. These spatial and intellectual changes contributed to the formation of a collective Sufi identity. An important element of this identity was the chains of masters within an order known as *silsiles*.

#### a. Silsile

In Sufi tariqats of Islam, the chain that is accepted as reaching from sheikh to sheikh to the *pir* (founder) of the tariqat, and from sheikh to sheikh, and thus to the Prophet Muhammad, is called silsile.<sup>28</sup> Silsile has been considered as a tool that ensures the soundness of a tradition of knowledge and its transmission in a valid way. It prevents incompetence by refuting the claims of people considered incompetent by the bearers of tradition.<sup>29</sup> Silsile is thus the

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26 Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 138.

27 Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 176.

28 Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 214; Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 90; Aşkar, "Bir Türk Tarikatı Olarak: Halvetiyye'nin Tarihi Gelişimi ve Halvetiyye Silsilesinin Tahlili," 551.

29 Atila Gökdemir, "Yanyalı Hâfız Refî' Efendi'nin Manzum Nakşî-Hâlidî Silsile-nâmesi," *Turkish Academic Research Review* 7, no. 3 (2022), 659.

primary source of legitimate power and charisma to keep some people in and others out of the Sufi tariqats.

The word *silsile*, meaning chain in Arabic, was first seen in the field of hadith in Islamic culture.<sup>30</sup> Islamic scholars considered it essential to base the hadith narrators on a chain to ensure the reliability of hadiths.<sup>31</sup> In addition to hadith, there were *silsiles* in tafsir and fiqh. As the written records increased since the 11th century, the lineages in these fields lost their importance<sup>32</sup>. In Sufism, however, the *silsile* remained a fundamental element because the oral transmission of Sufi knowledge was an important feature. According to the Sufis, the Prophet Muhammed suggested special remembrances and prayers to some of his companions, including the four “rightly guided” caliphs. Sufi *silsiles* were formed by continuing these methods.<sup>33</sup> Sufi tariqats are basically of two types today: one is based on Ebubekir (called *Bekrî* tariqats), the other on Ali (called *Alevî* tariqats).<sup>34</sup> A main difference between the two lines is how they practice remembrances (*zikir*): Alevî *zikir* is voiced, whereas, in tariqats based on Ebubekir, silent *zikir* is the norm.<sup>35</sup>

All tariqats have a *silsile* reaching the Prophet, kept in the *silsilename* records. Sufis believe the mystical knowledge coming from the Prophet has been transferred from one person to another through these chains. On the other hand, some Sufi masters have not met face-to-face historically in the lineage. Sufis explain this situation with *üveysilik*, a situation where people who cannot meet face-to-face establish a mystical relationship by communicating through spiritual means such as dreams.<sup>36</sup>

30 Harald Motzki, ed., *Hadith: Origins and Developments* (Routledge, 2016); M. Jafar, “The Position of Hadith/Sunna in Understanding the Quran,” *Budapest International Research and Critics Institute-Journal (BIRCI-Journal)* 4, no. 4 (2021).

31 Gökdemir, “Yanyalı Hâfız Refî’ Efendi’nin Manzum Nakşî-Hâlidî Silsile-nâmesi,” 659.

32 Hasan Kamil Yılmaz, *Altın Silsile* (Erkam Yayıncılık, 2021).

33 Gökdemir, “Yanyalı Hâfız Refî’ Efendi’nin Manzum Nakşî-Hâlidî Silsile-nâmesi,” 659.

34 Gökdemir, “Yanyalı Hâfız Refî’ Efendi’nin Manzum Nakşî-Hâlidî Silsile-nâmesi,” 660.

35 Aşkar, “Bir Türk Tarikatı Olarak: Halvetiyye’nin Tarihî Gelişimi ve Halvetiyye Silsilesinin Tahlili,” 554.

36 Ahmet Yaşar Ocak, *Veysel Karanî ve Üveysilik*, Vol. 7 (İstanbul: Dergâh Yayınları, 1982); Aşkar, “Bir Türk Tarikatı Olarak: Halvetiyye’nin Tarihî Gelişimi ve Halvetiyye Silsilesinin Tahlili,” 553; Hasan Kamil Yılmaz, *Altın Silsile* (Erkam Yayıncılık, 2021).

The silsile is like a spiritual family tree for a Sufi. It is thus necessary to know all family members, the spiritual fathers, and what kind of people the old sheikhs were. For this reason, the legends of old sheikhs are recorded and told from generation to generation. Also, previous members of the silsile are mentioned in the gatherings. For example, the Nakşibendis perform *hatm-i hâcegan* ceremonies to commemorate the tariqat silsile. It is believed that identifying the dervish with the masters in the silsile through these commemorations will ensure their spiritual ascent.<sup>37</sup> Two other significant tools of spiritual training are *icazet* and *seyrüsüluk*.

## b. İcazet and Seyrüsüluk

İcazet is the written or verbal authorization that sheikhs offer to their disciples who have attained a certain level of maturation and are deemed capable of instructing new students. An icazet that has become a written document is called *icazetname*.<sup>38</sup> It is a kind of certificate developed to protect the silsiles from false sheikhs. A disciple who receives permission is called a caliph, who can now provide *irşad*, or guidance. Obtaining a socially recognized icazet requires education under a sheikhh with an unbroken silsile tracing back to the Prophet.<sup>39</sup> This training process is called *seyrüsüluk*. Disciples who have completed this process under the supervision of a “true” sheikh can get icazetname.

Seyrüsüluk refers to the spiritual journey made under the supervision of a master to reach God and the disciple’s cleansing from bad moral attributes such as love of the world and rank and equipping him with good morals.<sup>40</sup> Ibn al-Arabi defines seyrüsüluk as a “transition from one range of worship to another with meaning.” In other words, according to him, seyrüsüluk is a legitimate deed that intends to get closer to Allah. Another famous sufi, Imam Rab-bani, argues that seyrüsüluk is a movement of a person in knowledge or a journey through the levels of existence.<sup>41</sup>

37 Hasan Kamil Yılmaz, *Altın Silsile* (Erkam Yayıncılık, 2021), 3-10.

38 Yılmaz, *Altın Silsile*, 2-3.

39 Ahmet Yıldırım, “Peygamber-Sahabe İlişkisi Bağlamında Tasavvufi Düşünce ve Yorumlarda Şeyh-Mürîd” (2010).

40 Büşra Çakmaktaş, “Mesnevi Şarihi Bir Bayrami-Melami: Sarı Abdullah Efendi’nin Seyrüsüluk Yorumu,” *Journal of International Social Research* 9, no. 43 (2016), 2385.

