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Ahl-é Haqq (Ehli Heq, Ahl-é-Haqîqat, Yarsanism, Kaka'î)

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Summary

Yarsanism, also known as Ahl-e Haqq, is a syncretic belief that combines various mystical and gnostic traditions with Islamic, Mazdean, and ancient Kurdish elements. The Yarsani follow the mystical teachings of Sultan Sahak (Suhāk; Farsi: Solţān Şohāk; Turkish: Sultan İshak; fl. 14th–15th century). From the Yarsani point of view, the universe is composed of two distinct yet interrelated worlds: the internal (bātinī) and the external (zāhirī), each having its own order and rules. Although humans are only aware of the outer world, their lives are governed according to the rules of the inner world. This aspect of the Yarsani faith can be identified as Kurdish esoterism which emerged under the intense influence of Bātinī-Sufism. The Arabic term Batiniyya refers to Muslim groups that distinguish between an outer, exoteric (zāhir) and an inner, esoteric (bāṭin) meaning in Islamic scriptures.[i]

Kurds call this faith that emerged in the borderland of East-Iraq and West-Iran Yarsan, Persians Ahl-e Haqq or Ahl-e Haqiqat (“People of the (absolute) Truth”) and Kurds in Iraq Kaka'î. The Yarsan philosophy is closely related to the Alevi faith and philosophy and shares elements with the Syrian Noşayrīs (Nusayris; Alawites) – communion - and the Yazidi faith (rebirth, incarnation). It is a belief based on nature, society, nature and social laws and traditions. The Yarsanis are emanationists and incarnationists who believe that the divine essence also undergoes successive incarnations known as Mazhariyyats. These ideas originate from Gnosticism. The Yarsani religious minority is often considered “heretical,” especially by the majority population in Iran. Persecution and discrimination against Yarsanis have led to their marginalization and social exclusion. This is one reason why many aspects of Yarsani teachings remain secret and are solely passed on to initiates.

An Ancient Gnostic Belief

Yarsanism (Kurdish) or Ahl-e Haqq (Persian for “People of Truth”) or Kaka'î is a syncretic mystical religion with elements of Shi'ism, the Gnosis, shamanism,

Mazdaism, and other pre-Islamic cults, founded by Sultan Suhāk (Farsi: Solṭān Şohāk; also: Sahak; Turkish: Sultan İshak), who is also revered as an incarnation of God. Although he is a historical figure, there are widely differing accounts of his life and therefore of the age of the religious community: 8th/14th or 9th/15th century.[ii]

Yarsanism shares fundamental Gnostic ideas, such as the idea of emanation (the emergence of beings from a higher divine source) and the idea of incarnations (God's manifestation in various forms). Yarsanis believe that God manifests himself in successive incarnations, known as Mazhariyyats. These are comparable to the Hindu avatars[iii]. Similar to Gnostics, Yarsanis believe that a divine essence is contained in all things and that this essence manifests itself in various forms.

There are also elements of cosmological dualism, which is common in the Gnostic faith, although the Yarsani do not necessarily interpret this as a strict dualism between good and evil, but rather as different aspects of the same divine source.

Estimated Numbers of Believers

The total number of Yarsanis is estimated to be between 1,000,000 and 3,000,000. Their exact number is difficult to determine. Many Yarsanis hide their affiliation due to pressure from Iran's Islamic system, and there are no precise statistics.

Shi'ite Sect or Autochthonous Religion?

Es herrschen unterschiedliche Meinungen darüber, ob die Yarsan-Religion eine eigenständige Religion mit schiitischen Einflüssen ist oder eine schiitische Sekte mit ausgeprägten vorislamischen Elementen. Ahl-i Haqq class other Muslims as either *Ahl-i Tashayyu* (followers of Shi'ism) or *Ahl-i Tasannun* (followers of Sunnism). The Ahl-i Haqq neither observe Muslim rites, such as daily prayers and fasting during the month of Ramadan, nor share Islamic theology and sacred space, such as belief in the day of resurrection and sanctity of the mosque.[iv]

Discrimination and Persecution

Extremist Sunni Islamic groups, such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant and al-Qaeda, regard the followers of Yarsanism as unbelievers who have to convert to Islam or die. These militants have persecuted Yarsanis during the Iraq conflict, possibly prompting some Iraqi Yarsan community leaders to declare in 2013 that their people were actually Muslims to avoid sectarian attacks.[v]

