Abstract
As a consequence of the importance of the Sanūsīyya in Libyan history the literature on Sufism has shown a scarce curiosity for other Libyan brotherhoods. One of the reasons for this is the fact that, being characterised by a lack of central authority, these orders were considered unorganised entities that could not sustain the comparison with the Sanūsīyya. The article problematises this view by concentrating on the Īsāwīyya, a Libyan brotherhood constituted by local leaders who do not recognise a common authority. In particular, the paper heavily relies on the recent re-conceptualisation of the idea of ‘Sufi order’ put forward by Rachida Chih, who suggests that Sufi brotherhoods could be best understood as ensembles of different local patronal relationships. The article discusses the weaknesses and strenghts of Chih’s framework in an attempt to propose a set of preliminary conclusions for the study of the Libyan Īsāwīyya.

Introduction
Academic discussions on Libyan Sufi brotherhoods have ultimately always been about one brotherhood, the Sanūsīyya. The reasons for this are obvious, particularly to those who are familiar with Libya’s recent past. As E.E. Evans-Pritchard famously exposed in his 1949 classic *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*, the Sanūsīyya consolidated an influential position in the tribal system of Eastern Libya, and ensured a fundamental role in the anti-colonial struggle against the Italians right until the liberation of the country (Evans-Pritchard 1946; 1949). Unsurprisingly, when British interests in the region catalysed the creation of a state, the head of the Sanūsī order became the amīr of Tripolitania, and then, after petroleum provided new incentives for national unity, the king of newly unified Libya (Davis 1987, 28–30; Vandewalle 2006, 24–73). The narrative of how the Sanūsīyya came to be the Libyan Sufi order par excellence is well known. The role of the other Sufi brotherhoods in the macro-history of modern Libya is, however, considerably harder to detect. Unlike the Sanūsīyya, the majority of these orders were internally divided into groups headed by local Sufi masters (shaykh, sing. shaykh) who did not recognise a common leader (Baldinetti 2003; Evans-Pritchard 1949, 84, 88). As a consequence, they were pushed to the margins of academic enquiry, and quickly dismissed as a list of organisations that could not aspire to a place in history due to their lack of cohesion and organisation (Evans-Pritchard 1949, 84; Grandin 1986; Triaud 1996).

The idea of non-Sanūsī Libyan orders as mere unorganised associations, though fundamentally correct (and indeed justifiable given their minor role in Libyan political affairs), begs for a deeper contextualisation. Indeed, behind the understanding of these brotherhoods as ‘lesser entities’ lies a simplistic model that has dominated both the debate on Libyan mysticism and the broader discussion on Sufism: a view of Sufi orders as pyramidal structures with a spiritual leader on top and local cells at the bottom (Chih 2007, 21). In her critical reappraisal on the fallacies of this paradigm, the scholar of Egyptian Sufism Rachida Chih has recently called for more attention towards those brotherhoods that do not conform to the model (Chih 2007). In particular, Chih has proposed to abandon the focus on centralised hierarchy for a view of ‘Sufi brotherhood’ as a composition of different patronal relationships between local Sufi masters and their circles of followers (Chih 2007, 21–22). In order to assess the applicability of this framework to Libyan Sufism, and especially to those Libyan orders that history seems to have forgotten, I will concentrate on the Īsāwīyya, a Sufi order characterised – both today and in colonial times – by a lack of centralised hierarchical organisation. In doing so, a brief ethnographic presentation of the brotherhood in Libya will be provided with the purpose of explaining both the strengths and the weaknesses of looking at the Īsāwīyya as a ‘set of patronal relationships’. While more detailed explorations on this subject are much needed, I will limit myself here only to some preliminary conclusions in the hope of starting a discussion that will contribute to the regrettably scarce anthropological literature on Libya (Behnke 1947; Davis 1987; Kohl 2010; Mason 1977; Peters 1990).