41 Çakmaktaş, “Mesnevi Şarihi Bir Bayrami-Melami: Sarı Abdullah Efendi’nin Seyrüsüluk Yorumu,” 2385.

Sufi commentator Sarı Abdullah Efendi (d.1660) lists the fundamentals of seyrüsüluk: devotion to the sharia, being attached to a perfect guide (a true sheikh), and having love to reach God.<sup>42</sup> Being able to see at what stage the dervish is during the seyrüsüluk is the characteristic of true sheikhs, and a sheikh should train accordingly and give his dervishes the love of God.<sup>43</sup> As can be seen, the sheikh-dervish relationship is one in which both the sheikh and the dervish have mutual responsibilities. According to famous Sufi Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi, a person who wants to progress in the way of God should choose their guide very carefully.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, the dervish should listen to their sheikh and surrender their will to a true sheikh. The sheikh should provide training appropriate to the dervish's situation and spiritual level.<sup>45</sup> It is necessary to practice under the supervision of an experienced true sheikh because there are issues that cannot be learned by just reading and listening. Only theoretically knowing something is not enough for Sufis; it must be internalized and turned into second nature.<sup>46</sup> According to Rumi, the things that lead people astray from the right path are their own nafs and the devil.<sup>47</sup> A person who does not have knowledge and experience about the traps and obstacles of the soul and the devil is exposed to many dangers. This situation makes it almost compulsory to take refuge in a sheikh.<sup>48</sup> Views similar to these were also expressed by the prominent Nakşibendi sheikh Ziyaüddin Gümüşhanevi (1813-1893). According to Gümüşhanevi, a sheikh guides everyone individually, considering all the characteristics and abilities of the disciple.<sup>49</sup> Mevlana Halid al-Baghdadi (1779-1827), one of the elders of the Nakşibendi order, warns sheikhs not to accept people who pursue their worldly desires as

42 Çakmaktaş, "Mesnevi Şarihi Bir Bayrami-Melami: Sarı Abdullah Efendi'nin Seyrû Süluk Yorumu," 2386-87.

43 Çakmaktaş, "Mesnevi Şarihi Bir Bayrami-Melami: Sarı Abdullah Efendi'nin Seyrû Süluk Yorumu," 2387-88.

44 Himmet Konur, "Mesnevî'de Mürid-Mürşid İlişkisi," *Tasavvuf İlmî ve Akademik Araştırma Dergisi* 14 (2005), 153.

45 Konur, "Mesnevî'de Mürid-Mürşid İlişkisi," 150.

46 Konur, "Mesnevî'de Mürid-Mürşid İlişkisi," 150.

47 Şefik Can, *Mesnevi Tercümesi* (İstanbul: Ötüken Yayınları, 2003); Erol Güngör, *İslam Tasavvufunun Meseleleri* (İstanbul: Ötüken Neşriyat, 1982).

48 Konur, "Mesnevî'de Mürid-Mürşid İlişkisi," 150-151.

49 Öncel Demirdaş, "Ahmed Ziyaüddin Gümüşhanevî'ye Göre Mürid-Mürşid İlişkisinin Boyutları," *I. Uluslararası Ahmed Ziyaüddin Gümüşhanevî Sempozyumu Bildiriler Kitabı* (03-05 Ekim 2013 Gümüşhane, 2014): 323-330.

dervishes and states that the number of disciples is not important<sup>50</sup> because *feyiz* (Sufi knowledge and spiritual pleasure) can only be transferred from master to disciple in a relationship established with good intentions.<sup>51</sup> Muhammad al-Hani, on the other hand, emphasizes the four principles of the Nakşibendi-Halidi order regarding the sheikh-dervish relationship: a conversation with the sheikh, *rabita*, *zikir*, and contemplation.<sup>52</sup> Some Sufis define *rabita* as a necessary procedure only for those new to the sect.<sup>53</sup> Although the types of communication emphasized in Sufi sources vary, the central importance of the sheikh-dervish relationship, both face-to-face and spiritual, remains the same in terms of Sufism.

## 2. DIFFERENTIATION OF CONTEMPORARY SHEIKH-DERVISH RELATIONSHIPS

Sufi experiences in Turkey seem to have undergone change and diversification in the 20th century due to political-legal bans since 1924, technological developments, and rising urbanization. The relationship between the sheikh and the dervish has also been transformed. My field research reveals different emphases and definitions of the ideal sheikh-disciple relationship. Below, I discuss how some dervishes and sheikhs prioritize face-to-face close relationships while others consider it sufficient to have a spiritual bond, and some members think that it is not necessary to enter a sheikh-disciple relationship and choose only to communicate with fundamental texts. On the other hand, face-to-face communication has been replaced by many communication tools such as books, radio, and the Internet. In addition, we see that intermediary people who are more intimate with the sheikh play an important role in large groups where it is difficult to reach the sheikh directly. Another defining relationship stands out as the family; because of their family affiliation, some contemporary Sufis feel they belong to a group, even though they are not “formally” dervishes bound to a sheikh.

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50 Mahmud Erkaya, “Halidiyye Tasavvuf Geleneğinde Mürid-Mürşid İlişkileri,” *Şarkiyat* 9, no. 2 (2017), 849.

