

THE PEACOCK IN SUFI COSMOLOGY AND POPULAR RELIGION Connections between Indonesia, South India, and the Middle East

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Abstract

In various cultural and religious contexts, from West Asia to Southeast Asia, we come across a number of quite similar creation myths in which a peacock, seated on a cosmic tree, plays a central part. For the Yazidis, a sect of Sufi origins that has moved away from Islam, the Peacock Angel, who is the most glorious of the angels, is the master of the created world. This belief may be related to early Muslim cosmologies involving the Mubammadan Light (Nur Mubammad), which in some narratives had the shape of a peacock and participated in creation. In a different set of myths, the peacock and the Tree of Certainty (shajarat al-yaqin) play a role in Adam and Eve's fall and expulsion from Paradise. The central myth of the South Indian Hindu cult of the god Murugan also involves a tree and a peacock. The myth is enacted in the annual ritual of Thaipusam, like the Nur Mubammad myth is still enacted annually in the Maulid festival of Cikoang in South Sulawesi. Images of the peacock, originating from South India, have moved across cultural and religious boundaries and have been adopted as representing the different communities' peacock myths.

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[Dalam keragaman budaya dan agama, dari Asia Barat hingga Asia Tenggara, kami menemui sejumlah mitos penciptaan yang sangat mirip di mana burung merak, duduk di pohon kosmik, memainkan bagian sentral. Bagi pengikut Yazidi, sebuah sekte Sufi yang menyimpang dari Islam, Malaikat Merak, sosok malaikat yang paling jelita, dianggap sebagai penguasa alam semesta. Keyakinan seperti ini barangkali terkait dengan kosmologi klasik yang berkembang di kalangan Muslim mengenai “Nur Muhammad” yang dalam beberapa cerita dikisahkan berbentuk merak and terlibat dalam penciptaan. Dalam kisah berbeda, merak dan sbajarat al-yaqīn (pohon keyakinan) berperan dalam kejatuhan Adam dan Hawa [ke bumi] dan terusir dari surga. Mitos penting di kalangan sekte Hindu pemuja dewa Murugan di India Selatan juga menyebutkan pohon dan merak. Mitos tersebut dipertunjukkan melalui ritual tahunan Thaipusam, seperti juga mitos Nur Muhammad yang diekspresikan melalui festival Maulid di Cikoang, Sulawesi Selatan setiap tahunnya. Gambar burung merak, yang berasal dari India Selatan, menyebar lintas batas budaya dan agama dan diadopsi secara beragam sebagai representasi mitos burung oleh komunitas yang beragam pula.]

Keywords: *Nur Muhammad, Maulid, Tree of Certainty, Peacock, Thaipusam.*

Abdul Jabar and the Peacock

Many years ago, in the early 1980s, I lived in Bandung, Indonesia, in a poor neighbourhood, where I tried to study the relationship between social and economic deprivation and religious ideas and practices. It soon became obvious that my neighbours were, with one or two exceptions, not at all interested in the radical Islamic ideas for which Bandung was becoming known in those days. It was mainly students and members of middle class who were attracted to the ideas of Maududi, Sayyid Qutb and Ali Shari’ati that were printed by such local publishers as Pustaka, Risalah and Mizan. In my neighbourhood, people were more interested in the magical uses of religion for healing, success in work or school, or for acquiring supernatural powers. There

were *dukun* (magical healers) with various specialisations, and many people followed the spiritual discipline of one of the numerous local Sufi orders (*tarekat*) and *kebatinan* mystical movements.¹ I was also taking lessons in *pencak silat*, the local variety of martial arts, which I believed to be closely connected with the world of the *pesantren*, the traditional institution of religious education that I was interested in. West Java was home to several traditional schools (*aliran*) of *pencak silat*, each of which had its own spiritual exercises, with fasting and the recitation of prayers, *jampé* and *hizib*. Many practitioners moreover were connected with a specific religious movement or cult.

One of these local religious cults with which I first became acquainted through my neighbours was known as Abdul Jabar. Its followers engaged in exercises through which they hoped to harness the tremendous powers of the divine name of *Jabbār*, ‘the Almighty’. Abdul Jabar was also the name that the founder of this cult had adopted during his stay in Mecca. His birth name was Rojak, and in later life he was generally known as Mama Amilin (‘Mama’ is a term of respect for older men). It was hinted that he had received the name of Abdul Jabar after completing spiritual training in Mecca under the guidance of a certain Shaikh Fatoni. As a young man, Rojak had shown a great aptitude for calling upon the help of spirits (*jinn*) through the recitation of certain *hizib*, a common enough practice among young men in the early twentieth century. He had made the voyage to Mecca in pursuit of deeper knowledge of *hizib* and amulets. Shaikh Fatoni had redirected his attention from amulets and *hizib* and *jinn* to the superior force of God’s names, especially the most powerful name of *Jabbār*. After he had learned how to use the power of that name, he returned to West Java, around 1928.

¹ I wrote on these aspects of the religious life in my neighbourhood in: Martin van Bruinessen, ‘Duit, Jodoh, Dukun’: Remarks on cultural change among poor migrants to Bandung’, *Masyarakat Indonesia* XV, 1988, pp. 35-65.

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I later heard from various sources that Mama Amilin or Haji Abdul Jabar, who died in 1962, had been famous in the *pencak silat* world and had been the teacher of several well-known martial arts specialists (*pendekar*), including many later Darul Islam activists (I discovered that my own *pencak* teacher was also a follower, and the method of evoking supernatural support known as ‘Abdul Jabar’ was quite well-known in *pencak* circles outside the cult itself as well.) Mama Amilin was himself a diminutive man but it was said that he could force much taller and stronger men to admit defeat because his powers immobilised them. The cult that grew up around him also became known as Abdul Jabar. Its teachings consisted of an idiosyncratic interpretation of God’s essence and attributes (*Dhat* and *Sifat*) and the nature of the divine names (*Asma*), and a variety of traditional Islamic cosmology. Some of the followers applied the powers that they acquired through Abdul Jabar’s spiritual exercises in martial arts, others in healing or for other purposes.

Members recognised each other by an emblem that represented the cosmological meaning of Abdul Jabar. We see a bird, vaguely resembling a Garuda, that is made up of the Arabic letters of the words *‘Abd* and *Jabbār*. Above the bird we see the names of Muhammad and Allah, and surrounding it the names of Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman and Ali. This emblem is commonly embroidered on cloth, the colour of which (red, green or black) indicates the follower’s specialisation. The emblem is also engraved on Haji Abdul Jabar’s grave stone.



