

Chivalry in the Islamic World: Ayyāri, Akhism and Ahdāth

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Abstract—Morality and ethical issues such as chivalric virtue have been critical concepts in the Islamic culture. It included the religiously inspired virtues of love and faith and religious and martial connotations attached to this motif. The aim of this paper is to explore the diverse manifestation of chivalry groups in different realms of the Islamic world. This article discusses the chivalry movement of ayyāri in Persia, akhism in Anatolia and Asia Minor, and ahdāth in Syria and Irāq in order to shed light on the similarities and differences as well as their connectedness and connotations. However, it focuses on ayyāri and studies the other two movements regarding their alliance to Persian chivalry. It outlines the ethical principles of each organization in short and their origins, emergence and development. The article discusses the political, social, economic and religious influence of each organization in different periods and the reasons of their reputation or unpopularity. It also portrays how and to what extent the spirit of futuwwa affects the ideological structure of each chivalry organization.

Index Terms— ahdāth, akhism, ayyāri, chivalry, futuwwa.

I. INTRODUCTION

Morality and ethical issues such as chivalric virtue have been critical concepts in the Islamic culture. Despite this fact, it cannot be concluded that they emerged and grew after the advent of Islam. The tradition of chivalric behavior which has always been associated with the virtues of courage, forbearance, liberality, generosity and fidelity existed in pre-Islamic world. The Persian Hero Rustam in Shahnama of Firdawsi and Hatim al-Ta'i the Arab symbol of generosity can approve the idea. However, this motif came to include the religiously inspired virtues of love of truth and justice, reverence for women, protection of the poor and indigent, piety, altruism, and indefatigable devotion to the faith after the advent of Islam. The martial connotations of chivalric ethos in Islamic society have its origins in the military connotations of the pre-Islamic ideal of manliness and chivalry, religious warriors who fought out of faith. In Iran the circles of futuwwa within Sufism took on spiritual rather than religious and martial connotations and in the Medieval Islam chivalric groups like ayyārs aimed to promote social and economical justice especially for those oppressed by the government [1]. In Anatolia, chivalry was more institutionalized around religious brotherhoods and professional guilds and in Arab society, ahdāth as chivalric groups were used as resolution by the politicians of the time in order to provide public security and welfare to observe the

governing rules in Islam. This paper portrays the realization of chivalry in the Islamic world. We examined the chivalry movement in Persia, Anatolia and Asia Minor, and Syria and Irāq in order to shed light on the similarities and differences as well as their connectedness.

II. AYYĀRI IN PERSIA

Persian culture and literature has always gained a special place in the world due to the geographical position of Iran and its advanced civilization. Liberality, benevolence, loyalty and honor have always been the most prominent and utmost qualities of the chivalrous and Persian ayyārs. The word 'Iran' emerged from *ārya* means noble, magnanimous and liberal. It can endorse this fact that the ayyārs were originally Iranians who remained steadfast in Iranian traditions and customs. They tried to provide the conditions in this country for people to join their groups and organizations aimed at creating a utopian society in Iran.

The emergence of ayyāri organizations in Iran was a kind of intellectual movement. The members of ayyāri ethos endeavored to forge a national alliance and elevate the intellectual abilities of the people in order to further their patriotic aims and ensure the survival of their ancestors' culture and art. Indeed, they were the protectors of cultural heritage and saviors of people who faded into oblivion under the domination of Arabs and Omavi and Abbāsi Caliphs. One of the decisive factors in re-empowering Iranians and reviving their political and national independence was the establishment of different local communities and folklore movements [2].

Preserving human values and observing prime ethical principles are the most salient features of the chivalrous including ayyārs in Iran, knights in the Middle Ages and samurais in Japan. The main reason of their popularity among their people can be their special characteristics. According to Futuwwanames and books about chivalry and ayyāri, a perfect ayyār should possess 72 ethical characteristics [3]. The most prominent ones are briefly mentioned here.

