MICHEL LEEZENBERG

Mazaoui 1972

Minorsky 1920

Mokri 1970

Moosa 1988

Rassam 1977

Rasool 1990

Rawlinson 1839
Henry Creswicke Rawlinson, “Notes on a March from Zohab ... to Kirkmanshah, in the Year 1836”, JRGS 9, 26-116.

Roux 1969
Jean-Paul Roux, Les Fiébdes de Vérité et les croyances religieuses des Turcs”. RHR 175, 61-95.

al-Sarraf 1954
Ahmad Hamid al-Sarraf, Al-Shabak [in Arabic], Bagdad.

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BREAKING THE SEAL:
THE NEW FACE OF THE AHL-E HAQQ

ZIBA MIR-HOSSEINI

The Ahl-e Haqq are an esoteric sect, commonly reckoned by outsiders as being among the Shi‘a ghulat, those who ‘exaggerate’ in their veneration of ‘Ali, the first Shi‘a Imam. Long regarded as heretics by their Shi‘a and Sunni neighbours, followers of the sect kept their beliefs and practices clandestine: they regarded their faith as a serr, a secret, that ‘sealed’ the lips of those who knew it. There was no published account of the sect’s dogmas and practices by an insider until Nur ‘Ali Elahi, an Ahl-e Haqq spiritual leader, published Borhan ol-Haqq (The Proof of Ultimate Truth) in 1963.

This paper tells the story of this ‘breaking of the seal’. It is also the story of the reformist movement in the sect, which began early this century when Nur ‘Ali’s father, Hajj Ne‘mat, unified the sect’s diverse traditions and constructed an ‘authentic’ history. A generation later, Nur ‘Ali reconciled Ahl-e Haqq dogmas with Shi‘a orthodoxies, brought to the surface its rich mystical dimension, and produced a theology for it. His efforts were welcomed by the traditional leadership and also earned the sect new converts. After Nur ‘Ali’s death in 1974, his son, Dr. Bahram Elahi, continued his father’s line, and gave the sect a universalist dimension, but his ideas have met with a great deal of opposition, and by 1992 the sect had divided into two opposing camps: the traditionalists and the reformists.

The traditionalists, who still wish to be known as Ahl-e Haqq, are those born into the sect, and are mostly of rural and tribal background. They live mostly in the southern part of Iran and Iraqi Kurdistan, in Iranian Luristan and Azerbajian, and in isolated pockets in other parts of the country. These traditional adepts are pejoratively known as ‘Ali-Elahi, ‘defiers of Ali’; they themselves refer to their faith as Din-e Yari, ‘the religion of Yar (i.e. the Friend — God)’, and to themselves as Tayefeh, ‘the sect’, Yaresan, ‘the people of Yar’ (in Iran), or Kakai‘, ‘the brotherhood’ (in Iraq).

The reformists call themselves Maktabi, i.e. followers of the maktab (school) of Nur ‘Ali. They are mainly converts: educated and urban Iranians and some Westerners, for whom the special appeal of Ahl-e
Haqq is more mystical than practical. The numbers of converts are increasing both inside and outside Iran. Iranians living in exile after the 1979 Revolution seem to be particularly attracted. In Paris, and to a lesser extent in London, Rome and New York, they and the Western converts meet regularly in groups to receive ‘new lessons’ from Nur ‘Ali’s spiritual heir, Bahram Elahi, and to celebrate Ahl-e Haqq rituals.

In this paper I am primarily concerned with the reformists, and how their leaders, through their publications in the course of three generations, have transformed the sect’s sacred narrative.1 I examine these publications in the context, first, of internal rivalries within the sect, and secondly, of changes in the outside world, notably the wider Iranian society. Developments among the Ahl-e Haqq may clearly be viewed in the light of the historical diversity in Shi‘a Islam, but they are also an example of how its less orthodox manifestations have responded to new assertions of Islamic identity or ‘re-Islamization’ following the 1979 Revolution in Iran, as well as an instance of how the printed word inevitably transforms the centuries-old isolation and secrecy of an esoteric sect. At the same time, examination of additions, omissions and changes which these publications have undergone in successive editions, reveals something of how the reformists have sought both to refine external understandings of the sect and to respond to internal opposition to their reforms.2

**History and 'Mystery':
THE SACRED NARRATIVE OF THE AHL-E HAQQ**

Little is known of the origin and early history of the Ahl-e Haqq. The sect emerged in Kurdistan as a popular religion of nomadic tribesmen and peasants. Most scholars date its formation to the late 14th or early 15th century, when it appears to have been one of many popular mani-

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1 I did fieldwork among the new converts between 1985 and 1989, and among the traditionalists in Iranian Kurdistan during 1992 when I was Research Fellow at Girton College, Cambridge. Fieldwork was supported by grants from the Economic and Social Research Council and the British Academy. I wish to record my thanks to these bodies, and to Richard Tapper for reading and commenting on the paper. I should stress that the present discussion of the reformists is based on a reading of their publications, and not on my experiences when attending their meetings.

2 Elsewhere (1994b) I have dealt with the ways in which the traditional group has responded to new conditions in the Islamic Republic.

