The Safavid Merger:

Sufism, Popular Islam, and the Rise of the Safavids

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Abstract

The Safavid dynasty represented a major change in Iranian history, most notably for establishing Twelver Shi'ism as the majority and official religion, which continues to this day. The nature of their simultaneous transition from a Sufi religious order to a political movement and their rise to power is, however, a point of debate. Until the 21st century, the established historical narrative was one of a tyrannical, fanatical minority taking power and asserting its particular worldview on an unwilling majority. More recently, there have been increasingly diverse views among historians on the Safavid transition. This paper attempts to enter into the ongoing debate on the nature of the Safavid transition and rise to power, incorporating the perspectives of prominent voices in the debate into a new, holistic view that utilizes a Marxist, merger-based framework both to place the early Safavids in their material context and to work toward an explanation of their rise. The socio-economic situation in Iran under the Mongols and Timurids is briefly described, followed by descriptions of both Iranian Sufism and popular Islam in Iran. The Safavids were able to succeed and establish a stable state in Iran primarily through the merger of Sufi ideology and organizational structures with the Islam of the lower classes. This merger allowed for the creation of a mass base for the Safavids and the mobilization of that mass base toward political ends.

Introduction

In the context of Iranian history, the Safavids represent a turning point. They were, along with the Ottomans to their west and the Mughals to their east, one of the so-called gunpowder empires of the late medieval Muslim world. They were the first state to establish Twelver Shi'ism as an official religion over the whole of Iran, which persists to this day. And, most notably, they are the most prominent example of a Sufi order and millenarian religio-political movement transitioning from a religious order to dynastic state. This transition, unique in the context of post-Mongol Iran, represents the culmination of broader trends of popular Islam, Sufism, and mass politics.

The Safavids emerged as a Sufi order in the 6th/13th (Islamic calendar/Christian calendar) century, founded by the mystic leader Safi ad-Din Ardabili (649-734/1252-1334). Initially a resolutely Sunni organization, it began to transition in the years following Safi ad-Din's death toward a militant movement inflected by popular Islam, ultimately culminating in Shah Isma'il's establishment of Twelver Shi'ism as state religion. Traditionally, this transition has been described as the Safaviyya abandoning their orthodoxy and throwing themselves into Shi'ism and the *ghulat*, extremely heterodox Shi'i sects.[1] This narrative is, however, biased against the Safavids and their religious milieu, making Safavid Islam out to have been molded by secretive minority forces. Safavid Islam was a reflection of the Safavi movement's mass nature and its basis in the twin milieus of Sufism and popular Islam. Popular Islamic practice in the medieval Middle East, while sharing elements of Shi'ism such as veneration for 'Ali, does not fit neatly into the typical division of Islam into Sunni and Shi'i. Centering on

[1] For a major example, see: Michel Mazzoui, *The Origins of the Safawids: Šiʿism, Ṣufism, and the Ġulāt* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag GMBH, 1972): 83; Matti Moosa, *Extremist Shiites: The Ghulat Sects* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1988): xiii.

Sufi orders as networks of political, social, and religious organization and incorporating veneration of ‘Ali, popular Islam transcended this false dichotomy. A hard distinction between Sunnism and Shi’ism as two opposing forms of widely practiced Islam inaccurately describes the religious world of medieval Islam.

To work toward a better understanding of the Safavid transition—in addition to placing the Safavids in their religious, social, and material contexts—I will employ a Marxist framework. The Safavids became a populist, antinomian, intensely political movement that had a social base in the peasantry and the less powerful nomads. The merger between Sufism and popular Islam, the twin milieus mentioned above, was the political combination which propelled the Safavid dynasty and Safaviyya order to political power. Bringing these forces together was necessary to effectively mobilize their mass base and respond to the contradictions of post-Mongol Iranian society. This Marxist, merger-focused framework within the context of the political economy of post-Mongol Iran and the social context of religiosity during the time of the Safavids makes the picture of Safavid success become clearer: the Safavids were successful in establishing a new state with a new religious-political ideology due to the merger of Sufi organization with popular Islam.

The State of the Scholarship

The field of Safavid studies has received an invaluable influx of new perspectives and voices in just the last fifteen years. There remains relatively little scholarly work on the Safavi movement before their seizure of power; in general, however, the trend has been toward a wider array of scholarship from a wider diversity of scholars. Whereas for

the past century, the study of the Safavids was the interest of mostly Euro-American orientalists, it has since broadened, and there has been more work outside of the traditionally dominant realms of philology and the history of elites. Safavid scholarship can be divided into two general categories: traditional and contemporary. “Traditional scholarship” is those scholarly works, primarily from the twentieth century, which provide the foundation for Safavid studies through philology, elite history, and poetry. “Contemporary scholarship,” on the other hand, is a purely chronological term. Rather than describing a specific school of thought, it describes scholarly works which have been published in the last two decades.

Traditional Safavid scholarship begins with Vladimir Minorsky (1877-1966), a Russian orientalist and founder of the twentieth century study of the Safavids as a distinct polity, though he was a scholar of Iran and the Caucasus generally. His major contribution to Safavid studies was his translation and examination of the poetry of the first Safavid Shah, Shah Isma’il (892-930/1487-1524). His contribution provides invaluable quotations for the examination of Isma’il’s place in the Safavid transition. After Minorsky, the other most important voice in the realm of traditional scholarship is Roger Savory (1925-2022), author of *Iran Under the Safavids* (1980). Savory is much more focused on the later era of Shah ‘Abbas the Great (979-1038/1571-1629), but does cover the period of the Safaviyya order and Shah Isma’il in enough detail that his work is an invaluable resource. While incorporating some discussion of Safavid economy, he is primarily an elite historian, and one who excessively relies on European sources. Where he does innovate on Minorsky, it is for the worse, such as in his strange

assessment that the Safavids were "totalitarian."[2] Ultimately, however, Minorsky and Savory still provide valuable foundations, even if they should be understood in the context of orientalist, Eurocentric, elite-focused history.

The crucial transition point between traditional and contemporary scholarship is the work of Kathryn Babayan, who shifts focus to the period of the Safavid transition and the Safavids' mostly Turkic militant arm, the *Qizilbash* (Turkic for "red head," in reference to the red headgear they wore). While not the first to work into the era of the Safaviyya Order, her focus on the *Qizilbash* is ultimately the context within which most later scholarship is situated. She explores the *Qizilbash* and the role of popular Islam and Shi'ism in the Safavid transition in works such as "The Safavid Synthesis: From Qizilbash Islam to Imamite Shi'ism" (1994) and *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs: Cultural Landscapes of Early Modern Iran* (2002). While she is not properly contemporary, having begun her work toward the end of the twentieth century, it is Babayan's *Qizilbash* studies that opened the door to the wide array of contemporary scholarship on the Safavids and their road to power.

After Babayan, contemporary Safavid studies flourished and broadened. For the purposes of this paper, three contemporary scholars are most important, each of whom will be discussed topically. To contextualize the Safavid transition, it is important to understand the material conditions of Iranian society before and during it. While not focusing specifically on the Safavid transition, Willem Floor was the first to commit himself to a complete economic material history of the Safavids, with such works as *A Fiscal History of Iran in the Safavid and Qajar Periods* (2000). His work provides a

[2] Roger Savory, "Some Reflections on Totalitarian Tendencies in the Safavid State," *Der Islam: Journal of the History and Culture of the Middle East* Vol. 53, no. 2 (1976): 226.

foundational understanding of the material conditions of the time and the economic base for the Safavid superstructure. He also discusses the political structures and organization of the Safavids in more detail than his predecessors, in articles such as "The Khalifeh al-kholafah of the Safavid Sufi Order" (2003).

