

## Niyazi Misri – life

Shams al-dīn Muhammad b. ‘Alī, better known as Niyazi Misri, was born on 12 Rabi‘ I 1027/March 9, 1618 in Malatya, a small town in eastern Anatolia - actually he was born in the summer town of Aspuzi (now modern Malatya), where locals would retreat to in summer to get away from the heat of the plain.<sup>1</sup> His father, Soğancızade ‘Ali Çelebi, a Naqshbandi, was one of the city notables, and it was in Malatya that Niyazi began not only his religious education but also his Sufi training at the hand of a Khalwati shaykh called Husayn Efendi.

However, as with most people, his real education began elsewhere, away from the familiarity of his hometown – beginning with Cairo, when he had a dream of ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī. In the dream, Niyazi was addressed by ‘Abd al-Qādir (who appeared as a Sultan) as a ‘sufi’ and given a pouch:

“I took it and opened it before him. There were silver coins in it. And within the pouch, there was another one, and I opened it, too. In it, there were golden coins. I asked him: ‘What is the meaning of these two pouches?’ He replied: ‘The silver coins are outward knowledge; learn and act upon it. The golden coins are knowledge of the Way. You can attain it only through one who is pre-destined for you.’ And he added: ‘Your Guide is not in this city.’ I woke up with relief and a joy that I cannot describe.”

Gold and silver, here depicted in the form of coins, is a familiar motif in mystical experience: silver represents the last but one stage in the sevenfold alchemical process of transformation, the highest quality that can characterize the relative being, the clothing of servanthood and receptivity, but which is still not the true fulfillment of human potential – that is represented only by gold, the final stage (which is also apparently paradoxically the first), the incorruptible and unchanging essence of completion and perfection. The dream impelled Niyazi to leave Egypt and travel: he received permission from his Shaykh to set out and find his true Guide as indicated by ‘Abd al-Qādir. For several years he wandered in Arabia and Anatolia. When he was in Bursa, he had another dream: a tinsmith was tinning cups in a shop crowded with customers. Misri came to the shop to have his ablution pitcher tinned, and handed it to the tinsmith. The latter took it and said, “The outside can be tinned by anyone, the skill is to tin its inside.” Then, he split the pitcher in two and tinned both the outside and the inside; and joining the pieces together, he gave it back.

Niyazi Misri understood that this tinsmith was the Guide he had been seeking, and soon after he found the man he called “the light of my eye and the remedy of my heart”, a Khalwati (Halveti)

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<sup>1</sup> In one of his poems in the *Divan* he celebrates his hometown of Aspuzi, calling it the ‘rose-garden of nightingales’, ‘the gathering-place for the joyful assembly of saints’. One of the features of this poem, which is often thought of as one of his least mystical, is the way it relates specific spiritual qualities to a physical place, and in particular the way those spiritual qualities are also (explicitly or implicitly) related to prophetic figures such as Idris, Khidr or Jesus.

shaykh, Umami Sinan of Elmalı: for 9 years, from 1647 to 1656, Niyazi stayed with Umami Sinan, who then sent him to Ushak as his khalifa. When Umami Sinan was asked why he had sent him to a small, provincial town like Ushak instead of to a large, important city like Bursa, he replied: “You will see that our Misri Muhammad Dervish will be contained in neither Ushak nor Bursa, nor any other land. He will be a well-known Guide and one of those abiding in the station of Pole-hood.”

This promise was to be amply fulfilled, as Niyazi Misri became someone more renowned even than his own master Umami Sinan: the 413 manuscripts listed to his name in Turkish libraries testify to the popularity of his works.

While he was making preparations for moving to Ushak, some friends, having obtained Umami Sinan’s permission, asked him to give a religious speech to the people of Elmalı in the mosque. When he sat down to deliver the sermon, he found he had forgotten everything he knew and did not know what to say. Umami Sinan, who was among the congregation, exclaimed: “Speak Misri Efendi! From now on do not be silent; always speak!” He was then able to talk, and gave a beautiful speech on divine realities. Mentioning this event later, Niyazi Misri said: “With the permission and *himma* of my Shaykh we are still talking; for us there is nothing to fear.”

After the death of his Shaykh in 1657, he moved to Bursa where he established his Sufi lodge and became a widely known spiritual guide throughout the country. In this period, the Kadizadeliler, a group of fundamentalist madrasa clerics, gained influence over the state governors, and managed to enforce a prohibition against Sufi practices such as *samā’*, describing them as anti-Islamic. The Sufi lodges were closed, with few exceptions including that of Niyazi Misri. This prohibition, which lasted until 1674, was lifted by the Sultan after a sermon given by Niyazi Misri in the Ayasofya Mosque during a visit to Istanbul, at which the sultan was present: the sermon apparently described the virtues of remembrance (*dhikr*) and the services of Sufis to Islam and the Muslim community.

From 1675 came the years of exile for Niyazi Misri: once to the island of Rhodes for 9 months, and twice to the island of Lemnos, 18 years in total. In 1691 he returned to Bursa, and two years later was invited by the sultan to participate in the Austrian Campaign. When he set out to Edirne (Adrianople) where the army was to gather, so many of his followers began to join him that the state governors feared a popular revolt. He was exiled to Lemnos for the second time, and in 1694, at the age of 78, he died - his tomb remains there to this day, a Muslim shrine amidst a Christian cemetery.