

## Pious and Modern:

### Women's Islam in the Ayverdi Circle

İlker Aytürk

Samiha Ayverdi (1905-1993)<sup>1</sup> was a woman with multiple careers. She would have probably chosen being a *derviş* (a Muslim sufi) as her most meaningful occupation in life, but, in addition to that, Ayverdi was also a well-published author, an important novelist, the woman leader of a religious brotherhood in İstanbul, one of the most influential right-wing intellectuals of twentieth century Turkey, and founder of and benefactor to many right-wing associations. In 2013, the twentieth anniversary of her passing was marked by dozens of talks, panels, conferences and symposia mostly sponsored by the family-run Kubbealtı Foundation and Academy, which aims, among other things, to keep her memory alive and spread her message and teachings to a broader audience. As a matter of fact, acts of recognition continued to pile up during the past decade. A prestigious high school in İstanbul was named after her. Turkish public TV channels have so far produced and aired on prime time two, hour-long documentaries on her life and legacy. The Turkish Ministry of National Education

---

<sup>1</sup> Nazlı Kaner, *Sâmiha Ayverdi (1905-1993) und die osmanische Gesellschaft* (Würzburg: Egon Verlag, 1998); Elifhan Köse, "Muhafazakar Bir Kadın Portresi Olarak Semiha [sic] Ayverdi: Muhafazakarlık Düşüncesinde Kadınlara İlişkin Bir Hat Çizebilmek", *Fe Dergi* 1 (2009), 11-20; İlker Aytürk and Laurent Mignon, "Paradoxes of a Cold War Sufi Woman: Sâmiha Ayverdi between Islam Nationalism, and Modernity", *New Perspectives on Turkey* 49 (2013), 57-89; Kazım Yetiş, *Sâmiha Ayverdi: Hayatı ve Eserleri* (Ankara: Kültür Bakanlığı, 1993); Altan Deliorman, *Işıklı Hayatlar* (İstanbul: Kubbealtı, 2004); Aysel Yüksel and Zeynep Uluant, eds. *Sâmiha Ayverdi* (İstanbul: Kültür Bakanlığı, 2005); Hicran Göze, *Mâveradan Gelen Ses* (İstanbul: Kubbealtı, 2005); Özcan Ergiydiren, *Hayâli Cihan Değer: Sâmiha Ayverdi ile Hatıralar* (İstanbul: Kubbealtı, 2009); Aysel Yüksel, *Sır Kâtibi: Sâmiha Ayverdi ile 36 Yıl* (İstanbul: Kubbealtı, 2018); Anna Neubauer, "This is the Age of Women: Legitimizing Female Authority in Contemporary Turkish Sufism", *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion* 29 (2016), 150-166; Laurent Mignon, "Du mysticisme au nationalisme religieux: les ambiguïtés de Sâmiha Ayverdi (1905-1993)", *European Journal of Turkish Studies* (e-journal) 25 (2017). Recent publication of Ayverdi's correspondence with friends and disciples, on the other hand, provide us with a peek into her routines and daily life at home; see Sâmiha Ayverdi, *Mektuplar-1: Belkıs Dengiz* (İstanbul: Kubbealtı, 2015); *Mektuplar-2: Annemarie Schimmel* (İstanbul: Kubbealtı, 2015); *Mektuplar-3: Nazik Erik* (İstanbul: Kubbealtı, 2016); *Mektuplar-4: İlhan Ayverdi* (İstanbul: Kubbealtı, 2016); *Mektuplar-5: Sofi Huri, Safiye Erol, Nezihe Araz* (İstanbul: Kubbealtı, 2016); *Mektuplar-6: Kemal Yurdakul Aren* (İstanbul: Kubbealtı, 2016); *Mektuplar-7/1: Vehbi Güneri* (İstanbul: Kubbealtı, 2017); *Mektuplar-8: Özcan Ergiydiren* (İstanbul: Kubbealtı, 2019); *Mektuplar-9: İnci A. Birol* (İstanbul: Kubbealtı, 2019).

included, in 2004, her *İbrahim Paşa Konağı* (The Mansion of İbrahim Pasha) in the official canon of 52 Turkish novels to be read by all middle and high school students. Judging by the continuous stream of Ayverdi-related activities in the past few years,<sup>2</sup> it seems there is no end to them until she finally takes her pride of place in the pantheon of twentieth century Turkish right.

This might come as a surprise to those who remember that Ayverdi was a controversial figure in her lifetime. The artistic worth of her fiction is only recently being discussed, because the left-leaning editors and critics in the Turkish literary world did not take her work seriously most of the time. This was, however, the least of her concerns. Although Ayverdi remained the revered and beloved leader of her Rifai circle, she and her sheikh, Kenan Rifai, had become victims of vilification campaigns a number of times. Interestingly, her opponents hailed from opposite ends of the political spectrum. On the one hand, many secular, westernized members of the İstanbul elite at the time snubbed the *tarikât* framework as a relic of the Oriental past and could not figure out why those educated, modern-looking—meaning no headscarves—upper class women flocked to the *dergah* (a dervish lodge) of an elderly sheikh. Watching things from afar with immense curiosity, secular critics assumed intuitively that Kenan Rifai<sup>3</sup> must have been abusing Islam to attract and have intimate relations with the women in his following (*ihvan*). Rumors of this sort eventually found their way into Refik Halid Karay's 1954 novel, *Kadınlar Tekkesi* (The Dervish Lodge of Women), whose plot was undoubtedly modeled after the Rifais.<sup>4</sup> Simultaneously, Ayverdi faced bitter criticism from her right-wing enemies,

---

<sup>2</sup> A list of past and planned activities can be found on [www.kubbealti.org.tr](http://www.kubbealti.org.tr) and [www.samihaayverdi.org](http://www.samihaayverdi.org).

