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Shahzad Bashir

SHAH ISMA‘IL AND THE
QIZILBASH:
CANNIBALISM IN THE
RELIGIOUS HISTORY OF
EARLY SAFAVID IRAN

The first decade of the sixteenth century of the Common Era saw the rise of the Safavids, an Iranian dynasty that lasted more than two centuries. In the year 1501, Isma‘il, the sixth hereditary successor to the prominent Sufi master Shaykh Safi al-Din Ardabili (d. 1334), took control of the city of Tabriz and proclaimed himself king.¹ Isma‘il was only fourteen at this time, and his extraordinary feat was accomplished with the support of intensely loyal soldiers called the Qizilbash, who held him in great esteem

Earlier interpretations of the material discussed in this essay were presented in a paper delivered at the Fourth International Round Table on Safavid Studies in Bamberg, Germany, in August 2003. I am grateful to the conference organizers for the opportunity to present and to Kathryn Babayan, Devin DeWeese, Yusuf Jamali, Adeeb Khalid, Lori Pearson, Sholeh Quinn, Giorgio Rota, Parna Sengupta, Marie Szuppe, Serena Zabin, and the anonymous reader for this journal for their helpful comments.

¹ The most recent comprehensive treatment of the rise of the Safavids is Jean Aubin, “L’avènement des Safavides reconsidéré,” *Moyen Orient & Océan Indien* 5 (1988): 1–130. Aubin’s analysis contains references and judicious comments for previous studies on the subject. The most detailed treatments in English are Michel Mazzaoui, *The Origins of the Safavids: Ši‘ism, Sufism and the Ġulat* (Wiesbaden: F. Steiner, 1972), and Said Amir Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). For an extensive recent bibliography of sources and studies on the Safavid period in all languages, see Jahanbakhsh Savaqib, *Tarikhnigari-yi ‘asr-i Safavi va shinakht-i manabi‘ va ma’akhiz* (Shiraz: Navid, 2001).

as their political leader and charismatic Sufi guide (*murshid*).² The Qizilbash were mostly Turkic tribesmen with origins in Azerbaijan, Anatolia, Syria, and the South Caucuses, who had become attached to the Safavid Sufi order over the course of the fifteenth century.³ Their name, which literally means “redhead,” was derived from a special crimson headgear designed for them by Shaykh Haydar (d. 1488), Isma‘il’s father and his predecessor as the head of the Safavid order.⁴

This essay attempts to understand the religious relationship between Shah Isma‘il and his followers by focusing on reports that the Qizilbash cannibalized the bodies of some of their enemies during the early years of the establishment of the Safavid dynasty. I argue that a careful examination of the words and actions attributed to the various parties involved in the alleged cannibalism can lead to a better understanding of the period’s religious imagination. The meanings ascribed to the episodes of cannibalism underwent a substantial shift in Safavid historical sources written between the beginning and the end of the sixteenth century. This shift correlates with the transformation of the Safavid king’s persona as the dynasty established itself firmly and, subsequently, faced problems of internal cohesion in the ranks of its supporters. Cannibalism was a highly sensational act in the context of medieval Islamic societies, and no author who reported it would have been unaware of its symbolic significance. Tracing the way it is invoked in the historiographic tradition highlights changes in Iranian religious and political cultures over the course of first century of Safavid rule.

The essay is divided into four parts. I first treat in detail the historical reports of cannibalism allegedly committed in Shah Isma‘il’s time and suggest how to interpret these based on the historical contexts in which the sources in question were produced. The second section deals with cannibalism said to have been committed in the court of the later Safavid

² The ultimate religious effect of the Safavids’ rise to power was the conversion of Iranian society to Twelver Shi‘ism, an Islamic sect representing a religious worldview quite different from that discussed in this essay. The transition to Twelver Shi‘ism has been treated in detail in most secondary works cited here; I will bracket it in my discussion in the interest of space and clarity.

³ For general information about the cultural background, organizational practices, and demographic data related to the Qizilbash, see Aubin, “L’avènement,” 28–36; Irène Mélikoff, “Le problème Kızılbaş,” *Turcica* 6 (1975): 49–67 (repr. in Irène Mélikoff, *Sur les traces du Soufisme turc* [Istanbul: Isis Press, 1992]); Masashi Haneda, *Le Chah et les Qizilbaş* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 1987); Willem Floor, “The *Khalifeh al-kholafa* of the Safavid Sufi Order,” *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 153, no. 1 (2003): 51–86; and Faruk Sümer, *Seferî devletinin kuruluşu ve gelişmesinde Anadolu Türklerinin rolü* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1992).

⁴ The history of the production and use of the headgear is reviewed in Willem Floor, *The Persian Textile Industry in Historical Perspective, 1500–1925* (Paris: Harmattan, 1999), 277–89.

king Shah ʿAbbas (d. 1629). Here, from the most detailed historical description available, I provide evidence to show that this type of anthropophagy was quite different from the behavior of Shah Ismaʿil’s followers; there were variations in the acts’ stated purposes and symbolic underpinnings, as well as differences in the identities of the victims and the cannibals. Putting the two types of cannibalism next to each other helps delineate elements particular to each. The third section of the essay connects cannibalism to the *chub-i tariq* ritual (literally, “the stick of the path”) in which the Qizilbash received blows on their bodies by representatives of Safavid kings to symbolize their religious and political loyalty to the Safavid house. I contend that cannibalism reported from the time of Shah Ismaʿil and the *chub* ritual are symbolically interconnected and reflect the highly corporeal nature of Qizilbash religious imagination. The conclusion to the essay argues that, although cannibalism itself was very much an exceptional activity among medieval Islamic religious practices, the logic underlying the incidents reported in Safavid chronicles connects Qizilbash religion to more common ways in which Sufi masters related to their disciples in the later medieval period. Pursuing the thread of cannibalism, then, allows us to place Qizilbash practices within the larger context of socioreligious trends that pervaded the Iranian Islamic world at the beginning of the sixteenth century.

EARLY QIZILBASH CANNIBALISM

Narratives concerned with Shah Ismaʿil’s reign describe only two instances where the Qizilbash are said to have committed cannibalism following the king’s command.⁵ The first dates to 1504, at the end of a military expedition to an area on the southern shore of the Caspian Sea, and the second to 1510, following the defeat of the Uzbeks and the capture of the city of Merv. For both incidents, historians’ reports fall into three categories: reports with explicit description of cannibalism; reports with no reference to cannibalism, but description of burning and/or mutilation of enemies’ bodies; and reports with no mention of any desecration of human bodies.⁶ Whenever it is mentioned, cannibalism is portrayed as a spontaneous

⁵ In saying this, I am excluding reports about cannibalism that are said to have occurred in times of famine. Such cannibalism is invoked often in Islamic historiography, in the Safavid period as well as before and after, in order to emphasize the desperation of a population following a natural catastrophe or the devastation brought on by a siege or military conquest.

