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## REDEFINING THE TRUTH: AHL-I HAQQ AND THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN\*

Ziba Mir-Hosseini

This article traces the roots of a recent split among the followers of an esoteric Shī'a sect known to outsiders as Ahl-i Haqq (literally, the Followers of Truth).<sup>1</sup> The seeds of the rift were sown three generations ago in a leadership struggle in a village in southern Kurdistan, but the sect's followers divided into two opposing camps only with the onset of the Islamic Republic in Iran. In mapping the split, this article focuses on the diversity and particularly the esoteric side of Shī'a Islam. The Islamic revolution of 1979 in Iran has drawn attention to the faith, but recent studies, in concentrating on issues of doctrinal orthodoxy or the political dimension of Shī'ism, do little to explain Shī'a diversity, and how and why Shī'ism appeals in different ways to different groups. The Ahl-i Haqq, no more 'typical' than any other tendency or sect of Shī'a Islam, are certainly one of its less known and less 'orthodox' manifestations. But recent developments in the sect and its appeal to two very different groups in Iran make it a particularly interesting case through which to understand the appeal of esotericism in Iran more generally and its changing character in the twentieth century.

One sub-sect consists of rural and tribal people, mostly of Kurdish background, who were born into Ahl-i Haqq. They have long been regarded as heretics by their Shī'ite and Sunnite neighbours and, for this reason, have remained secretive about their beliefs and practices. Their number is estimated to be as many as one million, mostly living in southern parts of Iranian and Iraqi Kurdistan as well as in Iranian Luristan and Azarbaijan.<sup>2</sup>

\* Research on which this paper is based was conducted during my tenure of a Research Fellowship at Girton College, Cambridge. Fieldwork was supported by grants from the ESRC and the British Academy. I wish to record my thanks to these bodies. Earlier versions of the paper were presented in seminars at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London; at the Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches Internationales, Paris; and at the Middle East Studies Association of North America Annual Meeting, North Carolina, November 1993. I am grateful to Philip Kreyenbroek, Fariba Adelkhah and other participants in the seminars for their comments, and to Richard Tapper for reading and commenting on the various drafts of the paper.

<sup>1</sup> The sect is popularly known as 'Alī-Ilāhī or 'Alīlūhī (deifiers of 'Alī); the adepts themselves refer to their faith as *dīn-i yārī* (religion of *yār*, Friend, God) and to themselves as *ṭāyīfeh* (the sect), or as *yaresan* (in Iran) and *kākā'ī* (in Iraq).

<sup>2</sup> There is no accurate information on the number of adherents, given that followers tend not to declare their affiliation to outsiders. The followers claim that they are as many as 20 million world-wide, of whom 5 million live in Iran. This is certainly an exaggeration. Mehrdad R. Izady in his book, *The Kurds: A Concise Handbook*, London & Washington: Taylor & Francis International Publishers, 1992, pp.132–33, gives the percentage of Ahl-i Haqq (Yaresan) for each province where Kurds are found in Iran, Iraq and Turkey. It is not clear how he arrived at these percentages. Although the percentage given for Kermanshah (37.3%) is close to my own data, that given for the Iranian province of Kurdistan (16%) is certainly in error. There

The other sub-sect is quite different. It consists of educated and urban Iranians who were attracted to Ahl-i Ḥaqq in the late 1960s. This was when one of its spiritual leaders, 'Alī Ilāhī, published an account of the sect's doctrines and rites, reformulated by his reforming father, Ḥāj Ni'mat. To this sub-sect, unlike the first, the special appeal of Ahl-i Ḥaqq is more mystical, less practical. The number of new converts who do not have Kurdish origins is growing both inside and outside Iran. Iranians living in exile after the revolution seem to be particularly attracted to the sect: in Paris, and to a lesser degree in London, Rome and New York, they form groups who meet regularly to celebrate Ahl-i Ḥaqq rituals.

The new developments are curious in view of the fact that history shows an opposite tendency in the fortunes of other mystical sects in Islam, which have gradually shed their mystical aspects. Here I am primarily concerned with the impact of these developments on the sect's followers in Kurdistan, focusing on the evolving interaction of its two sub-sects with the Islamic Republic.<sup>3</sup> While the reformists are redefining Ahl-i Ḥaqq dogmas in an attempt to bring them into line with Shī'a orthodoxies, the traditionalists are relying on dormant tribal structures of power in an attempt to find a political role for the sect. In their different ways, both groups have so far been successful in keeping a Shī'a backlash at bay.

#### *The Genesis of Reforms: Ahl-i Haqq and the Twentieth Century*

The Ahl-i Ḥaqq, it is generally assumed, started as a variant of Sufism in fifteenth-century Kurdistan, where it appealed to people who were not literate and needed a mediating saint to interpret the complexities of the faith. Its relationship with Islamic orthodoxies has always been awkward, at best ambivalent and at worst irreconcilable. It has commonly been subsumed among the *ghulāt* sects, or extremist Shī'as, those who have 'exaggerated' in their veneration of 'Alī.<sup>4</sup> In line with most other *ghulāt* sects, Ahl-i Ḥaqq extremism essentially took a religious form, shunning political concerns and following an esoteric path. Neither its rise nor any events in its development seem to have captured the attention of chroniclers. There is no

is no single Ahl-i Ḥaqq community in that province, and it seems improbable that individual adherents would constitute such a large percentage.

<sup>3</sup> I have been tracing the impact of these developments on the sect by studying its various types of followers. In 1978 and 1985 I carried out field research in Kalardasht, northern Iran, where members of a Kurdish tribe, Khajwand, who settled there in the eighteenth century, are still adherents of the sect. Between 1986 and 1988 I conducted research in Tehran, London and Paris, where new followers are concentrated. In October 1992 I completed the six months' fieldwork in Iranian Kurdistan on which this paper is mainly based. In a monograph in preparation I give a full account of these developments and place them in the context of changes in the wider Iranian society: *Between Truth and Expediency: the Two Worlds of the Ahl-i Haqq*.

<sup>4</sup> For *ghulāt* sects, see M. Moosa, *Extremist Shiites: the Ghulat Sects*, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1988; and for Ahl-i Ḥaqq, see M.R. Hamzeh'ee, *The Yaresan: A Sociological, Historical & Religio-Historical Study of a Kurdish Community*, Berlin: Schwarz, 1980.

reference to the sect or to its founder, Sultān Ṣohāk, in sources dealing with the period of the rise to power of the Safavids.<sup>5</sup>

As late as the 1950s, when Ahl-i Ḥaqq started to acquire converts, its followers were largely tribespeople and peasants, or poor urban migrants, with no link to centres of power. Marginalized and free from the Islam of the clergy, the sect retained not only elements of early Shī'a and Sufi practices which were later cast aside, but also elements of the pre-Islamic religious heritage which were still alive in popular culture. The remnants of these elements, as expressed in the sect's beliefs and practices, came to negate many Islamic orthodoxies, both Shī'a and Sunni. For instance, two cardinal dogmas of the sect, the belief in successive manifestations of the Divine Essence in human form (*mazhariyyat*) and the belief in transmigration of souls (*dūnadūnī*), are at variance with Islamic doctrines of Unity (*tawhīd*) and Resurrection (*mu'ād*). Likewise, the adepts neither observe Muslim rites, such as daily prayers and fasting during the month of Ramaḍān, nor share its sacred space, such as sanctity of the mosque and pilgrimage to Mecca. Instead they have their own sacred space and proper forms of worship centred on the *jam'*, a gathering in which they chant their sacred litany (*kalām*), play their sacred lute (*tanbūr*), make offerings (*niyāz*) and share a sacrificial meal (*qurbānī* or *khidmat*).<sup>6</sup> Not surprisingly, both Shī'a and Sunni theologians have, from time to time, branded the sect's beliefs and practices as heresies, exposing the adepts to religious persecution by their more 'orthodox' neighbours.

