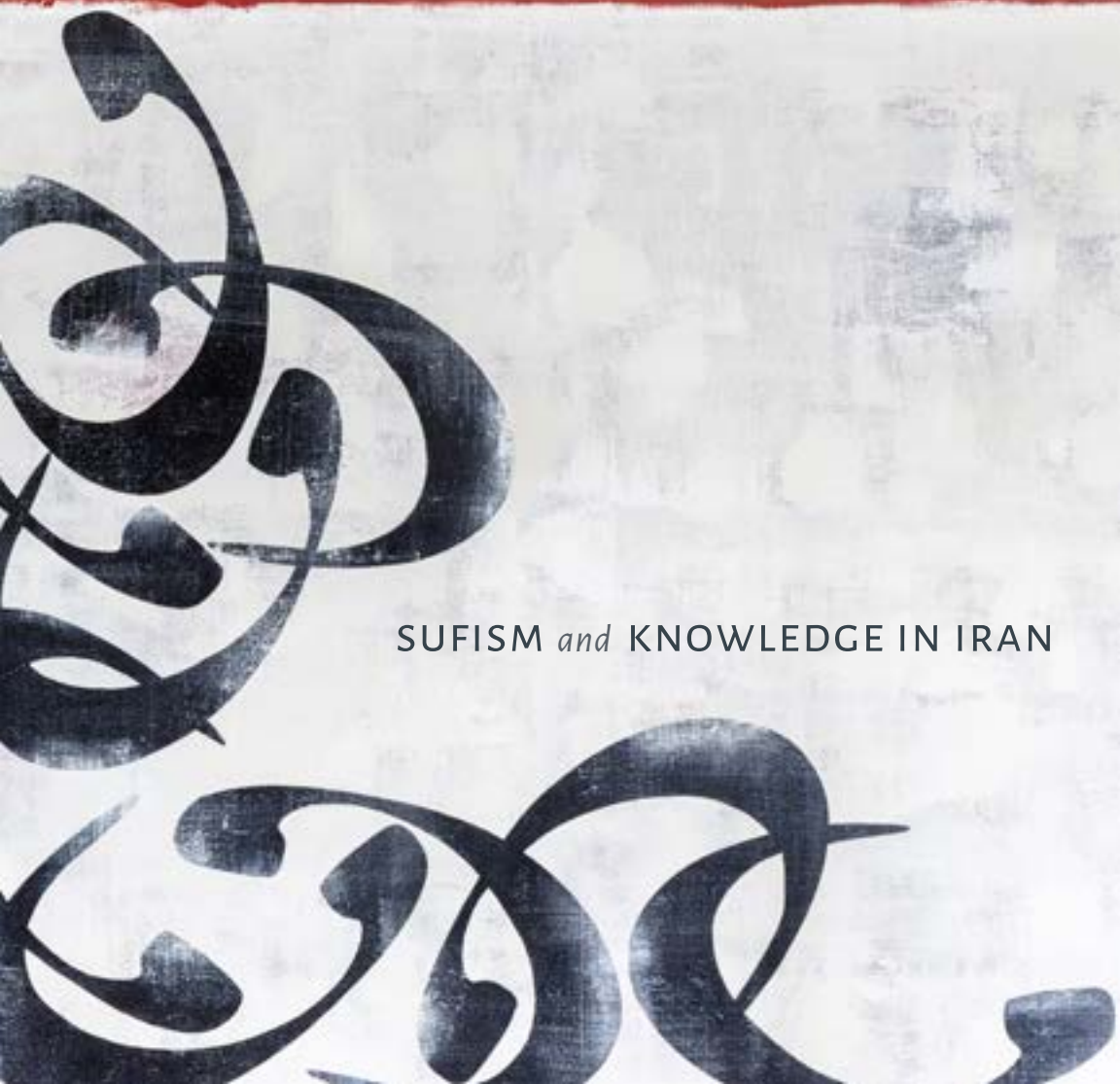
Seema Golestaneh

UNKNOWING *and the* EVERYDAY



SUFISM *and* KNOWLEDGE IN IRAN

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Seema Golestaneh

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This book is dedicated to

Lila, Nasser, and Parisa

(Maman, Baba, Abji)

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For all the shortcomings of this text I bear sole responsibility, as they are mine and mine alone.

Sometimes, in Isfahan, a river appears. When it is there, it runs straight through the heart of the city, from west to east. The river Zayandeh runs 400 kilometers long and in the city of Isfahan proper it is between 150 and 300 meters wide, and hundreds of years ago the Shahs built six footbridges so that people and horses could cross it with ease. Since then, the wide banks have been transformed into parks full of flowers and greenery.

Today, however, sometimes these footbridges are not necessary because the river has been rerouted to Qom Province, to provide water for farmers there feeling the effects of desertification. And so, for months at a time, Zayandeh's bed is completely dry and hence passable by foot, cracks in the earth noticeable as you make the strange and unsettling walk across it, as if you are walking across a moonscape in the middle of a lush park. Sometimes football games pop up in the wide expanse of the river where a current once ran.

When the water returns, the people come out in droves to its banks, as if to see for themselves that the rumors are true: the river had come back to Isfahan. Families small and large, groups of young people, gaggles of girls and boys, old men in blazers and wool hats, ladies in elegantly draped black chadors; all are present. When the waters first started being rerouted, the opening and closing of the river was more dramatic; people were brought to tears at the return of the waters, as if overcome with relief that indeed it was real, it was real, the river was a river once more, a current flowed through Isfahan again, and all was water, light, and sound. Now the inhabitants have become accustomed to the unpredictable rhythms of their fickle river, and while its reappearance is still met with gratitude, it is not as quite as heartrending as during those initial years.

And yet, what a river it is. When the river Zayandeh is full and flowing in springtime, and the flowers are in full bloom, to walk the

banks of the river of Isfahan is to experience a beauty of historical proportions. There is an easy serenity to these riverbanks; the gardens are not ostentatious or overly manicured, but as relaxed and easy as a sigh. The flowers' heady perfumes transport you somewhere so that you are at once deeply present, immersed as you are in the sensory perception of the present time and place, and very much elsewhere, all at the same time.

And those imagined things which are common and proverbial among people of any group, village, or town should not be disregarded openly as long as they are the subjects of attention. For, as a result of the attention paid to them by these souls, they give rise to some effects.

HAJJ SHEIKH MUHAMMAD HASAN SALIH 'ALI SHAH,
SPIRITUAL LEADER OF THE NIMATULLAHI SULTANALISHAH
SUFI ORDER, *PAND-E SALEH*, 1939

Introduction

Isfahan
August 2012

It was Friday, the day of rest, but Elaheh had still gone to work. A young woman in her late twenties, she had a degree in architectural design but, unable to find work in her field of choice, had two jobs instead: one working in a half-time IT position, the other tutoring high school students in math. She also did some Web design on the side when the opportunity presented itself, and it was a meeting with a potential client for this specialty that she had attended today. Needless to say, she was tired.

I had wanted to talk to Elaheh about her experiences with Sufism and, despite her fatigue, she did not cancel our meeting. She was not born into a "family of Sufis" (*khanevade darvishi*), but had started attending meetings some years ago after hearing about them from a friend, and said she had called herself a Sufi for several years now. We spoke about her love of the "endlessness of meanings" (*tamoom nadare*) in the Qur'an and Persian poetry (*adabiyat*), the constant remembrance of the mysteries of God at all times, and how meetings left her with "an open heart" (*del baz*). Given her busy and unpredictable schedule, however, she did not make the meetings as regularly as she would have liked. The meetings themselves, held either Thursday night or Friday, had also grown increasingly infrequent and irregularly scheduled—sometimes alternating weeks, other times occurring several weeks in a row then nothing—which also made going more difficult.

"Whenever I go, I always enjoy myself. Especially when the readings are of [the poet] Sa'adi, and I like how those things they say have great application [*amal*] for me. . . . But it's hard to coordinate sometimes: I don't know when I will have the time, and also if there is a meeting at all that week. So, you see, it's both my being able to go, and they being able to have a meeting! But I always try to go when I can, it's good for my spirit [*ruhiyeh*]!" Compounding the issue was that Elaheh had applied for a master's degree program in Malaysia and was waiting to hear if she had been accepted, and, in the event of her admittance, if there was also scholarship money. She was doubtful about her chances for acceptance, however, and she had heard a rumor that Malaysian universities were taking fewer Iranian students these days, because of "something to do with Russia." Despite the uncertainties she faced, she remained upbeat: "I will always love mysticism, and God willing I can continue, perhaps even on my own, but I'm just not sure about my plan for next year. For now I'll keep going, though, and then we will see what happens later."

We started our way back to the street to catch the bus when two young boys selling fortunes (*fal*) on scraps of papers approached us: "Four fortunes for a *toman*, ma'am; come on then, buy something from me!" I turned over a bill to the boys and Elaheh and I both took a fortune. As is always the case, the "fortune" was actually a verse from a poem. I read mine aloud first. It was from Mawlana, also known as Rumi:

Andam keh mara beh gherd-e to doran ast
Saqi o sharab o qadah-o dor an ast
Vandam keh tora tajjali-e ehsan ast
Jan dar heyrat cho Musi-e Umran ast.

The moment in which I turn round and round, circulating
It is the age of wine, the wine-bearer, and the cup
And in that moment of kindness which you have made manifest
In amazement I am like Moses, son of Umran.

