

Review

Le shaykhisme à la période qajare: Histoire sociale et doctrinale d'une École chiïte, Denis Hermann, Turnhout (Belgium), Brepols, 2017 ("Miroir de l'Orient Musulman," 3), glossary, bibliography, index. ISBN 9 782503 531519, paperback, 402 pp.¹

The Sheykhi school, a branch of Twelver Shi'ism, seems to have been rather well studied since the publications of Comte de Gobineau, A. L. M. Nicolas and E. G. Browne; more recently H. Corbin or D. M. MacEoin have stressed both the theosophical dimension of their doctrine and the filiation generally attested between them and the Babi and Baha'i faiths. Hermann's book challenges this impression and systematically goes back to the sources, the main ones being the writings of Sheykhi masters. He studies them in their historical settings, in their relations to the history of Qajar Iran, in their social dimension, in the ideological framework of the encounter with the West and with new ideas, and in their confrontation with other forms of creed.

The introduction gives a description of Shi'ism at the beginning of the Qajars: a profusion of antagonist tendencies and a new type of relationship to the ruling dynasty. The Shi'ite Sufi orders had suffered severe persecution before the advent of Mohammad Shah and his Sufi vizier, Hajj Mirza Aqasi. The dominating *osuli*

¹The present review follows a simplified transliteration style closer to Persian pronunciation.

school which attributed legitimate authority in religious matters to the *mojtaheds*, was challenged by Sufi orders and by remnants of *akbbāri* tendencies. *Osuli-s* clerics aspired to be the sole religious institution sharing political legitimacy with the monarch during the Occultation of the Imam. The Sheykhi community, which Hermann calls *order* (like Sufi “orders”), came out as a challenger, because it denied any legitimacy to *mojtaheds* and forbade blind imitation (*taqlid*) of any human being except the Imam. The Sheykhis were divided into at least three branches with very different social and political agendas, the main Kermani branch and the Tabrizi and Hamadani branches. Studies of their thought are scarce, says Hermann, because of inaccessibility of sources, at least of libraries where Sheykhi books are available, many in the form of manuscripts. Repressive measures, destruction of libraries and assassination of Sheykhi leaders by fanatic opponents—up to our days—make the study of Sheykhism a permanent challenge in Iran. Hermann’s assertion that his work is the first in European languages on the subject (p. 31) seems exaggerated: Nicolas, Corbin and McEoin at least have dealt with spiritual and social aspects of their history. The present book has its own specificities and relies on primary sources. It refutes the generally assumed generic link from Sheykhism to Babism.

It is divided into four parts: birth of the Sheykhi community under Ahmad Ahsa’i and Sayyed Kazem Rashti; organization and transmission of Sheykhi communities through foundations (*vaqf*) by Mohammad-Karim Khan Kermani and Mohammad Khan Kermani; the violent relations between Sheykhis and non-Sheykhis (*osulis*) up to the beginning of the twentieth century; the Sheykhis confronted with sociopolitical movements, the Bābi movement and the westernization of society.

Hermann introduces first the life and works of Sheykh Ahmad Ahsa’i and Sayyed Kazem Rashti with the split that followed the latter’s death. Ahsa’i, born in 1753, first came to Iran as a pilgrim, aged fifty-three, and was summoned to the court but soon went away to Yazd, where he wrote extensively. He was then invited to Kermanshah, where he stayed five years. He developed critical positions about Molla Sadra and his legacy. He was anathematized by Molla Mohammad-Taqi Baraghāni in Qazvin in 1824 for his disbelief concerning the Prophet’s ascension and the physical resurrection of bodies. His creed in an intermediary world called *hurqalyā* (and translated by Henry Corbin as “*mundus imaginalis*”) was considered a heresy. He died two years later in Medina.

The original name of Ahsa’i’s community, *Kashfiya* (from *kashf*, spiritual unveiling), was soon replaced by *Sheykhi*, but they were often called *Poshtesari*, in opposition to *Bālāsari*, because the Sheykhis refused to pray before the head of the Imam who was buried with his face toward Mecca (by praying behind his face, *posht-e sar*, they avoid turning their back to the Imam).

The book presents Sayyed Kazem Rashti (1798–1844), who, with some other disciples, decided to resist the sentence of Baraghāni. He engaged in discussions with the ulama of Karbalā, had to endure severe physical attacks, and they eventually, Sheykhi and non-Sheykhi, united to face a severe anti-Shiite suppression by the Ottoman army in 1842.

The Kermani branch, historically more important, was founded by Mohammad-Karim Khan Kermani (1809–71), a Qajar relative who studied in Karbala, and author of 278 titles. The Tabrizi branch was dominated by Molla Mohammad Māmaqāni, Shafi‘ Seqat ol-Eslām Tabrizi and Mohammad-Baqer Osku‘i. Seqat al-Islam, a powerful cleric, dominated the local community and one of the offspring of the family became famous when the Russians hanged him on the last day of 1911, the day of Ashura. A third branch, which Hermann calls *Bāqeri*, was based in Hamadan until they were chased away in 1898: it was founded by Mohammad-Bāqer a dissident disciple of Mohammad Khan Kermani.

