

Roses and Nightingales

Looking for traditional anarchism in Iran

Peter Lamborn Wilson

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Introduction

The military dictator Reza' Shah Pahlavi changed the name of Persia to Iran in 1935. This move was part of a broader effort to craft a nation through the celebration of a largely imaginary Indo-Aryan past at a time the territory was dealing with a century's worth of British and Russian imperialist interference, as well as the increasing power of foreign oil companies.

Today, Iran is on the "Axis of Evil" shortlist, meaning that its people have been continually threatened by the Bush-Cheney regime's mass murder fantasies and neo-colonialist ambitions. With an eye to current events, then, we present Peter Lamborn Wilson's "Roses and Nightingales," an appreciation of the heretical, Islamic mysticism that he encountered while traveling in southwest Asia in the early 1970s.

Wilson associates the fringe elements of sufism with a cultural tendency that has tenaciously survived despite nationalist modernization, deepening levels of European imperialist penetration, and escalating governmental repression. In the course of Wilson's investigations, he believes that he has found vestiges of pre-Iranian Persia and a rich variety of unorthodox Islamic (and pre-Islamic) practices. Both then and now, the sufi exploration of emotive extremes of asceticism and debauchery in pursuit of ecstasy rattle those who adhere to strict Islamic doctrine and other rigid institutions of law and order.

Many of you already appreciate Wilson as an informed observer of offbeat arcana, and his efforts to tease out those strands in the history of Islamic society that cherish freedom and imagination are perceptive. In general, the sufis are a community of Muslims whose practices run counter to the oppressive use of that religion by the ayatollah oligarchy, the House of Saud aristocrats, and the murderously prudish swine of the Hezbollah and al-Qaeda.

When cynical neoconservatives and hateful, right-wing Christian/Zionist neo-crusaders are exaggerating the tyrannical characteristics of Islamic society in order to demonize and disparage anything remotely Arabic and Muslim, any positive evaluation of that culture that defies the National Security State's use of racism, prejudice, and provincialism is welcome.

Still, there will be those who will be irritated by Wilson's embrace of mysticism and tolerance of misogyny within these subcultures. Some readers (together with some members of FE's editorial collective, including myself) find it impossible to reconcile any aspect of any form of theism—no matter how lawlessly exhilarating or ecstatic—with freedom, mutual aid, and solidarity.

But I am reminded of a conversation that I had a few nights ago on the subject of sufism and political dissent with my friend Sayeedeh. Following a bloody cycle of mass anti-government demonstrations and police riots in September 1978, she, like many of her Marxist comrades at Tehran University, had her life threatened by both the thugs loyal to the Shah and by those who supported Khomeini. When she eventually had to escape the city, she did so along night-darkened railway lines with the help of some indigent sufis. When I asked her why sufi ascetics would help a Marxist feminist escape police dogs and fundamentalist Shi'ite vigilantes, Sayeedeh brought up the subject of the medieval Christian heretic and radical primitivist Jan Hus.

Was everyone in the anti-feudal peasant and artisan rebel movement following Hus really Christian? Or, were some using Christian language and symbols simply as means for articulating the realities of the deep social crisis that they were experiencing? Perhaps Wilson appreciates Sufism in the same light.

— Doug Graves

It was 1971. After two years on the Hippie Trail in India and Pakistan, a winter of poverty in Afghanistan, months of opium smoking in Quetta (capital of Pakistani Baluchistan) followed by a severe and hallucinatory bout of intestinal malaria, I must not have looked very respectable to the Iranian Consul.

The Consulate, a concrete box in a dreary new suburb of Quetta, appeared to be empty except for me and the Consul, a small sour man in a suit, who seemed to have nothing to do except make life difficult for me personally. He was quizzing me about why he shouldn't simply issue me a 14-day transit visa rather than the standard Tourist Three Month visa I wanted. He seemed to suspect me of something. Recently, I'd been sort of thrown out of India and also Afghanistan. Clearly the Consul took me for a wealthless vagabond, which was rather perspicacious of him.

"Why do you want to visit my country?" he kept asking.

I felt too tired to make anything up so I said, "Well, you see, I'm interested in sufism..."

"Sufism!? Do you know what is sufism?"

"I know enough to want to know more. Some sufis I met in India told me to go to Iran. So..."

