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ARTICLE

# And the Master Answered?: Deferrals of Authority in Contemporary Sufism in Iran

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## Abstract

Authority in Islam is often understood to operate as a site of negotiation. Based on textual analysis and ethnographic research, this article examines three case studies of disparate Shi'i Sufi Orders where a willing deferral of certain types of authority exists. In the first case study, the Soltanalishahi Order refer their members to an outside *mujtahid* for all matters relating to the *shariat*, therein limiting the powers of their *shaykh*s and *qotb*. The second case study looks at debates concerning the nature of the *qotb*'s authority within a single order, particularly as it pertains to the power of touch and transmissibility of blessing (*barakat*) from *qotb* to object to person, with the order's leadership refuting the idea of charismatic embodied authority despite some of their lay members' beliefs. Finally, the third case study addresses a group who refute the need for any centralized leadership at all and instead recognize and read the works of multiple *qotb*s from disparate Iranian orders. By focusing on the deferral of authority, as a type of editing, as a type of shaping, I hope to show that the refuting of certain duties is just as formative as the amassing of powers.

**Keywords:** Sufism; Authority; Mysticism; Materiality; Shi'ism; Ethnography

The word *qotb* is typically translated as pole or axis, entities upon which entire worlds orient themselves. *Qotb* is also the title many Sufis employ for their highest spiritual figure of authority, that single individual deemed so close to God that entire communities coalesce around them, each a complex solar system shaped around the *qotb*'s particular gravitational pull. In contemporary Iran, the word *qotb* is also used by many mystics, sometimes interchangeably with *shaykh*, but not usually.[1] Despite this shared terminology, however, Iranian Sufi groups demonstrate a wide array of understandings of what defines a *qotb*, particularly with regards to their specific forms of authority and from where it derives. Furthermore, given how essential the *qotb*'s role is within a Sufi order, when this role and positionality change, the entire series of constellations circulating around him also shifts in turn.

Authority in Islam has long operated as a site of negotiation and contestation. Whether it is religious leaders and scholars vying for authority with temporal political leadership,[2]

[1] For a history of the term within Iranian Sufism, see Cancian "Translation, Authority and Exegesis in Modern Iranian Sufism: Two Iranian Sufi Masters in Dialogue," 89; Scharbrodt, "The qutb as special representative of the Hidden Imam: the conflation of Shii and Sufi Vilayat in the Ni 'matullahi Order."

[2] Dabashi, *Authority in Islam*; Crone and Hinds, *God's Caliph: Religious Authority in the First Centuries of Islam;* Zaman, *Religion and Politics under the Early Abbasids: The Emergence of the Proto-Sunnite Elite*; *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change*.

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understanding the ways disparate forms of expertise and textual interpretation can lead to legitimacy and thus a leadership position,[3] discussions around the role of heredity and succession (*selseleh*) as a basis for authority,[4] the classic question of the role of charisma, or, in the modern era, contestations with (ostensibly) secular legal entities in terms of carrying out and enforcing decisions,[5] authority has long proved an arena of great debate. Within Shiism, disputes around authority have been particularly acute, as the question and role of the imamate has proved central to Shiism's epistemologies and forms of knowledge production,[6] even if, as some have argued, "traditional structures of [Shi'i authority] have… proved more enduring" than those of their Sunni counterparts.[7] No matter the time or geographic region, the who, what, why and how of authority, the grounds upon which it is based, and how and by whom it is exercised, authority has proved a site of negotiation since the earliest days of the post-Prophetic era.

As such, authority in contemporary Shi'i Sufism is similarly prone to the shifting sands of changing hermeneutic stances as well as fluctuations within the larger sociopolitical context. Indeed, despite the fact that Sufism is still sometimes associated with a single-minded form of "saint worship,"[8] unquestioning obedience to the *shaykh* or *qotb* is far from a foregone conclusion. Hence, in this essay, I explore a particular type of negotiation with regards to Shi'i Sufi authority: the deferral of authority (*walayat*).[9] In three separate case studies, I analyze instances in which *shaykh*s and *qotb*s willingly and deliberately either delegate certain responsibilities to others or reject certain forms of authority altogether; in one instance, in fact, the idea of a single authority is dismissed altogether.

In doing so, I argue that this deferral is not primarily a shirking of power, but rather a fine-tuning of the *type* of authority they wish to yield. In a sense, it is a form of editing, an excising of duties they find inappropriate which might otherwise be expected by outsiders. As I explain, the reasons for these "edits" vary, but in all cases they are tied to a particular vision of what contemporary Shi'i Sufi authority should look like. Rather than any perceived "crisis of authority" that some claim plagues contemporary Islam,[10] it is all part of the larger process of cultivating the ideal form of leadership.

In considering these deferrals of authority, we might also reflect on the following questions: What roles do authority figures play in Sufi Orders in contemporary Iran, as the era of the *khanega* as lodge and place of residence is long over? Are specific types of authority embraced over others and, if so, how does this affect the impact authority figures potentially have on their followers' everyday lives? What influences an authority's decision to put aside certain duties or forms of leadership? Is it other, non-Sufi discourses, their larger socio-

[3] Madigan, *The Quran's Self-Image: Writing and Authority in Islam's Scripture.*

[4] Takim, *The heirs of the prophet: charisma and religious authority in Shi'ite Islam*; Haider, *Shi'i Islam: an introduction.*

[5] Agrama, "Ethics, tradition, authority: Toward an anthropology of the fatwa."

[6] Mavani, *Religious authority and political thought in Twelver Shi'ism: From Ali to post Khomeini.*

[7] Clarke, "Neo-calligraphy: religious authority and media technology in contemporary Shiite Islam," 353. To this point see also Gleave, "Conceptions of authority in Iraqi Shi'ism: Baqir al-Hakim, Ha'iri and Sistani on ijtihad, taqlid and marja'iyya," 59–78.

[8] For early Islamic studies, see Gilsenan, *Saint and Sufi in Modern Egypt: An Essay in the Sociology of Religion*; Martin Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century.* For saint worship within Sufism, see Cornell, *Realm of the Saint: Power and Authority in Moroccan Sufism*; Harder, *Sufism and Saint Veneration in Contemporary Bangladesh: The Maijbhandaris of Chittagong;* Kugle, *Sufis and Saints' Bodies: Mysticism, Corporeality, and Sacred Power in Islam.*

[9] The Soltanalishahis define *walayat* as a term "derived from *walayah*, meaning friendship with God and His guardianship. The literal meaning of *walayah* is 'nearness, closeness', and derivative meanings are 'authority, friendship'. It is through prophecy that Islam is revealed, and through *walayah* that faith is acquired." Hazrat Hajj 'Ali Tabandeh Mahbub 'Alishah, "Observations on the Meaning of Bayat," in *The Sufi Path: An Introduction to the Ni'matullahi Sultan 'Alishahi Order*, ed. and trans. Shahram Pazouki, 27. This connection between intimacy and authority is important to remember going forward, Tehran: Haqiqat Publications, 2002.

[10] Robinson, "Crisis of Authority: Crisis of Islam? Vol 1," 339–354; Bulliet, "The crisis within Islam," 34–40; Grewal, *Islam Is a Foreign Country.*

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political context, or some other, seemingly external factor? Is it based on a particular philosophico-theological stance or a combination of many factors?

Hussein Agrama, following Hannah Arendt, thoughtfully explored how authority in the modern era has become synonymous with coercion.[11] This is partially due to the liberal notion that the true self is the free self, and so any assertion over the self will ultimately restrict and constrict this freedom, therein suggesting that all authority is coercion. What happen then, to one's sense of self, when certain forms of authority are rejected by those who could wield them? Or, are these moments of refusal just another exercise in the consolidation of power, a strange inversion of Schmitt's idea of the state of exception?[12]

Based on textual analysis and ethnographic research conducted in various cities in Iran from 2009–2017, this article traces the ways in which Sufi leadership is conceptualized, recognized, and manifested in contemporary Iran through moments of its deferral. It is centered around the analysis of three case studies that draw on my research with three disparate Sufi Orders. While all the groups are comprised of ethnic Persian,[13] Shi'i-identified individuals who recognized Shah Nimatullah Valī[14] as a key spiritual grandfather, they are three quite distinct Orders with their own preferred hermeneutics, musical practices, spiritual genealogies, and more.[15] The cities in which these groups operate go unnamed in order to protect the identities of my interlocutors, as do many more details: specific dates, names, and places. While including more information would certainly enrich my analysis, my ethical obligation to my interlocutors and adherence to their requests takes precedent. Only the first case study is not anonymized, as the individuals have published materials under their own names.

