



KOBRAWIYA I. THE EPONYM

KOBRAWIYA, the most influential Sufi order of the Mongol period in Central Asia and Persia, with branches that survived elsewhere for several centuries.

i. THE EPONYM

Abu'l-Jannāb Aḥmad b. 'Omar Najm-al-Din Kobrā, eponym of the Kobrawiya, was born in K̄vārazm in 1145 (or possibly a decade later; he is said to have been approximately eighty years of age when the Mongols overran K̄vārazm in 1221). “Kobrā,” the element in his name that gave rise to the designation of the Kobrawiya, is said to be the abbreviation of *al-ṭāmmat al-kobrā* (the overwhelming event), a description of resurrection in the Qur'ān, 79:34; his *maktab* teacher so called him in view of his insuperable powers of debate. Alternatively, a number of his followers are related to have described him as *āyat Allāh al-kobrā* (God's supreme sign), which was similarly truncated as “Kobrā” (Meier, intro. to *Fawā'eḥ* , p. 8).

He was born into a family that evidently combined religious learning with trade, for he relates how in childhood he was once left alone in the cloth shop they owned in order to guard against thieves (*Fawā'eḥ* , pp. 51-52). In the same anecdote he recounts how he experienced a temporary “loosening of the bonds of the intellect;” visions of this type (“absences” from conventional modes of perception, he was wont to call them), prefiguring his later immersion in the world of Sufism, recurred frequently in his early years. For long, however, he remained preoccupied with the study of Hadith. He pursued the subject successively in Nišāpur, with Abu'l-Ḥasan Farāvi; in Hamadān,



with Abu'l-'Alā' 'Aṭṭār as well as Moḥammad b. Abi Solaymān b. Yusof Hamadāni, with whom he additionally studied Abu'l-Qāsem Qoṣayri's *Resāla al-Qoṣayriya* ; Isfahan, with Abu'l-Makārem Labbān and Abu Ja'far Ṣaydalāni; Mecca, with Abu Moḥammad Ṭabbāk; and Alexandria, with Abu Ṭāher Salafi (or Selāfi). It was in the last of these cities that he received his *konya* Abu'l-Jannāb from none other than the Prophet, glimpsed in a dream, which he interpreted to mean “the one who shuns this world and the next.” This came to replace the *konya* of Abu 'Abd-Allāh that he had previously used. In the same dream, the Prophet praised him for his continuing attention to Hadith while recommending that he also devote the night to reading the Qur'an; there was therefore no reason for Kobrā abruptly to change course (Kobrā, *Fawā'eḥ* , pp. 79-80).

Nonetheless, it was now, when he was roughly thirty-five years of age, that Kobrā began to search earnestly for a spiritual preceptor, although handicapped by awareness of his own superiority in erudition to the shaikhs he encountered. Arriving in Dezfūl, he fell ill and was fortunate enough to find lodging at the *kānaqāh* of a locally eminent Sufi, Shaikh Esmā'il Qaṣri. At first he found the noise of the nightly *samā'* irksome, but when bidden by Qaṣri himself to participate, he rose from his bed, danced, and was cured; the following day he formally became a disciple (*morid*) of Qaṣri. Not long after, however, the shaikh perceived that Kobrā had fallen prey once more to the arrogance induced by erudition and he sent him away to be chastened and trained by Abu Yāser 'Ammār Bedlisi, a deputy (*kalifa*) of Abu'l-Najib Sohravardi. Yet again, Kobrā was unable to suppress the silent but detectable discourtesy of imagining himself superior to his shaikh, so Bedlisi sent him on to Egypt to have this lingering arrogance literally knocked out of his head by Ruzbehān Wazzān Meṣri, a migrant from Kāzerun who had settled in Cairo. When Kobrā arrived at Ruzbehān's *kānaqāh* , he found him making his ablutions with — so Kobrā imagined — insufficient water. Ruzbehān thereupon sprinkled him with some of the water, causing him to lose consciousness and experience a vision in the course of which Ruzbehān vigorously boxed his ears. He then awoke, and according to one account, suffered the same chastisement once more, this time in the flesh. The purpose of the Egyptian sojourn thus having been met, Kobrā returned to Abu Yāser for further training. Such is the story as narrated several generations later by a prominent member of the Kobrawi line, 'Alā'-al-Dawla Semnāni and recorded by one of Semnāni's disciples, Eqbāl Sistāni ('Alā'-al-Dawla Semnāni, 1987, pp. 227-30).