Elaheh rolled her eyes and laughed**:** "This one is always drunk!" she said, meaning Rumi. She turned to hers next. It was yet another by Rumi:

Ey aql boro keh aqel inja nist
Ghar moy shavo moy-e to ra ghunja nist

Ruz amad o ruz har cheraghi keh furokht
Dar sholeh-e aftab joz rusva nist.

O reason, begone! There is no wiseman here
There is no room for you here, even for the finest of your hairs
The day has come, and whatever lamp gives light
Is shamed by the face of the sun's bright glare.

"Not exactly his best," I remarked, unimpressed. After a moment had passed, Elaheh expressed her disagreement: "No, you see, it's actually kind of interesting. Light and the intellectual are always supposed to go together, right?" Here she used the Persian word for intellectual: *roshanfekr*, literally "the light thinker" or "the lit thinker." She began to speak more quickly and more impassionedly: "But Rumi is saying that the reasoned thinking of the intellectual will always be less than that of the sun, the light and knowledge of God. This is what we must think about: there is always that which is beyond what we are thinking!" And at this declaration of one's own limitations, Elaheh seemed overjoyed.

What does it mean, to think "there is always that which is beyond what we are thinking"? To not only recognize that the cognitive capabilities of the intellectual pales in comparison to the knowledge of God, but then to position oneself at that very threshold, that precipice where the capabilities of human thought are said to end? In other words, what does it mean to recognize the endpoint of human thinking not as a terminus but as a beginning? Within certain iterations of the Islamic mystical tradition, to better understand and approach this mode of thought one must utilize a specific type of knowledge. This type of knowledge is called *ma'rifat*, an epistemology often called gnosis in English but which I translate here as "unknowing."

Over the course of nearly a decade of fieldwork in Iran, including an extended period of time from 2009 through 2011, I worked with various Sufi groups whose members were deeply invested in this form of unknowing, among other ideas. I say "this form" because the understandings and interpretations of *ma'rifat* are myriad and vast, but for the sake of this project I use the word to indicate the particular hermeneutic stance of my interlocutors.

Intriguingly, what I found was that discussions of *ma'rifat* were not only relegated to the page but that interpretations of *ma'rifat* spilled out

onto the street, accompanying its practitioners into situations foreseen and unforeseen, into the smallest corners of life and its widest expanses, just as countless theological concepts before it have also been carried in the pockets of their practitioners. Mysticism has too often been dismissed as only belonging to the world of the abstract and far removed from the socio-material realm; my interlocutors instead discussed its potential for *amal*, application.

And so, the question arises: How does one utilize a type of knowledge that contests the finality of thought in the context of the everyday?

Understanding Unknowing

What is unknowing (*ma'rifat*)? It is a concept that is first and foremost based on the affirmation of the unknowability of God, that it is ultimately impossible for humans to fully understand the divine. And yet rather than consider this fact an obstacle to contemplating the nature of the divine and other related matters, these Sufis firmly position themselves at this juncture in developing their epistemologies. They operate from a position of accepting and emphasizing that there will always be that which we do not know. Thus, we might posit non-knowledge not as a form of anti-knowledge or metaknowledge but rather as *an awareness of that which we do not know, an engaged awareness that we know nothing*.

While I think it is fair to assert that the vast majority of Muslims would agree that God is inherently unknowable, these Sufi groups take this conceit as the foundation of their broader epistemology. For the contemporary sheikh Seyed Mustafa Azmayesh, the interminable nature of the journey of Sufism is perhaps its most defining feature: "The road to God is endless because God is infinite. Constantly we have to go on and accept to go on. When you stop you are no longer a Sufi."[1] My friend Elaheh's interpretation of the Rumi poem expressed a similar faith in the endlessness of meaning, where a reminder of the limits of the human intellect, being made cognizant of this often forgotten fact, was a source not of melancholy but of joy.

Within non-knowledge there remains some elemental form of understanding, a self-conscious awareness, but it is an awareness that something remains unresolved, something remains unanswered. Hajj Nur'Ali Tabandeh, the highest spiritual authority figure (*qotb*) of the Nimatullahi Soltanalishahi Sufi Order, who passed away in December 2019, offers the following definition of *ma'rifat* emphasizing the lack of finality that it

invokes: "Literally, *erfan* is knowing. Yet knowing has different stages . . . gnosis is not an absolute matter. It is something that, as the philosophers say, is graduated [*tashkiki*] such as light and faith, which have degrees. . . . More than anything else . . . this process continues endlessly."[2] Here then we see one of the first aspects of unknowing: that it contests the finality of thought, suggesting an intimation of knowing as a process without endpoint, and that there will always exist that which we do not know. Far from advocating the removal of knowledge, this form of thinking, where thought is compelled to its limit, rather emancipates thinking as an automatic, systematic means to an end, and allows it to operate as a constantly searching, ceaselessly critical investigative device. What surfaces then is a new mode of thinking, one that, through its need to question, is able to conceive of a wholly different conception of reality. Above all else, unknowing must be understood as a fundamentally *generative* enterprise, one wherein the finality of conventional knowledge is supplanted by an unresolvable dilemma until ultimately all thought operates as a formless, generative endeavor, speculating upon that which it does not know, moving forward into the "nothing," until all life is lived at the level of an improvisatory gesture.

Unknowing is exactly that: it causes one to *unknow* something; it takes a seemingly concrete and finite entity and unravels it, blurs its ends and beginnings, renders the once familiar into the unfamiliar, and, in some cases, puts its very existence into question. As the eleventh-century writer Ahmad Ghazzali explained in his famous treatise *Sawaneh*: "This station is beyond the limit of knowledge (*aql*) and the allusive expression of knowledge cannot reach it, any more than its outward expression (*ebarat*). However, the allusion of mystical epistemologies (*ma'rifat*) will indicate it, for unlike knowledge, the boundaries of which are all well-constructed, the boundaries of mystical epistemology lead to ruin. Here is the dashing of waves of the ocean of love, breaking on themselves and returning to themselves."[3] This ruination of boundaries, of that which is contained, is seen throughout this book.

At the heart of the project are four ethnographic case studies. In each instance, I trace the affective and sensory dimensions of *ma'rifat* as it influences the mystics' understanding of text and authority, the self, memory, and place. I speak with two sheikhs whose belief in the endlessness of meanings found in works of poetry, the ultimate unknowability of text, leads them to confirm the limits of their own authority, as interpreters and subsequently as spiritual leaders. Listening practices within the musical *zekr* ritual demonstrate a reconfiguration of the self as an unbound

entity, a move toward a destabilization of subjectivity, a "loss of self" in a postcolonial context where a "return to the self" has long been championed by Iranian thinkers like Ali Shariati and Jalal Al-e Ahmad. A small collective of mystics actively attempt to overturn a memory of a difficult event, summoning a "willful amnesia" that both dovetails with and diverges from other forms of remembrance (*zekr*) in postwar Iran. Finally, a residential neighborhood is rendered unfamiliar as a group of young people reimagine the space through movement, reviving a literal interpretation of the idea of *sargardan*, intentional wandering.

I hence approach unknowing in two ways: as object of study but also as critical lens, utilizing the Sufis' own mystical epistemology to guide me in understanding and interpreting my ethnographic case studies. In this way, the project of this book is to demonstrate the ways in which mystical thought is rendered manifest in Iran today, and how unknowing unravels the borders of the material. In doing so, the Sufis reaffirm not only the supremacy of God's omniscience but also their belief in the illusory nature of reality. I should reiterate that *ma'rifat* is a hugely complex category with thousands of definitions of what it might entail. In this text, however, unless otherwise noted, when I refer to *ma'rifat* I refer to the specific interpretation of *ma'rifat* of my interlocutors, and I have translated it here as "unknowing" to better reflect their particular hermeneutic stance.[4]

Guiding me in my analysis are the following questions: What are the possibilities and limitations—intellectually, ethically, politically—contained in the application of *ma'rifat*? In what ways is this interpretation and utilization influenced by the larger sociopolitical context of postrevolutionary Iran and how, in turn, does it influence this same arena? More broadly, what is the role of Sufism in late modernity, and how might such a question be answered anthropologically?

In some sense, this book is more an ethnography of an idea or, perhaps more accurately, an ethnography of an interpretation of a theological concept, than an exhaustive study of what might be called "Iranian Sufism" in and of itself.[5] Such a framing is not intended to downplay the role of my interlocutors—as if I am emphasizing abstract knowledge at the cost of those who generate it—but rather to allow my primary subject matter to be their interpretations and applications of said knowledge. An ethnography of an interpretation traces how theories of *ma'rifat* are understood and interpreted, applied and utilized, influence and subsequently are influenced by the larger sociopolitical context in which they operate, arise out

of particular historical contingencies—in other words, carries out all the things an ethnography must do.

