



GONĀBĀDI ORDER

GONĀBĀDI ORDER, an offshoot of the Ne‘mat-Allāhi Sufi order, still active in Persia. The designation Gonābādi refers to the Gonābād (q.v.) region of Khorasan, where Bidokt, the place of residence of the founding figure, Mollā Solṭān Moḥammad Solṭān-‘Ališāh, and subsequently center of the order, is located. The order is sometimes known also as the Mollā-Solṭāniya or Solṭān-‘Ališāhiya with reference to him, or as the Ṭā‘usiya, by way of allusion to the sobriquet of his master, Sa‘ādat-‘Ališāh Ṭā‘us-al-‘Orafā’.

History. When Zayn-al-‘Ābedin Raḥmat-‘Ališāh, the last master to enjoy more or less universal acceptance among the Ne‘mat-Allāhis of Persia, died in 1278/1861, three claimants to his mantle arose, resulting in a trifurcation of the order into the branches that subsequently crystallized as the Gonābādi, Ṣafi-‘Ališāhi, and Ḍu‘l-Riāsatayn lines. Of the three rivals, Hājj Moḥammad-Kāzem Ḳorāsāni Tā‘us-al-‘Orafā’ (so nicknamed by Moḥammad Shah, an aficionado of the Sufis, because of the opulence of his clothing), with the *ṭariqat* name of Sa‘ādat-‘Ališāh, counts as the immediate ancestor of the Gonābādis. An Eṣfahāni tobacco merchant by origin, he had been first initiated into the Ne‘mat-Allāhiya by Zayn-al-‘Ābedin Širvāni Mast-‘Ališāh (d. 1253/1837-38), the master of Raḥmat-‘Ališāh, but, despite his lengthy involvement in the order, he faced considerable opposition from the other two claimants to the succession to Raḥmat-‘Ališāh, Ṣafi-‘Ališāh and Monawwar-‘Ališāh (Homāyuni, 1979, p. 207). Furthermore, he had to confront the hostility to Sufism that had long been nurtured by the ulama, which, although less intense than in the early years of the recrudescence of the Ne‘mat-Allāhiya in



early 13th/late 18th century Persia, was still unrelenting. He therefore lived a life of seclusion in Isfahan, emerging only for discreet biweekly gatherings of *dekr* in the city and pilgrimages to Mašhad before moving to Tehran in 1280/1863; there he died nine years later, roughly at the age of seventy, and was buried near the shrine of Emāmzāda Ḥamza (Homāyuni, 1979, p. 208).

Mollā Solṭān Moḥammad Solṭān-‘Ališāh emerged from Sa‘ādat-‘Ališāh’s small band of followers as the principal initiatic heir. Born at Bidokṭ in 1251/1835, he lost his father, Mollā Ḥaydar Moḥammad, at an early age when he either died or disappeared (as a result of abduction by Turkman raiders, according to one account). He embarked on religious studies at the age of seventeen, first in Mašhad, then in Sabzavār (where he benefited from the instruction of the illustrious Mollā Hādi Sabzavāri), and finally in the shrine cities of Iraq. Returning to Persia, he organized a teaching circle in Tehran, which he was obliged to abandon precipitately because of alleged Bābi tendencies (Gramlich, 1965, p. 65). While traveling from the capital to Khorasan, he crossed paths in Sabzavār with Sa‘ādat-‘Ališāh, who was en route at the time to the shrine of Imam Rezā. He followed Sa‘ādat-‘Ališāh to Mašhad and thence to Isfahan, where he was initiated by him shortly before the master’s departure for Tehran. Two years later, he was appointed Sa‘ādat-‘Ališāh’s representative in Khorasan and returned definitively to Bidokṭ. On the occasion of a return visit to Sa‘ādat-‘Ališāh while returning home from the *hajj* in 1284/1867, he allegedly received from him a letter of appointment as his successor. The authenticity of the document has been doubted, not least because Sa‘ādat-‘Ališāh was illiterate while the letter is couched in an ornate and convoluted language that is hardly accessible to the unlettered (Homāyuni, 1979, p. 209), but this in no way hindered Solṭān-‘Ališāh’s successful, although stormy, career of thirty-four years at the head of an order that now became exclusively associated with him. His following came greatly to exceed that of his master, in large part thanks to the efforts of his chief recruiter, Ḥājj Shaikh ‘Abbās-‘Ali Maṣṣūr-‘Ališāh (better known as Kayvān-e Qazvini), a gifted preacher who drew large crowds to his sermons at the Masjed-e Šāh and Masjed-e Sepahsālār in Tehran; no fewer than 3,000 people are said to have pledged their loyalty to the Gonābādi order as a result of his suasion. With the gifts of devotees, wealth also began to accumulate in Bidokṭ (Gramlich, 1965, p. 66).

