

Neo-Sufism in the 1960s: Idries Shah

Mark Sedgwick

1. Introduction

The 1960s saw the start of major social and cultural changes that still mark the world today. Among these, in both North America and Western Europe, was a growth in alternative religiosity. Alternative religiosity, defined in a Western context as doctrines and practices distinct from those promoted by the major Christian and Jewish denominations, was of course not new. The late nineteenth century had seen the growth of the Theosophical Society, a major forum for the development of alternative religiosity, and other forms of alternative religiosity were also found in the interwar period. Alternative religiosity in the nineteenth century and the interwar period, however, was still the alternative of a small minority. During the 1960s, as the Beatles traveled to India to attend the ashram of Maharishi Yogi (in 1968), alternative religiosity seemed to be becoming almost mainstream, at least for the generation born after 1940. The books of the “Neo-Shaman” Carlos Castaneda (1925-98), of which the first, *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge*, was published in 1968, are said by Wikipedia to have sold 28 million copies.¹⁾

No Sufi or Neo-Sufi ever became as famous as Castaneda or Maharishi Yogi, but Idries Shah, the subject of this article, came close to it. Starting with *The Sufis* in 1964, his books are said to have sold 15 million copies,²⁾ a figure which is of course hard to verify (like Castaneda’s 28 million). Shah certainly received more public attention than any other Neo-Sufi. In 1970, for example, the BBC invited him to make a television program in the long-running “One Pair of Eyes” series, a distinction given to public figures such as the novelist Margaret Drabble, the playwright Tom Stoppard, and the astronomer Patrick Moore. In 1974, a lead article in *Time* magazine on the campaign of Jerry Brown for governor of California mentioned Brown’s reading material as including “Thomas Merton on Zen, Arnold Toynbee on the future, Idries Shah on Sufi parables.”³⁾ No other Neo-Sufi ever received this sort of attention.

Despite Shah’s fame and impact on the Western public, he has attracted almost no scholarly interest.⁴⁾ The novelist and Nobel Laureate Doris Lessing (1919-2013) was one of his followers, and so Shah has been examined in work on Lessing written by scholars in literature. Scholars in religious studies and Islamology, however, have generally ignored him. One exception is Laurence Elwell-

Sutton, a Persianist, who in 1975 published an article entitled “Sufism and Pseudo-Sufism.”⁵⁾ Elwell-Sutton’s main point was that Shah was a “pseudo-Sufi,” not a “real” Sufi. His approach to Shah was hostile rather than analytical.

Most of what has been written about Shah is either hagiographical or hostile. This article will avoid both approaches. Shah did not give an academically accurate presentation of Sufism, but neither did Castaneda give an academically accurate presentation of Shamanism. Castaneda, like Shah, drew hostile commentary. Several scholars, however, have since argued that this misses the point. For Alan Olson, Castaneda “effectively and creatively recontextualizes some of the more salient features of medieval mysticism in a manner that is both provocative and compelling.”⁶⁾ For Charlotte Hardman, Castaneda “was the storyteller who was able to retell the old stories to capture imaginations. The stories had been told before but never with such persuasive force.”⁷⁾ Something similar, it will be seen, can be said of Shah.

This article will examine the nature of Shah’s Neo-Sufism, and the reasons for its success. It will argue that Shah drew on existing Western conceptions of Sufism as universal wisdom separate from religion, on the legacy of Georges Gurdjieff (1866-1949), and on the literature and anecdote of the Muslim world, sources that were then little known in the West. Unlike many other Neo-Sufis of the period, he did not draw in any significant way on Islam as a religion, as opposed to drawing on the Muslim world as a civilization, and specifically on its literature.

2. Shah’s early life and influences

Idries Shah was born in Simla, the “summer capital” of British India, in 1924. He was the son of the Indian-British writer, Iqbal Ali Shah (1894-1969), who had remained in Britain with a Scottish wife after originally moving to Britain to study medicine, and had attempted to establish an Islamic Society in London in 1918 together with Inayat Khan (1882-1927),⁸⁾ the dominant figure in the Western Neo-Sufism of the interwar period. Although born in Simla, Shah was brought up mostly in England, and attended the City of Oxford High School.⁹⁾ His father lived off his writing, which covered “Oriental” topics, ranging from travelogues to biographies of well-known figures such as Atatürk, the Aga Khan, and King Fuad of Egypt. Nothing is known of Shah’s early adulthood, about which he said nothing either to friends or family, save that in the 1940s he spent some time with his father in South America.¹⁰⁾

