Conjectures on Solṭānʿalīshāh, the *Valāyat-nāme and Shiite Sufi authority*

Abstract

Few concepts if any are more central to Shiite Sufism (as to Shiism generally) than *valāyat*, and the current essay briefly explores its significance in and around an Iranian treatise of the early twentieth-century named the *Valāyat-nāme*. Three perspectives frame the discussion: the modern theory of friendship generally, Christian mystical and Islamic concepts of Friendship with God, and (Sunni and) Shiite Sufi authority. It is proposed that typical Islamic formulations of Friendship with God are particularised from their mentioned Christian and secular counterparts by the Friend’s conception as an initiatory patron, which provides a basis to Sufi authority. Given that Sufi claims to patronage remain contested in Shiite spheres, where legitimacy is predicated on subordination to the Imamate, ambiguous articulations of hierarchy are crucial to understanding Shiite Sufi authority. The *Valāyat-nāme* read thus sheds light on the downfall of its author, the Sufi master Solṭānʿalīshāh (d.1909). The latter’s projection of spiritual authority unravelled on interrelated religious, economic and political grounds, in the context of the Constitutional Revolution in early twentieth-century provincial Khorasan.

Keywords: friendship, *valāyat*, *Valāyat-nāme*, Shiite Sufi authority, Solṭānʿalīshāh

In the library of Shiite Sufi writings in modern Iran stands an important, largely neglected treatise titled the *Valāyat-nāme* (Gonābādī 1384/2005-6 [1323Q/1905-6]), by the Solṭānʿalīshāhī-Neʿmatollāhī author Mollā Solṭānmoḥammād Beydokhtī, *Solṭānʿalīshāh* (1251Q/1835-1327Q/1909) (Tābande 1384/2006:19, 176). The present essay briefly examines the book - conscious of the need for a thorough critical edition - and the biography of its author, in order to explore what they tell us of Shiite Sufi authority. The discussion is contained in a larger reflection on Islamic friendship with God, *wilāya/walāya* (here rendered in the
Persian velāyat/valāyat), and the theory of (religious) friendship in general – invoking a broad comparative frame that extends beyond the Islamic context.

Contemporary friendship is defined more than anything else by its *sui generis* quality, contrasting the main, contractual order of society (Giddens 1991:90; cf. Silver 1989). Through this and related features associated with friendship, one traces an historical thread connecting Western early and late modernity. Michel de Montaigne wrote one of his famous sixteenth-century *Essais* on friendship, and three interrelated notions in this text are intuitive of friendship until today, namely, altruism, reciprocity and freedom from constraint (De Montaigne 1933 [1580-1595]:193, 202, 194). (Related conceptions of ‘elective friendship’ rigidly opposed to ‘ascribed kinship,’ however, are challenged by contemporary ‘primordial’ ethnographies, set in Western contexts and beyond. These anthropological cases claim kinship as a powerful idiom, generally, ‘to express the power’ of any binding social ties, which might include friendship, and show kin relations as friendship, entered into on the basis of volition (Bell & Coleman 1999)).

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1 The example given for the first case documents a close friendship between two Ndendeulei men in Tanzania, who treated each other as if kin and were presumed, based on their closeness, to be kin by their associates. The second case, set in London, holds that in ‘open’ societies with multilateral kinship organization, ‘the number of possible kin to draw upon […] is very large,’ so that ‘[k]inship becomes like friendship’ in being ‘personal and to some extent a matter of choice’ (Bell, S. and S. Coleman. 1999. “The Anthropology of Friendship: Enduring Themes and Future Possibilities,” in *The Anthropology of Friendship*, ed. Bell and Coleman. Oxford: Berg Publishers Ltd., 6-7, 8).
Islamic discussions of velāyat/valāyat may similarly feature altruism, as in statements in the *Valāyat-nāme* regarding the necessity of giving to others. However, īthār – the Islamic concept - is not ultimately for other *humans*, but the greater love of *God*, from whom it also stems. The element of reciprocity is often evident in Sufi views of interaction with the divine, for instance, where Sufis’ divine interaction was conceived of - in kin terms – as a ‘marriage’. Such communion, however, would often be appreciated in respect of doctrinal bounds, steered clear, for example, of concepts of *ettehād* and *vaḥdat ol-vojūd*, which were stated by Solṭān‘alīshāh among the ‘corrupt beliefs’ (Gonābādī 1384/2005-6 [1323Q/1905-6]:34). For altruism and reciprocity, Islamic mystical articulations abound, which do not show ‘freedom from constraint,’ however, but hierarchical religious embedding. This structural aspect more than others provides a key to understanding *valāyat* as a social and political relation in Islamic society.

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For mystic Islamic articulations of altruism and reciprocity there exist equivalents in the Christian notion of *Gottesfreundschaft* - similarly a hierarchical idea of religious friendship. Corbin invokes *Gottesfreundschaft*, justifiably and to productive comparative use, in rendering *valāyat* (Corbin 1972a:396). But one will not, it seems, find concepts of friendship with God in this tradition that appreciate the Friend’s role as a spiritual initiator within the religious community.

