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Competing Sovereignties in Eighteenth-Century South Asia: Afghan Claims to Kingship

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Abstract

Ahmad Shah Abdali-Durrani's court chronicle, *Ta'rīkh-i Aḥmad Shāhī*, written by Mahmud bin Ibrahim al-Husaini and completed soon after Ahmad Shah's death in 1772, provides an eighteenth-century perspective on the criterion for kingship and sovereignty. Unsurprisingly, the only person who fulfills these requirements, according to the historian, is Ahmad Shah. While this is standard practice in most Persianate and Islamic histories about a king, the text deviates from a number of other literary conventions. The historian deemphasizes Ahmad Shah's genealogy and connection to Sufi saints; instead, he focuses on Ahmad Shah's inner piety and morality by attributing to him the concept of *ilhām* (direct revelation from God)—an attribute more generally characteristic of prophets and saints, not kings. The double move of deemphasizing lineage and Sufi connection while privileging personal, God-bestowed attributes is sharpened through comparison: Mughal governors and emperors are depicted by the author as descendants of noble, dynastic genealogies, but govern incompetently because they do not have the clarity of vision and fate of victory on their side, as God has not bestowed them with *ilhām*.

Keyword

sovereignty – Afghans – eighteenth century – Mughals – Ahmad Shah Abdali-Durrani

Introduction

Ahmad Shah Abdali-Durrani's (hereafter Ahmad Shah, d. 1772) court chronicle, *Ta'rīkh-i Aḥmad Shāhī*, is one of the many "scaffolds"[1] that Ahmad Shah commissioned to legitimize his succession after Nadir Shah Afshar's assassination in 1747. In addition to the court chronicle, Ahmad Shah patronized art, poetry, and architecture; built new trade routes and trade-centers; minted coins and had the Friday sermon recited in his name; and participated in courtly ritual and culture that included hosting guests and diplomats with large feasts, gift-giving, organizing hunting expeditions, and ornate processional ceremonies.[2] In 1754, Ahmad Shah assigned Mahmud al-Husaini al-Munshi bin Ibrahim al-Jami (hereafter al-Husaini) to compose the *Ta'rīkh-i Aḥmad Shāhī*; al-Husaini would continue work on this history until Ahmad Shah's death in 1772.

At first glance, the *Ta'rīkh-i Aḥmad Shāhī* follows early modern Persianate and Islamic conventions of historiography. It is organized by regnal year, centered on the king, and documents historical events that highlight the king's victories. A closer examination, however, reveals that the history deviates from Persianate and Islamic conventions in the way its author legitimates Ahmad Shah's claim to sovereignty. The historiographical convention is to highlight the king's noble birth, his genealogy, and connections to Sufi saints. Al-Husaini, on the other hand, pays little attention to these signs of kingship. Instead, he attributes religious qualities and characteristics to Ahmad Shah that are usually reserved for prophets and saints. In particular, al-Husaini depicts Ahmad Shah as the recipient of *ilhām*, direct revelation/inspiration from God. Al-Husaini describes Ahmad Shah, who receives direct revelation/inspiration from God, as embodying supernatural abilities that become visible when the natural environment conforms to his wishes. For example, discussed in detail below, in Ahmad Shah's presence, flowers bloom and mighty rivers recede. Through

1 Z. Ben-Dor Benite, S. Geroulanos, and N. Jerr (ed.), *The Scaffolding of Sovereignty: Global and Aesthetic Perspectives on the History of a Concept* (New York, NY: New York University, 2017).

2 G. Singh, *Ahmad Shah Durrani: Father of Modern Afghanistan* (London: Asia Publishing House, 1959); J.J Gommans, *The Rise of the Indo-Afghan Empire: C. 1710-1780* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999); C. Noelle-Karimi, *The Pearl in Its Midst: Herat and the Mapping of Khurasan (15th-19th Centuries)* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2014); C. Noelle-Karimi, "Afghan Polities and the Indo-Persian Literary Realm." In *Afghan History through Afghan Eyes*, ed. Nile Green (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016); S. Nejatie, "The Pearl of Pearls: The Abdālī-Durrānī Confederacy and Its Transformation under Ahmad Shāh, Durr-i Durrān" (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2017); W. Ziad, "Transporting Knowledge in the Durrani Empire: Two Manuals of Naqshbandi-Mujaddidi Sufi Practice." In *Afghanistan's Islam: From Conversion to the Taliban*, ed. Nile Green (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017): 105-26.

ilhām, Ahmad Shah has foresight to win battles and govern efficiently. The Mughals, according to the author, lack this favor from God, which is visible to the outsider because of internal Mughal dissent, civil wars, and defeat. The requirement of visible signs of God's favor is not unique in theories of Islamic kingship, but it is usually not the sole criterion upon which someone claims legitimacy, as in the case of Ahmad Shah's court chronicle.

After the fall of the Abbasid empire, and especially from the sixteenth century onwards, God's favor upon a ruler took on mystical language and notions.[3] This coincided with the expansion of Muslim societies outside of the Arabian Peninsula. New formulas were required for legitimizing sovereignty to would-be kings and emperors who could not claim an Arab ethnic identity or trace their family lineage back to Prophet Muhammad or the first four "rightly-guided" caliphs.[4] For the Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals, two factors were key requirements for legitimate kingship: the first was descent from an established genealogy and the second was Sufi rhetoric, imagery, and vocabulary to describe the king as the friend of God, the shadow of God, the deputy of God, and so on. Kings were portrayed as the cosmic center or pole, *qutb*, and the inheritor of the Prophet's authority and charisma.[5] Acceptable genealogies shifted from the families of the first four caliphs, claimed by the Umayyads, Abbasids, Fatimids, to the house of Osman, or house of Gukān claimed by the Ottomans and Mughals, respectively.[6] Descent from Prophet Muhammad's family continued to be legitimate, and this was claimed by the Safavids.

Fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Lodi and Sur Afghan rulers in Hindustan claimed sovereignty in manners similar to kings who came before them. These Afghan rulers performed courtly rituals, their names and titles were minted on coins recited in the Friday sermon, they engaged in diplomacy, gift-giving, warfare, and taxation—following the cultural and political norms of the time.[7] They commissioned Afghan histories and genealogies in Persian of Afghan origins and important Afghan leaders, which were composed in Hindustan, Indus

3 H. Yilmaz, *Caliphate Redefined: The Mystical Turn in Ottoman Political Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018): 1-3.

4 Ibid.: 2. The four "rightly-guided" caliphs are: Abu Bakr (d. 634): Umar ibn al-Khattab (d. 644): Uthman ibn Affan (d. 656): and Ali ibn Abi Talib (d. 661).

5 A. Al-Azmeh, *Muslim Kingship: Power and the Sacred in Muslim, Christian and Pagan Polities* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2001): 36, 77.

6 Gukān means "son-in-law." Timur assumed this honorific title after marrying into the family of Genghis Khan (d. 1227). See Babur, *The Baburnama: Memoirs of Babur, Prince and Emperor*, trans. W.M. Thackston (New York, NY: Modern Library, 2002): 30; Yilmaz, *Caliphate Redefined*: 4.

7 R. Aquil, *Sufism, culture, and politics: Afghans and Islam in medieval North India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007): 8.

valley and north India specifically, where they lived and governed.[8] These texts included long and elaborate genealogies and hagiographies that incorporated Sufi saints who may or may not have been affiliated with Afghan genealogies.[9] Although the Lodis and Surs did not trace a genealogy back to the house of Osman, Gukān or Prophet Muhammad, they projected an even nobler lineage: *banī isrā'īl*, people of Israel, hinting at a long-standing monotheistic worldview.[10] These histories and genealogies further stipulate that they accepted Islam during Prophet Muhammad's lifetime and eventually moved east with the mission to spread the word of Islam.[11] The Persian texts are replete with supernatural miracles and anecdotes that transcend human reason, but serve as tools to legitimize authority. Indeed, these were foundational texts early modern Afghans used to articulate their identity in Hindustan through genealogy, hagiography, and proximity to Sufi saints.[12]

Similar invocations to the supernatural continued into the eighteenth century. Al-Husaini, the author of the *Ta'rīkh-i Aḥmad Shāhī*, chooses to depict Ahmad Shah as a source for supernatural powers, but does not base his history on previous Persianate Afghan historiography. Specifically, in Ahmad Shah's court chronicle, there are no origin stories of the Afghans, and genealogies and connections to Sufi saints are downplayed. Rather than relying on established criterion, al-Husaini privileges one criteria over all others: God's favor upon Ahmad Shah—the legitimate sovereign—manifested through harmony with the environment, military success, and visible justice.