*Fig. 1. Abdul Jabar emblem embroidered on a red kerchief
(the colour associated with martial arts)*



Fig. 2. One of my neighbours visiting the grave of Haji Abdul Jabar



Fig. 3. The Abdul Jabar emblem on the founder's grave

During one of my first conversations with Mama Ili, one of the main teachers of the cult, he told me a story of the creation of the world that appeared to be central to the cosmology of the cult. I may not have understood everything he told me, but in my field notes I summarised the myth in these words:

“In the beginning, *Dhat* Allah created light, and from the light emerged the bird Tawus, the proud peacock. And a mirror was also created. The peacock, seeing itself in the mirror, began to sweat. And the drops of sweat dripping from its body turned into angels.” (conversation with Mama Ili, Bandung, 1 June 1984)

Much of the significance that this myth held for the cult of Abdul Jabar eluded me then. As in many esoteric sects, there were secret teachings, of which only the outer layers were gradually revealed to me. Haji Abdul Jabar’s son Ishaq, whom I later came to know well, told me that the bird of the Abdul Jabar emblem was not a Garuda but in fact represented the

peacock of the creation story. Studying my own kerchief with the emblem again, I noticed that even the drops of sweat were represented, under the bird's wings. What the peacock symbol had to do with the supernatural powers cultivated in the Abdul Jabar cult I never discovered.

Much later I encountered more elaborate versions of this creation myth, and I discovered that it was once widely known in the Muslim world, as I shall show below. But when I first heard it from Mama Ili, I was fascinated because the combination of a peacock and angels in the process of creation reminded me immediately of the belief system of the Yezidis and the Ahl-e Haqq, two religious communities in Kurdistan with which I was familiar. The Yezidis venerate a spiritual entity they name Peacock Angel (Malak Tawus or Tawûsê Melek), the most important of seven angels who emanated from God's light before the creation of the world. The Peacock Angel played an important role in the creation and maintenance of the world. According to the Yezidis' Christian and Muslim neighbours, the Peacock Angel is none other than Satan, and they have therefore commonly called the Yezidis *Shayt ānparast* ("Devil worshippers"). The Yezidis simply deny that they venerate the Evil principle; according to them, Malak Tawus is the angel who is closest to God. I had found the same beliefs in an Ahl-e Haqq community in Iranian Kurdistan, which I had visited several years earlier. They venerated a figure named Dawud, who also was a manifestation of Satan or Malak Tawus, and whom they asked for help in all worldly matters. Both communities had adopted some version of the Sufi tale of Satan's disobedience and redemption. When God ordered all angels to prostrate (*sujūd*) before Adam, Satan had refused to do so but in his disobedience had shown that he alone among the angels was a true monotheist, who would only prostrate before God and nothing else. Rather than punishing him, as is claimed by most Christians and Muslims, God rewarded the Peacock Angel by making him the lord of the world.²

² John S. Guest, *The Yezidis. A study in survival*, London/New York: Kegan Paul International, 1987, pp. 28-41; Garnik Asatrian and Victoria Arakelova, "Malak-Tawus: The Peacock Angel of the Yezidis," *Iran and the Caucasus*, Vol. 7, No. 1/2, 2003, pp. 1-36; Martin van Bruinessen, "Veneration of Satan among the Ahl-e Haqq of the Gûrân region," *Fritillaria Kurdica, Bulletin of Kurdish Studies*, No. 3-4, 2014, pp. 6-41. Sufi

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This background made me wonder how the supernatural powers cultivated in the Abdul Jabar cult, which they claim to be superior to the mere invocation of help from *jinn* or simple magic, are explained in the cult's cosmological scheme. How was the power of the divine name *Jabbār* related to the primordial peacock? I never received a satisfactory answer to my questioning – either because there were secrets my interlocutors did not wish to reveal or (as I suspect was the case) because my questions were too alien to their own cosmological concepts and therefore meaningless to them.

Maulid, Nur Muhammad and the Peacock in Cikoang

Not long after my stay in Bandung, I discovered that a more elaborate version of the same creation myth is being kept alive and is re-enacted every year in a unique festival celebrated in South Sulawesi. Cikoang is a fishers' settlement on the south-western tip of Sulawesi. Like many other fishing villages, the community makes an annual offering to the sea to ward off danger. In Cikoang, unlike elsewhere, this occurs on the occasion of *Maulid*, the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad, in a ritual directed by a family of *sayyids* (descendants of the Prophet) who have been living among the fishermen for centuries. It is these *sayyids* who have carefully guarded the miraculous tales of the Prophet's birth as well as the myth of *Nur Muhammad*, the Muhammadan Light, as they are narrated in old Malay books (*kitab*).³

narratives of Satan are studied extensively by Peter J. Awn, *Satan's tragedy and redemption: Iblis in Sufi psychology*, (Leiden: Brill, 1983).

³ I first read about the *Maulid* celebrations in Cikoang in an article by the French anthropologist Gibert Hamonic ('La fête du grand *Maulid* à Cikoang, regard sur une *tarekat* dite "shī'ite" en pays Makassar' ["The feast of the great *Maulid* in Cikoang: on a *tarekat* said to be "Shī'ite" in the Makassar country"], *Archipel*, Vol. 29, 1985, pp. 175-192. See also Muhamad Hisyam, "Sayyid-Jawi: Studi kasus jaringan sosial di desa Cikoang, kecamatan Mangarabombang, kabupaten Takalar, Sulawesi Selatan," Mukhlis and Kathryn Robinson (ed.), *Panorama Kehidupan Sosial* (Ujung Pandang: Lembaga Penerbitan Universitas Hasanuddin, 1985), pp. 112-199. Much later, M. Adlin Sila wrote a dissertation about this tradition: Muhammad Adlin Sila, *Maudu': A Way of Union with God* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2015).

In the Cikoang narration of the myth, before the world was created God created the Muhammadan Light. It was this prophetic essence that would take a human embodiment in all successive prophets, attaining the most perfect embodiment at the birth of the Prophet Muhammad. This primeval *Nur Muhammad* was a brightly shining light resembling a peacock, which was contained in a vessel of precious crystal. The Creator then placed the peacock on a cosmic tree with four main branches, known as the Tree of Certainty (*shajarat al-yaqīn*) or Tree of the Faithful (*shajarat al-muttaqīn*).⁴

In the *Maulid* celebrations at Cikoang, both the tree and the peacock are represented in the festive offerings the community prepares. The tree with its four branches is represented by wooden constructions with four legs called *kandiwari*, that men carry on their shoulders in the procession. The vessel containing the peacock is represented by the *bakul Maudu`*, woven baskets filled with offerings. Colourful banners and other decorations represent the beauty of the peacock. The most important part of the food offering consists of five chickens, which also represent the peacock.⁵



Fig. 4. Cikoang: men carrying a *kandiwari* on their shoulders
(after Hamonic, 'La fête du grand Maulid', p. 183.)

⁴ Hamonic, 'La fête du grand Maulid', p. 182; Sila, *Maudu`*, p. 82-3, 97.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 96.



Fig. 5. *Kandiwari with symbolic decorations* (Sila, Maudu`, p. 96)

The story of *Nur Muhammad* as a peacock of course reminded me of the creation myth as told in the Abdul Jabar cult, but not only of that. The photographs accompanying Hamonic's article (Fig. 4), of a procession with representations of a cosmic tree and peacock, reminded me especially of a procession I had witnessed in Malaysia, during the Hindu Tamil festival of Thaipusam. There too, men and women carried wooden constructions called *kavadi*, usually embellished with peacock feathers (Fig. 6, 7). The similarity was superficial, and only much later did I discover that the Thaipusam procession I had seen was in fact also associated with a creation myth involving a peacock and a tree. I shall return to the myths about the god Murugan and the peacock below.



