Introduction

Of Sufism and Islamic unorthodoxy

The *'Alid* nature of Sufism, and that of heterodoxy in Islam in general, has been studied in various disciplines of the Humanities. Its direct connection however, to the Shi'a tradition remains to be fully explored. Shi'a-Sufi studies is a relatively new sub-field, the study of which has been limited by a lack of primary sources. Any researcher of Shi'ism in history is hindered by the very nature of the religion, which for most of its existence either concealed itself and its real beliefs, or tempered its outward identity to make it more acceptable to the orthodox. Exceptions to the above of course are to be found whenever Shi'a denominations held the reins of state power. Similarly, researchers of Shi'a connections to Sufism, or of Sufi orders with Shi'a beliefs, are for the most part confronted by high levels of secrecy.

In short, research into Shi'a-Sufi relations in the medieval period is handicapped by concealment from the outset. But primary textual evidence can undermine the attempt to conceal. Clues are from time to time left as to what was really happening. For the most part, the real corpus of beliefs would be held secretly, transmitted orally and be expressed in forms other than the ordinary, to hide them from the majority of the believers. Indeed, some of the personalities in this book, when studied through textual evidence, would appear as good 'orthodox' Sufi Muslims, who lived their lives according to the predefined structure of their *tariqat*, i.e. order. A notable example of what can be done with these sources can be found in Amina Steinfels' book *Knowledge before Action: Islamic Learning and Sufi Practice in the Life of Sayyid Jalal al-Din Bukhari Makhdum-I Jahaniyan* (2012), where she reconstructs the life and times

of Jahaniyan Jahangasht (d.1384) for the first time in modern scholarship. Steinfels' commendable work is based on textual evidence–Jahangasht's correspondence, relationships with his disciples and with the state, and material about his esoteric training as a Sufi. However Jahangasht, appears somewhat differently in this book as the evidence used to show his 'real' spiritual leanings here is mostly archaeological and metaphysical.

The aim of this book is to show the hidden connections that existed between medieval Shi'ism and Sufism, by mainly examining the link that the Suhrawardi Sufi Order shared with the *Nizari* Isma'ili tradition of Shi'a Islam. The use of the term 'Shi'a' or 'Shi'ism' in this book is generic, and signifies all sects, groups and beliefs that were associated with the Shi'a branch of Islam in the medieval era, as opposed to the narrower definitions which are evoked for this religious system within Islam today. The development of Sufism has been roughly classified into three stages in this work, which are approximately, pre-tariqa or pre-'order' Sufism (mid 700s to 1100 CE), tariqa or 'order' Sufism (1100-1600 CE), and finally 'popular' Sufism, which starts in the early modern era (1600 CE).[1] The last saw Sufi motifs evolve into popular culture, especially in South Asia, from where they spread into vernacular language and poetry, while the era itself is characterised by a widespread Sufi populism the scale of which was unknown in times past. Because the greatest number of work were produced in the latter era, it is the final stage of Sufism which has been studied more than others in modern scholarship, and through which previous stages of Sufi development are gauged. The final era also sees a clearer division between orthodoxy within Sufi beliefs and heterodoxy, and the religious classification of certain orders as 'orthodox', which in earlier periods may have been heterodox- maintained having active relations with various forms of Shi'a Islam. This book has also been concerned to downplay the sharper demarcation of identity, which has been a feature of the 'final stage' of Sufism, i.e. the period of European expansion and modern politics. It is the tariqa stage of Sufism that is the main subject of this book. But in the case of the Suhrawardi Order, to understand its secretive near embryonic tie to Nizari Isma'ilism, a short analysis of the religious and political conditions that existed on the ground towards the end of the pre-tariqa Sufi era must be made. This analysis focuses on Shi'ism in the region, as the Shi'a milieu

[1] Trimingham was the first to classify Sufism into pre and post-tariqa stages, along with a revivalist stage in the nineteenth century, albeit not exactly in the same manner as defined in this book, see Trimingham 1998, pp. 7*ff.*

then was probably the single most important factor that facilitated the rise of tariqa Sufism.

