

GEÇMİŐTEN GÜNÜMÜZE İDİL

(Uluslararası Geçmişten Günümüze İdil Sempozyumu Bildirileri)



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THE YEZIDI RELIGION AND THE “HERETIC” MILIEU OF THE REGION

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Özet:

Yezidilik, en esrarengiz ve Yakın Doğu'nun dogmatik (vahye dayalı) olmayan ya da sözde *heretik* bir inanış olarak az araştırılmış fenomenlerinden biridir. Bu makale esas olarak, modern ve vahye dayanmayan Yakın Doğu muhitine nazaran ve bazı unsurlarıyla daha önce bölgedeki dogmatik dinlerin (yani Zoraastiranizm) bir parçası olan ya da dogmatik olmayan çeşitli temayüller vasıtasıyla (Mandaeans ve Maniheizm vb.) Yezidiliği açıklamayı amaçlamıştır. Bunun için o, Melek Tâvus kültü, siyah köpeğe perestiş ve tenâsüh (reenkarnasyon) fikrine odaklanmaktadır; çünkü bunlar Yezidiliğin yanı sıra çeşitli zaman dilimlerinde ortaya çıkmış olan ve farklı dini çevrelere dayanan oldukça farklı geleneklere de işaret etmektedir. Bu sebeple söz konusu fenomenler “Yakın Doğu'nun heretik ortamının belirleyicileri” olarak tanımlanabilir. Bunlar, dogmatik olmayan eğilimler tarafından, ya onların merkezi fikirleri ya da marjinal unsurları şeklinde muhafaza edilmiştir. Bu makale aynı zamanda din fenomenolojisi açısından bu fenomen üzerine bazı kavramlaşmalarla teşebbüs etmiştir. Bu yönüyle o, bu alandaki daha ileri araştırmalar için teorik bir temel olarak işlev üstlenebilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yezidilik, Melek Tâvus, Heretik, Siyah Köpek, Tenâsüh

The Yezidi Religion and the “Heretic” Milieu of the Region

Abstract:

The Yezidi religion is one of the most enigmatic and least investigated phenomena of the Near Eastern non-dogmatic or, so-called “heretic” milieu, while the Yezidis is an illustrative example of the so-called ethno-religious community. This paper was primarily aimed at illustrating the Yezidism against the background of the modern non-dogmatic Near-Eastern environment, with certain elements, which had previously been part of either dogmatic religions in the region (e.g., the Zoroastrianism), or various non-dogmatic trends (e.g. Mandaeans, Manichaeism, etc.). It, therefore, focus on three phenomena – the cult of Malak-Tawus (Peacock Angel), the worship of a black dog and the idea of *tanâsux* (reincarnation), since they mark, apart the Yezidism, quite different traditions, which emerged in different periods of time and which go back to different religious environment. So, the mentioned three phenomena can be generally defined as markers of the Near Eastern “heretic” milieu, which have been preserved by non-dogmatic trends either as their central ideas or marginal elements. This paper is also an attempt of certain conceptualisation of this phenomenon, from the point of view of the phenomenology of religions, which can serve as theoretical basis for further research in this field.

Key words: Yezidism, Malak Tâvus, Heretic, Black Dog, Reincarnation

The Yezidi religion is one of the most enigmatic and least investigated phenomena of the Near Eastern non-dogmatic or, so-called “heretic” milieu, while the Yezidis is an illustrative example of the so-called ethno-religious community.¹ The Yezidi identity is *ante omnia* based on a religion exclusively specific for this people and called *Sharfadin* by them.

The peculiarities of this religious system are not only limited to its syncretism, some elements of which could be traced in Sufism, a number of Extreme Shi‘ite sects, substrate pre-Islamic beliefs, Gnosticism, etc., but they also include specific features solely characteristic of the Yezidi faith, which define the belonging of its followers to the Ezdikhana (*Ēzdīxāna*)—the esoteric community of the Yezidis.²

Comparative study of heterodox Islam and its derivatives (the Yezidism should be definitely approached as one of them), naturally, reveal multiple parallels easily explained by the common Muslim origin or regional popular traditions.