In doing so, I find myself in conversation with other recent anthropologies of Islam focused upon the ineffable and the unseen, where communities or individuals are concerned with planes of existence that are difficult if not impossible to access (at least for the anthropologist). Amira Mittermaier's artful and far-reaching study of dreams and dreaming in Egypt has proved an incomparable guide as she investigates a realm—the world of dreams—that is at once "radically inassimilable" to her interlocutors while demonstrating how this space of alterity acts as a site of engagement for them, leading to profound reconfigurations of what might be classified as real and unreal, self and nonself, and more. Other examples of anthropologies of the invisible include Anand Taneja's elegiac exploration of the interactions between *jinns*—spirits made of smokeless fires—and the Hindu and Muslim visitors of the medieval Firoz-Shah Kotla shrine in contemporary Delhi who consult them, demonstrating how supernatural entities keep alive histories otherwise effaced by the Indian government. Alireza Doostdar offers no less than an historically informed anthropology of *al-ghayb*, that dominion of the concealed and unseen, as a window into contemporary debates concerning rationality and scientific thought in Iran. And finally, Stefania Pandolfo's magisterial *Knot of the Soul* bears witness to the tribulations of the souls of individuals living "in the proximity of madness,"[6] wherein she explores that which, oftentimes explicitly by definition, eludes human understanding. How are we to approach such topics, as anthropologists and ethnographers but also as writers? How can such experiences be rendered legible to ourselves and to others? When the subject matter is the formulation and interactions of multiple realities (and perhaps nonrealities), the researcher must look for evidence, beyond that which is immediately available. As Pandolfo writes in the overture to part 3 of *Knot of the Soul*, "The Jurisprudence of the Soul": "I was clear that I could not write based on his [the Imam's] practice, or even his teachings and explications alone. In the watermark of his words, there was an archive that I had the responsibility of addressing, on its own terms, and in terms of the questions and concepts that had guided my own search."[7] Here, Pandolfo points out that in the Imam's words there is an entire corpus of knowledge that must be addressed, viewed on its own terms but also through the lens of her own reading. A watermark can be seen, but it remains ever vague.

The dream-world, the spirit-world, the world of the unconscious: these are all realms the majority of individuals can never fully inhabit but are able to encounter or at least engage with through a variety of methods and an equally diverse set of consequences. Moreover, what I find compelling in these texts is that each phenomenon—dreams, *jinns*, souls, knowledge—acts as an object of ethnographic inquiry in its own right, rather than solely as an avenue or entryway to understanding some other determining force: electoral politics, economics, infrastructure. This is not to say that these more ephemeral phenomena are apolitical in any sense, or are divorced from or unaffected by the contexts in which they operate, far from it; I simply suggest that the political or some other larger determining force does not exhaust them as subjects of ethnographic inquiry or, to put it differently, the political does not *wholly* shape or determine their significance. Indeed, my objective here is to trace the ways that these Sufis in Iran engage with difficult-to-access mystical epistemologies, ones that often may be retrieved only through much effort and dedication. In other words, I examine the ways in which that which is intangible—namely, abstract thought in the form of philosophical ideas—is rendered material in such a way as to leave its mark upon the social realm, and it is this act of rendering in which I am most interested. My intention is not to explicate the ways in which these case studies provide merely an example or an uncritical and unthinking implementation of a predetermined conceit, but to examine how these epistemological matrices are first interpreted and then applied to the specific context at hand. What this requires is an activation of the religious imaginary, one to generate an envisioning of a world that is in conversation with, yet not entirely restricted to, the larger sociopolitical context in which those who imagine belong.

The Sufi Ties That Bind

I began my work with Sufis in 2007, with a longer period of research in late 2009 through 2011. The Green Movement, the series of large-scale protests prompted by the 2009 presidential election, were largely in the rearview mirror at this point, and though they continued to act as a point of conversation, as all current events do, they otherwise did not affect my research. It was not my first extended trip to Iran, either, as I had spent summers at my grandmother's house in Isfahan, experiencing the country as many children of the diaspora do, through the joy of large family gatherings, ice

cream cones and picnics in the park, being a little scared and secretly delighted when the power went out, and enjoying the company of hordes of cousins, bringing with us many pairs of jeans as gifts, the trendy ones still in short supply in the waning days of the Iran-Iraq War and the years after. In other words, the holiday version of Iran. It was only when I was in my early twenties that I started to venture outside my large circle of relations. No one in my extended family is part of any Sufi order, but it was through networks of friends and family that I met some of my initial interlocutors; in other cases, I approached Sufi groups myself, without any intermediary. All my interlocutors were incredibly gracious with their time, but it is a testament to these latter groups' generosity of spirit that they were so open and welcoming to a complete stranger.

At this point, I must introduce my interlocutors with more specificity. This study is not focused upon a single Sufi order,[8] nor does it purport to be an exhaustive overview of what might be called "organized Sufism" within Iran. My interlocutors include members of groups of varying sizes and organizational structures, all of whom have their own different spiritual leaders. Because I worked with mystics in the cities of Isfahan, Kerman, and Tehran, a regional specificity is lacking as well. In all but one of my case studies, I make no mention of which city my interlocutors are located in or when exactly the interviews took place. This is an intentional blurring, done to provide more cover for my interlocutors.

There are, however, certain characteristics shared by all my interlocutors. They are all ethnically Persian, and hence part of the majority ethnic group of Iran.[9] Unlike other Sufi groups in Iran, such as the Sunni Kurdish Qaderis, my interlocutors are indistinguishable from the rest of the ethnic Persian population in terms of their phenotypical appearance, their names, and the language they speak. They also all identify, resolutely and without fail, as followers of Twelver Shi'ism, the state religion of Iran. They are Shi'i Sufis, meaning they follow all the tenets of Twelver Shi'ism,[10] but either have a particular hermeneutic stance toward said tenets and/or believe in certain conceptual matrices that may be seen as outside "mainstream" Shi'i thought (although of course the Sufis themselves always argue that any and all of their beliefs are perfectly within the guidelines of Twelver Shi'ism). I will think through these differences in more detail in chapter 1.

More compelling than this set of ethnic, linguistic, and "sect" characteristics shared between my interlocutors, however, are those of the conceptual variety. As such, all my interlocutors share the following traits: (1) all identify the fourteenth-century sheikh Shah Nimatullah Vali as a

key intellectual grandfather; (2) they read and discuss a similar corpus of texts, and, most significantly; (3) they express similar interpretations of key mystical concepts despite belonging to different orders. The ties that bind these groups are thus more literary and conceptual than organizational or immediately empirical. In privileging the conceptual over the structural, I aim to foreground the groups' intellectual output, as well as the source material that helps formulate their ideas and interpretations, in my study. In other words, texts and interpretative stance are the criteria by which I have organized these mystical orders into a somewhat cohesive collection of case studies. Unknowing thus emerges as a trans-order phenomenon; it does not belong to a single group or specific sheikh; it is not relegated to mystics of any particular class background or training. Of course, this is not to say that many self-identified Sufis, in Iran and elsewhere, would surely disagree with this interpretation of *ma'rifat*; it is not a universal interpretation. Indeed, a more comprehensive study would provide examples of other Sufis' alternative understandings of the concepts explored in this study, and that is something that is surely lacking. Still, that this interpretive stance operates across these disparate groups indicates that a hermeneutic trend is currently operating today. The case studies of this book are thus a fragmentary portrait of contemporary Sufi practice in Iran, a series of isolated snapshots that give clues to a larger, unseen whole.

As previously mentioned, all my interlocutors consider themselves followers of Shah Nimatullah Vali (d. 1431), and either use the moniker "Nimatullahi" or trace their spiritual lineage (*selsele*) back to him. To be clear, this does not mean they are part of the same order nor does it mean they share an identical spiritual lineage. But the shared claiming of Shah Nimatullah Vali is significant for two reasons: (1) it indicates the potential for some shared epistemologies; and (2) it ties them more directly to the organized mysticism of a Sufi order (*tariqeh*),[11] meaning a collective of students and teachers following a more codified school of mystical thinking that has typically been in place for some generations prior, as opposed to other forms of "mystical practice." Iterations of the Nimatullahi Order have existed within Iran or South Asia since the fifteenth century, and by identifying as such my interlocutors lay claim to and view themselves as part of a broader tradition of organized Sufism.[12] This is in contrast to many individuals in contemporary Iran who feel a predilection for mysticism but who may or may not identify as Sufi (*darvish*), a phenomenon I explain in greater detail in chapter 1. Indeed, "mysticism" in Iran is a shape-shifter, existing in a number of disparate but interconnected cat-

egories: religio-philosophical mysticism taught in the seminaries (*erfan* and *tasavvuf*), literary and musical mysticism (*erfan*), New Age health and psychology, as well as the organized group practices (*sufigari*) that are the focus of this study. This self-identifying as Nimatullahi, however, distinguishes my interlocutors from other individuals in Iran who are invested in mysticism (usually *tasavvuf* or *erfan*), including those following mystically inflected self-help programs and writings, a trend thoughtfully investigated by Alireza Doostdar through both anthropological and historical lenses,[13] as well as those authors who write about what Niloofar Haeri has termed "simple *erfan*" or "simple mysticism" (*erfan-e sadeh*).[14] Haeri has outlined this phenomenon of lay authors, meaning they are neither clerics nor professors, who write prayer books in Persian on the subject of mysticism in plain prose, making them accessible to a much broader readership than the more dense, philosophically oriented prose that often characterize writings on mysticism. In self-identifying as *darvish* or *faqir* specifically and in laying claim to having ties to Shah Nimatullah Vali—either nominally or genealogically—these Sufis are putting themselves firmly in a different category than the two other groups. There is a specific genealogy being invoked here, and all the accompanying identifying factors as well: literary, philosophical, and hierarchical.

