

# SURA MIHBETÊ

THE IDEA OF LOVE IN THE YEZIDI COSMOGONY  
AND THE DISCUSSION ON THE ONTOLOGY OF LOVE IN EARLY SUFISM

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SESSION III. (16:30-18:30)

YEZIDI STUDIES

ROOM I

Chairs: Johnny Cheung, Peter Nicolaus

1. Cheung, Johnny (*INALCO, Paris*) – On the Tales of Creation recounted by the Yezidi Singers: a Reflection of Mediaeval Sufism?
2. Nicolaus, Peter (*Vienna*) – The Yezidi Genocide
3. Rodziewicz, Artur (*Warsaw*) – *Sura mihbetê*. The Idea of Love in the Yezidi Cosmogony and the Discussion on the Ontology of Love in Early Sufism
4. Żuchowicz, Roman (*University of Warsaw*) – Yezidis' Inscriptions
5. Arakelova, Victoria (*Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, National Academy of Sciences, Armenia; Russian-Armenian State University*) – *The Story of a Christian Martyr of the Yezidi Origin*

## Abstract

In the very first stages of the cosmogony described in the Yezidi sacred hymns, *qewles*, except God and the Pearl there is also Love mentioned. It is consistently and exclusively expressed by a word *mihbet*. This consequence allows to assume that the author or authors of the hymns deliberately selected the term.

In my paper I will try to post a question whether in the Yezidi *qewles* we are dealing with reflexes of the old ongoing controversy among the first Sufis such as Mansur al-Hallaj, Abu al-Hasan al-Daylami or Ruzbihan Baqli on the theological status of Love? The controversy that was also connected with the debate over the terminological distinction between *ishq* (arab.)/ *eshq* (pers.) and *mahabba* (arab.)/ *mohabbat* (pers.) This question seems to be important also for the reason that the codifier of the Yezidism, Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir, who is believed to be the author of some important *qewles*, before settling in Lalish, had been studying in Baghdad and had been a disciple of Ahmad al-Ghazali – the author of *Sawaneh*, the oldest Persian Sufi treatise on love.

# SURA MIHBETÊ • THE IDEA OF LOVE IN THE YEZIDI COSMOGONY AND THE DISCUSSION ON THE ONTOLOGY OF LOVE IN EARLY SUFISM

The main source of information on the Yezidi vision of cosmogony are the religious hymns. Of particular interest is the fact that in initial stages of the world forming, as one of the main factors Love is mentioned.

The subsequent stages of the creation of the world are as follows: in the midst of static and homogeneous dark waters without motion appears luminous Pearl containing God. The Pearl is opened and out of it flows – various hymns illustrate it differently – the sea or four colors or four primary elements. In the next stage of creation the luminous Love appears and God unites these elements by Love. They are condensed by Love that acts as a rennet. In this way the world becomes – the ordered unity.

Such a sequence is presented in the most important Yezidi hymns. For example in the *Quewle Zebuni Meksur*, where we read:

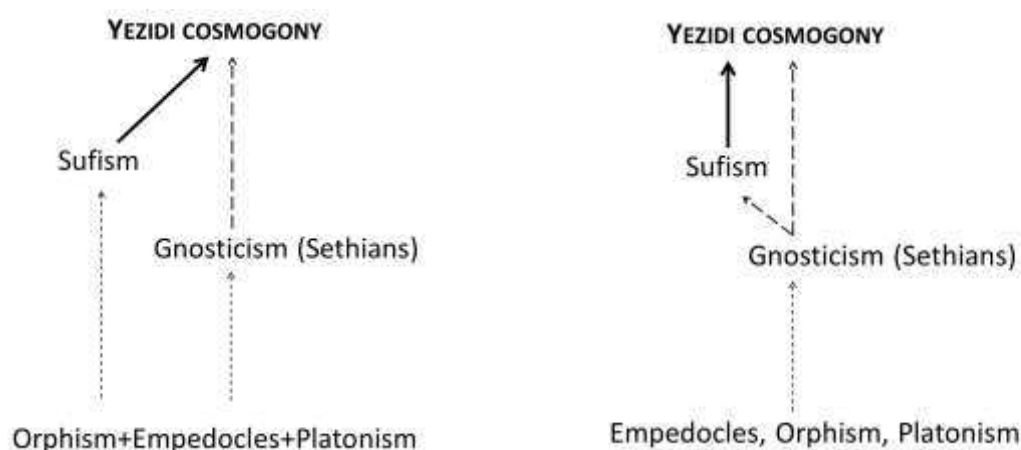
- |    |   |  |
|----|---|--|
| 6  | When the King came from the Pearl<br>Some perceptions developed from it<br>The branch of <b>Love</b> came into being. (...)             | <i>Wekî Pedşayî li durê bû<br/>Hisyatek jê çihê bû<br/>Şaxa mihbetê ava bû. (...)</i>                              |
| 15 | My King spoke pleasantly<br>The King and the Cup and <b>Love</b><br>They had created rules and limits<br>There love had its place (...) | <i>Padşê min xoş kir sihbete<br/>Padşa û kase û mihbete<br/>Ewan çêkiribû hed û sede<br/>Lêk rûniştin mihbete.</i> |
| 18 | <b>Love</b> , the luminous, acting as leaven<br>Came to dwell in it [in heavenly Lalesh] (...)  | <i>Mihbeta xerza nûranî di navda<br/>disekinî</i>  |
| 27 | My King threw rennet into sea and<br>the sea coagulated<br>Smoke rose up from it<br>All the seven heavens were built with it (...)      | <i>Padşê min hêvên havête behrê,<br/>behir meyini<br/>Duxanek jê duxini<br/>Her heft ezman pê nijinî</i>           |
| 32 | The earth did not become solid<br>Until <b>Love</b> the luminous, acting as<br>rennet, was sent into it.                                | <i>'Erdî bi xora negirtibu hisare<br/>Heta mihbeta xerza nurani bi<br/>navda nedihinare.</i>                       |



In an attempt to reconstruct thoughts contained in the hymns, one may notice that Love, following the Pearl which is the source of the primary elements, is what again collects the scattered elements and restores them to the state of the universe resembling the original unity, which was represented by the primary Pearl. We may say that the function of Love is to create the universum by restoring the original state of unity.

Significantly, although the author, or authors, of the hymns, have at their disposal the entire spectrum of terminology to describe the cosmogonical love, **they use the word *mihbet* exclusively, what can be regarded as an intentional act.**

I would like, therefore, to elaborate on the possible origins of the thread of Love in the Yezidi hymns. It should be noted that the main elements of the Yezidi cosmogony resemble an ancient cosmogony of Empedocles and especially of the Orphics. The continuation of the latter tradition can be traced in the Middle East in case of some Gnostic movements, especially Sethians, who believed in a cosmogonical myth that was very similar to that of the Yezidis, and who were already recognized as continuators of Orphism by the Church Fathers.



Although this association seems to be worthy of attention,<sup>1</sup> taking into account a long period of time between the possible beginning of the Yezidism and the Greeks or early Gnosticism, we can also indicate another possible origin of the thread of Love, which is certainly easier to prove – **the Sufism.**

<sup>1</sup> A. Rodziewicz, *Yezidi Eros. Love as the Cosmogonic Factor and Distinctive Feature of the Yezidi Theology in the Light of Some Ancient Cosmogonies*, *Fritillaria Kurdica. Bulletin of Kurdish Studies* 3,4 (2014), pp. 42–105: [http://www.kurdishstudies.pl/files/Fritillaria\\_Kurdica\\_2014\\_03\\_04\\_v1.pdf](http://www.kurdishstudies.pl/files/Fritillaria_Kurdica_2014_03_04_v1.pdf)

Let us note that the codifier, or the modifier of the Yezidism – Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir, before he settled among the dervishes in the Hakkari mountains and founded Sufi *tariqat Adawiyya* – studied in Baghdad. And in Baghdad he became acquainted with Muslim mystics, as for example Abd al-Qadir al-Gilani (with whom he went in 1116 to Mecca), and especially with Ahmad al-Ghazali. The impact of Ghazali on Adi was pointed out long ago by an editor of Adi's texts, Rudolph Frank.

**The very high status of dervishes and Sufis in Yezidism remains undoubted.** The Yezidi hymns are devoted to such persons as Al-Hallaj or Rabia al-Adawiya. Also six of the seven great angels are connected with such Sufis as Abd al-Qadir al-Gilani, Hasan al-Basri, Mansur al-Hallaj, Qadib al-Ban, Fakhr ad-Din ar-Razi and Shaikh Shams Tabrizi. It is hard to believe that their ideas are not affected on the Yezidism.

Sufism, being not only a theoretical system, but especially the practice, sees in love above all, the way of a lover (human) to the union with the Beloved (God). As a famous friend of Sheikh Adi, Abd al-Qadir al-Gilani wrote:

Do you know that He [God] is One and that the One loves oneness in the matter of love  
and loves one who is singular in his love to Him?