Sufism and medieval Isma'ilism

Little work has been done on the connections between Isma'ilism and Sufism. One of the few exceptions is the introductory chapter by Herman Landolt called "Attar, Sufism and Isma'ilism', in Lewisohn and Shackle's recent book on the famed twelfth century Persian Sufi master Farid al-din 'Attar. Here the author uses a new approach to discern the secret Isma'ili leanings of 'Attar, from the metaphysical tendencies of his writings, by comparing them to Shi'a concepts on existence. Yet Landolt observes that 'Attar, in the true spirit of dissimulation, places his Sufi writings in the middle ground between Twelver Shi'ism and Isma'ilism, but with a tilt towards the latter. All the while, 'Attar asserts his own Sunnism, posing as an objective writer on the subject, in a Sunni-ruled environment.[2]

Landolt's approach identifies one methodological approach used for the arguments made in this book. It must be pointed out that it is still early, through the use of Landolt's analysis, to be able to state that entire Sufi orders were Isma'ilis in dissimulation, secretly paying homage to the Isma'ili Imam of the time, or that there is an essential Shi'a connection to most Sufi orders. Landolt deals for the most part with 'Attar's writings, who is one individual. Indeed, the real situation was much more complex, with the probability of one branch or some members of the same Sufi order being more prone to Shi'a tendencies when living in a Shi'a environment, than other branches/members who worked in regimes under Sunni rule. However, as we will show, there were generally very strong metaphysical connections, and religious and theological empathy, between Isma'ilism and certain Sufi orders, especially the Suhrawardi Order. This connection evolved secretly over time to reach a zenith in the case of the middle Indus region.

The starting period for this book is the late twelfth century, just before the Ghorids conquered Delhi in 1206, an act that delineates the beginning of the Delhi Sultanate (ended 1526). This is nearly two centuries after Mahmud of Ghazna successfully destroyed the Isma'ili state of Sind and Multan in 1008. The Ghorid era saw the expansion of Muslim rule from present day Pakistan into the north Indian heartland for the first time in the form of a Turkic empire.

[2] Lewisohn and Shackle 2006, pp. 5-7.

The creation of this empire saw a large influx of immigrants to sustain its infrastructure, among them prominent Sufis who reached the highest favour at court, outstripping that afforded to the '*Ulama* or the traditional Sunni clergy. This period also saw a resurgent 'underground' Isma'ilism as missionaries from Iranian Khurasan made inroads into the country, who at times commanded such a cult of personality and spiritual prowess that they were in part tolerated even by the officials of the empire.

The Ghaznawids in northern India

The Ghaznawid period (starts 962) in Indo-Muslim history is important for this book for three reasons. The first is the arrival of a number of Sufis, who for the most part were not attached to a tariqa or order. The second reason is that the foes of the Ghaznawids i.e. Isma'ilis, and not just Hindus as some would argue, are part of the larger religio-political reality of Shi'ism on the ground in that era which requires further investigation. The third reason is connected to the second, which is the syncretic nature of Fatimid Isma'ili rule in the middle Indus region. This said, Isma'ili rule in the region also saw one major iconoclastic event, which was the destruction of the Sun temple in Multan. But this uncharacteristic event was probably a reaction on orders from Cairo, the Fatimid capital, to the emergence of syncretic practices in Multan under local Isma'ili authority.[3] General evidence available suggests that Fatimid Multan was religiously pluralistic. Hence on their arrival in the country the Ghaznawids confronted a syncretic Isma'ili belief system comprised of Shi'a Islam and elements of Hindu/Buddhist beliefs. These local religious groups in turn formed martial alliances with the isma'ilis against the invaders.