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festations of Sufism at a time of extreme proliferation of religio-political movements in the Turko-Iranian world, culminating in the establishment of the Safavid dynasty in Iran in 1501. Yet there is no reference to the sect in contemporary sources of this and immediately subsequent periods. Not even the name of its reputed founder, Sohtan Sohak, is mentioned. This silence can be taken as evidence that the sect’s rise was both gradual and peaceful, and did not involve events which could be of importance to outside chroniclers.3 The same seems to be true of its later development. The Ahl-e Haqq rose and developed in isolation and obscurity.

In contrast to such reticence on the part of outsiders, the Ahl-e Haqq themselves possess a rich tradition of oral texts, known as *kalam*, ‘word(s)’. To the Ahl-e Haqq, *kalam* are divinely revealed and historically factual narratives, in which one finds an account of their history and struggles, doctrines, the origin and rationale of their rituals; and, in short, the sect’s *raison d’être*. These *kalam* narratives are in the form of poetry in Gurani and other Kurdish languages, as well as in Turkish, transmitted orally from generation to generation. It seems that they were not committed to writing before the 19th century; the oldest manuscript known to outsiders, that found by Vladimir Minorsky, dates from 1843 (Minorsky 1936, 9). There are now many written collections of *kalam*, each belonging to a specific period; the most important is that belonging to the period of Sohtan Sohak, the sect’s founder. They have all retained their oral character and were, until recently, jealously guarded from outsiders. Even within the sect, only an inner circle of initiates, namely the Seyyeds (the sect’s religious leaders) and *kalam-khan* (experts in *kalam*), had access to these manuscripts. It was believed that the sect’s ‘mystery’, hidden in the *kalam*, put a seal (mohr) on the lips of those who learned it.

The first Ahl-e Haqq to break the ‘seal’ was Haji Ne‘matollah from the village of Jeyhunabad in Sahneh district, one of the two clusters of the Ahl-e Haqq in the province of Kermanshah.4 He gathered and scrutinized different collections of *kalam* and provided the sect with an ‘authentic’ version of its history, dogmas and rites. A prolific writer, Haji Ne‘mat left eighteen manuscripts in Persian and Kurdish.5 Minorsky was provided by a Kurdish convert to Christianity, Dr. Sa‘id
Khan Kordestani, with a copy of one of Hajj Ne'mat's treatises, Forqan ol-Akbabar (Selector of Traditions), which became a source for his entry on the sect in the Encyclopedia of Islam. The text of Forqan, written in Persian prose, has never been published, but in 1966 Mohammad Mokri edited and published Hajj Ne'mat's Shahnameh-ye Haqiqat (The Book of Kings of Truth, henceforth Shahnameh), whose content and thematic scheme are the same as those of Forqan. The Shahnameh was Hajj Ne'mat's last work, completed in 1919 shortly before his death. It also replaces two of his earlier works: one in Persian verse, Haqq ol-Haqayeq (The Truth of Truths), and the other in Kurdish verse, Kuch-e Kordi (Kurdish Migration) (Mokri 1982, 15).

Before examining the Shahnameh and Hajj Ne'mat's motives for breaking the sect's code of secrecy, a note on the Ahl-e Haqq kalam and their mystery is in order.

'Mystery' in the Ahl-e Haqq Kalam: Dogmas and Rites

The history told in Ahl-e Haqq kalam is not chronological, nor is the account of the doctrines and rituals coherent or systematic. Kalam resemble Sufi poetry in that their language is allegorical and expresses a yearning for the divine. But whereas Sufi poetry provides a symbolic understanding of the Sufi 'mystery' through allegory, kalam are understood by the adepts in a literal sense. To understand kalam as they are understood by adepts, one first needs to penetrate the sect's conceptual universe and its peculiar notion of history.

On the conceptual level, the main feature of the Ahl-e Haqq universe is its division into two distinct but inter-related worlds: the outer (zaher) and the inner (baten). Each world has its own order and is governed by its own rules; as ordinary human beings we are aware of the order of the outer world, yet our life is governed by the rules of the inner world, where our ultimate destiny lies. This division is so deep-rooted that adepts tend to perceive their faith, as well as their everyday life, in terms of pairs of binary opposites. For instance, their faith and their struggles are haqq (true), as opposed to batel (false); whatever is haqq belongs to the realm of baqi (eternal), as opposed to fani (transient). It is zat (divine essence) as opposed to sefat (attributes), which defines and rules the eternal realm. It is the King of haqiqat (truth) and his various manifestations who rule in this realm, as opposed to those who possess worldly powers.

Such oppositions inform the notion of history contained in kalam, which are concerned with the inner meaning of events as they unfold in the world of baten. There is an inner logic and a distinct pattern by which events and characters from the world of zaher are appropriated and become part of the sect's sacred universe. What all Ahl-e Haqq historical-mythical characters have in common is their opposition to the political establishment and the Islamic orthodoxies of the time. In the end, all are defeated by the dark forces ruling the world of zaher, but in the sect's traditions they become the King of Truth, Sultan-e Haqiqat, or one of his companions. In this way, by virtue of the history that they narrate, kalam become the senn, the secret, that can be revealed only to those who are initiated into the sect's mysteries, in other words those who come to share the sect's cognitive universe and its notion of history.

On a doctrinal level, the two cardinal Ahl-e Haqq dogmas revealed in kalam are mazharih, the belief in successive manifestations of the Divine Essence (zat-e Haqq) in human form, and dunaduni, the belief in the transmigration of souls. Both beliefs defy Islamic orthodoxies; they form the core of the Ahl-e Haqq mystery and provide a permanent passage between its inner and outer worlds.