In addition to the material-economic context, the Safavids should also be placed in their ideological-theological context. Two further contemporary scholars provide valuable work in this regard: Riza Yildirim and Ayfer Karakaya-Stump. Both are specialists in minority Shi'i-inflected religious movements such as the Alevis and Bektashis, placing the Safavid-*Qizilbash* in that context. Riza Yildirim contributes to the scholarship on the early Safavids in articles such as "The Safavid-Qizilbash Ecumene and the Formation of the Qizilbash-Alevi Community in the Ottoman Empire, c. 1500- c. 1700" (2019) and "The Rise of the Safavids as a Political Dynasty: The Revolution of Shāh Esmā'Il, the Founder of the Safavid State" (2021). He continues Babayan's centering of the *Qizilbash*, declaring the Safavids a "millenarian revolutionary movement."[3] While much of his work centers the connections between the Safavids and Shi'i-influenced popular movements, in "The Rise of the Safavids as a Political Dynasty," he also contextualizes the Safavid transition by referring to the Turkic background of its members and the socio-geopolitical context of the post-Mongol world.[4] Ayfer Karakaya-Stump provides another perspective on this aspect of Safavid studies in works such as *The Kizilbash-Alevis in Ottoman Anatolia: Sufism, Politics, and Community* (2020), and the article "Who really were the Kizilbash? a rethinking of the Kizilbash movement in light of new sources and research" (2021). She focuses

[3] Riza Yildirim, "The Rise of the Safavids as a Political Dynasty: The Revolution of Shāh Esmā'Il, the Founder of the Safavid State," in *The Safavid World* ed. Rudi Matthee (London: Routledge, 2022), 56.
[4] Ibid, 58-65.

specifically on Safavid-*Qizilbash* influence in Anatolia and on the religious aspect of Safavid ideology, rather than the specifics of the Safavid transition, but her work is still invaluable. She extensively discusses the nature of the *Qizilbash* militant movement, without simplifying it down to ethnic qualities or reductive categories.

While not the especial purview of any single scholar, the subject of the early Safavids has interested many over the years. The lively contemporary scholarship on the Safavids provides new perspectives for a more nuanced reappraisal of the Safavid transition, beyond the burdens of the traditional elite, Sunni-biased, Ottoman-biased, and Western-biased histories. The goal of this paper is not to argue in favor of any particular scholar's stance, but rather to synthesize the best of the contemporary scholarship on the Safavid road to power, using certain sources translated and provided by major traditional scholars, to come to a multifaceted understanding of this crucial transition.

The Post-Mongol Context

The leaders of the Safavid-*Qizilbash* movement made history, but while people "make their own history,... they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past."[5] To properly understand the Safavid road to power, it must first be placed within the context of those circumstances. The Safavids emerge in an Iran redefined by two waves of bloody conquest: first the conquest of Chinggis (615-655/1219-1258), then that of Timur (782-799/1381-1397). This period was a transition more devastating to the base of Iranian society than the

[5] Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1963), 15.

previous Seljuq or Arab conquests; while segments of the Iranian Muslim elite held onto some influence through the conquest, the general populace was utterly destroyed. Arab and Persian sources contemporary to the conquest describe cities and provinces losing millions to Mongol swords, although not all sources agree on the specifics; compare Ibn al-Athir's account of 700,000 killed in Merv with Juvaini's astounding 1,300,000.[6] While these extreme numbers should be taken with a grain of salt, they indicate the impact and reach of Mongol bloodshed; they imply "a grandiose scale of mass-extermination, astounding the imagination of contemporaries."[7] Agriculture was also likely affected by the destruction and disrepair of the *qanat*, underground irrigation tunnels widespread in the Iranian plateau.[8]

The Safaviyya Order first emerged in the aftermath of this bloodshed, founded by Safi ad-Din Ardabili's assumption of the leadership of the Zahediyya, a preexisting Sufi order centered on Ardabil which became the Safaviyya under Safi ad-Din, in 700/1301 (Safi ad-Din's very city of origin was sacked by the Mongols in 616/1220).[9] A second wave of conquest came in the 8th/14th century under the leadership of Timur, albeit without casualties as extensive as the preceding Mongol conquest. Notably, however, Timur's rule also involved a systematic transference of resources, production, and population out of the Iranian plateau into Transoxiana.[10] While economic motivations were also behind the earlier Mongol conquest, Timur's project involved a

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[6] I.P. Petrushevsky, "The Socio-Economic Condition of Iran Under the Īl-Khāns," in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, ed. J.A. Boyle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 5:485; Peter Jackson, *The Mongols and the Islamic World: From Conquest to Conversion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 162-165.
[7] Petrushevsky, "The Socio-Economic Condition of Iran," 486.
[8] Jackson, *The Mongols and the Islamic World*, 175.
[9] Roger Savory, *Iran Under the Safavids*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 1; Ibid, 6-8.
[10] H.R. Roemer, "Tīmūr in Iran," in *The Cambridge History of Iran* ed. Peter Jackson and Laurence Lockhart (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 6:52-57.

peripheralization of the already decimated Iranian plateau to serve his state-building project in central Asia.

Iran's economic and social base was devastated by conquest and peripheralization, but what precisely was this base? Iran was an overwhelmingly agrarian country, with land worked by a large peasant class and owned by nobility and the state. While the accounts of population decline during the Mongol conquest center on the destruction of cities, it is very likely that these numbers also encompass the depopulation of the surrounding countryside as well; the peasantry around cities such as Nishapur likely fell in similar numbers to the townsfolk of the city proper.[11] Land ownership was generally divided into *mulk*, lands held privately, and *iqta'*, lands nominally owned by the state but conditionally bequeathed to a landowner who received the right to collect the *iqta'*s taxes for themself.[12] By the Mongol conquest, the vast majority of land in Iran was held in *iqta'*, and these were increasingly distant from control or intervention by central administration.[13] The economic burden on the peasants on *iqta'* lands increased leading up to and during the aftermath of the Mongol conquest, primarily due to *iqta'* holders' incentives to squeeze as much monetary value as possible from their holdings through the land tax.[14] This burden was intensified under the Ilkhans when Ghazan, the first Ilkhanid ruler to convert to Islam, enforced mobility restrictions on peasants under *iqta*' in his effort to reconcile traditional Mongol law and Islamic *shari'a*, tying formerly nominally free peasants to the land.[15] Between

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[11] Petrushevsky, "The Socio-Economic Condition of Iran," 485□486.
[12] Ibid, 515; Ibid, 518.
[13] Ann K.S. Lambton, *Continuity and Change in Medieval Persia: Aspects of Administrative, Economic and Social History, 11th□14th Century* (Albany: The Persian Heritage Foundation, 1988), 98-99.
[14] Ali Anooshahr, "Timurids and Turcomans: Transition and Flowering in the Fifteenth Century," in *The Oxford Handbook of Iranian History* ed. Touraj Daryaee (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 274; Lambton, *Continuity and Change*, 100-101.
[15] Petrushevsky, "The Socio-Economic Condition of Iran," 523-525.

widespread death, the intensification of tax burdens, and the tying to the land under the Ilkhanids, it is no wonder that peasants under the Ilkhanids and Timurids perennially opted for nomadism, banditry, or revolt.[16]