<sup>3</sup> Sâmiha Ayverdi, Safiye Erol, Nezihe Araz and Sofi Huri, *Ken'an Rifâi ve Yirminci Asrın Işığında Müslümanlık* 4<sup>th</sup> ed (İstanbul: Kubbealti, 2003); Cemalnur Sargut, *Kenan Rifâi ile Aşka Yolculuk* (İstanbul: Sufi Kitap Yayınları, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Refik Halid Karay, *Kadınlar Tekkesi* (İstanbul: İnkılap, 1999 [1954]).

as well. This time the problem was Ayverdi's modernized version of Islam and especially her unorthodox costume for a pious Muslim woman of her age and stature.<sup>5</sup> She was always modestly, but impeccably dressed up in the latest fashion trends, and with the exception of the duration of daily prayers and other Islamic rituals, she did not wear the Islamic headscarf. Not only she did not wear it, nationalist-Islamist critics of Ayverdi suspected that she impressed her example on other women who joined or wanted to join her circle.<sup>6</sup>

Both cases of criticism clearly show that the main source of criticism for, what I call, the Ayverdi Circle stemmed from their challenge to the traditional roles ascribed to women in Turkish society. Although the Ayverdi Circle is very interesting in itself and presents an excellent case study for social scientists and humanities scholars of various disciplinary backgrounds, I believe their most original aspect is that they exemplify the one and only case of a very visible and, one is tempted to say, dominant role played by women in a *tarikât*, the like of which had never been seen

---

<sup>5</sup> The literature on Muslim women's dress codes and how those codes are being shaped and re-shaped after the encounter with modernity is huge. For the general debate, see Joan Wallach Scott, *The Politics of the Veil* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007); Lila Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others", *American Anthropologist* 104 (2002), 783-790; Arlene Elowe MacLeod, *Accommodating Protest: Working Women, the New Veiling and Change in Cairo* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); Saba Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival Author(s)", *Cultural Anthropology* 16 (2001), 202-236; Ashraf Zahedi, "Concealing and Revealing Female Hair: Veiling Dynamics in Contemporary Iran", in *The Veil: Women Writers on Its History, Lore, and Politics*, Jennifer Heath (ed.) (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2008), 250-266. For the Turkish case, see Elizabeth Özdalga, *The Veiling Issue, Official Secularism and Popular Islam in Modern Turkey* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Anna Secor, "The Veil and Urban Space in Istanbul: Women's Dress, Mobility and Islamic Knowledge", *Gender, Place and Culture* 9 (2002), 5-22; Banu Gokarikel and Katharyne Mitchell, "Veiling, Secularism, and the Neoliberal Subject: National Narratives and Supranational Desires in Turkey and France", *Global Networks* 5 (2005), 147-165; Alev Çınar, "Subversion and Subjugation in the Public Sphere: Secularism and the Islamic Headscarf", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 33 (2008), 891-913; Ayşe Saktanber and Gül Çorbacıoğlu, "Veiling and Headscarf- Skepticism in Turkey", *Social Politics* 15 (2008), 514-538; Sevgi Adak, "Women in the Post-Ottoman Public Sphere: Anti-Veiling Campaigns and the Gendered Reshaping of Urban Space in Early Republican Turkey" in *Women and the City, Women in the City: A Gendered Perspective on Ottoman Urban History*, Nazan Maksudyan (ed.) (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2014), 36-67; Sevgi Adak, "Anti-Veiling Campaigns and Local Elites in Turkey of the 1930s: A View from the Periphery", in *Anti-Veiling Campaigns in the Muslim World: Gender, Modernism and the Politics of Dress*, Stephanie Cronin (ed.) (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 59-85.

<sup>6</sup> Ahmet B. Karabacak, *Üç Hilâl'in [sic] Hikayesi* (İstanbul: Bilgeoğuz, 2011), 59-60.

before in the history of Islam. The visibility of religiously empowered women in this Rifai group was encouraged by the master of the *dergah*, Sheikh Kenan Rifai in the 1920s and certainly gained momentum after the republican government in Turkey banned all religious orders in 1925. Actually, Neubauer rightly makes the point that women's empowerment in this particular *dergah* was possible only after the weakening of the male-dominated format after the 1925 law.<sup>7</sup> The traditional *tarikah* framework of this Rifai group was gradually replaced by a more experimental organizational structure in which women came to occupy an expanding role. In order to capture the essence of that role and to better reflect its nature, I am using the term "women's Islam", though I know, for sure, Samiha Ayverdi would have been the first one to object and disown the concept. Yet, as a non-member academic observer, I must say I find no better term to describe the unique blend of Islam and modernity she and other women in the circle produced with a revolutionary female touch.

I will start by explaining the context in which the Ayverdi circle was born and, to that end, I will first examine how Samiha Ayverdi inherited Kenan Rifai's mantle and continued his path of fusing Islam with modernity. Next, I will introduce some of the most remarkable women in the Ayverdi Circle and make a special digression on Meşküre Sargut, who left us with a video recorded account of her memories at the *dergah*. Finally, I will conclude by elaborating on the concept of "women's Islam."