Searching for a Framework
The attention reserved to the Sanūsī order can be understood not only by unwrapping the complex set of professional (Baldinetti 2010, 14; Peters 1990, 21), academic (Peters 1990, 21–24) and even personal (Douglas 1980, 46; Li Causi 1988) reasons that...
motivated Evans-Pritchard, but also by understanding the military agenda of the French and Italian sources that dealt with Libyan Sufism (Baldinetti 2003, 129; Triaud 1995; Vikør 1995, 11). Certainly the inaccurate (and often mythopoetic) nature of some of the colonial accounts on the brotherhoods has been sufficiently demonstrated (Baldinetti 2003; Triaud 1995; Vikør 2000, 158), while some aspects of Evans-Pritchard’s sophisticated insight have been proven to be incorrect with time (Eickelman 1998, 52; Peters 1990, 10–28). Nonetheless, one particular element stands out from both the colonial studies and the academic re-examinations of the Sanusiyya: the order was characterised by a functional and reasonably centralised organisation, at least when compared with other Libyan brotherhoods (Triaud 1995; Vikør 1995; 1996; Ziadeh 1958). Determining whether the success of the Sanusiyya brotherhood was the consequence of an intrinsic political inclination or the fruit of historical circumstances involves a debate that cannot be possibly summarised here (ibid.; Ahmad 1994, 100; Evans-Pritchard 1949, 26, 173; Vikør 2000). What is important to note, however, is that regardless of dynamic issues and undeniable structural limitations (Evans-Pritchard 1949, 20, 26, 83, 84, 131; McGuirk 2007; Vikør 2000, 157; Ziadeh 1958, 120), the organisational and hierarchical structure of the Sanusiyya helped the order to gain its predominant place in history (Gilsenan 1990, 160), and therefore attracted the interest of the colonial observers (Baldinetti 2003).

The focus on organised Sufism in Libya can largely be explained by an appreciation of the military role of the Sanusiyya in the colonial era. However, this specific attention to cohesiveness and hierarchy mirrors a general preference for the study of centralised Sufi brotherhoods that can be detected even in post-colonial publications dealing with other geographical contexts. Certainly, scholars have noticed that Sufi structures vary greatly, and that Sufi orders effectively range between centralised organisations and discontinuous associations (Gilsenan 1973, 4–5, 65, 199). Nevertheless, academia has mainly dedicated itself to cohesive orders like the Sanusiyya (Cruise O’Brien 1971; Gilsenan 1973), while those rare studies that have dealt with ‘loose brotherhoods’ have generally avoided problematising issues of organisation (and disorganisation) in detail (Cranzanzo 1973). Indeed, a complete analysis of this preference should be rooted in a larger discussion on the obsession for ‘social structure’ that had haunted social sciences up until the seventies (Fortes 1963; Radcliffe-Brown 1952; Stocking 1984). However, for the purposes of this article it is sufficient to note that a focus on hierarchy, understood either as a necessary aspect of ‘successful’ brotherhoods (Gilsenan 1973, 5–91), as a fundamental dynamic of Sufi affairs (Hammoudi 1997, 85), or as a characteristic that can develop in a Sufi brotherhood due to a myriad of factors (De Jong 1978; Tringham 1998, 67–105) is a very visible feature of the scholarship on Islamic mysticism. Academics of the calibre of Ernst Gellner even went as far as to define Sufism (rather inappropriately) as a form of ‘reformation in reverse’ within Islam: the formation of a church-structure within a religion born without ecclesial hierarchy (Gellner 1981, 104). Bearing all of this in mind, Rachida Chih’s analysis of the relationships that characterise the members of the Khalwati order in Egypt constitutes an interesting exception (Chih 2007).

In presenting this acephalous Egyptian brotherhood, Chih highlights how the Sufi pyramidal model that transpires from the literature has more to do with an academic ‘preference for studying those turāq that have a distinct and clear organisational structure’ (Chih 2007, 22) than with anything else. Conscious of the problems of using this model as a tool to understand the Khalwatiyya – and indeed Sufism in general – she therefore calls for a radical re-conceptualisation of the very notion of Sufi order. A brief exploration of the characteristics of the Khalwatiyya is fundamental both for an understanding of Chih’s argument and for an evaluation of the possible virtues of applying her views to Libyan Sufism. Chih explains how the Khalwati brotherhood is effectively an ensemble of different branches that articulate their identities around the figure of local shayk̲h. Each specific branch of the Khalwatiyya names itself after the founding shayk̲h (a practice which is familiar to anyone who has an interest in Sufism), and has its own network of followers. In this perspective, Chih demonstrates how an understanding of the relationship between masters and disciples that characterises the life of the brotherhood on a local level is key to understanding the order (Chih 2007, 33). These relationships have a patronal nature since they are based on the shayk̲h acting as a ‘patron’ for his followers. More specifically, Chih explains how followers of the order see their attachment as being first and foremost to their own shayk̲h rather than to the brotherhood in its entirety (Chih 2007, 28). In Chih’s view, therefore, a focus on the personal relationship between a given shayk̲h and his direct disciples – together with an understanding of the fact that this relationship does not necessarily have to be inscribed into a larger framework of vertical hierarchy – allows us to grasp the dynamics that rule the Sufi orders in a much more nuanced way (Chih 2007, 33–34). A Sufi brotherhood can consequently...
be looked at as a composition of different localised patron-client relationships, personal hierarchies and (Chih does not use these terms but they are implied in her argument) localised leaderships.

