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RIVAL EMPIRES OF TRADE AND IMAMI SHI'ISM
IN EASTERN ARABIA, 1300–1800

The history of the Shi‘i Muslims in the islands of Bahrain and the oases of Qatif and al-Hassa has been little studied despite the economic and political importance lent them by the large petroleum deposits in their region. The significance of this community has been further magnified by the rise in the Gulf region of Shi‘i radicalism, as in the Iranian Revolution of 1978–1979 and the failed 1981 Shi‘i coup attempt in Bahrain. The study of Shi‘ism in the Gulf has advanced so little that even a basic chronology and overview of institutional developments are lacking for all but the most recent decades. A full history of Twelver Shi‘ism in the Gulf would require archival research in Portuguese, Iranian, Ottoman, Dutch, French, and British repositories, in addition to extensive manuscript work in eastern Arabia itself. Until this daunting task is tackled in a thorough-going manner, it may be useful to make a preliminary survey of Twelver Shi‘i history in the Gulf in its formative premodern period of 1300–1800 on the basis of more accessible sources, such as published travel accounts and Twelver Shi‘i biographical dictionaries.

The following overview has the limited ambition of showing shift from Isma‘ili Shi‘ism to the Usuli school of Twelver Shi‘ism, and finally to the Akhbari school of Twelver Shi‘ism, as the major ideological orientation of Bahrain Twelvers. In addition to tracing institutional and ideological developments, this study has several analytical concerns. These questions include the relationship of dynastic, social, and economic changes to Shi‘ism, the shifting economic bases of religious institutions, and the specific social origins of the Twelver clerical corps (ulama).

Eastern Arabia has been an arena of contention between Sunni Muslims, partisans of the orthodox caliphs, and Shi‘is, partisans of the Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law, ‘Ali. The major branches of Shi‘ism of concern here are the Seveners or Isma‘ilis, who follow one of several still-existing lines of ‘Ali’s descendants through Isma‘il b. Ja‘far as-Sadiq; and the Twelvers. Twelvers followed Isma‘il’s brother Kazim and his descendants, holding that the later eleventh Imam had a small son who went into supernatural occultation and would return in the future.

The geographical isolation and economic richness of eastern Arabia help explain why it sometimes threw up regional states. But that wealth, combined with its relatively small population, also accounts for the many attempts that
nearby great powers made to incorporate this region into their territories. Its proximity to undersea pearl fields enriched its merchants and notables while also attracting conquerors, divers and peasants seldom shared much, however, in Bahrain's fabled prosperity. The area benefited from the trade in spices between Asia and Europe, some of which passed through the Gulf. The Baháruma or indigenous Arab Shi'ites inhabunants of eastern Arabia are still a majority on the islands of Bahrain and once constituted an even greater proportion of the population. Other areas of Shi'i settlement include the port city and oasus of Qatif, and the oases of al-Hassa, both now in Saudi Arabia. Al-Hassa consists of a group of oases in a 180 sq. km “L” shape southeast of Qatif, which take their collective name from pools of water (hayy) collecting above a stony substratum in sandy soil. The region has traditionally produced dates, horses, and fine textiles.

The wealth of this region often gave it an autonomy from surrounding powers expressed in a local ideology of Shi'ism. The Shi'i pastoralists, peasants and pearl divers were dominated by their own elite of clan elders, urban merchants, and landholders. But Sunni bedouins and distant naval powers often conquered the Shi'i triangle. Eastern Arabia formed part of the medieval Islamic empires. From the late ninth century A.D., however, a local branch of the Isma'ili movement, the Carmathian (Qarmatii) sect, set up a polity there. A radical religious group encompassing pastoralists, peasants and townsmen, it established a more egalitarian social system than was normal in the 10th century Middle East. The Carmathian state controlled for a while the Arabian peninsula's overland trade and pilgrimage routes, but from the middle of the 11th century they lost political control to local Sunni tribes loyal to the Sunni Saljuc. A succession of tribal dynasties and Gulf naval powers thereafter exercised varying degrees of control. In 1330, the forces of Hurmuz, ruled in the early 14th century by Qutb'd-Din Tahamram, conquered Bahrain.

The Baháruma gradually traded the radical, egalitarian Isma'ili'ism of the ninth through 11th century Carmathian movement for a more quietist version of Shi'ism—the Twelver or Isma'ili branch—which Sunni rulers considered less objectionable. This change is now difficult to trace. Carmathian tribes remained politically important at least until the 15th century. But from the 13th century Twelver biographical dictionaries begin mentioning ulama from Bahrain and al-Hassa. For instance, Maytham b. 'Ali al-Bahraini (d. 1280 A.D.) wrote on Twelver doctrine, affirming free will, the infallibility of prophets and imams, the appointed imamate of 'Ali, and the ascension of the Twelfth Imam. By tracing the history of Twelver Shi'ism through biographical dictionaries, we can gain some picture of indigenous cultural and religious developments.

JARWANED BAHARUM AND THE ISMA'ILI UALMA

Sunni rule in the Shi'i regions of eastern Arabia remained tenuous, and by the end of the 13th century had greatly declined, allowing Shi'i tribal forces to assert their autonomy. Among these Isma'ili populations some Twelver Shi'is also existed, and Twelver clerical expertise proved useful to the reigning Isma'ili chiefs. Twelver experts in Shi'i law (mujahids) trained in Iraq were recruited to
staff judicial and administrative posts. Twelver and Ismāʿīlī law was similar enough to allow this symbiosis, and the Ismāʿīlī tribespeople appear to have lacked the seminaries and clerical traditions to produce enough of their own judges and clerical administrators.

At the opening of the 14th century the local Carmathian chieflain Saʿīd b. Mughāša dominated eastern Arabia, probably as a vassal of the Tibi merchant princes of the island of Qays, tributaries of the Il-Khanid Mongols. In 1305-1306 A.D. (705-706 A.H.) Saʿīd the Carmathian was defeated in Qatif by bedoun forces led by Jarwān ibn Muḥtār, of the Quraysh tribe. The Banū Jarwān ruled "the lands of Bahrain" (Qatif, al-Hasa, and the Bahrain islands) for nearly a century and a half, renewing Shi`ī power there. Jarwān was followed by his son Naṣr, then by his grandson Ibrāhīm (still alive in 1417). Al-Sakhāwī called the Jarwānids "remnants of the Carmathians," suggesting that they were an Ismāʿīlī tribe.

From the 1320s the Banū Jarwān began paying tribute to the Sunni kings of Humayz. Local Shi`ī rule gave a certain freedom to the Imamī ulama, though Imamīs were probably still a minority. The North African traveler Ibn Battūta visited Qatif around 1331, finding it inhabited by Arab tribes whom he described as "extremist Shi`īs" (tiffāyatīyya ghullī). This is how a Sunni would describe Imamīs. He noted that in Qatif the mosques called to prayer in an openly Shi`ī manner, including phrases about ʿAlī. Ibn Battūta described the great wealth of the area, writing that the Jarwānī ruler took one fifth of the pearl revenues in taxes, and saying that al-Hasa grew more dates than any place else in the world. The major Imamī Shi`ī figure in Bahrain during this era was Sheikh Ahmad b. ʿAbdullāh ibn al-Mutawwaj al-Bahrānī, called by one early source "the leader of the Imamīs in his time." A mujtiḥid, his legal rulings were renowned in the east and the west. Sheikh Ahmad ibn al-Mutawwaj studied in Iraq at al-Hill with ʿAllāma Fakhrudd-Dīn Muḥammad al-Hillī (d. 1369), the son of the celebrated Usuli innovator ʿAllāma al-Hillī, receiving diplomas from him and other Iraqi scholars. Sheikh Ahmad adopted the new Usuli school from his teacher, but he had differences with some Usulis, debating Shamsudd-Dīn Muḥammad b. Makkī, the Imamī "First Martyr" (d. 1384), several times In Bahrain, the local Imamī rulers, the Banū Jarwān, put Sheikh Ahmad ibn al-Mutawwaj in charge of policing market prices (riqa) and deciding legal questions.

As an Usuli, Sheikh Ahmad believed that legal rulings could be derived from the Qurʾān and the Imamī oral sayings, not simply through linguistic meaning and interpreting it literally, but through the independent exercise (miḥāṣāt) of legal reasoning (qiyās, based on Greek rationalism). Here, as elsewhere, the willingness of Usuli clerics to cooperate with and legitimate the state under which they lived, performing judicial and administrative functions, made them more useful to the state than were the conservative Akhbāris. A khārāṣ insisted on a literal interpretation of the Qurʾān and oral reports, and often disallowed the central functions of the Islamic state in the absence of the Twelver Imam.

