Somali Studies: A Peer-Reviewed Academic Journal for Somali Studies,
Volume 6, 2021, pp. 75-100

"Political Sufism": The Interplay of Sufism and Politics in Somalia

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Abstract

Sufism and its adherents have long been considered as being mainly engaged in mystical activities and disinterested in politics. This argument has however been challenged by a number of scholars as history proves that Sufis have not been always detached from politics. This is an exploratory research on the relations between Sufism and politics in Somalia. The purpose of this article is twofold: To deconstruct the myth surrounding the apolitical nature of Sufis and; to explore the interplay between Sufism and politics in Somalia in the pre-colonial era, the colonial, post-independence, and after the civil war periods. I argue that Sufis and Sufi movements in Somalia have often joined politics. This is not to say that their mystical aspect is exaggerated, rather, joining politics has often been a necessity Sufis could not avoid.

Keywords: Somali politics, political Sufism, politics, Sufism.

1. Introduction

Somalis are Muslims with majority of the population traditionally adhering to Sufi understanding of Islam. In the second half of 20th century, the spread of Salafism and other forms of *sahwa Islamiyah* (Islamic awakening) have gained strong foothold in Somalia consequently the role of the Sufi orders has declined. Most of the studies on Islamist movements in Somalia in the past decades have focused on militant groups such as Al-Shabaab. Sufi groups and their role in politics have subsequently been understudied. Ahlu Sunna Waljama'a, a paramilitary group in Galmudug State in Central Somalia, has since 2008 been one of the significant actors fighting Al-Shabaab in the country. Their emergence as a militant group and their participation in local politics have ignited my interest to study the relationship between Sufism and politics in Somalia and hence this article.

Before examining Sufism and politics generally and particularly in Somalia, it is important that we first understand the concept "Sufism" which is the anglicized version of *Tasawwuf.* The term is contested both within Muslim and non-Muslim literatures. They are used interchangeably with concepts such as mysticism and Islamic mysticism and through other Christian prisms which could be misleading (Anjum, 2006, p. 222). It is important therefore to be careful when applying terms such as 'mysticism', 'saint' and 'sainthood' since they have different connotations in Christianity and other religions.

The root word *Tasawwuf* is derived from the word *Sufi* and there are various opinions on the etymological derivations of the words *Tasawwuf* and *Sufi*. The main derivations can be summed up as follows: "*Safa'* (purity), because of the purity of their hearts; *Saff* (rank) as they are in the first rank before God; *Suffah* (the platform) as the qualities of the Sufis resembled those of the *Ashab Al-Suffah* (People of the Platform, a group

of the Companions of the Prophet (peace be upon him) who had devoted their lives to worship and learning); *Suf* (wool) because of their habit of wearing wool, and *Safwah* (the chosen, the select) owing to their being the elite, or the chosen or selected ones" (Ibid, pp. 224-5). While there is no consensus regarding the origin of the term, the most widely accepted opinion is perhaps its etymological derivation from the word *Suf* (wool) which symbolized rejection of worldly desires through appearing as poor people (Renard, 2009, pp. 4-5).

A simple definition of Sufism is difficult because of the contentious nature of the term. However, it is generally agreed that the aim for Sufism is to achieve qualities such as inner purification, engaging with the Divine, displaying Godly virtues such as "kindness" and "love" and emphasizing on individual or collective remembrance of God (*dhikr*) (Muedini, 2015, p. 20).

2. Deconstructing Myths

In the Muslim world, being the dominant religion, Islam has had a profound effect on state, governance and politics. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the abolishment of the Caliphate were accompanied by the sidelining of Islam and the diminishing of its role in politics in the new emerging nation-states. This led to the emergence of "political Islam", which according to Beinin and Stork represents politically motivated movements that seek "to revitalize and re-Islamize modern Muslim societies" based on the main Islamic sources i.e. The Qur'an, the Hadith and other reliable sources (Beinin & Stork, 1997, pp. 3-4). This does not however mean that Islam was previously apolitical. According to Abdurahman Baadiyow, political Islam entailed the attempts by Islamic movements in Muslim majority countries to revive Islam in the political sphere and that Islam's role in politics is not strange as assumed by many Western scholars (Abdurahman, 2017, p. 26). By extension, Sufism has

long been assumed, particularly in the West, as apolitical. The political role of Sufis as followers of Islam has thus been understudied. Marietta Stepanyants (2009, p. 166) highlights this scenario of overlooking the role Sufism played in politics of the Muslim world. She argues that, while the political life of Sufis was disregarded in academia, historical accounts indicate that Sufis, depending on circumstances, have often given up their neutral stance as apolitical and actively joined political wrangles.