Fig. 6. Thaipusam procession, Batu Caves, Kuala Lumpur, 1982.



Fig 7. Thaipusam procession, Batu Caves, Kuala Lumpur, 1982.

Nur Muhammad* in Classical Arabic and Malay *Kitab

The concept of *Nur Muhammad* as an emanation from God, or as the primeval spirit that was created before the material world was created, was long very popular in Nusantara as well as elsewhere in the Muslim world. It is explicitly or implicitly present in several of the most popular *Maulid* texts, including the one known as ‘*Barzanji*’ (Ja`far al-Barzinji’s *Lujjāyn al-Dāni*).⁶ The moment of the Prophet’s birth, when the Light enters the world, is the most ‘magical’ moment of the narrative, at which all present rise to their feet. We do not find the narrative of *Nur Muhammad* as a peacock and creation of the world from its sweat in these *Maulid* texts however (with one exception, a relatively recent *Maulid* text by the South Indian Sufi master Bawa Muhaiyaddeen⁷).

The Malay texts about *Nur Muhammad* in the shape of a peacock, to which the Cikoang *sayyids* referred, were once widely read, and when I started collecting books in Arabic script in the late 1980s, I found some of them still on sale in bookshops in isolated places in Kalimantan and Malaysia, but they were then no longer part of the curriculum of *pondok* and *pesantren*, if they had ever been. Reformers had, I supposed, condemned these works as superstitious and purged them from the shelves of the more respectable establishments.⁸

⁶ For a recent Indonesian discussion of relevant *Maulid* texts and supporting *hadith* adduced by the famous Nawawi Banten, see ‘*Nur Muhammad dalam Kitab Barzanji*’, NU Online, 23 November 2018, <https://islam.nu.or.id/post/read/99346/nur-muhammad-dalam-kitab-barzanji>. An excellent recent study of the *Maulid* literature is: Marion Holmes Katz, *The Birth of The Prophet Muhammad: Devotional Piety in Sunni Islam* (London; New York: Routledge, 2007).

⁷ M. R. Bawa Muhaiyaddeen, *A Song of Muhammad* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: The Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship, 1996), p. 3-18 (these pages are available online at Google Books). Bawa Muhaiyaddeen is the founder of a modern Sufi movement with many followers in North America.

⁸ I briefly mentioned these texts in my overview of *kitab kuning* available in the 1980s: Martin van Bruinessen, “*Kitab kuning: books in Arabic script used in the pesantren milieu*,” *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, Vol. 146, No. 2-3, 1990, pp. 226-269. The contents of these works are summarised in Mohd. Nor bin Ngah, *Kitab Jawi: Islamic thought of the Malay Muslim scholars* (Singapore: ISEAS, 1983).

The texts continue to be discussed, however, especially in Malaysia. They all appear to be based on an early Arabic text, *Daqā'iq al-Akbbār fī Dhikr al-Janna wa-l-Nār* ('Particularities from the Traditions about Heaven and Hell'), attributed to a certain `Abd al-Rahīm b. Aḥmad al-Qāḍī, of whom little is known but who may have lived in the sixteenth century.⁹ This text must once have been widely read in Southeast Asia, both in Arabic and in translation. I found both the Arabic original and Malay, Sundanese and Madurese translations for sale in Indonesia. The Arabic text directly begins with the narrative of Creation:

God created a tree with four branches and named it 'Tree of the Devout (*shajarat al-muttaqīn*). And God created the Muhammadan Light in a veil of white pearl, in the shape of a peacock, and placed it on that tree. There it said praise to God for forty thousand years. Then He created the mirror of shame and placed it opposite [the bird], and the peacock saw in the mirror that it was most beautiful and ornate, and it became ashamed before God and sweated six drops of sweat. And from the first drop God created Abu Bakr, from the second Umar, from the third Uthman, from the fourth Ali, from the fifth the rose, and from the sixth the rice (*aruz*). Then the Muhammadan Light made five prostrations, and these five prostrations each day are now obligatory upon us, and God also made five prayers for the Prophet and his *umma* obligatory. And God looked upon that Light once more and it was ashamed before God and sweated. From the sweat of its head God created all the angels, from the sweat of its face the Throne and the Stool, the Tablet and the Pen, the sun and the moon, the veil and the stars and all that is in the heavens. From the sweat of its breast God created the prophets and messengers, the scholars and the martyrs, and the pious folk. And from the sweat of its back He created al-Bayt al-Ma`mūr,¹⁰ the Ka`ba and Bayt al-Maqdis,¹¹ and the place of all mosques in the world. From the sweat of its eyebrows He created the *umma* of Muhammad, believers and Muslims, from the sweat of its ears the spirits of the Jews and Christians and Zoroastrians and similar renegades, unbelievers and hypocrites. And from its feet He created the earth, from East to West, with all that is in it.

⁹ On this text, of which numerous manuscripts were found from Morocco to India and Indonesia, and its author see: Roberto Tottoli, "Muslim Eschatological Literature and Western Studies," *Der Islam*, Vol. 83, 2008, pp. 452–477. I am indebted to Christian Lange for drawing my attention to this article.

¹⁰ *Al-bayt al-ma`mūr* is the heavenly counterpart to the Ka`ba on earth; it is circumambulated by the angels.

¹¹ *Bayt al-maqdis* is Jerusalem, and more specifically the Dome on the Rock.

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The main Malay adaptations of this text are Nuruddin Raniri's *Bad` Khabq al-Samawāt wa'l-`Arḍ* (The Creation of Heaven and Earth), Ahmad b. Muhammad Yunus Lingga's *Daqā'iq al-Akbbār*, and Zayn al-`Abidin b. Muhammad al-Fatani's *Kasyf al-Ghaybiyyah* (Revelation of the Hidden). On a recent visit to *pondok* in Kelantan and Patani, I found that these texts were still widely available in recent reprints and in use in several *pondok*.¹² The last-named two Malay adaptations follow al-Qadi's text closely, but Zayn al-`Abidin al-Fatani (who is also known as Tuan Minal in his homeland) shows that he has read more widely by commenting that in other creation narratives the cosmic tree is named *shajarat al-yaqīn*, 'Tree of Certainty'.¹³

It is obvious that this Malay adaptation of *al-Qādi's Daqā'iq al-Akbbār* is at the origin of both the Cikoang ritual and the creation myth I heard from Mama Ili in Bandung, and it explains why the bird in the Abdul Jabar emblem (Fig. 1) is surrounded by the names of Abu Bakar, Umar, Uthman and Ali. The Shaikh Fatoni who was Haji Abdul Jabar's teacher in Mecca cannot have been Zayn al-`Abidin himself, for the latter died in Patani in 1913 and his stay in Mecca had been many decades earlier, whereas Abdul Jabar was in Mecca in 1926 or 1928.¹⁴ Shaikh Fatoni may have been a countryman of Tuan Minal, or perhaps just the book.

