
The Religious and Cultural Roles of Dreams

*and Visions in Islam**

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Introduction

Since “visions appear material to spiritual persons only, the vulgar herd of historians and annalists cannot hope to be so favoured by Heaven”.¹ So, in his nineteenth-century account of the *ṣūfīs* of Sind, Sir Richard Burton expressed the dilemma of scholars researching Muslim dream and visionary experiences in his characteristic style. But while scholarly discussion of the visionary activities of premodern *ṣūfīs* and other Muslims is still no straightforward matter we need no longer be deterred by Burton’s sardonic pessimism. Despite the reticence of earlier generations of positivist scholarship, the past two decades have witnessed a flourishing of research into the visionary aspects of Muslim religious and cultural practice, chiefly through the analysis of the extensive literature surrounding the dream and vision in Islam. For, from the very beginning of Islamic history, there has developed a rich and varied discourse on the nature of the imagination and its expression in the form of dreams and waking visions. The theoretical approaches to the imagination developed by early Muslim philosophers and mystical theorists were always accompanied by the activities of a more active sodality of dreamers and vision seekers. For this reason, Islamic tradition is especially rich for its contributions to both theories of the imagination and the description of its expression in dream and visionary experience. The abundant yields from this rich research field in recent years afford new insight into the Muslim past, allowing an often intimate encounter with past individuals and private experiences scarcely granted by the analysis of other kinds of documentation.

It was the dreams and subsequent visions of the Prophet Muḥammad that announced the beginning of Islam and it is in this sense that the Qurʾān itself may be seen as a visionary text. While visions of one kind or another were unsurprisingly an important aspect of *ṣūfīsm* in each of its many forms, both visions and dreams also played important roles in many other fields of Muslim life, from historiography and medicine to folklore and magic.² As many of the episodes discussed in this article reveal, visions and dreams were a crucial means of

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¹ R. F. Burton, *Sindh and the Races that Inhabit the Valley of the Indus* (Karachi, 1973 [1851]), p. 409.

² For general accounts of the dream in Islam, see U. Azam, *Dreams in Islam* (Pittsburgh, 1992). T. Fahd, ‘The Dream in Medieval Islamic Society’, in G. E. von Grunebaum and R. Caillois (eds), *The Dream and Human Societies* (Berkeley, 1966), A. Schimmel, *Die Träume des Kalifen: Träume und ihre Deutung in der islamischen Kultur* (Munich, 1998) and H. Ziai, ‘Dreams and Dream Interpretation’ in *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (hereafter EI).

connecting with past time and the major figures with whom it was peopled. For in the Muslim literary works that are discussed in this article, one classic characteristic stands out especially that is in common with the premodern literatures of other civilisations. This is the weight of history, the importance of access to the past and concurrence and continuity with the models provided by it. It is therefore no surprise that the visionary and oneirocritical literature of Islam shows a greater preponderance towards bringing alive the past into present experience than looking forward into futures as yet unreal. This crucial fracture between the major directions taken by the modern and premodern imagination reminds us at the onset of the relationship of the imagination to a wider *Gedankenwelt*. It is this cultural embeddedness of dreams and visions within a shared Islamic universe of symbols that suggests the customs and literature of the dream and vision in Islam may form a useful means of charting some of the parameters of the inner imaginative universe of the Muslim past.

The Pre-Islamic Heritage

When early Muslims came to generate models with which to understand imaginative experiences, particularly in their most widespread form as dreams, they drew in part on the common cultural heritage that the ancient Near East provided to both Islam and Christianity before it.³ The practice of dream interpretation in the Near East stretched back to the very beginnings of Mesopotamian civilisation, being handed on thereafter partly through the religion of the Jews (as in the biblical story of Joseph, a tradition no less important to Islam and related in the Qur'ān).⁴ It was the late antique legacy of Greek culture, however, with its similar fascination with dreams that was the most direct funnel into Islam of earlier traditions of dream theories.⁵

After some of the earliest Greek literary references to the dream (*oneiros*) in Homer, later Greek thinkers developed a number of systematic theories of dreaming.⁶ In his *Timaeus*, Plato offered an interesting theory of mantic dreams, claiming that while they originate from the insight of the rational soul they are perceived by the irrational soul as images reflected on the smooth surface of the liver (hence their obscure, symbolic character). Plato in this way allowed such dreams an indirect relationship to reality, albeit not one that he rated very highly. More important were Aristotle's short essays *On Dreams* and *On Divination in Sleep*, which denied that any dreams are god-sent. Reasonably enough, Aristotle argued that if the gods wanted to communicate with humankind they would do it in the daytime and be more selective about the recipients of their nocturnal messages.

Despite Aristotle's sceptical approach to the dream, it continued to play an important role in both the popular religious life of late antiquity (particularly through the popularity of the cult of Asclepius) and the writings of philosophers and occultists. The most important text on

³ See O. L. Oppenheim, *The Interpretation of Dreams in the Ancient Near East* (Philadelphia, 1956).

⁴ Qur'ān 12:1–100. On the interaction of Jewish and Muslim oneirocriticism, see S. Suiri, 'Dreaming Analyzed and Recorded Dreams in the World of Medieval Islam', in D. Schulman and G. G. Stroumsa (eds), *Dream Cultures: Explorations in the Comparative History of Dreaming* (Oxford, 1999).

⁵ See E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley, 1951), Chapter Four, 'Dream Pattern and Culture Pattern'.

⁶ See Artemidorus, *Oneirocritica: The Interpretation of Dreams by Artemidorus*, trans. R. J. White (Park Ridge, 1975) and C. Blum, *Studies on the Dream Book of Artemidorus* (Uppsala, 1936).

dreaming in late antiquity was undoubtedly the second-century *Oneirocritica* of Artemidorus of Ephesus. The classification of dreams in the writings of Artemidorus described a type of symbolic dream (often including riddles) as well as the vision (*horama*) that was a clear pre-enactment of future events and the oracle (*chrematismos*), when the dreamer's parent, or some other respected or impressive personage, reveals, in a literal manner, the nature of future events and advises on how to deal with them. Through direct translations and the writing of epitomes, the dream theories of classical thinkers like Aristotle and Artemidorus, as well as a wider series of speculative philosophical works touching upon the subject of dreaming, were later made available to Muslim thinkers.⁷

While poorly documented, the pre-Islamic Arabs had certainly possessed their own understanding of dream experiences and means of relating dreams to their waking lives. They possessed, for example, diviners and dream interpreters in the form of the *kāhin*, ecstatic soothsayers who were seen to be able to recite inspired oracles. Dreams were also sometimes actively sought by the pre-Islamic Arabs by saying special prayers at the Ka'bah or by sleeping beside it.⁸ Literary evidence of the Arab experience of the dream and vision during the *jahiliyyah* is also attested to in the abundance of poetry that has survived from that period. Popular in the *nasīb* style of the ode (*qaṣīdah*) from the pre-Islamic period is the motif of the poet resting at night only to be haunted by the vision (*khayāl*, *ṭayf*) of his beloved.⁹

The Dream and Vision in Early Islam

While there were clearly a number of ready models of analytical theories of dreaming to hand for Muslim intellectuals in the early centuries of Islam, dreams and visions had nonetheless been themselves an integral part of Islam from its very beginnings. The primary revelation of Islam had come through the experience of the Prophet Muḥammad's visionary encounter with the archangel Jabrā'il. Sweating, clammy and hearing bells ringing in his ears, in what is perhaps literary history's greatest apotheosis of the wracking pains of inspiration, the result of Muḥammad's numinous fear and trembling was the birth of the Qur'ān. The Qur'ān (39:42 and 6:60) itself upholds the validity of dream experiences when it tells believers that in dreams the soul is taken back into the presence of God. Accounts of the visions and dreams (*ru'yā*, *manām*) of both Muḥammad and earlier prophets also feature in the Qur'ān.¹⁰ The dream most famously occurs in the Qur'ānic accounts of the life of Yūsuf (12:1–100) and the sacrifice of Iṣḥāq (37:83–113), while in Sūrat al-Faṭḥ (48:27) the scripture also recounts a clairvoyant dream of the Prophet in which he foresaw his eventual triumphant return to Makkah. These canonical prototypes of dreams and visions as at times prognosticating and

⁷ See A. E. Affifi, "The Influence of Hermetic Literature on Muslim Thought", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 13 (1950), S. M. Oberhelman, *The Oneirocriticon of Achmet: A Medieval Greek and Arabic Treatise on the Interpretation of Dreams* (Lubbock, 1991) and S. Pines, "The Arabic Recension of *Parva Naturalia* and the Philosophical Doctrine Concerning Veridical Dreams According to *al-Risāla al-Manāmiyya* and Other Sources", *Israel Oriental Studies* 4 (1974).

⁸ See T. Fahd, "*istikhāra*" in *EI2*.

⁹ See R. Jacobi, "Qaṣīda" in J. S. Meisami and P. Starkey (eds), *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature* (London, 1998), p. 631.

¹⁰ See L. Kinberg, "Dreams and Sleep", in J. Dammen McAuliffe (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān* (Leiden, 2001), vol. 1, pp. 546–553.

at other times revelatory were to recur in myriad form throughout the subsequent history of Islam.

The *ḥadīth* are also replete with accounts of the dreams of the Prophet and his companions or references by them to dreaming. One often quoted tradition held that the Prophet himself had said that such dreams constitute one forty-sixth part of prophecy.¹¹ The *sīrah* literature also contains many accounts of the Prophet's dreams and visions (especially his ascent to heaven). These dreams were often related to major events in his life and were related along with accounts of the dream-life of his companions. One of the most interesting episodes in the *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* of Ibn Ishāq refers to a dream of one of the companions, 'Abd Allāh ibn Zayd.¹² 'Abd Allāh recounted to the Prophet a dream in which he had encountered a man wearing two green garments and carrying a clapper. 'Abd Allāh had asked to buy the clapper, explaining that he would use it for summoning people to prayer, at which the man explained that there was a better way to do this and instructed 'Abd Allāh in the performance of the call to prayer (*adhān*). On hearing this account, the Prophet declared the dream an authentic vision from God and had the first *mū'adhīn* Bilāl instructed accordingly. Here we see how the *adhān*, one of the most characteristic features of Muslim life, was regarded as having been established through the intervention of a dream. Yet a whole host of less momentous dreams and visions also feature in Ibn Ishāq's *Sīrah*, such as the vision in which al-Ṭufayl al-Dawsī sees himself with his head shaven and with a bird coming out of his mouth, which was later seen as having prophesied his martyrdom during the reign of the caliph 'Umar (634–644 AD).¹³ For his part, the companion and first caliph, Abū Bakr (r.632–634 AD) was widely regarded as a gifted interpreter of dreams.¹⁴

After the prophet Yūsuf, it was the pious Iraqi traditionist Ibn Sīrīn (d.728 AD) who was regarded as the most famous of Muslim dream interpreters. His early fame as a scholar of *ḥadīth* was eclipsed by a growing reputation as an interpreter of dreams (*mu'abbir*) and by the tenth century numerous treatises on dreams had been posthumously ascribed to him in much the same way as publishers faked books by popular authors in the early history of European publishing.¹⁵ Ibn Sīrīn's name certainly features in the earliest known Arabic work of dream interpretation, the *Dustūr fī'l ta'bir* of Abū Ishāq al-Kirmānī (fl.775–785 AD). The earliest of the texts ascribed to Ibn Sīrīn himself was entitled simply *Tā'bir al-ru'yā*, though the numbers of such texts escalated so that by the fifteenth century it was possible for an Arabic compilation of Ibn Sīrīn's supposed works to appear. So widespread was his renown that the great Chishtī sūfī of Dihlī, Niẓām al-dīn Awliyā (d.1325 AD) made reference to his dream interpretations (albeit as received via al-Ghazālī) in his discourses that were recorded in *Fawā'id al-fu'ād*. Later works were attributed to Ibn Sīrīn in Turkish and Persian as well as Greek and Latin.¹⁶

¹¹ A. J. Wensinck, *Concordance et Indices de la Tradition Musulmane* (Leiden, 1936–1969), vol. 1, p. 343. See also L. Kinberg, "Interaction Between This World and the Afterworld in Early Islamic Traditions", *Oriens* 29–30 (1986).

