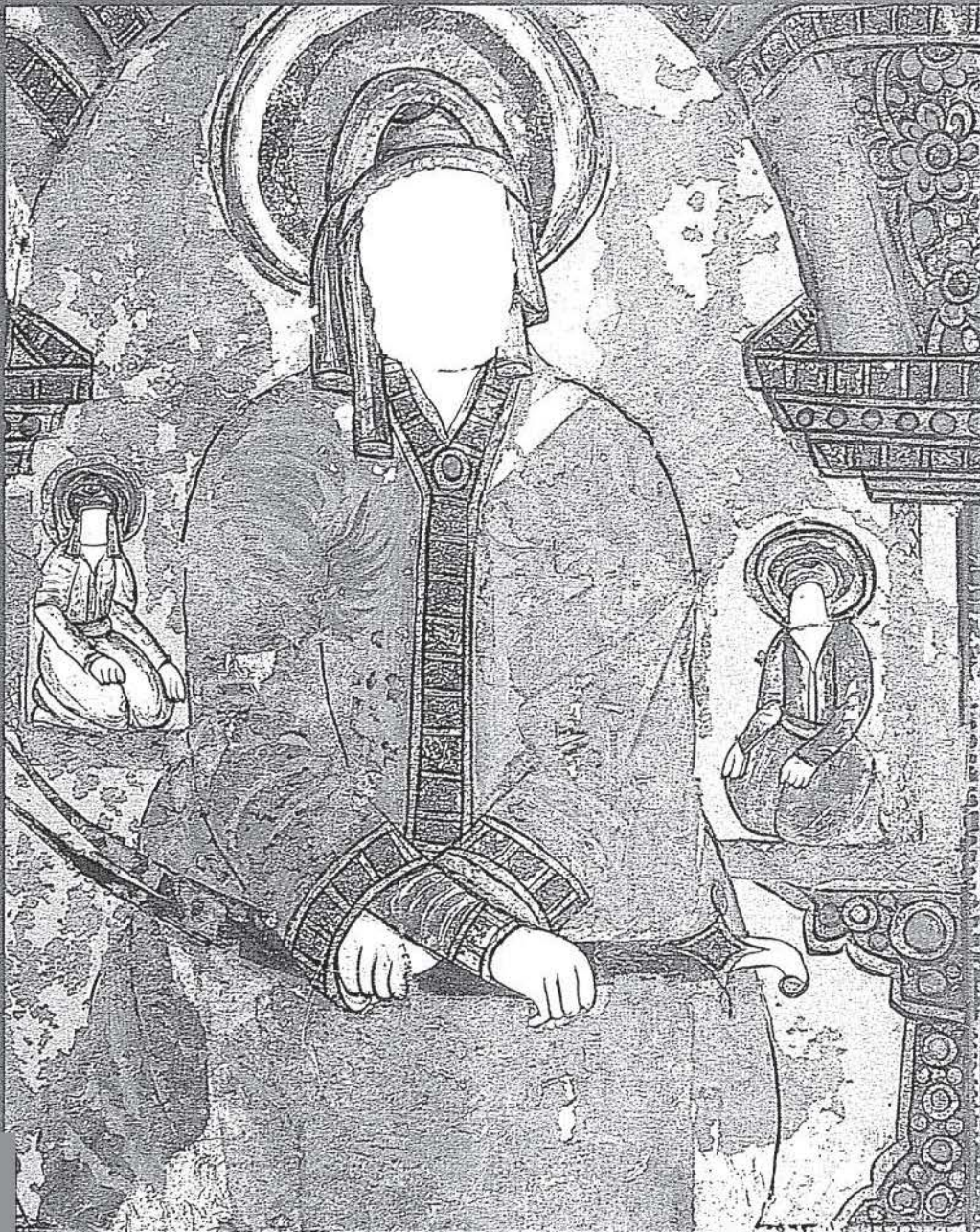


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# ALEVI IDENTITY



Edited by Tord Olsson, Elisabeth Özdalga, Catharina Raudvere  
SWEDISH RESEARCH INSTITUTE IN ISTANBUL 1998



# ALEVI IDENTITY

CULTURAL, RELIGIOUS AND SOCIAL PERSPECTIVES

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Edited by Tord Olsson, Elisabeth Özdalga and  
Catharina Raudvere



SWEDISH RESEARCH INSTITUTE IN ISTANBUL  
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# The Gnosis of Mountaineers and Townspeople. The Religion of the Syrian Alawites, or the Nuṣairīs

TORD OLSSON

The Syrian Nuṣairīs, or the Alawites ('Alawīūn), as they are presently called, are an ethnic and religious minority group of great interest today, not least politically. The majority of the Syrian people are Sunni Muslims, but the leading stratum of the Ba'th party and the politically important corps of officers consists of Alawites, among them the most powerful men in Syria, such as the president of the Republic, Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad, who is also the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces. Members of his family have played, and play, a prominent role in the political life of the country, such as his brother Rif'at, who has been the Commander of *Sarāyā d-Difā'*, the Defence Units that surround Damascus and control its access routes; further his brother Jamīl al-Asad, who has had another leading position within the defence forces that are responsible for the security of the Alawites, and his cousin 'Adnān al-Asad, who has been Commander of the Struggle Units, *Sarāyā ṣ-Ṣirā'*.

The turns and alterations of Syrian politics often consist of transfers and regroupings of persons in the Asad family. Recently (January 1997), Jamīl al-Asad has been transferred to Geneva, and Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad's son Bashār al-Asad has gained reputation as the coming man, and is the object of considerable massmedial speculation.<sup>1</sup>

## Ecological and Cultural Conditions

The Alawites compose 12 percent of the population of Syria. We also find Alawites in Southern Turkey, in the provinces of Hatay, Seyhan (Adana), and İçel, in Lebanon, and in Israel after the annexation of the Golan heights. (I have no access to recent statistics, but the population figures for 1970 are: 680 000 in Syria, 185 000 in Turkey, and 9000 in Lebanon.<sup>2</sup> In Syria the Alawites live in small villages along the Mediterranean coast and in the town of Latakia, in the mountains and in the inland plains. But the heart of the Alawite region is the mountain range running parallel to the coast from Turkey to the south; it is named after the Alawites, or Nuṣairīs: Jabal an-Nuṣairiya.<sup>3</sup>

These Nuṣairī mountains, where the bulk of the Alawites live in numerous small villages, can be described as exceptionally poor: there are few rivers and other water resources, hard erosion caused by heavy rains, and lack of fertile soil. Despite the impoverished condition of the area, the Alawites are in the main a rural people, pri-

<sup>1</sup> *Al-Watan al-Arabi*, No 1039, Friday January 31, 1997, 20-21.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Gubser, "Minorities in power: the Alawites of Syria", in R. D. Mc Laurin (ed.), *The Political Role of Minority Groups in the Middle East*, New York, 1979, p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

marily living in the mountains. They constitute the majority of the population of the Latakia province, but are only 11 percent of the population of the city of Latakia. Substantial numbers of Alawites live in the provinces of Homs and Hama, but very few in the principal towns of these provinces. These facts are worth mentioning since they are contrary to the general pattern in the Arab Middle East, where the urban element is otherwise very prominent. In Syria as a whole less than 2/3 of the population is rural. However, in the province of Latakia, where the Alawites dominate in number, more than 3/4 of the population live in the countryside, a figure that reflects a different pattern, implying that the Alawites tend to live away from the cities.<sup>4</sup> These conditions have been slowly changing during the last decades, due to political reasons. I shall return to this below.

