Traces of Yaresan–Alevism in Pre-Islamic Kurdish Poetry

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Summary
This entry explores traces of Yaresan–Alevism in pre-Islamic Kurdish poetry within the framework of cultural continuity, oral literary tradition, and religious themes. It emphasises that the Kurdish oral poetic tradition has been shaped not only by post-Islamic influences but also by the legacy of ancient civilisations of Mesopotamia and Anatolia. In this context, it is argued that the intellectual world of Yaresan–Alevism is rooted in a prehistoric and multilayered cultural foundation, intertwined with mythological and religious elements. Critiquing Fuad Köprülü's approach that considers the mystical movements developed in Anatolia as originating from Yesevism, the entry highlights the pre-Islamic traces found in the belief systems and literary productions sustained through oral tradition. Throughout the entry, the historical continuity of discourses, concepts, and symbols specific to Yaresan–Alevism in Kurdish poetry is illustrated with examples.

Keywords: Alevilik, Alevism, Anadolu–Mezopotamya, Anatolia–Mesopotamia, cultural continuity, divine light (nur), hafıza metinleri, İslam öncesi inançlar, Kalanderî dervişleri, kültürel süreklilik, Kurdish poetry, Kürt şiiri, kutsal coğrafya, kutsal semboller, oral tradition, poetic cosmology, pre-Islamic beliefs, Qalandari dervishes, Sacred Geography, sacred symbols, Şehname, Shahnameh, şiirsel kozmoloji, sözlü gelenek, Yaresan

Cultural Continuity and a Critique of Official Historiography

To identify traces of Yaresan-Alevism in pre-Islamic Kurdish poetry, one must approach the issue not only from a religious standpoint but also in terms of cultural continuity. Official historiographies shaped by modern nation-state ideologies have often tended to limit cultures to their own defined points of origin, disregarding the accumulated social and cultural heritage of earlier periods. Particularly in the

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cultural policies of the Republican era in Turkey, the influences of pre-Islamic peoples who lived in Anatolia have been systematically marginalised. In their place, a perception has been promoted that all cultural development began with the synthesis of Turkishness and Islam.

Yet, according to many scholars, this perspective does not align with historical and social realities. In the Anatolian-Mesopotamian geography-where numerous civilisations have coexisted and overlapped for centuries-successive communities have influenced one another's languages, beliefs, music, and poetry. The resulting cultural products are not solely expressions of a single people or faith but are instead the outcomes of a complex, multilayered historical experience.

One scholar who offers key insights into this subject is İsmet Zeki Eyuboğlu, who argues that the roots of Anatolian poetry lie in the region's ancient civilisations and cannot be explained merely through external influences. According to Eyuboğlu:

"Our poetry is an artistic entity that, while drawing nourishment from certain external sources throughout history, ultimately finds its roots in the deep soil of the land we inhabit today and has grown through the cultural nutrients inherited from the ancient civilisations of Anatolia" (Eyuboğlu 1970).

This perspective emphasises the need to evaluate poetry not solely through post-Islamic developments but also in relation to the cultural heritage that preceded them. Archaeological and musicological findings-such as the presence of musical instruments, including the bağlama, among ancient civilisations like the Sumerians and Hittites-serve as tangible indicators of this cultural continuity. Therefore, to fully grasp Kurdish poetry and the Yaresan-Alevi elements it carries, it is essential to consider prehistoric cultural traces as part of the interpretive framework.

The Transcivilisational Journey of Poetry in the Anatolian-Mesopotamian Region

Kurdish poetry and the religious elements it carries must be understood not solely through the internal dynamics of a single people but in relation to the multilayered cultural heritage of the geography in which it emerged. Anatolia and Mesopotamia have historically hosted successive civilisations, serving as a space of both conflict and exchange among them. In such a region, the idea that oral literary forms such as poetry emerged only in the post-Islamic period does not reflect historical reality.

The cultural legacy created by civilisations such as the Sumerians, Akkadians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Hittites, Urartians, Medes, Parthians, and Sasanians continued to live on-both mythologically and ritually-in the memory of subsequent peoples. These communities transmitted their belief and thought systems not only through written texts but also via oral traditions. As part of this cultural heritage, poetry served to articulate relations with the divine and forms of sacred contact through myth, legend, epic, and prayer.

Many motifs found in Kurdish poetry-such as sacred mountains, light, fire, water, and angelic figures-share symbolic commonalities with the religious iconography of ancient Mesopotamian faiths. These same symbols also hold central importance in the Yaresan-Alevi belief system. Thus, in the pre-Islamic period, Kurdish poetry functioned not only as an art form but also as an expression of faith-a kind of "oral theology."

The nature-centred imagery present in Kurdish poetry, which explains the relationship between the divine and the human through tangible elements of the natural world, parallels the Yaresan-Alevi understanding of sacred places (mountains, waters, fire, etc.). This indicates that poetry should be seen not only as a literary genre but also as a cultural and religious vessel.