¹² A. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishāq's Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* (Karachi, 1967), p. 236.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

¹⁴ See T. Fahd and H. Daiber, "ru'yā", in *EL2*.

¹⁵ See Fahd in von Grunebaum and Caillouis (1966), pp. 360–363. See also Ibn Sīrīn, *Das Arabische Traumbuch des Ibn Sīrīn*, trans. H. Klopfer (Munich, 1989).

¹⁶ Niẓām Ad-Dīn Awliya, *Morals for the Heart*, trans. B. B. Lawrence (New York, 1992), p. 174. On the later attributed works of Ibn Sīrīn, see T. Fahd, "Ibn Sīrīn", in *EL2*.

Other pious early figures also came to be associated with the subject. One early Persian treatise on the interpretation of dreams was attributed to no less a figure than the sixth Shīʿī imām, Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq (d.765 AD).¹⁷ Of greater influence, however, were those works created as a result of caliphal patronage, that reflected the importance of the subject in ʿAbbāsīd Baghdād. For example a version of the *Oneirocritica* of Artemidorus was translated into Arabic at the request of al-Maʿmūn (r.813–833 AD). Marking the long reach of the shadows of classical antiquity, the prestige of Artemidorus among Muslim thinkers is demonstrated through his citations in the other great caliphal dream manual. This was the voluminous *al-Qādirī fīʾl taʿbīr* of Abū Saʿīd al-Dīnawarī (d.c.1009 AD) that was commissioned in 1006 by the caliph al-Qādir (991–1031 AD).¹⁸ During this period the bookseller and bibliographer Ibn al-Nadīm (d.996 AD?) recorded the details of some ten of the dream manuals that were available in Baghdād.¹⁹ Including works by Artemidorus and the neo-platonist Porphyry as well as Ibn Sīrīn and al-Kirmānī, al-Nadīm’s *Fihrist* is further proof of the cosmopolitan atmosphere in which such works flourished. Interestingly, these texts were classified in the section of his catalogue dealing with magic, alchemy and the occult, a section which was one of the most extensive of his inventory.

By the ninth century a written oneirocritical tradition had developed in Arabic that was supplemented by a wider oral tradition. In a reflection of its antique predecessors, early Muslim dream-theory posited three different types of dream. The first and most common type has its origins in bodily sensations, such as heat, discomfort or indigestion. A rarer second type provides glimpses of future events, but it is only the third and most blessed type that forms the veridical dream that is a special class of personalised divine message. To the standard classical dream repertoire, Islam also added the possibility of the satanic dream (*hulm*), a dream capable of leading the dreamer wildly astray. However its graver implications were overridden by a saying of the Prophet relating that neither Satan nor any of the *jinn* could assume the Prophet’s form in a dream and so rob a believer of that most favoured of all dreams. Indeed, in one of the first *ḥadīth* in Bukhārī’s *Ṣaḥīḥ* the Prophet explained that “Whoever has seen me has seen me truly, and Satan cannot take my form”.²⁰ In practice, this sometimes came to mean that dreams of the Prophet could form a legally waterproof means of legitimating all kinds of arguments, persons or policies. Yet dreams of the Prophet have formed one of the earliest and most lasting expressions of Islamic piety.²¹ The Prophet’s own son-in-law ʿAlī had described one such Prophetic dream of his own in a sermon found in his *Nahj al-balāghah*, while dreams of the Prophet continue to be important to believers in the modern day.²² The purposes of such prophetic visits, however, were many. Muḥammad might thus appear to reveal to the dreamer his future grave, to urge a celibate mystic to follow him in the path of married life or to express his approval of a writer’s work.

¹⁷ See H. Hosain, “A Treatise on the Interpretation of Dreams”, *Islamic Culture* 6, 4 (1932).

¹⁸ T. Fahd and H. Daiber in *EL*.

¹⁹ Al-Nadīm, *The Fihrist of al-Nadīm: A Tenth Century Survey of Muslim Culture*, 2 vols, trans. B. Dodge (New York, 1970), p. 742.

²⁰ Quoted in J. G. Katz, *Dreams, Sufism and Sainthood: The Visionary Career of Muhammad al-Zawāwī* (Leiden, 1996), p. 205.

²¹ See I. Goldziher, “The Appearance of the Prophet in Dreams”, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1921).

²² See Ḥadrat ʿAlī, *Nahj al-balāghah* (Tihirān, Chihil Sutūn, n.d.), *Khūtbah* 73, p. 43.

The importance given to the dream was also reflected in the early Arabic philosophical tradition and it was here that the continuities with pre-Islamic oneirocriticism were most apparent. Following Aristotle, al-Fārābī (d.950 AD) reasoned that the soul thought in images. It was these symbols, originating in the divine active intellect, that could under certain conditions be made manifest in dreams and so serve clairvoyant or even prophetic purposes.²³ Subsequently this theory was to influence Ibn Sīnā (d.1037 AD), though in his *Kitāb al-shifā'* he was to modify the theory to describe the prophetic dream as an act of providence (*'ināyah*) from the divine. In an important prefiguring of later ṣūfī approaches to the dream, Ibn Sīnā saw such providence as allotted to all humans in different degrees and not as in any way unique to the prophets.²⁴ The practice of philosophy at times came together with dreaming in interesting ways during this period and al-Ma'mūn (r.813–833 AD), the great caliphal patron of Islamic philosophy and the translation of Greek works into Arabic, was said to have experienced a dream encounter with Aristotle.²⁵ In the dream Aristotle lectured the caliph on the meaning of the good, while the bibliographer al-Nadīm later asserted that this encounter had also resulted in the caliph's promotion of book production. In the Muslim west, dream theory was later discussed by Ibn Rusd (d.1198 AD) and the philosopher of history Ibn Khaldūn (d.1406 AD).

With regard to the vision in Islam, the life of the Prophet formed a major model and point of reference. Subsequently, the *locus classicus* of the vision in Islam has always been the Night Journey (*isrā'*) to Jerusalem and the Second Journey (*mi'rāj*) through the heavens undergone by Muḥammad.²⁶ The main source of the *mi'rāj* motif was the account given in the Qur'ān (17:1 and 53:1–18) which although not mentioning the Prophet by name has always been assumed to refer to him. In this touchstone of all Muslim visions, the Prophet ascended through each of the heavenly spheres until famously coming within a distance of 'the length of two bows' away from the inner presence of God. In its many subsequent elaborations, it is a story redolent with rich imagery of many different kinds. Particularly vivid is the tradition that before the celestial journey otherworldly figures came to remove Muḥammad's internal organs, an image rich with correspondences to the shaman's flight and paintings of the preparations for the voyage to the Sun in pharaonic tomb paintings.

As the early revelation contained in the Qur'ān was gradually transformed into the basis for a more complex urban civilisation in the early centuries of Islam, the nature of the experience undergone by the Prophet became a topic of tremendous intellectual importance. Later mystics like Shāh Ni'mat Allāh Walī (d.1431 AD) were to write commentaries on these verses.²⁷ This Qur'ānic point of reference lent the vision great prestige as well as legitimacy, both of which were reinforced by many *ḥadīth* as well as, in turn, later traditions which elaborated the theme further.²⁸ Nonetheless, the subject

²³ See T. Fahd, *La Divination Arabe* (Strasbourg, 1966), pp. 51–60 and M. W. Ur-Rahman, "Al-Fārābī and his Theory of Dreams", *Islamic Culture* 10 (1936).

²⁴ See T. Fahd (1966), pp. 51–60 and T. Fahd and H. Daiber in *ELz*.

²⁵ Al-Nadīm (1970), pp. 583–584.

²⁶ See B. Schrieke, J. Horowitz, J. E. Bencheikh, J. Knappert and B. W. Robinson, "*mi'rāj*", in *ELz*.

²⁷ See N. El-Azma, "Some notes on the impact of the story of the *Mi'rāj* on Sufi literature", *Muslim World* 63 (1973).

²⁸ On dreams and *ḥadīth*, see L. Kinberg, "The Legitimation of the Madhahib Through Dreams", *Arabica* 32 (1985), *idem*, "Literal Dreams and Prophetic Hadith in Classical Islam – A Comparison of Two Ways of Legitimation", *Der Islam* 70, 2 (1993) and *idem*, *Ibn Abī al-Dunyā: Morality in the Guise of Dreams* (Leiden, 1994).

of visions always remained a matter of theological delicacy and the precise nature of the Qur'ān's purported references to visionary experiences were frequently a matter of controversy.²⁹

The Prophet's journey became a popular theme in oral and written traditions all around the Mediterranean. One medieval Arabic version of the *mir'āj* story composed in al-Andalus was subsequently translated into Latin.³⁰ This text as well as oral traditions of the story have been seen by some scholars as a key influence on Dante's literary vision of his own journey through the cosmos as recounted in the *Commedia*.³¹ However, further east the Prophet's celestial journey became a source of inspiration for writers in Persian. The *Mi'rājnāma* of Ibn Sīnā is the earliest of its type in Persian prose, while among the more notable poems to have been written in Persian on the theme are those by the Iranian poet Jamāl al-dīn 'Alawī (d.1590 AD) and the south Indian poet 'Azam Bījāpūrī (fl.1666 AD). Such *mi'rājnāmas* were even written in Tamil by Muslim poets writing in the far south of India as late as the eighteenth century and, in lithographic form, they became a popular feature of Iranian booksellers' catalogues during the nineteenth century.³²

In Islamic tradition the *mi'rāj* was seen to epitomise the notion of the vision as a genuine revelation from God, as a true epistemic rupture (or *fath*, literally an 'opening') of everyday reality. The Prophet's visionary experience was always recounted in a highly symbolic language, something that provided later believers with a witness to the role of symbols in visionary experience. But it also provided fertile material for artists. Vivid painted depictions of the Prophet's Night Journey, along with various imaginings of his mysterious steed Burāq, came to form one of the most widespread forms of Muslim devotional art. It is the visionary creature Burāq himself who is often the most lovingly portrayed element in these paintings, over time evolving the beautiful face of a young man upon his taut equine body and a peacock's tail fanned out at his rear. However, earlier depictions of Burāq sometimes show a startling resemblance to images of the winged lion representation of St Matthew the Evangelist found carved on Romanesque churches. Such images of the *mi'rāj* were occasionally found in books of divination (*fālnāmas*) in which miniature paintings of the prophets were paired with poetic forecasts of the reader's future, as in the case of a mid-sixteenth century example from Şafawid Tabrīz or Qazwīn.³³ An example of the vibrancy of the traditions of the *mi'rāj* in the religious imagination of modern-day Muslims are the paintings of Burāq found on the sides of lorries in Pakistan in order to provide the blessing of a safe journey as they plod through the hazardous mountain roads of the region.³⁴

²⁹ See e.g. A. K. Tuft, "The *ru'ya* controversy and the interpretation of Qur'an verse 7 (al-A'af): 143", *Hamdard Islamicus* 6, 3 (1983).

³⁰ See G. Besson and M. Brossard-Dandré (ed. & trans.), *Le Livre de l'échelle de Mahomet: Liber Scale Machometi* (Paris, 1991).

³¹ See M. Asín Palacios, *Islam and the Divine Comedy* (London, 1926).

³² See M. M. Uwise, "Muslim Literary Forms in Tamil Literature", *Proceedings of the Second International Conference Seminar of Tamil Studies*, vol.1 (Madras, 1968), pp. 182–189 and U. Marzolph, "Persian Popular Literature in the Qajar Period", *Asian Folklore Studies* 60, 2 (2001), p. 231.

³³ The twenty-nine known pages of this manuscript, attributed to the painters Āqā Mīrak and 'Abd al-'Azīz at the court of Shāh Tahmāsp, are now dispersed among several collections. The painting of the *mi'rāj* referred to is now in the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Washington.

³⁴ See J.-C. Blanc, *Afghan Trucks* (London, 1976).

