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Special Issue Yezidism and Yezidi Studies in the Early 21st Century

Guest Editors Philip Kreyenbroek and Khanna Omarkhali

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Editorial

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The travellers, diplomats, missionaries and academics who have written on the Kurds have always shown a remarkable fascination with the Yezidis. The great Ottoman traveller Evliya Çelebi, who in the mid-seventeenth century wrote so extensively on diverse aspects of Kurdish culture, social life and political organisation that he may well be called the first Kurdologist, was also one of the first to write some tantalising observations on customs and practices of the Yezidis he encountered. He also reports in some detail on two punitive campaigns mounted by Ottoman governors against the Yezidis of Sinjar, in one of which he played a minor role himself. Christian missionaries based in Kurdistan were drawn to the Yezidis as the major non-Muslim and non-Christian community and fascinated by what they understood of its elusive theology. Two of the founders of West European academic Kurdology, C. J. Edmonds and Roger Lescot, devoted some of their major work to the Yezidis, and most Kurdish experts have felt the need to pay due attention to the Yezidi religion. Several of the ideologists of Kurdish nationalism, finally, have elevated the Yezidis to the status of most authentic Kurds. For more has been written about the Yezidis and their religion than about the religious practices and institutions of the Muslim Kurds, reflecting a bias among both foreign academics and secular Kurdish nationalists.

In discussions on Kurdish identity, reference to the Yezidis appears almost unavoidable. Although they are but a small minority among the Kurds, they are a defining element, even if only by their being different from the majority. They are not representative but somehow widely felt to be exemplary, much like the Yezidis' history of persecution is felt by many Kurds to be exemplary of the history of their entire people. Yezidis often speak of their history as a series of murderous campaigns, *ferman* (literally, imperial edict), aiming to subjugate them and destroy their religion. The mother of all *ferman*, lively remembered in oral narratives throughout Kurdistan, was the Armenian *ferman* of 1915, the order to deport and kill the Armenians. The Yezidis remember not less than seventy-two or seventy-three *ferman* against their community. By extension,

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some campaigns to wipe out Kurdish nationalist resistance have come to be called by the same name. In his haunting elegy on the Halabja massacre, the singer Şivan Perwer strings together the names of earlier campaigns against Kurdish uprisings, much like Yezidis count the *ferman* of their community's history. The gassing of Halabja in March 1988 was the prelude to the much larger *Anfal* campaign later that year, which is now widely recognised as a genocide. The traumas of Halabja and the *Anfal* are inscribed in the memories of Kurds not only in Iraqi Kurdistan but in the other parts as well; for many, this shared memory is part of what it means to be a Kurd. The latest *ferman* against the Yezidis, the assault on Sinjar by the so-called Islamic State, with its indiscriminate murder of men, enslavement of women, and forced conversion of children – with which most of the contributions in this issue are concerned – was almost immediately recognised as one of the most shocking cases of genocide and drew the world's attention to the Yezidis like nothing had done before. Not only for Yezidis, but for Kurds in general, the 2014 genocide of Sinjar constitutes a defining moment of history and identity.

The Kurds, however, also have to face some uncomfortable truths in connection with the assault and occupation of Sinjar by ISIS. Peshmerga units that were supposed to protect Sinjar withdrew in the face of the (admittedly, far superior) Islamist forces. And Yezidis report that their own Muslim neighbours, with whom they had long lived in peace and mutual support, sided with the Islamists in the attack and took part in the killing and pillage. These Muslim neighbours-turned-enemies included not only Arabs but apparently Kurds as well. This resonated with memories of earlier *ferman* that were not carried out on orders of the sultan or his governors but by local Kurdish rulers. Both Bedir Khan Beg of Botan and Mir Muhammad of Rowanduz, the two last great lords of semi-independent Kurdish emirates, carried out massacres of Yezidis in the 1830s and these are still vividly remembered. Mistrust of Muslims – Kurds as well as Arabs or Turks – has steeply risen among the affected Yezidis. Although *pêşmerge* as well as PKK guerrillas have taken part in re-establishing a degree of security in Sinjar again and have vowed to protect the Yezidis, and in spite of the real solidarity and support shown to the displaced Yezidis by numerous Kurds in Iraq, Syria and Turkey, the events appear to have deepened the existing fault line separating Yezidis and Muslim Kurds.

The guest editors of this special issue, Philip Kreyenbroek and Khanna Omarkhali, have made their mark with earlier important studies on the Yezidis. Kreyenbroek's work, beginning with the path-breaking *Yezidism* (1995), is especially remarkable for the comparative perspective that his considerable knowledge of other Iranian religions allows and for his close collaboration with Yezidi intellectuals in editing and interpreting the Yezidi religious texts

that until recently were handed down orally. Khanna Omarkhali is the leading academic of Yezidi background, with a thorough training in the Russian tradition of Oriental studies and a rapidly expanding list of publications in Russian, English and Kurdish. The Kurdish version of her book on social organisation, symbols and ritual of the Yezidis (2007) was a modest bestseller in Turkey. The editors have earlier collaborated in a volume on the Yezidi diaspora in Europe and the efforts to redefine the Yezidi religion and develop supporting institutions. For the present issue, they have brought together contributions describing and analysing the ISIS onslaught, the Yezidis' flight and displacement, and the impact of these events on their social and religious life. Another underlying theme, present implicitly in several of the contributions, is that of Yezidi identity and its redefinition vis-à-vis the (other) Kurds – which is likely to remain a contested issue in the foreseeable future.

Although it is too early to state so with any confidence, it is my guess that especially the observations of shifts and changes in Yezidi ritual practices as a result of the massive displacement from Sinjar will be among the major merits of this special issue. The assault on Sinjar and the Yezidi genocide are among the most traumatic events in the recent history of the Yezidis and of Kurdistan and need to be remembered and commemorated. This special issue is our journal's modest contribution.

October 2016, Utrecht

Editors' Acknowledgement

It is our pleasure to publish this issue of *Kurdish Studies* specifically themed on the Yezidis at a critical historical juncture in the history of Kurdistan and the Middle East. We would like to sincerely thank the guest editors, the authors, the book reviewers and everyone else who made this special issue possible for their committed work and collaboration. Special thanks also go to Kübra Sağır, Ergin Öpengin, Farangis Ghaderi and Seevan Saeed for kindly translating all the abstracts into Kurdish.

Welat Zeydanlıoğlu
Ibrahim Sirkeci
Managing editors of *Kurdish Studies*

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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

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 têgihiştina rûdanên dawî yên derbarê êzidiyan de. Ev xebat dêneke taybet didine ser encamên hewla DAIŞê ya qirkirina

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êzdiyan li herêma Şengalê û cîhetên gotara/dîskûra giştî û akademîk li ser êzdiyan û dînê wan.

ئێزیدییایەتی و و لێکۆڵینەوەی ئێزیدیی لە سەرەتایی سەدەی بیست و یەکدا: دەروازەیەک بۆ ژمارەی تایبەت

وتاری ئەم ژمارەیە گرنگی دەدات بە بابەتی ئەو پێشڤەچوونە نوێیانەی لەمەر ئێزیدییەکان هاتۆتە پێش. وتارەکان زیاتر تیشک دەخەنە سەر مژاری هاتنی دەوڵەتی ئیسلامی داعش و هەوڵی جینۆسایدکردنی ئێزیدییەکان لە هەرێمی شەنگال و لایەنەکانی ئەو گوتارە گشتی و ئەکادیمییانەی کە لەسەر ئێزیدییەکان و هەرێمەکەیان هەیە.

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 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 *Tawûsî 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 Pîrs, 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 "Anfāl" 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 *Qewl*s, "hymns"), expounded in "sermons" (*mishabet*), or be told as prose stories (*çîrok*). 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 Kurdmancî* ("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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The Displacement of the Yezidis after the Rise of ISIS in Northern Iraq

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Abstract

In the summer of 2014 the expansion of "The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant" (ISIL/ISIS) from Syria into Iraqi territory triggered the displacement of two to three hundred thousand members of the Yezidi community in Northern Iraq. Displaced from Sinjar and other districts in the Nineveh governorate, the majority of Yezidis are hosted in the Dohuk governorate and are living there as internally displaced persons. The article explores the impact of the displacement from different angles and investigates the impact on the Yezidi community as well as the impact on ethnic and religious aspects of social life in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Keywords

Northern Iraq – minorities – Yezidis – ISIS – internally displaced persons

Koçberbûna Êzdiyan piştî peydabûna DAIŞê li Bakurê Iraqê

Havîna 2014an, belavbûna "Dewleta Îslamî ya Iraq û Şamê" (DAIŞ) ji Surî bo nav axa Iraqê, bû sebebê jicihbûn û koçberiya dused-sêsed hezar endamên civaka êzdî li Bakurê Iraqê. Piraniya êzdiyên ji Şingalê û navçeyên din ên wîlayeta Mûsilê penaber bûyî, li wilayeta Duhokê dihewin an jî wek penaberên navxweyî li wir dijîn. Ev gotar

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berê xwe dide vekolîna tesîra jicihbûn an koçberbûnê ji nêrînên cuda û tesîra wê li ser civaka êzdî ligel tesîra wê ya li ser aliyên qewmî û dînî yên jiyana civakî li Herêma Kurdistanê ya Iraqê.

بێلانەکردنی ئێزیدییەکان لە باکوری عێراق لە پاش هاتنی داعش

لە هاوینی ٢٠١٤ دا کێشانی قەڵەمرەوی دەوڵەتی ئیسلامی لە عێراق و شام لە سووریاوە بۆ عێراق بوویە مایەی بێلانەبوون و ئاوارەیی دووسەد تا سێ سەد هەزار کەس لە ئێزیدییەکانی باکوری عێراق. ئاوارەبوونەکە زیاتر لە شەنگال و هەندێ ناوچەی پارێزگای موسڵ بوو بەرەو پارێزگای دهۆک و لەوێ وەک خەڵکی بێلانەی ناوخۆیی حسابیان بۆ دەکرا. ئەم وتارە جەخت دەکاتەوە لەسەر تێگەشتنێکی جیاواز بۆ کاریگەریی ئەم ئاوارەبوونە لەسەر کۆمەڵگەی ئێزدیی و کاریگەری لەسەر ڕەوشی ئایینیی و ڕەگەزیی لە ژیانیی کۆمەڵایەتی کوردستانی عێراقدا.

Introduction

On 3 and 4 August 2014, a small minority living in Northern Iraq made it into global headlines: pictures of terrified Yezidi women, children and elderly people, desperately fleeing the onslaught of a group which called itself "The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant" (ISIL/ISIS), and later "The Islamic State" (IS) were all over the news.[1]

The displacement wave of hundreds of thousands of Yezidis[2] from the Northern Iraqi regions of Sinjar and Sheikhan in summer 2014 was caused by the expansion of ISIS. The rise of the group is closely linked to its first Iraqi territorial gains in January 2014, when it seized parts of the Anbar governorate. As Svoboda et al. (2014: 2) state, ISIS exploited a security vacuum between local tribal leaders and the Iraqi government of Iraq. Other factors were the withdrawal of the US troops from Iraq, which was completed by December 2011. In June, ISIS publicly claimed the cities of Mosul and Tikrit and "declare(d) a caliphate and change(d) its name to Islamic State". In August 2014, ISIS took control of the Sinjar, Tel Afar, Tel Keyf and Hamdaniya districts triggering mass movements on Mt. Sinjar and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of

1 Guthrie (2015) wrote that the term for the self-proclaimed "Islamic State" in the Arab world since 2013 is the acronym "Daesh", standing for الدولة الإسلامية في العراق والشام "The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant". Coined by the Syrian activist Khaled al-Haj Salih, the term signifies a refusal to acknowledge the "Islamic State" as such and mocking it at the same time.

2 In Kurdish, referred to as *êzîdî* or *êzdî*.

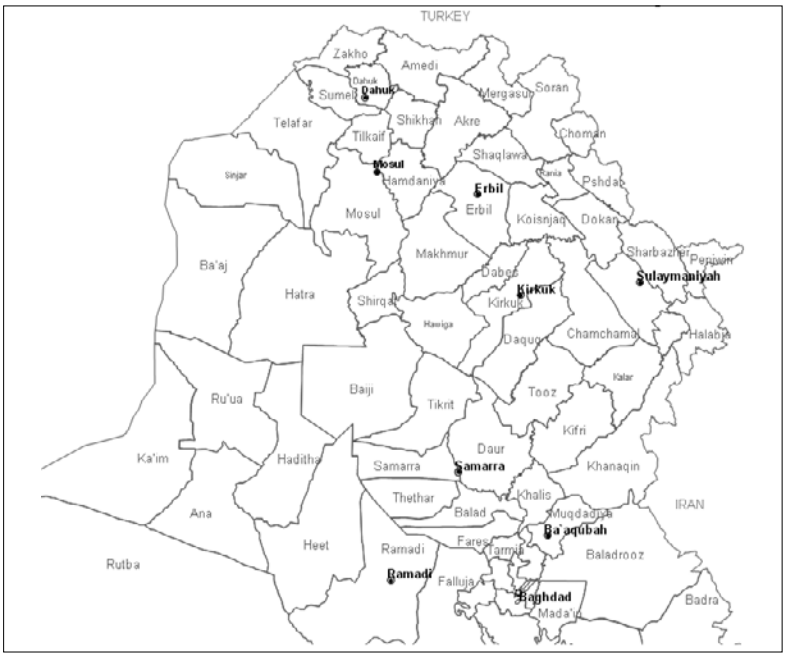

FIGURE 1 Reference map of Northern Iraq
SOURCE: MAPACTION POWERPOINT MAPS – IRAQ, MAPACTION, 2015

Yezidis, Shabak, Christians and Shiite Turkmen, in addition to Sunni Arabs and Sunni Kurds. The majority of Sinjari Yezidis fled into Syria and from there entered the Kurdistan Region of Iraq via the Syrian/Iraqi-Kurdish border crossing of Pesh Khabur.

Within days of the ISIS invasion, the terror, human rights abuses, executions and killings led to a mass exodus of Yezidis, which left all their collective villages and towns depopulated and either occupied by ISIS-fighters and their affiliates, or deserted.[3] As a result, the demographic distribution and make-up of the Yezidi community in Northern Iraq has changed dramatically.

This article describes the wave of displacement of the Yezidis in Northern Iraq in August 2014, which was accompanied by atrocities committed by ISIS including the mass execution of boys and men, forced conversions, boys forced into ISIS training camps and the kidnapping of thousands of Yezidi women and girls being sold at slave markets and held in sexual slavery by ISIS fighters. These events revive cultural memories of traumatic experiences in the history of the community, such as mass persecution and exodus from the Yezidi ancestral land, and are experienced as a collective traumatic event.

3 For further information on collective villages and towns see background in this article.

The majority of displaced Yezidis found immediate refuge as internally displaced persons (IDPs) within the borders of the Kurdistan Region in public buildings, unfinished and abandoned buildings, in community centres, with host families and later in camps established for the specific purpose of hosting the displaced. Two years after these events some individuals and families have settled in better camps than others. Spät (2008: 397) concludes:

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

This article will give an overview of the geographical distribution in Northern Iraq, and of historical perceptions of this minority. The next section examines the significant developments under the Ba'ath Regime, namely the collectivisation of Yezidi villages from the 1960s into the 1980s. The main part of the article will discuss the depopulation of Yezidi territories in Northern Iraq in the course of the ISIS invasion and the current situation of Yezidi IDPs in the Kurdistan Region, especially in Dohuk as this smallest Iraqi-Kurdish governorate hosts the vast majority of Yezidi displaced persons. Finally, the article explores some aspects of the emerging communal implications, i.e. the impact on the community itself.

It is too early to understand what the impact of the displacement of the Yezidi community in Northern Iraq will be with regards to demographic changes in the middle or longer term; will there be social cohesion and integration into the host community, or rather a return to the homelands? What will the impact be of the societal changes that may accompany, or be triggered by these developments?

The role of ISIS as a terror organisation has been thoroughly documented. However, little scientific research has been done on the impact of the displacements caused by ISIS, including that of the Yezidi community in 2014 and its consequences within the society. In-depth research and the collection of empirical data on this topic remains a desideratum, as research dealing with these aspects has not been published to date.

Background

The Yezidi community is one of the most prominent minorities in Iraq. It is part of the ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity of the country. Like the

Christians of various confessions, the Shabak and the Kaka'i, the Yezidis are members of a small religious minority in Northern Iraq.

It is widely held that the Yezidis are ethnically Kurds and most Yezidis regard themselves as Kurds. However, there are voices of dispute as to whether Yezidis are indeed Kurds, form a distinct ethnic group, or are Arabs. These questions remain contested even within the community.

Fuccaro (1999) notes that in the context of Northern Iraq, Yezidis speak Kurdish as a first language and use the Kurmanji dialect with a substantial input of Arabic words. However, exceptions exist such as Yezidis from Be'shiqe and Behzane, near Mosul city whose first language is usually Arabic.

Reliable primary data on the population numbers of Yezidis in Northern Iraq do not exist; the estimated number of Yezidis varies, and is based on secondary data rather than officially recognised population census. Yezidis are mainly found in Iraq and Syria, but also in Turkey, the Caucasian states and the Diaspora. Members of the community suggest that half a million to one million live in Iraq. Spät (2008) estimates that perhaps 200,000 to 300,000 Yezidis live in Northern Iraq; Maisel (2008) puts their numbers at 400,000. The Central Intelligence Agency statistics (2015) show that the total of the Iraqi population is 37 million. Possibly, therefore, the Yezidi minority makes up 1 to 1.5 percent of the population.

Until the summer of 2014, approximately 10 percent of Iraq's Yezidis lived in the Kurdish-administered north of Iraq, in recent years referred to as the Kurdistan Region. Within the Region, Yezidis predominantly reside in the Dohuk governorate, which has been controlled by the *pêşmerge* forces[4] since the 1990s. Sharing borders with Syria and Turkey, Dohuk constitutes the smallest of the three Iraqi-Kurdish governorates, Dohuk, Erbil and Sulaimaniya.

Until August 2014, the majority of the Yezidi community (around 90 percent) lived within the so-called disputed internal boundaries (DIBs) of the Nineveh governorate,[5] being demographically dominant in certain districts. The DIBs consist of 15 districts which stretch across the four northern governorates of Nineveh, Kirkuk, Salah ad-Din and Diyala (Shanks, 2015). The author's

4 *Pêşmerge* literally means "Those who face death". The Kurdish *pêşmerge* forces, although part of the new Iraqi Army, are controlled through the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).

5 The term "disputed internal boundaries" refers to territory within Iraq's boundaries which are disputed by the Iraqi government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). These are usually ethnically and religiously diverse governorates. This applies in particular to parts of Nineveh and Kirkuk, but also to smaller areas within Salah ad-Din and Diyala governorates. "Disputed territories in the Nineveh Plain" refers to territories to the north and east of the Mosul city which were controlled by Saddam Hussein's military up to the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, and subsequently came under the control of the Kurdish *pêşmerge* forces.

study (Dulz, 2001) found that the Yezidi community of Iraq were settled in two enclaves in the Nineveh governorate, in areas around Mt. Sinjar as well as in the nearby Sheikhan region. These areas were subject to the former regimes' Arabisation campaigns, as a result of which the residents were persecuted and displaced. Mt. Sinjar was depopulated in four waves (in 1965, between 1973–1975 and 1986–1987), during which the residents of some 400 Yezidi villages were forced to live in collective villages and towns (*mujamma'āt*); the most recent displacement occurred in August 2014. Similarly, Sheikhan was "Arabised" in 1975.

From the time of Ottoman rule, under the British Mandate, during the 1958 revolution and the establishment of the Republic of Iraq, and under the Ba'ath Regime, the Yezidi community lived in Northern Iraq, generally in relative isolation. The Advisor at the General Board for Kurdistani Areas Outside the Region, KRG (M. Dinnayi, p. c., 25 November, 2015) explains that the persistence of seclusion is due to religious reasons, for the sake of protection, and ultimately a result of the fear of persecution.

The 14th-century Syrian jurist Ibn Taimīya discussed the heretical status of the followers of the Yezidi religious reformer, the Sufi Sheikh 'Adī bin Musāfir, as "excessive". Fuccaro (1999: 2) notes that "the Yazidis, in the same way as other primordial groups have often been perceived as closely-knit, self-contained and inward-looking communities". Accounts produced by Western scholars, travellers and journalists in the 19th and early 20th century "view them as a rigid social and cultural entity". Layard (1873) observes that the Yezidis were stigmatised as "devil worshippers"; their religious difference from other groups offering one central reason for their retreat to the seclusion of Sinjar. Fuccaro (1999) explains that the Yezidis from Sinjar devoted themselves to agriculture and making a living from livestock-farming. Living conditions in Sinjar are harsh, marked by extreme heat in summer and difficult agricultural conditions, including severe water scarcity and drought. Fuccaro (1999: 11) states:

> (A)s a result of increasing religious Ottoman persecutions, the marginalisation of the Yazidi religion determined the dramatic expansion of one of the two major Yazidi enclaves of Northern Iraq, that of Jabal Sinjar. This mountainous area located in the middle of the Jazira plateau developed a distinct diaspora settlement since the early Ottoman period and over time a retained tribal character. The other major Yazidi settlement which was located in the Shaykhan district north of the city of Mosul and was the seat of the Yazidi Emirates.

Throughout history, the Yezidi community has faced persecution due to its religious and linguistic identity as well as its ethnic affiliation as Kurds. On

the basis of orally transmitted accounts, S. Tagay (2015) states that the Yezidis remember 74 incidents of mass persecution or genocide.[6] As Allison (2001: ix) states, "oral tradition is the vehicle for transmission of most Kurdish history and almost all specifically Yezidi history". Some stories of mass persecution that were handed down in oral transmission predate Ottoman rule, while others refer to latest exodus of the Yezidi community from Sinjar in August 2014.

Collectivisation under the Ba'ath Regime

Savelsberg et al. (2008: 103–104) document the areas inhabited by the Yezidi community in Iraq until the early 1960s and 1970s as follows:

a) 137 villages located in or close to Mt. Sinjar (Kurdish: *Çiyayê Şingalê*),
b) 5 Yezidi neighbourhoods within Sinjar city, and
c) 182 villages spread over the Sheikhan region and Nineveh Plain.

From the mid-1970s onwards the Ba'ath Regime under Saddam Hussein initiated a process of forced displacement. The residents were displaced either to so-called "collective" villages and towns (sg. *mujammaʿ*, pl. *mujammaʿāt*) or to other parts of Iraq. The persecution of ethnic (non-Arab) and religious minorities (non-Sunni Muslims) such as Kurds and Shia Muslims in Iraq is well documented. Van Bruinessen (1994: 172–175) defines the persecution of Kurds in Iraq during the so-called *Anfāl* campaigns as a series of brutal offensives which amounted to genocide. The *Anfāl* campaigns were carried out by the regime, in particular by Ali Hassan Al-Majid, nicknamed "Chemical Ali". The genocide is well documented by Human Rights Watch (1993; 1995) and recognised by Iraq and some western states.

The Yezidi minority was targeted by the Iraqi regime primarily owing to its affiliation and definition as ethnic Kurds. As the author (Dulz, 2001: 68–75) has shown, the Yezidi people in Iraq were subsequently persecuted and became victims of the *Anfāl* campaigns. In the course of the *Anfāl* campaigns the Yezidi community was forcedly displaced from their indigenous villages and resettled into collective villages and towns.

The establishment of collective villages in Iraq from the late 1960s until the early 1980s is an example of the carrot-and-stick policies conducted by the Iraqi regime: agricultural reform and infrastructure development on the one hand, state control and displacement on the other. The aim of the first generation of collective villages, the Ba'ath government claimed, was development,

6 Tagay Sefik, speech at the 100th anniversary of the Armenian genocide, St. Jacobi, Hamburg, Germany, 25 April 2015.

agricultural reform, and through this the inclusion of the rural population in the economic dynamics and prosperity of oil-rich Iraq (Reccia, 2014). Alkazaz (1981) and Wirth (1982) record that the agricultural reform was implemented throughout Iraq in the late 1970s and early 1980s, before the Iran-Iraq war had a devastating impact on the country.