The longest of the surviving *quasidas* by Sheikh Adi, written probably in Baghdad, begins with the words “I drank from the cup of love” (شربت بكس الحب). In his poems he repeatedly called God “the Beloved.” Among the numerous Yezidi stories about Sheikh Adi, there is also a one that depicts his disciples asked him to explain the essence of love. In the version quoted by Anis Frayha we read:

*- My Lord, by the love of Muslim, will you not talk to us about Love?  
Sheikh Adi was glad and he talked them about love.*

Unfortunately, the content of this lecture has not been preserved. Perhaps this may be associated with the fact that the theme of love in Sufism was regarded as particularly delicate.

For example, the famous Persian mystic of the eleventh century, Al-Hujwiri in his treatise on Sufism, mentioning one of the Sufis of Baghdad, Sumnun al-Muhibb (Sumnun the Lover, d. 287/900 CE) emphasized that the Sufi doctrine of love remained to some extent secret and the Sufi masters decided not to speak about it in public, since „they wished the doctrine of Divine love to remain hidden”. This could be due to the fact that they not only were afraid of desecration of the divine love, but especially of falling into heresy. Speaking about the mystical love, they could dangerously equate man with God.

This perspective did not allow to state that "God is love" – as it is in the Christian tradition – or to make love an independent factor by giving to it a special ontological status, because it could lead one to fall into a *shirk* by “attributing a partner to Allah”.

Declaration of a passionate love in context of theology was one of the reasons that in the ninth century led to accusations of heresy to the famous Sufi of Baghdad, Abu al-Hassan al-Nuri (d. 907), author of *Maqamat al-qulub* (*Stations of the Hearts*) and the well-known maxim: “I love God and God loves me”.

However, many theologians and mystics of Islam were cautious in expressing their views on the ontological status of love, **but they could safely describe such concepts in the context of referring to views of the infidels – especially those of the ancient Greeks.**

And a scientific environment of Baghdad was the best area, where the Greek thought could penetrate the minds of Muslim mystics, starting from the ninth and tenth centuries, especially because of *Bayt al-Hikma* – the one of the most important centers of translation Greek works into Arabic.

Greek traces appear in many Muslim works concerning the love theme. A good example would be here a 10th-century scientific and philosophical *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity* (*Rasâ'il Ikhwân al-Safâ*). Entire chapter of this work devoted to the mystical love (*Fî mâhiyyat al-'ishq, On the Essence of Love*) is filled with Greek elements. Another instance that is worth mentioning here, is the work of Ibn Dawud al-Isfahani (868–909), a medieval theologian and scholar of the Islamic law, who contributed to the verdict against Mansur Al-Hallaj. A half of Isfahani's book *Kitāb al-Zahrah* is devoted to the theory of love and love poetry, and is considered to be one of the first Arabic works on the theory of love. In the fifty

chapters he shows the Greek and Muslim approach to love referring especially to the *Symposium* of Plato.

**Muslim mystics dealing with the thread of love as a cosmogonical factor often referred to Plato, Aristotle and Empedocles.** Reporting on the views of the Greek philosophers, they describe Love as a cosmogonical factor by the term *mahabba* (that has its equivalent in Kurdish word *mihbet*). Such translation solidified over time in the literature of Islam. For example, Persian historiographer, Shahrastānī (1086–1153), contemporary to Sheich Adi and Ahmad al-Ghazali, in *The Book of Sects and Creeds* wrote:

It is reported that Empedocles said: “The world is composed of four elements. (...) Composition in composites is through Love (*maḥabba*).

Numerous references to the Greeks are also present in one of the oldest known Sufi works about love, written around the one thousand A.D., the *Book of the Conjunction of the Cherished Alif with the Conjoined Lām* by Abu al-Hasan al-Dailami. Dailami writing about the Greek cosmogonical concepts of love, binds it with al-Hallaj, who had considered passionate love (*ishq*) as an essence of the divine essence. Dailami stresses the uniqueness of this position among other mystics. He notices that ‘*ishq* can be understood as the highest stage of religious love and that

*‘Ishq* is synonymous with the word *maḥabba* in the meaning „love.” But *maḥabba* is more widely used and accepted and has unanimous approval.

