

CONTENTS

Islam and University Education in Contemporary Nigeria
A.A Oladosu, L.O Abbas and H Oladosu-Uthman ... 1-15

Between Theory and Practice: The Struggle for Sharī'Ah Application in
Southwestern Nigeria
Makinde, Abdul-Fatah 'Kola ... 16-30

Sāfi Quietism between Al-Ghazzālī's Islamic Philosophy and the
Jihād of 'Uthmān ibn Fudī
Dr. Ibrahim Olatunde Uthman ... 31-43

"Al-Mutanabbī's Satiric Poems on Kāfir; a Content Analysis"
Sulayman Adeniran Shittu ... 44-63

"My People shall not be Poor": Mosque-based Microfinance Model and
Poverty Alleviation among Nigerian Muslims.
Noibi, M.A. ... 64-80

An Inquiry into the Position of Arabic in Islamic Studies in Nigeria
Adesina Ayuba ... 81-95

Political Metaphor in Selected Novel: of T.M. Aluko and M. Bulgakov
Adegboyega Yakubu Adeoti ... 96-108

Planet in Peril: Islam and the Global Imperative of Environmental Security
Musbandeen Olawale Raheemson ... 109-120

معطيات تكنولوجيا المعلومات في مجال الثقافة العربية بالجامعات النيجيرية
Muhammad Sharif Ramadan ... 121-136

Mintez Publishers 08034034165



ISSN 01-89-361-6

Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies

• VOL. 21/22 • 2008/2009



18

Sūfī Quietism between Al-Ghazzālī's Islamic Philosophy and the *Jihād* of 'Uthmān ibn Fudī

Dr. Ibrahim Olatunde Uthman,
Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies,
University of Ibadan, Nigeria.

Abstract

This paper studies the lives and teachings of two leading Sufi scholars, Imām Abu Hāmid Muhammad Ibn Muhammad Al-Ghazzālī (450/1058-505/ 1111) and Shaykh 'Uthmān Ibn Fudī (1754-1817) in respect of the belief that Sufis generally live a quietist life. It focuses on the mass quietist appeal of the Sufi movement by studying Al-Ghazzālī's recourse to Islamic Philosophy in his mystical interpretation and experience and the Sufi Da'wah and Jihād of 'Uthmān Ibn Fudī in pre-colonial Nigeria. Against the above background of the Sufi doctrines of peaceful and quietist life, the paper shows how both the Sufi conceptions of Islamic philosophical mysticism and Jihād sought to bring about an Islamic reformation both in space and time through a peaceful movement. The paper offers a justification for this Sufi quietist practice and demonstrates that while Sufis uphold the Islamic philosophical virtues of being at peace with all that is around them, they also do rise up in revolution by physically defending themselves when the need arises.

Introduction

The term *Sufism* has been traced to the Greek verb *muo* which means silence or closing of the lips. Sufism is also related to the *Bātin* which implies the inward, inner and hidden. Sufis therefore see themselves first of all as the noble guardians of *Asnān* or Divine mysteries, hence the term mysticism. It is therefore proper to describe Sufism as a form of Islamic mysticism and esotericism because Sufism or Islamic mysticism deals with the esoteric or divine mysteries. Esotericism implies an understanding by only a restricted or particular kind of people. It is by its confidential nature meant only for an elected few.¹

In this sense of always looking inwards which makes Sufism to differ from *fiqh* which is concerned with public religious practices of the Muslims, Syed Abul 'Ala Maududi, a contemporary Islamic scholar, refers to Sufism as a twin brother of *fiqh* because while the former deals with the esoteric

