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Iran and the Caucasus 21 (2017) 376-380

Yezdistan *versus* Kurdistan: Another Legend on the Origin of the Yezidis

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the analysis of the term *Yezdistan* (*Ēzdīstān*) attested in a Yezidi legend, having obvious parallels with the *Shahnameh*'s "Tale of Zahhak". It is particularly interesting that this plot does not occur in any of the Kurmanji versions of the *Shahnameh* ever recorded in Armenia and represents, in fact, a separate legend out of the epic context.

Keywords

Yezidis Origin, Yezdistan, Kurdistan, *Shahnameh*

The syncretic nature of Yezidism, revealed in its various aspects (see, e.g., Arakelova 2004; eadem 2015; Asatrian/Arakelova 2014: 121-132), is particularly obvious in the fact of coexistence of several legends on the origin of the Yezidi people in the tradition. Two of them—one of the pronounced Abrahamic background, and the other, going back to an Old Iranian mythologem—have been previously discussed in detail (Kreyenbroek 1995: 182-192; Spät 2002; Asatrian 2007; Asatrian/Arakelova 2014: 72-76).

However, the Yezidi lore attests one more ethno-genetic myth, going back to a *Shahnameh* plot, which occurs in a text written down in Armenia, in the 40-s of the last century, by the prominent Yezidi pandit Amine Avdal. His informant, Ahmade Čolo from the village of Alagaz, Ashtarak region, was a well-known story-teller and an outstanding connoisseur of the Yezidi oral tradition. Originally from historical Western Armenia, he moved to Eastern Armenia after the 1915 Genocide in the Ottoman Empire.

The legend told by Ahmade Čolo, says: "On the shoulders of an unrighteous king, two snakes had grown up. The king asked the shaikhs how

to protect himself from their dangerous presence. The shaikhs told him that if he would feed the snakes with human brain, they would make no harm to him. Thus, every day, by the king's order, they killed a young man from the inhabitants of this country and fed the snakes with his brain. Soon, however, the executioners felt sorry for the young men, and they started killing sheep instead and feeding the snakes with the sheep brain. And those saved young men found their shelter in the mountains of *Yezidistan* (*Ēzdistān*), and their descendants later shaped the Yezidi people. In the mountains, they started to fight against the king and finally defeated him" (Avdal 2006: 18).

There can be no doubt that the legend is an explicit echo of the *Shahnameh* story of Zakhak, a despotic and power-hungry king, full of wicked desires, who, tempted with the promise of unlimited power, makes an alliance with Ahriman and, with the latter's help, takes the royal throne. Ahriman, having turned into a handsome young man, becomes Zakhak's cook, pleases the king in every way, and eventually asks him, as a reward, to let him kiss Zakhak's shoulders. After the kisses two black snakes grow up on the king's shoulders. There is no way to get rid of them: each time they cut the snakes' heads, new ones appear immediately on their places. Then Ahriman comes to Zakhak in the form of a doctor and gives him an advice to feed the snakes with human brain, hoping thereby to exterminate the human race. Further, when the Iranians proclaim Zakhak as the king instead of expelled Jamshid, Zakhak reigns over Iran for a thousand years, committing atrocities and every day feeding the snakes with two young men. He kills Jamshid and his descendants. Only Fereydun, Jamshid's great-grandson, survives: his mother entrusts the child to a hermit, and Fereydun grows up in the forests of Alborz. It is just Fereydun who, being back in 16 years, comes to know about his origin, defeats Zakhak and leaves him chained in a deep cave of Damavand.

Among other obvious elements, connecting the two characters, there is even such a peculiar detail as their long reign: Zakhak was on the throne for a thousand years, and the king from the Yezidi legend remained in power for the period of several generations of those escaped young men, who settled in the mountains of Yezdistan and whose descendants gave origin to the Yezidi people.

It is interesting to note that this plot has never been attested in any of Kurmanji versions of the *Shahnameh* ever published in Armenia (see, e.g., Hovsep'ean 1901; Haykuni 1904; Srvanjtean 1904; see also Arakelova 1998) and actually represents a separate story beyond the epic context.