The followers have reacted to outside pressure in two ways. First, they isolated themselves: until recently most Ahl-i Ḥaqq communities were to be found in remote places where they could practise their creed more freely. Secondly, they adopted a strict code of secrecy, which in time came to define the faith as a *sirr*, a mystery that was to be guarded from the outside world at all cost. The 'mystery' was both preserved and transmitted orally in Gurani and other Kurdish languages as well as in Turkish, in the form of poetry, known as *kalām* (lit., word, discourse). *Kalām* provides the sect with a 'sacred narrative' in which one finds an account of its history, the roots and rationale of its secret rites and, in short, its *raison d'être*. It appears that *kalām* were not committed to writing until the eighteenth century; the oldest manuscript known to outsiders dates from 1843, and was found by Minorsky. There are now many collections of *kalām* available, each relating to a specific period; the most important is that belonging to the period of the sect's founder, Sultān Ṣohāk. They have all retained their oral character and until recently were jealously guarded from outsiders. Even within the sect, only an inner circle of initiates, namely Sayyids (the sect's religious leaders) and *Kalām Khāns* (experts in *kalām*), had access to these manuscripts. It was believed that whoever learned the 'mystery' as embodied in *kalām* had their lips 'sealed' (*muhr*).

<sup>5</sup> For a summary of prevalent hypotheses on the origins and history of the sect, see Z. Mir-Hosseini, 'Faith, Ritual and Culture Among the Ahl-e Ḥaqq of Southern Kurdistan', in P. Kreyenbroek (ed.), *Kurdish Cultural Identity*, London: Zed Press, 1995.

<sup>6</sup> For an account of these rituals, see Mir-Hosseini, op. cit. and Hamzeh'ee, *The Yaresan*, chapter 6.

By the early twentieth century, it had become increasingly difficult to keep the 'mystery' intact. The edges of the 'seal', literally, started to crack with the integration of the Ahl-i Ḥaqq communities into wider Iranian society and the expansion of literacy. Both had a profound impact on the sect, igniting a deep yearning for access to the 'mystery' believed to be found in *kalām*. Today we are witnessing a totally different phase in the sect's history in which not only is one of its essential rules, secrecy, relaxed but there is an attempt to redefine its theology in terms of Shī'a orthodoxies. One important feature of this phase is 'textual production', which is indeed a departure from the sect's entrenched tradition of silence and secrecy. At present there are a number of texts written by insiders which not only reproduce the *kalām* in Persian, a language accessible to all, but attempt to give them a theological context by interpreting them and justifying their 'truth' with reference to the Qur'ān and Shī'a religious traditions.

What is interesting about this phase is that its onset can be traced with a degree of accuracy impossible for earlier phases of Ahl-i Ḥaqq history. It dates back to the turn of the century and involves a reforming spiritual character, Ḥāj Ni'mat Jayhūnābādī. He was the first Ahl-i Ḥaqq who patently endeavoured to break the secrecy code by writing in Persian and tracing the sect's Shī'a genealogy. His treatise, *Furqān al-Akhhbār* (The Sifter of Traditions), became a main source for Minorsky's entry on the sect in the *Encyclopedia of Islam*.<sup>7</sup> However, his seminal work is *Ḥaqq al-Ḥaqāyiq* (the Truth of Truths) subtitled *Shāhnāmeḥ-i Ḥaqīqat* (Book of Kings of Truth), comprising over 15,000 lines of Persian verse.<sup>8</sup> Both the sub-title of this book and its historical/mythical content recall the more famous *Shāhnāmeḥ*, the Persian epic by Firdowsi who attempted to preserve and immortalize the pre-Islamic heritage of Iran in the form of poetry. But unlike Firdowsi, who wrote of the outer (*zāhir*) world and its mortal Kings, Ḥāj Ni'mat was concerned with the inner (*bāṭin*) world and the successive manifestations of the Divine Essence or the Kings of Truth. Ḥāj Ni'mat's *Shāhnāmeḥ*, completed in 1918, was the first attempt to unify the sect's dogmas and practices and to trace its Shī'a roots and genealogy. His efforts were continued by his son, Nūr 'Alī, who in 1963 published the first book which can be regarded as Ahl-i Ḥaqq theology. The significance of Nūr 'Alī's book, entitled *Burhān al-Ḥaqq* (lit. Proof of the Ultimate Truth), lies in his redefinition of Ahl-i Ḥaqq dogmas and his attempt to realign them with Shī'a orthodoxies, while stressing their dormant mystical traditions.<sup>9</sup> These are more fully developed in his other writings, some of which appeared in the appendix

<sup>7</sup> V. Minorsky, 'Ahl-i Ḥakk', *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edition, Vol.1, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1960, pp.260–63.

<sup>8</sup> The book was edited and published by M. Mokri in 1966: *Shāhnāmeḥ-e Ḥaqīqat: Le livre des Rois de Vérité: Histoire Traditionnelle des Ahl-e Ḥaqq*, Vol.1 Tehran/Paris: Bibliothèque Iranienne 14. A new edition, which includes a previously unpublished section and a commentary by Nūr 'Alī, came out in winter 1985 in Tehran, *Ḥaqq ul-Ḥaqāyiq Yā Shāhnāmeḥ-ye Ḥaqīqat*, Tehran: Jayhun Publishers, 1363.

<sup>9</sup> For an English summary of *Burhān* and an insightful commentary, see S.C.R. Weightman, 'The Significance of Kitab Burhan Ul-Ḥaqq: Additional material for the study of the Ahl-i Ḥaqq', *Iran*, 1965, pp.83–103.

to the third edition of *Burhān*, where he answers the questions posed by the readers of the first edition (the appendix is 306 pages long, whereas the actual text is 183 pages).<sup>10</sup> His exposition of the mystical dimension of *Ahl-i Haqq* earned the sect a number of followers, largely middle-class Tehranis, many of them women, with neither Kurdish origins nor any prior knowledge of the sect. It was in response to the spiritual needs of these new converts that Nūr 'Alī elaborated the outlines of a spiritual path, tapping into the rich but obscure mystical currents of the sect. He named his path The School of Perfection (*maktab-i sayr-i kamāl*), and started to provide spiritual guidance to its students (*bachchehhā-yi maktab*).