⁶ The relative strengths and drawbacks of all sources pertaining to the history of Shah Ismaʿil remain to be investigated in full. For preliminary remarks, see Jean Aubin, “Chroniques persanes et relations italiennes: Notes sur les sources narratives du regne de Šah Esmaʿil Ier,” *Studia Iranica* 24 (1995): 247–59. General descriptions of the sources are found also in Haneda, *Chah et les Qizilbaš*, 10–28, and Muhammad Karim Yusuf Jamali, *Zindigani-yi Shah Ismaʿil-i Avval* (Kashan: Intisharat-i Muhtasham, 1997), 23–38. The most sophisticated study of Safavid historiography is Sholeh Quinn’s *Historical Writing during the Reign of Shah ʿAbbas* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2000), which provides brief descriptions of the major Safavid chronicles written until the middle of the seventeenth century (16–23).

activity that cannot be termed a “ritual” in the sense of being a “performance of a more or less invariant sequence of formal acts and utterances not entirely coded by the performers.”⁷ This point needs emphasis since secondary authors have persisted in calling these incidents “ritual cannibalism,” even though only two events are ever mentioned and the actual historical reports indicate no premeditation, defined structure, or orderly repetition.⁸

The fact that cannibalism is not mentioned in all the earliest sources to report on the two relevant contexts creates some doubt about whether the events actually occurred. Historical and anthropological studies from different parts of the world attest to the symbolic power of the cannibalistic act to provoke a sensational reaction. The word *cannibal* itself derives from the Spanish mispronunciation of the designation Carib, applied to peoples of the Americas met by Christopher Columbus. The imputation of cannibalism to the Caribs was of political value to the Europeans in their colonization of the region’s indigenous inhabitants. An assessment of the theme in reports about Polynesian societies similarly shows that alleged cannibalism mostly amounts to talk about eating human bodies, stemming from cultural preoccupations of various groups and ideological and material interests, rather than any evidence that can withstand close scrutiny.⁹ Ideological biases in the attribution of cannibalism are significant enough that some authors doubt that customary cannibalism has ever actually existed in a human society. The most recent ethnographic work on the topic attests that, although cannibalism can in fact be substantiated as a human cultural practice, it is never a matter taken lightly by those who perform it or observe it being carried out. Wherever it can be shown to have taken place, cannibalism is an act laden with symbolic meaning.¹⁰ To understand any reports about cannibalism, then, we must query the details of the alleged incidents and the sociohistorical context in which the acts are said to have occurred.

Reports about Qizilbash cannibalism are different from the modern cases that have been studied in detail, in that the events come to us mostly from

⁷ Roy A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 24.

⁸ For recent examples of this tendency, see Floor, “The *Khalifeh al-kholafa* of the Safavid Sufi Order,” 62–63; Rula Jurdi Abisaab, *Converting Persia: Religion and Power in the Safavid Empire* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004), 4; and Jean Calmard, “Les rituels Shiites et la pouvoir: L’imposition du shiisme safavide,” in *Etudes Safavides*, ed. Jean Calmard (Paris and Tehran: Institut Français de Recherche en Iran, 1993), 117.

⁹ For anthropological debates on this issue, see Gannanath Obeyesekere, *Cannibal Talk: The Man-Eating Myth and Human Sacrifice in the South Seas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). The classic work that problematizes the understanding of cannibalism in the modern period is W. Arens, *The Man-Eating Myth: Anthropology and Anthropophagy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

¹⁰ See Beth Conklin, *Consuming Grief: Compassionate Cannibalism in an Amazonian Society* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001).

internal Safavid sources rather than from negative portraits produced by their enemies. The attributions of cannibalism that need adjudication are not, therefore, part of the negative construction of an “other” culture that was condemned in order to justify domination. The earliest accounts of Safavid cannibalism come across largely as impartial reportage, although some of the authors do employ vivid metaphors to convey the ferociousness of the cannibals’ behavior. These descriptions of cannibalism should not be taken at face value since they could very easily have been part of the general martial rhetoric employed by Safavid historians to commemorate the dynasty’s rise to power.¹¹

Explicitly negative assessments of Safavid cannibalism occur in a work dedicated to the Ottoman Sultan Selim I (d. 1520), Shah Isma‘il’s greatest rival, which attributes a generalized cannibalism to the Qizilbash to condemn them as barbarians.¹² In the later Safavid context itself, cannibalism committed by Shah Isma‘il’s Qizilbash could still be assessed positively or negatively, depending on context. For some, it was an embarrassing aspect of early Safavid history, one which many historians tried to forget by omitting it from their narratives. On the other hand, it was also used to lionize the Qizilbash in order to bolster their symbolic capital as uninhibited warriors. During the sixteenth century, the Qizilbash were embroiled in numerous struggles, both among themselves and as a group competing with other factions in the Safavid state, and the reputation for an extreme act such as cannibalism could be used to indicate their excessive loyalty to the Safavid house.¹³ There is no single overarching pattern for interpreting the historiographic tradition on Safavid cannibalism, and reports from different periods have to be contextualized with respect to the social situation of the times in which they were written and the authors’ overall perspective on the Safavid dynasty.

MURAD BEG JAHANSHAHLU

The first incident involving Qizilbash cannibalism is reported for the year 1504, following the defeat of Husayn Kiya Chulavi, a local overlord in the region of Mazandaran.¹⁴ The information common to all sources states that Chulavi, the ruler of Firuzkuh and vicinity, was hoping to

¹¹ Obeyesekere makes a similar point about internal Maori sources that describe Maori cannibalism in the context of exaggerated martial claims (*Cannibal Talk*, 94–102).

¹² Sayyid ‘Ali Akbar Khata‘i, *Khataynama*, ed. Iraj Afshar (Tehran: Markaz-i Asnad-i Farhangi-yi Asiya, 1993), 167. Also, the fact that the section on cannibalism is placed randomly at the end of the work and is not included in all manuscripts suggests that it may have been added later for propaganda purposes.

¹³ The Qizilbashes’ contest with proponents of other religious and political views is discussed extensively in Kathryn Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs and Messiahs: Cultural Landscapes of Early Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Harvard Center for Middle Eastern Studies, 2003).

¹⁴ For a summary of information about the incident, gleaned from all the major sources but presented without a critical assessment, see Ghulam Sarwar, *History of Shah Isma‘il Safawi* (Aligarh, 1939), 47–49.

expand his dominions in the confused political situation during the first decade of the sixteenth century.¹⁵ Isma‘il, who had declared himself king three years earlier, decided to tackle this threat to his ascendancy in the region and marched toward the north from Qum. The *Futuhāt-i Shāhi* of Amini Hiravi (d. 1535) and the *Habīb al-siyar* of Khwandamir (d. ca. 1534), both of which were written during the 1520s and are the earliest sources to describe Chulavi’s defeat, make no reference to cannibalism or desecration of bodies.¹⁶

The first source to mention cannibalism is the *Lubb al-tavarikh*, whose author, Sayyid Yahya Qazvini (d. 1555), states that he was accompanying the Safavid army during the expedition. According to Qazvini, Chulavi prepared to defend himself from the assault by gathering his garrisons into reliable forts, but Isma‘il was able to eliminate the front guard of the defenses at the forts of Gulkhandan and Firuzkuh quite easily. Chulavi’s domains were, at this time, host to remnants of the Aqquyunlu Turkic federation, the rulers of Iran prior to the rise of the Safavids, who were aiding him in the hope of reversing their earlier defeat at Isma‘il’s hands. An Aqquyunlu commander named Murad Beg Jahanshahlu and Chulavi decided to ensconce themselves in the fort of Usta, resorting to self-preservation in the face of the advancing army.¹⁷ Safavid forces were unable to capture this fort until a month later, when a scheme was devised to divert the river that passed through the fort and was its water supply. The garrison capitulated in the face of thirst and, at this point, Qazvini writes simply that the victors “cooked Murad Beg on fire and the revengeful soldiers devoured his flesh.”¹⁸

¹⁵ Chulavi had also been a participant in interdynastic politics of the region before the rise of Isma‘il. He had supported the claims of Muhammadi Mirza against his brother Alvand Beg in the struggle for the throne after the death of Ya‘qub Aqquyunlu in 1498–99 (see Aubin, “L’avènement,” 6).

¹⁶ Sadr al-Din Ibrahim Amini Hiravi, *Futuhāt-i Shāhi*, ed. Muhammad Riza Nasiri (Tehran: Anjuman-i Asar va Mafakhar-i Farhangī, 2004), 224–30; Ghiyas al-Din Khwandamir, *Habīb al-siyar*, ed. Muhammad Dabir Siyaqi, 4 vols. (Tehran: Kitābfurūshī-yi Khayyam, 1984), 4:477–78.