This distribution of the Alawite population can be explained by historical causes. Some of these causes are religious and are related to the character of the Alawite religion, which strongly diverges both from Sunni Islam and generally accepted forms of Shia. Because of the distinctive character of their religion, the Alawites have been a persecuted minority from the time of the Mamluks and Ottomans until our own day. They have always had to protect themselves, and the mountains have offered the best place of refuge. Today, with the Alawites in power, this pattern is gradually changing. Many move in to the towns, and the physical defense mechanisms in the political and the religious spheres are superseded by verbal, interpretative, and theological means of defense, and a *taqīya*-principle that is now not only religiously, but also politically warranted. *Taqīya*, "dissimulation", denotes the right to conceal, or give a false impression of one's religious conviction, as a means of defense in menacing situations. I shall soon illustrate by examples these functions, but let us first consider the concrete reasons that would justify such defense measures. What is the nature of the Alawite religion, and how does it diverge from Sunni Islam and from current Shia?

The teaching is secret and very complex, and I shall here only mention a few vital features which could be considered as fundamental to an Alawite and at the same time offensive to an orthodox Muslim and which would warrant the esoteric character of the Alawite religion and the above mentioned defense measures.

## The Secret Scriptures and the Apotheosis of 'Alī

Religiously, the Alawites belong to a secret sect of Shia type, with striking gnostic features. Except for the Mandeans, the Alawites now seem to be the only living group of people who adhere to a mythological gnosis that has been transmitted for centuries as a religious legacy.

The materials for the study of this religion are very rich, but consist mainly of unedited manuscripts in European, Syrian, and Turkish libraries. Most of these manuscripts are unique, each of them existing in one copy only. They are written in a particular religious sociolect which contains dialectal features as well as other non-literary characteristics. The particular sociolect represented by the language of the Alawite texts has, to a certain extent, to do with their esoteric nature. Since they presuppose that a certain amount of secret knowledge has been previously transmitted in some form of tuition, such as initiation or individual study of doctrinal works, they are characterized by a particular jargon, often interspersed with colloquial and dialectal elements. Massignon has rightly characterized this style as "littérature patoisante"

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18f.

with "particularités dialectales".<sup>5</sup> Linguistically, the bulk of Alawite writings thus represents a form of Muslim Middle Arabic (I say "Muslim" since most studies of Middle Arabic have been carried out in the fields of Jewish or Christian Middle Arabic). But above everything, these scriptures are stamped by their esoteric content. Certain key words and gestures which are taken from the esoteric doctrinal and ritual traditions of the Alawites are used as code words for mutual identification among the initiated. From a sociology of language perspective all these features may be considered as expressions of the cultural identity of the group, and are certainly important at the transmission of tradition.

Both Arabic and European scholars have drawn attention to the fact that the doctrine of the divine nature of 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib is the basic element in the Alawite or Nuṣairī religion - hence the designations "Alawī" and "Alawite". In general, however, this doctrine has been presented in the scholarly literature as a mere curiosity, and without any serious studies of its expression in the primary sources. One prominent exception is René Dussaud's book *Histoire et religion des Nuṣairīs*, (Paris 1900), so far the only monograph in any European language on the religion of the Alawites. The doctrine of the divine nature of 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib finds expression in most treatises of the sect, particularly in those used in the initiation rituals. These scriptures are composed as catechisms with questions and answers, often in the form of allegorical Koran interpretation or as quotations from scriptures and speeches ascribed to 'Alī. In these quotations we find a representation of God that is determined by the tension between 'Alī as a *cosmic* being and the *historical* 'Alī, in his role of khalif and imam. The proof of the divine nature of 'Alī is seen in his appearance as a political and religious leader and in his deeds as transmitted in his biographies, but particularly in certain autobiographical statements which are ascribed to 'Alī himself. A pregnant expression of this doctrine is found in the first paragraphs of the catechism *Kitāb ta'lim diyānat an-nuṣairīya*, Ms Paris.arab. 6182, fol 2v, 4-12:

s 1 man huwa rabbunā lladhī khalaqanā  
j huwa maulānā amīr al-mu'minīn amīr  
an-naḥl 'alī ibn abī ṭālib wa huwa llāhu  
lladhī lā illāha illā huwa r-raḥmān ar-  
raḥīm

s 2 min aina na'lamu anna maulānā amīr  
al-mu'minīn 'alī ibn abī ṭālib huwa llāhu  
j min shahādātihi wa waṣfihi li-nafsihi fī  
khuṭbatin lahu mashhūratin naṭaqa bihā  
'alā l-minbar amāma kāffa min ḥaḍar wa  
'alamihā ahl al-'aql wa n-naḍar

Q(uestion) 1: Who is our Lord, who has created us?

A(nswer): He is our master, the Commander of the faithful, the prince of the bees, 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, and he is God, of whom (it holds true that) there is no god except him, the merciful, the compassionate.

Q(uestion) 2: From what do we

على انعامك هذا العظيم. وفضلك العظيم  
وإلهي الداهرين أما بعد نشركي بكاتب  
التعليم وهو هذا وتيلوه المشيخة والفقهاء  
من من هو ربنا الذي خلقنا  
ج هو مولانا امير المؤمنين امير النحل على  
ابن ابي طالب وهو الله الذي لا اله الا هو  
الرحمن الرحيم  
س من اين نعلم ان مولانا امير المؤمنين  
على بن ابي طالب هو الله  
ج من شهادته ووصفه لنفسه في خطبته  
له مشهوره نطق بها على المنبر امام كافة  
من حضر وعلمها اهل العقل والنظر انا  
عندي علم الائمة وعلى ذلك الرسل  
وبوحيدي لظقت والى معرفتي دعت  
انا صمت اسمائها وسطحت أرضها و  
اربيت جبالها واجريت انهارها وجز  
انما رها انا غسقت الغسق انا اطقت

<sup>5</sup> Louis Massignon, "Esquisse d'une bibliographie Nusayrie", *Mélanges R. Dussaud II*, 1939, p. 914; for the dialect spoken in the "Jebel Ansariye", see Bernhard Lewin, *Notes on Cabali. The Arabic dialect spoken by the Alawis of "Jebel Ansariye"*, *Orientalia Gothoburgensia I. Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis*, Göteborg, 1969.

know that our master, the Commander of the faithful, 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib is God?

A(nswer): From his own testimony, and his own description in a famous sermon by himself, which he gave from the minbar, in the presence of all the local people and the eminent, people with common sense and discernment.

It follows a quotation from the sermon mentioned, beginning as follows: "I have knowledge of the hour of resurrection and for me the apostles furnished evidence..." (anā 'indī 'ilm as-sā'a wa-'alayya dallat ar-rusul, fol 2v, 12f). Here is another example, from Ms Kiel. arab. 19,<sup>6</sup> fol 1, 4 - fol 2v, 4:

anā ṭawaytu asbābahā wa 'alimtu ghuyyābahā wa saraytu sarāyāhā wa rakamtu aṣṣābahā. anā muzalzil al-arḍ wa jibālahā wa mukhrīj kunūzahā wa athqālahā. anā muqim al-qibla wa ṣāḥib al-ka'ba wa mubdi sh-sharī'a wa muṭfi' nār al-ḥāmiya. anā dhābiḥ iblis. anā rāfi' idris wa nākis al-kufr wa nāṭiq bi-kulli sifr. anā ahlaktu l-qurūn ba'da l-qurūn. anā a'dadtu wa abdaytu wa dammartu wa afnaytu wa a'lamu mā tabdūna wa mā takhfauna wa mā ta'kulūna wa mā taddakhrūna. wa-inna mā min ghaib illā 'indī mafāṭihuhū. anā ahlaktu 'ād wa thamūd wa aṣṣāb ar-rathth wa qurūn baina dhālika kathīr. anā rāfi' as-samāwāt wa sāmikuhā wa ḍāḥi l-araḍīn wa sāṭihuhā wa ghāris al-ashjār wa munbituhā wa mufajjir al-anhār wa mujarrihā. is'alūnī 'an 'ilm al-manāyā wa l-balāyā wa l-wasāyā wa faṣl al-khiṭāb wa l-qaḍāyā wa 'an mauḷūd al-iṣlām wa 'an muwallid al-kufr wa 'an shāh ḍallat wa 'an fi'a ḍallat wa htadat wa 'an sā'iqihā wa ba'ithihā wa 'an mā kāna wa mā huwa kā'in ilā yaum al-qiyāma. anā qarm min ḥadid. anā fi kulli zamān wa waqt jadīd. anā munbi' an-nabiyyin wa mursil al-mursalin. 'alayya dallat ar-rusul wa bi-tauḥīdī naṭāqat al-kutub.

