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Citation for published version:

Newman, AJ 2020, Sufism and the Safavids in Iran: A further challenge to 'decline'. in L Ridgeon (ed.), *Routledge Handbook on Sufism*. 1 edn, Routledge, London, pp. 370-386.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315175348>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.4324/9781315175348](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315175348)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Routledge Handbook on Sufism

Publisher Rights Statement:

This is an Accepted Manuscript of a book chapter published by Routledge in Routledge Handbook on Sufism on 10 August 2020, available online: <https://www.routledge.com/Routledge-Handbook-on-Sufism/Ridgeon/p/book/9781138040120>

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Sufism and the Safavids in Iran: A Further Challenge to 'Decline'

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The conventional portrayal of the development of Sufism over the years of the Safavid period (1501-1722¹) has privileged the history of known Sufi orders, generally depicting that history as one of incorporation/disappearance into the Safavid 'polity' or, more usually, persecution by the Safavids and subsequent decline.²

This narrative has both reinforced and is reinforced by the traditional, broader 'decline' narrative that both before and, perhaps even more, since Iran's 1979 revolution has been deployed to characterise the trajectory of the Safavid period more generally.³

¹ The field has long dated the period based solely on politico-military events, the 1501 Safavid capture of Tabriz and the 1722 fall of Esfahan to the Afghans. For a discussion of this narrative, see the introductory remarks to our *Safavid Iran: Rebirth of a Persian Empire* (London, 2006).

² In addition to the sources cited further below, see S. A. Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam, Religion, Political Order, and Societal Change in Shi'ite Iran from the Beginning to 1890*, Chicago, 1984, 112-19. See, also, A. Anzali, *Mysticism in Iran. the Safavid Roots of a Modern Concept*, Columbia, S.C., 2017, 25f, referring to Arjomand, S. H. Nasr ('Religion in Safavid Persian', *Iranian Studies* 7/i-ii (1974), 279-80) and, noting that what he terms the 'suppression' paradigm as regards the trajectory of Sufi fortunes in the later years of the Safavid period has been on offer in the field from at least as early as the work of E. G. Browne (d. 1926), citing the latter's *A Literary History of Persia*, Cambridge, 1924, 4: 26-28. Anzali also refers (28) to T. Graham's 'The Ni`matallāhī Order under Safavid Suppression and in Indian Exile', in L. Lewisohn and D. Morgan, eds., *The Heritage of Sufism (Volume 3): Late Classical Persianate Sufism (1501-1750)* Oxford, 1999, 165-200. In his own 'Sufism and the School of Isfahan', in the same volume (63-134) L. Lewisohn himself combines elements of both approaches. S. Quinn notes that care must be taken using contemporary sources on the order in her 'Rewriting Ni`matallāhī History in Safavid Chronicles' in the same volume (201-222).

³ See our outline and critique of this paradigm, itself on offer in the field at least from the final volume of Browne's *A Literary History*, in our *Safavid Iran*. Most notably the second Safavid century, for example, has long been portrayed as having begun with a burst of cultural and intellectual achievement, in an atmosphere of military, political, and economic stability - ascribed solely to the presence of the 'strong' shah `Abbās I (reg. 1587-1629) - only to end in the darkness of fanatical religious orthodoxy amid military, political, and economic chaos, the result of 'weak' leadership at the centre. For a subsequent example of this paradigm's application, see R. Matthee, *Persia in Crisis: Safavid Decline and the Fall of Isfahan*, London, 2011. Anzali's contributions are an example of the extent to which the broader 'decline' paradigm, long ago abandoned in Ottoman studies, may itself be in decline in Safavid studies. On other such works, see, also, our essay in the forthcoming collection of papers from 'The Idea of Iran: The Safavid Era' conference held in London, 2018, edited by C. Melville.

This paper, first, addresses what is known of the history of those Sufi orders understood to have been active during these years. Although the conventional wisdom maintains that by the early to mid-17th century most of these were no longer active in Safavid Iran, more recent research suggests the opposite, that is, that Sufi orders were very much present on the spiritual scene in the period's later years.

The paper then focuses on what is known of what might be termed 'non-organised', that is non-order based, Sufi-style beliefs and activities among the Safavid period's 'popular classes'. In the pre-modern era the 'voices' of such, predominantly illiterate, elements - the majority in any age - are recoverable mainly indirectly, as they may be referenced in works produced by the minority literate class. In the present case, some elements of the Safavid-period's popular classes' voices, including references to their beliefs and practices, can be retrieved via careful attention to works authored by a range of Twelver Shī'ī clerics in which these clerics referenced and condemned as 'unorthodox' popular beliefs and practices.

Parts two and three of the paper, then, utilise several sets of such refutations composed over the period to offer something of a reconstruction of this 'popular' discourse.

In sum, the suggestion is that both Sufi orders and popular, rather more heterodox, Sufi-style beliefs and practices were more alive and well than the conventional wisdom has maintained. Indeed, such heterodoxies perhaps more comprised the majority spiritual discourse than any 'orthodoxy' espoused by the religious class, itself a small subset of the already minority literate class.⁴

Part One: Safavid Sufi Orders – The Conventional and the Unconventional

The roots of many of those Sufi orders understood to have been present, and active, on the Iranian plateau and adjacent lands in the later 1400s into the early 1500s lay in the not-so-distant past.

The years following the Mongol conquest of the 'Abbāsīd capital of Baghdad in 1258, the rise of the Mongols' successors the Ilkhānids (1260-1335) and, the death of the Ilkhānid Abū Sa'īd in 1335 witnessed the reappearance of earlier tendencies toward political decentralisation and, concomitantly, of heterodox spirituality. The combined impact of these

⁴ Although this essay refers to such 'elite' figures in the tradition of philosophy and 'higher' mystical discourse (*irfān*) as Muḥammad Bāqir Astarābādī, Mīr Dāmād (d. 1631) and Sadr al-Dīn Muḥammad Shīrāzī, Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1640) - 'members' of the 'Esfahan School of Philosophy' with whose legacy the field has long been better acquainted - it does not address this discourse in any depth. On that 'school', see S. Rizvi, 'Isfahan School of Philosophy', *Encyclopaedia Iranica (EIr)*, 14/2, 119-25.

influenced the politico-spiritual scene across the eastern Islamic world for the next several centuries.

In the aftermath of Abū Sa`īd's death arose such local polities as the Jalāyirids, based in western Iran and Iraq, including Baghdad, the Chūbānids, based in Azerbaijan, and the Muẓāffarids, based around Isfahan. Further east arose the Sarbadārs, based in Sabzivār, the Kartids, in Herat, and the Injūids in Fars – the latter both former Ilkhānid vassals. These survived on the scene until Timur (d. 1405) arrived in the region in the later 1300s.

Following the death of Timur's son and successor Shāh Rukh in 1447, political decentralisation again re-asserted itself. To the west, the Qara Qūyūnlū (Black Sheep) Turkmen, whom Timur had defeated, expanded eastward, taking Baghdad in 1410. After Shah Rukh's death they took central and southern Iran, and even Oman in the Persian Gulf.

In 1467, they were crushed by an Aq Qūyūnlū (White Sheep) Turkmen force led by Uzūn Ḥasan (d. 1478). The latter had been Timur's ally against the Ottomans and had been gifted the area around Diyar Bakr. The Aq Qūyūnlū subsequently seized Iraq, areas on the Iranian plateau into Khurasan and the Persian Gulf coast. Their later disappearance commenced with their defeat by rising Ottoman forces in 1473.⁵

The shifting boundaries and political decentralisation that marked these years, together with the complex, and very heterogeneous forms of spirituality that these several waves of eastern migrants brought with them further encouraged the spread of popular, very heterodox blend of Sufi-Shī`ī millenarian discourse that had long been present in the region.

Thus, `Alā al-Dawla al-Simnānī (d. 1336), a member of Kubravī order, after a mystical experience that caused him to abandon government service, family and property, became identified with an extreme form of veneration for `Alī, the family of the Prophet (*Ahl al-Bayt*) and the twelfth Imam.

In the Mazāndirān/Sabzivār area, Shaykh Khalīfā (d. 1335) and his successor Shaykh Ḥasan Juri (d. 1342) are identified with discourse predicting the imminent return of the twelfth Imam. This discourse was popular among certain bazaar elements, tradesmen and craftsmen, but not among Sunnis, who killed him.

