Haji Bektash, Sultan Sahak, Shah Mina Sahib
and Various Avatars of a Running Wall

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I. FIRST AVATAR: IN PIRDIWAR

The Ahl-i Haqq of Dalahu in southern Kurdistan relate a legend of Sultan Sahak, the reputed founder of their sect (who must have flourished in the mid-15th century), that must sound familiar to anyone acquainted with Bektashi lore:

When Sultan Sahak was ready to reveal his esoteric teachings to the world, he decided to settle with his first four Companions in Hawraman, in a place called Pirdiwar on the upper course of the river Sirwan. Dawud, one of the Companions, was a master bricklayer and started building a house for them not far from the river. The chosen spot, however, appeared to belong to the area over which a certain Pir Mika’il, a mystic of great magical powers, had long exercised spiritual authority. The Pir was greatly annoyed by the arrival of the new pretender and his disciples, and decided to chasten them with a show of his occult powers. Mounted on a wild lion, wielding a venomous snake by way of a whip, he rode like a fierce warrior towards Pirdiwar. Sultan Sahak, aware of the Pir’s approaching, ordered Dawud to mount the wall that he was building, and to ride out on it to meet Pir Mika’il and ask what he wanted. By the power of the Sultan, the wall galloped away, happy to carry Dawud on its back. The two riders met on the banks of the Sirwan, on opposite sides. Dawud friendly greeted the Pir but the latter was irritated and said: “What is this? I had expected to see Shaykh Sahak, a man said to be of some spiritual accomplishment, but what I see is only an ordinary sorcerer’s apprentice, playing tricks with walls!” Dawud patiently answered: “I am but the Sultan’s faithful retainer (ghulam); outside of the Sultan nothing has existence!” Pir Mika’il ordered Dawud to call his master, but before the latter

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1 This is an updated version of an article that first appeared in *Turcica* XXI-XXIII, 1991, 55-69.
could even turn around, Sultan Sahak suddenly appeared. The river Sirwan roared with happiness at the Sultan’s presence; its noise was so loud that the men on the banks could hardly hear each other. The Sultan challenged the Pir to silence the river, which he failed to do. Thereupon Sultan Sahak, who is the Lord of the Waters, told the river to be silent and was immediately obeyed. The Sultan ordered Dawud to spread his magical carpet (qalîcha-yi qudrat) on the river and sat down on it. Seeing that Pir Mika’il was hungry, the Sultan stretched a hand into the water, produced a cooked fish and handed it to the Pir, telling him not to break a single bone when eating it. When the Pir had finished his meal, another fish appeared at the surface and spoke to the Sultan: “What have you done to my mate? Have you given it to that glutton over there? I want it back! Please give my mate back to me, o Lord of the Waters!” The Sultan then took the (unbroken) bones back from Pir Mika’il, restored the fish to life and threw it back into the river. Having seen all this, Pir Mika’il recognised Sultan Sahak’s spiritual superiority and became one of his faithful disciples.

This legend consists of a number of seemingly unrelated themes, each of which provides intriguing cues as to the origins of this sect — and of related sects, for that matter. To the Ahl-i Haqq of Dalahu themselves, it is one of the most important and significant of their legends; they tell it very often, and it exists in several versified versions. They associate one central ritual prescription with it. The bones of their sacrificial animals should never be broken and always be kept together, “so that”, as several informants believed, “Sultan Sahak may set their souls free.” As the rationale of this rule they quote the fish’ restoration to life from its bones and similar miracles in other legends.

I shall revert to this theme later but first take a closer look at the miracle involving the running wall.

The theme of a contest between a lion-riding, serpent-wielding challenger and a superior newcomer who makes a wall run about has a wide geographical distribution. At the time of fieldwork I was not yet aware of this fact, but I am convinced that my Ahl-i Haqq friends would not at all have been surprised to hear that the same legend is told elsewhere.
with Haji Bektash as the victorious saint. Sultan Sahak is believed to have manifested himself in the world many times, in various human forms, and Haji Bektash is recognised as one of these. Certain events of cosmic significance, moreover, are believed to have repeated themselves in each of these cycles. There is, in fact, no reason why Sultan Sahak, in some other guise again, may not be sending his wall running towards some other lion-riding challenger this very moment, somewhere in the world. The question arises, even from an Ahl-i Haqq point of view, what the (cosmic, or sociological) meaning is of an event so often occurring.

