



Religious Oral Tradition and Literacy among the Yezidis of Iraq

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Abstract. – This article analyses how emerging literacy among the Kurdish-speaking Yezidis of northern Iraq is affecting their religious oral tradition. It looks at the issue of canonisation, modernising mythology, discarding elements deemed obsolete or non-scientific, rejecting myth perceived to be of Islamic origin, and finally, how new myth are constructed to meet new needs, raised by modern education and increased contact with the outside world. [*Yezidis, Kurds, oral tradition, literizing societies, religion, mythopoesis*]

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The words “Kurdistan” and “Kurds” conjure up the image of Islam in the mind of most people. However, not all the Kurds living in Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Iran, and the Caucasian states are Muslims, Sunni Muslims to be more exact. There are relatively small but important groups among the Kurds, who still follow creeds that retain religious concepts bequeathed by distant ancestors before the advance of Islam. Yezidis are a case in question. Once a powerful group among the Kurds, if the 16th-century “Sherefname”¹ is a reliable source, the number of Yezidis has dwindled considerably due to repeated persecution and forced conversions. Today their largest community lives in northern Iraq (counting perhaps between 200–300.000 people), while there are about ten thousand in Syria and the Transcaucasia, hardly a few hundred in

Turkey, and a considerable immigrant community (most of them refugees from Turkey) in Western Europe. Yezidis follow their own peculiar religion, which can be traced back to the faith of the Western Iranian immigrants arriving in this region more than three millennia ago, though it clearly displays the influence of all the religions that exerted their influence in this region in the last three millennia.²

One of the many peculiar characteristics of Yezidi religion is its oral nature. Until quite recently the faith of the Yezidis was based on oral tradition. They had no written texts, in fact, even writing was forbidden to its followers, with the exception of one sheikh family. Sacred texts (hymns and myths) were memorised and transmitted from father to son by the *gewels*, the sacred bards of the Yezidis. This oral nature shaped the structure and nature of Yezidi belief system. This oral nature has, however, undergone profound changes in the last few decades, thanks to the spread of compulsory education, general literacy, the interest of outsiders in Yezidi faith, and the interest of literate Yezidis in what outsiders had to say about them. As a result, Yezidism no longer can be called a purely oral religion.

Yezidis have always lived dispersed over a wide stretch of land, and communities far from each other had only limited contact while they faced varying external influences. As a result, considerable differences have developed, and it would be

1 “Sherefname” or “Sharafnama” is the famous book of Sharaf al-Din Bitlisi (Iranian Kurdish historian and poet) (1543–1599) written in Persian, which is regarded as a main source on Kurdish history. He wrote it in 1597 in Iran.

2 For more details of the Yezidis see Guest 1993; Kreyenbroek and Rashow 2005; Spät 2005.

difficult to speak about Yezidi customs in general, save for some basic characteristics. Therefore, it may be assumed that the advent of literacy, though in itself a general phenomenon, may not have necessarily generated the same changes and reaction in “every corner of Yezidi land.” This article deals with the phenomenon of transition from oral to written culture among the Yezidis of northern Iraq, more particularly among the Yezidis around Duhok near the Turkish border (in what functioned as the Kurdish Autonomy between 1992–2003) and the Sheikhan region.³

In this region school education is common, especially among the young and younger middle-aged generation, and illiteracy is slowly becoming a thing of the past. With school education many modern ideas inevitably intrude into the Yezidi worldview. Even more importantly, educated Yezidis, influenced by the demands of the so-called “written religions” and modern life, started *putting their own religion into writing* – something that was unimaginable not so long ago. The revolutionary change came in the 70s when two Yezidi university graduates managed to secure the permission of the Yezidi religious leaders to put down Yezidi religious texts. The first publication was soon followed by several others. Many of these publications are easily available to most Yezidis in the above mentioned region. (So, for example, *Lalish* and *Roj* magazines, which publish sacred hymns, religious tales, folktales, and essays on Yezidi religion, can be found in many Yezidi homes.)

The process of putting Yezidi religion into writing was further accelerated by the sizeable Yezidi diaspora living in the West, especially in Germany. These Yezidis are cut off from all the old forms of Yezidi religious life, where holiday rituals, visits to holy places or being visited by religious leaders play a central role. At the same time, living in close proximity to other religions for the first time, Yezidis in the West are becoming more and more acutely aware of the fact that, unlike other religions, they lack a holy book to which they could refer or a clear idea of the history of their own religion. Their children, brought up in a culture of books and confronted by Western schoolmates or

friends with more profound religious education, are increasingly turning to books trying to find information.⁴ There is also a general wish to be able to present a holy book, just like other religions. While in the past even the idea of putting a sacred text into writing would have been anathema, today in Yezidi households in the diaspora it is not unusual, for example, to find the two Yezidi “holy texts,” the “Jelwa” and the “Meshefi Resh,” which contain genuine oral tradition albeit written down by outsiders in the 19th century (Kreyenbroek 1995: 12–25). Others claim to have found the original Yezidi holy book in the form of the Zoroastrian Zend-Avesta (Murad 1993: 396).⁵ The diaspora, in turn, further influences Yezidis back in their home country. This has all led to a changing attitude toward books and oral tradition in general, at least in the Iraqi Sheikhan and in the European diaspora,⁶ where the place accorded to oral tradition is fast becoming usurped by books written on and mainly by Yezidis. With this development profound changes have appeared, which seem to alter the centuries-old nature and content of Yezidi religion.