Reports of two subsequent, related manifestations of Christian mystical organization, Van Ruusbroec’s (d.1381) parish and later priory in Groenendaal near Brussels (Verdeyen c1994:22-3; van Ruusbroec 1981) and Grote’s (d.1384) devotional movement, which spread out from Deventer beyond the Low Countries.

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and was posthumously named the *Zusters en Broeders van het Gemene Leven* (‘Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life’) (Post 1968:197; van Engen 2008), do not indicate either that disciples’ spiritual progression was held dependent on the person of the spiritual founder, irrespective of the great esteem in which he would be held as the ‘first exemplar of the New Devotion’ (Grote-van Engen 1988:45) or as an illuminated teacher (Ruusbroec-cf. Verduyen c1994:45-6; van Ruusbroec 1981:21; van Engen 2008:esp. 84-118). In the Islamic case, his friendship with God allows the Friend to be at once, a patron in the community of the faithful – *valāyat*, very often, involves a relationship of double religious patronage, of the Friend by God and flowing from there, the Faithful(-Initiands) by the Friend.\(^6\)

Basic meanings of *velāyat/valāyat* are distinguished, but the terms are also used interchangeably (cf. Cornell 1998:xviiff.). They render both ‘friendship’ or ‘assistance,’ and ‘authority’ or ‘power’ – a duality of meanings (Landolt 1987:316).\(^7\) The Sufi terms are often rendered as Friendship with God, which may

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\(^7\) It is not opportune for this relatively short text to discuss the extensive academic literature on *velāyat/valāyat* but pertinent in lieu of that to refer, for instance, to Landolt’s comprehensive encyclopaedic entry (ibid.) and McGregor’s overview of especially Sunni Sufi thought in this area (2001. *The Development of the Islamic Understanding of Sanctity*. *Religious Studies and Theology* 20, no. 1 ) – in addition to the sources mentioned elsewhere in this section in relation with Sufi
connote understandings from both sides of the divide such as nearness, Imamic love/love of the Imams (which is the core understanding of *valāyat* in Shiism (Walker 2002:209)), spiritual jurisdiction, or sanctity (Radtke 2000:109; Corbin 1972b: [vol. 3], 9-10). Chodkiewicz’s parallel of Islamic sainthood with late Roman *amicitia* (1986:35), moreover, serves as an important reminder that the dual meanings of *velāyat* and *valāyat* are often implied in one another. Notions of *velāyat,valāyat* reveal embeddedness in socio-political life, and related to this fact are discerning questions over the spiritual authority of those who might claim or to whom might be attributed divine friendship. Among other categories, they might include caliphs, shahs, imams, sheikhs, jurists, mystics or the faithful at large.

Sufi thought on Friendship with God, whether in Shiism or Sunnism, often discusses the Friends, with implications for these other functions of Islamic society as well, by distinguishing *valī* and *valāyat* from, on the one hand, the Prophet and prophethood, *nabī* and *nobovvat*, and on the other, the Messenger and revelation, *rasūl* and *resālat* (e.g., cf. Corbin 1972b:171). Shiite theory is particular in its association of *valāyat* with the imamate.⁸ There has been a chain of four main Sufi *velāyat,valāyat*, each of which also contain assessments of either parts or the full breadth of its intellectual history.

⁸ Amir-Moezzi’s discussion of the term distinguishes two semantic levels, that concerning the *valī*-imam and that in relation with his follower; the first involving the imamate as spiritual leadership or the imam’s ontological status as the site where God manifests himself, and the second love (*ḥobb*) and affection (*mawadda*) for or submission (*taslīm*) to him (2002. Notes À Propos De La *Walāya* Imamite (Aspects De L’Imamologie Duodécimaine, X). *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 122, no. 4).
discussants of valāyat: al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (d.#907-12), Hojvīrī (d.#1072) Ibn ṭArabī (d.1240) and, the only Shiite contributor among these four, Āmolī (d. after 1385) (cf. Radtke 2000; Landolt 1987; Radtke & O’Kane 1996:1-9; Landolt 2000:91; Corbin 1972b:170-71; Chodkiewicz 1986).

