

The Religious Textual Heritage of the Yārsān (Ahl-e Haqq)

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The Yārsān

This paper will discuss the complex “textual” heritage of the Yārsān of western Iran and northern Iraq, which is mainly transmitted orally but has partly been made available in writing in recent decades. The Yārsān (“Group of Friends”), also known as Ahl-e Haqq (“People of Truth”), and in Iraq as Kāka’i (“Members of the Brotherhood”), are a religious minority whose members are mainly ethnic Kurds, although there is also a large Turkic-speaking group. Large communities live in western Iran, in the Guran¹ region to the west of Kermanshah, and in and around the town of Sahne to its northeast. Further groups live in Iranian Azerbaijan, Hamadan, Lorestan, Tehran, Karaj, Save, and Kelardasht. In northern Iraq Kāka’i communities are found in the regions of Erbil, Mosul, Kirkuk, Khaneqin, and Halabja. Some diaspora communities exist in Europe, notably in the Scandinavian countries. There are no reliable data on the numbers of the Yārsān; estimates vary from one to four million.

There is disagreement, both among the Yārsān themselves and among scholars, as to whether the Yārsān religion is essentially a form of Shia Islam with a strong admixture of pre-Islamic elements, or rather an independent religious tradition with some Shiite components. The striking similarities in social structure and mythology between Yarsanism and Yezidism, and to some extent the tradition of the Alevis of the Dersim region, play a role in these discussions (Kreyenbroek 1996).

A major schism in the Yārsān community is that between “modernists” and “traditionalists.” The modernists follow a new interpretation of the religion proposed by Hājj Ne’matollāh Mokri Jeyhunābādi (1871-1920; see Membrado 2012) and his successors, Nur ‘Ali Elāhi (1895-1974) and Dr. Behram Elahi (born 1931). The present paper is not concerned with this branch of Yarsanism, which is now an international organization run from Paris. Among the traditionalists in Iran there is a distinction between the highly conservative Guran group, which rejects all connections with Islam, and the tradition of Sahne, which accepts links with the Shia. The question of the possible adherence to Islam plays a much less central role among the communities in Northern Iraq.

¹ For geographical names, no diacritics will be used here.

Languages

Religious or “sacred” Yārsān texts exist in a number of languages. There is a considerable corpus of texts in a Turkic dialect closely akin to Azeri Turkish (Geranpayeh 2007), and some texts in Persian and in a form of Kurdish. However, the main body of “sacred” texts is in “Literary Gurani” (hereafter LG; see Kreyenbroek and Chaman Ara 2013), an idiom that was once a highly prestigious vehicle for the verbal art of the eastern Kurds. From a grammatical point of view, LG could be described as a simplified form of Gurani, a group of dialects that were once spoken in the Guran region, and by some communities in northern Iraq, including Kāka’is. In Iran these dialects are now dying out and, perhaps as a result, knowledge of LG also is rapidly declining in the Yārsān community. Texts are increasingly becoming objects of reverence rather than bearers of meaning. In Iraq, on the other hand, forms of Gurani are still spoken.

The Religious World of the Yārsān

Socially, the Yārsān distinguish between two hereditary “castes,” the laity and the “priestly” Sayyeds. Most communities recognize twelve lineages or “families” (*khāndān*) of Sayyeds, who are thought to descend from figures who once played important roles in the history of the religion. All members of the community must have a “religious guide” (*Pir*), that is, a Sayyed who is responsible for their religious life. Such relations are hereditary; a Sayyed “inherits” his followers (*Morid*), and communities generally have ties with a particular *khāndān*.²

The principle of “recurrence” plays an important role in the religious world of the Yārsān. Their view of history is a cyclical one, which means that each “period” (*dowre*) of history essentially repeats the mythical period of Creation, and that the essence of individual beings can return in another form (*dunāduni*, “moving from form to form”).

