

# **Beyond Turk and Hindu**

Rethinking Religious Identities

in Islamicate South Asia

Edited by David Gilmartin and Bruce B. Lawrence

University Press of Florida

Gainesville. Tallahassee. Tampa. Boca Raton

Pensacola. Orlando. Miami. Jacksonville. Ft Myers

# Real Men and Fasle Men at the Court of Akbar

## The *Majalis* of Shaykh Mustafa Gujarati

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The year 982/1574 was an auspicious one for the intellectual history of Muslim India. It was a year which, following the successful Mughal conquest of Gujarat, saw the introduction to the imperial court of the two bitter antagonists, Bada' uni and Abu al-Fazl, the building of the foundation of the *'ibadat-khanah* (house of devotion) at Fatehpur Sikri, and the inauguration there of intensive discussions concerning the nature of Islam in India as the emperor Akbar strove to locate an ideology congenial to him personally and to the expanding empire. In the same year, Asaf Khan, the Mir Bakhshi, brought a prisoner from Gujarat to Fatehpur Sikri. His name was Shaykh Mustafa, and he was a Mahdavi of some renown who had already entered into a lengthy correspondence with Shaykh Mubarak, Abu al-Fazl's father, met Akbar himself at Patan during the conquest of Gujarat, and been subjected to a prolonged and strenuous interrogation at Ahmadabad by Mirza 'Aziz Koka, the first Mughal governor of Gujarat and Akbar's foster brother. Shaykh Mustafa would spend over a year at the court of Akbar, meeting Bada' uni, Shaykh 'Abd an-Nabi, and other Mughal luminaries, and serving as the main course in a series of imperial disputations concerning his movement, the Mahdaviyah. Fortunately for historians, Shaykh Mustafa left an account of five of these sessions (*majalis*), copied in some haste by his son, Faqir Jalal. This little-known source, the subject of this chapter, provides privileged access to the disputation of identity at a critical juncture in Indo-Muslim history.

Shaykh Mustafa belonged to the Mahdaviyah community, which attributes its origins to Sayyid Muhammad Jaunpuri (847-910/ 1443-1505), a pious Chishti Sufi from North India who arrived in Ahmadabad in 902/1497 and began teaching a radical Sufi message at the mosque of Taj Khan Salar<sup>1</sup>. Expelled from Ahmadabad for his views on the vision of God and then from Patan for his *takfir* (anathema) of those who desire the world, he settled in Barli, just outside of Patan, where the mixed message of his earlier years was clarified in a divine audition: "You are

<sup>1</sup> The biography of the Mahdi given here is reconstructed from the earliest collections of traditions, assembled by Bandagi Miyan Vali ibn Yusuf (d. after 955/1548), *Insaf-namah* (Hyderabad: Shamsiyah, 1947), and the first cohesive biography by Bandagi Miyan Shah'Abd ar-Rahman (d. after 950/1543), *Sirat-i Imam Mahdi Maw'ud khalifat allah* (Hyderabad: Jam'iyat-i Mahdaviyah, 1948). Later Mahdavis wrote prodigious biographies of the Mahdi, but these are less useful for the historical Mahdi than for subsequent developments. See, e.g., the most important of the Mughal period biographies, Bandagi Miyan Sayyid Burhan ud-Din (d. 1062/1651), *Shavahid al-vilayat* (Hyderabad: Jam'i yat Mahdaviyah, 1959).

promised Mahdi; proclaim the manifestation of your Mahdship, and do not fear the people.”<sup>2</sup> His public proclamation at Barli propelled him from the ranks of those with acceptable Sufi charisma into the more dangerous realm of Mahdi charisma. His increasingly focused rejection of the political and religious status quo coupled with mounting support among the religious and political elite led to his expulsion from Gujarat. Sayyid Muhammad emigrated first to Sind and then, after his expulsion there, to Khurasan where he settled at Farah and spend the last three years of his life, dying on Monday 19 al-Qa’dah 910 (23 April 1505).

The death of the Mahdi left the nascent community in considerable disarray. His followers regrouped back in Gujarat, where they began to work out the implications of a Mahdism without a Mahdi or a new scripture. While some Mahdavis claimed to be ‘Isa (Jesus) and others looked for the Dajjal (Antichrist), most of his companions attempted to locate the Mahdi in an eschatological and social context and to provide a blue print for the guidance of the community<sup>3</sup>. This process involved a series of restructurings and reimaginings of the notions and practices of being Muslim in India.

The early Mahdavis proposed by passing historically evolved Islam and returning to projected origins. Rejecting the notions of *taqlid* (binding authority of prior jurists) and *naskh* (abrogation of Qur’anic verses), the Mahdavis referred their concerns back to the Qur’an and the prophetic *hadith*, as reread by the Mahdi and his companions, for social and moral directives. This authoritative rereading opened up numerous possibilities. The Mahdavis recovered the notion of emigration (*hijrah*) as a religious duty (*farz*) defining the community of believers. While emigration was from a cluster of physical and social ties (of place, family status, and wealth), it was also immigration to new residential communes founded by the Mahdavis. Called *da’irahs* (circles) and modeled after Sufi hospices, they consisted of an enclosed compound run as a self-contained joint family system and governed through the consensus of the brotherhood. Within these communes, the Mahdavis practiced breath meditation (*pas-i anfas*) and an extended but silent liturgy (*zikh-i khafi*) fifteen hours a day, forbade its members to earn a living or receive any kind of sinecure, and distributed all legitimate unsought income daily and equally to all commune members. The purpose of these arrangements was to facilitate the removal of all possible mundane obstacles between man and God and, through the various onerous disciplines, achieve the direct vision of God (*didar*) thought to be characteristic of the spiritual perfection (*ihsan*) of true Muslims in the last days<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> Vali, *Insaf-namah*, p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> The companions of the Mahdi sought consensus (*ijma’*) in a series of authoritative *mahzars* that summarized their agreement of the Mahdi’s position or sayings on specific issues. They normally were signed by all those present. For the process, see Vali, *Insaf-namah*, P. 3. A well-known example is preserved as the *Mahzar-i Shah Dilavar* (Hyderabad: A’zam Steam Press, 1941).

