

# Conference: Shi'i Spirituality and Sufi Paths in Early Modern and Modern Times

Spiritualité chiite et voies soufies à l'époque pré-moderne et moderne

15<sup>th</sup> of April 2014

Ca' Foscari University of Venice

Sala Baratto / Sala Berengo, Ca' Foscari, Dorsoduro 3246, Venezia.

Conference convenors : Denis Hermann (CNRS, Mondes iranien et indien, Paris), Marco Salati (Ca' Foscari University of Venice) and Mathieu Terrier (EPHE, Paris)



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The Institute of Ismaili Studies



## Programme

9.20: Sala Baratto

Chair and discussant : **Marco Salati** (Ca' Foscari University of Venice Venice)

9.20-10.00: **Mathieu Terrier** (Ph.D candidate, EPHE, Paris): La défense du soufisme dans la pensée shi'ite imamite (fin XIV<sup>e</sup>- fin XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle) : thèmes et arguments

10.00-10.40: **Andrew Newman** (University of Edinburgh): Notes on the Earlier Phase of the Anti-Sufi Polemic in 11<sup>th</sup>/17<sup>th</sup> Iran

10.40-11.00: Coffee break

Chair and discussant : **Vanessa Martin** (Royal Holloway, University of London)

11.00-11.40: **Fabrizio Speziale** (Sorbonne Nouvelle – Paris III/CNRS, Mondes iranien et indien): The Ni'matullāhī Renewal in the Deccan and the Contrasting Biographical Narratives of Shāh 'Alī Rizā

11.40-12.20: **Alessandro Cancian** (Institute of Ismaili Studies, London): 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> history of Shi'i Qur'anic Exegesis Reconsidered: The Role of Shi'i Sufi *Tafsīr*

12.20-13.00: **Denis Hermann** (CNRS, Mondes iranien et indien, Paris): The Social and Intellectual History of Shi'i Sufism in Modern Times : Some notes on the development of the Ni'matullahī Sultān 'Alī Shāhī branch in Tehran in light of *waqf* documents

**13.00-15.00:** Lunch

**15:00 Sala Berengo**

Chair and discussant : **Sabrina Mervin** (CNRS, CEIFR, Paris)

15.00-15.40: **Stefano Pello** (Ca' Foscari University of Venice): "I Prefer the Imambara to the House of God": Shi'ism, Sufism and Hindu Persian Poets in Later Mughal India

15.40-16.20: **Riza Yildirim** (TOBB University of Economics and Technology, Ankara): The Perception of Twelve Imams in the Alevi-Bektashi Theology: a Study of the *Kitāb-e Davāzdeh Imām* (17<sup>th</sup> century)

16.20-16.40: Coffee break

16.40-17.20: **Lloyd Ridgeon** (University of Glasgow): Sufis in Society: the Case of Khaksar Dervishes in Qajar Iran

17.20-17.30: Concluding remarks

### **Abstracts:**

**Mathieu Terrier** (Ph.D Candidate, EPHE, Paris): La défense du soufisme dans la pensée shi'ite imamite (fin XIVE- fin XVIIe siècle): thèmes et arguments

Il est connu que de la période ilkhanide à la période safavide, le discours anti-soufi connut une progression régulière jusqu'à devenir quasiment hégémonique en milieu shi'ite iranien. Mais parallèlement à ce discours d'exclusion, un discours de rapprochement (*taqrīb*) du soufisme et du shi'isme se développait aussi, reconduit de siècle en siècle par des penseurs imâmites aux tendances philosophiques et mystiques prononcées. Ces penseurs sont Ḥaydar Âmolī (fin du XIVE siècle), auteur du *Jāmi' al-asrār* ; Ibn Abī Jumhūr (fin du XVe), auteur du *Kitāb al-Mujlī* ; Nūr Allāh Shushtarī (fin du XVIe) auteur des *Majālis al-mu'minīn* ; enfin, Quṭb al-Dīn Ashkevarī (fin du XVIIe siècle), auteur du *Maḥbūb al-qulūb*. Tous ces penseurs partagent une même thèse : le véritable soufisme fait partie intégrante de la « religion vraie », le shi'isme duodécimain. Cette position unique est défendue à travers trois types d'arguments. Tout d'abord, une reconstruction historique des origines du soufisme présente des figures éminentes du début de l'islam, tel Uways al-Qaranī, et des maîtres spirituels antérieurs à l'apparition du soufisme confrérique, tel Abū Yazīd al-Bastāmī (m. 874 ou 877), comme des disciples des imams shi'ites. Ensuite, une argumentation de type conceptuel affirme l'accord a priori de la Loi (*sharī'a*), de la Voie (*tarīqa*) et de la Vérité (*ḥaqīqa*). Enfin, une argumentation fondée sur une certaine philosophie du langage pointe l'analogie entre les « paradoxes des Soufis » (*shataḥāt*) et certains prônes auto-panégyriques du premier imam. Il est pourtant possible de distinguer, d'une œuvre à l'autre, des variations et des évolutions dans le dosage et le détail de ces thèmes et arguments. Cette différence dans la répétition s'explique autant par la personnalité spirituelle de chaque auteur que par l'évolution de la situation respective du shi'isme et du