According to the Myth of Creation, God first created a Pearl that contained the elements of this world in embryonic form. He then created Seven Beings (*Haft Tan*), to whom he left the control of the world. God and the Seven then gathered in a first “meeting” (*jam*); a bull or deer appeared and was sacrificed, after which the Pearl burst and the world came into being. All later “periods” of history are marked by the “appearance” (*zohur*) of humans who incorporate the essence (*zāt*) of the divine beings. “Great” *dowres* are marked by the presence of incarnations of the Leader and all other members of the *Haft Tan*. Most Yārsān are agreed that the current *dowre* began with the appearance of Soltān Sahāk, perhaps in the fifteenth century CE.³

Such truths are part of a hidden “inner” (*bāten*) reality that underlies and informs the “outer” (*zāher*) existence we all experience. Hidden reality can partly be understood only by those who have studied the sacred poems and other religious lore, and by “seers” (*didedār*) who perceive aspects of the *bāten* world directly. Much of the religious knowledge of the Yārsān is

² The sub-group of Sayyeds who used to function as “Dalils” has now lost much of its relevance in Iran.

³ In the Guran region many people believe that a new *dowre* has been initiated by Sayyed Brāke in the nineteenth century, but this view is rejected by other Yārsān.

concerned with knowledge about the *bāten* essence of certain figures and periods, and the *zāher* appearance of divine beings during various *dowres*. Furthermore, there is a corpus of myths, narratives that are known in some form to most members of the group and are referred to in an allusive manner in the religious hymns (see below).

The central ritual of the Yārsān is the *jam* (“meeting”),⁴ in which a minimum of seven male Yārsān must participate, sitting in a circle which they may not leave whilst the ritual is going on. Others may follow the ritual standing outside the circle. A Sayyed must be present to supervise the ritual, and a *kalāmkhwān* (“singer of holy poems”) leads the musical part of the performance. During the *jam*, a bowl of water and some food (for example, sweets or apples) are handed round the circle and ritually partaken of. After this, the ceremony largely consists of rhythmic music, singing, and clapping in an ever-increasing tempo, which towards the climax may induce an altered or ecstatic state of consciousness. Towards the end of the ceremony the music slows down again, and the Sayyed formally ends the ritual.

Where members of other religions pray or listen to sermons, the Yārsān sing. Religious knowledge and emotion are bound up with music in a striking manner. Music is indispensable to the creation of a ritual atmosphere, indicating and establishing the passage to a holy communal experience. It is a key element of the *jam* and many other performances of a religious or semi-religious nature. During the *jam* the music of the sacred instrument, the *tanbur* (a long-necked stringed instrument), accompanies the singing, where solos by the *kalam-khwān* alternate with communal singing. The *tanbur* is exclusively used to accompany songs that are felt to be “religious” (*haqqāni*). Texts of a “semi-religious” character (*majāni*) are accompanied by different instruments (see further below).

Texts and Classifications of the Oral Literature of the Yārsān

A key difficulty in describing the religious “literature” is that different speakers, and sometimes even a single speaker, may use different terms for the same concept, whilst texts that clearly have different functions may be spoken of as if belonging to the same category. Thus the functional difference between the relatively short poetic compositions that are normally sung during the *jam*, and the long poetic texts that represent the core of Yārsān religious knowledge, often appears to be ignored in Yārsān discourse and terminology. For the sake of clarity, we will here use terminology that is most often found in academic publications on the Yārsān, is used in the titles of several such texts, and is sometimes used by members of the group. Thus, a single “long poetic text” is here called a *kalām*, although that word can also be used for the shorter texts sung during the *jam*, which are here called *nazm*. For these long texts some Yārsān also use words like *daftar* (collection of poems) or *dowre* (period, see below), neither of which appears to be more apt to describe a single text than *kalām*.

