

History of Islam

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The Emergence of the Safavids

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The origins of the Safavid dynasty in Persia must be sought in the folk Islam that developed in the immediate aftermath of the Mongol devastations and in the political convulsions in the border areas of Persia and Anatolia after the Timurid invasions. Between the year 1219 when Genghiz Khan's troops crossed the Amu Darya in Kazagistan, and 1261 when the Mamlukes finally stopped the Mongol forces at Ayn Jalut, the central mass of Islam was obliterated. Central Asia, Persia, Iraq, Afghanistan, as well as parts of Syria and Pakistan lay in ruins. In some areas, as much as ninety percent of the population was killed. Major centers of learning like Bukhara, Samarqand, Herat, and Baghdad were razed to the ground. Libraries were burned, scholars butchered, monuments demolished, dams destroyed, and the general population was enslaved. To grasp the magnitude of the calamity from a global Islamic perspective, it must be recalled that this was the same period when the Christians captured much of Spain, including Seville and Cordoba.

Faced with this enormous calamity, Muslims turned to their own spiritual roots. Gone were the *ulema* who could discuss the fine details of theology or argue the relative merits of the various mazhabs. The Abbasid Caliphate, which had become an empty shell, disappeared. Faced with total obliteration, the schisms between the various sects and mazhabs were temporarily shelved. In the pre-Mongol period, Persia, Iraq and Syria had witnessed countless feuds among followers of the Shafi'i, Hanafi and Ithna Ashari schools of *Fiqh*. What emerged in place of a theological Islam dominated by the ulema was a folk Islam nurtured by the Sufis.

Sufic Islam was different from pre-Mongol theological Islam in its emphasis on the spiritual content of faith as contrasted with its ritualistic content. The warriors of Central Asia had failed to prevent the triumph of the Mongols. The *ulema*, who depended on the warrior rulers for their survival, had been obliterated. A religious vacuum was thus created. Times were hard and it was not clear whether Islam itself would survive in Central Asia and Persia. The faithful therefore turned to the reservoir of their inner souls. The sword of the Mongol could decapitate a ruler but it could not touch the spirit of a believer. The common folk, in search of leadership, gravitated to the Sufi masters.

The Sufic approach, from its very infancy, had stayed above the political infighting that has characterized Shi'a-Sunni relations since the assassination of Ali ibn Abu Talib (r). Sufi practices were an amalgam of Shi'a and Sunni practices. The Sufis, always suspect in the eyes of the theological establishment, had to be circumspect in their practices. In their emphasis on the transmission of knowledge through a teacher (*murshid, pir, qutub*), the Sufis were closer to the Shi'a approach. In their

adherence to the Shariah, they were closer to the Sunni methodology. Furthermore, Ali ibn Abu Talib (r) was accepted by most Sufi orders as the patron-Imam and special honor was accorded to Ahl-al Bait (household of the Prophet).

Esoteric knowledge of God's presence through *irfan* (intuitive, immediate, personal knowledge of the Divine Presence) was emphasized as much as the exoteric knowledge of the Divine through adherence to Shariah. To escape persecution, elements of *taqiyya* (concealment of true religious faith from the enemy) were also accepted. Some tareeqas incorporated music and sama'a in their practices. It was this folk Islam, incorporating in it the spirituality of Islam, but with a lesser emphasis on its outward shell, that survived the Mongol age. And it was this Sufic Islam that was introduced into Pakistan, India, Indonesia, Malaysia and much of Africa. The Arab core of the Islamic world was less influenced by this approach because it escaped the Mongol devastations thanks to the victory of the Mamlukes at Ayn Jalut. Even to this day, in a melting pot such as America, one sees this difference in emphasis among Muslim groups. Those from the Arab world emphasize the Shariah and strict adherence to its rules, whereas those from the Indo-Pak subcontinent, Indonesia, Malaysia and Africa emphasize its spiritual content.