The second-generation collective villages were intended to control the rebellious population opposed to the regime, specifically the Kurds and Shiites, minorities and other opponents. The inhabitants of collectives were easily controllable, a modern "Iraqi" way of life was imposed on the inhabitants, and rural life was standardised. Recchia (2014) states that "the spatial reorganisation of communities made them easier targets and more malleable objects of administration through the disruption of traditional livelihoods …".

Subsequently, many of the village-sized collectives have grown and developed into sizable towns and small cities. Examples include the large Yezidi collective towns Mahat, Khatara and Qahtaniya in the Sheikhan and the Sinjar region. More examples throughout the Kurdistan Region exist such as Baharka, Binaslawa, Daratu and Kasnazan which are Muslim populated. Observing the landscape of Iraqi Kurdistan in recent years, Recchia (2014) concludes that collective towns have become the main contributory factor to contemporary urbanisation and they were ultimately absorbed by larger urban centres or turned into independent urban cores.

Some characteristics are specific to collectives throughout Iraq: they were initially populated by ethnically, linguistically and religiously homogenous groups during the Ba'ath Regime. After 2003, when sectarianism erupted, in the case of the Yezidi community and the Christian minority alike, the concept of homogeneity has provided a sense of protection.

The long-term result of the forced displacement by the Ba'ath Regime is that rural communities have permanently deserted their indigenous villages to live in so-called collective villages and towns. This applies to all minorities, ethnic and religious, and as Savelsberg et al. (2011) conclude, the majority of Iraqi Yezidis are now effectively urbanised in collective settlements. The author's fieldwork shows that residents of collectives have not returned to their villages of origin either in large numbers or in a systematic or organised manner.[7] The "collective" pattern of settlement persists for the areas inhabited by Yezidis in the Sinjar and the Sheikhan region.

7 The author conducted research on the situation of the Yezidis in the Kurdistan Region, in particular amongst the displaced Yezidis in the Dohuk governorate from August to December 2014 and June 2015 onwards. The research results are included in this paper.

However, examples of the rebuilding of and the return to villages exist for other areas in the Kurdistan Region. As Fischer-Tahir (2010) has demonstrated, Qaradagh, an area consisting of 86 villages and a centre named Qaradagh to the southwest of Sulaimaniya city, was completely destroyed during the *Anfāl* campaigns in 1988, but after the Kurdish uprising in 1991 many inhabitants returned to rebuild their villages.

Depopulation of Nineveh in the Course of the Isis Invasion

The majority of Iraqi Yezidis are originally from the Nineveh governorate, whilst 10 percent are from the Dohuk governorate.[8]

Since 1957 no official population census has been carried out in Iraq that would show the ethnic and religious breakdown of the disputed territories. The district of Sinjar has the highest concentration of Yezidis and includes Mt. Sinjar, the territory to its south and north, the city of Sinuni to its west and Sinjar city, which is the district capital and has an ethnically and religiously mixed population. According to the International Organization of Migration (2011) the population of Sinjar district numbered approximately 350,000 people in 2011, an estimated two thirds of whom were Yezidis. ʻEin Sifne or Sheikhan, the capital of Sheikhan district, is ethnically and religiously mixed. The largest Yezidi collective town of Sheikhan district is Mahat with approximately 13,500 inhabitants, while there are also numerous Yezidi collective villages and small towns.

Since the US-led invasion into Iraq in 2003, vast territories inhabited by the Yezidi community have more or less come under the control of the *pêşmerge* forces. Firstly, Sheikhan and subsequently other areas in the disputed districts such as Tel Afar, Tel Keyf and Hamdaniya, and periodically parts of Sinjar district were *de facto* incorporated into the Kurdistan Region and widely governed by its administration, the KRG.

In early 2014, ISIS occupied Mosul, and advanced across the Nineveh governorate. The wave of displacement from the north-west of the Nineveh governorate in August 2014 is the result of a security vacuum which was exploited by ISIS. In addition, according to van den Toorn (August 2014), a researcher who spoke to a number of Yezidis in the area, the *pêşmerge* forces and the political leadership of the Kurdistan Region abandoned Sinjar once it came under

8 The Nineveh governorate has 5 districts accommodating Yezidis which are the districts of Sinjar, Tel Afar, Tel Keyf, Sheikhan and Hamdaniye, including Beʻshiqe, Qahtaniya and the Sinuni sub-districts. An estimated 90 percent of the Yezidi population in Iraq used to live in these districts.

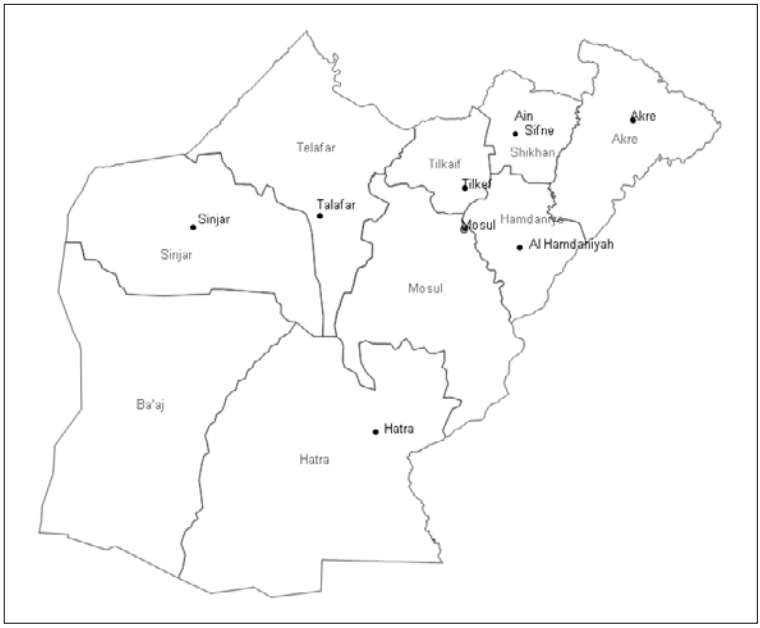

FIGURE 2 IRAQ: Ninewa governorate
SOURCE: MAPACTION POWERPOINT MAPS – IRAQ, MAPACTION, 2015

attack.[9] The mass exodus of the Yezidi community left Yezidi collective villages and towns either under the control of ISIS or abandoned.

Reach Initiative (2014), which aims at facilitating planning by aid actors and supports inter-agency aid coordination mechanisms, suggests that from early to mid-August 2014 up to 200,000 people fled their homes in Sinjar city and the surrounding towns and villages in two phases of displacement. Reach Initiative comes to the conclusion that: "On August 3rd an initial wave of IDPs fled their homes directly along the Syrian/Iraqi border towards Dohuk Governorate, mainly by vehicle. The road became inaccessible to IDPs from August 4th following intensification of fighting on the Rabia'a Crossing, on the Syrian/Iraqi border. Approximately 130,000 IDPs were stranded on Mount Sinjar …".

Based on numerous interviews with survivors, religious leaders, etc., the Human Rights Council of the Office of the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights (15 June 2016: 7) describes the subsequent days as follows:

9 This much discussed issue and the perception of many displaced Yezidis from Sinjar that they were abandoned was also repeatedly reported to the author in the months following the event.

> Those who fled early enough to reach the upper plateau of Mount Sinjar were besieged by ISIS. A humanitarian crisis quickly unfolded as ISIS trapped tens of thousands of Yazidi men, women, and children in temperatures rising above 50 degrees Celsius and prevented them from accessing water, food or medical care … American, Iraqi, British, French, and Australian forces were involved in airdrops of water and other supplies to the besieged Yazidis. ISIS fighters shot at planes airdropping aid, and at helicopters attempting to evacuate the most vulnerable Yazidis.

The second phase is described by Reach Initiative (2014): "Evacuation of the stranded population began on August 4th following the establishment of a safe corridor by Kurdish armed forces. The majority of people left Mount Sinjar between August the 9th–13th and travelled through Syria in order to reach Nawroz Camp in Northern Syria, or camps and communities in Dohuk Governorate, KRI".

The corridor was established by armed forces of the People's Protection Units (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*, YPG) which are militarily linked and supported by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*, PKK). YPG played the most significant role in rescuing Yezidis and others fleeing ISIS from Sinjar and opening a safe passage to flee north across the Iraqi border into Syria and Rojava, the self-administered region of northeast Syria. By September 2014, the Roj Women's Association (2014: 3) reported that 4,000 Yezidi refugees were living in the Nawroz camp in northeast Syria. By early September 2014, the International Organization of Migration (IOM: 2014) observed that the Dohuk governorate hosted the largest IDP population, comprising more than 465,000 individuals.

The Current Distribution of Yezidi IDP Population in Dohuk

Dohuk is the smallest of a total of 18 Iraqi governorates, with an estimated population of less than 500,000 in 2004 (Iraq Central Organization for Statistics and Information Technology, 2005: 16). As a result of economic prosperity, relative security and the proximity to Turkey and Syria, the population density in Dohuk has increased by 168% between 1997 and 2009. This is the highest increase of all 18 Iraqi governorates over this period (Iraq National Population Commission, 2012: 39).

The International Organisation of Migration (IOM: 2015a) states that in April 2015, the Dohuk governorate hosted approximately 452,500 internally displaced persons (IDPs), mostly originating from Nineveh governorate, and in smaller numbers from the Anbar and Salah ad Din governorates.

By September 2015, 18 camps were built to accommodate IDPs from the displacement waves in June to August 2014 in more than 42,500 shelters (in tents and cabins). Camps were established by United Nation agencies and international non-governmental organisations, the Turkish Aid Agency (AFAD), and the Dohuk governorate (BRHA, 2015: 14).

The Board of Relief and Humanitarian Assistance (BRHA) is the local governmental authority appointed to respond to the humanitarian needs for refugees, IDPs and host community in the Dohuk governorate. Statistical data on the demographic composition in IDP camps in Dohuk according to ethnic and religious groups was published by BRHA. Accordingly, 85% of camp inhabitants in Dohuk governorate are Yezidis. The concentration of Yezidis is obvious in camps which are located in or close to Yezidi villages, towns or collective villages such as Sharia, Khanke, Esyan, Bajid Kandala 1 and Bajid Kandala 2. These IDP camps are exclusively inhabited by Yezidis. The other IDP camps (such as Bersive 1, Bersive 2, Chamishko, Dawidiya, Kabartu 1, Kabartu 2, Mamilyan and Qadya) accommodate IDP families with different ethnic, religious and linguistic backgrounds such as Yezidis, Sunni Kurds, Shia Kurds and Shabak (BRHA, 2015: 17).

TABLE 1 Implementing agencies of camps

Implementing agency	**Camps**	**Shelters**	**Total number of shelters in percentage**	**Names of camps**
UN agencies and INGOs	8	11,274	26%	Bajid Kandala 1, Bajid Kandala 2, Dawidiya, Khanke, Bersive 2, Germawa, Sheikhan and Darkar
Turkish agency (AFAD)	2	6,500	15%	Sharia, Bersive 1
Rwanga Foundation	1	3,000	7%	Qadya (Rwanga Foundation)
Dohuk governorate	7	22,000	52%	Kabartu 1, Kabartu 2, Chamishko, Esyan, Bardarash, Mamilyan and Mamrashan
Total	18	42,774	100%	

SOURCE: BRHA, 2015: 14

Living in a camp or in temporary accommodation is experienced as a caesura impacting all aspects of life, putting strains on coping with the trauma, on the gender roles and on the relations within the nuclear and the extended family. Relationships within the family change, family members and relatives have been abducted and have gone missing, neighbours have settled in other camps or have returned home. In Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), Yezidi women report that it also makes daily life more difficult.[10] As household roles and responsibilities continue to be gender-specific, female roles, such as housework, cooking, fetching water, caring for children, elders and the disabled, are taking up more time.

In December 2015, the International Organization of Migration (IOM: 2015b) recorded 409,170 IDPs in Dohuk governorate, making up some 12–13% of the total of 3,195,000 IDPs in Iraq from April 2014 to December 2015. An estimated 70–85% of the IDP population in Dohuk governorate (286,500 to 345,000) are Yezidis from Sinjar.

Inter-community Cohesion and Integration into the Host Society

The impact of the ISIS occupation on Nineveh's society goes beyond displacement. Other problems, such as demographic engineering, are expected to occur on a large scale whether the balance of power in Nineveh remains as it is now, or if the power shifts to another force.

The ethnic, religious and linguistic fabric of Northern Iraq is characterised by diversity. The communities of Nineveh are polarised and deep divisions exist between Sunni Arabs, Kurds and minorities. One perception is that the Kurds and minorities perceive Sunni Arabs as aggressors (PAX: 2015). In interviews, Yezidis who were displaced from Sinuni and Be'shiqe, two ethnically and religiously mixed towns, recount stories of their Sunni Muslim neighbours turning against them in the event of the ISIS invasion.[11]

Divisions are observed between Kurds and the minority groups. It seems that the *pêşmerge* forces failed to protect the Sinjari Yezidis from ISIS in August 2014. Van den Toorn (August 2014) suggests that the *pêşmerge* forces and the KRG leadership misled the Yezidi community about the threat, and

10 FGDs with Yezidi women from Sinjar (Khana Sor, Sinuni, Tel Azer, Gohbal, and Sîpa Sheikh Khidir) living in IDP camps in Dohuk were carried out by the author in March 2016. The participants were aged from 17 to 50 years and of different marital status (single, married, and widowed).

11 Interviews with Yezidis living in IDP camps in Dohuk were carried out by the author in March 2016.

abandoned them once they came under attack. The militia groups fighting against ISIS on and around Mt. Sinjar are (1) the Sinjar Defence Units under Haider Shesho, a non-active member of the PUK, (2) the Yezidi militia group of Qasim Shesho under the auspices of the KDP affiliated *pêşmerge* forces, and (3) the Sinjar Resistance Units headed by Hayri Demir, affiliated with the PKK. These three militias or military groups are pro-Kurdish, pro-Yezidi, and their motives, political affiliations and military capacity to confront ISIS differ.

In addition, rifts are apparent within the minority communities. The Yezidi community of Northern Iraq is no exception and characterised by differences within the community. Divisions exist along lines of politics and party affiliation (the KDP *versus* the PUK), self-definition of ethnic affiliation (Kurdish *versus* Yezidi *versus* Arab), social class and the religious caste system (Sheikhs and Pîrs *versus* laity), gender (male *versus* female) and language (Kurmanji *versus* Arabic).

Cordesman (2010) anticipates that "… the risk of new forms of ethnic and sectarian violence – especially ethnic conflict between Arab, Kurd and other minorities in the North" as one of the key challenges Iraq faces. The Livelihood and Social Cohesion cluster of the United Nations has pointed to a lack of consistent data, allowing one to track tensions or proxy indicators of social tensions (OCHA, 2015: 7). Escalations in inter-community relations are sporadically documented in the media.

In a report Amnesty International concludes that the forced displacement of Arab residents in Northern Nineveh and other contested areas in Northern Iraq contribute to "further aggravating inter-communal tensions and violence in the country, with grave implications for (social cohesion) and the security of the different communities" (2016: 42).

The several hundred thousand Sinjar Yezidis living in the Kurdistan Region (including Northern Nineveh) as IDPs have found shelter in camps, informal settlements, publicly run schools, unfinished and abandoned buildings and religious communal buildings, with relatives, or in rented accommodation. Since their displacement in August 2014 changes have occurred at many levels. The new living environment with mixed ethnic and religious demographics brings new experiences and encounters with members of other communities. It requires redefinitions concerning social and inter-community cohesion, freedom of movement, coping strategies and gender as well as protection issues. A consequence of the displacement is the discontinuation of a secluded lifestyle in the Yezidi villages and collective villages of Sinjar region. Encounters with other communities *viz* Muslim Kurds, Muslim Arabs and Turkmen, take place on a daily basis in the new living environment and apply to all members of the Yezidi community, girls and boys, women, men and elders.

In March 2016, FGDs were carried out by the author with Yezidi women living in camps in Dohuk to gain a better understanding of inter-community cohesion in the new environment.[12] One outcome of the FDGs was that "inter-community cohesion" was defined as the absence of hostilities or negative experiences with members of other communities (including other displaced persons and the host community). Some women mentioned that they felt respected by the host community. Proactive encounters for social reasons such as visits to other ethnic and religious displaced communities on the occasion of religious festivities, holidays and other traditional practices were not reported. Inter-communal cohesion arises from necessary and practical encounters with the host community, for example to purchase goods, for education, for medical care and other services, and for work.

The divisions within the Northern Iraqi society pose a challenge for the integration perspectives of IDPs into the host society of the Dohuk governorate as inter-community relations remain superficial. Further research is required to understand the impact of the demographical changes on such parameters as education, income and living standards, employment, social and eco-social cohesion, gender, and public health.

It should be noted that such a deep and widely-felt impact as was caused by the spread of ISIS in the Yezidi spiritual heartlands, has never yet been documented in the long history of Yezidi persecutions. The resulting trauma is felt at the individual, familiar and communal level. The documented forms of persecution have never been so diverse and horrific: from physical attacks to terror, murder, rape, forced conversion, abduction and sexual enslavement, without taking into account the impoverishment of those who were displaced. Never, it seems, has the persecution of Yezidis touched so many and left their futures so uncertain.

Turning to the future, the situation remains unresolved despite the recent military gains that have been made against ISIS, notably the recapture of Sinjar city by *pêşmerge* and allied forces, including Yezidi militias, in January 2016. At the time of writing it is too early to speculate about the prospect of return as a durable solution while ISIS continues to pose a real threat from the key city of Mosul.

The subject of whether and when to return is widely discussed in the Yezidi community. It was a topic discussed in FGDs carried out with Yezidi women from Sinjar living in camps in Dohuk.[13] The desire to return home was consistently expressed by all participants. The lack of security and the lack of trust in

12 See note 11.

13 See note 11.

securing Sinjar and other areas of return are prominent subjects in the discussion. Security, the experience of failure by the *pêşmerge* forces to secure Sinjar from the invasion of ISIS, the trauma caused by the persecution by ISIS, the loss of family members and the lack of confidence that Sinjar is secure from future invasions by ISIS are the main subjects that come up in discussions on whether and when to return to Sinjar. The question of security is paramount. Other factors are food supply, economic considerations such as herding of livestock, the farming of agricultural lands, homesickness, the lack of perspectives in the new living environment, and the continuation of children's education.

Certainly some long-term demographic changes have been triggered, the scale of which are yet to be determined. Further social and demographic change can be anticipated, since currently displaced Yezidis will have to decide whether to return to their places of origin or not and when this becomes viable. As with all people in the region, and most particularly persecuted minorities that were affected by the actions of ISIS, the implications for the future are likely to be long-lasting and wider than may have been anticipated by many. The sense of insecurity and persecution has intensified, and despite efforts of the KRG authorities to support a return to the homeland, the political perspective remains unpredictable. One positive corollary to the damage ISIS has caused is the reaction of the Yezidi spiritual leader, the Baba Sheikh, who issued a proclamation urging the community for the first time to accept the return to the community of Yezidi women who have been forced to renounce their faith and convert to Islam (UNHCR, 2015). This shows the ability of the religion itself to recognise, and indeed begin to undo the damage it has suffered by allowing the possibility of change.

Conclusion

The advance of ISIS into Sinjar and the Nineveh Plains in August 2014 led to dramatic demographic changes in Northern Iraq. An estimated 286,500 to 345,000 Yezidis, originating from various districts in the Nineveh governorate, are currently living as IDPs in the Dohuk governorate and the disputed territories in the north of the Nineveh governorate. At the time of writing it remains uncertain if, when and in which numbers Sinjar Yezidis will return to their homeland, and whether it will be possible to return to the demographic situation that existed prior to August 2014. By May 2016 the International Organization of Migration-Iraq (IOM-Iraq, 2016) found that only 3,220 families had returned to their location of origin in Sinjar, mostly living in informal camps in the north of Mt. Sinjar. Sinjar is the scene of, or at least affected by a

proxy war which is taking place in Iraq. In the Kurdistan Region after the fall of the Ba'ath Regime, a system of self-protection was set up by establishing local militias formed by minority groups. Sinjar falls squarely within the territories disputed by the central Iraqi government and the KRG. Rescuing it from ISIS will not resolve the pre-existing political dispute.

It is equally uncertain to what extent the displaced Yezidi population will be able to integrate and prosper in the host community in Dohuk. Nor can it be foreseen whether a durable solution can be found for some outside the traditional Yezidi territories, either inside Iraq or elsewhere.

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Hola hola Tawûsî Melek, hola hola şehidêt Şingalê: Persecution and the Development of Yezidi Ritual Life

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Abstract

Holidays and associated rituals have always played a crucial role in Yezidi religious life. The attack of ISIS on Yezidis and the subsequent displacement of more than half the community has had a profound impact on the way these holidays can be celebrated. The fact that the Sinjari Yezidi community has lost access to its sacred landscape, which is the traditional focus of much ritual activity, as well as a semi-official ban on any public form of rejoicing at a time of mourning, constitute a threat to the continuation of ritual life. However, contrary to expectations, Yezidi religious and ritual life has become more intense rather than declining in the wake of the ISIS attack. The driving forces behind this phenomenon are the need for supernatural help, new opportunities, and a sense of defiance. The daily mixing of the two communities, local Yezidis and Sinjari refugees, with diverse traditions, has also led to an enrichment of ritual life and a new awareness of the multiform nature of Yezidi traditions as people exchange and adopt new customs.

Keywords

Yezidis – religion – rituals – ISIS – syncretism

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Hola hola Tawûsî Melek, hola hola şehidêt Şingalê: Zulm û pêkhatina jiyana ayînî ya êzdî

Cejn û merasimên li wan rojên cejnan bi rê ve diçin hergav xwedanê roleke serekî bûne di jiyana dînî ya êzdiyan de. Êrîşa DAIŞê bi ser êzdiyan û koçberbûna zêdetir ji nîvê cemaeta êzdiyan li dû wê êrîşê tesîreke mezin li ser awayê pîrozkirina wan cejnan kiriye. Cemaeta êzdî ya Şingalê ji devera xwe ya pîroz qût bûye, ku piraniya çalakiyên dînî lê bi rê ve diçin, û herwiha qedexeyeke nîv-resmî li ser her çi awayekî xweşhaliyê heye di vê dema şînê de. Ev herdu eger gefeke mezin in li ser berdewamiya jiyana ayînî an dînî ya cemaetê. Ligel vê jî, ber'eksê ya ku mirov li bendê be, jiyana dînî û ayînî/merasimî ya êzdiyan li dû êrîşa DAIŞê lawaz neketiye, belkî kûrtir û berfirehtir bûye. Li pişt vê diyardeyê sebebên wek pêdiviya alîkariya xwedayî, îmkanên nû, û hesta berxwedanê hene. Têkilbûna herdu cemaetên êzdiyên xwecih û koçberên ji Şingalê, ku xwedanê nerîtên cuda ne, rê li ber dewlemendbûna qewareya merasiman vekiriye û her ku endamên cemaetan dikevine danûstandinê û dab û nerîtên nû dinasin têgihiştineke nû ya tebîetê pir-şiklî ya nerîtên êzdî jî li bal wan peyda dibe.