### Defense of Sufism in Shi'i thought (14th-17th centuries): themes and arguments

It is well known that from the Ilkhanid to the Safavid period, the anti-Sufi discourse experienced a steady increase until it became almost hegemonic in Iranian Shi'ite community. But in parallel to this discourse of exclusion, another discourse of *rapprochement* between Sufism and Shi'ism grew also and was renewed from century to century by Imamite thinkers who had pronounced philosophical and mystical trends. These thinkers were Haydar Āmolī (end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century), author of *Jāmi' al-asrār* ; Ibn Abī Jumhūr (end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century), author of the *Kitāb al-Mujlī* ; Nūr Allāh Shushtarī (end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century), author of the *Majālis al-mu'minīn* ; Quṭb al-Dīn Ashkevarī (end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century), author of the *Maḥbūb al-qulūb*. All these thinkers shared a same thesis according to which the "real Sufism" is part of the "religion of truth", namely the Twelver Shi'ism. This sole position is defended through three ways of argumentation. First, a historiographical reconstruction of the origins of Sufism presents some eminent figures of the early Islam as Uways al-Qaranī, and some spiritual masters prior to the apparition of the Sufi orders as Abū Yazīd al-Bastāmī, like that having been disciples of Shi'ite Imams. Secondly, a conceptual argument asserts a priori agreement of the Law (*sharī'a*), the Path (*ṭarīqa*) and the Truth (*ḥaqīqa*). Finally, an argument based on a certain philosophy of language point the analogy between "Sufi's paradoxes" (*shaṭaḥāt*) and some auto-panegyric sermons of the first Imam. It is however possible to discern, from one work to another, some variations and evolutions in the details of these themes and arguments. This difference in the obvious repetition can be explained both by the spiritual personality of each author and the evolution of the relative situation of Shi'ism and Sufism in Iran over the centuries.

### **Andrew Newman** (Reader in Islamic Studies and Persian, University of Edinburgh): Notes on the Earlier Phase of the Anti-Sufi Polemic in 11th/17th Iran

Most discussions of the Anti-Sufi polemic of 17<sup>th</sup> Safavid Iran focus on the discourse of the latest years of the century, particularly from 1050/1640 and especially 1060/1650 on. In part this must be both because of the relatively large number of works in this discourse composed from these years through the end of the period and because so many of these have become available in published, or other relatively accessible, formats since the early 1980s. The present writer also has more than played his role in the privileging of these later works.

By contrast, although many works in this genre were in fact composed in the earliest years, a dearth of these remain extant. Mightn't the limited number of such texts in fact encouraged such study earlier?

In any case, the present paper examines several of the very earliest works in this polemic, composed before 1060/1650, for insights into the substance and style of that polemic, and the participants, therein as background to the polemic's development in the years thereafter. A translation of the earliest of these, *Ṣaḥīfat al-rishād*, compose before 1041/1631, is included in the paper.