¹⁷ It is difficult to identify Murad Beg definitively because the designation “Jahanshahlu” does not figure among the clans that formed the Aqquyunlu federation (see John Woods, *The Aqquyunlu: Clan, Confederation, Empire*, rev. ed. [Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1999], 183–98). In a personal communication, Dr. Yusuf Jamali of Danishgah-i Azad-i Islami, Isfahan, has suggested to me that the name should be read “Jahangirlu” on the basis of some manuscripts of the *Lubb al-tavarikh*. I have yet to come across a manuscript of the work that gives the name in this form, and the final verdict on this possibility will have to wait until a reliable critical edition of the *Lubb al-tavarikh* becomes available. It is tempting to accept the suggestion since that would place Murad Beg into an Aqquyunlu lineage going back to Jahangir b. ‘Alī Bayandur (d. 1469), who was a disputed sovereign over the Aqquyunlu principality between 1444 and 1457 (Woods, *Aqquyunlu*, 71–78).

¹⁸ Sayyid Yahya Qazvini, *Lubb al-tavarikh*, MS Elliot 347, Bodleian Library, Oxford, fol. 160a, and MS Persian Add. 65410, British Library, London, 117b. The uncritical published edition of this work mentions the burning of Murad Beg’s body but omits cannibalism in the incident (*Kitāb lubb al-tavarikh* [Tehran: Instisharat-i Bunyad va Guya, 1984], 398).

The most extensive report on the eating of Murad Beg’s body occurs in the slightly later *Tarikh-i ilchi-yi Nizam Shah*, whose author was an Indian ambassador at the court of Shah Tahmasb (d. 1576), Shah Isma‘il’s successor, for a year during 1545–47. This author cites Qazvini as a source but describes the end of the expedition as follows:

To make a long story short, Kiya descended from the fort along with a mounted army of six or seven hundred Turkomans¹⁹ and people of the local mountains and submitted to the court of the exalted Shah with humility, contrition, and a tongue laden with prayers and praises. But according to the noble injunction “on the day that one of your lord’s signs comes it shall not profit a soul” [Qur’an, 6:158], all this humility and modesty was of no avail. On the first day, they imprisoned him in a commander’s house and massacred his soldiers as a reprisal. Then they put Murad Beg Turkoman on a skewer and roasted him on fire. It was decreed that whoever is a convinced believer [*mu‘taqid*] among the great fighters of faith [*ghazis*] must partake a morsel from the roasted body as his share. A terrifying crowd of man-eaters swarmed in and ate the body up such that not a trace of flesh or bone remained. After finishing with the soldiers and the Turkomans, they turned to Kiya. During the days of his ascendancy and independence he had claimed: “I will very soon capture the Shaykhzada [i.e., Isma‘il] who has arisen and unsettled the world with his magnificence and put him in a cage.” They had carried this tale to the majestic hearing of the bounteous Shah and he, following the hadith “whoever digs a well for his brother is put in it,” brought the same idea to bear on Kiya and put him in the very cage that had been the object of his boast. . . . He committed suicide while imprisoned in it after a few days and his body was burned in Quhih-i Rayy.²⁰

In this report, the impetus for the cannibalistic act comes from the Qizilbash’s religious relationship with Shah Isma‘il. They are described as fighters of faith who feel compelled to eat the enemy’s body when Isma‘il dares them to prove the sincerity of their belief in him as their guide and their king. The body is consumed on a command and not as a part of defined ritual that the Qizilbash were expected to enact as a matter of course with respect to all enemies’ bodies.

It is significant that, in the *Tarikh-i ilchi*, cannibalism is linked to proving one’s faith and not to general vengefulness against the rebels or to safe-

¹⁹ The designation “Turkoman” in the Safavid context referred specifically to members of the Aqquyunlu Turkic tribal confederation. Isma‘il eventually attempted to neutralize the Aqquyunlu as a separate confederate clan (*uymaq*) in the nascent Safavid system (see Woods, *Aqquyunlu*, 168).

²⁰ Khurshah b. Qubad al-Husayni, *Tarikh-i ilchi-yi Nizam Shah*, ed. Muhammad Riza Nasiri and Koichi Haneda (Tehran: Anjuman-i Asar va Mafakhar-i Farhangi, 2000), 23–27. Khwandamir states, instead, that Chulavi’s body was burned in Isfahan to intimidate an Ottoman envoy at the court of Shah Isma‘il in 1505 (*Habib al-siyar*, 4:480–81).

guarding against future rebellions. In contrast, later sources that document Chulavi's defeat either do not mention cannibalism at all or repeat Qazvini's one-line description. No author cites the rationale for the act found in the *Tarikh-i ilchi*; instead, some introduce the idea that the purpose of the act was to teach the onlookers a lesson. To follow the chronological trail of the sources: Hasan Beg Rumlu's *Ahsan al-tavarikh* (completed ca. 1577) mentions no roasting or eating;²¹ both the *Takmilat al-akhbar* of Navidi Shirazi (d. 1580–81) and Qazi Ahmad Qummi's *Khulasat al-tavarikh* (completed 1590–91) mention cannibalism but represent it as a means of teaching a lesson to the enemies;²² the *Tarikh-i 'alam-ara-yi 'Abbasi* of Iskandar Beg Munshi (d. 1628–29) repeats verbatim from Qazvini's *Lubb al-tavarikh*;²³ Mirza Beg Junabadi's *Rawzat al-safaviyya* (completed in 1626) first describes the victory without the cannibalism and then states that a different account of the incident seen by the author included the devouring of Murad Beg as a lesson;²⁴ and the anonymous *Jahangusha-yi khaqan*, dated to circa 1680, states that the bodies of Murad Beg and another Aqquyunlu commander named Saytalmish were roasted, but the author makes no reference to eating.²⁵ In addition to these historical accounts of Isma'īl's career, legendary works also recounted the king's accomplishments, which tended to acquire mythological proportions. An illustrated manuscript of one such work, dated to around 1540 on contextual grounds, contains a painting depicting Husayn Kiya Chulavi imprisoned in a cage and the roasting of Murad Beg's body (see fig. 1).²⁶

²¹ Hasan Beg Rumlu, *Ahsan al-tavarikh*, ed. 'Abd al-Husayn Nava'i (Tehran: Intisharat-i Babak, 1978), 108.

²² 'Abdi Beg Navidi Shirazi, *Takmilat al-akhbar*, ed. 'Abd al-Husayn Nava'i (Tehran: Nashr-i Nay, 1990), 43; Qazi Ahmad Qummi, *Khulasat al-tavarikh*, ed. Ihsan Ishraqi, 2 vols. (Tehran: Intisharat-i Danishgah, 2005 [repr.]), 1:83.

²³ Iskandar Beg Munshi, *Tarikh-i 'alam-ara-yi 'Abbasi*, ed. Muhammad Isma'īl Rizvani, 3 vols. (Tehran: Dunya-yi Kitab, 1999), 1:51.

²⁴ Mirza Beg Junabadi, *Rawzat al-safaviyya*, ed. Ghulam Riza Tabataba'i Majd (Tehran: Majmu'a-yi Intisharat-i Adabi va Tarikhi, 2000), 179.

²⁵ Anonymous, *Jahangusha-yi Khaqan: Tarikh-i Shah Isma'īl*, ed. Allah Ditta Muztarr (Islamabad: Markaz-i Tahqiqat-i Farsi-yi Iran va Pakistan, 1984), 209. For the provenance of this source, see A. H. Morton, "The Date and Attribution of the *Ross Anonymus*: Notes on a Persian History of Shah Isma'īl I," in *Pembroke Papers I: Persian and Islamic Studies in Honour of P. W. Avery*, ed. Charles Melville (Cambridge: University of Cambridge, Centre of Middle Eastern Studies, 1990), 179–212. One manuscript of this work contains a painting showing Isma'īl's siege of the fortress of Firuzkuh (MS Or. 3248, British Library, fol. 100b).

