

The Kurdish Community from the Abbasids to Safavids; Sharafkhan Bedlisi's Perspective

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Abstract

Sharafkhan Bedlisi began writing Kurdish historiography in the late sixteenth century by writing Sharafnama. Sharafnama includes the history of the Kurdish emirates from the Abbasid caliphates to the end of the years (1596-1597), i.e. until the Safavid era. Sharafnama is basically a continuation of the same method of traditional Islamic historiography, i.e. political, military and family event writing. However, the introduction of Sharafnama regarding the characteristics of Kurdish people and the Kurdish society from the Abbasid to Safavid eras can differentiate this historical work from the contemporary and earlier historical works. In this regard, Sharafnama can be considered as a work different from the tradition of Islamic historiography. Sharafkhan Bedlisi maintains that religionism, irrationality, chaos (lack of concentration), lack of unity thoughts, fratricidal desires, lack of foresight, importance of warrior-ship and unwillingness to establish a local government are the most important characteristics of Kurdish people and Kurdish society from the Abbasid to Safavid eras. The present study attempts to discuss the aforementioned characteristics in a descriptive-analytical manner.

Key-words: Kurdish Historiography, Sharafkhan, *Sharafnama*, Kurdish Society, Abbasid Era.

1. Introduction

Sharafnama is the product of Safavid era (1501-1722) and Sharafkhan was also brought up in the royal court of this dynasty, especially Shah Tahmasb Safavid (1524-1576). Thus, it can be stated that Safavid discourse had a significant effect on Sharafkhan's training and his perspective towards history and historiography. For example, one can mention the "Persian" language of *Sharafnama*; Persian was the dominant written language of that era, and it can also be acknowledged the dominant

Safavid discourse, though it was in the Ottoman Empire, played a significant role in writing this book in Persian.

In the history of Iran, the Safavid era is known as the era of giving significance to historiography and history-making, and appreciating historians apart from the level of historiography in this era. For example, in this era, i.e. about 330 years of Safavid rule, as many as 40 books of general and family history have been written (Aram, 2007: 2-11) and more importantly, in this era one can witness the writing and creation (32) of historical books in the form of local historiography (Sawagheb: 2013: 6-24).

Although Sharafkhan lived during the reign of the Safavids and Shah Tahmasb (1520-1576)-the second Safavid king, writing this number of historical books at that time shows the importance of history and historiography and historians as well as the special care of the kings of the Safavids to history and historiography. Most of the researchers believe that the Safavid era is one of the richest periods of Iranian historiography in terms of the number of historical sources. However, the nature and definition of history were not important to them; most of these historical sources were written on political and military issues (Aram, 2007: 228-229).

The historiography of this period was conducted in three ways: general historiography, family historiography, and local historiography. In general historiography, the historian starts with a discussion from the beginning of history and continues until the events of his/her own time (Azhand: 2001: 8), but family historiography is written on the ruling dynasty, i.e. the Safavid dynasty, and in the local historiography, the historian's priority is to report the events of his/her own place of residence and region. It can be stated that local historiography has never been given so much importance as this period did. The love for the homeland, pride of one's homeland, reaction to the center, individual desire and interest of local rulers in preserving the name and symbol and learning from the past were the most important reasons for local historiography (Sawagheb, 2013: 26).

Safavid historiography, as mentioned, deals with recording of events, and it is the continuation of the same tradition of Islamic-Iranian historiography in which the narration and recording of events based on political and military events and the history of families and dynasties are of high significance. In other words, history in this period is a political and military history; cultural and social history is given little or no significance. Moreover, the epistemology of Safavid historians is a continuation of the same tradition of fatalism, Messianism, and elitism, more importantly, the philosophy of history is based on theological and providential philosophy (God's will). (Aram, 2007: 16).

Before addressing the main topic of the article, namely the discussion on the characteristics of Kurdish people and Kurdish society from the perspective of Sharafkhan, the present study aims to discuss the background of Sharafkhan's view on history and historiography as well as Sharafkhan's method of historiography.

2. Review of the Related Literature

In Iran, *Sharafnama* is known as a local history as well as one of the main sources of Kurdish studies. Among the Kurds, it is known as the beginning of Kurdish historiography. However, apart from a few brief references and a specific research, no significant material has been written on this work. Here, we will briefly discuss two of the works written on Sharafkhan's historiography written on Kurdish and Persian languages.

2.1. In Persian

Two books have been written on the knowledge and historical research of the Safavid period, but none of them have mentioned *Sharafnama*, even in a brief manner.

