

A Response to Prof. Mark Sedgwick: “Neo-Sufism in the 1960s: Idries Shah”

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Prof. Sedgwick discussed one of the most successful figures of the non-Islamic universal ‘Neo-Sufism’ movement in the 20th century Western societies, Idrīs Shāh. Prof. Sedgwick analyzed his life, books, promotion, and criticism against him. Through these analyses, Prof. Sedgwick considered the nature of his thoughts and activities, and concluded that his success, which prevailed over criticism from orientalist scholars, is ascribed to the following five points: (1) he responded to the social needs for alternative religiosity in the Western societies, (2) it successfully combined Sufism, folk wisdom and other alternative religiosity as like Gurdjieff, (3) managed well to promote himself and his famous followers, (4) utilized publisher, and (5) validated himself by using names of universities and self-presentation as Grand Shaykh of Ṣūfīs originating from an exiled Afghan aristocratic family, which gave him the oriental exotic mystic atmosphere popular among Western people.

Prof. Sedgwick’s paper provides a lot of knowledge on this outstanding Westernized non-Islamic ‘Neo-Ṣūfī’, Idrīs Shāh, who is not well known among Japanese researchers of Islamic studies. The Japanese academic society of Islamic studies has paid some attention to Western acceptance of Sufism as a sort of Oriental mystical spirituality, which is similar to Zen and Yoga, but not as a part of Islam religion. However, as yet, there is not much progress in Japan in serious research on ‘Neo-Sufism’ in the West.

In addition to the limitation of knowledge and the underdevelopment of research, the difference in usage of the term of ‘Neo-Sufism’ might strengthen Japanese researchers’ impression that this lecture suggests something novel. Japanese researchers devote the term of ‘Neo-Sufism’ to a form of Ṭaṣawwuf or Sufism that claims strict adherence to the Prophetic Sunna and Ḥadīth, represented by the argumentation and activity of Shāh Walī-Allāh (d. 1763). At the same time, they also use the term to refer to relatively new established Ṭarīqas or Ṣūfī orders. Ṭarīqas such as Naqshbandīya Mujaddidīya or Sanūsīya have been established since the 18th century and attempted to exclude practices deviating from Sharī‘a. They have played important role in the purification movement of Islam. Their organizations are well constructed as compared with the more traditional Ṭarīqas. They utilized these organizations to motivate Muslim people towards resistance against Western

colonialism. This is the general understanding and usage of the term ‘Neo-Sufism’ in Japan.¹⁾

That difference in meaning and usage of the term ‘Neo-Sufism’ between Prof. Sedgwick and Japanese researchers clarifies the fact that two opposing tendencies have been founded in modern-contemporary Sūfism. One has attempted to separate Sufism from Islam and to transform it into universal wisdom in contemporary Western societies, whereas the other has made efforts to adapt Sufism to the strict Sharī‘a oriented *al-Islām* in modern-contemporary Muslim societies.

Prof. Sedgwick’s analysis of Idrīs Shāh makes us aware that his ‘Neo-Sufism’ is very typical of alternative religiosity and has many elements similar to other alternative religiosities. For instance, one of the most powerful Japanese alternative form of religiosity rooted in Buddhism, Soka-Gakkai, interprets the words of great medieval Buddhist priests as universal wisdom, and claims harmony with other religions. Their spiritual leader has accumulated many titles of honorary professor or honorary doctor from universities all over the world. He holds interviews with famous leaders of different religions. They also have their own press and publisher to promote their thoughts and achievements extensively.²⁾ The strategies that Idrīs Shāh used in order to spread his ‘Neo-Sufism’ into Western societies were very typical of the alternative religiosity in modernized societies, i.e. citing words and concepts attributed to traditional religious literature as universal folk wisdom, interchanging with other religiosity, keeping apart from single traditional religion, using the authority of universities to authorize their claims and achievements, and advertising through publications.

On the other hand, when we look at Idrīs Shāh’s ‘Neo-Sufism’ from the perspective of Islamic studies, we seemingly receive the impression that it can be hardly categorized as ‘Taṣawwuf’ or ‘Sufism’, because he separated it from Islam. Nevertheless, we cannot say that he was not an heir to the ethos of ‘Taṣawwuf’ either, because, as Prof. Sedgwick pointed out, Idrīs Shāh did not deny Islam, neither did he deny that he himself was a Muslim.