The second trait shared by all the Sufis in my case studies is their similar interpretations of key mystical concepts, despite the fact that they follow different sheikhs. Of particular importance is their adherence to the idea that Sufi knowledge (*ma'rifat*), or unknowing as I am calling it, remains an open-ended phenomenon, where the mystery of God is seen not as limitation but as opportunity. Such an idea, although certainly not exclusive to these Iranian Sufis, is not universally accepted within all forms of Islamic mysticism, with luminaries such as Abu-Hamid al-Ghazzali and Mulla Sadra proving key objectors.

The third point of convergence between my interlocutors is the use of similar textual materials. As is the case with many Islamic groups, the majority of the Sufis' time together is spent reading, discussing, and/or analyzing different texts, and so an overlap in reading material is not an insignificant fact. The interpretation of this constellation of textual material forms the bedrock of their practices, and as one navigates with heavenly bodies so too do these written works provide the guidance the Sufis may use to move through life.

The use of shared textual materials also demonstrates a shared affinity for particular intellectual debates and discourses. This is not to say that

their "reading lists" were entirely identical; there were certainly divergences—in terms of genre, in terms of favored writers—but there was enough overlap of texts that I was able to make note of it.

There is also a cross-pollination of literatures between the groups, meaning many of the mystics read and discussed texts by twentieth- and twenty-first-century Sufi sheikhs other than their own. For example, I found the works of Javad Nurbakhsh, the psychologist who founded his own order in the 1970s and left Iran during the early days of the revolution, were still in relatively heavy circulation and in every group there were at least a few who were familiar with his work.[15] Such a finding speaks against narrow definitions of "saint worship" and the supposedly single-minded devotion students give to their leader, where the disciples accept the word of their spiritual authority figure as the beginning and end of debate.

Other literatures read by sheikhs or members of the groups with whom I worked include the writings of members of the Safi Ali Shahi Order and the Soltan Ali Shahi Order. All read the poetry of Shah Nimatullah Vali, the aforementioned intellectual grandfather. While his writings are not widely read amongst the broader population, the fifteenth-century sheikh's poetry is not obscure by any means—volumes of his collected works can be found in mainstream Iranian bookstores like City of Books (Shahr-e Ketab). The works of the sixth Shi'i imam, Imam Jafar al-Sadeq, and key Shi'i clerics such as Ayatollah Khomeini, Allameh Sayyed Mohammad Tabatabai, and Seyed Mohammad Husayn Husayni Tihrani were also of interest to some—if not all—members of each of the groups with which I worked. Of course, the works of many medieval Persian poets are heavily read and discussed by the Sufis as well. The analysis of poetry, medieval or otherwise, is extraordinarily common in Iran, regardless of one's religiosity or educational background, from those who may identify as atheist to the most devout practitioners of "mainstream" Twelver Shi'ism (whatever that may be). Haeri, Shams, Olszewska, Manoukian, and Fischer have all traced the ways in which poetry and specific forms of knowledge derived from poetry (sometimes called poetics or poesis) occupy places in the Iranian imagery both expected and unexpected,[16] appearing in everything from television game shows and art house cinema to prayer circles and refugee cultural organizations, university and seminary settings, and debates at bus stops. The infiltration of poetry and poetics into contemporary Iranian life cannot be underestimated, and this book contributes to this ever-growing and thoughtful genre with a focus on the role of poetry for a particular group of readers, here Sufis.

The Sufis refer to themselves by a variety of names: gnostics (*arif/urafa*), paupers (*faqir/fuqara*), wayfarers or wanderers (*salik/salik-ha*), *darvish* (also pauper or, alternatively, one who travels "door to door"), Sufis, and, to a much lesser extent, students (*murid*). The different collectives with which I worked often referred to themselves most frequently with one specific moniker, such that some preferred *faqir* while others used *darvish*. Generally, however, the name *faqir*, or pauper, indicating that one exists in a state of "spiritual poverty," was used the most frequently. Outside of Sufi circles, Iranians almost exclusively used the term *darvish* or Sufi.

Finally, and most significantly for this study, I counter assertions of Sufi "exceptionalism," which argues that mystics are not in conversation with other Islamic debates and discourses, a claim which could not be further from the truth. In this book, I explore how Iranian Shi'i mystical epistemologies have similarities and differences with the conceptual matrices of their non-Sufi, Twelver Shi'i counterparts. Indeed, it is vital to remember that within Qom, the home of mainstream and state-run Shi'ite seminaries (*howzeh*),[17] students have been able to study mysticism (*tasavvuf*) with teachers—both inside and outside the classroom—since the city's reemergence as a site of Shi'i scholarship in the early 1920s.[18] More recently, there have been a number of more prominent clerics within the seminaries of Mashhad that espouse a more esoterically oriented view, which I discuss briefly in chapter 1. While it would require another book entirely to more exhaustively trace convergences and divergences between philosophies of Sufi orders and the staggering output of ideas from the seminaries, I do hope my modest contribution to such an endeavor here highlights the fact that mystical thought does not operate in a vacuum.

Transfigurations of the Self

> The enemy of Sufism (*faqr*) is the devil of the self, which appears in various forms. Do not be taken in by the deceptions of the self, for it is possible that it may take on the appearance of being pleasing to God.
>
> HAZRAT MAHBUB ALISHAH (D. 1997)

> Remember God so much that you are forgotten. Let the caller and the called disappear; be lost in the call.
>
> RUMI

The self as an enemy to be avoided, the self as a thing to be dissolved, the self as a false mirror of understanding: these are typical injunctions for those who subscribe to the mystical path. As previously mentioned, the primary objective of Sufism is union with God (*tawhid*) through the acquisition of non-knowledge. As such, something which is both a cause and a consequence of this increased proximity to God is the transformation of the self. This altering of subjectivity, which can range from a quieting of self-involved patterns of thought (self-pity, envy, etc.) to an extinguishing of subjectivity (*fana*) entirely, is something for the faithful to work toward and achieve. This of course necessitates the questions of exactly *how* one goes about dissolving their own subjectivity (*fana*), their own sense of self, and how exactly one manages to usher in a form of consciousness where the self has been dislodged as the origin point and source of all things.

The answer is twofold, and involves an understanding of multiple forms of subjectivity. The first mode of subjectivity is similar to that which is found in studies of what has been called ethical self-fashioning, a phenomenon masterfully explored in works by Charles Hirschkind, Saba Mahmood, Lara Deeb, and others. This aspect of one's self is dedicated to proper ethical comportment (*akhlaq*, the *shari'at*) and involves reading and analyzing textual materials. It is a type of selfhood recognizable by many as the liberal autonomous subject, contained and centered, with the self as the sun in the Copernican model of consciousness. Moreover, the trope of "cultivation" is also appropriate here, as many Sufis work tirelessly to try to educate themselves about mystical epistemologies, attending classes or sessions and reading through materials, working to increase their knowledge and achieve the realization of their full scholarly potential. There is an active engagement here, a dedication of time and energy to create an ethical and knowledgeable self whose boundaries are discernible and whole.

And then there is another form of subjectivity, one a bit more porous and opaque, that is dedicated to its own dissolution. This element of the self is seen as contingent upon but also resolutely distinct from the type just described. While proper ethical comportment and obtaining scholarly knowledge—the domain of the worldly self—are understood to be important, they are considered to be only the (necessary) first step in achieving *tawhid*. To continue forward on the path toward *tawhid* requires the capturing of a form of subjectivity that cannot be developed solely through careful study and good deeds—a fact relayed to me time and time again by many of my interlocutors—but by making oneself vulnerable, by

allowing oneself to be exposed to a certain existential and ontological register; it is as if one has undergone a long and potentially difficult journey and then arrived at a destination where such journeying, such efforts are no longer effective. Peppered throughout the mystical literatures is the language of surrender and submission; rather than develop the self, one must abandon it, and what of course makes this all the more difficult is that even this cannot be an act of pure volition. But it is only with this form of radical subjectivity/nonsubjectivity that one is able to experience and obtain unknowing (*ma'rifat*).

According to the Sufis, there is a clear hierarchy between these different forms of self and the corresponding forms of knowledge and knowledge production with which they are engaged. As Sheikh Alizadeh, one of my key interlocutors, told me, "If you just want to learn how to be an ethical person, a person of substance (*adam-e dorost va hesabi*), to pray correctly, maybe learn more about the Qur'an, there are a hundred thousand religious teachers who can do that. If you want to learn of the loss of self (*bikhudi*) and nonexistence (*naboodi*), then you turn to the mystics (*fuqaha*)!" For Sheikh Alizadeh, activities like studying the Qur'an and aspirations of living an ethical life are presented as almost unremarkable undertakings, "*just* learn[ing] how to be an ethical person," (emphasis mine), in contrast to learning about nonexistence, which seems to be the domain, or at least the specialty, of those who have embarked on the mystical path (*tariqeh*). Many other individuals with whom I spoke, including Sheikh Noroozi, described *fana*, the annihilation of the self, as the "next stage" or the "next step" in the process toward *tawhid, following* the cultivation of an ethical self. Among the Soltanalishahi Order, the *qotb* Hazrat Hajj Nur'Ali Tabandeh Majzub'alishah described in an introductory text: "In Islam, Sufism or gnosis (*erfan*) is the inward dimension of the religion, like the seed of a nut whose shell is the outward rules (*shari'at*) and whose seed is the path (*tariqeh*),"[19] at once privileging the *tariqeh* as the "seed" and depicting the *shari'at* as the protective outer shell guarding the treasure inside. In these cases, all embrace the importance of ethics and the self-contained and self-directed subjectivity that it requires, but all also emphasize the equal and often greater significance of the unbounded and unknown self that the *tariqeh*, the mystical path, entails.