²⁶ For details about this manuscript, see Barry Wood, "The *Shahnamah-i Isma'īl*: Art and Cultural Memory in Sixteenth-Century Iran" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2002), 290–312. Interestingly, the text in this manuscript does not refer to the roasting or eating of Murad Beg's body. A second manuscript, dated ca. 1580, has a generic painting showing the siege of Firuzkuh (Wood, "*Shahnamah-i Isma'īl*," 352–53, commenting on MS 888, India Office Collection, British Library, London, fol. 40b).

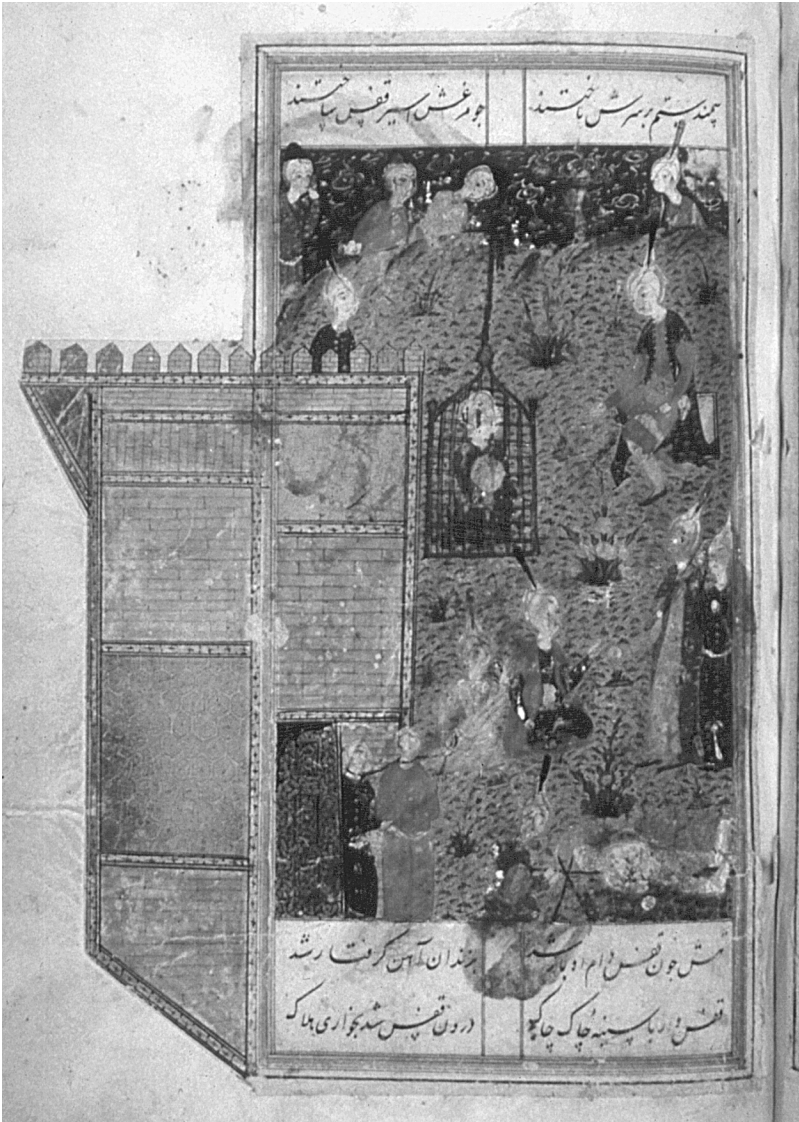


FIG. 1.—Husayn Kiya Chulavi in a cage and Murad Beg's body being roasted on a spit (*Shahnama-yi i Isma'il*, MS. Elliot 328, Bodleian Library, Oxford, fol. 91a).

SHĪBANI KHAN UZBEK

Sources on the second incident involving cannibalism, which occurred six years after the desecration of Murad Beg's body, also reflect considerable differences in the description of the event and the meaning ascribed to the treatment of the victim's body. This cast pertains to Shah Isma'īl's victory over the Uzbeks, who were a major impediment to the establishment and expansion of Safavid power in Khurasan and Transoxiana.²⁷ The earliest sources to narrate the incident are again Amini Hiravi's *Futuhāt-i shahi* and Khwandamir's *Habib al-siyar*, which give accounts of the defeat of the Uzbek leader Shībani Khan outside the city of Merv. These sources state that Shībani Khan had died by being suffocated under a pile of the dead bodies of his soldiers. The Safavid soldiers who found the body severed his head, and it was trodden over by the hooves of Shah Isma'īl's horse.²⁸

The earliest report on cannibalism in this case comes from the *Tarikh-i Shah Isma'īl va Shah Tahmasb-i Safavi* (sometimes known also as *Zayl-i habib al-siyar*) of Khwandamir's son Amir Mahmud, completed around 1550.²⁹ Mahmud writes that after the rout, Shah Isma'īl was presented with two enemy commanders who had been captured alive and he asked them about Shībani Khan's fate. They said that he had not escaped and a search of the battlefield would likely turn up his body. In Mahmud's words:

When [Isma'īl's] bloody-minded warriors of faith [*ghaziyan*] heard this from the two commanders, they began an intensive search. After much rummaging, they found the body, bearing no wounds or cuts, under a pile of slain Uzbeks. They immediately severed the head and brought it to the victorious king, but when he saw this he demanded the [enemy's] whole malice-filled body. Sword-girding courtiers immediately presented the body, and the brave hero first struck its belly three times with his sword and then said: "whoever among our sincere soldiers [*qurchiyan-i kasir al-ikhlas*]³⁰ and special servants [*mulaziman-i kasir al-ikhhtisas*] loves our imperial head [*sar-i navvab-i humayun-i ma*] should partake of the flesh of this enemy." Truthful people present at the event have reported

²⁷ The larger context of Shībani Khan's defeat at the hands of Isma'īl is discussed in Maria Zuppe, *Entre Timourides, Uzbeks et Safavides: Questions d'histoire politique et sociale de Hérat dans la première moitié du xvie siècle* (Paris: Association pour l'Avancement des Études Iraniennes, 1992), 77–84.

²⁸ Amini Hiravi, *Futuhāt-i Shahi*, 345–47; Khwandamir, *Habib al-siyar*, 4:513.

²⁹ This source presents the early career of Shah Isma'īl in a very brief summary and makes no mention of the defeat of Chulavi.

³⁰ The term *qurchi* is roughly equivalent to Qizilbash in the present context since it refers to troops who were both devotees of the Safavid order and soldiers in the Safavid army. In later periods, the term indicated the corps of the king's personal guard. For a discussion of the term and its historical development, see Haneda, *Chah et les Qizilbaş*, 144–202.

that such a crowd then rushed in upon the body of that impure being that a number of people were injured. Those who were far from the body purchased morsels of flesh from those who were near and consumed them. The way they ate this raw, impure [*haram*] meat, caked with dirt and blood, surpassed the relish with which starving hemp addicts must wolf down the roasted meat of a fattened lamb in moments of being beset by hunger and the cravings of their drug habit.³¹

As with the report on Murad Beg, the Qizilbash are described here as warriors of faith and their cannibalism is a spontaneous act undertaken explicitly for the purpose of proving their love for and loyalty to Shah Ismaʿil. There is, once again, no indication that the act is a ritual, and the historian himself does not connect this event to any other incidents or practices involving the Qizilbash. One significant difference between the two detailed reports on cannibalism is that Murad Beg's body was eaten after being put on a skewer and roasting while Shībani Khan is said to have been eaten raw.

