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ZIKR-I ERRE IN THE YASAWIYYA

Аннотация. Мақалада Қожа Ахмет Ясауи ізбасарлары арасында ғасырлар бойы қолданылған Ясауия сопылық дәстүріндегі ұжымдық зікірдің ерекше түрі – *зикр-и эрре* қарастырылады. Зерттеуде *зикр-и эрренің* шығу тарихына қатысты деректер мен оның Ясауи дәруіштері арасында қалыптасу ерекшеліктері талданады. Сондай-ақ XVI–XIX ғасырлардағы сопылық еңбектерде кездесетін *зикр-и эрренің* орындалу тәсілдері мен түрлері сараланады. Дереккөздерде зікірдің *Allah, Hay, Hū, Āh* сияқты зікір сөздері арқылы орындалғаны, оның барысында тыныс алу, дене қимылы және ырғақтық әрекеттердің қолданылғаны көрсетіледі. Мақалада Ясауи зікір мәжілістеріне қатысты тарихи және хикаялық сипаттағы мәліметтер, сондай-ақ Орталық Азия мен Осман дәуіріндегі Стамбұлдағы Ясауи дәстүрінің көріністері қарастырылады. Зерттеу нәтижесінде *зикр-и эрренің* бір ғана қалыптасқан үлгімен шектелмей, әртүрлі дыбыстық, тыныстық және қимылдық тәсілдер арқылы орындалғаны анықталады. Автор бұл дәстүрдің қазіргі таңда тарихи сипат алып бара жатқанын атап өтіп, Орталық Азияда сақталған зікір үлгілерін далалық зерттеу арқылы жинақтап, аудиовизуалды түрде тіркеудің маңыздылығын көрсетеді.

Түйін сөздер: Қожа Ахмет Ясауи, Ясауия, сопылық, *зикр-и эрре*, зікір, жария зікір, Ясауи дәруіштері, сопылық рәсімдер, Орталық Азия.

Abstract. This article examines *zikr-i erre*, a distinctive form of collective vocal zikr practiced within Yasawiyya Sufi tradition associated with Khoja Ahmad Yasawi. The study focuses on the origins, development, ritual characteristics, and various forms of this zikr as reflected in historical and hagiographical sources. Particular attention is given to accounts concerning the emergence of *zikr-i erre*, including narratives connecting it with Khoja Ahmad Yasawi, Khidr, and the Prophet Zachariah. The article analyzes descriptions of the zikr found in the works of Yasawi and Yasawi-Naqshbandi scholars, as well as in the writings of Sufi authors from other traditions. The sources demonstrate that *zikr-i erre* was performed in different forms using such invocations as *Allah, Hay, Hū*, and *Āh*, accompanied in some cases by specific breathing techniques, bodily movements, and a rhythmic collective performance. The study also considers the ritual practices of Yasawi dervishes and the historical accounts of zikr assemblies in Central Asia and Ottoman Istanbul. The analysis shows that *zikr-i erre* had no single fixed form but represented a diverse set of vocal and bodily practices within the broader tradition of

Yasawi zikr. The article emphasizes the importance of field research and audiovisual documentation for preserving information about these disappearing ritual practices and transmitting them to future generations.

Keywords: Khoja Ahmad Yasawi, Sufism, *zikr-i erre*, zikr, vocal zikr, Yasawi, dervishes, Sufi rituals, Central Asia.

Аннотация. В статье рассматривается *зикр-и эрре* – особая форма коллективного громкого зикра, практиковавшаяся в суфийской традиции Ясавийя, связанной с Ходжой Ахмедом Ясави. Основное внимание уделяется происхождению, развитию, ритуальным особенностям и различным формам данного вида зикра, отражённым в исторических и житийных источниках. Анализируются предания о возникновении *зикр-и эрре*, в том числе повествования, связывающие его с Ходжой Ахмедом Ясави, Хызыром и пророком Закарией. Рассматриваются сведения о зикре в трудах ясавийских и ясавийско-накшбандийских шейхов, а также в произведениях представителей других суфийских традиций. Источники свидетельствуют о существовании различных способов исполнения *зикр-и эрре* с использованием формул *Allah*, *Hay*, *Hū*, и *Āh*, а в некоторых случаях – специальных дыхательных техник, движений тела и ритмического коллективного исполнения. Особое внимание уделяется описаниям ритуальных собраний ясавийских дервишей в Центральной Азии и Османском Стамбуле. Проведённый анализ показывает, что *зикр-и эрре* не имел единой строго фиксированной формы, а включал различные вокальные, дыхательные и телесные практики в рамках более широкой традиций ясавийского зикра. В заключение подчёркивается необходимость проведения полевых исследований и аудиовизуальной фиксации сохранившихся элементов данной традиции для её изучения и передачи будущим поколениям.

