

The Sufism of Iran: Regional Indigeneity and Islamic Mysticism

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In a recent study of the Sufi heritage of Iran, I attempted to demonstrate the power of Sufi cultural capital to influence change and shape the religio-political climate of its region (Milani, 2013). I explain the often overlooked or difficult to perceive drive behind Sufi literature as evidence of political contestation within the Iranian social framework, and as an expression of Iranian indigeneity in particular. The present chapter takes a closer look at the correlations between Sufi cultural capital and Iranian indigeneity. In this work I do not argue for a Persian influence on Sufism, but rather aim to expose key Persian contributions to the evolution of Sufism. At the same time, this work does not search for the origins of Sufism, nor is it an attempt to determine that Persia was a foundation hub of Sufism. What this chapter does is note the effect of Persianate components during the development of the mystical tradition of Muslims in Iran, for one cannot downplay the Iranian contribution to the history of Islam, in particular, in the third century of Islamic civilisation and beyond.

In this light, Iran has been vital to the formation of Islamic culture. As pointed out by Richard Bulliet, less attention is paid to the fact that the Abbasid period signals the beginning of a uniquely Iranian (Muslim) dynasty that follows the decline of the Arab in the Middle East (Bulliet, 1994: 37–39). Thus the case can be made that the Iranians played a significant role in transforming Islam into a global faith. Also noteworthy is the extent to which the later development and maturation of the tradition of Islamic mysticism owes to the Iranian social and cultural milieu, and indeed, religious sensibility from its indigenous givens.

Historicity and Complexity of Context

There are, of course, problems in the way that one might conceive of the ‘indigenous’ in Iran, and especially when attempting to discern its influence on later developments. Also, there is the problematic nature of locating and defining the ‘autochthonous’ element. A point to be appreciated, however, is that it is as difficult to pin down a definitive Iranian ethos as it is to outright ignore a

consistency of 'Persianness' in the long history of the Iranians. To be sure, Iran stands out among its Semitic neighbours in the Middle East. It is geographically, culturally, linguistically, and religiously unique, so much so that it is seen as an anomaly. Whereas Iranians have always had a westward orientation, Iran has had a great deal more in common – culturally, linguistically and religiously – with its eastern cousins. And arguably, Iran has had far more influence on regions east of its borders. Additionally, Iran has experienced great change over a long period of time. Both in its conquests, and being conquered, it displays an array of influences from a significant range of cultural "others." Some are more easily discernible but notable influences include Assyrian, Mesopotamian, Arab, Turkic, and Mongol influences that are evident in the formation of what is considered 'Persian' or 'Iranian,' and should not be discounted as being composite in the emergence of the identity of its people and its nation. But the Iranians are of a distinctive Aryan race of the Indo-European stock of people. Despite social and cultural fluctuations throughout the years, this distinguishable Aryan identity remains intact – though arguably more as a political trope that is repeatedly revived for the bolstering of national fervour.

For this reason, I treat the 'indigenous' here as those relics of Iran's past that are clearly demarcated from the newly introduced 'Arab Islamic' component that comes to define the history of Iran from the seventh century. In relation to the indigenous elements within Sufism, what I refer to as 'autochthonous' is simply the carry-over of pre-Islamic components into the Islamic period, and I speak about these as 'indigenous' Iranian elements because they are the relics of a bygone era that are somewhat revived and integrated into (and to a large extent have come to define) a Sufic culture among the Iranians. As such, I will tend to view the development of 'Persianness' or 'Iranianness' as dynamic and unidirectional, with each period of its history needing to be carefully defined in relation to its appropriate socio-historical context. By no means do I take Iran to be a monolithic whole, an entity that is defined by essential characteristics that can be clearly identified as intrinsically 'Persian' or 'Iranian' and that are seen to endure the ages.

For anyone studying the history of Iran, a clear shift can be noted in 632 CE. Whilst the Arab Muslims for a long time ruled over a majoritively non-Muslim population outside of the Arabian Peninsula, the year 632 is typically taken to demarcate a major historical shift and a commonly perceived break with the Iranian past.¹ There are in fact far more instances of continuity and appropriation than usually admitted by those who wish to exacerbate the chasm

1 This date refers to the commonly accepted date for the beginning of the period of conquest of Iran. For a revisionist history of the conquest of Iran refer to Pourshariati, 2008.

between 'Iranian' and 'Arab' or between the old Indo-Iranian religions and the newly dominant Semitic monotheisms. Nevertheless, the point made here is that this continuity is well documented and visible in the emergence and development of Islamic mysticism.