and inner dimension of Muslim worship, the latter deals with the external and public dimension of this worship.² This is similar to the view held by most Sufis, including *Shaykh* 'Uthmān Ibn Fudī who as shown by Y. A. Quadri, another contemporary Islamic scholar and professor of Islamic Studies, asserts that Sufism or *Tasawwuf* is not only a part of Islam but in fact, the twin brother of *Fiqh*. The *Shaykh* also stresses the role of the "*Shaykh al-murabī*, (a training *Shaykh*) whose duty he said was to teach his students the ways of Sufi leaders and teach them esoterism (*bawā'ī*) through exoterism (*Zawāhir*)."³ Therefore, what makes *Sufism* first and foremost a quietist practice is the fact that it focuses on the personal relationship between a Muslim and his Creator, Allah as expounded upon by Al-Ghazzālī in his book, the *Ihyā' al-'ulum al-Dīn*.⁴ Sufism is also related to the element of Divine love or *mahabbah* shared among God's servants. It is not individualistic or sentimental though personal to a worshipper. As explained by Al-Ghazzālī, a true Sufi loves only God most High while loving others because of his love of the Almighty and Sublime God. This love of God implies absolute trust and confidence in God or *tawwakul* and the true Sufi gives himself up to God "like a corpse in the hands of a corpse washer."⁵

Sufism is also understood by many *Sufis* as a path of knowledge or *al-ma'rifa*. This explains why in the course of its development, Islamic mysticism has had a close relationship with philosophy. This is still true of Islamic philosophy today, especially with respect to the Shi'ite mysticism, where philosophy is interwoven with mysticism.⁶ For instance, Al-Fārābī, a Sufi was the first celebrated Islamic philosopher. Ibn Sīnā is another famous Islamic philosopher who was greatly influenced by Sufism especially in his "*al-Hikmat al-Mashriqiyyah*". In fact, chapter nine of his "*al-Ishārāt wa al-Tanbīhāt*" - which is still taught in Persia today -, contains a strong advocacy of the attainment of the ultimate truth by Gnostics through the Sufi path. In short both Islamic philosophers and *Sufis* have been concerned with the search for the ultimate truth especially in the *Twelve Imāmiyyah* and *Isnā'īliyyah Shi'ite* schools.⁷

Though *Sufism* at different time became marginalized in all centres of Islamic learning which focused more on *Usul al-Fiqh*, it has always been revived by great and illustrious sons of the philosophical school of illumination such as Al-Ghazzālī, Mulla Sadra, and Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī, all of whom used mysticism in their understanding of philosophy.⁸ Hence there is the need at this juncture to examine Islamic philosophy as understood by one of its proponents, Al-Ghazzālī in relation to the Sufi quietist doctrine in the next section of this paper.

Al-Ghazzālī, Philosophy and Sufi Quietism

Imām Abu Hāmid Muhammad Ibn Muhammad Al-Ghazzālī (450/1058-505/1111) was born at fēs, a city in Khurasan in Persia and received a very good traditional education first at Jurjan and later Nishapur the provincial capital where he learnt the main principles of Ash'arite Kalām at the feet Imām al-Haramayn Abu al-Ma'ālī al-Juwaynī. He held the Ash'arite beliefs of the Unity of God, the reality of Divine attributes distinguished from the essence of God, the eternity of the Qur'an, Seeing the face of God by the blessed in Paradise, the supremacy of revelation over reason and the legitimacy of the succession of the *Khulafā' al-Rāshidīn*.⁹

Though he did not consider himself a philosopher, Al-Ghazzālī is a celebrated authority on Islamic philosophy. His *Maqāsid al-Falāsifah* was an exposition of main philosophical issues of his time objectively. He not only studied, but in fact, assimilated and mastered philosophy deeply so much that it had influence on his mystical thoughts. He became a professor in Bagdad, teaching Islamic theology with philosophical arguments. While fighting against the contradictions in philosophy, his theology and mysticism had a logical theoretical basis. He argued that philosophy cannot ensure the truth because it does not produce certainty and accused it of making great compromises in its own methodology. He explained in his book, *al-Munqidh mina al-dalāl* that in applying logic, philosophers usually draw some conditions to be fulfilled in order to ensure certainty but later relax these conditions when it comes to religious issues. To him logic based on the necessary relationship between premises and their conclusions is not satisfying to the mind and the heart. True Knowledge is the product of divine illumination (*ilhām*) because when God nurtures the heart and lightens the breasts of men, the mystery of the spiritual realm becomes revealed leaving the reality things while removing ignorance. He considered theoretical certainty as the result of the highest form of knowledge which is revelation.¹⁰