The Dream and Vision Among the Ṣūfīs

The most important early example of a non-prophetic vision in ṣūfī tradition was that of the mystical ascent of Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī (d.874 AD). Different accounts of Abū Yazīd's visions were recorded in the descriptions written by more desk-loving ṣūfīs like Sarrāj (d.988 AD), a pseudo-Junayd of Baghdād and the celebrated Persian poet 'Aṭṭār (d.c.1221 AD).³⁵ In time the hoary ecstatic dervish Abū Yazīd became in subsequent ṣūfī literature a kind of mystical *Urmensch* and many later ṣūfīs were to have their own dreams about meeting him. Other early writers also spoke of the visionary encounter with God undergone by the great early female saint of Islam, Rābi'ah al-'Adawiyyah (d.801 AD). But perhaps the importance of veridical dreams to the ṣūfīs is best seen in the story in the *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyyah* of 'Abd Allāh Anṣārī which recounts how Shāh Shujā' Kirmānī (d.c.880 AD) went without sleep for forty years until one night he slept and saw the Prophet in a dream, after which he was always to be seen either asleep or trying to sleep.³⁶ Albeit often with a certain caution, such visionary tales also became a common feature of accounts of later ṣūfīs, like Muḥammad Ghawth Gwālīārī (d.1562–3 AD).³⁷

The fact that many ṣūfī writers had been more concerned with the amazing subject matter of the spellbinding visions of their early mentors suggests that they allowed themselves, at times, to leave the more trifling category of the dream to the chattering classes of Baghdād. Texts such as the *Kashf al-mahjūb* of 'Alī al-Hujwīrī (d.c.1072 AD) are replete with stories of the visions of the early ṣūfīs.³⁸ Yet dreams continued to play an important role in ṣūfism and by the time of the composition of the *'Awārif al-ma'ārif* of 'Umar Suhrawardī (d.1234 AD), theories of dreaming were a commonplace of ṣūfī literature. Thus Suhrawardī devoted a chapter of his book to the role of dreams in *taṣawwuf*.³⁹ Once again the crucial reference point in the *'Awārif al-ma'ārif* was the Prophet Muḥammad, though more curious was Suhrawardī's method of attributing different types of vision with the different elements of nature transcended in the defeat of the lower soul (*nafs*). Dreams of deserts thus relate to earth, oceans to water and so on. A common ṣūfī idea was the notion that veridical dreams formed a lesser type of the waking vision that was more suitable to the neophyte whose visionary or imaginative faculties have yet to fully awaken. The main *topos* for this was once again the Prophet Muḥammad, who had himself experienced dream premonitions before receiving his first vision of Jabrā'īl. More prolific ṣūfīs devoted entire works to the subject, as in the case of *Asmār al-asrār* of Muḥammad al-Ḥusaynī Gēsū Darāz (d.1422 AD).⁴⁰

The Crystalisation of Ṣūfī Visionary Theory

While the early ṣūfīs simply spoke of visions in terms of a breaching into “the world of the unseen” (*'ālam al-ghayb*), the most important codification of a formal theory of the dream

³⁵ See M. A. Sells (trans. and ed.), *Early Islamic Mysticism* (New York, 1996), pp. 212–250.

³⁶ Khwājah 'Abd Allāh Anṣārī, *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyyah*, ed. A. H. Ḥabībī (Kābul, 1404/1983), pp. 196–197. Quoted in R. Islam, *Sufism in South Asia: Impact on Fourteenth Century Muslim Society* (Karachi, 2002), pp. 27–28.

³⁷ See S. Kugle, “Heaven's Witness: the Uses and Abuses of Muhammad Ghawth Gwaliorī's Ascension”, *Journal of Islamic Studies* 4, 1 (2003).

³⁸ See Ali Bin Uthman al-Hujwiri, *The Kashf al Mahjub: The Oldest Persian Treatise on Sufism*, trans. R. A. Nicholson (Delhi, 1999), especially pp. 88–160.

³⁹ See R. Gramlich, *Die Gaben der Erkenntnisse des 'Umar al-Suhrawardī – 'Awārif al-ma'ārif* (Wiesbaden, 1978).

⁴⁰ Muḥammad al-Ḥusaynī Gēsū Darāz, *Asmār al-asrār*, ed. 'Aṭā' Allāh Ḥusaynī (Ḥaydarābād, 1350f/1971–2).

and vision into a wider mystico-philosophical system came in the work of Shihāb al-dīn Suhrawardī (d.1191 AD). A visionary and a philosopher, Suhrawardī aimed to make the ancient religious systems of pre-Islamic Iran (as well as those of ancient Greece and Egypt) meld with Islam to form a truly cosmopolitan theory of mystical knowledge in which the visionary experiences sought by the ṣūfīs played a pivotal role. It is Suhrawardī who appears to have been the first to schematise the realm of vision into a proper world of its own, accessed through the mode of knowledge he suggestively entitled the wisdom of oriental illumination (*ḥikmat al-ishrāq*). Suhrawardī laid out this epistemological system in his *Kitāb ḥikmat al-ishrāq* and other lesser Arabic works and, more intimately, in a number of visionary narratives composed in Persian.⁴¹ As some of the earliest examples of Persian prose writing, the place of these visionary recitals in the history of Persian letters is evocative of the wider importance of the vision in Islamic culture at large. It is noteworthy that Suhrawardī borrowed both the model of the symbolic *risālah* and the title of his philosophical system from the earlier work of Ibn Sīnā. Whether or not Ibn Sīnā had sought to formulate a more mystical system of knowledge later in his career, in which visions played an increased role, remains uncertain if not entirely impossible to answer.⁴²

For Suhrawardī, both visions and their lesser kindred of dreams take place in an intermediate world between that of concrete phenomenal reality and the realm of pure intellectual abstraction. Possessing form but not substance, he referred to this intermediate world as the world of likenesses (*'ālam al-mithāl*). Connecting it back to the foundations of the Muslim faith, he also frequently referred to it by the Qur'ānic term of isthmus or interface (*barzakh*). Through its custody of symbols as its mode of communication, this cosmic sphere (or alternatively, level of existence) was seen to act as an intermediary between God's non-delimited knowledge and our own fragmentary understanding the universe. It was also seen to act as the interface between the living and the dead and was in this sense understood as acting as the visionary meeting ground for living ṣūfīs and their dead predecessors. As a proper realm of existence that mediated between different kinds of and levels of being, the *'ālam al-mithāl* thus played an important part in the cosmological model which underpinned Suhrawardī's wider mystical epistemology.⁴³ For the first time in Islamic thought, visions and dreams were here enrobed with a special sphere of existence of their own. No longer regarded as simple messages from on high they were seen as in some way actual *events* existentially undergone at a different level of our being.

Not wishing to merely show himself solely as a master of theory, Suhrawardī naturally also described a number of visions of his own. These included a meeting with the philosopher Aristotle in which Suhrawardī enquired as to the relative achievements of earlier generations of spiritual aspirants.⁴⁴ Aristotle told him that while none of the Muslim philosophers had reached even a thousandth part of the rank of the Divine Plato, early ṣūfīs like Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī (d.875 AD) and Sahl al-Tustarī (d.896 AD) could be confirmed as true men

⁴¹ Suhrawardī, *Le Livre de la Sagesse Orientale [Kitāb Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq]*, trans. H. Corbin (Paris, 1986).

⁴² See H. Corbin, *Avicenne et le récit visionnaire* (Paris, 1952).

⁴³ See M. Amin Razavi, *Suhrawardī and the School of Illumination* (Richmond, 1997), F. Rahman, "Dream, Imagination and 'Ālam al-Mithāl", in von Grunebaum and Caillois (1966) and H. Ziai, *Knowledge and Illumination: A Study of Suhrawardī's Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq* (Atlanta, 1990).

⁴⁴ See M. Y. Hairī, "Suhrawardī's An Episode and a Trance: A Philosophical Dialogue in a Mystical Stage", in P. Morewedge (ed.), *Islamic Philosophy and Mysticism* (Delmar, 1981).

of divine wisdom. Over a century later the *sūfī* ‘Alā’ al-Dawlah al-Simnānī (d.1336 AD) would have a vision in which he in turn denounced Suhrawardī’s mystical achievements.⁴⁵ Such episodes draw our attention to the role of dreams and visions in the legitimation of various individuals, processes or institutions. Yet as well as playing an important role in the development of Persian literature, the short treatises purporting to describe Suhrawardī’s own private visions outlined a typology of the initiatory mystical vision for his own disciples and later mystics to follow. In one of these visions, described in the treatise *‘Aql-e-surkh*, Suhrawardī encounters a mysterious wayfarer who looks both youthful and ancient at the same time.⁴⁶ Glowing with a strange crimson hue all over, the stranger explains that he is the first born of creation, an archangel perpetually glowing with the primordial sunrise that was the dawn of creation.⁴⁷

A generation later, a re-working of the theory of the *‘ālam al-mithāl* was to feature prominently in the grand systematisation of mystical experience that was the life work of Ibn ‘Arabī of Mursiyyah (d.1240 AD). In Ibn ‘Arabī’s system the role of the imaginative faculty (*khayāl*) played an increased role as the creative agent that is active in understanding.⁴⁸ Indeed, Ibn ‘Arabī viewed mystic man’s own imaginative impulse as an essential aspect of God’s eternal and unrepeating self-manifestation (*tajallī*). He in this way considered the use of the imagination to be the essential part of the journey into God, as the supreme human faculty capable of bridging the existential gap between human and divine knowledge. In this we witness the axiomatic yes/no formulation present in so many mystical theories, for Ibn ‘Arabī regarded visions as, at the same instant, both descending from God to man as a private revelation and ascending from man to God as a creative visual encounter with the divine. Every original and creative act of man (the freedom of whom he was keen not to limit) was at another level to be seen as a divine act of self-manifestation, tying in with Ibn ‘Arabī’s wider theory of the unity of existence (*waḥdat al-wujūd*). Such ideas of the spiritual importance of the imagination were to recur throughout Muslim civilisation during the following centuries as Ibn ‘Arabī’s ideas were spread in manuscript form and through the writings of later commentators.⁴⁹ One of the most interesting later expressions of Ibn ‘Arabī’s theory of the imagination appeared in the *Adab al-mashq*, a sixteenth-century guidebook to the art of calligraphy, in which the great Iranian calligrapher Bābā Shāh Isfāhānī (d.1587–8 AD) developed the idea of imaginative practice (*mashq-e-khayālī*) as a means of reaching the divine perfection inherent in the beauty of Arabic calligraphy.⁵⁰

Ibn ‘Arabī also devoted considerable attention to the subject of dreams. His ideas on dreaming found most famous expression in the chapters on the especial theophanic

⁴⁵ See J. J. Elias, “A Kubrawī Treatise on Mystical Visions: The *Risāla-yi Nūriyya* of ‘Alā’ ad-Dawlah al-Simnānī”, *Muslim World* 83, 1 (1993).

⁴⁶ See N. Green, “A New Translation of Suhrawardī’s *The Crimson Archangel* (*‘Aql-e-Surkh*)”, *Sufi* 36 (1998).

⁴⁷ See Suhrawardī, *The Mystical and Visionary Treatises of Suhrawardī*, trans. W. M. Thackston (London, 1982) and G. Webb, “An Exegesis of Suhrawardī’s *The Purple Intellect* (*‘Aql-i surkh*)”, *Islamic Quarterly* 26, 4 (1982).

⁴⁸ See W. C. Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn ‘Arabī and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany, 1994) and H. Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn al-‘Arabī* (Princeton, 1969). On the imagination in Arabic philosophical tradition, see J. S. Meisami, “Imagination”, in Meisami and Starkey (1998), pp. 393–394.

⁴⁹ See e.g. W. C. Chittick, “Notes on Ibn ‘Arabī’s Influence in the Indian Sub-Continent”, *Muslim World* 82 (1992).

