| **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

# Religion and Culture Intersected in 2M's Mediated Discourse: *Toruq Alarifeen Program* as a Case Study

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| **ABSTRACT**

Early studies focused mainly on demystifying Sufism, but little has been said about its mediated broadcasting to the Moroccan audience. This article explores the ways Moroccan public media channels the Sufi dichotomies. Specifically, I investigate the binary oppositions of cultural rites versus Sufi esoteric practices through a reflexive thematic analysis. A purposeful inspection of *Turouq Alarefeen's* TV program is gauged to identify the manifestation of Sufi and cultural aspects in this TV show as a sample for this study. Three themes are selected to contextualize the discussion: language absurdity, esotericism versus exotericism, and glorification of the *shaykhs*. The qualitative methodology seems to serve my research better as it is convenient for the nature of the subject matter. I have worked on the most recent ten program episodes as samples representing mainly an ongoing Sufi TV show. The main findings reveal how the Media reproduce the mystery of Sufism and the fact that coverage tends to amalgamate cultural dimensions of popular Islam with Sufi esoteric scopes.

## 1. Introduction

By looking at how Sufism is presented to the Moroccan audience, there seem to be several fine lines between religious elements and culturally rooted rituals in the country. This ambiguity stems from a subtle mixing of the official state religion.[1] and the popular[2] One. The complexity of such a case is fueled by the lack of general guidelines to label and order events according to their categories. The ambiguity prevails among the large audience in some religious festivities like the birthday of the Prophet Mohammed. Some places like Moulay Idriss Zarhoune[3] attract considerable crowds where Sufi practices mingle with popular ones. In an ideal situation, the role of media would describe, filter, and classify events following a logic that everyone can understand. In other words, journalists behoove to be clear about the Sufi spiritual events and differentiate between them and the inherited traditions, such as the notion of *baraka*[4]  And veneration of the saints.

This writing attempts to fill a gap that considers the relationship between media and Sufism. The focus thus is oriented towards 2M, the Moroccan channel with a very unorthodox editorial line. Such an outlet is purposefully envisioned given its diverse audience. The choice might have been a religious channel like the *Assadissa*, Mohamed VI channel of the Holy Qur'an, which is a religious-oriented Channel. In such a case, the audience is selective, and the findings of such a paper might not be generalized.

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[1] The Sunni Maliki Islam as interpreted by the Ashaarit theological school.

[2] How the masses explain and interpret religion is often associated with visiting different shrines for different reasons in Morocco.

[3] It is where the founder of the first Muslim dynasty (789-927) in Morocco, Moulay Idriss, is buried. His mausoleum is one of the famous in the country, and Sufi groups come to such places from all over Morocco

[4] It is a term that often describes the spiritual blessing people seek when they visit the shrines. It is described in Merriam Webster as an indwelling spiritual force and divine gift inhering in saints, charismatic leaders, and natural objects.

This paper, therefore, provides an external perspective into the relationship between media and Sufism in Morocco in the sampled episodes of the TV show. The program should be at its highest regarding its aesthetics and quality, considering that Dr. Ahmed El kheligh, the presenter, has previously contributed to the Moroccan visual field by staging several Sufism-related TV programs. In other words, this program seems to be an extension of previous ones.

## 2. Review of Literature and Conceptual Framework

By skimming the literature that tackles Sufism, it seems that a minute of attention has been devoted to how media channels the Sufi content. In this context, most of the writings about Sufi orders in Morocco often stem from members of such orders where objectivity might not always be extant. However, various scholars such as Mohammed Eljabiri (2001) in his work, *The Structure of Arab Thought*, and Abdellah Hammoudi (1997) in his masterpiece, *Master and Disciples,* have contributed to casting light on various aspects of Sufism in Morocco. Many non-Moroccan scholars have tackled Sufism to demystify a foreign culture and religion from an orientalist perspective. Some of these scholars include early research in the field, Vincent Crapanzano, who titled his work, *The Hamadsha: Study in Moroccan Ethnosphychiatry.* He deals with some of the profane practices in popular culture. In the last decade, Emilio Spadola (2014), a prominent scholar with several contributions in the field, studies how digitalizing some of the facets of popular Islam have become. These works have formed a  social consciousness on Sufism where Culture, religion, and spirituality intersect, but more research is required to shed light on such intersection.

