

**How to cite this article:**

Dehghani Sanij, S. H., & Fallahzadeh, A. (2025). The Impact of the Works of Shah Ni'matullah Vali on the Socio-Political Interaction Between the Ni'matullahi Order and the Imami School in the Safavid Era. *Journal of Historical Research, Law and Policy*, 3(4), 1-8. <https://doi.org/10.61838/jhrlp.167>



Article history:
Original Research

Dates:

Submission Date: 15 August 2025

Revision Date: 10 November 2025

Acceptance Date: 17 November 2025

Publication Date: 10 December 2025

The Impact of the Works of Shah Ni'matullah Vali on the Socio-Political Interaction Between the Ni'matullahi Order and the Imami School in the Safavid Era

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ABSTRACT

The Ni'matullahi order is one of the Shi'i Sufi traditions that emerged in the fourteenth century and became actively involved in significant social and political affairs during the Safavid era. Despite governmental restrictions and pressures imposed during the Safavid period, this order attracted segments of the population and some members of the court due to its mystical teachings and its emphasis on social service. This article examines the socio-political interaction between the Ni'matullahi order and the Imami (Twelver Shi'i) school during the Safavid era. By analyzing the religious and political climate of the period, the study investigates the position of the Ni'matullahi order and the role of Sayyid Nur al-Din Shah Ni'matullah Vali and his works in cultural and social developments (Tabatabaii, 2008). The research method is based on library research and data analysis aimed at assessing the extent of the influence of Ni'matullahi writings on Imami thought. The findings indicate that the relationship between the Ni'matullahi order and the Imami school was neither mere peaceful coexistence nor outright confrontation, but rather a form of reciprocal interaction that contributed to the formation of Shi'i mysticism and the consolidation of the political order of the period. In addition, the role of the Safavid government in regulating and managing this interaction to strengthen Twelver Shi'ism and maintain political stability is highlighted. This article seeks to present a clear picture of the mutual influences of mysticism and politics in Safavid society.

Keywords: *socio-political interaction; Ni'matullahi order; Imami Shi'ism in the Safavid period; the Safavids and Islamic mysticism; reciprocal influence of Shi'i orders.*

Introduction

The Safavid period represents a turning point in the history of Iran and the Islamic world, during which the establishment of an Imami Shi'i state brought about fundamental transformations in political, social, and religious spheres. In this era, complex interactions emerged between the official religion (Imami Shi'ism) and Sufi orders, including the Ni'matullahi order (1). With its mystical and Sufi foundations, the Ni'matullahi order, in addition to its spiritual dimensions, played a significant role in the social and political relations of its time (2).

The Ni'matullahi order has historically adopted a distinctive approach in its political and social interactions with other orders and ruling powers. During the Safavid period, this order—particularly in opposition to Sunni dynasties



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and concurrently with the rise of Shi'i governments—occupied specific political and religious positions. In the Qajar period as well, in light of the particular political circumstances of that era, the Ni'matullahi order assumed varying roles in its interactions with different states. Especially in the face of autocratic rule, the order adopted a stance that defended the people and their religious demands (3, 4).

Given the prominent position of Imami Shi'ism within the Safavid apparatus and the particular importance of the Ni'matullahi order, the main question of this study is how the works and teachings of Sayyid Ni'matullah Wali, the founder of this order, influenced socio-political interactions between Imami Shi'ism and the Ni'matullahi order, and what reflections this interaction had on the Safavid governmental structure.

Examining the interaction between Imami Shi'ism and the Ni'matullahi order during the Safavid period is significant because it contributes to a clearer understanding of the process through which Imami Shi'ism was consolidated as the official religion, while also illuminating the political and social dimensions of the presence of mysticism and Sufism. Understanding the influence of the works of Sayyid Ni'matullah Wali also facilitates insight into the reciprocal relationship between religion and politics and the role of mysticism in Safavid political life. This topic is likewise relevant to analyses of Iran's cultural and religious developments after the Safavids and to the position of Sufism in contemporary Iran.

Research Questions:

1. How did the works and teachings of Sayyid Ni'matullah Wali influence socio-political interactions between Imami Shi'ism and the Ni'matullahi order during the Safavid period?
2. How were socio-political relations between Imami Shi'ism and the Ni'matullahi order formed in the Safavid era, and can this interaction be explained primarily in terms of coexistence, confrontation, or synergy?
3. What role did the Safavid government play in regulating, managing, and organizing this interaction between Imami Shi'ism and the Ni'matullahi order?

Theoretical Foundations and Research Background

Theoretical Foundations

The present study lies at the intersection of two fields of knowledge.