Sheykhi doctrine, says Hermann, has been largely neglected among Islamists. Their original views on Qur’anic exegesis, on *hadith* and revelation (*naql*) deserve more attention. Their refutation of Molla Sadra is more difficult to investigate due to scarce texts on the subject.

Tabrizi Sheykhis were closer to the *osuli* doctrine by their acceptance of some *ejtehād* (interpretation of the sharia) through authorized theologians. Mirza Ali Seqat al-Islam Tabrizi (d. 1911) acknowledged the authority of the great mojtaheds of Najaf (p . 71). Consequently the Tabriz branch kept some distance from the Kermānis and claimed greater loyalty to the original doctrine of Ahsa‘i. Hermann shows how the first Sheykhis, who rejected *ejtehād* in order to stay faithful to the tradition of the Imams, were the heirs of the Akhbāris. They study this tradition in the hadiths (Kermani Sheykhis have extensive collections of hadith). The filiation from *akhbāri* masters can be traced in the biography of Sheikh Ahmad al-Ahsa‘i (p . 77).

The book introduces the main topics of Sheykhi doctrine: the rejection of *ejtehād* and *aql* in Islamic jurisprudence; particular Sheykhi views on the history of Shiite Islam; the “fourth pillar” (*rokn-e rābe‘*), a most original conception of Islam on which Hermann gives a detailed presentation. To the three traditional “pillars” of religion, divine oneness, prophetic cycle and resurrection at the end of times, the Shiites add generally two principles: justice of God and imamate as the complement of prophecy. Sheykhis have it otherwise; they put the resurrection (*ma‘ād*) as a minor pillar (*foru‘-e din*), they consider imamate the third pillar and add a fourth, the *rokn-e rābe‘*. The fourth pillar is the assertion that in each period there is a spiritual elite of noble and perfect guides (*nojabā, noqabā*), a gate (*bāb*) who link up the common believer to the Imam and to God. This elite must remain in occultation.

Hermann traces the history of this creed back to the origins of Shiite theology, the commandment to love the Imams and their neighbors and friends and to hate their enemies. The essential goal of religion is this love which turns Islam to the religion of mystical love. The split between Bāqeri and Kermāni Sheykhis came from diverging interpretations of *rokn-e rābe‘*, Mohammad-Bāqer Hamadāni bringing this doctrine close to the *osuli* conception of *ejtehād*.

The position of Sheykhis toward politics differs considerably: Kerman was less influenced by reformist ideas and the Sheykhis there were distant from any social doctrine. Their family ties with the Qajars might have played a role in helping them resist the attacks of the mojtaheds. In Tabriz, on the contrary, commitment was the rule and

Mirza Ali Seqat al-Islam paid the price of his life for his action with the Constitutional revolution.

A very original part of the book deals with the settlement of Sheykhism in Iran, in particular in Kerman: Hermann examines (p . 121 f.) how Kerman became the seat of the community and how the foundation of wealthy *vaqf* (charitable endowments) secured central institutions such as the Ebrāhimiya school and the setting of religious ceremonies (*‘Ashura*, *Eid-e Qadir Khom*, Ramadan, etc.). Through the *vaqf* revenues, salaries could be paid to teaching staff, preachers and students and the control of the *madrasa* remained in Sheykhi hands. Under Mohammad Khan Kermani (son of Mohammad-Karim Khan, 1846–1906), the Kermani Sheykhis became great land-owners allowing their leaders to refuse any gifts from believers. The use of foundation charters (*vaqf-nāmes*) can be, when used by historians, of great help when chronicles or other official reports are missing, as Hermann brilliantly shows here. The chapter on endowments ends with a sad conclusion: today all Sheykhi *vaqfs* have been declared void and the institutions depending on them have been closed (p . 152).

The dramatic issue to which Hermann introduces the reader in the third part is the conflictual relation of the Sheykhis to the *osuli* majority of Shiite Muslims. This was not the first bloody interconfessional conflict among Iranian believers, and the book rightly recalls violent clashes with Akhbāris and Sufis. Extreme tension leading to civil war rose against the Babis with deep consequences which lasted up to the Constitutional revolution and the persecution of Baha'is to this day. With the Sheykhis, violence erupted even between different branches of the sub-community, which, given the paucity of sources, makes the understanding of their history more difficult.

