THE YEZIDI PANTHEON

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General

Besides the Holy Triad, constituting the so-called dogmatic base of the Yezidi religion and standing distinctly out in the cult and in the beliefs, the pantheon of the Yezidis includes a multiplicity of deities and spirit guardians, which are not too easy to determine, by many reasons other than scarcity or sparseness of the available material. Identifying the denotata of the Yezidi nomenclature of divine beings is obstructed by the multiplicity and heterogeneity of the revered historical personalities—Sheikh ‘Adi’s kinsmen and ambience, locally significant saints, having restricted spheres of influence, the Sufi saints (Mansur al-Hallaj, Rabi’a ‘Adawiyaa), Biblical and Qur’anic characters (Ibrahim, Musa, ‘Isa, ‘Ali, etc.), as well as simply sheikhs and pirs possessing a certain halo of saintliness. At the same time, many mythical and semi-mythical figures, saints, often even historical characters, having retained their cults in various Near Eastern religious traditions, e.g. in Islam and, in particular, in its so-called heretical environment, gained popularity with the Yezidis who worship them along with their genuine deities. A specific regional figure from this category of characters can be included in the paradigm of the Yezidi divine beings in case it has been deeply implanted in the popular mind and adapted to the religious tradition (e.g. Ibrahim-khalil, Khidir-nabi).

For the figures of the folk pantheon it is impossible to identify the unambiguous attributes of sanctity for a given figure even in the relig-

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1 The Holy Triad includes Malak-Tawīs, Sultan Yezid, and Sheikh ‘Adi bin Musafir, a historical figure, the founder of the ‘Adawīyya Sufi order, which was later to become the main basis for the formation of the Yezidi community (cf. Asatrian, Arakelova 2003: 4-9; the detailed account of this issue see in the forthcoming monograph by the same authors, Asatrian, Arakelova).
ions having an official institute of canonisation (as in Christianity). Even more so it is related to the doctrines wherein the deification or canonisation is done informally, in the way of a popular tradition. In Yezidism, these informal criteria can be satisfied by the character being by all represented in the oral religious tradition (Qawl-ü-bayt’), as well as in most cases, by having been rested in a legendary burial place in Lalish.\(^2\) Canonisation (deification) can be also substantiated by a genealogy going back to the relatives and subordinates of Sheikh ‘Adi (Sheikh Hasan, Fakhr-ad-din, and Sheikh Shams).

The figures identified here as deities are those who patronise diverse spheres of human activities or personify the natural phenomena. This list does not include the seven avatars of Malak-Tawûs: ‘Azrail, Dardail, Israfil, Mikail, Jabrail, Shamnail, and Turail (of which ‘Azrail, the alleged head of the Seven, is usually identified with Malak-Tawûs, the Seven all in all still being the emanations of the latter), as well as most of their counterparts within the system of saints—historical personalities of the ‘Adawiiya order, eiz. Sheikh Abu Bakr (Šexîbakr), Sajad ad-din (Sijîdîn, being characterised as gâsidê ruhâ mirîyà—psychopomp, responsible for escorting the souls of the dead to the underworld), Nasr ad-din (identified with the angel of death; he used to be the executor under Sheikh ‘Adi, killing everyone who countered him). The exceptions are Sheikh Shams, symbolising the sun, and Fakhr ad-din identified with the moon.

As regards the deities controlling the natural phenomena, most are believed to heal the diseases caused by the corresponding spheres under their command. It is to be noted that the healing function is commonly ascribed to the sanctuaries, shrines, and certain sheikhy clans, as one of the important elements of working miracles (see Arakelova 2001a).

The names of deities, spirit guardians and saints are commonly featured with the caste-related titles sheikh (šex), pîr (p’îr), as well as dervish (dawrêş). The latter means, as a rule, a saint, a righteous, errant hermit, a mystic, perhaps even “the lord, the master”. This word, as shown by its Old Iranian proto-form *driguška- (< *adari-gauša-), originally meant “listener, (spiritual) disciple”, being attested also in the Middle Iranian texts (cf., e. g., in Sogdian zûwšk, ŏţûwšk/ţûwšk “disciple”). Socially and semantically, dervish is comparable with the

\(^2\) The valley of Lalish, in the mountains north of Mosul in Iraq, where the shrine of Sheikh ‘Adi and sanctuaries of other holy beings are located (see Guest 1987: 16-17; Kreybroek 1995: 77-80).