



ASMĀR AL-ASRĀR

ASMĀR AL-ASRĀR (Night-discourses of secrets), theosophical treatise in Persian composed by a 9th/15th century Češtī Sufi of India, Sayyed Moḥammad Ḥosaynī Gīsūdarāz (q.v., d. 825/1422), popularly known as K̄vāja-ye Bandanavāz. Several manuscripts are extant, and the text has been edited by S. 'Aṭā Ḥosayn (Hyderabad, 1350/1931). It was originally divided into 114 *asmār* to correspond with the number of *sūras* in the Qur'ān. Yet the editor, who seem to have had four manuscripts before him, states that three of them contained 115 chapters and one contained 114. He preferred the majority (*ibid.*, editor's introduction, pp. 6-7), but chapters 74 and 75 deal with the same subject and should be treated as one, in the fashion of the fourth manuscript. Each chapter is a complete unit, containing an inspiration set to writing as it seems to have occurred to the writer. There is no systematic organization to the subject matter.

Composed in 811-12/1408-09, the work highlights the Persian style of Gīsūdarāz, one reminiscent of 'Ayn-al-qożāt Hamadānī (d. 525/1130-31) in his monumental work *Tamhīdāt*, and of Aḥmad Ġazālī (d. ca. 520/1126) in his Persian treatise *Sawāneḥ fi'l-'ešq*. The *Asmār* represents an elegant combination of Persian prose and poetry. In the tradition of classical Persian, the influence of Arabic is apparent throughout the work. Prosodic in style, its language is replete with metaphors, symbolic analogies, similes, allegorical elucidations, and poetic imagery. It is eloquent, rhetorical, and, when the author chooses, lucid—a display of spiritual artistry in the language most suitable to the subject which it treats. Yet the construction of sentences is at



times odd and unidiomatic, while the usage of certain words is otherwise rare in the Persian language. The author's avowed intent was to make understanding of the text painful; by his own admission he sets forth only allusions (*Asmār*, no. 24, p. 80). While visions and stories with multi-leveled mystical meaning are set forth in an elegant style, their intelligibility is opaque; the reader has to struggle to mine their significance. Yet enigmatic exposition and difficult style are worth enduring for what B. Lawrence has described as the “dazzling” quality of the *Asmār* (*Notes from a Distant Flute*, Tehran, 1978, p. 51).

The *Asmār* becomes more intelligible and more engaging when viewed in the context of 14th-15th century India, when Ebn al-‘Arabī’s doctrines of *waḥdat al-wojūd* “unity of being” were penetrating Sufism and apparently also popular religion in the subcontinent. The works of Ebn al-‘Arabī were much commented on, and Sufis corresponded about them freely, while jurists—and Sufis such as [Shaikh Naṣīr-al-dīn Maḥmūd Čerāg-e Dehlī](#) (d. 757/1356)—emphasized strict observance of the *šarī‘a*. A means of testing a Sufi’s fidelity to the *šarī‘a* was to have him explain and comment on ideas of Ebn al-‘Arabī that were regarded as heretical. The *Asmār* presupposes a knowledge of Ebn al-‘Arabī’s doctrines and criticizes him and his followers directly (e.g., *Asmār*, no. 10, pp. 31-32; no. 20, p. 62) or by inference (*ibid.*, no. 44, p. 151; no. 110, p. 333). The key idea behind the entire work is: “Every day God takes a new grandeur” (Qur’ān 55:29); “He does not manifest Himself twice in one form, neither does he take two forms in one manifestation” (*Asmār*, no. 1, pp. 4-5; no. 4, pp. 16-18; no. 10, p. 31; no. 59, p. 192). Hence God becomes, or remains, indescribable and unidentifiable. The author’s contention is that everything is the emanation (*fayẓ*) of God but is not God Himself (*Asmār*, no. 10, p. 32; no. 47, p. 161). In short, Gīsūdarāz demurs from Ebn al-‘Arabī’s identification of Absolute Existence (*wojūd al-moṭlaq*) as God.

Yet the *Asmār* is much more than a critique of Ebn al-‘Arabī and contains a mine of information for the student of *taṣawwuf*. The *Asmār*, in the words of its author, expounds the denudation of unity (*taḥrīd al-tawḥīd*) and the singularity of isolation (*efrād al-tafrīd*, *ibid.*, p. 1). The work is hailed as a product of pure inspiration, free from human additions or deletions (*ibid.*, p. 3). All the major subjects of which Sufis reflected are treated in its pages: meditation, the significance of colors, the “nonsense” letters of the Qur’ān, prophethood and saintship, music and dance, poverty and patience, life, death, and above all love. Mystical love (*‘eṣq* or *maḥabba*) is the explicit, exclusive



subject of six *asmār* (nos. 32, 47, 67-69, 73), and its heightened appeal looms in visions elsewhere in the text (e.g., no. 42, pp. 147-48).

Among evidences of the wide popularity which the *Asmār* enjoyed in Muslim India are three commentaries. The first was *Tabṣerat al-eṣṭelāḥāt al-ṣūfiya* written by Sayyed Moḥammad Akbar Ḥosaynī, the eldest son of Gīsūdarāz, in 811-12/1408-09 (ed. S. ‘Aṭā Ḥosayan, Hyderabad, 1365/1945). Another was *Asrār al-asmār, šarḥ-e Asmār al-asrār*, the unicum for which is preserved in Asafiyah State Library, Hyderabad, India (*taṣwwof* no. 1464). It is an anonymous work compiled in 877/1472. A partial, third commentary was produced by Shah Rafī‘-al-dīn, son of Shah Walīallāh (d.1177/1763). It has been printed (in *Majmū‘ tes‘a rasā‘el*, Delhi, 1314/1896; see K. A. Nizami, “Gīsū Darāz,” *EI*² II, p. 1115).

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See also Ethé, *Cat. Ind. Off.* I, p. 1027, no. 1861.

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