The Ghaznawids and latter day Muslim historiography

In Pakistan today, and in the polemical Muslim nationalist historiography associated with its territory, the Ghaznawids are seen as advocates of a concerted Islamisation push into India. In reality, the Ghaznawid armies fought the local Isma'ili state of Multan and its affiliates.[4] Due to the general lack of historical

[3] See Flood 2011, p.42. Flood speaks of the Fatimid Imam al-Mu'izz criticising the local Isma'ili missionary for 'fostering and permitting heterodoxy in doctrinal matters,' i.e. religious syncretism. Syncretic practices included probable continued visitation to the Sun temple until its destruction.

[4] Ibid, p.19.

sources about the Shi'a tradition in early Islam, the ground realities of the Isma'ili era in Pakistan are indiscernible except from a few surviving Isma'ili texts. New work is being done on the subject, mainly through Fatimid sources from Egypt; many of these are letters, which mention the Isma'ili *jazira* or province of Sind. In fact, the practice of writing historical treatises was not really the mainstay of early Muslim scholarship in India or its surrounding countries.

There are however, ample numbers of theological and metaphysical texts, written by both Sunnis and various kinds of Shi'as, from the late Ghaznawid into the Ghorid era, along with some Sufi texts. Such sources are sufficient to construct a basic historical argument when supplemented with other evidence.

When Islamic histories did finally start to be written, from the Sultanate era into the early Mughal period, they asserted a homogeneous Muslim identity in the sub-continent for reasons of kingship and power.[5] In these, Isma'ilism or other kinds of early Islamic heterodoxy are portrayed as something that needed to be shunned, and were dealt with forcefully and quickly whenever they did appear. In contrast (in later works), the *Ithna 'Ashari* or Twelver Shi'a state that flowered in the Sultanate era in India, starting from the late fourteenth century onwards in the Deccan, fuelled by an immigrant Shi'a population from Iran, is historically better recorded and acknowledged.[6]

The first real historical and political treatise in Muslim India is Juzjani's *Tabaqat-i Nasiri*, a voluminous work completed in 1260.[7] The work predominantly deals with the Ghorids and their governors who inherited territory and became Sultans in India, but it also contains the history of the Ghaznawids from the earliest era, before they rose to power,[8] hence granting them a watershed status in Muslim historiography in India. The *Tabaqat* is probably the most referenced historical work on the Ghorids and the Indian exploits of the Ghaznawids. It even mentions briefly the head of the Suhrawardi Order at the time, Baha al-din Zakiriyya, and his involvement in high level politics,[9] but not unexpectedly; this is in the capacity of his public profile as an orthodox Sufi master-a fact that is taken for granted in the *Tabaqat*.

[5] A visible change in writing, of course, occurred with the Mughal emperor Akbar (ruled 1556-1605), due to his own interest in multi-faith doctrines.

[6] The Twelver Shi'a Bahmani dynasty in the Deccan started in 1347 with the coronation of its first king 'Ala al-din Hasan: Hollister 1953, pp. 104 *ff.*

[7] Siddiqui 2010, p.83.

[8] Bosworth 1963, p.11.

[9] See Siddiqui 2010, p.83.

Nearly a century after Juzjani, the first notable historian to emerge is Ziya al-din Barani (1285-1357). His two works, *Fatawa-i Jahandari* and *Tarikh-i Firuz Shahi* were written in the mid-fourteenth century during the Tughluq dynasty (1320-1398).[10] Although post-dating the Ghaznawid era by three centuries, the Ghaznawid dynasty still figures prominently as a point of reference in Barani's works, as the beginning of Islamic rule in India and a golden age. In the *Fatawa-i Jahandari*, Mahmud of Ghazna is represented as a model of good governance and efficient administration, one that the king of the time should emulate. Elements of his other work, *Tarikh-i Firuz Shahi,* can be seen at times to be poised at an anti-Isma'ili and anti-heterodox stance.

