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Citation

Pukhovaia, E. (2023). Sayyids, Tribal Kinship, and the Imamate in Zaydi Yemen under Imam Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn (d. 965/1558). *Medieval Encounters. Jewish, Christian And Muslim Culture In Confluence And Dialogue*, 29(5-6), 442-463.
doi:10.1163/15700674-12340173

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).



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MEDIEVAL ENCOUNTERS 29 (2023) 442–463

Medieval
Jewish, Christian and Muslim Culture
Encounters
in Confluence and Dialogue
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Sayyids, Tribal Kinship, and the Imamate in Zaydi Yemen under Imam Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn (d. 965/1558)

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Received 28 October 2022 | Accepted 12 February 2023 |

Published online 16 November 2023

Abstract

Studies of Zaydi Yemen tend to underline the divisions, rather than connections, between sayyids, descendants of the Prophet, and tribal groups in the political sphere. This paper answers the question what value family connections to tribes had for ambitious sayyids in early modern Yemen who wanted to become Zaydi imams. To this end, the article examines a section of Imam Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn's (d. 965/1558) unpublished biography, containing the genealogy of his second wife, Tāj al-Bahā' bint al-shaykh Sharaf al-Dīn. The paper argues that the imam and his circle valued the connections that the marriage to a daughter of a shaykh brought to the imamate, and that it is due to its symbolic value for the legitimacy of the imamate that her genealogy was included in the biography.

Keywords

Yemen – Zaydi imamate – tribes – sayyids – genealogy

1 Introduction

The Zaydi imamate, a Shi'ite state founded in North Yemen in the tenth century CE, was characterized by a domination of sayyids, descendants of the Prophet.

Published with license by Koninklijke Brill NV | DOI:10.1163/15700674-12340173

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They alone could qualify to rule as imams. The Zaydi imams and sayyids who contended for this role lived in a society that was simultaneously settled and tribal. Within this society there were local elites, shaykhly clans, that had their own visions of legitimacy and sovereignty, rooted in their genealogies and connections to specific regions. In this complex setting, tribal structures perforce influenced state development, the inner politics of the Zaydi imamate, and the ways in which Zaydi imams balanced their claims to sovereignty based on sayyid descent with the context of tribal domination.

A manuscript, preserved at the Biblioteca Ambrosiana of Milan (Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Nuovo Fondo, MS A.3.ar), contains the only currently known copy of a biography (*sīra*) of the Yemeni Zaydi imam al-Mutawakkil Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn (d. 965/1558), composed during the life of the imam by his court historian, Ḥusayn al-ʿUlufī (d. unknown). For many decades this unique source has been neglected, and it remains largely unknown even in Yemen.¹ An in-depth study and edition of this over three hundred folio-long text would be a welcome scholarly contribution. This article will focus on a single segment of this important source, a tribal genealogy of the second wife of Imam Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn, Tāj al-Bahāʾ bint al-shaykh Sharaf al-Dīn. By identifying two layers of the genealogy – a historical and a legendary layer – this article untangles the question of why this genealogy was added to the biography of the imam and what practical implications it had for the imam's career.

Existing studies of tribal-state relations in Yemen build on rich source material and diverse methodologies. At its broadest, the historiography presents a

1 The authoritative catalogue of Zaydi works by Aḥmad al-Ḥusaynī does not mention al-ʿUlufī's biography of the imam, and the short biography in 'Abd al-Salām Wajīh's dictionary of Zaydi authors does not list the title of this biography (*sīra*) or a shelfmark, indicating that no copies of this work were preserved in Yemen or that none of those preserved were known to Wajīh. Sayyid Aḥmad al-Ḥusaynī, *Mu'allafāt al-Zaydiyya*, 3 vols. (Qom: Maṭba'at Ismā'īlyān, 1992); 'Abd al-Salām ibn 'Abbās al-Wajīh, *A'lām al-Mu'allifīn al-Zaydiyya* (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Imām Zayd ibn 'Alī al-Thaqāfiyya, 1999), 379. The Yemeni historian 'Abdallāh al-Ḥibshī similarly remarked in his overview of medieval and early modern *sīras* of Zaydi imams that no copies of any biographies of imam Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn survived and only the names of their authors are known. Ḥusayn ibn Aḥmad ibn Ya'qūb, *Sīrat al-Imām al-Manṣūr bi-'llāh al-Qāsim ibn 'Alī al-'Iyyānī*, ed. 'Abdallāh Muḥammad al-Ḥibshī (Sanaa: Dār al-Ḥikma al-Yamāniyya, 1996), 8. To make matters more complicated, the catalogue of the Biblioteca Ambrosiana does not identify the author of this work and suggests, erroneously, that the author might be al-Zurayqī or Ibn al-Dā'ir. Oscar Löfgren and Renato Traini, *Catalogue of the Arabic Manuscripts in the Biblioteca Ambrosiana*, 3 vols. (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 1975–1995), 2: 2. A recent edition of a posthumous biography of Imam Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn mentions the name of this biographer but not the manuscript preserved in Milan. Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mufaḍḍal, *al-Sulūk al-Dhahabīyya fī Khulāṣat al-Sīra al-Mutawakkilīyya*, ed. Zayd ibn 'Alī al-Fuḍayl (Jeddah: Maṭba'at al-Mafāhīm, 2012), 12.

divide between sayyids, who were engaged in the building of the Zaydi imamate in Yemen through various means, and the tribes, who were in a perpetual, if not always full-fledged, opposition to these efforts.² While facts of enmity are undeniable across Yemen's history, cases of cooperation or mutual influence remain less explored.³

The following analysis of a genealogy of a Zaydi imam's noble, tribal wife shows that Zaydi rulers valued their tribal alliances and could rely on tribal visions of community-building and history in their own political projects. Instead of focusing on tensions in state-tribal relations in the region, this source underlines instances of tribal service to various governments, including non-Zaydi ones, and how the tribes benefited from these interactions. The genealogy of the tribal wife of the imam sought to build a connection between two groups – the sayyids and the Yemeni tribes – that are, if viewed from a genealogical perspective, disconnected. It aimed to show that the long history of tribal achievement coalesced in the figure of this woman and that by marrying her, the imam also laid a claim to the prestige of her family and tribe. The focus on this symbolic connection indicates that the imam thought of tribal alliances as more than occasions to build stronger local support and augment his military capabilities. His vision of productive alliances with the tribes instead indicated a level of symbolic engagement and a possibility of expanding ideological underpinnings of the Zaydi imamate.⁴ This development meant that the articulation of legitimacy moved beyond the religious vocabulary of Zaydism and turned to include what was relevant to large groups of the Zaydi imam's Yemeni subjects.

2 Paul Dresch highlights how Zaydi history writing and legal tradition, a tool of the imamate's domination, consistently obscured tribal contributions to the history of Yemen and condemned tribal custom. Paul Dresch, *Tribes, Government, and History in Yemen* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 158–88. See also David Thomas Gochenour, "The Penetration of Zaydi Islam into Early Medieval Yemen" (PhD Dissertation, Harvard University, 1984), 244–76; Jeffrey Meissner, "Tribes at the Core: Legitimacy, Structure, and Power in Zaydi Yemen" (PhD Dissertation, Columbia University, 1987), 358–64; Robert B. Serjeant, "The Interplay between Tribal Affinities and Religious (Zaydi) Authority in the Yemen," *al-Abhâth* 30 (1982): 11–50.

3 See, for example, the exploration, by Andre Gingrich, of the various ways in which states affected tribal organization in Northern Yemen. Andre Gingrich, "Tribes and Rulers in Northern Yemen," in *Studies in Oriental Culture and History: Festschrift for Walter Dostal*, ed. Andre Gingrich, Sylvia Haas, Gabriele Paleczek, and Thomas Fillintz (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1993), 253–80.

