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Alevism and Sacred Texts in Kurdish Batinism

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This entry examines the historical, cultural, and ritual role of sacred texts in Alevism and, more broadly, in Kurdish Batinî belief systems. It emphasizes the significance of sacred oral and written texts—such as gatha, āyat, beyt, ilahi, qewl, and lawij—in esoteric traditions rooted in Mesopotamia, including Zoroastrianism, Mazdakism, Yaresanism, Êzidism, Ahlêhaq, and Alevism. These texts, often composed in lyrical and poetic forms, have been transmitted from generation to generation as expressions of religious teachings that shape both ritual life and collective memory. The entry draws on historical sources and textual examples to explore the emergence and transformation of these sacred compositions within the layered religious heritage of Mesopotamia. It also discusses how esoteric communities—particularly Kurdish groups who have lived as “minorities within minorities”—have preserved and carried these texts into the present. Ultimately, sacred texts are regarded as both instruments of resistance and continuity, serving as core carriers of cultural and religious memory in Kurdish Batinism.

Introduction

The historical continuity and function of sacred texts in the Kurdish Batinî tradition bear witness to a resilient memory of belief that has survived centuries of massacres, forced migrations, religious conversion, assimilation, and prohibition. In his work on *oda culture* and Kurdish literature in the İçtoros region, Mehmet Bayrak (2015) dedicates his study with the following words: “This work is dedicated to the Babas, Dayês (Mothers), Murshids, Seyids, Pîrs, Dedes, Raybers, Şêxes, Dervishes, Zâkirs, Qewals, Poets, Âşıks, Dengbêjs, and Kılambêjs who, despite centuries of massacre, persecution, forced conversion, exile, assimilation, and religious bans, have managed to preserve and transmit the sacred lyrical-religious compositions of Kurdish Batinism—including *gatha*, *āyat*, *beyt*, *ilahi*, *qawil*, and *lawij*, written in Kurdish, Turkish, and Persian—thus keeping alive the essence-focused, friendship- and love-based Yârî faith.”

This dedication underscores the enduring presence of a rich mythological, cultural, and esoteric heritage deeply rooted in Upper Mesopotamia. The region has served as fertile ground for numerous belief systems—natural, philosophical, polytheistic, and

monotheistic—and has carried forward their spiritual and intellectual legacies through successive generations. Esoteric traditions such as Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Mazdakism, Hurremism, Babakism, Karmatism, Êzidism, Ismailism, Vefailik, Babailik, Kızılbaş belief, Alevism, Ahlêhaq, Kakaism, Rayêhaq, and Yaresanism have all endured in this geography, often through the oral and poetic transmission of their sacred teachings.

Archaeological discoveries and historical documentation further attest to this continuity. Each year, new findings illuminate the religious and cultural landscape of Northern Mesopotamia: from additional lines of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* to inscriptions concerning the Hurrians; from the *Celwa*—a sacred text inscribed on eight kilograms of gazelle hide and believed to be the world's oldest book—found in the region of Zaxo, to the monumental 12,500-year-old remains of Göbeklitepe. These discoveries continue to rewrite the cultural and spiritual history of the region.

Under Pressure and Accusation: The Historical Trajectory of "Minorities within Minorities" in Batinî Communities

Throughout history, the ethnic communities that preserved Kurdish Batinî belief systems often existed in a precarious position as "minorities within minorities" in their respective geographies. Following the rise of monotheistic religions, these communities faced systematic forms of repression, accusation, and exclusion—resulting in a deeply painful religious, social, and political trajectory.

One example of this marginalization concerns the Mazdakite communities, whose belief system sought to emancipate women from seclusion in harems and introduce collective ownership structures. In response, Islamic caliphs derogatorily labeled them "kavaz"—a term linked to the Sasanian ruler Kavad I, and interpreted to mean "those who sell women." Similarly, Zoroastrians devoted to the Zend-Avesta were accused both of fire-worship and of heresy (*zandaqa*)—a term connoting godlessness and irreligion.

