

under the current orthodox regime, while others have been given more freedoms. The strategies are unclear and asking questions rarely leads to adequate answers. Different orders are pitted against each other, go underground or stay safe by using a camouflaged discourse. Everyone keeps their cards close to their chests. Instead of proclaiming who they are, the facades of Sufi meeting houses are discretely anonymous, usually with locked front doors. If you're very lucky, there will be an entrance at the back. The idea that there is a split between Islam and mysticism as if the two things can be separated is probably too simplistic. Mysticism is the basis of all religion.

(14)

The application of the rules and the excessive attention to these rules may be orthodox. Mysticism, or the internalisation of the divine, is more acceptable and comprehensible for westerners since it conforms to their views on the private nature of spirituality. Mysticism is considered a separate aspect of traditional religions. But it is not a personal matter in Iran.

Nor is it an individual business: it is a powerful drive that uses social tentacles to challenge the authoritarian and hierarchical and assert a common ground of unity. Some of the orders have a problematic relationship with the authorities. It is impossible to figure out what exactly is going on, aside from the obvious observation that this is a liberal versus an orthodox view. It is like struggling in quicksand: with every new fragment of information, the overall picture becomes more muddled and out of reach. Every statement, conversation or occurrence can be read in two ways. This particular social paranoia arises from the sense of being hunted. The insecurity is the result of not fitting in with the ideology of the ruling authority. When people are in such vulnerable positions, there is a strong argument for forming groups. It is not only the Sufi communities that speak in paranoid terms: so do the authorities, though from a different perspective. The tighter the strictures of an ideology, the faster the self-generated outsiders will be seen as dissidents. There is a constant interaction between real threat and misplaced distrust. Where there is armour, it will be attacked.

Sufi schools and Iranian history are deeply entwined and this is their best protection from an intolerant regime. The radical placelessness and timelessness that are inherent to Sufism and mysticism are a mental state. Language can make it communicable but also vulnerable. Through language alone, it remains essentially misunderstood.

(Note 6)

A view with room

The pre-verbal field of mysticism is often described as a field behind a veil or curtain. It is the basic principle that both establishes and questions the narrative and thus frees it from being set in stone. The veil - the image and the language - can be communicated. That means that it can also be mediated and instrumentalised. But that which is behind it is free. It is the space where the one is completely the other. The borders between living room and street are untenable. This is not for ideological reasons but through being encapsulated in a broader field where each is equal and even non-existent as separate spaces. This field has no inside or outside. It is atopic. In mysticism, the coordinates of time and space are imaginary. While bodies are indeed present and are the bearers of stories that continually shape the course of events, they are also perceived as an undivided unity. Everything is instantaneous. The moment is not understood as an unfathomable point between the past and the future. All that makes someone an individual dissolves and as a result, the past and the future are products of the all-encompassing now.

12.

Ali Shariati Mazinani, sociologist, historian, revolutionary, °Kahak (Iran) (1952-1977)
13.

Khosrow Shahriari, Breaking down Borders and Bridging Barriers: Iranian Taziyeh Theatre (University of South Wales, 2006)
14.

Interview with Jonas Slaats, writer, social activist, °1980 (Ghent); author of Soefi's, punkers & poëten. Een christen op reis door de islam (Altiora, 2015)