Due to a spiritual crisis Al-Ghazzālī eventually abdicated his professorial position in Bagdad in 488 and went into concealment in Syria and Palestine. During the period he devoted himself exclusively to *Sufi* life and performed pilgrimage to Makkah. He became convinced that he had a divine mandate to carry out the revivalism of Islam for his epoch.¹¹ He later returned to his professorial position in 499 only to retire two years later before he died in 505. Before his death, Al-Ghazzālī succeeded in effecting reconciliation between *Sufism* and the mainstream of Islam. He argued that the mystical experience is the highest form of knowledge

when compared to philosophy and theology. This he stated clearly when, using his own personal illustration, he explained that despite his juristic and philosophical apprehension and professorial position, he was still in need of mystical illumination.¹²

Al-Ghazzālī went ahead to analyze in dept the various stages and states that make up the Sufī path. He also provided the manner of training that can aid the Sufi to gain control over the lower soul (*nafs al-amnīyah bi su*). He explained that true *Sufism* starts from knowledge of God, His attributes and religious obligations like prayers and pilgrimage followed by the avoidance of unlawful and prohibited vices like love of worldly things. According to him these unlawful practices can remove the murīd or novice from the *Sufi* path while practices like asceticism, repentance and fear of Allah will sustain him on the path. This is so because the conduct of a true Sufi implies a silent satisfaction with God's decree.¹³ According to Al-Ghazzālī, it is only after attaining the best possible disposition that a murīd can start his proper journey to God. It begins with the sincere intention or niyyah to approach God followed by the continuous remembrance of God's name or *dhikr* which leads to the total annihilation of human weaknesses and immersion in God known as *fanā*. Al-Ghazzālī differentiates between this ecstatic moment and *hulul* or incarnation in God. He believes that this moment of *fanā* is very short and devoid of anthropomorphic utterances and acts of shirk or polytheism.¹⁴

True *Sufism* according to him, indeed, a lifelong struggle or *Jihād* to establish a communion or oneness with Allah. A point in support of the above 'Islamized *Sufism*' by Al-Ghazzālī is that nearly all notable Sufis were not only practising Muslims, they were also great Islamic scholars, whom, as I have explained elsewhere, brought their knowledge of Islamic ethics into all branches of learning.¹⁵ This is true of Imam Al-Ghazzālī. It is for this reason that Nasr remarks that Al-Ghazzālī is seriously needed by Muslims today over the secularizing trajectory of westernization.¹⁶ It is also true of Shaykh 'Uthmān Ibn Fudī who is one of the most revered scholars in Islam as would be seen in the next section.

That *Sufism* to all intents and purposes is a form or embodiment of a quietist life or pacifism was demonstrated by Al-Ghazzālī who stigmatized any form of revolt even if it is against an unjust and tyrannical ruler. He went further to support the Caliphate and recognized the legitimacy of the Abbasids and even sanctioned its suppression of any revolt against its authority.¹⁷ This could have been induced by his philosophical interpretation of the relationship between the mystic goal of

reform and political stability. Indeed, no reform can duly take place in an environment characterized by wars and crises. It would therefore be justified, to argue that this Ghazzālīan preference for peaceful and stable but unjust society at the expense of a just and egalitarian leadership that can only be established through violent or revolutionary disruption of the society, reflects the general *Sufi* focus on the peaceful transformation of individuals and the society in its Islamic reformation processes. Consequently, many *Sufis* tend to reject in its totality the concept of military *jihād* while they call for the 'establishment of Islamized spaces' and people through the reformation and restoration of the human and societal consciences.

One way of justifying this quietist doctrine is that the reform of the hearts which accommodate human consciences needs peace and stability in order for it to be effective and lasting. This is why Islam places more emphasis on what has come to be regarded as the greater *jihād*. Though, it is the "confrontational or revolutionary" military lesser *jihād* based on the age-long maxim that the world is divided into two antagonistic spaces; the abode of peace and the abode of war, and that was founded purely on the historically contingent rivalry that had existed between the early Muslims and the unbelievers in Makkah and later between the Muslims and Roman Catholic Church, that is still rife today in many parts of the world, it is not different from how people of different religions at various times, both lay individuals and religious leaders have appropriated upon themselves the authority to kill and slaughter "infidels" in the name of God. It is however, the greater *jihād* of peaceful reformation of individuals and the society, establishing 'Islamized spaces' or an Islamic society that transcends the politics of multicultural consociation and tolerance, upholding a society built on justice, unity and accommodation that are in consonance with the Islamic declaration of one God and common humanity irrespective of differences in religious and cultural ideologies and beliefs and constructing a society where benevolence and reward are measured by performance and not the mundane stratifications of race, religion and lineage etc that Islam emphasizes. A careful reading of Islamic teachings will therefore show that being "confrontational or revolutionary" is against the essence of Islam and the divine guidance and direction for humanity to attain peace, tranquillity and happiness. As a matter of fact, it is to attain this essence, that military *Jihād* has been sanctioned in Islam, as I have argued before.¹⁸