Nagihan Doğan analyzes the political and social implications of such accusations through the lens of the Abbasid period. In the late 8th century, Caliph Muhammad al-Mahdi appointed an official specifically tasked with identifying and eliminating so-called *zindiqs*, bestowing upon this individual the title *sâhibu'z-zandaqa*. In 780, upon reaching Aleppo during a campaign against Byzantium, al-Mahdi issued his first orders targeting heretics. Those apprehended in Aleppo and surrounding areas were executed under his command. The persecution was of such significance that al-Mahdi instructed his successor, Caliph al-Hadi, to continue the policy after his death (Doğan 2015, 225).

Over time, dualist and Iranian-influenced traditions such as Manichaeism—viewed as ideologically subversive by Islamic orthodoxy—came to be collectively associated with the terms *zindiq* and *zandaqa*. The word *zindiq* itself originates from the Zoroastrian text *Zend*, which interprets the *Avesta*. While Zoroastrian clergy condemned *Zend* as a heretical deviation, adherents regarded it as a sacred text. In the Islamic context, the term *Zendî* was Arabized into *zindiq*, eventually becoming a broad accusation applied to Manichaeans, Mazdakites, and other dualist Batinî sects (Bayrak 2015).

Continuity of Belief and Cultural Memory: Traces from Mesopotamia to the Present

Official cultural narratives have often been constructed around the assumption that civilization and culture began with their own emergence, disregarding the influence of prior cultural accumulations on later societies. However, such a perspective is neither historically nor sociologically tenable. Addressing this issue, Mehmet Bayrak draws attention to the problems of cultural rupture in his 1996 article “Do We Know Our Beliefs?”, published in *Ronahî* newspaper (Bayrak 1996).

In regions where multiple civilizations have succeeded one another over centuries, cultural and religious influences have inevitably shaped the newcomers. This process has led to syntheses between older and newer belief systems, particularly through the ways earlier traditions have become embedded in the social and symbolic fabric of later ones. In this regard, Mesopotamia stands out not only as the birthplace of many natural and philosophical belief systems, but also as the cradle of both polytheistic and monotheistic religions. This ancient region has long served as a bridge between the Middle East and the Far East, giving rise to natural-philosophical traditions such as Confucianism and Buddhism, as well as Abrahamic religions like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The sacred texts of these traditions were written in the languages of this region and reflect the layered inheritance of preceding religions.

As Özgür Şeyben observes, the influence of pre-Islamic traditions such as Zoroastrianism, Paganism, Christianity, and Judaism in Anatolia has persisted into the present through customs, weddings, harvest celebrations, popular games, and ritual practices. Archaic traditions such as alchemy, vow offerings, and shrine visitation have endured, even as Orthodox Islamic frameworks sought to suppress them (Şeyben 2004).

This historical continuity is also evident in the teachings of Zoroaster, who lived 2,500 years ago. His exhortations, often summarized in Kurdish as *“rast bifikrin, bipeyvin û bikin”* (“think rightly, speak truthfully, act justly”), call on humans to preserve moral clarity: “O human! Do not stray from the right path… Think well, speak truth, act just…

Be master of your hand, tongue, and desire! Protect the fire, for it is the symbol of purity and truth" (Şen 2004).

A further reflection of this enduring legacy appears in the words that the 17th-century French philosopher Volney attributes to a Zoroastrian priest: "Jews, Christians, Muslims... Regardless of what you claim, you are nothing but misguided children of Zoroaster!" (Bayrak 2014, 17).

Batinî Perspectives on the Origins of Revealed Scriptures

Historical inquiries into the origins of sacred scriptures hold a prominent place in the intellectual heritage of esoteric traditions. In this context, the claim made by French thinker Volney—that all Abrahamic religions are, in fact, divergent interpretations of Zoroaster's teachings—gains meaning as part of a longer continuum of cultural and religious memory (Bayrak 2014, 17). One finds comprehensive mythological motifs that underpin the earliest sacred texts in the Zend-Avesta, the foundational scripture of Zoroastrianism. By contrast, the Torah—attributed to Moses, who is believed to have lived between 1400 and 1300 BCE—was not completed until around 300 BCE, and is believed to have been significantly influenced by the Avesta.