The classification most often employed by Yārsān treats all compositions as if they were essentially songs. They are divided into three categories: wholly religious or *haqqāni* (“related to God”); semi-religious or *majāzi* (“virtual”); and non-religious or *majlesi* (for worldly

⁴ On some of these concepts see also Hooshmandrad in this volume.

gatherings). This paper is not concerned with the latter category. The well-known Yārsān musician, Ali Akbar Moradi, using a slightly different terminology said:⁵

There are three categories of songs, *kalām-e Perdiwari* [i.e., *haqqāni*],⁶ *majāzi*, and *majlesi*. The *kalām-e Perdiwari* are purely religious. They are recited when one wishes to be in touch with higher things. Recitation of these texts is typically accompanied by the *tanbur*, and there is a typical way of singing the Perdiwari texts:⁷ it begins slowly and gradually gets livelier, finally bringing people into a spiritual state. This is performed during the *jam*, where people believe God is also present. *Majāzi* music sounds very much like *kalām* music . . . but its connection is with physical and earthly things, such as weddings, love, tribal wars, and dancing. They are not connected with the soul. They are performed in a different manner from Perdiwari music. The instruments employed are typically the *kamānche* [a string instrument] and the *shamshāl* [a type of flute] The *tanbur* is not normally used, although this is sometimes seen nowadays. *Majlesi* music is for when people wish to relax and are not paying special attention to the music.

The *Haqqāni* Texts

These mainly comprise the long “sacred” poetic texts (*kalām*), and the “songs” (*nazm*)⁸ that are performed during the ritual. The *kalām*, in turn, are divided into “Perdiwari” and “non-Perdiwari” texts. The former are said to have existed at the time of Soltān Sahāk, and many are believed to have been composed during earlier “periods” of Yārsān history. The Perdiwari *kalāms* are closely linked to the *dowre* or historical period when they are thought to have been composed. This association is so strong that the term *dowre* can denote both a period of mythical history and a collection of poems, and many Yārsān have difficulty distinguishing between the two. Ali Akbar Moradi⁹ defined the Perdiwari *kalāms* as “religious poetry that has existed for a long time and to which no additions or deletions were ever made.” The Perdiwari *kalāms* are mostly concerned with the religious or mythical history of the community. Many refer to the experiences of holy figures during earlier “periods.” On the other hand, a few other, well known *kalāms* are not explicitly connected with a particular *dowre*, but are concerned with some other aspect of religious knowledge.

The later, non-Perdiwari *kalāms* notably include the compositions of the so-called “Thirty-Six Poets” (*si-o shesh shā‘er*), who are connected with the figure known as Sayyed

⁵ Conversation with the author, Göttingen, May 3, 2011.

⁶ The reference appears to be to the *nazm*; see above.

⁷ Note that this informant does not distinguish between the texts that are sung during a *jam* (*nazm*) and the long, more formal hymns (*kalām*).

⁸ On the *nazm* see Hooshmandrad 2004:96-98. Sayyed Fereidoun Hosseini states that the *kalāms* may be recited in their entirety at certain festivals (see below). This seems to refer, however, to teaching sessions where the texts are recited and discussed, not to recitation during a *jam*.

⁹ Conversation with the author, Göttingen, May 3, 2011.

Brāke, who lived in the village of Tutshami in the nineteenth century, and whom many Gurani Yārsān believe to have possessed the Divine Essence.

The main difference between the ancient and later groups of *kalāms* lies in language and style, the language of the later compositions being simpler and easier to understand. While the Perdiwari texts tend to refer to Yārsān sacred history and mythology, the later texts are more often concerned with religious emotions. Some Yārsān argue that the later *kalāms* show more Islamic influences. There is also a difference in prestige: the authority of the Perdiwari *kalāms* appears to be greater, and they are largely studied and recited by learned Yārsān, whereas the later texts are more widely known.

