Middle East
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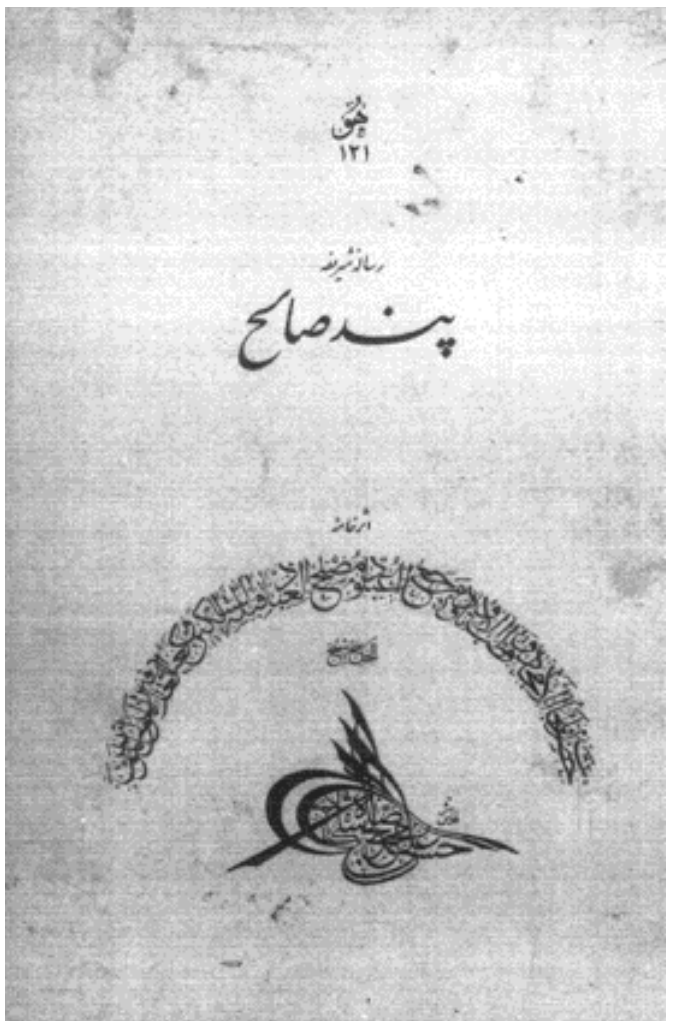
Roots of modern Shiᶜite Sufism in Iran

Theories of cultural stagnation and decline or of modernization's devastation in the realm of Sufism have not only figured in orientalist or social science repertoires. Conversing with contemporary Iranian Sufis, one comes across a remarkable consensus: the Safawid rise to state power coincided with the eclipse of Sufism's radiant sun in Iran, and it has never since regained its former brilliance. Whether such views hold true in the history of ideas or at the strictly literary level remains for specialists to decide. However, various social and political transformations that have conditioned Iranian Sufism as it is presently known, contradict the idea of Sufism's stagnant and therefore negligible religiosity.



Pand-e Ṣāleḥ **booklet, Tehran 1365/1986 (second edition), written by Hajj Sheikh Mohammad Hasan Salehᶜalishah.**

The long-term survival and modern development of Sufism in Iran has its foundation in the Neᶜmatollāhī order's 18th -century socio-political renaissance, after the fall of the Safawids. In the 19th century, religiously influential Sufis found royal patronage in the courts of the late Qajar shahs. Sufi spiritual authority was sometimes conceptualized as a worldly realm, autonomous from royal or jurist power. These Iranian developments were contemporaneous with increasing repression of Sufis by reformist jurists elsewhere in the 18th and 19th-century Islamic world. While Sufism in Turkey and Egypt suffered from 20th-century modernist regimes and subsequently declined, the Solṭānᶜalīšāhī-Neᶜmatollāhī order redefined its traditional, Shiᶜite Sufi religiosity in the face of 20th-century modernity, and expanded.

Sufism and the nation-state

Nationalist modernization in the early Pahlavi polity (1921-1941) has been associated with the repression of Sufism as a component of anti-religious policy. However, there are also different accounts that defy the alleged incongruity of religion and nationalist modernization. While the nationalist historian Ahmad Kasravi proclaimed that all books of the Sufis had to be thrown into the fire, Sufism made its way into schoolbooks. The shah himself, Reza Shah, is reported to have been closely associated with the Sufi member of parliament Sheikh ol-Molk Owrang.