51 Ramazan Muslu, “Mevlânâ Hâlid-i Bağdâdî’ye Göre Mürid-Mürşid İlişkinin Boyutları,” (2012), 113.

52 Erkaya, “Halidiyye Tasavvuf Geleneğinde Mürid-Mürşid İlişkileri,” 851.

53 Muslu, “Mevlânâ Hâlid-i Bağdâdî’ye Göre Mürid-Mürşid İlişkinin Boyutları,” 116.

Below, I have tabulated the connections through which the participants joined the tariqat and how they continue communicating with their sheikhs today. In the rest of the article, I will interpret different discursive strategies about sheikh-dervish communication separately.

**Table 2:** Information about joining the tariqat and ways to communicate with the sheikh.

Participants	How did they join?	Face-to-face meeting	Rabita	Other
I1	Family	No (used to be)	Yes	-
I2	Her own quest	Yes	No	-
I3	Neighbour	No	Yes	Radio
I4	Family	No (2 times)	No	Intermediary
I5	Family	No	No	Radio, books
I6	Friend	No (a few times)	Yes	Website
I7	Family	No (a few times)	Yes	E-mail
I8	Family	No	No	E-mail
I9	Relative	No	Yes	Radio
I10	Relative	No (used to be)	Yes	Intermediary, Radio, books
E1	Family	No (a few)	No	Intermediary
E2	Family	No	No	Intermediary, letters
E3	Family	Yes (very limited)	Yes	-
E4	Family	No (a few times)	Yes	Participating in public speeches
E5	Family	No (a few times)	No	Intermediary
E6	Family	No	No	Intermediary, YouTube, TV
E7	Family	No	Yes	TV, radio, YouTube, intermediary
E8	Friend	No	Yes	Intermediary, YouTube
E9	Relative	No (used to be)	Yes	-
E10	Family	No	Yes	-



<b>M1</b>	Work	Yes	No	WhatsApp, phone
<b>M2</b>	His own quest	Yes	No	WhatsApp, phone
<b>M3</b>	Family	Yes	No	-
<b>M4</b>	Neighbor	Yes	Yes	-
<b>M5</b>	Family	No (no sheikh)	No	Books
<b>M6</b>	Books	Yes	No	Books
<b>M7</b>	Books	No (no sheikh)	No	Books
<b>M8</b>	Friend	Yes	Yes	Phone
<b>M9</b>	Neighbor	Yes	No	-
<b>M10</b>	Friend	Yes	No	WhatsApp, phone

### a. Emphasizing Face-to-face Relationships

According to Tönnies,<sup>54</sup> religious groups are a kind of “*gemeinschaft*,” that is, communities in which intimate face-to-face relations and strong feelings of solidarity among members are emphasized. The classical sheikh-disciple relationship is also based on a face-to-face relationship.<sup>55</sup> However, we see that face-to-face communication weakens when (i) some groups have grown large, (ii) some sheikhs do not prefer face-to-face communication, (iii) the sheikh is old and/or sick, (iv) if communication between male and female subgroups in a religious group is limited, or (v) due to the technological possibilities. In the following, accepting face-to-face meetings as of primary importance and arguing that they are unnecessary constitute two basic discursive strategies here. In general, many Nakşibendi interviewees do not find face-to-face meetings necessary; this is of fundamental importance for Mevlevi.

Only one of the İskenderpaşa members I met maintains face-to-face communication with the sheikh. Two people stated that they had such communication with the previous sheikh but not with the current sheikh. Some dervishes stated that they never felt the

54 Ferdinand Tönnies, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft: Abhandlung des Communismus und des Socialismus als empirischer Culturformen* (Leipzig: Fues, 1887).

55 Zehra Işık, “Dini Grup Mensubu Kadınların Dini Grup Aidyeti ve Diğer Dini Gruplara Yaklaşımları: Cerrahî Grubu Örneği,” *Din Sosyolojisi Araştırmaları* 1, no. 1 (2021): 5.

need for such a meeting. Two İskenderpaşa dervishes, I8 and I9, explain why they do not need to consult their sheikh directly:

I8: I don't feel the need to ask [him directly] because I know the answer he will give in advance. He is a natural leader. But this leader does not lead this way, "ask me anything; nothing will happen without my knowledge." There is a sheikh in a community in people's minds, and that sheikh knows everything; he must be consulted, etc. He [the current sheikh] has broken this perception himself. ... we consult our master on any religious or other issues. There is no such thing as a shame if we talk. But we no longer prefer this. We say that everyone should improve themselves. He did this himself. He said critical-analytical thinking. He has directed this audience to critical-analytical thinking. Now, instead of asking everything to our sheikh, we have drawn a path by thinking about ourselves as a whole, then with its parts, by talking to competent people in the field.

I9: He has messages that he says for us, advises us to do, directs us... if we can implement them anyway... There is no such thing as a face-to-face meeting or messaging... I don't know; I've never felt such a need. Doing what he says... This is not our group's way: there is a problem, ask immediately, obey what he says. No! Our leader always says to think critically, try to see behind the scenes, and distinguish right from wrong ... For example, our leader says that we eat halal and be healthy, and I pay attention to him personally. I'm researching; I don't eat sugary foods, and I don't eat packaged products; by following his words...

In these statements, "we" instead of "I" predominates. Since they cannot communicate with their sheikhs, they avoid expressing themselves with the "I" language. It is impossible for them not to want to meet their sheikh. However, it is plausible to think they use such language because they do not want to complain about their sheikh not meeting them. Additionally, speaking in "we" language may make them feel more included in the group. Here, the choice of the İskenderpaşa sheikh is to give people more freedom in their decisions. Underlining critical-analytical thinking aims for dervishes to make various inferences from the words of their sheikhs and shape their lives accordingly, in fact, by their own decisions. A tariqat system in which everything was consulted with the sheikh has been completely abandoned, except for the small group around the sheikh.

