



'ALĀ'-AL-DAWLA SEMNĀNĪ

'ALĀ'-AL-DAWLA SEMNĀNĪ, ROKN-AL-DĪN ABU'L-MAKĀREM AḤMAD B. ŠARAF-AL-DĪN MOḤAMMAD B. AḤMAD AL-BĪĀBĀNAKĪ (b. Du'l-ḥejja, 659/November, 1261, d. 21 or 22 Raġab 736/5 or 6 March 1336), famous mystic of the Il-khanid period, opponent of the growing influence of Ebn 'Arabī in Iran. He stemmed from a family of wealthy landlords at Semnān (ca. 200 km east of Tehran). Through his grandmother he was related to the 'Alid aristocracy; she had been the daughter of a descendant of Ḥosayn Ašġar, the son of Zayn-al-'ābedīn (cf. Ebn 'Enaba, *Omdat al-ṭāleb*, Naġaf, 1380/1961, p. 317.13ff.). His great-grandfather Żīā'-al-dīn Bīābānakī had been one of the five or six vice-regents appointed by Sultan Moḥammad K̄vārazmšāh in 614/1218, shortly before his defeat by Jengiz Khan. In spite of this, the family gained strong influence at the Mongol court during the Il-khanid period. 'Alā'-al-dawla's paternal uncle, Jalāl-al-dīn, became vizier of the crown-prince Arġūn and, at the accession of the latter, in 683/1284, first minister of the empire. His maternal uncle, Šā'en-al-dīn, held the office of *qāzi-e jomla-ye mamālek* and was executed in 700/1300 because of his participation in a conspiracy against Ġāzān's vizier K̄vāġa Rašīd-al-dīn Faẓlallāh. In 687/1288 his father, Šaraf-al-dīn, became for a short time *šāḥeb-e dīvān* (minister of finance and civil governor) of Iraq and in 694/1295, again only for a short period, vizier under Ġāzān with the title *uluġ bitikči*.

'Alā'-al-dawla himself, of approximately the same age as Arġūn, entered government service at the age of fifteen. This meant that, like his older relatives, he had to practice religious compromise; the Il-khans had not yet



been converted to Islam, and Buddhist monks (*baḳṣī*, i.e. *bhikṣu*) had a strong position at the court. This seems to have driven him into a religious crisis; at the age of twenty-four, when accompanying Arḡūn in a campaign against one of his uncles in 683/1284, he experienced near Qazvīn a vision of the other world. Stricken by a serious disease which held him in Tabrīz for two years, he turned more and more toward mainstream Sunnism and a moderate kind of Sufism. In 685/1286 he quit his service and returned to Semnān. He separated from his wife and son and built several convents which he endowed with *waqfs* from his own property. But he did not attach himself to a shaikh; he practiced the *ta’līm bi’l-ketāb* advocated by many Sunni mystics and trained himself through books like Abū Ṭāleb al-Makkī’s *Qūt al-qolūb*. The ideal he wanted to follow was Ebrāhīm Adham, the legendary prince who had turned into an ascetic.

Shortly afterward, however, he met Aḳī Šaraf-al-dīn Sa’dallāh b. Hannōya Semnānī, a disciple of Nūr-al-dīn ‘Abd-al-Raḥmān b. Moḥammad Kaserqī Esfarāyenī (639-717/1242-1317), who had been keeping a Sufi circle at Baghdad for more than ten years. Aḳī Šaraf-al-dīn taught him the type of *dekr* which had been introduced by Najm-al-dīn Kobrā (q.v.) and perfected in his school by Esfarāyenī (cf. R. Gramlich, *Die schiitischen Derwischorden Persiens II*, Wiesbaden, 1976, pp. 401ff.). ‘Alā’-al-dawla tells us that during the very first night that he performed this spiritual exercise, which was characterized mainly by swift movements of the head, it induced a vision of flames rising from his chest to heaven. This is why he decided, as he says, to put on the Sufi dress and to visit the master himself at Baghdad. But he was acting without Arḡūn’s consent: On his way (early in 686/1282) he was arrested at Hamadān and brought back to Šarūyāt, where the il-khan was just founding the city of Solṭānīya, the future capital of Öljäytü and his successor, Abū Sa’īd. Here he was again confronted with the presence of Buddhist monks who had come from Tibet and Kashmir, etc.; and in a series of disputations he proved himself a true *fidei defensor*.