Following the above, it is therefore surprising that the same Al-Ghazzālī employed his entire teaching career in all forms of revolt. He, for instance, turned the Ash'arite Kalām (orthodox Islamic theology) into the

dialectical and philosophical basis of his religious revival and mystical reflection. He joined the court of *Nizām al-Mulk* in 478 and became the Shāfi'ite jurist in the *Madrasah al-Nizāmiyyah* (the equivalent of today's University of Baghdad) in 484 and at the same time, an intellectual of the court, a position which made him study, appreciate and fought the corruption of the depraved Kings and Sultans and the compromises of 'Ulamā' and Fuqahā' (Islamic scholars and jurists).¹⁹

Al-Ghazzālī also upheld an anti-Batinite polemic at a time when the *Isnā'īlī* state was still very strong in *Fātimid* Cairo and spreading like fire throughout the Middle East. He devoted a lot of his energy to the critique of *Isnā'īlism* and its Batinite absurdities which are parts of what he termed *Sufī Shatahāt*. Some of his works devoted to this task included *Fadā'il al-bāṭiniyyah wa' fadā'il al-mustazhiriyyah*. He attacked vehemently what he considered to be the Batinite heretical innovations of taqlīd or submission to the authoritarian teachings of their Imams in lieu of the Prophetic *Sunnah* which is the only necessary guide after the book of Allah.²⁰

Hence, it can be truly contended that Al-Ghazzālī, while eschewing all forms of violent and destructive open revolt that unleashes terror on the society, does not conceive of the *Sufī* quietist doctrine as implying pacifism or fatalism. This is reflected in his use of his philosophical mysticism to challenge and oppose all that he considered antithetical to the book of Allah and the *Sunnah* of His Prophet.²¹ Hence, there is the need at this juncture to examine this *Sufī* quietist doctrine in juxtaposition with the concept of *jihād* as demonstrated by Shaykh 'Uthmān Ibn Fudī (1754-1817) in his use of, to borrow the term of Olivier Roy, 'a quietest movement,' the *Qāḍiriyyah Sufī* order to conduct *jihād* that established 'Islamized spaces all over Hausa land.²² This analysis will reveal that the concept of *jihād* as demonstrated by the *Shaykh* is not in opposition to the *Sufī* quietist doctrine upheld by Al-Ghazzālī.

Shaykh 'Uthmān Ibn Fudī and the Qāḍiriyyah Inspired jihād

Contrary to the claims of 'Abubakr Gumi²³ in respect of 'Uthmān Ibn Fudī's *Sufī* inclination, membership and leadership, the learned *Shaykh* at no point renounced his affiliation with mystical Islam. As explained by Quadri above, the *Shaykh's* affiliation to both the *Shādhiliyyah* and *Khalwatiyyah*, a branch of the *Qāḍiriyyah* cannot be denied.²⁴ As the Sokoto Jihād owes its success and expansion mainly to the contributions of 'Uthmān Ibn Fudī, his brother 'Abdallāh and their followers, the credit

thus goes to the *Sufī* orders especially the *Qāḍiriyyah* order. The above affiliation of Islamic scholars to the *Sufī* orders is almost as old as the history of Islam in Africa; especially the West African Subcontinent, where Islam found a firm foothold around the time the Mali Empire began to decline. Abdul has shown how scholars from Mali came to Nigeria, especially the Northern part, such as Kano, Katsina and Zaria, to settle. Even the Yoruba in Southern Nigeria still refer to Islam as "esin Imale" meaning the religion of Mali.²⁵ Most of these scholars were *Sufī* masters; and one of such *Sufī* scholars was the teacher of 'Uthmān Ibn Fudī and his brother 'Abdallāh named Jibrīl Ibn 'Umar. 'Uthmān Ibn Fudī and his younger brother, who were also great scholars of the Mālikī school of Islamic Law in West Africa, were initiated into the *Shādhiliyyah* and *Khalwatiyyah*, a branch of the *Qāḍiriyyah* as stated above by their teacher, Jibrīl.²⁶