Hojvīrī’s Kashf ol-Maḥjūb presents valāyat as Sufism’s doctrinal core (Landolt 1987:321; Hojvīrī 1371/1992:265-311), based on a discussion of Tirmidhī’s thought (Radtke 2000:110), but omits the central aspect in his Khatm/Sīrat al-awliyā’, of ‘the seal’ (khatm) of the Friends of God (Chodkiewicz 1986:49). Ibn ṭArabī’s Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkīya, to the contrary, elaborates on Tirmidhī’s presentation of valāyat, including the doctrine of the Seal whilst distinguishing two kinds of khatm al-awliyā’, the universal or general (ṭāʾīma) and the particular or Muhammadan (muḥammadīya), and explicating their identity (unambiguously Jesus in the first case and more complicately himself in the second) (see Chodkiewicz 1986:70; 148; ch. 9; Affifi 1979 [1939]:100). But only Ḥeydar Āmolī wrote from a Shiite viewpoint, presenting the imams as mystical

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9 A warning against false continuities in spite of Sufi discussions over centuries and continents about the Seal, Radtke points out that Ibn ṭArabī hardly took over any of Tirmidhī’s thought and used the latter’s terms to unfold his own system (see 1994. Tirmidjiana Minora. Oriens 34: 277; 294-96, 297). Ibn ṭArabī discerned an additional ‘Seal of Children,’ which, however, was apparently marginal to his elaborations and need not concern us here (cf. Chodkiewicz, M. 1986. Le Sceau des Saints. Prophétie et Sainteté dans la Doctrine d’Ibn Arabī. Paris: Gallimard, ch.8).
guides while defining true Shiism as Sufism and true Sufism as Shiism.\(^{10}\) His *Jāmī‘ al-asrār wa manba‘ al-anwār* incorporates and transforms the scheme of Ibn ʿArabī in the latter’s *Futūḥāt*, identifying Imam ʿAlī with ‘the seal of the universal (*moṭlaq*) walāya’ and ‘the seal of the particular (*moqayyad*), Mohammadan walāya’ with the Twelfth Imam ((Kohlberg 2011 [1989]; Āmolī 1969 [#752Q/1351]:395-6).

Āmolī’s view has become increasingly heterodox since the days of the late Safavid repression and the realignment of Shiism around a juristic core. More broadly, Sufis faced a recurrent rebuke of Sufism from among Shiite authors (including Āmolī), who did not necessarily oppose Sufism as a whole. To paraphrase Corbin, this blamed (Shiite) Sufism for ‘forgetfulness of its sources’ – that is, the ‘Sunni’ claim to a Friendship with God that followed the prophethood but did not subjugate itself amply to the Imamic cycle, claiming Friendship instead for itself (e.g., Corbin 1971:17-18).

One way in which Shiite Sufis contained such readings – which would bring *qoṭbiyat* (lit., poleship, i.e., Sufi spiritual authority) and imamate, and by extension, the class of religious jurists into collision - was through hierarchical demarcations. These would encompass the authority of the *qoṭb* in the spiritual dominion of ‘the fourteen immaculates’: the Prophet’s authority, Fāṭima’s *valāyat-e Fāṭeḥmīya*, and that of the twelve imams. For instance, Shiite Sufis conceived of

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10 ‘Every true Shiite (referred to by Āmolī as *mormen momtahan*, ‘a believer put to the test’) is also a Sufi, and vice versa’ (Kohlberg, E. 2011 [1989]. Āmolī, Sayyed Bahā‘-Al-Dīn. In *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. 1, Fasc. 9, London, 983-85.).
the Mahdī’s realm in terms of the Universal Authority (velāyat-e kollīya) or Sun Authority (velāyat-e shamsīya), while Partial Authority (velāyat-e jozīya) or Moon Authority (velāyat-e qamarīya) circumscribed the Pole’s jurisdiction. Thus, Shiite Sufis posited velāyat-e jozīya as a spiritual authority derived from that of the twelfth imam, but whom, in ambivalent terminology that reminds once more of Āmoli,11 they might also conceive of as the Pole of Poles (qoṭb ol-aqtāb), the qoṭb-e shamsī or the pīr-e ḥaqīqat (see Gramlich 1976:158ff).12

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11 E.g., cf. Nasr’s reference to the latter holding that “[t]he Quṭb and the Imām are two expressions possessing the same meaning and referring to the same person” (1972. "Shiᶜism and Sufism: their Relationship in Essence and in History,” in Sufi essays. London: G. Allen and Unwin, 111).