As for articles, only one article has been written in Persian about *Sharafnama*. Keyvan Shafei, a professor of history at Sanandaj Azad University, in his article "the level of social, economic and religious reflection of Kurdistan in *Sharafnama*" has briefly referred to some social, economic and religious references of *Sharafnama* and introduced *Sharafnama* as part of the classical historiography process.

2.2. In Kurdish

Although it is the first book of historiography of Kurdistan and in other words it is the beginning of Kurdish historiography, no research has been yet written on the method of his historiography as well as the issues of Kurds and Kurdish society from Sharafkhan's perspective and the position of Sharafkhan's historiography in general.

3. Sharafkhan's Life and the Beginning of Kurdish Historiography

Sharafkhan is the son of Shamsaddin Khan, the emir of Bitlis. His father and ancestors were from the Rojaki dynasty and one of the famous families and rulers of Kurdistan. Sharafkhan's

grandfather was Amir Ashraf, who was killed in a war due to the betrayal of his commander Amir Beig (Sharafkhan, 1998: 432) by the army of *Ulameh Sultan*, the ruler of Azerbaijan. (Sharafkhan, 1998: 438)

After the killing of Amir Ashraf, the Rojaki tribe chose his son Shamsaddin as his successor. Although he was initially able to partly gain the confidence of Istanbul, he was forced to leave the Emirate of Bitlis due to the constant conspiracies of *Ulameh Sultan*, Shah Tahmasb's brother, who had taken refuge in Istanbul and hated Shamsaddin. Afterwards, he turned to the Safavid government.

Shah Tahmasb warmly welcomed him and made him one of his close friends and gave him the title of Khan. Moreover, he set him the income of several regions in Iran, including "Sarab, Maragheh and Damavand". After several years of providing services to Shah Tahmasb, he lost everything due to drug abuse. Even after Shah Ismail II came to power and invited Amir Shamsaddin to Qazvin - the capital of Safavid rule- he failed to visit, due to his deteriorating physical conditions. He remained in Qazvin until his death. He had two sons named Khalaf and Sharaf. (Sharafkhan, 1998: 443-446).

Sharaf Khan was born in Karahrud, Qom, in 1543, and was entrusted to the family of the judges of Karahrud as a child to be brought up by them.

It was the custom of Shah Tahmasb that he entrusted the children and adolescents of the families of his close emirs to capable and knowledgeable teachers to be educated and trained. After a short time, Sharafkhan attracted the attention of Shah Tahmasb, and at the age of 9, he was given the opportunity to attend the royal court and stayed there for three years (ibid: 449). According to the tradition of that time, the existence and presence of the leader of the tribe was important, so the Rojaki tribe asked Shah Tahmasb to appoint Amir Sharaf as the leader of the tribe and send him back to his family. In addition to accepting this request, Shah Tahmasb appointed Amir Sharaf as the emir of "Salian" and "Mahmud Abad" and "Shirvan" regions (Ibid: 450).

After staying in Shirvan for three years, he went to Hamedan, the center of the Rojaki tribe. Then, after staying in Hamedan for another three years, owing to the uprising of "Khan Ahmad Khan Gilani", he went to Gilan to confront Khan Ahmad Khan by the order of the King. After suppressing the Khan Ahmad Khan's uprising, he stayed in Gilan for seven years, and due to the unfavorable weather conditions in Gilan, he asked Shah Tahmasb to summon him. At this time, due to the slander and conspiracy made by the Qizilbashes, the Shah became suspicious of him and sends him back to Shirvan (ibid: 452-453)

After staying in Shirvan for eight months, he returned to the capital Qazvin upon the invitation of Shah Ismail II, who had succeeded to the throne after Shah Tahmasb. He was

re-appointed as the emir of all Kurds or the emir of emirs of Kurds by order of the king (ibid: 455). His duty was to constantly serve the king and advise him on Kurdish affairs. Shortly afterwards. However, he was sent to “Nakhchivan” on the pretext of a Chinese plot against the Shah, and he was appointed as the emir of Nakhchivan.

After staying in Nakhchivan for a year and a half, he was informed through Khosrow Pasha, the ruler of Van, that Sultan Murad was prepared to return the position of his ancestors to him and return the Emirate of Bitlis to him. So in June-July (1578) he reached the Van with Rojaki tribe, and was appointed as the emir of Bitlis and remained in this position until 1597. After that, he felt tired and old and handed over power to his son Shamsaddin. He died in 1603/1604, after seven years away of handing over the power. (Yousef, 2005: 27).