In line with the *Sufī* tradition of a quietist and mass appeal through peaceful and reformative methods, the *Sufī* practitioners, teachers and preachers in West Africa in general, and Nigeria in particular, were generally and till today, are still apolitical. Rather than pursue political power or challenge powers that be, the *Sufīs* concentrate on *Da'wah* activities which they carried out most often than not, in the mosques and Arabic Schools that were built by them. In different communities, people came to learn about Islam mostly from these *Sufī* teachers. Following this *Sufī* tradition, 'Uthmān Ibn Fudī became an itinerant preacher, with his *Da'wah* activities directed mainly at nominal Muslims who neglected the teachings and practices of Islam, while practising what is regarded as "takhliṭ" or syncretism and mixture of Islam with pagan practices. 'Uthmān Ibn Fudī soon gathered round him, a large following of people who started practising Islam in accordance with the book of Allah and the *Sunnah* of His Prophet. But the Hausa rulers and some scholars became threatened by the movement and the *Shaykh's* followers were soon attacked and arrested. Finally the Hausa land was plunged into a religious war during which the nineteenth century *jihād* scholars fought vigorously against all anti Islamic practices along *Sufī* lines.²⁷

In short, contrary to the accusations of some orthodox Muslim scholars, like 'Abubakr Gumi above,²⁸ the Sokoto *Sufī jihād* scholars did not abandon their *Sufī* inclination, membership and affiliation. As documented by 'Uthmān Ibn Fudī and his brother 'Abdallāh in many of their writing, the *jihād* was not devoid of mystical benedictions. 'Uthmān Ibn Fudī outlines the personal roles played by dreams which featured the Holy Prophet Muhammad and other prophets of Allah (ASW), including the founder of the *Qāḍiriyyah* order in the success of the *jihād*.²⁹ This is

also the view of Hisket, who also explains that the *jihād* scholars were inspired by the *Qāḍiriyyah Sufī* order, to which they attributed their success during the *jihād*.³⁰

After the *jihād*, the *Qāḍiriyyah jihād* scholars went on to found an Islamic state known as the Sokoto Sultanate after the revolution which flourished in the area now known as Nigeria till the coming of the British colonial masters. Contrary to many modernist theories, about Sufī un-Islamic inclinations, observances and dispositions, the *Qāḍiriyyah* scholars did not abandon their adherence to the *sharī'ah* after their success. They did not adopt their Islamic posture before the *jihād*, because they wanted to mobilize people for any nationalist cause, political power or economic gains and so abandoned it after attaining power. Instead, the *Sufī* leaders used the success of the *jihād* to carry out the task of religious renaissance and reformation among the people. Before his death at the age of 62 years, 'Uthmān Ibn Fudī had written over 115 books and pamphlets. The most famous of these books is no doubt the *Ihyā al-sunnah wa Ikhnā'id al-Bid'ah* which emphasizes adherence to the Sunnah. In the above book just like Al-Ghazzālī before him, the *Shaykh* also spells out the training of the Sufī in order to gain control over his soul. He explains that true Sufī practices starts from knowing God and His attributes, followed by knowledge of religious obligations like prayers and pilgrimage. He also stresses the importance of the five daily prayers and other devotional acts of worship in the life of a true Muslim. 'Uthmān Ibn Fudī also describes the relationship between the murīd or novice and the Sufī *Shaykh al-murabbī* (Training Shaykh). His description does not differ from the established *Sufī* perception. In fact he also upholds the need for the novice not only to have a spiritual mentor but also to submit to him unconditionally like a corpse in the hands of the washer. The impact of 'Uthmān Ibn Fudī on Sufism is still felt in West Africa today so much that his tomb in Sokoto, Nigeria is besieged annually for pilgrimage by Sufī members. This is similar to what obtains in Egypt where the tombs of Sayyid al-Badawī and Sayyidah Zaynab have also become places of pilgrimage.³¹