Shaykh Ḥasan's message spread in the Nishapur/Ṭūs area, with a similar base of support. His discourse was more radical than that of the rising Sarbadār movement with whom he allied to fight off the Kartids of Herat, and in which struggles he was killed. A pupil

⁵ For a basic overview of this period, see D. Morgan, *Medieval Persia, 1040-1797*, various editions.

of Shaykh Ḥasan who was a Ḥusaynī descendant of Imam Zayn al-`Abidīn, and himself a Shī`ī-style darvīsh, was the father of the ‘founder’ of the Shī`ī Mar`ashī dynasty. These established an independent position along the Caspian which fell at the arrival of Timur.

The spiritual discourse of the Sarbadār ‘polity’, based in the Sabzivār area and a presence in the areas since the 1330s, blended the same messianic Shī`ī-Sufī discourse with a political structure rooted in the contemporary popular *akhī/futūwwa* tribal- based movements. The Sarbadār ruler `Alī Mu`ayyad (*reg.* 1364–86) minted coins bearing the names of `Alī and the Imams on coins and downplayed darvīsh, messianic tendencies. `Alī surrendered immediately to Timur at his arrival on the scene in 1381 and abandoned all Shī`ī tendencies.

In this shifting political milieu there also flourished a range of both quietist and militantly pantheistic, messianic and egalitarian Sufī orders and other heterodox spiritual movements whose polemics often exhibited a distinctly Shī`ī, anti-establishment tone. One of these was the Ḥurūfīs - associated with Faḍlallāh al-Astarābādī (d. 1394), a sayyid and the son of a *qāḍī*, who enjoyed a following among artisans - who were influential from Khurasan to Anatolia and Syria.

An offshoot of the Ḥurūfīs and, to some extent, a movement linked also with the Nizārī variant of Ismā`īlī Shī`īsm, were the Nuḡṭāvīs whose ‘founder’ was the Gilani scholar Mahmūd Pasīkhānī (d. 1427-8).

These years also witnessed the rise of the Naqshbandī movement, whose ‘founder’ was Bahā` al-Dīn Naqshband of Bukhārā (d. 1389). One of its leaders declared that, on the basis of a dream, a disciple of his, one Muḥammad Nūrbakhsh (1393–1464), born in northeast Iran, was the *Mahdi*. The latter abandoned the Sunni Shafī`ī legal school, espoused by many of region’s Sufī orders, for Shī`ī *fiqh*. His very heterodox spiritual discourse also referred to Jesus coming down from the sky as light. Coins were minted in his name in Kurdistan. Those Naqshbandīs who accepted him and his Shī`ī discourse came to be called the Nūrbakhshīyyah.

The Aleppo-born sayyid Shāh Ni`matallāh Valī (d. 1430-31), born in Syria, also rose to prominence in the region, travelling to Mecca, Egypt, Iraq and Azerbaijan, and then Transoxiana back through Ṭūs and Herat and finally to Kirman.

The belief system of Ahl al-Ḥaqq, identified in these years as located in the modern areas of western Iran and north-eastern Iraq, is perhaps more typical of the ‘popular’ ‘extremist Shī`ī’ doctrines that permeated the region across these years that did not later go on to attain ‘formal’ status as an ‘order’.

In all, however, across these years the hard lines which today are usually seen as distinguishing between Sunnism and Shī`īsm, let alone between these two and the above ‘Sufi-style’ discourses, were very fluid and much blurred. The discourse of these centuries that evolved into what today is held to be ‘orthodox’ Sunni and Shī`ī discourse were mainly prevalent among, and limited to, the small number of urban-based clerical elites much of whose written legacy survived through to modern times to preoccupy the attention of the field when, in fact, the majority of the region’s population was decidedly rural/tribal in nature.⁶

Another such order, the Safavids, ‘founded’ by Ṣafī al-Dīn (d. 1334), in fact transitioned from a quietist, mainly urban and Sunni-style movement to a more rural and, especially, tribal-based movement owing, it is usually understood, to an influx of rural, and, especially, tribal, elements over later years. The order’s discourse subsequently became infused with many of the elements of the region’s more popular Shī`ī-style veneration of `Alī and the Imams and radical, messianic and millenarian style discourse.

Based in Ardabīl the popularity of the order’s discourse among local tribal elements who provided the military force behind the region’s various polities, may well have been the reason the Safavids attracted the attention of the Aq Qūyūnlū leader Uzūn Ḥasan. Uzūn married his sister and his daughter to Junayd (d. 1460), a direct descendant of Ṣafī al-Dīn, and to Junayd’s son Ḥaydar (d. 1488) respectively. Illustrating the radical turn the order’s discourse had taken by now, both Junayd and Ḥaydar died in battle. Following Aq Qūyūnlū defeats, the Safavid identification with such discourse also attracted to the order those tribal elements who had provided the backbone to the Aq Qūyūnlū ‘polity’. One of Ḥaydar’s sons, Ismā`īl, at the head of just a reconfigured coalition of the region’s powerful Turkic tribes, called the Qizilbāsh for their distinctive 12-coned headgear - in commemoration of the twelve Imams -, conquered Tabriz in 1501. In less than a decade thereafter Safavid forces took control of territory held by eight different rulers, including areas from Baghdad and the nearby Shī`ī shrine cities of Karbala and Najaf to Khurasan in the east and the Persian Gulf in the South.

⁶ For an introduction to the Twelver faith, see *Twelver Shiism, Unity and Diversity in the Life of Islam, 632-1722*, Edinburgh, 2013. On this period especially see 138f, on which this section is based. For an extended discussion of sources on these movements especially, see, in addition to the sources cited below, I. P. Petrushevsky, *Islam in Iran*, H. Evans transl., London, 1985, 260–4, 291–300; J. Baldick, *Mystical Islam*, London, 1989, 71–7, 94, 96, 100–4, 111 and the sources cited in both our *Safavid Iran*, 149n20 and *Twelver Shiism*, the latter as cited above. On the urban/rural/tribal dynamic, see n62.

Ismā`īl's spiritual discourse, as epitomised in his poetry, precisely reflects the distinctly heterogeneous, multi-confessional messianism that spoke to an array of spiritual and 'secular' tendencies extant in both urban and also rural/tribal settings across the region. Thus, he portrayed himself simultaneously as the now-returned twelfth Imam, as the reincarnations of the heroes of various Persian epic tales, such as Rustam, Jesus and even Alexander the Great. The Safavids also advanced claims to their status as sayyids, descendants of the Prophet. Such claims, not only further substantiated Ismā`īl's identification with the Hidden Imam himself, but also put the Safavids on a par with the sayyid founders of others of the region's contemporary millenarian movements as the Ḥurūfīs, Kubravīs and Ni`matallāhīs.

While such discourse was off-putting to contemporary orthodox Twelver clerics, mainly based in Arabic-speaking lands to the West,⁷ it was a factor in facilitating the holding together of the Qizilbāsh confederation with the Tajik (i.e. native Iranian) elements and their allegiance to the Safavid house following the Safavid defeat by the Ottomans at the battle of Chaldirān in 1514 and, after the deaths of Ismā`īl in 1524 and his son and successor Tahmāsp in 1576, two prolonged periods of civil war and their resulting invasions and seizures of large amounts of territory by the Uzbegs and Ottomans.⁸

The Safavids thus successfully combined regional political-military power and association with a heterodox discourse that embodied many of the same features as other of the various Sufi-Shī`ī discourses extant in the region at the same time.

It followed that any spiritual discourses which focused on figures other than the sitting 'shah' in his position, also, as head of the Safavid Sufi order were, by definition, a challenge to the exclusivity of the Safavid identification therewith and, in turn, the allegiance of both Turkish and Tajik adherents thereto.

The responses of those associated with such challenges to the Safavid project varied.

Some effected some measures of compromise. Hātifi (d. 1521), a nephew of the poet Jāmī (d. 1492), then the leader of the Naqshbandī order who had served Sulṭān Ḥusayn Bayqarā (d. 1506) in Herat, accepted a commission from Ismā`īl while others left the city. The Naqshbandī `Abd al-Vahhāb Hamādānī, whose father had close associations with the Aq Qūyūnlū, also served Sulṭān Ḥusayn and, at the rise of Safavids, also came into Ismā`īl's

⁷ See our *Safavid Iran*, 24f; idem, *Twelver Shiism*, 159.

