Afterword

Sayyid-ness beyond the Borders of South Asia

KAZUO MORIMOTO*

The putative kinfolk of the Prophet Muhammad, typically called Sayyid or Sharif, have lived not only in Muslim societies of South Asia but in many regions of the Muslim world over the centuries.[1] Their lineages are linked to one and the same figure of the Prophet Muhammad. Hence, while they have adapted to varying social, religious and political conditions prevalent in their respective milieux, Sayyids and Sharifs are marked by both commonalities that transcend local circumstances as well as diversities and differences that are conditioned by local circumstances. Whether she is a Sunni or Shiʿi, from Morocco or Iraq or Indonesia, a proud member of the Prophet Muhammad's kinfolk with Islamic religious education is likely to refer invariably to the Verse of Affection (*surat al-mawaddah*) in the Qur'an (42:23), when she is asked on what scriptural basis it is incumbent upon Muslims to love the kinfolk of the Prophet.[2] Contrastingly, an Iranian Sayyid traveller will find it unfamiliar,

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[1]As explained in the co-editors' introduction, a unique nomenclature is prevalent in South Asia in which the words 'Sayyid' and 'Sharif' have two clearly different meanings. While 'Sayyid' is used, like in many other regions, as a title to denote the people who claim to be members of the kinfolk of the Prophet Muhammad, 'Sharif', in its plural 'Ashraf', signifies a wider category, that is, Muslims of foreign origins as a whole. Thus, Sayyids form a part of the Ashraf in South Asia, while the two terms 'Sayyid' and 'Sharif' can generally be treated as synonyms in relation to Muslim societies elsewhere (I do not believe that the oft-repeated explanation about the differentiation between 'Sayyid' as signifying a Husainid and 'Sharif' as denoting a Hasanid has widely applicable factual basis). In this afterword, 'Ashraf' is used only in its South Asian sense, while 'Sharif' in singular or the 'Sharifs' in English plural is used in its non-South Asian meaning (in contrast with the rest of the Special Issue, where '*sharif*' is used in relation to the notion of *sharafat*, meaning both nobility and good manners).

[2]The verse reads "*Qul la as'alukum 'alayhi ajr^an illa al-mawaddah fi'l-qurba*" and is interpreted, when used as a basis for the obligation of love for Sayyids and Sharifs, as "Say, 'I ask no remuneration for it [i.e., my mission as God's Apostle] except for your love for my close kinfolk' " (my own translation). There are, however, other well-known interpretations.

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and possibly even exotic, when he hears about the moral standard prevalent in the Hadramaut (southern Arabia) that Sayyids there should not carry arms.[3]

It is important, therefore, to look at Sayyids in South Asia not only as a component of Muslim societies of that region and study them in light of different local contexts but also as part of the trans-regional diaspora of the putative kinfolk of the Prophet Muhammad. When interpreting a case in the South Asian context, also referring to comparable phenomena related to Sayyids and Sharifs in other regions provides the scholar with opportunities to be more attuned and sensitive to the case at hand. In short, having a broad transregional perspective allows the scholar to offer deeper and more nuanced analyses of Sayyids in South Asia. At the same time, elucidation of the traits of Sayyids in South Asia, whether those traits are shared with Sayyids and Sharifs in other regions or are specific to South Asia, certainly contributes to a holistic understanding of Sayyids and Sharifs as a phenomenon widely observed in many Muslim societies in the world. Accordingly, my comments in this afterword on matters raised and discussed in "Historicising Sayyid-ness: Social Status and Muslim Identity in South Asia" are from this comparative perspective. In other words, I approach this Special Issue as a contribution to the field of research that I have myself termed 'sayyido-sharifology'.[4]