The popular aspect of Sufism that emphasizes on the detachment from the material world is important in promoting the debate surrounding the relation between Sufism and politics. Some of the historical Muslim Sufis promoted the idea that individuals should disengage with all worldly attainments including power if they wanted to experience "God's immanence" (Awn 1983, p. 241). This point was stressed because most early Sufis believed that the inner part of the human is good, but it is the outside world and its material dimensions that corrupts him and sways him away from God. Peter Awn noted the extreme tendencies of some Sufis denouncement of the world as a "devil", while others such as Ibrahim ibn Adham abandoned his kingship to live a life of complete dependence on God (*Tawakkul*) and abstained from marriage and family for fear that they will distract him from God (Ibid, p. 245). Similarly, Alexander Knysh notes that a famous Sufi author Abu Bakr Muhammad al-Kalabadhi sought to prove in several passages in his treaties that Sufis do not harbor any political goals and are strictly concerned with improving their souls and perfecting their acts of worship (Knysh, 2010, p. 124). Such extreme tendencies of total detachment from world affairs still persist within some Sufi circles, "the revivalists" (Muedini, 2015, p. 25).

These perceptions have gained prominence particularly after the September 11 attacks blamed on violent extremist Muslim individuals and groups. As a way of countering religious extremism, there have been attempts at supporting and promoting Sufi groups to counter these

extremist ideologies both in the Muslim world and in the West. This is because the Sufis have been perceived as primarily engaging in 'mysticism' and as 'moderate', 'quietist' and 'tolerant' (Philippon, 2018). For instance, governments of Morocco, Syria, Algeria and Pakistan have promoted certain Sufi orders to varying degrees in an attempt to ward off Salafi groups and weaken their political parties because they associate them with extremism. This approach is also shared with some in the American foreign policy circles who consider Sufis as 'friendly' and apolitical (Ceballos, 2014, p.334).

However, the assumption of Sufis total detachment from the material world has not often been the case. According to Milad Milani (2017, p. 2), Sufis are political in that they actively engage in promoting their interpretation of Islam and by aspiring to shape the Muslim polity. With the establishment of Sufi orders (*tariqa*) in the medieval era, Sufis and Sufi orders became active tools of spreading Islam and established 'bases' in strategic regions and along trade routes in the world with names such as *zawiya* and *ribat* in their attempt to pursue the interests of 'Islamdom'. The Sufi orders have hierarchical organizational structures in which a *Sheikh* leads a group of followers or disciples known as *murids.* The sheikh is powerful and is able to exercise authority both within the order and outside the order while having control on all the donations offered to the order (Muedini, 2015, p. 27). The leaders or sheikhs of the orders are important in understanding the political role of Sufism. They are highly revered and considered to be *awliya' allah* (friends of God) for their piety and accumulation of spiritual knowledge often inherited from pious ancestor(s) or from connection to a late Sufi leader, which are enough to elevate them to lead the order (Ibid, pp. 27-8). The orders continue to exist today and their numbers are many. Milani remarks that, in the medieval period, some of these orders were either 'patronized' – received political backing though not openly involved in politics – or 'politicized'

by actively engaging in politics hence arguing that "Sufis and Sufi orders can be quietist, but are never apolitical" (Milani, 2017, p. 14).

According to Carl Ernst, many Orientalists, through their literal analysis of Sufis, assumed the Sufis as part of "Oriental culture that the Europeans found attractive" and as "free-thinkers" (Ernst, 2003, p. 110). However, after facing resistance from Sufi orders during the occupation of countries such as Algeria, Somalia and Sudan, Orientalists tended to separate Sufism from its institutionalized versions, the Sufi orders, because of their staunch resistance against colonialism (Ibid). The colonialists woke up to the reality that Sufis are not apolitical as they assumed.

The rise and growth of Sufism is seen as being political since it attempted to redefine important concepts within the Islamic theology. But it is after the formation of Sufi orders particularly in medieval period three centuries after the Abbasid revolution that Sufis gradually started expressing political actions (Anjum, 2006, pp. 237-8). Anjum notes that even early Sufis such as Ibrahim ibn Adham and Abdullah ibn al-Mubarak who were considered to be solely focused on self-purification and known for detaching themselves from politics were known to have participated in battles against the Byzantine Empire.

