

## THE SUFISM IN AZERBAIJAN AND SAFAVIYYA ORDER (TARIQA)

**Gadim Gubadov**

PhD, Senior Research Fellow, Institute of Literature named after Nizami Ganjavi  
of the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences, Azerbaijan

e-mail: qedim.kerimoglu@gmail.com, orcid.org/0000-0003-0952-0435

### Summary

Sufism was one of the main trends of ideas in the XI-XII centuries. Until the 11th century, the activities of Sufi thinkers, the direction of their ideas, along with the economic and social-political conditions, mainly determined their individual ways of life. From the end of the 10th century, Sufi communities were organized and began to spread widely. Individual sheikhs gathered many murids around them, and prepared their future followers according to the strict rituals they designed for them. The purpose of the article is to reveal that Azerbaijan is a Sufi spiritual and moral center. In the Middle Ages, as everywhere in the Islamic world, influential sheikhs grew up in Azerbaijan, and many Sufi spiritual and moral centers – sects (tariqas) were founded. One such sect was “Safawiyyah” founded by Sheikh Safiaddin Ardabili in the 13th century, which gained influence in a short period of time and gathered many disciples around it. “Safawiyya” sect has been under the influence of various ideas and Sufi currents since its inception. Among those Sufi teachings, the tradition of the “Suhrawardiyya” order is famous for playing an important role in the formation of “Safawiyya”. In this regard, the name of another sect should be mentioned.

**Key words:** Sufism, sect, Sheikh Safiaddin, Safaviyya, Suhrawardiyya, Haydariyya.

DOI <https://doi.org/10.23856/5607>

### 1. Introduction

As the Sufi worldview and ideas permeated the world of Islam in the Middle Ages, including in Azerbaijan, khanagahs, tekkes and other Sufi monasteries began to emerge all around. From all sides, Azerbaijan was involved in a network of numerous sects, each of which had its peculiar rites that were controlled by powerful leaders known as murshids who exerted hierarchical control over disciples. One such sect was the “Safaviyya” established in the 13th century by Sheikh Safiaddin Ardebili has been under the influence of a variety of Sufi ideas for a very long period since its formation. Initially attracting the disciples – people from different nations of the world of Islam, “Safaviyya” in the following centuries focused more and more on the Turkic ethnic groups that were concentrated in Azerbaijan, South Anatolia, Syria, and other regions of the Islamic world. And it eventually transformed into a monoethnic sect made up of Turkish people.

**Methods of the paper.** Analysis, synthesis, induction, deduction, comparative analysis methods were used while writing the article.

**Analysis of recent studies and publications.** The research of authors such as Hafiz Hussein ibn Karbalai Tabrizi; Tarbiyat M.; Koprulu F.; Khwandamir G.; Sajjadi Seyid Zindan; Golpinarly A.; Gumi Gazi Ahmed; Ardabili Ibn Bezzaz; Shah Ismail Khatai; Ojak A. Ya; Alamarai Safavi; Mir Jafar Hussein; Barthold V.V.; Misel Matsui; Togan Z.V.; Ripka Y. History of Persian and Tajik literature. Moscow: Nauka, 1970, 439 p.; Golpinarly A.; Khunji Fazlullah

ibn Ruzbikhan; Sheikh Zahidi Hussein Pirzade; Iskender bey Turkman; Bertels E.E.; Trimmingham J.S. was used during the research.

## 2. Main part

Throughout the medieval Islamic world, Sufism was extensive in Azerbaijan and achieved fame with eminent sheikhs. The activity of the Sufi center of truth established at that time by Ahi Faraj (d.1062) in Zanjan brought it a considerable reputation. According to the sources, under his direction, numerous prominent Sufis from Azerbaijan, particularly those from Tabriz, studied the method of spiritual elevation and the mystical cognition of the truth after completing the Sufi “maqam” (stations), the stages of “mujahid” (struggle for faith) and “riyazat” (asceticism, carnal denial, quiet renunciation for the love of Divine will). The expansion of Sufi teaching in Azerbaijan was contributed by individuals such as Haja Muhammad Khoshnam, Haja Muhammad Kochajani, Baba Nemet Shadibadi, Bale Khalil, and other disciples of Ahi Faraj Zanjani (*Hussein, 1399: 1-9*).