In *Objects of Translation: Material Culture and the Medieval 'Hindu-Muslim' Encounter,* Barry Flood examines the antagonistic engagements between Sunnis and Shi'as of various sorts that were integral to the self-fashioning of the Ghaznawid and Ghorid sultans.[11] This antagonistic way of writing history in the Sultanate era actually begins with the Ghaznawids-in part through their encounter with Isma'ilism. The style was emulated in the early histories of the Mughal era, with Mughal emperors hoping to portray themselves as a continuation of the earlier Sultanate era sovereigns. In short, the view of Isma'ilism as it exists in the imperial histories of Muslim India is that of a heretical force which succeeded in the country by letting natives retain their un-Islamic practices and cultural traits in exchange for allegiance and religious tithes.

It is important to point these facts out, since this is one of the main reasons that this book does not primarily rely on histories from either its period, or later commentaries. They are consciously ignored because of their polemical style. Even surviving Sufi manuals and biographies of this period make such a good job of dissimulation that, unlike in Landolt's analysis of 'Attar's writings, nothing much can be made of the 'real' religious identity of the Sufi concerned except the obvious, i.e. Sunni orthodoxy.[12] On methodology it

[10] The latter treatise covers the first years of Firuz Shah Tughluq (ruled 1351-1388) in the Sultanate era; Firuz Shah subsequently commissioned a work under his own authorship (his autobiography).

[11] Flood 2011, p.107. Flood also cites the sack of the Iranian city of Rayy in 1029 by Mahmud of Ghazna as an example, where texts associated to the promulgation of heterodox (Shi'a or Mu'tazilite) ideas were burned on the ground, in the likeness of the *linga* of the Somnath (Hindu) temple broken and burned where it stood, see p.34.

[12] Among others, a good example of the above polemic can be found in the Persian Sufi text from Sind titled *Tadhkira Awliya-i Siwistan* (written 1039 Hijri, or 1630 CE). It portrays Shahbaz Qalandar as an orthodox Muslim who 'fulfilled the prerequisites of the shari'a.' However, it is an established fact that members of the Qalandariyya Sufi Order

should be noted that Flood also uses evidence from material culture, coinage and architecture, alongside textual evidence, as this book does, to advance his arguments.[13]

Syncretism: Isma'ili Multan and Sind

The nature of early Isma'ilism is necessarily syncretic, and it is necessary to understand this in the context of larger Shi'a beliefs in the region, which together with Fatimid Isma'ilism provided a broad Islamic platform for the mixing of religions. In Islam, early Shi'ism is generally known to be more associated with heterodoxy than its counterpart in the modern era. The Fatimid Empire started in 909 in what is now Tunisia, and lasted until 1171 with Cairo as its capital, until it was finally overrun by Salah al-din. The Fatimids, in line with their cyclical view of the sacred history of mankind, made intentional attempts to accommodate major religions like Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism in their Gnostic system of thought.[14] Aside from the Fatimids, other heterodox Shi'a groups in the region were equally open, if not more so, to the mixing of religious ideas. This background was pirotal for the Suhrawardi Sufi Order to emerge in the middle Indus region two centuries later, through its own connections to Isma'ilism; as the ideas that began a few centuries earlier provided the order with a clear base from which to spring forth. In the case of Multan, the said syncretism carries even more weight, when one considers the city's old Sun temple and the astrological permutations of the associated planet (i.e. the Sun), within a meta-religious framework based around the Sun. As the book reaches its central focus of research, this fact will become self-evident.

Available sources do not permit us to give an exact date for the beginning of the Isma'ili state of Multan, but it is generally acknowledged to be sometime in the tenth century, which then continued until the Ghaznawid invasions. Some scholars however, cite the exact date of 965 CE as its beginning, connecting the state's establishment to the successful takeover of the city's administration by an Isma'ili missionary, Jalam ibn Shayban, who was an agent of the Fatimid Imam al-Mu'izz in Cairo.[15] However, it was the same al-Mu'izz who had

actively reject all notions of piety derived from the shari'a. I thank assistant professor Dr. 'Ismat Durrani of the Persian Department, Islamiyya University, Bahawalpur, for this reference.