4. The Writing of *Sharafnama*

Sharafkhan took religious and painting lessons while attending the family of the judges of Karahrud (Sharafkhan, 1998: 499-500). Later, as quoted from himself, he occasionally reads historical books and considers “Mirkhvand’s *Rawdatu 's-safa*” as one of the books that encouraged him to think of the idea of historiography (Sharafkhan, 1998: 5-6).

The value of history for Sharaf Khan, the marginalization of history and Kurdistan by historians, the necessity to collect the great stories of Kurdish men and names and leaders of Kurdistan, and most importantly preservin the name and reputation of the great ruling families of Kurdistan from oblivion and ignorance were the most important reasons for starting historiography by Sharafkhan; in other words, the transfer of power in favor of historiography (Sharafkhan, 1998: 5-8) It is also worth noting that his presumption for writing the *Sharafnama* was to revive the history of the ruling families of Kurdistan. The main purpose of Sharafkhan’s historiography was to perpetuate the name and fame of Kurdish ruling families; “All I need and wish is to revive that the great families of Kurdistan so that their names will not be forgotten” (Bedlisi, 2006: 13-14).

Sharafkhan's Views and Methods on History and Historiography

According to Sharafkhan, history is a science whose main subject includes “text of verses” and “truth of narrations” (*Sharafnama*, 1998: 5).

Sharafkhan believes that history, like an “noble art”, has so many achievements as a that they cannot be easily discussed. Thus, according to Sharfkhan, history is an “noble and sacred art” that is

likely to bring happiness, understanding, comfort, admonition, peace, rulers' fear for not being oppressive, and learning from the past.

According to Sharafkhan, history means a noble art with a religious burden that shows the will of God, "Those who have come to power, it God's will" (ibid: 3). He believes what happens is all the Divine will, command and destiny, and even reaching a high position and status, in other words, the rule of emirs and kings, is the result of God's mercy and grace; "God has determined the status of kings and emirs based on their merit" (Sharafkhan, 1998: 2).

Thus, Sharafkhan's perspective toward the course of history is based on a providential-fatalistic viewpoint, that is, according to Sharafkhan, all affairs are handled and controlled by God's will and desire. Accordingly, the basis of Sharafkhan's philosophy of history is based on historical theology, that is, "it is based on the fulfillment of the Divine promise and salvation".

Sharafkhan' Historiography Method

Sharafnama consists of two parts, the first part is about Kurdish history and Kurdish ruling families. This section includes an introduction and four chapters titled as "Sahifa". In each "Sahifa", he tells the story of some Kurdish rulers. For example, the first Sahifa deals with the rulers who have attempted for independence, and historians have named them "Pasha" and independent rulers. This section consists of five subsections including the rulers of Diyarbakir and the Jazirah, the rulers of Dinawar and *Sharazur* (Hasanuyeh), the rulers of the Great Lor (Fazluyeh) and the rulers of the Little Lor, the kings of Egypt and Syria (Ayubian). The second part of the book entitled as "Khatima" deals with the history of the Ottoman kings as well as those of Iran and Turan.

Sharafkhan's method is the same as that of traditional historians, that is, recording political and military events. There are only two differences between Sharafkhan's approach and the approach followed by the traditional historians. Firstly, he discusses Bitlis, apart from other regions, as his homeland. He makes some social, cultural and religious references. In other words, he speaks of some strange details (Sharafkhan, 1998: 334-360); one might say that this is very rare. Secondly, he discusses Kurds and Kurdish society in the introduction of *Sharafnama*. From this point of view, it can be stated that the historiography method and approach adopted by Sharafkhan in the introduction is largely different from the method followed by other historians and even *Sharafnama's* own historiography.

It should be noted that the introduction of *Sharafnama* was written after *Sharafnama* itself, in other words, it can be stated that the introduction of *Sharafnama* is Sharafkhan's history reading and interpretation on Kurds and Kurdish society.

In the introduction to *Sharafnama*, Sharafkhan discusses the Kurdish problem with a critical and even cultural perspective and occasionally frees himself from the providential views; this is completely contrary to the traditional historiography approach even the very text of *Sharafnama*.

5. Kurds from Sharafkhan's Perspective

According to Sharafkhan, Kurds are tribes whose language and customs and ethics vary. They are divided into four parts: Kurmanj, Lor, Kalhor, Goran (Bedlisi, 2006: 21).