The view of a Sufi order as a set of patronal relationships seems to be a useful framework, at least when it comes to brotherhoods whose structure does not involve a centralised leadership and a clear hierarchical organisation. Bearing in mind the fragmentary nature of Libyan Sufism, the application of Chih’s ideas seems to be the best way to rehabilitate the non-Sanusi brotherhoods by showing that they are neither exceptions nor defective versions of a centralised brotherhood like the Sanusiyya. Nonetheless, this framework does not present a solution for all the analytic issues encountered when looking at unstructured Sufism in Libya. Indeed, if the pyramidal model put forward by the literature is an empty construction that often does not correspond to Sufi reality, an analysis that reduces a Sufi order to its internal patronal relationships runs the risk of exaggerating the fragmentary character of a brotherhood. A concise examination of the case of the Libyan ‘Isawiyya illustrates these issues very well. The ‘Isawi order in Libya presents characteristics that are similar to the ones of the Khalwatiyya in Egypt. The brotherhood does not have a recognised common leader, and is effectively organised into different groups that revolve around the figures of local shuyukh. Generally speaking, the ‘Isawiyya can be looked at through the lens of Chih’s conceptualisation, particularly because the followers of the order attach themselves to a local shaykh and mainly live their affiliation to the brotherhood through their relation to him. However, if we examine the way the brotherhood articulates its own identity we realise that we cannot reduce the ‘Isawiyya to an ensemble of different Sufi currents in Libya. Moreover, the ‘Isawiyya is spread across much of North-Africa (ibid.) – was founded at the beginning of the sixteenth century in Morocco by the followers of Sidi Muhammad b. ‘Isa, usually referred to as ‘al-Shaykh al-Kamil’, the ‘Perfect Shaykh’. Even though Muhammad b. ‘Isa, the patron saint of the city of Meknes, is effectively one of the most important and intriguing characters of Moroccan mysticism, the information available to reconstruct a historical profile of his life is poor in detail. Apart from a long series of fascinating hagiographic accounts of his miraculous performances and spiritual powers (Brunel 1926), we know that in his search for mystical knowledge the ‘Perfect Shaykh’ attached himself to the eminent Sufi master Ahmad al-Hariti, and – after the death of his teacher – to the famous shuyukh Muhammad al-Saghir al-Sahlī and Abd al-Aziz Tabba’, all direct disciples of the great North-African saint Muhammad b. Sulayman al-Jazuli (d. between 1465 and 1470) (Michon 1978, 93; Tringham 1998, 85–86). Al-Jazuli was a member of the Shahdhiyya, an important brotherhood that generated a series of different Sufi currents in the Islamic world (Burckhardt 1976, 46; Tringham 1998, 44–51). With time Al-Jazuli originated through his peculiar spirituality a branch of the Shahdhiyya that came to be known under the name of Jazuliyya (ibid.), so that the ‘Isawiyya can be identified, from a historical point of view, as a direct product of the Jazuli tradition. This explains the profound similarities between Jazuli and ‘Isawi liturgical practices, revealing the inaccuracy of both colonial and recent publications that mistook the ‘Isawiyya for a branch of the Madaniyya (Baldinetti 2003, 132) or the Zarruqyya (Khushaim 1976, 113; Tringham 1998, 113, 126, 279).

The historical circumstances of the diffusion of the ‘Isawi brotherhood in Libya are largely unidentifiable. The most famous account in this regard is an oral narrative that describes how the ‘Isawiyya arrived in Tripoli. As reported to the author by a large number of ‘Isa’is, the brotherhood was brought into the city by Muhammad al-‘Alam Bani’n al-Fasi, a Moroccan ‘Isawi shaykh from the city of Fes, on an unknown date between the sixteenth and the seventeenth century. Usually Sufi orders in the Islamic world are characterised by the presence of zawaya (sing. zawiya, literally ‘corners’): gathering places where the members of the order meet on a local level. The ‘Isawiyya is no exception in this sense, so that ‘Isawi zawaya (in the form of buildings of different construction and size) can be found within and beyond the urban centres practically all over the country. Bearing this

