

Processes of Integration, Identity Construction and the Role of Religion: The Case of the Iraqi Yezidis

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Yezidis are a Kurdish-speaking religious minority living in the Middle East. The majority of Yezidis live in Northern Iraq, with smaller pockets in Northern Syria and South-East Turkey (as well as in the Caucasian states and in the Western diaspora.) For centuries Yezidis constituted an anomaly in the Middle East, as followers of an oral religion in a region long ruled by “bookish religions”. Their religion also influenced their social position, since not being considered “ahl al-Kitab” or “people of a (revealed) Book”, they had to exist on the periphery of Kurdish society, vulnerable to attacks by the Muslim majority. The last few decades have wrought a radical change on both Yezidi religion and their place in society. While Yezidis came to play an increasing role in the Kurdish nationalist movement, which accords Yezidism the prestigious position of being the “original Kurdish religion,” Yezidi religious traditions themselves are also undergoing a profound transformation under the influence of modernity. My research focused on these processes which can be seen as paradigmatic of the important role religion plays in modern Middle East identity politics, and of the radical transformation of oral and popular religion in the region.

My research consisted of two different phases: (i) field research for gathering material on Yezidis; (ii) working on the collected material and placing it within the framework of literature on. I did field work with the help of the OTKA grant in Northern Iraq (Iraqi Kurdish Region and the Sinjar Mountain) between April – May 2011, October – December 2013. (I also carried out field work between September 2011 – February 2012 with a Gerda Henkel grant with the permission of the OTKA.) During my field research I concentrated on the following different (but naturally interrelated) topics: oral history of the Yezidis under the Baath era; Yezidis’ attitude toward Kurdish identity today and their relationship with the agencies of Kurdish political power; the process of scripturalization of Yezidi oral tradition and its connection to different aspects of Kurdish nationalism; the balance of continuity and change in Yezidi religious tradition.

One of the main aims of my research was oral history of the Ba'ath era, that is, how Yezidis of different social and educational backgrounds reconstruct their role in the Kurdish movement during the Ba'ath era, as well as their experiences with the central government. This topic has never been studied by researchers before, and therefore it necessitated intense field research and the collection of oral testimonies. I have managed to collect a great amount of material which throws new light on this period, often contradicting the official discourse on Yezidis as staunch defenders of the Kurdish cause. While I was already aware of the fact that Kurdish identity among the Yezidis is a recent development and may depend on the political circumstances, even I was surprised by my findings. Oral testimonies suggest that while Yezidis may have been sympathetic toward the Kurdish movement opposed to the central-government (often merely as a mere reaction to the heavy-handed politics of Baghdad), many of those who actually joined the *peshmerga* organization in the Kurdish mountains usually did so for a number of personal reasons (attempt to avoid conscription to the Iraq-Iran front, trouble with the authorities or even cases of blood revenge within the Yezidi community.) On the other hand, while the *chete* (Kurdish irregulars fighting alongside the central government against the Kurdish *peshmerga*) are today depicted in Kurdish public discourse as traitors, many Yezidis actually joined these irregular troops in the 80's with the aim of escaping both the Iraq-Iran war and the punishment meted out by Baghdad to those families whose members were known to have joined the *peshmerga*. (The same is true, on a grander scale, for many Muslim Kurds in the 80s'.) Many (especially women) also recall the Ba'ath era (with its considerable social-benefits system) with nostalgia and see "Kurdishness" as the start of the troubles which affected Yezidis during the decades of warfare between Baghdad and the Kurds.

While today most Yezidis living in the Kurdish Region and even in the Sinjar (where the Kurdish Regional Government, and especially the Kurdish Democratic Party had a strong presence until August 2014) seem to accept the "official" discourse that Yezidis are Kurds, and devoted to the Kurdish cause, in-depth interviews indicate that most Yezidis, who see Muslims as the "inimical other", do not see themselves as members of the same ethnic or national community than (Muslim) Kurds. All the same, at the time of my field works (between 2011 April and 2013 December) Yezid identification with "Kurdishness" seemed to be steadily gaining in strength among the younger population (who now all go to school), a fact also indicated by the adoption of such Kurdish holidays as Newroz, or of the "Kurdish dress" worn on festive occasion (which is markedly different from traditional Yezidi dress.) The events of this summer, however, may have stopped, or even reversed this gradual

acceptation of Kurdish identity, as many Yezidis feel they were deliberately abandoned by Muslim Kurds. All this suggest that national identity in the Middle East is shifting one, with religious affiliation still being far more important than belonging to an “ethnic group” (a Western concept rather than a local one), a conclusion born out by recent political developments both in Iraq and Syria.