It was this folk Islam, neither Shi'a nor Sunni, that was the preeminent religion in 13th and 14th century west central Asia. And it was from its womb that the Safavid, the Moghul and the Ottoman Empires emerged. The confluence of Shi'a-Sunni ideas in *tasawwuf* makes it easier for a determined organized group to swing the populace one way or the other. Thus it was that the Safavids found it easier to tilt to the Ithna Ashari Fiqh in Persia, whereas their cousins among the Great Moghuls of India and the Ottomans tilted towards the Hanafi Fiqh. What was initially a tilt in a social political movement was hardened into bitter Shi'a-Sunni rivalry in later centuries as the Ottomans and the Safavids fought over the control of Azerbaijan and Iraq, while the Moghuls and the Safavids crossed swords over control of southern Afghanistan. Political and military ambitions were clothed in religious slogans and expressed in religious jargon, further widening a rift that runs through Islamic history like an earthquake fault. The Shi'a-Sunni differences were political, not religious, which were amplified by interested rulers and theologians.

It is noteworthy that the emergence of folk Islam sustained one of the greatest periods of creativity in Islamic literature, poetry, music, mathematics and art. It was during this period that the Farsi language attained its linguistic zenith and developed into the lingua franca in much of Asia. Turkish literature flourished and the Urdu language was born in India. Many of Timur's descendants, Shah Rukh, Abu Said, Ulugh Beg and Hussain Baiqara, were patrons of art and literature. Some of the greatest literary figures of this age were Hafiz of Shiraz (d. 1389, author of Diwan e Hafiz), Abu Ishaq Inju of Shiraz (d. 1355, author of Muwaqqif), Emir Khusro of Delhi (author of numerous ecstatic poems), Jalaluddin Rumi of Turkey (d. 1273, author of Masnavi); Abu Ishaq of Shiraz (d. 1424, author of Kanz e Ishtiha), Abdur Rahman Jami (d. 1492, author of Nafhatul Uns); Mir Ali Navai (d.1490, author of Mahbul Qulub); Nuruddin Ghazani of Samarqand (d. 1407, author of Zafar Nama); Shihabuddin Abdallah (d. 1430, author of Majma e Tavarish); and Zaheeruddin Babur, founder of the Moghul dynasty of India (d. 1528, author of Babur Nama).

The area around the Caspian Sea, from Tabriz to Jeelan, was a center for Sufi activities. It was in this milieu that Shaykh Safiuddin Ishaq (1252-1334), after whom the Safavid dynasty is named, was born. Shaykh Safiuddin received his *ijaza* from Shaykh Tajuddin Jeelani, a member of the Qadariya order. Shaykh Jeelani saw in the young Safi a combination of Sufic rectitude, political astuteness, and mundane practicality, and gave his daughter in marriage to him. Shaykh Safi established his own religious order in Ardabil, a city about 200 miles east of Tabriz. Those were unstable times, when the Il Khanid dynasty

had ended and various Turkish tribes were jostling for political power. Under Shaykh Safiuddin, Ardabil became a refuge for many who were fleeing the tumult in the surrounding countryside. Shaykh Safi's fame spread, bringing him the patronage of the courts and donations from the rich. The Shaykh used this wealth to provide relief to the poor and succor for the oppressed. The Safaviyya brotherhood grew and developed a widespread following among the Turks, Persians, Syrians, Iraqis and Kurds of Azerbaijan and eastern Anatolia. To this brotherhood, Shaykh Safi was the Pir and Murshad e Kamil (supreme spiritual leader) as well as its temporal ruler. The followers accorded the Murshad their unquestioned loyalty and total trust. The origins of the zeal with which the Safaviyya brotherhood followed Shah Ismail a hundred years later (circa 1500), is to be found in the discipline, comradeship, loyalty and organization that was established by Shaykh Safiuddin.

A great deal has been written by Safavid chroniclers to claim that Shaykh Safi was a Shi'a. This appears to be social history written in retrospect. It is more likely that Shaykh Safi was neither Shi'a nor Sunni but belonged to that universal folk Islam, based on *tasawwuf*, that had emerged in the post-Mongol period and had brought about an amalgam of Sunni and Shi'a elements. It was also claimed by the Safavids that Shaykh Safi was a Sayyid, a person in the lineage of Ali and Fatima. This claim, whether true or not, is relevant only to the extent that throughout Islamic history, kings and emperors have sought to establish the legitimacy of their rule by claiming to be descendants of the Prophet. Compare, for instance, the desire of Indonesian and Malaysian Sultans, during the 14th and 15th centuries, to marry their daughters to Sayyids from Arabia so as to establish the legitimacy of their rule. The Sayyids who seized power in Delhi following the withdrawal of Timur provide yet another example of this practice.