The account of Kobrā's initiatic trajectory provided by another of his spiritual descendants, Ḥosayn K̄vārazmi, is significantly different from the foregoing. According to him, Kobrā joined the circle of Ruzbehān in Cairo immediately after terminating his Hadith studies in Alexandria. He spent several periods of forty-day seclusion under the supervision of Ruzbehān and gained his favor to such a degree that he gave him his daughter in marriage. After a stay in Cairo, which lasted at least long enough for her to bear Kobrā two sons, he learned that Abu Moḥammad Baḡawi's *Maṣābiḥ al-sonna*, a noted collection of prophetic tradition, was being taught in Tabriz by one of his students, 'Omdat-al-Din Ḥafda, and, loyal to his perennial interest in Hadith, Kobrā left Egypt to study under him. When he arrived in Tabriz, however, he encountered an ecstatic dervish (*majdub*), Bābā Faraj, who dissuaded him from further study and clothed him initiatically in one of his own torn garments. This induced mystical experiences in him which, still a captive to scholarly habit, he tried to capture in writing, much to the displeasure of Bābā Faraj. It was now, according to this account, that Kobrā went on to receive training at the hands of 'Ammār b. Yāser and Esmā'il Qaṣri successively, the latter pronouncing him sufficiently mature to return to K̄vārazm and begin acquiring his own disciples. First, however, he paid a farewell visit to Ruzbehān in Cairo (K̄vārazmi, pp. 112-18).

It is impossible to know which of the two accounts is accurate, in whole or in part, although Fritz Meier concludes from a lengthy examination of them that Eqbāl Sistāni's version of events is more plausible (Meier, Intro. to *Fawā'eḥ*, pp. 14-40). In any event, the names of Ruzbehān Meṣri, 'Ammār Yāser Bedlisi, and Esmā'il Qaṣri are common to both, so it may be assumed that Kobrā associated with all three preceptors, in whatever order. Bedlisi appears to have played the greatest role in his spiritual evolution, for it is to him alone that Kobrā refers in his writings. He thus records how he abandoned, after a mere eleven days, the first period of forty-day retreat he was due to spend under his supervision; and how he was admonished by him that to count the days left to emerging from seclusion amounted to already having left it (*Fawā'eḥ*, pp. 59-60). Insofar as Kobrā received his principal *kerqa* (initiatic cloak) from Bedlisi, the Kobrawiya may be regarded as a branch of the Sohrawardiya in its origins; it was the geographical separation that followed Kobrā's return to K̄vārazm, as well as his choice of distinctive spiritual emphases, that made of it a new and independent order. Some sources, however, contrastingly accord primacy to his affiliation to Esmā'il Qaṣri (e.g., Zabidi, fol. 87a).



The return took place in 1184, and Kobrā devoted the rest of his life to training some sixty disciples, twelve of whom he regarded with particular esteem and who earned him the hagiographical title of *šayḳ-e walitarāš* (the saint-manufacturing shaikh). Foremost among them were Majd-al-Din Baḡdādi (d. 1219), Raḡi-al-Din ‘Ali Lālā (d. 1244), Sa’d-al-Din Ḥammu’i/Ḥammuya (d. 1253), Jamāl-al-Din Jili (d. 1258), Sayf-al-Din Bākarzi (d. 1261), *Najm-al-Din Dāya* Rāzi (d. 1256), and Bābā Kamāl Jandi (d. 1273). The notion advanced by ‘Abd-al-Raḥmān Jāmi that *Bahā’-al-Din Moḥammad Walad* (d. 1230), father of Jalāl-al-Din Moḥammad Rumi, was also one of Kobrā’s pupils must be dismissed; there is no mention of Kobrā, however slight, in the writings of either father or son, nor any trace of his distinctive teachings (Lewis, pp. 30-33). Similarly baseless is the assertion that *Farid-al-Din ‘Aṭṭār* was among Kobrā’s followers, although it is possible that he met with two of his successors, Majd-al-Din Baḡdādi and Sa’d-al-Din Ḥammuya. Faḳr-al-Din Rāzi, the great adversary of the Sufis, is related to have met with Kobrā in Ḳvārazm; he instructed this adversary of Sufism that only “an inspiration (*wāred*) descending irresistibly on the soul” could vouchsafe certain knowledge of God, and that this in turn could be attained only by the discarding of formal knowledge and pretension (Meier, intro. to *Fawā’eḥ* , pp. 45-46). The account of this meeting appears to be formulaic, for it is reminiscent of stories concerning similar encounters between Abu Sa’id b. Abi’l-Ḳayr and Ebn Sinā (Avicenna) and between Ebn al-‘Arabi and Ebn Rošd; in all three cases the proponent of experiential certainty triumphs over the advocate of rational or philosophical learning. Nonetheless, it cannot be dismissed as unfounded.

