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A Kızilbash Community in Iraqi Kurdistan: The Shabak

Martin van Bruinessen

Iraqi Kurdistan is home to a number of heterodox religious communities, of which the Yezidi and the Kaka'i are the best known.¹ Both of these religions show numerous similarities with the religion of the Kizilbash or Alevi of Anatolia, but there are also clear differences. There is, however, also a small community in northern Iraq, the Shabak, that appears to adhere to the same beliefs and practices as the Anatolian Alevis, although they live far from the nearest Alevi community and are in regular contact with neighbouring communities adhering to other heterodox traditions. The Shabak live in several dozen villages east of Mosul, in a triangle bounded by the Tigris and the Greater Zab.² In 1925 their numbers were estimated at around 10,000; the 1960 Iraqi census enumerated 15,000, living in 35 villages.³ Recent estimates tend to be considerably higher, and one local source even claims that there are 100,000 Shabak scattered over some 60 villages, with several thousand of them presently living in the city of Mosul.⁴

Ethnic affiliation

Most Shabak are multilingual, which has given rise to contradictory claims about their ethnic identity. They have been declared Turcomans or Kurdish speakers or even Arabs, and individual Shabak have frequently accepted one or the other of these designations when it was expedient. Outsiders have commonly regarded them as Kurds, like the other heterodox groups of the region, and this is how most of the Shabak appear to have thought of themselves, if they ever thought of a more encompassing identity than that of their own sect. The language of their prayers and religious ritual, however, is Turkish (as it is in the case of the Kurdish Alevis of Anatolia), which may be the reason why they have sometimes been thought to be Turcomans. Their mother tongue, however, or at least that of most Shabak, is a dialect of the Gurani branch of Iranian languages, which is also spoken by the Kaka'i and various small sects

¹ The religion of the Kaka'i is the same as that which in Iran is called Ahl-i Haqq. The best study still is Edmonds 1969; see also Edmonds 1957, pp. 182-201. The best recent study of Yezidi religion is Kreyenbroek 1995.

² C.J. Edmonds' careful account of his visit to the Shabak's Yezidi neighbours (Edmonds 1967) contains a list of Shabak villages and has a good map showing the most important villages of these and the other heterodox communities in the region.

³ Vinogradov 1974, p. 208.

⁴ Interview by Michiel Leezenberg (1997, p. 159).

and tribes in the neighbourhood, notably the Sarli and the Bajalan tribe (but not by the Yezidis, who speak Kurmanji).⁵

The name of the Shabak has also given rise to speculations as to their ethnic origins. Vinogradov relates a popular etymology of the name from the Arabic verb *shabaka*, ‘to intertwine, interweave’, reflecting their view of themselves as a community of heterogeneous origins held together by allegiance to a common *tariqa* (Sufi order) and to the same spiritual leaders.⁶ Until the land reforms of 1958 and 1963, virtually all Shabak were landless share-cropping peasants. The land on which they worked was owned by city-dwelling *sayyid* families, who claimed to have possessed this land since the mid-18th century. These sayyid families, held in high respect by the Shabak for being *ahl al-bayt* (descendants of the Prophet), were their patrons in a political sense also, mediating between the Shabak on the one hand and the state and wider society on the other. A family legend, recorded by Rassam from a member of the major landholding family, has it that during the Persian siege of Mosul in 1743 the *naqib al-ashraf* of the city, by performing a minor miracle, succeeded in persuading the shah to lift the siege. As a reward for this feat, the *naqib* was granted extensive landholdings outside the town. He or his descendants then allowed the poor Shabak to settle on their land.⁷ Apocryphal though this story may be, it suggests a possible explanation of how a persecuted heterodox community came to live so near a major town rather than in more inaccessible mountain terrain. Association with the urban sayyids (who were Twelver Shi`is) also gave the Shabak a certain protection from religious persecution. There have been Shabak who claimed to be Twelver Shi`is themselves, and a process of gradual Shi`isation appears to be taking place.

