

The Yazidis

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Summary and Keywords

One of the world's most endangered religious minorities, the Yazidis are a predominantly Kurdish-speaking group numbering some 500,000 souls, who once inhabited a wide area stretching across eastern Turkey, northern Syria, northern Iraq, and western Iran. Of these territories, only the community in Iraq still numbers in the hundreds of thousands. Most come from two areas: Sheikhan, a collection of villages and towns to the northeast of Mosul, and Sinjar, a mountain to the northwest close to the border with Syria. Until recently these areas seemed stable; however, in August 2014, the so-called Islamic State (Da'esh) attacked the ancient community of Yazidis of Mount Sinjar, massacring hundreds of men, enslaving thousands of women and children, and driving the population of some 350,000 Yazidis into camps for internally displaced persons in the Kurdistan region. They are targeted because of their non-Abrahamic religion; for many years they have been erroneously known as "devil-worshippers." In fact, their belief system incorporates visible elements from the three "religions of the Book" (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) and traces of lesser-known religions, upon a substratum that may derive from Iranian religions (Zoroastrianism or similar). It is not a proselytizing faith, and religious relationships within the community are determined by birth. Marrying out is traditionally forbidden.

Yazidis are relative newcomers to urban life and are often socially, economically, and educationally disadvantaged. Internal pressures, especially from the youth, to "modernize" the religion have existed at least since the 1990s. However, the main drive toward change comes now from the Yazidis' loss of confidence in their safety in Iraq and their consequent migration toward Europe and the stresses of diaspora life. At the same time, an increasingly activist younger generation is demanding justice. The future of Yazidism is unclear, but it will certainly never be the same again.

Keywords: Iraq, Turkey, Armenia, Syria, caste, Peacock Angel, sheikh, pîr, murîd, taboo

Historical Background

The name “Yazidi,” used by outsiders, is nowadays resented because of its possible association with the ‘Umayyad caliph Yazid ibn Mu‘āwiya; the community prefers the Kurdish-language term Êzdî or Êzîdî, for which various popular etymologies are given (such as from the Kurdish *ez dam*, “I was given” [i.e., created, by God]) that do not stand up to philological scrutiny.¹ In the past, many scholars derived the name from the Old Iranian *yazata*, Middle Persian *yazad*, “Divine Being,” though most now favor a derivation from the name Yazid. This need not of course mean that today’s Yazidis are in fact associated with Yazid ibn Mu‘āwiya. ² A pro-‘Umayyad movement called the Yazidiyya existed in what is now northern Iraq during the 11th and 12th centuries, but this group may not constitute the same people later known as “Yazidis.” Yazid’s name appears in some of the Yazidi sacred texts, but any association this may have had with the historical caliph in Yazidi teaching has vanished over the centuries. However, we can be sure of the community’s connection with Sheikh ‘Adī b. Musāfir, founder of the ‘Adawiyya order, who settled at Lalesh, northeast of Mosul, at the turn of the 11th and 12th centuries ce. There is some discussion of whether ‘Adī himself or his successor of the same name settled there, but there is no doubt that this is the community that became today’s Yazidis.³ Like many other Sufi orders, the ‘Adawiyya brotherhood of Lalesh had a strong belief in the *baraka* (spiritual power) of the Sheikh and the mystery (*sirr*) of his sainthood, also inherited by other family members who were his successors. The current ruling family, the Chol dynasty of Yazidi princes, did not assume leadership until the 17th century. However, early historians noted that ‘Adī’s grand-nephew al-Ḥasan b. ‘Adī was venerated to an unusual extent and unable to control his fanatical supporters among the Kurdish tribes.⁴ He and two hundred supporters were executed in 1254 by Badr al-Dīn Lu’lu’, the Zangid Atabeg (governor) of Mosul. Sheikh Adī’s bones were then burned. Further evidence of conflict between Yazidis and Muslims is given by Al-Maqrīzī, who cites many instances of neglect and violation of Islamic laws by Yazidis. This provoked another burning of the Lalesh shrine in 1415 by a Shāfi‘ī theologian, ‘Izz al-Dīn al Hulwānī, with the military support of the Kurds of the Sindi tribe and the lord of Ḥiṣn Kayfā.⁵ Instances of Yazidi rule over larger areas that included non-Yazidis are few but noteworthy. The emirs of Jezīra b. Omar (known in Kurdish as

Cezîrê Botan) had once been Yazidis, probably, according to J. S. Guest, before 1415. In 1516, the Yazidi Sheikh ‘Izz al-Dîn managed to secure the execution of his rival Qasim Beg, chieftain of the Kurds near Aleppo, and to have himself named emir of the Kurds. However, after his death he left no heirs and the title reverted to Qasim Beg’s family. In 1534, the Yazidi Hussein Beg, under Sultan Suleyman, ruled briefly and brutally over the Soran tribes of Erbil, who as Shi’ites were the Yazidis’ enemies. He was soon supplanted by a member of the previous emir’s family, and put to death in Istanbul. In 1649, the Dasini Mirza Beg was briefly appointed governor of Mosul but was executed after traveling to Istanbul to seek reappointment upon the replacement of the grand vizier.⁶