In the medieval era, the relationship between the Sufi orders and the state or the rulers was not homogenous across all Sufi sects. According to Anjum (2006, p. 257), Sufis of various orders and regions engaged differently with political authorities. While many Sufis avoided and discouraged any cooperation with rulers among their followers, many others considered forming associations with rulers and political authorities as a means to impact positively on the rulers and their policies. Therefore, the relationship between Sufis and state were of two approaches: "the conflictual or oppositional relationship and cordial or friendly relationship" (Ibid, pp. 260-8). On the other hand, the

relationship between the state and Sufis was also not homogenous. At times the state sought to collaborate with Sufi orders as was the case with Seljuk and Mameluke empires who patronized Sufis in exchange for religious legitimacy. While at other times, the state regarded Sufi orders and their sheikhs as a threat to their political supremacy and sought to contain and subordinate them (Ibid).

The debate over the relationship between Sufis and politics resurfaced strongly during the colonial era. Reaction towards European conquest manifested itself through formation of Sufi-led anti-colonial resistance movements. In Algeria, the Qadiriyya Sufi order under the leadership of Abdul-Qadir led a rebellion against the French colonizers while in Libya the Sanussi Sufi order militarily confronted the Italian occupation. Their aims were not limited to the removal of the occupation, but also to gain political power in their respective states (Muedini, 2015b, p. 138). Other examples include the resistance by the Salihiyya Sufi order which conducted military campaigns against the British and colonialists under the leadership of Sayyid Mahammad 'Abdille Hasan (Samatar, 1982, p. 93) and the Mahdiyya movement in Sudan against the British led by Muhammad Ahmed (Muedini, 2015, p. 35). Other parts of the Muslim world such as the Middle East and South East Asia also witnessed the resistance of Sufi orders to colonialism (Ibid, p. 137). In Northern Caucasus, Sufis in Dagestan led resistance against Russians in the region (Knysh, 2002). The colonial period arguably witnessed the peak of Sufi political activity through their formation of anti-colonial movements. This could be interpreted as an attempt by Sufi orders to defend Islam by preventing the ‘Christianization’ of their respective population. Engaging in military activities means engaging in politics.

The relationship between Sufis and politics has been vague over the centuries. Often, Sufis warn against the moral liabilities of cooperation or association with rulers, however, they have frequently felt compelled to

engage in politics as advisers to rulers, state propagandists, and sometimes seeking to be rulers themselves (Heck 2011, pp. 103-5). Milani agrees that Sufism is largely assumed by many, and promoted by many Sufis, as spiritually oriented and emphasizing on developing the self. He refutes this arguing that Sufi orders have historically engaged in political activities (Milani, 2017, p. 5). And while Sufis might appear politically inactive, it doesn't mean that they are apolitical, it's only that some are passive and others assertive (Ibid, p. 14). According to him, the fact that Sufis generally promote Rumi poems of love is an act of biasness by the 'new age' and cannot hide the reality that "Sufi orders, groups, and organizations are political, active in inter-faith dialogue, and engage in changing society" (Ibid, p. 5).

Sufis and their engagement in politics were, as mentioned earlier, either in the form of being patronized or politicized. In Ottoman territories the Mevlevi order, and to some extent, the Bektashi order forged close alliances with the ruling power, while the Naqshabandi order in Moghul period were close associates of the kings and greatly influenced religion and politics and called for the waging of Jihad against the Sikhs (Stepanyants, 2009, p. 166). In some circumstances, Sufis went as far as revolting against the existing authorities and establishing their dynasties as was the case with the Safavid dynasty in Persia and the Qaramanoghlus in Turkish city of Konya (Ibid, p. 167).

In medieval India, while the *Ulama* (Muslim scholars of jurisprudence) urged the Muslim Sultanate of the period to force the Hindus into either accepting Islam or choose death, the arrival of the Sufis, particularly the Chishti order, urged the Sultan not to use force in converting the general population to Islam, an alternative that was more appealing to the Sultan (Aquil, 2020, pp. 42-3). While this supports the view that Sufis are generally peaceful, it also confirms their political influence. At times, differences between the Sufi orders and the monarchs on religious or

political matters led to conflictual and complex relationship between the two because the Sufis considered themselves responsible to assist in alleviating the sufferings of the people they live amongst (Ibid, p. 56).