The ‘Isawiyya as a Case-study
In order to appreciate the advantages and the limits of Chih’s theory when used to understand the Libyan ‘Isawiyya we need to contextualise the order, albeit briefly. The ‘Isawiyya is not an indigenous Libyan reality, and certainly not an unknown entity in the literature on Sufism (Andezian 2001; Brunel 1926; Tringham 1998, 86, 276). The brotherhood – which is spread across much of North-Africa (ibid.) – was founded at the beginning of the sixteenth century in Morocco by the followers of Sidi Muhammad b. ‘Isa, usually referred to as ‘al-Shaykh al-Kamil’, the ‘Perfect Shaykh’. Even though Muhammad b. ‘Isa, the patron saint of the city of Meknes, is effectively one of the most important and intriguing characters of Moroccan mysticism, the information available to reconstruct a historical profile of his life is poor in detail. Apart from a long series of fascinating hagiographic accounts of his miraculous performances and spiritual powers (Brunel 1926), we know that in his search for mystical knowledge the ‘Perfect Shaykh’ attached himself to the eminent Sufi master Ahmad al-Hariti, and – after the death of his teacher – to the famous shuyukh Muhammad al-Saghir al-Sahlī and Abd al-Aziz Tabba’, all direct disciples of the great North-African saint Muhammad b. Sulayman al-Jazuli (d. between 1465 and 1470) (Michon 1978, 93; Tringham 1998, 85–86). Al-Jazuli was a member of the Shahdhiyya, an important brotherhood that generated a series of different Sufi currents in the Islamic world (Burckhardt 1976, 46; Tringham 1998, 44–51). With time Al-Jazuli originated through his peculiar spirituality a branch of the Shahdhiyya that came to be known under the name of Jazuliyya (ibid.), so that the ‘Isawiyya can be identified, from a historical point of view, as a direct product of the Jazuli tradition. This explains the profound similarities between Jazuli and ‘Isawi liturgical practices, revealing the inaccuracy of both colonial and recent publications that mistook the ‘Isawiyya for a branch of the Madaniyya (Baldinetti 2003, 132) or the Zarruqyya (Khushaim 1976, 113; Tringham 1998, 113, 126, 279).

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in mind, the narrative of the arrival of Shaykh Bānūn in Tripoli is particularly significant since the zaʿwiya that he founded — al-Ẓawiya al-Kabīra (‘the Great Zawiya’) — still exists today in the old part of the city, close to a compound of houses of the Italian period called ‘Mariotti’. According to the Italian documents of the colonial era — which make an explicit mention of the Zawiya al-Kabīra together with a list of names of other zaʿwiya — the ‘Īsawi order was the most widespread, at least in Tripolitania (Baldinetti 2003, 134–136), while according to other sources the brotherhood could count members also in the Eastern part of the country (Drague 1951, 75; Goodchild 1970, 26; Evans-Pritchard 1949, 84–86). The colonial documents clearly specify how the order did not have a common leader or a shared hierarchical structure (Baldinetti 2003, 135). Today the brotherhood is without a doubt the largest and most active order in Libya, and presents essentially the same characteristics that were noticed by the Italians in the past. Each Ḥāwi zaʿwiya is headed by local shaykh who is in charge of his own congregation, so that the Ḥāwiya appears as a pervasive but fundamentally acephalous entity.

The Structure of the ‘Īsawi Order

The number of scholars that have dedicated their attention to the ‘Īsawiya in Libya is very small. Some publications have described the variety and the emotional charge of the musical tradition of the Ḥāwi zaʿwiya (Ciantar 2003; 2005; 2006), while others have described the climate of feast and enjoyment that annually permeates the order on the occasion of the celebration of the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad, a recurrence which is observed particularly by Ḥāwiya all over Libya (Cerbella and Ageli 1949). Although these works have the virtue of adding some ethnographic details to a subject that has been largely ignored by the literature, they mainly concentrate on the most visible aspects that characterise the social existence of the brotherhood. ‘Īsawi zaʿwiya, however, are also places where a set of internal, less visible dynamics take place, and it is these dynamics that provide the key to understanding both the structure of the brotherhood and the limits of Chih’s framework. Like any other Sufi order, the Ḥāwiya presents itself as a spiritual path that supposedly leads its members towards a higher moral maturity through specific spiritual exercises. It is not difficult to understand therefore how, as often happens in Sufism, whoever wants to join the ‘Īsawi order needs to receive an initiation from a shaykh that introduces him to the practices of the brotherhood. Usually the first step in this path, immediately before the initiation takes place, is to become a muhibb (pl. muhibbīn), a sympathiser of the order. As with other Sufi orders (Crapanzano 1973, 89), the ‘Īsawī muhibb is quite literally someone who has ‘love’ for the ‘Īsawiya. Muhibbīn constitute the great majority of the people that associate with an ‘Īsawi zaʿwiya. They are informal followers that are not required to exhibit specific forms of commitment, and that often do not show any.