The 1300s witnessed important advances in institutionalizing the position of at least some Imamī ulama, which would have helped men like Sheikh Ahmad ibn al-Mutawwaj bring many into the Twelver branch. Indeed, at least one member
of the Banū Jarwān became a Twelver cleric—Sheikh Jamālī-Dīn Hasan al-Madhūlī al-Jarwānī of al-Hassa. Another Imamī figure who attained high posts under the Jarwānīs, Sheikh Nasīr-Dīn Ibrāhīm b. ʿAbd al-Ahsāʿī, served as chief judge (qāqī al-ʿadilī) and became an important teacher. Perhaps nowhere else in the Islamic world of the 14th century did Imamī Shiʿis have the kind of freedom and institutional position they possessed in Jarwānī Bahrain and East Arabia.

During the 15th century east Arabian Shiʿis maintained their strong links with Iraq. The direction of the trade routes may have facilitated travel from eastern Arabia to the Shiʿī shrines in Iraq. Already in the 1420s Venice was the destination for some spices brought by merchants from further East through the Gulf and thence to Basra for transshipment via Syria. Twelver Shiʿī merchant-ulama could combine study and pilgrimage with trade, and some became teachers. Sheikh Nasīr b. al-Mutallawājī of Bahrain taught the Sufi Shiʿī Ahmad b. Fadl al-Hilli (d. 1437), which indicates that the Shiʿī scholars of Bahrain were considered to have preserved Imamī oral reports that made it worthwhile to study with them. Ahmad b. Fadl al-Hilli in turn taught another Sufi Shiʿī, Sayyid Muhammad Nūrākhkhāl (d. 1453), whose father was from the Qaṭīf region. Nūrākhkhāl rose to become the leader of the Ḥusnawīyya Sufi order in Iran, and claims were put forward that he was a mahdī or messiah. His esoteric ideas may owe something to an undercurrent of folk Shiʿīm in East Arabia that maintained Ismaʿīlī traditions.

Ahmad b. Fadl al-Hilli trained more orthodox scholars as well, and one of his students helped to promote Imamī orthodoxy in Bahrain. Sheikh Muḥī b. Hasan came originally from near Basra but emigrated to Bahrain, settling in Salmabad during Jarwānī times. He wrote a commentary on ʿAllāma al-Hilli's ʿIshāʾ al-Islām and a work aimed at Sunnis on ʿAli's right to the caliphate. In Bahrain, he excommunicated (takfīr) Ibrāhīm Qārüş, a notable whom he accused of playing with the Law of Islam. This antithesis suggests the continued existence of heterodox ideas among influential Shiʿīs in Bahrain, and the role of Iraqi-trained Imamī ulama in spreading more scripturalist Twelver notions. Sheikh Muḥī's commentary on the work of ʿAllāma al-Hilli indicates that he was an Usūlī, apparently the major Imamī legal school under the Jarwānīs. At least, several other 14th-century scholars from the region wrote commentaries on Usūlī works.

The century and a half of local Imamī rule by the Jarwānīs as vassals of the Sunnī Hurrānī empire allowed the extensive development of Twelver thought and institutions. Twelver clerics became court judges, took control of the market police, and served as jurists. They had to make compromises with their Imamī patrons. Yet they certainly enjoyed more freedom, and, indeed, privilege, than Sunnī rulers would have granted.

BANū JABR

The middle of the 15th century witnessed a revival of tribal and dynastic struggles over markets in the region as the Banū Jabr, a Sunnī bedouin tribe...
originally from Najd but settled in al-Hasa, came into conflict with Banū Jarwān Sayf ibn Zād. A leader of the Banū Jabr obtained the cession of Bahrain and Qatif from the king of Harmuz, the titular sovereign of those areas, except for some gardens the monarch reserved to himself. But later Saighur Shah of Harmuz changed his mind about this arrangement, which deprived him of the extensive pearl and date revenues of Bahrain and Qatif, and he made war on Banū Jabr until they, in 1485, agreed to pay him tribute after all. This agreement lasted until 1507. Thereafter the Harmuzis made several inconclusive attempts to wrest Bahrain from the defunct Banū Jabr.17

The 1600s marked the first time for a century and a half that east Arabian Shi’is labored for a prolonged period under a local Sunni government, and this change produced traumatic readjustments. For two centuries, the Shi’is in Bahrain were to endure the governance of non-Shi’is. The Jabrids appointed Maliki Sunni judges instead of Shi’i ones, initiated Sunni Friday prayers, and greatly encouraged the pilgrimage to Mecca. They forced some Shi’i judges to become Sunnis.18 Shi’i ulama, though disadvantaged, were not wholly quiescent. Sheikh Muthth’s son, Sheikh Husayn (d. 1526), continued to help spread a concern with Imami law and theological orthodoxy in Bahrain.19 He went on pilgrimage to Mecca or visitation to the shrine cities of Iraq nearly every year, which attests, not only to his piety, but also to his wealth. The sources do not indicate the provenance of that wealth, but it seems likely that these early Imami scholars were involved in the pearl trade, just as were those of the 17th and 18th centuries. Even under the Sunni Jabrids, some Shi’is became wealthy and prominent.

Banū Jabr ended the appointment of Shi’i scholars to head the judiciary and the market police, and persecuted Shi’ism. But they clearly did not extirpate it, and a few Shi’i ulama, some of them local men of substance, continued to study, teach, and write in the lands of Bahrain. Jabrid hostility to Shi’ism may have been one reason Sheikh Muhammad ibn Abī Jumhūr al-Ahsā’ī (b. 1434), one of the region’s great minds in that era, spent most of his intellectual life abroad.20 He had the misfortune to complete his education just as the Jabrids came to power. He began his studies in al-Hasa with his father, but went on to Najaf in Iraq. The 1480s and 1490s found him teaching in Iraq and Iran, though he visited al-Hasan in 1488. His theological works were informed by Illuminism in the school of Suhrawardi, Sufi metaphysics after Ibn ‘Arabi, and scholastic metaphysics in the style of Averroes. A profound knowledge of Averroes was common among Imami scholars of eastern Arabia, but the Sufi emphases were rarer, because Sufi leaders (sing. qābi) were seen as competitors of the Imams. Scholastic metaphysics characterized the work of Mayyāth b. ‘Ali, noted above, and Nasir al-Dīn Tūsī popularized it in the 13th century. But Ibn Abī Jumhūr was not the first or only Imami Sufi. One earlier Twelver with similar proclivities was the Imami Sayyid Haydar Āmulī (b. 1320), an adherent of the school of Ibn ‘Arabi21.
Ibn Abī Jumḥūr's interest in esoteric styles of thought might have derived from currents in his homeland (Islamism and Sufism were both present there in his youth). He sought to synthesize his Usūl beliefs with other traditions, and this departure from narrow orthodoxy might have been in part made possible by the fall of the Shi'i establishment in eastern Arabia. The Imamī community in the late 1460s had few sanctions or mechanisms of social control at its command.

Jabrub rule displaced Shi'is from their positions of privilege under Bābī Jarwān, depriving ulama of judicial and other official posts and sources of income. Some were even forced to embrace the Malikī rite of Sunnism. But the Shi'i peasants, divers, and weavers had less reason to desert their partisanship for 'Alī, and those Imāmī ulama with independent incomes as pearl traders could likewise weather the storm.

RIVAL 16TH CENTURY EMPIRES OF TRADE AND THE SHI'IT TRIANGLE

The Portuguese and the Ottomans in the Gulf

The Shi'is of Bahrain, Qatif, and al-Hasa dwelled along the renowned spice route from South and East Asia to Europe. Their geographical position and their own coveted economic resources, ensured that the rise of new global empires would have an immediate impact upon them. They directly felt the changes brought about by Portuguese mercantile expansion on the seas of the Old World and Sunni Ottoman imperial conquest of the Arab lands of southwest Asia and North Africa.

Sheikh Hasan b. Multih would have witnessed from Bahrain, no doubt with horror, the rise of Portuguese power and the reduction of the island kingdom of Hormuz to a proxy for the Europeans. The Portuguese, having discovered the route to the Indian Ocean from the Atlantic by the Cape of Good Hope, swiftly began setting up a maritime empire based at Goa in India, into which they integrated the Persian Gulf entrepot port of Hormuz, along with its political and economic dependencies, such as Bahrain.