The Appearance of a “Canonical” Text

As it is well known for all researchers of oral tradition, the most characteristic feature of tradition based on orality is the simultaneous existence of

3 I carried out my field research in the Kurdish Region of Iraq between 2002 and 2006. Most of my observations come from the Sheikhan region, east of Mosul. Due to practical difficulties I could only pay two fleeting visits to the Sinjar mountain on the Syrian border, this isolated refuge of Yezidis, where the influence of the modern world is less obvious. It may also be assumed that Yezidis living in other regions, like Syria, Georgia or Germany for example, are exposed to different external influences, and therefore their traditions may see different changes.

4 For example, one of the interviewees of Jasim Murad stated (Murad 1993: 384 f.): “when in the German school my classmates would ask me about my religion. I would tell them that I am a Yazidi and then they would ask me the details of my religion and I would just remain silent. That of course irritated me for these classmates know who Christ is and the history of Christianity and I did not know, for example, who Sheikh Adi or Ta’us Melek is. Then I decided to search for the history and origins of our religion. I went to the libraries and checked out some books written in German about the Yezidis. From these sources I learned that we worship God and believe in seven angels headed by Ta’us Melek. I also found the two holy books Mishaf Rash and Jalwa.” Philip Kreyenbroek also confirmed in several conversations that the search for identity among the young and the need for books was a strong driving force behind the birth of Yezidi religious literature in Germany. On the role of writing in Yezidi culture in the West see also Kreyenbroek and Rashow (2005: 45 f.)

5 Murad (1993: 396) writes “many informants have viewed the two manuscripts and declare them to be authentic books of their religion. Those informants wrapped the two books in silk garment and carefully stored them on a sacred shelf beyond the reach of children.”

6 The isolated and impoverished Sinjar mountain on the Iraqi-Syrian border, that has been a refuge of Yezidis for centuries and was under Saddam’s rule until recently, seems to present a more traditional picture at present, though this may also change in the near future.

many different versions of the same motif or story. This is, or at least used to be, true for Yezidis as well, as many travellers and researchers of the past have noticed. The different versions may even contradict each other from time to time, or may at least seem illogical to a Western observer. As Kreyenbroek (1995: 19) writes “It is well known that, in oral literature, it is impossible to identify a single ‘original’ or ‘true’ version of an account.” There is no “‘official’ form of the faith . . . different people have been taught different things . . . , some Yezidis seem capable of holding mutually exclusive beliefs at the same time . . . the lack of written tradition has prevented the development of a single, monolithic system of beliefs.”

With the publication of Yezidi sacred texts a new development appeared. People have started to insist on the written version as the only correct and authentic one. The written version acquires the nature and reputation of a holy scripture – all other versions are compared with this and any divergence is commented on as, e.g., “It is wrong” “He (i.e., the source) is mistaken.”⁷ It is possible, though it would be hard to prove, that the wish for “one, canonised body of writings” can subconsciously be connected with a wish to refute one of the most popular Muslim accusations against Yezidis, namely that they have *no written scriptures* and are therefore *kafirs*, or unbelievers. This accusation is of such a great relevance in Kurdish culture that even Christians speak about this characteristic of Yezidism in a negative way.

This novel notion of an “authentic version” includes not only the written text itself, but it is beginning to influence the way sources are viewed as well. The idea, characteristic of all “literizing” societies, that orality is inferior to literacy (Henige 1974: 100) is extended to religious experts. *Qewels*, the traditional keepers of religious lore, most of whom are still illiterate, enjoy ever less respect.⁸ On the other hand, literate persons, who – due to a number of factors – have become known as “experts on Yezidi texts,” that is, they are often quoted

7 Similar observations were also made by Christine Allison a decade earlier (2001: 19).

8 During my trip to Beshiqe-Behzani, the twin-villages where *qewels* traditionally reside, for example, local people generally preferred to introduce me to “laymen,” whom for some reason they saw as knowledgeable about the topic of religion, and accompanied me to meet *qewels* only at my own request. Some even expressed an opinion to the effect that *qewels* (and religious leaders for that matter) were no longer what they used to be, and their knowledge can in no way be compared to the *qewels* of the past. In the Yezidi “Sunday school” in Beshiqe, a school set up in the 90s to teach children of the twin-villages their religion, children are now taught from books by laymen and not by *qewels*.

in newspaper articles published by Yezidis, are seen as the only authentic sources when it comes to differences between two versions. Yezidis repeatedly tried to discourage me from trying to interview other, less well-known persons, on the basis that “they know less than X.” I have repeatedly met with confusion and perplexity, when I wanted to speak with yet another person, after having talked with a more valued authority, especially if he was known to “have published” about Yezidi religion. My explanation that there may be “a different version” was even understood to mean that I found the version already told incorrect.

Such an attitude, which insists on one fixed version coming from one accredited source, will eventually lead to the weeding out of “non-canonised” versions and an impoverishment, or at least simplification of Yezidi lore. But it is not only the mere amount of differing variants that is being affected by these changes.

Books on the Yezidis as a Source of Knowledge

Another far-reaching development of literacy is that the written word has started influencing the self-perception of the Yezidis, and it has become a source of knowledge even for so-called religious experts. Books and periodicals are read enthusiastically by many these days. The written word enjoys great respect and is trusted far more than the memory and knowledge of a living person. (I have even seen a *micawir*, or guardian of a shrine, take out his hand-written collection of hymns – despite the traditional ban on writing.)