Internal Organization under Sufi Influence

“Split up into numerous ethnic, tribal and religious groups, the Ahl-e Ḥaqq lack a unified, central organization, just as they lack a canonical scripture. However, the institutions and rites founded by Solṭān Şohāk are universally recognized. Among these is the important ceremony of *sar-sepordan*, the ‘entrustment of the head’ (a Sufi term), an initiation rite in which the neophyte (ṭāleb) links himself to a spiritual master (pīr). As an external sign, a nutmeg is broken on the neophyte’s head. The relationship between master and disciple, a typical dervish institution, has its prototype in the story of the angel Benyāmīn, the pīr of the pīrs, and is interpreted as a renewal of the original covenant between God and his creation. The same meaning is attributed to the spiritual brotherhood established between a man (or several men) and a woman and called *şarṭ-e eqrār* ‘covenant of acknowledgement’; known among the Yazīdīs in a similar form, it entails the taboo of incest.”[vi]

Yarsanism is organised into spiritual houses or *Khandans*, seven of which were established at the time of Sultan Sahak, and four afterwards, making eleven Khandans in all. The Khandans were established when, along with the Haft Tan, Sultan Sahak also formed the Haft Tawane, a group of seven holy persons charged with the affairs of the outer world. Each of them was charged with responsibility for the guidance of a number of followers, and these followers formed the original seven Khandans, namely Shah Ebrahim, Baba Yadegar, Ali Qalandar, Khamush, Mir Sur, Sey-yed Mosaffa and Hajji Babu Isa. After Sultan Sahak’s time another four khandans were established, namely Atesh Bag, Baba Heydar, Zolnour and Shah Hayas.

Every Yarsani therefore belongs to a specific khandan, which is led by a spiritual leader called a *say-yed*, to whom each member must swear obedience. The say-yed is the spiritual leader of the community and is normally present during the ceremonies attended by the followers. Say-yeds are the only ones allowed to have full access to the religious texts of Yarsanism, and have traditionally competed with each other to have the largest number of followers. The position of Say-yed is hereditary, being passed down through the generations from the original founders. As the say-yed are considered spiritual ‘parents’, it is the tradition for them not to marry their followers.

Geographic and Linguistic Affiliations

“The heartlands of the Ahl-e Ḥaqq are Lorestān and, to the north of it, the regions of the Gūrānī-speaking population around Kermānşāh. The two main sanctuaries of the sect, the tomb of Bābā Yādgār in Ḍohāb and that of Solṭān Şohāk in Perdīvar, are located in Gūrānī territory. There are also Ahl-e Ḥaqq in the adjacent regions of Iraqī Kurdistan, around Kerkūk and Solaymānīya. Toward the north, they are dispersed in Iranian Azerbaijan around Lake Ormīa [Urmia] and as far as Mākū. Farther east, they

are found in the mountains north of Tehran and on the southern shore of the Caspian Sea. There are also communities of Ahl-e Haqq in most major cities in Iran.”[vii]

The Yarsan faith is mainly found in the west of Iran (Luristan, Kermanshah, Azerbaijan) and eastern Iraq (where Yarsan are known as Kaka’i), as well as among ethnic Kurds, but there are also larger groups of Turkish, Persian, Luri, Azerbaijani, and Arab followers. Communities of Yarsanism can also be found in Kurdish diasporas. The Yarsan religion is known for its oral tradition and unique religious poetry, mainly written in the Gorani language. Gorani (Kurdish: Hewramî or Awromani) is a northwestern Iranian language that, together with Zazaki, forms the Zaza-Gorani subgroup. Gorani is spoken by about 500,000 people in Iraq and Iran. Many speakers of this language belong to the Ahl-e Haqq religious community.

Gûrani, Machû, Kordî, Hewramî: Language and Poetry

The term Gûrani, which is an invention of Western linguists, is unknown to the speakers themselves. They call their language *machû* (“I say”), *kordî* or *hewramî*. The term Goran/Gûran is ambiguous; on the one hand, it refers to a farmer or a detribalized Kurd from the lower class, and on the other hand, it refers to a widespread tribe in Kurdistan, but it is also reminiscent of the word Goranî, which means “song” or “singing” in Kurdish. The Yarsani tradition claims that all early communities used Gorani as their religious language, but that over time, some groups were forced to adopt a Turkic language closely akin to Azeri for all purposes, including religion.[viii]

