

# SUFISM AND GRADUAL TRANSFORMATION IN THE MEANING OF SUFI IN SAFAVID PERIOD

Hossain Mirjafari

The history of the Safavid dynasty can be divided into three periods: (a) religious (gnostic) period ; (b) religio-political period ; (c) politico-national period.

Shaikh Safī al-Dīn of Ardabil (650-735/1252-1334), of the Safavid family, was one of the greatest Sufis who, due to his belief in Sufism, has gained considerable fame. Shaikh Safī was directed by Shaikh Zāhid Gīlānā (d. 694/1296) to follow the Khurāsānī order of Sufism.<sup>44</sup>

Both Shaikh Safī and his son Shaikh Ṣadr al-Dīn, as leaders of Sufism, were absolute followers of Sunnī faith.<sup>45</sup>

Khwājah 'Alī, Shaikh Safī's grandson, was the first in his family who showed a tendency towards Imāmīs and became a Shī'ah but his inclination to this faith was not very strong.

The followers of Khwājah 'Alī basically changed their beliefs to Shī'ism, after Khwājah death in Palestine, in 831/1427. They extended the concept of

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<sup>44</sup> J.S. Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (Oxford, 1971), p. 100; see also his pedigrees in the same source, pp. 30-31.

<sup>45</sup> The first indication that Shaikh Safī was a Shāfi'ī Sunni is to be found in Ḥamdullah Mustawfī's *Nuzhat al-Qulūb* (Tehran, 1956), p. 92, written during his visit to Ardabil, five years after the demise of Shaikh Safī. He writes as follows: "The majority of the population of Ardabil are the disciples of both the Shāfi'ī school of the Sunni faith, and Shaikh Safī's." On the same subject see also:

(a) Ibn Bazzār Ardabili, who himself was one of the disciples of the Shaikh, states in his book, *S'afvat al-Saf* (manuscript copy Ayasofya Library, No. 2123, Sheet 464), that Shaikh Safī was a Shāfi'ī Sunni.

The following sources can also be referred to, in relation to the Shaikh's beliefs.

(b) Ahmad Kasravi, *Shaikh Ṣafī and His Clan*, Tehran, 1948.

(c) Z.V. Togan, *Sur l'origine de safavides*, *Melanges Louis Massignon*, Dams, 1957.

(d) *Die Safaviden*, Saeculum, 1953.

Shī'ism to the extreme, such that their leader (Fīr) was now considered to be an emanation of God, displaying God's attributes.

Under the influence, of this extremism, the Firs began to treat those who believed in other religions, particularly Sunnīs, very harshly, ordering holy war (jihad) against them, during which Shaikh Junaid and Shaikh Ḥaidar, Shāh Ismā'īl's grandfather and father, were killed as partisans. Shāh Ismā'īl, who spent his early years in concealment and had narrow escapes from death, was later recognized as the spiritual leader of the Sufis.<sup>46</sup>

When the Safavid clan accepted the Shī'ah faith, Sufism lost its significance and was used only in its apparent and nominal sense. This was because the "Theory of the Unity of God and Man," which was the base of Sufism, is rejected by Shī'ism.

Those who followed Shaikh Junaid, Shaikh Ḥaidar, constituting their armies, were called Sufis. Various historical sources indicate that Sulṭān Ḥaidar had ordered his Sufi Turkoman artisans to wear scarlet caps (tājs) with twelve grooves standing for the twelve Imams of the Shī'ah distinguishing them from others, and that they granted them the honourable name of Qizilbāsh (red head).

The historians of the Safavid period believed that, although the "Red Cap" was called Tāj-i Ḥaidarī, there are proofs that a group of Sufis were using hats with twelve or twenty grooves, prior to the emergence of the Safavid clan.<sup>47</sup>

It is understood that the twelve-grooved hat in the Safavid time was not meant to be a hat or a sign of the twelve Imams, but was the symbol of those who were Sufis and who had isolated themselves from material life. Therefore, the word Kakāh-i Faqr or Kalālt-i Faithr meant really magnanimity or independence crown if one wore the twelve-grooved cap,

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<sup>46</sup> Laurence Lockhart, *The Fall of the Safavi Dynasty and the Afghan Occupation of Persia* (Cambridge, 1958), pp. 15-19.