In other words, Kurds refer to the tribes that have long lived in a land called Kurdistan and their borders "start from the shores of the Hormuz Sea-located on the shores of the Indian Ocean- and extends from there in a straight line and ends in Malatya and Mar'ash. The lands of Persia and Iraq, Persian Iraq, Azerbaijan and Greater Armenia are located on the north of this line. Arab Iraq, Mosul and Diyarbakir are on the south of this border. In addition, a large number of Kurdish tribes and clans are scattered and settled on the other side of the eastern regions, and they have passed beyond the western regions" (Bedlisi, 2006: 21-22).

According to Sharafkhan, the Kurds consist of four main tribes that have some differences in terms of language, customs and ethics, and live in a vast area called Kurdistan; their race, lineage, and origin are unknown and only God is aware of their race, lineage, and origin (Sharafkhan, 1998: 3). The group of people named Kurds and live in the land of Kurdistan form a Kurdish community. According to Sharafkhan, these people share some characteristics that will be discussed in the following sections.

Kurdish Community is a Religious One

"Most of the Kurds are Sunni following Imam Shafi'i. They insist on following their religious rites and customs. They go one their way, so that their prayers won't be delayed. They are really careful about Haj and Zakat. They work hard to fulfill their religious commitments and duties, and they obey the orders of religious scholars and are ready to carry out any kind of religious orders. They are not as flawed even to a very small amount, and they love the companions of the Prophet very much (Bedlisi, 2006: 22-23).

Besides stating that most of the Kurds are Shafi'i, Sharafkhan speaks of Yazidi Kurds and writes: "some Kurdish tribes and nomads living in Mosul and the Levant - such as Dasni, Khaledi, Pasyan and some Mahmudi and Dunbli are Yazidis and are followers of the Sheikh A'si, the son of Mosafir, who was under the command of the Marwanids (Ibid: 23). However, he introduces them as "unfavorable tribes" (Bedlisi, 1947: 156) who "had chosen the wrong path" (ibid, 341) and have "false views" (ibid, 26).

Perhaps because of Sharaf Khan's prejudice over the Sunnism, especially the Shafi'i's views, he did not mention Yarsan and Shiite Kurds. However, he generally introduces the Kurdish community as a religious community whose main priority is to conduct and follow religious duties and customs.

The Lack of Unity Thoughts and Insisting on Fratricidal Desires

"They do not accept each other's words and they are not united. They do not obey each other, and they cannot be controlled by one another, and they still think of their own success in a their own way". Sharafkhan maintains that that "Kurdish society is a fragmented, extremist, and strange one. In such a society, no one listens to the orders of another, and they never support each other and there is no such thing as unity among them; everyone considers only himself/herself to be good and great. Unity exist only in a narrow tribal circle. However, they generally agree on the word "monotheism". He adds "they do not listen to each other's orders and are not united. They never support each other, and there is no such thing as unity among them, and everyone thinks only of his/her own success. They don't generally think of collective success and do not support; they cannot be united. On this appalling behavior, in his Turkish history (written for the Ottomans), Mullah Sa'd al-Din, being the teacher of the late Sultan Murad Khan, states "every Kurd is independent of himself, that is he/she is on his/her own way. They attempt and fight for independence and power. They live freely in the mountains, and if you pay attention to the status of their unity and cooperation, there is nothing but Tashahhud and faith (monotheism). They are not united in anything else" (Bedlisi, 2006: 52-56).

In this regard, in the issue of "Idris Bedlisi" and calling the Kurdish leaders based on his own proposal, he quotes from Idris Bedlisi, "The holy flag of Sultan turned from Tabriz to Rome. Hakim Idris recommended the great Sultan that the rulers of Kurdistan are waiting for royal grace to give them back the land of their ancestors and chose one of them as their elder, so that they could attack Qarah Khan and drive him out of Diyarbakir. The conquering Sultan replied they appoint a capable leader as their emir, and the others were to support and obey him to overpower Qizilbash. Hakim

Idris replied that the Kurds are so arrogant and opinionated that no one of them would submit to another's command. If you expect to eliminate Qizilbash, it is better to appoint one of his majesty's leaders or commanders so that the Kurds would be under his command as soon as possible (*Sharafnama*: 2006: 524).

Therefore, according to Sharafkhan, the lack of unity and intolerance of one other had resulted in a constant fratricide among the Kurds; they always attempt to overpower one another. Fratricide is so prominent and common that according to Sharafkhan, "The Kurds' population will not increase owing to fratricide and murder and genocide being so common among them". He continues "according to the tradition of the Prophet, the Kurds can have four wives and four maids. And by the will of God, they would have a lot of children and plenty of wealth. If they did not kill each other, the famine would spread not only in Iran but also throughout the entire world" (Bedlisi, 1998: 18).