Here I would like to quote a few telling examples to demonstrate the general interest among literate (though not necessarily very educated) Yezidis in all forms of literature on the Yezidis, their history, and religion. In Shariya, a collective village near Duhok, I was shown the book of the late American researcher, John Guest, “Survival among the Kurds.” My host proudly claimed having read its contents with the aid of a dictionary, and called my attention to the fact that it contained a number of sacred hymns. He even offered me the book so that I could gain from it what he called good information on Yezidis and their religion (regardless of the fact that the book did not belong to him but to his neighbour, as his mother pointed out). Admittedly, of all Yezidi settlements Shariya is the one where contact with foreigners has been the most frequent in the last decade, and where perhaps there are more people speaking or understanding some English than in other villages. This is due to its

proximity to Duhok, in the former Kurdish Autonomy, with its international NGOs and the UN, an important source of jobs for nearly a decade, and also to the fact that Shariya was one of the four Yezidi settlements that foreign researchers could dream of setting their feet into.

But even if the presence of a piece of Western scholarship can be called an exception, books and periodicals written by Yezidis or even by outsiders in Arabic (provided they wrote of the Yezidis in a favourable light) have definitely found their way to many Yezidi households around Duhok and in the Sheikhan. Just like in the case of Guest's book, these writings are often seen by younger people as the best way to obtain knowledge about Yezidi traditions. In the course of my field research I was repeatedly referred to two Yezidi periodicals, *Lalish* and *Roj*, as the "best sources of information." In one case a university undergraduate even painstakingly translated a folktale, sentence by sentence, for my sake from *Roj* magazine. Sheikh Mîrza of Baadra, who claimed to be the descendant of the 17th-century Yezidi hero Ēzdi Mîrza, leafed through a number of books written in Kurdish to look for his family tree and other information on his illustrious forebear. (This is all the more surprising because according to my experience family and tribal history generally still belong to the realm of oral tradition among the Iraqi Yezidis.)

This phenomenon poses a new "caveat" for unsuspecting researchers: one that is known as "feedback" among researchers of oral tradition. "Feedback may be defined as the co-opting of extraneous printed or written information into previously oral accounts" (Henige 1974: 96), and it has been widely studied among oral groups who came under the influence of literate cultures. The influence of books that become sources of a new tradition in their turn, that is feedback, is not a recent phenomenon among the Yezidis – it was first noticed when a literate elite appeared in the first half of the 20th century, though we cannot rule out an earlier appearance. Lescot, writing on the book "El Yazdîyya," by the black sheep of the Yezidi princely family, Ismail Chol beg, published in 1934, warned that "l'auteur a eu connaissance des articles sur la secte édités dans des revues arabes; il a naturellement accepté toutes les erreurs qu'ils contenaient et les a fidèlement reproduites" (1938: 6). Just around the same time, the anthropologist Henry Field purchased a Yezidi book in Beled Sinjar.⁹ Upon showing it to Fa-

ther Anstase-Marie al-Carmali, an expert on Yezidi texts, al-Carmali broke out heatedly "this is a very bad joke, an insult . . . this is a careless translation into Arabic of my article on the Yazidiyah in the Encyclopedia of Islam" (Field 1975: vii).

With the growing influence of literacy such feedbacks have become a common phenomenon. For example, on several occasions I was told by "experts"¹⁰ that the black *xirqe*, the sacred garment of the Yezidi holy men, the *feqirs*, was a symbol of the original darkness that surrounded the pearl, that is God himself, before the creation started. In other words, the black shirt symbolises the original garment covering God. This was something I have never met before in the literature on Yezidis, and I considered it, rather proudly, an interesting new piece of information on Yezidi religion. It was only by chance that later on in Göttingen Dr. Xalil Jindy Rashow (known among Yezidis as Sheikh Xalil Jindy), a Yezidi researcher presently living in Germany but publishing in Kurdish, heard this recorded on my tape. He told me that this was not an original piece of Yezidi mythology but his own idea or interpretation of the black shirt of the *feqirs*, which he had published in the *Roj* magazine. It was obviously where my two informants had read it and then passed it on as an authentic bit of Yezidi mythology. (It is worth noting that one of my informants was from Behzani, under Saddam's rule until recently, which means that Yezidi publications have reached even there, despite the official policy of repression of Yezidi identity.) Through those who read Yezidi publications or publications on Yezidis, usually considered the "local intelligentsia," the information is quick to reach others and eventually becomes part of the oral tradition.

Not only do books take the place of oral tradition where gaining concrete information on Yezidi religion is concerned, but they have started influencing Yezidi identity as well. Thus, for example, the English teacher of the high school in Baadra, Mamoste Sabah, claimed that the content of the three Holy Books, that is, the Old and New Testament and the Quran, can all be traced back to the sacred books (i.e., mythology) of the Sumerians. At the same time, Sumerian sacred texts (just as later Babylonian and Assyrian texts) mention the word *ezid*, which had been solved to mean "pure souls," "those who go on the right path." In other words, they refer to the Yezidis, who are thus proven to be the fountainhead of Sumerian religion and consequently of

⁹ The "capital" of the Sinjar mountain that has a sizeable Yezidi population, and where Yezidi-Christian relations have traditionally been very good.

¹⁰ These experts were Sheikh Dosti, the guardian of a shrine in Xanke, and Arab Xidir, a village teacher collecting religious texts, see below.

the three religions based on the above mentioned Holy Books. According to Mamoste Sabah, the source of his knowledge on this matter was a book written by Dr. Xalil Jindy Rashow. Unfortunately, I had no way to ascertain the exact content of the book, but this certainly demonstrates the great impact of the written word (especially if written by authors well-known to the community) on the dissemination of new ideas and formation of Yezidi identity as regards their own religion and past.