⁸ On these and other factors/policies which kept this alliance together across the 16th century, see our *Safavid Iran*, especially 13f, on which, in addition to sources cited elsewhere, this discussion is based. On the reign of Tahmāsp, see 26f. See also our *Twelver Shiism*, 158-63.

circle, remaining loyal even after Chaldirān. Qazvin became a Naqshbandī centre of activity in the years after Tabriz. When, ca. 1548, Tahmāsp designated Qazvin as the capital, some left the city. Some of those based in Hamadan also left during Tahmāsp’s reign.⁹

As to the Ni`matallāhīs, the Yazdi notable Sayyid `Abd al-Bāqī, a descendant of the eponymous founder of the Ni`matallāhī Sufi order, Shāh Ni`matallāh, was both head of the religious institution (*ṣadr*) under Ismā`il and, from 1512, *vakīl*.¹⁰ His son Nūr al-Dīn Bāqī (d. 1564) succeeded his father as head of the Ni`matallāhī order and was confirmed as *naqīb* and governor of Yazd when Tahmāsp acceded to the throne. Ca. 1535-6, he married a sister of Tahmāsp. In 1554–55, the daughter of this union married Tahmāsp’s son, the future Ismā`il II (d. 1577). In 1578–79, Khudābandah, who succeeded his brother Ismā`il II as shah, married a daughter of Ismā`il II to Khalīlallāh b. Mīr Mīrān Yazdī (d. 1607–08), the son of the same Nūr al-Dīn. One of the period’s prominent poets was the Ni`matallāhī Vaḥshī (d. 1583–4) of Bāfq, in Kirman, who wrote *qaṣīdas* in praise of the shah. Court chronicles of the period similarly downplayed any independent Ni`matallāhī Sufi discourse, likely reflecting the official denigration of any alternative to the Safavid hegemony over Sufi discourse.¹¹

As to the Nūrbakhshīs, some accepted land grants from Ismā`il. The most accomplished disciple of Nūrbakhsh was Shaykh Muḥammad Lāhijī (d. 1515), author of the *Mafātīḥ al-I`jāz fī Sharḥ-i Gulshān-i Rāz* (*The Keys of the Inimitability on the Commentary of the Rose Garden of Secrets*) one of the most widely-read later Sufi texts. He established a Nūrbakhshī *khāniqāh*¹² in Shiraz, known as the Nūriyya, which was visited by Ismā`il. Lāhijī’s son Aḥmad was sent as ambassador by Ismā`il to the Uzbek ruler Muḥammad Shaybānī. Ca. 1537 the successor to Shāh Qāsim Nūrbakhsh, himself son of Sayyid Muḥammad Nūrbakhsh, who had himself been well treated, refused the hand of a sister of Tahmāsp, bespeaking an effort to maintain Nūrbakhshī independence. He was subsequently

⁹ H. Algar, ‘Naqshbandis and Safavids: A Contribution to the Religious History of Iran and Her Neighbors’, in M. Mazzaoui, ed., *Safavid Iran and Her Neighbors*, Salt Lake City, 2003, 25f, 9f, 22f. See also our *Safavid Iran*, 20, 28, 32.

¹⁰ On these posts, and their changing briefs over the period, see W. Floor, *Safavid Government Institutions*, Costa Mesa, 2001, sv.

¹¹ Algar, 26; Newman, *Safavid Iran*, 41f, 33, 35.

¹² On this term as a reference to a ‘residential facility’, see J. Renard, *Historical Dictionary of Sufism*, Oxford, 2005, 200. See also Gerhard Böwering and Matthew Melvin-Koushki, ‘Khānaqāh’, *Elr*.

executed, but separatist Nūrbakhshī actions are recorded in Rayy during the reigns of both Ismā`īl and Tahmāsp.¹³

Among more overtly competitive Shī`ī movements, the Nizārī Ismā`īlī Shī`a, based at Andījān, near Arak, became increasingly active following the Safavids' appearance. Ismā`īl ordered the execution of Shāh Ṭāhir, the thirty-first imam of the Muḥammad-Shāhī branch of the Nizārīs, who then fled to India in 1520.¹⁴

The Musha`sha` Arabs of Southern Iraq pledged fealty to Ismā`īl following his 1508 conquest of Baghdad. Nevertheless, coins with distinctly Twelver inscriptions were minted in 1508 by the Musha`sha` governor of Shūshtar. The joint rulers of the confederation were killed later the same year by the new Safavid governor of Shūshtar, likely on Ismā`īl's orders and probably owing to their continuing efforts to claim association with the Twelver faith. Later, however, the Musha`sha` sayyids' continued Shī`ī discourse was still deemed sufficiently problematic that Qizilbāsh governors were sent to Shūshtar in 1539-40 and Dizfūl in 1541-2. Twice in the years after 1590, when `Abbās I (*reg.* 1587-1629) was occupied with Uzbek challenges in Khurasan, the Musha`sha` moved to assert their independence; on the second occasion, they occupied Dizfūl. Safavid forces checked both moves.¹⁵

Even within the ranks of Safavid order itself, there could be discontent. Following the 1587 enthronement of Ṭahmāsp's grandson `Abbās I some Sufis openly questioned him about the identity of their *pīr*, suggesting that `Abbās' father, the still-living Muḥammad Khudābandah (d. 1595-96), who had been deposed by `Abbās' tribal and Tajik backers, was still viewed as the head of the Safavid Sufi order. `Abbās and his tribal supporters executed these elements as they did, in 1591, the leader of a group of Sufis in Lāhījān – forces from which had provided support for Ismā`īl I – who also questioned the identity of `Abbās as the present *pīr*.¹⁶

The history of Nuḡṭavī order across these years provides a further example of the extent to which the Safavid centre moved against discourses portending challenges to the legitimacy of the Safavids' very heterodox spiritual discourse.

¹³ Algar, 26; S. Bashir, *Messianic Hopes and Mystical Visions: The Nūrbakhshīya Between Medieval and Modern Islam* Columbia, S.C., 2003, 187, 175, 189-95; H. Algar, "Nūrbakhshīyya", in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition, (*EI2*); Newman, *ibid*, 33, 35.

¹⁴ Newman, *Safavid Iran*, 20.

¹⁵ Newman, 20, 33,

¹⁶ Newman, *Safavid Iran*, 51.

In the years that the Nizārī Ismā`īlīs were active in Andījān, near Kashan, the Nuḡṭavīs also surfaced. In the 1560s two brothers who had been given posts at court under Tahmāsp were blinded and exiled for heresy. In 1574, when Tahmāsp was ill, there were Nuḡṭavī risings in the area.¹⁷

In 1591, several years after the accession to the throne of Khudābandah's son `Abbās I, a rising by a Shiraz-based Nuḡṭavī poet whom Tahmāsp had blinded in 1565, was foiled. In the 1580s several other Nuḡṭavī figures were executed in Kashan. At his accession `Abbās I reached out to the darvīsh and, it is said, became a member of the order.¹⁸ Nevertheless a 1591 rebellion in Fars was crushed.

In 1593, the Nuḡṭavī Darvīsh Khusraw rose up in Qazvin, clearly attesting to continued Nuḡṭavī sympathies among capital's populace. The darvīsh had been a figure of concern during Tahmāsp's reign but, after being interviewed by Tahmāsp himself, was released. From a family of refuse collectors and well-diggers, he had been active and popular both there and in Sāvah, Kashan, Isfahan, Nā'in and Shiraz. Nuḡṭavī elements had forecast 1593 as the year in which a Nuḡṭavī who had achieved true unity with Allah would assume power. In the context of the ongoing disorder this preaching is said to have attracted significant support among both Turkish [i.e. Qizilbāsh] and Tajik elements. The movement was also put down, with the shah's personal intervention. The darvīsh was executed but risings also boiled up in Kashan, Mashhad and Fars. An Ustajlū *amīr* and other Qizilbāsh elements associated with it were executed, again suggesting that both urban and rural/tribal elements were taken with the discourse.

When astrologers predicted the fall of the shah in 1594, `Abbās placed another Nuḡṭavī darvīsh on the throne for those days. The darvīsh then claimed this movement foretold Nuḡṭavī ascension to power. When the days of crisis were deemed over the darvīsh was executed, and Nuḡṭavīs across the region were detained and executed. A number fled to India.¹⁹

The same urban-cum-tribal/rural unrest would seem to have been at work in July, 1631, during a reign of `Abbās' successor Ṣafī (*reg.* 1629-42) when one Darvīsh Riza arose, yet again in the former capital of Qazvin. The Darvīsh, an Afshar married to the daughter of a

¹⁷ H. Algar, 'Nuḡṭawīyya', *EI2*; Newman, 46.

¹⁸ Algar, *ibid*; Newman, *Safavid Iran*, 51.

¹⁹ Algar, *ibid*; Newman, *ibid*. See also K. Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs and Messiahs, Cultural Landscapes of Early Modern Iran*, Cambridge, Mass., 2002, 90f, in the middle of a lengthy discussion on the Nuḡṭavīs.

