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[Interview] Spotlight on: Mark Sedgwick – Sufism in Latin America

Author: Mark Sedgwick, interview and introduction by Ken Chitwood

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## Spotlight on: Mark Sedgwick – Sufism in Latin America

Interview and introduction by Ken Chitwood

While working on a project charting the landscape of Islamic outreach centers, mosques, and organizations across Latin America and the Caribbean, I started to notice Sufi communities in places I did not expect: a Ni'matullāhī order in central Mexico, a stone-built *dargah* (shrine) in Patagonia, and a Uruguayan Naqshbandiyya branch under the name of Instituto Jabí. Coming across each, I started to wonder what connections, relationships, and moments led to the construction of these locales and the establishment of such communities. As I started to dig deeper into the networks and individuals who made the founding of these Sufi *turuq* possible, I came across the work of Mark Sedgwick, who conducted his research on Sufism in Latin America in 2018, a year before I began working on the cartography project in 2019. His research – in a sense, a mapping of its own – helped me trace some of the networks I was encountering and identify undiscovered nodes in places such as Chile and Brazil.

Altogether, the impression that emerged from my reading of Sedgwick's work, and my own research, was of a lattice of ideas, individuals, and institutions that connected Sufis and others in a complex and crisscrossing matrix that spanned Egypt and Argentina, Turkey and Mexico, Iran and Brazil, Afghanistan and Uruguay. In the interview that follows – and in the literature provided below – readers are invited to explore the intricate and entangled narrative of Sufism in Latin America, which spills beyond the region's geographic boundaries and connects these communities with Muslims and others across the globe. Not only does this serve as an introduction to an understudied and underappreciated field of study within *both* global Islam *and* Latin America, but perhaps as a provocation to pick up where the threads of Sedgwick's research end. As he writes in the following interview, most Sufi groups in the region “have not been studied in much detail” and there remains a great deal to consider, appreciate, and understand.

**You have written the chapter on Sufism in Latin America for the forthcoming Brill handbook on Sufism in Western contexts, which is the first ever general historical survey on this topic. But first, tell us a little about your research interests more broadly.**

I work mostly on Islam in the modern period, that is to say from about the 1860s onwards. Normally I work on the Middle East and Europe, but I have been interested in Latin America ever since I was a history undergraduate, and at one point even considered doing a PhD on Latin American economic history. But in the end I did my PhD on Sufism in the Sudan, Egypt, and Malaysia.

I became interested in Sufism in the West when an Italian colleague introduced me to some Sufis in Milan who belonged to an order I had been studying in the Sudan. That encounter with Milanese Sufis led me to more Sufis in other parts of Europe, and then the United States. In 2016 I published *Western Sufism: From the Abbasids to the New Age* with Oxford University Press, in an attempt to tell the whole story of the Western relationship with Sufism. It involved tracing Sufism right back to the Abbasids, before anything that can be called “the West” really existed, to show how Sufism had always been part of a larger, general philosophical culture that spread beyond Islam. In 2019, I went one step further, editing a collection on *Global Sufism* with Francesco Piraino, again an Italian scholar, but not the one who had first introduced me to Western Sufism. *Global Sufism* was published by Hurst, and its title was inspired by Roel Meijer’s superb *Global Salafism*, published by Hurst in 2009.

**You have recently surveyed Sufi movements and communities in Latin America. Where did this interest begin? What was your first clue that there was a narrative to be told here?**

Most existing work on Sufism outside the Muslim world, including most of my own work, has focused on Sufism in North America and in Europe. There is almost nothing on Sufism in Latin America in English. One exception is the Murabitun in Chiapas, Mexico. During the Zapatista revolt of the 1990s, the Murabitun, a European group who are of Sufi origin if not exactly Sufi, turned up and started converting people to Islam, initially with great success. That was such an unexpected development that it really attracted attention, including mine. That was the first time I thought about Sufism in Latin America.