Despite the acquisition of a following in various parts of Persia (administered on his behalf by four shaikhs in addition to Kayvān-e Qazvini), Solṭān-‘Ališāh



had to contend with substantial enmity in Khorasan itself. The reasons for this hostility are not entirely clear. Ma‘sum-‘Ališāh (d. 1344/1926), son of Raḥmat-‘Ališāh, who conceived a high regard for Solṭān-‘Ališāh in the course of several months spent with him at Bidokòt and a journey they made together from Batum to Mecca, denounced all his adversaries as motivated by pure malice (Ma‘sum-‘Ališāh, III, p. 542). According to others, the hostility to Solṭān-‘Ališāh was due to his alleged hoarding of grain at a time of famine (Miller, p. 345), and, more significantly, to doctrinal considerations. For he went beyond the conventional claims made by Sufis on the loyalty and obedience of their followers—claims already extensive enough to arouse the hostility of the ulama—to exalt the status of the *qoṭb* (leader of the order) to unprecedented heights. He asserted that “the sending of Messengers, the revelation of scriptures, the efforts of the Prophets, the sufferings endured by the Imams—all of this was for the sake of *erādat*” (the devotion of the *morid* to the *qoṭb*; Solṭān-‘Ališāh, p. 138), and that the *qoṭb*, as the means of creation of all things, “may legitimately be called creator” (*kāleq*; *ibid.*, p. 11). He also hinted that he was himself—in an undefined sense—the Imam of the Age, and proclaimed that “whoever knows his own imam does not need to wait for the appearance of the Hidden Imam” (*ḥazrat-e qā‘em*; Solṭān-‘Ališāh, p. 269). Šafi-‘Ališāh (d. 1316/1899)—admittedly a rival for supremacy in the world of the Ne‘mat-Allāhis—had already accused Solṭān-‘Ališāh’s master of concocting a mixture of Shaikhism and Babism, flavoring it with some of his own notions, and attempting to substitute it for authentic Ne‘mat-Allāhi tradition (*Divān*, p. 14), and it was comprehensible that accusations of straightforward heresy should now be raised against Solṭān-‘Ališāh himself (Gramlich, 1965, p. 66).

Solṭān-‘Ališāh had also to contend with dissidence in his own household. His own son, Ḥājj Mollā ‘Ali, born in 1284/1867, was initially opposed to Sufism in general and to his father’s order in particular, and he expressed his opposition publicly, preaching against the Gonābādis from the pulpit. After studying for a while in Mašhad, he embarked in 1300/1882-83, without seeking his father’s permission, on a seven-year journey that took him to Afghanistan, Central Asia, India, and the Arab lands. So profound was his alienation from Solṭān-‘Ališāh at this time that when the two of them happened to be on the *ḥajj* pilgrimage in the same year after a lengthy separation and Ḥājj Mollā ‘Ali glimpsed his father from afar, he pretended not to notice him. Finally Solṭān-‘Ališāh sent one of his shaikhs, Ḥājj ‘Abd-Allāh Ḥā‘eri, to look for his errant son in the shrine cities of Iraq. The mission was successful, and Ḥājj Mollā ‘Ali came home, to be reconciled both with his father and with Sufism (Gramlich,



1965, p. 67). Now Solṭān-ʿAlīšāh determined to make him his own successor, despite his initial aversion to Sufism and his relative youthfulness. Some of the dervishes made their objections known, but when Solṭān-ʿAlīšāh fell sick in Ramazān 1314/February 1897 and thought his death imminent, he proceeded with the appointment, at the same time giving his son the *ṭariqat* name Nur-ʿAlīšāh (he is sometimes designated in the literature of the order as Nur-ʿAlīšāh II, Nur-ʿAlīšāh I (d. 1212/1797) having been a pioneer in propagating the Neʿmat-Allāhiya in Persia, newly reintroduced at the time from the Deccan). Solṭān ʿAlīšāh unexpectedly recovered, and lived on for another thirteen years to direct the affairs of the Gonābādis, but the resentment he had aroused persisted, particularly among the dervishes in Tehran. His end ultimately came by assassination in 1327/1909, when he was cut down (or, according to one account, strangled) by assailants one morning when making ablutions for the dawn prayer in front of his house; the killers are said to have been incited by a certain Mollā Ḥājj Abu Torāb (Modarresi Čahārdehi, 1981, p. 284).