Confidentiality, hospitality and providing food for hungry and poor people and passengers are primary principles of ayyāri. Ayyārs swore an oath of keeping the secrets of other, especially other ayyārs, any time, under any conditions. For them 'bread' and 'salt' were of great sanctity as they swore to them. They offered their best food and drink to their guests, whether a friend or a stranger. Among other traits, honesty, truthfulness, generosity, selflessness, patience, chastity, and perusing justice were the most outstanding.

The sense of nationalism and futuwwa among Iranians has made their land the realm of spiritual challenges. As reference [4] write the Arabic word fatā whose plural form is

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fatiān means young. Its Latin equivalent is *juvenis* and in Persian language the word *javān* is used. *Javānmardi* (i.e. youthfulness) or *futuwwa* literally refer to the young physique but its metaphorical meaning is *sālik* (i.e. wayfarer), a member of sufism who seeks perfection and the purification of the soul and attempts to realize the attributes of the Truth. Corbin proposed that the most appropriate equivalent for the word *fatā* is *chevalier* and Iranians have preferred to use the word *shovāliye*, the loanword from *French*.

Among these social groups, the *lutis* were in close contact with people of the cities and villages during the Qajar Dynasty and very similar to the *ayyārs* in the ethos, spending most of their time in the House of Strength (*Zoorkhaneh*). The *lutis* believed in *futuwwa* and *futuwwa* ethos; consequently, they had strong spiritual and altitudinal bonds. They tried to live with the ideal of chivalry and protect the subordinates and the oppressed to gain the privilege of *ayyāri*. They supported socio-political developments as *Sattār Khan* was known as a *luti* in the defense of *Tabriz*. *Bazaar lutis* played an important role in social riots and revolts [5].

A. Emergence of *Ayyāri Ethos*

As reference [6] puts it into words, *ayyāri* has its roots in the rituals of *Mehr*¹ widely observed by Iranians. He pinpointed several similarities between *ayyāri* and *Mehr*. Accordingly, *Mehr* holds a string in hand at the time of birth and the *ayyārs* carry a knife with themselves. As *Mehr* honors pledges, the *ayyārs* pledge their solidarity and resolute in companionship to the death. Like the *ayyārs*, *Mehr* expresses hostility towards wickedness and lie. *Mehr* is vigilant and the *ayyārs* are night guards. Both *Mehr* and *ayyār* are experts in wrestling. In both rituals, respecting the *doyens* is of great importance. Last but not least, the *ayyārs* swear to God and to *Mehr* and *Zand* and *Pāzand*² when making a promise.

Regarding the trends of this social institution and the features of its foundation, it can be concluded that this organization was established after people's awakening and their struggle against the rulers of injustice and cruelty who made the life of oppressed people a misery, the period of class divisions. Reference [7] knows this as one of the reasons of the establishment of the *ayyārs* before Islam and emergence of the mania beliefs in *ayyāri*.

The legendary *ayyārs* commenced in *Sistān* where the national uprising against *Abbāsi* Caliphs originated. *Sistān ayyārs* were well-known for their smartness and nimbleness. They made a living by escorting caravans. They guarded the caravans against brigands and were paid protection money for guarding their lives and properties. These *ayyārs* turned to brigands not long afterwards. However, they were still obliged to *javānmardi* ethos and morals. Due to this fact, they were called chivalric brigands. *Sistāni ayyārs* meddled in city affairs and some robbed the wealthy and gave the stolen to the poor and needy leading to a situation of chaos and

agitation in the state. This group of *ayyārs* worked for *Abbāsi* Caliphs as wage-paid warriors helping them to suppress *Sistān* apostates. Then they started to fight against *Abbāsi* Caliphs when a coppersmith (*saffār*) named *yaqub al-Layth* revolted and founded the *Saffarid* dynasty with the aim of overthrowing cruel government of *Baghdād*. In fact, *Ayyāri* could bring about a resurgence of nationalism and resistance against the Arab caliphs [9].