***Majāzi* Texts**

These semi-religious works notably include texts and performances connected with the Iranian epic tradition. This genre, which found its best known expression in Abu'l Qāsem Ferdowsi's written Persian *Shāhnāme* (c. 1000 CE), also plays a considerable role in the oral and written literature of the eastern Kurds (Chaman Ara 2015). It is particularly prominent in Yārsān culture, because the ancient Iranian heroes are believed to have been incarnations of prominent divine Beings. Sayyed Fereidoun Hosseini said:¹⁰

Some poems are religious, but they are not Perdiwari. Others are *majāzi*, they are for social purposes, e.g., *Tarz-e Rostam*. It describes Rostam [an Iranian epic hero] and such topics. When you read it, and even when we ourselves read it, there is a feeling that it belongs to the religious tradition; it is connected with it, but it is not in itself religious. Still, our belief is that Siyāwash for example, who in the *Shāhnāme* is a symbol of the fight for freedom and for the oppressed, was an incarnation of the Essence or soul of Bābā Yādegār [an early Yārsān leader] And when we recite the love story of Shirin and Farhād it is the same thing; we believe it represents the love between Hazrat-e Soltān and Bābā Yādegār. So, for that reason, the Yārsān have a close connection with the *Shāhnāme*.

Religious Discourse and the *Kalāms*

The storylines that form the basis of Yārsān religious knowledge can be expressed in many forms, from bedtime stories, via references in Yārsān discourse and the *nazm* that are sung during the *jam*, to the formal, allusive poetry of the *kalāms*. Many discussions on religion, at least by Sayyeds and others who have studied the religion, are interspersed with quotations of lines or stanzas from the religious hymns.

Religious knowledge—both esoteric (*bāten*) and mundane (*zāher*)—plays an important

¹⁰ Quotations from Sayyed Fereidoun Hosseini are translations of long discussions in Persian between Sayyed Fereidoun and the present writer from 2008 until the present time, in person or by telephone, in various places in Iran, Norway, and Germany. All translations from Persian texts and narratives in this paper are by the present writer.

role in the religious life of the community. It is said that certain Sayyeds and visionaries possess esoteric knowledge that may not be communicated to outsiders. Still, community discourse on religious topics suggests that knowledge of the various *dowres* and of the identity of the incarnations of the Seven Beings during each of these are part of the core of religious knowledge, as are several great Yārsān myths.

This knowledge is transmitted and used in a number of ways: it is taught informally by parents to children; it forms part of priestly learning, which is transmitted within the “lineage” to which a priest belongs (usually from father to son); the knowledge is constantly alluded to in *nazms* and *kalāms*, which are often quoted in religious discussions, suggesting these difficult and allusive texts have been memorized and pondered, at least by an intellectual elite. Like the Yezidi sacred texts, the *kalāms* can only be understood through the oral transmission of the myths and religious narratives they allude to.

It is interesting to note that, unlike the Yezidi tradition, where sacred poems are mainly used as liturgical texts, this is not the case with the Yārsān *kalāms*. Also, unlike the Yezidis (Kreyenbroek 1995:132-33), the Yārsān have no distinct social group whose task it is to memorize the sacred texts. That means that a sizable and complex body of texts have been preserved by a poor and partly illiterate community, not because the texts are needed for ritual purposes but for other reasons that were evidently considered to be of key importance. Memorizing these texts is generally regarded as the province of Sayyeds, though not all Sayyeds have an interest in the *kalāms*, and non-Sayyeds may also study these texts if they choose. The contents of the texts are discussed at religious gatherings. Sayyede Behnaz Hosseini states: “After the children have grown up . . . they can participate in Yārsāni Kalām classes. In these classes, elders and religion experts read and interpret the Kalām and then lead a discussion with the adolescents” (2017:29). Sayyed Fereidoun Hosseini, describing the three days of fasting (Marnow) followed by the Feast of Khāwankār, says:

But the true occasion for performing and really concentrating on these texts is the Fast of Khāwankār, or Marnow. The texts are also recited on other occasions, but especially during the Fast of Khāwankār

It was the custom in Gahwāre [a Yārsān village], and happily it still is, that when the days of the fast begin, on the first night, called *shab-e raftan be khāne-ye Sayyed* (“the night for visiting the house of the Sayyed”), people go to visit their Sayyed at his home. In the house of the Sayyed they prepare a pottage called *āsh-e māst*, which consists of yogurt and rice. They mix this, cook it, pray over it, and offer it to the *Morids* (“followers”) who come as guests. Everyone must bring his *niyāz* (“offering”). . . . The Sayyed gives him [the visitor] *āsh-e māst* in a bowl with a piece of bread [and he eats] until all are assembled. When they are all there, they distribute the offerings and recite *kalāms* together. Then, around 10:30 or 11:00 p.m. they get up and the Sayyed and his *Morids* go to visit another Sayyed. They recite one *kalām* there and then go on to another Sayyed. This goes on till dawn. At dawn, they are tired and go home to sleep.