<sup>4</sup> The process of community definition was protracted and contested. The earliest attempt to define essentials belonged to Bandagi Miyan Sayyid Khundmir (d. 930/1523), *Umm al-‘aqa’id* (Hyderabad: Jam’iyat-i Mahdaviyah, n.d.), and Mughal era formulations of community rules (*ahkam*) can be found in Bandagi Miyan Sayyid Burhan ud-Din (d. 1062/1651), *Hadiqat al-haqa’iq haqiqat al-daqa’iq: daftar duvum*, ms., Kutub-khanah-yi Sayyid Da’ud ‘Alim Palanpuri, 2:182-84, and Bandagi Miyan Shah Qasim Mujtahid (d. 1043/1633), *Jami’al-usul* (Hyderabad: Jam’iyat-i

There were clear political implications in the notion of a Mahdi come to enforce justice at a time of injustice, the emphasis on emigration with its suggestion of subsequent *jihad*, the practice of defensive takfir, and the active proselytization of the political and religious elite looking for ideological clarity at a time of perceived chaos. The challenge to the state was initially articulated by Sayyid Khundmir, the second *khalifah* of the Mahdi, who argued in response to intensified persecution that “it has now become a general religious duty (*farz-i ‘ayn*) for all—men and women, slaves and freemen—to unite and defeat the oppressors so that the faithful might be victorious.”<sup>5</sup> Khundmir died in battle shortly thereafter (930/1523), but the Mahdavis continued to pursue the victory of the faithful in Gujarat with the conversion of the Afghan Lohanis and Puladis, in Ahmadnagar with the conversion of members of the Nizam shahi dynasty, and in North India with the activities of Shaykh ‘Abd Allah Niyazi and Shaykh ‘Ala’i<sup>6</sup>. In the confused and highly volatile political situation of the sixteenth century, it seemed for a time as if the Mahdaviyah, with the support of disaffected Afghans, would sweep across India from their base in Gujarat and establish a millennial empire, just as the Qizilbash had done for the Safavids in neighboring Iran.

Shaykh Mustafa Gujarati was born within this charged political and social climate in Patan in 932/1525, shortly after the martyrdom of Sayyid Khundmir. His father, Miyan ‘Abd ar-Rashid, a descendent of Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyah and kubravi, was a first-generation Mahdavi who had converted at the hands of the Mahdi himself and subsequently attached himself to the da’irah of Sayyid Khundmir<sup>7</sup>. Shaykh Mustafa received a quality Mahdavi education from his father and others, and rapidly mastered Arabic, Persian, Urdu, and Gujarati. Indeed, there is evidence that Mustafa was being hot-housed by the Mahdavis to serve as an intellectual carrier of their position in the many disputations that were breaking out in Gujarat around this time. At an early age, he was selected, along with the older scholar ‘Abd al-Malik Sajavandi, to reply to a series of questions posed to the Mahdavis by Shaykh Mubarak, the father of Abu al-Fazl and Mahdavi sympathizer<sup>8</sup>. Mustafa’s reply, later known as the *Hujjat al-balighah*, reveals not only

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Mahdaviyah, 1944). Also see the modern Urdu discussion by Sayyid Qutb ud-Din Khub Miyan Khundmiri Palanpuri, *Risalah-yi hudud-i da’irah-i Mahdaviyat* (Hyderabad: Idarah-yi Tabligh-i Mahdaviyah, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> Khundmir argues (Vali, *Insaf-namah*, p. 206) that the legal (*shar’*) position here is equivalent to a case where Muslim cities have been attacked and a defensive jihad becomes incumbent on all Muslims. The ensuing conflict is formalized by Mahdavis as the incident of *qatalu wa-qutilu* (meaning “they fought and were slain”) and read as a fulfillment of Qur’an 3:195. See Vali, *Insaf-namah*, pp.205-10, and Miyan Sayyid Husayn ‘Alim Sayyidan Miyan (d. after 1106/1694), *Tazkirat as-salihin* (Hyderabad: Jam’iyat-i Mahdaviyah, 1961), pp. 57-98.

<sup>6</sup> The political sympathizers of the Mahdaviyah are segregated into four separate chapters of Malik Muhammad Sulayman (d. 1232/1816), *Khatam-i Sulaymani*, ms., Kutub-Khanah-yi Sayyid ‘Abd al-Karim Yadillahi, vol.4, ff. 356-497.

