

# AN IRANIST'S VIEWS ON THE SHU'UBIYAS

Dr, Kersey Antia, Mar 20, 2020

As some scholars view differently than what is viewed here, I see the need to include here the views of a prominent scholar, Ray P. Mottahedeh, published in the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Volume 7, No. 2, 1976, pp. 161-182, Cambridge University Press. What the particular nature of that agreement was, is collected from the form into which the particular society has been cast.

To describe in what sense the early Islamic Iranians were a people, scholars have quite naturally looked at the fairly generous literary remains of the *shu'ubiyah* controversy. The Arabs, Persians, and other participants insult one another's customs and pretensions with a vigor that would warm the heart of any modern ethnic nationalist. Moreover, the *shu'ubis*, those who claimed the equality or superiority of their group to the Arabs, took on the coloring of many different movements of their period. Since not all the subjects of early Muslim governments admired the Arabs, there is evidence in the literature of the *shu'ubiyah* that for some few *shu'ubis* the movement was, in fact, an expression of political aspirations – one could almost say political fantasies – that so-called Arab rule would be judged a mistake before the bar of history and that Arabs would be sent back to their deserts where they could practice their loathsome customs away from their betters. Certainly, many anti-*shu'ubis* (or, loosely, pro-Arabs) tried to tar all the *shu'ubis* with the same brush by claiming that rejection of Islamic government was the secret motivation of all *shu'ubi* writers, since it was natural to assume that anyone with such a low opinion of the historical rule of the Arabs must have a low opinion of Islam itself.

Even the 'Abbasids had, at first, faced such charges, as when the Umayyad general Nasr b. as-Sayyar said in his well-known poem: “If one should ask me the basis of their (the 'Abbasids') religious belief, (I answer) their religion is to kill Arabs.” But, in any case, more *shu'ubi* and anti-*shu'ubi* polemic was concerned not with activist Islamic movements like the 'Abbasid *da'wah*; rather, it was concerned with points of honor and dishonor in the customs and past of the Arabs and of the peoples they had conquered. The central issues for the *shu'ubis* were not overtly political; they were not primarily concerned with the creation of Sasanian governments.

Rather, in our opinion it is a question of a diffuse tendency among the non-Arabs, often coinciding with heterodox religious and intellectual aspirations. Yet, somehow, we have to account for the strong emotion produced by the *shu'ubiyah* controversy in the third, fourth, and

fifth centuries of Islam; if the controversy seems unimportant to us, why did it seem very important to Muslims of that period? We have, for example, five heated replies extant to the extremely short *shu'ubi* tract of Ibn Garcia (Garshiyah). All five replies were written in or before the sixth/twelfth century, and all are framed in violent language. The tone of the reply of Ibn ad-Dudin al-Balansi is representative of the tone of all the replies, as when he addresses Ibn Garcia as “very ignorant apostate and depraved religious hypocrite...may your mother be bereft of you!...True justice in answering you...would consist of stripping you of your skin and crucifying you on your gate. Clearly, if the *shu'ubiyah* was not a concerted movement with a clear program, it nonetheless involved matters that were even more sensitive to Muslims than the diets and marriage laws of their non-Muslim ancestors. However, one may wonder if introducing diets and marriage laws of ancestors is fair and even relevant here.

Goldziher was, in a sense, studying the *shu'ubiyah* for evidence of nationalist movements, and may have given more political significance to expressions of ethnic pride than they deserved. But in examining these expressions of ethnic pride, Goldziher demonstrated with a wonderful abundance of detail the cultural conflicts caused by the assimilation of diverse people into the Islamic community and the traces of these conflicts in ethnical precepts ascribed to Muhammad. Gibb sought to analyze more closely the motivations of the *shu'ubis* and their opponents, and believed that the issue at stake was the “whole cultural orientation of the new Islamic society” since the *shu'ubis* wanted to remold the political and social institutions of the Islamic empire and inner spirit of Islamic culture on the model of Sasanian institutions and values.