Parallel to sedentary Iranian society is the world of the nomads, which, while already present in Iran, grew ever more prominent during and after the Mongol conquest. While both the peasant-town relationship and nomadic pastoralist society interacted with the state in meaningful ways, they are more properly conceived of as distinct but interrelated forms of economic and social life. Although the towns and agrarian countryside were decimated by the armies of Chinggis and Timur, the populations of nomads grew significantly. This growth was due to the steady flow of peasants into nomadic groups mentioned above, as well as "a considerable migration of Mongol nomadic tribes into the territory of the Īl-Khāns, not to mention that of Turkish nomads."[17] The increasing importance of the division of the economic base of society into sedentary and nomadic parts is indicated by the Ilkhanid "dual administrative structure, one Mongol, the other Iranian."[18] It is impossible to say, given the lack of accurate population data, how much the nomadic population increased, but by all accounts it was a notable increase. Petrushevsky describes how "previously agricultural territory became pasture for the nomads," and argues that this trend was negative for Iranian economic development, in addition to the general population decline, due to their year round cattle grazing and regular raiding of peasant communities.[19] While the

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[16] Anooshahr, "Timurids and Turcomans," 274; Petrushevsky, "The Socio-Economic Condition of Iran," 489.
[17] Petrushevsky, "The Socio-Economic Condition of Iran," 489.
[18] Denise Aigle, "Iran Under Mongol Domination: The effectiveness and failings of a dual administrative system," vol. 52, Supplement LE POUVOIR À L'ÂGE DES SULTANATS DANS LE "BILĀD AL-SHĀM" / POWER IN THE AGE OF SULTANATES IN THE "BILĀD AL-SHĀM (2006-2007): 72. JSTOR.
[19] Petrushevsky, "The Socio-Economic Condition of Iran," 490.

element of consistent raids was a definite hindrance to agricultural development, the introduction of local peasants into nomadic groups over time likely lessened the ecological impacts of their cattle grazing compared to sedentary agriculture. Rather than holding back economic life, increasingly prominent nomadism simply represented a change, "[b]ecause, although nomad cattle-breeding was known in Iran from ancient times, it had never occupied as important a position in the economy, as it did under the Mongols and later."[20] In the centuries leading up to the Safavid revolution, nomadism had redefined and shifted economic and social dynamics in Iran. The numbers of nomads in the country increased significantly due to migration and some peasants' transitioning to nomadism, and ever more of economic life was connected to the pastoral herding of Turkic and Mongol nomads. Sedentary agriculture and its associated urban society were now on more of an even footing with nomadic pastoralist society than ever before.

While there was already steady decentralization of authority in the centuries following the 'Abbasid Revolution (129-132/747-750), the Mongol conquest and its aftermath steadily broke down, in Iran at least, the well established relationships between the state, the Muslim religious leadership (*'ulema*), and the people. There was a double crisis of legitimacy: first with the complete destruction of the 'Abbasids during the sack of Baghdad in 655/1258 and secondly with the simple fact of the Mongols' nature as non-Muslim rulers. For Islamic elites, especially the *'ulema*, all of the Muslim lands conquered and administered by the Mongols before their conversions to Islam were *Dar al-harb*, the "house of war."[21] Collaboration with the Mongol authorities thus

[20] Petrushevsky, "The Socio-Economic Condition of Iran," 490.
[21] Jackson, *The Mongols and the Islamic World*, 47; Ibid, 297.

amounted to an abandonment of the paradigm that had defined so much of the Islamic political worldview for so long. For the Muslim elites of the time, there was no meaningful alternative without leaving the realm of Sunni orthodoxy. The full picture of Islamic compromises and responses to Mongol rule is beyond the scope of this paper. While by the end of the Ilkhanate, non-Islamic rule had given way to conversion and, subsequently, the rule of Timur and his successors, the crisis of political legitimacy persisted, and kings innovated new methods of legitimacy, such as Timur's claims to be Lord of the Conjunction.[22] The *'ulema* and other segments of the traditional elite did not provide a meaningful alternative for the general populace; they were more interested in challenging *dhimmi* (non-Muslim) Ilkhanid vizier appointments than advocating for the decimated peasantry.[23] Beyond the deepening problem of political legitimacy, there was also a steady trend of lack of central authority, namely after Timur. While conquering figures such as Chinggis, Hülegu, and Timur brought relatively brief (and intensely brutal) centralization of authority, in between the reigns of such figures political disintegration was the norm. Before the Safavid Revolution, Iran was governed by a variety of nomadic polities, such as the Qara Qoyunlu and Aq Qoyunlu, which tended to center more on nomadic society, subordinating urbanism to nomadism.[24] The lack of elite political legitimacy and the disintegration of central authority established the conditions for the rise of the Safavids.

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[22] A. Azfar Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign: Sacred Kingship and Sainthood in Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012): 28-37.
[23] Lambton, *Continuity and Change*, 307-309; Ibid, 313-314; Ibid, 321.
[24] Anooshahr, "Timurids and Turcomans," 272-273.

Sufism in Society

Social conditions in Iran after the Mongol conquest were rife with instability and contradictions, which affected the lower classes and weakened the legitimacy of orthodox elite authorities in their eyes. Thus, new social organizations and networks of support were needed to provide for a populace decimated by conquest, exploited by *iqta'* holders, and lacking political voice. While the roots of its presence among the lower classes go back to before the Mongol conquest, Sufi orders increasingly filled this need in post-Mongol society. Many Sufi orders had become "tribunes of the people," to borrow a term from Roman history, integrated into popular society and voicing the social demands of the voiceless.[25] This is in addition to their general widespread presence across the *Dar al-Islam* and the increasing prominence of Sufism in popular Islamic practice. In many ways, the practices and figures of Sufi Islam were likely more important for the average Muslim than members of the elite *'ulema*, particularly after the Mongol conquest.[26] Although a thorough review of Iranian Sufism can not be attempted here, the social position of Sufism is important to examine for a proper understanding of the Safavids. Not only did the Safavids begin as a Sufi order, but the position of Sufis as medieval tribunes of the people and the vast reach of orders like the Safaviyya, which seems to have spanned the length and breadth of Iran as early as the time of Ardabili, contributed to their transition to power.[27]

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[25] Frank Frost Abbott, *A History and Description of Roman Political Institutions* (Boston: Ginn & Company, 1901): 27; Arnaldo Momigliano, "Tribunis Plebis," in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* ed. M. Cary et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949): 923-924.
[26] Lambton, *Continuity and Change*, 321-322.
[27] Savory, *Iran Under the Safavids*, 10.

Sufi networks were not only geographically widespread; they also held significant authority and legitimacy in the eyes of the people. While this will be more thoroughly explored in the following section on popular Islam in post-Mongol Iran, it is worth mentioning here. In her work on Medieval Iranian society, *Continuity and Change in Medieval Persia*, Lambton discusses the role of Sufis as a group "among the religious classes [which] enjoyed a special position in society."[28] Because of their "wide following among the people," they were a social grouping which Iranian elites could not ignore. Political elites often patronized them and consulted them, sometimes out of a real spiritual connection to Sufism but more often simply due to their immense popularity.[29] Some Sufis even served as mediators of conflict between members of the elite.[30] There was a notable tension here, however; by the time of the Mongol conquests, a culture of political quietism, oppositionalism, and distancing from temporal elites had developed within Sufi circles.[31] It is this specific combination of factors which allows for Sufis to become medieval popular tribunes: widespread popularity among the lower classes, contacts with the elite, and a political culture of distance and oppositionalism. Had medieval Iranian Sufis lacked any one of these aspects, their position as tribunes would likely have been less prominent.