After Nūr 'Alī's death in 1974, his French-educated son, Dr. Bahram Ilāhī, assumed the guidance of the disciples. He has produced four books, two in Persian and two in French, in which he expounds his father's teachings.<sup>11</sup> In these books, Bahram Ilāhī has attempted to give *Ahl-i Haqq* a more universal appeal, while stressing that all his teachings derive from his father's.<sup>12</sup> His efforts have not only attracted new converts, including some foreigners, but have also earned the sanction of Shī'a orthodoxy. The recent entry on the *Ahl-i Haqq* in the newly founded Encyclopedia of Shī'ism refers to his group as Muslim *Ahl-i Haqq* (*Ahl-i Haqq-i musalmān*) and to the rest as Devil-Worshippers (*shaytān-parastān*).<sup>13</sup>

Bahram Ilāhī's attempts to do away with those aspects of *Ahl-i Haqq* traditions which he classes as decadent and rotten have met with a great deal of opposition in the sect and resulted in a serious rift. At present the followers are divided into two camps: those loyal to the old leaders; and those who embrace the new reformulation and owe allegiance to Nūr 'Alī. The latter, who are known as *maktabī*, call the first group *kohneh Ahl-i Haqq*, literally, old *Ahl-i Haqq*, with disparaging connotations of 'superstition and backwardness'. There have been a number of clashes between the two groups. In 1980, shortly after the Islamic revolution, Nūr 'Alī's mausoleum in Hashtgerd (about 100 kilometres from Tehran, where there is a sizeable *Ahl-i Haqq* community and where he owned some property) was destroyed in one of these clashes which led to the intervention of the

<sup>10</sup> Some of Nūr 'Alī's mystical teachings, again in the form of questions and answers, were published in French by Mokri who furnished them with a context and a commentary; see his *Nūr 'Alī-Shah Elāhī, Esoterisme Kurde, Aperçus sur le secte gnostique des Fidèles de Vérité*, Paris: Editions Albin Michel, 1966.

<sup>11</sup> The Persian books are: *Āṣār ul-Haqq, Guftārḥā'ī az Nūr 'Alī Elāhī*, Vol.1, Tehran: Tahuri, 1979 and Vol.2, Tehran: Jayhun Publishers, 1992. The French books are: *La Voie de perfection: l'enseignement secret d'un Maître Kurde en Iran*, Paris: Edition Sefhers, 1976; 2nd edition Paris: Albin Michel, 1982 and *Le Chemin de la lumière: La Voie de Nur Ali Elahi*, Paris: Albin Michel, 1985. In 1988 the former was translated into English as *The Path of Perfection: The Spiritual Teachings of Master Nur Ali*, London: Century; and the latter in 1993 as *The Way of Light: The Path of Nur Ali Elahi* (Shaftesbury, etc.: Element).

<sup>12</sup> This is clearly stated in each of his books. For instance, the first page of *La Voie* opens with this: 'Ce qui est écrit dans ce livre n'est pas de moi. Ce sont des leçons de mon maître. Toutes les découvertes sont de lui et je ne fais que répéter ce que j'ai entendu de lui. Que Dieu me pardonne si j'ai commis des erreurs.'

<sup>13</sup> 'Ahl-i Haqq', *Dā'irat ul-ma'ārif Tashayyū'*, *Encyclopedia of Shī'ism*, Vol.2, Tehran, 1369/1990, p.613.

Revolutionary Guards and the authorities. Rumour has it that the Imām Jum'eh of Hashtgerd (the leader of Friday Prayer, an important office in post-revolutionary Iran) sided with the opposing camp and masterminded the destruction of the mausoleum. By the late 1980s the conflict had reached Kurdistan, centring on the village of Jayhunabad, the birth place of Nūr 'Alī, where a series of violent clashes resulted in two deaths and many injuries. Here, the local authorities are said to have sided with the reformists.

Before examining further the dynamics and impact of these developments, which by 1993 had brought about a complete break between the two groups, it is necessary to give a brief ethnographic account of the Ahl-i Ḥaqq in Iranian Kurdistan.

#### *Iranian Kurdistan and its two Ahl-i Ḥaqq Clusters*

Iranian Kurdistan stretches across three administrative provinces: Kurdistan, Kermanshah and Western Azarbaijan. The largest concentration of the Ahl-i Ḥaqq of Iran is to be found in the province of Kermanshah. This is the only province where the sect forms a continuous population; it exists elsewhere as small pockets of followers or as dispersed communities. The Ahl-i Ḥaqq of Kermanshah, numbering up to half a million, are grouped in two main clusters, at the western and eastern extremes of the province.

The larger Ahl-i Ḥaqq cluster is in the west, scattered in the mountainous territory of the Guran, on the border with Iraq; most of the Ahl-i Ḥaqq sacred places are also located here. This area, with the most dense concentration of the Ahl-i Ḥaqq in Iran, has a population of once nomadic but now settled tribes: the Guran and Qalkhani (all of whom are Ahl-i Ḥaqq), Sanjabi (90 per cent), and some sections of the Kalhur, Jalilvand and 'Usmanvand. Because of both their geographical situation and their tribal structure, the Ahl-i Ḥaqq communities of Guran remained highly isolated and relatively autonomous until early this century; and since the mid-nineteenth century they have been under the religious leadership of one single Sayyid family, the Ḥaydarīs. The religious centre of Guran is the village of Tutshami, which is also the seat of the Ḥaydarī Sayyids. The village also has a *takīyeh* (lodge) which was built in the mid-nineteenth century. It is the place where Sayyid Barake, whom the Guran believe to be the last manifestation of the Divine Essence, and his 36 dervishes held their sacred gatherings (*jam'*). The Sayyid's room is kept in its original state, and is part of a large compound that constitutes one of the sacred places of the Ahl-i Ḥaqq. It is also the place of residence of the Sayyid's spiritual successor, referred to as *takīyeh-dār* (i.e. custodian of the *takīyeh*).

The urban centre of Guran is the town of Kerend, harbouring two Ahl-i Ḥaqq shrines, those of Pīr Binyamīn and Pīr Mūsi. Until the early 1950s, Kerend's population comprised an Ahl-i Ḥaqq majority and a Jewish minority. By 1992 the town had lost its Jewish quarter (most Jews had migrated to Israel) and instead gained a Shī'a one, occupied by the families of civil servants, army personnel and (since 1979) revolutionary guards, stationed there. Qasr-i Shirin and Sar-i Pul-i Zuhab, the two other towns of the sub-province, also have substantial Ahl-i Ḥaqq communities, about one third of their population.

The second Ahl-i Haqq cluster is found in the eastern part of the province, in the town of Sahneh and its surrounding villages. Administratively, Sahneh is a district centre within the central sub-province of Kermanshah, and is the only town there with a predominantly Ahl-i Haqq population.<sup>14</sup> The Ahl-i Haqq of Sahneh district are not only fewer but less isolated and more prosperous; here Ahl-i Haqq communities have a peasant composition and do not include any tribes of the region. Since the early nineteenth century the religious centre of Sahneh has been the village of Jayhunabad, the seat of the Shāh Hayāsī Sayyids, whose influence has greatly diminished in recent years. Jayhunabad also has a *takīyeh*, built by Āqā Ismā'īl, the first Shāh Hayāsī Sayyid who settled there, having left Iraq under pressure from the Sunni Ottomans around the 1840s.

