

THE KURDS & THE SADE

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It is a living assumed "tradition" that the Kurds are involved in the Iranian cult of fire, and literary sources are not so helpful in clarifying the question, which is very important considering the hypothesis of Boratav on the derivation of Turkish *saya* from Iranian *sade* (Boratav 1971, pp. 27-30): the Kurds could be a suitable trait-d'union. However, if we pay due attention to the available material, we can notice something that is not pure folklore, concerning the cult of fire and particularly the *sade* in a Kurdish environment.

A "canonical" tradition on the institution of *jašn-e sade* could be the Ferdowsian one: "It happened one day, while the king of the world was making a journey towards the mountains with some of his retinue, that there came into view, moving at speed, an elongated creature black in colour. In its head were two eyes like pools of blood and from its mouth there poured black smoke covering the world with gloom. Hushang observed it keenly and steadily, then took up a stone, which he gripped firmly and, with the strength granted to heroes, let fly against this world-devouring monster, which leapt aside from the world-conquering Shah. The small stone dashed against a greater one, both were shattered by the impact, and from between the two there flashed out a spark whose brightness set the heart of the stone aglow. The monster was not slain, but, out of the realm of the hidden, fire was discovered from that stone. So that whenever iron is struck against stone a spark appears. On that first occurrence the world-potter went to the Creator of the world and worshipped him, calling down blessings on him for having granted him the gift of the spark. And he appointed the fire to be the objective to which men turn in worship. This spark, he proclaimed, is God-given; if you are wise you will worship it.

Night came, and with it the fire blazed mountain-high, the king and his retinue being gathered about it. That night he feasted and drank wine and gave the name *Sade* to this happy occasion" (Ferdowsi-Levy, pp. 7-8).

This version is apparently accepted as the basic account of the establishment of *Sade* in Christensen's *Les Types du Premier homme et du Premier Roi* in as much as the chapter dedicated to the legendary king-hero Hushang is immediately followed by a notoriously diffused excursus, namely *La fête de Sādā et d'autres fêtes du feu iraniennes* (1, Stockholm 1917, pp. 164-182). The same "mood", or *metus reverentialis*, which privileges the Ferdowsian account, is to be found among Iranian scholars too, as in the case of Hāšem Rađī, who opens the chapter of his *Gāhšomārī va jašnā-ye Irān-e bāstān* dedicated to the *sade* and to the fire-festivals, discussing the importance of this natural element in the symbolic and religious life of the Persians; then he goes on presenting the *sade* as the "*jašn-i ke be yadgār-e peydāy-e ataš bargozār mišavad*" (1992, pp. 560), thus considering this feast, without any hesitation, as the feast of the *inventio* of fire, connecting it with the Hushangian cycle, and closing this kind of general introduction on the "fire-festivals" topic with the quoted passage from the *Šāhnāme*.

However, on the *sade* and its origin we have some other versions: Nuwayri's one, for instance, where the «ode is scheduled as the celebration of the victory of "Daq ibn Tahmāsb" (i.e. Zav-e Tahmāsp) over Afrāsiyāb (in *Nihayat al-arab*, cf. *Jašn-e sade*, pp. 48-49), while other "informations", collected by Biruni in *Ātār al-bāqiya* (cf. *Jašn-e sade*, pp. 44, lacuna in Biruni-Sachau) and Qazuini in *'Aǰā'ib ell-matilūqāt* (cf. *Jašn-e sade*, pp. 39), ascribe the establishment of that feast to Ardašīr-e Bābakān (quite a late occurrence, we can say) and some other ones (Biruni, *Ātār al-bāqiya* cf. *Jašn-e sade*, pp. 44-45; Biruni-Wright, p. 182; Gardizi, *Zeyn ol-axbār*, cf. *Jašn-e sade*, p. 36), on the contrary, place the *sade* within the most ancient period of human history: it is then case of Kayumārth or Mašiye and Mašiyāne, or the number of generated sons and/or days and nights between *sade* and *nowr tiz* (Turkish

