



The Sufi and the Sultan

Persian Sufism - Iran

A darwish, who had taken a vow of loneliness and had cut himself off from the world was living in a desert when the caravan of the sultan passed by. The darwish was, at that moment, submerged in deep contemplation, so he did not notice the retinue and did not prostrate himself before the passage of the king, as everyone else in the country did. The sultan was in a good mood but he still said, annoyed:

‘Those who dress in rags resemble beasts. They do not even recognise a king.’

The vizier, wanting to impress the sultan, dismounted and, prodded the darwish with his foot, saying:

‘The sultan of the whole world is passing in front of you, darwish. Are you not going to pay homage to him as you should?’

The darwish, came back to himself, and without losing his composure, answered:

‘The sultan should seek homage from those who hope to take advantage of his goodwill,’ he said. “And tell him that kings were created to protect and take care of their subjects, and not for the subjects to serve them.”

The darwish continued:

‘The king is the custodian and guardian of the humble ones, although he lives among riches, just as the sheep are not there to take care of the shepherd, but the shepherd of the sheep.’

The vizier, like the king and his courtiers, was speechless in the face of the boldness of the darwish. When no one stepped in to silence him, the darwish continued like this:

‘When I see a man showing off his riches, the first thing I ask myself is who will be miserable for his cause. But time puts things right. Maybe it will take a little longer, but the dust will consume all of our brains. At that time, you will not be able to differentiate between a king and a slave. When the decree of fate overtakes us and they open our graves, who will differentiate the rich from the poor?’

The sultan was impressed, not only by the darwish’s bravery, but also by his wisdom.

‘You may ask me for anything you wish,’ the sultan said benevolently.

‘All I want is for you to leave me alone and not bother me again,’ replied the darwish insolently.

‘Well, then ... give me some advice,’ said the sultan, accepting the man’s rebuff.

‘Be warned, now you have power and riches, but these change hands.’ □

Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda (2018).

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Comments

This story is an adaptation of the 28th story in the first chapter of the Gulistan of Sa’adi of Shiraz, specifically from the Spanish version on WebIslam (Sa’adi, 2000).

Sa'adi was one of the most important Persian poets of medieval times, but to the beauty of his poems he added a deep social awareness. An indefatigable traveller, some authors compare him with the Christian Marco Polo. But Sa'adi's social sensitivity establishes a fundamental difference between them: while Marco Polo preferred to spend time with the most powerful people in the lands through which he travelled, Sa'adi preferred the company of the humblest people, such as merchants, farmers, tramps, outcasts, thieves and Sufi beggars.

Sources

Sa'adi de Shiraz (2000, August 28). El sufi contra el poder. WebIslam. Retrieved from https://www.webislam.com/cuentos/18508-el_sufi_contra_el_poder.html.

Associated text of the Earth Charter

Principle 13: Strengthen democratic institutions at all levels, and provide transparency and accountability in governance, inclusive participation in decision making, and access to justice.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Preamble: The Global Situation.- Communities are being undermined. The benefits of development are not shared equitably and the gap between rich and poor is widening. Injustice, poverty, ignorance, and violent conflict are widespread and the cause of great suffering.

Principle 9c: Recognize the ignored, protect the vulnerable, serve those who suffer, and enable them to develop their capacities and to pursue their aspirations.

Principle 10d: Require multinational corporations and international financial organizations to act transparently in the public good, and hold them accountable for the consequences of their activities.