The organizational structures of Sufi orders, and more specifically of the Safaviyya Order, also contributed to the Safavid transition. These orders, more properly termed *tariqat*, meaning "ways" or "paths", coalesced around a tradition passed down from master to disciple over the course of generations, the master-disciple relationship

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[28] Lambton, *Continuity and Change*, 318.
[29] Lambton, *Continuity and Change*, 319.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Antony Black, *The History of Islamic Political Thought: From the Prophet to the Present* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 133.

being central to Sufism, especially by the time of the Safavids.[32] The central element of Sufi Islam—the progression through mystic, esoteric, and mendicant initiations along the Sufi path—was facilitated by the master, the *sheikh* or *pir*. This progression and its facilitation by the *sheikh* is mirrored in the structure of medieval orders: the master at its head and its center and the various disciples emanating out, organized around him. These kinds of structures are relatively common for social groupings in premodern Islam, centering on a division between the inner and the outer: for instance, the division between *khassa* (meaning both private and the elite) and *'amma* (meaning both public and the masses) in medieval Iranian thought or the structure of the Ottoman harem contemporary to the rise of the Safavids.[33] Sufism has an egalitarian element within it, but the Sufi *sheikh*, by this period, was undoubtedly above his disciples. The head of a given *tariqa* had the highest authority within his circle, where "the Sufi aspirant now appeared as a corpse in the hands of the Sufi master, who had unquestionable authority over his novices."[34] Coupled with the wide geographic spread and intense popularity of Sufis, it quickly becomes apparent how influential the leader of a given order could become.

The Safaviyya brought together all of these elements, due to being a widespread and popular Sufi order, and utilized these factors to their political advantage. The general popularity of Sufis among the lower classes, and more specifically the position of post-Mongol Sufis as medieval "tribunes of the people," allowed for a close relationship between the Safaviyya and the lower classes. Although the Safaviyya did

[32] J. Spencer Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971): 166; Ibid, 173-175.
[33] Lambton, *Continuity and Change*, 224; Leslie P. Peirce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 6-12.
[34] Ahmet T. Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 117.

enjoy elite support at times, including the patronage of the Ilkhans, the steady integration of ‘Ali veneration, millenarianism, and more radical approaches to politics indicate that the balance tipped more and more toward the lower classes over time, although this will be explored more thoroughly in the following section.[35] Over time the Safavids also increasingly came into conflict with established rulers; in 816/1413, for instance, a member of the Qara Qoyunlu confederation pillaged the Safaviyya shrine and kidnapped a member of the Safavid family.

The unquestionable authority of the Sufi *sheikh* for his followers provided the basis for broad political mobilization, as well as being the basis for the political structure of the revolutionary Safavid polity during and after the seizure of power. Following the seizure of power, the Safavid *shah* was not simply a king, but was also a Sufi master and millenarian omen. While the latter of these roles will be explored below, the former allowed for him to control the religious life of his ever increasing number of followers and adherents, either directly or through the intercession of the *khalifeh al-kholafah*, a position which will receive more attention in the section on Safavid political structures. The role of the Safavid *shah* as Sufi *sheikh* also accounts for the forcible integration of non-Safaviyya Sufi orders into the Safaviyya; the Safavids governed what could be termed a *tariqa*-state, simultaneously kingdom and order, unable to accommodate Sufi paths outside of its own. The Safavids were a political movement that operated on the Sufi model and grew out of the Sufi milieu; while they integrated other influences over the course of their history, their fundamental model of politics was that of Sufism.

[35] Savory, *Iran Under the Safavids*, 10.

The Influence of Popular Islam

The forms of practice and belief which were held to by the general populace during the medieval period is a very difficult question to approach, and one which this paper does not claim to describe in all its detail. In many ways, the study of medieval Islam has been often overly focused on the religion of elites, whether the *'ulema* or political elites, with the study of popular Islam only emerging in the late 20th century.[36] While much of this focus is simply due to the availability of particular sources, it also reflects a general lacuna of direct study of the lower classes, especially in the premodern world. It is important, however, to approach popular Islam as it was actually practiced and understood in the period leading up to the rise of the Safavids, because it is just as much in the milieu of popular Islam as of Sufism that the Safavids as a political movement emerge. Establishing a general picture of popular practice in this period, albeit a sketch rather than a detailed description, is necessary to fully appreciate the nature of the Safavid synthesis.

But what was medieval popular Islam? Was popular Islam a "sort of oxymoron[, consisting] simply of abuses… 'the religion of the streets,' which needed reform," as Dr. Abd al-Halim Mahmud of al-Azhar put it?[37] Such descriptions illustrate the intense disdain for popular practice on the part of elites, ignoring that Islam, as with all religions, has always had a popular aspect, and that it would be impossible for any religion to become so widespread were its practices restricted to a selective elite. In the Iranian context, Islam was able to become so well established by the Mongol conquest not solely due to state backing, but also due to events such as the 'Abbasid Revolution,

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[36] Patrick D. Gaffney, "Popular Islam," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* Vol. 524, Political Islam (November 1992): 39. JSTOR.
[37] Ibid, 39.

which integrated Iranian people into Islamic religious, social, and political life, making them members of an Islamic community rather than subjects of an Islamic empire.[38] While the shift from the Umayyads to the ‘Abbasids was primarily a simple shift of leadership, that shift was propelled by popular sentiment, often contained in religious language.[39] Central among this was a reverence for ‘Ali, which both led to followers of ‘Ali to at times support and then break away from the ‘Abbasids. This popular reverence for ‘Ali continues after the ‘Abbasid Revolution, emerging in popular movements across Iran such as the Khurram-Dinan (“those of the joyful religion”), and pervading social institutions such as the *futuwwa*, brotherhoods which were very prominent in social and political life from Egypt to Iran.[40] From the earliest periods of widespread folk Islam in Iran and Iraq, simultaneously religious and political veneration for the figure of ‘Ali was prominent.

This is not to say that medieval Iranian popular Islam was Shi’i; in fact, the division between Sunni and Shi’i has little descriptive value for medieval popular Islam. The usage of these terms as fundamental divisions of the Muslim community is an anachronistic retroactive definition, a misapplication of norms that postdate the establishments of the Ottoman and Safavid empires. While there was political repression on the part of “orthodox” authorities of the activities of underground Shi’i organizations, as well as vibrant and vitriolic debate between the Sunni *‘ulema* and Shi’i scholars, the masses of Islamicate Iran likely maintained adherence to established

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[38] Patricia Crone, *The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran: Rural Revolt and Local Zoroastrianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013): 489-493.
[39] Moshe Sharon, *Black Banners from the East: The Establishment of the ‘Abbasid State– Incubation of a Revolt* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1983): 19-20.
[40] Crone, *The Nativist Prophets*, 11-27; Riza Yildirim, “Shi’itisation of the Futuwwa Tradition in the Fifteenth Century,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* Volume 40, No. 1 (January 2013): 55-70. JSTOR.

shari'ah as well as simultaneous reverence for 'Ali and Sufi saints.[41] Before the age of the so-called gunpowder empires, using the terms Sunni or Shi'i to describe lower class religiosity would have been extrapolating the conflicts of the political-religious elites and sectarian groups onto the general populace. Getting peasants and nomads to outright identify with one or the other of these signifiers was a state-sponsored project which took root after the period in question. After the Mongol invasion, both the Sunni *'ulema* and Shi'i sectarians had influence in Iran, attaining popular support or working within lower class communities. For instance, it was urban Iranian Sunni *'ulema* who headed a widespread campaign against the appointment of Jewish or Jewish converts to Islam to the office of vizier.[42] On the Shi'i side, during the age of Ilkhanid religious toleration, formerly underground sects were able to operate more in the open, using the situation to their advantage to propagandize to the popular classes.[43] Put simply, categories which hold true for modern Islam are reductive when applied retroactively. Popular Islam during the medieval period seems to have spanned categorical divisions and, in many ways, transcended them.