Despite the turbulence of the 16th and 17th centuries, Yazidism remained widespread and influential in the politics of the area. Sheref Khan Bitlisi’s *Sheref-name* of 1597 cites seven of the Kurdish tribes as being Yazidi, at least in part. These included the Boti around Jezira and the Dasini around Sheikhan. The Yazidis of Syria had their origins, according to Sheref Khan, in the element of Saladin’s army that came from Hakkari. Further east were the Dunbeli, to the west of Lake Urmiya, and the Mahmudi southeast of Van. To the north were the nomadic Khaliti (east of Batman) and the Basian near Silvan.⁷ In his description of his travels of 1655–1656, Evliya Çelebi also counts Yazidi tribes, especially the Rojkî, among the supporters of Abdal Khan Bitlisi, whose rebellion against the Ottoman emperor he chronicles.⁸ He also gives an account of visits to the Dasini near Dihok and the Yazidis of Sinjar.⁹ The 18th and 19th centuries saw Yazidi influence and numbers decline. The end of the semiautonomous Kurdish principalities and the series of Ottoman *Tanzimat* reforms from the mid-19th century onward made the region more vulnerable to localized political instabilities. The 1832 massacre by “the Blind Prince” of Rawanduz of the Yazidi Prince Ali Beg, along with many of his followers in the valley that still bears his name, left a deep scar on the Yazidis of Sheikhan. Religious tensions inherent in the Ottoman *millet* system, whereby legal status was attributed according to religious identity, became more evident, with attacks on Yazidis and other minorities by chieftains such as Bedir Khan Beg of Cezîrê Botan.¹⁰ Without the status of “People of the Book,” the Yazidis did not have the religious rights extended to other groups such as Christians and Jews under the Ottoman millet system, and in the

words of the 20th-century British administrator C. J. Edmonds, “they tended to be regarded ... as apostates and were thus exposed to the danger that persons in authority, high and low ... might think it not only legitimate but even meritorious to maltreat them.”¹¹

During the late 19th century, the Ottoman state viewed them as targets for conversion under their civilizing mission, frequently depicting them as ignorant people led astray by their leaders.¹² They were also targeted by Catholic and Protestant missionaries, with limited success. After repeated interventions by Stratford Canning, British ambassador to Istanbul, and A. H. Layard, excavator of Nineveh and Babylon, their status officially changed in 1849, when an Ottoman edict was issued giving the Yazidis a degree of legal status.¹³ Nevertheless, attempts at forced conversion were still not prevented at higher levels, and local tribal politics remained dynamic and often uncertain, especially for the settled Yazidis of the Sheikhan area (near the holy site of Lalesh), who were less able to defend themselves than the tribally organized seminomads of Mount Sinjar, Van, and Kars provinces. The Yazidis’ aversion to military service, as evidenced in the so-called 1872 Petition, a document presented to the governor of Baghdad to request exemption, also irked the Ottoman authorities.

Perhaps the most egregious example of forced conversion before 2014 is the episode in 1892, when ‘Umar Wehbi Pasha (“Ferîq Pasha” in later Yazidi memory) was sent from Istanbul to the Mosul province to reclaim outstanding taxes and recruit *Hamidiye* (local irregular regiments) of converted Yazidis. Most Yazidi communities, like their former Armenian and Syriac neighbors, remember the Hamidiye with fear as enforcers of a militant Sunnism. Yazidi tribes are usually portrayed by Armenians as sheltering them from such forces. However, a Yazidi subsection of the Milli tribal confederation, led by Ibrahim Pasha and inhabiting the region around Viranşehir, did enlist. Their leader, Hesên Kenco, converted to Islam, but his followers seem to have kept their Yazidism; Hesên may also have been instrumental in having ‘Umar Wehbi Pasha recalled to Istanbul. But the violence of ‘Umar Wehbi Pasha’s actions in the Mosul area saw many civilians killed in Sheikhan, the annexation of Lalesh as an Islamic endowment, or *waqf*, and the forced conversion of the Mir, Mirza Beg.¹⁴ The Sinjaris were able to repel government forces, but the whole grievous episode is remembered in the oral tradition and still inspires fear.¹⁵

The great upheaval for the Yazidis of Van, Kars, and Bayazid (near Turkey's border with Iran and the Caucasus) was the aftermath of the Armenian genocide of 1915. Along with many Armenians, they fled en masse from the Ottoman Empire into Transcaucasia (now Georgia and Armenia), following those of their kinsfolk who had fled to Russian territories during the Russo-Turkish wars of 1828–1829 and 1877–1878.¹⁶ The Yazidis' role in the decisive battle of Sardarapat of May 1918, where the Turkish army was defeated, is commemorated by their Armenian neighbours.¹⁷ At the same time, the Yazidis of the 'Tur 'Abdin' or 'Jebel Tur' area (around Mardin in southeast Turkey) and those of Sinjar also made common cause with Christians and fought defensive campaigns from their mountain strongholds.