Shah’s earliest interests were not in Sufism but in occultism. His first book, published in 1956 when he was 32, was *Oriental Magic*, a popular treatment of magic in various non-Western cultures,

lent weight by a brief foreword by a young French anthropologist, Louis Marin (1931-92). It was followed in 1957 by *The Secret Lore of Magic*, which paraphrased classic Western texts,¹¹ and paid little attention to “Oriental” magic.¹² It indicates a familiarity with classic occultist works, including Eliphas Lévi.¹³ In 1957 Shah also published a light travelogue, *Destination Mecca*. This includes what seems a well-informed account of smuggling cigarettes into Spain from Morocco, as well as accounts of other Arab countries that may or may not have been based on first-hand knowledge, so Shah may well have spent some of his early adulthood traveling, as he indeed later said himself. In 1958 or 1963 he married Cynthia Kabraji, a woman of a very similar background to his own, the daughter of the Indian-British writer and poet Fredoon Kabraji (1897-1986) and of one Eleanor Wilkinson.¹⁴

In 1956, then, Shah seems to have been partly following in his father’s footsteps with books on “Oriental” topics, and also following a new track, magic. In 1959, he met Gerald Gardner (1884–1964), a former rubber planter and colonial official who had moved through Rosicrucianism and the Ordo Templi Orientis (O.T.O.) to running a Museum of Magic and Witchcraft on the Isle of Man and working to revive the practice of witchcraft, organizing a coven as well as publishing several books on the topic.¹⁵ Shah was the ghost-writer for Gardner’s biography.¹⁶

In 1961, Shah became friends with the celebrated English writer Robert Graves (1895-1985), known especially for his war poetry and his historical novels set in Greek and Roman antiquity, especially *I, Claudius*, published in 1934 and made into a very successful television series in 1976. Graves was interested in witchcraft, on which he published in 1948 (*The White Goddess*) and also in hallucinogenic mushrooms, on which he published in 1960 (“Centaur’s Food”).¹⁷ On a visit with Gardner to the Spanish island of Majorca, where Graves had been living since the 1920s, Shah wrote to Graves that he had been attending “experiments conducted by the witches in Britain, into mushroom-eating and so on.”¹⁸ This interested Graves, who met Shah and Gardener.¹⁹ He was not impressed by Gardener, but he and Shah became close friends.²⁰ Under the influence of Graves, Shah moved on from witchcraft and mushrooms, dropping a project to write *The Secret Lore of Alchemy* as a companion to *The Secret Lore of Magic*.²¹ He attempted to interest Graves in a joint project to re-write the *Thousand and One Nights*, to “decode” it in the light of Graves’s re-reading of Greek myth.²² Graves had succeeding in making classical antiquity speak to modern readers, and might well have done the same for Arab antiquity. He does not seem to have been much interested in Shah’s idea, as there is no word of the project getting anywhere. The basic idea of re-reading and re-writing myths and stories from the Muslim world, however, was of great importance for Shah’s later work.

At some time before 1961, Shah also encountered the “Fourth Way” of Georges Gurdjieff, though

there is no indication of how this happened, and Gurdjieff is not mentioned in his later work, which frequently cites ancient and Islamic sources, but never acknowledges or discusses modern or Western sources. It may have been through the works of Gurdjieff's close colleague Peter D. Ouspensky (1878-1947), whose *In Search of the Miraculous* was published in 1949, and would almost certainly have come to the attention of anyone with a serious interest in the occult.

3. Shah as Sufi

Shah seems to have focused most on the Sufi elements in Gurdjieff's (largely fictional) autobiography. In 1961, an article entitled "Solo to Mecca" was published in *Blackwood's Magazine*, a venerable British monthly that accepted a variety of literary genres. The author was given as "Omar Burke," but this was evidently a pseudonym. The article tells the tale of a Persian-speaking Englishman who is helped on his way to Mecca by a number of Sufis, the first of whom he meets in a cafe. This Sufi explains that Sufism is the ancient and universal essence of all religions, following (but not mentioning) the universalistic interpretation of Inayat Khan and other Neo-Sufis before him, and takes the Englishman to spend a month in a Sufi "monastery," where the participants practice the "Stop" exercise, the characteristic practice of the Gurdjieff "Work." They also explain that there is a secret Sufi hierarchy, and that the peak of this hierarchy is "the Grand Sheikh of the Sufi Way," a prince known as *Idries Shah* [original italics], glossed as "the Studious King."²³ Although individual Sufi orders have shaykhs and even sometimes grand shaykhs, there has never actually been any single Grand Sheikh of the Sufi Way. *Shah* does indeed mean "king," but *Idries* does not mean "studious." It is, rather, the name of a minor prophet mentioned in the Quran, though some imaginative manipulation of Arabic morphology might conceivably produce a meaning of "studious."

Shah is the most likely author of "Solo to Mecca," as the article's style and even some of the events are reminiscent of his *Destination Mecca*. It is possible, however, that the article was written by Shah's older brother Omar Ali Shah (1922-2005), whose first name was used in the article's author's pseudonym, and who might conceivably have intended the reference to his brother Idries as Grand Sheikh of the Sufi Way as an amusing Christmas present to his brother—the article was published in the Christmas issue of *Blackwood's*.