First, historical-social studies of religion that examine how religious and Sufi orders interacted with the official religion and political power during the Safavid period (5).

Second, studies of Shi'i Sufism and mysticism that analyze the role of mystical thought in cultural and political transformations (6).

The key theoretical concepts employed include the following.

The theory of religious interaction, according to which religious orders and groups, when confronting official religion and political power, may display patterns of confrontation, coexistence, or synergy.

The role of power structures in shaping religious orientations, whereby Safavid religious policy can be understood as a form of the "production of religious truth" aimed at consolidating power.

The mystical reading of politics, from the perspective of mystics such as Sayyid Ni'matullah Wali, in which politics is viewed as an inward and ethical matter that transcends purely political and institutional structures.

Research Background

Studies related to the interaction between Imami Shi'ism and Sufi orders during the Safavid period are limited but valuable.

Sayyid Hossein Modarresi Tabataba'i, in *The School in the Process of Evolution*, examines the process of consolidating Imami Shi'ism and its interaction with Sufis (6).

Abdolhossein Zarrinkub, in *History of Sufism in Iran*, refers to the Ni'matullahi order and its position (2).

Mohammad Reza Shafiei Kadkani analyzes the influence of Shi'i mystics, particularly Ni'matullah Wali, on Safavid culture and politics (7).

Numerous articles in the fields of Islamic history and Sufism have addressed Safavid religious policy toward Sufis.

Studies such as those on the interaction between Sufis and the Safavid state indicate that the Safavid attitude toward Sufism was both dual and contingent (3).

Innovation

By conducting a systematic and comprehensive analysis of the works of Sayyid Ni'matullah Wali and simultaneously drawing on historical sources, mystical texts, and interdisciplinary studies, this research offers a more comprehensive and in-depth picture of the complex interaction between Imami Shi'ism and the Ni'matullahi order during the Safavid period. In addition to examining social and political dimensions, the study pays particular attention to the role of mystical teachings in shaping relations between power and religion, an aspect that has received less integrated treatment in previous research.

An Overview of the Safavid Period and the Religious-Political Context

An Introduction to the Safavid Period

The Safavid period (1501–1736 CE) is considered one of the most important and influential eras in Iran's post-Islamic history, beginning with the establishment of a powerful centralized state by Shah Isma'il Safavi (8). This era represents a turning point in the consolidation of Twelver Imami Shi'ism as the official religion of the country and in the formation of Iran's national-religious identity after Islam (2). The Safavids not only founded a new political system but also laid the groundwork for fundamental transformations in the relationship between power and religion in Iran.

During the Safavid period, the Ni'matullahi order, benefiting from royal patronage—especially under Shah Abbas—was able not only to contribute to the spread of Imami Shi'ism but also to play an important role in strengthening the national identity of Shi'i Iranians in the face of internal and external threats. Shah Abbas made use of Sufi orders, particularly the Ni'matullahi order, to promote Shi'i teachings and national unity, thereby reinforcing his political authority (3).

The Religious Atmosphere of the Safavid Period

Shah Isma'il Safavi pursued an extensive policy aimed at promoting and consolidating Imami Shi'ism in Iran by inviting prominent Shi'i scholars and jurists from regions such as Iraq, Lebanon, and other Shi'i centers (9). This religious policy was implemented to establish doctrinal unity among Iran's diverse ethnic and social groups and to counter Sunni influence, particularly that of the Ottoman state and other regional rivals. Within this new religious

environment, Sufi orders also occupied an important position, including the Ni'matullahi order, which, owing to its deep Shi'i roots and distinctive mystical teachings, succeeded in securing a special place alongside the official religious structure. Although at times tensions and conflicts arose between Imami jurists and certain Sufi teachings, including those of the Ni'matullahi order, this order—by virtue of its unique characteristics and relative conformity with Shi'i principles—played a significant role in the cultural, social, and even political life of Safavid society.

The Political Atmosphere of the Safavid Period

By skillfully employing Shi'ism as an official ideology, the Safavid state succeeded in institutionalizing its ideological and political dominance over society. Within this power structure, religious scholars functioned as legitimizing institutions and played a central role in consolidating Safavid rule by linking religious legitimacy to political authority. Safavid rulers, particularly Shah Tahmasp and Shah Abbas I, established a strategic alliance between religious and state institutions, thereby facilitating the consolidation of Shi'i governance. In this context, although some Sufi orders faced pressure, the Ni'matullahi order—due to its Shi'i character and mystical teachings aligned with Safavid political objectives—was able to preserve its position and, especially in regions such as Kerman and Fars, function as one of the important social and religious institutions (5, 8).

