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Sufism and Iranian Orientalism: The Academic Study of Sufi Heritage in Modern Iran

1. Theoretical Framework

This is an investigation of the genealogy of the concept of ‘Sufism’ and its approximate equivalents (*taṣawwuf*, mysticism, *irfān*) in modern Iranian studies. As students and scholars of religion, we have largely forgotten the question of internal tension in the process of formation of the idea of Sufism in the premodern era. The portraits of Sufism, in general, and Iranian Sufism, in particular, have been drawn in a remarkably monolithic way, and the discourse of Sufism has been represented, to a large extent, as a moderate, normativized, and quasi-canonized, set of ideas in which major players had broadly agreed upon a fixed core despite their regional, temporal divergences on corollaries and accidental components of their intellectual constellations and ritual activities. The diverse networks of individuals, orders, and institutions – manifested in monographs, manuals, treatises, correspondences, relics, and monuments – are largely sacrificed at the expense of providing monolithic, consonant narratives, not only in premodern labors but also in modern works of art, and the Academy. This essentialist approach to the study of Sufism, which is concomitant with a monothetic taxonomy of Sufism, has long been prevalent not only among modern scholars of Sufi literature, but also modern historians of Sufism.

The sovereignty of this unitive approach – embodied both in essentialist and even to a large extent historical overviews – toward the study of Sufism in premodern Greater Iran led me to this seminal question: How has the concept of Sufism been reformulated in modern Iranian studies? At the modern level, the idea of Sufism has been reformulated and reproduced in the second half of the nineteenth century as an element of world religions discourse which is foundationally unitive and monologizing. Likewise, at the premodern level, the idea of *taṣawwuf* (Sufism), both as a way of thought and a form of life, was formulated through the authority of Sufi manuals that aimed to represent the Sufi intellectual and ritual apparatus as an integral body. It is not possible, however, to reach the premodern without the mediation of modern colonial, Islamic modernist, and post-colonial lenses. The history of premodern Sufism is available only through the disciplinary lenses and formative assumptions provided by modern scholars. This necessitates a genealogy of the study on the production, authentication, and circulation of Sufism in modern Iran. This project is based on the first part of my dissertation. It deals with the study of Sufism by

delving into the intellectual and academic heritage of three generations of scholars and intellectuals who spilled much ink on Iranian studies: the 1st generation is chiefly composed of those Euro-American Orientalists who studied Persianate societies through predominantly textual and literary approaches. The intellectual enterprise of the 1st generation is concomitant to the developments that took place during the Iranian Constitutional Revolution (1905- 1911), that is the first phase of the emergence of the idea of Nation-State (from the 1880s to the 1910s). This development is almost simultaneous to one of the zeniths of the so-called “empire of religion” in the 19th century (between 1879 and 1910). The formation of the 2nd generation revolves around the foundation of the disciplines of theology, literature, and history at nascent Iranian academic institutions, most notably, Tehran University (founded in 1934) in the 1930s as the pace of modernization increased in Iran. I will argue that the formation of the notion of Sufism has experienced a dramatic configuration through the establishment of the modern nation-state, the production of the modern bureaucratic and administrative system, and the realization of the rule of law as the ideals of the Constitutional Revolution that were, by and large, consummated in the 1930s. The analysis and assessment of the appearance of Sufism as a modern fabrication of European scholarship can be extended to the critique of the internalization of Orientalist approaches toward the indigenous heritage through the interventions of Iranian liberal-authoritarian governances in the first half of the 20th century. Eventually, the 3rd generation includes academics who have come on the scene since the 1960s, and are still largely regarded as the corpus of scholars who continue and break with the second generation. It is in the third wave that the procedure of depoliticization of Sufism has been expedited. Evacuating Sufism from its political content, academic scholars, literary critics and *literateures*, journalists, and the intelligentsia accelerate idealization, ideologization, and aestheticization of the formative and blossoming periods of Sufism (9th- 13th centuries). I will focus on a handful of generative and influential themes in the modern study of Sufism to unravel the discursive operation of power behind the constitution of the current portraits of Persianate Sufism: these include the contribution of the imperial and colonial in the invention of Sufism within various discursive formations such as world religion or perennial wisdom; the role of nationalism in the construction of edifices such as ‘Persian Spirituality’ and ‘Iranian Islam,’ and an investigation into the interwoven mechanisms of translation in the re-creation of the academic and intellectual languages and symbols through which the idea of premodern Sufism is formed.

2. Primary Outline

Part I: A Scholarly Triumvirate: Browne, Qazvīnī, Taqīzādeh, and the study of Sufism

Chapter One: Three lives of Browne: Journey from race theory of religion to the literary history of social movements

Chapter Two: The legacy of Kaveh circle and the critical examination of Sufi Heritage

Part II: Birth of the Modern Academic Study of Sufism at Tehran University

Chapter Three: Sa‘īd Nafīsī: Sufism as Philosophy of the Aryans

Chapter Four: The Marvelous Mr. Furūzānfar: the heir of antiquarian dyglots

Part III: Iranian Orientalism Triumphant

Chapter Five: The Secret of the Creed: ‘Abdolhossein Zarrīnkūb, Sufism and Iranian Nationalism

Chapter Six: Flags of our Sufi Forefathers: Nasrullāh Pūrjavādī on verge of Iranian Chauvinism

Conclusion