⁵⁰ See C. W. Ernst, “The Spirit of Islamic Calligraphy: Baba Shah Isfahani’s *Adab al-mashq*”, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 112 (1992), pp. 279–286.

capabilities of the prophets Iṣḥāq and Yūsuf in his *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*.⁵¹ If highly controversial, his ideas refused to go away and in India five centuries later the juriconsult and mystic Shāh Walī Allāh of Dihlī (d.1762 AD) likewise referred to veridical dreams as a form of divine self-manifestation (*tajallī*) that was drawn down from the imaginary world (*'ālam al-mithāl*).⁵² To this day the interpretation of dreams forms one of the most important services expected from ṣūfī masters in many parts of the Muslim world, forming a style of spiritualised Islamic psychoanalysis.⁵³ Ṣūfī masters regularly interrogate their disciples concerning their dream lives in *khānaqāhs* in Iran no less than Pakistan and Morocco. In northern India, the shrine of Pattishāh specialises in the cure of psychiatric conditions and makes use of techniques combining the tradition of Graeco-Islamic medicine (*yūnānī ṭibb*) with more local therapeutic methods.⁵⁴

Like the life of his precursor Suhrawardī, Ibn 'Arabī's own life was also notable for an abundance of visionary episodes. These began in 1190 while he was living in the Spanish city of Qurṭubah during his youth and experienced a mystical encounter with the souls of all of the prophets (including Mūsā, 'Īsā and Muḥammad).⁵⁵ It was around this time that Ibn 'Arabī wrote an account of the ṣūfīs of Spain entitled *Rūḥ al-quḍs*, in which he showed that visions of this kind (if not of this masterly degree) were a far from unusual feature of the Islamic *milieu* of the southern Europe of his day.⁵⁶ Yet even by the high standards of the visionary carpenters and cobblers of Andalusia, Ibn 'Arabī's own vocation for visions was exceptional. His commentator Ṣadr al-dīn Qunawī (d.1273 AD) later described how his master could summon the spirit of any dead person (the prophets included) to come and speak with him at any time whatsoever, in this way presenting Ibn 'Arabī as a signorial precursor to such European visionaries as William Blake and Immanuel Swedenborg.⁵⁷

Later ṣūfīs also claimed such grand visionary abilities, often as a means of showing divine favour. A mid-nineteenth century echo of Ibn 'Arabī's celebrated youthful encounter with the souls of the prophets is found in the autobiographic ramblings of the great Iranian ṣūfī, Ṣafī 'Alī Shāh (c.1835–1899 AD). Describing a retreat (*chila*) he performed as a young man, this Shīrī ṣūfī claimed to have first encountered Ḥusayn before noticing the assembled spirits of all of the prophets and saints in the distance behind him. In this Shīrī version of the classic ṣūfī initiatory vision, Ṣafī was then beckoned forward by Ḥusayn and handed a

⁵¹ Ibn 'Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, trans. R. W. J. Austin (Lahore, 1988), pp. 98–103 and 120–127. On Ibn 'Arabī and dreams, see also W. C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany, 1989), pp. 119–121.

⁵² See G. N. Jalbani and D. B. Fry (trans. and ed.), *Sufism and the Islamic Tradition: The Lamahat and Sata'at of Shah Waliullah* (London, 1980), pp. 112–114.

⁵³ This is based on the author's own observations with regard to Iran and India. For Pakistan, see K. P. Ewing, "The Dream of Spiritual Initiation and the Organization of Self Representation among Pakistani Sufis", *American Ethnologist* 17, 1 (1990) and *idem*, *Arguing Sainthood: Modernity, Psychoanalysis, and Islam* (Durham, 1997). On similar processes in Morocco and Egypt, see V. Crapanzano, "Saints, Jnūn, and Dreams: An Essay in Moroccan Ethnopsychology", *Psychiatry* 38 (1975) and E. Sirriyeh, "Dreams of the Holy Dead: Traditional Islamic Oneirocriticism Versus Salafi Scepticism", *Journal of Semitic Studies* 45, 1 (2000).

⁵⁴ S. Kakar, *Shamans, Mystics and Doctors: A Psychological Inquiry into India and its Healing Traditions* (Delhi, 1990), pp. 15–52.

⁵⁵ See M. Chodkiewicz, *Seal of the Saints: Prophethood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn 'Arabī* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 17. On Ibn 'Arabī's visions more generally, see C. Addas, *La Quête du soufre rouge* (Paris, 1989) and W. C. Chittick, "Meetings with Imaginal Men", *Sufi* 19 (1993).

⁵⁶ Ibn 'Arabī, *Sufis of Andalusia*, trans. R. W. J. Austin (London, 1971).

⁵⁷ Chodkiewicz (1993), pp. 17–18.

sword with which he was ordered to pursue *jihād*.⁵⁸ Ṣafī was far from the only visionary of this kind in Qājār Iran, for visions also formed the epistemological centre of the mystical theology expounded by the founders of the Shaykhī school of Shīʿī thought. The founder of the school, Shaykh Aḥmad Aḥsāʿī (d. 1826 AD), described his dream encounters with the imāms in considerable detail, his use of the classic terminology of unveiling (*kashf*) gave his followers their alternative title of the Kashfiyya.⁵⁹

Such accounts of visionary encounters were therefore not merely a matter of the aggrandisement of memory and commemoration. For visionary interviews with past (and indeed pre-eternal) luminaries were of great epistemological importance in an historical sense, in that they formed a way in which the people and knowledge of the past could be reclaimed and re-figured to play a role in the present. In defiance of the strictures and fragility of written knowledge, when the souls of the sages of time-past could turn up at any time for a lesson unmediated by the written word such visionary meetings overrode the need to worry about the desecrated libraries and the lost knowledge of the ancients. Such visions provided a means of avoiding the mediation of the written word through bringing the dead into the speaking presence of the living. In this they reflected a more general epistemological suspicion of written knowledge in Islam that was manifested elsewhere in the “recorded conversations” (*malfūzāt*) of Indian ṣūfīs and the emphasis on the oral qualities of the Qurʾān itself.⁶⁰

Visionary encounters created literature as well as circumvented the epistemological need for it. The most important of all Ibn ʿArabī’s many visionary experiences were those that he claimed had brought about his own major written works. He claimed that prophetic visions brought about the writing of his vast *Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* as well as the shorter *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, the redaction which he made of the *Futūḥāt* to the gratitude of subsequent generations. These texts Ibn ʿArabī described as being composed not by himself but by divine dictation (*imlāʾ ilāhī*) which occurred as the result of a series of visionary encounters with the Prophet Muḥammad undergone during a period of residence in the holy city.⁶¹ Ibn ʿArabī’s claim to be a kind of secretary to the Prophet is certainly not contradicted by the extraordinary scope, lucid complexity and sheer unrelenting volume of the *Futūḥāt*, a text that few since have fully read and perhaps none digested in all of its splendours. But in its close resemblance to the prophetic experience of Muḥammad himself, it was a claim that outraged as many as it impressed. Here visions were seen as tearing away at the divine order that separated ordinary men from prophets and indeed God himself. To his enemies, however, the visions of Ibn ʿArabī were not revelatory but delusional and heretical.

Nevertheless, many later ṣūfīs regarded Ibn ʿArabī’s visionary life as a central part of his mission and ṣūfīs continued to place visionary experience at the centre of their theorising works of mysticism. Working in the tradition of Ibn ʿArabī, the later ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Jīlī (d. between 1406 and 1417 AD) discussed dreams and visions in his *Insān al-kāmil*.⁶² In

⁵⁸ These reminiscences have been published in M. Homāyūnī, *Tārīkh-e-silsilah-e-ṭarīqah-e-Nīʿmatullāhiyyah dar Irān* (London, 1371/1992), pp. 267–268.

⁵⁹ See M. Bayat, *Mysticism and Dissent: Socioreligious Thought in Qajar Iran* (Syracuse, 1982).

⁶⁰ See N. Green, “Translating the Spoken Words of the Saints: Oral Literature and the Sufis of Awrangabad”, in Lynne Long (ed.), *Holy Untranslatable* (London, forthcoming).

⁶¹ See Chittick, (1989), pp. xii–xv.

⁶² See R. A. Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism* (Cambridge, 1921), pp. 90–92.

discussing Ibn ‘Arabī’s theory of the perfect man that lay at the centre of this text, in the sixtieth chapter of his book *Jlī* described a vision of his own which he received in Zabīd in 1394.⁶³ In claiming to see the perfect man, who is also the Prophet, in the form of his own master Sharaf al-dīn al-Jabartī it was the very kind of vision which to Ibn ‘Arabī’s detractors summed up all that was most dangerous about his theories.

Despite such controversies, other ṣūfīs even claimed similar inspiration as that of Ibn ‘Arabī for their own works, even in the case of such minor treatises as the *Qudsiyya* of ‘Alā’ al-Dawlah al-Simnānī (d.1336 AD).⁶⁴ In the same way dreams occasionally played a role as cultural mediators, as when Dārā Shikūh attested to having been inspired to patronise a new translation of the *Yōgā Vāsishṭha* in a dream of the Hindu sage Rāmacandra in which the latter embraced him and fed him with sweets.⁶⁵ But such positive visionary inspiration notwithstanding, a dream or vision could also at times stand directly in the way of literary composition. At Abarqūh in 1281, for example, the Prophet appeared in a dream to warn ‘Azīz Nasafī (d. between 1281 and 1300 AD) to delay the writing of the remaining chapters of his *Kashf al-ḥaqā’iq* for another two decades.⁶⁶

Uways al-Qaranī and Visionary Initiations

Theories of visions were not limited to the central Islamic lands and the school of Najm al-dīn Kubrā (d.1221 AD) added to the development of the ṣūfī technics of vision in the eastern Islamic world. Working in Najm al-dīn’s tradition, ‘Alā’ al-Dawlah al-Simnānī also wrote a treatise on visions adapted to the principles and practices of the Kubrāwī order.⁶⁷ Simnānī’s treatise reminds us of the practical aspects of the visionary life in Islam, the way in which visions were actively sought through the performance of specific meditative and ritual practices. Simnānī recommended a *dhikr* consisting of the silent repetition of the credal formula ‘There is no god other than God’ before sunrise and after sunset.⁶⁸ According to Simnānī, diligence in this practice would introduce the mystic to the witnessing of a progression of coloured lights that herald the onset of the ṣūfī’s visionary career.

Originally confined to Central Asia, the Kubrāwī school to which Simnānī contributed so greatly was also important for its adaptation and transmission of the tradition of the “path of the Uwaysis” (*tarīqa-e-uwaysiyān*).⁶⁹ This tradition was named after the mysterious Uways al-Qaranī, the reputed friend of the Prophet Muḥammad from Yaman who had reputedly only communicated with him through visions and telepathy.⁷⁰ Uways had been

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

⁶⁴ See J. J. Elias, *The Throne Carrier of God: The Life and Thought of ‘Alā’ ad-dawla as-Simnānī* (New York, 1995), p. 192.

⁶⁵ Muḥammad Dārā Shikūh, *Majma‘-ul-Bahrain or the Mingling of Two Oceans*, ed. M. Mahfuz-ul-Haq (Calcutta, 1929), pp. 25–26.

⁶⁶ See L. Ridgeon, *‘Azīz Nasafī* (Richmond, 1998), pp. 8–9.

⁶⁷ See Elias (1993).

⁶⁸ Elias (1995), pp. 124–141.

⁶⁹ On the visionary techniques of the Kubrāwiyya, see Elias (1995). On Uwaysī mysticism, see J. Baldick, *Imaginary Muslims: The Uwaysi Sufis of Central Asia* (New York, 1993) and D. DeWeese, “The *Tadhkira-i Bughra-khan* and the ‘Uwaysi’ Sufis of Central Asia: Notes in Review of *Imaginary Muslims*”, *Central Asiatic Journal* 40, 1 (1996).

⁷⁰ See A. S. Husaini, “Uways al-Qaranī and the Uwaysī Sufis”, *The Moslem World* 57 (1967) and K. Khaharia, “Uways al-Qarani, Visages d’une légende”, *Arabica* 46, 2 (1999).

a famous figure throughout the history of *ṣūfism* and in the eleventh century his life was once again recounted in al-Hujwārī's *Kashf al-mahjūb*. However, in his description of the different sects of the *ṣūfīs* Hujwārī did not make any reference to any tradition named after Uways at this time.⁷¹ In truth, Uways was to lend his name to the denomination of a style rather than an actual school of *sufism*. Such *ṣūfīs* claimed to have been initiated into the mystical path not through the more usual and mundane mode of clasping the hand of a living master but through the means of a visionary initiatory encounter. Usually this visionary initiation would be with the enigmatic green-man of Islam al-Khiḍr or else with the Prophet himself.⁷² Two no lesser figures than Ibn 'Arabī and the great Indian Naqshbandī *ṣūfī* Aḥmad Sirhindī (d.1624 AD) claimed initiations this kind.⁷³ However perhaps the richest single source of Uwaysī visionary narratives is the collection written in eastern Turkestan around the year 1600 by Aḥmad of Uzgan in his *Tadhkirah-ye-bughrā khānī*.⁷⁴ In this visionary history we hear of an Afghan greengrocer who is given mystical instructions by the prophet Ismā'īl, a Tājik perfumer who has terrifying encounters with dragons, and an elderly scholar called Nizām al-dīn whose devotion to God brings about visions of the prophet Dā'ūd in which he is taught to sing in rapture as beautifully as the writer of the Psalms himself.