Many parts of the Torah are deeply intertwined with older Mesopotamian mythologies, most notably the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and Sumerian mythic traditions. Other sections are thought to have been composed later by different religious leaders and added over time. From the perspective of Batinî traditions, these texts are not considered "divine" (*semavi*) in origin, but rather "created" (*mahluk*)—that is, written by human hands.

This approach has found increasing support in contemporary scholarship in the West, where studies titled *Who Wrote the Torah?* or *Who Wrote the Bible?* challenge traditional views of divine authorship. The renowned Sumerologist Muazzez İlmiye Çığ argues in her book *The Sumerian Origins of the Qur'an, the Bible, and the Torah* that all three scriptures are rooted in Mesopotamian mythological and ritual traditions (Çığ 2007).

Similarly, Safa Kaçmaz traces the literary and ritual sources of the Torah, the Bible, and the Qur'an back to ancient Mesopotamian inscriptions. Based on the deciphered content of clay tablets, he argues that these scriptures derive their structure, narratives, and ethical principles from the hymns of the Sumerians and Akkadians. These hymns, Kaçmaz emphasizes, should not be seen merely as religious texts, but as expressions of ancient Mesopotamian institutions and social structures (Bayrak 2015, 7).

Mythologist Yaşar Atan further expands on this idea by proposing that gods were born out of human fears—reflections of unattainable desires. In the ancient world, humans created gods to give meaning to their fear of nature and the unknown. These gods, however, often imposed submission upon humans. In contrast, certain poets sought to transform these divine figures into liberating forces, charting paths toward human freedom (Atan 2007, 58).

In the emergence of monotheistic religions, it became increasingly common for people to ascribe divine status—naming it “Allah”—to that which they could not understand or explain. In contrast, natural and philosophical belief systems centered the God–Human relationship as a central tenet. This understanding is powerfully expressed in the 14th century by the Hurufist leader Fazlullah, who declared: “We have found in the human being the god of the universe.”

The Transmission of the Zend-Avesta to the West and Cultural Continuity

The sacred texts of Zoroastrianism were already known to ancient Greek thinkers such as Herodotus, Xenophon, Plutarch, Pliny, and Plato. Their historical prominence and broad dissemination became even more pronounced by the mid-19th century, particularly through translations of al-Shahrastani’s *al-Milal wa’l-Nihal* into various Western languages. In his study titled *Religion in Ancient Iran*, Şemseddin Yaltkaya emphasized that Zoroastrianism extended its influence not only within Iran, but also into Egypt and Greece through the Alexandrian School, into Judaism and Christianity via the Babylonian exile, and into Islam through groups such as the Qarmatians. According to Yaltkaya, despite Islamic repression, Zoroastrianism (referred to in Islamic texts as *Majusism*) could not be eradicated completely; in Iran’s interior regions and along the Caspian coast, followers of Zoroaster continued to preserve their faith (Bayrak 2015).

In a 1994 study published during his forced exile, Mehmet Bayrak included translations by Prof. Dr. Ali Nihad Tarlan of Zoroaster’s poetic and lyrical verses known as the *Gathas*. These texts had been introduced into Turkish literature based on English translations that Tarlan had obtained during a visit to Iran to commemorate the death anniversary of the Persian epic poet Ferdowsi. Tarlan’s efforts marked the first appearance of these sacred verses in Turkish scholarship, where they were evaluated as the lyrical teachings of Zoroaster (Bayrak 1994, 357–408).

The introduction of Zoroastrian scripture into the Western world is generally traced to the year 1755, when the French Orientalist Anquetil Duperron returned from a research expedition to India carrying six texts written in the ancient Pahlavi language. These documents, which collectively constitute the core books of the *Zend-Avesta*,

allowed European audiences to gain deeper familiarity with this ancient religious system.

Scholarly investigations that emphasize this long-term continuity underscore the central role of ritual in the transition from oral to written religious and literary texts. T. Uysal and M. Türk argue that many universal mythological and literary motifs were first documented on Sumerian tablets, revealing the foundational influence of Mesopotamia on global cultural history. Concepts such as cosmology, creation, divine law, and early gender beliefs—especially those related to women—can all be traced back to these early texts (Uysal and Türk 2012).

