



## SELECTIVE APPROPRIATION OF GENEALOGICAL TRADITIONS: SPIRITUAL CLAIMS OF HADHRAMI SAYYIDS

Anas Edoli

Research Scholar

Department of History

Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit

Kalady, Ernakulam

**Key Words:-** Hadhrami, Sayyid Genealogy, Genealogy and Islam

### Introduction

Genealogy is very important and part of prestige in the life of Arabs. There were many conflicts and confrontation between the tribes to sustain the prestige of the tribe. Prophet Muhammad's advance with prophethood was also during this period whereas he tried to integrate all tribes and gain their support. However the genealogical prestige existed even after the prophet Muhammad. Prophet himself was from the prominent tribes of Arabia that is why he got support from many people. It is written by many scholars that it would have been difficult to get the followers whether he was from a lower tribe. Prophet once said I am from the prominent *Adnan* tribe, amongst *Adnan* I am the Qureshi and Hashim among the Qureshi.

On this ground prophetic genealogy was considered as prestigious after Prophet Muhammad. This lineage by the successors of Ali and Fathima is named as *Ahl Bayth*. They attempted to keep this lineage through the *kafa* (equivalent partner) marriage practices. Through this lineage they got vast support from the people wherever they migrated and they practiced the spiritual activities claiming direct descendants from the prophet Muhammad.

## Genealogy in Pre-Islamic Times

Tribal Arab culture itself gives due importance to genealogy and kinship. Early Arabic literature mainly focuses on family origin and clans. They fought long years only in the names of family prestige. Jaleel P.K.M. writes, “Genealogy can be conceived as an Arab culture that existed even before the advent of Islam where Islam tried to purge it from the arrogances of period of ignorance. Boasting on the base of lineage and evoking fights and wars due to clannish reasons were ubiquitous in Arabia at the time of advent of Islam”.<sup>i</sup> Shatwiri, a prominent Arab writer, has argued that Arabs were among the forbearers of genealogical traditions. Genealogy of Arab societies mainly branches out of two great fathers named Adnan and Qahtan. Prophet belonged to the Adnan clan which rests on high status. There was continuous fight between the tribes for silly issues like trespassing of the camel to the meadow of other tribe. The war, in many occasions took place between the cousin and uncle on the basis of tribes.

In the pre Islamic Arabia, there was a culture of sending the daughters to the male from upper class tribe to reproduce the off springs belong to the high strata. As the male was dominant in those periods, such off springs were connected to the upper tribe and claimed the high status. On the other hand it was strongly prohibited to intercourse between women from the upper class tribe with a man from lower class tribe.

To keep genealogical prestige, Arabs were ready to help each other in precarious situations. When a person sought the help from the same clan they consider it as a responsibility of co-tribes man to help him. Hadrath Mirza Bashirudhin writes, “They (Arabs) will help those who were oppressed and will restore them their rights, as long as the last drop of water remained in the sea. And if they do not do so, they will compensate the victims out of their own belongings” .<sup>ii</sup> When quarrel between the persons from two tribes were intervened with the authority of the tribes, It is a question how they sustain their genealogy in this area. Imam Suhail answered as it was desert, it was very difficult to live, but the Arabs were familiar with it. Therefore no one outside the desert can lead their life there. On this ground only Arab tribes lived in the deserts of Arabia and kept their genealogical origins.<sup>iii</sup> Once they get a child from the upper tribe they were reluctant to marry him or her to the lower tribe and exhibits pomp in front of others. This was very prevalent in Arabia.