12 In a non-sectarian context in which scholars of discernment have at minimum suggested Shiite leanings (cf. Ridgeon, L.V.J. 1998. ‘Azīz Nasafi. Richmond: Curzon, 190-99), such ‘ambiguity in hierarchy’ finds an exemplary illustration in ‘Azīz Nasafi’s treatment of one of the oldest Sufi controversies. Kashf al-ṣirāṭ contains an ‘orthodox’ spiritual hierarchy in which the Prophets rank higher than the Friends (ibid., 172). “On discussing the spiritual hierarchy[,]” however, “Nasafi suggests that the relationship is not as simple as it appears at first sight” (ibid., 173). This emerges, for instance, from Nasafi’s view that “Friendship is the heart of Prophecy” (ibid.). The Friend, who is a guide, and knows of the realities of things, has greater knowledge than the Prophet, who is a warner, and knows of the qualities of things. Furthermore, the Prophet is also a Friend, but whose Friendship is superior to his Prophecy (ibid., 178; 180; 181). The ‘first sight’ also holds true, however, as “in another respect, Prophecy is superior to Friendship” (ibid., 181). This emerges in Nasafi’s Ketāb-e tanzīl from Khiḍr’s obeisance to Moses (ibid., 182) and Nasafi’s statement that “[t]he Possessor of the Holy Law is an Establisher and the Possessor of Realities is an Unveiler. Each Prophet is not a Possessor of a Holy Law, but each Possessor of a Holy Law is a Prophet. Each Friend is not a Possessor of Realities, but each Possessor of Realities is a Friend.” Although
In religious models of friendship such as the above, the relations of friends under God are often legitimate only in as far as they are hierarchically embedded – an instance of intricate family resemblances between hierarchy and religion (see Dumont (1966) 1980). Shiite Sufis often carve out a proper religious space within Shiism in modern discussions of Friendship with God, charting delicate balances of authority with imams and jurists (as in the Solțănălişhahī case), or uphold such equilibrium in practice with other possessors of sanctity, such as sometimes rulers. Moreover, one is often struck by ambiguity in Sufis’ claims to legitimate authority in Shiism: the qoṭb has partial authority but how distinctive is it when the Mahdī is conceived as pīr? Or, in relations with rulers, the laqab of shāh is held to

be symbolic but not always, as when Shāh Neʿmatollāh stated that rulers had to spread the word of the *True King* by the sword.\footnote{14 The two examples derive from Pourjavady, N. and P.L. Wilson. 1978. *Kings of Love. The Poetry and History of the Niʿmatullāhī Sufi Order*. Tehran: Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy, 21, 117.}

The theme of ambiguity in hierarchy is central to an essay in linguistic anthropology that explores accommodation in the face of hegemonic ideology. Corin’s study (1995) explores Islamic and other cases where subordinates manipulate the definition of an ideological centre and its margins, allowing simultaneously for their adjustment to a hegemonic discourse and their retention of identity.\footnote{15 One of Corin’s cases concerns a spirit possession ritual in the former Zaire called *Mizuka* and deemed Islamic, starting with ‘the Shaada’ (Corin, E.E. 1995. ”Meaning Games at the Margins: The cultural centrality of subordinated structures,” in *Beyond Textuality. Asceticism and violence in anthropological interpretation*, ed. Bibeau and Corin, *Approaches to Semiotics Series*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 183-84). *Mizuka* refers to a category of Muslim *jinn*, which, however, have ‘servant spirits’ named *Kilima* that are considered part of ‘African tradition.’ Paraphrasing, Corin argues that as ritual practice is particularly concerned with the ‘African’ side, this subverts the ideological centrality of Islam to the ritual (ibid., 184-86), hence, ‘the cultural centrality of subordinated structures.’ A similar praxis-ideology opposition is not implied for the Sufi case developed here (let alone a juxtaposition with Islam), but inspiration is drawn from the analysis of internal differentiation in a dominant discourse, which creates ideological space and legitimacy for subordinate groups (and may also turn against them in sufficiently hostile environments, as Solṭānʿalīshāh’s case will show).}
nobovvat and valāyat, and Shiite Sufi ‘homologies’ of sharī‘at, tārīqat and haqīqat (Corbin 1971:259; cf. Antes 1971:11 for Āmolī’s additional applications). Shiite Sufis might venture a further, ‘marginal’ subdivision from this construction, establishing Sufis or Gnostics (‘orafāḥ) and jurists (foqahā) as esoteric and exoteric agents of the esoteric Imamic authority. Such a division of spiritual authority between ‘orafāḥ and foqahā, whether explicit or implicit, has been at the basis of Solṭān-ālîshâhī doctrine and practice.

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Solṭān-ālîshâh was a Sufi master of national renown from Beydokht who headed the order in his name, which was the largest modern offshoot of the Ne’matollâhī path, in Khorasan. Unlike his predecessor and the first qoṭb of the Order, ʻSaštāndān-ālîshâh (d.1293Q/1876), Solṭān-ālîshâh pursued extensive and profound religious training. His teachers included the philosopher Hâdî Sabzavârî in Sabzavâr and before that, several Iraqi marāje’, one of whom, Mîrzâ Ḥabîbollâh Rashtî, in the late nineteenth century had granted him an ejâze–ye ejtehâd (Pâzûkî 1387/2008-9:12). He thus became the Order’s first mojtahed-qoṭb - of three to date. Reflecting his orthodox credentials, Solṭān-ālîshâh is reputed for a tafsîr, Bayân al-Sâvāda (1314Q/1896-7). In his lifetime, the Order swelled in social and numerical importance and Solṭān-ālîshâh himself grew increasingly wealthy. His conspicuous outward success helps explain why heresies were attributed to him,
and he was harassed and murdered on 26 ṭabīʿ al-avval 1327Q/18 April 1909 (Tābande 1384/2006:170), but his vita and oeuvre provide other clues as well.