One fundamental point that we need to keep in mind when discussing Sayyids and Sharifs is the fact that both the status *of* a Sayyid or Sharif—that is, **what** a Sayyid or Sharif is—and the status *as* a Sayyid or Sharif—that is, **who** is a Sayyid or Sharif—are never ahistorical, stable givens but objects of social negotiations in multiple ways. It is, therefore, most appropriate that this Special Issue sheds light on the processes of such negotiations in early-modern to post-colonial South Asia mostly by elucidating how Sayyids themselves participated in them. Case studies gathered here make it abundantly clear that Sayyids in South Asia were themselves active—and probably the most influential—participants in these processes. These studies also show, importantly, that Sayyids were quite creative and flexible in their self-identification. The leaders of the Aligarh movement, for instance, although preponderantly of Sayyid status themselves, could choose to emphasise their status as part of the wider category of Ashraf, and not as Sayyids per se, when they saw this as the effective way to promote their movement's goals (Eve Tignol). The significance of this is better appreciated when we learn from David Lelyveld's contribution that Sayyid Ahmad Khan's Sayyid status enhanced his sense of entitlement and responsibility with regards to his role as a reformer of the Muslim community. Sayyid Ahmad Khan was certainly not heedless of his own Prophetic descent when he took the initiative in emphasising the Ashraf identity of his *qaum* that naturally included himself. In addition, other articles in this Special Issue present cases where the meaning claimed for Sayyid-ness underwent a transformation as a result of new modes of assertion. We can think, for example, of Mahmud Ahmad ʿAbbasi's

[3]See Ulrike Freitag, *Indian Ocean Migrants and State Formation in Hadhramaut: Reforming the Homeland* (Leiden and Boston, 2003), p. 42, for this moral standard.

[4]For 'sayyido-sharifology', which aims at a holistic understanding of Sayyids and Sharifs across regions without ever losing sight of their diversities, see Kazuo Morimoto, 'Toward the Formation of Sayyido-Sharifology: Questioning Accepted Fact', *The Journal of Sophia Asian Studies* XXII (2004), pp. 87–103; *idem*, 'Sayyido-Sharifology: Personal and Collective Endeavors to Define a New Research Field', in *Islamic Studies and the Study of Sufism in Academia: Rethinking Methodologies*, (eds.) Yasushi Tonaga and Chiaki Fujii (Kyoto, 2019), pp. 47–54.

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contrasting *nasab* (lineage) with *nasal parasti* (discrimination based on ethnicity or, in this case, 'caste') to justify the former, as examined in Soheb Niazi's article.

When it comes to the negotiations over **who** was entitled to be called a Sayyid, one interesting case brought to light here is the insecure position of the ʿAbbasi Sayyids of Amroha. Niazi tells us that Mahmud Ahmad ʿAbbasi, the author of one of Niazi's sources and an ʿAbbasi Sayyid himself, criticised the Shiʿis of Amroha for not accepting the Sayyid status of his family. That was because the genealogy claimed by the ʿAbbasi Sayyids went back to the Prophet Muhammad's paternal uncle ʿAbbas, and not to Hasan or Husain (the two grandsons of the Prophet), nor, for that matter, to any of ʿAli b. Abi Talib's sons or brothers; that is, the ʿAbbasi Sayyids of Amroha were not of Fatimid, ʿAlid, or even Talibid descent, but were of Hashimid lineage. Such conflicting understandings concerning the range of descent groups considered worthy of the title Sayyid or Sharif are commonly observed in different times and places. Al-Suyuti in late Mamluk Egypt (fourteenth–fifteenth centuries), for instance, authored a well-known treatise (or a *fatwa*) entitled *al-ʿAjajah al-zarnabiyah fi al-sulalah al-Zaynabiyah* in order to discuss the exact status of the Zainabids, that is, the descendants of Zainab, ʿAli's daughter, and ʿAbd Allah, son of ʿAli's brother Jaʿfar al-Tayyar, according to the numerous ways to demarcate the kinfolk of the Prophet. Interestingly, al-Suyuti's conclusion on Zainabids' status is not free from ambiguity: they could be addressed as Sharif but were not allowed to receive shares from the bequests or w*aqf*s earmarked for Sharifs unless their inclusion was clearly stipulated.[5]