Ahmad Shah was one of many successors after Nadir Shah Afshar's assassination in 1747. Sadozai Afghans gathered and appointed Ahmad Shah as the new sovereign. Ahmad Shah participated in Turco-Mongol and Persianate customs and norms of kingship—some of which were established centuries earlier—and were emulated by his predecessor Nadir Shah Afshar and neighboring Ottoman and Mughal rulers. These included the above-mentioned courtly practices and rituals, and commissioning histories that documented courtly life and campaigns of the king, in a chronological manner, and hiring

8 The Lodis were part of the Delhi sultanate and ruled over north India. The Surs expanded their territories and added the Indus river and surrounding areas to the north Indian plains.

9 R. Aquil, "Reconsidering Sovereignty and Governance Under the Afghans: North India in the Late Fifteenth and Early Sixteenth Centuries." *Journal of South Asian Studies* 26/1 (2003): 5-21; N. Green, "Tribe, Diaspora, and Sainthood in Afghan History." *Journal of Asian Studies* 67/1 (2008): pp.171-212.

10 N. Allah and B. Dorn, *History of the Afghans: Translated from the Persian of Neamet Ullah* (London: Printed for the Oriental translation Fund of Great Britain and Ireland, 1836): 10.

11 Ibid.: 37-38.

12 Green, "Tribe, Diaspora, and Sainthood in Afghan History": 172.

court poets to render his campaigns into poetry. Four years into his reign, Ahmad Shah's territories expanded in Hindustan and came to incorporate Lahore and Multan. A treaty to this effect was written between Ahmad Shah and Muin al-Mulk (d. 1753), governor of Lahore, in 1751, and was ratified by the Mughal emperor Ahmad Shah Bahadur (d. 1775, r. 1748-1754). The treaty further stipulated that Muin al-Mulk would continue to act as governor, and while the internal administration of Lahore and Multan was to remain as it had been, the excess revenues were to be sent to Ahmad Shah. Only questions of the highest importance were to be sent to Ahmad Shah for response.[13] Soon after, Kashmir was further included. The annexation of Kashmir was ratified in 1757, between Ahmad Shah and Alamgir II (d. 1759, r. 1754-59).[14] With each successful campaign, Ahmad Shah and his troops acquired much wealth, weapons, and goods.[15]

Ahmad Shah's success reached its peak in 1761 with the decisive victory at Panipat against the Marathas. Ahmad Shah's territories included Nishapur to the west, Balkh and Kabul to the north (to the river Oxus), Panipat and Sirhind to the east, and the Indian Ocean to the south. Ahmad Shah began losing control over Lahore in the mid-1760s. While Ahmad Shah was not able to displace the Sikhs from Lahore and other parts of Punjab, he successfully kept the Marathas at bay. After his death, Durrani territories shrunk further, but the two capital cities, Qandahar and Kabul, along with Herat, Peshawar, Dera Ghazi Khan, Dera Ismail Khan, and Multan remained under Afghan jurisdiction until the mid-nineteenth century. Eventually, the remaining territories were lost between the Barakzai Afghan Dost Muhammad Khan, Sikhs, and the British. During his twenty-five-year reign, Ahmad Shah relocated architects and builders to construct new mosques, caravanserais, gardens, and forts; and founded new cities and trade routes, such as Shikarpur—other "scaffolds" of sovereignty. The editors of the recently published edited volume *Scaffolding of Sovereignty* explain:

> By "the scaffolding of sovereignty" we mean that sovereignty is established and maintained as much by aesthetic, artistic, theatrical, and symbolic structures as by political claims over everyday life, war and peace,

13 Singh, *Ahmad Shah Durrani: Father of Modern Afghanistan*: 121; Mahmud bin Ibrahim al-Husaini, *Tārīkh-i Aḥmad Shāhī: Tārīkh-i Tashkīl Awwalīn Hukūmat Afghānistān*, ed. Ghulam Husain Zargarinezhad (Tehran: University of Tehran Press, 2005): 224.

14 Noelle-Karimi, *The Pearl in Its Midst: Herat and the Mapping of Khurasan (15th-19th Centuries)*: 101.

15 Ibid.: 113; J. Sarkar, *Fall of the Mughal Empire.*, vol. II, 1754-1771 (Calcutta: M.C. Sarkar & Sons, LD., 1934): 74-75.

> and life and death; sovereignty is mutable and fragile, requiring continual care and support; sovereignty is overpowering in the instant, yet never once and for all; sovereignty is defined by the rulers yet also by the ruled, the producers and the consumers of propaganda; sovereignty is a practice that not only colors but carves, defining the experience of space and time; sovereignty is at once inflected by theological problems and influential on religious belief; sovereignty is a subject of—and also a tool for—genealogical investigation; and insofar as sovereignty is a promise, it is, for the future of polities, a poisoned promise.[16]

The editors of *The Scaffolding of Sovereignty* further emphasize the need to analyze the aesthetics of representation found in literary forms.[17] This article takes seriously the idea of scaffolding sovereignty as it applies to an understudied and untranslated court chronicle—the *Ta'rīkh-i Aḥmad Shāhī*.[18] Safavid and Mughal historians have noted how the founders of these respective empires established their sovereign claims through these kinds of scaffolds required in legitimizing claims to sovereignty. Colin Mitchell, for example, describes how the Safavids invoked Pre-Islamic Persian empires, Abrahamic Prophetic tradition, Imami hagiography, and Turco-Mongolian elements to legitimize their claims in a variegated manner.[19]

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16 Ben-Dor Benite, Geroulanos, and Jerr, *The Scaffolding of Sovereignty*: 3.

17 Ibid.

18 The history has not been translated into English, not even in part. It has been critically edited, which is what I have used for this article. For a brief discussion of the manuscripts available and details of the extant full manuscript of the history in Saint Petersburg, see A. Tarzi, "Tarikh-i Ahmad Shahi: The First History of 'Afghanistan'." In *Afghan History through Afghan Eyes*, ed. N. Green (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016): 81. Amin Tarzi's chapter on the *Ta'rīkh-i Aḥmad Shāhī* provides a basic summary and outline of the history. The *Ta'rīkh-i Aḥmad Shāhī* has been read and incorporated in scholarly research by a handful of scholars. Christine Noelle-Karimi's detailed and erudite chapter in the same edited volume as Tarzi's compares the two court chronicles of Ahmad Shah: the *Ta'rīkh-i Aḥmad Shāhī*, written by Mahmud al-Husaini and completed soon after Ahmad Shah's death; and Imam al-Din Husaini's *Ta'rīkh-i Husain Shāhī* or *Tawārīkh-i Aḥmad Shāhī*, written in the late eighteenth century (at least two decades after Ahmad Shah's death). Sajjad Netjatie's doctoral dissertation provides a comprehensive placement of the chronicle vis-à-vis Durrani sources. Nejatie, "The Pearl of Pearls." Other scholars have used the the *Tārīkh-i Aḥmad Shāhī* as a reference for dates, events, and reconciling information mined from other sources. See Singh, *Ahmad Shah Durrani: Father of Modern Afghanistan*; Gommans, *The Rise of the Indo-Afghan Empire*.

19 C.P. Mitchell, *The Practice of Politics in Safavid Iran: Power, Religion and Rhetoric* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012): 4-5.

