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Introduction to the special issue: Yezidism and Yezidi Studies in the early 21st century

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Abstract

The articles in this volume deal with recent developments concerning the Yezidis. They focus on the consequences of ISIS' attempted genocide of Yezidis in the Sinjar region, and on aspects of the current public and academic discourse on Yezidis and their religion.

Keywords: Yezidism; Yezidi Studies; methodology; genocide; ISIS.

Abstract in Kurmanji

Destpêk bo hejmara taybet: Êzdiyatî û Lêkolînên li ser êzdiyan di serê sedsala 21an de
Danasîna hejmara taybet: Êzdiyatî û xebatên li ser êzdiyan di destpêka sedsala 21em de.
Nivîsarên vê hejmarê berê xwe didine têgihîştina rûdanên dawî yên derbarê êzdiyan de. Ev xebat dêneke taybet didine ser encamên hewla DAIŞê ya qirkirina êzdiyan li herêma Şengalê û cîhetên gotara/dîskûra giştî û akademîk li ser êzdiyan û dinê wan.

Abstract in Sorani

نیزدییایه‌تی و لیکۆڵینه‌وه‌ی نێزدی له سه‌رده‌تای سه‌ده‌ی بیست ویه‌کدا : ده‌روازه‌یه‌ک بۆ ژماره‌ی تایبته‌

وتاری نهم ژماره‌یه گرنه‌گی ده‌دات به‌ بابه‌تی نهم پێشه‌چوونه نووبه‌یه‌ی له‌مه‌ر نێزدیان هاتوته‌ پێش. وتاره‌کان زیاتر نیشکده‌خه‌نه سه‌ر مزاری هاتتی ده‌وله‌تی نیه‌لامیه‌ی داعش و هه‌ولێ جینۆسایدکردنی نێزدیان له‌ هه‌رێمی شهنه‌گال و لایه‌نه‌کانی نهم گوته‌ره‌ گشتیه‌ی و نه‌کادیه‌یه‌یه‌ی که‌ له‌سه‌ر نێزدیان و هه‌رێمه‌که‌یان هه‌یه‌.

Introduction

The present volume deals with recent trends and developments in the Yezidi community, and analyses contemporary portrayals of the Yezidis. The initial focus is on the far-reaching consequences of ISIS's (the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria [also known as ISIL or the Islamic State (IS)]) genocide of Yezidis in the Sinjar region of Iraq which began in August 2014, and its possible implications for the Yezidi religion generally. Further contributions discuss how the Yezidis have recently been described in Western media and academic literature.

Yezidism is a minority religion that originated in Kurdistan, and Kurdish is the common language of the community. Most Yezidis regard themselves as Kurds, while a minority use the term “Kurds” for Muslims and claim

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Yezidism as an ethnic as well as a religious identity. While there have been some earlier references to Yezidis, this community and their religion began to draw public and academic interest in the West from the 1850s onwards, with the publications of accounts by travellers and missionaries (Kreyenbroek, 1995: 1–5). Early authors on the subject tended to be particularly interested in the possible origin of Yezidism, and to describe the Yezidis in a somewhat romantic light. A little later, there were many discussions about two short texts that were thought the “Sacred Books” of Yezidism. These were eventually shown to be inauthentic (Kreyenbroek, 1995: 10–16). The romantic perception of the Yezidis was strengthened in the German-speaking world by the author Karl May (1842–1912); in his *Wild Kurdistan (Durchs Wilde Kurdistan* 1892), May portrayed the Yezidis as noble and well-meaning “Devil-worshippers”. The notion that Yezidis worship the principle of Evil is an error, the result of a misinterpretation of the role of the Yezidi *Tawîsî Melek* (“the Peacock Angel”), the “Lord of this World” who is responsible for all that happens on earth, both good and bad (as humans would see it). However wrong, this label has deeply influenced outsiders’ perceptions of Yezidism, the more so because for many years, academic speculations on their religion were based on relatively little actual information. After decades of active academic discussions on Yezidism, around the 1930s M. Guidi’s definition of Yezidism as an aberrant form of Islam came to be widely accepted by academics (Kreyenbroek, 1995: 16–17). The resulting view of Yezidis as “Muslims who do not profess Islam” may well account for the gradual loss of interest in Yezidi affairs among scholars. A renewed interest in the religion began the 1990s (Allison, 2008: 3f), when Yezidis themselves started to take an active role in discussions on their own religion. The existence of a body of authentic Yezidi sacred and religious texts became known (these texts had always been transmitted orally and their importance was previously kept secret from researchers), and researchers had become more concerned with interpreting their data on Yezidism within the framework of the culture(s) of the communities in question. These more recent researchers tend to accept the Yezidis’ own view of their religion as an independent tradition, and both Yezidi and non-Yezidi authors seek to represent this religion in a manner that many Yezidis would understand and recognise. Since the 1990s “Yezidi Studies” can perhaps be said to have become established in academia, albeit in a very modest way.