At the same time, some of the features, which the Yezidism shares with other non-dogmatic groups (and not only within Islam), can hardly be determined by parallel religious developments of certain historical period in a concrete area. Multiple groups of that kind are not only separated from each other by time and geography, and, what is even more essential, by the esoteric character of their doctrines, which excludes the factor of their direct mutual influence to each other.

Such common features can be revealed on different levels: the mentioned traditions can share both important basic ideas and marginal elements. Moreover, sometimes two traditions, which are at first sight, can be characterised as inimical to each other, can share the same idea with diametrically different interpretations.³

And if the parallels between the Yezidism and extreme Shi‘a sects (*ghulat*), rooted in the same heterodox Muslim environment, have been emphasized more than once⁴, a wider analysis, discussing this phenomenon as part of the whole Near Eastern non-dogmatic and particularly pre-Islamic milieu, still remains a challenge for the scholars of comparative religion studies.

¹ On the Yezidis and their religion, see in general: Guest (1987), Kreyenbroek (1995), Arakelova (2005), among the most recent publications – Açıkyıldız (2010). On the phenomenon of ethno-religious identities, including that of the Yezidis, see: Arakelova (2010).

² See in detail: Arakelova (2004): 19.

³ For example, the Yezidis deifying Sultan Yezid, and the Shi‘ites primarily associating this personality with the Kerbela battle and thus approaching him as the principal causer of this dramatic event, regard each other as the so-called inimical others, and the very name “Yezidi” bears obvious pejorative attribution among the Shi‘ites (Arakelova 2005a). Still, there are many illustrative Shi‘a elements in the Yezidism, see: Arakelova (2008); particularly on the figure of ‘Ali (who, in the Yezidi lore, is a Yezidi hero, see: Asatrian 2002), and that of Fatima deified as Pira Fat- the patroness of women (Asatrian 2007);

⁴ Kreyenbroek (1995): 53 et.sq. Arakelova (2004).

My paper is an attempt to bring several examples, which, to a certain extent, spotlight the niche of the Yezidism in the mentioned Near Eastern “heretic” environment. The below discussed examples illustrate those common features, shared by the Yezidis and the heterodox Muslim sects, which cannot be approached as a result of mutual influence and/or common Muslim roots. These features, which can be generally characterized as essential components of the Near Eastern “heretic” environment, having existed in the area long before the emergence of Islam and been preserved as marginal characteristics of the heterodox Muslim milieu and its derivatives, in particular the Yezidism.

I would like to focus on the following three phenomena – the cult of Malak-Tawus (Peacock Angel)⁵, the worship of a black dog and the idea of *tanāsux* (reincarnation), since they mark, apart the Yezidism, quite different traditions, which emerged in different periods of time and which go back to different religious environment. So, the mentioned three phenomena can be generally defined as markers of the Near Eastern “heretic” milieu, which have been preserved by non-dogmatic trends either as their central ideas or marginal elements.

The figure of Malak-Tawus reigns in the Yezidi religious mentality; the Peacock Angel being the basic characteristic of the Yezidi religion, and the essence of their faith:

Min ša’datīya īmānā xwa
 Bī nāvē xwadē ū Tāwūsī malak dāya.⁶
 “I attest that my faith is given
 In the names of God and Malak-Tawus”

His importance in the cult is reflected in the fact that Malak-Tawus is at the same time an eponym for the Yezidis: they are called *milatē Malak tāwūs*—the nation (or tribe) of Malak-Tawus.

Malak-Tawus is thus the main distinguishing feature of the Yezidism, lending a unique character to this syncretic religion - not a single religious trend in the region has a comparable cult.

Malak-Tawus is with no exaggeration one of the most exotic figures in the Near Eastern religious continuum. His non-ordinary character is manifested in everything: in the very image of a bird from overseas and a controversial nature; what is more interesting is that among the neighbouring communities, despite admitting his ambivalent character, he is definitely regarded as an incarnation of evil or even as Satan himself, although the Yezidis see the Peacock in another light. It is because of this mysterious image that the Yezidis have acquired the attributes of devil worshippers, were considered a mystic tribe originating from the devil’s saliva, and so

⁵ On Malak-Tawus and its genesis in the Yezidism and other traditions, see Asatrian, Arakelova (2003).