This kind of Uwaysī initiatory vision was widespread if not common. Far from the territory and time of the *Tadhkirah-ye-bughrā khānī*, the North African *ṣūfī* 'Abd al- 'Azīz ibn al-Dabbāgh was initiated by a vision of Khiḍr at the tomb of the jurist and *sūfī* Abū'l Ḥasan ibn al-Hīrizhim (d.1164 AD) in Fās in 1713.⁷⁵ Uwaysī mysticism could certainly prove subversive in enabling ambitious mystics to claim a grand initiation while side-stepping the usual institutionalised methods of entry into Islamic mystical discourse through the membership of a recognised order (*ṭarīqa*) and under the restraining guidance of a living master. Encounters with Uways could also have political dimensions, as when the emerging ruler of the Dakan 'Alā' al-dīn Ḥasan Bahman Shāh (1347–1358 AD) was encouraged by Uways in a dream to take up arms against his rival Muḥammad bin Tughluq.⁷⁶ But such was the prestige of visionary encounters that visionary initiations became at times an acceptable if marginal aspect of *ṣūfī* experience. Nonetheless, limits needed to be set and the Syrian Naqshbandī master 'Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī (d.1731) issued a legal ruling that visionary initiations were only acceptable so long as their content was not at variance with *sharī'a*.⁷⁷ For the most part, however, the Uwaysī tradition became absorbed into the broader stream of institutional *ṣūfism* and the bounds of imagination were in this way restrained by a variety of checks and balances. These were later seen among Persian and Indian *ṣūfī* groups in the prominence given to telepathic communication between a disciple and his living master, who could always recant on any outrageous claims he was said to have made to his follower

⁷¹ See Hujwiri (1999), pp. 83–84.

⁷² On such encounters with Khiḍr, see P. Franke, *Begegnung mit Khidr: Quellenstudien zum Imaginären in traditionellen Islam* (Stuttgart, 2000) and I. Omar, "Khidr in Islamic Tradition", *Muslim World* 83 (1993).

⁷³ See Y. Friedmann, *Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindī* (Montreal, 1971), pp. 27–28.

⁷⁴ Baldick (1993).

⁷⁵ See J. S. Tringham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (Oxford, 1971), p. 159.

⁷⁶ H. K. Sherwani, *The Bahmanis of the Deccan* (Delhi, 1985), p. 41. Since the Tughluq ruler died before 'Alā' al-dīn could meet him in battle, Uways may also here have played a role in protecting the martial reputation of the new ruler.

⁷⁷ See Katz (1996), p. 220 and Kinberg (1994), pp. 36–37.

in a vision or dream.⁷⁸ Nonetheless, initiatory dreams, whether in the institutionalised form of investiture by an aspirant's living master or in the less controlled form of investiture by such figures as Khidr and the Prophet, have continued to be an important theme of Muslim spirituality through to the present day.⁷⁹ *Āftāb-e-dakan*, a modern Urdu hagiography of the *sūfīs* of Awrangābād, describes the visionary initiation of Shihāb al-dīn the first *sajjāda nashīn* of one of the city's shrines. In the vision, Mu'tin al-dīn Chishtī appeared on a throne before Sayyid Shihāb al-dīn at his shrine in Ajmēr before Khidr arrived on horseback to carry Shihāb al-dīn across India to the Dakan where he was delivered into the service of Shāh Nūr Ḥammāmī (d.1692 AD).⁸⁰

Dreams, Visions and Historiography

Accounts of clairvoyant dreams and visions also featured in works of a non-religious nature and often played an important role in Arabic and Persian historiography. Just as today the idea of meaningful dreams seems altogether less troubling a thought than the voice of an invisible God booming in our right ear, so for the city-dwelling *beau monde* of the 'Abbāsīd empire was the idea of dream analysis an enjoyable middle-point between frivolous entertainment and the really frightening existential issues of revelation. Dream interpretation (*ta'bir*) became a subject of great popularity in the sophisticated circles of the 'Abbāsīd court in Baghdād and its popularity brought about the creation of circles of expert interpreters. The great 'Abbāsīd historians al-Ṭabarī (d.923 AD) and al-Mas'ūdī (d.956 AD) recorded such narratives, as did biographical works relating to all classes of people.⁸¹

In these historical works, dreams at times clearly serve the purpose of flattering some rulers and besmirching the memory of others. Mas'ūdī recounts the dream in which Hārūn al-Rashīd (786–809 AD) saw two branches of a tree given to him and his brother, al-Hādī (785–786 AD).⁸² While Hārūn's branch flourished, that of his brother bore only few leaves, an image which the royal physician Ibn Ishāq al-Saymarī needlessly explained as referring to the relative success and longevity of their reigns. In a later caliphal dream, the earlier ruler al-Mutawakkil (847–861 AD) is seen burning in the flames.⁸³ More interesting is another dream of Hārūn al-Rashīd in which he is commanded by the Prophet to free Mūsā ibn Ja'far from prison during the same night that the latter has a dream of the Prophet promising his freedom.⁸⁴ Here a dream narrative may clear the name of one person while intimating the piety of another. Yet as a historian in particular, Mas'ūdī is also of interest for

⁷⁸ This was especially the case with Naqshbandī *sūfīs*, whose founder had also been an Uwaysī. See Baldick (1993), pp. 25–26 and p. 29. On the mediation of such experiences by *sūfī* masters in the modern period, see also A. Buehler, *Sufi Heirs of the Prophet: The Indian Naqshbandi Brotherhood and the Rise of the Mediating Sufi Shaykh*, (Columbia, 1998) and L. Lewisohn, "An Introduction to the History of Modern Persian Sufism, Part II: A Socio-cultural Profile of Sufism, from the Dhahabī Revival to the Present Day", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 62 (1999).

⁷⁹ See M. A. Amir-Moezzi (ed.), *Le Voyage initiatique en terre d'islam: Ascensions célestes et itinéraires spirituels* (Paris, 1996) and K. P. Ewing, "The Dream of Spiritual Initiation and the Organization of Self Representation among Pakistani Sufis", *American Ethnologist* 17, 1 (1990).

⁸⁰ Tārā Sāhib Qurēshī, *Āftāb-e-Dakan* (Aurangābād, c.1985), pp. 13–14. [Urdu]

⁸¹ Von Grunebaum and Caillois (1966), pp. 12–19.

⁸² Mas'ūdī, *The Meadows of Gold: The Abbasids*, trans. and ed. P. Lunde and C. Stone (London, 1989), pp. 64–65.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 272.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 74–75.

showing how dreams could be used to explain developments in political history. The origins of the pro-‘Alid policies of al-Mu‘tadid (892–902 AD), for example, are explained through reference to a dream of ‘Alī himself warning the caliph from persecuting his descendants.⁸⁵ Clearly, there is little originality in the dream stories recounted by Mas‘ūdī and one dream narrative in particular reflects imagery surrounding the birth of prophets and saints as found in the hagiographical and folkloric traditions of various cultures. In this narrative Salāmah, the Berber slave-girl who was the mother of al-Manṣūr (754–775 AD), dreamt during her pregnancy of a lion emerging from her side. Crouching, and then roaring with its tail beating ominously on the ground, it was presently surrounded by other lions who reverently bowed their heads before it.⁸⁶

In a Persian literary context the connections between dreaming and kingship were demonstrated in as early a work as the *Shāhnāma* of Firdawsī (d. 1020 AD), when for example the poet recounted Zuḥāk’s nightmare of being dragged through the streets and beaten with an ox-headed mace and Sām’s dream of finding his son Zāl. Persian prose historians were no less keen to record royal dreams. One of the most interesting of all such royal dreams occurred several centuries after Firdawsī and was recounted by the Persian chronicler of the Saljuqs of Rūm Ibn Bībī (d. after 1284 AD). Ibn Bībī describes how during his imprisonment his royal patron ‘Alā’ al-dīn Kay Qubād (1219–1237 AD) had dreamt of a mysterious shaykh on the night before he was unexpectedly released. But this was not merely a historian’s reworking of Mas‘ūdī’s story of the dream of Mūsā ibn Ja‘far and the element of wonder in Ibn Bībī’s story features rather in the moment of Kay Qubād’s meeting with the great ṣūfī Abū Ḥafṣ ‘Umar Suhrawardī (d. 1234 AD), who was sent on a diplomatic mission to the Saljuq capital at Quniyāh by the ‘Abbāsid caliph al-Nāsir (1180–1225 AD). For in a marvellous crossover of courtly and ṣūfī imagery, it was only upon meeting Suhrawardī and his entourage outside the walls of the city that Kay Qubād recognised the shaykh as the dream figure who had appeared to him to presage the throwing off of his bonds.⁸⁷

However, insight into the roles of women as dreamers and clairvoyants is also sometimes given in Persian historical works. The mother of Ibn Bībī, Bībī Munajama, was one such fortune-teller from Nīshāpūr whose extraordinary prognosticating gifts enabled her to become a royal adviser and secure her son’s fortunes at court.⁸⁸ Another Persian historian, Ḍayn al-dīn Wāṣafī (d. after 1551 AD), tells us that a less fortunate woman rose from the city slums to have a similar if short-lived role in Tīmūrid Harāt. After considerable and lucrative success among the Tīmūrid aristocrats of the city, Wāṣafī explains how Bībī Rūshanāyī was eventually revealed as a fraud when Harāt’s wise new Uzbek rulers (who were also kind enough to patronise his work) quickly saw through her ventriloquistic ‘trances’. The scorching embarrassment of the many aristocrats she had gulled soon ensured that she was hanged in public for her crimes.⁸⁹ Here we see how stories of fortune-telling

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 366.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 21. On comparable lion dreams concerning ṣūfīs such as al-Ḥallāj (d. 922), see L. Massignon, “Thèmes archétypiques en onirocritique musulmane”, *Eranos-Jahrbuch* 12 (1945), pp. 244–246.

⁸⁷ H. W. Duda, *Die Seltchukengeschichte des Ibn Bībī* (Copenhagen, 1959), pp. 101–104.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 187–188.

⁸⁹ Zayn al-dīn Mahmūd Wāṣafī, *Badā’ī al-waqā’ī* (Tīhrān, 1350/1971), pp. 395–396.

visionaries could be used as a rhetorical ploy by which court savants could drag their patrons' enemies over the coals to the public ridicule of future generations.

Nevertheless, grandees continued to publicise their dream lives and place great weight on their correct interpretation, a royal duty which was at times emphasised in the genre of the *Mirror for Princes*. In the anonymous twelfth-century *Baḥr al-fawā'id*, for example, princely readers are instructed on some of the basic themes of oneirocriticism, illustrated with reference to the caliph 'Umar's dream of the sun and moon fighting.⁹⁰ The text is also interesting for its discussion of inconsistencies in the experience of time in different kinds of dream. Reflecting these royal interests, one sixteenth-century Ottoman miniature subsequently depicts a grave faced sultan describing his dreams to his vizier and other close advisers.⁹¹ In the same period, the dreams of Shaykh Ṣafī al-dīn of Ardabīl (d.1334 AD) became an important feature of Ṣafawid historical writings.⁹² The dreams of the founder of the family dynasty were capable of encoding political claims to legitimate rule into signs of divine blessing and approval. These dream narratives formed a rhetoric that was made all the more powerful by the fact that Ṣafī al-dīn's shrine acted both as a nationwide centre for pilgrimage and, in the manner of a mountain-ringed Versailles, as a seasonal courtly retreat. Dream narratives and the imposing architecture of sainthood might in this way work together to deter wayward courtiers from thoughts of conspiracy. In a similar manner, dream narratives might also be used to justify certain policies. In *Zaḡfar al-wāliḥ*, for example, the historian al-Makkī recorded Sulṭān Buhlūl Lōdī's claim of seeing the great Dihlī ṣūfī Quṭb al-dīn Bakhtiyār Kākī (d.1235 AD) in a dream encouraging him to wage war against the Sharqī sultan of Jawnpūr.⁹³

Such dreams and visions were clearly by no means the preserve of contemplative ṣūfī purveyors of miracle and magic. As though to reinforce the point, autobiographical material also survives which shows that the importance lent to dreams was common to both men of action and rationalising religious reformers. In one sixteenth-century set of memoirs, an Indo-Afghan soldier recorded his own vivid dream life. It is a document that provides a direct insight into the inner world of a career warrior from the frontier in a way that modern European scholars reconstructing the mental world of Italian millers of the same period could indeed only dream of.⁹⁴ However, it is in the autobiography of the first Mughal emperor Bābur (r.1526–30 AD) that one of the most closely observed of all dream narratives in Muslim historiographical or autobiographical works appears. The dream occurred in the year 1500–1, as Bābur sought to conquer Samarqand early in his career. The account deserves to speak for itself.