The scope of Sufism in Morocco is one of the accessible yet reluctant areas where the image gets blurry once it is perceived from a mediatic perspective. The country is reputed internationally to be hosting a vast number of saints. However, there is little to be explored in our national media, and even the literature has reservedly contributed to such a venture. Khalid Touzani (2015) compared such intentional ambiguity to an iceberg; what people discern is just the tip, while the rest needs many divers to reveal its reality (77). Touzani, in this context, is describing the texts and the importance of their interpretation in the Sufi area. The ambiguity accordingly seems to be on purpose. The representation of Sufism, thus, goes beyond the linguistic tools into the paradigm of wondrous.[5]. The media seems to consent with the Sufi writings by making Sufism look alien in a country where the state is betting on such a field to shift religious directives towards a moderate apparatus.

The status quo of the media regarding Sufism might have some repercussions on the field from the general opinion. Sufism is a mysterious field for most people, and if the remedies do not help render it accessible to people, misjudgment and stereotypes will surely prevail. The profane and the sacred will eventually be mingled, and customs might be taken for religious rites. The challenging aspect in this regard is representing people who are unwilling to be represented. The Sufis themselves are looking to be distinguished by their ways in seeking their truth; as Adonis (2016) puts it: "The Sufi reject the simplification and go on to say that the orthodoxy does not represent the whole truth" (158). If the orthodoxy does not represent the truth, how can a journalist present the truth to the audience? As complex as it seems, people need to know when Sufism starts and when it turns into a cultural rite.

Encoding messages requires considering several factors that include chiefly the audience. The TV structure as a medium shapes the content of the message as several ideological, institutional, and organizational elements interplay. The production thus becomes a set of complex operations where the message is hammered from diverse angles. In this regard, Stuart Hall (1998) argues that:

> Though television production structures originate the television discourse, they do not constitute a closed system. They draw topics, treatments, agendas, events, personnel, audience images, 'definitions of the situation' from other sources, and other discursive formations within the broader socio-cultural and political structure of which they are a differentiated part (119).

The audience seems to influence the message's encoding since they somehow push the encoder to consider all the mentioned elements. Nevertheless, they are receivers in a production perspective in such a circulatory information model. The Sufi message has additional complexities given its mysterious nature and symbolic language.

In the audience's perception, turning such practices into notions and facts is hard labor, and thus it is sometimes hard to distinguish between what is religious and what is cultural. The Sufi order would perceive themselves or their master as the "ideal" as Raymond Williams (1998) put it in his categorization of Culture, "the ideal in which culture is a state or a process of human perfection, in terms of certain absolute universal values" (48). Williams, here, refers to everything as Culture. To Judge, subsequently, the Sufi

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[5] The Sufis usually use Ala'jeeb to indicate certain miraculous aspects that brand some Shaykhs' lives. Such miracles are characterized by secrecy except among the Sufis themselves.

activities would become very daring in this context if, supposedly, Sufi orders were asked to classify themselves. The same can be said about ordinary people who are considered saints to master the essence of religion and hence venerate them perfectly.

## 3. Methodology

This study is part of broader research on Sufism in Morocco, The Representation of Sufism in the Morocco Media: An Analysis of Sufism Dichotomies in Toruq Alarifeen TV program. The project considers interviews and two focus groups as an instrument to complete the TV show's content analysis findings. I opt for a qualitative approach, given its assets in humanities. The strength of such an approach is that it allows the researcher to set specific observations that are expended to produce certain theories and conclusions. Creswell (2018) contends that the researcher inductively presents narrower themes into broader ones (263). Researchers also use deductive thinking to build themes constantly being checked against the data. Qualitative research seems inductive as it allows the use of measures from the data collection and in data analysis and lets concepts emerge from the data (Scheier28). The inductive–deductive logic process means that the qualitative researcher uses complex reasoning skills throughout the research process.

This article intrinsically takes the form of new research but on an existing research topic and in different social and political contexts. My strategy is case study-oriented as it seems better to serve the nature of this subject. It is better placed to answer the research questions this article raises; how do some traditional media outlets such as 2M reproduce the ambiguity of the Sufi field? Margrit Schreier (2012) comments on such a strategy by stating that "The main advantage of the case-oriented strategy is the in-depth understanding that you gain from your case" (26). Such a focus of the *Toruq Alarifeen* program will allow for overall scrutiny of the themes presented. I have opted for such a program as a case study given its ongoing diffusion as it is still taking place every week. Besides, the TV outlet where it is broadcasted is one of the most-watched public televisions in the country. Therefore, three themes have emanated from the analysis of the TV show, as revealed in some examples in the result section of this paper.