It should be emphasized the significance of “Suhravardiyya” in the formation of Sufi ideas in Azerbaijan. This tariqa (Sufi direction, path, Sufi) gathered around itself like-minded disciples from the most remote regions of Central Asia, Egypt, Asia Minor, and Iran. The sufi sect also had followers in Azerbaijan and by the end of the 12th – beginning of the 13th century, the authority and sphere of influence of the sheikhs from this sect especially increased. Abdulganaim Rukneddin Sajjasi, a disciple of the “Suhraverdiyya” sect, was the murshid of several great sheikhs, such as Ahvadaddin Kirmani, Sheikh Shikhabeddin Tabrizi, and many more (*Tarbiyat, 436*).

According to F. Kopruluzadeh, there is proof that some dervishes and zahids (hermits) among the Turks were addressed with reverence as “Baba” (literally – father) as early as the 10th century. Turks have revered saints, verse reciters, those who help others for the sake of God, and dervishes who show the way to heaven and likened them to ozans (storytellers) for a long time. Sufis known as “Baba” who are highly esteemed, have been mostly located in South Azerbaijan, in Tabriz, since the 12th century (*Koprulu, 1991, 139*).

The observations of the Turkish scholar were verified by several other medieval sources, that the Sufi teachings were extensively promoted by numerous Sufis who called themselves “Baba”, gathering around the “tekke” (Sufi monastery) established by Baba Hasan Vali Tabrizi early in the 17th century. During this time, another Sufi – Baba Faraj Tabrizi, became famous. Referring to such sources as “Tarihi-guzide”, “Haft iqlim”, and “Rovzeye-akhtar”, M. Tarbiyat, an Azerbaijani scientist, mentions the great virtues of this prominent Sufi having the chance not only to meet the legendary Sufi Najmeddin Kubra but also to astonish him with his knowledge (*Hussein, 1399, 37-38*), (*Koprulu, 1991, 265*).

Sufism was regarded highly in Central Azerbaijan by government circles and officials of the Ilkhanate, who even built khanagahs (monasteries) and engaged in philanthropic activities. Accepting Islam by the Ilkhanate and converting from Paganism to Islam happened with the assistance of Sufis. Ghazan Khan (1295–1304) accepted Islam in 1295 under the influence of Sheikh Sadreddin Juvain (*Khwandamir, 1333, 121-123*) and a year later built the Shenbeyi-Gazan complex in Tabriz, establishing a khanagah for Sufis within it, also took care of the Sufis and attached great importance to their teachings. Among those who provided financial and moral support to the Sufis, it should be mentioned the name of a person associated with Sufi thought – Ilkhani vizier Haji Rashiduddin Fazlullah who was a supporter of these ideas. Sufi teachings and ideas were increasingly pervading the vast expanse of the Islamic world

by the 12th-13th century, particularly in Azerbaijan, where Sufi traditions were most clearly developed. At that time “Safaviyya” order gained influence during a short period and gathered around itself a large number of disciples. There are divergent opinions among scholars on the Sufi directions upon which this tariqa was based. The “Safaviyya” order, according to Iranian scholar Seyid Ziyaddin Sajjadi, was based on one of the fourteen sections of the “Marufiya” tariqa, established by the famous Sufi philosopher Maruf Karkhi (*Zindan*, 1388, 187). According to the Turkish scholar Golpinarly, the “Safaviyya” order was formed as a result of two tariqas – “Kalenderiyya” and “Khalvatiyya” (*Golpinarly*, 1987, 7, 248). Beyond doubt, in some specific issues of Sufi teaching, the newly developed “Safaviyya” order in the 13th century was affected by the tariqas existing at the time in Azerbaijan. As many scholars have rightly pointed out, the influence of the Sufi sect “Suhravardiya” is particularly noticeable.

In the lineage of the founders of the tariqa, beginning with Sheikh Safiyaddin, sources include personalities such as Sheikh Zahid Gilan (d. 1253), Sheikh Jamaledin Gilani (d. 1253), Sheikh Shikhabeddin Mahmud Akhari (XIII century), Abdulganayim Rukneddin Sajjasi, Gutbeddin Abubekr Abkhari. In the sixth line of the tariqa, the founder of the tariqa “Suhraverdiyya” – Sheikh Abu Najib Suhraverdi, clearly appears (*Khwandamir*, 1333, 415); (*Ahmed*, 1978, 21).