“Under the independent rulers of Ardalân (9th-14th/14th-19th cent.), with their capital latterly at Sanandaj, Gurâni became the vehicle of a considerable corpus of poetry which, until the rise in the last century of a literature in Kurdish, found currency throughout south-east Kurdistan. Gurâni was and remains the first language of the scriptures of the Ahl-e Haqq sect (q.v.) centered around Gahvâra. Prose works, in contrast, are hardly known. The structure of Gurâni verse is very simple and monotonous. It consists almost entirely of stanzas of two rhyming half-verses of ten syllables each, with no regard to the quantity of syllables. There is a regular caesura at the middle of the half-verse, and a syllabic eżâfa or the conjunction ū “and” which would otherwise fall in this position is elided.”[ix]

Gorani/Hewramî was used by many speakers in Iran and Iraq until the 19th century, but was increasingly replaced by Sorani. Today, Gorani is mainly spoken by the Ahl-e Haqq. However, only a few modern Ahl-e Haqq can read or write Gorani, as their native languages are South Kurdish and Sorani (also known as Central or South Kurdish), which belong to the two other branches of the Kurdish languages. The speakers of Sarli, who live near Eski Kalak (Iraq), are also followers of the Ahl-e Haqq.

Transmigration of Souls and Divine Incarnations (the “Holy Seven”)

The basic tenets of the Yarsan religion are the belief in a single God who reveals himself in various manifestations (one primary and six secondary), which together form the Holy Seven.

The belief in seven successive incarnations of God is apparently based on the spiritual heritage of early extreme Shiism. References can also be made to Zoroastrianism. The purification of the soul takes place through the transmigration of souls. After seven cycles of divine manifestation, the eschatological savior is supposed to appear in the homeland of the Ahl-e Haqqi. One of these incarnations, accompanied by the four archangels, is ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib. However, the founder of the religion, Sultan Suhāk (who probably lived in the 15th century), is more important than ‘Alī. A female spirit is Ramzbar[x], who is venerated as the virgin mother of the divine incarnation. The A. Ḥ. are divided into various ethnic, tribal, and religious subgroups. Although there is no unified organization, the institutions and rites introduced by Sultan Suhāk, the actual founder of the religion, are valid for all members of the faith.[xi]

“Another feature also found in extremist Shi‘ite groups is the belief in metempsychosis; it is as a ‘changing of (corporeal) garments’ whose aim is the purification of the soul through 1,001 rebirths. Salvation is restricted, however, to the people created of yellow clay (zarda-gel), i.e., the Ahl-e Ḥaqq; those created of black earth (kāk-e sīāh) are eternally damned. The seven cycles will be consummated by the appearance of an eschatological savior, the Mahdī or Lord of the Time (ṣāḥeb-e zamān) and the Last Judgment will take place in the plains of Šahrazūr or Solṭāniya.”[xii]

Customs and rituals

Many teachings and traditions are passed down orally, with sacred texts in Gorani playing an important role. Ritual gatherings (jam) are a central part of the Yarsan faith, where people sing, pray, and celebrate together. The tambur instrument plays a special role in these gatherings. The tambur is a sacred symbol of Yarsanism and is played during religious ceremonies.[xiii] Tambur (Kurdish Tembûr) or tanbour is a fretted string instrument and is an initial and main form of the tanbûr instrument family, used by the Kurds. It is highly associated with the Yarsan (Ehli Heq) religion in Kurdish areas and in the Lorestān provinces of Iran. It is one of the few musical instruments used in Ehli Heq rituals, and practitioners venerate the tembûr as a sacred object.[xiv]

The unique customs of the Yarsanis include wearing an uncut moustache (for men)

and the significance of →pomegranates. It is said that Sultan Sahak was given birth by a Kurdish maiden and, as in the case of the Virgin Mary, it was an immaculate conception. Once while sleeping under a pomegranate tree, a kernel of fruit fell into her mouth because a bird had nibbled the fruit directly above her and caused the kernel to fall.[xv]

Conclusions

In Islam, some groups of the Shia (Ismailis, Alevis, Nusayris, and Druze), as well as the syncretic religions that emerged from the Shia, are considered Gnostics. Sometimes the Sufis (followers of Islamic mysticism) are considered Gnostics as well.

The religious community of the Yarsanis or Ahl-e Haqq (Kurdish: Ehli Heq), Ahl-é-Haqîqat, or Kaka'i is a syncretic and esoteric variant of Kurdish Alevism influenced by the Gnostic faith, Bâtinî Sufism, and the Yazidi belief in the transmigration of souls. At the center of this belief are the seven sacred incarnations of the divine essence, which include the founder of the religion, Sultan Suhak (Sahak).