One of the most essential moments of the whole story is the unique use of the term *Yezdistan*, absolutely non-typical of the Yezidi oral tradition and wider—I would say, of the whole Yezidi mentality. Speaking of their habitat, the Yezidis always use the term *ēzdīxāna* denoting the proper Yezidi community, and *walatē ēzdīyā*, “the land of the Yezidis”, pointing to the territory inhabited by the Yezidis. We do have an example of a term with the suffix *-stān*, denoting a name of a closed esoteric community—the Ahl-i Haqq's endonym *yāres(t)ān* (“abode of beloved brethren”). But in this particular meaning, it is *ēzdīxāna*, “abode of the Yezidis”, which represents a direct semantic analogy of the Ahl-i Haqq's *yāres(t)ān*, while *Yezdistan* can only imply a territory inhabited by the Yezidis.

Anyway, the term *Yezdistan* never occurs in any other piece of the Yezidi lore. Well, then how could it appear in this particular context? And why did the young men who had escaped the execution and settled in the mountains, become the backbone of the Yezidi community, according to the legend withdrawn from the Iranian epic's context?

In order to find the solution of this enigma, we have to once more turn to the classical version of the *Shahnameh*, which says that in the mountains the survivors form “the tribe of kurds”—*kurdān*. Of course, *kurdān* in the *Shahnameh* is not an ethnonym but, rather, a social term, signifying generally cattle-breeders and nomads (Malamir 2008; see also Asatrian 2009). However, starting from the end of the 19th century, this detail, alongside with other ideological myths, has been actively used in the nationalistic Kurdish circles with the purpose of artificial archaisation of the newly-shaping Kurdish ethnos (see, e.g., MacKenzie 1963; Asatrian 2009), in particular, for the justification of numerous legendary versions of the Kurdish ethnogenesis. The latter were allegedly supposed to prove the autochthonous character of various parts of the Kurdish conglomerate on the territories of its present habitation.

This targeted actualisation of the Kurdish identity could give birth to a parallel counter-myth among the Yezidis, emphasising their own, non-Kurdish identity, their dissociation from the Kurdish milieu, with which

they have often been erroneously associated. This problem was particularly topical for the Yezidis of Armenia for at least two reasons. First, most of them were originating from historical Western Armenia and preserved the clear memory of constant persecutions in the Muslim milieu of the Ottoman Empire, particularly from the neighbouring Kurds. Second, in Soviet Armenia, the Yezidi identity was completely ignored by the state and, as Kurmanji speakers, the Yezidis had been recorded as Kurds in all the Soviet population censuses from the 30s and till 1989 (Asatrian/Arakelova 2002: 7-8; Dalalyan 2008).

Under such circumstances, the virtual term Yezdistan as denoting the “land of the Yezidis”, could emerge in a narrative *ad hoc*, as a parallel and reaction to the increasingly spreading term *Kurdistan*, which initially was not either correlated with any historical state, but artificially applied to any territory inhabited by any part of the Kurdish-speaking element.

We should also take into consideration that almost the whole bulk of the folk literature in Kurmanji published in the Soviet Union as “The Kurdish Folklore” (see, e.g. Celil/Celil 1978a, 1978b), in fact, represents the Yezidi oral tradition. As for the *Shahnameh* cycles in Kurmanji, they had been taking shape within the *dangbêžî* traditions in historical Western Armenia equally among the Kurds, Yezidis, and even Armenians, the latter having performed the poetic cycles in both Armenian and Kurmanji. After the 1915 Genocide, bearers of this tradition fled to Eastern Armenia where, starting from the 1920s, folkloric texts in Kurmanji have been recorded exclusively from the Yezidis and Armenians.

Incidentally, the rich and multi-genre Yezidi folklore could have contained a pretty early Yezidi version of *Shahnameh*, in which the above analysed plot could have been reinterpreted as related to the Yezidis long before their migration to Eastern Armenia and, thus, developed as a separate legend of their origin.

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