I went to Kermanshah with the assumption (largely derived from my previous research among the converts) that the reforms introduced by Nūr 'Alī had had a profound impact everywhere. Yet what I encountered was the deep division they have created and the force with which they are opposed and rejected there. There is, moreover, a sharp contrast in the ways in which Kermanshah's two Ahl-i Haqq clusters have responded to these reforms and have been evolving since the emergence of the Islamic Republic. While the Ahl-i Haqq of Sahneh are divided and torn apart by conflict, the opposite is true of the Guran, where a kind of religio-political centralization appears to be taking shape, which I believe has no precedent in the history of the sect. There are two related facets to these developments. While the first concerns the internal politics of the sect, the second has to do with the fact that the Ahl-i Haqq are now part of an Islamic Republic, which they see as hostile. This has revived a painful collective memory, dormant in the last few decades before the revolution. Let me elaborate by interjecting a brief historical note.

Both the scant historical data available on the sect, and its own sacred history as recorded in *kalām*, attest that the sect has its origins in early Shī'a movements. Its early sacred personages are closely associated with Shī'a Imams: the founder, Sultan Şohāk, was descended from the eighth Imam, and the most revered saint, Baba Yadegar, is believed to have been a reincarnation of the third Imam. It seems that it diverged from the main body of Ithnā 'Asharī Shī'ism when the latter became part of the state apparatus of the Safavids, in the early sixteenth century. As Shī'ism was transformed from a religion of protest into a religion of power and as it underwent extensive theological reforms, its earlier tendencies, such as Ahl-i Haqq, were pushed to the periphery. In time, these tendencies became more and more marginalized, and their once admissible beliefs then became patent heresies. Hence they acquired the label of *ghulāt*, those who indeed 'exaggerated' by comparison to the established Shī'ism of the Safavids.

The background against which the Ahl-i Haqq emerged and survived left an indelible trace in its collective sense of identity. Even today the adepts do not fail to remind the outsider that their religion is one of miracles and mystical power (*ī'jāz va karāmat*), not one of worldly compromises and force. Their ancestors accepted it because of what they saw in it, not because they wanted power and succumbed to it or the faith was forced on them. Similar sentiments abound in the

<sup>14</sup> This sub-province has always had the same name as the Province itself, which also includes the city of Kermanshah.

sect's sacred narrative, relating a tradition of suppressed and tacit opposition to imposed orthodoxies, which the adepts dismiss as the rules of the outer world ('*ālam-i zāhir*), declaring their own dogmas and practices to be governed by the rules of the inner world ('*ālam-i bātin*). It is in this context of defiance of orthodoxies that the sect must be viewed.<sup>15</sup> For instance, instead of *namāz* (the daily prayer) the Ahl-i Haqq developed *niyāz* (lit. supplication, a dialogue with the Divine), which then became the main form of their worship and was combined with making an offering of food; instead of the Ramadān fast, the Ahl-i Haqq have a three-day fast in winter, and instead of the *hajj* pilgrimage to Mecca, they go to Shaykhan, a village in Awraman where Sultān Ṣohāk founded the sect and where his tomb is, and become Hājī by performing the necessary rituals. The adepts call themselves People of *Niyāz*, and other Muslims, whether Shī'a or Sunni, People of *Namāz*. The latter are seen as those concerned with and aware of only the outer aspects of the faith, whereas the adepts are those who are concerned with the inner aspect.

The same is true of the sect's cardinal dogma, *mazhariyyat*, or manifestation of the Divine Essence, which in essence is but a literal interpretation of the Shī'a concept of Imamate and the Sufi concept of the Perfect Man.<sup>16</sup> But as articulated in *kalām* and as understood by ordinary adepts, *mazhariyyat* transcends both. It informs the sect's cosmogony and defines its theology. Both revolve around successive manifestations of the Divine Essence. In each manifestation the Divine Essence (*zāt-i haqq*) appears in a different human form, likened to putting on a different robe (*jāmeḥ*).<sup>17</sup> Cosmic time and the universe have a cyclical dimension, consisting of different cycles of manifestation. Ahl-i Haqq religion existed from pre-eternity, *azal*, when the Divine Essence was hidden in a pearl; the pearl in a shell; the shell in an ocean, encompassing the universe. The creation of the world was the outcome of the first of these cycles, when the Divine Essence was manifested in Khavandgar, the Creator. Islam is the product of the next cycle when the Divine Essence was manifested in 'Alī, the first Shī'a Imam. This established the stage of *sharī'at* (Islamic law). Then in the course of other cycles the stages of *ṭarīqat* (Sufism, teachings and rituals of the order) and *ma'rifat* (Gnosis, knowledge of the Divine Reality) were established. Finally the Divine Essence manifested itself in Sultān Ṣohāk, who brought new laws, establishing Ahl-i Haqq as a separate creed. This is the stage of *ḥaqīqat* (Ultimate Truth, mystical experience of the Divine Reality), which supersedes the previous stages, and thus frees adepts from observing the *Sharī'a* rules incumbent on Muslims. It was during this cycle that the last component of the 'mystery' was revealed, through the pact that Sultān made with

<sup>15</sup> For the interaction between the two worlds, see Ziba Mir-Hosseini, 'Inner Truth and Outer History: the Two Worlds of an Iranian Mystical Sect, Ahl-i Haqq of Kurdistan', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 1994, 26 (4), pp.267–85.

<sup>16</sup> Such literal understanding is in fact what separates the sect from Sufi precepts. See Mir-Hosseini, 'Inner Truth and ...' and 'Faith, Ritual ...'.

<sup>17</sup> This appears to be influenced by Isma'ili beliefs; see Minorsky, 'Ahl-i Haqq', p.10; and in particular Mokri's interesting discussion in *Le Chasseur de Dieu et le Myth du Roi Aigle (Dawra-ye Damyari)*, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1967, pp.47–53.

his companions, mirroring the one that was made in pre-eternity which resulted in the creation of the world.<sup>18</sup>

### *Ahl-i Haqq and the Challenge of Reforms*

What the reformist group are now doing is to challenge these age-old Ahl-i Haqq beliefs and practices. Although, as already mentioned, Hāj Ni'mat sowed the seeds of the challenge, its style and the force with which it is now pursued owe much to the ingenuity of Bahram Ilāhī, the current leader of the reformist group. He has done this in three major ways: by employing a kind of shaming technique, labelling some of the sect's dogmas *kohneh bavārhā* (old beliefs); by discrediting the traditional religious élite (the Sayyids) of the Ahl-i Haqq; and by stressing the urgency of and the need for radical reforms. The reformists constantly remind the ordinary adepts of their ignorance, blame them for not knowing their own sacred doctrines, and declare these to be in essence not different from the Shī'a. They hold the Sayyids responsible for both the ignorance and the 'distortion' of the sect's true teachings.<sup>19</sup> Finally, they hold that with the teachings of Nūr 'Alī, referred to as *ḥāzrat-i ustād*, 'the esteemed Master', a new phase has begun in which some of the old rules are to be abrogated.

The new phase appears to be a combination of the two phases of *shar'at* and *ḥaqīqat*. The adepts are now required to observe rules incumbent on all Muslims, including performing the daily prayers and the fast during the month of Ramadan. At the same time, Bahram has elaborated and further expanded the inner teachings, which are the products of the phase of *ḥaqīqat*. He has elaborated the reforms in the course of weekly gatherings (*jam'*) held at his house in Tehran, when new directives, referred to as 'lessons', are disseminated and discussed. He claims to derive all 'lessons', from the teachings of the Master Nūr 'Alī, as elaborated in his seminal work, *Burhān al-Haqq* and the two volumes of his sayings, known as *Āsār al-Haqq*. Both volumes, which appeared after Nūr 'Alī's death (the first four years and the second 18 years after), are in practice an outlet for the ideas of Bahram, who is gradually making available some of the hitherto unrevealed teachings of the Master. Reformists hold that, since his departure, Nūr 'Alī has continued to transmit new directives from the inner world through Shaykh Janī, his blind sister, who acted as medium between the two worlds until she died in September 1993.