It is often explained that Sayyids and Sharifs are the descendants of Hasan or Husain. Although it is true that the Hasanids and the Husainids form the conceptual core of Sayyids and Sharifs[6] and are also numerically preponderant among those people, such a categorical definition misses the ever-existing ambiguity in the definition of who Sayyids and Sharifs are and the room for social negotiations opened by that very ambiguity. In the case of Mahmud Ahmad ʿAbbasi in Amroha, his criticism of Shiʿis in his town may be construed as his effort to safeguard the Sayyid status of his family that had been accepted among the Sunnis by superposing the confessional borders of Sunnis versus Shiʿis on the borders between those who denied their lineage and those who accepted it. It might, at the same time, also be worthwhile asking if the Sunnis of Amroha were really supportive of the ʿAbbasis' Sayyid status. It may be that Mahmud Ahmad ʿAbbasi was trying to change the attitude of the Sunni critiques of his family's Sayyid status by implicitly aligning them with the Shiʿis. As shown by Sayyid Ahmad Khan's pronouncement that only Hasanids and Husainids had the right to the title Sayyid (Lelyveld), it should certainly not be taken for granted that Sunnis accept the Sayyid status of the descendants of ʿAbbas.

The question of who is a Sayyid and/or Sharif can also be raised regarding the authenticity of the lineage claimed by a specific family or individual. Different 'signs' could manifest

[5] Al-Suyuti, *al-ʿAjajah al-zarnabiyah fi al-sulalah al-Zaynabiyah*, in *idem*, *al-Hawi lil-fatawi* ([Cairo], 1933), ii, pp. 31–34.

[6] I have the following two points in mind in my use of 'conceptual core' here: (1) no theory for demarcating Sayyids and Sharifs from non-Sayyids and non-Sharifs known to me excludes the Hasanids and the Husainids, while there have been disagreements concerning the rest of the ʿAlids, Talibids or the Hashimids; (2) only the Hasanids and the Husainids are considered entitled to claim direct descent from the Prophet Muhammad (albeit quite irregularly through his daughter Fatima) while the other lines of the Hashimids are related to the Prophet only collaterally.

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themselves or be evoked in such occasions so as to clear any doubt. A dream or a waking vision featuring the Prophet Muhammad was the most common among them. For example, Ibn al-Tiqtaqa's book on the genealogy of Sayyids and Sharifs, written around the turn of the fourteenth century in Iraq (and possibly also in western Iran), contains an account in which a scholar encounters the Prophet in a dream and learns from him the authenticity or lack thereof of the lineages of different Sayyids and Sharifs.[7] The dream narrative that Sayyid Ahmad Khan recounted from his childhood, which not only convinced him of his blessedness as a Sayyid but also confirmed his own Sayyid status (Lelyveld), therefore strikes a familiar chord to a Sayyid/Sharif enthusiast like me.[8] All these findings in this Special Issue overwhelmingly confirm that the role and status of Sayyids in South Asian Muslim societies and the question of who is entitled to that role and status have been arenas of social negotiations, just as they are in many other places where Sayyids and Sharifs are found. In this way, the study of Sayyids can offer a fresh perspective on the wider social conditions that shaped such negotiations in South Asia.

This Special Issue focuses on a timespan extending from the latter half of the eighteenth century to the present day, with special reference to the period before Independence. Although it is not possible for a single thematic issue to elucidate the overall outline of the social conditions and transformations that conditioned Sayyids' modes of self-identification during that *longue durée*, the six contributions provide useful information regarding the impact of two particular broad phenomena of the time: Islamic reformism and British colonial rule.

It is widely argued that the spread of Islamic reformism in the modern period was generally detrimental to the status and authority of people who claimed saintliness and the power of intercession with God. It goes without saying that Sayyid status was a common claim for the authority vested in such people. In this special issue, Diego Abenante's contribution clearly endorses this understanding. Abenante argues that the spread of the reform-minded Chishti Nizami Sufi network undermined the role, status and power of *dargah*-based saintly figures who typically also claimed Sayyid lineage.