After World War I, Yazidi communities were divided by new international frontiers, which became more difficult to cross as the 20th century continued. The Caucasian Yazidis, separated from the *qewwals* (singers of the sacred texts) of Sheikhan, relied exclusively on their own men of religion, who were few in number and could be punished with exile if caught practicing religious rites. However, despite the difficulty of life in the villages and the uncertainties of the political climate, especially during the purges of 1937–1952, Soviet education policies brought literacy to the villages and created an educated professional class of Yazidis. Many were active in publishing and broadcasting; a few became historians, ethnographers, or folklorists, at a time when few of their co-religionists in Iraq attended school.¹⁸ After the fall of the Soviet Union and the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Mountainous Karabagh, the Muslim Kurds of Armenia were seen as suspect and almost all left; among the Yazidis a schism grew up between those who saw themselves as ethnically Kurdish and Yazidi by religion and those who considered Yazidism to be a separate ethnicity. This still exists today, though its ferocity has declined considerably. An even greater problem has been the precarious economic situation that has motivated many of Armenia's Yazidis to leave, seeking work in other former Soviet states, or looking for a better life in Europe. Few now remain in the villages of Armenia. The Yazidis of Georgia, linked by family ties to those of Armenia, are centered mainly around Tbilisi; although the identity issue is less divisive, they also experience similar economic difficulties. The 20th-century history of the Yazidis of Syria and Turkey is more obscure, with fewer sources available. Syria came under French

mandate after the Treaty of Lausanne; more recently, the Yazidis have been subjected to the general “invisibilization” policies applied to Syrian Kurds, including a lack of formal recognition and sometimes a lack of citizenship. The great majority of Turkey’s Yazidis left for Germany where they were offered asylum from ill treatment in the 1970s; although the younger generation has a strong political profile in the Kurdish movement there, the religious discourse is largely guided by influential Iraqi Yazidis who migrated to Germany in the early 1990s. There are strong communities in Oldenburg, Hanover, Bielefeld, and Celle. The period of British mandate in Iraq saw a Yazidi rebellion led by Dawûdê Dawûd, chieftain of the Mêrkan tribe of Sinjar, in 1925, which provoked air strikes by the Royal Air Force. He rebelled again in 1935 in protest against attempts to conscript Yazidis into the Iraqi army. During this period, tensions also grew between the Sheikhan and Sinjar communities, especially on the issue of the control exercised by the princely family and the revenues accruing to it.¹⁹ For most of the 20th century, the Iraqi Yazidis remained rather isolated, with few living in the towns alongside those of other faiths. Even the government collectivization projects, which for Yazidi settlements began after 1975, resulted in large but exclusively Yazidi collectives. The first generation of Yazidi university students in Iraq emerged in the late 1970s, and in 1979 the first collection of Yazidi sacred texts was published, by two Yazidi students at the University of Baghdad. This heralded a new area of public Yazidi reflection on their own religion and identity. After the Gulf War of 1991, a Kurdish de facto autonomous zone was created, which included a few of the Yazidi communities of Sheikhan and the shrine of Lalesh, but not Sinjar. Many Yazidis moved from collective villages into the city of Duhok. The Kurdistan Regional Government hailed them as “the original Kurds” (whereas Saddam Hussein had classified them as “Arabs”), and many became integrated into the Kurdish political structures. Instances of intercommunal violence between Yazidis and Muslims occasionally took place. Sinjar remained outside the Kurdish zone until 2007, when suicide bombs in the villages of Kahtaniya and Siba Sheikh Khidir resulted in hundreds of deaths. A garrison of *peshmerga* (Kurdish fighters) belonging to the Kurdistan Democratic Party then took responsibility for protecting the area, following party policy of discouraging local Yazidis from moving into the more prosperous Kurdish zone proper.²⁰ Yazidi feelings of resentment at

this turned into anger after the events of 2014, when the peshmerga fled the advance of Islamic State forces without warning the civilian population. Many Yazidis now no longer identify themselves as Kurdish.

The Yazidi Religion

Yazidism incorporates many elements (such as saints) from the Abrahamic religions, but is a religion apart, despite the importance of the 'Adawiyya Sufi brotherhood in their history. We know of no historical sources where Yazidis describe themselves as Muslim, although internal textual evidence from the orally transmitted sacred hymns, or *qewls*, seem to take the stance that Yazidis follow the true “tradition” while followers of the Sharia are heretics. It has been suggested that these come from a time when the divide between Yazidism and Islam was not yet absolute.²¹ Although a great deal of Yazidi religious terminology derives from Islam, much of it has altered in meaning. Yazidism has until recently been a religion of orthodox practice and right living, rather than of dogma. Esoteric knowledge contained in the religious texts is confined to a very limited number of people, with most taking practical advice from the men of religion. There is no universal declaration of faith (like the Islamic *shahada*) or definitive set of tenets (like the Christian catechism) that all Yazidis must know.

For Yazidis, God is a relatively remote figure, and contact with the divine takes place through seven Holy Beings (also known as “Angels”). These are emanations of the Divine, and because God has many names (a thousand, according to some), the Holy Beings also may have a number of names. Chief among them is Melek Tawûs, the Peacock Angel, also identified by the name “Sultan Êzî,” among others. It is this figure whom outsiders have identified with Satan, though Yazidism has no conceptualization of an Evil Principle and does not see Melek Tawûs as anything but divine; indeed, they find the word “Satan” so offensive that a taboo exists against pronouncing it, or even words that resemble it. The Peacock Angel is the Demiurge, placed in charge of the world by God. The Holy Beings have also appeared in human form at various points in history, most recently as Sheikh Adi and his companions, but also in the form of prophets and mystics known from other religions (e.g., Adam, Jesus, Hasan al-Basri).