A number of recent works that have explored the phenomenon of nonautonomous selves in other Islamic settings have been extremely instructive for my own project. In her study of the social life of dreams in contemporary Egypt, Amira Mittermaier considers subjectivity in light of

the fact that dreams are said to "come" to her interlocutors rather originate within them, therein tracing the ways that the self is understood to be formulated by external forces as well as internal forces. This is a community of individuals who value being "acted upon"—primarily by those spirits and saints who visit them in their dreams—where the self emerges as a *site for interaction* between the Real and Unreal worlds rather than a wholly self-contained entity. Borrowing from Godfrey Lienhardt's classic study, Mittermaier describes the phenomenon of "being acted upon" as an "ethics of passion": "The ethics of passions that emerges from my interlocutors' dream stories not only undoes the notion of a unified subject but also draws attention to the role of an Elsewhere in constituting the subject, and with it to elements of unpredictability and contingency."[20] In other words, the vicissitudes of the self are contingent upon not only internal processing but external processing as well.

The destabilization of subjectivity is also a major theme in Stefania Pandolfo's ethnography of madness, in which her interlocutors are suffering from "maladies of the soul" alternately caused by *jinn* possession, the trauma of war, and emotional abuse.[21] Those who experience this form of dislocation of the self, however, are in stark contrast to the Sufis with whom I worked in that the former experience great pain and suffering, and are actively looking to reestablish an equilibrium within themselves, whereas the latter are striving to *activate* this potentially unsettling experience. Pandolfo's interlocutors understand the cause of their maladies as arising from something external to themselves; whether they be from malevolent spirits or from the devastation of violence, these undoings are caused by that which is exterior to body and consciousness. In this sense, it seems as though the soul (*nafs*) is being undermined, which is quite different from the actions undertaken by the mystics with whom I worked, where the dissolution of the self is something that is, at least in part, self-driven.

Outside of the Islamic context (but within the Iranian context), Setrag Manoukian offers the idea of "the impersonal," considering what it might mean to conduct ethnography where selves are not bounded entities, where the self does not exist at all, but where the self once was there exist moments (and perhaps records) of exchange. Manoukian develops this critical lens in response to his interlocutors in Shiraz, Iran, who understand poetry as a way of existence, and Manoukian takes this assertion seriously, viewing it as an epistemic challenge, rather than simply as metaphor or empty language. He writes:

> In Iran, poetic traditions are relevant in constructing an existential ground for recognition. Beyond political and religious differences, Iranians habitually recur to poetry when existential matters are at play . . . it is the impersonal force of poetry that structures a mode of existence in which form and life become inseparable. Shiraz poet Mansur Awji . . . explained to me that while a poet needs an equal measure of effort and inspiration to compose verses, one cannot control the combination of circumstances in which poetry comes, if it comes at all. These poetic occurrences are neither active movements from the inside towards the outside, a sovereign self-expression, nor passive recipients of messages from the outside to the self.[22]

Here, the composition of the poetry is not wholly the result of either interior or external forces, but it arises instead from something in between. Similarly, as the mystics of this study work to dislodge their subjectivity, the "who" that is doing the "work" becomes ever more unclear, a form of engagement with the world neither entirely fully active or fully passive.

In this book I frequently refer to "transformation," and by this I mean a transfiguration of the self that occurs simultaneously at the divine and existential registers. The transformation of the self at the levels of the Real (*haqiqat*) is seen as a fundamentally distinct as well as more significant cultivation of the self than that which occurs at the level of ethics. Indeed, if one is to take seriously the idea that the acquisition of *ma'rifat* and achievement of *tawhid* require no less than the dissolution of subjectivity, then we must entertain forms of thinking and thought that operate without subjectivity, a form of thought that seems impossible by standards of Western consciousness. By considering unknowing, this book expands on those forms of Islamic selfhood/non-selfhood that do not fit so easily into self-cultivation, and at the same time challenge, perhaps in a more radical fashion, the notion of the liberal autonomous subject.

The Real and the Unreal

Sheikh Noroozi led a modestly sized group of followers and they would meet to discuss, among many other things, theories of the nature of reality (*haqiqat*). Effervescent and irascible, he would illustrate the ways that intimate experiences with and of God can occur in more quotidian moments.

"If you listen closely, sometimes even in the din of the streets (*sar-a seda-ye khiyaban*), you can hear the sound of '*Hu*.'[23] But then in that same

moment it will disappear. You will ask yourself: Did you really hear it? Maybe you did and maybe you did not. Was it really there? Were *you* really there? Was it just the wind, playing tricks? Was it the sound of your own heartbeat, echoing through your ears? While you are waiting to cross the street, can you hear the *Hu*? Even if you are not 100 percent sure, even if all you have understood really is a strange question, for a moment, you will not be in this world."

Later I discussed Sheikh Noroozi's lecture with Shohreh, a homemaker and mother in her forties who regularly attended his gatherings. "I like the reminder of thinking about union with God (*tawhid*), that it can happen in this world too, just from a strange noise on a street corner. I mean, of course not fully, but we can have moments, we can get a little closer. It's so beneficial to remember the world of Truth (*haqiqat*; the divine realm), just thinking this other world is there and is possible. Here, in the Unreal (*alam-e khiyali*), it changes the time you spend on the little street corner, makes it a new experience."

At the core of Nimatullahi Sufism there lies a central idea: that existence is composed of two separate but interrelated realms: the Real (*haqiqat*) and the Unreal (*khiyali, vehmi*).[24] In contrast to many post-Enlightenment discourses, the Real is the world of the divine, of the unseen and the imperceptible, while everything else in the universe—humanity, plants, animals, mountains, deserts—are inhabitants of the Unreal. It is also essential to understand that the Real and the Unreal exist simultaneously. A common idea within Sufi literatures is that the Real is available to us but is merely veiled, and therein concealed, from the Unreal. It is the goal of Sufism to remove this veil and become ever closer to the Real, the world of God, therein achieving *tawhid*, union with God.

As Sheikh Noroozi explains it, the reception of a passing sound, one which you are not entirely sure you have heard at all, is enough to transport you to another world. This other world is the world of the Real (*haqiqat*), the world of the divine. You must listen for this sound, or "listen closely" as Sheikh Noroozi advises, and even then you will not be sure you have heard it at all. It will cause you to question yourself and your surroundings, inspiring a small vertigo, so that your heartbeat, the wind, and the disparate sounds of the street might take the shape of one another.

Reports of feeling unmoored and unsettled when one is becoming closer to the Real are extremely common throughout Sufi literatures; leaving behind the illusory plane of the profane world, this Unreal, is not with-

out side effects, it would seem. And yet despite any discomfort that might accompany this questioning of the self that occurs in approaching the Real, it is seen by Shohreh as something to be desired. Indeed, Shohreh does not focus on the lack of clarity that Sheikh Noroozi describes, but notes instead her appreciation of the reminder that opportunities for union with God (*tawhid*) might occur even in the most quotidian moments, in this case instigated by an unidentified noise on the street. This moment is then able to transform the experience of the street corner, suggesting that even the mere remembrance of the Real can impact the experience of the Unreal.

This interplay between the Real and the Unreal, especially as it relates to materiality, is an important theme in three out of four of my case studies. To recap, the world in which humanity resides is fundamentally Unreal, meaning illusory and fictive, and to affirm such a belief in the *unreality* of the world is a simultaneous confirmation of the *reality* of God and the inherent supremacy of the divine realm. Moreover, an acceptance of the illusory nature of reality allows for a certain kind of imaginative capability, one that sometimes involves the questioning of the ontological and/or existential status of people, places, things, and even the self. Of course, these imaginings do not occur in a vacuum, but are influenced by the specific contexts in which the imaginer operates, whether that influence is personal, sociopolitical, or something else. It is important to remember that this is an active process, as one must always remember to listen closely.

Textual Ethnography and the Hermeneutic Imagination

Much of my time in "the field" was spent with an open book in my lap, sitting around with other tome-laden individuals, shifting our gazes up and down from the pages in front of us to one another. Sometimes there was a leader to these discussions, and sometimes there was none. Sometimes the mood of these reading groups was relaxed and contemplative, full of slow movements and the gentle turning of pages, and other times they could be charged and electric, slightly raised voices puncturing the air, potential energy radiating from those waiting their turn to speak. In most of these meetings the topic at hand was poetry. All the groups were thoughtful, and a privilege to attend.

While I was very interested in the discussions that occurred in these reading groups, I also wished to understand how the ideas and themes debated also influenced my interlocutors' lives outside of the reading

groups, just as many ethnographies of religion have previously done. In this book, I strive to understand the disparate forms of social phenomena—both knowledge and practices—that arise from texts and textual practices specifically, where the written word is seen as both the result of and source of cultural formations. In other words, to consider what it means to approach textual materials—here religio-philosophical texts—as a form of anthropological evidence.