Safavid general, proclaimed himself ‘Lord of the Age (*Ṣāhib al-Zamān*)’, a distinctly Shī`ī reference to himself as the Hidden Imam which, combined with an overtly Sufi discourse, recalled and revived aspects of the messianic millenarianism hegemony over which was solely claimed by the Safavid Sufi order. Though this rising also was crushed, a follower rose up proclaiming himself the reincarnated darvīsh, suggesting, as with the discourse of such earlier Nuḡtavīs as Darvīsh Khusraw, a degree of acceptance of the transmigration of souls, a heresy among orthodox Shī`a.²⁰

The above, ‘conventional’, narrative does suggest activity among such orders as were present among the plateau’s Sufi orders. It also suggests that Sufi orders had all but disappeared by this point, either incorporated into the life of the ‘polity’, crushed by its overwhelming power or perhaps some combination of these two. As such, this narrative echoes more than not that conventional ‘decline’ paradigm in the field, especially as it has been applied to the seventeenth century.²¹

Indeed, proponents of what Anzali calls the ‘suppression’ theory of Sufi fortunes over the Safavid period mention and dismiss a claim by the later anti-Sufi polemicist Muḡammad Ṭāhir al-Qummī (d. 1687), in his Persian-language volume *Tuḡfat al-Akhyār* - completed ca. 1656 to 1664 - in which al-Qummī wrote that the most popular Sufi order in Iran in those years was the Nūrbakhshīs.²²

In fact, more recent research points to the Nūrbakhshīs being actively present in Mashhad, and Khurasan generally, in these years, thus seemingly corroborating al-Qummī’s reference to the Nūrbakhshī as such.²³

²⁰ Newman, 75; Babayan, 377f.

²¹ See n3 above and Newman, 2f.

²² Algar (‘Nūrbakhshīyya’, *EI2*) suggests that this reference was meant to comprise all Sufis at the time. Bashir (194) suggests that al-Qummī’s ‘lack of any concrete reference’ to contemporary Nūrbakhshī shaykhs or authors means al-Qummī’s reference was a ‘rhetorical exercise not directed toward an actual Nūrbakhshī presence’. On this and other works by al-Qummī, and his criticisms therein, see our discussion further below, based on our ‘Glimpses into Late-Safavid Spiritual Discourse: An ‘Akḡbārī’ Critique of Sufism and Philosophy’ forthcoming in *Sufis and Mullas: Sufis and their Opponents in the Persianate World*, R. Tabandeh and L. Lewisohn, eds.

²³ See A. Anzali, ‘The Emergence of the Ṣāhibīyya in Safavid Iran’, *Journal of Sufi Studies*, 2/iii (2013), 159, 159n40, 161n46. Anzali suggests (159n40) the Nūrbakhshīs ‘had an extensive network in place at this time in Khurasan and beyond.’ See also Anzali, *Mysticism*, 71.

Note that in the fourth *faṣl* of *Tuḡfat* al-Qummī pointed to Khurasan as a particular centre of activity. See his *Tuḡfat al-Akhyār* (*The Gift of the Superior*), Qum, 1393, 24f.

As to other orders, the essay ‘Tuḥfa-yi `Abbāsī’, named in honour of `Abbās II, was composed ca. 1664 by Muḥammad `Alī Mashhadī, Mu`azzin Khurāsānī (d. 1668). The latter was the master of the nascent Ṣāḥabī Sufi order in Isfahan. During his tenure the order seems to have experienced a degree of expansion. The volume is replete with references to and citations of the Imams’ narrations - from such early collections of the narrations as *al-Kāfī* and *al-Faqīh*²⁴- precisely addressing, and supporting the legitimacy of many, of the points of Sufi-style doctrines and practices being critiqued by al-Qummī, including asceticism (*zuhd*), silence and seeking solitude.²⁵

In the 1680s, during the reign of Sulaymān (*reg.* 1666/68- 1694) Isfahan was badly affected by the series of socio-economic and especially natural crises that struck the realm. Where the order had been more active and attractive during the mastership of Mu`azzin, in these later years the order suffered accordingly, according to the then-master the goldsmith Najīb al-Dīn Riḏā Zargar Tabrīzī Iṣfahānī (d. ca. 1697). However, in Shiraz, after Zargar’s decampment there, the order’s fortunes experienced a marked upturn.²⁶

The Fars-born Quṭb al-Dīn Nayrīzī (d. 1760), trained in Shiraz and, having moved to Isfahan, was a Ṣāḥabī master, attesting to the order’s presence in the capital city into the next century.²⁷

The Lost ‘Voices’ of the Early Seventeenth Century

Preoccupation with the trajectory of the realm’s Sufi orders across these years has meant less attention has been devoted to the presence and activities of such Sufi-style movements and

²⁴ These collections are Muḥammad b Ya`qūb al-Kulaynī’s (d. 940-1)’s *al-Kāfī* and *al-Faqīh* of Muḥammad b. `Alī al-Qummī, Ibn Bābawayh (d. 991). These are two of the ‘four books’ of the Imams’ traditions collected in the several centuries immediately following the 874 disappearance of the Twelfth Imam. The other two - *Tahdhīb al-Aḥkām* and *al-Istibṣār* - were assembled by Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī (d. 1067). The four, and other early collections of the Imams’ traditions are discussed in our *Twelver Shiism*, sv, especially chapters two through four.

²⁵ See Muḥammad `Alī Mashhadī Sabzavārī, *Tuḥfa-yi `Abbāsī: The Golden Chain of Sufism in Shī`ite Islam*, Mohammad Hassan Faghfoory, transl., Lanham, MD, 2008, e.g. 121f, 133f, 147f, and, for references to scholars and the earlier collections, 99, 123, 103, 152, 135. See also Anzali, ‘The Emergence’, 161f. Anzali notes (161-2) that the order was so popular in Isfahan during Mu`azzin’s time that it attracted the criticism of such critiques as Mīr Lawḥī, on whom see the next section.

²⁶ Anzali, ‘The Emergence’, 161, 167-68. On Shiraz as a location of Sufi activity in these later years, see also Anzali, *Mysticism*, 141f.

²⁷ See n58. This is to say nothing of the numerous Sufi groups listed in the mid-17th century *Ḥadīqat al-Shī`a* and ‘Radd-i Ṣūfiyya’, discussed below, especially ad n48. Some of these clearly seem to have been active at the time.

tendencies as do not immediately appear to have been affiliated to any named figure or known order.

In the later years of the 16th century in particular, evidence points to the rise/reappearance of just such Sufi-style millenarian tendencies that motivated those of the region's tribal forces that provided Ismā'īl I with the wherewithal to carve out a polity in the first place. As such, these at least implicitly questioned the legitimacy of the sitting shah as, also, the embodiment of such messianic discourse.

Thus, after Ismā'īl II's death in 1577 pseudo-Ismā'īls, that is in reference to Ismā'īl I, described as *darvīshes* (*qalandars*) unattached to any recognised Sufi order, enjoyed support among Tajik elements in Luristan, Fars, Khuzistan, Hamadan, Gilan and Khurasan. One of these was, in fact, was based in the Ardabīl area, the spiritual home of the Safavid Sufi order. These also enjoyed support among non-Qizilbāsh tribal elements, Kurds and Lurs especially.²⁸

In the years following 'Abbās' accession, the physical expansion of Isfahan, if not also of other cities as well and, especially, the concomitant growth of urban 'popular' classes encouraged the expansion of links between urban artisans and craftsmen and urban-based messianic Sufi discourse already visible in the later 16th century with the urban appeal of the Nuḡṭavīs and Darvīsh Khusraw.

Contemporary sources attest, if indirectly, that the distinctly urban-dimension of such messianic tendencies apparent toward the end of the 16th century only continued to expand. Thus, in 1607 an unknown author composed the Persian-language 'Arba'īn ḥadīth fī radd al-ṣūfiyya', a work of forty *ḥadīth* attacking Sufism and Sufis with a section citing condemnation of Sufism by prominent ulama.²⁹

The use of Persian suggests the urban-based Tajik population was the primary target of such discourse and, thus, the primary constituency associated with such activities.

In 1618, no less a figure that the famous Mullā Ṣadrā, in his *Kasr Aṣnām*, decried the abandonment by artisans and craftsmen – among those urban elements whose numbers

²⁸ R. Savory, 'A Curious Episode of Safavid History', in C. E. Bosworth, ed., *Iran and Islam*, Edinburgh, 1971, 461–473. On the *qalandars* more generally, see L. Ridgeon, *Morals and Mysticism in Persian Sufism: a history of Sufi-futuwwat in Iran*, Abingdon, Oxon/ New York, 2010, 132f. See also Ridgeon's 'Short Back and Sides, Were the Qalandars of Late Safavid Iran Domesticated?' *Journal of Sufi Studies* 6 (2017), 82-115, also cited below.