In the Solṭānᶜalīšāhī order, the state context of nationalist modernization made its impact upon Sufi religiosity. Where formerly the community of believers in general had been a target audience, Sufi leaders now specifically targeted the Iranian nation. In order to support his claim for the Solṭānᶜalīšāhī leadership, Nūrᶜalīšāh (d.1918), for instance, 'issued a proclamation […] in which he called upon the nation to accept him as its head.'[1] His claim was challenged by KeyvānQazvīnī (d.1938), who in 1926 departed from the Sufi path as it was predominantly known in Iran.[2]

While Qazvīnī witnessed the shah's demolition of the traditional clergy's religious institutions, it is unlikely to have eluded him that 'some audacious thinkers attempted to reconcile […] intellectual modernism with a renewal of religion.'[3] The sermons of the influential ayatollah Sangelağī (1890-1944), for instance, attracted many from the state and societal elite. Central among his ideas was the need for a more rigorous monotheism that would do away with the belief in sacred intermediaries, i.e. the imams, and their 'intercession' (*šefā'*at). The 'emulation' (*taqlīd*) of *moğtahed*s ought to be replaced by everyman's direct 'interpretation' (*eğtheād*) of the sacred sources.

While Sangelağī attacked Shiᶜite *taqlīd*, Qazvīnī assaulted the traditional authority structure of master and disciple, and juxtaposed the 'formalist' (*rasmī*) Sufism of Sufi orders to 'true' (*ḥaqīqī*) Sufism. At its core lay the idea that mysticism could be a modern scientific enterprise. The 1930 version of his *Book of Mysticism* (ᶜ*Erfān-nāme*) used the measure of the modern age: the Gregorian calendar.

Qazvīnī's Sufism was strongly condemned by the Solṭānᶜalīšāhīs: 'One cannot count this to be Islamic Sufism anymore, it was a new religion.' They furthermore protested that 'sometimes [Qazvīnī was] particularly interested in the Wahhabi religion' and that 'like the Sunnis, he did not recognise "being divinely chosen" (*naṣṣ*) and "authorisation" (*eğāze*) as necessary conditions.'[4] In other words: in attacking all established Shiᶜite bases of spiritual authority, Qazvīnī was a heretic unbeliever.

Qazvīnī's challenge presents a distinctly modernist struggle: not only personal claims to spiritual authority were questioned, but also the nature of authority itself. In addition, his questioning of Sufi authority had the nation-state as an organizing motif. He outlined a vision of 'classes in society [that] are like organs in the body, [and] that must be present in the society to the extent that they are necessary, not too much and not too little, otherwise [society] would become defective like the man with four eyes and one hand, or four feet and one tooth'. Of the clergy, few were functional. If there were many clergymen, there would be more corruption (ᶜ*Erfān-nāme*, p. 313). Even less leniency was left over in his consideration of Sufism. In Qazvīnī's functionalist mode of reasoning, the organ of traditional Sufism was not only un-Islamic, but nationally dysfunctional (p. 311).

Admonitory advice

After Nūrᶜalīšāh died in 1918, his son Ṣāleḥᶜalīšāh (d.1966) assumed the order's leadership. His position was enhanced by well-to-do and influential affiliates, including the premier Qavām os-Salṭana. There are, moreover, several narratives of direct contacts between the Solṭānᶜalīšāhīs and Reza Shah, which concerned one son Ṣāleḥᶜalīšāh's sheikhs, Ayatollah ᶜAbdollāh Ḥa'erī Mazanderani. Before his ascent to power, Reza Shah had been impressed in an encounter with Hā'erī, who predicted: 'You will be shah', and added that the king-to-be ought to treat the people right.[5]