As emphasised by Bayrak (2009, pp. 49-73), this poetic and spiritual continuity was never abruptly broken at any point in history; rather, it evolved in form while continuing to live on within different social structures.

Oral Culture, Poetry, and the Formation of Alevi-Yaresan Beliefs

Oral culture has played a decisive role in the formation of both Kurdish folk literature and the Alevi-Yaresan belief systems. In periods when written documentation was scarce, social memory was passed down through oral forms such as poetry, epics, hymns, *kılam*, and legends. This mode of transmission not only conveyed artistic expression but also served as a medium for ethical, religious, and social norms.

Oral narrators in Kurdish society-referred to by various titles such as *aşık*, *dengbêj*, *şair*, *bêjan*, and *klamker*-have been the primary agents of this cultural continuity. These figures were not merely entertainers; they were carriers of history, belief, law, and mythology. Within the narratives and poems they recited, one can also find the foundational motifs of the Yaresan-Alevi faith.

Recurring themes in these poems include the manifestation of the divine as *nur* (light), the glorification of sacred mountains or water sources as life-giving powers, and angelic figures acting as spiritual guides. These motifs are central not only to the metaphorical world of oral poetry but also to the ritual and narrative fabric of Alevi-Yaresan tradition.

Furthermore, in this oral tradition, female figures often appear as transmitters of wisdom and sacred knowledge. In ancient mythological accounts, “wise women” who serve as the source of sacred speech reflect the egalitarian structure of Yaresan-Alevism. Contrary to the male-dominated narratives of monotheistic religions, these traditions feature the transmission of sacred word and knowledge through women, who are regarded as sources of mystery and fertility

among ancient sanctities.

Therefore, the role of poetry within these belief systems should be seen as more than a medium of artistic expression; it is also one of the primary modes of communicating with the sacred. As Bayrak (2009, pp. 49-73) highlights, this poetic tradition is not merely an aesthetic form but a vessel for collective memory, belief, and identity.

Fuad Köprülü's Thesis and Its Critique: Yesevism or Ancient West Asian Heritage?

Fuad Köprülü, known for his influential studies on Turkish literature and the Sufi tradition, proposed that the Sufi movements emerging in Anatolia originated from Hoca Ahmed Yesevî. According to Köprülü, many of the Anatolian Sufi currents were nourished by Yesevism and brought to the region via dervishes of Central Asian Turkic origin. For many years, this approach dominated both academic scholarship and official historical discourse in Turkey.

However, criticisms have been raised that Köprülü's thesis overlooks the deep influences of much older Anatolian and Mesopotamian civilisations. Scholars such as İsmet Zeki Eyuboğlu and Mehmet Bayrak have noted that Köprülü's argument is reductionist and incomplete. From their perspective, locating the origins of Sufi movements and poetic expression solely in Central Asia disregards the millennia-old indigenous cultures of the region.

Eyuboğlu, in this context, critiques Köprülü's attempt to link numerous Anatolian Sufi orders exclusively to Hoca Ahmed Yesevî, asserting that such an approach ignores the enduring impact of Anatolian civilisations over the ages. According to Eyuboğlu, this perspective "fails to comprehend how the peoples of a land can influence newcomers in various ways" (Eyuboğlu 1970).

Similarly, Bayrak (2009) emphasises the necessity of acknowledging the cultural legacy of pre-Islamic Anatolian-Mesopotamian peoples in the formation of Sufi poetry. In his

view, Kurdish folk poetry and the Yaresan-Alevi elements within it should be interpreted not merely as products of Islam or Yesevism, but as continuations of much older belief and cultural systems. The understanding of the divine, angelic figures, sacred beings, and elements of nature found in these poems often diverge significantly from Islamic theology, indicating that the sources nourishing these poems are far deeper and more ancient.

In conclusion, where Yaresan-Alevi traditions intersect with poetic expression, one must acknowledge a heritage that is too rich and multifaceted to be reduced to a single geographic or historical origin.

Mythological and Religious Themes in Kurdish Poetry: From the *Shahnameh* to Qalandari Thought

Pre-Islamic Kurdish poetry encompasses not only individual emotions but also collective memory, belief systems, and mythological narratives, forming a rich symbolic universe. In this poetic tradition, themes of heroism, love, cosmogony, sacred beings, and natural phenomena are intricately interwoven. The mythological and religious motifs that constitute a significant strand of Kurdish poetry can thus be seen both as sources for and expressions of Yaresan-Alevi thought.

One frequently encountered figure in these poems is the legendary hero Rustam. Kurdish bards have recreated the *Shahnameh* tradition through localised variations such as “Rustemê Zal” and “Rustemê Qulek,” revealing how Iranian mythology has been integrated into folk narratives. The character of Rustam is sometimes portrayed as a manifestation of divine justice, or even as a sacred being sent to earth. The inclusion of such figures in folk poetry aligns with core Yaresan-Alevi beliefs such as the concept of divine light (*nur*), sacred births, and theophanies.