II. BEKTASHI-ALEVI AVATARS

There are various accounts of this contest with Haji Bektash in the victorious role, the earliest version probably being that of the Vilayetname, a late 15th-century hagiography of the saint. The challenger here is Haji Mahmud Hayranı, apparently a disciple of Mawlana Jalaluddin Rumi. In this account, Haji Bektash spreads his prayer mat (another magical carpet?) on a rock which he then orders to walk about, causing Haji Mahmud to repent and acknowledge Haji Bektash’ superiority. In later versions, it is not a rock but a wall on which Haji Bektash rides, and the identity of the challenging mystic (always with lion and snake) is variously given as Ahmad Badawi, Ahmad Rifa’i, or Haji Bayram. The fact that these three saints are also the founders of three rival mystical orders strongly suggests that Bektashi dervishes have adapted the story in accordance with their needs, in order to claim their own order’s superiority to whatever order happened to be their chief rival. An extreme case of such adaptation is that by the devotees of the Greek saint Charambolos, a Christian alter ego of Haji Bektash. They have their saint ride the wall and thus prove his superiority over a lion-riding prophet Muhammad.


5 Gölpınarlı in Vilayet-name, p. 119 (after the 16th-century shaykh Üftade, as quoted by his disciple Aziz Mahmud Hüda’i).


7 Le Conte de Cholet, Voyage en Turquie d'Aste: Arménie, Kurdistan et Mésopotamie, Paris: Plon, 1892, p. 47. De Cholet heard the story, and was shown remnants of the wall, in Kırşehir.

8 Hasluck, op. cit., p. 289 n.
In the present Bektashi environment, the story is no longer associated with rivalries between dervish orders, and it is no longer seen as one of a miracle contest. My Alevi and Bektashi informants unanimously mentioned as the lion’s rider Karaca Ahmed, a well-known Bektashi saint himself. A relatively recent inscription in Karaca Ahmed’s türbe in Üsküdar, in fact, refers to the miraculous feats in terms suggesting harmony rather than conflict: the saints are riding out together. The legend is made to express internal consensus rather than external conflict and rivalry.

Thus far we have seen Haji Bektash himself as the rider of the wall (or rock, as the case may be). The Kızılbaş (Alevi) Kurds of Dersim, however, tell precisely the same story with different protagonists. The rider of the lion, in this Dersim version, was the mythical ancestor of the Kureyşan tribe, and the man who mounted the wall was Baba Mansur, the eponymous ancestor of the Bamasuran (= Baba Mansuran). It is recognised, however, that Baba Mansur did not win the contest by his own superiority; he made the wall run about “by the power of Haji Bektash”. The Bamasuran and Kureyşan tribes now act as pir (“spiritual instructors”) and reyber (rehber, “guides”), respectively, to the other Dersim tribes, called toliw (talip, “disciples”) in this connection. The pir form the channel of communication between the toliw tribes and Haji Bektash (or the çelebi in Hacı Bektaş Köyü), while the reyber mediate between the toliw and their pir.

The legend of the equestrian miracles must, in its various forms, have enjoyed wide popularity in Asia Minor, as is attested by the fact that several places boast(ed) the remnants

9 Karaca Ahmed already figures in the Vilayet-name, and there is no indication of an initial rivalry between him and Haji Bektash. In that text, the challenger on the lion still was Haji Mahmud Hayrani (who also became a Bektashi but is now almost forgotten). It is unclear when Karaca Ahmed was first cast into this role. The inscription is dated 1318/ 1900-1901; it is a poem that has as its refrain: yürüten cansız düvarı Hacı Bektaş-ı Veli / bindin arslana gazanfer Karaca Ahmed Veli (“It was Haji Bektash who made the inanimate wall run; you mounted a lion, o heroic Karaca Ahmed”). The entire poem is quoted in a book published under the auspices of the türbe: Mehmet Yaman, Karaca Ahmed Sultan Hazretleri, Istanbul,1974, p. 186.

10 More precisely, by the destur of Haji Bektash. “Destur” is a polysemic term, that carries, among the Bektashi and Alevi, beneath its surface meaning of “instruction”, “order” and “rule” the more special meaning of “initiation” or “secret teaching”. The toliw tribes (see below) receive their destur from their reyber (usually Kureyşan); the latter receive theirs from the pir (Bamasuran or another pir tribe, Sari Saltuş); the pir finally receive their destur from Haji Bektash. [This is, at least, what I was told by some informants in the early 1980s. Over a decade later, the existence of such a hierarchical relationship between Haji Bektash and the Bamasuran tribe or the Alevis of Dersim in general is denied by many. The connection with the contest between Mahmud Hayrani and Haji Bektash is, however, strengthened by a Kureyşan author, who claims that the eponymous ancestor of this seyyid tribe, Baba Kureyş, descended from Mahmud Hayrani; see Seyyid Hacı Mustafa Akılabuşında, Ehlibeyi nesli Seyyid Mahmud Hayrani ve evlâtları. N.p., 1993.]

of the running wall. Baba Mansur’s wall, still venerated by the local Kızılbaş, was pointed out to Molyneux-Seel at the village of Kardere, on the northern flank of the Baba Dujik mountain,12 while Bumke was told it is to be seen in Mohonu near Mazgirt.13 Local belief still has it that the rock at Hacı Bektas Köyü was the saint’s mount.14 De Cholet was shown the remnants of the wall in nearby Kırşehir,15 while in the 17th century Evliya Çelebi saw Haji Bektash’ wall at a place called Saru Beg.16 Pictorial representations are also well known, both in the Balkan and in Anatolia (Figs. 1 and 2).

