Summary

Common efforts by the ANR RedGold Research Programme, the Central Eurasian Seminar of the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, the China–Korea–Japan Centre of the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, the Italian Institute of Oriental Studies at the University of Rome La Sapienza and the Centre for Studies on Ethnic Groups in Northwest China of Lanzhou University have permitted the organisation, on April 11–12, 2023 of a first online multiplex roundtable on Muslim gnostic poetry in the former USSR and Popular Democracies: a century of history and present-day heritages.

Through literary examples borrowed from the Albanian, Tatar, Persian, Uyghur and Chinese languages, this meeting has tried to shed light on the historical continuities and ruptures expressed in reputedly conservative genres practiced, often, in margins of official or dominant culture during periods of restriction or suppression of religious practice. Interregional comparison was allowed by the sharing of spiritual heritages — the Hanafi Sunni madhhab and the Naqshbandi Sufi tradition especially, with openings on the Albanian Bektashiyya and Badakhshani Ismailism — and by the experiment, from Albania to the PRC, of more or less durable periods of Communist rule.

The presentations and debates have highlighted a great richness and variety of the primary materials exposed (through elaborated English translations, in several cases). At the same time, it has illustrated a number of common threads, potentially interesting for future comparative work.

1. These threads have to do, first, with a number of geographical features, starting with the role of peripheral or border regions, long considered frontier or mission lands for Islam in the vitality of modern-day Muslim hagiographic experiments in general, especially in the last fifty years (from Tropoje, in Northeast Albania, to Henan in the Central Plains of China, via the Middle Volga region of Russia or the Qarategin and Badakhshan highlands in Tajikistan). Among the characteristics of these experiments: the valorisation and, sometimes, the popularisation of Muslim gnostic verses written by men of God active during the ‘short’ twentieth century.

2. A second feature of this particularly wide, diverse but coherent cultural area is the impact exerted by the antireligious policies of this period, between China and the Balkans, on the significance taken by orality — and, thus, by orally performed poetic genres such as the mukhammas — in the transmission of high knowledge identified with high culture (Ar. ma’rifa). This explains the importance of ethnographic observation and of oral history in research, especially for the reconstruction of the role of gnostic poetry (whether Tatar, Tajik or Uyghur) in funerary rituals extremely important in the (post) communist world.
3. Antireligious policies have exerted an influence, too, on the reinterpretations, here and there, of the notion of *ma’rifa* in a sense close to that of *adab* (the classical code of values and norms of deportment, conveyed by the classical genres of didactic literature). At the same time, they have strengthened the role of learned women of high lineage in this work of transmission, illustrated during the roundtable by Tatar and Uyghur examples — even if access to sainthood seems to have remained a male prerogative, throughout the area studied during the said period. (Among the possible explanations of this gendered distribution of roles: the role of male modern Muslim saints as community founders, against backgrounds of deep socio-demographic transformations and colonisation of new territories — in connection with the quick expansion of cotton monoculture as far as post-WWII Soviet Central Asia is concerned, for instance).

4. A fourth common feature between the different regions studied is the impact exerted by the socio-political transformations of the 20th century on the development of particular interactions between classical Muslim gnostic poetry (re-)produced along all this period within Sufi circles and spiritual lineages, on the first hand, and, on the other hand, secular literary creation (in early-20th-century nationalist circles, for example, or later in the Writer’s Unions of the USSR, as suggested by the popularity of a theme such as the martyrdom of Karbala). Another specific interaction can be identified under Communist rule between the Sufi tradition and human sciences research — in ethnography, philology and musicology, in particular, which sometimes played decisive roles in the preservation and transmission of spiritual and literary traditions in danger of escheat.

5. This very theme of an escheat of traditions that pre-existed to the establishment of Communist powers, and the related themes of loss and bereavement, are widely attested in several Muslim gnostic literatures of the 20th century. The sense of danger and the specific sorrow that they reflect explain the role played by gnostic poetry in a wide range of commemoration experiments (as suggested, notably, by the insistence of Uyghur chanting on the term ‘*unutma*’ — thou shan’t forget! —, in a poem by Mashrab (c. 1865–1711) sung in a street of a Xinjiang city around 2010). This thematic focus explains the link between the *dhikr* (ceremonies of invocation of the names of the Divine) of the Albanian Bektashis, or the Uyghur *muqams*, on the one hand, and the national Albanian or Uyghur poetry of the second half of the 20th century, on the other.

6. Although poorly documented, the peculiar interaction between Sufi and secular literatures has been illustrated during the roundtable by the study of Albanian, Tatar, Tajik Persian, Uyghur and Chinese language verses. This interaction has influenced the modern, still often ongoing sanctification of territories and of national groups resulting from the population resettlements and mass labour migrations of the past century. (This is what has suggested, among others, the case of the Wakhsh River valley, in Tajikistan, and its lowlands’ human colonisation after WWII, followed by the appearance of a chain of contemporary Muslim sanctuaries spread out between its northern highlands and southern cotton-growing plain).

These perspectives open up the possibility of comparative research studies that the participants will try to develop in the coming years, in the framework of a light collab-
orative project. Such an initiative could allow their exchanges to be intensified, especially those between young researchers. A tentative programme will be proposed to them in summer 2023. It may include, also, specialists in the gnostic literatures of religious systems other than Islam, such as Orthodox Christianity, Judaism or Buddhism as they have been developing, too, under Communist rule. Meanwhile, the blog of the RedGold ANR Research Programme (https://redgold.hypotheses.org/) may continue to host distinctive materials (transcriptions of primary sources and tentative studies) relative to this project.