Many later sources describe the desecration of Shībani Khan's body but make no mention of cannibalism. Once again, in chronological order: the *Lubb al-tavarikh* states only that Shībani Khan's dead body was discovered after the battle.³² The *Tarikh-i ilchi*, our major source for the eating of Murad Beg, does not mention cannibalism but gives an extended account according to which the severed head was sent to the Ottomans, the Safavids' major political rivals, while a hand was sent to a certain Aqa Rustam of Mazandaran, who had earlier sent a messenger to the slain ruler offering his allegiance with the phrase "my hand is in your lap." Ismaʿil's envoy delivered the hand to Rustam's lap with the ominous statement, "yesterday your hand was in his lap and today his is in yours," which caused Rustam to die of shock.³³

The *Ahsan al-tavarikh* and the *Khulasat al-tavarikh* state that when the body was found, Ismaʿil immediately ordered that the head be stuffed and sent to the Ottoman ruler Sultan Beyazit II (d. 1513) and that the skull be gilded over to form a goblet for the king's wine.³⁴ Navidi Shirazi's *Tak-*

³¹ Amir Mahmud Khwandamir, *Tarikh-i Shah Ismaʿil va Shah Tahmasb-i Safavi (Zayl-i tarikh-i Habib al-siyar)*, ed. Muhammad ʿAli Jarrahi (Tehran: Nashr-i Gustara, 1991), 71. Although serviceable for the present topic, this edition of Amir Mahmud's work is rife with errors and omissions (see Szuppe, *Entre Timourides, Uzbeks et Safavides*, 58, n. 211). For a slightly different wording on the report (but with the same overall meaning), see MS Or. 2776, British Library, London, fols. 46b–47a.

³² Qazvini, *Lubb al-tavarikh*, 409, MS Persian Add. 65410, British Library, 121a.

³³ Husayni, *Tarikh-i ilchi*, 53–54.

³⁴ Rumlu, *Ahsan al-tavarikh*, 161; Qummi, *Khulasat al-tavarikh*, 1:112–13. The published version of Amir Mahmud's *Tarikh-i Shah Ismaʿil va Shah Tahmasb-i Safavi* does not mention the gilding of the skull, but at least one manuscript of the work does state that it was made into a goblet for Ismaʿil's wine (MS Or. 2776, British Library, London, fol. 47a).

milat al-akhbar mentions only that Shībani Khan's head was brought to Shah Isma'īl.³⁵ The *Tarikh-i 'alam-ara-yi 'Abbasi* repeats from the *Ahsan al-tavarikh* but adds the name of the person who found the body ('Aziz Agha Buzchilu, known as Adi Bahadur) and states that, in addition to the head, various parts of the body were sent to different regions.

The *Rawzat al-safaviyya* combines all the previous reports and describes the discovery of the body, the cannibalism, and the making of the goblet from the skull, although it simplifies Isma'īl's command for eating to "whoever holds me in esteem must eat from the flesh of this enemy."³⁶ Although quite late (completed in 1626), this work is helpful in that it reveals the "truthful source" cited in Mahmud's description (translated above) to be Khwaja Mahmud Sagharchi, who had been in Shībani Khan's administration but had handed over the keys of Merv to Isma'īl after the Uzbek defeat and had been made vizier and treasurer (*sahib-i divan*) of Khurasan.³⁷ The fact that Sagharchi is the ultimate source for this report casts a shadow on its veracity since he was not a neutral observer but a significant part in the changeover of ruling houses taking place at the moment. The report from *Rawzat al-safaviyya* is repeated verbatim in the *Jahangusha-yi khaqan*, written around 1680.³⁸ Illustrative cycles accompanying the legendary histories of Isma'īl include depictions of the battlefield at the Uzbek defeat but none of them contain a body identifiable as that of Shībani Khan.³⁹

The various accounts of the treatment of Shībani Khan's body differ in the amount of detail, and some are quite contradictory. Clearly, either the body was consumed as described in Mahmud's graphic report and those who copy him, or it was systematically dismembered and dispatched to various recipients as a means of causing terror. In Mahmud's account, the dead body mediates between Isma'īl and Qizilbash through his command for them to consume it, while in later sources the treatment of the body is primarily a way for Isma'īl to indicate his superiority over rival rulers.

MAKING SENSE OF REPORTS ON CANNIBALISM

The variance between the reports surveyed above may partly reflect the sheer abnormality of the cannibalistic act. Some historians are likely to have omitted mentioning it simply because of their reluctance to report on extreme acts attributed to the Qizilbash. Moreover, a number of historians writing in the second half of the sixteenth century had Qizilbash

³⁵ Navidi Shirazi, *Takmilat al-akhbar*, 50.

³⁶ Junabadi, *Rawzat al-safaviyya*, 241.

³⁷ Sagharchi's appointment is described first in Khwandamir, *Habib al-siyar*, 4:513, and repeated in all later sources.

³⁸ Anonymous, *Jahangusha-yi khaqan*, 380–81.

³⁹ See Wood, "The *Shahnamah-i Isma'īl*," 138.

backgrounds and they may not have wished to incite criticism of their predecessors. There is no way to fully adjudicate whether the cannibalism actually occurred or was a myth propagated at certain times for political ends. I am inclined to see the historical reports as reflections of real events since the first reports that do mention cannibalism are quite close to the events, and no motives can be identified that would have led the particular historians in question to invent the traditions. For purposes of the present discussion, the major issue is not, in any case, the historicity of the events but what can be inferred about the period's religious imagination from the way the events are described in the sources.

The surveys of sources show that the rationalization of the events underwent a pronounced shift between authors writing in the early versus the late sixteenth century. Husayni and Mahmud, translated above, both gathered their material before 1550, and neither states that the Qizilbash consumed the bodies of all their enemies as a matter of course. The victims that did get eaten were significant, in both cases, as individuals whose existence was threatening to the nascent Safavid royal lineage. Shibani Khan was, along with the Ottoman Sultan, Ismaʿil's greatest rival for succeeding to the Timurid and Aqqyunlu ruling houses in the Middle East and central Asia. His elimination thus marked a major triumph for Ismaʿil. The pattern holds true for the first case discussed above as well since the body chosen for devouring was not that of Husayn Kiya Chulavi, the chief rebel, but that of Murad Beg, a member of the Aqqyunlu house. During his reign, Ismaʿil's attempt to systematically obliterate the Aqqyunlu as a royal lineage went as far as killing all pregnant princesses.⁴⁰ There is considerable irony in this since Ismaʿil's own mother, Halima Begi Agha (known also as ʿAlamshah Khatun), was a daughter of the Aqqyunlu ruler Uzun Hasan (d. 1478).⁴¹

The highly deliberate nature of the cannibalistic acts tallies also with the fact that the two reported incidents occurred after Ismaʿil's inauguration of the Safavid dynasty in 1501. Sources that describe the activities of Safavid Shaykhs Haydar (d. 1488) and Junayd (d. 1460), his father and grandfather, never mention cannibalism, although they do describe the militancy of their followers. Quite significantly, even Fazlallah b. Ruzbihan Khunji-Isfahani (d. 1519), a historian vehemently critical of Ismaʿil's immediate ancestors, does not refer to cannibalism in his catalog of the vices of the Safavid order in the late fifteenth century.⁴² This omission,

⁴⁰ Woods, *Aqqyunlu*, 168.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 107, 211.

⁴² Fazlallah b. Ruzbihan Khunji-Isfahani, *Tarikh-i ʿalam-ara-yi Amini*, ed. John Woods (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1992), 261–307, 53–70.

combined with the fact that no other reports of cannibalism among Turkic populations have ever come to light,⁴³ makes it implausible that cannibalism was in any way a “traditional” practice brought into the Safavid order with the establishment of Qizilbash identity. It was, instead, an act or a legend pertinent to the particular circumstances prevailing in the early sixteenth century when Isma‘il was seeking to certify the loyalty of his followers.

The two detailed reports of cannibalism translated above assign the impetus for the consumption of the bodies to Isma‘il’s words directed toward his followers. Those who love the head of the king/guide are commanded to eat of Shībani Khan; in the case of Murad Beg, the onus is put on fighters who are complete believers. Consuming the body is a spontaneous and deliberately dramatic affirmation of the bond between the Shah and the Qizilbash. The act is simultaneously a negation and an affirmation: the devoured bodies mark a total obliteration of political alternatives consisting of other dynasties, even as the acts of consumption solidify the socioreligious relationship between the Shah and his troops. What makes the performance of the act memorable is its abnormality: the reports’ major underlying purpose is to depict the Qizilbashes’ devotion to Isma‘il by showing that even an act as repugnant as consuming human flesh became a pleasure for them when commanded by their leader.

