THE RECONSTRUCTION OF ŠAYH ʿADĪ B. MUSĀFIR'S BIOGRAPHY ON THE BASIS OF ARABIC AND KURDISH SOURCES

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1 Introduction

While speaking of the Yezidi denomination, we must keep in mind the central position of Šayh ʿAdī within it. The Šayh's teaching, itself impacted by both rationalistic and ecstatic forms of Sufism, was reflected in the religious views of the Yezidi Kurds.


In the present paper, we reconstruct the biography of Šayh ʿAdī b. Musāfir by adding oral sources of the Yezidi Kurds to the material in Arabic. The Yezidi religious poetry contains valuable material on the history and world outlook of the Yezidi community, but it could not be heard by outsiders and was only recently recorded. In an indirect way, that is, by using poetic and religious symbolism, the Kurdish material discloses the life data of the Šayh which does not contradict the written Arabic sources.

2 Biography of Šayh ʿAdī

2.1 Previous Inadequate Attempts to identify Šayh ʿAdī

In the past there existed a number of suggestions concerning Šayh ʿAdī's personality (Badger 1852:110-113; Semēnov 1927:76; Wigram 1914:104). With regard to the information in two Christian sources of the 15th century, that of an archbishop of Arbil Ješū ʿAyūb and that of the monk Rāmīšū, the case is as follows: in the early 13th century, Šayh ʿAdī al-Kurdi did away with the monks and occupied the Christian monastery in Lalish, transforming it into his sanctuary (ʿAlī 1989:81; al-Ḥasanī 1953:12, 20-21).

First of all, these sources, either deliberately or otherwise, identify Šayh ʿAdī b. Musāfir with his brother Sahr's grandson, whose complete name was Šayh ʿAdī b. Abī l-Barakāt al-Kurdi. The latter person indeed lived in the 13th century and, for

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1 The best bibliography on Yezidism is by ʿAwwād (1969).

2 The Kurdish authors and titles are referred to according to Kurdish Latin alphabet.
some reason, was engaged in a struggle with the monks quartered in his patrimonial (at least, as it appeared to him) abode.

Secondly, the interior layout of the tomb of Šayh ʿAdī does not have elements characteristic of Christian monasteries (Badger 1852:110). The architecture of the Yezidi buildings provides evidence that they had been erected in pre-Christian times; during the late Roman age, the Christian monks settled in them (Wigram:1914:94).

Thirdly, it is no coincidence that the anti-Yezidi tendencies in these Syrian manuscripts fall within the 15th century. It was a time when the Mesopotamian Christians, being under the patronage of the Muslim rulers, were engaged in activity against the ‘infidels’³. As Longrigg indicated, the situation with the Yezidis was aggravated by the fact they always were in opposition to all the authorities (Longrigg 1925:8-9).

2.2 Data on ʿAdī’s Origin

At present, the majority of scholars maintain that Šayh ʿAdī b. Musāfīr arrived in the Kurdish mountains of Hakkari from aš-Šām (historical Syria). Thus, the Yezidi tradition says:

“Šayh ʿAdī came from Šām
In the East [he] got down to work,
Virtue is upon the houses of [our] fathers,
Šayh ʿAdī himself is a gift of the Light,
[He is] Light from the house of the Šayhs”⁴.


With regard to ʿAdī’s descent, the issue is still debated. al-ʿAzzāwī (1935:29) adduces the two most wide-spread genealogies:


At any rate, the Umayyad origin of Šayh ʿAdī is almost beyond any doubt. This fact, on the one hand, explains the sensitivity of his followers to Yazīd b. Muḥāwiya and, on the other hand, makes us think of the connections between ʿAdī’s, or his successors’, teaching and the ideas of the Merwanites. It is noteworthy that as late as in the early 20th century, the sect of the Merwanites in Shugnan (Badahshan) was also called Yezidiya⁵.

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³ See e.g., “Kurdische evreei” 1988:634.
⁴ Celfel 1978:18. See also: Silēman 1979:100, 104.
⁵ The sources prove that the last Umayyad ruler, Marwān II, is a direct ancestor of Šayh ʿAdī. Before ascending the throne (740-750), Marwān II ruled over Northern Mesopotamia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan,
Thus, with certain reservation, we can conclude that Šayh ʿAdī b. Musāfir was an Arab from the once powerful dynasty of Umayyads with Kurdish blood running in his veins.