Another key feature of Yazidism is its concern with purity, which is visible not only in religious and everyday practice but also in social organization and rules that prescribe the mixing of like with like. Thus, marrying out,

marrying outside one's social grouping, and even living away from the Yazidi community traditionally constituted grounds for ostracism. The well-known Yazidi taboo against reading and writing, attested during the 19th century, may be based in a reluctance to attend school alongside other communities; Yazidi aversion to military service alongside Muslims is attested in the 1872 petition mentioned previously. Some taboos may be due to word association: that against wearing the color blue may be a reflection that a common word for "blue" in Kurmanji, *şîn*, also means "mourning"; the much commented upon taboo against eating lettuce may reflect the fact that the Arabic word for an incarnated Divine Being, *khaşş*, sounds, to Kurdish ears, similar to the Kurdish word for lettuce, *xas*. Most of Yazidism's religious rules, despite their outlandish descriptions in outsider literature, can be reasonably explained in terms of the worldview of rural dwellers in Kurdistan who followed the guidance of oral tradition as interpreted by their men of religion.

The Yazidis' link with their homeland is a crucial part of the faith. In both the Sheikhan and Sinjar regions of northern Iraq, shrines mark places where the Holy Beings descended to earth; these are a focus for highly localized devotion and may also contain the tomb of a saint. Principal among these places is Lalesh, microcosm of the world, birthplace of Adam, and site of the descent of the Holy Beings. However, the landscape of Sheikhan and Sinjar is dotted with smaller shrines to such figures as Sheikh Mend or Pîrê Ewra, "Lord of the Clouds," some of the many names for the emanations of the Divine. Inside, there is normally an anteroom where the guardian may sit and talk with guests, and an inner sanctum where prayers and requests for divine help can be made. The earth of this place may be sacred, and tiny amounts may be taken away by believers; it is also normal for the faithful to kiss the threshold, which must be stepped over and never walked upon. The offering of a prayer or intention is often symbolized by small tasks or games performed on the sacred sites; one may tie a knot in a drape kept within the sanctuary to symbolize one's prayer (at the same time untying someone else's knot to have their prayer answered), or throw a cloth aimed at a certain point on the wall to secure a positive result for the prayer. More taxing and puzzle-like are the smooth spherical stones that can be piled up on top of one another, with the same aim. Some sites have broad pillars that the faithful embrace; if their hands can meet around a pillar, their prayer may be answered. The *stuna mirazê*,

“Wishing pillar.” of Lalesh is the best known but there are others. These activities have a religious purpose but are also part of the fun and festivity of visiting holy places. Sometimes particular trees grow nearby, where scraps of fabric are tied to symbolize prayers and intentions; this latter practice is known in all the religious communities of the area. There are also daily prayers that can be performed at home, though their form and practice vary; they are not compulsory. Yazidis also practice baptism at Lalesh.

Yazidis of the Caucasus, who mostly arrived in Armenia and Georgia during 1915–1918, may also offer prayer and sacrifice at natural sites such as caves and springs, or at Armenian shrines and churches. Unlike their co-religionists in Iraq, they use the *stêr*, or “portable” shrine, as a focus of devotion in the homes of religious families. This is made up of immaculately stacked quilts, each of which may represent the soul of a deceased person, often donated by their families; religious or valuable objects may be placed on top or within it.²² This *stêr* may reflect their seminomadic past; unlike their co-religionists in Iraq, who can visit shrines that mark where Divine Beings descended to earth, they would have needed to carry their religion with them. Since the turn of the 21st century, Yazidis have constructed several shrines representing Lalesh in Georgia and Armenia. Architecturally, these are made to resemble the shrines of Iraq, though they mark places of importance to those who fund them (such as the donors’ home villages), rather than sites of religious significance. They are used as a focus for festivals, devotion, and teaching and learning.²³

Ancestral tombs are also extremely important for Yazidis as a focus of prayer and offerings, for example, on the New Year, celebrated in April. The Caucasus Yazidis keep specific days for group visits to cemeteries and feasts in honor of the ancestors; they also preserve the memory of the location of their ancestral tombs in Turkey from the early 20th century.

Social Organization

Yazidi society is organized into three castelike social groups determined by birth—the religious *sheikhs* and *pîrs* and the lay *murîds*. Other kinship groups who have special roles are the *feqîrs*—known for their religious knowledge and ascetic lives, and recognizable by their sacred black cloak known as the *xirqe*—and the *qewwals*, who learn and perform the *qewls*, or sacred hymns. Each *murid* has a *sheikh* and a *pîr*. There are

specific responsibilities surrounding each of these relationships on both sides; along with other figures, such as a *murebbi* (preceptor) and a *birayê*, or *xuška/xwiška axiretê*, “brother (or sister) of the hereafter,” who accompany the *murîd* at key moments in life, these form part of the *pênc ferz*, “five duties,” of Yazidi religious life.²⁴ The sheikhs themselves are divided into three lineage groups, Shemsani, Qatani, and ‘Adani, reflecting their descent from the companions of Sheikh Adi. The paramount prince, or *Mîr* (emir), of the Yazidis, who is linked to the Qatani group of sheikhs, has an official residence at Ba‘drê in Sheikhan, Iraq. The current incumbent, Tahsin Beg, lives in Germany; other family members reside in Baghdad and Kurdistan of Iraq. Religious leadership is given by the *Baba Sheikh* and/or the *Pêş Imam*, with the Chief Qewwal and the *Baba Çawîş*, chatelain of Lalesh, also members of the Yazidi High Religious Council. The Yazidis of the Caucasus were distanced from these authority structures throughout the 20th century, and oral history seems to indicate that they felt somewhat remote from them—it took them some time to learn of the conversion of the Mir during the Feriq Pasha massacres, for instance. Nevertheless, they were visited by qewwals and sheikhs from Sheikhan during the *tawûsgerran*, “Parading of the Peacock,” when sheikhs and qewwals would take an image of a peacock representing Melek Tawus to the different Yazidi provinces, where it would receive veneration and where alms accruing to the Mîr would be collected. This only happened annually—or less, in troubled times.