Interestingly enough, some of the books that seem to have exerted a great influence on how Yezidis view their own mythology and religion were written by non-Yezidis. One of them is the Christian George Habibi whose theory of the Assyrian origin of the Yezidis, also put forward by other non-Yezidi authors, enjoys a great popularity among the Yezidis (who quote him or read from his book to support their claim of an Assyrian origin). It may have been in a similar way that the Sufi interpretation of Lucifer's Fall reached Yezidism. Though originally the Yezidi view of the creation very simply did not accept the existence of the Devil or any evil principle, now quite a few Yezidis will repeat a rather daring interpretation of the myth that can probably be traced back to the Sufi philosopher al-Hallaj. According to this interpretation, when Lucifer refused to worship Adam, despite having been ordered to do so by God, he was in fact just being loyal to God, who earlier commanded him not to worship any other being. Though this is a very interesting interpretation of Lucifer's Fall, it simply does not fit into Yezidi mythology, where there is absolutely no place for the evil. In all probability, it was from the work of Muslim authors, who tried to explain the obviously false accusation of Devil worship among the Yezidis, that Yezidis picked up this nice sounding story. Today it is repeated by many Yezidis (though not by the most conservative ones¹¹) and also by some educated Muslims.

Modernising Yezidi Mythology: Scientific Interpretation

The other salient feature of this transition from the oral to the written is a "rewriting," one could say

11 For example, Feqir Haci, one of the best-known and most quoted experts on Yezidi religious lore, emphatically denied this story, and none of those older people who acquired their knowledge, much or little, on Yezidi religion in the traditional (oral) way repeated this myth. On the other hand, it was quoted by a number of people who had read publications on Yezidis and were obviously influenced by what they had read.

a modernisation, of their own mythology by the Yezidis. For long centuries, the Yezidi community was relatively isolated, and had limited contact with its – often hostile – Muslim neighbours, and even less with the world outside the Kurdish mountains. Today there is an ever-increasing contact with the external world, and what is more important, a growing participation in it (both in Europe and in Iraq).

This increased contact with the world in large has led to an attempt at modernisation and similarly at trying to avoid ridicule. Yezidis, who have attended school and have extensive, everyday contact with non-Yezidis (Muslims or Christians), tend to modernise or rewrite their legends so that they conform to the expectation of outsiders and also to their new found knowledge of history and science. Some Yezidi intellectuals leading this trend like to refer to it as "reforming" Yezidi faith.¹² As a part of this process some myths are slowly being *discarded* as absurd, while others receive new interpretation. These novel interpretations sometimes seem to contradict the ethos of Yezidi hymns and tales, while they are more in keeping with Christian and Muslim notions on the divine and its relationship with the created world.

An arresting feature of such attempts to make Yezidi faith "up-to-date" is the wish to give a modern scientific interpretation to Yezidi legends, so that they be fit for consumption by people whose worldview is determined by compulsory school education. How educated Yezidis of a modern turn of mind wish to see their own religion, and have it seen by outsiders, was eloquently demonstrated by the principal of a school in Eyn Sifni. The principal, who formerly taught in the Yezidi village of Baadra (the Kurdish Autonomy), instructed me to write about the Yezidis in a "scientific way" (*alemi*) and not like other researchers. When asked what exactly he meant by this, he expressed his distaste for what he called "old men's fancy" about people flying up to the sky and similar absurd tales (or myths as a researcher would call them), and explained that researchers must call attention to the fact that Yezidi hymns express scientific truth only recently known to modern science. For example, hymns on the creation talk of the world first being an endless sea above which God was travelling in a ship, while modern science has only recently

12 Thus, for example, Pîr Mamou Othman, at the conference on Yezidis in Frankfurt ("Yezidism in Transition," 12–17 April, 2007, Frobenius Institute), talked of the need of "reformation of religion" and repeatedly referred to the influence of Martin Luther and the Reformation of Christianity in Europe, drawing a parallel to the need of a similar "Reformation" in the framework of Yezidi religion.

“proven” that water was the beginning of life on earth. Accordingly, he wanted me to talk about the ancient scientific knowledge coated in ceremonial language in Yezidi hymns, instead of what he viewed as fairy tales, like accounts on incarnated angels and their miraculous deeds.

His endeavours in a scientific interpretation of Yezidi religious traditions are not unique among the educated Yezidis. Arab Xidir, a volunteer collector of sacred hymns and a teacher at the religious Yezidi school in Beshiqe-Behzani, who is known for his exceptional interest in Yezidi lore, expressed similar opinions. Rather proudly he related that Yezidi hymns contain a hidden, deeper understanding of the universe which has become known to the great masses only recently. He quoted a hymn on the death of Sheikh Hassan, killed by Badradin Lulu, mentioning a “black star” (*sterê resh*) which he claimed to refer to the phenomenon known as “black hole” centuries before Western science realised its existence. The popular tale of Mîr Mih, the young prince looking for a place where no death exists, who then spends 400 years at the abode of Fortune as if it were 4, was interpreted by him as an allegory of Einstein’s concept of relativity. Similarly he claimed that Yezidi *qewls* speaking of the Seven Angels and God prove that Yezidis had a heliocentric view long before Copernicus. This ancient knowledge was also indicated by the *sema*, a religious dance, as well, where the line of the seven men circumambulating the sacred fire symbolises the stars turning around the sun. As a further proof he mentioned that while all other religions speak of water as the element out of which the world was created, Yezidi hymns alone name the air (*ba*), which as we now know is the basis of water (H₂O) and all other elements. Of course, this latter information is at variance with the one volunteered by the school principal mentioned above, but in both cases we meet the same concept: Yezidi *qewls* indicate a divinely inspired scientific understanding of the universe that is unique among religious texts.