Given the legend’s popularity among Bektashi and Alevi, it is not surprising that the same theme occurs among the Ahl-i Haqq. There have been several periods of more or less intensive contacts between these communities,17 and one might assume the contest of Sultan Sahak and Pir Mika’il to be just another adaptation of a Haji Bektash miracle.

The same legend is also recorded among the Yezidis.18 Here it is the most important Yezidi saint, Shaykh `Adi, who shows his superiority by making a rock walk, and his challengers are, not surprisingly, well-known Muslim saints. In a qasida attributed by the Yezidis to Shaykh `Adi himself, the saint says (in Kreyenbroek’s translation):

I lived at Lalish in glory and happiness
al-Qadiri came to me and likewise ibn al-Rifa‘i
and Abu’l-Wafa, oh young man, came to me riding a lion.
And I rode something without life, without body:
a massive rock which followed after me....19

The same story recurs in other Yezidi texts, two of which are also given by Kreyenbroek. One

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13 Bumke, art. cit., p. 537. A letter in the Kurdish journal Roja Nû 17/1987, pp. 3-4, also refers to “the wall of Bamansur” in Moxindî (= Mohonu).
15 De Cholet, op. cit., p. 47.
16 According to Lucy M.J. Garnett, Mysticism and magic in Turkey, London: Pitman, 1912, p. 163. I have not yet been able to locate the passage in the Seyahatname to which she refers.
17 Martin van Bruinessen, “When Haji Bektash...”
18 The following paragraph on the Yezidis was not part of the original article and was added for this reissue.
of them begins as follows:

Shaykhs came who would perform miracles
their steed a lion, their whip a snake (borr şêr e, qamçiyê wan mar e)
They enquired about Shaykh `Adi….

Shaykh `Adi then orders his disciple Mehmed Reshan to mount a rock and thus to show his spiritual superiority.\(^{20}\)

In the case of the Yezidis, it is not entirely impossible that they also borrowed this legend from Bektashi or Alevi sources but the nature of their contacts with their Muslim neighbours does not make this very likely. The hypothesis of Bektashi influence becomes untenable, however, for the more distant avatars of the same legend.

III. IN THE INDIAN ENVIRONMENT

A popular religious print that I bought some years ago in Multan (southern Punjab, Pakistan), shows two Indian Muslim saints engaged in precisely the same miracle contest (Fig. 4). The challenger, who here too comes from the left, rides a tiger (often an Indian equivalent to the lion), using again a snake as his whip; his superior rival, on the right, is shown squatting on a piece of wall that has just detached itself. Just as in the Ahl-i Haqq version, the contest takes place near a river. Haji Bektash’ wall in Fig. 1, incidentally, looks like a masonry bridge, which also suggests a river — an observation to which I shall revert later. The captions identify the protagonists as Shah Madar Sahib (on the tiger) and Shah Mina Sahib, two well-known early 15th century sufis; the inset in the centre shows the latter’s shrine in Lucknow.\(^{21}\)

\(^{20}\) Kreyenbroek, Yezidism, pp. 290-300.

\(^{21}\) Shah Madar died in 1436; his tomb in Makanpur (near Kanpur) attracts large numbers of Muslims as well as Hindus. Shah Mina was a younger contemporary, living in nearby Lucknow. On the cult around his shrine, see: Beliefs and practices associated with Muslim pirs in two cities of India (Delhi and Lucknow) (Census of India 1961, vol. I, Monograph Series, part VII-B), New Delhi, 1966.
The literature on these saints makes no mention of the contest depicted here (although I found it to be known in oral lore). It is, however, instructive to sketch the very contrasting reputations of both saints. Shah Mina’s *Malfāzāt* (recorded conversations) present him as a perfectly orthodox sufī of the learned, “high” tradition. Shah Madar on the other hand was a peripatetic miracle-worker, a Syrian Jew turned Muslim, who had wandered eastward in the track of several generations of vagrant dervishes and ended up as a popular saint in India. A 17th century hagiography, the *Mir’at-i Mâdârî*, shows him performing the most outlandish miracles. He became the patron saint of the Madari dervishes, who were probably the most yogi-like of the various Qalandar-type sects in late medieval India, and conspicuously antinomian.