Yet, surprisingly, neither Gibb nor Goldziher looked for evidence in one of the most obvious places – the Qur'an commentaries which provide a copious and almost untouched source of information for the opinions of Muslims in every age on social and political ideas. Virtually all Muslim controversialists tried to find proof texts in the Qur'an.

The very name of the *shu'ubiyah* comes from a proof text. Verse 13 of *surah* 49 (*al-hujurat*) reads: “Oh men, We have created you from a male and a female and We have made you into groups (*shu'ub*) and tribes (*qaba'il*) that you may come to know one another.

In his essay on “The Arabic Tribes and Islam,” Goldziher makes an important point: The last part of this verse, “the noblest among you before God is the most righteous among you,” was used to combat the tribal pride which was such a danger to the early Islamic community. Although Goldziher is not here speaking of the *shu'ubiyah*, what he says is germane to the self-conceptions of many *shu'ubis*. The *shu'ubi* were often called the *ahl at-taswiyah*, *the people (who advocate) equality*,”

and sometimes used this Qur'anic phrase "Truly the noblest among you before God is the most righteous as a cornerstone of their argument. The *shu'ubic* say, according to Ibn 'Abd Rabbih (d. 328/940).

The Qur'an says that men should know their genealogies in order that they may recognize how they are related to one another. To claim a false ancestry is an act of criminality.

"The *shu'ub* are the *mawali* (non-Arab clients) and the *qaba'il* are the Arabs." The *shu'ub* are the '*ajam* (non-Arabs, principally – in the eastern Islamic world – the Iranians), while the *qaba'il* are the Arabs and the *Asbat* are (the divisions of) the Jews.

"The *shu'ub* are those who do not trace their descent back to any one person; rather, they trace themselves (*yantasibune*) to cities (*mada'in*) and villages. The *qaba'il* are the Arabs who trace themselves to their ancestors (*aba*).

Still, a strong school of opinion refused to acknowledge that any group not related by traceable genealogies could be properly called a people. The *shu'ubis*, however, found in the Qur'an itself a warrant for the non-tribal and non-genealogical organization of the societies to which they belonged. They did so by interpreting *sha'b* as a people united by a territorial principle, and it is largely for this reason that their movement continued to be called later *shu'ub*, a single word in 49:13.

Tabarsi, a Khurasanian who died in 548/1153, writes in his commentary on the verse: "The *shu'ubis* are those who belittle the importance of the Arabs and do not consider them superior to others. Men who traced the origin to a region and not a person virtually had no recognizable origin.

For Iranian *shu'ubis* (and probably for the majority of Iranians) the agreement was based in large part on ties to the land. But the *shu'ubis*, like most polemicists, are too closely preoccupied with refusing their opponents. They are only defending a minimal definition of their differences with the Arabs; and in the fragments of *shu'ubi* literature which still exist, they seldom elaborate on the specific nature of this territorial understanding of people-hood among the non-Arabs. We find indications of the specific nature of this understanding in the Persian epic, the *Shah-nama* of Firdausi, which was completed in 400/1010. Scholars have too often been exclusively concerned to look in this vast work for evidence of Firdausi's contempt for *Arabs*. Several modern Persian words for nation, *millat*, *qaum*, and *vatan* (all, incidentally, from the Arabic) do not occur in the *Shah-nama*; nor does *ummah*, an Arabic word. As one would expect, neither *sha'b* nor *qubilah* appears. The territorial concept of Iran is very important in the *Shah-nama*; and the terms *Iran-zamin* (or "the land of Iran") and *shar-i Iran* ("the city,

i.e., land of Iran”) occur with great frequency. Correspondingly, the distinction between Iran and Aniran (literally, “non-Iran,” describing the territories beyond the boundaries of Iran proper), a distinction well known in Pahlavi inscriptions, survives in Firdausi as Iran and Niran. Genealogical distinctions are by no means disregarded in the *Shah-nama* and the term *nizhad*, meaning something like “descent” or even “race,” is very frequently used in the earlier parts of the *Shah-nama* where a system of group descent from common ancestors is described. Questions of *nizhad* also play an important part in relations among Iranians and in certain circumstances *nizhad* can even mean “well-born” (among the Iranians).