Religion

Like other heterodox groups, the Shabak have been the subject of much malignant speculation as to the true nature of their religious beliefs and practices, and the earliest publications about them are full of misinformation.⁸ In the 1950s, a Sunni resident of Mosul, Ahmad Hâmid al-Sarrâf, who had won the confidence of some members of the community, published a study of the community and its beliefs and rituals, that for the first time gave an unbiased presentation of the Shabak.⁹ Al-Sarrâf moreover reproduced a sacred book of the Shabak, the *Kitab al-*

⁵ Some distinctive characteristics of the Gurani dialects of the Shabak and the Kaka`i are described in Leezenberg 1997.

⁶ Vinogradov 1974, p. 210.

⁷ Vinogradov 1974, pp. 211-12; see also Rassam [= A. Vinogradov] 1977.

⁸ The description of the Shabak by the Carmelite Father Anastase-Marie (Al-Karmali 1902) has been the source of much misunderstanding and biased secondary literature.

⁹ Al-Sarrâf 1954. This is the best study of the Shabak that exists. Part of this book is summarised in English in Moosa 1987. The author of the latter work, a Christian, is also a former Mosul resident who had personal

manaqib or *Buyuruq*, in the original Turkish with an Arabic translation. Al-Sarrâf's work made it unambiguously clear that the Shabak's religion is closely related to that of the Anatolian Alevi (Kizilbash). One of the Shabak invocations (*gölbenk*), as given by al-Sarrâf, explicitly refers to Hacı Bektash and the adepts of Ardabil (*Erdebil erenleri*, i.e., the Safavids) as the founders of their spiritual path.¹⁰ The Shabak have ritual meetings in which religious poems are sung or recited, and some of these are explicitly attributed to the Safavid Shah Isma`il (by his *takhallus* of Hatâyî) and the Anatolian Alevi saint Pir Sultan Abdal. A basic tenet, expressed in several poems and invocations, is the belief that Allah, Muhammad and Ali constitute a trinity, in which Ali appears as the dominant manifestation of the divine.

The deification of Ali is quite explicit in one *nefes* (Alevi religious poem) quoted by al-Sarrâf.¹¹ It is a variant form of a *nefes* that is well known among the Anatolian Alevi and more explicit than the latter.¹² Even though the text appears to be corrupt at a few places, the poem is well worth quoting in full :

*Yedi iklim çar köşeyi seyr ettim
ben Aliden gayrı ala görmedim
yaradubdur on sekiz bin alemlerini
rızkın vermege ganidir gani*

*bir ismin Alidir bir ismin Allah
şükür b.r.l.giye(?) el-hamdülillah
dinimiz kavidir vallahi ve billahi
ben Aliden gayrı ala görmedim*

*Ali gimen er gelmedi cihane
ona da tuttular yüz bin bahane
yedi kere durdum ulu divane
ben Aliden gayrı ala görmedim*

contacts with Shabak. His book, however, is an unsystematic and uncritical compilation of material from other written sources.

¹⁰ *Hacı Bektaş veli kızıl pırleri, Erdebil erenleri bu yolu bize kurmuş* : "Hacı Bektash' red *pir* and the adepts of Ardabil have founded this spiritual path for us" (Al-Sarrâf 1954, p. 96). The complete text of this *gölbenk* is as follows: *Tevelli tecelli kabul ola / istekleri müyesser ola / akşamın hayrı gele şerri def' ola / gerçege hu, batıla yuh ola / sirri sir edenin demine hu! / Hacı Bektaş Veli kızıl pırleri / Erdebil erenleri bu yolu bize kurmuş / Hu diyelim erenlerin demine / Allah Muhammed Ali, Hakk dost, pir dost / Hakka şah, batıla uf!*

¹¹ Al-Sarrâf 1954, pp. 113-4. The author does not use the term *nefes* but speaks of *qasida*. It is not clear which term the Shabak themselves use for their religious poetry.

¹² The Anatolian variant is found in several collections, e.g. Öztelli 1973, p. 35; Özkırımlı 1985, p. 151; Yıldırım 1991, vol 1, p. 298.