It seems probable that the tale of the contest, whatever its origins, was adopted by the devotees of Shah Mina to proclaim the superiority of their saint and his orthodox sufism over the unruly but magically powerful Madari dervishes. Given the dates of these saints, this can hardly have happened before the second half of the 15th century, which is also the period when the contest was first mentioned in a Bektashi context (assuming that it is not a later interpolation in the *Vilayetname*). The Bektashi version can therefore hardly have been a borrowing from the Shah Mina tale. Borrowing in the other direction, although chronologically possible, seems unlikely for another reason. The legend conforms to a pattern typical of medieval Indian, yogi-influenced, sufī anecdotes, studied by Digby and Rizvi. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that we found exactly the same anecdote told

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22 The saints are mentioned in most general works on Indian sufism, and both have their own hagiographies. I am indebted to Simon Digby, an authority on medieval Indian Islam, for communicating me the summaries of the texts briefly mentioned below.

23 “… like yogis they smeared their bodies with ashes, wore their hair long, beat themselves with chains, practised celibacy and most of them refrained from eating meat. Like yogis, they were habituated to the intoxicant bhang. (…) Muhsin Fani [the late 16th century author of *Dabistân-i madhahib*] classifies them as Hindus who had adopted bi-shar’ Sufism, and who regarded Shah Madar as superior to the prophets of Islam”. Aziz Ahmad, *Studies in Islamic culture in the Indian environment*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1964, p. 162. Cf. also John Subhan, *Sufism, its saints and shrines*, New York: Samuel Weiser, 1970 [1938], pp. 302-306. “… like yogis they smeared their bodies with ashes, wore their hair long, beat themselves with chains, practised celibacy and most of them refrained from eating meat. Like yogis, they were habituated to the intoxicant bhang. (…) Muhsin Fani [the late 16th century author of *Dabistân-i madhahib*] classifies them as Hindus who had adopted bi-shar’ Sufism, and who regarded Shah Madar as superior to the prophets of Islam”. Aziz Ahmad, *Studies in Islamic culture in the Indian environment*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1964, p. 162. Cf. also John Subhan, *Sufism, its saints and shrines*, New York: Samuel Weiser, 1970 [1938], pp. 302-306.

24 Simon Digby, “Anecdotes of yogis in sūfī hagiography”, unpublished paper; S.A.A. Rizvi, “Sufis and Natha yogis in medieval northern India”, *Journal of the Oriental Society of Australia* 7 (1970), pp. 119-133. One example on this pattern: “one contestant levitates, the second does not levitate but sends his slipper levitating, to beat the first down to earth” (Digby, personal communication).
about two other, less well-known Indian Muslim saints, Sayyid Tajuddin Shersawar and Shaykh Qutbuddin Mannawar Hansoi.\textsuperscript{25}

Moreover, we find the miracles of our legend separately, not yet combined into a contest, in a number of earlier Indian Muslim sources. Thus, it is said of the 14th century Panjabi sufi Abu Ali Qalandar that he “used to ride about on a wall.”\textsuperscript{26} The running wall occurs earlier still in one of the conversations of Shaykh Nizamuddin of Delhi (recorded in 1308), in a reference to Shaykh Luqman of Sarakhs (10th century). The latter was known as negligent in the externals of the shari`a, but when pious men came out to censure him, he told the wall on which he happened to be sitting: “By the command of God, start moving!”, and rode out to meet his critics.\textsuperscript{27}

The same Luqman appears in various anecdotes in the \textit{Asrâr-i Tawhîd}, a collection of sayings attributed to the Khurasani shaykh Abu Sa`id b. Abi’l-Khayr (d. 1049), that was compiled around 1180. The running wall does not occur here, but there is a passage in the \textit{Asrâr} where it is said of none other than the great Bayazid Bistami, that he rode a lion and used a venomous snake as a whip!\textsuperscript{28}

I believe that we are here close to the time and place where these miracles first entered into popular sufi lore. It seems reasonable to assume that their combination into a contest also took place in Khurasan, at a somewhat later date, and that the legend thence spread both to the west and to India. But even Bayazid was not the first to grab a snake and mount a tiger, nor Luqman the first to order a wall to run about.

\textsuperscript{25} Jagat S. Bright. \textit{Muslim Miracle Makers}, Bombay etc.: Jaico Books, 1984, p. 86. Shaykh Shersawar (“Lion-rider”) is said to lie buried outside the town of Narnaul, near Khetri in Rajasthan. The author claimed to have found this true story in “Urdu books” but informed me that having perused them he had given them away, and could therefore not provide further detail.

\textsuperscript{26} W. Crooke, \textit{The popular religion and folklore of northern India}, vol. I, Delhi, 1968 [1893], p. 218. This saint lies buried both at Karnal and Panipat, and there is moreover “a shrine erected over the place where he used to ride the wall” (ibid., 219).