Apart from the pious and the learned, Kobrā seems to have enjoyed the esteem of the court of Ḳvārazm; he mentions being visited by an unnamed vizier (*Fawā’eḥ* , p. 74). Bahā’-al-Din Baḡdādi, the brother of one of Kobrā’s main disciples Majd-al-Din, was secretary to the Ḳvārazmšāh, which must have provided linkages to the court.

It was also during the three and a half decades that elapsed after his return to Ḳvārazm that Kobrā wrote a series of works, brief for the most part, on various aspects of the Sufi path; several of his initiatic descendants were far more prolific than he was, perhaps because he had finally taken to heart the admonitions of his guides on the path to refrain from scholarly work. With two exceptions, all of Kobrā’s writings are in Arabic, although several were translated by later Kobrawis into Persian, sometimes with the addition of commentaries. Probably the most influential of Kobrā’s works was *Al-Oṣul al-*



'*ašara* , also known as *Aqrab al-ṭoroq*, a phrase contained in one of its opening sentences. It begins with a threefold division of the paths to God that men may follow: the path of those who rely on acts of devotion (*arbāb al-mo'āmalāt*) such as prayer, fasting, recitation of the Qur'an, pilgrimage to Mecca (*ḥajj*) and *jehād* ; the path of those given to inward struggle and ascetic practice (*arbāb al-mojāhadāt wa'l-riāzāt*); and the path of "those who journey towards God and fly by means of Him" (*al-sā'erin ela'llāh wa'l-ṭā'erin behi*). It is this third path that is the closest to God (hence the alternative title of the work), in that it is based on the volitional death mandated by the Prophet in a much-cited Hadith. There follows an enumeration of the ten principles or methods whereby that state can be attained: repentance (*tawba*), ascetic restraint (*zohd*), reliance on God (*tawakkol*), contentment (*qanā'a*), isolation (*'ozla*), constant remembrance (*modāwamat al-dekr*), orientation to God (*al-tawajjoh ila'llāh*), patient endurance (*ṣabr*), vigilance (*morāqaba*), and satisfaction (*reżā*). There are two Persian translations of this work: one by 'Ali Hamadāni (d. 1384), commonly known as *Dah qā'eda* although it has been published under the title *Aqrab al-ṭoroq ela'llāh* ; and the other by a Naqšbandi, 'Abd-al-Ġafur Lāri (d. 1506). A commentary in Persian was written on *al-Oṣul al-'ašara* by Kamāl-al-Din Ḥosayn K̄vārazmi (d. 1433 or 1436), and one in Ottoman Turkish by Esmā'il Ḥaqqi Borsavi (d. 1725), a Sufi of the Jelwati order (ed. Mustafa Kara , pp. 33-70).

Another of Kobrā's treatises, *Resāla ela'l-ḥā'em al-kā'ef men lawmat al-lā'em* , also organized under ten headings, deals with the duties to be observed by the *morid* : ritual purity, retreat, continuous silence, continuous fasting, continuous remembrance, submission, the repelling of stray thoughts, linking the heart to the shaikh, restricting sleep to the minimum, and observing moderation in eating and drinking. Kobrā himself prepared a Persian translation of this work under the title *al-Sā'er al-ḥā'er al-wājed* ; there is also a translation in Modern Turkish (Mustafa Kara, pp. 73-90). Also practical in its concerns is Kobrā's other work in Persian, *Ādāb al-ṣuffiyya* , in which he discusses the behavioral norms (*ādāb*) to be observed on seven occasions: donning the *kerqa* ; sitting and rising; entering the *kānaqāh* ; eating; accepting hospitality; participating in *samā'* ; and traveling. Much of the content is reminiscent of other books on Sufi *adab* , notably Sohrawardi's *Ādāb al-moridin* .

Fawā'eḥ al-jamāl wa fawāteḥ al-jalāl , perhaps the best known of Kobrā's works to Western scholarship, is noted principally for its description and



analysis of the epiphenomena of the Sufi path. In it Kobrā discusses visions of heavenly bodies (the sun, the moon, the stars, the signs of the zodiac and the stations of the moon) categorized by him as “supernal” (*a’lā*), as well as earthly entities (*adnā*) such as forms, colors, oceans, fire, deserts, castles, fields, and pits. The precise fashion in which any of these or other objects are seen determines their meaning: thus to dream one is traversing an ocean while submerged in it is an indication that he is being divested of water, one of the four elements that make up man’s being as the microcosm; to dream of calm seas in which suns, lights, or fires have been immersed is to observe the seas of gnosis; and to dream of rainfall is to witness its descent from the divine mercy to revive the barren soil of dead hearts (p. 6). As for lights, they are twofold: those that ascend from the human heart, and those that descend from the divine throne; once the veil between heart and throne is removed and a gate to the throne is opened for the heart, the two yearning for each other, the ascending and descending lights merge, as the Qur’ān indicates in 24:35: “light upon light” (*nur ‘alā nur* ; p. 30). Lights may be glimpsed in varying colors: green, red, yellow, and blue; these, too, are of significance. Green light, for example, betokens the vitality of the heart: “when you witness greenness, you sense a freeing of the heart, a broadening of the breast, a purity of the soul, a joy of the spirit, and a delight of the vision, all these being attributes of [true] life” (p. 6).