Muhibbīn visit the zaʿwiya as frequently as their personal inclination dictates, deciding for themselves whether to maintain a spiritual relation with the shaykh of the zaʿwiya or not. Indeed, when asked about their status some muhibbīn explicitly stated that they preferred to remain erratic sympathisers for the rest of their lives, explaining that they did not feel suited for the demanding life of the Sufi. On other occasions, however, muhibbīn revealed that they became close to a particular zaʿwiya, or a particular shaykh, with the precise intention of eventually becoming full members of the brotherhood. Theoretically, according to some masters of the order, the shaykh of the zaʿwiya is supposed to observe the muhibb for a period of time in order to see whether he is a suitable candidate for the ‘Īsawi path or not. However, there is great variation when it comes to this rule, and while some muhibbīn are required to wait for a long time before being initiated, others make the transition from follower to disciple much more rapidly. When the muhibb decides that he wants to enter the order — and when the master of the zaʿwiya decides that he is ready to do so — he receives his initiation and becomes a formal murid (pl. muridīn), a disciple of the shaykh. In the contemporary ‘Īsawiya the relationship between master and disciple — a topic that has filled many publications on Sufism and that is often portrayed as the archetypical relation of Islamic mysticism (Burckhardt 1976; Lings 1988; Nicholson 1963) — is differentiated and various. In conversations and interviews, a number of shuyuḥk stressed the importance of submission and discipline in their approach to the muridīn. This highlights how, as an ‘Īsawi shuyuḥk once told the author, quoting a well known Sufi saying, ‘the disciple should abandon himself to the care of the master like the corpse in the hands of the undertaker’. Other ‘Īsawi masters however, described their relationship with their disciples as based mainly on friendship and affection. While some shuyuḥk advocate the use of punishment for moral mistakes, others believe that the fundamental purpose of their role is simply to encourage their muridīn to live their lives as good Muslims, persuading them to perform the fundamental requirements of Islam.
The **murid** is supposed to initiate a spiritual journey under the care of the **shaykh**. Obviously different **muridin** have different approaches towards this aspect of the order. If some are very committed, to the point of visiting their **shaykh** daily, asking him for advice even on worldly matters, others limit themselves to visit their **zāwiya** regularly (and at times irregularly), receiving their spiritual exercises from the master, but avoiding discussions on either practical or spiritual issues. Entry to the brotherhood, however, is generally described as a journey that takes the disciple through different stages of mystic development and moral formation. When the **murid** is close to reaching the end of this process, he might receive from his own master the ‘**mashyikha**’ (**shaykh**-hood), and become an **Isāwī** master himself. The **shaykh** of the **zāwiya** chooses only one of his own **muridin** as successor and guide of the congregation, often giving him the title of ‘**naqīf**’ and making him a vice-**shaykh** who takes his place temporarily when he is absent and definitively when he dies. A **shaykh** can also give the **mashyikha** to more than one of his disciples who, once made **shuyukb**, can officially create their own **zawāya** and recruit their own disciples or sympathisers. Occasionally an **Isāwī** master maintains a degree of influence over his **ex-muridin**, so that he effectively becomes the head of a number of **shuyukb** who have their own **zawāya**, but who all consider the original **shaykh** (and after him his successors) as the main spiritual point of reference, indicating his **zāwiya** as the ‘**zāwiya al-umm**’, the ‘mother **zāwiya**’. More often, however – perhaps after their master’s death has paved the way for a series of successors that do not have a personal relation with them – the newly appointed **shuyukb** (or their successors) distance themselves from the **zāwiya** of origin. Even though one of the heirs of the original **shaykh** might try to reconstruct a relationship with them, these **shuyukb** usually end up becoming autonomous spiritual leaders that take care of their own Sufi affairs in a completely independent way.

The Libyan ‘**Isāwīyya** thus seems to have a centrifugal character which is prone to fragmentation. Every time a **murid** is made a **shaykh** there is a possibility for a new independent segment to appear, and for a new partition in the order to take place. Due to the passage of time and to dynamics of **shaykh** succession, fragmentation can happen even in those cases where the **shaykh** of a ‘mother **zāwiya**’ maintains his authority over a number of **shuyukb**. In analysing this constant emergence of groups and subdivisions – which ultimately characterises the ‘**Isāwīyya** as a brotherhood whose structure is continuously in the making – one element in particular stands out: the importance of the role of local **shuyukb**. The order is effectively composed by Sufi masters who often distance themselves from the **zāwiya** of the **shaykh** that gave them **shuyukb**-hood and form their own local networks of **muhībbin** and **muridin**. The brotherhood appears therefore as a composition of different networks of people that gravitate around local leaders: a picture which is, at least on a superficial level, very similar to that described by Chih in her study of the Kḥalwatiyya, as summarised above. With this in mind, Chih’s ideas, which urge us to look at the Libyan ‘**Isāwīyya** with a focus on the patronal relationships that link the different **Isāwī** masters with their groups of followers, appear to be particularly valuable. Nevertheless, if we look more closely at the ‘**Isāwī** brotherhood in Libya we realise how this particular framework is also an essentially limited paradigm, particularly when it comes to understanding the nuances of ‘**Isāwī** identity.