Another important state where *ayyārs* emerged in was *Khurāsān*. Therein *Marv* was the city where *Abu Muslem Khurāsāni*, the first warrior against *Baghdād* Caliphs, rebelled against *Omavian*. *Abu Muslem* who knew about the discontent of the public with *Omavian* and at unjust deeds of this government tried to rise *Abbāsian* to power. But *Abbāsi* Caliphs betrayed the public's beliefs and it precipitated their uprising led by *ayyārs* of *Sistān*.

Sarbedārān (i.e. head on gallows) whose term meaning is aggressive and adventurous were another group of *ayyārs* who ruled *Sabzevār* and its neighboring states. These people-oriented warriors revolted against the *Mongols* and their oppression. They tried to propagate the *Shi'ites* and forge relations with *Sufism*, *fatiān* and *akhism*. *Baghdād fatiān* were especially influential in shaping the thought of the public and royal court. They were the same as *Sistān ayyārs* who collected their dispersed members to develop their institution to *Baghdād* in order to fight against *Abbāsi* Caliphs.

Ayyārs continued to have political and social influence in *Iran* and *Iraq* especially in *Baqdād* until one of the *Abbāsi* Caliphs, *An-Nasir li-Din Allah* (1158-1225) under the influence of a mystic (*Sufi*), joined *futuwwa* and obliged those who decided to move in the circle of *futuwwa* to practice specific mores. Consequently, as [2] discusses, *ayyāri* melted in *Sufism* and *futuwwa*. As a matter of fact, *ayyāri* was rather moral and less social, a practical *Sufism* which was similar to *malamatia* (i.e. "blameworthy"); it was a movement against the hypocritical and insincere behaviors of some *shaykhs*, resulting in *malamatia* ethos of hiding asceticism and blaming hypocrisy.

B. Admissions of an *Ayyār*

Admissions to *ayyāri* groups as chivalry organizations required the performance of specific rituals at special ceremonies that made them obliged to observe expected manners in order to be formally known as an *ayyār*.

'Drinking to cheer' as one of these rituals changed overtime due to religious beliefs and Islamic rules. However, it was preserved in other forms such as drinking water with salt instead of drinking wine. Drinking to someone's cheer and health as an old custom of drinking originated in *ayyāri* rituals. An *ayyār* took up the chalice of wine and drank to his *mater's* joy in one gulp; after pronouncing *master's* name, he or she announced himself or herself as *master's* follower and disciple [3].

Ayyārs drank to their *ayyār* companions' joy and health as well in order to make themselves obliged to adhere to *ayyāri* principles and renew their solidarity. Although drinking to others' cheer was a ritual of ancient *Persia*, with the integration of *ayyāri* with *Sufism* and *futuwwa*, they started to drink water with salt in a special cup called '*kās*

¹ An *Indio-Iranian* goddess in ancient *Persia* that was the symbol of light and brightness, a mediation between temporary light (the created) and eternal light (the creator) [8].

² *Zand* is derived from *Azanti* which means reporting and translating. *Zand* refers to translated version of the book '*Avestā*' to '*Pahlavi*. *Pāzand*, the abbreviated form of *Pāzand*, is a re-translation of *Avestā* to *Dari* [8].

al-futuwwa' (i.e. bowl belonging to futuwwa). For futuwwa eating salt (a metaphor for food) in someone's house makes you beholden to that person and water is a symbol of honesty and sincerity. On the other hand, it was strongly associated with Mohammed, the Prophet of Islam [10].

Another ritual of ayyāri was taking an oath; ayyārs swear to their own life in the sense that in case they broke their promise, other ayyārs could kill them. According to reference [11], ayyārs as ancient Iraninas took oath to 'dādār' (i.e. the Creator). Swearing to light and flame, Zand and Pāzand and the soul of great men demonstrates this fact that it is all connected to Mehr and Pareses and Zoroastrian.

In this ceremony, a length of cloth was tied around to an ayyār's waist by the master or the doyens to imply that he is always ready to assist other especially the oppressed and needy. Discussing their special hats, shirts and shoes and the relationship between their clothes and duties involves another paper. Some ayyārs also had tattoos of animals on their arms and shoulders [3].