<sup>7</sup> Biographical information for Shaykh Mustafa and his family comes primarily from Sulayman, *Khatam-i Sulaymani*, vol.3, ff.95, 213-36. Also see Bandagi Miyan Shah Qasim Mujtahid (d. 1043/1633), *Asami-yi musaddiqin* (Hyderabad: Jam’iyat-i Mahdaviyah, 1972), pp. 6-7, and *Fazilat afzal al-qawn* (Hyderabad: Jam’iyat-i Mahdaviyah, 1970), and the non-Mahdavi ‘Abd alQadir Bada’uni (d. ca. 1024/1615), *Muntakhab at-tawarikh*, ed. Maulvi Ahmad ‘Ali (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1865-1869), 3:50-51. Bada’uni tells us that Mustafa’s father was Bohrah, but this is not confirmed by Mahdavi sources. Mustafa’s unnamed mother was the daughter of Qutb-i Jahan, a prominent Sufi of Patan.

<sup>8</sup> Bandagi Miyan ‘Abd al-Malik Sajavandi (d. 981/1574), *Minhaj at-taqwim* (Hyderabad: Jam’iyat-i Mahdaviyah, 1951); Bandagi Miyan Shaykh Mustafa Gujarati (d. 983/1576), *Risalah al-hujjat al-balighah* (Hyderabad: Jam’iyat-i

a lively intellect, one already well acquainted with the critical proof texts of Mahdship, but also a personal inclination to move beyond questions of proofs to matters of community and mysticism<sup>9</sup>. Around the same time, he wrote a short treatise denying the abrogation of any Qur'anic verse and, perhaps somewhat later, a more formidable treatise (*Javahir at-tasdiq*) on the traditional proofs of the Mahdship, complete with apparatus and the piling on of textual citations<sup>10</sup>. He would subsequently compile his letters while in prison in Ahmadabad<sup>11</sup>.

Mustafa's influence quickly surpassed that of his father, and he established his own da'irah in Andari, in the vicinity of Patan. He married into the family of 'Alam Khan Suri, the prominent Afghan *jagirdar* of Morabi, and began to attract as *murids* a large following of Afghan maliks, especially the Puladis, who were beginning to make a bid for power and to whom Mustafa was related by marriage<sup>12</sup>. At the time of Akbar's invasion of Gujarat, then Shaykh Mustafa held a very high political and religious profile, and he almost immediately attracted the attention of the Mughals. The well-known traditionalist of Patan, Muhammad ibn Tahir, and ex-Bohrah and newly returned from Mecca, is said to have used the occasion of the Mughal invasion to enlist the aid of Shaykh 'Abd an-Nabi, the chief *sadr*, and Qazi Ya'qub Manakpuri, the chief *qazi*, in his efforts to enforce a juristic orthodoxy in Gujarat<sup>13</sup>. Political events, especially the Puladi threat, led to Mughal troops being sent against Mustafa, who had fled to Murabi and 'Alam Khan Suri. His Afghan connections proved a liability, and Mustafa's da'irah was pillaged, eight members (including his father) were executed, the women and children were imprisoned, and Mustafa and his son were brought in chains to Ahmadabad. Here he was tortured and then interrogated at length before being summoned to the more congenial court of Akbar at Fatehpur Sikri. He would reside here for almost two years, participating in the newly launched debates at Akbar's court and recording their proceedings in his *Majalis*. Shaykh Mustafa's health rapidly deteriorated Bada'uni saw him coughing up blood at the home of the painter Khwajah 'Abd as-Samad—and Akbar ultimately gave him permission to return to Gujarat<sup>14</sup>. He never made it, dying at Bayanah in 983/1576 at the age of fifty-two.

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Mahdaviyah, 1958). Mubarak's queries are preserved in Persian in both works, although Sajavandi responds in Arabic and Mustafa in Persian. While Mustafa does not mention Mubarak by name, Sajavandi does (p.3), and there seems little reason to doubt the Mahdavi tradition that both works are in response to Mubarak.

<sup>9</sup> Mustafa Gujarati addresses such matters as mystical audition, dress, and ritual in *Risalah al-hujjat al-balighah*, pp.32-50.

<sup>10</sup> Mustafa Gujarati, *Risalah dar bahth-i nasikh va mansukh* (Hyderabad: Jam'iyat-i Mahdaviyah, 1982); *Javahir at-tasdiq* (Hyderabad: Jam'iyat-i Mahdaviyah, 1988). The latter, with its careful listing of texts and authorities, is useful in locating the textual and conceptual resources of Mahdavis of the period.

<sup>11</sup> Mustafa Gujarati, *Makatib* (Hyderabad: Jam'iyat-i Mahdaviyah, 1957). Bada'uni refers to these letters in his *Muntakhab* (3:51).

<sup>12</sup> The Puladis (aka Fuladis) are discussed in Sulayman, *Khatam-i Sulaymani*, vol.4, ff. 436-44, and Qasim, Asami, p.6. Malik Shah Muhammad Puladi was the nephew of Shaykh Mustafa. The Puladi role in Gujarati politics is noted in all standard Mughal histories. See, e.g., Khvajah Nizam ud-Din Ahmad (d. 1003/1594), *Tabaqat-i Akbari*, trans. B.De (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1927-39), 3:394-414.

<sup>13</sup> Sulayman, *Khatam-i Sulaymani*, vol. 4, ff. 95,221-26. For a non-Mahdavi view of Muhammad ibn Tahir, see Shaykh 'Abd al-Haqq Muhaddith Dihlavi, *Akhbar al-akhyar* (Delhi: Muhammad Mirza Khan, 1866), p. 268.

<sup>14</sup> Bada'uni, *Muntakhab*, 3:51.