Portuguese commander Albuquerque quickly realized the riches to be had by controlling the Hormuz spice trade and the Bahrain pearl fisheries. The Portuguese finally took Hormuz in 1515, after fighting a fierce naval battle against the island's navy. The Europeans, having made the Hormuz sultans of the Qutb al-Dīn dynasty their vassals, wished to penetrate further into the Gulf itself. They faced the obstacle of the politically powerful Bābī Jāhr, led by three brothers who controlled Oman, the Persian Gulf coast west of Oman, and the Bahrain–Qatif area. Muqrin, the Jabrub ruler of Bahrain, refused to render tribute to the Portuguese–Hormuz condominium. In 1521, a joint Portuguese–Hormuzi force undertook an expedition against Bahrain which subdued it and left Portuguese garrisons. This began three quarters of a century of European rule over the Shi'is of Bahrain, though these Europeans exercised their authority over the islands through Hormuz governors, sometimes of doubtful loyalty. 22

The Ottomans extended their empire into Syria (1516) and Egypt (1517), then marched on Iraq (1534). Their armies, backed by artillery, took the southern Iraqi port of Basra in 1538. They proceeded down the southern littoral of the...
Gulf, reaching al-Hasa in 1550, from which the Portuguese attempted, and failed, to dislodge them by sacking Qatif in 1552. Although the Portuguese could not expel the Ottomans from al-Hasa and Basra, neither could the Turks push the Europeans out of the southern Gulf in their counterattacks on Harmuz and Muskat later in 1552. Thereafter, the Portuguese decimated the Ottoman Basra fleet as it attempted to move to the Red Sea. In their contest with the Sunni Ottomans, the Portuguese looked to another new power in the region, the Twelve Shi‘i Safavids of Iran, as allies, guaranteeing the Iranians passage over the Gulf to Bahrain and Qatif (the starting point of the inner-Arabian trade route to Mecca and the Red Sea).²³

Portuguese Bahrain suffered economically from high Portuguese duties and tribute, from the disruption of trade routes by naval battles, and from Portuguese economic policies. These policies included their attempt to divert the spice trade away from the Gulf-Mediterranean route to the Atlantic and shipping Bahraini pearls to Portugal on their own vessels. Formerly, Bahraini merchants had traded the pearls themselves to Harmuz and India.²⁴

Ottoman rule also had unfortunate effects on the Shi‘is of Qatif and al-Hasa. Many local Shi‘i landlords, whom the Ottomans saw as Iran’s (occum) likely to support their Safavid enemies, had their land expropriated. The Ottomans closed off the trans-Arabian trade and pilgrimage route from Qatif to Mecca from the 1590s until at least 1591, which hurt local merchants who used to trade to Mecca in Indian goods. The Turks feared that al-Hasa Shi‘is might spread Safavid propaganda in the Hijaz, and even when they reopened the route they barred Shi‘is from using it.²⁵

Some positive economic developments did occur in the second half of the 16th century that may have benefitted some Bahraini. The Ottomans promoted a revival of the pepper trade from the Indian Ocean over their Arab possessions and thence to Europe. The Portuguese ceased their attempt to divert all of that trade to the Atlantic, and the spice route did indeed revive in what Brandel called the “Mediterranean revenge.”²⁶

Gulf Shi‘is suffered many vicissitudes during the Portuguese-Ottoman rivalry of the 16th century. They felt harsh European rule and watched their cities looted. In the first half of the century Portuguese economic policies caused some decline in the trans-Fertile Crescent trade with Europe. The Shi‘is, under the local rule of Sunni vassals of the Portuguese and Ottomans, suffered religious disadvantages. The second half of the century saw an economic upturn, as the spice route revived and military encounters between the Ottomans and Portuguese grew less frequent. A status quo emerged, with the Ottomans in control of the mainland from Basra to al-Hasa and of the overland spice route to the Mediterranean, while the Portuguese, with their naval superiority, dominated the southern Gulf from Bahrain to Harmuz, as well as the Indian Ocean trade.

Safavid Shi‘ism and Portuguese Bahrain

Religious developments in the Iranian north had cultural implications for the Shi‘is of Bahrain as great as the hegemony of the Portuguese and the Ottomans.
With the rise of a Shi'i state in Iran, the eastern Arabian Shi'is had an ideological ally in the region for the first time since the pro-Shi'i Buyuds last ruled Iraq in the middle of the 11th century. Still, Portuguese rule in the Gulf prevented its Arab Shi'is from feeling the full impact of Safavid religious developments for another century.

In 1501, Shah Isma'il, leader of the militant Safavi Shi'i Sufi order, became Shah of Iran with the help of Turkoman Shi'i tribesmen from Anatolia. The new state imposed Shi'ism on Iran, ritually cursing Sunni holy figures, burning mosques, and expropriating the land of Sunnis. But the Safavids' preoccupation with their Ottoman foes in the northwest and in Iraq left them no opportunity to conquer the Persian Gulf. The Safavids in any case lacked a navy. Thus, they first accepted the nominal allegiance of the Sunni Hurmuzi dynasty, which at least in theory ruled most of the Gulf, then after 1514 accepted the Portuguese-Hurmuzi condominium.

Under the Safavids, Imami Shi'ism in Iran changed greatly, with Usulism coming to the fore as a formal religious establishment and state religion. Especially in the reign of Shah Tahmasp (1533-1576), a corps of Shi'i ulama attracted from Jabal 'Amil and Iraq began making vast changes in the way Twelver Shi'ism was practiced. Prominent among these innovators was Sheikh 'Ali b. 'Abd al-'Ali al-Karaki (d. 1534), from what is now southern Lebanon. In the first year of Shah Tahmasp's reign al-Karaki ordered that in every town a Shi'i prayer leader be appointed. Since many Shi'i ulama held Friday congregational prayers invalid in the Occultation, this move dismayed conservatives, especially Arab Shi'is still under Sunni rule. But al-Karaki clearly intended to build up an ulama structure under his own authority and to make himself useful to the new regime by having his prayer leaders pronounce blessings on the Safavids in the Friday afternoon sermon. He allowed the collection of land tax (khartaj) in the Occultation, another controversial opinion, and wrote rules for Safavid tax collectors. He ordered that Shi'i cease practicing pious dissimulation (targhib) out of fear of Sunnis, since they now had Safavid protection, and instituted the public cursing of the first two Sunni Caliphs.

By allowing the central functions of the state to be undertaken by someone other than a divinely appointed Imam, al-Karaki and his cohorts from Jabal 'Amil made themselves general proxies for the Hidden Imam and legitimized the Shi'i Safavid regime. They also began creating a Shi'i religious hierarchy, staffed largely by Arabs, based mostly on the newly created offices of Shi'i prayer leader and Shaykhul-Islam. Safavid Usulism emerged as the ideology of Arab immigrant ulama within Iran, who sought upward mobility and the implementation of a new vision of Shi'ism through their alliance with the Safavid state. These innovations provoked opposition from two quarters. First, as Arjomand has shown, in Iran the old indigenous families in charge of religious institutions such as judgships and pious endowment supervision, many of whom now embraced Shi'ism, resented the upstart Lebanese. Second, many Shi'is of the Arab world found al-Karaki's innovations inappropriate to their own situation, given their status as minorities under Sunni rule.

Arab Shi'i ulama living in Mecca wrote to the immigrant Arab prayer leaders of Isfahan complaining that their policy of publicly cursing the first caliphs...
revered by the Sunnis was causing a Sunni backlash against Shi‘ism outside Iran. 29  
An Arab figure from eastern Arabia, Ibrahim al-Qatif, helped combat al-Karaki’s establishmentarman form of Usul Shi‘ism. 30 Although he studied with al-Karaki when he first arrived in the shrine cities from Qatif in 1507, he later developed a bitter personal enmity for him. Al-Qatif cautiously accepted the necessity of independent legal reasoning, and so could be categorized as an Usuli. 31 But, deriving from Sunni-ruled Jazirat Qatif, he advocated a conservative Usulism that would not exacerbate Sunni persecution of Shi‘ism. Clinging to the conservative political culture of minority Shi‘ism, he rejected the legitimacy of holding Friday prayers during the Occultation, of collecting kharij land taxes, and of associating with rulers.