4 For a discussion of how marriage patterns between sayyids and tribes influenced the development of social hierarchies in medieval Yemen see also Andre Gingrich, Johann Heiss, and Odile Kommer, "Between Diversity and Hegemony: Transformations of Kinship and Gender Relations in Upper Yemen, Seventh- to Thirteenth-Century CE," *History and Anthropology* 32, no. 2 (2021): 188–210. DOI: 10.1080/02757206.2021.1905242.

2 The *sīra* of Imam Yahyā Sharaf al-Dīn

Imam Yahyā Sharaf al-Dīn had several biographies (*sīras*) written about him during his life and one more after his death.⁵ This was a rare, but not unheard of, situation for a Zaydi imam. Among the many imams who ruled in North Yemen, several had more than one biography written about them. One such ruler was al-Manṣūr ‘Abdallāh ibn Ḥamza (d. 614/1217), an imam who reformed the political structure of the medieval Zaydi imamate, laying the foundation for more resilient state institutions and practices.⁶ The existence of multiple contemporaneous biographies of one imam can be considered a measure of

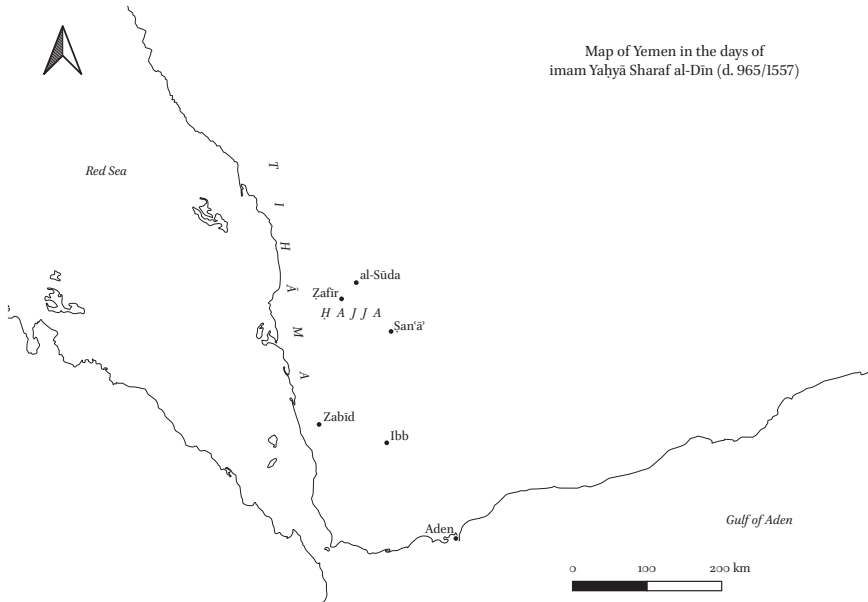


FIGURE 1 Map of Yemen in the days of Imam Yahyā Sharaf al-Dīn (d. 965/1550)

- 5 The contemporaneous biographies of Imam Yahyā Sharaf al-Dīn include the biography by al-Ulufi (Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Nuovo Fondo, MS A.3.ar), an anonymous *sīra*, possibly by al-Marhabī (Imam Zayd ibn ‘Alī Cultural Foundation, MS ZA 561–01), the biography of the imam by al-Zurayqī (Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, MS Glaser 39), and its possible draft (Imam Zayd ibn ‘Alī Cultural Foundation, MS ZA 238–03). The posthumous biography of the imam was composed by his descendant Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mufaḍḍal. It is the only published biography of the imam. Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mufaḍḍal, *al-Sulūk al-Dhahabīyya fī Khulāṣat al-Sīra al-Mutawakkilīyya*, ed. Zayd ibn ‘Alī al-Fuḍayl (Jeddah: Maṭba‘at al-Mafāhīm, 2012).
- 6 The role of Imam al-Manṣūr ‘Abdallāh ibn Ḥamza in building the institutional and political structures of the Zaydi imamate is discussed in Johann Heiss and Eirik Hovden, “Competing Visions of Community in Mediaeval Zaydī Yemen,” *Journal of the Economic*

state-building success, since such occurrences were only possible when the court could support the production of several texts dedicated to the ruler.

We know very little about the author of the biography under discussion. Later sources give his full name as Ḥusayn al-‘Ulufī.⁷ In the surviving *sīra*, the author mentions his father, the scholar (*faqīh*) Yaḥyā ibn Muḥammad al-Qurashī al-‘Ulufī, and a certain Ḥasan ibn Ḥusayn al-Qurashī al-‘Ulufī, most probably a relative.⁸ This information allows us to connect the author of the *sīra* to the al-‘Ulufī family of scholars based in Sanaa.⁹ The *nisba* (descent name) al-‘Ulufī indicates place of origin, namely ‘Ulufa, a village, and the *wādī* ‘Uluf, in tribal, Ḥāshid territory in Northern Yemen.¹⁰ The second *nisba*, al-Qurashī, indicated the family’s claims to descent from the Umayyads of Quraysh through the caliph ‘Umar ibn Abd al-‘Azīz (d. 101/720).¹¹ That said, no contemporaneous information on the first name of our author survives, which is another indication of the obscurity into which his work fell. We are unaided by the fact that the only preserved copy of his work misses its title page, introduction, and colophon. Nevertheless, al-‘Ulufī’s connection to Ḥāshid, one of the great tribal confederations of Upper Yemen, is significant, as it provided him with a deeper understanding of tribal communities and their genealogy.

and Social History of the Orient 59, no. 3 (2016): 366–407. DOI: 10.1163/15685209-12341402. His influence on the political system of the Zaydi imamate in Yemen correlates with his contribution to Zaydi law. See Eirik Hovden, *Waqf in Zaydi Yemen: Legal Theory, Codification, and Local Practice* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 154–55. DOI: 10.1163/9789004377844. There are four biographies of this imam. Donzel, Emeri van, “al-Manṣūr Bi’llāh,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. Peri Bearman et al. (Brill Online) DOI: 10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_4937; al-Wajīh, *A’lām al-Mu’allifīn al-Zaydiyya*, 585. The only published *sīra* is Abū Firas ibn Di’tham, *al-Sīra al-Sharīfa al-Manṣūriyya: Sīrat al-Imām ‘Abdallāh ibn Ḥamza (593–614 AH)*, ed. ‘Abd al-Ghanī Maḥmūd ‘Abd al-Āṭī, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr al-Mu‘āshir, 1993).

7 al-Wajīh, *A’lām al-Mu’allifīn al-Zaydiyya*, 379; Ibn Ya‘qūb, *Sīrat al-Imām al-Manṣūr bi-llāh al-Qāsim ibn ‘Alī al-Iyyānī*, 8.

8 al-‘Ulufī, *Sīrat al-Imām Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn*, Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Nuovo Fondo MS A.3.ar, fols. 10r, 12v, 80r, 83v, 95v; Aḥmad al-Sharafī, *al-La’ālī al-Muḍṭā fi Tārīkh al-‘Imma al-Zaydiyya*, Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Nuovo Fondo, MS C.101.ar, fol. 20r.

9 Other members of this family mentioned in other sources include ‘Alī ibn Yaḥyā al-‘Ulufī, a contemporary of imam Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn, in Aḥmad ibn ‘Abdallāh ibn al-Wazīr, *Tārīkh Banī al-Wazīr*, Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Nuovo Fondo MS D.556.ar, fol. 44r; Ṣāliḥ ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-‘Ulufī, a scholar and contemporary of the first Qasimid imams in al-Sharafī, *al-La’ālī al-Muḍṭā*, fol. 141v.

10 Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Ḥajrī, *Majmū‘ Buldān al-Yaman wa-Qabā’ilihā*, ed. Ismā‘īl ibn ‘Alī al-Akwa‘, 2 vols. (Sanaa: Dār al-Ḥikma al-Yamāniyya, 1996), 2:609; Ibrāhīm Aḥmad al-Maqḥafī, *Muḥjam al-Buldān wa-l-Qabā’il al-Yamaniyya*, 2 vols. (Sanaa: Dār al-Kalima li-l-Ṭibā’a wa-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzī’, 2002), 2:1104.