هۆلا هۆلا تاووسی مەلەک، هۆلا هۆلا شەهیدێت شنگالێ: ئازار و گەشەکردنی ژیانی سرودی ئێزیدی

بۆنە و سرودەکان بەردەوام رۆڵێکی کاریگەریان لە ژیانی ئایینی ئێزیدی گێراوە. هێرشی داعش بۆ سەر ئێزیدییەکان و جێگۆرکێی دوا بە دوای زیاتر لە نیوەی کۆمەڵگەکەدا، کاریگەرییەکی قوواڵی لەسەر چۆنیەتی بەسەربردنی ئەو بۆنانە داناوە. ئەو راستییەی کە ئێزیدییەکانی شەنگال پەیوەندییان لەگەڵ خاکی پیرۆزیان لە دەست داوە، کە تەرکیزی زۆربەی کردەوە ئایینیەکانیان بووە، و هەروەها جۆرە قەدەغەکردنێکی نیوە فەرمی لەسەر هەر جۆرە شێوازێک لە شایی گشتی یان لە کاتی ماتەمیندا، مەترسییەکی لە سەر بەردەوامی ژیانی ئایینی دروست کردووە. بەڵام بە پێچەوانەی چاوەروانیەکان ژیانی سرودی و ئایینی ئێزیدی بە جێگەی کاڵ بوونەوە لە دوای هێرشی داعش لە جاران خەستر بووەتەوە. ئەو هێزە هاندەرەی لە پشت ئەم دیاردەوەیە، نیاز بە یارمەتییەکی سەرووی سروشتی، دەرفەتگەلی نوێ، و هەستی بەر هەڵستاکردییە. بە هۆی تێکەڵ بوونی رۆژانەی دوو کۆمەڵگە، واتا ئێزیدییە خۆماڵییەکان و ئاوارەکانی شەنگال، بە دوو تراديسۆنی جیاواز، ئاڵۆ گۆر و وەرگرتنی نەریتی نوێ، ژیانی سرود دەوڵەمەندتر بووە و هۆشیارییەکی نوێ لە سەر سروشتی فرەفۆرمی تراديسیۆنەکانی ئێزیدی دروست بووە.

Introduction

On the 3rd August 2014, the "Islamic State of Syria and Iraq" (ISIS) overran the Yezidi community of Sinjar in Northern Iraq, killing and capturing thousands and sending hundreds of thousands of others into exile in the Kurdish Region of Iraq. The ISIS attack ruptured the life of the entire Yezidi community of Iraq, Sinjaris as well as those living in the Kurdish Region.[1] This article studies the impact of the ISIS attack and the subsequent mass displacement of Yezidis on ritual life in Northern Iraq.[2]

Ritual life has always played an important role in the transmission of Yezidi religion and in maintaining the cohesion of Yezidi socio-religious life. Given the lack of written religious texts and therefore of formal religious education, participating in the various rituals during holidays has been an important means of sustaining and perpetuating the sense of Yezidi identity as a distinct religious community. As Philip Kreyenbroek writes in his seminal work on Yezidis (1995: 18–19), the oral character of the Yezidi religion has meant that a much greater emphasis is laid on orthopraxy than on orthodoxy. This orthopraxy included, among other things, the dutiful observance of Yezidi holidays and associated private and public rituals. These holidays and rituals are closely tied to the land itself and its sacred sites, that is, Yezidi holy places, which traditionally "offer a focus for devotions" (Kreyenbroek, 1995: 69).

Yezidi holy places, especially village shrines, play an important part in the cycle of Yezidi holidays and ritual life. Each Yezidi village "belongs" to a sacred space, which may be a shrine or a holy place containing several shrines. The

1 Though legally Sheikhan is not (as yet) a part of the Kurdish Region, *de facto* it is. For the sake of simplicity, I shall refer to the Yezidi villages east of the Tigris, including Dêrebûn, the Duhok region and the Sheikhan as the Kurdish Region in this article.

2 My field research was carried out in the collective villages of Khanke and Shariya, and I also visited the village of Bozan (in the Sheikhan district) as well as the holy valley of Lalish several times. The primary focus of research was Khanke, as Khanke did not only have an official refugee camp on its outskirts (as did Shariya), but there was an unofficial camp as well (where I did not need the permission of the authorities to visit), and people also erected tents in any empty space they could find, as well as inside a huge, unfinished wedding hall. I had also previously established contact with some families in Khanke who were hosting relatives from Sinjar. The field research took place in April, which is perhaps the month that offers the most opportunities to participate in religious events. Yezidi New Year takes place on the "first" Wednesday of April (third Wednesday by the Gregorian calendar). New Year itself is preceded by a number of religious events, and then is followed by a cycle of *tiwaf*s or shrine feast. Consequently, I had plenty of opportunity to observe the ritual life both among locals and refugees.

dead of the village are buried in the cemetery surrounding this sacred space, and new brides are taken there on their wedding day, as a symbol of their acceptance into the community. Some villages have their own "central" shrine, which may be inside or next to the village, or even some distance from it.[3] In other cases, several villages "belong" to one shrine or sacred space. Thus several villages take their dead (and their brides) to the small hill consecrated to the holy being Mem Şivan in the village of Khanke, thirteen villages belong to Mehderi, a collection of shrines and graves next to the village of Bozan, while many Sinjaris take their dead to be buried at the shrine of Şerfedîn.

These shrines and the graves around them are also visited on all important holidays. Most works on Yezidi ritual life mention the New Year tradition of women going to the cemetery at dawn to mourn the dead. The women first lay the graves with special holiday food (as well as chocolates, biscuits and canned soft drinks these days) and then sing dirges, wailing and beating their chests. In some villages the mourners are accompanied by the *qewwal*s,[4] in others just by the local *zurna* players.[5] Once the dead have been dutifully mourned, women partake of a ritual meal among the graves. The existing literature, however, generally fails to note that the custom of visiting the graves (and the shrine next to which they can be found) and taking food there is observed not just on New Year, but on a number of different holidays as well. For example, on *Cejna Êzîd*, a major holiday in December following a period of fasts,[6] women flock to

3 For example, the shrine of Sheikh Anzarut of the village of Herşenî (today a part the collective settlement of Shariya) rises on a mountain ridge. Khanke's shrine of Bayazid and Babire's shrine of Şexsê Batê were originally several kilometers away by the Tigris. After the original villages and shrines were inundated by the water of the Mosul reservoir, the shrines were rebuilt next to the new villages.

4 The *qewwal*s are the singers of Yezidi hymns (*Qewl*). They alone can play on the sacred musical instruments, the *def û şibab* (tambourine and flute), and their presence is indispensable for certain rituals.

5 In Shariya, near Duhok, there is no music, and local tribal leaders have banned the participation of *qewwal*s, saying that their presence and music leads to excessive mourning. This, however, is a novel development and shows the impact of the non-Yezidi world.

6 The holiday itself is preceded by a three-day fast for the holy being Êzîd, but in the previous weeks people may do a one-day fast for various holy beings. People usually fast for their own *xudan*, that is the holy being of the sheikh linage they belong to as *murîd*s, for Tawûsî Melek (the Peacock Angel), for the holy being of the shrine where they bury their dead, and any other holy being they feel they are connected to for one reason or another. Thus, in one family I know, the man fasts for Sheikh Mend (the *xudan* of his lineage), for Bayazid (next to whose shrine his relatives are buried), for Sheikh Şems (considered a very important holy being) and for Tawûsî Melek. His wife in addition also fasts for Xatûna Fexra (who takes care of women during pregnancy and child birth) and of course, they both observe the three-day fast for Êzîd.

the cemeteries, taking food to the graves, though admittedly there is much less feasting, perhaps on account of the cold weather.[7] The same happens on the holiday of *Belinda* in January, when small fires are lit not only in front of the doors of the homes, but also next to the graves.[8]

*Tiwaf*s or the yearly feasts of shrines and their holy beings are also of tantamount importance in Yezidi religious and communal life. *Tiwaf*s are accompanied by various rituals, varying from shrine to shrine: there may be a performance by the *qewwal*s on their musical instruments, the coloured strips of cloth (*perî*) hanging from the spire of the shrine may be changed for new ones, there may be a ritual meal (either for the heads of the households or for the whole village), while at other shrines cooked pieces of the sacrificial sheep may be auctioned off to bidders amidst a cheering crowd. In other places, the *tiwaf* includes a trip into nature in order to reach a sacred spot, lending an air of picnic to the occasion.[9] Finally, in many places, a huge, communal dance may be a part of the celebrations. *Tiwaf*s are attended not only by the people of the village itself, but also many other Yezidis (especially those who have relatives in the village, or have some attachment to the holy being to whom the shrine is dedicated). Thus *tiwaf*s serve not only to keep alive Yezidi religious ethos, but also to strengthen social ties between families and to reinforce communal solidarity, both on the village and inter-village level.[10]

A holy place that all Yezidis share, or rather the holiest place of all for Yezidis, is the valley of Lalish (usually referred to by Yezidis as "Sheikh Adi" or "*ziyaret*" or place of pilgrimage). Lalish is the spiritual centre of the Yezidi religious universe, with numerous shrines and sacred spots dedicated to the 365 (that is, the totality of) Yezidi holy beings. Ideally every Yezidi should visit Lalish once a year, and the Autumn Assembly or *Cema'iye*, a one-week festival in Lalish at the beginning of October, when crowds of pilgrims congregate in the valley to take part in the rituals, is one of the most important events of the Yezidis religious calendar.[11]

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7 People mostly just invite other women to taste some dried figs or distribute chocolates, but nobody sits on the grass to eat as during New Year. The packages of food are often not even unwrapped these days, but are put on the graves still in black nylon sacks.

8 At least this is the custom observed in some villages.

9 For example, the *tiwaf*s at the shrine of Kerecal near Shariya is on a mountain, or at the sacred rock of Sexrê Cinê which lies deep in the Valley of Jinn near Bozan, attract great crowds.

10 For a more detailed account of *tiwaf*s see Spät (2005: 68–69).

11 For a more detailed account of the Autumn Assembly see Kreyenbroek (1995: 152–154), Spät (2004: 147–157), Spät (2005: 50–60).

Finally, there is the Parading of the Peacock or *tawûs gêran*, when the *sencaq* or standard of the Peacock Angel (with the image of the Peacock on top) is taken around Yezidi villages accompanied by the *qewwal*s who give sermons and sing the sacred hymns to their captive audience. Traditionally, before the introduction of Yezidi religious lessons at school and the appearance of various printed materials on Yezidi religion, this was the only or at least the primary source of religious education and spiritual food for most lay Yezidis.[12] While the Parading of Peacock is not tied to shrines or sacred places, as the *sencaq* is always set up in private Yezidi homes, the Peacock Standard only walks in times of peace. Should the roads be unsafe or should the community be in mourning, the Peacock does not walk.

Yezidi Ritual Life and the Upheavals of the Past Decades

As can be seen above, it is not abstract religious knowledge but participation in rituals which constitutes the backbone of religion as experienced by the majority of Yezidi community. This fact makes the Yezidi religion extremely vulnerable to the political upheavals that have characterised the region for decades and have disrupted the life of the Yezidi community repeatedly. The first serious disruption was brought about by the Kurdish policy of the Ba'athist regime. The notion that Saddam suppressed and persecuted the Yezidi religion is a staple part of the official discourse on Yezidis' recent past and it is dutifully repeated by various journalists writing about the Yezidis. However, the reality is far more complicated. Interviews with various Yezidis make it clear that Saddam did not persecute the Yezidi religion as such.[13] What is more, many Yezidis recalling the Saddam era even claimed that Saddam liked Yezidis (and Christians) and trusted them more than Muslims. What, however, brought strict retribution was identifying as a Kurd and supporting the Kurdish cause. Consequently, the participation of at least a part of the Yezidi community in the Kurdish movement had serious consequences. As part of the Ba'athist fight against

12 On the Parading of the Peacock see Spät (2005: 66–68) and Spät (2009: 105–116). For the impact of literacy and school education on Yezidi oral tradition see Spät (2008: 393–404).

13 A very interesting example of contrast between official discourse and personal memories was supplied by a middle aged man, who currently works as a party officer for the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). He stated that Saddam wanted to make Yezidis Muslims, but later on, talking about his recollections as a soldier during the Iraq-Iran war, he mentioned that Yezidis were given leave from the army for Yezidi holidays, provided they brought a certificate from the Baba Sheikh, stating they were indeed Yezidis and when the Yezidi holiday was going to take place.

Kurdish guerrillas and their supporters, Yezidi villages at the foot of mountains were destroyed and their inhabitants moved into huge collective settlements where they could be monitored with more ease.[14] Apart from the social, economic and psychological impact of the destruction of their ancient villages, in the case of some villages this also meant the loss of the village shrine(s). Many shrines were even destroyed by Saddam's army, when the villagers were moved. In some cases, these shrines were rebuilt in the new villages,[15] despite the traditional ban on building shrines in new places, for only the presence of a holy being can make space sacred, but not humans.[16] Other communities, however, were left with no access to their holy spaces, for example, in the collective village of Shariya, lying just on the Kurdish side of the internal border between the Kurdish Autonomous Region and "Iraq" after 1991.[17] The shrines of several former villages moved into the collective settlement of Shariya (Girêbanî, Herşenî, Rêkava) remained either in the Arab-controlled region or too near to the heavily militarised border zone for villagers to attempt to carry on ritual activities or bury their dead there. Even in villages which stayed on the Kurdish side, villagers opted not to rebuild their shrines until 2003, arguing that any day Saddam may come to destroy them again. Such rituals which were supposed to be carried out at a shrine (for example, the ritual of auctioning off the sacrificial animal or consuming a ritual meal at a *tiwaf*), were instead performed at the house of the *micewir* or guardian of the shrine, while the dead had to be buried in the cemeteries of other villages (as a new cemetery can no more be created than a new sacred space). The internal border between the two political entities also cut the Yezidi community in half. This meant that people living on the two sides of the borders could no longer easily participate in each other's religious rituals, like the *tiwaf*s (which usually act as magnets for people from numerous villages). More importantly, those left

14 Yezidis in the Sinjar were moved into collective settlements in the mid-1970s, while Yezidis East of the Tigris were moved between 1985–1988. On the policies of "collective towns" in the Kurdish Region see Wachtmeister (2010); and Allison (2001: 29–31).

15 For example, the shrines of Bayazid and Memhedê Cindar (now under the Mosul water reservoir), were rebuilt in new Khanke, and so was the shrine of Çawûş in new Keberto. The shrine of Şexsê Batê (also under the water reservoir) was rebuilt in Bapirê as well as in neighboring Xeter (following a dispute between the two villages).

16 On this, see more below. However, as several religious experts and leaders have noted, this was a special situation, because it was not acceptable to leave the community without its holy places.

17 When I first arrived in Kurdistan in the fall of 2002, the people of the Kurdish Region routinely referred to the other side of the internal border (non-accessible to many of them) as "Iraq", implying that they did not really see their own autonomous region as a part of Iraq.

on the Baghdad-controlled side (the majority) faced serious difficulties if they wanted to travel to Lalish, the holy valley of the Yezidis, which had remained in the Kurdish Autonomous Region. In the years between 1992 and 2003, people living in "Iraq" were officially forbidden to cross the border into the Kurdish controlled areas.[18] This also applied to Yezidis wishing to make the pilgrimage to Lalish, although the Iraqi authorities usually relented on the occasion of the Autumn Assembly. For example, in October of 2002, pilgrims traveling to Lalish were not allowed to cross the border on the first day of the festivities. The next day, however, Iraqi authorities yielded, and people were let through. One could never be certain, however.

Following the 2003 war and the collapse of the Saddam regime, the two communities were unified, or at least the internal border ceased to exist[19] and Yezidis were free to travel wherever they pleased. On the other hand, Islamist fundamentalism and banditry masquerading itself as Islamic jihad was soon to rise after the war, and Yezidis were often the targets of terrorist activities. Shootings, explosions and kidnappings created a security situation where many were too careful to avail themselves of the theoretical freedom of movement provided by the fall of the previous regime. This could not but affect ritual life. The Autumn Assembly was repeatedly cancelled in the years following the war (and then, after a few years of consolidation, again in 2013).[20] Similarly, communal dances during *tiwaf*s were repeatedly forbidden for fear of the crowd attracting a terror attack. In some villages *tiwaf*s were also "scaled down", with only the heads of households congregating at the private house of the shrine guardian, instead of the whole community (and their guests) jostling around at the shrine.

Paradoxically, at the same time, despite the terror threat, there was also a renaissance of religious life. Previously it could be assumed that in villages, where the rituals could not be celebrated at the sacred places for over a decade, these rituals would sink into oblivion and ritual life would decline. However,

18 People living in the Autonomous Region were allowed to go to Iraq. However, for those who were in some way affiliated with the Kurdish parties or for young men registered as originating from the territories under the control of Baghdad, and therefore expected to do the compulsory military training, it was not advisable to cross the border.

19 Both the Sheikhan and Sinjar belong to the territories contested between Baghdad and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). The question was meant to be decided by a popular referendum according to the article 140 of the new Iraqi constitution, but this has been repeatedly delayed.

20 This last followed an attack against a military checkpoint in Erbil. As it was not targeting Yezidis, the decision to cancel the Autumn Assembly was probably made for political rather than security considerations.

after Saddam's fall, these rituals were resumed, especially as the economic boom made it possible to rebuild the destroyed shrines, often in a grander form. Some of these shrines were originally no more than small stone huts, but were now rebuilt as a proper *qub*s, that is, shrines with conical spires,[21] with enough rooms inside for an imitation grave that people can circumambulate during *tiwaf*s. For *tiwaf*s, when permitted, were once again celebrated at these places, attracting many people.

Yezidis formerly living under Saddam's rule could now also now travel freely to Lalish. A growing economy meant that new asphalt roads were being built (including the former unpaved path leading to Lalish) and many Yezidi households could afford to buy a car. Toward the end of the decade, as security appeared to improve, the number of visitors to Lalish grew exponentially, especially during holidays. In 2011, such crowds arrived for the Autumn Assembly (primarily from Sinjar) that at one point cars were no longer allowed to enter the road (full of parked cars) leading to the holy valley, but had to park on the main road, some two kilometres from Lalish, and the pilgrims had to proceed on foot.[22] As a consequence of the increased ease of travel, more people also came to Lalish for other holidays (leading to the development of new ritual events),[23] as well as on Fridays.

The Parading of the Peacock was continued in Sinjar (except for the year 2003), though according to the *qewwal*s and the *sheikh el-wezir*,[24] it was reduced to once instead of twice a year. (The explanation they gave was that the event put too much financial strain on the community, as a ceremonial meal had to be provided and people brought *fito* or alms for the Peacock.) In the Kurdish Region the Parading of the Peacock happened only intermittently, and years passed without *tawûs gêran* taking place. In 2013 a number of differences[25]

21 *Qub*s with conical spires, though originally a part of Muslim funerary architecture, have in the past decades become a symbol of the Yezidi religion and a great number of older sacred structures were rebuilt in the form of a *qub* with conical spire. Yezidi jewellers sell medallions in the shape of a *qub*, and such conical spires are embroidered on many of the special bags hanging on the walls of Yezidi homes which contain balls of sacred soil from Lalish (the *berat*).

22 Though traversing the Mosul plain, especially at night, still held some dangers, and according to the Sinjari pilgrims some people had just been kidnapped at one of the settlements, compared to previous years the situation had improved enough for many Sinjaris to undertake the journey.

23 On the lamp lighting ceremony at Lalish, see below.

24 The Sinjar Peacock is usually accompanied by the religious dignitary, the Sheikh el-wezir and his son.

25 Mostly financial in nature.

between the Princely family,[26] traditional religious leaders and the new Yezidi intelligentsia were settled and it was decided that from then on the Peacock would walk regularly. Hardly a year after this was announced, the ISIS attack overturned the lives of the whole Yezidi community.

The ISIS Attack and Its Aftermath

In August 2014, ISIS attacked and occupied most of Sinjar. The majority of the Sinjari community fled and took refuge in the Kurdish Region, settling in official and non-official camps, half-finished houses (*heykel*s) or the lucky ones with their relatives and in rented homes. ISIS also occupied the twin-villages of Be'shiqe and Behzane near Mosul, destroying the shrines that dominated the skyline and making the inhabitants, including the *qewwal*s, flee. This forced displacement cut off the greater part of the community from its holy places and cemeteries, making it impossible for them to observe their rituals. Furthermore, various Yezidi religious as well as secular leaders repeatedly declared that Yezidi holidays were cancelled (*betil kirin*) for the foreseeable future. Firstly, the community was in mourning for all those killed by ISIS. Secondly, the whole community was in suspense over the fate of those taken captive, especially the women. As a high-ranking member of the Yezidi *Haraket* party (which was essentially a Sinjari party) declared on Mosul-TV[27] before New Year, it was not possible to celebrate while the voices of the kidnapped girls echoed in their ears. Finally, any rejoicing was also banned out of respect for the *pêşmerge* dying on the battlefield against ISIS. (Muslim celebrations, especially huge weddings with music and dancing were also being cancelled throughout the year.) Naturally, the ban itself was not aimed at the performance of obligatory religious rituals themselves. As the Baba Sheikh declared, these had to be observed, lest Yezidi religion be lost (just as ISIS wanted). Rather it was acts of rejoicing (dancing, visiting, etc.) and events attracting crowds (and thus possible targets of terrorist attacks) that were at the centre of the ban. However, as most rituals involve the presence of a considerable number of people, it was highly uncertain how much of ritual life could actually

26 The Prince or *Mîr* is the supreme religious and secular leader of the whole Yezidi community. The Prince and members of his extended family, the *Mala Mîra*, used to enjoy a great respect. However, these days their authority is declining, especially in the political sphere. The present incumbent, the elderly Mîr Tehsîn Seîd Beg now resides in Germany and has delegated running the community in Iraq to his son, Hazim Beg.

27 Run from the Kurdish Region since ISIS took over Mosul.

be observed. For example, the Autumn Assembly at Lalish was cancelled in October of both 2014 and 2015. Before my trip to Kurdistan I asked a member of the Princely Family living in Germany about the upcoming New Year, and she declared with confidence: "no, this spring there will be no New Year. This was the decision of the Prince".

Considering the importance of holy places in everyday Yezidi religious practice, the virtual ban on celebrating holidays, the psychological trauma caused by the ISIS attack and the hardship of life in the refugee camps, it was natural to fear that a general decline of ritual life would follow. However, contrary to expectations, when I visited the Kurdish Region in the April of 2015, I found an intense ritual life taking place. Once again, the Yezidi religion proved itself more resilient to adversities than expected. In fact, the adversities seem to have added a new life and vibrancy to the way Yezidis saw and experienced their religion and rituals.

Need for Supernatural Succour, Opportunity and Defiance

There were three major driving forces behind the intensity of ritual life: The acute spiritual need for supernatural succour, opportunity and finally a sense of defiance. The need for supernatural succour does not need much explanation. Around 300,000 Yezidis had lost their homes and were uncertain about when they could return and to what.[28] They were living under dire conditions. Many people had been killed, children left orphaned and women left widowed without a source of income. Even worse, many Yezidis were missing, still in the captivity of ISIS. Most painful was the knowledge of the fate of captured Yezidis girls and young women. There was plenty to pray for, and during my visit I repeatedly heard: we went to Sheikh Adi/*ziyaret* to pray so that ISIS would be defeated, so that we could return to Sinjar, so that those enslaved would be freed.

Coupled with this need for supernatural help was an opportunity to go to Lalish, rare in the life of many in the Sinjari community, which was paradoxically provided by their situation as refugees in the Kurdish Region. This opportunity meant easy access to Lalish, the sacred valley of Yezidis. Though literature on Yezidis says that each Yezidi should visit Lalish at least once a year (and many Yezidis from the Kurdish Region do so), for many Sinjaris travelling to Lalish was not viable. Despite the fact that the number of pilgrims had

28 See article by Irene Dulz in this volume.

grown in the past years, the relative distance from Sinjar, economic difficulties and various other reasons prevented many people from visiting. It was not only the young who have not yet had the chance to go. Some older people told me that they had not been to Lalish for over a decade or even since they were children. Lack of money and even more having to work, especially housework and taking care of children in the case of women, made it impossible for them undertake such a trip. Middle-aged women talked about how their children had not been baptised,[29] as Yezidi children can only be baptised in the White Spring in Lalish.[30]

Now that Lalish was just a short car ride away and they also felt a great need for spiritual solace, many people availed themselves of the opportunity, and even the more impoverished refugees were planning to organise a trip to Lalish (and take their children as well). Small wonder that each time I visited Lalish, even on ordinary Fridays, the valley was full of pilgrims, and there was a certain air of festive outing to their behaviour, even if many of them referred to the tragedy suffered by the Yezidis when asked for the concrete reason of their visit.