soya echoing this particular tradition, see Boratav, pp. 29-30). In brief, why should we consider "canonic" an isolated tradition, as the Ferdowsian version risks to be? A possible answer is that, with regard to all other versions - including the Birunian passage quoted below, to be read in the light of a related passage of Hamadāni - this is the variant most intimately connected with fire as a natural element, subsequently the most apt to propose itself as the perfect mythical interpretation of a fire-feast that had a special flavour to be interpreted as the fire-feast par excellence (cf. Deylamani, p. 86, "*maxšus-e jašn-e ātaš*"). But another answer, more simple, is that, may be, we are concerned here with the sole mythic "fact" which did not happen to be considered in the texts as the founding moment, not only of the *sade* but also of some other religious or somewhat solemn occurrences: in other words, the only "pigeon hole" with no need to face competition (*contra Boyce, p. 801, but see Grünbaum, pp. 445-446 for the "universal" value of the Ferdowsian paradigm of the invention of fire*). Well, apart from the Ferdowsian tradition, we find, inter alia, the Birunian "aetiological" interpretation, which is not isolated at all; we can retrace some fragments of it from Gardizi's, *Zeyn ol-axbār* (Massé I, p. 37, and from the *Nouruz-nāme* (*Xayyām-Minovi, p. 10*) up to Morier (Massé I, p. 37, where this particular feast, however, could be the *adarjašn*), and a particularly expressive poetical echo is in a *nasib* of Farroxi (cf. Farroxi-Dabirsiyaqi: 363) where the flames of the *sade* remind us of the standard of *Kāve*, the well known popular hero of the *mehrgān*.

"Another report accounts for the lighting of the fires during this night in the following way: When *Bēvarasp* had ordered people to provide him every day with two men, that he might feed his two serpents with their brains, he commissioned immediately after his arrival a man called *Azmā'īl* to attend to this. Now, this man always used to set free one of the two, giving him food, and ordering him to settle in the western part of mount *Dunbāwand* and there to build himself some sort of house, whilst he fed the two serpents with the brains of a ram instead of that prisoner whom he had set free, mixing them with the brains of the other victim who was killed. When *Frēdūn* had conquered *Bēvarasp*, he ordered *Azmā'īl* to be fetched and punished in revenge for those whom he had killed. Thereupon *Azmā'īl* told him the tale of those whom he had set free, speaking the truth, and asked the king to send out a messenger with him that he might show them to him. So the king did, and *Azmā'īl* ordered those whom he had set free to light fires on the roofs of their houses, in order that their number might be seen. This happened in the 10-th night of *Bahman*. Therefore the messenger said to *Azmā'īl*: 'What a number of them thou hast set free! May God give thee a good reward!' He returned to *Frēdūn* and brought him his report. *Frēdūn* exceedingly rejoiced at the matter, and set out himself for *Dunbāwand* to see the thing himself. Thereupon he conferred great honour upon *Azmā'īl*, he gave him *Dunbāwand* as a fief, made him sit on a golden throne, and called him *Masmaghān*" (*Biruni-Sachau, pp. 213-214*).

This tradition - a (Kurdish?) variant of the ambrosia myth, according to Dumézil (pp. 66-67) - clearly re-connects the *sade* to the victory of *Fereydun*, thus causing a sort of confusion (presumably not so unfounded) with the *mehrgān*. As a matter of fact, we can retrace the substance of this Birunian passage, and of the passages from both *Nouruz-nāme* and *Zeyn al-axbar*, in the passage of the *Muxtasar kitāb al-buldān* by *Ibn al-Faqlāh* (*Hamadāni-De Goeje, p. 275 and foll.*) devoted to the *mehrgān*. In this case we are dealing with the legend containing the canonic version of the founding of *mehrgān*. This passage of *Hamadāni* is particularly interesting, we can say, because it possibly highlights an eloquent link between the symbolic meaning of the "event" *Hušang* happened to front and the "events" recorded in the heterodox versions of *Bīrūnī*, *Gardizi* and the *Nowruz-nāme*. It may have provided a special mental approach, not unknown to modern Iranian scholars. *Raḡi* writes: "čēnānke dar naql-e dāstān-e *Hušang ešāre šod, mār-e siyah ramz-e tamthili-ye Ahriman va zešti bud ke marg va nabudi mi-āfarinad, va čun dar kār-e ḥamle bar āmad, ātaš-e owramazdi bederaxšid va marg va badi rā be dur rānd. Hamin kenāyat va tamthil dar dāstān-e Bivarāšb va Fereydun tekrār mi-šavad. Aji Dahāk ya Dabḥāk čēnānke az nām-aš bar mi-āyad, ajdahāst, mār ast, do mār bar duš-e u, nešāni-ye ahrimani va kenāyat az vojūd-e šeytāni-aš mi-*