*Hakk buyurmuş levh üstünde kalemi
nur ile doldurmuş cümle alemi
Alini çağırın mahrum kalır mı
ben Aliden gayrı ala görmedim*

*indim yer bahrine ılgar eyledim
sarı öküz tüğün saydım fark eyledim
çıkdim gök yüzine seyran etdim
ben Aliden gayrı ala görmedim*

*cennet alanın kapısı divarı taş
la'ldır atarışı gevherdir taşı
Alidir belin kırkların baş
ben Aliden gayrı ala görmedim*

*Pir Sultan Abdal özüdür Ali
dilim böyle söyle: ben özüm eli
Allah Muhammed kendü özüdür Ali
ben Aliden gayrı ala görmedim*

This may be translated as: “I travelled through the seven climes, the four corners [of the world] / I saw no elevated one but Ali / He created the eighteen thousand worlds / He is munificent in providing sustenance, munificent // One of your names is Ali, another is God / thanks (...), praise be to God / our religion is powerful, by God / I saw no elevated one but Ali // No saint like Ali ever came into the world / They found him a hundred thousand excuses (?) / Seven times I stood up to the great council / I saw no elevated one but Ali // God ordered the Pen to write on the Tablet / He filled the entire world with light / Will anyone remain deprived who appeals to Ali? / I saw no elevated one but Ali // I descended into the sea and rose up again / I counted the hairs of the yellow ox, distinguishing them one by one / I rose to the skies and had a vision / I saw no elevated one but Ali // The gate, the wall, the stones of heavenly Paradise / they are rubies all over, jewels all stones / the head of (...), of the Forty is Ali / I saw no elevated one but Ali // Pir Sultan Abdal is Ali himself / my tongue, say it thus: I am myself his hand / Allah and Muhammad, they are the same as Ali / I saw no elevated one but Ali.”

In the last strophe, the poet identifies himself as Pir Sultan Abdal, the famous Alevi saint who was hanged in Sivas, perhaps in the late 16th century. The Anatolian variant of this *nefes*, as we find it in various collections, is attributed to another poet, Kul Himmet, who is often said to have been a disciple of Pir Sultan. Apart from the first strophe and the hemistich that is

repeated at the end of each following strophe, it differs somewhat from the *nefes* as sung by the Shabak, but they clearly derive from a common original.¹³

The fact that the Shabak know this *nefes* (and that they attribute it to Pir Sultan) is another indication of their close relationship with the Anatolian Kızılbaş-Alevi. It has been suggested by Iraqi authors that the Shabak are themselves originally Anatolian Kızılbaş, who fled to the south after the battle of Çaldıran in 1514.¹⁴ Our *nefes* cannot have been composed before the lifetime of Pir Sultan, which means that there must have been an influx of people and/or ideas from Anatolia well after Chaldıran, and perhaps considerably later than the 16th century.

The Buyuruq

The 'sacred book' of the Shabak, the *Kitab al-Manaqib* or *Buyuruq* (*burukh*, in the local pronunciation) consists of two parts. The first part is a question-and-answer dialogue between Shaykh Safi al-Din and his son Sadr al-Din on the *adab* of the *tariqa*, in which there is no indication of extremist Shi'i influences; the second part, the *Buyruk* proper, is similar to, though not identical with, the *Buyruk* texts that are held sacred by the various Alevi communities of Anatolia.¹⁵ It consists of various teachings and instructions associated with the Imams Ali and Ja'far al-Sadiq and discusses the relationship between teacher (*mürebbi*) and disciple (*talib*), and the institution of ritual brotherhood (*musahiblik*).

The relation between this sacred text and the actual beliefs and practices of the Shabak remains opaque. Being a Sunni Muslim himself, al-Sarrâf notes that the Shabak do not perform the *salat*, do not fast during Ramadan, do not give *zakat* and do not perform the hajj, but he adds that for each of these obligations they have their own alternatives. Instead of *salat* they hold ritual meetings in the house of the *pir* (a hereditary religious leader), where they recite invocations (*gülbenk*). Instead of Ramadan, the Shabak fast during the first nine days of