There exists yet another Malay narrative, titled *Hikayat Nur Muhammad*, which shows similarity to *Daqā'iq al-Akbbār* but deviates from it in an interesting way, which suggests a Shi'i bias. Instead of listing Abu Bakr, Umar,

¹² Raniri's *Bad` Khabq* is printed in the margin of the anonymous *Tajul Muluk (Tāj al-Mulk)*, a compilation of astrological and other occult knowledge.

¹³ A text very similar to the printed Arabic versions of *Daqā'iq al-akbbār* was published by E. Wolff in his *Muhammedanische Eschatologie, Kitab Ahwal al-Qiyama, nach der Leipziger und Dresdner Handschrift*, (Leipzig: 1872). In this version, the tree is called *shajarat al-yaqīn*.

¹⁴ Biographical data on Tuan Minal in: Francis R. Bradley, *Forging Islamic power and place. The legacy of Shaykh Da'ud bin `Abd Allah al-Fatani in Mecca and Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016), p. 102, 126. The date of Abdul Jabar's *hajj* was given by his son, Haji Ishaq, who added that Shaikh Patoni was a pilgrim *shaiikh* in whose guesthouse Abdul Jabar stayed.

Uthman and Ali as entities created before the rest of the world, Uthman is not mentioned at all and Ali is given precedence over the others, along with Hasan, Husayn and Fatima. Summarised, the narrative goes like this:

God created the Muhammadan Light and instructed it in the five pillars of Islam. The He made from the Light a noble and beautiful bird. Its head was Ali b. Abi Talib, its eyes were Hasan and Husayn, its neck was Fatima al-Zahra, its two hands (sic!) were Abu Bakr and Umar, its tail was Hamza b. Abd al-Muttalib and its back was Abbas, and its foot was Khadija. The bird has various adventurous encounters with the four elements, and only after that it begins sweating and thus takes part in the creation of angels, etc.¹⁵



Fig. 8. The first page of *al-Qadi's Daqa'iq al-Akhhbar*, with in the margin a text attributed to *al-Suyuti, Al-Durar al-Hisān fī Ba'th Na'im al-Jinān*.

¹⁵The *Hikayat* appears not to be in print anymore, but a scan of an older printed edition can be read online: <https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP153-6-11>.



Fig. 9. Various Malay adaptations of *Daqa'iq al-Akbbār* (acquired in Patani, March 2019).

Peacock and Tree in Creation Myths across Asia and the Middle East

Maulid rituals and the concept of *Nur Muhammad* have long been the targets of reformist criticism and efforts at purification. Apologists have pointed to a small number of *hadith* suggesting that the Prophet was created as light before Adam was created.¹⁶ Some of the *hadith* appear to be widely accepted as reliable, but the peacock is not mentioned in any of these. I shall attempt to show here that the myth as narrated in *Daqa'iq al-Akbbār* contains elements of a much older creation myth that we find in different religions across Asia and the Middle East.

¹⁶Udah bin Mohsin, “Nur Muhammad dari sudut hadis,” *Jurnal Penyelidikan Islam*, Vol. 18, 2005, pp. 143-156 ; Gibril Fouad Haddad, *The Muhammadan Light in the Qur'an, Sunna, and Companion-Reports. From the Teachings of Maulana al-Sayyid Shaykh Muhammad Nazim al-Haqqani and His Deputy al-Sayyid Shaykh Muhammad Hisham al-Kabbani* (Fenton, MI: Institute for Spiritual and Cultural Advancement, 2012).

The Singaporean-Malaysian Salafi preacher Rasul Dahri, who like other Salafis in the region sees the struggle against local beliefs and practices as his major task, devotes two chapters of his textbook on correct belief to the concept of *Nur Muhammad* and a critique of Barzinji's *Maulid* and local sects such as *Tariqah Nur Muhammad* or *Haqiqiah Muhammadiyah*. In a videotaped sermon, he makes the more interesting observation that the representation of *Nur Muhammad* as a Peacock on the Tree of Certainty originates from Persian religion (*'Majusi'*) and is identical with the *kavadi* carried by Hindu devotees at Thaipusam.¹⁷ As I mentioned above, I had made the same association between the *Maulid* procession of Cikoang and the Thaipusam procession I had watched near Kuala Lumpur. In 1985, when I first read about Cikoang, I briefly played with the idea that both processions might have been influenced by some older ritual tradition widespread in Southeast Asia, but I rejected that idea because Thaipusam had been brought to Malaysia relatively recently by labour migrants from South India and Sri Lanka, whereas the Cikoang tradition credibly went back centuries.

It was only in the last few years that my interest in Thaipusam and its cosmological-mythological background was rekindled. I observed several Thaipusam processions in Singapore and Malaysia and tried to make sense of the symbolism. A recent book proved very helpful.¹⁸ The author, a former Australian diplomat, had been posted in Kuala Lumpur, had been drawn strongly towards the Indian community and Indian religious practices, and though himself an agnostic had begun taking part in the Thaipusam festival with all the attending ascetic practices in 1981 and continued doing this for decades. The book showed that he had become a serious scholar of Indian religion as well. I started

¹⁷Rasul bin Dahri, *Akidah Abli as-Sunnah wal-Jamaah mengikut Manhaj Salaf as-Soleh* (Johor Bahru: Perniagaan Jahabersa, 2001), p. 429-451; Ustaz Rasul Dahri, 'Kepercayaan Nur Muhammad daripada Majusi', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d8cJvEH67rg>.

¹⁸Carl Vadivella Belle, *Thaipusam in Malaysia: A Hindu Festival in the Tamil Diaspora* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2017).

corresponding with Belle and had the good fortune to meet him and have some extended exchanges with him about the peacock and its various meanings in Tamil Hinduism.¹⁹

The Thaipusam festival is focused on the most important South Indian deity, the warrior god Murugan (who is also known by the name of Subrahmanya). Devotees prepare themselves for months by fasting and other austerities for the procession, in which they pierce their bodies (tongue, cheeks, chest or back) with metal skewers or hooks and carry a wooden contraption called *kavadi* that is usually embellished with peacock feathers and images of the deity. Women usually carry a light *kavadi* on a shoulder; men's *kavadi* are complex, far heavier contraptions resting on both shoulders and stabilised by a heavy belt around the waist and numerous spikes and hooks piercing the skin of the nude upper body. In most cases, people take *kavadi* at Thaipusam in fulfilment of a vow



Fig. 10. Carl Vadivella Belle carrying *kavadi*.

¹⁹ Other books that I found to be highly informative and insightful are: Fred W. Clothey, *The many faces of Murukan. The history and meaning of a South Indian god*, (The Hague: Mouton, 1978); Kamil V. Zvelebil, *Tamil traditions on Subrahmanya-Murugan* (Madras: Institute of Asian Studies, 1991); Elizabeth Fuller Collins, *Pierced by Murugan's Lance: Ritual, Power, and Moral Redemption Among Malaysian Hindus* (Northern Illinois University Press, 1997).

