

**LIBYAN SECRETS:  
SUFISM, ESOTERISM AND THE STATE IN THE JAMAHIRIYA**

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*This thesis is dedicated to all my Libyan friends in Tripolitania and in Cyrenaica, to the memory of Fr. Alan Fudge (who told me to 'do what I was doing'), and to the late Domenico Fossataro, who knew that the only true secret of the Libyan people is hospitality.*

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS:

<b>ABSTRACT</b>	1
<b>PREFACE</b>	2
<b>MAP OF LIBYA</b>	4
<b>GLOSSARY</b>	5
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	6
1 - Exotic, Notorious and Inconsequential (the Issawiya in the Academic Literature)	8
2 - From Sufi Kingdom to State of the Masses (Historical Overview)	10
3 - Mapping Libyan Mysticism (the non-Sanusy orders)	15
4 – A Jihad made of Miracles (Non-Sanusy Narratives of Resistance)	20
5 – Keeping the Enchantment, Losing the Secrets (Miracles, Modernity and Secrecy)	25
6 – Secrecy as Pedagogy, Secrets as Experience (The purpose of Issawy Secrecy)	31
7- Accessing the Libyan Issawiya (Field, Field-Work and Methodology)	35
8 – The Structure of the Thesis	40
<b>1 - “THE ESSENCE IS IN MOROCCO, BUT THE SECRET IS IN LIBYA” (The Structure of the Issawy Order)</b>	
1 - Many Issawis, One Issawiya (Introduction)	42
1.1 - Patron Saint and perfect Shaykh (the Founder of the Order)	44
1.2 - The Medina as a Microcosm (the Issawiya in Tripoli)	48
1.3 - Masters, Disciples and Devotees (the Structure of the Issawy Zawiya)	52
1.4 - Fragmented Sufism (Assessing the Structure of the Issawy Order)	59
1.5 - Issawis and their Rules (Assessing the Ijaza System)	63
1.6 - An Issawy Discursive Tradition (Secrecy and Mystery)	67
1.7 A Note on Comparative Sufi History (the Issawiya Contextualised)	70

1.8 – Conclusion	74
<b>2 - “THINGS THAT OTHERS CANNOT SEE” (Rituals, Routine and Special Occasions)</b>	
2 - Secrecy in Public (Introduction)	75
2.1 - Same Routine, Different Schedules (Weekly Gatherings)	83
2.2 - Devotion, Socialisation and Lots of Tea (Issawy Special Occasions)	92
2.3 - Poems, Sweets and Parades (the Birthday of the Prophet)	97
2.4 - Recite, Move and Listen (the Hadhra)	103
2.5 - Things that Others cannot See (Secrecy as Identity)	109
2.6 – Conclusion	118
<b>3 - “THERE ARE NO SECRETS” (Spiritual Exercises, Miracles and Esoteric Knowledge)</b>	
3- Secrecy without Secrets (Introduction)	120
3.1 – Prayer Beads and Cure of the Soul (Spiritual Exercises)	127
3.2 - Secrets in Action ( Miracles and Secret Formulas)	134
3.3 - “From Taste you know!” (Experientiality, Secrecy and Pedagogy)	140
3.4 – “Our Religion is very Clear “ (Assessing Issawy Esoteric Knowledge)	145
3.5 – Conclusion	154
<b>4 - “NOTHING IS CLEARER THAN THE ISLAMIC FAITH” (The interaction between Sufism and the Libyan Regime)</b>	
4- ‘Clarifying’ Sufism (Introduction)	155
4.1 – Socialism, Sorcerers and Spies (Brief Overview of a Troubled Relationship)	162
4.2 – “The Sufism which is not Darwysha” (Gheddafi and the Sufis)	169
4.3 - Incomprehensible Saints (the Darwysh)	173

4.4 – “All Stabbing Knives and Nonsense” (issawy Secret Knowledge as Darwysha)	182
4.5 - “They do Strange Things” ( Sufis, Salafis and the Regime)	190
4.6 - Conclusion	194
<b>5 - “A SECRET THING AND A FAMILY MATTER” (Family Dynamics and Loss of Secrets)</b>	
5- Familial Sufism (Introduction)	195
5.1 - The Descendants of the first Issawy ( the Banun Family)	197
5.2 - Sons and Brothers (the Dynamics of Succession of the Banun)	202
5.3 - A ‘young’ - but important - line of Masters ( the Massaudi Family)	203
5.4 - From Father to Son (the Dynamics of Succession of the Massaudi)	207
5.5 - A Secret Sanad (the S. Family)	209
5.6 - Presages and Distant Relatives (the dynamics of Succession of the S.)	214
5.7 – Conclusion	217
<b>CONCLUSION (Keeping the Secret, Losing the Secrets)</b>	218
<b>APPENDIX A</b>	224
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	225

## ABSTRACT

*My research is based on a fifteen months field-work carried out in the city of Tripoli. In particular, my thesis focuses on the Issawiya, a Libyan Sufi brotherhood that has often attracted the curiosity of western observers due to the spectacular nature of its ritual performances. For centuries Libyan Issawis have made use of a specific secret knowledge that has allowed them to perform karamat (“miracles”). These miraculous exhibitions involve acts of self-harm aimed at demonstrating a prodigious invulnerability, and supernatural actions carried out through the acquisition of the strength of animals. Even though these miraculous performances are attested both in the colonial literature and in local narratives today the majority of the Issawis dismiss karamat as outdated practices that are in contrast with the dictates of the Qur’an. Bearing this in mind, one would be tempted to say that the Issawiya has embraced a more ‘disenchanted’ approach to Islam. In my thesis, however, I challenge this assumption. More specifically, I demonstrate that Issawis have not lost their belief in miracles, but only changed their attitude towards secrecy. Though still very much concerned with divine manifestations and supernatural phenomena, Issawis feel the need to distance themselves from the secret practices of the past in order to demonstrate the ‘transparency’ and orthodoxy of their religiosity. In order to understand why the brotherhood has ‘lost’ its secrets, I contextualise the Issawiya within the broader scenario of Gheddafi’s Libya, paying particular attention to the impact of the regime’s religious rhetorics on Sufism. In doing so I demonstrate that Libya’s political framework has forced Issawis to re-articulate the role of secrecy in their practices, but I also identify some internal dynamics of the brotherhood that have contributed to this ‘loss of secrets’.*

## PREFACE

Since the completion of my field-work in 2008 Libya has witnessed a series of radical changes. As documented by the world press, in February 2011 the citizens of Benghazi initiated a series of protests against the regime of Muammar Ghaddafi, and in the space of a few weeks the riots developed into a civil war. In the following months the anti-Ghaddafi forces constituted a Transitional National Council that asked for a foreign military intervention, and in August 2011 the rebels managed to enter Tripoli putting an end to forty years of dictatorial rule. By October of the same year the last loyalist strongholds were defeated, and in the course of these operations Colonel Ghaddafi was killed. The Libya of today is different from the Libya I have experienced some four years ago. I have kept in contact with my Libyan friends before, during and after these recent events, and in the course of a short visit in February 2012 I was pleased to find that many of them were still alive. Some had participated to the conflict, and though shaken by the war they were extremely excited about the upcoming democratic elections, the first Libya had witnessed in fifty years. Even though I had the occasion to comment on the Libyan war and on the post-conflict situation through short journalistic pieces, I have decided not to include these recent developments in my thesis. An in-depth analysis of the changes that have taken place in the country would require further research, and I intend to return for a prolonged period of field-work as soon as possible. In the meantime, I have written this dissertation as if none of the above had taken place in order to facilitate the reader. It is also important to clarify that I have decided to implement a simplified version of the transliteration from Arabic. Following the example of other published ethnographies (Gilsenan 1973; Hammoudi 1997; Marchand 2001), I have chosen to spell the Arabic words replicating their sound in the Libyan dialect (or at least the way they sounded to my ear) without using the

standard diacritics for Arabic transliteration (“Gheddafi” instead of “Qaḏḏāfi”). Following this principle, I have also made specific choices of spelling (e.g. “*Issawiya*” instead of “*Aissaoua*” or “*Aissawa*” that are used in other publications). Occasionally, I have preferred the anglicised version of an Arabic term, particularly for what concerns the plural form (“*Issawis*” instead of “*Issawyin*”). The speeches of Colonel Gheddafi mentioned in this thesis have been examined using a digitalised database put together by the personnel of the “*Centre for the Studies and Researches on the Green Book*” of the city of Tripoli. For this reason, whenever I refer to these texts I do not include a specific page number. The same speeches can be found in paper form in a voluminous collection of Gheddafi’s declarations published under the title “*Al Sijil Al Qawmi: Bayanat wa Ahadith al Aqid Muammar al Gaddafi*”. As a final note, it is important to clarify that the people mentioned in this thesis are referred to using pseudonyms, except when they are referred to as a group (e.g. the *Issawy* order or the *Banun* family). Chapter Five constitutes an exception in this sense, but it is important to clarify that I have never asked politically ‘dangerous’ questions to the people whose name and surname are stated in this thesis (these people have also never indulged in *karamat*). The reasons for these exceptions (which have been agreed upon by my informants) will be apparent to the reader.



MAP OF LIBYA

## GLOSSARY

Bandir: musical instrument used in Sufi rituals

Baraka: blessings, spiritual power.

Bida': ideas or practices that are considered to be outside of the textual tradition of Islam

Dhikr: an invocation of the ninety nine attributes traditionally ascribed to Allah

Hadra: Sufi ritual which involves dhikr, movements and music.

Hezb: litany which is recited in the zawaya on a weekly basis.

Ijaza (Ijazat): written license, a necessary component of shaykh-hood

Jedheb: state of ecstasy, trance

Karama (Karamat): miracle

Mal'uf: melodious genre of music which was imported in North-Africa from Andalusia

Mawlid: celebration for the birthday of the prophet Mohammed

Mazar (Mazarat): festival held in honour of a saint

Medina: 'city', it usually indicates the old part of the city

Muhib(Muhibbin): devotee in a Sufi zawiya

Murid (Muridin): Sufi disciple

Sanad (Assanid): spiritual genealogy of a Sufi shaykh, but also a familial group within the Issawy order

Sharif(Ashraf): descendent of the prophet Mohammed

Shaush (Shauash): person in charge of one of the aspects of the life of the zawiya

Shaykh (Shuyukh): Sufi master

Sidhi/Sayyed: a blood descendent of the prophet Mohammed, or a saint or an important person

Tariqa(Turuq): Sufi order

Tasawwuf: Sufism

Tasbih (Tasabih): spiritual exercise

Zawya (Zawaya) : Sufi gathering place

“...My Secret is from the Secret of God,  
my Light is from the Light of God,  
I have experienced 70.000 Secrets,  
in the vicinity of (the heavenly) Jerusalem  
Lovers meet...”

Mohammed Ben ‘Aysa, Sixteenth century AD.

## INTRODUCTION

For Martin Lings Sufism is “simply Islamic mysticism” (Lings 1988:45), while for Clifford Geertz it is rather “a series of different and even contradictory experiments” (Geertz 1971:48). Though seemingly conflicting, these two definitions are effectively both true. Sufism (or “*tasawwuf*”) is generally understood to be the mystical dimension of Islam, but it is also a highly complex phenomenon that has taken different shapes and forms throughout history (Werbner 1995, 2003: 289, 2007: 197)<sup>1</sup>. In the Muslim world Sufism is mainly organised into “*turuq*” (sing. “*tariqa*”, “ways”), brotherhoods or orders. Each “way”, however, is characterised by its own very peculiar background of practices and doctrines, or, to use Geertz’s definition, “experiments”. Far from providing an account of Islamic mysticism as an all-encompassing religious category, this thesis deals with one specific *tariqa*, the *Issawiya*, a Moroccan Sufi order founded in the sixteenth century that has spread in a number of North-African countries. In particular, I concentrate on the Libyan branch of the brotherhood. Though aimed at presenting different aspects of the social life of Libyan Issawis, this work is mainly concerned with secrets and miracles. More

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<sup>1</sup> Detailed accounts of the historical and doctrinal aspects of Sufism can be found in Rinn 1884; Massignon 1943, 1982; Montgomery Watt 1962, 1963; Nicholson 1963; Schimmel 1975, 1994; Stoddart 1976; Burckhardt 1976; Vanover 1977: 345; Nurbaksh 1984; Lings 1988; Chittick 1989, 1999, 2005; Popovic & Veinstein 1996; Melchert 1996; Trimigham 1998; Sirriyeh 1999; Knysh 2000; Baldick 2000; Netton 2000; Hirtenstein & Tiernan 2003; Byniamin 2003; Abisaab 2004; Winter 2008. The word “Sufi” is possibly related to the Arabic “*Suf*” (“wool”) with reference to the rough clothes worn by the first ascetics of Islam as a sign of penance and renunciation of the world (Knish 2000:6; Chittick 1999: 15-31; Crapanzano 1973:15).

specifically, this dissertation tells the story of a Sufi *tariqa* that seems to have lost its miracles, but in fact it has only lost its secrets.

In the ethnographic literature the *Issawiya* is most renowned for the performance of “*karamat*” (“miracles<sup>2</sup>”). These miraculous exhibitions involve acts of self-harm aimed at demonstrating a prodigious invulnerability and supernatural actions carried out through the acquisition of the strength of animals. For centuries Libyan Issawis have made use of a secret body of spiritual knowledge that has allowed them to perform these wonders. Nevertheless, today only a few members of the brotherhood value secrets and *karamat* as an important part of their religiosity while many Libyan Issawis dismiss them as outdated practices that are in contrast with the dictates of the *Qur’an* and the *Sunna*<sup>3</sup>. When faced with this change in *Issawy* spirituality one might be tempted to say that the brotherhood has renounced miracles and developed a more ‘rational’ approach to religion. In this thesis, however, I challenge this assumption. By relying on fifteen months’ field-work carried out in the city of Tripoli between 2006 and 2008, I will show that Issawis have kept their belief in supernatural phenomena and divine manifestations, but changed their attitude towards secrecy and, therefore, towards esoteric practices like *karamat*.

In abandoning *karamat* Issawis have not lost their sense of the miraculous, but their secrets. In shedding light on this phenomenon, I will show that the political scenario of contemporary Libya has pushed the members of the order to re-articulate the role of secrecy in their practices, but I will also identify some internal dynamics of the brotherhood that have contributed to this ‘loss of secrets’. In order to expose the

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<sup>2</sup> Islamic theology differentiates between “*mu’ajizat*” (miracles performed by the prophets) and “*karamat*” (signs of grace granted by God to particularly pious individuals) (Flueckiger 2008: 171).

<sup>3</sup> “Tradition”, a set of practices and ideas whose origin is traced back directly to the prophet Mohammed (Hallaq 2005: 46-56). Together with the *Qur’an* the *Sunna* constitutes the textual apparatus of Islam.

different facets of my argument I will firstly contextualise my work in light of the existing literature on the *Issawiya* and on Libyan Sufism, showing the shortcomings that have characterised this scholarship. Secondly, I will present an overview of the recent history of Libya paying particular attention to the role played by Sufism in the vicissitudes of the country. Subsequently, I will position my thesis within current anthropological debates on secrecy and miracles, and identify my contribution to these theoretical discussions. Finally, I will present the methodological aspects of my field-work and the outline of the thesis.

### ***1- Exotic, Notorious and Inconsequential (The Issawiya in the Academic Literature)***

Ethnographers dealing with North Africa have been intrigued by the “fakiristic” (Rouget 1985: 274) and “strange” (Rinn 1884: 303) performances of the *Issawy* order, but they have also failed to produce an in-depth analysis of these practices. Doubtlessly, the brotherhood is known in the anthropological literature as “the most exotic and notorious of all North-African ways” (Gellner 1981: 137). Nonetheless, many scholars have mentioned the *Issawiya* only cursorily dismissing it as an odd brotherhood indulging in “scenes of collective hysteria” (André 1956: 216), mysterious practices centred around the mimicry of animal behaviour, and disturbing acts of self-flagellation (Felice 1936; Drague 1951: 75 – 217; Crapanzano 1973: 145, 1980: 92; Michon 1978; Eickelman 1981: 83, 352; Andezian 1996: 395-401; Trimmingham 1998: 86, 276; Glasse’ 2002:40). The few anthropologists who have dedicated a monographic study to the brotherhood have either portrayed the miraculous performances of the *Issawiya* as an “ensemble of heretic beliefs” (Brunel 1926: 246), or described them as archaic practices

that have disappeared in modern times without probing further (Andezian 2001:114). The “most notorious” of the Sufi ways remains therefore a largely un-explored phenomenon<sup>4</sup>.

In this thesis I will show that *Issawy* miracles are not manifestations of ‘hysteria’ as the previous literature has suggested but expressions of a sophisticated esoteric spirituality that has been abandoned by Issawis due to a combination of factors. In doing so, I will attempt to expand the scarce anthropological knowledge of *Issawiya*, but I will also try to fill a vacuum in the ethnographic literature on Libyan Sufism. The *Issawy* brotherhood appears in publications dealing with Morocco (Brunel 1926; Drague 1951: 75; 121; André 1956: 216 – 217; Rabinow 1977: 51; Geertz 1979; Crapanzano 1973: 79, 141-145, 203; 1980: 16, 36, 82, 91-92; 1981: 83), Egypt (El Said Yousef Mosa 2008: 179), and Algeria (Andezian 2001). The scholarship on Libya, however, has completely ignored the *Issawiya* focusing instead on another Libyan brotherhood, the *Sanusiya*, a *tariqa* that has played an extremely important role in the modern history of the country (Santa Maria 1912; Nallino 1940; Adams 1947; Evans-Pritchard 1946, 1949; Ziadeh 1958; De Candole 1988; Peters 1990; Gilsenan 1990: 160; Triaud 1995, 1995b; Vikor 1995, 1996; McGuirk 2007). As documented by a vast number of publications, during the first half of the twentieth century the Sanusis created a form of local government in the Eastern part of Libya and later a kingdom that lasted until Muammar Gheddafi’s revolutionary takeover in 1969 (ibid.). Given the importance of this brotherhood scholars have largely equated Libyan Sufism with *Sanusy* Sufism. The Libyan *Issawiya* has been therefore completely neglected.

The work of renowned British anthropologist E.E. Evans-Pritchard has been instrumental in the academic ‘marginalisation’ of the Libyan non-*Sanusy* orders like the *Issawiya*. In his 1949 classic “The Sanusi of

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<sup>4</sup> “Everyone has heard about the *Aissaoua* and their strange practices, yet few people know exactly what they are” (Rinn 1884: 303, translation mine).

Cyrenaica<sup>5</sup>” Evans-Pritchard famously argued that the *Sanusiya* was able to achieve its political status because of its solid internal organisations while the other Libyan brotherhoods remained inconsequential entities due to their “lack of cohesion, common direction, and political influence” (Evans-Pritchard 1949: 84). Doubtless, some aspects of Evans-Pritchard’s account have been criticised by the subsequent scholarship (Eickelman 1981b: 52). Indeed, Scholars have unpacked the reasons behind Evans-Pritchard’s choice to focus on the *Sanusiya*<sup>6</sup>, questioned the importance of the brotherhood in the political dynamics of the country (Peters 1990: 10-28; Baldinetti 2010) and debated over whether the order had an intrinsic political inclination or not (Evans-Pritchard 1949: 26, 173; Ziadeh 1958; Ahmida 1994: 100, 173; Triaud 1984, 1995; Vikor 1995, 1996, 2000). Even still, “The Sanusi of Cyrenaica” has had the enduring effect of reducing the non-*Sanusy* orders like the *Issawiya* to a list of marginal organisations that have not left any visible mark on Libyan history (Brunel 1926:64; Agela and Cerbelli 1949: 41-43; Evans-Pritchard 1949: 84-85; Drague 1951: 75; Goodchilde 1970:26; Depont & Coppolani 1987: 304; Grandin 1986; Triaud 1996; Baldinetti 2003: 136; Najem 2005). In analysing *Issawy* practices I will try to furnish this list with some ‘ethnographic flesh’ showing that Libyan Sufism is a variegated reality that cannot be understood only by looking at the *Sanusiya* as scholars have done in the past. In order to do so, I will first present a brief account of Libya’s transition from *Sanusy* monarchy to revolutionary state, and then lay out an overview of the Libyan brotherhoods that academia has ignored.

## **2- From Sufi Kingdom to State of the Masses (Historical Overview)**

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<sup>5</sup> Libya is divided into three main regions, Tripolitania in the West, Cyrenaica in the East and Fezzan in the South, for an analysis of the historical origins of this geographical division see Peters 1982; Vandewalle 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Evans-Pritchard collected the material on the *Sanusiya* while working for the British Military Administration in Cyrenaica. For an analysis of the professional, intellectual and personal motivations that have pushed Evans – Pritchard to study the *Sanusiya* instead of other Libyan orders see Douglas 1980: 46; Li Causi 1988; Peters 1990:21-24; Ahmida 1994; Baldinetti 2010: 14. On the relationship between Anthropology and colonialism see Asad 1973; Asad 1991; Goody 1995: 1-6; Stocking 1996: 367-421; Kuper 1996: 94-114.

From a religious point of view, Libya is officially a Maliki<sup>7</sup> country whose population is made up entirely of Sunni Muslims, most of whom are of Arab and Berber origin<sup>8</sup>. From a political point of view, Libya is a *Jamahiriyah* (“*state of the masses*”), a unique political system instituted by Colonel Muammar Ghaddafi. Prior to Ghaddafi’s revolutionary coup, however, Libya was a kingdom with a Sufi king. Even though the rise to power of the Sanusis has been described as “the most remarkable *tariqa* event in the last century” (Trimingham 1998: 257), the brotherhood started out mainly as a missionary organisation with no political agenda<sup>9</sup> (Trimingham 1998: 119). The *Sanusiya* was founded by the Algerian Sufi Mohammed Ibn Ali asSanusy, a scholar and mystic usually referred to as “*asSanusy al Kabir*,” the “Grand Sanusy” (Peters 1990:14; Vikor 1995). Born in Algeria about 1787, the Grand Sanusy studied under the well-known Sufi master Ahmad bin Idris al Fasi and joined forty different Sufi orders before establishing his own *tariqa* (Giglio 1932: 1-11; Evans-Pritchard 1949: 12- 13; Vikor 1995: 49–76, 1996: 127–142)<sup>10</sup>. After an unsuccessful attempt to settle in Mecca he travelled to Eastern Libya, where he founded his first *zawiya*<sup>11</sup> in the city of al Baydha in 1843 (Adams 1947:3-10). From al Baydha asSanusy moved to the oasis of Jaghabub, deep in the Libyan desert, where he was able to organise an important centre of religious studies with the purpose of revitalising local Islam (Evans-Pritchard 1949:14). Among the Bedouins of

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<sup>7</sup> One of the four schools of jurisprudence in Sunni Islam, the others being Hanafi, Shafi’i and Hanbali (Melchert 1997).

<sup>8</sup> Amongst Libyans there are also *Corioghli* (Libyans who claim Ottoman blood in their ancestorship), and blacks (who count immigrants or slaves amongst their ancestors). Many black Libyans consider themselves as Arabs. At times, however, the skin colour is invoked as a sign of different ethnic membership, and in the case of the Tabu, a self-proclaimed ethnic minority living at the borders between Libya and Chad. Libya hosts also a few thousands Tuaregs.

<sup>9</sup> The creation of the *Sanusiya* should be looked at in the context of the various revivalist movements that have characterised Islam in the nineteenth century (Ziadeh 1958; Abu Nasr 1987; Trimingham 1998: 105-132).

<sup>10</sup> Very often an individual can be part of two or more Sufi orders at the same time. Multiple membership is quite a common feature in North-African Sufism (Gellner 1981: 138). In my experience a Sufi would often perceive one of the orders he is part of as his main *tariqa*, and the others as ‘secondary’ ones. This aspect of Sufism will be briefly discussed later on in the introduction.

<sup>11</sup> pl. *zawaya*, litt. “*corner*”, the term will be used extensively in this thesis. In the Arabic-speaking world “*zawiya*” indicates a Sufi gathering place. In Evans-Pritchard’s words, a *zawiya* “may be regarded as a kind of club, founded for religious exercises (and) for the performance of good works” (Evans-Pritchard 1949:87).

Cyrenaica the cult of the *Murabitin*<sup>12</sup>, the holy men, was deeply diffused, and the Grand Sanusy begun to be seen as a saint and as a wonderworker very soon (Peters 1990:16; Mason 1977: 50-65). After his death in 1859, the Grand Sanusy was buried in Jaghabub. His tomb became a site of pilgrimage, and his brotherhood started spreading throughout the Eastern region gaining a certain influence amongst the tribes of Cyrenaica (Evans-Pritchard 1949:73; Peters 1990: 10-28).

When the *Sanusiya* started to spread, Libya was part of the Ottoman Empire. Even though the relationship between the Sublime Porte and the Sanusis was initially characterised by a certain antipathy, the Ottoman authorities and the order established a rapport of mutual approval (Davis 1987:27; Ziadeh 1958: 11-34). Nonetheless, with time the brotherhood developed into something more than a peripheral religious organisation. Having established its centre far from the cities of the coast (and therefore far from the seats of the Ottoman administration), the *Sanusiya* was able to increase its political weight undisturbed (Evans-Pritchard 1949: 88; Vandewalle 2006: 23; Baldinetti 2010: 32). The prominence of the order became explicit during the Italian occupation in the First World War. When the Italians invaded the country in 1911, the Ottomans made peace with them. The Sanusis, however, launched a defensive *jihad* (“*holy war*”) against the colonisers and the Libyan tribes continued their resistance under the *Sanusy* banner (Evans-Pritchard 1949:104; Evans-Pritchard 1946). Failing to crush the opposition, the Italians were forced to come to terms with it, but they could not negotiate peace with an indistinct tribal system. In order to settle a non-aggression pact they had to establish relations with the only organisation that was

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<sup>12</sup> Sing *Murabut*, “saints” (hence “*Maraboutisme*”, or “*Maraboutage*”, “cult of the saints”, in the French colonial literature – Soares 2005:26; 129). The term means “tied ones” and it is linked both with the idea of “being tied to God” and with the word “*ribat*” (“fortified sanctuary”). In the Muslim world the expression ‘*Murabut*’ has been used with different connotations (Rinn 1838; Geertz 1968: 43; Eickelman 1981; Rasmussen 1992; Andezian 1996: 390; Gemmeke 2009). For an analysis of the use of the term in Libya (where ‘*murabitin*’ is also used to describe a tribe that traces its origin to a holy person) see Evans-Pritchard 1949: 65-70; Peters 1990: 40-83; Najem 2005: 43. On Libyan tribes see de Agostini 1917, 1922-23, Behnke 1947; Evans-Pritchard 1944; 1944b, 1949:51; Mason 1977, 1978, 1982; Davis 1987; Peters 1977, 1990; Obeidi 2001: 108-135; Wright 2002; Najem 2003.

representative of the complicated tribal structure of the nomads: the *Sanusy* order. In dealing with the Sanusis as the true leaders of the Libyan nomads, the Italians furnished the *Sanusiya* with a symbolic and political recognition and with time “the *tariqa*, the religious order, began to speak of itself as a *hukuma*, government” (Evans-Pritchard 1949:105).

When the Fascists took power in Italy at the end of 1922, Benito Mussolini began a new colonial campaign with the intention of ‘re-conquering’ Libya, thus breaking the treaty with the Sanusis. The *Sanusy* guerrilla resisted this second invasion for nine years, fighting against the troops of General Rodolfo Graziani, newly appointed Governor General of Libya (Evans-Pritchard 1949:191; 1946b). The head of the brotherhood at the time, Idris asSanusy, grandson of the Grand Sanusy, went into exile in Egypt searching for allies in the fight against the Italians, while the famous *Sanusy* leader Omar al-Mukhtar (“our irreducible enemy” as general Graziani called him) became the chief of all the partisan bands and, to all intents and purposes, the incarnated symbol of the Libyan resistance (Evans-Pritchard 1949:168; Rochat & Goglia 1986; Peters 1990: 20). The resistance, however, died when its symbol did. In September 1930 Omar al Mukhtar was captured, put on trial and hanged before twenty thousand Bedouins and the notables of Cyrenaica (Evans-Pritchard 1949:190). The repression of General Graziani was brutally sanguinary, and the Bedouin population was, according to Evans-Pritchard, reduced by half (Evans-Pritchard 1949:191; 1946b; Ahmida 2005: 43-54). Finally, on 24 January 1931 the resistance was sedated, the war ended and Libya became, in Mussolini’s famous words, the “*quarta sponda*”, the “fourth shore” (Vandewalle 2006: 24-42): Italy’s projection on the other side of the Mediterranean.

The exiled head of the Sanusis Idris asSanusy had already received formal support from Britain, but when Italy’s increasing colonial expansion started to worry the British this support turned into military help

(Ministero 1949: 53-55). Following the Italian occupation of Ethiopia in 1936 Britain and Italy came into conflict, and a newfound Anglo-*Sanusy* coalition opposed the Italians in the Second World War (Davis 1987: 28). In forging an alliance with the *Sanusiya* the British authorities started to deal with Idris as a head of state. Eager to transform Libya into a protectorate, Britain offered the head of the order not only the future independence from Italy but also the crown of Cyrenaica (Davis 1987: 28). On 23<sup>rd</sup> January 1942 the British forces entered Tripoli while simultaneously the French occupied the southern region of Fezzan. Idris as Sanusy, now officially king of Cyrenaica, returned to the country after an exile of twenty-two years and the Fascist domination of Libya came to an end (De Candole 1988:65). The Libyan kingdom (initially organised as a federal monarchy) remained under the British military administration until 1952, when, with the approval of the United Nations, Libya became the first African colony to gain independence (Wright 1969: 208-228; Davis 1987: 30). Eleven years later, the discovery of Cyrenaican petroleum became a new cohesive factor destined to strengthen many Libyans' desire for national unity (Kubba 1964; Allan 1981; Barker & McLachlan; Davis 1987: 30; Bergs 1988:133). King Idris abandoned therefore the federal constitution and proclaimed the birth of the unified kingdom of Libya (ibid.).

With time, the identity of the *Sanusiya* as a Sufi order began to weaken (Davis 1987: 110 n15; Vandewalle 2006: 45), but members of the order (and of King Idris's family) maintained prestigious positions of power in the country (Vandewalle 2006: 43-73). The *Sanusy* kingdom, however, was bound to crumble at the beginning of its second decade of life. On the first of September 1969, a message from a non-identified "purely revolutionary council" (Davis 1987: 30) was delivered to the Libyans. From the very first lines of this communiqué, the 'modernising' agenda of the council was very clear: "*to remove all past hindrances to solving the various social and economic problems of the Libyan nation*" (ibid.). In

the same year Muammar Gheddafi, a twenty-seven year old junior military officer born from a Bedouin family in Sirte staged a bloodless coup d'état together with a small group of fellow soldiers (Bianco 1975; Blundy & Lycett 1987). Following the example of the Egyptian “free officers” (whose socialist revolution led by Jamal Abdul Nasser had overthrown the Egyptian monarchy in 1952), the Libyan “free officers” “abolished the monarchy. The *Sanusiya* was dismantled (Davis 1987)<sup>13</sup> and Idris asSanusy, first and last king of Libya, was sent back into exile in Egypt where he died in 1983 (De Candole 1988). After a few uncertain years the coupists managed to ensure control over the country, nationalising banks and oil companies and producing a provisional constitutional declaration (Vandewalle 2006: 97-136). On the 7<sup>th</sup> of April 1974 Gheddafi (now raised to the grade of Colonel) resigned as head of state in order to devote himself to revolutionary activities, assuming the symbolic title of *Qaid atThawra* (“Guide of the Revolution”) but keeping control of the armed forces (ibid.). In 1975 Libya became the “*Libyan Arab Republic*”, a Socialist state organised around Nasserian principles and headed by a “Revolutionary Command Council”(RCC) under the leadership of Colonel Gheddafi (Obeidi 2001:45-57).

Having led a revolution, Gheddafi was now forced to organise the vague ideals of the “free officers” into a recognisable ideology. Between 1975 and 1979 the Guide of the Revolution published the three volumes of his *Kitab al Akhdar*, the “Green Book”, elucidating his “third universal theory”, a political alternative to Communism and Capitalism (Bleuchot 1982; Gathafi 2005). In his book colonel Gheddafi launched the creation of a system of direct political participation based on local popular assemblies, and in 1977 Libya became a *Jamahiriyah*, a state supposedly managed by its own citizens (Vandewalle 2006: 97-136). In proposing a mixture of religious language, Socialism, anti-Western sentiment, diffidence towards the party system and ‘statelessness’, Gheddafi created not only a unique political system but also

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<sup>13</sup> Many of my Libyan informants confirmed to me that the government ordered the destruction of the tomb of the founder of the *Sanusiya* in Jaghabub.

a specific political rhetorics that was going to accompany the country for three decades (Bianco 1975; Anderson 1981, 1986; Bearman 1986: 282-286; Brundy and Lycett 1987: 79-159; Davis 1987: 15-136; Lemarchand 1988; Vandewalle 1998:32-36; Joffe 1995; Obeidi 2001). Libya's new political makeover, however, was not well received by the West. In 1979 the American government included Libya in the State Department list of sponsors of state terrorism, and in 1982 the United Nations imposed a trade embargo on the country (Bearman 1986: 287-297; Vandewalle 2006: 169-171). The following years were characterised by a series of changes both in internal and in foreign policies. After the initial abolition of private property promulgated by the regime in 1978 Libya entered into a slow process of liberalisation, and in 1987 the Libyan authorities decided to re-introduce the private sector as part of a broader project of reform that lasted through the eighties and the nineties (Vandewalle 2006: 144- 167). By the late nineties Gheddafi started to show signs of openings to the international community, and in 2004 the United Nations Security Council revoked the embargo on Libya (Vandewalle 2006: 169-171), allowing the country to become a member of the Council in 2007. Strengthened by this international recognition, Gheddafi emerged as the undisputed leader of a state that was supposed to be governed solely by the people.

### **3- *Mapping Libyan Mysticism (The Non-Sanusy Orders)***

In the course of last sixty years Libya has witnessed the birth of a Sufi kingdom, the creation of a pariah state despised by Western powers, and the consolidation of a dictatorial regime backed up by the international community. When trying to delineate the role played by Sufism in this complex process the vicissitudes of the *Sanusiya* stand out as the main 'Sufi contribution' to Libyan history. Libyan mysticism, however, is a complex phenomenon that goes beyond the political achievements of the *tariqa* that ended up becoming a state. Indeed, Libya presents a series of non- *Sanusy* orders that have been

largely ignored by scholarship because deemed less important. Evans-Pritchard noticed the existence of the ‘other’ brotherhoods (1949: 84-85), but he also dismissed them as marginal entities that lacked any “unity of direction” (Evans-Pritchard 1949: 88), and therefore as organisations unworthy of academic interest<sup>14</sup>. The Italians, on the other hand, approached the non-*Sanusy* orders with greater attention. As shown by a recent study of Italian colonial documents (Baldinetti 2003), the colonisers sought to find an agreement with *turuq* with the purpose of gaining allies in the fight against the *Sanusiya* (Baldinetti 2003:129)<sup>15</sup>. In order to do so, the Italians collected some information on the brotherhoods, enough to delineate a map of non-*Sanusy* Sufism in colonial times.

The Italian sources present a great deal of information about the *Sanusiya*, but they also mention a number of non-*Sanusy turuq*, mainly orders related to the *Shadiliya*, an extremely influential *tariqa* that gave rise to a family of different Sufi orders in North-Africa (Geoffroy 1996: 65; Bhurkhardt 1976:46; Trimmingham 1998: 44-51). Amongst these non-*Sanusy* brotherhoods, the *Issawiya* is described as being particularly widespread, at least for what concerns the Western region of Tripolitania (Baldinetti 2003: 134)<sup>16</sup>. The colonisers collected information concerning the location and distribution of *Issawy zawaya*, but they also realised that the *Issawiya* was a *tariqa* made up of independent *zawaya* without a common leader (ibid.). Though large in numbers, Issawis were considered too divided to be used for military

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<sup>14</sup> Evans-Pritchard’s approach to Libyan Sufism should be looked at in the context of a certain ‘obsession’ for social organisation and for social structure that has haunted British anthropology until the seventies (Radcliffe-Brown 1952; Fortes 1963; Stocking 1984). For an analysis of the developments in Evans-Pritchard’s thought compare Evans-Prichard 1949, Evans-Pritchard 1956 and 1974.

<sup>15</sup> The intention of using the orders against the Sanusis is explicitly stated in “*Le societa’ segrete della Tripolitania*” (“The Secret Societies of Tripolitania”), a 1912 document written by the Italian military intelligence with the purpose of furnishing the Italian officers with various information on the brotherhoods (Baldinetti 2003:129). On the use of colonial documentation in Anthropology see Peel 1996. On the relationship between the Italians and Islam in colonial times see Marongiu 1982; Vandewalle 1996: 32-40; Graziani 2002: 73. In their propagandistic maneuvers the Italians portrayed the Libyans as “Muslim Italian citizens” while in fact treating them as ‘lesser’ Italians (ibid.).

<sup>16</sup> The presence of the *Issawiya* in Libya is also cursorily mentioned in Brunel 1926: 64, according to whom the number of Issawis in Tripolitania was particularly elevated. See also Evans-Pritchard 1949: 84-85; Drague 1951: 75; and Goodchilde 1970: 26.

purposes, hence the Italians attempted to create an alliance with the *Madaniya*, a Sufi order which is described in the documents as the largest *tariqa* in Libya after the *Sanusiya* (Baldinetti 2003:131; Grandin 1986; Triaud 1996)<sup>17</sup>. Even though the head of the Madanis showed a certain antipathy towards the Sanusis, the Italians did not manage to persuade the members of the brotherhood, and as a consequence the *Madaniya* remained essentially neutral in the military operations (Trimingham 1998: 113; Baldinetti 2003:132-133, 147-149). The Italians evaluated other possibilities, but the other *turuq* proved to be unsuitable candidates. The members of the '*Arusiya* (Trimingham 1998: 87) were rather numerous in Libya, but they did not have a common leadership to negotiate with, while the *Rifa'iya* (Popovic 1996; Trimingham 1998: 37-44; Najem 2005: 50), the *Qadiriya* (Zarcone 1996; Depont & Coppolani 1897: 304), and the *Sa'adiya* were small orders that could not possibly contribute to the success of the colonial campaign (Baldinetti 2003: 131-139). In the end none of the *turuq* sided with the Italians, but they did not actively take part in the *Sanusy* resistance either (Peters 1990: 18; Baldinetti 2003).

Being motivated by a military agenda, the Italian documents focus on the geographical distribution of the orders, and contain very little information about the origins of the *turuq* (Baldinetti 2003:138). Due to the partial nature of these data, reconstructing a pre-colonial history of non-*Sanusy* Sufism is particularly difficult. Tracing a more contemporary history of the *turuq*, however, is equally hard. Out of the brotherhoods mentioned by the Italians today only the *Issawiya*, the *Madaniya*, the '*Arusiya* and the *Qadiriya* are still present in Libya while the other *turuq* seem to have died out in a process which is difficult to delineate<sup>18</sup>. Though once large enough to be considered as a possible ally by the Italians the

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<sup>17</sup> Evans-Pritchard mentions briefly that the Italians had tried to play the Madanis against the Sanusis, but he does not expand on the matter (Evans-Pritchard 1949: 87). The Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid had already tried to use the *Madaniya* in order to contain the growing expansion of the *Sanusiya* (Baldinetti 1996: 147; Trimingham 1998:126).

<sup>18</sup> In time the *Rifa'iya* seems to have merged with the *Issawiya*. According to the Italian documents after 1903, the year of the death of the last head of the order in Libya, the number of the Rifa'is started to diminish very rapidly until the order was completely absorbed by the *Issawiya* with which it shared deep doctrinal and ritual similarities (according to the documents

*Madaniya* has developed into a small and largely un-influential brotherhood<sup>19</sup>, while the *Qadiriya* has retained his minor role in Libyan Sufism. The *Issawiya*, on the other hand, has become the largest *tariqa* in the country, as confirmed to me by the totality of my informants and by the personnel of the Central *Auqaf* of Tripoli (the institution dealing with religious affairs in Libya)<sup>20</sup>, while the '*Arusiya*' is today the second largest order in Libya. Other *turuq* have recently started to spread in the country, but they remain minor orders in terms of number of *zawaya*. The *Tijaniya* (Abu-Nasr 1965), the *Burhanya* (Luizard 1996: 356), and the *Khaliliya* (Trimingham 1998: 124) were brought to the country between the sixties and the seventies (respectively from Algeria, Sudan and Egypt), but they are not particularly diffused within Libyan society. The *Alawiya* (Lings 1961), the *Jaafariya*, and the *Khalwatiya* (Clayer 1996; Trimingham 1998: 74-78) are the latest additions in the Libyan Sufi landscape. These orders have entered the country from Egypt between the nineties and the early two thousands, but they count an extremely small number of followers. Interestingly, the *Sanusiya* has also become an inconsequential order, even more so than the minor brotherhoods I have mentioned. As I have previously explained, the brotherhood was officially

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many Tripolitarians did not even see the *Issawiya* and the *Rifa'iya* as two separate orders) (Baldinetti 2003:136). According to some of my informants some people have recently tried to re-affirm the Libyan *Rifa'iya* as an independent order without succeeding. In my field-work I have only met two people who identified themselves as 'purely' Rifa'is. More remarks on the relationship between *Issawiya* and *Rifa'iya* can be found later on in the introduction. Though not mentioned by the Italians, the *Zarruqya* (Khushaim 1976; Trimingham 1998: 87), the *Tayybiya* (Andezian 1996: 394-398) and the '*Azuziya*' (Evans-Pritchard 1949: 84-85) were also once present in Libya. According to some of my informants, the *Hamdushiya* (Crapanzano 1973), the *Maaziya*, the *Marghaniya* (Trimingham 1998: 116-118), and the *Ayssiya* should be also added to the list of the Libyan *turuq* that have disappeared in time. Trimingham reports the presence of a branch of the *Badawiya* in Tripolitania (Trimingham 1998:45), but the order has not left any trace in the colonial literature or in local narratives.

<sup>19</sup>Comparing the data collected by the Italians and the little information on non-*Sanusy* Sufism contained in Evans-Pritchard, one realises that the loss of influence of the *Madaniya* has been a gradual process which was evident already in the forties (Evans-Pritchard 1949:85; Baldinetti 2003:134, see also Triaud 1996:410, Najem 2005: 54).

<sup>20</sup>At the time of my field-work the *Auqaf* (which will be mentioned again in this introduction and in the course of the thesis) was processing data collected in a census of the *turuq* in the different Libyan municipalities. According to a preliminary counting in 2007, there were about four hundred *Issawy zawaya* in the whole of Libya, mainly concentrated in the cities of Tripoli and Benghazi. This number might seem small when compared with the figures of other ethnographies on Sufism, particularly those dealing with Egypt (Gilsenan 1973). It should be borne in mind, however, that Libya has a population of only six million (less than Cairo's) distributed on a large geographical surface of 1.800.0000 km<sup>2</sup>.

dismantled by the regime after the coup of 1968. However, a number of self-proclaimed Sanusis still exists in Libya, even though they do not profess their membership publicly nor do they gather together in *zawaya*<sup>21</sup>.

Even though scholars have examined the role of religion in the ideology of Gheddafi (Bleuchot & Monastiri 1981; Bruce St John 1983; Bearman 1986; Davis 1987: 57, 66-68, 76; Joffe 1988; Obeidi 2001: 86-107), they have never analysed the relationship between the regime and Sufism. During the years of the monarchy, the *turuq* were highly regarded by the *Sanusy* king<sup>22</sup>. As a consequence, following the coup of 1969 Gheddafi treated the brotherhoods as one of the “past hindrances” (Davis 1987: 30) that the revolution aimed at removing. The Guide of the Revolution, however, saw the brotherhoods not only as a fossil of the monarchic past but also as organisations whose doctrines were incompatible with his understanding of Islam. Since the early days of the regime Colonel Gheddafi had stressed the need for Libyans to re-discover the centrality of the *Qur’an* as the only source of religious direction for Muslims, and the necessity to purify Libyan religiosity from practices that did not have a clear basis in the holy book (Gellner 1981: 62, 63, 172; Bearman 1986: 162-163; Davis 1987: 44-58). As soon as he established control over the country, the revolutionary leader identified the mystical background of Sufism as an agent of corruption that had polluted the simplicity of the Quranic message. As a consequence, Gheddafi presented Sufism as a source of “rottenness and regression” (Gheddafi 1982) whose followers “deserve to be slaughtered” (ibid.). Throughout the seventies and the eighties a number of *zawaya* were closed down

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<sup>21</sup> It is really difficult to determine the number of Sanusis living in Libya today. The fact that some people in Tripoli were open with me about their ties with the *Sanusiya* suggests that the authorities tolerate the order as long as it does not proselytise, and condone its underground existence. In the past Sanusis were also simultaneously members of other orders (Santa Maria 1912: 145; Evans-Pritchard 1949: 8; 86-89; see also footnote 9). The Sanusis I have met in the course of my field-work were also at the same time members of other brotherhoods. Some of them saw the *Sanusiya* as their main order (even though they did not gather with other Sanusis, nor they publicly professed their membership), others told me that they joined the *Sanusiya* only as secondary *tariqa* (see footnote 9). In a private communication Prof. John Davis, author of “Libyan Politics – Tribes and Revolution” (1987) told me that at the time of his fieldwork in Libya, the *Sanusiyya* was already a “dormant practice” that was slowly dying out.

<sup>22</sup> Often Sanusis were also, simultaneously, members of other brotherhoods. See previous footnote.

or destroyed by the Libyan police. Ghaddafi's approach to Sufism, however, begun to change with the approaching of the nineties. All of a sudden the Colonel realised that another force was more threatening for the *Jamahiriyah*, and that Sufism could be actually used as a deterrent against this force.

In the late eighties a series of Salafi-inspired<sup>23</sup> organisations started to spread in Libya (Joffe 1988; Pargeter 2005; Martinez 2007: 59-84). Signs of increasing 'Salafisation' could be detected throughout the country in the form of an increasing use of the full *hijab*, Islamic veil, for women (Pargeter 2013: 165), a practice that had somehow decreased during the monarchy and in the first years of the revolution. Preoccupied with the political agenda of some of these 'Islamist' groups, the government decided to eradicate Salafism from Libya. During the eighties and nineties several thousands of Salafi activists were arrested, tortured, executed and detained in inhuman conditions (Joffe 1988; Pargeter 2005; De Bona 2013: 81). In some instances, anti-Salafi measures involved even the use of armed forces, particularly in the Eastern region (Ibid; Pargeter 2013: 169). Ghaddafi excluded the 'Islamists' from the benefit of judicial guarantees following the so-called '*1991 Law on the Consolidation of Freedoms*' whose article five stated that religion could not be exploited for political purposes (ibid.). In March 1997, the regime introduced a collective punishment law that allowed it to persecute the families and even tribal groups of suspected Islamists (Pargeter 2013: 169). Ghaddafi decided to create a 'Popular Guard' whose task was to prevent Salafi groups from creating a supporting network in the mosques of the Libyan urban centers

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<sup>23</sup> 'Salafism' (from *Salafi* - "predecessor") is a Sunni school of thought that takes the first three generations of Muslims of early Islam (Mohammed's companions, their successors, and the successors' successors) as exemplary models. The main theoretician of Salafism is perhaps the famous Mohammed ibn Abdul Wahab (1703-1792). *Salafi* Islam encompasses a series of different groups but it is generally characterised by a literalistic interpretation of the *Qur'an*, and by a strong antipathy towards Sufism (either in its entirety or in some of its manifestations) (Sirryeh 1999; De Jong & Radtke 1999). On the complexities that characterise this current within Islam see Euben 1997; Salvatore 1997; Nagata 2001; Roy 2002; Devji 2005; Soares 2005: 1-8; Marsden 2005b, 2007b, 2008; Mahmood 2005; Hirshkind 2006; Meijer 2009; Ostebo 2012; Osella and Soares 2010: 9-12; Huq 2010). The literature on Libyan Salafism is particularly scarce (Joffe 1988; Pargeter 2005; Martinez 2007: 59-84; De Bona 2013: 80-82).

(ibid.), and in a speech delivered on the 20<sup>th</sup> of July 1991 Gheddafi called the ‘Islamists’ “*agents of the enemy*” (Ibid.)<sup>24</sup>. As part of this general anti-Salafi approach, the Libyan government decided, quite surprisingly, to counter-balance the expansion of Salafism by promoting Sufism (thus paralleling similar measures undertaken by the governments of other North-African countries<sup>25</sup>).

As part of this process of rehabilitation of the Sufis, the regime decided to furnish the brotherhoods with an administrative apparatus. In 1990 the government created the “*Idhara Turuq wa Zawaya*” (“*Administration of the brotherhoods and of the zawaya*”), a bureau which still exists (and which will be mentioned again throughout the thesis) whose purpose is favouring the coordination between the different *uruq*. At the same time Gheddafi started to praise publicly Sufism as a “*modern weapon*” in the battle against fundamentalism (Gheddafi 1995e), and as a form of spirituality that had re-discovered its Quranic roots (Gheddafi 1988, 1995, 1995d), so that by the mid-nineties Sufism was re-incorporated as part of the national discourse<sup>26</sup>. Today the Sufi orders are a highly celebrated component of Libyan society. Every first day of September the *uruq* participate in the feast for the anniversary of the revolution in Tripoli, parading in the main square of the capital. Members of the orders live a very public existence, and

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<sup>24</sup> According to Martinez, by antagonising ‘radical’ Islam Gheddafi tried to join in the global ‘war on terror’ and win the sympathy of the West (Martinez 2007: 59-84).

<sup>25</sup> The idea of playing the Sufis against the Salafis is by no means a Libyan invention. In the course of private conversations with Prof. George Joffe and Dr. Michael Willis (Oxford University) I was told that in the early 2000’s the governments of Morocco and Algeria have started to publicly support Sufism with the specific aim of containing the expansion of *Salafi* groups. Though not dealing with this specific issue, preliminary thoughts on the measures applied by these governments in order to marginalise Salafism can be found in Willis 1996; 2006 and Magrahoui 2009.

<sup>26</sup> As I have previously explained, the *Sanusiya* exists in Libya only on an underground level but it seems to be tolerated by the government. Perhaps it is in the mid-nineties that the government has ceased to persecute the brotherhood, maybe as a result of this new pro-Sufi attitude. In a post on the website *16Beaver*, Hakim Bey (pseudonym of the political writer Peter Lamborn Wilson), says that in the mid-nineties he was invited to a conference in Tripoli to discuss the relationship between Sufism and the thought of Colonel Gheddafi. In the post Hakim Bey says: “...*the Sanussi order still exists (‘just not the royal branch of it’, as a Libyan delegate told me)...*” (“Jihad Revisited”, 6<sup>th</sup> August 2004, <http://www.16beavergroup.org/mtarchive/archives/001033.php>, accessed 25<sup>th</sup> November 2012).

Sufism is constantly praised by media as part of the national cultural heritage. In its transition from despicable religiosity to celebrated spirituality, however, Libyan mysticism seems to have changed. Most specifically, it seems to have lost its miracles.

#### **4- *A Jihad made of miracles* ( Non-*Sanusy* Narratives of Resistance)**

As we have seen, the non-*Sanusy turuq* maintained a neutral position in the war against the Italians and, subsequently, they unwillingly became a tool in the political manoeuvres of the regime of Gheddafi. In looking at this process one might formulate the opinion that the history of the orders is characterised by a certain ‘passivity’ particularly when compared with the one of the *Sanusiya*. Nonetheless, in some local narratives of the past the brotherhoods appear as ‘active’ agents in the historical vicissitudes of the country, at least for what concerns the colonial period. Though ready to recognise that the *Sanusiya* was the only order that took arms against the colonisers, my informants often clarified to me that the other *turuq* played a role in the anti-colonial struggle. When I asked about these non-*Sanusy* narratives of resistance, I was frequently told that the Sufis performed miracles in front of the Italian officers in order to demonstrate that God was on the side of the Libyans. Though extremely brief and un-detailed these stories were presented to me as having an ‘historical’ significance: they represented a record of the non-*Sanusy* participation in the colonial war. In telling me these narratives, however, my informants also stressed to me that Sufi miracles (or at least certain kinds of Sufi miracles) were once much more frequent than nowadays.

The ‘*jihad* made of miracles’ was mentioned to me by Libyans of different age and social status both inside and outside of Tripoli. Often the occasional story-teller would tell me about these miraculous

events upon learning that I was an Italian citizen<sup>27</sup>. Other times the stories were brought up because the conversation was taking place in a location where a miracle had happened in colonial times<sup>28</sup>. Benito Mussolini or General Graziani would occasionally appear as characters in the narration. More often, however, the story would feature a nameless “*Italian officer*”. Though different in the details, these accounts were usually characterised by the same narrative structure. In the first part of the story the overbearing Italian officer challenged the member of a brotherhood to prove that he was a real “*marabutto*”<sup>29</sup>. Accepting the challenge, the Sufi performed a miracle in order to demonstrate that Libyans - and Muslims in general - enjoyed the favour of God. Finally, the Italian surrendered in front of the miraculous powers of the pious Sufi, and either embraced Islam as the true religion or began to treat the Libyans with respect<sup>30</sup>. The chronological dimension of these tales of resistance (and conversion) was often kept rather vague by my informants (“*during the colonial occupation*”). The temporal connotation of the miraculous *jihad*, however, was presented to me also as a time where certain specific manifestations of the divine were more common than in the present.

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<sup>27</sup> Further reflections on my presence in Libya as an Italian anthropologist can be found later on in the introduction.

<sup>28</sup> On the relationship between history, geography, memory and story-telling see Douglas 1968: 65; 1975:146; Basso 1984; Bloch 1998: 120 - 121; Lowenthal 1985; Casey 1993: 273-278. On the complex relationship between history and anthropology see Fabian 1983: 37-52; Axel 2002: 1-44; Lambek & Atze 1995; Lambek: 2002: 3-49; Simpson & Kresse 2008. On topography and mysticism see De Certeau 1992:21. On the relationship between folk-poetry and colonial memory in Libya see Ahmida 2005.

<sup>29</sup> Italianised version of the word “*murabut*”, “*saint*” (see footnote 10) attested in early Italian accounts on Libya (Della Cella 1912; Agabiti 1912: 75; Graziani 2002: 260). “*Marabutto*” has become part of the Libyan dialect together with a number of Italian words like *marshiabiedi* (“*marciapiedi*”, “pavement”), *barkiju* (“*parcheggio*”, “parking place”), and many others. At times the meaning of these words differs from the original Italian meaning. In Tripolitania, for instance, “*Ghusto*” (“*Gusto*”, “Taste”) indicates an entertaining (and therefore “tasty”) event, while a man with a goatee connected to the moustaches is described as having a “shinque” (“cinque”, “five”) because the shape of his facial hair resembles the number five in the Arabic script. On the peculiarities of Libyan dialects see Griffini 1913, Iannotta 1933, Cesaro 1939 and Panetta 1943. For an analysis of the role played by the manual of spoken Arabic in colonial Libya see Airo’ 2003.

<sup>30</sup> On the under-studied phenomenon of the Italians who converted to Islam at the time of the colonial enterprise in Libya see Santarelli et al. 1986: 156. On the Islamic notion of miracle as proof to be exhibited in answer to a challenge by an unbeliever see Flueckiger 2008 and Van Lent & Bearman 1997: 615. For an analysis of the same concept in other cultural contexts see Davis 1998 and Dempsey 2005.

The protagonists of these stories were often described to me as “*Sufi persons*” without any specific connotation. Other times, however, the raconteurs were able to identify the name of the wonder-maker and his membership to a specific brotherhood, as in the case of the famous *Sidhi*<sup>31</sup> Abdallah al Fitury, an ‘*Arusy*<sup>32</sup> character of the past whose miraculous adventures occupied a number of conversations I had in the Tripoli area. Born in Ajillat (a small town at about 70 kilometres from the capital), *Sidhi* Abdallah was imprisoned by the Italians and deported together with other Libyans to the Italian island of Ponza<sup>33</sup>. As it was explained to me by a number of interlocutors, the Sufi was kept under arrest by a particularly stern Italian officer and, when the daughter of this man fell mysteriously ill, challenged to perform a miracle. Intentioned to demonstrate the truth of Islam to the oppressors, *Sidhi* Abdallah read some verses from the *Qur’an* over the girl and, having succeeded whereas the Italian doctors had not, he was recognised as a holy person and offered freedom. Narratives similar to the one of *Sidhi* Abdallah were reported to me featuring members of other *turuq*. Issawis, however, were amongst the main protagonists of these stories, even when the story-tellers were not associated with the *Issawy* order. Interestingly, those who told me these tales explained to me that in the colonial past the *Issawiya* used to perform a very specific typology of miracles, and that these special wonders, or *karamat*, had disappeared in modern times.

Unlike other narratives of ‘miraculous resistance’ the *Issawy* tales were always characterised by one recurrent theme: the need to show the colonisers that even though they had conquered Libya they could not subjugate the bodies of the Libyans. In some cases the protagonist (often an anonymous *Issawy*) would impress the colonial oppressor by drinking a cup of poison without suffering any damage or by stabbing himself with a knife without dying. In other cases the *Issawy* would perform supernatural

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<sup>31</sup> Short for “*Sayyed*”. The term (which will be used extensively in this thesis) indicates a blood descendent of the prophet Mohammed, and it is a common epithet for a saint or an important person.

<sup>32</sup> See page 17.

<sup>33</sup> In colonial times a number of Libyans were deported by the Italians to this Island of the Tyrrhenian sea (Baldinetti 2010:23).

exhibitions demonstrating that he had the strength and the dexterity of an animal, or that he was capable of taming all sorts of wild beasts<sup>34</sup>. Though often centred on an act of self-harm these narratives would occasionally feature a ‘miraculous aggression’, as in the case of *Sidhi Nueji as-Serrari*, a deceased *Issawy* who famously performed a ‘miraculous attack’ against an Italian in the area of Beni-Walid (South-West of Tripoli). As I was told on a number of occasions, *Sidhi Nueji* was challenged by an Italian general, and in order to demonstrate the truth of Islam he stabbed the officer with a sword leaving him miraculously un-harmed. Tales of Issawis demonstrating the power of God over their own bodies (or over the bodies of the colonisers) were a constant feature of my field-work. Interestingly, however, the story-tellers often felt the need to add that with time the *Issawiya* had abandoned its ‘self-hurting miracles’ and its ‘animal powers’. Though once used to defend Islam against the infidels, these practices were now described to me as problematic, old-fashioned and even irreligious.

The narrations of the miraculous *jihad* of the Issawis struck me for a number of reasons. On the one hand, these stories featured the notion of miracle as “weapon of the weak” (Scott 1990) thus evoking a series of similar examples documented by the anthropological literature (Gilsenan 1990: 77; Reeves 1995: 310) and by the scholarship on oppression and resistance (Fanon 1963:44; Llewellyn 1985). On the other hand, these narratives had also the purpose of explaining that *Issawy* practices had radically changed with time. Doubtlessly, these tales represented an attempt to portray the Italians as witnesses of the truth of

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<sup>34</sup> Though absent in the Italian military documents these practices are attested in other Italian sources of the time. Agela and Cerbelli (1949: 41- 43) explain that the Issawis of Tripoli were able to “stab themselves with swords from front to back without producing any blood...and to perform jumps like cats despite having received no acrobatic training” (Agela & Cerbelli 1949: 43 translation mine). A similar description can be found in Agabiti 1912: 77. “Fakiristic exhibitions “are also briefly mentioned by Evans-Pritchard (1949:88). According to Jones, in colonial Algeria the French were the object of a similar miraculous *jihad* launched by local Issawis. In dealing with the *Issawiya* the French deployed professional illusionists from France with the purpose of un-masking the *Issawy* ‘tricks’ Jones 2010.

Islam in order to express the spirit of resistance of the local Muslims<sup>35</sup>. However, in telling me these stories Issawis expressed often a paradoxical mixture of pride and ‘distance’. Though proud of their miraculous past, they also clarified to me that Issawis had changed their spiritual priorities. In describing their brotherhood as a powerful Sufi order that had ‘fought’ the oppressors through miracles, the *Issawy* story-tellers explained to me that the order was now concerned only with the teachings of the *Qur’an*, thus implying a discrepancy between *karamat* and the dictates of the holy book. During conversations and interviews, some Issawis maintained an ambivalent position towards *karamat* describing them as problematic practices that though powerful should not be performed by good Muslims. Others explained to me that since Libya was no longer oppressed by infidels *karamat* had simply lost their purpose of proofs for non-Muslims. Others in turn, told me that even though *karamat* might have been necessary at the time of the *jihad* they were nevertheless practices that explicitly contradicted Islamic orthodoxy.