Of the eight items comprising Solṭān-ʿAlīšāh’s literary legacy, two—*Welāyat-nāma* and *Bašārat al-moʿmenin*—are of some interest for the doctrines and practices of the order he founded, but it is *Bayān al-saʿāda*, his Arabic commentary on the Qurʾān, completed in 1311/1893 and first printed three years later, that has attained the greatest fame. The celebrity of the work is due in part to the charges of plagiarism that have been made against Solṭān ʿAlīšāh. Decisive, perhaps, is the testimony of the great Shiʿite bibliographer Āqā Bozorg Ṭehrāni (q.v.). Āqā Bozorg reports that when alerted to parallels between *Bayān al-saʿāda* and a commentary written by an Indian scholar, Makòdum ʿAli Mahāʿemi Nawāʿeti (d. 835/1432), *Tabsir al-raḥmān wa taysir al-mannān*, he compared the two texts and found the similarities so close and numerous as to admit of no explanation but wholesale plagiarism (*al-Ḍarīʿa*, III, pp. 181-82; see also Monzawī, *Noskḥā* I, p. 8 and Ḥabībābādi, *Makārem* IV, p. 1385, n. 1).

Despite the misgivings his appointment had aroused, Nur-ʿAlīšāh proved able to gain the confidence of the Gonābādi dervishes and, with the aid of five shaikhs, some of them inherited from his father, to rebuild the membership of the order. In addition, he began constructing a large mausoleum for Solṭān-ʿAlīšāh, thereby making of Bidokòt a center of pilgrimage. He was nonetheless plagued with hostility of the type his father had faced, and he found it prudent to leave Bidokòt. He went first to Tehran and then, at the invitation of his devotees, to Arāk and Kāšān. While in Kāšān, in 1337/1918, Nur-ʿAlīšāh sought



in vain to bring about the reformation of a local bandit, Māšā-Allāh Khan, who enraged by his homilies tricked him into drinking a cup of poisoned coffee. He died in Kahrizak on the road to Tehran before his life could be saved, and was buried next to the tomb of Sa'adat-'Ališāh near the shrine of Emānzāda Ḥamza. The work he wrote in defense of his father, *Rojum al-šayātin*, initially withheld from distribution because, according to Ma'šum-'Ališāh (III, p. 542), it contained "inappropriate material," was published in Tehran in 1315/1898; it is unclear whether the offending passages had been excised. He also wrote a number of treatises and an introduction to the *tafsir* his father claimed to have written (Homāyuni, 1979, p. 223).

Nur-'Ališāh's eldest son, Moḥammad-Ḥasan Šāleḥ-'Ališāh, the next *qoṭb* of the Gonābādis, had been born in 1308/1891 and initiated into the order at the age of twenty-one. He enjoyed a longer and more tranquil tenure than either his father or grandfather, presiding in 1928 over a following of some 10,000, 4,000 of whom lived in the Gonābād region with the rest scattered throughout Persia (Miller, p. 346). His period as *qoṭb* is said, however, to have been marked by a certain stagnation, despite his recruitment of high-ranking personages such as Aḥmad Qawām (Qawām-al-Salṭana), who served as prime minister under Aḥmad Shah and Moḥammad-Rezā Shah. This loss of momentum may be attributed in part to the departure from the order in 1345/1926 of Kayvān Qazvini, who had not only won it many adherents but also assisted both Solṭān-'Ališāh and Nur-'Ališāh in writing their books. Himself a prolific author, Kayvān wrote six books after his defection, using his detailed knowledge as an insider of longstanding to denounce the practices and beliefs of the Gonābādis and to argue for a replacement of the traditional authoritarian structure of all the Sufi orders with what he regarded as true Sufism (for a list of his writings, see Gramlich, 1965, p. 69, and Homāyuni, 1979, p. 233). As for Šāleḥ-'Ališāh, he wrote only a slim pamphlet, *Pand-e Šāleḥ*, which was read at the gatherings of his followers, and his principal achievement appears to have been the completion of his grandfather's mausoleum at Bidokt and the construction of a library adjacent to it. He died in 1386/1966, and was buried in Bidokt.

Šāleḥ-'Ališāh's son and successor, Solṭān Ḥosayn Tābanda Rezā-'Ališāh, was a man of somewhat different stamp. Born in Bidokt in 1332/1914, he began his studies with his father, but later moved to Tehran, where he enrolled first in the Faculty of Theology (Dāneškada-ye ma'qul o manqul) and then in the Teachers' Training College (Dāneš-sarā-ye 'āli); his horizons were also broadened by travels in the Middle East and Europe. The content and format



of Reżā ‘Alīšāh’s writings reflected his duality of educational background. In addition to Nābeġa-ye ‘elm o ‘erfān, a voluminous biography of Solţān-‘Alīšāh designed to refute the various criticisms that had been made of him, he wrote on topics such as Neoplatonism (a revised version of his graduation thesis for the Dāneš-sarā-ye ‘āli) and the doctrine of human rights that could be extrapolated from Islamic law. He was formally appointed successor to his father in 1379/1959. Despite the doctrinal peculiarities that had marked the Gonābādi order, particularly in its early years, and the long record of friction with the ulama, Reżā -‘Alīšāh proclaimed his fealty to the Islamic Republic soon after the institution of the new order in 1979, in part by placing newspaper advertisements deploring the loss of such personages as Ayatollah Maḥmud Ṭālaqāni and Ayatollah Mortazā Moṭahhari. He died in 1371/1992, and was buried at Bidokt.