Before exploring the findings of the ten episodes under study, it is crucial to provide a succinct description of the program following Creswell's suggestion in this respect. The TV. program, Toruq Alarifeen, started six years ago to shed light on the life of some of the prominent Sufi mystics all over the country. This ongoing program is produced by God News company, directed by Ahmed Bouaroua and presented by Dr. Ahmed El kheligh. It is a weekly program that 2M TV. Channel broadcasts every Friday at 5:30 P.M. The length of the program ranges between 10 and 15 minutes per episode. The soundtrack used belongs to the Ibn Arabi band. El kheligh uses standard Arabic, which incorporates some poetry from distinguished Sufi poets like Jallal Eddine Rumi. The program adopts a narration style where events related to the saint are presented. The closing credit of the episodes mentions a thank you note to the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Endowment, which somehow gives the TV show an official push from the highest religious institution in the country.

## 4. Results

### *4.1. Esotericism versus Exotericism*

The two notions of esotericism[6] and exotericism[7] They are almost omnipresent in all the program's episodes. The speaker either introduces them directly or refers to them implicitly. For instance, in the episode of April 30th, 2021, Ahmed EL Kheligh opens the episode by discussing how both the esoteric and exoteric sides of Sufism must reflect the core of Islam. He states that "if the Sufi revelation (kashf) contradicts with the Qur'an and Sunnah, the Sufi should resort to these latter instead and let *kashf* away" (El kheligh, April 30th, 01:00-01:09). For him, this is a way to demonstrate how the Sufi doctrine does not contradict the core of Shari'ah. So, he is taking a self-justifying stance regarding the Sufis. For him, their practices comply with conventional Islam.

Throughout the program, the presenter would refer to one of the orders in the way it incorporates both sides of Sufism. For instance, he discusses how the Chadhili[8] Order strikes a demonstrable balance between the inward aspect and the outward one in combining the teachings of the Qur'an and the core of the Sufi doctrine. El Kheligh states that the renowned names of the Chadhili order combined all of this. They were, accordingly, managing the *dhaher* and *batin* between *kashf* and *rassm* equally. He stated several non-Moroccans scholars who converted to Islam, such as Éric Geoffroy. His description of such well-known names indicated that they mastered Sufism and Islam's inward and outward dimension. The two notions are mentioned seven times; the speaker mentions them accordingly.

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[6] It refers to the inward side of religion; scholars would often resort to the term esotericism. This latter is widely used in Sufism since it is a critical stage the Sufi people must go through. In other words, for Sufis, their rituals are mostly found and undertaken in an esoteric stage.

[7] It stands for the outer side of religion, manifests everywhere in the Islamic world. It is referred to as the visible world (*Alalam Adhaher*).

[8] The order was established by Abû al-Hasan Alchadhili Ali ibn Abdillah ibn Abd al-Jabbar Alchadhili from Ghumarah Morocco. His intellectual journey started from age 6, under the guidance of Shayekh Abi Sa'id, for about 19 years to learn about religious lessons such as Qur'an, hadith, fiqh, tawhid, and others.

The duality of inward versus outward practices was revealed by defining the outward acts that lead to the inward ones. El Kheligh explains how some of the practices that the mystics perform are inevitable to reach the ultimate stations of Sufism. Some of these practices operate in the cause-and-effect paradigm; excelling in exoteric practice confirms the esoteric one. El kheligh comes up with some examples in this context: "Poverty and patience are two stations that give the impression that the mystic wanted to torture himself by choosing such stations, and they are punishing themselves with a lot of efforts and absence from the ordinary— also, abandoning life with an understanding of priests. Nevertheless, the essence of Poverty and patience in this context is rather a confirmation matter" (07:08-07:58). Poverty, therefore, is not an end but just a means to confirm one's willingness to transcend earthly desires. The state and stages must be confirmed and assured for a mystic to reach a vision. According to what this episode is advocating, the latter is one of the highest stages of esoterism as it is only achievable for genuine mystics.