In traditional Yezidism, location and continuity have always played significant role in the transmission, and indeed the understanding, of the Yezidi religion. Over the past sixty years or so, greater social mobility has led to the migration of many Yezidis to new lands, and to the formation of Diaspora communities. Furthermore, since 2014, the vicious attacks and activities of ISIS have uprooted one of the major Yezidi communities, that of Sinjar. This has caused reverberations throughout Yezidi society. As will be shown in this volume, the resulting dislocation and profound disruption of

tradition and continuity means that many things are changing. Indeed, some Yezidis fear that this may mean the end of their tradition and community. On the other hand, as is shown here, we see that some of the social norms and traditions that were long held to be immutable in Yezidism, are being re-examined, and attempts are made to adapt the tradition to modern realities.

In order to provide the reader with a context in which to understand the impact of current trends and developments, it may be useful to give an overview of what are generally described as important aspects of traditional Yezidi religious life.

Communal religious life, which comprises:

- a) A social structure which includes the relations between a number of well-defined groups (such as the three endogamous “castes”: the “priestly” Sheikhs and Pirs, and the Mirîd or laymen), and other institutionalised relationships. In other words, in any Yezidi community we see a criss-crossing web of mutual links and obligations. Playing one’s proper role in this social context was traditionally regarded as a key aspect of being a Yezidi. While this probably seemed self-evident and constructive in long-established local communities, such a system is difficult to recreate in a meaningful way in a new and unfamiliar environment.
- b) Other sets of norms and rules governing society, notably those concerning endogamy (which forbids marrying outside the community), and “honour” (*namûs*, cf. Buffon and Allison in this volume). In the minds of many traditional Yezidis this strict concept of “honour”, although it is by no means peculiar to Yezidism, is nevertheless closely associated with “religion”. The concept of *namûs* places great emphasis on the modest behaviour of the women of a family. The slightest doubt in this respect may lead to the loss of “honour”, which theoretically can only be restored by the severe punishment of the culprit, or the ostracism of her family. According to traditional standards, a woman who was thought to have had “improper” relationships could no longer be part of the community or the family. The abduction and abuse of many Yezidi women by ISIS has now raised important questions in the community about these norms, and new solutions appear to have been found (see Kizilhan & Omarkhali in this volume).
- c) Observances and rituals. Many of these are connected with a particular locality. They include local festivals centred around the village shrine and venerating the Holy Being to whom it is dedicated. When Yezidi communities were forcibly resettled in “communal villages” in Iraq during the “Anfâl” campaigns in the 1980s (see Dulz in this volume), they often continued to celebrate the feasts of their original village. Other, communal festivals, such as the great Autumn Gathering at Lalish, can only take place in a particular location. Furthermore, there are many holy places to which people make pilgrimage.

Religious narratives.

These include myths and legends, and other traditions (see Kreyenbroek and Omarkhali). These narratives are transmitted in various forms. They are alluded to in the poetical sacred texts (particularly *Qewls*, “hymns”), expounded in “sermons” (*mishabet*), or be told as prose stories (*cîrok*). This means that many or most Yezidis have at least some knowledge of the contents of these narratives.

Personal devotional life.

This is informed by all of the above, and may further include prayers and pilgrimages.

Among the contributors to this volume, Irene Dulz, a researcher on Kurdish society and Yezidis who has been living in the autonomous Kurdish Region for many years, describes a range of social developments resulting from the ISIS genocide in Sinjar, which deeply affect the Yezidi community. The current conditions resulting from the first shock-wave of migrations inside Kurdistan are hardly permanent, and a long-lasting solution will have to be found either inside Kurdistan or in the diaspora.