How fast this approach is gaining ground was demonstrated by a young university student of physics from the University of Duhok (Iraq). During an interview (concerning the creation of the world), when she helped me with the translation, she referred to the divine pearl of the hymns from which the world was created as “atom,” to the creation as the “Big Boom,” and the barren period before vegetation was created as the “Ice Age.” Typically, she did not really translate what was said (as I later ascertained listening to my tapes,) rather she told me her own ideas which were clearly influenced by her wish to adjust her faith to her

scientific knowledge. Whether such attempts at a modern, scientific interpretation of ancient sacred texts are culturally influenced by similar attempts among Muslims to find references to all modern scientific phenomena in the holy text of the Quran (such as rockets for example) is an open question.

Not only the content but even the very origin of these sacred hymns has become a “bone of contention” in the quest for making a “scientific religion” out of Yezidi faith. Some reformist go as far as to claim that Yezidi tradition attributes the authorship of Yezidi sacred hymns to different human beings, and Yezidis have no tradition of their sacred texts being revealed by angels or sent from the sky, despite the clear (and recorded) evidence to the contrary.¹³

The other aspect of this rewriting of the mythology is the wish to avoid ridicule in the eyes of outsiders, or even, if I may use an anachronism, the wish to be politically correct, that is, not to say things that may be taken amiss by the majority. The best example of this is the fate of the Yezidi origin myth, the myth of Shehid bin Jerr. According to this narrative, the Yezidi nation was not created like the other nations or peoples. This story has several versions, but they all claim that Yezidis were created from the seed of Adam, which symbolised his divine power, and was placed in a jar by the Peacock Angel. After 9 months a beautiful boy was found in this jar, Shehid bin Jerr, who married a *hourî* from paradise, and they became the forefathers of the Yezidis. Furthermore, Shehid knew the true religion of God, which he passed on to the Yezidis. Other nations were born in an inferior way, i.e., through sexual intercourse between Eve and Adam, therefore, they are inferior. Naturally they do not possess knowledge of the true religion and are considered impure. Yezidis are forbidden to marry such inferior creatures. Clearly, such a myth sounds either absurd or insulting, perhaps both, to outsiders. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that people like Qewel Suleyman, the head of the *qewels*, or religious singers, at first pretended not to be familiar with this story, insisting that everybody was born from Adam and Eve. Arab Xidir referred to Shehid as the first prophet, and while he talked of his having married a *hourî*, he never mentioned the story of the jar. When asked, he claimed that Shehid was no other than Adam, who was made from water, earth, air, and fire, according to Yezidi mythology. As

¹³ This view was put forward, for example, by Mamou Othman at the Frankfurt conference. It is debatable, however, if such an extremely rationalist view would be embraced by the majority of the Yezidis, especially as they feel the need to become a “religion of the book” as noticed above.

Arab Xidir said, water and earth give clay, which is then put to dry in the air, and it is finally cooked in fire. The result is a jar. Thus the epithet bin Jerr (son of the jar) simply referred to Adam as a man created from the same four elements as a jar. Others, like Sheik Alo from Shariya, a former Communist Party member, talked about the myth as something “our grandfathers believed in, but of course today we know that we are all from Adam and Eve.”

Pre-Islamic Origin and Islam as an Alien Element

Finally this modern “rewriting” of Yezidi lore entails another phenomenon, namely, the rejecting of any notions of Islamic origin or Muslim influence. Yezidi–Muslim relations have traditionally been rather strained, as Yezidis were considered either as *kafirs* or as heretics, that is, Muslims who deviated from the right path, a capital sin in Islam. In fact, this view still holds fast despite the official propaganda of declaring Yezidi faith the “original Kurdish religion.”¹⁴ Today, when the understanding and dealing with religion has become more conscious among the educated, Yezidis seem to be “taking their revenge” in a novel way. They claim that anything that appears to be connected with Islam is a “foreign body” added to the pure Yezidi religion either to mislead the Muslims or as a result of aggressive Muslim proselytising.

This is best reflected in the way Sheikh Adi, the most important religious figure of Yezidi faith, is treated today. Sheikh Adi was traditionally considered a divine being incarnated in human form, the earthly manifestation of Tawusi Melek, the Peacock Angel, and the head of the Seven Angels. Yezidi hymns even seem to identify him with God. Many legends talk of miracles performed by him. He is a central figure of Yezidi hymns and his tomb is the most important place of pilgrimage for the Yezidis. In the second half of the 19th century, however, he was identified by the French consul, M Siouffi, with the historical Sheikh Adi bin Musafir, the 12th-century founder of the Sufi Adawiya order, and of Arabic origin. In the course of time, this was confirmed by other researchers as well and could be called a common knowledge in Iraq today. On the other hand, in the 30s the

Bedirxan brothers, in their search for a unified Kurdish identity came up with the idea that Yezidism was in fact the original, pre-Islamic Kurdish religion (Strohmeier 2003: 167). During the struggle for Kurdish independence in the last few decades, much was made of this theory, and it was enthusiastically embraced by many Yezidis as well, at least in the Sheikhan region.¹⁵ For Yezidis keen about this “original Kurdish religion image,” the presence of Sheikh Adi, an Arab and a Muslim, proved somewhat confusing or even embarrassing. It was all the more so as the Saddam regime tried to present the Yezidis as people of an Arab origin, and Sheikh Adi’s figure was quite useful for this purpose. As a result, these days educated Yezidis who wish to distance themselves from any allegation that Yezidi faith is a deviation of Islam not only reject the divinity of Sheikh Adi but also stress that he was a *reformer*, and no more, of the Yezidi religion. The presence of many elements perceived as coming from Islam is thus attributed to the outside influence of Sheikh Adi. The idea of Sheikh Adi as a mere reformer leads to another curious development. There seems to be a new theory among the Yezidis of two clearly separate stages in the history of the Yezidis, one before and one after Sheikh Adi. Sometimes two different versions of the same myth are being explained as one belonging to the time before Sheikh Adi and the other to the one after him.