### 4.2 Glorification of the Shaykhs the Overstatements of their Names

The presenter exaggerates their depiction by looking at how the Sufi mystics are introduced in various episodes by providing an overwhelming list of names. El Kheligh mentions the full family name every time a Sufi Shaykh is mentioned. These names sometimes are composed of up to five words, such as the case of the following statement "The order gave birth to many renowned figures including some of the contemporary ones such as the learned and the lecturer Shaykh of Islam Imam Maulana Mohamed Ibn Jaafar Alkatani Alhassani, who is buried in Fez and who wrote *Salwat Alanfas" (*El kheligh, April 30th, 02:15-02:35). To pre-modify him, the mystic counts six words, Learnt, Lecturer, Shaykh of Islam, Imam, Maulana. Three names as his; Mohamed Ibn Jaafar. In addition to two words to post, modify him: Alkattani, Alhasani. Moreover, an entire phrase to shed light on his work. The speaker, thus, used eleven words in total to speak about Shaykh Mohammed Ibn Jaafar.

In addition to the overstatement of the names of the Sufi mystics in all the episodes, the speaker generally opts for the glorification of the Sufi mystics such as the ones of the Chadhili order. El-khaligh places the mystics in a very high position regarding their intellectual contributions and Sufi positions. He opts for descriptive language showing their achievement and where they were born or died to indicate such dimension. Further, he selects some glorifying terms for their description to place them in very high positions. One of these terms is Maulana, which is repeated five times. In addition to the phrase, May Allah is pleased with them, which counts a frequency of five to ten times in each episode. In this context, it is important to mention that these terms and phrases are often used at the end of a given hadith by the Prophet Mohammed and sometimes to refer to companions of his. Such a model of description in the hadith seemed to be borrowed in this context of mystics to probably provide them with an aura as high as the Prophet and his companions.

### 4.3 Language Vagueness

The program's language repertoire is very high to the extent that it sometimes becomes challenging to decode its messages. El-khaligh seems to be very selective in choosing the language of the TV. Show. He encodes his massages so that even the intellectuals might need a dictionary to understand the phrases and words he uses. He would often employ verses from the classical Arab poetry of the different centuries, such as the Twelfth Century. For instance, in the episode of April 30th, he quotes the contemporary mystic Mohammed Alharak Elhassani Almaghribi *"dhikru Alilah bihi younalu ridahu wa yazoul aa'n basari alfouadi a'maahu. Kam qad sama bedawmehi men moukhlessin fihi fashraqa fi alwojudi salamu"* (El kheligh, April 30th, 12:23-12:43). This verse would be translated in order as follows: The praising of God by God is what grants his satisfaction, and the blindness of the heart disappears. Thanks to it, several faithful were elevated, and peace spread in the universe. The structure of such verse is very complex as the reader must finish reading the whole verse to understand it.

In addition to incorporating classical poetry, the TV program employs many abstract words and phrases in almost all the episodes under investigation. El-khaligh introduces several notions that seem unfamiliar to the ordinary audience. These notions rather belong to the Sufi jargon. These concepts sometimes even belong to the esoteric world, which is unknown to people who do not belong to the Sufi world. For instance, he uses *kashf* and *rasm*, which carry different connotations in a non-Sufi context; *kashf* means to reveal, and *rasm* means drawing. These words and phrases come in a duality, such as *dhaher wa batin (*esoteric and exoteric) and *shari'a wa haqiqa* (shari'a and truth). The speaker's speech is not linear in terms of the structure of the sentences and the ideas. Chronological order is absent in the content as El Khaligh combines different tenses and different periods. Therefore, it seems that both on the aesthetic level and the content, the language used transcends the norms of communication and channels a purely Sufi content.

### 5. Discussion

The subtleties of the Sufi mediated message necessitate a thorough investigation of the audience. The challenge that emerges in this context is related to the reciprocity aspect of the process. In other words, to what extent the meaning can be shared between the encoder and the audience and whether the interpretation is left to the latter. By looking at our case study, the reciprocity issue manifests as one of the arbitrary aspects of the relation of the journalist and the audience. *Toruq Alarifeen* is broadcast on 2M,

which is a public TV. Channel with a wide-ranging audience. In other words, the TV program is not presented in a thematic channel like a religious one. In such a case, the audience will be much more filtered, and the level of reciprocity eventually arises. A close look at the content of a sample episode of the program reveals other aspects that fuel the dichotomies and distort the shared meaning. These aspects are classified into three central themes to accurately describe and explore these dichotomized aspects.