The development of Sufism in Iran serves as a case in point that helps demonstrate robust correlation between the old and the new and the gradual transformation of the religion of the Arabs into a local, hybrid form of 'Islam' unique to the Iranians. 'Sufism' is one such product, born through the fusion of indigenous Iranian identity and belief systems, and the introduced Arab Islamic culture. Indeed, as problematic as it is to talk about 'Sufism' itself as being a clearly defined and essentialised movement, it would be better stated that Sufism was just one element out of the many possible interpretations of Islam, and similarly one such experience, among many, that contributed to what it meant to be Muslim. Rather than speaking of a perpetual clash between 'Sufism' and 'Islam,' or between 'pure jurists/theologians' and 'heretical Sufis,' it is more accurate to underline the differences of opinion, personalities, vested economic interests and, of course, factional rivalries (Knysh 1994: 273–275).

The topological and categorical legacy of Iranian religious heritage raises questions about the factors involved in ensuring the longevity of ancient Persian religious culture, and thus how it has survived into modern times. Avoiding essentialist and essentialising discourses, my aim here is to conceptualise the application of 'indigenous' within the scope of a study of Sufism in Iran, and more specifically Sufism in the historical imagination of Iranians. The latter is just as important, since it is the perception of later times as shaped by its reconstruction of the past that both outlines a peoples' desire to know the past and to inadvertently manufacture it. I will be expanding on what is seemingly the 'Persian religious consciousness' from pre-Islamic times to the Islamic era, and how this, correctly understood, has contributed to the development of Sufism more broadly.

The use of 'Persian religious consciousness' is admittedly somewhat bold and contentious, given issues of theory and method raised; however, I would argue it is a necessary step in emphasising any explanation of why Iran is the anomaly that it is in the Middle East. This part has a great deal to do with geography, and as a consequence, cultural and ideological distances between the political centre in Baghdad and the remote mercantile and agricultural oasis in Khurasan. In comparing two areas of the Abbasid empire, the western and eastern as it were, I am not making the assumption that there are two 'types' of Sufism in competition: one in Baghdad and the other in 'Khurasan.' The emergence of Sufism is more accurately seen as a diffusion and/or circulation of ideas and practices of a religious nature with Khurasan offering its own unique contributions (Green 2012: 44).

What is seen with developments in Khurasan – from the ninth to the twelfth century – relates directly to the discourse about the infusion of indigenous elements of Iranian culture and the gradual emergence of Sufism during this process of diffusion. The impact of geography is important here since the western parts of the Islamic Abbasid Empire were formerly under Byzantine Christian rule; Khurasan was, in contrast, subject to Persian Zoroastrian rule and also contained clusters of Buddhist and Christian presence. The conditions in Khurasan therefore set up a precedent that defined itself as Muslim in harmony with the local flavour, which shaped the notion of Islam as the religion of an immigrant imperial elite. These local developments are discussed in detail elsewhere, and were direct contributing factors to the production and definition of later Sufi ritual and practice (Green 2012: 45, n. 65).

This is not to say that the residents of Khurasan were less Islamic or pseudo-Muslim. Rather, being far removed from the imperial hothouse of religious production and disputation in Baghdad, it merely ensured that Islamic ideas were being sowed in a distinctive cultural soil which produced its own new kind of Muslim movements (Green 2012: 45).

Thus any notion of an unadulterated and pure Persian culture can certainly be attributed to the machinations of modern nationalism. Having said this, however, it is also a key point in the argument put forward here about indigeneity. The imaginary, whether ancient or modern, should not be neglected or discarded entirely from view. Its historical validity, according to Trompf, is first and foremost found in appreciating and doing the work in retracing the steps in a peoples' mythical [re-]construction of their own past (Trompf, 1989). Moreover, to draw on Hughes (2012: e.g. 24), the value of myth-histories within the academic study of religion more generally suggests that such perceived notions, whether of the past or present, whilst invariably not true either in part or in their entirety, nevertheless say something important about those that are identified with the idea. Indeed, the deconstruction of myth-histories yields the dynamic and often difficult relationship between subject and historical enquiry and between data and knowledge formation.