As Prophet Muhammad was from the prominent tribe of Arabia people were very reluctant to oppose him. When he got first revelation he came to his family and divulged his revelation but nobody was ready to accept him except Ali. Against this background, Abu Jahl insulted the prophet as he did not get the support from his own family. This made Hamza (uncle of prophet) very angry towards Abu Jahl and rushed to retaliate from him. Leila Azzam writes, “Later, Hamzah, one of the Prophet's uncles, who was a strong and brave warrior of whom people were quite

afraid, heard how his nephew had been insulted. Filled with rage, he ran straight to the Ka'bah where Abu Jahl was sitting among the people and struck him a violent blow in the face with his bow. Hamzah then shouted, 'Will you insult him' .<sup>iv</sup>

When his propagation was strong people came to Abdul Muthalib (who is the paternal uncle of prophet) and complained that Muhammad criticizes their idols which are worshipped by their forefathers. Liela Azzam writes, "When this Message was preached to the people of Mecca and the well-meaning and reflective among them began to be impressed by it. The elders of Mecca took a serious view of what was happening. They went in a deputation to the Prophet' uncle, Abu Talib, and addressed him as: You are one of our chiefs and for your sake we have so far spared your nephew, Muhammad. The time has come, however, when we should put an end to this national crisis, this conflict, in our midst. We ask and demand that he should desist from saying anything against our idols. Let him proclaim that God is One, but let him not say anything against our idols. If he agrees to this, our conflict and controversy with him will be over. We urge you to persuade him. But if you are unable to do so, then one of two things must happen. Either you will have to give up your nephew or make him part of our belief."<sup>v</sup>

When Abu Thalib got the complaint from the people, he advised Muhammed not to blame the idols and follow the religion of the forefathers because their prestige lays in their leadership. They lived for their people, and their people for them. Abu Thalib again told him that if you do not agree, he said with tears in his eyes, then either I have to give you up or my people will give me up. When the Muhammad heard the advice, he replied that give up him and he will propagate independently and he is not ready to take back from this activity. This answer made Abu Thalib very irritated, so he decided to conserve the blood even if people give up him and said: Muhammed, go your way and do your duty. Let my people give me up. I am with you. From this historical anecdote it is very clear that a person from the same tribe was not ready to give up him at any cost, because it affects the prestige of the tribe.

## **Islam and Genealogy**

After the emergence of Islam, Prophet Muhammad tried to unify the tribes and propagate Islam. He invited the people to the oneness of God and ordered to desist the wars between the tribes. He advised that there is no any prestige for any person without surrender to the God. But the prestige still remained for those surrendered, and also motivated them to study the genealogy. He himself studied his genealogy till his twentieth father. However he asked not to pomp with ones genealogy as it was prevalent in pre Islamic times.

There is Quranic verse which refers to the genealogical prestige that Allah says I made some of you to the upper strata and some others in lower strata but final

success is to those who surrendered to the God.<sup>vi</sup> From this, one can understand there is concept of family prestige in Islam.

Prophet used his tribe (Quresh), which was most important amongst the Arabs to propagate Islam. As he was the member of high class tribe, people from the lower tribe wished to follow him. If it was vice versa it would have been very difficult to propagate the Islam. But he himself said in another occasion that “There is no superiority for an Arab over a non-Arab except on the basis of taqwa (piety)”.

### **Genealogy in Post Prophet (Muhammed) period**

After the prophet Muhammad, his family possessed the prestige in the society. Prophet himself gave this importance by giving the name *Ahlbayth*. Therefore in the post prophetic period *sada (AhlBayth)* considered themselves as the direct heirs of the Prophet. Due to the high status accorded to the descendants of the Prophet, they proclaim genealogical ties by whatever means. To sustain their prestige they depend upon the Quran and prophetic traditions. The Quran says that “Verily, Allah has decreed to purify you, O' *AhluBayt*, and sanctify you in a perfect way”. The prophetic origin gave them a very prestigious position among the *Muslims* community across the Muslim world.

There is another question why the status of Sayyids is not given to the other daughters of prophet Muhammed like Zaynab, Ummu Kulsu and Ruqiya. The genealogy through the female is the peculiarity of prophet's daughters and the descendant of other daughters were died in early childhood like Ali (son of Zaynab, daughter of prophet) or daughters were childless like Ruqiya and UmmuKulsu. Al shili opined that the descendant of *sharif* (female of Sayyid) is not the *Ahlbayth* as the Islamic genealogy goes through the males. Moreover prophet gives the status of *Ahlbayth* only to the descendant of Fathima as it is clear from the prophetic tradition that “I am a tree and Fathima is its ovule and Ali its pollen and Hassan and Hussain are its fruits and the beloved of my house are its leaves and all of them are in heaven truly”. On the other hand there are many arguments on the authenticity of Sayyids and which are the clans included in the *Ahlbayth*.

