



Extended Abstract of PhD Dissertation

Sayyid Yaḥyā Shirvānī's Love for the Ahl al-Bayt and His Sufi Views

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Abstract

There are notable differences between Sunni and Shi'a perspectives concerning the identification and theological interpretation of the Ahl al-Bayt. The attitude of Sufis affiliated with the Sunni tradition represents a distinct and independent stance. Since many Sunni Sufis attribute profound spiritual status and reverence to 'Alī (d. 40/661) and his descendants, similar in some aspects to Shi'a thought, some scholars have argued that this approach may have been shaped under Shi'a influence. Nevertheless, the conception of the Ahl al-Bayt that developed within the teachings of Yaḥyā Shirvānī (d. 1466), regarded as the second founder of the Khalwatiyyah order, one of the most influential Sufi orders among Sunnis, did not arise from Shi'a sources. Instead, it originated from the Sunni Sufi tradition, which faithfully preserved the Prophet's sunnah and spiritual heritage in its complete sense. Therefore, the Sufi perception of the Ahl al-Bayt neither fully aligns with the as a sect of Sunni Islam nor the Shi'a interpretations but rather reflects a unique spiritual perspective grounded in its own metaphysical framework. This research, which provides a reinterpretation of the notion of the Prophet's Sunnah, reveals through various historical records that the Sufis functioned as a spiritual mediator between the two sects, grounded in their love for the Ahl al-Bayt. Furthermore, in this study, the works of Sayyid Yaḥyā Shirvānī have been analyzed for the first time from this interpretive angle, examining both his views on the Ahl al-Bayt and his broader Sufi doctrines in depth.

Keywords: Sayyid Yaḥyā Shirvānī; Khalwatiyyah; Sufism; Ahl al-Bayt; Shi'ism; Sunnism; Caliphs.

Background and Research Context

Throughout history, Azerbaijan has been one of the major centers of various religions. Following the arrival of Islam in the eighth century, the region became home to numerous Sufi masters and orders that guided the spiritual life of its people. Although Azerbaijan initially adopted the Sunni school of Islam, over time Shi'ism began to spread and was eventually recognized as the official sect of the land. Accordingly, this study aims to explore how Sayyid Yaḥyā Shīrvānī, who was born in such a transitional period, positioned himself regarding the Ahl al-Bayt, and how his geographical and cultural context enabled him to act as a spiritual bridge between Shi'ism and Sunnism through his devotion to the Ahl al-Bayt. The research also investigates how this devotion shaped the concept of spiritual journey (sulūk) in his mystical thought, as well as his influence and position within the history of Sufism. As a pioneering work, this study presents significant findings concerning the religious history of Azerbaijan, the Khalwatiyyah order, and Islamic intellectual history more broadly. As is well known, in Islamic history, numerous points of contention have arisen between Ahl al-Sunnah and Shi'a, particularly regarding the definition and interpretation of the Ahl al-Bayt. From this perspective, the present research sheds light on these historical debates by examining, for the first time through the example of Sayyid Yaḥyā Shīrvānī, the shared domain between both traditions, namely, the love and veneration of the Ahl al-Bayt.

Objectives and Research Questions

- How does a Sunni Sufi perceive and express love for the Ahl al-Bayt while living in a geography shared by both Ahl al-Sunnah and Shi'a communities?
- What are the converging and conflicting dimensions of this affection in relation to Sunni and Shi'a theology?
- How could a Sufi belonging to the Sunni tradition articulate his devotion to the Ahl al-Bayt through the language and terminology of Shi'ism?
- In what ways did he utilize both Sunni and Shi'a sources in his writings?

Through this study, we have observed that this subject has not been adequately addressed in the existing literature, and there are significant gaps in scholarly research. Therefore, our research seeks to provide answers to these fundamental questions and to fill the existing void within the field.

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

- Recent archaeological and historical studies conducted in Azerbaijan have contributed significantly to the originality of this research.
- During the examination of the available sources, discussions were held with authors and field specialists, allowing the subject to be explored from multiple scholarly perspectives.
- Moreover, the study establishes connections between previously disconnected strands of literature and, through this analytical pattern, introduces new findings and interpretations to the field.