¹³ The complete text is (lines corresponding to those in the Shabak *nefes* are italicised): *Yedi iklim dört köşeyi dolandım / Ben Ali'den gayrı bir er görmedim / Kısmet verip âlemleri yaradan / Ben Ali'den gayrı bir er görmedim // Bir ismi Ali'dir, bir ismi Allah / İnkârım yoktur, hem vallah hem billah / Muhammed, Ali yoluna Allah eyvallah / Ben Ali'den gayrı bir er görmedim // Ol kudret bendini kırdım, gark ettim / Sarı öküz tüyün saydım, fark ettim / Arş-ı muallayı gezdim, seyrettim / Ben Ali'den gayrı bir er görmedim // Ali gibi er gelmedi cihana / Ona da buldular türlü bahane / Yedi kez vardım ben ulu divane / Ben Ali'den gayrı bir er görmedim // Cennet bahçesinin nedendir taşı / İncidir topra@ı, hikmettir işi / Yüz yirmi bin peygamberler başı / Ben Ali'den gayrı bir er görmedim // Kul Himmet'im eydür, Kırklara beli / Dilim medhin söyler, aslımız deli / Evveli Muhammed, âhiri Ali / Ben Ali'den gayrı bir er görmedim* (Öztelli 1973, p. 35).

¹⁴ Thus Moosa (1988, p. 6), following the Iraqi author al-Shaybi. Vinogradov (1974, p. 210) also follows this hypothesis, adding the suggestion that the Shabak, like other heterodox groups in the region, sought to associate themselves with the Bektashi order in order to protect themselves against political suspicions.

¹⁵ The most reliable published text is AYTEKİN 1958. See the study of *Buyruk* texts by ANKE OTTER-BEAUJEAN (1997).

Muharram, and instead of *zakat* they pay the more substantial *khums*, a fifth of agricultural produce, to the *ahl al-bayt* (this being the landlord's share). They do not visit Mecca but frequent holy shrines, in their own region but more recently also in Najaf and Karbala.

The Shabak and other sects

The Safavi-Kızılbaş affiliation distinguishes the Shabak from neighbouring heterodox communities, the Yezidi to their north and the Sarli to their southeast. The latter are, like the Kaka'i, a branch of the Ahl-i Haqq; they speak a Gurani dialect very similar to that of the Shabak. Another neighbouring Gurani-speaking community, the Bajwan or Bajalan,¹⁶ are often said to be a section of the Shabak or vice versa. The Bajwan, however, are tribally organised and led by tribal chieftains, whereas the Shabak are non-tribal peasants, share-cropping on land belonging to urban-based sayyid families who have great moral authority over them due to their descent from the Prophet and Ali. The Shabak intermarry freely with Bajwan, Sarli, Kaka'i and Shi'i Turcomans of the region, resulting in the boundaries between these religious communities becoming fuzzy.

Hierarchy and ritual

The Shabak community is structured by a spiritual hierarchy similar to that of the Alevi, Ahl-i Haqq and Yezidi. Each adult is affiliated with a *pir*, his spiritual elder (occasionally also called *dede* by al-Sarrâf). This is a hereditary function, and each family tends to continue its affiliation with a particular *pir* lineage from generation to generation. All rituals have to be led by a *pir*. In most he has to be assisted by a *rehber* or guide, and in the major annual celebrations, twelve functionaries have to be present: *pir*, *rehber*, lamp-bearer (*hamil al-jiragh*), broom-bearer (*hamil al-miknasa*), cup-bearer (*saqqa*), butcher, four attendants (*khadam*) and two gate-keepers (*bawwab*). The Alevi communities of Anatolia also know these twelve functionaries (*on iki hizmet*), although the names given to each vary.¹⁷ The Shabak *pir* are themselves hierarchically ordered, and there is a supreme spiritual authority known as the *baba*.

The regular ritual meetings are held in the house of the *pir*. There are three major annual celebrations, one on New Year's eve (celebrated in December), another during the night of *'ashura*. The third is the 'night of forgiveness' (*özür gecesi*), during which public confessions

¹⁶ See MacKenzie 1960.