The present leader of the order, Mağẕūbᶜalīšāh, recollected three reproaches during the Reza Shah era: the Solṭānᶜalīšāhīs were accused of smoking opium, of bribing judges, and Qazvīnī had written that son Ṣāleḥᶜalīšāh pretended to kingship. Mağẕūbᶜalīšāh also recollected a visit by Reza Shah during which the king requested – to the background of these allegations – the writing of an instruction from which it would become manifest what constituted legitimate Sufi behaviour. The manuscript that resulted in 1939 was 'Ṣāleḥ'sAdvice' (*Pand-e* Ṣāleḥ), a booklet which more than any other established the Solṭānᶜalīšāhīs as a legitimate religious force in modern Iran. According to another manifesto, the booklet became 'a household word amongst the religious of Iran.' The order's respectable mission aimed at the broadest possible audience, as *Pand-e* Sāleḥ 'makes clear for the ordinary man and woman how to practice this moral and spiritual discipline [of Sufism], and so to enjoy the fruits of the spirit in daily life in this world.'[6] *Pand-e* Sāleḥ was recently observed to be 'a work filled with platitudes and hackneyed moral exhortations, the mystical content of which is insignificant.'[7] Whether or not one accepts this qualification, there is indeed nothing in it that would put Solṭānᶜalīšāhī Sufis up against the national, societal or stately order. When son Sāleḥᶜalīšāh did call upon the state, it was in a bid for support of traditional crafts and industries, a token of the (great) nation of Iran.[8]

Communalism

National integration had been a cause of great concern for Kasravi, who had 'focused on the question of communalism in [his treatise] *Sufigari*', and held Sufism, as a religious sect, among the primary causes of national disintegration.[9] But Nūrᶜalīšāh had promised 'to remove all discord from the nation in the space of two years' (if only the nation would recognize him as its spiritual leader).[10] Son Sāleḥᶜalīšāh had not verbally countered Kasravi's assault, but Sāleḥ's national advice (*Pand-e* Sāleḥ) contradicted any potential challenge in Sufi authority and developed the Solṭānᶜalīšāhī order in ways to make it seem idle.

One finds traces of modern Shiᶜite Sufism in the Solṭānᶜalīšāhī order, then, not only in the conspicuously revolutionary innovations of Qazvīnī. It is also to be found in Nūrᶜalīšāh's nation-wide appeal for spiritual recognition and national unity, and in the streamlined religiosity which stories surrounding *Pand-e* Ṣāleḥ claim was commissioned by the (state's) leader of the nation. Thus, the Solṭānᶜalīšāhī order evolved from being a powerful but localized *ferqe* (sect) into, to some outward extent at least, becoming a subdued but nationally integrated socio-religious organization. ✦

Notes

1. Miller, W. (1923). 'Shiᶜah Mysticism (The Sufis of Gunābād)', *The Moslem World*, 13, p. 353.
2. Gramlich, R. (1965). *Die schiitischen Derwischorden Persiens. Erster Teil: Die Affiliationen*. Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, p. 68.
3. Richard, Y. (1988). 'Sharīᶜat Sangalajī: A Reformist Theologian of the Riḍa Shāh Period'. In *Authority and Political Culture in Shiᶜism*, edited by S. Arjomand. Albany: State University of New York Press, p. 159.
4. Nāṣerᶜalī, Asadollāh Golpāyegānī (362/1983). *Resāle-ye Ğavābīya*. Tehran: Ḫwāğa, p.67.
5. Interview Mağẕūbᶜalīšāh, 04/19/97, cf. Owrang, ᶜA. 'To solṭān-emoqtader-e īn mamlekat ḫwāhī šhod' in *Sāl-nāme-ye Donyā,* 22, p. 218; Neᶜmatollāhī, ᶜA (1361/1982). *Tīq-eBorande*. Tehran: Payām, p. 80.
6. Hazeghi, H. (1970). In *A Muslim Commentary on The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, S. Tabandeh. London: Goulding, pp. viii, ix.
7. Lewisohn, L. (1998). 'An Introduction to the History of Modern Persian Sufism, Part I: The Niᶜmatullāhī Order: Persecution, Revival and Schism'. *Bulletin of the School for Oriental and African Studies*, 61 (3), p. 452.
8. *Yādnāme-ye* (1367/1988) *Ṣāleḥ*. Tehran: Ketabkhane-ye Amir Soleymani, p.141.
9. Abrahamian, E. (1973). 'Kasravi: The Integrative Nationalist of Iran.' *Middle Eastern Studies*, 9 (3), pp. 282, 297.
10. Miller (1923), p. 354.

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