11 al-Ḥajrī, *Majmū‘ buldān al-Yaman wa-Qabā’ilihā* 2:609; al-Maqḥafī, *Muḥjam al-Buldān wa-l-Qabā’il al-Yamaniyya*, 2:1104; al-Sharafī, *al-La’ālī al-Muḍṭā*, fol. 178v.

The surviving copy of the *sīra* of al-ʿUlufi is written on large (38 × 20 cm) paper in a generously spaced hand in black and red ink. There is a switch to a more economical hand later in the manuscript, on folio 63r. The biography contains several sections, but the manuscript is incomplete both at the beginning and end. The manuscript opens with a discussion of the imam's ancestors. The first folio starts mid-sentence with the mention of one of the imam's maternal ancestors, most probably, his mother Dahmā' bint al-imām Muṭahhar ibn Muḥammad ibn Sulaymān.¹² Her name is absent, which indicates that at the very least a folio giving the name of this relative is missing. Based on the structure of other *sīras*, the missing folios in the beginning could have also contained a brief introduction of the work and the full name of the imam listing all his male ancestors down to the Prophet.¹³

The text moves on to speak about the imam's birth, upbringing, and education.¹⁴ Another section discusses the qualities of the imam, ranging from his piety and wisdom to miraculous events that confirmed his special status as ruler.¹⁵ Included among the preliminaries of the biography is a collection of poems and epistles composed by the imam on different occasions.¹⁶ These sections of the biography of the imam are part of a common structure in Zaydi *sīra* compositions and appear in many earlier biographies of imams; for example, in the biography of his paternal grandfather, Imam al-Mahdī Aḥmad ibn Yaḥyā ibn al-Murtaḍā (d. 840/1437).¹⁷

The largest section of the biography is effectively a chronicle – a year-by-year description of the events taking place in Yemen during Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn's rule, starting in 914/1509. There is a gap between the years 914/1508 and 921/1515.¹⁸ The chronicle is continuous from the year 923/1517 till the last year that it discusses, 934/1528. Interspersing descriptions of events are extensive collections of poetry dedicated to the imam and to various occasions during

12 Indications in favor of this include a marginal note in the original manuscript and a possible quote from this *sīra* in a later chronicle. al-ʿUlufi, *Sīrat al-Imām Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn*, fol. 4r; al-Sharafī, *al-Laʿālī al-Muḍrāʿa fī Tārīkh al-Aʿimma al-Zaydiyya*, fol. 14r.

13 See, for comparison, the introductions to the biography of this imam in al-Sharafī, *al-Laʿālī al-Muḍrāʿa*, fol. 14r and in Yaḥyā ibn ʿAlī al-Ḥibshī, *Tatimmat al-Ifāda fī Tārīkh al-Aʿimma al-Sāda*, Berlin Staatsbibliothek, MS Glaser 37, fol. 81r.

14 al-ʿUlufi, *Sīrat al-Imām Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn*, fols. 10r–16v.

15 al-ʿUlufi, *Sīrat al-Imām Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn*, fols. 22r–29v; 78r–91r.

16 al-ʿUlufi, *Sīrat al-Imām Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn*, fols. 31r–70v.

17 This biography, composed by the son of this imam, Ḥasan, includes sections on the speeches of the imam, his poetry, his epistles (*rasāʾil*), and a short chronicle. Ḥasan ibn al-imām al-Mahdī Aḥmad ibn al-Murtaḍā, *Kanz al-Ḥukamāʾ wa-Rawḍat al-ʿUlamāʾ*, Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Nuovo Fondo, MS E.58.ar, fols. 1v–26r.

18 al-ʿUlufi, *Sīrat al-Imām Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn*, fols. 102r–108v.

his rule. These elements allow us to think of the *sīra* of Imam Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn as a court history, focused on the ruler, but also discussing his inner circle.

Before the chronicle part of the biography, al-ʿUlufī adds another section on the family of the imam. It is not common for the discussion of the imam's family other than his male ancestors to appear at the beginning of his biography.¹⁹ In it, al-ʿUlufī writes about the wives and children of Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn. It is in this section that the tribal genealogy, central to this article, appears.²⁰ To the best of my knowledge, this is the only *sīra* of an imam that contains a tribal genealogy of a close female relative. The fact that the tribal genealogy was placed in the preliminaries of this *sīra* speaks to its importance. Its presence alongside information about the imam's education and good leadership qualities indicates that to the author and his audience this marriage to a noble, tribal woman was an element of the imam's legitimacy. It is, therefore, a unique source that gives us insight into the development of tribal communities in Yemen and their connections to a ruling Zaydi imam.

3 The Tribal Genealogy of Tāj al-Bahā

Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn's first marriage was to a *sharīfa*, a female descendant of the Prophet, Fāṭima bint ʿAbdallāh ibn al-imām Muṭahhar ibn Muḥammad ibn Sulaymān, who was also his maternal cousin.²¹ This was an important marriage for the imam because it continued his sayyid lineage and strengthened his ties to the elites of Sanaa, where Fāṭima and her family resided.²² However, in 910/1505 Fāṭima and their first-born son died in Sanaa, after a long siege of

19 See, for comparison, how Muṭahhar al-Jurmūzī, a seventeenth-century Yemeni Zaydi historian, consistently placed the section on the family of the imam, focusing predominantly on the male progeny, at the end of his biographical works. Muṭahhar ibn Muḥammad al-Jurmūzī, *Kitāb al-Nubdha al-Mushīra ilā Jumal min ʿUyūn al-Sīra fī Akhbār Mawlānā Amīr al-Muʾminīn wa-Sayyid al-Muḥimīn al-Manṣūr bi-ʾllāh Rabb al-ʾĀlamīn al-Qāsim ibn Muḥammad ibn ʿAlī* (Sanaa: Maktabat al-Yaman al-Kubrā, 1980), 484–5; Muṭahhar ibn Muḥammad al-Jurmūzī, *al-Jawhara al-Munīra fī Jumal min ʿUyūn al-Sīra*, ed. Amat al-Malik Ismāʿīl Qāsim al-Thawr, 3 vols. (Sanaa: Muʾassasat al-Imām Zayd ibn ʿAlī al-Thaqāfiyya, 2008), 3:1236.

20 al-ʿUlufī, *Sīrat al-Imām Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn*, fols. 71v–77v.

21 al-ʿUlufī, *Sīrat al-Imām Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn*, fols. 71v–72r.

22 Even though Zaydi thinking did not require the wives of sayyids to hold descent from the Prophet for their progeny to be counted among sayyids, due to the importance assigned to sayyid lineage for political leadership, concerns over mixing blood with non-sayyids remained ever-present. See Gabriele vom Bruck, *Islam, Memory, and Morality in Yemen: Ruling Families in Transition* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 137–9.

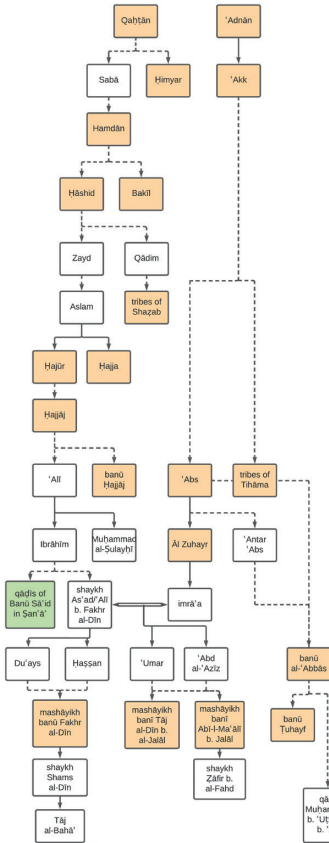


FIGURE 2 Genealogical chart of Tāj al-Bahā' based on al-'Ulufi's *Sīra*. Marked in color are family or tribal groups. Dotted lines represent lines of descent that have been simplified to make the chart.

the city led by 'Amir ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb (r. 894–923 / 1488–1517), the Tahirid ruler of Lower Yemen.²³ This was a heavy loss for Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn, and several years later, in 931/1525, he dedicated a heartfelt poem to his deceased wife.²⁴ Even though it appears that the future imam valued his relationship with Fāṭima, already several years before her death he took Tāj al-Bahā' bint al-shaykh Shams al-Dīn as a second wife.