Though initially convinced that the *Issawiya* had lost its miracles in the course of my field-work, I realised that the order had simply lost a specific type of miracles. With time I slowly understood that many Issawis rejected the miraculous practices related to invulnerability and to the acquisition of animal powers, but that they had nonetheless kept the notion of ‘miracle’. Being members of a Sufi *tariqa*, Issawis were very much concerned with miraculous manifestations of the divine and with mystical experiences. However, they had changed their attitude towards those specific miraculous expressions that had made them well-known in the past developing the idea that these practices were somehow in contradiction with the *Qur’an*. Furthering my exploration of *Issawy* practices I also realised that a small number of Issawis had kept these practices alive and that, unlike the majority of the members of the order,

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<sup>35</sup>Similar ethnographic cases where the oppressor has been ‘translated’ into a familiar narrative language by the oppressed can be found in Worsley 1970; Clyde Mitchell 1971; Comaroff 1985; Boddy 1989: 269-309; Taussig 1993: 1-88. For a more philosophical take on the process of making the ‘other’ similar to oneself see Ricoeur 1990.

they saw *karamat* as being compatible with the dictates of *Qur'an* and *Sunna*. When I asked this restricted group about their capacity to make their bodies invulnerable and capable of feral strength, I was told that *karamat* are the expressions of an ancient body of *Issawy* secret knowledge entirely based on the *Qur'an*<sup>36</sup>. It was this discovery of the relationship between secrecy, *karamat* and the *Qur'an* that made me re-frame my approach to *Issawy* miracles. Both those Issawis who had kept the *karamat* of their predecessors and those who had abandoned them seemed to be concerned with miraculous manifestations and with the necessity to follow the textual apparatus of Islam. The difference between the two, however, lay in their relationship with the notion of 'secret'. While some members of the order had kept an esoteric approach towards miracles and towards textual orthodoxy, the majority of the Issawis had not. Throughout the decades, while Libya was transiting from colonial oppression to '*Qur'ano-centric*' home-made Socialism, the *Issawiya* had somehow lost its secrets.

## 5- Keeping the Enchantment, Losing the Secrets (Miracles, Modernity and Secrecy)

The *Issawy* order seems to have lost its miracles, but in fact it has only lost its secrets. Even though, as I have shown, *Issawy* secret practices are attested in the narratives of the colonial times they have been abandoned in more recent times, and in order to understand this change in *Issawy* spirituality it is important to contextualise my discussion in light of current anthropological debates on modernity,

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<sup>36</sup> The secretive dimension and the Quranic foundation of *Issawy karamat* has been completely ignored by the literature on the *Issawiya*. According to Brunel, the mimicry of animal behavior found amongst Issawis was simply the fossil of a pre-Islamic carnivalesque practice that has survived in Morocco and in other North-African countries (Brunel 1926: 214; Hammoudi 1993). According to Eliade, who took an interest in the brotherhood, these practices were the reminiscences of a pagan mystery cult involving lycanthropy (Glasse' 2002:409). Acts of Self-mutilation have been noticed by anthropologists dealing with other Sufi brotherhoods in the Islamic world (Crapanzano 1971, 1973; Gilsenan 1973; 211; Van der Veer 1992; Frishkopf 1999: 339; Hoffman 1995:85-86; Shannon 2004: 385; Louw 2007:45; Biegman 2009; Pinto 2010:468). However, these scholars have

put more emphasis on the mysterious aspect of these practices than on the secretive one. On flagellation in the context of public display of mourning amongst Muslim communities see Ayoub 1978; Ende 1978; Hegland 1998; Abou-Zahab 2008. For a more comparative analysis of self-harm in religious phenomena see Bloch 1992; Glücklich 2001.

miracles, Sufism and secrecy. For most of the twentieth century scholars have held the conviction that miracles were bound to disappear (Giddens 1997: 441; Soares 2005: 3). Influenced by the theories of Max Weber (1968, 1978, 1991) – but also, indirectly, by earlier philosophers like Vico (1970), Hume (1989), and Comte (Hadden 1997: 27-30) – social scientists have long believed that miracles and modernity were incompatible, and that this incompatibility had to do with the very features of the modern age. According to Weber, the advent of modernity brought about an inevitable bureaucratisation of human institutions, and, consequently a rationalisation (or ‘disenchantment’) in the way human beings dealt with the universe (Weber 1968, 1978, 1991). Following this framework, scholars have either foreseen a gradual decline of religion, or predicted that modern religious phenomena were bound to lose their mysterious and miraculous aspects (Berger 1967; Wilson 1975; Howell & van Bruinessen 2007:5). Today, with very few exceptions (Bruce 1996; Hamilton 1995: 186; Chaves 2004), academics have abandoned this conceptualisation of modernity (Parsons 1967: 383-425; Casanova 1994; Martin 1978; Swatos & Christiano 1983, 1999; Alridge 2007: 100-128). Social scientists have noticed that the importance of religion has not diminished in modern times (Martin 1978, 2002), and that religious phenomena have not become less ‘enchanted’ or less ‘mysterious’ (Luhmann 1989; Comaroff & Comaroff 1993, 1999; Heelas & Woodhand 2005; Dempsey & Raj 2008) even in those contexts where formal attachment to religion has become weaker (Davie 1994; Lester 2005). Propelled by this evidence, scholars have realised that Weberian theory was based on the erroneous belief that mankind was going to transit from pre-modern ‘magic’ to modern ‘religion’, a notion deeply rooted in nineteenth century evolutionary ideas (Malinowski 1948: 68-92; Douglas Frazer 1988: 2003: 72-90; Howell & Van Bruinessen 2007:5).

Similar developments in the theorisation of the miraculous can be identified in the study of Islam, and particularly in the anthropology of Sufism. Adopting a Weberian approach, Ernest Gellner famously argued that modern Muslim societies were destined to lose their miracles and, consequently, their mysticism (Gellner 1969b, 1981: 1-85, 99-113, 1992). Having identified the Sufi tradition as a particularly ‘enchanted’ form of Islam, Gellner predicted the modernity was going to be characterised by the decline of Sufism and by the diffusion of more ‘disenchanted’ approaches to Islam like Salafism<sup>37</sup> (ibid.). Similarly Clifford Geertz envisioned an inevitable Weberian shift from “maraboutism”<sup>38</sup> (centred on miracles and explicit manifestations of the divine) towards scripturalism (based on a ‘modern’ attention for the textual apparatus of Islam), thus declaring Sufism moribund (Geertz 1968). With time, however, these predictions have proven wrong. By re-visiting previous ethnographic works that had predicted a decline of Sufism (or a disenchantment of Sufi practices generated by the bureaucratisation of modern Muslim states) (Gilsenan 1973), anthropologists have proven that both Sufi practices and Sufi miracles are very much alive in modern times (Zarcone 1992; Hoffman 1995; Salvatore 1997; Yavuz 1999; Gilsenan 2000; Eickelman 2000; Pinto 2004; Eickelman and Salvatore 2004: xv; Voll 2007; Silverstein 2007; Chih 2007; Van Bruinessen 2007; Howell & Van Bruinessen 2007: 3-18; Flueckiger 2008). Scholars have successfully demonstrated not only that Sufism has survived even in ‘hostile’ environments (Pinto: 2004b: 191; Silverstein 2009, 2011), but also that the decline or the flourishing of Sufi practices has to do with specific socio-historical contingencies, and not with homogeneous trends within Islam (De Jong 1974, 1978; Baldick 2000: 158-159). In unpacking the dichotomy of ‘scripturalism’ and ‘miraculous religiosity’ anthropologists have also shown that Sufism is often characterised by a strict faithfulness to the ‘text’ (Pinto 2005; Sikand 2007; Weismann 2007), and that

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<sup>37</sup> See footnote 19  
<sup>38</sup> See footnote 10.

literalistic forms of Islam are not necessarily 'disenchanted' (Marsden 2005: 157-192) thus dismantling the Gellnerian binomial of 'textual' and 'miraculous' Islam.

The anthropology of Islam has abandoned the notion of modernity as monolithic 'disenchanted' process and embraced the idea of different 'modernities' characterised by different and complex forms of religiosity (Ahmed & Donnan 1994; Eickelman & Piscatori 1996: 22-37; Salvatore 1997; Euben 1997; Abu Lughod 1998: 7-13; Eickelman 2000; Arkoun 2002; Eickelman & Salvatore 2004, Osella & Osella 2006; Simpson 2008:378-383; Masud et al. 2009). Following this line of thought, ethnographers of Sufi communities have proven not only that Sufi miracles and Sufi practices have still a role to play in the modern world, but also that the Gellnerian differentiation between 'textual Islam' and 'miraculous Islam' is misleading because Sufism is (and has always been) a composition of both. In revealing these dynamics, however, anthropologists have spent more time demonstrating that Sufism has 'survived' modernity than analysing the way in which it has survived. Those scholars who have demonstrated the modern persistence of Sufism have also indirectly (and often unintentionally) shown that many Sufi orders have undertaken a change in modern times. Doubtlessly, modern Sufis have neither renounced miracles nor developed a new attention for the 'text' (Van Bruinessen & Howell 2007: 10-11; Van Bruinessen 2009). Nonetheless, Sufi orders have often been forced to adapt to specific modern political contexts, and in doing so they have frequently abandoned or downplayed those aspects of their spirituality that clashed with state-sponsored religiosity (Ewing 1983, 2006; Gilsenan 1990: 237-250; Pinto 2004b: 191, 199; Silverstein 2007, 2011; Van Bruinessen 2007; Van de Bos 2007) or with locally diffused understandings of Islam (Gardener 1993; Frishkopf 1999; Knysh 2001: 413; Hoffman 2005; Hatina 2007: 396; Villalon 2007). In this process Sufi communities have not necessarily lost their enchantment or developed a new-found scripturalism. However, they have often embraced specific 'types of

enchantment' and specific understandings of 'textual orthodoxy' that were not necessarily part of their spiritual repertoire in the past (Gilsenan 1973: 24, 1990: 85; 2000; Ewing 1997: 180).

Whereas the majority of the anthropologists of Sufism have simply focused on unpacking the equation between modernity and disenchantment, Katherine Ewing has analysed the way in which specific localised modernities have impacted on Sufism (Ewing 1983, 1997). Drawing from the work of theoreticians interested in the relationship between modernity, identity and religion (Gramsci 1971; Foucault 1973, 1988; Lacan 1977), Ewing has suggested that Sufism has often experienced a 're-articulation' in its encounter with the modern nation state (or with forms of hegemonic ideology) (Ewing 1997: 65-90). Even though this encounter has not necessarily had a 'disenchanting' or a 'scripturalistic' effect (as Gellner argued), it has nevertheless produced hegemonic understandings of what counts as 'proper Sufism' and what does not (ibid.). Modern Sufis, in other words, have often experienced a hegemonic "split" (Ewing 1997: 47-64), so that practices and ideas that were once associated with Sufism have been labeled as not 'fully Sufi' by those in power (Ewing 1997: 201-270). According to Ewing, the relationship between Sufism and modernity should not be looked at through the lenses of a generalised theory of 'Sufi modernisation' (whether with a focus on disenchantment or on the persistence of enchantment). On the contrary, in Ewing's view, an analysis of Sufi practices should be guided by an understanding of the way in which Sufism has been re-defined according to local hegemonic projects of modernisation. Building on Ewing's argument one realises that anthropologists should not simply register the persistence of Sufi miracles or prove that Sufism has always been textual even in pre-modern times. On the contrary, ethnographers should look at how specific encounters between Sufism and modernity produce specific hegemonic 'styles' of enchantment and of textual orthodoxy.

This notion of a hegemonic “split” of Sufism is particularly useful for an understanding of the Libyan *Issawiya*. As I have previously explained, those Issawis who have abandoned *karamat* have neither become more ‘disenchanted’ nor developed an unprecedented necessity to follow the *Qur’an*, but simply changed their attitude towards secrecy. Bearing in mind Ewing’s argument, we realise that this change in *Issawy* spirituality can be understood by illuminating the effects that the modernising discourse of the Gheddafi regime has had on Sufism. Doubtlessly, the advent of the *Jamahiriyah* has not deprived the *Issawiya* of its sense of the miraculous, neither has it implanted a new textual orthodoxy that Issawis did not have before. However, the encounter between Sufism and the Qurano-centric modernising project of Gheddafi has produced a specific style of enchantment and of textuality that has forced Sufis to develop an ‘explicit’ spirituality with no secrets. This phenomenon became apparent to me when I compared the opinions of the majority of the members of the order with those of the few Issawis who had kept the secret knowledge of *karamat*. The first explained to me that, being Sufis, they dealt with the spiritual world (a world whose dynamics are mysterious and often miraculous), but they also clarified that *Issawy* practices are explicitly based on the *Qur’an* and characterised by an un-ambiguous orthodoxy. The second expressed the same level of ‘enchantment’ and the same attention for textual orthodoxy, but they also clarified that even though *Issawy* practices are based on the *Qur’an* some of these practices (like *karamat*) are secret, and one should be initiated in order to appreciate their orthodoxy. These explanations made me realise that the difference between those Issawis who rejected *karamat* and those who valued them lied neither in their degree of belief in the mystery nor in their level of ‘textuality’, but purely in their relationship with the notion of ‘secret information’.

Exploring the relationship between ‘secret’ and ‘mystery’ is particularly important for an understanding of the effects that Libyan modernity has had on the *Issawiya*. The majority of the Issawis described

themselves as members of an orthodox brotherhood that deals with mystery but only in a paradigm of explicit textuality where there is no space for secret information. The Issawis who had kept the knowledge of *karamat*, on the other hand, portrayed themselves as Sufis whose mysterious practices can be fully recognised as ‘orthodox’ only by those who partake in a specific secret knowledge. Both these two groups presented themselves as people who have a privileged relationship with the mysterious realm of the ‘unseen’, but they differed in the way they managed this relationship. Those Issawis who rejected *karamat* told me that Sufis can see and experience things that others cannot but only through practices that are accessible (though not necessarily understandable) to every Muslim. Those who valued secret knowledge, on the contrary, explained to me that in order to access the invisible world a Sufi can make use of a set of information which is secret for the un-initiated. In a sense, they both described Sufism as having a ‘hidden’ (and therefore, ‘secret’) dimension. However, the first described the esoteric side of their practices as a matter of mysterious and unexplainable phenomena, while the second portrayed it as a combination of mysterious dynamics and of secret information. In light of this consideration one can understand how the encounter between Libyan modernity and Libyan Sufism has produced a specific form of enchantment that leaves room for mysteries but not for secrets.

#### **6- Secrecy as Pedagogy, Secret as Experience (The purpose of *Issawy* Secrecy)**

A study of the Libyan *Issawiya* can help enrich the debate on the relationship between modernity and miracles but it can also contribute to furthering the anthropological discussions on secrecy. Anthropologists of Islam have studied the esoteric aspects of religion amongst Muslim communities (Clarke 1976; Shankland 2004; Marsden 2005: 157-192; Gemmeke 2009) and Sufi communities (Gilsenan 1973, 1990; Brenner 1984: 105; Soares 1996:742, 2005: 127-152; Brenner 2000; 2005: 127-152; Flueckiger 2006; 2008: 178) identifying the “esoteric episteme” that characterises many forms of

Sufi knowledge (Brenner 2000). However, these ethnographers have also often adopted a simplistic conceptualisation of the notion of 'secret' in Sufi practices. Even though these scholars have noticed that Sufi secrecy entails both 'dealing with mysteries' (Gilsenan 1973: 24, 36) and 'possessing a body of concealed information' (Dilley 2009:59), they have not investigated the relationship between these two facets of the 'secret' properly. All Libyan Issawis, as I have explained, portray themselves as Sufis whose practices have a mysterious and esoteric side, but if some include secret information in this paradigm, others do not. An analysis of *Issawy* practices can therefore contribute to a better anthropological understanding of secrecy by revealing that Sufis can conceptualise the esoteric facet of Sufism in different ways. However, it can also help deepen the anthropological debate concerning the very purpose of secrecy.

Anthropologists have taken different positions in analysing the dynamics of concealment. Some ethnographers have noticed that those who deal with secrets put more emphasis on the 'form' of secrecy than on its 'content', and that maintaining the notion that 'there is secret' is often more important than protecting the secret itself (Gell 1980: 737; Bellman 1981, 1984; Wagner 1984; Piot 1993; Taussig 1999). Secrecy, according to these scholars should not be looked at simply as a voluntary act of concealment, but as a type of 'aesthetics' : a way to portray the universe as having a hidden dimension (Bellman 1975, 1984; Herdt 1990, 2003; Ferme 2001: 1-21; Piot 1993; Urban 1997) and society as having 'things that should be left un-said' (Simmel 1950). Other anthropologists, however, have preferred to concentrate on the purpose of secrecy illuminating different functions of concealment (Fulton 1972; Ottenberg 1989), and paying particular attention to the use of secrecy as a tool of power (La Fontaine 1977; Bledsoe & Roby 1986). These ethnographers too have noticed that secrecy is more a matter of 'form' than of 'content' (Barth 1975, 1987, 1990; Murphy 1980; Godelier 1982, 1986; Ottenberg 1989;

Herdt 2003: 60-61). Instead of focusing on 'aesthetics', however, they have suggested that often those who claim to be the 'protectors of the secret' have, in fact, no secret to protect and that secrecy is therefore a deceptive tool used to subordinate 'those who do not know' (ibid.). Doubtlessly, recent studies have shown that while secrecy is frequently used to perpetrate domination it can also have, at the same time, other functions like the one of protecting practices that are perceived to be at risk of disappearing (Herdt 2003: 34). Even still, anthropologists are still very much influenced by the notion of secrecy as instrument of power, particularly when it comes to analysing the internal dynamics of Sufi groups (Werbner 1995: 151).

These ethnographers have successfully shown that secrecy is often a matter of aesthetics (or of 'form' rather than of 'content') and that acts of concealment carry an intrinsic hierarchical dimension (an inherent differentiation between 'those who know' and 'those who do not'). Nonetheless, these anthropologists have also largely ignored indigenous motivations for secrecy (Bellman 1984:143; Piot 1993:354). When I asked those Issawis who have kept the knowledge of *karamat* about their "esoteric rationale" (Bok 1989: 39)<sup>39</sup>, I was often told that secrecy is most of all a pedagogical necessity. These members of the order explained to me the knowledge of *karamat* is secret because the Sufi must undertake a specific spiritual path before he can understand them, thus highlighting a 'didactic' aspect of secrecy that has never been noticed by scholars interested in forms of esoteric knowledge. More than once these Issawis clarified to me that secrecy is part of pedagogy: the novice who enters the order must be gradually exposed to certain aspects of *Issawy* knowledge, otherwise he might misunderstand them. This pedagogical conceptualisation of secrecy is very far from the anthropological understanding of

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<sup>39</sup> According to philosopher Sissela Bok there is always a specific "esoteric rationale for protecting what is held sacred and the secrets that partake of it" (Bok 1989: 39)

concealment as tool of power and from the negative connotation of secrecy as ‘deception’ that can be found in a number of publications (Simmel 1950: 331; Tefft 1980: 13-14, 1992; Herdt 2003: 48; 55).

Unlike those anthropologists who have stressed the importance of the ‘form’ of secrecy over its ‘content’, in conversations Issawis expressed a ‘holistic’ understanding of the two. The few members of the order who had kept the performance of *karamat* explained me that, in the end, it is the very ‘content’ of secret knowledge that demands the ‘form’ of secrecy. These Issawis told me that if one is to understand *karamat* he needs to have a direct experience of them and that being ‘experiential’, *karamat* cannot be fully ‘explained’ verbally. The secrecy of these practices, therefore, was presented to me as being motivated both by the pedagogical necessities of Sufi knowledge and by the very nature of this knowledge. This understanding of secret knowledge as a combination of secret information to be learned and of specific experiences to be had is extremely interesting, particularly when bearing in mind that anthropologists, as we have seen, have emphasised the form (or the ‘doing aspect’) of concealment over the content (or the ‘knowing aspect’) of secrecy (Barth 1990; Whitehouse 2000; Laidlaw 2004). Being based on both a specific knowledge of the *Qur’an* and on direct experience *Issawy* secrecy encapsulates both these aspects, thus challenging the notion of concealment as a matter of pure ‘form’.

In light of these considerations, the *Issawy* case appears as an important ethnographic conundrum. By analysing how Gheddafi’s religiosity has pushed the brotherhood to develop spirituality where there is space for mystery but not for secrets one notices the shortcomings that have characterised the literature on miracles and the scholarship on secrecy. On the one hand, the *Issawy* ‘loss of secrets’ demonstrates that anthropologists who deal with Sufism and modernity should not simply highlight the persistence of enchantment, but look for specific hegemonic modes of enchantment. On the other hand, the indigenous

explanations for *Issawy* secrecy show that ‘concealment’ is not necessarily a matter of ‘form’ (whether in an ‘aesthetic’ sense or in a ‘deceptive’ one) because secrecy can be a pedagogical measure where form and content are interconnected. These clarifications are extremely important for an understanding of the *Issawiya*: they show that in embracing a style of hegemonic enchantment which emphasises mystery over secrecy Issawis have also changed their approach to knowledge. Though still concerned with the mysteries of Sufism many members of the order have lost the notion of secrecy as ‘didactic tool’ which is necessary in managing some aspects of Sufi knowledge. In my analysis of the *Issawiya* I will touch upon these different facets of the ‘loss of secrecy’, deepening my discussion in the different chapters and contextualising my argument in light of the ethnographic material. Before I do so, however, it is important to present also the more ‘practical’ aspects of my research explaining how my relationship with Libyan Sufism came about and the way in which I decided to conduct my research in the field.

## **7- Accessing the Libyan *Issawiya* (Field, Field-work and Methodology)**

I was first exposed to Libyan society in the course of three visits I made to the Eastern part of the country in 2002 and 2003 as a member of the archaeological mission of the University of Chieti. At the time I was conducting a survey in the famous Greek Necropolis of Cyrene (modern *Shahat*)<sup>40</sup> in order to collect material for my dissertation in Classical Archaeology. During these visits I realised that as much as I was fascinated by Libyan archaeology, I had also a strong interest in the Libyan people. While staying in *Shahat* I heard about a group of people who “*stab themselves with knives without dying*”. My unethical curiosity led me to ask my friends whether I could see this miracle, and one night I was taken to a local *zawiya* where I took part in a large Sufi gathering. Contrary to my expectations, the evening did not

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<sup>40</sup> Libya presents a rich archaeological landscape characterised by a beautiful and complex mixture of Greek and Roman material. It is interesting to notice that the flux of Greek immigration to the country has continued throughout the centuries, at least in the Eastern part of Libya. Today the descendants of Greek and Cretan immigrants (commonly referred to as “*Gritli*”) are perfectly integrated in the local tribal system of Cyrenaica. Some of them have also kept the use of Greek language.

involve any miraculous performance, but it nevertheless implanted in me a strong interest for Sufism. Following the completion of my Mphil in Anthropology I applied therefore for a research visa in order to study the Libyan Sufi orders. After nine months of long waiting, I realised that the Libyan embassies of London and Rome did not know how to deal with my situation. None wanted to take the risk of offering a visa to a ‘suspicious’ archaeologist who wanted to return to Libya in order to study people instead of tombs. Thanks to my ‘archaeological connections’ I finally managed to get in contact with the “Umar al Mukhtar University” of al-Baydha whose personnel, unlike the Libyan immigration officers, understood (and supported) my transition from archaeology to anthropology.

After a short one month visit made on a tourist visa in December 2006, I was able to come back to Libya with an invitation letter of the University of al Baydha in early March 2007. The actual release of the visa took quite some time and involved a mysterious combination of stamps, conversations, visa-renewals, letters, waiting rooms and trips from al Baydha to Tripoli which is too complex to be summarised here. Eventually, however, I was allowed to remain in the country for fourteen months until the end of April 2008 and to spend the vast majority of my time concentrating on my research. Given my previous ‘Cyrenaican experience’ I initially intended to conduct my field-work in the Eastern region, but I soon realised that the Sufi orders were mainly concentrated in the capital. When I decided to move to Tripoli (with the blessings of the “Umar al Mukhtar University”), the head of the ‘Department of Antiquities’ of the capital kindly allowed me to stay in “Villa Volpi”, a house in the city centre built during the time of the Italian occupation that had been re-converted into a small museum closed to the public, and that became my Tripolitan home.

At the time of my research Libya presented a reasonably high level of scholarisation and literacy. As part of Gheddafi's project of modernisation of the country, the government had implemented the building of a series of universities. Every reasonably large urban centre in Libya had a university (with teaching personnel often working in more than one university at the same time), a phenomenon which is particularly striking when bearing in mind that at the time of independence ninety percent of the population was illiterate (Obeidi 2001: 31-38; Vandewalle 2006: 51). Even still, the educational system of the country did not meet the need for trained and skilled personnel (Fathaly & Palmer 1980: 28), and I could detect a certain presence of foreign high-skilled labour, particularly in the capital. As for the employment rate, in 2003 Libya's unemployment was estimated at thirty percent (Vandewalle 2006:184) and even though it is difficult to gather more recent data, I am under the impression that the situation has not particularly improved. I have rarely witnessed extreme poverty in Tripoli, but Libya struck me as a rich country inhabited by not particularly rich people. The proliferation of the private sector (a trend that has accompanied the *Jamahiriya*, particularly in recent years) had brought a certain level of economic vivacity (Vandewalle 2006: 139-196). Nonetheless, many of my Libyan friends complained about the difficulties they encountered in finding a stable job and buying a house<sup>41</sup> During my stay Libya was also undergoing a constant growth in terms of urban population, at least in Tripoli. In the early twentieth century less than one fifth of the population lived in urban areas and oases, and even though according to some scholars the figure had likely remained un-changed (Vandewalle 2006: 15) many of my friends told me that their families had recently moved to the capital (a phenomenon that seems to be the natural progression of certain trends identified by works published during the first decades of the *Jamahiriya* - Fathaly & Palmer 1980: 28; Peters 1982:115).

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<sup>41</sup> Renting a house was very much perceived in negative terms by the totality of my Libyan informants.

In political terms, the majority of my Libyan informants (both Sufis and non-Sufis) seemed to be in a state of imposed (and at times voluntary) political alienation (a phenomenon that has been documented in broader terms by some works on political culture in Libya - Obeidi 2001; Werfalli 2011). As it will be clear to the reader, I have interacted with people who were close to (or even working for) the regime as much as with individuals who preferred to stay as far as possible from politics. However, for what concerns this second category, the interviews and the conversations I had were often coloured by a sense of resignation and impotence. Some of my Libyan friends engaged in what one might call ‘everyday acts of resistance’ (Scott 1990), and often joked about Gheddafi, or criticised the regime’s policies in the privacy of their houses (particularly for what concerned the lack of civil, political and human rights in the country – De Bona 2011). Nonetheless, the same people frequently described the regime as something that could not be possibly fought against. In its four decades of power, Gheddafi had ensured that Libyans did not have the tools one might need to organise a revolt. As I have witnessed during my field-work, the secret service was omnipresent in Libya, and people were very much aware of the fact that they were constantly watched, monitored and observed. As I will show later on in the thesis, many had either memories or knowledge or personal experience of repression and violence operated by the regime. Very often this proved to be quite a strong deterrent for any potential act of resistance. Obviously, this is not to say that Libyans did not wish for their country to change, or for the regime to come to an end. Indeed, many, particularly amongst the youth, expressed these desires to me. Quite differently, people often told me that they did not know how to change their country, and that they had to resign to the hope that things will one day change for the better.

Tripoli became my home for a few months. The capital is the country’s largest commercial and manufacturing centre, the site of the University of Tripoli and the political nexus of the *Jamahiriyah*. As

part of the internal policies of the regime Tripoli played a fundamental role in keeping a centralised management of the country. The city hosts a series of public offices and institutions that operate on a national scale, and it is not uncommon to meet Libyans from different parts of the country who are visiting the capital in order to solve a bureaucratic issue, get their passport done or collect documents that cannot be produced by local offices. Tripoli's city centre is a mixture of impressive buildings of the Fascist era, gigantic billboards portraying Gheddafi in different phases of his life, cafes, markets, and shops. "*Saha Khadra*", the "Green Square", the main plaza of the capital stands as the centre of the centre. On the square, the "*Soraya el Amra*", the "Red Castle", a fortress built by the Knight of St. John in the sixteenth century which is today the site of the museum of Tripoli. The streets of Tripoli are often crowded with taxis<sup>42</sup> and people. However, walking through the city particularly in the evening, one can feel a sense of intimacy (often of 'small- scale quietness') that cannot be found in other North-African capitals. Tripoli is a city, the largest Libyan city, but at times it feels like a small place, even on Thursday night, when many Tripolitans go out, ready to enjoy the long week-end<sup>43</sup>. Some Tripolitans have kept a certain knowledge of the different families living in the different areas of the city; some describe the city in terms that resemble a town rather than a capital. Even still, during the months I dedicated to my research on the *Issawiya* the capital of Libya stood as complex universe made of rich neighbourhood, as much as of poor (or even dangerous) areas. It is by moving in this urban texture that I approached the *Issawiya*.

As soon as I realised that the *Issawiya* was the largest *tariqa* in the city, I immediately started to build up a network of friends and informants in the different *Issawy zawaya* of Tripoli. As I will show in the

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<sup>42</sup> Libya does not have a system of train transport nor does it have a service of bus transport. Urban transport is organised through taxis. Inter-urban transport entails paying for a sit on private cars and mini-buses. The price for a taxi in Tripoli is around 2 or 3 dinars while the price of extra-urban journeys by car varies greatly. In terms of airplanes, the country is connected by a good network of flights, particularly between Tripoli and Benghazi. On transport in Libya see Elazzabi 1982.

<sup>43</sup> In Libya many professions have both Friday and Saturday as days off.

following chapters, the *Issawy zawaya* constitute an intricate urban network of *shuyukh* (sing. *shaykh*, “Sufi masters”) and *muridin* (sing. *murid*, “disciples”). In approaching this complex network of people I have dealt exclusively with male individuals. Even though female Issawis do exist, they are very few in numbers, they do not take part in the activities of the *zawaya* in any way, and, most importantly they live a life which is scarcely accessible to an un-married European anthropologist<sup>44</sup>. My *Issawy* informants belonged to a highly differentiated social spectrum. Some scholars have shown that in the Moroccan context the *Issawy* brotherhood is linked with specific professions (particularly blacksmithing) (Geertz 1979). More generally, however, the literature dealing with the *Issawiya* in North-Africa has often described the *Issawy* order as a ‘popular’ brotherhood, (Brunel 1926; Drague 1951: 75; 121; André 1956: 216 – 217) and at times it has even suggested a link between the low-class social matrix of the order and its supposedly ‘heretic’ practices (Zghal 1976: 13; Hammoudi 1997: note 6): an approach that can be found also in ethnographies of the past dealing with so called ‘low Sufism’, understood as a form of Sufism which is practiced by the un-educated lower strata of society (Crapanzano 1973; Gilsenan 1973). A reading of the Italian colonial documents seem to confirm the view of a popular *Issawiya* since, according to the documents, in Tripolitania the order was particularly widespread amongst the lower strata of society (Baldinetti 2003). Interestingly, some of my Tripolitan informants told me that in the past some *Issawy zawaya* tended to be frequented by fishermen<sup>45</sup>. ‘Fossils’ of this relationship between the fishing community of the capital and the order can be seen even today, as in the case of the *Zawiya*

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<sup>44</sup> Even though my thesis is not concerned with gender-issues, it is important to clarify that in Libya the division of genders is (with very few exceptions) acute, or at least it is in my experience. To my knowledge, women are free to work, to dress as they like, to pursue an education at any level and, in many cases, to stay un-married if they wish. However, Libyan houses (in Tripoli as elsewhere) have always a ‘female section’ and a ‘male one’, and it is very rare for a male European visitor to be introduced to the ‘world of women’. The same division applies to a series of social occasions (weddings, funerals etc.). Towards the end of my field-work I heard about an all-women *zawiya* in the area of Misurata, but I could not check this information properly. Broader reflections on the role of women in the *Jamahiriyah* can be found in Souriau 1986; Davis 1987: 271- 273; Graeff-Wassink 1993; Obeidi 2001.

<sup>45</sup> Fishing is one of the most ancient and important activities in the city of Tripoli. The city is the site of an extremely important port (Norman 1965: 118-125, Anderson & Blake 1982). More broadly on Libyan industry, Oil – industry, agriculture (and economy in general) see Kubbah 1964; Allan 1981, 1982; Khader & El-Wifati 1987; Vandewalle 2006.

*asSaghira* (the “Small *Zawiya*”), one of the most ancient *Issawy zawiya* in Tripoli<sup>46</sup>, whose main hall hosts an old hand-made wooden ship model: a reminiscence of the *Issawy* devotion of some Tripolitan fishermen of the past. Nonetheless, it is interesting to notice that today, the order does not present any particular pattern of membership based on social class or profession. In the “Small *Zawiya*”, as in other *zawaya*, Issawis come from all walks of life, and form a diversified plethora of people with different degrees of education and different social statuses.

The notion of ‘low Sufism’ has been extensively criticised by the recent scholarship on Sufism (Howell & van Bruinessen 2007), particularly because it is based on the simplistic Gellnerian notion that Sufism has little to do with literacy, scriptures and education<sup>47</sup>. As a proof of the strength of this critique it is important to mention that amongst the Issawis I interacted with there were lawyers, doctors, teachers (both at universities and at schools), undergraduate and postgraduate students, imams, technicians of different kinds, businessmen, builders, workers, un-employed, and shop-keepers. I could not detect any substantial social difference between those Issawis who practiced *karamat* and those who did not (as the reader will realise, both categories presented an equal mixture of educated, un-educated, low class and high class people). Even though many of my informants tended to be over thirties the age-range of the Issawis I have interviewed was highly diversified (from teenagers to retired old men in their eighties), and so was their level of education (from primary school or no schooling, to university level). Generally speaking, the younger *Issawy* informants tended to be educated at a university level (mainly undergraduate), while the older ones tended to have lower levels of schooling. However, this should be taken more as an unquantifiable impression on my part rather than as a universal statement, since some of my older *Issawy* friends (both those who practiced *karamat* and those who did not) were highly educated

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<sup>46</sup> The “*Small Zawiya*” will be mentioned again later on in the thesis.

<sup>47</sup> See earlier on in the introduction.

professionals. A large number of my informants were able to converse in Italian or English (and French in some cases)<sup>48</sup>. Nonetheless, the great majority of my conversations were held in Arabic<sup>49</sup> (some of my *Issawy* friends could not speak any other language). I have resorted to English or Italian only rarely, mainly when my informants insisted that they preferred so and always making sure that the level of communication was good.

Dealing with the *Issawiya* meant also, in a sense, dealing with other Libyan brotherhoods. It is safe to say that the relationship between the *Issawiya* and the other Libyan orders is one of peaceful co-existence<sup>50</sup>. As I will show later on in the thesis, the life of the orders is characterised by a series of weekly activities, social gatherings, and special occasions, and it is not rare for members of other orders to take part to *Issawy* events (or even to *Issawy* rituals) and vice versa. I have not encountered any ‘competition’ between the orders. Generally speaking, Issawis tended to invite members of other orders to their gatherings. Occasionally, the Issawis I interviewed were also, at the same time, members of other *turuq*<sup>51</sup>. However, those people I interviewed who identified themselves as ‘Issawis’ (often demonstrating a fluid and complex sense of identity, as I will explain in the first chapter) tended to consider the *Issawiya* as

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<sup>48</sup> Many old Libyans both in Cyrenaica and Tripolitania have kept a knowledge of the Italian language (some of them have received schooling during the Fascist occupation). As for the younger generations, in Tripoli many attend courses in English, Italian or French organised by the British Council, by the Centre of Italian Culture, and by the French Cultural Institute. Finding a way to learn English seems to be one of the main concerns for the younger generations in the capital. A considerable number of young Libyans go to study abroad, (often in Italy or England) as the government offers grants and scholarships for this purpose.

<sup>49</sup> In preparation for my field-work I have studied Arabic for one year, undertaking two intense courses in Arabic Grammar and in spoken Modern Standard Arabic at the “School of Oriental and African Studies” of London. I have also taken private Arabic lessons in London, studied the language in my spare time with the use of audiocassettes and signed to an accelerated Arabic language course in the city of Cairo in the summer of 2006. The fact that Libyan Arabic features a pronunciation which is very similar to the one of Standard Arabic (and a grammar which is much easier) helped me to become familiar with the dialect.

<sup>50</sup> Occasionally some of my informants told me that in the past, particularly during the *Sanusy* kingdom, the *Issawiya* had some clashes with the *Sanusiya* for the ‘control’ of certain areas. The same people, however, added that rivalries were usually resolved in diplomatic ways, and that in Libya the relationship between the orders has always been generally peaceful.

<sup>51</sup> See footnote 9. Issawis were usually open about their multiple membership to different orders, except for those who were affiliated with the *Sanusiya*. (see footnote 20).

their ‘main order’. Some Issawis were particularly prone to highlight a link between the *Issawiya* and the *Rifa’iya*<sup>52</sup>, and identified themselves as Issawis – Rifa’is. Others, however, simply recognised an historical relationship between the two orders (but firmly affirmed to be Issawis), and others in turn did not mention this relationship at all. More often, Issawis demonstrated a close relationship with the ‘*Arusiya*<sup>53</sup>, the second largest order in the country. Some of my *Issawy* informants were also, at the same time, ‘Arusis (and often *Issawy* gatherings were characterised by a considerable ‘*Arusy* presence), but generally speaking they treated the *Issawiya* as a distinct, recognisable and specific entity.

During my previous experiences in Libya I had become used to the strict perquisitions of the Libyan police, as well as to the presence of regular check-points in the streets. My access to the ‘field’, however, proved to be less problematic than expected. In the course of my research I was frequently interrogated by the police, but mainly in a polite way. Even though I have been occasionally stalked (or detained in a police-car for a few hours), I was largely allowed to perform my visits to the *zawaya* freely and to take notes undisturbed. Often, while attending a Sufi event in a *zawiya* a self-declared ‘agent’ in plain clothes would ask me to exhibit my documents and to wait under his custody until he had made” few phone-calls”, but I was never asked to report on the results of my research nor to submit my field-notes (which, out of precaution, I had decided to write in an ‘encoded’ way). Occasionally my Libyan friends would tell me that the police had enquired about me and that they had been forced to report on my movements. However, I have always encouraged my informants not to keep any of this information secret, and I have always enquired whether they had been mistreated by the police in any way (which luckily never happened). Paradoxically, the fact that I was continuously checked on by police-men (and always left free to continue my research with no consequences) contributed to re-enforce the trust of my informants by

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<sup>52</sup> The two orders merged in the early twentieth century, as explained in footnote 17.

<sup>53</sup> See page 17.

proving that I was 'clean'. Towards the end of my research (after I had bought my return ticket), I was asked to stay for one more month so that my file could be 'cleared' before the release of an exit visa, but I was also allowed to use this time to further my research and to collect some more data. Essentially, I have been constantly monitored, but always allowed to work without interference.

My presence as an Italian also proved less problematic than I thought, partly because Libya was going through a particular stage of its search for international recognition at the time of my research. While I was conducting my field-work the Libyan government managed to ratify a treaty with Italy that involved the payment of a large amount of money as compensation for the damages inflicted during the colonial occupation, and this broader political atmosphere contributed to making my presence more acceptable (or tolerable) for the local authorities. However, there were also other factors that played a part in my interaction with the Libyans as an Italian citizen. The majority of my informants associated 'Italy' not only with the atrocities of the Fascist era, but also with more recent and more positive memories. During my conversations I found out that a large portion of Italians had remained in the country until the seventies (when the regime had decided to expel them and to expropriate their lands) and that many of them had become fluent in Arabic and familiar with local customs. Though very aware (and proud) of their anti-colonial heritage, many of my Tripolitan friends had either experienced a peaceful interaction with this community or heard stories about it. Indeed, the fact that I was Italian did not prevent anyone from treating me with anything but utter respect and, very often, with affection.

Amongst the people who treated me with particular friendliness *Shaykh* Ramadan deserves a special mention. *Shaykh* Ramadan, a thirty-six year old *Issawy* master with a trimmed black beard and an extremely charismatic presence, is one of the few members of his brotherhood who has kept the secret

knowledge of *karamat*, but he is also in friendly terms with those Issawis who whole-heartedly reject these practices. *Shaykh* Ramadan proved to be a scrupulous, open-minded, and well-connected person with a love for books and ancient buildings: in short, an intellectual. In his life he gained a doctorate in Islamic Law, studied a series of different subjects (amongst which dentistry), and served as imam in a local mosque. Most of all, however, *Shaykh* Ramadan proved to be a mentor more than an informant. Born in a family that had been part of the *Issawy* order for centuries, Ramadan was a walking encyclopaedia of Libyan Sufism, and an invaluable source of information on mysticism as well as on the history of Tripoli. At the time of my field-work he had just published a book on the history of the *Issawiya*. Even though Ramadan never ‘monopolised’ my research (but always encouraged me to collect the opinions of other Issawis) he offered criticism, suggestions and moral support. Ramadan wanted to make sure I understood the complex world I was moving in, and in order to do so he invited me to his house (where he lived with his parents, his wife and his children) on a daily basis.

As will be apparent to the reader, *Shaykh* Ramadan played an important role in my research. In the course of my field-work, however, I have also spent a considerable amount of time with a large number of Issawis from different *zawaya* as well as with members of other brotherhoods, ‘non-denominational’ devotees of Sufism, personnel of the *Auqaf*<sup>54</sup> and of the *Idhara Turuq wa Zawaya*<sup>55</sup>, and even people who did not have a particular interest in Sufi matters<sup>56</sup>. My interaction with the brotherhood involved mainly taking part in the ritual life of the *zawaya* and visiting the houses of my *Issawy* friends. My ‘participant observation’ also entailed tours of the city, chats accompanied by a good cup of tea,

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<sup>54</sup> See page 18

<sup>55</sup> See page 20

<sup>56</sup> The only exception was represented by those associated with Salafism. As previously explained, Salafis have been (and still are) harshly persecuted by the Libyan government, As a consequence, I have only been able to collect very few interviews with them. Though extremely short, these conversations are dealt with in one of the chapters of the thesis.

communal meals and jokes. I have accompanied my informants while they performed their prayers in the mosque or relaxed in cafés, and often visited them at their work-place. Even though my research was mainly concerned with secrecy and miracles, I have had the opportunity to converse with Issawis on a number of different topics, to be introduced to their families and to share their life. In asking questions that might have been judged as ‘political’, I have always clarified the agenda of my research and asked my informants whether they felt comfortable discussing these matters or not. When dealing with Issawis who valued the secret knowledge of *karamat*, I have always been very respectful of the limits dictated by secrecy, even when this meant that I had to rely on the opinions of the Sufi masters and reduce my ‘access’ to the disciples. More importantly, I have never demanded for a miraculous demonstration. Neither did I complain when it was presented to me un-requested.

## **8– The Structure of the Thesis**

The information I have collected in the field – together with the theoretical concerns I developed in analysing this material - have very much informed the structure of this thesis. In order to present the different facets of my argument, I have divided this dissertation into five chapters. In the first chapter, I will present an overview of the structure of the *Issawiya*, describing the internal organisation of the *zawaya* and some fundamental aspects of the order (amongst which the *Issawy* conceptualisation of ‘secret’ and a series of differences and commonalities that characterise the way in which Issawis approach their *tariqa*). In doing so I will offer a framework for analysis that should be borne in mind by the reader in approaching the rest of the thesis. In my second chapter I will look at the ritual practices of the brotherhood furthering my discussion on secrecy and exploring both the weekly liturgical routine and the ‘special occasions’ that mark the social life of the *Issawiya*. In my third chapter I will deal specifically with the ‘loss of secrets’ that has characterised the order, presenting the main differences between those

members of the *Issawiya* who still perform *karamat* and those who do not. In my fourth chapter, I will contextualise my discussion within the political scenario of the *Jamahiriyah*, elucidating the relationship between Gheddafi's religiosity and the 'loss of secrets', while in the fifth I will present other factors (mainly related to family dynamics) that should also be taken into account when trying to understand the changes that have taken place in *Issawy* spirituality. While the first four chapters are a combination of theoretical reflections and ethnographic descriptions, the last one is mainly ethnographic in its content. In order to maintain a stronger continuity between the sections of the thesis, I have decided to start each chapter with a very brief ethnographic vignette featuring the same character. Hopefully, this will help maintain cohesion within the work.

**“THE ESSENCE IS IN MOROCCO BUT THE SECRET IS IN LIBYA”  
The Structure of the Issawy Order**

*On the day of his initiation the murid did not seem anxious. The akhwan (the “brothers”, as members of a zawiya call themselves) were in a circle. The murid knelt down in front of the shaykh. Someone brought a large green flag. Two brothers placed the flag over the murid so that he was completely covered. The shaykh put his hand on the murid’s head, and all the brothers started chanting “La ilaha illa Allah”, “There is no God but God”. The shaykh joined the murid under the flag, both covered completely by the cloth. Later on I was told that during the initiation ceremony the shaykh kneels in front of the candidate, takes his hand and asks the murid to perform an oath. The flag was removed. The ceremony ended. The murid spoke to his shaykh who gave him a specific prayer to recite. The murid and I took a taxi and left. On the back-seat of the car hi lips were whispering, and I tried not to disturb him. He was praying and I envied him for having something to do during the trip. Intrigued by the ceremony, I started asking other shuyukh about the dynamics of the initiation to the brotherhood. To my surprise, however, I realised Issawy masters had different opinions on the matter. They all told me that joining the Issawiya meant entering into a brotherhood with a specific tradition, but if some insisted that the ceremony with the flag was necessary others did not. The Issawiya seemed to be a spiritual path where rules apply differently.*

***Many Issawis, One Issawiya (Introduction)***

In the introduction I have demonstrated that Libyan Sufism is a complex phenomenon that cannot be analysed by concentrating only at the *Sanusiya* as scholars have done in the past. In particular, I have shown that the *Issawiya* plays an important role both in Libya’s contemporary Sufi landscape and in local narratives of anti-colonial resistance. Following on from this necessary background, this chapter presents the *Issawiya* in greater detail, introducing the founder of the brotherhood, providing an account of the presence of the order in Tripoli, and focusing in particular on the structure of the *tariqa*. As I have previously explained, the Italian colonial

officers noticed that *Issawy zawaya* were particularly independent entities. Today, as we will see, the *Issawiya* has maintained this ‘fragmented’ structure. In this chapter I will show that the *Issawiya* is composed by different autonomous groups (or “*assanid*”) headed by independent Sufi masters (*shuyukh*) who do not recognise a common spiritual leader and who have very different understandings of the ‘rules’ of their brotherhood. In presenting this internal fragmentation, however, I will also show that, though divided, Issawis see themselves as members of the same brotherhood.

The *Issawiya* presents the observer with a paradox. *Issawy shuyukh* apply the regulations of their order differently, and live their role as Sufi masters independently. However, they also portray themselves as people who share the same spiritual identity. Unfortunately, the previous literature on Sufism does not provide us with the necessary analytical tools to unpack this paradox. Anthropologists interested in Sufi practices have often shown a preference for the study of brotherhoods with centralised organisation and with a homogeneous system of rules (Evans-Pritchard 1948; Cruise O’Brien 1971; Gilsenan 1973; Chih 2007: 21-22), demonstrating a predilection for cohesiveness that is of little help for an understanding of the ‘fragmented’ *Issawiya*<sup>57</sup>. Doubtlessly, ethnographers have noticed that Sufi orders have often a loose and decentralised structure characterised by division and fragmentation (Gilsenan 1973: 4-5, 65, 199; De Jong 1983). However, the very few studies that have dealt with ‘loose brotherhoods’ have

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<sup>57</sup> Past scholarship has suggested that gradual systematisation (both for what concerns the organisation and the internal rules of the Sufi orders) is a general trend in the history of Sufism all over the Muslim world (Trimingham 1998: 67-105; Chih 2007:21) and that often the *turuq* become more cohesive in order to survive in certain socio-political environments (Gilsenan 1973: 5-91). Gellner identified ‘pyramidal hierarchy’ as one of the defining aspects of Sufism defining the establishment of the Sufi orders as a “reformation in reverse” within Islam: the formation of a church-structure within a religion born without ecclesial hierarchy (Gellner 1971: 255; 1981: 48-51). Other anthropologists noticed that, being cohesive entities by nature, Sufi brotherhoods contribute to bring cohesion in society (Evans-Pritchard 1948; Day Howell & Van Bruinessen 2007: 21; Soares 2005:69). Generally speaking, as Evans-Pritchard’s analysis of Libyan Sufism shows, social scientists have held the opinion that ‘un-organised’ Sufi orders are destined to remain inconsequential in the large scheme of things (Evans-Pritchard 1949).

generally failed to analyse the relationship between identity and organisation (Crapanzano 1973), or focused on internal divisions (Chih 2007) without considering that Sufis who belong to a ‘loose’ order might nevertheless feel part of the same *tariqa*.

*Issawy* identity entails multiplicity and fragmentation, but also the idea that all Issawis belong to the same spiritual path. In this chapter I will attempt to account for this complex mixture of difference and commonality, and in doing so I will introduce an analytic framework that will inform the rest of the thesis. Borrowing from Talal Asad’s notion of “discursive tradition” (Asad 1986), I will demonstrate that even though *Issawy shuyukh* are independent leaders with different understandings of ‘*Issawy* rules’ they nevertheless legitimise themselves as Sufi masters by referring to a common ‘*Issawy* tradition’. In analysing the concept of *ijaza* (“licence”) – an indispensable component of *Issawy shaykh*-hood – I will demonstrate that the *Issawiya* is not merely a ‘loose’ order, but a *tariqa* characterised by a complex ‘discursive tradition’ that allows Issawis to do ‘different things in the same way’. In the chapter I will also analyse the role played by ‘mystery’ and ‘secrecy’ in this tradition. In particular, I will show that all Issawis see *shaykh*-hood as a condition based on a privileged relationship with the mysteries of the spiritual world, but I will also explain that whereas some *shuyukh* articulate this relationship in terms of ‘mysterious dynamics’, others see it as a condition that entails knowing a specific set of secret information. In presenting these aspects of the order I will introduce the reader to a series of concepts that will be referred to again in the other chapters, but I will also identify some historical factors that have contributed to determine a ‘fragmentation’ within the order.

### **1.1 Patron Saint and Perfect Shaykh (The Founder of the Order)**

As in all respectful ethnographies on Sufism, we need to begin with the founder. Sufi orders trace their origin to an initiator, and the *Issawiya* is no exception. *Sidhi*<sup>58</sup> Mohamed Ben ‘Aysa asSufiyan al Mukhtary (*usually* referred to as “*asShaykh al Kamil*”, “the Perfect *Shaykh*”, or as “*Fahlu arRijali*, “the Stallion amongst men” Brunel 11926:54), was born in Morocco into an *Idrisy sharif* family in the fifteenth century<sup>59</sup>. The few scholars who have taken a serious interest in the life of Ben ‘Aysa have lamented the impossibility to isolate the little biographic information from “the very abundant growth of hagiographic legend” (Michon 1978: 93). The historical profile of this intriguing character of Moroccan Sufism is particularly elusive. Even the narratives concerning the supernatural aspects of his life, though abundant, are scanty and undetailed. According to a widely diffused Libyan legend, the Perfect *Shaykh* was related on the maternal side to the famous Libyan saint *Sidhi* Abdusalam al Asmar, whose shrine in the city (or “holy city” if you trust certain sensationalist travel guides to Libya) of Zlitan is visited by large numbers of pilgrims until this day. *Sidhi* el Asmar (who will be mentioned again in the course of the thesis) is the most powerful indigenous figure of Libyan religiosity: his name is celebrated in songs and poetry, called up by people, and invoked by mothers when children cross the street and risk of being run over by cars. The claim that he and *Sidhi* Ben ‘Aysa shared the same blood is most probably erroneous (*shaykh* Ramadan explained that Ben ‘Aysa’s mother Meryem Mukhtariya was not a descendent of the prophet, while el Asmar’s was). Nevertheless, this claim

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<sup>58</sup> See introduction footnote 25.

<sup>59</sup> *Sharif*, pl. *ashraf*, indicates (like the word *sayyed* – see introduction footnote 25) a blood-descendent of the prophet Mohammed. An “*Idrisy*” is a *sharif* who traces his genealogy through the prophet’s grandson Hasan, and particularly through Hasan’s grandson Idris ibn Abdallah (d. 791), originator of the Idrisid dynasty in Morocco. The dates of birth and death of the Perfect *Shaykh* are disputed. Brunel proposes 1465-66 and 1526-27 (1926: 15), Trimingham, 1465 and 1524 (1998: 86), while Michon 1467-68 and 1523-27 (1978: 93). In his own book on the origins of the *Issawiya Shaykh* Ramadan, my main informant, opts for 1467 as date of birth of the Perfect *Shaykh* (al-Sara>ri> 2009: 15).

represents an interesting attempt to ‘indigenise’ the figure of the Perfect *Shaykh* by making him the relative of a well-known character in Libyan Sufism<sup>60</sup>.

According to a narrative collected by Brunel, seven months after his conception, still in his mother’s womb, the Perfect *Shaykh* asked God to purify him before he entered the world (Brunel 1926: 20-21). From early childhood he applied himself to Quranic studies, showing a supernatural proficiency in his schooling and attracting the curiosity of his preceptor who recognised him as a saintly child (ibid.). Still young, Ben ‘Aysa travelled through northern Morocco with his father (a pious but modest man) finally settling down in the city of Meknes, where he attached himself to eminent *shaykh* Ahmad al Harithi, and –after the death of his master – to famous *shuyukh* Muhammad asSaghir asSahli and Abdul Aziz Tabba (known as el Harrar, “the silk-maker”), all direct disciples of great North African Sufi Muhammad ibn Sulayman al-Jazuli<sup>61</sup> (Michon 1978: 93; Trimmingham 1998: 85-86). Al Jazuli was a member of the tariqa *Shadiliya*<sup>62</sup> and (though never eager to create a brotherhood of his own) he originated through his peculiar spirituality the prominent order of the *Jazuliya* (ibid.). The *Issawiya* could therefore be identified historically as a branch of the *Jazuly* order (and more broadly of the *Shadily tariqa*),

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60 *Sidhi* Abdusalam’s nickname (“*Al Asmar*”, “*the Brown*”) is most probably a vernacular distortion of “*asSamir*” (“*the one who is awake*”) in relation to the saint’s habit of indulging in spiritual exercises at night. *Sidhi* Abdusalam is particularly dear to the ‘*Arusy*’ brotherhood (see introduction page 17) of which he was a member. *Sidhi* Abdusalam is very much an ‘*Arusy*’ saint, and the story of a blood-relation between him and Ben ‘Aysa testifies therefore to a close relationship between the two major Tripolitanian orders of the *Arusiya* and *Issawiya* (see introduction). In his study on the Moroccan *Issawiya* Brunel reports on a number of narratives where the Perfect *Shaykh* meets or befriends other famous Sufi saints (Brunel 1926: 32; 54). Brunel comments with skepticism on the historicity of these narratives explaining that often the saintly figures met by the Perfect *Shaykh* were far from him not only topographically but also chronologically (ibid.)

<sup>61</sup> d. between 1465 and 1470. (ibid.)

<sup>62</sup> See introduction page 16.

and this certainly explains the ‘*Jazuly* elements’ that, according to many of my informants, characterise the practices of the *Issawiya*<sup>63</sup>.

Having concluded his mystical training, Ben ‘Aysa built a *zawiya*, gathering a number of disciples and gaining a remarkable reputation based on his religious knowledge and piety. Ben ‘Aysa’s fame, however, grew particularly because of his miraculous deeds. In Meknes the Perfect *Shaykh* became known because during his preaching each one of his auditors found in his words the answer to the questions they had in mind (Brunel 1926:35). His ‘miraculous reputation’ exceeded Morocco and, according to a famous poem written by Tunisian *Issawy shaykh* Abu bakr Sharif (and occasionally quoted to me by *Shaykh* Ramadan), a “king of Senegal”, having seen the Perfect *Shaykh* in a dream, decided to send him slaves as a homage for his holiness. The miraculous powers of the Perfect *Shaykh* seem to have been particularly prominent in relation to the wild and the harmful. He gained immunity to poison and snakes for himself and his disciples, and he became able to discipline dangerous beasts that would occasionally accompany him on his travels (Brunel 1926: 36, 58; Michon 1978: 93; Crapanzano 1980: 91; Andezian 1996: 98), developing a particularly friendly relationship with lions<sup>64</sup>. This particular aspect of Ben ‘Aysa’s saintly powers (which was reported to me by some of my *Issawy* informants but denied by others) is deeply connected with *Issawy* practices and it will be analysed later on in the thesis. For now, however, it suffices to say that the Perfect *Shaykh* embodies the well-known prototype of the “tamer of the wilderness”, a literary archetype which is particularly recurrent in the complex corpus of Islamic hagiography (Werbner 2003: 45-490; Schimmel 2003: 7-8).

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<sup>63</sup> The only discrepant source in this sense is Khushaim, according to whom the *Issawiya* originated from the Libyan order of the *Zarruqiya* (see Introduction footnote 15) (Khushaim 1976: 113). In light of both the available literature and the information I collected through my informants Khushaim’s statement appears to be completely wrong.

<sup>64</sup> According to some of my *Issawy* informants, Ben ‘Aysa was often accompanied by two lions.

Ben ‘Aysa lived in a time of deep political turmoil that took place between the end of the Marinid and the rise of the Sa’did dynasty in Morocco (Abu Nasr 1987: 202-234). Nevertheless, he appears not to have taken any position whether in sustaining local chiefs or in fighting against the Portuguese that were invading Maghreb at the time (Cornell 1990; Bennison 2002: 15-41). The Perfect *Shaykh* seems to have kept himself far from worldly politics. Even so, due to his popularity, he occasionally attracted the jealousy of local authorities, to the point of being forced to leave Meknes for a period of time (Michon 1978: 93). The link between Ben ‘Aysa and the city that was going to accept him as a patron saint, however, remained deep until – and long after – his death. From Meknes the *Issawiya* spread throughout Morocco, and, with time, throughout North-Africa. The Perfect *Shaykh* was buried in the *zawiya* he himself built in the city, a place which still exists and that I have learned to recognise by looking at the faded photographs you find on the walls of Libyan *zawaya*: a dis-coloured, two-dimensional celluloid link between Libya and the Moroccan mother of all *Issawy zawaya*.

### **1.2 *The Medina as a Microcosm (The Issawiya in Tripoli)***

The relationship between the *Issawy* order and Morocco was always commented on cursorily by my Libyan informants. Issawis described their brotherhood as a *tariqa* whose roots are in Morocco but also as an order that, with time, has become quintessentially Libyan. Even still, Issawis would occasionally mention anecdotes on the life of the Perfect *Shaykh* in Morocco, often referring to him as “*wali Meknes*”, “*the saint of Meknes*” thus expressing a certain geographical sensibility in assessing the origins of the order. It is therefore not surprising that the best known narrative on the diffusion of the order in Tripoli is directly linked with the figure of the Perfect

*Shaykh*. Many of my informants told me that at an unknown date between the sixteenth and the seventeenth century Mohammed al Allam Banun al Fasi, a Moroccan *shaykh* from the city of Fes and a disciple of the Perfect *Shaykh*, left the land of his master Ben ‘Aysa and settled down in Tripoli. The story of the arrival of *Shaykh* Banun was reported to me by different sources with different narrative details. All my informants, however, agreed that once in Tripoli *shaykh* Banun built what was going to become the oldest, for some time the only and for a long time the most important *Issawy zawiya* of the city of Tripoli, the *Zawiya al Kabyra*, the “Great *Zawiya*”<sup>65</sup>.

The construction of the “Great *Zawiya*” some four hundred years ago led to the very first exposure of the city of Tripoli to the *Issawy* order. The *Zawiya al Kabyra*, located today near a compound of houses of the Italian period called “Mariotti”, right at the entrance of the old city, is therefore both a fundamental element of local ‘*Issawy* archaeology’ and a testimonial of the Sufi heritage that impregnates the ancient part of Tripoli. “*Al medina al qadima*”, the “old city” (often referred to as the “*medina*”, the “city”, perhaps an indication of the fact that old Tripoli was in fact the whole of Tripoli up until the twentieth century – Ward 1969: 33; 38; Rossi 1968) is an amalgam of strata of different materials from different times. Inside its pentagonal walls you can find architectural treasures (and if you look carefully, you can even notice pieces of Roman columns re-used in some of the Islamic buildings, or discover Tripoli’s synagogue, left in decay after the Gheddafi regime decided to expel the Libyan Jews in 1974). The old city is an intricate ensemble of narrow streets, tombs of saints and garbage where - a poet who loved Tripoli once said – you can easily “experience an odd sensation that might be rather akin to that of a bucket dropping down a well” (Ward 1969: 34). In the *medina* the fish is cooked in a simple but tasty

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<sup>65</sup> Amongst the Libyan authors who have briefly mentioned the arrival of Banun in Tripoli in relation with the spreading of the *Issawy* order we can mention Qa{t{‘a>ni> 2001: 23, and Najem 2005: 51. The “Great *Zawiya*” is mentioned also in the Italian colonial documents (Baldinetti 2003: 134).

way, and the gold traders seem to respect the too often miscalculated euro/dinar rate. Today (apart from the Ottoman monuments, a series of famous buildings of different periods, the markets, and a few restaurants) the old city is an elaborate world of broken houses inhabited mainly by immigrants from Sub-Saharan countries<sup>66</sup>. Nonetheless, the *medina* can be also looked at as a meaningful microcosm of Tripolitan Sufism.