In addition to these brief treatises, Kobrā has been credited with embarking on a Qur’ān commentary (*tafsir*) and bringing it as far as 51:18 before being overtaken by death; it was then taken up first by Najm-al-Din Dāya and brought to completion by ‘Alā’-al-Dawla Semnāni (Ateş, pp. 139-60). In reality, the *tafsir* has now been shown to be the work only of the later Kobrawis, not of Kobrā himself (Algar, “Bahrü’l-Hakâik ve’l-Meânî”). The confusion arose, no doubt, from the name shared by Kobrā and Dāya as well as the multiple names by which the *tafsir* in question was known. Despite its importance as the sole commentary on the Qur’ān written by Kobrawis and a widespread diffusion attested by an abundance of manuscripts in Turkey and Persia, this work has still not been published. Considerable extracts indicative of its tone and content are, however, to be found in Esmā’il Ḥaqqi (Hakkı) Borsavi’s *Ruḥ al-bayān* . As is so often the case with the genre, doubt also surrounds the attribution to Kobrā of numerous quatrains; however, at least some may be regarded as his (see [Berthels](#)).

Kobrā died in the slaughter wrought by the Mongols on K̲v̲ārazm in 1221,



although the precise circumstances are unclear. According to Rašid-al-Din Fażl-Allāh (cited by Meier, intro. to *Fawā'eḥ*, p. 53), Čengiz Khan gave him the option of leaving the city in advance of the massacre, but he declined, saying it would be improper for him to abandon the city with which he had been associated all his life. Another account, that of al-Yāfe'i, records that once the Mongols had broken through the fortifications of K̄vārazm, Kobrā summoned his followers in the city and instructed some of them, notably Sa'd al-Din Ḥammuya and 'Ali Lālā, to leave; he then led into battle those that remained and was martyred (Yāfe'i, IV, 41-42). Yet another narration, at variance with both the preceding, claims that Kobrā sent his disciples to 'Abd-al-Kāleq Ğojdovāni in Bukhara, unaware that he had just died, so that they might have him pray for the Mongol attack to be averted ("Maqāmat-e 'Āref Rivgari," pp. 16-17). This seems to reflect a wish on the part of Ğojdovāni's Naqšbandi descendants to have Kobrā implicitly acknowledge his pre-eminence.

Rašid-al-Din Fażl-Allāh and Yāfe'i differ also on the fate of Kobrā's corpse; the former reports that it could not be identified among the multitude of the fallen, and the latter that it was buried in the ruins of his *kānaqāh* (Meier, intro. to *Fawā'eḥ*; Yāfe'i, IV, p. 42). Whatever be the case, a grave and a *zāwīa* bearing his name had come into being on the outskirts of K̄vārazm, at the latest by the time of Ebn Baṭṭuta's visit to the city in 1332: it dispensed food to travelers and was supervised by a certain Sayf-al-Din b. 'Ašāba (Ebn Baṭṭuta, I, p. 360). A. Y. Yakubovskii, a Russian archeologist, concluded after his examination of Kobrā's shrine in 1929 that it had been constructed some time between 1321 and 1333 (Meier, Intro. to *Fawā'eḥ*, p. 62). Local tradition nonetheless came to credit Timur with its building; it was perhaps he who restored or expanded it. Repair work was undertaken in the first half of the 19th century by Moḥammad Amin Khan, the ruler of K̄iva. The results were seen by [Rezāqoli Khan Hedāyat](#), the Qājār bureaucrat and littérateur, when he visited K̄vārazm on a diplomatic mission in 1852; he recited a *Fāteḥa* for Kobrā, and noted that unlike Čengiz Khan or Sultan Moḥammad the K̄vārazmšāh, Kobrā was still benefiting from men's prayers (Hedāyat, pp. 94-95). The shrine continued to receive thousands of pilgrims throughout the 19th century and, on a smaller scale, even during the Soviet period; despite lack of evidence, Russian ethnologists insisted on classifying such pilgrimages as relics of pre-Islamic Uzbek belief (Snesarev, pp. 269, 433).



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