Al-'Ulufi is our main source of information about Tāj al-Bahā'. From what he reports, it appears that the reason for this second marriage must be sought in the fact that Tāj al-Bahā' was the daughter of a powerful shaykh from the Ḥajja region. Ḥajja was located on the trade routes connecting the Yemeni highlands

23 al-'Ulufi, *Sīrat al-Imām Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn*, fol. 72r. al-'Ulufi claims the Tahirid ruler purposefully prevented the imam's wife from leaving the city.
 24 al-'Ulufi, *Sīrat al-Imām Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn*, fol. 286v; al-Sharafī, *al-La'ālī al-Muḍrā'a fī Tārīkh A'immat al-Zaydiyya*, fols. 48v–49r.

to Tihama.²⁵ This territory in the mountain ranges to the northwest of Sanaa was strategically important to the Zaydi imams due to its fortifications.²⁶ Thus, second in chronological order, Tāj al-Bahā' was the first wife of the imam in terms of political importance, due to her family's connections and the territory that they controlled.

Al-'Ulufi wrote of Tāj al-Bahā's father, shaykh Shams al-Dīn al-Ḥuṣṣ that he was "one of the most noble and great *shaykhs* of the land".²⁷ The shaykh's influence was recognized by Imam Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn's predecessor, Imam al-Manṣūr Muḥammad al-Sirājī (d. 910/1505), who "gave him the appointment to collect taxes from the population residing under his control."²⁸ Another indication of the authority of the shaykh and the power of his family can be seen in al-'Ulufi's remark preceding the tribal genealogy that Tāj al-Bahā' "after the call to rule of the imam took care of the affairs of the army, visitors, and delegations."²⁹ Tāj al-Bahā's responsibility for the well-being and reception of these groups is therefore a recognition of the authority of her family – and a way for the imam to benefit from it in action. But where did that authority stem from? To answer this question, we turn to the tribal genealogy.

4 The Banū Ḥajjāj Layer

The genealogy can be approached in several ways. I suggest that those parts of the genealogy that refer to events in Yemen's history from the times of Imam al-Manṣūr 'Abdallāh ibn Ḥamza (d. 614/1217) to the days of Imam Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn can be grouped in a single layer related to what would have been seen by contemporaries as the relatively recent history of the Zaydi imamate in Yemen. I argue that the purpose of introducing this historical material in the text was pragmatic – it established sovereignty claims for the imam and promoted alliances between the state and the tribal elites by mentioning examples of

25 Robert T.O. Wilson, *Gazetteer of Historical North-West Yemen* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1989), 129.

26 Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Ḥajrī, *Majmū' Buldān al-Yaman wa-Qabā'ilthā*, 1:242–5; Yaḥyā Muḥammad Jaḥḥāf, *Ḥajja: Ma'ālim wa-A'lām* (Sanaa: Maktabat Khālid ibn al-Walīd, 2013), 33–4.

27 al-'Ulufi, *Sīrat al-Imām Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn*, fol. 74r: "kān min ajall mashāyikh al-bilād wa-a'zamihim."

28 al-'Ulufi, *Sīrat al-Imām Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn*, fol. 74r: "fa'ala [al-imām al-Manṣūr bi-'llāh Muḥammad ibn 'Alī al-Sirājī] lahu ... wilāya fī qabḍ mā yaqbuḍuhu min al-ra'āyā alladhīn taḥta yadihi."

29 al-'Ulufi, *Sīrat al-Imām Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn*, fol. 74r: "wa-kān lahā qiyām bi-aḥwāl al-jund wa-l-ḍifān wa-l-wāfidīn ba'da da'wat al-imām."

collaboration between the tribal elites and the Zaydi imamate. Moreover, the Banū Ḥajjāj layer of the genealogy can be used as a source for how a recently established tribal group formed its vision of its history and geographical belonging. This consideration is visible in al-ʿUlufī's attention to place names related to the tribal group and in the distinction he made between the larger confederation, whose genesis is in the realm of mythologized tribal history, and the *ahl* Ḥajjāj whose history and genealogy were more concrete and recent.³⁰

The section on recent Banū Ḥajjāj history is built around the premise that through his marriage to Tāj al-Bahā' the imam established a connection with her tribal confederation. Al-ʿUlufī stressed several ways in which the imam's wife represented her tribe's high status. He first discussed Tāj al-Bahā's direct paternal ancestor, a certain shaykh Ibn Fakhr al-Dīn al-Ḥajjājī. Al-ʿUlufī first called him Asʿad in the following passage dedicated to his connection to Imam al-Manṣūr ʿAbdallāh ibn Ḥamza (d. 614/1217):

Shaykh Asʿad ibn Fakhr al-Dīn al-Ḥajjājī lived in the days of Imam al-Manṣūr bi-llāh ʿAbdallāh ibn Ḥamza, may God bless his soul. He was one of the supporters of the imam, one of his generals, ... and a sword of his war. He controlled the region of Ḥajja and neighboring areas ... and some regions of Tihama. He also controlled ... most other forts of Ḥajja in the days of Imam al-Manṣūr bi-llāh. He led famous conquests and battles. ... He was killed there [in Tihama] and took from there [Tihama] in marriage a woman of Āl Zuhayr ... There are many who are related to this clan in Tihama, Lāʿa,³¹ and Ḥajja. The Banū al-ʿAbbās of Maṣānīʿ Ḥimyar,³² from whom are the Banū Ṭuhayf and those under their protection, are also related to them.³³

Thus, al-ʿUlufī's narrative presents shaykh Ibn Fakhr al-Dīn as a well-connected tribal leader and a champion of the Zaydi imamate. What about the historicity of these claims? The biography of Imam al-Manṣūr ʿAbdallāh ibn Ḥamza mentions the Banū Ḥajjāj, a tribal group residing near al-Sūda, a town and military

30 Wilson hypothesized that the development of the Banū Ḥajjāj began in the sixteenth century, based on an absence of earlier mentions of this tribal group, a hypothesis that the evidence presented in this article supports. Robert T.O. Wilson, *Gazetteer of Historical North-West Yemen*, 129–30.

31 Lāʿa is a region and valley in north-west Yemen, close to Sanaa and Ḥajja.

32 Maṣānīʿ Ḥimyar is a mountain range in the vicinity of Ḥajja.

33 al-ʿUlufī, *Sīrat Imām Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn*, fol. 72v. Translations from the manuscript are my own.

stronghold to the northwest of Sanaa, who pledged allegiance to the imam.³⁴ Based on contemporaneous information about Imam al-Manṣūr ‘Abdallāh ibn Ḥamza this shaykh, however, does not appear to have been close to the imam. It is equally not clear from the text of the genealogy (potentially due to a purposeful omission) whether the shaykh already controlled vast areas of Ḥajja reaching the Tihama or came to control them because of his collaboration with the imam. Overall, the scant historical information from previous centuries and the contrasting interest of al-‘Ulufī in the history of tribes in Ḥajja fit the argument of Robert Wilson, who first postulated that the tribes of the mountains to the northwest of Sanaa and their territories started to become more integrated in Yemeni politics – and, therefore, came increasingly in the view of Yemeni historians – between the thirteenth and the sixteenth century.³⁵ Al-‘Ulufī’s genealogy and history of these groups could be a reflection of this new integrative process.

The mention of this shaykh’s marriage to a woman from a noble, tribal lineage indicates that it was a marriage that increased his prestige. It parallels the implicit claim that Imam Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn’s status was reinforced through his marriage to Tāj al-Bahā’. In addition, this connection through marriage allowed the author to weave in the mention of other tribal groups – the Banū al-‘Abbās and their relatives from the Banū Ṭuhayf. This reference is not a coincidence, as another wife of the imam was a daughter of a Banū Ṭuhayf shaykh.³⁶ Thus, in the opening of his description of the ancestor of the imam’s wife al-‘Ulufī included several other tribal groups, implying to the reader that they too are important allies of the imam, with whom he sought to establish a connection through his marriage to Tāj al-Bahā’.