Woman ayyārs equaled man ayyārs regarding their abilities and skills. As a matter of fact, woman ayyārs could not exist because they did not have the permission to join the chivalry organizations and ayyāri groups. This can be the reason why those who had the infatuation with ayyāri dressed in men clothes. Roozafzun, daughter of one of the ayyāri doyens, is one these women. She killed her brother and father to join Samk-e ayyār. Being able to work with knife, lasso, bow and arrow skillfully and to riding horses, swimming and fighting, she could fight like a real warrior.

Despite their beauty, these women did not get married and devoted themselves to their ethos and manners. Feminine traits were evident in woman ayyārs' behaviors though. They envied other ayyārs' capacities and success. Their feminine sympathy and sensitiveness thwarted some ayyāri plans making male ayyārs call them ignorant and incompetent. As women were known to reveal the secrets man ayyārs did not trust them and were doubtful about the realization of the principle of confidentiality for woman ayyārs [3].

III. AKHIS AND AKHISM IN ANATOLIA AND ASIA MINOR

The akhi is the title given to members of craftsman and artisan union including people of different guilds in Anatolia from the 13th century to the 20th century. Reference [12] used the words such as brotherhood, honesty, bravery, rationalism and productivity to define akhism. As reference [13] states it was a vocational training institution that was appropriate for Turkish culture. They possessed socio-religious nature and followed futuwwa principles which accorded with the life of Ali (d. 661 CE), the second Imam of Shi'ite, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law.

Diverse manifestations of chivalry organizations have made the study of their origins and development difficult. Origins of akhism have been highly debatable. Some researchers believe that futuwwa is the principle ayyārs and akhis share. Futuwwa and javānmardi began in Baghdād and developed to Anatolia after Abbāsi Caliphs invited the leaders of other countries to join fatiān. In Asia Minor, Seljuk Izzeddin Keykavus (1211-1220) took up the invitation resulting in the establishment of akhi institutions. The

futuwwa that fused the ethos of manliness and ethics with spirituality identified Javānmardi and religious brotherhood in the medieval Islamic world. The futuwwa circles and Sufism, where futuwwa took on its explicitly religious connotations, merged by the time of the Mongol invasion and this led to the development of professional groupings. In Iran and Anatolia between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries, the futuwwa increasingly became the sufi orders of guilds and it became so prevalent that in the Ottoman and Safavid domains most guilds were distinguished by their own chivalric rules, initiatory rites, hierarchies, and ceremonials. This led to the emergence of akhi movements [14].

Some other researchers hold a different idea believing that Akhism as an occupational foundation originated by Turks. They argue that akhis should practice a vocation while Persian fatiān and ayyārs were not obliged to. However, according to reference [15] akhism is social rather than occupational attaining its ideas through foundation of guilds as their members were chosen from teachers and judges. He argued that since single workers were the main members of seclusion zawiya (i.e. cell) in khnagāh (a place of worship), it was supposed that they were just vocational cooperates. He also states that besides religious training, universal and general moral values were taught.

Admission to akhi groups was performed through a special ceremony in which an akhi candidate wore special pants and drank salt and water. Then a special kind of belt (Sed) was tied around his waist by the Akhibābā. An akhi had absolute loyalty and endless obey towards the organization and was obliged to get knowledge, generosity, patience, purification of soul, loyalty, friendship, tolerance, etc. An akhi should have his hand, his door and his dining table open (respectively to help the needy, to welcome the guests and to feed the poor). He should have his hand, tongue and waist close (respectively not to steal or victimize, not to lie, gossip or insult and not to defame others' honor) [13].

Ibn Battuta's Travels as a primary source about akhism classifies akhi group-consciousness in three closely related modes: religious, socioeconomic, and political. Their effort to spread Islam in Christian areas of Anatolia leads one into thinking that they were religious groups. In the absence of a strong civil government, they acted as governors indicating to their political role. However it must be acknowledged that the Moroccan traveler was deeply impressed by akhis' socioeconomic role rather than their political or religious setup especially when akhism was in a state of decline. A clearly defined social ideology and adherence to the fundamental principles of the futuwwa kept akhis united as well-integrated institutions [16]. This is closely allied to ayyārs whose main aim was to promote social and economical justice.

