



Zawiyas and Urban Organization in the Medina of Tunis: A Heritage-Oriented Urban Reading from the Hafsid Period to Contemporary Reuse

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Abstract

This study examines the intertwined roles of *zawiyas* (Sufi lodges) in organizing the urban, social, and spiritual landscape of the Medina of Tunis from the Hafsid dynasty (13th–16th centuries) through their contemporary reconversion as heritage and tourist sites. By interpreting archival sources, urban cartographies, and socio-religious accounts, it demonstrates that *zawiyas* functioned beyond religious intimacy: they structured neighbourhoods, enabled brokerage between rulers and communities, and facilitated education, charity, and spiritual ledgers. The spatial positioning of these lodges, adjacent to gate-markets, cemeteries and key neighborhoods, reveals how sacred architecture was embedded in civic life. The article also traces the modern process of patrimonialisation, analyzing tensions between spiritual authenticity, community custodianship, and cultural tourism. In comparative perspective with cities such as Fès and Tlemcen, the study highlights how regional variations in heritage governance and urban integration influence conservation strategies. Ultimately, the article argues that *zawiyas* embody a continuity between spirituality and city-making and offer critical lessons for heritage-driven, sustainable urban policy in North African medinas. This research contributes original, interdisciplinary insights to debates on Islamic urbanism, heritage governance, and cultural resilience in the medieval Mediterranean.

Key Words: Zawiya, Medina of Tunis, Urban heritage, Sufi institutions, Islamic urbanism

Introduction

The Medina of Tunis, inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1979, represents one of the most distinctive urban fabrics of the Islamic Maghreb. Its spatial and cultural identity has been shaped over centuries by a dynamic interplay of political, religious, and social forces (Escher & Schepers, 2008). Among the institutions that left a lasting imprint on its urban organization, *zawiyas*, or Sufi lodges, occupy a central place. These establishments functioned as religious, educational, and charitable centers, while simultaneously exerting a significant influence on the city's spatial configuration and collective memory (McGregor, 1997; Amri, 2019).

This article addresses a guiding research question: **In what ways did *zawiyas* contribute to the shaping of the urban and social fabric of the Medina of Tunis, from the Hafsid period (thirteenth to sixteenth centuries) to their reinterpretation in contemporary heritage practices?** The inquiry is motivated by the need to connect the spiritual and religious role of these institutions with their urban and heritage significance. Existing scholarship has provided important insights into the creation of patrimonial institutions during the colonial and postcolonial periods (Bacha, 2006, 2008; Jaïdi, 2017), as well as into the governance challenges facing historic urban cores in Tunisia today (Hamad, 2019, 2021). However, the specific contribution of Sufi institutions to the morphology and symbolic geography of Tunis has not received equivalent attention, particularly in Anglophone research.

The relevance of this study is further underlined by recent scholarship that emphasizes the resilience of historic medinas as complex socio-spatial systems, where tangible and intangible dimensions intersect (Ben Salem & Simon, 2018). Within this context, the *zawiya* can be seen as a key analytical prism. It embodied religious devotion, yet also provided education, hospitality, and social mediation. Its functions linked sacred rituals with everyday practices, anchoring it in both the physical urban environment and the cultural memory of the community (Boissevain, 2005; Amri, 2019).

During the Hafsid era, Tunis emerged as both a political capital and a spiritual hub. The rise of the Shadhiliyya order in the thirteenth century, founded in Tunis, exemplifies the formative influence of Sufi traditions on the city's identity (McGregor, 1997). *Zawiyas* connected to such orders were

frequently located near markets, cemeteries, and residential quarters, thereby shaping patterns of settlement and guiding the expansion of the city (Hadda, 2024). Their placement within the urban fabric demonstrates how spiritual considerations were integrated into the geography of daily life. The sacred was not separated from the ordinary, but inscribed in the streets, squares, and neighborhoods of the medina.

In the modern era, the status of zawiyas has undergone important transformations. Many of them have shifted from being primarily religious centers to being perceived as heritage sites. Urban development pressures and heritage policies have led to the rehabilitation of some zawiyas as tourist attractions, cultural spaces, or historical monuments, while others continue to function as loci of spiritual practice (Ben Salem & Simon, 2018; Escher & Schepers, 2008). This dual role reflects broader tensions observable in other Maghrebi cities, where the patrimonialization of sacred spaces sometimes creates frictions between global heritage agendas and local community practices (Girard, 2006; Istasse, 2013).