The importance of the Banū Ḥajjāj connection, in the eyes of al-‘Ulufī, was not limited to the figure of the shaykh. In a later part of the genealogy, having switched to calling this person ‘Alī, the author of the *sīra* dives deeper into the history of his descendants. In this way, al-‘Ulufī first reached back to the oldest layers of the connected history of the Zaydi imamate and tribal groups, identifying a seminal moment of cooperation, and then traced the subsequent development of the alliance. In fact, as the following passage from the genealogy shows, al-‘Ulufī aimed to show that the first connection between the tribal

34 Ibn Dī‘tham, *al-Sīra al-Manṣūriyya*, 980. A certain Ibn Ḥajjāj, possibly, a relative, is mentioned as serving the Ayyubids.

35 Robert T.O. Wilson, “The Fortification of North-West Yemen (the Emergence of the Modern Administrative Centres),” *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 12 (1982): 95–103.

36 She was Amīra bt. al-sulṭān al-Ṭuhayf. al-‘Ulufī, *Sīrat al-Imām Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn*, fol. 75r.

leader and the Zaydi imamate impacted his descendants' lives, bringing them respect from different political regimes and prosperity:

Let us now return to 'Alī ibn Fakhr al-Dīn. The abovementioned woman gave him two sons ... They were brought up with their maternal uncles after their father was killed. [Then] they got married ... Their descendants moved to al-Saḥūl³⁷ and the plains during the rule of the Banū Ghassān.³⁸ They were their governors (*wulā*). Among their descendants are the shaykhs of the Tāj al-Dīn family ... and [the shaykhs] of the family of his brother. ... They were both supporters of 'Alī ibn al-imām Ṣalāḥ ibn 'Alī ibn Ṣalāḥ.³⁹ Among their ... descendants are shaykh al-Zāfir ibn al-Fahd and his relatives, who also supported 'Alī ibn Ṣalāḥ.⁴⁰

In this passage, al-'Ulufī pointed to later developments in the history of the family. Due to the shaykh's special status, his descendants were able to move up in life. They moved to a region near Ibb, a city in Lower Yemen that was well-connected to trade routes, and served the Rasulid dynasty.⁴¹ This relocation seems historically plausible and parallel to tribal relocation in the Aden area, but it is hard to verify whether these tribal leaders held appointments as governors in the Rasulid administration.⁴² Regardless of its historicity, the presence in the text of the statement about state service to the Rasulids is remarkable. It creates a causal link between the service of the shaykh to an imam and the subsequent increase in the wealth and prestige of the family of his descendants even under non-Zaydi rule.

While this branch of the family benefited from their Rasulid connections, they also participated in Zaydi politics. According to al-'Ulufī, several members of the family pledged allegiance to a certain 'Alī ibn al-imām Ṣalāḥ ibn 'Alī ibn Ṣalāḥ. This person is most probably Imam al-Manṣūr 'Alī ibn al-imām al-Nāṣir Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn al-imām al-Mahdī 'Alī (d. 840/1437),

37 al-Saḥūl is a region near Ibb in Lower Yemen.

38 Meaning the Rasulid dynasty of Southern Yemen.

39 Most probably, meaning Imam al-Manṣūr 'Alī ibn al-imām al-Nāṣir Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn al-imām al-Mahdī 'Alī (d. 840/1437).

40 al-'Ulufī, *Sīrat al-Imām Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn*, fol. 72v.

41 Ibb under the Rasulids appears to have had less importance than the more developed Aden, Zabīd, and Ta'izz. Nevertheless, it was a center of local economic activity. Éric Vallet, *L'Arabie marchande: État et commerce sous les sultans rasūlides du Yémen (626–858/1229–1454)* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2010), 349. DOI: 10.4000/books.psrbonne.2441.

42 Rasulid sources mention population movements from tribal territories to areas near Aden in the late twelfth century. Vallet, *L'Arabie marchande*, 302.

a Zaydi ruler known for his victorious wars against the Ismā'īlīs.⁴³ He controlled Sanaa and belonged to the Banū al-Wazīr sayyid family to whom Imam Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn was related through his father.⁴⁴ By mentioning the support of Tāj al-Bahā's ancestors to ancestors of Imam Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn al-'Ulufī stresses the long history of alliances between the Zaydi imamate and the tribes.

Up to this point al-'Ulufī presented elite tribal families, to which Tāj al-Bahā, the imam's wife, was only distantly related, through her male ancestor. Having concluded this section, al-'Ulufī then added a passage that draws a direct line from shaykh Ibn Fakhr al-Dīn al-Ḥajjājī to the days of Imam Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn:

Let us now return to the sons of 'Alī ibn Fakhr al-Dīn who resided in Ḥajja. They were Ḥaṣṣan and Du'ays. Among their descendants are the shaykhs of Banū Fakhr al-Dīn, who nowadays reside in al-Zafīr⁴⁵ and control it – and they are all the maternal uncles of ... the sons of our lord the commander of the faithful.⁴⁶

The second set of the shaykh's descendants received less detailed historical descriptions, but al-'Ulufī stressed their strong connection to Ḥajja, the home region of the imam. According to him, the family of Ibn Fakhr al-Dīn al-Ḥajjājī resided in this area for at least three hundred years. Al-Zafīr, a *hijra*, center of religious study, located in tribal territory, mentioned in this section of the text, started flourishing under the paternal grandfather of Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn, the imam and scholar al-Mahdī Aḥmad ibn Yaḥyā ibn al-Murtaḍā.⁴⁷ It is from this line of tribal leaders that Tāj al-Bahā, the imam's wife, and her brothers, the

43 Muḥammad ibn Fand al-Zuḥayf, *Ma'āthir al-Abrār fi Tafṣil Muḥmalāt Jawāhīr al-Akhbār wa-yusammā al-Lawāḥiq al-Nadiyya bi-l-Ḥadā'iq al-Wardiyya*, ed. 'Abd al-Salām al-Wajīh, 3 vols. (Amman: Mu'assasat al-Imām Zayd ibn 'Alī al-Thaqāfiyya, 2002), 2:1056–8; Aḥmad al-Sharafī, *al-La'ālī al-Muḍrā fi Akhbār A'immat al-Zaydiyya*, Paris Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Société de Géographie, MS SG MS4–67 (1252), fol. 192 (citing al-Zuḥayf but adding also a note on gift exchanges between this imam and Rasulid rulers).

44 Aḥmad ibn 'Abdallāh ibn al-Wazīr, *Tārīkh Banī al-Wazīr*, Milan Biblioteca Ambrosiana Nuofondo MS C.35.ar, fols. 30v, 43v, 62v–63r, 76r–79r. The same source provides information on his genealogy that allows to draw the link with imam Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn. Additional information on this connection is provided by al-'Ulufī earlier in the biography. al-'Ulufī, *Sīrat al-Imām Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn*, fol. 4r.

45 Al-Zafīr is a *hijra* (center of religious study in tribal territory) in the Ḥajja region.

46 al-'Ulufī, *Sīrat al-Imām Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn*, fol. 73r.

47 On the rise of al-Zafīr under Ibn al-Murtaḍā see Ismā'īl ibn 'Alī al-Akwa', *Hijar al-'Ilm wa-Ma'āqiluhu fi-l-Yaman*, 5 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr al-Mu'āṣir, 1995), 3:1312–9. On the concept of *hijra* in Zaydi Yemen see Ismā'īl ibn 'Alī al-Akwa', *An Introduction to Hijrah and Other Refuges of Learning in Yemen*. Translated by Tim Mackintosh-Smith (Ardmore, PA: American Institute for Yemeni Studies, 2009); and Wilferd Madelung, "The Origins

maternal uncles of the imam's sons mentioned in the text, descended. It appears that the mention of the *hijra* underlined the connections between tribal and scholarly prestige that the marriage to Tāj al-Bahā' provided the imam. Thus, the biographer circled back to the starting point of the genealogy.