[13] See Flood 2011, pp.

[14] Daftary 1996, p.14.

[15] See Flood 2011, p.30.

five years previously criticised an earlier missionary for 'fostering heterodoxy in doctrinal matters' (see above), and the statement itself points to a position of Isma'ili authority and control existing in Multan before 965. Flood speaks of North African missionaries successfully converting the rulers of Multan to Isma'ilism within six or seven decades,[16] which means that Fatimid missionary activity in the region started with the beginning of their empire in Tunisia in 909.

It is reported by some scholars that Fatimid missionaries were actually sent to the Sind region at the end of the ninth century, even before their state was established in North Africa in 909; many such missionary names have been historically recorded.[17] According to Flood, like Multan where Sunni piety coexisted with Sun worship and the missionary activities of the Isma'ilis, the remote frontier areas of the Indus Valley and Sistan were often seen as the resort of heterodox Muslims.[18] In light of this statement, it is worthy to note that just before the arrival of Fatimid missionaries, in 871 the 'Abbasid Caliph al-Mu'tamid (under duress) handed the governance of Sind, Sistan and Khurasan to a certain Yaqub ibn Layth al-Saffar. Ibn Layth subsequently set up the proto-Shi'a Saffarid dynasty (871-1003), which after 900 became a Sunni vassal. The Saffarids are credited with pursuing a successful Shi'a agenda, especially in Sind,[19] making the story of heterodox Shi'ism and Sind an old one in the annals of Islam.

Flood comments that around the same time as Multan became (officially) Isma'ili, i.e. 965, the *amirs* or rulers of Mansura (in lower Sind) aligned themselves to the Buwayhids (a dynasty in Iran we will come across again in this chapter), thus bringing the two Arab polities in (larger) Sind into the Shi'a fold. The heterodoxy of the (Sindhi) amirs led to their extinction at the hands of Mahmud of Ghazna.[20] Comparing Multan with Anatolia, Flood

[16] Ibid, p. 50.

[17] See Hamdani 1956, p.1.

[18] See Flood 2011, p. 43.

[19] For details of Yaqub bin Layth's conflict with the 'Abbasid Caliph and his Shi'ism, see Husain 1978, pp.226 *ff.* Historical snippets of Shi'a connections to the region which is now Pakistan, dating back to the earliest Islamic era, are too anecdotal and numerous to mention. The first reported Isma'ili presence in Sind is the migration of two sons of the eighth Isma'ili Imam Muhammad bin Isma'il (late eighth century) who then became advocates of Isma'ilism here, while some anecdotes also mention a visit to Sind of Muhammad bin Isma'il himself (from Iraq): Hollister 1953, p.206.

[20] Flood 2011, p. 19. It should be stated that the Buwayhids were Twelver Shi'a and not Isma'ili, and that 'Sind' in the medieval era included the area up until Multan and the middle Indus region, as part of greater Sind.

reflects on the failure to enforce orthodoxy actually having been useful and a means of fostering social cohesion in areas conquered by force in which Muslims were a minority (i.e. it being a conscious process). The patronage of the Sun temple or the minting of bilingual coins in Multan by its amirs points in this direction, and are (acts) set quite apart from their obvious economic benefits.[21] But whatever utilitarian reasons such attempts to foster what Flood calls 'pietistic cosmopolitanism' had, it is important to note that they always took place under the banner of Shi'a heterodoxy.

The syncretism and mixing of ideas in Isma'ili Multan even show up in non-Muslim sources consulted by scholars who study other regional religions, as do the martial alliances against the Ghaznawids that took place as a result. Due to their comparatively tolerant attitude towards local traditions, the Isma'ilis found strong allies in the region now comprising Pakistan, including Hindu and Buddhist principalities.[22] Religious coexistence was the main reason that united the Isma'ili state of Multan and the Hindu Shahi rulers, who fought together against the Ghaznawids. In fact, the one reason for Mahmud's initial attack on Hindu Shahi territory was simply that it was sandwiched between Ghazna and Multan.[23] Ironically over a period of time the Ghaznawids too became superficially syncretic. After conquering the Hindu Shahi state and obliterating Isma'ili Multan and Mansura in lower Sind, in his later wars Mahmud used unconverted Hindu troops and a Hindu general against his other 'heterodox' enemies to the west, the Shi'a Buwayhid dynasty in Iran.