One way in which emerging emperors positioned themselves as sovereigns was through their use of epistolary rhetoric.[20] Ahmad Shah Durrani was no exception. In his monograph on the Indo-Afghan empire, Gommans studies a letter written to the Ottoman emperor, who is referred to as "brother" by the Durrani emperor Ahmad Shah. Gommans writes, "In the letter Ahmad Shah clearly disassociates himself from Nadir Shah, whom he calls a tyrant (*sitamgār*) and whose rule he qualifies accordingly as one of tyranny (*zulm*), oppression and injustice (*ta'addi wa jaur*)." He continues:

> The divine character of the Durrani mission also finds reflection in a visit by the "ever-flying" bird Huma. Following an ancient Persian kingship tradition, the shadow of this epic bird falling on Ahmad Shah's head predicted his elevation to royalty. From this moment on he was turned into the "king of the seven climes" (*farman-rawa'i-yi haft iqlim*) invested with a Godly mission to restore the sultanates of Iran, Hind and Turkistan. In this heavenly task he situated himself in the tradition of the early associates of the Prophet and the first rightly-guided caliphs. It was because of the lack of a strong *pādshāh*, he judged, that the conditions of the temporal government had fallen to such an utterly low level and chaos prevailed everywhere. Hence his religious and temporal scenario was aimed at the restoration of legitimate rule and the punishment of dissenters, not only in Iran but throughout all the sultanates of Iran, Hind and Turkistan.[21]

In this letter, Ahmad Shah invokes a Persian past, the Prophet Muhammad, and his early companions, very much like the Safavids. Ahmad Shah disassociates himself from Nadir Shah when writing to the Ottoman caliph; and yet, he relies on the logic of restoring peace and justice in Iran, as Nadir Shah's historians used to justify his rule. The question of audience is important here. To the Ottomans, Ahmad Shah was required to distance himself, but to the Mughals in Hindustan, he positioned himself as Nadir Shah's rightful successor.[22] For

20 Mitchell, *The Practice of Politics in Safavid Iran: Power, Religion and Rhetoric*: 16; Al-Azmeh, *Muslim Kingship*: 89.

21 J.J. Gommans, *The Rise of the Indo-Afghan Empire: c. 1710-1780* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999): 49-51.

22 Noelle-Karimi, "Afghan Polities and the Indo-Persian Literary Realm": 69-71. Noelle-Karimi notes that Imam al-Din Husaini, a nineteenth-century historian who composed a history of Ahmad Shah's reign, that it was Nadir Shah who "detected signs of future greatness" in Ahmad Shah. Imam al-Din Husaini describes in great detail Ahmad Shah's proximity to Nadir Shah during his army service. Husaini adds that the Sufi saint, Sabir Khan, informed Ahmad Shah three years prior to Nadir Shah's assassination that Ahmad Shah would succeed Nadir Shah.

example, Ahmad Shah sent envoys to the Mughal court to transfer the treaty signed between Nadir Shah and Muhammad Shah in 1739 to Ahmad Shah, as he succeeded Nadir Shah .[23]

Epistles allow for specification with a very targeted audience in mind. Through letters, Ahmad Shah presented himself in close proximity or in great distance to Nadir Shah. A court chronicle, on the other hand, could, theoretically, be read by anyone who had access to it—or could get access to it long after it was written. It was, therefore, the author's task to write about Ahmad Shah in a more generalized and universal way that legitimized his political ambitions to those who surrounded him or visited him—and to future audiences.

In the chronicle, al-Husaini describes how he was hired to undertake the task of chronicler. According to his account, Ahmad Shah sought a historian to record his life and campaigns after he secured Khurasan in 1754.[24] Ahmad Shah asked a man named Muhammad Taqi Khan (d. unknown) to search for a *munshī* (author, scribe, prose composer) who could write a history in the same manner as Mirza Mahdi Kaukabi Khan Astarabadi's (d. unknown) *Ta'rīkh-i Nādir Shāhī*, also known as *Jahāngushā-i Nādirī*, Nadir Shah Afshar's court chronicle.[25] Muhammad Taqi Khan recommended al-Husaini because he had spent time with Astarabadi and was familiar with his style of history-writing.[26] The events recorded by al-Husaini prior to 1754 required gathering

23 al-Husaini, *Ta 'rīkh-i Ahmad Shāhī*: 88.

24 Ibid.: 50-51; Noelle-Karimi, "Afghan Polities and the Indo-Persian Literary Realm": 55; Amin Tarzi, "Tarikh-i Ahmad Shahi": 82.

25 al-Husaini, *Ta'rīkh-i Ahmad Shāhī*: 50-51. The *Ta'rīkh-i Nādir Shāhī* was actually completed after Ahmad Shah's death, and three decades after Nadir Shah's assassination, but parts of it were probably in circulation, and it is also possible that Ahmad Shah was in attendance when selections were read out loud in court settings. Noelle-Karimi, "Afghan Polities and the Indo-Persian Literary Realm": 56. Lawrence Lockhart writes that Astarabadi included more text after Nadir Shah's assassination that included his change in character after Nadir Shah had his first son blinded, and the last few years of his rule, which were more tyrannical. L. Lockhart, *Nadir Shah: A Critical Study Based Mainly upon Contemporary Sources*, (London: Luzac, 1938): 295-96.

26 al-Husaini, *Tārīkh-i Ahmad Shāhī*: 51; Noelle-Karimi, "Afghan Polities and the Indo-Persian Literary Realm": 56. Karimi's translation: "In the Turkish year of the dog, equivalent to the Hijri year of 1167, when the province of Mashhad was conquered by the strikes of the swords of the glorious lion-like fighters (ghazis) … the aforementioned Taqi Khan, who had some previous acquaintance with this poor and humble person, submitted [the following recommendation] to the courtiers of the royal throne, 'The munshi Mahmud al-Husaini, son of Ibrahim of Jam, who, because of strokes of fate, has withdrawn from the world …, has spent some time with Mirza Mahdi Khan, the author of the *Tarikh-i Nadiri* … He has adopted the latter's subtlety and phraseology, indeed, he describes the subject matter better and more lively. When it comes to argumentation, he shows unique talent.'" It should be noted that the *hijri* year given in Zargarinijhad's edited text is 1766.

information from informants and/or reading accounts preserved by fellow record keepers. After 1754, the author includes extracts and complete copies of letters or decrees sent between Ahmad Shah and others, including the Mughals. Al-Husaini completed the Abdali-Durrani court history shortly after his patron's death in 1772.

Contemporary Persianate histories about Afghan elites and local rulers during the eighteenth century in north India, such as Hafiz Rahmat Khan's (d. 1774) *Tawārīkh-i Hāfiz Rahmat Khānī*, a history of the Afghans in Rohilkhand, written in Pashto with a Persian introduction, follows the conventions of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in that it also emphasizes genealogical claims and connections to Sufi saints, whether Afghan or not.[27] Imam al-Din Husaini composed a Durrani history in the late eighteenth century. Ahmad Shah's grandson, Shah Zaman (d. 1801), commissioned the history and it is referred to as both *Ta'rīkh-i Husain Shāhī* and *Tawārīkh-i Aḥmad Shāhī*. This history reads less like a chronicle because of its emphases on Afghan genealogies and hagiographies of Sufi saints. The author dedicates the Durrani history to the Chishti Sufi Saint, Khwaja Abu Muhsin Husayn Chishti.[28] Imam al-Din Husaini's history follows the conventions of Persianate Afghan historiography in Hindustan; for example, it mirrors Nimat Allah ibn Habib Allah Harawi's *Ta'rīkh-i Khān Jahānī wa Makhzan-i Afghānī*, composed in the early seventeenth century, and commissioned by Khan Jahan Lodi (d. 1631). This is the earliest extant account of Afghan origin stories and historical figures. It is upon this genealogical history that Imam al-Din Husaini legitimizes Ahmad Shah's kingship and inherently ties his family to the Chishti Sufi *ṭarīqa* (order, path, community).[29] Indeed, in this account the Sufi shaikh Sabir Shah informs Nadir Shah that Ahmad Shah will succeed him, three years before Nadir Shah's death.[30]

Early modern Afghan histories that focus primarily on genealogies led some colonial writers, such as Mountstuart Elphinstone and Charles Hamilton, and post-colonial scholars, including anthropologists, to read Afghans as primarily "tribal."[31] Colonial and postcolonial historians view Afghan sovereignty as

27 Green, "Tribe, Diaspora, and Sainthood in Afghan History": 172. Green's article focuses on "Pashtun tribes," and he defines Pashtun as equivalent to Afghan, and thus it includes Ahmad Shah Abdali who was part of the Sadozai lineage. The Sadozais resided in Multan from the seventeenth century: the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan (d. 1666) bestowed a land grant to the Sadozai leader, Shah Hussain Khan, in 1649.

28 Noelle-Karimi, "Afghan Polities and the Indo-Persian Literary Realm": 66. This text contains a collection of letters as an appendix, added later at the urging of the Sufi master.

