

Unveiling the Spiritual Tapestry: An Examination of Shamanistic Elements in Kurdish Traditions

1. Introduction to Shamanism and the Kurdish Context

1.1. Defining Shamanism: Core Characteristics and Global Manifestations

Shamanism represents an ancient and globally dispersed spiritual practice, deeply rooted in numerous indigenous cultures. It is fundamentally characterized by the figure of the shaman, an individual who serves as an intermediary between the human realm and the spiritual dimensions.¹ Practitioners of shamanism engage in specific rituals, often involving rhythmic elements such as drumming and chanting, to induce altered states of consciousness. These states are sought for purposes of healing, divination, and acquiring guidance from spirit entities.¹

Several core characteristics define shamanic practice. A central tenet is the engagement with a spirit realm and the cultivation of relationships with various spirit guides; these may include ancestral spirits, totemic animals, nature spirits, or other spiritual beings and energies that are believed to populate the cosmos.² Shamanism is intrinsically animistic, perceiving all elements of existence—animate and inanimate—as possessing a spirit or consciousness. This includes not only living beings such as animals and plants but also natural phenomena like wind and fire, and even objects such as stones.² The overarching purpose of shamanic work is practical: to address and resolve problems encountered in daily life, offering healing and wisdom to individuals and the community. This problem-solving extends to the spiritual domain, as shamanism often focuses on healing the soul or vital essence of individuals, society, and nature itself.² A key technique employed by shamans is "journeying," an out-of-body experience wherein the shaman's consciousness travels to the spirit realm to interact directly with spirit guides for healing or information.² The shaman is thus often described as a "walker between the worlds."

The pragmatic and community-oriented nature of shamanism is a critical aspect. Its focus on solving "problems in daily life" and acting as "menders of nets" for physical and social interaction underscores its functional role within societies.² This suggests that any shamanistic elements identified within Kurdish traditions would likely be deeply interwoven with communal well-being, healing practices, and the maintenance of social and spiritual balance, rather than existing as purely abstract mystical pursuits. The shaman's ability to navigate different realities through altered states of consciousness provides a crucial framework for examining the roles and practices of ritual specialists within the Kurdish

spiritual landscape.

For comparative context, Siberian shamanism, often considered a classical locus of shamanic practice, illustrates these principles vividly. In many Siberian traditions, the universe is conceptualized as having three distinct worlds—upper, middle (earth), and lower—all interconnected by a cosmic axis, sometimes referred to as the Golden Pillar.³ Shamans in these cultures are believed to interact with spirits from all three realms. They achieve this through ecstatic techniques such as dreams, visions, and trances, often facilitated by specific attire, rhythmic chanting, drumming using tambourines (which can symbolize the universe), and sometimes the use of psychoactive plants or mushrooms to expedite the ecstatic state.³ Rituals commonly involve healing (e.g., retrieving lost soul portions or expelling harmful spirits), purification, divination (foretelling the future or diagnosing illness), and escorting the souls of the deceased to the afterlife.³ This comparative example helps to contextualize the potential forms and functions that shamanistic expressions might have taken within the diverse cultural history of the Kurds.

1.2. Locating "Kurdish Shamanism": A Complex Tapestry of Beliefs

The term "Kurdish Shamanism" does not refer to a singular, formally defined religious system but rather to a constellation of shamanistic themes, survivals, and influences within the multifaceted spiritual heritage of the Kurdish people. Kurdish spirituality is a complex tapestry woven from numerous historical and cultural threads. These include ancient Iranian and Mesopotamian traditions, regional polytheisms, Zoroastrianism, various forms of Christianity, and subsequently Islam, which is the majority religion among Kurds today, predominantly of the Sunni branch, often following the Shafi'i school.⁴

Within this diverse religious landscape, indigenous minority faiths such as Yazidism and Yarsanism (also known as Ahl-e Haqq or Kaka'i), as well as the syncretic traditions of Kurdish Alevism, have preserved unique beliefs and practices. These traditions are often seen as repositories of pre-Islamic and potentially shamanistic elements.⁴ The historical layering of these faiths means that shamanistic elements, where they persist, are likely to be syncretized, transformed, or reinterpreted within the frameworks of these later religious systems. This necessitates a careful analytical approach to identify and understand these embedded spiritual threads. The very persistence of distinct minority faiths like Yazidism and Yarsanism, often in the face of significant historical persecution⁷, points to a profound cultural and spiritual resilience. It is plausible that these communities, by maintaining their distinct identities, may have preserved older strata of belief, including shamanistic ones, more overtly than communities that more fully assimilated into majority religious narratives. Therefore, this report aims to explore these shamanistic expressions as they appear across this rich and varied spiritual terrain.

2. Ancient Echoes: Pre-Islamic Influences and Proto-Shamanistic Elements in Kurdistan

2.1. Early Iranian and Mesopotamian Religious Landscapes

The roots of Kurdish spirituality extend deep into the ancient religious landscapes of Iran and Mesopotamia. Before the widespread adoption of Islam starting in the 7th century CE, the majority of Kurds adhered to a western Iranic pre-Zoroastrian faith that was directly derived from broader Indo-Iranian traditions.⁴ This ancient spiritual milieu was characterized by a variety of influences, including indigenous regional polytheisms and, later, the more formalized system of Zoroastrianism.⁵ Crucially, elements of this ancient faith complex are believed to have survived and found continuity within the later indigenous Kurdish religions of Yazidism, Yarsanism, and aspects of Kurdish Alevism.⁴ The infusion of Indo-European (specifically Iranic) language, culture, and genetic components into the ancestral Kurdish population over millennia also involved the incorporation of Aryan religious practices and deities into the existing indigenous belief systems.¹¹

This historical backdrop, connecting Kurdish origins to ancient "Indo-Iranian tradition"⁴ and "Aryan religious practices"¹¹, points towards a vast and archaic spiritual heritage. Early Indo-European and Indo-Iranian religions commonly featured animistic beliefs, the veneration of natural forces, a pantheon of deities, and ritual specialists whose roles often bore resemblance to those of shamans. The "western Iranic pre-Zoroastrian faith"⁴ thus represents a key stratum where proto-shamanistic elements likely flourished. While Zoroastrianism, as it developed, became a more structured and dualistic religion, its own emergence from the broader ancient Iranian religious environment means that its earlier forms, and the milieu itself, likely contained elements—such as a profound reverence for natural forces and a complex cosmology of spiritual beings—that could overlap with, or provide fertile ground for, shamanistic worldviews.