Al-Qatif, based in Iraq, refused to take money offered him by Shah Tahmasp, for which al-Karaki publicly rebuked him. Sheikh al-‘Ali invoked the example of Imam Hasan, who took a stipend from the Umayyad ruler Mu‘awiya, pointing out acerbically that Shah Tahmasp was not as bad as Mu‘awiya, nor was al-Qatif better than Hasan. Al-Qatif’s reply to this argument was that taking money from an unjust (zalim, i.e., not divinely appointed) ruler was reprehensible (makruh), citing Shams al-Din Muhammad b. Maski the First Martyr’s argument that Hasan, as Imam, had a legal right to the money from Mu‘awiya. Ulama, the argument implies, have no such right. Al-Qatif presented al-Karaki’s rise to the top of the Shi‘i establishment in Iran from 1533, saying he claimed to have a monopoly on learning and he infringed against Sheikh ‘Ali with one of the latter’s former students. Al-Qatif lived to see the Ottoman conquest of Iraq in the 1530s, after which, aside from a hiatus during the reign of Shah ‘Abbas the Great, Iraqi Shi‘is labored under Sunni rule. Perhaps for this reason, the shrine cities remained centers of a more cautious, conservative type of Shi‘ism than the liberal, establishmentarman Usulism of al-Karaki and his like.

In Safavid Iran, particularly in the capital, al-Karaki’s version of Usulism became well entrenched. The major opposition to this school came from Akhbari jurisprudence. Akhbarism rejected the legitimacy of independent legal reasoning and denied the need of laypersons to emulate mujahids. A major intellectual figure in the revival of this strict constructionist approach to Shi‘ism, Muhammad Amin Ashtarabadi (d. 1624), attacked the mujahids from Mecca, in the Arab world. 32 Ashtarabad’s restatement of conservative Shi‘i jurisprudence found great acclaim in the shrine cities of Iraq, and, Arjomand has argued, in Iran among Iranian religious officials in competition with the ‘Amili mujahids. 33

Although the ulama based in Bahrain and eastern Arabia were under European rule while the Safavids were elaborating a new form of Twelver Shi‘ism, they were not wholly isolated from these developments. Several Shi‘i ulama from Bahrain studied with al-Karaki, so that his activistic Usuli ideas were known on the islands. But the domination of the Sunni Banu Jabri and then of the Portuguese made a more formal Shi‘i establishment on the Safavid model impossible to develop on Bahrain. The scholars living in Bahrain under the Portuguese in the 1500s are given for the most part short notices in the biographical dictionaries. The times were unpropitious for great Shi‘i scholarship.

The Shaykhul-Islam of Safavid Isfahan, Muhammad Baqir Majlis (d. 1699), wrote a century later that the Portuguese appointed Sunni governors of Bahrain
who attempted with some brutality to convert the populace from Shi'ism to Sunniism.4

Some Shi'i scholars of Bahrain are mentioned in the sources for this period. Sayyid Husayn b. Hasan al-Gharayt al-Bahrani (d. 1593), an Akhbari from a village in the south of the main island of Bahrain, wrote a work forbidding the emulation of mujtahids (al-Gharayt fī muḥimmāt al-dīn 'an taqīd al-mujtahidīn).5 But rationalist approaches to thought also continued to exist; Sheikh Da'ud b. Abu Shafīz, a theologian, litterateur, philosopher, and polymath, wrote on logic in the school of al-Fārābī. Also a great but humble debater, he often took on al-Gharayt. Likewise, when the father of the important 17th century Safavid thinker Bahā al-Dīn ʿAmīlī settled in Bahrain, Sheikh Da'ud debated him 6.

Usuli thought penetrated the island. Sheikh Husayn b. ʿAlī of the Abu Sādī clan also studied with Sheikh ʿAlī al Karadī.7 Sheikh ʿAbd al-Muḥammad, the grandson of Muḥammad mentioned above, received a diploma (ijāza) in 1548 that said his grandfather was instructed by the mujtahids, who in turn went back to the Imams, and thence to the Prophet himself. Thus, the old link some Bahraini clans had with the Usuli family of the ʿAllāma in Hillah was a source of pride to these local Usulis.

Twelve Shi'ism in Portuguese Bahrain continued to show intellectual vigor, with both strict constructionism of an Akhbari orientation and rationalists of the Safavid Usuli variety represented on the island. The rise of Imām Iran under the Safavids may have lent that branch more prestige and perhaps led some in Bahrain still clinging to Imamism to become Twelvers. Portuguese dominance interfered with easy travel to Iran and prevented Bahraini Imami scholars from helping spread Shi'ism in Safavid Iran, a role left to the clerics of Jabal ʿAmīl and the urban centers of Iraq. In Bahrain, the Shi'is remained a persecuted group under local Sunni Arab rule with no major religious institutions or offices under their control. In al-Husayn the Shi'is fell under Sunni Ottoman control, as did their brethren in Iraq and Jabal ʿAmīl, though in fact the Shi'is remained largely under the domination of local Arab Sunni tribesmen owing loose fealty to the Ottomans.

SAFAVID BAHRAIN, 1602-1717

The 17th century witnessed the Safavid conquest of Bahrain and the growth of Bahraini religious institutions in a manner similar to that in Iran the previous century. Usuli Shi'ism, with its posts of Friday prayer leaders and mujtahid judges and its syllabus in formal seminaries, became the reigning orthodoxy. Shi'i scholars from Bahrain trekked to Isfahan for studies with Usuli luminaries like Bahā al-Dīn ʿAmīlī, and some of them settled in the capital and in southwestern Iran, cross-fertilizing Iranian religious culture with ideas from the Arab Gulf. The economic and political integration of Bahrain into the Safavid empire facilitated emigration from Bahrain to Iran on a larger scale than in the past.

In 1602, the Safavid military occupied Bahrain.8 Texiera described the Isles around 1610 as inhabited by Arabs with an Iranian minister and garrison. He
estimated the official value of the yearly pearl trade of Bahrain at 500,000 ducats, with another 100,000 smuggled on the black market. The tax-farm of the islands itself was worth 4,000 ducats annually. The governors sent from Iran appear from their names mostly to have been Qizilbash notables and al-Nabhan wrote that one was removed by the sheikh after the Bahraini complained of extortions. 39

With the rise of Dutch and British mercantile and naval power in the first decades of the 17th century, the Safavids saw an opportunity to dislodge the Portuguese from the Gulf altogether. The Portuguese protection system, requiring that Asian merchants pay high tariffs and bribes to Portuguese officials in return for safety from Portuguese attacks, had grown so onerous to Indian merchants that they began reviving the overland route to Iran from Lahore through Qandahar. At the same time, new Dutch naval technology and trade routes allowed the Dutch to bypass the Portuguesefactories. Gulf trade probably fell in the first decades of the 17th century which weakened the Portuguese at Hormuz. In a joint 1622 Anglo-Iranian campaign against Hormuz, the Iranians expelled the Portuguese, who retired to Goa. 40

With Hormuz now an Iranian dependency, the Safavids briefly reverted to the practice of administering Bahrain from that island. Later, Bahrain fell under the administrative jurisdiction of the Baghlarbegi of Kuhgilu centered at Abhbaan in southern Iran. But the governor of Bahrain always exercised a great deal of autonomy. With Iranian dominance of Bahrain, the marketing entrepot for its pearls shifted to the Iranian Persian Gulf port of Cengouz near the administrative center of Lar. 41

The Dutch and British East India Companies, new economic institutions that by their control of the sea, their lower protection costs, and their knowledge of world prices represented an advance on the protection racket that constituted the Portuguese empire, began carrying Iranian and Indian merchants for a transport fee. The Companies traded with the local merchants, as well as competing with them, setting up a system of European-staffed Asian trade alongside their trade to Europe. The 17th century witnessed Dutch supremacy, as well as a gradual shift after 1650 from pepper to cotton textiles as the major European import from the East—through pepper imports did not decline in absolute terms. The Gulf trade overland to the Levant continued, despite the decline of Venice, to remain important along with the Red Sea route, especially for the French. The Gulf also witnessed expanded commerce between the East and Iran and Iraq. The Dutch, for instance, brought Indonesian pepper and Bengal sugar into the Gulf. 42

ULAMA AND RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS IN SAFAVID BAHRAIN

In the 16th century, Portuguese-Harmuz rule had restricted Imami Shi'is in Bahrain and denied their scholars the sort of patronage and positions that would promote scholarship. But in the 17th century Safavid financial and administrative support in the islands allowed a great increase in the number of trained ulama and the sophistication of their work. The nature of the transformation of religious life among Twelver Bahraini under the Safavids has never been sketched. We have not had a picture of how the Safavids founded institutions
such as Friday prayers or how they built up an ulama corps. The social origins of the ulama, their relations with the secular notables and with the laboring orders, and their internal disputes all merit discussion. Such an inquiry bears, not only on the history of eastern Arabia, but on that of Iran as well, given the great immigration of ulama from Bahrain to that country late in the Safavid period and their wide intellectual influence.