This first case study investigates the Nimatullahi Soltanalishahi Shi'i Sufi Order's bifurcation of authority along the lines of the *shariat* and *tariqat*. For all matters relating to Islamic law (the *shariat*) and many relating to ethical comportment, this order refers their members to an outside *mujtahid*, which in Iran is an Usuli Shi'ite cleric, stating that the authority of their *qotb* only relates to the acquisition of esoteric knowledge, the *tariqat*. In other words, there is an outsourcing that occurs here, where all concerns related to the *shariat* are declared to belong to the jurisdiction of a *mujtahid*, rather than their own Sufi *shaykh* or *qotb*. Furthermore, while such bifurcations of authority have been consistent since the order's revival in the late nineteenth century, the way in which it is being articulated has changed, particularly over the past twenty-five years.

The second case study examines an order whose leadership rejects a form of charismatic authority that operates via *barakat* (blessing) by way of touch, despite the fact that many of

[11] Agrama, "Ethics, tradition, authority: Toward an anthropology of the fatwa," 6.

[12] Schmitt, *Political theology: Four chapters on the concept of sovereignty.*

[13] Ethnicity is, of course, a highly complex and loaded concept. While I do not have the space here to reflect on the intricacies of how different individuals self-identify in terms of "race" and/or "ethnic identity," I refer to my interlocutors as "ethnic Persians" simply to indicate: 1) they are part of the country's largest ethno-racial group, especially as there many Kurdish and some Arab Sufi groups; and 2) the fact that "Persian" is *also* an ethnicity—however much it is a social construct—is often forgotten, such that only minoritized groups such as Kurds or Azeris are considered "ethnic." For more on the complexities of ethnicity in Iran, see Elling and Harris, "Difference in difference: language, geography, and ethno-racial identity in contemporary Iran"; and Baghoolizadeh, "From Religious Eulogy to War Anthem: Kurdizadeh's 'Layla Bigufta' and Blackness in Late Twentieth-Century Iran."

[14] Shah Nimatullah Vali (d. 1431) was a Syrian-born mystic who, after many years of itinerancy, ultimately settled in Kerman, Iran and attracted a wide following. Despite the fact that Shah Nimatullah Vali was Sunni himself, nearly all ethnic Persian, Shi'i Sufi groups identify him as a key figure within their spiritual lineage, demonstrating the wide influence of his writings and the order itself. In the sentence above, I describe him as "spiritual grandfather" rather than as a part of a typical chain of succession (*selseleh*) because the individuals in my second case study do not employ the term *selseleh.*

[15] For the sake of brevity, I am not discussing the many differences between the groups in this article, merely the shared phenomenon of precisely editing their conceptions of ideal leadership to the point of limiting it in certain ways. For more on the disparate forms of contemporary Shi'i Sufism, see Golestaneh, *Unknowing and the Everyday: Sufism and Knowledge in Iran.*

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their members are invested in the idea. More specifically, certain lay members of the group believe strongly that the sacrality of their *qotb* can be transmitted and absorbed through objects with which he has come into contact, and thus when they touch something the *qotb* has touched they receive a type of blessing (*barakat*). The order's leadership, as well as some other lay members, are quick to downplay this and gently discourage such beliefs. Opponents of this *barakat* via touch argue that adherence to such beliefs discredits the *qotb*'s authority as a learned and godly man, with some even accusing their fellow faithful of believing in superstition (*khorāfāt*). Moving away from what has been called the routinization of charismatic authority within Twelver Shi'ism,[16] this order instead desires their *qotb*'s legitimacy be based on erudition and ethical comportment, rather than an embodied and seemingly a priori charisma.

The final case study looks at a Sufi collective who reject the idea of a single *qotb* altogether, deferring almost all forms of authority that usually lie with a traditional Sufi leader—i.e., providing ethical guidance to a wide a range of inquiries, proper interpretation of key texts, and acting as a source of emulation—to the group as a whole. A smaller and more recently formed group, they do not adhere to the teachings of a single authority, but rather deem the writings of a number of twentieth-century Iranian Shi'i Sufi *shaykh*s—some still living—equally vital and worthy of attention. While this may seem like a sharp deviation from "traditional" Sufi practices, it was actually quite common in the early modern and medieval periods for mystical seekers to study and even accept initiation with multiple masters during their lifetime. This contemporary Sufi collective similarly demonstrates how authority can be perceived as pluralistic, dispersed, and contradictory, as the members exhibit an almost ambivalent attitude toward the question of leadership. Indeed, in their discussion with me, my interlocutors seemed largely uninterested in their decisions regarding the lack of leadership, even among those who act as the group's primary organizers and could have taken up such a role. Within this very ambivalence, however, is a pointed stance that reveals their thoughts on the best methods for obtaining esoteric knowledge.

Whether these deferrals exist in the form of outsourcing responsibilities, rejecting the idea of embodied and charismatic leadership, or questioning the need for a single, "top down" pedagogy as a whole, this apparent "limiting" of the authority figure's powers operates as editorial practice. Contrary to many modern conceptions of power,[17] the goal of authority figures in contemporary Shi'i Sufism in Iran is not to amass as much power as possible, but to ensure that power exists in the most proper and effective form according to the tenets of their own system of belief. Through tracing these willing relinquishments, we can thus not only see several disparate idealizations of esoteric authority, but also gain a greater understanding of the epistemologies of contemporary Sufism as a whole.

## Questions for Another: The *Shariat* outside the Jurisdiction of the *Shaykh*

The members of the Nimatullahi Soltanalishahi Shi'i Sufi Order[18] are undoubtedly devoted to their *qotb*, as well as their *shaykh*s. They travel long distances on overnight buses to hear the elderly *qotb*, who no longer ventures far, speak in Tehran; some of the travelers are also, themselves, in the autumn of their years. Sometimes, members bring notes to and take notes in their meetings with *shaykh*s, as they discuss inquiries of everyday life, dreams they have had, or thoughts on their relationship with God. The *shaykh*s and *shaykhiyya*s

[16] Dabashi, *Authority in Islam*; Takim *The Heirs of the Prophet*. For more, see footnote 34.

[17] Arendt, "What is Authority," 91–142.

[18] The order, who are all ethnically Persian and vehemently Shi'i, claim lineage to Shah Nimatullah Vali, who founded the order in the early fifteenth century in the southeastern Iranian city of Kerman, and to that Imam Ali before him. They have meeting places (*khaneqa*s) throughout Iran—although the extent of their presence various greatly in different cities—and are a mixed-gender and mixed-class order.

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(the female leaders) are equally devoted, as many have full careers outside the Sufi community and yet still spend much time organizing events, the upkeep of the *khaneqa*, and making themselves available to the faithful whenever possible. Despite the often-intimate relationship within the order, its authority figures send their followers to seek guidance from another in certain matters; specifically, any and all matters relating to the *shariat*. In such cases, authorities refer their members to an outside *mujtahid*, noting that the authority of their *qotb* only relates to the *tariqat,* the dimension of the faith that deals with internal and "hidden," rather than worldly, matters. This is also of particular importance because the Nimatullahi Soltanalishahi Order also consistently emphasize the importance of both the *shariat* and *tariqat,* the division of esoteric knowledge within Islam.

These bifurcations of authority have been consistent since the order's revival in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as Alessandro Cancian has thoughtfully explored. Cancian notes how, in the era when the Nimatullahi began returning to Iran after a long period of semi-exile in the Deccan,[19] its earliest leadership possessed no juridical training and relied on charismatic authority instead.[20] The second generation of Nimatullahi leadership overcorrected this, receiving formal Shi'i training and arguing that their authority came from erudition first and foremost. The third generation, and the model upon which Nimatullahi leadership was subsequently based, positioned themselves roughly in some sort of middle ground. As Cancian writes:

> These masters-scholars of the second generation functioned as a bridge between the first charismatic masters and the third generation of Niʿmatullāhī leaders who, rather than settling on the juridical stand of their predecessors, built on their legacy and readapted the pre-existing tradition, operating a synthesis of classical, non-juridically minded Persian Sufism and 18th and 19th century Uṣūlī Twelver Shiʿism, incorporating elements of Akhbārī thought in the process.[21]

In another words, they no longer assumed the role of *mujtahid*, leaving the legal scholarship to others, with the *qotb* Sultan Ali Shah proposing that legal scholars (*fuqaha*) assert their authority (*walaya*) "through a chain of transmission similar to that of the Sufis themselves."[22]

The reasons why the shift occurred are varied, must be ultimately deduced from the information we have, and can be difficult to trace given the many splinter groups that arose from the Nimatullahi revival.[23] Given the intense persecution of Sufi Orders in the late Qajar era,[24] even though less severe than in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries,[25] it is reasonable to deduce that the Nimatullahis made such a shift in order to avoid the ire of the seminaries (*howzeh*) or state authorities. Ata Anzali has noted how it took several decades for the Nimatullahis, after their arrival from India, to understand how to safely incorporate themselves into the political and religious landscape of Iran, which included

[19] Pourjavady and Wilson, *Kings of Love: The Poetry and History of the Ni'matullahi Sufi Order*; Lewisohn, "An introduction to the history of modern Persian Sufism, 1 Part I: The Ni'matullāhī order: persecution, revival and schism," 437–464.