The rites of the tariqas “Suhraverdiyya” and “Safaviyya” at the early stages of their emergence show a close resemblance between them. The Sharia must be rigorously followed for the disciples of the “Suhraverdiyya” tariqa to advance in the Sufism stages; otherwise, those steps will be blocked off for them: tariqat, marifat, hakikat. At first, in the “Safaviyya” order it was also strictly required to follow these rules. In the madhhab (teaching) of Sheikh Safi “Safvetu-s-Safa”, the sheikh’s own words are given in the section just following the heading: “Whoever follows the Sharia, he will remain in Tariqa, and whoever does not follow, all doors will be closed for him” (*Bezzaz*, 1376, 887). And that means both during Sheikh Safi’s time and after him, blind obedience to the sharia was obligatory for the disciples.

However, sources demonstrate that there were heterodox Sufi sects around the time of the establishment of “Safaviyya” in Azerbaijan in addition to the orthodox Sufi orders that were not strictly bound by Sharia. They included the disciples of the “Haydariyya” and “Kalenderiyya” tariqas, which emerged in various parts of Azerbaijan: in Tabriz, Shirvan, Maragha, and in particular in Ardabil, the central city of the Safavids. There are sufficient narratives about “Kalenderiyya” dervishes in “Safvatu-s-Safa” (*Bezzaz*, 1376, 131-32, 656-58, 794-955). From these narratives, it can be concluded that Sheikh Safiyaddin did not at all approve of their Sufi ideas and thoughts, calling for their eradication and penance (“tovba”). Even though Sheikh Safiyaddin Ardabili, an ardent follower of the Sharia, forbids meetings with them due to the “Kalenderiyya” sect, in the following centuries close ties between the disciples of “Safaviyya” and “Kalenderiyya” developed. The great poet and ruler Shah Ismail Khatai, in one of his poems, praises the disciples of “Kalenderiyya” and calls them sultans of two worlds (*Khatai*, 1388, 64-65). One more tariqa that deserves special attention is the “Haydariyya” which was derived from the “Kalenderiyya” sect which subsequently influenced “Safaviyya”. According to sources (*Koprulu*, 1991, 99); (*Safavi*, 1350, 42), this sect was founded by Sheikh Qutbeddin Heydar at the end of the 12th century and the early 13th century. It first appeared in the middle regions of Central Asia and subsequently spread to India, Iraq, and Syria, including Azerbaijan. For the first time, Qutbeddin Heydar, who wore a 12-gored cap (taj) being a symbol of the Isnai-Ashariya imams, maintained a thick moustache despite shaving his face and stood out for his strange appearance, clothing, and behaviour. It was clear that the “Safaviyya” was completely influenced by the tariqa founded by sheikh Qutbeddin Heydar of Turkish origin.

The Safavids started wearing the same cap (taj) with twelve gore, known as the Haydari cap, after Sheikh Haydar's leadership. It is shown in the sources that Sheikh Heydar saw Hazrat Ali in his dream and according to his order commanded the disciples to wear the 12-gored red cap (Hussein, 2004, 30). However, there is no doubt that the Safavid sheikhs wanted to use this idea to seem in a guise of a saint and more closely bind their supporters around them. Since that time, the supporters of the "Safaviyya" order, wearing such a cap on their heads, were called "Gizilbash" (redheads). On other hand, the Gizilbash also shaved their beards and grew their moustaches like the Heydaris. A further indication of the impact of the Gizilbash sects like Heydari and the aforementioned Kalenderi is displaying an inattentive behaviour toward religious rites. One of the controversial issues involved in researching sources among scholars about sheikhs of "Safaviyya" order is their madhhab. The first sheikhs were Sunnis, according to V.V. Bartold (Barthold, 1963, 747), Michel Matsui (Matsui, 1363, 131), Z.V. Togan (Togan, 1957, 356), J. Ripka (Ripka, 1970, 275) and others, but later generations of followers of the tariqa joined the Shiites for political reasons. Iranian scholars disagree with this view; for instance, S.Z. Sajjadi believes that the tariqa's followers were Shiites from the beginning (Zindan, 1388, 185). The Turkish scholar Golpinarly, considering Sheikh Safi and his supporters as Sunnis, at the same time admits the possibility of their belonging to Shiites. This means that, even though they were Shiites, they initially pretended to be Sunnis and hid their true faith (Golpinarly, 1969, 232). As is evident, there is disagreement among scholars over the Safavid sheikhs' madhhab. This issue was somewhat unclear due to the lack of the author copy of "Safvatus-Safa", the primary source on this tariqa, as well as the diversity of opinions about the tariqa sheikhs' madhhab in many versions of the manuscripts that were written at various times. Many Safavid sources show its disciples as Shia Jafaris, including Sheikh Safiaddin Ardabili. In some sources, Firuzshah Zarrinkulah, who is considered the ancestor of the Safavids, has been described as a person who promoted and spread Isna-Ash'ariism in the Aran and Mughan regions (Safavi, 1350, 9). However, it must be remembered that the majority of these works were written after the Safavids gained power, i.e. after 1501. Shiism was designated as the state's official religion by the Safavids, who took control after this date. Therefore, the reliability of opinions in those sources about the madhhab of Safavid sheikhs is without merit. On the contrary, more opinions would support the claim that Sheikh Safiaddin Ardabili, a founder of the tariqa, was a Sunni rather than a Shia in the texts published before 1501.