3. An Overview of Sufism and Politics in the Modern Muslim World

As discussed earlier, the wider perceptions about Sufism being apolitical which is shared by many policy makers both in the Muslim World and in the West is just but a myth. In this subsection, I will mention some cases in the Muslim world that demonstrate the political aspect of Sufism before later on discussing Sufism and politics in Somalia. While in the case of Somalia, I will breakdown my analysis of the interplay of Sufism and politics into different eras or periods, for the purpose of clarity and simplicity, in this short overview I will randomly cite a number of cases in different countries without giving particular attention to the period.

Beyond the medieval era, Sufi orders were crucial in resisting European colonial expansion in the nineteenth century from Algeria to the Caucasus to Southeast Asia (Voll, 2008, p. 317). Most Orientalist writers on Sufism assumed the resistance against colonialism by Sufi *tariqas* as a deviation "from the "quietist" and "pacifistic" tendencies of a "classical" or "authentic" Sufism." (Knysh, 2002, p. 171). Ceballos demonstrates the representations of politics and *jihad* in the writings of the Moroccan Sufi Muḥammad ibn Yaggabsh al-Tazi who called for *jihad* against Portuguese imperialism in Morocco (Ceballos, 2014, p. 333).

The "Mahdiya" movement in Sudan led by Muhammad Ahmed, who belonged to the Samaniyyah order, was one of the most successful anti-colonial movements against British and Egypt occupation and was eventually successful in establishing an Islamic government between 1885 and 1898 (Muedini, 2015, p. 35). Once the British regained control, the Sufi brotherhood were strictly monitored and were regarded as

dangerous and fanatics who caused uprisings, chaos and instability (Manger, 2001, p. 145). In Central Asia, Sufi orders formed resistance movements against the tsars and the Soviet occupation who had to respond with greater military power to weaken them. The Soviets also branded Sufis as extremists, strictly monitored their activities through surveillance, stripped them of their wealth, detained and executed key Sufi figures, and directed religious officials to issue fatwas against Sufism (O'Dell, 2016, p. 99). This is how much the Sufis politically and militarily threatened the tsars and the Soviets. When Central Asian states gained independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the governments embraced Sufism as part of their national identities and sought the support of Sufi leaders in combating the threat posed by Wahhabism as they considered them to be extremists (Ibid, pp. 101-2).

The Sanusi order in Libya politically and militarily challenged the Italian colonialists by declaring *jihad* on the invaders (Muedini, 2015, pp. 37-8). On the other hand, in Algeria the Tijaniyya Sufi order, among other Sufi groups, played a primary role in resisting the French colonists in Algeria (Ibid, p. 43). In Senegal, Amadou Bamba founded the Mouride Sufi Brotherhood in 1883 and politically challenged the French colonialists by leading a peaceful struggle against their presence in the country (Judah 2011).

In recent times, particularly with the rise of jihadist Salafi groups and other political Islamist groups, Sufi movements have been considered as alternatives by some Muslim majority countries, tendencies that have promoted Sufis participation in politics. Muedini notes in various chapters in his book that governments in Morocco, Algeria, Pakistan and in countries in Central Asia have increasingly sought the support of Sufi orders to ward off the threat of other Islamist groups such as the Salafis and the Muslim Brotherhood as they consider it easier to deal with Sufis.

During the Arab Spring, Sufi orders in Egypt such as Al-Azmiyya and al-Bashrawiyya encouraged their followers to take part in the 2011 January revolution that was part of the Arab Spring which ultimately led to the overthrow of Mubarak (Aljazeera Arabic 2017). However, the increase in popularity of the Muslim Brotherhood party during the preceding elections prompted Sufis to establish political parties such as Al-Tahrir and Al-Nasr parties for fear that the Muslim Brotherhood, their long-term enemy, will rule the country (Ibid). The antagonism between Sufis and the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi groups is so deep that the former would rather form an alliance with liberal groups instead of other Islamist parties (Brown, 2011, p. 12).

The aforementioned cases show us how much Sufism is often intertwined with politics. This is not to say that the mystical part of Sufism is not true, it is just meant to show that there is also another side of the coin. Sufis are political whether actively or passively, whether they attempt to promote their teachings, align themselves with rulers, establish political parties or take part in military activities in form of *jihad.*

4. Somalia, Sufism and Politics

As in the previous examples, Sufism and its interplay with politics is very well demonstrated in Somalia, yet, understudied. In recent years, the interest has been revived after a Sufi group in the country known as *Ahlu-Sunna wal-Jama* took up arms to defend themselves from Al-Shabaab insurgents and have fought alongside the Somali government soldiers (CNN News 2010). To discuss the interplay between Sufism and politics in Somalia, I will breakdown the section into four different periods to understand how Sufi orders engaged in politics in different periods in history. These periods are: pre-colonial era, colonial era, post-independence era, and finally in the era of 1991 - 2021.