The religious scholars of Malabar used to eulogize about the Sayyid community in their *vaz<sup>vii</sup>* program. The manuscript (*ThuhfathulVaezeen*) found in the Chaliyam mosque (Calicut) says that it is the responsibility of the Muslims to respect the descendants of the prophet and those who deny the prestige of this community would be out of the purview of Islam.<sup>viii</sup> This is the attitude towards the Sayyids across the world though not without opposition. EngSa Ho who conducted anthropological studies on the Hadhramies also opines that their prestigious origin is the one important reason that gave them easy acceptance in the host society. Francoise Le Guennec-Coppens writes that the “prestigious descent of the *Sharifs* (Sayyids) and

their reputed piety often earned them the consideration usually given to the highest groups, the Swahili aristocracy and the Omani elite”.<sup>ix</sup>

This acceptance in the host society made them spiritual healers. People from different walks of life came to them to find solution for their problems. The spiritual healing tradition of Hadhrami Sayyids was very prevalent across the Indian ocean territories. This paper focuses on the genealogical claims of Sayyid spiritual hierarchy.

### **Genealogy of Spirituality**

Genealogy helps to understand the familial origin of the person in a systematic manner. Prestigious genealogical communities try to keep them up through endogamy. Jaleel P.K.M. writes “being the science of lineage, genealogy helps to easily attach the family pedigrees at the family origins. In defining genealogy, *ilmnasab* or *ilmansab* as often called in Arabic”.<sup>x</sup> In the case of Hadhrami Sayyids they project their genealogy as part of their claim to prestige and this helps them to get high rank in the socio political arena. Raffaele Mauriello writes, “the role of genealogy in shaping political, religious and social realities appear to have been overlooked particularly, or even ignored, in the case of the contemporary history of the Middle East. This, at least, is the case with the family of the prophet. However, observed through the lens of genealogical prestige and marriage strategies, the role and behavior of the descendants of the family of the Prophet in recent times reveal customs of nobility that are close, at least similar to those witnessed in European history”.<sup>xi</sup>

The genealogical origin of Hadhrami Sayyid has been discussed by many scholars. Majority of them considered this prestige due to direct heirs of prophet. Muhaamed bin Abibakkr Shilli writes, “The science of genealogy is a grand art. It is part of the sciences of Prophetic hadith (sayings of the Prophet). The Prophet had said: ‘Learn from your genealogies of your kinsfolk (arham) attached to them, for the bond of kinship (*silatur-rahim*) is love in family, riches in property and merit in the afterlife.’ ..... Among its legal boons are descendants, suitability in marriage (*kafa’a*), avoidance of marriage with those prohibited, providing for those to whom one is obliged, knowledge of the female/multilateral kin whom one is commanded to visit regularly and aid”.<sup>xii</sup>

### **Genealogical claims and Kafa Marriage Practices**

The *kafa* literary means ‘equality’. *Kafa* in marriage practice is that the marriage of a person from equal partner in social and economic aspects. It is to preserve the prestigious origin of the family as scholars opines “Genealogy is an attempt to preserve one’s prestigious lineage position and to support his claims leaving no chances of manipulations. It conspicuously explicates the descendant of a

particular father, by which the lineage is named after, and branches into different clans, phrateries and moieties.<sup>xiii</sup> In this practice of *kafa* marriage male are given dominance because, the genealogy is possessed through the males.