Yezidi New Year and the rituals connected with this holiday were another example of how Sinjaris enthusiastically made use of the opportunity to participate in rituals they would under normal circumstances have had little chance to partake in.

A week before New Year I was visiting some local friends in Khanke, who had Sinjari relatives staying with them. While I was there, one elderly refugee was busy making a rope on the traditional wooden spindle. (These days the wooden spindle or *taşî* is mainly used for making ritual objects that must still be made in the traditional way,[31] and not bought in stores, unlike most other household items.) The rope was for her son, she said, who was staying in the refugee camp set up on the outskirts of the Yezidi village of Baʿdre (not far from

29 A symbol of being taken into the community.

30 Naturally, in the past, before the modern travel, most members of the far-flung Yezidi community would not have been able to come to Lalish, so the *qewwal*s carried water from the White Spring with themselves for this purpose during *tawûsî gêran* or the Parading of the Peacock, when they visited the villages (Kreyenbroek, 2009: 31). Interestingly my Sinjari informants did not know of this possibility, or else they felt it was not sufficient these days, and insisted it could only be done in Lalish. When I asked how people managed in the past, before cars, some told me that "before" everybody used to go, on horseback, reflecting the idealisation of the past.

31 For example, wicks for oil lamps to be lit in holy places on holidays, ropes to be used in a ritual setting, or – in the case of the priestly caste – *dêzî*s, the sacred thread. (On *dêzî*s, see more below.)

Lalish). Her son telephoned her and asked her to make such a rope for him, as he was planning to go with the inhabitants of Baʿdre to participate in the ritual of *Sefera Kola*. During the *Sefera Kola*, which precedes Yezidi New Year, people go to the valley of Lalish where they climb the hills to collect firewood for the guesthouse of the Sanctuary. The wood, fastened with the help of ropes to their backs, is then carried back in a picturesque procession to the Sanctuary, to be used throughout the year for cooking large meals for the pilgrims. Participating in the *Sefera Kola* is a *xêr*, a good religious deed bringing blessing. People from each Yezidi village in the Sheikhan go on *Sefera Kola* on a different day, and this young man from Sinjar was planning to go with the inhabitants of Baʿdre, since he was staying in the refugee camp there.

Another good example of opportunities to participate in hitherto not easily accessible aspects of religious life is that of the lamp lighting ceremony (*çira helkirin*) on New Year's Eve at Lalish.[32] The lamp lighting ceremony is itself something of an innovation. That is, the practice of lighting oil lamps all over the holy valley on the eve of New Year is a traditional ritual. However, in the past it was only men (and women) of religion, religious leaders and their household who assembled in Lalish for this ceremony. Going to Lalish was not so easy, and in any case tradition dictated that women be at home in order to go to the cemetery at dawn.[33] New Year was typically a feast people celebrated in their home villages. However, this slowly started to change as transport became easier. In 2003 the internal border between Lalish and the Yezidi community disappeared. In the second half of the decade, as security improved (at least temporarily), the new road to Lalish was built and more people bought cars, common Yezidis suddenly "discovered" the ceremony. Lalish became the scene of a new ritual (that is, new for most people) that was both religious and social in character, and the number of pilgrims rapidly grew year after year. In the spring of 2011, when I went to see the ceremony, there must have been thousands of pilgrims in Lalish.[34] Most of them came from nearby villages and towns, but a few even came from Sinjar, equipped to camp out in Lalish for a few days. Many of the people I talked with came for the first time in their life

32 Yezidis calculate the days from sunset, so New Year actually starts on the evening of the previous day, Tuesday.

33 And elderly female member of the Princely family – probably in her late fifties – told me that she had always attended this ceremony. First she insisted that so did other Yezidis, who had cars. When I asked her, if many other Yezidis had cars in her native town of ʿEin Sifni, she recalled when she was young, only her family did, and common people never participated in the ceremony.

34 A Yezidi friend attended in 2007 and sent photos. It is apparent from the photos that the number of people participating was much smaller in 2007 than in 2011.

(and quite a few youngsters openly admitted that they came for the "party" (*hefle*), as the ceremony was seen as fun, rather than a spiritual event, followed by singing and dancing in the night). The ritual itself took place just before sunset, when the Baba Sheikh and other religious dignitaries left the Sanctuary of Sheikh Adi and went to the "main square" in front of it, where they lit the sacred fire. The light was then passed through the waiting crowd, who all lit their own lamps, or in most cases the simple wicks soaked in oil and placed on pieces of stones which were then held aloft above their heads. Saying that the atmosphere was festive would not be adequate to describe the enthusiasm of the crowd, which went on cheering and ululating until well after dark.

When, before New Year, people discussed what the cancelling (*betil kirin*) of the New Year, announced on TV, exactly constituted, most were of the opinion that the rituals (mourning at the graves, sacrificing an animal) would be observed, but the joyous aspects, such as visiting or the lamp lighting ceremony in Lalish would be banned. (Or at least people would be banned from participating in the latter, as the guardians of the shrine would naturally have to light lamps all over the valley as is the custom.) Given the relatively new nature of this ritual and that for the majority it was a social rather than a spiritual event (if such distinctions can be made, of course) and the rather festive nature of the occasion, this seemed a natural conjecture.[35] As it turned out, we were wrong. Apparently the lamp lighting ceremony was observed attracting even greater crowds than ever before. At least, this is what those who had taken part told me. A Yezidi taxi driver from Duhok (originally a native of the village of Bozan) declared that he had never seen such a crowded lamp lighting ceremony, though he "goes every year". (Or to be more precise, as I ascertained, he had been going for the last four years.) The guardians of the shrine of Sheikh Şems, up on the hillside and some distance from the Sanctuary, recounted how there were so many people this year that they filled not only the big square in front of the Main Sanctuary,[36] but they were standing with lit *çira* in hand even in front of their shrine.

In fact, despite the ban or "cancelling", at first glance New Year did not seem to significantly differ from the celebration in other years. Women went to the graves in the morning, mourned the dead and then settled to eat some of the food. Children went around the graves clutching black plastic bags filled with dyed eggs and sweets collected from the mourners. People dyed eggs and did after all go visiting each other. Even Muslims came to express their good wishes to their *kirîv*s for the New Year. The differences were subtle: instead of the usual

35 I therefore decided against trying to organise a trip to Lalish, which would have only be possible by private car or taxi so late in the day.

36 As when I participated in 2011.

small talk, visitors discussed the tragedy that befell Yezidis, exchanging information on what happened to various relatives and friends. Men did not sit around sharing bottles of whiskey, though they consumed a huge New Year lunch as usual. Some painted eggs with the patriotic words *bijî Kurdistan* or *bijî pêşmerge* on them. In the cemeteries, where new sections were provided for the dead of the refugees, old Sinjari women came to mourn the dead. A few of them, moved by the solemn occasion, sang *xerîbî*s or dirges mourning the dead. But instead of the traditional words, now they sang of the slaughter, of the kidnapping of the girls and of the pain of the refugees in strange lands:

> Our daughters fell into the hands of the *kafir*s
> Our house (family) is in the hands of the *kafir*s
> Our families are destroyed
> They sold the girls and women to strange nations
> This girl ran to mountain to flee *daesh* and fell
> She threw herself lest she fall into the hand of *daesh*
> She escaped the hand of *daesh*[37]
> It is a great holiday (*'eyd*), but they are orphaned, in the hands of *daesh*
> Our daughters were sold in the bazaar
> Our graves are in strange lands
> Oh poor me, I am in the hands of *daesh*
> The Yezidi nation was destroyed
> There was a *ferman*[38] on the mountain
> We have no one left, we are captives
> The refugees are sitting before the street-doors of strangers
> Our dead are left orphaned in Sinjar[39]
> There is no help
> The people of Sinjar did a lot of *xêr*,[40] why did this happen to them
> Our pain has blinded us
> There is a *ferman*, there is a *ferman*[41]

37 The daughter of the singer, buried in the cemetery of Mem Şivan at Khanke, fell from the mountain when they escaped. It was not clear if this was an accident or an attempt to escape ISIS, but my local friends told me that many women threw themselves from the mountain, either to escape ISIS or when they heard what happened to their family.

38 *Ferman* literally means decree, edict by a sovereign, but Yezidis (as well as Muslim Kurds) use the word in the sense of attack, massacre, and "pogrom".

39 I.e. no one goes to visit the graves on holidays.

40 I.e. good religious deeds, that is, they observed religious precepts as they should.

41 *Ferman e, ferman e* is a famous refrain of many Kurdish songs singing about attacks against them.

In October of 2015, the Autumn Assembly was once again cancelled. However, as a video from the Rudaw news channel showed,[42] this did not stop pilgrims from showing up in Lalish. Each day approximately four or five thousand pilgrims, most of them Sinjaris from the refugee camps, turned up at the holy valley. While the major rituals associated with the *Cema'iye* were not celebrated, the pilgrims themselves performed the numerous small, personal rites that accompany such visits, from the baptism of their children to praying at shrines of holy beings to tying knots on the colourful clothes covering the tombs of the angels in the Main Sanctuary, so that their wishes may come true. In an interview with a Rudaw reporter, Luqman Sileman, a representative of Lalish Cultural Centre, explained that people came in such great numbers for the following reasons: 1. opportunity (in the past Lalish was far and getting there was expensive); 2. a visit to Lalish breaks the soul-grinding empty routine of life in camps; 3. ISIS wanted to make Yezidis disappear from this world, but as a result people's faith only became stronger, greater. This last sentiment was echoed by a young girl *Rudaw* interviewed: "this is a message to the enemy" she said, "that we will never give up our customs".

This sense of defiance in the face of an existential threat to the community was yet another strong driving force behind the intense religious life observed. While both good taste and the edicts of the religious and secular leaders banned the rejoicing that normally accompanies holidays, the religious leaders emphasised again and again: "we are not giving up our religion, our rituals just because of ISIS".

This defiance was most clearly symbolised by the recent construction and ceremonial "consecration" of the new *qub* dedicated to the holy being, Sheikh Mend at Mem Şivan. The expression "new shrine" has to be qualified – as Sheikh Deştî, a religious expert form the village of Khanke reminded me, "Don't say new *qub*, for it is not really new, we only rebuilt the structure. But Sheikh Mend has always had a sacred place there". For Yezidis, it is the presence of a holy being which makes a space sacred, whether he died there, resided in the place, merely rested there for a while, or just appeared to people there in a dream. Consequently, Yezidis cannot create a new sacred place like the followers of other religions,[43] such an act would be a "heavy burden" and would call down the anger of the holy beings. On the other hand, rebuilding an already

42 The video was shared on Facebook by Yezidis. Its claims were also confirmed over the telephone by my acquaintances.

43 The reality is, of course, more complicated, and there are exceptions, but this discussion cannot be undertaken within the present paper.

existing shrine, or replacing an older structure with a newer and grander one is perfectly acceptable and is even considered to bring great religious merit.

In the past decade, several simple older structures were replaced with new ones, thanks to the economic boom enjoyed by the Kurdish Region. Despite the Kurdish Region suffering several serious financial set-backs during the past two years (first the suspension of all payments from the central budget due to an oil dispute between the central and the Kurdish government, then the expenses of the war against ISIS and of the need to provide for over a million refugees), the Lalish Cultural Centre still opted for the building of three "new" shrines in the spring of 2015 at Mem Şivan, near Khanke. This is a small hill dedicated to the holy being Mem Şivan ("Uncle Shepherd"). Yezidis of the region refer to this place as the second *Kuçuk Laliş* or "Little Lalish".[44] They claim that Sheikh Adi, when he came from Syria, first settled here, then moved on to Bozan, and finally to Lalish. Furthermore, there are said to be 365 *xas*,[45] or spots dedicated to holy beings at Mem Şivan, one for each holy being of the Yezidi "pantheon".

The decision to continue replacing older structures with new ones at Mem Şivan was taken in February. As a member of the Lalish Cultural Centre explained, this was meant as a symbol that Yezidis would not give up their traditions and rituals (*rê û resm*). In March, two small *nîşan*s,[46] dedicated to Sheikh Babik and to Beyazid, were rebuilt as miniature *qub*s and "inaugurated" on 22 March. The really great event, however, was to be the "consecration" of the new *qub* of Sheikh Mend on 10 April. The previous structure dedicated to Sheikh Mend was just a simple stone room with a flat roof, but the new one was a proper *qub*, with a conical spire. (Several people had previously claimed that Sheikh Mend was not supposed to have a *qub* with a spire, this was against tradition. This may be true, but tradition changes fast, and some new shrines built for Sheikh Mend are now in the form of a *qub*.) It was this spire that played the main role in the "inauguration" ceremony referred to as *perî pêve dan* or "attaching the flags". The word "flags" (*perî*) refer to the colourful strips of cloth that hang from the spire of *qub*s (and which are then changed every year as part of the ceremonies connected with the *tiwaf*s). The ritual of *perî pêve dan*

44 The other "Little Lalish" is Mehdari, a piece of land next to the village of Bozan, dotted with numerous shrines with graves around them. This is where nearby villages bring their dead to be buried.

45 *Xas* means holy being, but Yezidis often use the word to refer to places dedicated to holy beings. Such places may be marked by various structures, or just some natural feature of the landscape, as a rock, tree or stream, often surrounded by a low wall of stones.

46 These are small structures, sometimes just a heap of stones.

is when a copper ornament, the *hilal*[47] and the colourful flags hanging from it are ceremoniously fixed to the conical spire of a shrine. As is the custom, the *perî*, along with the *hilal* were brought by the *ruhanî*, or religious leaders, from Lalish where they had first been "baptised" in the White Spring. Yards of coloured clothes were also brought by local women as a gift to be hung on the *hilal* or on the walls of the chamber inside the *qub*, as well as on a pillar in the centre of the room, a peculiar feature, probably erected in lieu of a grave.[48] In the morning a great, jostling crowd assembled on the hill, waiting for hours for the *ruhanî* to arrive. They finally appeared, slowly climbing the hill and visiting the major shrines to pray. Then there was another prolonged wait, as the *perî* and the *hilal* were being brought by another car. Finally, the *hilal* arrived as well, swathed in the *perî*s so it appeared as a huge bundle of coloured materials solemnly carried to the new shrine on top of the hill on the shoulder of a man. He was closely surrounded by an ecstatically ululating crowd. As he got near to the shrine, the local women who had brought their own *perî*s as gifts, pushed through the crowd to throw them on top of the bundle. The *qewwal*s sang their hymns accompanied by music, the Baba Sheikh said the requisite prayers, and then a small group of men clambered onto the roof of the *qub* and climbed the ladder laid against the spire. The bundle hiding the *hilal* was lifted, handed up from man to man and fixed to the spire amid a general and clamorous jubilation.

After the *hilal* and *perî* were in place, some of the spectators formed a circle and started dancing accompanied by the *qewwal*s playing on their instruments, in spite of the oft-repeated ban on any kind of dancing during this period of intense mourning. This was not a common dance, however, as people pointed out, but a *govend*, a type of Kurdish dance that in Yezidi tradition forms part of many sacred occasions. It is an expression of religious feelings rather than mere fun.[49] Accordingly, the dancers were not young people either, but middle-aged ones. Their frame of mind, just as that of the whole community, was made clear when they cried out in the traditional way: *Hola hola Tawûsî Melek* (Hola,

47 Literally "half moon", though it comes in many shapes.

48 Since Yezidi shrines usually commemorate a place where a holy being once stayed, rather than the place where s/he died, they are not considered mausoleums. However, in many of the newly erected *qub*s there is an imitation grave inside, though people are often aware that there is nobody under it.

49 The majority of those joining in the *govend* (and present at the event) seemed to be locals, as far as it was possible to judge by their clothing, but at least one of the dancers must have been from Sinjar, as he was wearing a white *dishdasha*, the ankle-length shirt of Arabs that many Sinjaris had adopted.

hola Peacock Angel),[50] but this time one of the dancers added at the top of his voice: *Hola hola şehidêt Şingalê* (Hola, hola, martyrs of Sinjar), a cry picked up by those around him.

Syncretism

There is another aspect of the impact the ISIS attack had on ritual life within the Yezidi community, one which perhaps merits mentioning: a fascinating "internal syncretism". Despite their common roots and a more or less constant contact, through the centuries the two communities have developed their own distinct customs and rituals. The enforced mixing of the two groups, however, may eventually lead to their adopting each other's traditions, enriching their religious life and giving it new layers. It also makes Yezidis aware of how varied their own traditions are.[51] In the past decades, the process of scripturalisation and the introduction of religious education at schools, complete with centrally produced books, have gradually been leading to the eventual uniformisation of a previously multiform tradition and to the acceptance of the notion that there must be "a right form" of texts, rituals and holidays. At such a time, experiencing first-hand the various differences may have a great effect on how Yezidis think about their religion and may counterbalance the simplified view provided by books (and recently television programs) on the Yezidi religion.

When I arrived in Kurdistan in the spring of 2015, I was surprised to see a trendy-looking bracelet, woven of red and white threads, on the wrists (and occasionally the neck) of many of my old acquaintances. While *dêzî*s or thin necklaces made of sacred thread (woven by members of the priestly castes) were traditionally worn by Yezidi babies and toddlers, and occasionally by grownups (especially elderly women) suffering from mysterious ailments,[52]

50 Yezidis cannot explain the literal meaning of the word *hola*, which might possibly be related to Hebrew *hallal*, "to praise" (as in the expression *halleluyah* or "praise God").

51 Many Yezidis do not realise this. So for example, when I visited Srechka, a village in the Sheikhan region, a sheikh of the Adani lineage there told us that no Yezidi marriage was valid without an Adani Sheikh celebrating the union. My driver, a Yezidi from Khanke, hardly an hour's car ride away, was amazed to hear this, though he himself was a married man.

52 Such *dêzî*s are believed to protect against a number of ills, in accordance with the supernatural powers of healing inherited within sheikh and pîr lineages. See further Spät (forthcoming).

I have never seen this type of *dêzî* with its distinct pattern. What is more, it was often worn by healthy young people, who usually have neither the need nor the inclination to wear traditional healing-protecting *dêzî*s. This new fashion was soon explained: this was the *dêzikê Batizmî* (or *dêzî* of Batizmî), a ritual object made popular by the refugees.

Batizmî, a winter holiday, is an eloquent attestation both to the repeated (forced) migrations of sections of the Yezidi community and to how this has led to an "internal syncretism", merging the different traditions which had evolved in diverse parts of the Yezidi world. Batizmî, celebrated in mid-January, is observed only by the Çêlka tribe, who presently live dispersed in Turkey, Syria and Sinjar. The Çêlka living in Sinjar claim to have migrated from what is today southern Turkey, fleeing persecution there. Sinjaris are perfectly aware of the "foreign" origin of this holiday, and refer to it as the "holiday of the Çêlka". At the same time, while making it clear that this is not "their own" holiday, Sinjaris celebrate Batizmî along with their Çêlka neighbors. Unlike the Çêlka, they do not keep the three-day fast preceding the holiday, but they go and partake in the *simat* (ritual meal) prepared by members of the Çêlka tribe. More interestingly, Sinjaris have themselves adopted the Çêlka tradition of wearing and gifting the red-and-white *dêzikê Batizmî* and distributing it among friends. To be more exact, this bracelet, which is believed to protect against fear, lightning and sickness in general, can only be woven by members of the Çêlka tribe, who then give it as a gift on the day of Batizmî to those who come to wish them happy holiday (as it the custom in the region). However, they may give not just a single bracelet, but sometimes even a small ball of the red-and-white thread. Those who receive the ball, even if they do not belong to the Çêlka tribe themselves, may in their turn make a gift of *dêzikê Batizmî* to others. Sinjaris, fleeing ISIS, have then brought this custom to the Kurdish Region, where it was previously unknown. In the spring of 2015 many local Yezidis, who had never heard of the *dêzike Batizmi* (or worn *dêzî*s) before, sported the red-and-white bracelet on their hand. Thus a tradition brought by Yezidis once fleeing from what is today's Turkey to Sinjar, was then in its turn brought to the Yezidis of the Iraqi Kurdish Region by refugees fleeing ISIS, to become a fashionable novelty there. It is, naturally, too early to tell, but the *dêzikê Batizmî* has become so popular that it is possible that the tradition of making and gifting it will become a custom in the Kurdish Region as well.

Even customs associated with holidays shared by both communities may differ. The most striking difference concerns gender roles. This is well demonstrated by the way the two communities celebrate New Year. In the Kurdish Region the traditional "scenario" for New Year is for women to go to the graves

early in the morning (or these days, in the afternoon before New Year).[53] Men do not visit the graves (even if they take their female relatives to the cemetery by car, they never participate in the mourning ritual itself). The rest of the day is taken up with a huge family lunch, visiting and receiving guests. Therefore, it caused a sensation in Khanke when in the afternoon of New Year thousands of Sinjari refugees of both genders headed to the various shrines dotting the landscape around the village. The small hills on which the shrines rose soon filled with people strolling about, especially young ones. Several amazed locals commented on how the event resembled *tiwaf*s or shrine feasts, when crowds congregate around the shrines. A *tiwaf* is exactly what a Sinjari informant compared their way of celebrating New Year to. Just like in the Kurdish Region, on New Year Sinjari women go to the cemeteries at dawn, but once the ritual of mourning is over it is the custom for everybody, men and children included to go. From that time onwards they may stay until the evening, with *dul û zurna*, that is music and dancing. At popular shrines, like that of Şerfedîn, the protector of Sinjar, on the northern side of the mountain, the crowds are immense and the atmosphere highly festive. On the New Year of 2015 in Khanke, given the circumstances, the *dul û zurna* had to be dispensed with, but Sinjaris still observed the custom of visiting the shrines. Older people and families just paid a short, obligatory visit, but many of the young ones stayed milling around. In its turn, the sight of so many Sinjaris parading at the shrines attracted locals (especially younger men), who all felt that they had to go and have a look at the proceedings and take part in the fun themselves. Young men, who would never dream of visiting a shrine or the cemetery next to it on New Year, now went from one shrine to another, enjoying the novelty and excitement.

Similarly, in Sinjar both men and women go to the graves on other holidays, like the Holiday of Êzîd and Bêlinda. Those who have buried their dead in the Kurdish Region since their flight from Sinjar, go to the cemeteries together on these holidays, eat their holiday food there, or make a bonfire next to the grave, according to the occasion.[54] Though, as has been said above, it is not the custom among the Yezidis of the Kurdish Region for men to go to the cemeteries, those who have Sinjari relatives of friends staying with them, or have some

53 My acquaintances claimed that this was a new custom, though Lady Drower (1941: 97–98) does give an account of women in Be'shiqe mourning at the graves on the eve of the holiday.

54 The information is from my Yezidi acquaintances, as I have not been in Iraq to witness these holidays personally.

other close connection with Sinjaris do sometimes accompany their acquaintances to the cemeteries, out of politeness or curiosity.

Yet another curious difference between the ways holidays are celebrated in Sinjar and in the Kurdish Region concerns the discrepancy between the holiday cycle of the *feqîr*s and the holiday cycle of everybody else. *Feqîr*s were originally men of religion, or men who opted to live a life of asceticism. However, in the course of the nineteenth century, *feqîr*s in Sinjar evolved into a special community organised along tribal lines (Fuccaro, 1999: 30).[55] Though they are no longer men of religion (except for the few who opt to don the *xirqe* and live the life of an ascetic), *feqîr*s still occupy a special niche within religious life. All the males wear beards, just like Yezidi men of religion, and older *feqîr*s allegedly pray twice a day.[56] In the past, there were many *qewlbêj* or "sayers of hymns"[57] among the *feqir*s of Sinjar, while others (both males and females) knew many prayers (*du'a*) for curing various ailments. *Feqîr*s also observe their own calendar of holidays. Some holidays (like the Holiday of Şex Alê Şemsa) are peculiar only to the *feqîr*s, but even more interestingly, for some no-longer remembered reason, *feqîr*s celebrate all the shared holidays a week before others. This is a fact that most Yezidis living in the Kurdish region were formerly not cognizant with, since most *feqîr*s live in Sinjar these days. In the spring of 2015 many locals witnessed *feqîr*s celebrate New Year in style: go on a pilgrimage to Lalish just before New Year, then on the day of New Year mourn at the graves of those who passed away after the flight from Sinjar and were buried in local cemeteries, sacrifice a sheep, prepare a holiday lunch for the extended family, and receive visitors proffering their good wishes for new year – one week early. Similarly, a week before locals celebrated Holiday of Êzîd or Bêlinda, *feqîr* families duly repaired to the graves to consume some holiday food there or to light bonfires. Again, some of these *feqîr* families were accompanied by their local friends or relatives[58] on these occasions.