Despite humorous elements, the article had serious consequences. One of its readers was Reginald Hoare (?-?), a scion of the British banking family, who had been a follower of Ouspensky since 1924 and then a follower of Gurdjieff himself after 1948.²⁴ Hoare wrote to "Omar Burke" via the editor of *Blackwood's*, and received a reply from Shah.²⁵ Shah was then invited to visit a group of expatriate

English Gurdjieffians in Paris, which he did in 1962, bringing with him his brother Omar. It is unclear what the Shah brothers said or how they presented themselves, but the Parisian Gurdjieffian group was evidently in search of a leader, and in 1963 took the Shah brothers as its joint leaders. Omar remained in Paris as the resident leader of the group.²⁶⁾ Idries Shah returned to London, where Hoare introduced him to the Gurdjieffian group run by John G. Bennett (1897-1974), which was also in search of a leader, as Bennett had been led by various events to expect a messenger from the Source of Gurdjieff's teachings.²⁷⁾

Shah presented himself to Bennett in a "Declaration of the People of the Tradition" not as a Sufi but as a representative of an "Invisible Hierarchy" which possessed a "superior form of knowledge" which made it possible to "slip through the veil of conditioning to a perception with a part of the mind which is virtually unused."²⁸⁾ His "Declaration" ends with a direct call to those of Bennett's followers who had "capacity for obtaining the special knowledge of man which is available" to form "a harmonious organism... to provide an external and interior format with which to work."²⁹⁾ At first, Bennett and his followers merely reflected on this call.

Then, in 1964, Shah published his most important book, *The Sufis*, which identified Sufism as "the secret tradition."³⁰⁾ Graves, who had been in correspondence with Shah since meeting him in 1961, wrote a long and enthusiastic introduction to *The Sufis*, and explained that it was he who had encouraged Shah to write it.³¹⁾ Graves accepted a universalistic construction of Sufism. "The Sufis are at home in all religions," he stated, even though they are "commonly mistaken for a Moslem sect." In fact, Sufis are an ancient spiritual order of unknown origins, with "no religious dogma however tenuous" who "respect the rituals of religion insofar as these further social harmony."³²⁾ This universalist understanding of Sufism was followed in the book itself by Shah. Sufism is universal, a combination of the secret wisdom of the Jews, Zoroastrians, Hindus, Buddhists, and Christians. "Formal religion is for the Sufi merely a shell ... which fulfills a function."³³⁾

As well as accepting a universalistic construction of Sufism, Graves also accepted the construction of Shah himself as Grand Sheikh of the Sufi Way, adding that he had inherited the secrets of his ancestors, the Caliphs,³⁴⁾ evidently a confused reference to the Shah family tradition of descent from Ali al-Rida, the eighth Shi'i imam.³⁵⁾ This identification followed a short anonymous article in *The Times* in which the absent leader of the Sufis was again identified as Idries Shah, this time spelled "Idd-rees Shaah."³⁶⁾ At the beginning of his Sufi career, then, Shah was not only promoting his writing, which is generally considered acceptable, but also his own qualifications as writer, which, when involving this degree of exaggeration, is generally considered less acceptable.

Graves's support of Shah was valuable. *The Sufis* was published not by the small publisher of

Oriental Magic, Rider & Co., which specialized in occult and the spiritual works, but by the major publisher W. H. Allen in London, with US publication by Doubleday. This and the introduction by Graves was enough to get the book a review in *The Spectator* in the UK and in the *New York Times Book Review* in the US. In *The Spectator* the novelist Doris Lessing, whose *Golden Notebook* had been published to acclaim in 1962, described *The Sufis* as “a fascinating book” and added “I can’t remember being more provoked and stimulated.”³⁷⁾ The review in the *New York Times Book Review* was less favorable, and will be considered below. In the UK, however, *The Sufis* at the end of 1964 carried the recommendation of two of the country’s major literary figures, the established Graves and the rising Lessing.

Bennett encouraged everyone at Coombe Springs, his Gurdjieffian center outside London, to read *The Sufis*,³⁸⁾ and in 1965 the call that Shah had issued in 1963 was formally put by Bennett to a General Meeting of the members of the Institute that owned Coombe Springs. Bennett asked the General Meeting to decide whether or not they would accept Shah as their leader and transfer Coombe Springs to his care. As recommended by Bennett, they mostly voted in favor of this, and ownership of the Coombe Springs property was accordingly transferred from Bennett’s Institute to a new body controlled by Shah.³⁹⁾

Shah, however, did not in the event establish a community at Coombe Springs. He stopped the Gurdjieff exercises on the grounds that they were too mechanical, and only accepted part of Bennett’s former following. Then he asked the remaining residents to move out.⁴⁰⁾ Finally, he sold the house and grounds,⁴¹⁾ and moved to Langton House in Kent, also a substantial property, but given its distance from London probably a much less expensive one. Here he lived for the next thirty years, until his death in 1996, with no permanent community in residence, devoting his time to writing, to occasional visits by members of his informal following, and to running a small publishing house, Octagon Press. He also organized lectures under the auspices of the Society for Understanding Fundamental Ideas (SUFU), later known as the Institute for Cultural Research (ICR), which had some 200 members.⁴²⁾ These activities were well financed: when the Institute for Cultural Research was finally wound up in 2014, it had net assets of almost \$4 million,⁴³⁾ rather more than it had inherited from Bennett’s Institute.