Portions of five of these imperial sessions have been preserved by the Mahdavis and are known variously as the *Majalis-i khamsah*, *Munazarat*, and *Tahqiqat-i Akbari*. The earliest known manuscript begins abruptly without the usual apparatus:

These are the sessions of Miyan Shaykh Mustafa held in the presence of the emperor Akbar. This fragment (*qat'i*) concerns the proofs of the Mahdaviyat and took place before the 'ulama' and nobles. It begins: "Shaykh Mustafa said: 'When they brought this helpless one in chains into the assembly and the presence of the *vali*, the other nobles, and many 'ulama', this helpless one greeted them and they responded. They sat this helpless one in the middle of the circle, and the *vali* began the interrogation: "What is your name?"'"<sup>15</sup>

Two sessions took place at Ahmadabad at the court of Mirza 'Aziz Koka, and three were at the court of Akbar at Fatehpur Sikri. There is a clear difference between the Ahmadabad and Fatehpur sessions. The former took place in the atmosphere of a trial where Mustafa's life was in peril due to a preexisting *fatva* of execution for heresy and by the political stance of his murids, the Puladis. The Fatehpur sessions, in contrast, occurred in the more relaxed atmosphere of court debate far from the conflict in Gujarat. The sessions also reflect the personalities of the conveners. 'Aziz Koka emerges as a witty and learned scholar in his own right, frequently interrupting the participants either to bring the discussion back on track or to interject some Shi'ite interpretation<sup>16</sup>. The Fatehpur sessions, on the other hand, reveal a congenial if slightly dim-witted and naive Akbar who delights in exemplary tales and poetry, especially *dohras* in the vernacular<sup>17</sup>.

The sociopolitical contexts for these sessions seem relatively straight forward. Akbar would appear to be using Mustafa to play tricks on recalcitrant court 'ulama'. This was the beginning of Akbar's Hindustani turn, when he was attempting to legitimate his rule as an Indo-Muslim emperor, and it was not yet clear whether the 'ulama' could be abashed into supporting his agenda<sup>18</sup>. While we need not accept the *Majalis'* insistence that the 'ulama' were routed by the vigor of Mustafa's arguments, clearly Akbar drew some satisfaction from Mustafa's turning the tables on them, especially 'Abd an-Nabi, the center of Mustafa's opprobrium, and suggesting that it was not Mustafa or the Mahdavis who were on trial but the imperial 'ulama' and their role in the state and society.

<sup>15</sup> When I cite the *Majalis* of Mustafa Gujarati, I am referring to the untitled manuscript preserved in the Kutub-khanah-yi Sayyid Da'ud 'Alim Palanpuri. A marginal note indicates that it was copied by Mustafa's son, Faqir Jalal. There are two lithograph traditions: the older *Tahqiqat-i Akbari* (n.p.: Shin-Pa, n.d.), and the much reprinted *Majalis-i Khamsah* (Hyderabad: Jam'iyat-I Mahdaviyah, 1946). The manuscript differs from both lithographs in the order and length of the sessions and the sequence and substance of the questions and answers. While retaining the abrupt quality of the work, the lithographs have polished Mustafa's prose, improved the citations, and added some formulaic aspects required of disputations (*munazarat*).

<sup>16</sup> See, e.g., *Majalis*, ff. 9-12b.

<sup>17</sup> The sessions with Akbar contain all of the *dohras* of the text (95.23-24) and, in contrast to the Ahmadabad sessions, Arabic is usually carefully translated into Persian for Akbar's benefit, although the Hindi *dohras* are not.

<sup>18</sup> The best discussion of the various phases remains Iqtidar Alam Khan, "The Nobility under Akbar and the Development of His Religious Policy," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1968): 29-36. Also note the suggestive comments of Bruce Lawrence, "The City as an Intellectual Center," in *Fatehpur-Sikri*, ed. Michael Brand and Glenn D. Lowry (Bombay: Marg, 1987), pp. 83-92.



It is possible that Akbar was toying with the notion of a Mahdvi derived millennial state ideology to legitimate Mughal domination, following the well-known Safavid example. That the *'ibadat-khanah*, the center of Akbar's imperial debates, was built around this time on the hospice quarters of Shaykh 'Abd Allah Niyazi, a prominent Mahdavi, does suggest an imperial attempt to co-opt Mahdavi charisma<sup>19</sup>. There are other historical and thematic connections between Mahdavi and Akbari millennialism, although it may be preferable to speak of a common millennial climate rather than a specific Mahdvi source<sup>20</sup>. In any case, the Mahdavis were too closely connected with Afghan solidery by this time to make it a safe power ideology for Akbar. He would look elsewhere, to the Chistis, to construct a mystique of legitimacy.

As far as the unfortunate Shaykh Mustafa is concerned, he also had a clear agenda, demonstrated both by the *Majalis* and his substantial collection of letters. Mustafa would appear to be concerned with de-emphasizing the political engagement of earlier Mahdavis, the paradigm of Sayyid Khundmir and Shaykh 'Ala'i, and portraying the Mahdavi community as a kind of politically benign millennial mystical order, with the Mahdi as a kind of charismatic foundational *pir* and vali not all that dissimilar to Akbar's own Mu'in ud-Din Chisti. "What would you do," Mustafa asks Akbar, "if someone were to say that Shaykh Mu'in ud-Din was sinful and deviant and leading his murids astray?" Akbar replies, not surprisingly, "I would call him a *kafir* and slay him with my own hands." In the same way, continues Mustafa, "The *pir* of this servant is the Mahdi of the last days."<sup>21</sup>

Shaykh Mustafa performs this difficult balancing feat without sacrificing essential Mahdavi tenets, but by putting a slightly different gloss on them. In the first session at Ahmadabad, Mustafa explains to 'Aziz Koka that the Mahdavi spiritual genealogy is Sufi (*ahl-i tasavvuf*) and that it is the custom (*mazhab*) of this group to consider the denial (*inkar*) of the words of the vali forbidden (*haram*)<sup>22</sup>. The Mahdavis are simply following this well-trodden path. It is true, he adds, that the externalists (*ahl-i zahir*) do deny the authority of the valis, but in the process they do injury to both faith (*iman*) and mystical experience (*ma'rifat*). In any case, this leads them to divisive and aggressive confrontations (*mubahathat va mujaalat*) and away from saintly society (*hoshiyar*).