The *Valāyat-nāme* was completed in 1320Q/1902 (ibid., 242) and originally published as a lithograph in Tehran in 1323Q/1905-6. It occupies a unique place in the Solṭān‘alīshāhī order’s literary corpus. It is a very different work than both Solṭān‘alīshāh’s *tafsīr*, acclaimed by ʿolamā contemporary with the Master such as Ākhūnd Mollā Moḥammad Kāshī (d.1333Q/1915), and its follow-up, *Majmaʿ os-Saʿādat*, which is concerned with *ahkām-e gālebī* (formal precepts) and *sharīʿat* rather than with *ahkām-e qalbī* (ordinances of the heart) and *valāyat* (ibid., 221, 241). After Solṭān‘alīshāh, moreover, it was particularly a juristic, *feqhī* emphasis that set through in the Order’s writings, at first through his son and successor, ʿNūr‘alīshāh (d.1297/1918).

The main text consists of forty-seven chapters in twelve parts that consecutively cover, primarily, the exegesis of *valāyat*; the meaning of ‘obligatory’ (*taklīfiye* *valāyat*; differentiations of the revelation and Messenger, prophethood and Prophet and Friend and *valāyat*; classes of people in all eras among all peoples and religions and the purpose of creation; uses of *valāyat* in the language of the people of God; requirements for the Wayfarer (*sālek*) in relation to God; dealings of the Wayfarer with the people; dealings of the Wayfarer with the subjects of his country and his forces; habitudes of the soul (*kheṣlāthā ye nafsānī*) that strengthen *valāyat*; the connecting thread of *valāyat* to the time of Adam; the people’s need of a teacher and a guide; and the state (*hāl*) of the believer who
pleads allegiance (bey'at) and to whom the graft (peyvand) of valāyat has reached.

The Valāyat-nāme does not explicitly address Ibn ṭArabī (but rejects vaḥdat ol-vojūd – see above) or Āmoli’s scheme (avoiding the term ‘sufi’ altogether) or more broadly, problems of the Seal (limiting use of the term to the common Islamic understanding of the prophet Moḥammad as the haẓrat-e khatmī).

The treatise follows a ‘central’ Shiite tradition in discussing velāyat/valāyat in relation to the prophethood – namely, as its spirit (‘maqām-e valāyat ke rūḥ-e nobovvat ast’) (Gonābādī 1384/2005-6 [1323Q/1905-6]:33)16 - and in relation to the revelation (resālat). In these various explanations, the revelation is always the exoteric aspect (e.g., ‘resālat ta'lim-e aḥkām-e qālebī ast’) (ibid., 27). The prophethood is presented under dual aspects, that of forewarning (enẓār), which is dominant (ghāleb) and exoteric, and guidance (hedāyat) towards the afterlife and God (ḥaqq), which is subordinate (maghlūb) and concealed (ibid., 24). A similar duality obtains among the prophets’ legatees (owṣiyā’) - i.e., the Imams -, but hedāyat dominates their mission, inverting the relation between the exoteric and the esoteric elements (ibid.). One of the strongest images of polarity between the exoteric and esoteric realms that is nevertheless complementary, the Valāyat-nāme elaborates on two forms of allegiance (bey'at), one relating to the revelation and

16 This has been a traditional conception in the Ne'matollāhī order since the times of its founder, Shāh Ne'matollāh Valī (see Algar, H. 1995. Ni'mat-Allāhiyya. In Encyclopaedia of Islam II. 8, Leiden: Brill, 45).
the (exoteric) ordinations of Islam, and the other concerning \textit{valāyat} and faith (\textit{īmān}) (ibid., 28).

The key issue connecting the general Shiite views of \textit{velāyat/valāyat} to particular Sufi discussions of it, is the theme of these latter pacts or oaths of ‘allegiance’ (\textit{beyʿat-e valavīya}), although this does not appear immediately from the discussion of prophetic, imamic and sheikhal authority. The ‘general’ (\textit{cāmme}) allegiance that Solṭānᶜalīshāh associates with the exterior ordinations is due to the Messenger, while the ‘particular’ (\textit{khāṣse}) pact applies to the \textit{owliyāʾ} (which term seems mostly to connote the \textit{aʿemmē} but might also refer to the \textit{anbiyāʾ}, in their esoteric aspect) (ibid., 29, 181, 25). Each of the ‘fourteen immaculates,’ continues the \textit{Valāyat-nāme} in a Shiite view that crosses from a central into a ‘marginal’ realm, had their own sheikhs, and Solṭānᶜalīshāh traces his own line of authorisations to Imam ʿAlī (ibid., 129, 32, 33-4).\footnote{17} During the life of Imam Ḥasan ʿAskarī, the sheikhs took \textit{beyʿat} from ‘seekers’ (\textit{ṭālebīn}) on his behalf (ibid., 131). By the time of the Greater Occultation, however, the great sheikhs had died, and others with genuine knowledge of Shiism ‘strutted towards the \textit{dār-e ākherat}.’ Their sons had only understood Shiism in name and without recourse to the sheikhs, the method of \textit{ejtehād} gradually became current among them [...] (ibid., 132).