²⁹ On this essay, see Babayan, *Mystics*, 430 n11. This work does not appear to be listed by Aghā Buzurg al-Ṭīhrānī in his *al-Zarī'a ilā Ṭaṣanīf al-Shī'a*, Tehran/Najaf, 1353-1398, nor is it mentioned by Anzali in his *Mysticism*.

experienced such growth in these years –³⁰ of their professions to associate with popular Sufi movements.³¹ That this work was composed in Arabic does suggest, however, that his audience of choice was clerical and not the ‘popular’ classes themselves.

These anti-Sufi polemics and the 1631 rising of both Darvīsh Riza and his reincarnated self a few years later occurred against the background of the resurgence of the messianic veneration of Abū Muslim (d. 755) - the Iranian agent of the `Abbāsīd movement in Khurasan - dating at least to 1629. Such veneration was particularly popular among Isfahan’s artisanal and merchant classes and kept alive by ‘popular’ storytellers (*qiṣṣakhwānān*) based in the city’s growing number of coffee houses.

The previous century had witnessed attacks on the veneration of Abū Muslim. These were few in number, composed mainly in Arabic and took place within a socio-religious dynamic different to that of the latter years of the same century and the 17th century.³² Indeed, Ismā`īl came to power in the region having identified himself, in his own poetry, for example, with a range of Muslim, Shī`ī and Christian figures and even personalities from Tajik literary history. These included Abū Muslim. As suggested, it was the very heterodoxy of this discourse that resonated both among the member of the various Turkic tribes which composed Ismā`īl’s Qizilbāsh tribal confederation, largely rural-based, and largely urban-based Tajik elements.

³⁰ R. J. Abisaab (*Converting Persia, Religion and Power in the Safavid Empire*, London, 2004, 82–85) notes the anger of the Lebanese immigrant Luṭfallāh al-Maysī (d. 1622-1623), recipient of `Abbās I’s patronage, to challenges to his authority from precisely these same, clearly well-organised, elements in the city. Abisaab sees ‘racial overtones’ (i.e. Arab v non-Arab) to this mutual hostility (84). To be sure, the opposition of the ‘artisans and guildsmen’ (85) and their clear disdain for the *mujtahid* class generally - that she says al-Maysī ascribed to these elements - was likely as much, if not more, rooted in the socio-religious than she suggests. This anti-clerical sentiment could only fuel the rise of a desire for a more immanent spiritual experience - unmediated by court-based clerical elites, Arab or not - that was an important factor underlying such classes’ interest in millenarian discourse.

³¹ Ṣadr al-Dīn Muḥammad Shīrāzī, *Kasr Aṣnām al-Jāhiliyyih*, M. T. Danishpazhuh, ed. Tihrān, 1340 Sh./1962, 3; Ṣadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī (Mullā Ṣadrā), *Breaking the Idols of Ignorance*, M. Dasht Buzurgi and F. Asadi Amjad, transls., S. K. Toussi, ed. London, 2008, 4. Anzali’s discussion of the text (*Mysticism*, 60-62, 66) misses the vocational dimension.

See also Babayan, *Mystics*, 165f, 176f, 213f, on the historical links between guilds and Sufi `Alid movements, focusing especially on *Futuvvatnāma-yi Ṣulṭānī*, the undated work of Ḥusayn Kāshifī (d. 1504–1505).

³² See, for example, Babayan, 142, 145-47, 159n74, 281n1, 409n42, with her defining of the second ‘wave’ of such attacks as occurring from 1626 to 1649, and also 250f, 265, 283n21; Newman, as cited above; Anzali, *Mysticism* (34) and n37. See also Anzali, ‘The Emergence’, 161f. On earlier veneration of Abū Muslim, see I. Melikoff, *Abū Muslim, le “porte-hache” du Khorasan dans la tradition épique turcoiranienne*, Paris, 1962.

This millenarianism, including praise for Abū Muslim, reappeared at Ismā'īl's death in 1524, an event that sparked a multi-year long civil war and consequent invasions of Safavid territory by the Safavids' Uzbek and Ottoman enemies.³³

This veneration produced a reaction among clerics of the day. One of first Twelver clerics to decry Abū Muslim's popularity was `Alī al-Karakī (d. 1534), one of the very few Twelver scholars who came to Safavid Iran from Arabic-speaking lands during the decades following the 1501 capture of Tabriz by Ismā'īl I (d. 1524). His *Maṭā'in al-Mujrimīyya* (*The Abuses of the Criminals*) which, though lost, is said to have included a refutation both of Sufism and of the public veneration of Abū Muslim by storytellers. He also issued a short Arabic-language ruling (*fatwā*) in which he approved of the cursing of Abū Muslim.³⁴

That the language of these interventions was Arabic suggests their intended audience was primarily, as in the case of some essays already discussed as well as the period's exchanges on the legitimacy of Friday prayer during the continued absence of the Hidden Imam, members of the self-same, small scholarly class.³⁵ Perhaps this, as the Friday prayer essays, signalled some scepticism/disagreement or a perceived lack of urgency on the matter.

Clearly reflecting a growing interest in Abū Muslim among urban, Tajik, i.e. Persians-speaking elements, `Alī al-Karakī's student Muḥammad b. Ishāq al-Hamavī (d. after 1531) completed a Persian-language work *Anīs al-Mu'minīn* (*The Close Friend of the Believers*), in which he also attacked the veneration of Abū Muslim. Ṭahmāsp himself is said

³³ See Newman, *Safavid Iran*, 14-15 n6; 20; 31-32. See also Babayan, *Mystics*, 145f; J. Calmard, 'Popular Literature Under the Safavids', in Newman ed., *Society and Culture in the Early Modern Middle East: Studies on Iran in the Safavid Period*, Leiden, 2003, 318-321, 336-337.

³⁴ The text of al-Karakī's *fatwā*, in Arabic, as cited in *Anīs al-Mu'minīn*, the Persian-language work of al-Karakī's student al-Hamavī, can be found in R. Ja'fariyan, *Şafaviyya dar Arşih-yi Dīn, Farhang, va Siyāsat*, Qum, 1379 Sh./2000, 2: 868. For an English translation, see Babayan, *Mystics*, 121. On al-Hamavī, see also further below.

On *Maṭā'in* see al-Ṭihirānī, 21: 138; Ja'fariyan, 2: 521, 860f. Babayan (*Mystics*, 430 n9) says this work was 'probably' composed in 1526 but offers no supporting evidence. Anzali (*Mysticism*, 37n39) refers to the work as lost but offers no date.

See our *Twelver Shiism* for discussion of Twelver works nearly or completely lost across Twelver history.

On the storytellers, see Babayan, *Mystics*, 121f; Ja'fariyan, 2: 851-879.

³⁵ On the Friday prayer essays composed in this century, see our *Twelver Shiism*, 184f.

to have banned recitation of stories about Abū Muslim and ordered the tongues cut out of any of those storytellers who refused.³⁶

By contrast with the handful of, mainly Arabic-language, contributions composed by a few scholars in the previous century, between the 1620s and 1652, that is over the later years of the reign of `Abbās I through the reign of Şafī and into that of `Abbās II (1642-1666), some 24 works were composed attacking the veneration of Abū Muslim and, in the process, defending one Mīr Lawḥī, Sayyid Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Ḥusaynī (d. after 1672). The latter was then engaged, in Isfahan, in attacking that veneration.³⁷

That so many essays in this one genre were composed across these years clearly attests that the affection for Abū Muslim had become quite a distinct feature of Safavid spiritual landscape.

Clerics' use of Persian for their attacks also attest that such an affection was widespread among urban Tajik elements. Of the 24 essays only three, all Persian-language, essays remain - *Şaḥīfat al-Rashād (The Page of Reason)*, completed by one Mīr Muḥammad Zamān b. Muḥammad Ja`far Riḏavī (d. 1631), *Izhār al-Ḥaqq va Mi`yār al-Şidq (The Disclosure of What is Right and the Measuring of the Truth)*, written by Sayyid Aḥmad al-`Alavī al-`Āmilī (d. between 1644 and 1650) in 1633 and *Khulāṣat al-Favā'id (A Summary of the Benefits)*, of `Abd al-Muṭṭalib b. Yaḥyā Ṭāliqānī. The latter's death date is not known and the essay itself is undated, but likely composed in the years immediately prior to 1652.

These essays are examined in detail elsewhere.³⁸ Although not all of the critiques levelled by these essays' authors can be accepted as entirely accurate reflections of that veneration itself, read carefully they do add considerably to the understanding of the discourse of those for whom Abū Muslim was a popular figure.