<sup>47</sup> 'Ārif Ardabili, who wrote in the fourteenth century during Sulṭān Uwais Jalayar's time and who was invited to Shirvan, by Shirvanshah Kaykavūs ibn Qubād (744-745/1343-1344) states in his book entitled *Farhād Nāmāh* (the only manuscript copy available is in Ayasofya Library) that there were a group of people using scarlet caps with twenty grooves, viz. "twenty-grooved hat on his head." "He has worn a beautiful ragged robe" (Muhammad 'Ali, *Tarbiat*, Adharbajjan scholars [Tehran, 1936], pp. 251-52).

one was considered to have abandoned the material world and reached the spiritual world. Being convinced of the importance of this symbolism, Shaikh Ḥaidar recommended all his followers to become Sufis and be none other than men of Truth.

Faḍlullāh Khurjī Iṣfahānī (d. 926/1520), the historian of the Aqqyunlu court, has several times indicated in his book Ta'riḫ-i 'A-lam Amīnī that the word tark means to give up all needs and desires for worldly wealth and physical welfare and to deprive oneself from the material life. He writes about his father: "My father Roozbehan replaced (Magnanimity Cap), rejecting his ancestor's positions, and lived in isolation."<sup>48</sup>

Faḍlullāh has indicated in his book the abstemiousness and worship of Shaikh Safī, the leader of the Safavid clan, and recited the story of Sulṭān Muḥammad Oljayto's invitation to the Shaikh to his feast, which was rejected by the latter as he criticised the Sulṭān's politics and acquisition of wealth, and also his greediness for the Sultanate Crown instead of Tāj-i Tark (Magnanimity Cap). The word tāj was defined in Tāj Nāmāh, written by Shāh Nī'matullāh Wail as follows: "There are twelve grooves in each tāj, symbolising twelve abstentions and twelve demands. A Sufi should avoid twelve indecencies, and demand twelve decencies." The twelve "indecencies to be avoided are the following:

(1) Jealousy, (2) Spite, (3) Anger, (4) Rancour, (5) Egotism, (6) Cavil, (7) Selfishness, (8) Lasciviousness, (9) Inhumanity, (10)

Gluttony, (11) Sleepiness, (12) Evils.<sup>49</sup>

After Shaikh Ḥaidar's demise, the word Qizilbāsh was given to all his followers and the Sufis of the Safavid clan, thus, the word Qizilbāsh became equivalent to Sufi.

It is understood from the sources that before Shaikh Ḥaidar there were groups of people who had been wrapping a piece of red cloth round their heads. This caused fear in the heart of the onlookers. The first person who,

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<sup>48</sup> Fadlullah Khurji Isfahani, Ta'riḫ-i 'Alam Ara'-I Amini, reproduced copy, Fath Library, Istanbul, No. 4431, p. 148.

<sup>49</sup> See the article entitled "A Research on Qizilbash" by Firouz Mansouri, in "Magazine of Historical Researches" (Rsr'ras Paay-i Tarikh-i), Tehran, No. 59, p. 145.

in Islamic history, wore a red head-band was said to be a man in the Battle of Uḥud and devoted his life to the Prophet Muḥammad:<sup>50</sup>

Islamic sources record that 'Alī, the son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, wore a red head-band in the Battle of Khaibar, showing his preparedness and seriousness towards enemies and showing that he was ready to die, but not to escape. As a result 'Alī was successful in conquering the Khaibar Fort.<sup>51</sup>

Ḍiya' Shākir, Turkish historian, acknowledging all the above references, states that Shaikh Ḥaidar followed Abū Dajānah and 'Alī in wearing a red head-band, saying that he will take revenge on his father's and grandfather's enemies and will gladly die for their cause. In order to generate more bravery, belief and co-ordination in his army, Shaikh Ḥaidar ordered everyone to wear a red head-band.<sup>52</sup>

Shaikh Ḥaidar's reason for wearing a red head-band and for making his army wear it was that, by these means, he could create an increased spiritual power and faith in his army and Sufis and show them the way of 'Alī.

At the beginning of his rule Shāh Ismā'īl's followers and devotees were called Sufis. Consequently in European countries where Shah Ismā'īl's name and fame had filled the political circles and also in other parts of the world where tourists and ambassadors have spread information about Iran, Shāh Ismā'īl was called "The Grand Sufi". This name remained somehow with all Safavid kings till the decline of this dynasty.