ʿAdī b. Musāfir was born between 1073 and 1078 in Bayt-Fār in Baʿlabakk, which is situated in the Biqāʾ Valley (present-day Lebanon). Afterwards, ʿAdī’s birth was described through picturesque legends. According to one of them, ʿAdī’s future as a Şūfī was pre-determined by events with his father:

“Musāfir b. Ismāʿīl, the father of ʿAdī, went to a forest and remained there for forty years. Once he had a dream that someone told him: “O Musāfir! Come out and copulate with your wife, and a Friend of God will come to you, whose fame will spread in the East and the West.” Then, Musāfir came out from the forest and went to his wife. She told him: “I shall not do it unless the Luminary arises.” Then Musāfir appealed: “O residents of the city! I am Musāfir, I came because I received an order to climb my mare, and Friends of God will come to those who climb their mares.” And thus 313 Friends of God were born to him”⁸ (al-Hasanī 1953:15-16).

2.3 The Baghdad Period⁹

As a young person, ʿAdī b. Musāfir moved to Baghdad and spent the first half of his life there. In this centre of culture and education, ʿAdī learned from the esteemed figures and won respect for his good manners. In Baghdad ʿAdī b. Musāfir was seriously worried about the increasing misunderstandings among Muslims and condemned those who furthered the split in Islam, either deliberately or guided by mistaken considerations.

Another major issue that must be mentioned is the Šayh’s attitude towards ‘illicit innovations’ (bidʿa). As is well known, the notion of bidʿa was always unclearly defined since different dogmatic schools characterised the same action or opinion in different ways, that is, describing them either as an illicit innovation or as a faithful idea hallowed by the Qur’an and Islamic tradition. Therefore, the question of who

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⁶ According to Drower (1941:151-152), the marvellous ruins around Baʿlabakk had an emotional impact on ʿAdī’s views.

⁷ ‘Friend of God’ is a term for Şūfī.

⁸ I.e. 313 associates and/or successors of ʿAdī b. Musāfir.

⁹ Sub-chapters 2.3 and 2.4 are chiefly based on the two major sources – ʿAdī b. Musāfir, Works; Frank 1911 – which, therefore, are not referred to.
in ‘Adī’s view belonged to the *ahl al-bidā‘a* is of great interest. On the basis of the Șayḥ’s works written in Baghdad, we can conclude that the theologians of his circle criticised the following: aš-Šī‘a, al-Mu’tazila, al-Qadariyya, and al-Mușabbiha (Anthropomorphists), which means that ‘Adī b. Musāfir, in general, shared the point of view of al-Hanābila. Nevertheless, as early as in the Baghdad period of his activity, Șayḥ ‘Adī took a great interest in Şüfism, a position which contradicts the attitude of al-Hanābila to the theory and practice of Islamic mysticism. This ‘inconsistency’ can be understood by taking into account that ‘Adī’s Şüfism integrates with the Qur’an.

Evidently, ‘Adī b. Musāfir felt cramped and suffocated amongst those theologians who restricted their minds by the Qur’an and the ideas of deceased authorities. The point here is that in the late 11th-early 12th centuries, mysticism attracted many ordinary Sunnis, who greatly appreciated such characteristics of Şüfi teaching as advocacy of poverty, repudiation of collaboration with authorities and hence – of certain material benefits, and secret charitable deeds in order to avoid earthly glory.

Speaking of ‘Adī’s activity in Baghdad, we must pay special attention to the Şüfi Șayḥs who influenced his treatises and his subsequent life in general. Șayḥ ‘Adī and al-Gazâlî (1058-1111) could have become acquainted with each other, and in the year of al-Gazâlî’s death, the Șayḥ moved to Hakkari. Another version is that ‘Adī b. Musāfir knew al-Gazâlî’s brother Mağd ad-Dîn Ahmad al-Gazâlî. At any rate, Șayḥ ‘Adī attended Ahmad’s lectures in Baghdad, including those concerning İblîs.

In different ways, other Şüfis influenced the Șayḥ’s teaching, as hinted in the Yezidi sacred book, the *Meshef-i Reş* (Marie 1911:22-39). Yezidism supposes that the historical personalities are represented in the capacity of seven angels/deities, ruling the universe, by turns, through the will of God. Five of them have been identified by Semênov (1927:77). They are: ‘Abdalqâdîr al-Çilâî, al-Hasan al-Başrî, Maşîr al-Hallâq, Qâdis ad-Ban, and Fahr ad-Dîn Tabaristânî al-Qaydî.