### **Ayverdi: An Introduction**

Samiha Ayverdi was born in 1905 in the Şehzadebaşı quarter of İstanbul's old city.<sup>8</sup> On both sides, she descended from and grew up in a large family of Ottoman bureaucrats. Like other upper class urban Muslim woman of her time, she, too,

---

<sup>7</sup> Neubauer, "This is the Age of Women", 162. That said, it is important to note the 1925 law did not lead to the decline of patriarchy in any other *dergah* in Turkey. Therefore, the role of the 1925 law as an independent variable must not be singled out as the one and only factor that enabled the empowerment of women in this particular *dergah*.

<sup>8</sup> Aytürk and Mignon, "Paradoxes of a Cold War Sufi Woman".

attended a school for girls, but otherwise much of her education consisted of private instruction at home, which included French and violin lessons. She married quite young, at the age of 16, and soon her only child, Nadide, was born. This marriage ended in divorce and the 21 year-old Samiha returned to her family home with her daughter. She was never going to marry again and, because it reminded bitter memories of the past, she did not like to talk about her marriage either, so much so that we do not even know who her husband was.

The big calamity in young Samiha's life overlapped with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the birth of the Turkish Republic, both of which were traumatic events for the remnants of the Ottoman elite living in İstanbul. Under the impact of the trauma, she sought solace in the *dergah* of Kenan Rifai, who provided a spiritual anchor to forget personal and national catastrophe and to build her life again. The sheikh was no stranger to her: Samiha's mother was already a disciple and her maternal uncle was one of the sheikh's designated successors (*halife*). Samiha joined the order right about when it was being outlawed and, as it seems to be the custom for the inner circle, maintained contact with her master on an almost daily basis for more than 20 years, until Kenan Rifai passed away in 1950.

Following the passing of her master, Samiha Ayverdi was acknowledged by the *ihvan* as the foremost student and disciple of the deceased sheikh and succeeded him as the intellectual leader of this Rifai circle. From then on, the introvert, self-effacing Samiha transformed herself into one of the best-known right-wing public intellectuals in Cold War Turkey. All her public activities now were geared toward reversing secular prejudices against Islam and rehabilitating the Ottoman past when hardly anyone else was willing to. With financial support from her elder brother, Ekrem Hakkı Ayverdi, she joined the *İstanbul Fetih Cemiyeti* (The İstanbul Conquest

Society), which aimed to commemorate the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the conquest of İstanbul by the Ottomans. In 1953, she used her connections with the ruling Democratic Party—especially with the DP Minister of Education, Tevfik İleri—and played a significant role in restarting the centuries-old Mevlevi *Şeb-i Arus* ceremony in Konya, which had not been performed since 1925. In 1958, the brother and sister founded the *İstanbul Enstitüsü* (The İstanbul Institute) and the *Yahya Kemal Enstitüsü* (The Yahya Kemal Institute), two semi-academic institutions, which were meant to revive interest in the Ottoman capital and the neoclassicist poet, respectively. By far the most important institution Ayverdis built, however, was the *Kubbealtı Cemiyeti* (The Kubbealtı Society) of 1970, which was later renamed as an academy for all right-wing intellectuals, artists, authors and poets, who stood firm against the leftist tide that swept Turkey in the 1960s and 1970s. Located in the heart of İstanbul’s old city, the Kubbealtı soon became a meeting point and a hub of activities, including regular academic lectures as well as artisan workshops, which employed the last generation of practitioners of Ottoman-Islamic arts. Last but not least, while Samiha Ayverdi herself did not join the *Aydınlar Ocağı* (The Intellectuals’ Hearth),<sup>9</sup> arguably the most important right-wing think-tank of late Cold War Turkey, her brother did, and due to the importance accorded to the Ayverdis in right-wing circles, the list of founders marked his name as Member No.1. Growing increasingly concerned that Turkey might not survive the civil war it was going through in the second half of the 1970s, Samiha Ayverdi decided to throw her support behind Alpaslan Türkeş and encouraged some of her disciples to join the Nationalist Action Party. The fact that she did not chose the other far right party, the National Salvation Party of Necmettin Erbakan was a clear signal of her long-standing disagreement with political Islamists

---

<sup>9</sup> Sema Basmacı, “Aydınlar Ocağı ve Türk-İslam Sentezi: 1980’lerden 2000’li Yıllara Devreden Milliyetçi Muhafazakar Bakiye”, MA Dissertation, Hacettepe University, 2009.

over what “true Islam” was and how it could be lived. In the aftermath of the 1980 Coup, Samiha Ayverdi withdrew from public life and spent the last decade of her life housebound partly because of her failing health, but her silence could also be attributed to a newly found feeling of recompense: on the one hand, her arch-enemy, the Soviet Union was fast collapsing, bringing down with it the allure of socialism, and, on the other, her ideas were coming to power in Turkey in the form of the so-called “Turkish-Islamic Synthesis”<sup>10</sup> as the new cultural policy of right-wing governments after 1983. Now she could die a peaceful death—in 1993—and get buried right next to her master. The epitaph on her beautifully carved tombstone summarizes the meaning of her life in a few simple words: “Samiha Ayverdi, 1905-1993, Servant [*lit. slave*] of Kenan Rifai.”