Ключевые слова: Ходжа Ахмед Ясави, Ясавийя, суфизм, *зикр-и эрре*, зикр, громкий зикр, ясавийские дервиши, суфийские ритуалы, Центральная Азия.

Introduction: The collective form of zikr practiced for centuries by the Yasawi dervishes, the followers of Khoja Ahmad Yasawi in Central Asia, is called *zikr-i erre*, that is, “the saw zikr.” It was given this name because, in the later stages of the zikr, the words (*asmāʾ*) disappear and only a sound resembling the rasping of a saw emerges from the throat. Since the Yasawiyya has largely passed into history today, it has become almost impossible to find people who know the zikr practices of the early Yasawis. The information provided in the sources concerning *zikr-i erre* is also quite limited. In the works they composed, especially in the seventeenth century, the Yasawis touched upon *zikr-i erre*, but rather than describing how this zikr was actually performed, they mostly presented proofs demonstrating the permissibility of *zikr jahrī* (vocal zikr).

There are several accounts in the sources concerning when and how *zikr-i erre* began. According to the Naqshbandi shaykh Ahmad Kāsānī, who lived around

Samarqand in the sixteenth century, Khoja Ahmad Yasawi initially engaged in *zikr khafī* (silent zikr). However, when he went to the region of Turkistan, he realized that he could not bring the people of that region onto the spiritual path through this form of zikr and therefore initiated the vocal and effective zikr known as *zikr-i erre* [1].

Another account is essentially similar to this one, although it is more hagiographical in character. According to this account, one day Khidr (peace be upon him) came to converse with Khoja Ahmad Yasawi. Seeing that the Khoja, whose heart was normally at ease every day, was distressed on that particular day, Khidr asked him in amazement about the reason. Ahmad Yasawi replied that he was saddened because he had realized that it was impossible to remove this condition. Thereupon, Khidr began to perform zikr by saying “Ah, ah.” Through the effect of this zikr, the sorrow and distress disappeared, and *zikr-i erre* thus became a tradition of the order [2].

It has also been suggested that zikr-i erre was a tradition dating back to the time of the Prophet Zachariah (peace be upon him) [3]. According to the account, while Zachariah (peace be upon him) was being executed by his opponents by being cut with a saw, he remained engaged in the remembrance of God; thus, zikr-i erre (“the saw zikr”) became an established tradition. The association of zikr-i erre with Khidr or Zachariah (peace be upon him) was probably devised as a response to the Hanafi scholars and some Naqshbandis who regarded and criticized vocal zikr, and consequently zikr-i erre, as an innovation (bid‘a).

Two accounts concerning the zikr assemblies established by Ahmad Yasawi are noteworthy. According to the first, men and women performed zikr together in his assemblies. According to the hagiographical account, this situation led some scholars to criticize him, whereupon Yasawi placed fire and cotton in a box and gave it to those scholars. When the scholars saw that the fire had caused no harm to the cotton, they concluded that Yasawi meant: “The fact that women and men are together in our assembly causes no harm to their hearts” [4]. Although this hagiographical account is well known, it appears from Yasawi sources that the Yasawis of later periods did not establish such mixed zikr assemblies.

The second account concerning Ahmad Yasawi’s zikr assemblies is the hagiographical story that, after the age of sixty-three, Yasawi entered an underground chamber and on certain days held zikr assemblies there with his disciples; the sweat of those participating in the zikr flowed down and accumulated in a jar at the lower end of the cave, where it was transformed into a sherbet. This jar was later called khum-i ‘ishq (“the jar of love”) [5].

After instructing one of his disciples in zikr, Ismā‘īl Ata, one of the fourteenth-century Yasawi shaykhs, would say:

“O dervish! We have become brothers in the spiritual path. Accept one piece of advice from me: Think of this world as a green dome, and suppose that there is

no one in the universe except you and the Most High God. Perform so much zikr that, through the predominance of tawhīd, only the Most High God remains and you disappear from between them!” [6].