The acquisition and subsequent sale of Coombe Springs has often been portrayed by Shah’s critics as a deliberate deception turned to financial advantage. This was not the understanding of Bennett himself, however, who wrote of the transaction without recrimination.⁴⁴⁾ Quite what Shah’s intentions were when Coombe Springs was transferred to him is not known. It is quite possible that he did intend to establish a community, but then found himself unable to do so. It could certainly be argued

that it made little sense to use such a valuable property as Coombe Springs only for occasional gatherings, and that its sale and reinvestment made sense in terms of the objectives of the Institute that retained and used the proceeds of the sale. These proceeds were used to support the Institute's objectives, not just Shah personally. The transaction may, then, have been entirely innocent.

4. Shah's writings

Lessing opened her review of *The Sufis* with the tale of the elephant, told by Shah. As she puts it:

The citizens of a certain town, mad with curiosity, sneaked a preview of a beast strange to them, an elephant. For safety's sake it was kept in the dark, and they had to rely on their sense of touch. One, finding its trunk, said it was a hosepipe. Another, that it was a fan: he had touched its ear. A third said it was a kind of pillar, while a fourth reported it must be a living throne. Each was sure he was right; yet none had formed a complete picture; and of the part he had felt, could only talk in terms of things he knew.⁴⁵⁾

For Shah and Lessing, this is a Sufi story, and shows how important truths are only partially understood. Sufism was one such truth, and had been partially understood by those Westerners who had written about it, but not by Shah, who became Sufism's authoritative representative. In fact, the story of the elephant is not a particularly Sufi story, and a reader of Lessing's review immediately wrote a letter to the editor to draw attention to the famous print of this scene by the Japanese artist Hokusai (d. 1949).⁴⁶⁾ The oldest version of the story of the elephant is in fact found in the Buddhist Pali Canon, recorded in 29 BC.⁴⁷⁾ That does not, however, stop the story making a good point in other contexts as well, and even Robert Payne (1911-83), the author of the hostile review of *The Sufis* in the *New York Times Book Review*, liked Shah's use of stories, one of which it retold, and conceded that *The Sufis* was "eminently readable."⁴⁸⁾

Payne was right. *The Sufis* is eminently readable, and the stories are excellent. Many of them are Mulla Nasrudin stories. These are an important part of the folk wisdom of the Muslim world, known universally from the Arab countries⁴⁹⁾ through Turkey and Iran to India. They are a genre of short tales, of unknown and multiple authorship, in which Nasrudin normally says or does something apparently ridiculous which, on closer examination, turns out to make complete sense, often in a rather whacky way.

The Sufis sold well and has never been out of print.⁵⁰⁾ As well as going into multiple editions in English, it was translated into French in 1972, German in 1976, and then into a number of other

languages, including Arabic and Japanese. It is not, however, Shah's best selling book. Even more successful was his next book, *The Exploits of the Incomparable Mulla Nasrudin*, published in 1966, and translated into French, German, Dutch, Swedish, Spanish, Polish, and Russian. Two other successful Nasrudin collections followed: *The Pleasantries of the Incredible Mullah Nasrudin* in 1968, and *The Subtleties of the Inimitable Mulla Nasrudin* in 1973. *Tales of the Dervishes* (1967) was Shah's single most successful book, which collects over eighty tales by various notable Muslims, mostly Sufis, all comparable to the Nasrudin stories, though often more literary and less earthy. This book was translated into Japanese, Chinese and Thai, as well as most of the major Western languages.

The majority of Shah's books after *The Sufis*, of which there were twenty six, are collections of such stories. Exceptions, like *Learning how to Learn: Psychology and Spirituality in the Sufi Way* (1978), which is based around a series of questions and answers, still contain many stories. *Learning how to Learn* also contains Shah's own understanding of the use of these stories: that instead of arguing about what Sufism was or was not, all that was necessary for people to understand it and its "psychological insights" was to re-tell Sufi stories.⁵¹⁾ Another exception is *The Book of the Book* (1969), an unusual work dedicated to making the point that the contents and container differ. This point is made partly in classic Shah fashion, with short tales of kings and dervishes, and partly by example: the contents of the book stop on page 16, leaving some 200 entirely blank pages to make up the remainder of the container.⁵²⁾

The popularity of these stories, in *The Sufis* and in subsequent books, is easy enough to explain. They may be compared to the stories in the *Thousand and One Nights*, a collection which had been even more phenomenally popular, and which Shah had tried to interest Graves in rewriting. Nasrudin had been popular for centuries among Arabs, Turks, Iranians and Indian Muslims, so why not also—once well retold in English—among Westerners? The popularity of Shah's stories and the *Tales of the Dervishes*, then, has something in common with the popularity of the *Thousand and One Nights* in the eighteenth century, with the popularity of *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* some seventy-five years earlier, and with the popularity of Graves's re-tellings of ancient myth and history, to which at one point Shah had indeed proposed that he and Graves should add a re-telling of the *Thousand and One Nights*.