The Consul metamorphized before my eyes into a different person: all at once he became a cultivated and poetic soul unfairly and inexplicably consigned to this empty concrete box in Baluchistan. He unbent. He beamed, "This is fantastic! You must let me give you the maximum possible visa," he began fumbling for seals and stamps, "One Year With Extensions, Yes?"

"Well...but..."

"You must remain in my country until you have learned everything. Please, promise me!"

Although I never learned "everything" about the Consul's country or even about sufism, I did spend the next seven years there, more or less, so my problem now is one of choice; what to leave out of this little memoir and what to put in. I follow a loose thread suggested by the theme of the Consul's unbending, his strange transformation from bureaucrat to human being. My motive for this arises from the probability that over the next few years no one in the US is going to be discussing these aspects of Persian culture. Iran will be consigned to the evil pseudo-discourse and vacant imaginary of the "News". Persian humanism (as Iqbal called it) will be forgotten, denied, and even betrayed—precisely because it belongs not to the realm of ideology and the "clash of cultures", but to "everyday life" and the ordinary and even unrepresentable beauties of the soul.

Music, tea, and glass-eating

By a strange coincidence possible only in a "developing nation", the strongest force for traditional and creative preservation of classical music was then the Iranian National Television. Radio Tehran, by contrast represented a lovely but impure neo-traditionalism, which even ran to experiments with violin and piano—I love Persian piano music, which always reminds me of the mirror-mosaic architecture of Shiite tomb-shrines and other late 19th century public buildings. Like pianos (mostly uprights), European mirrors were shipped to Iran by caravan and naturally many of them broke en route.

Tile-mosaic craftsmen bought up shards by the camel-load and created a vulgar but scintillating hybrid form in which whole domes and iwans are transformed into glittering ice-diamond bursts of illumination. Purists hate this stuff. The pianos were re-tuned to Persian modes and played like dulcimers, unpedaled, using only four fingers. Another comparison: all over Asia tra-

ditional embroidery techniques were given a creative burst by the introduction of foot-pedaled Singer sewing machines. Sooner or later modern technology (inextricably linked with Capital) will suffocate and destroy traditional crafts, but the initial contact is often a stimulus, and gives birth to vigorous hybrids.

Be that as it may, the TV musicians were all rigorous but creative purists, and the 1970s witnessed a mini-renaissance of excellent Persian music: played by very young enthusiasts and very old virtuosi who'd been rescued from oblivion by the new wave and the TV budget. The Shiraz Festival was one of its epicenters. I spent a lot of time talking with Dr. Dariush Safvat, TV's director of "The Centre for the Preservation and Propagation of Traditional Iranian Music." One night in Shiraz, Dr. Safvat told me an interesting story. I already knew most of it because Nasrallah Poujavady and I had written about it in *Kings of Love*, our study of the history and poetry of the Ni'matollahi Sufi Order, the spiritual progeny of Shah Ni'matollah Wali. In 1792, one of these dervishes was martyred in Kerman; his sufi name was Mushtaq Ali Shah and he was a niadzub, a sufi "madman" totally absorbed in divine ecstasy. He was also a legendary musician and played the sehtar, the little three-stringed lute of Central Asia (ancestor of the Indian sitar). One day, in his craziness, Mushtaq played an accompaniment to the Call to Prayer (azan) from a nearby mosque, and this blasphemy aroused the puritanical wrath of a bigoted mullah. The mullah called on a mosque-full of people to stone Mushtaq Ali Shah, and he was crushed to death along with one of his disciples. Dr. Safvat told me the story over again, but he hadn't read it in a book. He'd heard it as a youth from an old musician friend who heard it from his grandfather who had actually been present in Kerman on May 19, 1792, and witnessed the death of Mushtaq.

The Ni'matollahi Order in the 1970s was still very pro-music (although they never used musical instruments in their actual sufi praxis). Several times a year on happy holidays such as the Birthday of the Prophet or Ali, the Ni'matollahi khaniqah [or "spiritual center"] in downtown Tehran would organize a jashn, or musical fest. Dr. Javad Nurbakhsh, the qotb or Shaykh of the Order, counted many musicians among his disciples and friends, all glad to perform at his parties. Several thousand people from all classes and every part of Tehran (including women and kids) would attend, and each and every one received a free hot meal of rice and meat and all the tea and sweets they could stomach, along with several hours of excellent traditional music. The grand finale was always provided by a troupe of wild-looking Qadiri dervishes from Kurdistan, who roused the crowd to delirium with dramatic chants and pounding drums. Dr Nurbakhsh told us that at home in Kurdistan they'd follow the music with feats of power such as sticking knives through their cheeks or eating light bulbs. "But I don't allow any of that in my khaniqah," he said with a twinkle in his eye. "You'll have to go to Sanandaj if you want to see that sort of thaumaturgy."