In each manifestation, the Divine Essence appears in a different human form and is accompanied by four (or five) companions. This is likened to putting on a different robe (jameh). Both cosmic time and the universe are conceptualized in terms of different cycles of divine manifestation. The Ahl-e Haqq religion existed from the time before time began, when the Divine Essence was hidden in a pearl; the pearl in a shell; the shell in an ocean, encompassing the universe. The

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8 Kordestani 1927, 42; for a summary of Forqan, see Minorsky 1936, 11-12, also Mokri 1982, 8-9. The title of this and other works of Hajj Ne'mat suggest re-examination and reformation; forqan is an epithet of the Koran, with the implication of a final recension.
9 I have not managed to see a copy of the Forqan. The whereabouts of Minorsky's copy is not known to me; it is not among his bequests to Cambridge University Library; perhaps it is among those that went to Moscow. Mokri told me that he has a copy of the Forqan. He also states that Hajj Ne'mat modified the text of Forqan several times; he has seen Minorsky's copy, and it is the most complete; part of the manuscript is in Hajj Ne'mat's handwriting, part in Nur 'Ali's and the rest in that of Hajj Ne'mat's scribe, Ghulam-Reza Kerendi (Mokri 1982, 9).

1 For a critical discussion on the historical value of kalam and other Ahl-e Haqq narratives as the only source of the sect's dogmas and rites, see Mir-Hosseini 1996.
creation of the universe was the outcome of the first of these cycles, when the Divine Essence was manifested in Khavandgar, the creator. Islam is the product of a cycle in which the Divine Essence was manifested in 'Ali, the first Shi'a Imam: this established the stage of shari'at (Islamic law). Then in the course of other cycles, the stages of tariqat (the 'path', the teachings and rituals of the Sufi orders) and mu' Afrof (gnosis, knowledge of Divine Reality) were established. Finally the Divine Essence manifested itself in Soltan Sohak, who brought new laws, establishing Ahl-e Haq as a separate creed: this is the state of haqiqat (Ultimate Truth, mystical experience of the Divine Reality), which supersedes the previous stages and thus frees adepts from observing the Shari'a rules incumbent on ordinary Muslims.

Just as the Divine Essence is reincarnated in different forms, so is the human soul. Life is a series of journeys in which the soul travels from one world to another. In each of these journeys, the soul is reincarnated in a different body, which is again likened to putting on a different robe (duan). Suffering and good fortune in this world are determined by the accumulated actions and thoughts of one's previous lives. The whole purpose of all these comings and goings, whose number is fixed at a thousand and one in the course of fifty thousand years, is for the soul to gain perfection and join the divine source from which it has emanated. Those who have completed this journey become perfect souls, part of the world of baten, and if they come back to the outer world it is always for a purpose, to fulfill a mission.

On an organizational level, the principle of siasi, holy descent, both accentuates the division between the two worlds of the Ahl-e Haq and provides a passage between them. It divides the community into two broad strata: Seyyeds and commoners. Seyyeds are descendents (spiritual or biological) of the sect's founder or one of his later manifestations, and they fall into eleven holy lineages, known as khandan (house, dynasty). Each khandan is headed by a certain Seyyed family, referred to as pir (spiritual master). Seven of these khandans were founded at the time of Soltan Sohak, the sect's founder; the rest were formed subsequently, when the Divine Essence made further manifestations. One of the many functions of the khandan is to ensure a personal connection between the holy lineages of Seyyeds and the commoners, a connection which is similar to that between a Sufi master and his disciples.

Seyyeds are believed to inherit the divine quality (zat) of their ancestors. It is this divine ancestry that enables them to act as pir, leading the commoners along the right path. Every Ahl-e Haq must recognize as pir a Seyyed from the khandan in which his/her father was initiated. The initiation is called sar sepeordan, which literally means 'dedicating one's head'. It should take place not later than a year after a child is born, although in practice it is often delayed. In this way the relations between certain Seyyed and commoner families extend over generations. These relations, referred as pir-mordi, are at the core of the Ahl-e Haq communities and are regulated by networks of mutual obligations and duties, among which are a kind of religious due and a marriage-ban. The due, called saraneh, is paid annually by a commoner to the Seyyed-pir who has performed his/her initiation ceremony. The marriage-ban between Seyyed families and commoners acquires a dimension not far from an incest taboo; the Ahl-e Haq consider their community to be a large family in which Seyyeds (male and females) are the spiritual parents of commoners.

To the Ahl-e Haq, the world of baten is as real and tangible as the world of zaher. Events are always seen in their dual aspect; it is somehow like a drama in which parts of the plot are unfolding on an invisible stage, the world of baten being revealed only to those whose inner eyes are opened. These are called baten-dar or dideh-dar, i.e. those who possess the ability to see the world of baten.

To understand the kalam, adepts have developed another body of oral narratives, which can best be described as commentaries. They consist of stories and legends about Ahl-e Haq sacred characters that contextualize the kalam; unlike the latter, they are the products of the world of zaher, as narrated by ordinary believers. Orientalists who have studied the textual traditions of the sect seem not to have appreciated this distinction, treating non-kalam narratives as sources for the mysteries that adepts believe to be hidden in the kalam, and thus causing major offence to educated Ahl-e Haq.