According to A. Golpinarli, there is a separate chapter titled "The Teachings of Sheikh Safi" in the oldest known manuscript regarding the Safavids, kept in the Hagia Sophia library and written in 1491 by a scribe named Sunullah, which says: "We are of the same faith with the companions, we honour all four (the four righteous caliphs – Abu Bekr, Omar, Osman, Ali), we pray for them". But he did not choose the path of "rukhsat" (concession), but he followed the path of "azimet" (obligation) – the paths prescribed by Shariah, and inculcated this path in his followers. There is written that even his son Sadreddin performed ablution according to the Sunni-Shafi'i madhhab when he touched his mother with his hand (Golpinarly, 1969, 132). One of the greatest and most full copies of "Safvatus-Safa", compiled by the Iranian publisher Ghulamrza Tabatabai Majid, draws attention to the fact that the Safavids were Sunnis in the beginning. In this book, the companions such as Abu Bakr, Umar, and Osman, who are not loved by the Shias, are mentioned with respect, and their names are mentioned together with Ali, Hasan, Huseyn (Bezzaz, 1376, 675-677), and there is also a good deal of hadith from Abu Hurairah, which was referred to by the Sunnis, considering them reliable, however, among the Shiites, they were regarded with suspicion and therefore were mostly ignored (Bezzaz, 1376, 38, 524, 989).

The names of Imams Bukhari and Muslim, whose hadiths the author frequently cites, are mentioned throughout the book with veneration, yet the Shiites did not address them, considering them unreliable (*Bezzaz, 1376, 54, 502*).

Thus, all sources show that in the initial period, the Shiites were disciples of Sunnism. Researchers confirm that Shiism in the Ardebil tekke was accepted after Khoja Ali Siyahpush.

The fact that the founder of the sect, Sheikh Safiaddin, is a devout believer and an influential sheikh has attracted the attention of both political circles and common people regardless of their faith. Sources testify that the eminent sheikhs of the Islamic world, not limited to calling the people to pure faith, also sought to solve the moral problems of the people, advising them on the true path (*Khunji, 1987, 225*). It was less essential in such cases whether a branch of Islam those people belonged to. Not only in Safwatus-Safa, but also other Safavid sources, it is noted that Muslims of various madhabs (currents) from such far-off countries as Sri Lanka and China visited Sheikh Safiaddin (*Bezzaz, 1376, 1123*). The Shiite-batiniyya Turkmen tribes that were situated in Eastern Anatolia and the adjacent areas were more prevalent among the people who visited Sheikh Safiaddin and his successors, according to the sources (*Pirzade, 1343, 78*). It was no coincidence that the sheikhs of the Safavid tariqa, being Sunni by madhabb, were visited by Turkmen tribes of Shiite-batiniyya faith. Although Sheikh Safiaddin, the founder of the tariqa, and his disciples are Sunnis, it is important to note their love and respect for Hazrat Ali and his family. There is no doubt that as soon as the second Safavid ruler, Sheikh Sadraddin, took over the leadership of the Safaviyya.

Even after Sheikh Sadreddin, Ardabil was in the spotlight of the Turkmen tribes residing in Anatolia and other regions, most of whom are Shiites. Amir Teymur (1370–1405), who decisively defeated the Ottoman Sultan Yildirim Beyazid (1389–1402) at the Battle of Ankara in 1402, came to Ardabil and met with Khoja Ali (1392–1429), the third Safavid sheikh known as Siyahpush. Amir Teymur released more than 30,000 Turkmen captives taken from Anatolia at Khoja Ali's request because of his exceptional reverence for the Safavid land (*Alamarai, 1350, 126*).