I have given the following papers on this topic based on the above research material: In my lecture, “Yezidis: Images of a Shifting Identity in Iraq,” delivered at the workshop on *New Voices, New Media, New Agendas? Pluralism and Particularism in the Middle East and North Africa* (organized by the Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin, 2011) I talked about the formation of multiple Yezidi identities in modern Iraq, and how this is both represented and shaped by modern media, from books through traditional newspapers to cyberspace. I analyzed how a religious-ethnic minority is affected by the cultural, political and economical changes in the Middle East, and most specifically in a new nation-state in the process of just being forged (i.e. Iraqi Kurdistan) in the papers “Yezidis: A Religious Minority in a transforming Middle East” (in Hung., delivered at Károli Gáspár University, Budapest, 2012); and “Yezidis: Religion and Identity in the Middle East” (in Hung., at the Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Budapest, 2014). Yezidis’ primary identity as a religious, non-Muslim group was also a part of my lecture “73 Fermans: Persecution in Yezidi Communal Memory” given at the workshop *Violence Remembered, Violence Lived: The Islamic State, Genocide and the Yazidis of Iraq*, organized by The NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust, and Genocide Studies in Amsterdam, 2014 November. This lecture analyzed how Yezidis see themselves vis-à-vis Muslims (whether Kurds, Arabs or Turks) and how the memories of past persecutions, rather than shared language or culture, constitute the basis of contemporary Yezidi identity.

As what is written above demonstrates, religion is an inseparable part of identity formation in the Middle East. Therefore I devoted much field work to Yezidi religion (which, though marginally more researched than Yezidi oral history of the past decades, is still a little-known topic, due to difficult access to Iraqi Yezidis, as well as the nature of oral tradition, which necessitates a markedly different approach than the so-called bookish religions). My attention was especially focused on the multiple aspects of scripturalization.

One of the most salient characteristic of Yezidi religion is its oral nature. This orality shaped the structure and nature of the Yezidi belief system. However, the encroachment of modernity, which led to the inclusion of Yezidis in modern nationalist politics and to the

formations of new identities, also resulted in a radical reconstruction of the traditional religious system. The impetus for such a fast transformation can be traced back to the structural changes of Yezidi and Kurdish society as well as to new “cultural pools” recently made accessible to Yezidis by new technologies of information transfer. In the past few decades, with the fast urbanization of Kurdish society, the appearance of an educated Yezidi professional class working in urban centers and the large scale emigration to the West, there has been an ever-increasing contact with the non-Yezidi world and a growing participation in it, both in Iraq and in the West. The most notable cultural concomitant of this social change is the appearance of literacy among Yezidis. Acquiring literacy also means that concepts based on literacy, such as possessing books (both on religion and community history), and valuing the written word over orality has become a general concern. As a result, Yezidi religion is steadily transforming from an oral religion into a written one. This process of scripturalization entails not only collecting and writing down oral texts and creating a written corpus but also the ways this corpus is then being handled. Educated Yezidis who have everyday contact with non-Yezidis (Muslims or Christians) aim to “modernize” or rather to reconstruct the Yezidi belief system in such a way that it conforms to the (perceived) expectation of outsiders and also to their recently acquired knowledge of history, science and philosophy. In essence, they wish to create a “bookish religion,” primarily modeled on Christianity and on currently popular Western interpretations of what religion means or should mean. Some Yezidi intellectuals leading this trend like to refer to this as “reforming” Yezidi faith.

Scripturalization is affected not only by the spread of literacy, the emergence of a new middle class, and the transnational Yezidi diaspora, but also by the political exigencies of a Yezidi middle class reliant on the Kurdish authorities and aligning itself with the Kurdish movement. As a result, the process of scripturalization is accompanied by the creation of new myths which aim to align Yezidi mythology with the nationalist concept of Yezidi religion being the “original Kurdish religion.”