4.1 Pre-colonial Era

Islam came to Somalia in the seventh century shortly after *hijra* (Abdullahi, 2017b, p. 67). According to I. M. Lewis, historically, Islam in Somalia has been associated with Sufi *tariqas* or orders which are characterized with a hierarchical organization (Lewis, 1998, p. 63). Said Samatar argues that the organizational structure of the brotherhoods or orders was strictly hierarchical with the founding Sheikh or representative exercising absolute authority over the members (*murids* or *ikhwan)* of the brotherhood (Samatar, 1982, p. 97). The sheikh possesses "the apostolic chain (*silsila*) and the commission (*ijaza*) to propagate the tenets of the order" which allow him to connect "with all the recognized saints of the order and ultimately to God through the prophet." These make his followers completely dependent upon him (Ibid, p. 98).

Abdurrahman Baadiyow notes that Sufi orders came to Somalia in the fifteenth century from the Arabian Peninsula and it was in the eighteenth century that they vibrantly impacted on "the illiterate and pastoral Somali society" thanks to their "innovative mobilization techniques and cultural sensitivity" (Abdullahi, 2017b, pp. 67-72). The Sufi orders had massive political influence on the society establishing settlements and promoting "urbanization of the pastoral population through establishing permanent Islamic education centers" (Ibid, p. 72). They engaged in peaceful propagation of Islamic spiritualism, undertook religious reforms and their learning centers graduated teachers and judges. It often accorded the status of sainthood to clan elders making it widely appreciated by the people (Lewis, 1998, p. 63). In this way, Baadiyow questions the idea that Sufis are apolitical which is popular in conventional historiography. He gives two reasons for this: first, every Muslim has a duty to enjoin others to do what is good and forbid what is evil, and second, Sufi leaders were politically influential at times more than the clan elders (Abdullahi,

2017b, p. 74). In addition, their transformation of pastoral societies into settled communities is in itself a proof of their political influence.

The Sufi orders political influence was not always peaceful. They engaged in armed conflict at times with established sultanates over various issues. For instance, the Bardheere Jama'a Sufi group, under the leadership of Sheikh Ibrahim Yabarow, implemented a plan to establish Islamic order by banning "tobacco, the ivory trade, and popular dancing" while also enforcing rules on Islamic women dress code (Ibid, p. 75). It is the outlawing of the lucrative ivory trade that provoked the wrath of traders and clans alike who allied with the Geledi sultanate and mobilized up to 40,000 men to attack and burn down Bardheere in 1843 (Ibid, p. 76).

In conclusion, Sufism in Somalia in the pre-colonial era was political on many accounts. The arrival of Sufi orders led to rapid urbanization, religious institutionalization, and political influence over clans and their elders. At times, certain Sufi orders went into conflict with clans or sultanates over a clash of interests mainly based on trade.

4.2 The Colonial Era

The colonial era has seen the most aggressive form of Sufi political engagement in Somalia. This is because, as we shall discuss, it was the Sufi orders which were the first to resist the European colonialists in the Somali peninsula. There were different orders in Somalia, but in the years that followed 1890 the Qaadiriya and the Ahmadiya orders (Saalihiya is an offshoot of Ahmadiya) which traced their roots to Sayyid 'Abd al-Qadir Jilani and Ahmad Idris al-Faasi respectively, commanded the greatest number of followers (Samatar 1982, p. 96)).

The Somali resistance to colonialism became better organized under the leadership of the Islamic scholars of the Sufi orders, particularly the two aforementioned orders. For instance, Sayyid Mohamed Abdulle Hasan famously known as Sayyidka who was the leader of the Saalihiya order created a movement known as Darwish and relentlessly led insurgencies against the colonialists for more than two decades consequently becoming "a symbol of Somali nationalism" and a pioneer of "anti-colonial movement" in Somalia (Abdullahi, 2017b, p. 92). Sayyidka was able to rally massive support from pastoralist communities by warning them of the colonialist intentions to encroach their country and Christianize its people (Lewis, 1998, p. 69).