Bulliet's study of local histories in medieval Iran clearly outlines the way in which Islam is accepted and shaped through regional appropriations (Bulliet 1994). His work reveals that there are important local histories to be accounted for, which are typically overlooked in favour of the historical narratives that align with the "view from the centre" (Bulliet 1994, 8f; 169f). The biographical dictionaries, which compile the source materials in Bulliet's research, are the basis for invaluable insight into the ordinary lives of everyday Muslims. The result is a narrative that expresses the "view from the edge," the view from the periphery of Islamic society. Bulliet's historiography deals directly with the

development of local Islamic traditions based on an integration of 'indigenous' cultures of previously non-Arab non-Muslim peoples with that of the foreign (and new) religion of the invading Arabs. The Iranian response, as presented in Bulliet's study, is an excellent demonstration of the activity of the 'indigenous' in asserting itself through the creation of a distinct identity. Furthermore, it clearly shows how the 'indigenous' element in different geographies had lent themselves to variations in the development of Sufi ideas and practices in Spain in contrast to the East, generally (Bulliet 1994, 170).

The scholarly work of retracing the steps of a specific Iranian myth-history, to apply Trompf, will no doubt raise uncomfortable concerns and confronting notions about identity construction, to say the least. Yet it is an exercise that is necessary (Jensen 2005, 4) in the context of locating the notion of 'indigeneity' in the collective historical memory of 'autochthones' (Sanson, 1985), specifically in the case of Iranian Sufis, as we will come to see shortly in the case study of a contemporary Sufi order with special links (albeit, constructed) to an imagined, historic, past.

Theoretical Framework

My own view of approaching the categories of 'indigeneity' and 'indigenous religion' follows the road already mapped out so articulately by Lars Jensen in *Unsettling Australia* (2005). Widespread academic inquires into the guarded "national Establishment" and its cherished nationalist myth is not peculiar to any one time or place. Jensen's analysis of the Australian phenomenon has comfortable correlations with the Iranian phenomenon, and one that the case of Sufi indigeneity can just as easily slip into. The autochthone narrative is an important one to pay close attention to, though not at the expense of ignoring the colonialist discourse. Looking critically at both exposes what is in reality the "shifting theoretical ground" about establishment views on nationhood and its associated rhetoric (Weaver 2000, 221). Any discussion of indigeneity will undoubtedly cut across notions about race, marginality, imperialism, and identity (Weaver 2000, 221). And "the closer one cuts to the bone, the sharper the nationalist reaction [...]" (Jensen 2005, v).

Of course, specific studies that detail conversions of regional indigeneity and Islamic mysticism document the creation of myth and the invention of tradition peculiar to geo-social climates. For example, Sears (2000) discusses the blending of 'native' Javanese mysticism (*wayang*) with Islamic Sufi teachings within the context of postcolonial studies, highlighting the way in which both regional (Javanese) and external (European) representations participated

in the construction of Javanese literary and historical traditions. The specialised research of Martin van Bruinessen (1998) furthermore outlines the role of grassroots Sufism as a form of religio-political resistance to European domination. With the continued persecution of Sufi orders in Iran and elsewhere in the Middles East, this work follows the efforts of Lloyd Ridgeon (2010) and Leonard Lewisohn (2006), two prominent scholars of Sufism, in dealing directly with the historical roots of Sufism in Iran (as well as its extensions in diasporic communities), and tensions (perceived or otherwise) with normative Islam (as prescribed by the authorities there).

In consideration of discussions hitherto, this chapter is about discussing the broader construction of indigeneity (Weaver 2000) within Sufi history, but specifically within the historical development of Sufism in Iran. As such, this chapter is less a thought experiment and more a case study that attempts to demonstrate the application of the indigenous category to the history of Sufism as it develops in Iran, and specifically as it is reformulated in the imagination of Javad Nurbakhsh, a contemporary Sufi master (1926–2008). In this sense, the chapter outlines the construction of the category of the indigenous in Sufi thought. To be clear, the attempt is not conceptualise the category of indigeneity, but rather to demonstrate the application of the category to Sufism. Moreover, it is specifically to demonstrate the application of the category to the conceptualisation of Sufism in the myth-history of the Nimatullahi Khaniqahi Sufi order under Nurbakhsh.