What is significant about the Shahnaneh is that it is the first Ahl-e Haq text to make the relationship between the two genres of narrative clear. At the same time, there is enough information available both within the text and extraneous to it, to enable us to explore the relationship between the two worlds of the sect in a manner that is impossible for earlier periods in the history of the sect.

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9 The Tazkerah-yé A'la, for example, published and analysed by Ivanov (1953), was not a kalam text; its publication in Iran caused much distress among the Ahl-e Haq.
used to be the most powerful khandan in Kermanshah province: perhaps they welcomed Hajj Ne'mat's challenge to the Shah-Hayassic, their rivals in the Sahneh district. So instead, Aqa Hamid Jan banished Hajj Ne'mat to the nearby village of Qazvineh and had his dervishes' hair cut off, which was tantamount to depriving them of their status. A year later, again through the intercession of Seyyeds, Hajj Ne'mat came back to his natal village. He apparently dropped his spiritual claims and his overt opposition to the Seyyeds, replaced the black screen with a white one, and devoted the rest of his life to unifying the sect's diverse traditions and writing an 'authentic' account of its history. It was in the process of doing so that he came to break the 'seal', to reveal the sect's mysteries.

There are two editions of the Shahnameh. The first was published in 1966 by Mokri, and reprinted in 1982 with a new Introduction and comprehensive indices. The other, published anonymously by Bahram Elahi in 1985, includes a one-page Preface by Hajj Ne'mat written in February 1919, and a 30-page Commentary by his son Nur 'Ali written in June 1966. The Preface states:

The Shahnameh, also known as Haqq ol-Haqaye, contains a preamble (Ejjetahieh) and five sections; the preamble of the Shahnameh is the treatise Kashef ol-Asrar (Revealer of Secrets), written as a paper summary to inform the Truth-seekers (Jeyahunabadi 1985).

However, this treatise, which is in Persian prose, is not included, as the publisher states that he did not have access to it.

Thus, like Mokri's edition, the 1985 edition of the Shahnameh starts with Hajj Ne'mat's introductory verses. These verses present a broad overview of the 'history of the world', beginning with the creation of Adam and the advent of prophets, proceeding to the pre-Islamic Iranian dynasties and the Greek sages, and ending with the four principles (arkan) of Islam and a list of the twelve Shi'a Imams. These principles are the four stages of religion, as revealed in kalam: shari'at (religious law), tariqat (mystical way), ma'refat (mystical knowledge) and haqiqat (mystical truth).

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10 Minorsky (1936, 11) and Mokri (1982, 7) give the year of his birth as 1871. Minorsky also wrongly suggests that Hajj Ne'mat was initiated into the Khamushi khandan.
11 Minorsky 1936, 11–12; Mokri 1982, 8–9; and Jeyahunabadi 1985, 409–415.
12 Individuals in whom the Divine Essence is manifested are accorded the epithet 'Shah'.
13 For the legend of Aqa Esma'il, see Mir-Hosseini 1994 b, 279; for another version, see N. Elahi 1991, 69.
The main body of the *Shahnameh* consists of five sections and deals with Ahl-e Haqq history. Each section bears as title one of the Arabic or Persian epithets for Paradise, each with special mystical associations. Section One (*Ferdows*) narrates from the creation of the world up to the advent of Islam, including the sect’s creation myth in which the Divine Essence was manifested in the form of ‘Ya’. Section Two (*Rezwan*), from the advent of Islam until the appearance of the sect’s founder, Soltan Sohak, contains legends about Mohammad’s miraculous night-journey to heaven (*me’raj*), the martyrdom of ‘Ali and his sons, and the Sufi saints who acted as precursors for the sect. Section Three (*Khold*) is devoted to Soltan Sohak’s period, and includes the main body of the sect’s legends and myths, dogmas and rituals, and the holy lineages founded by the Soltan himself. Section Four (*Jenan*) concerns the later manifestations and the formation of the five subsequent *khandan*. Section Five (*Na’im*) is about the author’s life, his journey to the other world and his own mission.

In this fifth section, some lines, sometimes one word or half a line, are left blank. These blanks appear to have contained the names of Ahl-e Haqq characters alive at the time of Hajj Ne’mat. Quite likely the editor-publisher, Bahram Elahi (the current leader of the reformist movement) sought to avoid confrontation with the descendants of those whose names are mentioned. Interestingly, the fifth section is not included in Mokri’s edition; Mokri doubts that Hajj Ne’mat ever completed it, arguing that the three other texts which share *Shahnameh*’s thematic scheme have only four parts, dealing with the same four periods (Mokri 1982, 15). Bahram Elahi makes no reference to Mokri’s edition, and in the Commentary by his father (originally addressed to Mokri) all reference to Mokri is omitted.

The *Shahnameh* is discursive in style, remaining true to *kalam* narrative. It takes the reader through a rich web of facts and legends, from one historical epoch to another, and from one Ahl-e Haqq world to the other. The narrative is punctuated by accounts of other events, details of dogmas, origins of rites, mystical lessons and Hajj Ne’mat’s own experiences. There are no signposts; and Mokri’s attempt to indicate the subject matter of a group of verses by giving them a short title is not always successful. The *Shahnameh*’s notion of history is indeed that of the *kalam*, in which facts and dates are secondary to inner history. Its approach to dogma is again that of the sect: rich in ‘sheer yearning’ (*hal*) and poor in theology, which the adept calls ‘mere talk’ (*qal*). It is a work of faith, written by an adept who believes that the time has come to reveal the sect’s ‘truths’, but feels no need to justify these ‘truths’, and is content to trace their Shi’a mystical ancestry.

