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How Close is ʻAli to God? On the Status of ʻAli in the Yezidi Tradition

Abstract:

While the deification of ʻAli serves as a defining feature of extreme Shiʻite currents, his role within Yezidism has not yet received focused scholarly attention. Given the notable parallels between Yezidism and the heterodox Shiʻite milieu, this article seeks to explore and clarify the position of ʿAli within the Yezidi religious tradition. References to ʻAli appear multiple times in Yezidi religious texts, and in certain hymns he assumes a central role. A close examination of these sources reveals that, in contrast to extremist Shiʻism, Yezidism does not attribute divine status to ʻAli. Nonetheless, some of his functional attributes and a unique role in certain contexts suggest that he once held a particular and possibly significant position within the Yezidi tradition.

Keywords:

ʻAli, Yezidism, Extreme Shiʻism, Duldul/Dundul, Perfect Man.

The issue of Muslim and particularly Shiʻa elements in Yezidism have been addressed by scholars of the field more than once.[1] The presence of these elements in the Yezidi tradition seems odd, if only because of the ideological antagonism between Shiʻism and Yezidism, which lies, in addition to "dogmatics", in the perception of such a key figure in Islam as Yazid ibn Muʻawiya, the second Umayyad caliph. An absolutely sinister character in Shiʻism, he is not just a neutral figure in Yezidism, but is also deified, represented in the Yezidi holy triad and historically recognized as the main eponym of the community.[2] Moreover, the status of another central figure in Yezidism, Sheikh ʻAdi – whose historical lineage also traces back to the Umayyad dynasty – fur-

[1] Among such elements are numerous Muslim personalities inherited by Yezidism from its Adawiyya background – from the most iconic figures (Prophet Muhammad, Imam ʻAli, Fatima) to Sufi saints (Hussein Hallaj, Rabia Adawiya), all of them, with the exception of the Prophet Muhammad, being fully adapted by the Yezidi tradition and represented in the religious texts as Yezidi characters having nothing to do with Islam (Cf: Аракелова 2021: 157–162; *eadem* 2020: 143–146; 2001: 183–192; Asatrian 2007: 323–328; Asatrian and Arakelova 2016: 385–395; Пирбари and Мосаки 2021: 2012–227).

[2] On this character, cf. Asatrian and Arakelova 2014: Chapter 3. On the Yezidis' ethnonyms, cf. Аракелова 2006: 64–65.

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ther illustrates the consolidation of Umayyad veneration among his Sufi followers within the ʿAdawiyya order. This veneration ultimately culminated in Sheikh ʿAdi's deification within the Yezidi community, whose identity had by then undergone a significant transformation into that of the distinct Yezidi tradition. In contrast, Shiʿite doctrine regards the Umayyads as illegitimate usurpers of Islamic authority and staunch enemies of the *ahl al-bayt*, the family of the Prophet Muḥammad. These fundamental divergences would strongly suggest the absence of direct Shiʿite influence on the development of the Yezidi religious tradition.

Nevertheless, the apparent incongruity of Shiʿite elements within Yezidism becomes more comprehensible when viewed in light of a series of striking parallels between Yezidism and the extreme Shiʿa sects – and more broadly, with various strands of the Near Eastern non-dogmatic religious environment, the so called "shibboleths of heresies". I have previously explored this subject by focusing on three particularly significant elements: the idea of *tanasux* (reincarnation), the cult of the black dog, and the figure of Malak-Tawus, the Peacock Angel. Importantly, none of these parallels appear to be the result of direct or mutual influence, but rather reflect a shared symbolic and conceptual reservoir characteristic of the region's heterodox traditions[3]. Apparently, this list can be extended to include the distinctive role accorded to ʿAli ibn Abi Talib – the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muḥammad, the fourth Rightly Guided Caliph, and the first Imam in Shiʿa Islam. While Yezidism, in contrast to various heterodox Shiʿa sects, does not deify ʿAli, nor assign him an explicitly defined theological status, the Yezidi religious lore nevertheless accords him a particular and noteworthy position across several textual contexts.

Before proceeding to the Yezidi material, I would like to touch upon some of the most illustrative examples of ʿAli's deification in the extreme Shiʿa environment.

