Introductory Draft

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**Tentative Title:**

**Judging Sufis: An AI-Assisted Examination of Sufi Encounters in the Early Modern Istanbul Courts**

This research project leverages the capabilities of Large Language Models (hereafter LLMs) to analyze Istanbul court records, or *sicil*, spanning from the mid-16th to the late-18th centuries. Compiled into 100 volumes by the Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı Center for Islamic Studies (hereafter İSAM), these records offer a glimpse for exploring the social landscape of the Ottoman capital. By applying machine learning tools to these primary sources, this study aims to trace long-term characteristics and trends within the socio-legal framework of Ottoman Istanbul.

The project primarily investigates trends and patterns of participation in social and legal matters among members of Sufi orders, seeking to understand the extent and nature of Sufi involvement in the Ottoman legal system and its broader impact on the social fabric of the time. Additionally, this study examines how ordinary Sufis—who are often absent from the manuscripts produced by renowned Sufi sheikhs and masters—participated in urban life and interacted both among themselves and with the broader urban community, as revealed through the court registers. By integrating AI capabilities into conventional historical research, this project ultimately aims to develop a research model that opens new avenues for historical inquiry, especially in the field of Ottoman studies.

To achieve the objectives of this study, the project extensively employs Generative Pre-Trained Transformer models (GPT), developed by OpenAI, to process Ottoman Turkish texts. Specifically, these models perform Named Entity Recognition (NER) tasks, systematically extracting and categorizing names, titles, social classes, and genders of individuals mentioned in over fifty thousand court record entries. This approach facilitates the creation of detailed profiles for individuals involved in legal proceedings, enabling the development of a rich historical dataset.

For the NER tasks, I use a structured prompt tailored to the complexity of Ottoman Turkish court records. The prompt instructs the model to identify and organize relevant information, such as names, titles, social roles, and affiliations with specific Sufi orders (e.g., Mevlevi, Bektashi, Naqshbandi, and others). Additionally, it categorizes each individual’s gender, religion or ethnicity, social status or occupation, and role within the case. The model is further prompted to distinguish place names by type (e.g., city, village, Sufi-specific places like *asitane* or *tekke*). Each entry is also assigned a unique identifier (person\_id) based on the court title and case ID, ensuring consistent tracking of individuals across cases. Moreover, for cases involving disputes, the model identifies the legal outcome, noting whether the resolution is a settlement, trial by evidence, or an oath-based resolution.

Once this dataset is established, containing profiles of participants in various legal cases, the study seeks to derive meaningful historical insights and identify social trends in Ottoman Istanbul. Key questions arise about urban religiosity and societal interactions: What new insights can be gained about the role of Sufis in legal contexts, such as their appearances as plaintiffs or witnesses, and their interactions with different societal groups? How visible were Sufis in these settings, and what does their participation reveal about the broader social fabric of the Ottoman capital? Furthermore, how did Sufi orders’ involvement in legal matters evolve over time? Temporal patterns may reveal shifts in their roles—whether as plaintiffs, defendants, or mediators—across the 16th to 18th centuries.

Additional questions examine geographical patterns in Sufi activity. Are there specific neighborhoods or districts where Sufis were more active, and what might this suggest about the city’s social and spatial organization? The influence of Sufi titles and affiliations on legal outcomes also warrants exploration. Did titles such as *dervish* or *şeyh*, or affiliations with particular orders like Mevlevi or Naqshbandi, impact their interactions within the legal system? This comparison extends to the roles and status of Sufi versus non-Sufi participants, potentially highlighting differences in the types of cases they engaged in or their social standing based on job roles and affiliations. Lastly, gender dynamics are also considered: are there distinct patterns in the roles of men and women associated with Sufi orders? By examining these interactions, the study aims to uncover gendered dimensions of Sufi involvement in the legal and social spheres of Ottoman Istanbul. (I am not sure if I can answer this question)