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The Onion and the Mandrake: Plants in Yezidi Folk Beliefs

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Abstract

The non-dogmatic character of the Yezidi religion presupposes the presence of a heavy layer of so-called "primitive" religious elements, including plant worship. This paper focuses on plants having obvious sacred connotations in Yezidi beliefs, both on the level of the cult and marginal folk beliefs. There is no explicit tree cult in the Yezidism, or dendrolatry, despite the existence of a cultic complex connected with the so-called Dārā mirāzā or "The trees of Desire". Still, there are representatives of the flora world that bear obvious cultic attribution, the most important of which are the onion and the mandrake. The mandrake has mystical fame and reverence not only among the Yezidis, but also among many other peoples of the region. This panacea for all diseases, widely used in folk medicine, is also considered an important element of the *materia magica*, primarily due to its aphrodisiac qualities. This paper will provide a comparative analysis of plant worship among the Yezidis and several other traditions of the Caucaso-Iranian region.

Keywords

Yezidi folk beliefs – sacred plants – the onion – the mandrake – Armenian folk tradition

The syncretism and eclectic character of Yezidism is presumed to include a deep layer of primitive religious elements: it is impossible to provide a complete picture of the Yezidi religious beliefs without considering pantheistic views.

On the level of folk beliefs, especially those connected with various aspects of nature (e.g. animal cults or interpretation of celestial bodies, etc.), the Yezidi

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tradition shares multiple common features with other peoples of the region (Arakelova). Plant worship constitutes no exception to this system. The onion cult, which seems to have been among the most significant elements of the Yezidi *Weltanschauung* in the past, and has remained as a marginal but quite obvious element of the present day tradition though on a more profane level, is a widely spread phenomena not only among the Iranian peoples, but all over the Near East. As for the cult of the mandrake, there can be little doubt, that among the Yezidis it was developed under the strong influence of the Armenian tradition, which demonstrates special attitudes towards this enigmatic plant and even incorporated the mandrake worship into the folk Christianity.

There is no explicit *tree* cult in Yezidism such that can be viewed as dendrolatry, despite the existence of a cultic complex connected with the so-called *Dārā mirāzā* or "the Trees of Desire". The sacred character of these particular trees does not depend on their genus, but rather on the place where they grow, their age, shape or any other attributed features. Usually in late autumn, festivals, including some sacrificial practices (*bindārūk*), are celebrated under these trees.

This kind of tradition has been recorded among many nations of the region, and should be considered more as an element of the cult of 'the cosmic channel.' This includes the worship of the holding beam of the house, or central pole of the marquee (albeit with a different interpretation), or the connections between the three worlds; underworld, our world and heaven. The cult complex concerned with the worship of such trees also involves the hanging of rags on the branches of a tree in memory of the dead or for the fulfilment of a wish. It should be noted that the worship of huge trees, like oak (especially black oak,) beech, plane, or juniper, as attested to among the Talishis, the Zazas in Central Anatolia and other Iranian peoples, is never recorded among the Yezidis or Kurds (Asatrian 1992, 107; cf. Kaya 2011, 43). There is only one allusion to the marked nature of the oak, namely the Yezedi thundergod Mam Rasan, who dissects its stem with an arrow; the lightning bolt (Asatrian and Arakelova, 234-242, fn.11)

As for the world of flora, the most esteemed plant bearing evident cultic significance is the onion (Lat. *allium cepa*) or *pīvāz.* The earliest evidence of onion worship among the Yezidis can be found in a passage by Evlia Çelebi, an official Ottoman historiographer, in which he writes that the Yezidis of Sinjar "carry onion and *jajezil* [a sort of cheese with pungent flavouring]. If anybody smashes or squashes an onion, his head will be smashed and he will be killed by them. Of greater importance, if a rich person dies, he is washed with onion juice and an onion is planted on his grave. I asked the captives [Yezidis] several times about it, but never got a straight answer. 'Onion is good,' they said. There

is a parable. It says that a Yezidi was asked what he would do if he became a king. I would eat onion, he answered. And indeed, Kurds [here: Yezidis] like onion very much" (Çelebi, 188).

Leaving aside the gastronomic partiality towards onion, which is traceable among Yezidis and Kurds even today, judging from Çelebi's information, the cultic significance of this plant cannot be doubted. The killing of a human due to improper ritual handling of this plant directly bespeaks its sacred character and the presence of a certain cultic complex connected with it. Although this aspect of life is, unfortunately, no longer mentioned among Yezidis today, it is very probable that it once existed. The washing of a deceased person with onion juice and the planting of an onion plant on the grave is apparently part of this complex, practices which are believed to protect the dead person's soul against dark forces. Together with congener garlic and parsley, the onion is a well-known protection against evil spirits. Sion Levon Archimandrite Tēr-Manuelian, an Armenian intellectual of the early twentieth century, relates the following narrative about the Yezidis' particular passion for onion: "Onion is their whole-hearted love, which they will never change for anything else; this love and worship came to such an extent that it turned into parable. In their words: *Az pīvāz na-dixōm*, *dibēža šak'ar bixō* ("I [even] do not eat onion, and [he] says 'eat sugar'"). Onion is a permanent adornment of Yezidi traditional meal, and its big bunches are always put in the middle of a table" (Tēr-Manuelian, 28).