Serve she did, as she presided faithfully over a big retinue of Rifais whom she inherited from the late Kenan Rifai. Indeed, parallel to the more visible, public part of her life, Samiha Ayverdi spared much of her time for catering to the Rifai *ihvan*. Being a member of the Rifai order meant one had to look up to the sheikh or solicit his opinion about every decision to be made, ranging from the most important issues such as marriage and divorce, health problems, and employment to rather mundane matters of one’s daily life. In the absence of a proper sheikh, Samiha Ayverdi stepped in to fulfill that role. She was in contact with hundreds of *ihvan*, mostly in Istanbul, but sometimes without. She visited them to mark the most important moments in their lives, to celebrate births, circumcision or marriage ceremonies, purchase of new homes, or for sad occasions, to pray for and bid farewell to the sick and the old. Otherwise, she called them over the phone and received phone calls, or spent hours

---

<sup>10</sup> Bozkurt Güvenç *et al*, *Türk-İslam Sentezi* (İstanbul: Sarmal, 1991); Sam Kaplan, “Din-ü Devlet All Over Again? The Politics of Military Secularism and Religious Militarism in Turkey following the 1980 Coup”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34 (2002), 113-127; Yüksel Taşkın, *Anti-komünizmden Küreselleşme Karşıtlığına: Milliyetçi Muhafazakar Entelijensiya* (İstanbul: İletişim, 2007).

every day writing letters or responding to them.<sup>11</sup> Sometimes she had to act with decisiveness and jealousy for the Rifai cause to protect her folk from other sheikhs who attempted to transfer Ayverdi's Rifais to their orders.<sup>12</sup> The poor looked up to her as well as the young and the perplexed. All in all, she was always on a very tight schedule and she often thanked God for not having any spare time.

### **Other Prominent Women in the Ayverdi Circle**

While Ayverdi followed in her sheikh's footsteps and succeeded him as the mentor of the Rifai circle, she definitely was not the only woman there. Actually, she was in the company of many other women, who left an imprint on this religious circle. Within the Ayverdi Circle, women were not only represented in large numbers, but, more important than numerical superiority, they were also performing the most visible and influential roles. Those roles could be divided into two, reflecting a basic division of labor, which began early on, even under Kenan Rifai's tenure as the sheikh of the circle.

On the one hand, there were women who were responsible for the everyday hustle and bustle in the *dergah*, which combined religious quarters where Rifai rituals were performed until 1925 and the three-storey house in which the sheikh lived with his family and attendants. Their jobs included, first and foremost, serving the sheikh and help him maintain his fastidious routine; then, came other daily chores, related to running a big household: cleaning, cooking, shopping, and of course welcoming and caring for the *ihvan* who were visiting the *dergah* endlessly. At the top of the list of these first group of women was the mistress of the household, Hatice Cenani Hanım, who was Kenan Rifai's mother and who held absolute sway over his son and the

---

<sup>11</sup> To mark the approaching *bayram* in 1964, for instance, Ayverdi penned nearly 200 letters and postcards; see Ayverdi, *Mektuplar-6: Kemal Yurdakul Aren*, 72.

<sup>12</sup> Meşküre Sargut, "Meşküre Sargut—Efendim Hayatımda 4", (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mA7d2knaOPE>), (accessed on 2 May 2015).

*dergah* until she passed away. She herself was credited with powers of second sight and it was she who initiated her son in the sufi path.<sup>13</sup> In order to cater to her son's following, she had the *dergah* built for him in 1908,<sup>14</sup> which was officially known as the *Ümmü Kenan Dergahı* (The Dervish Lodge of Kenan's Mother), portending generations of women's influence to come in the future. So, right from the beginning, the tradition of women's imprint in the *dergah* of Kenan Rifai can be said to have appeared in the persona of this powerful mother. Next came the sheikh's wives: Kenan Rifai was regally married to four women. Although Islamic law allowed Muslim males to be married with up to four women at any given time, in the late Ottoman period polygamy was quite uncommon in Istanbul.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, Kenan Rifai's, too, were not necessarily love marriages and they were not entirely by choice either; Hatice Cenani Hanım kindly pushed her son into at least one—and probably more—of those marriages to protect young women related to them by acquaintance. We are also given to understand that, while the four wives were held in high esteem both during the sheikh's lifetime and after, they were modest women with no cerebral weight or pretensions, especially in comparison to the women on the other side of the division of labor.

Indeed, the *Ümmü Kenan Dergahı* counted among its members some of the most intellectually and artistically visible women of the early republican period. These women did not belong to the household,<sup>16</sup> and their relationship with the sheikh—and later, with Samiha Ayverdi—was only as Rifai disciples. Many of them graduated from the best schools of Kemalist Turkey and yet others received degrees

---

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.cemalnur.org/contents/detail/kenan-rifai-kimdir/24> (accessed on 2 May 2015).

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.cenanvakfi.org/vakif-binasi/> (accessed on 2 May 2015).

<sup>15</sup> Alan Duben and Cem Behar, *Istanbul Households: Marriage, Family and Fertility, 1880-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>16</sup> That is why I am not including Hatice Cenani Hanım in this category, who, otherwise, with her preeminent role in the order, belongs exactly here.

from abroad. Apart from Samiha Ayverdi, who was one of the few accomplished Turkish women novelists of the 1930s and 1940s, Samiha's cousin Semiha Cemal stood out as the first example of this pattern in the making. Semiha graduated in 1926 from Turkey's one and only university at the time with a degree in psychology, taught at girls' high schools in İzmir and İstanbul, and translated (from French) Plato and Marcus Aurelius into Turkish. Privately, she was a star student of Kenan Rifai and studied sufi teachings and Rumi's Mesnevi with him until she died very young in 1936 at the age of 31. The bond between the sheikh and the disciple was so strong that, 14 years after her passing, Kenan Rifai wished to be buried right next to her in 1950.