In his attempts to purge the faith of its 'decadent and fanatical' beliefs, Bahram first implicitly and then explicitly challenged the authority of the traditional leadership. To understand the nature of this challenge we must look at the principle

<sup>18</sup> On the concept of the pact in the Ahl-i Haqq and in Islamic tradition see Mokri 'Le Kalam Gourani sur le Pacte des Compagnons Fidèles de Vérité au sein de la Perle Premondiale', *Journal Asiatique*, 1977, pp.237–71.

<sup>19</sup> For new ways in which the Ahl-i Haqq is now defined, see Chapter 19 of *La Voie* (second edition, 1982) and the introduction written by Jean During, who is also a convert. In his own book, *Musique et mystique dans les traditions de l'Iran*, Paris & Tehran: Institut Français de Recherche en Iran, 1989, During has a chapter on the sect in which he echoes Bahram Ilāhī when he says: 'les représentants éclairés de l'ordre ne cessent de déplorer l'ignorance de leurs coreligionnaires, qui a conduit des groupes entiers à des déviations', p.295.

of holy descent or *siyādat* which is in effect inseparable from the sect's central dogma, *mazhariyyat*. While the latter forms the theological core of the sect, the former is the very basis of its social organization.

Sayyids are descendants (either spiritual or biological) of the sect's founder or one of his later manifestations, and they fall into 11 holy lineages, referred to as *khāndān* (lit. House or dynasty). Seven of these *khāndāns* originated at the time of Sultān Ṣohāk, the sect's founder, in the fifteenth century; the rest were formed subsequently, when the Divine Essence made further manifestations.<sup>20</sup> Each *khāndān* is headed by a certain Sayyid family referred to as *pīr*. The Ahl-i Ḥaqq see the main function of a *khāndān* as providing the commoners (who are referred to, by themselves and the Sayyids, as *tāyifeh*, lit., tribe) personal access to divinity, a connection which is similar to that between a Sufi master and his disciples. Sayyids are believed to have inherited the divine quality of their ancestors in whom the Divine Essence was once manifested. It is their divine ancestry that enables them to act as *pīr* (spiritual master), leading the commoners along the right path. No ceremony can take place without the presence of a Sayyid. Their link with commoners defines the sacred as well as the social boundaries of the community. Every Ahl-i Ḥaqq individual must recognize as *pīr* a Sayyid from the *khāndān* in which his/her father was initiated. The initiation is called *sar-sipurdan*, which literally means 'dedicating one's head'; it should take place not later than a year after a child is born. In this way the relations between certain Sayyids and commoners' families extend over generations. This relationship, referred to as *pīr-murīdī* (master-disciple), is the focus of Ahl-i Ḥaqq community and is regulated by a network of mutual obligations and duties, among them the payment of a religious due and a marriage-ban. The due, known as *sarāneh*, is payable to the Sayyid to whom one has 'dedicated one's head'. The marriage-ban between Sayyid families and commoners, though it appears to distinguish two endogamous strata, is seen by Ahl-i Ḥaqq rather as a kind of incest taboo: they consider their community to be a large family in which Sayyids are seen as spiritual parents of commoners.

The reformists now argue that holy descent on its own is not sufficient for spiritual leadership, as the effect of Divine Essence (*zāt*) does not extend beyond three generations. They say that the time for unification of all *khāndāns* has arrived; there is talk of the formation of a new *khāndān*, in line with the teachings of Nūr 'Alī, to supersede all the previous ones. Interestingly this new *khāndān* is named Davāzdah Imāmī, Twelve Imams, further evidence of the pursuit of compatibility with Shī'a orthodoxies.

These ideas, which constitute a serious challenge to the hereditary claims of Sayyids to the leadership of the Ahl-i Ḥaqq community, have antagonized Sayyids from different *khāndāns*, even those who initially welcomed Bahram's efforts to secure the sect a kind of respectability. Their religious authority, which is at the root of their personal power and influence in the community, is at stake. Their immediate economic interests are also threatened, as many of them earn income from annual

<sup>20</sup> For a list of the *khāndāns*, see Hamzeh'ee, *Yaresan*, pp.205–209. In Kermanshah these *khāndāns* predominate: Shāh Ibrāhīmī (whose Sayyids used to claim leadership), Khāmūshī, Yādghāzī, Shāh Ḥayāsī and Ātash Begī.

payments they receive from those who are initiated into their *khāndān* as well as from fees for officiating at ceremonies. All this has forced the Sayyids to put aside their endemic rivalry and to present a unified front, by disowning Nūr 'Alī and his reforms. In winter 1983 and again in spring 1989, two open letters, signed by a large number of Ahl-i Haqq Sayyids, denounced Nūr 'Alī's teaching and declared those following him to be outside the bounds of the Ahl-i Haqq faith. The second letter was sent to the office of the President of Islamic Republic and to the leaders of Friday Prayers in all major towns of the country.<sup>21</sup>

*The Legacy of Nūr 'Alī's Reforms: Factionalism in Sahneh*

In Sahneh the Ahl-i Haqq scene is dominated by the reformists and the challenge that they pose to the traditional leadership. The challenge has its origins in a dispute stretching over three generations. It started when Hāj Ni'mat, a commoner, made a bid for the leadership of the Ahl-i Haqq community in Sahneh. A literate man who had worked as scribe and landlord's agent in a nearby village, he retired in 1899 to his natal village, Jayhunabad, to comply with a spiritual calling. This was shortly after his recovery from a severe illness, when he made a journey to the 'other world' and was given the title of *Hāj Vahāb* (bestower) and was told that the time had come to reveal the 'truth' and unify all *khāndāns*.<sup>22</sup> A charismatic man, well versed in Ahl-i Haqq sacred narrative, Hāj Ni'mat soon acquired a large number of dervish followers. They upheld his claim, inscribed on a black screen decorating a wall of his house, announcing the coming of the Lord of Time (*ṣāhib al-zamān*). His dervish followers, said to be as many as 900, from the surrounding villages and the town of Sahneh, made Hāj Ni'mat's house, (*māl-i Hajjī*) the centre of their activities.

All these events enraged Āqā Hamīd-Jān the then leading Sayyid (*masnad-nishīn*) of the Shāh Hayāsī *khāndān*, whose house (*māl-i Āqā*) was until then the only focus for the followers' devotions. It is said that Āqā Hamīd-Jān, who had armed men at his disposal, first wanted to have Hāj Ni'mat beheaded but was prevented by Sayyids from other *khāndāns* in Sahneh who did not want 'Sayyids' hands to be stained with blood'.<sup>23</sup> Instead he banished Hāj Ni'mat from Jayhunabad and had his dervishes' hair cut off, which deprived them of their dervish status. After further intercession by Sayyids from Sahneh, Hāj Ni'mat came back a year later and dropped his claims, replacing the black screen with a white flag, to symbolize his

<sup>21</sup> A copy of the letter is in my possession.