I keep the (heavenly) causes folded (in my hand) and I know its (heaven's) hidden secrets. I spread those of it that are travelling by night (the stars) and I accumulate its clouds. I cause the earth and its mountains to quake and I cause its treasures and its burdens to emerge. I am the resident of the Qibla and I am the master of the Ka'ba. I reveal the law. I extinguish the hot fire. I slaughter the devil. I exalt Idrīs and humiliate the unbeliever, and I am the speaker in every holy scripture. I destroyed generations after generations. I made plans and carried them out, and I annihilated and destroyed. I know what you exhibit and what you disguise, and what you consume and what you store away. There is no hidden secret to which I have not the keys. I destroyed 'Ād, Thamūd, and the men of Rathth, and many generations in between. I keep the heavens high and make them tight, and I spread the earths and make them plain, and I plant the trees and make them grow, and let the rivers and streams flow. Ask me about the knowledge of destinies, calamities, admonitions, unmistakable lawsuits, about the birth of Islam, and about the origin of unbelief, about a sheep which went astray, and about a group which went astray, but was led on the right way, and about their driver and their resurrection, and about what has been and what will be till the day of resurrection. I am the lord of iron. I am renewed in every time and period. I call the prophets and send the messengers. For me the apostles furnished evidence, and the scriptures announced my unity.

According to the manuscript, these words are quoted from the famous *Khutbat al-bayān*, which 'Alī delivered from the minbar in Kufa. On the one hand, the proclamation of these mighty acts is ascribed to the *historical* person of 'Alī as a political and religious leader in the history of Islam in his role of khalif and imām. On the other hand, one of the most striking features in these self-proclamations ascribed to him is the extent to which 'Alī appears with epithets taken from the Koran, where they are attributed to God alone. By the transfer of these epithets to 'Alī, he appears as a *cosmic* being, or God himself. This tension in the representation of God, between the human and historical element, and the cosmic and mythological element, is a constitutive feature in the traditional scriptures of the Syrian Alawites.

6 Untitled catechism. Facsimile in Rudolph Strothmann, *Morgenländische Geheimsekten in abendländischer Forschung und die Handschrift Kiel. arab 19*, Abhandlungen der deutschen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin, Kl. f. Sprachen, Lit. u Kunst, Jahrg. 1952:5, Berlin 1953.

Such teachings are, of course, also considered heretical within Shiite Islam. Statements like those in the above quoted passage are not even to be found where we more than elsewhere would have expected to find them, as in the Shiite collections of speeches and sermons called *Nahj al-Balāgha*,<sup>7</sup> which are attributed to ‘Alī. These collections are much read by learned Alawites. They often compare the embellished and ingenious literary style of these documents with the beauty and elegance of the language in the Koran, thus using them as evidence of the divine nature of ‘Alī. Such excellence of language cannot derive from human beings, they argue. However, self-proclamations of the sort quoted above are not found in these collections. From this negative evidence alone we cannot draw too far-reaching conclusions, of course, but I would assume that such doctrines were considered “heretical” and inopportune in the official forms of Shia. Only by the commentators of the different editions of the *Nahj al-Balāgha* do we occasionally meet with short fragments citing statements on the divine nature of ‘Alī, and then with a negative reference to persons who have exaggerated (*ghalā*) the excellence of his nature and his mighty acts. For instance, in the edition by ar-Raḍī,<sup>8</sup> al-Ḥadīd comments as follows with reference to the *ghālī* al-Mughīra b. Sa‘īd:

fa-ghalā fī ‘alī (‘alaihi s-salām) wa qāla lau shā’a ‘alī la’ahyā ‘ādan wa thamūdan wa qurūnan baina dhālika kathīran

And he exaggerated concerning ‘Alī (peace be upon him) and said: “If ‘Alī had wished it, he had given new life to ‘Ād and Thamūd and many ages in between.”

Further references to the divine nature of ‘Alī is found only among the Arabic chroniclers and “heresiographers”, in quotations and accounts by late Shiite writers and from the Imamite *rijāl*-literature. In all these cases the provided evidence refers to movements originating in the so called extremist tradition, *ghulāt*.

The exaggerated position that the early *ghulāt* and their later off-shoots ascribed to ‘Alī’s person may be of great importance both for our understanding of the most vital religious doctrines in the early Shia and its later developments in relation to the response of a Sunni environment. The ideological and cultic background, taken in a broad sense, is of course part of the general history of the different ‘Alī-oriented forms of Islam, which is outside the scope of this paper. Here, I shall restrict myself to drawing attention to a few concrete parallels and singular literary motifs which in form - as self-proclamations - and in content, are related to the Nuṣairī aretologies.

The Ismā‘īlitic (Fatimide) preacher al-Mu‘ayyad fī d-Dīn ash-Shirāzī (390 or 400 - 470 a.H.), in his 30th - 37th *Majālis*,<sup>9</sup> takes the above quoted *Khutbat al-bayān* as a basis for his discussion on Shiite conceptions of the imam, in comparing those ideas with the notion of Christ, *masīh*. The version quoted by Shirāzī runs as follows:

anā l-awwal wa anā l-ākhir wa anā ḡ-ḡāhir wa anā l-bāṭin wa anā bi-kulli shai’in ‘alīm wa anā lladhī rafa’tu samā’ahā wa anā lladhī daḡautu arḡahā anbattu ashjārāhā wa anā lladhī ajraytu anhārāhā

I am the first, and I am the last, and I am the manifest, and I am the hidden, and I am the one who knows everything, and I am the one who has kept its

<sup>7</sup> Alleged ‘Alī speeches collected by ash-Sharīf ar-Raḍī, with comments by Ibn Abi l-Ḥadīd al-Madā‘īnī, I-IV, Cairo, 1329 A. H.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. II, p. 309.

<sup>9</sup> al-Mu‘ayyad fī d-Dīn ash-Shirāzī, *al-Majālis al-Mu‘ayyadiya. al-Mi’at al-ūlā*, vol. I, ed. Muṣṭafa Ghālīb, Silsilat at-Turāth al-Fāṭimī, 13, Beirut, 1974.

heaven high, and I am the one who has spread out its earth, and I have let the trees grow, and I am the one who has let the rivers stream.

Concerning the reception and understanding of this sermon Shīrāzī notes three groups of interpreters:

- 1) Those who reject it.
- 2) Those who embrace a truly balanced interpretation. In this group are included the Fatimide Ismā‘īlis of whom Shīrāzī himself is a spokesman.
- 3) The exaggerators, the *ghulāt*, who understand the text as an apotheosis of the imam.

As we have seen, the last position finds its most radical exponents among the Nuṣairīs. Besides the texts handed down by themselves, shorter passages with similar content to that in their own tractates are quoted in the so called *Rijāl*-literature.

