

# Journée d'étude : Shi'i Sufism in Modern Times

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Pour des raisons historiques et doctrinales, l'existence du soufisme shî'ite et son statut d'objet d'étude ont toujours été problématiques. Le soufisme est généralement présenté comme l'expression mystique de l'islam sunnite. Les confréries soufies se réclament en grande majorité du sunnisme, même quand leur chaîne d'initiation (*silsila*) remonte à l'un des imâms du shî'isme ; seules quelques unes, comme la Ni'matullâhiyyah et la Dhahabbiyyah, se déclarent ouvertement shî'ites à partir de la période moderne. Les études orientalistes ont longtemps cherché les origines spirituelles et sociales du soufisme en dehors de l'islam, tandis que les études shî'ites demeuraient rares. Avec le progrès de celles-ci et le renouveau de l'orientalisme en général, l'existence d'un soufisme shî'ite a été reconnue, mais ce nouvel objet d'étude s'est trouvé pris entre deux approches, en apparence contradictoires mais aboutissant toutes deux à le nier.

D'une part, une approche socio-historique centrée sur le phénomène confrérique, étudiant l'existence concrète des confréries dans les sociétés historiques, a tendance à séparer objectivement le soufisme et le shî'isme. Une telle investigation se préoccupe peu d'étudier pour elles-mêmes les idées véhiculées par les maîtres soufis. D'autre part, une approche philosophique, dominée par la figure d'Henry Corbin, se posant en rupture avec l'historicisme et le positivisme, relève des affinités profondes entre la spiritualité soufie et l'ésotérisme shî'ite, et va jusqu'à faire sienne la thèse de certains penseurs shî'ites (Haydar Âmolî) selon laquelle le véritable soufisme est nécessairement shî'ite. Une telle approche néglige, comme on a pu lui en faire la critique (Ballanfat), le phénomène confrérique et son rôle dans l'économie des doctrines. Ainsi, la première perspective tend à nier l'importance historique d'un soufisme shî'ite, quand la seconde opère une réduction phénoménologique du soufisme au shî'isme. Ce qui ressort de ces travaux et de leurs critiques, c'est que soufisme et shî'isme, dans l'histoire sociale et intellectuelle du monde musulman, sont à la fois indissociables et irréductibles l'un à l'autre. Faire du soufisme shî'ite un objet d'étude pertinent supposerait donc de dépasser l'antinomie des approches sociologique et philosophique, de conjointre le point de vue externe de l'explication historique et le point de vue interne de la compréhension spirituelle. En la matière, l'étude du chercheur irakien Kâmil Mustafâ al-Shîbî sur les relations du soufisme et du shî'isme peut apparaître comme pionnière, mais elle ne porte que sur le centre arabo-iranien du monde musulman. Comment donc penser et étudier le soufisme shî'ite sans dissocier les deux termes ni en éliminer un au profit de l'autre ? Comment appréhender le soufisme shî'ite comme étant à la fois proprement soufi et proprement shî'ite ? Enfin, comment saisir ce phénomène dans toute sa durée historique et son extension géographique ?

Le problème des relations historiques et principales du soufisme et du shî'isme, pour reprendre le titre d'un fameux article de Sayyid Husayn Nasr, se pose avec acuité aux chercheurs, historiens des sociétés ou des idées, travaillant sur l'Iran safavide et le monde indo-iranien à l'époque moderne. En effet, c'est une confrérie soufie passée du sunnisme au shî'isme, la Safaviyyah, qui est à l'origine de l'instauration du chiisme imâmite comme religion officielle en Iran. Celle-ci eut de profonds effets sur la doctrine et la forme sociale de l'imâmisme ; elle entraîna aussi l'évolution, la disparition ou la migration, notamment en Inde, de nombreuses confréries soufies. Sur les développements du soufisme shî'ite à l'époque moderne, de nouvelles recherches restent à mener et partager ; c'est ce à quoi voudrait contribuer notre journée d'étude. Quelles furent les relations sociales et doctrinales du shî'isme et du soufisme en Iran safavide ? Comment une confrérie shî'ite comme la Ni'matullâhiyyah a-t-elle évolué à l'époque qâjâre ? Quelles sont les manifestations du soufisme shî'ite en Inde et en Iran moderne ? Telles seront les questions traitées par les différents moments de cette journée.