The letters of Shaykh Mustafa, compiled in prison in Ahamadabad and intended for a wider audience, provide further evidence of the attempt to mystify the Mahdaviyah. He is quite

<sup>19</sup> Bada'uni, *Muntakhab*, 2:201.

<sup>20</sup> A crucial conduit of Mahdavi ideas into Akbar's court would have been Shaykh Mubarak and his sons, Abu al-Fazl and Fayzi, major architects of Akbar's political millennialism. While Abu al-Fazl would ultimately gloss over his father's well-known Mahdavi episode (Shaykh Abu al-Fazl 'Allami [d.1011/1602], *Seh daftar* [Lucknow: Bayt as-Sultanat, 1853], pp. 242-44), clearly Mubarak was a sympathizer and his sons would have been well acquainted with Mahdavi perspectives. Not only is Mubarak's correspondence with Mahdavis preserved (see note 8 above), but Sayyid Yusuf wrote a biography of his great-grandfather, the Mahdi, at the request of Fayzi himself. See Bandagi Miyan Sayyid Yusuf (d. 1026/1617), *Matla 'al-vilayat*, ms., Kutub-khanah-yi Sayyid Muhammad Asadullah Ishaqi. Common elements in Mahdavi and Akbari millennialism include the attack on taqlid, the concern with the eschatological properties of the year 1000, the emphasis on authoritative *vilayat*, and the use of elusive experimental poetry as expressive of that vilayat.

<sup>21</sup> *Majalis*, f.17b

<sup>22</sup> *Majalis*, ff.3-3b

explicit concerning his motives: “Just as the assembly of ascetics (*majlis-i fuqara’*) does not lack in religious tales (*hikayat-i dinvi*), so these letters do not lack them. They are written to make an impression on the heart. While the writer does not belong to the group of ascetics (*zumrah-yi fuqara’*), he aspires to resemble (*mushabihat*) them. The tradition (*hukm*), ‘who resembles a people (*qawn*), belongs to them; provides grounds for hope in this endeavor.”<sup>23</sup> Mustafa is arguing here for a family resemblance between the Sufi and Mahdavi communities. He demonstrates this resemblance in subtle and linguistically exacting letters, full of Sufisms, often expressed in quite stunning poetry in Persian, Arabic, Urdu, and even *rekhtah* (macaronic Persian-Urdu)<sup>24</sup>.

Mustafa’s attempt “to make an impression on the heart,” referred to in the above letter, found a receptive audience among the mystically inclined at Fatehpur Sikri. Bada’uni clearly saw him as one of his own, and ascetic ‘*alim*, referring in his *Muntakhab at-tawarikh* to Mustafa’s letters, “full of the odor of exile and annihilation (*ghurabt va fana’*),” and numbering him among the prominent Sufis (*tariqah-yi faqr va fana’*)<sup>25</sup>.

Shaykh Mustafa was not the only Mahdavi looking for rapprochement after a half century of political confrontation, and later Mahdavis would adopt a quietist stance toward the state, with the pirs turning inward to the ritual and theology of the private realm of the da’irah<sup>26</sup>. They would not lose their sense of being a chosen community with a larger moral authority, but the activist political implications of Mahdism would be downplayed, and the history of the earlier phase would be rewritten as an ethic of exemplary martyrdom of misunderstood pirs.

But the sessions are not simply evidence for political and social contexts and agenda. They represent transcriptions of public disputations concerning meaning and action, and they imply a community of discourse and attempts to monopolize ways of speaking about the world. As George Zito has observed: “The true apostate *speaks some other language*, foreign to the parent group. This does not occur in heresy. In heresy, the speaker employs the *same language* as the parent group, retains its values, but attempts to order its discourse to some other end.”<sup>27</sup>

Mustafa was a formidable ‘*alim* and shaykh by any standard, a man of consequence. He knew the language and conventions of the pan-Indian juristic and mystical traditions, and he utilized this knowledge to support a Mahdavi reading at the court. The major themes discussed by Mustafa, the authorities invoked in defense of the themes, the technical vocabulary utilized to discuss them, and interpretive conventions are, for the most part, familiar ones. To a certain extent, then, the *Majalis* appears as a kind of Islamist discourse over the authority to interpret

<sup>23</sup> *Majalis*, pp. 38-39.

<sup>24</sup> See, e.g., *Makatib*, pp. 141-42, for a long *rekhtah*.

<sup>25</sup> Bada’uni, *Muntakhab*, 3:50-51. Bada’uni expands on his complex understanding of the Mahdaviyah in his *Najat ar-arshid*, ed. Sayyid Mu’in al-Haqq (Lahore: Idarah-yi Tahqiqat-i Pakistan, Danishgah-yi Panjab, 1972), pp. 77-92.