In addition to those classic texts, which understood literacy as a form of technology and power,[25] many have analyzed reading as a critical act which itself is "culturally and historically determined," as Jonathan Boyarin has articulated, tracing the intersections between knowledge production and the literary and hermeneutic imagination.[26] Influential works like those of Fischer and Abedi and Brinkley Messick demonstrated how intellectual debates, often centered around questions and interpretations of specific textual materials, might be rendered legible by historically informed anthropological research, combining ethnography with analyses of religious texts.[27]

Since then, many others have followed suit, especially in considering how reading determines subject formation.[28] In recent years, the reading and nonreading of documents, especially of the bureaucratic variety, has also drawn substantial attention,[29] and of course there is much "nonknowing" that occurs in bureaucracy, and those who privilege reading practice over content.[30]

This book draws most heavily from those studies that trace the intersections between cultural production and the literary and hermeneutic imagination. Of particular importance is the role of poetry, especially medieval Persian poetry, which my interlocuters read alongside the Qur'an, the Hadith, and other texts of religious authority. Setrag Manoukian explores how Iranians are able to view themselves as subjects and subjects-in-history through engagement with and composition of poetry. Far from constituting a genre that is divorced from the sociocultural realm, Manoukian demonstrates how "poetry is the form in which Iranians experience themselves as subjects endowed with the power to act and live in the world."[31] While I found my interlocutors to take a similar stance toward poetry, my work is less concerned with the historical and genealogical contingencies of the relationship between self and poetry within Iran as Manoukian's work demonstrates, and more focused upon poetry as an affirmation and purveyor of a particular type of knowledge for these Iranian Sufis. I will explain.

There are certain characteristics that define the poetry my interlocutors read: ambiguity of meaning, multiplicity of meaning, words that

may or may not adhere to their literal definitions, a sensitivity to rhythm, rhyme, and speed. This does not even include the further nuances that these poems can take on when they are performed orally, each reader adding their unique interpretation in the way they utter aloud the poem. Of course, it is not only poetry that utilizes these tropes—one only has to read the prose works of more esoterically minded theologians to encounter similarly abstruse epistemologies—but these literary traits are most consistently found in poetic genres. It is the genre of writing that is perhaps the most uncompromising in its multiplicities of meanings and, as a result, most conducive to Sufi epistemologies of unknowing.

Moreover, within this multiplicity of meanings there is a more specific hermeneutic stance that many Islamic mystics adopt. Poetry, like esoteric interpretations of the Qur'an, is seen as containing esoteric meanings and exoteric meanings; in other words, poems contain meanings both hidden and transparent.[32]

What is vital to understand is that this interpretative lens, of hidden meanings and transparent meanings, is directly tied to the idea of the world as being composed of two separate but intertwined realms: the Real and the Unreal. In other words, poetry is reflective and emblematic of the nature of reality as a whole. The Real, the world of the divine, is analogous to the hidden meaning of the poem, so much so that the Real is often referred to as the hidden (*al-ghayb*). Just as one must strive to gain access to the Real—the realm of the divine—so too must the reader work toward accessing the hidden meaning of the text. Similarly, the transparent meanings of the text are as readily available as the Unreal—the profane—world around us; still providing valuable insights, but not quite as transformative as those insights found in hidden meanings.

In this way, each poem is a microcosm of the world. Simultaneously self-contained and infinite, possessing an endless array of meanings, some surface level and easily accessible, others requiring more dexterity of thought. The Sufis' interpretation of poetry is directly influenced by the way they interpret the world, such that their hermeneutics and ontological critical lenses are one and the same. As such, what I wish to demonstrate in *Unknowing and the Everyday* is that this particular critical lens of the Real and the Unreal arises from the page but also extends beyond it, as the goal of textual ethnography is to trace the intersections between cultural production and the hermeneutic imagination. This is seen most clearly in chapter 2 when I speak with two sheikhs who discuss the relationship between hermeneutics and religious authority, both agreeing

that the multiplicity of meanings, the endlessness of meanings, of poetry complicates notions of religious authority.

It is one thing to have an admiration and predilection for poetry as many Iranians do, believing it to hold valuable life lessons and complex ideas, as Niloofar Haeri and Michael Fischer have thoughtfully investigated.[33] It is another thing to believe that poetry is a reflection of reality as a whole, and as such can be used to transform the self at the divino-existential registers. As one of my interlocutors told me about his relationship with the poet Hafez, "You cannot simply read Hafez [to understand him], you must *live* with him." Ultimately, I agree with Manoukian's assertion, stated above, that the Iranians view poetry as a means by which to experience themselves as subjects in the world. I am only applying a more specific hermeneutic stance here.

As previously mentioned, I also draw from Sufi publications and literatures as a critical lens; in other words, using passages and quotes from their own literature in understanding my case studies. As such, the primary sources I am utilizing include the sermons, decrees, epistles, essays, and poetry written by the Sufi sheikhs of the order in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, with a particular focus given to (1) texts that were written by sheikhs during the past twenty years and (2) texts that are widely read by all lay Sufis. Many of these works are self-published by a Sufi publishing house, Entesharat-e Haqiqat.

My focus is narrowed further still to the works of *qotbs* (literally "pole" or "axis" but indicating highest religious authority) of the contemporary era, with special attention given to the writings of those still active or very recently passed. In this sense, I am working backward through the chain of succession. By focusing on the work of the sheikhs and *qotbs* created in recent memory, my goal is not only to begin to outline the current debates and discourses within Iranian Sufism, but also to track those ideas which have been encountered with more frequency by lay Sufis (*darvish*) in Iran. For this reason, I draw more heavily from sermons and also introductory texts, which, as I was informed by elders of the order, receive the most circulation among their members. Of particular importance is the short treatise *Saleh's Advice* (*Pand-e Saleh*). Written in 1939 by the *qotb* Saleh Alishah (1891–1966), *Saleh's Advice* broadly outlines the group's epistemologies and, to a lesser extent, best practices. The majority of the texts used here are thus available in Sufi bookstores and libraries, meaning those adjacent to a meeting place (*khaneqah*), public libraries, and, to a lesser extent, private bookstores, and a not insignificant number of them have been made

available online. In addition, I draw from works of poetry of the medieval canon that are highly familiar and widely read by my interlocutors: namely, Rumi, Attar, Sa'adi, Hafez, Hallaj, Baba Taher, and several prominent Sufi philosophers,[34] such as Junayd Baghdadi, Sayyed Haydar Amoli, Ahmad Ghazzali, Bastami, and Shah Nimatullah Vali.[35]

Aesthetics and Affect

In order to trace these aforementioned intangible theories, I hope to provide a more material object of study by investigating the realm of sensorial affect, with a specific focus on the uses of intentional listening (*sama*). Moreover, in addition to providing a concrete analytical endpoint, audition is considered an absolutely central practice for many of my interlocutors, existing not as a passive mode of reception but as a highly intentional act that possesses near-infinite transformative capacities. Put more simply, listening is considered a strategy to achieve the experience of *ma'rifat* in that it provides a conduit, a cipher by which to unravel that moment of interaction between the individual and the material world. Furthermore, it may be argued that the type of knowledge inherent in aesthetic experience—that strange information gathered from touching, tasting, seeing, hearing, smelling—is very much analogous to the experience of unknowing: it needs to be experienced before it can be understood. I further situate my analysis within what might be called Islamic aesthetic theory, where I draw from both canonical and contemporary writings of the Sufis focused on the philosophies of music and listening. In this way, rather than carry out an analysis of the auditory itself, I trace instances and experiences of unknowing as they are generated through sensorial affect. For it is through the affect, or the impact or response, imparted onto someone or something that we are able to see the transformative capacities inherent in sensoriality.

I draw from a number of literatures concerned with the intersection of aesthetics and anthropology. Indeed, as audition is an undoubtedly essential part of Islamic practice, it has been analyzed through the lens of various subjects: from the initial revelation of the Qur'an to the call to prayer,[36] to the complex sermon tradition[37]—and I do hope to expand upon the specifics of mystical *sama* with other interpretations of the uses of audition in Islam. Here, I draw from work about Islamic soundscapes such as those by Charles Hirschkind, Brian Larkin, Naveeda Khan, and Emilio Spadola.[38]

Outside of the Islamic studies category, my work is situated within the world of auditory anthropology, or "anthropologies of sound,"[39] which not only focus upon music, sound, and listening as objects of inquiry, but also analyze the ways in which the auditory influences and is influenced by the broader sociopolitical realm. In other words, they follow James Clifford's question: "Suppose that, instead of seeing those places, these anthropologists had heard them: how would they have theorized their encounters with the other?"[40] From this conjecture it is made apparent that such an endeavor would not simply result in a cataloging of the particular sounds of an environment, but rather would affect the way in which this environment was approached critically, as we remember Attali's declaration to "theorize through sound."[41] By theorizing through intentional listening, and by extension through the prism of a particularized aesthetic experience, one is therein able to merge both perception and the production of critical thought together into one instantiation of consciousness, until it is difficult to identify one from the other. Similarly, this project closely follows the work of Michael Taussig,[42] which considers not only the aesthetic experience as the object and method of inquiry, but also looks to the transformative capabilities of affect in regards to the anthropological inquiry more broadly.

Chapter Overview

Each chapter of this book, with the exception of the first, analyzes an individual case study. These chapters all begin with an ethnographic anecdote that describes the event or practice in question. This is then followed by an analysis that traces the ways that particular mystical concepts present within the case studies are applied to navigate the socio-material realm. In utilizing this rhetorical technique, I adopt a more miniaturist stance, taking individual stories and unraveling them, ethnographically, rather than exploring broader themes present within my research. This is perhaps a less explicit mode of analysis, one that asks too much of the reader to try to knit these disparate strands of ethnography together themselves, but in doing so I feel I am avoiding laying claim to essentialisms about the Iranian Sufi community, or at least doing so slightly less than might be otherwise. Moreover, given the abstracted nature of certain aspects of mysticism, I find beginning each chapter with an ethnographic anecdote provides more solid ground upon which to venture into the chapter's investigation. Or,

perhaps more accurately, it is a reminder that the goal is to mine the concepts and epistemologies at play within the ethnographic narratives and not the other way around, and so the analysis unfolds as such. As Deleuze has written: "Empiricism is by no means a reaction against concepts. . . . On the contrary, it undertakes the most insane creation of concepts ever."[43] It is in this spirit that I foreground my chapters in the socio-material realm, Unreal though it may be to the Sufis themselves.