The scripturalization of Yezidi oral religion and the way it reflects on the ongoing transformation of Yezidi society and identity was the topic of my lectures “Constructing a ‘Real Religion’ in Modern Iraq” (*Religion Outside Text*, workshop organized by the Dynamics of the History of Religion in Asia and Europe project of Käte Hamburger Kolleg, Ruhr University, Bochum, 2013); “The Yezidis: An Old Religion in the Changing Middle East,” (Slovakian Society for the Study of Religions, Bratislava, 2014); “Following the Peacock: The Yezidis” (Department of Religious Studies at School of Oriental and African Studies, London, 2014.); “Creating Books and Creating New Memories in Northern Iraq”

(*Traveling Memories: Lives in Transition*, The Fifth International Symposium of the Finnish Oral History Network, Helsinki, 2014.)

Studying the material culture of the sacred and its transformation is closely related to question of the scripturalization of Yezidi religion, as the same factors are shaping these two, complimentary aspects of religious culture. My invited article “The Peacock *Sanjak*, Yezidi Oral Tradition and Identity” (Hung. „A páva *szandzsák*, jezidi szóbeli hagyomány és identitás”) for the periodical *Axis: Journal of Religious History* 5 (*Axis: Vallástörténeti Folyóirat*) analyzes the possible origins of Yezidis’ most sacred object, the Peacock Standard, and its role in helping to preserve Yezidi oral religious tradition. It also studies how in the past few decades, as oral tradition has slowly been replaced by bookish tradition and ritual life has started to loose its former importance, the Standard evolved from a sacred object to a symbol of modern Yezidi identity widely utilized in the transnational Yezidi printed and social media. It also looked at Yezidi reaction to the discovery (attributed to modern media, primarily television) that similar peacock standards were routinely sold in Indian shops of religious artifacts, and the absorption of such Indian imports into Yezidi culture, from displaying them in the homes of religious leaders to featuring them in schoolbooks on Yezidi religion. The treatment of these imported peacock standards demonstrates the flexibility and resilience of Yezidi religion, which is able to adapt itself to changing realities by absorbing and adapting new motifs and concepts with an ease that would not be possible in the case of bookish religions.

I gave a lecture, “Islamic Magic Bowls and Yezidi Oral History in Iraqi Kurdistan,” at the Central European University within the framework of a lecture series organized by the Center for Eastern Mediterranean Studies, on the role of “objects of memory.” Such objects (usually connected to the field of religion) simultaneously serve to construct and reconstruct communal memory of past history, strengthen Yezidi group identity, demonstrate the spiritual superiority of Yezidi religion and provide prestige for individual families. A manuscript on this topic is in preparation.

I have also worked on the recent “invention of a culture of images” among Yezidis which is tied both to material culture and to the process of scripturalization, as this development is also a result of the growing influence of non-Yezidi culture and increasing contact with the external world, technical modernization (from photography to internet), as well as the use of images in the personality cult of Iraqi political leaders. A combination of these factors have led to the gradual emergence of images of the supernatural from the mid

90s' on, which eventually led to the creation of images depicting various Yezidi holy beings, displayed on blogs, the Facebook, mobiles and even in Yezidi homes and shrines. I have talked about this development at the conference *Iconology Old and New: A Transregional Conference on the Move: Current Theoretical Interfaces: Iconicity, Semiotics, Historicity* (2013, Budapest) in my paper "The Yezidi Saint George: The Invention of Images in Iraqi Kurdistan." A manuscript on this topic is in preparation, preferably for an online journal which makes the inclusion of plenty of pictures possible.

As Yezidi culture and religious customs are seriously under-researched, it was necessary to pay attention to a number of other related topics. Researching these "secondary" topics was indispensable in order to see Yezidi culture in its entirety and to really comprehend the ongoing transformations. Furthermore, given the rapid social and cultural changes detailed above, many of these features may soon disappear or at the very least go through profound alterations. I have therefore also tried to research and record such things as the traditional ways of celebrating holidays and important events, ritual practices of healing, the concept of sacred space, attending pilgrimages, creating amulets, the beliefs concerning the jinn, and the institution of Yezidi seers.