With the Ottoman conquest of Ankara in 1361, akhis started to lose their momentum. As reference [17] states their political influence gradually waned and they continued their activities rather than as guild organizations. Although akhism has ceased to exist today, it has been celebrated officially with the Week of akhi Cultural Celebration on the second Monday of the Month of October every year.

IV. AHDĀTH IN SYRIA AND IRĀQ

The exact meaning of the word is still a matter of debate but it can have the meanings of "groups of young men" and "urban militia". They played a prominent role in political and military conditions of Syria and Irāq in the 5th-6th Centuries A.H. (the 11th and 12th Centuries A.D.) especially to face successive waves of Turkish and Crusader assaults and due to Byzantine expansion. However, they continued their presence since Caliphs needed their help to provide for individual privacy in the crowded cities, in particular regarding the protection of women, and for public welfare because Islamic cities allowed the free entry and exit of people of different occupations and social classes and there are minute regulations concerning rights of streets, houses and walls.

Ahdāth were great soldiers despite being not particularly well-trained. They wore a short tunic and loose-fitting trousers, often going barefoot and bare-headed. They were poorly armed, mostly carrying short swords or light spears with broad heads, medium-sized triangular infantry shields, and at times only primitive hand grenades.

The dawn of this organization returns back to Umar (15/636) who delegated some people called Amir ahdāth or Vāli to fight against heresy, to prevent law-breaking activities and to conduct prayer. They were in charge of supervising the policing of the city, making judicial decisions and maintaining public order. Ahdāth as stationary armed forces (Shurta) had control over city affairs in Jerusalem and Jews had to pay special taxes to them for patrolling the market. Ahdāth took the taxes to finance the payment for these armed bands. As you can find in reference [18] with the growth of their power and influence, their headmen ruled the cities as Ra'is al- Balad (i.e. the ruler of the city). According to reference [19] the frequent changes of governor under the Fatimids allowed ahdāth to expand, so that in 1024 the Fatimid troops garrisoned in Damascus fought together against encirclement by Bedouin in an alliance with ahdāth.

Reference [20] discusses the emergence of ahdāth from a different perspective. Accordingly, in Middle Eastern and Central Asian cities, the townspeople looked at most rulers as foreigners, in origin or race, even if they were Muslims leading to conflicts over the way the system worked or the system itself between the townspeople and the government. Consequently, ahdāth came to the scene of politics to accomplish self-government and their autonomy, i.e. independence from a foreign power and administration and participation in the city's defense by representatives of the people themselves.

Some researchers wrote about the riots in some cities and Ahdāth's interference in these events resulting in the public's hatred for them. The members of these groups were not united with each other in making decisions in political and military deeds that made them more unreliable. Besides, many of them assassinated the rivals of governors on their order and this threw their socio-religious reputation into question.

The comparison between ahdāth and ayyārs brings about some differences that seem to stem from the Sasanid that prevailed in Iran and Iraq and the Byzantine tradition of Syria. He concludes that ayyāri possesses voluntary and popular

character symbolized in the *futuwwa* (chivalrous) spirit while ahdāth who had a strong official coloration acted as leaders of insurrections [21], [22].

To put in the nutshell, chivalry, philanthropy and morality as universal behaviors that people from different countries, ethnic groups and religious beliefs share make them close to each other and promote peace and companionship. Although they may be manifested in different rituals, forms and languages, they all represent human enthusiasm for truth and love. In the present paper, we attempted to portrait the realization of Islamic chivalry in Persia, Anatolia and Syria to shed light on the commonalities and differences. Finally as the current paper focused on the principles, emergence and morals of ayyāri, it tries to display the impact of Persian ayyāri and futuwwa on ahdāth and akhism.

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