At this point, discussion of the Shi'is will narrow to the islands of Bahrain. In contrast to the many illustrious scholars on the islands, few ulama are noted in the biographical dictionaries for this period from Ottoman al-Hasa and Qatif, and they often emigrated to Bahrain or Iran. The 1670 expulsion of the Ottomans from al-Hasa by the Bandi Khalid tribe if anything worsened the precarious situation of its peasants. On Bahrain, new religious institutions evolved. The Safavids faced the problem of ruling a relatively distant island, bordering the Ottomans, and warding off Portuguese attacks. As they did within 16th century Iran, they met this strategic and logistical problem, in part, with an ideological solution. By favoring the Imami Shi'i ulama and firmly implanting Shi'ism, they hoped to secure the islands of Bahrain, with their centrality to trade routes and their fabulous pearl wealth.

The 1602 incorporation of Bahrain into the Shi'i Safavid empire opened its Arab Shi'is to Iranian religious influences, as well as making it easier for its ulama to emigrate to Iran. Sayyid Majid al-Sadqgi al-Judia of Bahrain (d. 1619), for instance, gained the reputation of spreading the study of Imami oral traditions in Shiraz, holding salons for its ulama and giving Friday afternoon sermons in Shiraz. He met the Imam-Jum'a of Isfahan, Bahá' al-Din `Amîrî, and in Shiraz wrote the endowment deed for Fars Governor Imám Quli Khan's seminary.43

From this point on, many Bahraini ulama are mentioned as emigrating to Iran, where they often held high religious posts. For instance, Majid Al-Abu Shabina al-Bahraini served as religious court judge in Shiraz and Isfahan.44 Likewise, later in the century Shah Sulayman made Sheikh Salihi al-Karzakani religious court judge in Shiraz.45 Al-Karzakani's friend Sheikh Ja'far b Kamalu'd-Din (d. 1677) left Bahrain with him because they fell upon hard times, but went on to Hyderabad in Shi'i-ruled Golconda, South India. He and al Karzakani had made a pact that whichever of them first struck it rich through patronage would help the other.46 The old Gulf connection with South India thus did not die out, though emigration to Iran became far more frequent. As noted, ulama from Ottoman al-Hasa and Qatif also traveled to Iran. Sheikh Ja'far of Qatif (d. 1619) was forced to leave his village of al-Tuba because of heavy debts, going to Bahrain and then accompanying Sayyid Majid al-Sadqgi to Iran. He studied religious sciences, receiving a diploma from Bahá' al-Din al-`Amîrî in 1607, but he primarily became known as a poet.47 The flow of scholars from Bahrain to Iran grew steadily throughout the 17th century. In his study of Safavid ulama, Anjomand found "a shift from the clear predominance of Jabal `Amîrî over the other Arab regions in the first 140 years of our period to an equally clear predominance of Bahrain in the last fifty."48

In Bahrain itself, the Safavids promoted religious institutions, firmly establishing Imami Shi'ism as the dominant orthodoxy. They arranged for Friday
prayers to be said in the name of the Safavid shah and offered patronage to ulama and mosques. The status group of the Imami ulama became more differentiated from notable literati and took on the aspect of a profession. As always in the formation of a profession, the question of its members' social origins and control of resources arises. In Safavid Bahrain the ulama were drawn from a range of backgrounds among the propertyed classes.

The Safavids created a set of religious institutions in Bahrain, both from pious and from ideological motives. One of the first was Friday congregational prayers, first led in the early 1600s by Sheikh Muhammad al-Ruwaysi. He believed such prayers to be an absolute obligation (wa'jib 'ayni), a stance taken also by most high Safavid religious officials, but disputed by many 16th century conservatives and Akhbars. At the end of the Friday prayers the religious officials pronounced blessings on Safavid rule, and the Safavids were eager to institute them. Early Imami opinion tended against the validity of these prayers in the Occultation, and only with the rise of the Safavids and the development of a new sort of Usulism did they become widespread. Under Banū Jibril and Hurmuz, of course, such Shi'i institutions had in any case been forbidden.

The second important institution created by the Safavids was an Imami chief religious judge, al-Ruwaysi, an unrivaled expert in the law and in Imami oral reports, assumed this post as well. His successor as chief religious official, Sayyid 'Abd al-Ra'ûf al-Musawwii (1624–1660), was appointed to the post of Shaykhul-Islam through Hurmuz. Ali al-Bahraini glosses "Shaykhu'l-Islam" as chief judge, suggesting that in Bahrain this post primarily involved supervision of the judicial system. The succession of Safavid Shaykhul-Islam in Bahrain is seen in Figure 1.

The quite considerable wealth of the Shi'i learned men in Safavid Bahrain derived both from public and from private sources. The government generously funded the new religious institutions it created. In addition, most high ulama had been born into notable families or entered the ranks of the wealthy through trade. We have one European witness to the mechanisms of government funding for Imami ulama. The French traveler Jean de Thévenot wrote from Basra in 1665 of Bahrain's pearl derived riches. Basing himself on reports from a Portuguese official, Manuel Mendez Henriquez, who had first-hand experience with Safavid Bahrain, Thévenot put the number of pearl-bearing boats based on the island at two to three thousand, each of which paid a toll to the governor for permission to go pearl-fishing. In addition, they paid a yearly tax. Thévenot goes on to make the remarkable assertion that the shah of Iran never touched most of this revenue, because it belonged to the mosques, and the monarch owned only the heavier pearls. In interpreting this passage, it is hard for the historian not to conclude that the vast extension in Shi'i religious institutions, the building of mosques and training of a Safavid-style ulama corps, was subsidized by religious taxes on pearl wealth. A doctrinal basis may lie behind this governmental munificence. According to Usuli doctrine, believers must pay one fifth (al-khumus) of certain kinds of revenues, including wealth gained on treasures from the sea, to the mujarabah, to be used for religious institutions and for philanthropy to the poor. If Thévenot's informant is to be believed, the Safavids actually earmarked the khums on pearls for the ulama. Of course, many wealthy private individuals
FIGURE 1
Shi'ī Shaykhīl Islams in Safavid Iran
Muhammad b. Ruwaysi
Sayyid Ḥabd al-Ra'īf al-Musawi
(1654-1659)
Ali b. Sulaymān al-Qadami
(d. 1654)
Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Qadami
Muhammad b. Sulaymān al-Maṣābī
(d. 1674)
Ali b. Ja'far al-Qadami (deposed)
(d. 1719)
Sulaymān b. Sālih al-Durāzī
Muhammad b. Muḥammad b. Mahdī
(d. 1693)
Sayyid Hāshim al-Tāblī
(d. ca. 1695)
Sulaymān b. 'Abd al-Ḥād al-Maṭari
(1664-1709)
Ahmad b. 'Abd al-Ḥād al-Balādī
(d. 1725)

also donated money on similar grounds to the ulama.52 Other funds came into
the hands of the ulama as perquisites of office. Al-Musawi, for instance, con-
trolled pious endowments (waṣaf al-aqā'). and oversaw the market police.
Supervision of newly founded Twelve pious endowments, also proved an in-
creasingly important source of wealth for the clergies in Iran during this period.53
Immensely richs were given into the control of the ulama for public purposes,
but most high ulama were also personally wealthy. It would be anachronistic to
suppose that any great distinction between private and public monies was con-
sistently maintained. Not all high ulama in Bahram were born with wealth and
status, but most were. Sayyid Ḥabd al-Ra'īf al-Musawi derived from a notable
clan called Banīn, who said they went back to the seventh Imam through the
renowned al-Kadī family. Sheikh Muhammad b. Sulaymān al-Maṣābī (d. 1674),
on the other hand, rose from a relatively indigent background.54 He began
studying with Sheikh Ḥabd al-Ḥād b. Sulaymān al-Qadami, the chief religious dignitary,
in Bahram, and entered the pearl trade as a wholesaler. He later became Friday
prayer leader at a mosque in the village of his mentor, al-Qadami.
During the pearling season when the ships from al-Qadami came back from
diving, al-Maṣābī went down and bought their entire catch of pearls and the
cloth in which they had traded. Then pearl retailers from all over Bahram would
come to his house to buy. The people of the village had made an agreement to sell only to him, forcing retailers to buy from a single dealer. Al-Maqaibli, in turn, gave advances on profits (muraibiha) to the villagers and shared out money among them such that, his biographer says, no one went away disappointed. Yusuf al-Bahraini gives an idealized picture of the relationship between the mujahid-wholesalers and their village congregation of divers. He tells the story that once a man from the village of Bani Jarra near Diraz came to al-Maqaibli with a large pearl of unknown quality. Al-Maqaibli bought it for a small price, then gave it to a jeweller who worked it into a fine gem, so that it sold for 50 tumans. The next time al-Maqaibli saw the diver, he explained to him that the pearl had turned out to be worth far more than he originally paid for it, and the Sheikh wanted to share some of the subsequent huge profits with the diver. The man refused, saying he had sold it fairly, and that had the pearl proven defective al-Maqaibli would have taken the loss. Al-Maqaibli insisted, and finally they found a mediator who apportioned the profits between them.