29 Ibid.: 67-69.

30 Ibid.: 70.

31 M. Elphinstone, *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul, and Its Dependencies, in Persia, Tartary, and India: A View of the Afghaun Nation, and a History of the Dooraunee*

shared sovereignty, among the tribe, instead of as a hierarchy, with the king at the central and highest position, similar to the Mughals. Fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Afghan rulers such as Sikander Lodi (d. 1517) or Sher Shah Sur (d. 1545), according to these scholars, were unable to claim sovereignty for themselves and opted to share political authority—including the throne—and the royal treasury through shared governance.[32] Scholarly work produced in the last two decades troubles this logic and clearly demonstrates the blinders these faulty assumptions place on our view of the past. Ahmad Shah's court chronicle provides an example of articulating from the Afghan perspective of what sovereignty ought to be.

In the *Ta'rīkh-i Aḥmad Shāhī*, al-Husaini does not dwell on Ahmad Shah's lineage, nor on other Afghan genealogies. Further, he mentions only one Sufi saint, Sabir Khan, who played a critical role as Ahmad Shah's advocate to the throne, but otherwise whose role is downplayed in the chronicle.[33] Additionally, the author does not mention Ahmad Shah's affiliation to a Sufi *ṭarīqa*; whereas, other sources mention his close affiliation with the Mujaddidī-Naqshbandī and/or Chishti Sufi *ṭarīqa*.[34] Al-Husaini emphasizes Ahmad Shah as the one who is closest to God—not the Sufi saint upon whom political rulers historically relied upon to bolster their claims to sovereignty, but the one who himself

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Monarchy … (London: R. Bentley, 1839); C. Hamilton, *An Historical Relation of the Origin, Progress, and Final Dissolution of the Government of the Rohilla Afgans, in the Northern Provinces of Hindostan.: Compiled from a Persian Manuscript and Other Original Papers* (London: Printed for J. Debrett, 1788); F. Barth (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (Long Grove: Waveland Press, 2006); Green, "Tribe, Diaspora, and Sainthood in Afghan History."

32 Aquil, *Sufism, Culture, and Politics*: 7-8. Aquil questions the assumptions made by countless historians that the fifteenth and sixteenth century rulers of Hindustan were "anarchic" and crisis their lack of ability to govern generated perversion and immorality, whilst it emboldened Sufis to seek political prominence. The oft repeated anecdote recorded in Muhammad Kabir's account, *Afsāna-i Shāhān*, that the Afghan Lodi ruler instructed that his throne be so large that it should accommodate him and his brothers is one of many stories that historians have used to justify their readings of Afghans as unable to govern in a hierarchical manner.

33 al-Husaini, *Ta'rīkh-i Ahmad Shāhī*: 67.The Sufi saint appears one more time, p. 98, in the role of mediator between Ahmad Shah and local governor of Punjab, Shah Nawaz Khan. In the second instance, as discussed later in the article, he is killed during his mediating mission.

34 For sources about Ahmad Shah Abdali that are inclined towards Sufism, see Nejatie, "The Pearl of Pearls": 74, 341-46. Imam al-Din Husaini Chishti's history of Ahmad Shah, composed in the nineteenth century and commissioned by Shah Zaman Durrani (r. 1793-1801) includes a longer genealogy and associates the Abdalis with the Chishti Sufi *ṭarīqa*, see Noelle-Karimi, "Afghan Polities and the Indo-Persian Literary Realm": 17; Nejatie, "The Pearl of Pearls": 89-90.

had foresight to predict worldly outcomes, and whose supernatural powers perfectly aligned with nature, even to the point of bending to his will, as described in an anecdote below.

While the author does not follow the two important features of genealogy and claiming Sufi connections that are present in early modern Afghan historiography, he does borrow from Astarabadi's court history of Nadir Shah.[35] Similarities between Astarabadi's history of Nadir Shah and al-Husaini's history of Ahmad Shah includes shared language and diction.[36] Like Astarabadi, al-Husaini describes the sovereign he serves as *khurshīd-kulāh* ("sun-like hat") and *khaqān* ("emperor"); similarly, al-Husaini calls his army *īl-i jalīl durrānī* ("glorious Durrani troops"), echoing how Astarabadi calls Nadir Shah's troops *īl-i jalīl turcomān* ("glorious Turcoman troops"). Like most Persianate histories, the text is interspersed with poetry; however, the author adds his own stylistic feature: sometimes the poetry summarizes the prose that comes before it, and other times it foreshadows the prose that follows. Quranic *āyah*s (verses) and lines of poetry from famous Shirazi poets, including Saadi (d. 1291) and Hafiz (d. 1390) ornament the text, but are inserted when contextually relevant. The rhythmic pattern of the writing style suggests that the text was read aloud, and the text comes to life when a battle scene unfolds through these metered rhythms. The author's use of anthropomorphisms further livens the text. A cannon is described as being "life-taking" and its cannon ball "turns cold" the warm blood of a man.[37] At times he includes some wit and sarcasm, perhaps to keep the reader/listener's attention. For example, he describes how lions and panthers turn yellow when they witness Ahmad Shah's army in battle—the army is so skilled that lions and panthers lose their liver function due to shock.[38] Scandal, rumor, battle scenes, and enticing story-telling keep the history moving forward, and one can easily understand what values are important to the author, he does not filter his criticisms or judgments of historical figures. Al-Husaini leans heavily on these aesthetic and theatrical accounts of scandal, rumor, and battle scenes to "scaffold" sovereignty. In particular, al-Husaini privileges ideas of divine intervention and the rhetoric of being chosen and sustained by God, whilst not ignoring the contested and negotiated nature of his sovereignty.

35 For a brief discussion of how this text follows Nadirid historiography see Noelle-Karimi, "Afghan Polities and the Indo-Persian Literary Realm": 65.

36 For an overview of these similarities, ibid.

37 al-Husaini, *Ta'rīkh-i Ahmad Shāhī*, 108.

38 Ibid.: 104.

1 *Ilhām*, Sovereignty, Inclusion, and Exclusion

Al-Husaini determines that Ahmad Shah succeeded as a just, world-conquering ruler through *ilhām*, direct inspiration or revelation from God/the unknown, unseen. This meant that Ahmad Shah was able to foretell what would occur and with a clear mind, he was able quickly to make (correct) decisions, including how to carry out justice. Externally, this was manifested, according to the author, by the harmonious alignment of his intention and his success.

The author refers to Ahmad Shah by a referential, an epithet, or formal title, usually shortened—never his name. The most common title for the section headings is the Turco-Mongol word, *khāqān*, meaning emperor or king. The title *khāqān* was used by Gengiz Khan, Timur, and Nadir Shah. The apparatus of sovereign, through titles and their reception, is maintained by the author, even though the internal evidence required to justify a concerted effort to associate Ahmad Shah with the above-mentioned three "world-conquerors" is weak. Al-Husaini does not describe Ahmad Shah physically; rather, he provides examples of Ahmad Shah's virtuous inner qualities. Ahmad Shah was aligned with and inspired by the divine. This internal connection with God, through *ilhām*, direct inspiration of God to an individual, was the source for Ahmad Shah's likeness to the sun (*khurshīd*), which radiates light incessantly.[39] Other words like *nūr*, *anwār*, *lāmi'*, all meaning light, radiating light, brightness, are associated with Ahmad Shah when the author describes his actions, thoughts, or characteristics.[40]

The author provides a terse three lines about Ahmad Shah's heritage: he was from the Sadozai family, and the Sadozais politically allied with the Turks, the family of Osman (Ottoman dynasty), and the Mughals.[41] According to the author, Ahmad Shah inherited nobility from his father and grandfather and after his ascension, he was guided by the unseen divine (God).[42] There is no description of his early years, and no mention of premonitions or astrological readings that he would one day become an emperor.[43] Al-Husani omits Ahmad Shah's

39 Ibid.: 71.

40 Astarabadi also uses words associated with light to describe Nadir Shah, but he does not connect those association with saintliness or piety. Sajjad Nejatie argues that the use of the light metaphor indicates Suhrawardi's philosophical theory of illuminationist thought through the writings of Jalal al-Din Muhammad Dawani's *Akhlāq-i Jalālī*. See Nejatie, "The Pearl of Pearls": 350-53.

41 Singh, *Ahmad Shah Durrani: Father of Modern Afghanistan*: 55.

42 al-Husaini, *Ta'rīkh-i Ahmad Shāhī*: 55.