Even though this part of the text mentions historical figures and events, as we discovered, it is hard to confirm its historical claims. The primary goal of the genealogy, however, was not historical accuracy. Instead, it points to a long history of cooperation between different kinds of rulers – both Zaydi and non-Zaydi – and the tribal shaykhs. It claims that the identity and elevated status of these tribal shaykhs formed in close connection to the rise of the Zaydi imamate. The genealogist connects his vision of state-tribal relations to Yemen's geography. By mentioning the different areas under the control of the ancestors of the imam's wife, al-'Ulufī implied that through his marriage the imam now had a sovereignty claim over these tribes and the territories that they controlled. These underlying assumptions were important in the context of Imam Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn's rule, as they promoted a history of alliances between the state and tribal elites. Moreover, by mentioning the relationship between the imam's sons and their maternal uncles, the historian implied that the next generation of Zaydi sayyid elites would continue working closely with the tribal elites.

5 Distant Tribal History

The second layer of the tribal genealogy lies in the realm of more distant and even mythologized past. Much of it appears to be based on *al-Iklīl* of the Yemeni scholar al-Ḥasan al-Hamdānī (d. 334/945), even though al-'Ulufī avoided direct citations. The purpose of this section is to appeal to a shared Arab-ness of the sayyids and the tribes in Yemen, overcoming perceived genealogical divisions.

Al-'Ulufī starts the tribal history after his concluding line on the maternal uncles of the sons of the imam. He returns to the direct ancestor of Tāj al-Bahā' to start his long discussion. He provides a genealogy of Ibn Fakhr al-Dīn, whom we discussed earlier, until he reaches Ibn Fakhr al-Dīn's ancestor whom he connects to the Ṣulayḥid dynasty in Yemen: "These ... are the sons of 'Alī ibn Fakhr al-Dīn ibn ... Ibrāhīm. ... The brother of said Ibrāhīm was Muḥammad, father of 'Alī al-Ṣulayhī, the king".⁴⁸

of The Yemenite Hijra," in *Arabicus Felix Luminosus Britannicus. Essays in Honour of A.F.L. Beeston on His Eightieth Birthday*, ed. Alan Jones (Reading: Ithaca Press, 1991), 25–44.
48 al-'Ulufī, *Sīrat al-Imām Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn*, fol. 73r.

This brief mention of the founder of the Yemeni Ṣulayḥid dynasty, ‘Alī ibn Muḥammad al-Ṣulayḥī, serves several purposes. The Ṣulayḥids were the Ismā‘īli rulers of Southern Yemen in the middle of the eleventh to the middle of the twelfth centuries.⁴⁹ They were geopolitical enemies of the Zaydi imams. However, the context of the mention of this dynasty in al-‘Ulufī’s text is neutral, if not positive. The conflict with the Zaydi imams is not mentioned at all. What seems to have mattered to the historian was that the founder of this powerful dynasty could be presented as a relative of the wife of Imam Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn. His political success, namely the fact that he established control over Sanaa and vast territories in southern Yemen, would have been known to the audience at the time. Through this mention, al-‘Ulufī enhanced the implication that the imam’s wife and her tribe had an elevated status and that through marriage this long history of power was reflected in the status of Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn himself.

The genealogist then continues his discussion of the extended tribal groups to which Tāj al-Bahā’s ancestor belonged, introducing even more geographical terms and names of powerful tribal confederations. He makes a pause in his narrative to discuss one such tribal confederation, Ḥajūr, whom he connected to territories outside of Yemen. Not only that, but members of this tribal group were important administrators in the Abbasid period:

Ḥajūr is a great tribal group (*baṭn*) in Yemen, Syria, Maghrib, and Iraq. From them were many nobles (*ashrāf*) in the days of Hārūn al-Rashīd, including Ma‘yūf ibn Yaḥyā and his son Yaḥyā ibn Ma‘yūf. They had leadership and courage, generosity, and discernment ... This Yaḥyā ibn Ma‘yūf was the governor of Palestine and died there a sultan. His brother was also considered a sultan.⁵⁰

This discussion of very distant ancestors of Tāj al-Bahā’ highlights the illustrious history of the tribe to which the imam’s wife belonged. In this passage, al-‘Ulufī connects the success and fame of tribal leaders with service to the fifth Abbasid caliph, Hārūn al-Rashīd (r. 170–193/786–809). While other sources that mention these historical actors focus on the participation of these tribal leaders in conquests, al-‘Ulufī emphasizes state-tribal relations built on service

49 G.R. Smith, “Ṣulayḥids,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. Peri Bearman et al. (Brill Online) DOI: 10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_1112.

50 al-‘Ulufī, *Sīrat al-Imām Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn*, fol. 73r. This section is echoing passages on Ḥajūr in *al-Iklīl*. Abū Muḥammad al-Ḥusayn ibn Aḥmad al-Hamdānī, *al-Iklīl min Akhbār al-Yaman wa-Ansāb Ḥimyar. al-Juz‘ al-Āshir*, ed. Muḥibb al-Dīn al-Khaṭīb (Beirut: al-Dār al-Yamaniyya, 1987), 99–100.

and reward.⁵¹ Thus, he is once again underlining the peaceful and mutually beneficial relationship between the central government and the tribes. The attention of al-‘Ulufi to Ḥajūr can be explained by the steady rise of this tribal confederation to prominence over the few centuries preceding Imam Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn, a process analyzed by David Gochenour in his study of the early Zaydi expansion in Yemen (900–1200).⁵² Al-‘Ulufi’s genealogy, therefore, when contrasted with information from previous periods, once again appears a useful source for the study of shifting perceptions of tribal history.

The Ḥajūr-related governors are important for al-‘Ulufi for yet another reason. This reference allows him to bring into the narrative the legendary brother of Ḥajūr, Ḥajja, after whom the region, so central to Imam Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn and his wife, was named: “Ḥajūr and Ḥajja are the sons of Aslam, and they are brothers. Ḥajja was one of the best people of Ḥāshid, of their elite.”⁵³ Thus, having traveled all the way to Palestine, al-‘Ulufi now returns to the Yemeni context.

The concluding lines of al-‘Ulufi’s genealogy of Tāj al-Bahā’ are filled with indications that ever-larger groups of tribes residing in the northern Yemeni highlands were interconnected. The historian writes of ten brothers, from whom “the great tribes of the two Ḥajjas, the two Lā’as, the two al-Sharafs, Shazab, and other locations” descended.⁵⁴ He then traced the lineage of Tāj al-Bahā’ to Ḥāshid and Bakīl, the two super-confederations of an even larger tribal group, Hamdān.⁵⁵ These tribal groups were key to the existence of the state in Yemen at the time, as they controlled the area around Sanaa and nearby mountain ranges. These central areas of Yemen were known to contemporaries as the land of Ḥāshid and Bakīl (*bilād Ḥāshid wa-Bakīl*) – a fact that was known to al-‘Ulufi, who, as his *nisba* shows, was no stranger to

51 al-Hamdānī, *al-Iklīl min Akhbār al-Yaman wa-Ansāb Ḥimyar*, 99–100; Abū Ja’far Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-Rusul wa-l-Mulūk*, ed. Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm, 11 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Turāth, 1967), 8:43, 204, 320, 322.

52 Gochenour, “The Penetration of Zaydi Islam into Early Medieval Yemen,” 322.

53 al-‘Ulufi, *Sīrat al-Imām Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn*, fol. 73r.

54 al-‘Ulufi, *Sīrat al-Imām Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn*, fol. 73v. The doubling of names of regions such as Lā’a, Ḥajja, and al-Sharaf is used to indicate that the region includes both an elevated area and a valley.