Out of the five *zawaya* of the ancient city, the three most active ones belong to the *Issawy* order: the already mentioned *Zawiya al Kabrya* (or “Great *Zawiya*”), the *Zawiya asSaghira* (“Small *Zawiya*”)<sup>67</sup>, and the *Zawiyat el Mukni* (a 10-15 year old *Issawy zawiya* that originally belonged to the ‘*Arusy* brotherhood). The remaining two are the practically abandoned ‘*Arusy zawiya* of *Sidhi el Hattab* and the *zawiya el Fnedeq*, a *zawiya* of the *Qadiry* order<sup>68</sup> built in front of *Jama enNaga* (the “*Mosque of the She-Camel*”, the oldest mosque of Tripoli – Ward 1969: 29). Nowadays the majority of the *Issawy zawayas* of the city are to be found outside the confines of the old *medina*. Nevertheless, the distribution of the *zawaya* of the old city seems to mirror proportionally the distribution of the Sufi orders in modern Tripoli and surrounding areas. According to a 2007 census carried out by the *Auqaf* (the institution dealing with religious affairs in Libya), out of the 113 *zawaya* located in the administrative area of the city of Tripoli 34 are

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<sup>66</sup> On issues of immigration in Libya see Muller 1982 and Paoletti 2011. Finding Sub-Saharan immigrants in the *Issawy zawayas* (or in Sufi *zawiyas* in general) of Tripoli is quite rare. Although I have seen some in the course of some *Issawy* gatherings (such occasions will be discussed in the following chapter). In the course of my field-work I have met only one Sudanese immigrant who was a regular *zawiya* goer and *Issawy* devotee. At the time of my research there was also a strong migratory flux from Egypt, although I have never met Egyptians in my visits to the *zawaya*. On this note it is important to say that I have never met Libyan or Berber origins in the *zawaya*. Generally speaking, I could detect a certain racism against sub-Saharan immigrants in Tripoli.

<sup>67</sup> According to the Italian colonial documents, the “Small *Zawiya*” was founded by Sidhi Yaqub al Khashab, an *Issawy* master who, according to the Italians, brought the *Issawy* order in Tripoli together with *Shaykh* Banun (Baldinetti 2003). My informants told me that this information is wrong and that “*Sidhi Yaqub*” is simply the name of a saint – much older than the *zawiya* – who is buried inside the “Small *Zawiya*”.

<sup>68</sup> See introduction page 17.

*Issawy*, 14 *Arusy* and 5 *Qadiry*<sup>69</sup>. The *Issawiya* is the most active and visible order in the city. As I explained at the beginning of this work, it is important not to reduce Libyan Sufism to ‘*Sanusy* Sufism’ or indeed to any other limitative category as scholars have done in the past. Even still it is safe to say that contemporary Tripolitan mysticism is deeply *Issawy* in its outline, particularly in its most urban connotation.

As I have explained, the arrival of *Shaykh* Banun from Morocco started up the diffusion of the *Issawy* brotherhood in Tripoli, but it also produced one of the most respected families of the city. Today the Banun are a well-known family of lawyers, and they are still in charge of the first *Issawy zawiya* built by their ancestor<sup>70</sup>. Nonetheless, the fact that both the family and the *zawiya* of the first *Issawy* master of Tripoli continue to exist to the present day should not be taken to mean that the Banun have a privileged position within the brotherhood. Pioneers are not necessarily leaders. The account of the first Banun is a narrative that *Issawis* mentioned to me mainly when they were talking about the past (or when they were trying to incorporate stories into history in order to make the ethnographer happy). Even though it is fair to assume that both the first Banun and his descendents enjoy and have enjoyed a high status throughout local *Issawy* history, today the *Issawiya* in Tripoli - and for that matter in all of Libya - does not have a recognised spiritual leader. *Issawy zawayas* are distinct entities headed by local *shuyukh*, and the brotherhood appears as a ‘fragmented’ order: a composite entity made of autonomous and independent groups. The fact that the presence of a direct disciple of the founder of the order has not generated a centralised hierarchical structure is not particularly surprising, since

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<sup>69</sup> See Appendix A.

<sup>70</sup> The first Banun, the disciple of the Perfect *Shaykh* who came to Tripoli, was an *Idrisy sharif* (see footnote 3) and the history of his family resembles the one of many contemporary Libyan *ashraf* who also claim a Moroccan/*Idrisy* origin. I will analyse the Banun family in greater detail in the fifth chapter.

ethnographers tell us that the *Issawy* order does not have a unified leadership even in its Moroccan homeland (Brunel 1926: 68-71; Andezian 2001: 98). It is nevertheless interesting to notice that in Libya the autonomous organisation of local *Issawy zawaya* is so strong that even the regime has not been able to systematise it.

Unlike countries like Egypt, Libya does not have a supreme Sufi council that regulates the activities of the orders (Gilsenan 1971: 36). In 2004, therefore, the *Idhara Turuq wa Zawaya* (*Administration of the brotherhoods and the zawaya*)<sup>71</sup> invited *Issawy shuyukh* to gather and elect an *amin* (a “secretary”) of the order with the purpose of systematising the organisation of the brotherhood<sup>72</sup>. Many *shuyukh*, however, told me that they did not participate in the election because they were not interested in choosing the secretary. Effectively, as it was clear from interviews and conversations, *Issawy shuyukh* - though respectful towards the *amin* and inclined to submit to the legal regulations concerning Libyan religious institutions – organise their own *zawaya* mainly in an autonomous way. This does not mean to say that the Libyan government relates with the order with a complete *laissez faire* attitude. As we will see in the fourth chapter, the relationship between the brotherhood and the Libyan regime is complex, and both the figure of the *amin* and the presence of the *Idhara* do force *Issawy zawaya* to a degree of negotiation. For now, however, it is safe to say that, regardless of official attempts of systematisation the structure of the order is clearly fragmentary. The brotherhood is constituted by independent Sufi masters, or *shuyukh*, that lead their own *zawaya* (and their own disciples) independently. In order to comprehend this division into segments (and before I explore the relationships between these

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<sup>71</sup> See introduction page 20

<sup>72</sup> The figure of the Amin (together with the relationship between the order, the *Auqaf* and the *Idhara*, will be looked at in greater detail in chapter 4. .

autonomous groups), I will first explore the ‘basic unit’ of the brotherhood, the *zawiya*, looking at the different relationships that typify its social existence.

### **1.3 Masters, Disciples and Devotees (the Structure of the *Issawy zawiya*)**

An *Issawy zawiya* is a ‘visual place’. A *zawiya* is a cosmos made of pictures of Sufi saints, lights, and photographs of Mecca. Red and green flags with Quranic lines delimitate the inner space of the *zawiya*. Apart from the main hall a *zawiya* can, and usually does, have a kitchen. It can also have a rest-house for guests, and an office. A *zawiya* can have properties registered under the name of the *shaykh* of the *zawiya* (usually only the piece of land on which the *zawiya* is built). These are properties that have been donated by donors. The richest *zawaiya* might have small allotments of land, and in these cases the *shuyukh* might decide to rent the allotments. Some of the *zawaya* of the old city receive monthly payments by shop-keepers whose shops are built over allotments that have belonged to the *zawiya* since generations<sup>73</sup>. In the proximity of a *zawiya* or inside it you can often find the tomb of a saint. All the times a *zawiya*’s name starts with “*Sidhi*” you can assume there is a saint buried nearby<sup>74</sup>. Asking an *Issawy* about the organisation of the *zawiya* means entering into a sophisticated discussion that starts with the definition of *muhib* (“lover”, “follower”). As for other Sufi orders (Crapanzano 1973:89), the *Issawy muhib* (pl. *muhibbin*) is quite literally someone who has ‘love’ for the brotherhood, a devotee of the order. ‘*Muhib*’ is a term that indicates the great majority of the people in the *tariqa*, but it is also a condition which is particularly difficult to define. A *Muhib* can be someone who visits the *zawiya* only occasionally, or a person who comes regularly in search of spiritual advice. He can have a

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<sup>73</sup> *Shuyukh* receive also a monthly income from the state. Further reflections on this and on the economy of the *zawaya* can be found in chapter 4.

<sup>74</sup> In Tripoli names of saints are important topographic indicators. A specific place or a ‘*zangha*’ (one of the narrow streets of the old *medina*) can be named after a saint that is buried in the proximity.

specific duty in the congregation and actively participate in social and ritual occasions, or he can simply stay in the back row minding his own business, ready to quickly come out and light up a cigarette as soon as the ritual is over.

There is no codified way of becoming *muhibbin*. People just are. A young *muhib* told me that in the summer he used to go to a specific *zawiya* every day because he did not have any particular place to go to. Another *muhib* told me how he had been going to the same *zawiya* for twenty-five years developing a strong affection for the place and the brothers; but adding that he considered himself “*free as a bird*”, greatly enjoying his role of informal aficionado and ‘non-denominational’ Sufi devotee, and recognising the prophet Mohammed as his only true spiritual guide. Sometimes, devotees recollect memories of being taken to the *zawiya* as children by their own fathers, or reminiscences of attending a Sufi ritual as young kids. A man in his thirties born and raised in the old city once told me how in the *medina* (“...*it is famous for this*”) you find two kinds of people, those who threaten you with a knife and those who go to Sufi places, and that since his house was near a *zawiya* he became a *muhib*<sup>75</sup>. *Muhibbin* have an attachment which oscillates between active membership and loose affective loyalty, but it is not uncommon for a *muhib* to look at a particular *zawiya* as ‘his *zawiya*’. In a way, their attachment to a particular *zawiya* is an expression of the fragmented structure of the order. Each *zawiya* with its own devotees. A situation that, as an informant told me once drawing a comparison from sports, can be a bit “*zay al kura*”, “*like football*”.

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<sup>75</sup> A *zawiya* is also a place of memory.“...*thanks to the house, a great many of our memories are housed...*” (Bachelard 1997:89). For the philosophical and sociological aspects of the relationship between place and memory see Bachelard 1997, 1998; Lefebvre 1991.

*Muhibbin* are erratic enthusiasts (often proudly so) who can choose to remain casual devotees for the rest of their lives<sup>76</sup>. Nonetheless, becoming a *muhib* can also be considered as a first step in joying the *tariqa* in a formal way. The *Issawiya* is considered to be a “path” of spiritual and moral formation, and a casual attachment to a specific *zawiya* (or to the brotherhood in general) can be considered as the very first stage of the path. *Shaykh* Ramadan, my main informant, told me that the Sufi master should observe the *muhib* (who does not necessarily need to know) for at least one or two years in order to understand if he is suitable for the *tariqa*. However, a *muhib* who intends to become a formal disciple, (or *murid*, “the one who desires”, pl. *muridin*), can wait for a longer period of time. If the candidate is particularly young, the observation can take up to six or seven years. *Shaykh* Ramadan told me once that one of his own disciples waited for fourteen years before being accepted as a *murid*. With his typical tendency to highlight the complexity of things Ramadan explained to me that the passage from *muhib* to *murid* can take an indeterminate hiatus that stretches from a number of years to twenty-four hours. Becoming part of the *Issawy* order is usually described as “taking the *tariqa*” (“*khut atTariqa*”). If the *muhib* decides to ‘take the *tariqa*’ – and if he is judged suitable for the path – he receives his initiation performing an oath to the *shaykh* who takes him as a disciple. Obviously, people decide to join the *Issawy* order for different reasons. “*Everyone has his own story*”, I was often told. Frequently, however, the accounts of people who have decided to join the brotherhood have the colour of true narratives of conversion.

Often when *Issawis* told me about the reasons that had pushed them to join the order they stressed that a chain of - sometimes miraculous - events had forced them to become part of the

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<sup>76</sup> *Muhibbin* seem to have a similar position also in other *Issawy* contexts as exposed by Andezian in her study on the brotherhood in France and Algeria (Andezian 2001:102).

brotherhood. Twenty-five-year-old Hasan, for instance, told me that his relationship with the *Issawiya* started with an event that happened to one of his close relatives. Hasan (an un-married language teacher who loved to converse with me in English), told me that this relative was fired from his job and that this man was understandably depressed. One day, therefore, he decided to visit the tomb of a Sufi saint to make a sincere vow: if God had freed him from his problems he would have joined a *Sufi tariqa*, trying to be a better Muslim at God's willing. Hasan's relative came back home, and miraculously, even though the situation looked hopeless, he learned that his boss had changed his mind and that he could keep the job. If a system works, you do not usually change it. Since his sincere prayers were answered with such efficacy, Hasan's relative went back to the same shrine and asked God to show him a good *shaykh* that could guide him on the spiritual path. Few days later, while Hasan's relative was shopping in the market, he felt a sudden attraction towards a *zawiya* he had passed by few times before. He entered inside, met the brothers - and lately the *shaykh* of the *zawiya* - and from then everything started. Hasan was particularly close to this person, knew the story, met the *shaykh* through him and remained close to the master after his relative died. He told me that his relative had a ulcer before he joined the brotherhood and that, as soon as he decided to become an *Issawy*, the ulcer suddenly disappeared, miraculously.

The decision to become an *Issawy* can involve spiritual inspiration and miracles. Usually, however, the figure of the *shaykh* plays a key-role in the process. Even though Hasan's first contact with the order was the consequence of supernatural events, he told me that he had chosen the *Issawiya* because he had happened to love the *shaykh* that he met through his relative (and consequently the brotherhood the *shaykh* belonged to). Hasan explained to me that he understood

that his *shaykh* was a true spiritual guide when he realised that he was an exceptional individual because “*when you meet him, you love him... he loves people, this is what makes him special*”. Often I was told that people see a particular *Issawy shaykh* in a dream, and understand that they have to take the *tariqa* from him, perhaps abandoning another brotherhood they had previously selected. Forty-year-old Buajeila, for instance, (a married worker who had been part of the order for a number of years) told me that he used to be a *muhib* in another brotherhood until he had a peculiar dream. Buajeila dreamt of being with three other *muhibbin* who wanted to go to Iraq (geography in Sufi dreams does not mean much) to visit the tomb of great medieval saint Abdul Qadir al Jeilani<sup>77</sup> or maybe the saint himself (death in Sufi dreams does not mean much). At some point Buajeila felt the need to leave his companions and the unexpected desire to go to Morocco to pay a visit to the Perfect *Shaykh*, Ben ‘Aysa. All of a sudden Buajeila found himself in a valley called *Abu Siba* (“*master of the lions*”), a real location in the *Jebel Akhdar* region in Eastern Libya. From the valley - whose name in my friend’s dream acquired a clear reference to Ben ‘Aysa’s power to tame lions - Buajeila travelled to Morocco, where he found an *Issawy Shaykh* he had known in the past. Later on Buajeila met the same *shaykh* in real life, and he was advised by him to join the *Issawiya*<sup>78</sup>.

The *Issawy* order is constituted by autonomous Sufi masters, and sometimes choosing one of them involves an undeniable intervention of the divine. Other times, however, a *muhib* decides to become the *murid* of a particular *shaykh* purely because he develops an attraction – whether spiritual or personal - for him. Perhaps the *shaykh* is simply the head of the *zawiya* that the

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<sup>77</sup> The founder of the *Qadiry* order (see introduction page 17).

<sup>78</sup> Dreams play an important role in many Sufi contexts (Ewing 1990, 1994; Katz 1996; Green 2003; Mittermaier 2008). Some sources claim that “*Abu Siba*” was also the name of the original tribe of the Perfect *Shaykh* (Brunel 1926: 17)

disciple used to visit as a devotee. Maybe the *shaykh* is particularly enlightened, or he gives special moral guidance. Often, however, affection plays an important role as in the case of Mansur, a forty-year-old doctor who spoke with me in detail about his relationship with a *shaykh* he had been knowing for more than two decades. Mansur told me that he had suffered greatly in the past for the divorce of his parents, and that he had found in his *shaykh* not only a guide that could give him a spiritual knowledge he could not acquire otherwise (“*I am a doctor, not a shaykh!*”), but also someone that could fill the emotional vacuum left by that traumatic experience<sup>79</sup>.

After joining the *tariqa*, the *murid* begins his spiritual path under the supervision of a *shaykh*. If he proceeds successfully, he might acquire *mashykh* (“*shaykh-hood*”), and become himself a *shaykh* (or *muqaddim*, “spokesman”) thus gaining the right to gather his own *muridin* and to initiate them into the order. When a master decides that his *murid* is ready to become a *shaykh*, he produces for him an *ijaza* (pl. *ijazat*, “*licence*” or “*permission*”). The *ijaza* is a written “*licence*” to *shaykh-hood*<sup>80</sup> and it embodies the idea that a given master can exercise his role since his *shaykh-hood* derives from a certified source. The “*licence*” expresses this sense of accreditation because it contains the spiritual genealogy of a *shaykh*. The *Issawy* receives a mystical formation from a specific master, who in turn has received it from his own master and so on. These different spiritual genealogies – whose origin is always traced back to the Perfect *Shaykh* – are usually referred to as *assanid* (sing. *sanad*, a concept that has a fundamental relevance in Sufism, in

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<sup>79</sup> The importance of affective bonds in the relationships between Sufi masters and disciples is perhaps ethnographically understudied (Werbner 2003: 134). This is quite ironic given the importance of “mystical love” in many Sufi traditions.

<sup>80</sup> For an ethnographic discussion on the importance of the ‘written text’ in Islam see Messick 1993. For a broader anthropological discussion on literacy and writing see Goody 1968; 1977; 2004; Bloch 1998; Street 1993; Fuller 2001. Philosophical reflections on the topic can be found Derrida 1976, Ahearne 1995: 52-64.

Libya as anywhere else - Gril 1991: 31 – 43; Baldick 2000: 75-77). The written *ijaza* contains the *sanad* of a master in the form of a list of previous *shuyukh* that have educated *muridin* (and have been educated as *muridin*) through time. The “licence” constitutes therefore the public pedigree of the Sufi master. The *ijaza* is altogether a business card, a reference letter and possibly much more. You can often find it on the wall of a *zawiya* (a visual testimony of the fact that *zawiya* is part of a broader network of accredited mystical education) or kept somewhere, ready to be taken out in case a proof of *shaykh*-hood is required.

Each *shaykh* chooses only one of his *muridin* as successor at the guide of the *zawiya* giving him a written *ijaza*, and for this purpose he might decide to indicate publicly his chosen candidate as *naqib*, making him a vice-*shaykh* that takes his place temporally when he is absent and definitively when he dies. *Issawy shuyukh* often say that blood relations are not important when it comes to choosing a successor. In actual fact, however, *shuyukh* tend to select members of their own families as heirs, usually their first born sons, and as a consequence *Issawy assanid* tend to have a strong familial character. In order to understand this system it is also important to clarify that while the *shaykh* chooses only one successor for his own *zawiya*, he can still give a ‘licence to *shaykh*-hood’ – and donate his spiritual genealogy - to a number of *muridin* who might or might not belong to his family. Occasionally these new made *shuyukh* might decide to remain in the *zawiya* of their *shaykh* without creating a congregation of their own, but usually they gather their own disciples and form their own *zawaya*. When this happens, the original *shaykh* (and after him his successors) might manage to retain a degree of influence over them, becoming the spiritual head of a number of *zawaya* (and of *shuyukh*) that belong to the same *sanad*. In other cases, however, particularly when the original *shaykh* dies, ex- *muridin* who have acquired an *ijaza*

become independent forming their own autonomous (and often familial) *assanid* and choosing not to recognise the successor of their *shaykh* as their new spiritual leader.

The rules of the *ijaza* are understood and applied in different ways by Issawis, and if some *shuyukh* feel that they have to remain close to the successor of the master who licenced them, others believe that the system of *ijaza* do not oblige them to do so. Grasping this diversified use of the *ijaza* system means understanding the way in which *Issawy* fragmentation takes place, particularly in the light of studies that have shown the importance of a precise code of fixed rules in maintaining cohesion within a Sufi brotherhood (Gilsenan 1973:199). This fragmentation, however, does not prevent Issawis from feeling part of the same brotherhood. Occasionally *shuyukh* express discontent when their leadership is not recognised by the *ex-muridin* of their predecessors. Generally speaking, however, the heads of the different *assanid* interact with each other in an atmosphere of general respect and, more importantly, mutual recognition, even when they have radically different understandings of the *ijaza* system. Bearing this in mind, the *Issawiya* appears as a *tariqa* characterised by a complex mixture of diversity and common identity. In order to understand the *tariqa* it is therefore important to contextualise my discussion within a series of debates concerning organisation and identity looking for an analytical framework that might account for both difference and commonality.

#### **1.4 *Fragmented Sufism* (Assessing the Structure of the *Issawy* order)**

As I have previously explained, the majority of the anthropologists dealing with Sufism have concentrated on brotherhoods characterised by a centralised organisation and by a cohesive structure. Some ethnographers, however, have attempted to explore more ‘fragmented’ Sufi

phenomena and in doing so they have shown that Sufi *turuq* are often less cohesive than anthropologists want them to be, thus demonstrating that the scholarship on Sufism has put forward a 'centralised' model that does not always correspond to reality (Werbner 2003, 2008; Malik & Hinnels 2006; Chih 2007). Rachida Chih's work on the *Khalwati* order in Egypt, for example, dismisses 'Sufi centralised models' on the basis that they have more to do with the literature on Sufism than with Sufism itself. In doing so, Chih invites scholars to concentrate on a much more defining feature: the local relationship between master and disciple (Chih 2004; 2007: 22). In Chih's view, a focus on the relations of patronage between local *shuyukh* and their disciples allows us to look at Sufism in a much more realistic way: as a composition of different localised micro-hierarchies (Chih 2007: 33-34). This conceptualisation of Sufi orders as combinations of different patronal relationships seems to be useful in the analysis of the *Issawiya*, particularly because it echoes ideas expressed by anthropologists who have dealt with lack of centralised authority in other contexts.

In the past, ethnographers have been puzzled by the fact that tribal societies seemed to function despite not having a centralised organisation. In trying to solve this ethnographic enigma Evans-Pritchard (1974) (and later on Gellner - 1969:41-44; Munson 1993), proposed to analyse tribes as ensembles of different segments that identify themselves in terms of common or different ancestorship. Through conflicts and alliances these segments form a system "sustained by a balance of power between its elements" that does not require centralised authority (Dresch 1986: 309). Subsequent reflections have shown that personal networks play an important role in this system. Instead of focusing merely on how segments create a balance between themselves, anthropologists have begun to analyse how individuals affiliate with different segments creating a

flexible web of micro-hierarchies (Hammoudi 1974; Rosen 1979; Eickelman 1981b; Dresch 1986:309; Caton 1987; Abu-Lughod 1989; Gilsenan 1990: 161; Khoury & Kostiner 1990; Sneath 2007)<sup>81</sup>. Viewing the *Issawiya* as an ensemble of micro-hierarchies based on patronal relationships seems therefore correct also in the light of conclusions that scholars have reached through different, but analogous, debates. Unfortunately, however, an examination of the way Issawis see themselves seem to suggest that this conceptualisation is simply not enough to understand the brotherhood.

Issawis live their lives associating with different and autonomous networks of masters. However, they also see the *Issawiya* as a specific brotherhood that was created by the Perfect *Shaykh*, and not merely as an acephalous amalgam of local leaders. Looking at the *Issawiya* through the lenses of local hierarchy and personal affiliation is certainly revealing. However, if we focus merely on local divisions, we run the risk of diminishing the sophistication that characterises *Issawy* identity. As we have seen, each *zawiya* is an autonomous universe populated by *muridin* and *muhibbin*, and headed by a local *shaykh* that might or might not choose to remain under the influence of the *sanad* that produced his licence to *shaykh*-hood. In the minds of Libyan Issawis, however, these autonomous segments *are* the *Issawy* order in Libya. Though autonomous *shuyukh* share a strong sense of belonging to the same mystical path, and, more importantly, they do not see the fragmentation of the order as being in contradiction with the idea of a common *Issawy* identity. *Shaykh* Ramadan, for instance, explained to me that *Issawy* fragmentation is in fact a source of spiritual richness for the *tariqa* because different *Issawy assanid* contribute with different portions of ‘Issawi-ness’ to the development of the brotherhood. The *Issawiya* is clearly

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<sup>81</sup> On Libyan tribes and segmentation see Peters 1990. Broader philosophical discussions on segmentation in relationship with multiplicity and identity can be found in Deleuze and Guattari 2007: 208-231).

a fragmented brotherhood that thinks of itself as a distinct *tariqa*. In order to analyse it we cannot therefore concentrate purely on internal divisions.

Since ethnographers have called for a broader contextualisation in the study of local Islam (Eickelman 1982), a debate on whether the *Issawiya* could be better understood as a distinct brotherhood or as a bricolage of different groups can be approached through a larger discussion on diversity and commonality in Islam. Anthropologists have long tried to reconcile the diversity of local Muslim communities with the notion of a recognisable Islamic tradition (Abu Lughod 1989; Tapper 1995; Salvatore 1996; Bowen 1998; Varisco 2005; Simpson & Kresse 2008). Some of these ethnographers have sought for Islamic social invariables (Gellner 1969b, 1981), or dismissed the notion of 'Islam' in favour of an appreciation of the different local 'Islams' (El Zein 1977). Others, on the other hand, have identified different styles of Islamic behaviour and consciousness (Geertz 1968), analysed the way in which local Muslims define 'ultra-local Islam' (Gilsenan 1990), and looked at Islam as an 'emotional category' that, though diversified, creates a strong sense of common identity (Marranci 2008). Talal Asad, in particular, has famously proposed a definition of Islam as "discursive tradition" (Asad 1986), that – apart from being the conceptual basis of a series of ethnographies on Muslim communities (Mahmood 2005; Marsden 2005) - seems to be particularly useful for an understanding of *Issawy* dynamics.

According to Asad, the different local understandings of Islam refer, in different ways, to a common discursive tradition. A "discursive tradition", in Asad's terms, consists of "discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice that, precisely because it is established, has a history" (Asad 1986: 14). In Asad's view the Islamic

tradition is therefore made of a set of discourses that - in informing certain practices - “relate conceptually to a past” (ibid.). According to Asad, however, the relation between these discourses and the history they refer to is not static because a “discursive tradition” is not simply the “repetition of an old form” (Asad 1986: 15). Since discourses are informed by a quest for what is traditionally correct and what is not, they “aspire” (Asad 1986: 16) to a coherence that is rooted in the past, but they also allow for heterogeneity when people attempt to achieve this coherence in the present (Asad 1993: 210). Asad, of course, deals with ‘Islam’ as a general category, highlighting the importance of the *Qur’an* and of the *Ahadith*<sup>82</sup> in the ‘past’ the Islamic tradition refers to (Asad 1986: 14). Nonetheless, recent ethnographic works have argued that the Asadian paradigm can be applied in the analysis of specific forms of local Islam treating them as specific “discursive traditions” within the broader “discursive tradition” of Islam (Zaman 2002:5). Following on from this, I suggest that the Asadian framework can be also used in the analysis of the *Issawiya*.

If we apply Asad’s ideas in the analysis of the *Issawy* order we realise that, though internally divided, the brotherhood articulates its own identity through the idea of an exclusive tradition that is related, in terms of source, to a common past. As I have previously explained, *shuyukh* have different approaches towards the practices related to the legitimisation of *shaykh*-hood. In particular *Issawy* masters have different interpretations concerning the restrictions that regulate these practices when it comes to deciding whether the relationship with the original *sanad* (or

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<sup>82</sup> (Sing. *Hadith*) written accounts of the sayings and deeds of the prophet Muhammad. Interesting ethnographic insights into the role of *ahadith* can be found in Metcalf 1993 and Zaman 1999. *Ahadith* have a moral, jurisprudential and practical value (Robson 1999), and should be understood within the broader concept of *Sunna*, or ‘tradition’ (see introduction footnote 3).

spiritual genealogy), that produced the *ijaza* (or licence to *shaykh*-hood) should be kept or not. However, if we concentrate on the *ijaza* system, we find that the idea of *Issawy* “licence”, though acted out in different ways, is based on a specific discursive tradition. This tradition - like all traditions at least in the Asadian understanding - presumes to regulate things in a correct way according to a model ‘from the past’, but it also allows for different opinions and variation when discussing how this has to be done in the present.

### **1.5 Issawis and their rules (Assessing the *Ijaza* system)**

In order to explain the relationship between the *ijaza* system and the ‘*Issawy* discursive tradition’, I will first contextualise the different approaches *shuyukh* have towards the *ijaza* within a broader discussion regarding the notion of ‘*Issawy* rules’. In my conversations with *Shaykh* Ramadan, for instance, I was told that the order has a specific set of rules that regulate the production of the licence to *shaykh*-hood with extreme precision. According to Ramadan, the brotherhood has effectively two kinds of *ijazat*: a simple one called “*ijaza muqayyda*” (“*limited ijaza*”) that allows a given *shaykh* to run his own *zawiya*, and a more sophisticated one, the “*ijaza mutlaqa*” (“*unlimited ijaza*”) that provides the *shaykh* with the right to make some of his disciples *shuyukh* of other *zawaya*<sup>83</sup>. In Ramadan’s understanding of the system, the *shaykh* who receives an “*unlimited ijaza*” can have under his care a number of *shuyukh* (his *ex-muridin*) who will need to ask for his agreement when designating their own successors. In Ramadan’s view, the *shaykh* who receives an *unlimited ijaza* becomes therefore the *shaykh el mashaykh* (the “*shaykh of shaykhs*”, or *khalifa*, “*representative*”), of a particular line of *shuyukh* (or *sanad*) who will be attached to him (and to his successors) for ever. *Shaykh* Ramadan’s approach to the rules of the *ijaza* implies

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<sup>83</sup>According to *shaykh* Ramadan the quantity of *zawaya* can be restricted in number, and in that case the number would be indicated in the *ijaza*.

that a *shaykh* should always remain under the leadership of the head of the *sanad* that produced his licence. When I asked other *shuyukh*, however, I was told that this is not the only way in which the rules of the *ijaza* system can be interpreted.

In my interviews many *shuyukh* recognised, like Ramadan, the existence of different types of *ijaza*. In many cases, however, they also told me that the difference between these types is minor, and that, essentially, all licences are the same: they all allow a *shaykh* to create his own congregation, to be the autonomous head of his *zawiya* and to choose his successor freely. Often, *shuyukh* would explain to me that remaining attached to one's original *sanad* (and therefore to the successor of one's *shaykh*'s) is a voluntary act of piety, not an obligation. Other times, *Issawy* masters told me that rules apply differently to different situations, and that a *shaykh* might decide not to recognise the authority of his *shaykh*'s successor when this person is younger than himself. *Shuyukh* demonstrated different understandings of *Issawy* rules, and often they even used a different terminology in referring to these rules. Whereas some *shuyukh* like Ramadan used the expression “*shaykh el mashaykh*” (“*shaykh of shaykhs*”) to indicate an *Issawy* master with an “unlimited *ijaza*”, others would use it to highlight the absence of a common leader recognised by all *Issawy shuyukh* (“*the Issawiya does not have a shaykh of shaykhs*”)<sup>84</sup>.

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<sup>84</sup>The great majority of the *Issawis* I have interviewed told me that the brotherhood has never had (and will never have) a common leader. At the time of my research an *Issawy* master from the city of Misurata claimed to be the rightful leader of all *Issawy zawaya* and the legitimate heir of the Perfect *Shaykh*. This particular *shaykh*, however, received very mixed (and often very critical responses) in Tripoli and elsewhere. In one case a *murid* from a different brotherhood told me that the “secretary” of the order elected under the invitation of the ‘Administration of the Brotherhoods and the Zawaya’ (see page 51.) is the leader of all *Issawis*: a statement which would have horrified many of my *Issawy* informants.

These differences in the way Issawis approach the rules of the ‘licence’ should also be contextualised within a broader discussion on the different ways in which *shuyukh* approach the internal rules of the *zawiya*. The literature on Sufism has often analysed the relationship between masters and disciples in terms of blind obedience (Hammoudi 1997: 5, 89-97, 134 - 158). In accordance with this notion of ‘Sufi submission’, some *Issawy shuyukh* maintain that discipline should be the main aspect of spiritual discipleship and that – to quote a Sufi dictum I often heard amongst Issawis - the *murid* should abandon himself in the care of the *shaykh* as a corpse in the hands of the undertaker. According to some *shuyukh* every decision taken by the *murid* (whether in the spiritual life or in life in general) should be approved by the *shaykh* first. These *Issawy* masters told me that when a *murid* commits a moral mistake or fails to fulfil his duties a *shaykh* can decide to punish him and that when this happens the *murid* can either be admonished verbally or be asked to make amends by paying some money. In the most serious cases, I was told, the *shaykh* can even force the disciple to leave the *zawiya* or (I witnessed this eventuality myself) asked to avoid interaction with the brothers for a period of time<sup>85</sup>. Indeed, for some *Issawy* masters the *zawiya* is a place of rigors and of strong regulations. Nevertheless, the order does not have a codified system of internal sanctions accepted by all, and different masters have, once again, different approaches towards their disciples<sup>86</sup>.

If some *shuyukh* see themselves as guarantors of a set of rules, others describe (and live) their relationship with the disciples simply in terms of friendship or social acquaintance. Mrajah, for instance, (an educated *shaykh* in his forties) told me once that he was aware of the existence of

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<sup>85</sup> An informant told me that in the past *shuyukh* used to inflict corporal punishments to their *muridin*. Nowadays, however, this practice has been abandoned.

<sup>86</sup> The best ethnographic discussion on the role played by sanctions and rules in a Sufi *tariqa* remains Gilsenan 1973: 92 -128.

'*Issawy* rules', but he also explained to me that he preferred to treat his disciples "*as friends*". Mrajah told me that the main task of a *shaykh* is "*to love his disciples*", and that, for this reason, he never forced his *muridin* to do anything else apart from coming to the *zawiya*. Like Mrajah, many *shuyukh* manifest a certain 'flexibility' in terms of rules. The same attitude, however, can be found also amongst many *muridin*. If some disciples believe that joining the *tariqa* involves submitting to a specific set of regulations, others live their disciple-ship in a much looser way. Occasionally *muridin* feel entitled to abandon their *shaykh* (or to deny the authority of their *shaykh*'s successor), and sometimes they join the *tariqa* with a particular *shaykh* but receive the *ijaza* to *shaykh*-hood from a different one. Indeed, *Issawis* manifest different opinions not only when it comes to the rules of *shaykh*-hood but also for what concerns the way in which the relationships within the *zawiya* should be managed.

In the past anthropologists of Islam have looked at the discrepancy between 'rules' and 'actions' mainly in terms of dissonance between 'belief' and social interaction (Geertz 1973, Bell 1992: 30-46). Recent ethnographic works, however, have emphasised the dangers of looking at Muslim communities with a rigid focus on discipline and rules, suggesting that anthropologists should account instead for the ambiguities, contradictions and "unfinished conversations" (Simpson 2008: 382) that mark the relationship between people and religious obligations (Ewing 1990b; Laidlaw 1995; Marsden 2005). These scholars have denounced the risks of looking at religious people with expectations of continuous coherence (Schielke 2009, 2009b), and problematised the notion of 'discipline' as mere submission to rules (Mahmood 2005; Hirshkind 2006) offering reflections on 'variety' and 'agency' that are particularly relevant in the case of the *Issawiya* (Lambek 1990, 1990b, 2000; Laidlaw 2002; Ortner 2006: 129-155; Mahmood 2005: 1-39).

However, if we explore the notion of *ijaza* we find that, once again, a focus on difference and variation is not enough to understand the brotherhood. A closer examination of the dynamics of *shaykh*-hood reveals that regardless of their different approaches to rules all *Issawy shuyukh* refer to a common set of *Issawy* discourses when they legitimise their *shaykh*-hood. This ‘*Issawy* discursive tradition’, as indicated by Asad (1986), allows for different approaches to *shaykh*-hood in the present but it also makes reference to a common *Issawy* past. *Shuyukh* might be autonomous leaders, but if they want to justify their status they have to demonstrate a relationship with this past. In short, in order to be *shuyukh*, they need to demonstrate that they are *Issawy* first.

### **1.6 An *Issawy* Discursive Tradition (Secrecy and Mystery)**

As I have explained, *Issawy shaykh*-hood is mainly a ‘genealogical’ condition. It takes a *shaykh* to make a *shaykh*, and even though *Issawy* masters have different opinions concerning the implications of *shaykh*-hood, they are nevertheless informed by specific discourses that evoke a sense of a ‘common past’. A *shaykh* can only become one in genealogical terms: he needs another master to write an *ijaza* for him including him into a *sanad*, a spiritual genealogy. This system might justify, as we have seen, the existence of an independent familial line of masters, but it also forces *Issawis* to demonstrate that their genealogies trace back to Ben ‘Aysa (whether in a linear way, or through other genealogies). Looking at the order purely in terms of differences makes us forget that all *Issawis* are, in a sense, forced to relate to a common history. *Issawy shaykh*-hood might be actualised in different ways, but all *shuyukh* are required to prove (through a written licence) that they have a relationship with a tradition of the past in which the Perfect *Shaykh* has, at least formally, a central position. The ‘*Issawy* discursive tradition’ has therefore a strong ‘genealogical’ character, but it carries also a component of mystery and secrecy that deserves to

be explored. For many *shuyukh* the spiritual genealogy, or *sanad*, is perceived to be a *silsila* (“*chain*”), a mystical chain made of the different masters through whom a specific tradition has been passed on. Those *shuyukh* that are willing to articulate this aspect in broader terms say that, through Ben ‘Aysa, his previous masters, and their predecessors (the closest ones being members of the *Jazuliya* and the *Shadilya*) the *Issawy* order traces back its mystical chain to Ali, the fourth caliph of Islam and cousin of the prophet, and from him to the prophet himself<sup>87</sup>. When describing the *silsila*, Issawis usually say that through the mystical chain they have received “*asrar*” (sing. “*sirr*”, literally “*secrets*”, but also “*mysteries*” in Arabic) from their predecessors, and in articulating this notion they demonstrate, once again, a mixture of similarity and difference.

In Libyan dialect “*asrar*” can be used to indicate a body of secret information, but also as a synonym for “*baraka*”, a well-known term in the anthropology of Islam that indicates blessings, grace and divine favour (Westermarck 1926; Geertz 1968, Gellner 1969; Crapanzano 1973; Eickelman 1981; Cruise O ‘Brien and Coulon 1988; Rasmussen 1991, 2005; Soares 2005). *Baraka* expresses “a conception of the mode in which the divine reaches into the world” (Geertz 1968:44), and in the case of the *Issawiya*, it indicates the mysterious spiritual powers (“*asrar*”, “*mysteries*”) that constitute the very basis of *shaykh*-hood. *Shaykh*-hood (with all its spiritual gifts and competences) is seen not only as a status that is acquired through education, but also as a condition whose spiritual foundations are materially inherited from a precise line of masters and derived from the mysterious world of the unseen. In this perspective, the *Issawy ijaza*, is perceived to be a channel through which one receives the mysterious capacity to do, say, perform

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<sup>87</sup> The great majority of Sufi orders trace their mystical chain back to Ali and consider him to be the first Sufi in the history of Islam - Trimmingham 1996: 133-136; Hoffman 1995:70).

and feel those things that distinguish a *shaykh* from a commoner. The great majority of the *shuyukh* stress mainly the ‘mysterious’ connotation of “*asrar*”, but some of them embrace also the ‘secretive’ one, explaining that through the spiritual genealogy a *shaykh* receives both a specific body of secret knowledge and the mysterious power which makes this knowledge effective. This double meaning of “*sirr*” (as “*secret*”, and as “*mystery*”) is particularly significant, and it will be touched upon again throughout the chapters. For now, however, it is important to explain that Issawis articulate the esoteric dimension of their practices differently (some see it as a matter of mystery, while others as a combination of mystery and secrecy) but always referring to the notion of “*sirr*”.

Doubtlessly, *Issawy shuyukh* pay different degrees of attention to the spiritual aspects of their *shaykh*-hood. Many *Assanid*, as I have explained, have a familial character, and masters would often say that they are *shuyukh* mainly because their predecessors (possibly their fathers or grandfathers) were also *shuyukh*. When asked to articulate (and legitimise) their *shaykh*-hood, however, *Issawy* masters always refer to the same ‘*Issawy* discursive tradition’, mentioning the notion of “*sirr*” (in one way or another), and stressing that they have a valid *ijaza* that testifies to a link with the original source of Issawi-ness<sup>88</sup>. Being discursive the *Issawy* tradition allows for both difference and commonality, but also, more specifically, for discussions. A *shaykh*, for instance, might claim that a line of *shuyukh* has more “*asrar*” than other lines, while another *shaykh* might disagree. Similarly, some *shuyukh* might argue that the mystical tradition of the

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<sup>88</sup> My informants have often demonstrated incredible attention in tracking down *Issawy* genealogies and in verifying *Issawy* licences. At times this particular aspect of the *tariqa* requires a specific competence, an “*elm al assanid*” (“*science of the assanid*”) that involves knowledge of the different lines through which *shuyukh* have received their *shaykh*-hood. In *Shaykh* Ramadan’s case the level of knowledge of the different Tripolitan *assanid* was uncanny: he was able to trace not only his own mystical chain but also the *assanid* of other *shuyukh* of the city of Tripoli and surrounding areas. Being a *sharif*, *Shaykh* Ramadan was also able to trace his genealogy back to the prophet enlisting all the ancestors of his blood-line. Interesting links between descent from the prophet and the concept of Sufi mystical chain and can be found in Gellner 1969:261 and Lewis 1998:10.

order can be enriched by new ‘spiritual revelations’, while others might have a different opinion on the matter. Some *shuyukh* might value the link between the Libyan *Issawiya* and its Moroccan counterpart, while others might stress that the Libyan incarnation of the order has developed its own peculiar ‘spiritual repertoire’ or kept the original *Issawy* tradition more faithfully than in Morocco. As a *shaykh* with the gift of lyric synthesis told me once, when it comes to the *Issawiya* “*al johar fi Maghreb, wa lakin asSirr fi Libya*”, “*the essence is in Morocco, but the secret (or the mystery) is in Libya*”.

The *Issawy* brotherhood might be divided into different local leaderships and fragmented into autonomous familial groups that follow different rules. Nonetheless, the way in which these autonomous cells articulate the basis of their legitimisation involves a shared, but discursive, relationship with a common source. *Shuyukh* need to demonstrate a link with a specific tradition and with the founder of this tradition in order to be considered as such: they need to prove that the ‘source’ of their status is unmistakably *Issawy*. The Libyan *Issawiya* is not merely a loose brotherhood, but an order characterised by a common discursive tradition within which the notion of ‘secret’ and the one of ‘mystery’ play an important role. Indeed, the picture of Ben ‘Aysa’s *zawiya* on the walls of Libyan *zawaya* might be discoloured, but it is still there. What we are dealing with is a multi-layered sense of being part of the same brotherhood that, though difficult to articulate, is definitively real. When it comes to the *Issawiya*, fragmentation and cohesiveness are not necessarily two mutually exclusive things. It is simply that, in essence, Issawis are complex people.

### **1.7 A Note on Comparative Sufi History (The *Issawiya* Contextualised)**

As I have demonstrated, Issawis operate according to an *Issawy* tradition that allows them to share a sense of common identity and, at the same time, to develop different approaches towards the *tariqa*. Having shed light on these dynamics, it is also important to clarify that the *Issawy* ‘fragmentation’ (both in terms of rules and for what concerns the internal organisation of the order) is the result of specific historical factors. In categorising Sufi orders as centralised or ‘loose’ anthropologists have often lacked an in-depth historical contextualisation. It is interesting to notice that the studies that have analysed brotherhoods characterised by a centralised authority (or by an homogeneous set of regulations) have always focused on ‘young’ orders whose founder had either recently died or been dead since few generations (Evans-Pritchard 1949; Cruise O’Brien 1971; Gilsenan 1973; Damrel 2006) while those works that have described more ‘fragmented’ brotherhoods like the *Issawiya* have dealt with much ‘older’ *turuq* (Crapanzano 1973; Chih 2007).

The literature has highlighted the importance of the figure of the founder of a Sufi order as a catalyst for cohesion, identifying the phase after his death as a critical point in the life of a *tariqa*, when members of the order might be required to take some measures in order to ensure continuation and cohesiveness (Gilsenan 1971). Echoing Max Weber’s famous notion of “charismatic authority”, the Sufi founder has been looked at as the source of pure charisma, and the time that follows his departure as moment of ‘charismatic crisis’ where the cohesion of the order is at risk (ibid. O’Brien & Coulon 1988; Weber 1991; Boubrik 2000). Obviously, we cannot generalise saying that all orders whose founder has been dead for a long time (as in the case of the *Issawiya*) are more prone to fragmentation, particularly in light of the fact that scholars have argued against the use of rigid historical categories when dealing with Sufism (Werbner 2007:

197-98). Nevertheless, regardless of whether the ‘post-founder phase’ is always a critical time for the cohesion of all *turuq* or not, we need to appreciate that there is a link between the historical circumstances of the *Issawiya*, its loose organisation, and its high level of variation when it comes to rules.

As I have explained in the introduction of the thesis, the scholarship on Libya has focused on the *Sanusiya* as the only brotherhood that managed to become a political entity as opposed to the non-*Sanusy* orders like the *Issawiya* that remained marginal in Libyan history. However, looking at Libyan Sufism only in these terms means de-historicising the *turuq*. In his discussion on the reasons behind the fact that the *Sanusiya* was able to become a strong political agent Evans-Pritchard depicts the Sanusis as having a strong hierarchical structure and a level of cohesion that seems to have been lacking with the other orders<sup>89</sup>. Nevertheless, what strikes me in Evans-Pritchard’s analysis is that he does not realise how the comparison he is proposing is heavily de-contextualised from an historical point of view. Even though the *Sanusy* order had its own internal tensions and dynastic problems (Evans-Pritchard 1949: 21, 27, 131), at the time of writing of the “Sanusi of Cyrenaica” the *tariqa* was still a young Libyan order whose founder had been dead only for ninety years<sup>90</sup>. The *Sanusiya* was studied by Evans-Pritchard in a time when power was still in the hands of the founder’s successors and when, therefore, some sort of

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<sup>89</sup> It is important to clarify that Evans-Pritchard saw the *Sanusiya* as having a functional structure, and not a perfect organisation. According to the British anthropologists, the organisation of the Sanusis was overall rather inadequate, to the point that if it was not for the Italian occupation that rallied the “outraged sentiment of the Bedouin” (Evans-Pritchard 1949: 26; Gilsean 1990:160) against the common enemy, the order would have most probably collapsed (ibid.). Nevertheless, Evans-Pritchard tells us that the *Sanusiya* was organised enough to have local *shuyukh* appointed directly by the head of the order and that the Sanusis had a system of taxation that ensured the collection of each *zawiya*’s economic surplus (Evans-Pritchard 1949: 26, 83, 84),

<sup>90</sup> At the death of the founder of the *Sanusiya* in 1859 the leadership of the order was taken up by his eldest son Muhammad al Mahdi (1844-1902). When al Mahdi died his eldest son, Idris, was still young, and the founder’s nephew (son of al Mahdi’s younger brother) Ahmad al-Sharif (1873- 1933) took over. After al-Sharif’s departure from Libya (McGuirk 2007) the line of succession came back to its original stock, and Idris (1889 – 1983) - later to become the first and last king of Libya (see introduction page 13) – became the head of the order (Evans-Pritchard 1949: 20, 131).

cohesion could be kept. The *Issawiya* on the other hand, arrived in Libya and remained there for four hundred years after the Perfect *Shaykh*'s death in Morocco<sup>91</sup>. Unlike the *Sanusiya*, he *Issawiya* had time to develop a structural fragmentation (and a strong diversification in terms of rules) in a land that was not its homeland.

As I have shown, the *Issawiya* is constituted by independent *assanid* that trace their common spiritual genealogy back to Morocco and to the Perfect *Shaykh*. The history of the order, however, is not simply the history of a 'linear movement' from Morocco to Libya. As I have explained at the beginning of the chapter, the story of the Banun family constitutes a well-known narrative of how the *Issawiya* was firstly brought into Tripoli. However, it is interesting to notice that the spiritual genealogies recorded in some written *ijazat* I have seen contain names of *Issawy shuyukh* of the past that lived in different locations of North Africa, This fact suggests that the *Issawiya* must have 'entered' Libya more than once, on different occasions, brought by different lines of masters, even after the order was introduced the first time. The *Issawiya* spread and roamed in North Africa for four centuries, creating a large number of *assanid* that have moved geographically and generated other *assanid* in turn. This historical dimension has to be taken into account when examining the fragmented organisation of the order. Decades and distance are enough to shorten memory, and time increases the possibility for the branches of a *sanad* to become independent whether in familial terms, *ijaza* terms or both.

An historical view of the organisation of the order allows us to contextualise its fragmentation properly, but it also helps us to understand that the '*Issawy* discursive tradition' is not static.

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<sup>91</sup> Reconstructing the line of succession after the death of the Perfect *Shaykh* is quite difficult due to lack of data. All we know is that his son became head of the brotherhood after his death (Brunel 1926: 43).

*Zawaya* inside and outside Tripoli are linked with each other through a complex network of ‘*ijaza*’ - relationships that, with time, have loosened up. However, these links are not simply forgotten or remembered: they are also created and re-created in time. A *shaykh* who believes that the licence of another master has originated (in the past) from his own *sanad* might decide to write a new *ijaza* for him in order to ‘re-create’ this relationship. The master can accept it as an act of courtesy, recognise it as a renewal of an historical link, or simply ignore it. The *Issawy* discursive tradition relates conceptually to a common past, but it is also dynamic. At the time of my fieldwork, for instance, a particular *zawiya* in Tripoli was ‘claimed’ verbally by three different *assanid*. The heads of two of them produced two separate *ijazat* for the *shaykh*, who, being a man of peace, accepted both regarding one as a genuine act of courtesy and the other as the restoration of a lost link with the original *sanad*. Sometimes these attempts to rebuild what history has separated are not particularly well received. In one case, for instance, a *shaykh* told me that he had been contacted by a *zawiya* in Morocco that wanted to reconstruct a lost *sanad*-relationship, and that he had categorically refused because he saw his licence as being perfectly valid. Indeed, the essence of the *Issawiya* might be in Morocco. However, in four hundred years the secret has become Libyan, and Libyan only.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have provided an account of the origins of the *Issawiya*, a description of the different dynamics that characterise the life of an *Issawy zawiya*, and an overview of the presence of the order in Tripoli. In particular, I have shown that the *Issawy* order is composed by autonomous groups that have often a familial basis, and that articulate their existence in terms of *sanad*, or spiritual genealogy. However, I have also problematised the view of the *Issawiya* as a

‘loose’ order demonstrating that, though autonomous, *Issawy shuyukh* refer to a common ‘*Issawy* tradition’. Through an analysis of the mechanics that constitute *Issawy shaykh*-hood I have shown that this tradition - being distinct but discursive – allows Issawis to keep a sense of common identity but also to approach the rules and the practices of their order in different ways. I doing so I have explained the significance of the notion of “*sirr*” (“*secret*” or “*mystery*”) in the *Issawy* tradition, and I have suggested that the fragmentation of the order should be contextualised historically. Bearing these considerations in mind, in the next chapter I will further explore the esoteric dimension of the order and the *Issawy* identity with a focus on the ritual practices of the order. In doing this, I will focus on religious occasions when *Issawy* identity becomes very visible, and on ritual performances where the same identity is articulated, on the contrary, in secret.

**“THINGS THAT OTHERS CANNOT SEE”  
Rituals, Routine and Special Occasions**

*The murid is a sensitive person, but he is also a practical man. Often he preferred not to be seen with me since, he told me, people loved gossiping about foreigners. It was Friday evening, and I went to a popular Issawy zawaya. The murid was there, but he pretended he did not know me. The ritual started and the attendees formed a series of concentric circles. People began to move slowly. With time the movements became quicker. I started feeling agitated, I realised that I was waving my head, and very soon we all became part of a kinetic assembly. Then the music started. One of the attendees told me to watch out for one particular song: “When they play that one you will see the Issawis go to trance”. While the man was still talking to me, someone had a convulsive shiver upon hearing the beginning of the song, Later my new friend was of course proven right. After a while some people did stand up moving at the rhythm of the music, in a trance. The murid was not even looking at me.*

***Secrecy in Public (Introduction)***

In the previous chapter I have demonstrated that the *Issawiya* is characterised by a specific discursive tradition. As I have shown, this tradition allows Issawis to refer to a sense of common identity and, at the same time, to approach the rules and customs of their own brotherhood in different ways. Similarity and difference, however, are not the only parameters used by members of the order to articulate their own ‘Issawi-ness’. As I have also explained, the concept of ‘*sirr*’ (“*secret*”) plays an important role in *Issawy* discourses, with “secret” indicating both a body of esoteric knowledge and the mysterious supernatural force that, amongst other things, makes *shaykh*-hood effective. Bearing this in mind (and postponing a detailed discussion on the double meaning of “*sirr*” to the next chapter) I will now elaborate on how these dynamics affect the ritual life of the *zawaya*. First of all, I will show how Issawis maintain that their brotherhood is characterised by certain common ritual

obligations while, at the same time, accepting that these obligations are carried out in different ways by the *zawaya*. After expanding on how this reflects the mixture of commonality and diversity that characterises the dynamics of *Issawy* tradition, I will embark on a longer description of the esoteric dimension of *Issawy* rituals.

The Libyan *Issawiya* is characterised by a variety of ritual practices. The most popular one, however, is the performance of *Mal'uf* (“*familiar*”, “*popular*”) (Ciantar & Sebai 2005), a melodious genre of music which was imported in North-Africa from Andalusia at the time of the Moorish caliphates in the Hispanic peninsula.<sup>92</sup> Historically speaking, *Mal'uf* has a strong Sufi connotation, since many of the songs performed in the *zawaya* are either adaptations of Sufi poems of the past or lyrical compositions in praise of Sufi saints (amongst whom is the Perfect *Shaykh* himself)<sup>93</sup>. However, because of this extremely fashionable genre of music, the *Issawiya* attracts a large amount of people who have no interest in Sufi affairs who gather in the *zawaya* at specific times of the year. Since, as I will show, *Mal'uf* is performed in the context of a specific ritual called “*hadhra*”, during these occasions many Tripolitans who do not normally associate with Sufism actively participate in the ritual where, at least from an external observer’s point of view, they engage in exactly the same ritual actions as the Issawis. Being a combination of formulas, music and movements the ritual

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<sup>92</sup>*Mal'uf* belongs to a complex musicological family that counts a number of orally transmitted local variations in the whole of North-Africa (Davis 1996a; 1996b). The genre seems to have arrived in Maghreb with Muslims and Jews escaping the Spanish *reconquista* of Andalusia (Davis 1997:3). In Libya *Mal'uf* is also called *Muwashshah Andalusia* (“*the Andalusian Muwashshah*”), *Muwashshah* being a specific genre in Arabic music whose technical characteristics are well described in Zwartjes 2006. Ciantar, the only ethnomusicologist who published on Libyan *Mal'uf*, mentions the possibility that this genre of music might have been brought to Libya via Tunisia (Ciantar 2006:58). For an understanding of the musicological characteristics of *Mal'uf* see Ciantar 2003, 2005, 2006 and Davis 1997, 1996 a, 1996 b. The most comprehensive publication in Arabic on Libyan *Mal'uf* is the voluminous Bushiyyah 2006 and 2006b.

<sup>93</sup>The lyrics of many *Mal'uf* songs were composed by the Andalusian Sufi mystic Abu l’Hasan Al Shushtari (or *ashShishtri*, according to the Libyan pronunciation) (1212 – 1269) (Hanif 2002: 178; Abou Bakr 1987). Others are of unknown author. On issues of authorship in Sufi poetry see Frishkopf 2003. Aspects of Sufi sainthood will be dealt with in chapter 4.

performance of the *hadhra* is a highly emotional moment (Crapanzano 1973: 185-235; Frishkopf 1999: 263 -345, 2001) where trance behaviour is common amongst both Issawis and non-Issawis. Nevertheless, Issawis claim that, though public and open to non-initiated, the ritual has an esoteric dimension which is accessible only to few.

When asked about the role of *Mal'uf*, Issawis constantly clarify that music is not a defining feature of the *Issawiya*. In particular, in describing occasional attendees of the *hadhra* as people who are interested only in music, Issawis articulate their identity as members of a brotherhood which is more concerned with spirituality than with entertainment. Members of the order, however, also describe the experience of trance as having a mysterious dimension that only Sufis would understand. Though downplaying the role of music, Issawis explain the trance produced by *Mal'uf* music as a moment where God gives spiritual gifts to the *muridin* in secret, as opposed to the trance of sporadic attendees that (though apparently similar) is often portrayed as a mere emotional response to the ritual. In light of these considerations, the *hadhra* is described as a moment of 'secrecy in public': a public event where, even though all participants perform the same actions, only a few experience the mystery behind these actions.

Studies of Sufism have highlighted how repetitive rhythms and movements instil highly emotional states in those who participate in Sufi rituals (Frishkopf 2001; Avery 2004; Racy 2003: 100-225). Sufi trance, consequently, has been mainly looked at as a product of sensorial stimulation (Rouget 1985; Frishkopf 1999: 263 -345, Shannon 2004). These considerations have certainly enriched the anthropological debate on emotionality (Crapanzano 1989; Rosaldo1984; Rosaldo 2004) and altered states of consciousness (Eliade 1951; Atkinson 1992; Vitebsky1993). Nevertheless, in reducing

trance to an emotional dynamic, these publications have also failed to explore how Sufis themselves make sense of the experience of ecstasy. Past ethnographic studies have analysed trance either as an instrument of resistance used by marginal strata of society against mainstream forms of religiosity (Lewis 1989), or as a way to discharge personal tensions in a socially accepted manner (Crapanzano 1973: 229). Even though the anthropology of Sufi rituals has been persuaded by these two approaches (ibid. Gilson 1973), studies not concerned with Sufism have successfully shown that trance is much more than a tool for the release of social or emotional pressure. As demonstrated by these works, trance is locally defined by a series of beliefs and ideas that help constructing altered states of consciousness as 'meaningful experiences' (Lambek 1981; Obeyesekere 1981; Boddy 1989, 1994). These works have suggested that in understanding how local discourses make trance more than a sheer emotional state we can learn about the way in which those who experience it see the world (ibid.). Nonetheless, the ethnography of Sufism has largely ignored this suggestion, paying scarce attention to how Sufis differentiate between spiritual ecstasy and mere emotional rapture in their public rituals. More importantly, these studies have not paid attention to the fact that the difference between the two might be considered a secret affair, and that this in turn can be useful in understanding how Sufis see themselves and the world around them.

Secret rituals have occupied a number of anthropological minds. And even though scholars of secrecy have focused on ritual actions carried out outside of the public domain (Barth 1975; Turner 1967: 103, 1977; T. Turner 1977; La Fontaine 1986; Richards 1988; Kratz 1990; Herdt 2003; Van Gennep 2004) they have nevertheless suggested that the difference between public and secret rituals is often blurry. Ethnographic accounts have shown that restricting the participation in secret rituals, particularly in the context of initiation, does not necessarily entail a complete separation of the

initiated from the public (Barth 1975, 1987; Middleton 1973; Hage 1981; Godellier 1982; Urban 1997). On the contrary, secret ceremonies are sometimes understood as practices aimed at preparing individuals to become full members of larger society (Bledsoe 1984:465; Kreamer 1995:59) and engendering “an understanding of the larger world of which secrecy forms only a part” (Ottenberg 1989:56). More importantly, scholars have shown that often those who deal with secrets put more effort in describing what they do in terms of secrecy than in actually protecting their secrets from the public (Simmel 1950; Bellman 1975, 1981). Frequently, for instance, those who participate in secret rituals decide to share some information with those who are excluded from them (Crook 2007: 11), so that the arcane knowledge protected by ritual secrecy is often publicly known though still referred to as a secret (Taussig 1999: 5). These considerations have successfully contributed to the demolition of simplistic differentiations between ‘private’ and ‘public’ (Rosaldo 1980; Comaroff 1987; Moore 1988; Seligman 1998): an enterprise that has helped scholars to demonstrate the imagined nature of the boundaries between the two domains (Bellman 1981; De Certeau 1993; Joseph 1997). Nevertheless, the debate has focused much more on the public dimension of secret rituals than on the secretive aspects of public ones. Scholars have explained that secrets can be publicly known without being publicly articulated (Taussig 1999). The fact that secrets can be under everyone’s eye while still remaining secret, however, has not attracted as much interest.