43 This is in contrast to Kazim Marvi's history of Nadir Shah and Imam al-Husaini's history of Ahmad Shah Abdali completed at the end of the 18th century. See E. Tucker, "Explaining Nadir Shah: Kingship and Royal Legitimacy in Muhammad Kazim Marvi's "Tārīkh-i

familial connections in Multan and other parts of Hindustan. The selection and coronation of Ahmad Shah as the new emperor took place in Qandahar in July 1747, mere weeks after Nadir Shah's assassination on June 19, 1747. The Sadozais hastily assembled to appoint a new leader, and when invited to assume authority, Ahmad Shah declined (perhaps to project humility), despite his noble Sadozai birth.[44] The Sufi saint, Sabir Khan, who was also a recipient of *ilhām*, intervened and appointed him the new leader by placing a green plant as a *jīgha* (ornament) on the corner of his turban.[45] Almonds and other sweets were distributed to those present. They paid homage to the newly appointed leader and in return were given robes of honor and money as a sign of good tidings.[46]

The author moves quickly to the first few months after his coronation. In this short period of time, Ahmad Shah was verified as the rightful God-ordained emperor because he effectively defeated conspirators from within and without the Durrani faction. That very summer of Ahmad Shah's coronation and Nadir Shah's assassination, Nadir Shah's appointed *sūbadār* (governor) of Kabul, Nasir Khan, unaware that Nadir Shah had been murdered, was on his way to Nadir Shah's camp in order to pay the revenues that had been agreed upon by Nadir Shah and the Mughal emperor Muhammad Shah after the sacking of Delhi in 1739. When Nasir Khan reached Qandahar, he learned about Nadir Shah's assassination and attempted to hide with the help of the *sūbadār* of Qandahar

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ʿālam-ārā-yi Nādirī"." *Iranian Studies* 26/1-2 (1993): 95-117 (104); Noelle-Karimi, "Afghan Polities and the Indo-Persian Literary Realm": 67.

44 al-Husaini, *Taʾrīkh-i Ahmad Shāhī*: 68. This is markedly different from Nadir Shah's coronation ceremony that followed the Turkoman convention of a *qurultai* (assembly of chiefs to appoint a new ruler). Nadir Shah took the crown at Mughan in 1736. Whilst performing humility and reticence, it was quite clear to all present—all the nobles from throughout Safavid territories, even some nobles from Thatta—that Nadir Shah was after the crown. When two nobles indicated their hesitancy, Nadir Shah's spies reported this news back to him. The two were immediately executed, thus sending a very clear message to the rest of the nobles who were present that anyone who would dare protest the coronation would be met with a similar fate. After this, Nadir Shah was crowned the new emperor of Iran, and the *khutba* (Friday sermon) and *sikka* (coins) were recited and minted in his name. See Lockhart, *Nadir Shah*; W.M. Floor, *The Rise and Fall of Nader Shah: Dutch East India Company Reports, 1730-1747* (Washington, D.C.: Mage Publishers, 2009); J. Fraser, *The History of Nadir Shah, Formerly Called Thomas Kuli Khan, the Present Emperor of Persia* (London: Printed by W. Strahan for the author., 1742).

45 al-Husaini, *Taʾrīkh-i Ahmad Shāhī*: 67. Al-Husaini writes that the Sufi saint Sabir was one of the recipients of knowledge and inspiration from the hidden world: *bi-ilhām-i mulhamān-i ghaybī*.

46 Ibid.: 69.

who was also appointed by Nadir Shah, Nur Muhammad Khan Alizai.[47] Nur Muhammad Khan Alizai was unhappy with Ahmad Shah's appointment and plotted to kill Ahmad Shah with two more conspirators, who had recently been promoted by the newly ascended emperor. The author describes how strategically and cleverly they planned their attack, and yet, because Ahmad Shah's fate as sovereign was divinely ordained, they were defeated.[48] Ahmad Shah punished the traitors and commandeered the tributes intended for Nadir Shah from Nasir Khan.

The religious language that accompanies the description of events is noteworthy; in fact, al-Husaini includes two Quranic *āyah*s (7:185 and 7:186). The first of these verses is rhetorical and asks, do these people not look to the heavens and think that their deaths are near? The second verse states that there is no guide for those whom God has led astray. According to al-Husaini, the people who went against years of loyal service were "immoral and they destroyed the foundation of their being, they ruined themselves."[49] In a sense, they authored their own fate. After this incident, as sovereign, Ahmad Shah had the right to punish or pardon those who rebelled against him, and he sentenced the first set of Durranis who rebelled against him, including Nur Muhammad Khan Alizai, to death by way of elephant trampling.[50] The author reassures the reader/listener that Ahmad Shah was just: indeed, one alleged conspirator was saved. The elephant that was meant to kill this unnamed man did not trample him; rather, the elephant used his trunk and flung the man to the Ahmad Shah's feet. While he might have made a mistake, initially, when he witnessed that the man had not been killed, Ahmad Shah saw the "truth in the matter of this man."[51] The author states that Ahmad Shah was aligned with God's divine power; and thus, he pardoned the alleged conspirator and spared his life.[52]

Al-Husaini devotes prose and poetry to describing this first internal struggle, about twelve pages from the published Persian text. Of the twelve pages, eight of them are devoted to describing the unhappy fate of the rebellious ones who conspired against Ahmad Shah. The prose, which precedes the poetry, relates the narrative whereas the poetry renders the same information in a

47 Nur Muhammad Alizai was also known as Abd al-Ghani Khan Alikzai, and he was the maternal uncle of Ahmad Shah Abdali, see C. Noelle-Karimi, *State and Tribe in Nineteenth-Century Afghanistan: The Reign of Amir Dost Muhammad Khan* (*1826-1863*). (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1997): 4.

48 al-Husaini, *Ta'rīkh-i Ahmad Shāhī*: 72.

49 Ibid.: 71.

50 Ibid.: 76.

51 Ibid.: 71.

52 Ibid.: 77.

higher register of oration. At the turning point of the narrative, the climax, the poetry comes before the prose and the poetry foreshadows what is about to happen, which is then rendered into prose. This climax is the moment when the listener/reader learns that Ahmad Shah will triumph over the two who betrayed his friendship. The logic of rendering this account in both prose and poetry, and for so many pages, further scaffolds claims to legitimacy very early in his reign.

For al-Husaini, the sovereign had to be aligned with and inspired by divine grace, and the only person in this text who consistently possessed *ilhām* was Ahmad Shah. The *ilhām* bestowed upon Ahmad Shah from God allowed him to take swift action, and this is especially true when the outcome was positive for him. He did not have to engage in time-consuming thought processes and consultations. Premonitions were clear in his mind; therefore, he did not worry about his enemy's army, especially the Mughals, that outnumbered his, or their ability to manipulate allies or strategically plan attacks.[53] That being said, not everyone was as enlightened as our author, and therefore, sovereignty was in fact constantly contested and negotiated. Consistently defeating his adversaries and succeeding in military campaigns proved that God's grace was upon Ahmad Shah. Rebels had to be appropriately punished as well. To the agitators whom Ahmad Shah deemed to be beyond help, he decreed the worst of all punishments, according to the author: obscurity. Those who fell into obscurity were either killed or relocated, but it would be impossible to verify their fate, carry out proper funeral rites, or visit their graves after their deaths.[54] In Hindustan, because of his innate goodness, Ahmad Shah pardoned some of his adversaries, if they were sincere in their repentance. The governor of Lahore Muin al-Mulk, for example, was pardoned twice. The second time, the author writes, Muin al-Mulk considered "submitting as an essential ingredient for happiness."[55] Acceptance and recognition of Ahmad Shah's sovereignty protected anyone who had attempted to rebel if they submitted to Ahmad Shah. Those who submitted would benefit in the physical world and in the hereafter.

In describing who is included and who is excluded and the implications of inclusion and exclusion, the author sets up multiple dichotomies, and they are clearly delineated. Those who were favored by God were the ones who accepted Ahmad Shah as their sovereign and submitted by paying obeisance. As a result, they were protected when they lived on the physical earth and would

53 Ibid.: 81.
54 Ibid.: 83.
55 Ibid.: 223.

be protected after they died. They would not be able to imagine the limitless grace and bounty that would be bestowed on them in both worlds. Those who did not submit to Ahmad Shah, they were the ignorant ones, led astray by God and themselves. They authored their own ruined fate, in worldly matters, and in the hereafter.

