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Sayyids, Tribal Kinship, and the Imamate in Zaydi Yemen under Imam Yahyā Sharaf al-Dīn (d. 965/1558)

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Abstract

Studies of Zaydi Yemen tend to underline the divisions, rather than connections, between sayyids, descendants of the Prophet, and tribal groups in the political sphere. This paper answers the question what value family connections to tribes had for ambitious sayyids in early modern Yemen who wanted to become Zaydi imams. To this end, the article examines a section of Imam Yahyā Sharaf al-Dīn's (d. 965/1558) unpublished biography, containing the genealogy of his second wife, Tāj al-Bahā' bint al-shaykh Sharaf al-Dīn. The paper argues that the imam and his circle valued the connections that the marriage to a daughter of a shaykh brought to the imamate, and that it is due to its symbolic value for the legitimacy of the imamate that her genealogy was included in the biography.

Keywords

Yemen – Zaydi imamate – tribes – sayyids – genealogy

1 Introduction

The Zaydi imamate, a Shī'ite state founded in North Yemen in the tenth century CE, was characterized by a domination of sayyids, descendants of the Prophet.

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They alone could qualify to rule as imams. The Zaydi imams and sayyids who contended for this role lived in a society that was simultaneously settled and tribal. Within this society there were local elites, shaykhly clans, that had their own visions of legitimacy and sovereignty, rooted in their genealogies and connections to specific regions. In this complex setting, tribal structures perforce influenced state development, the inner politics of the Zaydi imamate, and the ways in which Zaydi imams balanced their claims to sovereignty based on sayyid descent with the context of tribal domination.

A manuscript, preserved at the Biblioteca Ambrosiana of Milan (Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Nuovo Fondo, MS A.3.ar), contains the only currently known copy of a biography (*sīra*) of the Yemeni Zaydi imam al-Mutawakkil Yahyā Sharaf al-Dīn (d. 965/1558), composed during the life of the imam by his court historian, Ḥusayn al-'Ulufī (d. unknown). For many decades this unique source has been neglected, and it remains largely unknown even in Yemen.¹ An in-depth study and edition of this over three hundred folio-long text would be a welcome scholarly contribution. This article will focus on a single segment of this important source, a tribal genealogy of the second wife of Imam Yahyā Sharaf al-Dīn, Tāj al-Bahā' bint al-shaykh Sharaf al-Dīn. By identifying two layers of the genealogy – a historical and a legendary layer – this article untangles the question of why this genealogy was added to the biography of the imam and what practical implications it had for the imam's career.

Existing studies of tribal-state relations in Yemen build on rich source material and diverse methodologies. At its broadest, the historiography presents a

- 1 The authoritative catalogue of Zaydi works by Aḥmad al-Ḥusaynī does not mention al-'Ulufī's biography of the imam, and the short biography in 'Abd al-Salām Wajīh's dictionary of Zaydi authors does not list the title of this biography (*sīra*) or a shelfmark, indicating that no copies of this work were preserved in Yemen or that none of those preserved were known to Wajīh. Sayyid Aḥmad al-Ḥusaynī, *Mu'allafāt al-Zaydiyya*, 3 vols. (Qom: Maṭba'at Ismā'īlyān, 1992); 'Abd al-Salām ibn 'Abbās al-Wajīh, *A'lām al-Mu'allifīn al-Zaydiyya* (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Imām Zayd ibn 'Alī al-Thaqāfiyya, 1999), 379. The Yemeni historian 'Abdallāh al-Ḥibshī similarly remarked in his overview of medieval and early modern *sīras* of Zaydi imams that no copies of any biographies of imam Yahyā Sharaf al-Dīn survived and only the names of their authors are known. Ḥusayn ibn Aḥmad ibn Ya'qūb, *Sīrat al-Imām al-Manṣūr bi-'llāh al-Qāsim ibn 'Alī al-Tyyānī*, ed. 'Abdallāh Muḥammad al-Ḥibshī (Sanaa: Dār al-Ḥikma al-Yamāniyya, 1996), 8. To make matters more complicated, the catalogue of the Biblioteca Ambrosiana does not identify the author of this work and suggests, erroneously, that the author might be al-Zurayqī or Ibn al-Dā'ir. Oscar Löfgren and Renato Traini, *Catalogue of the Arabic Manuscripts in the Biblioteca Ambrosiana*, 3 vols. (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 1975–1995), 2: 2. A recent edition of a posthumous biography of Imam Yahyā Sharaf al-Dīn mentions the name of this biographer but not the manuscript preserved in Milan. Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mufaḍḍal, *al-Sulūk al-Dhahabīyya fī Khulāṣat al-Sīra al-Mutawakkilīyya*, ed. Zayd ibn 'Alī al-Fuḍayl (Jeddah: Maṭba'at al-Mafāhīm, 2012), 12.

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