

# HEIRS OF THE PROPHETS

An Account of the Clergy and Priests of Islam,  
the Personnel of the Mosque and “Holy Men”

by

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### SHARIFS AND SEYYIDS

THERE are, we have seen, religious leaders in Islam who became such by education or by sainthood. A third kind need not education nor even sainthood. They inherit class distinction and are, one might say, “hereditary priests.”

From the first century of Islam there arose a special veneration for the descendants of the prophet (*Ahl-al-bayt*), Surah 33:33. To be able to show kinship with the prophet was an important claim to rank, *sharif*; and this made one a member of a spiritual aristocracy. 74

The word *seyyid* was an alternative term for the same genealogical honor. Ali was called “*sayyid* of this world and the next (*Encyc. of Islam, sharif*, by Van Arendonk). Later on the terms were applied not only to the descendants of Hasan and Husain, the grandsons of the prophet, but to all who could claim even indirectly to be of the *Ahl-al-bayt*.

Special religious officials (*naqib*) were appointed by the Abbasids to keep registers of this nobility. The chief, *naqib* had other religious duties and honors; this is true even today. The *sharifs* wore green turbans or badges and distinctive dress, because green was the color of the garments of paradise (Koran 18:30; 76:21).

In Persia and India they also wear distinctive dress. “The sharing in the *sadaqa* is forbidden them.” That is, they are immune from payment. A *sharif* should marry only a *sharifa*.

None of the descendants of the prophet will suffer the punishment of hell; they all are included in the *āl-Mohammed* who receive a benediction in daily prayer; and it is expressly laid down that one should treat them with the same distinction as a governor, and give them anything they wish, even a daughter in marriage without dowry (Van Arendonk, quoting from al-Sha’rani).

It is simply impossible to read of the religious prestige of this class of hereditary saints and deny that they are “priests” among the common people.

Hurgronje traces their origin and growth (*Mohammedanism*, pp. 93, 94). They ruled Morocco for nearly a thousand years, and Mecca for centuries. "In practice it may be said that the Achenese fear the *sayyid* more than the Creator. This is due to his believing that Allah reserves His punishments for the hereafter and is inimitably merciful in the enforcement of His law against the faithful, whereas the curse of the *sayyids* takes effect here below without any hope of mercy. No Achenese will readily so much as lift a finger against a *sayyid*; one who would dare to take a *sayyid*'s life would not hesitate to cut his father's throat." 75

Because genealogical tables can be manipulated and extended, there are now tens of thousands of *sharifs* and *seyyids* in the world of Islam. A perfect, up-to-date illustration is given (1943) by Major R. A. B. Hamilton from Aden, Arabia:

"We next come to the holy classes. The first of these are the *sharifs* and *seyyids*, the descendants of the Prophet Mohammed. They live in settlements and elect among themselves in each family a headman. They have great influence in the community which varies of course, with the amount of their riches. Most *seyyids* — the only *sharifs* are those in Beihan — do not bear arms and take no part in tribal warfare. They are peacemakers, and derive considerable income as such, and as dispensers of the *sharia* or holy law of Islam. They are treated with veneration and respect and, after death, are frequently treated as saints. They marry tribeswomen and the daughters of chiefs, and many own land and are given tithes of other land by ancient right."

"The other holy class is that of the descendants of the saints, for so they claim to be. Almost every village in the territory has its saints' tomb, a white rectangular building with one or more domes. Each shrine is maintained by public subscription, in the form of tolls on travelers and gifts to reinforce prayers. Many shrines also own land or receive tithes from land. They are guarded by families who use the title *sheikh* and who claim descent from the original saint. The best description for these families is that of 'holy *sheikh*'! In most cases the saint is considered a miracle worker, and this power may descend upon the holy *sheikhs* as well. This fact in itself is sufficient to give the holy *sheikhs* considerable influence, and they inspire respect and fear. I would stress the question of fear, for it is important. The buried saint, and, to a certain degree, his supposed descendants, are credited with the power of doing bodily and personal harm, such as depriving of sanity, striking with blindness, destruction of crops and the like. They are, in effect, witch-doctors, and are feared more than are the *seyyids*, since they are considered to be dangerous men. 76

Are such pedigreed-saints in Sumatra and Arabia and everywhere, who are so holy that they inspire fear, and so powerful that they exact tithes (Melchisedec), not "priests" in every ordinary sense of the word? (Cf. Genesis 14:18; Hebrews 7:1).

And Harold Ingrams remarks (*Arabia and the Isles*, London, 1943, p. 177): "Before the *seyyids* came into Hadhramaut the *sheikhs* were the principal ecclesiastical influence, and they probably took the place of an earlier hierarchy formed by the *priesthood* of the old religion. Nowadays they take precedence after the *seyyids*, but they have much the same privileges."

The italics are ours to call attention to the use of such terms by one who knows Arabia and Islam thoroughly and practically.

In every Moslem land there are these saints, *walis*, and *seyyids*, with shrines and tombs.

“In Persia a visitor to a shrine will kiss the lock of the door and put his forehead to other parts of the building,” wrote Miss Holliday. “He gives salaams to the saint and speaks of him *as if he were alive*. Tablets containing prayers to the saint are hung on the walls; if the pilgrim can read, he reads these audibly; if not, someone else will read them to him. They burn votive lights. They ask permission to enter or leave the shrine of the saint. In common life they are always calling on the saints for help and blessing. Akin to this are the superstitions connected with their *holy living men and their families of which I have seen most among the ‘Ali Illahis who consider their sheikhs as mediators between them and God, and of a race set apart.’*”

74. Cf. George Percy Badger, *History of the Imams and Seyyids of Oman by Salih Ibn Razik from A. D. 661-1856*. Translation with introduction and notes.

75. Hurgronje, *The Achenese*, p. 158. There are over three score references to the functions and spiritual powers (*buraka*) of the *Sharifs* in Westermarck’s *Ritual and Belief in Morocco*.

76. *The Social Organization of the Tribes of the Aden Protectorate* in the Royal Asiatic Society Journal, May, 1943.

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