The Ni'matullahi Order in the Safavid Period

Geography of the Ni'matullahi Order

The Ni'matullahi order, attributed to Shah Nur al-Din Ni'matullah Wali, spread from southern and southeastern regions of Iran such as Kerman and the area of Mahan. The shrine of Shah Ni'matullah Wali in Mahan, Kerman, is regarded as one of the principal Sufi centers and a pilgrimage site for practitioners of mysticism.

Figures of the Ni'matullahi Order

Shah Ni'matullah Wali (circa 1330/1331–1431 CE) is the founder of this order. In addition to his mystical teachings, his lineage is traced to Imam Musa al-Kazim, which strengthened his spiritual standing among Shi'i communities. Sufi and historical sources describe his primary audience as disciples and residents of Sufi lodges who, after his death, continued the training of followers. Following the passing of Shah Ni'matullah Wali, several prominent disciples were influenced by his teachings and carried the order forward. Among these figures were Darvish Fakhr al-Din and Khwaja 'Abdullah Imami Isfahani, whom some historical sources report as having joined the Ni'matullahi order. These individuals acted as intermediaries between the order and local Shi'i communities and were effective in social and religious interaction. Their stance toward Imami Shi'ism was generally framed by respect and accommodation rather than open opposition, and their mystical discourse frequently emphasized devotion to the Ahl al-Bayt. In sources on Sufism and the history of the order, a succession of later *qutbs* (spiritual poles) is also mentioned who assumed leadership of the order in subsequent periods.

Relations between the Safavid State and the Ni'matullahi Order

Safavid policy toward Sufi orders, including the Ni'matullahi order, was contingent in nature: at certain times it involved conditional support, while at other times it imposed restrictions under the supervision of jurists and the official religious establishment. Studies of Safavid religious policy indicate that Sufism initially enjoyed a degree of

legitimacy during the early Safavid period, which later came under increasing pressure as more juridical-Imami orientations prevailed within the state.

Other historical analyses note that in later phases the Safavid state intensified oversight of Sufi lodges and endowments in order to prevent any form of religious or political dissent. Some historical sources report that Safavid rulers were careful to ensure that Sufi orders did not engage in political disobedience and therefore placed endowments and lodges under juridical supervision. It is also reported that, in later periods, the state maintained Sufis within the bounds of Shi'i legitimacy by granting temporary privileges while exercising control over Sufi institutions.

In addition, accounts of internal disruptions within the Ni'matullahi order suggest that internal dynamics, combined with external pressure, led some branches of the order to experience temporary interruption or to operate under governmental supervision (2, 10). These historical testimonies indicate that the theory of “regulation and control” discussed in this study is grounded in empirical evidence rather than being merely hypothetical.

An Examination of the Thought and Works of Shah Ni'matullah Wali and Sectarian Interaction

Coexistence, Confrontation, or Synergy?

The relationship between the Ni'matullahi order and Imami Shi'ism during the Safavid period cannot be easily reduced to either “pure coexistence” or “outright conflict.” Depending on political, social, and regional conditions, this interaction assumed different forms.

In some regions, Ni'matullahi shaykhs were able to establish constructive relations with Shi'i communities by emphasizing Shi'i doctrines such as the authority of the Ahl al-Bayt, messianic expectation, and devotion to the Imams.

Some religious scholars, particularly among juridically oriented circles, adopted a critical stance toward Sufism and regarded it as a threat to doctrinal purity (6, 7).

In other cases, forms of synergistic interaction emerged, whereby the Safavid state utilized the social influence of Sufi shaykhs to maintain social order or exercise local control.

Reciprocal Influence in Mysticism, Politics, and Society

Over the course of its development, the Ni'matullahi order succeeded in integrating elements of Shi'i doctrine into its intellectual structure, such as the primacy of the Imams' authority, messianic expectation, and divine justice. This integration enabled followers to act as intermediaries between local populations and the Shi'i religious establishment, for example by exercising spiritual presence among disciples and local communities.

In the political sphere, although extensive evidence is limited, some sources indicate that during periods such as the reign of Shah Abbas and thereafter, the Safavid state pursued pragmatic engagement with Sufi orders—neither fully excluding them nor granting them unrestricted freedom. This engagement may have included limited privileges, control over lodges and endowments, and minimal intervention in their internal affairs (5, 9).