CHAPTER ONE: SUFISM IN IRAN, IRAN IN SUFISM

My first chapter explores the complexities behind the category of "mysticism" within Iranian intellectual and political history, the legacies of this convoluted history, and the prevalence of mystical thought outside of Sufi circles. In sharp distinction to designations of Sufism as "heterodox" and their non-Sufi "mainstream" counterparts as "orthodox," Iranian intellectual histories demonstrate no such clear bifurcation. I begin by analyzing the ambiguity surrounding the terms Sufism (*sufigari*), literary mysticism (*erfan*), and scholarly mysticism (*tasavvuf*), and the subsequent difficulty involved in categorizing a person or group as Sufi or not within the Iranian popular imagination. I then provide an overview of the history of the Nimatullahi Sufi Order since the late nineteenth century, with a focus on the complicated history between certain branches of the Nimatullahi Sufi Order and the reigning political and theological authorities in Iran, highlighting how these relationships have varied drastically over time. From here, I highlight strains of Shi'i clerical commitment to mystical thought through the twentieth century, touching upon two of the most famous members of the mystically inclined clergy (*ulama*): Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and Allameh Sayyed Mohammad Tabatabai. I also draw on scholarship that explores the relationship between the seminaries (*howzeh*) and Sufi Orders in the mid-twentieth century, mysticism in the popular imagination as seen through self-help movements and popular fiction, and recent publications by mystically inclined clerics in Mashhad. While *Unknowing and the Everyday* does highlight several instances where Iranian mystical thought diverges from "mainstream" Twelver thought, by establishing this broader theological and sociohistorical landscape of Iran, I hope to highlight how the mysticism of my interlocutors is simultaneously convergent with and divergent from other forms of "Islamic thought" (considered broadly) within contemporary Iran.

CHAPTER TWO: UNKNOWING OF TEXT, UNKNOWING OF AUTHORITY

My second chapter analyzes the transformative power of textual interpretation (*tafsir*) for two Sufi reading groups. In particular, I trace the ways the Sufis' unique understanding of spiritual authority is directly tied to their methods of *tafsir*. The members of these Sufi poetry reading groups believe that the *tafsir* of a text leads not to the correct answer in regard to its meaning, but to yet more difficult questions contained therein. The text is in a sense endless, its words able to convey countless ideas that lead to ever deeper philosophical musings the further one goes in one's analysis. Thus, employing a hermeneutic method not dissimilar to many modern and postmodern literary theorists of the twentieth century, the Sufis adhere to an interpretative framework for understanding Persian poetry that mimics their understanding of knowledge as an exercise without limit or finality. Furthermore, this understanding of *tafsir* holds vast consequences not only for the possibilities contained within the text, but also the ways in which the Sufis view the one who leads the reading group and guides them in analysis: their sheikh. Indeed, in contrast to the mainstream Ja'fari Shi'i clerics (*mojtahed-ha*), whose authority is directly derived from their training and the fact that they are able to interpret sacred texts more accurately than lay people, therein providing the best answers to their students, the Sufi sheikhs engage with a different form of authority. It is their ability to guide their students (*taleban*) to find the appropriate *questions*, rather than provide them with the most accurate *answers* for a text that distinguishes them. Of course, anyone who has witnessed pedagogical sessions with ulama know that many of them are also hesitant to provide straightforward answers, similarly reveling in contradictions and complications, and yet I would argue that this form of pedagogy is never tied in any way to a questioning of their authority as a whole. Hence, this chapter examines these Sufi groups' methods of literary analysis, and the ways in which they apply to their broader ideas of gnosis and spiritual authority.

CHAPTER THREE: UNKNOWING OF SELF, UNKNOWING OF BODY

My third chapter investigates the relationship between the Sufi remembrance ritual (*zekr*), sensorial engagement, and sociopolitical identity. More specifically, I analyze how the Sufi idea of annihilation of the self (*fana*), achieved through the bodily *zekr* ritual, has been reinterpreted by my interlocutors in one of two ways: The first group articulates their

understandings of *fana* in largely theological terms, discussing concepts like the quieting of the lower soul (*nafs-e ammara*) and the turn to nonexistence. The second group, in contrast, describes their experience of *fana* as the loss of a much more socialized self, interpreting the loss of self as the loss of what might be called identity politics or the self in society. In the final part of this section, I compare these Sufis' desire to destabilize subjectivity with calls by prerevolutionary Iranian intellectuals Jalal Al-e Ahmad and Ali Shariati to "return to the self." How might these thinkers, both of whom advocate for a complex restoration of the self within a postcolonial context, where they understand the "loss" of self not as something to be desired but the outcome of, in part, colonial hegemony, reflect upon these mystics longing for an extinguishment of the self? I conclude the chapter by turning my attention to those Sufi aesthetic theories that expound upon the relationship between intentional listening and the transformation of the self specifically, understanding the ways that bodily and sensorial engagement might invoke a momentary alternative to the sociopolitical subject.

CHAPTER FOUR: UNKNOWING OF MEMORY

My fourth chapter traces an instance of the destruction of a Sufi meeting place (*khaneqah*) by the local authorities in the city of Isfahan in February 2009 and the Sufis' response not to mourn the site, but to actively and deliberately forget it in order to disavow the material in favor of the spiritual. A shrine that was used as a site for Thursday and Friday prayer meetings, it was housed in the Takhteh-Foulad Cemetery that had recently been dubbed an Islamic Heritage Site by UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization). Following this designation, the local authorities began to transform the cemetery into a tourist site and destroyed the shrine on the grounds of "beautification" of the neighborhood. Within this chapter, my focus is hence twofold: (1) an analysis of the Sufis' reaction to the actions of the authorities, both before and after the demolition; and (2) how such commemoration differs from that of memorialization processes of the Iranian state. Regarding the former, I analyze the order's curious decision to "remember to forget" the site. More specifically, the sheikhs advised their followers not to mourn the loss of the site but to actively try to forget it, arguing that the material structure was not important. From here, I examine how this command to "remember to forget" is tied to both Sufi ideals of the relationship between remembrance

and forgetting and Ja'fari Shi'i ideals of remembrance. I use this discussion as a jumping-off point to explore the ways in which this technique of commemoration exhibits both similarities and differences to the Islamic Republic's own exercises in the construction of public memory.

CHAPTER FIVE: UNKNOWING OF PLACE

My fifth and final chapter focuses on the relationship between concepts of wandering, intentional listening, and techniques of spatial formation as seen through the establishment and rotation of meeting places. As authorities continue to frown upon public gatherings, Sufis have sought alternative methods of convening that allow them to create and maintain an autonomous space while still complying with government regulations. One informal Sufi youth group, meaning one operating without the involvement of a sheikh or other spiritual leader, does so by meeting in private homes and rotating locations each week to avoid attention from the authorities. More notably, rather than let the participants know the exact address of the meeting place, each week they announce a nearby intersection at which to meet and then proceed to broadcast music to allow the members to locate the site by listening and hence "following" the sounds. While texting and telephone calls are ultimately used to find the exact address, in this chapter I examine (1) the ways that ideas of existential wandering are implemented to help resolve a matter of state interference, (2) the formation of a Sufi soundscape, and (3) the broader impact for the creation of such a collective space within postrevolutionary Iran.

POSTSCRIPT: IMPROVISATIONS

I conclude my book by thinking about the utilization of unknowing through the lens of improvisation. In musical improvisation, one draws upon one's prior training to instantaneously react to the immediate present. Similarly, the Sufis turn to their own mystical philosophies and ideas of gnosis to navigate the sociopolitical realm, responding to external actors by drawing upon their own training in real time. By drawing parallels between aesthetic and social improvisation, the postscript reaffirms the ways in which the contemporary Iranian mystical experience is in conversation with the sociopolitical realm, as well as the intricate relationship between religious, aesthetic, and sociopolitical narratives in Iran.

Introduction

1. Azmayesh, *Morvarid-e Sufi-gari*, 71.

2. Majzubʻalishah, "Sufigari, Shiʻigari, Erfan," 15.

3. This translation, with a few modifications of mine, is based on that of Nasrollah Pourjavady. Ghazzali, *Sawanih*, 26–27.