Firdausi seems to consider those people who live in Iran proper, *shahr-i-Iran*, and who accept that they share a common ancestry with each other as almost automatically part of the Iranian people even if they cannot trace their genealogies person by person. While it is almost impossible for those Iranians who are not of gentle birth to acquire such gentility in one generation, they remain Iranians all the same.

The clerks not only rejected much in the Arab humanities, as H.A.R. Gibb has shown in his essay on the *shu'ubiyah*, but they also resented the low opinion which the Arab rulers in general had of their non-Arab secretaries. Many Arabs probably shared the contempt of al-Jahiz who said that clerks were more subservient to the will of their masters than men of any other profession, and therefore more contemptible. “What proves that the profession of the clerks is detestable,” writes al-Jahiz, “is that only subordinates or people of – so to speak – servile condition practice it...in spite of all this, they attain the pinnacle of boasting, the summit of vanity, swimming on an ocean swelled with pride and self-conceit. Doubtless, al-Jahiz saw some of this conceit in the *shu'ubi* literature of the clerks which portrayed the ideal ruler as one who gave the greatest positions of honor and privilege to his clerks.

Arabs who felt that, in any case, the success of Islam had proved that the Divine Hand intended to cancel the warrants of earlier systems of rule. There can be little doubt that some Arabs in the Umayyad period openly advocated the preservation of this two-tiered ruling system without mixture of the old and new ruling classes. When the Umayyad governor of Mecca in the eighth century discovered that a non-Arab client had married a woman of the Arab tribe Banu Sulaim, he ordered the husband and wife separated, had the husband whipped two hundred strokes and had his hair, beard and eyebrows shaved off. An Arab poet congratulated him on this judgment saying: “For what right is more just for the *mawali* than the right of slave to join in marriage with slave?” I think it is fair to say that if such violent contempt was rare, mild contempt for even the *mawali* administrative class was common among the Arabs.

Since Arab indifference or contempt for the past of the *'ajam* and particularly of the Iranians had implications for the respect owed landlord and/or secretarial Iranians in the Islamic period, these classes were obliged to produce arguments supporting the importance of their pre-Islamic past. The *shu'ubi* poet al-Khurrami discussed the relation of the Arab and non-Arab past when he says: "It does not harm me that the tribes Yuhabir are not my ancestors, nor that the tribes Jarm and 'Ukl do not count me as one of them; If you do not preserve former glory with the new, what has gone before has not benefited you." In the long run this advantage told, and the so-called "Islamic humanities" included more material on the pre-Islamic past of the Arabs than on that of the Persians. Yet, the *shu'ubi* argument is in no way anti-Islamic, since the Arab and Iranian pasts were both "pagan."

These arguments are a long way from the sentiments concerning equality of men which were discussed at the beginning of this article; the *shu'ubi* poets we have quoted are arguing, at most for a parity of honor among the upper classes of two distinct peoples. The *shu'ubiyah* had its origin as a movement with egalitarian tendencies among the Kharijies, the most egalitarian of early Islamic sects. Since, however, it was reinterpreted by the landlords and clerks for their own purposes, in most (though not all) cases it lost its egalitarian tenor. The *shu'ubi* and some of their opponents continued to use a rhetoric that has been mistaken for egalitarianism, but on closer examination has no such meaning.

The commentators believe that this verse justifies only a very limited degree of egalitarianism in our present worldly life. All commentators are agreed that the nobility of piety outweighs all other forms of nobility; but many commentators remark on the practical and theological difficulties in deciding who is most righteous.

The social form into which Iranian society was cast by what Burke has called the common agreement, was, therefore, not egalitarian. It was, instead, elaborately hierarchical.

In fact, the seeming egalitarianism found in religious contexts in medieval Islamic literature is egalitarian only in its other-worldly implications. It is a condemnation of pride, that sinful attitude of the soul before the Almighty rather than an encouragement for men to cast off or disregard the differences of rank which separated them in their present life.