³⁶ On al-Hamavī, see Babayan, *Mystics*, 145f, 250-251, 282-289; Ja`fariyan, 2: 862f; Anzali, *Mysticism*, 34-35. See also Babayan, 'Sufis', in Melville, ed., 124-125; idem, 'The Safavid Synthesis', 143-147; Calmard, 318-321.

³⁷ Anzali (*Mysticism*, 34) criticizes Babayan's reference (citing her 'The Waning of the Qizilbāsh: The Spiritual and the Temporal in Seventeenth Century Iran', PhD dissertation, Princeton University, June 1993, 204) to the early 17th century anti-Abū Muslim essays as the second wave thereof because the 16th century essays were not 'coordinated' and so did not constitute a 'first' wave. On Mīr Lawḥī, see further below.

³⁸ See our 'The Limits of "Orthodoxy"? Notes on the Anti-Abū Muslim Polemic of Early 11th/17th-Century Iran, forthcoming in *Shi'ism and Sufism, Classical Views and Modern Perspectives*, D. Hermann and M. Terrier, eds., London, 65-119, on which this section is based.

Ṣaḥīfa in particular, the earliest of the three, suggests that Abū Muslim's popularity in these years may well have been limited to Isfahan. Taken as a whole they also point to a continuing presence of a Sunni population in the city: Sunnis and 'apostates', that is those Shī'a whom the authors were attacking, are said to have approved of Abū Muslim's role in bringing the `Abbāsids to power and to be citing Imam `Alī on the legitimacy of the `Abbāsids. These elements are seen to be holding favourable views of Abū Muslim's genealogy, and of Abbāsīd behaviour toward the Imams and the faithful. There is also the suggestion that this veneration included, for example, Abū Muslim being understood to have been a friend of Ahl al-Bayt, that Imam al-Bāqir, (d. 733), the 5th Imam, approved of Abū Muslim's public rising (*khurūj*) and that Abū Muslim was thought of as having been an incarnation of the Divine himself. There are also references to songs and singing (*ghinā'*).

In all this, the presence of 'storytellers' and their role in spreading pro-Abū Muslim sentiments is repeatedly referenced.³⁹

The essays claim also that such well known figures as Bahā' al-Dīn Muḥammad, Shaykh Bahā'ī (d. 1621) and Mīr Dāmād, well-known in the Western secondary literature on the period as philosopher-clerics, were actively involved in attacking the veneration of Abū Muslim and in supporting the anti-Abū Muslim activities of their student Mīr Lawḥī.

That said, although Ṭāliqānī suggests that not everyone in the city detested Abū Lawḥī, it is clear from these essays that there was a widespread opposition to Mīr Lawḥī's efforts. The essays attest also that this hostility extended to otherwise unidentified, contemporary important figures (*akābar*) of the faith.

Composed across the reigns of three Safavid rulers, the growing lengths of these three essays, owing itself to their authors' increasingly detailed references to and citations from both historical and religious sources, certainly bespeak their authors' increasing frustration at their failure to check what can only have been the growing popularity of the Abū Muslim tradition across these years. That only these three of more than twenty anti-Abū Muslim treatises composed in the years from before 1631 and up to 1652 survived and, further, that so few copies of these three are extant today all the more points to the minority status of the anti-Abū Muslim polemic in the city in these years.

Too, that such scholars as these were, or at least felt, on the defensive is only further attested by the fact that Riḍavī only felt confident in penning his essay once he had left

³⁹ On 'Abbās I's general concern with the capital's storytellers and his efforts and those of clerics of the day to check their discourse, see our *Safavid Iran*, 69.

Isfahan to return home to Mashhad. In his *Izhār al-ḥaqq* even Sayyid Aḥmad, a student of both Shaykh Bahā'ī and Mīr Dāmād and a cousin and son-in-law of the latter, refrained from explicitly referring to Mīr Lawḥī and did not refer to, and thereby avoided an opportunity to criticise, Abū Muslim's purported claims to being 'indwelt' by the Divine (*ḥulūl*).

Other contributors both to the anti-Abū Muslim, and the later anti-Sufi, polemic chose to hide their identities: the 1016/1607 Persian-language essay 'Arba`īn Ḥadīth (Forty Hadith)', cited above, was authored anonymously. The authors of *Ḥadīqat al-Shī`a* (*The Garden of the Shī`a*) and the 1650 'Salvat al-Shī`a (The Solace of the Shī`a)', on both of which see further below, also did not own up to their contributions.⁴⁰

To the extent that the limited legacy of this written record of this polemic reflects the state of the discourse on Abū Muslim 'on the street', then those clerics who otherwise might be considered 'orthodox', including those named above, the authors of the many 'lost' essays along with those who chose to hide their names would seem to have felt quite beleaguered, isolated and under attack over these years, even before the already-known reports of physical attacks in later years.⁴¹

The Lost 'Voices' of the Later Seventeenth Century

Examination of the three-above essays also reveals clear links between the anti-Abū Muslim polemics of these years and the anti-Sufi polemics of the middle and later years of the century. Both the extant essays from the earlier polemic and such later works as more clearly belonged to the later anti-Sufi polemic featured condemnations of such activities as songs and singing and claims to *ḥulūl*, and included an ever-larger number of references to religious texts, especially the Imams' *ḥadīth*. That these were composed in Persian suggests their authors' intended audience was composed mainly of urban artisanal and merchant elements.

⁴⁰ See our 'Sufism and Anti-Sufism in Safavid Iran: The Authorship of the "Ḥadīqat al-Shī`a" Revisited', *Iran*, XXXVII (1999), 95-108. See also the discussion on both texts in our Clerical Perceptions of Sufi Practices in Late Seventeenth-Century Persia: Arguments Over the Permissibility of Singing (*Ghinā`*), in L. Lewisohn and D. Morgan, eds., *The Heritage of Sufism*, 135-64. The author of 'Salvat' is one Muṭahhar b. Muḥammad b. Miqdādī, usually said to have been Mīr Lawḥī himself. On 'Salvat' see also above. See also the discussion of the authorship of 'Radd-i Ṣūfiyya' below, although it is now generally accepted as having been authored by Ṭāhir al-Qummī.

⁴¹ See our *Safavid Iran*, 77, on Mīr Lawḥī's claim, in his own *Arba`īn* (completed in 1672, sometime after which he died) that he was assaulted in the street. On these dates see al-Ṭīhrānī, 9/4: 220. See also our *Safavid Iran*, 215n33 and references to Mīr Lawḥī above.

In the same time frame, as noted above, appeared the Persian-language *Ḥadīqat al-Shī`a*, a work at the time ascribed to Aḥmad Ardabīlī (d. 1585) – himself well known for his critique of the Safavid political institution - although the main text was written in the 1640s in the Deccan. The presence in the work of both anti-Abū Muslim and anti-Sufi sections suggests sympathy for both sets of discourses among those Persian-speaking urban elements targeted by the author(s) of these sections. In the latter section ‘Ardabīlī’ denounced some twenty-one named Sufi groups for such heretical beliefs as ascribing partnership to Allah (*mushārīka*), abandoning prayer and fasting, dancing (*raqṣ*), singing, and listening to poetry or music (*samā`*), some of which are familiar from the anti-Abū Muslim polemics cited above. None of these named groups was among those well-established on the plateau discussed above.

The Persian-language ‘*Salvat al-Shī`a*’, composed between 1641 and 1650, likely by Mīr Lawḥī himself, bespeaks a shift to a more exclusively anti-Sufi discourse, focussing, as it does, on certain named, and very unorthodox, practices allegedly undertaken by Sufi groups. These ranged from abandoning both prayer and fasting, to ‘dancing’ and ‘singing’, to sexual immorality. The author made particular use of works by Shaykh al-Mufīd (d. 1022), al-`Allāma al-Ḥillī (d. 1325), both scholars of ‘orthodox’ discourse, and the Imams’ traditions cited therein, a tradition cited from *al-Kāfī* and others traditions cited from unnamed sources.⁴²

The reference above to Muḥammad Ṭāhir al-Qummī’s *Tuḥfat al-Akhyār* highlights al-Qummī’s role as a key figure in this later anti-Sufi polemic into which the attacks on the veneration of Abū Muslim seem to have evolved.⁴³

Ṭāhir al-Qummī was born at the end of the tenth/sixteenth century in a small community located between Shiraz and Yazd. After an apparent sojourn in Shiraz, his father relocated the family to Najaf. Following Muṣūl’s fall to the Ottomans in 1638, the year before the Zuhāb peace treaty was signed with the Ottomans, al-Qummī returned to Iran, during the reign of Shah Ṣafī.

By the 1660s and 1670s attacks on both Sufi doctrines and practices and ‘elite’ philosophical inquiry appear to have taken centre stage.

