



JAM (RELIGIOUS CEREMONY)

JAM, name given to a religious ceremony performed among two important religious communities living traditionally in the same historical region on the Zagros Mountain chain, which for a long time has been located in the core of several Mesopotamian and Iranian civilizations. Today, the same region is within the national borders of Iran, Iraq and Turkey. This term, according to Nur-ʿAli Elāhi (p. 27), is the Arabic word *jamʿ* (gathering, assembly), which is pronounced by the non-Arabs of the region without its last letter “*ʿayn*,” thus sounding exactly like Persian *jam*, the name of a king in Iranian mythology.

Jam is the most important religious ceremony among the Yāresān or Ahl-e Ḥaqq (q.v.) of Iran and Iraq as well the Alevis of Turkey, but it does not exist among the Yazidi or Ezdi Kurds (Kreyenbroek, p. 103), although they share many of their religious tenets with the other two communities. Jam is performed by both Yāresāns and Alevis as a ceremony for periodical meetings, but it also includes many other rituals. The ritual is structurally performed, with some notable variations, in a similar manner by all branches of these two communities. The place where Jam is performed is called *Jam-kāna*. In both communities Jam is accompanied by music and religious dances; sacrificial food and other offerings are also made and distributed among the participants (author's own fieldwork material). Their instrument of choice is *tanbur*, a plucked instrument of the lute family. Both groups seem to be using the same instrument, but the one played by the Yāresān is of more traditional form, while the one played by the Alevis (also called *sāz* or *divān*) seems to have undergone several modifications (for various forms of *tanbur*, see Mallāḥ, pp.



192-218, 386-87; Setāyešgar, I, pp. 284-86).

The ideal number of participants to perform a Jam by the Yāresān is three, five, or seven male adults. The women and children are allowed to attend a Jam, but they stand outside of the circle. This is usually for the sake of educating their children in religious matters. The children are not allowed to sit and are expected to stand throughout the ceremony. Women are not allowed to enter the Jam, even the one who is being ceremonially initiated; for her the ceremony is performed by a proxy (author's own fieldwork material).

Nur-'Ali Elāhi (q.v.), the leader of a branch of the Yāresān, states that both men and women can attend the Jam ceremony, but women are not allowed to sit with men; they may, however, gather behind a partition that would separate them from the men (Elāhi, p. 81). Considering relatively high position of the women among this community, the prohibition of women folk to participate directly in the Jam ritual seems to be a recent decision. Probable previous participation of the women could have been the reason for the outsiders to accuse them of holding orgies. For instance, Henry Rawlinson, writing in 1839, stated that orgiastic nights had existed among the Yāresān "until within the last half century" (Rawlinson, p. 110; cf. De Bode, II, p. 180 and Sā'edi, p. 127). In any case, the participation of the women is still current among the Alevis of Turkey, who even take part in their religious dances.

The sociological function of Jam may be both uniting and dividing the Yāresān as a whole. The performance of the ritual as well as its many latent and apparent symbols can bring about a strong sense of solidarity among the participants, who, in theory, should forget all kinds of resentful and rivalrous feelings that they might have entertained. At the same time, the members of each one of eleven branches (*kānadān*; Elāhi, pp. 53, 66-72) attend only their own ceremony, which is performed slightly different from those of others and which may lay grounds for alienation.

Another important motive emphasized in the Jam ceremony is the principal of absolute equality among the participants, which is also repeated in their songs (*kalām*), and which should be observed to the extent that a king and a beggar be treated equally (Elāhi, p. 84). Every participant covers his head, either wearing a hat or using a piece of cloth or a handkerchief. He also must gird his waist, either by a belt or with a length of cloth. This is usually done over their clothes, whether over their shirts and jackets, or under their coats or 'abā (a kind of loose outer garment for men, q.v.). Since no kinds of ranking is



recognized, no one is allowed to have a special place to sit, except those who are in charge of directing the ceremony (author's own fieldwork material).

When a participant enters, he prostrate himself, kisses the threshold and says: "The Beginning and the End is the *Yār*" (*Yār* "the Friend" is one of the names of God among the followers of the *Yāresān*). This is in accordance to their religious philosophy, which does not believe in death, rather comparing it with the diving of a duck into water. He then goes first to the *sayyed* or the religious guide in charge of the ceremony to perform the hand kissing rite. He then goes from the right to the left, kissing the hands of those already seated. To take the correct prescribed position, he gets down on his knees and sits back, resting his weight on his lower legs and feet. Otherwise, especially for those who do not have enough physical strength to go through the motion, it is enough to bend down before each participants in order to perform the hand kissing rite. In practice, however, the former way is not commonly performed. The participants in a Jam always sit on the floor and chairs are never used. Normally in the regions west of Kermānšāh city, the participants remain seated by kneeling, whereas those inhabiting the regions west of this city are seated cross legged (author's own fieldwork material).

They then hold each others right hands, palms touching each others. While still holding each others' right hands, they simultaneously bring them to the level of their lips in such a way that each one is able to kiss the back side of the other's right hand. In the version described by Nur-'Ali Elāhi, while right hands are holding, each participant should place his left hand on the back of the other person's right hand and kiss the back side of the other's left hand (Elāhi, p. 78). The first version, however, is more commonly followed.