The specific form which popular religion often took in the post-Mongol period, especially in terms of its intersection with political-social affairs, was millenarianism.[44] As has already been mentioned, the Mongol conquests were truly apocalyptic in scope, both in the political arena and in terms of their demographic and social impact. This, coupled with the coming of the first Islamic millennium, led to a flourishing of charismatic

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[41] Anooshahr, "Timurids and Turcomans," 278.
[42] Lambton, *Continuity and Change*, 307-309.
[43] Ibid, 255; Ibid, 320.
[44] Said Amir Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam: Religion, Political Order, and Societal Change in Shi'ite Iran from the Beginning to 1890* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984): 66-67; Ayfer Karakaya-Stump, "Who Really were the Kizilbash? A Rethinking of the Kizilbash Movement in Light of New Sources and Research," in *The Safavid World* ed. Rudi Mathee (London: Routledge, 2022): 39.

religious movements which anticipated the coming of the *Mahdi*, a messianic figure in Islamic eschatology, and the Day of Judgment. This was more than a simple coincidence; millenarianism was increasingly the political form of popular religion in the aftermath of the Mongol conquest, with populist groups coalescing around charismatic leaders who claimed to presage the coming millennium.[45] The Safavi movement, as much as it was a Sufi movement and an 'Ali-venerating movement, was also a millenarian movement; it existed in that milieu, and the leaders of the Safaviyya, especially Shah Isma'il, legitimized themselves in part using the millenarian model.[46] Aspects of Safavid millenarianism will be discussed in the following section, as well as being contrasted with preceding populist millenarian groups below.

The Safavid political-religious movement was not a movement led by members of the lower class. Neither Sheikh Safi ad-Din nor any of his successors were peasants or poor nomads. However, in their ideology, they incorporated the core elements of popular religiosity in the post-Mongol Iranian context. While the leaders were not members of the lower class, in their political activity they effectively mirrored the lower class context into which many of their members and followers were integrated. This, more so than the traditional account of the Safaviyya's turn to supposed "*ghulat*" ideas, explains the shift of the Safaviyya Order from a Sunni-leaning *tariqa* to a political-religious movement that was ultimately comfortable transitioning to Twelver Shi'ism. The Safavids were fully integrated into the cultural, religious, and political practices of medieval popular Islam due to their role as Sufi tribunes. 'Ali

[45] Arjomand, *The Shadow of God*, 66-67.
[46] Ibid, 80-82; Kathryn Babayan, "The Safavids in Iranian History (1501-1722)," in *The Oxford Handbook of Iranian History* ed. Touraj Daryaee (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012): 285-287; Karakaya-Stump, "Who Really were the Kizilbash?", 39-40.

veneration—which was not prominent among other Sufi orders—and millenarianism were the key pillars of post-Mongol popular Islam. While other Sufi orders similarly played a tribune role in Iran and in other Islamicate societies, their seeming unwillingness to adopt such popular religious ideas as ‘Ali veneration and charismatic millenarianism indicate a distance from full integration with popular religion. It is difficult to properly draw conclusions on this issue; it is, in a sense, working backward from the result to attempt to ascertain the cause. However, given the lack of lower class sources and Safavid sources preceding the seizure of political power, such a line of inquiry is necessary to approach the question. The prominence of ‘Ali veneration and millenarianism in Safavid ideology is the reflection of the people on their worldview.

The Safavid Merger

That there was a notable shift in Safavid ideology between the times of Sheikh Safi ad-Din and Shah Isma’il is widely acknowledged. But what was the nature of this shift? Was there a power-hungry tendency from the beginning, manifesting in the succession of Safi ad-Din’s son to the leadership of the order, as Savory claims?[47] Such a claim is superficial and overly reliant on elite history and a narrative biased against the Safavids; no, there is another explanation for the Safavid transition. Babayan refers to it as the Safavid synthesis: the three part transition from “orthodox” Sufi order to *Qizilbash* Islam to state-sponsored Twelver Shi’ism.[48] Babayan’s synthesis describes a larger span of time than this paper, but what she terms *Qizilbash* Islam is the religious expression of the political merger that propelled the Safavids to political rule, the

[47] Savory, *Iran Under the Safavids*, 8-9.
[48] Kathryn Babayan, “The Safavid Synthesis: From Qizilbash Islam to Imamite Shi’ism,” *Iranian Studies* vol. 27, no. 1/4, Religion and Society in Islamic Iran during the Pre-Modern Era (1994): 135. JSTOR.

culmination of the contradictions and social forces at play in post-Mongol Iranian society. With the social-material, Sufi, and popular Islamic contexts established, these interrelated elements must be analyzed and synthesized to come to a conclusion regarding the political success of the Safavid transition.

The Safavid rise to power was successful in large part due to the political merger that undergirded their ideology: the merger between Sufism and popular millenarian Islam. By bringing these two social elements into one political-religious movement, Safavid-*Qizilbash* leadership was able to mobilize significant popular support through a strong, centralized, widespread network. This merger was able to occur due to the role of Sufis in medieval Iranian society as popular tribunes providing an opportunity for Safavid leaders to ingratiate themselves with sections of the lower classes, in both sedentary and nomadic society. This is not to minimize the role of choice in this merger; many other Sufi *tariqa*s involved in advocacy for the lower classes did not evince any sort of integration with popular millenarianism. Allowing for the incorporation of popular Islamic theology and practice into Safaviyya was likely as much an active political strategic choice as it was an expression of social conditions. Bringing these two elements together presented a strong response to the contradictions of post-Mongol Iran. Popular religious ideas such as ‘Ali veneration and millenarianism spoke to the worldview of the peasants and less powerful nomads in this period, while Sufi networks and the culture of Sufi leadership provided a strong organizational ethos and structure. With the position of *sheikh* having unquestionable authority, coupled with millenarian charismatic authority, the masses of people finding appeal in Safavid millenarianism could be significantly mobilized to political ends.

Mass political mobilizations are often a result of mergers such as this, especially in the broader world-systemic transition from roughly the time of the Mongols to the 19th century.[49] The foundations of this model come primarily from European history; applying these merger models to the non-European context of the Safavid revolution allows for a deeper understanding of the Safavid merger. Karl Kautsky, the so-called "Pope of Marxism" of the Second International, coined what historian Lars Lih terms the "merger formula" to describe the necessary conditions for success of the Marxist Social Democratic movement: "Social democracy is the merger of socialism and the worker movement."[50] In this formula socialism is the intellectual-ideological element, while the worker movement is both a mass base and those organizational structures which have emerged in the fledgling labor movement of the 19th century. This is very similar to the formula from the opening lines of Russian anarchist and naturalist Petr Kropotkin's *The Great French Revolution*:

> Two great currents prepared and made the Great French Revolution. One of them, the current of ideas, concerning the political reorganization of States, came from the middle classes; the other, the current of action, came from the people, both peasants and workers in towns, who wanted to obtain immediate and definite improvements in their economic condition. And when these two currents met and joined in the endeavour to realise an aim which for some time was common to both, when they had helped each other for a certain time, the result was the Revolution.[51]

To connect these early 20th century formulations to the Safavids, Sufism and popular millenarian Islam would be the "two great currents" of post-Mongol Iran. The use of

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[49] Alexander Anievas and Kerem Nişancioğolu, *How the West Came to Rule: The Geopolitical Origins of Capitalism* (London: Pluto Press, 2015): 274-279.
[50] Lars T. Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered: What is to be Done? in Context* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2008): 41-42; Karl Kautsky, *The Class Struggle (Erfurt Program)* trans. William E. Bohn (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1910): 199.
[51] Petr Kropotkin, *The Great French Revolution 1789-1793*, trans. N.F. Dryhurst (London: William Heinemann, 1909): 1.

these historic formulas is not to make direct equivalence between the intellectual-political traditions of the Enlightenment or of Marxism, or the revolutions in France or Russia, and the Safavid-*Qizilbash* movement; in fact, Savory's overzealous tendency to analogy is one thing which holds his analysis back. Rather, it is to acknowledge a tendency across these revolutionary mass mobilizations throughout history, whether they completely upended the foundations of society as in France, or primarily facilitated a shift in leadership and religious ideology, as in the Safavid case.

