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Religious Poetry in Tajik Badakhshan

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Tajikistan
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One of the customs of the Ismailis of Tajik Badakhshan is the performance of a specific genre of religious poetry, called madâh. In madâh, literally meaning praise, the veneration of ‘Alî, the holy family of the Prophet Muhammad, the Ismaili imams, and the 11th century Ismaili poet-philosopher, Nâsir-i Khusraw, is expressed in combination with mystical ideas common in Sufi poetry.

Madâh is usually performed by one or two men, accompanied by a rubâb and a daf. They perform for their own community, which is in most cases a small village or a certain quarter of a town. Men, women and children may be present: sometimes the men join the performers in singing the refrains, but most of the time everybody listens in silence to the performance. Approving exclamations are expressed when the madâh comes to an end, which is usually after many hours.

Madâh is performed often as a ritual of mourning. It is also performed on Thursday evenings and Fridays, or on the occasion of an anniversary of one of the numerous holy places in Badakh-

shan. Holy places, called mazâr, are scattered throughout the country. They contain the remains of mystics or extremely pious men of past times, surrounded by horns of the ibex.

The poetry sung in madâh is exclusively in Persian. For many Badakhshanis, this is their second language. In most cases one of the Pamir languages, Shughnî-Rushânî or Wakhî, is their mother tongue. Persian has of old been in use as a lingua franca of the area and as the language for writing, since the above-mentioned languages did not have a script. Persian also served as the language of religion, together with Arabic.

In a performance of madâh different forms of Persian poetry are linked together. The begin-

ning of the performance is usually slow and solemn. The first poem is often a ghazal. In the course of the performance, the tempo rises. The poems tend to be longer in the middle of a performance, when versified stories are sung. In between, quatrains or short prayers form a pause.

Madâh poetry is largely orally transmitted. The madâhkhâns, the performers of madâh, state that the poetry comes from ‘the bayâz’, notebooks with miscellaneous poems. Some madâhkhâns keep a similar notebook with poems written in Tajik script, used to memorize the texts. Many poems sung in madâh are attributed to classical Persian poets like Jalâl al-

Dîn Rûmî. Often these poems can be characterized as Sufi poems. Like many instances of classical Persian Sufi poetry, madâh is intended to elucidate religious matters.

Madâhkhâns are not professional singers. To be a madâhkhân is not even a profession. It is a gift, from which one should not make money. Therefore all madâhkhâns have other professions; many of them are farmers. They perform madâh when requested. ♦