In contrast to Ahmad Shah, who was aligned with and guided by God through *ilhām*, his enemies were inspired by the devil (*waswās*) and led astray by God. Al-Husaini cites the Quranic *āyah*: "Those whom Allah sends astray, none can guide him; and Allah leaves them wandering blindly in their transgressions."[56] In their ignorance and arrogance, they resorted to trickery and deceit, leading others astray by manipulating them through monetary or other favors, as a hunter sets a trap for birds by throwing seeds.[57] Despite their machinations against Ahmad Shah, they were eventually defeated and subdued. Ultimately this was not merely a worldly war, it was the cosmic battle between good and evil, light and darkness, God and the devil.

2 Space and Sovereignty

Al-Husaini writes a lengthy anecdote about Ahmad Shah's first attempt to transfer the 1739 treaty between Mughal emperor Muhammad Shah (d. 1748) and Nadir Shah Afshar to Ahmad Shah. The treaty stipulated that the tributes from the lands west of the Indus river, from Kashmir and Tibet to the Indian Ocean, would be paid to Nadir Shah.[58] When Nasir Khan, who had been appointed governor of Peshawar by Nadir Shah in 1739, was detained by Ahmad Shah's soldiers, Nasir Khan quickly pledged his allegiance to him. Ahmad Shah permitted Nasir Khan to leave Qandahar and return to Kabul and instructed him to advise the Mughal emperor Muhammad Shah to transfer the treaty between the Mughal court and Nadir Shah to Ahmad Shah.

56 Ibid.: 73. Quran 7:186.

57 al-Husaini, *Ta'rīkh-i Ahmad Shāhī*: 73, 95.

58 According to Mahdi Khan Astarabadi's court chronicle of Nadir Shah Afshar, *Jahāngushā-yi Nādirī*, before leaving Hindustan, Nadir Shah restored Muhammad Shah to the throne as the rightful emperor of Hindustan in 1739. Muhammad Shah, in turn, allegedly insisted that Nadir Shah should take as a gift (*bi-rasm-i pīshkash ẓabṭ*) "the land between this side of the Attock river and the Sind river, from the border of Tibet and Kashmir until the river reaches the ocean, all of the space including the forts and ports." Astarabadi further notes that Kabul and Ghazni, "like much of the lands east and west of the Attock river," had been counted as part of Khurasan before. See Mahdi Khan Astarabadi, *Jahāngushā-yi Nādirī*, ed. Abd Allah Anwar (Tehran: Anjuman-i Asar va Mafakhir-i Farhangi, 1998): 333-34.

Before analyzing the lengthy anecdote, it is worth noting how ideas of sovereignty are constructed. In the brief summary above, we see that Muhammad Shah lost territory and revenues to Nadir Shah and Nasir Khan was forced to submit to Ahmad Shah and to serve as an envoy on Ahmad Shah's behalf to the Mughal court. Force, coercion, death were common methods of submission. But, as we read further, we see other layers or methods of submission and loyalty, which further scaffold sovereignty. These layers and methods reveal how sovereignty was accepted (or rejected), which go beyond force, coercion, or death. Moreover, we see how the text itself, as it was compiled and read out loud, and as an historical account meant to be read and studied well after its composition, constructs Ahmad Shah's legitimacy as a sovereign.

To return to the anecdote, upon reaching Kabul, writes al-Husaini, Nasir Khan re-pledged his allegiance to the Mughal emperor Muhammad Shah in Hindustan, and promised the Mughal emperor that the territories would return to the Mughal dominion if assistance was sent from the center.[59] With the approval of the Mughal court, Nasir Khan prepared to fight against Ahmad Shah and crossed the Indus river. As a way of outsmarting Ahmad Shah, Nasir Khan destroyed and sunk the boats he used. This cleverness on the part of Nasir Khan was no real obstacle for Ahmad Shah, according to al-Husaini, because Ahmad Shah was "divinely inspired and protected."[60] When Ahmad Shah and his troops reached the mighty Indus river, they searched for a way to ford it, without boats. Ahmad Shah's vanguard found a spot where the expansive river had lost its current and had divided itself into five small channels. Ahmad Shah commanded one of his "swift riders" cross it, noting the breadth and depth of the river. The rider carried out the order and reported back to Ahmad Shah. Ahmad Shah, still worried about the safety of his troops, ordered more of them to cross and further investigate if it would be safe for the entire group to ford the river. They too reported the breadth and depth of the river, and because the accounts agreed in their assessment, Ahmad Shah led on horseback and crossed the river, while the rest of his entourage and troops followed him. Upon seeing this, a merchant, unattached to Ahmad Shah, attempted to cross the river with all of his belongings, but he drowned immediately. When Ahmad Shah heard about this incident, he asked his spies to investigate and they learned that no one (historically or in the present) had

59 al-Husaini, *Ta'rīkh-i Ahmad Shāhī*: 88.

60 Ibid.: 93. Quran (57:21) "That is the grace of Allah; Allah bestows it upon whomsoever Allah wills."

been able to successfully cross the river without boats.[61] Soon after crossing the impassable Indus river, Ahmad Shah's troops engaged in battle with Nasir Khan, who fled and abandoned his family and possessions.

Al-Husaini devotes quite a bit of the text—prose and poetry—narrating this anecdote. Ahmad Shah's mere presence enabled the mighty river to recede into itself. In the narrative, the properties of the river and what resided in large bodies of water are transposed onto the "victorious army" who crossed it. The troops are described as being "wave-like" and the horses are likened to "whales."[62] Ahmad Shah took numerous precautions before crossing the river: as protector, he could not be the cause of loss of life or goods. And for the one who did drown, the author composes a poetic verse about how the Pharaoh drowned in his pursuit of Moses. This is to trigger the reader/listener's memory to associate Ahmad Shah's ease in crossing the mighty river to the Biblical and Quranic story of Moses parting the red seas. This story should have, but clearly does not, warn the unfortunate merchant. Because he was unattached to Ahmad Shah, he was not protected by him—resulting in his death.

The dramatic account of the Afghan army crossing an impassible river, one that could only be crossed by boat—until, of course, Ahmad Shah's divine presence inspired the river itself to recede into itself—is likely a generically informed fabrication. Nonetheless, al-Husaini provides an elaborate retelling of this miraculous crossing of the river, which would have occurred six years prior to when he was commissioned to write the history. Here we see the power of the symbolism and likening Ahmad Shah to previous prophets—Moses, in this case. It is noteworthy that Ahmad Shah's other history, composed by Imam al-Din Husaini, does not embellish Ahmad Shah's crossing of the rivers. He simply states them as fact, and in his account, they cross by boat.[63]

The connection between sovereignty and space is not unique in al-Husaini's history; in fact, this connection permeates the text. When Ahmad Shah was advised to leave Hindustan in 1748 after some of his troops were raided by "bat-like" enemies, the author relates that he did not wish to leave Hindustan, for fear that the country would fall into a bewildered state. When they arrived in Kabul, the author writes: "the king pulls on the reins, moving as swiftly as the breeze, these reins he turns away from Hindustan, the terrible country of fiery weather, which is not a place for the high bred of fine disposition to sit

61 al-Husaini, *Ta'rīkh-i Ahmad Shāhī*: 92-93. Imam al-Din Husaini's history of Ahmad Shah's reign does not include an anecdote like this; rather he writes that the Durrani army crossed the river on boats, see Noelle-Karimi, "Afghan Polities and the Indo-Persian Literary Realm": 71.

62 al-Husaini, *Ta'rīkh-i Ahmad Shāhī*: 92.