Shah was not only a re-teller of classic stories, however. He indicated that the stories pointed to a coherent whole, which he called "Sufism." He was never entirely explicit about exactly what Sufism was, rather as Gurdjieff was never entirely explicit about what his Fourth Way was, but his list of "subjects dealt with" at the beginning of his *Thinkers of the East* (1971), his most successful collection of stories after *Tales of the Dervishes*, gives a good idea of how he understood what he was teaching:

“Systems of study; the ‘Sufi Secret’; problem-solving by non-linear thinking; methods of choosing disciples; special groupings for inner study; use and abuse of literature; different realms of thought...”⁵³⁾

The list continues much like this for one and a half pages. Ways of thinking appear twice within the first four lines, and are a major theme in Shah’s writings. Ways of thinking are also the focus of the 40-minute television documentary that he made in 1970 in the BBC’s “One Pair of Eyes” series. This, entitled “The Dreamwalkers,” started by stating “Man is asleep,” and asking “Must he die before he wakes up?”⁵⁴⁾ This echoes the opening of *The Sufis*, which states that “Humanity is asleep, concerned only with what is useless, living in a wrong world.” This statement is credited to the twelfth-century Persian poet Abū al-Majd Majdūd Sanā’ī al-Ghaznavī,⁵⁵⁾ but its underlying sentiments are those of Gurdjieff, for which it is axiomatic that man is asleep, and therefore needs to develop a new consciousness. In a 1975 interview, Shah explained that Sufism was not “a body of thought” but an “experience [that] has to be provoked in a person,” and that his teaching stories allowed people to “burn.. off the[ir] conditioning.”⁵⁶⁾ In 1978, he wrote “Sufis jolt people from.. ‘sleep.’”⁵⁷⁾ Again, the teaching is that of Gurdjieff. Similarly, Shah followed Ouspensky and Gurdjieff in focusing on “automatic acts,” which he sometimes called “automatism,” a term he used in his “Declaration” to Bennett’s following.⁵⁸⁾ Automatism remained one of the things that Shah saw Sufism as combatting.⁵⁹⁾

Shah’s Sufism, however, was not just the *Thousand and One Nights* and Gurdjieff. He also quoted from classic Sufi writers, and from Nasrudin. The Nasrudin tales are not really Sufi, as they are not claimed by any particular Sufi order, but the folk wisdom that they draw on and encapsulate is often compatible with perspectives that a Sufi might take, presumably because of the impact of centuries of Sufi teachers on the accumulated folk wisdom of the Muslim world. Sometimes, however, Shah pushed his classic Sufi writers too far in the direction of Gurdjieff. According to Shah, for example, Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (1058-1111) “pointed out” that “people are conditioned, and that what they call their opinions and beliefs are frequently not their own but implanted by other people and institutions.”⁶⁰⁾ Al-Ghazālī could hardly have pointed out precisely this, as there was no word for “conditioning” in twelfth-century Arabic, as the concept did not exist, and it is hard to think of words that would have given anything like the modern sense of “implanted.” Al-Ghazālī almost certainly noted that the thoughts and behavior of one person are often affected by the thoughts and behavior of another person, but that is not quite the same thing.

When asked in an online survey in 2015 about what they most appreciated in Shah’s work, dedicated readers, most of whom had started reading Shah in the 1970s to 1990s, usually when in their thirties, did not fully agree on any one point. Certain themes, however, were repeated. Many respondents recalled that they had felt immediately that Shah’s books were different: “I had never

read anything like it” was a phrase used more than once. Some were struck by the “breadth of learning,” the “deep knowledge, understanding” that they found. For others, Shah’s books were different in that they were not like other “spiritual” books of the time—one thinks here of Castaneda, and of the host of less talented competing writers. Several respondents noted the absence of “mere emotionality” and of sentimentality, of the “trappings” of religion and philosophy, and the presence of the psychological dimension (ways of thought). Many respondents found the books clear and easy to read. Others found the books different because they gave access to an unsuspected world, to “centuries of Arabic thought, philosophy, psychology and spiritual teachings” which “a Western audience ... was almost totally ignorant of.” One respondent recalled “how shocking it was to uncover a major and complex system of thought in Islamic guise, where I [had been] led to believe there was nothing progressive.”⁶¹

Several respondents commented on the use of stories, which were easy to read and even entertaining. Their real point was sometimes not immediately obvious. “At first, I found amusement in the stories, and I treated them like puzzles,” remembered one respondent. The puzzles often solved themselves over time. “Finding myself in particular situations I will recall a tale, joke, or comment of Shah’s that relates directly to the situation,” wrote another respondent. “Passages from the books come back to me from time to time and help me deal with new situations as they occur,” wrote another. “The tales, jokes, and historical anecdotes ... embody the observations and insights gained and passed on over the centuries,” noted a further respondent. “The patterns contained in their story structures play out again and again in modern society as they did in previous centuries.”