Into the lineage of Shaykh Safi was born Ismail I in 1487, claiming his descent from the family of Ali ibn Abu Talib (r) and his spiritual legacy from Shaykh Safi. Ismail I was the founder of the Safavid dynasty of Persia, which lasted until 1736, and influenced cultural and political developments in much of Asia.

A second major element in the emergence of the Safavids was the migration of the Turkish tribes. We have observed earlier that the paramount religious-historical events of the last thousand years occurred towards the end of the first millennium, when the Germans were converted to Catholic Christianity (9th century), the Turks accepted Islam (8th and 9th centuries), and the Russians joined the Eastern Orthodox Church (10th and 11th centuries). The movement of Turkish tribes across Central Asia into Persia, Anatolia, India, Syria and Egypt had an impact on global history similar to that of Germanic movements in Europe. The Turks, a dynamic, resilient, restless people, moved in waves in search of pastures for their herds and room for their growing populations. The first wave, led by the tribe of Oghuz, crossed the Amu Darya in the 11th century and was responsible for the disintegration of the Ghaznavi Empire and the emergence of the Seljuk Empire. The Seljuks moved further west, established their capital at Konya in Turkey, and from there dominated much of Central and West Asia for more than a hundred years. It was the shield of the Seljuks that protected the Muslim heartland from the sword of the Crusaders. The collapse of the Seljuk Empire by 1308 may be compared with the explosion of a star. The Turks who had fought under a single banner now divided themselves up into dozens of smaller groups, each group headed by a chief, and marched out from their Turkish heartland in all directions. Military allegiance often shifted depending on the reputation of the chief and the opportunities provided by him. Expansion into Byzantine territories in Europe, and Georgia and Armenia to the northeast was sanctioned by the doctrine of *ghazza*. To justify encroachments into neighboring Muslim territories to the east, the Turkish chiefs were always careful to obtain a fatwa from the local kadis under one pretext or the other. It was one of these tribes, led by Uthmanali, which founded the Uthmania (Ottoman) Empire.

In the Battle of Ankara (1402), Timur decimated the Ottoman armies. Turkish power in Anatolia receded. The death of Timur in 1405 brought on a struggle for power among his sons and grandsons. It was a tradition among the Tatars, and among the Turks, that all the sons of a ruler had an equal claim to the throne. A kingdom was like a joint trust. The death of a ruler set off a scramble for power. The prince who won would become the next king. We see this pattern for succession among the Moghuls of India down to the time of Aurangzeb, and up until the 17th century among the Ottomans. Timur's vast empire had been won and was held by the iron will of a single man. His death created a political vacuum. Timur's son Shah Rukh held onto the core of Timurid territories in Central Asia and Persia. But the Mamlukes reclaimed Syria. India split off and established its own independent rule under the Sayyids. And in Anatolia, the Turks moved back in.

It was the movement of these Turkish tribes that provided the social thrust for the emergence of the Safavid Empire. Three major waves of Turkish movements may be identified between the death of Timur (1405) and the entry of Shah Ismail I into Tabriz (1501). The first wave was under the leadership of the Kara Kuyunlu (Turkish, meaning the keepers of black sheep). The Kara Kuyunlu had moved out from central Anatolia and northern Syria to Azerbaijan towards the beginning of the 14th century. By 1380, their leader Kara Muhammed established his authority over Mosul, Sinjar and Erzurum. Nominally, Kara Muhammed had accepted the protection of the Mamluke Sultans of Egypt and had ordered that the name of Mamluke Sultan Barquq be mentioned in the juma'a khutba. Kara Muhammed died in 1389 and was succeeded by his son Kara Yusuf. The same year, Timur invaded Persia. Advancing towards Azerbaijan and eastern Anatolia he demanded submission from Kara Yusuf. But Kara Yusuf resisted, took the field against Timur and was defeated. He fled westward and sought the protection of the Ottoman Sultan Bayazid I. Timur demanded from Bayazid the return of Kara Yusuf. Bayazid refused.