A notable fragment is quoted by the imamite writer Kashshī (d. 324/ 935 or 340/ 951):<sup>10</sup>

‘an abī ja‘far (‘alaihi s-salām) qāla qāla amīr al-mu‘minīn (‘alaihi s-salām) anā wajh allāh wa anā janb allāh wa anā l-awwal wa anā l-ākhir wa anā ḡ-ḡāhīr wa anā l-bāṭīn wa anā l-wārith al-arḡ wa anā sabil allāh wa bihi ‘azamtu ‘alaihi

From Abū Ja‘far (on whom be peace) who said: The Commander of the Faithful (on whom be peace) has said: I am the face of God, and I am the side of God. I am the first, and I am the last. I am the manifest, and I am the hidden. I am the heir of the earth, and I am the expedient of God. Hence I have decided for him.

The self-proclamation ascribed to the Commander of the Faithful, that is, ‘Alī, is here brought into connection with the particular historical setting in which the early so called *ghulāt* flourished. His words are said to be transmitted by Abū Ja‘far, i.e. the 5th imam Muḥammad al-Bāqir (d. 115/ 733 ), who is known to have surrounded himself with *ghulāt* thinkers. Stylistically, the ‘Alī-aretaology quoted here exhibits the same characteristics as the Nuṣairī aretaologies and the passage cited by Shīrāzī: short anaphoric sentences beginning with the pronoun *anā*, and connected in pairs on a principle of *complexio oppositorum*. Two significant Koranic ideas, which appear in the same terms in the Nuṣairī texts deserve particular attention:

- 1) ‘Alī is the first and the last being.
- 2) ‘Alī is the manifest (exterior) and the hidden (interior).

For stylistic reasons the expressions “heir of the earth” and “expedient of God” may be considered as a compound, because they appear as the last in the series of paired oppositions of which the text is composed. A certain emphasis is thereby given to ‘Alī’s two-fold connection with the terrestrial and divine spheres. The context further suggests that he is of both earthly and more or less divine nature; he is the “face” and “side” of God. The notions which are here attached to ‘Alī’s person apparently reflect an ideology based on his position as the imam, who was considered as the heir of religious authority on earth, and in whom the so called *ghulāt* and other Shiitic thinkers saw the divine nature manifested in human form.

The Turkish Alevi and Bektashi literature is rich of examples illustrating the identification of Alī with the divine reality, by attributing to him some of the “beautiful names” otherwise given to God only. Much of this literature consists of liturgic poet-

<sup>10</sup> Muḥammad ibn ‘Umar al-Kashshī, *Ma‘rifat akhbār ar-rijāl*, Mataba‘a al-Muṣṭafawiya, Bombay, 1317/1899f, p. 138.

ry called *nefes*, and its composers make use of the same type of concepts and stylistic arrangements as we have seen above. So did Mehmet Ali Hilmi Dede Baba who was one of the last *postnişins* of the Merdivenköy Şahkulu Sultan Dergâhı. Here are a few verses from one of the nefes hymns he composed, elaborated on a much liked motif in Alevi literature: A person who looks in a mirror does not see himself, but Ali, and indirectly God:

Âyine tuttum yüzüme  
Ali göründü gözüme...

İsa ve Ruhullah odur  
Muminlere penah odur  
İki Âlemde Şah odur  
Ali göründü gözüme

Ali tayyib, Ali tahir  
Ali bâtın, Ali zahir  
Ali evvel, Ali âhir  
Ali göründü gözüme

Ali candır, Ali canan  
Ali dindir, Ali iyman  
Ali Rahim, Ali Rahman  
Ali göründü gözüme

I took the mirror to my face  
Ali appeared to my eye...

He is Jesus and Christ  
He is the refuge to the believers  
He is the Shah of the two worlds  
Ali appeared to my eye

Ali is the pure, Ali is the clean  
Ali is the hidden, Ali is the manifest  
Ali is the first, Ali is the last  
Ali appeared to my eye  
Ali is the life, Ali is the Beloved  
Ali is the religion, Ali is the belief  
Ali is the Merciful, Ali is the Compassionate  
Ali appeared to my eye<sup>11</sup>

Among the Turkish Alevi the nefes hymns constitute an important and vital category of oral and written tradition. They are usually chanted to the accompaniment of saz at different occasions, the most important setting being the *ayin-i cem*, and other common Alevi rituals. Here is an example:

Şu dünyanın evvelisin, âhiri  
Şu kevn-ü mekânda sultan olan Şah

You are the first and the last of this world  
Shah, who is the sultan of the universe<sup>12</sup>

11 Turkish text in Nejat Birdoğan, *Anadolu'nun Gizli Kültürü Alevilik*, Hamburg Alevi Kültür Merkezi Yayınları, Hamburg, 1990, p. 305.

12 Turkish text in Bektaşî Gülleri, p. 35; cf. Krizstina Kehl-Bodrogi, *Die KızılbaşAleviten. Untersuchung über eine esoterische Glaubensgemeinschaft in Anotolien*, Islamkundliche Untersuchungen Band 126, Berlin, 1988, p. 130.

Another example:

Yedi iklim dört köşeyi dolandım  
Ben Aliden gayrı bir er görmedim  
Kısmet verip âlemleri yaradan  
Ben Aliden gayrı bir er görmedim

Bir ismi Alidir, bir ismi Allah  
İnkârım yoktur, hem vallah hem billah  
Muhammed, Ali yoluna Allah eyvallah  
Ben Aliden gayrı bir er görmedim

I wandered around in every corner of the world  
I never saw any other man than Ali  
Who bestowed Destiny and created the worlds  
I never saw any other man than Ali

One of his names is Ali, one of his names is Allah  
By God, I swear by God, I do not deny  
Facing the way of Ali and Muhammad  
I never saw any other man than Ali<sup>13</sup>

A number of nefes hymns are attributed to Hatayî, the head of the Şafawîya order, Shah İsmâ'îl, the Persian ruler 1501 - 1524; these hymns are still recognized as Şah Hatâyî nefesi<sup>14</sup>, here an example:

Ali'dir dünyaya edâyı veren  
Ali'dir sofiye sevdâyı veren  
Ali'dir Yezid'e kavgayı veren  
Hakk'a vâsıl olan merdan Ali'dir

Ali'dir cesetin kendisi yuyan  
Yuyup kefeniyle tabuta koyan  
Ali'dir devesin kendisi yeden  
Hak ile Hak olan Arslan Ali'dir

It is Ali who fashioned the world  
It is Ali who imbued the Sufi with love  
It is Ali who combatted Yazid  
The man among men who joined with God is Ali

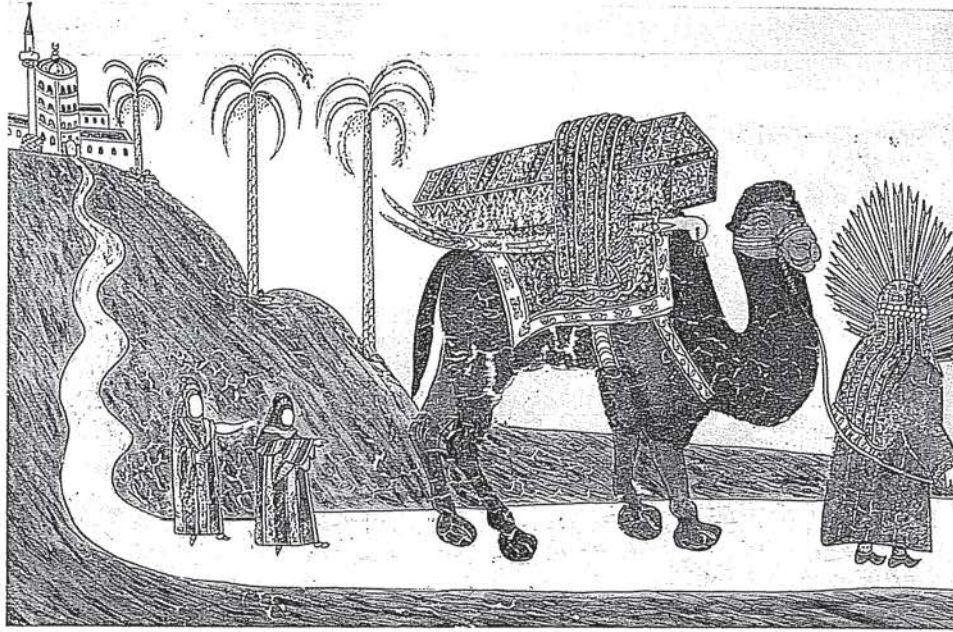
It is Ali who washed his own corpse  
who wound it in a shroud and put it in a coffin  
It is Ali who lead his own camel  
He who is God with God is Ali the lion<sup>15</sup>