During the time of Shāh Ismā'īl (907-930/1502-1524), all his followers and army-men were called Qizilbūsh and the title of Sufi was given to a limited group of people, so that the Sufis were mostly found in the tribes of Rumlū, Shamlī and Qājār. The king was commander and leader and had the title of Murshid-i Kūmil (Great Leader).<sup>53</sup>

The head of each Sufi tribe was called Khaiḥah and the chief of all Sufi tribes was called Khalīfat al-Khulafā . Because the chief was the deputy to the

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<sup>50</sup> Ibn al-Athir, X. Kāmil Pi al-Ta'rikh (Egypt, 1938), II, 106,

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., II, 148.

<sup>52</sup> Ḍiyā' Shākir, Mezepler Tarihi (Istanbul, n.d.), p. 95.

<sup>53</sup> Naṣr Allah Falsafī, Zindagānī-yi Shah `Abbās-i Avval (Tehran, 1955-62), 1, 181-82.

Murshid-i Kāmil, his position was considered to be both spiritually and secularly very important.

This position was occupied mostly by the leaders of the Rumlū tribe out of whom Husain Qulī Rumlū came to be named as Khalīfat al-Khulafā' of Shah Ṭahmāsp (930-984/1524-1576) and Shāh Ismā'il<sup>54</sup> (984-985/1576-1577).<sup>11</sup>

After Husain Qulī Rumlū died, a man named Bulgar Khalīfah occupied the position of Khalīfat al-Khulafā'. The latter was said to be of the Rumlū tribe. The other persons of the Rumlū tribe holding the position of Khalīfah's while having other military and governmental posts were: Mr 'Alī Khalīfah Ramlū,<sup>55</sup> Sufyān Khalīfah Rumlū,<sup>56</sup> Muhammad Qulī Khalīfah Rumlū,<sup>57</sup> and Shāh Qulī Khalīfah Rumlū.<sup>58</sup>

The basic condition for reaching the position of Sufī was unquestionably to obey the orders of Murshid-i Kāmil (the Great Leader—Shāh) and not to do anything against his will. Sacrificing life for the sake of Murshid-i Kāmil was the least and lowest possible degree of faith.

As a result of this deep faith and devotion to Murshid-i Kāmil or Shāh, some of the Safavid kings were reputed to have miraculous powers.

Many European missionaries who visited Iran during the time of the Safavids have recited stories about the supernatural power of the Safavid kings, although they did not fully substantiate the sources of these beliefs. A Venetian contemporary who visited Iran at the time of Shāh Ismā'il's emersion writes as follows: "deceulx de sa cour et ses subjectz il est ador [sic] come prophete." That is, "Those who were in Shāh Ismā'il's court and all his men were treating him as a prophet."

A Venetian merchant, who was in Tabriz in 1518, states that this Sufī, namely, Shāh Ismā'il, is loved and worshipped by the people of his country as

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<sup>54</sup> Iskandar Beg Munshī, *Ta'rikh-i-'Ālam Ārā'i`Abbāsī*, 2 vols. (Tehran, 1955-56), I, 110-201.

<sup>55</sup> Hasan-i Rumlū, *Aḥsanu't-Tavārikh* (a chronicle of the early Safavids), (Baroda, 1931), p. 134.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 268-69.

<sup>57</sup> Iskandar Beg Munshī, *op. cit.*, II, 882.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 326.

God, and that his soldiers go to the warfields unarmed believing that they will be supported and watched over by their Master, Ismā'il.<sup>59</sup>

Vincenzo D'Alessandri, Venetian Ambassador to Shāh Ṭahmāsp's court, states: The love and faith people have towards the king is unbelievable as they worship him not as a king but as a God and believe that since he is one of the grandsons of Ḥaḍrat he has the resurrection power.<sup>60</sup>

Jalāl al-Dīn Muhammad, the astronomer of Shāh 'Abbās I, has mentioned in his book the miraculous power of Shāh 'Abbās and writes as follows: When Shāh 'Abbās was a child he started to suck the milkless breasts of 'Alī Qulī Khān's mother and suddenly the breasts were full of milk.<sup>61</sup>