2.2. Nature Veneration, Fire Worship, and Seasonal Rites as Potential Precursors

Among the most prominent indicators of early shamanistic-like practices in the Kurdish regions is the profound and persistent veneration of nature. Pre-Islamic Kurdish territories were characterized by "fire worship, reverence for natural forces, and seasonal festivals integrated into later customs".⁵ These practices are deeply characteristic of animistic belief systems, which form the bedrock of shamanism globally.²

The Kurdish New Year festival, Newroz, celebrated at the spring equinox, is a powerful example. While imbued with multiple layers of meaning, including national and mythological significance (particularly the myth of Kawa the Blacksmith defeating the tyrant Zahhak), its core elements resonate with ancient seasonal rites.⁵ The lighting of fires during Newroz, symbolizing renewal, purification, and the victory of life and light over darkness, is a practice with deep antiquity and potential connections to fire's role as a sacred, mediating, or purifying element in older ritual systems, including those with shamanistic characteristics.⁵

Beyond seasonal festivals, the worship of specific natural features was widespread and deeply ingrained. Ancient trees, often referred to as Darê Mirazan or Dara Miraza ("The Tree of

Wishes" or "Tree of Miracles"), were, and in some areas continue to be, held sacred.¹² These trees are believed to possess healing powers, the ability to grant wishes, and to serve as abodes for guardian spirits known as Dêw.¹² These Dêw were associated with fertility, guidance, power, and protection, and veneration of these trees often involved offerings or sacrifices to these spirits to ensure well-being or ward off misfortune.¹² Historical accounts from 19th-century travelers describe Kurdish communities, including Alevi Kurds, worshipping stones, ancient trees, and water sources, believing that prophets or saints had sanctified these locations or that divinity resided within them.¹² Sacred sites, known as Jiâres, often encompassed trees, forests, mountains, rocks, and caves, where rituals and offerings were made.¹²

This profound reverence for specific natural elements and locations, and the belief in indwelling spirits, are classic hallmarks of animism. The continuity of practices such as tying rags or pieces of cloth to "Trees of Wishes" as a plea for healing or the fulfillment of desires¹² indicates a living tradition. In this worldview, nature is not a passive backdrop for human activity but an active spiritual force with which humans interact for tangible outcomes—a key functional aspect of shamanistic engagement with the world. These practices suggest a deeply rooted shamanistic worldview that predated and persisted alongside later, more organized religious systems, forming an ancient spiritual substratum in Kurdistan.

3. Manifestations in Indigenous Kurdish Faiths: A Comparative Exploration

The indigenous faiths of the Kurdish people, notably Yazidism, Yarsanism, and Alevism, offer significant avenues for exploring the persistence and transformation of shamanistic elements. These traditions, while distinct, share historical and cultural roots in the ancient spiritual landscape of the region and exhibit several features that resonate with shamanic cosmology, ritual, and the role of spiritual specialists.

3.1. Yazidism

Yazidism is an ancient, monotheistic ethnic religion with origins traceable to pre-Zoroastrian western Iranian beliefs, later incorporating elements from Mesopotamian religions, Judaism, Nestorian Christianity, and Islam.⁷ This syncretic nature has allowed for the preservation of unique theological and ritualistic characteristics.

3.1.1. Cosmology, the Heptad of Angels, and Malek Taus

Central to Yazidi belief is a supreme God, referred to by names such as Xwedê or Êzdan, who is the creator of the universe.¹⁵ However, this God is considered somewhat remote from worldly affairs, having entrusted the care and administration of the world to seven holy beings or angels, known as the Heft Sîr (the Heptad or Seven Mysteries).⁵ Preeminent among these seven angels is Malek Taus, the Peacock Angel, who serves as the chief archangel and a divine caretaker of the world.⁵ Yazidi cosmology also features a concept of a divine Triad, often understood as comprising God, Malek Taus, and the revered saint Sheikh 'Adî ibn

Musāfir (or sometimes Sultan Ezid), though the interpretations of this triad can vary.¹⁵ Furthermore, Yazidism holds certain natural elements—fire, water, air, and earth—as sacred and not to be polluted, and prayers are often directed towards the sun, leading to their occasional mischaracterization as "sun worshippers".¹⁵

This cosmological structure, featuring a transcendent high God who delegates worldly affairs to a group of active intermediary spirits led by a chief angel, exhibits strong parallels with many shamanistic cosmologies. In such systems, shamans typically interact with a pantheon of spirits, divine helpers, or masters of natural phenomena rather than directly engaging with an otiose (inactive) supreme being. Malek Taus and the other six angels function as powerful spiritual entities that influence the world and interact with humanity, akin to the types of spirit guides or powers that shamans cultivate relationships with for knowledge, healing, and intervention.² The profound reverence for sacred natural elements further connects Yazidism to ancient forms of nature veneration, a cornerstone of shamanistic traditions, indicating a continuity of pre-Zoroastrian elemental reverence.

3.1.2. Sacred Sites (Lalish), Pilgrimage, and Rituals

The holiest site in Yazidism is the valley of Lalish in northern Iraq, which houses the tomb of Sheikh 'Adī and serves as the primary center for global Yazidi pilgrimage.⁵ Pilgrimage to Lalish is a significant religious duty. Yazidi ritual life also includes periods of fasting, the recitation of sacred hymns known as Qewls, and the veneration of other sacred sites, such as natural springs and the tombs of saints.⁵ The Qewls are particularly important as they are oral texts that encode Yazidi history, religious laws, genealogies of holy figures, and mythic episodes detailing the actions of angelic beings and their influence on human destiny and moral understanding.⁵

The emphasis on pilgrimage to specific, geographically located sacred natural sites like Lalish aligns with shamanistic beliefs regarding power places or locations that serve as portals to the spirit world or are imbued with concentrated spiritual energy.³ The recitation of Qewls, which preserve and transmit sacred narratives and ancestral wisdom, can be seen as a method of maintaining a living connection with the spiritual realm. This is analogous to how shamans in various cultures use chants, songs, and sacred stories to invoke spirits, recount cosmogonic myths, or transmit esoteric knowledge. The content of these hymns, particularly narratives of angelic beings shaping destiny and providing moral instruction⁵, suggests a dynamic mythology where spiritual entities actively engage with humanity, a common theme in shamanic lore where spirits are known to guide, teach, or test individuals.

3.1.3. The Role of Kocheks: Seers, Healers, and Dream Interpreters

Within the Yazidi social and religious structure, a specialized group known as Kocheks plays a role highly reminiscent of shamans.¹⁹ Kocheks are described as seers who operate under the guidance of the Baba Sheikh (the supreme spiritual head of the Yazidis). They are renowned for their abilities in traditional healing, divination (including seeing into the future and uttering prophecies), the interpretation of dreams, and communication with the dead, the supernatural, and the "World of the Unseen".¹⁹ Individuals in the community consult Kocheks

for advice, when they have had significant dreams or visions requiring explanation, or for diagnosis of illnesses. Upon being consulted, Kocheks are said to "ponder or dream over the request or diagnosis until they eventually determine which Yezidi saint may be useful" for intercession or healing.¹⁹ Specific saints are associated with healing particular ailments, such as Sheikh Mand for snake bites or Sherfedin for skin issues.¹⁹

The functions attributed to the Kocheks—seer, healer, diviner, and communicator with the spirit world—are quintessential shamanic skills.² Their capacity to "see into the future," "interpret dreams," and interact with the "World of the Unseen" positions them as direct parallels to shamanic practitioners found in many other cultures. This is perhaps one of the most explicit examples of a shamanic specialist role surviving within a contemporary Kurdish religious tradition. The process by which Kocheks arrive at a diagnosis or guidance, involving "pondering or dreaming," strongly suggests a form of spiritual consultation, possibly involving altered states of consciousness or divinatory techniques to access information from the spirit realm, much like a shaman seeking insights from their spirit allies. While the precise methods of their communication (e.g., specific trance techniques or soul journey experiences) are not fully detailed in the available material, their described abilities and societal role are deeply resonant with those of a shaman.