On the other hand, the Qaadiriya order under the leadership of Sheikh Aweys Muhammad al-Barawi called for resistance against European colonizers, not only in Somalia, but also in German-occupied Tanganyika, parts of Uganda and Congo. Other followers of the Qadiriyah Sheikh Ahmad Haji Mahadi carried out an operation against Italian troops stationed in Lafole in 1896 (Abdullahi, 2017b, p. 94). Seen as the reviver of the Qaadiriya tariqa in the country, Sheikh Aweys found his own branch of the tariqa called *Uweysiyya* which spread across East Africa. His *manaqib* (hagiography) is still widely recited among followers of Qadiriya (Mukhtar, 2003, p. 163). Sheikh Aweys was opposing two fronts domestically a rival tariqa, the Saalihiya, and also the foreign powers particularly the Italian and German colonialists. He was multilingual speaking various Somali dialects as well as the *Chimbalazi* language spoken in Barawa which partly explains his great influence beyond Somalia into the hinterlands of East Africa (ibid 221).

Another Qaadiriya Sufi named Sheikh Faraj, also known as Sufi Baraki, carried a military campaign against the Italian colonial presence in Banadir setting up his base in Barawa, the birthplace of Sheikh Aweys. He was able to unite a number of "Jama'a settlements: Buulo Marerto,

Golwiing, [and] Muki Dumis" among others and his followers were trained both religiously and militarily to stop the Italians from advancing to Lower Shabelle region (Mukhtar, 2004, p. 79). His military campaign was aided by being the first successor of Sheikh Aweys upon his death. Sheikh Faraj formed a coalition with another movement led by Sharif Alyow Issaq al-Sarmani based in Tiyeglow town south of Somalia to resist the Italian occupation. The two introduced a number of reforms, pushed for unification efforts among different tribes and clans, and built fortresses to counter the Italian Fascist rule (ibid, 208).

Another Sufi leader and a poet, Sheikh Ahmed Abiikar "Gabyow" became famous for his religious poetry known as *masafo.* He composed anti-colonial poems and inspired residents of Warsheikh to rise and resist the Italians forcing the latter to withdraw its troops (Mukhtar, 2003, p. 204). One example of such poems was "Dariiq" meaning "The right path." It goes as follows (ibid):

Somaliyaan u dagaallamaeyna
Kuwa dulmaaya la dood galeyna
Kufriga soo degey diida leenahay
Dabeysha mawdka intey i daandeyn
Hilibka duud cunin oonan deeb noqan
Dadka tusaan danihiisa leenahay
Kuwa dambaan u dariiq falaaya

(Fight against the enemy of Somalia!
Reject the infidel colonial settlements!
Do something before you die;
Soon you will turn into ashes
and worms will eat your flesh
Set a model for later generations!)

Italians responded by killing more than 80 people in Warsheikh and Adale prompting Sheikh Gabyow to compose another poem "Rafaad" meaning "Suffering" in which the Sheikh criticized those who did not take part in resisting the colonial troops (ibid, p. 204).

Sheikh Bashir Yusuf in Burao is another Sufi religious figure famous for leading anti-colonial insurrections in northern Somalia. Being a Salihiya, he followed on the footsteps of Sayidka waging jihad against the British in the Burao area (Abdullahi, 2017, p. 94).

Another religious Sufi leader who led anti-colonial resistance is Sheikh Hassan Barsane. A son of a *tariqa* leader himself, Barsane was greatly influenced by teachings of famous Sufi reformers such as the Morrocan Sheikh Ahmad bin Idris during his time in Mecca where he was performing the *hajj* pilgrimage and also met Sheikh Muhammad bin Salah, the mentor of Sayyidka and founder of the Salihiyya order (Mukhtar, 2003, p. 209). Upon his return to Somalia, Sheikh Barsane adopted a "militantly millenarian message" and assembled a *shir* (meeting) aimed at countering colonial expansionism into Lower Shabelle with fighters recruited from his own followers. The Sheikh was eventually defeated by the Italian fascists in 1924 (ibid, p. 210).

In sum, Sufi leaders and orders formed organized resistance movements against colonialists and created obstacles for the colonial powers to administrate the country and westernize the system of education. By mid-1920s, the resistance led by Sufi orders failed to defeat colonialists but peaceful approaches to resistance continued. However, the Sufi influence persisted even during the peaceful resistance that eventually led to the formation of the Pan-Somali political party in 1943 known as the Somali Youth League (SYL) of which four of its members were prominent Sufi scholars (Abdullahi, 2017b, pp. 92-96). This shows the extent at which Sufism was influential in political history of Somalia.