One of the most general definitions of the heterodox Shiʿa phenomenon is the concept of ʿAli-oriented communities, indicating the special status of Imam ʿAli in most of the doctrines. His veneration in the non-dogmatic Shiʿa environment has acquired an extreme character – up to the deification of this personality. According to Islamic tradition, the deification of ʿAli dates back to his life. A legend says, ʿAli himself was categorically against such a tendency contradicting the basic pillar of Islam, monotheism, and that he even ordered a group of his most avid supporters to be set on fire, to what they, already engulfed in flames, shouted: "Now we know for sure that you are God, for only

[3] Cf. Arakelova 2018b: 119–128; also: eadem 2004: 19–28.

the Almighty can punish with fire". Hence another common definition of the 'Ali-oriented communities is *ghulat* (lit. "extreme, extremist").[4]

Many of the 'Ali-oriented groups emphasize their special commitment to 'Ali by introducing his name into the Islamic creed. They supplement the classic "There is no god but Allah, Muhammad is the prophet of Allah" with the phrase "Ali is the friend of Allah". However, in fact, heterodox Shi'ites approach 'Ali as someone much higher than the friend of Allah. Among the Alevis of Turkey, Muhammad and 'Ali are considered emanations of the Divine Light, but the figure of 'Ali rises even above the prophet of Islam: 'Ali is endowed with divine qualities and defined as the *bāb* – "the gate" leading to esoteric knowledge. In the Alevi tradition, god periodically manifests himself in human forms (*tecelli*) in the cyclical history of the world, but his absolute incarnation is 'Ali. 'Ali is an ultimate role model for the Alevi concept of the Perfect Man (*Insān-i Kāmil*).[5]

Irène Mélikoff writes about the perception of 'Ali as a solar deity in the remnants of ancient beliefs among the Alevis of Central Anatolia: "…He [the supreme god] can manifest himself through various cosmic phenomena: lightning, flood, earthquake, drought. But he is always far from human suffering… The heavenly gods are distant and passive. Therefore, their place is taken by deities closer to the realities of life. The sun, which is the basis of life, is closer to people… the deified sun takes the form of 'Ali, the King of people. But 'Ali, as a solar deity, appears at the last stage of a complex evolution: a long way was made between the solar deity and the god in human form, and there were many different influences".[6] The author cites, inter alia, the psalm (*nefes*) of a Qizilbash dervish:

> *It was he who created the earth, the sky, the world,*
> *The Heavenly Throne, I know no other god but 'Ali!*
>
> …I quickly realized that 'Ali was a solar deity. In the villages of Central Anatolia, he is identified with the rising sun, which is prayed to at that moment. 'Ali is symbolized by the solar animals: the lion, the crane, often identified with the phoenix, the calf.[7]

She also points to the Alevi belief in the appearance of god in human form, and in the Muslim era such a human form is 'Ali, who can also appear as a prophet or a saint.[8]

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4 On various extreme Shi'a groups and different aspects of heterodox Shi'ism cf. Moosa 1988; Olsson et al. 2005; also Аракелова 2012–2013: 12–13.

5 Cf. Zeidan 1999: 79 ff.

6 Mélikoff 2001: 90–91.

7 *Ibid*: 91.

8 Mélikoff 1922: 23.

There are certain sacred loci in Central Anatolia related to ʿAli in the Alevi tradition. One of such places is mentioned by Molyneux-Seel in his *Journey to Dersim*; he describes a high rock split in two, the upper portion of which bears a striking resemblance to a head surmounted by a fez. The Qizilbash say this is "the head of a hated Turk" cleft in two together with the rock he stood on, "by a blow from the mighty sword of Hazreti ʿAli".[9]