The Safavid-*Qizilbash* movement effecting a merger with the popular millenarianism of the peasant class and less powerful nomads does not, however, mean that its leadership was itself of the peasantry. Rather, it was a movement led by religious authorities and tribal leadership that used the language of popular discontent to grow its base of support. The shift toward politics on the part of the Safaviyya likely occurred in no small part due to the *tariqa* owning land in the form of *waqf*, religious endowment normally backed by the authority of the state.[52] While *waqf* was legally distinct from *iqta'* (and holders of *waqf* had more rights to the succession of ownership over the land), the tendency over the course of the post-Mongol period with regards to *waqf* and labor on *waqf* lands was much the same as was discussed above regarding *iqta'*. Crucially, however, the owners of *waqf* lands were not military. Traditionally, they were unable to defend their lands without recourse to the state. During the unstable times of Timur, Aq Qoyunlu, and Qara Qoyunlu, that recourse was uncertain, with dominant states shifting over the course of the period. While the Safaviyya had enjoyed support for their *waqf* lands at times, at other times they were forced to take matters into their own hands. The mobilization of their widespread mass base and establishment of the *Qizilbash* as a

[52] Savory, *Iran Under the Safavids*, 9; Ibid, 14.

military wing of the *tariqa* were likely responses to this.[53] Savory argues that the Safaviyya began to shift toward seeking the seizure of political power as Safi ad-Din's choice to have his son succeed him as *sheikh*, but this is unlikely; familial succession was not uncommon, and there are numerous other potential factors which preclude drawing Savory's conclusion that the Safaviyya was seemingly power hungry from its earliest days. The Safaviyya Order, like all other social and political formations throughout human history, had economic needs and conditions which in no small part shaped and determined their behavior. They were owners of *waqf* property in a time when property ownership was unstable and were even subjected to pillage, as in 816/1413 when the Safaviyya shrine in Ardabil was plundered by a member of the Qara Qoyunlu confederation.[54] They were also inundated with the voices of the poor and downtrodden from across Iran and needed to respond to the social and political contradictions of their day. It is no surprise that they came to the conclusion of the Safavid merger: bringing together Sufi organizational traditions and the practices of the general populace, both peasant and nomad, to mobilize a mass movement to protect their property, their *tariqa*, and the interests of the people under their leadership.

Thus far, the nomad element has been relatively underappreciated; it is time to bring focus to this major element of Safavid political mobilization. The military wing of the Safavid movement, the *Qizilbash*, was made up primarily of Turkmen nomads, from a variety of tribes, although it seems that less powerful, more discontented tribes were their earliest military supporters.[55] This Turkmen military wing is no doubt central to the Safavid seizure of power; there could be no Safavid revolution without it, and much of

[53] Anooshahr, "Timurids and Turcomans," 278.
[54] Savory, *Iran Under the Safavids*, 13.
[55] Yildirim, "The Rise of the Safavids as a Political Dynasty," 61.

Safavid ideology comes from the major role which the *Qizilbash* had in the movement. Yildirim uses a framework very similar to the Safavid merger discussed above when he describes the "fusion of Turkoman religiosity and the Safavid *tariqa*, which created a politico-religious synthesis that came to be known as 'Qezelbāsh Sufism'" as part of his project to recenter the *Qizilbash* in the discussion of the early Safavids, but he bends the stick too far, overcorrecting and overasserting a singularly ethnic nature of the Safavid movement.[56] He describes the Safavids as simply an expression of Turkmen discontent at the rise of a new *shari'ah*-based Irano-Islamic state system centered primarily on the Ottoman state with elements in the Aq Qoyunlu and, further east, in Mughal India, an outburst of Turkic politics in reaction to a sedentary turn.[57] Although Yildirim is generally correct in his description of the Safavids, this characterization of the Safavid political movement as almost a reactionary organization which, by the time of Isma'il, was almost entirely Turkic in nature is inaccurate. The *Qizilbash* were brought together much more on Sufi communal networks than ethnic identification.[58] Although rhetoric of the time utilized the division between Turk and Tajik, the cultural picture was more complex.

The distinction between less powerful nomads and rural peasants has purposefully not been emphasized throughout this paper. Although nomads and peasants had very different economic interests, by the time of the Safavids their cultural practices had often converged; thus, it is inaccurate to characterize the forms of popular Islamic practice integrated into Safavid ideology as specifically Turkmen in nature. This is due to the aforementioned integration into nomadic life of many peasants during the

[56] Ibid, 58.
[57] Ibid, 58-65.
[58] Karakaya-Stump, "Who Really were the Kizilbash?", 41-43.

aftermath of the Mongol conquest. ‘Ali veneration and millenarianism, the theological and political expressions of peasant discontent, also feature in nomadic Turkmen discontent. And, while the Safavids often continued the practice of keeping military positions with Turks and certain administrative positions with Tajiks, there is another lens through which this division can be viewed: the urban-rural divide.[59] The Tajiks appointed to positions such as vizier, state secretary, etc. were all urban in origin, while the military-religious base of the Safavid movement was primarily rural.[60] The leading figures of the *Qizilbash* military were Turkic in origin, yes, but undoubtedly many of them were of Iranian peasant descent, integrated into a predominantly Turkic nomadic society. Overreliance on a stark division between Turks and Tajiks presents an incomplete picture, reproducing reductive assumptions of the relationship between nomadic and sedentary peoples in this period. What Yildirim does very accurately note, however, is that the Safavids shifted their delineation of the ruling elite from particular Turkic tribes to members of the Sufi *tariqa*; the Safavids established a *tariqa*-state.[61] Thus, while leadership was still sharply delineated, it was theoretically universalizing, in contrast to the particularist tribal divisions of the Aq Qoyunlu and Qara Qoyunlu. In this way, the Safavid *tariqa*-state attempted to integrate both rural nomads and peasants as well as urban Tajiks into its political structure, under Safavid leadership.

[59] Yildirim, “The Rise of the Safavids as a Political Dynasty,” 68-70.
[60] Ibid, 69.
[61] Yildirim, “The Rise of the Safavids as a Political Dynasty,” 70; Karakaya-Stump, “Who Really were the Kizilbash?”, 41-43.

Safavid Politics and Governance

But what was the nature of Safavid leadership? Savory argues that the Safavids were archetypally power hungry and tyrannical, even describing Isma'il's state as "totalitarian."[62] Notably, however, the *sheikh* and shah, especially during the time of Isma'il, was not truly a powerful figure; Isma'il, for instance, was a child during the entire period of the Safavid revolution, only 14 years of age when the Safavids took power. To quote Yildirim, "one can hardly explain this astonishing success as the product of a child's acumen."[63] While the position of *sheikh* held incredible power and authority, it was not necessarily the man himself who ruled. Especially during the time of Isma'il, a collective leadership took charge in the *sheikh*'s name.[64] Power was dispersed through collective leadership, but was it still "totalitarian"? The term itself is fraught, massively overapplied and almost impossible to define, more a reflection of Savory's place in the Cold War and his overzealous analogies than the nature of Safavid political rule.[65] No, the Safavids were not "totalitarian"; but they did attempt to construct a new form of rule.