55 Even *feqîr*s themselves are uncertain whether the *feqîr*s constitute a tribe or not. Some people say they are not a tribe (*aşîret*), others say that they are, however, they readily admit that at the same time *feqîr*s belong to various other tribes, which have non-*feqîr* members as well.

56 That is, they recite long prayers, unlike other elderly Yezidis, who usually just call on the help of the holy beings in a few sentences – if they pray at all.

57 *Qewlbêj* are lay people who memorise and recite Yezidi hymns (however, unlike the *qewwal*, they cannot play the sacred musical instruments). This institution seems to be peculiar to Sinjar. I have heard of two *qewlbêj* in the Sheikhan region, but my impression was that this is a recent innovation there, prompted by the decline in the number in the *qewwal*s and the notion, due to the scripturalisation of Yezidi religion, that anyone can become proficient in religious lore.

58 I.e. relatives through marriage.

Though observing *feqîr*s celebrate holidays a week early is naturally unlikely to affect local customs, it is a source of new knowledge and makes people more aware of the varied nature of Yezidi tradition, at a time when other socio-cultural forces, from school education to television programs, are working toward a uniformisation of Yezidi faith and ritual practice.

Conclusion

The displacement of the Sinjari community poses a potential threat to the continuation of ritual life as it deprives villagers of access to their holy places, which act as the primary foci of most holiday rituals. Furthermore, mourning and fear of terrorism has prompted official "bans" on the more public and joyous aspects of holidays. However, just as in the past, the Yezidi religion has proved itself resilient and able to adapt to adverse conditions. The need for supernatural succour, a new-found opportunity to participate in religious events at Lalish, and a conscious sense of defiance in the face of an existential threat have contributed to the intensification of ritual life instead of an expected decline. Furthermore, the proximity and daily mixing of local Yezidis and refugees in the Kurdish Region has not only made Yezidis aware of the rich and varied nature of Yezidi religious tradition, but has also led to a kind of "internal syncretism" where people may adopt certain aspects of the other community's customs, eventually enriching ritual life.

Naturally, it is still too early to make a prognosis as to how ritual life and "internal syncretism" will develop in the long run. This depends on a number of factors, such as when (and whether) Yezidis will be able to return to Sinjar, and whether all of them will opt to do so, as some may prefer to stay in the Kurdish Region (due to the much greater level of security, better economic conditions and job opportunities, or because they will have managed to establish themselves there before return to Sinjar becomes possible).

It must be remembered, however, that what enabled Sinjari refugees in the Kurdish Region to carry on their ritual life with relative ease was the presence of Yezidi holy places in the region. While Yezidi religious tradition maintains that humans cannot and may not create new sacred spaces, utilising the sacred space of other Yezidi communities poses no "theological" difficulties. Consequently, the greatest immediate danger that threatens the continuation of traditional Yezidi ritual life is the potential whole-sale exodus of the community to the West. The complex connection between landscape, social structure and the traditions of an oral religion mean that severing the ties between the Yezidi community and its homeland may accomplish what ISIS has failed to do: bring about the end of Yezidi religion as an actively practiced living faith.

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The Gendering of Victimhood: Western Media and the Sinjar Genocide

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Abstract

This article adopts a gender perspective on war, problematising media attention on Yezidi women since the attacks by ISIS. Sinjari Yezidis' narratives/subjectivities since 2014 are silenced in Western media reports in favour of a "hyper-visibility" of women's "injured bodies", which mobilises a specific narrative of victimhood. Reports from UK and US broadsheet newspapers, plus the BBC, CNN and online publications are analysed, plus new data gathered through fieldwork among Yezidis in Northern Iraq. Western media draw on and reproduce cultural and gender representations, reinstating relations of power infused with orientalist and patriarchal tropes. The focus on women's bodies moves attention away from the workings of namûs "honour" and the suffering of Yezidi men. Some Yezidi women who became activists, speaking as victims, are heard internationally; the compromises this entails are discussed in light of Fassin and Rechtman's work on the politics of victimhood.

Keywords

gender – Yezidi – hyper-visibility – media – conflict

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Cinsiyeta civakî ya qurbanîbûnê: Medyaya rojava û jenosîda Şingalê

Ev gotar ji perspektîva cinsiyeta civakî re li diyardeya şer dinêre, û bal û rûmalkirina medyayê derheq jinên êzdî de ya ji dema êrîşên DAIŞê ve bi awayekî rexneyî dinirxîne. Ji dema êrîşên 2014an ve şahidî û tecrubeyên şexsî yên êzdiyên Şingalê di raportên medyaya rojavayî de têne bêdengkirin û li şûna wan "bedenên brîndar" ên jinan bi dereceyeke zêde têne dîtin, ku ev yek rê li ber duristbûna hikayêteke qurbanbûnê vedike. Raportên rojnameyên serekî yên Brîtanya û DYA'yê ligel weşanên înternetî yên BBC û CNNê û daneyên ji meydanê di nav êzdiyên li bakurê Îraqê hatî berhevkirin hatine tehlîlkirin. Medyaya rojavayî hem îstifadeyê ji temsîlên çandî û cinsiyetî dike hem jî wan ji nû ve ava dike, ku bi vê yekê re têkiliyên hêzê yên bi hêmayên oryantalîst û babsalar şikl girtî ji nû ve binecih dike. Zîqbûna li ser bedenê jinan balê ji ser babeta "namûsê" û ji êşên mêrên êzdî dide alî. Hindek jinên êzdî yên bûyî çalakvan, ku wek qurban dengê xwe bilind dikin, di qada navneteweyî de têne bihîstin. Rengvedanên menfî yên van kiryaran, li vir, di çarçoveya lêkolînên Fassin û Rechtman yên li ser polîtîkiya qurbaniyê de hatine munaqeşekirin.

به جێنده‌رکردنی قوربانی: میدیای رۆژئاو و جینوسایدی شه‌نگال

ئەم وتارە لە ڕوانگەی جێندەرەوە شەر شرۆڤە دەکا و سەرنجی مدیا لە سەر ژنانی ئێزیدی لە دوای هێرشەکانی داعش دەخاتە ژێر پرسیار و بە ئاستەنگ دەکا. گێرانەوی کەسەکانی/ سۆبجەکتیویتیەکانی ژنانی ئێزیدی شنگال لە دوای ٢٠١٤ دا لە ناو ڕاپۆرتەکانی مێدیای رۆژئاوادا لە بەرژەوەندی زەقکردنەوەی لەشی زامداری ژنان بێدەنگ کراوە، کە گێرانەوەیەکی تایبەتی قوربانی بەرهەم دێنێت. لەم وتارەدا ڕاپۆرتەکانێنی لاپەڕەی رۆژنامەکانی ئەمریکا و بەریتانیا لەگەڵ بی بی سی، سی ئێن ئێن، و چاپەمەنییەکانی ئۆنڵاین، و هەروەها داتایی نوێ کە لە ڕێگەی کاری مەیدانی لە ناو ئێزیدییەکانی باکووری عێراق کۆکراوەتەوە، شرۆڤە دەکرێت. میدیای رۆژاوا لە سەر بنەمای وێناکانی کلتوری و جێندەری چێ دەبیت و بەرهەمیان دێنێتەوە، کە دووپات کردنەوەی پەیوەندییەکانی دەسەڵاتی ئاوێتە لەگەڵ پیاوسالاری و رۆژهەڵاتناسی (ئۆریەنتالیزم)ە. تەرکیز لە سەر جەستەی ژنان لەو میدیایە سەرنج لە سەر چۆنییەتی ئیشکردنی ناموس و ئازارەکانی پیاوانی ئێزێدی دوورەدخاتەوە. هەندێک ژنانی ئێزیدی کە بوونە بە چالاکوان و وەک قوربانی دەئاخفن، لە ئاستی نێونەتەوەییدا گوێیان لێ دەگیرێت؛ [لەم وتارە] ئاکامەکانی ئەم سازشکارییە لە ژێر تیشکی بەرهەمەکانی فاسین (Fassin) و ڕێختمان (Rechtman) لە سەر سیاسەتی قوربانی باس دەکرێت.

Introduction

This article contributes to the literature on western representations of non-western women in conflict by considering western media reporting of the Sinjar genocide of 2014. We use this word advisedly, having considered both ISIS' publications on the subject and multiple eyewitness accounts that demonstrate Lemkin's classic definition of 1946, though detailed legal descriptions are beyond the scope of this article. We adopt a gender perspective on war (Enloe, 2000, 2007; Giles and Hyndman, 2004; Cockburn, 2007, Shalhoub-Kevorikian, 2009) problematising media attention on Yezidi women in the context of the war against ISIS. We argue that Sinjari Yezidis' narratives and subjectivities since 2014 are silenced across media representations in the West in favour of a "hyper-visibility" (Baudrillard, 2005, 1990, 1982) of women's "injured bodies", which mobilises a specific narrative of victimhood. We will ask what kind of subjectivities lie behind these representations of the "injured body" and consider how the paradigm of hyper-visibility of Yezidi women and its association with a narrative of victimhood are constructed and disseminated, highlighting the modalities through which they represent women's experience of war. We will show how the Western media draw on and reproduce cultural and gender representations, reinstating relations of power infused with orientalist and patriarchal tropes. We will argue that the Western media focus on women's bodies moves attention away from the very real suffering of Yezidi men, the workings of namûs "honour" and the collective nature of the catastrophe, which includes the experience of men, women and children. However, we will also note that some Yezidi women who became activists are claiming more agency starting from the victimhood narrative and are increasingly using their encounters with the Western media and their own social media accounts to make their voices heard; we will use Fassin and Rechtman's (2009) work on the politics of victimhood to consider the wider implications of this.

We wish to state at the outset that we do not intend to deny either the magnitude of the tragedy lived by the Yezidi community, or the utility of the media interest in preserving a general sense of attention and alert towards the destiny of this minority. We are aware that many journalists are working compassionately, with the intention of helping a disadvantaged group secure international attention and awareness, and that they regard bearing witness as a morally positive act. Reporters often have little role in the editing of their copy or in the headlines invented by editors. In a discussion which uses humanitarian organisations in Palestine as an example, Fassin and Rechtmann show that proxy testimonies of suffering offer "histories without history" – fragments of

experience "shuffled to suit the needs of humanitarians, to fit the message they wish to communicate" (2009: 214). They call for a focus on how "the victims have reappropriated this representation of themselves, how they are taking it over or diverting it, depending on their situation, how they claim or reject it" (2009: 216). Our interest lies in examining this dynamic further – in identifying how the gendered media narratives differ from the views expressed by Yezidis themselves, how they fit into the Orientalist wider use of stereotypes of the women and gender relations in the Middle East,[1] and how, given the dynamics of power operating, these discourses impose constraints on the Yezidis, who are still finding an international voice as a community.

In concentrating on women's bodies, the media discourse reproduces the fascination with women's bodies shown in Orientalist writing and art since the nineteenth century,[2] and sets up a narrative of Oriental women who need to be saved (preferably by Westerners), emasculating the Yezidi men. Paradoxically, although Yezidis were a focus of disproportionate volumes of Western Orientalist narrative in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Austen Henry Layard and George Percy Badger being the best known examples in English, these writings focused on the Yezidis' exotic customs and minority status; they contain few comments on the beauty, strength or visibility of Yezidi women, such as are found in the writings of E. B. Soane (1912) and Mark Sykes (1915), for example, on the Kurds. Moreover, the trope of 'white men saving brown women from brown men' (Spivak, 1994:93) is a feature currently associated predominantly with representations of Muslim women, as Abu Lughod has noted in her discussion of the representations of Afghan women in English-language sources (2002; 2013). 'Saving brown women' produced not only a specific representation of women but most importantly became the justification for military intervention (Cooke, 2002: 468).

As material for analysis, we have used specific items from influential English-language broadsheets and mainstream online sources. Internet searches, using terms such as "Yazidi/Yezidi" "Sinjar" "Islamic State", "Da'esh" and "women" brought up many articles, of which the most detailed and nuanced came predominantly from the websites of prestigious daily broadsheet publications.

1 In this article we use the term "Orientalism" to highlight the production of knowledge and the power embedded in the creation of truth about "the other", the Yezidis. Secondly, we reflect on how this process reproduces and proves a specific image of Yezidi women and "the women question", with the media as the Western authoritative subject that speaks about the Yezidis.

2 For example, the association made by Flaubert between the Orient and sex is noted by Said (2003: 188–190); harem paintings constitute an identifiable genre within nineteenth-century art.

Here we cite 1 article from the *New York Times* (US), 3 from the *Daily Telegraph* (UK), 4 from *The Guardian* (UK), 1 from the *Financial Times* (UK) – also 1 from the weekly *New Statesman* (UK). We also used the websites of large news agencies such as the BBC (3 audio/AV broadcast resources), CNN (1 article) and a few other well-known publications such as *GlobalPost* and *The Week*, which often contain embedded videos. We have used the versions archived on the websites as our sources, retrospectively surveying articles published since August 2014, although we read many of the articles when they were first published. Prestigious broadsheets not only help to form opinions in the countries they serve, but also put reporters on the ground while the events were happening and their feature articles tend to give relatively long and nuanced accounts of the events concerned. In the UK, *The Guardian* gives a left-of-centre perspective (as does the *New Statesman*) and of the right-of-centre publications, *The Telegraph* is known in the UK for its strong foreign coverage. Both help to form opinions among their political constituencies, and both presented results for our searches; by comparison, the News International-owned *The Times* presented us with relatively little data. Although we did not intend to survey US publications as such, a representative of the activist group Yazda.org[3] drew attention to the importance of Rukmini Callimachi's work in increasing the Yezidi profile internationally, and especially in Washington, hence our inclusion of *The New York Times*. There is a wider spread of news reporting across many different websites in the immediate aftermath of the genocide, that is, through August and September 2014, plus flurries of news coverage of subsequent events (the liberation of groups of victims over Winter 2014–15, the recapture of the town of Sinjar in late 2015, the press releases issued by activist groups etc). However, after October 2014, most of the articles are features, prompted by the work or travel of activists such as Nadia Murad, or aid enterprises such as Baden-Wurttemburg's Special Quota project (see below). The descriptions of events by Yezidis constitute new data, taken predominantly from interviews made by Christine in Northern Iraq during her February 2016 fieldwork, supplemented with recorded interviews online.

Description of Events and the International Media Response

In the early hours of 3 August 2014, forces of the so-called Islamic State moved into the Yezidi collective town of Sinjar City, located below the southern flank

3 Matthew Barber, personal communication, February 2016.

of Mount Sinjar. Abandoned by the Kurdish peshmerga garrison charged with protecting them, and knowing that the road leading east via Tell ʿAfar was closed to them, the panic-stricken townsfolk headed due north up the mountain, a hard and barren road where many died of exposure or were picked off by their enemies. Elsewhere in the Yezidi settlements around the mountain, people fled for their lives on the long road to Duhok, in the Kurdistan region. Some were cut off and only escaped when YPG (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*/*People's Protection Units*) forces from Syria's Kurdish-held areas (aligned with the PKK (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*/*Kurdistan Workers' Party*)) opened up an escape route via Syria. A few remained marooned on the mountain, in desperate need of supplies. Of those who did not leave their homes in time, ISIS forced many to choose between conversion to Islam or death. Others were not given the choice. Thousands of men were killed (hundreds in the village of Kocho alone) and approximately 7,000 women and children taken prisoner and sold into slavery. At the time of writing, almost 2 years on, more than 300,000 Sinjari Yezidi displaced persons remain in refugee camps in Iraqi Kurdistan, Syria and Turkey, whilst some 2,500 prisoners remain in the hands of ISIS and a constantly increasing number are leaving Iraq, mostly hoping to find asylum in Germany or the United States.

The media response to these events passed through various stages. In the immediate aftermath, the first week or so, there was a great deal of confusion, not only about what was happening, but about who it was happening to. Many of the "who are the Yezidis?" articles reached for comfortable Orientalist staples – ancient origins, timelessness, exoticism, which had characterised nineteenth and century writings on the community. Sean Thomas' piece of 7 August 2014 on the *Daily Telegraph* website opened: "They are afraid of lettuce. They abhor pumpkins. They practise maybe the oldest religion in the world. And now, after at least 6,000 years, they are finally being exterminated, even as I write this".

On 5 August the sole Yezidi member of the Iraqi parliament, Vian Dakhil, had broken down as she described the plight of her people in the chamber; her appeal, which covered the general humanitarian emergency, was widely reported and viewed online: "30,000 families have been besieged on Mount Sinjar, without food or water. Our women are being taken captive and sold on the slave-market. In the name of humanity save us".

At about the same time, Iraq's Human Rights Ministry issued a statement that "hundreds" of Yezidi women had been reported kidnapped by their families. The spokesman, Kamil Amin, used the word "slaves" and said they would be used in "demeaning ways". This was the element of the story which would become dominant. Priya Joshi's article of 8 August is an example of those

which included Dakhil's speech (citing the words above) but led with Amin's announcement concerning the women.

The humanitarian emergency on the mountain continued to dominate reporting over August 2014, as the story of the abducted women grew. On 12 August, the Secretary General of the UN, Ban Ki-Moon, expressed his "dismay" at the plight of the refugees amid a more general call to the government of Iraq to avoid sectarian strife (United Nations News Service, 2014). By this time, the first Western journalists had witnessed and reported on the situation; also on 12 August 2014, the *Daily Telegraph* website carried an interview with Jonathan Krohn, who described the refugees' journey from Sinjar into Syria, under PYD (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*/*The Kurdish Democratic Union Party*) protection and thence into Iraqi Kurdistan. Although Krohn describes the poverty of the Sinjaris and their utter lack of resources with compassion, the website's headline, which is "Mount Sinjar Dispatch: Yezidi refugees 'living like animals'", probably reflects an editorial choice rather than that of the journalist. Tracy Shelton's account of one man's wait in Erbil for news of his family, published in *GlobalPost* on 12 August 2014, was unusual (and remains so) in its voicing of the feelings and viewpoint of a Yezidi man.

Meanwhile, the Yezidis themselves were organising and forming pressure groups. The easiest to chronicle online is Yazda.org, formed by Yezidis in the USA in the immediate aftermath of August 4 and now a small but active NGO delivering advocacy and humanitarian aid in Northern Iraq and lobbying elsewhere. Their immediate goal was to make the Yezidis' plight known globally and to facilitate the liberation of women by collecting information, tracing prisoners wherever possible and mobilising the international community with a view to pressuring their governments into using special forces against ISIS to free the captives; as early as August 25 they issued a statement saying that airstrikes would not be enough. This was complicated by emerging information about the contribution of KDP (*Partiya Demokrata Kurdistanê*/*Kurdistan Democratic Party*) peshmerga forces – part of the KRG and thus an important ally of the West – to the humanitarian disaster by their failure to remain at their posts and protect civilians. This story was first broken on 17 August by Christine van den Toorn – tellingly, not in the mainstream press but in the online *Daily Beast*.

Although Yazda.org's press release of August 25 stated that the humanitarian situation on Mt. Sinjar remained critical, the abducted women were steadily becoming the tagline by which Yezidis were identified in the international media. This was consolidated by the online publication of issue 4 of the purported IS Magazine *Dabiq* in October 2014, which gave a justification for sexual slavery on religious grounds (pp. 14–17), provoking many

responses in the media. It also ensured that the story was decisively taken up by anti-slavery activists, such as CNN's Freedom Project (Watson 2014). Also during this month, Iraqi Yezidis sent a delegation to Washington to share information with policy makers on the whereabouts of the detainees in the hope of sparking targeted US attacks to liberate the women before they were dispersed; although many important contacts were made, this aim was not successful. However, it was an unprecedented attempt to transcend divisions of clan, political affiliation and locality to speak with a united Yezidi voice. By December 2014, Amnesty International's report on the abductions was bringing attention to the pressures put by host families (sometimes their own relations) and even by Yezidi activists, on women who had escaped from IS to speak to the media (Rovera, 2014: 14). However, many journalists worked more sensitively; Rukmini Callimachi's work in *The New York Times* on ISIS' "theology of rape" was welcomed by Yazda.org for its responsible approach and for putting the story into a wider international space (Matthew Barber, personal communication, February, 2016).

Another strand in the discourse on Yezidi women deals with their association with female fighting forces. By October 2014, the media were reporting on the Syrian Kurdish forces who had opened up an escape corridor for the Sinjaris; attention fell mostly on the female fighters (*The Week*, 7 October 2014).

The Media Discourse: Women's Bodies

Drawing on Baudrillard's analyses of media representation, we conceive hyper-visibility as an insistence or "excess" of visibility, which overloads with signification the object that has been represented. The object becomes therefore transparent, disappearing behind its broadcast image. "This is the murder of the image. It lies in this enforced visibility as the source of power and control, beyond even the 'panoptical': it is no longer a question of making things visible to an external eye but to making them transparent to themselves" (Baudrillard, 2005: 94).

The key point about hyper-visibility for Baudrillard is that this insistence of visibility erases what lies behind the image, fostering a sense of "obscenity" which privileges the "over exposed", the "all-too-visible". The concept of visibility here does not refer only to the realm of "images" (photographs and videos), but also includes "speeches" and, more generally, discourses produced and disseminated by the media. According to Baudrillard, this hyper-visibility produces a sort of pornographic effect through which the "hypervision in close-up" of the object erases the broader context in which action and

subjectivity occur (1990: 59–60). A plastic image of the corporeal detail is only visualised and endlessly disseminated in the circuit of communication, producing a magnetic fascination, which however removes the holistic dimension of the body and human relationship. When thought of in terms of the Yezidi experience, it is the gendered, "injured" body that is assumed as the object that the image encapsulates, produces and disseminates, effacing the subjects and the complexity of the context, while at the same time allowing for the capture of Western audience through an allusion to Orientalist tropes. With orientalist tropes we mean here quite conventionally the production of essentialising representation of the others which is functional both to political domination (Said, 1979), and to the normative constitution of a Western self (Isin, 2015). Most of the tropes are organised around a binary and dialectical principle whereby the colonial or post-colonial world is depicted as a space of irrationality, triviality, cruelty, innocence etc which is far more immune to historical change (Sadowski, 1993) allowing for the retrospective constitution of the western self as its radical opposite.

As discussed earlier, while media coverage initially focused on the "(re-)discovery" of the Yezidis in the Middle East, for example R. Jalabi's article "Who are the Yezidis and why is ISIS hunting them?" (*The Guardian*, 11 August 2014), the account of their participation in conflict in the region later became centred around the theme of sexual violence through a victim-perpetrator relationship, with IS fulfilling the role of the hyper-masculine, "unenlightened", sexually abusing perpetrator. Titles such as Rukmini Callimachi's "ISIS enshrines a Theology of Rape" (*The New York Times*, 13 August 2015), Nussaiba Younis' "How Isis has established a bureaucracy of rape" (*The Guardian*, 16 August 2015), Martin Chulov's "Yazidis tormented by fears for women and girls kidnapped by Isis jihadis" (*The Guardian*, 11 August 2014), Emma Graham-Harrison's "'You will stay here until you die': one woman's rescue from Isis" (*The Guardian*, 26 Dec 2015) – show how "Yezidi women" have become not only a key object of inquiry by the media, but also a genre per se based on a narrative of salvation and rescue.