Festivals

The Yazidi calendar is marked by a number of festivals, some movable and clearly carrying echoes of Islam, others fixed and seasonal. Of the movable feasts, the most important are the “Night of Barat,” the Yazidi counterpart of the Muslim Laylat *al-barâ`a*, which involves a modified form of the Muslim *şalât* performed at Lalesh; the “Feast of Ramazân,” which occurs two days before the Muslim “Id al-Fitr”; and the “Feast of ‘Arafât,” which falls on the same day as the sojourn at ‘Arafa during the Muslim *hajj* and comprises rituals centered around those focal points of the Lalesh sanctuary that have Islamic counterparts (such as the mountain called Arafat and the Zemzem spring).

The Yazidi New Year takes place on the first Wednesday in April and is marked by lamentation at ancestral graves, as well as decoration of houses, bonfires, and colored eggs. In the Caucasus, this holiday is now

often celebrated at the vernal equinox with Newroz, a specifically Kurdish celebration of the Iranian New Year.

Spring is also the season for the village festivals (*tiwaf*) of Sheikhan (Iraq), which include feasting, music, and veneration at local shrines. Each village has its own; even after the collectivization campaigns of the 1970s, these festivals continued to be held in the larger settlements. In midsummer, the forty-day fast known as *Çileyê Havînê* (Forty Days of Summer), kept in full only by the very observant, concludes with feasting at Lalesh. In the Caucasus, the midsummer period leading to the autumnal equinox is the season for days of commemoration of the dead, when tombs are visited for lamentation and then feasts in honor of the ancestors; these vary by village.

The largest festival of the year is the autumn *Jama'iyya*, the Feast of the Assembly, held in October when all who are able make the pilgrimage to Lalesh; attendance is a religious duty. The faithful believe that the Seven Angels gather at Lalesh at this time to decide the course of the forthcoming year, as do the terrestrial leaders. The *sema'*, or ceremonial procession of religious dignitaries, is performed; sacred texts are recited, with accompanying instruments. On the fifth day, a bull is sacrificed to Sheikh Shems, one of the Seven; on the sixth, a special sacrificial meal is prepared, and on the seventh, a ceremonial "bier of Sheikh Adi" is made, decorated with cloths and ceremonially washed. This festival is also an important occasion in the community's social life, where friendships can be cemented, alliances made, and disputes resolved. Families camp and picnic in the valley of Lalesh, catching up with old friends and making new ones, enjoying the holiday atmosphere as well as participating in the more solemn religious rituals.

Yazidism also has winter festivals. A series of one-day fasts begins in late November, often dedicated to the Holy Being associated with one's sheikh. Women often fast for Khatuna Feqra, a female Holy Being who helps with women's issues such as childbirth. The three-day fast for Ezîd that follows is observed by all traditional Yezidis (as opposed to the Forty Days of Winter fast, *Çileyê Zivistanê*, which is observed only by men of religion). At the beginning of January comes *Belinda*, or *Bêlenda*, when a fire is made before the door or gate. Each member of the family must jump through it three times, and a special bread is baked and shared.²⁵ In the Caucasus, the festival of Sultan Ezîd commemorates the dead, but a day of feasting and dancing also forms part of it.

In mid-February, the feast of *Xidir Nebî*, like its more widely known counterpart *Khidir Elyas/Eylas* with which it has merged, continues to be celebrated in the Caucasus, though this is not an exclusively Yazidi festival. Parallels have been drawn with European carnival season,²⁶ as it includes commemoration of the dead alongside music, dramatic representation, and the consumption of special cakes by young men and women, who eat half and place the rest under their pillows in the hope of dreaming about the person each will marry. In village houses one also sees drawings of people and animals made in flour on smoke-blackened beams; made during *Xidir Nebî*, these drawings depict wishes for the year ahead. Many communities in the region keep this festival, and it remains living and meaningful in Caucasus Yazidi villages.

Another tradition that lives on in the Caucasus is *Kiloç*, held on or around March 8, when the spirits of the dead visit Yazidi houses and special cakes are made for them and for the living. A piece of money hidden in each cake brings good fortune.