Then, in 2007, I met Professor Francisco García Bazán at a conference in Germany. Professor García Bazán is an Argentinian philosopher, and one of Latin America's leading authorities on René Guénon, a French philosopher who became a Sufi and moved to Cairo, where he died in 1951 as Shaykh Abd al-Wahid Yahya. I have done a lot of work on Guénon and his followers and their influence over the years, starting with a book, *Against the Modern World*, in 2004, and Professor García Bazán told me all about the reception of the works of Guénon in Argentina, a fascinating story. I decided then that I should go back to this if ever I had the chance.

Then in 2018, I did have the chance, that is to say a sabbatical and some funding for fieldwork. A search online revealed multiple Sufi groups in four countries: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Mexico. Which is not a great surprise, I suppose. Other countries had one or two groups, but none as many as those four. So off I went.

**What are some of the most surprising and/or insightful aspects of Sufism in Latin America that you came across in the course of your research? A certain community, a particular network, a specific movement or individual?**

In many ways, Sufism in Latin America today resembles Sufism in Europe and the US in the 1970s and 1980s. It is mostly a phenomenon for well-educated spiritual seekers, as it once was in London and New York. That has been changing recently in Europe and the US, as there are now substantial and well-established Muslim minorities of immigrant origin, and a lot of European Sufis now come from those minorities. This has changed things a lot. But this has not happened in Latin America, as patterns of immigration have been different. The original Latin American Arab communities that started to form during the nineteenth century have now mostly integrated, and of course many Arab immigrants were not even Muslim in the first place. I have only found one major Sufi group that derives from those earlier migrations. Similarly, there has been far less Muslim migration to Latin America than to Europe and North America in recent decades, and I found only one significant Sufi group that derives from current migrations. So the typical Latin American Sufi is a musician or a psychiatrist from a background that was in some sense Catholic.

Latin America is a long way from the Muslim world, and connections with North America and Europe are easier in several ways. Of course, for Mexico it is more the US,

and for South America it is more Europe. So the typical Latin American Sufi group is now one that first became established in Europe or the US, and then spread to Latin America. But there are also a few cases where Latin America is not just the importer, and things develop in an unusual way that is particular to the region.

The earliest of these particular developments related to the thought of Guénon that Professor García Bazán had told me about. In Europe and North America, when people start reading Guénon, the result is most often that they become Sufis. This did happen in Brazil, though initially what emerged was a Ta'i Chi group rather than a Sufi order. This has never happened anywhere else, and I am still not quite sure what it tells us about Brazil. But in the end Brazil did get a Guénon-reading Sufi order, located in São Paulo, and led by a certain Olavo de Carvalho. Yes, *that* Olavo de Carvalho, the Catholic “philosopher” who President Bolsonaro so much admires. He is nowadays not fond of people bringing up his embarrassing past as a Sufi, and he was not best pleased by an article on Sufism and Ta'i Chi in Brazil that I recently published in *Aries*. Actually, Olavo de Carvalho's present is more representative of Guénon's reception in Latin America than the São Paulo Sufi order was. During the 1930s, when European readers of Guénon were turning to Sufism, his Argentinian readers were turning to the far right. Much later, during military rule, a group of Catholics at a provincial seminary were all reading Guénon, led by Father Alberto Ezcurra Uriburu, best known for his earlier role as leader of Tacuara, a neo-fascist movement. He ended up sounding as if he almost preferred Sufism to the post-Vatican-2 Catholic Church. I explored this in a recent article in *Politics, Religion & Ideology*.

Another development that was particular to Latin America was a group that started in Argentina and then spread to Brazil and Spain, simply called “The Tradition” (La tradición or A tradição). It started off in Buenos Aires as a Gurdjieff group, and then turned to the well-known Indian-English writer on Sufism Idries Shah, who referred the Argentinian Gurdjieffians to his younger brother Omar Ali-Shah, who happened to speak Spanish, and was happy to take the group over. He was known to his followers as “*agha*” (lord), and he and his senior Latin American followers developed a practice based partly in Sufism and partly in Western esotericism that is quite distinct from any other known practice. I am still working on an article on them.