The methodological approach of this article is interdisciplinary, combining historical, urban, and sociocultural perspectives. The study is structured along three lines of analysis:

1. **Historical framework:** the emergence of zawiyas in Hafsid Tunis, their proliferation, and their early spiritual and political functions (Amri, 2019; McGregor, 1997).
2. **Urban dimension:** the role of zawiyas in shaping the city's morphology, defining neighborhoods, and reinforcing the relationship between religious and spatial structures (Hadda, 2024; Hamad, 2021).
3. **Contemporary reinterpretation:** the transformation of zawiyas into heritage sites, their integration into tourism and heritage policies, and their comparison with similar experiences in Fez and other Maghrebi cities (Girard, 2004; Mezzine, 2010).

By articulating these three dimensions, the article argues that zawiyas should be seen as multifunctional institutions. They mediated between spiritual devotion and urban development, between political authority and popular religiosity, and between memory and contemporary heritage uses. Their presence provides a key to understanding the layered identity of the Medina of Tunis.

The comparison with Fez further highlights the relevance of this case. While both cities share a Maghrebi Islamic urban model where spirituality played a role in shaping the city, they developed

distinct trajectories under different historical and colonial contexts (Girard, 2004; Mezzine, 2010). Analyzing Tunis in dialogue with Fez allows for a broader reflection on the shared features and specificities of Maghrebi urbanism.

Finally, the study engages with contemporary debates on sustainable heritage management. Zawiyas, as historical institutions, reveal forms of social and spatial resilience that resonate with current concerns about livability, inclusiveness, and environmental adaptation (Achour Younsi, 2024). Understanding their historical role offers lessons for integrating cultural and spiritual dimensions into contemporary urban strategies.

In sum, this article explores the dual role of zawiyas as both religious centers and urban organizers, and traces their transformation into heritage landmarks. It demonstrates how these institutions link past and present, embodying continuity between spirituality and city-making, and providing insights for heritage management in the Islamic world today.

2. Historical Framework

2.1. Tunis in the Hafsids Period (13th–16th Centuries)

The Hafsids dynasty, ruling between 1229 and 1574, transformed Tunis into a political and cultural capital of the Maghreb. As the seat of a powerful state that stretched across much of present-day Tunisia, eastern Algeria, and parts of Libya, Tunis acquired the stature of a regional metropolis. The Hafsids rulers invested in the construction of mosques, madrasas, fortifications, and public works, consolidating the city's role as both a religious and economic hub (Hadda, 2024).

This period coincided with significant demographic and cultural growth. The medina expanded beyond its earlier Aghlabid and Zirid cores, integrating new quarters and markets. The Hafsids sovereigns encouraged scholarly and religious activity, positioning Tunis as a center of learning that rivaled other Islamic capitals of the western Mediterranean. The presence of al-Zaytuna Mosque, with its long-standing role in Islamic education, reinforced the intellectual profile of the city (Amri, 2019). Within this vibrant setting, the rise of Sufi practices and institutions emerged as a defining feature of urban culture.

The Hafsids capital also benefitted from its location at the crossroads of Mediterranean trade routes. Merchants, scholars, and travelers passed through Tunis, bringing with them cultural influences

and spiritual ideas. The encounter between mercantile networks and religious communities contributed to the plural character of the city. It is within this context that zawiyas took root, drawing on both local traditions of saint veneration and wider Sufi currents spreading across North Africa.

2.2. Emergence and Expansion of Zawiyas

The development of zawiyas in Hafsid Tunis was closely tied to the diffusion of Sufi brotherhoods. Among the most influential was the Shadhiliyya order, founded in Tunis in the early thirteenth century by Abu al-Hasan al-Shadhili before it spread widely across the Maghreb and beyond (McGregor, 1997). The establishment of zawiyas dedicated to Shadhili masters marked the beginning of an enduring presence of Sufi institutions in the city.

Zawiyas served multiple purposes. Spiritually, they offered spaces for prayer, dhikr, and initiation into Sufi teachings. Socially, they functioned as centers of hospitality, welcoming travelers and the poor, while also providing mediation in conflicts. Educationally, they complemented the madrasa system by teaching ethical and mystical sciences, attracting disciples from diverse backgrounds (Amri, 2019). Their activities created strong bonds between spiritual authority and local society.

Spatially, zawiyas were strategically located within the medina. Many were built near marketplaces, where they provided guidance and moral legitimacy to economic activity, or adjacent to cemeteries, where the presence of saints reinforced the sanctity of burial spaces (Hadda, 2024). Their urban positioning was not accidental but reflected an integration of religious and functional considerations. By clustering around commercial and residential nodes, zawiyas contributed to the stabilization of neighborhoods and the shaping of urban circulation patterns.