So, of course, we did.

The Kurds are a sight for sore eyes after the Iranians, who have all (except the mullahs) adopted western-style clothes with generally counter-aesthetic results. The Kurds dress Kurdish: big fringed turbans, tight soldierly jackets, baggy trousers, riding boots—and guns, if they can get away with it. The women dress in dozens or scores of layered flower-patterned petticoats of dark, rich, saturated, velvety colors, and look like black tulips; some tattoo their face with blue marks, and go unveiled.

In Sanandaj, my friends and I—all of us American journalists working for the racketsy Tehran English daily journals and all fascinated by sufism—met Dr. Nurbakhsh's contact, a small 88-year-old gentleman who lived in a small house near the Qadiri khaniqah. He invited us in for

tea, and showed us an old photo of himself in military uniform with a really huge live snake draped over his shoulders. “You came to see us eat glass, my young friends? Ah, that’s nothing. One need not even enter the trance state for such tricks. I’ll show you!”

He snapped his fingers and his young grandson brought in a silver tray upon which sat a single light bulb. The old soldier broke it up with his fingers as he uttered an invocation, then began scooping up shards and popping them in his mouth, crunch crunch crunch. Swallow. As we gaped at him, he winked his eye and offered us the tray, “Like to try it yourselves?”

That night in the khaniqah (after a big dervish meal of mutton and tea on the floor around a sofreh or dining-cloth), we indeed witnessed feats of power, including cheek skewering, electricity eating, scorpion handling, light bulb chomping—all performed (after a really rousing zikr) without any trace of damage or visible scars. I later visited Sanandaj several times, and I have to admit these tricks soon came to seem rather ordinary (though I never tried any myself). But I never again saw the feat our tiny old soldier friend performed. After achieving hal or trance by dancing wildly and whirling to the zikr, he suddenly ran at tremendous speed across the whole length of the room (say the length of a tennis court at least); launched himself headfirst like a rocket into the air, and crashed his skull into the far wall—bounced off, onto his feet, and went around whirling and dancing and singing ecstatically for the next hour. I believe it was this chap who told us that the Grand Shaykh of the Qadiri Sufi Order in Baghdad was able to cut off the heads of his disciples, as part of the initiation ceremony, and then replace them, no harm done. After seeing the old soldier himself perform, I was inclined to believe this, though I admit that later I became skeptical again. But it’s a nice story.

Sufism: Islam’s “traditional anarchism”?

Sunni Islam is “built” upon Five Pillars: Confession of Unity, Belief in prophets and angels, Prayer, Pilgrimage, and the Poor-tax. To these Shiism adds a Sixth pillar: Social Justice. Shiism has usually existed as a religion without state power and traditionally as a source of potential revolt against Sunnism. But in the course of time, the Pillar of Justice has been given an even wider interpretation. The late Ali Shariati, a radical mullah assassinated by the Shah’s secret police, converted many Iranians to the concept of Shiite Socialism. Shariati’s tracts reveal a fascinating blend of Marxist humanism and reverence for Ali and Husayn as rebels against State oppression. Official revolutionary State Shiism in Iran today has taken another direction, not socialist, and not particularly radical. But the link between social justice Shiism and revolution is quite solidly historic and real—and always capable of regeneration. Iran is generally depicted as 90% orthodox Shiite, and this may be so.

But the dervishes and heretics have played a larger role than such statistics would suggest. Inside the “fat” Iranian a “thin” dervish often struggles for self-expression and freedom. Sufis are very pious, certainly—but dervishism (even without the outer signs and practices) also allows a way to cock a snoot at all dreary conformism, class suffocation, puritanism, overly formal manners, and philistine consensus aesthetics. In modern Persian, the adjective darvishi implies a whole complex of such attitudes and tastes, not necessarily even connected with any sufi praxis. It means something like “laid back,” “cool,” informal, and relaxed (“Don’t dress for dinner; we’ll be very darvishi”); also “hip” and bohemian. Dervishism and the strange sects (too many even

to list in this essay) seem to me to provide something quite vital to Persian culture and even “politics” in a broad sense of that term—something that might be called “traditional anarchism.”