[20] Cancian, "Sufi Mysticism and Uṣūlī Shiʿism: Practical Authority in Modern Iranian Shiʿi Sufism," 247.

[21] Ibid., 248.

[22] Ibid., 249.

[23] Anzali "*Mysticism" in Iran: the Safavid roots of a modern concept*, 191.

[24] See Van den Bos, *Mystic regimes: Sufism and the state in Iran, from the late Qajar era to the Islamic Republic*; Anzali, "*Mysticism" in Iran;* Algar, *Religion and State in Iran 1785–1906*.

[25] The seventeenth century is well documented as an era of extreme Sufi persecution, most of which was led by Usuli *ulama* and included figures such as Muhammad al-Bihbahani, the notorious "Sufi-killer" *sufi-kush*. To gain a better understanding of such discourses, see Anzali's compilation of anti-Sufi treatises written between 1795 and 1820: Anzali, *"Mysticism" in Iran,* 188. Anzali and Abbas Ammanat have noted how the early Qajar state, cementing its ties with the *ulama*, also condoned and abetted violence against Sufis at the time. Anzali, 189–190; Amanat, *Resurrection and renewal: The making of the Babi movement in Iran, 1844–1850.*

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the leadership receiving formal religious training in seminaries and acknowledging authority figures outside their immediate circle.[26] Further, while a *howzeh* education is no longer required, the Nimatullahis clearly understood they needed to see the training and role of their authority figures in light of the broader religio-political landscape they inhabited. Thus, this deferral of authority arose as a survival tactic first and foremost, rather than as the result of purely theological considerations. In order to exist at all, the Nimatullahis had to affirm both that they were not positioning themselves as an alternative to the theocratic powers of the time and that their own leaders would acquiesce to those in positions of power, therein tailoring their own conceptualizations of authority accordingly.

### *Establishing Jurisdictions: Defining the* Shariat *and* Tariqat

Clearly, the Nimatullahi Order has turned to outsiders for matters relating to the *shariat* for over a century. However, the kind of matters has changed, particularly over the past twenty-five years and with the advent of the Islamic Republic. Indeed, whereas the *qotb*s from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries typically discussed the *shariati* vis-à-vis its relationship with the *tariqat*—its esoteric counterpart—contemporary writings on the *shariat* now include issues like electoral politics and "social affairs" (*ravābit-e ijtimāyī*). This section will hence trace the deferral of authority within the Nimatullahi Soltanalishahi Sufi Order, the bifurcation of the *shariat* and *tariqat* as analogous to the role of the *mujtahid* versus that of the *shaykh*, and how the articulation of this distancing from *shariat* matters has changed over the twentieth century. Through these deferrals, we thus see how the Sufi Order views itself as part of a larger Shi'i community, one where there is always a *mujtahid* available, all the while reserving the right to advise on matters of the *tariqat*.

Before analyzing the deferral of authority that occurs within the Soltanalishahi Order, it is beneficial to first understand how these mystics conceive of the *shariat*. To do so, one must look to their interpretation of the *shariat*/*tariqat* binary. As is often the case with Sufi orders, the Soltanalishahis see *shariat* and *tariqat* as analogous to exoteric (*zāhir*) and esoteric (*bātin*) knowledge respectively; so the *shariat* does remain a key concern for them, as their ultimate objective of mystical union with the divine (*tawhīd*) cannot be achieved without both.

As one of the order's recent *qotb*s, Hajj Ali Tabandah Mahbub Ali Shah (d. 1997), describes in an introductory text often given to followers when they begin studying mysticism: "In Islam, Sufism or gnosis (*irfān*) is the inward dimension of the religion, like the seed of a nut whose shell is the outward rules (shariat) and whose seed is the path (tariqat) …."[27]Although still privileging the *tariqat* as the "seed," the *shariat* is also viewed as important: the protective outer shell guarding the treasure inside.

He also expanded on the division between the faith's disparate elements and the appropriate master to whom one must refer in a sermon:

> The responsibilities appointed by the sacred religion have been implicitly divided into three kinds by the high ranking gnostics (*urāfā*): 1) Principles of the shari'at which must be obtained by imitation (*taqlid*) from a completely qualified expert in Islamic law (mujtahid); and the discernment of such a *marjā* is the duty of every responsible person himself. 2) Principles of the tariqat which are to be obtained from the current Master, and instruction in gnosis (*irfān*) is also to be found in the books of the great gnostics (*urāfā*). 3) Personal principles are to be discerned by the person himself, in the sense that God, the Exalted (*mutaʿālī*), wants the spiritual powers of His servants to be put into practice, and to be exalted, and since He, the Sublime (*alīy*), has bestowed them, it becomes a

[26] Anzali, *"Mysticism" in Iran*, 190–191. See also Tabandeh, *The Rise of the Ni 'matullāhī Order: Shi'ite Sufi Masters against Islamic Fundamentalism in 19th-Century Persia*.

[27] Tabandeh, Hajj Ali Mahbub Ali Shah in Pazouki, *Sultan 'Alishahi Order The Sufi Path: An Introduction to the Ni'matullahi Sultan 'Alishahi Order*.

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> duty that aside from the two areas mentioned above one should personally discover one's responsibilities by one's own religious thinking and reasoning.[28]

Here then, Nur'Ali goes into more detail regarding the trifurcated responsibilities of the mystic: 1) affirming the importance of imitation (*taqlid*) and legal reasoning (*ijtihād*) from a *mujtahid*; 2) explicitly avowing the importance of books as sources of "instruction in gnosis"; and 3) describing the discovery of one's personal responsibilities as relating to a desire of God. Thus, the "thinking and reasoning" of the individual, outside the instruction of the Sufi master and legal expert, are also of utmost importance; they are duties that, through the assertion of their direct relation to the divine, have also taken on a sacred dimension.

A foundational master from the late nineteenth century and major figure in the order's revival as a whole, Hajj Sultan Mohammad Gonabadi Sultan Ali Shah (d. 1909) discusses the split between *tariqat* and *shariat* largely as the result of apparent negligence on the part of the faithful and, in fact, privileges the *tariqat* with regards to the Sufis:

> In Sufi terminology, Islam has two aspects: shariat, its outer dimension, or body, and tariqat, its inner dimension, or soul. These two aspects were inseparably joined in the person of the Prophet, but little by little through the history of Islam, there were people who paid attention only to the *shari'at* and even confined Islam to this. Often the jurists (*fuqāhā*) or clerics (*ulāmā*) took this attitude. In contrast to them there were people who emphasized the spiritual path (tariqat), who became famous as Sufis.[29]

Sultan Ali Shah thus offers the ideal of the Prophet as one who exemplifies the perfect convergence of exoteric and esoteric concerns, in contrast to jurists who only focus on the external aspects of Islam discussed in the *shariat*, thereby "confining" it in the process. He also utilizes a different metaphor to describe the relationship between *shariat* and *tariqat*, body and soul, again reaffirming the corporal and intangible characterizing of the two "aspects," but also perhaps not so subtly suggesting a clear hierarchy, as it is ultimately the soul (*nafs*) that acts as the site of transformation.

Finally, Sultan Ali Shah closely echoes the late twentieth-century *qotb* when proposing that one confer with a legal expert (*mujthahid*) rather than a *qotb* or *shaykh* for matters concerning *shariat*. In other words, Sultan Ali Shah is directing his followers to an alternative spiritual authority:

> 1) Principles of the *shari'at* must be obtained from a qualified expert in Islamic law (mujtahid); 2) Principles of the *tariqat* must be obtained from the current Sufi master; 3) Personal principles must be discerned by one's own religious thinking and reasoning.[30]

Thus, Sultan Ali Shah affirms the need not only for a *mujtahid* but for the *shariat* as a whole, as only one's esoteric knowledge training should come at the hands of a Sufi master; indeed, certain "principles" are even to be discerned by the individual alone.

Both Sultan Ali Shah and Nur'Ali's constant affirmation of and attention to the *shariat* are extremely significant. It would be one thing to simply refer to an outsider for the *shariat* and then not devote too much scholarly attention to it at all, understandable given that it is not their jurisdiction. But through their writings, and the writings of others, both Sultan Ali Shah and Nur'Ali make great effort to cement the importance of the *shariat* within their broader epistemologies, therein making the outsoucing of all matters related to it all the more remarkable.

[28] Sermon, Tabandeh, Hajj Ali Mahbub Ali Shah, January 17, 1997."
[29] Sultan Ali Shah, *Bayanehha ye Hazrat Sultan Ali Shah.*
[30] Ibid.