Researchers such as Zeynep Beydağı, Turan Alptekin, and Hakkı Özgüneş have also asserted that Sumerian mythology shaped many structures later found in the Abrahamic religions. They point to narratives like “houses of the gods,” “divine wrath,” and “myths of woman’s creation” as examples of this deep-seated continuity (Beydağı 2014; Alptekin 2015; Özgüneş 2008). Collectively, these contributions affirm Mesopotamia’s role not only as a historical heartland, but as a core of intellectual and theological continuity.

Within this framework, the advent of Islam in the region brought significant devastation to Zoroastrian traditions—a rupture that left a lasting scar, particularly in Kurdish poetry and cultural memory. Subsequent Batinî traditions directly experienced this rupture and preserved its memory through the oral transmission of sacred verse (Bayrak 2015).

From Sacred Text to Poetry: Traces of the Poetic Tradition in Mesopotamia

In regions such as Anatolia and Mesopotamia—cradles of ancient civilizations—any attempt to define cultural production solely through later populations while ignoring the scholars, poets, bards, musicians, and instruments that have inhabited these lands since antiquity is inconsistent with historical reality. For instance, many of the musical instruments still used across Anatolia and Mesopotamia today, including the *bağlama*, can be traced back to the Sumerian and Hittite periods. A meaningful analysis of cultural forms must therefore begin with this long durée.

Throughout human history, poetry has been one of the earliest and most enduring artistic expressions. Even in pre-literate eras, poetic forms were performed orally. Over time, these evolved alongside visual expression and were eventually inscribed through the invention of writing, marking a shift to written transmission. It is widely accepted that poetry constitutes the oldest genre of literature, with prose emerging much later. The tendency of rural communities—often seen as the direct heirs of

ancient populations—to express themselves through poetic forms while hesitating in prose composition further supports this view.

Sumerologist Muazzez İlmiye Çığ has provided numerous examples of Sumerian hymns and poetic invocations, while Aslı Kayabal has explored the love poetry written by Sumerian deities in her work titled *“Honeyed Love in Sumer”*. One such example reads: “O my exalted lady / O my magnificent Inanna / O my sacred jewel / I shall plough your field / … / Plough my field, sweet man / My sweetening man of honey / …” (Kayabal 1998; Çığ 2002a; 2002b)

Despite the derogatory tone of Surah *Ash-Shu’ara* (The Poets) in the Qur’an, poetic expression holds a central place in earlier sacred traditions, most notably in the Zoroastrian scripture *Avesta*, whose *Gathas* consist primarily of lyrical and poetic verses. Such texts are referred to as *āyat* and *beyt* among Alevi Kurds, *qewl* among the Êzidîs, and *beyt* or *kalām* in Yaresani contexts.

This lyrical tradition, which spread outward from Mesopotamia, finds a theological echo in the opening of the Old Testament: “In the beginning was the Word.” The *word* was thus sacralized and elevated. The Alevi-Bektashi literary genre known as *āyetleme* (rendering of verses) can be seen as a direct continuation of this Mesopotamian legacy.

Even limiting our scope to the Urfa–Diyarbakır–Mardin triangle in Upper Mesopotamia reveals a rich tapestry of cultural continuity: “Prayer and lament; violin and *bağlama*; *zikir* and *hoyrat*; *ney*, *tef*, or even piano… The musician, the *dengbêj*, and the Alevi-Bektashi bard… The sounds of art, devotion, and craftsmanship echoing through the Tigris and Euphrates carry us through millennia” (Atlas 2015).

The Contribution of Yaresan Poets to Kurdish Batinism

In response to the dogmatic darkness of the medieval era, poetry and music within natural and philosophical religions functioned as illuminating tools. In this context, the works of approximately forty male and female Kurdish poets affiliated with Yaresan Alevism, dating from the 7th to the 13th century, have survived to the present day. Among different branches of Kurdish society, religious traditions such as Êzidism, Ahlê Haq, and Kakaism have also been particularly fertile ground for religious poetry and music, allowing these cultural expressions to gain visibility within Kurdish literature.