⁶ Ibid.: 9.

on. There are at least two main components making up the image of Malak-Tawus: 1) his depiction as a peacock, and 2) his identification with the angel of darkness. The first is connected with the peacock cult and the ambivalent character of this bird as and the second is rooted in the apology of Iblis, inherited by the Yezidis from their Sufi ancestors.⁷

Malak-Tawus is an unambiguously key figure in the Yezidi religious domain. The religious tradition even describes Malak-Tawus as *bēširīk-bēhavāl*—“having no companion or friend”, in other words “the Only One”, which is undoubtedly the attribute of God, transferred to this image.⁸

But the problem to discuss here is in the genealogy of this character. Thus, that the cult of Malak-Tawus has acquired its most complete and clearly explicit form in the Yezidi tradition. However, the Peacock Angel, as a marginal image and in other interpretations, is present in some other traditions of the region.

Some *Ahl-i Haqq* groups approach Malak-Tawus as the embodiment of Satan, but with an alternate set of attributes, not completely identified with evil and having the features of the angel rejected by God. Also noted in the doctrine are the elements of Satan’s apologia, and there is even a kind of taboo for the word “Sheytan”, exactly like among the Yezidis. For this extreme Shi‘a sect, Satan is merely Azazel, the angel waved aside by God, whose name was changed to Iblis (“devil”) after the downfall. He is feeble and infirm, limited in his movements, rather than the concentration of evil as presented in dogmatic doctrines. The *Ahl-i Haqq* think that, except man there is no evil in nature; evil (devil) is just the way whereby the dominant Self is manifested in us.⁹

Among the *Ahl-i Haqq*, Malak-Tawus is sometimes also identified with Pir Dawud,¹⁰ the second most important among the *hafttan*, the Seven Saints in the *Ahl-i Haqq* religion.

In one of the *Ahl-i Haqq* groups (the region of Qalxan, the Dalahu mountains), the figure of Malak-Tawus has particular significance, so that the rest *Ahl-i Haqq* sectarians call this very group *Malak-Tawusiha*, i.e. *Malak-Tawusis* meaning “the followers of Malak-Tawus”. The local tradition says that the followers of Malak-Tawus have existed from times immemorial. When Soltan Sohak, the fourth Divine incarnation (among the seven successive incarnations of Divinity, building up the basic idea of the *Ahl-i Haqq* faith), came to this world, all the *Malak-Tawusis* became the devotees of this saint, and thus part of the People of Truth, i.e. *Ahl-i Haqq*. Since that time they have preserved both cults. However, among all the *Ahl-i Haqq*

⁷ Ibid.: 21.

⁸ Avdal (1960), folio 81.

⁹ Ibid.: 35-36.

¹⁰ Mokri (1966): 48, 53

sectarians, who equally venerate Soltan Sohak as God's main incarnation, this group is marked with the particular reverence to Malak-Tawus. Malak-Tawusis believe that God created the Universe and appointed Malak-Tawus as the supervisor over the world. One of his main functions is to do God's will, particularly to punish people for their sins. At the same time, no one is allowed to allude to Malak-Tawus's own sin as that of the Fallen Angel, since God had already forgiven him. Malak-Tawus is even approached as Malak-e Amin (the Trusted Angel), who had proved his monotheistic view to God by his action.

Malak-Tawus acquires new characteristics also in the light of the veneration of Ali, typical of most of heterodox Shi'a doctrines. Malak-Tawusis believe, Ali had existed before the Creation as Perfect (Absolute) Light (*nūr-ē mutlay*). Four servitor Angels were created from Ali's intemperate essence (*az jesm-e pāk-ē Ali*): Jibrail was created from Ali's right hand, Michail – from his left hand, Israil – from his tongue, and Malak-Amin, i.e. Malak-Tawus is the reincarnation of Ali (*dūn-ē Ali*). As reincarnation of Ali, Malak-Tawus thus rules over the world.¹¹