In general, early Sufism refuses to use the term ‘*ishq* concerning God (which is also associated with the fact that, unlike *hubb* or *maḥabba*, the word does not have a Quranic origin), but over the time more and more Sufis give that term a highly theoretical significance sometimes even allowing a synonymous use of these words. What separates Hallaj from other Sufis is that his teachings entail a description of the ontological status of love and its cosmogonical function. As it is posted in his *Dīwān*:

*'Ishq* existed in the preeternity of the preeternities from all eternity, in him, through him, from him; in it appears the manifestation of being. *'Ishq* is not temporal, it is an attribute of the attributes, of one, the victims of love for whom still live.

The theme of love was also of particular interest for Ahmad al-Ghazali, a Sheikh Adi's teacher from Baghdad who even wrote the *Sawaneh*, regarded to be the oldest Persian Sufi treatise on love. Al-Ghazali uses both terms, and advocates the concept of *'ishq* as a sacred love, which he places even above the *ḥubb* (in contrast to, for example, Al-Nuri, who had introduced the term *ishq* to Sufism and who considered *mahabba* as a higher stage, then *ishq*). **Ghazali compares the love among other things to the Pearl.** Its special status is described especially in the first and the last chapter of his work, where he states that:

When the spirit came into existence from non-existence, on the frontier of existence, love (*eshq*) was awaiting the steed, the spirit. I know not what kind of combining took place in the beginning of existence – if the spirit was an essence, then the attribute of that essence was love. Having found the house vacant, it resided therein. (1, 2)

The eyes of all intellects are shut to perceiving the essence and reality of the spirit, and the spirit is the shell of love (*eshq*). Now, since knowledge is not admitted to the shell, how can it be admitted to the hidden pearl within the shell?

**Discussion on the terms *ishq* and *mahabba* reminds a similar controversy in Early Christianity concerning the application of the terms *eros* and *agápe* to God.** Generally speaking, it can be assumed that in most cases the use of the term *ishq* by Sufis, is closer to the concept of passionate love, the profane one (which corresponds to the Greek word *eros*, or Latin *amor*) – hence they hesitated before using it with the reference to God. The *ḥubb* in turn is closer to the divine, pure love, love *par excellence* (which, in turn, corresponds to the Greek *agápe* and the Latin *caritas*).

But many Sufis combines both terms, such as Persian mystic Ruzbihan Baqlī (a little later than Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir, d. 1209), who wrote that „*'ishq* and *mahabba* are one”.



We can assume that love is the factor which at the level of mystical experience unites man with God, while in the area of cosmogony it combines elements of the world into the cosmic unity.

The origin of the cosmogonical thread of luminous Love in the Yezidi hymns still remains an open question. Besides Sufi inspiration, one may also reflect on the influence of the Christianity and the sentence from the biblical *Epistle of John*, who writes that "God is love" and "God is light."

However, one can say with a certainty that the treatment of love as a cosmogonical factor was present in the discussions of the Muslim philosophers and mystics, especially those among whom Sheikh Adi was educated in Bahgdad, and that they repeatedly appealed also to the Greek concepts, describing cosmogonical love using the term *mahabba*, which the Kurdish equivalent is the word *mihbet*, present in the Yezidi hymns.

The thread of love is still present in the Yezidi tradition, what can be demonstrated in their contemporary poetical works. On the picture we can see a publisher of the regional Yezidi journal, Sabah Dervish Haji from Ba'adra with his poem *The Mill of Love*.



# LET THERE BE LIGHT

THE COSMOGONIC FESTIVAL OF THE YEZIDIS FROM THE IRAQI KURDISTAN  
PHOTOGRAPHED BY ARTUR RODZIEWICZ

WOJEWÓDZKA BIBLIOTEKA PUBLICZNA W KRAKOWIE  
UL. RAJSKA 1, 13 X - 30 XI 2016

For centuries, in the spring month of Nisan, the Yezidis commemorate the creation of the world by God and His submitting it to its ruler, the Peacock Angel, whom they worship. The main celebrations take place during the Festival of Wednesday (Çarşemiya Sor) in the most important Yezidi sanctuary, which is situated in the Iraqi Kurdistan, in Lalish near Mosul. On Tuesday evening the Yezidis gather in the courtyard of the temple, and when the sun goes down, in the solemn atmosphere permeated with hymns intoned in praise of the emergence of the light and the world, they kindle hundreds of flames.

Now, as the so-called Islamic State is grabbing more and more territories, Shingal and Mosul have been seized, and the Yezidis themselves are being exterminated, the Yezidi culture is coming under a huge threat.

The exhibition aims to commemorate one of its treasures.



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