A Review of Selected Works of Shah Ni'matullah Wali and Their Impact on Imami Society

Shah Ni'matullah Wali produced a substantial body of mystical poetry and prose. His *Complete Divan* has been published and includes ghazals, qasidas, masnavis, and shorter mystical compositions. Within these poems, Shi'i themes such as devotion to the Ahl al-Bayt, messianic expectation, and esoteric authority are clearly evident (11).

One work attributed to Shah Ni'matullah Wali is *Prophecies of Shah Ni'matullah Wali*, which presents images of the political and religious future of Iran and other lands (10). Although the historical reliability of these prophecies has been debated, their presence in mystical-literary texts reflects beliefs that circulated among followers and mystical circles.

Studies on the position of the Imams in the life and works of Shah Ni'matullah Wali note that in his poetic corpus he repeatedly speaks as a devotee of the Ahl al-Bayt and articulates Shi'i perspectives, indicating his theoretical inclination toward Shi'ism (11).

Historical accounts of the Ni'matullahi lineages in Iran also emphasize that one of the distinctive features of this order was its rejection of isolation and its emphasis on social presence and active engagement among the people, a disposition that facilitated interaction between the order and the broader religious society (10).

Moreover, the shrine of Shah Ni'matullah Wali in Mahan, Kerman, has been recognized as a symbol of the order's social and devotional importance and has long served as a gathering place for followers and mystical assemblies.

The Ni'matullahi order also exerted considerable influence in social and cultural domains. During the Safavid period, drawing on its mystical and religious teachings, it played a key role in the development of mystical literature and Persian poetry. Numerous works in philosophy, mysticism, and Qur'anic interpretation were produced in Persian, some of which were explicitly grounded in Ni'matullahi teachings (12).

Shah Ni'matullah Wali was among the prominent Sufis who grounded his mystical teachings in the doctrine of the unity of existence and love of God. He maintained that all beings, including human beings, ultimately return to a single truth, namely divine reality, and he emphasized peaceful coexistence among Islamic sects and a shared understanding of religious truth (13).

In analyzing the intellectual impact of Shah Ni'matullah Wali on the Ni'matullahi order, works such as the *Treatise on the Self* (*Ma'rifat al-nafs*) and his collections of letters (*Treatise on Letters*) are particularly significant, especially in explicating spiritual teachings and self-knowledge within the order (14).

Through the prophecies articulated in his writings, Shah Ni'matullah Wali also influenced contemporary political and religious thought. Prophetic passages found in works such as *Treatise of Advices* reflect his concerns regarding the future of political authority and the religious condition of Iran, and they point to his reflections on the impact of religious policy on the fate of Iranian dynasties (15).

Conclusion

The present study demonstrates that the interaction between the Ni'matullahi order and Imami Shi'ism during the Safavid era was neither a purely coexistential nor a strictly confrontational relationship. Rather, it constituted a complex, dynamic, and reciprocal connection that took shape within the broader religious-political transformations of the period. The mystical teachings and writings of Sayyid Nur al-Din Ni'matullah Wali, drawing upon Shi'i themes

such as *wilayah* (spiritual authority), messianic expectation, and mystical ethics, provided a foundation for spiritual convergence and cultural legitimacy for the Ni'matullahi order in relation to Imami Shi'ism.

On the other hand, the Safavid state, recognizing the social and spiritual capacities of Sufism—particularly in branches such as the Ni'matullahi order—sought, through a pragmatic and regulated policy, not merely to restrict these orders but to incorporate and manage them within the official religious structure. This strategy contributed both to strengthening the religious hegemony of Twelver Shi'ism and to preventing the emergence of independent religious power centers. The distinction between this study and works such as those addressing the intellectual transformation of the Ni'matullahi order or its historical evolution lies in its specific focus on socio-political interaction and the analysis of the Shi'i dimensions of Shah Ni'matullah Wali's works, whereas those studies have primarily emphasized theoretical issues, historical development, or engagement with political authority (2, 5).

By integrating social, political, and mystical dimensions in a combined analytical framework, this article has succeeded in offering a more precise and comprehensive picture of how the Ni'matullahi order interacted with the official religion during the Safavid period. Nevertheless, although the Ni'matullahi order played an important role in the expansion of Imami Shi'ism and the consolidation of Iranian national identity under the Safavids, certain teachings and political activities of the order were subject to criticism in some periods. Particularly toward the end of the Safavid era, when Sufi orders—especially the Ni'matullahi—became more directly involved in politics and sought influence within governmental institutions, Shi'i scholars and jurists raised objections. These critiques were largely directed at extra-legal practices and the perceived impact of Sufi orders on state affairs (4).

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our appreciation and gratitude to all those who helped us carrying out this study.

Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

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