Also in the same book he says: Muhammad Mu'min ibn Mīrzā 'Arab Muqallad Marvī, was disabled at the age of five, his mother took him to the Shāh and the Shāh touched his disabled foot with his hand and immediately he regained his power to walk.<sup>62</sup>

Furthermore: When Shāh 'Abbās had gone as a pilgrim to Shaikh Ṣafī's speculchre in Ardabil, whichever lock he touched in different parts of the sanctuary, it opened immediately and this caused astonishment in the audience.<sup>63</sup>

All the beliefs regarding the Safavid king's miraculous powers find their origin in the deep-rooted faith in their spiritual and gnostic position. Those who lied to Murshid-i Kāmil or disobeyed him were sentenced to death by the Sufis. Bulgar Khalīfah, Khalīfat al-lx Khulafā'of Shāh Ismā'il II (984-985/1576-1577) had the same fate when he lied to the kīng and he was kicked to death by Sufis at the king's order.<sup>64</sup>

The position of and respect for the Sufis in the Safavid period at gradually declined to a level where only a small and special group of

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<sup>59</sup> A Narrative of Italian Travels in Persia, trans. C. Gray (London, 1873), II, 203 and 8 and 206.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., in 223.

<sup>61</sup> Jalāl-i Munajjim, Ta'rikh-i `Abbāsī, Tehran, Makek Library, No, 3762, sheet 2a.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., sheet 200a.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., sheet 238a-239b.

<sup>64</sup> Iskandar Beg Munshī, on. cit., I, 153.

people were called Sufis. They had a very simple administrative position in governmental offices in the time of Shāh 'Abbās I d (995-1038/1587-1629).

The Safavid kings had been choosing Sufis for the posts of Royal palace guards. A group of Sufis were private guards of the his king and always accompanied him and attended in his presence for the purpose of executing his immediate orders. Their number never exceeded 200 to 300 and their duty was to carry out the king's orders, executing those who were condemned to death by the king.

The Sufis killed their victims in Murshid-i Kāmil's presence with sword and battle-axe, or by kicking them to death. Sometimes they are their flesh after having murdered them.<sup>65</sup>

Shāh 'Abbās I hated the Sufis and did not trust them as they were disciples of his father Shāh Muhammad Khudābardah (985-4 995/1578-1588) who was deposed by Shāh 'Abbās.<sup>66</sup>

The attitude of Shāh 'Abbās I, and his disrespect for the Sufis, reduced their credit and importance amongst people to a level that they were dismissed from their posts as guards of the king and Royal palaces and were appointed as janitors of the buildings, watchmen and executioners.

Despite the above-mentioned treatment and disrespect, the Sufis never failed to hold their sessions of their circles on Friday nights and holidays, headed and led by Khali fat al-Khulafā'. Their food and lodgings were provided for at the order of the Shāh. Although the Sufis' respect and credit had declined to the extreme minimum, they were still considered to be the king's close men and by the majority of people they were reputed for their spiritual sacredness and position. Some people believed that a bit of Sufis' food was a cure and remedy for sickness and disease. Shāh 'Abbās, however, was not on good terms with the Sufis and called them ungrateful and rogues, but apparently pretended to respect them.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> When the body of Shaibak Khān was' taken to Shah Ismail, he hit it angrily with his sword and ordered the Sufis to eat his body (Rawḍat al-e, Ṣafaviyyah, Mirzabek Junabadi, Falsafi, I, 184).

<sup>66</sup> For more information as regards the enmity between Qizilbāsh leaders and Shāh 'Abbas I, refer to Iskandar Beg Munashī, op, cit., I, 381-85.

<sup>67</sup> Naṣr Allah Falsafi, op. cit., 1, 186.