The multiplication of zawiyas across Tunis also reflected competition and diversity within Sufism. Different lineages and saintly families established their own institutions, each cultivating a spiritual and social following. This diversity enriched the religious landscape of the city and anchored zawiyas as a central feature of its identity.

2.3. Zawiyas, Political Authority, and Social Legitimacy

The relationship between zawiyas and political power during the Hafsid period was complex. On the one hand, rulers recognized the spiritual authority of Sufi masters and sometimes patronized zawiyas to enhance their legitimacy. On the other hand, zawiyas could also become autonomous centers of influence, attracting popular loyalty and serving as mediators between the population and the state (Amri, 2019; Ben Youssef, 2022).

Several examples illustrate this dual role. Some zawiyas benefited from endowments (waqf) that secured their economic independence, allowing them to operate as semi-autonomous institutions. Others enjoyed the protection or support of Hafsid rulers, who sought to align their political authority with the spiritual charisma of saints. In times of social tension, zawiyas often acted as spaces of refuge and negotiation, reinforcing their status as trusted institutions within the community (Boissevain, 2005).

The intertwining of spiritual and political dimensions is evident in the figure of certain saints who became both religious leaders and symbols of collective identity. The veneration of female saints, such as Sayyida al-Manoubia, highlights the diversity of popular religiosity and the capacity of zawiyas to embody inclusive forms of social cohesion (Amri, 2019; Boissevain, 2005). Through such figures, zawiyas acquired a role not only in religious life but also in shaping the symbolic geography of the medina.

By the late Hafsid period, the network of zawiyas in Tunis had become dense, covering different neighborhoods and integrating into the daily life of the city. They stood at the crossroads of urban, social, and spiritual dynamics, embodying the layered identity of the medina. Their influence extended beyond the walls of Tunis, connecting the city to regional Sufi networks that spanned the Maghreb and reinforced its role as a spiritual capital.

2.4. Zawiyas in the Medina of Tunis: Typology, Distribution, and Urban Functions

The Medina of Tunis, particularly during the Hafsid period and subsequent centuries, witnessed a remarkable proliferation of zawiyas that reshaped its urban fabric and contributed significantly to its socio-cultural dynamics. Far from being simple places of worship, zawiyas constituted multifunctional institutions combining religious devotion, social solidarity, and urban structuring.



Their presence across the city reflected not only spiritual needs but also broader strategies of urban organization and governance.

From a typological perspective, *zawiyas* in Tunis can be classified into three main categories. First, **funerary *zawiyas***, which developed around the tombs of saints and sheikhs, such as the *Zawiya* of Sidi Mahrez (often called the “Protector of Tunis”), established around his mausoleum. These spaces acquired a dual function as shrines of local veneration and as centers for urban cohesion, attracting pilgrims, endowments, and commercial activities in their immediate surroundings. Second, **educational *zawiyas***, oriented towards Qur’anic teaching and Sufi instruction, such as the *Zawiya* of Sidi Ben Arous, which became a hub of religious learning and contributed to the intellectual prestige of Tunis. Third, **charitable *zawiyas***, endowed with *waqf* revenues to provide food, lodging, and assistance to the poor and travelers, thereby reinforcing the social safety net of the city.

The distribution of these *zawiyas* across the Medina reveals deliberate patterns that responded to both spiritual and urban imperatives. Several were strategically located near major gates, such as Bab Souika and Bab Jedid, ensuring visibility and accessibility for incoming travelers. Others were concentrated in residential quarters, functioning as nuclei of neighborhood identity and cohesion. The clustering of *zawiyas* in areas like Bab Souika created micro-networks of religious and social activity, while those near commercial hubs—such as the *Zawiya* of Sidi Ali Hattab close to the markets—linked spirituality with economic vitality. This spatial arrangement demonstrates how *zawiyas* played a central role in the articulation of the Medina’s neighborhoods and in the integration of peripheral spaces into the urban core.

Among the most prominent *zawiyas* of Tunis are:

- **Zawiya of Sidi Mahrez** (11th century, expanded in later periods), which became one of the most revered sanctuaries in the city and gave its name to an entire district.
- **Zawiya of Sidi Ben Arous** (15th century), renowned for its role in teaching and Sufi practices, attracting disciples from across the Hafsid realm.
- **Zawiya of Sidi Qasim al-Jalizi**, located near Bab Saadoun, closely associated with Andalusian migrants and known for its artistic funerary tiles.
- **Zawiya of Sidi Ali Hattab**, combining religious, commercial, and charitable functions, situated in proximity to market activities.

- **Zawiya of Sidi Brahim Riahi**, which gained prominence in the modern period but continued the tradition of integrating spiritual and communal functions.

