

THE FOUNDATION OF SUFISM

And Relation of Ismailism to Sufism

Preface

I was born in Karachi near Garden Jamatkhana. I am almost 90 years old and belong to the Manchester (UK) Jamat. My interest in Ismailism was a result of my daily attendance to Jamatkhana from childhood. This was from the year 1931 to 1941 when I was 5 to 15 years old. My 70 year old grandfather took me to Jamatkhana daily; he used my left shoulder as his support for walking to and from the JK. Jamati rituals in those days took over 2 ½ hours. Three weekdays were reserved for Wa'ez for over 1 ½ hours each day. There were three local Hon. Wa'ezeen, who mostly participated by a weekly turn, but sometimes, the Ismailia Association (Bombay) would send a travelling Al-Wa'ez. I listened to the Wa'ez with interest because it usually consisted of long stories - religious, Quranic, or historical.¹ My thirst for knowledge sprouted at that tender age. Sometimes the other children took interest in listening to my retelling of the stories. All those Wa'zeen referred to the group of Sufis, created by the Holy Prophet as "the group of forty". I have continued to study this subject for the last 20 years.

The Group of Forty! :

Once, a delegation of foreigners with some people of Medina approached the Holy Prophet, with extreme devotion, and desirous of experiencing God. They congratulated the Prophet, first for receiving deedar in Gar-e-Hira after doing Ibadat for so many years, and after a few months, for Shab-e-Qadar - his Prophethood from God, and finally, for having been blessed with Miraj. They asked the Prophet to pray for them too because they wanted have Deedar of God. The Prophet replied that they too can have Deedar of God, but for that they will have to sacrifice a good portion of their sleep and, do practice under the "Guru-ship" (teaching) of Hazrat Ali. He further said, he would also try to be present during those sessions. The three other Caliphs of the Prophet apologised, because they were wholesalers and went to their business in early hours of morning. But the delegation did succeed in their aim. Exactly forty volunteers were selected for the practice. The group included some foreigners: Salman Farris from Iran, Qamber Ghulam and Bilal from Ethiopia, Suhaib from Rome and one or two others from Egypt.

The practice went like this: In Medina, the Prophet had built a mosque in the compound of his residence. That was called: "The Prophet's Mosque". Outside the mosque, there was a raised platform like veranda, surrounded by benches made of stones. The 40 people sat on these benches for the practice. In Arabic, "bench" is called "Al-Suffa". So, the Prophet called them "Ahl-al-Suffa" meaning the people of the benches. Just after the Maghrib (Sanjah prayers), they came out and sat on those benches for an hour, listened to the Prophet and then learnt from their Guru, the Ism-e-Azam and the method of the practice.

1. For my other activities, and my experience in Ismailism, please refer to the Pamphlet : "My Interest in the Study of Ismailism".

Hazrat Ali gave them training in stages, and in the early morning from 2 am to 5am, they continued to practice on those benches.

Incidentally, the Origin of Nandi.

Most of the practicing Sufis used to bring a dish of food and presented to their dearest Mowla – the Prophet. The Prophet would select only two dishes for himself and then put to auction all the remaining, one after another². The money realized was added to the Byetul Mall (state revenue). The Ismailis continue this practice even today and call the auction as “Nandi”.

Historically, three things are clear: That Sufism was created in the days of the Prophet, and that it was created by the Prophet himself, and that its name was given by him. The above three qualities are called prides because the action of Prophet is attached to them. But how much pride there can be, when there was special revelation from God in Holy Quran in support of the Group? God asked the Prophet to help this group because they were praying morning and evening seeking His face. Here is the actual translation of verse 28 of Chapter 18 “Al Khahf (The Cave)” that revealed in those days: “ **Restrain yourself together with those who pray to their Lord morning and evening seeking His face.** Do not turn your eyes away from them in the quest for the good things in this life; nor obey any whose heart we have made heedless of Our remembrance who follows his own lust and gives loose reign to his desires.”

The training class went on to progress for two to three years when the Prophet died in the year 632 and, disregarding the commands of God, Hazrat Ali was ignored for appointment to the post of Caliph or successor. However he was appointed as fourth Caliph in the year 656, 24 years after the Prophet’s death. I do not think the class might have been suspended or dissolved on death of the Prophet. This is proved by the fact that Sufi Saints started appearing from East and West. Above all, Baytul Khyal was always there with the Ismailis and the Imam of the time has always been its Guru. This privacy continued until the days of Imam Shamasddin Muhammad, who started hiding and then lived, disguised as another person with different name. He called himself “Shamas Tabrez” and propagated teaching Sufism. He produced many saints who went to Iran and India (including the areas of Pakistan) and taught Sufism. Their shrines are still respected in Ajmer, Multan and Sehwan. He was Guru of the famous Sufi poet of Iran, Mowlana Rumi. In his disguised role, he never mentioned to any one, not even to Rumi, his originality. When he was assured that all was clear, and Mongols had totally left Iran, he disappeared from Rumi, went about two hundred miles North to Baqu, the headquarters of Ismailis, and declared himself as Imam Shamasuddin Muhammad. But, after that, the Ismailis always kept Baytul Khayal private and as an upper storey of the sect.