Though *anuloma* and *prathiloma* are Hindu marriage tradition, it exists among the Sayyids. In this type of marriage male origin is considered in the hereditary. In this case *anuloma* is acceptable and *prathiloma* is not allowable. Frode F. Jacobsen writes “they (Sayyids) were crucial to the maintenance of social boundaries which was achieved by way of dress codes, through specific customs and even customary law .... Mainly, however, these boundaries were perpetuated through marriage rules, according to which women from one stratum were preferably married to members of the same stratum. While women could marry men of higher strata, men could only marry within or below their own strata”.<sup>xiv</sup>

The texts written by the Hadhrami Sayyids reiterate the *kafa* Marriage. Payal Ahmmed Vettam writes in *Sayyid Alawi Puthiya Nercha Pattu* about the high status of the Sayyids and about their lineage. He writes “Prophet Muhammad has compared his *Ahlul Bayt* (Ahl al-Bayt) to Noah's ark. Whoever loves and follows them will attain salvation and whoever violates their sanctity will drown”.<sup>xv</sup> In the same manner Fadhl writes “While holding the door of Holy Kaaba, Abu Dharr told that he had heard Prophet Muhammad says, "My family among you is like Noah's ark. He who sails in it will be safe, but he who holds back from it will perish".<sup>xvi</sup>

However the scholars had different opinion about the keeping of *kafa* in the marriage practices. All three school of Islamic jurisprudence consider the freedom (not to be slave) of the partner as the basic needs and all other things are optional and in the case of Maliki school<sup>xvii</sup> only the equality of religion is the basic need in the light of prophetic tradition “When someone, whose faith and conduct is acceptable to you, comes to you with a proposal, then marry him. If you don't, it will result in corruption upon the earth and great discord”.<sup>xviii</sup>

The *Nadvathul Mujahideen* oppose the practice of ‘*kafa*’ saying that the Quran does not give importance to any individual without first showing piety to God. They bring the Quranic verse “Surely the most honorable amongst you in God 's sight is the most pious amongst you”.<sup>xix</sup> Moreover they bring the prophet’s speech in *Hajjathul Vida*<sup>xx</sup>, where the prophet pronounced that all people are equal and there is no specialty for anyone within Islam. Prophet says “There is no superiority for an Arab over a non-Arab except on the basis of taqwa(piety)”.<sup>xxi</sup>

*Nadvathul Mujahideen* alleged that the superiority of the Sayyids was part of spiritual exploitation through which they spread superstitions in the society. Osella and Osella write that “while Mujahids criticize *Thangals* for using their ritual status to promote superstition and to accumulate wealth”.<sup>xxii</sup> They even claim that there is no prophetic lineage survived since the heirs of prophet were killed in the *Karbalawar* (a



war between the Prophet's grandsons and supporters against the sects of people of Iraq at Karbala). But the *sunni* sects claim that the prophetic lineage still exists through the off springs of Ali Zainul Abideen who was not killed in the war of *Karbala*.

The *sunni* sect also supports the *kafa* marriage of Sayyids by giving importance to the prophetic genealogy and they argue that though the *kafa* is not compulsory, but Prophet liked to protect his genealogy. Against this background Hadhrami migrants across the Indian Ocean territories kept written documents of their genealogy. However in the case of Hadhrami migration males were the major migrants so they married local non Sayyid women in terms of *anulom* marriage and kept up the genealogy. Jaleel writes "In Hadhrami context, the reason also may be that this diaspora which only consisted of males was able to populate itself only through this hyper-gamy and to maintain its identity through the male considered descent."<sup>xxiii</sup>

### **Sayyid's prestige and claims of inequality in Islam**

The high rank of Sayyids in the society paved way for the hot discussion on the class discrimination among the Muslim community. One of the Hadeeth says that "Allah has selected from Arabs the sons of Ismail, Bani Kinana from sons of Ismail, Quraish from Bani Kinana, Bani Hashim from Quraish and me from Bani Hashim".<sup>xxiv</sup> Al Shili, prominent Arab writer, answered to the question that why the Sayyids are given special regards in Islam was that "the concept that pre-Muhammadan genealogy was continued in Muhammad- a transmission of light."<sup>xxv</sup> The people who oppose the 'caste system' in Islam claim that there is no any ritualistic superiority like the Brahmins for the Sayyids and Sayyids have only the genealogical claim as the descendants of the prophet. They claim there is no any mandatory responsibility to appoint a Sayyid as the Imam of a *masjid* or to conduct a spiritual healing, but it is optional. However Muslims go to the Sayyids expecting some blessings as they are descendant of the prophet.