The urban role of zawiya was thus multifaceted. Architecturally, they structured urban expansion by attracting ancillary constructions such as markets, fountains, and caravanserais. Socially, they reinforced solidarity through the provision of food, charity, and mediation in conflicts. Politically, their networks of disciples and their symbolic capital often supported, or at times contested, the authority of rulers. The embedding of zawiya into the Medina's urban fabric meant that they acted simultaneously as anchors of memory, spirituality, and community life.

In sum, the typology and distribution of zawiya in Tunis reveal their profound role in shaping the Medina's physical and social landscape. They functioned as spiritual landmarks, neighborhood centers, and instruments of urban cohesion, thereby demonstrating how religious institutions could transcend their devotional origins to become engines of city-making.

3. Zawiya as Urban Organizational Elements

Zawiya in Tunisian cities represent a multifaceted phenomenon, combining spiritual, social, and urban functions. Beyond their religious and educational roles, they are fundamental components of the urban fabric, contributing directly to the organization and evolution of city spaces. Their geographical positioning within the medina was far from arbitrary: zawiya were frequently located near markets, main thoroughfares, dense residential quarters, or cemeteries, thereby embedding themselves into both the daily life and the symbolic landscape of the city (Hadda, 2024; Abdelkafi; Souissi Ben Hamad, 2021). Such placement enabled them to mediate between spiritual authority and practical urban accessibility, ensuring that religious guidance was always within reach of both merchants and ordinary citizens.

The interaction of zawiya with other religious and educational institutions further reinforced their urban significance. They were closely linked to the Zitouna Mosque, neighborhood madrasas, and adjacent ribats, forming a dense network of knowledge and spiritual guidance. This network not only enhanced the spiritual authority of zawiya but also structured the social and physical organization of neighborhoods, influencing patterns of movement, congregation, and communal interaction (Souissi Ben Hamad, 2021). Zawiya often functioned as secondary urban centers, around which local markets, workshops, and residential areas could develop, creating nodes of activity that strengthened neighborhood cohesion.



Zawiyas also played a crucial role in shaping the spatial expansion of Tunis. The establishment of a major zawiya often acted as a catalyst for urban growth, attracting residents, artisans, and traders to its vicinity. This phenomenon led to the stabilization of emerging neighborhoods and sometimes to the creation of entirely new urban quarters. Their presence affected street layouts and connectivity, with pathways and alleys often oriented towards the zawiya, highlighting its centrality in both physical and symbolic terms (Hadda, 2024). In some cases, zawiya functioned as intermediaries between the medina and peripheral suburban zones, facilitating the integration of new urban areas while preserving traditional forms of social organization.

Furthermore, the architectural configuration of zawiya—courtyards, prayer halls, and ancillary spaces—also contributed to urban morphology. The spatial hierarchy within zawiya mirrored broader urban hierarchies, guiding pedestrian flow and organizing communal spaces for both worship and social interaction. In this way, zawiya were not merely passive components of the city but active agents in shaping its structure, growth, and functionality (Hadda, 2024; Abdelkafi; Souissi Ben Hamad, 2021).

In summary, zawiya functioned simultaneously as spiritual centers, social hubs, and urban organizing elements. Their strategic location, integration with other religious institutions, and influence on urban expansion underscore their dual role: while serving the religious and social needs of the population, they actively shaped the physical and functional structure of the medina, illustrating a complex interplay between spirituality and urbanism.

4. The Socio-Cultural Dimension of Zawiya

Beyond their urban and architectural significance, zawiya have historically played a pivotal role in the socio-cultural life of Tunisian cities. Their dual function as centers of education and spiritual practice positioned them at the heart of local communities, influencing social norms, collective memory, and modes of civic interaction.

4.1 Education and Sufism

Zawiya were primary loci for the dissemination of religious knowledge and Sufi practices. They provided instruction not only in Qur'anic studies and Islamic jurisprudence but also in spiritual cultivation, ethics, and ritual practice, functioning as bridges between formal education and mystical experience (McGregor; Amri; Hammoudi, 2023). The pedagogical model adopted by

many zawiyas combined oral transmission with experiential learning, emphasizing mentorship and communal engagement. This system fostered networks of disciples and adherents, reinforcing both spiritual authority and social cohesion.

4.2 Social Fabric

The social function of zawiyas extended beyond education. They operated as centers of hospitality, mutual aid, and charitable activity, offering shelter, food, and guidance to travelers, the poor, and marginalized groups (Boissevain, 2005; Amri, 2010). By providing these services, zawiyas became embedded in the social fabric, establishing themselves as loci of legitimacy and trust within their neighborhoods. Their capacity to mobilize local resources for social welfare illustrates the intertwined nature of spiritual leadership and community organization.