Samiha Ayverdi decided to break the shroud of secrecy that surrounded her circle, which bred unwanted rumors, and they came out of the shadows with a book published in 1951 that was also meant to commemorate the recently deceased master. This book immediately attracted attention both in Turkey and also among Orientalists in Europe and was acknowledged as a great example of female devotional literature. To be more precise, all four authors of *Kenan Rifâi ve Yirminci Asrın Işığında Müslümanlık* (Kenan Rifai and Islam in the Twentieth Century)<sup>17</sup> were women. The lead author was unsurprisingly Samiha Ayverdi, the new mentor of the remnants of the *Ümmü Kenan Dergahı*. The other three were very interesting figures, as well. Safiye Erol (1902-1964)<sup>18</sup> graduated from a German middle school in İstanbul, moved to Germany on a scholarship for a high school, and eventually a university degree. Upon receiving a PhD in Orientalistik from the University of Munich, she returned to İstanbul in 1926 and began a successful career as a novelist, specializing on historical themes with a conservative and a rare feminine perspective. She met

---

<sup>17</sup> Ayverdi, Erol, Araz and Huri, *Ken'an Rifâi*.

<sup>18</sup> [www.safiyeerol.org](http://www.safiyeerol.org) (accessed on 2 May 2015); Mehmet Nuri Yardım, *Safiye Erol Kitabı* (İstanbul: Bensen, 2003).

Samiha Ayverdi in 1947 and remained very close to the circle at least into the 1950s. Nezihe Araz (1920-2009),<sup>19</sup> one other co-author of the book, studied philosophy at the University of Ankara, turned leftist and joined the faculty as an assistant to the chair of sociology, Behice Boran. Boran was one of the leaders of the socialist movement in Cold War Turkey and when she was sacked from her chair by the government in 1948 on charges of communism and sympathy for the Soviet Union, Nezihe's father, a member of the Turkish parliament from the ruling RPP ticket, snatched Nezihe away from her socialist network to the "safety" of İstanbul. It was there that she met the now bed-ridden Kenan Rifai and Samiha Ayverdi and became a disciple of the Rifai order. Throughout her long career, she was going to make a living as one of Turkey's most respected journalists and playwrights. Finally, the most curious figure among the four was probably Sofi Huri (1897-1983).<sup>20</sup> Descending from an Aleppine Greek Orthodox priestly family, she studied at an American school in Turkey and, later, at Cambridge and Birmingham. Back in Turkey, Sofi Hanım worked for the Bible Society, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, and was an editor of the Redhouse Turkish-English-Turkish dictionary. She, too, joined the circle of women at the *Ümmü Kenan Dergahi* in the late 1930s or the 1940s, obviously falling under the spell of Kenan Rifai, who boasted extremely good relations with the leaders of the non-Muslim minority groups in İstanbul and counted some of them among his disciples. Ayverdi's books and texts by other people affiliated with the circle hinted at the likelihood that Sofi Huri converted to Islam. Yet, while those hints might contain a kernel of truth, the fact that she did not Islamicize her name as was often the case with converts, that she continued to work for Christian organizations into old age and, then, chose to

---

<sup>19</sup> Soner Yalçın, "Solculuktan Sufiliğe: Nezihe Araz", *Hürriyet* (01 August 2009); Jeyda Elsasser, *Beyond Words* (2010 documentary on Nezihe Araz by her sister's granddaughter).

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.kultur.gov.tr/EN,38047/huri-sofi.html> (accessed on 2 May 2015).

relocate to Athens with her extended family (she died and was buried there) cast some doubt on her alleged conversion. In any case, her very presence in an Islamic religious order challenges the tradition: after all, Sofi Huri was a double other, both as a woman and as a Christian.

### **An Excursus on Meşküre Sargut (1925-2013)**

Why this short digression on Meşküre Hanım? First, she happened to be one of the dozens of other women who got to know and were inspired by the late sheikh, but more significantly, she was a true representative of Kenan Rifai's ideal type of a woman; in other words, she was a lifestyle and character model for the rest. Although she, too, published two books in her youth, she hardly belongs to the ranks of intellectual Rifai women. On the one hand, she was a typical middle class woman of her times: she enrolled at the University of İstanbul, studying English literature, but dropped out without a diploma upon the request of her husband. From then on she divided her time between the *dergah*, her family, and all kinds of Rifai-related philanthropic activities. While she was not a leader of the movement—and this was quite unthinkable as long as Samiha Hanım was around—Meşküre Sargut certainly belonged to the inner core of the *ihvan* since the late 1940s. As a sign of her status in the Ayverdi Circle, she was buried in one of the remaining few, and thus very coveted spots that surrounded Kenan Rifai's grave at the Merkez Efendi Cemetery in İstanbul.

While she did not make a public claim herself, Meşküre Hanım hinted at her central role and had this confirmed by no other than Samiha Ayverdi. According to the story told by Meşküre Hanım, Samiha Ayverdi dreamed a powerful dream in the late 1940s, when the sheikh was still alive. In her dream, Kenan Rifai, a very young Meşküre, and herself were standing before an unfinished building with no roof over it. The sheikh was holding two very heavy long robes (*cübbe*), handed them over to

Samiha Hanım, entered the building and disappeared. After waiting a few minutes, Samiha Hanım got very worried and this time she handed the robes over to Meşküre, entered the building and disappeared as well. We are told that Samiha Ayverdi did not dream dreams very often and therefore she took this one very seriously, shared it with the sheikh and asked for his interpretation. Kenan Rifai was very pleased with this otherworldly message and said: “OK, go tell Meşküre, she has to prepare accordingly.”<sup>21</sup> This story of disappearing mentors and passing on of robes—a symbol of authority in the Islamic world—was perhaps intended to legitimize a line of succession. If it did not come true for Meşküre Sargut, it most certainly did in the case of Meşküre’s daughter, Cemalnur Sargut, who currently leads the most powerful, visible and influential offshoot from the *Ümmü Kenan Dergahı*.