In the example of Nurbakhsh (as will be discussed below), he uses examples of Antiquity in co-opting the rhetorical capital of specific categories to confer a special status to Sufism as being distinct from Islam. His written work has a polemical nature that aims to set certain Sufi traditions apart from others. He does this by utilising the rhetorical device of the indigenous category to demonstrate how his formulation of Sufism as 'indigenous' to Iran, is a phenomenon that is grounded in historical authority and lineage. The idea Nurbakhsh has produced deliberately reaches back in time to show its specialness, and to carve out traditions that make Sufism unique. Furthermore, in doing this, he aims to define membership in the uniqueness of the category he has constructed. The category is deployed politically for religious reasons; and it is a category that becomes particularly acute in the atmosphere of post-revolution of 1979, followed by his exile to the UK (Lewisohn 2006, 51). The creation of the category is therefore based on membership formation and it contrives to present a stark difference between being a member and not being a member of the constructed category. The case study of Nimatullahi Khaniqahi Sufism provides a process of categorising Sufism as indigenous in contradistinction to other forms of (non-Iranian) Sufism and in particular to Islam generally.

This is facilitated by a dialectic between the categories of members and non-members or non-Islamics (Milani 2013, 206f; 2016).

Sufism is a widely studied phenomenon about which numerous scholars have written from a variety of perspectives and researchers have investigated its appearance and activity across the entire globe. There is hitherto no agreed upon and definitive explanation of 'Sufism' or 'Islamic mysticism' (Arab. *tasawwuf*) and experts disagree about its exact role in the history of Islam. But there is an important lesson found in the observation of such variety of research outcomes: 'Sufism,' not just in the academic setting, is a category similar to 'Islam,' 'religion,' 'fundamentalism,' 'modernity' and so on, which hints not at an essentialism about the phenomenon, but rather brings to light the effect of its conceptualisation for all. Alexander Knysh sums it up well:

All these and many other conceptions often mean different things to different people and their usage varies considerably depending on the context in which they are deployed. If we still insist on having a universally acceptable definition of Sufism, we'll have to concede that it is yet to be developed and agreed upon by western scholars. Does this imply that we should simply discard the notion of 'Sufism' [...] Interestingly, this is exactly what many Sufi masters of old encouraged their followers to do, citing the ineffability and uniqueness of mystical experience and its distinctness from one mystic to another.

KNYSH 2005:107

Another point of concern is the utilisation of the academic study of Sufism by scholars of Islamic studies. As an extension to his critique of the current state of Islamic studies becoming increasingly theological, apologetic and essentialist, Aaron Hughes explains that the rise in interest in Sufi studies is similarly troubled by a less than critical research focus geared towards remedying Islamophobia (Hughes 2007: 31). The danger is that Sufism more often serves in research as a medium for peaceful negotiation and a reminder that Islam is at its heart a religion of peace and love, whilst ignoring that Sufis and Sufi orders were agents of social mobilisation and political intervention. Both Knysh and Hughes address the concern with scholarship that is coloured by the disciplinary focus of the researcher in question (Hughes 2012: 21; 2007: 31).

Thus, to go further, the research outcome of prominent scholars depends on (a) which Sufi figure or order the author takes as the subject of academic study (given they assume this as speaking for 'Sufism' as a whole), and (b) to what extent their research outcome is deemed to be affected by their disciplinary

focus. Since the question of indigeneity, at least to some extent, correlates with the larger question of origins, I return to two of the key works of earlier scholarship that was so heavily focused on the question of the origins of Sufism.

Of direct concern to the question of Iranian indigenous elements is the theory that was advanced by Robert Charles Zaehner (1913–1974). Zaehner raised the issue that Sufi teachings appear to be in contradiction with Islamic orthopraxy. It would thus be perceived that a ‘heretical’ Sufism was opposed by an ‘orthodox’ Islam. While such dichotomising is admittedly problematic, Zaehner’s efforts are not to be ignored in their entirety. Certain identifiable Sufi characteristics do suggest a ‘foreign’ element that Zaehner argued was derived from a ‘Hinduist’ persuasion (Zaehner 1994: 3, 108–109).

Critics of Zaehner argued that the *Qur’an* and *Sunna* were sufficient sources of influence for all that Muslim mystics said and did. If this is so, and if the view about Sufism as having an independent trajectory is not entirely discarded, then the argument can be made that the *Qur’an* and *Sunna*, as subjects of academic scrutiny, are themselves obviously not immune from foreign influence.

