

The Rifāʿiyya Order in Asia Minor (A Study of its History, Doctrines, Practices, and Relations with Other Orders)

Hadi Sadeghi

PhD Graduate in Persian Language and Literature, University of Tabriz, Tabriz, Iran, (Corresponding Author); Email: hadi.sadeghi@tabrizu.ac.ir

Asadollah Vahed

Professor, Department of Persian Language and Literature, University of Tabriz, Tabriz, Iran; Email: avahed@tabrizu.ac.ir

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Introduction

Ahmad al-Rifai attracted many followers and founded an order based on self-annihilation (fana), charismatic acts (karamat), and miraculous practices. In the Sufi tradition of Mesopotamia, two main currents are recognized: the Suhrawardiyya and the Rifaiyya. The Rifais, who lived for years in the marshes of Basra, gained a special status by emphasizing Ahmad al-Rifai's lineage and the continuity of the tradition of Arab Sufis. They were the only such order to achieve widespread influence in Asia Minor (Anatolia) and established lodges (zawiyas) in cities such as Cairo, Damascus, and Jerusalem. In Anatolia, the followers of this order were also known as the Ahmadiyya. The Rifais played a significant role in spreading Islam among the Mongols. It is reported that one of them, by displaying miraculous acts, caused Abaqa Khan to convert to Islam, and, according to narratives, two Iranian Rifai Sufis prevented Hulagu Khan from persecuting Muslims. Spectacles such as snake-eating, fire-walking, and demonstrating supernatural powers attracted the Mongols, who were familiar with magic and sorcery, earning the Rifais respect and influence within the Mongol court. Critics like Ibn Taymiyyah accused the Rifais of passivity and believed they facilitated the Mongols' easy domination over Muslims. Nevertheless, Mongol patronage strengthened and expanded the Rifai order's position in the Islamic world, particularly in Anatolia. Their presence and activities are mentioned in historical and literary sources from the 7th and 8th centuries AH, such as Aflaki's *Manaqib al-'Arifin* and Ibn Battuta's *Rihla*.

The present research introduces and analyzes the intellectual foundations and mystical practices of the Rifāʿiyya, seeking to explain its connections and doctrinal differences with groups such as the Futuwwa (Ahl al-Futuwwa), the Mevlevi (Mawlawiyya), and the Hurufiyya. A review of the background shows that no comprehensive Persian-language research has been conducted in this field to date, and existing studies have only provided a general introduction to the Rifai order in Arab lands. Relying on the order's influence in Asia Minor, this study analyzes its historical and intellectual position among the Sufi currents of Anatolia.

Research Findings

The Rifā'iyya order entered Anatolia in the late Seljuk period, concurrently with the formation of the Mevlevi order. The first signs of their presence, led by Sayyid Taj al-Din ibn Ahmad al-Rifai, are recorded in 7th-century AH Konya. However, the main expansion of the order in the region is owed to the activities of Sayyid Ahmad Kuchak al-Rifai (grandson of the great Ahmad al-Rifai) in the 8th century AH. His lodge (khanqah) in Amasya became an important center, and his followers were active in various cities such as Konya, Izmir, and Balıksir. Detailed reports by Ibn Battuta from his travels in Anatolia (circa 730 AH) indicate the influence, social status, and organized structure of the Rifais, who, like the akhis (futuwwa brotherhoods), hosted travelers. A noteworthy aspect is the attribution of the spiritual chain (silsila) of Yunus Emre, the great poet-mystic of 7th-8th century AH Anatolia, to the Rifai order. His chain of initiation (silsila) reaches back to Ahmad al-Rifai al-Kabir through Mahmud Hayrani, demonstrating the Rifai order's intellectual penetration into the region's Sufi fabric.

The distinguishing feature and main attraction of the Rifai order for the masses was their Sama' ceremonies accompanied by miraculous spectacles. These rituals included fire-walking, fire-eating, snake-handling, and inserting objects into the body without apparent injury. Although these practices had roots in the geography and traditions of the Iraqi regions (Batā'ih) and showed similarities to acts attributed to Husayn ibn Mansur al-Hallaj, they were welcomed and interpreted as "miracles" (karamat) within the social context of Asia Minor and among Turkoman tribes with shamanistic backgrounds. These displays attracted not only the common people but also the attention of rulers, including the Mongols. Other pillars of the order included an emphasis on poverty (faqr), the ritual of "donning the girdle" (tanura bastan— influenced by Qalandars and fityan), and a hierarchical system of master and disciple (muridi and murabbi) with specific ethical characteristics.

Despite its widespread historical presence and subsequent activities (including the revival of its lodges in Istanbul in the 9th and 13th centuries AH), the Rifai order never achieved a prominent and independent status comparable to major orders like the Mevlevi (Mawlawiyya) or the Bektashiyya in Anatolian Sufism. The primary reason for this was the order's Arab roots and its cultural difference from the dominant Iranian-Khorasani sphere that prevailed in Anatolia's mystical and cultural landscape. To survive and exert influence, the Rifai order was compelled to adopt a strategy of integration into the powerful native mystical currents. The Futuwwa (Ahl al-Futuwwa or Akhiyan) was one such powerful mystical movement that provided a suitable ground for Rifai integration. The structural and content similarities between Rifai treatises and Futuwwatnamas (manuals of futuwwa), and the mention of Rifai shaykhs in the genealogical documents (silsilas) of Futuwwa, attest to this deep connection. This assimilation was so profound that the Rifai order gradually became a branch of the Futuwwa, losing its original independent identity.

The Rifais also shared significant commonalities with the Qalandariyya in their itinerant lifestyle, miraculous displays, and some terminology (such as "miqraz randan" [shearing] and "sekka zadan" [stamping/minting]), and likely established close relations with them. In later periods, particularly from the 9th century AH onward, the Rifai order also interacted with and was influenced by the Bektashiyya

(as a gathering point for various beliefs) and the Hurufiyya (in terms of letter symbolism and esoteric writing).

Conclusion

The Rifai order, as one of the oldest active mystical orders in Anatolia, played a significant role in diversifying the region's Sufi landscape. However, its Arab, non-native nature and the strength of the Iranian-Khorasani Sufi culture prevented it from attaining an independent and prominent position. The ultimate fate of the Rifai order in Anatolia was not competition, but gradual integration and absorption into powerful native mystical currents, particularly the widespread Futuwwa movement. This integration allowed its teachings and some of its practices to continue in a new form; nevertheless, it never attained the level of status held by the Mevlevi and Bektashiyya orders in Asia Minor.

Keywords: Rifā'īyya Order, Aḥmad al-Rifā'ī, Asia Minor, Islamic Mysticism, Ahl-i Futuwwa.