In the Erenköy community, one person (E3) said that he maintains face-to-face communication with the sheikh limited to greetings and prayers. He only met privately once to discuss a private

issue. E9 stated that there was a face-to-face meeting during the previous sheikh Musa Topbaş (d.1999), but today's sheikh does not prefer this. Three people stated that they had met with the sheikh a few times but did not have the opportunity to meet regularly. On the other hand, most disciples believe that the sheikh is not unreachable, but they do not want to disturb him. E1 states that there is partial face-to-face communication in the Erenköy community. The sheikh Osman Nuri Topbaş (b.1942) had conversations at the Çilehane mosque and Aziz Mahmud Hudai Foundation (the NGO founded by the Erenköy community), and they had the opportunity to listen to his public speeches. E1 also had the opportunity to meet face-to-face with Osman Nuri Topbaş a few times, thanks to an intermediary. She states that they pay attention to the distinction between men and women and highlights that it is inappropriate for a men and a women to meet privately, even if they are sheikh and dervish. On the other hand, a male interviewee, E3, shared his experiences as follows:

Since I am a Foundation employee, I can meet him face to face. But during this face-to-face meeting, there is no actual conversation. "Hello sir," "have a good day...." He prays for me, and then he continues his work. However, community members from other cities also come to Istanbul to talk to him from time to time and have the opportunity to meet face-to-face. In other words, Osman Efendi is not an unreachable sheikh; you can meet him face-to-face, read his books, and watch his videos. Anyone who wishes can see Osman Nuri Topbaş at the Çilehane Mosque during prayer time. But since he works very hard, it is impossible for me or any person to go to his room and talk with him.

I asked E3 if he had ever met with him for an interpretation of a dream or an important decision. He stated that:

That situation is obviously not very open, especially for Osman Efendi. But in his close circle, for his friends with whom he has worked for years, or his grandchildren, I hear such things: I have consulted Osman Efendi, I have consulted our master... But he does not have such an approach regarding dream interpretation. Usually, the decision is left to the questioner. I have heard that he stated what was in his heart and what was good for him. I heard him say, "Son, it would be better if you do this." But the time spent on this is very little. I see that he usually avoids it. I once asked something face to face, but I don't want to tell its content. If there is a situation that I can't get out of today, I can go and talk [to him].

This statement shows that a young male dervish also could not easily meet with the Erenköy sheikh. When men want to communicate with the sheikh, it seems that they have a habit of evaluating the issue they will consult and not taking the time of the sheikh. They cannot ask the sheikh everything, but they think they can reach him if there is a serious situation they really need to consult him for. In both İskenderpaşa and Erenköy, dervishes do not think that their sheikh is inaccessible, but they have no aim to reach him most of the time. It seems that they know it is impossible to have close communication with the sheikh, and they have accepted it. They do not want to complain, saying, “I would love to see him, but the sheikh doesn’t want” or “He doesn’t spare time for us because he has too many dervishes.” Such complaints would be contrary to Sufi etiquette.

Another Erenköy follower, E4, said, “It is not possible to meet with Osman Efendi. I have met him several times due to my family relations. Apart from that, I follow his speeches; I try to join his public speeches (*sohbets*) in Istanbul.” As both E4 and E3 expressed, it is important to be in the inner circle of the sheikh, such as having a kinship relationship, to meet with him. The things they listen to in public conversations of the sheikh show that the way the sheikh in Sufism gives information according to the dervish and treats him privately seems changed. As I explained above, a dervish is responsible for obeying the sheikh, and the sheikh is responsible for developing his dervishes spiritually by sharing information according to the dervish’s special condition and level in the course of the *seyrüsülük*. On the other hand, some Mevlevi criticize this. M1 and M2 states as follows:

M1: There was no other way but to meet in person. He says this: a *mürşid* (guide) should not adopt more than 30 children as much as possible so that he can open his heart to all of them spiritually and not break up. Of course, many people come and go. We always meet face to face or by phone, message, WhatsApp... We use it all. ... We are already meeting with his wife and children as a family.

M2: I find it more appropriate to ask my sheikh for his opinion when there are special issues. After all, there is such an etiquette in Sufism: even if a job is normally *halal*, they say consult your sheikh anyway because consulting the sheikh also means I expect prayers from you. It is also *adab*, manners. ... We communicate face-to-face, by phone, by messaging via WhatsApp.

Here, it is evident that the pronoun “I” is more prevalent among Mevlevi comments. The use of “we” by M1 and M2 does not denote a collective “we” as seen among the Nakşibendis but rather signifies the unity between the dervish and their sheikh.

M1 states that his sheikh does not find it right that a sheikh has more than 30 followers. He thus rejects a mystical relationship without direct face-to-face communication. M1 and M2 stated in my interviews that their Mevlevi sheikh declared that he wanted to be able to take care of every dervish like a father. Moreover, contrary to the etiquette of not taking the time of the sheikh in Erenköy and İskenderpaşa, some Mevlevi follow the practice that the sheikh should be consulted and his prayers should be taken –two contradictory values. They consider both views to be correct in their own way.

M9, as a Mevlevi sheikh, highlights the importance of face-to-face relationships, referencing the sheikh-dervish relationship he experienced:

We were together 3 days a week. On Fridays, from 10-11 am until midnight. Unless something extraordinary happens, we would be together every Friday for 12-13 hours. There is the knowledge of “kal” [formal knowledge], and there is the knowledge of “hal” [experiential knowledge]. I think authentic Sufism is about the science of “hal.” You take the training and learn something, but what is important is what you bring into your life.

Here, what is referred to as the knowledge of “hal” is a person’s demonstration of what they know through her actions, the knowledge based on experience.<sup>56</sup> Knowledge of “kal” is the knowledge based on symbols, words, and language.<sup>57</sup> Here, M9 emphasizes the importance of the dervish learning from his sheikh by seeing him and observing his behaviors. M9 finds learning by observing the sheikh’s actions much more effective than learning by reading from a book or listening to someone’s words.

Thus, it is common for large tariqats to communicate through an intermediary, send letters, etc. For example, in the Erenköy community, we see that female dervishes communicate through a

56 Ethem Cebecioğlu, “Psiko-Tarih Açısından Farklı Rûhî Tekâmül Mertebelerinin Mevlânâ’nın Anlaşılmasındaki Rolü-Metodolojik Bir Yaklaşım,” *Tasavvuf: İlmî ve Akademik Araştırma Dergisi* 6 (2005): 29-54, 32.