4.3 Collective Memory and Popular Sanctity

Zawiyas also play a crucial role in shaping collective memory and popular devotion. Many are associated with local saints, revered figures, or miraculous events, which become focal points of pilgrimage and ritual commemoration. For instance, the cult of Sidi Bou Said or Sidi Mahrez exemplifies how zawiyas serve as custodians of popular memory, integrating spiritual narratives into the lived experience of the city (Boissevain; Amri). Through festivals, processions, and local rituals, zawiyas help to reproduce communal identity and transmit cultural heritage across generations.

In conclusion, the socio-cultural dimension of zawiyas highlights their role as dynamic centers of knowledge, charity, and collective memory. They act as intermediaries between the spiritual and social spheres, fostering networks of devotion, solidarity, and local identity, while simultaneously reinforcing the moral and cultural framework of urban life. This dual function illustrates that zawiyas are not merely architectural or religious entities but vital actors in shaping the social and cultural landscape of Tunisian cities.

5. From Medieval Urbanism to Contemporary Heritage

The evolution of zawiyas from medieval urban nodes to contemporary heritage sites demonstrates the complex interplay between spiritual functions, urban morphology, and socio-economic transformations. Historically, zawiyas were integral to the organic growth of Tunisian cities,



simultaneously shaping and reflecting patterns of urban expansion, social interaction, and spiritual life. In contemporary times, these structures face new challenges and opportunities, particularly as Tunisia negotiates the dual imperatives of heritage conservation and economic development.

5.1 Reuse and Functional Transformation

Over the centuries, the role of *zawiyas* has undergone significant transformation. While their original function centered on spiritual guidance, Sufi education, and community service, many *zawiyas* today have adopted a partially symbolic or touristic role. Some have been converted into museums, cultural centers, or sites of organized pilgrimage, reflecting broader trends in heritage commodification (Ben Salem & Simon, 2018; Valitutto & Beji, 2022). This functional shift often raises critical questions regarding authenticity and the preservation of intangible heritage. The challenge lies in balancing the *zawiyas*' spiritual identity with the demands of heritage presentation and urban tourism.

5.2 Heritage Classification and Protection

The recognition of *zawiyas* as heritage assets has led to increased institutional oversight. UNESCO and national authorities have sought to classify and protect selected *zawiyas*, emphasizing their architectural, historical, and spiritual significance (UNESCO, 2009; Prigent, 2013; Bacha, 2008). This classification entails not only legal protection but also efforts to integrate these sites into broader urban planning and cultural programming. However, the process is often selective and uneven, leaving many smaller or less famous *zawiyas* outside formal preservation frameworks. This unevenness highlights a tension between state-led heritage management and the locally embedded, community-centered functions of these spaces.

5.3 Management Practices and Governance

In Tunisia, the administration of *zawiyas* involves multiple actors, including the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, local municipalities, and religious authorities. Current governance models attempt to reconcile heritage conservation with public access and tourism, while maintaining some level of religious function. Management strategies often include structural restoration, interpretation for visitors, and programming of cultural events, yet they must navigate complex local expectations regarding spiritual legitimacy and community involvement. Local religious leaders, or *sheikhs*, often retain considerable influence over rituals and educational activities,

creating a dynamic where secular and spiritual authorities must cooperate yet sometimes contend for control (Ben Salem & Simon, 2018).

5.4 Tourism, Urban Development, and Local Identity

The role of tourism in the life of zawiyas is increasingly prominent. While tourist engagement can provide vital financial support for conservation, it also introduces pressures that may conflict with traditional uses. Issues of “staged authenticity” arise when spiritual spaces are transformed into performative venues for visitors, potentially marginalizing local community practices (Escher & Schepers, 2008; Souissi Ben Hamad, 2019). Urban development strategies, including infrastructural improvements and the creation of heritage trails, aim to integrate zawiyas into the economic and cultural life of the city. Yet, these interventions risk commodifying sacred spaces and eroding the lived experience of spirituality that originally defined them.

5.5 Spiritual and Social Continuity

Despite these transformations, the spiritual and social dimension of zawiyas persists. Many continue to host daily prayers, Sufi gatherings, and educational activities, sustaining networks of disciples and devotees. Their function as sites of moral authority, spiritual guidance, and communal support underscores the resilience of their core identity (Hammoudi, 2023). This continuity highlights the need for heritage policies that respect intangible dimensions alongside material conservation, ensuring that zawiyas remain active participants in urban life rather than static monuments.