Henry Corbin (1903–1978) is the foremost exponent of the Iranian origin of Sufism. Corbin wanted to prove the affinity between Shi’ism and Sufism. He concluded that Sufism was, early on, imbued with Shi’a esoteric ideas, and that the development of its tradition was particularly indebted to the Persians involved in bringing the intellectual culture into realisation. Two points of clarification are necessary here in order to avoid misconceptions of Corbin’s thesis. First, he held that the inhabitants of Iran and the Persian-speaking parts of the Muslim world were at the height of the intellectual and spiritual life of their times. Second, he underlines the effect of early Shi’ism prior to its later stagnation and institutionalisation (Corbin, 1971–2; 1993).

The difficulty with Corbin’s view is that it tends to portray Sufism as essentially ‘Iranian.’ This leads to a later Irano-centric focus in the works of Iranian intellectuals, and ultimately comes to ignore (or sideline) critical (and contemporaneous) developments outside of Iran. Corbin’s contribution is no doubt important, and the basic thread of his thesis that suggests Sufism gained a level of maturity and developed a greater capacity for literary and intellectual expression among the Persians is certainly defensible.

The idea of an ‘authentic Islam’ or ‘authentic Sufism’ as opposed to ‘unauthentic Islam/Sufism’ is to be strictly avoided. To adapt Marshall Hodgson’s critique of ‘Arabocentric’ perspective, and to follow Knysh’s own suggestions in line with Hodgson, and Hughes’ similar critiques of Islamic scholarship, such attempts to produce a ‘normative’ or ‘genuine’ form of Islam or Sufism and to

label those non-Islamic and non-Sufi elements as 'foreign importations' and 'borrowings' is not only static and a-historical, but it also treats this alleged 'genuine' form "as a self-sufficient and unchangeable entity, a 'thing in itself' that was somehow immune from re-interpretations and re-assessment by its adherents, who came from a wide variety of educational, ethnic, cultural and social backgrounds" (Knysh 2005:125; Hodgson 1974). Neither Sufism nor Islam (or the textual productions ascribed to them) should be treated as a fixed and final entity. Both are open to change and fluctuations and have produced variations in both their manifestation and advocacy.

Sufi Cultural Capital

There is a conscious attempt on the part of mystically inclined Muslims to build a formidable repertoire of cultural capital. The motivation behind this move is explained by complex relations between social agents who compete for power within the social arena. A significant part of this setting is defined by the dynamics of Irano-Arab relationship immediately following the conquest.

As such, non-Arab converts to Islam are a good example of how 'new' Muslims become key players in the history of Islam starting from ninth and tenth centuries onward. Sufis, over a span of two centuries (roughly speaking, 850–1050) were able to acquire their own measure of 'capital.' Those Iranians drawn to the newly developing mystical (Sufi) Islam from the ninth century onward, were also contributing their own 'native' innovations that, through "Sufism," came to find their own place within Islam. The Sufi contribution added to the overall richness and diversity of desired symbolic capital. The Sufi appropriation of native Iranian themes was a way to upset the balance of power, whereby the conquered 'natives' ironically take control of the introduced religion.

A primary aim of Sufi activity within Iran in the formative years would have been to establish the superiority of the Sufi interpretation of the religion and to elevate the so-called indigenous status above that of the 'other' through sheer mastery of the new faith. This process, therefore, can be defined by the way in which the Sufis of Iran invested on the existing cultural and linguistic capital available to them aiming to outclass competing versions or interpretations of the introduced faith. The argument for the Sufi cultural capital is supported by the now accepted view that the conversion of Iranians to Islam was a long and slow process that altogether took almost four hundred years. This supplants the two earlier theories about the conversion of Iran: the conquest by sword and a Marxist reading of economic persuasion. This suggests that

Iranians gradually became familiar with the religion of their conquerors prior to converting.²

Fragments of Iranian Indigeneity

Iranians did gradually embrace the new faith, but this often had little to do with religion. It was less so that Iranians were motivated by the promise of the *Qur'an* as much as they were eager to make the religion of the Arabs their own. This segment offers a comparative analysis between symbolic artefacts from the cult of Mithra and the Sufi tradition in order to demonstrate the point made with real examples of appropriation. Sufficient archaeological evidence permits a basic (and cautionary) analysis, but, to be clear, I do not intend to make a case for a direct historical connection between Mithraism and Sufism. My intention is purely to demonstrate one of a number of indigenous denominators in the Sufism of Iran which echoes the nation's cultural past (Lewisohn 2006, 56; Ansari 2012).

