Khānqāh

The institution of a residential teaching center for Ṣūfīs seems to have emerged in Iran with the formalization of Ṣūfī activity in the late tenth or eleventh century. Support for these religious institutions by the ruling elites gradually broadened and led to significant patronage in building khānqāhs and endowing stipends for the Ṣūfīs living there. Khānqāhs developed ritual functions in later periods, serving as centers for devotions such as listening to poetry or music and the performance of the dhikr and samā‘ ceremonies of specific Ṣūfī orders. Some Ṣūfī leaders were buried in their khānqāhs, thus making them into popular pilgrimage sites. The residential function of the khānqāh does not seem to be essential, and the name indicates the function performed by a space rather than any inherent physical structure, because the same buildings could shift their usage, for example by becoming schools.

The term is of Persian origin and probably derives from words meaning “a place of residence” (khāna-gāh) for Ṣūfīs, although many other etymologies have been suggested (Mīrā, 1990, pp. 55–64). Some scholars see a precedent for the khānqāh in Buddhist and Manichean activities in Iran. This institution has numerous regional
manifestations and has undergone a number of transformations in the premodern and modern periods, primarily because of the changing nature of institutional Sufism and its role in society.

Several other terms have a similar connotation. Zāwiyah, based on Arabic zawā, “to bring together, gather, contract, conceal,” also conveys the idea of withdrawing into a corner, or going into seclusion (Behrens-Abouseif, 1985, p. 116). Ribāt is an Arabic term that originally indicated a fortress or outpost for the defense of the faith, associated in Ṣūfī contexts with centers for Ṣūfī striving (jihād) against the lower self (nafs). Although some sources used the above three terms as equivalents, Fernandes (1988, p. 18) argues on the basis of Mamlūk endowment documents (waqfīyahs) that each had a distinct function. In Mamlūk Egypt, ribāṭs served as refuges for Ṣūfis as well as for the needy and homeless of both sexes. Tekke (Turkish) or takīyah (Arabic and Persian) is the term used for the Ṣūfī institution of the dervish lodge in Turkey and other parts of the Ottoman Empire. It is said to be derived from the Arabic root w-k-‘, which conveys the idea of a chamber in which one rests while being fed.

South Asia.

In the predominantly South Asian Chishtī order an institution for Ṣūfī activity was called jamāʿat khānah and was centered on the residence of the shaykh. Sections of these Ṣūfī complexes were named according to their particular functions—samāʿ maḥall (room for audition) or langar khāna (room for the preparation and distribution of food). Today they function predominantly as shrines to deceased saints where pilgrims can receive blessings or cures and make vows.

In contemporary Pakistan, the function of providing instruction to novices through contact with a living master and association with other spiritual aspirants has faded, and the buildings are in many cases converted to residential schools offering a standard madrasah
The students are young and seem to be there primarily for charity-based education rather than for individual spiritual guidance. One may speculate that this has to do with the decreasing charisma of the Ṣūfī teachers and the social pressures for young people to pursue education that is somewhat more economically productive than being a full-time disciple.

Turkey.

An article by Klaus Kreiser suggests that classical Ṣūfī tekkes in Turkey were generic, with no particular tarīqah affiliation. Tekkes often converted their function back and forth to being madrasahs, relocated, or switched tarīqah affiliation depending on the fortunes of the associated shaykh (1992, p. 51). Kreiser found that in 1870 in Istanbul there were 1,826 registered tekke residents drawn from various orders, the majority being Naqshbandīs. Many of the centers were very small (three or fewer permanent residents) (p. 52). However, the fact that few persons actually might have lived permanently in a khānqāh does not imply that the shaykh had only a small following: hundreds of disciples might attend Friday prayers or devotional practices at the center. Although the Turkish republic closed the tekkes in 1925, Ṣūfī activities continued in less public ways and are currently undergoing some revival in Turkey.

Egypt.

In Cairo “the spread of Sufism during the fourteenth century and its integration into popular religious life led to a gradual abandonment of the khānqāh's role as a place for seclusion and retreat. At the same time, mosques and madrasahs were opening their doors to Ṣūfī practices” (Behrens-Abouseif, 1985, p. 81). In the Egyptian context zāwiyahs as opposed to khānqāhs were characterized as being more open and associated with the popularization of Sufism rather than its elite-supported, formally organized and sanctioned forms. Khānqāhs in Cairo were often
linked with non-Egyptian Šūfīs who took up residence there and received official patronage. Zāwiyahs seem generally to have been built at the bequest of particular patrons, and some became waqfs on the death of the patron. From the thirteenth to the fifteenth century in Egypt, the term zāwiyah referred to a structure built for the shaykh of a particular order to serve as a residence for him and a meeting place for his disciples. When the shaykh was buried there after his death, the zāwiyah would become a shrine. After this period in Egypt institutional Sufism and the khānqāh declined; but since popular Sufism flourished, the functions and architectural importance of the zāwiyah increased.

In the late Mamlūk period, the separate designation khānqāh disappeared as part of a general decline in institutionalized Sufism. The designation zāwiyah grew in importance, and buildings called zāwiyahs, tekiyyas and ribāṭs were built by patrons in Ottoman Cairo.

Today in popular Egyptian Sufism, the ritual or performative aspects of Šūfī devotions are often performed in mosques. Zāwiyahs may be founded by individual shaykhs and persist in functioning as hospitality centers for those who travel the circuit of shrine celebrations (mawlids). See Mawlid.

North and East Africa.

In regions of Africa as diverse as Libya, the Sudan, and Somalia, khānqāh-like institutions called zāwiyahs or jamāʿāt emerged in the nineteenth century. R. S. O’Fahey (1990) suggests that these Šūfī communities established in Africa were a novelty for this part of the Islamic world, arising out of the contemporary movement of reformist Sufism. Noteworthy in this context were the effects of these Šūfī institutions in forging loyalties that tended to transcend tribal and social boundaries. For example, in southern Somali society jamāʿāts are bases for Šūfī mediators (wadaads) of local clan rivalries. The wadaads usually gather around charismatic shaykhs in
this region and form self-sufficient agricultural enclaves. In Libya, Sanūsī zāwiyahs were an effective form of organization in resisting European encroachment.

Iran.

The role of Sufism and Şūfī shrine complexes increased in prominence in fourteenth-century Mongol Iran. At this time Şūfī ritual became institutionalized, and relations of Şūfīs with the political authorities were important. This link between the state and Sufism can explain some of the vicissitudes of the Şūfī orders and their institutions in the Şafavid and Qājār periods. The Qājār period basically saw an increase in the establishment of Niʿmatullāhī khānqāhs when this order was patronized by the state as a balance to the power of the ‘ulamā‘. During recent decades some Persian orders, in particular the Niʿmatullāhī, have established khānqāhs in a number of cities in America, Europe, and other parts of the world.

See also Niʿmatullāhīyah; Sufism; and Zāwiyah.

Bibliography