Village families seeking wealth through pearling did not always have such happy endings, as one of al-Maqaibli's students found. Sheikh Sulayman b. Sulih al-Dirazi came from a family involved in pearl diving and trading. He was in the house of his older brother Ahmad, who maintained pearling ships. When Ahmad sent young Sulayman out to dive for pearls, the younger brother was struck with an illness. Sulayman felt sorry for him and took him out of pearling work, leaving him in the house with instructions to study. He hired al-Maqaibli to tutor him, and Sheikh Sulayman eventually rose to become chief source of emulation in Diraz.

Safavid donations to religious institutions helped assure ulama support for the government. The differences in the values of the ulama and those of the notables, however, did on occasion lead to friction between the religious institution and the state. When the Shah called Sulih al-Karzakani to Shiraz as court judge, he invested him with a robe of honor. Al-Karzakani was at first inclined to decline it, out of Imami reluctance to be associated with imperfect rulers, but friends and notables successfully implored him not to incur the Shah's wrath. In distant Bahrain, relations between the ulama and local notables took on great importance, since these magnates and the Qizilbash governors often had influence in the court at Isfahan.

Sheikh 'Ali b. Ja'far al-Qadami (d. 1719) ran into trouble with the authorities. The Imamli ulama of Bahrain had so quickly built up their institutions that they began to compete for certain kinds of influence on society with government officials. Sheikh 'Ali b. Ja'far haughtily refused to flatter the Safavid governor and provoked the hostility of many in the notable class in the capital city of Bilad al-Qadim. They sent reports to Shah Sulayman (1667-1694) accusing him of improprieties and the Shah had him arrested and brought in chains from Bahrain to Iran. In Kazerun, near Shiraz, Sheikh 'Ali made contacts with notables that could influence the court. They cleared his name with the Shah, and he settled in Kazerun as a Friday prayer leader. On the other hand, the local notables lobbied the Shah to put Sheikh Muhammad al-Maqaibli in charge of the market police and religious courts. The power of local notables was such
that their discontent even led to the dismissal of one of the Qizilbash governors.
Still, the more scrupulous ulama would stand up to them when a matter of
principle was at stake. The mujtahid Sheikh Muhammad b. Mājīd al-Māhūzī
(d. 1693) had ambivalent relations with the local deputy governor Muhammad
Al-Mājīd al-Bilādī, who helped rule on behalf of the Safavids. Once he inter-
vened for Sunāṭi pearl merchants from Qatar from whom al-Bilādī had bought
pearls without ever paying and employed verse to prick his conscience.37

The main lines of ulama ideology in Safavid Bahrain can be discerned from
the biographical dictionaries. A majority clearly supported the legitimacy of
Friday prayers even during the occultation and it likewise upheld the possibil-
ity of taking employment with a secular government. Usuli ideas were cer-
tainly important and even seem to have been dominant during the 17th century.
Sheikh ‘Afl b. Sulayman al-Qadami (d. 1654), religious head of the Shi‘īs in
Bahrain, received a diploma from the Usuli Bahrūddīn al-Fāmili in Isfahan.
He wrote a book allowing the emulation of mujtahids, an Usuli position, and
considered Friday congregational prayers an individual obligation (the strongest
possible stance on the issue). He also promoted the transmitted sciences, that is,
spreading the lore of Imamī oral reports in Bahrain. Yusuf al-Bahrani says he
removed the “numerous heresies” (hīda‘ adīda) that had darkened Bahrain
which implies the imposition of Imamī scripturalist orthodoxy on the folk
religion of the Bahārīna.38

Sheikh Sulaymān b. ‘Abdollāh al-Māhūzī (1664–1709), another Shi‘ī religious
head, likewise wrote many works on the principles of jurisprudence from an
Usuli point of view—though Yusuf al-Bahrani wrote that one later work seemed
to indicate that he moved toward Akhbarism. He compiled a book of Imamī
oral reports for Shah Sultan Husayn Safavi (r. 1699–1722), for which he received
2,000 asharafis. He therefore associated with rulers and took money from them.
He wrote a book on the duty of performing Friday congregational prayer
(refuting contemporaries who forbade it), and accepted rational sciences, includ-
ing metaphysics. Most Akhbars, on the other hand, forbade the study of
rationalist theology and philosophy. The last Safavid Shaykhulislam, Ahmad
b. ‘Abdollāh al-Bilādī (d. 1723), kept alive the tradition of rational sciences.39
This rationalist, Usuli tenor to Safavid Bahrain’s intellectual life comes as a
surprise in view of the islands’ later reputation as an Akhbari stronghold. But
even the 18th century Akhbari revivalist, Yusuf al-Bahrani, was brought up in a
traditionally Usuli family, as will be seen below.

The Safavid Shaykhulislam in Bahrain possessed great religious authority. If
a newly appointed Shaykhulislam normally lived outside the capital city of
Bilad al-Qadim, he was called upon to take up residence in the seat of govern-
ment and center for merchants and ulama upon accepting the post. The chief
religious dignitary often attempted to continue his teaching activities which
created a large circle of students and influencing the capital’s vigorous intellec-
tual culture.

The islands were hardly free of doctrinal dispute. Even the Shaykhulislams
sometimes took unusual positions. Sayyid Ḥāshim al-Tūbī, chief religious digni-
tary 1693–95 and known for his compilation approach to studies of the oral
reports from the Imams, wrote a treatise demonstrating the excellence of the Twelve Imams over any of the prophets save Muhammad. Such a stance is redolent of Isma'ili influence. Nor had all Imams, even all Usulis, accepted the transformation of Bahraini religion into a Safavid-style religious establishment. The mujtahid Sheikh Sulayman al-Isha'i (d. 1690), settled in the provincial town of Shakhura, wrote against the holding of congregational prayers in the Occultation. Despite his conservatism, he also attacked the Alkhurairas.

A dispute occurred during Ali al-Qadami’s brief tenure as clerical head of Bahrain that sheds light on the nature and handling of religious conflicts among the growing clerical class. He appointed Sheikh Ahmad b. Muhammed al-Isha'i, an Usuli jurisprudent, religious court judge for Bahrain. Al-Isha'i, from the village of Abu Isba’, became known for taking unusual stances in law. For instance, he held it an obligation upon the non-clerical notable class (al-a'yār) to practice independent legal judgment (ijtihad) in Islamic law and denied the validity of acting according to oral reports (khabar al-ahād) from the Imams that had only been transmitted by one individual in each early Islamic generation. Al-Isha'i’s stance on ijtihad may have made some sense in a small Shi’i community of only a few tens of thousands like Bahrain, given that the tiny literate notable class of landowners and big merchants also produced most of the ulama. But it threatened clerical privileges and cannot have made him popular among his colleagues. In the case of a woman who remarried during her husband’s absence, al-Isha’i ruled she belonged to the first husband. Sheikh ‘Ali b. Sulayman, as Shaykh al-Islam, called the decision into question. They submitted the dispute to the judges of Shiraz and Isfahan, who upheld al-Isha’i. The incident caused al-Qadami to feel enmity for al-Isha’i, whom he eventually dismissed.

Yusuf al-Bahraini’s biographical dictionary illuminates a great deal about Shi’ism in Bahrain during the 17th century. One notes the strong Usuli influence in the capital, Bilad al-Qadaria, and the mujtahidi adherence of many chief religious dignitaries appointed by the Safavids. Safavid notables and ulama cooperated in promulgating Friday congregational prayers, not only in the capital but in the provincial towns to the south and west, with their latent functions of legitimating the Safavid state and providing clerics with a way of influencing the public. They founded seminaries ((madrasah) to train ulama. Clerics received ultimate control over Islamic courts and over policing prices in the market. The chief religious dignitary (ra’isi) appointed by the state presided over all of these activities from Bilad, so that some degree of centralization existed in the islands. Ulama suppressed religious ideas conflicting with those of Safavid Shi’ism. In return for their services to the state, the ulama received benefits, and, if Thévenot is to be believed, the profits of a good deal of the pearl revenue. In promoting Imam Shi’i ideology through the religious institution, the Safavids helped make their rule in this distant island outpost more secure.