*Toruq Alarifeen* TV. Show has eventually provided an angle for demystifying the audience's relationship and media content in Sufism. Establishing such a relation can be challenging, given the nature of the Sufi doctrine. The latter is a very delectate field where spirituality is a community practice rather than an individual act. However, preliminary conclusions can be drawn from inspecting the ten episodes' linguistic variables and the themes. The thematic analysis of these episodes has been constructive in casting light on the subtleties of its content. Such a program mainly targets an audience who should know the field of Sufism very well and grasp the different signals the presenter brings into the front. Nevertheless, the main finding highlighted about this program is that its content is supposed to be for a large audience. Still, it seems significantly eliminate a more extensive stratum of the audience. This aspect has become one of the significant sources of dichotomies.

The Sufi duality of popular versus elite takes different shapes whenever Sufi content is inspected. El Kheligh's language transcends the ordinary level use into more sophisticated jargon embedded with symbolic and iconic expressions. Such use has been a noticeable feature in the ten sampled episodes of the program. Viewers of the program would not grasp what is being presented if they are not educated; if supposedly they are educated, they will get the primary meaning, especially whenever Sufi states and stations are introduced in the discussion. In other words, the program targets an educated audience familiar with Sufism who can contextualize and decode the enigmatic language. Thus, it seems that the program is for an elite audience where a sociolect.[9] Is employed. A choice that the Sufis can only appreciate while it makes the meaning, and the intended message goes beyond the understanding of the non-Sufi. Here, it is a recap of the dichotomies that characterize the field.

## 6. Conclusion

The sampled episodes have closely investigated how 2M presents the Sufi content to its wide-ranging audience as a famous TV outlet among Moroccans. The content is presented in standard refined Arabic. Sometimes, aesthetic aspects overtake the intended message; consequently, its decoding seems to go beyond the grasp of a large segment of the Moroccan audience. The choice of the language, the implementation of the Sufi dimensions in the program, and the overpraising of the saints make the program suits a Sufi audience par-excellence. It might even be somehow reductionist if we consider the background of numerous recipients. They are addressed in a language that does not consider their intellectual levels. The program would probably have more impacts if it had been broadcast in a religious TV outlet. Other possibilities would be implemented, such as notifying the audience that some of the aspects of the program might not be well understood, simplifying the language or even incorporating Moroccan Arabic and maybe Berber (Tamazight) language.

To avoid misconceptions and labelling of the Sufi activities, Sufism should be contextualized in its natural framework. Such a context should be related to the esoteric dimension where an individual's spirituality matters more than a cultural manifestation of certain rituals. The Moroccan media ought to focus more on this by calling things by their appropriate names and highlighting other aspects as purely cultural; this is because the ambiguity of Sufism, in the context of Morocco, is created from the way people have perceived it. The situation gets pervasive by looking at the media since it is unclear what essence Sufism could be to the large audience. The multiplicity of standpoints has created many obstacles to the perception and sometimes deviate from its initial cause of truth and purification. The boundaries have been blurry because people are not often lost in placing religious and social events in their context. What makes it more challenging is that there seems to be a mixture of purely esoteric Sufi practices and inherited traditions that Morocco has from various civilizations witnessed throughout its history.

This study's significant limitations are the lack of previous works in the field of Sufism besides the mysteriousness that characterizes some of its facets. Although the scope of literature is enormous as far as Sufism is concerned, every minute has been said about its relation to media. An additional limitation concerns the enigmatic aspect and the secrecy that marks it once a researcher tries to demystify some of the hidden aspects of esoterism. There are limitations regarding the availability of sources in English that Moroccan scholars have written, as most of their writings are either in Arabic or translated from Arabic. I would highly recommend, for future researchers, a complete immersion in the activities of one of the Sufi orders or at least one of their several festivals. An immersion will surely help them get acquainted with such a world; meanwhile, the familiarity with the terminology will be an added tool for the researchers as the language is very iconic, and the Sufi tend to use many symbols.

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[9] It is often used to refer to a dialect of a particular social class.

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