<sup>22</sup> In section Five of *Shāhnāme* and Part 3 of *Furqān*, Hāj Ni'mat discusses his own life and spiritual status and reveals his mission to unify the sect and to intercede with the 'Lord of Time' to give absolution of sins to the followers. See *Shāhnāme*, 1985, pp.409–15. For a summary of *Furqān* see Minorsky, 'Ahl-i Haqq', pp.11-12 and Mokri's French introduction to his 1982 edition of *Shāhnāme*, pp.8-9.

<sup>23</sup> These Sayyids were from the Shāh Ibrāhīm *khāndān*, which used to be the most powerful *khāndān* in both clusters of Ahl-i Haqq in Kermanshah. In Guran about 50 years earlier they had lost ground to the Haydarī Sayyids (see Mir-Hosseini, 'Inner Truth ... '), and probably they tolerated or even encouraged Hāj Ni'mat's challenging the Shāh Hayāsī Sayyids, their rivals in Sahneh.

retirement from the world.<sup>24</sup> But he never gave up his spiritual calling and devoted the rest of his life to writing an *Ahl-i Haqq* history and scrutinizing the diverse traditions of the sect. It was in the course of sifting 'false' from 'true' that he came to air his reforming ideas. He made the first attempts to reconcile the sect with Shī'ism and to challenge the absolute authority of the Sayyids and their claims to the leadership of the sect. He died in 1920, at the very end of the Qājār era when, as we shall see below, the Shāh Hayāsī still enjoyed royal patronage.

Influenced by his father's reforming ideas, Nūr 'Alī started the actual dialogue with Shī'a orthodoxy. He went to study in Qum and became well trained in Shī'a theology, before embarking on a civil career. He was a respected judge when he retired in 1957 to devote his energies to guiding his disciples. It is significant to note that Nūr 'Alī, unlike his father, never made a direct bid for leadership. In fact he did not need to: his achievement in the theological field had earned him a great deal of influence, ensuring him both a place in the *Ahl-i Haqq* leadership and the respect of the Shī'a authorities. At the same time, changes in the wider society and village structures as well as the erosion of the Shāh Hayāsī Sayyids' power-base made such a bid redundant. The sect's increasing contact, through its educated members, with the urban religious élite whose Islam was theoretically more sophisticated, and with the modern educated élite who were attracted to religion on a more personal basis, was transforming the sect's traditional sphere of authority. The *Ahl-i Haqq* now had to adapt itself if it was to survive in this new context. First, its dogmas had to be reinterpreted in order to be purged of those elements that had put it outside the boundaries of official Islam. Secondly, it had to compete with the Islam of the clergy without opposing it directly. Nūr 'Alī did this in his writings, not only achieving a synthesis between *Ahl-i Haqq* and Shī'ism but also devising a coherent theology for the sect. He brought to the surface the mystical elements of the sect and at the same time relegated its 'heretical' elements to the realms of myth and found a symbolic language to explain them.

It is only since the early 1980s that his spiritual heir, Bahram, has taken it upon himself to make an explicit bid for leadership. There are two reasons for this. First, the emergence of the Islamic Republic made it expedient to distance the sect from its non-orthodox elements, which still abounded among the traditional followers. Secondly, a void was created in the traditional leadership in 1982 by the sudden death of the last Shāh Hayāsī *masnad-nishīn*, Sayyid Nūr. He had succeeded his father, a powerful and revered man with still substantial land-ownership, only six years earlier. Sayyid Nūr himself was a high-ranking civil servant and commanded a great deal of respect in Sahneh. His son was too young and there was no one to replace him but his blind and illiterate brother, whose hereditary authority was

<sup>24</sup> Apparently it was during this period that he made contact with some of the Christian missionaries in Kermanshah. See F.M. Stead, 'The Ali Ilahi Sect in Persia', *Moslem World*, 22, 1932, pp.188–89. It was also a Christian, Sa'īd Khān Kordestānī, a Kurdish convert, who provided Minorsky with a copy of *Furqān*, 'The Sect of Ahl-e Haqq (Ali Ilahis)', *Muslim World*, 18, 1927, p.42.

easier to undermine.<sup>25</sup> All this prompted Bahram to pursue the reforming ideas of his forefathers to their logical conclusion and to make the final assault on the Sayyids' power-base. One of the reforms initiated by Hāj Ni'mat which Nūr 'Alī later fully developed was to raise the status of the *dīdeh-dār*, (lit. a person with sight, i.e. to see the inner world) at the expense of Sayyids. In the Ahl-i Haqq tradition, *dīdeh-dār* is merely a 'seer', heralding the coming of the Divine Manifestation. Although they are highly esteemed and are believed themselves to carry a spark of the *zāt*, they can neither replace nor assume any of the functions of Sayyids. Their *zāt*, unlike that of Sayyids, is transitory, not inherited by their descendants. Nūr 'Alī, who claimed for his father the rank of *dīdeh-dār*, made two revisionary assertions: first, that *dīdeh-dārs* only started to appear after the formation of the existing eleven *khāndāns*; and secondly that in the absence of the divine manifestation, directives from a *dīdeh-dār* took precedence over those of the leading Sayyid of the *Khāndān*.<sup>26</sup>

What Bahram has done is to highlight these new dogmas and to give them a coherent and systematic articulation. As now articulated, the reforms question the very legitimacy of the claims of the Sayyids of different *khāndāns* to any kind of sanctity. This has deepened the already existing rift between the supporters of Sayyids and those who welcomed the reforms of the Maktabīs. The rift reached its climax in spring 1989, when one of the Maktabīs defected to the Sayyids' camp and made a number of confessions, revealing some of the 'immoral' and 'deviant' practices prevalent among former associates. His confessions, whose tone and content were deeply shocking to local sensibilities, were tape-recorded by an ambitious Sayyid of the 'Alī-Qlandarī *Khāndān* of Sahneh, who passed copies to the Shāh Hayāsī Sayyids in Jayhunabad. The tape, which was listened to by many, was used to discredit and mock Maktabīs and their reforms, especially by questioning their moral and sexual integrity. Humiliated and enraged, Maktabīs attacked the houses of the leading Shāh Hayāsī Sayyid in Jayhunabad and the 'Alī-Qlandarī Sayyid in Sahneh. The clashes in Sahneh, which resulted in one man dying and the other becoming paralysed, finally ended when the authorities intervened and made a number of arrests on both sides. In Jayhunabad, the Sayyids had to leave and to take refuge in Kermanshah for about six months; the dispute was finally resolved by the intervention of the leading Sayyids from other *khandans* and the MP of Sahneh.

The radical break between the two groups came in winter 1991, however, when an order from Nūr 'Alī, transmitted by his sister, Shaykh Janī, required Ahl-i Haqq men to shave their moustaches. For the Ahl-i Haqq, an intact moustache is an element of faith on which the *kalām* are explicit. Tampering with one's moustache, spoken of as 'breaking its seal', can lead to excommunication, which is only expiated by offering a sacrifice. An unkempt moustache, which has come to embody the outer manifestation of the faith, is a potent marker of the sect's identity. In short, it is the very core of Ahl-i Haqq male self, separating them from ordinary Muslims.

<sup>25</sup> Jayhunabad is exceptional among the villages in the area in its high level of education: its emigrants are highly educated and often occupy important posts. Thus the *masnad-nishīn* is expected to match these levels.