At the same time he started a correspondence with Esfarāyenī, who advised him to give up the rigid fasting he had begun to perform. Three months later, he escaped without notice, together with a Sufi called Ḥājjī Āmolī, whom his two uncles, in agreement with the il-khan, had selected to distract him from Esfarāyenī’s influence. But when his companion revealed his mystical creed, which consisted in a kind of ontological *tawḥīd* similar to that of Ebn ‘Arabī, ‘Alā’-al-dawla reacted violently and even tried to have him killed by a Turk, to



whom he described him as an infidel. For two years he stayed in Semnān, from where he kept up his contacts with Esfarāyenī, asking for explanations of his visions and receiving through Akī Šaraf-al-dīn a *kerqa* as a sign of further encouragement. It seems that here he had his first disciples. A change of political scenery, the dismissal of his father as governor of Baghdad and the removal and subsequent execution of his uncle Jalāl-al-dīn, made him go to Baghdad, where he met Esfarāyenī for the first time in Ramažān, 688/September, 1289. He performed the *hajj* and saw his shaikh again for one month after his return in Moħarram, 689/February, 1290. But then, out of devotion to his mother, he went back to Semnān.

We are so well informed about ‘Alā’-al-dawla’s spiritual development because he describes it (with certain inconsistencies) in several autobiographical reports which may be found in his *Ketāb mašāre’ abwāb al-qods* (dated 711/1312), *Ketāb al-’orwa le-ahl al-kałwa* (finished in 722/1322), and *Ketāb šafwat al-’orwa*. The second part of his life, until his death in 736/1336, seems to have been much less dramatic. Released from all political commitments, he lived at Semnān, surrounded by an increasing number of students, at first in the Kānaqāh-e Sakkākī which he had restored, and then in a monastery which he had founded himself near Semnān, called Šūfiābād-e Kođādād. His inherited possessions brought him a yearly income of about 90,000 dirhams. He visited Baghdad rather frequently. We know that he saw Esfarāyenī in 696/1296 and again in late 702 or 703/mid-1303. But he also studied Hadith in Baghdad with Rāšed b. Abi’l-Qāsem Baġdādī, the most renowned expert of this discipline in Iraq (cf. Ebn Ḥaġar ‘Asqalānī, *al-Dorar al-kāmena*, Cairo, 1385/1966, II, p. 202, no. 1721), and with ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Omar al-Fārūṭī, a Shafe’ite jurist who died in 706/1306 (cf. *ibid.*, II, p. 386, no. 2190). He suffered under the political and religious situation in Iran and several times played with the idea of emigrating to Syria. His relationship with Öljäytü (730-16/1304-16) was strained; like Arġün, Öljäytü frowned upon ‘Alā’-al-dawla’s contacts with Esfarāyenī. This is striking, since Öljäytü was a Muslim, in contrast to Arġün; the Baghdad Kobrawī school seems to have been in opposition to the Mongol court. In 705/1305 ‘Alā’-al-dawla became reconciled with the il-khan; Öljäytü built an academy (*‘emārat*) at Solṭānīya on this occasion (cf. Kṽāfī, *Moġmal-e Fašihī*, ed. M. Farroḳ, Mašhad, 1339 Š./1960, II, p. 14.8ff.). But when the il-khan turned to Shi’ism in 710/1310, ‘Alā’-al-dawla did not conceal his criticism for the people at the court. Under Öljäytü’s successor, Abū Sa’īd, he enjoyed a high spiritual reputation and had contacts with the vizier Ġiāt-al-dīn, the son of Rašīd-al-dīn.



Names of disciples are given by Jāmī (*Nafahāt al-ons*, pp. 444ff.). Through one of them, ‘Alī Dūstī (d. 734/1334), who was perhaps the most outstanding, he influenced ‘Alī Hamadānī. There is a tradition that **Ḳvājū Kermānī** (d. 753/1352 or 762/1361) attended his circle in Šūfiābād (Dawlatšāh, ed. M. ‘Abbāsī, Tehran, 1332 Š./1943, p. 277). Some of his pupils bore the title *akī*. This may point to certain connections with *fotūwa* ideas.