The emergence of this belief is linked to the northwestern Iranian or Kurdish language Gorani, in which most of the mystical poetry that gave rise to this religion was written. Under pressure from Turkification, some works were also written in a variant of Azerbaijani Turkish.

Yarsani believers were and are still persecuted as "heretics," especially in Iran.

Endnotes

[i] "BĀṬENĪYA, a generic term for all groups and sects which distinguished the bāṭen and the ḡāher of the Koran and the Islamic law (Šarī'a). The Arabic word bāṭen (inner, hidden, q.v.) was used to denote non-literal meanings of Koranic verses and Islamic legal commands and prohibitions, its opposite, the Arabic word ḡāher (outer, visible), to denote literal or obvious meanings presented by the wording of the texts or the implementation of the laws. This distinction was fundamental to the thinking of a number of mainly Shi'ite sects, whose origins are traceable to 2nd/8th century Iraq. Christian, Jewish, and Gnostic influences on their thinking cannot be ruled out but are hard to prove in particular cases." Halm, Heinz: BĀṬENĪYA. Encyclopedia Iranica, Vol. III, Fasc. 8, 1988, pp. 861-863, <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/bateniya/>

[ii] Ders.: Ahl-e Ḥaqq. Encyclopedia Iranica, Vol. I, Fasc. 6, pp. 635-637, <https://www.jam.iranicaonline.org/articles/ahl-e-haqq-people/>

[iii] In Hinduism, an avatar (Sanskrit: अवतार, Avatāra) is the material manifestation or incarnation of a deity or higher being on Earth. It is a concept that describes the descent of a god in human or animal form to preserve good, destroy evil, or teach morality.

[iv] Mir-Hosseini, Z.: Inner Truth and Outer History: The Two Worlds of the Ahl-e Haqq of Kurdistan, "International Journal of Middle East Studies", Vol. 26, 1994, pp. 267-268

[v] Hussein, Rikar: (26 June 2018) IS Terror Group Surges in Iraq's Disputed Territories; "Voice of America", 26 June 2018; retrieved 6 July 2025.

<https://www.voanews.com/a/islamic-state-terror-group-surges-iraq-disputed-territories/4455890.html>; Anwar, Dilshad: (26 June 2018) IS Attacks Drive Members of Iraqi Kakai Minority From Their Villages, "Voice of America", 26 June 2018; retrieved 6 July 2025, <https://www.voanews.com/a/iraq-islamic-state-kakai-minority/4455712.html>

[vi] Halm, Ahl-e Haqq, op.cit.

[vii] Ibid.

[viii] Kanakis, Yannis; Kreyenbroek, Philip G.: God First and Last: Religious Traditions and Music of the Yaresan of Guran: Volume 1: Religious Traditions, Göttinger Orientforschungen, III. Reihe: Iranica Series. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2020, pp. 32-33

[ix] Mackenzie, D.N.: Gurāni. "Encyclopaedia Iranica", Vol. XI, Fasc. 4, pp. 401-403. <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/gurani/>

[x] In Esoteric Islam, the angel called Mother Ra(m)zbar (Daya Razbar), aka Ramzbar, or Remzebar, is a manifestation of Khatun-i Qiyamat, the Lady of the Resurrection. She is the Islamic Angel of the Presence, and greatly resembles the Divine Shekhinah of Kabbalah. Sufi mystics also call her Laila the Beloved (Habib), Dhat (Zat, or Zat-e khuda) the Divine Essence, or the Peri Face after a celestial fairy-woman. Ramzbar was the fifth of five great angels, the only one who was female. She always incarnates as the mother of the god incarnate. For example, Ramzbar was incarnate in Sultan Ishaq's mother, Khatun Dayrak.

[xi] Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung: Ahl-i Ḥaqq. <https://www.bpb.de/kurz-knapp/lexika/islam-lexikon/281749/ahl-i-haqq/>

[xii] Halm, op. cit.

[xiii] Shiloah, Amnon: Kurdish music. In Sadie, Stanley; Tyrrell, John (eds.): *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. Vol. xiv (2nd ed.). London: Macmillan, 2001, p. 40

[xiv] Ibid.

[xv] Nebez, Jamal: *The Kurds: History and Culture*. London: WKA Publications, 2004, p. 22. <http://www.bakhawan.com/dotkurd/nebez/Inglizi/TheKurds.pdf>

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