On top of everything else, Meşküre Sargut did a great service to all interested in the Ayverdi Circle by leaving behind a video of her reminiscences of the *dergah* during the sheikh’s lifetime. The video is 104 minutes long in total, was recorded by her daughter on 22 February 2003 and is currently available on Youtube in four parts.<sup>22</sup> Meşküre Hanım’s memories of life in the *dergah* in the late 1930s and 1940s is full of invaluable data about what it meant to be a women disciple of Kenan Rifai.

Meşküre Sargut was 25 years old and married for six years when the sheikh passed away. In the video, more than 50 years after that definitive event of her life, her excitement, passion, and sorrow over that big loss were still very fresh. She was born an *ihvan* child; both of her parents were affiliated with the *Ümmü Kenan Dergahı* and had moved to the same street so as to be close to their master. Kenan

---

<sup>21</sup> “Meşküre Sargut—Efendim Hayatımda 3”, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RBq-K5dbDuk>), accessed on 2 May 2015.

<sup>22</sup> “Meşküre Sargut—Efendim Hayatımda 1”, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5feGLO3YRqg>); “Meşküre Sargut—Efendim Hayatımda 2”, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zItkS1dcBvs>); “Meşküre Sargut—Efendim Hayatımda 3”, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RBq-K5dbDuk>); “Meşküre Sargut—Efendim Hayatımda 4”, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mA7d2knaOPE>) (all accessed on 2 May 2015).

Rifai instructed the family to name her Meşküre<sup>23</sup>—a girl to be thanked for—and later used to call her “my daughter, begotten by my soul (*ruhumun doğurduğu evlat*).”<sup>24</sup> To describe the impact he had on her, the sheikh once said: “You are on my embroiderer’s frame and I am embroidering you my little Meşküre.” Indeed, she spent a couple of hours at the *dergah* almost every day, working on what she calls her “moral and spiritual education (*manevi tahsil*)” in parallel to what she learned at high school and university.<sup>25</sup>

In Meşküre Hanım’s eyes, the sheikh appeared as a larger than life figure, a man who was the gate that opened up to the other, real world. Throughout the video, she repeatedly calls him “blessed (*mübarek*)”, “great (*ulu*)”, “stately (*heybetli*)”, “magnificent and imposing (*azametli*)”, and “majestic (*haşmetli*).” In her first recollection of the sheikh, dating back to when she was three years old, she remembers how she shook and trembled upon seeing him, because it was as if the skies had opened up and the man was high above them; he was so “beautiful” that even a child of her age could tell.<sup>26</sup> She later adds that even at his old age, he was still a very handsome—but also a very humble—man.<sup>27</sup> Whenever she relates a story about Kenan Rifai, she refers to him either as “my master (*efendim*)” and “my sultan (*sultanım*)”, or as “*kendileri*.” The latter expression roughly translates as “his highness”, and is written with a capital letter as “*Kendileri*”, which has become the standard way of referring to the master in Ayverdi Circle texts today. In religious terms, Meşküre Hanım is even bolder: her master is “the full heir of the prophet

---

<sup>23</sup> Sargut 1.

<sup>24</sup> Sargut 2.

<sup>25</sup> Sargut 1.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Sargut 3.

(*resulullahın tam varisi*)”, in whose person God and the prophet are manifest (*Allah’ın ve peygamberin kendisinden tecelli ettiği*).<sup>28</sup>

All these linguistic clues point at the absoluteness of Kenan Rifai’s authority over Meşküre Hanım as well as other women in the circle. This presents us with an interesting dilemma. Historically speaking, religious orders in Islam were actually brotherhoods where *men* sought proximity to God via the help (*himmet*) of a male sheikh.<sup>29</sup> Sufi women such as Rabia al-Adawiyah (713-801)<sup>30</sup> did exist, but these mystic women were mostly unmarried loners, who found the path to God by the grace of God, and not in the more formal, male-dominated hierarchy of an order. Because these women had neither sheikhs nor husbands, they did not experience a clash of authorities at home. Later, when women were allowed to join these orders on their own, as it happened in the late Ottoman Empire for instance, they would not be admitted to the *sanctus sanctorum* of the sheikh and would never be shown the same level of personal and warm attention that the male disciples received, which saved them from a similar dilemma.<sup>31</sup>

However, the *Ümmü Kenan Dergahı* stood out as a huge exception in this regard, where the sheikh removed all visible (Islamic *tesettür*) boundaries that separated him from his women *ihvan* and freely intermingled with them, taught them, advised them and even picked one of them as his heir. In other words, when these women joined the *dergah*, they accepted the fact that, in return, the sheikh joined their families, too, as the supreme authority in their lives, whose power overshadowed that

---

<sup>28</sup> Sargut 2.

<sup>29</sup> I. R. Netton, “Tarik”, *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.

<sup>30</sup> Margaret Smith, “Rabia al-Adawiyah al-Kaysiyya”, *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.

<sup>31</sup> There are very few references to the relationship between a sheikh and a woman disciple. One such example can be found in the dream-book of a seventeenth century woman, Asiye Hatun of Skopje, who recorded her dreams regularly and sent them to his sheikh for his interpretation. The correspondence between the sheikh and Asiye Hatun survived in a manuscript at the Topkapı Palace Library; see Cemal Kafadar, “Mütereddit Bir Mutasavvıf: Üsküplü Asiye Hatun’un Rüya Defteri, 1641-1643”, *Topkapı Sarayı Yıllığı* 5 (1992), 168-222.

of the traditional leader of conservative Muslim families, the husband. Membership in the *dergah* taxed the time these women would have otherwise spent at home: they visited the sheikh regularly, they now prayed a lot more, and they showed up at community activities. Moreover, the sheikh advised them on all matters important and unimportant: the ultimate, divinely guided decisions were always made by him.