5.6 Critical Reflections

From an analytical perspective, the contemporary status of zawiyas reveals inherent tensions in heritage management: between preservation and innovation, between tourism and local identity, and between secular governance and spiritual authority. These tensions require nuanced policies that combine urban planning, heritage conservation, and community engagement. A critical examination suggests that successful strategies are those that adopt a holistic approach, recognizing zawiyas as multidimensional sites—spiritual, social, urban, and economic—rather than reducing them to singular categories.

In summary, the transition of zawiyas from medieval urban instruments to contemporary heritage assets illustrates the dynamic interactions between history, spirituality, urbanism, and socio-economic pressures. Their current management in Tunisia reflects a delicate balancing act between conservation, tourism, and religious practice, raising important questions about authenticity, sustainability, and the role of spiritual spaces in modern urban life (Ben Salem & Simon, 2018; Valitutto & Beji, 2022; UNESCO, 2009). These reflections provide a foundation for rethinking how historic religious institutions can contribute meaningfully to contemporary urban development while preserving their spiritual and social essence.

6. Comparative Dimension: Zawiyas in the Maghreb – Fes, Tlemcen, and Tunis

The comparative study of zawiyas across the Maghreb reveals both shared cultural and religious frameworks and divergent strategies in heritage management, urban integration, and tourism development. While Tunisian zawiyas continue to fulfill their dual spiritual and social role, Moroccan and Algerian experiences, particularly in Fes and Tlemcen, demonstrate more comprehensive approaches to conservation, technical monitoring, and heritage valorization.

6.1 Fes: A Model of Integrated Heritage Management

In Fes, zawiyas are deeply embedded within the city's multi-layered urban fabric, functioning as spiritual centers, social nodes, and key markers of urban identity (John Steenbruggen, Pavlos Kazakopoulos & Ilyas Nizam, 2019). Restoration and conservation strategies in Fes combine advanced technical approaches, such as Heritage Building Information Modeling (HBIM), with traditional architectural expertise to monitor structural integrity, document interventions, and plan adaptive reuse (Ferro, Lo Brutto & Ventimiglia, 2023). This integration of digital and traditional methods reflects a sophisticated governance model that balances spiritual, social, and urban needs.

Moroccan authorities also emphasize the continuity of social and religious functions within zawiyas. Unlike approaches that focus primarily on heritage aesthetics, Fes ensures that zawiyas remain active spaces for Sufi instruction, religious gatherings, and community engagement, preserving their intangible heritage while simultaneously opening them to cultural tourism (Yazid Hamdouni Alami, Bouchta El Khazzan & Majda Souab, 2017). This dual approach is complemented by legal protections, urban planning interventions, and participatory policies, which collectively reinforce both material and immaterial values (Alexandre Abry, 2005; Laid Massmoudi, 2018).

The success in Fes highlights a proactive model of urban heritage management. Restoration projects are not isolated; they are linked to neighborhood revitalization, street alignments, and economic development strategies. Cultural tourism is carefully mediated to prevent the "museumification" of living religious sites, ensuring that local residents maintain access and that spiritual practices continue alongside heritage consumption (Berriane, 2012; 2014). This comprehensive integration contrasts sharply with cities where heritage management remains fragmented or focused solely on conservation aesthetics.

6.2 Tlemcen: Adaptive Reuse and Heritage Sustainability

Tlemcen in Algeria offers a complementary perspective. Here, zawiya and other historic religious sites have historically influenced urban morphology, shaping neighborhoods and public spaces. However, contemporary pressures—urban expansion, limited funding, and tourism demand—have prompted adaptive reuse strategies. Many zawiya have been transformed into museums or cultural centers, balancing the imperatives of conservation, tourism, and urban development (Djebbour & Biara, 2019; Kari, Vila & Bemoussa, 2020).

This strategy, while ensuring physical preservation and economic viability, sometimes challenges the spiritual continuity of zawiya. Unlike in Fes, where religious practice remains central, Tlemcen's approach prioritizes visibility, accessibility, and cultural commodification (Necissa, 2011; Khemies, Ouissi & Hamma, 2025). Nevertheless, innovative methodologies, such as netnography, have been employed to capture the intangible heritage and local ambiances, illustrating a nuanced understanding of social and spiritual dimensions within heritage planning (Khemies et al., 2025).

Urban planning in Tlemcen also reflects tensions between preservation and modernization. Expansion and infrastructural development threaten the integrity of historic medinas and their religious complexes (Triqui & Mazouz, 2024). Heritage management thus requires a delicate balance: maintaining authenticity and spiritual significance while integrating zawiya into broader urban and tourism strategies.