Younger, educated, and secular Yezidis, with a strong Kurdish consciousness, go even further in “rejecting” Sheikh Adi. For example, talking of certain taboos, like not eating fish, one young man claimed: “these do not have to be followed because they are not ancient Yezidi ideas but come from Sheikh Adi, who was an Arab.”¹⁶ Even the idea that Sheikh Adi “corrupted” pure Yezidi faith is voiced occasionally. For example, they state that Yezidi hymns are not authentic, as Sheikh Adi used the old Yezidi texts and mixed them with quotations taken from the Quran. They base this assertion on the presence of Arabic words and expressions in the hymns, the references to Islam and the Sunna, and some coincidences they claim to see in the Quranic text and the hymns, saying that the two use the same words and expressions.

Such a bias against Islam may even lead to the rejection of legends and hymns which should be

14 Some people actually manage to endorse both views simultaneously. That is, they proudly claim that Yezidism, the original Kurdish faith, is much older than Islam and Christianity, or even Judaism and Zoroastrianism, while insisting that Yezidis worship the Devil and quoting the Sufi story of Satan’s fall.

15 I found that in the Sinjar mountain, for example, the situation is somewhat different.

16 Similar observations were made by Allison (2001: 39). Another solution, among those of a more traditional mind, who are not willing to deny Sheikh Adi, is to claim that his family originally hailed from Hakkari and that he was born among the Kurds of Lebanon.

rightly considered authentic Yezidi legends, as their content clearly echoes the Yezidi ethos. But these are still rejected by “modernising” Yezidis – often with their exact content unknown – as “late insertions,” simply because the heroes of such works bear the names of Islamic historical figures. The so-called “Qewlê Mezin,” or Great Hymn, is a perfect example. This hymn on Yezid bin Muawiya was declared a “forgery” by a young university graduate, who is an editor of the Yezidi periodical *Lalish*, and who writes articles on the faith of the Yezidis. He claimed that the hymn was the product of attempts on the part of Yezidis to placate Muslims by inserting the name of a Muslim personage, the second Umayyad caliph, into their system. This view was shared by Arab Xidir, mentioned above, who was of the opinion that the Great Hymn itself was an authentic hymn, but that the name of Yezid bin Muawiya was inserted into it later on by Muslims. No attention was paid to the fact that the hymn is built around the figure and reputation (as a drunkard given to lewd and irresponsible ways) of Yezid bin Muawiya. Similarly, neither of my informants seemed to recall that the caliph has never enjoyed a very good reputation in Islamic history, and the role attributed to him in this Yezidi hymn is a plain rejection and mockery of the Islamic *shariya* and could have hardly won over any Muslim heart.

New Origin Myths of the Yezidis

The idea of a pre-Islamic origin leads almost automatically to a tendency to try to relate Yezidism to other ancient religious movements of the region, often following the suggestion of non-Yezidi writers (see also Allison 2001: 36, 40). Naturally, the notion of the ancient origin of the Yezidi faith is a traditional one. The above-mentioned Yezidi origin myth traces the lineage of the Yezidis straight to the son of Adam. The words “Our faith is old, very old” is a sentence a researcher is to hear everywhere, from fellow travellers in shared taxis travelling to Yezidi villages to university educated Yezidis. Similarly, most Yezidis will be ready to tell anyone interested that Yezidis used to be far more numerous in the past, and their numbers had been reduced dramatically due to the repeated persecutions and forced conversions. Today many will even mention that originally all Kurds were Yezidis, a notion that enjoys official patronage from the Kurdish state’s intent on building up a national myth. Of course, these statements do not lack the historical fundament, as persecutions are still vividly remembered, and many people, even younger ones have some

idea when and where their tribe came from,¹⁷ following a wave of massacres and forced conversions. However, there is a marked difference between communal memory regarding past but more or less concrete events transmitted by word of mouth, and the new Yezidi myth of an ancient and glorious past that is being constructed by educated Yezidis who are writing or reading articles about their people and religion. While simple people are satisfied with the stressing of the fact that their religion is very old or the oldest one, and that they used to be far more numerous, educated Yezidis try to trace the lineage of their faith to the once glorious cultures and religions of the Middle East, the cradle of modern civilisation, or what is more, they try to vindicate a Yezidi origin for these cultures.