2. The origin of Nandi is my incidental research. This practice of Nandi in the days of the Prophet has been outlined in a number of articles.

What is Sufism?

For an Ismaili, there is no difference between a Sufi and a practicing member of Baytul Khayal. It's origin goes back to doing Tapaksha in Ban (secluded area) in Hinduism some 3 to 4 thousand years back, then in Jainism, then in Buddhism, then in Hazrat Abraham's prophet hood. It was promoted by Hazrat Musa – that is proved by the fact that his Ummat, the Jews, even today, meditate in Synagogue in the very early hours of morning, almost at the same time as Ismailis do!

For Hindus, Jains, and Budhists the word “Om” was used as their Shabd / Word / Ism-e-Azam. Ismailis get this advice from their Guru / Imam-e-Zaman. To become a perfect Sufi, you always need to have a Guru. The Pirs in Ismaili Ginan say: “Gur bina ginan adhura” meaning knowledge (training) is incomplete without a teacher (Guru).

The difference between an ordinary Muslim and a Sufi :

Between an ordinary Muslim and a Sufi, there is no difference except the pressure on “Shariat”. A Sufi is like a student, pursuing his studies to get the best rank. For a Sufi, there are three stages over Shariat : 1. Tariqat, 2. Haqiqat and 3. Marefat. As a Sufi progresses in his practice, he reaches at higher and higher stages. The more he is high, the more diluted is his Shariat. Shariat is basic and primary but an important foundation for the primary students. Take the example of the alphabet. It is basic but an important foundation requirement for nursery and primary school students.

Mowlana Rumi once stopped at a mosque at noon to rest on a hot day. There was Azan for noon prayers. People first went to the pond for Wu'du (wash before Namaz). It was the month of Ramzan. The person adjoining Rumi at the pond whispered to ask if he was fasting. The Mowlana replied “No, but you must never miss”. The Mowlana, who was himself a Sufi, was not strict in Shariat but the other fellow was not a Sufi, so the Mowlana advised him to observe Shariat strictly.

Sufis are a most peaceful people. They are always busy in their spiritual progress and prefer to talk less and avoid controversies. There can be a Sunni Sufi or a Shia Sufi. Usman Marwandi / Lal Shah Baz Qalandar, in his famous song “Lal mori pat rakhio” says “Ali dam dam de andhar”. For Ali was their Guru and taught them the method by which they rose to the status of Olya or Saint. So, when they meditate with breadth, they say, Ali is within their every breath.

They say Islam has 72 sects. All of them have no objection to sufism except one: Wahabi / Salafi. The Wahabis destroy graves, tombs and shrines in Saudi Arabia, with the reasoning that their presence fuels idolatry. They say they would accept Sufism, if the Sufis did not reduce the status of Shariat. I do not think the Sufis can ever leave their three stages of Tariqat, Haqiqat and Marefat. It is at the stage of Marefat that they are blessed with the Deedar of God. But, Wahabism is intolerant of almost all sects of Islam outside of their own.

Conclusion:

In this article we found that the foundation of Sufism , in Islam, was laid by the Holy Prophet himself, its name was also given by him, that he appointed Ali as its Guru. That is the reason the saints have attachment with Mowla Ali. God revealed an Ayet in Holy Quran asking the Prophet to support this group. We also found that Sufism has three upper stages over Shariat: Tariqat, Haqiqat and Marefat.; and Sufism became the upper storey of Islam. Ismailis observe Sufism privately, ever since Ismaili's first Imam, Hazrat Ali, as successor to the Prophet as Mowla. We also found, incidentally, the foundation of the Ismaili custom of Nandi.

Further Reading:

1. "Sufism" By: John O. Voll, Kazuo Ohtsuka. Source: The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World. <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t236/e0759>
2. The Nature and Role of Sufism in Contemporary Islam: A Case Study of the Life, Thought and Teachings of Fethullah Gulen. Proquest, 2008.
3. The Origin of the School of Sufism" by Sayyedah Dr. Nahid Angha, International Association of Sufism.