### 3. Conclusion

Khoja Ali allocated an area for the placement of captives in Ardabil, mostly from Takalu and Karamanly, later this area was called "Sufi Rum". After Khoja Ali, when Sheikh Ibrahim (1392–1447) led the sect, a certain part of the Turkmen who settled in Ardabil returned to Anatolia, but kept in touch and were the most faithful disciples of the tariqa "Safaviyya". This led to a strengthening of ties between the Safavids and the Anatolian Turkmen.

Since its formation in the 13th century, the "Safaviyya" order has been influenced by several ideas and Sufi currents. Naturally, some of those currents and concepts have impacts on the mystical teachings of this tariqa. Namely, as the result of the mentioned influences Safaviyya which has emerged as an Orthodox Sunni sect in the course of its further development has been inclined to batiniyya further transformed into a Shiite sect.

### References

1. *Hafiz Hussein ibn Karbalai Tabrizi. Rovzatul-janan, 2 vol. Tehran: 1344 h., 642 p. (in Persian).*
2. *Tarbiyat M. Daneshmandani-Azerbaijan. (Outstanding people of science and art of Azerbaijan). Baku: Azerbaijan State Publishing House, 460 p. (in Azerbaijani).*

3. Koprulu F. (1991) *The First Sufis in Turkish Literature*. Ankara: TTK, 415 p. (in Turkish).
4. Koprulu F. (1991) *Creation of the Ottoman State*. Ankara: TTK, 122 p. (in Turkish).
5. Khwandamir G. *Tarihe Habibus-siyar*. Volume 4 Tehran: Khayyam Publishing House, 1333x., 791s. (in Persian).
6. Sajjadi Seyid Zindan. *Muqaddime ber mebani Erfan va Tasavvof*. Tehran: Sazmane mutaliye ve tadwin ketab, 1388 x., 348 p. (in Persian).
7. Golpinarly A. (1987) *Islamic mezhebs and Shiism throughout the centuries*. Istanbul: Gercek Yayinevi Publishing House. 314 p. (in Turkish).
8. Gumi Gazi Ahmed (1978) *Khulasatut-tavarih*. Freiburg, 246 p. (in Persian).
9. Ardabili Ibn Bezzaz. *Safvatut-safa*. Foreword and note by Gulamrza Tabatabai Majid. Tehran: 1376 h., 1348 p. (in Persian).
10. Shah Ismail Khatai. (1988) *Don't step on the bridge of enemy*. (Proceedings). Compiled by: A. Safarli, H. Yusifli. Baku: Yazychi, 342 p. (in Azerbaijani).
11. Ojak A. Ya. (1992) *Marginal Sufism in the Ottoman Empire – Kalenderiyyas (XIV-XVII centuries)*, Ankara: TTK Publishing House, 292 p. (in Turkish).
12. Alamarai Safavi. *Bekushesh Yadulla Shukri*. Tehran: Fehrange Iran. 1350 h., 688 p. (in Persian).
13. Mir Jafar Hussein (2004) *Shah Khatai's commitment to Sufism and Safavid Shiism. // Materials of the First International Symposium dedicated to Shah Ismail Khatai*. Ankara: Azim Publishing House, p. 86-94. (in Turkish).
14. Barthold V.V. (1963) *The Compositions, Volume III*. Moscow: Eastern Literature Publishing House, 1020 p.
15. Misel Matsui. *The emergence of the Safavid state*. Translation by Yagub Ajend. Tehran: Sahami AM, 1363 h., 224 p. (in Persian).
16. Togan Z.V. (1957) *On the Roots of the Safavids, Volume 3*. Damascus, p. 345-357 (in French).
17. Ripka Y. (1970) *History of Persian and Tajik literature*. Moscow: Nauka, 439 p.
18. Golpinarly A. (1969) *Hundred questions about tariqas and madhhabs*. Istanbul: Gercek Publishing House, 304 p. (in Turkish).
19. Khunji Fazlullah ibn Ruzbikhan. *Tarikh-i alam arayi Amini*. Baku: Elm, 1987, 173 p.
20. Sheikh Zahidi Hussein Pirzade. *A branch of the Safavid dynasty family tree*. Berlin: Iran-shehr, 1343 h., 112s. (in Persian).
21. Iskender bey Turkman. *Tarikhe Alam-araye Abbasi*. Vol. 1, Tehran: Gulshen, 1350x., 607 p. (in Persian).
22. Bertels E.E. (1965) *Sufism and Sufi Literature*. Moscow: Nauka, 522 p.
23. Trimmingham J.S. (1989) *Sufi Orders in Islam*. Moscow: Progress, 326 p.