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Sufism is usually understood as the mystical and esoteric expression *par excellence* in Islam. Shi'i Sufism has been little studied to date and, in fact, its existence, definition and status remain problematic. However, despite the limited number of sufi brotherhoods explicitly identified as Shi'i, Sufism and Shi'ism are two phenomena that have been closely intertwined since the inception of both. Many spiritual genealogies (*silsila*) of the principal brotherhoods, even those self-declared as Sunni, have been said to be traceable to one of the Shi'i imâms, with 'Ali often placed at the head of the initiatic chain. It is notable that the establishment of Shi'ism as Iran's official faith, at the beginning of the XVI<sup>th</sup> century, was undertaken by a sufi brotherhood that evolved from a Sunni to a Shi'i movement, the Safaviyyah.

After almost three centuries of oblivion, when Shi'i Sufi brotherhoods either went underground or disappeared, in Iran in the modern period (XVIII<sup>th</sup> and XIX<sup>th</sup> centuries) organized Sufism re-emerged with a new Shi'i coloring, thanks to the proselytism of the leaders of two brotherhoods in particular: the Ni'matullâhiyyah and the Dhahabiyyah. At the same time, the importance of Shi'i Sufi brotherhoods in the modern period, if to some extent clear and documented in Iran during the Qajar period, is much more difficult to detect elsewhere, for example in the Indian Subcontinent and the Arab World.

The literary output of Shi'i Sufism in the modern period is abundant. Many doctrinal treatises, collections of poetry (*dîvâns*) and Qur'anic commentaries have been to address the legitimacy, even the necessity, of the existence of a *tariqa* during the Occultation of the Imâm of the Age. The objective of this workshop will be to present new research on Shi'i Sufism, still a poorly addressed subject in the field of Shi'i and Islamic Studies.

## Programme

9.00-9.30:

Welcome/Coffee

9.30-10.20: **Andrew Newman** (Université d'Edimbourg): The Safawids, the Shi'a and the Sufis: The anti-Sufi Polemic and the 'Recovery' of the Twelver *aḥādīth* in the 11<sup>th</sup>/17<sup>th</sup> Century

10.20-11.10: **Mathieu Terrier** (Doctorant, EPHE, Paris): L'apologie des premiers maîtres soufis dans un ouvrage shi'ite de la dernière période safavide : le *Mahbûb al-qulûb* de Qutb al-Dîn Ashkevarî (Apology of the firsts Sufi Masters in a Shi'i Treatise of the last Safavid Period ; the *Mahbûb al-qulûb* of Qutb al-Dîn Ashkevarî)

11.10-11.25: Coffee break

11.25-12.15: **Fabrizio Speziale** (Sorbonne Nouvelle – Paris III/CNRS, Mondes iranien et indien): The Ni'matullāhī Renewal in Early Modern Deccan

12.15-13.05: **Michel Boivin** (CNRS, CEIAS): Soufism and Shiism in Sindh: A literary and ethnographic approach

13.05-14.30: Lunch

14.30-15.20: **Matthijs van den Bos** (Birkbeck, Université de Londres): Contested Friend. Soltan'alishah, the *Valayat-name* and Shiite Sufi authority

15.20-16.10: **Alessandro Cancian** (Institut d'Etudes Ismaéliennes, Londres): Categories Reconsidered: the Principles of Qur'ānic exegesis in Sulṭān'alīshāh's Shi'i-Sufi commentary

16.10-16.30: Coffee break

16.30-17.20: **Denis Hermann** (CNRS, Mondes Iranien et indien): Some Remarks on Shi'i Sufism in Modern Times : Communities, Rituals and Identities