[21] Ibid, p. 43.

[22] For details of this religious coexistence from work based on Buddhist sources see Alexander Berzin (1993), *The Historical Interaction between the Buddhist and Islamic Cultures before the Mongol Empire*, Part 3, Chapter 18: 'The Spread of Islam among and by the Turkic Peoples (840-1206)', at http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/e-books/unpublished_manuscripts/historical_interaction/pt3/history_cultures_18.html.

[23] This Hindu Shahi state existed in the tenth-eleventh centuries between the Ghaznawid Turks in Afghanistan and Isma'ili Multan, or rather between the Indus and the Hindu Kush mountains. Its rulers also appear to have practised a pluralistic religion, comprised mainly of Hindu beliefs, mixed with Buddhist and Zoroastrian elements (as visible from their coinage). They had a martial alliance with Isma'ili Multan against the Ghaznawids, which they upheld to the extent of fulfilling all their military obligations in the treaty, at a very heavy cost. The Hindu Shahis supported Hinduism and Buddhism: http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/advanced/kalachakra/relation_islam_hinduism/kalachakra_presentation_prophets/kc_pres_prophets_islam_full.html . The above report seems to suggest some Hindu Shahi metaphysical commonality with medieval Isma'ilism.

Mahmud's main target remained the Twelver Shi'a and Isma'ilis until the end of his rule.[24]

We can conclude to say that Shi'a influences, and the religious heterodoxy that accompanied them, has a long history in the Indus region, one which predates the arrival of the Fatimids. This milieu rendered local people open to multi-faith doctrines and syncretic practices.

The Shi'a Century

The heterodox Shi'a milieu that we have encountered so far in the region around Multan was actually a much wider phenomenon. Shi'a developments in the middle Indus region in the tenth century coincided with a larger trend towards Shi'ism in the Muslim world. It would not be incorrect to call the tenth century the 'Shi'a century,' since the religious conditions generally prevalent generated a Sunni backlash which resulted in the rule of the Ghaznawid Turks, a process that Flood paraphrases as 'antagonistic engagements between Sunnis and Shi'as of various sorts that were integral to the self-fashioning of the Ghaznawid and Ghorid Sultans'.[25]

Twelver Shi'ism and Isma'ilism were not always engaged in religious competition, as has become the case in the modern era, after the rise of clerical Twelver Shi'ism in Iran and the subsequent migration of the (Nizari) Isma'ili Imamate to India and beyond in the shape of the Aga Khans. Historically, they coexisted and facilitated each other for the most part; yet, there were still squabbles and infighting among them, mainly due to ethnic, dynastic and territorial reasons. This spirit of cooperation became regionally manifest in the early medieval era, when a sudden rise in Isma'ilism and various other Shi'a denominations so weakened Sunni Islam that is ceased to be a force to be reckoned with in the Middle East and South-Western Asia. Sunnism's only mainstay remained in eastern Iran and Central Asia in the form of the Samanid emirate (819-998),[26] via which it made a subsequent comeback. This was first through the Ghaznawids and later through their temporal successors, the Seljuqs of Iran, and the Ghorids of India and Afghanistan – whose invasion of the Indus Valley and later India heralds the beginning of this book.

[24] Ibid, p.18.

[25] See Flood 2011, p.107.

[26] The Samanid State (819-998) was founded when a Persian (Tajik) noble Saman Khuda converted to Sunni Islam under the 'Abbasid Caliphate: Daniel 2001, p.74. Their capital was based in Bukhara.