4.3 Post-independence Era (1960 – 1990)

In the years that followed independence, Sufi orders largely retreated from political involvement turning their focus instead on matters of jurisprudence and mysticism. This could be explained by the end of colonialism, which Sufi groups in Somalia regarded as threats to Islam in the country and thus the need to resist them. The newborn nation-state was ruled by Somalis which gave the impression that the country was no longer under external threat. Nonetheless, Sufi sheikhs played an important role in ensuring that the Somali constitution adhered to Islamic principles and also advocated for the use of the Arabic script instead of the Latin in writing the Somali language. In fact, it is reported that former Somalia's prime minister and president Abdirashid Sharmarke himself belonged to the Qadiriyah order and enjoyed good relations with many Islamic scholars and Sufi leaders who advised him not to allow legal issues that contradicted Islam (Abdullahi, p. 159, 2015).

However, during this period, other Islamic movements apart from the Sufi orders also existed in the country and were beginning to thrive. Salafists opposed many of the Sufi rituals denouncing them as un-Islamic and some elements among them going as far as questioning their Islam (Marchal and Sheikh 2015, p. 142). The new trend of Salafism was attracting many youths and its preachers were increasingly becoming famous and hostile to Sufism. This pushed the Sufis to align themselves closely with the government particularly after president Mohamed Siad Barre came to power. Barre promoted Sufi orders to curb the increasing influence of Islamists and appointed respected Sufi *ulama* from the main Sufi orders of the Qaadiriya and Saalihiya to government positions such as that of director of Religious Affairs at the Ministry of Justice responsible on religious matters including monitoring mosques and the *Hajj* pilgrimages (Ibid, p. 144).

Barre's adoption of scientific socialism as the doctrine of governing the country infuriated Islamists particularly the Salafists. It was the enactment of the Family Code in 1975 that brought the government to direct confrontation with Islamists including Sufi orders. Key Sufi leaders such as Mohammad Farah Olosow of the Qaadiriya order organized protests to denounce the Code and the regime used violence to disperse the protests and executed the main organizers including Olosow (Ibid, p. 143). However, it was the Islamists that suffered the most as the state took control of mosques and monitored the content of sermons and teachings to ensure that they do not bear Salafi ideas. Consequently, non-Sufi Islamic groups were forced into underground activities to safeguard themselves from the state's security apparatus (Ibid, p. 137).

This period was characterized by Sufis engagement in politics mainly by being patronized by the state to act as alternative to other stricter ideologies that threatened the regime. The Sufi groups on the other hand were assured of the government's protection and were able to maintain their influence within the society. Little has been written about Sufism and politics in Somalia during this period. However, it is clear that Sufi orders still engaged in political activities whether by being politicized or patronized. This costed them a lot as they lost their popularity among the youth who viewed Sufis as tools in the hand of the regime.

4.4 In the Era of 1991 - 2021

Sufi scholars have been part and parcel of the Muslim scholars (the *Ulama*) since independence. After the collapse of the central government in 1991, Sufi scholars took two different approaches: a group that remained quietist and confined itself in their religious and education centers (*mawlac*); and a group that involved itself in politics (Gurbiye, 2015). Sufi group known as Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama (ASWJ) forms the second group. While information about ASWJ's origins is scant, it is

believed that the group was created in 1991 (Stanford University, 2019). In the early 1990s, the group alongside other Sufi leaders and clan elders attempted to mediate between Ali Mahdi Mohammed and General Mohammed Farah Aideed, two political rivals who fought over control of Mogadishu (Conciliation Resources, 2021). The group also sent observers to the 1993 Addis Ababa conference and the 2000 Arta conference while also founding some of the clan-based Islamic Courts in Mogadishu in 1998 (Ibid).

However, ASWJ was not primarily a military organization until in 2008 when the group, in response to Al-Shabaab attacks against their practices and sacred places, created an armed force acquiring good number of soldiers and were able to oust Al-Shabaab from the towns of Guriceel and Dusa Mareeb of the Galgaduud region (Hassan, 2009). The group's desire to defeat Al-Shabaab drew it closer to the Somali government and the AMISOM peacekeepers particularly the Ethiopian army and they signed an agreement to fight Al-Shabaab (CNN News, 2010). In the years that followed, ASWJ became a formidable force and was able to retake swathes of land from Al-Shabaab, consequently becoming the de facto dominant power in Galmudug state of Somalia. ASWJ's increased influence brought it at odds with the Federal Government of Somalia and the Galmudug administration over a number of issues including salaries for soldiers, parliamentary representation and key leadership positions in the region among others (Tres, 2018). Through the mediation of Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), some sets of agreement were signed between the parties in December 2017 (Ibid).

