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'Urafa' of the Ninth/Fifteenth Century

1. Shah Ni'mat Allah Wali:

He claimed descent from the house of 'Ali. He is amongst the most famous of *'urafa'* and sufis. The current Ni'mat- ullahi order is one of the most famous of sufi orders. His grave near the city of Kirman is still a sufi shrine.

It is said that he lived until the age of ninety-five, and died in the year 820/1417, 827/1424 or 834/1430. He lived most of his life in the seventh century and associated with Hafiz Shirazi. Much of his mystical poetry has survived.

2. Sa'in al-Din 'Ali Tarakeh Isfahani:

He is one of the most erudite of *'urafa'*. He was deeply acquainted with the theoretical *'irfan* of Ibn al-'Arabi. His book *Tamhid al-qawa'id*, which has been published and is available, is a tribute to his profound learning in *'irfan*, and has been used as a source by the scholars who have succeeded him.

3. Muhammad ibn Mamzah al-Fanari al-Rumi:

One of the scholars of the 'Uthmani empire, he distinguished himself in several fields. Author of many books, his fame in *'irfan* is due to his book *Misbah al-'uns*. This is a commentary on Qunawi's *Miftah al-ghayb*. Although it is not every-one who can write a commentary and exposition on the books of Ibn al-'Arabi and his disciple Sadr al-Din Qunawi, the authorities in *'irfan* to have followed him have all confirmed the value of this work. A lithograph print of this book with the *hawashi* of Aqa Mirza Hashim Rashti, a mystic of the last century, has been published from Tehran.

Unfortunately due to bad print parts of the *hawashi* are unreadable.

4. Shams al-Din Muhammad Lahiji Nurbakhshi:

The author of a commentary on the *Gulshan-e raz* of Mahmud Shabistari, and a contemporary of Mir Sadr al-Din Dashtaki and 'Allamah Dawwani, he lived in Shiraz. These two, who were both outstanding philosophers of their age and, according to what Qadi Nur Allah Shushtari has written in his *Majalis al-mu'minin*, both accorded Lahiji the greatest respect.

Lahiji was the disciple of Sayyid Muhammad Nurbakhsh, himself the pupil of Ibn Fahd al-Hilli. In his commentary on the *Gulshan-e raz* he traces his chain back from Sayyid Muhammad Nurbakhsh to Ma'ruf al-Karkhi, thence to al-'Imam al-Rida and the preceding Imams and thus to the Holy Prophet himself (S). This he calls the 'Golden Chain' (*silsilat al-dhahab*).

His fame rests largely on his commentary on the *Gulshan-e raz*, a commentary that itself is one of the loftiest of mystic texts. He began his writings, according to what he himself relates in the introduction to his commentary, in the year 877/1472. The year of his death is not precisely known. It seems to have been before 900/1494.

5. Nur al-Din 'Abd al-Rahman Jami:

Jami claimed descent from the well-known jurist of the second century, Muhammad ibn al-Hasan al-Shaybani. A powerful poet, he is considered the last great mystic poet of the Persian language.

At first he assumed the *takhallus* "Dashti", but since he was born in the locality of Jam, in the vicinity of Mashhad, and traced his spiritual descent to Ahmad Jami (*Zhand-e Pil*), he changed this to Jami. In his own words:

My birthplace is Jam and the drops of my pen

Are the draught of the cup of Shaykh al-Islam, [1](#)

Thus in the pages of my poetry

In two ways my pen-name is Jami.

Jami was an accomplished scholar in the various fields of Arabic grammar and syntax, law, jurisprudence, logic, philosophy and *'irfan*. His many books include a commentary on the *Fusus al-hikam* of Ibn al-'Arabi, a commentary on the *Luma'at* of Fakhr al-Din 'Iraqi, a commentary on the *Ta'yyah* of Ibn al-Farid, a commentary on the *Qasidat al-Burdah* in praise of the Holy Prophet (S), a commentary on the *Qasidah Mimiyyah* of Farazdaq in praise of al-'Imam 'Ali ibn al-Husayn, a book entitled *al-Lawdyih*, his *Bahdristan*, written in the style of Sa'di's *Gulistans* and a book *Nafahat al-'uns* on the biographies of mystics.

Jami was the disciple of Baha' al-Din Naqshaband, the founder of the Naqshabandi order. However, as in the instance of Muhammad Lahiji, who was a disciple of Sayyid Muhammad Nurbakhsh, his academic standing is above that of his peer. Jami, even though he is counted as one of the followers of Baha' al-Din Naqshaband, achieved an academic standing several degrees higher than that of Baha' al-Din.

Thus in this brief history in which we are concentrating upon the academic side of *'irfan* and not upon the development of the various orders, special mention has been made of Muhammad Lahiji and 'Abd al-Rahman Jami, rather than of the founders of their orders. Jami died in 898/1492 at the age of 81.

This ends our brief history of *'irfan*, covering the period from its beginnings until the close of the 9th/15th century. We chose to end at this point because, in our view, from the 10th/16th century onwards *'irfan* took on a different form. Up until this time the learned and academic figures of *'irfan* had all been members of regular sufi orders and the poles (*aqtab*) or masters of the sufi orders were great academic figures of *'irfan*, to whom we owe the great mystic works. Around the beginning of the 10th/16th century, however, this began to change.

Firstly, the masters of the sufi orders were no longer possessed of the academic prominence of their forerunners. It may be said that from this time onwards formal sufism lost itself in customs, outward aspects, occasionally of an innovative nature (*bid'ah*).

Secondly, scholars who were not members of any formal sufi order began to show profound learning in the theoretical *'irfan* of Ibn al-'Arabi, such that none from amongst the sufi orders could match them. Examples of such scholars are Sadr al-Muta'allihin of Shiraz (d. 1050/1640), his pupil Fayd Kashani (d. 1091/1680), and Fayd's own pupil Qadi Sa'id Qummi (d. 1103/1691). The knowledge of each of these of the theoretical *'irfan* of Ibn al-'Arabi exceeded that of the poles or masters of any sufi order of their times, while they themselves were not attached to any of the sufi orders. Moreover, this is a development that has continued down to the present day, as can be seen in the examples of the late Aqa-Muhammad Rida Qumsheh'i and the late Aqa Mirza Hashim Rashti. These two scholars of the last hundred years were both experts in the field of theoretical *'irfan*, yet they too were not members of any sufi order.

On the whole, it can be said that it was from the time of Muhyi al-Din ibn al-'Arabi, who laid the foundations of theoretical *'irfan* and philosophized *'irfan*, that the seed of this new development was sown.

The above-mentioned Muhammad ibn Hamzah Fanari perhaps represented this type. But the new development that produced experts in the field of theoretical *'irfan* who were either not at all devoted to practical *'irfan* and its spiritual methodology, or, if they were – and to some extent most of them were – had nothing to do with any formal sufi order, is perfectly discernible from the 10th/16th century onwards.

Thirdly, since the 10th/16th century there have been individuals and groups devoted to the spiritual methodology of practical *'irfan*, who had attained a very lofty spiritual standing indeed and yet they were not members of any of the formal sufi orders. They were either indifferent to the formal *sufis* or regarded

them as being partially or totally heretical.

Amongst the characteristics of this new group of theoretical and practical '*urafa'* – who were also learned in law and jurisprudence – was a perfect loyalty to the shari'ah and a harmony between the rites of the path of progression and the rites of jurisprudence. This development has also its own history, but here we have no opportunity to enter its details.

¹. Ahmad Jami was known as Shaykh al Isma

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