So much more interesting against this background is the Mandaean Tāwūs Melka. In the Mandaean legend narrating the creation of man, the following story, inter alia, is recounted: "The Jews were of the children of Ruha and Adam. Their great men were the children of Ruha... They travelled and travelled until they came to 'Ur shalam (Jerusalem)... They wanted books, and Melka d Anhura (King of Light, the Supreme Being) said, 'A book must be written that does not make trouble for the Mandai,' and they sent one of the melki—Tāwūs Melka to write the Torat". As for the peacock (Tāwūs), it is the name given in the Mandaean tradition to the very *malka*, who was distressed about his having rebelled against the Great Life and allowed his pride to push him into rebellion. Thus, we are looking again at an ambivalent figure of the fallen angel, the term contained in his name being of a dubious interpretation integrating both the good and the evil origins.¹²

Thus, Malak-Tawus, being definitely the product of the Abrahamic religious milieu, bore initially a negative connotation of the Fallen Angel, that of the one who disobeyed God's order. Probably in the later tradition, most probably on the soil of early Gnosticism, the elements of his apology could spread in the sectarian environment. The Gnostic philosophy presupposed such kind of development in the light of the problem of predetermination and free will (that later appeared in the picture of non-dogmatic Muslim philosophy, particularly in Sufism; the apology of Iblis being among the main Sufi ideas).

¹¹ Avdal, *Ibid*

¹² Malkia (Melki) are semi-divinities among the Mandaeans, executing the will of Great Life. They obey the Creator, being at the same time his initial incarnations. As seen, the Mandaeans interpret malka in the combination Tāwūs Melka as "king", rather than "angel". Although the functions of malkia, as noted by Lady Drawer, are akin to the functions of messengers, angels (Heb. malāk, Arab. malak), the Mandaeans, however, used the word malax (equivalent of the aforementioned Heb. and Arab. forms) also to designate the evil spirit (Asatrian, Arakelova, op.cit. 35-36).

The second element marking certain “heresies” including the Yezidism, is the worship of a black dog. Nowadays, dog worship among the Yezidis doesn't go beyond the frames of that special attitude, which cattle-breeding peoples usually have towards shepherd dogs as essential part of animal husbandry. Earlier, however, the situation was different. Valuable facts about worshipping dogs are introduced in the *Siyāhet-nāme* («Book of Travels») by the Turkish traveller and official Ottoman historiographer Evliya Celebi:

“[Among the Yezidis of Sinjar they] first of all give children the milk of a black dog. If somebody dares to beat a dog, he is mercilessly murdered. Every Yezidi holds about five-ten dogs at the doors of his house. Food is first given to a dog and when the dog is satisfied, they eat themselves. One black dog is sold for 1000 *kuruş* and 10 mules... Putting a black dog's hair into a deceased's shroud is a general tradition [among them]... In this region, people arrange great feasts at birth of a black dog. And when the dog dies it [its body] is washed with the sap of [napiform] onion and it is buried at a special dog cemetery. For the repose of the soul of the dead dog, other dogs are given roasted mutton. The dogs of those people resemble lions indeed. In this country there are no wolves at all. It is strange that the mountain Sinjar, being a blessed land, sheltered such unfaithful...”. In this short message of Celebi, almost all the above-mentioned elements of dog cult can be marked out: 1) god homage and its top position, 2) the connection with death and funeral rites, and thus its apotropaic nature (reflected also in the fact that its milk is given to a baby, to conjure evil spirits), 3) cruel punishment for killing or harming a dog, etc. In addition, the symbolism of the color draws ones attention - a black dog has a special cultic meaning.”¹³

The loss of this cult among the Yezidis, that existed in Celebi's time in the XVII century, is most probably caused by the influence of Islam, which dogma approaches dog as a ritually unclean animal.

The similar dog cult was also attested among the Zaza: “*Il* (the Qizilbash; here are ment Zaza) *adorent un grand chien noir, comme l'image de la Divinité*. (“They warship big black dog as the symbol of a deity”¹⁴

In a number of quite widely-spread popular beliefs, a black dog is a medium, a creature that has obvious infernal characters. According to certain Muslim superstitions, a black dog is a peculiar werewolf that genies can turn into.¹⁵

The Yezidis, as well as Armenians (e.g. of Muş-Bulanykh) believe that a long howl of a dog at night is a presage of someone's death, because a dog can supposedly see the angel of death.¹⁶

¹³ Celebi (1967): 188.