Iran has produced a rich repository of literary materials during the Islamic period. With the introduction of paper to the Muslim world from China, probably around the ninth century, the proliferation of written sources throughout major cities such as Baghdad or Nishapur has provided a unique but narrow window to Iran's historic past. Iranian poetry, in particular, in the form of the grand epic of Firdausi's *Shahnameh*, for example, provides a fascinating sample for examination of this kind (Ansari 2012, 105). In this exercise, literary sources become noted archaeological fields seen to contain notional and thematic artefacts rooted in a distant time (see for example, Melikian-Chirvani, 1992). There is also a sufficient portion of art objects that though mostly produced in the Islamic era, reflect the style of the Persian Sassanid past. The combination of the two (Persian poetry and art objects) demonstrates important and recurrent patterns in Iranian thought from Antiquity through to the Islamic period. These materials speak to the thematic correspondence between long-term pre-Islamic and Islamic Persian symbolism.

I have argued elsewhere that the source of wine drinking and self-sacrifice symbolism – a prominent feature of Persian Sufi literature – is closely linked with sacrificial rites of the ancient pagan world of pre-Zoroastrian Iran (Milani, 2013; e.g. 61f.). This correlation is found in the neolithic Iranian cult of Mithra, in which the god is praised in the *Khorda Avesta* as 'Mithra of wide cattle pastures' and whose ceremony was closely tied to the sacrifice of the bull. While

2 On conversion theories and dates see Bulliet 1994, p. 39.

this ritual is interrupted in Iran with the consolidation of Zoroaster's teaching against the practice of bull sacrifice, the imagery is later preserved in the Roman appropriation and depicted in the tauroctony scene, samples of which are found in temple remains across the Roman Empire. The tauroctony scene is one of the renowned cult reliefs attributed to the Mithraic mysteries that thrived in the Roman world. These reliefs usually depict the central mythology of the Iranian creation story as found in the *Bundahish*. At the core of Roman Mithraic mysteries is the figure of Mithras (the Roman cult's protagonist), donning a phrygian hat and killing a bull. The killing of the bull symbolises the beginning of life, and the bull's blood is the life source. One obvious link between the Iranian creation story and Roman Mithraism is that the blood that pours from the moribund victim in the tauroctony. In ancient Iran, Mithra was the god that sanctions bonds through the ancient rite of the bull sacrifice (Hinnells 1974: 248). In Mithraism, the ritual incorporates the blood of the sacrificial animal as part of a purification ceremony. The thematic continuity between the Iranian cult of Mithra and Roman Mithraism is certainly apparent, but the meaning of the sacrifice is defined in a new context. For ancient Iranians Mithra was known as the god of justice, mediation and contractual agreement. The ritual of bull sacrifice among ancient Iranians is connected to the treaties made between peoples and the event being sanctioned by a festivity that included a shared meal. Zoroaster's intervention seems to be connected to a religious reform aimed at stabilising society along the lines of a new ethical guideline, in an effort to neutralise what was by then a failing system of his ancestors that had declined to in-fighting and cattle thievery. Still, particular elements of Mithraic practice continue to hold among western Iranians, which explains Roman appropriations.

The sentiments of this ancient ritual did not only emigrate, but they also found alternate means of survival within Iran. There are numerous allusions to 'blood' in Persian Sufi literature through figurative language. The interpretation of the ritual sacrifice is talked about in relation to a symbolic representation of wine and personal transformation. A particular passage from the *Bundahishn* further consolidates the connection of wine with that of bull's blood: 'It is said in the scripture: when the sole-created Gav passed away ... out of the blood grew the gourd of the wine grape from which they prepare wine ...' (Ankelesaria 1956: 53). A striking cognate feature shared by Mithraic and Sufic ritual symbolism is that the blood is symbolic of the life essence and the soul-rejuvenating elixir (Hinnells 1974: 248).