Another demonstrative example of Ali's deification is his status in the doctrine of the extreme Shiʿa sect Malak-Tawusis[10] (*Malak-Tāwūsihā*, i.e. followers of Malak-Tawus – the Peacock Angel), which is a branch community of the Iranian Ahl-i Haqq (*Ahl-ī Haqq*). The Malak-Tawusis inhabit the Dalahu mountains in the Kermanshah province of Iran, and have remained a notably insular and esoteric community, significantly more so than the mainstream Ahl-i Haqq. They particularly stress that ʿAli is pre-eternal, he had existed before the Creation as the Perfect (Absolute) Light (*nūr-ē muţlaq*). From his pure essence (*az jesm-ē pāk-ē ʿAli*) four angels close to the Creator, were created: Jibrail from ʿAli's right hand, Mikail from his left hand, Israil from his tongue, and, finally, Malak-Amin (i.e. Malak-Tawus), who is the absolute reincarnation of Ali (*dūn-ē ʿAli*), who now rules the world.[11]

As for the Yezidi tradition, here ʿAli is also known by the epithet "Lion of God" (*Šērē Xwadē*), paralleling the title *Asadullāh* used among the Shiʿites. This shared designation strongly suggests that both Yezidi and Muslim traditions refer to the same historical figure: ʿAli ibn Abi Talib, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammad. Further support for this identification can be found in the Yezidi "Hymn to ʿAli, the Lion of God", (*Bayt'ā A'lī Šērē xwadē*;[12] which reinforces the reverence for his figure across both religious frameworks. The text mentions, besides ʿAli, also Fatima – the Prophet Mohammad's daughter and ʿAli's wife (Fāt, also Fātima dēm šalāla – "Fatima with the Shining Face"), the sons of ʿAli and Fatima – Hasan and Husayn (H'asan, H'usayn), Zeynab (Zīn) and Aisha, the wife of the Prophet Mohammad.

Together with the Prophet of Islam, ʿAli is also mentioned in the Yezidi requiem *Qawlē Saramargē*, in which both are represented as *terminus comparationis* in the context of the inevitability of death for all living beings:

[9] Molyneux-Seel 1914: 58.

[10] The name of the sect, in fact, coincides with one of the ethnonymic self-identifications of the Yezidis, who identify themselves, among other names, as "milatē Malak-Tāwus", i.e. the people of Malak-Tawus.

[11] Cf. Arakelova 2018a.

[12] Cf. Celil and Celil 1978: 403–412.

Řūh' čū, mā qadībī qālib,
Řāwāstīya sar ma dastakī tālib;
Avā k'āsā vaxwārīya navī Mah'madē bin A'vdila,
A'līyē bin A'būt'ālib.

The Soul has gone, an empty form remained,
The spare-hand taking away [the souls] is hung over us,
This cup was drained [even by] Prophet, Mohammad the son of Abdullah
[And] 'Ali, the son of Abutalib.[13]

An interesting detail with significant symbolic connotations in both Islamic and Yezidi contexts is the figure of Duldul (Arabic: *Duldul*, meaning "porcupine"), the she-mule – an offspring of a mare and a donkey – originally owned by the Prophet Muḥammad and later inherited by 'Ali, holding a notable place in the Shi'a tradition as a symbol of 'Ali's martial and spiritual authority.[14] Remarkably, a cognate figure appears in the Yezidi lore under the names Dundul and Dādul, suggesting a shared mythological motif that further underscores the deep, though complex, intersections between Yezidi and Islamic traditions. However, in Yezidism Dundul's owners are also Sheikh 'Adi (Šīxādī) and Sharfadin (Malak-Tawus)[15].

Šīxādī mi habū A'rabistānē,
Xudānē Dādul ū dāna.[16]

I had Sheikh 'Adi in the land of the Arabs,
[Who is] the owner of Dadul and dān (?).[17]

Šarfadīnō, xarzē gulē,
A'māmata [corrupted *a'lāmat – "sign, symbol,* embodiment"] *dastē gulē,*
Šarfadīn sīyārē Dundulē.
Šarfadīna – dīnē mina,
Šarfadīna – dīnē mina.

Sharfadin, [you are] the green of a flower,
The manifestation of a bouquet of flowers,
Sharfidin is the horseman upon Dundul,
Sharfadin is my religion,
Sharfidin is my religion.[18]

[13] Asatrian and Arakelova 2014: 42.

[14] Myths and loci (hoofprints) related to Duldul are widely spread in the Muslim folklore traditions, particularly Central Asia and the North Caucasus (Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, Pamirs, Adyghes, Kabardians, etc.).