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### *From* Shariat *to* Sīyasat *(Politics): Changing Discussions of the Role of the* Mujtahid

While the writings of Sultan Ali Shah and Hajj Ali Tabandah Mahbub Ali Shah demonstrate very similar positions regarding *qotb* inadequacy in responding to *shariat*-related matters, in recent years these discussions have taken a much more explicitly political tone. Indeed, in the past twenty-five years, *qotb*s of the Soltanalishahi Order have consistently made decrees, at least annually, explicitly emphasizing Sufis' noninterference in governance and politics—a discussion almost entirely absent from the writings of *shaykh*s and *qotbs* prior to the Islamic Revolution of 1977–79—and often with regards to *shariat* matters.

To provide just one example, the following excerpt from a decree by the recently-passed *qotb* Dr. Hajj Nur Ali Tabandeh expresses the order's removal from the arena of politics in the strongest and most unequivocal of terms.[31]

> The practice of the masters of the order had always been this…once again it is stressed that the ordinance of tariqat [the Sufi path] and Sufism and Sufi sessions, has never been adherent to any politics and party. In other words, Sufism will not interfere in politics, because it is a commandment of the heart and spirit, but individual Sufis (*fuqāhā*) are free to choose any political policy which should be in the confines of the school of Islam.…[32]

From this statement, it can be inferred that the Sufi order does not align itself with any political party, but individuals are allowed to participate and advocate for any policy they deem worthy. Clearly, advocating for electoral politics is not the this *qotb*'s concern.

Contemporary *shaykh*s have also identified historical precedence to the group's disinterest in political matters, as relayed in the following famous treatise by *qotb* Sultan Ali Shah:

> During the constitutional crisis in Iran in the first decade of the twentieth century, when the Sufis (*fuqāhā*) asked [*qotb*] Hazrat Sultan 'Alishah about their duties, he used to say, "I am a simple farmer from a village. I don't know what constitutional and absolute monarchy means." He left it to them to figure out for themselves.[33]

Even when the faithful came to ask their spiritual leader for guidance during times of major political unrest, the *qotb* disengaged himself, relaying his own ignorance on such matters. This use of historical precedent is thus relied upon as a legitimizing justification for their spiritual authorities' lack of jurisdiction in such matters

To supply just one more example, the following quote is from the first sermon Nur'Ali Tabandeh delivered upon assuming the position of *qotb*:

> Thus, interference in and expressing views about social affairs is outside the scope of tariqat [Sufi path] and the *fuqārā* [paupers, Sufis] should not expect instructions in such regards from the authorities of the Order.… The authorities of the Order will not express views on such questions so that it is not imagined that these are duties of tariqat. This same manner and absence of interference in social questions, as in the past, will be maintained.[34]

Here then, we again see the order's lack of affiliation with any political party as a whole and absence of intent to politically influence its followers. In addition, by declaring such as beyond the scope of the guides of the spiritual path, it is also made clear that Sufi authorities will not advise their followers on "social affairs."

[31] Nur'Ali Tabandeh passed away in 2019.
[32] Tabandeh, Hajj Ali Mahbub Ali Shah, "Sermon, January 17, 1997."
[33] Sultan Ali Shah, *Bayanehha ye Hazrat Sultan Ali Shah*.
[34] Tabandeh, "Sermon, March 21, 1997."

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Ultimately, the Soltanalishahi Order's outsourcing of *shariat*-related matters demonstrates a unique interpretation of authority for a Sufi circle. Islamic authority is here willingly given up by the very figures who might have wielded it, instead choosing to edit through excision their understanding of the role of the *qotb* and *shaykh*. While the Nimatullahi Order initially faced intense persecution upon their return from India in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and it is clear that the "decision" to work closely with the clerical establishment was most likely not one of their own making, the Soltanalishahi Nimatullahis had already given much thought to how and why such bifurcations of authority should occur by that time. In other words, while the deferral of authority may have been borne out of political necessity, it was later articulated in more theological terms. Indeed, their specific reading of the *shariat* demands it be handled by, in their view, one better trained to interpret it; an idea that both predates the Islamic Revolution and continues through to the present day, when the role of the *mujtahid* has been much widened in scope.

## Touch and Authority: The Refusal of Embodied Charisma

Let us move now to another collective with a very different understanding of authority. I use a pseudonym here, especially since some of the sentiments expressed by the group might be challenged as superstitious (*khorāfāti*) and thus worthy of derision.[35] I will call them the Delneshin Order, or the Delneshinniya, and there exists a controversy within the group around their *qotb*'s authority, particularly regarding the role of his body and person.[36] This debate became clear to me while observing the actions of certain Sufis, and others' *reactions* to these actions, after a meeting with their *qotb* . I will explain.

When the elderly *qotb* comes to speak, either for a sermon or in a more intimate question-and-answer session that immediately follows a sermon, he will sit in a chair set in the middle of the room, so his unamplified voice can carry. Further, while these question-and-answer sessions take place in a gender-segregated setting, the *qotb* himself will enter the women's section during the event. After the discussion is done and he has filed out of the room, people will reach out to touch the chair he had been sitting on, drawing their hands along the pillow against which his back had rested, grazing their hands on the top of the small table placed beside the chair. Others will grasp and release the glass cup he had been using for tea, and occasionally someone takes the rumpled napkins he had used, as if collecting a sacred residue left behind. For some *darvish*, this form of interacting with the *qotb* gives evidence to a belief that their leader's body can act as a transmitter of blessing (*barakat*), as his material being possesses some sort of sacral power.

Other Sufis within the very same order, however, frown upon such practices—touching tea cups, grazing his chair—claiming they distract from the *qotb*'s real power, derived from his knowledge and learning, his goodness and godliness. Such Sufis expressed their displeasure about these practices to me clearly; so there is some low-level grumbling, some clicking of tongues, some eye-rolling at their fellow *darvish.* In other words, there is disagreement within the order about the nature of the *qotb*'s authority, from where it derives, and how they might benefit from being in his presence.

At the same time, there was no real disagreement on the matter between the elders and other group leaders. The majority spoke in gentle tones and none outwardly condoned the practice, although some were more sympathetic to the desires of the lay faithful than others. Clearly though, this was not a form of authority for which the leadership wished to be

[35] For more on current debates and accusations of superstition in contemporary Iran, see Doostdar, *The Iranian Metaphysicals: Explorations in Science, Islam, and the Uncanny.*

[36] I am providing woefully little information about the order, as per their request. However, I can say: they have been functioning for over twenty years; there are a few, self-published written materials from the collective that circulate among more educated members; some of the leaders have formal religious training, but most do not; and many members follow both outside *marja-e taqlid* and their *qotb*.

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known. In this section, I trace the thoughts of individuals on both sides of the debate, analyzing how and why this refutation of embodied charisma and transmissible *barakat* are situated within the Iranian theological landscape today.

### *Tactility, Intimacy, Authority*

"You know, I don't even know why I do it. I just feel compelled to do it, I *must* touch some part of his chair when he gets up," Laleh explained to me. She used the Persian expression *Dast-e khudam nīst*, in this case, meaning something along the lines of "I just can't help myself," or a more literal translation being "It's out of my hands." What is achieved through touching these surfaces and what does it mean to how these Sufi understand authority? Is it an old-fashioned form of saint worship, where the faithful see their *shaykh* as some sort of supernatural being, such that even his trash may possess talismanic powers?[37]

Touch is a powerful and widespread practice in contemporary Iranian Shi'i devotional practices, as is the collecting of small tokens from shrines. Anyone who has visited one of the popular Shi'i shrines, whether the Hazrat Masumih in Qom or Shah Chiragh in Shiraz, has witnessed the touching of the tomb. As one circumambulates around their half of the tomb (the large shrines are gender segregated, with a heavy curtain dividing the room in two, so that one half of the tomb is in the men's section, the other side in the women's), many individuals clutch at the *zarīh*, the metal latticework that encapsulates the glass case housing the casket itself. As people move around the tomb (*maghbare)* slowly, in a single direction to prevent crowding, fingers remain intertwined with the gold or silver *zarīh*, each step forward accompanied by a release and subsequent new clasp. Oftentimes further contact is made as people lean forward, pressing their foreheads against the latticework as they recite prayers under their breath; others kiss the outside of the tomb multiple times. Even at small, local shrines where there is no crowd and hence no limit on the time one might spend at the foot of the departed saint, people will perform similar actions: touching, clasping, leaning, kissing.

There is an intimacy here, and a desire; a longing to get as close to the beloved figure as possible (and, less this be perceived as a Shi'i-specific phenomenon, one only needs to observe the crush of devotees reaching out to touch the Kaaba during their circumambulation during the Hajj, or such practices as touching saintly figures among Sunni Sufi communities in South Asia).[38] By extending their hands, the Sufis of the Delneshin Order are confirming their understanding of their *qotb* as a beloved figure of devotion, just like those who kiss the tombs of their imams and the imam's family members. Furthermore, while the Sufis are not touching a tomb or a shrine, but instead banal objects that have come into contact with their *qotb*, they are also turning to touch as a way of interacting with their spiritual authority figure.