### **Prophetic Lineage and Medicinal Practices**

The healing practice of Sayyid community is part of traditional *ijazh*<sup>xxvi</sup> practice which they practiced in the host societies. The main treatments of the Sayyids are the Quranic verses, *dikr* or some other chants from Islamic tradition. They mainly gave solution to the material and psychological problems of common people. The visitors were included from every walks of life. This healing practice helped them to get the acceptance in the host society even among the non-Muslims. In the case of Mamburam Thangal there is much evidence for coming of Hindus to find the solution for their problems. They called him *mamburathe thambran* (lord of Mamburam) as an

honorific term. The same thing can be seen in Malay Archipelago as Ulrike Frietrag writes, “the emergence first of Sufism, and from the twelfth century onwards of Sufi orders, offered religious practices which were attractive to non-Muslims as well. Charismatic Sufis who knew how to read and write, who practiced medicine, wrote amulets and often were ascribed supernatural powers, drew Muslims and non-Muslims alike into their circles”.<sup>xxvii</sup> Moreover local narratives on the miraculous events of Sayyids have indeed played a key role in making a good acceptance and expanding this circle of religious legitimacy across the Indian Ocean territories.

The system *uruk*, *pinznamezuth* and *mantram* were the basic aspects of Hadhrami Sayyids spiritual healing. These practices were very prevalent in Arabian countries which were completely introduced in Indian Ocean network. In the earlier days of Hadhrami migration these practices did not get much acceptance but later it became very prevalent among the host society and Hadhrami Sayyid became spiritual healers. This *mantram* or *uruk* was not always successful remedies but in some occasion it failed to find the solution.

However these spiritual healing practices were very strongly opposed by the Islahi activists who consider this as part of the Sayyid exploitation of the common people. They claim that there is no any evidence for the practice of *mantram* or *uruk* from the life of the prophet. Abdussalm Sullami write that none of the four imams of jurisprudent supported the *uruk*, *mantram* or *pizanamezuth* at any stage and he claims that there is a prophetic tradition that any person who ties *urk* is made counterpart to the God.<sup>xxviii</sup> But the *sunni* sect claim that *urk* is only prohibited when it is make problem to the human body mentally or physically if it is not so, it is permissible in Islam taking the words of imam Razi. The prohibited *uruk*, which is tied in hands with names other than Allah's, which was very prevalent in pre-prophet times.

## Conclusion

The genealogy plays a vital role in the life of the Arab people which started even before the advent of the prophet. There is evidence of many war fought between the clans on the basis of family prestige. There is special discipline for the studying the genealogy in Arabia in the name of *ilm al ansab*. After the advent of prophet also, this tradition was continued and family or the descendants of prophet became the prestigious among the society. Those descendants of the prophet were called as *Ahlbayth* who were considered in highest strata in the society as they are the direct heirs from the prophet.

To keep this genealogical origin, Sayyids take many risks and efforts especially in the case of marriage. In selecting partner they try to keep *kafa* (sufficiency or partner from same clan). The *sharifa* (female of Sayyids) had more restriction because they have to marry only with the person from same strata but for the Sayyids has to marry from same strata or from below because, the genealogy



of Sayyids exist through the male members of *aAhlbayt*. On the other hand there many scholars who strongly oppose the *kafa* marriage of Sayyids by claiming that there is no any importance for *kafa* marriage to keep the genealogy. They argue that the only the piety is the sign of prestige not any genealogy.

In the same time there arising the issue of class distinction among the Muslim community by giving high position to the Sayyids. Therefore *Islahi* activists claim that there is no any importance to the Sayyids. But those supporting the status of Sayyids claim that the status of Sayyids is not like the class distinction but they had only genealogical establishment. In the case of Islamic matter there is no any ritualistic purity to become imam of a *masjid* or to do other Islamic deeds. But people approach them only to get the blessing as they are the descendant of the prophet and to get some solution to their material or psychological problems.

As the spiritual healers Sayyids use the common practice of *mantram*, *uruk* and *pizanemzuth*. All these things are doing taking certain verses from the Quran and Hadeeth. Spiritual healing has caused many criticism from the part of many organizations and personally. They consider the spiritual healing as part of the exploitation. Moreover it is not found in the life of the prophet who suggesting *urk* or *pizenamezuth*, rather he has strongly opposed those practices. However those supporting the spiritual healing say that the prophet prohibited *urk* and *pizanmezuth* which leads to the idolatry which was prevalent in the pre- prophetic time.