Though ready to explain how secret ritual can be public, anthropologists seem to be in trouble when it comes to understanding how public rituals can be secret. The scholarship on secrecy has highlighted that secrets - whether personal, shared or both - are a feature of public life (Simmel 1950: 330-376; Pitt-Rivers 1971; Richardson 1988; Bok 1989; Gilsenan 1990: 122; 1995; Ferme 2001: 12) even in societies that practise ritual secrecy (Piot 1993; Bellman 1984: 43-52). Secrecy, it has been

pointed out, is as a habitual aspect of the public sphere, particularly in contexts where concealment creates the possibility to safely comment on public dynamics (Scott 1990b; Murphy 1990). Attempts to produce a more specific analysis of secrecy in public rituals, however, still remain at the margins of the academic discussion, perhaps due to a rooted prejudice that sees secrecy as an inherently anti-social force (Herdt 2003: 36, 47-49) with no role in forms of public interaction like rituals. Doubtlessly, the idea that a public ritual might have specific meanings and functions that are accessible only to a restricted portion of participants has been ethnographically documented (Gilmore 1993; Pitt Rivers 1971). As shown by some ethnographers, ritual performers might claim that formulas which are uttered publicly have a second meaning which is comprehensible only for a few (Bellman 1984; Apter 1991), or use an encoded language in order to protect themselves from repercussion by others who attend the same ritual (Piot 1993). However, these scholars have not reflected enough on the implications of their data. By showing that rituals can involve – paraphrasing a famous TS Eliot poem - ‘private words that are addressed in public’, these works have in fact involuntarily shown that often, for a specific community, secrecy takes place publicly. Apart from leaving this point unaddressed, these works have failed to realise that this is particularly telling when it comes to understanding how that community defines itself.

A rich corpus of publications has suggested that communities often use exclusive ritual performances to define themselves (Radcliffe-Brown 1965; Leach 1970; Geertz 1980; Cohen 1985; Valeri 1985; Durkheim 2008), with rituals acting as tools that help in shaping a feeling of corporate membership (Bourdieu 1977: 194-195; Douglas 2007) or solving internal conflicts (Gluckman 1963; Turner 1967, 1996). More recent literature, however, has advised against similar monolithic interpretations, highlighting how rituals generate a plethora of different meanings (Firth 1973; Aune 1996;

Obeyesekere 1981) because they are constantly informed by the different personal experiences of the participants (Schechner 1977; Lewis 1980; Ortner 1984; Schieffelin 1985; Moore 1999; Bell 1992; Humphrey & Laidlaw 2004: 12). In light of these considerations, more than simply looking at how rituals define groups, scholars have focused on how groups construct discourses around rituals, claiming specific meanings for them, and creating distinctions between those who understand these meanings and those who do not (Anderson 1991; Harrison 1992; Hobsbawm 2003; Cannadine 2003). Though clarifying that this process is negotiable (Lambek 1990; Comaroff & Comaroff 1991; Beatty 2006), anthropologists have mainly paid attention to how ritual performers trace these distinctions in an explicit way either in the organisation (Holloman 1973; Bloch 1977, 1985; Valeri 1985; Rappaport 1979: 101, 116,121) or in the exegesis of public rituals (Bourdieu 1990: 36, 75, 371-283). Less interest has been raised, however, for cases in which ritual participants maintain that these differentiations - though perceived to be real – remain ritually invisible, and cannot be articulated because they are secret.

This lack of interest in ‘secrecy in public’ is particularly apparent in ethnographic publications dealing with rituals in Islamic settings. The anthropology of Islam has shown how Muslims might resort to notions of secrecy in making sense of their own practices and doctrines (Clarke 1976; Marsden 2005: 157-192) or in formulating ideas about the world they live in (Soares 1996: 745, 2005: 127-152). However, these studies have also concentrated on how those who claim to possess the ‘secret’ make this claim overtly (Brenner 2000), excluding those who do not possess it from certain ritual practices (Shankland 2004). Doubtless, the literature has demonstrated that the process of meaning-making involved in Islamic rituals is complex (Eickelman & Piscatorial 1996), so that, for instance, in performing ritual practices that are deemed universally Islamic Muslims are in fact

informed by localised or personalised notions of religiosity (Combs-Schilling 1989; Bowen 1989, 1992, 1992b; Manger 1999; Harir 1999; Marsden 2005; Mahmood 2005: 118-152). Nevertheless, anthropologists have also mainly looked at how Muslims compete in claiming meanings for their rituals in a public and explicit way (Asad 1986; Gilsenan 1990: 242; Lambek 1990b; Eickelman & Salvatore 2002, 2004, 2004b, Zaman 2004, Didier 2004). Consequently, the relationship between secret meanings and public rituals in Islam has been largely ignored.

Interestingly, this is true even for what concerns studies on Sufism. The view of the Sufis as those who understand the true meaning of Islamic practices (whereas other Muslims might simply perform them without grasping their essence) can be found in classical studies of Islamic mysticism (Burkhardt 1976; Schiimmel 1994). This understanding of Sufism as being concerned with ‘what is invisible for others’, however, has only provided theological background for the anthropology of Sufism (Gilsenan 1990:116-141; Pinto 2006, Schielke 2008b: 121) without inspiring a specific analysis of secret dynamics in Sufi public performances. Though clarifying that Sufi rituals are often open to non-Sufis, ethnographers have mainly concentrated on contexts where the division between initiated and non-initiated is explicitly visible either in the organisation of the assembly during the ritual (Gilsenan 1973: 160) or in the actions that are performed in it (Crapanzano 1973: 218). The existence of Sufi discourses involving subtle and secret differentiations within the ritual context has therefore escaped anthropological scrutiny.

Similar limitations can be found in studies dealing specifically with Sufi music. In following current trends in ritual studies, these publications have mainly focused on how Sufi rituals generate a multiplicity of meanings for the listeners (Qureshi 1995, 2000; Shannon 2004). As shown by a body

of anthropological literature dealing with musical performances (Appadurai et al.1991; Staal 1996; Wolf 2000, 2001: 381, 413) the meaning of music “is not static and immutable, but an evolving, changing attribution of a gesture or sound term” (Meyer 1956: 48). Even though the practice of music is always shaped by culturally specific sensibilities that people develop as members of a specific community (Seeger 2004; Hirshkind 2006: 101), the meaning of music is actively constructed by those who participate in the performance, because they bring their own intentions and expectations in the very act of listening (Hirshkind 2006: 2-31, 35, 2001). Certainly, these studies have successfully demonstrated how music means different things for different listeners (Caton 1990: 256; Miller 2007: 159; Marsden 2007). When it comes to Sufism, however, scholars have not paid enough attention to ritual discourses centred on the notion that both ritual and music do have one specific meaning, and that, since this meaning is secret, only a few might be able to access it.

A consideration of *Issawy* rituals as moments of ‘secrecy in public’ can help us understand not only that secrets can be public while still remaining secret, but also that *Issawy* secrecy is, in the end, a way of describing the world ( Ferme 2001: 1-21; Herdt 2003: 204). *Issawy* rituals show that secrecy – far from being merely about creating a realm cut off from the public - is a way of portraying both the universe and Sufism as being made of more than what meets the eye. *Issawy* secrecy, therefore, is not necessarily only about ‘keeping secrets away from the public’ but also about ‘knowing that there is a mystery though the public might not be able to see it’. The implications of this phenomenon are of fundamental importance for an understanding of the way in which Libyan Issawis tell the story of who they are. Realising that ‘secret’ does not involve only ‘knowing the mystery others do not know’, but also ‘knowing that there is a mystery’ is crucial for a comprehension of the main theoretical concern of this thesis. Later on, this clarification will help me to explain the paradox of why, in the

context of contemporary Libya, Issawis downplay the importance of secretive knowledge while still keeping the notion of ‘secret’ as a fundamental aspect of their spiritual life.

### ***2.1 Same Routine, Different Schedules (Weekly Gatherings)***

Before entering into a deeper discussion on secrecy it is important to start with an exploration of the ritual routine of the *zawaya*. In particular, in this first section I will show how Issawis perform their rituals in slightly different ways while still conceiving of a common identity, demonstrating therefore the dynamics of the *Issawy* discursive tradition that I have previously delineated. *Zawaya*, as I have previously explained, are spaces characterised by a continuous social interaction between masters, disciples and devotees. *Zawaya*, however, are also where the weekly ritual routine of the *Issawiya* takes place. The main liturgical event that happens in the *zawiya* is the recitation of a litany called the “*hezb*” (pl. *ahzab*, “*section*”), a term which is used with the same meaning (but with different connotations) also in other Sufi orders (Gilsenan 1973:156; Hoffman 1995: 156). According to the majority of the *Issawy shuyukh*, the *hezb* - usually called “*hezb al kabyr*” (“*the great hezb*”), “*hezb atTawhid*” (“*the hezb of the oneness of God*”) or “*hezb subhana adDaim*” (“*the ‘glory to the Eternal’ hezb*”) - is the main ritual obligation of the Libyan *Issawiya*. *Muridin* are expected to come and devotees or the *zawiya* are always welcome. A *zawiya* might be used on an everyday basis for different reasons. But the day of the *hezb* is the day of the *hezb*.

*Zawaya* recite the *hezb* either on Thursday evening or on Friday. The performance of the *hezb* is always taken care of by a specific person in the congregation that is appointed by the *shaykh*, the *shaush*. The *shaush* (pl. *shauash*) is someone who is in charge of one of the aspects of the life of the *zawiya* from an organisational point of view. A *zawiya* has usually a number of *shauash* who,

according to some of my informants, should have a knowledge of the *tariqa* which is superior to the one possessed by simple *muridin*. Usually, in my experience, *shauash* are people with good practical and social skills. You will easily recognise them because they know everyone in the *zawiya* and they are frequently in the middle of doing something. Theoretically a *zawiya* can have a *shaush* for every sort of purpose: there might be one who is responsible for keeping the *zawiya* tidy, and even one who takes care of the shoes left at the entrance of the *zawiya*. In the great majority of Tripolitan *zawaya*, however, the purpose of the *shauash* is mainly liturgical: *shauash* ensure that rites are performed properly, continuously putting order into the assembly, inviting people to stay silent or join the group instead of leaning on the wall of the *zawiya*. There is always a specific *shaush* who is responsible for the *hezb* (a “*shaush el hezb*”). As the *hezb* is performed remaining seated on pillows that are put on the floor, the *shaush* is usually the only person who stands up and moves around in case his services are required<sup>94</sup>.

At the beginning of the *hezb* the brothers sit on the floor in a rectangular shaped assembly. The *shaykh* of the *zawiya* has usually a central position facing all the others. At the centre of the congregation there is a low lying table with a jar of water or honey, aspersoria and (at times the *hezb* is recited with low lights) lit candles. The water over which the *hezb* is recited becomes *moya muqaddisa*, “holy water”. It should be handled respectfully and used for various spiritual purposes<sup>95</sup>. The performance of the litany is usually organised in two groups. After declaiming the opening *sura* of the *Qur’an*<sup>96</sup>, the *shaykh* - together with a group of people that know the *hezb* by heart - recites the

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<sup>94</sup> As already noticed in the colonial literature (Baldinetti 2003:135), in Tripoli the *shauash* who have a ritual responsibility are often referred to using the term “*shaykh*” (*shaykh el hezb*, the “*shaykh* of the *hezb*”).

<sup>95</sup> If the *shaykh* of the *zawiya* is an active exorcist the “holy water” is mixed with copious litres of normal water in order to have a constant storage of curative liquid to be used in exorcisms. On spirit possession and Islam see Lambek 1981 and Boddy 1989, more specifically on Sufism and practices of exorcism see Crapanzano 1971, 1973, 1977 and Ewing 1984.

<sup>96</sup> The *Qur’an* is divided into 114 chapters, or “*suwar*” (“sing.”*sura*”) (Nelson 2001:4).

first verses of the *hezb*. As the recitation proceeds the second group repeats the verses, declaims other lines or joins the first group according to the recitative rules of the *hezb*. Occasionally the recitation can be accompanied by rhythmic movement of the body, though the *hezb* is usually a very ‘contained’ performance. At the end of the “great *hezb*” the *shaush* stands up, puts a hand on his head or on his chest and asks “*man shaq anNabi*”, “*whoever loves the Prophet*” to praise him chorally, inviting the attendees to recite the opening sura for Mohammed, the “*ashraf el mursalin*”, “*the most honourable of those who have been sent by God*”. Subsequently, the *shaush* of the *hezb* goes all around the assembly and using the *aspersoria* he pours water mixed with essence of the flowers on the hands of the attendees who wash their hands and faces. The fragrance of the rose-water is refreshing. Then tea, and hopefully sweets are served.

Since the *Issawy* order has a variegated repertoire of litanies, some *shuyukh* might invite the brothers to meet a second time during the week – usually on Sunday - in order to read another *hezb* (frequently the *hezb al falah*, “*hezb of deliverance*”, also called “*hezb asSaghir*”, “*the small hezb*”). However, even in those *zawaya* where the brothers meet regularly twice a week, the “great *hezb*” of the Friday is always described as ‘*the hezb*’<sup>97</sup>. If the brothers of a *zawiya* decide to meet during the week in order to recite one of the minor litanies of the brotherhood, the *shaykh* would always make sure that everyone hears him saying “*come to the zawiya on Friday!*”. The “great *hezb*” is described as an *Issawy* ritual obligation, and it is therefore interesting to notice how *Issawis* recite slightly different versions of the litany. Since, as I have previously explained, the *Issawiya* is divided into

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<sup>97</sup>Sometimes, the brothers might also recite a third *hezb*, the “*hezb el Fatah*”, “*the hezb of the conquest*”, although this is quite rare. The *ahzab* cited in this chapter are also mentioned in the literature concerning the Moroccan and the Algerian *Issawiya* (Brunel 1926:90- 93, Andezian 2001:104 note7)

groups (or *assanid*), different *assanid* within the order (and occasionally different *zawayya* within a *sanad*) have their own peculiar way of performing the *hezb*.

Some *zawayya* might start the *hezb* with six recitations of the opening *sura* of the *Qur'an*: one for God, one for the Prophet (and his companions and family), one for the Perfect *Shaykh* (and his masters and disciples), one for the saints (the “*ahl illah*”, “the people of God”) and one for the deceased Muslims (the “*amuat el muslimin*”). Others, however, recite only three (for God, the Prophet and Ben ‘Aysa), or one. In some *zawayya* the recitation of the *hezb* is completed with – or preceded by – a series of “*la ilaha illa Allah*” (“*there is no God but God*”), “*Allah ya Allah*” (“*God, oh God*”) and “*Astaffirullah*” (“*forgive me, oh God*”). However, if some *shuyukh* insist that these formulas should be repeated respectively two-three hundred times, one-two hundred times and thirty-three times, others do not recite them at all. After the *hezb* a *shaykh* might choose to read a different section of the *Qur'an* every week - or at times always the same - while another *shaykh* might decide not to do so<sup>98</sup>. Perhaps some *shuyukh* might give a *dars*, a “*lecture*”, on religious matters after the reading of the *Qur'an*, while others (indeed the majority of them at least in Tripoli) might not think this is necessary, or might simply not feel comfortable with the idea of preparing a lecture every week. In the *zawiya* of *shaykh* Ramadan, my main informant, after the *hezb* the brothers invoke God’s blessings (“*ya Rauf!*” “*Oh, you the compassionate!*”) twice over the holy water, but this does not happen elsewhere.

Variations can be found not only in what comes before and after the *hezb*, but also in the actual recitation. From the point of view of the content the *hezb* is a list of the main coordinates that should

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<sup>98</sup>The term “*hezb*” is also used to indicate one of the sixty sections in which the *Qur'an* is divided (Allen 2000:53). After the recitation of the “*great hezb*”, some *zawayya* perform therefore a “*hezb el Qur'an*”, “*a hezb from the Qur'an*”.

orientate the life of the *Issawy* as a Muslim: a formulaic reminder that the bases of the order are the fundamentals of Islam, and a definition of God's perfect attributes as creator against the imperfections of men as creatures. Nonetheless, some *zawaya* might repeat three times a section of the *hezb* that others perform only once, or recite slightly different verses. Since the performance includes formulae for the request of *tawassul*, ("intercession" from saints or the Prophet) the brothers usually chant a long list of famous, relatively known and rather obscure saints. However, in doing so, a *zawiya* might seek the help of a *Sidhi Yunnis*, while another might ask the intercession of a *Sidhi Uweiss*. Sometimes different *zawaya* refer to the same saintly characters, but in different ways, or ask intercession from spiritual powers that other *zawaya* do not invoke. In a *zawiya* there might be a weekly mention of the "*ahl el loh wa ahl el qalam*", "*the people of the pen and of the loh*<sup>99</sup>", with reference to God's angels that write down past, present and future events, but this line might have never been uttered in the *hezb* of another *zawiya*. Variety is a very visible feature of the *Issawy* weekly life in Tripoli. Interestingly, however, Issawis do seem to see it as a problem.

Even though Issawis commented to me on the differences in the performance, they never developed the concept of an orthodoxy of the *hezb*. Some told me that a specific way of reciting the verses better conveyed the meaning of the text, or remarked that sometimes people misread or misconstrue the lines due to lack of education. From time to time Issawis elaborated on the reasons behind a certain version of the *hezb*, as in the case of a *zawiya* that, according to some informants, changed a particular verse because it could have been misunderstood by the Libyan authorities as having a

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<sup>99</sup>The wooden panel used by Libyan students in Quranic schools to practise their writing. On Quranic schools in Libya see Cerbella 1943. For a general discussion on Islamic education see Hefner & Zaman 2007.

political connotation<sup>100</sup>. Even still, my questions regarding the differences in the *hezb* were usually dismissed rather quickly as not relevant. In Libyan dialect the word “*barnamj*” (“*program*”) broadly indicates “*routine*” or “*things you are up to*”. Unsurprisingly, therefore, when asked about the differences in the *hezb* Issawis nonchalantly answered that each *zawiya* had simply its own “*barnamj*”, its own habitual way of doing things<sup>101</sup>. The same Issawis, however, would refer to the *hezb* as “*our hezb*”, or the “*Issawy hezb*”. The *hezb*, I was told, is a text that belongs to the order in its entirety despite differences and variations. The relation between the litany and the *Issawiya* as a group was reflected even in jokes or indirect statements. Playing with the fact that the Arabic “*hezb*” can also mean “*party*”, an *Issawy shaykh* once jokingly told me “*our party (our litany/our group) is the only political party allowed in Libya!*”<sup>102</sup>”

The fact that members of a community might enact the same rituals in slightly different ways has been documented in the anthropology of ritual. Nonetheless, very rarely scholars have explicitly acknowledged that difference in practices might not particularly trouble the practitioners themselves. Generally speaking, anthropologists have noticed that repetition and consistency are not necessarily defining aspects of rituals (Goody 1977b:28; Tambiah 1985; Myerhoff 1977: 201), demonstrating instead how ritual routine leaves space for re-elaboration of old schemes (Bloch 1987), variations on a theme (Fox 1979), creativity (Barth 1987; Csordas 1997), and even surprise (Whitehouse 2000).

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<sup>100</sup>The *hezb* mentions Idris ben Abdallah, originator of the Idrisid dynasty in Morocco (see chap. 1 footnote 3), but some feared that the line could have been mistaken for a reference to King Idris asSanusy, the last king of Libya overthrown by Gheddafi in 1969 (see introduction of the thesis page 13).

<sup>101</sup>Though a common word in standard Arabic, in Libya “*barnamj*” is ubiquitous term which is used in different ways. “*Shnu barnamej-ek?*” (“*what is your program/what are you up to?*”), “*keifa el barnamj?*” (“*What is the program/ what is the situation?*”). In commenting on the extensive use of the term a Tripolitan computer engineer once jokingly told me “*in Libya everyone is a programmer*”.

<sup>102</sup>Following Colonel Gheddafi’s famous indications contained in his “*Green Book*”, the Libyan political system does not involve political parties since they are seen as “*the means by which a narrow majority can usurp the right to speak in the name of all*” (Davis 1987: 40-44; Gathafi 2005: 8-11; Vandewalle 2006: 103). Broader considerations on the relationship between the Libyan government and Sufi orders can be found in chapter four.

Even though these studies have shown how ritual is much more than a repetitive action that demands total conformity (Bell 1992:72-74; Asad 1993: 57-58; Mahmood 2001), they have nonetheless emphasised that people can be either disturbed by differences in the ritual performances of their communities, or simply not willing to elaborate on them once asked (Barth 1987:5; Fox 1979: 158). Issawis, on the contrary, were usually very aware of the variations in the recitation of the *hezb*, and always ready to clarify that differences were simply a normal aspect of the *tariqa*. At times they even patiently sat me down to enumerate all these variations, but never engaging with an idea of ‘official text’ that should be performed unanimously by everyone.

Aside from illustrating a genuine openness to variety that will be clearer to the reader by the end of this chapter, the perception of the *hezb* as a common obligation which is carried out in different ways clearly testifies to the dynamics of the *Issawy* discursive tradition. James Laidlaw and Caroline Humphrey have argued that the actions involved in a ritual are often regulated by a necessity to follow rules rather than by a clear codification of what these rules might be (Laidlaw & Humphrey 2004: 111-132). Ritual performers, in other words, might be driven more by a need to ‘get the ritual right’ than by a desire to systematise the right way of doing so (ibid.). Similarly, Issawis feel the need to refer to a common tradition made of rules and obligations, but in performing the obligatory recitation of the *hezb* they also enact the specific peculiarities of each *sanad* within the order. Even though the “great *hezb*” is portrayed as ‘one’, each version of the litany is in itself a practice that has been passed on through a line of *shuyukh* within a specific *sanad*. In other words (as often happens when it comes to ‘tradition’ - Gilsenan 1990:15; Boyer 1990; Hobsbawm 2003), behind the notion of the one *hezb* there are effectively several traditions that have developed historically. Nevertheless, as

we have previously seen, the *Issawy* discursive tradition involves a specific link with a common past, and in the case of the *hezb* this link is anything but vague.

In conversation, *shuyukh* and *muridin* were able to contextualise the *hezb* fairly well within the history of the order as a whole. I was told on many occasions that the text was originally written by *Sidhi* al-Jazuli who, as I have previously explained, was the historical originator of the spiritual tradition from which the *Issawiya* blossomed as an independent order<sup>103</sup>. Occasionally, an *Issawy shaykh* would tell me how one of his predecessors in the *sanad* (whether his father or a more ancient figure) added some verses to the *hezb* for spiritual reasons. *Shaykh* Ramadan, in particular, explained to me how (as already noticed by Brunel – 1926: 91) even the Perfect *Shaykh* and his masters el Harithi and asSahli<sup>104</sup> enriched the original text with some additional formulas for the request of intercession. Nevertheless, *shuyukh* and *muridin* always emphasised the continuity between the *hezb* of Jazuli and the *hezb* recited by the *Issawiya*, recognising the *hezb* as a text coming from a common *Issawy* past. Only on one occasion did a *shaykh* tell me that he had decided to make amendments to the litany (changing therefore the version of the *hezb* that had been passed on to him by his predecessor). The *shaykh*, an educated professional in his late sixties, avoided reciting the formulas of intercession from the saints because he wanted to teach his *muridin* that trusting in God only was more important than reciting the *hezb* in its entirety. Significantly, in a later conversation, the same *shaykh* also explained to me not only that seeking help from the saints was not in itself a negative practice, but also that the *hezb* was characterised by an historical continuity because Ben ‘Aysa “kept (al Jazuli’s text) as it was”.

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<sup>103</sup>See chap. 1 page 46. The fact that the main body of the litany was not written by the founder of the *Issawiya* is not particularly surprising bearing in mind the fact that the Perfect *Shaykh* was not exceptionally prolific in terms of literary production (Brunel 1926).

<sup>104</sup> See chapter 1 page 46.

It is also important to say that Issawis do not debate the differences in the *hezb* because they do not debate the *hezb* in the first place. On the one hand, the differences in the performance are essentially minor. On the other hand, the litany is in a sense an ‘unproblematic’ topic of conversation. Apart from having a well-known position in the history of the order, the *hezb* has also, as explained, an explicit pious and devotional content. With its unambiguous references to the Prophet and the pillars of Islam the text remains therefore a fundamentally uncontroversial subject. This ‘unproblematic’ nature of the *hezb* will be better understood in the next chapter when compared with other practices that generate divergent opinions amongst Issawis because of their supposedly ‘less explicit’ piety. Nonetheless, for now it is important to highlight that one of the reasons why the *hezb* is portrayed as the *Issawy* practice par excellence is precisely this overt piety. In diminishing the importance of the differences that characterise the *hezb* in the different *zawaya*, Issawis portray their order not only as a homogenous brotherhood, but also, as we will see later on in the chapter, as an unambiguously pious organisation.

So far I have explored ideas of commonality and *sanad*-specific diversity in *Issawy* liturgical practices. However, in the following section I will show how Issawis do not approach their ritual life merely as a matter of doing the same things in different ways. The members of the brotherhood also cultivate other ritual discourses. In particular, as I explained in the introduction to the chapter, Issawis describe their rituals as performances that, though public, have a secret dimension which is not accessible by everyone. In order to discuss this complex aspect of the *Issawiya*, I need to engage in a more comprehensive discussion of the practices of the order. Even though the *hezb* is portrayed as ‘the’ *Issawy* ritual, the brotherhood has a rich ritual variety that involves, amongst other things,

musical performances, and it is on these practices that I will concentrate in order to discuss issues of secrecy and publicity. Before doing so, however, I will need to describe the ‘special occasions’ that characterise the life of the *zawaya* since these are the occurrences where *Issawy* ritual variety takes place, becomes visible and, most of all, audible.

## **2.2 Devotion, Socialisation and lots of Tea (Issawy Special Occasions)**

Even though some *zawaya* attract a good number of *Issawy* devotees who might decide to participate in the *hezb*, in Tripolitania the average quantity of attendees during weekly gatherings is usually around ten people (occasionally more, often less, mainly *muridin*). Without a doubt, this datum is important for an understanding of the dimensions of the brotherhood. However, it should be also kept in mind in order to appreciate that when it comes to *Issawy* ‘special occasions’ the scenario is very different. Following the order in which I present them in this chapter, for reasons of clarity (but not the one in which *Issawis* would necessarily rate them), *Issawy* special occasions are mainly festivals held in honour of a saint and celebrations related to the birthday of the prophet Mohammed. It would be wrong to assume that *Issawis* only spend their time between following the weekly routine of the *zawiya* and participating in these occasions. I have accompanied *Issawis* to recreational visits in the countryside, lounged in the guestroom of their houses, and laughed at their jokes (that in Tripolitania for some reason always concern the inhabitants of a specific little town whose name I will purposely omit). However, it would be wrong to exclude *Issawy* ‘special events’ from this list of leisure activities. In order to explain how *Issawy* rituals are moments of ‘secrecy in public’, I need to show how these rituals are attended also by non-*Issawis*. In presenting these occasions therefore I will only concentrate on the large participation of occasional attendees that characterises them, explaining how these feasts are not only occasions of devotion, but also of

entertainment. Even though one of the main reasons behind this element of entertainment is music, I prefer to give a general overview of these events before taking musical performances into account.

The term “*mazar*” literally means “*place of visitation*” (Trimingham 1998: 230; 307), and in many Islamic contexts it indicates the shrine of a saint (Lemercier-Quelquejay 1996:306; Gaborieu 1996: 207). In Libya however the term does not refer to a place, but to an occurrence. “*Mazar*” is a word that can be used in the broader sense of religious gathering, but also to indicate a festival held in honour of a saint, usually in the proximity of a *darih* (pl. *adriah*), a saint’s tomb. The Libyan landscape is a constellation of saints’ shrines of all dimensions and shapes, from small cubic buildings to much larger domed constructions. Some of them host *mazarat* while others do not. The duration of these festivals can vary greatly, and the dates in which they start might be slightly different every year. Usually, when it comes to ancient saints, the dates are set up according to the Islamic calendar, as in the case of medieval saint *Sidhi* el Andalusi whose shrine hosts the longest *mazar* in Tripoli that lasts for a week. However, festivals that commemorate more recent saints generally follow the Western calendar, as for the popular festival of *Sidhi* Ali Budabus celebrated in the area of Jamzur, just outside Tripoli, every 12 of July in remembrance of the day of his death in 1999<sup>105</sup>.

A Libyan *mazar* is a pious occasion for many: attendees come to pay a visit to the tomb of the saint, sitting close to the shrine in contemplation. However, often the shrine is just an element of the scene, and not necessarily the most important. Frequently, people are only able to produce poor accounts of

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<sup>105</sup>Unlike other Arabic countries, in Libya there are officially three calendars. In addition to the Islamic (*Hijri*) and the Western (*Miladi*) a third calendar that starts from the date of the death of the prophet (632AD) has been introduced by the government together with new names for the months of the year (Bearman 1986:163) In everyday life none seems to use this system.

the life of the saint who is celebrated, and very often they admittedly come to the *mazarat* only to meet other people and have fun. Though ready to identify the broader social implications of saints' festivals (Werbner 2008; Stauth & Schielke 2008), scholars of Islam have generally emphasised the devotional character of these events (Hoffman 1995: 101-122). In particular, anthropologists have identified processes of sacralisation of locality (Saheb 1998; Takim 2005) highlighting how a festival held in honour of a saintly figure is "not just a festival but a ritual" (Werbner 2003:258). This is obviously true since in Libya visiting the shrine of a saint is perceived to be a form of devotional pilgrimage, or *zyara* (Tapper 1990; Werbner 1998; Coleman & Elsner 1995:69-73). Nevertheless, recent publications have also stressed the importance of the entertaining aspect of these events, explaining how religious festivals can be occasions of leisure, and even playfulness (Coulon 1999: 196; Schielke 2006: 119-120, 2008). Generally speaking, Libyan festivals are very small events that lack the "element of the medieval fair" (Gilsenan 1973:48), or the general vivaciousness that characterises the veneration of shrines in other ethnographic contexts (Gilsenan 1973: 50). Even though *mazarat* might take the form of *fêtes* with clothes' sellers and tents assembled for the attendees, they are usually nothing more than an all-male cosmos of chats, hand-shaking and food that takes place in the courtyard of a shrine.<sup>106</sup> Yet, Libyan *mazarat* remain highly sociable occasions where people come to eat, talk and enjoy a cup of tea. In a Libyan *mazar* you will not find the public manifestations of moral irreverence that have struck ethnographers dealing with ideas of fun and entertainment (Verkaaik 2004; Torab 2007). Tea, however, is never missing.

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<sup>106</sup>Even though *mazarat* can be held for female saints, women are not usually present in Libyan saints' festivals. Issues of saint cults and gender in Islam are dealt with in Jeffrey 1979, Basu 1998 and Callan 2008. From my experience (based on a 2006 visit to the festival held in honour of the 8th century saint *Sayyda Nafisa* in Cairo), and by examining the literature (Gilsenan 1973, Biegan 1990; Hoffman 1995; Schielke 2003; 2008; Madoeuf 2006) I am under the impression that Libyan festivals are generally considerably smaller than Egyptian ones.

I have countless memories of friends passing by my house to ask if I wanted to go with them to a *mazar*. At times, they were people who had no interest in Sufi matters whatsoever, while other times they were Sufi enthusiasts or people who did not have a specific opinion on Sufi affairs. We would usually get inside a car, perhaps stop for a *macchiata*<sup>107</sup> on the way, and, once arrived, have a good time. Attendees sit on mats on the ground, while the people who take care of the event carry trays transporting small cups of tea (pouring tea from above causes a thin layer of froth which is much appreciated). Carbonated soft drinks are omnipresent. Dinner is always served, usually after the sunset prayer. The menu can include fruits, couscous, rice, *mbakbuka* (a pasta meal whose onomatopoeic name comes from the noise of the boiling pot) or *makaruna*<sup>108</sup>. You are almost forced to chat. Conversations cover all sorts of subject. Even when I decided to go to a *mazar* by myself, I have always found a glass of tea and someone to talk with (or, better said, someone has always found me). It is when I started to be recognised in all the *mazarat* I went to in Tripolitania – and when one of my friends jokingly stated that I would have gone anywhere as long as the name of the destination started with “*Sidhi*” - that I knew that my network of contacts was solid. *Mazarat* are occasions of strong interaction and socialisation.

The importance of certain saints’ festivals for specific tribal groups has been documented in Libya (Peters 1976; Mason 1981) and generally in North-Africa (Marx 1977; Eickelman 1977, 1981). However, ethnographic studies have also highlighted how these occasions can often be very inclusive events (Gilsenan: 1973: 62; Werbner 2003) and this is certainly the case in the Tripoli district where

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<sup>107</sup>From the Italian “*macchiato*”: espresso coffee with milk. According to my ethnocentric palate, Libya is the Arab country where you can find a decent espresso.

<sup>108</sup>In Italian “*maccheroni*” indicates a specific kind of pasta. On eating and fasting in Sufism see Hoffman 1995b. Insightful discussions on the relation between food and religiosity can be found in Bynum 1987, Lester 1995.

the participation in the *mazarat* is open to different strata of society and to different Sufi orders<sup>109</sup>. Since Sufi *zawaya* are often built close to - or directly on - the tomb of a saint, sometimes the *mazar* is organised by the brothers of the *zawiya* that hosts the shrine. Other times, however, the festival is put together by people from the local neighbourhood who might not have anything to do with a Sufi order. For what concerns the *Issawiya*, different *zawaya*, and sometimes different people within a particular *zawiya* have their own habits in relation to saints' festivals. Some *zawaya* go every year to the same *mazar*, particularly when they have friendly (or *sanad*-based<sup>110</sup>) relations with the *zawiya* that hosts the festival. Others, however, do not go to any at all. Some *shuyukh* openly distance themselves from the crowded nature of these events, as in the case of *Shaykh* Ramadan who often expressed no interest in participating due to the “*zahma*”, the “*crowding*” of saints' festivals. In this regard, the *Issawy* presence in saints' festivals should be understood in the broader context of the flexible mobility that characterises the life of the *zawaya*. *Issawy shuyukh* often invite each other on the occasion of funerals or births, and sometimes, when the relative of a murid dies, people from different *zawaya* might decide to gather in his house and perform the *hezb*. These events are flexible occasions that might or might not see a large *Issawy* participation, and in a similar vein *mazarat* are events characterised by a highly variable degree of *Issawy* presence.<sup>111</sup>

There are of course festivals where *Issawis* are more likely to participate either because the saint that is celebrated was a member of the order or because the *mazar* is organised by a particularly popular

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<sup>109</sup>One possible exception might be the *mazar* of *Sidhi* Sulayman al Fituri (whose shrine is in the proximities of the Mahari Hotel in Tripoli). *Sidhi* Sulayman is the originator of the seven branches of the Fwatir, the tribe of the famous Libyan saint Abdusalam el Asmar (see chapter 1 page 45). I was told that this *mazar* is particularly dear to members of this tribe, but I have not been able to check this information properly.

<sup>110</sup> See previous chapter.

<sup>111</sup> Some *Issawis shuyukh* might also decide to invite brothers from other *zawaya* in order to celebrate together a recurrence of the Islamic calendar, whether the *Isra wal-Miraj* (the night journey of the prophet Mohammed to Jerusalem and to heaven), *Laylat el Qadr* (the night of the revelation of the first verses of the *Qur'an*) or *Laylat an-Nus min Sha'baan* (the night of mid *Sha'bban*, the month preceding Ramadan). Many *Issawy zawaya*, however, do not organise particular celebrations for these occasions.

*Issawy zawiya*. In Tripoli, for instance, members of the brotherhood tend to gather every year in the suburb of Tajura to celebrate a *mazar* at the shrine of *Sidhi* Ali Jundub, an influential *Issawy shaykh* who died in 1978. Popular amongst Tripolitan Issawis are also the *mazarat* held in honour of *Sidhi* al Mazri and *Sidhi* al Kittani, organised by the members of two very important *Issawy zawayya* that are named after these two saints. Worth mentioning, finally, are also two festivals that happen in the city of Zlitan the day after the *ayd asSaghir* and the one after the *ayd al Kabyr* (the two most important festivities of the Islamic calendar). The two *mazarat* are particularly dear to all Libyan brotherhoods since they are dedicated to *Sidhi* Abdusalam el Asmar (a fundamental figure in Libyan mysticism, as previously explained)<sup>112</sup>. Yet, even on these occasions Issawis constitute only a portion of the attendees. These *mazarat* might attract Issawis, but they are also frequented by members of other brotherhoods, and by people who do not usually associate themselves with Sufism. Interestingly, this is also the case for what concerns the one festival which bears the most significance for Issawis: the celebration for the birthday of the Prophet.

### **2.3 Poems, Sweets and Parades (The Birthday of the Prophet)**

The only feast that engages the whole of the *Issawy* order is the celebration of the *mawlid annabi*' (the "*birthday of the Prophet*")<sup>113</sup>. Like any other birthday, the "*mawlid*" is celebrated on a precise day of the calendar: the 12<sup>th</sup> day of the Islamic month of *Rabya al Aul*. For the *Issawiya* however, the

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<sup>112</sup> See Chap. 1, page 45. *Sidhi* el Asmar's importance explains not only why two *mazarat* are held in his honour, but also why festivals are organised in the shrines of some of his relatives as well. The shrine of *Sayyda* Aysha (el Asmar's maternal aunt), for instance, hosts a very popular festival that takes place in the town of Taurgha, near the city of Misurata.

<sup>113</sup> In other ethnographic contexts the word "*mawlid*" can indicate a festival held in honour of a saint, particularly when celebrated on the day in which the departed holy person was born (Gilsenan 1973). In Libya, however, the term applies only to the birthday of the Prophet. For a comprehensive historical analysis of the Prophet's *mawlid* in the Islamic world see Kaptein 1993 and de Jong 1993. Early ethnographic observations on the *mawlid* celebrations in Tripoli were recorded in Cerbella & Ageli 1949.

*mawlid* is not a day but a season. In every *zawiya* the commemoration of the *mawlid* involves a long period of preparation that ends with a final celebration called “*iom el khatim*”, “*the final day*”. Each *zawiya* celebrates its “final day” on a different day in a rota, allowing and indeed encouraging other Issawis to participate. Often, at least in Tripoli, *Issawy shuyukh* summon all the *zawayya* of the city for the occasion, so that the *mawlid* becomes both a *zawiya*-specific event and a common *Issawy* affair. Brothers of different *Issawy zawayya* visit each other, devotees of the order become more assiduous, and the *mawlid* strikes the observer as a multiple feast that sets the whole *Issawiya* into motion. Interestingly, even in this time that appears to be so important for the brotherhood, the celebration attracts people who do not usually frequent *Issawy zawayya* during the rest of the year. All of a sudden *zawayya* become full of non-Issawis (both members of other brotherhoods and people without particular Sufi inclinations) who come, join in the celebration and enjoy the vibrant atmosphere of the feast.

In preparation for the “final day” the members of each *zawiya* meet regularly for a period of time in order to read sections of a long poetic composition in praise of the Prophet which is usually referred to as “*el Baghdadi*”<sup>114</sup>. The poem mentions episodes from the life of Mohammed, and it is supposed to help the *muridin* entering into the spirit of the feast (“*I cannot know the Prophet if I do not listen!*” a murid told me once<sup>115</sup>). Subsequent to the completion of the poem, each *zawiya* has a small parade in the streets of the city. The parades are scheduled on different days, and the participation is

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<sup>114</sup>From the the name of the author, *shaykh* Abdullah Mohammed el Baghdadi (d.266 Hijri). The poem is divided in chapters of 21 quintets (groups of five verses) organised according to the letters of the Arabic alphabet. Some *zawayya* prefer to read a similar but more recent poem by *Shaykh* Ahmed el Bahlul, a famous Libyan Sufi character buried in the *Sidhi* Muneidher cemetery in Tripoli. On the last day of recitation (or on the actual “final day”), some *shuyukh* might also decide to read another popular poem dedicated to the Prophet and written by *Imam* Jaafar el Barazanji (1834 – 1899). This poem (ubiquitously known in Western Libya as “*the mawlid*”) is also recited during wedding celebrations. The families involved in the marriage might ask the brothers of an *Issawy zawiya* to come and recite it for free, or summon a group of semi-professional reciters for a price of 300-400 dinars.

<sup>115</sup> On the relationship between spiritual education and the act of listening (though in a context very different from the one I consider here) see Hirshkind 2006.

often spontaneous: devotees of the order call each other on the phone<sup>116</sup> (or text the anthropologist) spreading the word that a particular *zawiya* is “coming out” on a given day. The only *zawaya* who parade on the actual day of the *mawlid* are the ones of old Tripoli. As shown in the previous chapter, the old city hosts the eldest *Issawy zawiya* in Tripoli, and this might explain why it is the *medina* that initiates the rota of the parades. This tradition might be the fossil of a time when the *Issawiya* was confined between the walls of the *medina* since there was no Tripoli outside of old Tripoli. If the great majority of the *zawaya* organise little (and at times pretty unnoticeable) processions, the parade in the *medina* constitutes a real urban event that attracts large portions of Tripolitans every *mawlid*.

The celebration of the *mawlid* does not involve only the *zawaya*. In Tripoli children shoot firecrackers during and after the feast, Imams deliver sermons against the use of pyrotechnics, and housewives prepare great quantities of *hasida*, a delicious *mawlid* sweet made of flour, olive oil and honey. On the morning of the *mawlid*, however, the three *zawaya* of the old *medina*<sup>117</sup> become the protagonists of the day. After reciting the *hezb*, each *zawiya* starts a procession in the old city carrying a standard, shouting out pious slogans and moving according to a different itinerary. In a rather theatrical fashion, each parade stops for a symbolic visit of courtesy when passing by the building of one of the other two *zawaya*. Very soon the inhabitants of the *medina* start to sprinkle perfumed water over the parades from their balconies, while the entire old city becomes crowded with occasional attendees. Fathers carry their children on the shoulders, and kids eat sweets made, I suspect, only of sugar and food colouring. Using sunglasses and scarves to protect themselves from the sun, they join the parade of a particular *zawiya*, then leave and join another one, or decide to stop

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<sup>116</sup>In recent years the price of sim cards in Libya has become particularly accessible. Sim cards are produced by two local companies, and exchanging phone-numbers has become an obligatory social ritual. On mobile phones, religiosity and Islam see Rollier 2010. More broadly on Islam and ‘new’ media see Eickelman & Anderson 1999.

<sup>117</sup>See Chapter 1 pag.49-50.

for a chat with an acquaintance. Women stay at distance from the processions, talking amongst themselves, and occasionally producing their traditional ‘ululation’<sup>118</sup>. The streets of the *medina* are so narrow that often one of the parades gets stuck in a corner of the old city for few minutes. At lunch time, food is traditionally offered by the attendants of the beautiful 17<sup>th</sup> century “Mosque of Othman Pasha”, one of the most important Ottoman buildings of old Tripoli. One of the *zawaya* might decide to terminate its procession earlier than the other two by leading the crowd outside of the *medina* into the “*Green Square*”, the central plaza of the city. Usually, however, the parades last until the late afternoon, with pauses dictated only by the daily prayers.

The parades of the *medina* inaugurate a rota of “final days” in the different *zawaya*. The celebration of a “final day” takes place always in the evening (the final day is in fact a final night). If some *zawaya* have their special night on a fixed date every year, others choose a different day every *mawlid* according to organisational necessities. Even though a *zawaya* can decide to postpone the celebration for months after the actual day of the birthday of the Prophet, in Tripoli the interval between the various “final days” is reasonably short, so that you can literally find yourself going to one every week for a month or two. The atmosphere of a “final day” closely resembles the one I have sketched out when talking about saints’ festivals. People who do not manifest any interest in Sufi affairs during the rest of the year come to the *zawaya* to socialise, spend a pleasant evening and enjoy themselves. *Zawaya* offer food, tea, and *khamra* (“*inebriating*”), a sweet that can only be found in *Issawy* gatherings in *mawlid* time<sup>119</sup>. Most importantly, *Issawy zawaya* provide - as I have explained

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<sup>118</sup> A common expression of joy amongst Libyan women. One could be tempted to think that the practice pre-dates the arabisation of the country since it is attested even in the Libyan section of Herodotus’ Histories (Book IV.168-198).

<sup>119</sup>The recipe involves a basis made of hummus, peanuts, almonds, olive oil, honey, sugar, aromas, and - occasionally - sesame and dates. However, each *sanad* (and sometimes each *zawaya*) adds its own special ingredients to the basis. Like so many aspects of *Issawy* tradition, *khamra* is a combination of similarities and differences. The brothers read the *hezib* and some *Qur’an* over the *khamra*, and then put it in small containers that will be distributed to whoever comes to

in the introduction to the chapter - *Mal'uf* music, and this is the one true catalyst that pushes many Tripolitans to partake into the Issawy celebrations of the *mawlid* every year.

Even though Libya has a variety of regional musical traditions, *Mal'uf* has certainly a central place in the soundscape of the country, particularly in Western Libya. Apart from being performed in a number of social situations including weddings<sup>120</sup>, *Mal'uf* is one of the most popular choices when it comes to select music for a car-journey, or to fill up the track list of an Mp3 player. In Tripoli people of different age and social status listen to *Mal'uf* in their recreational time, and this explains why even Libyans who are not particularly into Sufism visit the *zawaya* in *mawlid* time expecting to listen to *Mal'uf*<sup>121</sup>. Some Tripolitan *zawaya* have a particularly good reputation for their *Mal'uf*, attracting therefore both *Mal'uf* connoisseurs and fans on the occasion of their “final day”. In the *Issawy zawaya*, however, *Mal'uf* is played in a ritual context. As I will explain in the following section one of the most recognisable components of the *mawlid* seasons is the *hadhra*: a well known ritual in the literature on Sufism that involves involves pious recitations, physical movements and music.

The term (“*hadhra*”, “presence”) assumes different connotations in the various Sufi traditions (Gilsenan 1973: 159; Crapanzano 1973; Hoffman 1995; Trimmingham 1998), but in Libya, according to many Issawis, it indicates the state of mind of the attendees, who come to the ritual to ‘be present’: to elevate their soul in praise of the almighty. Even though some *Issawy zawaya* perform a *hadhra* in the

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participate in the “last day”. In keeping up with the rota of the “last days”, I had the culinary privilege to taste different varieties of *khamra*.

<sup>120</sup> In Tripolitania *Mal'uf* is played in the course of the *zaffa*, the singing procession that accompanies the groom during the wedding (Ciantar 2006: 60). On wedding ceremonies in Libya see Mason 1975 and Abdelkafi 1977.

<sup>121</sup> Generally speaking, young Tripolitans have a very diversified musical taste that includes American rock or rap, Egyptian, Lebanese or Italian pop, and Libyan reggae (a musical reality that is growing exponentially in Libya). Though considered as ‘old music’, *Mal'uf* is nevertheless largely appreciated by youngsters.

course of their weekly gatherings during the year, this ritual is usually reserved for special occasions. A *hadhra* can be held in the course of a saint's festival, or to celebrate the birth of a newborn in one of the brother's house. The *hadhra*, however, is mainly a component of the *mawlid* celebrations. A few days before their "final day", the brothers of each *zawiya* start to meet every night in order to perform the *hadhra*, until they celebrate one last, larger *hadhra* performance on their final day. As I have previously explained, the weekly *hezb* is described as a fundamental part of the *Issawy* routine and as the most important ritual obligation of the order. Nonetheless, the *hadhra* is the most popular *Issawy* performance, the one that attracts people the most. If the weekly *hezb* is routine, the *hadhra* is an event. And the *hadhra* of the "final day" is the main event of the year.

Both saints' festivals and *mawlid* celebrations are characterised by a large participation of attendees, and by a clear recreational element. Bearing in mind how these occasions are attended by *Issawis* and non-*Issawis* alike, I will now explore the performance of the *hadhra* in greater detail. Before doing so, however, it is important to remark that participation in the *Issawy hadhra* is completely open. Both members and non-members of the order perform essentially the same actions in the ritual. In a sense, this lack of visual differentiation between initiated and occasional participants resonates with the ideas of many *Issawis* who told me how anyone, whether he belongs to a brotherhood or not, can receive spiritual gifts in the *hadhra*<sup>122</sup>. Nonetheless, the notion that the spiritual power inherent in the ritual is limitless (and that it can therefore have an influence on all attendees) is only one aspect of the *Issawy* interpretation of the *hadhra*. When commenting on the ritual, *Issawis* also state that even though all those who participate in the ritual do the same things, only some understand the ritual in its fullness.

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<sup>122</sup> "(The *hadhra*) is performed by men in what are viewed as their primordial, total identities set off from the identities and contingent situations of the everyday social world" (Gilsenan 1973: 183).

#### 2.4 Recite, Move and Listen (the Hadhra)

Libyan Issawis (unlike their Algerian and Moroccan counterparts) perform the *hadhra* as a ritual in three parts (Brunel 1926: 112 – 143; Andezian 2001: 107-116). In the first part the attendees recite the “great *hezb*” in the same manner in which it is performed during the weekly gatherings. Secondly, to use a term that can be ubiquitously found in studies on Sufism (Mole’ 1963; Chodkiewicz 1985; Schimmel 1994), Issawis perform the *dhikr*, the “*remembrance (of God)*”: a prolonged invocation of the ninety-nine attributes that Islam traditionally ascribes to Allah (Gimaret 1988; Schimmel 1975: 177)<sup>123</sup>. The third part, finally, is the *fen* (“*art*”): the performance of *Mal’uf* music. As I have mentioned previously, each *zawiya* has always a *shaush* who is responsible for the *hezb*. However, the same is true for the other two parts of the *hadhra*: a “*shaush of the dhikr*” takes care of the second part of the ceremony, and a “*shaush of the fen*” looks after the third. The *hadhra* of the ‘final day’ starts in the evening. At the beginning of the ceremony, the attendees gather in the *zawiya* to recite the *hezb*, which ends with a series of formulaic and spontaneous prayers. After the *hezb*, there is a break in order to allow the attendees to pray the last of the five daily prayers, and perhaps smoke a cigarette. When the people come back for the second part of the ritual, they sit on the floor and sing poems of religious content (*qasaid*, sing. *qasida*)<sup>124</sup>.

At some point, the *shaykh* of the *zawiya* – or the *shaush* of the *dhikr*, or even an important non-Issawy guest - invites the attendees to stand up and form a circle. Subsequently, he recites a well

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<sup>123</sup>The ninety nine “*asma’ Allah al husna*, the “*most beautiful names of Allah*”, include attributes like “*latif*,” “*gentle*”, or “*rahim*”, “*merciful*”. For a broader contextualisation on the divine attributes in Sufi philosophy see Dobie 2010 and Frank 2009. The importance of these names in Issawy practices will be analysed in the next chapter. Broader anthropological reflections on names and naming can be found in Vom Bruck & Bodenhorn 2009.

<sup>124</sup>“*Qasida*” is a specific poetic genre. However, the great majority of my informants used the word rather generically to indicate any sort of poem. For a good contextualization of the *qasida* genre in the complex universe of Arabic poetry see Caton 1990.

known *hadith*<sup>125</sup> concerning the importance of remembering God at all times. The recitation of the *hadith*, as I was often told, reminds the assembly that the ritual they are about to perform is rooted in the tradition of the Prophet. The attendees recite the opening *sura* of the *Qur'an* three times. Lights are dimmed, and incense is burnt. The fragrance of the incense occupies the room, while people begin to move slowly, swaying from right to left. Starting from the person in charge, they recite together a *sigha* (pl. *sighat*), a “formula”. The *dhikr* is a continuous succession of different codified or improvised formulas. At the beginning the formulas are always chosen by the person who is in charge of the *dhikr*, but at some point someone else (an *Issawy*, a devotee or an occasional attendee who is known in the *zawiya*) is asked to propose a formula. Even though the first *sigha* is always “*la Ilaha illa Allah*” (“*there is not God but God*”), the formulas involve a practically infinite combination of the ninety-nine names of God and of pious rhymes, so that every *dhikr* session is different, unique, and open to variation.

After a while there is a division in the congregation. The *dhakirin* (“*those who perform the dhikr*”) keep on swaying in circle, while the *munshidin* (“*religious singers*”)<sup>126</sup> group together, sitting at the centre of the assembly. There is no particular reason why one should choose one or the other (apart from singing abilities, personal preferences or habit), and both members of the order and occasional attendees are free to join either of the two groups. Throughout the entire ceremony the *munshidin* sing a series of *Mal'uf* pieces in order to create a counter tempo with the formulas recited by the *dhakirin*. Together they produce a complicated harmony that does not leave room for silence. After three or four minutes the *dhakirin* change their formula: without interrupting their movements they start calling out some of the names of Allah, usually “*ya Hay, wa ya Qayyum*”, “*oh! You the Living*

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<sup>125</sup>See Chapter 1, footnote 24.

<sup>126</sup>For a deeper analysis of the term “*munshid*” see Waugh 1989 and 2005.

*one, oh! You the Self-sustaining*”, while the *munshidin* sing one of the songs from their extremely vast repertoire. *Munshidin* do not take too much time to select a particular *Mal’uf* song, an experienced *munshid* selects a piece that matches rhythmically with the formulas chosen by the *dhakirin*, and the others follow him.

With time movements become more intense, and as the repetitions become quicker the *dhakirin* start to recite the formulas in a combination of words and emphatic breath: “*Allah!* (breathe in) *Allah!* (breathe out)”. If the *dhakirin* change their formula again, saying, for instance, “*Enta el Hoqq!*”, “*You are the Truth!*”, then the *munshidin* select an appropriate song that marries with the formula, perhaps “*...ashafaa ar-Rasul Allah, ashafaa ya habib Allah*”, “*...intercede o Prophet of God! Intercede o beloved by God!*”. As the ritual proceeds, movements change as well. The brothers start leaning back and forward, shouting the formulas. The rhythm of the repetition becomes extremely quick until the *shaykh* (or whoever is leading the *dhikr*) raises his arm saying “*La Ilaha illa Allah*” (“*there is no God but God*”). The assembly stops. The attendees pause to regain their breath, until one of the more experienced *munshidin* (not necessarily a member of the brotherhood) starts singing an *inshad* (“*religious singing*”), the solo recitation of a verse from one of the *Mal’uf* songs, to which the assembly collectively replies: “*Allah Hay*” (“*God, the Living one*”). This basic unit of the *dhikr* (a series of repetition that ends with an *inshad*) is repeated a number of times, as a *dhikr* session can last for more than one hour.

The intensity of the ritual grows exponentially, and after a while the formulas are shortened in order to keep up with the movements. As soon as the assembly reaches a full coordination the *shaush* of the *dhikr* distributes a small hand-drum (the *bez*) to be played by each one of the attendees at the

rhythm of the formulas. An appointed person starts playing the cymbals. As the ritual gains sonic potency, there is always someone who moves forward leaving the circle, waving his hands with his eyes closed, in trance. Trance (“*jedheb*”, “*being taken*”) is quite common, amongst both muridin and occasional attendees. The person in trance (“*majdhub*”, “*the one who is taken*”) is never constrained straight away. If, after a while, the *shaush* of the *dhikr* thinks that the behaviour of the “taken one” can ruin the general atmosphere of the ritual, he tackles him to the floor, holds him down until he surrenders, and then whispers a set of pious formulas in his ears that are supposed to help him regain consciousness. When the person is back to his senses, the *shaush* might even impart a massage to help him recover. Meanwhile the ritual does not stop.

With time the synchrony between *munshidin* and *dhakirin* reaches completion, and the *dhakirin* are able to resume longer formulas without disturbing the rhythm. The Prophet and Ben ‘Aysa might be invoked. “*Allah humma salli ‘ala anNabi’, teyyeb el anfas, Ben Aysa shaykna, wali’ Muknas*”, “*God’s blessings on the Prophet who is the best of souls, Ben Aysa our Shaykh, the Saint of Meknes*”. When the *hadhra* reaches this point, it is an emotional detonation. In some *zawaya* all lights are switched off. Large portions of the attendees are free to go to trance. Screaming and growling noises can be heard, until the *shaykh* of the *zawiya* stops, inviting everyone else to calm down. If someone is still in trance, then the *shaush* might make further use of his ‘re-animation techniques’. The *shaykh* asks a member of the assembly to recite a final spontaneous prayer. People take a break and grab a cup of tea, while things are set for the third part of the *hadhra*: the musical performance, or *fen*.

At the beginning of the *fen* a group of amateur musicians that is summoned for the occasion (and that can include both Issawis and people who do not usually frequent the *zawaya*) gathers on one side of the

*zawiya*. The musical instruments include the *bandir* (a single headed drum which is commonly used in *Issawy* parades), the *ghyta* (a particular kind of shawm), the *naqra* (a small sized kettle drum), the *darbuka* (a goblet drum) and the *nawba* (a large drum). The rest of the attendees occupy the space of the *zawiya* sitting dispersed on the floor, or in small groups. The melody is always provided by communal singing. It is very rare to find an attendee who does not know at least part of the lyrics by heart. The music is called “*Mal’uf*”, “*familiar*”, and perhaps not by chance. Often the *Mal’uf* pieces heard at an ordinary wedding are the same that are performed during an *Issawy hadhra*, and indeed it is not uncommon for a groom - particularly but not necessarily one with some *Issawy* connection – to be accompanied in his wedding procession by songs that explicitly mention Ben ‘Aysa. Generally speaking, the quantity of attendees who participate in the first part of the *hadhra* might not be very high, but when the *fen* is played the number grows considerably, and by the end of a *mawlid* night a *zawiya* can easily host some two hundred people of different age, background and social status.

The *fen* is divided into different sections or *nawbat* (sing. *nawba*)<sup>127</sup>. Sometimes, particularly on a “final day”, a *fen*-session can last until the early hours of the morning, involving a number of *nawbat*. Generally speaking, *Mal’uf* is divided into *Mal’uf el madah* (“*Mal’uf of praise*”) including songs of religious content, and *Mal’uf el ghazal* (“*Mal’uf of courtship*”) whose lyrics are centred on love with no explicit spiritual connotation<sup>128</sup>. The Sufi temperament of the music can be detected particularly in this second type that, following well-documented literary conventions of Sufi poetry (Schimmel 1982, 1997; Nurbakhsh 1984: 143; Bruijn 1997: 69; Abbas 2002: 65), presents references to romance, drunkenness, and wine. These are supposed to be metaphors of the passionate love the Sufi has for God and the Prophet: a love that can bring the mystic to spiritual intoxication. As a shaykh explained

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<sup>127</sup> Although Ciantar defines a ‘*nawba*’ as a “*suite of songs*” (Ciantar 2005), many of my informants used the term to indicate a singular song.

<sup>128</sup> Even though both kinds can be used in the course of the *fen*, Issawis prefer to use the first during the *dhikr*.

to me once, the Sufi can be “*sakran bi khamra ilahiya*”, “*drunk with divine love*”. A famous example of this genre is the renowned “*Naha el Hamam*” (“*the Caged Doves*”), an extremely popular *Mal’uf* piece which is usually executed towards the end of the *fen*, and that invites the listener to ‘drink’ from the wine of spiritual love:

*“The Caged doves have cried,  
Oh Nadim<sup>129</sup> stand out amongst us,  
Drink your drink merrily  
(Your drink comes) from an ancient beverage,  
From the fermented wine,  
(It is) Sorrel,  
It quenches the thirst,  
A Bride that they have adorned in the darkest hour of the night”*

Once again, trance behaviour is very common during the *fen* amongst both Issawis and non –Issawis. Very often, someone who has not stepped inside an *Issawy zawiya* for years might come to a *mawlid* night and spend a large portion of the *fen* waving his hands in ecstasy and screaming out unarticulated sounds of joy. Many stand up with their eyes closed, completely “attracted”, often crying. Some simply follow the rhythm of the *Mal’uf*, while others – particularly when the song of choice has a vibrant tempo - fall into a violent dance. On one occasion an “attracted” *Issawy murid* waved his arms so violently that his wristwatch unfastened and dangerously flew over the room. When the number of people in ecstasy is too high (or if one of the “attracted” refuses to calm down), the *shaush* might not be able to restrain them, and the authority of the *shaykh* of the *zawiya* might be required.

The *fen* is always supervised by the “*shaush of the fen*”. Attention to musical aesthetics can be very high. If the “*shaush of the fen*” thinks that the musicians are not performing properly – and if he is particularly picky or renowned - he might explicitly express his discontent, as in one case where I witnessed a *shaush* declaring that the sound he was hearing from the drummers was as bad as the

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<sup>129</sup>A common male Arabic name here used to indicate the wine-bearer.

noises of the copper market of the old *medina*. The *fen* of the “final day” is a joyful, animated and jubilant moment. Sometimes the drum players allow themselves a short drum solo during the performance, and the emphasis is so strong that often they break the skins of their drums. When the music stops the *hadhra* is over. Tea is served and greetings are exchanged. It is the end of the vivacious *mawlid* season of an *Issawy zawiya*, and it is therefore time to participate in the “final days” of other *zawaya*. One can almost feel a comradely atmosphere around. Nevertheless, according to many Issawis, only a small percentage of the attendees has actually understood what has happened during the ritual.

### ***2.5 Things that others cannot see (Secrecy as Identity)***

When assessing the *hadhra*, Issawis make a series of differentiations, all of which imply that the ritual, though public, has a hidden (or less visible) dimension that is not accessible to everyone. The first and more immediate demarcation (one which was vocalised by *shuyukh*, *muridin* and often even devotees) concerns the very structure of the ritual. Issawis unanimously say that the first two parts of the *hadhra* (the *hezb* and the *dhikr*) are the most important parts of the ritual, while dismissing the musical performance of the *fen* as a less significant moment. This consideration is of fundamental importance for a understanding the way in which Issawis articulate the relationship between their identity and their rituals, particularly when bearing in mind that the majority of the occasional participants of the *hadhra* come to join the ritual only during the *Mal'uf* performance. By claiming a superiority of *hezb* and *dhikr* over the musical performance Issawis stress how the aesthetic component of the *hadhra* should be taken into account only within the spiritual framework of the brotherhood. In other words, Issawis imply – and often express - a differentiation between those who come only to listen to good *Mal'uf* music, and those who, being close to the brotherhood, appreciate what the ritual is really about.