Each newcomer goes round the room from right to left, and after kissing the hands of all those already seated one by one, he takes the first vacant place to sit. As already mentioned, only those in charge of directing the ceremony have their prescribed places in the Jam to sit. These are, the *sayyed*, the leader of the assembly, who sits opposite the entrance; his representative (called *kalifa*), who sits on the left side of the *sayyed*; and the person in charge of reciting the *kalām*, who sits on his right side. These three, as well as a person in charge of serving the Jam (*kādem*) are the necessary authorities for a Jam to be performed (author's own fieldwork material). Therefore, the prescriptive rule of holding a Jam with the minimum number of three can only mean three participants added to these four, making the total number at least seven. Some believe that, although a Jam can be performed with the minimum number of



three participants, at least seven participants are required if the ceremony is accompanied by an initiation rite (Hamzeh'ee, p. 156).

The *kādem* should remain standing in the doorway opposite of the sayyed throughout the ceremony. He is required to have already washed his feet and to serve the Jam bare-footed. In the absence of a sayyed, the *kalifa* recites prayer when offerings are made, but he is not allowed to recite prayer for sacrifices, which can only be done by a sayyed. Once everyone is seated in a circle, the *kādem* declares the beginning of the ceremony by saying “The Beginning and the End is the *Yār*.” From the beginning to the end of a Jam, all participants are required to remain seated in the manner already described. No movements or changing positions are allowed once the *kādem* declares the official beginning of the Jam, except in the case of urgent or unexpected situations (author's own fieldwork material).

A Jam is often accompanied by other rituals such as offerings and sacrifices as well as initiation rites. In case that a sacrifice is made, first a bowl and a ewer are brought to the Jam by the *kādem*, who takes them around for the participants to wash their hands. Then they touch their faces with the palms of their hands (*mash*) and recite the above mentioned formula. The *kādem* also washes his own hands after all participants. Then a white table cloth (*sofra*) is brought in and spread before the sayyed. The pot containing cooked sacrificial meat is placed on the *sofra*, and the sayyed separates the meat from the bones without the bones being broken. Then equal portions of the meat are put on a type of bread (called *tiri*) and rolled up. In case that offerings of rice are made, some cooked rice may be added to each portion of meat. These sacrificial shares are called *baš* or *nawāla*. The shares are distributed by the *kalifa* among the participants, including men, women, and children outside of the Jam. The first *baš* is a holy one and is called *māl-e Dāwud* (belonging to Dāwud). This is regarded as that of the Divinity and would be put in the middle of the Jam. While doing so, all the participants say *Hu* “He” (i.e., God). In case the Jam is performed at night, the second share called “*māl-e čerāg*” may be offered to the light and it would be kept in front of a burning candle or an oil lamp. Except for tasting or eating the holy share received, nothing should be eaten throughout the ceremony. Similarly, no private word should be exchanged or the prescribed sitting position altered. This is not applicable for those who are in charge of the performance. The *kādem* is not allowed to leave the room, and the works outside are done by his assistants. He may, however, leave the room when no assistants are available, but he has to leave



his headgear in the Jam each time he goes out (author's own fieldwork material).

Throughout the ceremony, the *kalām* is recited or music is played on the *tanbur*. Just like the Alevis, the Yāresān may merely listen to the music meditatively or move their bodies with its rhythms. The whole atmosphere of the Jam and religious songs as well as the sound of *tanbur*, often leads several of the participants to experience deep moments of ecstasy. A Jam might be performed without music as well, when no one is present to play music or recite the religious songs. After the sacrificial shares are distributed, the *kādem* brings in a bowl of drinking water, offering water to each participant one by one, from the right to the left. Each person takes a sip of water from the same bowl and returns it to the *kādem*, who turns the bowl a little bit around before offering it to the next person, so that the lips of the next participant do not touch the same point where those of the previous one has done. The ceremony is called *āw-e čark-e Jam*, meaning the circulating water of the Jam (Hamzeh'ee, pp. 175, 177, 203).

After the *sofra* is collected and taken away, the *sofra* prayer is recited by the sayyed. Then at the end of the ceremony, the *kādem* and his helper call the Permission Prayer (*Do'ā-ye rokṣat*), after which they go to kiss the hands of all the participants from the right to the left, starting from the sayyed. Finally the sayyed, who is called *sarjam*, declares the completion of the ceremony.

The Jam ceremony is an extremely important ritual for both the Alevis and the Yāresān. The latter regard Jam as a Mecca of their own and believe that there is a divine manifestation wherever it is held. Thus, all participants are believed to be in the presence of the Holy Essence (*dāt* or *darra*) of God, and any person attending the Jam is required to observe the purity of both body and mind (for detailed description of the ceremony, see Hamzeh'ee, chap. 6.1). The great importance that the Yāresān attach to the Jam is illustrated in a myth in which a son of Solṭān Şahāk, one of the main theophanies of the Yāresān religion, is said to have been wrestling with a believer. He called out for his father to give him strength, but the believer called on the magnanimity of the Jam and won. The youth went and complained to his father. Solṭān Şahāk said: "Quite right, for my right arm is always with the Jam" (Saeed Khan, p. 37). It is believed that, in a Jam, all problems of the participants would receive solutions, as promised by the Divinity. This can be one of the reasons for the followers to use a particular language with many symbolic expressions while describing the Jam.



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