The *Shahnameh*, like all Ahl-e Haqq narratives, is concerned with the sect’s inner world yet at the same time is the product of events in its outer world – in this case a frustrated challenge to the traditional Ahl-e Haqq leadership. Such challenges, as I show elsewhere (1994a, 1994b), are a recurrent feature of the Ahl-e Haqq outer world, an expression of an underlying tension between the two poles of mystical expression and authority within the sect: Seyyeds and dervishes. While Seyyeds are carriers of a mystical state (the Divine Essence manifested in their ancestor), dervishes are those who keep that mystical state alive: they actually experience it. This tension has been at the root of the proliferation of *khandan*, which has allowed the sect to accommodate periodical challenges to the authority of the Seyyeds, and to reinvigorate and keep alive its mystical tradition.15

If Hajj Ne’mat’s challenge to the hereditary leadership was not new to the Ahl-e Haqq outer world, his unveiling of the ‘mystery’ hidden in *kalam* is unprecedented, and has proved a highly effective tactic for confronting the authority of the Seyyeds. It was perhaps no coincidence that he chose the pen-name *Mojrem* (culpable, guilty). In the *Shahnameh* he is full of repentance, requesting forgiveness for his sins and crimes; although the reader never learns what these were, a strong impression is conveyed that Hajj Ne’mat is apologizing for unveiling the sect’s mysteries.

**BORHAN OL-HAQQ:**

**RECONCILING THE ‘MYSTERY’ WITH SHI’A ORTHODOXIES**

Hajj Ne’mat died in 1920, at the very end of the Qajar era, having instructed his son, Nur ‘Ali (born 1896) in mystical ways. After his father’s death, Nur ‘Ali left his retreat in Jeyshunabad to pursue his studies. This took him to the seminaries in Qom, where he became well acquainted with Shi’a scholarship. He then (1936?) started a civil career as a judge, and served in different parts of the country. In 1957 he retired in his home in Tehran, to devote his energies to spiritual

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15 If the challenger is himself a Seyyed, he will not form a new *khandan*. For an account of three cases where Seyyed leadership among the Ahl-e Haqq of Kermanshah was challenged at the end of the Qajar era, see Mir-Hosseini 1994b.
it outside the boundaries of official Islam. Secondly, the sect had to compete with the Islam of the Shi’i ulama without offending them.

In **Borhan**, Nur ‘Ali achieves both. He provides a synthesis between Ahl-e Haqq dogma and Shi’ism, playing down ‘heretical’ elements by relegating them to the realm of myth and finding a symbolic language to explain them. In so doing, he also transforms the meaning and narrative function of kalam: where previously they had been stories where the narrative is only one version, one vehicle for conveying inner truths, Nur ‘Ali sought to define and justify these truths, and to identify the correct version. In other words he sought to use kalam in the same way that Shi’i scholars use the sacred sources (Koran and Hadith). His notion of history and his mode of argumentation are entirely different from those of his father.

Soon after Mokri’s edition of the **Shahnameh** appeared, Nur ‘Ali published a commentary, in order to mitigate some of the obvious inconsistencies between the **Shahnameh** and Shi’i orthodoxies, and to rectify inaccuracies in facts and dates. He thanks Mokri for his efforts to edit and publish the **Shahnameh**, saying that he learned about it through Henry Corbin. When Mokri was in Iran in the 1940s and was keen to see the **Shahnameh**, Nur ‘Ali was unable to locate his copy; now he has found it, and although he finds no substantial differences between the two copies he decided to write a commentary, since some of the verses contain special idioms and secrets that only he can interpret, as he was closely familiar with his father’s thoughts and intentions. He comments on key concepts such as mazharia and dunaduni, he corrects some of Mokri’s introductory statements, and provides a table containing the accurate dates of birth and death of those Islamic mystics who are part of Ahl-e Haqq inner world and thus appear in the **Shahnameh** (N. Elahi 1967).

In the **Borhan**, there is almost nothing of the Ahl-e Haqq inner world, nor of Nur ‘Ali’s own mystical experiences. These are to be found in other writings, two of which, both in question-and-answer format, appeared in his lifetime: as a 300-page Appendix in later impressions of **Borhan**, when the questions are posed by readers of earlier impressions; and in a book compiled by Mokri, entitled *Nur ‘Ali-Shah Elahi: l’estérisme kurde* and published in 1966, when the questions are posed by traditional adepts.17 In his answers, Nur ‘Ali’s narrative

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16 I am using the third impression of 1975. For an account of **Borhan**, see Weightman 1964.

17 Mokri does not say how he came by this text. In Sahneh in 1992 I came across a xerox copy of a manuscript circulating among the traditional adepts, which contained
is that of the *Shahnameh*, concerned with exposition of the inner mysteries of the sect and development of the reforming ideas of his father.