For many respondents, Shah’s books were more than just books. Together, they formed a coherent corpus, to be read and re-read. “I continue to find new meaning in the books and they reinforce my hope that I am slowly learning how to learn,” wrote a respondent who was, at the time of writing, in his seventies. Together, the books “work like a guide for the development of consciousness,” showing that there are “other modes of thinking,” “another way of seeing the world and ways of being/acting beyond the everyday,” beyond everyday assumptions and conditioning. “The books work, initially, without the readers knowledge,” noted one respondent. “While reading his work, some alchemy occurs within,” noted another.

Shah’s achievement, then, was to combine three sources: existing Western conceptions of Sufism as universal wisdom separate from religion, the legacy of Gurdjieff, and the literature and anecdote of the Muslim world. This is the construction of Sufism that he presented to millions of readers. Exactly as Hardman said of Castaneda, Shah “was the storyteller who was able to retell the old stories to capture imaginations.” And, again, “the stories had been told before but never with such persuasive

force.” They were told not just with force, but also so as to present a coherent worldview.

5. Followers and opponents

Had Shah followed the normal pattern among Neo-Sufis of combining writing with leading followers, his following would probably have been large, as by the mid 1970s he was receiving some 10,000 letters a year, which included many requests to meet him.⁶² He argued that he could not both write and lead many followers at the same time,⁶³ but many others have managed to combine these two activities, which in some ways come together naturally, as research and teaching do. Shah did not, however, establish a formal following, and criticized those who, inspired by his writings, were sufficiently “religious-minded” to go in search of Sufi groups and teachers, whether (as has been noted) “the often grotesque versions of Sufism in the East” or “guru-ist cults of the West.”⁶⁴ He regarded the human desire for “meetings, groups and classes” as childish, and considered that Sufi groups that indulged this desire had deteriorated into cults.⁶⁵ Sufi rituals, he thought, were “automatic processes” of no value.⁶⁶ He was, it seems, convinced of the superiority of knowledge over practice.

Despite this, Shah did have a few followers. A few lived in or near the village of Langton,⁶⁷ but most visited only at weekends, by invitation; Shah reserved his weeks for writing.⁶⁸ Small groups would arrive, engage in communal physical work on the Saturday, and then move for dinner to a former barn on the estate known as “The Elephant” (a reference to the story retold above) and then gather to listen to Shah speak until after midnight.⁶⁹

Shah also had a small following in North America. A US organization, the Institute for the Study of Human Knowledge (ISHK), was established in 1969 under the leadership of Robert Ornstein, then a postdoctoral fellow in psychology.⁷⁰ There was also a Shah group in Denver, Colorado, under Leonard Lewin, an electrical engineer who taught at the University of Colorado.⁷¹

A further group was established by Shah’s brother Omar, who began to distance himself from the Gurdjieffian tradition in 1968, replacing the Gurdjieffian term “Work” with the more neutral term “Tradition,” and in 1977 he formally separated himself from Shah, and introduced such Islamic Sufi practices as *dhikr* and prayers in Arabic.⁷² Omar’s following⁷³ did not become fully Islamic in its practice, however. An account from the 1990s of a substantial center in Arcos de la Frontera, Spain reports Islamic forms of practice combined with heavy consumption of alcohol.⁷⁴

Shah’s most famous followers were Graves and Lessing. Graves was important at the start of his career, as we have seen. Lessing was important later. Her *The Golden Notebook* was widely read and much respected. One of its themes was disenchantment with, and disengagement from, the Communist

Party, which Lessing had herself joined and left, unlike her husband Gottfried Lessing (1914-79), who went on (after their divorce) to become a senior member of East Germany's ruling party. Another theme was limitations on women in English society, and this was the theme for which the book became best known. Lessing later complained that "it became the property of the feminists," despite the fact that so far as she was concerned, "it was fundamentally a political book."⁷⁵ After finishing *The Golden Notebook* Lessing found she "could no longer accept the contemporary package of materialism, socialism, and atheism," and went looking for something else.⁷⁶ Like many writers before her, she read her way through the Christian and non-Christian spiritual classics, concluding that "all religions and types of mysticism say the same thing in different words." At this point, she read *The Sufis*, wrote to Shah, and was accepted by him as a pupil.⁷⁷

Lessing remained a pupil of Shah until Shah's death. She promoted his work in three main ways. Firstly, she introduced Shah to her publisher, Tom Maschler (b. 1933) at Jonathan Cape,⁷⁸ who subsequently published and promoted Shah's books. Secondly, she periodically wrote glowing reviews of Shah's work in various newspapers and magazines, accepting and repeating his claims to authority, and thus adding to his authenticity and legitimacy. Thirdly, she referred to Shah and Sufism so often that anyone seriously interested in her work inevitably became interested in Shah as well. This is visible in the number of scholarly books and articles devoted to Lessing and Sufism. What was true for professional devotees of Lessing was presumably also true for amateur devotees. Many readers of Lessing must have become readers of Shah.