Judging by the corpus of texts written by members of the Ayverdi Circle, there is no evidence for a clash between the sheikh and the husbands, and this must have been because most of the time the husbands themselves were affiliated with the *dergah*, and therefore, submitted to the authority of Kenan Rifai alongside their wives. Meşküre Sargut provides us with two anecdotes that make this point, one of her parents, and the other of her own. In the first, the story of how Meşküre's parents became *ihvan* is very telling. Her father was a naval officer and away from home for two to three weeks every month. In one of his absences, her mother joined the *dergah* and was saying her beads when the husband returned home. She immediately declared with an ultimatum that she had become a *derviş* in the meantime, and he had to either accept this, or, if not, he was free to divorce. Meşküre's father did not object, but reminded his wife that being a *derviş* was not a trifle thing, it had to be taken seriously with all its responsibilities. Soon, Kenan Rifai requested to meet with the husband of this young *ihvan*, and the husband, too, "fell in love (*babam aşık olmuş efendime*)" with the sheikh on the spot.<sup>32</sup>

Meşküre Hanım's own story is quite long but worth recounting because it shows the extent to which Kenan Rifai had penetrated the core of the Sargut family.<sup>33</sup> Meşküre's husband, Ömer Faruk Bey was a medical doctor, and when he passed, in 1949, a very difficult series of exams to become an internal specialist, the newly-wed

---

<sup>32</sup> Sargut 1.

<sup>33</sup> Sargut 2.

Meşküre attributed this success partly to the mystical intervention of her master. She decided to buy the now ailing sheikh a gift, her first ever gift to him, and she wanted this to be a special thing. In a posh store in the Pera district of İstanbul, she found a beige silk *robe-de-chambre* with ruby stripes, up for sale for the hefty sum of 150 liras, enough to cover the expenses of a family for a month in those years. Meşküre did not have the money to buy it, but in the meantime, her husband sold his family property to open his own clinic and to buy an expensive radiology machine. The machine was hard to get, therefore, he brought the money home, locked it up in their safe and told his wife to keep an eye on it: when the machine was going to be available, in a few months he hoped, he would purchase it immediately. With a safe full of money and after consulting with her father Meşküre made a plan: she was going to take 150 liras from the safe—without telling her husband—then replace it at the beginning of the following month with money borrowed from her father, who was going to receive his retirement pay soon. Initially, everything worked as planned. She bought the gift and delivered it to the women at the *dergah* to be given to Kenan Rifai. She did not dare to hand it in face-to-face.

But a nasty surprise was waiting for her at home. Her husband showed up that evening with the good news that the machine became available unexpectedly and he asked Meşküre to bring the money from the safe. In that panicked moment, she could not explain what had happened and had no choice but to bring the money and watch her husband count it. Now comes the miracle: Ömer Faruk Bey counted it to the last lira and found nothing missing, it was as if 150 liras had never been whisked away. The following day, Meşküre paid her everyday visit to the *dergah* and met a smiling Kenan Rifai, who first listened to the incident at the Sargut home the previous day

and then announced he would always come to the rescue of *ihvan* in such dire moments!

She does not say when, but she later told her husband the truth about the money. His response was protest: “Why didn’t you tell me in the first place, why did you take the money secretly” he asked, “Am I not a son of that great teacher? I would even give up my soul for him.”<sup>34</sup> Indeed, why did Meşküre keep the gift a secret? Because of the substantial price? Was it the intimate nature of the gift? Or, maybe she thought her husband might be upset if he learned she was crediting the sheikh for his success? Probably all of these factors shaped Meşküre’s thinking, however what she went through is obvious. She was torn between two loyalties and like all other women in the circle, she chose the otherworldly.

### **Conclusion: Observations on Women’s Islam**

The *Ümmü Kenan Dergahı* represents a revolutionary streak within early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Islam, because it allowed women to feel fully Muslim at the same time as it also liberated them from male domination to a hitherto unprecedented degree. This was quite inconceivable in the traditional sufi framework, and once again, the Kemalist reforms seem to be the decisive phenomenon in making this kind of an outcome possible. Law No. 677 (promulgated on 13 December 1925) that closed all the *dergah*, banned the *tarikats* and the use of sufi titles presented the sufi leaders and rank and file with a fait accompli. Some *tarikats*, such as the Mevlevis for example, disappeared from the scene and lost their former clout. Others, and mainly the Nakşibendis, chose to go underground and tried to weather the storm; they were going to resurface after 1945 and construct a very elaborate and effective network that

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

continues to shape modern Turkish politics.<sup>35</sup> However, there was also a third path: the early republican decision to eliminate these sufi networks led to the transformation of the traditional framework of the *tarikât* in a number of cases. One very important case is the Nurculuk Movement,<sup>36</sup> established by a former Nakşibendi, Said Nursi, who, however, removed the Nakşibendi rituals, minimized the role of the sheikh (who could no longer be called a sheikh according to law), and replaced the former *Gemeinschaft*-type of relationship between the master and the disciples with a more text-centric approach, a policy that won him hundreds of thousands of followers.