Again in the *Ihyā, 'Uthmān Ibn Fudī*, just like al-Ghazzālī above, clearly explains the need for the people to uphold religious observances while shunning all forbidden actions. He also stresses the importance of the five daily prayers and other devotional acts of worship in the life of a true Muslim. He taught the people to always say the truth and abstain from all forms of evil acts such as falsehood, backbiting, envy and arrogance. Again just like al-Ghazzālī, 'Uthmān Ibn Fudī's book, containing all

these prescriptions is called the *Ihyā al-sunnah wa Ikhnā'id al-Bid'ah* after al-Ghazzālī's *Ihyā 'Ulum al-Dīn*.³²

Not surprisingly the above two books are alike in many respects. In *Ihyā 'Ulum al-Dīn*, al-Ghazzālī freed Sufism from its anti-Islamic doctrines and brought it within the mainstream of Islamic orthodoxy while the *Ihyā* of 'Uthmān Ibn Fudī, equally spelt out all the anti-Islamic doctrines and practices of its time. The two books therefore share a great similarity in that they were both written to fulfil the task of bringing about a renaissance of Islamic teachings in both the form and spirit of Islam. They were also both written by great *Sufī* teachers who were also great theologians. But while al-Ghazzālī used Islamic philosophy to wage an intellectual *jihād* against all forms of un-Islamic practices and all facets of the establishment order, including the Sufī order to carry out the task of religious renaissance and reformation among the people and he successfully achieved the integration of Sufism with mainstream Islam, 'Uthmān Ibn Fudī, on the other hand, carried out a successful military *jihād* against all Hausa rulers not because he wanted power but because he wanted to reach the hearts of people. He saw the *Qāḍiriyyah* order as a spiritual clinic where all Muslims are to be admitted for a spiritual treatment with doses of *adhkār* (remembrances) and *awzād* (litanies). After the success of the *jihād*, therefore the *Shaykh* refused to rule but rather retired to his mission of being a preacher and teacher.

It can be said therefore that both the intellectual *jihād* of al-Ghazzālī and the military *jihād* of 'Uthmān Ibn Fudī are two same sides of the Sufī quietist practice for it was to ensure that all people, especially Muslims practise their religious observances peacefully without official molest and harassment that al-Ghazzālī vilified the rulers, rooted the philosophers and reformed Sufism from within while the *Shaykh* engaged in war with the Hausa rulers because they wanted to stop his reforming activities.

Conclusion

In today's postmodern societies, religion especially Christianity has not only been marginalized but also secularized and the religious ideology of the modern mind is based on practical thoughts that fall within the field of experimental sciences and reject any moral responsibility and all moral values. The temples of modern man's religion are the factories, laboratories, cinemas and discos etc.³³ Consequently all religious and moral values are gone and modernity has invaded the entire human life including the private recesses of man. Thus secularism became total. The entertainment or pleasure industry now controls the people's life in his

entirety including their dreams. The media is employed to sell people utopias in all forms especially with a sensate, capitalist and erotic culture. Pornography is being promoted daily on the electronic, and print media. It has also taken over the Internet and Satellite telecommunication.³⁴

It is against the above prevailing global sensate, capitalist and erotic utopias that the world is again in need of the Sufi quietist mass appeal to bring about the reformation of all people, especially Muslims through the Sufi *Da'wah* and *Jihād* movement as represented by either Al-Ghazzālī's Islamic philosophical mysticism or *Shaykh* 'Uthmān Ibn Fudī's *Jihād*, both of which are capable of the same Islamic reformation both in space and time through a peaceful *Sufi* movement informed by the Islamic philosophical virtues of being at peace with all that is in the universe, even if that necessitate rising up in revolution by physically defending this mystical quietist doctrine as exemplified by the *Da'wah* and *Jihād* of *Shaykh* 'Uthmān Ibn Fudī in the 'establishment of Islamized spaces' in Hausa land.³⁵

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