Works. Only a few of ‘Alā’-al-dawla’s works have been edited or analyzed up to now. There is first his correspondence with his spiritual master Esfarāyenī, which continued until the latter’s death in 717/1317. It was edited by H. Landolt (*Correspondence spirituelle échangée entre Nuraddin Esfarayeni et son disciple ‘Alaoddawleh Semnani*, Tehran, Bibliothèque Iranienne 21, 1972). Three letters of the second period of his life date from 693/1294, a fourth one from 705/1306, and a fifth one from 717/1317. Another letter, which is earlier and can probably be dated to the year 689/1290, was published separately in *Mélanges offerts à Henry Corbin* (Tehran, 1977, pp. 279ff.). The correspondence demonstrates, according to Semnānī’s categories, the suprasensual communication which should exist between master and disciple in the Kobrawī tradition. Maǰd-al-dīn Baǰdādī, a disciple of Naǰm-al-dīn Kobrā, had talked in this connection of the *kāṭer al-šayḳ*, the “inner voice” coming from the shaikh. ‘Alā’-al-dawla sometimes mentions Maǰd-al-dīn in his *selsela*, but normally he traced himself back to Kobrā through Esfarāyenī, then Aḥmad Gūrpānī (d. 669/1270) and Rażī-al-dīn ‘Alī Lālā (d. 642/1244). His Kobrawī outlook manifests itself in his emphasis on visions and hallucinations; in his *Ketāb faẓl al-ṭarīqa* (written in 712/1313) he tries to categorize these phenomena. He strongly believed in the omnipresence of Ḳeẓr; this is why he recommended always speaking of him with respect as “Ḳvāja Ḳeẓr.”

Another correspondence links ‘Alā’-al-dawla with ‘Abd-al-Razzāq Kāšānī (d. 736/1335, half a year before ‘Alā’-al-dawla himself), the author of the so-called *Tafsīr-e Ebn ‘Arabī*. The two letters (one by each) have been translated and commented upon by H. Landolt in *Der Islam* 50, 1973, pp. 29ff. They deal with the evaluation of Ebn ‘Arabī’s mystical philosophy. It is possible that ‘Alā’-al-dawla’s unconcealed antipathy toward the *šayḳ al-akbar* is related to the fact that he sensed traits in common with the Buddhist (Vajrayāna) doctrines preferred by the monks at Arǰūn’s court (cf. M. Molé in *REI* 29, 1961, pp. 92ff.). But the main reason lies deeper. ‘Alā’-al-dawla is profoundly convinced of God’s transcendence. He takes over the notion of *tajallī* (“theophany”), but he stresses its different degrees of realization rather than the fact that everything



participates in the Supreme Being. In contrast to Ebn 'Arabī's static concept of absolute Being, he advocates a more dynamic type of mysticism which centers around becoming and which sees in divine Being not so much God's essence as the "act of giving existence" (*fe'l al-ījād*). God cannot be identical with absolute Being, because the potential Being is separated from its origin through the ontological limit of divine action, i.e., creation. In this respect Semnānī anticipates certain lines of thought followed by Shaikh Aḥmad Aḥsā'ī, the founder of the Šaykīya, in his reaction against Mollā Šadrā Šīrāzī. To a lesser extent, he foreshadows some ideas proffered in the Indian school of *waḥdat-e šohūd*, e.g., by Shaikh Aḥmad Serhendī (d. 1035/1626; cf. Landolt, loc. cit.; also his article "Simnānī on waḥdat-al-wujūd," *Collected Papers on Islamic Philosophy and Mysticism*, ed. M. Mohaghegh and H. Landolt, Tehran, 1971, pp. 93ff.).

The different degrees of cosmic theophany are perceived by subtle organs (*laṭā'ef*) which form part of the spiritual body. In describing their relationship to each other, 'Alā'-al-dawla built up an entire system of parallelisms and structural analogies. The *laṭā'ef* are seven in number (e.g., *al-laṭīfat al-qalbīya*, *al-laṭīfat al-rūḥīya*, etc.); the mystical experiences they create manifest themselves as visions in seven different colors, which may be understood as the veils behind which God hides Himself. They also correspond to seven different meanings concealed in each verse of scripture; the Qur'ān is, like the seven worlds, a locus of constant theophany. Historically, these seven different meanings were unfolded by the seven great prophets from Adam to Moḥammad; through the subtlety of his own anthropological structure, the mystic is able to grasp their deepest intentions. 'Alā'-al-dawla expounds this doctrine in a rudimentary form in one of his letters to Esfarāyenī (cf. H. Landolt in *Mélanges offerts à Henry Corbin*, pp. 279ff.). Its main ideas are rooted in Kobrawī tradition, but the term *laṭīfa* goes back as far as 'Ayn-al-qozāt Hamadānī (d. 525/1131). The theory is fully developed in the introduction of 'Alā'-al-dawla's *Tafsīr*, which forms a continuation of the unfinished commentary of the Kobrawī Naǧm-al-dīn Dāya Rāzī (d. 654/1256) and starts therefore only with Sūra 52. The crucial text has recently been edited by P. Nwyia (*al-Abhath* 26, 1973-77, pp. 141ff.; see also H. Corbin, "L'Interiorisation du sens en herméneutique soufie iranienne," *Eranos-Jahrbuch* 26, 1957, pp. 57ff., especially pp. 137ff.; revised version in *En Islam iranien*, Paris, 1972, III, pp. 275ff.; idem in Sayyed Haydar Amoli, *La Philosophie Shi'ite*, Tehran, 1969, intro., pp. 50ff.).