Nur ‘Ali’s efforts earned the respect of the sect, including the traditionalists; they also brought the sect new converts, largely from middle-class Tehranis, many of them women, with neither Kurdish origins nor any prior knowledge of the sect. Meanwhile, in response to the spiritual needs of these new followers, Nur ‘Ali elaborated the outlines of a spiritual path, tapping into the rich but obscure mystical currents of the sect. He named his Path the ‘School of Perfection’ (*Maktab-e Seyr-e Kamal*) and started to provide spiritual guidance for its students (*bacheha-ye maktab*), who refer to him as Master (*Ostad*) or Nur ‘Ali Shah.

**La Voie de la Perfection: Universalizing the Mystery**

Nur ‘Ali Elahi died in October 1974, and since then his students have been guided by his second son, Bahram. His followers maintain that after his physical death the Master maintained contact with his spiritual school through the intermediary of his blind sister, Malek Jan, known as Hazrat-e Sheykh (B. Elahi 1993, 6–7). Malek Jan, herself a *dideh-dar*, who spent all her life in Jeyhunabad, became the recipient of new directives from the inner world, which is now called the ‘world of meaning’ (*‘alam-e ma’na*, a standard Sufi concept). She died in September 1993; no one has yet replaced her. These directives, referred to as ‘lessons’, have been elaborated and disseminated by her nephew, Bahram. Born in 1931, Bahram grew up in Iran; at the age of 20 he went to France to continue his medical studies, returning to live in Iran in 1964; currently (1995) he is Professor of Pediatric Surgery in Tehran University. On his return to Iran, Bahram went through a spiritual transformation, which he describes as having his ‘angelic soul changed’. After this he was able to recognize ‘his Master’. He is both a student and a master: “I have made an agreement to be a student of the ‘Master’, and he has entrusted me with the mission of teaching others in order to guide them” (B. Elahi 1993, 1–5, 7). In addition, students seek guidance in the Master’s writings in Persian, including not only the *Borhan*, but the two volumes of his sayings, compiled and published by Bahram as *Asar ol-Haqq* (The Works/Effects of the Truth, henceforth *Asar*).

The first volume of *Asar* appeared four years after the Master’s departure, and the second fourteen years later (N. Elahi 1978, 1991). These two volumes present a new genre of Ahl-e Haqq narrative: *kalam* (the sacred) is merged with non-*kalam* (contextualization of the sacred) and becomes *goftar*, ‘saying’. The first volume contains 2082 sayings, grouped into 24 chapters according to subject-matter, which are those sayings of the Master that Bahram recorded between 1964 (after his return from France) and 1974 (when the Master departed). The second volume is formatted differently and comprises two parts. The first part contains 629 *goftar* recorded by an unnamed disciple between 1963 and 1972 (though mostly in 1963–1964); they appear chronologically and some of them are also found in Volume 1. The second part is drawn from the sessions, held every Monday, during which the Master gave spiritual ‘lessons’ to students.

It is in *Asar* that Bahram fully articulates the ‘reforms’ overshadowed by the *Shahnameh* and implied in the *Borhan*. The two volumes of *Asar* are in effect a channel through which Nur ‘Ali’s spiritual teachings have been gradually made available to his Iranian disciples after his physical departure. In the Introduction to the first volume, dated February 1978, to clarify the term Ahl-e Haqq as it was intended by Nur ‘Ali, Bahram divides the followers into two broad categories. The first consists of those born into Ahl-e Haqq, whom he subdivides into those who are initiated into the order founded by Soltan Sohak and who now follow the instructions of *Borhan*; and those who do not follow *Borhan* and “call themselves ‘Ali-elahi (deifers of Ali) or Sheytan-parsat (Devil-Worshippers)”.

The second category are those who, “although not born into the Ahl-e Haqq, are ‘true Ahl-e Haqq’, that is, genuine seekers of Truth”. By Ahl-e Haqq, Bahram contends that “the Master had especially the second category in mind”, and certainly not the second group of the first category (N. Elahi 1978, iii).

The traditional leaders of the Ahl-e Haqq, who respected Nur ‘Ali’s work, have not welcomed his son’s efforts to purge the sect further.

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"As noted above, these people, whom I have labelled the traditionalists, reject and are deeply offended by both these appellations: they call themselves Ahl-e Haqq, Yareasn or Tayefeh."
elements that he holds to be misperceived and misunderstood. The rise of the Islamic Republic in Iran has intensified the need for reforms and altered the nature of resistance to them. Elsewhere (1994a) I have discussed how the rift between the traditional leadership and the reformist group widened at the outset of the Revolution, leading to a total split by 1992, since when both the reformists and the traditionalists have sought to keep distance from each other. The reformists consider those who do not follow their redefinition of the sect to be ignorant of their true religion, which has been corrupted by ambitious and illiterate Seyyeds. In turn, a large majority of the Ahl-e Haqq in Kermanshah, Seyyeds and commoners alike, see these redefinitions as a plot to destroy the sect from within. Only a small minority in the Sahneh cluster of the sect have embraced the reforms, which, as articulated by Bahram, undermine the very legitimacy of any spiritual claim by Seyyeds to inherit the Divine Essence (zat) manifested in their ancestry. Reformists now argue that the effect of zat lasts for only three generations, and that in the absence of Divine Manifestation, directives from dideh-dar take precedence over those of leading Seyyeds of the khandan. With Nur ‘Ali, the Ahl-e Haqq enter a new phase, in which the old ways are abrogated and replaced by the Path of Perfection, and the eleven khandan are unified.