This program of institution-building and religious socialization, which coincided with the perceived wellfare both of the state and of the rising clerical elite, met some opposition. Yusuf al-Bahraini wrote nothing about the fate of the
Sunnis, though many must have resided, fled, or become Shi'is. Even Usuli ulama of provincial towns like Abu Isba adhered to beliefs such as extending the privilege of ijtihād to non-ulama notables, or the illegitimacy of Friday congregational prayers, which brought them into conflict with the new religious hierarchy. Akhbarism remained a minority school of jurisprudence, though Sheik Yūsuf knew little about its history; few of his chains of transmission led through 18th century Akhbaris, since his father and teachers were Usulis. Over the century, tensions developed between the notables ruling Bahrain for the Iranians and the ulama corps. Notables sought power and authority through their connection with the Safavid court, whereas the high ulama made their own play for authority on the basis of their scriptural values and styles of life. These tensions erupted in the case of Sheik All b. Ja'far al-Qadami, whom the local notables had deposed by manipulating their contacts at the Shah's court which demonstrated that the power of the notables remained more effective than the authority of the ulama.

The ulama came from the landed and merchant classes, as numerous remarks in the biographical dictionaries show, and many of them derived from old notable families. But some originated in poorer families of less status. Sheikh Sulaymān b. Sālih al-Dirās labored as a common pearl diver in his youth, though his family did own ships rather than being propertyless workers. Sheikh Muḥammad b. Sulaymān al-Maqāshī parlayed his religious prestige as Friday prayer leader in al-Qadam into a monopoly in wholesaling local pearls and imported cloth that earned him a fortune. The divers and small shippers no doubt agreed to such an arrangement to avoid undercutting one another and driving down prices on an open market. Still, the ulama-merchants profited by skimming off a substantial surplus as middlemen in the pearl trade. In Safavid Bahrain, pearl trading, landholding, and religious office often went hand in hand.

Although earned as well as inherited wealth could serve as a passport into the ulama elite, achieving the highest religious posts and the confidence of the notables who influenced those appointments required both learning and wealth. Often a thin line demarcated notables from their clerical cousins, since many appear to have gained some seminary training and writing religious poetry about the Imams was a national pastime. Public recitation of religious poetry probably served, along with congregational prayers, to link the ruling class vertically with the Shi'i divers and peasants whose labor the ruling class exploited. Unfortunately, the Shi'i folk culture of this period remains inaccessible.

The 18th Century

In 1717, Bahrain and Qatif fell to invading Omanis of the Ædhe branch of Islam. The Safavids failed to recoup, and met their own end five years later in 1722 with the Afghan invasion; the 1730s witnessed the rise in Iran of Nadir Shah, with his Sunni-Shi'i ecumenism. The political and socioeconomic events of the age also caused changes in culture. Powerful challenges, in which ulama from Bahrain and al-Hasa played major roles, grew up in the 18th century to
Imami Shi’ism in Eastern Arabia

Safavid-style Usulism. These included the Akhbari revival after 1722 in Bahrain, the shrine cities of Iraq, and the small towns of south-western Iran (all of which had continued to have important Akhbari populations even in Safavid times). Also important was the esoteric Shaykhī movement of Sheikh Ahmad b. Zayn al-Dīn al-Ashā’ī (1753–1826), so unlike anything in mainstream Imami Iran or the shrine cities that it probably reflected underground religious currents still running among Shi‘is and others in eastern Arabia and southern Iraq.

The Omaní invasions of Qatif and Bahrain, conducted with the help of some Sunnī tribes in the area, disrupted the institutional life of Shi‘ism. The Omanis imposed high taxes on the merchant ulama which caused many to flee to south-western Iran or to Najaf and Karbala in Iraq. The European Hamilton wrote that extensive desertion of the islands by Arab Shi‘ī pearl fishers made Bahrain unprofitable for the Omanis. The invasion began a long period of political insecurity in the Gulf, as ‘Uthmān Sunnī tribes wrestled for supremacy over its islands and litoral with the Omanis and then with the Iranians under Nadir Shah and Karim Khan Zand Carsten Niebuhr found in 1763 that Bahrain’s 369 towns and villages had through warfare and economic distress been reduced to only 60. Though Bahrain still yielded 300,000 French livres in duties on pearls and dates every year, little of it went any longer to Shi‘ī ulama.

Meanwhile, the British East India Company gradually established commercial hegemony over the Gulf. Toward the end of the 18th century a new contender for domination appeared in the form of the Saud-Wahhabi alliance based in Najd, which conquered regions along the Gulf in the name of their tribal Islamic reformism.

A generational shift from Usulism to Akhbarism among some families can be witnessed in the available biographies. Sheikh ‘Abdallah al-Samahiji (1675–1722), was born in a village on a small island next to Bahrain and raised in the town of Abu Isba on the larger island. His father, a pure Usul who detested Akhbari, trained him as a mujtahid. Sheikh ‘Abdallah fled the Omaní invasion for Isfahan, where he pleaded with Shah Sultán-Husayn and the Shaykhul-Islam to repulse the attackers, but was refused help. Al-Samahiji then settled in the south-western Iranian town of Bihbahan. Becoming an Akhbari, he wrote a treatise denying the validity of independent legal reasoning (i’tidal) on the grounds that it did not exist in the time of the Imams. Still, Sheikh ‘Abdallah affirmed the validity of Friday congregational prayers during the Imam’s Occupation. The neo-Akhbari of his generation were not as conservative as the Akhbari of the 15th century had been. Al-Samahiji was joined in Bihbahan by Sayyid ‘Abdallah al-Biladi (d. 1767), who likewise fled the Omaní conquest of Bahrain and studied with the old man, deserting his ancestral Usulism for Akhbarism. Al-Biladi rose to become the leader of Friday congregational prayers in Bihbahan.

Younger members of the Al-Asfar family of Diraz likewise adopted Akhbarism, even though this clan of pearl merchants and ulama had been staunch Usul since the Safavid period. The most famous neo-Akhbari of this family, Sheikh Yusuf al-Bahrain (1695–1722), forsook Bahrain because the Omani invaders’ exactions bankrupted his pearl business. Attempting to begin life again in Shiraz, he suffered through the 1724 Afghan siege and sack of that city, finally
settling in Karbala in Ottoman Iraq. There he became his generation’s major exponent of the neo-Akhbari creed.  

Al-Bahrani’s neo-Akhbarism accepted only two sources for Imamite jurisprudence, the Qur’an and the oral reports from the Imams. He did not, however, go so far as to say that no verse in the Qur’an could be understood without the interpretation of the Imams, a position held by the Safavid-era Akhbari revivalist Astarabadi which Sheikh Yusuf denounced as extremist. He rejected the Usuli principles of consensus (ijma’) and independent reasoning (‘aqil, ijtihad). Indeed, he questioned rationalist approaches to religion in general, quoting with approval a condemnation of reading philosophy and theosophy. But Sheikh Yusuf accepted the validity of Friday prayers in the Occultation and did not completely reject Usuli positions on other issues. His Bahraini neo-Akhbarism sought to be an intermediate path between extremist Usulism and extremist Akhbarism.

Yet the trend to Akhbarism was not followed by all in Bahrain. Some, especially in the old Safavid provincial capital of Bilad, clung to Usulism. Sheikh Muhammad b. ‘Ali al-Majdabhi, who flourished in the middle of the 18th century, became prayer leader and chief of the ulama in Bilad, writing works on jurisprudence in which he expounded the classical Usuli stance of al-Shahid al-Thani. Indeed, most inhabitants of Bilad remained Usulis through the 18th century and opposed the Akhbari leaders of the rival city of Durr. In the late 18th century, Sheikh ‘Abdallâh al-Biladi, a mu’talib, engaged in a rivalry with the Akhbari leader Sheikh Husayn Al-Ashur (d. 1802) of Durr. Sheikh Husayn’s Akhbari followers considered him a spiritual renewer (mu’addhid) such as many Muslims believe appear at the beginning of every Islamic century.

Aside from the renewed Usuli-Akhbari struggle, a new movement was introduced into the area by Sheikh Ahmad b. Zayn al-Din al-Ahsâ’i. Although his fame spread and a new school of Imamite Shi’ism became attached to his name only after his 1806 emigration to Iran, he spent the first 30 years of his life in al-Hasa, Bahrain, and southern Iraq. New scholarship has been produced on this Sheikh Ahmad by Corbin, MacEoin, Rafati, and Amanat, concentrating on his later career in Iran. But a full understanding of this visionary and enigmatic figure must eventually come to terms with his eastern Arabum heritage and context.