---

<sup>i</sup>Jaleel P.K.M., The Sayyid Lineage and Hadhrami Social network, Unpublished M.Phil Thesis, Jamia Millia Islamia, 2011, p. 21

<sup>ii</sup>Hadrath Mirza Bashirudhin, *Life of Muhammed*, Islam International Publication Limited, Islamabad, 2013,p. 26

<sup>iii</sup> Imam Suhail, *Sirathu Hisham* (Arabic), Darul Islam Press, Beirut, 2001, p. 45

<sup>iv</sup>Leila Azzam, op.cit., p. 26

<sup>v</sup> Leila Azzam, *Life of Prophet Muhammed*, Islam International Press, Islamabad, 2013, p. 16

<sup>vi</sup> Quran, 4:12

<sup>vii</sup>Religious speech among the Mappila Muslims

<sup>viii</sup>*ThufathulVaezeen*, manuscript, Chaliyam mosque

<sup>ix</sup>Francoise Le Guennec- Coppens, 'Changing Patterns of Hadhrami Migration and Social Integration in East Africa'

In UlrikFreitag William G.Clarrence Smith (eds.) *Hadhrami Traders, Scholars,and Statesmen in the Indian Ocean, 1750-1960s*, p. 166

<sup>x</sup>Jaleel P.K.M., The Sayyid Lineage and Hadhrami Social network, Jamia Millia Islamia, 2011, p. 19

<sup>xi</sup>Raffaele Mauriello, 'Genealogical Prestige and Marriage Strategy among the AhlBayth: The Case of Al Sadar Fa-

mily in Recent Times' in Sara Bowen and Helena (eds.) *Genealogy and Knowledge in Muslim Societies: Understand-*

*ing the Past'*, Edinburg University press, Edinburg, 2004, p. 131

<sup>xii</sup>Engseng Ho, *The graves of Tarim: Genealogy and mobility across the Indian Ocean* Berkeley, University of California Press, 2006, p.146

<sup>xiii</sup>Jaleel P.K.M., op.cit, p. 20

<sup>xiv</sup>Forde F. Jacobsen, *Hadhrami Arabs in Present-day Indonesia*, Rutledge, New York, 2009, p. 72

- <sup>xv</sup> PayalAhmmedVettam, Sayyid Alawi Puthiya Nercha pattu, manuscript
- <sup>xvi</sup> SayyidFadhI, *KaukabuDhurri*, Manuscript
- <sup>xvii</sup> It is one of the four school of jurisprudence in Islam
- <sup>xviii</sup> Abu Davood, *Sunanu Abu Davood*, Islamic press, Beirut,2008, p. 156.
- <sup>xix</sup> Quran, 49:13
- <sup>xx</sup> This is the last speech by the prophet at Makkah
- <sup>xxi</sup> A.K. Muslim, *Saheeh Muslim* vol.1, Islamic Press, Bierut, 2001,p. 153
- <sup>xxii</sup> Fileppo Osella and Caroline Osella, 'Islamism and Social Reform in Kerala', South India, Modern Asian Studies 42, 2/3 (2008) pp. 317–346, Cambridge University Press,p. 328
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Jaleel P.K.M., op.cit., p. 21
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Thurmudi, *SunanuThurmudhi* vol. 3, Islamic Press, Beirut,2008, p. 125
- <sup>xxv</sup> This is a mythical concept in Islam that the light of God is transformed from one to another through pious lineage.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> It means permission. In Islamic concept the permission from the great saints for the healing or etcould be more effective than the independent healing.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Ulrike Freitag, 'Reflection on the Longevity of Hadhrami Diaspora in the Indian Ocean' in Ibrahim Abushouk (ed.), *Hadhrami Diaspora in Southeast Asia*, p. 19.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> AbdussalmSullami, *ThouheedOruSamagraVishakalanam*, [www.voiceofislah.com](http://www.voiceofislah.com)