

Post-Doctoral Project

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**The anthropological research about to undertaken in this project centres around modern Shi'ite Sufi identity in Iran, which will be dealt with by exploring the construction of modern self in the Soltan'alishahi order. This and possibly other Iranian orders will be compared. Also compared will be two instances of modernity: the coming into being of the nation-state in early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Iran (particularly 1905–1911 and 1921–1941), and the re-emergence of a civil society since the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (especially since 1997). It is presumed that the former periods evidenced state-oriented identity formations, while the latter period witnessed more anti-statist ones. These are two variations of a modern Sufi orientation towards the Iranian nation.**

Many classical monographs in the anthropology of Islam have, explicitly or implicitly, juxtaposed Sufism and modernity. At first sight, the contemporary construction of Shi'ite Sufi self and the modern nation-state may seem unrelated: Sufi representations of the self apparently have been marked by a persistent distancing from the 'here and now', while (Iranian) nation-state modernity has been characterized by an activist appropriation of it. It can be argued, however, that the two have been intimately related.

# Anthropological Exploration of Modern Self

The construction of self in modern Iran has been closely related to 'alterity', taking the shape of either a nativism that demonized the West, or an appropriation of Western traditions in order to – paradoxically – attain 'authenticity'. This latter line of reasoning was expressed by an early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Sufi, Keyvan-e Qazvini, who criticized the following of Sufi masters and proposed rational authority on a Western educational basis that would benefit the Iranian nation. The background to these concerns was the perception of Western success in social, military and administrative order. In propagating worthy subjects of the Iranian nation-state, Qazvini epitomized Reza Shah's modernity.

While the case of a state-oriented 'positive alterity' seems well represented by early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Sufis such as Qazvini, the nature of the attitude towards the West in present-day Iranian Sufism remains, in the first instance, an open empirical question. However, there are several indications that allow for calculated guesses. 'Mysticism' has been used by

Iranian intellectuals such as Ahmad Fardid and Reza Davari – both paradoxically influenced by Heidegger – to argue for the authentic legitimacy of the Islamic Republic *vis-à-vis* the West. A contrary trend has been established in the writings of Iran's most famous intellectual, 'Abdolkarim Soroush, who identified authentic Shi'ite religiosity in Sufism while simultaneously defending Western traditions of pluralism and civil society. Soroush favours the Soltan'alishahi order, having even made a trip to its centre in Khorasan to meet with the spiritual master.

In the Safi'alishahi order, I witnessed a recent trend in which freedom and personal choice were made central in informal sessions that allowed for an atmosphere of free debate and implicit criticism of authoritarianism in the state. My analyses will focus on practices surrounding and discourse about the most important article of faith in Shi'ite Sufism: Friendship with God/guidance (*walayat*). Practices of and discourse about *walayat* are the locus *per se* for studying Sufi self

because they potentially clash with juridical (and state) conceptions of spiritual authority. For this reason, they provide a view on what particularizes Sufism within Shi'ism. Although Friendship with God is by definition an individual, non-social affair, I hold that discourse on and practice of Sufi spiritual authority in fact incorporate the context of the nation. Lastly, studies of modern uses of *walayat* are as yet unavailable. This project aims at providing such a study in an anthropological exploration of modern self. ◆

*Dr Matthijs van den Bos studied Cultural Anthropology in Amsterdam and Iranian Studies in Utrecht. His PhD dissertation comprises a fieldwork-based study on the comparative, modern social and cultural history of two Iranian, Shi'ite Sufi orders (entitled Mystic Regimes). The author welcomes any suggestions on his post-doc research project description.*

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