The former included, especially, a discourse on the legitimacy of singing, as one of those practices associated with contemporary ‘popular’ Sufi activity. Essays

⁴² On these works, see our ‘Sufism and Anti-Sufism’ and our ‘Clerical Perceptions’.

⁴³ See our forthcoming ‘Glimpses’, on which this section is based.

against singing composed by Shaykh `Alī al-`Āmilī (d. 1691-92), and Muḥammad b al-Ḥasan, al-Ḥurr al-`Āmilī (d. 1693), like Shaykh `Alī al-`Āmilī, a first-generation arrival from the Lebanon in these years, and the ‘rebuttal’ thereto by Muḥammad Bāqir al-Sabzivārī (d. 1679) - were composed in Arabic. Clearly these were intended to read and considered mainly by members of the clerical class, signalling disagreement among on the issue.⁴⁴

By contrast, Persian was al-Qummī’s language of choice.

That said, in the first years following his return to Iran, al-Qummī himself seems to have been as cautious about openly identifying with such discourse as the authors of *Ḥadīqat al-Shī`a* and ‘*Salvat al-Shī`a*’. The Persian-language ‘*Radd-i Ṣūfiyya* (A Rebuttal of Sufism)’, accepted as having been authored by al-Qummī, was composed ca. 1650, within twelve years of his return to Iran, when he was still a relatively junior scholar.⁴⁵

The essay is in two parts: part one critiques various beliefs and practices and links to these as espoused by earlier well-known Sufi figures, Ḥallāj⁴⁶ and Bāyazīd⁴⁷, Aḥmad al-Ghazālī (d. 1126), as well as Ibn al-`Arabī (d. 1240), especially. Al-Qummī cites condemnations thereof in the revealed texts as well as in works by both various Twelver scholars. In part two he discusses a critique of the beliefs and practices of various named Sufi groups, a number of which are, also, clearly contemporary and do not figure among the

⁴⁴ Shaykh `Alī’s critiques are on offer in volume one of his *al-Durr al-Manthūr*, completed in 1662. His ‘*al-Sihām al-Mā`riqa*’, though undated, was completed after this. Al-Ḥurr’s three contributions to the anti-singing discourse can be dated to 1662, ca. 1665 and before 1679.

On the anti-Sufi discourse, see our ‘*Sufism and Anti-Sufism*’. On the anti-singing polemic, see our ‘*Clerical Perceptions of Sufi Practices in Late Seventeenth-Century Persia: Arguments Over the Permissibility of Singing (Ghinā`)*’, in Lewisohn and Morgan, eds., *The Heritage of Sufism*, 135-64; idem, ‘*Clerical Perceptions of Sufi Practices in Late 17th Century Persia, II: al-Ḥurr al-`Āmilī (d. 1693) and the Debate on the Permissibility of Ghinā`*’ in, Y. Suleiman, ed., *Living Islamic History: Studies in Honour of Professor Carole Hillenbrand*, Edinburgh, 2010, 192-207. Anzali (*Mysticism*, 38f) offers a useful, recent review of the essays in the anti-Sufi polemic.

⁴⁵ Anzali, *Muḥammad Ṭāhir Al-Qummī, Opposition to Philosophy in Safawid Iran: Mulla Muḥammad-Ṭāhir Al-Qummī’s Hikmat al-`Ārifīn*, introduction and critical edition by A. Anzali, S.M. Hadi Gerami, Leiden, 2018, 17, 23; idem, *Mysticism*, 39, 47f. See also al-Tihrānī, 10: 206-8; Newman, ‘*Sufism and Anti-Sufism*’, 99f; Babayan, 467.

⁴⁶ Ḥusayn b. Maṣūūr al-Ḥallāj, executed in 922), on whom see Renard, 101-02; A. Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism, A Short History*, Leiden, 2000, s.v., esp. 72-82. Thanks to Dr L. Ridgeon for his pointing me to these works as useful for some basic background on figures referred to by al-Qummī. On Ḥallāj and the early Twelver community, see our *The Formative Period of Shi`i Law: Hadith as Discourse Between Qum and Baghdad*, Richmond, 2000, s.v.

⁴⁷ Bāyazīd al-Biṣṭāmī (d. ca. 875), mystic and follower of the Ḥanafī legal school, on whom see Renard, 49; Knysh, s.v., esp. 69-72.

known orders discussed above. Among the practices cited in part one are were practicing hand-clapping, leaping (*bar jastan*), spinning (*charkhīdan*) and free love (*ishqbāzī*) with men. Elsewhere he refers to, and condemns, the belief in predestination (*jabr*), not attending the mosque or Friday prayer, spending much time praying in the *khāniqāh*, wearing special clothes, sitting in seclusion for months on end, and eschewing meat.⁴⁸

That he undertook a second Persian-language work on the subject, the volume *Tuḥfat al-Akhyār*, completed between 1656 and 1664,⁴⁹ can only bespeak his own conclusion that the popularity of these discourses among Persian-speaking urban elements was only waxing ever stronger and so demanded a ‘doubling-down’ of his attack. By this time, also, given the Arabic -language contributions to this discourse completed in the 1660s and 1670s by both Shaykh `Alī and al-Ḥurr, al-Qummī seems to have perceived own position on the Safavid spiritual scene as a fellow critic of such beliefs and practices as more secure than when he has first returned to the country some decades earlier, such that he was now less reluctant to identify himself as the author.

As in the earlier ‘Radd’, so in *Tuḥfat*, at much greater length, al-Qummī condemns a panoply of beliefs and practices that he traces to those of such earlier figures as Ḥasan-i Baṣrī (d. 728),⁵⁰ Bāyazīd, Abū’l-Ḥasan `Alī al-Kharaqānī (d. 1033)⁵¹, Ḥallāj, Ibn al-`Arabī, in both the latter’s *al-Futūḥāt* and *Fuṣūs al-Ḥikam*, and Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 1273). As evidence for his argument that these roots of these beliefs and practices lay in earlier times, al-Qummī repeatedly refers to sources from within the Sufi tradition itself. Thus he cites Jāmī, Farīd al-

⁴⁸ Part one is discussed in greater detail in our ‘Glimpses’. On part two, see the detailed discussion in our ‘Sufism and Anti-Sufism’ and our ‘Clerical Perceptions’. As argued therein, the discussions of some of the many Sufi groups referenced in both *Ḥadīqa* and ‘Radd’ contain references which are clearly contemporary. More exploration of these is clearly in order.⁴⁹ See Anzali, *Opposition*, 24, 24n88 (referring to the earliest, less complete manuscript, dated to 1656); idem, *Mysticism* (40, 40n) citing the completion date as 1664. Al-Qummī himself refers to 1664 as the present date (*Tuḥfat al-Akhyār* (*The Gift of the Superior*), Qum, 1393, 88, 99). Al-Tihrānī (3: 147) does not date the work.

⁴⁹ See Anzali, *Opposition*, 24, 24n88 (referring to the earliest, less complete manuscript, dated to 1656); idem, *Mysticism* (40, 40n) citing the completion date as 1664. Al-Qummī himself refers to 1664 as the present date (*Tuḥfat al-Akhyār* (*The Gift of the Superior*), Qum, 1393, 88, 99). Al-Tihrānī (3: 147) does not date the work.

⁵⁰ Renard, 103.

⁵¹ Renard, 136.

Dīn al-`Aṭṭār (d. 1221)'s *Tadhkirat al-Awliyā`*, Sulṭān Ḥusayn Mīrzā Bāyqarā's *Majālis al-Ushshāq*,⁵² and Maḥmūd Shabistarī's (d. ca. 1337) *Gulshān-i Rāz*.⁵³

Those beliefs and practices that al-Qummī associates with such figures in *Tuḥfat* include belief in predestination (*jabr*), the transmigration of souls (*tanāsukh*), the reading of love (*ishq*) poetry in both mosques and the *khāniqāh*, singing - which al-Qummī calls a major sin (*gunāh-i kabīr*) - dancing and clapping, advocating drunkenness (*mastī*), madness (*divānigi*), the wearing of a hat (*kulāh*) and the Sufi robe (*khirqā*), forswearing marriage, the smell of meat, belief in the unity of existence (*vaḥdat-i vujūd*) and the promulgating of claims to divinity and/or the Imamate itself. He denounces also the predisposition to monasticism and those who sat in hermitages (*ṣawma`a nishīnān*). He also refers to these elements' abandoning the hajj, their praising of the Sunni legist al-Shāfi`ī (d. 820), Abū Bakr (d. 634) and `Umar (d. 644), the first two caliphs, and Mu`āwiya (d. 680), the first Umayyad caliph, and their censuring of Imamis and the rightful claims of Ahl al-Bayt.