17.20-18.10: **Lloyd Ridgeon** (Université de Glasgow): Hidden Khomeini: Mysticism and Poetry

18.10-18.30: Concluding remarks

## Abstracts:

**Andrew Newman** (Université d'Edimbourg): The Safawids, the Shi'a and the Sufis: The anti-Sufi Polemic and the 'Recovery' of the Twelver *aḥādīth* in the 11<sup>th</sup>/17<sup>th</sup> Century

There is an implicit, if not explicit, tendency to equate the formal 'establishment' of Twelver Shi'ism in Iran following the conquest of Tabriz by Isma'il I in 907/1501 with its 'institutionalisation'/'popularisation'. As for the Twelver clerical class itself, the proposition that following the capture of Tabriz large numbers of Arab clerics migrated to Safawid territory still, also, enjoys a large degree of acceptance. Contemporary with, if not directly inspired and encouraged by, the establishment of the faith by the Safavids, the early tenth/sixteenth century is also said to have witnessed something of a scholarly revival of interest in the Imams' *aḥādīth* and their study, particularly among several named Lebanese scholars. The association of these scholars with, if not their establishment of, *ḥadīth* criticism (*ʿilm al-dirāyah* or *dirāyat al-ḥadīth*) has also been noted.

This paper will note that the evidence for the widespread understanding and acceptance of the distinctive doctrines and practices of the faith as promulgated by contemporary 'orthodox' scholars – at home and abroad - among both Safawid Iran's elites and 'popular' classes over the 10<sup>th</sup>/16<sup>th</sup> century is remarkably thin. It will also suggest that scholarly interest in work with the Imams' traditions was also quite limited in this period.

In fact, it will be argued, it was not until the 1640s that concrete evidence of wider interest in and work with the traditions is visible. The paper will discuss this evidence, and argue that this rising interest in the traditions was concomitant with and, at least partly, the response to the rising, urban-based Sufi style messianism that began to be a feature of the Safawid spiritual landscape in this period and re-set the tone of spiritual discourse for the remainder of the period.

**Mathieu Terrier** (Doctorant, EPHE, Paris): L'apologie des premiers maîtres soufis dans un ouvrage shi'ite de la dernière période safavide : le *Mahbûb al-qulûb* de Qutb al-Dîn Ashkevarî (Apology of the firsts Sufi Masters in a Shi'i Treatise of the last Safavid Period ; the *Mahbûb al-qulûb* of Qutb al-Dîn Ashkevarî)

La fin de l'ère safavide en Iran est généralement caractérisée par une vigoureuse réaction anti-soufie et antiphilosophique, représentée par la figure de Muhammad Bâqir al-Majlisî (m. 1699). À la même époque pourtant, un *shaykh al-islam* de province, Qutb al-Dîn Ashkevarî (m. entre 1677 et 1684), compose une encyclopédie des sages, intitulée *Mahbûb al-qulûb*, intégrant les premiers maîtres du soufisme comme les philosophes grecs de l'Antiquité dans la perspective de la « religion vraie », le shi'isme duodécimain. Dans un chapitre apologétique et une suite de notices bio-doxographiques, l'auteur entend sauver de la réprobation un cortège de maîtres soufis, parmi lesquels Abû Yazîd al-Bistâmî (m. 848 ou 874), al-Hallâj (m. 922) et al-Ghazâlî (m. 1111), au motif de leurs liens historiques avec les imâms et de la congruence de leurs paroles avec le message imâmite. Certains se voient convertis au shi'isme au moyen d'arguments forgés ; mais cette shi'itisation artificielle pourrait bien n'être qu'un expédient afin de défendre entre les lignes la vérité du soufisme. L'harmonisation entreprise par Ashkevarî entre soufisme et shi'isme concerne un certain soufisme, individuel, ascétique et respectueux de la

*sharî'a*, étranger donc au confrérisme comme à l'antinomisme ; mais aussi un certain shî'isme, non-rationnel et gnostique, éloigné des positions *usûli*-es. L'étude de ce discours intéresse donc tout à la fois l'histoire intellectuelle de l'Iran safavide et la question des rapports principaux du shî'isme et du soufisme.