\textsuperscript{28} “Shaykh guft: Bayazîd shîrî ra markab kardî wa mâr-i âfî ra tâziyâna (kardî).” Muhammad ibn al-Munawwar, \textit{Asrâr-i tawhîd fî maqamât al-shaykh Abû Sa`id}, Tehran ed., p. 266. Kindly communicated to me by John O’Kane, who is preparing a translation of the \textit{Asrâr}. 
An indologist friend drew my attention to the occurrence of the same miracles in the legends of the eighty four siddhas of the Hindu-Buddhist tradition. These siddhas are the mythical originators of a religious-magical movement that became highly popular among the Hindus of northern India from the 11th or 12th century on. This movement, quite unconnected with the high, Brahmanic tradition, formed “the point of convergence for a large number of religious, magical and alchemical traditions and practices, most of them Sivaistic, but some of them Buddhist.” The siddhas, believed to have reached “magical perfection”, occur prominently in popular Hinduism as well as in Tibetan Buddhism and even in some Sikh legends. The oldest extant legends of these siddhas are preserved in Tibetan only, in a text that was translated from a Sanskrit original compiled in the late 11th or early 12th century.

One of the eighty-four, Guru Dombipa, was a king who was forced to abdicate because he had chosen a low-caste woman (dombi) as his consort in Tantric exercises. The king accepted his social descent into the woman’s caste, the Dom, singers, dancers and jugglers, and retired with his consort into the woods, where they practised for twelve years. At the end of this period the couple emerged from the wilderness “on a young tigress, using a poisonous snake as a whip”. The now perfect yogi refused his former subjects’ offer to make him king again and demanded to be burned alive. In the pyre the couple transformed into the deity Hevajra and his consort.

This siddha owes his name to the low caste Dom into which he had willingly descended. (This descent is reminiscent of the attitudes of the later Malamati dervishes, who on

29 I owe most of the references for the following paragraphs to Frans Janssen of Utrecht, a specialist of Indian iconography, who also helped me find Tibetan pictorial representations of the tiger-riding Dombipa, and sent me the book mentioned in note 21 above.


33 Robinson, op. cit., p. 35; Grünwedel, art. ci., p. 148. Iconographically, representations of Dombipa are of various types; most present him seated on the tiger, some have the snake as well (Figs. 5-7). There are several other lion- and tiger-riders in the Indian and East Asian pantheons; it is the poisonous snake that most clearly distinguishes Dombipa from the others.
purpose sought society’s contempt.) These Dom exist until this day as a gypsy-like caste, specialising in various forms of entertainment and services related to cremation. One of their most favourite places of pilgrimage used to be ... the shrine of Shah Madar in Makanpur. This makes one wonder whether the shrine is not the location of some older Dombipa sanctuary, that later became adopted by Madari dervishes and considered as the shrine of their own tiger-riding patron saint.

There are no moving walls in this Tibetan account of the siddhas, but we find one in a later legend. A 17th-century hagiography of Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh religion, relates a meeting of the saint with the eighty-four siddhas. They performed various miracles before him; one of them caused a wall to run about. Does this mean that these siddhas are the nearest previous avatars of our Ahl-i Haqq and Bektashi miracle-workers, or can we find closer relatives elsewhere?

INTERMEZZO: RESURRECTION FROM THE BONES

In the Tibetan text, one of the other siddhas, Guru Virupa (who incidentally was Dombipa’s Tantric teacher), kills and eats pigeons, and later restores them to life from the feathers. This too is not an uncommon feat. The great yogi Gorakhnath, who is usually considered as one of the siddhas, is similarly said to have resurrected deceased humans from their skins or from their ashes, and there are numerous Indian folktales in which similar miracles occur.

34 George Weston Briggs, The Doms and their near relations, Mysore, 1953, p. 481.
36 Grünwedel, art. cit., p. 145; Robinson, op. cit1., pp. 28-29.
37 Briggs, Gorakhnath, pp. 189-190.
38 Stith Thompson and Jonas Balys, The oral tales of India, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1958, motifs E30-E42
This is the same theme that also occurs in several Ahl-i Haqq legends, including the one quoted above.\textsuperscript{39} It is also well-known in the Bektashi environment. In these two cases, however, there is an additional element: life is restored from the bones rather than other physical remains, and there is an insistence that the bones should not be broken.\textsuperscript{40} The general theme is known all over the world,\textsuperscript{41} but this specific form seems to be typically Central Asian. The pre-Islamic Turks and Mongols took care not to break the bones of their sacrificial animals, to collect them all and to either bury or burn them, believing that this made the animal’s resuscitation in another world possible. Damage or disappearance of one of the bones would result in the animal’s being crippled.\textsuperscript{42}

In this case, the similarity of a theme in Ahl-i Haqq and Bektashi lore with that of the \textit{siddhas} does not necessitate in any way the assumption of direct contacts between both families of traditions. The direct origins of the former seem to lie in the Turco-Mongol world. Roux has demonstrated a host of such Turkish elements in the Ahl-i Haqq texts published by Mokri.\textsuperscript{43}