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<p>A Few Examples of Madâh Poetry</p> <p>The first example is a mystical poem, addressed to a pupil on the mystical path, literally a ‘searcher for unity (with God)’. The pupil, and implicitly the audience, is accused of having too much pride and vanity. The poet speaks for a divine initiator, who appears in all forms and who stands above the cycle of beings. The listener is invited to heed this Absolute Truth, which is invisible to the physical eye, unless the outward eye is turned inwards, to the interior aspect of everything. Awareness of the interior aspect of things and beings leads to an understanding of the Secret. This secret is only known to the initiated.</p>	<p>The second example may be seen as a heterodox poem, in which ‘Alî is more or less deified. The first part of the sixth line is a sort of spell against the accusation of blasphemy; it is obvious that the composer of this poem is aware of a possible reproach in consequence of his statements. In the Ismaili religion, ‘Alî is not deified; but in the Ismaili doctrine of prophetic cycles he holds a key position as the wasî or deputy of the Prophet Muhammad. The deputies in the different prophetic cycles knew the secret meaning behind the outer form of religion. This secret was only revealed to a limited number of initiates. One of the reasons for the prevalence of ‘Alî in the poetry of Badakhshan may well be the fact that ‘Alî as a deputy of Muhammad represents the inner dimension of faith, which is deemed more important than the outer form. In this poem, ‘Alî is identified with a number of prophets. It has been recorded as well among the Ahl-i haqq of Kurdistan. The alleged author of this poem is Shams-i Tabrêzî: but this is probably a false attribution.</p>	<p>The theme of the third example of madâh poetry is the transience of this world. In all genres of poetry performed in Badakhshan, allusions to the transience of the world are common. Admonitions not to attach oneself to the world are eagerly listened to by the audience.</p>
<p><i>Oh you searcher of Unity, you are all the boasting I am looking for Listen to my words because I am saying the words of God</i></p> <p><i>Be the pupil of my heart in the school of learning If you want me to open the door of secrets for you</i></p> <p><i>If you want to serve in this divine horizon Then be ready for my command and listen to everything I say</i></p> <p><i>In this treasury of nine roofs there are four houses and six views Know the talisman of the treasure of meaning in it – it is my world-adorning Being</i></p> <p><i>If you want to see my face then open the eye of Secret Knowledge Because the worldly eye does not see a thing except my world-adorning Being</i></p> <p><i>Where do you see me in the earthly world with this eye? Since I am on a place and without a place, I stand above place and abode</i></p> <p><i>If you want to know me then first know yourself I know every one, I bring knowing and I am knowing</i></p> <p><i>In that sense I have become visible so that you know that I am wise as well as unwise, blind as well as seeing</i></p> <p><i>Become drunk of the cup of longing so that you learn to know That I am sometimes wine, sometimes the cup and sometimes the cup-bearer</i></p> <p><i>Although everyone is from God on his way to God, I am master of this all</i></p> <p><i>Whatever be the place of highest essence, whatever be the place of lowest essence I do not need anything and I am free from this all</i></p> <p><i>You will not see anything but me, nor at the beginning, nor at the end In this sense that I am hidden and always visible</i></p> <p><i>For me, there is no change in meaning but in outward appearance I change sometimes and I appear in every form</i></p>	<p><i>Since the world came into existence, ‘Alî was Since earth and time came into being, ‘Alî was</i></p> <p><i>The king who was executor after the Lord, was ‘Alî Sultan of generosity, benevolence and liberality was ‘Alî</i></p> <p><i>Adam as well as Seth, Job as well as Enoch The prophet Salih as well as David: it was ‘Alî</i></p> <p><i>First and last, exterior and interior Devotee, place of worship and deity: it was ‘Alî</i></p> <p><i>Jesus came into being and spoke these words ‘The inner meaning of my story is: it was ‘Alî</i></p> <p><i>This is no blasphemy, these words are no blasphemy As long as something is, ‘Alî will be; as long as something was, ‘Alî was</i></p> <p><i>Listen to the luminous Lamech, so that you will know That friend, who was this prophetic soul, was ‘Alî</i></p> <p><i>Gabriel came from near the incomparable Creator In the qibla was Muhammad, but the goal was ‘Alî</i></p> <p><i>Moses saw in a dream that the kernel of prophecy which he showed to the Pharaoh in Egypt, was ‘Alî</i></p> <p><i>The seal on the finger of Solomon the Prophet That divine light that was in it, was ‘Alî</i></p> <p><i>That conqueror who on the fortress of Khaybar destroyed the door with one stroke and opened it, was ‘Alî</i></p> <p><i>That mighty king who on the road of Islam did not rest till he had success, was ‘Alî</i></p> <p><i>That mighty king who was one with the chosen Ahmad in the night of the Ascension, was ‘Alî</i></p>	<p><i>Do not feel secure in this world, for no rose or rose-bed remains Do not be negligent in remembering God for in the body no soul remains</i></p> <p><i>Do you not fear the day that you put your side against the earth? For you, as an ornament not even a piece of turban and clothes remains</i></p> <p><i>Surely there is a ray of the soul as a loan in the house of the body For life not even a ray of the sun in a small window remains</i></p> <p><i>The kings of the world delighted in pride of their palace and throne They were unable to consider ‘to me, nothing of this remains’</i></p> <p><i>The greedy people have collected earthly possessions out of greed Look, in the end not even earth in the hem of the skirt remains</i></p> <p><i>Alas I spent the house of my life in negligence Everything I threw in the wind and from the heap of corn no grain remains</i></p> <p><i>Think well, for our past life does not return Such is the portion formed by day and night: from going nothing remains</i></p> <p><i>White became the eye of Jacob because of separation from Joseph ‘For my heart’s comfort nothing but the smell of the shirt remains’</i></p> <p><i>Qalandar, if you boast Love for Him then learn from the nightingales For no long nights to wail over separation remain</i></p>