[15] On Sharfadin as an epithet of Malak-Tawus, cf. Asatrian and Arakelova 2014: 29–30.

[16] Celil and Celil 1978: 319.

[17] Asatrian and Arakelova 2014: 41.

[18] *Ibid*.

If ʿAli himself is represented in the Yezidi tradition, why then do figures such as Sheikh ʿAdi and Sharfadin also appear mounted on the legendary beast? One might be tempted to dismiss this question, considering the absence of a rigid dogmatic structure within Yezidism. However, the complex trajectory of Duldul in Islamic tradition prevents such a simple dismissal. In Islam, the story of Duldul evolves far beyond the mere inheritance of one of the Prophet Muḥammad's possessions by his cousin and son-in-law, ʿAli ibn Abi Talib. Instead, Duldul comes to symbolize the *transfer of spiritual and temporal authority* – a motif that may be echoed in Yezidi narratives, where the mount serves as a marker of sacred legitimacy shared among several key religious figures.

Having been entrusted to ʿAli after Muhammad's death, alongside with the latter's armor and land, Duldul, in early Islamic tradition, became one of the key signs of transmission of caliphal authority. For some early Islamic theologians and hadith scholars and transmitters, the possession of Duldul by ʿAli thus had become one of the elements justifying or refuting ʿAli's right to power. Miraculous acts performed by ʿAli riding Duldul are mentioned by such Shiʿa theologians as Shaykh al-Mufid (d. 1022) in his *Kitab al-Irshad* ("Book of Guidance") and Sharif al-Radi (d. 1015). Sunni authors (such as, e.g. al-Dhahabi (d. 1348)), however, who would deny Ali's right to power immediately after Muhammad, doubt ʿAli's direct inheritance of Duldul, stating that the she-mule had been first gifted to Abu Bakr, who in fact succeeded to the Prophet Mohammad's political and administrative functions and thereby initiated the institute of the caliph. Ibn Abi Shaybah (d. 849) mentions that ʿAli "was the owner of the gray she-mule, like Muʿawiya", implying that the very fact of the ownership of Duldul by Muʿawiya indicates the legitimacy of the latter's and wider – the Umayyads' political power. Muʿawiya as the final owner of Duldul is also mentioned by Suhayl b. Abi Salih (d. 755).[19]

Thus, if Duldul is approached as a sign of the rightful political succession and his ownership justifies the legitimacy of power, including the Umayyads' rule, it could have penetrated into the early Adawiyya community with the same connotation. Of course, by that time (11–12 cc.), the Umayyads had no political influence, but their high religious status, sometimes bordering on worship, was still preserved in various segments of the Islamic world.[20] One of such segments was, of course, the Adawiyya Sufi order, in which the cult of its founder, Sheikh ʿAdi bin Musafir, was reinforced, in addition to the Sufi tradition of worshipping the *murshids*, also by his Umayyad origin. Later, when

[19] Cf. in detail: Marashi 2021: 643 ff.

[20] Cf. in detail: Arakelova 2005: 200–201.

the community had gradually reshaped its identity and transformed into a group with the principally new identity, alien to Islam and therefore heretical to the Muslim environment, some elements "confirming" its belonging to the dogmatic field and thus "justifying" its legitimacy and right for existence, may have been well preserved, at least on a marginal level. The Umayyad lineage of Sheikh ʻAdi bin Musafir, which had been definitely a significant aspect of his personality in the Adawiyya order, was hardly particularly emphasized later, three-four centuries after his death, already in the shaped, proper Yezidi community. But the element of the "rightful political succession" of the Umayyads and thus kind of legalization of the Yezidis as followers of Sheikh ʻAdi, could still be preserved by the community. In the lore it is reflected in the fact that Sheikh ʻAdi is the owner/master of Dadul (Duldul) – *Xudānē Dādul*. All the more, he shares it with Sharfidin/Malak-Tawus, whose cult was, most probably, less significant in the early period of the Yezidi community's formation than that of Sheikh ʻAdi, and who "receives the right" to ride Dundul (Duldul) only with the rise of his own status, when the cult of the Peacock Angel becomes central in Yezidism.