Another famous writer who was influenced by Shah, though never a formal follower of Shah, was the Brazilian author Paulo Coelho (b. 1947).⁷⁹ The rebirth of the central character, Veronika, in Coelho's *Veronika Decides to Die* is preceded by the advice of a Sufi teacher who bases his lesson around "Nasrudin, the great master of the Sufi tradition."⁸⁰ As Nasrudin is regarded as a Sufi primarily by Shah, whose spelling Coelho also follows, Shah must be Coelho's source. Nasrudin not only features in *Veronika*, but also makes periodic appearances on Coelho's blog.⁸¹ A full study of Coelho's work would be required to establish the exact extent of Shah's influence, but it is certainly there. Strangely, given Coelho's vast readership, there is at present almost no critical or scholarly literature on him.

It is somewhat easier to discern the influence that Coelho's novels might have on their readers than it is to speculate about Lessing's possible influence, because Coelho's message is more explicit. The subtitle of the English translation of his most popular book, *The Alchemist*, is *A Fable About Following Your Dream*, and to follow your dream is the essence of Coelho's message. It is much the advice that the Sufi teacher gives Veronika: "Allow the real 'I' to reveal itself," he tells the group Veronika has

joined. “What is the real ‘I’?” asks Veronica. “It’s what you are, not what others make of you,” replies the teacher.⁸²⁾ This answer is in the tradition of Gurdjieff and Shah, not of Islamic Sufism, which emphasises gaining mastery over the *nafs*, not promoting it.

Criticism of Idries Shah grew with time. As has been mentioned, the original 1964 review of *The Sufis* in the *New York Times Book Review* was less than positive. The reviewer complained that the book was “inclined to see Sufi influence everywhere” and made fun of Shah’s suggestion that Shakespeare might be Shaykh-pir (a combination of Arab and Persian terms for a Sufi master). While Payne conceded that “there is a good deal of information to be derived from the book,” this was “in spite of so many incursions into the higher lunacy, magic, witchcraft, and numerology.”⁸³⁾ *The Sufis* indeed made extraordinary claims for Sufi influence everywhere, including the Carbonari, the alchemists, and the Order of the Garter,⁸⁴⁾ Britain’s premier order of chivalry. There were also many incursions into what might be termed “higher lunacy,” not only in the familiar form of numerology, but also in the less familiar form of Arabic grammar. Shah drew on the remarkable variety of meanings that might be derived from a single Arabic tri-literal root, some of which are logically related, and some of which are startlingly contrasting. For those who did not know Arabic, this may have given an air of learning to the book. For those who do know Arabic, it is faintly absurd, and for those who know their Arabic dictionaries, it is clear that Shah was simply using J. G. Hava’s Arabic-English dictionary of 1915.

Criticism of Shah grew after 1967, when a new translation of *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, a work that had been extremely popular in the West at the end of the nineteenth century, was published under the joint names of Robert Graves and of Shah’s brother, Omar Ali Shah. The translation was presented as their joint work, Graves having cast into verse what Omar had translated from the Persian. It was also presented as a vast improvement on the original translations by Edward Fitzgerald (1809-83) that had originally made the work so popular. Firstly, Graves and Omar recognized Omar Khayyam (1048-1131) for the Sufi he was, unlike Fitzgerald, who Graves attacked very severely in a long introduction entitled “The Fitz-Omar Cult.” Secondly, Graves and Omar were working from the original twelfth-century manuscript, rather than the later and defective manuscript that Fitzgerald had used.⁸⁵⁾ The new translation was not well received, however. One reviewer described it as “a prosy *New English Bible* sort of Khayyam,”⁸⁶⁾ referring to the generally unloved 1961 new translation of the Bible into more faithful, but definitely unpoetic, English. More importantly, those who knew classical Persian literature immediately doubted the claim of a new twelfth-century manuscript, especially since that manuscript seemed suspiciously close to Fitzgerald’s text. Public controversy followed, with Graves coming under attack from Laurence Elwell-Sutton (1912-84), a leading

Persianist at Edinburgh University, who identified the translation's source as an 1899 work on Fitzgerald's translation by Edward Heron-Allen (1861-1943).⁸⁷⁾ The reason the allegedly new manuscript resembled the Fitzgerald's translation was that it was, in fact, actually based on the Fitzgerald translation.