The last stanza refers to the tradition according to which Ali shortly before his death told his sons Hasan and Hüseyin that his corps was going to be washed and carried away by a veiled man, and he asked them to let the matter be done that way. On his death it happened as Ali had predicted, but his sons being curious, followed the mysterious man who was leading away the camel loaded with the bier, and made the

13 Turkish text in *Bektaşî Gülleri*, p. 35; cf. K. Kehl-Bodrogi, *Die Kızılbaş/Aleviten.*, p. 130.

14 *Buyruk*, ed. Sefer Aytekin, Ankara, 1958.

15 Turkish text in *Bektaşî Gülleri*, p. 21; cf. Kehl-Bodrogi, *Die Kızılbaş/Aleviten*, p. 130.



After his death the corpse of Hz. Ali was carried away on a camel lead by himself and followed by his sons Hasan and Hüseyin.

Glass-painting, Robert Anhegger-Mualla Eyüboğlu Anhegger collection, *Camalında Yirmibin Fersah*, Yapı Kredi Kültür Sanat Yayıncılık, İstanbul, 1997.

man unveil himself. To their surprise it was Ali who had come to carry away his own body.<sup>16</sup> The story is well-known among Turkish Alevi. Many times I also heard it told with great affection during the long evenings among the Syrian Alawites in the small villages in the Nuşairî mountains. The legend has become a beloved motive of folk art. An example of it is included above.

In the early New Persian Nizārī Ismā‘īlitic text *Haft Bābi Bābā Sayyid-nā*,<sup>17</sup> which was composed ca 1200 CE, and exclusively preserved by the Badakhshani communities at the Upper Amu Darya, we read the following:

va-dīgar ‘abd allāh-i ‘abbās rivāyat mikunad keh ‘umqiyat-i insān bimithl-i ‘alī ibn abī ṭālib ānkeh miḡūyad keh man rūy-i xudāy-am va-man pahlū-ye xudāy-am va-man afrāshteh-am āsmānhārā va-man gustarānīdam zamīnhārā va-az īn samt suxunān bisyār ast va-ānkeh miḡūyad keh man dast-i xudāy-am va-dast dar ātash kunam va-bandagān-i xvēshrā az ātash bīrūn āvaram va-dushmanān rā dar ātash bi-guzāram pas ātash rā bigūyam inhā marā va-ānhā turā.

And further: ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Abbās reports the traditions that, the depth of man is like ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, he who says: “I am the face of God and I am the side of God. I raised the heavens, and I spread the earths”. And there are many words of the sort. And he who says: “I am the hand of God, and I put my hand in the Fire [i.e. Hell], and bring my own servants out of the Fire, and I leave the enemies in the Fire. Then I say to the Fire: ‘These for me, and those for you’”.

I have here translated *rūy* literally, and not e.g. as “front”, because of the body-symbolism employed (*pahlū* “side”, and *dast* “hand”). As in the Kashshī fragment, ‘Alī thus claims to be the face of God and the side of God. The mighty acts asserted

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* p. 131.

<sup>17</sup> W. Ivanow ed., *Two Early Ismaili Treaties: Haft Babi Baba Sayyid-na and Matlubu'l-mu' minin by Tusi, Persian Text, with an Introductory Note*, Islamic Research Association No. 2., Bombay, 1933.

by 'Alī are found again in the Nuṣairī catechism of the Ms Kiel. arab. 19. I have identified two motifs.

The first motif: He has raised the heavens and spread the earths.

fol 2, 6f	<i>anā rāfi' as-samawāt ... wa dāhī l-aradīn</i> I keep the heavens high...and spread the earths
fol 7v, 5 =	<i>anā lladhī rafa'tu asmā'ahā</i>
fol 17v, 3f	I am the one who has made its canopies high
fol 7v, 5f	<i>anā lladhī aḥṭaṭtu l-arḍ wa arsaytu jibālahā</i> I am the one who has made the earth level and its mountains steady
fol 17v, 11	<i>ana lladhī basaṭtu l-arḍ wa arsaytu jibālahā</i> I am the one who has extended the earth and made its mountains steady

The second motif: He bring his servants out of the fire of hell, and leaves the enemies in it. Certainly there is no word-for-word correspondence in the catechism, but the basic concept is the same:

fol 3, 9	<i>anā...qāsim al-janna wa n-nār</i> I...parcel paradise and hell
fol 4, 5f	<i>anā ...ṣāhib an-nār dhāt al-wuqūd</i> I am ...the master of the burning fire
fol 7, 7	<i>anā...muṭfi' an-nār al-ḥāmiya</i> I...extinguish the hot fire
fol 18, 6-8	<i>wa anā mus'id ahl al-janna wa mukhiṣṣuhum bi-l-anwār wa anā mushqī ahl an-nār wa muṣlihim sa'iran wa mudammiruhum tadmīran</i> I make the inhabitants of the paradise happy and bestow them with lights. I make the inhabitants of the hell wretched, let them burn in the fire, and annihilate them completely.

The same stylistic and conceptual elements are thus found in the aretologies of the Nuṣairī chatecism, in the passage quoted by Shirāzī, in the fragments in Kashshī's book, and, transcending the linguistic frontiers, in *Haft Bābi Bābā Sayyid-nā*. They are composed as a series of short anaphoric sentences, which are connected in pairs on a principle of oppositions, an arrangement which is based on formulas in the Koran, and especially in the lengthy texts, apparently employed in order to convey an impression of completeness. The common notions articulated in the texts, as well as their almost complete verbal identity suggest that the alleged self-proclamations by 'Alī were expressed in a fairly standardized form.

Our knowledge of the so called *ghulāt* movements, which is crucial for our understanding of the religious and political processes described as the emergence of sects in Islam has so far mainly been based on indirect sources such as the above mentioned chroniclers, the Imamite *rijāl*-literature, quotations and accounts by late Shiite writers and the reports of the "heresiographers". They all refer to the "extremist" position with disapproval. The Nuṣairī-Alawite texts, mostly unpublished manuscripts, have on the whole remained unused by historians of religion. However, the most extensive, and positive, quotations are found in the Nuṣairī literature, where they hold a central position in testifying to the divine nature of 'Alī. The situation would thus suggest the hypothesis that the doctrines which are briefly touched upon in the just mentioned literature and apparently have their origin in the so called *ghulāt* tradition, are relatively completely retained, in an archaic form, in the Nuṣairī-Alawite literature. The central religious problem on which these teachings are focused is the question posed by every religion with a conception of a transcendent God, that is, how God manifests himself in this world. The Nuṣairī-Alawite

answer is that this takes place in the person of the religious and political leader, whose prototype is 'Alī ibn Abī Tālib.