57 Ethem Cebecioğlu, *Tasavvuf Terimleri ve Deyimleri Sözlüğü* (İstanbul: Anka Yayınları, 2005): 29.

(female) intermediary close to the sheikh, but not one-on-one. Interviewee E1 stated that she met with Osman Nuri Topbaş several times through her intermediary, who was a relative of the sheikh. More attention is paid to a male-female distinction in Erenköy, which is not seen in other groups. The Erenköy disciples consider it wrong for a woman to meet with a man alone, even if this person is a sheikh. Thus, intermediaries act as a helpful vehicle for maintaining this gender distinction. Another female interviewee, E5, states that:

Not everyone can meet one-on-one due to the high number of followers. There are sohbet groups in every province and district. ... You give it [your question written on paper] to the older sisters who are there at a particular time. They are also forwarding them to someone else. It happens through two intermediaries.

İskenderpaşa dervishes I4 and I8 state that they have also communicated with their sheikhs through intermediaries: Sheikh Nureddin Coşan has a secretary for communication with dervishes. I4 states that she resorted to both that private secretary and her father as intermediaries:

For example, if there is something very important I will ask, or if we have a dream and we ask for his prayer, my father writes to his secretary, and he gets an answer from his secretary. ... It's not that hard to reach. It's easy to reach, but we don't prefer to ask him about everything.

His dervishes usually avoid asking Nureddin Coşan about mundane stuff; they choose and share with him what they find very important. This may serve as evidence that face-to-face relationships are relatively rare, and the İskenderpaşa sheikh does not prefer to have the same level of relationship with every disciple.

In Mevlevis, on the other hand, the sheikh-murid relationship is either achieved without an intermediary or not observed at all. I did not come across any findings regarding this kind of mediation in my interviews.

This differentiation in the groups' perspectives is related to the fact that Nakşibendi communities are quite large and generally single-centered. In contrast, Mevlevis consists of fragmented small groups with fewer members. The fact that Nakşibendis are single-centered large groups, all loyal to a single sheikh, is new in terms of the history of Sufism. In previous centuries, it was not common for a sheikh to have thousands of dervishes. Their differences from

other tariqats in terms of tradition, such as the lack of ceremony among the Nakşibendi order and their silent remembrance practices, made this possible. Moreover, the rise of urbanization and individualization are also factors behind the increase in the number of Nakşibendi members. A Nakşibendi dervish takes a rosary and easily performs their remembrances. Unlike Mevlevis, performing Nakşibendi rituals does not require a lodge or a place where ceremonies can be held and services provided. This is more suitable for modern urban life, so it may have impacted the rising number of members of Nakşibendi orders. In parallel with the place problem in Mevlevilik, I should mention the political ban since 1925. The Nakşibendi order, which has less visible practices in the public arena and wider doctrinal opportunities to maintain its lodge within its own body, reduced face-to-face communication as it became more crowded and replaced it with other methods. Mevlevis, who are left without a lodge, could not perform many of the place-based rituals of their traditions. They continued to meet face-to-face and organize into small sub-groups, maintaining their existence, albeit in a weakened form. However, there are other “unique” emphases on Mevlevis, such as the significance of texts for spiritual training.

## b. Highlighting Foundational Texts

A prominent discursive strategy for some Mevlevis is the emphasis placed on texts, the *Mesnevi*, and other textual sources of the order. After the closure of the lodges in 1925, the Mevlevi order, where dervishes were trained through service in these lodges and where ceremonies held in the lodges were central to the order, faced significant challenges in preserving and transmitting its traditions. Transmitters such as Abdülbaki Gölpınarlı (d.1982) tried to ensure this transfer by writing down everything they knew about the Mevlevi tradition. On the other hand, the last sheikhs trained in the lodge, such as Midhat Bahari Beytur (b.1971), contributed to this transfer by training dervishes such as Emin Işık (b.2019) and Hüseyin Top (b.1933), and the Çelebi family gave the Mevlevi sheikhship to those they deemed suitable<sup>58</sup>. However, the number of these people was not very large. As methods such as serving in the lodge and going through ordeal disappeared, edu-

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58 Burcu Sağlam, “How Does Prohibition Stop Working? The Visibility and Legitimacy of Mevlevi Ceremonies in Modern Turkey.” Master’s thesis, Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, 2017.

cation through texts came to the fore. On the other hand, in the 1970s, when Rumi's *Mesnevi* became popular in America and Europe,<sup>59</sup> people who claimed to be Mevlevi, influenced by these texts, emerged. Both followers who were related to the tradition and those who were not related to the tradition emerged who saw the relationship with Rumi through the texts as a sheikh-dervish relationship.

M7, who considers himself a Mevlevi, states that he did not become attached to a sheikh and passed through the *seyrüsülük*, but because of his studies on Mevlana's *Mesnevi*, he felt that he was a Mevlevi. He legitimizes this identification with an example from a couplet from the *Mesnevi*:

M7: Of course, I did not receive training in a Mevlevi lodge. I personally feel attached to Mevlana's heartland. This is how my work has been for a long time (on Mevlana). Esteemed Mevlana says in one of his poems: After me, my works will do my job. While reading his *Mesnevi*, one feels he is talking to Mevlana.

M7 believes he directly communicated with Mevlana through his text and that he benefits from his inspiration. Another Mevlevi, M5, also highlights the text's importance, which explains the difference between Mevlevi and other *tariqats*. When I asked her whether the gradual decline in the number of Mevlevi who were raised in a sheikh-dervish relationship was a problem, she replied:

M5: We are fortunate in Mevlevilik. Everything is written down to the smallest detail. God forbid, if all Mevlevi die in a great earthquake, people who can read from sources can re-create the tradition. We have detailed information on how to perform the *sema* ritual, even how it changed from time to time. ...There are video recordings. Of course, losing these people would still be a pity, but I think the Mevlevi way will continue.

Interviewer: As an intellectual pursuit or a Sufi order?