In the old days (say, up to mid-19th century), Iranian dervishes adhered to an ancient way of life very similar to that of Hindu siddhus in India: long hair (or shaved bald), patched cloak, begging bowl (made from coco de mer shells) and ritual axes (also useful for chopping vegetables), distinctive cap or taj (“crown”); endless aimless wandering, music and dance, sometimes wine and hashish, an attitude of insouciance vis-a-vis the claims of orthodoxy; yogic asceticism and libertine excess—and a theology of ecstatic love. The Ni’matollahi Order once occupied the vanguard of this sort of dervishism, but severe repression and even executions for heresy (such as that of Mushtaq Ali Shah), carried out by powerful mullahs (one of them known as Sufi-kush or “sufi killer”) gradually drove the radical dervishes underground. Inwardly, they retained their anti-puritanical convictions, but outwardly, they conformed to orthodox Shiism. Some of the shaykhs even dressed as mullahs in dark sober robes and snow white turbans.

Sufism of the wild qalandari variety may be older than Islam, harking back to an Indo-Iranian antiquity or even a common shamanistic culture traceable in the earliest Indian and Iranian scriptures (the Vedas and the Yashts). Hallucinogenic plants (called Soma or Haoma) must have played a central role in this ur-cult. First orthodox Brahminism and Zoroastrianism, and later Islam, pushed these power-plants into the outer darkness of “heresy,” or “forgot” them, or turned them into metaphors like the flavorless “wine” of so many mediocre sufi poems.

But dervishism resists change. In the hierarchic world of Asia, with its rigid sets of inherited identities, the dervish life always offers a way out, a kind of traditional bohemianism, not exactly approved by authority, but at least recognized as a viable identity. It’s no wonder the hippies immediately gravitated toward the company of these “1000 year-old beatniks,” sharing the same zero-work ethic and predilection for intoxicants and phantastica. In India, I found both dervishes and siddhus in plenty, but in Iran they had mostly vanished, at least outwardly. The only patched cloaks belonged to an Order called the Khaksariyya or “Dust-Heads” (as in the image of prostrating in the dust of the Beloved’s doorway, or throwing dust on the head in mourning). In Shiraz, I attended zikr in one of their khaniqahs in a beautiful garden called “Seven Bodies,” where they recited Hafez and then turned out the lights and wept in darkness. Patch-cloaked Khaksari dervishes still occasionally wandered about begging or selling incense against the Evil Eye (esphand aka Syrian rue, a potent hallucinogen if ingested; also used to make a red dye for fezzes). I knew a teahouse in Isfahan staffed by Khaksari dervishes, where the headwaiter, their shaykh, recited from the epic Shahnameh acting out all the parts, a one-man theater. The Khaksari Order has initiatic links with a strange Kurdish sect called the Ahl-i Haqq or “People of the Truth” (the same Divine Name claimed by Hallaj, the sufi martyr). This is not a sufi order but a folk religion, a syncretism of pre-Zoroastrian paganism, extreme Shiism, dervish sufism, and perhaps Manichaeism. One branch of the Ahl-i Haqq actually worship Satan, eat pork, and drink wine; several friends of mine traveled to their remote valleys and found them quite warm and hospitable. The “orthodox” Ahl-i Haqq had established a jamkhaneh or meeting-house in Tehran under a charismatic shaykh, Ustad Elahi, a famous musician and master of the sehtar. Many Tehran musicians were drawn to him as disciples, as were some Westerners, including my friend the French ethnomusicologist, Jean During. Ustad Elahi’s son has written books’ in French and English.

Some sufis are very darvishi, like the Safi Ali Shahi branch of the Ni’matollahi Order, who owned a very nice khaniqah (with garden and tiled dome) in Tehran. Many of them were profes-

sional musicians at Radio Tehran, and some of them (so people said) smoked opium. I attended a fashionable funeral in their garden once, since the dervishes rented it out for such occasions. Other sufis criticized them for this and looked on them as slackers. Not all sufis are darvishi by any means.