A fourth text by ‘Alā’-al-dawla is a short appreciation of ‘Alī’s role in early Islam, written in 713/1313 and entitled *Manāẓer al-moḥāẓer li’l-monāẓer al-ḥāẓer* (ed. and tr. M. Molé, *Bulletin d’études orientales* 16, 1961, pp. 61ff.). Basing himself on the *Nahj al-balāgha*, ‘Alā’-al-dawla insists on ‘Alī’s preeminence with respect to the other Companions, especially the first “Sunni” caliphs; ‘Alī not only possessed the rank of *kelāfa*, but also of *walāya* and *warāta*. ‘Alā’-al-dawla calls him “our imam;” he also shows deep reverence for the *ahl-e bayt*. But he was no Shi’ite, at least not in the Eṭnā ‘ašarī sense; he disapproved of any polemics against ‘Ā’eša. He included the Twelfth Imam among the *abdāl*; and he believed that, as such, he had been raised to the rank of *qoṭb* (“axis, chief”) during his *ḡayba* (“disappearance”). But he asserted that this *ḡayba* had lasted only for nineteen years and that Moḥammad b. Ḥasan ‘Askarī had died afterwards; for him, the *ḡayba* was only another way of expressing the unrecognizability of the *qoṭb*, and the Twelfth Imam was only one “pole” in an uninterrupted invisible hierarchy.

This individual rearrangement of theological elements midway between Sunnism and Shi’ism is characteristic for the Kobrawīya of the period (cf. M. Molé, “Les Kubrawīya entre Sunnisme et Shiisme aux huitième et neuvième siècle de l’hégire,” *REI* 29, 1961, pp. 61ff., especially pp. 94ff.). But ‘Alā’-al-dawla stands in a specific situation. He came from a family which had, for at least two generations, entertained contacts with moderate Shi’ism; in some places, his “compromises” may be explained as a Sufi transformation of Zaydī ideas (cf. Molé, *op. cit.*, pp. 138ff. and the critical remarks by H. Cordt, *Die Sitzungen des ‘Alā’ ad-dawla as-Simnānī*, Ph.D. thesis, Basel [Zürich, 1977], pp. 17ff.). His wealth made him vulnerable toward political intervention; this may have induced him during Öljäytü’s reign to temper his Sunnite convictions and to “reinterpret” Shi’ite concepts. And there was, above all, the experience of his formative period; through Sufism, the unity of Islam could be emphasized against a non-Muslim government.

A great number of ‘Alā’-al-dawla’s statements and reminiscences were collected by a certain Eqbāl b. Sābeq, a person of some political importance in Sejestān who visited him as a Sufi in 724/1324 (and for some time afterwards) and left two notebooks, entitled *Čehel majāles* and *Fawā’ed*, which were fused later on into a common redaction (cf. the edition by ‘A. Ḥaqīqat, Tehran, 1358 Š./1979, and the German summary by H. Cordt, *op. cit.*, pp. 51ff.). For further works, see *GAL*² II, p. 263, S. II, p. 281; with corrections and additions by F. Meier in *EI*² I, p. 347 and in *Fawā’ih*, p. 2, n. 1, and p. 245; by M. Molé, *op. cit.*,



pp. 76ff., n. 58, p. 138, n. 220, p. 141, n. 222; and by H. Landolt in *Correspondance*, pp. 47ff., n. 68, and in *Der Islam* 50, 1973, pp. 40ff., n. 50. Cf. also the anonymous treatise edited by H. L. Fleischer in *ZDMG* 16, 1862, pp. 235ff. (“Über farbige Lichterscheinungen der Sufi’s”), which consists mainly of sayings by Semnānī. The authenticity of the *Fotūwat-nāma* (ed. By A. Gölpınarlı, *Iktisat Fakültesi Mecmuası* 11, 1949-50, pp. 173ff., 296ff.) is not yet secure (see pp. 109ff.).

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