‘Abdalqâdîr al-Çilâî (1077-1166), who had gone with ‘Adî to the pilgrimage in 1116, evaluated his piety in the following phrase: “If the prophetic mission was gifted for the diligence, it would be gifted to Șayḥ ‘Adî b. Musâfir.” We also know of Șayḥ ‘Adî’s saying about al-Çilâî which is as picturesque poetically. Once ‘Adî b. Musâfir said to ‘Abdalqâdîr’s disciples visiting him in Hakkari: “Welcome you

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10 Since the issue of Yezidi demonology is a specific subject, we must note that Șayḥ ‘Adî’s views on this topic were in accordance with traditional Islamic theology.

11 This text’s authorship is unlikely to be ascribed to ‘Adî b. Musâfir (Bittner 1911), although Kurtoev (1971) holds an opposite opinion. At any rate, the *Meshef-i Reş* reflects some points linked to Șayḥ ‘Adî’s life and teaching.

12 ‘Diligence’ (*muğâbada*) in the Şüfi terminology is one of the stations on the way towards God.
who left a sea to come to a brook. I can see ‘Abdalqādir taking the rein of all the saints in his hand and operating the cavalry of lovers of God’.


Apparently, for the sake of confirming the prestige of the Yezidi community through the fame of al-Ǧilānī, there is his ‘grave’ not far away from the grave of Šayḫ ‘Adī, although al-Ǧilānī is in fact buried in Baghdad (Drower 1941:156). The tradition says that ‘Abdalqādir was a founder and an eponymous of the tariqa Qādiriya, although in reality, it was founded by his successors after the 13th century (Prozorov 1991:65). This tariqa has followers in present-day Southern Kurdistan, district of Kirkuk (Nikitine 1964:315-316). Thus, ‘Abdalqādir al-Ǧilānī plays an essential role in the composition of ‘Adī b. Musāfīr’s theology and is highly honoured by the Kurds, both Yezidis and Muslims.

Another ‘grave’ situated in that district is that of al-Hasan al-Baṣrī (642-728). Most probably, this situation reveals a similar intention since the ‘graves’ of al-Baṣrī are dispersed throughout the Islamic world. Another supposition is that there exists a mytho-mystical identification between al-Hasan al-Baṣrī and Šayḫ Ḥasan b. ‘Adī b. Abū l-Barakāt b. Saḥr b. Musāfīr (1194/95-1246/47), who played a crucial role in Yezidi history. The fact of al-Baṣrī’s ‘grave’, the quotations from the Qur’an at his and ‘Adī’s shrines together with other attributes were designed to protect the Yezidi sanctuaries from Muslim desecration (Badger 1852:112).

However, the most esteemed personality in the religious folklore of the Yezidis is Abū l-Muğīr al-Husayn b. Mansūr al-Ḫallāġ (858-922). In the Yezidi canticles, admiration for him is re-enforced by the grief of his tragic death (Celîl 1978:37-40; Silêman 1979:133-139). In general, starting from the assumption that al-Ḫallāġ was of Kurdish origin, both the Yezidi and Muslim Kurds have created a special image of al-Ḫallāġ. It is possible that after al-Ḫallāġ’s execution, some of his followers found asylum in the Kurdish mountains, and, thus, could have joined the tariqa ‘Adawiyya.


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13 In Baghdad, al-Ǧilānī attended the school of ad-Dabbās (Prozorov 1991:65).

14 These measures were especially typical, since cruel anti-Yezidi campaigns were repeatedly carried out by the Muslim authorities. See e.g., ‘Ali 1989:78-79; Longrigg 1925:97, 126, 176, 208, 210, 223, 286.
2.4 In the Kurdish Mountains of Hakkari

In order to attain a Şûfî life, Şayh 'Adî desired to seclude himself from the mundane world and he found a quiet haven in Hakkari. This Kurdish region, once ruled by Marwân II, stretches from the lake of Van to Iran in the East and to Mosul in the West. In the observed period, it lost its independence and became subordinated to the rulers of Mosul (al-Hasani 1953:15-16). Here, close to nature, the Kurds were living. With regard to their religion, the medieval Arab historians relate them to the Zoroastrian sect called Tirâhiyya. According to the monk Râmişû', the local Kurds used to summer with their herds in nomads’ camps returning to the environs of Mosul in the winter, and the number of their tents exceeded one thousand (al-Hasani 1953:12-13).