## Cosmogonical and Cosmological Doctrines

As I mentioned, the Alawite religion is a strongly 'Alī-oriented type of Shia, and shows striking gnostic features. Acquaintance with fundamental cosmogonical and cosmological doctrines is usually taken for granted in the religious scriptures of the Alawites. These scriptures represent secret knowledge and are, according to the religious norms, only accessible to readers who have been ritually initiated into the fundamental mysteries of religion.

As in other gnostic religions, the objective content of this knowledge is basically identical with the cosmogonical and cosmological doctrines of the sect. These doctrines display and explain the existential conditions of the world by exposing its transcendental history and its structure. The above outlined concept of the divine 'Alī is embedded in such narrative contexts.

The main part of the material which concerns cosmogonical and cosmological doctrines consists of fragments, scattered and interwoven in different types of texts, such as prayers, hymns, cultic texts, aretologies, Koran interpretations, doctrinal works, and catechisms. Fortunately there is also a small number of comprehensive texts in which cosmogonical and cosmological topics are dealt with in a relatively systematical way.

One of the most important sources of the Alawite religion is a version of an origin myth, contained in the *Kitāb al-bakūrat as-Sulaimānīya fī kashf asrār ad-diyānat an-nuṣairīya*, written by the Nuṣairī renegade Sulaimān Efendī al-Adhanī (born 1250/1834-35), and published in Beirut 1863. It is a rare work. Section IV of this tractate is entitled "On the Fall" (*fī l-habṭa*). It contains one of the few comprehensive accounts, in narrative form, of the cosmogonical and cosmological ideas of the Alawites.

All groups of the Nuṣairīs believe that in the beginning, before the existence of the world, they were shining lights and luminous stars and that they used to distinguish between submission and rebellion, neither eating, drinking, nor excreting, but beholding 'Alī ibn Abī Tālib in the yellow aspect. They remained in this condition 7,077 years and 7 hours. Then they thought among themselves, "As for creation, there has not been created anybody nobler than we". This was the first transgression that the Nuṣairīs committed. And so he ('Alī) created for them a veil (*hijāb*), keeping them under restraint for 7,000 years. Thereupon, 'Alī ibn Abī Tālib appeared to them saying, "Am I not your Lord?" and they replied, "Indeed", after that he had made visible to them his Omnipotence. But then they imagined they could apprehend him in his fullness on their supposition that he was one unto themselves. By that they committed a second transgression. Then he showed them the veil, and they circumambulated it for 7,077 years and 7 hours. Thereupon, he appeared to them in the form of an aged man with a hoary head and beard, by which form he tried the people of light, the supreme luminous world (*ahl an-nūr al-'ālam al-'alawī an-nūrānī*). But then they imagined him to be such as that shape through which he appeared to them. And he said to them, "Who am I?", and they replied, "We do not know". Then he appeared in the form of a young man with a twisted moustache, riding on a furious-looking lion, and again he appeared to them in the form of a small child. Again he called them and said, "Am I not your Lord?". And he repeated the question to them on each manifestation, in his company being his Name (*ism*) and his Gate (*bāb*) and the people of the grades of his holiness (*ahl marātib qudsihī*), namely the first seven grades, constituting the Great Luminous World (*al-marātib as-sab' al-awwal al-'ālam al-kabīr an-nūrānī*). And when he called them, they imagined that he was one like unto themselves, and they became confused and

did not know what to answer; and so he created them, out of their backwardness, doubt and confusion. And he called them, saying "I have created for you a lower abode (*dār suflāniya*) and I intend to cast you down into it. And I shall create for you fleshly temples (*hayākil bashariya*) and I shall appear to you in a veil as one of your kind; and he who acknowledges me amongst you, and acknowledges my Gate and my Veil, him will I bring back hither. But he who rebels against me, out of his rebellion will I create an Adversary (*didd*) to confront him. And he who denies me, him will I enclose in the vestments of transmigration (*qumṣān al-masūkhīya*). And they replied, saying, "O Lord, lodge us here, then we shall sing your praise and serve you, and cast us not down into the lower abode". Then he said, "You have rebelled against me, but if you had said 'O our Lord, we have no knowledge, except what you have taught us; indeed, you are the One Who Thoroughly Knows the Invisible Things (*al-'allām al-ghuyūb* sic!)", then I would have rescued you". Then he created out of their rebellion the devils and Satans and out of the sins of the devils he created the women. / For that reason they do not teach their prayers to their women; this explanation is moreover found in *Kitāb al-haft*, in *Kitāb ad-dalā'il* and in *Kitāb at-ta'yid* / [Obviously a gloss inserted by Sulaimān].

Thereupon he appeared to them in the 7 Canopies (*al-qubāb as-sab'*): The first Canopy called *al-Hinn* in which the name of the Ma'nā was Faḡaḡ, and the *Ism* was Shīt [Seth], and the *Bāb* was Jaddāh, and the *Didd* was Raubā' [The text continues in this way with all the Canopies, identifying the holy trinity Meaning-Name-Gate, and its Adversary, with enigmatic names]. ...In all the Canopies thus mentioned, the *Didd*, that is Satan (*ash-Shaiṭān*), consisted of three persons in one, namely the trinity (*al-aqānīm*) Abū Bakr, 'Umar and 'Uthmān. And after that he ('Alī) appeared to them in the 7 Person Canopies (*qibāb adhdhātīya*), which are those from Hābil [Abel] to 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib.<sup>18</sup>

We are here presented with the main tenets of the Nuṣairī-Alawite religion in a concentrated narrative form, and we can get a preliminary idea of the phenomenological type of religion we are dealing with. In its general structure, its imagery and symbolic language, the myth shows a number of features common to the salvation dramas of gnostic religions. Thus, it is based on a tripartite structure which takes the form of speculations on a pre-existent state before the fall, on the fall itself, and on the return to the original state. The text is a dramatic expression of a world-view which is based on a dualism between this evil world of material existence and the other world, spiritual and good. The two worlds are connected by the descent at the fall and the ascent at salvation.

Though these dimensions are all present, the narrative is mainly concerned with the stages which precede the fall; the location of the actual scene is in heaven. In this respect, the bulk of the text is a specimen of a sub-genre or of a type of episode which is common in gnostic mythological writings, namely the Prologue in Heaven. In this first act of the salvation drama, the ultimate conditions of human existence and the conditions for salvation are determined forever. In general terms the original state is, thus, the scope of salvation and, from a mythological point of view, the act of salvation is the inversion of the fall. In religious practice, this means that salvation becomes possible through the right understanding of these matters; that is, through gnosis.

Considering the structure and perspective of the text, it is important to note that this is not the type of pseudo-scientific speculation often met with in gnostic or neoplatonic writings, which concentrate on the degradation of the divine world. The chief interest throughout the text is concentrated on the anthropological problem of the relation between the divinity or ideal existence and the destination of man. The focus is on divine manifestation and on anthropogony, and not on theogony or cosmogony in a restricted sense. The text indeed conveys very little, if any, information in positive terms concerning the essence of the supreme Deity. Only indirectly we

<sup>18</sup> *Kitāb al-bakūra*, pp. 59-62.

can conclude that the Godhead existed "in its fullness" (*fi kulliyatihi*), and that this dimension was not truly perceptible and comprehensible to the heavenly Nuṣairīs. Although this fullness surpassed their comprehension it possessed at the same time a quality of manifestation. Despite any explicit speculation on the divine fullness itself, this unknown dimension, however, is a presupposed element which is necessary for the development of the discourse. In fact, the text is built up around the same central tenet in Nuṣairī religion as we have met with above in the aretalogies of the catechisms and related texts, namely, the true recognition of the divine dimension in 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, in whose form the Deity manifests itself among men, along with his Name and his Gate.