In the Iranian Sufi literature, it is the Sufi master who is the one who performs the sacrifice, slaughtering the ego of the neophyte. The theme of *pir-e moghan* or 'Magian master' and his connection with sacrificial bull's blood is

thus later understood to supervise the symbolic 'wine drinking' for the Sufis; a double theme that is transmitted right throughout Persian Sufi poetry depicting the steps in the sacred passage of mystical initiation (Melikian-Chirvani 1992: 101–133). Of course, the peculiar presence of 'wine drinking' and the 'Magian Master' in Persian Sufi literature explains the metamorphosis of ancient rites and their radical adaptation in later contexts. On the whole, the composite themes include celebrations during sunrise and sunset (Boyce 1979: 32–33; see also Boyce 1975) master and cupbearer; and bull's blood, wine, and light. All are constant themes in Islamic Persian symbolism and they continually regenerate its identity. In Persian Sufi literature there are three key features that convey the ancient ingredients of its ancestral past: master, cup, and wine, with the addition of a fourth common and continuing feature, light (often substituted for wine). Ibn al-Motazz invokes the sacred imagery of Iranian religiosity from its roots to the present in a swift poetic sweep: 'And people uttered praise saying they saw a surprising thing; Light made of water in a fire made of grapes' (*Diwan Ibn al-Mu'tazz*, cited in Melikian-Chirvani 1990:104).

The 'master' appears under various aliases: cupbearer (*saqi*), boon companion, friend and so on. Melikian-Chirvani draws a parallel between the 'cup' or 'goblet' (*badeh*) and crescent shaped 'wine-boats' that represent the Sufi's begging bowl (*kashkul*). Wine would be poured out of a vessel known in literature as a 'bull' into drinking cups reproducing the crescent-shape designed as a boat. The *kashkul* is meant to have served as a wine vessel as is demonstrated by many verses inscribed on it (Melikian-Chirvani 1992: 101). 'Wine' is the classic symbol of illumination, initiation, and sacred knowledge. Javad Nurbakhsh explains that the 'wine' is 'the intuitive savour of the recollection of God within a Sufi's heart, inducing a heady intoxication [...]' It is the 'boiling up of love' inside the seeker through devotional and contemplative exercises. This love is described as being possessed by those who are perfected (in love) and realized at the end of the 'path' (Nurbakhsh 2000: 143, 149).

The Sufi master (like Mithra) has the personal power with which to retrieve the bull's blood and disseminate the 'illuminating wine.' There are many elaborate descriptions in the Sufi poetry of Nezami and Khaqani in the second half of the twelfth century of what appears to be the 'ceremonial drinking of wine poured out of a wine-bull into a crescent-moon cup, i.e. a wine-boat.' These ceremonies in fact describe the theme of initiation of the Sufi lover (*asheq*) by the 'Magian master.' Further correlations are visible in a panegyric by Khaqani evoking the esoteric symbolism of an initiation rite involving 'the drinking of wine poured out of a silver bull vessel into the golden boat filled with wine, symbolizing the conjunction of the moon and the sun.' (Khaqani, *Diwan*, cited in Melikian-Chirvani 1992, "Wine-Bull," 117).

The 'ultimate synthesis' in Persianate Sufism is clearly spelled out in the following panegyric of the twelfth century Persian poet:

Remember the precepts of the Magian master
 Remember the clamour of the bird that speaks the Zandavasta
 Fill up the cup with Tigris rivers of wine
 As high as the Baghdad parallel and remember the Ancient Dynasty
 [*Keyan*]
 The esoteric knowledge of the drunken ones has been divulged
 'The morning draught': that shout has been divulged
 The Cupbearer was drawing blood from the cephalic vein of the jar
 The golden tray³ fell out of Heaven
 The ascetic in the mountain was flinging about his sleeve
 Out of it there fell the key to the tavern
 The Sufi *Quran* reader tore his blue robe
 His wine cup fell out from the top of its mast.

KHAQANI, *Diwan*, cited in MELIKIAN-CHIRVANI 1992: 115

These verses do not, strictly speaking, belong to Sufism. They are a product of indigenous improvisation in the face of the introduction of a foreign ruling religion. It is the activity of certain Persian Sufis who adapt the cultural productions of the local poets to their own needs, and thus stake a claim in the process of self-legitimation.

The Nimatullahi Myth-history

The Nimatullahi myth-history provides an excellent example of a modern reconstruction of the past as found in contemporary Sufi imagination. Whilst there are obvious concerns with the historical accuracy of the Nimatullahi myth-history and the correctly perceived correlation between pre-Islamic and Islamic worlds, closer observation of these claims do shed light on what may be considered an assessment of the 'Persian influence.'