<sup>26</sup> Around this time, a tradition was circulated to the effect that Humayun had become a Mahdavi supporter (*mu’taqid*) while in exile in Gujarat and that he had left written instructions to his descendants to follow his example. See Burhan ud-Din, *Shavahid*, p. 151.

<sup>27</sup> George V. Zito, “Toward a Sociology of Heresy,” *Sociological Analysis* 44 (1983): 125 (original emphasis).



and reduces to the perceived superior grammar, textual citations, and logic of Shaykh Mustafa. The ‘ulama’ are made to say in some exasperation: “If we, the learned people in the emperor’s assembly, hear even a little of his words, we might imagine that he is right, for his words made an impression on our hearts. For this reason, one must not permit *fitnah*.”<sup>28</sup> The issue, they explain, is not if Mustafa is right, but that he is engaged in *fitnah* (actions threatening the stability and power of a Muslim state) and they have a fatva to that effect. It now remains to act on it. This and other passages witness to the concern for the power and danger of words, proper textual citations, and the mastery of the conventions of disputation. Shaykh Mustafa must be silenced, for he speaks the language of the pious ‘ulama’.

But while the *Majalis* can be read as a public transcript disputing the location of heresy, there are elements in it that suggest a hidden transcript of the Gujarat Mahdavis, with its own codes and conventions. This is particularly evident when Mustafa seems to depart from pan-Indian norms of comportment in the disputation, the charge of gynomimesis against Akbar’s court ‘ulama’ is raised, and discursive slippage results.

In the course of the first surviving session at Fatehpur Sikri, the participants broke for the midday prayer. Shaykh ‘Abd an-Nabi, the chief *sadr*, served as the prayer leader (*imam*) for the group, but Shaykh Mustafa declined to follow his lead in the prayer. ‘Abd an-Nabi was quick to draw the implications of Mustafa’s action, asking him why he was calling Muslims *kafir*. Akbar added, more specifically, “O Shaykh Mustafa, these shaykhs and *mullas* are pious persons showing the way for the people. Why did you not pray behind them?”<sup>29</sup> In a rather startling justification, Shaykh Mustafa explained that he was calling them not *kafirs* but transvestites or effeminate:

The Messenger, on whom be peace, has said: “The pursuer of the world is effeminate (*mukhannath*), the pursuer of the next world is feminine (*mu’annath*), and the pursuer of the Lord is masculine (*muzakkar*).” This means that the pursuers of this world are effeminate, the pursuers of the next world are women, and the pursuers of God are men. Likewise, God Almighty has said: “Men (*rijal*) whom neither trade nor sale keeps from the remembrance of God and prayer” [Qur’an 24:37]. This means men who are not occupied in trade nor buying and selling and renounce the world hearing only the *zikr* of God and the *bayan* of the Qur’an and act on that. They are the only real men (*mardan*); the rest are false men (*na-mardan*). O emperor, exercise justice (*insaf*) and ask ‘Abd an-Nabi and those in the assembly to produce even a single support (*masalah*) from the literature (*kutub*) where the imam might be effeminate and it is permissible for real men to follow him [in the prayers]. It is overwhelmingly clear from the literature that the *imamat* of the effeminate is not permissible, and for that reason I did not pray behind him<sup>30</sup>.

<sup>28</sup> *Majalis*, ff. 9-9b.

<sup>29</sup> *Majalis*, ff. 17b

<sup>30</sup> *Majalis*, ff. 17b-18.

The Arabic term used by Mustafa here is *mukhannath*, which means transvestite in hadith and effeminate in lexicography<sup>31</sup>. Mustafa renders this in Persian as *na-mard* (false man) and contrasts it with *mard* (real man). He does not employ the term *hijra* (the Indian community of transvestites), the most obvious translation of *mukhannath* in an Indian context, but perhaps the participants would have made the connection<sup>32</sup>.

Despite the outraged reaction to this charge, Shaykh Mustafa does not leave the matter alone but tells Akbar a tale of real men who were sitting in an assembly speaking of the rewards of pilgrimage<sup>33</sup>. An envious effeminate heard them and resolved to proceed to Mecca. After traveling a few miles from his home he spotted a large shade tree and lay down beneath it, "sighing like a woman." A real man passed by, and the effeminate asked how far it was to Mecca. The man replied, "Many months the way you are going," and told him of the many difficulties of the journey: "O effeminate one, you are here and Mecca there; return home for when you see the sea you will surely perish." The effeminate, alarmed by these words, quickly returned home and, again "sighing like a woman," threw himself down on the cushions. His family were not surprised to find him back, since pilgrimage, they inform him, is "the affair of real men."

In case Akbar may have missed the point, Mustafa carefully draws out the moral of the tale. Real men practice *taqva* (fear of God) and *tavakkal* (trust in God), while false men appear before the king, flatter him and his nobles, and accept his largesse (*vazifat*). Like the effeminate who never reached Mecca, they are caught in a life of comfort and ease and will never reach God. "Go, O effeminate one, this is not the place to pray; for the love of God is not the affair of the effeminate."<sup>34</sup> 34

Shaykh Mustafa returns to the subject in the next session when the debate addresses the topic of the witness of truth. Mustafa quotes the Qur'an (2:282), "Call to witness two witnesses from your men (*rijal*)," and points out that God specified in this verse real men (*mardan*) and not false men (*na-mardan*)<sup>35</sup>. He then cites the previously mentioned hadith of the effeminate pursuers of the world and concludes that since the court 'ulama' are not real men, they are not legitimate witnesses to whether the Mahdi will come or has come and gone. Real men act on their knowledge, he explains, while the false men of the 'ulama' are like asses who carry books on their backs but cannot use them<sup>36</sup>. Files buzzing around human excrement, he concludes, are more beautiful than the 'ulama' and *fuqaha'* who buzz around the door of the emperor out

<sup>31</sup> Everett K. Rowson, "The Effeminates of Early Medina," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 111 (1991): 671-93.