6.3 Tunis: Continuity with Constraints

In Tunis, zawiya continue to function primarily as spiritual and social centers embedded within the urban fabric, maintaining their role in education, Sufi practice, and community support (Eya



Mahroug, 2017). Conservation efforts, while present, face challenges of funding, technical capacity, and legal frameworks. Restoration projects often prioritize structural stability and selective aesthetic interventions, with less systematic integration into city-wide urban planning compared to Fes.

Tourism in Tunis emphasizes cultural visitation, but interventions tend to be less coordinated, occasionally leading to tensions between visitor access and local religious practices (Ben Salem & Simon, 2018; Valitutto & Beji, 2022). Despite these constraints, Tunis retains the advantage of strong community engagement, with local religious leaders actively managing rituals and educational activities, ensuring that the spiritual dimension remains central. Compared to Fes, Tunisian zawiyas face limitations in digital monitoring, technical conservation, and coordinated heritage-tourism integration, but they continue to sustain the intangible, lived experience of spirituality.

6.4 Comparative Insights

A detailed comparison of Tunis, Fes, and Tlemcen offers several critical observations:

1. **Governance and Technical Capacity:** Morocco, particularly Fes, demonstrates more sophisticated governance structures, integrating digital tools, legal frameworks, and participatory planning. Tunisia exhibits continuity and local engagement but with lower technical integration and planning capacity. Tlemcen prioritizes adaptive reuse, often at the cost of spiritual continuity.
2. **Balancing Spiritual and Tourist Functions:** Fes exemplifies a model where tourism and spiritual life coexist, mediated through careful policy and community engagement. Tunis emphasizes spiritual continuity but struggles to align it fully with heritage tourism. Tlemcen prioritizes visibility and adaptive reuse, highlighting tensions between conservation and religiosity.
3. **Urban and Social Integration:** Zawiyas in all three cities shape neighborhoods, circulation, and social networks. Fes offers the most integrated approach, linking restoration to urban revitalization. Tunis maintains local urban influence but lacks large-scale planning coordination. Tlemcen faces challenges from urban expansion but innovates through participatory documentation of heritage ambiances.



- 4. Maghrebian Lessons:** Regional comparisons underscore the potential for knowledge exchange. Tunisia could benefit from Morocco's integrated urban-heritage-tourism strategies and Tlemcen's adaptive documentation approaches. Conversely, Tunis illustrates the importance of maintaining local spiritual practices within heritage management, a value sometimes secondary in other cities.

In conclusion, zawiya across the Maghreb illustrate a spectrum of heritage management models, balancing spiritual, social, urban, and economic dimensions. Fes demonstrates a proactive, integrated approach; Tlemcen emphasizes adaptive reuse and sustainability under resource constraints; Tunis preserves community-centered spiritual functions while gradually engaging with heritage tourism. Understanding these comparative experiences provides a framework for enhancing Tunisia's strategies in heritage conservation, urban integration, and sustainable development, situating its zawiya within a broader Maghrebian context (Berriane, 2012; 2014; Mahroug, 2017; Ferro et al., 2023).

6.5 Synthesis and Comparative Overview

To synthesize the comparative analysis, Table 1 provides a structured overview of key dimensions in the management and role of zawiya across Tunis, Fes, and Tlemcen. This table highlights differences and convergences in spiritual function, urban integration, conservation strategies, tourism engagement, and technical capacity. It is the author's own production, designed to provide a clear visual summary of the Maghrebian context.

Table 1. Comparative Overview of Zawiya in Tunis, Fes, and Tlemcen (Author's Production)

Dimension	Tunis	Fes	Tlemcen
Spiritual Role	High: daily prayers, Sufi education, community rituals	High: maintained alongside tourism; Sufi instruction continues	Medium: partially diminished due to adaptive reuse; spiritual activities exist but limited
Urban Integration	Moderate: embedded in medina, influences	High: integrated into urban planning and revitalization projects	Medium: historic influence preserved, but



	neighborhood patterns		urban expansion pressures evident
Conservation Strategies	Structural restoration; selective aesthetic interventions	Comprehensive: HBIM monitoring, structural and cultural conservation, participatory planning	Adaptive reuse: conversion to museums/cultural centers; heritage ambiances documented
Tourism and Cultural Promotion	Moderate: selective promotion; tension with local use	High: integrated heritage-tourism strategy; balanced with local spiritual use	Medium-High: heritage commodification prioritized; sometimes reduces religious functions
Technical and Digital Capacity	Low-Moderate: traditional methods; limited technical monitoring	High: HBIM, digital documentation, advanced conservation technologies	Moderate: documentation via participatory and netnographic methods; limited digital infrastructure
Community Engagement and Governance	High: local religious leaders manage rituals; moderate municipal involvement	High: participatory governance; balance between state and community	Medium: governance focuses on heritage visibility; partial community involvement

This table illustrates that while all three cities preserve the spiritual and social dimensions of zawiya, their approaches to urban integration, technical conservation, and tourism management vary significantly. Fes stands out as the most advanced model in balancing multiple functions, Tunisia emphasizes spiritual continuity with moderate heritage interventions, and Tlemcen demonstrates adaptive reuse under urban pressures. Such comparative synthesis provides a foundation for cross-regional learning and future strategic planning in Maghreb heritage management.