The type of commentary we scrutinise in this article enacts a "hypervisibility" of Yezidi women and violence, celebrating a generalised form of "global feminism" which dismisses the function of local practices and complexities in the context of Iraq, the specificity of war experience in this location, and the macro-systemic variables which have defined such an experience over time; that is, the way in which war, conflict and the very sense of being a minority has been shaped by colonial heritage, neo-colonial practices, various ethnic and religious tensions, and global capitalism. Only the dualist relationship between ISIS and Yezidi women (in the form of their "injured

body") remains, dismissing the broader context in which this relationship is embodied.

An interesting example is offered in the BBC program Newshour dedicated to the "Yezidi women sex slave ordeal" (22 December 2014). The journalist in this programme asks Donatella Rovera, Amnesty senior advisor in Iraq, whether this kind of violence could be described as a strategy adopted by ISIS. Interestingly, Rovera highlights how ISIS' strategy is to annihilate ethnic and religious minorities that "have lived in Iraq for centuries", forcing them out of their territory. While little is said here about the histories of violence that Yezidi have suffered in Iraq over time, therefore isolating the dualistic relationship of Yezidi and ISIS out of their broader historical context, attention is mostly put on the "corporeal" abuse of Yezidi women and their international relevance as now recognisable victims of ISIS. Their invisibility in the past (and invisibility of past experiences of violence suffered) is now turned into a new visibility as 'witnesses' to the violence of ISIS, which finally endowed them with a voice to be broadcast. This is, however, only made possible by highlighting a material and corporeal aspect of violence and sexual pleasure in relation to which a logic of salvation can be opposed. Hence, the journalist asks whether ISIS' strategy includes "impregnating Yezidi women [...] in order to dilute blood line?"; or whether this strategy aims at achieving "simple sexual gratification or encouraging other men to come and join IS", and whether "those [women] who have managed to escape get the help they now need?" It is interesting how the journalist uses terms related to the materiality of the body ("blood", "impregnating") to confirm the brutal practices operated by ISIS, fixing the image of Yezidi women as "victims" of individual violence by ISIS members and object of "sexual gratification".

In this scenario, how is the hyper-visibility of Yezidi women in war contexts produced, knotted, and disseminated? That is, what forms of subjectivities are concealed behind the image of the injured body? The injured body conceals the diversity of female roles and positions within the Yezidi community, producing a homogenised and undifferentiated image of the "abducted woman". The experiences of older women, children, widows and the diversity of socio-economic conditions in the specific context of the Yezidi community are thus excluded from the representation that the injured body mobilises. This is also reflected in the elaboration of the priorities and the criteria informing "humanitarian intervention programmes" whereby humanitarian and medical considerations inevitably end up fragmenting and concealing the experience of the community as a whole, while isolating a predefined model of woman to be rescued. In Philippe Sands' article presenting the Baden-Wurttemberg's Special Quota Project (2016), which aims at temporarily relocating 1000 Yezidi

women from refugee camps in Iraq to Germany, Jan Ilhan Kizilhan, the medical head of the project, says:

> It was hell to make such decisions, to decide for that one, yes, you meet the criteria, but for another one, no, you do not [...] The elderly, or girls who were alone, would not be selected, the former because it was felt they would not benefit from a programme of treatment, the latter because they should not travel without close family members [...] There was one child, she was nine or ten, we decided she could not come alone but then, after two months, an aunt was freed from Da'esh and we agreed to bring them both (Sands, 2016).

Kizilhan is clearly aware of the rhetoric of rescuing and saving women (Abu Lughod, 2002, 2013; Das, 2007) and also of the difficulties experienced in the refugee camps. However, despite the understandable difficulty of deciding which women can be identified as good candidates for the programme, the scrutinisation of Yezidi women's body and personhood, the action of dividing them by age group and the problems related to the separation of women from their community, demonstrate the mobilisation of a predominant image of Yezidi woman to be rescued and healed against those women that do not "meet the criteria" and therefore disappear behind that image, an effect which is further enhanced by the media gaze.

But how is this image of the injured body upheld? This is partly done through the narrative of victimhood that the hyper-visibility of the abducted woman instantiates. This narrative, however, is sustained by its counter-part in the iconographic representation of Yezidi women: the female fighter. After the initial portrayal of the Sinjar massacre as the event where the victimhood of Yezidi women was originally produced and made self-evident, a sequel in the media representation puts emphasis on the "revenge" that some abducted women have embraced by assuming the role of fighters resisting and challenging the misogynist cruelty of ISIS. Interestingly enough, in the narrative of victimhood, abducted women are constantly interviewed and asked to recall and give testimony to the individual violence they have suffered. By distancing themselves from this logic, interviewed female fighters actively reshape a mode of representation of war experience, which downplays individual trauma in favour of a collective sense of belonging and agency. The insistence on a narrative of victimhood by the media, however, intervenes here to bring back the image of the injured body. As the BBC commentator Jiyar Gol put it on 19 August 2015, when discussing the experience of a Yezidi female fighter in the PKK:

> Avin is shy and quiet, the commander advised me not to ask about what happened to her in captivity but the scars on her face and hands are a silent testimony. She says she is now focused on learning everything she can in order to go back and face her abductors (Gol, 2016).

In the passage the paternalist narrative of victimhood reproduces the hyper-visibility of women's "injured" body by assuming the materiality of the body as the ultimate parameter against which the truth of Yezidi women can be stated and tested. The impossibility of asking Avin about her individual trauma is overcome by the immediate truth that the signs in her body reveal, allowing her body to figure as an empty surface where signification and truth can be played despite the real subject embodying the image. Avin is thus forced to coincide with hyper-visibility of the body injured, to "transform herself into the image" as Baudrillard would put it, adapting to the "jurisdictions of signs" of hyper-visibility (Baudrillard, 1990: 31). On the one hand, therefore, the female fighters complement the passive figure of the victim celebrating the active alter ego of the same figure. On the other hand, their disruptive dimension as active subjects and embodiments of collective agency is re-domesticated through their re-confinement to the image of the victim. Hence, Avin's contradictory "nature" as a female fighter with a "shy and quiet" character, who has to "learn" how to "go back and face her abductors".

This example once again shows the modalities of production of gendered and sexualised media practices. Victimhood stands here as dispositif or apparatus in a Foucauldian sense; that is, a mechanism through which heterogeneous discursive and institutional practices concur to structure and implement forms of power relations (Foucault, 1980). An essential feature in the apparatus of victimhood is that of protection. The more Yezidi women are produced as victims of IS, the more the patriarchal value system of the Yezidi community is called into question, with emphasis on the "failing" role of Yezidi men in protecting the "honour" of their women. This will be discussed further below.

The Yezidi Discourse: Men's Voices and Collective Suffering

Let us now consider some Yezidi accounts of the Sinjar genocide and its effect on the community. With the exception of a few privileged interlocutors such as Nadia Murad and the KDP MP Vian Dakhil, Sinjari Yezidi voices are rarely heard in the international media and the data given here, unless stated otherwise, was collected during Christine's visit to the Badinan province and Sinjar in February 2016.

When one speaks with Sinjari refugees in camps, or with activists, the narratives of the genocide begin by embedding the events themselves within their historical and political context, which, as mentioned above, is rarely visible in the media stories. The media do not tell us that Sinjar has long been a poor region by Iraq's standards, disadvantaged by insufficient healthcare and schooling, with little water; that "Sinjar city" is one of a number of collective settlements made during the 1970s when Saddam's government forcibly evacuated ancestral villages; that the inhabitants, under the protection of the KRG but not within the Kurdistan region itself and not benefiting directly from the economic boom post-2003, have felt marginalised even in post-Saddam Iraq.[4]

As the media coverage freezes their experience of suffering to the present conflict with ISIS, what is obscured is the specific way in which Yezidis frame their experience of violence, attaching it to a genealogy of *ferman* (persecutions) and a feeling of being outnumbered and surrounded.[5] In 1992, they counted 72 *ferman* against their community, which, after the 2007 bombings of the Yezidi communities of Kahtaniya and Siba Sheikh Khidir and then the 2014 genocide, has now risen to 74 (Sinuni, personal communication, February 2016). A full discussion of this worldview is beyond the scope of this article, but anxiety about the abduction of women has long been one of its strong features.[6] In 1992, Iraqi Yezidis discussed the politics of folkloric songs about the past with Christine. They saw the performance of songs by Muslim singers about love between Yezidi women and Muslim men as an act of epistemic violence, and a reflection of a dystopian past where the Muslim majority preyed on the women of minorities.[7]

In the present circumstances, the abduction of women en masse reduces the Sinjari male to an "injured man" unable to fulfil the social expectation to protect his womenfolk that the "rules of honour" require (cf. Abu-Lughod, 2000: 89–90). As early as 12 August 2014, Tracey Shelton's Sinjari interviewee in Erbil made these rules clear: "Give me a weapon and I will go to fight. Give the weapons to all the Yazidi men. Just give us a chance to fight for our families or die trying. That's all I ask".

A young (i.e. aged under 30) Sinjari stranbêj (singer of folkloric songs) living in Rwanga community camp near Zakho explained this further to Christine

4 See Dulz, Savelsberg and Hajo 2008.

5 Although the core meaning of *ferman* is no more negative than "official decree", it has come to mean "persecution" in the Yezidi context. Cf. Allison 2001: 44, 284.

6 Yezidis are not alone in this; see Das 2007: 32–33 for Hindu imagery of "the lustful Muslim".

7 In both 1992 and 2016 Christine heard complaints (first from non-Sinjari Yezidis, and secondly from a Sinjari) of the way non-Yezidi singers performed a song called Keça or Kurê Simoqî (Simoqi girl/boy) which for them represented abduction of a Yezidi girl.

(February 2016). After explaining his great feeling and passion for the old songs of Sinjar, he stated that he would not sing them again until "someone comes to protect us or brings our mothers and sisters back … or what has happened to us happens to them [i.e. the enemy]".[8] He added, "Let the men go … but let the girls and ladies return[9] … a woman is powerless, she has no support".[10] People don't know how it feels, he added, to have a sister or daughter calling on the phone saying "come and save me …".

As it is incumbent on men to protect women and children, the young singer makes it clear that there is shame surrounding these events for Sinjari men: "We don't know what to say [i.e. we are at a loss/embarrassed] … we won't go back to Sinjar, we have no faith left … it's finished …".

Describing the flight over the mountain in the context of the singers' practice of immortalising persecutions or *ferman* in songs, which often praise the heroism (literally "manliness") of heroes, he said, "A ferman happened to us, we don't know who to praise, we don't know whose heroism to praise … there was nobody [lit. we saw nobody] to help us …".[11]

Little children were "thrown aside" (avêtî). At a moment when such things could happen, when children could be cast aside, there is no hero with manly virtue (mêranî) to praise. Pursuing the subject of children, he said, it didn't matter if he went hungry or thirsty himself, but he worried about protecting his own children. "I wish they had never been born", he added. The despair resulting from their inability to provide help and protection highlight the sense of powerlessness men experience as an effect of the assault, which produce a de facto feminisation of the whole community in this war context, as they are subsumed into the narrative of victimhood.

The singer quoted above had no female members of his immediate family in captivity, but his words tally with accounts of those who do. During the first public conference to be held on the Yezidi genocide, at the American University of Suleymani, Iraqi Kurdistan, on 11 February 2016 (which Christine attended), several survivors spoke publicly about their experiences. One, a man named Kiçê, who came from Kocho, described the massacre of the men (which he survived by chance) and the abduction of the women, including women from

8 ezê ser karê xwe mînim bes, heta em nabînin yekî me rabe an jî yek da ku dayk u xwiskê me bîne … yan jî ya bi sere me hatî, bila bi serê wan jî be. All translations in this article are by Christine Allison and Kawa Morad.

9 Kec and khanom bên, mêr bila biçin …

10 Jin bê dest e … desthilatiya wê nîne.

11 Ji ber ku em nizanin çi bêjin, em neçine Singal … baweriya me nema … xelas bû …… Ferman me rabû em nizanin emê medhê kê bikin, em nizanim mêraniya kê pesin bidin … Me kesekî xwe nedît.

his own close family; he stated that, although he suffered various symptoms, he had had no psychological help. Another account of the Kocho massacre, given shortly after the event by Nayef Jassem (17 August 2014) in a video from Associated Press embedded in the *Daily Telegraph* website, speaks in similar terms: the delivery is factual and deadpan, with the telling comments at the end: "I just want for my family to be in a safe place; I wish I had been killed there instead of them, that's what I want". An aid worker told Christine at the same conference that a number of Yezidi men have lost their own womenfolk and live alone in camps, or with groups of other similarly afflicted men. A Yezidi woman from the Sinuni area north of Mount Sinjar who lived in Bajit Kandala camp near Zakho, affirmed this, saying that she and other women nearby took turns to cook for one such man who lived nearby. Camp life presents many challenges for men in general; the current economic crisis in Iraqi Kurdistan makes it extremely difficult to find work to provide for the family. We conjecture that this affects their wellbeing further, though we know of no studies so far on this. But it is perhaps worth noting that in an article by Lara Whyte in the *New Statesman* profiling the Baden-Wurttemburg project of giving women psychological treatment in Germany (26 January 2016), the women's only criticism of the project is that it does not include men over 18.

In Western media discourse, the hyper-visibility of the Yezidi woman is accompanied by an invisibility and silencing of the Yezidi male. He is sidelined, leaving little room for a discussion of his experience whether as resistance fighter or as wounded survivor. There is no focus on men's bodies as a counterpoint to those of women; nor are the sufferings of boys problematised, though boys do suffer; for example, it is known in the region that pre-adolescent Yezidi boys who have been taken captive are being trained by ISIS as suicide bombers (personal conversations, Yazda staff, February 2016). The absence of the Yezidi male voice also masks one of the central aspects of this genocide for the Yezidis, namely its collective nature. It is the whole group which has been violated.

Yezidi Voices in the Media

The events in Sinjar gave Yezidis an unprecedented opportunity to speak to the world. Although the senior members of the Yezidi religious council (the Majlis-i Ruhanî), who are mostly from the Sheikhan area, have spoken publicly through their links with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), Sinjari voices have now also made themselves heard in the West. Yazda took a strong role in this with their support of the delegation which visited Washington in

October 2014, but the advocacy and dialogue process also continues through Yezidi groups in Germany, most of whom, like Jan Ilhan Kizilhan, have roots in Turkey. Some, though not all, of these are aligned with the Kurdish movement from Turkey.

Fassin and Rechtman (2009: 275) see the current prominence of victim testimonies and the valorisation of bearing witness as the culmination of a long process, whereby victimhood develops from a source of shame into a strong position from which to speak. This, they note, recalls Reinhardt Koselleck's prediction that in the future, history would become a "historiography of the vanquished" (2002: 76–83). Within the international discourse of human rights, a victim's story can be heard, understood and valued by the world, indeed there are few other forms of communication open to the subaltern. This is the framework within which the Yezidis can make their voice heard and put forward their agenda as a minority in the international arena.

Another important contextual element here is the political climate of Kurdistan and the emphasis placed on narratives of Kurdish suffering and victimhood. Before the rise of ISIS, the demand for the "Anfal" campaigns (of deportation and massacre undertaken by the Ba'ath regime against Kurdish civilians during the 1980s) to be accepted as a genocide, was a keynote of Kurdish international relations. Crimes against humanity committed by the Saddam Hussein regime were (and are) memorialised, through statues, museums, investigations and oral history projects with victim narratives and testimonies figuring strongly (Fischer-Tahir, 2012). However, it is noticeable that there are still some kinds of victimhood which are difficult to enunciate and these are often associated with namûs. In Turkey, for example, memories of extremely humiliating violence suffered in prisons may be evoked in public discourse (e.g. in published prison diaries). However, women still find it difficult to express their experiences of rape or sexual violence (e.g. Aras, 2014: 95–96); accounts of this violence are not part of the public domain in the same way. In Iraq, the iconic "Anfal woman" is represented as mother and/or widow, but is rarely if ever described as a rape victim. Thus, although the politics of victimhood and suffering within Kurdistan interface well with the Yezidis' own consciousness of persecution over many years, the placing of the international gaze squarely on female bodies and the namûs issue is extremely painful for the whole community.

Some of the protest politics in Kurdistan have centred on the "ownership" of victimhood. The destruction of the Halabja genocide monument in 2006 by the people of Halabja themselves had its origins in public discontent at the slow pace of regeneration and a strong feeling that the KRG was using the suffering of victims to raise international money without channelling that money

back to the victims themselves (cf. Watts, 2012). Some Anfal women have had a complex relationship with the way they have been publicly represented by the political establishment (Mlodoch, 2012). It is not surprising, then that while some of the most active Yezidi campaigners who speak to the media, such as Vian Dakhil and the activist Khidir Dommle in Duhok, are members of the KDP, other groups favour media spokespersons without such connections. Yazda.org, for instance, has sponsored the visits made by Nadia Murad to Europe and the USA (see below).

In formulating responses to the fall of Sinjar, Yezidis are negotiating with the politics of victimhood at a number of levels, within the community, in Kurdistan and Iraq, and internationally. Many young men (and some women) have joined the fight for Sinjar, enlisting in a number of defence units aligned with various political forces; the politics of these is beyond the scope of this article. But for the first time, spokespersons have stepped forward whose permission to speak comes not from their hereditary authority (like the religious leaders), nor their local political role (like the village leaders or the Yezidi MPs Vian Dakhil and Amira Hassan), but from their own experience of suffering. In the international discourse, the women's narratives of victimhood are privileged over men's and the female voice is audible on the media, as we discussed earlier, because it is in line with the brutality of ISIS.

The most prominent of these survivors is the UN good will ambassador Nadia Murad, who, backed by Yazda.org, has visited many senior politicians worldwide and addressed the UN Security Council. A former IS prisoner who managed to escape, Ms. Murad has secured support from prominent figures (most recently the human rights lawyer Amal Clooney, who has agreed to represent her) and has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. She keeps the story of the women still in captivity in the media but in her frequent tweets places a greater emphasis on the entire and collective nature of the crime, placing her cause within the framework of international human rights. She leads on her website, nadia-murad.com, with her aim to have the crime against the Yezidis internationally accepted as genocide. She describes herself there as "survivor of enslavement and human trafficking" and "human rights activist". She visited the UK in February 2016, when as mentioned above, the *Daily Telegraph* website's headline described her as "former sex slave".

During the same visit, Nadia Murad was interviewed for the BBC discussion programme HARDtalk (2016), by journalist Sarah Montague. Nadia recalled her personal experience before and during the captivity and how she managed to escape. Sarah Montague framed all her questions in the perpetrator-victim continuum; she reminded us that Nadia exists and has a voice as an "abducted woman" who survived. This is visible by looking at the questions posed:

"When you think about the man who raped you in the time you were held what do you want to happen to them?" "There are young people all over the world who are attracted by what the Islamic State is doing, what do you say to them?" "There are many women who have been held who killed themselves out of desperation – was it something that at the time you thought about?" "I wonder you did not question your faith?" "You said they told you to convert to Islam, did you think about that?"

Despite the framing of these questions in terms of Nadia as a victim, Ms. Murad manages to escape her role as simple vulnerable actor and manifest a sense of agency and self-assertiveness. As well as affirming her faith in God she says: "I have never thought of killing myself, either before or after I was captured by Da'esh, it has never occurred to me. I believe that everyone should accept what God has given them (…) we must all endure".

Despite her instrumental and political functioning in the public discourse of the West, Nadia succeeded to become politically vocal for her own community through her vivid descriptions of the reality lived by Yezidis. By accepting the media morbidity related to the details of her captivity she embraces the "tactical dimension of trauma" (based on the social significance of the trauma) which recognises the "social intelligence of the actors involved" (Fassin and Rechtman, 2009: 10–11).

When Nadia answered the question posed by Sarah Montague "Do you also want to see soldiers going in from Western countries to take on IS" with "I don't really understand military matters" she purposely moved the discussion away from the violence suffered. She precisely named her expectations in regard to the "ethical" Western military forces in context of war (respectful towards women and children in opposition to the brutality of ISIS). Furthermore, Nadia reminded the audience that in the occupied areas in Syria and Iraq regular people who do not support ISIS, Muslim families who were active in helping her and other women, were also suffering therefore "International forces must stop Da'esh and bring them to justice". By recognising the dignity of the victims and their request, Sarah Montague reproduced the west as the generous benefactor which can act now through military intervention (Cook, 2002: 468).

In campaigning for international recognition of the genocide, Nadia is in line with Yezidi lawyers in Iraq and Yezidi activists more generally. As well as the wish for justice to be done, Yezidis are aware that special security arrangements for Sinjar, which would permit a more concerted return home, will be more likely if Western allies recognise that genocide has taken place. Moreover, within the current discursive environment of international acknowledgment of the inviolability of human rights, in the aftermath of Bosnia and Rwanda, genocide is the ultimate crime. The controversy over recognition of

the Armenian genocide is well known in the region and a major part of discussions in Turkey about the Kurds' past. Before June 2014, the KRG's key international demand was its campaign for Anfal to be internationally recognised as genocide (Fischer-Tahir, 2012). Apart from any more concrete benefits, success would inscribe the stateless Kurds into international frames of reference. Therefore, it is not surprising that the Yezidis too, having lost faith in their own country's ability to protect them, are seeking justice by this route, using international terms of reference rather than local structures.

Conclusion

We have analysed English-language media representations of the Sinjar genocide, and found that they focus predominantly on the bodies of suffering Yezidi women and on their sexual slavery. In doing so, the genocide becomes gendered and not only the suffering of Yezidi men, but their very voices are effaced. By contrast the discourse of the Yezidis themselves foregrounds the collective nature of the genocide and sets it within a historical framework of persecution and marginalisation.

The Yezidi community has publicly suffered pain which remains unspeakable even within the current acceptability of narratives of victimhood in Kurdistan. A community which venerates blood succession as a guarantee of purity has lost control of its reproductivity.[12] Families have lost livelihoods, women have lost the reputation they valued and men have been emasculated. Many despair; however, great resources within the community have been revealed in their responses to these events. Not only have Yezidis made an unprecedented decision to welcome violated women home without loss to the honour (namûs) of their families; they have united as never before to speak out on these matters and to advocate an approach which moves on from established practices of localised revenge towards a campaign for justice and security at international levels. Through the media presence of figures such as Nadia, who are not affiliated with political parties within Iraq, Yezidis are taking their claim of genocide directly into the international arena. This provides a fillip for the efforts of Yezidi lawyers in Iraq, who struggle with formidable legal difficulties both within Iraq, as Sinjar is a disputed territory, and outside. US Secretary of State John Kerry's announcement of 17 March 2016, in which

12 This story, that in addition to rape, the women were given the contraceptive pill, often without their knowledge, broke in March 2016 and was covered, among others, by Rukmini Callimachi in the New York Times.

he described the attack on the Sinjari Yezidi community as "genocide", constitutes a milestone in the Yezidis' fight for international recognition, though the route to eventual prosecutions remains long and complex.

Fassin and Rechtman (2009: 274) note that in the context of asylum claims, the professional discourse from lawyers and clinicians on psychic trauma "speaks only the truth about the victim that society is prepared to hear".[13] It seems that the same is true of media discourse. The media gendering of the genocide does not match the collective nature of the trauma as lived and narrated by the Yezidis. Yet in order to be heard, the Yezidis are forced to abide by the agendas of Western discourse, which they have not set themselves. The unequal power dynamic drives a hard bargain. The voices of Yezidis such as Nadia are securing international support for the Yezidi case, but the cost of this, thus far, has been an unblinking spotlight placed on the community's deepest hurt.

The Yezidis, always subaltern in the countries where they have lived, practise a unique religion and culture which for hundreds of years has frequently found itself in conflict with local manifestations of Islam. It is ironic that, in terms of gender, the way in which they are represented in international contexts, a mode of representation in which they acquiesce, for pragmatic reasons, bears many similarities to the issues faced by Muslims. The perspectives given by gender studies scholarship enable these wider dynamics of subalternity and intersectionality, which may not be obvious within an oppositional framework of Yezidi identities versus Muslim identities, to be discerned. Today, the challenge faced by Yezidis, who are seeking social justice and international recognition, is also related to their exclusive existence, presence or status in the world as possible victims of genocide.