¹⁷ Al-Sarrâf 1954: 101-3 (the butcher is not mentioned explicitly by al-Sarrâf but is listed in Moosa's summary, p. 123). In Anatolia the titles of the *on iki hizmet* may also vary from place to place. A good overview is given in Birdoğan 1990: 277-285.

of guilt are made and conflicts in the community settled.¹⁸ It is these three nightly celebrations, in which both sexes take part, that in the early literature on the Shabak and Sarli are referred to as the *laylat al-kafsha*, with the usual accusation of unspeakable abominations (the verb *kafasha* meaning, in the local Arabic dialect, ‘to grab’). Minorsky’s suggestion of deriving the name from more innocent Persian *kafsh*, ‘footwear’, has been adopted by several later authors, such as Moosa, who sees the taking off of slippers as the origin of the name. The Shabak themselves do not appear to use the name at all, however.

Pilgrimages constitute another important part of the ritual calendar. Two important local shrines, visited at *ʿid al-fitr* and *ʿid al-adha*, are named Ali Resh (“Black Ali”) and Abbas. The Shabak identify the former with the fourth Imam, Ali Zayn al-Abidin b. Husayn, and the latter with Husayn’s younger brother Abbas, who was also killed at Karbala. A different type of *ziyâra* consists of the stoning of the alleged grave of Ubayd Allah b. Ziyad, the Umayyad governor of Iraq who was responsible for the tragedy at Karbala. This takes place throughout the year.¹⁹

Changing ethnic identity

The fact that the Shabak’s major places of pilgrimage are all in the environs of their present habitat shows that they long ago struck root there and no longer retain attachments to a region of origin. It is only the content of their beliefs that connects them with the Anatolian Alevi. Their language, however, is neither Turkish nor any of the northern Kurdish dialects but Gurani, the language of the Sarli and other Ahl-i Haqq, and the outsiders with whom they have most frequent social contacts are the Sarli and the Shi`i sayyids of Mosul. They are, in many ways, people in between.

There have been various efforts to make the Shabak change their ethnic or religious affiliation. Like other heterodox groups, they are subject to some social pressure to conform outwardly to more “orthodox” forms of religion. In the late nineteenth century, during the reign of Sultan Abdulhamid II, they were converted by force to the Ottoman state religion, the Hanafi *madhhab* of Sunni Islam.²⁰ This event does not appear to have made a lasting impact on the community, for by the early twentieth century they had reverted to the beliefs and practices of their ancestors. More recently, some of the Shabak appear to identify themselves as Twelver Shi`is, probably under the influence of their patronage relationship with the sayyids of Mosul. In the early 1980s, a certain Aziz Shabak (a former associate of the secular

¹⁸ This is the ritual known in Anatolia as the *görgü cemi*.

¹⁹ Al-Sarrâf 1954: 103-4.

²⁰ Deringil 1998: 71, 73 (referring to Ottoman archival documents). It was the Ottoman governor of Mosul, Ömer Vehbi Paşa, who in 1892 carried out these forced conversions of Shabak and Yezidis and built mosques in their villages.

politician Jalal Talabani) succeeded in receiving Iranian financial patronage for a short-lived Kurdish Islamic political movement.

Both the Kurds and the Turcomans have considered the Shabak as a minority within their own ethnic group. Since the 1970s, the Shabak (as well as the other religious minorities of the region) have been subjected to concerted efforts on the part of the Iraqi government to arabicise them. Following the 1987 census, in which people had been asked to state to which “nationality” — Arab or Kurd — they belonged, these efforts culminated in the destruction of around 20 Shabak villages and the deportation of their inhabitants in the course of the genocidal *Anfal* campaign of 1988.²¹ Since the establishment of a “safe haven” in northern Iraq in 1991, Turkey has made some efforts to have the Shabak and other heterodox minorities in the zone define themselves as Turcomans, distributing relief aid through the Turcoman parties to all who declared themselves Turcoman.

²¹ On the *Anfal* and its effects, see Human Rights Watch 1995. Iraq is officially a bi-national state and no other ethno-national designation apart from Arab and Kurd is accepted. The state defines all religious minorities as Arabs, and it appears that their different self-designations were the reason why Yezidis and Christians were targeted in the *Anfal* along with Kurds of the “forbidden” zones. According to Leezenberg (1997, p. 163-5), 22 Shabak villages were in whole or in part destroyed and their inhabitants, some 3000 families, were deported to collection centres in Erbil province. In 1990, most were allowed to return to their villages, apparently after one of their leaders had formally declared that the Shabak were Arabs.

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