The relation of general Shiite and particular Sufi views of \textit{valāyat} through \textit{beyʿat}, emerges more explicitly from the discussion of interaction between sheikhs

\footnote{17} See the first section of this essay for the specific understanding of ‘centre’ and ‘margin’ deployed here in relation with ambiguity in hierarchy and Shiite Sufi relations to the Shiite mainstream.
and the community of believers at large, and a more restricted category of initiated disciples. The text explains the need for a teacher (*moʿallem*), for instance, from the observation that ‘man is like a sheep, before the patch of *valāyat*, endlessly perplexed and wandering in the wilderness’ (ibid., 136). More specifically, the need for a sheikh (*eḥtiyāj be sheykh*), derives from the fact that he is the faithful’s broker of *valāyat*. Through his oath of allegiance to the sheikh, the celestial graft (*peyvand-e malakūtī*, also the ‘graft of *valāyat*’) reaches the believer (ibid., 11). *Valāyat* will settle in the believer’s heart, and it will be nourished there by such practices as *ẕekr*, ‘ritual greeting’ (*moṣāfeḥe*) and ‘bringing the image of the sheikh in one’s mind’ (*be naẓar āvordan-e ʂūrat-e morshed*). Invigoration of this graft leads to the Imamic illumination of the heart (ibid., part 9–chapter 2, 158, 10, 30).

There are several elements in these passages that religious commentators outside the Solṭānʿalīshāhī confines have found controversial (see Zarrīnkūb—1369/1990:346). The cleric ‘Allāme Borqeī, for instance, stated à propos the *Valāyat-nāme* that evidence was utterly lacking for a religious instruction that *beyʿat* was to be given to someone during the *gheybat*, characterising this idea as an ‘illegitimate innovation’ (*bedʿat*). He found Solṭānʿalīshāh’s notion of *valāyat* as allegiance to the Hidden Imam but entering the heart ‘through the celestial image of the sheikh,’ to be clear in its ‘invalidity’ (*boṭlān*). Critiquing the *Saʿādat-nāme*, Solṭānʿalīshāh’s earliest book, for ideas that the *Valāyat-nāme* also exposes,
Borqēī argued that rendering present the sheikh’s image during worship was ‘worse than idolatry’ (az bot-parastī badtar) (? :168-69). 18

Religious contestation was an important element in the confrontations that Solṭān-ʿalīshāh had become involved in from an early stage and which ended in his murder in Beydokht. Before joining Saʿādat-ʿalīshāh’s Neʿmatollāhī branch in about 1280Q (Tābande 1384/2006:62ff), for instance, - that would become the Solṭān-ʿalīshāhī order -, he had been forced to abandon his teaching circle in Tehran, accused of Bābī leanings (Gramlich 1965:65). Biographical material also suggests, however, that political and economic differences were at stake in the events leading up to his murder. It is difficult to judge from these sources which elements were decisive, and there are, moreover, some indications of an intricate interplay between the religious, the political and the economic factors.

The Valāyat-nāme treats esoteric subject matter, except in a chapter on ‘the administration of a country and the treatment of the subjects’ (mamlekat-dārī va raʿīyat-parvarī). A later commentary in the Order’s literature holds that in this chapter, Solṭān-ʿalīshāh ‘referred to the injustices [in Gonābād] of [a state functionary named] Mīrzā Āqā Khān Shokūh os-Solṭān and his friends and wrote that this behaviour causes the end of the state and the monarchy’ (Tābande

18 A major source for criticism of Solṭān-ʿalīshāh’s religious practice and belief consists of the expansive oeuvre of Keyvān Qazvīnī (d.1938), which would best be treated in separate studies.
1384/2006:141). This phrasing suggests that Solṭān’alīshāh’s larger concern besides the particular injustices of Shokūh os-Solṭān, was the preservation of national or regional order, fearing violence and anomie. If state authorities engaged in oppression, he wrote, they would not be able to keep the subjects in check and ‘the people will release oppression on one another and the country will break down - as is witnessed in these times’ (Gonābādī 1384/2005-6 [1323Q/1905-6]:88). Elsewhere in the treatise, the national state is related to Sufism: ‘These days […], the practice of beyʿat has been removed from the people of the nation and no fame remains of it!’ (ibid., 72).