The late Safavid period in Iran is generally said to have been marked by a strong reaction against Sufism and Philosophy, a reaction represented by the figure of Muhammad Bâqir al-Majlisî (d. 1699). At the same time however, a provincial *shaykh al-islâm*, Qutb al-Dîn Ashkevarî (d. c. 1677-1684), composed an encyclopedia of 'wise men' entitled *Mahbûb al-qulûb*, and which includes references to the earliest first masters of Sufism and the Greek philosophers of antiquity, from the perspective of the "true religion" Twelver Shi'ism. In an apologetic chapter and a series of bio-doxographical notes, the author intends to defend the reputations of a group of Sufi masters, including Abû Yazîd al-Bistâmî (d. 848 or 874), al-Hallâj (d. 922) and al-Ghazâlî (d. 1111), on the basis of their historical associations with the imams and the confluence of their discourse with that of the Imams. Some of them are said to have converted to Shi'ism through *ad hoc* arguments. But, this artificial "shiitization" could be just an expedient to defend the truth of Sufism. The attempted harmonization between Sufism and Shi'ism undertaken by Ashkevarî concerns a particular Sufism, individual, ascetic and *sharia*-abiding Sufism, as distinct from brotherhood-form and Antinomism, but also a particular Shi'ism, gnostic and non-rational, distant from *usûli* positions. The study of this discourse therefore addresses both the intellectual history of Safavid Iran and the question of the relations between fundamentals of both Sufism and Shi'ism

**Fabrizio Speziale** (Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris III - CNRS, Paris): The Ni'matullâhî Renewal in Early Modern Deccan

This paper looks at the history of the Ni'matullâhiyya in the Deccan region of India and at the Ni'matullâhî centre which was established in Hyderabad by 'Imâd al-Dîn Maḥmûd al-Ḥusaynî (m. 1100/1689), a Shi'a of Iraqî 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'matullâhî did not receive the support of the Shi'i dynasty of the Quṭb Shâh, in spite of the relations between its founder and the Ni'matullâhî of Iran. They enjoyed later the devotion of several nobleman of the city during the period of the Nizâm, such as Ma'sûm 'Alî Shâh Dakanî (m. 1211/1797 ca), who was sent to restore the order in Iran. His master Shâh 'Alî Rizâ (m. 1215/1801) is considered the architect of the plan 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.

**Michel Boivin** (CNRS, CEIAS, Paris): Sufism and Shi'ism in the Indian Subcontinent: Sindh as a case Study

The relationship between Shi'ism and Sufism is a main issue of the religious landscape of the Indus Valley, located in the Western part of the Indian Subcontinent. After Maḥmûd Ghaznawî destroyed the Isma'ili emirate in the 11<sup>th</sup> Century, Isma'ili *pîrs* were back and between the 12<sup>th</sup> and the 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, they were able to convert a number of Hindu castes to their creed. Simultaneously, the Sohrawardiyyah from Multan were very active and they challenged Isma'ili proselytising. From the 15<sup>th</sup> C. to the 18<sup>th</sup> C., there is a lack of historical sources

related to Shi'ism in Sindh.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> C., the Sufi Shâh `Abd al-Lâtif (1689-1752) is the first to insert a *marthiya* in his poetry, the famous *Shâh jo Risâlo*. Probably due to an Iranian influence, which is still to be documented, the *marthiyas* became a main feature of the devotional Sindhi poetry. In the 19<sup>th</sup> C., *marthiyas* were composed by Shii authors like Thâbit `Alî Shâh (1740-1810), but also by Sunnis and even Hindus, like Dalpat Sûfi (1769-1842). They are also numerous in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Isma'ili corpus.