In contrast with the earliest historical reports, those writing after approximately 1550 never repeat the idea that the Qizilbash ate the bodies to prove their loyalty to Isma‘il, and, as mentioned above, the only manuscript to contain a depiction of the roasting of Murad Beg’s body has been dated to around 1540. Later literary sources portray the acts as lessons for local onlookers and dynastic rivals. All later historians who mention the eating of Murad Beg explicitly state that the act was meant as a lesson, and for Shībani Khan, the focus shifts from the consumption of the body to its dismemberment and the dispatch of parts to rival rulers. The sending of the stuffed head to the Ottoman Sultan Beyazit II is particularly significant since here the mutilated body of one great rival was being presented to the other.

The historiographic shift in the depiction of cannibalism reflects the different light in which the Safavids and their historians saw the dynasty between roughly the first and the last quarter of the sixteenth century. Isma‘il had been heavily dependent on the loyalty of the Qizilbash to maintain his position during his reign, while later Safavid monarchs were acknowledged heads of a dynastic state that was maintained by bureaucrats

⁴³ Jean Aubin, “La politique religieuse des Safavides,” in *Le Shi‘isme imāmīte* (Paris: Presses Universitaire de France, 1970), 237.

and scholars in addition to soldiers. Historians who write about Isma‘il while they worked in the courts of his successors imagined the dynasty’s progenitor in terms suitable for the kings then before them, rather than trying to recover faithfully the circumstances of an upstart pretender. Thus, the perception of the status of the Safavid sovereign at the time a particular source was composed determined the author’s understanding of the cannibalistic act.

CANNIBALISM IN LATER SAFAVID HISTORY

In addition to the issue of the king’s image, later historians writing about cannibalistic acts committed by Shah Isma‘il’s followers were also affected in their understanding by terrorizing practices reported from the court of Shah ‘Abbas, which included cannibalizing live prisoners. This anthropophagy is described quite differently in the sources than that in the reports about Shah Isma‘il’s times; the historians’ own interpretations of the purpose of the later practice are markedly dissimilar from the reports translated above. Most significantly, the later type of cannibalism appears as a secular punitive measure that had no bearing on the relationship between the Safavid king and his Qizilbash followers.

Among reports on later cannibalism, one historian states that the king Muhammad Khudabanda (r. 1578–88) once collected together all the elders among his Qizilbash followers and, after performing the customary *zikr*, asked them what the punishment should be for someone who goes against the intentions and words of the religious guide (*murshid*), implying himself. They allegedly replied simply that they would eat such a person.⁴⁴ While this purported exchange does resonate with the symbolic paradigm that we saw invoked in Shah Isma‘il’s command to the Qizilbash to eat the bodies of Murad Beg and Shībani Khan, it is significant that what is recounted is a verbal affirmation of the idea and not an actual incident. Given that only one source cites this event, and that there are no reports of actual incidents, it is likely that the idea was alive more as an echo of the past than as a current practice.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Nasrallah Falsafi, *Zindigani-yi Shah ‘Abbas-i Avval*, 3 vols., 6th printing (Tehran: Intisharat-i ‘Ilmi, 1997), 1:470, citing Qazi Ahmad Qummi’s *Khulasat al-tavarikh*. Falsafi’s extensive catalogue of Safavid history was originally published in five volumes, but the edition cited here combines volumes 1 and 2, and 4 and 5, into single bindings with continuous pagination.

⁴⁵ The idea that Khudabanda would order his followers to cannibalize a wayward devotee is not in keeping with the way this king is generally portrayed in the sources. He is said to have been virtually blind and more inclined to solitary religious pursuits and writing poetry than matters of state. During his reign, the empire’s political scene was dominated by rival factions that largely ignored the king (see H. R. Roemer, “The Safavid Period,” in *Cambridge History of Iran*, ed. Peter Jackson [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986], 6:253–62).

The tenor of the historical sources on the question of cannibalism changes quite significantly for the period of Muhammad Khudabanda's son and successor, 'Abbas I (r. 1588–1629). He is said to have had trained cannibals in his court who wore distinctive clothing and would, when commanded, eat alive prisoners brought in the king's presence. These cannibals are mentioned in the context of other groups at the court whose explicit job was to instill awe for the king's power in the hearts of the assembly. The most detailed report on these cannibals comes from Junabadi's *Rawzat al-safaviyya* (completed in 1626):

Another squad among the types of people [used to instill terror] was under the command of the chief herald Malik Beg Isfahani and was known as *chigiyyin* [from Turkish *çiğ*, raw or uncooked], or those who eat raw meat. These people were also a tool for torturing and marking [the king's] fury. They would take each person among a group of condemned people one by one and would proceed to bite off and swallow their noses and ears. This was followed by using teeth to cut off the victims' other organs, which were also eaten, until all the condemned were gradually stripped of their lives. This squad also wore a distinctive dress, marked by bulky, tall hats with no turbans that sat a small measure down on their heads and were adorned on the sides with bunches of cranes' and owls' feathers. Most members of the two groups appointed to torture the condemned were tall, massive men with terrible faces.⁴⁶

This graphic description of cannibalism depicts a premeditated show of power intended to terrorize the audience and stands in strong contrast with the spontaneous exhibitions of loyalty reported from the time of Shah Isma'īl. The point of consuming the victims' bodies on this account is to demonstrate the king's ruthlessness. The victim is still alive, and can be anybody who has been condemned, instead of being a dead person whose body becomes marked because of the threat he represents to a nascent dynasty. Also, the cannibals here are a specifically designated group and are already known as such to the assembly because of their distinctive collective name, physiques, and attires. In contrast, the Qizilbash who consumed the bodies at Isma'īl's behest were an undifferentiated crowd who turned into cannibals at the moment to prove their dedication to Isma'īl. The symbolic content of the act, which always needs to be kept in view in discussing cannibalism, is therefore exceedingly different between the two types.

The type of cannibalism associated with the time of Shah 'Abbas was a part of this king's general tendency toward cruelty. Remarks on this

⁴⁶ Junabadi, *Rawzat al-safaviyya*, 724.

cruelty can be found in both Safavid historical sources⁴⁷ and reports by Europeans who passed through the Safavid court during his reign.⁴⁸ The later historians' recasting of the meaning of cannibalistic performances in Shah Isma‘il's time, discussed above, was likely affected by their knowledge of practices occurring at the court of Shah ‘Abbas. They seem to have transposed meanings associated with later secular cannibalism onto events that had taken place under very different circumstances and that had pertained to the religious relationship between the king and his followers.⁴⁹

The fact that reports about religiously motivated cannibalism are restricted to the period of Shah Isma‘il in Safavid history also reflects the Qizilbash's demise as the state's most powerful component quite soon after the dynasty's inauguration. While united in their initial support for the Safavid political cause, the Qizilbash were a heterogeneous group formed of different "tribes," which were themselves constituted on the basis of complex genealogical as well as voluntary associations. Qizilbash factions were often at loggerheads with each other even during Isma‘il's time, and the first twelve years (1524–36) of the reign of his successor, Shah Tahmasb, were marked by an open revolt that compelled the king to invest in alternative sources of social and political legitimacy. This pattern gained greater and greater momentum with the passage of the sixteenth century, particularly as the kings came to rely ever more on military slaves (*ghulams*) rather than the Qizilbash tribesman for their power. Shah ‘Abbas was also faced with a civil war during the first two years of his rule (1588–90) and made a concerted effort to reduce Qizilbash power. As a result of these trends, the second century of Safavid rule (seventeenth century CE) was an age of the rule of eunuchs, concubines, and military slaves rather than the Qizilbash.⁵⁰ The kind of loyalty being affirmed in the reports on early cannibalism was, therefore, not in keeping with the historical situation of the Qizilbash after Isma‘il's reign.