It was the flight of Kara Yusuf into Ottoman territories and the Ottoman refusal to surrender him to Timur that was responsible for the events leading up to the Battle of Ankara (1402). After the death of Timur, Kara Yusuf returned and re-established his authority. In 1410 he occupied Tabriz and made it his capital. In 1412 he added Baghdad to his dominions. By 1420, parts of Georgia and Armenia were under his control. At its zenith in 1430, the Kara Kuyunlu Empire extended from the Black Sea to the Persian Gulf and included Azerbaijan, Iraq, and parts of Turkey and Syria. The eastern thrust of the Kara Kuyunlu did not escape the attention of Shah Rukh who had not abandoned his claims to the Timurid Empire. Moving west at the head of a large army, Shah Rukh drove away Kara Iskandar, son of Kara Yusuf who had succeeded his father, and installed Jehan Shah, another Kara Kuyunlu prince in Tabriz. When Shah Rukh died in 1447, Jehan Shah threw off his allegiance to the Timurid court in Samarqand and asserted his independence. Moving eastward, he captured Kirman, Fars, Isfahan and Herat. Assuming the title of Sultan and Ka-khan, he sought to establish the legitimacy of his rule in the eyes of the Turks, Persians and Mongols alike.

Jehan Shah was the greatest of the Kara Kuyunlu rulers and is known not only for his military exploits but also for his patronage of art, architecture and literature. He embellished Tabriz with mosques and madrasas. The blue mosque of Tabriz stands to this day. It was also a golden age for Farsi literature. Poets and writers of repute received his patronage and his protection. Jehan Shah was a follower of the Ithna Ashari *Fiqh* and it was his legacy in Persia and Iraq that was inherited and adopted by the Safavids. (Shah Quli, one of the descendants of Jehan Shah, fled to India in 1478, and established the Qutub Shahi dynasty of Golkunda in southern India. The patronage of the Ithna Ashari *Fiqh* in the courts of the Deccan became a factor in the political rivalries between the Moghul and Safavid courts in the 17th century.)

Jehan Shah died in a battle with the rival tribe of Aq Kuyunlu (Turkish, meaning, keepers of the white sheep). The migration of the Aq Kuyunlu constitutes the second major movement of Turkish tribes from their heartland in Anatolia to the east. The Aq Kuyunlu territories lay to the west of the territories held by the Kara Kuyunlu and included the modern cities of Erzurum, Diyarbakır, Urfa, Mardin and Sivas. Since the two tribes were neighbors, they constantly jostled with each other for turf. The Aq Kuyunlu, like their Ottoman cousins, carried on their *ghazza* against the Byzantine territories of Trebizond, located on the Black Sea. When Timur invaded the territories of the Kara Kuyunlu, the Aq Kuyunlu sided with Timur. Their chief, Uthman Beg accepted the overlordship of Timur (1399) and sided with him against the Ottomans at the Battle of Ankara (1402). After the death of Timur, Uthman Beg continued his alliance to the Timurid court, and worked against his Kara Kuyunlu neighbors to the east.

The Aq Kuyunlu territories lay in areas where the mutual interests of the Mamlukes of Egypt, the Timurids of Central Asia and the Ottomans of Turkey overlapped and sometimes collided. Uthman Beg had to play his hand carefully. His military exploits soon attracted a large following. He expanded his territories, often with the help of the Timurid princes, but was killed in a battle with the rival Kara Kuyunlu in 1435. The usual scramble for power happened, and it was not until 1469 that the Aq Kuyunlu regained their territories under Uzun Hassan, a grandson of Uthman Beg.