3.1.4. Beliefs in Transmigration and Purity

Yazidism incorporates a belief in metempsychosis, the transmigration of souls, through which spirits undergo progressive purification over multiple lifetimes.⁸ It is believed that Sheikh 'Adī himself achieved a divine state through this process of spiritual evolution.⁸ Alongside this, Yazidism places a strong emphasis on religious purity, which manifests in a complex system of taboos. These include prohibitions on certain foods, the avoidance of the color blue in clothing, a reluctance to pronounce the word Shayṭān (Satan) or similar-sounding words, and traditionally, a discouragement of excessive contact with outsiders.⁸

The belief in the transmigration of souls, while also present in other religious systems, can intersect with shamanistic concepts of the soul's journey, its potential for fragmentation or loss, and its existence across multiple lives or forms. The idea of "progressive purification of the spirit" through reincarnation is a spiritual objective that may find parallels in shamanic quests for soul retrieval, spiritual empowerment, or the attainment of wholeness. The stringent purity laws and taboos, while serving to maintain community cohesion and distinct identity, particularly in the face of historical persecution, might also be interpreted through a spiritual lens. Such rules can function as a means of maintaining the spiritual cleanliness deemed necessary for interacting with sacred beings or forces, and for warding off negative or polluting spiritual influences—a concern often found in shamanic practices where practitioners must protect themselves and their communities from harmful energies.

3.2. Yarsanism (Ahl-e Haqq / Kaka'i)

Yarsanism, also known as Ahl-e Haqq ("People of Truth") or Kaka'i (particularly in Iraqi Kurdistan), is another indigenous Kurdish faith with deep historical roots. It is often described as having been founded or significantly reformed by Sultan Sahak, a Kurdish religious leader

of the 14th-15th century.⁹ Yarsanism is characterized by mystical and esoteric teachings.

3.2.1. Esoteric Teachings and Divine Manifestations (Mazhariyyat)

A cornerstone of Yarsani belief is the concept of *mazhariyyat*, which posits successive manifestations of the Divine Essence in human form (similar to avatars in Hindu traditions).¹⁷ Yarsanis believe that God manifests in one primary and seven secondary forms in each epoch of the world. These seven secondary manifestations are collectively known as the "Heft Tan" (The Seven Persons or Seven Archangels), who are key figures in Yarsani cosmology and history.¹⁷ Sultan Sahak is considered a primary divine manifestation of his era.²⁰ The Yarsani worldview also posits two distinct yet interrelated worlds: an internal, spiritual world (*bātinī*) and an external, material world (*zāhirī*). Although humans are primarily aware of the external world, their lives are believed to be governed by the laws and principles of the inner, spiritual world.¹⁷ This esoteric understanding is identified as a form of Kurdish esoterism, influenced by *Bātinī-Sufism*.²⁰

The notion of *mazhariyyat* and the "Heft Tan" resonates with shamanistic beliefs in powerful spirits, deities, or deified ancestors who can incarnate or directly interact with the human world to provide guidance, teachings, or power. These divine manifestations can be seen as analogous to the primary spirit allies or tutelary deities that a shaman might cultivate a deep relationship with. Furthermore, the Yarsani distinction between an "internal (*bātinī*)" and "external (*zāhirī*)" reality, with the inner world holding primacy and influencing the outer, is highly congruent with the shamanic understanding of a non-ordinary reality (the spirit world) that underpins and shapes ordinary existence. Shamanic practices, particularly soul journeying, are precisely about accessing and navigating this inner, non-ordinary realm to gain knowledge and effect change in the material world.

3.2.2. The Inner Journey of the Soul and Transmigration

Yarsanism places significant emphasis on the "inner journey of the soul" and incorporates a firm belief in the transmigration of the soul, known in Kurdish as *dunaduni*.⁵ It is a core tenet that the soul must pass through 1,001 incarnations to achieve ultimate purification and perfection.⁹ This cyclical process of rebirth and the soul's progressive refinement is central to Yarsani soteriology.

This focus on the "inner journey of the soul" combined with the doctrine of transmigration through numerous lives directly parallels shamanic concepts of soul travel, soul development, and the evolution of consciousness across multiple existences. The arduous path of 1,001 incarnations⁹ represents a long, cyclical process of spiritual learning and purification, which can be compared to the often challenging training, initiatory crises, and transformative experiences described in shamanic traditions worldwide. Both systems share a profound concern with the soul's trajectory, its potential for transformation, and its ultimate destiny beyond a single lifespan.

3.2.3. Ritual Practices, Music (Tanbur), and Jamkhaneh

Yarsani religious life revolves around communal gatherings known as *jam*, which typically take

place monthly in designated places of worship called *jamkhaneh*.⁹ These ceremonies are governed by specific rules, such as the wearing of special hats by participants and sitting in a circle, often facing a sacred focal point called the *Pardivar*.⁹ A crucial element of the *jam* is the playing of the *tanbur*, a sacred lute, and the recitation or chanting of sacred words and hymns, known as *kalam*.⁹ Yarsani texts and rituals are often described as esoteric, with their deeper meanings accessible primarily to initiates, and they blend music, poetry, and mythological symbolism.⁵ Yarsanis also observe an annual three-day fast, which is broken collectively at sunset each day.⁹ Certain natural products, like the pomegranate, are considered sacred and feature in ceremonies.⁹ Some Kaka'i (Yarsani) communities, such as those in the Hawraman region, hold specific annual ceremonies like *Masti Qalati* (Giving Day) in particular outdoor locations, involving offerings, communal reconciliation, and visits to shrines.²² However, many Yarsani religious events are intentionally kept hidden and conducted in private *Jam Khana*, partly due to a history of persecution and partly from a belief that the sanctity and efficacy of worship are enhanced by secrecy, strengthening the direct bond between the individual, the community, and God.²²

The prominent use of the sacred *tanbur* and the recitation of *kalam* during *jam* ceremonies⁹ are highly suggestive of techniques employed to induce altered states of consciousness or to create a sacred atmosphere conducive to profound spiritual experience. Music, rhythm, and chanting are primary tools in shamanic rituals across diverse cultures, used to facilitate trance, spirit communication, or ecstatic journeys.¹ The often esoteric nature of Yarsani rituals and the restriction of deeper knowledge to initiates⁵ also mirror the way shamanic wisdom and practices are frequently transmitted within closed circles or through rigorous apprenticeships. The communal gathering in a circle for the *jam*⁹, along with collective practices like fasting and feasting, underscores the importance of community cohesion, a vital aspect of many shamanistic societies where rituals serve to reinforce social bonds and promote collective spiritual well-being.² The secrecy surrounding many Yarsani ceremonies²², while a pragmatic response to historical pressures, also serves to create a contained, potent sacred space for these communal spiritual activities, similar to how shamans carefully prepare and consecrate a space for their rituals.²⁴

3.3. Kurdish Alevism

Alevism is a syncretic spiritual tradition found among both Turkish and Kurdish populations. Kurdish Alevism, while sharing core tenets with broader Alevi beliefs, also exhibits distinct characteristics, particularly in its relationship with nature and specific revered figures.