The practice of Turkic tribespeople espousing an overweening loyalty to the Safavid king also gave birth to the new designation of Shahsevan, or Lovers of the King, that evolved some time in the late sixteenth century. The historical background for this development is not quite clear,

⁴⁷ For some examples, see Falsafi, *Zindigani-yi Shah ‘Abbas-i Avval*, 1:470–71.

⁴⁸ See Floor, "The *Khalifeh al-kholafa* of the Safavid Sufi Order," 63–64.

⁴⁹ It is also worth noting that generally speaking, rather different sorts of religious performances were carried out in Shah ‘Abbas's time than those that characterized early Safavid history. As a king with grand pretensions, ‘Abbas enacted theatrical rituals on a large scale rather than seeking the loyalty of individual followers through dramatic acts of affirmation. For an exploration of some issues relating to this theme, see Babak Rahimi, "The Rebound Theater State: The Politics of the Safavid Camel Sacrifice Rituals, 1598–1695 C.E.," *Iranian Studies* 37, no. 3 (September 2004): 451–78.

⁵⁰ See Susan Babaie, Kathryn Babayan, Ina Baghdiantz-McCabe, and Massumeh Farhad, *Slaves of the Shah: New Elites of Safavid Iran* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004), 20–48.

but it seems that kings beginning with Tahmasb tried to actively fashion a new identity among the Qizilbash that would resist disintegrating tribal power and instead be constituted solely on the basis of commitment to the king. This identity solidified over the course of the seventeenth century and eventually included a number of Turkic tribal federations that have survived to the modern period.⁵¹ Later Safavid kings' deliberate cultivation of and appeal to a designation based on love for the king parallels the sentiment behind Isma'īl's command to the Qizilbash to eat enemies' bodies for the sake of their love for him. The two cases differ, however, in that Isma'īl absolutely needed the loyalty of his Qizilbash followers to retain his power, while the later kings were interested in reining in the power of the Qizilbash for their dynastic and state purposes. Isma'īl's situation compelled him to ask for a dramatic affirmation in the form of the extreme act of cannibalizing while his successors were involved in delicate balancing acts regarding the various powers influential in running a complex state.

BEATING BODIES: THE CHUB-I TARIQ RITUAL

As I have shown above, to understand the cannibalism attributed to Shah Isma'īl's followers it is crucial to take account of the logic invoked in the statements attributed to the king prior to the consumption of the bodies of Murad Beg and Shībani Khan. This point can be buttressed further by reviewing reports about a ritual called the *Chub-i tariq*, or "stick of the path," that was practiced by the Safavids' religious followers throughout the dynasty's rule. A. H. Morton has already treated the historiographical particulars regarding the practice in an excellent survey,⁵² and the stick used for the ritual has been identified in Safavid painting as well.⁵³ Here I will focus only on interpreting the ritual and connecting it to the symbolism invoked in reports on cannibalism.

The *chub* ritual can be traced in material pertaining to the reign of Shah Isma'īl,⁵⁴ but for purposes of illustration, the account of the Venetian-Cypriot envoy Michele Membré, who was a guest at the court of Shah Tahmasb during 1540–41, is more useful. Membré's best description of

⁵¹ See Richard Tapper, *Frontier Nomads of Iran: A Political and Social History of the Shahsevan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 35–57.

⁵² A. H. Morton, "The *Chub-i tariq* and Qizilbash Ritual in Safavid Persia," in *Etudes Safavides*, ed. Jean Calmard (Paris and Tehran: Institut Français de Recherche en Iran, 1993), 225–45.

⁵³ Kishwar Rizvi, "'Its mortar mixed with the sweetness of life': Architecture and Ceremonial at the Shrine of Safi al-Din Ishaq Ardabili during the Reign of Shah Tahmasb I," *Muslim World* 90, nos. 3 and 4 (2000): 343–44.

⁵⁴ Morton, "The *Chub-i tariq* and Qizilbash Ritual," 230–31, citing *Habib al-siyar*, *Khulasat al-tavarikh*, *Afzal al-tavarikh*, *'Alam-ara-yi Shah Isma'īl*, and *'Alam-ara-yi Safavi*.

the ritual comes from an occasion he terms a wedding in which he participated after becoming intimate with the Qizilbash nobility. He first describes the practice of *zīkr* using the formula “*allah allah*” by members of the Safavid Sufi order and then goes on to write:

And after that is done, the *khalifa* [deputy] has a substantial wooden stick, and begins from the first to the last; one by one they all come for love of the Shah to the middle of the room and stretch themselves out on the ground; and the said *khalifa* with the stick gives them a most mighty blow on the behind; and then the *khalifa* kisses the head and feet of the one he has given the blow; then he himself gets up and kisses the stick and thus they all do, one by one; so, as I was sitting then came to be my turn, and the villain, who had a pair of cloth breeches, gave me a blow which still hurts.⁵⁵

Here the intent of the ritual is quite clear (the love of the Shah and fealty to him), and what is most spectacular is, of course, the devotees allowing the use of the stick on their behinds as an affirmation of their affiliation. That the blow is not to be perceived as an act of aggression can be discerned from the kissing of the devotee by the *khalifa* and of the stick by the devotee.

I suggest that this ritual belongs to the same religious matrix as the cannibalism ascribed to the period of Shah Isma‘il. There is no enemy body of a rival dynast to be eliminated here, but the devotee’s body—treated as the essential locus of his person—is acted upon similarly. Moreover, cannibalism has an impact not only the victim’s body, which is eliminated, but also the bodies of the cannibals themselves, since they become marked through the memorable act of consuming human flesh. What happens to the bodies of the Qizilbash in cannibalism is, therefore, directly parallel to what happens to the bodies of the devotees during the *chub* ritual.

The eventual social import of the *chub* ritual lies in the fact that it solidifies the relationship between the Shah and the Qizilbash in a highly corporeal way. The stick literally imprints the king’s mark on the devotee’s body, and the pain caused by the hit acts as a jolting affirmation of the allegiance the recipient owes to the Shah. In much the way the cannibalism is described, the ritual is highly communal, the attendees “from the first to the last” participate without individuation. Even a non-Qizilbash visitor is obligated to participate in it by virtue of his presence in the crowd. The Shah stands alone as the recipient of devotion, while the ritual turns

⁵⁵ Michele Membré, *Mission to the Lord Sophy of Persia (1539–1542)*, trans. A. H. Morton (London: Gibb Memorial Trust, 1999), 42–43.

the Qizilbash into a single social body affirming its ties to him as a community. As Morton has shown, the Safavid practice is akin to other similar rituals among Turkic-derived religions from the Safavid period and after. In all cases, the rituals' purpose is to affirm two bonds: one between the members of the community themselves, and another between the community as a single entity and the leader who is seen as both the source of the collectivity and the final authority over it.⁵⁶

In contrast with early Safavid cannibalism, the use of the stick is indeed a ritual, performed in a premeditated way in a defined setting. It seems to have been used to generate *communitas* in all the contexts for which we have evidence; in the Safavid case, in particular, it acquired additional significance, because the devotees being treated with the stick were also the king's soldiers. Just as in the case of the command to eat the bodies of Murad Beg and Shībani Khan, the institution of the *chub* ritual within the Safavid context reflected the imperative of affirming the loyalty of the Qizilbash to their king.

CONCLUSION: QIZILBASH RELIGION IN ITS HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The review of original sources on Safavid cannibalism in this essay indicates that existing scholarly explanations on this topic need revision. To date, most studies that have treated the issue have regarded cannibalism simply as a part of an ecstatic religious cult that was based in mob mentality and had no larger meaning that can be investigated for understanding the period's religious environment.⁵⁷ Recent authors who have actually discussed the religious practices associated with the Qizilbash have concentrated on tracing the genealogies of some of their ideas to Turkic, ancient Iranian, or early Islamic prototypes.⁵⁸ A careful comparative reading of the sources, however, reveals that the question of cannibalism can help us trace some elements of the religious sphere in Safavid Iran.