There is another important nuance to mention in this context. Despite the fact that, in the Yezidi tradition, ʻAli also rides Duldul, the above analysis proves that Sheikh ʻAdi (and, as a secondary development, Sharfadin/Malak-Tawus) did not inherited it from ʻAli.

There appear to be two distinct pathways through which the figure of Duldul may have entered Yezidi tradition. On one hand, if ʻAli is incorporated into the Yezidi worldview already identified as Duldul's historical owner, then his possession of the animal serves as a direct theological inheritance. On the other hand, Sheikh ʻAdi – venerated as the legendary founder of the Yezidi community – seems to have acquired a kind of *metaphysical* ownership of Duldul, possibly reflecting his symbolic association with the Umayyad dynasty.[21]

Finally, we approach to a principally unique niche of ʻAli in an absolutely amazing Yezidi text recorded in Armenia and dedicated to Ali's journey to hereafter. *Aʼlī Šērē Xwadē Āxiratēdā* – "Ali the Lion of God in the Hereafter",[22] in its many aspects, reminds the Zoroastrian *Ardā Wīrāz-nāmag* ("The Book of Righteous Wiraz").[23]

The plot develops from the moment when ʻAli gets the allowance from god to penetrate into the hereafter, together with his horse Dandul, through a grave in the grave-

[21] It is quite interesting, that the Yezidi tradition does not grant the right to ride/own Dundul to Sultan Ezid (*Silt'ān Ēzīd*), who is no less a cult figure than Sheikh ʻAdi in Yezidism, and, all the more, whose historical prototype, Yazid bin Muʻawiya, was the son of Muʻawiya bin Sufyan – owner of Duldul after ʻAli's death, according to some Muslim authors; Marashi 2021: 647.

[22] Cf. Arakelova 2025: 153–156.

[23] Cf. its publications: Gignoux 1984; Vahman 1986.

yard, in order to see the punishment of sinners with his own eyes. In the other world, ʿAli is accompanied by a young man who comments on what is happening and explains for what sin particularly each sinner suffers or is tortured. After each scene, the young man asks ʿAli to share what he saw with people, when he returns to the "unjust world", so that no one would commit similar sins.

The episodes from the text *A'lī Šērē Xwadē Āxiratēdā* give a clear idea of several sins and relevant punishments for each of them. The text highlights such sins as greed, grouchiness, licentiousness, lust, spreading gossip, eavesdropping and transmitting private information, renunciation of faith (marriage to a non-believer).

ʿAli shows his reaction, while watching the scenes of punishments. In one episode, he witnesses a woman hanging upside down from a tree, being beaten by two men. Upon observing the scene, ʿAli inquires about the reason for her punishment. A young man accompanying him responds: "She was dishonest – she was a whore". Upon hearing this, ʿAli expresses approval, reportedly saying: "Very good, then!"[24].

Leaving aside the specific details of this otherworldly journey, one is compelled to ask, why it is ʿAli – rather than another prophetic or saintly figure – who is chosen to travel to the hereafter, to witness divine retribution, and to warn the Yezidis against sin? Such a role could have been assigned to many relevant representatives of the Yezidi pantheon – starting from such authentic Yezidi figures as Davrēše A'rd,[25] the Lord of the Earth, serving as intermediary between this and the other worlds, or the psychopomp Šēx Kirās,[26] to, let us say, Sheikh ʿAdi, who presides over the judgement of souls on the Sirat bridge. Why does the Yezidi tradition entrust this mission to ʿAli? The obvious answer is that ʿAli is not deified. Unlike the deities, spirits and, all the more, members of the holy triad, who do not directly communicate with people, ʿAli does. He is a human being, although definitely a significant figure, appearing in such a notable context as the Yezidi prayer of transition, and sharing the legendary Dundul with the most sacred characters of Yezidism. He is also supposed to be the most righteous man, taking into account that in the Zoroastrian tradition, Wiraz was chosen for this mission as the most righteous among men of his time. To use a more relevant in the given context term, which reflects rather both a Sufi and extreme Shiʿa concept, than the Yezidi one, ʿAli is a Perfect Man, the one who embodies the concept of *Insān-i Kāmil* to the absolute degree.

[24] Arakelova 2025: 161–162.

[25] On this character cf. Asatrian and Arakelova 2014: 87–90.