The problem how a transcendent god manifests himself, that is, how religious experience is at all possible, was posed by the early Sufis and the early 'Alī-oriented religious groups in the Islamic world, and is retained by the Nuṣairīs as the most fundamental of all questions. The answer in the aretalogies and related texts, in which the mighty acts of 'Alī are glorified, is that the divinity manifests itself in him, as the historical person, though endowed with cosmological and cosmogonical implications. In the origin myth, the notion of divine manifestation in a succession of imagined historical personalities from Abel to 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib is only briefly mentioned at the end of the discourse; in the main part of the text the problem is transferred to the celestial level and dramatized in cosmogonical and cosmological terms. The objective content of the Nuṣairī gnosis, i.e. the secret, revealed, and saving knowledge about a particular system of reality, as it is presented here, is also taken for granted in other types of religious texts, such as hymns, prayers, and ritual texts, including initiation manuals.<sup>19</sup>

## Initiation Rituals

The three degrees of initiation are still the vital moments in the transmission of the Alawite religious traditions, in particular of esoterical doctrines and theology. The initiation rituals are confined to male individuals whose parents are both Alawites. The teachings are transmitted orally to the initiand or by delivering secret canonical scriptures, such as aṭ-Ṭabarānī's *Kitāb majmū' al-a'yād*.<sup>20</sup> Of particular importance is the initiation in *ta'wīl*, the allegorical interpretation technique. It is a central, most vital and generative element in Alawite religious life, through which Koran verses and rituals of Islam are given esoteric interpretations by the use of Nuṣairī doctrines, holy persons and traditions as a frame of reference. So far, written initiation manuals like those of the Ismailites are not known outside the circles of initiated Alawites, but from Sulaimān's *Bakūra* it may be concluded that the author has drawn from some manual, or manuals, in the part about his own initiation. Therefore, his book is still the most important text available on this subject.

However, most of the sources have not been published and will, for very good

<sup>19</sup> Tord Olsson, "Extrem shi'a—synpunkter på de syriska 'alawiternas religion", *Religion och samhälle i Mellanöstern*, J. O. Blichfeldt and J. Hjärpe eds., Vänersborg, 1985; T. Olsson, "Imagery of Divine Epiphany in Nuṣairī scriptures" *Acta Iranica. Hommages et Opera Minora*, vol. XII, Papers in Honour of Professor Jes P. Asmussen, Leiden, 1988; T. Olsson, "Den gudomlige 'Alī. Aretalogierna i den nuṣairiska litteraturen", *Religionsvetenskapliga studier. Festskrift till Sven S. Hartman*, A. Geels, T. Olsson, P. Schalk eds., Religio 12. Lund, 1983, pp. 117-130; T. Olsson, "The Divine 'Alī. The Aretalogies in the Nuṣairī Literature", *Proceedings of the XXXII International Congress for Asian and North African Studies*, Hamburg, 25th-30 August 1986, A. Wezler, E. Hammerschmidt eds., ZDMG-Suppl. 9, Franz Steiner Verlag Stuttgart, 1992, pp. 428-429.

<sup>20</sup> Surūr ibn al-Qāsim at-Ṭabarānī, *Kitāb majmū' al-a'yād*, R. Strothmann ed., "Festkalender der Nuṣairier", *Der Islam* 27 (1944-46).

reasons, never be published. This is due to a unique type of procedure which consists of a combined oral and written transmission. My Alawite friends told me that catechisms, like the ones I have quoted above, have as a rule been taken down in writing by sheiks, in order to be used by individual young men in preparation for their initiation, and only then. The handwritten text was entrusted to the initiate to be studied in private, and when his sheik had made sure that he had learnt it by heart the text was burnt. However, a number of manuscripts have been preserved outside the Alawite community, and are to be found in Syrian, Turkish, Egyptian, and European libraries.

### Ta'wīl and Taqīya

An interesting but rather neglected phenomenon in the religious practice of the Alawites is the connection between *ta'wīl*, the allegorical interpretation of the Koran and the Islamic rituals, and the *taqīya* practice, or the right to conceal or give a false idea of one's religion in situations of political or religious menace. Acting on these two principles seems to be a complementary practice among the Alawites in Syria today, especially because of the political situation with the Alawites in power. By applying *ta'wīl* inwardly, towards the interior of the communion and in the communication between its members, and *taqīya* outwardly, in relation to others, it is possible for an Alawite to appear officially as a Sunni or a common Shiite, who follows the Koran and observes the canonical rituals. Acting on these two principles would probably serve the integration of the community and its members' experience of an Alawite identity. Besides, open conflicts with other Shiites or with the Sunnite entourage can be avoided as well.

The Alawite leaders deny emphatically any affinity with mythological gnosticism or any other dissentient belief or practice that would stray from conventional Shia. For instance, in a formal declaration delivered in 1973, 80 religious authorities declared that their holy book was the Koran, that they were Muslims and followed the majority of Shia, i.e. the Twelvers, and that whatever else was attributed to them consisted of lies fabricated by their enemies and by the enemies of Islam. However, when they were asked to publish their secret scriptures, as an answer to the suspicion nursed by other groups in Syria, they refused.<sup>21</sup> It is difficult to see this as anything else but politically warranted *taqīya*. In 1982 and 1984 I received a similar impression in my interviews with influential personages, including for instance 'Alī Kheir Bek, the editor-in-chief of the leading ideological mouthpiece *Mujallat al-Iqtisād*, "Economic Journal". The arguments were frequently based on "the history of religion", and very often started from the conflict between Mu'āwiya and 'Alī: since it was 'Alī alone in this conflict who represented the true Islam, it is his followers, i.e. the Alawites, who are the real exponents of the true Islamic tradition, that is, Sunna. Moreover, we have the same Koran, and 'Alī was the first Sufi.

The distribution of power in Syria during the last two decades has resulted in a new middle class, including an intellectual stratum, of urbanized Alawites in Damascus and Latakia. At the time of my fieldwork the religious and legal head of the Alawites lived in Damascus, namely the now late mufti Shaikh 'Abdu r-Raḥmān al-Khayyir. He wrote a number of religious scriptures in which he laid particular emphasis on the importance of *ja'farīya* for the Alawite tradition. This was also a recurrent theme in our conversations in his home in Damascus. An interesting polit-

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<sup>21</sup> Hanna Batatu, "Some observations on the social roots of Syria's ruling, military group and the causes for its dominance", *Middle East Journal*, Summer-Autumn 1981.

ical and religious fact is that Muḥammad Amīn Ghālib aṭ-Ṭawīl's book *Ṭa'rikh al-'alawīyīn*, (1st edition 1924), a popular and partly romanticizing account of the history of the Alawites, appeared in a second edition in 1979, with a 60 page introduction by al-Khayyir - one of the few books on the subject that has been permitted by the censorship during the Alawite regime in Syria.

## Mountain-Dwellers and Townspeople

The ordinary Alawites have little knowledge of religious doctrines and theology, especially the majority of non-initiates. Among the mountain-dwellers some general features typical of Middle East folklore are found, such as the use of amulets and the veneration of *ziyāras*, the burial sites of holy men, to which people go on pilgrimage. Many of the shrines I visited in the Alawite mountains were filled with incense and photos of the petitioners and their simple votive gifts. People often spent a long time at those sites in the presence of the saints.