Yazidi Sacred Texts

For most of its history, Yazidism has passed on its sacred and secular texts orally, with a taboo against reading and writing for all but 'Adani sheikhs. In practice, there were some instances of literacy in Yazidi life; written texts were sometimes kept by men of religion and referred to for divinatory purposes. In traditional Yazidism, other types of written texts were known, such as *mişûr*, manuscripts usually kept by Pirs, with a family tree of the lineage, a list of relevant murîd tribes, and their whereabouts, and *keshkûl*, collections of religious texts, such as prayers, accounts of history, and some qewls. There is no indication that these played a particularly important role in the religious life of the premodern Yazidi community.²⁷

The most sacred texts of Yazidism are the qewls, in Kurmanji (northern Kurdish); they are composed in verse form, are dense in meaning, and require much religious knowledge to interpret. Alongside these are *beyts*; not to be confused with the classical poetic genre or the Kurdish folkloric poetry of the same name, Yazidi beyts are often not easily distinguishable in form from the qewl to the outsider, but demarcated as different by tradition.²⁸ When performed, these beyts are often supported by explanatory narratives called *çîrok* (the normal Kurdish word for "story"), and during formal occasions such as the *tawûsgerran* ("Parading of the Peacock"), a sermon called a *mishabet* may also be

delivered. A particular kin group, the *qewwals*, are responsible for memorizing and performing the *qewls*, often accompanied by musical instruments, such as the *def* and *shebab* (frame-drum and flute).²⁹ However, not all of the *qewwals* know the texts, and conversely, some *faqirs*, *sheikhs*, *pîrs*, and *murids* have studied them and are renowned for their knowledge. The oral transmission has led to variant forms of the *qewls*, with some found in the Caucasus, for instance, that are not found elsewhere.

In the absence of a strong system of centers of knowledge dissemination (such as networks of churches or madrasas), it is hardly surprising that among the Yazidis of Turkey and Syria, who followed the guidance of their own *sheikhs* and *pîrs* on most matters, variant and distinctive forms of the religious texts are found, and there are differences in practice. Nevertheless, both the Iraq and Caucasus communities feel strongly connected to each other, and most religious lineages are found in both.

Surrounded by “People of the Book,” Yazidis have felt the pressure in the past to have a written scripture, and rumors have abounded for centuries of a Yazidi holy text, referred to as *Cilwe*, “Revelation,” or *Meshafa Rash*, “The Black Book.” With the arrival of a larger number of European and American travelers in the region in the 19th century, a market for “Yazidi books” was created, served by members of the local Christian community who purveyed manuscripts to curious Westerners. Some of those books now in European libraries, such as the Karshuni manuscripts in the Bibliothèque Nationale, which contain episodes from Yazidi history, may have their origins in Yazidi *keshkûls*.³⁰ The so-called sacred books of the Yazidis in Kurdish and Arabic were published by the Carmelite Father Anastase Marie de Saint-Élie in 1911, and more fully with linguistic analysis and German translation by Prof. Maximilian Bittner of Berlin in 1913.³¹ They had a suitably romantic myth of origin, having been supposedly found in a cave on a deerskin manuscript and copied in sections by a Yazidi convert to Christianity. The dialect of the traditions in this book, which are in both Arabic and Kurdish, is not that of the *qewls* we now know, and we can safely say—as did the Orientalist scholar Alphonse Mingana in 1916—that these texts are, strictly speaking, fakes.³² Nevertheless, their content includes some genuine Yazidi traditions, transmitted orally within the community, amid much material unrecognizable to Yazidis.³³

Yazidism is now moving slowly but surely toward becoming a scriptural religion. Since the 1990s, senior Yazidis have organized lessons for children in both the Kurdistan region of Iraq and in Germany, where printed texts are used. Since the publication of a selection of sacred texts in Baghdad in 1977,³⁴ there have been several collection initiatives and a scholarly edition (by P. G. Kreyenbroek and Khalil Jindy Rashow).³⁵ The “Lalesh” centers of the Kurdistan region have published some; many more, collected by Yazidi scholars in the Sheikhan and Duhok areas, remain unpublished. The Sinjari community may launch similar initiatives in the light of the threat posed by displacement to the preservation of their distinctive tradition. Moreover, despite the lessons in religion available to some, a generational gap has opened up in the Yazidi community between the young, who receive a state education and expect the religion to be formulated in terms of doctrines and core beliefs (like Christianity or Islam), and their parents, who find themselves unable to make this formulation. This is especially noticeable in the diaspora (especially Germany), and to a lesser extent in the homeland. Burning issues for Yazidi youth are the religious rules underlying marriage and the permissibility of marrying for love and marrying out. There is much discussion of religious authority online;³⁶ this issue, along with a wider interest in the Yazidi heritage, prompts many young people to read widely about their religion and to formulate opinions based on the texts they read, rather than on the worldview of particular men of religion. New forms of scriptural authority are being produced. The move toward scripturalization and the consultations surrounding the formation of a canon have gathered momentum since the 1990s. Visible changes include the standardization of certain forms of sacred texts through publication; this necessarily implies that other variants are rejected and lost, and that the tradition becomes less rich as the canon forms. Some “organized forgetting” happens when texts are deemed too embarrassing to repeat outside the community, often because they contain profane or scatological elements. Other texts, which bear an interpretation consistent with modern knowledge or science, may be promoted instead.³⁷

The Future

It is difficult to be optimistic about the future of Yazidism. At the time of writing, only one of the Yazidis’ two heartlands, Sheikhan, remains uncompromised—though even this lost the historic twin towns of