**Struggling for a Framework**

As previously mentioned, the Libyan ‘**Isāwīyya** and Chih’s Kḥalwatiyya present very similar organisational features. However, if we decide to follow Chih and reduce the ‘**Isāwī** order to the patronal relationships that typify its structure we miss an extremely important point: though internally divided, the ‘**Isāwī** brotherhood often describes itself – and to an extent behaves – as one recognisable entity. Doubtlessly, ‘**Isāwī** **shuyukb** mainly run their **zawāya** (or, in those cases where they manage to keep their spiritual influence over **ex-muridin**, groups of **zawāya**) as independent circles of followers. Nevertheless, generally speaking, members of the brotherhood do not see these internal divisions as an issue. One one of the recurrent aspects of the author’s conversations with many ‘**Isāwī** masters, disciples and sympathisers was the continuous attempt on their part to clarify that the fragmentary character of the order is essentially a natural, though not necessarily positive, aspect of its existence. In describing the complex mechanics that rule the organisation of the brotherhood in Libya, ‘**Isāwīs** often advise against taking the composite structure of the brotherhood as proof of the fact that ‘**Isāwīyya**’ is a mere label for an amalgam of independent leaders. Undoubtedly, this should not persuade us to think of the order as a perfectly harmonious organisation. Indeed, some **shuyukb** of the brotherhood comment on other masters’ behaviour and practices, often even to the point of questioning the legitimacy of their **shaykh**-hood, or the goodness of the spiritual practices undertaken in a particular **zawāya**. Sometimes ‘**Isāwī** masters have deeply
different (if not opposite) ways of interpreting the requirements of the order. However, shuyūkh usually also ensure that divergences and possible misunderstandings do not compromise the relation between the different zawāya. In general, the interaction between shuyūkh is characterised by a pervasive and visible attention to politeness and good manners, particularly amongst the zawāya of the same city or area. Interestingly, even the shuyūkh who consider their own zawāya to be the ‘mother’ of a larger group of zawāya often do not enforce their right to claim authority over the other shuyūkh. At times, though, adamant of the righteous nature of their claims, they explain that avoiding the inconveniences they might incur by voicing their opinion is a good enough reason to keep peaceful.

Interestingly, from time to time, a shaykh with a particular mystical vein might even identify spiritual advantages behind the internal divisions of the order. Showing a great capacity for lateral thinking, an ‘Īsāwī master told the author that the fragmentation of the Isāwīyya should be looked at as a source of richness, since the various ‘Īsāwī groups contribute with different portions of Sufi knowledge to the development of the entire brotherhood. Nonetheless, the difficulty in applying Chih’s framework to the Isāwīyya does not rest merely on the fact that ‘Īsāwīs often have a laissez-faire attitude towards each other, nor on the fact that members of the order usually describe themselves as a brotherhood. Doubtlessly, these elements are important, particularly when it comes to understanding the way in which ‘Īsāwī articulate their own identity. However, more specifically, the author’s impression that the Isāwīyya is something more than a set of different paternal relations is based on an observation of the lived relationships that exist between ‘Īsāwī shuyūkh and, generally, between Isāwī zawāya. Indeed, the masters of the brotherhood constantly invite each other (and each other’s entourage of muridīn and muhibbin) to attend liturgical performances and celebrations related to the festivities of the Islamic calendar in their zawāya. Often, if not always, these gatherings become social occasions where devotion takes place, food is served and tea is prepared. At times this willingness to construct and maintain, at least publicly, an ‘Īsāwī network takes the shape of a formal proposition. An influential shaykh has explained to the author how, for instance, he sent written invitations to all the other shuyūkh of the brotherhood of his city on the occasion of the celebration of the birthday of the Prophet. Certainly, this sense of unity and common identity must not be exaggerated. Although generally open to receive visits from any master of the order, shuyūkh mainly invite to their zawāya those ‘Īsāwī masters with whom they have a relationship of affection, friendship or admiration. For the shuyūkh who are able to exercise their authority over more than one zawāya, for example, these are valuable occasions to bring together their larger following in order to strengthen both social and spiritual ties. Nonetheless, when we look at the way ‘Īsāwī zawāya interact with each other, we realise that even though the brotherhood is an acephalous entity that survives despite a constant propensity towards fragmentation, members of the order (or at least some of them) tend to gather together and cultivate social links with each other.