In the ritual field, the local Sufis incorporated many Shi'i references in the mystical quest insomuch as most of the Sufi masters are themselves Shi'i. Furthermore, in some Sufi places like Sehwan Sharif, the local saint is sometimes seen as a 'manifestation' (*mazhar*) of *imâm* Husayn. After briefly surveying the historical development of both Shi'ism and Sufism in Sindh, the relationship will be approached through a study of the Shi'i motifs in Sufi poetry in Sindh. The following part will be devoted to an ethnographical approach of the relation between Shi'ism and Sufism.

**Matthijs van den Bos** (Birkbeck, Université de Londres): Contested Friend. Soltan'alishah, the *Valayat-name* and Shiite Sufi authority

Contemporary Western notions of friendship are characterised by altruism, reciprocity and freedom from constraint, beyond the kinship realm. Islamic Sufi Friendship with God – which reverberates in Iranian popular culture - has carried contrary ideals to the present day, valuing submission and clothing it in primordial terminology. An anthropology of modern Islamic Friendship with God must therefore take Islamic doctrines as its point of departure. Building from Islamic doctrine, the article proposes a sociological grid of Sufis' relations, rendering Friendship with God as a socio-political phenomenon, and structuring contexts in which Friendship with God is played out. It is proposed that many might claim to be a Friend of God in modern Iran, and that Sufi Friends remain contested in the face of jurists' modern-day expansive and monopolising claims to authority. The third part explores Sufi Friendship claims in the face of actual contestation, which involve Sufis' struggle for symbolic accommodation - as opposed to antagonistically confrontational notions of conflict. This comes to the fore in and around a Sufi treatise on Friendship with God, the *Valāyat-name* by the Ne'matollahi master Soltan'alishah (d.1909), which parallels the order's ascent to power in Khorasan. In the environment of the impending Constitutional Revolution, with state authority under siege ideologically and breaking down de facto, both the master's religious and his worldly claims to authority were contested, and this helped bring about his martyrdom.

**Alessandro Cancian** (Institut d'Etudes Ismaéliennes, Londres): Categories Reconsidered: the Principles of Qur'ānic exegesis in Sultān'alīshāh's Shī'i-Sufi commentary

Discussion of exclusion/inclusion in religion necessarily entails the clarification of the dynamic relationship between orthodoxy and heterodoxy. Much has been written by sociologists and historians of religions about the tendency towards dichotomisation within religions. The terminology that has been employed by scholars – orthodoxy/heterodoxy, majority/minority, normative/antinomic, official/sect etc., reflects and echoes internal definition of the religious subjects. In

the case of Islam, for example, imān/kufr, dar al-islām/dar al-harb, firqa nājiyya/firqa muḍilla; in the case of Shi‘ism, ‘amma/khāṣṣa, ahl al-bāṭin/ahl al-zāhir, illiyyūn/sijjīn, tawallā/tabarra’, among many others. While these dichotomies apparently imply a degree of contradiction that doesn’t allow for compromise, the reality of the religious phenomenon proves more problematic and fluid.

One of the *loci* where this interplay gains interpretive weight in Islam is exegetical literature. Hermeneutics is pivotal in defining what a religion is and how it should be professed and practiced. Hence, what scriptural sources have to tell us about religious belonging, exclusion/inclusion, orthodoxy/heterodoxy, is mediated by of formal and informal exegetical activity, which in Islam is codified primarily, but not exclusively, in *tafsīr* literature. To thoroughly understand the recent evolution of the Qur’anic exegesis in Shi‘ism in general, and in Iran in particular, it is useful to look at the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Although often overlooked, it is in this period that Twelver Shi‘ism developed some basic concepts that came to shape its doctrine and social structure in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, equipping it for the encounter with the modern Western cultural influences.

In this presentation I will look at the main exegetical work of Sulṭān‘alī-Shāh Gunabādī (d. 1909), eponym master of the Gunabādī branch of the Ni‘matullahi Sufi order, the *tafsīr bayān al-sa‘āda fī maqāmāt al-‘ibāda*, through the lenses of how the relationship between its being at once Shi‘i and Sufi has been articulated. I will do so highlighting the work’s hermeneutical principles, its structure and style, attempting to place it in the broader context of the Shi‘i exegetical tradition.