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13 Their point is that society finds it much more acceptable to focus on the general principles of a link between violence and trauma rather than proof of that damage in individual cases.

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Yezidi Spirits? On the Question of Yezidi Beliefs: a Review Article

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Abstract

While the Yezidi tradition undoubtedly has certain core characteristics, a more or less "logically" coherent system of beliefs is rarely described as one of these. The book under review deals with beliefs about a wide range of Yezidi "Holy Beings" and seeks to describe the "essentials" of Yezidism in this respect. This calls into question both the nature of Yezidi beliefs, and the methodological approach used here to analyse these. For the record, the authors' views on some individual Beings will be discussed.

Keywords

Yezidi Studies – Yezidi holy beings – method

"Ruh"ên êzdî? Gotareke rexneyî li ser pirsa baweriyên êzdiyan

Herçend hindek taybetiyên navendî yên nerîta êzdî hebin jî, sîstemeke hevaheng a baweriyan ya kêm-zêde "mentiqî" wek yek ji wan taybetiyan xuya nabe. Kitêba li vir

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tê nirxandin berê xwe dide hejmareke zêde ya "şexsên pîroz" ên êzdî û di vê çarçoveyê de hewl dide "bingeh"ên êzdiyatiyê destnîşan bike. Li vir hem tebîetê baweriyên êzdiyatiyê û hem jî rêbaza tehlîla wan cihê pirsê ye. Herwiha, hindek fikrên nivîskaran li ser çend şexsên diyar dê bêne nirxandin.

رۆحی ئێزیدی ؟ لە بارەی پرسیاری بیروباوەری ئێزیدیەوە: وتاری هەڵسەنگاندکاری

لە کاتێکدا بە دڵنیای کولتوری ئێزیدیایەتی خاوەنی کارەکتەریی تایبەت خۆیەتی، بەڵام سیستەمێکی بیروباوەڕیی بە لۆجیکی هاوخوێن و یەکگرتوو بە دەگمەن وەکو یەکێک لەوانە لە قەڵەم دەدرێت. ئەم کتێبەی کە لێرەدا هەڵدەسنگێنرێت گرنگیی بە رۆحێ ئێزدییایەتی بیروباوەریی ئێزدییایەتی و هەرواش لە سەر روانگەی مێتۆلۆژیکی کە بۆ لێکدانەوەی ئەمەن بە کاردەهێنرێت.

Introduction

The Religion of the Peacock Angel. The Yezidis and Their Spirit World (Durham: Routledge/Acumen 2014)[1] by Garnik S. Asatrian and Viktoria Arakelova raises some fundamental questions, both on methodology and on the question of Yezidi religious beliefs, that are relevant for Yezidi Studies generally. Since the work has been positively reviewed so far, it seems appropriate to discuss these questions and some of the author's conclusions regarding individual Holy Beings at some length here.

Various developments and events affecting different Yezidi communities over the past decades have brought about a new interest among Yezidis in questions relating to their own religion; as is shown by other articles in this special issue, the Yezidi community as a whole may be on the brink of momentous new developments. At the same time, the non-Yezidi public in many parts of the world is now seeking more information about this group and its religion. For many years academic information on this tradition was scarce, but the past three decades have seen a significant increase in publications by Yezidis and outsiders, so that we are now relatively well informed about important aspects of the religious life of the group. At this stage, the focus of many

1 Garnik S. Asatrian and Viktoria Arakelova (2014). *The Religion of the Peacock Angel. The Yezidis and Their Spirit World*. Durham: Routledge/Acumen, 157 pp. (Series: Gnostica Texts and Interpretations.) ISBN: 978-1-84465-761-2.

students of Yezidism is on the differences between local traditions (see Spät in this volume), and on the fact that structures and social norms long regarded as unchangeable are now capable of being re-negotiated (see Spät and Kizilhan in this volume).

This new interest in variety and dynamism coincides with a general trend among students of religion to be wary of "essentialism", i.e. of a view of "religion" as an eternal constant that underlies and inspires all actual manifestations of a religion. In the case of a religion that is based on oral transmission rather than written learned works ("theology"), an essentialist approach is perhaps particularly hazardous. Nevertheless, Yezidism is not a blank screen. The Yezidi community has its own distinctive social structures, religious observances, norms and obligations. Furthermore, there is a rich store of myths and religious narratives. These can be expressed in various ways, in the sacred Hymns (such as *Qewl*s, which are traditionally performed by professional reciters), in edifying sermons (*mishabet*), and in prose stories (*çîrok*), of which popular and more elevated versions may exist.

There is broad consensus that the Yezidi tradition lays greater emphasis on proper behaviour (orthopraxy) than on questions of true belief (orthodoxy). It is doubtful whether a more or less abstract, "logically coherent" system of religious teachings, tenets and beliefs can be said to form part of the Yezidi religious tradition. No such system appears to be reflected either in the religious discourse of modern Yezidis or in the sacred and religious texts. One finds references to God and (in the *Qewl*s at least) to the "Seven Mysteries" (*Heft Sir*), both open and covert allusions to Tawûsî Melek, and mentions of a number of other Beings (*xas*, see further below), and the religious world-view is clearly informed by myths and other religious narratives. However, on many topics one finds various accounts which, from a logical point of view, show contradictions. For instance, a belief in reincarnation exists among Yezidis, but the concepts of heaven and hell also are very much present in Yezidi religious discourse. Although there are cultural parameters that limit the range of beliefs that would be acceptable to most Yezidis, it is probably true to say that a range of different religious beliefs coexist in Yezidi culture, while few attempts have been made to reconcile conflicting beliefs, systematise religious tenets into an abstract system (e.g. by defining the mutual relations between individual Holy Beings), or to establish an "orthodoxy" based upon the "essential" teachings of Yezidism.

It is important in this context to point to the nature of the transmission of such beliefs among the Yezidis. Ideally, the transmission of religious knowledge is in the hands of the individual's Sheikh and Pîr, whilst the *Qewal*s contribute to it with their "sermons"; naturally the parents and social environment

also play a role. Religious instruction was traditionally given by word of mouth, and often on a one-to-one basis. Until recently, writing played at most a very minor role in the Yezidi tradition. Given the manner of their transmission, it would be strange if the contents of such oral teachings were highly abstract and wholly consistent, or remained unaltered over the centuries.

The Religion of the Peacock Angel bucks the current trend in Yezidi Studies which concentrates on dynamism and variety, and is instead explicitly concerned with an abstract, "essential" form of Yezidi beliefs. It aims to provide a systematic study of the Holy Beings who are referred to in Yezidi narratives. These range from major figures such as the "Peacock Angel" (Tawûsî Melek or Melek Tawûs), to the less prominent Beings. The latter group is known among Yezidis as *xas* ("special ones") and many (though not all) of its members appear to be chiefly associated with a lineage of Sheikhs or Pîrs, or with holy places. If the lineage or place is thought to have particular powers (such as healing), these may be associated with the Being in question. Otherwise, whether in modern Yezidi discourse or in the Hymns, few *xas* appear to have a strong individuality.

The work is divided into two main parts. Part I: "The one god", contains chapters entitled (1) "Malak-Tāwūs: the leader of the triad"; (2) "Sheikh ʿAdi"; (3) "Sultan Ezid". Part II: "The Yezidis' pantheon and the syncretic features of their religion", containing the chapters (4) "The Yezidi minor deities, saints and holy men"; (5) "Aspects of nature and celestial bodies in the Yezidi tradition"; (6) "Yezidi religious syncretism" It is said to be "mainly based on Yezidi texts and materials collected by the authors during their fieldwork in the Yezidi communities of Armenia, Georgia, Russia and Turkey over the last fourteen years" (p. x). No details are given as to the nature and methodological approach of this fieldwork.

Although the ostensible aim of the work suggests a largely descriptive approach, in fact many of its comments – and indeed its very structure – reflect the authors' assumption of the existence of an underlying, complex belief-system which it seems, is neither known to modern believers nor attested in the corpus of Yezidi sacred texts (see below), but whose contents they deduce, and regard as representing an essential form of the religion:

> This book is entirely dedicated to the essentials of Yezidi identity – the Yezidi religion, or more precisely the so-called Yezidi folk-pantheon in its varied dimensions. The idea of one god and his incarnations, Yezidi deities, saints, holy patrons and their deified personalities are the prolonged focus of this book (pp. ix–x).

In the concluding part of the book the authors write:

> There have been numerous publications on Yezidi history and religion, but we can dare to conclude that this has been first attempt [sic] to probe the core aspects of the Yezidi religious outlook and to do so in a systematic way. We have presented all the characters we can detect that are and have been worshipped by the Yezidis, and through them, especially the major spirit beings, we are now able to approach the quintessence of their cosmic vision (p. 133).

The key problem with these pronouncements is the implication that phrases like "essentials of Yezidi identity", and "the quintessence of their cosmic vision" denote realities that have an objective existence at some level in the Yezidi tradition. In other words, they construct an abstract system of beliefs, which is held to underlie the actual expressions of religious belief in the sources. In our opinion, this is problematic because the process of constructing abstracts can hardly be fully objective. It is likely to be informed by the authors' views on the way the data should be interpreted. The authors define the questions to be addressed and the criteria to be applied; they take decisions as to the relative validity of information collected from a range of heterogeneous sources; and the abstract language they use has no connection with the actual utterances of Yezidis, and may be misleading.[2]

In fact, the underlying belief-system the authors have deduced, shape the very structure of the book. The list of Chapters of Part I (see above) reflects their thesis that "the one god" is in fact a "triad" headed by Tawûsî Melek (hereafter TM). The Being who is known to Yezidis as "God" (*Xwedê*), however, is at the same time said to have been "sidelined" by TM, who is one of his manifestations:

> Malak-Tāwūs, being as noted a manifestation of *xwadē*, claims, quite legitimately, the role of the demiurge, even if, in so being sidelined by a later triad, *xwadē* could not leave the cosmogonic void (p. 13).

A hypothetical Yezidi divine "triad" plays a prominent role in the authors' understanding of Yezidi teaching. Its members are said to be TM, Sheikh ʿAdi,

2 Such abstractions can legitimately be used, e.g. when describing ancient religions, where such a process is the only option, and where these interpretations are less likely to affect living people.

and Sultan Êzîd. There are admittedly some references in the Yezidi tradition stating that God has three names or "three letters", but references to these terms remain obscure. The Yezidi scholar Khalil Jindy (1998: 74), suggests that "perhaps" the names may be those of TM, Sheikh Shems (not Sheikh ʿAdi), and Sultan Êzîd. This hardly suggests that the "three names of God" are at all central to Yezidi belief.[3]

Many variants of the text known as the Yezidi Declaration of Faith begin with the words: "My declaration of faith is that there is one God" (Kreyenbroek, 1995: 226–227), and in everyday discourse many modern Yezidis say the same thing. In the *Qewl*s, some passages suggest a clear distinction between God and TM ("Pronounce the names of God and Tawūsī Melek over me", *Qewlê Seremergê* v. 52; Keyenbroek, 1998: 319). One of Kreyenbroek's informants claimed that Sheikh Shems is "really God", while another said that "Sheikh Shems goes to see God three times a day", implying that they are two distinct Beings (Kreyenbroek, 1998: 98). The question is complicated further by the fact that several names, such as "the King", "the Prince", "the Lord", can demonstrably be used for both *Xwedē* and several other beings (Kreyenbroek, 1998: 93–94).

The obvious solution, we would argue, is to regard all such statements as being, or having once been valid within the framework of the Yezidi tradition. Asatrian and Arakelova's attempts to explain the divergence between such statements by looking for one original "truth" from which they all derive, by constructing a hypothetical system of beliefs based on Aristotelian logic, seems to us an attempt to systematise and intellectualise a world-view that does not lend itself to such a process.

About Tawûsî Melek, we find several further "theologising" statements, including:

> [Malak-Tāwūs] ... dominates all major and minor divinities of the pantheon. Malak-Tāwūs is, in fact, the essence or *raison d'être* of the religion of the Yezidis (p. 9).

3 The notion of a Yezidi "Triad" may also be connected with the expression "the Three Letters (of God)" (*sê herf*), which occasionally occur in the Yezidi tradition, but with a variety of different meanings. In Armenia, the term *sê herf* is used to refer to three major sins or offences (see Omarkhali, 2005: 127–128, 148–149). In Iraq it is sometimes understood to refer to the three letters used in Arabic script to write the word *Xuda*/*Xwedê* "God". In this sense the expression *sê herf* also occurs in the *Qewl*s, e.g. *Qewlê Behra* 17 (Kreyenbroek, 1995: 204–205), in a context which suggests that it is a mystery, not an obvious and prominent element of the Yezidi faith: "His name consists of three Letters / One is in Mecca and one is in Medina / I wish I knew where they are on earth".

> Nevertheless, Malak-Tāwūs, even while he might seem to have a mere latent presence within the [sic] Yezidi dogmatics and beliefs, is an unambiguously key figure in the Yezidi religious domain (p. 19).

The authors admit that, given the scarcity of references to Tawûsî Melek in the Yezidi textual tradition, an adequate description of this figure is problematic. However, they offer the reader a full translation of *Kitêba Cilwe*, which they say is "devoted entirely to Malak-Tāwūs" (p. 19). The problem is that the text in question is not an authentic Yezidi text. The authors admit this, but describe this work as "still definitely reflecting the genuine religious and folk tradition" (p. viii). Elsewhere we find a similar circular argument, citing a doubtful source as evidence because it confirms one's preconceived notion:

> Eliseev mentions in his notes, which we can hardly vouch for as authentic, but which we nonetheless consider it expedient to quote here in full, since it is very substantially indicative of the constitutive essence of Malak-Tāwūs (p. 21).

The tensions between Yezidi realities and intellectual definitions cause some problems when it comes to categorising Yezidi beliefs as monotheistic, polytheistic or pantheist. The authors write:

> The poly-variation in the Yezidis' religious thought, or rather, their dismembered representation of the divine entity or of god, is none other than the personification of the functional division of the divine, which has nothing to do with polytheism in its pure form, the essential nature of which does not change even in the presence of a manifestly principal divinity within the system of gods. … It is therefore necessary to differentiate clearly between the Yezidis' dismembered representations of the divine … reduced to the single initiation, and polytheism characterized by a dispersed representation of the divine (p. 1).

However, the authors admit a degree of pantheism:

> The syncretism and eclectic character of Yezidism is supposed to include a deep, thick layer of primitive religious elements, yet distinctions between canon, dogmatics (if we suppose their existence) and primitive beliefs (or "superstitions") remain very hazy. Still, to complete the religious picture of the Yezidis, it is necessary to consider their pantheistic views, all of them turning out to be reflections of early forms of religion (p. 109).

This brings us to another problem with this book, namely its idiosyncratic use of language. In the above passages is not clear what is meant by "initiation". The images conjured up by the phrase "dismembered representation of the divine entity or of god" may not be what the authors intended. The words "a deep, thick layer of primitive religious elements" is surely out of place in an academic work on religion. The term "pantheon" is used throughout the work. It is said to be a "provisional term" (p. x), but given the objective meaning of the word (*viz*. a collective group of gods) it is misleading and inappropriate for representing Yezidi beliefs. Similarly the term "gods" is used throughout for major and minor Holy Beings. Collectively these are referred to in the subtitle as the Yezidis' "spirit world", a term most often used in English in connection with Spiritualism. The word "incarnations" occurs regularly. Members of the Heptad are called "avatars of Malak Tāwūs" (p. 53).

For the record, some of the book's conclusions about individual Holy Beings must be discussed here. The hypothesis (pp. 29–30) that Şerfedîn (Šaraf al-Dīn, Honour of the Religion), is in fact an epithet of, or an oblique way of referring to TM, is ingenious. It is contradicted, however, by the textual evidence which strongly suggests that Şerfedîn is a saviour figure, who is currently absent from the known world but will return at the end of time.[4]

A doubtful use of sources informs the authors' claims regarding the existence of what amounts to Yezidi cults of the onion and the black dog. On p. 113 we find:

> the most esteemed plant bearing evident cultic significance is the onion (…) or *pīvāz*. The earliest evidence for onion worship among the Yezidis can be found in the same passage by Çelebi that discusses the worship of black dogs.

The key passage from Evliya Çelebi's *Siyāhetnāme* on which this claim is based reads as follows:

> If anybody smashes or squashes onion, his head will be smashed and he will be killed by them [Yezidis]. And the most important thing is that if a rich person dies, he is washed with onion juice and onion is planted on his grave. I asked the captives [Yezidis] several times about it, but never got a straight answer (p. 113).

4 See Kreyenbroek and Rashow (2005: 427). On the historical figure see Kreyenbroek (1995: 34–35).

Çelebi's readiness to emphasise or invent strange things about Yezidis is further illustrated by another passage, which is quoted as evidence of a cult of black dogs (pp. 111–112). The authors quote the *Siyāhetnāme* as saying that the Yezidis "first give to their children milk of a black dog", and hold "great feasts" when a black dog is born; when such an animal dies they offer the other dogs roast mutton "for the soul of the dead dog"; and they bury their dogs in a special cemetery after washing the body with the sap of onions. The passage's final sentence, "It is strange that the mount [sic] Sinjar, known as a blessed land, sheltered such infidels", strengthens the impression that Çelebi was not an unbiased reporter on Yezidi affairs. Also the expense and inherent impracticality of such lavish canine *rites de passage* in a society where "every Yezidi holds ten to five dogs in front of the doors" should perhaps make one wary of Çelebi's claims. Furthermore, not a trace of a special religious preoccupation with black dogs or onions can be found in the Yezidis' sacred texts or modern practice.

The cult of a "Deity of the Phallus" (pp. 82–86) must join those of the onion and the black dog as an unlikely phenomenon. It represents the authors' interpretation of what seems to be a relatively minor, beneficent Being called *Milyaketê Qenc* (Good Angel). The authors admit that this is "the only example of the *Deus Phalli* in all New Iranian folk pantheons" (p. 12), and that most of their female informants "tried to avoid this subject altogether, denying the very existence of a phallic deity in Yezidi beliefs" (p. 83). Nevertheless, they insist on this curious identification,[5] saying: "still, the information gleaned from our research thus far allows us to reconstruct at least the general idea of this deity, once probably a popular image among the Yezidis" (p. 83). On the next page the authors cite an 80-year old female informant who described a fertility rite.[6] No such rite appears to be known in most Yezidi communities. However, given that such a ceremony is said to exist among other Armenian groups (p. 84), the informant's community may have borrowed a rite of non-Yezidi origin, invoking the help of the Yezidi "Good Angel", who is thought to be helpful in all

5 The hypothesis apparently originates with Amine Avdal (see p. 83). Two of Avdal's works (1957, 1960) were published, and their contents are well-known among Yezidi intellectuals in or from Armenia. Avdal's views were strongly informed by anti-religious Soviet ideology. Although his work offers a great deal of information, it contains too many inaccuracies to be acceptable as a basis for a claim of this magnitude and inherent implausibility.

6 The informant apparently recited the formula *Yā Milyaketē Qenc, mi āvis ke*, which is here translated as: "O *Milyāk'atē-qanǰ* make me pregnant" (p. 84). As an Armenian-born Yezidi, Khanna Omarkhali strongly questions the authenticity of this formula, on the grounds that in all known forms of Armenian Kurdish the term *avis* 'pregnant (of animals)' would be improper to use for a human being.

things. Furthermore, Khanna Omarkhali heard the formula *Ya Milyaketê Qenc, were hewara min* ("O Good Angel, come to my aid"), used by male Yezidis in Armenia. Unless these men publicly implored *Milyaketê Qenc* to restore their virility, this suggests that the Being is not felt to have any particular connection with the phallus. Elsewhere in the same passage, the authors quote prayers asking *Milyaketê Qenc* for help, and discuss folk observances thought to further prosperity and pregnancy, but offer no convincing evidence to show that *Milyaketê Qenc* is particularly concerned with fertility rather than with helping believers generally. A mistranslation in this context is found on p. 83, where, in a prayer to *Milyaketê Qenc*, the words *ber min rûnî* "sit (i.e. appear) before me", are said to mean "impregnate me [lit. 'sit upon me']".

Further problematic translations are found in connection with the Being the authors call Pîrā-Fāt (pp. 72–76). About this Being, they say (p. 76): "Although this is not explicitly stated in the extant materials, it was most probably Pîrā-Fāt who produced the first Yezidi from the primordial seed". The reference to "primordial seed" is based on a mistranslation of two formulae directly connected with the Being, while another mistranslation and an arbitrary interpretation of *Qewl* passages are adduced as further evidence supporting this theory.[7] On this basis, the authors describe her as "the foremother of the Yezidis" (p. 72).

This Being is said to be "a female deity, and she is the daughter of Farxadin" (p. 72). Many of the functions associated here with Pîra Fat are attributed by most Yezidi communities to Xatûna Ferxa (or Fexra), whose name indicates she is the daughter of Fexredîn.[8] The authors admit that Xatūna Ferxa is the eponym of a Sheikhly lineage and has a well-known sanctuary at Lalish. This clearly implies that she has considerable prominence. Nevertheless, the authors call her a "frail duplicate of Pîrā-Fāt with a reduced scope of activities", and "a secondary figure, budding from the image of Pîrā-Fāt" (p. 77). Unlike

7 On p. 73, the formula *Çara Pîra Fat bê hewara te*, "May the remedy of Pîra Fat be of assistance to you", is rendered as: "May the seed of Pîrā Fāt help you!" The authors further assert (*ibid.*): "Similarly, they invoke this seed when embarking on a journey: *Yā Pîra-Fāt, čārā ta sar ma*, 'Oh Pîra-Fāt, let your assistance (seed) be with us'". Few women might wish to get pregnant during a journey, and an interpretation of the words as a simple prayer for help, not particularly connected with semen, seems preferable. On the same page the words of a *Qewl: ji durrê ferq kirina çare; baya, ave axe û nare*, are translated: "[He] created a liquid from a pearl, It is a wind [air], water, earth and fire". The correct translation is: 'He extracted four (elements) from the Pearl: Wind, Water, Earth and Fire'. In the same *Qewl*, the words *feqîrek şandiye teveka herherê, avek aniye*, which simply mean: 'He sent a Feqîr to the eternal sphere; he brought water', are rendered by the authors as: "[He] sent once a *faqīr* [probably Šēxōbakr] to the seventh sphere of heavens; [he] brought a liquid [lit. 'water']". The "liquid" is said to be connected to the Pîr's "seed-keeping".

8 The word *Ferxa* is here (p. 76) connected with Arabic *farx*, "chicken" and the name Xatûna Ferxa is said to mean "The Dame of Children".

Xatūna Ferxa/Fexra, Pîra Fat is hardly a central figure in Yezidi belief. This is shown, for example, by the fact that very different views exist on his/her gender and associations. Jindy (1998: 26) refers to a masculine "Pîr Afat", whom he connects with storm and flooding. A connection with flooding can also be found in an Armenian Yezidi tradition to the effect that Pîra Fat has rescued all Yezidis in her tent during the Flood (Omarkhali, 2005: 142–144).

The authors admit that they could find no evidence for the existence of Xeta Cot (lit. "the Line of the Plough", here called "The Spirit of the Furrow") as a revered Being (p. 91). Still, they state: "Nonetheless, a genuine imaging of her exists, having its own niche in the religious concepts of the Yezidis", also remarking that "Xatā-ǰōt is almost certainly a female character" (*ibid*). In fact the term refers to the line that is drawn over the cakes baked for the New Year (known among the Yezidis of the Caucasus as *kloça Serê Salê*), to divide these into two halves, which is not in any way revered as a Being (Omarkhali, 2005: 70).

The same goes for Şêx Kiras, "the Sheikh of the Shirt", here called "the spirit of the garment". This Being is not known to be revered by any Yezidi community.[9] The authors admit that Şêx Kiras is "an almost forgotten personage now" (p. 77). Still, this Being is said to have been "responsible for the process of death, transmigration of a soul, maybe even reincarnation" (*ibid*).

