



QAWL

QAWL, Yezidi, a type of poetry that plays a central role in the religious life of the Yezidis. These hymns are chanted to music on solemn religious occasions, and are an important source of Yezidi religious knowledge.

Traditionally the *qawls* are transmitted orally, mainly in families of hereditary professional “reciters” (*qawwāl*), while other Yezidi religious leaders usually have some knowledge of them as well. *Qawwāls* were taught the texts of a number of *qawls* (from under ten to over a hundred, depending on personal ability), and the specific melody (Kurd. *kubrî*) of each one. In some cases they were also trained to understand the deeper meaning of these hymns, so as to enable them to refer to these in their sermons (*meşhābat*), which form an important part of certain religious functions. On such occasions *qawls* are also chanted to the accompaniment of the “sacred” instruments, the tambourine (*daf*) and flute (*şebāb*).

The *qawls* are composed in Northern Kurdish dialect. They are usually end-rhymed, and can be relatively long (the longest-known *qawl* has 117 stanzas, while the usual length is 20-60 stanzas). Both their language and content point to an early origin of the hymns, though the oral character of their transmission makes it impossible to give firm dates. Whereas later Yezidism regarded itself as wholly separate from Islam, the hymns reflect a period when the community still thought of itself as “the (true) Sunna,” as opposed to “the People of the Shari’a” (i.e., the majority of Muslims) and the “Rāfezis,” meaning Shi’ites (Kreyenbroek, pp. 226-27). The few references to a direct opposition between the community and “the Muslims” presumably reflect a



later stage in this development.

It seems likely that the term *qawl* was used exclusively for compositions by early religious leaders, similar hymns of a different origin being known as *bayt*. In some texts the author's name or pen-name is given at the end, or his identity is indicated by the title. This evidence suggests that several prolific *qawl* composers were at work at an early stage of the community's history, but we have no certainty as to the veracity of the attributions. Both the structure and the content of several hymns suggest that they may originally have been composed in written form.

Central topics found in the *qawls* are (1) the cosmogony; (2) the early history of the faith and community; (3) stories about miracles and holy figures; (4) eschatology; (5) death, grief and consolation; (6) mystical themes, usually inspired by the Sufi tradition; (7) stories deriving from the Islamic or Judeo-Christian traditions; (8) proper behavior.

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(Philip G. Kreyenbroek)