bāšad. Marg mi-talabad, čun bāyad az mayz-e ādami taγziye šavad. Pas be band kešide mi-šavad va ātaš mi-afrozand va foruγ va rowšani-ye in ātaš ast ke Bivarāsb-e marduš rā nabud mi-konad va hamiše dar band negāh mi-dārad" (p. 567).

How does this uncertainty concerning the origin of these festivals come about? And how can we explain, above all, this analogy between the *sade* and the *mehrgān*? One is tempted to understand such a situation in the texts (reflecting a storiographic custom according to which *everything* is recorded, *everything* naturally and consequently merging into a unique level or register of reliability) by assuming a rather late introduction of the *sade* in the canonical structure of Persian festivals and a subsequent projection into remote antiquity (far more than Fereyduṅ himself!) of a theme historically moulded out of *mehrgān*.

But to a certain extent we could explain the versions we find in Bīrūnī, Gardizi and the Nowruz-nāme, on the basis of the hypothesis of an ancient competition between *sade* and *mehrgān* (solstice versus equinox, increasing light versus balance darkness-light?) according to the thinkable "valences" of the Mithraic theme, at least in a certain environment, the *sade* pertaining to a "pastoral" milieu - as the typological analysis of Turkish *saya* could suggest - and facing the "aulic" *mehrgān*. Last (but, in this case, least), a fire-feast on the roofs of the houses is reported in Khorasan (in the little town of Ferdows), till thirty years ago (and may be till today): the assumed vitality of age-old customs (*Nowyāni*, p. 42)! (In modern times, the [Iranian] Kurds are reported to feast with fire once a week, but every week uninterruptedly from *sade* until *čahāršanbe suri*, cf. Nafisi, p. 843 and *Jašn-e sade*, p. 33).

Strictly speaking, all this has apparently nothing to do with the Kurds. But what does indeed concern the Kurds is the name of the merciful Azmā'il / Azmā'il - and in a variant of the Šāhname (*Ferdowsi-Bertel's*, p. 52, n. 4) Armānak (cf. *Bīrūnī-Wright*, p. 182, *Armānik*), this variant introducing an interesting parallelism with the ethnogenesis of the Armenians, a nation which does not ignore neither the thema of Daḥḥāk nor the ritual "luminaria" (*Scarcia*, pp. 82-89). This name reminds us of the ethnogenesis of the Kurds, whose ancestors were set free by that minister and fled "to the west of Dunbāwand" (*Scarcia, ibid.*) choosing a "wild" way of life (*Ferdowsi-Bertel's*, p. 53).

The obvious deduction is that a submerged Iranian tradition, retraceable by checking accounts on Azmā'il, available in both Bīrūnī and Ferdowsi, apparently connects to the (ancestors of the) Kurds the very institution of the *sade*, recognising to that nation an "urban" civilisation too. So, the possible link is not only a "savage" (let us say pastoral, cf. *Dumézil*, pp. 66-67) one, but a learned one too. In brief, beyond whatever competition between Iranian festivals and whatever outcome of it, if it is not possible to speak sic et simpliciter of an ancient Kurdish cult of fire, it is not possible, nevertheless, to exclude the presence, amongst at least *some* Kurds, of a certain fire-festival. No doubt, the rich Irano-Islamic erudition of a thousand years ago happened to collect some "reports" on this purpose, and the degree of arbitrariness or likelihood of such a record has to be seriously evaluated in the contest of *all* available material, although not always perfectly consistent, on the *sade*.

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