Of course, there were compelling differences in people's reasons for reaching out. In some cases, people discussed their reasons enthusiastically and emphatically, expressing real fervor in their response. For Laleh, it was an extension of her deep love for her *qotb*, such that her touching of his chair was an almost reflexive act. She was not able to articulate "why" she does it, suggesting that what moved her was something closer to the register of the instinctual, beyond elucidation and conscious thought. An older gentlemen, Mojtaba, told me: "This, the chair that Hazrat Agha sat in...when I put my hand on it, I get a charge from it!" Here he used the anglicized word "charge," as in a jolt of energy or transference of power. In this case, it is as if a force is being transmitted from the chair to Mojtaba, an electric circuit flowing from the *qotb* to the chair to Mojtaba. In her analysis of South Asian

[37] Absent from this discussion (for reasons of scope) is the social power of trash and detritus. For more on this topic, see Stamatopolou-Robbins, *Waste Siege*; Carl A. Zimring and Rathje, *Encyclopedia of Consumption and Waste: The Social Science of Garbage*, Vol. 1.

[38] Boivin and Delage, *Devotional Islam in Contemporary South Asia: Shrines, Journeys and Wanderers*; Chauhan, "The Healing Touch Saint: Baba Chamliyal Shrine at the International Border in Samba District."

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reform Sufism, Pnina Werbner found a similar phenomenon, as her interlocutors sought to absorb some of what she called the "charismatic embodiment" of the *shaykh*, writing: "so powerful is this embodiment that merely to touch anything that has come into contact with the saint is to absorb some of his magical potency."[39] Among the Delneshinniya, some mentioned that whatever the *qotb* touched, it was as if it he had said prayers over it, blessed it. One person mentioned the potentially healing powers of something their *pīr* came into contact with, claiming her headaches go away whenever she sees the *qotb* in person, and this pain moratorium lasts longer if she touches his chair.[40]

For these individuals, their *qotb* is not only a teacher who can provide proper guidance and knowledge, but also someone who possesses *barakat* within his very being, to the point that even coming into indirect contact with him enables one to receive some form of blessing. It is a different envisioning of an authority figure, where the authority—through their intimate relation to God—is seen as ontologically and existentially distinct from the common person, as they contain within their person the stuff and substance of the divine. The Sufis reaching out to touch where the *qotb* has been is confirmation of their belief in an authority figure whose very body provides a moment of interaction with *barakat*. And of course, so strong is this embodied sacrality that it is transmitted onto the inanimate objects with which the *qotb* comes into contact; the corporeal, the cosmological and the banal all converging in a single instance.

In considering this transmission from person to object, I am reminded of a poignant story of a chain of handshakes originating with the Prophet of Islam that Shahzard Bashir analyzed in his insightful book *Sufi Bodies*.[41] According to Said Habashi, a companion of the Prophet, the Prophet stated:

> Whoever shakes my hand, I will shake his hand on the day of resurrection and will be obligated to intercede on his behalf. Likewise, anyone who shakes the hand of someone who shook my hand—up to seven subsequent links—I will shake his hand on the day of resurrection and will be obligated to intercede on his behalf.[42]

Bashir then goes on to describe the story of the seventh and final recipient of these prophetic handshakes, a man named Hafiz Sultan Ali Awbahi, who wrote of his life-changing experience some eight hundred years after the death of the Prophet. In both this story and the instance of the Delneshinniya, touch is used as a way to come into contact with an absent figure, despite the fact that touch typically requires physical immediacy and presence.

> In another instance of transmission through contact, Jamal Elias wrote about how the passing down of a Sufi robe (*khīrqā*) between master and disciple

> can have a transformative impact on the disciple, in that it carries the master's spiritual state (as if it were carrying perfume), and envelops the disciple in it, thereby helping him to attain the degree of advancement the master wants.[43]

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[39] Pnina Werbner, "Reform Sufism in South Asia," 60.

[40] Of course, embracing the idea of charismatic authority is a well-documented phenomenon, especially in Shi'i and Sufi communities, even into the present day. The reliance on charismatic authority, as a whole, is a huge arena of debate within Shi'i studies. Hamid Dabashi has argued that the importance of charismatic authority originates not in the figure of Imam Ali, but in the figure of the Prophet himself, who altered the political sphere of pre-Islamic Arabia by offering the idea and practice of leadership by a single individual endowed with qualities that could not be replicated (Dabashi, *Authority in Islam*. See also Dabashi, *Shi'ism: a religion of protest*, 37). Liyakat Takim has made the point that this charisma was then "routinized" in Shi'i communities, becoming an expected characteristic or quality that all Shi'i leaders must possess (Takim, *The Heirs of the Prophet*).

[41] Bashir, *Sufi Bodies*, 1.

[42] Bashir, *Sufi Bodies,* 1.

[43] Elias, "The Sufi Robe (Khirqa) as a Vehicle of Spiritual Authority," 276.

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Whether through contact with furniture, clothing, or hands, this idea of sacral transmission through intermediary figures or objects—a sort of "secondhand" contact, if you will—remains a powerful force.

While most of my interlocutors were enthusiastic in describing their reasons for reaching out, others were more ambivalent in their response. A woman named Batul, with whom I had traveled from another city to see the *qotb*, had taken a napkin that held a cookie for the *pīr*. When I inquired about it, she shrugged and told me, "I don't get to see the *qotb* in person that frequently, this is just a little memento (*yādegārī*) of Hazrat Agha for myself." Here there is no discussion of electric charges or compulsion, but rather something to mark the trip and remember the spiritual leader; detritus as keepsake. Another young woman was actually sheepish in her response. When I asked Mojgan about her reasons for touching the *qotb*'s chair and tea cup, she seemed a bit embarrassed, even telling me, "Oh! You noticed that! Well, I'm a really tactile person, you know when I visit the graves of my family members, my mom teases me that I like to caress (*nāz*) them"—here she chose a word commonly used to describe stroking the head of a child. "I guess this is the same," Mojgan continued, "but maybe I shouldn't do it, maybe it's not right to do so."

"What might make it not right?" I inquired.

"Some people say it's like a form of superstition (*khorāfāt*), that it's not proper, and Shi'is especially shouldn't do such things because we are always accused of idolatry (*shirk*) and the like," Mojgan explained. Here, Mojgan expressed not only her awareness of the fact that touching the *qotb*'s items might be seen as inappropriate, a form of superstition, but also that as a Shi'i she must be sensitive to the misrepresentations and accusations that plague her faith. As is so often the case, here we see the global and geopolitical infiltrate moments that are intimate and personal. Still, despite her hesitancy, it was not enough to prevent her from reaching out, clasping and releasing her fingers around the narrow-waisted tea glass.

I highlight Batul and Mojgan's ambivalence here because their opinions provide an interesting bridge between members of the Delneshin Order who described pocketing napkins and touching furniture as expressing a form of love or devotion to the *qotb*, and members who actively looked down on or disapproved of such actions. In this next section, I highlight conversations I had with some of these Sufis, who took pains to elaborate to me, the anthropologist and outsider, their displeasure at the activities of their peers. These are the individuals who do *not* understand the *qotb*'s sacrality to be transmissible via touch, who altogether reject this type of embodied *barakat* and the authority it entails, and feel that such beliefs ultimately undermine their *qotb*'s position as a learned and godly man.

### *A Hands-off Sacrality*

"Don't think we all do this type of improper (*nāh-monāsib*) thing!"

On one of my very first visits to a Sufi meeting, an acquaintance of mine, a woman in late-middle age named Khadijeh, who knew I was from America and interested in contemporary Sufism, spoke these words to me as we filed past the *qotb*'s chair, many hands reaching out to graze its surface.

"I'm sorry?" I replied, a bit startled.

"We don't all think Hazrat Agha can fly and the like."

"Oh, I…I didn't think so."

"I just wanted to make it clear to you," she continued, more gently now, "that not all of us believe in such nonsense (*dari-vari*)."

Khadijeh's unprompted comments clearly expressed a desire to clarify to me—the anthropologist—that not all members of the order take part in what she called "improper" (*nāh-monāsib*) activities, ensuring I knew that there were Sufis who disapproved of such behavior. She also seamlessly tied together the practice of touching the chair with a belief in the miraculous—i.e., the *qotb* "can fly." Khadijeh was right in that there were members of the order who relayed stories of their spiritual leader performing superhuman feats—flying,

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appearing in far-flung places only minutes apart, making the deaf hear and the blind see—although they were a relatively small minority.

Khadijeh, of course, approved of neither of those proclivities, and she was not alone in expressing displeasure at her fellow Sufis who did. Underlying these concerns is not only a different theological stance, but a particular politics of respectability. This is a preemptive stance taken under the assumption of accusation, an awareness that, as Sufis, they will face accusations of indulging in superstition (*khorāfāt*) or worse. Khadijeh's fears about how her group might be represented by an outsider led her to comment and condemn, quick to assure me that others do not share this theological interpretation of the *qotb*'s authority and power.