About that time I had a strange dream. I dreamed Khwaja Ubaydullah [Aḥrār] had arrived and I had gone out to greet him. He came and sat down. The tablecloth must have been laid somewhat

⁹⁰ See J. S. Meisami, *The Sea of Precious Virtues (Baḥr al-Fawā'id): A Medieval Islamic Mirror for Princes* (Salt Lake City, 1991), pp. 284–292.

⁹¹ The miniature is found in a *Siyār al-nabī* preserved in the Topkapı Palace, Istanbul.

⁹² See S. A. Quinn, "The Dreams of Shaykh Safi al-Din and Safavid Historical Writing", *Iranian Studies* 29 (1996).

⁹³ Quoted in S. Digby, "Tabarrukāt and Succession Among the Great Chishti Shaykhs of the Delhi Sultanate", in R. E. Frykenberg (ed.), *Dellii Through the Ages* (Delhi, 1986), p. 103.

⁹⁴ S. Digby, "Dreams and Reminiscences of Dattu Sarvani, a Sixteenth Century Indo-Afghan Soldier", *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 2 (1965). Cf. C. Ginzberg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth Century Miller* (Baltimore, 1992).

unceremoniously before him, for it seemed that he was offended. Mullah Baba looked at me and motioned. I motioned back as if to say, 'It's not my fault. The steward is to blame'. The khwaja understood and accepted this apology. Then he rose and I rose to escort him. In the entryway he took me by the arm, the right or the left, I don't remember which, and lifted me so that one of me feet was off the ground. In Turkish he said, '*Shaykh Maslahat berdi* [Shaykh Maslahat has bestowed]'. A few days later I took Samarqand.⁹⁵

Here we see the hold of the Naqshbandī saints even over the imagination of one of the greatest warriors and statesmen in history. For the great Naqshbandī saints of Central Asia were as close to Bābur's heart as they were to that of his own father and those of his descendants in India.

As the great age of the Muslim empires was drawing to a close, in nineteenth-century Dihlī one of the last Mughal princes put forward a theory of the special relationship between kingship and visionary capacity.⁹⁶ Mīrzā 'Alī Aẓfarī re-worked the claim for the supernatural qualities of the Tīmūrid house that had been presented three centuries earlier in Abū'l Faḍl's *Akbarnāma*. According to Aẓfarī, as the heirs of Tīmūr (*nasl-e-tīmūriyya*) the Mughal household had a special affinity for the clairvoyant dream and vision (*ru'ḡā-e-ṣādiq*). As a minor prince himself, Aẓfarī (d.1818/19 AD) appears in his autobiography as someone proud of his own premonitory dreams, such as that in which he foresaw the exact details of the shrine of Mu'īn al-dīn Chishtī at Ajmēr prior to going there on pilgrimage. But in accordance with his genealogical theory of the supernatural, he blamed his own limited powers on the fact that his father had taken a wife who did not possess even a drop of Tīmūrid blood in her veins. In interpreting a dream of the Hindu goddess Lakshmi, this fact also enabled him to explain to readers the all too apparent lack of political success in his own career. Dreams, then, could console and exonerate the unsuccessful no less effectively than they could reinforce the achievements of those who had attained political eminence. Yet such theories did not merely represent the idiosyncrasies of a disappearing royal elite. Despite all of the epistemic ruptures of the colonial experience, in the reformist climate of northern India, a generation later, the great Islamic modernist Sir Sayyid Aḥmad Khān (d.1898 AD) wrote a book devoted to his own dream life. In this work, like others before him, he confessed that many of his most important actions had been provoked by dreams.⁹⁷

Visionary Diarists

Despite the wealth of such material concerning princes to be found in historical and biographical writings, it is nonetheless ṣūfī biographies that remain the richest sources of visionary narratives. While some of the earlier ṣūfī writers like Sulamī (d.1021 AD) had been happy to record the visions of other ṣūfīs, there were also those ṣūfīs for whom their

⁹⁵ Zahiruddin Muhammad Babur, *The Baburnama: Memoirs of Babur, Prince and Emperor*, trans. and ed. W. M. Thackston (Washington and Oxford, 1996), p. 120.

⁹⁶ S. Subrahmanyam, "Palace or Prison: the World as Seen by a Mughal Prince in Delhi, c.1800", Commonwealth History Seminar, Oxford University, 28th February 2003.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.* On such features of Sir Sayyid's thought, see B. B. Lawrence, "Mystical and Rational Elements in the Early Religious Writings of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan", in B. B. Lawrence (ed.), *The Rose and the Rock: Mystical and Rational Elements in the Intellectual History of South Asian Islam* (Durham, 1979). On another nineteenth-century Muslim dreamer, see J. G. Katz, "Shaykh Ahmad's Dream: A 19th Century Eschatological Vision", *Studia Islamica* 79 (1994).

own personal visions formed the basis of a literary genre in its own right. This was not, as in the case of Ibn ‘Arabī, a literature revealed by vision as such but rather one which sought to describe the contents of actual visions. The precise role of such texts in ṣūfī life is uncertain. It seems possible that as with the visionary treatises of Suhrawardī, these accounts may have been seen as a means of teaching a ṣūfī’s disciples about the nature of visions. A hermeneutical lesson based on the interpretation of the meanings of a visionary narrative might in this way teach the novice to interpret his own private dreams and visions as part of the central ṣūfī obligation of spiritual self-reckoning (*muḥāsib*). Here we see the inherent ambiguity of such texts in promoting the notion of visionary experience itself while at the same time creating a blueprint of powerful images that might recur in the novice’s own visionary life. Vision and text, imagination and tradition, were in such ways frequently interlinked. However, it also seems likely that the content of these visions was to be seen as a kind of revelatory unveiling (*fatūḥ*, *kashf* or *shuhūd*) in its own right. Since the ṣūfī saints were regarded as the heirs of the Prophet in a chronological, initiatory and ontological sense, the stuff of their visions represented a continuum with the revelation of the Qur’ān itself. In its variously contested configuration, the relationship between prophet and saint also plotted out the relationship between the revelation of Muḥammad and the visions of the ṣūfī masters.

The earliest example of the ṣūfī autobiographical dream narration is perhaps the *Bad’ sha’n* of al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (d.c.908 AD).⁹⁸ In this work, Tirmidhī describes not only the content of his own dreams but also those of his wife, whom he clearly regarded as in some sense his own instructor. For the dreams of Tirmidhī’s unnamed wife were directed towards the spiritual education of her husband as much as the edification of her own soul. At one point in Tirmidhī’s career, his wife kept dreaming of him just before the dawn and so came to be the medium of teachings sent for him by spiritual beings in the other world. In one such dream she saw Tirmidhī sitting with his two sisters with his feet dangling in a pool of crystal clear spring water. As Tirmidhī sat eating clear white grapes, a man (in fact an angel) appeared and drew him aside before instructing him about the meaning of divine justice and the cultivation of piety, likened to the growing of myrtle. In another uxorial dream, Khidr makes an appearance to teach Tirmidhī to behave justly towards his enemies.

Persian literature also had its own tradition of dream diarists. Indeed, the *Kashf al-asrār* of Rūzbihān Baqlī of Shīrāz (d.1209 AD) is one of the most celebrated of all the visionary autobiographies of the ṣūfīs.⁹⁹ *Kashf al-asrār* forms an extraordinary journal that details its author’s visionary encounters with all manner of human and celestial beings. Perhaps appropriately for someone hailing from the home city of the Shīrāz grape, *Kashf al-asrār* includes descriptions of intoxicating mystical wine-drinking sessions as well as the poetic symbolism of divine showers of pearls and white roses. There are visions of vast celestial deserts where Rūzbihān encounters God in the form of a handsome Turk who reaches for a lute to play such soulful music that Rūzbihān’s heart swells with unbearable love.

⁹⁸ For an annotated translation, see B. Radtke and J. O’Kane, *The Concept of Sainthood in Early Islamic Mysticism: Two Works by Al-Hakīm Al-Tirmidhī* (London, 1996), pp. 15–36. See also Suiri (1999), pp. 261–268.

⁹⁹ Rūzbihān al-Baqlī, *Rūzbihān al-Baqlī ve Kitāb Kashf al-asrār’I ile Farsça bāzi Şileri*, ed. N. Hoca (Istanbul, 1971) [Arabic and Persian]. For an English translation, see C. W. Ernst, *The Unveiling of Secrets: Diary of a Sufi Master* (Chapel Hill, 1997).

Unsurprisingly, with its heady mix of sensitivity and grandeur the diary has proven to be one of the most popular texts of Persian *ṣūfism*.¹⁰⁰

Perhaps one of the more surprising examples of a later *ṣūfī* dream diarist was Shāh Walī Allāh of Dihlī (d.1762), whose own visionary narratives show that the writing of visionary texts was also sometimes an occupation shared by professors of Islamic law. Indeed, the *Fuyūd al-ḥaramayn* of Shāh Walī Allāh is one of the most notable of all Muslim visionary texts as well as one of the most important contributions of South Asian Islam to Arabic literature. In *Fuyūd al-ḥaramayn* a terrestrial journey is seen to prefigure a more celestial visionary itinerary that is pursued during a pilgrimage to the holy cities of Makkah and Madīnah. In the text Walī Allāh described no fewer than forty-six visions that, like Ibn ‘Arabī before him, he received during his stay in the holy cities.¹⁰¹ One of the most interesting aspects of such texts as that of Shāh Walī Allāh is the interplay which they propose between the experience of travel (especially pilgrimage) and parallel sets of visionary experiences relating to locations visited on a journey. Such *ṣūfīs* were undoubtedly people who knew how to get the most out of their holidays.

More colourful than the somewhat orthodox visions of Shāh Walī Allāh were the earlier apparitions witnessed by another such contributor to *ṣūfī* visionary literature in Arabic, the fifteenth-century Algerian Muḥammad al-Zawāwī (d.1477 AD). In suggesting that a journey to the east is the most auspicious time for visions, dream diaries such as that of al-Zawāwī form a kind of home-grown and anti-Orientalist version of such later European visionary journeys to the Levant as the *Voyage en Orient* of Gerard de Nerval. For among the hundred and nine visionary encounters described in al-Zawāwī’s journal, their most intense and fertile period comes during a seven month visit to Egypt in which al-Zawāwī found his visions to be drawn from a sublimated encounter with the physical places he visited. Of course there are important differences with Nerval, not least in that al-Zawāwī seems to have really completed the actual journey he described. Another important difference is that al-Zawāwī’s favoured places for visions were amid a sacred Muslim (rather than pharaonic) geography that was to be found among the many tombs of early *ṣūfīs* and other religious figures lying in Cairo’s enormous medieval necropolis of al-Qarāfah. In one dream, two dead *ṣūfī* shaykhs appeared to al-Zawāwī whom he then tried to browbeat into bestowing upon him the Robe of Perfection. Since they adamantly refused, al-Zawāwī went to visit another tomb and sat crying beside it. Eventually the long dead Alexandrian *ṣūfī* Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh (d.1309 AD) appeared and asked him why he was crying. When al-Zawāwī explained, Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh also refused him the Robe, but since al-Zawāwī went on crying he offered him the Garment of Perfection instead. Having travelled the length of the Sahara, al-Zawāwī was hard to satisfy and he and Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh bartered for a while, but when the latter explained that the Garment did not only bestow the ability to walk on water and fly in the air but also came with the power to make the sultan of Egypt hand out four thousand gold dinars, al-Zawāwī eventually agreed.