‘Īsāwī zawāya essentially perform the same rituals, though often – if not always – there are slight local liturgical variations. This fundamental unity of practice has to be taken into account, but it should not should not be overstated since, as Chih tells us, the Khālwaṭī order in Egypt presents exactly the same situation (Chih 2007, 27). The real difference between the two brotherhoods has to be looked for in the way they see their own social and organisational texture. Both in the ‘Īsāwīyya and in the Khālwaṭīyya, local shuyūkh have, as we said, a fundamental role. As explained above, Chih tells us (Chih 2007, 28) that members of the Khālwaṭī order see themselves as attached to a particular shaykh more than to a Sufi order. This consideration, together with the fact that the Khālwaṭīyya is divided into branches that take the names of their founding shuyūkh, is indeed one of the main points of Chih’s argument. The Isāwīyya, however, presents a different situation. ‘Īsāwī muridīn often state that admiration for a particular shaykh was the reason for their choice to join the order. Indeed, one of the persistent themes that stands out from the different accounts on how and why a person chose to become an ‘Īsāwī is the fact that he was struck by the moral or ethical qualities of a specific ‘Īsāwī master. Many muridīn live their lives as ‘Īsāwī ‘through’ the figure of their shaykh, and in a similar way, the sympathisers of the order often describe their attachment to the brotherhood as an attachment to a particular zawāya, thus demonstrating a prominence of the local dynamics of the order, which cannot be ignored. Nonetheless, unlike the Khālwaṭīyya, the Isāwīyya does not have recognisable branches. Chih clarifies that the different branches of the Khālwaṭī order share the same spiritual background and are indeed different from each other only in ‘social appearance’ (Chih 2007, 26). However, as we said, she also explains that the different Khālwaṭī branches have specific names. In Lāḥya, on the contrary, the ‘Īsāwī order is, so to speak, simply
the ‘Isāwī order’. No ‘Isāwī shaykh has ever created a particular ‘Isāwī current that bears his name, not even in those cases when a line of shaykhī has managed to maintain control over a specific group of ṭawāfiyya over time. Although shaykhī are particularly careful in keeping a record of the line of masters that have preceded them at the helm of a ṭawāfiyya (or of a group of ṭawāfiyya), they never consider themselves as part of a specific branch, but only as an internal sub-division that is still very much part of the brotherhood. Even in those very rare cases when a shaykh claims a privileged position within the entire order (a statement that the great majority of shaykhī would most definitively refrain from making) they do this by referring to special links that their family had — according to their interpretation of the history of the order — with Muhammad b. ‘Isā, the Moroccan founder of the ṭawāfiyya. In other words, even those masters that might aspire to be something more than local leaders do not express a desire to create a separate branch. On the contrary — since the brotherhood is perceived to be one recognisable entity — they articulate this aspiration by highlighting their supposed links with the very symbol of the unity of the order: its founder. ‘Isāwī disciples and sympathisers see themselves as followers of a particular shaykhī first and as members of the order second. However, they also engage, in different ways and to different degrees, with the idea of a common membership in a Sufi order, and a shared identity.

Even though patronal relationships are a very important aspect in the life of the ‘Isāwī brotherhood, we cannot limit ourselves to use Chih’s ideas if we want to fully grasp the complex social dynamics of the order. Using Chih’s framework to understand the Libyan ‘Isāwīyya presents a series of conceptual advantages. Firstly, it enables us to look at a brotherhood that does not have a common leadership or a clear-cut organisation with the necessary observance of the complexities of ethnographic reality. Secondly, it represents a valuable alternative to previous ‘Sufi models’ that, with their focus on hierarchy and vertical organisation, are unhelpful when faced with the fluidity of non-Sanūsī Sufism. Certainly, Chih’s account on the Ḥaṭra ṭawāfiyya is persuasive and convincing. As the case of the ‘Isāwīyya clearly shows, the application of Chih’s framework is limitative at least when applied to Libyan Sufism. In particular, we cannot use Chih’s idea to fully account for the fact that members of a divided brotherhood might nevertheless maintain an interest in keeping a close network of relationships with each other. Furthermore, by advocating a focus on the patronal nature of Sufism, Chih’s approach prevents us from giving the necessary weight to the fact that the members of the ‘Isāwīyya, though involved in a complex plethora of networks whose nexuses are local spiritual leaders, still describe their order as fundamentally one. Chih’s ideas imply that we should concentrate on this intricate system of local affiliations, but observation of the ‘Isāwīyya shows us that the way its members look at this system does not preclude them from articulating a sense of common identity.