My article "On Soil and Jinn: Ritual Practices and Syncretism among the Yezidis of Iraq" shows how certain rituals among the Yezidis of Iraq throw light on the religious syncretism between the different denominational groups of the region. It also studies how today these very same rituals may be affected by a new form of syncretism, that is, the deliberate attempt to "modernize" Yezidi religion (In *Rituale als Ausdruck von Kulturkontakt: „Synkretismus“ zwischen Negation und Neudefinition*. Studies in Oriental Religions 67. Ed. A. Pries, L. Martzloff, R. Langer and C. Ambos. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2013.)

The question of tradition and change and of the complex relationship between religion and changing social and political environment is brought to the fore again when we look at the topic of sacred space. While sacred space is in the center of most ritual and communal activities, Yezidi tradition follows very strict rules concerning such sacred space. It decrees that space can be made sacred only by the presence of holy beings, and humans cannot create sacred space – unlike in other religions. However, the Ba'ath era saw the destruction of many Yezidi villages together with their traditional sacred shrines and other constructions. In some cases Yezidis were permanently expelled even from the very sites of their sacred spaces (e.g. when their villages were inundated by the construction of the Mosul dam, or when the original villages became inaccessible to the community due to military presence or the

establishment of the Kurdish-Arab border.) This made it inevitable that creative solutions for the creation of new sacred space be found despite the traditional bans, in order to ensure the survival of the community. I dealt with this topic in my lecture “Turning Profane Space into Sacred: Constructing New Shrines among the Yezidis of Northern Iraq” as well as a half-a-day workshop "Sacred Space and Ritual in an Oral Religion. From Rocks and Springs to Yezidi *Qobs*", both given at the invitation of the “Ritual Dynamics” Collaborative Research Center (SFB 619), at Heidelberg University (Heidelberg, 2012).

Religion, politics and social issues are intertwined in the study of the recent renaissance and role of Yezidi seers in post-Saddam Iraqi Kurdistan. Yezidi seers act as spiritual mediators outside the formal religious establishment where hereditary is more important than spirituality. Seers, acting as channels of communication between the spiritual and the material world may come from any background (and both genders). During the Saddam era Yezidi seers all but disappeared due to the fact that the regime condemned, and in fact persecuted such activities, both as an obstacle to the modernization of Iraqi society and as a source of alternative power-structure that was seen as a threat to a strongly centralized state. In the last decade seers have made a come-back, with their numbers fast growing, and they have again started to fill an important function among Yezidis where the fast transformation of society creates great psychological tensions. Seers are often consulted not only on traditional matters (sickness, child-bearing) but also on such novel topics as (illegal) migration to the West, or (formerly tabooed) romantic relationships between young men and women, or even the problems of living in a Western society by Yezidis from the diaspora. The shift from male seers to the present preponderance of female ones also reflects the transformation of Yezidi (and in general Kurdish) society. I first talked about this topic at the conference *Spiritual Mediators* organized by the Hungarian Society for Religious Studies (Budapest, 2013) and later expanded this into an article “Those who ‘fall into book’: Yezidi seers in Northern Iraq at the beginning of the 21st Century” (Hung., in *Spiritual Mediators* (Hung.: Spirituális Közvetítők) Karoli Books Series. Budapest: L’Harmattan, 2014.)

My lecture, “Good Jinn - Bad Jinn: Healing Jinn-affliction among the Yezidis of Iraqi Kurdistan,” given at the Institute of Ethnology, Medical Anthropology (Heidelberg University, 2012) dealt with faith-based healing within the framework of beliefs concerning afflictions attributed to possession by the jinn among Yezidis and Muslims.

At the conference *Sacrifice, Ordeal Divination* (organized by the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, University of Pécs, 2014) I tried to demonstrate in my paper “Inter-Faith Practices of Beseeching the Supernatural in Northern Iraq” how common

concepts and rituals concerning mental and physical afflictions reflect the complex relationship between different religious groups in Northern Iraq. An article on this topic will be published as part of the series *Studies on the Transcendence*, at the Cambridge Scholars Publishing (to be submitted by 30th March, 2015.)