Findings and Main Arguments

This study makes several significant contributions to the scholarship on ‘Umar al-Khalwatī and his successors by drawing on newly accessed and critically examined sources. Through consultation of the Baku manuscript copy, the research incorporates a set of ghazals and na‘t al-sharīf poems found exclusively in that version, thereby expanding the known corpus of Khalwatī poetry. Furthermore, the study locates and utilizes the Ottoman Turkish translation of Bayān-i Usūl-i Atwār-i Sab‘a (The Exposition of the Seven Stages of Spiritual Discipline), originally composed in Persian but no longer extant in its original form. On the historical level, the research precisely identifies both the burial site and the year of death of ‘Umar al-Khalwatī, while also documenting updated information regarding the khānqāh (Sufi lodge) of Dede ‘Umar Rūshanī in Karabakh. A critical examination of the silsilah (chain of transmission) composed by Yūsuf al-Muskūrī further illuminates the classical Khalwatiyya lineage, which includes key figures such as Abū Shaykh Aḥmad and Ibn Abī al-Qāsim. The study also addresses long-standing misconceptions about the sectarian orientation of the Khalwati Sufis: while their terminology occasionally resembles Shī‘ī expressions, the underlying meanings remain firmly within the doctrinal framework of Ahl al-Sunnah. Indeed, both Sunni and Shī‘ī sources were drawn upon in the Khalwati tradition, producing a middle path centered on shared love and devotion for the Ahl al-Bayt. Most importantly, for the first time, the mystical doctrines of Shirvānī are analyzed through the lens of spiritual wayfaring (sulūk), understood as a process that can only be undertaken under the guidance of a murshid who embodies the spiritual station of ‘Alī—the true inheritor of the Muḥammadan Reality (al-ḥaqīqah al-Muḥammadiyyah).

Discussion and Significance

Throughout history, some Sunni and Sufi scholars have been accused of being Shi'a due to their profound love for the Ahl al-Bayt, and one notable example of this is Shirvānī. In this context, the Sufis' devotion to the Ahl al-Bayt, which appears superficially similar to the Shi'a perception shaped by political factors, has often been misunderstood. Accordingly, this study examines the issue through the example of Sayyid Yaḥyā Shirvānī.

First, the study outlines the perspectives of Ahl al-Sunnah and Shi'a regarding the Ahl al-Bayt, demonstrating that the historical disputes between the two sects were largely rooted in political considerations. Based on these findings, it is observed that the Sunni tradition tended to keep its devotion to the Ahl al-Bayt in the background, in order to avoid being perceived as Shi'i, whereas the Shi'a understanding, heavily influenced by political agendas, does not always align with the essence of Islam. In this context, it has been established that the Sufis' love for the Ahl al-Bayt originates inherently from the essence of Islam, rather than the Shi'a conception of Ahl al-Bayt as a tool for political authority. Consequently, the Sufis did not limit the Ahl al-Bayt to the twelve Imams, as in Shi'ism, but recognized that the inheritors of the Muhammadan Reality also occupy the station of 'Alī. Another important aspect is that members of the Ahl al-Bayt themselves, such as Muḥammad al-Bāqir, Jā'far al-Ṣādiq, 'Alī al-Riḍā, and Ḥasan ibn Ḥasan ibn 'Alī, adopted a firm stance against those who distinguished between Sunnis and Shi'a or spoke against the caliphs. This attitude aligns with the principles embraced by the Sufis, further underscoring their spiritual and doctrinal independence from political or sectarian affiliations. Although Sayyid Yaḥyā Shirvānī was descended from the Ahl al-Bayt, he did not consider this lineage as a source of personal superiority; rather, he maintained that even the descendants of noble lineages could be deceived by Satan. At the same time, by using the title Yaḥyā al-Ḥusaynī in his writings, he signaled his affiliation with Ḥusayn, an aspect that should be understood within the context of the geography in which he lived. Accordingly, Shirvānī neither boasted of his sayyid status nor allowed this distinction to create division; instead, by acknowledging his lineage, he performed a mediating role between Sunnism and Shi'ism in terms of devotion to the Ahl al-Bayt, demonstrating that followers from both traditions could benefit from this shared source of spiritual guidance. Although Shirvānī, who was sometimes accused of being Shi'a, shared certain views with the Shi'a, such as his profound love for the Prophet Muḥammad and the Ahl al-Bayt, his perception of himself as their devoted servant, and his belief that those who rejected them would face Hell, other aspects of his thought clearly indicate his alignment with Sunni Sufism. His deep respect for the four caliphs, the praises he composed in their honor, and the sources he employed in his writings all