Herein al-Qummī says that the Nūrbakhshīs, who claimed the imamate and maintained that Muḥammad Nūrbakhsh was the *mahdī*, were the most popular order in Iran.⁵⁴

Al-Qummī's 'al-Fawā'id al-Dīniyya (Useful Religious Lessons)' which, though undated, post-dated *Tuḥfat*, was more a theological/jurisprudential work. Nevertheless, it does contain some references to problematic beliefs and practices of the day as deriving from those of earlier Sufi figures.

The work is comprised of 37 statements/questions and his replies, of quite varying lengths. Five of these repay especial attention here: number 24 condemns Ḥallāj and Bāyazīd for believing in the possibility of attaining unity with Allah (*ittiḥād*). Herein, also, al-Qummī cites a long passage from al-`Aṭṭār. 25 condemns Ibn al-`Arabī and his followers, e.g. Rūmī, who accept *vaḥdat-i vujūd*, referring to his discussions in his own *Ḥikmat al-`Ārifīn*, *Tuḥfat* and other works. 26 censures Ibn al-`Arabī's denial, citing *Fuṣūṣ*, of the reality of Hell. 27 condemns Ibn al-`Arabī's claim, in *Fuṣūṣ*, that the Prophet drew his `ilm from the lamp niche (*mishkat*) of the seal (*khatam*) of Sufi 'saints' (*al-awliyā`*), who, Ibn al-`Arabī claimed, was in fact

⁵² This is, in fact, a work dedicated to the Timurid Sulṭān Ḥusayn Bāyqarā and on which see K. Rizvi, 'Between the Human and the Divine: The *Majālis al-Ushshāq* and the Materiality of Love in Early Safavid Art' in W. Melion et al., eds., *Ut pictura amor, The Reflexive Imagery of Love in Artistic Theory and Practice, 1500-1700*, Leiden, 2017, 229-63.

⁵³ Renard, 216.

⁵⁴ See n22 and, also, the reference above to Bashir and Algar dismissing al-Qummī's reference to this order.

himself.⁵⁵ 28 cites Rūmī's *Masnavī* on the lapsing of the law (*sharī'a*) and refers to *Tuhfat*'s discussion.⁵⁶

As has been noted, al-Qummī's reference to the Nūrbakhshī order's popularity in these later years of the century has heretofore been dismissed. That al-Qummī was mainly/more concerned to link/trace such contemporary beliefs and practices that he branded as 'unorthodox' back to those, similarly 'unorthodox', as promulgated by/associated with various earlier Sufī orders and figures is all the more reason to suggest that the impetus for al-Qummī's references clearly was his own contemporary observations.

As noted above, more recent research has corroborated al-Qummī's reference to the active presence of the Nūrbakhshīs and pointed to that of the Ṣahabīs as well.

But there is also good evidence further attesting to Sufi-style activity in these years not associated with any named order. Thus in 1668, an unknown author composed Persian-language work supportive of the Qalandars and their belief system. The author carefully affirms loyalty both to the Twelver faith - perhaps all the more important in light of such criticisms of al-Qummī's focus on the anti-Ahl al-Bayt sentiments of the targets of his critiques – and to the newly-ascended Shah Sulaymān.⁵⁷

Too, the Ṣahabī master Nayrīzī portrays the conflict which brought down the Safavids in the early eighteenth century as between *ashbah ahl al-faqr* (which Anzali translates as 'pseudo-dervīshes') and the greedy and status-conscious 'pseudo-ulama' (*ashbah ahl al-ilm*). That Nayrīzī then notes that even he himself had been accused of being one of the former does suggest, also, that the sort of 'popular' Sufi-style activity with which al-Qummī had been so concerned in the later years of the seventeenth century remained extant, if not flourishing, into the early years of the next century.⁵⁸

Summary and Conclusion

⁵⁵ On the term, see M. Chodkiewicz, *The Seal of the Saints. Prophethood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn 'Arabi*. L. Sherrard, transl., Cambridge, 1993.

⁵⁶ See our 'Glimpses' for a discussion of the full text.

⁵⁷ Ridgeon, 'Short Back and Sides'.

⁵⁸ Nayrīzī witnessed the 1722 Afghan capture of the city, fled to Iraq, perhaps returned to Iran but was back in Iraq for the last ten years of his life. In his *Faṣl al-Khiṭṭāb*, completed in Najaf, Nayrīzī names, and links himself to a number of, clerical proponents of mystical inquiry, suggesting that just as 'popular' Sufi-style activity continued into the new century so too did such elite-level inquiry. See Anzali, *Mysticism*, 143-54. See also Newman, *Safavid Iran*, 236n34, 241n59 and R. Ja'fariyān's extensive discussion of Nayrīzī and his works in his *Ṣafaviyya dar 'Arṣih-yi Dīn, Farhang, va Siyāsāt*, Qum, 1379/2000, 3: 1355f.

The conventional approach to tracking Sufism into the Safavid period's Sufi-style discourse by referring mainly to the period's several Sufi orders offers limited insight into the fortunes of such discourse, let alone Sufi-style activities, over the period. The argument that these orders had all but disappeared from the realm's spiritual scene by the early-to-mid seventeenth century only replicates and gave further credence to the broader 'decline' paradigm that has been applied to the period as a whole.

Too, recent research into the later seventeenth century has, in fact, challenged the alleged downward trajectory of some of the realm's Sufi orders.

At the same time, putting to one side focus on these orders alone allows scope for attention to 'non-order' forms of Sufi-style belief and expression. While al-Qummī certainly may have exaggerated 'for effect' the details of the 'unorthodox' dimensions of Sufi beliefs and practices given in his several accounts examined above,⁵⁹ what does also emerge from his works is a sense of the lively presence of such 'popular' inquiry and activity in the later years of the century.⁶⁰

Evidence from what remains of the earlier anti-Abū Muslim polemic reveals a similarly active popular discourse that blended veneration of Abū Muslim with Sufi-style beliefs and practices and was sufficiently widespread so as to put the authors of that polemic on the defensive. Such 'orthodoxies' as were promulgated across the Safavid period by the small number of urban-based ulama whose works are best known, and most-studied, today were most likely in the minority.

In reality, the extent of what is not known about Safavid social and 'cultural' life far outweighs what is not known, this especially as the domestic and foreign sources thereon on which historians so rely for discussions of both Safavid socio-economic and political and

⁵⁹ This said, al-Qummī's citations of earlier texts within the mystical tradition to corroborate the antecedents of such heterodox doctrines and practices are generally solid. See our forthcoming 'Glimpses' for a more detailed discussion of these.

⁶⁰ To date Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlīsī (d. 1699) has been continuously referred in the secondary sources to as the Safavid period's quintessential opponent of Sufism and philosophical inquiry if not also all things 'foreign', usually absent detailed attention to both his Arabic- and his Persian-language works let alone notice of al-Qummī and his contributions, also in both languages. It is clear that, overall, based on the depth, and detail, of his many expressions of distrust of both elite philosophical and *irfānī* discourse and, especially, 'popular' beliefs and practices, that al-Qummī was the period's premier critic of both. On such critiques of al-Majlīsī, see our *Twelver Shiism*, 3, 5-6, 75n31. See also 188f. See also our forthcoming essay in the Melville volume, referred to above.

‘cultural’ life are both few in number and, especially also, subject to their own biases.⁶¹ It is notable that in these years the majority of Iran’s population was rural/tribal.⁶² Based on the above discussion, it would seem that at the popular level elements of the very same complex, Sufi-Shī‘ī if not also other forms of the complex, distinctly heterodox discourse that dominated Iran’s spiritual scene in the years before prior to the Safavid capture of Tabriz remained extant, if they did also continue predominant, across the Safavid period.

⁶¹ On the agendas of the court chronicles of the day, for example, see S. Quinn, *Historical Writing during the Reign of Shah `Abbās*, Salt Lake City, 2000. S. Brentjes, among others, has raised similar caveats with respect to the materials produced by foreign travellers to Iran over the period. See, for example, her *Travellers from Europe in the Ottoman and Safavid Empires, 16th–17th Centuries: Seeking, Transforming, Discarding Knowledge*, Farnham, Surrey and Burlington, Vt., 2010. On both genres of literature, see also our *Safavid Iran*, 6f.

⁶² In his *The Economy of Safavid Persia*, Wiesbaden, 2000, 2-9, W. Floor suggests that across the 17th century 85-90% of Iran’s population, never higher than nine million in total, was rural. This is to say nothing of Iran’s myriad linguistic, ethnic and religious differences on which see Floor, 12f.