Yezidis are not the only or the first ones to try to trace their descent from the long-gone empires of the Middle East. Claiming a glorious ancestry is a source of prestige in the region (Allison 2001: 36, 41). In a clear instance of feedback, Christians identify themselves with the Assyrians since the 19th century, when European researchers first put the theory of their Assyrian origin forward. Zoroastrian descent is popular among Kurds, while others draw their swords to prove that Kurds are no others than the descendants of the Medes. The Sumerian origin is claimed by all and sundry in the region (including even some Turkish researchers). Among Yezidis a disconcerting number of theories are circulating today. Some talk enthusiastically of the Assyrians, who have long been publicised as putative grandfathers of the Yezidis by some Western researchers.¹⁸ Sumerians and the “ancient religions” of Mesopotamia are also often mentioned (boundaries between different deities and nations seem to have become somewhat obscure here). Others put great energy into discovering the

17 I.e., Turkey, other parts of Iraq, or even, surprisingly, Russia, as an older Dina woman of the *pîr* class, originally from a Syrian village near the Iraqi border, claimed. According to her, her people originated in Russia, and came to what was once the Ottoman Empire only after a persecution finished off all the *pîrs* of her tribe. Another young Yezidi pointed out, on a trip to the mountains just next to the Turkish border, around Kani Masi, that there used to be many Yezidi villages less than a century ago, and many settlements still have the same names as Yezidi villages today more to the South. I had no way of checking the truth content of this statement. Yet again another Yezidi claimed that Hatra, once an important town of the Assyrians, well south of Mosul, used to be Yezidi until its inhabitants were moved to the North, to the Yezidi village of Xeter, a few kilometres north of Mosul. This is obviously a case of false etymological reasoning.

18 Some Assyrian Christians also embrace the notion of the Assyrian origin of the Yezidis, though it is hard to tell if they do so out of genuine conviction or political consideration.

Zoroastrian¹⁹ or even “Mithrean” origins of their faith.²⁰ A constructed past needs its own myths, and in the attempt to prove such relationships the Yezidi talent for creating myths seems to spring to life again. So, for example, I was told in all seriousness that there were ancient Assyrian pictograms on the wall of the Lalish sanctuary, only they were covered by white plaster so that Muslims would not become jealous. On another occasion, I was told that the Assyrian rock carvings on the mountainside above Duhok represented the Seven Holy Angels of the Yezidis (actually each of the three panels showed eight figures). The conviction that the legend of Mîr Mih, a young prince who went in search of eternal life, is in fact the same myth as the Gilgamesh epic was voiced by several people.

Some of the most ambitious are not satisfied with merely tracing the origin of the Yezidis to ancient civilisations, but rather turn the whole thing around and set out to prove that these very civilisations were in fact Yezidis. The notion that Yezidis are the “original Kurds,” in other words all Kurds have once been Yezidis, has for some time enjoyed popularity not only among Yezidis but – since the foundation of the Kurdish Autonomy in 1991 and the need for constructing a national myth – among Sunni Kurds as well (Allison 2001: 38, 41).²¹ But some root searching Yezidis are no longer content with this and have lately tried to lay claim to more “originality.”

One example of Yezidis having provided other religions with their mythology through the Sumerians has been mentioned above. Another one, rather unsettling for Western ears, is that of Aryan (*Arî*) ancestry. The notion of the Aryan ancestry of the Yezidis, or rather of Yezidi faith being the original and unadulterated Aryan religion, seems to have gained a surprising popularity.²² I have heard fleeting references to such ancestry several times (but

interestingly, never from Muslim Kurds, though they belong to the group of Indo-European speakers too). The most coherent picture of Yezidis as Aryans and Aryans as Yezidis was furnished by Arab Xidir. He gave a very good example of how traditional Yezidi mythology and bits and pieces from modern linguistic and historical writings²³ can be worked into a complex fabric to meet the demands of the new Yezidi self-image. He related that the “Forty Men,” well-known figures of Yezidi mythology, who travelled in the boat of Noah, became the forefathers of the Aryan people.²⁴ These Aryan people, who included, according to my informant, the Sumerians, the Hurrians, the Guti, the Elami, the Mittani, and a host of other ancient peoples of the Middle East, were all Yezidis, that is monotheists, “Ezi” being the name of God whose unity and oneness they worshipped. Here my informant quoted the story of the destruction of the Tower of Babel. In his interpretation, this tale referred to the fact that originally all these people were of the same religion, that is, they worshipped God and God alone, but then they were dispersed and lost their original faith. In this way an ancient myth combined with modern historiography leads to the birth of a new myth. The story of the Tower of Babel, adapted from one of the Semitic religions, is not rejected but retold in a different way. With time and the arrival of the Semi people and the Semitic religions, the number of Yezidi Aryans dwindled and today’s Kurdish Yezidis are their only descendants. Other Aryans, who once peopled Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Caucasia, and Europe, have strayed from the path of the righteous religion (i.e., a sentiment calling to mind the view Islam takes on the “Religions of Book”). He claimed that the name of these once glorious peoples survived among the tribe names of the Yezidis, thus proving that the Yezidis were in fact the descendants of these groups, who have once played the role of protagonists at the dawn of our culture. Thus the Reshke of Sinjar were the Ashak (??), the Horka were Horri, the Haweri were Hurin, the Haltî were Mittani, and the Smokan were Sumeri originally. Using similar etymological reasoning, he pointed to the “fact” that Sumerians used a lot of Kurdish

19 Zoroastrians have also been proposed as the putative ancestors of the Yezidis by early researchers like Rev. Empson (1928).

20 Yezidis are not the only Kurdish heterodox group to seek links with pre-Islamic cults. The Ahl-i Haqq of southern Kurdistan also “like to emphasize the endogeneity of their culture and spirituality, and minimise the Arabo-Islamic lore” thus securing themselves a respected space among the Muslim but nationalist majority (During 1998: 111).

21 It must be noted that while Yezidis in the Sheikhan and the Duhok are enthusiastically embracing this notion, Sinjari Yezidis insist that they are a people apart, and since the fall of the Saddam regime have managed to infuriate their brethren by stubbornly refusing to be labelled Kurds.