The Thaipusam festival commemorates the primordial struggle of Murugan with the demon Surapadman and celebrates his ultimate victory as the triumph of Good over Evil. In this mythical fight, Murugan is the more powerful, but whenever he has almost subdued Surapadman, the latter changes shape and transforms into another kind of being that once again fiercely attacks Murugan. Towards the end of the battle, the demon assumes the shape of a giant tree standing in the ocean. Murugan then takes the leaf-shaped spear that is his major attribute, the *Vel*, and throws it towards the tree, splitting it in two. The two halves become a rooster and a peacock, both of which again assault Murugan but are finally subdued. The rooster is given a place in Murugan's battle standard, and the peacock (*mayil*) becomes Murugan's vehicle (*vahana*). Murugan is commonly depicted with his *Vel* and the peacock. In many representations, the peacock is accompanied by a snake. This animal does not occur in the myth of Murugan's battle and I searched the literature in vain for an explanation of its presence here.



Fig. 11, 12. Murugan and Shanmuga Subrahmanya (the six-faced manifestation of Murugan) with Vel, peacock and snake

When I asked Belle about the symbolism of the peacock, he told me the explanation given by the Hindu priest who had been his teacher. Murugan, who is armed with the magic *Vel*, stands for righteousness, self-control, and decisive action. The fierce demon Surapadman represents the forces of the unrestrained ego, and the various forms he adopts represent the illusions that the ego can bestow. The peacock and a rooster, the final manifestations of Surapadman to attack Murugan, are minor forms of ego – the rooster representing self-importance, while the peacock represents vanity. Murugan tames both with a single glance. The peacock thus represents the controlled ego which is longer a threat. Peacocks do not have negative associations for the devotees but are regarded as sacred birds, and they are kept in many Murugan-Subrahmanya temples. Belle did not at once have an explanation of the serpent in the iconography of Murugan, but noted that in most representations the peacock restrains the snake with its foot, suggesting that the serpent also represents unbridled passion.

In a later message, he added this reflection:

“Those who take a *kavadi* (in the Thaipusam ritual) may view themselves as the untamed peacock, and in bearing a *kavadi* are emulating the peacock. But to do so the devotee must undergo a fast and purification to move from the state of mundane life into a more spiritual state of being. The final moment of truth is acquisition of the state of trance known as *arul* (state of grace) which places him/her in a state where he/she may receive the blessings of the Lord. The devotee identifies with the peacock and asks Murugan to control and remove the negative powers of the ego.”

Although the myth of Murugan’s battle with Surapadman is very different from the Nur Muhammad myths, they have two core elements in common: the cosmic tree and the cosmic bird. The image of a tree standing in the middle of a primeval ocean and a cosmic bird sitting on the tree is found in many early creation myths and may have spread

from Mesopotamia over the world.²⁰ The cosmic bird is not always a peacock; in fact, in the earliest myths it is often an eagle or falcon, and it is clearly a symbol of the sun.

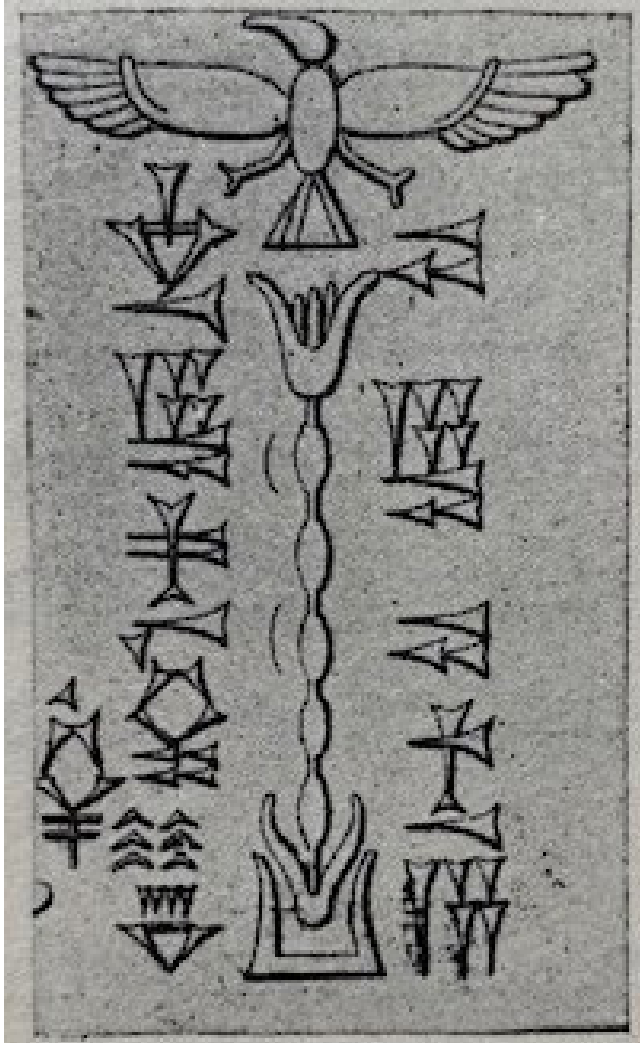


Fig. 13. Cosmic tree and cosmic bird on a Mesopotamian scroll
(from Wensick 1921, p.44).

²⁰ A. J. Wensinck, "Tree and bird as cosmological symbols in western Asia," *Verhandelingen der Koninklijke Akademie van Wetenschappen te Amsterdam, Afdeling Letterkunde* Vol. 22, No. 1, 1921, pp. 1-56.

The peacock is indigenous to South India and has long been considered as sacred there; it is claimed that the god Murugan was originally the deified form of the peacock.²¹ The peacock first appeared in the Middle East almost a thousand years before the birth of Islam and was kept as a precious pet at royal courts. In early Christian art, the image of the peacock is used as a symbol of eternal life; it is frequently represented in Byzantine mosaics.²²

Paradise, Peacock and Serpent

In both Christianity and Islam, popular belief associates the peacock also with Paradise, although its appearance there is not mentioned in either Bible or Qur'an. Popular prints from South Asia, such as Fig. 14, may place the peacock in a garden with trees and flowers, reminiscent of Paradise. In this particular print two peacocks, seated on branches of a rose bush, flank a radiant light from which the Ka`ba and the Prophet's mosque appear: a hint perhaps of *Nur Muhammad* manifesting itself in the world?



Fig. 14. Peacocks on trees in a garden, flanking the Ka`ba and the Prophet's mosque.
Popular print acquired in Pakistan, 1978.

²¹ Many examples of veneration of the peacock in India and its early reception in the ancient world are given in P. Thankappan Nair, "The Peacock Cult in Asia," *Asian Folklore Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 2, 1974, pp. 93-170.

²² See for instance this mosaic and the accompanying description: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/466653>.

Various medieval texts speak of the peacock as the most beautiful animal of all Creation. Its beauty made it the most striking inhabitant of Paradise. But according to some narratives, it was precisely because of this privileged position that it unwittingly helped Satan to enter Paradise and seduce Adam and Eve. The story is found with several medieval authors. I summarise it here from al-Kisāʾī's widely read *Tales of the Prophets (Qisas al-Anbiyāʾ)*, which was written not long before 600 AH/ 1200 CE.