Could it be that our anecdotes of tiger and wall belong to the same class of Turkish elements (which might, in this case, have either been borrowed from, or been the source of, the \textit{siddha} legends)? I believe not, although it is probably impossible to trace the precise origins and peregrinations of these motifs. For one thing, they have not, to my knowledge, been recorded in pre-Islamic Turco-Mongol lore. It seems likely that they were borrowed by Khurasani dervishes from wandering yogis, together perhaps with some of the Tantric practices that the tiger and viper seem to symbolise. Many of the yogi-type Indian sufi anecdotes referred to above (note 21) appear also to have their origins in 10\textsuperscript{th} to 12\textsuperscript{th}-century

\textsuperscript{39} From the Ahl-i Haqq it spread into more orthodox Muslim lore as well, and became popular as far as Indonesia. Ja'ilar al-Barzinji (1690-1766), whose family not only originated from the heartland of the Ahl-i Haqq but was even related to the historical Sultan Sahak, wrote a hagiography of `Abd al-Qadir Jilani (\textit{Lujjayn al-dânî}), in which the saint restores to life the bones of a chicken he has just eaten. This work is extremely popular in Indonesia, and the anecdote in question became the subject of a polemic between modernist critics and traditionalist apologetes. The same theme was also known in medieval Central Asian Islam: it occurs in one manuscript of Rabghuzi's \textit{Qisas al-anbiyâ'}, but appears to have been purged from another redaction (H. Boeschoten, personal communication).

\textsuperscript{40} E.g., \textit{Vilayet-name}, p. 72.


Khurasan. The interaction of Muslim mystics with vagrant Buddhist and Hindu ascetics was apparently more fruitful here than later in India itself.

THE MEANING OF THE MIRACLE CONTEST

Whatever the meaning of the tiger and serpent in the Tantric context, in the Muslim environment, and especially when contrasted with the running wall, they seem to symbolise the vagrant, ascetic, magical, ecstatic and, perhaps, antinomian spiritual way, as opposed to the settled, sober and more shari`a-oriented varieties. It is significant that the earliest sufi who is said to have mounted a lion and used a serpent as a whip was Bayazid Bistami, the archetype of the intoxicated, nonconformist mystic. And it certainly befits Shah Madar’s reputation that later legend put him on a tiger too — whatever the role of the Dom in this process may have been. We know nothing about the personalities of the other lion-riders, Pir Mika’il (among the Ahl-i Haqq) and Mahmud Hayrani, but in these two cases the legend is almost explicitly associated with a process of subjection of a formerly vagrant and undisciplined spiritual tradition to the authority of a settled “orthodoxy”.

The contrast between two distinctive spiritual styles is also evident from the wording of the Ahl-i Haqq tale and the iconography of the other two cases (Figs. 1 and 4). The lion (or tiger) and the venomous serpent are associated with the wilderness, and mastery over them reeks of (non-Islamic) magic. The wall, on the other hand, suggests settled life and civilisation. Haji Bektash’ wall in Fig. 1 looks like a bridge; in the Ahl-i Haqq tale and in Fig. 4, the contest takes place near a river. The river is associated with irrigated agriculture and settlement (see the lush fields in Fig. 4), which is again in stark contrast with the mountains or desert whence the lion-driver comes. Haji Bektash’ prayer mat (in Fig. 1 it is a skin) denotes adherence to the shari`a; note also the tasbih in his hand. Shah Mina in Fig. 4 is performing his wudu’ when Shah Madar arrives, as is shown by the water jug standing beside him and moreover indicated in the caption.

It is probably not accidental that the lion-rider in these pictures, as well as in the few other representations I have seen, comes from the left and the man on the wall from the opposite direction. The left-right dichotomy is part of the symbolic classifications in most
cultures, and the connotations of the two sides are almost universal.\(^{44}\) We do not have to think of the left and right Tantras in order to immediately understand that the man on the wall is righteous and the one on the lion has something sinister:

Ostensibly then, the contest symbolises a process that has taken place in many parts of the world more or less independently: the victory of a “high” over a “popular” mystical tradition, of the settled, staid and “square” over the vagrant, weird and “hip”. More precisely, perhaps, it seems to refer to the decline of Qalandarism and its incorporation into settled orders. The first *Qalandar*, ferocious-looking, extremely poor, mendicant vagrant dervishes with a conspicuous disrespect of canonical religious obligations and a strong penchant for intoxicants, had made their appearance in Khurasan in the late 10th or early 11th-century. Their numbers were swelled under the impact of the Mongol invasions, as many of the uprooted joined them, and their wanderings took them far beyond the boundaries of Khurasan. Qalandarism expanded westward to Asia Minor, Syria and Egypt in the early 13th century, and not much later to northern India as well. This was not a one-way traffic; during the 13th and 14th centuries, numerous Qalandar-type vagrants moved from Asia Minor to India (Shah Madar himself, who hailed from Syria, was part of this massive west-east movement). During the following few centuries, *Qalandar* could be met travelling anywhere between Bengal and the Atlantic coast.\(^{45}\)