As I have previously shown, the *hezb* has an important role in the tradition of the brotherhood, one that is explained, amongst other factors, by its explicitly pious content and by the strong position it enjoys in the history of the order. Similarly, the *dhikr*, apart from being an omnipresent component of Sufi rituals all over the Islamic world (Netton 2000; Werbner 1996, 2003)<sup>130</sup>, is accompanied by the recitation of a *hadith* of the Prophet that affirms both the pious nature and the strongly ‘Islamic’ character of the second part of the ritual<sup>131</sup>. The musical performance, however, is described by Issawis as practice that bears a weaker link with both the Issawy tradition and the pious roots of Islam. Though always ready to clarify that *Mal’uf* is essentially Sufi music, Issawis are unanimously adamant in explaining that, unlike the litany of the *hezb*, the *fen* was not performed at the time of the founder of the order<sup>132</sup>. Furthermore, Issawis talk about the *fen* as a moment in the ritual that has a less explicit spiritual quality because it can be easily mistaken for pure entertainment. This is not to say, of course, that *hezb* and *dhikr* have an explicit virtuousness that would be apparent to every Muslim, while the *fen* does not. Nor it is to say that Issawis are not proud of their musical traditions. However, this is to infer that, in privileging the ‘pious’ part of the *hadhra*, Issawis make a precise statement on the nature of their own *tariqa*. In diminishing the importance of music, Issawis define the brotherhood not only as an entity which is more concerned with spiritual matters than with

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<sup>130</sup> “...*Dhikr*...is the pivot of mysticism” (Trimingham 1998:194).

<sup>131</sup> ‘*Dhikr*’ (understood as the conscious attempt to ‘remember God’) is a well known Quranic principle (Schimmel 1975). The necessity to ‘remember God’ is mentioned extensively in the holy book, for instance in *Sura* 33, 41 (“remember God with frequent remembrance and glorify him morning and evening”). Issawis often quote verses like this in order to stress the orthodoxy of the *dhikr*.

<sup>132</sup> Similar statements make a reconstruction of the process through which *Mal’uf* music came to be part of the ritual an extremely difficult endeavour. All we know is that “it was the *Issawiya* brotherhood that maintained the tradition of the *Mal’uf* in Libya” (Ciantar 2006: 58). Interestingly, Issawis often say that the Libyan *Issawiya* has kept on attracting people throughout the centuries largely because of music. The *Issawy* order is characterised by the deployment of musical performances also in other geographical contexts (Lortat-Jacob 1986; Slyomovics 1991: 183, Rouget 1985: 310-311), but it is only in Libya that the brotherhood has developed a link with *Mal’uf*.

aesthetic entertainment, but also as an organisation that measures the importance of its rituals according to their relationship with a specific tradition. Similarly, in highlighting the importance of those ritual practices whose origin can be traced to the textual apparatus of Islam, Issawis describe *Issawiya* as solidly based on Islamic orthodoxy<sup>133</sup>.

*Mal'uf* is a deeply rooted *zawiya* tradition, as demonstrated by the fact that the great majority of amateur *Mal'uf* musicians (whether members of the brotherhood or not) learn how to play in the *zawaya*. In my interviews with Issawis, however, appreciations of *Mal'uf* were always accompanied by a devaluing of the third part of the *hadhra*. On many occasions *Shaykh* Ramadan demonstrated a sophisticated artistic palate, whether in appreciating a gracious Ottoman building in the medina or in commenting on the beauty of a piece of music (be it Western classical music, *Mal'uf* or traditional Arabic material). Nonetheless, Ramadan also explained to me that love for music should pave the way for a deeper interest in spiritual affairs. When I asked him why the *hadhra* was such a complicated ritual Ramadan responded saying that “*the hadhra is art...not a simple thing*”. However, he also added that *shuyukh* who are interested in the more spiritual aspects of the brotherhood are usually not particularly gifted with musical skills. When commenting on the relationship between *Mal'uf* and the *zawaya*, an *Issawy shaykh* in his seventies once told me how his stuttering grandfather was so fond of music that, having been asked to witness in a case of homicide, he resolved to overcome his speech impediment by singing his answers in *Mal'uf* fashion. Yet, the same *shaykh* promptly added that music is not particularly important for Issawis. Similarly some *muridin* admitted to me that the first reason that pushed them to visit the *zawaya* before joining the order was *Mal'uf* music, and then quickly specified that once initiated into the brotherhood they started to come to the *zawiya* for the important rituals, like the *dhikr*.

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<sup>133</sup>This aspect will be dealt with in greater detail in the following chapter.

In differentiating between those who participate in the *hadhra* for musical entertainment and those who appreciate the real significance of the ritual, Issawis portray the *hadhra* as a ritual that, though public, is understood only by a few. This differentiation, of course, is not entirely representative of the real state of affairs of many *zawaya*. It is undeniable, for instance, that a number of Issawis neglects the pious part of the ritual (or even the weekly *hezb*) and effectively only come to the *zawiya* when *Mal'uf* music is performed. Nonetheless, even those Issawis who frequented the *zawaya* only when the *hadhra* was performed always highlighted to me both the lesser importance of music and the fact that people might mistake the ritual for an occasion to have fun. This clearly shows how the notion that *Issawy* rituals are more than enjoyable occasions does not prevent Issawis from participating in the activities of their *zawaya* for entertainment. When bearing this in mind, portraying non-Issawis as people who are only after fun might seem to be a mere rhetorical device used by Issawis to define themselves as pious Sufis. Nevertheless, in my interviews with a number of non-Issawy attendees, many effectively told me that the only reason that pushed them to take part in the *hadhra* was the music, since they either did not have any interest in *zawaya* affairs, or were in fact critical towards Sufism<sup>134</sup>.

It is also important to say that Issawis do not simply differentiate between those who understand the spiritual significance of the *hadhra* and those who do not. Members of the order also claim that both the lyrics and the music of *Mal'uf* (though not of fundamental importance in the broader scheme of *Issawy* ritual life) have a secret dimension that not everyone would understand. If on the one hand Issawis claim to be those who pay respect to the important part of the *hadhra*, on the other hand they

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<sup>134</sup>As I will show later in the thesis a large number of Tripolitans have a critical attitude towards Sufism. Even though I will deal with this in chapter four, for now it suffices to say that many of those who conceptually oppose Sufism participate nonetheless in *Mal'uf* performances in the *zawaya*.

also argue that they have the tools to understand that even the less significant part of the ritual is more than mere entertainment. Generally speaking, all Issawis tend to describe the music in the *hadhra* as nothing more than a moment of “*taruih ennfas*”, “*relaxation of the soul*”. *Mal’uf* is therefore supposed to relieve the attendees from the physical and spiritual fatigues of the first two parts of the ritual. At the same time, however, some Issawis particularly value the historical link between *Mal’uf* and Sufism, arguing that since many *Mal’uf* pieces were initially composed as Sufi poetry they contain, as I have previously explained, mystical concepts expressed in a metaphorical manner. While being publicly performed, therefore, *Mal’uf* pieces have, in the words of some of my informants, a “*manaa thani*”, “*a second meaning*” which is not apparent to everyone<sup>135</sup>.

In the case of the aforementioned “the Caged Doves”, for instance, the song contains, according to some Issawis, a secret symbolic meaning. *Shaykh* Ramadan explained to me how doves mate only once in their life-time. According to Ramadan, if a dove is separated from her partner and put into a cage, she grieves loudly and desperately, until eventually she lets herself die out of sorrow. Bearing this in mind, the allegory of the dove is a powerful representation of the human soul which longs for his maker, crying in anguish until it finds peace in God. “The caged doves” is therefore, in the words of some of my informants, a “*nawba li ‘anda sirr*”, “*a Mal’uf piece with a secret*”. Other examples concern, for instance, the metaphorical use of the female given name ‘Layla’ in the *Mal’uf* corpus. Even though, as *Shaykh* Ramadan put it, many might be thinking about their girlfriend when the name is mentioned in the lyrics of a mellow *Mal’uf* piece, praising the beauty of Layla (often portrayed as a woman dressed in black) indicates in fact spiritual admiration for the Ka’aba (the

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<sup>135</sup>In differentiating between the pious part of the ritual and the entertaining one, Issawis do not see ‘ethics’ and ‘aesthetics’ as completely distinct, but only the first as more important than the second. For philosophical reflections on the relation between ethics and aesthetics see Wittgenstein 2005.

black-draped building which represents the holiest site of Islam in Mecca - Ayoub 1992: 259-260)<sup>136</sup>. According to a number of Issawis, even though the great majority of the attendees of the *hadhra* might be familiar with the lyrics of *Mal'uf*, only some are able to relate to their secret meaning since they contain “*kalam el arrifin*”, “*words that are understood only by those who know*”.

As I have previously explained, both Issawis and occasional attendees often go into trance during either the dhikr or the *fen*. According to some of my *Issawy* informants, however, while occasional attendees can be “attracted” at any given moment of the ritual, Issawis tend to go to trance when verses holding a particularly powerful secret meaning are recited, and principally when “the caged doves” is played. Interestingly, it is not just members of the order who expressed the opinion that Sufis had a privileged understanding of *Mal'uf* songs. The most influential Libyan *Mal'uf* performer alive, Hasan Areby (a recurrent presence in Libyan state television and a well known personality amongst North-African connoisseurs of Andalusian music) told me in the course of a brief interview how he considered himself a sympathiser of Sufism. He also added that *Mal'uf* has a hidden spiritual meaning that only few can appreciate, so that “*when you see a Sufi listening to Mal'uf and going to trance (ijdhib), it is because he knows the real meanings of the lyrics*”. Doubtlessly, the view of *Mal'uf* as symbolic language creates interesting parallels with other ethnographic debates concerning the deployment of metaphors in public occasions. Studies of oral poetry and rhetoric, for instance, have highlighted how the public use of veiled references is often aimed at addressing an audience within the audience, creating subtle divisions between those who understand and those who do not in the course of a performance (Rosaldo 1973, 1984; Abu Lughod 1985; 1986; 1990). However, some amongst Issawis and *Issawy* sympathisers also explained to me how the secret of the ritual did not reside only in the lyrics, but also in the music itself.

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<sup>136</sup>Examples of Sufi poetry using female names as metaphors for spiritual concepts can be found in Lings 1961:106.

From the point of view of the musical texture, the songs of *Mal'uf* follow (like all Arabic music) specific *maqamat* (sing. *maqam*, “levels”). *Maqamat* are melodic patterns that are combined in the course of the performance in order to achieve a continuous alternation of melancholic, joyful, calm and vibrant tonal modes (Frishkopf 2001; Van der Linden 2001; Racy 2003)<sup>137</sup>. In discussing the deployment of the different *maqamat* with *Mal'uf* musicians, I was told that each *maqam*, due to its specific rhythmic qualities, is supposed to affect the listener in a different way, inspiring from time to time feelings of pious contemplation or passionate agitation in the audience. The idea that different melodic patterns can produce different states of mind is a well-known concept both in classical Arabic musicology, and in the ethnomusicology of the Middle-East (Racy 2003: 100-225). What is interesting to notice, however, is that according to some *Issawy* devotees, when the Sufis listen to a specific vibrant *maqam* called *Muhayyer* they cannot help going into ecstasy. While occasional attendees might go into trance with all melodic patterns, Sufis are thought to have a particularly strong response to the *Muhayyer* frequency (which incidentally is the one of “the Caged Doves”). This happens because, in the words of an *Issawy* devotee, Sufis are “*sensitive people*” who are particularly touched by the vivacious rhythm of the *Muhayyer* pattern<sup>138</sup>.

Whether with a stress on lyrics or on music, many of those who answered my questions on *Issawy* rituals expressed the opinion that the *hadhra* had certain dynamics that only Sufis could understand or perceive. In the earlier phases of my field-work, for instance, when I was still far from grasping the

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<sup>137</sup> According to some of my informants out of the seventy-five *maqamat* codified in Arabic music, Libyan *Mal'uf* deploys only thirteen. Each *maqam* has a specific name and it is based on a specific tonality (*Rast*, *Noua* and *Ajam* are melodic patterns in C; *Baiati*, *Saba*, *Hijaz*, *Asbahani*, *Husayni*, *Maia* and *Muhayyer* in D; *Sika* and *Huzam* in E; *Jaharka*, finally, in F). Each one of them is sub-divided into *naghamat* or sub-tonalities that help coloring the musical piece and enlarge the spectrum of rhythmical possibilities.

<sup>138</sup> A similar notion can be found in Moroccan Sufism, particularly amongst members of the Hamadsha brotherhood (Crapanzano 1973: 95;204). With regards to the music used in their rituals Hamadsha believe that each person is responsive to a particular tune that, when played, can generate trance and ecstasy (ibid.).

subtle but potent difference between disciples and devotees, I sat close to a person in the course of a *Mal'uf* session, encouraged by the promisingly open expression of his face. I enquired about one of the participants in the rite, who appeared to be in ecstasy, completely “attracted”, and he told me that the man was an *Issawy*. Perplexed, I asked him “*what are you then?*”. He replied that he was only a devotee of the brotherhood, making sure that I understood the fundamental difference implied in the statement. My new friend was enjoying the atmosphere, and singing the *Mal'uf* lyrics he knew by heart. With the *Issawy*, however, there was something secret at work. All the times I have participated in the *hadhra* in a *zawiya*, I was always allowed to take pictures or tape. As soon as a conspicuous number of *Issawis* went to trance, however, the *shaykh* of the *zawiya* would always send someone to tell me to switch off my camera. On one occasion, I was explicitly asked “*not to photograph the Issawiya*” even though amongst those in trance there were both *Issawis* and non-*Issawis*, almost in an attempt to leave the secret undisturbed, hidden (paradoxically) under everyone’s eyes.

It is also important to clarify that, although the idea that *Mal'uf* lyrics have a secret meaning is fairly diffused, not all *Issawis* necessarily see the music of the *hadhra* as carrying a secret message. When commenting on the metaphorical aspect of *Mal'uf*, for instance, a young educated *Issawy* in his twenties urged me to realise that the meaning of certain *Mal'uf* metaphors is understood even outside of Sufi circles, as in the case of the popular image of “wine” as a symbol of love<sup>139</sup>. Nevertheless, both those *Issawis* who stressed the esoteric dimension of *Mal'uf* and those who did not often articulated the experience of trance (or “*jedheb*”) in terms of secrecy (and more specifically secrecy in public). As I have previously explained, in the *Issawy* understanding “secret” ( or “*sirr*”) is not

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<sup>139</sup>Though certainly true, this statement should not be exaggerated. A thirty year old Tripolitan (a big fan of *Mal'uf* with no interest in Sufism) told me that *Mal'uf* pieces refer to “wine” simply because they were composed in ancient Andalusia, a rich land full of vineyards where materialistic decadence pushed the faithful to consume alcohol. Criticism towards Sufism will be dealt with in chapter 4.

just a piece of concealed information, but also the mysterious force that makes the practices of the brotherhood effective. Even though the first aspect of “*sirr*” “with regards to the lyrics of *Mal’uf* was highlighted only by some Issawis, the second was expressed by virtually all of them. The “*sirr*” of the ritual (understood as the force that might push some of the attendees to go into trance) was always referred to as something that operates in an invisible, and therefore secret, way<sup>140</sup>.

When I asked why people went into trance during the *dhikr*, *shuyukh* always told me that the remembrance of God starts with the tongue (“*lisana*”), but that through vocal repetition the love for God slowly enters the heart (*qalb*), and consequently generates movements in the body (*jism*) because “*el mahabba tataharra*”, “*love generates heat*”. The attendee of the *dhikr* who follows the movements of the assembly to the point of losing consciousness was therefore described to me as someone who remembers God “*bi jismha*”, “*with his body*”<sup>141</sup>. Similarly, both the music and the lyrics of *Mal’uf* were often described as something that “*harraka el qalb*”, “*moves the heart*”, or “*tkush el qalb tul*”, “*enters the heart straight away*”. As an *Issawy shaykh* explained to me, when the Sufi listens to *Mal’uf* he goes into trance because he reaches a “*tauazm beina al sod al jamil wa al kalaam*” (“*a balance between the beautiful sound of music and the lyrics*”) that pushes him to lose control of his body to the point that “*isir raqs*” (“*a dance takes place*”). Generally speaking, Issawis always made sure that I did not give too much importance to trance since, to quote the *shaykh* of a popular *Issawy zawiya* in the city of Misurata, “*the inner state of the person in the hadhra is not the basis of Sufism*”. “Attraction”, I was often told, is in the end a form of spiritual recreation. When in trance, the Sufi, tired from the hardship of a devoted life, can completely relax (“*taruih*”) in God.

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<sup>140</sup>This double meaning of ‘*sirr*’ will be dealt with in greater detail in the following chapter.

<sup>141</sup>The *hadhra* is often described as “*ryadha ruhaniya*” (“*spiritual exercise*”). The Arabic “*ryadha*” refers explicitly to physical exercise (more specifically to “*sport exercise*”). Incidentally (and quite ironically) “*ryadhi*”, “*sporty*”, is the name of a popular brand of cigarettes in Libya.

Nevertheless, Issawis also always clarified that there was a difference between true and false “attraction”, and that this difference, being invisible to external observers, was in the end secret.

Though unanimous in describing “attraction” as relaxation of the spirit, Issawis always differentiated between spiritual ecstasy and trance generated by non -spiritual factors. In the first case, as a large number of *Issawy shuyukh* and *muridin* explained to me, the “attracted” can receive spiritual gifts from God, be it a feeling of spiritual bliss or the realisation of a deep inner peace that goes beyond consciousness. In the second, however, trance is only a highly emotional state with no spiritual connotation, or even worst, mere pretence<sup>142</sup>. Even though these two states are understood as being inherently different, they also portrayed as being similar from the outside. The reason for this is that, as a *shaykh* explained to me, “*in the hadhra God gives (spiritual) things to the muridin privately... things that others cannot see*”. More than once *Shaykh* Ramadan repeated to me that understanding whether a particular person was truly “attracted” or simply emotionally moved was impossible for an observer. Even amongst members of the brotherhood, I was told, some go into trance only because of “*istiriya*”, (“*hysteria*”). In this respect, the *hadhra* is understood as being ‘secret’ not only because there are secret dynamics that only Sufis can understand, but also because the spiritual force of the ritual operates, in the end, in secret.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have analysed both the ritual routine and the special ritual occasions of the *Issawy zawaya*. In doing so, I have identified how *Issawy* ritual practices mirror the dynamics of the *Issawy* discursive tradition that I have delineated in the first chapter. In particular, I have shown how even though members of the *Issawy* brotherhood perform their rituals in a different way they nonetheless

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<sup>142</sup>On pretence in relationship with trance see Lambek 1981: 41.

portray the *Issawiya* as having common ritual obligations. As I have also shown, in highlighting how these obligations are rooted both in *Issawy* history and in the sources of Islamic doctrine, Issawis describe their brotherhood as being homogenous, pious and orthodox. With the purpose of further exploring *Issawy* rituality, I have finally illustrated how Issawis see their ritual as a combination of publicity and secrecy. Above all, I have demonstrated how *Issawy* rituals are described as having secret dynamics that nevertheless takes place publicly. Apart from showing the importance of the ‘secret’ in *Issawy* discourses, this consideration clarifies that secrecy is not simply the conscious attempt to keep a body of secrets hidden from the public. Quite differently, *Issawy* secrecy involves the realisation that there is a mystery, the belief that people might be looking at it without recognising it, and the notion that Sufis are those who deal with it. Bearing this in mind, I will now move into a more detailed discussion on this two-fold understanding of secrecy as secret knowledge and as acknowledgment of the mystery. More specifically, I will show how Issawis are unanimous in appreciating the second, but have different opinions when it comes to qualifying the first. If in this chapter we have seen how members of the order stress the commonality and homogeneity of their practices, in the next we will see how the notion of secret knowledge pushes Issawis to take radically different positions.

**“THERE ARE NO SECRETS”  
Spiritual exercises, Miracles and Esoteric Knowledge**

*The murid and I were sitting on a bench, somewhere in the centre of Tripoli. A couple of months before we had seen a miracle, and we were talking about it. The marvel had taken place in the course of a large Issawy gathering. I asked the murid if on that occasion the Issawis had felt the need to perform a miracle because I, an Italian, was there. Libya is full of stories of Sufis stabbing themselves in front of Italian officers without receiving any harm: the miracle was supposed to demonstrate the truth of Islam to the colonisers. I asked the murid if the Issawis had made me witness something similar because they wanted me to convert. I told the murid that the thought of people hurting themselves because of me had left me unsettled ever since. With his typical nonchalance, he replied that they would have done it even if I had not been there. After a while, I left him, and I went home. Later on, I happened to think that my guilt might have been merely based on arrogance. Perhaps my presence as an ethnographer was less consequential than I would have liked to admit. Perhaps Culture is always stronger than Ethnography. Perhaps it will always show itself to you, fiercely, regardless of what you might think or do.*

***Secrecy without Secrets (Introduction)***

So far I have shown how heterogeneity does not raise any concern amongst members of the order. In this chapter, however, I will dwell on a set of practices that spawns conflicting positions when it comes to define the best way of being an *Issawy*. All members of the brotherhood agree that a specific secret knowledge has been handed down over time within the *Issawiya*, but clash over whether this knowledge should be used or not. *Issawy* esoteric knowledge, as we will see, involves a series of secret formulas that are supposed to bestow a supernatural invulnerability and the capacity to assume the strength and agility of certain animals. If some members of the order condone public performances of these ‘miracles’ (or “*karamat*”), the majority of them believe that these practices are somehow in conflict with the dictates of *Qur’an* and *Sunna*<sup>143</sup>. Even though this dynamic would push us to conclude that the *Issawiya* has moved towards a ‘disenchanted’ and literalist understanding of Sufism, in this chapter I will demonstrate that this

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<sup>143</sup>The tradition of the Prophet Muhammad, see introduction footnote 3.

would be an incorrect analysis of *Issawy* religiosity. In particular, I will show that those Issawis who condone *karamat* and those who reject them share an equally strong belief in the supernatural and an equal diligence in following the texts of Islam. In doing so, I will demonstrate that the difference between the two does not lie in their degree of ‘enchantment’ or in their level of ‘textuality’ but in the ways in which they present their relationship with the uncanny and with ‘the text’ and, therefore, in their rhetoric of self-representation. In particular, I will explore the significance of the fact that some Issawis include the notion of secret knowledge in this relationship while others do not.

As I have previously demonstrated, the Issawy conceptualization of ‘secret’ (“*sirr*”) indicates both a body of secret information and the mysterious spiritual dynamics Sufism is concerned with. Bearing this in mind, in this chapter we will look at the different ways in which members of the order position themselves within this paradigm. If those Issawis who condone esoteric knowledge see a continuity between the two facets of ‘*sirr*’, those who reject it stress a difference between *the secret* (as *baraka*<sup>144</sup>, a power whose mechanics are mysterious), and *secrets* (as concealed knowledge that allows this power to be accessed). If the first approach the mystery through secrecy, the second explain that they have a privileged rapport with the secret world of the invisible but no secrets to keep. Though ready to admit that the brotherhood has used esoteric knowledge to perform wonders in the past, these Issawis explain that the *tariqa* is now concerned with other kinds of miracles. In stressing how the *Issawiya* is a path of spiritual formation, they explain that the order provides miraculous healing of the soul due to its spiritual liaison with the mysteries of *baraka*, and not ambiguous gifts like ‘becoming animal’. Far from denying the existence of the miraculous, therefore, the majority of the Issawis simply clarify that miracles are beneficial manifestations of *the secret*, and not obscure manifestations of a knowledge made of *secrets*.

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<sup>144</sup>The spiritual power that, amongst other things, makes *shaykh*-hood effective (see chapter 1 pag 68-69).

The esoteric dimension of Sufi miracles has occupied a number of anthropological works. In dealing with different aspects of Islamic mysticism, this vast ethnographic corpus has shown that Sufi wonders are not simply supernatural gifts that come with piety (Gilsenan 1973; Van der Veer 1992: 561; Hoffman 1995; Pinto 2004) but also fruits of a 'secret' that is known to the wonder-maker but mysterious for the common man (Brenner 1984: 52; Sengers 2000, Soares 2005: 127-152). Nonetheless, these publications offer little theoretical help when it comes to analyse the different ways in which Issawy approach secrecy. In their analytical frameworks these scholars of Sufism have mainly treated 'the secret' as a synonym for secret information (Brenner 1984: 105; Soares 1996:742, 2005: 127-152; Flueckiger 2006, 2008: 178). However, as shown by the *Issawy* case, secrecy is an aspect of the supernatural that Sufis articulate and fashion in different manners according to a different 'rhetoric of secrecy'. It is these different rhetorics that allow Issawis to portray themselves as heirs of a secret tradition of miraculous powers, or as pious Sufis who derive miracles from the 'secret' without resorting to concealment.

The notion of miracles as proof of divine favour has been extensively accounted for in the study of Islam (Fierro 1992: 240; Loebenstein 2003). Nevertheless, scholars have also noticed that in order to be counted as signs of grace miracles need to be recognised as such (Lewis 1947; Locke 1958; Gilsenan 1990; Ewing 1997). Though exhibited as irrefutable proof or described as exceptional experiences (Dilthey 1976: 210; Turner 1986; Abrahams 1986; Csordas 1994b, 2002), miracles have to be presented as something other than coincidences, fabrications or diabolic manifestations (Gaffney 1988; Ewing 1994; Corner 2005; Weddle 2010) according to culturally specific paradigms of truthfulness (James 1995). Supernatural deeds, therefore, are always accompanied by specific discourses (Granoff 1996), exegeses (Tambiah 1984:325,330; Dempsey 2008) and various tools of persuasion (Csordas 1997: 153, 2002: 11-57) that are used to portray miracles as miracles (Levi-Strauss 1963: 180; Weber 1968: 49). Far from being simple

accounts of the uncanny, however, these ‘discourses of the miraculous’, are rhetorical operations that can be used to highlight certain features of the supernatural at the expense of others (Gilsenan 1990: 75-94, 2000; Ewing 1997: 180). Like any other aspect of the miraculous, secrecy is therefore a rhetorical trope whose aspects can be selectively emphasised. If some Issawis refer to the ‘secret’ both as mystery and as concealment of knowledge, the majority of them describe it mainly as a spiritual connection with the unfathomable.

This diversity in the ‘rhetoric of secrecy’ sheds light on a broader difference in the discourses Issawis use to legitimise their practices. Those Issawis who reject esoteric knowledge emphasise that regardless of what the order used to do in the past, now it deals only with educational techniques that are explicitly legitimised by the *Qur’an* and derived from Quranic material. Though concerned with mysterious spiritual dynamics, they stress the unambiguous legitimacy of *Issawy* praxis, dismissing *karamat* as having no clear basis in textual orthodoxy, and no overt pedagogical purpose. Issawis who perform *karamat*, however, take equally good care in showing their rootedness in the *Qur’an* and spiritual formation, though in a different way. More specifically, they clarify that secret formulas for the acquisition of invulnerability and animal powers work according to a spiritual principle that is attested in the holy book. Furthermore, they also explain that if one experiences these practices he realises their true secret: that they are powerful spiritual exercises aimed at helping him to follow the dictates of the *Qur’an*. Though all are concerned with ‘the text’, Issawis therefore make different rhetorical choices in presenting their relationship with it. Those Issawis who value secret formulas explain that esoteric knowledge is both a *textual* corpus rooted in the holy book and an *experiential* knowledge whose legitimisation and educational capacity lie in the secrecy of personal experience. The majority of the Issawis, on the

contrary, describe *karamat* as not being 'explicit enough' in their textuality and pedagogical purpose, and therefore as not fitting within their paradigm of overt textual orthodoxy with no secrets.

In describing *karamat* as being both 'textual' and 'non textual' Issawis who perform secret formulas legitimise the secrecy of their praxis. Conversely, by dismissing *karamat* as practices that are not 'fully textual' the majority of the Issawis show themselves as orthodox Sufis who have no secrets. Claims of textuality (or lack of it) appear therefore as part of a broader attempt to justify a set of practices. Apart from showing the complexity that distinguishes the *Issawy* approach to secrecy, this consideration is particularly important because it highlights some limitations that characterise anthropological reflections on knowledge. Generally speaking, anthropologists have preferred to dwell on the difference between 'textual' and 'non textual' rather than on reasons why people ascribe knowledge to one of these two categories. Ethnographers studying skilled trades and craftsmanship, for instance, have distinguished between experiential knowledge (being non-verbal, but not necessarily un-reflexive - Portisch 2010; Downey 2010; Ingold 2010) and other forms of knowledge that require textuality, whether oral or written (Marchand 2001: 17-26, 179, 2003, 2010). If some have insisted that 'the textual' and the 'non-textual' constitute two distinct realms (Bloch 1986; Marchand 2001: 149-183; Marchand 2009; Graw 2009, Rice 2010), others have shown that the means of acquisition of these two types of knowledge are similar (Cohen 2010) demonstrating that the 'experiential' can influence the 'textual' and vice versa (Rappaport 1979: 173-221; Rosaldo 1984; Lambek 1992, 1998: 112-120; Jackson 1989: 136; Csordas 1994:12; Strathern & Lambek 1998; Kresse & Marchand 2009: 2). In both cases, however, ethnographers have taken these two categories for granted without exploring the rhetorical operations people make in applying them.

Similar limitations can be found in the works of anthropologists dealing with regimes of knowledge amongst Muslim communities (Lambek 1990b). Even though these scholars have noticed that the acquisition of 'Islamic knowledge' can involve bodily techniques (Lambek 1993:396; Zaman 2002: 38-59) non-textual skills (Lambek 1990), and intertwining of orality and literacy (Messick 1993) they have also identified Islam as a textual entity which is different from forms of purely experiential religious knowledge (ibid. Lambek 1995: 263-267, 1993: 12, 19, 63) because the two "cannot be put in the same language" (Lambek1995:267). Doubtlessly, these anthropologists have noticed that the 'textual' and the 'experiential' occasionally meet, particularly when it comes to certain forms of Islamic spirituality (Mahmood 2005:158) including Sufism (Lambek 1995: 276; Marchand 2001: 72-74, 95, 182; Werbner 2003: 29; Pinto 2005). However, they have not explored the question of why people categorise knowledge in one of the two types, and ignored that 'textuality' is - as the different *Issawy* approaches to secrecy show - a contested category.

The *Issawy* case also compels to look at the 'rhetoric of textuality' rather than at the difference between textual and non-textual, and this consideration is particularly useful not only for what concerns broader debates on knowledge and Islam, but also more specifically for the anthropology of secrecy. Anthropologists dealing with non-Islamic contexts, for instance, have shown that ritual secrecy often does not involve secrets to be revealed, but only actions without verbal exegesis (Barth 1975, 1987: 26; Herdt 2003: 141-158, 219). In demonstrating that the meaning of esoteric rituals is often verbally articulated only a posteriori (Barth 1987; Crook 2007:5, 195), these scholars have labeled secrecy as inherently 'empty' (Herdt 2003: 219), and non-textual (Whitehouse 1995: 55-56). Ethnographers dealing with secrecy in Islam, on the contrary, have paid particular attention to textuality and literacy. Though aware that secret knowledge is often understood to be mystical, anti-intellectual (Brenner 2007, 1984: 161), and

practical (Marsden 2005: 183), they have suggested that writing is a chief feature of esoteric Islam (ibid. Goody 1968b; Bledsoe & Robey 1986). If the first have looked at secrecy as a peculiarity of anti-doctrinal and performative modes of religiosity (Barth 1990; Whitehouse 2000; Laidlaw 2004), the second have emphasised that Islamic esoterism is distinguished from other secret traditions because it is a written science rooted in the *Qur'an* (ibid.; Soares 2005: 136 – 137; Marchand 2009: 59-82). Doubtlessly, these works have illuminated some important aspects of the intricate relationship between knowledge and concealment. In doing so, however, they have also applied rigid parameters of 'textuality' and 'non-textuality' rather than looking at how people use these concepts to legitimise or de-legitimise certain practices.

Portraying esoteric knowledge as a not 'fully textual' practice that has to be abandoned is a way for many Issawis to show their indisputable orthodoxy. In the chapter, however, we will see how this willingness to demonstrate that the *Issawiya* has no secrets is not always articulated as a coherent critique. As I will show in the following pages, Issawis occasionally explain that even though *karamat* are not fully 'correct' they might have had a purpose in the past when they were used to show the truth of Islam to the Italian colonial officers. This paradoxical view of miracles (as proofs to educate those who are 'outside' of the textual apparatus of Islam, and as practices that are not orthodox enough for those who are inside of it) is particularly interesting. On the one hand, it demonstrates that the *Issawiya* is a discursive tradition made of certain 'elements of Issawi-ness' that cannot be completely denied even by those who reject them. On the other hand, it sheds light on why secret knowledge is the only practice of the brotherhood that pushes Issawis to take a clear stance in terms of what is correct praxis and what is not. *Karamat* are perceived as a 'un-resolved' fossil of the past that cannot be ignored but that should not be talked about too much: a 'skeleton in the closet' that prevents Issawis from transparency and overt religious correctness. In this

chapter I will simply explore the nuances of this phenomenon; subsequently I will identify the reasons why many Issawis feel the need to clarify that they have no information to hide from the rest of Libyan society.

### 3.1 Prayer Beads and Cure of the Soul (Spiritual Exercises)

Before I discuss the contested relationship between esoteric practices, spiritual pedagogy and orthodoxy I have to present an overview of the educational practices of the brotherhood. The *Issawiya* is often described as a path aimed at “*hailaj enNafs*”, (“*cure of the self*”) through “*tarbia enNafs*” (“*pedagogy of the self*”). When asked to describe the main tool to achieve this spiritual purification, Issawis always mention the recitation of the *tasbih*. In a number of Sufi orders, but also outside of Sufi circles, the word “*tasbih*” (pl. *tasabih*, “*praising*”, also called “*wird*”, pl. *awrad*, “*access*”) indicates a series of pious formulas that are recited in addition to the prescribed five daily prayers of Islam (Hoffman 1995: 419; McGregor 1997: 264). As unanimously explained by my informants, upon joining the order the *Issawy* receive a specific *tasbih* from the *shaykh* to be recited everyday as a spiritual exercise. These recitations include standard Islamic formulas, Quranic verses and some of the names of God<sup>145</sup>, and it is through their constant performance that the soul can be purified. Usually, but not necessarily, *Issawy* spiritual exercises are performed using a string of prayer beads that can be found all over the Muslim world, and that in Libya is called “*sbha*”<sup>146</sup>. In Tripoli the *sbha* is literally everywhere. Strings of eleven or thirty-three beads (fractions of ninety-nine, the number of the names of God) can be found hanging from the rear-view mirror of a car, or lying down in the guestroom of a house. The *sbha* is a truly omnipresent devotional object. However, it is also an item that Libyans of different religious inclinations, age and

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<sup>145</sup>Standard formulas include “*la ilaha illa Allah*”, “*there is no God but God*”, or “*Astaffir’Ullah al ‘Adhim*”, “*may God Almighty forgive me*”. On divine names see Chapter 2, footnote 32. The use and purpose of the ninety-nine attributes of God will be discussed further on in this chapter.

<sup>146</sup>From the same Arabic root as “*tasbih*”. For an early comparative study of the use of prayer beads in different religious contexts see Blackman 1918.

social status would immediately associate with Sufism. *Shuyukh* and *muridin* often carry their plastic or wooden prayer beads in their hands, or around their neck. The *sbha* has a special place in the realm of Sufi paraphernalia, since spiritual exercises are, in the words of many Issawis, the “work” of the *murid*<sup>147</sup>.

Members of the order constantly remark on the centrality of the *tasbih* as a means of spiritual improvement, stressing the necessity for spiritual exercises to be performed under the supervision of a shaykh. Doubtlessly, some *shuyukh* are more nonchalant than others in managing the *tasbih*, and occasionally prefer to leave the encumbrance of assigning spiritual exercises to their vice-*shuyukh*<sup>148</sup>. Nonetheless, even those *Issawy* masters who admit not to entertaining particularly close relationships with their disciples obstinately repeat that the *tasbih* is “*qaida atTariqa*”, “*the basis of the tariqa*”. Often spiritual exercises are compared with the musical performances in the *zawaya* in order to highlight the importance of the former over the latter. In the words of an *Issawy shaykh* I briefly met in the course of a *Mal’uf* musical performance, the essence of the *tariqa* “*is not music, but spiritual exercises, the Qur’an and the prescribed five prayers*”. In line with this paradigm, *muridin* are generally required to conduct their spiritual exercises after the five daily prayers, making sure that they perform *tasbih* in a state of ritual purity<sup>149</sup>. Furthermore, members of the order often clarify that the very first step for a *murid* is to learn about the *Qur’an* and the pillars of Islam, and that spiritual exercises are a form of *dhikr*, a practice which is solidly based on Islamic doctrine<sup>150</sup>.

Pious repetitions are always described as a cumulative practice. The *tasbih* is generally understood as an action that increases in intensity along the spiritual path. Therefore, if the *murid* is initially asked to

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<sup>147</sup> On holding prayer beads as a visible sign of piety see Marsden 2005: 172.

<sup>148</sup> “*Naqib*”. See Chapter 1 pag. 57.

<sup>149</sup> Daily prayers are preceded by *wudu*, ritual ablution (Glasse’ 2002).

<sup>150</sup> ‘*Dhikr*’ as previously explained is the ‘remembrance of God’ through repetitions of Quranic verses and God’s names. On the Quranic foundation of *Dhikr* ‘see Chapter 2 footnote 40).

perform three hundred repetitions after every prayer (“*wird asSsaghir*”, the “*small wird*”), with time he will be assigned a more demanding *tasbih* that increases the quantity to sets of five hundreds (“*wird al wasaf*”, the “*middle wird*”), and eventually to a thousand (“*wird al kabyr*”, the “*great wird*”). The terminology in three parts (which is also used by the Moroccan *Issawiya* - Brunel 1926:84) mirrors the supposed spiritual progresses of the *Issawy* disciple, and it is used by the great majority of the *shuyukh* in Tripoli. Usually *shuyukh* ask their *muridin* to perform also the *dala'il al khairat* (“*way marks of benefits*”), a well-known series of invocations organised according to the days of the week written by Jazuli<sup>151</sup> (Trimingham 1998:70). Even though *Issawy* masters might occasionally implement different quantities, or disagree on whether the formulas should be the same for every disciple, they generally present this tripartite scheme and the exercises of the Jazuli as the basis of *Issawy* spiritual education<sup>152</sup>. Nonetheless, more than being a clear-cut codified method, spiritual pedagogy is understood as a versatile practice. The degree of this versatility is given, according to many of my informants, by the educational skills of the *Issawy* master. Should the *shaykh* be a real educator, he can (and indeed he will) accommodate the system to the personal needs of the *murid*.

Many *shuyukh* only assign the three types of exercises. However, *Issawis* constantly clarify that not all *shuyukh* are equally good in spiritual matters, and in order to explain why certain masters are better spiritual educators than others they usually refer to the figure of the *shaykh murabbi* (the “*shaykh pedagogue*”). The Sufi master, I was often told, is a spiritual doctor. The “*shaykh pedagogue*”, however, is a talented therapist. In order to explain this dynamic *shaykh* Ramadan referred to his medical

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<sup>151</sup> As explained in the first two chapters, Jazuli was an important figure in the history of the order and the author of the litany of the *hezb* (see previous chapter). The “*waymarks of benefits*” are used also in the Moroccan *Issawiya* (Brunel 1926: 110).

<sup>152</sup> In some cases *Issawis* add other elements to this format. I was once told, for instance, that in addition to *tasbih* an *Issawy* should read a section of the *Qur'an* and recite the *hezb* (see previous chapter) by himself everyday.

background. A virus might require strong medications, he once told me, but as a result of the heavy treatment a sensitive organism might experience headaches or digestive issues. Whereas a doctor might simply prescribe antibiotics, he said, the good doctor would study the case, and perhaps administer aspirin as well in order to smooth the curative process. Similarly, if a ‘normal’ *shaykh* only makes use of the three types of spiritual exercises, the “pedagogue” adapts the medicine to personal necessities of the patient<sup>153</sup>.

*Shaykh* Ashraf - a round-faced, jolly and educated *shaykh* in his late thirties - expanded on this concept. During one of my visits to his house (where he lived, un-married and un-employed, with his parents) he told me that a “*shaykh* pedagogue” examines the profession, education, and everyday schedule of his *muridin*. Though loosely following the tripartite scheme of the *tasbih* with his *muridin*, Ashraf clarified that different cases should be treated differently. If the *murid* is illiterate, then asking him to recite the litanies written by the Jazuli it is not advisable. If he has a tight everyday schedule, then he should not be forced to perform his *tasbih* after every prayer, otherwise the burden will be unbearable for him. If he has a demanding job he should be assigned a lesser number of repetitions, and if he is a student he should be asked to perform spiritual exercises that do not converge with his schooling duties<sup>154</sup>. However, Ashraf also told me that spiritual exercises are not simply a matter of accommodating to someone’s daily schedule. The diagnosis for the correct spiritual cure involves also an attentive examination of the spiritual idiosyncrasies of the *murid*.

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<sup>153</sup> At times this parallel between medicine and mysticism produces a ‘clinic’ taxonomy of the diseases of the soul. As a “*shaykh* pedagogue”(recognised as such by his *muridin*) once told me, spiritual sicknesses can be pinned down to thirty-three different types.

<sup>154</sup> In the *Arusy* order (see introduction page 17), this differentiation in spiritual exercises according to profession is even more explicit. The *Arusy* nomenclature includes awrad like the “*wird of the farmer*” or “the *wird of the student*”.

Spiritual exercises are described as “*tarbia*” (“pedagogy”) and explained as a practice guided by a principle of education of the self (“*nafs*”). In order to be efficacious, therefore, they require God to accord his help, the *murid* to have the intention to be graced, and the *shaykh* to map the ‘self’ of the disciple. The *Issawy* master – Ashraf and other *shuyukh* told me - should look at the character of the *murid*, observing his personality and thought. Based on this analysis, the “*shaykh* pedagogue” finds the best way to tackle the spiritual issues of the *murid*. Large amounts of spiritual repetitions, for instance, should be given only to *muridin* who have a very active personality. If the *murid* is nervous or quick to anger, Ashraf explained, he should be given formulas that contain a name of God that is related with patience and kindness, like “*Latif*”, “*Gentle*”<sup>155</sup>. Sometimes, Ashraf added, pious receptions might not be the best spiritual exercise for a *murid*. Perhaps it is better for him to read certain sections of the *Qur’an* every day, or to fast twice a week instead. Given the variety of the spiritual necessities of the *murid*, some *shuyukh* avoid pinning down a precise systematisation of the *tasbih*. Some of them deploy spiritual exercises that are used in other brotherhoods, or that comes from the traditions of famous Sufi characters of the past. Variety is therefore understood as a strategic way to approach the spiritual dysfunctions of the *murid*, and intuition as the chief tool through which this variety is managed.

According to my informants, a pedagogue derives his skills from a number of sources. Being a *shaykh*, he receives blessings and spiritual grace from his ‘licence to *shaykh*-hood’<sup>156</sup>, and from the spiritual genealogy of his predecessors that makes the licence legitimate and effective. Having been a *murid* himself, the *shaykh* pedagogue can also benefit from his own experience as a disciple putting what he has learned from his own *shaykh* (perhaps a pedagogue himself) into practice. However, the pedagogue also

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<sup>155</sup>As Ashraf explained to me, “*mush el fayda enta tasbah el ism...el fayda enta kun el ism!*”, “*the benefit does not come from reciting the name...it comes from becoming* (litt. ‘being’) *the name!*”. In the words of Sufi philosopher Ibn ‘Arabi, Sufism is “Assuming the character traits of God” (Chittick 1989: 283; 2005:30). On the subject see also Lings 1961.

<sup>156</sup>See chapter 1 pag. 57.

receives special gifts that are mysteriously bestowed on him by God<sup>157</sup>. As a result of this combination he develops what some Issawis call “*elm el basira*” (“*science of the sight*”), the capacity to see, amongst other things, into people’s true nature<sup>158</sup>. This knowledge, as *shaykh* Ashraf told me once, is made of “*shuhur*” (“*intuitions*”). Through the *baraka* which is mysteriously embedded in the licence, his experience as a *murid* and the blessings given by the almighty, the *Issawy* master receives divine inspirations that allow him to understand what others cannot. As a *shaykh* once explained to me, every man has a veil that separates him from his true self, and a veil that separates him from God. The pedagogue (and indeed any *shaykh*) is supposed to be the one who helps lifting the first in order to remove the second. He enjoys a special relationship with the mystery, and he has the intuitive tools to see into the secrecy of someone else’s self.

Often the spiritual exercises provided by *Issawy shuyukh* are considered to be part of a broader educational relationship they have with their disciples. Some *muridin* describe the very presence of their *shaykh* as a source of comfort and direction<sup>159</sup>. “*Sometimes*” a young fervent disciple told me “*a text message (from the shaykh’s phone) might be enough, or a quick word (from him), there is always an education on what to do, on how to behave*”<sup>160</sup>. Naturally, not all *muridin* are equally enthusiastic in their approach to spiritual education, and often *Issawy* disciples describe their *tasbih* simply in terms of routine. A retired *murid* in his sixties, for instance, told me that after a number of years in the *tariqa* the *tasbih* had become for him “*like cigarettes*”, both something he could not live without and a habit he had simply incorporated in his everyday life. Nonetheless, *Issawy* pedagogy is frequently explained as an

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<sup>157</sup> Here a parallel can be drawn with the life of the Perfect *Shaykh* who, as we have seen in chapter 1 (page 45 – 48) derived his exceptional spiritual skills both from education he received from his masters and directly from God.

<sup>158</sup> On Sufi *shuyukh* being able to scrutinise the hidden aspects of someone’s life see Gilsenan 1990. On secrets as something that once revealed might damage social position or reputation see Gilsenan 1995 and Marsden 2005

<sup>159</sup> On how the Sufi *shaykh* makes present the knowledge he teaches through his own persona see Werbner & Basu 1998.

<sup>160</sup> On piety, Islam and technology see Clarke 2008; 2010

exceptional, if not miraculous process. Sometimes the uncanny and the quotidian merge together, as in the case of an *Issawy shaykh* who assured me that spiritual exercises amalgamate smoothly with other daily occupations because while doing them time goes miraculously faster. Other times, however, Issawis speak of healing of the self, softening of the heart and meeting with grace. For example, a young educated murid in his late twenties who had been performing his spiritual exercises for two months once told me:

*“I am becoming more sensitive...I look at poor people, and it hurts me more...my heart is more sensitive...I can feel the change...sometimes when God’s Prophet is praised I am on the verge of tears, and I have never been like that before...maybe when I was a kid...”*

Similarly, a university student who had been part of the *Issawiya* only for a month told me how the continuous recitation of the *tasabih* had helped him to achieve a spiritual status he had always desired:

*“..I started feeling that God is really watching me.....sometimes when they mention God or the prophet I start to shake.....I always wanted to cry from feeling God, and it never happened to me (before)...”*

In light of these statements *Issawy* pious repetitions should be looked at as an example of Foucauldian “technology of the self” (Rabinow & Dreyfuss 1983: 188-197), techniques through which moral education can be implemented in order to achieve an ideal model of self-hood (Foucault 1994b; Rabinow & Rose 1994: vii- xxiv; Althusser 1994; Rose 1999). In this perspective *tasabih* are a system of exercises that “permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations ...so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection...” (Foucault 1982: 17). *Issawy* exercises evoke this notion of shaping and moulding the self even in their nomenclature. The *maqamat el anfus* (“levels of the selves”), for instance, are often mentioned as one of the main tools deployed by a *shaykh* pedagogue. Through this specific set of

repetitions (which is deployed also in other Sufi traditions - Werbner 2003: 183-211), the *murid* is supposed to pass through seven stages of purification of the soul, so that the “*nafs el amara*” (the “*authoritative self*”) naturally inclined towards satisfying the desires of the flesh can be transformed into “*nafs al kamila*”, the “*perfect self*”. When bearing this in mind, *tasbih* appears as an important feature of *Issawy* life, one that embodies the pedagogical nature of the order. However, if *shuyukh* and *muridin* are generally in agreement about the benefits of pious repetitions, they are less so when it comes to a particular category of *tasabih*, and it is on this particular type that I will concentrate in the rest of the chapter. After presenting ethnographically the use of these formulas, I will show how some *Issawis* include these practices into the pedagogical paradigm of the order while others do not.

### **3.2 Secrets in Action (Miracles and Secret Formulas)**

Some members of the order were reticent in discussing special *tasabih*, and simply clarified to me that the topic was covered by secrecy. *Shaykh* Ramadan, however, decided to give me some general information on the matter. *Issawy tasabih*, Ramadan explained to me, are divided into *daruri* (“*obligatory*”), and *ikhtiari* (“*optional*”). The first typology includes all the different repetitions that can be assigned to the *muridin* as spiritual exercises. The second, however, involves special formulas that are given only to some *muridin* according to the discernment of the *shaykh*. Amongst the different *tasabih* that belong to this corpus, Ramadan told me, there are some which allow the *Issawy* to perform miraculous actions like piercing his own body with a knife without being harmed or assuming temporarily the characteristics of an animal. Miracles, Ramadan and others often told me, are a gift that God can bestow on anyone. *Karamat* do not require a specific knowledge, but only faith (“*iman*”) and God’s grace. However, if spiritual exercises can allow the *murid* who has faith to purify his soul, then special *tasbih* – given the

same preconditions – allow the *Issawy* to perform wonders. In this spiritual economy, *Shaykh* Ramadan clarified, the saintly powers of the founder of the brotherhood have a fundamental role.

When mentioning the name of the Perfect *Shaykh* many Issawis add “*qaddas’Allahu sirrha*”, “*may God sanctify his secret*”. *Shaykh* Ramdan insisted that in doing so they refer to the mysterious *baraka*, the “secret”, that was given to him by God. As a consequence of this secret Ben ‘Aysa gained, as explained in the first chapter, a supernatural invulnerability and the power to tame wild creatures, and it is this capacity to master the wild and the harmful (a power that has God as originator and the Perfect *Shaykh* as main channel) that is given to the followers of Ben ‘Aysa through the special tasabih. “*These miracles are Ben ‘Aysa’s*” *Shaykh* Ramdan told me once “*not mine*”<sup>161</sup>. In order to emphasise this point, he quoted a famous poem where the Perfect *Shaykh* describes the special favours granted to him by God through the intercession of the prophet:

*“Land and Sea they follow my orders,  
Even on the Day of Judgment I intercede for those  
who have gone astray,  
My grandfather<sup>162</sup> placed the world (duniya) in my hands,  
Everything is under my command,  
Even the murderous poison,  
fire, iron and the unruly creatures”*

Even though *Shaykh* Ramadan was adamant in relating these practices to the founder, other shuyukh traced their origin back to unspecified saintly figures of the past (“*those who have spiritual insight*”), or stressed the power inherent in the secret tasabih without mentioning the *baraka* of Ben ‘Aysa<sup>163</sup>. In all

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<sup>161</sup>On the ‘transferability’ of miracles in Sufism see Van der Veer 1992 (who incidentally mentions miracles very similar to the ones described in this chapter). More generally, on miracles as a result of someone else’s *baraka* see Pinto 2004.

<sup>162</sup>The prophet Mohammed, of whom the *Perfect Shaykh* was a descendant (see Chapter 1 pag.45). The poem is the well-known “*Fahlu arRijali*” (“*The Stallion amongst Men*”). Sections of the poem are recited in some Libyan *zawaya* on the occasion of the birthday of the prophet.

<sup>163</sup>The view of secret knowledge as a body of information coming from the past is common also in other esoteric traditions (Herdt 2003: 52).

cases, however, Issawis who practised these formulas told me that they were peculiar to the order<sup>164</sup>, and occasionally opened up on the broader spiritual principle behind the secret practices.

*Shaykh* Ramdan and *Shaykh* Ashraf (whom I mentioned earlier on in the chapter) were those who decided to explain the secret to me without revealing it. The *Qur'an*, they told me, says that the whole of creation praises God at all times. Animals, plants and objects continuously glorify the creator performing *tasbih* (“praising”) like humans do, though in a language that cannot be understood<sup>165</sup>. A cat, a bird, and a piece of iron all praise their maker, each one using a specific combination of some of the ninety-nine attributes of God. These names, however, do not constitute simply the ‘praising’ of a particular creature, but also (as a *murid* whispered to me once, afraid of breaking the secrecy of the practice) its “*spiritual secret*”, or mysterious spiritual nature. It is precisely by virtue of these names, Ashraf told me, that a cat can climb trees without falling and a bird can fly, and if someone knows these specific combinations, he can acquire the essence of these creatures. Knowing the names of the lion allows one to tame them or to attain their strength; reciting the names of iron to be invulnerable to blades, or to cut things with one’s fingers as if they were knives<sup>166</sup>. Issawis referred to these specific formulas in various ways: “*Sla’ esShaykh*” (“*the weapons of the Shaykh*”), “*Asma’ al Maqamat*” (“*names of the levels*”), “*Asma’ al murakkaba*”, (“*the combined names*”), “*Asma’ atTariqa el Issawiya*”, “*the names of the Issawy order*”. Many called them

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<sup>164</sup> Even members of other brotherhoods (some of whom used these *tasabih*) admitted to me that they (or the masters) had ‘borrowed’ these formulas from the *Issawy* order.

<sup>165</sup> See for instance *Sura* 17, 44 in the *Qur'an*: “*The seven heavens and the earth, and all beings therein, declare his glory, there is not a thing that does not celebrate his praise, and yet you do not understand how they declare his glory* (lit. *You do not understand their tasbih*)! *Verily he is forbearing, most forgiving!*”

<sup>166</sup> Scholar of Sufism Annemarie Schimmel describes a very similar principle (1975). In the philosophy of Ibn’Arabi, God created the universe (and manifested himself in it) through his ninety-nine attributes. In this perspective Ibn Arabi considers divine names as the “molds through which the creative energy was channelled to produce particular beings” (270). Each name of God, therefore, rules over a particular creature which is submitted to it, and each realm in creation is also the manifestation of a particular divine attribute (in the case of the vegetable realm for instance, the name *ar-Raziq* “the *Nourisher*”) (197,267-268) . In discussing *Sura* 2:31 - “(God) taught Adam the names of all things” - Schimmel says that this “simple Koranic statement was sometimes explained to imply that God has granted Adam the knowledge of the divine names reflected in creation, which he might use in his prayers...”(188).

simply “*al asma*”, “*the names*”, while Shaykh Ramadan preferred “*al Iltihaq bi qawass baa’d al makhluqat*” “*the acquisition of the characteristics of some creatures*”.

I witnessed the performances of secret *tasabih* very rarely, mainly in the course of *hadhra* performances in occasion of the mawlid of the prophet, or during a saint’s festival<sup>167</sup>. Often I had to pay attention in order to notice that a miracle was taking place. Only after observing one of Ramadan’s *muridin*, for instance, did I realise that when in trance he used to chew with his mouth like a ruminant, and only after a conversation with the *shaykh* I understood that those were the symptoms of the ‘*tasbih* of the camel’<sup>168</sup>. Other times, however, guessing the type of *tasbih* performed by an *Issawy* was considerably easier, though not obvious. In the course of a musical performance in a Tripolitan *zawiya*, for example, a *murid* in his late sixties stood up with his eyes closed, shaking nervously and then falling on his knees. Walking on all four (eyes opened in an angry glance), he approached a brazier used by the musical performers to stretch the skins of their drums. Trance, as previously explained, is common in these events, but fearing that the old *Issawy* might burn himself the attendants tried to catch him, though he escaped their manoeuvres. Suddenly the *Issawy* focused his attention on a member of the assembly, a young man who was nodding his head at the rhythm of the music. Perhaps irritated by the over-dramatic movements of the youngster, the *Issawy* jumped on him, scratched him with his finger-nails and then escaped again. A second *Issawy* stood up (the music was still playing), and laid down supine in the middle of the assembly. After a while, the ‘cat’ took interest in the still body, and began to touch it in a mixture of suspicion and curiosity, until the man on the floor quickly turned, grabbed him and made him come back to his senses

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<sup>167</sup> See Chapter 2 page 92.

<sup>168</sup> In the Libyan *Issawiya* animal behaviour during trance is much more ‘discrete’ than in the Moroccan case as described by Brunel (1926). An observer can easily miss the miracle, if he does not know what he is looking at.

.The performance of the ‘*tasbih* of the cat’ remained unnoticed for many of the occasional attendees who dismissed it as ‘usual’ trance behaviour<sup>169</sup>.

On at least in two occasions, however, *karamat* took the shape of an undeniable intervention of the supernatural. The first time I saw the effects of the *tasbih* of iron, for instance, I was in a small urban centre in Eastern Libya, where I had been invited by local Issawis to celebrate the mawlid. The *hadhra* (that counted approximately one hundred participants) was set up in the courtyard of a very large house, with the family of the owner enjoying the scene from an internal balcony looking out onto the yard. The ritual seemed to proceed as usual, but at some point I was asked (to my surprise) to stand right at the centre of the assembly. The *shaykh* in charge - a man in his forties- came close to me, invited me not to have fear and called up another shaykh, a visibly older man with a white beard. The bearded *shaykh* brought a long iron skewer (the kind people use to roast meat) and made me touch its pointed end to make sure it was real. The atmosphere was vibrant, tales of miracles performed in front of the Italian colonial officers came into my mind, and I knew what was going to happen. The *shaykh* asked the assembly to chant in honour of the prophet and Ben ‘Aysa, while a young man in his thirties took his shirt off. The *shaykh* passed the skewer over his tongue<sup>170</sup>, put the tip of the skewer on the abdomen of the youth (who instinctively raised his arms), and then pushed against the resistance of the flesh, piercing the stomach from front to back and producing one drop of dark blood<sup>171</sup>. He invited me to take pictures of the abdomen of the *murid*, and then removed the skewer from the man’s stomach. After pushing his finger on

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<sup>169</sup> In later conversations I noticed that the *tasbih* of the cat was often referred to as “*aqtazi*”, Libyan dialect for “*feline*”.

<sup>170</sup> As explained in chapter one, many Issawis look at *shaykh*-hood as a state that implies the material possession of blessings, or *baraka* (see Chapter 1 page 68) In Libya saliva is considered as a common vehicle for *baraka* (parallels can be found in Crapanzano 1973: 50; Van Der Veer 1992: 554).

<sup>171</sup> Those informants who were willing to comment on *Issawy* miracles always specified that blood was the proof that the miracle was not an illusion created by witchcraft. Interestingly, in other Sufi traditions the presence of blood in similar *karamat* is, on the contrary, a sign of the action of magic (Pinto 2010: 469). On miracles as something which requires a specific secretive knowledge in order to be discerned from sorcery see Flueckiger 2008: 170. The topic of sorcery will be touched upon in the next chapter.

the wound, he took it away leaving what seemed to be only a spot, almost a clean scar. The miracle had taken place. The bearded *shaykh* asked me if I wanted to try, to which I politely declined. Some of the attendants came to me, asked me if I was traumatised by the bloody scene, and then offered me tea and food. The ritual ended, and the next day I came back to Tripoli, where, few months later, I was going to see a miracle for the second time.

One of the *zawaya* of the old city of Tripoli was having a belated celebration of the *mawlid*. As I approached the *zawiya* walking in one of the hallways of the *medina*, I met a group of people talking with each other. One of them (a corpulent bearded *shaykh* in his fifties) introduced himself to me, and told me that he felt close to the *Issawiya* even though he belonged to another Sufi brotherhood. All of a sudden, someone in the group recognised me, and told me that he had seen me in the *hadhra* where I had witnessed my first miracle. Upon hearing it, the corpulent *shaykh* surprised everyone: addressing someone in the group he said “*bring the iron*”. I told the *shaykh* it was not necessary. “*Maleshi*” (“*let it be*”), he replied. He took up his shirt revealing some fifty visible scars all over his big stomach, traces left by miracles on his body. Meanwhile, one of his *muridin* had brought him a knife from his car. The *shaykh* leaned back, raised his head, and stabbed himself in the throat. He remained in the same position for a while, manoeuvring with the blade under his long beard. His hat<sup>172</sup> fell on the ground. Irritated, he asked for the hat to be put back on. When he suddenly took the knife away with a dramatic gesture, he unexpectedly pushed it on the sternum of one of his *muridin*, right under the throat, and then he put his finger on the murid’s wound to stop the bleeding. Feeling somehow uneasy, I could not help asking the *shaykh* if I could see his neck more closely. On his throat there was a deep (but clean) wound. The *shaykh*

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<sup>172</sup> The Libyan traditional hat (or “*taghiya*”) is a simple, cylindrical, quintessentially ottoman headgear. With cold weather two hats of the same shape can be worn, one on top of the other.

asked me if I was distressed (while in fact I was mainly glad that no one had called the police<sup>173</sup>). We chatted for a while, and then departed from each other. The next day, I managed to meet him on his way back to his hometown. We had tea, and he explained to me that he had not performed the miracle with the intention of converting me to Islam (“*Islam is higher than this!*”). Needless to say, on his throat there was nothing, even the wound I had seen the night before had miraculously disappeared.