<sup>32</sup> For a discussion of India's third gender, see Serena Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1990).

<sup>33</sup> *Majalis*, f. 18b-19.

<sup>34</sup> *Majalis*, f. 18b.

<sup>35</sup> *Majalis*, ff. 23-25.

<sup>36</sup> *Majalis*, ff. 23b-24. Mustafa's frequent reference to the 'ulama' as asses or as riding on asses might evoke for literate Muslims the traditional image of the one-eyed Dajjal riding an ass at the end of time.

of greed and worldly-mindedness. How can such persons sight the Mahdi? “The sun has appeared in the sky; what is the profit of sightless eyes?”<sup>37</sup>

Clearly, Mustafa’s colorful charge surprised Akbar and the ‘ulama’. Indeed, Akbar’s initial response was to laugh before turning to the ‘ulama’ and saying, “See, he does not pray behind you, because you are effeminate and prayer behind the effeminate is not permissible.”<sup>38</sup> Akbar then asks Mustafa for a proper answer, but Mustafa does not understand why Akbar is laughing and persists for the remainder of the session in drawing out the charge. Mustafa is not telling a joke for the entertainment of the imperial court.

What should we make of this? At the simplest level, it seems legitimate to consider it part of a strategy to emasculate the court ‘ulama’. They are not male, not female, but a third and confused gender. Real men are potent, whereas false men are impotent<sup>39</sup>. And moral authority belongs to real men who think independently and act decisively on their thoughts; false men dither and scurry off to the Hijaz for their opinions. This is not an argument that privileges Arab Islam. Mustafa pillories the ‘ulama’ who accept the fatvas of the Hijaz rather than create their own in India. The court jurists justify acting on the Meccan fatva of execution of the Mahdavis: “We do not possess the knowledge of the ‘ulama’ of Mecca. It is not our place to protest or object to their words, but simply to accept the binding authority (*taqlid*) of their words and act on them.”<sup>40</sup> Shaykh Mustafa vehemently objects to this contemporary *taqlid* of Indian scholars to the Meccans, accepting only *taqlid* to the Qur’an and the Prophet. Indian Muslims are capable of producing, indeed, are required to produce in his view, an Islam as authentic and legitimate as in the central heartlands. It is the effeminate impotent false Muslims and not the masculine potent real Muslims who practice this illegitimate foreign *taqlid* in India.

The incident also reveals something of the Gujarati Mahdavi mentality and conceptual resources. The Gujarati Mahdavis of the period tended to think in terms of triads reduced to dyads for the purpose of critical resonance. We have seen how Mustafa employed the triad masculine/feminine/effeminate, but then dropped the feminine, reducing the critical realm of gender to the dyad of real men and false men. Indeed, in both subsequent citations of the hadith of the effeminate, the middle element, the feminine, is not even mentioned<sup>41</sup>. Similarly, the triad real Muslim/real kafir/false Muslim drops the real kafir, the Hindu or Jain, and reduces the actionable political and religious world to the dyad of real Muslims and false Muslims. Hindus or Jains are as irrelevant to this dyad as women were irrelevant to the other.

The secondary literature on the Mahdaviyah has tended to read it as a mass revitalization movement directed against the Hinduizing Islam of the subcontinent. It is seen as part of a

<sup>37</sup> *Majalis*, f.24b.

<sup>38</sup> *Majalis*, f. 18.

<sup>39</sup> In a somewhat similar manner, Mustafa’s father, ‘Abd ar-Rashid, earlier had used the analogy of judicial divorce (*tafriq*) for physical impotence to justify the right of Mahdavis to divorce their spiritually impotent teachers (*ustadan*). In both cases, any dishonor (*‘ayb*) involved in the divorce belonged to the impotent and not the potent. See Bandagi Miyan ‘Abd ar-Rashid (d. 980/1572), *Naqliyat* (Hyderabad: Jam’iyat-i Mahdaviyah, 1955), pp. 13-14.

<sup>40</sup> *Majalis*, f. 9b.

<sup>41</sup> *Majalis*, ff. 19, 23.

larger Muslim “orthodox” reaction with a genealogy extending from the Mahdavis through the Mujaddidi Naqshbandis, perhaps even up to Pakistan. That it ultimately failed, Bazmee Ansari tells us, was only because “the immoderate teachings of the *Mahdi* could not stand up to the mature, sober and Islamically creative message of the Mujaddid.”<sup>42</sup> To the extent that a Mahdavi identity is located by modern historians, it is found in a series of reactions to an indigenizing or Hinduizing Indian Islam.

There is very little in Mahdavi primary sources to commend this view. The customs (*rasm*), habit (*‘adat*), and innovations (*bid‘at*) criticized so soundly by the Mahdi were contaminants not from the non-Muslim environment but from the Muslim<sup>43</sup>. In any case, Mustafa’s straw men are the Arabizing, not the indigenizing, ‘ulama’ of the imperial court. The Mahdavi charge is against false Muslims who do not take Islam seriously, and their solution is a radical millennial space on Indian earth: the faithful, real men, who through constant *zikr* and trust in God obtain within the communes the vision of God with their own eyes. The Mahdavis construct an identity as a righteous Muslim community within Islam and within India, and not as a defense against the non-Muslim environment. It is not an identity constructed in opposition to a Hindu “other”.