¹⁰⁰ See H. Corbin, *En Islam Iranien: aspects spirituels et philosophiques*, Tome 3, *Les fidèles d’amour, shī’isme et soufisme* (Paris, 1972), pp. 9–146 and C. W. Ernst, *Ruzbihan Baqli: Mysticism and the Rhetoric of Sainthood in Persian Sufism* (Richmond, 1996).

¹⁰¹ See J. M. S. Baljon, *Religion and Thought of Shāh Walī Allāh Dihlawī, 1703–1762* (Leiden, 1986), p. 9.

Aside from such Arabic and Persian examples, the dream diary was also known to Turkish literature. These included the dream letters of the Balkan female Ottoman dervish, 'Ashiyah Khātūn of Üsküb (fl.1641–43 AD) as well as the more extensive dream diary of Niyāzī-e-Miṣrī (d.1694 AD). In his extraordinary prison notebooks, Niyāzī-e-Miṣrī recorded all manner of esoteric encounters, including a series of angelic lectures in which Jabrā'il explained to him, in Turkish, the secrets of the science of letter divination (*jafī*).¹⁰²

Visionary Geographies

Al-Zawāwī was far from unique in demanding the visionary appearance of those saints whose tombs he had come to visit and other pilgrims were sometimes given advice by their ṣūfī instructors on the best ways of ensuring a vision of a chosen saint. Another assiduous visitor to the great Cairene necropolis of al-Qarāfah was 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha'rānī (d.1565 AD), whose *Laṭā'if al-minan* is also replete with tomb-side visionary episodes.¹⁰³ But like the highly popular pilgrimage guidebooks to al-Qarāfah, Sha'rānī also offered advice to those seeking visionary encounters with the necropolis's thousands of deceased inhabitants.¹⁰⁴ Sha'rānī advised, for example, that since the dead saints still travel around a great deal, certain days of the week are the best for catching them at their mausolea; Abū'l 'Abbās al-Mursī (d.1287 AD) thus tended only to be in residence at his shrine before sunrise on a Saturday. Similar kinds of advice also filtered into the folklore of the Muslim world and in northern India, as elsewhere, it was customary for visitors to clap their hands before entering a shrine so as to alert the saint to their presence. The annoyance caused by disturbing a saint or catching him unawares was believed to lead to that least welcome form of visionary visitation in the form of haunting.¹⁰⁵

Persian ṣūfīs also encouraged such customs and 'Azīz Nasafī (d. between 1281 and 1300 AD) was only one among many to give advice on summoning dead shaykhs from their tombs. In describing a technique well-known throughout the Muslim world, in his *al-Insān al-kāmil* Nasafī directed the pilgrim to circumambulate the tomb while concentrating on clearing his mind and purifying his heart.¹⁰⁶ However, in *Kashkūl-e-kalīmī*, Shāh Kalīm Allāh of Dihlī (d.1729 AD) instead recommended a special graveside *dhikr* (*dhikr-e-kashf-e-qubūr*) as the best means of revealing to its practitioner, in a dream, the soul of the deceased master beside whose tomb it was performed.¹⁰⁷ Another practice for ensuring a visionary encounter with a saint or prophet was known as *istikhārah*, the custom of sleeping in tombs in order

¹⁰² See D. Terzioğlu, "Man in the Image of God in the Image of the Times: Sufi Self-Narratives and the Diary of Niyazi-e-Misri (1618–94)", *Studia Islamica* 94 (2002), p. 157.

¹⁰³ Trimmingham (1971), pp. 220–225. See also J. G. Katz, "An Egyptian Sufi Interprets His Dreams: 'Abd al-Wahhab al-Sha'rani, 1493–1565", *Religion* 27, 1 (1997).

¹⁰⁴ For more on popular medieval pilgrimage and guidebooks to al-Qarāfah, see T. Ohtoshi, "The Manners, Customs and Mentality of Pilgrims to the Egyptian City of the Dead: 1100–1500 A.D.", *Orient* 29 (1993) and C. S. Taylor, *In the Vicinity of the Righteous: Ziyāra and the Veneration of Muslim Saints in Late Medieval Egypt* (Leiden, 1999).

¹⁰⁵ See W. Crooke, *The Popular Religion and Folklore of Northern India*, 2 vols (Westminster, 1896), vol. 1, p. 229. According to Crooke's informants, the saints become especially annoyed when "discovered in *déshabille*" by unannounced visitors.

¹⁰⁶ 'Azīz Nasafī, *al-Insān al-kāmil*, ed. M. Molé (Tihān/Paris, 1962), pp. 236–237. The section is translated in Ridgeon (1998), p. 146.

¹⁰⁷ Kalimullah Jahanabadi, *The Scallop Shell, (Being a Sufite Practical Course on Divine Union)* (Madras, 1910), pp. 46–47.

to summon dreams that was common to both *ṣūfīs* and ordinary pilgrims.¹⁰⁸ Following the performance of two cycles of prayer, *istikhārah* could also be accomplished in mosques and in the home. The Prophet himself had advised on the way of performing a basic version of this practice, though without any reference to the time or place of performance. Nevertheless, the practice of associating *namāz al-istikhārah* with specific places certainly developed and was especially common in the Maghrib. Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Zubayrī is said to have written an entire book on the subject of *istikhārah*. Similar practices, along with a whole host of other occult procedures, were famously compiled in the *Jawāhir-e-khamsah* of the Indian *ṣūfī*, Muḥammad Ghawth Gwālārī (d.1562–3 AD), whose own mausoleum is one of the most magnificent in the subcontinent.¹⁰⁹

Some shrines were famous as places to encounter visionary beings with or without specific practices to summon them. The great necropolis at Maklī (‘the little Makkah’) in Sind is one such place, famous for the visionary appearance there of the Prophet and his grandsons as well as the many saints interred there. This special quality was celebrated by Mīr ‘Alī Shīr Qanī in the *Jilawgāh-e-imām*, where Maklī was eulogised as “a paradise on earth . . . the visiting place of the men of God”.¹¹⁰ In Morocco, however, it is the shrine of the king of the *jinn*, Sīdī Shamharūsh, in the foothills of the Atlas that is most famous for the visions witnessed by its pilgrims, including visions of Sīdī Shamharūsh himself leading his armies of followers drawn from the *jinn*.¹¹¹ In Iran, it is arguably the shrine of Shāh Ni‘mat Allāh Walī (d.1431 AD) that has acted as the most active centre of *ṣūfī* pilgrimage in recent centuries. Among the reminiscences of Ṣafī ‘Alī Shāh (d.1899 AD) that were mentioned earlier we find an account of one such *ṣūfī* visit to the shrine at Māhān. There, amid a closely observed scene of morning tea-making and sleeping pilgrims, another dervish described seeing Shāh Ni‘mat Allāh coming to gently wake him up from his sleep before quietly returning to the privacy of his tomb.¹¹² Similarly, at many other shrines throughout the Muslim world believers have caught short glimpses of a saint engaged in worship, while at a less anthropomorphic level pilgrims have witnessed glowing green lights hovering above the saintly sepulchre.¹¹³

Ironically, many of the tombs and shrines which pilgrims like al-Zawāwī visited were themselves the concrete residue of earlier visionary experiences. In premodern Islam, as in Christianity no less, saints and prophets appeared on a fairly regular basis to demand the building of a memorial shrine or even a complete mausoleum for themselves on a given spot. Some of the most famous and most obscure of Muslim pilgrimage sites in this way owe their existence to a particular class of dreams and visions in which a holy personage appears to demand the construction or elaboration of a shrine around their purported burial site. The great pilgrimage city of Mazār-e-Sharīf in northern Afghanistan was originally built as a

¹⁰⁸ See T. Fahd, “*Istikhārah*”, in *ELZ*. The practice reflects (though may not necessarily relate to) the custom of incubation in Greek and Roman temples, particularly in the form associated with the cult of Asclepius.

¹⁰⁹ Ḥaḍrat Shaykh Muḥammad Ghawth Gwālārī, *Jawāhir-e-khamsah*, trans. Muḥammad Bēg Naqshbandī (Dilhī, n.d.). [Ūrdu]

¹¹⁰ Mīr ‘Alī Shīr Qanī, *Maklīnāma*, ed. S. H. Rashdī (Ḥaydarābād, 1967). Quoted in A. Schimmel, *Islam in the Indian Subcontinent* (Leiden, 1980), p. 127.

¹¹¹ See A. Chlyeh, *Les Gnaoua du Maroc: itinéraires initiatique, transe et possession* (Casablanca, 1998), especially pp. 60–62.

¹¹² See Homāyūnī (1371/1992), p. 267.

¹¹³ See e.g. T. Canaan, *Mohammedan Saints and Sanctuaries in Palestine* (London, 1927).

result of one such dream in which the site was revealed as the true burial site of the Prophet's son-in-law, 'Alī, whose body had been secretly brought there centuries earlier by divinely guided camels.¹¹⁴ In other cases, ṣūfīs have themselves been instructed by earlier saints or else the Prophet about the places in which they themselves should be buried. As in the case of the famous patron of the Muslims of Kashmīr, Sayyid 'Alī Hamadānī (d. 1385 AD), such dream-located tombs are in turn revered as shrines. This process demonstrates the continual interplay that existed between pilgrimage cults and hagiographical dream narratives.¹¹⁵ On such occasions dreams have augmented the development of rival sacred geographies, in the case of Mazār-e-Sharīf positing a more local burial place for 'Alī for Afghan and Central Asian Muslims than his more famous shrine in Najaf.

However, lesser known vision-shrines also dot the landscape throughout the Muslim world. Such vision-shrines (*mashāhid al-ru'yā*) were a common feature of the landscape of medieval Syria, while many others lay in al-Qarāfah and were visited by al-Zawāwī and thousands of others.¹¹⁶ At the other end of the Islamic world, hidden behind the main mausoleum at the eighteenth-century Naqshbandī shrine known as Panchakkī in Awrangābād lies a large modern cenotaph built after Dūst Muḥammad, one of the Mughal soldiers who made up the original following of the saints buried there, appeared in a dream to a modern-day devotee to demand recognition of his own burial site. In ways such as these, the physical and subtle worlds were able to interact through the medium of human perception and creativity, whether expressed through architectural, literary or even ritual means. At times this traffic between the intangible world of the vision and the concrete world of the mausoleum led to the overlapping of terrestrial and visionary geographies in literary works that deliberately confused physical geography with its ethereal counterparts.¹¹⁷

The Dream and Vision in Hagiography

The frequent interplay between dreaming and death, burial and enshrinement, meant that stories of the dreams and visions of the saints and their followers played an important role in Muslim hagiographies. Possessing such claims to truth, the *leitmotif* of the visionary experiences possessed a powerful rhetoric that was often exploited through its frequent featuring in ṣūfī hagiography. On a sociological level, it is noteworthy that the memory of many of these ṣūfīs whose visions were best known and recorded in literary form by themselves and their successors also lay at the centre of important shrine cults.¹¹⁸ This was the

¹¹⁴ See R. D. McChesney, *Waqf in Central Asia: Four Hundred Years in the History of a Muslim Shrine* (Princeton, 1991).

¹¹⁵ See D. DeWeese, "Sayyid 'Alī Hamadānī and Kubrawī Hagiographical Traditions", in L. Lewisohn (ed.), *The Legacy of Medieval Persian Sufism* (Oxford, 1999), p. 149.

¹¹⁶ On such vision shrines, see J. Meri, *The Cult of Saints among Muslims and Jews in Medieval Syria* (Oxford, 2002) and Taylor (1999), pp. 32–33. As is sometimes revealed in foundation inscriptions, mosques founded as the result of visions also existed.

¹¹⁷ See G. J. van Gelder, "Dream Towns of Islam: Geography in Arabic Oneirocritical Works", in A. Neuwirth (ed.), *Myths, Historical Archetypes and Symbolic Figures in Arabic Literature: Towards a New Hermeneutic Approach* (Stuttgart, 1999).

¹¹⁸ See M. K. Hermansen, "Citing the Sights at the Holy Sights: Visionary Pilgrimage Narratives of Pre-Modern South Asian Sufis", in E. Waugh and F. M. Denny (eds.), *Islamic Studies in America: Fazlur Rahman* (Atlanta, 1997), J. G. Katz, "Visionary Experience, Autobiography and Sainthood in North African Islam", *Princeton Interdisciplinary*

case with the great Rūzbihān Baqlī and al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī no less than the prototypical ṣūfī visionary Abū Yazīd, whose early shrine was enlarged and beautified during the period of the Īl-Khāns.¹¹⁹ The vision was often therefore an essential element in the rhetoric of sainthood. As such, visionary narratives at times also entertained an element of competition.

