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MISCELLANEOUS COMMUNICATIONS

THE REIGN OF AḤMAD IBN SA'ĪD, IMAM OF OMAN

In spite of the importance of Aḥmad ibn Sa'īd, the founder of the Āl Bū Sa'īd dynasties still ruling at Muscat and at Zanzibar, there is considerable confusion among historians as to the dates of his accession and of his death. He is stated by Badger to have been elected Imam in 1741, by Guillain in 1744, and by Palgrave in 1759. According to Captain Robert Taylor he died in 1771,¹ according to Badger in 1775, according to Palgrave about 1780, and according to Colonel Miles in 1783, while Professor Coupland says that he was succeeded by Sulṭān ibn Aḥmad in 1792.² His reign is most often said to have lasted from 1741 to 1775. This is certainly wrong, and I think it can be shown that his election probably occurred in 1749 and that he died in 1783.

The only readily accessible account of the history of Oman in the eighteenth century is G. P. Badger's translation of the chronicle of Salil ibn Raziq³ and this is the original authority for the dates 1741 and 1775, which Badger accepted without question. Ibn Raziq, however, does not say that Aḥmad was elected in 1741, but only that the transfer of power to the Āl Bū Sa'īd took place in A.H. 1154, i.e. 1741-2. Moreover, Badger remarks in his preface that the transcriber of the manuscript he used was very careless about dates. There is, therefore, no reason to believe that Aḥmad became Imam as early as 1741 if there is evidence to the contrary.

¹ *Selections from the Records of the Bombay Government, New Series*, vol. 24, p. 8.

² R. Coupland, *East Africa and its Invaders*, p. 89. Aḥmad was succeeded by his son Sa'īd.

³ So far as I know the Arabic text has not been published. The manuscript was presented by the Sayyid Thuwaini to Badger, and after his death was given by his widow to Cambridge University Library where it is now.

There appears to be no doubt as to the sequence of events leading to his election. The Imam Saif ibn Sulṭān appealed to Nādir Shāh for help against Sulṭān ibn Murshid who had been elected in opposition to him. The Persian army sent in answer to Saif's request recaptured Muscat but failed to take Sohar, which was defended by Aḥmad ibn Sa'īd. After the deaths of Saif and of Sulṭān, Aḥmad came to terms with the besiegers, recovered Muscat, and was later proclaimed Imam. He afterwards marched against his only remaining rival for the throne, Ibn Ḥimyar, who was defeated and killed. Now, Ibn Raziq says that Sulṭān ibn Murshid revolted in 1151, i.e. 1738-9, but Dr. Lockhart's references to the East India Company's records in his biography of Nādir Shāh show that this cannot be true and he gives 1742 as the correct date. This is given also by Colonel Miles and by Guillain,¹ on the authority of the French traveller, Jean Otter, and of a manuscript chronicle by Abū Sulaimān Muḥammad ibn Amīr ibn Rashīd which Guillain saw at Zanzibar and which says that the election of Sulṭān was made on the 10th Dhu'l Ḥijja, 1154. This is confirmed by an anonymous manuscript history of Oman in the British Museum which says that it took place on "the night of the Pilgrimage" in that year.² According to the same work the death of Sulṭān occurred on the 27th Rabi' II, 1156, i.e. 1743.³ Thus Aḥmad can hardly have become Imam before 1744. Dr. Lockhart mentions this as the date of his election and refers to Kersten and Guillain as authorities for it. Kersten, however, seems to have taken it from Guillain, and Guillain merely says: "L'élection d'Ahhmed dut avoir lieu à la fin de 1744."⁴ While his account proves that it cannot well have been earlier than this, he brings no evidence to show that it was not later. The British

¹ *Documents sur l'histoire, la géographie et le commerce de l'Afrique Orientale*, pt. 1, p. 535.

² B.M. MSS. Add. 23, 343, fol. 154 recto.

³ v. fol. 159 verso.

⁴ Guillain, op. cit., pt. 1, p. 542.

Museum manuscript says that it was on the night of the 23rd Jumādā II, 1162, i.e. 1749, and there is no reason why this should not be correct. The writer is in general more accurate than Ibn Razīq, and presumably because of its importance the copyist has written this date in full and not merely given it in figures as is his usual practice. It agrees with Niebuhr's observation that in 1765 Aḥmad had been reigning for sixteen years, while Palgrave's date, 1759, may easily have been a mistake for 1749. Both Salil ibn Razīq and the anonymous chronicler say that the final defeat of Ibn Ḥimyar took place after the election, and Colonel Miles considers that the battle was fought in the latter part of 1749. It is likely that the formal proclamation of Aḥmad would be followed almost at once by a campaign against his sole competitor.

The only objection that can be brought against this date is that it supposes a delay of several years between the fall of Muscat and the election, but the title of Imam was not one to be adopted rashly by a member of an unimportant, mercantile family. Colonel Miles says of one of Aḥmad's predecessors: "The conduct of Yaarab in thus exalting himself to the Imamate, instead of raising his fortunes, served on the contrary to hasten his downfall, and caused the deepest offence to the people."¹ Yet Ya'rab was related to the reigning dynasty, had enjoyed supreme power in Oman for over a year, and had been formally absolved from the guilt of rebellion by a Qāḍī. A few years later, in similar circumstances, Muḥammad ibn Nāṣir thought it necessary to convene an assembly and announce his intention of resigning the regency and retiring into private life. Again, during the greater part of the life of Aḥmad's son and successor, the Imam Sa'īd, the real power was in the hands of others, but none of them ever used the title of Imam and of all his successors only 'Azzān ibn Qais has done so. In 1744 the

¹ S. B. Miles, *The Countries and Tribes of the Persian Gulf*, vol. i, p. 240.

interior of Oman had submitted to Ibn Ḥimyar and there was still a Persian garrison at Julfar in 1748.¹ Aḥmad must have been anxious to do nothing that would offend the religious susceptibilities of his supporters.

There is less confusion about the date of Aḥmad's death, and most modern historians have given it either as 1775 or as 1783. Ibn Raziq says that he died in Dhu'l Qa'da, 1188, i.e. 1775.² Colonel Miles has, however, published a translation of the inscription on his tombstone, where he is said to have died on the 19th Muḥarram, 1198, i.e. 1783. There can be no doubt as to which is the more reliable. Mr. Said Ruete accepts this date and it is confirmed by the anonymous history in the British Museum already cited.³

C. F. BECKINGHAM.

¹ L. Lockhart, *Nadir Shah*, p. 219.

² *Vide* p. 188 of Badger's translation. C.U.L. MSS. Add. 2892, fol. 173 recto.

³ B.M. MSS. Add. 23, 343, fol. 171 recto.