Conclusion

I have sought to present a set of preliminary points that should be taken into account in a study of Libyan non-Sanūsī Sufi traditions in general, and of the ‘Isāwīyya in particular. Starting with a brief contextualisation of past accounts on Libyan Sufism, the focus on the Sanūsīyya that has dominated the debate on Libyan mysticism has been identified, elucidating the reasons behind this particular inclination of the literature and the consequential lack of curiosity for other Libyan brotherhoods that it has generated. After explaining how this is effectively the manifestation of a broader scholarly preference for centralised brotherhoods, the assumptions implied in this preference have been highlighted, and an attempt has been made to illuminate the merits and limitations of using Rachida Chih’s theories in an analysis of the Libyan ‘Isāwīyya. Indeed, as we have seen, although Chih’s ideas are particularly valuable when it comes to appreciating some of the features of the ‘Isāwī order, they nevertheless fail to account for the fact that ‘Isāwīs see themselves as part of the same brotherhood. Certainly, this consideration opens up a series of questions that should be addressed in a broader discussion of Libyan Sufism. Indeed, limiting ourselves to say that the ‘Isāwīyya is simply one and many at the same time — a statement that many of my ‘Isāwī friends would have no problem to accept — means assuming an honest analytic position. However, it also means offering only a partial solution to the problem of representing contemporary Libyan Sufism properly. Without a doubt, as a series of anthropological and ethnographic works has shown, searching for a framework or a paradigm is often a risky enterprise that prevents us from accepting the fluidity of social life (Bourdieu 1977; Laidlaw and Humphrey 2004; Marsden 2005). However, scholars have also called for a correct articulation of this fluidity (Asad 1986), and unfortunately at present we find ourselves struggling to find one. To conclude, we limit ourselves to reiterate the sophistication that characterises the dynamics of Libyan Sufism, in the conviction of having at least demonstrated how the Libyan ‘Isāwīyya escapes frameworks and paradigms.
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Notes
1 Sufi brotherhoods or orders are usually referred to as Tarīqa (‘Paths’, sing. Tariqā).
2 Given the complexity of the concept, an omniciprehensive academic definition of ‘Sufism’ is hard to find (Geertz 1971:48; Lings 1988:45; Werbner 1995, 2003). Generally speaking, the term is a translation from the Arabic Taṣawwuf, which refers to Islamic mysticism, and incorporates a series of different phenomena all over the Islamic world.
3 Examples of more ethnographic and descriptive literature on Libyan society are Cerbella and Ageli 1949; Cerbella 1953; de Agostini 1917; 1922-23 and Panetta 1963. For a broader introduction to the relation between Anthropology and Italian colonialism, see Dore 1980.
4 On the Italian colonial documents dealing with the non-Sanūṣi orders, see Baldinetti 2003. The only brotherhood that received considerable attention in the colonial documents apart from the Sanūṣiya was the Madaniyya (Baldinetti 2003, 132; Triaud 1996, 410-411); the Italians tried to use it as an anti-Sanūṣi tool without success (Baldinetti 2003, 132; Triaud 1996, 410-411); the Italians tried to require further ethnographic exploration that might divert the attention of the reader from the main argument of the paper. I have therefore avoided discussing the ijtāz in the ‘Isa wiya with the intention of doing so in the future.
5 The Khalwati order is also present in Libya, although in 2008 it counted only one shaykh. The shaykh, who lives in the Eastern part of the country, explained to me how his father inaugurated the first Libyan za wiya of the Khalwatiyya in 2001. For additional, general information on the brotherhood see Clayer 1996 and Trimingham 1998, 74−78. 6 The dates of birth and death of b. ‘Iṣā are disputed. Brunel proposes 1465–66 and 1526–27 (1926, 15), Trimingham opts for 1465 and 1524 (1998, 86), while Michon suggests 1467–68 and 1523–27 (1978, 93).
7 The narrative is also briefly mentioned in Najem 2005, 51.
8 A complete elucidation of the dynamics that regulate the notion of shaykh- hood should involve an explanation of the concept of ijtāz (‘permission’, or ‘license’, in this particular case understood as ‘license to shaykh- hood’), a well known concept in academic discussions on Sufism (Trimingham 1998, 86, 122, 174, 192–3, 227). Nevertheless, explaining the complex facets of this concept would require further ethnographic exploration that might divert the attention of the reader from the main argument of the paper. I have therefore avoided discussing the ijtāz in the ‘Isa wiya with the intention of doing so in the future.

References
THE LIBYAN ‘ISĀWIYYA