Alireza Doostdar has written thoughtfully on how Iranian religio-spiritual groups and individuals outside the mainstream are also highly sensitive to their image as false prophets and charlatans.[44] Indeed, Doostdar explores how Islamic occultists insist on the rational and scientific nature of their work, which includes exorcisms, geomancy, and other engagements with the unseen (*al-ghayb*), at least partially in order to ward off accusations of idolatry (*shirk*) and superstition (*khorāfāt*). Such accusations occur not only in whispered exchanges and suspicious glances, but also in television debates, essays in newspapers both yellow and respectable, and at the highest registers of government, as Doostdar and others have shown.[45]

Furthermore, there were still others who disapproved of the touching on more theologico-intellectual grounds. One such person was Mr. Kamal. An elderly fellow, Mr. Kamal and his wife Ezzat Khanum were lifelong Sufis, but had markedly different understandings of how they conceived of their spiritual authority figure. Retired from a life of manual labor, Mr. Kamal spent his time selling secondhand books, prayer beads, and small metal objects he thought would make nice decorative pieces; a collection of items laid out on a blanket on the side of the road. I found it somewhat poignant that, despite the fact that he spent much of the day surrounded by objects, he found it completely disdainful that anyone would take a keepsake of the *qotb*. Ezzat Khanum wholly disagreed and, when I visited their home, brought out a pen that had belonged to an earlier *qotb*, which prompted the discussion in the first place. Mr. Kamal scoffed,

> "She thinks this pen has magical powers! Can you believe it? Hazrat Agha has a [professional degree], he is a learned man.[46] In his lectures, he speaks of Najl-al Balagha, *hadith*, poetry and with such artistry! His *tafsīr* is so rich, so much better than the CDs of these other clergy. And you think he is some magical, mystical man with magic pens!

Here, Mr. Kamal used the word *qalāndar*, which often connotes an itinerant mystic, but in this context was used derisively, giving the impression of a cartoonish holy man peddling wares. Ezzat Khanum countered,

> "Can you believe this man [*Ajab ādamiye!*]? Every idiot in government is an engineer of this or that, can write great texts and even poetry (*shihr*). Hazrat Agha has a heart that is pure, a heart that is polished by God, his cells are different from you and me. Can you blame if I wanted a little memento of this man? We are also old and can't get to the sessions unless my daughter takes me, at least I have a little something of him close to me here.

[44] Doostdar, *Iranian Metaphysicals.*

[45] Perlmutter, "The Politics of The Politics of Muslim Magic," 73–80; El-Zein, *Islam, Arabs and the Intelligent World of the Jinn*; Sengers, *Women and Demons: Cult Healing in Islamic Egypt*.

[46] It is true that the *qotb* possessed a graduate degree in a secular field. I am not mentioning the specific degree in order to better conceal his identity.

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Embedded within this husband and wife debate are two long-standing viewpoints in a deeply entrenched debate in the history of Islam: What is the source of spiritual authority? Is it based on learned wisdom, gleaned from deep study of canonical texts and the ability to convey that information thoughtfully and eloquently to the masses? Or, is authority found within individuals who possess a form of radical spirito-corporeal alterity, and only they are existentially and ontologically distinctive enough to lead us? For Ezzat Khanum, to be learned was not enough; graduate degrees and the ability to produce scholarly or poetic works are too commonplace. Instead, she praised the *qotb*'s heart as "polished by God." For many Sufis, the heart is the organ that acts as the seat of one's spirituality and spiritual development, the corporeal home of the soul (*nafs*) and esoteric knowledge. It is for this reason that there exists innumerable *paens* within mystical literatures indicating that one must be guided by and see, listen, and think with the heart.[47] It is this spirito-corporeal supremacy over the average person that makes the *qotb* so singular, so ontologically disparate, and therein worthy of being a figure of authority. It is also for this reason that Ezzat Khanum wished to keep a memento of him.

Within Shi'ism, there are millennia-long debates about the metaphysical and cosmological powers contained in the bodies of authority figures, especially the Twelve Imams themselves. Stories of the Imams' supernatural powers—such as the ability to fly, speak to animals, or cure the blind—have been around since the time of the first Imam. These stories' proliferation and circulation most likely reached their peak during the medieval period, particularly in the time of the eleventh and twelfth Imams, Hasan al-Askari and Muhammad al-Mahdi, when exponentially more people had *heard* about the Imams than had actually seen them.[48] Within these narratives, the Imam's body is a manifestation of the powers of the divine, and it is thus unencumbered by the limits of the profane world and human body. Beyond the Imams' bodies, Shahzard Bashir has written about Sufi families who claim their authority derives from a spiritually superior bloodline, allowing for generations of a single family to inherit positions of authority, moving beyond narratives of the miraculous and a more genetic form of corporal-spirituality.[49] Others have explored how, even in death, the body of the saint maintains its otherworldly capabilities, where bones have curative powers and corpses are incapable of decay.[50]

Given the long history of Sufi authority figures whose bodies were considered ontologically distinctive from the lay person, my interlocutors committed to this idea were clearly inheritors of an established and storied tradition. Even outside Sufi networks, Iranians today are invested in touch as an expression of faith, reaching out to touch graves and tombs, shrines and dust. Intimacies developed and maintained through moments of tactility.

On the other side of the debate, my interlocutors who dismissed ideas of the spiritio-corporeal and were invested instead in an authority derived exclusively from formalized training and education, intellectual acuity, and spiritual development on the path (*tariqa*), also had many intellectual grandfathers to turn to support their claims. Perhaps the most classic example of this turn towards more textually-derived authority is that of the Safavid Period, when the ruling dynasty's financial and political commitment to developing seminaries (*hawza*) allowed for the institutionalized education of Shi'i clerics.[51] Ultimately, I highlight the thoughts of these lay members of the Delneshin Order to demonstrate that conceptualizations and debates around the ideal form of mystical authority occur at both

[47] Kugle, "The Heart of Ritual is the Body: Anatomy of an Islamic Devotional Manual of the Nineteenth Century," 42–60; Bashir, *Sufi Bodies.*

[48] The eleventh Imam, Hasan al-Askari, and the twelfth Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi, faced persecution to such an extent that they lived most of their lives in hiding. According to Shi'i sources, the twelfth is of course still in hiding, a phenomenon known as the major occultation. See Haider, *Shi'i Islam: An Introduction;* Muharrami, "History of Shi'ism: From the Advent of Islam up to the End of Minor Occultation."

[49] Bashir, *Sufi Bodies*.

[50] Kugle, *Sufis and Saints' Bodies*.

[51] Abisaab, *Converting Persia: religion and power in the Safavid Empire*.

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the "elite" and "non-elite" levels, with those who believe that their *qotb* does *not* possess certain powers arguing as passionately as those who argue they do.

### *The Gentle Hand of the* Shaykhs

Finally, we arrive to the thoughts of the *shaykh*s: those members of the order who attained the title of *shaykh* from the *qotb*, teach classes, give talks, and provide guidance for the faithful and other important members of the order, including elder women. These are the individuals with the ability to condemn or condone the tendency toward touch, declaring it either "not right" (*nahdorost*) or appropriate or laudatory. Where did they fall in this debate on the nature of the *qotb*'s authority?

Simply put, not a single one condoned the touching of the chair or similar activities. Their stance was clear: this was not an activity they engaged in themselves, and neither they nor the *qotb* ever referred to his person as having inherent or transmissible healing or similar qualities. In discussions on the matter, several brought up, unprompted by me, their highest-ranking member's qualifications. Namely, that he had been selected to be *qotb* by the previous *qotb* in consultation with other senior members of the group, based on his great erudition and knowledge, his composition of poetry, his ability to communicate the love of God in his sermons, the kindness of his heart, and his advanced age. One also mentioned that the *qotb* had spent some time in the *howzeh* as a young man, even though he ultimately continued his studies in the secular university system. Clearly, the authority embraced by the Delneshinniya leadership is one based on scholarly knowledge, oratory skills, and ethical comportment rather than an embodied charisma characterized by an ability to perform miracles.

At the same time, none of the order's half dozen leaders spoke of people's habit of touching in particularly harsh terms. If there was a refutation of the notion of embodied charisma, it was certainly a gentle one. Indeed, some even seemed sympathetic, explaining the desire for contact as an affective response to being in the presence of the *qotb*. As one female elder told me, "People get very emotional when they [are] in the presence of Hazrat Agha, they can't help themselves," echoing Laleh's assertion that her desire "was out of her hands." One senior *shaykh* interpreted their actions thusly: "It is not the appropriate response, but it is an understandable one." His sympathetic description seemed to confirm the difficulty in condemning the acts outright, acknowledging instead those gray zones that occur when there are things that may not be "appropriate" but are also not really worthy of rebuke. As a whole, the *shaykh*s and elders were much more forgiving than some of the lay people who condemned the touching as disrespectful of the critical thinking that should underscore all mystical epistemologies.