7. Conclusion

This study has examined the multifaceted role of zawiya in Tunisian cities, contextualizing them within a broader Maghrebian framework by comparing experiences in Fes (Morocco) and Tlemcen (Algeria). By integrating historical, urban, socio-cultural, and heritage perspectives, the research highlights the complex interplay between spirituality, urban organization, and heritage management, offering several key insights and contributions to the scholarly discourse.

7.1 Reassessing the Dual Role of Zawiya

The analysis confirms that zawiya cannot be reduced to mere religious institutions or architectural relics. They perform a dual function:

1. **Spiritual and Social:** Zawiya remain active centers of Sufi instruction, daily prayers, and communal rituals, contributing to moral guidance, social cohesion, and local identity formation (McGregor; Amri; Hammoudi, 2023; Boissevain, 2005).
2. **Urban and Heritage-Oriented:** Through their strategic placement within the medina, alignment with markets, schools, and neighborhoods, and influence on urban expansion, zawiya act as agents shaping city morphology and urban networks (Hadda, 2024; Souissi Ben Hamad, 2021; Mahroug, 2017).

The article demonstrates that these roles are not separate; rather, they intersect in ways that shape both tangible urban forms and intangible social-spiritual dynamics.

7.2 Contribution to Maghrebian Comparative Research

By situating Tunis within a Maghrebian comparative framework, the study highlights differential approaches to heritage conservation, tourism management, and urban planning:

- **Fes** exemplifies a highly integrated model combining advanced technical monitoring (HBIM), participatory governance, and careful balancing of spiritual and tourist functions (Ferro et al., 2023; Abry, 2005; Hamdouni Alami et al., 2017).
- **Tlemcen** demonstrates adaptive reuse strategies that prioritize heritage visibility and sustainability, occasionally at the expense of continuous spiritual practice (Djebbour & Biara, 2019; Khemies et al., 2025).

- **Tunis** maintains strong community-centered spiritual continuity but faces constraints in technical capacity and large-scale heritage-tourism integration (Ben Salem & Simon, 2018; Valitutto & Beji, 2022).

The comparative analysis underscores the potential for cross-regional learning and highlights how Tunisia might adopt best practices from Moroccan and Algerian experiences while preserving its distinctive spiritual-centered approach.

7.3 Original Contribution and Novel Insights

This article provides several original contributions to scholarly research on North African urbanism and religious heritage:

1. **Holistic Framework:** It offers an integrated perspective linking spiritual, urban, and heritage functions of zawiyas, rather than treating these dimensions in isolation.
2. **Cross-Linguistic and Comparative Approach:** The study synthesizes sources in Arabic, French, and English, creating a more nuanced understanding of Maghrebian zawiyas in both local and international scholarly discourses.
3. **Urban Heritage Implications:** By connecting historical patterns with contemporary management practices, the article provides a model for assessing how living religious sites can inform sustainable urban development and heritage strategies.
4. **Empirical and Analytical Tools:** The comparative table and synthesis in section 6.5 offer a structured analytical tool for evaluating the effectiveness of heritage governance across cities, demonstrating methodological innovation within the field.

7.4 Implications for Policy and Future Research

The findings suggest that heritage policy in Tunisia should pursue an integrated model that:

- Maintains the spiritual and social vitality of zawiyas.
- Enhances urban planning and conservation strategies using advanced monitoring and participatory approaches.
- Leverages cultural tourism without undermining community engagement or the sacred function of these sites.

Future research could extend this framework by incorporating additional Maghrebian cities, exploring digital heritage documentation, and assessing the long-term socio-economic impacts of heritage-tourism integration on local communities.

7.5 Final Remarks

In conclusion, zawiya emerge as multifunctional institutions that simultaneously shape spiritual life, urban organization, and heritage landscapes. This study demonstrates that a comprehensive, comparative, and cross-linguistic analysis provides deeper insights into their enduring relevance. By connecting historical functions with contemporary management practices, the article offers both scholarly and practical guidance for enhancing the role of zawiya in sustainable urban and cultural development in Tunisia and the wider Maghreb region.

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