His successor, Ḥājj ‘Ali Tābanda Maḥbub-‘Alīšāh, born in 1365/1946, had been initiated into the order by his grandfather, Şāleḥ-‘Alīšāh, at the age of eighteen, before going on to study at the Faculty of Letters of Tehran University. After graduation, he worked at the National Iranian Oil Company until his retirement in 1990, but remained involved in the affairs of the order, being nominated as successor by his father in 1986. His own tenure as *qoṭb* was short-lived, for he died suddenly early in 1997, whereupon the leadership of the Gonābādis passed to an uncle, Nur-‘Ali Tābanda Majdub-‘Alīšāh. The pattern of hereditary succession was thereby broken, presumably because Maḥbub-‘Alīšāh lacked male offspring of sufficient maturity to assume the leadership.

Beliefs, ritual and organization. The Gonābādis have placed on *bay‘at*—the swearing of allegiance to the *qoṭb*—even greater emphasis than other Shi‘ite Sufi orders in Persia. First articulated by Solţān-‘Alīšāh himself, their view of its significance was restated several decades later in remarkably uninhibited terms by Darviš Hemmat-‘Ali, one of the shaikhs operating under the authority first of Şāleḥ-‘Alīšāh and then of Reżā-‘Alīšāh: “For a person’s faith to become firmly established, this swearing of allegiance must take place; only then will a light come from the Possessor of Sanctity (*sāḥeb welāyat*, i.e., the Occulted Imam). Once this has taken place, the light of the Imam will have manifested itself, and he will in effect have appeared” (Reżā-ḵāni, p. 482). Given this belief that *bay‘at* gives rise to a luminous parousia of the twelfth Imam, it is not surprising that the ceremony of initiation, centering as it does on the *bay‘at*, forms the most important part of Gonābādi ritual.



The aspirant (*ṭāleb*) is accompanied to the presence of the *qoṭb* (or, outside of Bidoḳt, the shaikh representing him) by a master of ceremonies known as *pir-e dalil* or simply as *dalil*. Both the ṭāleb and the dalil will have performed a complete fivefold ablution (*ḡosl*), the stages of which are designated as *tawba* (repentance), *ḥājat* (neediness), *ziārat* (pilgrimage or visitation), *eslām* (reaffirmation of faith in Islam), and *jom'a* (the ablution made before attending Friday prayers). The ṭāleb brings with him to the ceremony five gifts for the qoṭb or his representative: a nutmeg symbolizing submission (*sar sepordan*) to be split in half by the recipient as an indication of the absolution of all sins committed by the aspirant before initiation; a ring inset with a precious stone; a coin, preferably gold or silver, indicating readiness to donate all one's property to the order; a piece of sugar-candy, suggestive of the sweetness that the new initiate will exude; and a white cloth, in which all the foregoing are wrapped. It then remains for the aspirant to remove his socks, any headgear he happens to be wearing, and all his outer clothing; to undo the buttons of his shirt; and to bare his shoulders. Thus prepared, he hands the gifts to the dalil for presentation to the qoṭb or shaikh, places his right hand in the left hand of the dalil, and together with him performs two prostrations before the initiating figure, which are distinguished from the prostrations made in prayer by turning the palms of the hands upwards. Then the qoṭb or shaikh takes the right hand of the ṭāleb in his own in the ritual handclasp known as *ṣafā* and administers to him the *bay'at*, which carries with it five undertakings: unconditional obedience to the order; benevolence to all men; keeping the secrets of the order; accepting to serve the shaikh as ordered for a period of twelve years; and preparing for his fellow dervishes the ritual meal known as *digjuš* whenever commanded to do so. Finally, the formula of the *ḍekr* to be recited is inculcated (*talqin*) into the new morid (Gramlich, 1981, pp. 75-77).

The *ḍekr* recited by the Gonābādi dervishes at their regular meetings on Thursday evenings (*ṣab-e jom'a*) is silent (*kaḥfi*), a feature reminiscent of the Naqšbandi order, as is their practice of imagining the physical form of the shaikh while engaged in it. These similarities are remarkable, given the otherwise radically different orientations of the two orders. Less surprising are correspondences in ritual and terminology between the Gonābādis on the one hand and marginal groups such as the Ahl-e Ḥaqq (q.v.) on the other, correspondences which have led some scholars to classify the Gonābādis as “a heterodox Shi'i sect” (Nikitine, p. 397), a somewhat exaggerated conclusion.



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