4. A further note on translation: I have translated *maʻrifat* as "non-knowledge" and "unknowing" rather than "gnosis" for a few reasons. First, gnosis itself is an extremely vague term, and one that often requires unpacking. More importantly, the word "gnosis" is derived from "Gnosticism," a collection of beliefs within Hellenistic strains of early Judeo-Christian thought (Aldo, "Free Will According to the Gnostics," 174–95; Thomassen, *The Coherence of "Gnosticism"*; Merkur, *Gnosis*). While there are of course intriguing parallels between Christian and Islamic esotericism, translating *maʻrifat* as "gnosis" risks erasing the specificity of its development within the Islamic tradition. My second reason is that there are thousands of interpretations of what *maʻrifat* entails, some of which may run counter to the ideas espoused in this book, and so I translate *maʻrifat* as unknowing to reaffirm that it is this particular interpretation of *maʻrifat* that is being explored herein. In other words, when I refer to either *maʻrifat* or unknowing in this text, I am referring to that interpretation utilized by my interlocutors unless specified otherwise. Lastly, my choice of "unknowing" is inspired by Georges Bataille's idea of "nonknowledge," which he defines as "the undefinable, what thought cannot conceive . . . everything that is contrary to knowledge," or in other words, that which we do not know, which remains unknown to us. See Bataille, *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, 131. The experience of this "undefined knowledge," however, is distinctly different from the experience of ignorance, as Bataille elaborates further: "When I speak of nonknowledge now, I mean essentially that I know nothing, and if that I am still talking, it is essentially insofar as I have a knowledge that brings me to nothing" (Bataille, *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, 140). I have also utilized the gerund form to highlight the experiential nature of Sufi knowledge, reaffirming the way it operates as an active and participatory mode of thinking.

5. I avoid the term "Iranian Sufism" because this would imply a holistic study into Sufism in *all* its current manifestations, including groups like the Kurdish Sunni Orders, and I want to be clear that my manuscript does not claim to represent all mystical collectives and/or strains of thoughts that exist within Iran today.

6. Mittermaier, *Dreams that Matter*; Taneja, *Jinnealogy*; Doostdar, *The Iranian Metaphysicals*; Pandolfo, *Knot of the Soul*, 191.

7. Pandolfo, *Knot of the Soul*, 240.

8. I follow Devin Deweese's definition of a Sufi order as a group of initiated members who follow a single religious authority, and who can trace their organization back through a chain of authority figures to an original founding member (Deweese, "'Dis-ordering' Sufism in Early Modern Central Asia" and "Organizational Patterns and Developments within Sufi Communities"). Orders have often been closed to the public and/or nonmembers, but that tended not to be my experience in Iran.

9. According to the 2008 Library of Congress Country Profile, Iran's demographic was 65 percent Persian, 16 percent Azeri Turk, 7 percent Kurd, 6 percent Lur, 2 percent Arab, 2 percent Baluchi, 1 percent Turkmen, 1 percent Qashai, and less than 1 percent Armenian, Assyrian, and Georgian.

10. This includes an acceptance and reverence for the twelve Imams of Twelver (Ithna-ashari) Shi'ism, belief in ideas such as divine justice (*adalat*), *velayat* (authority), *ijtihad* (legal reasoning) adherence to all Shi'i holidays, veneration of saints, prayer formations, and more. For works that provide an overview of Twelver as well as Zaydi and Ismaili Shi'ism in English, see the works of Najam Haidar, *The Origins of the Shī'a* and *Shi'i Islam*, and Amir-Moezzi, *The Spirituality of Shi'i Islam*.

11. For more discussions of how to define an order, see Deweese, "'Dis-ordering' Sufism," and "Organizational Patterns and Developments"; Ernst and Lawrence, *Sufi Martyrs of Love*; Green, "Emerging Approaches to the Sufi Traditions of South Asia," 123–48; Green, *Sufism*.

12. Kiani, *Tarikhe Khanegha Dar Iran*; Abisaab, *Converting Persia*; Connell, *The Nimatullahi Sayyids of Taft*; Lewisohn, "An Introduction to the History of Modern Persian Sufism, Part I," 437–64; Zarrinkub, *Jostojou dar tassavof-e Iran*; Nurbakhsh, *Masters of the Path*.

13. Doostdar, *The Iranian Metaphysicals*.

14. Haeri, *Say What Your Longing Heart Desires*, 144–45.

15. These included:*Sufism: Meaning, Knowledge, Unity; Ma'arifa Sufiya; Sufi Symbolism*, Vol. 8, *Insations, Revelations, Lights*.

16. Haeri, *Say What Your Longing Heart Desires*; Shams, *A Revolution in Rhyme*; Manoukian, *City of Knowledge in Twentieth Century Iran*; Olszewska, *The Pearl of Dari*; Fischer, *Mute Dreams, Blind Owls, and Dispersed Knowledges*; Fischer and Abedi, *Debating Muslims*.

17. Prior to 1979 the seminaries were famously not state run (although it might be argued they had a certain copacetic relationship with the Shah), and one was able to study

mysticism with a teacher, sometimes in a formal classroom setting, sometimes in private lessons. See Fischer, *Iran*, for more on the history of the Qom seminary in twentieth-century Iran. Today there are both state-run and independent seminaries, with *tasavvuf* debated and discussed in both.

18. Walbridge, *The Most Learned of the Shia*; Fischer, *Iran*; Asghari, "Islamic Philosophy and Sufism in the Contemporary Shia Seminary and Their Opponents (1850–present)."

19. Majzub'alishah, "Sufigari, Shi'igari, Erfan," 18.

20. Mittermaier, "Dreams from Elsewhere," 249.

21. Pandolfo, *Knot of the Soul*.

22. Manoukian, "Thinking with the Impersonal," 212.

23. *Hu* refers to an invocation of the name of God, a shortened version of Allah-Hu, and is often used as a declarative during moments of emotional intensity.

24. The idea that existence is marked by an interplay between the Real and the Unreal is not exclusive to Nimatullahi Sufism but is a widely discussed conceptual matrix analyzed by such luminaries of mystical thought as al-Ghazzali, Ibn Arabi, Rumi, and many others.

25. Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*.

26. Boyarin, *The Ethnography of Reading*, 6. An early proponent of situating the project of ethnography at the nexus between anthropology, literary studies, and critical theory, in his work Boyarin has tackled how thought processes and thinking through reading might be understood as a form of human "practice."

27. Fischer and Abedi, *Debating Muslims*; Messick, *The Calligraphic State* and *Shari'a Scripts*.

28. See Fabian, *Out of Our Minds*; Mittermaier, "The Book of Visions," 229–47.

29. See Hull, *Government of Paper*; Das and Poole, "Anthropology in the Margins of the State," 140–44; Gupta, *Red Tape*.

30. See Rosen, "Ethnographies of Reading," 1059–83.

31. Manoukian, *City of Knowledge*, 205.

32. Absent from this discussion is the obfuscation of meaning within Persian poetry for reasons *outside* the Sufi tradition. The employment of rhetorical devices like metaphor (*est'areh*), simile (*tashbih*), figurative speech (*majaz*), and analogy (*tamthil*)—all tropes that may be said to "hide" meaning—is an essential skill of any sophisticated writer. Indeed, the field of classical Persian literary theory is a rich and well-developed discipline, and for some literary theorists such as Jurjani (d. 1078) and Mohammad al-Raduyani (d. 1100), the more complicated and obtuse the wordplay, the better. As Seyed-Gohrab has written, however, the employment of these tropes were valued not only for their originality and sophistication, but because they provided "puzzles" for their audiences to unravel, a chance for the erudite reader to demonstrate their analytical skills and engage with the poem on a deeper level as they would solve the riddle behind the words

(Seyed-Gohrab, ed., *Metaphor and Imagery in Persian Poetry*). I would argue that there is a stark difference between such valorization of metaphor/obscured meaning as a puzzle to be resolved and what the Sufis would believe: namely, that obscured meanings are there not to be solved but to allow for further—nay, endless—opportunities for engagement.

33. Haeri, *Say What Your Longing Heart Desires*; Fischer, *Mute Dreams, Blind Owls*.

34. The distinction between a Sufi philosopher and a Sufi poet is not necessarily an easy one to make. Here, I base the distinction on the different written forms employed by the two groups as the key determining factor.

35. Junayd Baghdadi and Ahmad Ghazzali are considered sheikhs of the order and, given their prolific output, are hence a natural reference for the sheikhs. Ibn Arabi, a self-identified Sunni from Al-Andalus and perhaps one of the most influential and widely read Sufis of all time, is more curious. His popularity is due not only to the widespread analysis of his writings in Iran at the time, particularly for the jurists of the School of Isfahan, but also that Shah Nimatullah Vali, the namesake of the order, in fact translated Ibn Arabi's masterwork, *Bezels of Wisdom* (*Fusus al-Hikam*), into Persian and commented upon it (see Nasr, *Sufi Essays*).

36. Tamimi Arab, "A Minaret of Light," 136–63. Lee, "Technology and the Production of Islamic Space," 86–100.

37. Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape*.

38. Hirschkind, "Hearing Modernity"; Larkin, "Techniques of Inattention," 989–1015; Khan, "The Acoustics of Muslim Striving," 571–94; Spadola, *The Calls of Islam*.

39. Erlmann, "But What of the Ethnographic Ear?," 1–20; Bull and Back, eds.,*The Auditory Culture Reader*.

40. Clifford, "Introduction: Partial Truths," 12.

41. Attali, *Noise*.

42. Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*.

43. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, xix.

Chapter One. Sufism in Iran, Iran in Sufism

1. Doostdar, *Iranian Metaphysicals*.

2. Safi, *The Politics of Knowledge in Premodern Islam*.

3. Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs*.

4. Megan Specia, "Who Are Sufi Muslims and Why Do Some Extremists Hate Them?" *New York Times*, Nov. 17, 2017.

5. The Safavids date back to Safi-ad-din Ardaabil (d. 1334), who transformed the Zahediya Sufi Order to bear his name. It was only when Shakyh Junayd assumed leadership in 1447