The Prevention of the Formation of a Kurdish Government

Sharafkhan maintains that the Kurds are very scattered and hostile against each other, and no single one of them accepts the others. Each one claims independence; that's why they are constantly killing each other. This has prevented the Kurdish society from being prepared for the formation of a Kurdish government and the Kurds will not be able to have a king, a ruler or an emir who will rule over all Kurds. The result of this phenomenon is that Kurdish society will be more prone to bloodshed and violence. In particular, he writes: "Since there is no powerful and acceptable ruler and kingdom among the Kurds, they are often violent, bloodthirsty and daring to the extent that they react in the worst way to the slightest mistake" (Bedlisi, 1998: 2). "They even lack the arts and skills that bring them closer to power". Kurds and their scholars lack the sciences and arts whose learning opens the doors of the kingdoms and courts through which they can achieve high ranks and positions, 1998: 15).

According to Sharafkhan, the lack of a leader who is acceptable and charismatic among all Kurds, in other words, the Kurds' failure to have such a leader has resulted in their discord and division; it has led to violence, bloodshed, and even fratricide among Kurds. According to Sharafkhan, this phenomenon is the outcome of irrationality among Kurdish people and Kurdish society. Irrationality has had such a significant effect on the Kurdish people and the Kurdish society that they are commonly involved with meaningless words and irrational pride; they have often failed to deal with enemies" (Bedlisi, 1998: 432).

Lack of Rationality in the Kurdish Society

Sharafkhan maintains that thinking and rationality have no value and place in the Kurdish society and Kurdish people do not care about thinking. The old famous saying “whoever thinks about the future is a coward” has become part of the Kurdish society’s tradition and lifestyle. In this regard, Sharafkhan writes “according to the old saying “whoever thinks about the future is a coward” – the Kurds do not take future into account in many matters of their life as well as important actions and future interactions” (Bedlisi, 1998: 14).

“The important thing is that this issue has made courage the best trait of human beings for Kurds. They value bravery and courage to such an extent that they would rather be known as warriors and bandits than thoughtful and rational human beings. Most Kurds are brave, courageous, and zealous people and call themselves thieves and robbers.” (Bedlisi, 1998: 14).

According to Sharafkhan, the Kurdish society is a society that does not pay much attention to thinking and rationality. It is a fragmented society that is more prone to violence and fratricide. Thus, it has never been able to have a Kurdish government and maintain its unity. The Kurdish society has even failed to think of having unity and determining an individual as their leader, so that they no longer suffer from defeat, fratricide and bloodshed.

Thus, it can be said that, in this introduction, Sharafkhan has largely freed himself from a providential approach. By referring to human thought or better to say Kurds’ thought, he considers irrationality as a factor of underdevelopment and lack of unity in the Kurdish society “Lack of unity has led to Kurdicide and Kurdicide has led to internal hatred and resentment, and this in itself has hindered the establishment of a Kurdish government; the major cause of damage is irrationality and lack of thinking in Kurdish society”.

6. Conclusion

Sharafnama refers to the history of the ruling families of Kurdistan and the beginning of the process of Kurdish historiography. It was written in the Safavid era and is influenced by the ruling discourse of the Safavid period in terms of perspective, method, and even language.

Sharafkhan’s perspective towards history and historiography is a continuation of the method of his predecessors, a method which is based on the will of God and a divine promise for the salvation of man. However, the introduction of *Sharafnama* was probably written after Sharafnameh

itself. The introduction of *Sharafnama* is Sharafkhan's history reading and interpretation on Kurds and Kurdish society; it is thus breaking from the past tradition.

In the introduction of *Sharafnama*, for the first time Sharafkhan ignores the heavenly will and gives priority to human will and human reasons. In other words, instead of speaking of the Divine Will, he used the human factor and the Kurdish factor as a factor of dispersion and discord that results in the lack of a Kurdish government.

In addition, this view can be defined as the beginning of breaking with the dominant style of Sharafkhan's era and even the style dominant after him. It can also be considered as the beginning of the internal reading of Kurdish society based on the facts of history.

According to Sharafkhan, Kurdish society is a scattered society lacking leadership. This has resulted in violence, Kurdicide, and fratricide. According to Sharafkhan, the main cause of this situation is the lack of rationality and thinking. This is the first reading on the Kurdish society that is based on historical facts by one of the historians of the Safavid era. This view can be considered as the beginning of the rational reading method of the Kurdish society and also the beginning of a new method and perspective based on the realities of Kurdish society from the Abbasids to Safavids.

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