This happens for three nights. During those three nights, apart from reciting the *kalāms* with *tanbur* and all that, they [the Sayyeds] also offer explanations of the *kalāms*. They recite the *kalāms*—the Perdiwari *kalāms* and those of Nowruz—and explain them. They explain each one to the young ones, and then they explain the religious customs of the Yārsān. On those three nights,

fortunately, people learn a great deal about the melodies¹¹ and about the texts. In this way, religious knowledge is transmitted orally.

Thus, while most Yārsān are familiar with the outlines of their great myths and of religious history because they heard these narratives in various forms, religious “experts” appear to function as channels through which the deeper religious knowledge that is contained in the *kalāms* is made accessible to the community at large.

Scripturalization

There is a widespread belief that the Yārsān have always had a sacred book but that it was lost from sight for a long time. This putative book was sometimes referred to as *Saranjām* (“Conclusion”). In the recent past, in the Guran area at least, it was possible to order a handwritten copy of a certain sacred text (rather than the entire collection) from members of a single family that was allowed to write such texts down (see below). Since this was expensive, relatively few such manuscripts existed. In any case, these manuscripts, it seems, were primarily regarded as venerable objects rather than as sources of information. The fact that such a tradition existed suggests that this was an old and established practice, but otherwise we do not know much about the written transmission of these texts. The Introduction to the *Daftar-e Diwān-e Gewre-ye Perdiwari* (see below) suggests that, for a long time, written copies of sacred texts were absent or very scarce. It is probably true to say, therefore, that for several centuries the community relied mainly on oral transmission.

Over the past thirty years, however, collections of sacred texts have been published either privately, intended for the sole use of the community, or by “mainstream” publishers, which gave access to the texts to a wider public including researchers.

An account of Yārsān views on the origin and history of the compilation of Perdiwari *kalāms* (here referred to as *Daftar-e Haqiqat*) is found in the Introduction to the *Daftar-e Diwān-e Gewre-ye Perdiwari* (Anonymous 2008:1):

From the appearance of Soltān [Sahāk] till the end of the period of Bābā Yādegār, perhaps, as is laid down in this *Daftar*, the Ahl-e Ḥaqq had the *Daftar-e Haqiqat* (“the manuscript of Truth”) at their disposal in visible, written form, noble and beautiful.

Later, as a result of the appearance of a period of hardship, for a time there were no buyers, and it [the *Daftar*] was passed from hand to hand secretly, until *Hazrat-e Haqq* [God] arranged for there to be the means and purveyors of teaching, and those who picked the grapes of Truth were successful in their endeavors, so that some of the treasures of the *Daftar*—valuable items and priceless texts—are now at the disposal of each individual according to their [i.e., those individuals’] subtlety and suitability to receive this grace . . .

¹¹ I.e., presumably about the melody with which *nazms* are to be recited.

Sayyed Fereidoun Hosseini said:

Since the Revolution things have become much better, there are lots of texts available now. Before the Revolution, there were no printed copies of the texts. If you wanted a copy of a text you had to go to a family who had an original copy and specialized in writing them. They were written in very beautiful handwriting. If you wanted to have a copy you had to order it and pay the scribe for writing it. There may have been one or two *darwish* (“pious men”) in the region who could do this, a special family. People believed that Soltān Sahāk gave them a special grace so they could do this. For instance, [when] my father wanted to have a copy of the *Ketāb-e Perdiwari* (“Book of Perdiwari Texts”), he went there and got it. But a copy of the Thirty-Six Poets was very expensive, my father said it would have cost him as much as several hectares of land So it was limited. As it was very expensive and people were illiterate anyway, this [copying sacred texts] wasn’t done very often. Only Sayyeds generally had written copies, they called them *Daftar*. If people wanted to swear, they swore on those copies. Another reason for this scarcity was that there was very little paper available, whereas now, since the Revolution, there are all these Xerox machines and things, so it is easier to make copies.