At the same time, Sayyid Ahmad Khan's Sayyid status contributed to his sense of entitlement and responsibility as a reformist leader and lent weight to his discourse in the eyes of his followers (Lelyveld and Tignol). This suggests that Sayyid status could sometimes underpin Islamic reformism as a motivating and enabling attribute of a reformer. This formulation may also be applicable to other reformists, even outside South Asia, whose status as Sayyid or Sharif was well-known to their audiences. Here I have in mind the case of Muhammad Rashid Rida (Syria and Egypt; 1865–1935). Rashid Rida evidently took pride in his Sayyid status as shown by the fact that he explicitly noted his Prophetic

[7] Ibn al-Tiqtaqa, *al-Asili fi ansab al-Talibiyin*, (ed.) Mahdi al-Raja'i (Qom, 1997–98), pp. 239–240.

[8] One may recall another well-known case from South Asia in which dreams served as evidence of the Sayyid status of the family of Husain Ahmad Madani, the leader of Jam'iyyat 'Ulama'-i Hind. See Barbara D. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860–1900* (Princeton, 1982), pp. 246–247. I thank Dr. Julien Levesque for bringing this material to my attention.

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descent in his autobiography.[9] It has also been repeatedly noted that Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838/9–1897) claimed to be a Sayyid.[10]

In any case, Sayyid status lent a versatile power to its holder. It could support the authority of a *jinn*-exorcising Sufi *pir* with peacock feathers in his hand, while it could also motivate a modern reformist such as Sir Sayyid. Sayyid-ness tends to be discussed as something with affinity to Ernest Gellner's *C*, a 'set or syndrome of characteristics' within a religion (here we have Islam in mind, of course) that is marked by hierarchical, charismatic, symbolic and ecstatic tendencies, or what I have elsewhere called 'intercessional Islam'. However, it has not been asked seriously how it can also have an affinity with Gellner's *P*, another 'set or syndrome of characteristics' marked by egalitarian, text-centred, puritan and sober tendencies.[11] Lelyveld's in-depth discussion of Sayyid Ahmad Khan's self-perception suggests the profitability of a new line of inquiry—how Sayyid-ness may have an association with these latter tendencies—an aspect of Sayyid-ness which has scarcely been noted until now.

To what extent can we suppose that Sayyids in Muslim societies of pre-colonial and colonial periods lived in what some scholars have called the 'Muslim caste' system? To what extent should that concept of 'Muslim castes' be considered a legacy of the colonial period? This Special Issue raises this question in relation to the impact of the colonial encounter on negotiation processes surrounding Sayyid status and Sayyid-ness. This is of particular interest because, in discussing variations of Sayyids' and Sharifs' modes of being in different local societies, scholars often highlight South Asia and the Hadramaut as two distinctive regions where Sayyids are situated in highly-stratified societies consisting of distinct caste-like categories. Observations on Sayyids and Sharifs in such societies, where groups' statuses and hierarchical positions tend to be more clearly identifiable, can inform research on Sayyids and Sharifs in other social settings too. In the Hadramaut, for instance, Sayyid status contributes to the perception that saintly figures with that status operate beyond the vested interests of local tribes (*qaba'il*), which allows them to act as intermediaries between these tribes. These findings may sharpen our eyes in search of comparable roles played by Sayyids and Sharifs in other settings.[12]

We, non-experts of South Asia, are conventionally taught that Sayyids in that region operate in a 'Muslim caste' system. Whether the term 'caste' is appropriate here is a separate issue, but it is helpful to historicise this highly stratified social system and to uncover which

[9] I have, however, no knowledge as to whether or not Rashid Rida linked his Sayyid status with any sense of entitlement or responsibility to reform his ancestor's Umma. For Rashid Rida's own mention of his Sayyid status, see Muhammad Rashid Rida, *al-Manar wa-al-Azhar* (Cairo, 2007), pp. 148–152, especially p. 151.

