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Non-Mainstream Religion in Persianate Societies

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Preface

In the last few years, a research project entitled “The Khāksār Order between Ahl-e Ḥaqq and Shiite Sufi Order”, funded by the German Research Foundation, has been carried out by the editor of the present book at the Institute of Iranian Studies at the Georg-August University of Göttingen. This book is the proceeding of the symposium “Islamic Alternatives; Non-Mainstream Religion in Persianate Societies”, which was held within the framework of this project and with the financial support of the same foundation at the University of Göttingen in April 2014.

The tradition and belief system of the Khāksār in question is closely connected to several cultural and religious traditions across a vast geographical area in the orient: the territory of Persianate societies, which might also be called ‘the territory of wandering dervishes’.

The vast historical and cultural relations and associations, the similarities between the Khāksār Order and the Futuwwa tradition or religious communities (such as the Ahl-e Ḥaqq and Bektashi order in different geographical territories), the relationship between this order and Dervish groups in Pakistan and Central Asia on the one hand and its connection with the official orthodox Shia on the other hand – all these ideas were also considered in the formation of this symposium and the present proceeding.

The common points and cultural relations of these numerous and diverse cultural traditions as well as the heterodox movements in this region are so substantial that understanding the related aspects of each helps us gain a deeper knowledge of the whole subject matter.

Diverse domains of Iranian cultural history – which are in close or far association with the Khāksār tradition – and its connection with several cultural phenomena such as Naqqālī (dramatic storytelling), Pardekhānī (storytelling by reading paintings), Maddāhī (singing Shiite mourning), Ta‘zīyeh (Shiite ritual dramatic art), and also the tradition of Zūrḥāneh (the centre of Iranian heroic sport) have turned it into a multi-dimensional cultural phenomenon. When studying this order and belief system, all these different aspects should be considered. The Khāksār, especially the ‘Ajam branch of this order, have played an important role in the transmission of cultural phenomena in Iran since the Safavid Era, and the Khāksār Dervishes were actively present on the streets of Iranian cities and villages while wandering and praising ‘Alī from this era until at least the end of the Qajar Era. As a result, the image that forms in the mind of Persephones after hearing the word “Dervish” resembles the traditional image of a Khāksār Dervish.

This symposium and the present proceeding attempted to gather as many specialists of these diverse but associated themes as possible in order to get to a better understanding of these concepts. Obviously, analysing all related dimensions requires more articles and studies.

The discussed subjects and the groups under study in most of the papers are so interconnected that it is difficult to categorise them into specific themes. The articles mainly include several key words and interrelated themes. Therefore, their order in this categorisation could as well be different to a great extent without facing a problem in the understanding of the main idea. However, in order to achieve a structure and to facilitate the presentation of the main subjects, they are divided into five categories.

- Papers which analyse Shiism, its first decades, and also the concept of the Futuwwa which was later interwoven with Sufism.
- Papers which specifically and mainly focus on the Yāresān tradition.
- Articles which study key concepts in these religious groups from a cultural anthropological perspective.
- Articles with a specific focus on Khāksār.
- Articles which investigate the relationship between the folklore tradition and Sufism in general as well as Khāksār and Yāresān traditions.

Obviously, the speakers from different universities and research institutes in Europe and Iran who participated in this symposium and presented their ideas (first in form of their speeches and then as articles) have played the main role in the formation of this collection and helped enrich it.

Their scientific experiences, gathered in different geographical and cultural territories and with diverse and possibly interconnected heterodox religious groups within the region, allowed for a productive exchange of valuable knowledge. Thus, I would like to take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to the honourable contributors of this volume.

I would also like to express my special thanks to Professor Ulrich Marzolph, Dr. Stéphane A. Dudoignon, and Dr. Khanna Omarkhali, who contributed to this symposium with their fruitful papers.

Dr. Mohammad Ali Soltani, who has been in close relationship with the followers of the Khāksār and Yāresān for decades, participated in this symposium as a reliable representative of these two religious traditions. At this point, I would like to express my very sincere thanks to him. He also gave a detailed seminal speech in Persian which unfortunately, for technical reasons, we were not able to publish in this volume.

Finally, I would like to thank the German Research Foundation, the Georg-August University of Göttingen, and the director of its Department of Iranian Studies, Prof. Philip Kreyenbroek who supported me in organising the symposium and publishing this proceeding. This publication is also indebted to Peter Welk and Pierke Bosschieter for proofreading and formatting it, as well as preparing the index.

May this proceeding present an opportunity for a better understanding of Islamic groups that have different ideas from orthodox Islam, and for attracting the academic attention to these groups and their role in the cultural diversity of these societies.

Shahrokh Raei
Freiburg im Breisgau, 10th September 2016