22 I can only assume that Yezidis are naively unaware of the negative images this word, and especially casual references to Germans as Aryans, conjure up in those familiar with European history.

23 Unfortunately, I don’t know what his sources were, though I managed to ascertain that he read Yezidi magazines like *Lalish* and *Roj*.

24 There are different opinions as to who the Forty Men, or *Chil Mêr*, to whom a high peak in the Sinjar is consecrated, exactly were. According to Feqir Haci they were companions of Sheikh Adi, but the Baba Sheikh also spoke of them in connection of the Flood. See also Kreyenbroek (1995: 100f.).

words, a further proof of the common origin. Thus the name of Gilgamesh means “buffalo.” The name of Ibrahim Xalil, that is of Abraham, a Yezidi himself, was also Kurdish, meaning the “brother of all” (*birayê hemî*).

Though in the course of my research, I heard the most coherent and full exposition of the theory of Aryan ancestry from Arab Xidir, such ideas were presumably not all his own, but more likely they formed a part of the current literature on the Yezidis, for similar opinions were voiced by others as well in the Sheikhan-Duhok region. While some contented themselves with a vague reference to their Aryan descent and their German relatives, others also spoke of the Mittanis, Hurrians, and so on. During a debate on the question of mixed marriages, the fact that a Mittani king gave his daughter in marriage to the Pharaoh of Egypt was mentioned as a proof that Yezidis had not always been opposed to marriage with non-Yezidis. An article published in the *Lalish* magazine dispensed with the Aryan origins but repeated the Kurdish etymology of Ibrahim’s name, trying to link the patriarch, an alleged sun worshipper, to the Yezidis, ancient sun worshippers.

Such academic root searching can eventually become a part of everyday religious consciousness. The idea that Christians were originally Yezidis seems to have gained quite currency, no doubt partly due to the traditional good relations between the two minorities. An even more telling example is the theory that Yezidism originally was a form of sun worship – a very popular theory if one is to go by the content of *Lalish* magazine. So, for example, the guardian of a shrine in Xanke, Sheikh Dosti, explained me that Bayazid Bastami, a well-known Sufi saint of the 9th century, was a Yezidi and a Shemseni. The so-called Shemseni sheikhs trace their lineage to Sheikh Shems, a companion of Sheikh Adi, who lived much later than Bayazid Bastami. According to Sheikh Dosti’s explanation, however, the tribe of the Shemsenis is in fact much older, because it means “sun worshippers.” In other words, it refers to the Yezidis who were the ancient sun worshippers of the region. Though vestiges of sun worship can indeed be found in the Yezidi belief system, it is unlikely that a Yezidi, say a hundred years ago, would have put things quite in this way. At least, there is nothing in the accounts of past travellers to imply this. The notion of Shemsenis as ancient sun worshippers clearly shows an external influence, that is, how non-Yezidi writings on the origins of Yezidis eventually come to influence the self-perception of the Yezidis, which – in its turn – reflects on the retelling of the mythology.

Conclusion

To sum it all up, while in the past it was the oral way of transmitting tradition that shaped Yezidi religion and gave it its peculiar characteristics, today one can witness the very opposite. The sudden appearance of literacy seems to be reshaping not only the way traditions are transmitted through the vehicle of books and publications instead of the oral way, but also the very content of these traditions themselves. While we witness a certain simplification of Yezidi lore, as many variants perceived as “superfluous” are eventually rejected and the same happens to those myths that would be perceived as ridiculous or unfit to modern, “scientific thinking,” new elements are taking their place. These elements are usually the result of “research” on Yezidis and first appear in some publications then to become a part of the Yezidi lore. They aim at constructing (or reconstructing) Yezidi history and providing the Yezidis with a “modern and scientific” religion.

The “modernisation” or “rewriting” of Yezidi religious lore can offer us a glimpse not only of the future but of the past of the Yezidi religion as well. This is not the first time in history that the Yezidis came to be influenced by “the outside world.” As researchers have pointed out, there are countless motifs in their mythology and religious poetry that can be traced to the religions that succeeded each other in the region.²⁵ It is certain that the outside influence has never been as penetrating as it is now in the age of mass-communication. But we can still assume that what we witness today may serve as a model for how oral religions in the past managed to incorporate and adapt numerous motifs from other religions.

These days we can watch the mythmaking process in an accelerated way. Above we have seen several instances of how certain new elements can become incorporated into Yezidi mythology and retold as part of the myth itself. The idea that the *xirqe*, or sacred shirt, symbolizes the darkness surrounding the original Pearl is mentioned not as a possible explanation of a motif (taken from a learned article) but as part of the tradition. The destruction of the Tower of Babel is now retold as the end of the primeval monotheism, originally confessed by all Aryans. The concept of the Yezidis being sun worshippers is apparently on its way to become a popular motif, and the same is true about notions that Sheikh Adi’s advent marked a new stage in the history of Yezidi religion and mythology. Many other examples could be mentioned.

²⁵ Kreyenbroek 1992, 1995: 45–67; Spät 2002.

While these motifs were probably originally offered as explanations or theories, they are no longer seen as mere hypotheses, attempts at interpreting the mythology, or mythical history of the Yezidis, but now show all the characteristics of becoming an integral part of the mythology. They are being recounted in exactly the same way as, say, the myth of Shehid bin Jerr or the story of a *xas* – a holy being connected with some sacred place.

It is not unreasonable to assume that the process of adopting new motifs and creating new myths, or rather modifying older myths and mythology according to new ideas and concepts coming from outside, is not altogether different from what had happened in earlier centuries, even if the vehicle of transmission – writing – is a new one.

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