M5: Mevlevilik's difference from other ways is that there is no specific, fixed way. For example, with *Nakşibendis*, you will follow this remembrance first and then this one... What is done in Mevlevilik? What are the stages of being a Mevlevi? None. The only thing about being a Mevlevi is following the *Mesnevi*, the *Divan-ı Kebir*, and Hz. Mevlana himself.

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59 Sophia Rose Arjana, *Buying Buddha, Selling Rumi: Orientalism and the Mystical Marketplace* (Oneworld Academic, 2020).



How you will progress depends on what school your sheikh is from. In the history of Mevlevilik, there have been Mevlevi sheikhs who have a more pious point of view, but there have also been Mevlevi sheikhs who drank wine and smoked. How can they be together? Because it is not within the strict rules, it is a purely intellectual path. What does the intellectual path mean? People from different perspectives can be together and communicate. This is the most important difference between the Mevlevis and Nakşibendis.

M5 thus believes that Mevlevilik is a way that can be learned and practiced by reading books. She thinks that the decreasing number of Mevlevi educated in the sheikh-disciple relationship is acceptable in terms of the continuation of this Sufism path. She sees this as a feature of Mevlevism. I have encountered no such attitude among the interviewees from the two Nakşibendi groups. The latter, however, are keen on the *rabıta*, another form of bonding between the pupil and the master.

### c. Stressing the Importance of *Rabıta* (Spiritual Union)

*Rabıta* refers to the bond or connection established with another person and, in Sufism, is used to denote the spiritual connection formed between a disciple and their sheikh. In the early periods of Sufism, the connection of the murshid started as feeling affectionate towards his sheikh and taking him as an example; later, it evolved to think of or visualize the sheikh's silhouette to get inspiration from him.<sup>60</sup> *Rabıta* is described as the devotee's attachment to a perfect master, thinking of his form, appearance, face, morals, and behaviors.<sup>61</sup> During this practice, disciples try to act as if they are in the presence of their sheikh, as well as when they are in his presence. In this way, they discipline themselves.

As seen in the findings of the field study, especially the Nakşibendis have adopted a discursive strategy that *rabıta* is sufficient and face-to-face meetings with the sheikh are not necessary. İskenderpaşa members regularly practice *rabıta*, too. Among my interviewees, I1 talks about *rabıta* as a duty of dervish, a part of their lessons, and as

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60 Akif Dursun, "Râbitanın Tarihi Gelişimi, Tanımı ve Fıkhî Hükümü." *Sufiyye* 10 (2021): 84.

61 Cebecioğlu, Ethem. "Tasavvuf terimleri ve deyimleri sözlüğü." İstanbul: Anka Yayınları (2005), 507.

a method performed in *hatm-i haccgans*,<sup>62</sup> while I6 explains it as a comprehensive, life-covering activity:

I1: Of course, there is the *rabita* method. We have specific lessons every day; that's the essence of our commitment. Of course, we would love to see our sheikh, but *rabita* is a kind of seeing. We also have *hatmes* [remembrances]. That's how we remember our sheikh.

I6: ...I continue this with a heartfelt commitment and connection (*rabita*). Here, *rabita* is not like a ritual of just sitting and doing the *rabitas* given by İskenderpaşa one after the other; it is not like a ritual... I ask myself: would I be ashamed or embarrassed if my sheikh Nureddin Bey saw me here? If being seen there at that moment bothers me before my leader, this is an answer for me. Think the same for the Prophet; think that God sees you too... But my teacher Nureddin is alive and has the opportunity to come there. I will explain my attitude to God, but we are waiting for the hereafter. I believe I am on Nureddin Efendi's way. This is how we maintain our communication since there is a distance, and we cannot always see each other.

Here, we see that the *rabita* is both a dervish duty, a ritual, and a self-disciplining that ideally covers life in general. According to I8's statement mentioned in the previous section, he had acted by guessing the answer the sheikh would give without directly asking him. This, too, stands out as a kind of *rabita*, a self-disciplined *sey-rüsülük* experience from a distance.

Some dervishes also interpret their spiritual bond with their sheikhs as the sheikh knows them spiritually, and dervishes can get answers without asking their questions. They claim that they can feel their sheikh's presence even without seeing him:

I5: I also like this feature of our leaders because they follow the path of self-discipline and mysticism. There is also an issue called the pursuit of being perfect human beings, their answers, wisdom, and miracles. They can give people their answers without even asking. You look at it; it gives you the answer to your question in that chat. I've come across that a few times.

I7: Sometimes I feel their help at very critical points. There is an answer to the question I am looking for in a message that reaches me somehow. It's a spiritual thing. A kind of *rabita*...

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<sup>62</sup> A form of remembrance practiced especially in the Halidiye branch of the Nakşibendi Sufi order.

The other Nakşibendi group, Erenköy members, maintain that they practice *rabita* as part of *hatm-i hacegan* rituals, not unlike what I1 does:

E4: We have something called *hatm-i hacegan*. There, the real *rabita* is tried to be experienced concretely. There is a certain circle where the remembrance of “*la ilaha illallah*” is performed. To think that Osman Efendi and his predecessors in the lineage were in the same place as our Prophet. That’s how *rabita* is, as far as I know.

The *rabita* method is almost identified with the Nakşibendi order. However, many Mevlevi practice *rabita* with their masters as well. M4, for example, emphasizes the importance of *rabita* in his relationship in addition to a face-to-face relationship:

M4: I see my sheikh at least once a month. Training in *seyrüsüluk* is not possible with books only. It comes from the heart (*sadır*), with spirit (*mana*). If you ask what your meeting frequency is, I say it is a face-to-face meeting once a month. Apart from that, we are together almost every minute.

...I was in contact with my sheikh (previous sheikh) whenever I wanted. I used to see him in a dream or call him by phone. There is no such need in the dervish. There is something we call *rabita*. As long as you are in connection with your sheikh, you will not feel yearning. Your yearning is for flesh and bone. I think that things like I can’t see my sheikh, I see them once a year, I rarely see them are the foolishness of those who have just started. Whichever way you go, it’s from heart to heart. You cannot be guided by material things. ... Let’s say one day, a spiritual thing we call a blessing will descend on a place. The man we call the *mürşid* (guide) is the one who is aware of this. He starts a chat to keep you there at that hour of the day, that’s all. Conversation is the excuse. It is not the result or the purpose. Since the aim is to mature spiritually and be on the path spiritually, it is important to follow a competent master, a perfect *mürşid*.