[10] I have, however, not been able to figure out whether his claim to be a Sayyid merely formed a part of his faked identity as an Afghan or he sincerely believed himself to be one. See Ignaz Goldziher and Jacques Jomier, 'Dj̲amāl al-Dīn al-Afg̲h̲ānī', in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_1963 (accessed 30 August 2019); Nikki R. Keddie, 'Afḡānī, Jamāl-al-Dīn', *Encyclopædia Iranica,* http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/afgani-jamal-al-din (accessed 30 August 2019).

[11] For *C* and *P*, see Ernest Gellner, 'A Pendulum Swing Theory of Islam', *Annales marocaines de sociologie. 1968* (1968), pp. 5–14, reprinted, in *Sociology of Religion: Selected Readings*, (ed.) Roland Robertson (Harmondsworth, 1969), pp. 127–139. For my use of 'intercessional Islam', see my 'Introduction', in *Sayyids and Sharifs in Muslim Societies: Living Links to the Prophet*, (ed.) Kazuo Morimoto (London and New York, 2012), p. 9 [pp. 1–12].

[12] Robert Bertram Serjeant, "Ḥaram and Ḥawṭa: The Sacred Enclave in Arabia", in *Mélanges Taha Husayn*, (ed.) A. Badawi (Cairo, 1962), pp. 41–58; Freitag, *Indian Ocean Migrants*, p. 42. Abenante indeed mentions such a role played by *dargah*-based saintly figures in Multan in his contribution.

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elements originate from before the colonial period and which do not. Interestingly, the contributors to this Special Issue appear to have different opinions on this. While Abenante states that the "impact of the colonial conceptions must not be overestimated", Lelyveld writes, "It is probably an error to read back this nineteenth century construction to a precolonial past and to associate that past with modern ideas about caste". There seems to be room for further inquiry in this regard.[13]

This Special Issue, by highlighting different Sayyid voices, has shown that the discourses of Sayyids themselves, set in different contexts, represent a useful avenue for further inquiry. For example, Mir Ali Shir Qani's *Tuhfat al-kiram* (written in Thatta in the latter eighteenth century), and discussed here by Shayan Rajani, placed Sayyids at the top of a hierarchy that was also composed of other groups such as "qazis, religious scholars and other pious people, Sufi saints and their deputies, people of renown, calligraphers, and poets". According to Rajani, Qani tried to project this hierarchy as a desirable societal state. Yet, that hierarchy shares nothing with the notion of 'Muslim castes'. Qani made no clear distinction between Muslims of foreign and indigenous origins, nor did he mention *zat* or *baradari*. By contrast, in 1930s Amroha, Mahmud Ahmad ʿAbbasi clearly distinguished groups of *Hindi nasal* from groups of foreign origins (*ʿArabi nasal* and *ʿAjami nasal*). In addition, he considered Muslims of *Hindi nasal* to consist of occupational groups while Muslims of foreign origins were identified in terms of their ethnic/geographical origins. How, then, do we understand and contextualise these different views on the society in which Sayyids were to be situated? Should we, for instance, interpret ʿAbbasi's discourse as proof that he was thinking of the society in which he lived in terms of 'Muslim castes'? If yes, then perhaps could we also approach Qani's hierarchy as an indication of how starkly different Muslims' own perceptions of their own societies were before the colonial period? It appears necessary to gather yet more puzzle pieces to understand the evolution and variations in Muslim perceptions of their own societies as well as the status of Sayyids within them.