Garlic and onion often appear as characters of Yezidi tales such as Pīvāz and Sērō (Wikander, 33-34). Also notable is the registered Yezidi tribal name Pīvāzī, from which the Armenian family name Pivazyan evidently originates.

Elements of onion worship can be traced in various traditions outside the Caucaso-Iranian region. In Egypt, for instance, people celebrate *Šām an-naïim* ("the Breath of Breeze"), when, from the early? morning, they eat onion and dye eggs. The French litterateur Gérard de Nerval documented the direct worship of the onion in Egypt from the second half of the nineteenth century.

He writes, "Imagine my amazement when once I entered my (Egyptian) slave's room and saw a long garland of onions, hang aslant the door, and other onions symmetrically hang over the sofa she sleeps on, and she was making acts of worship" (Nerval, 137-138). The onion is also an important part of *materia magica*, used both in white and black magic, for bedeviling purposes. According to the author's field notes, in some regions of Iran, in order to make harm or do a bad turn to a neighbour, the onion is pierced with a needle and then pointed towards a particular house and left in this position for a night as sorcery. Talishis also believe that an onion tied to the heel relieves toothache (Miller, 146; 152). The Kurds of Khorasan (north-eastern Iran and Central Asia)

say that if one eats an onion on a Saturday, one will become rich (Mīrnyā, 201). And according to Zaza popular tradition, it is a great sin to eat garlic or onion, and to eat onion on Friday is a serious sin (Kaya 1995, 44). The onion has certain ritual and magical significance among Armenians as well. The most demonstrative example here is the so called *aklatiz*, a dummy made of onion and stuffed with feathers, which is used in folk magic (Vardanian, 207).

Another plant with widespread mystical fame and reverence within many traditions, including amongst those of the Yezidis, is the *mandrake* (Lat. mandragora). The mandrake (Grk μανδραγόρας) is a Mediterranean narcotic plant of the nightshade family (*solanaceae*) and its tuber-like root resembles a human figure. It is widely used in folk medicine as an antihypertensive and diuretic, as well as to subdue a fever, remove pain, stop bleeding, and so on. But above all, the mandrake is considered to be a means of stimulating desire for lovemaking and it is believed to ensure conception, characteristics incidentally reflected in the mandrake's Persian name *mehrgiāh*, i.e., "love plant." In the Bible (Gen. 30:14-16), it is also mentioned in connection with this same meaning.

Despite the indigenous nature of the mandrake to the Mediterranean region, Iran, Central Asia, Northern India and Western China, Iranian dialects, including Persian, have no original term for this plant, probably because in the historical period it was already an extinct (or sporadic) species within the floristic nomenclature of Iran and, in all likelihood, Central Asia. Old Iranian and Middle Iranian texts also lack a proper term for this plant. Currently, the mandrake is totally absent from the flora of Iran.

Persian has a direct descriptive denomination for the mandrake—*mihrgiāh* (lit. love-plant), *mardum-giāh* (man-like plant), *sag-kosh* (dog-slayer), *sag-shekan* (dog-breaker), *sag-kan* (dog-dug, digged by a dog), *mandagō/ūr*(*a*), which is likely a load-word from later Byz. Greek μανδραγόρας. In modern Persian colloquial speech *mandagūr* means "a giant-like man", "a lucky person", probably by analogy with "*landa hur*" (Asatrian 2012, 105-97). To indicate the mandrake in folk beliefs, New West Iranian dialects use either the above-mentioned Persian form or simply describe it as a "magic plant".

The original Iranian name of this mysterious plant was probably a substrate term hidden under Gr. Μανδραγόρας, from which Latin *mandragoras* and Armenian *manragot* are borrowed (Beeked 2010, 900). For the mandrake, Armenian has also "*Adami glux*" (lit. Adam's head), "*Solomon imastuni car*" (Solomon's tree) and *marda-xot* (lit. human-like plant) = Gr. Ανδρωπόμορφος (id.). The so-called 'diabolic' nature of the mandrake and its ability to bring on madness allowed also for the emergence of names such as Arab. *tuffāh al-jinn* (lit. 'jinn's apple'), or *tuffāh al-majānīn* (lit. "the apple of the mad"). In general,

the idea of the mandrake as a plant with hallucinogenic effects has been merged with the same notions of the belladonna, or deadly nightshade (Atroga L., A. Belladonna L.), bryony (Bryonia L.), and even henbane (Hyoscyamus L.).