Uzun Hassan is the best known of the Aq Kuyunlu dynasty. Through diplomacy and war, he expanded the territories of the Aq Kuyunlu in every direction. He married Catherine, the daughter of the Byzantine ruler Johannes of Trebizond, thereby forming a marriage alliance with a former enemy. However, it was another of his marriage ties that was to have a far greater historical impact. He gave his sister, Khadija Begum in marriage to Shaykh Junaid who belonged at the time to the Safaviyya Sufi order of Ardabil. Shaykh Junaid, himself a chief of the Turkomans based in Ardabil, had sought to expand his military-political influence, which had brought him into conflict with Jehan Shah, the Kara Kuyunlu Sultan. Shaykh Junaid's marriage to Khadija Begum gained for Uzun Hassan the support of the expanding Safaviyya order. In a series of military campaigns, Uzun Hassan consolidated his hold on eastern Anatolia and made inroads into territories of the Kara Kuyunlu to the east, the Mamlukes to the south and the Ottomans to the west. It was during one of these campaigns that he defeated the Kara Kuyunlu Sultan Jehan Shah. Jehan Shah died in battle (1467) and the territories of Aq Kuyunlu expanded to include most of modern Persia.

The rise of Uzun Hassan attracted the attention of the European powers that were still chafing from the loss of Istanbul (1453). Pope Nicholas V declared a Crusade against the Ottomans in 1453 and, seeking to isolate the Ottomans, sent an envoy to Uzun Hassan proposing a military alliance. Uzun Hassan's response was positive. The anti-Ottoman alliance, concluded in 1464, included the Vatican, Venice, Naples, Armenia and the Empire of Uzun Hassan.

War commenced in 1463 and lasted for sixteen years. The Ottomans had the upper hand in the hostilities and expanded their territories in all directions. Sultan Mehmet II captured Trebizond (1461), Morea (1464) and Lesbos (1469). The European powers, desperate for help, asked Uzun Hassan to invade Ottoman territories from the east. As a quid pro quo, Uzun Hassan requested guns and artillery from the Venetians, weapons that he desperately lacked. An understanding was reached, and in 1471, he advanced against Karaman in south central Anatolia while the Venetian navy bombarded the Turkish coast. Mehmet II realized that between the Venetians and the Aq Kuyunlu, the latter presented by far the greater threat. In a pitched battle at Bashkent in 1473, the Ottomans under Mehmet II crushed Uzun Hassan. The latter retreated after concluding a peace treaty recognizing the Euphrates as the border between the Ottomans and the Aq Kuyunlu territories.

Just as Jehan Shah was the best known of the Kara Kuyunlu Sultans, Uzun Hassan was the best known of the Aq Kuyunlu Sultans. He organized his empire along sound fiscal and administrative lines and documented his methodology in *Qanun Nama ye Hassan Padisha*, a treatise which was used by both the Safavids and the Ottomans in their administrative practices. Uzun Hassan died in 1478 and his empire went into rapid decline. Between 1493 and 1501, no less than six princes ascended the Aq Kuyunlu throne one after the other. It was in this unstable environment that the Safaviyya order expanded its political influence.

Shaykh Junaid, the Safaviyya Sufi who had married the sister of Uzun Hassan, traveled extensively through Azerbaijan, eastern Anatolia and northern Syria, gaining additional followers. Military conflicts with the established powers were inevitable and the Safaviyya order had its share of victories and defeats. Shaykh Junaid's son Shaykh Haider and grandson Shaykh Ali continued the struggle. Political alliances often shifted, and when Shaykh Ali was killed in a battle with the Turkomans in 1493, the leadership of the Safaviyya order passed on to Ismail, brother of Shaykh Ali.

Tabriz fell to the Safaviyya in 1501 and the Safavid Empire was born. Ismail, the founder of the Safavid dynasty, had Turkish blood from his grandfather Shaykh Junaid, and Persian blood from his grandmother, Khadija Begum, sister of Uzun Hassan. Thus he combined in himself the spiritual legacy of the Safaviyya order, the tribal legacy of the Turks, and blood relationships with the Persians. In addition, he claimed his descent from Ali ibn Abu Talib (r). This was a powerful combination of claims to establish the legitimacy of his rule in accordance not only with religious tradition but also with the dynastic tradition of Persia and the tribal tradition of the Turks.

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