As was said earlier, a series of collections of *kalāms* has been published in the past decades. These are now widely available to Yārsān and non-Yārsān alike. It could be that, at some time in the future, the cumulative effect of these publications will be that a canon of key Yārsān texts will emerge, whilst no such well defined collection of sacred texts existed previously.

The first of the publications in question was Safizādeh 1996, which comprises a collection of texts here called *Kalām-e Khazāne* or *Saranjām*. The author (Safizādeh 1996:20) mentions the existence of several other texts not included in his work. That publication was followed by that of Hosseyni (2003), which claims to include the entire Perdiwari tradition: “The true *kalāms* of the Ahl-e Haqq, i.e. the *Diwān-e Gewre* (the Great Collection), the only written *Diwān* belonging to the period of Soltān Sahāk” (Hosseyni 2003:3). Tāheri’s (2007) *Saranjām* is the result of a long and painstaking comparison between different manuscripts; it comprises a greater number of texts than Hosseyni’s work. The *Daftar-e Diwān-e Gewre-ye Perdiwari* (Anonymous 2008) and other collections of *kalāms* were produced locally and were evidently intended for a more restricted, Yārsān readership. Among traditional Yārsān Sayyeds, the latter work has a greater prestige than the others. These collections, although based upon roughly the same corpus of older manuscripts, constitute independent efforts to publish the sacred texts of the Yārsān in a structured manner. There are significant differences in the sequence of the texts, and some variations as to which texts are included. Nevertheless, the commonalities exceed the differences. Thus, a body of texts is now emerging upon whose authenticity most Yārsān seem to be agreed.

Outlook

The increased use of writing is inevitably leading to a transformation of the religious

textual tradition of the Yārsān to some extent. In essence, this is a process of “reification”—the change of status from an intangible text existing in the memory (or “heart”) of some authoritative figures that can be only listened to uncritically (as neither time to deliberate while listening nor objects of comparison are available), to that of a tangible object that can be scrutinized at leisure and compared with other, similar texts. The differences between an oral tradition (where texts in a sense exist side by side, and the existence of variant forms is either ignored or taken for granted) and a book (which forces the author(s) to determine the proper sequence and the best, or “true” form of the texts), implies that those who will carry the tradition forward will require skills that traditional priests did not need to have, ideally including a theoretical understanding of the way oral traditions function. So far, however, the various publications of sacred texts that have appeared do not seem to have given rise to much debate, or indeed great interest in the community. Whilst among the Yezidis the newly written sacred texts are studied intensively by an intellectual elite, so as to reach a deeper and more objective understanding of their religion, at the time of writing the Yārsān do not appear to feel the need for such activities. Those who have the texts by heart and can quote from them in religious discussions do not need written versions, while the scrutiny of the *kalāms* as a basis for a new study of the religion is hampered by a range of factors. Besides a reluctance to discuss religious questions in public—often based on realistic fears as well as tradition—and the scarcity of suitable forums for religious debates,¹² another contributory factor may be the lack of central authority: individual communities tend to have their own formal or informal leaders, and there appears to be little or no interaction between these.

Another factor that may eventually inform the reception of the *kalāms*, at least in Iran, is the virtual loss of spoken forms of Gurani and the decline of the active command of the literary form of that language. Instead of texts that are recited at least in part because of the messages they contain, in the future *kalāms* may come to be perceived as texts that are recited for the inherent power of their mysterious, divinely inspired words.

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¹² A few websites exist (such as <http://www.yaresan.com/> and <http://www.yarsan.blogfa.com/>), but these apparently aim to inform the reader on the Yārsān tradition rather than engaging in debates as to its teachings.

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