The magical properties ascribed to the mandrake, both benign and evil qualities; its ability to heal, to injure or to kill, as well as to enhance human fertility and love strength, made it an object of awesome veneration. In the folk imagination, the mandrake was conceived in the sensate context as a being with obvious ties with underworld forces.

The cult of the mandrake among the Armenian Yezidis was probably developed under the influence of local Armenian tradition, as evident in their use of the Armenian plant-names *loštak* or *mardaxot'* (see below) as the only denominations of *mandragora*.

The Yezidi folk tradition considers this plant to have the color of human skin. Yezidis believe that at night mandrakes glitter and their leaves look like silver, but as soon as someone approaches it, the mandrake hides below the ground. In order to call it out, one should splash some drops of women's urine on it. And when one tries to uproot a mandrake, it supposedly shouts so shrilly that the one who digs it up dies at once. In order to avoid death, the soil must first be dug around the root, after which a hungry dog or a goat is tied to it. Having moved away at a reasonable distance, a person should show food to the hungry animal to coax it to follow him and pull up the plant. The animal is believed to die afterwards.

The same procedure is mentioned among Armenians, Persians and other peoples of the region (Simoons, 101-135). Armenians call the mandrake *loštak* (which is rather the denomination of the burdock (Lat. *arctium*)), *mardaxot'* (lit. "human(-like) hurb") or *manraxot*. In the Armenian folk tradition, the mandrake is considered to be "the king of all plants," or *t'agawor amen xotic'*. Its obvious sacred meaning among Armenians and its high estimation as a real panacea is proved by the existence of a special prayer-praise *called Aγot'k' vasn loštakin*, the "Prayer to the Mandrake" (Sruanjteanc', 285-86):

You are the king of all the plants!
Almighty God created you and endowed you
(With talent of) healing of people and nations
From all the known illnesses in the name of
Invisible and eternal God,
Kind and beneficial Creator
And (in the name of) His Apostles,
Prophets, martyrs, patriarchs,
Hermits, saint virgins,

> *Warriors* (*for faith*) *and saint angels,*
> *And archangels and the whole heavenly hosts,*
> *And all the more so, through the mediation of all-merciful*
> *blessed Holy Mother.*
> *Be blessed, you, Mandrake!*
> *By the power of Almighty, by the spear-hand of Invisible,*
> *By powerful hand of Mighty, let all the afflictions disappear,*
> *The demons be prostrated, and intrigues come out,*
> *And the assemblage of demons be scattered,*
> *And the foundations of those evil be ruined,*
> *And may you be blessed*
> *From here to eternity.*

It is recommended to recite this prayer seven times before digging up a mandrake.

An Armenian legend relates how this plant (*loštak*) appeared:

> *Once upon a time there was an ostiary-servant* (*a monk of the very lowest order*), *Loshtak by name. Constantly oppressed by the monk he attended upon, once Loshtak poured some lamp oil over the sleeping monk's beard and set it on fire. The monk awoke in horror and bawled at Loshtak: "Let the earth swallow you up!" and at the same moment Loshtak sank into the ground. But the monk regretfully added: "Be the panacea for all diseases." However, some time later, suffering from the pain, he again cursed Loshtak, wishing that if anyone tried to dig him out, he himself would sink into the ground. That's why people are digging out Loshtak, tying it to a dog's tale* (Ganalanyan, 103).

There are no other such univocally sacred plants among the Yezidis.

A popular legend tells of a kind of herb in the mountains whose smell makes a person blind. But there is always an antidote growing right next to it, which will restore a person's eyesight. Unfortunately, tradition does not mention the name of this magic plant. Another legend relates a story about a tree which once grew in the mountains of Sinjar and people used to put a new *kharqa*[1] over its branches, to make it acquire its particular colour. Now it is

1 *Kharqa*, a woolen tunic worn by the Yezidi *faqir*s. Made of pure sheep wool, the *kharqa* is dyed in the infused leaves of zargōz (extract from the nutshell) and gazwān (Terebinthus, turpentine bush); see Asatrian 1999-2000, fn. 11.

believed that these trees are no more to be found, and that "the Kurds cut them all down."[2]

Thus, two elements in the whole world of flora are central in the picture of the Yezidi system of folk beliefs: the onion and the mandrake. The significance of these particular plants can be primarily explained by their connection with such spheres as funeral rites and healing practices. The funeral rite, being among the most sacred rituals of human existence, is supposed to provide "the proper transition" of a soul from the profane world into the sacred one, protecting it from malign forces. That is why, the use of apotropaic means (the onion being among them) often shapes various aspects of a funeral ceremony in non-dogmatic religious systems. As for the mandrake, its significance as a medical and sacred plant is typical of various folk traditions. Yet, in the case of the Yezidis, it was definitely the Armenian tradition which shaped this cult in the neighbouring Yezidi community. Thus, the mandrake has a sacred meaning primarily among the Yezidis of Armenia, who use only the Armenian denominations of this plant.

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