According to Ismā‘īl Ata, just as a blacksmith heats iron in the fire and then hammers it, removing its crookedness, so too does the disciple purify his heart of evils as he continues to perform zikr [7]. Ismā‘īl Ata’s son, Khoja Ishāq Ata, stated that Ahmad Yasawi taught his own disciples two forms of zikr: the zikr of Allah and the zikr of Hū [8]. Ahmad b. Mahmūd Hazīnī (d. after 1002/1593), one of the Yasawi-Naqshbandi shaykhs of the sixteenth century, records in his work Hujjat al-abrār that zikr-i erre removes bad qualities from the heart, that the heart comes to know God through this zikr, and that the zikr of the heart is performed with the words Hū, Āh, and Hay [9].

The Indian Shattari shaykh Muhammad Ghawth (d. 970/1563), in his work Jawāhir al-khams, states that zikr-i erre (zikr-i minshārī) was performed by some shaykhs with Hay and Hū, while others performed it with the letters Hī and Hā. He describes its method as follows: The sālik should place both hands upon his thighs and, directing his breath toward his navel, say “Hā”; he should then draw the breath from below the navel toward the heart and, keeping his head, waist, and back straight, forcefully say “Hay,” continuing in this manner. This zikr may also be performed by saying Hū, Hay and Allah [10].

It is recorded, quoting from the work al-Sifr al-mastūr li’l-bidāya fi’l-zikr al-manshūr li’l-wilāya by Sālīm b. Ahmad Shaykhān Bā-‘Alawī al-Yamanī (d. 1046/1637), that zikr-i erre was performed in five different ways. According to the first method, the person performing zikr sits on his knees, places his hands upon his knees, and begins to draw his breath from his navel toward his palate, saying “Hā”; he then extends his breath toward his navel and, while forcefully expelling it downward with his head, waist, and back aligned, says “Hay.” The sound produced while

continuing the zikr in this manner resembles the sound of a saw. According to the second method, the sālik says “Hū” while inhaling and “Hay” while exhaling downward; alternatively, he says “Allah” in both cases. According to the third method, he says “Allah” while inhaling and “Hū” while exhaling downward. According to the fourth method, he says “Hay” in both cases. According to the fifth method, he says Dā’im, Qā’im, Hādir, Nāzir, Shāhid in both cases [11].

Muhammad Sharīf Husaynī (d. 1109/1697), one of the Yasawi shaykhs of the seventeenth century, states that the Yasawi dervishes sometimes performed zikr with “Allah,” sometimes with “Hay,” and sometimes with both together, saying “Hay, Allah.” He explains that, as spiritual enthusiasm increased during the zikr, a sound resembling that of a saw emerged from the throats of those performing the zikr as they inhaled and exhaled, creating the sensation that they were placing a saw upon the head of the nafs al-ammāra and cutting away its desires. He also states that at times the dervishes engaged in the zikr of Hū [12].

Suleyman Shaykhī Kostendilī (d. 1235/1820) gives the following information concerning zikr-i erre:

“Among this exalted group, and among the shaykhs of Turkistan, they call it zikr-i erre. It is a zikr performed neither with the tongue nor with the heart. When one continuously engages with the Divine Name while keeping the mouth closed and using the palate, it is a wondrous zikr. Since it resembles the sound of a saw, they call it zikr-i erre. In other words, it is a zikr accompanied by a strange sound that is stimulating and exceedingly effective, resembling the rasping of a saw” [13].

A work written in Chaghatay Turkish, whose author is unknown and which is known as Risāla-i Zikr-i Hazrat-i Sultānū’l-Ārifin, mentions six types of zikr practiced by the Yasawis:

1. The zikr of the Ism-i Zāt: To perform zikr by saying “Allah.” This zikr is also performed in the form “Allah Hū, Allah Hū, Yā Hū, Allah Hū.”

2. The zikr of the Ism-i Sifat: To perform zikr by saying “Hay āh, Hay āh.” This zikr is performed standing (qiyāmī) after the noon prayer; while saying “Hay” and “āh,” the five fingers are clenched.

3. The Dūsara zikr: To perform zikr by saying “Hay, āh, Allah, Hay Hū,” and “Hay, Hayyan, Hū Allah; Hay Hayyan, Hū Allah.”

4. The zikr of Hū: To perform zikr by saying “Hū, Hū, Hū Allah; Hū, Hū, Hū Allah.”

5. The Chaykun zikr: At the time of zikr, the person performing the zikr moves an instrument resembling a rattle in his hand, producing a “çak çak” sound, so that rhythm, harmony, and music may continue together in an integrated manner. The zikr is performed by saying “Hū (çakka), Hū (çakka).”