Sufism in the past has occasionally taken its “traditional anarchism” as far as armed uprising against injustice, but in recent times, it has transferred its energies to theological and intellectual liberation and applied its wildness to more inward dimensions. Given a political reading, sufism provides plenty of inspiration for resistance—think of Hafez’s line, “Stain your prayer carpet with wine!” Given a cultural reading, sufism has sparked off countless revivals of traditional culture precisely by resisting tradition’s “dead weight.” The tremendous changes in Persian Classical music in the late 19th century for example—larger ensembles, new melodic material, experiments with European influences—were all carried out by sufis or artists steeped in cultural sufism. “Radical tolerance” may prove impossible as a political program at a given time and place, but it can always be internalized by the artist and externalized as art. Since “the Orient” never really experienced the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution (except as imposed by colonial imperialism), it retained many traditional forms of Romantic resistance within the “permitted dissidence” of sufism and the arts.

Under conditions of overwhelming oppression, the dervish becomes *rendi*, that is to say, clever. A *rend* can drink wine under the very nose of the Law and get away with it. The *rend* is a secret agent of self-illumination, a strange combination of mystic monk and prankish surrealist. Perhaps this is where Gurdjieff found his notion of the “clever one” who avoids onerous paths of religion and yoga and slips into heaven like a burglar, so to speak. In folklore, the *rend* becomes a comic figure like the famous Mulla Nasroddin, outwardly a fool but in truth a realized sage.

Iran?... or Persia?

By traveling in India and Iran rather than only reading about them I came to appreciate and actually love certain “late decadent periods” of the sort that are universally despised by the Orientalists for their aesthetic impurity, despised by the new breed of Islamist bigots for their religious impurity, and despised by modernist pro-Westerners for their medieval impurity. Pretty much the only people who don’t despise these late decadent periods are the people who are actually still living in them and are too ignorant and backward to realize their own irrelevance, outdateness, political incorrectness—and impurity. In India, the remnants of the late Mughal era still provide a ghostly and melancholic but exquisitely refined matrix for the lives of many. In Iran it’s the Qajar period (the dynasty before the Pahlevis); a past recent enough that in the 1970s one could still touch it through stories (like Dr. Safvat’s story about Mushtaq), through buildings, paintings, music, crafts, poetry, and even food. The past lingered in a way inconceivable to Americans or even Europeans; enough of it lingered that one could almost live in it.

Late decadent periods attract me for many reasons, e.g. they’re usually rather peaceful (too tired and blase for war); often they’re devoted to “small happinesses”—which as Nietzsche says may be more important than the big ones, the ones that always betray us. Maybe great original art fails to thrive in such periods—since the kings and lords can no longer afford it—but the “minor arts” often experience a kind of perfection; aristocratic tastes (in cheap folkish forms) filter down even to the lowest levels. I remember one late winter night in Tehran, as I passed the skeleton of

a half-built, pseudo-Californian office block, I saw a lone night watchman warming himself by a barrel of burning trash; he wore a sheepskin coat and he was entertaining himself by reciting Hafez viva voce to the snowflakes.

“Iran” is the proper ancient name for Persia, but it wasn’t the official name till the mid-20th century, changed by decree of Reza Shah (the last late Shah’s father) from “Persia” to “Iran”. His motive for this was suspect, because he was a Nazi sympathizer and because “Iran” means “land of the Aryans”—and the name-change left a bad taste in the mouths of many Iranians. The name “Persia” was supposed to represent all that was backward, medieval, superstitious, anti-progress, late and decadent—every thing “Oriental” in the land and its people. But the land and its people (or some of them) still lived in that world and loved it.

I know it’s perfectly illegitimate and indefensible for me to say that I also loved it. I know that I was an outsider (although at times I convinced myself otherwise); I know that I cannot “represent the Other” and even that the whole project of representation has become suspect amidst the “ruins” of post-modernity. I even know that the entire hippie project of Romantic travel was largely illusory and certainly doomed to failure. The “post-colonial discourse” has made all this perfectly and painfully clear. Sadly, however, I’m unable to repent or to write off my experiences as irrelevant, crypto-reactionary delusions.

“Iran” as represented in the “News”, a two-dimensional image of oil wells and atomic reactors under the control of evil fanatics in black robes...Is this “Iran” any more real than the “Persia” in which I tried to travel and even to lose my self?—the Persia of roses and nightingales that impinges so sensibly on my memory? Or, are both equally real and unreal? The truth must certainly be more complex even than such paradox could suggest. But since “Iran” is now being pumped up in the media as the next spoke of the Axis of Evil, I doubt that “Persia” will get as much airplay over the next few years. Hence this essay. “Persia” has become a part of The World We Lost—its perfume lingers even as it recedes into a past that’s half imaginal. It leaves behind it only something that might be called difference. How else to define that which we feel is leaving us?

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