Sulṭān‘alī-Shāh Gunabādī, one of the great minds behind the success and influence of the Order in contemporary Iran, has been a charismatic master and a prolific writer, whose exegetical activity is not limited to his *tafsīr*. His hermeneutic principles are scattered throughout his literary production, particularly in his *Sa‘ādat-nāmeḥ*, in the *Majma‘ al-sa‘ādat*, and in a fascinating commentary on the aphorisms of the mystical poet Bābā Ṭāher, the *Touḍīḥ*. The exegetical activity of Sulṭān‘alī-Shāh influenced all the successive intellectual output of the order, and mystical exegesis even outside of it. Understanding how the hermeneutic principles of Sulṭān‘alī-Shāh work in shaping the Order’s confessional outlook is crucial to address the Gunabādī’s later proscription at the hands of most Shi‘i anti-Sufi ‘ulamā.

The *Bayān* combines features of the pre-Buwayhid, *ḥadīth*-based commentaries with some typical tracts of the classical mystical *tafsīrs*, adding a fair amount of original speculation. These traits, along with its being used and quoted by a number of later Twelver exegetes, make the *Bayān* a sort of hermeneutic bridge between the late antique Imami exegetical methodology and the modern stage of Shi‘i exegesis.

Despite the remarkable influence – whether overt or dissimulated – exerted by this *tafsīr* on later Shi‘i Qur’anic exegesis, the *Bayān* is still referred to with some suspect within mainstream exoteric Twelver Shi‘ism, to the extent of not being regarded as Shi‘i altogether. Far from having intrinsic scholarly reasons, this bias is grounded in delicate mechanisms of inclusion/exclusion, which encompasses issues of authority, orthodoxy and legitimacy. In this contribution, some of the key issues related to these mechanisms in contemporary Shi‘ism will also be addressed.

**Denis Hermann** (CNRS, Mondes iranien et indien, Paris) : Some Remarks on Shi‘i Sufism in Modern Times : Communities, Rituals and Identities

Utilising a multidisciplinary approach this paper examines aspects of the history of Shi‘i Sufi brotherhoods in XX<sup>th</sup> century Iran. As a case study we will focus mainly on the centrality of some of the famous Sufi locations in Tehran. But, if XIX<sup>th</sup> c Tehran was not considered one of the principal Sufi centers of Iran, viz many provincial towns, as a new capital Tehran consistently attracted many migrants from the provinces over both the Pahlavi and Revolutionary periods. As a result, it became one of the principal hubs for Iran-based Shi‘i Sufi brotherhoods and 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 Sultān ‘Alī Shāhī branch of the Ni‘matullahī, 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.

**Lloyd Ridgeon** (Université de Glasgow): Hidden Khomeini: Mysticism and Poetry

This paper will discuss an important yet all too frequently neglected dimension of Ayatollah Khomeini’s worldview, namely his perspective on mysticism. Some observers witness reflections of this outlook throughout the whole of his life, indeed, it has even been claimed that Khomeini believed he himself had achieved mystical union. It will be argued in this chapter that the idea of mystical union was discussed by Khomeini in great detail in the 1930s. His works from this period betray the legacy of Ibn ‘Arabī and Mullā Ṣadrā, and Khomeini combined the ‘*irfānī*’ ideas of these thinkers with elements of Shi‘ism, so that his message became more palatable to the Iranian milieu. Subsequently Khomeini remained silent of the mystical tradition until the 1980s when a small volume of his ghazals was published which reflect the deep stylistic influence of Ḥāfiẓ. More intriguingly in a letter prefacing the ghazals, Khomeini categorically denied that he had ever experienced anything mystical through his study of Ibn ‘Arabī’s works. This chapter argues that if this statement is to be believed, it falsifies the claim of Baqer Moin that Khomeini himself had completed the so-called “four journeys” to perfection and undermines the argument of those who witness the lifelong influence of ‘*irfān*’ on Khomeini, which of course has profound political implications.

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