How does one explain this "soft" rejection of embodied charisma, and the type of mysticism—intuitive, miraculous—that it invokes? I would argue it demonstrates that although the leadership is committed to a form of Islamic mysticism centered around learned knowledge, proper ethical comportment, and an intimate relationship with God, they also understand that it is not always possible for lay members to toe the line, so to speak. By not speaking harshly about their order members' actions, the leadership are acknowledging the importance of the faithful's emotional experience and the intimacy they feel with their *qotb*, even if the leadership cannot fully condone the ways such sentiments are expressed. With these allowances, the leadership is acknowledging and affirming the importance of the lay Sufi's individualized experience, especially their affection for the *qotb*, even if such diverges from what the *shaykh*s and *shaykhiyya*s would consider the ideal form of worship (*ibadat*). It would seem then, that some things are perhaps more important than being "perfect" in one's practice.

As such, the Delneshinniya's insistence reveals that it is not only the deferral of authority that gives insight into the order's epistemologies and practices, but also the ways in which such refutations are articulated. By paying attention to these more nuanced aspects of the refutation, we see the unique and somewhat poignant relationship that exists between the

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order's leadership and the lay faithful, where *shaykh*s demonstrate a kind flexibility rather than strict adherence to an unwavering ideal. This flexibility, in turn, reveals the *shaykh*s attitude toward esotericism as a whole, a form of faith that allows for some infallibility and some gentle transgressions, so long as they work towards a greater intimacy as a whole. In a way, there are almost two forms of refuting certain types of authority within the Delneshin Order: the first is what we have discussed thus far, advocating against embodied charisma, by both lay and elite; and the second is the leadership's refusal to clamp down on the belief and practice of *barakat*-via-touch. They certainly possess the authority to do so—they could issue a decree, give a sermon, or simply make a statement—but have chosen against. The order's leaders instead demurred, deciding not to exercise their powers so as to allow their followers to experience intimacy with the *qotb*. If the basis of *wilayat* is *walaya* or "friendship," at least according to certain Sufis,[52] then perhaps it is not so surprising that the Delshenin leaders employ their *walayat* in a manner to best cultivate closeness or friendship with the *qotb*.

## Of Many and None: Refusing Singular Leadership in Favor of Multiple *Qotbs*

The room did not disappoint. It was the meeting place of a Sufi group I call the Nur Street Collective. It was a sizable space, large enough to comfortably fit around fifty people. What was striking about the space, however, was not its size but the elaborate décor. Mounted on the walls was a small orchestra's worth of instruments: round and light frame drums (*daf*) that resembled large tambourines, delicate reed flutes (*niy*), a painted *setār*, and a heavy-looking dulcimer (*santur*). Alongside the instruments were framed calligraphic works of various sizes, some full of text that could not be read from afar, others consisting of a single line that could be read from the other side of the room—"Praise Saint Rumi" (*Yā Hazrat Molānā!*)—or even a single word, "*Hu!*" An assortment of other items filled the rest of the space: colorful prayer beads (*tasbih*) pinned at various intervals, light wool cloaks stretched out as display pieces, tools for self-flagellation, begging bowls, and small prayer rugs.

Amongst the cornucopia of Sufi paraphernalia, perhaps most striking to me were the photographs and paintings of well-known Iranian Sufi *pīrs*. It was not that these were images in and of themselves, as it is indeed very common for Sufis to adorn the walls of meeting places (*khāneghāh*), shrines, mausoleums, and libraries with portraits of spiritual leaders past and present. The images themselves were also not particularly remarkable: they were simple black-and-white portraits of serious-looking, bearded men shot from the neck up; color photos in a similar portrait style, only now the faces depicted were more human and imperfect, less ghostly than their black-and-white counterparts; other color photos showed a man speaking in front of a crowd; and finally several paintings of men in dress from a far-off era. Only in the photo of the man speaking to the crowd did the subject not gaze out at the viewer; his audience was trapped in the frame with him.

No, it was not the pictures' aesthetics that caught my attention; what I found unusual was that the men depicted (and they were all men) were from disparate Sufi collectives, not individuals from a single chain of succession (*selseleh*). The *qotb*s depicted were both those of the past, such as the Nurbakhshiyya and Safialishai leaders, and those still living at the time, such as Soltanalishai Pir Nur Ali Tabandeh, alongside portraits of the teacher (*ostād)* whose space I was now inhabiting. In other words, it was a veritable *Who's Who* of twentieth-century Iranian Shi'i Sufism. In taking the care to obtain, frame, and display photos and drawings of the spiritual leaders of these multiple orders, the Nur Street Collective was paying respect to multiple lineages at once, positioning themselves as a group open to an array of traditions, interpretations, and authority figures.

The collective is largely the result of the organizational efforts of an individual I call Irfan Ahmad and a few friends. These organizers were all college-educated individuals in their late

52 Soltanalishahis, "Intro to Sufism."

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twenties to late thirties, a number with young families. The large space on Nur Street where they held these gatherings was a private residence belonging to an older family member of one the organizers. Using private residences for large gatherings for devotional practices—Quranic study groups, ceremonies for mourning holidays, luncheons for saints' birthdays—is quite common in Iran.[53]

These individuals act as the group's de facto leadership—deciding meeting times for both larger and smaller gatherings, organizing volunteers to make and distribute tea and sweets at large meetings, making photocopies of readings, inviting musicians to perform on birthday celebrations (*moludi*), and the like—but their "authority," if it can be called that at all, does not extend past organizational and practical matters. Indeed, the vast majority of the Nur Street Collective's activities, i.e., smaller reading groups of roughly a dozen individuals, operate without anyone occupying the role of teacher, with members working through the material together as a group. They are a new group, and do not carry out any writing or publishing themselves.

In this regard, the Nur Street Collective seemingly echoes the countless reading groups that happen across Iran,[54] many of which focus on poetry of the medieval canon categorized under the all-purpose heading of *erfan*.[55] The very important difference between the Nur Street Collective and these other reading groups, however, is that the collective undertakes close readings of the writings of twentieth-century Iranian Sufi *qotb*s and firmly understand themselves as members of Sufi *tariqa*, with clear lineage tracing back to Shah Nimatullah Vali. It should also be noted that some writings by *qotb*s of other orders are not particularly easy to find, and so this gathering of material required effort and intentionality on the part of the members of this order.

And yet, despite identifying as Sufi (*darvish*), the order has no *qotb*, no network of *shaykh*s to act as sources of emulation or provide guidance on matters textual and/or ethical. Instead, the group eschews any sort of centralized authority altogether, rejecting the classic model of *pir-murid* relationship for a more decentralized operation that embraces a more ecumenical form of Shi'i Sufism, as evidenced by the reading and veneration of these multiple *qotb*.

During my earliest encounters with the group, I strove to understand if the Nur Street Collective see their authority figures as merely *in absentia*, either due to geographic distance or if they have passed. As I was soon to find out, however, as much as *I* was concerned with the group's relationship to authority, it was not a major point of contemplation for them.

I was very curious about the pictures and how the group understands themselves vis-à-vis the other orders whose *qotb*s adorned their walls, how they understand their own *selselehselseleh*, but Irfan Ahmad did not share my interest. "You want to categorize us properly, don't you?" he said with a bemused air. "What is our official *isnād* and the like? I must check our *selseleh* record book and get back to you." Now he was teasing. I laughed but also defended myself: "Well, you know, the teacher-student (*pīr-murid*) relationship is often so key in mysticism (*tassavuf*), with students following *one* master. To me, it's noteworthy that you recognize and read all these different *qotb*s."

"No, no, I understand," Irfan responded,

> and you know we don't read *all* of them, and some of us have read the writings of one particular order more than another, so we're not even particularly systematic in approach. But I think it is important to us to give respect to these great masters

[53] See Torab, "Piety as gendered agency: A study of Jalaseh ritual discourse in an urban neighbourhood in Iran." 235–252; and Haeri, "The Private Performance of 'Salat' Prayers: Repetition, Time, and Meaning."

[54] Niloofar Haeri has carefully examined this phenomenon, noting that many such groups indeed focus on a form of "neo-Sufism" or adjacent Sufism. Haeri, *Say What Your Longing Heart Desires: Women, Prayer, and Poetry in Iran.*

[55] For more on the emergence of the differences between *erfan* and *tasavvuf*, see Anzali, *Mysticism in Iran: the Safavid roots of a modern concept.*

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> (*ostād-ha*), they all have reached great spiritual stages. We don't discriminate between them, we are not so invested in finding out who is the best teacher or whatever, we are just curious to learn from them.

Irfan relayed his answer thoughtfully and kindly, but I could tell he was not particularly interested in the topic. Compared to our conversations about intentional listening, the dissolution of lower souls (*nafs*), and the transformative powers of meditation (*fikr*), the question of how they identified—either vis-à-vis other orders or just more generally—did not seem to inspire him in the same way. The fact that it was I, the overeager anthropologist, who was anxious to have a quick answer to the "how do you define yourself" question, pushing the conversation, was not a promising sign as to the importance of such debates in the group.

