Religious Poetry in Tajik Badakhshan

Madâh is usually performed by one or two men, accompanied by a rubâb and a davûd. They perform for their own community, which is in most cases a small village or a certain quarter of a town. Men, women and children may be present: sometimes the men join the performers in singing the refrains, but most of the time everybody listens in silence to the performance. Approving exclamations are expressed when the madâh comes to an end, which is usually after many hours. Madâh is performed often as a ritual of mourning. It is also performed on Thursday evenings and Fridays, or on the occasion of an anniversary of one of the numerous holy places in Badakhshan. Holy places, called madâh, are scattered throughout the country. They contain the remains of mystics or extremely pious men of past times, surrounded by hens of the dove.

The poetry sung in madâh is exclusively in Persian. For many Badakhshani, this is their second language. In most cases one of the Farsi languages, Shûhîn-Rushân or Wâli, is their mother tongue. Persian has of old been in use as a lingua franca of the area and as the language for writing, since the above-mentioned languages did not have a script. Persian also served as the language of religion, together with Arabic. In a performance of madâh different forms of Persian poetry are linked together. The beginning of the performance is usually slow and solemn. The first poem is often a ghazal. In the course of the performance, the tempo rises. The poems tend to be longer in the middle of a performance, when verified stories are sung. In between, quatrains or short prayers form a pause. Madâh poetry is largely orally transmitted. The madâhkâns, the performers of madâh, state that the poetry comes from ‘the baysâr’, notebooks with miscellaneous poems. Some madâhkâns keep a similar notebook with poems written in Tajik script, used to memorize the texts. Many poems sung in madâh are attributed to classical Persian poets like Í`lî al-Dîn Rûmî. Often these poems can be characterized as Sufi poems. Like many instances of classical Persian Sufi poetry, madâh is intended to elucidate religious matters.

Madâhkâns are not professional singers. To be a madâhkân is not even a profession. It is the gift, from which one should not make money. Therefore all madâhkâns have other professions; many of them are farmers. They perform madâh when requested.

A Few Examples of Madâh Poetry

The first example is a mystical poem, addressed to a pupil on the mystical path, literally a ‘searcher for unity (with God)’. The pupil, and implicitly the audience, is accused of having too much pride and vanity. The poet speaks for a divine initiator, who appears in all forms and in whom stands above the cycle of beings. The listener is invited to heed this Absolute Truth, which is invisible to the physical eye, unless the outward eye is turned inwards, to the interior aspect of everything. Awareness of the interior aspect of things and beings leads to an understanding of the Secret. This secret is only known to the initiated.

The second example may be seen as a heterodox poem, in which ‘Allâh’ is more or less defied. The first part of the sixth line is a sort of spell against the accusation of blasphemy; it is obvious that the composer of this poem is aware of a possible reproach in consequence of his statements. In the Ismaili religion, ‘Allâh’ is not defied, but in the Ismaili doctrine of prophetic cycles he holds a key position as the wali of the Prophet Muhammad. The deputies in the different prophetic cycles knew the secret meaning behind the outer form of religion. This secret was only revealed to a limited number of initiates. One of the reasons for the prevalence of ‘Allâh’ in the poetry of Badakhshan may well be the fact that ‘Allâh’ as a deputy of Muhammad represents the inner dimension of faith, which is deemed more important than the outer form. In this poem, ‘Allâh’ is identified with a number of prophets. It has been recorded as among the Ahiyâh of Qandahar. The alleged author of this poem is Shamiy Tabrûz: but this is probably a false attribution.

Oh you searcher of Unity, you are all the boasting I am looking for. I listen to my words because I am saying the words of God.

The king who was executor after the Lord, was ‘Allâh’

Adam as well as Seth, Job as well as Enosh

Jesus came into being and spoke these words:

Listen to the luminous Lâmech, so that you will know That friend, who was this prophetic soul, was ‘Allâh’

Gâubîr came from near the incorporeal Creator In the qu’îla was Muhammad, but the goal was ‘Allâh’

The seal on the finger of Solomon the Prophet That divine light that was in it, was ‘Allâh’

That conqueror who on the road of Islam destroyed the door with one stroke and opened it, was ‘Allâh’

Then be ready for my command and listen to everything I say

If you want to serve in this divine horizon Be the pupil of my heart in the school of learning

Listen to my words because I am saying the words of God

Awareness of the interior aspect of things and beings leads to an
outward eye is turned inwards, to the interior aspect of everything.

The kings of the world delighted in pride of their palace and throne
They were unable to consider ‘to me, nothing of this remains’

The greedy people have collected earthly possessions out of greed
Look, in the end not even the hem of the skirt remains

Alas I spent the house of my life in negligence

Think well, for our past life does not return

Whoever is from God on his way to God, I am master of this all

Whoever is the place of highest essence, whatever be the place of lowest essence

I do not need anything and I am free from this all

You will not see anything but me, nor at the beginning, nor at the end

For me, there is no change in meaning but in outward appearance I change sometimes and I appear in every form

The theme of the third example of madâh poetry is the transience of this world. In all genres of poetry performed in Badakhshan, allusions to the transience of the world are common. Admonitions not to attach oneself to the world are eagerly listened to by the audience.

Do not feel secure in this world, for no rose or rose-bed remains

Do not be negligent in remembering God for in the body no soul remains

Do you not fear the day that you put your side against the earth?

For you, as an ornament not even a piece of turban and clothes remains

Surely there is a ray of the soul as a leash in the house of the body

For life not even a ray of the sun in a small window remains

The greedy people have collected earthly possessions out of greed

Look, in the end not even the hem of the skirt remains

Alas I spent the house of my life in negligence

Everything I throw in the wind and from the heap of corn no grain remains

Think well, for our past life does not return

Such is the portion formed by day and night: from going nothing remains

White became the eye of Jacob because of separation from Joseph ‘For my heart’s comfort nothing but the smell of the skirt remains’

Qalander, if you boast Love for Him then learn from the nightingales

For no long nights to wait over separation remain