I would like to end my Afterword with a comment inspired by Simon Fuchs' remark that he did not encounter discourses for the 'cosmological and theological status' of Sayyids in the sources that he examined. Similarly, the other contributions to this Special Issue present little material referring to the perceived intrinsic and ontological superiority of Sayyids vis-à-vis non-Sayyids. For example, Mir Ali Shir Qani placed Sayyids at the top of the desirable hierarchical social structure only on the grounds that these people were the breeding ground par excellence of meritorious individuals. Qani fell short of discussing what was special about Sayyids that enabled them to be like that. This Special Issue indicates that discourses regarding the 'cosmological and theological status' of Sayyids should be sought after in other societal and/or textual milieus, provided that such discourses were explicitly articulated elsewhere. There exists a genre of religious literature that deals with the virtues

[13]Of course, it is of utmost importance in this discussion to clarify what institution or discourse one has in mind when we talk about a 'Muslim caste' system. Do we talk about, for example, the Ashraf–Ajlaf dichotomy or the quadripartite division of the Ashraf into Sayyids, Shaikhs, Mughals and Pathans, or even a society composed of different descent/occupational groups (*zat*, *baradari* and suchlike) whose interrelations are dictated by established social norms?

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(*faza'il/manaqib*) of the kinfolk of the Prophet as a whole.[14] One apparently significant work in this genre is the *Manaqib al-sadat*, which was composed during the Sultanate period by Shihab al-Din ʿUmar Dawlat-abadi (d. 849/1445), a renowned *ʿalim* and a second-generation disciple of the Chishti Sufi master Nasir al-Din Mahmud Chiragh-i Dihlavi. This work was still being copied in the early nineteenth century.[15] Thus, it seems that discourses about the 'cosmological and theological status' of Sayyids circulated in South Asia during the period covered by this Special Issue, in milieus not discussed here, including, most probably, among Sufis. If its contributors have shed light primarily on the discourses of reform-minded Muslim writers, then one way potentially to expand the findings of this Special Issue would be to turn to those people in South Asia whose discourses and practices were criticised by reform-minded Muslim writers. Shedding light on the discourses and practices of these supposedly more conservative groups may also open up avenues for studying Sayyid-ness in South Asian Muslim societies in periods prior to the latter eighteenth century, and it would certainly widen our scope of inquiry further when we compare South Asian Sayyids with Sayyids and Sharifs elsewhere.

KAZUO MORIMOTO
University of Tokyo
morikazu@ioc.u-tokyo.ac.jp

[14]For studies discussing works of this genre, see Kazuo Morimoto, 'How to Behave toward *Sayyid*s and *Sharīf*s: A Trans-Sectarian Tradition of Dream Accounts', in *Sayyids and Sharifs in Muslim Societies: The Living Links to the Prophet*, (ed.) Kazuo Morimoto (London and New York, 2012), pp. 15–36; *idem*, 'The Prophet's Family as the Perennial Source of Saintly Scholars: Al-Samhūdī on *ʿIlm* and *Nasab*', in *Family Portraits with Saints: Hagiography, Sanctity, and Family in the Muslim World*, (eds.) Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen and Alexandre Papas (Berlin, 2014), pp. 106–124.

[15]I thank Professor Ayako Ninomiya for this information. According to her, one of the four manuscripts of the *Manaqib al-sadat* kept at the Maulana Azad Library, Aligarh Muslim University (MS University Collection, *Farsi, mazhab wa tasavvuf* 268) is dated in its colophon to 10 Rabiʿ I 1313 AH/31 August 1895. Although I currently have no information as to where and for what purpose the manuscript in question was copied, this would suggest that the work still had an audience towards the late nineteenth century. Ninomiya is currently carrying out a study of the work, without, however, focusing on its reception history in modern times. My knowledge about the *Manaqib al-sadat* comes mainly from Ayako Ninomiya, 'Arguing *Sayyid*s in the Frontiers of the Islamic World: The *Manaqib al-sadat* by Dawlatabadi', unpublished presentation in Japanese, 6 July 2019, Institute for Advanced Studies on Asia, University of Tokyo, and my own preliminary examination of a manuscript of the work (MS Majles Library 14134). See also Mustafa Dirayati (ed.), *Fihristgan-i nuskha-ha-yi khatti-yi Iran (Fankha)* (Tehran, 2011/12–15/16), xxxi, p. 649. I thank Professor Ninomiya for her permission to cite her unpublished work.

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