This controversy was painful for Graves, who wrote to Idries Shah that it did him "a great deal of harm," and who took the Shah brothers' failure to silence critics such as Elwell-Sutton by producing the original twelfth-century manuscript as an inexplicable betrayal of their long friendship.⁸⁸⁾ It is likely that the manuscript was in fact an invention of Omar's, but that Idries felt he had to support his brother, despite his friendship with Graves. For a follower of the Shah brothers, however, the controversy did not discredit them. It merely showed that, unable to object to the basic argument that Omar Khayyam was an unrecognized Sufi, the academic establishment focused instead on petty details about the provenance of manuscripts.⁸⁹⁾

When revealing the 1899 origin of the allegedly twelfth-century manuscript of Khayyam in a scholarly journal, Elwell-Sutton observed standard academic courtesies. In later articles in general publications, however, he was much less restrained. In 1970, he described Shah's works in the *New York Review of Books* as "merely trivial," "a schoolboy essay," and "a muddle of platitudes, irrelevancies, and plain mumbo-jumbo."⁹⁰⁾ In 1975, he accused Shah of "a well-planned build-up" of the "attempt to upgrade [a] rather undistinguished lineage," and drew attention to the transaction involving the acquisition and sale of Coombe Springs and the purchase of Langton House in a way that implied dishonesty. In Elwell-Sutton's view, Shah's only achievement was to acquire such knowledge of Sufism as was available in commonly available reference works, and use it to produce a pseudo-Sufism fitted to the needs of the intellectual of his time, who "is usually incapable of swallowing the idea of a transcendent God more omnipotent than himself."⁹¹⁾

Elwell-Sutton was right in his identification of the source of the alleged twelfth-century manuscript, but went somewhat too far in his other criticisms. As we have seen, the Coombe Springs transaction may have been entirely innocent. Shah was indeed consistently presented as the non-existent Grand Sheikh of the Sufis, from "Solo to Mecca" in 1961 to his obituary in *The Daily Telegraph* in 1996.⁹²⁾ He was also presented as an Afghan aristocrat, for example in the American popular magazine *Psychology Today*, which described him as "a witty, urbane man whose family palaces are in Afghanistan" and added that "Shah is adviser to several monarchs and heads of state—purely in an unofficial capacity."⁹³⁾ From the very beginning in *Destination Mecca*, Shah presents himself as a Sayed and, after 1957 describes himself as "*The Sayed Idries Shah*" (my emphasis), a style almost unique to him, treating "Sayed" as English custom treats such titles as "Honourable" or, sometimes

“Lord.” In fact, the title is closer to the French *Monsieur*, and though it is given only to descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, there are several million people in the Muslim world who trace their descent from the Prophet. There is no record of Shah advising monarchs or heads of state, and no family palaces in Afghanistan. Shah’s background, however, was not as undistinguished as Elwell-Sutton suggested. He was descended from an Afghan, Muhammad Jan Fishan Khan (d. 1864), who had moved to India at the end of First Anglo-Afghan War (1839-42), and had remained loyal to the British during the Indian Rebellion of 1857, as a reward for which he had been granted what a British semi-official source described as “an important estate,” covering about 28 square miles, at Sardhana in Uttar Pradesh, along with the title *nawab*, a form of peerage.⁹⁴ Elwell-Sutton, then, went somewhat too far.

Idries Shah died in 1996. His following dispersed, Langton Place was sold, and the proceeds transferred to the Idries Shah Foundation,⁹⁵ which now publishes and promotes his books.

6. Conclusion

Shah’s work and impact are of major significance in the history of the Western reception of Sufism. From 1964 until the 1990s, when interest in his work began to decline, millions read his books, and many were changed by them. They thought they were learning about Sufism, which sometimes they were, as Shah’s books included extracts from classic Sufi authors, and other classic Sufi authors were published in translation by Octagon Press. Often, however, they were learning not Sufism but the folk wisdom of the Muslim world, which sometimes overlapped with Sufism, and sometimes overlapped, as in the case of the story of the elephant, with the folk wisdom of humanity. Beyond this, they were also sometimes learning something of the teachings of Gurdjieff. One thing they were not learning about was Islam.

Idries Shah was to Sufism as Carlos Castaneda was to Shamanism, an immensely successful interpreter and popularizer, whose work met the needs of the time. In Islamic terms, he was not really a Sufi, but then neither was the only other Western Neo-Sufi to rival him in fame or influence, his father’s one-time friend Inayat Khan. Islamic Neo-Sufism was a phenomenon that began to develop during Shah’s lifetime, but it was a later phenomenon.

Shah’s success may be ascribed partly to the needs of the time, and partly to his combination of Sufism, folk wisdom, and Gurdjieff. In addition, Shah was good at promoting his work, and at promoting himself. Graves launched his work, and Lessing pushed it. And even though it drew criticism or even ridicule, Shah’s self-presentation as Grand Sheikh of the Sufis and as exiled Afghan

aristocrat also helped promote his work.

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Notes

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 - 20) To judge from the tone of many of Graves' letters to Shah in *Between Moon and Moon*. This is confirmed by Richard Perceval Graves, *Robert Graves*, p. 326.
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