Then, finally, there is the enneagram, the symbol that derives from Gurdjieff in pre-revolutionary Russia and is now used for everything from teaching Sufism to personality tests administered by HR departments. This passed through Mexico and Chile, then to Argentina via New York, on onwards to Spain... a dizzying journey that I explored in a chapter in a book on *Esoteric Transfers and Constructions* that has just come out.

### **How does your research contribute to your work on “global Sufism?”**

My research on Latin American Sufism is making our knowledge of global Sufism a little bit more truly global! In the context of the book I mentioned earlier, *Global Sufism*, “global” really meant “not just regional,” as it did for *Global Salafism*. A lot of studies of phenomena like Sufism and Salafism are purely regional, or even purely national. So it was important in those two books to look beyond the Middle East. But neither mentioned Latin America.

Looking at Latin America also makes it possible to make more comparisons between areas outside the Muslim world to which Sufism has spread. What I would love to do is add Russia to this comparison, as Russia also tends to get left out. There is a very nice Sufi mosque in Patagonia, and I expect there is also another one somewhere in Siberia, but I am not yet sure where.

### **What does your research on Sufism in Latin America tell us more broadly about “global Islam?” How does it change our view of what landscapes, movements, etc. constitute this category?**

“Global Islam” means majority Islam—Islam in countries where Muslims are the majority—plus minority Islam. To this, I would add Islam in cyberspace, which is already global. Perhaps one stage further is Islam for non-Muslims? Guénon and some other Sufis, mostly of Western origin, believe that a single perennial esoteric truth unites all religions at their core. I would not go that far, but when one sees how esoteric Islam (mostly Sufism) appeals equally to people of Catholic background in Buenos Aires and people of Muslim background in Baghdad, that is Islam at its most global. It is also an argument for the fundamental commonality of all humanity, despite the interethnic and sectarian conflict that so often plagues minority Islam, from Kashmir and Xinjiang to

Paris and Vienna. Latin America is also one of the few places where Islam is *not* a major political issue, which means that we can see Islam in a different condition.

**What are the questions and/or areas for further consideration that you would like to see others take up from here?**

One thing we need is more and more detailed ethnographic studies of individual Sufi groups. Some such studies already exist, often by Latin American scholars and often unpublished, but not many. I used those I could find in my chapter on “Sufism in Latin America” in the forthcoming Brill handbook, which is as good a historical survey as I could do, but most of the groups in it have not been studied in much detail.

We also need studies of particular themes, one of the most important of which is gender. This has been generally neglected in the study of Sufism, globally. Another theme is how individuals “do” Sufism *outside* the Sufi group. For obvious reasons, when we study religious phenomena we tend to go to the mosque, *zawiya*, church, whatever, and study people in that context. We need to follow people home more often, to see how religion and faith and practice work out in everyday life. Again, this is true globally. And as important in Latin America as elsewhere.

**Anything else you would like to share with our network (keeping in mind their interest on Islam and Muslim communities in Latin America and the Caribbean)?**

I am so glad that this network exists, and so looking forward to what it can do! And so happy to have been able to share my own work with others in this network. Thank you!

**Mark Sedgwick's work on Sufism in Latin America:**

- "Sufism in Latin America." In *Brill Handbook on Sufism in Western Contexts*, ed. Marcia Hermansen and Saeed Zarrabi-Zadeh. Leiden: Brill, forthcoming.
- "Traditionalism in Brazil: Sufism, Ta'i Chi, and Olavo de Carvalho." *Aries*. Advance Articles (2020) <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700593-20201001>.
- "Traditionalism and the Far Right in Argentina," *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 22, no. 2. Online first (2020) DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2021.1904909>.
- "Sufism and the Enneagram." In *Esoteric Transfers and Constructions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. Mark Sedgwick and Francesco Piraino. New York: Palgrave, 2021, pp. 219-246.
- "Guénonian Traditionalism in South American Literature and Academia." *International Journal of Latin American Religions*. Online first (2021) <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41603-021-00134-6>
- "The Glocalization of Esotericism: Guénonian Traditionalism in South America." *Nova Religio*, forthcoming.