Sometimes Issawis approached the topic with irony (“*do you prefer eating a piece of glass or a fork?*” asked once an *Issawy* to a friend making sure that I would hear the conversation). Other times my enquiries on the topic led to ambiguous situations, as in the case of a *shaykh* who invited me to his house to experience the power of the *karama* on my own body. Feeling scared I declined. But once taken to the house with the reassurance that none would have forced me to do anything, I witnessed the *shaykh* performing a short prayer and then hitting one of his *muridin* on the back with a blunt, quite un-harmful blade. Unsurprised by the fact that the gentle, un-dangerous hits had not produced any wound, I respectfully (but unconvincingly) faked amazement in response to the fake (and unconvincing) miracle. When the *shaykh* asked me to uncover my belly in order to experience the *karama*, I felt obliged to do so but the *Issawy* appeared unsatisfied with my lack of enthusiasm and decided to end his improvised domestic performance. Later on, on a subsequent occasion, I was invited again by the same *shaykh* and introduced to one of his friends who, rather unexpectedly, unleashed a very small snake from a bag during the conversation in the guest-room. While I was wondering about the ‘names’ he would have used to tame the beast, the man promptly explained that he simply enjoyed playing with little creatures since his childhood ( no mention of special tasbih was made). When I reported both incidents to Ramadan (who did not have a very high opinion of the *shaykh*) I asked him if my presence had been an incentive for the performance of miracles (whether real or fake). He replied that perhaps members of the order had felt the

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<sup>173</sup> The relationship between Sufism and the Libyan state will be looked at in detail in the following chapter.

need to impress me, re-enacting the miraculous stories involving Italian colonial officers. He promptly clarified, however, that “the names” are much more than tools of amazement for non-Muslims.

### 3.4 “From Taste you know!” (*Experientiality, Secrecy and Pedagogy*)

Ramadan recognised that miracles could be used as ‘proofs’ to show the truth of Islam, and he was very much in favour of maintaining the memory of *karamat* performed by his predecessors in the *sanad*<sup>174</sup> in front of the colonial oppressors. Amongst the blades he used to perform the “names”, for instance, Ramadan kept a short sword that was once deployed by one of his ancestors to convince a sceptical Italian general about the power of Sufi practices. However, the *shaykh* never performed *karamat* in front of me. In fact, he preferred to perform the more spectacular miracles only on the day of the birthday of the prophet, inviting a selected audience made of *muridin*, members of his family and Issawis from *zawaya* related to his *sanad*. *Karamat*, he explained to me, are not a “*sirk*” (“*circus*”) for people’s amusement<sup>175</sup>, but powerful (if not potentially dangerous) encounters with the mystery. The *Issawiya* is a “*strong path*”, he told me, and if someone is not ready to handle its secret practices “*there might be problems*”: bad things might happen to him as a consequence of approaching the mystery with scarce spiritual preparation<sup>176</sup>. Furthermore, as he vigorously clarified, special *tasabih* of *karamat* are first and foremost pedagogical tools for the *muridin*. Far from being simply instruments to proselytise the infidels, they are

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<sup>174</sup> Spiritual genealogy. See chapter 1 page 57.

<sup>175</sup> On the inappropriateness of public miraculous displays in Sufism see Hoffman 1995:86. On the necessity to perform *karamat* only privately according to some theological currents in Islam see Ernst 1997:61.

<sup>176</sup> Special *tasabih* are perceived to be dangerous also because they can be deployed with the conscious intention to harm. As Ramadan told me once, one of his predecessors at the guide of the *sanad* decided to forbid the performance of *karamat* for a period of time precisely because of this reason. According to *Shaykh* Ramadan behind this decision there was a specific incident. During the *Issawy* parade for the birthday of the prophet in the *medina* of Tripoli, a Jewish girl decided to throw urine on the Sufis from a balcony as a joke. Enraged by the gesture, an *Issawy* belonging to Ramadan’s *sanad* used one of secret *tasbih* to make the girl fall from the balcony (Ramadan did not want to explain how). Following the death of the girl, the head of the *sanad* at the time forbade (“*closed*”, in *Shaykh* Ramadan’s words) the secret *tasabih*. Later on, in safer times, the *tasabih* were “*re-opened*”. On Jewish communities in Libya see Cohen 1924; Goldberg 1972, 1990; Hakohen 1980; Simon 1992. On the use of divine names in Jewish mysticism in Libya see Cohen 1924: 11-28. On the role of risk in rituals see Howe 2000 (and, more generally Douglas 2002). For an analysis of violence as an intrinsic component of all ritual performances see Bloch 1992.

means that Issawis use to achieve spiritual improvement. The secret “names”, he told me, are most of all spiritual exercises, and like any other *tasbih*, they produce a spiritual *foyda* (“benefit”) for those who experience them.

As Ramadan told me more than once, the most important aspects of Sufism are education of the soul and strict faithfulness to the *Qur’an*. In following this paradigm, the *shaykh* organised regular meetings with his *muridin* to discuss their spiritual exercises, and held weekly lectures in his *zawaya* in which he covered Quranic material, *Sunna*, and the proper way to perform the five pillars of Islam<sup>177</sup>. The *shaykh* often told me that spiritual formation and knowledge of Islam are far more important than *karamat*. However, he also explained to me that Islam has an exoteric facet (“*asSshariya*”, the “*law*”<sup>178</sup>) and an esoteric one (the “*ilm al batin*”, “*science of the hidden*”, or “*el haqiqa*”, the “*truth*”), clarifying that the two are deeply intertwined. Ramadan explained to me that special *tasabih* have a place in the education of the *Issawy* not only because they are based, as previously explained, on a Quranic principle, but also because they allow the *murid* to have a direct experience of the “truth”. Through miracles the *murid* gains the ultimate experiential proof that the *shaykh* has, in Ramadan’s words, the “*sirr masbut*” (“*the correct secret*”). By experiencing miracles in his body the *murid* understands that his *shaykh* has access both to the correct secretive knowledge and to the secret power that makes this knowledge work, and, therefore, that he can be trusted as a channel of divine grace and pedagogue. Ramadan explained to me that *karamat* validate on an experiential level the power of a spiritual education that involves both knowledge of the

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<sup>177</sup>The five essential practices that characterise the religious life of the Sunni Muslim according to the *Qur’an*: professing monotheism and accepting Mohammed as the seal of the prophets, the daily prayers, alms giving, fasting in the month of Ramadan and pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca.

<sup>178</sup>The term “Shariya”, as explained by countless publications, indicates the moral code and religious law in Islam, but in this context it refers to the more normative (and therefore exoteric) aspects of religion. For an analysis of the complexities related to the jurisprudential facet of the Islamic faith see Ewing 1988 and Zaman 1999, 2002, 2004. For an historical examination of Islamic legal systems see Coulson 1964. For an examination of how Islamic law has been the object of a codification that has transformed its multivocal tradition into a rigid legal code see Messick 1993.

‘texts’ of Islam and experience of its secrets. Consequently, he clarified, they should be accounted amongst the various tools of *Issawy* education.

*Shaykh* Ashraf elaborated on this connection between pedagogy, textual orthodoxy and miracles. When I asked him whether the *Issawy* who performs the *tasbih* of an animal turns truly into a beast he told that it was impossible for him to explain this spiritual process without me having experienced it<sup>179</sup>. Similarly, when I enquired about the spiritual benefits of the “names” he told me that they could be understood only through experience. Ashraf told me that he performed the secret *tasabih* with a certain regularity, and that *karamat* are not only about becoming invulnerable to blades or acquiring the agility of a cat. “*People do similar miraculous actions even in India*” he said. The difference, he added, is that “*Sufism is based on the Qur’an and the Sunna*”. The *Issawy* who performs the “names”, Ashraf clarified, acquires not only miraculous capacities, but also special graces that help him following the teachings of the holy book. Even though the *shaykh* could not expand on the topic due to its secrecy, he told me that if one performs the ‘*tasbih* of the iron’ he realises that it becomes physically impossible for him to eat food which is not cooked according to the dietary rules set up by *Qur’an* and *Sunna* (Campo 2009: 246 -250) because his body automatically causes him to vomit it out. “The names”, he emphatically repeated to me, are supernatural tools that help one becoming a good Muslims. Being actions that allow the divine “secret” to educate one’s own self secret, the *tasabih* are not dissimilar from other spiritual exercises. Unlike

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<sup>179</sup> Identification between humans and animals has been looked at in different ways in Anthropology. Some have highlighted the metaphorical (Urton 1985; Leach 1964; Tambiah 1969; Halverson 1976), or symbolic (Levi-Strauss 1969; Geertz 1973b; Boddy1992) nature of similar identifications, other have observed that they are often intended to be literal (Evans- Pritchard 1956; Lienhardt 1954; Firth 1966). Others still – touching on sensitive issues concerning the appropriateness of looking for symbols where people see reality (Turner 1967; Obeyesekere 1992; Sahlins 1995) – have suggested that, even when it is considered real by people, the identification with an animal should be analysed as a metaphor by the Anthropologist (Ashforth 1998; White 2000). In an attempt to combine both approaches, Harry West has recently argued that ‘becoming animal’ can be considered to be both a symbolic and literal statement (West 2007), since metaphors do not simply link two different semantic domains, but influence the experience people have of these domains (Lakoff & Johnson 1980; Fernandez 1972; Comaroff 1985). Philosophical reflections on the relationship between humans and beasts can be found in Midgley 1978; Deleuze & Guattari 2007: 262; Derrida 2008, and Berger & Segarra 2011. For a general introduction to animal symbology in Islam see Schimmel 2003.

standard spiritual exercises, however, they have to be personally experienced in order to understand their link with *Qur'an*, *Sunna* and spiritual education.

In the words of Ramadan and Ashraf, secret tasabih appear as something more than rituals of transformation (Turner 1967), re-enactments of colonial memory (Stoller 1994, 1995) and performances centred on mimicry of animal behaviour (Taussig 1993)<sup>180</sup>. The “names” are understood as practices related to the *Qur'an*, and as tools that help the *murid* to deeply internalise the teachings of Islam. Even though these considerations echo a series of anthropological reflections concerning the role of the body in absorbing the rules and values of a community, the fact that my informants refused to elaborate the matter due to its secrecy prevents me from analysing this process in detail<sup>181</sup>. However, if there is one aspect of

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<sup>180</sup> I asked *Shaykh* Ashraf whether a *murid* can pretend that the miracle has taken place and imitate the behaviour of an animal without actually absorbing its powers, but the *shaykh* excluded this possibility. Ashraf told me that when an *Issawy* master decides to give a secret formula to a *murid* he does not specify what are the miraculous powers attached to it. If the *murid's* heart is in the right place, the ‘secret’ will manifest itself and the *murid* will find out. If, on the contrary, the *murid* is not spiritually ready, the *tasbih* will remain ineffective, the *murid* unaware of the specific powers attached to the formula and the secret preserved. In his analysis of the concept of “mimesis” Taussig suggests that imitation (through which one adopts characteristics of ‘the other’ while remaining distant from it) is as a powerful tool to master alterity (1993). Even though the idea is not applicable to the case I discuss, in her study of divine names in Sufi theology Schimmel suggests that Adam, being the first man created by God, received from him knowledge of the “secret of the names” that allowed him to become “master over all created things”(1975: 188). Stoller (1995) suggests that mastery of alterity through imitation can involve a lived re-enactment of past encounters with the ‘other’ while Bloch (1992) is of the opinion that achieving mastery of death is a fundamental component of all ritual systems. Mimesis has also been looked at as an occasion to express internalised knowledge that remains un-expressed in everyday life (Jackson 1983), as an attempt to ‘translate’ the other into a familiar idiom (Boddy 1989), and as a moment in which one can comment on himself and his society from a ‘distant’ position (Lambek 1998). Thoughts on the blurry difference between ‘imitating’ and “becoming’ can be found in Deleuze and Guattari 2007: 262.

<sup>181</sup> As elucidated by Foucault, techniques focused on educating the self involve necessarily processes aimed at making the body docile (Foucault 1984; 1984b; 1984c; 1991: 3-31) in perspective of desired or imposed ideas of well – being (Foucault 1988; Turner 1992). Similar ideas have been developed in studies of educational systems (Elias 2000; Evans et al. 2004), but also in works dealing with the process of internalisation of social norms. A vast scholarship has highlighted not only that the body plays an important role in the way human beings conceptualise the universe (Douglas 2007:72-92; Lambek 1998: 107), but also that moral, intellectual and spiritual values are absorbed through standardised acts repeated in time (Bourdieu 1977, 1990: 271-283; Taussig 1987: 394; Asad 1993: 83-167; Lester 2005; Mauss 2006; Ortner 2006: 150). Whether with a focus on discipline or on performance, these publications have shown that through bodily practices a subject comes to ‘embody’ specific social roles and rules (Goffman 1962; Butler 1990; Butler 1993: 121-140; Wacquant 2004). A different approach has been proposed by anthropologists inspired by philosophical reflections on ‘experience’ (Moran 2000; Merleau-Ponty 2002) who have suggested that the body is not a passive recipient, but the very existential ground of culture and self, and that

these practices that can be highlighted in light of my informants' statements it is precisely their secret nature. According to Ramadan and Ashraf, esoteric practices have to be experienced in order to be appreciated as educational and religiously correct. The only way to know if the tea is good, Ashraf told me once, is to taste it because from “*taste you know*” (“*min dhaqa araf*”)<sup>182</sup>. The orthodoxy, Quranic foundation and pedagogical nature of the “names” lie therefore hidden in the secrecy of personal experience, and this consideration is particularly important for an understanding of Issawy esoterism. Both Ramadan and Ashraf told me that special *tasabih* are kept secret precisely due to their experiential nature. If the *shaykh* tries to explain this practice to a *murid* (or to someone else) who has not directly experienced them, then they can be easily misunderstood and dismissed as having nothing to do with Islam. Secrecy therefore stands out as a pedagogical necessity. Concealment, for Ramadan and Ashraf, is the only way to manage a particular portion of *Issawy* knowledge and education which is both textual and experiential.

### 3.5 “Our Religion is very Clear” (*Assessing Issawy Esoteric knowledge*)

So far I have elucidated the way in which *Issawy* spiritual education is implemented and I have explained how, according to some members of the order, secret *tasabih* should be considered as part of the educational repertoire of the brotherhood. In this last part of the chapter, however, I will concentrate on those Issawis who do not recognise this continuity between secret practices and pedagogy. Almost all the *Issawy shuyukh*, *muridin* and devotees I interviewed acknowledged that, in the past, members of the

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‘embodiment’ is therefore an active dynamic as much as a passive one (Sheper-Hughes & Lock 1987; Jackson 1989; 1996; Lock 1993: 137-138; Csordas 1990; 1994). This perspective has been applied in the study of miracles (Csordas 1994b, 2002) and Sufism (Pinto 2005), but it has also been criticised on the basis that anthropologists will always interpret experience using referents “that are alien to local culture” (Knibbe & Versteeg 2008: 60). Interestingly, my analysis of Issawy secret knowledge illuminates another limitation of this approach: when dealing with secrecy (or at least with the kind of ‘experiential secrecy’ on which I focus here) investigating the body as ‘existential ground’ becomes practically impossible.

<sup>182</sup> In Libyan dialect “tasting” can be used as a synonym for “trying” or “experiencing”. On one occasion a young Libyan fellow who had nothing to do with Sufism tried to convince me to take up Islam as a religion for a week, to see if it suited me. “*Dhuqha!*” (“*taste it!*”) he told me.

brotherhood used to perform *karamat* much more than today. More specifically, many *shuyukh* recognised that their predecessors in the *sanad* (often their grandfathers, or great grandfathers) had made use of the “names” in one way or another. However, for the greater part the same *Issawy* masters also told me they did not intend to perform secret tasabih of *karamat* nor to assign them to their *muridin*.

These members of the order neither denied the existence of miracles nor the power of the ‘secret’ as divine force. Quite the contrary, they talked with me extensively about the miraculous effects of spiritual exercises in healing the soul and the self, and explicitly acknowledged the mysterious power behind certain pious formulas or Quranic verses. Often they reported supernatural stories (mainly concerning difficult situations that have been resolved through divine intervention) explaining how through the performance of certain *tasabih* one can receive special graces from God. Furthermore, they also stressed the importance of the “*shaykh* pedagogue”, highlighting how – as explained before – the pedagogue is able to miraculously scrutinise the ‘secret’ nature of his disciples due to special spiritual gifts that are bestowed mysteriously to him by God. Nevertheless, in the great majority of cases *Issawis* also dismissed the role of the secret formulas, or, more broadly, the need to conceal a certain body of information. Though ready to admit that a gifted *shaykh* can achieve intuitive *knowledge of the secret*, they also emphatically clarified that the order does not need any *secret knowledge*. In describing the nature of their brotherhood, they always stressed how the *Issawiya* is a path of spiritual education and a brotherhood based on clear Islamic orthodoxy. In doing so, they also excluded secret formulas from either one or both of these defining aspects of the order.

Occasionally, *shuyukh* explained to me that they simply did not know the special formulas of the order because in time their *assanid* had lost the knowledge of the “names “. However, in the majority of cases

lack of knowledge was not the reason behind the decision not to perform *karamat*. In one case, for instance, a wealthy *shaykh* in his late seventies (an *Issawy* master whose *zawiya* counted a high number of *muridin* and an entrepreneur whose business had proven successful and rewarding) explained to me that he had not inherited the secret *tasabih* from his *sanad*. Nonetheless, the *shaykh* also told me that he had met a much younger *Issawy* who had convinced him to learn the special formulas and offered to teach them. The old *shaykh* (who was happy about this new found body of knowledge) recognised the benefit and the power of the “names”, but decided that he did not want to use the formulas because piety is more important than sensational supernatural deeds. Sometimes I was told that even though secret *tasabih* are part of the knowledge of the order their miraculous effects can divert the Sufi’s attention from less spectacular but more important spiritual matters (“*what are you after? The ‘lion’ or God?*” an *Issawy shaykh* once asked me commenting on the *tasbih* of the lion). For the greater part, however, Issawis told me that secret *tasabih* have simply lost their purpose.

Contrary to what was explained to me by *Shaykh* Ramadan, a large number of Issawis told me that special *tasabih* for the *karamat* are first and foremost practices designed to impress infidels. At times, *shuyukh* would concede that secret *tasabih* can occasionally be used when a *murid* asks his master for a proof (“*delil*”) of his powers and capacities. In the majority of cases, however, *Issawy* masters stressed not only that they had never encountered this necessity but also that this is not the main function of the miracles. Forty year old *shaykh* Abdul Qadir, for instance, told me that he had inherited the knowledge of the secret *tasabih* from his deceased father, a well known *shaykh* pedagogue in his time. Abdul Qadir is the head of a very popular *zawiya* that hosted a large congregation of *muridin*, and when I asked him whether he had ever performed *karamat* in front of his disciples he clarified that neither he nor his father had done so, because “*now, we are all Muslims (in Libya)*”. Abdul Qadir kept the special *tasabih* for himself, without

sharing this knowledge with anyone. Significantly, he explained to me that it is advisable for a *shaykh* to impart only the three basic spiritual exercises of the order and to educate his *muridin* in the teachings of Islam, implying therefore that the “names” were excluded from this paradigm of education.

Abdul Kerim, an influential *Issawy shaykh* in his seventies kindly agreed to be interviewed by me on a number of occasions, and in the course of these conversations he expressed very similar opinions. *Shaykh Abdul Kerim* (a highly educated professional who spoke fluent English and Italian with his deep baritone voice) is an exception in the Tripolitan *Issawiya*. Though not against the performance of music in principle, he told me that he had forbidden musical performances in his *zawiya* because he thought they were inappropriate. Nevertheless, the *shaykh* represents a particularly prestigious *sanad*, and – though relatively unpopular due to his disdain for musical performances – he is recognised as the heir of an important spiritual genealogy. In discussing *karamat*, *Shaykh Abdul Kerim* explained to me that even though he had received from his predecessors “*tasabih against the poison, or against the knife*” he had never given these formulas to his *muridin* nor he had experimented with them personally. “*I do not need to try*”, he said. Like many other *shuyukh* Abdul Kerim dismissed the necessity to perform *karamat* in today’s age. He explained to me not only that special *tasabih* had a purpose only in colonial times, but also that nowadays Sufis (and Muslims in general) need more articulate and sophisticated ways to show the truth of Islam. In relationship to miraculous performances he told me:

*“The problem is that it is not a show. I think, it should be done sometimes, in very few occasions, when there is a challenge. For example, it happened two or three times, as I have been told, not in my lifetime, before, in our zawya, when the Italian Governor said: your tariqa and your zawya are nothing! So the shaykh asked one of his murid to drink some poison...it is a proof, when you are in a position where you are challenged. Otherwise, we don’t need, I think...this is my point of view...I will only do it if I am obliged to do it, otherwise I will never do it in my zawya...sometimes many people say the same thing that the Italian governor said...so maybe other shuyukh are convinced that they have to do it. I am trying to convince people with (he*

points at his head)...*I think that in any case your 'evidence' should change according to the circumstances and to the mentality of the people in society. For example, when the prophet Mohammed came his evidence was el Qur'an...speech....because his people, the human beings of that time had a better mentality than the people of the period of Jesus or Moses. So, now we need an evidence, beside el Qur'an... we need to discuss with the people, to convince them...I am not speaking only about the tariqa now, I am speaking about Islam. We need to discuss all the cases with our mind, do you understand? Maybe for the simple people, maybe these things, the poison, the sword, the knife et cetera, maybe it will be useful for them, but for me it is not useful. I need you to convince me, and either you convince me or I convince you"*

Shaykh Abdul Kerim presented *karamat* as obsolete practices that should not be counted amongst the pedagogical instruments of the brotherhood. Interestingly, in relegating the use of special *tasabih* to the colonial past, he also stressed that even though the brotherhood might have had secrets once, it certainly does not anymore. Significantly, Shaykh Abdul Kerim allowed me to speak freely with his *muridin* precisely because, he told me, in his *zawiya* he did not have anything to hide<sup>183</sup>. When commenting on the subject he explained that Islam is, quite simply, a very clear religion:

*"Igor, and let me say simply 'Igor', like you were one of my sons... if we say that Sufism means religion, the right religion...the right way to Allah, then I can say I am sure that there are not secrets, Our religion is very clear. Mohammed (May Allah honour him and grant him peace) announced to the people all religion in its entirety....and he did not....he did not have the right to keep for himself, or to hide any part of religion. We are speaking about religion, and I am sure that Sufism is the right religion. So, if we said that even Mohammed (May Allah honour him and grant him peace) did not have the right to keep something for himself, this applies much more to the people that came after him"*

When I asked Abdul Kerim about the secret aspects of Islam (that Ramadan had previously described as "the truth" or "science of the hidden"), he told me that, when it comes to Islam, the esoteric and the exoteric are indeed intertwined. Unlike Shaykh Ramadan, however, Abdul Hakim used this point to argue that both Islam and Sufism have, effectively, no secrets.

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<sup>183</sup> Unlike Abdul Kerim, a shaykh who performed *karamat* regularly told me once that he did not want me to interview his *muridin*, particularly about secret *tasabih*. He told me that if I had tried to ask his *muridin* to reveal the secret *tasabih* to me they would have lied in order to protect the secret. On lying, though in a very different context, see Gilsenan 1989

*“... (some shuyukh) speak about ‘the truth ...and they say that the religion has two branches: the ‘law’, and the’ truth’, do you understand me? ...but law and truth are two faces of the same coin...and the prophet brought these two faces (together), there is no conflict between them...Mohammed (May Allah honour him and grant him peace) brought these two “faces” and gave them to the people: so, no shaykh has this “truth” only for himself, to hide it, and nobody has the right to keep this “truth”, or a part of this “truth” for himself...you call it “science””, “science of the hidden”; it means that anybody can study it! Like “medicine”, “mathematics” ... it is not secret! ... It is science! It is an open door for the common people! And anybody who wants to get in will get in...we have to mention a very important point about this subject, when we speak about the secrets or about this “science of the hidden”: maybe you are not Sufi, but...it is not necessary to be Sufi in order to knock at the door and get in; if you have a right relationship with God, and if you are going on the right path, you will get inside, even if you don’t have any relationship with any shaykh of any tariqa in the world. Is that clear? our tariqa is as Mohammed said: ‘I will leave you, after I am gone, on a very large road... a very large and clear highway to go to Allah...nobody who is (in the) right walks away from it to follow the small paths that depart from the highway. So, the right way or the highway, call it whatever you like, it is not just the tariqa. When we speak about this ‘highway’ we speak about the religion itself, Islam! So the Sufi orders are just doctrines of thinking and acting, and it is not necessary to be one of the followers of one of these brotherhoods”*

Shaykh Abdul Kerim was not the only *Issawy* who expressed this dismissive attitude towards secrecy. In fact the majority of the *shuyukh* I interviewed constantly downplayed the importance of secret information, emphasising that the order has no information to keep secret because it is explicitly based on *Qur’an* and *Sunna*. In this perspective, the *Issawiya* was presented to me as a brotherhood that retains special blessings but no exclusivity over grace (“*it is not necessary to be a Sufi...*”). Often members of the brotherhood referred to *Issawy* knowledge as a “special knowledge” (“*elm al qass*”) that is not known to other Muslims. Nonetheless, the same *Issawis* always clarified that, unlike special formulas for the acquisition of animal powers, this knowledge is made of spiritual exercises that bring about blessings, cure of the soul and explicit benefits that anyone could understand. In excluding the “names” from this paradigm of ‘explicitness’, some *Issawis* told me that they recognised the Quranic principle behind the special *tasabih* of the animals, but also that they could not possibly grasp the reasons why one might want to ‘become’ an animal. Others emphatically highlighted this ‘lack of explicitness’ and described

*karamat* as *bida*<sup>184</sup> with no clear basis in the texts of Islam. For the greater part, however, members of the order maintained an ambiguous (if not contradictory) position on *karamat* describing them both as powerful practices that once had a purpose and as heterodox aberrations that have no place in an Islamic order with no secrets.

*Shaykh* Mansur, for example, vigorously repeated to me that he whole-heartedly rejected the performance of secret *tasabih*. Mansur is a well-respected *shaykh* in his sixties who has been educated in the order by his father (from whom he ‘inherited’ the leadership of a number of *zawaya* in Western Libya). He enjoys a vast network of friendships and acquaintances within the order, and when I asked him to elaborate on his position towards esoteric practices he told me that:

*“in the correct tariqa you do not find these (practices); the bases of the Sufi brotherhoods are the (holy) book, the Sunna, the spiritual exercises...these are the bases...some shuyukh have used karamat...but in the wrong way...they have taken the formulas of the tasabih and used them...for (the karamat with) the knife...yes, at that time (in the colonial period) it was important (for Issawis) to give a ‘proof’, but it is forbidden to do these things in all periods, we do not have these things, these things are forbidden...the Perfect Shaykh did not do these things, when the Perfect Shaykh spoke he presented his wisdom, he gave a proof through his knowledge..the Perfect Shaykh did not do these things, because he followed the prophet...therefore if someone comes and does new things and gives proofs in that way, then he does things in a way which is different from (the prophet and Ben ‘Aysa) who are greater than him...”*

In the words of *Shaykh* Mansur, *karamat* were described to me both as potential proofs for non-Muslims (“at the time it was important to give a proof”), and as ‘innovations’ that were never endorsed by the founder of the order or by the prophet. Showing an ambiguity which I found also in other Issawis, *shaykh* Mansur related to secret *tasabih* almost as an ‘un-resolved’ feature of the order. The “names” were described by him as a set of practices that the *Issawiya* once used and for good reasons, but also,

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<sup>184</sup>*Innovation*”, ideas or practices that are considered to be outside of the textual tradition of Islam (Glasse’ 2002: 87, Winter 2008).

somehow, as a distortion of the original *Issawy* message. Similarly, when I asked Mansur to further develop his views he told me that even though secret formulas are based on the *Qur'an* they are nevertheless, at the same time, in conflict with *Qur'an* and the *Sunna*.

*“What is the secret? What is the tasbih? The names of God and the verses of the Qur’an, do you understand? Things regarding religion and the Islamic law...miracles are the result of the fear of God (“taqwa”)...a result of being close to God...there are not secret things, the secret is the tasbih for God, the recitation of the Qur’an...there is not such a secret thing...do you know what it is that these shuyukh told you about? You recite a particular tasbih...what is the secret in this? There is not! The secret in this: if I recite these words within me, or loudly, the secret is specific to that sentence, for instance a particular verse in the Qur’an, or a tasbih have a specific secret that is known to God, not to the shuyukh, for instance...there are verses in the Qur’an for the healing of the sick, or to facilitate difficult situations... there are tasabih against poison...but if you look at the truth of these tasbih (you will find that) they are nothing more than verses from the Qur’an...for the poison, for instance you say: (at this point the shaykh recited a specific verse from the Qur’an to me)...I do not have (the tasabih of the animals), but some shuyukh use them...but in the correct tariqa there are not such things...in the past these things were done a lot, but not now, because now everything (we do) is based on...the Qur’an,... the sword... the knife...these are special tasabih but we do not use them...they used to do it in the past... (now) it is wrong, (to do it) because it is not the time for these things... (these things) were used in the time of the colonisers, in the past...as a proof...but doing these things now does not make any sense”.*

*Shaykh* Mansur’s comments are particularly interesting for a number of reasons. Regarding secrecy, the *shaykh* referred to the ‘secret’ as power inherent in certain practices (“*a tasbih has a specific secret that is known to God*”) rather than as hidden information (“*there are no secret things*”). Interestingly, in privileging an understanding of ‘secret’ as mystery rather than as concealment he even revealed one of the secret *tasabih* to me (“*for the poison, for instance, you say...*”). For what concerns the orthodoxy of the “names”, Mansur described special *tasabih* both as a textual knowledge made of “*nothing more than verses from the Qur’an*” and as practices of the past that cannot be performed because “*now everything is based on the Qur’an*”. On the one hand, the *shaykh* stressed that the “names” of the *Issawy* order are nothing more than textual knowledge rooted in the holy book (showing therefore that the brotherhood

does not deal with any secret source of knowledge from which other Muslims are precluded). On the other hand, however, he also described the “names” as not being ‘textual enough’ to be included in a paradigm of undisputed textuality. This ambiguous attitude (which informed the decision of many *shuyukh* to keep the special *tasabih* they had received through their assanid while simultaneously being critical of them) testifies to a certain ‘difficulty’ in assessing the secret practices in the order. The “names” were presented to me as elements of Issawi-ness that cannot be completely rejected, but also as practices that are not fully correct. Interestingly, I found a similar attitude even amongst Sufis who had personally experienced the power of the formulas.

Though not a member of the *Issawiya*, Ali, for example, told me that he had tried the “*tasbih* of iron “ a number of times because his shaykh had learned how to perform them. Ali, a nice student of medicine in his twenties who had joined a minor Sufi order, told me that he had felt pain as any other human being would. The Sufi who performs the “names”, he clarified, is subject to the same biological laws as anyone else (he feels the pain, he bleeds, “*he can even go to coma*”), with the only difference that “*there is not damage*”. Ali told me that he was aware of the Quranic principle behind the practice. However, he also added that “*karamat do not belong to Sufism*” (“*karamat mush min atTasawwuf*”) because “*they do not have a basis in the (holy) book and in the Sunna*”. When I asked why a Sufi should therefore feel the need to perform the “names” he explained to me that sometimes, particularly when they are accused of not being orthodox Muslims, Sufis need to provide a proof of the special divine favour they enjoy<sup>185</sup>. When I replied that this view of *karamat* as non-Islamic tools used to prove orthodoxy seemed paradoxical to me, he added that, in the end, both those *shuyukh* who perform the “names” and those who criticise them can furnish a proof of their opinions, even though this proof is textual in the first case and experiential in the second. Almost in an attempt to divert the subject, he finally explained to me that “the

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<sup>185</sup> Similar accusations will be dealt with in the next chapter.

iron” (“*el hadid*”) is not amongst the more important aspects of Sufism anyway, and that therefore it is better not to perform them.

Unlike Ramadan and Ashraf, the majority of the Sufis I spoke with portrayed special *tasabih* as practices that do not fully meet the educational and textual requirements of the *Issawy* order. In this perspective, the “names” were described to me as practices that are *Issawy* (but not completely) and Islamic (but not totally). Even though I have never seen Issawis quarrelling with each other over the subject, secret practices were often described to me as the only true source of division within the brotherhood. *Shuyukh* who were deeply critical towards those who performed *karamat* only criticised them privately (and for the greater part, politely) stressing that in the end they all belonged to the same brotherhood. More than once, for instance, I have seen shuyukh putting aside their differences on the matter, and greeting each other or inviting each to their respective *zawaya*. Nonetheless, *karamat* and secret *tasabih* were always talked about as a delicate topic, one that is better not to mention at all. Often I found myself discussing with *Shaykh* Ramadan (or other Issawis who regularly performed *karamat*) about the divergence of positions between them and the majority of the *Issawy shuyukh*. Interestingly, Ramadan told me that the main reason why many *shuyukh* do not value the secret *tasabih* is simply because they have never tried them. “*Lazem jarabha*”, “*you have to experience them*”, he said, quoting the same principle to explain not only why I, a non- Sufi, could not possibly understand the *karamat*, but also why Issawis themselves had lost the will (if not the capacity) to perform them.

### ***Conclusion***

In previous sections of the thesis I have demonstrated how the *Issawy* discursive tradition allows the members of the order to articulate a sense of common identity. As I have repeatedly explained, however,

the *Issawy* tradition also leaves scope for difference and disagreement, and in this chapter I have shown how this is particularly true for what concerns esoteric practices and miracles. After presenting the spiritual exercises of the brotherhood, I have elucidated how some Issawis see secret formulas as part of this corpus of spiritual education while the majority of them do not. In unpacking this phenomenon I have demonstrated that the discriminating factor between the two is the way in which they approach secrecy. Though all are prone to highlight that their order enjoys a special relationship with the ‘secret’ (understood as mysterious supernatural power), members of the brotherhood differ in the way they relate with the notion of secret information. The majority of the Issawis criticise esoteric practices for not being explicitly textual and pedagogical, and stress that the brotherhood is not concerned with secrets but with miraculous healing of the soul. Those Issawis who perform miraculous formulas, however, explain that esoteric knowledge has an educational purpose and a Quranic foundation, but also that both these aspects can be appreciated only through experience. In light of these considerations the contemporary *Issawiya* does not appear to be more ‘disenchanted’ and ‘text-oriented’ than in the past, but only more interested in demonstrating that it has no secrets, and it is on this particular aspect that I will concentrate in the following chapter. By contextualising the brotherhood in terms of its relationship with the Libyan state I will develop a discussion aimed at explaining why Issawis feel the need to show that they have nothing to conceal.

**“NOTHING IS CLEARER THAN THE ISLAMIC FAITH”  
The Interaction between Sufism and the Libyan Regime**

*The murid was telling me about the Darwysch. The Darwysch is a peculiar kind of Sufi saint. In his search for God, the Darwysch has been consumed by divine truth. As a result the Darwysch appears like a crazy person who has lost his mind: a weird, simple-minded and unpredictable saint. The murid advised me to stay far from the Darwysch people. “They might ask you to do something and if you do not then you will feel remorse...”. He told me that the actions of a Darwysch might seem meaningless (or even morally wrong) while in fact they are often guided by a mysterious divine plan. “They have a secret with God”, the murid said. From then onwards the ‘saints with a secret’ became a common theme in our conversations. Soon I realised that people used the term with reference to eccentric shuyukh, unconventional characters and mendicants. With time, however, I noticed that the word was also applied with another connotation. “Darwyscha “was also used to indicate backwardness, weirdness, religious heterodoxy and even witchcraft. For some the strange saints were agents of the mystery, while for others, they were the antinomy of what is good and orthodox. In both cases, the Darwysch was described to me as borderline figure at the edge of the understandable.*

**‘Clarifying’ Sufism (Introduction)**

The majority of the Issawis refer to ‘secrecy’ only as a privileged relationship with the invisible, describing the Issawiya as a mystical order with special blessings, but with no secrets to keep. In analysing this phenomenon I have shown how those Issawis who reject miraculous performances (or *karamat*) have not necessarily lost their belief in the uncanny or gained a greater attention for the texts of Islam. On the contrary, many members of the brotherhood simply feel the need to highlight the ‘explicitness’ of their practices in terms of overt educational purpose, clear textuality and unambiguous orthodoxy. Having shown how Issawis struggle to reconcile secret knowledge with this paradigm of transparency (and deal with it as an ‘unresolved’ aspect of the Issawy past), I will now turn to the reasons behind this need to accentuate unambiguousness and intelligibility. In doing so, I will consider an aspect of the brotherhood that so far has remained only in the background of my analysis: its relationship with

the state. In particular, I will show how the Libyan regime has created a specific religious rhetoric focused not only on the ‘textuality’, but also on the ‘clarity’ and ‘intelligibility’ of Islam. In analysing the impact of this discourse on Sufism I will shed light on why many Issawis distance themselves from those ‘less explicit’ practices that require experientiality in order to be understood and appreciated.

Studies that have dealt with forms of experiential knowledge have often drawn attention on processes of transmission through practice. In analysing the acquisition of skills and crafts (Marchand 2003, 2009, 2010), the internalisation of habitual behaviour, or the role played by bodily dispositions in learning processes (Bourdieu 1977, 1990: 271-283; Wacquant 2004), these works have suggested that some distinct forms of knowledge are acquired through mute imitation and unconscious assimilation<sup>186</sup>. Even though this approach has shown that knowledge can be internalised “beyond the grasp of consciousness” (Bourdieu 1977: 93) and “without attaining the state of discourse” (Bourdieu 1977:87), it has also attracted some criticism for offering only a partial understanding of the process of knowledge-making. As demonstrated by a number of anthropologists dealing with religious and ritual systems, the acquisition of experiential knowledge can indeed also involve agency (Mahmood 2005; Van Der Veer 2008), deliberateness (Lambek 1992) and, most importantly, conscious ascription of meaning by different agents including the state (Bowen 1989; Starrett 1995; Starrett 2008). Bearing this in mind, in this chapter I will contextualise Issawy ‘experiential secrets’ within the broader hegemonic discourses formulated by the Libyan regime. In doing so, I will show that the changes in the conceptualisation of secrecy that have characterised the Issawiya are related, amongst other things, to a broader operation of ‘re-definition’ carried out on Sufism by the Libyan state.

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<sup>186</sup> A larger overview of this literature can be found in Chapter 3 page 124 and footnote 34.

The relationship between the regime and Sufism has considerably changed in the last two decades. As I have briefly explained in the introduction of the thesis, after being the object of Gheddafi's antipathy for nearly thirty years, in the nineties Sufism was rehabilitated as part of Libyan religiosity and, more importantly, proposed as an alternative to ever growing Salafi-inspired forms of Islam<sup>187</sup>. In this chapter I will further explore this political manoeuvre. More specifically, I will analyse the accusations of backwardness initially made by Colonel Gheddafi against Sufism, and I will consider the way in which the Sufi 'rehabilitation' has taken place. Doubtlessly, the Libyan government has used Sufism as a tool against forms of Islam that were perceived to be more 'political' and 'threatening'. Nonetheless, as we will see, the Libyan government has not simply *reintegrated* the Sufis as 'moderate' Muslims to be used for a specific political agenda. Rather, the regime has also produced a series of discourses aimed at *rearticulating* Sufism in order to make it compatible with Gheddafi's ideology and religious rhetorics.

Analysts of Libyan politics have often clarified that 'religion' is not the most important component of Gheddafi's thought. In their works, however, these scholars have also described the 'centrality of the *Qur'an*' and the 'return to pristine Islam' as two fundamental points in the propaganda of the "guide of the revolution" (Bearman 1986: 157-164; Davis 1987: 67; Joffe 1988). These studies have certainly contributed to illuminate the 'omni-textual' and 'nostalgic' character of Gheddafi's rhetoric. Nevertheless, these works have not duly emphasised the importance of a rhetorical trope which stems directly from these two facets of the Green Thought<sup>188</sup>: the notion that "*nothing is clearer than the Islamic faith*" (Gheddafi 1982). In articulating his hegemonic discourse of modernisation<sup>189</sup> (based, amongst other things, on the idea that Libya has entered a new age, freed from the stains of colonialism and ignorance- Vandewalle 2006: 126), Gheddafi has constantly highlighted the need to sanitise Islam

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<sup>187</sup> See Introduction page 25.

<sup>188</sup> One of the names of Gheddafi's ideology.

<sup>189</sup> See introduction page 29.

from corruptive elements of the past (Bruce St John 1983; Davis 1987: 30, 50). In explaining the collapse of pure religion, however, the Libyan leader also emphasised that Islam is a “clear” (“*uadihu*”) religion (Gheddafi 1982) that has been made opaque by some ‘agents of corruption’, and this is particularly important for an understanding of the Sufi rehabilitation that has taken place in Libya<sup>190</sup>.

Gheddafi’s belief that pristine Islam and the clarity of the *Qur’an* have been obfuscated by an accumulation of “commentaries, traditions and precedents” (Davis: 1987: 47; Vandewalle 2006:123) has been analysed by scholars as a move to undermine un-aligned religious interpretations (Bleuchot & Monastiri 1981; Bearman 1986: 162-63). His stress on the need for a personal interpretation of the *Qur’an*<sup>191</sup> has been generally considered as an attempt to weaken local *ulama*<sup>192</sup> by clarifying that their exegesis and expertise was no longer needed (ibid.). Nevertheless, the notion of an ‘explicit’, immediately understandable Islam cannot be reduced only to a political escamotage aimed at depriving religious scholars from their power to criticise the ruler on grounds of religious proficiency (Gellner 1981: 64). Indeed, the idea that Islam is a religion of clarity and transparency is also a powerful component of the regime’s peculiar objectification of religion<sup>193</sup>, and this is very visible in its approach to

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<sup>190</sup> ‘Clarifying religion’ was also the concern of other North African regimes. On ‘clarity’ being the guiding principle in the organisation of State Islamic education in Egypt in the 80’s see Starrett 1998: 126-153.

<sup>191</sup> “*Ijtihad*”, the principle that attests the “exercise of independent judgment” in relation to the *Qur’an* and *Sunna* (Bearman 1986: 163). For an analysis of this complex concept of Islamic jurisprudence see Ali Khan & Ramadan 2011. In terms of legal system, *Shariya* (see previous chapter note 36) was applied as the only valid source of law in Libya until the late seventies, when the regime slowly began to realise that some aspects of Islamic law were, effectively, in contradiction with the principles of the revolution (Mayer 1977, 1995; Vandewalle 2006:123).

<sup>192</sup> Sing. “*Alim*”, “men of religious learning”. On the difficult relation between Gheddafi and the *ulama* see Bearman 1986 and Davis 1987. For an interesting analysis aimed at challenging the idea that *ulama* are conservative custodians of static religiosity see Zaman 2002, and 2004. Insightful reflections on the relationship between *ulama* and the spread of mass education that has characterised the Muslim world from the nineteenth century onwards can be found in Eickelman 1992 and Eickelman & Piscatori 1996: 37-79, 131-135.

<sup>193</sup> According to Eickelman and Piscatori (1996: 37-45) the tendency to conceptualise religious beliefs as ‘an objective system’ is one of the defining aspects of modern Islam. The phenomenon entails the notion that Islam “has been made open, manifest, and clear” (Eickelman & Piscatori 1996: 42).

the Sufi brotherhoods<sup>194</sup>. Doubtlessly, Libyan Sufism was redeemed for political reasons. However, in this process it was also re-defined as a form of religiosity whose authentic essence had to be cleaned up from ‘un-clear’ and ‘incomprehensible’ elements.

Even though state apparatuses have often accused Sufism of being an obstacle in their projects of modernisation (Sirryeh 1999: 153-160; Schielke 2007; Silverstein 2007, 2009, 2011; Bruinessen & Day Howell 2007), in some cases they have also publicly favoured it (Baldick 2000:86-131; Haroon 2007: 33-63; De Jong 1978), co-opted it in nation-building initiatives (Pinto 2006; Louw 2007 : 42-61) and even recognised it as an influential social force that has to be appeased in the name of political stability (Behrman 1970: 85-131). Whether rejected or embraced, however, Sufism has often been the object of a ‘domesticating’ process by the state. As shown by a number of works, this process has involved measures aimed at reducing Sufism’s supposed religious heterodoxy (Schielke 2008), limiting its domain to the purely religious (Gilsenan 1973) or private (Silverstein 2007; 2011) sphere or aligning it with mainstream national ideologies (Gilsenan 1990: 237-250; Starrett 1995; Schielke 2006, 2007). More importantly, as part of this effort to cultivate the governmentality<sup>195</sup> of Sufism, state apparatuses have frequently endorsed a distinction between ‘legitimate’ and ‘illegitimate’ Sufis, and this is particularly relevant for

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<sup>194</sup> The idea that Islam is an explicit and ‘self-evident’ religion can also be detected in Gheddafi’s missionary attitude. Though reasonably respectful towards the Christians present in Libya, the Libyan leader has often invited them to accept the ‘obvious’ truth of Islam. In 1976, for example, the regime organised an Islamo-Christian seminar in Tripoli aimed at repairing the diplomatic relationship with the Vatican after Gheddafi had openly accused the Pope of being an agent of imperialism (Davis 1987: 52). Having no intention to follow the agenda of the meeting Gheddafi and some of the Libyan personnel intervened inviting the Catholic delegation to accept the self-evident truth of the Qur’an (risking therefore a second diplomatic disarray) (ibid.). The Christian population of Libya is made up entirely of foreigners and it includes Catholics, Anglicans, Greek Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox and members of the Union Church.

<sup>195</sup> “Governmentality” is a notion first crafted by Michel Foucault. The term indicates a series of techniques whose purpose is to produce citizens suited for the policies and strategies adopted by a specific form of government. (Foucault 1991b; 2004; Inda 2005). Brian Silverstein applies the concept in his analysis of the relationship between the Turkish state and the Sufi brotherhoods. In Silverstein’s view, the Turkish government had an interest in “normalising the objects of governance and the particular kinds of knowledge and subjectivities associated with them” (Silverstein 2007: 58) Broader ethnographic reflections on the relationship between religion and the state can be found in Zubaida 1989; Gupta 1995; Lapidus 1996; Hansen & Stepputat 2001; Navaro-Yashin 2002, Eickelman & Salvatore 2004.

what concerns the Libyan case. Bearing this in mind, in this chapter we will see that the rehabilitation of the brotherhoods carried out by the regime has involved also a re-articulation of Sufi legitimacy in terms of ‘clarity’.

In a number of contexts the separation between licit and illicit Sufism operated by the state has entailed discerning between ‘orthodox’ and ‘heterodox’ Sufis (Pinto 2006; Van Bruinessen 2007: 101), or selecting certain Sufi practices as part of the national culture while dismissing others as inappropriate (Harris & Dawut 2002). As suggested by Katherine Ewing, however, often more than dissecting the Sufis into ‘good’ and ‘bad’, nation states have effectively attempted to establish what is to be put under the rubric of Sufism and what is not (Ewing 1983, 1997). According to Ewing, the ‘selection’ operated on Sufism by the state can be identified as an attempt to re-define what counts as Sufism in the first place, so that some practices that are broadly associated with the Sufi world are re-articulated as inauthentic, or ‘non-Sufi’ (Ewing 1997:49). Bearing this in mind, in this chapter I will show how the Libyan regime has extrapolated a particular aspect of Libyan Sufism and re-defined it as a non-Sufi component to be expelled from an otherwise authentic core. In analysing this interesting example of “managing tradition” (Boddy 1995) we will see that the regime has described these ‘inauthentic elements’ using a term that invokes ambiguity and incomprehensibility: “*darwysha*”.

The word “*darwysh*” (pl. *darwysh*, probably Persian for “*poor*”, later incorporated into Arabic) can be found in different Sufi contexts with different meanings (Houtsma 1993: 949-952; Espin & Nickoloff. 2007: 332-333), but in Libyan Sufism it has a specific connotation. Though occasionally used as a synonym for ‘Sufi’, in Libya ‘*darwysh*’ indicates a particular kind of Sufi saint who has lost his mind as a result of his intense vicinity to God. These ‘holy fools’ are supposed to be characterised by an

incomprehensible behaviour behind which they hide their saintly status, and in some Libyan Sufi circles they are accepted as a spiritual phenomenon that embodies the mysterious and secretive nature of Sufism<sup>196</sup>. However, if for some Sufis “*darwyssha*” indicates an authentic, though enigmatic, manifestation of the divine in the discourses of the Libyan regime the word assumes a negative and different nuance. Though keeping the sense of ‘incomprehensibility’ embedded in the term, in his speeches Gheddafi has re-articulated *darwyssha* as a category to be opposed to *tasawwuf* (“Sufism”). In these declarations, as we will see, “Sufism” appears as a religiosity marked by explicit modesty, ‘clear’ piousness and understandable religiosity, while “*darwyssha*” as a category that comprises all the unclear, backward (and therefore inauthentic) practices that are supposedly in contrast with Sufi orthodoxy.

By showing how Sufism has been re-defined as an entity whose ‘clear’ essence needs to be purified from the ambiguity of ‘*darwyssha*’, I will demonstrate that the Libyan government has created a hostile environment for *Issawy* secret knowledge. Being a form of knowledge that does not fit within the paradigm of ‘explicitness’ proposed by the Libyan regime, *Issawy* secrets are in fact dismissed as inauthentic practices that have nothing to do with Sufism and, consequently, put under the rubric of ‘*darwyssha*’. In exploring this dynamic, I will shed light on the influence that Gheddafi’s notion of religious clarity has and has had on Sufi practices in general and on *Issawy* practices in particular. In doing so, I will explore the more evident factors that push *Issawis* to ‘clarify’ their practices, while in the

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<sup>196</sup> The figure of the ‘mad saint’ is present in a number of Sufi traditions (Crapanzano 1980; Frembgen 1998, 2004, 2006) though it is only in Libya (to my knowledge) that this figure is unanimously referred to as ‘*darwyssh*’. Shocking behavior, apparent insanity, and inscrutability of thoughts are some of the typical features of this special kind of Sufi (ibid.). Often they are described as wandering mystics (Ewing 1997: 52-61) who live outside of the urban consortium “in the way of the ancient cynics, provoking the people, admonishing them, and mixing freely with social outcasts” (Frembgen 1998: 145). Broader reflections on sainthood in Sufism (though not focused on the *darwyssh* type) can be found in Lings 1961; Gellner 1969; 1971; Hammoudi 1974; Gilsenan 1973, 1990, Ewing 1994: 1997; Lewis 1998; Pinto 2004; Schielke & Stauth 2008. For an analysis of ‘holy madness’ in Christianity see Fairfax Pope 2003, and for an ethnographic account dealing with sainthood and schizophrenia see Scheper-Hughes 2001.

next chapter I will pay attention to some less visible, but not less important, factors that also need be taken into account.

#### **4.1 Socialism, Sorcerers and Spies (Brief overview of a Troubled Relationship)**

Sufism plays a very visible role in contemporary Libya. The Libyan national television broadcasts the annual *Issawy* procession in the old city<sup>197</sup>, Sufis appear in the media in the course of musical performances, and renowned citizens of Tripoli (whether state functionaries, well-known personalities and even ambassadors) occasionally attend Sufi gatherings<sup>198</sup>. On a number of official occasions Colonel Gheddafi himself has been publicly awarded with symbolic *ijazat* from prominent *shuyukh* becoming an honorary member of some Sufi brotherhoods<sup>199</sup>. Bearing this in mind, it is only understandable that many of my *Issawy* friends did not want to talk about the time when Sufism was not the highly celebrated component of Libyan society that it is today. Only after a while did a few of my informants decide to open up on the troubled state of Sufism during the first three decades of the regime, and it is on this initial phase of friction that I will first concentrate in my analysis. My informants provided very different recollections of this period and very different explanations for Gheddafi's early antipathy towards the Sufis. Before I explore how Sufism was rehabilitated I will therefore present a brief overview of these

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<sup>197</sup> See Chapter 2 page 99.

<sup>198</sup> A festival of Mal'uf music ("*Maharajan al Mal'uf*") is organised and televised every year in the city of Tripoli. Given the strong link between this type of music and the *Issawy* zawaya (see chapter 2) often members and devotees of the *Issawiya* take part to the festival performing pieces from the *Issawy* repertoire. The *Maharajn al Mal'uf* is highly appreciated by the Libyan general public. Interestingly, when in 2007 Tripoli was nominated "Capital of Islamic Culture" a troupe of *Issawy* musicians from Morocco was invited for the occasion. Their performance in the "*msrah el kashef*" (the "*boy-scout theatre*", one of the auditoria of the capital) attracted a relatively large number of people amongst whom myself. In May of the same year the Moroccan ambassador participated in a dhikr session in the "Great *Zawiya*", the oldest *Issawy* *zawiya* in the *medina* of Tripoli (see chapter 1 page 48). On Sufi music and the state see Harris & Dawut 2002 and Qureshi 1999.

<sup>199</sup> This information was confirmed to me by a number of different sources (both close to and far from the Sufi world). The *ijaza*, as explained in chapter 1, is the 'licence to *shaykh*-hood' (see page 57).

succinct, cursory and contradictory narratives in order to highlight some similarities and differences between them.

For some of my interviewees, the regime's opposition to Sufism was the manifestation of a deeper antagonism towards Islam in general. Despite his public rebuke of Marxism (Vandewalle 2006: 106; Davis 1987:36-40), Gheddafi retained, according to some of my informants, a 'socialist aversion' towards religion. Seventy year old, university educated, *Shaykh* Fatallah, for instance, explained to me that, being initially inspired by radical leftist ideas, Gheddafi developed a hate for religious figures and, consequently, repugnance for the Sufis. *Shaykh* Fatallah has no particular interest in esoteric knowledge and he is one of the most active *Issawy shuyukh* in Tripoli (apart from being the head of an influential *sanad* that counts a number of *zawaya* both in the East and in the West of the country). At the beginning of his *shaykh*-hood, however, Fatallah only had one *zawiya* outside of Tripoli which was bulldozed over by the government in 1982 for unspecified reasons. One of Fatallah's muridin – only a teenager at the time – also described the event to me, specifying that this was one of the saddest moments in his entire life. According to Fatallah during the seventies and the eighties the regime was “*giving signs against religion in general*”, and since Sufism was the “*only organised religious group in the country*”, Gheddafi decided to antagonise the *zawaya*. The *shaykh* told me he witnessed policemen arresting a number of Sufis during that period, and that Colonel Gheddafi changed his approach towards the Sufis only in the first part of the nineties. Taking advantage of the repression of Sufism, the *shaykh* told me, various Salafi-inspired groups started to spread in Libya because “*you cannot control the people...they need religion like food, and if you do not give them a good (religious) idea, someone else will come and give them a bad one*”. In Fatallah's view when the government was faced with this new challenge it decided to rehabilitate the Sufis in order to fight the Salafis, judging the first as less dangerous than the second.

The notion that Gheddafi persecuted Sufism because of a supposed anti-religion stance was reported to me also by *Shaykh* Ramadan. Though initially reticent to discuss “*politics*” (“*siyasa*”) in the course of our conversations, after some time Ramadan explained to me that at the beginning of the regime Gheddafi had embraced “*Marxist ideas*” (“*Marxiya*”). Since the Libyans are traditionally deeply religious people, the *shaykh* told me, Gheddafi wanted to change their mentality in order to reduce the influence of Islam on the country. Ramadan clarified to me that Gheddafi outlawed Sufism for a while not only because of his political ideas but also because he hated the *Sanusy* order<sup>200</sup>. Ramadan was not the head of his *sanad* at the time, and though precociously interested in Sufi matters he was still learning the bases of mysticism from his grandfather (who preceded him as *khalifa*<sup>201</sup>) while furthering his religious education with another *shaykh*. Conscious of the situation, however, Ramadan did not want to endanger himself and his family and he used to hide books of religious content under his jumper while walking back home after visiting his teachers. The *shaykh* confirmed to me that some *zawaya* in different parts of the country were closed down by the government (but not his own), and that the situation only changed in the nineties when Salafis started to be perceived as a threat by the regime. Ramadan ended the conversation by clarifying that Gheddafi has no love for Sufism, only the desire to manipulate it as a political tool against other religious groups.

If some of my interviewees told me that the regime attempted to repress all *zawaya*, others explained to me that Colonel Gheddafi did not despise Sufism per se, only some Sufis. Forty year old *Shaykh* Bilal, for example, told me that between the seventies and the nineties the government only persecuted those Sufis who used to do “*wrong things*” from a religious point of view. Bilal is the head of a fairly large *Issawy*

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<sup>200</sup> The Sufi order whose head became the first and last king of Libya, see Introduction page 13.

<sup>201</sup> The head of an *Issawy sanad* see Chapter 1 page 64.

*zawiya* in Tripoli (apart from being the appreciated imam of a popular mosque in the city), and he assured me that neither he nor his *muridin* had ever had any problem with the police. Though not a supporter of the regime, Bilal clarified that the police only antagonised those *zawaya* whose members used to “perform *hadra* every night, going to trance until four o clock in the morning without even praying the *Fajer*<sup>202</sup> prayer”. Because of these few *zawaya*, Bilal told me, “there was a time when one could not even say ‘I am a Sufi’ without incurring in some issues with the police”. The *Shaykh* clarified to me that the government had no intention of eradicating Sufism from the country: the regime only wanted to make sure that Libyan Sufism was orthodox. In order to prove his point, Bilal told me that many men who work for the government (and even people from Gheddafi’s inner entourage) are devotees or members of Sufi brotherhoods.

Thirty years old Salem (an unmarried accountant with no particular sympathy for Sufism or the regime) gave me a very similar account. Salem told me that the government did not persecute all Sufis, but only those who were “not good”. Salem explained to me that the regime always supported the *zawaya* out of convenience because, unlike other religious groups, “they do not create political problems”. In Salem’s view, during the first decades of Gheddafi’s power the police was only after those Sufis who, under the disguise of religious *shuyukh*, were in fact practising “witchcraft” and dealing with the *jnun*<sup>203</sup>. Salem also told me that at the time the regime was broadcasting programmes on television where false Sufis (who were actually sorcerers) were forced to make a public confession of their misdeeds. These measures were applied, according to Salem, in order to encourage Libyans to be careful when deciding to follow a Sufi master: it was a way to make people understand that sometimes religious figures “are not who they say

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<sup>202</sup> The first of the five daily prayers prescribed in Islam.

<sup>203</sup> Sing “*Jin*”, supernatural creatures that inhabit the world and live a parallel existence to the one of human beings. The *Jnun* are understood to be creatures of God who will account for their actions on the Day of Judgment. In Libya witchcraft or “*sahar*” (see also chapter 3 note 29) is widely defined as the art of manipulating *jnun* in order to harm people. The topic will be looked at again later on in the chapter.

*they are*". Interestingly, this information was also confirmed to me in the course of a brief conversation with a group of three Tripolitans working for a television channel. Being afraid of repercussions for their comments the three gentlemen did not want to deepen the matter, but they told me that similar programmes were indeed part of the regular repertoire of Libyan television up until the early nineties.

For some of my interviewees the regime had a substantial antipathy either towards Sufism in general or towards some deviant manifestations of it. For others, however, the repression of the Sufis was only an act of political precaution. For example, *Shaykh* Amir - a wealthy professional in his late seventies - explained to me that no *zawiya* was ever closed down or destroyed by the government. In the eighties, he told me, a number of Sufi *shuyukh* (amongst whom some Issawis, including himself) were simply summoned by the police and asked to report on any suspect character in their *zawaya*. Amir added that "*one of the government people*" was a devotee in an important Sufi *zawiya* at the time, and that this person had lost the favour of the regime for unspecified reasons. As a result, the *shaykh* told me, the authorities thought that many Sufis were somehow related to this person, and applied a series of precautionary measures against the *zawaya*. Similarly, seventy year old *shaykh* Atif (who, notwithstanding his age, had become head of his *zawiya* only recently at the time of our conversation) told me that the regime only wanted to monitor the Sufis. Atif explained to me that the *shaykh* who preceded him as the guide of his *zawiya* was once asked by the police to keep a register of the attendees. According to Atif, the *shaykh* refused and one occasion, during one of Gheddafi's public appearances, he even confronted the Colonel telling him: "*the zawiya is open, send your people but it is them who have to do the job*".