3.3.1. Syncretic Nature: Blending Turkic Shamanism, Sufism, and Shia Elements

Alevism is widely recognized as a heterodox Islamic tradition whose adherents follow the mystical teachings of figures like Haji Bektash Veli and revere the Twelve Imams of Shia Islam, while significantly incorporating pre-Islamic traditions, notably from Turkic shamanism.²⁵ Alevism developed in Anatolia around the 13th century, spread by itinerant Muslim mystics or dervishes (often called *babas*). These charismatic figures, many of whom came from Central

Asia, included in their doctrines not only elements of Shia Islam and Sufism but also many features of pre-Islamic Turkic shamanic beliefs, and potentially influences from Manichaeism and Buddhism, with which Turkic peoples had contact in Central Asia.²⁶ These teachings found fertile ground among nomadic and semi-nomadic groups who were often only superficially Islamized and maintained older spiritual outlooks.²⁶ Within Alevism, Kurdish Alevis are noted to place a particular emphasis on the figure of Pir Sultan Abdal and are often described as having a belief system that is more deeply rooted in nature veneration compared to some Turkish Alevi communities.²⁵ Some Alevis from regions like Munzur (Dersim) explicitly trace the origins of their faith to ancient Zoroastrian and Shamanistic traditions that they believe pre-date Islam by many centuries, viewing the Islamic components as later additions or adaptations.²⁷

The explicit acknowledgment by scholars and Alevis themselves of "pre-Islamic Turkish shamanism"²⁵ and broader "Shamanistic traditions"²⁷ as foundational or integral elements within Alevism makes it a particularly significant area for investigating surviving shamanistic traits. The itinerant mystics who disseminated these syncretic beliefs likely acted as crucial carriers and transformers of these older traditions, allowing them to persist within a nominally Islamic framework. The stronger emphasis on "nature veneration" among Kurdish Alevis²⁵ suggests that this branch of Alevism might preserve these ancient animistic and shamanistic connections to the land and its spiritual forces with particular intensity, aligning with the broader patterns of nature reverence observed in general Kurdish folklore.

3.3.2. Reverence for Nature, Ancestor Veneration, and Haqq-Muhammad-Ali

Alevi cosmology is deeply imbued with a reverence for nature and a belief in the immanence of the divine. God is often referred to as Al-Haqq (The Truth), and it is a core Alevi belief that every human being, and indeed all living creatures, carries an essence of God, making humanity and nature sacred.²⁹ Consequently, elements of nature such as fire and water are considered sacred, as are specific natural features like rivers, lakes, forests, and trees.²³ This reverence for nature is coupled with a clear sense of ancestor worship, or at least profound veneration for key spiritual progenitors and saints. This includes Ali (the cousin and son-in-law of Prophet Muhammad), his sons Hasan and Hüseyin, and Muhammad's daughter Fatma.²³ In a more modern context, some Alevi communities even include Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Republic of Turkey, within this sphere of revered figures, with his portrait sometimes displayed in Alevi prayer houses (cemevis) alongside that of Ali.²³ Alevis also believe in the immortality of the soul and the existence of various supernatural beings, including angels (melekler), jinn (cinler), and the power of the evil eye.²⁵ Central to Alevi theology is the concept of the unity of Haqq-Muhammad-Ali. This is not understood as a trinity in the Christian sense, but rather Muhammad and Ali are seen as representations or manifestations of Allah's light (Nur), inseparable from God yet not God Himself.²⁵ This profound reverence for nature, where natural elements and beings are seen as sacred and imbued with divine essence²³, represents a sophisticated form of animism or pantheism that resonates deeply with shamanistic worldviews where divinity is immanent in the world.

The practice of "ancestor worship" or the deep veneration of saintly figures ²³ provides another direct link to shamanistic traditions, where ancestors often play crucial roles as spirit guides, protectors, or sources of power and wisdom.² The theological concept of Haqq-Muhammad-Ali as "representations of Allah's light" ²⁵ can be interpreted as an Alevi way of integrating these highly revered (ancestral or saintly) figures into their understanding of the divine. These figures may function as primary spiritual intermediaries or focal points for devotion and intercession, a role analogous to that of major spirits, deified ancestors, or tutelary deities within a shamanic spiritual hierarchy.

3.3.3. The Cem Ceremony and Semah (Ritual Dance) as Potential Trance/Ecstatic Practices

The primary communal worship ceremony in Alevism is the Ayn-i Cem (often simply Cem). This ritual is modeled on the mystical gathering of the Kırklar Meclisi (Assembly of the Forty Beings), a pivotal event in Alevi sacred history involving Prophet Muhammad and Ali.²⁸ The Cem is a collective ritual where men and women participate together. It involves several elements, including prayers, the chanting of Alevi hymns (*deyiş* or *nefes*), spiritual discourses, and often a communal meal (*lokma*) shared at the end.²⁹ A most distinctive and central part of the Cem is the Semah, a ritual dance performed by both men and women, often in circular formations.⁵ The Semah is not merely a social dance but a profound act of worship. It is described as a means of achieving a "state of trance" or spiritual ecstasy, constructed through the synergistic combination of Alevi music (typically played on the *saz* or *bağlama*, a long-necked lute), sacred teachings, poetic recitations, and the dance movements themselves.²⁹ Popular forms like the Crane Semah (*Turnalar Semahı*) symbolically enact spiritual journeys or cosmic movements.²⁹ Significantly, the Alevi term "cem" has been linguistically connected by some scholars to the older Turkic word "qam," which means shaman or spiritual guide, suggesting a deep historical linkage.²³

The Semah, explicitly characterized as inducing a "state of trance" ²⁹ through the integrated use of music, rhythmic dance, and sacred poetry, stands out as a strong candidate for an ecstatic ritual practice directly comparable to shamanic trance induction techniques. The combination of these elements—music (*saz*), patterned rhythmic movement (dance), and the chanting of sacred utterances (hymns/poetry)—are classic methodologies employed in shamanic traditions worldwide to alter consciousness, facilitate communion with the spiritual realm, or embark on mystical journeys.¹ The linguistic connection proposed between the Alevi "cem" (gathering/ceremony) and the Turkic "qam" (shaman) ²³ is a compelling piece of evidence. It suggests that the Alevi Cem ceremony itself, and the role of its spiritual leader, may have evolved from, or consciously incorporated functions of, older Turkic shamanic communal rituals that were presided over by a qam.

3.3.4. Role of Dedês as Spiritual Guides

Spiritual leadership within Alevi communities is traditionally held by Dedês (literally "grandfathers"). Dedês are revered spiritual guides who are generally believed to be

descended from the lineage of Ali (Ahl-i Bayt).²⁹ They play a central role in the social and spiritual life of their communities, presiding over Cem ceremonies and other rituals, offering spiritual guidance, mediating disputes, and transmitting Alevi teachings and traditions.²⁹ The authority of Dedês is often situated within a hierarchical system of spiritual centers or lineages known as *ocak* (hearths), with a principle of *El ele el Hakk'a* (hand in hand, hand to God) signifying a chain of spiritual transmission and authority.²⁹ Alevi teachings are typically passed on by such spiritual leaders, a model shared with many Sufi orders.²⁵

The Dedê, as a hereditary or lineage-based spiritual guide who leads sacred rituals, interprets religious teachings, and provides comprehensive social and spiritual guidance to the community, fulfills a role that is analogous in many respects to that of a shaman or traditional spiritual elder found in numerous indigenous societies. While the Alevi Dedê system is clearly influenced by Islamic Sufi structures (such as the *pir-murid* or master-disciple relationship) and concepts of sacred lineage, the underlying function of a dedicated, respected spiritual specialist who mediates between the sacred and the community, and who is responsible for maintaining the spiritual well-being of the group, has strong resonances with shamanistic leadership roles.