Tendencies towards organisation and settlement became apparent among the *Qalandar* from as early as the 13th century on, in Asia Minor and Egypt as well as in India. They probably influenced and were gradually absorbed into, the popular religious movements whose heirs we find among the Bektashi, the Alevi and the Ahl-i Haqq. The Indian Madari were one Qalandar-type sect that persisted as such at least into the 17th century. By the mid-17th century, *Qalandar* and related groups were still numerous and influential among the popular masses in Iran, but they were apparently no longer vagrants and had become sedentary in *khânaqâh* and *zâwiya*.\(^{46}\) It is this process of settlement and incorporation, I


\(^{46}\) Said Amir Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam*, Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1984, pp. 118-119. Evliya Çelebi mentions in the west Iranian town of Nihavand, which he passed in 1655-1656, six convents of “Haydari and Bektashi and Qalandari and Wahidi dervishes”, suggesting he considered all of these as more or less akin (*Seyahatname*, Ms. Bağdat Köşkü 305, fol. 307r).
believe, that we find reflected in the various avatars of our miracle contest. It can hardly be accidental that in all environments where the anecdote was adopted there are clear Qalandar connections. It is even most likely, given the times and places where we see the anecdote emerge, that it was Qalandar who spread it, in its various forms, to all corners of the Islamic world.

This raises a few questions: why would the Qalandar spread an anecdote that presents them as the losers in the contest? And why is it precisely heterodox sects like the Bektashi, Kızılbaş and Ahl-i Haqq that present their founders or ancestors as the orthodox victors? The apparent contradictions are resolved if we assume the struggle between two varieties of mystical attitude to have been internal to the Qalandar-type movements. Moreover, the original Bektashi and Ahl-i Haqq seem to have been closer to Islamic orthodoxy than later generations. The historical Haji Bektash and his followers were probably shari‘a-abiding Sunnis, and only in a later phase did the order incorporate the extremist Shi‘i (ghuluww) and pre-Islamic Near Eastern mystical ideas that made it attractive to, among others, Qalandar. The incorporation of Qalandar into the order may in fact have contributed much to the Bektashi’s relaxed attitude towards the shari‘a. The settled, orthodox saint on his wall had thus at first out-miracled the vagrant lion-riding magician, but once the latter was accepted as a disciple his steed proved to be a Trojan horse. There was a similar development among the Ahl-i Haqq. Sultan Sahak’s successor Baba Yadigar emerges from a contemporary document (early 16th century) as an ordinary Muslim shaykh, whereas later generations increasingly stressed the heterodox or non-Islamic aspects of their beliefs.47

The development among the devotees of Shah Mina Sahib appears to have been along similar lines too. His Malfûzât present him as a sober and orthodox sufi, but a 20th century Urdu hagiography not only mentions a meeting with Shah Madar but even makes him a disciple of the latter (beside other teachers).49 Although this work too does not mention our anecdote (the source for my Punjabi print, Fig. 4, remains as yet unclear), the guardian of Shah Mina’s shrine was well aware of it when I interviewed him, and so were many

48 See my forthcoming “Satan's psalmists. On some heterodox beliefs and practices among the Ahl-i Haqq of the Guran district”.
49 Simon Digby, personal communication.
pilgrims visiting. Like the present Bektashis, they preferred to interpret the anecdote not as one of a contest but as one of two men of diverse spiritual powers joining forces: “both performed extraordinary miracles and it is not for us to judge which was greater”. The guardian of Shah Madar’s shrine, on the other hand, seemed rather embarrassed when I enquired about the anecdote. He was well aware of it, but vehemently denied a connection with Shah Madar; the lion-rider had been someone else.\(^5^0\) This perhaps reflects an earlier rivalry between followers of the two saints, in which the legend was used to prove Shah Mina’s superiority.

The anecdote thus seems to have successively performed three different functions, and communicated three somewhat distinct meanings. Initially, it symbolised the unruly vagrant, mendicant, drug-using dervishes’ accepting settled life and the discipline of established orders. In a later phase, it came to be used, like many similar sufi anecdotes (cf. note 20), in rivalries with the followers of other saints or sufi orders, as a claim to spiritual superiority. The opposition of settled versus vagrant receded into the background, and the meaning conveyed became the same as in the Biblical and Qur’anic tale of Moses and the Egyptian magicians: true versus false supernaturalism. In the last phase, finally, a form of accommodation between previous rivals has been reached, or perhaps a recognition of heterogeneous ancestry. The anecdote is no longer perceived as expressive of conflict but of convergence and integration. The two mounts represent different but equivalent forms of spiritual achievement.