One finds an indication in these passages, although critical of state functionaries, of Solṭān’alīshāh’s support for the monarchy. There are other clues in and around the Valāyat-nāme of the importance to the Order of ties to provincial authorities representing the monarch, as protectors of life and good, especially as the Gonābādī Sufis had suffered injustices at the hand of state representatives. For instance, the Sufis welcomed the appointment of Nayyer od-Dowle as governor (vālī) of Khorasan in 1318Q/1901, in light of the anti-Sufism, and harassment in its wake, of his predecessor Rokn od-Dowle (Tābande 1384/2006:156). Gonābādī Sufis allege that Solṭān’alīshāh had foretold Nayyer od-Dowle’s governorship, and the latter reportedly declared that during his tenure, he would grant all the Master’s wishes (ibid., 157). When notables in Mashhad sought to prevent the festive welcome of the new governor, a military commander and disciple of Solṭān’alīshāh intervened. Made aware of his Master’s prediction, he and his forces arranged their own celebratory reception with military honours (ibid.).
From late 1908, Khorasan was administered by a provincial constitutionalist Anjoman, rejecting monarchical authority. In early 1909, Nayyer od-Dowle was reappointed as governor of Khorasan but clashed with the Anjoman in Nishabur, and faced with widespread popular hostility, returned to Tehran, deposed. The cause of constitutionalism was a weapon, too, for the enemies of Solṭān-‘alīshāh. His local nemesis Abū Torāb Nūghābī was reportedly incensed at the journey toward Nishabur by one of Solṭān-‘alīshāh’s disciples, hailing the return of Nayyer od-Dowle (ibid., 158). Constitutionalist villagers in Beydokht – it is unclear when -, had confronted Solṭān-‘alīshāh, demanding a clarification of his political position. The Master, whose predecessor had wished Nāṣer od-Dīn Shāh Qājār dead and his ‘despotism’ to end (ibid., 138), defended himself by saying, ‘I am only a village farmer and a dervish, and I do not know what ‘constitutionalism’ or ‘despotism’ mean. We have nothing to do with these matters and we obey the government, whether constitutional or autocratic’ (ibid., 145).

Rather than plainly and simply a zāre-e dehātī, however, Solṭān-‘alīshāh was, more accurately, a wealthy landowner (cf. Miller 1923:345) who - although warning against worldly conceit - valued wealth positively (‘wealth itself, and its

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21 Going by the Order’s report, Abū Torāb was a local landowner of criminal pedigree (e.g., having in his youth killed his paternal cousin) who was at first well disposed toward the Sufis but became embroiled in a conflict over property with a Gonābādī affiliate. This he attributed to the influence of the Sufi’s Master, causing lasting enmity toward the Order (ibid., 146, 151, 152).
spending in lawful ways and on charitable work and for developing the world, is not in any way inconsistent with dervishhood’) (Tābande 1384/2006:203). In the *Valāyat-nāme*, he argued that ‘usury’ (*rebā*) did not, for example, refer to exchanging wheat for barley, or one currency to another, for too little or too much, but rather to the non-*sharī'a*-based practices of banks that were now common in Iran and in the West (Gonābādī 1384/2005-6 [1323Q/1905-6]:81). But his murder was related, in the area, to his refusing ‘to give people grain from his storehouses’ at a time of famine. It was claimed by people in the area that he then ‘became so unpopular that he was killed’ (Miller 1923:345).

A third aspect beyond the political and the economic involved in these confrontations of the Sufi master, concerned religious opposition. Complaints about Solṭān-ālishāh’s teachings had reached the constitutionalist Āyatollāhs (cf. Hairi 1977:91; Tābande 1384/2006:513) Mīrzā-ye Shīrāzī the Second (Madanī 1381/2002 [1376/1997]:76) (d.1920) and Moḥammad-Kāẓem Khorāsānī (d.1911) (Tābande 1384/2006:513) in Iraq, allegedly via parties of visitors from, respectively, Kheybarī and Gonābād (Madanī 1381/2002 [1376/1997]:76-7). The latter *marja‘* had responded to his visitors’ portrayal of the teachings of Solṭān-ālishāh by stating that they concerned *kofr*, and that their author was deserving of execution (*koshtanī*) (Tābande 1384/2006:513). The Order states that Khorāsānī had not, however, wished to proclaim his *fatvā* on Solṭān-ālishāh, not having read his work or met with him. The Master was later exonerated and the recipient of Khorāsānī’s praise, the Order further claims, after the *marja‘* had been sent the former’s *tafsīr* (ibid.). But irrespective of Khorāsānī’s alleged restraint,
Solṭān'ālîshāh’s fate was still imperilled by the travelling Gonābādīs who, upon their return, spread the news of his alleged subjection to Khorāsānī’s takfīr (Madanī 1381/2002 [1376/1997]:77).