Table: Comparative Overview of Shamanistic-like Elements in Yazidism, Yarsanism, and Kurdish Alevism

To synthesize the distinct yet related expressions of potential shamanistic elements within these three indigenous Kurdish faiths, the following table provides a comparative overview:

Feature	Yazidism	Yarsanism (Ahl-e Haqq / Kaka'i)	Kurdish Alevism
Belief in Intermediary Spirits/Angels	Heptad of Seven Angels (Heft Sirr) led by Malek Taus (Peacock Angel), entrusted with world's care. ⁵	Heft Tan ("The Seven Persons"), divine manifestations in each epoch; universe has internal (bâtinî) and external (zâhirî) worlds. ¹⁷	Belief in angels (melekler), jinn; Haqq-Muhammad-Ali as representations of God's light. ²⁵
Role of Key Spiritual Figures/Founders	Sheikh 'Adî ibn Musâfir, considered a divine manifestation or saint, central to faith. ⁸	Sultan Sahak, founder/reformer, considered a primary divine manifestation (mazhariyyat). ²⁰	Haji Bektash Veli, Pir Sultan Abdal as key spiritual guides; Ali highly venerated. ²⁵
Nature of Ritual Specialists	Kocheks: seers, healers, dream interpreters, communicators with the "World of the	Rituals often led by initiated members; secrecy maintained. Sayyids (descendants of spiritual figures)	Dedês: hereditary spiritual leaders, guide Cem ceremonies, provide social/spiritual guidance. ²⁹

	Unseen". ¹⁹ Sheikhs and Pirs as spiritual guides. ¹⁹	may have leadership roles.	
Use of Music/Chant/Dance in Ritual	Recitation of sacred hymns (Qewls). ⁵ Music (e.g., daf, shibab) in some rituals.	Sacred <i>tanbur</i> (lute) and recitation/chanting of <i>kalam</i> (sacred words) in <i>jam</i> ceremonies. ⁹	Saz (lute) music, chanting of hymns (deyiş), and Semah (ritual dance) are central to Cem ceremony. ²⁸
Altered States of Consciousness/Trance	Kocheks "ponder or dream" for divination/diagnosis, implying altered states. ¹⁹	<i>Jam</i> ceremonies with music and kalam may facilitate spiritual experiences; esoteric nature. ⁵	Semah explicitly described as a "state of trance" achieved through music, dance, poetry. ²⁹
Sacred Natural Elements/Sites	Lalish as holiest pilgrimage site; reverence for sun, fire, water, air, earth; sacred springs, tombs. ⁵	Sacred sites (e.g., tomb of Bābā Yādgār, Sultan Sahak's shrine); pomegranates sacred; Masti Qalati ceremony in specific locales. ⁹	Fire and water sacred; reverence for rivers, lakes, forests, trees. Stronger nature veneration in Kurdish Alevism. ²³
Soul Journey/Transmigration Concepts	Metempsychosis (transmigration of souls) for progressive purification. ⁸	Transmigration of the soul (dunaduni) through 1,001 incarnations for purification; "inner journey of the soul". ⁵	Belief in immortality of the soul; concept of spiritual path (yol) through "four gates, forty levels". ²⁵
Importance of Ancestors/Saints	Veneration of Sheikh 'Adī and other saints; tombs are pilgrimage sites. ⁵	Reverence for Sultan Sahak and other key figures of the Heft Tan and past manifestations. ²⁰	Veneration of Ali, Hasan, Hüseyin, Fatma, Haji Bektash Veli, Pir Sultan Abdal, and other saints/ancestors. ²³
Esoteric Knowledge/Initiation	Yazidi society has distinct religious castes (Sheikhs, Pirs, Murids) with hereditary roles. ⁸	Yarsani texts and rituals often accessible only to initiates; esoteric (bātinī) teachings. ⁵	Teachings passed on by spiritual leaders (Dedês); inner meanings of Quran taught by teacher. ²⁵

This comparative table highlights that while each faith has its unique theological framework and ritual expressions, they share underlying themes such as the importance of intermediary spiritual beings, the role of specialized spiritual guides, the use of music and rhythmic practices in worship, reverence for nature, and concepts related to the soul's journey and interaction with revered ancestral or saintly figures. These shared characteristics suggest a

common ancient spiritual substratum from which these faiths drew, a substratum likely rich in shamanistic-like elements that were subsequently adapted and integrated into their evolving doctrines.

4. Shamanistic Survivals in Kurdish Folklore, Healing, and Divination

Beyond the more formalized structures of indigenous Kurdish faiths, a wealth of shamanistic elements and animistic beliefs persists within Kurdish folklore, traditional healing modalities, divination practices, and symbolic systems. These expressions often exist at a grassroots level, interwoven with the fabric of daily life and oral tradition.

4.1. Veneration of Sacred Natural Sites: Trees (Darê Mirazan), Mountains, Water

As previously noted, Kurdish culture exhibits a profound and enduring veneration for specific natural sites, a practice deeply rooted in an animistic worldview that is foundational to shamanism.² Old and prominent trees, known as Darê Mirazan ("Tree of Wishes" or "Tree of Miracles"), are particularly significant.¹² These trees are widely believed to possess inherent healing powers and the ability to grant wishes to those who approach them with respect and perform certain rituals, such as tying pieces of cloth from their garments to the branches.¹² This act symbolizes a connection or transference, where a part of the individual is left with the tree to receive its blessing or healing influence.

The belief in guardian spirits, often termed Dêw, inhabiting these sacred trees is a key aspect of this veneration.¹² These spirits are associated with potent forces such as fertility, guidance, and protection, and historically, offerings or sacrifices were made to them to solicit their favor or to ward off malevolent influences.¹² This direct engagement with nature spirits for tangible benefits is a hallmark of shamanistic practice. Historical accounts from the 19th and early 20th centuries confirm the widespread worship of stones, ancient trees, and water sources among various Kurdish groups, including Alevi and tribes who reportedly had altars in forest recesses.¹² Sacred protected sites, known as Jiare (among Rêyâ Haqî Kurds in Dersim, for instance), often encompass a range of natural features including trees, forests, mountains, rocks, and caves, where offerings are made.¹² These practices are not merely symbolic gestures but represent active spiritual interactions with a perceived ensouled environment, a direct manifestation of the animistic core of shamanism.

4.2. Beliefs in Spirits: Dêw, Jinn, Peri, and Guardian Spirits

The Kurdish spiritual landscape, as reflected in folklore and belief, is densely populated with a variety of non-human entities. Beyond the Dêw associated with trees, Kurdish folk legends recount encounters with Peri (fairies), Jinn (genies, often of Islamic lore but integrated into local belief), and other benevolent or trickster spirits that are believed to inhabit mountains, lakes, ancient ruins, and other natural features.⁵ Alevi beliefs also incorporate the existence of

angels, jinn, and the influence of the evil eye.²⁵

A particularly striking figure in Kurdish mythology is Shahmaran, a mythical being, often depicted as half-woman and half-snake, who embodies wisdom, healing, and the potent, sometimes dangerous, power of the earth and the underworld.⁵ Such hybrid, chthonic figures are archetypal of powerful nature spirits or deities encountered in many shamanistic traditions, representing the sacred and transformative energies inherent in the natural and spiritual worlds. The rich taxonomy of these various spirits indicates a complex, multi-layered spirit world that individuals must navigate. This belief in a world co-inhabited and influenced by diverse non-human entities is fundamental to shamanism, where the shaman's role often involves learning to perceive, understand, and interact with these varied beings for the benefit of the community.

4.3. Traditional Healing Practices and Ritual Specialists

Kurdish folklore and traditional practices include various forms of healing that involve interaction with the spirit world. Ritual specialists, such as traditional healers and midwives, have historically been known to invoke spirits or spiritual forces during healing rites and in the application of folk medicine.⁵ The Yazidi Kocheks, as discussed, are prominent traditional healers who diagnose and suggest spiritual remedies.¹⁹ The practice of tying a rag from the garments of a sick person to a sacred tree, with the belief that the illness will be transferred or alleviated, is a widespread folk healing method.¹² This type of symbolic transference is a common technique in many folk and shamanistic healing systems.

