



## BAHRAIN II. SHI'ITE ELEMENTS IN BAHRAIN

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### ii. Shi'ism in Bahrain

Bahrain came into the Iranian sphere of influence for the first time in the Sasanian period. After the Portuguese occupation (1521-1602), it again fell under Persian domination for nearly two centuries, despite several Omani invasions, in 1718 and 1738, which caused major devastation and the abandonment of villages, mentioned by Niebuhr in the 1760s (II, p. 188). In 1753 the island was reoccupied by the Persians, who remained until 1783, when it was conquered by the Arab dynasty of Āl-Ḳalifa, of mainland Bedouin stock descended from the Banū 'Otba of Qaṭar. Iranian claims to the island were renewed several times subsequently, however, notably at the time of the 1861 and 1871 treaties establishing the British protectorate in Bahrain and at the Turkish conquest of the Ḥasā in 1871 (see Esmā'ili; [Adamiyat](#); [Tadjbakhche](#)). They were officially abandoned only after a mission of mediation by the United Nations Organization in 1971, at the moment when the emirate achieved its independence. Obviously Persian domination has been reflected in a degree of cultural influence, which, however, should certainly not be exaggerated, for the agents of Iranian power have often been the Howala or other Arab chieftains established in the eighteenth century in the region of Būšehr on the Iranian coast of the gulf (Rentz and Mulligan, p. 942).



The question is particularly relevant in connection with Shi'ism. The island actually contains two quite distinct cultural and religious strata. The urban population, concentrated around the Āl-Kalīfa dynasty in the two cities of Manāma and Moḥarraḡ, is Sunnite, primarily of the Malikite rite, with a very few Hanbalite elements reflecting Wahhābī influence. The rural population is Shi'ite. It is generally estimated at about half the indigenous population, perhaps even 55 to 60 percent (no precision is possible, for sectarian affiliation is not recorded in the censuses). This rural Shi'ite population calls itself by the name Baḥārna, Baḥārena, or Beḥārna (sing. Baḥrānī; Hansen, 1968, p. 22) and readily claims not to be Arab, in order to distinguish itself from the population of Bedouin origin that revolves around the dynasty. It is certainly this attitude that has given rise to the rumor—obviously without foundation but repeated frequently in Iranian publications or those reflecting Iranian political views on the archipelago (Tadjbakhche, pp. 14, 223) and sometimes reported in survey works (Aubry, p. 453)—according to which these people are supposed to be of Persian origin and to speak Persian among themselves, at least part of the time. But to what extent did the Shi'ism of the pre-Bedouin population of Bahrain owe its origin to Persian influence and to the period of Persian domination in the island? The answer to this question must be categorically negative. Shi'ism, in various forms, is very old on the northeastern coast of Arabia and Bahrain, connected with the Carmathian movement and in geographical proximity to the great Shi'ite province of southern Iraq, where it has continued uninterrupted since the Buyid period. Twelver Shi'ism was deeply rooted in the Ḥasā at the beginning of the fourteenth century (Ebn Baṭṭūṭa, II, p. 247). During the Persian domination in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, religious influence seems to have flowed mainly from Bahrain to Iran, rather than the reverse. Niebuhr (II, p. 189) states very clearly that Persian clerics traveled to the shaikhs of Bahrain, considered “the university of the Shi'ites,” to acquire the Arab culture that they required.

This symbiotic period, however, did allow the introduction of a certain number of Persian elements into the material and spiritual culture of the island. It has been shown, for example, that female costume, notably the veil (*čādor*) and the garments worn during the pilgrimage, include elements that are manifestly Persian (Hansen, 1968, pp. 71ff., 166), whereas male costume does not differ from the Arab type common in the region. Equally, however, some differences must be noted. Pious images, which are frequent among Iranian Shi'ites, are very rare in Bahrain (*ibid.*, p. 149). Their diffusion among the lower classes in Iran seems to have occurred mainly in the Qajar period,



and their absence from Bahrain is obviously to be explained by the much less active cultural relations after the Arab conquest of 1783. In the same way the new elements developed in Iran during the Pahlavi period (for example, the solar calendar) have never spread to Bahrain. In fact, the essential element continues to be the emotional attachment of the Shi'ites of Bahrain to Iran, which they regard as their spiritual home (*ibid.*, p. 185). In order to determine more precisely the ultimate role of Iran in the Shi'ite culture of the island, a comparative study of this culture and that of the Ḥasā, on the neighboring mainland, would be necessary, but no such study has yet been undertaken.

Other elements in the material culture of Bahrain are just as certainly of Persian origin. The underground drainage channels, for example, are known on Bahrain as *qanāt* (Hansen, 1968, p. 85; Bibby, *passim*), the term used in western and southern Iran, rather than as *falaj*, the term used in Oman. But Persian terminology on this subject reaches as far as central Arabia (Naval Intelligence, p. 34) and is not specific to Bahrain. In sum, it does not appear possible, at least in the present state of knowledge, to define clearly an Iranian cultural stratum on Bahrain.

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