He came of a branch of the Sunni Mahâshir tribe that several generations previously had settled in the town of al-Mutayrî in al-Hasa, adopting Twelve Shi’ism. He described mid-18th century al-Hasa as a provincial land of villages wherein the rural inhabitants practiced a folk Islam at variance with urban, Shari’ah-based codes. As a youth, he enjoyed the tribal festivals they held, with music, drums, and singing. But a strong meditative sense led him to study Arabic grammar, religious sciences, and poetry. His brief account of his early years in al-Hasa makes clear the importance of visions of the Imams for his adolescent religious development, and even for his mature development as a scholar. His brief autobiography suggests that the political instability of his times encouraged him as a young man to see the things of this world as ephemeral and to concentrate his energies on otherworldly meditation. Like many contemporary
Akhbarism in the area, he said his ideas opposed those of the philosophers and theologians but agreed with the oral reports of the Imams. He also disagreed with Sufism and attacked the doctrine of existential monoism (wahdat al-wujūd).

Unlike the Akhbaris, however, who criticized philosophers and theologians from a literalist, scripturalist stance, al-Ashârî criticized them from a theosophist and esoteric point of view. Indeed, in his qualified approval of reason (‘aql) and in his defense of the jurisprudential principle of consensus, he came closer to the Usuli position than to the Akhbari.

Sheikh Ahmad studied with Sheikh Husayn Āl-‘Askārī, nephew of Sheikh Yūsūf al-Bahrāmī, an Akhbari who had many students in Bahrain despite the turbulence of the era, and received a diploma from Sheikh Ahmad b. Hasan al-Dumashqī. Sheikh Ahmad engaged in a long debate with Sayyid ‘Abd al-Samad al-Zanjī, a landed cleric in Bahrain, and copied out books produced by 18th century Bahrain scholars. Only in the 1970s, in the wake of the Wahhabi attack, did he succeed in studying with the great Usuli teachers in the Iraqi shrine cities. His later doctrines included the existence of the world at all times of a Perfect Shī‘i (presumably himself) and the posthumous presence of the pure bodies of the Imams in the celestial realms. His application of his theory of the essential bodies to the Muslim doctrines of the Prophet’s ascension to heaven from Jerusalem and the bodily resurrection of the dead at the judgment day infuriated many literalist ulama. Both his visions of the Imams as a basis for his scholarly knowledge and his doctrine of Ḥuqqayqa derived from his local context. In the 18th century Sayyid Ḥāshim al-Ashârî got in touch with early hadith sources through visions, Sayyid Ḥāshim al-Tūbī thought the Imams superior to most prophets, and Sheikh Ahmad’s doctrine of Ḥuqqayqa derived from his contact in southern Iraq with Mandaeans. Moreover, Sheikh Ahmad may have received some of his esoteric ideas from the 15th century mystic Ibn Abī Jumhūr al-Ashârî, or from folk Shī‘ism still influenced by Ismā‘īlī esotericism. Certainly, Sheikh Ahmad’s structural position resembled that of Ibn Abī Jumhūr, in that he wrote at a time when Sunni tribal invasions had crippled the Shī‘i establishment which allowed individual speculation to flourish. His doctrines took root especially in Ḥufuf and al-Mubarraz in al-Ha‘a.

The main trend in 18th century Bahrain, however, was toward Akhbarism. Three immediate factors in the frequent adoption of Akhbarism are suggested by the biographical accounts available. The first is political. Akhbarism seems to have been embraced by many after the fall of Bahrain and of the Safavids to Sunni invaders. After 1717, with only short intervals, non-Shī‘a ruled Bahrain locally, even though some Sunni tribal chiefs owed loyalty to Iran for a while. This pattern suggests, here as elsewhere, a link between Usulism and the Shi‘i state. Akhbarism as an ideology suited most out-of-power Imams better, as it required a less activist role and fewer ulama links with the establishment.

Second, a generational gap seems apparent. Sons born around the turn of the century into strict Usuli families, disappointed by the failure of the Shi‘i establishment to meet the Oman and Afghan challenges, rebelled against their upbringing and adopted Akhbarism. Many Shi‘is from Bahrain were displaced
by the Omani invasion to southwestern Iran and to the sister cities of Iraq, centers of more conservative jurisprudence. There, as refugees, they tended to adopt the Akhbarism of their hosts.

Third, within Bahrain geographical divisions emerged. The eminence of Sheikh Yusuf al-Bahraini in Karbula helped swing his brothers and cousins of Al-Asfar to Akhbarism, and ultimately the whole town of Daraz. The old Safavid Usuli center of al-Bilad clung to the rationalist school much longer, its muhtahids remembering a time when the Safavids appointed them to head the entire Shi'i religious establishment in Bahrain and to administer as a religious tax a portion of the islands' rich pearl revenues. Qatif also remained an Usuli stronghold.

CONCLUSION

The rich interplay of local social structures and economic conditions with regional dynastic rhythms and the rise of European mercantile empires made a dramatic impact on Shi'ism in Bahrain from the 14th through the 18th centuries. A trend toward the adoption of Twelver Shi'ism began after the defeat of the Carmathians, since the Twelver branch was considered less radical and less objectionable by Sunni leaders. From 1300, local Carmathian tribal chiefs allowed scope for the growth of early Imamis institutions and of the Usuli school. This relative freedom for Imamis ended with the rise of Banu Jabr and the conquest by the Portuguese-Iranian condominium. The post-1501 Twelver Shi'i state in formerly Sunni Iran under the Safavids had little immediate impact on Shi'is in Bahrain and Eastern Arabia, though some scholars from that region did study with Safavid Usulis in Iran.

The 1602 incorporation of the Bahrain islands into Shah 'Abbas's Iranian empire, along with Dutch and British mercantile but not political hegemony, gave Bahrain prosperity and allowed local Twelver Shi'is to dominate the political and religious life of their islands. Subvented by huge pearl revenues, the ulama set up a whole range of institutions to administer and spread Imam Shi'ism, including seminaries, Friday prayer leaderships, religious judgeships, and market police. Informal salons also played a major role in helping spread Shi'i culture among the elite. Shi'i ulama, drawn from notable landholding and merchant families, had a paternalistic attitude toward their peasants and divers and attempted to eradicate what they saw as extremist folk beliefs. The relationship of the ulama with laymen, always complex, was further complicated when the clergy also acted as wholesalers for pearls brought them by divers in their congregations. Given the trust laymen often reposed in them, the ulama in this situation could be accused of conflict of interest and exploiting their position for gain.

The Omani invasion of 1717 and the fall of the Safavids five years later dealt a lethal blow to the Usuli religious establishment on Bahrain. Many disillusioned scholars of the younger generation adopted the conservative Akhbari school, with its disallowal of many functions of the state during the Occupation of the Imam. No Shi'i state, after all, existed from 1722 to 1763 when the Zands
consolidated their power. Akhbarism, although it had long existed on the islands, came to dominate them. The political and institutional chaos of the 18th century also allowed some Shi'i thinkers to express individualist views, and such as those of Sheikh Ahmad al-Ahsa'i, Shi'i ulama, formerly rich, often declined into poverty or found themselves forced to emigrate to Iran or Iraq. Shi'i culture continued on the islands, however, even in the face of repeated Sunni tribal invasions, and the peasants and divers retained their partianship for the family of the Prophet. Even in the 1860s, out of a population of 70,000, all the subsistence peasants, and five-sixths of the inhabitants of Manama, were Shi'a. Dynasties and clerical wealth from the pearl or spice trade sometimes created Shi'i religious establishments, but the often exploited common folk kept alive faith in the Imams in times of Sunni domination.

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NOTES


3W. Moulton, "Kurban," EF.


Imam Shi'ism in Eastern Arabia


Arjomand, The Shadow of God, ch. 5.


A. al-Bahrani, Amur al-Bahrain, pp. 112-13, 81-94.


A. al-Bahrani Amur al-Bahrain, p. 78.


Pedro Teixeira, The Travels of Pedro Teixeira, William F. Simler ed. (London Hakluyt Society, 1902), pp. 174-76. al-Mubarak, al-Taffa, vol. 1, pp. 63-64. gives a list of Safavid governors of Bahrain as follows: Sattar Sultan, with one tenure before 1633, when he was recalled, and another tenure thereafter when his gifts to the shah won him reinstatement, Bibi Khana, to 1666 when the people complained of his oppression. Sultan b. Qazi Khan, from 1666 Yildiz Quli Khan to 1701 Qazi Khan from 1701. | 1717 (Bahrain was lost to the Safavids in 1717).


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A. al-Bahrani, Amur al-Bahrain, p. 131.