demonstrate that he was a Sufi who embraced Sunni orthodoxy. Shirvānī emphasizes that the true Ahl al-Sunnah are those who integrate both the exoteric and esoteric sciences, and he recognizes ‘Alī, and thereby the Ahl al-Bayt, as the inheritor of these spiritual sciences. In this regard, Shirvānī views the Ahl al-Bayt as guardians of Sunni orthodoxy, a perspective that is entirely distinct from the Shi’a understanding. Moreover, several features in Shirvānī’s works provide clear evidence of his Sunni Sufi identity. These include his frequent use of Sunni sources alongside references to ‘Alī and Jā’far al-Ṣādiq, his engagement with the views of the four madhhab imams, and his adherence to the paths of Sufis aligned with Sunni thought. He also refers to ‘Ā’isha as “my respected mother”, emphasizes that the Ahl al-Sunnah are on the true path, and declares those who do not follow this line to be people of innovation (*bid’ah*). In this context, Shirvānī served as a bridge in Azerbaijan, a region representing the intersection of the two sects, through the shared devotion to the Ahl al-Bayt, which constitutes a point of convergence between Sunni and Shi’a. His role continues to this day, as evidenced by the fact that both Sunni and Shi’a adherents visit his tomb, maintaining the legacy of his mediating function.

As a result of our research, we have identified new findings both regarding Shirvānī’s works and the Khalwatiyya order. Previous studies on Sayyid Yaḥyā Shirvānī have mostly focused on the manuscript copies of his works available in Turkey. In this study, however, we accessed the Baku manuscript copies of his Persian works, and included in our research the ghazals and *na’t al-sharīf* poems that exist exclusively in this manuscript, evaluating them in relation to our topic. Furthermore, we obtained the Ottoman Turkish copy of his Persian work, *Bayān-i Usūl-i Atwār-i Sab’a*, and utilized the information contained therein, thereby contributing this material to the scholarly literature. Within the scope of our study, it has been established that the primary focus of Shirvānī’s writings is on union with the Divine and serving as a guide for the spiritual traveler (*sālik*). Moreover, his treatment of the stages of the heart, the rivers flowing within the heart, and the use of metaphors to describe the heart, as well as his engagement with Bayāzīd al-Bistāmī’s *Risālah fī al-Qalb*, demonstrate significant originality and distinct contributions to the history of Sufism.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that Sayyid Yaḥyā Shirvānī occupies a pivotal position in the intellectual and spiritual history of Islam, particularly as a mediator between Sunni and Shi’a traditions through his profound yet balanced devotion to the Ahl al-Bayt. His writings and teachings reveal that the veneration of the Ahl al-Bayt within the Khalwati Sufi framework was not derived from Shi’a doctrine but was deeply

rooted in the Sunni mystical heritage that sought to preserve the Prophet's sunnah in its most complete spiritual sense. By integrating Sunni orthodoxy with an inclusive love for the Prophet's family, Shirvānī constructed a unifying spiritual vision that transcended sectarian divides, positioning Sufism as a bridge of reconciliation in a region historically shaped by both traditions. The discovery and analysis of previously unstudied manuscript materials, including the Baku copies of his ghazals and na't al-sharīf poems and the Ottoman Turkish translation of Bayān-i Usūl-i Atwār-i Sab'a, have expanded our understanding of his thought and literary legacy. Ultimately, this research establishes Shirvānī as a major figure who redefined Sunni Sufi engagement with the Ahl al-Bayt, offering a model of spiritual universality grounded in the ethics of love, humility, and guidance; a model that continues to inspire both Sunni and Shi'a devotees who venerate him today.

Dissertation Information

This doctoral dissertation was successfully defended and refereed in April 2024 at the Institute for Sufi Studies, Üsküdar University, Turkey.

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