In some cases my informants explained to me that the regime had no interest in Sufi practices in themselves and that the government persecuted the Sufis simply because it suspected the *zawaya* of illicit political activities. Thirty year old Mohsin, for example, told me that the only *zawaya* who were targeted by the government were those that entertained relationships with clandestine political groups. Mohsin (a translator with journalistic aspirations who has no particular interest in Sufi matters) heard from his mother that in the eighties the regime suspected a relationship between the *zawaya* and a local branch of the ‘Muslim Brotherhood’<sup>204</sup>. Mohsin told me that it is difficult to reconstruct what happened because “*over here everyone knows, but none talks*”. However, he also explained to me that both his grandfather and his uncle used to visit a *zawiya* in the suburbs of Tripoli, and that his uncle was implicated in the matter and imprisoned for five years despite not having any relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood. “*The zawiya frequented by my uncle was dismantled and transformed into a clinic*”, he said “*while other zawaya were destroyed with bulldozers*”. Mohsin told me that the Sufis were closely monitored until the government realised that they could be used as an instrument against more aggressive Islamist groups. “*In Libya you cannot have a movement linked with religion*” he added “*because it is a dangerous instrument*”. The power-holders, Mohsin told me, have always been aware of this danger, and they have therefore decided to play one religious group against the other in order to keep their grip over the country.

A similar account was given to me by Dr. Khaled, a senior functionary in the Auqaf offices of Tripoli<sup>205</sup>. According to Dr. Khaled, the Sufi *zawaya* were closed down by the government purely for security reasons. He told me that “*in the eighties all the countries Libya had trouble with sent secret agents to*

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<sup>204</sup> “*Akhwan al Muslimin*”, a reformist movement founded in 1928 by Egyptian scholar Hasan al Banna (Rubin 2010). The brotherhood is massively diffused in a number of Islamic countries. Though tolerated at the time of the monarchy the Libyan branch has been outlawed and persecuted by the Gheddafi regime during the first years after the revolution (Joffe 1988; Pargeter 2005; Martinez 2007: 59-60). In the eighties the group renamed itself the “*Libyan Islamic Group*” (“*Al Jama’a Al Islamiya al Libiya*”) and started to promote a full application of *Shariya* law through peaceful means. This second wave was also crushed by the Libyan government (ibid.) although some members of the brotherhood managed to keep a base of consents in a number of Libyan mosques (Pargeter 2013: 168).

<sup>205</sup> The insitution dealing with religious affairs in Libya (see Introduction page 18 and later on in this chapter).

*infiltrate the Sufi zawaya*<sup>206</sup>”. Khaled explained to me that “*the zawaya gather all kinds of people...militaries, politicians, people working in the foreign affairs sector...(and Sufis) do not hide anything, so (the spies) sit with them and took all the information they needed...therefore Sufism was suspended by the government*”. Dr Khaled insisted that Gheddafi did not have anything against Sufism, and that in fact the Colonel has always had great devotion for some famous Sufi figures of the past. In Khaled’s view, however, the regime was forced to forbid all Sufi gatherings and practices for a long time out of precaution. It was only in the nineties, Khaled told me, that the matter was clarified and Sufism rehabilitated. When I asked him why, he explained to me that Sufism “*is the only thing that stands up against all the extremism that is causing troubles in the world in the name of Islam and of the Muslims...*”. According to Dr. Khaled, a number of *zawaya* were in fact bulldozed, but those were the ones whose members exhibited suspicious behaviour: they had “*enemy movements inside*”.

The accounts of my informants are particularly interesting. On the one hand, my interviewees agreed that before the nineties being associated with Sufism was problematic and that the situation only changed once Libyan Salafism started to expand. On the other hand, however, my interviewees disagreed on whether colonel Gheddafi favoured Sufism or not, and diverged on whether the motifs behind the persecution of the Sufis were of political or religious nature. In a sense, the fact that my informants expressed very different interpretations of the inclinations of their leadership testifies to the lack of ‘political information’ that, according to some scholars, has characterised Libyan society during the first decades of the regime (Obeidi 2001; Werfalli 2011). Nonetheless, once contextualised in the light of the

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<sup>206</sup> During the late seventies and in the eighties Libya was involved in a series of sporadic warfare events in Chad (1978 - 1987) and Egypt (1977). During the same period the country had also particularly conflictual relationships with Sudan, the United States, the United Kingdom, the Federal Republic of Germany, Israel, Saudi Arabia and Italy (Bruce Saint John 1988; Bennafla 1999; Grégoire 1999; Vandewalle 2006).

‘public transcripts’<sup>207</sup> propagated by the Libyan government at the time, this difference in the accounts appears less surprising. As I will show in the following section, in his speeches Gheddafi has effectively oscillated between praising Sufism as a legitimate form of religiosity and condemning it as politically dangerous or religiously unorthodox entity. Bearing this in mind it is only natural that, according to different personal perceptions, people associated with Sufism felt either praised or condemned. By briefly analysing the declarations of the Libyan leader, however, I will demonstrate that behind the contradictory attitude expressed in Gheddafi’s speeches lies an attempt to promote a very specific understanding of what counts as legitimate Sufism and what does not.

#### ***4.2 “The Sufism which is not Darwysa” (Gheddafi and the Sufis)***

First of all, it is important to highlight that the speeches of Colonel Gheddafi support some of the statements made by my informants. As we will see, after accusing the Sufis of ignorance and irreligiousness in his early declarations, the Colonel shows a change of attitude in the nineties expressing the desire to counter Salafi-inspired movements with the spreading of Sufi practices. The speeches, however, show something more than a mere intention to use the Sufis as a political tool against the Salafis. In embracing Sufism as a newly found resource against the Salafi encroachment, the Libyan leader highlights also the need for the Sufis to re-discover the authentic core of their doctrine, and in doing so he makes an interesting use of the word ‘*darwysa*’. In Libya the term ‘*darwysa*’ is occasionally deployed with the meaning of ‘Sufi’, but it also has other semantic connotations, particularly amongst some Sufi circles. Before I explore ethnographically the complexities related to the notion of ‘*darwysa*’, I

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<sup>207</sup> According to James Scott, every relationship between dominant and dominated produces a series of ‘public’ and ‘hidden’ transcripts. If the first category includes the public narratives promoted by the power –holders, the second indicates accounts produced ‘offstage’, far from the glance of power. In Scott’s view both types of transcripts have to be taken into account in the analysis of a power relationship (Scott 1990b).

will highlight its place in Gheddafi's rhetoric. More specifically I will show how 'darwysha' is used as a synonym for Sufism in the earlier speeches and with reference to the corruptive elements from which Sufism needs to be sanitised in the later ones.

In his declarations during the early eighties Gheddafi accuses Sufism of two major sins, namely religious backwardness and political divisiveness. In these speeches the Sufi orders are described as 'darwysha' and listed together with other organisations as groups that spread factionalism and as elements that pollute the pristine clarity of the Islamic doctrine. In a famous speech delivered in 1982, for instance, the Libyan leader declares:

*"...the revolutionary movement takes on the struggle on behalf of the people...( the) rotten political powers...use the struggle for their own agenda, and therefore they serve colonialism...the struggle between us and them must be clear, all the political parties, all the sides, all the factions, all the classes, the darwysha, the Sufi orders, the Issawiya, the brotherhoods... they all represent stumped growth and rottenness and regression... there is nothing clearer than Islamic faith: in Islam you pray five times a day and if you don't who will pray on your behalf...I do not accept a shaykh or a religious leader to be between me and god... what is this filth, in this age mankind tries to solve all the secrets of the universe... at this present stage, you are not a backward person for you to listen to a Sufi order and the zawaya and the Sufi rituals: things of the darwysha... what's religiously permissible is clear and what is religiously prohibited is clear...you worship Allah, I worship Allah... I do not need...the Muslim Brotherhood<sup>208</sup> or a Sufi order, and the person who embraces these things deserves to be slaughtered because his existence in this age is of no benefit...for someone to open their ears to such talk it is...political divergence, religion should go back to the way it was brought down to us...God gave us a Qur'an through Mohammed and it is believed that Mohammed is a prophet and that the Qur'an is from Allah" (Gheddafi 1982).*

In the words of Colonel Gheddafi Sufi practices, or "*the things of the darwysha*", are presented as a corruptive praxis, and those who indulge in them as people who deserve "*to be slaughtered*". Sufism (and specifically the Issawiya) is portrayed as a 'confusing' force that is in opposition with both the clear intelligibility of Islam ("*nothing is clearer than the Islamic faith*") and with the progress of modernity (an

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<sup>208</sup> See footnote 19.

age in which “*mankind tries to solve the secrets of the universe*”). Being groups that serve “*their own agenda*”, the Sufi orders are also described as elements of division amongst the Muslims community and, therefore, as agents of “colonialism”. The equation between ‘*darwyssha*’, ‘Sufism’, ‘regression’ and ‘colonialism’ can also be found in other declarations of Colonel Gheddafi. In a speech delivered on the same year, for instance, the leader offers an interesting re-interpretation of the figure of Omar al Mukhtar (the famous Sufi *shaykh* and *Sanusy* anti-colonial hero)<sup>209</sup> explaining that he was, in fact, neither a Sufi nor a *Sanusy*.

*“...Omar al Mukhtar did not gather the Libyans through the darwyssha of the Sanusis...neither through the Sufi rituals, nor through the Sufi orders and charlatanism, he did not bring them together with money and by reaching out to the Italians...by selling his country, territory and people... in the way that Idris asSanusy and the Sanusy family did” (Gheddafi 1982b)*

Similarly, in a declaration of 1987 Gheddafi explains that Sufism, or *darwyssha*, has spread in the Muslim world with the complicity of Western colonialism.

*“... Most Islamic countries now fall into the realm of backwardness. Why? It is not because Islam is a religion linked to backwardness but because colonialism targeted Islamic countries and colonised them, made them backwards... in reality, wherever there is colonialism there is backwardness because these regions ...were targeted by crusader colonialism which harbours hatred against Muslims everywhere; as a result, sectarianism, division, partisanship and darwyssha spread in parts of the Islamic world ...the Qur’an warned us from transforming(religion) into sects and parties...”(Gheddafi 1987)*

Throughout the eighties, whenever Colonel Gheddafi refers to Sufism he does so in terms of religious and political criticism. With the approach of the nineties, however, his approach towards Sufism seems to change. Traces of a different attitude can be found already in a speech delivered in 1982, where, in

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<sup>209</sup> As explained in chapter one, Omar al Mukhtar was a member of the *Sanusiya* and the most celebrated protagonist of the guerrilla against the Italians. Mukhtar was killed by the Italian fascists before the creation of the *Sanusy* kingdom by King Idris (see Introduction page 12.).

praising the virtues of modesty and austerity, the Libyan leader makes a brief mention of Sufism clarifying that: *“Sufism, asceticism, and worship are all one movement...which in essence means that its followers free themselves from wealth...and from worldly gains...”* (Gheddafi 1982c). Nevertheless, it is only in the late eighties that a completely new approach seems to emerge. Interestingly, in rehabilitating the Sufis the Libyan leader begins to use ‘*darwyscha*’ as a separate category from ‘Sufism’. In a speech of 1988, for instance, colonel Gheddafi states that:

*“... when Islam calls for mysticism and asceticism, this, in truth, is a call that makes us return to our right path...from this perspective, Sufism should spread, I do not mean ‘Sufism’ with the meaning of ‘darwyscha’, I do not understand the Sufism in the old yellow books<sup>210</sup>... the Sufism to which I refer and that comes from the heart of Islam should spread, instead of the spread of the veil and (instead of )stopping women from working...it is Sufism and Islamic principles that should spread instead of exploiting religion and distorting it, and instead of sorcery ... in front of you is the elimination of darwyscha..”* (Gheddafi 1988).

In this speech, Colonel Gheddafi draws for the first time a clear differentiation between true Sufism (understood as “*mysticism*” and “*asceticism*”), and the “*Sufism with the meaning of darwyscha*” (which entails “*sorcery*” and religious heterodoxy). If the first is encouraged to spread as an alternative to Islamist interpretations of Islam (“*the veil, and stopping women from working*”), the second is condemned as a form of Sufism that does not come “*from the heart of Islam*”. Similar declarations appear more frequently throughout the nineties, where, in contrast with his earlier position, Colonel Gheddafi urges the Libyans to learn about Sufism and forget about the *darwyscha*.

*“... (you need to) learn the Sufism which is not darwyscha and that does not drug up the minds of people..Sufism is not extravagance, we need the Sufism which is austerity...the (agents of corruption) do not want us to have Sufism, what they want from us is extravagance and corruption ...* (Gheddafi 1995)”

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<sup>210</sup> In Libyan folklore the “Yellow Books”, or “*Kutub asSafraa*”, are legendary books containing the secrets of witchcraft. Whoever possesses them can learn the art of manipulating the *jnun* at will (see also note 22).. In other speeches Colonel Gheddafi says that “*the yellow books have things in them that the mind cannot believe*” (Gheddafi 1995b) comparing them with his Green Book in order to highlight the dangers coming from the former *and the advantages brought about by the latter* (Gheddafi 1995c).

If in the earlier speeches Gheddafi accuses Sufism of being in contrast with the clarity of Islam, in these declarations the Libyan leader explains that true Sufism is “*not extravagance*”, and that it is *darwysa*, and not Sufism, that “*drugs up the minds of the people*”. Contrary to what he stated in his previous speeches, Colonel Gheddafi also clarifies that authentic Sufism is the true enemy of colonialism because it encourages Muslims towards austerity.

*“...Sufism is a way of life, Sufism is economics, eat and drink but do not waste, surely the squanderers are the fellows of the devils... Sufism is to abstain from what we indulged in because of western colonialism, their food and their drinks; when you refuse western food and drinks and western clothing and everything that came from the West, this is Sufism...”* (Gheddafi 1995d)

As it appears from a reading of the speeches, in 1995 Gheddafi organised an event called “*Sufism World Islamic Forum*” (“*Multaqa atTasawwuf al Islami al ‘Alami*”) in the city of Tripoli as part of this public rehabilitation of Sufism<sup>211</sup>. In the opening speech the leader expresses in clear terms the need to free Sufism from the shackles of *darwysa*:

*“... (we) benefit from our spiritual power, from the power of Sufism, from the power of asceticism, from the power of piety, from the power of faith, from the power of Islam, from the power of the Qur’an, from the power of the Sunna, from the power of our spiritual and intellectual heritage... (all these things) we want to turn into provisions for this battle... we have met here to turn Sufism into a weapon in the battle of the age in order to dust off accusations of darwysa... we want the community to wake up, to rise, and to turn all its intellectual, positive, academic and historical components into a tangible and meaningful modern weapon... and if we take a quick look at history it confirms to the world the validity of our predictions and compels us to believe that we will benefit”.* (Gheddafi 1995e)

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<sup>211</sup> The event has been cursorily mentioned to me by a number of informants. None of my interviewees, however, appears to have participated. Only on one occasion an Issawy shaykh told me that his defunct brother (a *shaykh* also) was invited to deliver a paper in the forum. Even though he did not attend the event, the shaykh reported to me that both Libyan Sufis and personalities from abroad were invited. The Forum seems to have been the first public conference dealing with Sufism since the revolution of 1969. In the course of a series of conversations I had in the “*Markaz Jihad al Libyiii*” (the “*Center for the Struggle of the Libyan people*”, the most important research institution of the city of Tripoli) I was told that from 1995 onwards the Center had promoted a series of conferences focused on the spirituality of famous Sufi figures of the past. Once again, none of my informants took part to these initiatives.

As shown by these declarations, the rehabilitation of the Sufi orders operated by the regime has entailed also a public re-definition of Sufism. Colonel Gheddafi has passed from dismissing the Sufis as incompatible with religious clarity and modernity to defining them as a spiritual resource and as a “*meaningful modern weapon*” against Salafism. In this process, a certain component of Sufism, which the Libyan leader labels ‘*darwysha*’, has been isolated as an ambiguous, extravagant and inauthentic element to be expelled from the true Sufi core. Having shed light on this process I will now move to a broader contextualisation of the term ‘*darwysh*’. As we will see, for some Sufis ‘*darwysha*’ is effectively an ambiguous and extravagant part of Sufism, but it is also (in sharp contrast with the declarations of the Libyan leader) an authentic manifestation of it. By analysing the use of the term amongst some Sufi circles I will show how the regime has effectively promoted a ‘re-definition’ of Sufism. In creating a separation between clear ‘Sufism’ and ambiguous ‘*darwysha*’ - whereas some of my Sufi informants see a continuity between the two- the regime has attempted to re-articulate Sufism in terms of clarity and transparency.

### **4.3 Incomprehensible Saints (the *Darwysh*)**

If in the speeches of the Libyan leader ‘*darwysha*’ is presented as the extravagant counterpart of Sufism, in the words of some of my informants ‘*darwysh*’ indicates an extravagant Sufi saint. In order to highlight this very different use of the term I will present an in depth exploration of the notion of ‘*darwysha*’ showing how, for some Sufis, the word refers to a valid, though enigmatic, element of Sufism. Needless to say, the concept was first presented to me by *Shaykh* Ramadan. In discussing the role of sainthood (“*wilaya*”) in Sufism, Ramadan explained to me that there is a fundamental differentiation between types of holy men, or “*awlià*”<sup>212</sup>. The *shaykh* told me that amongst the saints there are some who have achieved

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<sup>212</sup> Sing. “*Wali*”, “*friend (of God)*”.

perfection through a long process of spiritual evolution, and others who have had a precocious, overwhelming experience of the divine. The first type - whom the *shaykh*, like many others, called “*salekin*”, “those *who has passed through (spiritual stages)*” – includes, according to Ramadan, holy men who are able to guide the common people on the same spiritual path they have travelled. The second category, on the contrary, comprises the ‘darawysh’ or “*majadhib*”, “those *who have been taken (by God)*”, individuals who have contemplated the divine nature so intensely to lose the capacity to interact fully with the world. If the first (amongst whom Ramadan included also the Perfect Shaykh) manifest their saintly status in an unequivocal way, the second remain hidden under the disguise of madmen, simpletons, and social outsiders<sup>213</sup>.

When I asked *Shaykh* Ramadan whether the two types of holy men were equally close to God, he explained to me that in the end the *darwysch* is a ‘lesser’ saint because he cannot fully guide others along the path that leads to divine knowledge. Nonetheless, Ramadan also clarified that the ‘mad saint’ is an important figure of the Sufi universe and that ‘*darwyscha*’ is, in a sense, a condition that affects all those who practise Sufism. Every Sufi is “*majdhub*” – “taken (by God)”- because the ‘secret’ (understood as divine power) “*takes you, attracting the soul like a magnet attracts iron*”. The only difference, Ramadan told me, is that the *darwysch* is a constant state of *jedheb* (“*being taken*”) while the majority of the Sufis have an episodic experience of this phenomenon. The *shaykh* also told me that if an *Issawy* is extremely zealous and intense in performing his spiritual exercises he can temporarily enter the state of *darwyscha*, and that it is the job of a good *shaykh* to help the murid keeping a balance in the management of his

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<sup>213</sup> In some Arab countries like Egypt the term “*majdhub*” has the explicit meaning of “mad”. In Libya, however, “*maklub*” or “*majnun*” are preferred when referring to a mentally ill person. Though occasionally deploying ‘*majdhub*’ for ‘crazy’ Libyans usually use it in the way I have explained here. The term “*Majdhub*”, as I have mentioned in chapter 2 is also used to indicate a person in the state of trance during a Sufi ritual.

spiritual affairs<sup>214</sup>. Far from condemning *darwyshta*, however, Ramadan stressed that becoming a ‘mad saint’ is one of the many paths that lead the Sufi to God, though perhaps not the most advisable. In our conversations Ramadan - like other *Issawy shuyukh* - depicted *darwyshta*, quite simply, as a style of sainthood.

The ‘mad saints’ were described to me in terms of ambiguity and reverence. In a number of conversations I was told that the God reveals his secrets to the darawysh and that, being affected by such a strong experience of the divine, they lose their mental faculties while retaining a deep spiritual wisdom. Being a saint, the *darwysht* helps those in need, demonstrates the power of God through miracles and teaches the spiritual truths to the people. Having been ‘burnt out’ by divine power, however, the mad saint implements his saintly duties through bizarre and unusual actions. As an *Issawy shaykh* once explained to me, ‘regular’ saints are like pieces of bread that have been patiently baked by God, while the *darawysht* are “*loaves that have been taken out of the oven before time*”. If the first drink regularly from the well of divine knowledge, the *shaykh* told me, the second “*have been thrown in it* “. In the words of my informants, the mad saints were portrayed as *having* an intense but childish character, the resemblance of a mentally ill person and no intention to conduct a normal life. Due to their irregular and erratic nature, I was often advised to keep a respectful distance from those affected by a state of “*darwyshta*”. “*When they ask you to do something do as they command...*” I was once told by an *Issawy* friend “*...but do not eat with them, do not drink with them and do not wear their clothes*”.

Even though I heard extensively about the *darawysht*, I had very few contacts with them, mainly because they were difficult to spot. In the course of Sufi gatherings and saints’ festivals, the attendees would occasionally point out certain individuals in the assembly and whispered to me that they were

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<sup>214</sup> On the relationship between madness and excessive exposure to secret spiritual knowledge see Soares 2005: 138.

*darawysh*<sup>215</sup>. During these occasions, however, I have seen people applying the label to a highly differentiated plethora of characters. Scruffy looking vagabonds, old men dressed with odd clothes, shuyukh with a particularly eccentric character, jovial young bachelors, Sufis who exhibited moments of wild trance and even handicaps were all described to me as *darawysh*. My attempts to interact directly with this variegated spectrum of individuals were never successful, and in reply to my questions on *darwyshta* I often collected angry looks, enigmatic smiles or awkward moments of silence. Only on one occasion I had the chance to talk with a self-declared *darwysht* - a seventeen year old mentally retarded boy who ensured me that he was one - but when I asked him what a *darwysht* was he candidly replied to me: “*God knows*”. Some of my informants warned me that true *darawysh* never reveal their identity. *Shaykh* Ramadan, in particular, told me that whereas people might simply consider the *darwysht* as a crazy person the true Sufi can see the secret that lies behind the appearance and distinguish between illness and *darwyshta*.

When I asked people to describe *darwyshta* to me, they would often draw from a vast body of brief oral stories concerning famous mad saints (whose name, of course, was always preceded by ‘*Sidhi*’<sup>216</sup>). In doing so, some of my informants told me that *darawysh* are not bound by religious rules like any other Muslim. Famous *darwysht* of the past *Sidhi* Ahmed Attiar, for instance, was renowned for enjoying sessions of wine-drinking with the Italians in the town of Zlitan because, in the words of one informant, “*God had granted permission to him*” (“*attahunnah Allah*”). Others, however, stressed that the true *darawysh* follow all the requirements of *Qur’an* and *Sunna*, and that they simply like to scandalise those around them with seemingly unlawful gestures. The renowned mad saint *Sidhi* Imhammed Hanesh, for

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<sup>215</sup> Some mazarat (or festivals held in honor of a saint – see chapter 2) are explicitly dedicated to deceased holy men of the *darwysht* type.

<sup>216</sup> On the use of this title see introduction footnote 25.

example, used to drink *legghi*<sup>217</sup> so that people would not know whether he was breaking God's law or simply refreshing his palate. "It was a secret between him and God", I was told by the Sufi devotee who reported the story to me. If some portrayed the *darawysh* as 'special Sufis' who are beyond the constraints of religion, others described them as secretive holy men who hide their sanctity on purpose. In both cases, however, those who recognised *darwyshta* as a genuine expression of Sufism told me that the ultimate characteristic of a mad saint is his enigmatic behaviour. Whether described as being freed from the prescriptions of the *shariah* or respectful of them, *darawysh* were depicted as incomprehensible beings whose words and actions are characterised by 'incomprehensibility' and 'ambiguity'.

The most famous *darwyshta* at the time of my field-work was certainly *Sidhi* Mohammed Adhfer Kasherma, a Sufi *shaykh* from the town of Zlitan, and the protagonist of a number of stories circulating amongst my Tripolitan informants. Kasherma was described to me as a charismatic but enigmatic member of the 'Arusy order'<sup>218</sup>, and given his fame I will briefly present him as an archetypical example of mad saint. The *darwyshta* had died at an old age five years before my arrival in Libya but his supernatural deeds were still discussed, his name remembered in the course of a festival in Zlitan, and his pictures hanged inside a number of 'Arusy *zawaya*. In some of these portraits the *darwyshta* appeared as having small moustaches, good-looking features and a jocose glance. Apart from being famous for his miraculous powers (due to which he was apparently able to walk into *Bab el Aziziya*<sup>219</sup> at will, and drive for days without putting petrol in the car), Kasherma was also known for making puzzling comments, confusing statements and incomprehensible gestures. Famously, the *darwyshta* used to welcome people

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<sup>217</sup> A date-based beverage that is *halal* when drunk fresh and *haram* if left to ferment. "Halal", "Lawful", indicates practices that are permissible according to Islamic law, while "Haram" refers to what is forbidden by it.

<sup>218</sup> See Introduction of the thesis page 17.

<sup>219</sup> Residence of Colonel Gheddafi in the center of Tripoli. Bab al Aziziya is constantly guarded by a conspicuous number of soldiers (and occasionally by tanks) and it is surrounded by more than one row of walls in order to prevent the observer from seeing the internal area. Stories of people being shot only because they stopped their cars close to the building have been reported to me on more than one occasion.

with random phrases like ‘get a hair-cut’, or ‘give me five dinars’. At times the saint would even call people with strange names for no apparent reason, as in the case of a young man I met in Tripoli who was once told: “*from now on your name is Aysha*<sup>220</sup>”. If some of my friends confessed to have never grasped the sense and purpose of these strange statements, others explained to me that, in typical *darwyysh* fashion, they had a hidden prophetic meaning, a secret purpose and a strong miraculous efficacy.

Forty-five years old businessman and Sufi devotee Zohayr, for instance, told me that for a period of his life he used to travel regularly from Tripoli to Zlitan in order to visit *Sidhi* Kasherma. Since the saint was constantly surrounded by a large number of followers, Zohayr never had the chance to talk with him personally. Nonetheless, after few visits (during which Kasherma had neither spoken with him nor acknowledged his presence), Zohayr was surprised to discover that the *darwyysh* had written him a letter. Upon receiving the letter, Zohayr was even more surprised to read the request made by the mad saint: Kasherma expressed the desire to perform the pilgrimage to Mecca and asked Zohayr to book a flight for him to Saudi Arabia. Zohayr was deeply puzzled by the bizarre demand of the *darwyysh*, and for a while he was indecisive about fulfilling the request or not. After some time, however, he simply (and strangely) forgot about the entire story. Nine months later, Zohayr decided to take his wife and children to Jordan for a holiday, and on his way back he had the inexplicable inspiration to use his savings in order to open a travel agency specialising in pilgrimages. Only after starting his new business Zohayr realised that through the strange letter Kasherma wanted to implant the idea in his head, so that he could start a remunerative, and at the same time pious, activity.

According to Zohayr, Kasherma was able to predict the future even though his predictions were always expressed in an initially incomprehensible way. In this regard Zohayr told me that in the nineties the

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<sup>220</sup> Highly popular female name.

*darwys* was once asked to foretell the results of the presidential elections in America. To everyone's surprise Kasherma replied that the next president would be "*the one who eats tuna*" ("*elli iakul al Tun*"), and after the television announced that the presidency had gone to Bill *Clinton* people realised that the strange statement had a close assonance with the president's surname. Zohayr explained to me that Kasherma had the capacity to deliver enigmatic messages through dreams and visions, and that he had the opportunity to experience this power of the saint personally. One day, for instance, Zohayr had a strange dream where the *darwys* suddenly appeared and commanded him to kill a cat. Feeling compelled to fulfil the absurd request, Zohayr instinctively tried to slaughter the beast according to Islamic fashion<sup>221</sup>, but the saint insisted that the animal should be cut into halves. Waking up, Zohayr consulted a popular book for the interpretation of dreams that was lying in his house, and discovered that the cat is often associated with death. Only few days later, when his sister died at a young age ("*having lived only half of the years she should have*") Zohayr grasped the meaning of the dream and understood that Kasherma wanted to prepare him for the sad event.

Thirty-five year old university educated Abdul-Basit also confirmed to me that Kasherma was an exceptional and eccentric character. Being a passionate *Issawy* devotee Abdul-Basit accompanied me in many of my visits to the *zawaya*, and during one of these occasions he told me that Kasherma could easily come across as a madman while in fact he was a Sufi saint who wanted to help people in difficult situations. Once, Abdul –Basit told me, a teenager went to see the saint because he felt depressed. The young man told Kasherma that, having reached eighteen, he was going to start his military service on the next day, and that he felt deeply unsettled at the thought of wasting one month of his life with the

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<sup>221</sup> Following the *Qur'an* and the *Sunna* an animal should be slaughtered by cutting its throat while invoking the name of God. The method provides a quick and merciful death, and helps the blood (considered un-clean) flow out of the body Campo 2009: 246 -250

soldiers<sup>222</sup>. The boy confessed to the *darwysh* that he did not want to go, and - in his typically cryptic style - the saint told him to buy a large quantity of bread loaves before arriving to the barracks. Surprised by the enigmatic comment (but determined to follow Kasherma's command) the youth went home and on the following day he stopped at the bakery before reaching the military barracks. Upon arrival, he left the loaves inside one of the barracks, and joined a row of men who were waiting to be called in. Unexpectedly, the captain in chief came out, said that he had found the bread and enquired about it, to which the young man replied that he had bought it. The captain told him that from then onwards he only had to bring bread for the soldiers every morning, and that as long as he was willing to do so he did not have to attend military service.

A similar story was reported to me by Zakariya, an *Issawy shaykh* and a labourer in his early forties. Even though Zakariya had not met Kasherma in person he recognised his holiness and sanctity. More specifically, Zakariya told me that many had benefited from following the apparently meaningless commands of the *darwysh*. On one occasion, he told me, the mad saint approached a man in the middle of the street (something the *darwysh* was famous for doing). Quite randomly, Kasherma asked him whether he was willing to spend an entire month in his company. Aware of the saint's reputation, the man did not want to decline the strange request, but he explained to the *darwysh* that he was supposed to attend military service and that he would be arrested if he did not present himself to the military barracks on the next day. The saint insisted so much that the man finally agreed, risking a prison sentence but enriching his soul at the presence of the *darwysh* for thirty days. After the month had passed, Kasherma finally told the man that he was free to leave, and commanded him to go to the barracks of the soldiers and behave as if he had been with them the whole time. Once there, the man was surprised to realise that none had

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<sup>222</sup> All Libyans who are older than eighteen are required to attend a month of military service every year. Very often this experience was described to me as an annoying occurrence and as a waste of time. Some older informants told me that in the past young boys undertaking the service were often beaten up and bullied by superiors and seniors.

noticed his absence and that by responding to the cryptic request of the mad saint he had spared himself a tedious month of boredom and gained a holy experience.

Mabruk, a shopkeeper and Sufi devotee in his late fifties, told me that the saintly status of Kasherma was unanimously recognised by his fellow saints (whether of the *darwysh* or the ‘regular’ kind) and vice versa. In order to explain the difference between the mad saints and the sane ones (and the reciprocal respect between the two), Mabruk told me of two encounters between his own *shaykh* (recognised by his *muridin* and devotees as a saint) and the famous *darwysh*. According to Mabruk the *shaykh* used to invite Kasherma to his house because he considered him a holy man. During one of these meetings the *darwysh* approached the *shaykh* and asked him, inexplicably, to give him ten dinars. Upon receiving the money, however, Kasherma pulled a surprised expression and shouted: ‘*I did not know you were one of God’s friends, here take your money back!*’ thus publicly recognising the *shaykh* as a saint. When, later on, the *darwysh* was once again invited to a meeting with the *shaykh* and his *muridin* he addressed them and made one of his usual incomprehensible requests: he asked them to get a hair-cut and to give him five dinars each. Being a ‘sane’ saint the *shaykh* felt compelled to intervene respectfully but promptly, and told the *darwysh*: ‘I am the one who gives (spiritual gifts), not them’. Having heard the reply, rejoicing for the confession of sainthood, Kasherma stood up as in ecstasy, put his hand over his heart and commanded those present in the meeting to prepare some food and celebrate the holy event.

The accounts of Kasherma’s deeds – and indeed the figure of Kasherma himself – can furnish some useful narrative coordinates for an understanding of the notion of *darwysha*. Doubtlessly, the figure of the *darwysh* as described in these stories begs for a comparison with other ‘borderline’ characters analysed by

anthropologists in different contexts<sup>223</sup>. However, the aspect of these narratives that I would like to highlight is that they portray ‘*darwysha*’ as an authentic, though incomprehensible, manifestation of the divine that belongs to the Sufi world. This consideration is particularly important when bearing in mind the negative use of the term that, as have I previously shown, characterises the public speeches of Gheddafi. Both in these accounts and in the speeches, *darwysha* is understood as an obscure and ambiguous force. However, if in the declarations of the Libyan leader the concept epitomises the ambiguous elements that do not belong to true Sufism, in the stories of my informants *darwysha* is described as yet another mysterious aspect of the Sufi universe. In light of a full contextualisation of ‘*darwysha*’ one can easily realise how the regime has attempted to re-articulate Sufism as a ‘clear’ form of religiosity needing to be freed from religious extravagances. Having shown how the Libyan government has extrapolated an element of the Sufi world and re-define it as its opposite, I will now concentrate on the effect of this re-articulation on *Issawy* practices.

#### **4.4 “All Stabbing Knives and Nonsense” (Issawy Secret knowledge as Darwysha)**

The differentiation between ‘Sufism’ and ‘*Darwysha*’ is not peculiar to the speeches of the Libyan leader only. On the contrary, the necessity to discern between authentic Sufi doctrine and ambiguous ‘*darwysh* practices’ was expressed to me in a number of conversations<sup>224</sup>, and particularly in the course of interviews I had with people working in the administrative side of Sufism. As I have previously

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<sup>223</sup> Being an unpredictable entity to be both feared and loved, untouched by the limitations of conventional behaviour, the *darwysh* resembles, for instance, the ‘trickster’ of a certain ethnographic literature (Guenther 1999; Winzeler 2008: 133-137). As a droll being that helps common people circumventing the constrictions of power, the mad saint is also a ‘carnavalesque’ figure: a burlesque reminder that rules can be broken and subverted (Bakhtin 1968; Ivanov 1993; Sheperd 1993). Finally, as a creature suspended between the mysteries of the spiritual realm and the contingencies of the material world the *darwysh* is a ‘liminal’ character living “betwixt and between” (Turner 1967: 93-111) the visible dimension and invisible one (Turner 1968; 1977b; Ashley 1990).

<sup>224</sup> In order to collect the full transcripts of Colonel Gheddafi’s speeches I made a number of visits to the “*Markaz el Alami lil dirasat wa abhat al kitab al akhdar*” (the “*World Centre for the Studies and Researches on the Green Book*”) of the city of Tripoli. Upon hearing about the subject of my research, the personnel of the Centre warned me more than once to make sure I studied only authentic Sufism, leaving *darwysha* out of my research.

mentioned, *Issawy shuyukh* and *zawaya* are supposed to be coordinated by a secretary (or “*Amin*”) of the *Issawy* order, and by the “*Idhara Turuq wa Zawaya*” (“*Administration of the Brotherhoods and of the Zawaya*”), both of which operate under the direct supervision of the central *Auqaf* offices<sup>225</sup>. Bearing this in mind, in this section I will briefly explore the organisation of the *Idhara* as an administrative interface between the *zawaya* and the government, and then contextualise the figure of the *Amin* explaining his functions and tasks. More importantly, however, I will show how people working in the administration of the *zawaya* re-produce the dichotomy of authentic ‘Sufism’ and ‘*darwyshta*’ that is found in the speeches of the Libyan leader. In doing so, I will pay particular attention to the fact that these informants dismiss *Issawy* esoteric knowledge and miraculous performances as inauthentic elements that do not belong to true Sufism and, consequently, put them under the rubric of ‘*darwyshta*’.

Since the “*Idhara Turuq wa zawaya*” was created in 1990 (while the post of the *Issawy* secretary was created in 2004), one can easily realise how the rehabilitation of Sufism carried out by the regime in the nineties has entailed also an attempt to ‘institutionalise’ the *zawaya*. The *Idhara*, which consists of a couple of small, hardly furnished offices far from the city centre, constitutes one of the five sections of the *Auqaf* (the others being much larger administrative organs dealing with the management of the mosques, the organisation of Quranic schools, the registration of lands and goods that belong to these or other religious institutions, and the distribution of the *zaka*,<sup>226</sup>). As explained to me on a number of conversations I had in the offices of the *Auqaf*, the *Idhara* is composed of two *aqsam* (sing. “*qism*” “*sections*”), namely the “*Qism al Adriha*” (“*the Shrines section*”) and the “*Qism atTuruq asSufiya*” (the “*Sufi brotherhoods section*”), each one with its own director and personnel. If the first section deals with

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<sup>225</sup> See chapter 1 page 51 and Introduction page 18.

<sup>226</sup> ‘Alms giving’, one of the five pillars of Islam (see Chapter 3 footnote 8). Every Libyan is legally bound to pay *zaka*’ (whose amount is proportional to salary).

the maintenance of the most popular Sufi shrines<sup>227</sup> in the country, the second takes care of the administrative side of the *zawaya*, facilitating the cooperation between *shuyukh* and between the different brotherhoods present in Libya. The “Sufi brotherhoods section”, in particular, has the task of keeping a register of all the *shuyukh* operating in the country and the purpose of organising a monthly payment of 120 dinars for each of them in order to contribute to the expenses of their *zawaya*<sup>228</sup>.

The employees working in the *Idhara* are not required to belong to a Sufi order, and their tasks are supposed to be only of an organisational (*tandhimiya*) and administrative (*idhariya*) nature. As I was told many times during my visits to the “Sufi brotherhoods section”, the *Idhara* has no say on the actual management of the properties of a *zawiya*<sup>229</sup> and, more importantly, no right to interfere with the religious aspects of the life of a Sufi congregation. Even though every *shaykh* is required to have the official stamp of the *Auqaf* on his *ijaza*<sup>230</sup> (and on any piece of documentation that is related with his *zawiya*), the *Idhara* has no jurisdiction over the spiritual side of *shaykh*-hood (be it the validity of the spiritual genealogy contained in the *ijaza*, the organisation of the weekly meetings in the *zawiya*, or the decision to admit someone in a Sufi brotherhood). The only exception to this rule, I was told, relates to those *shuyukh* who have received their ‘licence to *shaykh*-hood’ abroad (particularly if they belong to a Sufi order which is not present in Libya). In the majority of cases the *Idhara* only requires the *shuyukh* to prove that they have Libyan citizenship, but when a Sufi master exhibit an *ijaza* produced in another country the *Idhara*

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<sup>227</sup> See Chapter 2 page 93.

<sup>228</sup> This amount of money is not particularly conspicuous. The expenses faced by an *Issawy zawiya* during the celebration of the birthday of the prophet, for instance, amount to anything between 4000 and 5000 dinars. The production of *khamra* (a special sweet which, as explained in chapter 2 page 100, is freely distributed to the attendees of the *mawlid* nights in the *zawaya*) can cost some 2500 dinars (of which a typical breakdown is: 600 dinars for 60 kilograms of honey, 1000 dinars for 100 kilograms of almonds, 160 dinars worth of olive oil, 700 dinars worth of peanuts and some 20 dinars to be spent for sugar, hummus and aromas). Occasionally Saints festivals (whose larger expenses are certainly those related to food) are paid for by people who live close to the shrine, while other times (if the festival is organised by a *Sufi zawiya*) the *shaykh* of the *zawiya* can ask the *Auqaf* for extra-funding, even though it is quite rare. Some *shuyukh* have regular donors (at times anonymous) paying for the expenses of their *zawaya*, while others resort to personal savings or ask their *muridin* and devotees to contribute regularly with whatever they can.

<sup>229</sup> See Chapter 1 page. 52. The topic will be touched upon again in the fifth chapter.

<sup>230</sup> Or licence to *shaykh*-hood. See chapter 1.

has the right to check the validity of the licence either by contacting the *Auqaf* offices of the country in question, or by asking for an expert report from another Libyan *shaykh*<sup>231</sup>. Other than this, the *Idhara* was presented to me as an organisation dealing with the Sufis rather than as a Sufi institution.

Even though the majority of the Issawis told me that the *Idhara* did not interfere with their dealings, *shuyukh* would occasionally make remarks that suggest otherwise. Though eager to maintain a formal relationship with the director of the “Sufi brotherhoods section”, many *shuyukh* urged me to understand that Libyan Sufi masters are free to run their *zawaya* as they wish as long as they do not break the law<sup>232</sup>. Issawis often explained to me that *shaykh*-hood is a spiritual status that has nothing to do with state administration and, in some cases, that they were not willing to accept money from the *Idhara* because they were not “*employees of the Auqaf*”. Nonetheless, at times Issawis would describe the relationship between the *zawaya* and the *Idhara* in terms that go beyond formal supervision. *Shaykh* Ramadan, for instance, explained to me that he was once summoned to the offices of the *Auqaf* and explicitly asked not to perform *karamat*. The *shaykh* allowed me to take note of the event, but he did not furnish me with the details of the story, perhaps due to the delicacy of the matter. In some cases Issawis would tell me that performing *karamat* was not safe because “... *there is the administration, there is the law*” (“... *fi Idhara, fi qanun...*”), while in other cases I was told that the *Idhara* had explicitly banned *karamat* and that those Issawis who perform them are only able to do so because the regime “*cannot control everyone*”<sup>233</sup>. Even

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<sup>231</sup> In my conversations with the personnel of the *idhara* I was told that this measure has two purposes: preventing people (and specifically spies) from producing fake *ijazat* and infiltrate the *zawaya*, and making sure that Libyans who have practised Sufism abroad do not spread Sufi practices that are “*culturally incompatible*” with Libyan society. This might partly explain the absence of immigrants amongst Tripolitan Sufis that I have mentioned in chapter one footnote 10.

<sup>232</sup> Some *shuyukh* decide not to accept the monthly payment of 120 dinars by the state. Some told me that they did not consider themselves as people employed by the *Auqaf* and that *shaykh*-hood is a spiritual duty that has nothing to do with money. In one case a *shaykh* told me that he had decided to donate all the properties of his *zawiya* to the state because he did not want his *zawiya* to become an economic enterprise.

<sup>233</sup> *Zawaya*, like any other gathering place in Libya, are certainly monitored by the secret police. On one occasion, during a Sufi ritual in Tripoli I was almost arrested by two agents in plain clothes. Even though the ritual had been quite un-eventful I had my camera confiscated and I was detained in a car for some time. Eventually, I was allowed to leave and on the next day I

though none of these informants was willing to elaborate, these cursory comments appear particularly important in light of the opinions I collected during my interviews in the offices of the *Idhara*.

*Karamat* were harshly criticised and dismissed as ‘*darwysha*’ in all the conversations I had with the administrative personnel dealing with *zawaya*. In our chats (which were often accompanied by tea and cigarettes) employees of the *Idhara* would regularly tell me not to write about weird people harming themselves and pretending to be an animal. During a conversation with the director of the “Sufi brotherhoods section”, for instance, I was explicitly advised to focus my research on authentic Sufism leaving *karamat* out of my investigation. The director (a talkative, university educated bureaucrat, and a self-described Sufi devotee in his forties) explained to me that in the past true Sufism had been polluted by “*darwysh things*”, and that the *karamat* of the *Issawiya* were one of these elements of corruption. Though admitting that in Sufism there are things “*that go beyond human comprehension*”, he told me that *Issawy karamat* were simply heterodox, *darwysh* practices:

*“(people) do not know anything about Sufism, they think that it is all stabbing knives and nonsense....darwysha...( but) this era has turned Sufism from darwysha into thought (fikir), Sufism is thought, it is knowledge, it is culture, it is traditions, it is feelings, and Sufism is not bandir<sup>234</sup> and knives, On the contrary! In Sufism they are fighting these things, and these things should be fought.. in the past these things were all forbidden...(as for now) not only (it is forbidden) by law, but also by the Sufi brotherhoods themselves, by law if one kills himself it is suicide! And if someone stabs another one with a knife, and this one dies, it is homicide! We can never confuse between Sufism and darwysha, I told you that Sufism is knowledge (elm)... Sufism is not Darwysha,...Sufism is a science on its own, we must renew the Sufi culture, when you come to see all the Islamic thinkers, all of them are Sufis my brother!... What is Sufism? It is to do everything that our prophet did...no, this thing of the karamat does not make any sense...”*

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was summoned to a police station to collect my camera and receive the excuses of the two agents. On the relationship between Sufi miraculous practices and state administration in Egypt see Gilsenan 1990: 237-250 and Hoffman 1995: 86. A very brief mention of the critical attitude of the Moroccan government towards *Issawy* self-harm can be found in Hammoudi 1997: 181.

<sup>234</sup> Musical instrument used in *Issawy* rituals (see Chapter 2 page 106)

The director's remarks epitomise the approach of the *Idhara* in Sufi matters, and particularly its position in relation to the *karamat*. On many occasions the director clarified to me that the "Sufi brotherhoods section" does not interfere with the way in which a Sufi *shaykh* chooses to practice his spirituality. However, in the course of our conversations he also stressed that *karamat* are practices that are "forbidden" from a legal point of view and actions that should be actively repressed because they do not belong to Sufism. In a sense *karamat* were described to me as sort of exception in the jurisdiction of the *Idhara*. Though formally un-interested in spiritual interference, the administrative personnel felt the need to trace a clear line between orthodox Sufism ("*thought, knowledge and culture*") and *darwyshta* ("*knives and nonsense*").

A similar opinion was expressed to me by Muammar, an *Issawy shaykh* in his sixties who had served as director of the *Idhara* at a younger age until the late nineties. Muammar, a charismatic professional and the head of a fairly large *zawiya* outside of Tripoli, told me that usually people working in the administrative side of the *zawaya* are not initiated to a Sufi order and that, being an *Issawy*, he was an exception. The *shaykh* explained to me that he was made director of the *Idhara* because he had an interest in putting "*some order*" in the disorganised structure of the *zawaya* and that this indeed has always been the only purpose of the *Idhara*, leaving the spiritual side of Sufism to the *shuyukh*. In reply to my questions on *karamat*, however, Muammar told me that one has to differentiate between "*true Sufism*" ("*atTasawwuf al Haqiqi*") and the false Sufism which is all about "*knives and bidā*"<sup>235</sup>. Though eager to highlight the purely administrative nature of the *Idhara*, *shaykh* Muammar expressed the opinion that the "Sufi brotherhoods section" would benefit from employing good Sufi *shuyukh* who practise correct religiosity. The *shaykh* also told me that the administration has always tried to fight false Sufis in the past

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<sup>235</sup> "Innovations", see Chapter 3 footnote 42.

(but not those Sufis who are “*on the correct path*”) and that *karamat* do not belong to the *Issawiya* because the brotherhood only deals with practises that are solidly based on *Qur’an* and *Sunna*.

This blurring of the lines between administration and spiritual direction (particularly in relationship with *karamat*) was also evident in conversations I had with the secretary of the *Issawy* order. All my *Issawy* informants told me that the secretary, or “*Amin*”, was elected (as mentioned in the first chapter) by a number of *shuyukh* under request of the *Auqaf* and that, consequently, he only served as a figure of reference in organisational terms. Even though my informants stressed that the *Amin* was chosen by members of the brotherhood and not by the *Idhara*, they also told me that he had no right to interfere with spiritual affairs and that, for this reason, they had very little contact with him. In my interviews with the secretary, however, I was presented with a very different interpretation of the competences of the figure of the *Amin*. The secretary, an *Issawy shaykh* in his sixties and the head of a large sanad counting a number of *zawaya* inside and outside of Tripoli, told me that he saw himself as carrying a spiritual duty. As a consequence, he explained to me that he had full rights to have a say on the way *shuyukh* practised Sufism. In explaining his tasks, the secretary clarified that he was entitled to reproach those *Issawis* who do not conform to correct religiosity:

*“This is the spiritual aspect (and) this is my job, I go around visiting the (shuyukh or the zawaya), and I talk with them, we organise reunions (between shuyukh) in every area, and I see who follows the correct path and who does things that are not correct... I check whether a sanad is correct or not, for instance (someone) brings me his licence to shaykh-hood, I check it and I ask him....who made you shaykh?...now we have many things in the zawaya that are not correct, there are only few zawaya that do everything in a correct way...not all of them...but some of these zawaya do things correctly...”*

In defining himself as a guide dealing with “*the spiritual aspect*” of the order, the secretary traced not only a differentiation between authentic and inauthentic Sufism, but also a demarcation between true

*Issawy* practices and false ones. For instance, in striking contrast with many of my *Issawy* interviewees, the *Amin* told me that he wanted to create a standard version of the litanies of the order<sup>236</sup> and that he was in the process of publishing a “*correct version*” of them.

*“this is my job, I supervise (the shuyukh) from a spiritual point of view, for what concerns spiritual exercises...sometimes we organise meetings and give instructions (to the shuyukh) and we ask what are the activities in their zawaya, and how they perform the spiritual exercises, and we are printing out books in order to create a uniformed standard version of doing the spiritual exercises and the litanies, so that we all follow one way of doing things, and everyone has to follow what is written in these books...”*

The secretary explained to me that he had a spiritual responsibility over the entire *Issawy* order, and that he intended to suppress the performance of *karamat* because “*in the true spiritual path there are not such things...and if I see someone doing these things I tell him it is wrong!*”. Significantly, the *shaykh* emphasised that similar practices are “*forbidden*” (“*mamnua*”) and despicable from a religious point of view (“*haram*”) because they do not have a base in the *Qur’an* and in the *Sunna*.

As shown by these comments, the perception of *Issawy karamat* has been heavily influenced by the dichotomy of ‘Sufism’ and ‘*darwysha*’ produced by the Libyan government. The remarks made by the administrative personnel dealing with the *zawaya* help us understand that the form of ‘clear’ Sufism promoted by the regime leaves very little room for esoteric knowledge. In light of these considerations - and bearing in mind that, as explained in the previous chapter, the majority of the *Issawis* distance themselves from secret practices - one realises the link between the positions of the regime and the attitude of many members of the brotherhood. The fact that *Issawis* feel the need to present themselves as an order that enjoys a special relationship with the mystical realm (rather than as a brotherhood that

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<sup>236</sup> As explained in the second chapter for many members of the order the fact that *Issawy* litanies are performed in different ways does not constitute a problem.

indulges in ambiguous and incomprehensible practices) is, amongst other things, the product of a specific hegemonic discourse. The tendency to conceptualise ‘the secret’ as a mystical force rather than as a corpus of ‘non-explicit’ practices can therefore be analysed as an attempt to adjust to the mainstream religiosity put forward by the Libyan government: a desire to demonstrate that Issawis are mystics, not darwishes. Having shed light on the influences of the regime on Sufism and on the *Issawiya*, in the final chapter I will briefly draw some further conclusions in order better to contextualise the broader religious landscape of contemporary Libya.

#### **4.5 “They do Strange Things” (Sufis, Salafis and the Regime)**

As I have demonstrated throughout the chapter, the Libyan government criticised the Sufi brotherhoods for almost three decades and then rehabilitated them in order to counter balance the expansion of Salafi movements. In the course of my field-work, however, I developed the impression that this political manoeuvre has had the opposite effect on Libyan society. Even though Salafi Islam was not one of my research concerns I have noticed that many of those Tripolitans who are not involved with Sufism (particularly the youth born during and after the revolution) have a strong sympathy for the anti-Sufi arguments proposed by Libyan Salafis. It is reasonable to think that the anti-Sufi propaganda carried out by the regime in the past - and the view of Sufism as a religiosity in need of purification proposed by Gheddafi after the nineties- have strengthened the efficacy of the anti-Sufi rhetoric of the local Salafi cells<sup>237</sup>. Bearing this in mind, in this last section of the chapter I will briefly present the criticism of Sufism offered by Libyan Salafis. Far from proposing an in-depth analysis I will simply make some remarks in order to show the actual similarity between the Salafi positions and the views put forward by the regime, and then I will conclude with some final comments on the phenomenon of Libyan Salafism.

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<sup>237</sup> In his study of Moroccan Islam Dale Eickelman (1981) notices a similar dynamic, though in a very different socio-historical context. According to Eickelman, by antagonising the Sufis the French colonisers indirectly contributed to the expansion of local Salafism (ibid.).

Salafism was ferociously persecuted by the regime at the time of my field-work. The Libyan media were constantly reporting on the imprisonment and execution of ‘dangerous Salafi extremists’ and even sporting a long beard was enough to attract attention from the police<sup>238</sup>. Due to this very tense situation, I had very few occasions to interview Tripolitans who are associated with Salafism. In some of these sporadic conversations, however, I collected opinions that closely resemble the dichotomy of authentic and inauthentic Sufism proposed by the Libyan regime. Thirty year old self-described Salafi Abdul Kher, for instance, told me that some of the famous Sufis of the past like *Sidhi* Abdul Qadir al Jeilani<sup>239</sup> were authentic Muslims who followed in the steps of the prophet Mohammad and that, with time, Sufism has been corrupted by various religious innovations that cannot be found in the *Qur’an* and in the *Sunna*. “*The Sufism of the past was good*”, Abdul Kher told me, “*but the one that you find today is not*”<sup>240</sup>. He explained to me that, unlike the Salafis, Libyan Sufis “*are not strong in their faith, they are not rigid enough*”. According to Abdul Kher, people in the *zawaya* like to eat and drink, and Sufi orders “*...attract good people but force them to do wrong things*”. Expressing an opinion which echoes the declarations of the Libyan leaders prior to the nineties, Abdul Kher told me that Sufis do “*strange things (shay gharib) in their rituals, things that seem miracles while in fact they are works of sorcery*”.

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<sup>238</sup> Growing a long beard with trimmed moustaches is recommended by the Sunna (Gafeny 1994: 90). In Libya this particular style of facial hair is popularly associated with Salafism, but it is also sported by people with different religious inclinations. On a number of occasions my informants told me that they had been interrogated or bothered by the police because of the ‘suspicious’ length of their beards even though they had no involvement with Salafism.. Pargeter mentions the existence of Salafi pamphlets and recorded sermons in Libya (Pargeter 2012: 165-173). Personally I have not come across any Salafi pamphlet, book, video or audio-tape (means of proselytisation that are quite typical in Salafi contexts – Hirshkind 2006). Perhaps my Salafi interlocutors did not mention these tools of proselytisation because of the repressive anti-Salafi measures adopted by the Libyan government. Obviously, Salafi charities (another important tool of Salafi proselytism in many Islamic contexts) do not exist in Libya.

<sup>239</sup> Renowned medieval shaykh and founder of the *Qadiri* order (see Introduction page 17 and Chapter 1 footnote 19).

<sup>240</sup> As noticed by Magnus Marsden often Salafi-inspired Muslims “rather than rejecting Sufi traditions out of hand have sought to reduce its teachings to their visions of purified Islam” (Marsden 2005:158). Recent publications have shown that the difference between Sufism and Salafism is often blurrier than it seems (Weismann 2007; Sikand 2007; Laffan 2007; Villalon 2007). Even still, all my informants (and particularly my *Issawy* friends) described ‘Salafi’ and ‘Sufi’ as two completely opposite and distinct categories.

Similar comments were reported to me by Ludvy, a university-educated Salafi in his late forties and an ex-Sufi. *“It is not that I do not love Sufism”*, Ludvy told me, *“Sufis are actually good people, but they make mistakes in the way they approach religion, and I feel for them because I was one of them”*. Ludvy explained to me that when he was younger he was a Sufi devotee, and that he used to visit the *zawaya* regularly in order to enjoy the music of the *Issawiya*. Having met some Salafis during his pilgrimage to Mecca<sup>241</sup>, however, Ludvy reconsidered his ideas on Sufism and, in particular, his opinions on the miraculous performances of the *Issawiya*. He told me that *Issawy* miracles are *“tricks done with the help of sorcery and people believe these things to be true miracles because they are not educated”*. Resembling the notion of a clear Islam put forward by the regime, Ludvy told me that *“the prophet has always been clear in teaching Islam to the people, and the Qur’an clearly states that if someone loves God he has to follow only the instructions that were given to us by the prophet”*. Ludvy ended the conversation by saying that Colonel Ghaddafi is a good Muslim who preaches the correct Islam, and that he only persecutes the Salafis because he does not realise that their positions are very similar to his.

The stress on the ‘clarity’ of Islam characterised all my conversations with people associated with Salafism. Fifty year old Iskander, for example, told me that many Libyans agree with the critique of Sufism put forward by the Salafis because *“Salafism is a natural (tabiyy) approach Islam that requires Muslims to live a normal life, and follow what is written in the holy book while Sufis do things that you do not find in the Qur’an”*. Iskander explained to me that Libyans – whether Salafis or not- are very aware that *“Sufism is ignorance (asSufiya jahel)”*, that *“Sufis do not know God (asSufiyin ma iarfush Allah)”* and that behind certain Sufi practices there are *“diabolic ideas (fikra shaytaniya)”*. According to Iskander,

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<sup>241</sup> From the conversations I had with Libyan self-professed Salafis it seems that the pilgrimage to Mecca is one of the most important occasions of encounter with Salafi ideology. Ghaddafi’s antipathy towards Salafism should also be looked at bearing in mind the conflictual nature of the relationships between Libya and Saudi Arabia, a country that has actively contributed to the spreading of Salafi Islam worldwide (see footnote 21 and later on the chapter).

Muslims “are required to believe in invisible things like paradise and hell, and miracles do exist”. Nonetheless, when I asked him about the *karamat* of the *Issawiya* he told me that “*Sufis operate these things through sorcery*” and that “*these are things that the prophet has never done*”. Iskander told me that when he was a young man he used to attend Sufi gatherings because *zawaya* were places where one could go to drink tea and have a chat with friends. Having embraced Salafi Islam for a number of years, however, Iskander told me that he has finally realised that “*God does not require Muslims to do strange things...before I used to ask myself many questions on religion to the point that I could not sleep, but now I can go to sleep at night with a clear head, I am not confused anymore*”<sup>242</sup>.

Though brief, these comments show a certain similarity between the peculiar form of religiosity publicised by the Libyan regime and the positions of some Libyan Salafis. Bearing in mind these similarities, it is safe to suggest that the propaganda of the Libyan government might have possibly paved the way for the spreading of the Salafi criticism of Sufism (and particularly of the *Issawiya*). As I have demonstrated, Gheddafi’s stress on the textuality and clarity of pristine Islam has entailed an attempt to re-define Sufism as a form of spirituality that has been polluted by *darwyssha*. In framing this re-definition, however, the Libyan government has effectively portrayed Sufi Islam as ‘defective’ approach to religion. By inviting the Libyan Sufis to get rid of their ‘extravagance’ the government had communicated the idea that Sufism is a ‘contaminated’ spirituality, thus indirectly supporting the arguments of the Salafis. Indeed, the political manoeuvres of the Libyan regime seem to have been successful in influencing Sufi practices, particularly for what concerns the negative perception of *Issawy*

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<sup>242</sup> Some publications have shown that Salafi Muslims are not necessarily critical towards the most esoteric aspects of Islam (Marsden 2005: 157-192) or towards secrecy in general (Van Der Veer 2004). Nonetheless, this does not seem to be the case with the Libyan Salafis I have interviewed. One might argue that there is a relationship between the diffusion of Salafism in Libya and the fact that the *Issawiya* has abandoned its secrets. Perhaps *Issawis* might have been influenced by Gheddafi’s understanding of Islam as much as by certain Salafi ideas. In my interviews, however, members of the order have always distanced themselves clearly and explicitly from Salafi Islam. Even though I could not investigate Libyan Salafism (and its relationships with Sufism) in depth, I still believe that the changes that have characterised the *Issawy* order have more to do with the Libyan regime than with anything else.

*karamat*. The same cannot be said, however, for the regime's attempt to play the Sufis against the Salafis since the first seem to be disfavoured – and the second supported – by a large portion of Libyan youth. Doubtlessly, an analysis of the relationship between Gheddafi's views on Islam and Salafism would require a much deeper investigation. An analysis of the similarity between Gheddafi's positions and the *Salafi* arguments might help shedding light on the changes that have occurred in the popular perception Libyans have of *Issawy* practices (and therefore, to an extent, on the changes that have occurred in the way in which Issawis articulate secrecy). Nonetheless, this similarity does not explain the spreading of Salafism in Libya in its entirety. The continuity one might detect between the discourses of the regime and the Salafi arguments is quite striking when it comes to the criticism of Sufism and to the scriptural 'clarity' of Islam. However, the connection between the two is much weaker (if not completely absent) when it comes to other aspects of Libyan Salafism and of the Green Thought. There are other factors that have to be taken into account if one wants to understand the growth of Salafism in Libya.

As I have mentioned in the introduction to the thesis, in the past scholars have linked the rise of Salafism, or to use a Gellnerian terminology, of 'textual' Islam', to modernisation, the spread of literacy and the proliferation of a more 'rationalistic' (or even 'scientific') approach to religion and to the world in general (Geertz 1968; Gellner 1981). Contemporary Libya is certainly characterised by a certain growth of literacy and education<sup>243</sup> (and by a certain 'scriptural' approach to religion fuelled by the regime), and this has certainly played a part in the spreading of Salafi ideas amongst the youth. However, as I have also explained in the introduction, the view of Salafism as a phenomenon propelled by modern rationalisation is one which is based on a simplistic understanding of Islam, disenchantment and modernity. More recent publications dealing with Salafi Islam have emphasised the 'global' nature of this phenomenon demonstrating that Salafism is, to a certain extent, an agent of (as well as a consequence of) globalisation

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<sup>243</sup> See introduction pag. 37.