Iblīs had been thrown out of Paradise for disobeying the divine command to prostrate before Adam. He heard God proclaim that everything in Paradise would be permitted for Adam and Eve, except the Tree of Certainty. Wishing to seduce them to disobedience, he sought to re-enter Paradise by a ruse. Seeing the peacock, he flattered the animal and asked it to take him into Paradise. In exchange he would teach it the three words that would give immortality. The peacock believed Iblīs but was afraid the angel Ridwān, who guarded the gates of Paradise, would notice if it tried to smuggle Iblīs in. It promised instead to send the serpent, 'who is the mistress of the beasts of Paradise.' Hearing about the three magic words, the serpent was eager to learn them and went out to find Iblīs. In those days the serpent still had four legs; it was a large animal shaped like a camel. Iblīs proposed he could find place between the serpent's fangs and thus enter Paradise unnoticed. Once inside, he refused to leave the serpent's mouth. From inside the mouth he spoke to Eve and asked why God had forbidden her the Tree of Certainty. Then, appearing before her as a radiant angel, he told her she would gain immortality and become an angel like him if she ate from the tree. She was persuaded and took seeds from the tree, eating some and bringing the rest to Adam. As punishment for their disobedience, Adam and Eve, the peacock and the serpent were expelled from Paradise. The serpent lost its legs and ability to speak.²³

The expulsion of Adam and Eve, the peacock and the serpent from Paradise is depicted in several miniatures, of which Fig. 15 is probably the most spectacular.

²³ Summarised from W.M. Thackston, Jr. (trl.), *The Tales of the Prophets of al-Kisāʾī*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978, pp. 36-47. See also Awn, *Satan's tragedy*, pp. 40-44, summarising other sources.



Fig. 15 Adam and Eve, riding the serpent and the peacock, are being expelled from Paradise. From a Safavid *Fālnāme*, c. 1550 (see Farhad and Bağcı 2009, pp. 98-9).

Despite this story of the peacock's fall from grace, its physical beauty remained a symbol for heavenly qualities. The great intoxicated Sufi, Bāyazīd Bastāmī, was known as the 'Peacock of the Saints' (*Ṭā'ūs al-amliyā'*), and the most glorious of the angels, Jibrīl, is given the title of 'Peacock of the Angels' (*Ṭā'ūs al-Malā'ika*) in medieval works such as Qazwīnī's *ʿAjā'ib al-Makhlūqāt* (late 13th century). Both titles obviously were meant as praise.²⁴

²⁴ Zakariyā al-Qazwīnī's *ʿAjā'ib al-Makhlūqāt* has a long section describing the angels. It sums up the various functions of Jibrīl: trusted with revelation (*amīn al-wahy*), holy spirit (*rūḥ al-qudī*), and finally *ṭā'ūs al-malā'ika*. The original Arabic of Qazwīnī's

It is likely that the origin of the Yezidis' concept of the Peacock Angel (*Tawûsê Melek*) must be sought in the attribution of peacock-like qualities to the most beautiful angel. However, it is not Jibrîl who is their Peacock Angel but the one whom Muslims call Iblîs. Although the Yezidis deny the evil character of their Peacock Angel, some ambiguity remains. Moreover, for the Yezidis both the peacock and the serpent are sacred animals. The most sacred site of the Yezidi religion in Lalish, as well as many other shrines, are decorated with the image of a tall black snake (Fig. 16).²⁵



Fig. 16. *The Shaykh `Adî sanctuary in Lalish, with large black snake beside the main entrance.*

It is striking that we find the peacock and serpent together in South Indian Hindu iconography, in medieval Muslim cosmology (especially in the Persianite realm) and as icons held sacred by the Yezidis.

text in: *Zakarîja Ben Muhammed Ben Mahmud el-Cazvîni's Kosmographie. Erster Theil: Die Wunder der Schöpfung*, hrsg. Ferdinand Wüstenfeld (Wiesbaden, 1848), p. 57. Other medieval authors who mention this title are discussed by Katz, *The Birth of the Prophet Muhammad*, pp. 15-16.

²⁵ On the various meanings of the snake in Yezidi tradition see: Peter Nicolaus, "The Serpent Symbolism in the Yezidi Religious Tradition and the Snake in Yerevan," *Iran and the Caucasus*, Vol. 15, No. 1/2, 2011, pp. 49-72.

Peacocks as Ritual Objects

The Yezidis have sacred objects called *sanjaq* that represent the Peacock Angel. Each *sanjaq* is associated with a particular region (there are Yezidi villages in various parts of Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Armenia and Georgia). Once a year each *sanjaq* is taken on a tour of the Yezidi villages of its region and welcomed with much devotion. They used to be kept carefully hidden from the eyes of outsiders, but two foreigners who had excellent relations with the Yezidis in the mid-nineteenth century, the archaeologist Austen Henry Layard and the missionary George Percy Badger, each were allowed to see one and published their sketches of these two different *sanjaq*. More recently, the Hungarian scholar Eszter Spät was allowed to follow the parade of one of the *sanjaq* and observe the rituals involved.²⁶

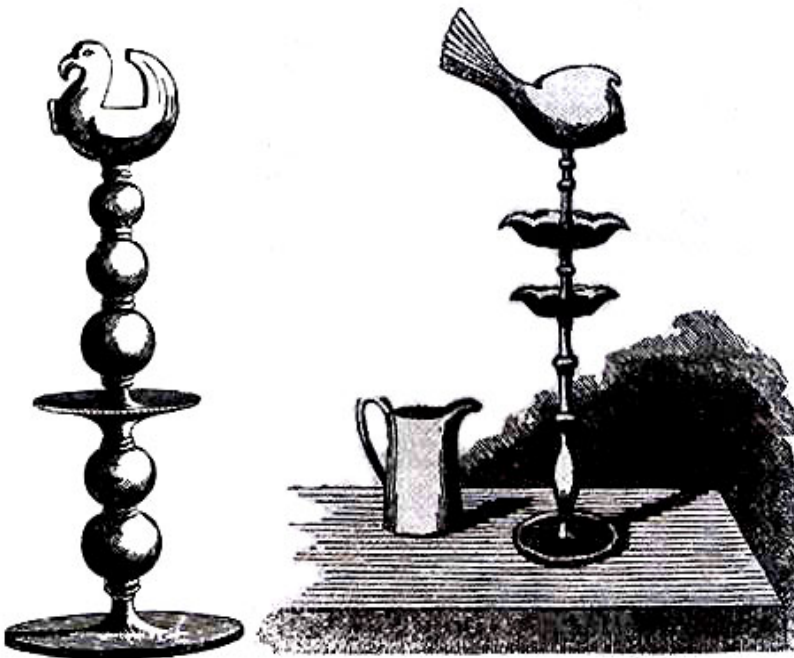


Fig. 17. Two sketches of Yezidi *sanjaq* (after Layard and Badger).

