



CALIPHS AND THE CALIPHATE

CALIPHS AND THE CALIPHATE, as viewed by the Shi'ites of Persia.

Shi'ite attitudes in rejection of the legitimacy of the first three caliphs, as well as the caliphs of the Omayyad and 'Abbasid dynasties, first entered Persia toward the end of the Omayyad period with the establishment there of the earliest Shi'ite communities. During the period of Buyid supremacy in Baghdad, the various rites performed by the Shi'ite community of that city in commemoration of the imams and condemnation of the caliphs were presumably imitated by Shi'ites living in the Persian portions of the Buyid domains, but there is no record of this. We know, however, that in the Saljuq period singers and poets known as *manāqebk'vāns* would publicly recite verses that often had as their corollary abuse of the caliphs (*Ketāb al-naqẓ*, quoted by Bausani, p. 293). This was, in a sense, inevitable, since *tawallā* (proclamation of loyalty to the imams) has its complement in *tabarrā* (proclamation of dissociation from their enemies).

The recitation of such material continued throughout the Mongol period. Although Sunnites, especially Sufis among them, displayed increasing respect for the Twelve Imams of Shi'ite belief, there was no reciprocal grant of esteem by Shi'ites toward the first three caliphs. Indeed, when the Safavids imposed Shi'ite beliefs on Iran at the beginning of the 10th/16th century, the ritual cursing of the first three caliphs (as well as 'Ā'eša, wife of the Prophet, and many other of his companions) became both a hallmark of Safavid rule and a means for eliciting consent to the change in religious direction. On the first Friday after his conquest of Tabrīz in 907/1501, Shah Esmā'īl assembled the



people of the city in the Masjed-e Jāme' and instructed them to curse the first three caliphs. One third of those assembled did so willingly enough, lustily shouting, "may it (the cursing) be more, not less" (*bīš bād o kam mabād*), a phrase that was to become the conventional response to the rite of cursing. The remaining two-thirds of the congregation joined in only from fear of the heavily armed Qezelbāš and a special officer of the shah called *tabarrā'ī* who patrolled the mosque carrying a battle-axe (*Ālamārā-ye Šafawī*, pp. 63-65). Similar scenes were enacted elsewhere in Persia, and every major provincial city had its own *tabarrā'ī*.

A temporary reversal of policy took place under Shah Esmā'il II (r. 984-85/1576-78), who posted guards in the mosques of Qazvīn to prevent the caliphs from being vilified and rewarded inhabitants of the city who could prove they had never engaged in the practice (Hinz, pp. 78-79). Before long, however, the cursing of the caliphs and the sentiments it implied became absorbed into the religious culture of the masses, being sustained not only by the official *tabarrā'īs* but also by wandering dervishes who perpetuated the traditions of the *manāqebk'āns*.

The Safavid interpretation of *tabarrā* as *sabb* (vilification) or *la'n* (cursing) appears to have been an innovation, derived—like much else in early Safavid religion—from the traditions of *gōlāt* (extremist) Shi'ism rather than those of Twelver Shi'ite belief. Certainly the emphasis placed on it was new. Shaikh 'Alī Karakī found it necessary, in 917/1511, to write a treatise demonstrating the obligatory nature of cursing (*Ḳatūnābādī*, p. 448). A century and a half later, Moḥammad-Bāqer Majlesī devoted substantial portions of his books in Persian to the vilification of the first three caliphs, including a vast amount of fantastic and defamatory material not found in earlier Shi'ite sources (see, e.g., pp. 154-219).

The ritual cursing of the first three caliphs was a lasting irritant in the relations of Persia with its Sunnite neighbors, especially the Ottoman empire. *Sabb* and *la'n* figured prominently in the Ottoman polemical writings (some penned by Sunnite refugees from Persia) that were directed against the Safavids, and on several occasions—notably the [Treaty of Amasya](#) in 963/1555—the Ottomans insisted on Persian abandonment of the practice as a condition for concluding peace (Eberhard, pp. 104-07). It was not until the time of Nāder Shah (1148-60/1736-47) that a sustained attempt was made from within Persia, independently of Ottoman pressure, to ban the cursing of the first three caliphs. Motivated by a variety of political considerations, Nāder



Shah demanded at his coronation in 1148/1736 that the ritual vilification of the first three caliphs should cease and even that the Shi'ite '*olamā*' of Persia should recognize the legitimacy of their rule (Astarābādī, p. 270; Marvī, III, pp. 978-88). His command was obeyed, by way of *taqīya* (dissimulation), but the practices of *sabb* and *la'n* were resumed after his death in 1160/1747.

One measure of the penetration of popular culture by hostility to the caliphs was a festival in commemoration of the assassination of the Caliph 'Omar by *Abū Lo'lo*', to whom a shrine was dedicated on the outskirts of Kāšān (Narāqī, pp. 186-88). This festival, known as 'Omar-košān (killing 'Omar), is said varyingly to have been celebrated on 26 Dū'l-ḥejja and 9 or 10 Rabī' I. Effigies of 'Omar stuffed with straw would be beaten and then burnt to the accompaniment of ribald and abusive poetry, as well as entertainments of an entirely secular nature (Massé, I, pp. 166-69; Rezvani, pp. 105-07). The festival of 'Omar-košān formed a burlesque counterpart of the *ta'zīa*, the dramatic commemoration of the martyrdom of Imam Ḥosayn. Although the principal target of execration in the *ta'zīa* was always the Omayyad caliph Yazīd and his associates, material hostile to the first three caliphs was sometimes incorporated into the *ta'zīa*.

In the Qajar period, peace was finally established with the Ottomans, and religiously inspired hostility came to be redirected against the European powers that were encroaching on Persian independence. There was therefore a gradual discarding of ritually expressed hostility to the first three caliphs. Elements offensive to Sunnite sentiment were purged from the *ta'zīas* performed at the court *takīya* in Tehran; the cursing of the caliphs after the call to prayer was prohibited during the reign of Nāṣer-al-Dīn Shah (1264-1313/1848-96); and by the early twentieth century the festival of 'Omar-košān ceased to be observed in the chief cities of Persia, although it probably persisted in the countryside for considerably longer. By 1319/1902, attitudes had changed sufficiently to permit some of the Shi'ite '*olamā*' to regard the Ottoman sultan-caliph as the potential political leader of all Muslims (Algar, p. 231). The rise of Islamic activism in Persia after World War II with its concern for pan-Islamic solidarity hastened the demise of old habits of the tongue and the mind, and by 1349 Š./1970 Ayatollah Komeynī (p. 56) was able to refer to Abū Bakr and 'Omar as men who had "adhered to the example of the Prophet in the outer conduct of their personal lives." Derogatory references to the caliphs are now scrupulously avoided at all levels of official and semi-official discourse in the Islamic Republic.



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