

Mohamed Enab

Esotericism Embodied: Traces of *Ghulāt* Thought and Symbolic Expression in Yemeni Islamic Architecture

The study of *Ghulāt* currents in formative Shi'ism has primarily focused on transmitted hadith, sectarian polemics, theological disputes, and debates over the boundaries of legitimate devotion to the Imams. While these textual traditions remain central to understanding *ghuluww*, they often obscure the broader cultural and material contexts in which esoteric Shi'i ideas, symbolic vocabularies, and contested forms of religious authority were expressed. This paper extends the discussion from doctrinal texts to material culture by examining Yemeni Islamic architecture as a visual and spatial field in which Shi'i intellectual tensions were materially inscribed and socially negotiated. Rather than treating Yemeni architecture as the direct product of a unified *Ghulāt* movement, the paper investigates how modes of allegorical interpretation, symbolic expression, and heightened devotion to the Ahl al-Bayt shaped architectural and epigraphic practices across different Yemeni Shi'i contexts. It first considers the Ismā'īlī Ṣulayḥīd milieu of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, where architecture, inscriptions, and ornamental systems may be read as part of a broader esoteric culture in which built space functioned not merely as aesthetic form, but as an encoded medium of authority, cosmology, and sacred meaning. The paper then turns to the Qāsimī state in Yemen during the period of independence between the first and second Ottoman occupations. Particular attention is given to the insertion of Shi'i and 'Alid expressions in mosques originally associated with Ottoman-Sunni patronage, including the *miḥrāb* of the Azdmur/Özdemir Mosque. These epigraphic interventions are interpreted as acts of symbolic reorientation, through which inherited Ottoman religious spaces were reinscribed with Zaydī-Qāsimī claims to imamic legitimacy, local sovereignty, and communal memory. By bringing the Ṣulayḥīd and Qāsimī cases into dialogue, the paper argues that Yemeni Islamic architecture embodied enduring tensions between legal-historical, political, and symbolic understandings of Shi'i authority. Inscriptions invoking *walāya*, the Prophet's family, the Imams, and related devotional concepts reveal how the boundaries between reverence, legitimacy, esotericism, and accusations of excess were negotiated visually as well as textually. Methodologically, the study combines architectural history, epigraphy, visual analysis, and Shi'i intellectual history, placing Yemeni material evidence alongside wider polemical debates on *ghuluww* in formative Shi'ism. In doing so, it challenges the reduction of *ghuluww* to doctrinal deviance alone and highlights architecture as a vital archive for tracing the cultural, visual, and spatial ramifications of Shi'i esotericism.

Keywords: *Ghulāt*; *ghuluww*; Yemeni Islamic architecture; Ismā'ilism; Ṣulayḥīd; Qāsimī Yemen; Zaydism; Ottoman Yemen; Azdmur Mosque; *walāya*; 'Alid devotion; Shi'i symbolism; esotericism.



Mohamed Enab

Faculty of Archaeology, Fayoum University

Professor Mohamed Enab is Professor of Islamic Archaeology and Architecture at the Faculty of Archaeology, Fayoum University, Egypt. His research focuses on Islamic architectural history, archaeology, epigraphy, and heritage, with particular attention to Yemen and the Arabian Peninsula. He received his Ph.D. in Islamic Archaeology from Cairo University for a dissertation on the surviving Ottoman mosques of Ṣan'ā'. Across his scholarship, he approaches buildings and inscriptions as historical evidence for authority, devotion, memory, and cultural exchange. He has published widely in peer-reviewed journals on Yemeni monuments, Ottoman and Qāsimī architecture, Islamic epigraphy, and heritage preservation. His work also examines Zaydī inscriptions, Shi'i architectural symbolism, and the material traces of religious and political legitimacy in Yemen. He has presented his research at major international conferences in the United Kingdom, France, the United States, the United Arab Emirates, and Lebanon. He has received competitive grants and awards from institutions including the Getty Foundation, ACSS, ICCROM Sharjah, and NYU Abu Dhabi. His current paper, "*Esotericism Embodied*," brings this expertise into dialogue with debates on the *Ghulāt* and formative Shi'ism. It reads Yemeni Islamic architecture as a visual and spatial archive through which esoteric meanings, 'Alid devotion, and intellectual tensions may be traced.