I was also asked to contribute to a volume (with the working title: *Mutant Biographies: Between Hagiography and Appropriation*) to be published by Brepols Publishing House in their series “Cultural Encounters in Late Antiquities and the Middle Ages.” My article will analyze the stories attributed Mohamed and Yezid bin Muawiya in Yezidi sacred texts and contrast them with contemporary Yezidi discourse on such Islamic figures. (Deadline for the submission of articles is July 2015.)

Furthermore I wrote the script for, edited and produced an anthropological film of 52 minutes, with the title “Following the Peacock.” This anthropological documentary features one of the central, but hitherto visually undocumented Yezidi rituals, the “parading of the Peacock” which was one of the most important means of transmitting religious oral tradition in the past. This film follows the Peacock Standard as it tours the settlements of Sinjar Mountain on the Iraqi-Syrian border, and it reflects on the role of this ritual in Yezidi spiritual and social life. Using the ritual as its central plot, it also analyzes how the events and changes of the past few decades affected Yezidi society, its traditional lifestyle and culture. The Sinjar Mountain has since been overrun by ISIS, and the whole Sinjari Yezidi community has fled. At the moment it is impossible to know if they will ever return. With the demise of the community, it is conceivable that the ritual of the Parading of the Peacock, recorded in this documentary for the first time, will never be resumed.

The film had its premier on the 11th of October 2013 at the Second Duhok International Filmfestival in Iraqi Kurdistan. It was subsequently screened at the Biennial Conference of the European Association of Social Anthropology (ACME Film Program, Tallinn), the Central European University, ISA Ethnographic Film Series of the Institute of Social Anthropology (Austrian Academy of Sciences, Vienna), School of Oriental and African Studies (London), Ancient India & Iran Trust (Cambridge), 8th "Cinema Vérité" Iran International Documentary Film Festival (Tehran), and Culture Unplugged Film Festival 2015: *Humanity Explored*. It was also put on the webpage of Duke University's Islamic Studies Center, the webpage of “Anthropology of Muslims in Europe” religionresearch.org, the website of Antall Jozsef Research Center, as well as numerous Kurdish websites and blogs.

Beside Yezidis, I also carried out some research on the role of Sufims (mystical Islam) and Sufi orders in present day Iraqi Kurdistan. While in some regions Sufism and related ritual and social practices have practically disappeared (mostly due to the forced urbanization during the Saddam era and the subsequent encroachment of puritanist Islamic movements), Sufism still plays an important cultural role in some communities, both rural and urban. I gave lectures on Sufi ritual gatherings and their function in rural Kurdish society at the Institute of Languages and Cultures of the Near East, Department of Islamic Studies of Heidelberg University (“Proof of True Faith’ in Akre: The Ecstatic *Sema* of the Qadri Dervish order in Iraqi Kurdistan”), at Károli Gáspár University (“Dervish Dance in the Kurdish Mountains”), and at the Center for Religious Studies, Central European University. (“Qadri Dervishes and their Rituals in Today’s Iraqi Kurdistan.”)

In September 2014, after the attack of ISIS/ISIL on the Yezidi community of Sinjar, which prompted the exodus of approximately 300 000 people and ultimately led to the international coalition against ISIS, I prepared a photo exhibition on Yezidis at the Central European University. The exhibition contained my pictures (from 2002 to my last OTKA-funded field trip in the fall of 2013), as well as recent pictures of the flight from Sinjar and of the refugee camps in the Kurdish Region sent by Yezidi acquaintances from Iraq, along with explanations written by me. The photo exhibition was opened by a round-table on ISIS and religious minorities in the Middle East.

Beside the articles I am working on at the moment (mentioned above), my field trips have provided me with plenty of material to work on in the next few years, involving different aspects of Yezidi history and religion. Furthermore, the material I collected and the academic results I achieved with the help of my OTKA grant also opened new academic possibilities for me. I have received a one year visiting research fellow position in the “Dynamics in the History of Religions in Asia and Europe” of the Käte Hamburger Kolleg (Ruhr-University Bochum), working on the process of the scripturalization of Yezidi religion. Following my lectures on Yezidi identity and religions, and on Kurdish Sufi orders at Karoli Gaspar University, I was asked to give a course on “Religious Minorities in the Middle East” in the fall semester of 2014. I was also asked to give another course on “Ritual Healing in the Middle East” in the 2015/16 academic year.