If the *shu'ubiyah* controversy touched on such important issues of self-conception, why did the controversy disappear after the sixth/twelfth century? Gibb suggests that the canon was closed because the "Sasanian strands which had been woven into the fabric of Muslim thought were, and remained, foreign to its native constitution. But then

many of the later works of Persian ethics and literature did enter the canon of Turkish and Indian Muslim humanities. Were the Turks and Indians less aware of the foreignness of these works to their Islamic beliefs?

Again, the commentaries on 49:13 are of some help. The Arabic language (*al'arabiyah*) is not a father and a mother; it is an understandable speech (*lisanum natiqun*) and whoever speaks in it is an Arab.

To offer men who spoke Arabic recognition as Arabs was an acknowledgment that it was highly desirable to be an Arab; but it was also an invitation to men to vote with their tongues. Now that the Iranians of the plateau were writing popular literature in their own language, they were no longer closely engaged in a dialogue with the genealogically minded Arabs – who had, in any case, through sedentarization and assimilation, become much less genealogically minded. Numerous Arabs had been broadcast throughout Iran as landowners by the original conquest and had held onto their Arab genealogies tenaciously for three or four hundred years. Eventually, they ceased to identify themselves with the Arabic-speaking peoples who were their Western neighbors, and – as local histories testify – they became increasingly identified with the pretensions of the Iranian landlord and administrative classes. For them, as for all Persian-speaking peoples, the canon remained open and even ethical thinkers felt free to add new “Sasanian” stories to their works, as Ghazzali (d. 505/1111) did in his *Nasihah al-Muluk*.

Many of the most ardent *shu'ubis* like the Samanid vizier al-Jaihani, were anything but men of the lower orders; nevertheless Ibn Qutaibah, who wants to encourage the upper classes of the '*ajam* to identify with the Arabs, tries to win these upper classes over by assuming they are not *shu'ubis* and that they have genealogies as reliable as those of the Arabs.

Ibn Qutaibah who, in this same treatise affirms his own Persian origin, in effect believes that the new Arab ruling class and the older Iranian ruling class can have shared genealogical prejudice against their “rootless” subordinates which I find unhistoric to say the least. In Iran, the assimilation of the two ruling classes eventually took place; but it took place because both classes accepted a mixed territorial and genealogical self-definition, and because they found themselves united by a community of language (and its shared literature) which was distinct from the community of the Arabs. As the Iranian and Arab worlds drew apart, and the Arab and non-Arab ruling classes in Iran became one, the *shu'ubiyah* controversy no longer had any reason to exist and I would add because the majority became Muslim and thereby did not have to become a Mawla under an Arab and because their domination thereby was too complete to rebel.

I would emphasize that educated Iranians who could record their opinions, not about peasants whose feelings of group identity are lost to history. Not true because of their rebellions one after another. Literate Iranians saw themselves as a people joined by their shared tie to *Iran-zamin*, the heartland of Iran. Correspondingly they assumed that those accepting a special tie to this land were of common ancestry, even though they could not recount their genealogies person by person back to a fictive ancestor, as even the non-noble Arab did to Ishmael or Qahtan. In the opinion of many Iranians, the warrant for the continued existence of such a people in the Islamic period was to be found in the Qur'an, where it was explicitly stated that God Himself made tribes and peoples. Yet if the division between the Iranians as a people – between their *sha'b* and other *shu'ub* – was acceptable to God, regional and social divisions among Iranians continued to be just as important. Privileged Iranians, especially landlords and clerks, shared a pride in their Iranian past and resented the derogation of this past. They did so partly because such derogation also called into question their claim to be men who ranked in the upper levels of this hierarchy. So partly they resented it as Iranians, as all Iranians did until forced to convert in one way or another.

There is very little evidence that Iranians felt their political life to be deficient if they could not express their group feeling by having their own national state. I wonder how they explain many revolts of Islamic rule! Not true it was adopted by Arabs as per Wellhausen, Arabs loved luxury and became lax.

A government that protected their portion of *Iran-zamin* and kept men in the stations that were proper to them was an acceptable government.

Within their understanding of Islam the Iranians had found a self-definition which was strong enough to survive a long succession of non-Iranian masters, but one wonders if it survived because the Iranians had no choice at all in the matter. Anyway, Mottahedah's views represent a differing view from what is quoted earlier here.