They ruled on behalf of the wide social base that they led, although their economic policies after taking power did not improve the position of the peasantry; the peasants continued to be tied to the land as under the Ilkhans.[66] Where the peasant and less powerful nomad base of the Safavids emerges in their political rule, however, is in their strong leadership under a culturally and religiously significant figurehead. To

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[62] Savory, "Some Reflections," 226.
[63] Yildirim, "The Rise of the Safavids as a Political Dynasty," 56.
[64] Ibid, 62.
[65] Domenico Losurdo, "Towards a Critique of the Category of Totalitarianism," *Historical Materialism* Vol. 12, no. 2 (January 2004): 50-53; Enzo Traverso, "Totalitarianism Between History and Theory," *History & Theory: Studies in the Philosophy of History* Vol. 56, no. 4 (December 2017): 97-118. https://doi.org/10.1111/hith.12040
[66] Willem Floor, *A Fiscal History of Iran in the Safavid and Qajar Periods* (New York: Bibliotheca Persica Press, 1998): 7-8.

borrow Marx's phrase, the peasants and nomads of Iran were a "sack of potatoes" shaken up by the violence and instability of the Mongol and Timurid periods; and just as "the tradition of all dead generations weigh like a nightmare on the brain of the living," so too did Safavid leadership lean on well established rhetorical justifications for their rule.[67] The Safavids claimed to descend from the prophet Muhammad through Fatima and 'Ali and to presage the *Mahdi*.[68] In the realm of politics, their supposed "tyranny" was the very political form which protected the interests of the Iranian lower classes. European travelers to Iran often noted, in almost Hobbesian terms, how the unquestionable power of the shah, even if admittedly mediated through collective leadership, allowed for the state to restrict the rights of arbitrary abuses by nobles, merchants, and landowners.[69] For instance, the Englishman Sir John Malcolm stated, "If the shah is not feared… the nation suffers a great increase of misery under a multitude of tyrants."[70] While the economic foundations of society remained very much the same, the political state was reshaped to reflect the political form favored by the Safavid social base.

One of the major sources for the traditional assessment of the Safavids as especially tyrannical or "totalitarian" is Shah Isma'il's poetry. This corpus of Turkish language poems is a major primary source for the study of the Safavids and their ideology, being a major form of Safavid propaganda during their rise to power. However, there has been a tendency toward overreliance on Isma'il's poetry, especially by

[67] Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, 123-124; Ibid, 15.
[68] Savory, *Iran Under the Safavids*, 2-3.
[69] Savory, *Iran Under the Safavids*, 33-34.
[70] Savory, *Iran Under the Safavids*, 33.

historians such as Minorsky and Savory. Much of Savory's assessment of Isma'il's egotistical "totalitarianism" comes from his poems, where he claims divine nature:

> I am God's eye… come now, o blind man gone astray, to behold Truth (God).
> I am that Absolute Doer of whom they speak. Sun and Moon are in my power.
> My being is God's House, know it for certain. Prostration before me is incumbent on thee, in the morn and even.
> Know for certain that with the People of Recognition… Heaven and Earth are all Truth. Do not stray!
> The garden of Sanctity has produced a (or *one*) fruit. How can it be plucked by a short-handed one?
> If you wish to join Truth to Truth, (here is) God who has reached the state of Mim.
> The one of pure connections considers his own person. Suddenly Khata'i has come by a treasure.[71]

It is no wonder that there has been such a focus on Isma'il over other early Safavid figures when he uses such language! Drawing too many conclusions from such descriptions is, however, flawed; they take Isma'il's words at face value, from a standpoint which is itself biased against the Safavids. Karakaya-Stump, in *The Kizilbash-Alevis in Ottoman Anatolia*, places Isma'il's poetry in a Sufi context, arguing that while they undeniably do speak of God and the *Mahdi*, they are less an expression of tyrannical ego and more an outflowing of millenarian Sufism.[72] Her main argument rests on Isma'il's use of the negative name "Khata'i" as his poetic pseudonym, which translates as "the wrongful."[73] Such terminology is typical of antinomian Sufism, such as the Qalandaris, well known throughout the Middle East for their practice of seeking blame for themselves.[74] Isma'il's poetry is also very similar to other contemporary Sufi poems, and in fact the relative relationship between Isma'il's poetry and the

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[71] Vladimir Minorsky and Shah Isma'il I, "The Poetry of Shah Isma'il I," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* Vol. 10, no. 4 (1942): 1047a. JSTOR.
[72] Ayfer Karakaya-Stump, *The Kizilbash/Alevis in Ottoman Anatolia: Sufism, Politics and Community* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020): 223-226.
[73] Ibid, 223.
[74] Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam*, 267-269.

propagandistic poems of other *Qizilbash* leaders illustrates that Isma'il's poems were not placed on a higher position in terms of spreading the Safavid *dawa,* or propaganda (literally translated as "invitation").[75] Isma'il was a figure vested with significant religious authority, but was not the only voice of the Safavid movement.

The Safavid movement, as has been emphasized, was a fundamentally Sufi movement, and while the influences of popular millenarian Islam and Turkmen nomadism played a significant role in its politics, the ultimate structural model for their politics and state was the Sufi *tariqa*. Isma'il was the figurehead expression of mystical Sufi authority, in whose hands the initiates of the order were like corpses, but this authority was collectively dispersed across the entire leadership of the order. The unquestionable authority of the figure of shah/*sheikh* grew out of the preexisting Sufi milieu, but was intensified by the deadly political struggle which the Safavid movement went through during the 9th/15th and 10th/16th centuries. This human representative of religious authority, the Safavid *sheikh*, came about through experiences of collective effervescence, in this case both ritual practices such as the Sufi *dhikr* (rhythmic chanted prayer) and political experiences such as the migration of the order from Ardabil or the military conquest of power during Isma'il's *khoruj* (meaning "advent", as in "advent to power").[76] Both ritual practice and political experience are moments of high emotional energy which are able to vest sacrality in a figure, and, in the case of a mass political movement like the Safavids, political authority as well.

Safavid government was ultimately structured on the Sufi model: the shah as a political and spiritual *sheikh*, integrating the whole of Iran into his *tariqa*-state. Inclusion

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[75] Karakaya-Stump, *The Kizilbash/Alevis in Ottoman Anatolia*, 225-226.
[76] Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: The Free Press, 1995): 220.

in the state's elite was tied to membership in the order, and the Safavid reaction to other Sufi orders in Iran, often decried by later Sufi apologists as anti-Sufi behavior, is much more an expression of the need on the part of the Safavid movement to subsume all religious authority into their structure. It was not a hostility to Sufism, but instead an integration of all Sufis into their circle, a standardization and universalization of the Safaviyya on a mass scale.[77] With Isma'il and his successors being both shah and *sheikh*, religious and temporal authority were united in one figure; however, the day to day functioning of both modes of authority could not always be merged. This is where a position such as the *khalifeh al-kholafa* comes in, a recognition of the political position of the Safavid shah keeping him away from the expectations of Sufi leadership.[78] The *khalifeh al-kholafa* was vested with the authority to lead *dhikr* and other Sufi rituals; however, this authority was entirely predicated on the continuing authority of the Safavid shah as a Sufi leader.[79] With no shah, there could be no *khalifeh al-kholafa*; the Safavid shah and *sheikh* was paramount. The *khalifeh al-kholafa* also served as an intermediary between the Safavid state and religiously aligned groups in Anatolia, who continued to revere the Safavid *sheikh* well after the state was established. This crucial role continued the propaganda struggle begun by Isma'il and his predecessors, in spreading the Safavid *dawa*.[80]

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[77] Leonard Lewisohn, "Overview: Iranian Islam and Persianate Sufism," in *The Heritage of Sufism Volume II: The Legacy of Medieval Persian Sufism (1150-1500)* ed. Leonard Lewisohn (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1999): 17-18.
[78] Willem Floor, "The Khalifeh al-kholafa of the Safavid Sufi Order," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* vol. 153, no. 1 (2003): 51; Ibid, 55-57.
[79] Ibid, 61-62.
[80] Ibid, 52.