Accounts of the life of Sayyid ‘Alī Hamadānī lent an especially important place to descriptions of dreams as an expression of the saint’s miraculous powers.¹²⁰ Hamadānī’s hagiographers recount how the Prophet appeared in different people’s dreams to urge them to follow the saint, while Hamadānī himself frequently both appeared in the dreams of others and interpreted the dreams of kings. One such royal dream predicted the saint’s conversion of Kashmīr to Islam, thus linking dream narratives to traditions of collective history and ethnogenesis. Such stories also proliferate in the oral traditions of South-East Asian Islam, particularly in the motif describing the conversion of a king as having been effected through a dream containing the arrival of a ṣūfī by ship, after which the king wakes up mysteriously circumcised.¹²¹

Dream episodes feature prominently in the most famous Muslim hagiographical works. In the *Tadhkirat al-awliyā* of ‘Aṭṭār (d.c.1221 AD), for example, the Prophet appears in a dream to chastise a self-satisfied follower of Dhū’l Nūn Miṣrī (d.861 AD), while a follower of the deceased Ma’rūf Kārkhī (d.815 AD) dreamed of seeing his master standing stupefied with love beneath the throne of God.¹²² In the great *Nafaḥāt al-uns*, Jāmī (d.1492 AD) describes a dream of ‘Ayn al-Zamān Jamāl al-dīn Gīlī, one of the disciples of Najm al-dīn Kubrā, that hints at the same epistemological weighing of visionary experience versus book-learning that we have discussed earlier.¹²³ Before setting off to seek out his master, Gīlī packed several books on logic (*‘aql*) and tradition (*naql*) to accompany him on his journey. When near to Najm al-dīn’s centre at Khwārazm, Gīlī had a dream in which he was told to throw away his travel bag. On waking, Gīlī felt puzzled since he felt he was not carrying any possessions with him and it took two more dreams containing Najm al-dīn, in the second of which the exasperated master spelt the matter out for him, for Gīlī to realise that the dreams referred to his sack of books. This time, Gīlī promptly threw the books into the river Bactrus, for which act Najm al-dīn invested him with his ṣūfī robe (*khirqah*). Among the many other accounts of dreams and visions in the same work, Jāmī also describes a vision seen by another Kubrāwī ṣūfī, Sa’d al-dīn Ḥamāwī, of the Prophet coming to attend a ṣūfī musical gathering (*majlis-e-samā’*).¹²⁴ The others present at the gathering saw Sa’d al-dīn standing with great propriety as he stared at the empty bench on which he saw Muḥammad seated.

Journal of Middle Eastern Studies 1 (1992) and F. Malti-Douglas, “Dreams, the Blind and the Semiotics of the Biographical Notice”, *Studia Islamica* 51 (1980).

¹¹⁹ To this day Iranian ṣūfīs still go on vision quests by passing the night beside the tomb of Abū Yazīd at Bistām. (Author’s personal observation.)

¹²⁰ See De Weese (1999).

¹²¹ Mary Turnbull (personal communication).

¹²² Farid al-dīn Attar, *Muslim Saints and Mystics: Episodes from the Tadhkirat al-Awliya’*, trans. A. J. Arberry (London, 1990), pp. 93 and 165.

¹²³ ‘Abd al-Rahmān ibn Aḥmad Jāmī, *Nafaḥāt al-uns min ḥadāṭāt al-quds* (Tīhrān, 1375/1955), p. 432.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 429.

Hagiographies from the Indian subcontinent are particularly noteworthy for their often spectacular tales of visionary encounters.¹²⁵ In his *Jawāhir al-awliyā*, the North Indian Suhrawardī memorialist Shaykh ‘Uthmān Bukhārī (d.c.1687 AD) described the prophetic visions of his spiritual ancestor, Shaykh Makhdūm Jahāniyān of Uchch (d.1383 AD).¹²⁶ Shaykh Makhdūm had encountered the Prophet during a visit to Madīnah and was personally instructed by him about the most efficient forms of *dhikr*. Visions, then, affect religious practice in the human sphere, just as the Prophet himself had been instructed in the performance of the ritual prayers by a vision of the angel Jabrā’il engaged in worship. Stories surrounding popular saint cults with shared Muslim and Hindu congregations also frequently involve visionary or oneiric episodes, often at the same time invoking legends concerning earlier kings and emperors. Royal dreams thus feature in the Bengali tradition of the legendary Satya Pīr, while in the Dakan the Mughal emperor Awrangzēb and his vizier are initiated into the world of the vision in stories that are still recounted in the oral tradition of Shāh Nūr Ḥammāmī (d.1692 AD).¹²⁷

In some South Asian texts, Muslim saints are seen to be able to commit the greatest of all visionary accomplishments, that of shape-shifting into another form. Here it is onlookers who partake in the vision, if such it is rightly considered. There exist many such accounts of *ṣūfīs* transforming themselves into tigers and lions, a motif which has also found rich expression in the folklore of South Asia. However, literary versions of the motif also exist and one Persian hagiography from the eighteenth-century Dakan describes thieves sneaking into the tent of the sleeping *ṣūfī* master, Shāh Palangpōsh (d.1699 AD) only to be chased out screaming as they see the *ṣūfī* transform himself into “a wild tiger with eyes popping like a peacock’s”.¹²⁸

Conclusions

Although most of our examples have been drawn from the past, the recounting of visions and dreams has continued to be an important aspect of Muslim religiosity. This is by no means limited to the *ṣūfī* groups that continue to flourish throughout the Muslim world and dreams have even played roles amid the discourse of Muslim reform.¹²⁹ In a different context of political reform, early twentieth-century Iraqi writers developed the genre of the *ru’yā* as a means of portraying utopias of social and political justice in their promotion of a programme of Iraqi national cultural revival.¹³⁰ More recently, the Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk has intricately assembled traditional Muslim theories of the dream and vision as the framework for his novel *Kara Kitap*, while Swahili manuals of dream interpretation

¹²⁵ For details of visionary episodes in medieval and modern South Asian Muslim hagiography, see respectively B. B. Lawrence, *Notes From a Distant Flute: The Extant Literature of Pre-Mughal Indian Sufism* (Tehran, 1978) and C. Liebeskind, *Piety on its Knees: Three Sufi Traditions in South Asia in Modern Times* (Delhi, 1998).

¹²⁶ See Qamar-ul Huda, *Striving for Divine Union: Spiritual Exercises for Suhrawardī Sūfīs* (London, 2003), pp. 103–104.

¹²⁷ See N. Green, “Stories of Saints and Sultans: the Oral Historical Tradition of the Aurangabad Shrines” *Modern Asian Studies* (forthcoming) and T. K. Stewart, “Satya Pīr: Muslim Holy Man and Hindu God” in D. S. Lopez (ed.), *Religions of India in Practice* (Princeton, 1995).

¹²⁸ Shāh Mahmūd Awrangābādī, *Malfūzāt-e-Naqshbandiyyah: Ḥālāt-e-Ḥaḍrat Bābā Shāh Musāfir Šāhib* (Ḥaydarābād: Nizāmat-e-‘Umūr-e-Madhhabī-e-Sarkār-e-‘Āli, 1358/1939–40), p. 37.

¹²⁹ See M. Gaborieau, “Criticizing the Sufis: The Debate in Nineteenth Century India”, in F. de Jong and B. Radtke (eds), *Islamic Mysticism Contested: 13 Centuries of Controversies and Polemics* (Leiden, 1999).

¹³⁰ See W. Walther, “Folklore”, in Meisami and Starkey (1998), pp. 234–236.

form some of the most popular titles stocked by Muslim booksellers along the East African coast.¹³¹ The interpretation of dreams has thus continued to play a role in the religious life of all classes of society right across the Muslim world, while in literary form dreams and visions have continued to develop new cultural functions and resonance. Evidently, these continued roles of imaginative experience in no way impinge upon the modernity of the societies in which they are found.¹³²

For scholars one useful aspect of recent attempts to understand the cultural framework of the imagination in Islam is the way in which it allows us to treat premodern Muslim visionary narratives in the neutral ground of what used simply to be called suspended disbelief. But perhaps the most rewarding aspect of the study of Muslim dream and visionary traditions is the way in which they alert us to the different roles played by the imagination in formulating the diverse ways in which believers broadened the boundaries of what it means to be Muslim. Whether recounted by hagiographers, historians or autobiographers, the character of visionary experiences was often altered for specific ends when experience itself came to be mutated into literary form. But in all of their diversity, in such writings we can clearly make out the different social, cultural and political uses towards which accounts of dreams and visions have been directed.

Aside from Piers Plowman and the poetry of William Blake, the most famous visionary episodes in English literature are probably those related to Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Thomas de Quincey. Such opium fantasies also played a considerable role in Muslim cultural history. Both opium and the various preparations of cannabis (as *bhang* in South Asia or *majnūn* in North Africa) were a central element of the practices of the *qalandariyyah*, for example.¹³³ Medieval *malfūzāt* texts from the circle of Nizām al-dīn Awliyā (d. 1325 AD) in Dihlī show how *qalandars* often flaunted the usage of such drugs to the displeasure of their more sober colleagues.¹³⁴ In the secular sphere, the famous painting of Jahāngīr's boon-companion 'Ināyat Khān dying from the ravages of opium and the popular medieval Arabic sub-genre of humorous tales describing the picaresque adventures of the eaters of hashish both remind us of the undoubted contributions of such less respectable visionaries to the arts of Islam.¹³⁵ The exploration of this subject, however, must fall beyond the remit of this article.

To the cultural historian, oneirocritical and visionary texts reveal the ways in which a discourse on the imagination finds expression in different historical contexts. Yet beneath each of the uses to which visionary narratives have been put, below each entrapment of the

¹³¹ Orhan Pamuk, *The Black Book*, trans. G. Gün (London, 1996).

¹³² See e.g. K. P. Ewing, "The Modern Businessman and the Pakistani Saint: The Interpenetration of Worlds" in G. M. Smith and C. W. Ernst (eds), *Manifestations of Sainthood in Islam* (Istanbul, 1993) and V. J. Hoffman, "The Role of Visions in Contemporary Egyptian Religious Life", *Religion* 27, 1 (1997). Extensive accounts of the dream lives of contemporary Muslims are also found in Azam (1992), pp. 33–103.

¹³³ On the activities of such groups, see J. Baldick, "Les Qalenderis" in A. Popovic and G. Veinstein (eds), *Les Voies d'Allah: Les ordres mystiques dans le monde musulman des origines à aujourd'hui* (Paris, 1996) and A. Karamustafa, *God's Unruly Friends: Dervish Groups in the Later Middle Period, 1200–1550* (Salt Lake City, 1994).

¹³⁴ See S. Digby, "Qalandars and Related Groups: Elements of Social Deviance in the Religious Life of the Delhi Sultanate of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries", in Y. Friedmann (ed.), *Islam in India*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 1984).

¹³⁵ Bodleian Library, MS. Ouseley Add. 171b, fol. 4 verso. See F. Rosenthal, *The Herb: Hashish Versus Medieval Muslim Society* (Leiden, 1971).

quiet eloquence of the dream in the blunter world of writing, there lingers the aura of the experience itself. Often there is an unquestionably universal quality to such experiences, tropes and images that will be as familiar to the scholar of Buddhism as of Christianity. The monastic chronicle of Jocelin of Brakelond (d.c.1202 AD) recounts how at the time of the election of the new abbot in 1182 the worried monks of Bury St Edmunds were haunted by all manner of portentous dreams.¹³⁶ Each morning new accounts of these dreams spread around the cloisters and one monk even reported seeing the broken body of St Edmund himself rise from his tomb amid all of the disquiet of the abbey. Through the shared qualities of the dreams of the monks of Bury and the visions of the likes of Rūzbihān Baqlī, the freshness of such glimpses into another soul ultimately serves to remind us of the living individual humanity of the past.

¹³⁶ Jocelin of Brakelond, *Chronicle of the Abbey of Bury St Edmunds*, trans. D. Greenway and J. Sayers (Oxford, 1989), pp. 18–19.