Another set of practices, known as Zār, involves beliefs about spirit possession causing illness and corresponding healing rituals. While Zār is found across a broader region including Iran, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Egypt, its presence in Iran suggests potential cultural overlap or similar phenomena in Kurdish areas.³¹ Zār rituals typically involve the possessed individual's body becoming a locus for the spirit, with healing achieved through ceremonies that can include music, songs, dance, trance states, and negotiation with the possessing spirit by a specialized healer. The healer attempts to identify the spirit, understand its demands, and appease it through offerings or promises, thereby transforming the affliction into a state of well-being.³¹ Such practices, centered on direct engagement with possessing spirits and the use of trance and ritual to restore health, are classic examples of shamanistic healing modalities that address illness as a spiritual imbalance or intrusion.

4.4. Divination (Falzanî) and Seers (Falzan, Kochek)

Divination, the practice of seeking knowledge of the unknown or the future through supernatural means, is another area where shamanistic-like roles and practices are evident. The Yazidi Kocheks are explicitly described as seers who interpret dreams and can foresee future events.¹⁹ The Kurdish language itself contains terms for diviners and divination: *falzan* refers to a diviner or soothsayer, and *falzanî* denotes the practice of divination.³² A Kurdish folktale recounts the story of a farmer named Gerdo who, after a baz (hawk or falcon) lands on his plowing yoke—an unusual omen—travels to a village to seek out a *falzan* to understand the meaning of the event.³²

While the specific techniques of Kurdish *falzanî* are not extensively detailed in the available research beyond the dream interpretation and future-seeing abilities attributed to Kocheks, the acknowledged existence of such specialized roles is significant. Divination is a key skill and function of shamans in many cultures, who use various methods to gain insights from the spirit world to guide individuals or the community.³ The societal function of the *falzan*, as illustrated in the folktale of Gerdo, is to make sense of unusual, uncanny, or portentous events by interpreting their spiritual significance. This role of providing meaning and guidance in the face of the unknown or the spiritually charged is precisely how shamans often serve their communities.

4.5. Animal Symbolism: The Wolf and its Ritual Significance

Certain animals hold particular symbolic and ritual importance in Kurdish and related regional folk beliefs, with the wolf being a notable example. This reverence for, and ritual use of, the wolf contrasts with orthodox Islamic views, which generally do not attribute sanctity to animals³⁴, suggesting a pre-Islamic, possibly shamanistic, origin for these beliefs. In the Hakkari region of Kurdistan, a specific practice involves a groom who has been "bound" by magic (e.g., rendered impotent) being made to ritually unite with his wife on a wolf's pelt, presumably to break the spell or harness the wolf's virile power.³⁵ Furthermore, young girls in the Uludere district of Hakkari have been known to wear silver belts with buckles shaped like wolf heads, considered protective and honorific.³⁵

Among the Zaza Kurds in Tunceli, the Bozkurt (Grey Wolf) is seen as a guide. A ritual known as "Kurtağzı bağlama" (wolf's mouth binding) is performed on Kara Çarşamba (Black Wednesday, the first Wednesday of March). This involves passing people, especially the sick, through a hoop made from a split rose branch while invoking the Great Guide (the wolf) to protect their herds.³⁵ Alevis in Silifke have considered the wolf a sacred animal, and its astragalus (ankle) bone is worn by children for protection or powdered and ingested with water for certain spiritual ailments.³⁵ Among descendants of Horasan migrants in Kozan, a wolf's pelt is believed to protect a woman in confinement from the malevolent spirit *Al*.³⁵

These various protective, guiding, and healing attributes ascribed to the wolf, and the ritualistic use of its physical parts (pelt, bone), strongly suggest a totemic or power animal significance. Such beliefs are common in shamanistic traditions, where specific animal spirits are regarded as powerful allies, protectors, or sources of particular qualities or medicines.² The "Kurtağzı bağlama" ritual, whether aimed at symbolically "binding" the wolf's predatory nature or invoking its protective aspect, implies a belief in the ability to negotiate with, appease, or harness the power of the wolf spirit. This mode of ritual engagement with potent natural forces and animal spirits is characteristic of shamanic interaction with the spiritual world.

4.6. The Role of Dengbêj (Bards) and Âşîks: Inheritors of Shamanic Oral and Performative Traditions?

The Dengbêj are traditional Kurdish bards or minstrels who play a crucial role in preserving

and transmitting Kurdish oral history, epic tales, and cultural memory through song.³⁶ They are particularly renowned for their often lengthy and emotive songs of mourning (*stran*) and heroic sagas. While not explicitly defined as shamans, the function of the Dengbêj shares some characteristics with the roles that shamans often fulfilled in their communities as lore-keepers, ritual performers, and masters of sacred language and sound.

Parallels can be drawn with the Turkish âşık tradition. Âşıks (folk poets and singers) are viewed by some scholars as inheritors of certain shamanic poetic and performative functions that were once held by pre-Islamic Turkic shamans (*ozans* or *kams*).³⁷ These parallels include similarities in their upbringing and training (often involving a master-apprentice relationship), their esteemed societal position, and, significantly, a connection to ancestor or master spirits, which is sometimes expressed through the reverent performance of the works of deceased masters.³⁷ The act of reciting these masters' poems and songs is seen as an endeavor to establish a connection with their spirits.³⁷

Although the available information focuses primarily on Turkish âşıks³⁷, the general model of bards inheriting and transforming shamanic oral and performative traditions provides a relevant framework for considering the Kurdish Dengbêj. The Dengbêj's powerful use of voice, their mastery of extensive narratives, and their ability to evoke deep emotions through song could be interpreted as a continuation, perhaps in a more secularized or culturally specific form, of ancient shamanic performative traditions. If the connection to ancestral spirits observed in the âşık tradition can be tentatively extended to the Dengbêj, their performances of ancient tales or profound mourning songs might also be seen as a way of invoking ancestral memory, connecting with the spirits of the past, or facilitating communal catharsis—functions that resonate deeply with shamanistic concerns about lineage, memory, and spiritual continuity.

5. Material and Scholarly Perspectives

The exploration of Kurdish shamanism is not limited to textual analysis of religious beliefs or ethnographic accounts of folk practices. Material culture, particularly ancient art, and scholarly theories attempting to synthesize diverse Kurdish spiritual traditions also offer valuable, albeit sometimes contested, insights.

5.1. Archaeological Traces: Rock Art in Kurdistan and Shamanic Motifs

Archaeological findings in the Kurdish regions provide tangible, though interpretive, evidence for the deep historical roots of shamanistic-like practices. A notable study focuses on newly discovered golden lithographs (rock art) in the Zarrineh area of Kurdistan, located in western Iran.³⁸ The researchers analyzing these lithographs have identified several motifs that they interpret as reflections of early shamanism. These include depictions of dancing human figures, mountain goats portrayed in an ascending position (possibly symbolizing soul flight or journeys to a sky world), human figures engaged in acts that appear to be whipping (hypothesized as an attempt to dominate or interact with a hunting spirit), and various geometric motifs such as wheels.³⁸ Based on stylistic, technical, and thematic comparisons with rock art from other regions, particularly around the Iranian plateau, the study suggests a

possible dating for these Zarrineh lithographs to the second millennium BCE.³⁸ This research also posits that such interpretations challenge previous theories that often dismissed rock art designs as random or incomprehensible.³⁸

The identification of these specific motifs in ancient Kurdish rock art as "reflections of Early shamanism" ³⁸ is significant. Shamanistic practices globally often involve ritual dance, the symbolic importance of animals (as spirit guides, sources of power, or objects of shamanic journeys), and rituals related to hunting magic or influencing the spirits of game animals. If these interpretations of the Kurdish rock art are accurate, they provide material evidence for shamanic cosmologies and rituals in Kurdistan that predate most textual sources by millennia. They offer a potential visual record of ancient beliefs and practices, forging a crucial link between contemporary folk traditions that may contain shamanistic survivals and a much older, deeply embedded shamanistic stratum in the region's spiritual history. The "mountain goat in ascending position," for example, is a particularly evocative image that resonates with common shamanic motifs of soul flight, ascent to a celestial realm, or the shaman's journey to other worlds.