Bashika-Behzane, home of the qewwals, to Da'esh, the so-called Islamic State, from 2014–2016. Although Sinjar city (the principal town on the south side of the mountain) was recaptured at the end of 2015, and as of Fall 2016, Da'esh is being driven from Mosul, its major stronghold in Iraq, many Yazidis from the south of the mountain do not feel secure enough to go home and face those of their neighbors who sided with the enemy. Some have taken up arms themselves, joining units from Kurdish-controlled areas in Syria aligned with the Kurdish Workers' Party from Turkey, or indeed forming their own. The community is urgently seeking legal redress by demanding that the genocide case be heard at an international level and that they and the Christians of the Nineveh plain be able to exercise autonomy under international protection. They are also seeking international help to recover the 2,000 or so women and children who are still in the hands of Da'esh. Emigration to the West, especially Germany, continues apace, with all the attendant dangers of crossing the Mediterranean to Europe. A mass return to Sinjar seems unlikely. Many Yazidi children are likely to grow up in refugee camps amid a traumatized community, with both women and men facing psychological problems.

The diaspora community will surely grow, accelerating the pace of change of the Yazidi culture and religion and forcing the immediate confrontation of a number of difficult problems. As an economically disadvantaged community, the Yazidis have a smaller number of highly educated members than some other groups; these are the first to travel abroad, where they will need to acquire more skills to progress economically. The most pressing issue in the long term is the problem of marrying out. Yazidi leaders have shown that they can innovate when necessary, by their historic decision to acknowledge formerly enslaved and raped women as full members of the community. If they can follow this decision with more momentous ones, by finding a mechanism for permitting more choice in marriage, and perhaps by recognizing the children of Yazidis married to outsiders, the community may be able to maintain its numbers and avoid a rapid decline.

Review of the Literature

For a supposedly little-known group, the Yazidis have a large bibliography, though much of it is less than scholarly. The best introductory guide is Eszter Spät's slim publication of 2005,³⁸ but within the discipline as a whole, a major problem for Yazidi historiography is

the paucity of literature on Yazidism by Yazidi writers, as compared with the immense volume of writing from Orientalists, storytellers, and those opposed to Yazidis on religious grounds. It is only since 1979, with the publication of a number of sacred texts by two young university graduates in Iraq, that Yazidis began to write regularly in detail about their religion and history.³⁹ We rarely see the community through Yazidi eyes. Even early writers on the Yazidis, such as the great Ottoman traveler Evliya Çelebi and the Kurdish prince Sheref Khan Bitlisi, speak of the Yazidi religion in the exoticizing tone that later became characteristic of Western Orientalists. Sheref Khan alleges, *inter alia*, that they sell their own children into slavery.⁴⁰ Islamic manuscripts from the 16th to 19th centuries containing *fatwas* condemning the Yazidis are important sources for beliefs concerning Yazidis and the accusation of “devil-worship”; emanating as they do from the Yazidis’ enemies, they must be handled with care.⁴¹

It is in the 19th century, however, that we see Western Orientalist learning brought to bear on the Yazidis and their religion; travelers and missionaries often contrasted the unassuming people they encountered with the “devil worshippers” given to orgiastic rites described by local rumors in Kurdistan. Thus, the Anglican missionary George Percy Badger described the Yazidis as “a very industrious race, clean in their habits, and quiet and orderly in their general behaviour,” but also reported local rumors of their “great lewdness,” while bewailing their ignorance and lack of interest in the Gospels.⁴² Austen Henry Layard, excavator of Nineveh and Babylon, described the Yazidis and their hospitality in positive terms. In keeping with the philological mood of the time, Western Orientalists devoted much energy to determining the Yazidis’ origins—Layard, for instance, suggested a Sabaeen or Chaldaean origin in Southern Iraq, while Badger favored a Zoroastrian dualist origin. During the second half of the 19th century, various writings in Syriac and Karshuni (Arabic in Syriac script) concerning Yazidis emerged in the Christian community, many of which were traded with Westerners visiting the *vilayet* of Mosul. Some of these writings were used in Isya Joseph’s account of the religion (published in 1919), which identifies them as devil-worshippers.⁴³

A decisive step forward in Yazidi studies had been taken by the French consul N. Siouffi in 1885, when he used historical sources to identify the Sheikh Adi of Yazidi tradition as the well-known Sufi ‘Adī b. Musāfir.⁴⁴

This confirmation that the historical Sheikh 'Adi had been a Sunni Muslim enabled further study of Yazidism as an errant branch of Islam. Both M. Guidi in 1932 and, a few years later, Roger Lescot see an exclusively Islamic origin for the Yazidis.⁴⁵ As Kreyenbroek points out, the ultimate effect of Guidi's work, illuminating though it was for placing the early community within its historical context, was to place the study of Yazidism "within the remit of Islamic studies, to which it could contribute little or nothing, while students of other disciplines could feel little inducement to occupy themselves with it."⁴⁶