¹⁴ Gilbert (1997), p. 203

¹⁵ About the role of the dog in national religious beliefs and in cult as a whole see Hastings (1892), vol. I: 511-513.

¹⁶ Bense (1972): 42

It is a well-known fact, that in ancient Iran, the most esteemed creature was dog. Both in Zoroastrianism and in Mithraism dogs were considered second after humans by their importance. In the *Vendidad*, a whole chapter is devoted to dog and its varieties, the description of its virtues and those punishments that one should undergo if he killed a dog or caused harm to it, or even poorly fed it.¹⁷

The Zoroastrian *Book of Arda Viraf* narrates about the hard trials of the souls of those who during their lives killed or hit a dog or spared with food shepherd dogs and sentry dogs.¹⁸

In the Sassanid Iran they believed that those who did not like dogs' barking, were doomed to spend their days in foreign lands in misery.¹⁹

A dog was considered a creature that had a straight connection with the underground world. It is no coincidence that in many traditions the guard of the underworld gate was exactly a dog (for example Cerberus in the Greek mythology). The participation of dogs in the funeral ritual was a sort of *locus communis*. The most demonstrative in this case – the *sagdid* ceremony (lit. *dog's look*) spread among the Zoroastrians, when a dog is brought close to the coffin to look at the deceased. It is considered that a dog by its look ousts the cadaveric evil spirit, Drug-nasu.²⁰ The apotropaic nature of dog, the mere presence of which frightens off evil beginnings, clearly appears here. Dog and the evil, in the Iranian conception, are in relations of complementary distribution. And foxes and hedgehogs were also classified as varieties of dog by ancient Iranians, and had their niches in the complex of Zoroastrian popular beliefs.²¹

The Armenian writer of the end of the 19th century Raffi mentions that, when a dog that has served a house for a long time dies, *nra gluxe d'ran šemi tak t'ayele oyurow ē*, i.e. "burying its head under the house threshold brings luck".²² Anatolian Turks hang up a skull of a wolf over the threshold of the house for the same reason.²³

Thus, the dog-cult, rooted in the Old-Iranian dogmatic belief, has been also preserved on both the level of various folk traditions and in regional heterodox trends. Despite the influence of dogmatic Islam (which approaches dog as *haram*), many cattle-breeding societies in the region still have specific attitude towards this domestic animal, which has for centuries been among the most important elements of animal husbandry economy. That is why, probably, this *prima facie* marginal element, can serve as another marker of the "heretic" milieu in the region.

¹⁷ *Vendidad*, XIII: 10-16

¹⁸ See: *Arta Viraz Namag*, 33. 19-29, 34.1-6. – Vahman (1986): 141-143

¹⁹ Inostrantsev (1909): 92.

²⁰ See: Darmesteter (1887): LXXXVI et sq.; Vahman, Asatrian (2002): 55

²¹ About dog among Indo-Iranians see: Willman-Grabowska (1931-1932).

²² Raffi (1955): 110.

²³ Türkmen (1992): 391.

And finally, we approach to the so-called *tanāsux* (lit. *transmigration, metempsychosis*), one of those elements of the Near Eastern “heretic” milieu, which was initially alien to the doxies of Islam. Some Muslim authors attributed this phenomenon to the Indian influence.²⁴ Shahrastani was, probably, the first, who noted that overall the *tanāsux* was the typical characteristic of sectarianism: “Transmigration of souls used to be a doctrine of [certain] sects in each religious [community]: it occurs among the Mazdakite Magi, Brahmans in India, philosophers, and Sabaeans. They held that Allah the Most High existed in any place, spoke any language, appeared in any human form; and this means incarnation”²⁵

The book of doubtful authorship “Teatro della Turchia” (published in Rome, 1674, the), hypothesizes that among the Yezidis, animal-worship is connected with the idea of reincarnation.²⁶

In the present-day Yezidism, the idea of *tanāsux* has lost its meaning. But there are elements pointing that that it could have been part of the early tradition. The nearly forgotten character in the Yezidi tradition, Šēxkirās—«Sheikh of the Robe» (Kurd. kirās “shirt, robe” < OIr. *kṛpa-pāθra—“defending the body”), was perhaps responsible for the process of death, and possibly, for reincarnation, replacement of bodies as change of clothes.²⁷

The garment and clothes in general often symbolise the body and physical existence; “to take a garment off” is a metaphor for death, and to change it is a metaphor for reincarnation. The phrase kirās *guhērīn* –literally, “to change clothes”—is the denotation of death among the Yezidis.