63 Noelle-Karimi, "Afghan Polities and the Indo-Persian Literary Realm," 71.

in merriment … and its salty earth with its abundance of prickly branches and thorns is not a place where the people of high disposition, of fine sensibilities can be inspired … or have their hearts bloom …"[64] Kabul, on the other hand, is "like paradise because of its abundance of greenery and flowers" and the "sweet water inspires more happiness than wine."[65] Al-Husaini portrays the stark difference between Kabul, which he describes as refreshing and rejuvenating, as opposed to Hindustan, which was "salty," "hot," and "wild".[66] Nonetheless, we should note that he only portrays Hindustan in pejorative terms when Ahmad Shah was not physically in Hindustan. For example, when Ahmad Shah and his troops returned to Hindustan, he describes, quite beautifully, surrounding areas of Lahore where hills had formed as a result of brick-making practices. Al-Husaini provides a detailed description of how mounds were formed due to the brick-making process and that "the hills become green during the rainy season and from a distance they manifested into mountains of emeralds."[67] It was so beautiful that "people who had a desire go at that time [spring] to visit the hillocks … they made their eyes shine with the freshness of the renewed greenery. The fine water that collected on the lower end of those miraculous alleys appeared to be full of miracles." It was precisely those seasons when Ahmad Shah campaigned and resided in Hindustan, as the climate in the winter and spring months would not interfere with the efficiency of their weapons (wetness and humidity rendered gunpowder unusable).[68]

In the pleasant climate of Kabul, Ahmad Shah "rode around and saw with his inner and outer eye: the truth-discerning king outwardly spent his time looking at the flowers and flowerbeds of happiness, and with the inner eye, he observed the beauty of divine manifestation and he received a refreshed mind from his observations … a true witness from the veil of the two worlds. As the garden of enjoyment was enhanced in its freshness by the grace of the loving gaze, in the same manner, the matters of religion and government likewise were settled to the best in every way owing to the kind attention of the one in charge of the two worlds."[69] Al-Husaini reveals a mutually beneficial relationship between Ahmad Shah and the environment: Ahmad Shah's presence brought flowers to bloom, and this in turn bestowed peace and rejuvenated his heart and mind.

64 al-Husaini, *Ta'rīkh-i Ahmad Shāhī*: 114.
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.: 217.
68 There is one exception to this, in 1760, before the battle of Panipat in 1761, Ahmad Shah and his troops stayed in Hindustan for the entire year.
69 al-Husaini, *Ta'rīkh-i Ahmad Shāhī*: 115.

In a non-allegorical sense, Ahmad Shah cultivated the spaces he inhabited as well.[70] In 1752, Ahmad Shah spent three months in the city of Peshawar. His presence harmonized with the arrival of spring: "the sun covered the earth with emerald green plants and it fills the air with the property of making flowers grow from stone."[71] The "sun-crowned" king, Ahmad Shah, as the protector of people and religion, ordered that buildings be erected for the inhabitants. This included a place for prayer and meditation with a paradise-like pool for people, rich and poor, to perform ablutions; a caravanserai for traders and travelers, which adjoined the mosque and a large splendorous market; and a large garden next to the mosque whose beauty could be the "envy of all gardens."[72] The market attracted merchants who sold goods from all over the world, making available rare goods in abundance at fair yet profitable prices.[73]

As the sovereign, it was Ahmad Shah's responsibility to provide spaces for prayer and reflection and, equally important, to ensure opportunities for trade in a safe and just way. The author describes how goods that could not be found in many places were sold in abundance in this market, and that buyers would get a fair price because price-gauging was impossible, as hoarding goods was prohibited. The sellers, likewise, would receive their "desired profit."[74]

Al-Husaini employs miraculous accounts, the crossing of the Indus river, beautiful descriptions of the environment, and Ahmad Shah's commissioning of built environment as evidence that Ahmad Shah was internally and externally aligned with nature. In his decisions, whether it be to cross a river, or how trade transactions were to be conducted in his jurisdiction, Ahmad Shah is described as being reasonable, thoughtful, and effective.

3 Mughal Lack of Sovereignty

According to al-Husaini, Ahmad Shah's virtuous qualities led to his victories in Hindustan against the governors of Lahore, Shah Nawaz Khan (d. unknown but after 1747; son of Zakariya Khan d. 1745, grandson of Abd al-Samad Khan d. 1713) and Muin al-Mulk, who lacked God-given clarity bestowed upon Ahmad Shah. Likewise, the Mughal emperors are described as being confused,

70 For a discussion on the foundation of the Durrani capital of Qandahar during Ahmad Shah's reign see Noelle-Karimi, "Afghan Polities and the Indo-Persian Literary Realm": 57-58.

71 al-Husaini, *Ta'rīkh-i Ahmad Shāhī*: 231.

72 Ibid.: 231-32.

73 Ibid.

74 Ibid.

irresolute, and weak. Mughal governors held more power than the emperor, as did eunuchs and mother of the emperor. These were signs of a dilapidated empire, in need of a new sovereign ruler—Ahmad Shah.

The author takes every opportunity to describe, in ornate language, the flaws of Mughal governors and emperors. For example, he depicts Shah Nawaz Khan as a greedy individual, who confiscated all of his forefathers' wealth after detaining and imprisoning his elder brother and rightful heir. Shah Nawaz Khan "set a trap of deceit by bestowing favors on Lahore's notables." Further, he listened to and resolved petitions, inspiring hope in people for further justice, and he behaved in "the way of kings:" he erected and resided in red-colored tents and built watch towers.[75] When Shah Nawaz Khan heard about Ahmad Shah's victories, he arrogantly sent a petition pledging his submission and loyalty to Ahmad Shah, thereby ensuring peace for the time being.[76] It is clear from the way in which the author describes Shah Nawaz Khan that this so-called submission was simply another trick, made up in an "intoxicated, smoke-dwelling mind."[77]

Muhammad Shah, the emperor of Hindustan, on the other hand, upon hearing about the ascension and successful campaigns of Ahmad Shah, consulted with his entourage for one month, then resolved to send his son, Ahmad Shah Bahadur, accompanied by elders, including the Mughal vizier, Nizam al-Mulk Asaf Jah I Qamar al-Din (d. 1748), to Punjab to stop Ahmad Shah's advance.[78] When Shah Nawaz Khan heard about this, he sent a message to Muhammad Shah, saying that his son's arrival in Punjab was unnecessary. Shah Nawaz Khan, having underestimated Ahmad Shah's might, wrote to the Mughal emperor that Ahmad Shah did not command a large force, and that the prince should not exhaust his troops. Moreover, he, Shah Nawaz Khan, had been diligent in maintaining the region, and the prince's arrival would ruin his hard work.[79] The prince, therefore, was stopped at Sirhind beyond his control and will.[80]

The detailed accounts of (bad) decisions and indecision on the part of the Mughals reveals how our author undermines their authority and their claims to sovereignty. In this encounter, Ahmad Shah is portrayed as being wise, as someone who preferred diplomacy over the death of a single person. To that end, he sent Sabir Khan, the Sufi shaikh who had placed the crown upon Ahmad

75 Ibid.: 95.
76 Ibid.: 96.
77 Ibid.:97-100.
78 Ibid.: 96.
79 Ibid.: 96-97.
80 Ibid.: 97.

Shah's head, to "adorn Shah Nawaz Khan's ears with pearls of wisdom."[81] Shah Nawaz Khan, the author writes, was "intoxicated on the wine of pride, [he] was not interested in the expositions of the dervish, and did not listen to his sermons, and instead he accused the auspicious dervish of magic and killed him."[82] At that very time, Ahmad Shah and some of his soldiers mounted their horses to survey the surrounding land, with the intention of mapping out how the troops would be placed during the time of battle. Shah Nawaz Khan's spies reported to him that Ahmad Shah was alone and wandering the land, accompanied with only a few soldiers. Shah Nawaz Khan saw this as his opportunity to strike. Ahmad Shah caught wind of this, and because he was bestowed with *ilhām*, a divinely-inspired premonition, he knew that this encounter would end with his victory and Shah Nawaz Khan's defeat. Ahmad Shah raised the banner, thus summoning his troops into motion, and a great battle ensued. The overpowered Shah Nawaz Khan left towards Delhi with a few close companions and a donkey-load of money. Plunder consisting of goods, weapons, and captives fell to Ahmad Shah and his troops.

Implicit constructions of sovereignty in this text can be teased out if we consider how the author describes the Mughal governors and emperors. As previously mentioned, Shah Nawaz Khan was the governor of Lahore, and yet he behaved as if he were emperor. He bestowed favors and robes of honor, claimed to protect the people of Lahore, erected tents in the fashion of sovereigns, and even halted the movement of the Mughal prince. The Mughal emperor and his son are depicted as having no real power in this text. In an implicit way, the author undermines Mughal sovereignty: the emperor Muhammad Shah was subordinate to the provincial governor. He was in constant confusion, underwent endless consultations, and did not possess the resolve or focus that Ahmad Shah had. Shah Nawaz Khan, who may have had more power, was deluded in his ambitions, and deviated from the right path. His defeat and subjugation indicated his illegitimacy to govern.