In addition to compiling his father’s sayings in the Asar, Bahram himself has produced two books in French, intended for ‘students from Western countries’. In these books, he has made the first effort to translate the Ahl-e Haqq inner world into a narrative that is meaningful to those who are foreign to its cognitive universe and its notion of history; and he makes clear his aim to give Nur ‘Ali’s teachings a general appeal, and to make a complete break from the traditional Ahl-e Haqq.

His first book, La Voie de la Perfection: L’enseignement secret d’un maître kurde en Iran, was published in 1976; an English translation, with a different introduction and a modified title (no mention of the ‘Kurdish Master’), appeared in 1987 under the title The Path of Perfection: The Spiritual Teachings of Master Nur ‘Ali Elahi. Its five parts and 40 short chapters map the outlines of the ‘path of perfection’ and make it available to all seekers, regardless of religion and origin. The author sees it as his duty “to convey to my fellow men some part of that Knowledge I received” (B. Elahi 1987, xi). The book’s approach and narrative style reveal the influence of both traditional Sufi literature and contemporary Western self-awareness manuals. Its focus is on the individual, dealing with stages of self-knowledge and self-improvement, while placing Ahl-e Haqq teachings in the context of universal esotericism. The author states that every “true religion” has both exoteric and esoteric dimensions, and that they differ only in their esoteric dimensions, while their esoteric dimension is “like the apex of a pyramid: it is unique and the same for all”. This summit is only accessible to “those who have practised, fulfilled and gone beyond the exoteric stage in one of the religions of the prophets: Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity or Islam” (ibid.). Thus, not only are Ahl-e Haqq teachings no longer exclusive to those who are born into the sect, but they are denied to them if they do not follow the rules of the Shari‘a, and become practising Muslims.

Bahram Elahi’s second book, Le Chemin de la Lumiére: la voie de Nur ‘Ali Elahi, was published in 1985. An English translation, The Way of Light: the Path of Nur Ali Elahi, appeared in 1993, with a Preface which differs substantially from the 1985 French edition, describing the book as “a selection of lessons given orally by Bahram Elahi for small groups of French-speaking disciples in Iran and France between 1977 and 1986”. These lessons complement Nur ‘Ali’s teachings as outlined in Asar and as formulated in La Voie, and are intended for advanced students, those who have already started on the ‘Path of Perfection’. Le Chemin’s format is that of question-and-answer, reminiscent of Nur ‘Ali’s style of teaching. Despite Bahram’s statement that “Nothing of what is written in this book is mine. These are the teachings of my Master. All the discoveries are his, and I have only repeated what I heard and understood from him. May God forgive me if I have made any mistakes” (B. Elahi 1993, cover), the book is a far cry from Ahl-e Haqq kalam and Nur ‘Ali’s goftar. There is no reference to Ahl-e Haqq sacred characters and legends, and stories revolve around Nur ‘Ali’s family. Nur ‘Ali himself is held to be the last manifestation of the Divine Essence, now referred to as Vahi Ne‘mat is presented as a dideh-dar who paved the way for his son.

1993 saw the publication of a new English edition of Bahram’s first book, La Voie. Although the title (The Path of Perfection) is the same as that of the 1987 edition, the headings and contents of some chapters have been substantially modified. In a new Foreword, a leading French supporter, Jean During, writes:

19 NB, in the Introduction to the 1993 edition, Judaism is listed first of the “true religions”.
Religion, like everything that is created, continues to follow its own movement of Perfection. While its basic principles are unchanging, spiritual knowledge is limitless; those seekers who study it and apply its principles are constantly making new discoveries as they advance. Therefore the author has profoundly revised this new edition in comparison with the original version (B. Elahi 1993, ix).

Notably, the final part of the earlier edition, consisting of two chapters on ‘The teachings of Ahl-e Haqq’ (i.e. Soltan Sohak’s order) and ‘The Way of Perfection’ (i.e. Nur ‘Ali’s reformulation of the order), has been replaced by three chapters on ‘The Spiritual Hierarchy’, ‘The Stage of Truth’, and ‘The Path of Spiritual Perfection, or the Spiritual University’. Most significant of all, perhaps, there is no longer any mention whatsoever of Ahl-e Haqq; the reformists now appear to be rejecting this label altogether. The separation from the traditionalists is now complete.

CONCLUSION: FROM ‘PEOPLE OF TRUTH’ TO THE ‘PATH OF PERFECTION’

This new face of Ahl-e Haqq, as presented by Bahram Elahi, has not only attracted more converts, including Western ones, but also earned the approval, or at least the tolerance, of Shi’a orthodoxy in post-revolutionary Iran. The entry on the Ahl-e Haqq in the Encyclopaedia of Shi’ism, founded after the Revolution, refers to Nur ‘Ali’s followers as “Muslim Ahl-e Haqq” (Ahl-e Haqq-e Mosalman) and to the rest as “Devil-Worshippers” (Sheytan-parastan) (Anon. 1990).