The idea of reincarnation, surprisingly coexistent with the tradition of paradise and hell, excluding the need for reincarnation, is widely spread in the esoteric trends of Islam. At present, *tanāsux*, again, marks primarily the so-called *γulāt*, the heterodox Shi`its. For example, the idea of *tanāsux* among Ahl-i Haqq, is quite popular, having its certain peculiarities and concrete interpretations. Apart from the general idea of the so-called *tanāsux-e malakūtī* (which is actually associated with the Day of Judgement, after which the Good shall enter paradise, and the Wicked shall be annihilated), they believe in the reincarnation of the theophanies, the successive manifestation of divinity. The same Eternal Divine Substance manifests Itself each time in a different form, always accompanied by angels. The original substances (*δāt*) of the angels, in their turn, become reincarnated every time in a new “dress”. And finally, *tanāsux* among the *Ahl-i Haqq* presupposes the

²⁴ Biruni (1995): 88.

²⁵ Šaxrastani (1984): 154.

²⁶ Guest (1985): 55.

²⁷ See on this character, Arakelova (2002): 70-75.

metempsychosis among humans, the so-called *tanāsux-e dūn be dūn* ("from one dress to another"), which can be both ascending and descending, regarding the personal qualities of a person and his nature. Among the four kinds of *tanāsux*, only *nasx* ("metempsychosis, metamorphosis"), in fact, presupposes the reincarnations from one human's body into another (*rūḥ be rūḥ*). *Masx* ("transformation") is a kind of reincarnation into an animal's body, *rasx* ("rooting")—reincarnation into a plant, and *fasx* ("dissolution")—reincarnation into an inanimate object.

The Ahl-i Haqq followers, speaking about incarnation, use the Turkish word *dun* or Persian *ĵame* (dressing); the Persian *be lebās āmadan*, literally, "to put on clothes" means "to be made flesh" – the same metaphor, mentioned above in the context of the Yezidis.²⁸

The idea of reincarnation, in various interpretations, exists also among the Nusayri-ʿAlawis.²⁹

As for the Sufi milieu, Al-Hujwiri³⁰, e.g., writes about the Ḥulūlīs (later also mentioned *inter alia* by Šahrastani) formally professing to belong to Sufism and, at the same time, sharing the idea of *tanāsux*, thus making "the Sufis partners in their errors".

It is worthy of note that in one of the Parthian Manichean mourning hymns, the dramatic description of Mani's death is represented with the same metaphor: *frāmōxtiš tanβār padmōžan aβdēn* (M5, 63-66)—"And he (the prophet Mani) shed his beautiful bodily garment (= died)".

So, the idea of metempsychosis, or reincarnation was typical of Gnostic sects, which actually formed the "heretic" environment of their time. Although Biruni attributed this element exclusively to Hinduism (see above), it could penetrate into the non-dogmatic Muslim milieu rather from the Gnosticism, which elements are widely presented in the heterodox trends of Islam.

So, my paper was primarily aimed at illustrating the Yezidism against the background of the modern non-dogmatic Near-Eastern environment, with certain elements, which had previously been part of either dogmatic religions in the region (e.g., the Zoroastrianism), or various non-dogmatic trends (e.g. Mandaeanism, Manichaeism, etc.). It is also an attempt of certain conceptualisation of this phenomenon, from the point of view of the phenomenology of religions, which can serve as theoretical basis for further research in this field.

²⁸ On the *tanāsux* among the Ahl-i Haqq, see, e.g., Khaksar (2009): 117-134

²⁹ On the manifestation of the Deity in the historical cycles and the manifestation of the Deity in the Imams, see, e.g., Bar-Asher, Kofsky (2002).

³⁰ Hujwiri (1999): 260-266.

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