After Muhammad Shah's death in 1748, his son, Ahmad Shah Bahadur (d. 1775), named Mirza Ahmad in the text, ascended the throne on April 29, 1748.[83] According to al-Husaini, the new emperor was young and inexperienced. Moreover, his predilection for following baser desires prevented him from governing. Political affairs, big and small, were in the hands of a eunuch, Jawed Khan, also known as Nawab Bahadur, and Ahmad Shah Bahadur's

81 Ibid.: 98.

82 Ibid.

83 Ibid.: 116. The precise date of the death is not given in the text.

mother Nawab Qudsiya.[84] The author inserts the (historically controversial and extensively debated) Quranic verse 4:34 "men are the guardians of women"[85] to indicate how the viziers and ministers serving the Mughal court could not stomach a woman or a eunuch at the helm of power.

This was especially true for Safdar Jang (d. 1754), Burhan al-Mulk's (d. 1739) nephew and son-in-law, who is called Abu al-Mansur Khan in this text. According to al-Husaini, Safdar Jang was annoyed with the loss of power and requested the Mughal emperor Ahmad Shah Bahadur to permit him to return to Awadh, where he was the governor. When Ahmad Shah Bahadur allowed him to leave, the eunuch Jawed Khan sent letters to Safdar Jang's enemy, the Afghan, Ahmad Khan Bangash, informing him that Safdar Jang had left Shahjahanabad and that he should be killed *en route* to Awadh.[86] Safdar Jang, unbeknownst to Jawed Khan, intercepted some letters and foiled the eunuch's attempt to assassinate him. Safdar Jang cleverly carried out his revenge, which is dramatically rendered in this account: Safdar Jang invited the eunuch Jawed Khan to dine with him at his residence. Jawed Khan's "loyal advisors and well-wishers" warned him saying that he should not be led astray by Safdar Jang's sweet words and flattery. Not heeding their sound advice, Jawed Khan accepted the invitation, and "with his own feet, he set out to his killing ground."[87] This, the author writes, was the result of fate. When Jawed Khan arrived in Safdar Jang's residence, he was treated with refined hospitality and it soon dawned on him that, "like a bird caught in a trap," he had no choice but to patiently await his fate. And so, Jawed Khan sat with a heart full of trepidation, while Safdar Jang performed all the rites and customs of being a generous host, whilst eloquently praising his guest. The food was served and "the *khwāja sarā* (eunuch), whose luck had turned, ate some morsels that had remained from the daily portion from fate … from the same bowl as his host."[88] As Jawed Khan smelled the garlic in the food he stopped eating and recited a couplet: "Oh regret! We have eaten from the colorful cloth of life for some moments, and then they [fate] said: 'enough!'"[89] After the meal, Safdar Jang and Jawed Khan washed their hands, and it was as if Jawed Khan was "washing his hands from life." Safdar Jang suggested that they should meet in private, away from others so that he might reveal some secrets to him. Safdar Jang took Jawed Khan, like a lamb about to be sacrificed, to the place where he was destined to die:

84 al-Husaini, *Ta'rīkh-i Ahmad Shāhī*: 235.
85 Quran 4:34.
86 al-Husaini, *Ta'rīkh-i Ahmad Shāhī*: 236.
87 Ibid.: 237.
88 Ibid.: 238.
89 Ibid.: 238.

> At this time, Muhammad Ali Khan, the guard, and some others had been sitting in the ambush of revenge and like hunters had fixed their eyes on the approach of the prey. Jawed Khan entered through the door and Muhammad Ali Khan brought out a knife sharper than lightening which he had hidden in his sleeve waiting for the proper opportunity. He drew it out quickly, and skillfully brought it to the side of *khwāja sarā* and from the other side, with one stroke, Muhammad Ali Khan separated Jawed Khan's head from his body.[90]

When word of Jawed Khan's murder reached the ears of the Mughal court, the emperor fell into a deep state of melancholy. His mother, on the other hand, whom the author describes as stronger than her son,[91] immediately wrote letters to the governor of Punjab, Muin al-Mulk, and his nephew, Feroze Jang III Ghazi al-Din, also known as Imad al-Mulk. She reminded them of their ancestors' loyal service to the house of Gukān and beseeched them to immediately come to Delhi and correct the injustice carried out by an Iranian who had once been a loyal servant, but now had become a disloyal rebel.[92] According to the author, she wrote about Safdar Jang: "the Iranians have closed their eyes from the rights of taking salt: they have turned away from this, they have collected followers, and they have girded their loins with the belt of enmity and disloyalty, and they sit in the place of eating salt while breaking the salt."[93] Imad al-Mulk took advantage of this opportunity and engaged in fighting against Safdar Jang, who allied with Suraj Mal Jat and the Maratha leader Malhar Rao, for over four months. When there was no end in sight, notables beseeched the emperor to end the bloodshed, which was only resulting in the death of Muslims. He acquiesced and forgave Safdar Jang, and commanded Imad al-Mulk to return to Delhi. Imad al-Mulk was unhappy with this result because, the author says, he did not like peace and was a lover of war.[94] True to his disposition, Imad al-Mulk plotted to remove the Mughal emperor, Ahmad Shah Bahadur, from power. He ordered one of his assistants, Aqabat Mahmud, to bribe the gatekeepers of the artillery and when the time was right, he freed one of the Mughal princes from prison, placing him on the throne, while his brother Saif al-Din removed Ahmad Shah Bahadur and his mother from the royal harem in a secret, albeit disgraceful manner, and then imprisoned them

90 Ibid.

91 Ibid.: 239.

92 Ibid.

93 Ibid.: 239. Salt is a symbol for loyalty. It is very much like the saying, "Don't bite the hand that feeds you." One is not supposed to be disloyal to the one who provides safety and employment.

94 Ibid.: 246-47.

both.[95] After Alamgir II ascended the throne, Imad al-Mulk immediately paid his obeisance. Alamgir II was not wise enough to rid himself of Imad al-Mulk, and out of "stupidity and fear,"[96] Alamgir II kept Imad al-Mulk in his position as the vizier. Imad al-Mulk inquired what should be done about the dethroned emperor and his mother, and the new emperor said that they should remain in prison and not be killed. Imad al-Mulk was restless with this decision, and took it upon himself to ensure that Ahmad Shah Bahadur would be incapable of returning to the throne. He ordered his trusted servant Aqabat Mahmud to blind both Ahmad Shah Bahadur and his mother (the very person who invited Imad al-Mulk to aid them against Safdar Jung). Soon after Aqabat Mahmud successfully carried out his orders, Imad al-Mulk killed him, for no apparent reason.[97] This, however, was swift justice, according to our author.[98] In a short period of time, Imad al-Mulk assassinated Alamgir II and had the Marathas kill Shah Jahan III, who would have been the next successor. Imad al-Mulk placed Ali Gauhar, Shah Alam II on the throne in 1759.

Al-Husaini devotes many pages on the internal struggles within the Mughal court, including many pages on their civil war in Shahjahanabad, which led to the death of a large number of loyal subjects. The enticing stories of plotting murders and carrying them out, the dethroning and blinding of emperors, and the foiled ambitions of women and eunuchs demonstrate in great detail Mughal lack of sovereignty. The emperors have no power. Political and governmental affairs had fallen to eunuchs, women (who are described as being inept to govern in the text), and viziers. Internal tensions and disputes that led to battles and wars represented confusion and weak leadership. Ahmad Shah, on the other hand, masterfully commanded his domains and his subjects. It was only fitting, then, that Ahmad Shah be accepted as the sovereign in Hindustani territories as well.

Conclusion

This article traces how Ahmad Shah's court chronicler, al-Husaini, constructed Ahmad Shah as the sovereign, with a focus on legitimizing his attempts to rule in western frontiers of Mughal Hindustan early in his career. It explored *how* the author scaffolds sovereignty by examining his understanding and use of *ilhām* and religious rhetoric; Ahmad Shah's ascension as the successor to Nadir

95 Ibid.: 257.
96 Ibid.: 257.
97 Ibid.: 258.
98 Ibid.

Shah and his victory over internal and external rivals; connections of space and sovereignty; and finally Ahmad Shah's superiority—in a literal and moral sense—over Mughal governors and emperors.

Al-Husaini's "scaffolding" of sovereignty follows certain aspects of Persianate historiography, but his use of *ilhām* for an emperor is unique. This history is a clear break from the conventions of Afghan historiography composed in Hindustan in the early modern period. Based on this, one is led to question the value of imposing ethnic identities on rival contenders for power. In other words, how "Afghan" is this text and what does this say about how al-Husaini wanted his immediate and future audiences to imagine Ahmad Shah and his empire?

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