At first, Şayh 'Adî b. Musâfir followed a life of solitude, and the local population invented implausible stories concerning his way of living. By way of illustration, we can mention the legends that the Şayh did not eat and never drank. And one day, in order to refute these rumours, the Şayh “ate something in the presence of people” (al-Hasani 1953:7).

Here, the Şayh appears to carry out the mortification of the flesh and the cult of poverty (faqr), of which he was writing in Baghdîd in his Kitâb fihi dikr adab annâfs. Gradually, Şayh 'Adî won respect from the local population. Then with their questions and problems, the people started to come to this dark-complexioned, medium-height person whose speeches “fascinated emotionally rather than rationally” (al-Azzâwî 1935:29; al-Hasani 1953:8). There is a story written by the Şayh’s nephew and successor as a ruler over the Yezidi community, Abû l-Barakât, which shows that the cult of poverty (faqr) was of special significance and success in ‘Adî’s Şûfîsm:

“Once thirty poor men came to my uncle Şayh 'Adî. The ten of them said: O master! Tell us something about the Truth. He told them, and they melted, and on their place the water gulf remained. Then the other ten came nearer saying: Tell us something about the essence of Love. He told them, and they died. After that the last [ten] came nearer and said: O master! Tell us something about essence of poverty

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15 There exists more than sufficient evidence that the territory of present-day Kurdistan was an important Zoroastrian centre from the ancient times until the Islamic age. As it appears to us, the term Bab-dinen (equal to Hakkari, but the latter is also the name of the mountains) traces back to the words “beh-din/vebdin” with the literal meaning of ‘a good faith’, and the suffix for the Plural form, an. The word behdin is the self-definition of Zoroastrians beginning from the Islamic period, or in other words, the place-name “Behdinan” could have a descriptive meaning as ‘the residence of the Zoroastrians’. See also: Ali 1989:85-86.

16 The Highest Truth (al-haqq) is one of 99 Qur’anic attributes of God. In the Şîfî terminology, the word is the name of God relating to His essence (Prozorov 1991:265).
(faqr). He told them, and they rent their garments, and went out naked” (al-Hasani 1953:8).

Surrounded by his disciples, 'Adî b. Musâfir preached in both Arabic and Kurdish. Before long, Christians, Muslims, and the members of other ethno-religious communities joined the Yezidi Kurds, who had already regarded Šayh 'Adî as their teacher (Semênov 1927:77). This fact might have promoted the syncretic nature of Yezidism.

The Šayh presents his eschatological views in the two works of the Baghdad period: Kitâb fihi dîkîr adab an-nafs and I'tiqâd ahl as-sunnâ. Thus, he speaks of Judgement Day and accounts the favours of Divine substances to a man after his death. All these do not exceed the framework of traditional Islamic eschatology. Later, in Hakkari, Šayh 'Adî might still have been preoccupied with such ideas. The latter supposition is based on two stories from the fascinating book of 'Adî's miracles, Kitâb manâqib aššayh 'Adî b. Musâfir.

The first story speaks of a written certificate delivered by the Sultan of Constantinople to a disciple of 'Adî. This certificate is said to contain the petition to the Most High to keep the Šayh and his accomplices away from the Fire of Hell.

The second story is narrated by Šayh al-Bârisîqî. Once, Šayh 'Adî addressed him while they were crossing the village cemetery: “Have you not heard that those buried there appeal to me for help?” Pointing to one of the graves emitting puffs of smoke, Šayh 'Adî came nearer to it and began to ask God to take compassion on that man. According to al-Bârisîqî, the smoke immediately ceased, and the Šayh informed him that the deceased was forgiven. To prove this, Šayh 'Adî asked the buried person whose name was Hasan: “O Hasan! Do you enjoy your place?” And an astonished al-Bârisîqî heard from the grave: “Yes, yes”.

Essentially, the last story is about punishment in the afterlife with reminiscences of interrogations and tests in the grave. It is remarkable that here Šayh 'Adî is represented as an intercessor (as in the Yezidi beliefs)17.

However, as early as in the late Baghdad period, 'Adî's qaṣidas reveal motifs of self-deification as a result of the "union with God". After his death, they developed into the idea of the incarnation of a lower deity. According to the Yezidis, alongside the Creator there exists the lower deity incarnated in three images: the beautiful bird - Melek-Tauś, the young man - Yazîd b. Mu'âwiya, and the aged Šayh - Šayh 'Adî (Semênov 1927:72-73).