<sup>26</sup> See Mokri, *Esoterisme Kurde*, pp.99–104.

The order to shave moustaches created an uproar, even among those who were silent supporters of the reforms. It put the reformists out of the bounds of the Ahl-i Ḥaqq and gave the Sayyids the much needed evidence to prove their non-Ahl-i Ḥaqq ideas and subversive intentions. What made matters worse was that it was backed by a *fatwā* from Āyatollāh Arakī in Qum. This was the last straw, which gave substance to rumours of sabotage from within. The Maktabīs are now accused of conspiring with outsiders to undermine the unity of the sect. In practice the order has removed most local support for the reforms which largely rested on the respect and authority that Ḥāj Ni'mat and Nūr 'Alī used to command for their endeavours to introduce the sect to outsiders. Now their ideas are seen as deviations, as conspiracies, all engineered by outsiders to destroy the sect from within.

*Opposition to Reforms: Unification in Guran*

In the other Ahl-i Ḥaqq cluster in Kermanshah, Guran, which also constitutes the largest concentration of the sect in Iran, not only have the reformists made no inroads but there is a kind of unification taking place under the leadership of a single Ḥaydarī Sayyid, Naṣr al-Dīn. The Revolution in 1979 and its aftermath were catalysts for this unification: they not only revived old memories of centuries of religious oppression but brought home the prospect of a Shī'a backlash. Through his leadership, Sayyid Naṣr al-Dīn has managed not only to protect the Ahl-i Ḥaqq communities in Guran from such a backlash but to negotiate a political role for them during the eight years of war with Iraq. He personally headed an Ahl-i Ḥaqq militia, fighting side by side with the state-organized *basij* (volunteer para-military force) to guard the only sector of the frontier that the Iraqi army failed to penetrate. In doing so, he turned the clock back: the Ahl-i Ḥaqq tribes were the guardians of the frontier until the formation of the national army in the 1920s.

Apart from resurrecting old politics, Sayyid Naṣr al-Dīn has managed to use the modern political machinery of the Islamic Republic to give a voice to the Ahl-i Ḥaqq. In both the previous and the 1992 parliamentary elections he proved that his support for one candidate could transform the electoral results at the level of the province. In April 1982, there was fierce competition between two candidates: one was supported by the Imām Jum'eh and the governor of Kermanshah and the other was an outspoken man who went to parliament, with the support of the Ahl-i Ḥaqq communities, in the previous election. This man was disqualified at the last minute—all candidates must be approved by a council in Tehran. When the news reached Kermanshah, less than eight hours were left to the end of campaign time. The Ahl-i Ḥaqq had no substitute, leaving the field to the other candidate. However, in an attempt to show Ahl-i Ḥaqq political muscle, Sayyid Naṣr al-Dīn gave his blessing to a third candidate, a young mullah who had just graduated from Qum; he was an unknown with no political record and little prospects, and without the funds to produce enough posters to run his campaign. Just hours before the start of balloting, this young mullah was approached by messengers from Sayyid Naṣr al-Dīn and was asked 'what would you do for the Ahl-i Ḥaqq if we gave you all our votes?' He was shrewd enough to reply 'I make no promises now, but I tell you one thing, that in four years' time either you will vote for me again or I would not have the face to look at you'. He was elected to the parliament by a very large margin.

Given the age-old hostilities and the present discrimination that the Ahl-i Haqq are subjected to, the choice of a mullah as their representative seems indeed paradoxical. Yet this choice indicates, more than anything else, the triumph of expediency over dogma and has many precedents in the wider political scene and in the sect's history. Close allies of Sayyid Naṣr al-Dīn and those who went among the Ahl-i Haqq communities to run a last-minute campaign for the mullah, told me that they themselves were not sure whether the Ahl-i Haqq would vote for him. Yet as the results confirm, the Sayyid's religious authority and his pre-revolutionary political record were sufficient to convince the incredulous voters. It is no exaggeration to say that virtually the entire population of the Guran voted for a young mullah who otherwise had no chance of success. The episode underlined the extent of the Sayyid's religio-political power, as well as sending a strong message to the authorities that it is Sayyid Naṣr al-Dīn, not Nūr 'Alī's successor, whom the Ahl-i Haqq of Kermanshah recognize as their *de facto* leader: a message that the authorities, to their consternation, had to acknowledge.

#### *Tribal Versus Peasant Settings of the Ahl-i Haqq*

There are several factors which can account for the different ways in which the two Ahl-i Haqq clusters in Kermanshah have evolved and responded to the emergence of the Islamic Republic. Without going into detail, I merely outline them here.

The tribal structure of the Guran, and Sayyid Naṣr al-Dīn's style of leadership, are both in line with the internal structure of the Ahl-i Haqq communities, in which religious and political aspects of power are very much intertwined. For the adepts, Sayyid Naṣr al-Dīn has now come to embody both aspects; and in that sense he is following a family tradition. He comes from a line of Sayyids who rose to power in the mid-nineteenth century, when the Divine Essence manifested itself in an unknown Sayyid, Ḥaydar, who later became known as Sayyid Barake. This manifestation was upheld by the paramount chief of the Guran tribe, who donated land to the *takīyeh* (lodge) built by the Sayyid and his dervishes and gave them protection. Sayyid Barake was a shrewd man who successfully used the tribal in-fighting and rivalries within the Guran chiefdom to consolidate his power-base. After him, his son continued his line, and paved the way for grafting his religious office onto the tribal structure of Guran. Apart from forging new alliances, this was done through a number of marriages between women from chiefly families and male descendants of Sayyid Barake, which entailed the modification of Ahl-i Haqq marriage rules. In this way, Ḥaydarī Sayyids in effect became leaders of all the Ahl-i Haqq of the Guran and remained influential until the early 1920s when Rezā Shāh's centralization policies dismantled tribal chiefdoms and sent chiefs into exile.

With the emergence of the Islamic Republic and the onset of war with Iraq, the entire political scene was transformed. New alliances needed to be made and thus the dormant tribal politics came to the surface. Interestingly, despite the abolition of the tribal chiefdoms early this century, and despite the continued efforts since then to undermine tribal political structures everywhere in Iran, they survived in the Guran and among the Ahl-i Haqq, only because of the religious dimension. It is this factor that accounts for the unification of the Ahl-i Haqq in Guran, as it is still capable of bringing different factions together at a time of crisis. In Sahneh, on the

other hand, the religio-political fabric has always been very different. Situated in the most fertile plains of Kermanshah, Sahneh and its villages have always been less isolated, more prosperous, less removed from centres of religious learning and under tighter government control. In Qājār times, the power in Sahneh, unlike Guran, did not rest with tribal chiefs but with a landed gentry who enjoyed close ties with central government. In fact a large part of Sahneh's agricultural land was state-owned (*khālīseh*), whose rent was allocated to certain court notables in lieu of salary or as reward for service. The Ahl-i Haqq Sayyids were closely allied with this landed gentry. Both the way that this alliance came about, and its subsequent structure, resemble the rise of the Ḥaydarī Sayyids in Guran. The centre of this alliance was the village of Jayhunabad, the seat of the Shāh Ḥayāsī *khāndān*. This *khāndān*, which came into existence in the early fifteenth century, had its base in Iraqi Kurdistan until the early nineteenth century when, under pressure from the Sunni Ottomans, Āqā Ismā'īl, the grandson of Shāh Hayas, came to Iran. Legend has it that Āqā Ismā'īl was invited to come to Iran by Muḥammad Shāh Qājār, who defeated his rival brother to ascend the throne thanks to the inner power of Shāh Hayas. On his way to Tehran, Āqā Ismā'īl was welcomed by one of his landed disciples, who invited him to settle in the village of Jayhunabad. Āqā Ismā'īl declined the offer but chose a site overlooking the village, where he built a *takīyeh*. Later the disciple dedicated one third of the land of each of the three surrounding villages to the *takīyeh*. Also the Shah allocated the land-tax of the state lands of Sahneh and seven of its villages as a contribution to Āqā Ismā'īl's *sufreh* expenditure, that is to provide for his guests. His descendants, who inherited these privileges, became the recruiting head of the Nanikali tribe of Kermanshah, an armed division composed of Ahl-i Haqq forces put at the disposal of the central government whenever required.