6. Cherār darb: To perform zikr by saying “Hay, āh, āh, āh, Hay, Hū; Hay, āh, āh, āh, Hay, Hū.”

In addition to these six forms of zikr, there is also the “zikr-i kabūter” (the pigeon zikr), which is performed by saying “Hū, Hū” [14].

The Indian Chishti shaykh İmdādullah Tehānevī (d. 1317/1899) described zikr-i erre as follows: When saying lā ilāha, the breath is forcefully brought down toward the right shoulder and the head is tilted slightly backward; then the phrase illallāh is struck upon the heart [15].

In 1873, Eugene Schuyler, who travelled through Central Asia and collected important information about the cultural life of the region, described a Yasawi zikr that he witnessed at the Īshān Sāhib Khoja Mosque in Tashkent. He summarized it as follows:

“On Thursday evening we went to this mosque. About thirty men, young and old, were seated on their knees facing the qibla, reciting prayers aloud and moving their bodies rapidly. There was a circle around them. Since the night was hot and the ritual intense, most of those taking part in the zikr had removed their robes and turbans. They were reciting the following phrases: ‘Hasbī Rabbī jallallāh, mā fī qalbī ghayrullāh, nūr Muhammad sallallāh, lā

ilāha illalāh.’ During this, the head was rapidly moved toward the left shoulder and the heart, then toward the right shoulder and from there back toward the heart. These movements were repeated hundreds of times, and the zikr generally lasted one or two hours, according to the wishes of the Īshān (shaykh), who presided over it. At first the movements were slow, but they gradually became faster. If one of them slowed down, the Īshān responsible for regulating the tempo of the zikr would strike him on the head or push him outside the circle and call another person into the circle.

The participants became so hot and sweaty that they sometimes had to rest for several minutes. Their places were immediately filled by others while they rested. They recited different forms of zikr until their voices became hoarse, and then began the zikr ‘Hay, Hay, Allah Hay.’ At first they slowly bent their bodies toward the ground; then the rhythm accelerated and they all rose to their feet. The tempo continued to increase. Each person placed his hand upon the shoulder of the companion next to him. Several circles were formed around a common centre. They moved collectively from one side of the mosque to the other, constantly repeating ‘Hay, Allah Hay.’ Sometimes the zikr changed into ‘Hū Allah,’ and the participants bent their bodies forward and backward. Eventually, most of the participants came toward the centre of the circle, and a wild dance began. At times they also pulled some people from the surrounding circle into the centre. When their physical strength was exhausted, they engaged in murāqaba and contemplation. After some couplets from Hāfiz’s Divān had been recited, the zikr continued again with sound and movement. The zikr continued in this manner until morning. Unlike prayer, there are no fixed rules governing bodily movements during the zikr. Everything is organized by the Īshān. After a while we left the mosque and were taken to the chief Īshān. He was too ill to preside over the zikr assembly, but he offered us some tea and fruit” [16].

Musāhipzāde Celāl states that during the Ottoman period, Chaghatay and Uyghur hymns were recited in the Uzbek tekkes of Istanbul and that, in particular, the hikmets of Ahmad Yasawī were sung to melodies and ritual ceremonies were performed [17]. According to Ömer Tuğrul İnançer’s account, in these tekkes the dervishes either stood in facing rows or formed a circle for the zikr; they performed the zikr by leaning their bodies from side to side and, when the rhythm accelerated, striking their right knees against the ground and then rising upright again [18].

These accounts indicate that zikr-i erre had numerous forms. Conducting field research in Central Asia and, if there are people who traditionally know these practices, recording their performance on video would constitute an important service for introducing this culture, which has passed into history, to future generations.

Conclusion: The analysis of historical and textual sources shows that zikr-i erre was practiced in various forms within the Yasawi tradition. The sources describe differences in its vocal formulas, breathing techniques, bodily movements, and ritual settings. Although the available written evidence is limited and often combines historical information with hagiographical narratives, these accounts demonstrate the diversity of Yasawi zikr practices. The study also shows that zikr-i erre was transmitted and interpreted differently across periods and Sufi traditions. Further field research and documentation of surviving traditional practices in Central Asia may contribute to a better understanding and preservation of this important aspect of Yasawi spiritual heritage.

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