⁵⁶ Morton, "The *Chub-i tariq* and Qizilbash Ritual," 236–39.

⁵⁷ See, e.g., Aubin, "L'avènement," 44–48; Arjomand, *Shadow of God*, 80–82; Biancamaria Scarcia-Amoretti, "Religion in the Timurid and the Safavid Periods," in *Cambridge History of Iran*, ed. Peter Jackson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 6:634–40; and, most recently, Floor, "The *Khalifeh al-kholafa* of the Safavid Sufi Order."

⁵⁸ See Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs and Messiahs*. Babayan connects the Qizilbash to an early form of Shi'ism called *ghuluww* (exaggeration) and stresses the significance of a distinctly Persian identity. Her detailed discussions shed much light on religion and society during the Safavid period, but her emphasis on seeing religious forms as continuing earlier apparent or latent traditions downplays the Qizilbashes' self-understanding within the context in which they were living. The theory of the connection between Qizilbash practices and Turkic beliefs is reviewed in Giorgio Rota, "Cannibalism in the Safavid Period: A Remnant of Shamanistic Beliefs?" in *Proceedings of the European Society for Central Asian Studies Conference, 2000* (forthcoming). I am grateful to Dr. Rota for sharing the text of his article with me before its publication.

It is quite significant that the details of the historical reports provide evidence for two distinct types of cannibalism during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The act of consuming human flesh is common between the two, but the types differ starkly on issues such as whether the victim was dead or alive when chosen for consumption, purported reasons for eating the body, the identity of the cannibals, and the manner in which the body was consumed. Differentiating between the two types makes clear that the early cannibalism involved a religious affirmation of the Qizilbash's faith in their guide and king. The later type, in contrast, was a secular political tool without religious associations. This type of cannibalism also appears to have been linked to the personal propensities of one king, Shah ‘Abbas, since it is not attested for the court of any other monarch.

Moving a step further, the idea that Qizilbash cannibalism was a continuation of earlier Turkic religious practices is not borne out by the surviving evidence. The theory of central Asian origin cited by a number of authors can be dismissed on the grounds that actual cannibalism (rather than symbolic dismemberment and reconstitution of the body by a shaman) is not attested as a practice among Turkic peoples.⁵⁹ Similarly, the contention that the harshness of nomadic life, combined with an ecstatic religious cult, turned the Qizilbash into cannibals is based upon doubtful logic. The Qizilbash emerged from a larger Turkic milieu whose other proponents were subject to similar conditions, but we have no reports about them involving cannibalism. And in any case, speculating about the possible origins of the practice seems pointless since hypotheses about origins do not speak to what the act was taken to mean in the specific historical context of the early Safavid period.

Instead of looking for “survivals,” we should see early Qizilbash cannibalism as pertaining to the historical time in which it was enacted; its *raison d'être* should be extracted from socioreligious relations obtaining from the patterns that existed in the historical time in question, namely, the relationship between the shah as the guide/king and the Qizilbash as his devotees/soldiers willing to go to extremes to prove their loyalty. My treatment of Safavid practices in this essay underscores the necessity of paying attention to the specifics of the historical reports at our disposal to comprehend the logic that formed the basis for the acts committed by the Qizilbash. The words and behaviors attributed to the Safavid king and his followers make most sense when we see them as aspects of a larger religious imagination that was at work in the period. It is particularly noteworthy that the stories of early cannibalism and the *chub* ritual involved the king making a demand for affirmation citing his own body and

⁵⁹ The entirely circumstantial evidence usually invoked for this assertion is reviewed in Rota, “Cannibalism in the Safavid Period” (forthcoming).

the devotees responding through dramatic physical actions. This emphasizes the fact that the religious system as a whole was centered on Ismaʿil's bodily self, which was regarded as an actual manifestation of the divine in certain moments.⁶⁰ The bodies of others were treated in relation to his body: those of his disciples were marked by the dramatic act of eating human flesh or imprinted with the stick, while those of his greatest enemies were obliterated through mutilation, burning or cooking, and eating. The drama of religion took place in the material sphere; divinity, good, and evil were not abstractions but matters materialized in the form of representative bodies.

When seen as a part of a highly corporeal religious imagination, Qizilbash cannibalism can be related to the ideological concerns and practices of other Islamic groups that prevailed in the fifteenth century. The Sufi orders or paths (*туруq*) formed around particular chains of transmission (*silsilas*) that acquired great power and prestige in the Iranian world during the fifteenth century were predicated on bonds of authority, servitude, and affection between masters and disciples that were certified through bodily initiations and affirmations. The enormous hagiographic literature produced in this period concerned with chains such as the Naqshbandiyya, the Kubraviyya, the Niʿmatullahiyya, and so on, is centrally focused on showing the transmission and legitimation of religious authority through physical contacts between Sufis.⁶¹ As members of a Sufi order, the Safavids' Qizilbash followers were fundamentally a part of this pattern that pervaded the Iranian religious environment in the later medieval period.

However, the Safavids became an exceptional case beginning in the sixteenth century, since the Sufi lineage became a dynasty. The dual functions of the Safavid monarchs as guides and kings, and that of the Qizilbash as devotees and soldiers, required that their actions and practices be delineated more sharply than the behaviors of the members of other Sufi orders. In a mainstream order, a disciple could break from a master based

⁶⁰ See Aubin, "L'avènement," 38–40, citing the reports of European observers. Shah Ismaʿil's surviving poetry also contains verses where the poet proclaims himself a manifestation of the divine (see Vladimir Minorsky, "The Poetry of Shah Ismaʿil I," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 10 [1942]: 1006a–1053a, and Tourkhan Gandjei, *Il Canzoniere di Şah Ismaʿil Hataʿi* [Naples: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1959]). The poetry actually presents a complex image of Ismaʿil since, even as it claims his divinity in some verses, it also represents him both as a mere ordinary person and as an agent of God or the prophets and the Imams who had been charged with a special mission. A comprehensive interpretation of Shah Ismaʿil's poetry remains to be undertaken.

⁶¹ For the development of the relationship between masters and disciples in one particular order, see Fritz Meier, *Meister und Schüler im Orden der Naqşbandiyya* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1995). The potential of this hagiographical literature to illuminate medieval Islamic social history is discussed in Jürgen Paul, "Hagiographische Texte als historische Quelle," *Saeculum* 41 (1990): 17–43. I am currently working on an extended study focused on corporeal themes in the religious history of fifteenth-century Iran and central Asia.

on personal or ideological grounds. It was also quite common for people to be initiated into numerous orders, and some Sufis even made it a pastime to travel far and wide to acquire affiliation with numerous orders by visiting shaykhs belonging to various chains of Sufi authority and charisma. But all this was different when a devotee was also to be a soldier. The Qizilbash's exclusive loyalty to the Safavids had to be certified emphatically, and desertion or multiple affiliations amounted to treason. The dramatic act of cannibalizing the bodies of archenemies and receiving memorable blows on one's body in the *chub* ritual enabled the king/guide to bond the Qizilbash to his person and the Safavid dynasty.⁶²

The Safavids represent a rare case in Islamic history in which a religious movement successfully transformed itself into a ruling house. As the main agents who enacted this transformation, Shah Isma‘il and his Qizilbash followers stood at a historical moment marked by the overlapping of religious and political paradigms. The words and acts attributed to them in the reports of cannibalism and other activities discussed in this essay reflect the multiple functions that were expected of them because of the historical circumstances. Taking these reports apart to try to understand the symbolism embedded within them allows us access to a religious imagination otherwise obscured from view due to the passage of time and the lack of extensive sources.

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⁶² The "materialist" orientation of Qizilbash religion relates also to views held by followers of the Nuqtavi sect that began in the early fifteenth century and remained a significant element of the Safavid religious scene throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. For the details of Nuqtavi views as they prevailed in Safavid times, see Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs*, 57–117.