[26] Cf. *ibid*: 77–80.

In modern Yezidism, ʿAli's special niche is not particularly emphasized. However, his status of the Perfect Man and the most righteous one could well have existed in the tradition in the past.

Thus, the special status of ʿAli – whether in the form of outright deification or a unique mode of reverence – can be seen as another shibboleth of the Near Eastern non-dogmatic religious milieu. This symbolic elevation is not limited to the well-known heterodox Shiʿa groups that explicitly deify him; it also appears within the Yezidi tradition, where ʿAli emerges as a Perfect Man and the most righteous among human beings. This charismatic figure is imbued with metaphysical authority, transcending rigid sectarian boundaries and embodying moral and spiritual ideals shared across diverse religious systems.

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ვიქტორია არაქელოვა

რამდენად ახლოსაა ʻალი ღმერთთან?
ʻალის სტატუსის შესახებ ეზიდურ ტრადიციაში

აბსტრაქტი:

მიუხედავად იმისა, რომ 'ალის გაღმრთობა უკიდურესად შიიტური მიმდინარეობების განმსაზღვრელ მახასიათებელს წარმოადგენს, მის როლს ეზიდურ რელიგიაში ჯერ კიდევ არ მიქცევია ჯეროვანი სამეცნიერო ყურადღება. ეზიდიზმსა და ჰეტეროდოქსულ შიიტურ გარემოს შორის არსებული მნიშვნელოვანი პარალელების გათვალისწინებით, ეს სტატია მიზნად ისახავს ეზიდურ რელიგიურ ტრადიციაში ʻალის პოზიციის შესწავლასა და დაზუსტებას. ეზიდურ რელიგიურ ტექსტებში ʻალი მრავალჯერ გვხვდება, და გარკვეულ საგალობლებში ის ცენტრალურ როლს ასრულებს. ამ წყაროების საგულდაგულო შესწავლა ცხადყოფს, რომ რადიკალური შიიზმისგან განსხვავებით, ეზიდიზმი ʻალის ღვთაებრივ სტატუსს არ ანიჭებს. მიუხედავად ამისა, მისი ზოგიერთი ფუნქციური მახასიათებელი და გარკვეულ კონტექსტებში უნიკალური როლი მიუთითებს, რომ მას ერთ დროს განსაკუთრებული და, შესაძლოა, მნიშვნელოვანი პოზიცია ეკავა ეზიდურ ტრადიციაში.

საკვანძო სიტყვები:

ʻალი, ეზიდობა, ეზიდიზმი, რადიკალური შიიზმი, დულდულ/დუნდულ, სრულტოფილი ადამიანი.

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Victoria Arakelova

ʻElî çiqasî nêzîkî Xwedêye? Li ser statûsa ʻElî di kevneşopiya êzdiyanda

Kurte:

Çiqasî jî xudêkirina ʻElî taybetmendiyeke bingehî û cîgire di nav hindek rewt û tevgerên şiîʻyên radîkalda, rola wî di nav kevneşopiya dînê êzdiyanda heta niha bi awayekê taybet li ser esasê zanistî nehatîye lêkolînkirin. Berçavê ku di navbera êzdiyan û dinya şiîʻya klasîk û heterodoksda hevrêziyên balkêş hene, ev gotara pêkolê dike ku cî û statûsa ʻElî di kevneşopiya dînî ya êzdiyanda lêkolîn û ronkirinê bike. Di nivîsên dînî yên êzdiyanda gelek caran behsa ʻElî tê kirin û di hindek qewl û stranan da ew roleke navendî digire. Lêkolîna bi hûrgulî ya van çavkaniyan nîşan dike ku, li berovajî şiîʻîyetiya hişk, dînê êzdiya statûsa xudayî nade ʻElî. Bi vê yekê jî, hindek taybetmendiyên wîye fûnksiyonel (wezîfet) û rola wîye taybet di hindek çarçoveyanda destnîşan dikin, ku dibe ew di kevneşopiya dînê êzdiyanda carekê cîyekî taybet û belkî girîng girtîye.

Peyvên sereke:

ʻElî; dînê êzdiyan; şiîʻya tund; Duldul/ Dundul; mirovê temam.