The modern reading of the Mahdaviyah movement also resonates within larger historiographic assumptions. Like national character, Indo-Muslim identity is usually read as dyadic, symbiotic, and oppositional in nature. It is dyadic in the sense that it is paired with some other group, symbiotic in that it feeds off a cluster of identifications of the other group, and oppositional in that it exists within a context of confrontations. In the case of Indian Islam, the dyad, symbiote, and opposition are usually thought to be Indian environment read as Hindu. Elements of this assumption are shared by those who emphasize the Islamic or the Indian in the Indo-Islamic, and it implies the existence and importance to identity of what Wilfred Cantwell Smith has termed “the crystallization of religious communities.”<sup>44</sup> Smith would place this development squarely in the Mughal period and relate it to empire, while others would place it much later and relate it to imperial decline, colonialism, or modernity.

While the Mahdavi evidence supports the notion of a series of self aware Muslim communities within premodern India (sometimes cohering, sometimes conflicting), it contradicts the notion that identity as a community is necessarily formed in opposition to the Hindu or indigenized environment. It is not an essence but a community that is being constructed, and there is no demonic Hindu “other” lurking in the background definition. This should not be taken, however, as evidence for some kind of benign Indo-Muslim apartheid, where Muslims inhabit India but are not part of it. Shaykh Mustafa himself frequently shifted registers and codes from Arabic to Persian to Urdu and back again, even producing some

<sup>42</sup> A.S. Bazmee Ansari, “Sayyid Muhammad Jawnpuri and his Movement,” *Islamic Studies* 2 (1963): 60.

<sup>43</sup> Vali, *Insaf-namah*, p.10.

<sup>44</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *On Understanding Islam: Selected Studies* (Delhi: Idarah-i Adabiyat-i Delli, 1981), pp. 177-96.

startling mixed Persian-Urdu rekhtah, and he did this without apology<sup>45</sup>. His descendants, the Mustafa'ayan, along with other Mahdavis, continued this process of straddling speech communities. The expanded repertoire of terms and symbols exists without apparent conflict or crisis of conscience: *prem* and *prit* alongside *'ishq* and *mahabbat*; *jap* with *zikr*; *prana* with *ruh*; *mitra* with *ma'shuq* or *dost*; *purush* with *insan*; *patti* with *khudavand*<sup>46</sup>. Real Muslims can employ both terms, within varying contexts. Linguistic hybridization does occur, as other genres are revoiced within a Mahdavi context, but it is neither oppositional nor syncretist. The symbolic repertoire expands in a complementary fashion and not by a series of essential exclusions.

What seems to be distinctive about premodern Indo-Muslim identity, as evidenced by the *Majalis*, is the degree to which it departs from assumptions that emerged and became reified during the modern period. To a major extent, colonial modes of “knowing” Islam, reproduced in nationalisms, have contaminated our understanding of Muslim identity formation and maintenance in premodern India. By contrast, the Mahdavi instance suggests that Indo-Muslim identity was embedded within a larger number of discrete primary communities with shared symbolic and social resources, and was not yet objectified in terms of an oppositional Hindu “other.” These primary communities could be regional, but more often in imperial polities they spanned regions. The multiplex nature of these communities is noteworthy, as is the plasticity of their interplay. They conjoined or clashed for the purposes of material or symbolic exchange, but the cultural product that emerged varied with the idiom and social location brought to the exchange. The social fabric was complex and changeable, and the signs bearing it were multiplex. Thus, while Mahdavi, identity was constructed and maintained through the unique space and rituals of the da'irah and personified in a Mahdi ushering in an end-game of time to validate that identity, the Mahdavis also represented or transmitted their identities variously, depending on the social or cultural location of the exchange and of its participants, coresiding and code-switching in turn as the need occurred. Dissonance could occur and frequently did. At times, as in the *Majalis*, Muslims spoke the same language and shared similar views of the world; at other times, they diverged and spoke past each other. One group saw a joke, but Shaykh Mustafa was not laughing.

## Notes

This essay is based on research funded in part by a Canada Research Fellowship and a President's Research Grant. I am indebted to the Mahdavis of Hyderabad and Palanpur, especially Sayyid Khuda Bakhsh Khundmiri and Sayyid Da'ud 'Alim Palanpuri, for their

<sup>45</sup> Letter 46 of his *Makatib*, e.g., begins in Arabic, follows with a Persian verse, returns to Arabic, then proceeds to a Hindi dohra. Letter 74 contains a long Persian-Urdu *tarji' band*. Also see Sulayman, *Khatam-l Sulaymani*, vol. 3, ff. 226-27, for a *khayal* of Mustafa.

<sup>46</sup> The Mahdavi contribution to early Urdu literature is discussed in an important article by Mahmud Sherani, “Da'irah ke Mahdaviyun ka Urdu adab ke ta'mir men hissah,” *Oriental College Magazine* 17 (November 1940): 27—92; 17(February 1941): 3—38. Also see Sayyid Shams ud-Din Mustafa'i, *Istiqamat fi ud-din* (Karachi: Sayyid Kamal ud-Din, 1977), a Mahdavi rejoinder to Sherani, and Sayyid Nusrat Mahdi Yadillahi, *Urdu adab men Mahdaviyun ka hissah* (Hyderabad: l'jaz Printing Press, 1984).

hospitality and generous access to sources. Naturally, the views expressed in this essay are my own.