Hermann puts into perspective what concerns the Sheykhis in the multiple splits which generated violence in Iranian Shiite communities. The status of religious minorities, of non-Muslims but also of heterodox groups (like Sufis), was worse than in Sunni countries (p . 155). Rules of ritual purity in Shiite jurisprudence imply that many segregation rules make coexistence with dissidents difficult, like the interdiction of public baths, trade, etc. In Iranian cities, the well-known divides between *Ne‘mati* and *Heydari* (studied by H. Mirjafari and J. Perry) was replicated in the opposition between *bālāsari* also called *motasharre‘* and *poshtesari* (Sheykhis). Ferocious writings are exchanged between Sheykhis and Osulis, even in Hamadan, where the *Bāqeri* Sheykhis had adopted a loose position towards the *mojtahed*-s. Physical assault, as a result of these polemics, managed to expel the Sheykhi dissidents from the city in February 1898 (p . 182 f.). Many of those who escaped died frozen on the roadside. In Kerman the violence was less destructive but lasted several years until the Constitutional revolution.

The last part consists of two sections: Sheykhi relations with Babism and with western civilization.

The rise of the Babi movement brought the Sheykhis to the front: *osuli mojtaheds* accused them of being the main source of the Bāb's uprising and the Bābis themselves claimed to be inspired by the two first masters of the Sheykhis. Hermann repeats what former historians (e.g. A. Amanat) have already demonstrated, that the Bab has only attended three classes of Sayyed Kazem Rashti and could not have received any real

initiation to his doctrine during his short residence in Karbala (p . 205). But both Babis and Baha'is have insisted on the filiation with Sheykhism in order to root their doctrine in a more legitimate Shiite trend. The Bab anathematized the enemies of Sheykhis until, unable to draw Mohammad-Karim Khan Kermani to his cause, he started to severely criticize both Ahmad Ahsa'i and Sayyed Kazem Rashti.

Denis Hermann uses some critical pages to refute common errors of western historians and religious specialists concerning the so-called filiation from Sheykhism to Babism. He passes quickly over such authors as Nicolas and Browne but analyzes with more care contemporary studies as those of M. Momen (p . 218), and reserves his toughest critique for D. MacEoin (pp . 219–26, where he discusses the latter's *The Messiah of Shiraz, Studies in Early and Middle Babism*, Leiden: Brill, 2009). For MacEoin, early Babism, as a starting point, comes out of Sheykhism, a deep-rooted link being only broken by isolated Sheykhis like some Tabriz ulama introduced by him as “non-Bābi Sheykhi.” For MacEoin, quoted by Hermann, the Kermani Sheykhis were obliged “to adopt a quietist and non-interventionist position in politics, coupled with the use of *taqiyya* in religious matters” (*The Messiah*, p. 136, quoted by Hermann, p . 223), thus minimizing the dynamics of their doctrine. Hermann offers a long discussion to refute MacEoin's statement. Among contemporary academics, only Vahid Rafati and Abbas Amanat seem to have properly measured the link between Sheykhis and Babis and shown other factors in the birth of Bābism. In any case, as Hermann shows in his next chapter (pp . 233–57), the Sheykhis have strongly reacted against the Bāb's predication and refuted his arguments: his spectators are mere unclean miscreants who deserve nothing else than malediction and rejection. The last chapter, dedicated to the attitude toward the West, is less original: Sheykhis' negative reaction started with the rejection of Russian and British encroachments and denounced the dangers of permissiveness, irreligion and Christian missionary predication among Muslims.

The bibliography is impressive (pp . 311–77, and without any justification for the separation between Persian-Arabic titles and western references), and rich scholarship comes out in numerous footnotes.

This book is a welcome contribution to our understanding of nineteenth-century Shi'ism, and gives the Sheykhis credit for their great inventiveness, their theological production and for their major place in the Iranian religious spectrum. The issue of how Babism came out from some typically Sheykhi thoughts augmented with eschatological expectations does not really concern the teachings of Sheykhis themselves; they are not responsible for what has been done to their heritage. Hermann's arguments to refute MacEoin and others can help those, especially in Iran, who have a sectarian look at the Sheykhis, to reconsider them.

I hope that in spite of today's relatively limited readership of French, this important book would generate discussions and reactions among historians of Shi'ism. However, I regret to say that the editing of the French text is deficient, with many typos, grammatical mistakes, and even recurrent errors in the transcription of Persian words—despite using an elaborate diacritical system which often tends to Arabize Persian phonology.

6 *Review*

Yann Richard

Sorbonne Nouvelle—Paris

© 2020, Yann Richard

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00210862.2019.1691437>



Le shaykhisme à la période qajare: Histoire sociale et doctrinale d'une École chiite

Denis Hermann, Turnhout (Belgium), Brepols, 2017 ("Miroir de l'Orient Musulman," 3), glossary, bibliography, index. ISBN 9 782503 531519, paperback, 402 pp.

Yann Richard

To cite this article: Yann Richard (2020): Le shaykhisme à la période qajare: Histoire sociale et doctrinale d'une École chiite, Iranian Studies, DOI: [10.1080/00210862.2019.1691437](https://doi.org/10.1080/00210862.2019.1691437)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00210862.2019.1691437>



Published online: 22 Jan 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)