Over a period of roughly 4,500 years, it can be said that people have always and everywhere recited poetry and created epics in diverse forms and styles (Kaynardağ 1979). Bards, minstrels, and *dengbêjs* did not primarily write their poetry; they

performed it orally, often accompanied by musical instruments, whether the verses were their own or derived from anonymous popular traditions.

Before falling under the influence of Islam, Kurdish poets composed in their native languages. With the expansion of Islam, however, they shifted first to Arabic—the language of religion and scholarship—and later to Persian. Melik Şarayê Bihar is recognized as one of the earliest Kurdish poets to write in Persian, and Nizami of Ganja (1140–1202), a foundational figure in classical Persian literature, is also believed to be of Kurdish origin.

This linguistic transformation is especially evident among poets from Batinî traditions such as Zoroastrianism, Mazdakism, Khurramism, and Yarsanism. The Yarsani Goran poets, due to their relative cultural and geographical insulation from Islamic influence, provide a particularly clear example of this continuity. According to Maruf Haznedar, the foundation of Yarsan literature lies in the Gorani dialect and maintains strong ties to Zoroastrian heritage. The Yarsanis consciously chose to express their beliefs in Kurdish rather than Arabic, and they transmitted these beliefs through poetic forms.

Many of the texts composed by Yaresan poets were written using secret scripts and encoded language structures. This allowed them to be preserved and transmitted across generations. Some notable examples include: *Serencam*, *Dewrey Balûl*, *Defterî Pîrdîwerî*, *Defterî Dîwanî Gewre*, *Dîwanî Sawa*, *Defterî Ramyaw*, *Kelamî Almas Xan*, *Kelamî Derşêş Kulî Kirindî*, *Dîwanî Şa Teymûr Banî Yaranî*, and *Kelamî Newroz*, among others. Especially *Serencam*, *Dewrey Balûl*, *Defterî Dîwanî Gewre*, and the later compilation *Zebûrê Haqiqat* are regarded as central sacred sources within Yarsani belief.

These distinctly Kurdish and Batinî characteristics are not exclusive to the Yaresan tradition. Êzidism, considered a continuation of Zoroastrian heritage, shares similar features. In addition to their sacred texts—*Mushafê Reş*, *Kitab-ı Cilwe*, and *Sheikh Adi's Hymns*—Êzidîs have developed an extensive corpus of sacred poetry, making them important custodians of Kurdish cultural memory. Due to shared ritual, institutional, and sacred elements, both Êzidism and Alevism are often classified as "folk religions" (Öztürk 2012).

Finally, it is crucial to emphasize that the foundational sources transmitting the beliefs and cultures of Batinî communities are not the *menakibname*-style hagiographies written centuries after the fact, nor the popular religious texts reworked with Islamic motifs. Rather, they are the sacred lyrical poems that emerged directly from the hearts, minds, and lived experiences of these communities' bards, musicians, and spiritual leaders—texts that encompass both daily life and devotional rituals.

Conclusion

In Alevism and Kurdish Batinism, sacred texts are not merely conveyors of religious knowledge—they are also the bearers of cultural memory, resistance, and collective identity. From Zoroastrianism to Yaresanism, and from Êzidism to Alevism, this lineage of belief has been shaped around an ancient tradition of oral and written expression rooted in Mesopotamia. Texts expressed in lyrical and poetic forms—such as *gatha*, *beyt*, *âyet*, *qewl*, and *kelam*—have endured throughout centuries of repression, assimilation, and religious marginalization, preserving the spirit of these esoteric belief systems through poetry and music.

These texts are not limited to the language of ritual and worship; they also serve as vehicles for philosophical, cosmological, and ethical teachings. Given the deep connections between the scriptural canons of the Abrahamic religions and earlier Mesopotamian mythologies, it becomes clear that the Batinî traditions of this region constitute not only an alternative but also a foundational universe of faith and culture.

The poetic nature, anonymity, esoteric encryption, and oral transmission that characterize the sacred texts of Yaresan, Êzidî, and Alevi communities are indicative of the autonomous structure and cultural resilience these traditions maintained in the face of centralized Islamic authority. Through these texts, Alevism and Kurdish Batinism have not only forged their own internal coherence, but also carried the ancient spiritual legacy of Mesopotamia into the present.

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