(Roy 2002; Meijer 2009). Some of these scholars have appreciated the global nature of Salafism but they have mainly analysed its spreading as a consequence of a foreign-policy platform shaped by Saudi interests, while others have demonstrated that the rise of Salafism is often the result of spontaneous dynamics shaped by both transnational and local flows that go beyond the mechanics of Saudi propaganda (Bonney 2009; 2012). Others in turn have disregarded geo-strategic and cultural forces suggesting that militant Islam should not be looked at as the expression of pre-existing territorial and cultural factors, but rather as agents that create their own interpretative lens of reality and politics and that interact with others interpretative landscapes (often even opposite ones) in very complex ways (Devji 2005). These considerations are particularly important because they show that the spread of Salafism is the result of a complex mixture of local, transnational and global factors that cannot be approached with a strictly deterministic approach. Even though it is reasonable to assume that Libyan Salafism might be propelled, to a certain extent, by ‘foreign’ (whether Saudi or more ‘global’) forces (and even ‘foreign money’), it is important to say that the regime has always adopted extremely repressive measures in dealing with any kind of foreign presence in Libya (Pargeter 2012: 163)<sup>244</sup>. Doubtlessly, the growth of Libyan militant Salafism should be looked at through global lenses, but together with the more ‘transnational’ aspects one has to consider also more regional and local factors.

On a transnational level, scholars have suggested that the spreading of Salafism in Libya should be linked to the general ‘Islamic awakening’ that has taken place in North-Africa since the seventies (Pargeter 2012: 163). Even considering the anti-immigration (and anti-Salafi) policies of the regime it was impossible for Libya to remain immune to this broader North-African spreading of Salafi Islam (ibid.). Furthermore, as Pargeter suggests, in the eighties, when Salafism started to spread in the country, many Libyans were strongly impressed by events like the *jihad* in Afghanistan, and indeed a high number of

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<sup>244</sup> See introduction, chapter 1 footnote 10 and this chapter footnote 46.

them left the country in order to take part to the *jihad* and came back ‘Salafised’ (ibid.)<sup>245</sup>. On a more local level, some scholars have suggested that the diffusion of Salafi-inspired movements in Libya might have been helped by a certain climate of reform and ‘political relaxation’ achieved in the *Jamahiriyah* at the end of the eighties (De Bona 2013: 15)<sup>246</sup>. The same scholars, however, have shed light on the discrepancy between the reformed discourses embraced by the regime and the ferocious repression of Salafi groups operated by it (De Bona 2013: 81). The Salafi presence in Libya is indeed a complex reality whose study goes beyond the scope of this thesis. However, it is safe to assume that behind this phenomenon there is a combination of both local and transnational factors, including the view of Salafism as a language of resistance against the regime. As in other contexts, Salafi Islam has provided a ‘global’ language that can be used locally in order to channelise the discontent Libyans have towards the regime and its corruption (Pargeter 2012: 163). Ironically, the regime has paved the way for the diffusion of some Salafi (or anti-Sufi) ideas, but it has also found in Salafism one of its more powerful antagonists.

### ***Conclusion***

In the previous chapter I have shown that many Issawis feel the need to reduce the importance of secrecy in their doctrines and practices and that, as a result, they conceptualise the ‘secret’, or *sirr*, as a spiritual power rather than as a body of secret knowledge. Bearing this in mind, in this chapter I have attempted to contextualise *Issawy* secret knowledge within a broader analysis of the relationship between the Libyan government and the Sufi orders after the revolution of 1969. In particular, I have elucidated that this

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<sup>245</sup> It is estimated that between eight hundreds and a thousand Libyans have joined the *jihad* in Afghanistan (Pargeter 2012: 163). A group of Libyan fighters called the “*Mujahideein Brigade*” (later to be called the “*Libyan Islamic Fighting Group*”) formed in Afghanistan and sought to return to Libya in order de-throne Gheddafi and bring Islamic rule in Libya (Pargeter 2013: 167). Some members of the groups managed to smuggle themselves into the country. The group (which unsuccessfully attempted to assassinate Gheddafi in 1996) enjoyed a certain local favour but it was harshly repressed by the regime. Many members of the organisation were detained in the infamous Abu Slim prison in Benghazi. In 1996 the regime engaged in a massacre of prison inmates, and it is estimated that around 1286 individuals were killed and buried in mass graves. This was, as Pargeter rightly points out, “one of the most notorious crimes of the Qaddafi era” (Pargeter 2013: 170).

<sup>246</sup> See introduction page 15.

relationship has been marked by friction and criticism until the nineties when, in a complete change of attitude, the government has started to support Sufism as an alternative to Salafism. As I have also shown, the rehabilitation of the Sufi orders carried out by the regime has entailed an attempt to make Sufism compatible with Gheddafi's peculiar understanding of Islam. As part of this process of 'domestication' Gheddafi has put forward the idea that authentic Sufi doctrine has been contaminated by in-authentic and extravagant practices, or '*darwyshta*'. By exploring ethnographically the notion of '*darwyshta*', however, I have shown that Colonel Gheddafi has created a dichotomy between 'Sufism' and '*darwyshta*' whereas some of my Sufi informants see a continuity between the two. In doing so, I have demonstrated that the regime had effectively tried to re-articulate Sufism as a 'clear' form of religiosity where there is very little room for secret and 'un-clear' practices. Having shed light on the impact of Gheddafi's ideology on the *Issawiya*, I will now consider other factors that need to be taken into account in an investigation of the 'loss' of secrets that has characterised the Issawy order. More specifically, I will show that this phenomenon is related not only to the manoeuvres of the Libyan regime, but also to the dynamics involved in the transmission of the esoteric knowledge within the brotherhood.

**“A SECRET THING AND A FAMILY MATTER”  
Familial Dynamics and Loss of Secrets**

*The end of my field-work was approaching. I was about to leave the country. One evening the murid came to my house. He told me that he had changed his mind. Even though he still believed in the goodness of the Issawy spiritual path, the murid wanted to leave his shaykh. The murid told me that he had realised that karamat are not true miracles. He wanted to follow another shaykh who did not condone these practices. I was truly surprised (the murid had not mentioned any of this before). I asked him about the reasons that had pushed him to take this decision. I thought that the murid had somehow embraced the discourses propagated by the regime: perhaps he had realised that the form of ‘clear’ Sufism publicised by the government was more appealing. To my surprise, the murid explained to me that it was, quite simply, a personal decision that did not have anything to do with politics. The murid had simply met another shaykh who seemed to be more convincing than the previous one. I thought that it was a shame. I only had few days left, and still many things to do. There was no time to explore this change properly. The murid left early (he too had things to do). We planned to meet again and say bye to each other before my departure. The last time I saw him we walked around Tripoli at night, talking about everything and nothing. We grabbed a cup of tea from a street vendor and decided to call few friends. The evening was nice. And I did not have the heart to ask him whether he wanted to expand on his latest spiritual developments.*

***Familial Sufism (Introduction)***

In the previous chapter I have looked at the relationship between the Sufi orders and the Libyan government. In analysing this complex rapport, I have demonstrated that the regime has carried out a re-articulation of Sufism in an attempt to transform it into a ‘un-ambiguous’ spirituality where there is no space for secrets. More specifically, I have shown that this re-definition of Sufism has pushed the *Issawiya* to abandon its secret knowledge in order to become compatible with the ‘clear’ religiosity sponsored by Colonel Gheddafi. Having shed light on this process, in this last chapter I will concentrate on other factors that need to be taken into account in an analysis of the *Issawy* ‘loss of secrets’. In order to broaden my investigation of the brotherhood, I will focus on the relationship between family dynamics and the transmission of *Issawy* secret knowledge. In doing so, I will demonstrate that the specific

dynamics that regulate *shaykh*-hood within the different familial groups that constitute the *Issawiya* determine, to a certain extent, whether these groups preserve the secret knowledge of the order or not.

As I have elucidated in the first chapter (and throughout the thesis) the *Issawiya* is divided into different groups, or *assanid* (sing. *sanad*), headed by independent *shuyukh* who do not recognise a common spiritual leader. Each *sanad*, as I have explained, articulates its identity in ‘genealogical’ terms: when a *shaykh* decides that his *muridin* are ready to become masters of the order, he gives them an *ijaza* (or licence to *shaykh*-hood) including them into his own spiritual genealogy (*sanad*). As I have also explained, however, a *shaykh* chooses only one of his ex-*muridin* as his successor, usually his son, so that *assanid* tend to become, with time, independent groups with a strictly familial character. Bearing this in mind, in this chapter I will examine the way in which specific dynamics of succession influence the transmission of secret knowledge within a *sanad*. In order to do so, I will analyse the history of three important familial *assanid* of the order. In two of these families, as we will see, *shuyukh* have always selected their eldest sons or their youngest brothers as successors even when these persons did not have an interest in esoteric knowledge. In the third family, on the contrary, *shuyukh* have applied a different strategy of succession: they have emphasised the importance of choosing a member of the family who is trained in the esoteric aspects of the order over the need to select a direct relative of the *shaykh*. As a consequence, the first two have lost the secret knowledge of *karamat*, while the third has kept it.

Previous studies on Sufism have shed light on the importance of blood-relationships within specific lines of Sufi masters. In particular, anthropologists have shown that Sufi *shuyukh* have often the tendency to choose their sons as successors thus keeping their specific Sufi traditions within the confines of the nuclear or enlarged family (Gellner 1969; Gilsenan 1973: 75-76; Pinto 2004; Sedgwick 2005; Werbner

2007). These ethnographers have suggested that the transmission of Sufi knowledge (and more specifically of esoteric knowledge – Soares 2005: 135) is very often a family matter, and in doing so they have identified Sufism as a religiosity entirely focused on blood-ties (Gellner 1969, 1969b, 1981) where knowledge and descent merge (Eickelman 1981). Doubtlessly, these ethnographers have illuminated some important aspects of ‘familial Sufism’ contributing to the anthropological debate on the relationship between knowledge and kinship (Bourdieu 1977; Eickelman 1981; Schneider 1984: 55; Lambek 1993: 151; Ensel 1999; Vom Bruck 2005)<sup>247</sup>. When dealing with Sufism, however, anthropologists have failed to analyse how specific familial dynamics produce specific kinds of Sufi knowledge. As I will show in this chapter, those *Issawy* families which privilege a filial or fraternal succession (regardless of the personal inclinations of the successor) increase the possibility of selecting a *shaykh* who does not value secret knowledge, and expose themselves to the ‘risk’ of losing their secrets. Those familial groups which apply a less ‘family-oriented’ style of transmission of knowledge, on the contrary, have a higher chance of preserving the secrets of the order. In analysing these dynamics I will unpack the simplistic view of Sufism as familial religiosity which is necessarily focused on strict blood-ties (ibid.), but I will also identify some ‘internal’ factors that, together with the ‘external’ intervention of the Libyan regime, have determined the loss of *Issawy* secrets.

### **5.1 *The Descendants of the First Issawy (The Banun Family)***

The first familial *sanad* I will explore is the one of the Banun, a name that the reader has already encountered in the first chapter. As I have previously explained, the Banun are the descendants of the Moroccan *Issawy* master Mohammed al Allam Banun al Fasi, a disciple of the Perfect *Shaykh* who founded the first *Issawy zawiya* in Tripoli (the *Zawiya al Kabyra*, or the “Great *Zawiya*”) between the

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<sup>247</sup> According to Vom Bruck (2005: 125) when a form of knowledge is wedded to descent it becomes more potent and effective.

sixteenth and the seventeenth century<sup>248</sup>. Today the Banun are both an important *Issawy sanad* (the oldest in the city) and a renowned *sharif*<sup>249</sup> family whose members share an interest in jurisprudence. Abdallah Banun, the head of the *sanad*, is both the *shaykh* of the “Great *Zawiya*” and a busy lawyer with a beautiful office in the old city of Tripoli. *Shaykh* Abdallah is a bearded, educated and charismatic character in his seventies who can speak, with his deep voice, English and Italian. He has been married for a number of decades and in raising his children he had them initiated to the *tariqa* as his *muridin*. Even though Abdallah has become an *Issawy* master in 1968 he has succeeded his older brother as the guide of the “Great *Zawiya*” only in the year 2000. Since then, *shaykh* Abdallah has tried to implement his own understanding of Sufism and of *Issawy* spirituality in the *zawiya*.

*Shaykh* Abdallah told me that, in his view, *karamat* should not be performed or taught in the *zawiya*. He explained to me that in the past the secret knowledge of *karamat* was used to demonstrate the truth of Islam to the Italian colonisers, and that now that Libya is no longer ruled by infidels this knowledge has lost its purpose. Abdallah told me that he had received this knowledge from his *sanad*, but he also added that he has never used it (“*I do not need to*”) because the brotherhood has now changed its spiritual priorities. *Issawis*, he told me, are not concerned with secrets anymore, but only with following Islamic orthodoxy. In order to strengthen the orthodoxy of the “Great *Zawiya*”, Abdallah has decided to forbid not only secret knowledge and *karamat*, but also musical performances in his congregation. He clarified that he had nothing against music in itself, but he also explained to me that by eliminating *Mal’uf*<sup>250</sup> music from the practices of the *zawiya* he wanted to encourage the *muridin* to focus on the more ‘Islamic’ of the *Issawy* rituals: the *dhikr*<sup>251</sup>, the “remembrance (of God)”, a practice which is solidly based on the

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<sup>248</sup> See chapter 1 page 48.

<sup>249</sup> Descendants of the prophet Mohammed (see Chapter 1 footnote 3).

<sup>250</sup> See Chapter 2 page 76.

<sup>251</sup> See Chapter 2 page 103.

*Qur'an*. *Shaykh* Abdallah told me that some of his predecessors at the guide of the *zawiya* had a different approach towards *Issawy* practices, and particularly towards *karamat*. When I asked him to reconstruct the history of his *sanad* (and the different approaches of his predecessors towards *karamat*) the *shaykh* made use not only of his memory but also of his “*Banuniat*” (“Banun things”): a folder full of newspapers articles, documents and photocopies of manuscripts that he had kept in his office. In order to present these data I will first focus on the dynamics of succession in the “Great *Zawiya*”, and subsequently I will offer some reflections on how these dynamics have affected the transmission (and the loss) of secret knowledge in the Banun line. In order to facilitate the reader I will refer to the different *shuyukh* both with names and with numbers.

After the death of the first Banun who brought the *Issawy tariqa* to Tripoli, another sixteen masters have followed him at the guide of the “Great *Zawiya*” (including *shaykh* Abdallah). Very little is known about the first eight *shuyukh*, but it is safe to say that in selecting their successors they have always chosen their sons (possibly their eldest, although this is not specified in the documents). *Shaykh* Abdallah, however, was able to tell me more information about the ninth, who was also called Abdallah (9). This first Abdallah had three male children Ahmeda (10), Abdul Qadir (11) and Arebi (12), and they all became head of the “Great *Zawiya*” (first the eldest, then the middle one and after that the youngest) following their father’s death. *Shaykh* Ahmeda (1240 *hijri* – 1335 *hijri*<sup>252</sup>), in particular, was a judge in the appellate court and had either five or six male children (together with a number of daughters). Nevertheless, all his male children, according to *shaykh* Abdallah, “*did not care about the tariqa*”. After two years at the guide of the *zawiya* Ahmeda (10) decided that he did not want to be in charge of the congregation anymore (for reasons that are unknown), and since his children were not suitable candidates he chose his

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<sup>252</sup>In the documents dates are indicated partly according the Islamic calendar (*hijri*) and partly according to the Western one (*miladi*). Often months are not indicated in the documents, and it is therefore difficult to make an exact conversion from *hijri* into *miladi*. On the difference between the two calendars and on their use in Libya see chapter 2 footnote 14.

younger brother Abdul Qadir (11) as successor because, in the words of *shaykh* Abdallah, “*he was suitable for shaykh-hood and he was still alive at the time*”.

*Shaykh* Abdul Qadir (11) (born after the 1240 *hijri* - 1325 *hijri*) became *shaykh* after his older brother. He was an officer in the Ottoman army<sup>253</sup>, and he had six daughters and one male son, Mohammed Abdul Qadir (1288 *ijri* – 1945 *miladi*), a renowned lawyer who lived in Turkey and in Palestine (where he was general prosecutor) for a while. According to *shaykh* Abdallah, Abdul Qadir’s son did not have any interest in the *tariqa*, and he wanted to pursue a career as a lawyer. *Shaykh* Abdul Qadir (11) decided therefore that his son was unsuitable to be the successor as head of the *zawiya*. When, after six months as the guide of the “Great *Zawiya*”, Abdul Qadir decided to ‘abdicate’ for unknown reasons, he chose his younger brother Arebi (12) because, according to *shaykh* Abdallah, he “*had the priority*”. Arebi (1256 *hijri* -1918 *miladi*) was a judge in the appellate court like his older brother. He succeeded Abdul Qadir as head of the *sanad* and married a woman from an important Ottoman family generating three sons and three daughters. His first born, however, was, according to *shaykh* Abdallah, “*a very simple man.... a merchant of wood*” who did not have the capacity to guide the *zawiya*, while his third son did not have any interest in Sufism. The second son, Abdallah (13), was therefore selected as successor.

Abdallah (13) (1281 *hijri* – 1938 *miladi*) was a lawyer. Amongst his famous cases, *shaykh* Abdallah remembers one where his predecessor defended the priest of an Italian catholic church of the old city against a famous Turkish military officer, winning the case. *Shaykh* Abdallah told me that the priest was

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<sup>253</sup> In a list of the *shuyukh* of the *zawiya* written by *Shaykh* Abdallah’s eldest brother on the 12 of May 1991, Abdul Qadir (11) is described as the eldest and Ahmeda (10) as the second. However, in a document written by *shaykh* Abdallah’s father Abdul Qadir is described as the first and Ahmeda as the second and this hypothesis is corroborated by the dates of birth of the two (1240 *hijri* for Abdul Qadir and “after 1240 *hijri*” for Ahmeda). Interestingly, *shaykh* Abdallah told me that, since Ahmeda was a judge in the appellate court (while Abdul Qadir only a military officer) “*Ahmeda would have been more suitable (in his father’s eyes) because he was the eldest and he was more educated*”.

particularly grateful to his predecessor, and that when on one occasion Abdallah (13) was captured by the Italians he interceded for his release. Abdallah had two sons and since, as I have explained, his two brothers were unsuitable to be chosen as successor he decided to nominate one of his sons. Unfortunately, his first born, Bashir, died at a very early age, and consequently, his second child, Mohammed Zeki (14), was chosen as successor as head of the *sanad*. Mohammed Zeki (1896- 16<sup>th</sup> August 1970) became *shaykh* of the “Great *Zawiya*” in 1928, and he remained as the guide of the *sanad* until his death. He had six children: Ibrahim (who died at a very early age), Arebi, Ibrahim the second, Fawzi (who died in his twenties), Abdallah and Mahmud (who died a teenager in 1957). Mohammed Zeki (14) decided to initiate all the three male children who remained alive to the brotherhood: Arebi (15), Ibrahim (16) and Abdallah (17 - the current head of the *sanad*) who all became *shaykh* starting from the eldest (15). Arebi (15) (1921 -1990) became *shaykh* of the “Great *Zawiya*” in 1970, and remained as the guide of the *muridin* until his death. Arebi had two male children, Fawzi and Mohammed. Fawzi, the first born, is today a young boy, and *shaykh* Abdallah does not know whether his father initiated him to the brotherhood before he died. Due to the young age of the two sons, Arebi indicated his younger brother Ibrahim (16) as successor.

Ibrahim (16) (1925 – 2000) became *shaykh* at the death of his brother and remained in charge of the *zawiya* until he died. He had three sons. *Shaykh* Abdallah told me that while Ibrahim (16) was still alive two of his children, distanced themselves from Sufism, and became Salafis, while the third, Mahmud remained close to the “Great *Zawiya*”. Mahmud, whom I met on a number of occasions, is an extremely friendly person, a military pilot in his forties who is always present during the special occasions of the *zawiya* (particularly during the celebration of the birthday of the prophet<sup>254</sup>). Though close to the *zawiya* Mahmud has decided not to join the order (according to *shaykh* Abdallah, he often jokingly says that “he

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<sup>254</sup> See Chapter 2 page 97.

*is still too young to become an Issawy*”). Since none of his children was a suitable candidate, *shaykh* Ibrahim (16) indicated his brother Abdallah (17) as successor (clarifying that, in case Abdallah had refused, his son Mahmud should have become *shaykh* of the *zawiya*). *Shaykh* Abdallah accepted to become the head of the “Great *Zawiya*”, a role that he still has. Abdallah has not made up his mind about succession. Even though his eldest son is already unofficially considered to be the successor by the *muridin*, Abdallah told me that he is still considering whether to choose him or his nephew Mahmud (in case he decides to join the order).

## **5.2 Sons and Brothers (the Dynamics of Succession of the Banun)**

When I asked *shaykh* Abdallah about the rules of succession in the Banun *sanad*, he told me that the suitability of the candidate is the main parameter of choice. By looking at the *sanad*, however, it appears that blood-relationships (particularly of the filial and fraternal kind) are also an important factor in the choice of a successor. As I have shown, the first eight Banun passed the leadership of the *sanad* to their sons, and the ninth followed this trend selecting his eldest son as successor. The tenth and the eleventh were somehow faced with a problem because their sons were not suitable candidates, and decided therefore to pass *shaykh*-hood to a younger brother instead of a child. The twelfth (faced with the death of his first-born) decided to select his second child as thirteenth successor, who (faced also with the death of his first-born) chose once again a second born. The fourteenth selected his first-born as fifteenth *shaykh* and he, in turn, chose his younger brother because his children were too young. Following the same scheme, the sixteenth, finally, chose his younger brother because his children were not suitable candidates. Bearing this in mind, one realises that the Banun have kept a ‘compromise’ between blood and suitability. Though concerned with choosing the more appropriate candidate they have also always chosen within a restricted pool of candidates made of children and brothers. In limiting the possibilities of

choice (and in establishing that, in the end, a *shaykh* can only choose between his brother and his child as a successor) the Banun have exposed themselves to ‘the risk’ of selecting a candidate who has no interest for secret knowledge.

*Shaykh* Abdallah told me that, as far as he knows and remembers, the first fifteen *shuyukh* of the *sanad* have made use of the secret knowledge of the brotherhood and performed *karamat* regularly. Even though *Shaykh* Abdallah’s father (14) and older brother, Arebi (15), used to perform *karamat* with less regularity than their predecessors they nevertheless kept the use of secret knowledge in the *zawiya*. Things started to change, however, with Abdallah’s other brother, Ibrahim (16) and with Abdallah himself (17). Unlike his brother Arebi, Ibrahim did not value secret knowledge, and once nominated *shaykh* of the “Great *Zawiya*” in 1990, he forbade the performance of *karamat* (and so did *shaykh* Abdallah after him). Abdallah told me that Ibrahim was “*closest to Arebi for what concerns age, but closest to me for what concerns mentality...he was a very educated man, very open minded, he was really a modern person, a different type of shaykh*”. The transition from Arebi (15) and Ibrahim (16) is particularly interesting here. In selecting a successor Arebi (who valued secret knowledge) chose his brother Ibrahim (who did not endorse *karamat*) because, as previously explained, his children were not suitable candidates. This dynamic shows that ‘suitability’ is a parameter in the choice for a successor, but it also shows that (as it is clear from the *sanad*) the Banun have always considered brothers and children as the only two possible options, even when this meant choosing someone who did not value the esoteric knowledge of the brotherhood. The strategy of succession deployed by the Banun has made them particularly prone to ‘lose’ the secrets of the order.

### **5.3 A ‘young’- but important- line of Masters (The Massaudi Family)**

The second familial *sanad* I will analyse is the one of the Massaudi. The Massaudi are a family which is ‘younger’ than the Banun, but that is characterised by dynamics of succession that are very similar to theirs, and that have also ‘lost’ the secret knowledge of the *Issawiya*. The current head of the *sanad*, *shaykh* Mohammed Said al Massaudi, is a quiet, soft-voiced, blue eyed man in his fifties who has been married for a number of years and who works for an oil company. *Shaykh* Mohammed Said is the head of an old *zawiya* in the city centre (the “*Zawiya of Sidhi Abumushmasha*”<sup>255</sup>) and the heir of a very important familial *sanad* that has produced a number of *ijazat* (originating a number of sub-*assanid* that, with time, have become independent). *Shaykh* Mohammed Said told me that he has received the special formulas of *karamat* through his *sanad*, but he also explained to me that he has never used them (and that he never will). Mohammed Said told me that he only wants his *muridin* to come to the *zawiya* and participate in the weekly recitation of the *hezb*<sup>256</sup> and in the *dhikr* : secret knowledge, in his view, does not play an important role in the education of the *muridin* (or in the *tariqa* in general).

*Shaykh* Mohammed Said told me that he has never spoken about the secret formulas of *karamat* with any of his *muridin* (or with his children). Mohammed Said clarified to me that he believes that there are “*asrar*”, “secrets”, in the *tariqa*, and that if he wanted to, he could use them. However, he also explained to me that these practices do not bring any spiritual benefit and that there are people who perform miracles because of their piety, without using the secret knowledge of the order. Issawis, the *shaykh* told me, should simply focus on following the teachings of the *Qur’an*. He explained to me that these practices might have had a purpose at the time of the Italian occupation, when *karamat* were used as proof of the truth of Islam for non-Muslims. However, he also told me that *karamat* are useless nowadays because Libya is a Muslim country whose population does not require any miraculous proof. Similarly to

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<sup>255</sup> The *Zawiya* is named after a saint buried in the vicinity of the *zawiya*. Originally the *sanad* was based in another *zawiya* of the city, but in 1934 the Italians decided to demolish the place and transform it into a hotel, forcing the *sanad* to relocate.

<sup>256</sup> See chapt 2 page 84.

*shaykh* Abdallah Banun, *shaykh* Mohammed Said al Massaudi has abandoned the secrets he had inherited from his family. When I asked *shaykh* Mohammed Said about the history of his *sanad* and about the attitudes of his predecessors towards *karamat*, he showed me a series of family documents. In doing so, he started telling me the story of the Massaudi family starting from the first Massaudi who joined the *Issawy* order, the progenitor of the *sanad*, Mohammed Tuati.

Mohammed Tuati (1) (1214 *hijri* – 1288 *hijri*) was a descendant of the prophet who belonged to a Libyan family of Moroccan origins. According to *shaykh* Mohammed Said, Mohammed Tuati was an extremely educated character with an interest in Sufism who wrote a memoir of his life which has been kept within the family for generations. Having been initiated to a number of Sufi brotherhoods, Mohammed Tuati decided that he wanted to join the *Issawiya*. For this reason he asked a Banun *shaykh* to accept him as *murid* (both the Banun family and the “Great *Zawiya*” were considered particularly important at the time). With time, however, Mohammed Tuati entered into conflict with his master and decided, therefore, to leave him<sup>257</sup>. Determined to find a *shaykh* that could satisfy his spiritual needs, Mohammed Tuati travelled to Tunisia with two friends, and, once arrived, he was received by a famous Tunisian *Issawy shaykh*, Ali ibn Qassim Asharif, who had dreamt about Mohammed’s arrival. *Shaykh* asSharif was particularly struck by Mohammed Tuati, and decided not only to initiate him into the brotherhood, but also to choose him as heir of his *sanad*.

After nine months of permanence (during which *shaykh* asSharif passed away), Mohammed Tuati (now an *Issawy shaykh*), came back to Libya, where he started to introduce himself to the *Issawy zawaya* of Tripoli. During his visits to the *zawaya*, however, Mohammed Tuati noticed that the members of these

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<sup>257</sup> Being intelligent men, Abdallah Banun and Mohammed Said al Massaudi are today on very friendly terms, however they have both kept memory of this ‘incident’ between the two *assanid*.

*zawayya* had the capacity to perform miracles. Issawis could drink poison or stab themselves with knives without dying, and Mohammed Tuati wanted to acquire the secret knowledge of these practices. Having learned that a renowned *Issawy shaykh* (a member of the family of the “Perfect *Shaykh*”) had temporarily settled in Benghazi on his way for the pilgrimage to Mecca, he decided to visit him and ask him about the secrets of the order. After a long journey of fifteen days, he arrived in Benghazi and enquired with the *shaykh* about the *karamat*. The *shaykh* put his hands on his shoulders, and Mohammed Tuati had immediately a vision: he “saw” the secret formulas of the *karamat*, memorising them straight away. The *shaykh* told Muhammad Tuati that the founder of the order himself, the “Perfect *Shaykh*” had made this miraculous gift to him.

With time Mohammed al Massaudi created a *zawiya*, and when the time came to choose a successor, he selected his only son, Ahmed (2). Ahmed al Massaudi (1252 *hijri*- 1413 *hijri*). had one male child from his first wife, Mohammed, and three sons from a second wife: Mohammed Said the first (3), Mohammed Saad edDin and Mohammed asSadek. All of them joined the *Issawy* order, becoming masters. However, in choosing his successor Ahmed selected Mohammed Said (3), his second child (the eldest from his second wife). *Shaykh* Mohammed Said the second (the current head of the *sanad*) does not know why Ahmed did not choose his first born as successor. However from a reading of documents it seems that his first child died at 39 (most probably while his father was still alive), hence one can argue that the *shaykh* was forced to choose the second born. Mohammed Said the first (1286 *hijri*- 1961 *miladi*) (3) was an educated and well-travelled man who studied Islamic jurisprudence in Egypt. He took part to the fight against the Italians in colonial times and kept in charge of the *zawiya* until his death.

Like his father, Mohammed Said the first (3) married twice: he had one son from his first wife (Ahmed, a judge and a teacher who died in 1952 when his father was still alive) and four from a second (whom he had met while fighting against the colonisers in the Tripolitanian town of Gharian): Mohammed Sharif (4), Mohammed Fatha, Mohammed Adel and Mohammed Najib. *Shaykh* Mohammed Said the second told me that he is not sure whether all of these four children joined the *tariqa* or not, but he also explained to me that in the past when a person used to come regularly to the *zawiya* he was considered to be an *Issawy* even if had not been formally initiated. Since his first son had died at a young age, Mohammed Said the first (3) chose his second born, Mohammed Sharif (4) as successor (the eldest from his second marriage). At the time, Mohammed Said's brothers were still alive (and since they were, as I have explained, *shuyukh*, they were suitable candidates) but his son was also an educated man and a spiritually suitable option. Once nominated head of the *sanad* in 1961, Mohammed Sharif (4) (1916-1993 *miladi*), remained as the guide of the *zawiya* until his death. He had three children: Mohammed Said the second (5) (the current head of the *sanad*), Mohammed Hafth and Mohammed Aissam (plus a number of daughters). Even though his three brothers were still alive at the time of his death, Mohammed Sharif (4) selected his first born as successor and Mohammed Said (5) became head of the *sanad* in 1993, a role that he still maintains. Currently Mohammed Said is contemplating the possibility of choosing his eldest son as successor.

#### **5.4 From Father to Son (the Dynamics of Succession of the Massaudi)**

When compared with the Banun the Massaudi show dynamics of succession that are very similar. The Massaudi, however, present parameters of choice that are even stricter: if the Banun have always selected children and brothers as successors, the Massaudi have always chosen their children (even when their brothers were suitable candidates). As it appears from an analysis of the *sanad*, all the Massaudi *shuyukh*

have chosen their first-born as successor, except with the second and the third *shaykh*, when the sudden death of the first-born has forced them to choose the second child. *Shaykh* Mohammed Said explained to me that a *shaykh* should consider a series of spiritual parameters in choosing the successor. The candidate, he told me, should be an educated person who has an interest in Sufi matters and he should take part to the life of the *zawiya*. In his case, for instance, the *shaykh* told me that he was chosen by his father not only because he was the eldest, but also because, unlike his two brothers he used to visit the *zawiya* even as a child. Nevertheless, *shaykh* Mohammed Said told me that there are also other factors that need to be taken into account in the choice. The *shaykh* told me that the Massaudi *zawiya* has a series of properties (mainly land) which are registered under the name of the family, and he explained to me that if a *shaykh* chooses someone outside of the Massaudi family the government is entitled to inherit the properties. This factor seems to have influenced the choice of the successor by pushing the Massaudis to keep the leadership of the *sanad* within the nuclear family. As in the case of the Banun (but even more so) the Massaudi have limited their range of choices in the succession, increasing the possibility that a first-born might be chosen as head of the *sanad* even when he has no interest for secret knowledge.

The story of the first Massaudi (and of his attempt to learn the secret knowledge of the brotherhood) shows that *karamat* were highly valued during the early days of the *sanad*. According to Mohammed Said, the first three *shuyukh* of the family kept this knowledge and used to perform *karamat* regularly. The third, in particular, was renowned in the city of Tripoli because he performed a *karama* in front of the famous Fascist general Italo Balbo<sup>258</sup>, drinking poison without receiving any harm. Mohammed Said told me that at the time of the English administration, the same *shaykh* used to perform *karamat* weekly (more specifically he used to eat pieces of glass during the weekly recitation of the *hezb*) and that for this reason the *zawiya* was visited by many foreigners who wanted to see his miraculous performances. With time,

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<sup>258</sup> (1896- 1940), Balbo was nominated governor of Libya by Benito Mussolini in 1934 (Vandewalle 2006)

however, the practice of *karamat* has been lost. Mohammed Said told me that his father (the fourth *shaykh*) has never considered the secret formulas of *karamat* as an important aspect of the *tariqa*. This shows that the third *shaykh* (who performed *karamat*) selected his son regardless of the fact that he did not value *Issawy* secret knowledge. In choosing always their first born (or the second in case of the first's death) the Massaudi have prioritised the necessity to preserve a strictly familial succession over the need to choose a successor who is interested in the secret knowledge of the brotherhood. Like the Banun, they have therefore kept a strict familial character but lost their secrets.

### **5.5 A Secret Sanad (The S. Family):**

The third familial *sanad* I will focus on is the one of the S., the family of my main informant *shaykh* Ramadan (the current head of the *sanad*), whom I mentioned extensively throughout the thesis. Like the Banun and the Massaudi, the S. are a *sharif* family of Moroccan origins. Unlike the first two *assanid*, however, the S. have adopted a strategy of succession that has allowed them to preserve both the familial character of the *sanad* and the secret knowledge of the order. As I have explained in the previous chapter, *shaykh* Ramadan (unlike *shaykh* Abdallah Banun and *shaykh* Mohammed Said al Massaudi) values *karamat* as an important part of the *tariqa* and treats them as a pedagogical tool to be used in the education of the *muridin*. Before I contextualise Ramadan's approach to secret knowledge within a discussion of the dynamics of succession of his family, I will present the S. *sanad* in detail. Like Abdallah and Mohammed Said, *shaykh* Ramadan too kept a folder with old family documents and manuscripts, and in reconstructing the history of his family he made use both of this documentation and of his memory.

Though largely based in Tripoli, the S. come originally from Beni Walid (a town South West of Tripoli). According to the family documents, *Sidhi* S., the progenitor of the family, was a judge (and a saintly

figure) from the city of Fez, who left in the year 800 *hijri* in order to settle down in Tunisia first and in Libya later on. Even though *Sidhi S.* eventually came back to Morocco, he left his children (judges as well) in Beni Walid, and with time the town has become the main centre of the S. (though sections of the family have moved to Cyrenaica settling in Kufra)<sup>259</sup>. Being a family of judges the S. have always had links with the capital (where, as an *Issawy sanad*, they have produced a series of *ijazat* and sub-*assanid* that are now independent), but they have officially moved to Tripoli only at the time of Ramadan's great grandfather<sup>260</sup>. Even though the 'zawiya-mother' of the *sanad* (the "*Zawiya of Sidhi S.*") is located in Beni Walid, Ramadan decided to create a new *zawiya* in Ghirgaresh (a beautiful area of Tripoli, not far from the city centre) which is, effectively, the new *zawiya*-mother of the *sanad*. Nevertheless, both Ramadan and his family have maintained a close relationship with Beni Walid, where a group of Ramadan's relatives still lives.

*Shaykh* Ramadan told me that the first S. who joined the *Issawy* brotherhood was Huedi S. (1), a descendant of *Sidhi S.* who was initiated to the order some four hundred years ago by one of the sons of the Perfect *Shaykh* himself. *Shaykh* Ramadan explained to me that he is the fourteenth successor of Huedi, and even though he spent a large amount of time going through all the *shuyukh* of the *sanad* he also forbade me from publishing the names (and the biographic details) of the first ten masters. Ramadan explained to me that a *sanad* is a "*secret thing and a family matter*" and that by publishing it in its entirety I would have exposed the family to a risk: someone could have used the names to produce a fake *ijaza* and claim a false spiritual genealogy from the S. Ramadan told me that as head of the *sanad* he felt the

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<sup>259</sup> Ramadan has kept a document dated to the 1207 *hijri* which testifies to the importance of the family in Beni Walid. The manuscript is a letter where the Ottoman leader Ahmed Pasha al Garamalli exhorts the tribes of Beni Walid to treat the descendants of *Sidhi S.* with utter respect.

<sup>260</sup> In the past the family used to own a *zawiya* in the famous Tripolitan mosque of *Sidhi Bel Imam* (named after a saint who belonged to the S. family) close to the city port. With time, however, the family has lost control of the *zawiya* (today the *zawiya* belongs to a *shaykh* linked with the Massaudi *sanad*).

responsibility of preserving the integrity of his line, adding that a *sanad* is not simply a list of names, but a record of the people through which a specific spiritual power has been transmitted. When I suggested the use of pseudonyms Ramadan insisted that I should tell the story of his family without recurring to lies (even ‘methodological’ ones), and, finally, we reached the compromise of publishing only the names of the last four *shuyukh* of the *sanad* (from the tenth to the fourteenth). This need to preserve the secret shows already a sense of secrecy which is not found amongst the Banun and the Massaudi. More importantly however, the section of the *sanad* I report here, though partial, shows dynamics of succession that are different from the ones of the Banun and the Massaudi.

The tenth head of the *sanad* was Abdul Khalaq S., a judge who lived in Beni Walid and a direct descendant of Huedi (1). The dates of birth and death of Abdul Khalaq (and of many of his predecessors) are not known. *Shaykh* Ramadan, however, showed me a document dated on the 1245 *hijri* which mentions the ninth *shaykh* as being alive at the time. In Ramadan’s view, therefore, Abdul Khalaq might have become head of the *sanad* after that date. Abdul Khalaq, according to Ramadan, was a saint<sup>261</sup> (recognised as such by many of his contemporaries) and an educated *Issawy* master who enjoyed the company of a number of famous Sufis of the time (amongst whom Mohammed Tuati al Massaudi, the first *shaykh* of the Massaudi line). Abdul Khalaq (10) had two brothers, Mohammed al Gheddafi and Ibrahim, who were also members of the *Issawiya*. Ibrahim died during Abdul Khalaq’s lifetime, but Mohammed al Gheddafi was still alive when the head of the *sanad* decided to nominate a successor. Even though al Gheddafi was perhaps a suitable candidate for succession, Abdul Khalaq (10) selected his only son Nueji (11) as eleventh *shaykh*. One factor that might have determined this choice is the fact that, most probably, al Gheddafi was not a *shaykh*, while Nueji was. This hypothesis appears to be plausible when

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<sup>261</sup> Ramadan told me that according to a family tradition there are always ten saints amongst the S., and that when one of them dies another one is born to replace him in order to keep the number of S. saints constant.

bearing in mind that, as attested in the documents, al Gheddafi's son was initiated to the order by his uncle Abdul Khalaq, not by his father. Perhaps, in choosing his son as successor, Abdul Khalaq was motivated both by paternal affection and by a concern for the suitability of the candidate.

Nueji (11) (who died in 1937 *miladi*) was a very educated man. Unlike his predecessor he did not work as a judge, but, according to Ramadan, this had to do with the fact that at the time of the Italian occupation all Islamic tribunals were closed down. Nueji however was also a well-respected Sufi whose miracles (as I have already briefly mentioned in the introduction of the thesis<sup>262</sup>) were known in all of Tripolitania. *Shaykh* Ramadan told me, for instance, that once an important Italian officer in Beni Walid expressed the desire of having an 'exotic' photo with a snake, and that Nueji took this opportunity to demonstrate his miraculous powers to the officer. He sent one of his *muridin* to capture a large snake, and using one of the secret formulas of the *Issawy* order he tamed the creature, presenting it to the officer so that he could have his picture taken. Nueji unleashed the snake in the room of the Italian and, apparently, the beast was so strong that he destroyed a chair. The officer was so scared that he jumped on the table, and in the end Nueji called one of his relatives who accepted to pose with the snake. Nueji (11) had only one son (together with a number of daughters), Ali (12), whom he chose as his successor.

Ali (12) (who died in 1961, and was probably born around 1900) was less educated than his father, but not less popular, at least in Beni Walid. Since Ali (like his father) was not a judge one can argue that it is with him that the traditional role of the S. as judges of Beni Walid comes to a definite end. During Ali's time, the *sanad* counted an incredibly high number of *muridin*. Ramadan told me that the great majority of the old *muridin* of the *sanad* he had met in his life were all initiated by Ali. According to Ramadan, this had to do with the fact that Libya was solidly in the hands of the Italians at the time: Libyans were

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<sup>262</sup> See introduction page 23.

turning towards religion more intensively almost as a political stance against the infidels. Ali (12) had only one son, Mohammed, an *Issawy* master who is today in his seventies, and who would have been a good candidate as head of the *sanad*. Mohammed, however, was not selected as successor. Even though Ali (12) initiated Mohammed to the brotherhood and wrote for him an *ijaza* making him a master of the order, he did not choose him as his heir. Enacting a dynamic which is not found amongst the Banun and the Massaudi, Ali (12) S. chose a distant relative (who was also an *Issawy*), Mabruk (13).

Even though Mabruk (13) (1913-2002) lived in Beni Walid and was a *murid* of Nueji (11) he was a very distant cousin of Ali (12). By looking at the family history (and at the different generations of S. that have originated from *Sidhi S.*) it is possible to calculate that at the time of Mabruk's nomination the bloodline of Ali and the one of Mabruk had been 'separated' for eighteen generations (their only common ancestor was *Sidhi S.* himself). According to Ramadan, Mabruk (13) was a very educated man who studied in Italy and was fluent in Italian. Being an intelligent and practical man, he worked for the local administration both under the *Sanusy* king and after Gheddafi's coup. Mabruk, however, was also a very reclusive character who did not want to have many *muridin*, and who spent the majority of his time at home. Mabruk, according to Ramadan, was very knowledgeable of *Issawy* secrets, but he also used to say that many people join the brotherhood only because they want to see miraculous performances, and not because they want to understand the spiritual principles behind these practices. When Mabruk decided that he wanted to choose a successor he had a large plethora of possible candidates around him.

Mabruk (13) was the third of three children. His older brother Yunnis (who was alive at the time), was a *shaush*<sup>263</sup> in the *zawiya*, and had two sons who were also well-respected *shauash*. Khalifa, his second brother had died at a young age, but he had also left a son (who was alive at the time), Ibrahim, a *shaykh* of the order. Mabruk (13) had also six male children who all lived in Tripoli. Ali, his first-born (who is today in his seventies) joined the order and was very close to the *zawiya* but he never became a *shaykh*. Being particularly educated, however, he was a good candidate. Mohammed, the second, who had studied in Italy, and al Makhluḥ, the third, who had become an atomic engineer in the States were also good candidate because they were both educated and particularly close to the brotherhood. Mustafa and Yussef (the fourth and the fifth, who are both still alive today) were even better candidates since they had become masters of the order rather early in their lives, while Khaled (the sixth) was simply a *murid* of his father. Mabruk (13) had one brother, three nephews and six sons who presented the right characteristics to become head of the *sanad*. Nevertheless, he chose the son of his first-born Ali, his grandson Ramadan (14) (born in 1973), the current leader of the *sanad*. Ramadan does not have siblings, and since his grand-mother was the niece of a previous head of the *sanad* (Ali - 12) he 're-unites' in his person the families of both the twelfth and of the thirteenth leaders of the S. line.

### **5.6 Presages and Distant Relatives (the Dynamics of Succession of the S. Family)**

The first difference between the S. family and the other two *assanid* I have analysed is that the S. do not present dynamics of succession that follow necessarily the filial and the fraternal line. Though partial, the *sanad* presented to me by Ramadan shows that the twelfth *shaykh* has chosen a distant relative as successor despite having a male son who was a suitable candidate. Similarly, as I have demonstrated, the thirteenth head of the line has chosen his grandson as heir despite having a large plethora of sons and

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<sup>263</sup>As explained in the second chapter (page 84) a *shaush* (pl. *shauash*) is a person who is in charge of one of the aspects of the ritual life of the *zawiya*. Yunnis, in particular, was a "*shaush el hadid*" ("*shaush of the iron*"): he took care of the weapons and items used during the performance of the self-hurting *karamat*.

brothers who were suitable to be selected as successors. These dynamics show that for the S. keeping the *sanad* within the confines of the nuclear family is not particularly important (or at least that it is less important than with the Banun or the Massaudi). ‘Freed’ from the obligation of choosing between brothers and children, the S. (or at least two of them) have selected their successors using parameters which are particularly conducive for the conservation of the secret knowledge of the order. By not limiting the possibilities of the choice they have increased the chances of having a successor who values secret knowledge as an important aspect of the *tariqa*. Unlike the Banun and the Massaudi, the S. have not exposed themselves to the possibility of ‘sacrificing’ the secrets of the order in the name of a filial or fraternal succession. At a closer examination, however, one realises that the fact that the S. have kept their secrets is not due to a ‘freer’ mode of succession, but to a specific style of transmission of knowledge.

When I asked *shaykh* Ramadan about the parameters of choice that regulates the leadership of his *sanad* he told me that the head of the S. line should be a person who is knowledgeable of the basics of Islam, familiar with the esoteric aspects of the brotherhood and talented in dealing with spiritual matters (“*ruhaniat*”). However, he also explained to me that selecting an heir does not simply involve a pondered decision by the head of the *sanad*. Ramadan told me that the choice of a successor is always accompanied by a presage, or, to be more precise, by an “*order*” (“*amr*”). According to Ramadan, when a S. *shaykh* decides in his heart that it is time to select a valid replacement, he has to wait for an inspiration, a sign, or a vision (perhaps a dream) from God that pushes him (or rather ‘orders him’) to choose a particular person. Ramadan explained to me that, as far as he knows, all his predecessors have followed this supernatural procedure. He also told me that the heads of the *sanad* have always put a great emphasis on training, and that his predecessors have always trained a group of possible candidates (teaching them a portion of the secrets of the order and insisting that they experience them personally) in the hope that the

“order” might indicate one of their favourites as successors. Ramadan himself, at the time of my research, had already chosen his group of possible heirs (though he had not received any “order” yet, perhaps because he is still young). Doubtlessly, the imponderability of the “order” (and the fact that the knowledge of the entire background of secret practices of the *sanad* is reserved only to the heir) seems to expose the *sanad* to the possibility that someone might be chosen despite not having a particular interest in secrets. Nevertheless, the need to prepare a plethora of possible heirs has allowed the *sanad* to have, constantly, a group of people who are familiar with the secret knowledge of *karamat* increasing the possibility that these practices might be preserved.

Unlike the Banun and the Massaudi, the choice of a S. successor is not an automatic selection that takes place regardless of the personal inclinations of the heir, but a choice that requires preparation (and training) in order to be prepared to deal with the imponderable. It is also interesting to notice that the imponderability of the supernatural “order” is somehow ‘regulated’ by the emphasis on training that seems to characterise the S. *sanad*. Ramadan told me that all his predecessors were part of a pre-selected group of possible candidates, but he also explained to me the “order” can manifest itself in erratic ways. Ramadan told me, for instance, that his grandfather Mabruk (13) had initially trained his second and third sons (al Makhluḥ and Mohammed) teaching them some of the secrets of the *Issawiya* in the hope that one of the two might have been chosen as successor. However, when Mabruk (13) was in his sixties he received the un-expected “order” to choose his grandson, Ramadan, who was still in his mother’s womb. This situation could have been potentially risky for the preservation of secret knowledge (growing up Ramadan could have turned out to be a person with no interest in secrets). However, the ‘pre-natal’ nomination of Ramadan proved to be, on the contrary, an incentive to educate the successor in the secrets of the order. In fact, Mabruk found himself in a situation where he had to ensure that Ramadan was exposed

to the secret knowledge of the brotherhood as soon as possible (if Mabruk had died a portion of knowledge would have been lost for ever). As soon as Ramadan was old enough to understand the spiritual secrets of the *Issawiya* his grandfather gave him “*cursat*” (“*courses*”) in all aspects of Sufism paying particular attention to the knowledge of *karamat*. Ramadan was therefore forced by his grandfather to experiment with all the secret formulas of the order, gaining a direct experience of the secrets of the *Issawiya* from a very young age. Unlike the other two families I have analysed, the S. have adopted a strategy of succession that has allowed them to keep the secret knowledge of the order even in situations where this knowledge was ‘at risk’ of being lost.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have looked at the relationship between family dynamics and the transmission of *Issawy* secret knowledge. In particular, I have compared the strategies of succession amongst the *shuyukh* of three *Issawy assanid*, the Banun, the Massaudi and the S. As I have demonstrated, in the first two familial groups *Issawy* masters have always selected members of their nuclear families as successors, regardless of whether these persons had an interest in secret knowledge or not, and as a consequence they have lost with time the secrets of the order. The *shuyukh* of the third *sanad*, on the contrary, have adopted a strategy of succession which is focused on the need for a successor to be trained in the esoteric aspects of the order thus reducing the possibility of losing their secrets. By educating a number of possible successors (and by emphasising the training of the successor over his blood relationship with the predecessor) the S. have created good conditions for the preservation of the secrets whereas the other two *assanid* have not. These considerations show that in analysing the reasons that have pushed the *Issawiya* to abandon its secrets one has to consider not only the intervention of the Libyan government, but also the

internal dynamics of the order. Doubtlessly, the *Issawiya* has been deprived of its secrets by the regime of Colonel Gheddafi. However, Issawis themselves (or at least some of them) have contributed to create the conditions that have determined the loss of their secret knowledge.

## CONCLUSION

### Keeping the Secret, Losing the Secrets

In this thesis I have provided an anthropological analysis of a Sufi order that seems to have lost its miracles, but in fact it has only lost its secrets. More specifically, I have demonstrated that in abandoning the miraculous performance that had made them famous in the past (*karamat*) Issawis have not abandoned their sense of the miraculous, but their secret knowledge. In articulating this argument I have tried to dismantle a series of assumptions one might formulate when faced with the peculiar characteristics of the *Issawiya*. The first of these assumptions concerned the very structure of the *Issawy* order. As I have shown at the beginning of this research, the *Issawiya* is divided into different familial groups that have different understandings of *Issawy* rules and practices, so that one might be tempted to see the order as a loose organisation without any sense of commonality. By closely exploring the dynamics of *shaykh*-hood, however, I have demonstrated that the *Issawy* brotherhood is characterised by a specific discursive tradition that allows Issawis to approach their *tariqa* in different ways but also, at the same time, to maintain a sense of common identity. In showing that the *Issawiya* is marked by a complex mixture of differences and commonalities, I have paid particular attention to the notion of “*sirr*” (“secret”) in the *Issawy* tradition. As I have elucidated, all Issawis refer to this important concept, but (following the dynamics of the *Issawy* discursive tradition) they do so in different ways. Some members of the order articulate the esoteric facet of their practices in terms of secret knowledge, while the majority of them refer to “*sirr*” simply as ‘mystery’, explaining that Sufis have a privileged relationship with the mysterious world of the unseen, but no secret information to hide.

The analysis of the double meaning of “*sirr*” has allowed me to problematise a second assumption which is rooted in the literature on Sufi esoterism: the idea that all Sufis articulate the notion of ‘secret’ in the same way (Brenner 1984: 105; Soares 1996:742, 2005: 127-152; Flueckiger 2006, 2008: 178). More specifically, I have demonstrated that *Issawy* esoterism is not simply about ‘keeping a set of information secret from the public’ but also about ‘conceptualising the universe as been made of mysterious (and therefore secret) dynamics’. In shedding light on this double aspect of secrecy, I have shown that many Issawis do not see the esoteric dimension of their rituals as a realm which is completely cut off from the public, but, quite differently, as a set of mysterious spiritual dynamics that often take place publicly, even though only few can fully experience their power. More importantly, I have shown that Issawis can position themselves differently within the paradigm of secrecy, articulating specific ‘rhetorics of secrecy’ that allow them to privilege ‘mystery’ over ‘secret’ if they so prefer. In uncovering these dynamics I have moved to an exploration of the secret knowledge of the order in an attempt to understand why many members of the brotherhood emphasise the ‘mysterious’ aspect of their practices but distance themselves from the notion of secret information. In particular, I have demonstrated that those Issawis who have abandoned *karamat* in the name of a more ‘orthodox’ and ‘textual’ religiosity have developed an ‘explicit’ spirituality where there is space for mystery, but not for secrets. This consideration has allowed me to reflect more broadly on the role of miracles and of the text in *Issawy* practices.

As I have explained, both those Issawis who value the secret knowledge of *karamat* and those who do not share a strong belief in mysterious or miraculous manifestations, and a robust dedication to the textual apparatus of Islam. More specifically, I have shown that the difference between the two does not lie in their degree of textuality or in their level of enchantment, but in the way they see the role of secret information in relationship with both miracles and the text. Whereas those Issawis who practise *karamat*

portray themselves as orthodox mystics who deal with mysteries through secret knowledge, those who dismiss them, on the contrary, describe themselves as Sufis who deal with the supernatural only through a paradigm of explicit orthodoxy with no secrets. By demonstrating that Issawis have kept their sense of the 'mysterious' and of the 'textual' (but changed their attitude towards secrecy) I have unpacked a third assumption: the notion that by abandoning *karamat* the *Issawiya* has moved towards a more 'textual' and 'disenchanted' religiosity. In particular, these considerations have allowed me to dismantle the simplistic dichotomy of 'text' and 'miracles' put forward by a certain anthropological literature of the past, but also to highlight the limits of the recent scholarship that has criticised this literature. As I have explained, recent anthropological works have illuminated the limits of previous ethnographic analyses focused on the idea that modernity brings an endemic disenchantment of religious practices. In doing so, however, these scholars have simply demonstrated the modern persistence of enchantment without analysing the specific 'styles of enchantment' produced by specific encounters between religion and modernity. In an attempt to overcome this limit, I have shown that the specific political scenario of modern Libya has pushed the *Issawiya* to develop a specific 'style of enchantment' where there is no room for secrets.

In my analysis of the relationship between the Libyan regime and the Sufi orders I have shed light on the complexities that have characterised this rapport. More specifically, I have explained that the Libyan government has sponsored a specific understanding of Islam based on the notions of religious clarity and doctrinal explicitness, and in doing so I have explored the impact of Gheddafi's religiosity on Sufism. As I have shown, Colonel Gheddafi has initially antagonised the brotherhoods treating them as agents of corruption that have polluted the pristine clarity of the *Qur'an*, changing his attitude towards the orders only in the nineties. After three decades of anti-Sufi propaganda Gheddafi has re-integrated Sufism as part of the national discourse in an attempt to counter-balance the growing expansion of local Salafism. In re-

habilitating the orders, however, the regime has also proposed a re-definition of the concept of ‘Sufi’ with the intention of making it compatible with Gheddafi’s peculiar understanding of Islam. More specifically, the Libyan government has carried out a re-articulation of Sufism transforming it into a form of ‘clear’ spirituality which is incompatible with the notion of ‘secret’. In uncovering this process, I have demonstrated that this re-definition in terms of clarity has forced Issawis to re-shape their relationship with secrecy and, eventually, to abandon its secret knowledge. Having explored this phenomenon, I have also identified some ‘internal’ factors that have contributed to the loss of secrets that has characterised the order. In particular, I have shown that the specific dynamics of transmission of secret knowledge within the order have made some *Issawy* groups prone to lose their secrets. In doing so I have, in a sense, problematised a fourth assumption one might formulate when faced with the argument of this thesis: the idea that the political manoeuvres of the regime are the only cause behind the changes that have taken place in *Issawy* spirituality. Doubtlessly, the re-articulation of Sufism proposed by Gheddafi is the main factor behind the *Issawy* loss of secrets. Issawis themselves, however, have played a part in depriving their order of its secret knowledge.

Throughout this thesis I have documented the complexities of *Issawy* spirituality, challenging a series of simplistic assumptions and contextualising the *Issawiya* within the political scenario of Gheddafi’s Libya. My analysis has been mainly concerned with the changes that have characterised the *Issawy* attitude towards secrecy. Through this research, however, I have also indirectly shed light on another important aspect of the order: the strength of its identity. Issawis have developed a differentiated approach towards their secret practices as a result of their encounter with Libyan modernity, but they have also retained certain common elements of ‘Issawi-ness’ that have proven to be too strong to be erased by the manoeuvres of the regime. Doubtlessly, the members of the order have deperated the notion of ‘*sirr*’ from

its most secretive connotation, highlighting its mysterious aspect instead. Nevertheless, as we have seen, they have also maintained the idea that the *Issawiya* has an esoteric dimension. The concept of '*sirr*' is so deeply rooted within the *Issawy* tradition (and, one might say, within Sufism in general) that Issawis have 'preferred' to change it instead of removing it completely. The members of the order have succeeded in creating a fascinating paradox, a form of esoterism with no secrets, and if it is true that this enigma sheds light on the way in which the order has changed, it is also true that it testifies to the persistence of *Issawy* identity. The Libyan government has succeeded in re-articulating Sufism, but it has not been able to demolish the Issawi-ness. This consideration appears particularly significant when bearing in mind that Issawis keep on seeing themselves as members of the same Sufi order regardless of their differences. Indeed, the regime of Gheddafi has managed to gobble the secrets, not the secret. And, for some mysterious (or rather secret) reason, I find this rather consoling.

I believe that my thesis has offered not only a solid anthropological analysis, but also a platform for future investigations on Libyan Sufism. Since the completion of my field-work Libya has witnessed a series of radical changes, entering into a new phase of its history. The fall of the Gheddafi regime has generated a series of new socio-political dynamics that will require further investigations. However, any exploration of the role of Sufism in the new Libya will have to be based on an analysis of the way in which the Sufi orders have co-existed with the regime for the past forty years. My work provides future research with such a basis. Unfortunately, one of the most recent developments in the Libyan religious landscape is the destruction of a series of Sufi shrines by local Salafi cells. As reported by the world media, Libyan Salafi groups are experiencing a revival in the post-Gheddafi phase: freed from the repression of the regime, Salafis are now pushing to take part in Libyan political life but they are also embracing violence as a way to express their anti-Sufi stances. In light of the findings of this thesis, however, this phenomenon

becomes less surprising than it appears to be. With his focus on textuality and religious clarity Colonel Gheddafi has effectively paved the way for the diffusion of Salafi ideas. Furthermore, in its attempt to use the Sufi orders as tools in the fight against Salafism the regime has created an association between Sufism and the ideology of Gheddafi that, though misleading, has certainly re-enforced the Salafi critique towards the brotherhoods in recent times. Hopefully, my research will contribute to shed light also on other aspects of Libyan religion in the post-Gheddafi era. Undeniably, this thesis has been limited in scope. Nevertheless, in approaching the spiritual life of the *Issawiya* I have attempted to offer an anthropological analysis for whoever is willing to take it further. In articulating my arguments I have tried to pay respect to the ethnographic truth, or at least to the way in which I have experienced this truth. I believe I managed to do so successfully. And in the end, to paraphrase those Sufi friends who know that partiality is the defining aspect of the human condition, “*God knows best*”.

## APPENDIX A: DISTRIBUTION OF ZAWAYA IN TRIPOLI

These figures have been collected by the central Auqaf of the city of Tripoli in 2007. This is the most recent census of the zawaya, and the Auqaf has granted permission for the publication of the data. The data concern only the jurisdictional area (“*shabia*”, pl. “*shabiat*”) of the city of Tripoli. Areas of Tripoli that are commonly considered to be part of the city but that were not under Tripoli’s administrative jurisdiction in 2007 are not considered in this census (e.g. the area of Jamzur). It is also important to clarify that the organisation of the *shabiat* in Libya has a tendency to change every few years. For a complete list of the brotherhoods diffused in Libya see the introduction of the thesis.

Areas of Tripoli	<u>Issawiya</u>	<u>Arusiya</u>	<u>Qadiriya</u>	<u>Alaiiya</u>	<u>Khaliliya</u>	<u>Tijaniya</u>	(n.s <sup>264</sup> .)	TOT
Abuslim	3	2	0	0	0	0	0	5
Tripoli (city centre)	15	4	3	1	0	0	0	23
Hay al’andalus	4	4	2	0	1	0	0	11
Suq Juma	6	0	1	0	0	0	7 <sup>265</sup>	14
Ain zara	6	3	0	0	0	3	0	12
Tajura	0	0	0	0	0	0	48	48
<b>TOT.</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>113</b>

<sup>264</sup> “Not specified”

<sup>265</sup> According to a senior functionary of the Auqaf these 7 zawaya might be ‘Arusy .

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