Similarly, the influence of Sufi orders such as Qalandariyya is also evident in Kurdish poetry. Qalandari dervishes, known

for their unconventional lifestyles, personal freedom, irreverence toward ostentatious piety, and intimate connection with the people, emerge as poetic figures. Their character reflects the antinomian tendencies found within Yaresan-Alevism. The subversive tone of Qalandari poetry, its emphasis on the *zahir-batin* (exoteric-esoteric) dichotomy, and its critique of worldly authority render these poems not only literary artefacts but also vehicles of religious expression.

Another recurring religious theme in the poetry is the figure of angels. Often perceived as *pîrs* or spiritual guides by the public, these angels are believed to protect individuals, guide them away from evil, and lead them toward sacred knowledge. These figures are linked to the Yaresan-Alevi concept of the sacred lineage (*nûr-i Muhammedî*). Symbols such as light, fire, water, and mountains point simultaneously to a cosmic order and to sacred wisdom.

Bayrak (2009, pp. 49-73) emphasises that these themes are nourished not only by Islamic narratives but also by the much older mythologies of Mesopotamia. According to him, these figures are preserved through poetry and are reinterpreted and sustained within new historical contexts.

The Historical Continuity and Transformation of Yaresan-Alevi Motifs

Many of the themes and symbols present in pre-Islamic Kurdish poetry offer important clues about the historical roots of the Yaresan-Alevi belief system. The sacred beings, metaphysical concepts, nature imagery, and moral teachings found in these poems not only reflect aesthetic richness but also signal the continuity of a living faith tradition. For this reason, these motifs should not be regarded merely as remnants of the past but as collective narratives that have persisted through historical transformation.

Frequently recurring motifs in the poetry-sacred mountains, springs, fire, light, and angelic figures-are poetic

manifestations of the Yaresan-Alevi understanding of sacred beings and sacred places. Over time, these motifs have continued to exist not only in verse but also in ritual practices, pilgrimage traditions, and collective memory. For example, fire is seen not merely as a source of heat and light, but as a sacred being; the mountain is not simply a geographic formation, but a site where divine presence is manifested. This conceptual framework reflects how esoteric interpretation (*batınî* hermeneutics) is embedded within poetic language in Yaresan-Alevism.

The conception of God in these poems is also notable. Rather than being imagined as a personal entity, God is often described as a force that permeates the cosmos and becomes one with all existence. This view parallels the Yaresan-Alevi cosmological principle of *wahdat al-wujud* (unity of being). The portrayal of God as light, a mountain, fire, or water underscores the predominance of the *batın* (esoteric) over the *zahir* (exoteric) dimension. This renders poetry a vehicle of mystical discourse and intuitive knowledge transmission.

Bayrak (2009, pp. 49-73) highlights this historical and cultural continuity, arguing that Yaresan-Alevism cannot be understood solely within an Islamic framework. Rather, it is interwoven with much older belief systems and narratives, embodying a multi-layered structure. The transformation of these motifs within poetry has allowed this structure to adapt to the spirit of the times and changing socio-political conditions.

In this regard, Kurdish poetry functions as a "site of memory." Social traumas, migrations, repression, and religious continuities are encoded between its lines. To decipher these codes is to shed light not only on the history of Kurdish poetry but also on the intellectual heritage of Alevi-Yaresan thought.

Conclusion: Yaresan-Alevism and the Poetic Consciousness of the Pre-Islamic Period

Pre-Islamic Kurdish poetry is not merely a subject of literary history; it is also a vital source for understanding the historical continuity, transformation, and transmission of indigenous belief systems such as Yaresan-Alevism through poetic means. This poetic consciousness reflects not only natural phenomena, social values, and spiritual tendencies encountered in everyday life, but also constructs symbolic modes of relating to the sacred.

In this context, poetry should not be viewed solely as an aesthetic form, but as an expression of collective consciousness, moral values, and metaphysical inquiry. Sacred sites, natural elements, angels, divine lights (*nurs*), and mountains that emerge in Kurdish oral literature are not only figurative elements but also symbols imbued with ontological meaning. These symbols, deeply embedded in Yaresan-Alevi cosmology, also sustain continuity in collective memory.

Bayrak's (2009, pp. 49-73) work makes visible the religious and historical depth carried by these poems, enabling us to move beyond dominant interpretations of the Alevi-Yaresan belief system. According to Bayrak, these poems function as "memory texts" that transmit the legacy of a civilisational chain stretching from Mesopotamia to Anatolia through word, sound, and symbol, beginning in the pre-Islamic period and carried forward across generations.

Within this framework, the poetic representations of the Alevi-Yaresan faith are not only relics of the past; they also serve as keys to understanding the present and transmitting knowledge to the future. This poetic consciousness points to a multilayered cultural and spiritual heritage that official historiographies have often ignored. Thus, tracing the Yaresan-Alevi motifs in Kurdish poetry should not only be seen as a literary analysis, but also as a form of historical justice.

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