By the end of World War I, the so-called Sacred Books had been published, first by Marie de Saint Élie and then by Bittner. After the end of the war, Syria came under French mandate and the Yazidis were studied by such French scholars such as Lescot and Father Thomas Bois.⁴⁷ Lescot's volume on the Yazidis of Syria and Sinjar is one of the few Western sources on the communities of Sinjar before their resettlement from villages into collective communities under Saddam Hussein, but still judges the Yazidis' capacities in terms of a literate, learned norm: He remarks on their "unbelievable slowness of mind."⁴⁸ By contrast, Lady Drower's account of her visit to Yazidi communities of Sheikhan is much more gentle: It depicts a religious practice in harmony with the environment of rural Kurdistan and a people preoccupied with normal human concerns in times of war. With its implicit acknowledgment of the coherence of Yazidi worldviews, her approach prefigures the more ethnographic approaches practiced by scholars from the 1990s onward. She speculates very little on the Yazidis' origins.⁴⁹ Much more ambitious in its remit was John Guest's 1987 history of the Yazidis, *Survival Among the Kurds*, which has become a reference in the field, not for its new hypotheses—its author was not a historian but worked in international finance—but for its use of a wide range of sources in many languages to bring together Western understanding of the Yazidis and their religion. It includes an English translation of the infamous Sacred Books. Nelida Fuccaro's scholarly 1999 monograph on the history of the Yazidis under the British Mandate, *The Other Kurds*, made use of the papers of the political officer C. J. Edmonds, whose own short account of a trip to Lalesh had been published in 1967.⁵⁰ More recently, it is the research done in Ottoman archives that has yielded the most exciting work on Yazidis, including Selim Deringil's *The Well-Protected Domains* in 1998 and Yavuz Aykan's *Rendre la justice à*

Amid in 2016,⁵¹ both of which used Yazidi examples as case studies within wider historical projects. Recent oral history on Yazidis in Turkey by Esra Danacıoğlu and Amed Gökçen is also uncovering new data. For studies of the Yazidi religion, a watershed came in 1979 when the young Yazidi scholars Pir Khidir Suleyman and Khalil Jindy Rashow published a selection of sacred texts for the first time, soon followed by a volume on Yazidi customs. This heralded a new phase of greater collaboration between insider and outsider scholars: In the early 1990s, both Suleyman and Jindy, and other men of religion, shared a number of texts and interpretations with Philip Kreyenbroek, who in his 1995 *Yezidism—Its Background, Observances and Textual Tradition* took Yazidi studies in a new direction by placing the focus on the orality of the religion and showing that the beliefs and practices of Yazidism were wholly consistent with its physical and cultural environment. He also compared Yazidi lore (especially its cosmogonies) with that of other religious minorities in the area, particularly the Yaresan (also known as the Ahl-e Haqq or Kaka'i); he suggested that for both religions, an Iranian religion akin to Zoroastrianism, with a Heptad (a group of seven) Divine Beings who have appeared in human form, may be the substrate in which many other beliefs and practices are based. A decade later, Eszter Spät's research, based on lengthy fieldwork, found convincing evidence of Gnostic elements in Yazidism—previously a matter of conjecture—though the orality of Yazidism makes precise tracing of the transmission of these lines of thought problematic.⁵² The work of Garnik Asatrian and Victoria Arakelova in Armenia has also used fieldwork to describe many points of Yazidi practice,⁵³ though their 2014 book on the Yazidi religion caused controversy among scholars of the field.⁵⁴ Most of the outsider scholarship produced on the Yazidis since the 1990s has adopted an inductive approach, seeking to be informed by the worldview and the lived religion of the Yazidis themselves by working with Yazidi partners wherever possible. As one might expect, Amy de la Bretèque's work on Caucasian Yazidi women's discourses of emotion made use of extensive fieldwork, as did Birgül Acıkyıldız's study of Yazidi architecture in context. Despite the growing number of Yazidi intellectuals and academics, the number of Yazidis who contribute to scholarly debates is still lamentably small.

Further Reading

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(1.) See, for example, the Website YezidiTruth.Org.

(2.) P. G. Kreyenbroek, "Yazīdī," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, eds. P. Bearman, T. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel,

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(3.) P. G. Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism—Its Background, Observances and Textual Tradition* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1995), 27–32.

(4.) Al-Kutubī and Ibn Ṭaymiyya are both cited in Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 31–32.

(5.) See Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 34–35, for a translation from the *al-Sulūk li-Maʿrifa Duwal al-Mulūk*, based on R. Frank, *Scheich ʿAdī, der grosse Heilige der Jezîdīs* (Berlin: Mayer & Müller, 1911), 87–91.

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(10.) Guest, *Survival Among the Kurds*, 96–97.

(11.) C. J. Edmonds, *A Pilgrimage to Lalish* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1967), 59.

(12.) Selim Deringil, *The Well-Protected Domains* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 1998), 40, 70.

(13.) A. H. Layard, *Discoveries in the Ruins of Nineveh and Babylon* (New York: Harper, 1853), 4.

(14.) Guest, *Survival Among the Kurds*, 134–140.

(15.) Christine Allison, *The Yezidi Oral Tradition in Iraqi Kurdistan* (London: Curzon, 2001), 87–101.

(16.) Guest, *Survival Among the Kurds*, 193–198.

(17.) Christine Allison, “Addressivity and the Monument: Memorials,

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(18.) Cf. the picture given by I. C. Vanly, “The Kurds of the Soviet Union,” in *The Kurds: A Contemporary Overview*, eds. P. G. Kreyenbroek and Stefan Sperl (London: Routledge, 1992).

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(24.) K. Omarkhali, “On the Structure of the Yezidi Clan and Tribal System and Its Terminology Among The Yezidis of the Caucasus,” *Journal of Kurdish Studies* 6 (2008): 104–119.

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