Khanna Omarkhali’s interview with Jan Ilhan Kizilhan focuses on his recent first-hand experience of the plight of Yezidi women who have been captured, enslaved and abused by ISIS. As a Yezidi transcultural psychologist, Kizilhan led a programme aiming to evaluate the mental state of many Yezidi women who escaped captivity, with a view to offering psychological treatment in Germany to those who were most likely to benefit from such treatment. Meanwhile, over 1000 traumatised Yezidi women are now undergoing treatment. Kizilhan reports here on his findings regarding these women’s traumas and on the likely impact their fate will have on the community, and the religion, as a whole.

Eszter Spät, who has studied many aspects of the Yezidi tradition and spends much of her time among Yezidi communities in the autonomous Kurdish Region, offers a penetrating analysis of changes in religious traditions resulting from recent developments. Whilst the devastating attacks on Sinjar could have plausibly lessened the Yezidis’ religious focus, this article shows that the contact between somewhat different traditions is in fact leading to an increased interest in religious customs.

It is particularly in the spheres of communal and personal life that developments in the early 21st century have affected the lives of Yezidi communities. One notes the increasing influence of diaspora-based Yezidi intellectuals in discussions on Yezidi identity and in community discourse generally. Many of these have not grown up in a traditional Yezidi environment, and feel free to re-examine the value of some accepted traditions (such as the ban on marrying “out”, and questions related to *namûs*). Given the close contacts between Yezidi communities, developments in the diaspora also tend to affect Yezidis in the homelands to some extent.

Whereas the migration of Yezidis to the diaspora countries from the 1960s onwards was a relatively gradual development which left those concerned time to adjust, the ISIS attack on Sinjar meant a sudden, unexpected and brutal disruption of the religious life of a key Yezidi community. As Dulz shows, the tragic events in Sinjar may eventually affect the religious life of the entire Yezidi community. It forced most Sinjaris to seek refuge with the Yezidis of other regions, which, as is described by Spät, made both groups realise their differences, and become more aware of the variety in Yezidi tradition; this probably broadened their sense of Yezidi identity.

Perhaps even more shocking to the community than the attack itself, was ISIS's brutal abduction, enslavement and abuse of so many of young women and children. The Yezidis' communal memory recalls many persecutions (see Kizilhan & Omarkhali in this volume), so that this genocide, however gruesome, may not have been unimaginable in Yezidi culture. On the other hand, traditional attitudes to honour and chastity among women seemed sufficiently rigid to prevent the community from finding ways of dealing with traumas of this nature. However, whilst Kizilhan shows that the personal pain of these women and their families is indeed beyond bearing, we see that the Yezidi leadership has taken the initiative of proclaiming that the women concerned continue to be full members of the Yezidi community.

At the time of writing (two years after the ISIS attacks), it is clearly too early to predict where these various developments will lead. It seems important nevertheless, to document the state of affairs at this uncertain stage for the information of interested readers and perhaps future historians of Yezidism.

Beside these tragic developments and their direct effects on Yezidi communities, some attention should also be paid to the question of how Yezidis are portrayed and represented outside their community. In a globalised world, interaction between Yezidis and outsiders is likely to play a significant role in the future self-definition of Yezidis. The way their culture is understood and described in the outside world – particularly by the media and by academics – is therefore a significant consideration.

Two Kurdologists from Exeter, Christine Allison and Veronica Buffon, analyse the discourse in the Western media on the genocide in Sinjar, throwing new light on how Yezidis are represented.

The extensive list of recent publications on Yezidis given below eloquently illustrates the scope and breadth of Yezidi Studies today. Many of these works presuppose a broad consensus on the overall character of the Yezidi tradition, and of the relevance of its study. Their aim is to fill the many gaps in our knowledge about local cults, Yezidism in the Diaspora, the oral character of traditional Yezidi culture, and many other subjects. Only a few scholars discuss Yezidi beliefs or tenets – no doubt the result of the Yezidi emphasis on orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy. In a review article on a work that is very much concerned with this question, Kreyenbroek and Omarkhali discuss the

underlying question of the status of “beliefs”, in an oral culture such as that of the Yezidis.

This volume contains much that is relevant for an understanding of the dynamism which now characterises sections of the Yezidi community, and most of its study. Still the reader’s lasting impression may well be – rightly – that much still needs to be done.

Notes on transcription

Kurdish or Yezidi words and names used here are transcribed according to the system proposed by Bedirkhan in *Bingehên Gramêra Kurdmançî* (“Fundamentals of the Kurmanji Grammar”). Terms and place names that are widely used in Western sources are given in the form in which they normally appear in English. Geographic names that have no established form in English are transcribed like other Kurdish words.

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