The long-term survival and modern development of Sufism in Iran has its foundation in the Nematollahi order’s 18th-century socio-political renaissance, after the fall of the Safawids. In the 19th century, religiously influential Sufis found royal patronage in the courts of the late Qajar shahs. Sufi spiritual authority was sometimes conceptualized as a worldly realm, autonomous from royal or jurist power. These Iranian developments were contemporaneous with increasing repression of Sufis by reformist jurists elsewhere in the 18th and 19th-century Islamic world. While Sufism in Turkey and Egypt suffered from 20th-century modernist regimes and subsequently declined, the Soltan’ali-Nematollahi order redefined its traditional, Shitte Sufi religiosity in the face of 20th-century modernity, and expanded.

Sufism and the nation-state
Nationalist modernization in the early Pahlavi poetry (1921-1941) has been associated with the repression of Sufism as a component of anti-religious policy. However, there are also different accounts that defy the alleged incongruity of religion and national modernization. While the nationalist historian Ahmad Kasravi proclaimed that books of the Sufis had to be thrown into the fire, Sufism made its way into schoolbooks. The shah himself, Reza Shah, is reported to have been closely associated with the Sufi member of parliament Sheikh Ol-Molk. Once in power, the shah began to stake claim to religiously significant places.

In the Soltan’ali-Nematollah order, the state context of nationalist modernization made its impact upon Sufi religiosity. Where formerly the community of believers in general had been a target audience, Sufi leaders now specifically targeted the Iranian nation. In order to support the Soltan’ali-Nematollah leadership, Nur’ali-Nematollah (d.1918), for instance, ‘issued a proclamation […] in which he called upon the nation to accept him as its head.’ His claim was challenged by Keyhaví Qazvini (d.1938), who in 1926 departed from the Sufi path as it was predominantly known.

While Qazvini witnessed the shah’s de-mobilization of the traditional clergy’s religious institutions, it is unlikely to have eluded him that ‘some audacious thinkers attempted to reconcile […] intellectual modernism with a renewal of religion. 4 The sermons of the influential ayyatollah, Sh. Hadi Qazvini (d.1936), the ‘emulation’ (topid) of mollahs ought to be replaced by everyday man’s direct ‘interpretation’ (aghadd) of the sacred sources.

While Soltan’ali-Nematollahi topid, Qazvini assailed the traditional authority structure of master and disciple, and justified the ‘double castion’ (inshat). They furthermore criticized the organizational framework that would do away with the belief in sacred intermediaries, i.e. the imams, and their ‘intercession’ (inhat). The ‘emulation’ (topid) of mollahs ought to be replaced by everyday man’s direct ‘interpretation’ (aghadd) of the sacred sources. While established Shitte-based spiritual authority, Qazvini was a heretic unbeliever.

Qazvini’s challenge presents a distinctively modernist struggle not only personal claims to spiritual authority but also the nature of authority itself. In addition, his questioning of Sufi authority had the state as an organizing motif. He outlined a vision of ‘classes in society’ that would compose the ordinary man and woman how to practice this moral and spiritual discipline (of Sufism), and so to enjoy the ‘fruits of the spirit in daily life in this world.’ 5 Qazvini’s challenge was recently observed to be a ‘work filled with platitudes and hackneyed moral exhortations, the mystical content of which is insignificant but not one accepts this qualification, there is indeed nothing in it that would put Soltan’ali-Nematollahi Sufis up against the national, societal or state authority. When Soltan’ali-Nematollahi leadership, if not the society, was reestablished by the (great) nation of Iran. 6

Sufism’s leadership. His position was enhanced by the fact that he was ‘a house hold word amongst the religious of Iran.’ The order’s respectable mission aimed at the broadest possible audience, as Pand-e Soltan ‘makes clear for the ordinary man and woman how to practice this moral and spiritual discipline (of Sufism), and so to enjoy the “fruits of the spirit” in daily life in this world.’ 6 Qazvini’s challenge was recently observed to be a ‘work filled with platitudes and hackneyed moral exhortations, the mystical content of which is insignificant but not one accepts this qualification, there is indeed nothing in it that would put Soltan’ali-Nematollahi Sufis up against the national, societal or state authority. When Soltan’ali-Nematollahi leadership, if not the society, was reestablished by the (great) nation of Iran. 6

Communalism
National integration had been a cause of great concern for Kasravi, who had ‘focused on the question of communalism in [his treatise] Sufijan;’ and held Sufism, as a religious sect, among the primary causes of national disintegration. 7 But Nasrallah had promised to ‘remove all discord from the nation in the space of two years’ (if only the nation would recognize him as its spiritual leader). 8 Son Soltan’ali-Nematollahi had not verbally countered Kasravi’s assault, but Soltan’ali-Nematollahi’s national appeal for spiritual authority and societal order and developed the Soltan’ali-Nematollah order in ways to make it seem ideal. One finds traces of modern Shitte Sufism in Soltan’ali-Nematollahi’s eyes and one hand, or four feet and one tooth. Of the feegh, were few functional. If there were many clergymen, there would be more corruption (Ferdin-nam-e, p. 313). Even less leniency was left over in his consideration of Sufism. In Qazvini’s functionalist mode of reasoning, the organ of traditional Sufism was not only un-Islamic, but nationally dysfunctional (p. 311).

Admonitory advice
After Nur’ali-Nematollah died in 1918, his son Soltan’ali-Nematollah (d.1966) assumed the order’s leadership. His position was enhanced by well-to-do and influential adherents, including the premier Qasim os-Saltana. There are, moreover, several narratives of direct contacts between the Soltan’ali-Nematollah and Reza Shah, which concerned one son Soltan’ali-Nematollah’s, the other by Mohammad Ha’eri Mazanderani. Before his accent to power, Reza Shah had been impressed in an encounter the fruit of the spirit, in daily life in this world.’ 6 Qazvini’s challenge was recently observed to be a ‘work filled with platitudes and hackneyed moral exhortations, the mystical content of which is insignificant but not one accepts this qualification, there is indeed nothing in it that would put Soltan’ali-Nematollahi Sufis up against the national, societal or state authority. When Soltan’ali-Nematollahi leadership, if not the society, was reestablished by the (great) nation of Iran. 6

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5. The Nation in the Space of Two Years (if only the nation would recognize him as its spiritual leader), 10 Soltan’ali-Nematollahi had not verbally countered Kasravi’s assault, but Soltan’ali-Nematollahi’s national appeal for spiritual authority and societal order and developed the Soltan’ali-Nematollah order in ways to make it seem ideal. One finds traces of modern Shitte Sufism in Soltan’ali-Nematollahi’s eyes and one hand, or four feet and one tooth. Of the feegh, were few functional. If there were many clergymen, there would be more corruption (Ferdin-nam-e, p. 313). Even less leniency was left over in his consideration of Sufism. In Qazvini’s functionalist mode of reasoning, the organ of traditional Sufism was not only un-Islamic, but nationally dysfunctional (p. 311).

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