A widely spread belief, especially among people dwelling in the mountains, was concerned with Khuḍr, the green divinity of the waters and of agriculture who appears from time to time as a savior in the form of a man. Some people told me that he has 365 shrines in the land of the Alawites. Farmers as well as people of some schooling all liked to talk about this beloved figure. One man I have known had the name of Khuḍr tattooed on his forearm. The traditions related to Khuḍr are rich, manifold and full of nuances. He shares some of his vital features with St. George, the dragon killer, who is a very important saint in the Syrian churches; and also with 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib. He is armed alike with his sword and like him he appears in the religious poetry of the Alawites under the name Mar Gurgīs (St. George). Both of them are related to notions of time and manifest themselves regularly to human beings. If I have rightly understood the emotions of the Alawites I have known, the two divine persons are the objects of very strong devotion. Functionally, the figure of Khuḍr in the folklore of the Syrian Alawites thus seems to be intelligible: to the non-initiates he certainly plays the same role as 'Alī to the initiated, that is, as the corporeal manifestation of the divinity. It is thus very likely that the bulk of legends connected with Khuḍr is an exoteric analogue to the esoteric myths which are linked to 'Alī as the physical epiphany of the transcendent divinity. According to my Alawite friends there is a great variety of legends related to Khuḍr, but to the best of our knowledge very few records exist. Fieldwork in the land of the Alawites is badly needed to qualify the written sources, and to test hypotheses like the one suggested here.

The former isolation of the Alawites in the mountains and their want of communication and education left them with little awareness of other groups; a full consciousness of their religious identity was probably not essential. However, the changing conditions during the last decades have led to an increased religious awareness and self-confidence, not at least among the urbanized, educated class of Alawites. Besides, membership of the Alawite sect has become a political asset as well. Since Alawites have attained high positions in society, fellow Alawites can appeal to their religious loyalty when applying for jobs or seeking social or economic benefits. Thus we find that the Alawites closely follow a pattern which has been called "situational selection", by which a person selects the group to which he wants to belong and which he can claim membership, and from which he will benefit most in a given situation.<sup>22</sup>

The crucial problem of transmission of tradition and its apparently integrative function involves very complex relations and can not be analyzed according to any

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<sup>22</sup> Gubser, "Minorities in power", p. 22.

simple model. It is evident, however, that the transmission of tradition both in content and in its more technical sense functions in different ways at different local and social levels. Political factors play an important role today because of the Alawites' powerful position during the last decades. Among the mountaineers, the traditional practice still goes on, with its different grades of initiation, including oral tuition and the handing over of holy tractates to the novices as its most vital elements. Though I have no access to any sort of statistics (which probably do not exist anyway), it is my general impression that the number of novices who attend initiation has decreased, which is a very likely result of the education politics in the country and the economic support given to the Alawite population in the mountain areas. Still, the initiated among the rural people are bound by the religious *taqīya*, probably with rather few political elements involved.

As a result of the political development, an increasing number of Alawites now live in Latakia and in Damascus, many with a high position in the power structure. Here, the *taqīya* principle may be warranted by political circumstances. A notable fact is the importance given to *ja'farīya*, the bundle of traditions which are thought by believers to go back to the 6th imam, Ja'far aṣ-Ṣādiq (d. 148 / 765), that is, to the imamate *before* the division into the sects of the Seveners and the Twelvers. I remember how the mufti of the Alawites gladly returned to this theme during our lengthy conversations in his home and willingly gave me access to the rich materials on this subject in his private library. By evoking the *ja'farīya* stock of traditions and referring to an imagined community before the split into sects as the soil from which they sprang and a model to live by, the Alawites appear as trustees of a common Shiite tradition, both to themselves and to those around them. Besides the philosophy that these notions are relatively acceptable to other Shia groups and to the Sunni majority in Syria and hence used as arguments in the religious-political discourse, such notions are key terms in the strategically important measures of integration in the urban milieu to which Alawites arrive from different villages with mutually diverging religious traditions and practices.

Among the urban middle class some are initiated, but so far I have not had a suitable opportunity to examine more closely their religious views and attitudes. To cautious inquiries in passing about initiation I was only given vague answers, e.g. "like in Sufism". Generally speaking, intellectuals showed a great interest in Sufism, especially in the philosophically elaborated and theosophical variants, as found in the works of Ibn al-'Arabī and Ibn al-Fārīd, and in the tractates of the *Ikhwān aṣ-ṣafā'*. Following a universal trend, many were attracted by modern expositions of Jungian psychology and psychoanalysis. They often proved to be quite familiar with the very specific Nuṣairī doctrines, but interpreted them by using such materials as frames of reference.

## Poetry

Symbolic, expressive and narrative elements received orally or in writing from theology, legend and folklore meet in cultural life and are handed down in festivals and in the rich artistic literature, especially in the religiously tinged poetry, such as the panegyric of 'Alī. However, many religious dimensions of Alawite poetry have generally been ignored, probably because of the very character of the texts themselves. They can be read as profane love poems or as Sufi poetry, understanding the beloved as a human or a divine person, but to the initiated they also articulate specific Alawite religious views. In the "twilight language" typical of much mystical

poetry, including that of the Sufis, the Alawites express their own unique devotion of the divine 'Alī and their specific gnostic doctrines. However, Alawite editors and writers who have had the ambition to deal in public with this literature have been placed in a quandary because of the obligation to keep its specific doctrines secret. For instance, Makhzūn as-Sinjārī's poetry has been edited and analyzed in bulky volumes by Ḥāmid Ḥasan, *Al-Makhzūn as-Sinjārī, baina l-imāma wa sh-shi'r wa taṣawwuf wa falsafa*, I-IV Damascus 1970-72, and by As'ad Aḥmad, *Ma'rifat Allāh wa Makhzūn as-Sinjārī*, I-II (3rd ed.) Beirut 1979. In these and other works Makhzūn has constantly been read as if he were a Sunni philosopher or a Sufī, whereas the specific Alawite dimension in his poetry is passed over in silence. Among the several glaring defects of this treatment the most flagrant is that verses containing Nuṣairī esoterical doctrines have been systematically omitted from the texts. The editors have practiced *taqīya*.

### Concluding Remarks and Suggestions

Summing up, I would suggest that the Syrian Alawites deserve further studies to be carried out by students of different social and historical disciplines.

- From the point of view of sociology and political science, the Alawites deserve attention because of their having formerly been a marginalized and suppressed Shiitic minority, who are now in power in Syria. With regard to religion, this has led to a politically justified *taqīya* for fear of serious attacks in religious-political terms from the Sunni orthodoxy. Because of the "heretical" character of their religious teachings and practices the Alawites' status as Muslims is constantly being called in question by their adversaries, who refer to the constitution of the country according to which the president must be a Muslim.

- The Alawite literature conveys a vivid picture of the importance and ideology attached to the political and religious leader figure in Shiite Islam. This and the following paragraphs might be of special relevance to students of Islamology and history of religions.

- As a religious group, the Alawites are of great interest insofar as they have retained an archaic form of Islamic gnosticism.

- The Alawite scriptures contain very important source materials for the study of the still rather unknown religious doctrines and practices of the most pronounced 'Alī-oriented groups in the Islamic world. They have been called *ghulāt*, or "extremist" Shiites, designations which reflect the perspective created by the early orthodox Muslim "heresiographers", but which are still widely used as standard terminology by scholars.<sup>23</sup> The life and teachings of these various groups in their primeval forms were part of the milieu in which the early Islamic orthodoxies were gradually chiseled out and established. The study of these groups would thus touch upon the conditions in which the creation of Shiite and of Sunnite orthodoxies as religious phenomena took place. The basic question of religion formation in early Islam should thus not be posed as a problem concerned with the division of sects from a supposedly orthodox religious core, but as a politically determined formation of orthodoxies out of a milieu of various amorphous religious groups.

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<sup>23</sup> E.g. by Matti Moosa, *Extremist Shiites, The Ghulat Sects*, Syracuse University Press, New York, 1988, p. 171.