As Galmudug elections approached, disagreements between the Somali government and ASWJ heightened and after rounds of talks an agreement was reached between the two parties including allocating the Sufi group 20 members out of 89 Galmudug parliamentarians (Shabelle Media Network, 2019). The ASWJ presented Sheikh Mohamed Shakir Ali as its

own regional presidential candidate in the elections, and amidst allegations towards the Somali government that it influenced the regional elections to have its preferred candidate elected, ASWJ declared its own candidate as the president (BBC Somali, 2020). The Somali National Army attacked the base of the ASWJ leader forcing him to surrender and disarmed the group in February 2020 (Garowe Online, 2020).

The Sufi militia's absence from the political scene did not last for so long. In August 2021, some indications emerged that the ASWJ was seeking to reclaim land from the Galmudug state administration on the grounds that it had failed to protect citizens from Al-Shabab; and on 1st October, the group took control of Guriel town and some adjacent villages from Galmudug security forces (Mukhtar & Salah, 2021). Following the arrival of reinforcements from Mogadishu, Galmudug security forces with the support of units of the Somali National Army engaged ASWJ in a bloody conflict that defeated the latter and forced to withdraw its forces from the town on 27 October, 2021. This defeat may put an end, may be temporarily, to the group's authority on the field.

ASWJ, a Sufi group, emerged as a group of unorganized Sufis who took up arms to protect themselves, their rituals and sacred places from Al-Shabaab, to seeking political influence in Galmudug state of Somalia. The reasons for this could be their need to ensure the dominance of their order and religious thought in a region marred with uncertainty, and to be able to protect itself from any future threats against its religious practices from Al-Shabaab. Whatever the reasons, history has shown that Sufi orders often engaged in politics to secure certain interests.

5. Conclusion

The literature on Sufism and politics is largely scant particularly in comparison to studies on other Islamic movements. The concept of

political Islam is mainly linked to non-Sufi Islamist groups whether radical or moderate. Hence, the role of Sufi movements in politics remains understudied. The events of 9/11 have brought to fore the study of militant Islamist groups such as al-Qaeda, DAESH, Boko Haram, and Al-Shabaab among others. Political Islam was in many ways associated with these extremist groups. Following the Arab Spring, political Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Ennahda in Tunisia came to power leading to more attention given by scholars to the study of these groups. In this article, I attempted to explore the relations between Sufism and politics particularly in Somalia in a bid to contribute to the understudied topic of Sufism and politics.

This paper has discussed the interplay between Sufism and politics by beginning with deconstructing myths about Sufism being apolitical, to discussing a number of examples that demonstrate the engagement of Sufis in politics across Islamic political history. In the second part of the paper, the case of Sufism and its relation with politics in Somalia was analyzed with particular attention across four eras namely: the pre-colonial; colonial; post-independence and the period between 1991, at the collapse of Somalia central government, up to now.

One main limitation of this paper is that there is limited academic work on Sufis in Somalia let alone Sufism and politics. Secondly, information about Sufi activism in Somalia has been hardly documented and interest in Sufism and politics is low. Also, interviewing key informants such as active Sufi leaders in the country as well as accessing archival documents and records could have strengthened the research. Since this is exploratory research, it is my hope that future research on the subject will do better in mitigating these limitations.

The paper concludes that Sufism and Sufi orders have played a great role in the Somali political sphere. They have immensely contributed to

literacy, education and urbanization in the country, and led long anti-colonial resistance while also contributing to state-building and fighting terrorism. The rise of Salafism in Somalia which is hostile to Sufi groups has pushed the latter towards closer cooperation with the state especially during the Siyad Barre regime. They engage in politics in different ways from influencing leaders or being patronized to challenging state authority. Somalia, which is recovering from decades of conflict, the political role of Sufi groups may be expected in a way or another.

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Somali Studies: *A Peer-Reviewed Academic Journal for Somali Studies* is a broad scope multidisciplinary academic journal devotes to Somali studies; published annually, in print and online forms, by the Institute for Somali Studies at Mogadishu University. ***Somali Studies*** aims to promote a scholarly understanding of Somalia, the Horn of Africa and the Somali diaspora communities around the globe. Special consideration is given to issues which are critical to the rebuilding of Somalia, a country recovering from a devastating civil war. ***Somali Studies*** is open access journal and all articles are freely available to read, print and download from the website of the institute, www.isos.so.

Published by Institute for Somali Studies
Hodan District, Near Km4 Square
Website: www.isos.so
Email: isos@mu.edu.so
Tel/Fax: +252 1 858118
Mogadishu, Somalia