A Comparison: The Musha'sha'

The Safavid-*Qizilbash* were not the only populist millenarian movement which emerged in the post-Mongol context. They were, however, the most successful in terms of utilizing populist millenarianism for political ends and maintaining lasting relevance. Their contemporaries, parties and polities which attempted to present their own alternatives to the post-Mongol world order, were either obliterated during their expansion or subsumed into the political edifice of the new Safavid state. While matters of military strategy were undoubtedly more important for the survival of such polities than ideological concerns, their difficulties in presenting a more attractive political alternative to the Safavid cause are connected to their lack of an effective political merger comparable to that of the Safavids. To emphasize the importance of the Safavid merger, the Safavids will be compared with their contemporaries, namely with the Musha'sha', a Shi'i millenarian sect-turned-state centered on Khuzestan, which was militarily defeated by the Safavids in 913/1508 during the reign of Shah Isma'il and subsequently integrated into the Safavid state.[81]

The Musha'sha' was founded by Arab theologian Muhammad ibn Falah in the year 839/1436, as a Shi'i millenarian movement claiming to presage the coming of the *Mahdi*.[82] His movement attained political power much sooner than the Safavids by appealing to the political aims of less powerful Arab tribes in Khuzestan and forming a confederation unified under his millenarian leadership, which had dynastic leadership following ibn Falah's son's accession in 865/1461.[83] In these regards, it is very similar to

[81] Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 102.
[82] Arjomand, *The Shadow of God*, 76-77.
[83] Ibid, 77.

the Safavid movement, which was also a dynastically led Shi'i-inflected millenarian movement that, crucially, found a significant political base in the less powerful tribes of a nomadic people, albeit in the Safavid context Turkic nomads rather than the Musha'sha's Khuzestani Arabs. A major distinction, however, was in the much more explicit articulation of Musha'sha' ideology, which was collected into a book titled the *Kalam al-Mahdi* modeled after the *sura* structure of the Qur'an; while Shah Isma'il's poetry propagated Safavid-*Qizilbash* ideology, it was not a cohesive and thorough articulation comparable to *Kalam al-Mahdi*.[84] It has already been discussed how millenarianism under a charismatic leader was the political expression of lower class discontent in post-Mongol Iran, and the Musha'sha' are no exception; they are just as much part of that political-social milieu as the Safavids. The ultimate reason why, however, they were not able to utilize that popular political expression for anything beyond regional power is because of crucial absences which privileged the Safavid strategy over theirs.

While the Musha'sha' expressed political-religious millenarianism, they lacked two major elements that consigned them to regionalism over a broader political project that could effectively compete with the Safavids. The first of these, most importantly, was the lack of a political merger comparable to the Safavid merger. There was no preexisting organizational structure beyond that of the Arab tribe and clan structure which they could merge their ideology with, no matter how well articulated it was in the *Kalam al-Mahdi*. In the Safavid case, this political organizational tradition was Sufism, which provided the emphasis on central leadership, the social role as "tribune of the people" which spanned ethnic and social divides, and, in the case of the Safaviyya, a

[84] Ibid.

wide geographic spread that facilitated a political presence across Iran. The Musha'sha' were not Sufis, and the core of their state structure was the particular social condition of the Arab tribes in Khuzestan, which, while effective in ensuring their rule in that region, restricted them from reaching the kind of widespread political power that the Safavids attained. This is the second notable absence which privileged the Safavids over the Musha'sha': while both had notable bases in the lesser tribes of nomadic peoples, the nomadic Arabs of Khuzestan were much more geographically bound than the Turkmen *Qizilbash* which provided the military arm of Safavid rule. Turkic and Mongolic nomads were widespread across greater Iran following the Mongol conquest, another factor which made the Safavid political merger more effective over a wider area than the Musha'sha' polity. While Yildirim argues that the Safavids were an expression of the particular Turco-Mongol political tradition, they were a movement with much more universal ambitions. The Musha'sha' had similar universal ambitions, but little ability to put them into action.

Conclusion

The merger of Sufi organization and mysticism with the millenarian movement was the effective political response to the contradictions of post-Mongol Iranian society. The peasants, in their disparate rural communities, were a violently jostled up "sack of potatoes" squeezed between repressive Islamic Mongol laws and widespread bloodshed; the less powerful nomads, the tribes that did not rule the confederations, their numbers grown by peasants fleeing their farms in times of uncertainty, were discontented by their lack of power. The religious expression of both of these groups

was the millenarian outburst, the desperate grasping for a revolutionary religious redefinition of the world. Providing a strong organizational structure and ethos to this impulse was Sufism, which was itself an integrated part of popular Islam. Sufi mystics were ingratiated with the lower classes, and often acted as “tribunes of the people,” speaking on behalf of the poor and downtrodden to temporal authorities. In bringing these two social and religious trends together, popular millenarian Islam and Sufi organization, the Safavids built a mass base among the peasants and less powerful nomads, along with allies in the aristocracy to be sure, and aimed that mass base at the conquest of political power through the organizational structures of Sufism.

This example of political mobilization can be used as a case study to understand other such instances across history. This kind of merger, between the actionable expression of popular discontent and the wider worldview to guide it, appears throughout history in other moments of mass political mobilization and revolutionary change. The specifics differ across time and space, but the prominence of such mergers is a near constant. One without the other is ineffectual: a riot or uprising, while a strong expression of lower class strife and righteous fury, will fizzle out without organization and aspiration; a revolutionary ideology, while providing a good critique, will not do anything of note without a kind of mass base. Ideas do not determine history; but, as the case of the Safavids illustrates, the right idea coupled with the right organizational structure coming at the right time can make all the difference.

Iran under the Safavids was not a revolutionary society, however. The foundations of society stayed much the same, albeit with a meaningful change in the political superstructure established atop it. The Safavid merger was a fine mobilization

of a mass base, but it did not revolutionize society, even as it revolutionized politics; as was explored above, the strong power of the state against the “smaller tyrants” was in the interest of the lower classes, even if the systems of land tenure remained the same. New contradictions developed within the Safavid state, conflicts between elements of the very movement which brought the Safavids to power, ultimately resulting in periods of civil strife and warfare, and the steady strengthening of the shah in comparison with the other forces of Safavid politics.[85] While this resulted in the Iran of Shah ‘Abbas the Great, a ruler who extended tolerance to other religious communities and developed the productive forces of Iranian industry, that phase of Safavid politics is far outside the scope of this paper. The foundations for these later contradictions, conflicts, and constructions were laid, however, by the Safavid merger and the movement that it created. Were the forces of Sufism and popular Islam not merged in response to Iran after the Mongols, the Safaviyya would have gone the way of the Mushasha’.

[85] Savory, *Iran Under the Safavids*, 46-75; Babayan, “The Safavid Synthesis,” 137; Ibid, 143-144.

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