²⁶ Eszter Spät, *The Yezidis* (London: Saqi, 2005). She also made a fascinating documentary film on the parade: “Following the Peacock”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zdDnyj8dtpk&feature=youtu.be>.



Fig. 18. The sanjaq of Sheikhan (courtesy Eszter Spät).

The *sanjaq* is the bronze image of a bird perched on a large bronze pedestal with one or two trays, which could perhaps be seen as yet another cosmic tree.

To my great surprise, I discovered somewhat similar metal peacocks in a very different ritual context, when I was observing Shi'i Muharram processions in Iran. In those processions, which commemorate the martyrdom of Husayn at Karbala, neighbourhood associations carry along banners and standards, called *'alam* or *'alāmat*,

which are covered with various symbolic objects. The one in Fig. 19, which I saw in Kermanshah in 1976, is a particularly beautiful one. When I noticed the peacocks, I was at once reminded of the drawings of Yezidi *sanjaq* that I had seen (Fig. 17), although the shapes are rather different. Peacocks are a common feature of such *`alāmat* and are mentioned in the literature, but I found no explanation for their presence there.²⁷ Taking a closer look at this and other photographs of *`alam*, I noticed moreover that there are also various representations of serpents with wide open mouths (Fig. 19, 21). The *`alāmat*, it would seem, is also a cosmic tree, a reference to Paradise, where Husayn and all other martyrs are awaiting the end of time.



Fig. 19. Muharram standard (*`alāmat*) with peacocks and snakes, Kermanshah, Iranian Kurdistan, 1976.

²⁷J. Calmard and J. W. Allan, “*`Alam* va *`alāmat*,” *Encyclopædia Iranica*, Vol. 1, No. 8, pp. 785-791; Jay Gluck and Sumi Hiramoto Gluck (ed.), *A survey of Persian handicraft. A pictorial introduction to the contemporary folk arts and art crafts of modern Iran* (Tehran: The Bank Melli Iran, 1977).



Fig. 20. *The same standard, carried in a procession. Kermanshah, 1976.*



Fig. 21. *Two serpents, on another `alāmat (from Gluck and Gluck 1977).*

Rediscovering (or Inventing) Older Connections

My interest in the peacock as a religious symbol was rekindled when, during a visit to the Yezidi religious centre at Lalish, I noticed a recent painting on a wall that appeared to show an Indian lady with what looked like a Yezidi *sanjaq*, except that she lighted a wick in the tray beneath the bird, showing it was an oil lamp (Fig. 22).



Fig. 22. Painting of Indian lady with Yezidi sanjaq, Lalish, 2012.

There was something eerily familiar about this *sanjaq*, but I could not imagine what an Indian lady was doing in a painting in Lalish until I heard about recently established contacts between Yezidis and Indian Hindu communities. And then I realised that the *sanjaq* in the painting was in fact an object I had seen in Hindu temples in Southeast Asia. It was a peacock lamp, such as stand in front of shrines of certain Hindu deities – Murugan but also others. The lamps are lit as a sign of devotion, but they are not themselves objects of devotion by Hindu worshippers.



Fig. 23 Peacock lamp in Murugan temple, Johor Bahru.

It was my colleague Eszter Spät who solved part of the mystery. Yezidis who had travelled to India, for whatever reason, had discovered that peacock lamps very much resembling the Yezidi *sanjaq* were being mass produced there. She observed that in the past years such lamps were being brought over from India and treated as sacred objects by Yezidis – although they kept distinguishing strictly between the ‘true’ *sanjaq* and these peacock lamps. Hindus in turn discovered the Yezidis’ worship of the peacock and speculated that the Yezidis must be the descendants of Murugan worshippers who migrated westward. American New Age groups appear to have been among intermediaries who established

communication between Tamil Hindus and Yezidis. Several websites are dedicated to exploring the relationship between both religious communities, notably murugan.org and yeziditruth.org, both of which appear to be run by American sympathisers and firm believers in the close relationship of both religions.

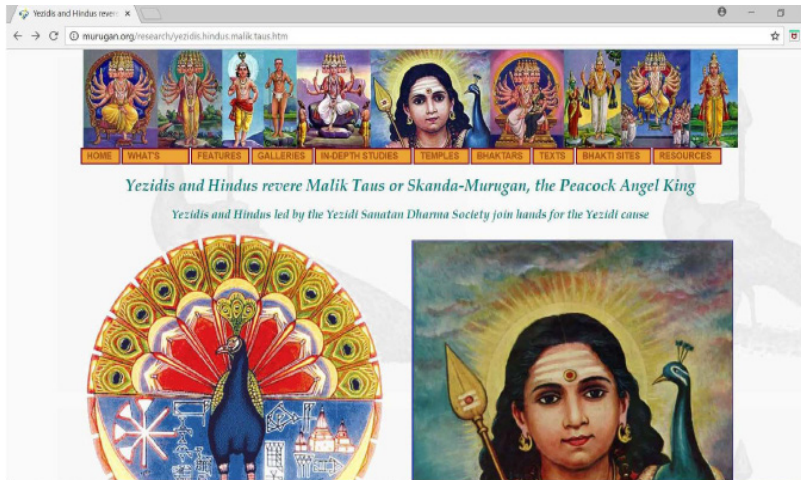


Fig. 24. A page of murugan.org, showing on the left a recently designed emblem of Yezidism and on the right a nineteenth-century representation of Murugan and his mount, the peacock.

In October 2014, when the Baba Shaykh, the highest religious authority of the Yezidis, was in Washington DC to speak to politicians about the genocide committed by ISIS against his community, that the editor of the murugan.org website, Patrick Harrigan, arranged for him to visit the Murugan temple there. The video footage made of that visit documents one of the strangest inter-religious meetings ever. The Baba Shaykh does not appear to have much of a clue as to what goes on in the temple, but he recognizes the peacocks and, at a request, utters a Yezidi prayer in Kurdish. For the temple personnel, the peacock lamps do not appear to have any of the sacred significance that they have for the Baba Shaykh.²⁸

²⁸ The video of the Baba Shaykh's visit can be seen on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AHXLkDVnAuI>. Harrigan furthermore reported on the visit in



Fig. 25. Still from the video film on the Baba Shaykh's visit to the Washington DC Murugan temple.

Nothing in the known history of the Yezidi religion points to a significant connection with India and Hinduism. But the similarity between the Yezidi *sanjaq* and the Hindu peacock lamp is certainly remarkable, although the Yezidis never use the *sanjaq* as a lamp. We do not know since when the *sanjaq* have been in use—Yezidis believe that they were created by Tawûsê Melek himself. It is thinkable that they were brought from India sometime before the early nineteenth century, when they were first mentioned.

The Yezidis were not alone in putting these bronze peacock lamps to ritual usage. In the 1850s, the Christian missionary traveller C. Sandreczki, visiting the main Nestorian church of Qochannis in Central

several newspaper articles, e.g. here: <http://www.sundaytimes.lk/141109/plus/appealing-to-the-peacock-angel-126086.html>.