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17 In 1216, Badr ad-Dîn Lu'lu', the ruler of Mosul, defeated the Yezidi Kurds and defiled Šayh 'Adî's tomb. This shocking event, according to al-Hasani (1953:22-23), explains the Yezidis' belief that after his death, Šayh 'Adî ascended to Heaven having left a testament. Then, a good angel appeared and said that that place should be regarded as Šayh 'Adî's grave. Thus, the Yezidi Kurds found consolation in beliefs of Šayh 'Adî's ascension and, consequently, in his divine essence (see e.g. Bîdîstî, Šaraf-nâmê 83-84).
Material on 'Adī’s life in Kurdistan suggests that while he was alive, the idea of his ‘divine nature’ remained in embryo. The stories of ‘Adī’s miracles (karāmāt) and grace (baraka) are characteristic of that period when Sufism slowly becomes a popular religion. Expressive stories such as the following, illustrate ‘Adī’s pious erudition and holiness:

Once ‘Adī’ travelled to Mosul at his followers’ request. While the whole city was in a joyful excitement, one of the Mosul ‘ulamā’, called Yūnus, envied Sayh ‘Adī’s fame and intended to put his religious erudition to the test. However, Yūnus himself was unable to answer a simple theological question that ‘Adī asked him. Later, an ashamed Yūnus explained his confusion by a miraculous case: when he was about to answer that question, he saw lions at ‘Adī’s right and left hands who opened their mouths wide and would gorge him if he dared to say a word.18

Afterwards, when the boundaries between the Yezidis and the tariqa of ‘Adawiya had been fixed, the Kurds began to ascribe their own ideas to Sayh ‘Adī. This is a frequent phenomenon in history which intends to consecrate pre-Islamic creeds by famous Islamic personalities.

Sayh ‘Adī b. Musāfīr said about his mission: “I know that I am given time when nothing soothes me and supports me. But in this time I soothe everything in me and I support it.”

Thus, we find Sayh ‘Adī b. Musāfīr appearing in Kurdish history as a solitary pious person. He won fame amongst the Kurds and their neighbours alike, and in Mosul and Baghdad, too. In Hakkari, the Sayh founded his tariqa, the members of which split into two groups after his death. The first group settled in Egypt and Syria and existed as an Islamic tariqa until at least the 16th century. The others, chiefly the members of ‘Adī’s family and the other Sayhs, joined the Kurdish religious group through filling the position of its spiritual leaders (Nikitine 1964:326).

In his declining years (when he was about 90 years old), ‘Adī b. Musāfīr passed away in the lone house that he had built himself in Lalish.19 Twice during his life, Sayh ‘Adī went to the pilgrimage to Mecca (once, as we have written, in 1116 from Hakkari joining ‘Abdalqādir al-Ǧilānī).20

This is a general re-construction of Sayh ‘Adī b. Musāfīr’s biography. Other views and suggestions do not appear to be well argumented.

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18 As is known, the lions in many cultures are firm guards of divinities.
19 The exact year of his death is not known for certain: either 555, or 557, or 558 A.H., i.e. about 1162 (al-‘Azzāwī 1935:29; al-Hasani 1953:15-17). Soon, the tomb of Sayh ‘Adī became the organizational and economic basis of the tariqa, recalling the Sufi cloister, zāwīya.
20 Legends of ‘Adī’s pilgrimages are described by Seabrook (1927:326-327) and Wigram (1914:104-105).
3 Conclusion

In this paper we have endeavoured to clarify Šayh ʿAdī’s biography to pave the way for further investigations of the formation of his views. We maintain that Yezidism, as well as other Kurdish religious teachings, traces back to the common ancient religious system. Since the Kurdish tribal groups were isolated by the mountainous nature of their country and by political rivalry, the success and failure of Islamization were strongly dependent on disseminators of the new cultural values. As a result, a number of Kurdish local religions came into existence.

The decisive factor in the Yezidi case is the personality and teaching of Šayh ʿAdī b. Musāfir. Thus, the Yezidi case proves that Sufism was one of the main ways for the introduction of the Kurds to Islamic values and evolution of the Kurdish tradition.

REFERENCES

A. Primary sources


B. Secondary sources