55 Paul Dresch, “Ḥāshid,” in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE*, ed. Kate Fleet et al. (Brill Online), DOI: 10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_35335; Paul Dresch, “Bakīl,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE*, ed. Kate Fleet et al. (Brill Online), DOI: 10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_24502; G. Rentz, “Ḥāshid wa-Bakīl,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. Peri Bearman et al. (Brill Online), DOI: 10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_2783.

Ḥāshid tribal territory.⁵⁶ This meant that only those governments that were able to negotiate with the powerful tribes could become stable. It is this concern that led al-ʿUlufī to mention these groups and the various highland regions where they resided. This shared genealogy and territory, in the eyes of al-ʿUlufī, meant that their historical achievements and cooperation with the state was also a shared heritage. Moreover, he implied that the collective history of these tribes was brought together in the figure of Tāj al-Bahāʾ, the imam's wife.

While tracing Tāj al-Bahāʾ's genealogy, al-ʿUlufī solved another issue that plagued Zaydi sayyids in Yemen – accusations of foreignness based on their northern, ʿAdnānī, lineage. Local Yemeni tribes saw themselves as belonging to Qaḥṭān, the southern group of Arab tribes.⁵⁷ To them, sayyids, as descendants of the Prophet and of Quraysh, were linked to ʿAdnān, the northern group of Arab tribes. This vision of sayyids as foreigners in Yemen based on their non-Qaḥṭānī descent seems to have informed the genealogical study of the Yemeni scholar al-Ḥasan al-Hamdānī (d. 334/945).⁵⁸ For many centuries after this famous genealogist completed his work, descent from northern tribes was leveled as an accusation against prominent Zaydi imams.⁵⁹ Al-ʿUlufī was certainly aware of these tensions and wrote this section to dissolve them. To deal with this issue, he drew up a connected genealogy of Qaḥṭān and ʿAdnān.⁶⁰ Al-ʿUlufī went even further, underlying the shared humanity of all people residing in Yemen, regardless of which tribe they belonged to, by concluding the genealogy of Tāj al-Bahāʾ with Adam and Eve.⁶¹

56 Paul Dresch, "The Tribes of Ḥāshid wa-Bakīl as Historical and Geographical Entities," in *Arabicus Felix Luminosus Britannicus*, 8–24.

57 A. Fischer and A.K Irvine, "Qaḥṭān," in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. Peri Bearman et al. (Brill Online) DOI: 10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_3790; Eva Orthmann, "ʿAdnān," in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE*, ed. Kate Fleet et al. (Brill Online) DOI: 10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_24770.

58 Meissner, "Tribes at the Core: Legitimacy, Structure, and Power in Zaydi Yemen," 173–4.

59 Based on these attitudes, some imams were criticized for studying Arabic grammar since native speakers would not need to make such an effort to speak correctly. Ibn Fand al-Zuhayf, *Maʿāthir al-Abrār fī Taḥṣīl Muḥmalāt Jawāhir al-Akḥbār*, 2: 846. Meissner remarked that he encountered such accusation of 'otherness' based on lineage among Yemenis he interviewed during his research in the region. Meissner, "Tribes at the Core: Legitimacy, Structure, and Power in Zaydi Yemen," 174–5. These accusations continue to be a source of tension up to these days. vom Bruck, *Islam, Memory, and Morality in Yemen: Ruling Families in Transition*, 53–8.

60 al-ʿUlufī, *Sīrat al-Imām Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn*, fol. 73r.

61 al-ʿUlufī, *Sīrat al-Imām Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn*, fol. 73r.

What is the function of the legendary section? Tribal genealogies are usually interpreted as tools of community-building and conflict resolution.⁶² As far as we can tell, al-ʿUlufi in this discussion of tribal lineages was not introducing any new material. The *longue-durée* tribal history in his text is reminiscent of the style of South Arabia's most famous tribal genealogist, al-Hamdānī.⁶³ What is, however, central to al-ʿUlufi's contribution is the context in which he places known material. If the Banū Ḥajjāj layer discussed above stressed the historicity of tribal-state relations in Zaydi Yemen and provided a historical ground for the sovereignty of the imam in the Yemeni context, the legendary layer created symbolic contacts between the sayyid-ruler and his tribal subjects and partners by appealing to their shared Arab past. It strengthened the implied argumentation of the Banū Ḥajjāj section by showing how cooperation between rulers, whether Zaydi or not, and the tribes was a common situation.

6 The Political Outcome of the Imam's Marriage to Tāj al-Bahā'

One key concern regarding the tribal genealogy in Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn's *sīra* is that, since it was authored by a member of the imam's court, it may not accurately represent how Yemeni tribes viewed themselves. Would the tribes have agreed with the genealogical history presented in the imam's biography and the claims to sovereignty that it set out? It is hard to answer this question, especially because we lack contemporaneous sources written by tribal authors in a milieu not centered around the imam. Instead, I suggest that we can evaluate the success of the textual strategy of blending sayyid and tribal identities by looking at the subsequent actions of Imam Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn and the feedback that his political decisions received from tribal populations. While we have no way to assess how this genealogy was circulated among the supporters of the imam, we can deduce, based on subsequent events, how valuable the connection to Tāj al-Bahā's tribal group was for the imam.

In 912/1506, Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn issued his call for the imamate, *da'wa*, in Banū Ḥajjāj territory, in the *hijra* Ḥafīr. This choice of location indicated to the

62 Marieke Brandt, "Heroic History, Disruptive Genealogy: Al-Ḥasan al-Hamdānī and the Historical Formation of the Shākir Tribe (Wā'ila and Dahm) in al-Jawf, Yemen," *Medieval Worlds* 3 (2016): 116–45, DOI: 10.1553/medievalworlds_n03_2016s116; Marieke Brandt, "Inhabiting Tribal Structures: Leadership Hierarchies in Tribal Upper Yemen (Hamdān & Khawlān ibn 'Amr)," in *Southwest Arabia across History: Essays to the Memory of Walter Dostal*, ed. Andre Gingrich and S. Haas (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2014), 93, DOI: 10.1553/oxo0321746.

63 Meissner, "Tribes at the Core: Legitimacy, Structure, and Power in Zaydi Yemen," 171–2.

onlookers that the foundational claims to legitimacy of this imam combined his position as a sayyid-scholar and his connection to the local tribes. Shortly after his *da'wa* Imam Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn set out on a tour of the northern highlands, with a focus on the region of Ḥajja and the mountain regions (and their forts) overlooking the plain of Sanaa.⁶⁴ This tour had several goals – networking to expand his supporter base among local elites and the general population, assessment of military potential, and tax collection. Imam Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn's travels helped him build the core of his imamate. As a result, within a year he was able to start his first military campaign to expand the area under his control.⁶⁵ Even though this early wave of Sharaf al-Dīn expansion was stopped by the southern Yemeni Tahirid dynasty, the region of Ḥajja remained in the hands of the imam, not least due to the strong connections that he built there through his marriage to Tāj al-Bahā'.⁶⁶

Imam Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn's second wave of conquests similarly relied on his wife's relatives from the Banū Ḥajjāj. The evidence for this is indirect and can be gleaned from al-'Ulufī, who mentions, for example, that before the start of the 925/1519 northward campaign from recently conquered Sanaa, Imam Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn spent several days traveling through Banū Ḥajjāj territory to assemble his army.⁶⁷ The subsequent decade of conquest (925–933/1519–1527) was equally supported by the Banū Ḥajjāj.⁶⁸

Moreover, in this period, the sons of Imam Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn and Tāj al-Bahā' increasingly stepped into the political arena, becoming military leaders and high-ranking administrators. The eldest son of the imam and his first-born with Tāj al-Bahā', Muṭahhar, led his first military campaign in 924/1518 and, based on al-'Ulufī's reports, remained an active commander from then onwards.⁶⁹ His brother Shams al-Dīn was responsible for tax collection trips (*ṭiyāfa*) in conquered territories.⁷⁰ In 943/1536 they jointly led a campaign to

64 al-'Ulufī, *Sīrat al-Imām Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn*, fols. 99v–102v.