The new face is still taking shape. It began three generations ago when Hajj Ne’mat broke the ‘seal’ and committed the ‘mystery’ hidden in the kalam to writing in his Shahnameh. Now the ‘mystery’ had to be redefined so as not to offend Shi’a orthodoxies. This was done by his son Nur ‘Ali in the Borhan, in which he provided a new commentary for kalam and Ahl-e Haqq concepts, trimming them of their popular notions and bringing their dormant mystical elements to the surface.

Bahram Elahi developed the “School of Perfection” established by his father and gave a universal dimension to his teaching. He did this in two concurrent ways: by seeking further rapprochement with Shi’ism, and by distorting the “School of Perfection” from its past. He achieved the former by placing the School in the context of Shi’a mysticism, as another Sufi order, and by writing in French and addressing a new audience. Shedding the Ahl-e Haqq past has been achieved by the publication in Persian of new editions of his father’s and grandfather’s works, some published before in a different form, some unpublished. Examination of these new editions shows various additions and exclusions. Several of these have been alluded to: the Shahnameh no longer contains the Kashef al-Asrar, but includes a new section on Hajj Ne’mat’s mystical experiences, yet with significant blanks; while the publication of Asar makes available previously unpublished work of Nur ‘Ali. Perhaps most striking is the attempted exclusion of Mohammad Mokri. For example, Nur ‘Ali’s Commentary of 1967, as published in Bahram’s 1985 edition of the Shahnameh, omits all mention of Mokri (to whom it was originally addressed), while retaining reference to Henry Corbin. Mokri must now be excluded, because he possesses and has already published manuscripts by Hajj Ne’mat and Nur ‘Ali, and above all because he has analysed them and placed them squarely in the context of the popular Kurdish form of the Ahl-e Haqq, that is, before Bahram’s reformulation; whereas Corbin, who is interested in Shi’a mysticism, has never worked on the Ahl-e Haqq.

Mokri has reacted to this exclusion in his more recent work. In his 1966 Introduction to L’esotérisme kurde, where he provided a context for Nur ‘Ali’s text, Mokri suggested that he knew him. He spoke very highly of him, called him a ‘paternal cousin’ who became a friend, and termed him the current spiritual leader of the Shah-Hayasi khandan, who had left Jeyhunabad and taken civil employment because he did not want to be burdened with the leadership of the sect. He also considered Nur ‘Ali’s writings on the esoteric teachings of the sect to be original; he regarded Borhan as less original and more concerned with esoteric aspects (Mokri 1966b, 32-39). However, in his Persian Introduction to the 1982 edition of the Shahnameh, Mokri’s tone is quite different. He dismisses Nur ‘Ali’s Commentary on the first edition, disparaging his corrections as ‘naive and simple minded’. He further denounces an unnamed book published in French (presumably Bahram Elahi’s La Voie) as propaganda and plagiarism (Mokri 1982, 15-21).

It is too early to draw any definite conclusion about the impact of the reforms on the future of the sect. All that can be said with any degree of certainty is that, now that the ‘seal’ of the sacred narrative is broken, those adepts who still reject the reforms that bring the sect into line with mystical Shi’ism now need to find another ‘seal’ to maintain the sect’s tradition of defiance of any form of imposed orthodoxy. It remains to be seen what the inner world has in store for the next generation of adepts.
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UN APERÇU GÉNÉRAL SUR L’HÉTÉRODOXIE MUSULMANE EN TURQUIE:
RÉFLEXIONS SUR LES ORIGINES ET LES CARACTÉRISTIQUES DU KIZILBACHISME (ALÉVISME) DANS LA PERSPECTIVE DE L’HISTOIRE

AHMET YAŞAR OCAK

Avant de commencer notre exposé, nous voudrions souligner une question de perspective et de méthodologie qui touche la plupart des recherches alévi-bektachies de ces dernières années, exception faite d’une partie mineure réalisée en Turquie et en Europe occidentale: il s’agit, faute d’une perspective historique, d’une optique généralement spéculative et superficielle qui provient du processus d’une déformation historique, due aux conflits idéologiques et culturels, qui prédomine en Turquie depuis longtemps. Nous n’avons certainement pas l’intention de discuter, ici, des facteurs idéologiques, les causes socio-culturelles et socio-politiques de cette déformation historique, étant encore un grave problème pour le développement des recherches historiques et culturelles en Turquie.1 Ces conflits idéologiques et culturels ont négativement influencé, et influencent encore, depuis environ une quinzaine d’années, les études alévis-bektachies qu’on tâche de mener dans des conditions défavorables et non scientifiques.2

C’est la raison pour laquelle nous avons choisi un tel sujet. Notre hypothèse est qu’aucune étude et analyse sociologique, ethnologique, anthropologique et même théologique au sujet de l’Alévisme, ou d’autre terme, du Kizilbâchisme – terme historique cité dans les sources ottomanopersanes de l’époque3 – n’aura, à notre avis, la

1 Nous avons essayé de discuter cette question de «déformation historique» en Turquie dans notre livre intitulé Türkiye’de Tarihin Saptırmısısı ve Türk Sülfik Tarıhi Araştırmaları, [sous presse].


3 On sait très bien que le mot d’«Alévisme» (ou comme on dit en turc «Alevilik») n’est pas le nom réel et historique de ce que l’on appelle couramment l’Alévisme aujourd’hui. Le nom historique est le Kizilbâçîk (Kizilbâchisme) qui existait depuis le XVIe siècle non seulement dans les sources ottomanes, telles que les chroniques et les