Kenan Rifai did the same thing, but with a very different mentality and results. He created a modern Islamic path that was at peace with modernity. First of all, he did not oppose, but embraced the law that forced him to close the doors of the *Ümmü Kenan Dergahı*. He found ample justification for his decision in the sufi toolbox of ideas. If all that happens is God's will and would not have happened if God did not wish them to, then it is the utmost duty of a sufi *derviş* to accept the closure and not to resist the authorities. The physical *dergah* (*zahiri dergah*) was unimportant and now gone, he once said, but the *dergah* in the heart (*kalp dergahı*) would survive forever.<sup>37</sup> At another time, he complimented Samiha Ayverdi: "O great Samiha," he exclaimed, "you re-opened my *dergah* in your novels."<sup>38</sup>

After 1925, the *Ümmü Kenan Dergahı* (which was longer recognized before the law as such) epitomized a modern reinterpretation of Islam, which accepted

---

<sup>35</sup> Ruşen Çakır, *Ayet ve Slogan: Türkiye'de İslami Oluşumlar* (İstanbul: Metis, 2010), 19-76; Elisabeth Özdalga, ed. *The Naqshbandis in Western and Central Asia: Change and Continuity* (İstanbul: Swedish Research Institute, 1999).

<sup>36</sup> Ursula Spuler, "Nurculuk: Die Bewegung des Bediüzzaman Said Nursi in der modernen Türkei", in *Studien zum Minderheitenproblem im Islam I*, ed. Otto Spies (Bonn: Bonner Orientalische Studien, 1973), 100-183; Şerif Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey: The Case of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989).

<sup>37</sup> Sargut 3; Samiha Ayverdi, *Mülakatlar* (İstanbul: Kubbealtı, 2005), 58-59.

<sup>38</sup> Sargut 3.

modernity as God's will. This was an interpretation that began with Kenan Rifai, and continued by Samiha Ayverdi; both mentors allowed their followers to participate in the modern world not as a deplorable obligation unlucky modern day Muslims had to suffer; in their eyes, modernity was not an enemy. They were like freshwater fish, tossed into saltwater: it was God who relocated them—without asking them—and he reigned supreme over *all* the waters. Therefore modernity—however unpleasant it may be—ought to be welcomed as a new phase of Islamic time and Muslims had to evolve, trusting almighty God and maintaining full belief in Islam's transformative power.

Another sign of impending modernity in the *dergah* was, without doubt, the increasing profile of women. Before 1925, Kenan Rifai, in his full capacity as a Rifai sheikh, had already admitted many women to his *ihvan*, but these women—with the exception of his mother—kept low profile in what was then yet another, typical Rifai *dergah* in İstanbul. The sheikh was still surrounded by male successors (*halife*) and all the Rifai rituals were mainly performed by the male *ihvan*. All this changed after 1925. The *halifes* disappeared mysteriously as they were no longer mentioned in the Ayverdi Circle texts. It was about this time that the *ihvan* underwent a transformation with the number, visibility and influence of women such as Semiha Cemal and Samiha Ayverdi constantly on the rise. This was a change that was not only approved by the sheikh, but actually initiated by him. Without his teachings and charisma, it could not have been possible.

From the 1930s onwards Kenan Rifai set in motion a process, which would later be shouldered by Samiha Hanım alone, that created an almost exclusively women's universe of relations, with the grand exception being the person of the sheikh himself. Kenan Rifai, alive or dead, stood at the very center of this universe

and he, alone, gave meaning and justification to it. Apart from him, men were usually not present in the narrative. If they did appear in the picture, they had no authority over the circle and were not regarded as decision-makers. In any case, male members of the Ayverdi Circle always belonged, or wanted to belong, to a social status group—middle-class, well-educated and affluent—that found it natural to agree with Kenan Rifai’s and Ayverdi’s emancipatory interpretation of the role of women in Islam.

In this new network, women were permanently and gladly bound to God and Kenan Rifai, but otherwise they acted as free individuals and modern women. Traditional Islam imposes many restrictions on women and, principally, makes their participation in public space conditional on observance of strict rules of *tesettür*. Even then, Muslim women are not granted legal—and in many cases, political—equality with men. As modern day Rabias, women in the Ayverdi Circle disregarded, or to put it better, bypassed those restrictions by making recourse to a discourse of divine love. It was in this sense that they created a “women’s Islam,” a totally new approach to Muslim women, endowed with dignity and power. For the majority of conservative Turkish Muslims, their ideas and, especially, their intentionally uncovered hair were tantamount to rebellion against God. In an Islamic world dominated by what Ayverdi called the “fanatic” or the “Wahhabi” approach,<sup>39</sup> they lived in a cocoon, invisible to and unfathomable by the uninitiated *zahid*, the pious and philistine bigot. This cocoon was impregnable: in the face of bitter criticism, Ayverdi and her following stood firm thanks to their unshaking belief that they had access to “true” Islam. This confidence resulted from these women’s assumption that they were in perpetual contact with the supernatural. They kept receiving messages from Kenan Rifai through dreams or

---

<sup>39</sup> Sâmiha Ayverdi, *Millî Kültür Mes’eleleri ve Maârif Davamız* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed (İstanbul: Kubbealtı, 2006), 377-379.

instances of precognition and second sight. They traced the invisible hand of the deceased sheikh, bringing them divine justice in this world, with many cases of good being rewarded and the wicked punished. Of course, Ayverdi would have objected to the term “women’s Islam” that I am using to describe them, because she did not give up imagining herself as a pious Muslim women; for her, there could be only one, true Islam and it would not branch off into many manly, womanly interpretations. Yet, the gap that separates the Ayverdi Circle from their traditional competitors is so huge that one can hardly fail to attribute this to the women’s touch under Kenan Rifai, Samiha Ayverdi, and today, Meşküre Hanım’s daughter Cemalnur Sargut.