One of the largest and most influential of the Sufi orders originating in Iran is the Nimatullahi. The Nimatullahi order demonstrates a propensity for adaptation and development consistent with Iranian themes, but it is strictly during the 1950s that the order had its tradition literally 'reinvented' under the directorship of a new master, Javad Nurbakhsh (1926–2008). Nurbakhsh's

3 Melikian-Chirvani notes that it is a "standard metaphor of the sun disc" (1992: 115).

propensity for the modern and his suspicion of religious corruption of the mullahs in Iran became the catalyst for the new direction of the order. The newly constructed identity of the order was then used first to validate and re-assert the suppressed indigeneity of the Iranian sense of religiousness (harking back to Zoroaster) as distinct from the 'imposed' Islam brought by the conquering Arabs of the peninsula. Secondly, it was used as tool for undermining the power structure and the authority of a perceived normative Islam. A clear distinction is therefore made between traditional Nimatullahi views, and the innovation introduced under Nurbakhsh and now known as the Khaniqahi Nimatullahi Order.

By Nurbakhshian reckoning, the historical reality of Sufism which is contextualized within an Islamic framework, is more or less ignored, and an alternative non-Arab and pre-Islamic archaic Persian genesis of Sufism is (invented and) adopted. Generally speaking, Sufism arises due to alternate needs of the Muslim community. As such, Nurbakhsh's appropriation is to some extent defensible, even though it is academically questionable. The Iranian use of 'Sufism' is most intriguing, and it is the Khaniqahi Nimatullahi's modern reinterpretation of Sufism and its associated invented historical narrative that becomes an important feature in a study of contemporary Sufism. With Nurbakhsh, one can see the emergence of 'Persian Sufism' as a construct along with an associated invented tradition (see Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) born out of the socio-political climate of 1950s Iran. Nurbakhsh draws heavily from older narratives of Iranian anti-Arabism dating back to the first two centuries of conquest (Milani 2013: 114–115).

Nurbakhsh's promotion of Sufism as a 'progressive spirituality,' earned it its marginalized status in Iran from the time of the 1979 revolution. His liberal attitude was subsequently made the hallmark of the many Western branches of the order that opened across America and the UK. Nurbakhsh was a prolific author. He had produced many publications in Persian (the majority of which are available in English), the central thesis of which is the affirmation that the core Iranian character and native Persian origin of Sufism are connected to the idea that the so-called universally humanitarian doctrines of Sufism are essentially an Iranian cultural by-product (Milani 2013: 217). Nurbakhsh had "nationalised" Sufism to attract despondent audiences who were fed up with the excesses of the Mullahs in post-revolutionary Iran. From what can be gleaned from historical records, everything he asserts about pre-Islamic and Iranian roots of Sufism is simply a 'myth' based on the literary narrative of Firdausi's *Shahnameh*.

Nurbakhsh essentially regarded Sufism as a universal (Iranian) spirituality that was only confined to Islam through the Islamic conquest of Iran. The

'Sufis,' according to Nurbakhsh, were known by other names prior, but came to be known specifically as Sufis when they accepted Islam (Nurbakhsh 1996: 13).

Conclusion

The Sufism that took root in Iran from the ninth to the twelfth centuries was defined by distinct features of regional indigeneity. The prominent features of this ingenious influence on the evolving Sufi tradition were primarily the lasting effect of the New Persian language and ancient Iranian cultural symbolism. These 'Persianate' features certainly come to define the eastward spread Sufism whereby the Persian linguistic and cultural quality is clearly discernible among Sufis of South Asia.

In this work I have not taken liberties with the definition of Sufism as a static monolithic entity that remains through the ages. Instead, I have taken 'Sufism' in the abstract to be defined by the absence of an essentialising feature, and a dynamic movement observed by a series of contextual analyses. In the Iranian context, 'Sufism' or 'Islamic mysticism' provides a lively example of cultural fusion through a unidirectional encounter. Iranians gradually embraced the Islamic faith, but the way its tradition is perpetuated in Iran depended heavily on local traditions, cultural memory and group identity. Sufism in Iran provides one aspect of the collective diffusion of religious innovation in the region.

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