**Fabrizio Speziale** (Sorbonne Nouvelle – Paris III/CNRS, Mondes iranien et indien): The Ni‘matullāhī Renewal in the Deccan and the Contrasting Biographical Narratives of Shāh ‘Alī Rizā

This paper looks at the history of the Ni‘matullāhiyya in the Deccan region of India and at the ni‘matullāhī centre which is established in Hyderabad by ‘Imād al-Dīn Maḥmūd al-Ḥusaynī (m. 1100/1689), a Shi‘a of Iraqi origin who was initiated at Bidar. The development of this branch and of its new line of masters represents the main element of renewal of the order in the Deccan during the early modern period. At Hyderabad the ni‘matullāhī did not receive the support of the Shi‘ite dynasty of the Quṭb Shāh, in spite of the relation of its founder with the ni‘matullāhī of Iran. They enjoyed later the devotion of several nobleman of the city during the period of the Nizām, such as Ma‘ṣūm ‘Alī Shāh Dakanī (m. 1211/1797 ca), who was sent to restore the order in Iran. His master Shāh ‘Alī Rizā (m. 1215/1801) is considered the architect of the plan aiming to restore the order in Iran, however the biographies of the Deccan Sufis give us a portrait of this personage that is quite different from the one given by the Iranian sources.

**Alessandro Cancian** (Institute of Ismaili Studies, London): 19th and 20th history of Shi‘i Qur’anic Exegesis Reconsidered: The Role of Shi‘i Sufi Tafsīr

A glance to the reference works of Shi‘i religious literature shows that between the fall of the Safavids and the last decades of the 19th century, *tafsīr* writing was facing a time of decline. However, Qur’anic exegesis had not lost its prestige among the learned. Writing a Qur’anic commentary has always been quite an achievement, for the authority it entailed and for the range of knowledge that need to be mastered by the author: lexical, grammatical, juridical, historical, philosophical and so on and so forth. Much of the ‘ulamā have continued to compose commentaries, both in Persian and in Arabic, both in poetry and in prose. However, most of these exegetical undertakings don’t have outstanding originality and reflect a sort of tiredness of exegetical thought at that time – repetition with some comments of Safavid and pre-Safavid commentaries was the norm and there is no notice of remarkable *tafsīr* being widely circulating in the religious circle.

Among the few remarkable exegetical work of the period, the *Tafsīr Bayān al-Sa‘ada* and the *Tafsīr-i Ṣafī*, respectively composed by Sulṭān ‘Alī Shāh Gunābādī (1909) and by Ṣafī ‘Alī Shāh (1889), both Ni‘matullāhī Sufi masters no doubt stand out as among the most influential. Both commentaries appeared as a fresh and original look to the interpretation of the Qur’ān. If the early 20th century see a revival in commentary writing in Iran, it is likely that the wide circulation of both played some role in this. This paper aims to address the role Shi‘i Sufi exegesis played in the wider field of early modern and modern Shi‘i Qur’anic exegesis.

**Denis Hermann** (CNRS, Mondes Iranien et indien): The Social and Intellectual History of Shi‘i Sufism in Modern Times: Some notes on the development of the Ni‘matullahī Sulṭān ‘Alī Shāhī branch in Tehran in light of *waqf* documents

This paper will first propose a brief outline of the existent state of the field of modern Shi‘i Sufism and suggest that scholars are confronted with the need to explain the

relative poverty of our knowledge and understanding of this specific dynamic in modern Shi'ism (XIXth-XXth centuries).

The second part of the paper will focus mainly on the importance of some Sufi locations in Tehran. If in the XIXth century Tehran was not considered one of the principle Sufi centers of Iran, in comparison with many provincial towns (Shiraz, Isfahan, Kerman), as a newly-established capital Tehran consistently attracted many migrants from the provinces over both the Pahlavi and the Revolutionary periods. As a result, it became one of the principle hubs for Iran-based Shi'i Sufism brotherhoods or communities.

Our remarks on some of the key Shi'i Sufi centers of the city, such as the Husayniyyas Amīr Sulaymānī and Ha'iri of the Sulṭān 'Alī Shāhī branch of the Ni'matullāhī and their foundation and development thanks to *waqf*, will also allow discussion of the evolution of Shi'i Sufism as a complex form of Shi'ism and an original identity marker of their followers. This will also be an opportunity to note the importance of such material sources as the *waqfnāma* for assessing better the social and intellectual history of Modern Shi'ism.