Another member of the core collective, Mohsen, also expressed ambivalence when pressed on the significance of reading the writings of disparate *shaykh*s, telling me: "They all have something to teach us, they are all Shi'i, they all write in Persian, they all follow Shah Nimatullah Valī, so we are familiar enough with their ideas (*fikrhāyishun*) to pontificate over them." In highlighting these shared similarities—Shi'i and the Persian language—Mohsen pointed to the fact that their reading choices are not entirely haphazard, but part of a broader tradition of twentieth-century, ethnically-Persian, Iranian Sufism. They are not discussing the works of twentieth-century masters from Pakistan or Senegal, but rather those with whom they are most familiar and have the most access, both logistically and intellectually. While there is undoubtedly some nationalist sentiment at play here, Mohsen's ambivalence on the matter suggests that it was more convenience than robust nationalism that led to the study of Iranian Sufism per se. As Irfan noted, it is not as "systematic" as that.

For both Mohsen and Irfan then, this more ecumenical style of Sufism—i.e., reading and recognizing the works of many—coupled with the choice to function without a clear teacher, was not an approach they came to after significant discussion and debate. Indeed, despite the outwardly radical shift from typical models of Sufi practice, this group's practice seemingly took shape without much forethought; it "just happened this way," another interlocutor noted. The decentralization of authority and embracing of multiple *qotb*s, happening almost without question, as if the need for a single leader was never an issue, demonstrates an understanding of mysticism as a largely communal practice, one less invested in reflecting on the configuration and genealogy of disparate source material and more invested in simply reading the work together.

However, others in the order approach the matter a bit differently. Bahar is one such person. A skilled *daf* player in her early thirties, Bahar was deeply invested in mystical life in the city, visiting both the Nur Street Collective and the meeting place (*khāneghā)* of a different, larger Sufi order on occasion. She would love, in her words, to spend "all the moments of [her] day" thinking through religio-philosophical matters, but worked as an accomplished engineer to pay the bills. As opposed to Irfan and Mohsen, Bahar was more invested in the fact that the group reads the work of multiple Sufi authorities, noting:

> It is used to be very common for Sufis [here she used the word *salik-hā,* or "seekers"] to visit and travel with multiple teachers, study with them for a few years, and then move on to another. Maybe one teacher might be more important than another, but not everyone had a *single* master. Even Shah Nimatullh Vali himself traveled for many years to find the proper master, but he studied with many!

Bahar is of course right. In contrast to the prevailing perception that Sufis are unwaveringly loyal to a single master, there is actually a long tradition of studying "at the feet" of many masters. As Devin Deweese points out, throughout the history of Sufism, and especially prior to the thirteenth century, "It was not only common, but nearly the rule for a Sufi

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seeker to engage with multiple masters," with some mystics boasting about the number of *shaykh*s whose *khirqās*—cloaks that are a sign of initiation—they have.[56] Even if traveling mystics did eventually settle on a primary teacher, rarely did they ever refute or disavow the learning of previous teachers. As Bahar observed, even the founder of the Nimatullahi Order himself, Shah Nimatullh Vali, spent many years traveling around the Muslim world with various teachers. Although he did eventually spend seven years studying in Mecca with Shaykh Abdo'llah Yafi, who is generally considered his most significant teacher, Shah Nimatullah Vali continued to allow students to come and go as they pleased when he became a revered master himself. Furthermore, Deweese also traces the phenomenon of what he calls "bundled *selselehs*," where individuals or collectives claim not only multiple masters but also multiple lineages, therein disrupting the narrative of Sufi *tarqia*s as neatly self-contained entities and suggesting instead a much more complex constellation of Sufi identities.[57]

Of course, the Nur Street Collective are not claiming multiple lineages (*selseleh*) when they read the works of disparate Iranian Sufi *shaykh*s. They are not using their reading lists as a means to assert authority in the way that a medieval mystic who professed initiation into multiple orders would do. Nor are the mystics of the Nur Street Collective traveling great distances to meet different masters, uprooting their lives in order to fulfill a spiritual quest as their medieval counterparts might have done. Yet, in pursuing the writings of disparate Iranian Sufi *shaykh*s, they too are part of a long practice within Islamic mysticism of seeking learning, including written directives, from a broad array of teachers rather than a single, solitary master. As Irfan noted, they are eager to acknowledge, affirm, and "respect" well-established authorities who have already given insight to so many. So the collective adorns the walls of their space with the images of these men, taking care that all the *qotb*s they read and study are represented in equal measure.

Ultimately, we see the deferral of centralized authority in favor of many textual authorities emerging out of at least two stances within the order. The one espoused by individuals like Bahar is more intentional, drawing on a long tradition of embracing multiple *qotb*s over following a single leader. Thus, these members acknowledge the importance of the role of the *qotb* or *murid*, but envision a form of Sufism where the individual is able to see multiple teachers in a lifetime, tailoring their own pedagogy and changing authority figures as suits them best. In other words, the individual ultimately must act as their own guide on the journey of their mystical path. In some sense, there are resonances here with what Shahab Ahmed has called "explorative authority." Ahmed explains: "Whereas the proponent of prescriptive authority views his authority as a license to prescribe to another, the bearer of explorative authority views his authority as a license to *explore* (by) himself."[58]

The more non-intentional, nonchalant stance assumed by Irfan and Mohsen, as they never really considered how they identified themselves vis-à-vis the *qotb*s they read or even why they embrace such an ecumenical style, is a bit different. I would argue that their lack of reflection on the decision reveals the sort of Sufism that takes community as its organizational principle over the *pir-murid* model. And while the communal, at times congregation-like aspect of Sufism has always been a vital component, it is rare to have a fully "headless" community. Instead, the Nur Street Collective assumed they would simply teach one another, not even considering that functioning without an authority figure would be an issue. I would argue that, ultimately, this lack of consideration is an even

[56] Deweese. "Organizational Patterns and Developments within Sufi Communities," 336.

[57] Deweese, "'Dis-ordering' Sufism in Early Modern Central Asia: Suggestions for Rethinking the Sources and Social Structures of Sufi History in the 18th and 19th Centuries," 268. See also DeWeese, "Re-Envisioning the History of Sufi Communities in Central Asia: Continuity and Adaptation in Sources and Social Frameworks, 16th–20th Centuries," 21–74.

[58] Ahmed, *What is Islam: The Importance of Being Islamic*, 283.

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more brutal form of rejection or deferral of authority than making the decision intentionally and amid discussion; as if it is not even worth the time.

## Conclusion

As countless studies have shown, authority within Islamic communities is constantly negotiated, debated, and re-calibrated. This, of course, also includes authority within Sufi Orders, despite the naysayers—in Iran and elsewhere—who accuse Sufi leaders of demanding full and total obedience, of "brain-washing" (*maghz-shooyi*)[59] their followers in the most extreme cases. In contrast, this article sought to examine the reasons for and ramifications of what transpires when certain forms of authority are rejected, whether by the *qotb* and *shaykh*s themselves or lay Sufis of the order. Indeed, by tracing instances when certain forms of authority are willingly eschewed—whether via the types of legitimacy that act as the basis for their authority, how authority is expressed or experienced, or deciding the appropriate duties of authority issues—we can understand not only how contemporary mystics conceptualize leadership, but their greater understanding of esoteric Islam as a whole.

When the Soltanalishahi Order advocate consulting an outside source for all matters related to the *shariat*, they are expressing not only their *qotb*'s perceived limitations and capabilities, but also revealing the assumption that they reside in a broader Shi'i community, where a *mujtahid* will always be available. Likewise, the Delneshin Order's debates on the nature of their *qotb*'s authority reveal sensitivities regarding how the group is perceived by outsiders, therein impacting intra-group dynamics, as we saw when some admonished their fellow faithful for participating in what might be seen as superstition. The Delneshin leadership's reluctance to chastise those who believe in embodied charisma, however, unlike the lay critics, demonstrates their appreciation of the power that emotion and intimacy holds for some members, even more than presenting a "united front." And of course, the Nur St. Collective eschews central leadership altogether, recognizing and reading the writings of multiple Iranian Shi'i Sufi *qotb*s and accepting them as equally worthy of study and admiration, indicating a Sufi group organized around communal reading practices first and foremost. Their ambivalence around their identity and self-categorization reveals a very unique set of organizational principles. Ultimately, debates around what comprises authority are animated, whether expressed through gentle bickering between a husband and wife or *shaykh*s citing the works of the order's past leaders. As such, in all three case studies, we see the vibrancy of the debates and discourses that surround contemporary conceptualizations of mystical authority in Iran today through moments of its deferral.

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[59] Doostdar, *Iranian Metaphysicals.*

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