Kurdistan, noticed to his surprise an oil lamp that closely resembled the Yezidi *sanjaq*.²⁹ This fascinating observation suggests that the Yezidis, to whom the peacock was sacred, may have adopted the peacock lamp from their Christian neighbours to serve as an icon for the Peacock Angel. I have come to believe that the most likely explanation of the origins of the Yezidi *sanjaq* is in the intermediary role played by Christian communities in Kurdistan and South India.

There is another observation that supports this hypothesis. The so-called Thomas Christians of Kerala in South India are one of the oldest Christian communities in the world, believed to have been converted by Saint Thomas the Apostle. They may in part be of Middle Eastern origin although they are locally considered an indigenous group and are accepted as social equals by the higher caste groups of Hindus. Christians and Hindus were so close in Kerala that at the village level they have commonly used the same paraphernalia for their religious processions, and these included peacock lamps, as reported in an interesting anthropological study.

Peacock lamps (called *nilavilakka* lamps there) are used in various blessing ceremonies and are also placed in the church (Fig. 25). When a Christian community in Kerala decided no longer to carry these Hindu peacock lamps, they found that the statue of Saint Sebastian that was usually carried in their procession had become so heavy it could hardly be lifted and there was an accident. Since that event, they always carry a *nilavilakka* lamp before the saint in the procession.³⁰

²⁹ C. Sandreczki, *Reise nach Mosul und durch Kurdistan nach Urmia*. Stuttgart: Steinkopf, 1857, Vol. 3, pp. 250f. Commenting on this observation by Sandreczki, the historian of religions Klaus Müller remarks that the Yezidis' icons of the peacock (*sanjaq*) must be a borrowing from the Nestorians rather than the other way around, because of the Christian disdain for the heathen Yezidis. Klaus E. Müller, *Kulturbistorische Studien zur Genese pseudo-islamischer Sektengebilde in Vorderasien* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1967), p. 217.

³⁰ Corinne G. Dempsey, *Kerala Christian Sainthood: Collisions of Culture and Worldview in South India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 59. The photograph is on p. 70.



Fig 26. Orthodox Syrian priests light incense and nilavilakka oil lamps before beginning a house blessing, milk boiling (pal kacca) ceremony (after Dempsey 2001).

Moreover, it is known that before the colonial period these Thomas Christian communities were in regular communication with the so-called Syrian churches of the Middle East and had the same language, Aramaic, as the liturgical language. (Their spoken language in daily life is

Malayalam, like that of their Hindu and Muslim neighbours). The oldest connections appear to have been with the Nestorian church, which had its main centres in Mosul and Central Kurdistan. In later years there appears to have been a shift towards the rival Jacobite or West Syrian church, but contact with the Nestorians may have continued.³¹ This makes it highly likely that Christian pilgrims from South India were the intermediaries who brought these particular effigies of peacocks to Kurdistan, where the Yezidis borrowed them from their Nestorian neighbours. Or perhaps the original borrowing went the other way: Artur Rodziewicz of the University of Warsaw drew my attention to Byzantine oil lamps with bird images that may have been an early form of the later peacock lamps. In that case, the recent import of Indian peacock lamps by Iraqi Yezidis would be a return of the bird lamp to the region of its origin.³²

South Indian oil lamps have made their way to Southeast Asia as well. In Singapore, I found them not only in Hindu temples but also in Indian restaurants, where they served no other purpose than a decorative one. To return to Indonesia, where I started this peacock journey, I end with a photograph from Aceh, taken between 1905 and 1910. The photograph (Fig. 27) is at first sight as enigmatic as the painting I saw in Lalish (Fig. 22). What would a Muslim woman in Aceh have to do with a Hindu peacock lamp? The answer is simple, in this case. It is a studio photo, taken by a Dutch photographer, who used

³¹ Susan Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings: Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society, 1700-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 246-54. Bayly also notes that legends about Saint Thomas, many of which involve a peacock, have a remarkable similarity with those about Murugan. The saint is a martyr, and the weapon with which he was killed was a *vel*, the leaf-shaped spear associated with Murugan (*Ibid.*, pp. 263-5).

³² Rodziewicz has not yet published about these Byzantine lamps but earlier pointed to Greek religious motifs in Yezidi cosmology: Artur Rodziewicz, "Tawus Protogonos: Parallels Between the Yezidi Theology and Some Ancient Greek Cosmogonies," *Iran and the Caucasus*, Vol. 18, 2014, pp. 27-45.

the same props (table covered with *songket* cloth, peacock lamp, palm tree) in a series of photographs.³³



Fig. 27. *Acehnese lady with a peacock lamp. Studio photo.*

³³The photograph is in the KITLV digital photograph collection in Leiden, <https://digitalcollections.universiteitleiden.nl/view/item/932534>. The photographer, C.B. Nieuwenhuis, had a studio in Aceh between 1905 and 1910. See <http://www.asia-pacific-photography.com/towardindependence/Nieuwenhuis/index.htm>.

Conclusion

We have seen peacocks, trees and serpents move across continents and across boundaries between religions. Once the peacock was brought from India westward, it was incorporated in various myths about Paradise and eternal life. Old creation myths about a cosmic tree and a cosmic bird came to incorporate the peacock as the cosmic bird and demiurge (secondary creator). It is not yet clear how the bird became incorporated into the Muslim traditions about the Muhammadan Light as the first emanation from God, but the idea of the peacock as the shape of the Muhammadan Light and origin of all other created things was widely known in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, from Morocco to the Ottoman Empire to India and Central Asia, and it lives on in local traditions in many different parts of the world.

A different but related set of ideas concerns the role of the peacock and the serpent in Adam's fall and expulsion from Paradise (which in a sense is also a creation myth, for this is where the history of the world begins). The forbidden tree in Paradise and the cosmic tree of the Nur Muhammad myth are both called Tree of Certainty (*shajarat al-yaqīn*), which shows that the myths are connected by shared traditions. The Yezidis' concept of the Peacock Angel as an emanation from God who is also somehow identical with Satan shows a relationship with both complexes of myths.

Tamil myths of Murugan's relationship with the peacock also involve a cosmic tree, from which the peacock emerges. In Tamil iconography the peacock is often accompanied by a serpent, which does not seem to be present in the myth. Could this perhaps be a borrowing from Muslim tradition, as a comparison of Figs. 11 and 15 might suggest? al-Kisāʿī's *Qīṣaṣ al-Anbiyā'* was a widely read work and a source of inspiration for popular piety throughout the Muslim world.

The physical representation of the peacock, finally, especially in the form of the peacock lamp, is a different matter altogether. It also

travelled, but probably did so without carrying a vast complex of ideas along with it. In India, the same icon was used by Hindus as well as Christians, and it is possible that the Yezidis' representation of Tawûsê Melek, the *sanjaq*, reached the Yezidi community of present northern Iraq through Christian channels. Tamil migrants brought peacock lamps to all regions of the Tamil diaspora, as ritual objects in temples but also, more recently, simply for decoration in secular settings. Some of these objects ended up among strangers, in museums or private collections.

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