Although the Ḥaydarī and Shāh Ḥayāsī Sayyids have a great deal in common in the way they rose to power and gained influence, their fortunes started to differ in the present century. Whereas the Ḥaydarī Sayyids were able to maintain, even to strengthen, both their power base and their religious authority in the face of changes in the wider Iranian society, the opposite has happened to the Shāh Ḥayāsī. Their influence began to erode under Rezā Shāh Pahlavī with the creation of the national army and the growth of literacy, suffered severely under the land reform of 1962, and received a final blow with the revolution of 1979. All these strengthened the hand of the reformist faction which aimed to redefine the sect's dogmas and presented a serious threat to its traditional leadership in Sahneh. Yet it must be stressed that this faction has so far failed to gain ground in Kermanshah, and seems unlikely ever to do so. The absence of tribal structures of power in Sahneh, where they have made some inroads, precludes the emergence of spontaneous alliances from inside and puts the Ahl-i Haqq leadership in a different position. No leader here can afford to by-pass the religious sensibilities of the Islamic Republic and appeal only to its political machinery, as the Guran leader has done. Yet no leader can win the trust of the masses of the Ahl-i Haqq when he is prepared to ignore their old wounds and to flirt with Shī'a orthodoxies.

It was perhaps in recognition of this fact that the reformist leader, Bahram Ilāhī, decided to make the final break with the sect in 1991. A decade ago when I began attending his weekly sessions in Tehran, he was still keen to have his message

accepted by the sect's traditional followers. A large part of the 'lessons' were devoted to examining and justifying the reforms, and rebuking the 'backward' and 'ignorant' Sayyids who had 'corrupted the faith'. Even as late as 1989, his followers in Kermanshah were trying to expand their influence and gain ground in Guran. By 1993 Bahram and his group were disowning any connection with the Ahl-i Haqq of Kermanshah, and wanting to be known as 'followers of the Path of Perfection'. It is significant that they broke free from the bonds of tradition by striking at one of the sect's taboos, 'breaking the seal of the moustache'. Just as raising the status of *dādeh-dār* over Sayyids compelled the religious élite of the sect to take a position, so the order to shave off moustaches impelled the commoners to distance themselves, even those who until then supported the reforms. The new converts have no difficulty in accepting this order, which was said to come from the inner world and to be a 'test' to assess the adepts' true understanding of and compliance with Nūr 'Alī's teachings. But those born into the sect found it exceedingly difficult to comply with it and many of Nūr 'Alī's followers defied the order. In Spring 1992, over a year after its issue, the order was still the main theme of 'lessons' for adepts in Sahneh.<sup>27</sup> Judging from the questions that followed these 'lessons', Kurdish adepts still found it hard to come to terms with the order; in fact almost all men had grown beards to cover their 'naked' faces.

With the death of Nūr 'Alī's sister, Shaykh Janī, in September 1993, the reformists' last bond with Kermanshah were severed. A medium between Nūr 'Alī and his disciples, Shaykh Janī became the focus for their devotional sentiments. This in turn made Jayhunabad, where she lived all her life, the centre of their ritual activities. Disciples used to travel from Tehran and elsewhere to seek her blessing and to attend ceremonies held in her house every Thursday evening. Now it is to Tehran and Paris that they have to turn.<sup>28</sup>

### *Coda*

It is important to stress that the situation is far from settled. There is not only intense rivalry for the leadership among the Ahl-i Haqq Sayyids in Kermanshah, but there is little consensus among them, either on Ahl-i Haqq doctrine and rites or on their policy toward the reforms, which have an intrinsic attraction for the youth in Kermanshah. At one extreme there is the voice of those who argue that the Ahl-i Haqq is the essence of Shī'a Islam, which represents the Shī'a of 'Alī (*tashayyu'-i 'Alavī*) as opposed to the present form of Shī'ism corrupted by the Safavids

<sup>27</sup> In summer 1992 when I conducted a census in Jayhunabad, Maktabīs constituted 18% of the households. But their influence is much greater than their size. They enjoy a great deal of cohesion and form a close network eager to assist each other. Neither is the case among the rest of the followers, who are divided on many issues but their rejection of Maktabīs. Sometimes even households are divided, often the wife and the children being secretly supporters of the Maktabīs.

<sup>28</sup> This is how the sect is presented on the back cover of *Le Chemin*: 'Cette école est universelle: ses principes se repandent et sont acceptés, même si les gens n'en connaissent pas l'origine et n'ont pas entendu parler de nous. Le nom ne nous interesse pas. Notre école n'a pas de couleur, n'a pas de territoire, n'est pas fermée. C'est une école pour ceux qui ont soif de spiritualité, qui veulent Dieu pour Dieu.'

(*tashayyu'-i Ṣafavī*). At the other extreme, there are those who argue that the Ahl-i Ḥaqq is a separate religion from Islam and must be understood in its own right. They want to establish minority status for the sect and recognition by the Iranian constitution. Between these two extremes, which together constitute a small minority of believers, one finds the majority who, in line with the reformist tendency, but in different forms, see the Ahl-i Ḥaqq as part of the Islamic tradition but representing its mystical side (*'irfān*). These voices largely come from the towns of Sahneh and Kermanshah, while those in Guran, in line with Sayyid Naṣr al-Dīn, are unimpressed by these doctrinal debates and are aiming to find a role in the machinery of the regime and to offset its discriminatory policies towards the Ahl-i Ḥaqq youth.

These different voices of the Ahl-i Ḥaqq in Iran clearly indicate that they see themselves at a crossroads where they must either bow to internal and external pressures and undergo further reforms, by purging those elements of their faith which form its traditional core but put them outside the bounds of Shī'ism; or make a radical break from Shī'a orthodoxy altogether. The unification of *khāndāns*, if it is ever achieved, is bound to transform the sect beyond recognition. It will also compromise the sect's mystical tradition, which owes its durability to the very existence of multiple centres of internal spiritual authority. It was this factor, combined with the absence of a rigid theological basis, that enabled the sect to retain and remain true to its mystical heritage.

Whether the Ahl-i Ḥaqq sect will continue to survive this latest challenge as it has done so far and retain its core intact, or whether it will adapt itself to the new expediencies and allow its truths to be redefined in line with Shī'a orthodoxies, remains to be seen. What I have attempted to do here is to suggest the elements of a likely answer.