65 al-'Ulufī, *Sīrat al-Imām Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn*, fol. 102r.

66 The Ṭahirid counteroffensive of 917/1511 is discussed in 'Isā ibn Luṭfallāh, *Rawḥ al-Rūḥ fi mā Ḥadatha ba'd al-Mī'a al-Tāsi'a min al-Fitan wa-l-Futūḥ*, ed. Ibrāhīm ibn Aḥmad al-Maḥḥafī (Sanaa: Markaz 'Abbādī li-l-Dirāsāt wa-l-Nashr, 2003), 26–7.

67 On the conquest of Sanaa in 923/1517 see al-'Ulufī, *Sīrat al-Imām Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn*, fols. 118v–119v. On the 925/1519 visit to Banū Ḥajjāj see al-'Ulufī, *Sīrat al-Imām Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn*, fol. 154v.

68 Ibn Luṭfallāh, *Rawḥ al-Rūḥ*, 58.

69 al-'Ulufī, *Sīrat al-Imām Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn*, fols. 140v, 181v–185r, 221, 232v, 234r, 238r, 245v–246r.

70 al-Marḥabī, *Sīrat al-Imām Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn*, Imam Zayd ibn 'Alī Cultural Foundation, MS ZA 561–01, fol. 36v.

capture Zabīd, an important city in South Yemen.⁷¹ Additionally, they were responsible for auditing the affairs of various regions.⁷² In these development we can see how the strength of the connection between the imam's family and the Banū Ḥajjāj supported the entire structure of the imamate, providing the imam and his sons with the authority and military power necessary to maintain the state.

The development of the Sharaf al-Dīn imamate was undercut by internal crisis and external pressure from the first Ottoman conquest of Yemen.⁷³ Despite territorial losses and the eventual disintegration of the Sharaf al-Dīn imamate, the core lands that the imam came to control through his marriage to Tāj al-Bahā' and the military campaigns supported by his Banū Ḥajjāj allies remained in the hands of his family. Most resilient among the descendants of this union was the line of Shams al-Dīn.⁷⁴ His family continued to control areas in Ḥajja and the fortified town Kawkabān throughout centuries of turmoil that included the Ottoman conquest and the rise of the Qasimid dynasty. Only during the second conquest of Yemen by the Ottomans in the late nineteenth century was this family uprooted from their ancestral home.⁷⁵ The long history of the descendants of Imam Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn and Tāj al-Bahā' indicates that the alliance built between this sayyid family and their tribal neighbors and relatives remained strong long after the time of its architects.

71 Kānī Çelebi, *Bughyat al-Khāṭir wa-Nuzhat al-Nāzīr*, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Nuovo Fondo, MS E.391.ar, fol. 124r.

72 al-Marhabī, *Sīrat al-Imām Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn*, fol. 103v.

73 For an overview of the history of the Sharaf al-Dīn imamate and its collapse see Richard J. Blackburn, "The Era of Imām Sharaf al-Dīn Yaḥyā and his son al-Muṭaḥhar (10th/16th Century)," *Yemen Update. Bulletin of the American Institute for Yemeni Studies* 42: 4–8; see also Michel Tuchscherer, "Chronologie du Yémen (1506–1635)," *Chroniques yéménites* 8 (2000), Accessed July 31, 2022 URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/cy/11>; DOI: 10.4000/cy.11 On the first Ottoman conquest of Yemen see Frédérique Soudan, *Le Yémen ottoman d'après la chronique d'al-Mawza'ī al-Iḥsān fī dukhūl mamlakat al-Yaman taḥt zill 'adālat Āl 'Uṭmān* (Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 1999).

74 On the Shams al-Dīns of Kawkabān and the city that they ruled see Clive Smith, "Kawkabān: some of its history," *Arabian Studies* VI (1982):32–50; Clive Smith, "Kawkabān, the key to Sinān Pasha's campaign in the Yemen (March 1569–March 1571)," *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 32 (2002):287–94; and Ekaterina Pukhovaia, "The Lords of Kawkabān and the Transformation of the State in Early Modern Yemen (15th–17th Centuries)," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 66 (2023):289–317. DOI: 10.1163/15685209-12341596.

75 Thomas Kuehn, *Empire, Islam, and the Politics of Difference: Ottoman Rule in Yemen, 1849–1919* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 47–51. DOI: 10.1163/ej.9789004211315.i-292.

7 Conclusion

The subsequent reception history of al-'Ulufi's *Sīra* of Imam Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn has implications for our discussions of the genealogy as well. If we open the biography of the imam written by his great-grandson Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mufaḍḍal (1022–1085/1614–1675), we will find no traces of the tribal history that we discussed so far. Ibn al-Mufaḍḍal wrote about his third great-grandfather seeking to reconceptualize Sharaf al-Dīn history in light of the recent turbulent political history of the region that was first conquered by the Ottomans and then witnessed the rise of the Qasimid dynasty of Zaydi imams. To update the image of his illustrious ancestor, Ibn al-Mufaḍḍal thought it prudent to erase the tribal component and bring the *sīra* to an imagined narrative standard. The short biography he wrote focuses on the education of Imam Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn, his scholarly output, and his political activity.⁷⁶ The imam's wives, in-laws, and numerous children do not appear in this text. It is of course possible that they were removed over concerns of brevity. However, the textual strategy of a contemporary of Ibn al-Mufaḍḍal indicates that this was a conscious erasure of certain aspects of the imam's biography.

The historian Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Sharafī (d. 1055/1645), who was an active supporter of the founder of the Qasimid imamate, Imam al-Manṣūr Qāsim (d. 1029/1620), in his three-volume history of Zaydi imams summarized the biography of Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn. Like Ibn al-Mufaḍḍal he had access to a variety of sources about the Sharaf al-Dīn period. Paraphrasing al-'Ulufi, he kept detailed information on Tāj al-Bahā' and her tribal genealogy.⁷⁷ From the vantage point of al-Sharafī, the genealogy of Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn's wife merited preservation because it clarified the legitimacy claims of the imam. We can therefore assume that outside observers of Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn and his family remembered the strong tribal connection and its importance to the survival of his imamate.

Thus, the genealogy of Tāj al-Bahā', the second wife of Imam Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn, preserved in al-'Ulufi's *sīra* of this Zaydi imam is an important witness to the flexibility of the Zaydi imamate. It shows that marriage was a political tool for the imam and that his concern with his wife's tribal genealogy had direct implications for the success of his political project. As this article demonstrates, the genealogy combines an excursus into recent tribal history with a discussion of more removed events. It touches upon several key themes:

76 Ibn al-Mufaḍḍal, *Al-Sulūk al-Dhahabiyya*.

77 al-Sharafī, *al-La'ālī al-Muḍī'a fī Tārīkh A'immat al-Zaydiyya*, Milan Biblioteca Ambrosiana Nuovo Fondo, MS D.545.ar, fols. 17v–18r.

tribal-state relations and the benefits that tribal elites enjoy through their partnerships with various administrations, the connected history of sayyids and tribes in Yemen, as well as the glorification of the lineage of the imam's wife.

Underlying this text is a concern over legitimacy. The author of Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn's biography implies that the noble lineage of the imam's wife Tāj al-Bahā' is connected to his own prestige and legitimacy. Her ancestral connections to a variety of tribes in northern and southern Yemen were foreshadowing subsequent expansion of the Sharaf al-Dīn imamate. The presence of such a unique text, dedicated to an imam's wife whose origins were tribal, is an important indication of the innovative nature of the Sharaf al-Dīn imamate and, potentially, of some pre-modern Zaydi political projects' much broader engagement with tribal visions of community and legitimacy.

Acknowledgments

This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 101023803. An early version of this article was presented at the conference "Ties of Kinship and the Early Islamic Empire" held at Leiden University on December 6–8, 2021. I thank the participants and organizers of the conference for the discussion, Cecilia Palombo and Birte Kristiansen for editorial suggestions, and the anonymous reviewers for their comments.