The real heroes of our anecdote, the vehicles of its various avatars, are the Qalandar and their Buddhist or Hindu predecessors. The many similarities between the Bektashi and Qizilbash on the one hand, and the Ahl-i Haqq on the other, are probably due as much to a heavy impact of Qalandarism on both, as to an older Near Eastern substrate that they may have in common. These sects not only readily accepted our anecdote with its strong Indian flavour, so different from the main run of Muslim miracle tales,\(^5^1\) they also have other beliefs and practices that superficially remind one of India, notably the beliefs in divine

\(^{50}\) In retrospect, I suppose he meant the Tajuddin Shersawar mentioned above (cf. note 21); at the time of my visit to both shrines, in May 1986, I was not aware of the existence of a saint of this name, and thought he spoke of an anonymous shêr-sawâr.

\(^{51}\) Significantly, no miracles resembling those in our anecdote are mentioned in Richard Gramlich's recent exhaustive study, *Die Wunder der Freunde Gottes: Theologien und Erscheinungsformen des islamischen Heiligenwunders* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1987).
incarnations and in metempsychosis. Although the latter are almost certainly of Near Eastern rather than Indian origin, they make the educated among these sects perceive Buddhism and Hinduism as kindred religions. Earlier generations, when hearing of Indian religious ideas, can hardly have reacted differently. In Ahl-i Haqq tradition there are, in fact, several explicit references to Indian connections.52

It must have been the Qalandar and their wide-ranging network that were responsible for most of the contacts and mutual influences among initially independent but somewhat similar heterodox sects in India and western Asia. Considering their reputation as the primordial “rolling stones”, it seems highly appropriate that the idea of orthodoxy in their environment assumed the form of a running wall.

POSTSCRIPT

A large number of other occurrences of saints riding lions or tigers, alone or in combination with saints riding rocks or walls, has come to my attention since this article was first published. An extensive survey of this theme in Indian Sufi hagiographies is given by Simon Digby in: “To ride a tiger or a wall? Strategies of prestige in Indian Sufi legend”, in: W.M. Callewaert & R. Snell (eds.), According to tradition: Hagiographical writing in India (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1994), pp. 99-129. A well-documented study by Julian Raby, arguing that the “Islamic” theme of the lion-rider should be distinguished from the Biblical one of the lion-slayer, and that a particular drawing by the Central Asian artist known as Siyah Qalem represents not the former but the latter, is accompanied by a whole series of iconographical representations of both types (“Samson and Siyah Qalem”, Islamic Art 1 (1981), 160-3).

Among the Yezidis, the name Şêrsuwar, meaning “lion-rider”, appears to have been attributed to a number of their leaders. In 1671, the new French consul in Aleppo, Joseph Dupont, reported that “the spiritual leaders of the Yezidis, despatched from distant lands by a high priest named Chersour, had been assembled for several months near St. Simeon Stylites’ monastery…” (quoted in John S. Guest, The Yezidis, London, 1987, p. 53). Of the Khalitî, a large Yezidi tribe, described as a robber tribe living on the banks of the Batman river

52 Examples in: van Bruinessen, “When Haji Bektash...“.
around Bitlis (sic!), it was reported that they “owed direct allegiance to the high priest Chersouar and to his delegates now assembled on the Jebel Seman” (ibid.). We may perhaps recognise the same name in that of a large rock near Beyazit in eastern Turkey, Şêresyar, on which the remnants of an old fortress can still be seen. According to local tradition, this was where Yezidis and Armenians from the 7th to the 11th century entrenched themselves against the Muslims (S. Mihotulî, *Arya uygarlıklarından Kürtlere*, Istanbul: Koral, 1992, 289-90; photograph of the rock at 292).
Fig. 1  Haji Bektash, seated on a brick wall, comes to meet a lion-riding challenger (Mahmud Hayrani or Karaca Ahmed?). Picture of unknown origin, reproductions of which were sold in Hacı Bektaş Köyü in 1979.
Fig. 2. Haji Bektash, seated on a wall, meets a lion-riding Karaca Ahmed.
(From the cover of Mehmet Yaman, *Karaca Ahmet Sultan hazretleri*. İstanbul, 1974).
Fig. 3. The rock in Hacı Bektaş Köyü that is identified as Haji Bektash’ lifeless mount. Women say prayers in front of the rock and a man stretches out on top in order to partake of Haji Bektash’ blessings.
Fig 4. Shah Madar, mounted on a tiger and wielding a viper as a whip, meets Shah Mina Sahib of Lucknow, who is seated on a wall that has just begun to move. Polychrome lithograph, acquired in Multan, 1979.
Fig 5. Guru Dombipa, riding a tiger and wielding a snake. From a Nepalese postcard, kindly sent to me by Simon Digby (the postcard incorrectly identifies this rishi as Nagarjuna)
Fig. 6. Guru Dombipa. Tibetan blockprint, courtesy Frans Janssen
Fig. 7. Guru Dombipa and his consort riding a tiger and using a poisonous snake as a whip. Fragment of a Tibetan thanka (published integrally in: Toni Schmid, The eighty-five siddhas, Stockholm, 1958, plate II).
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