Not only in the case of Idrīs Shāh, but also for Şūfīs generally, relations between Sufism and Islam, and the position of Sufism in or toward Islam have been various and problematic, though it is obvious that Sufism has been involved in Islam since its emergence. Indeed, in the history of Sufism, Şūfīs who did not emphasize their Muslimhood were not rare.

At the level of Islamic mystical thinking, it is very essential for the Şūfī to be a Muslim. Şūfī thinkers have composed an indispensable part of Islamic intellectuals since the 10th century. At the level of the Şūfī practices, however, Şūfīs were not and still are not seen only as Muslims, but also as persons blessed with having supernatural powers beyond borders between Islam and other religions. It is often argued that the inter-religious or syncretic nature of Şūfīs made a great contribution to the spread of Islām into the populace, especially in Southern and South-Eastern Asia as well as Sub-

Sahara Africa. Therefore, it is often argued that among Muslims this syncretism has caused strong criticism against Sufism, since the 18th century and until today. While 'Wahhābism' is recognized as the most remarkable example of this criticism, some Ṣūfī leaders, like Aḥmad ibn Idrīs (d. 1873), had criticized the syncretic nature of existing traditional Sufism. This criticism of traditional Sufism from within Ṣūfīs themselves has developed into the new type of Ṭarīqa, which is called 'Neo-Sufism' in Japanese Islamic studies.

Such elastic nature observed in the history of Sufism might allow us to see the Ṣūfīs as activists who devote themselves to spreading their practice and thoughts in given social situations. In order to accomplish their devotion, they continue to devise different practices and thoughts that they consider appropriate to the different social situations surrounding them. We should be aware of the fact that Sufism cannot be reduced to a single fixed concept. What we call Sufism consists of practices and thoughts that persons who recognize themselves as Ṣūfīs keep on changing according to changes occurring in the societies they inhabit.

In this sense, the contrastive tendencies categorized by researchers under the same name of 'Neo-Sufism', that is Idrīs Shāh's universal Sufism and strict Sharī'a observing Ṭarīqa, can be understood as two faces of accommodation by Ṣūfīs, to the societies in which they live. The former, that is living in Western societies, took advantage of the fact that new alternative religiosity came into fashion. The latter, acting in 'oriental' Muslim societies, has been forced to cope with criticism from the purification or Salafist movements of Islam as well as Western colonialism and orientalism.

Based on this comment, I would like to raise a question regarding the relationship between Idrīs Shāh's 'Neo-Sufism' and Muslims. In his paper Prof. Sedgwick repeatedly pointed out that Idrīs Shāh never described his Sufism as a part of Islam, and he succeeded in making his Sufism accepted as universal spirituality apart from Islam, among Western people. This point of the argument is very clear and well proved. On the other hand, how did and do Muslims see his Neo-Sufism? Are they ignorant of it altogether? Or do some Muslims who have some knowledge of it praise or criticize it? Especially nowadays when the number of Muslim immigrants and their children in Western societies are increasing, is there any evidence of influence of Idrīs Shāh's 'Neo-Sufism' on those Muslims living and growing in Western societies and if so, what is their reaction toward it? And, is there a case of Western native people being led to convert to Islam through acceptance of Shāh's Non-Islamic universal 'Neo-Sufism'?

Notes

- 1) Kazuo Otsuka, “Neo-Sufism,” in: Kazuo Otsuka et. al. eds., *Iwanami Encyclopedia of Islam*, Iwanami-Shoten, 2002 (大塚和夫「ネオ・スーフィズム」大塚和夫他編『岩波イスラーム辞典』岩波書店、2002年) . The Japanese understanding and usage of the term of ‘Neo-Sufism’ seem to be based on the works of Nehemia Levtzion, John Voll, and R. S. O’Fahey, as Prof. Sedgwick pointed out in the discussion. Nehemia Levtzion and John O. Voll eds., *Eighteenth-Century Renewal and Reform in Islam* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1987). John Voll, *Islam, Continuity and Change in the Modern World* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1994). R. S. O’Fahey, *The Enigmatic Saint: Ahmad Ibn Idris and Idrisi Tradition* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1994).
- 2) SOKAnet: 創価学会公式サイト <http://www.sokanet.jp/index.html>, (accessed August 19, 2015).