**Stefano Pello** (University Ca' Foscari, Venice): "I Prefer the Imambara to the House of God": Shi'ism, Sufism and Hindu Persian Poets in Later Mughal India

The diverse and nuanced discourse on the Sufi-Shia interactions among Persian-writing Hindu intellectuals in early modern North India, notwithstanding its relevance as an original historical, conceptual and aesthetic observation point, is an almost completely unexplored field. More specifically, if a relative amount of attention has been paid to the productive relationship between Hindu writers of Persian and the wider space of Persianate Sufism, especially as far as the comparative-assimilative use of a Sufi poetic lexicon (and the associated conceptual passe-partouts) is concerned, the correlated and productive interactions between Persian-writing Hindu munshis, Shi'ism and the Persian textual dimensions of Hindu devotional traditions are largely undescribed. In this paper, starting from the analysis of some selected *tazkiras*, poetic works and historical-religious texts, I will try to show some plausible starting points for further research in this terrain. In particular, I will deal with some eighteenth-century Persian poetic schools of Delhi and Lucknow, trying to articulate a critical discussion on the textualization - and the connected identifications, re-localizations, new rhetoricizations and lexicalizations - of the Sufi-Shia overlapping palimpsests and protocols expressed by Vaishnava authors such as, for instance, Bhagwan Das Hindi (in his *tazkira Safina-yi hindi*) and Mohan Lal Anis (in his *tazkira Anis al-ahibba*) but also, among others, by the convert Diwali Singh/Mirza Hasan Qatil in his broad Persian literary production.

**Riza Yildirim** (TOBB University of Economics and Technology, Ankara): The Perception of Twelve Imams in the Alevi-Bektashi Theology: a Study of the *Kitāb-e Davāzdeh Imām* (17th century)

The common wisdom deems Alevi and Bektashi of Turkey within the fold of Shi'i Islam. When considered the central place of 'Alī and the Ahl al-bayt in their theology and religious practice, a strong pro-'Alid coloring is obvious. In particular, the dominance of the twelve Imams in their faith and rituals forms the landmark of Alevi-Bektashi tradition, without making them and full-fledged Twelver Shi'i movement. Though such a divide is known to the scholarship, the details of

differences and similarities between Alevi-Bektashi and Twelver Shi'ism has not been studied on the basis of literary sources. They are rather considered under the generic title of ghulāt Shi'ism, a term which is probably outdated, if we were to understand the true nature of these pro-‘Alid religious traditions in the Islamic world.

This paper attempts to explore the perception of ‘Alī, the household of the Prophet and the Twelve Imams within the Alevi-Bektashi faith, relying on the textual sources produced within these communities. There are many unstudied manuscripts in private and public libraries that are dealing with the Alevi-Bektashi faith and rituals. Among them a special genre is of particular importance for the sake of my topic. Normally under the title of *Kitāb-e Davāzdeh Imām* (The Book of the Twelve Imams), these treatises are devoted to explain the sacred nature of the genealogy of the Prophet and its central place in the faith. My paper is based on the study of six samples of this textual tradition. Although there are slight differences between them, the main body of the text approximately follows the same pattern. The textual structure suggests that the original copy was written in the second half of the fifteenth century by the famous Ḥurūfī author Ferishteogli ‘Abd al-Majīd.

**Lloyd Ridgeon** (Reader in Islamic Studies and Persian, University of Glasgow): Sufis in Society: The Case of the Khaksar Dervishes in Qajar Iran

In this paper I shall examine the case of a group of Sufis, known as ‘Ajam dervishes, who were an off shoot of the Khaksar *silsila*. An examination of the ‘Ajam treatise known as “Wasilat al-Najat” demonstrates that there was a distinct care to integrate within the wider community, that is to say, within various trade groupings. Moreover, there is also attention to distinctly Persian sacred locations, suggestive of the growing recognition of nationalist discourses (perhaps directed against Ottoman or Indian traditions). Another feature worthy of attention is how the traditions of the ‘Ajam integrated the customs of tradition Sufi-futuwwat, which had developed in the Persian speaking world since the medieval period. In short “Wasilat al-Najat” is a very interesting mix of concerns, emerging from an ancient Sufi tradition, but responding to the new circumstances of Qajar Iran in which these dervishes were enmeshed.



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