Chivalry in the Islamic World: Ayyāri, Akhism and Ahdāth

Morteza Rashidi Ashjerdi and Saeedeh Shafiee Nahrkhalaji

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 ayyār 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 ayyār 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, ayyār, 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’l 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 portraits 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. AYYĀR 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 ayyār organizations in Iran was a kind of intellectual movement. The members of ayyār 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 savors 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 ayyār, 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 ayyār. 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
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 it 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 fatāt 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 (Zookkhaneh). 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 ayyārī. 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 Ayyārī Ethos

As reference [6] puts it into words, ayyārī has its roots in the rituals of Mehrī widely observed by Iranians. He pinpointed several similarities between ayyārī and Mehrī. 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 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 ayyārī.

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. Sistānī 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 Baghdad. In fact, Ayyārī 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 Khurāsānī, the first warrior against Baghdad 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 akhīsm. Baghdadī 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 Baghdad in order to fight against Abbāsi Caliphs.

Ayyārs continued to have political and social influence in Iran and Iraq especially in Baqkdād 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, ayyārī melted in Sufism and futuwwa. As a matter of fact, ayyārī was rather moral and less social, a practical Sufism which was similar to malamati (i.e. “blameworthy”); it was a movement against the hypocritical and insincere behaviors of some shaykhs, resulting in malamati ethos of hiding asceticism and blaming hypocrisy.

B. Admissions of an Ayyār

Admissions to ayyārī 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 was a ritual of ancient Persia, with the integration of ayyārī with Sufism and futuwwa, they started to drink water with salt in a special cup called ‘kās

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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 “Pahlavī. Pāzand, the abbreviated form of Pātzand, 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 ayyārī 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 ayyārī groups. This can be the reason why those who had the infatuation with ayyārī dressed in men clothes. Roozafrun, daughter of one of the ayyārī doyens, is one these women. She killed her brother and father to join Samk-e ayyārī. 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 ayyārī 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 ayyārī and akhis share. Futuwwa and javānmardi began in Baghdad 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 sufis 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 ceremonies. 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 exclusion zawīya (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 toward the organization that 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 that 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 conducting prayer. They were in charge of providing for the city affairs in Jerusalem and did not have control on the street to street affairs in the city.

The participation in the city's defense by representatives of the people themselves.

Byzantine expansion. However, they continued their participation in the city's defense by representatives of the people themselves.

In the present paper, we attempted to portrait the "urban militia". They played a prominent role 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 Sasānīd that prevailed in Iran and Iraq and the Byzantine tradition of Syria. He concludes that ayyār possesses voluntary and popular character symbolized in the fittuwwa (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 portray 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 ayyār, it tries to display the impact of Persian ayyār and futuwwa on ahdāth and akhīsm.

REFERENCES


Morteza Rashid Ashjerdi was born in Ashjerd, Isfahan, Iran, in 1973. He received his BA in Persian Language and Literature from Isfahan University (1995) and his MA from Teacher Training University of Tehran (1998). He completed his PhD in Isfahan University in 2008.

He is an Associate Professor in the Department of Persian Language and Literature at Islamic Azad University of Najafabad, Isfahan, Iran and a Lecturer at Isfahan University, Iran. He has been working as the head of the department for 3 years as well. His research interests lie in the area of Persian culture studies, literary stylistics, contemporary literature studies and literary criticism. He has published five books in his field and authored some articles.

Dr. Rashidi served on over different conference and workshop program committees and editorial board of journals. He has supervised and advised many MA dissertations in different universities as well and has given speeches as the keynote speaker in related conferences. As one of his ambitions to preserve the Persian culture and language, he has involved himself as the honorary chair in some committees of poetry and novel criticism.