In the absence, to my knowledge,22 of accounts detailing the charges levelled against the Master, one may conjecture about them from circumstantial evidence, beyond the contested religious reputation that Solṭān'ālîshāh had brought with him to Beydokht. On various grounds, Solṭān'ālîshāh constituted a source of rivalry for exoteric Shiite jurists. First, an account of the Order under the latter’s grandson Şāleḥ'ālîshāh, who emerges as of lesser stature than his grandfather, indicates that Sufi affiliates did not present zakāt ‘to the mullahs,’ but to their Pole (see Miller 1923: 345, 347). The issue of stature suggests that religious taxes would also have been presented to the Sufi master under Solṭān'ālîshāh. Both Sufi leaders, moreover, were also mojtaheds - which gave an edge to their competition for religious funds with the exoteric ‘olamā. Second, there was a confluence of the Master’s worldly and his spiritual authority, and thus, a challenge of the exoteric ‘olamā as leaders of the community. Hagiography mentions that ‘in addition to his ‘spiritual rule’ (salṭanat-e [...] ma’nāvī), that noble man [...] became entangled in the ‘exoteric leadership’ (reyāsat-e zāherī) [...] of the people as well.’ This fact had become a source of enmity against Solṭān'ālîshāh (Jaẕbī-Eṣfahānī

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22 Given the significance for the Order and in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century central Khorasan of the history in question, the existence of such documentation is very likely. Hence, future research will hopefully establish a fuller record of Solṭān'ālîshāh’s late religious confrontations in the region.
Third, heresiological literature asserts that resistance against the Master and the estefā requests had surfaced after Soltānʿalīshāh had ‘stated his claims’ in the Valāyat-nāme (Madanī 1381/2002 [1376/1997]:76). What, then, did the Valāyat-nāme assert regarding Shiite Sufi authority?

As elaborated in the preceding pages, the Valāyat-nāme posits the mediation of the faithful and the divine through beyʿat to the sheikh. Beyʿat and valāyat are intricately linked in the treatise and have closely related meanings, as where the sheikh’s image is discussed as methodology. It is possibly such ambiguity that has sometimes led observers to unduly conflate the terms, as in the statement that ‘[t]he first pillar of the Gūnābādī branch of the Niʿmatullāhiyya is valāya or ‘allegiance’ to the Quṭb’ (Trimingham 1971:164; cf. Borqeṭī ?: 168-69). One hears perhaps an echo in this assertion of charges, strongly rejected by the Order, that Soltānʿalīshāh would have claimed himself to be the Hidden Imam (Īzad-Gohasb 1362/1983:64, 66, 67). But sheikhal authority is emphasised in the Valāyat-nāme, as where it exhorts about ‘the need of the disciple-wayfarer (morīde sālek) [...] for the ‘perfect sheikh’ (sheykḥ-e kāmel)’ (Gonābādī 1384/2005-6 [1323Q/1905-6]:139) - intended, one assumes, was Soltānʿalīshāh. Referring to the Valāyat-nāme, Zarrinkoob held Soltānʿalīshāh’s mediation, as the ‘[G]reat Shaykh of the Gunābādī Order,’ to be acting in the Hidden Imam’s name (Zarrīnkūb—1970:198).  

The claim has been highly contentious: ‘With Twelver Sufis the Quṭb is the representative of the Imām on earth; hence the hatred of the mujahids for Sufis’ (Trimingham, J.S. 1971. The Sufi Orders in Islam. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 164).
A corroborating view of these readings appears indirectly from the Solṭān-ālīshāhī sheikh Emād, the grandson of Solṭān-ālīshāh’s teacher Hādī Sabzavārī. The sheikh stated that the word valāyat in the Valāyat-nāme derived from valī, in the meaning of ‘vice-gerent’ (cf. Miller 1923:352) - one only of several meanings that the treatise expounds. ‘Valī’ was reserved especially for Imam ʿAlī but could also refer to the Order’s aqtāb, as emerges from its application to Ṣāleḥ-ālīshāh. Congruent with Neʿmatollāhī notions of Sufi spiritual authority in preceding centuries (e.g., cf. Algar 1995:46, referring to the views of Nūr-ālīshāh I (d.1797)), furthermore, the latter qoṭb was also seen by his contemporary affiliates as nā‘eb-e emām (Miller 1923:354).

In the exposé of beyʿat and valāyat, in other words, Solṭān-ālīshāh’s Valāyat-nāme harboured a new Neʿmatollāhī claim to spiritual deputyship. The Master’s was a delegate authority in the name of the Mahdī, that went together with his expanding economic power and political relations – and all three were resented. In the merger of these factors, one finds ambiguity in hierarchy leading up, not to accommodation and the retention of identity, as in Corin’s cases, but inversely, to hostile contestation.

In these developments, the Master was faced with a turning tide that foregrounded the principle of popular sovereignty in the shape of a national constitution, supported in its initial stages by charismatic and influential exoteric ʿolamā, and which allowed for expressions of rebellion and class conflict in its name. In these circumstances, Solṭān-ālīshāh’s ‘marginal,’ Shiite mystic articulations, contained within ‘central’ conceptions of valāyat, did not engender
the restoration of national order that he anticipated. Instead, they helped open a Pandora’s box, casting him on the wrong side of legitimate Shiism to meet his end.

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