The method of *rabita* is a method that allows the traditional face-to-face sheikh-dervish relationship to take place from afar. It can be claimed that the widespread use of this method is a factor enabling Nakşibendilik to grow so much by numbers. While the Nakşibendis made their remembrances silently and made spiritual progress by thinking of their sheikhs, it is expected that the groups in which face-to-face communication was emphasized remained small and weaker in terms of expansion and economic and politi-

cal power. In this sense, new communication technologies are vital for Sufi orders' organizational needs.

#### d. Spreading the Sufi Message through Communication Tools

Historically, alongside face-to-face communication, letters were also used in Sufism<sup>63</sup> as a method of guidance and training. Sufi groups have also gathered letters, creating the *mektubat* genre. These letters were written to warn the ruler of the period, sometimes to answer the questions asked to the sheikh, and sometimes to shape the *salik's* journey and interpret his dreams. According to the E2 from the Erenköy community, this method is still practiced. He said: "For example, you see a dream, you think that it needs interpretation, then you do it by letter through the intermediary." Other than E2, almost all the Erenköy interviewees stated that they read Osman Nuri Topbaş's books published by Erkam Publications.

The face-to-face communication between the sheikh and the disciple in the traditional tariqat structure has been transformed in the modern period religious groups, as mass media such as books, cassettes, TV, and the Internet began to be used as tools along with the letter. The İskenderpaşa community stands out as one of the communities where these modern media come to the fore. As mentioned, İskenderpaşa is a large community where few members can meet face-to-face with the current sheikh Nureddin Coşan (b.1963). The speeches of the former sheikh, Nureddin Coşan's father, Mahmut Esad Coşan (d.2001), are broadcast on the AKRA FM radio channel and uploaded to digital media. Nureddin Coşan, too, occasionally broadcasts talks and posts messages on the community's website, *akra.media*. These media allow many disciples to be integrated with their community. I1 from İskenderpaşa comments as follows:

I1: Nureddin Hoca does not usually prefer face-to-face meetings. There is a situation of glorifying (exaggerating) the mastership, so he is a little withdrawn. He says that everything I am going to say is already mentioned in the sermons of Esad Coşan broadcast on the radio. Those speeches reflect even this time; the sermons to be given have already been given. People ask Nureddin Hoca about more current events. We don't have face-to-face talks (sorbets) now; of course, it used to happen

63 Muslu, "Mevlânâ Hâlid-i Bağdâdî'ye Göre Mürid-Mürşid İlişkinin Boyutları," 120.

before the Australia issue [the former sheikh's fatal accident in Australia], but not now.

Therefore, the current sheikh prefers a more solitary life than the previous one and does not have many face-to-face conversations with his disciples like his father used to do. This is similar to the early periods of Sufism. As mentioned in the previous sections, the sheikh-dervish relationship changed after the 10th century. The master-apprentice relationship, in which the sheikh was seen as a guide, turned into a tighter relationship based on obedience. The sheikh's authority was expanded by the holiness attributed to him. Here, we see that the İskenderpaşa sheikh's authority narrows again, and the relationship becomes looser. The emphasis is on the sheikh's human characteristics rather than his holiness; therefore, it is not deemed necessary to consult the sheikh for everything.

There are, however, some people who can meet face to face and work with their sheikhs. One of them, I2, explains this situation as follows:

I2: I'm already working together. But there is one thing, which is also true for our previous leader: it is not very difficult to communicate because they are not people who stand on the sidelines in this world. Whatever the world is interested in, they are also interested in it. ...by e-mail, people usually communicate. They can be set up by phone. For example, there are WhatsApp lines. Our master has a private secretary; they can communicate with him. But somehow, everyone communicates if they want to communicate.

All my interviewees from İskenderpaşa follow AKRA FM and *akra.media* website and listen to Esad Coşan's sermons there. Some stated that they read religious books published by the community's publishing house, Server İletişim. Two disciples further said that they communicate with Nureddin Coşan via e-mail when there is an important situation they want to consult.

On the other hand, in the Mevlevi groups, which are in smaller groups and have the opportunity to meet face-to-face, the dervishes said they were in constant contact with their sheikhs via WhatsApp and phone. Stating that they met more face-to-face before the 2020-22 pandemic, Mevlevi M1 and M2 added that they began to use technological tools more and more due to the pandemic. We may consider this type of communication as a continuation of face-to-face communication. In cases where this type of interac-

tion is not possible, the role of the intermediary contacts becomes more significant.

### e. Family and Kinship as an Important Basis of Sufi Identity

Being involved in a tariqat through the family is quite a common phenomenon in my fieldwork. Five İskenderpaşa members, seven Erenköy members, and two Mevlevi participants stated they met their sheikh through their families. Additionally, three people were included in these groups through their relatives (see Table 2). This situation can be observed with some differences in Mevlevi and Nakşibendi orders. *Çelebilik* is a title given to the grandchildren of Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi. Throughout history, in addition to tariqat sheikhs, Mevlana's grandchildren also served as the leaders of the Mevlevi order and the heads of the Mevlevi foundations. Even today, the importance of the Çelebi family on the Mevlevilik continues. Faruk Hemdem Çelebi, the leader of today's Mevlevilik, can give the "Mevlevi sheikh" title to those he deems appropriate. This situation is unique to the Mevlevis. On the other hand, there are well-known and prominent families in the branches of the Nakşibendi order as well. Some families are known to have closer relationships with the sheikh. In my fieldwork, I have observed that those interviewees who met and spoke to their sheikh do it primarily through their family ties. This is a two-way relationship: Kinship ties make it easier to have access to the higher echelons of the Sufi order, and being raised within that group's culture makes it possible for them to become a natural part of their communities and to readily embrace the tariqat as an important part of their lifestyle and identity.