5.2. The "Yazdânism" Thesis: Mehrdad Izady's "Cult of Angels" and its Academic Reception

In the realm of scholarly theories, the concept of "Yazdânism," or the "Cult of Angels," proposed by the Kurdish scholar Mehrdad Izady, has generated considerable discussion and debate.¹⁷ Izady posits Yazdânism as the "original," pre-Islamic religion of the Kurdish people, suggesting it has ties to ancient Mithraic religions. According to his thesis, this ancient faith is now continued in the modern denominations of Yazidism, Yarsanism, and (Chinarism-based) Kurdish Alevism.¹⁷ Key features of this proposed Yazdânism include a belief in seven benevolent divine beings or angels (the Heft Sirr or Heptad), who sustain universal life and can incarnate in human form (as *bābā* or "Gates"), and a doctrine of reincarnation (metempsychosis).¹⁷ Izady characterizes adherents of Yazdânism (Yazdânis) as not maintaining the requisite five pillars of Islam, nor having or frequenting mosques, and possessing their own distinct scriptures which they hold in higher esteem than the Quran. He views Yazdânism as an ancient "Aryan" (in the sense of Indo-Iranian) faith that predates Islam by millennia.¹⁷ The view of a non-Islamic identity for these faiths is shared by some other scholars, such as Mohammad Mokri, who described Yarsanism as "less Islamic than Bahá'ism".¹⁷

However, Izady's concept of Yazdânism as a unified, distinct historical religion has been disputed by several recognized scholars of Iranian religions. Richard Foltz, for example, considers Yazdânism Izady's "invented religion," arguing that it "owes more to contemporary Kurdish national sentiment than to actual religious history".¹⁷ Despite this critique, even scholars who question the overarching Yazdânism thesis acknowledge the "striking" and "unmistakable" similarities between Yazidism and Yarsanism (Ahl-e Haqq). These commonalities are often traced back to elements of an ancient, shared faith that was likely dominant among Western Iranians and was akin to, but distinct from, Zoroastrianism.¹⁷

Izady's Yazdânism theory, while controversial, attempts to provide a cohesive framework for understanding the profound connections and shared pre-Islamic origins of Yazidism, Yarsanism, and certain expressions of Kurdish Alevism. The features he highlights, such as a central heptad of divine beings and the belief in reincarnation, are indeed prominent in these traditions and can align with complex shamanistic cosmologies that involve hierarchies of spirits and beliefs about the soul's persistence and transformation. The academic debate surrounding Yazdânism underscores the inherent complexities in reconstructing ancient belief systems, particularly when such reconstructions intersect with modern issues of cultural identity and nationalism, in this case, Kurdish national consciousness. Regardless of the ultimate validity of "Yazdânism" as a singular, historically defined entity, the undeniable deep similarities and shared motifs among these Kurdish faiths point to a common cultural and religious substratum in the wider Kurdistan region. This shared heritage, even if not perfectly encapsulated by Izady's specific model, represents the fertile ground where shamanistic practices likely existed, evolved, and exerted influence on these later, more distinct religious expressions. The debate itself emphasizes the necessity for rigorous, evidence-based analysis when discussing these historically sensitive and spiritually significant connections.

6. Contemporary Landscape: Persistence, Transformation, and Revival

The spiritual landscape of Kurdistan today is predominantly shaped by Sunni Islam, which is the religion of the majority of Kurds.⁶ Yet, beneath this surface, older traditions and alternative spiritual expressions, some containing discernible shamanistic elements, continue to persist, transform, and, in some cases, experience revival.

6.1. The Current Status of Folk Spiritual Practices Amidst Dominant Religions

While Sunni Islam, often of the Shafi'i school, forms the religious mainstream in Kurdistan, the region is also home to vibrant communities of Yazidis, Yarsanis (Kaka'is), and Alevis, each maintaining their distinct beliefs and practices.⁵ Sufism, particularly through influential orders like the Naqshbandiya and Qadiriyya, also has a strong presence and deep historical roots among Kurds. Kurdish Sufism is characterized by a hierarchical system of spiritual leadership (sheikhs and their deputies, khalifas) and often involves the veneration of saints and their shrines.⁶

The persistence of these distinct minority faiths and the pervasive influence of Sufi traditions indicate that alternative spiritual pathways, some with demonstrable connections to pre-Islamic and potentially shamanistic roots, continue to hold profound meaning for significant segments of the Kurdish population. Sufism itself, with its emphasis on direct mystical experience (dhawq), the veneration of saints (awliya), and established spiritual lineages (silsila), can sometimes act as a conduit for, or a parallel expression to, shamanistic themes such as seeking direct connection with the divine, the role of spiritual intermediaries, and the importance of initiation and esoteric knowledge.

However, some traditional folk spiritual practices, particularly those more overtly animistic, appear to be facing challenges. For instance, the veneration of "Trees of Wishes" (Darê Mirazan) and the associated beliefs in their powers are reportedly fading among younger, more urbanized generations.¹² This decline may be attributed to modernization, increased formal religious education, and changing social values. Conversely, other traditions, such as many Yarsani/Kaka'i religious ceremonies, are intentionally kept secret and practiced within closed community settings.²² This secrecy is partly a legacy of historical oppression and persecution faced by the community, and partly due to an internal belief that religious devotion is a private matter between individuals and God, and that concealment can enhance the sanctity of rituals.²² This dynamic illustrates a complex interplay of cultural erosion, adaptation, and determined preservation. While some shamanistic-like folk beliefs may be receding from public view or losing adherence, others may be maintained with tenacity within the protective confines of close-knit communities, making them harder for outsiders to observe but potentially contributing to their long-term resilience.

6.2. Modern Interpretations and Revivals (e.g., Alevi revival, renewed interest in Zoroastrianism)

The contemporary period has also witnessed notable revivals and reinterpretations of older spiritual traditions among Kurds, often intertwined with broader cultural and political assertions of identity. Alevism, for example, underwent a significant "revival" starting in the 1980s, particularly in Turkey. This involved a greater public expression of Alevi rites, beliefs, and cultural identity, partly as a reaction against processes of state-led re-Islamization and as an assertion of distinct Alevi religious and cultural rights.²⁶

More recently, there has been a discernible trend of renewed interest in, and in some cases conversion to, Zoroastrianism, particularly in Iraqi Kurdistan.⁶ For some Kurds, embracing Zoroastrianism is seen as a return to an ancient, original spiritual identity, a reclaiming of ancestral heritage that predates the arrival of Islam. This movement gained some traction following periods of intense conflict and disillusionment with extremist interpretations of Islam, such as those propagated by ISIS.⁶ Zoroastrianism is now an officially recognized religion in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, and new temples (Ateshgahs or Dar-e Mehrs) have been opened.⁶

These revivals can be understood as part of a broader quest for authentic cultural and spiritual self-definition. In seeking to reclaim pre-Islamic or non-orthodox traditions, communities may also be, consciously or unconsciously, reconnecting with spiritual layers that harbor shamanistic elements. Such movements are often linked to political and cultural self-assertion and a desire to define identity on terms distinct from dominant surrounding cultures or religious orthodoxies.