Some of the Safavid kings insulted other groups of Sufis, besides disrespecting their own followers. J. Rypka recites in his book *History of Iranian Literature*, the following: "Religious orders died out under the pressure of Safavid policy and with them the Sufi conception and speculations, which were contested and suspected by the Mujtahids with the most intense hatred. To keep Maulavī's Mathnavī in the house involved constant danger. Moreover, Ṭahmāsp 1 (930-984/1524-15A) had already driven the Maulavīs from Persia. The Sufis were persecuted in an even more cruel manner by the last real Shah of the Safavid dynasty."<sup>68</sup>

Minorsky, quoting from Sanson, who visited Iran during the last years of Shāh Sulaimān's (1077/1607-1694) reign, says that the Sufis who were once respected had now lost their repute in the court and were appointed to the duties of watchmen, porters, horse grooms and farm care-takers.<sup>69</sup>

As a result of the decline in respect for and influence of the Sufis in the Safavid courts, Shī'ah Mullās were able to gradually extend their influence in the Safavid king's courts such that Sufis became to be considered the enemies of Safavid courts.<sup>70</sup>

Consequently, the policies of the later Safavid kings, especially those of Shāh Sulṭān Ḥusain (1054/1644-1722), who was a very prejudiced Shī'ah, were based on his personal hatred for the Sufis. The author of the history book *Ta'rīkh-i Ṭahmasīye* (on sheet 131a) says that "Shah Sulṭān Ḥusain abolished the Sufis' path which, at the commencement of the Safavid kingdom, was a slogan. He also stopped holding any sessions or gatherings in the Sufis' circle *Tawḥīd Knānah*, which was built next to the king's palace, where every Friday night the Sufis' circle was held and where the king and high-ranking officers of the government together with the Sufi leaders used to participate in religious ceremonies."<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> J. Rypka, *History of Iranian Literature* (Dordrecht, 1968), p. 292.

<sup>69</sup> *Tadhkirat al-Mulūk*, trans. and commented by V. Minorsky (E.J.W, Gibb Memorial Series, New Series, XVI, London, 1943), pp. 13-14.

<sup>70</sup> J.S. Trimminghaam, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

<sup>71</sup> Klaus Michael Roohr Born, *Provinzen und Zentralgewalt Persiens im 16. und 17. Jahrhundert* (Libertrogen ins Persische von K. Jahan-dari, 1971, Tehran), p. 58.



All Sufi leaders were from Isfahan and Mullā Muḥammad Bāqir Majlisī, the great Shī'ah Mujtahid, spread and extended his religious influence and power across the country.

Riḍā' Qulī Khan Hidayat mentions in his book *Ravḍat al Ṣafā'-i Nāṣirī* the exile of a Shī'ah religious leader from Iṣfahān who was accused to be a Sufi.<sup>72</sup>

It is astonishing that the Safavid clan which was the founder and promoter of Sufism and which endeavoured towards extending and strengthening Sufism, finally decided to cause its decline and abolition.

It is understood that Sufism was at the beginning a kind of spiritual and Gnostic movement which directed the disciples to loving worship of God, frankness, innocence and which campaigned against any luxury, prejudice and illogical rules and regulations.

But despite the willingness of the Sufi leaders and disciples, Sufism changed its nature from being a spiritual school of thought to an official, governmental and administrative organization which caused its own downfall.

In conclusion, it is worth noting that Sufism and Gnosticism were interrelated with Shī'ism in the Safavid period. This caused a gradual disappearance of the apparent and external aspects and characteristics of Sufism and resulted in the extension of its spiritual and gnostic aspects, but the interchanging enabled the interrelation of these two paths to remain constant and unchanged.

## **THE LAST WORDS OF ALP ARSLAN**

With one gesture, one turn of the hand,  
a thousand strong forts I laid low,  
And oft with one prick of my spurs  
have I scattered the ranks of foe,  
But now, when its Death who attacks me

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<sup>72</sup> Riḍā' Qulī Khān Hidāyat, *Ravḍat Nāṣirī*, 10 vols. (Qum, 1960), VIII, 586.

what profits are still with the sword?

God only endureth unchanging;

dominion belongs to the Lord!

The great Sultan Alp Arslan fell by the hand of the assassin. Joseph, a captive Christian, suddenly attacked him with his dagger and fatally wounded him on the chest. The dying monarch said to those who attended his last moments:

“I was advised by a sage in my youth to humble myself before Allah, to distrust my own strength and never to despise the most contemptible enemy. I have neglected these lessons and I have been justly punished. Yesterday I beheld from an eminence, the number, the discipline and the spirit of my armies: the earth appeared to tremble under my feet and said to myself: 'I am the greatest of kings and the mightiest of warriors. These armies are no longer mine and in the confidence of my strength, I now fall by the hand of an assassin.' “

—E. Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*