One of my interviewees, a member of İskenderpaşa, stated that although she is not a dervish yet, she considers herself a member of this tariqat because her parents are dervishes. She was born into this tariqat and was thinking of becoming a dervish in the future. In other words, although she has never entered into a sheikh-dervish relationship, she considers herself a tariqat member. Generally, interviewees who became dervishes through family ties expressed how "natural" this involvement process developed, that they were born into it. The prominence of family ties indicates that these tariqats have become a source of identity and promising spiritual development through a sheikh-dervish relationship.

## CONCLUSION

Sufi orders claim to maintain a tradition with a long history and have certain beliefs and practices that play a role in determining their future. The sheikh-dervish relationship is such a significant dimension of Sufism. Although the belief is essentially the same, what they prioritize can vary over time and space. For example, we have seen that while face-to-face meetings are very important for some Mevlevis, they may not be so important for some Mevlevi and Nakşibendis. On the other hand, they are able to “make up” for this difference with another traditional method, the *rabita* method.

While explaining the transformation of the sheikh-dervish relationship, we cannot ignore the effects of the political situation in Turkey. Since their official closure in 1925, Sufi tariqats have adopted various strategies for survival. As mentioned above, the Nakşibendi community was more fortunate in this regard, as their recitations were silent, and they followed the *rabita* method widely. This has contributed to their ability to adapt to contextual change, proceeding more secretly and without alerting political authorities or directly confronting the state institutions. For the Mevlevis, historically, the place or the solidification of brotherhood’s solidarity in a physical lodge has always been important; therefore, the dervish lodges’ closure had vital consequences. Mevlevilik became more decentralized as a result. Mevlevis came to the point of losing the authenticity and continuity of their *silsile* and historical legitimacy due to this decentralization with the closure of the Sufi orders. Accordingly, Mevlevilik became more open to different interpretations. In this environment, people who were not raised in the sheikh-dervish relationship or were not part of the Çelebi family could declare themselves Mevlevi. Some of these are Mevlevi titles given by the Çelebi family due to their services in the Mevlevi culture, but the rest are self-appointed Mevlevis. Also, as generations pass, it becomes increasingly difficult to determine who the “real/authentic” Mevlevi is, who is affiliated with one of the historical authorities, and who is self-appointed.

The sheikh-dervish relationship also varies among the current members of the Mevlevi order. As mentioned by a participant above, some contemporary Mevlevis highlight their relationship with foundational texts rather than a living human sheikh. While one Mevlevi believes that the spiritual knowledge of Sufism can

only be thought from heart to heart and passed from person to person, another Mevlevi may argue that it is sufficient to “communicate” with Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi through his *Mesnevi* book based on the writing of Rumi himself. On the other hand, Nakşibendi communities are more centralized. Thus, I have argued that in Nakşibendi orders, the traditional sheikh’s treatment of the dervishes according to their spiritual level has changed as the relationship became more flexible. Many dervishes keep in touch with their sheikh by turning on the radio and listening to broadcasts that anyone interested can listen to. Dervishes listen to their sheikh’s public speeches, in which everyone can participate. If we consider that it is not possible to give specific information suitable for the situation of every dervish there, we may conclude that one of these basic responsibilities of the sheikh-disciple relationship of classical Sufism can be partially realized through the *rabita* method. This is exemplified by the comparison presented above among the members of the Mevlevi and Nakşibendi (İskenderpaşa and Erenköy) orders. As such, my comparative analysis may contribute to understanding the contemporary dynamics of the organization of some Sufi communities and the sheikh-dervish relationship, in particular, in an urban setting.



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## TASAVVUFUN MODERNİTEYLE UZLAŞMASI: ÇAĞDAŞ TÜRKİYE’DE ŞEYH- DERVİŞ İLİŞKİSİNİN DÖNÜŞÜMÜ

### Öz

İslam’da tasavvuf tarikatları, kurulduğu 12. yüzyıldan bu yana “olgun insan” yetiştirmek iddiasında olan mistik gruplardır. Bu tarikatlarının vazgeçilmez unsurlarından biri de şeyh/üstat ile derviş/mürit arasındaki ilişkidir. Öyle ki, sufilere göre manevi bir rehberle bağlanmadan gerçek manevî ilerleme mümkün değildir. Bu makalede günümüz Türkiye’inde şeyh-derviş ilişkisinin nasıl yaşandığı incelenecektir. Üç tasavvuf grubunun (Nakşibendilerin İskenderpaşa ve Erenköy kolları, ve Mevleviler) otuz üyesiyle yaptığım derinlemesine görüşmelerden elde edilen verileri kullanarak şu sorulara cevap arayacağım: (1) Dervişler şeyhleriyle nasıl ve hangi vasıtalarla iletişim kuruyorlar? (2) İlişkileri sürdürmek için kullanılan yeni ve eski teknolojiler neler? (3) Şeyh-derviş ilişkilerindeki değişen unsurları nasıl meşrulaştırıp gelenekle ilişkilendiriyorlar? (4) Nasıl bir ideal şeyh-mürit ilişkisi tasavvur ediyorlar? Karşılaştırmalı ve tarihsel bir yaklaşıma, betimleyici analize ve söylem analizi yönteminin kısmi kullanımına dayanan araştırma sonuçları, günümüzdeki şeyh-mürit ilişkilerinin bazı temel stratejilerini göstermektedir: (1) yüz yüze ilişkilerin vurgulanması, (2) tarikat büyükleriyle metinler yoluyla iletişimin tercih edilmesi, (3) manevi bağın ve rabitanın öne çıkması (4) radyo, internet yayını, televizyon ve kitap gibi iletişim araçlarının tercih edilmesi ve (5) aile ilişkilerinin önemi. Bu makale hem modernitenin etkisinin hem de şeyh-derviş ilişkisinin çeşitlenmesini sağlayan siyasi süreçlerin önemini vurgulayacak ve böylece çağdaş tasavvuf çalışmalarına ampirik bir katkı sunacaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Tasavvuf, Şeyh-Derviş İlişkisi, Modern Türkiye’de Din, Şeyh, Derviş.