Furthermore, while not exclusively a Kurdish phenomenon, the emergence of "modern shamans" or neo-shamanic practitioners in the broader region, including Turkey, offers a potential model for how ancient shamanistic principles might be reinterpreted in contemporary urban contexts.²³ These modern practitioners often consist of individuals who feel alienated from mainstream societal or religious norms and come together to form new

spiritual communities. Their practices may involve shared ceremonies, often incorporating elements like drumming circles and fire rituals, and a focus on addressing modern concerns such as personal and ancestral trauma, karma, and individual spiritual growth. They frequently construct unique and personal forms of urban shamanism by drawing inspiration from diverse global shamanic traditions as well as local folk beliefs.²³ This suggests a potential pathway for how ancient shamanistic principles—such as achieving altered states of consciousness, working with spirits, and focusing on healing—might be adapted and find new expression in a modern Kurdish context, moving beyond traditional folk forms to address contemporary spiritual needs. The official recognition of faiths like Zoroastrianism in Iraqi Kurdistan ⁶ is a significant development, creating more space for diverse spiritual expressions and the potential re-emergence or re-valorization of older spiritual strata.

7. Conclusion: The Enduring Spirit of Shamanistic Traditions in Kurdistan

The exploration of "Kurdish Shamanism" reveals not a monolithic, extinct religion, but a vibrant and complex tapestry of surviving and transformed ancient spiritual practices, beliefs, and worldviews deeply embedded within the cultural and religious history of the Kurdish people. While a distinct, organized "Shamanic religion" may not be identifiable in the contemporary Kurdish landscape, the core elements characteristic of shamanism globally—interaction with a spirit world, the role of specialized intermediaries, altered states of consciousness, animistic reverence for nature, soul concepts, and healing practices tied to spiritual intervention—are demonstrably present in various forms.

7.1. Summary of Key Findings

Evidence for shamanistic elements in the Kurdish context is multifaceted. It can be traced through:

- **Pre-Islamic History:** Ancient Iranian and Indo-Iranian traditions, along with archaeological findings like rock art in Kurdistan depicting dancing figures and symbolic animals, suggest shamanistic practices dating back millennia.⁴ Widespread reverence for natural forces, fire worship, and sacred sites like "Trees of Wishes" (Darê Mirazan) inhabited by spirits (Dêw) point to a foundational animistic worldview.⁵
- **Indigenous Faiths:**
 - **Yazidism:** Features a cosmology with a remote God and active intermediary angels (the Heptad led by Malek Taus), sacred natural elements, pilgrimage to power places like Lalish, and crucially, the role of Kocheks as seers, healers, and communicators with the unseen world, who embody classic shamanic functions.⁵
 - **Yarsanism (Ahl-e Haqq/Kaka'i):** Presents esoteric teachings of divine manifestations (mazhariyyat, Heft Tan), a belief in inner (bâtinî) and outer (zâhirî) worlds, an emphasis on the soul's journey through 1,001 transmigrations, and communal *jam* ceremonies where sacred music (tanbur) and chants (kalam) may facilitate spiritual experiences.⁵

- **Kurdish Alevism:** Explicitly acknowledges roots in pre-Islamic Turkic shamanism, characterized by profound nature veneration, ancestor worship, and the Cem ceremony where the Semah (ritual dance) is performed to achieve a state of trance, with Dedês acting as spiritual guides.²³ The linguistic link between "cem" and "qam" (shaman) is particularly indicative.²³
- **Folklore, Healing, and Divination:** Beliefs in a populated spirit world (Peri, Jinn, Shahmaran), traditional healing practices invoking spirits or transferring illness via sacred trees, the presence of diviners (*falzan*), and potent animal symbolism (e.g., the wolf in ritual) further attest to the persistence of shamanistic themes in popular culture.⁵
- **Scholarly Interpretations:** While Mehrdad Izady's "Yazdânism" thesis is debated, the acknowledged deep similarities between Yazidism and Yarsanism point to a shared ancient spiritual substratum where shamanistic practices could have flourished.¹⁷

Thus, "Kurdish Shamanism" is best understood as a spectrum of resilient ancient spiritual practices and worldviews that have adapted, survived, and been reinterpreted through centuries of cultural and religious change.

7.2. Reflections on the Syncretic and Resilient Nature of Kurdish Spirituality

The spiritual traditions of Kurdistan demonstrate remarkable syncretism and resilience. Shamanistic elements have not existed in isolation but have been intricately interwoven with Zoroastrianism, various forms of Christianity, Sufi mysticism, and different interpretations of Islam. This adaptability has allowed core ancient beliefs—such as the sanctity of nature, the belief in intermediary spirits, and the importance of direct spiritual experience—to persist by finding new modes of expression within dominant religious frameworks or by being carefully preserved within distinct minority faiths.

These traditions have played a crucial role in maintaining Kurdish cultural identity, often in the face of immense historical pressures, including persecution and attempts at forced assimilation.⁸ The secrecy surrounding some Yarsani practices²² or the distinctiveness of Yazidi beliefs⁸ are testaments to a profound commitment to ancestral ways of understanding and interacting with the world. The revivals seen in Alevism and the renewed interest in Zoroastrianism⁶ further highlight a continuous engagement with and reassertion of these deep-rooted spiritual identities.

7.3. Potential Avenues for Future Research

While this report synthesizes existing information, the study of shamanistic elements in Kurdish traditions is far from exhaustive. Several avenues for future research could yield deeper understanding:

- **Ethnographic Research:** In-depth ethnographic fieldwork is needed, particularly in more remote rural areas of Kurdistan, to document contemporary folk healing practices, divination techniques (especially the methods of *falzan*), beliefs surrounding sacred sites, and the oral traditions that may preserve older shamanistic narratives. Investigating the specific techniques used by Yazidi Kocheks for divination and spirit

communication remains a key area.

- **Comparative Studies:** More detailed comparative analyses of ritual practices, sacred music (instrumentation, melodies, rhythms), dance forms (like the Semah), and oral mythologies across different Kurdish communities (Yazidi, Yarsani, Alevi, and those with strong folk traditions) could identify deeper structural, thematic, and functional parallels with global shamanism.
- **Archaeological and Linguistic Research:** Continued archaeological investigation, particularly focusing on ritual sites and iconography, and further linguistic analysis of Kurdish dialects for archaic terms related to spirits, healing, and ritual specialists, could uncover older layers of shamanistic belief and practice.
- **Specific Shamanistic Elements in Alevism:** Further research is needed to elaborate on the precise nature of "pre-Islamic Turkic shamanic beliefs" that influenced Alevism, particularly concerning beliefs and practices related to "miracles, saint-veneration, and a mortuary cult"²⁶, as these aspects were not fully detailed in the currently reviewed sources.
- **Modern Transformations:** Studying how modern Kurdish individuals and groups are reinterpreting or reviving shamanistic-like practices in response to contemporary social, political, and spiritual needs would provide insight into the living evolution of these traditions.

The spirit of these ancient traditions, characterized by a profound connection to nature, an acknowledgment of the unseen world, and a quest for healing and wisdom through direct spiritual experience, continues to echo in the rich and diverse spiritual tapestry of the Kurdish people.

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