Amine Avdal (see above, fn. 6) seems to have been responsible for introducing Aba Birûsk (Uncle Thunder), who is here discussed under the heading "The Thunder-God: the Deity of Lightning and Wind". The authors write (p. 54f.): "At the turn of the last century the Armenian Yezidis featured another image named Ābā-birūsk, as Amine Avdal reports, which is now completely forgotten (or at any rate no one of the queried pundits of Yezidi folklore amid the spiritual castes in Armenia is able to recollect this name)". To posit the existence of a "Thunder-God" on this basis seems unwarranted.

Cinteyar (or Cin Teyar), is mainly known to Yezidis in Armenia. He is said to have been a *jinn* who married a human, and so became the ancestor of the Cinteyar lineage, which only exists in Armenia and Georgia. The authors, however, call him a "deity" who "is believed to be the ruler of the jinns (genies, spirits)", although they admit that: "Jin-tayār is a fuzzy image, lacking precise explication within the cult" (p. 98). Furthermore, they postulate a link between Cin Teyar and Memê Reşan, who is somewhat arbitrarily discussed under the heading "The Thunder-God …" (pp. 54–61, see above under Aba Birûsk), and whose name, which surely means "Mem/Mehmed son of Reş", is translated here as "pouring, darting Mahmad (Muhammad)".

9 He is mentioned only by Furlani (1936: 64–83, esp. 76), whose information was uncritically accepted in an earlier publication by Kreyenbroek (1995: 11).

In most of the cases discussed above the authors show a readiness to let speculation prevail over the information that is found in either textual sources or the living tradition. This approach clearly originates in their consistent quest for underlying, "deeper" truths than those that emerge from an objective analysis of the evidence. As has been shown here, the search for the "essentials" of Yezidism shapes many aspects of this work. As a result, that religion is depicted and interpreted here in a way that many of its followers and students might fail to recognise.

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Transformations in the Yezidi Tradition after the ISIS Attacks: an Interview with Ilhan Kizilhan

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Abstract

Professor Dr. Jan Ilhan Kizilhan is a Yezidi transcultural psychologist. He is the Head of the Department of Mental Health and Addiction at the State University Baden-Württemberg, Germany. In that capacity he has made frequent visits to the Kurdistan Region in Iraq, as part of a project aiming to provide psychological aid to Yezidi women who escaped after being captured and enslaved by ISIS. Under ISIS, Yezidis suffered mass killings, forced conversion to Islam, torture, sexual slavery, and the abuse of their children as ISIS soldiers. In an interview with Khanna Omarkhali, Professor Kizilhan discusses his recent experiences.

Keywords

transformation of tradition – traumatized Yezidis – Yezidi women – ISIS – slavery

Veguherînên di nerîtên êzdiyatiyê de piştî êrîşên DAIŞê Hevpeyvînek ligel Ilhan Kizilhan

Profesor Dr. Jan Ilhan Kizilhan derûnnasekî transkulturî yê êzdî ye. Li Almanyayê, li Zanîngeha Dewletî ya Baden-Württembergê, serokê beşa Tendurustiya Derûnî û Muptelayiyê ye. Bi vî sifetî wî gelek caran serdana Herêma Kurdistanê ya Iraqê kiriye di çarçoveya projeyekê de ya bi armanca dabînkirina piştgiriya psîkolojîk bo jinên Êzidî

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yên ji destê DAIŞê xelas bûne piştî ku hatine revandin û bûne kole. Di bin hukmê DAIŞê de, cemaeta êzdî rastî qirkirinên girseyî, koletiya cinsî û îşkenceyê hatin, û bi darê zorê dînê wan hate guhertin bo Îslamê û zarokên wan bi zorê bûne leşkerên DAIŞê. Di hevpeyvînekê de bi Khanna Omarkhali re Profesor Kizilhan behsa tecrubeyên xwe yên vê dawiyê dike.

گۆرانی تراديسيۆنی ئێزيدی له پاش هێرشەکانی داعش: چاوپێکەوتنێک لەگەڵ ئيلهان کيزلخان

پرۆفيسۆر دوکتۆر يان ئيلهان کيزلخان دەروواسێکی فره کلتوری ئێزيديیه. ئەو سەرۆک بەشی نەخۆشييه دەرونييەکان و ئالوودەبوونه له زانکۆی دەوڵەتی بايدن – وورتەمبێرگی ئەڵمان. وەکوو سەرۆکی ئەو بەشه و بەشێک له پرۆژەيەک که يارمەتی دەروونی پێشکەش بەو ژنه ئێزيديانەی که له دەستی داعش هەڵاتوون، چەندين جار سەردانی کوردستانی عێراقی کردووه. له ژێر دەسەڵاتی داعش ئێزيدييەکان ئازار و ئەشکەنجه، جينۆساید، کۆيلايەتی سێکسی، به موسوڵمان بوونی ئيجباری، و بەکارهێنانی منداڵکانيان وەکوو سەربازی داعش بينيووه. له گفتگۆيەکدا لەگەڵ خانا عومەر خاڵی، پرۆفيسۆر کيزلخان ئەزموونی نوێی خۆی باس دەکات.

Introduction

The interview with Prof. Dr. Ilhan Kizilhan,[1] aims to discuss the certain significant changes in Yezidi society that came about as a result of the attacks by ISIS, most notably those that occurred following the escape of Yezidi women and girls from slavery after being had been captured by ISIS.

At the hands of ISIS, Yezidis suffered mass killings, forced conversion to Islam, torture, sexual slavery, and the abuse of their children as ISIS soldiers. According to some accounts, around 5,000 Yezidi women and girls (some as young as eight) were kidnapped as "spoils of war" by ISIS from August 2014 onwards, and have been kept and sold as slaves by the "Islamic State". These Yezidi women were separated from their families and forced to convert to Islam. Yezidi boys and men aged 14 and over were mostly executed. The Yezidi women and girls who escaped from slavery not only have to cope with deeply traumatic experiences, but in addition, given traditional norms in Yezidi

1 Professor Dr. Jan Ilhan Kizilhan is Head of Department for Mental Health and Addiction at the State University Baden-Württemberg, Germany. E-mail: Jan.Kizilhan@dhbw-vs.de. The interview took place in German. The translation is the author's.

society regarding the "purity" of women, they fear being ostracised or stigmatised by their own community. Many young women who escaped captivity, are very anxious, or feel too ashamed to come back to Yezidi society.

The experience of these attacks, the mass killings of men and enslavement of women, deeply shook the entire Yezidi community. Aside from the deep trauma that these attacks inflicted, they also led to significant developments in Yezidi society. The return of some of the captured women forced the Yezidis to question and re-examine their traditional norms and practices. An illustration of the current transformation of the Yezidi tradition is that Baba Sheikh (or *Babê Şêx*), the spiritual leader of Yezidis in the Kurdistan Region recently made an unprecedented statement, declaring that Yezidi women and girls who suffered captivity under ISIS are entitled to support from the Yezidi community and are not to be excommunicated, as earlier, traditional norms in Yezidi society would have dictated.

Khanna Omarkhali (KO): You participated in a project in Kurdistan that aimed to help traumatised Yezidi women and girls who escaped from ISIS. Could you tell us about the situation and the history of these women, please?

Ilhan Kizilhan (IK): As your readers may know, terrorism has shown an unexpected degree of destruction in recent years, and its fundamental nature is as yet only partly understood; it spreads its terror across the whole world, even though it usually starts out locally. Terrorism increasingly uses new methods, and the number of potential offenders and supporters is immense. Terror wears various religious and ideological faces; it uses the modern media and spans transnational networks; civilian casualties are allowed for as "collateral damage", or even intended; terror seeks to cause anxiety and horror; suicide bombers kill themselves in attacks, and terrorists abuse, rape, sell young girls, or decapitate people before running cameras and show the images on online networks. This new Islamic terrorism, especially that of ISIS, exceeds our human understanding of cruelty and suffering.

However, it has to be mentioned that the Yezidi conflict has been going on for several centuries. Due to the forcible Islamisation of Kurdish areas in Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Turkey, an unbelievable odyssey of persecution and forced Islamisation of Kurds, and thus Yezidis, has taken place until the present day. They have always been victims of massacres under the Ottoman and Persian Empires. Numerous *fatwa*s "allowed" for Yezidis to be killed, robbed, displaced, and forced to convert to Islam since their ancient religion was thought not to be accepted by Islam. In our day, ISIS uses the same false arguments to justify its genocide against the Yezidis.

As early as at the end of the Saddam era in 2003, and in particular since 2007, hundreds of Yezidis were murdered by terrorist groups in Iraq. Until the

present day, they have repeatedly experienced marginalisation and aggression by the Muslim majority. Since the attacks by ISIS in early August 2014, more than 7,000 Yezidis have been killed, thousands of families were kept hostage in their villages and murdered unless they converted to Islam. More than 5,800 girls were abducted, raped, and sold on Arabic markets, enslaved and killed. More than 20,000 Yezidis have sought refuge in Syria, 30,000 in Turkey, and more than 400,000 in the Kurdish region. The Yezidis have been, and still are, persecuted and murdered on a systematic level.

Thus, ISIS terrorists attacked Yezidi villages, herded their inhabitants in front of large buildings, and took their jewellery as well as other valuables. Then they separated the men from the women. Many men were executed immediately. Then older women, women with children, married women without children, girls, and boys between 8 and 14 years were split up into groups and brought to different places. Older women and women with children were detained in mass accommodation or villages (such as Tel Afar or Mosul) that had previously been inhabited by Shiites. They were guarded by ISIS combatants, humiliated, and raped. Every evening, ISIS fighters, but also civilians from Syria, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Qatar, Tunisia, and other countries showed up to buy and take them along.

The women were forced to convert to Islam and to pray in Arabic every day, although they only spoke Kurdish. The children are drilled and exploited in ways similar to those used on child soldiers in certain African countries. They are trained to be cruel and eventually to turn against their families. In the camps they are trained to beat other children, and to crucify or bury alive those who do not obey to the rules of the ISIS. The ones who are not sent to combat are put to work as servants to the Emir, guards or spies in the villages and camps where Yezidis or other religious minorities are detained.

Apart from daily religious indoctrination, the children's classes consist of martial arts and getting hardened against pain and atrocities. In cities like Tel Afar, Mosul or Raqqa, the children have to watch ISIS combatants stone, flog, and decapitate citizens, or cut off limbs in public squares. Whatever the children had learned from their parents must become meaningless. They are intended to become new fighters for ISIS. Some of the children who have been set free have changed significantly. They defend Islam and ISIS, although they are Yezidis; they threaten to decapitate their families if they refuse to join ISIS. The children are supposed to infiltrate Kurdish society with the pathologic ideology of the "Islamic State", in order to hollow it out from within.

So far, some 2,000 young Yezidi women have managed to escape from captivity, or were redeemed by their families. The severely traumatised women

now live in refugee camps near Duhok and Zakho. There are about 24 refugee camps housing up to 18,000 people. These women have hardly any access to psychological treatment. They wake up at night, have nightmares, fear being abducted by ISIS again, and often have fainting spells or flashbacks in which they re-experience rape and torture. They are anxious, insecure, nervous, tense, and hopeless, feel shame because of having been raped, and often consider suicide. Some have already taken their lives because they did not want to live with this perceived "loss of honour". Therefore, these women urgently need medical and psychological help, which unfortunately is insufficiently available in Kurdistan.

KO: Could you tell us more about project of the Baden-Württemberg Federal State Government to help Yezidi women, and your own role in this?

IK: Based on the catastrophic situation in Iraq and Syria as described above, the state government of Baden-Württemberg has decided to fly up to 1,000 people in need of protection, in particular women who were in ISIS captivity, for treatment in Baden-Württemberg. In the beginning, I was advisor to the Federal State Government, then took over the medical-psychological management during a later phase of the project. My task was to psychologically examine people in Northern Iraq as well as to offer vocational training, focusing on Yezidi cultural background and transcultural aspects, for the treatment, care, and consultation of traumatised people in several cities of Baden-Württemberg. I talked to hundreds of young women and even children, and listened to what they had gone through. Their stories were not easy to come to terms with. Whenever I thought I had just been told the "worst story" of terror and utmost inhumanity, I had to listen to even more tragic and horrible stories that were beyond human comprehension.

One of them had happened to 16-year-old Hanna, who woke up at night, worried that the jihadists could return and rape her again. She got up, sprinkled her face with fuel and set fire to herself. The girl survived, but her facial skin and her hands are burned. "If I'm ugly, they will not rape me again", she kept explaining to me.

Or 9-year-old Samya, who was walking to the bakery when ISIS combatants suddenly stopped her. They abducted the girl and several other families from her Iraqi-Yezidi village. Samya had to watch the jihadists murder her grandfather. Afterwards, she was sold and kept as a slave for months on end until she and some older women were released after payment by the Kurdish government.

Nevertheless, the strength and hope of the young women, who spent many hours talking to me, impressed me very much. Despite all those unimaginably

cruel experiences, they keep fighting. They wanted to survive and now have a chance to get treatment in Germany so as to regain a healthy perspective on their lives.

KO: Baba Sheikh has declared that Yezidi women and girls who escaped from captivity by ISIS should be accepted by the community regardless of traditional cultural and religious restrictions. Will this initiative be accepted by the Yezidi community or do these women risk being excommunicated or ostracised?

IK: The Yezidis traditionally live in a caste system, where marriage or sexual relations with men outside their caste, or with non-Yezidis, are banned. In the past there have been cases where Yezidis who had a relationship with non-Yezidis were excluded from their society.

The current genocide that started on 3rd August 2014 has led to the raping of thousands of young Yezidi women. Given these circumstances, exclusion from their society is scarcely feasible, since nearly every family is affected and the community is so shocked by the suffering of these young women that a majority wishes to reintegrate them. Some conservative Yezidis are rather critical and eye this change with distrust, but due to the great wave of sympathy and support for these young Yezidis, they keep a low profile. For the last 800 years, Yezidi culture has barely undergone any change in its community structure and religion. However, since August 2014, the Yezidis have become a different society than before the genocide. Their culture now needs changes and an acknowledgement of their new realities. In this context, Baba Sheikh, their spiritual head, has shown great courage by being the first to proclaim that the raped Yezidi women are still part of their community and are not to be discriminated against. They are still allowed to marry Yezidi men and continue to be members of the Yezidi community of faith.

In our project, the young women in question are given an opportunity to visit the Yezidi sanctuary at Lalish before they are flown to Germany. There, Baba Sheikh blesses every one of them personally and explains that they continue to be Yezidi and still belong to their community. Whoever says bad things to them is deemed a bad person himself. Baba Sheikh stated: "You are part of us and we are part of you, we share your pain. We are proud that you managed to escape and return to us despite the severe experiences you went through. You are courageous and strong women and I am proud to be here with you today. I bless you and wish you a good and blessed life in Germany. Be sure to behave well in Germany, to obey the laws and to continue living as Yezidi women".[2]

2 Personal interview with Baba Sheikh and Hazim Beg, son of Prince Mîr Tehsîn Beg, on 30.06.2015.

Hazim Beg, son of Prince Mîr Tehsîn Beg and spokesman of the Yezidi High Council, announced the Council's decision to continue to accept all raped women as members of Yezidi society with all corresponding rights.

This is unique in the history of Yezidism, and signifies a long-term paradigm shift. It will undoubtedly bring about developments in the Yezidi community that are as yet difficult to foresee.

Due to the strong migratory movements, the Yezidi community and therefore its social rules is bound to undergo further fundamental change. However, it cannot be foreseen whether this will result in the "annihilation of the Yezidis", as conservative forces in the community predict, or if the catastrophe of this genocide, will prompt the community to adapt, and thus to survive in a global and rapidly changing world.

KO: What effect do these attacks have on the physical and mental health of the victims?

IK: In the clinical and individual areas, this traumatisation often brings about physical suffering in addition to chronic psychological disorders. This includes diarrhoea and frequent colds, but also psychosomatic illnesses such as skin diseases, asthma, or aches. The children who survived this genocide often have migraines and regularly wet their bed. On a psychological level, the personality can change to an extent that the children will never again, i.e. even as grown-ups, be able to develop a sound relationship to other people because they will constantly be unconfident, reserved, and nervous. Or they cannot handle their feelings and develop an emotionally unstable personality. This means that they become aggressive, are unassertive, and have great difficulties to integrate into society. Therefore, especially children, but also traumatised adults, need assistance, support, and a sense of security in order to be able to stabilise and to develop a sound perspective on life.

Apart from the current traumatisation, the genocide by ISIS reactivated the Yezidi communal memory of earlier genocides and massacres. They experience a double or multiple traumatisation, resulting in the conclusion that they are unable to defend themselves, and are bound to become victims of Islamic terror over and again. Their antagonism to Islam has increased significantly. Out of fear of their fellow Muslim countrymen they do not speak up in public, but they have lost their trust after suffering from yet another massacre like those of the 18th and 19th centuries.

We see similar ways of behaviour in people who survived the holocaust. They are unconfident, tense, worried that their children won't survive, and have feelings of impotence and helplessness. They clearly experience a collective trauma.

The treatment of this trauma may take several generations and the process has to be addressed actively, by means of talking, writing, documentation, etc., so as to prevent the suppression of anxieties by shifting them into the subconscious and blocking their accessibility. The latter scenario would collectively pathologise Yezidi society and impede efforts to develop a future. In view of the most recent studies, we have to assume that some 50% of Yezidis develop a traumatic or post-traumatic disorder or will do so in the future.

KO: Will the extreme traumatic experiences of the recent years have any further effects on Yezidi established religious ideas? What other changes do you see emerging in the community as a result of this trauma?

IK: As mentioned above, this genocide by the ISIS has shaken the Yezidi community to its core, and it has yet to cope with this trauma. A majority of the Yezidis from the Shingal (Sinjar) region lives in camps under inhumane conditions, are still in ISIS captivity, or try to migrate to Europe. Only after there has been a period of rest, we will see which course the Yezidis will take. It also remains to be seen whether or not the caste system and the ban on marriages with non-Yezidis will be preserved. The High Council and Mîr Tehsîn Beg, the secular head of the Yezidis, were not able to protect their people or to offer them a perspective. The old institutions, such as the caste system, the Mir, Baba Sheikh, and the High Council failed to function in the face of the disaster. No network of support and solidarity exists. Rather, Yezidis in Europe and other diaspora areas try to help their peers in Kurdistan, which is nearly impossible given the high number of victims. Currently, the majority of Yezidis from Shingal wish to leave the Kurdistan Region because they don't have a perspective there. Shingal is still under ISIS control,[3] and a rift has opened up between Muslim Kurds and Yezidis, in particular because at the beginning of the disaster, Kurdish *pêşmerge* offered the Yezidis no help in the Shingal mountains.

Thus, many Yezidis want to leave Kurdistan in order to survive. Currently, it is hard to predict whether all this will lead the Yezidis to modify their religious rules, and develop a new identity in the diaspora in order to find peace at a new home abroad.

3 This was the case at the time of the interview. Shingal has since been liberated from ISIS control (Editors).

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Book Reviews

Twana Faris Bawa, *The Privatisation of Security in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq*. University of Buckingham Press, 2014, 305 pp., (ISBN: 978-1-908684-51-6).

Twana Faris Bawa's 'The Privatisation of Security in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq' is an important contribution to the literature on the Private Military and Security Companies (PMSCs) and Kurdish studies with a focus on the Kurdistan region of Iraq (KRI). In his book, Bawa argues that the PMSCs play a crucial role in the economic development of the KRI. By borrowing from international and regional legal practices, he proposes a well-defined legal framework for security-sector reform in order to enable the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) to regulate the PMSCs that are operational in the KRI. Therefore, the main theme remains his aim to provide a legal framework for regulation of the PMSCs to maintain security, and thus the economic growth of the KRI. This book review argues that this main theme constitutes the core of strengths and weaknesses of the book.

Regarding strengths, Bawa offers good understanding of the historical backgrounds and present contexts of the KRI and the PMSCs. Regarding the KRI, he dates the historical background of the region back to the beginning of Saddam's Baathist regime in 1979. He especially focuses on the Kurdish uprising in 1991 and the UN's response to the conflict. Then, he examines the present context of the KRI by emphasising the relationship between the Iraqi Constitution of 2005 and the KRG as well as the conflict between the Iraqi government and the KRG regarding the disputed areas. Regarding the PMSCs, he explores the conceptualisation and practices of mercenaries, and then compares the PMSCs with mercenaries in order to define the PMSCs. He significantly focuses on the Geneva Convention to reject any association of the PMSCs with mercenaries. He dates the historical background of the PMSCs to the Second World War and later Vietnam War, and provides a good account of the use of the PMSCs in the 2000s at the global level. Indeed, he offers a detailed account of activities of the PMSCs ranging from consulting, training and logistic support to

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intelligence gathering and combat. He also provides a detailed categorisation of the PMSCs, particularly in the KRI, in relation to their activities and services, main users of services, and main areas of activity.

Furthermore, Bawa provides a comprehensive insight on the international and domestic legal framework for the status and the use of the PMSCs at the global level in comparison with practices of the PMSCs in the KRI. Significantly, he analyses domestic legal structures of the USA, the UK, South Africa and Iraq. He also examines the Montreux Document as an important step to provide international legal structure. He further provides case studies derived from Africa in his approach to the KRI as 'a weak state' (p. 131), in order to explore reasons for and consequences of the lack of regulation on the PMSCs in the KRI. He particularly focuses on Angola and Sierra Leone, and activities of the Executive Outcomes in order to underline illegal activities of the PMSCs in weak states which lack regulations on the PMSCs. Regarding his proposal for a legal framework in the KRI, he describes and explains the security sector and the legal structure in the KRI. At this point, his extensive field research – based on governmental documents as well as semi-structured interviews with government officials, the PMSCs and local population – offers an invaluable research. He further provides case studies, namely the events of Zrary and Khalid Raouf, based on interviews with local population, media and personnel of the PMSCs. It should be noted that both Zrary and Khalid Raouf were civilians who were physically harassed by the PMSC contractors in the KRI (pp. 180–186). These case studies illustrate consequences of the lack of a legal framework for regulation of the PMSCs. In Appendices, his book includes the 'Proposed Law on Private Security Services [in the KRI]' (pp. 268–305), which is very useful for future research on primary sources. However, it does not include other Appendices on interviews or official documents, which limit ability of readers to access primary sources.

Regarding weaknesses, Bawa does not present any theoretical or methodological discussion either in literature review or in the rest of the book. However, both argumentation and the structure of book reveal which school of thought Bawa is inclined to. As said before, he provides a legal framework for the regulation of the PMSCs in the KRI to enhance the economic development of the region. However, he does not present any critical analysis between the global capitalist system and commodification of security, whose meaning and practices are broadened and blurred.[1] Similarly, he does not offer any critical

1 Abrahamsen, R. and Williams, M. C. (2008) Selling Security: Assessing the Impact of Military Privatization. *Review of International Political Economy*, 15(1), 131–146; Huysmans, J. (1998). Security! What Do You Mean? From Concept to Thick Signifier. *European Journal of*

understanding of the dependent relationship between core and (semi)peripheral countries.[2] Therefore, this book review argues that Bawa accepts the main premises and approach of neoliberalism. Indeed, he defines the Iraq War in 2003 as 'the liberation of Iraq' by associating it with 'the overthrow of the Saddam regime' (p. 31), in order to downplay the invasion of Iraq by the coalition forces under the USA's flagship. He further portrays the coalition forces as giving efforts to 'win the "Hearts and Minds" of the local civilian population' (p. 6). As a result, instead of contextualising the relationship among legal structures, states and the PMSCs, Bawa overwhelmingly accepts legal documents as *a priori* frameworks to define the relationship between the state and the PMSCs.

Bawa significantly suffers from recognisable vagueness and paradoxes in his definitions and analysis regarding the relationship between the PMSCs and the KRI. He defines the PMSCs as 'profit-driven corporations [...] [that] trade in professional services [...] linked to conflict and warfare' (pp. 47–48). In this way, he argues that the operations of the PMSCs should be considered legal on the grounds of permissions of the governments (p. 75). He takes for granted the rise of the PMSC industry and their role in state-building in post-conflict zones, significantly in the KRI (p. 3), by associating privatisation of security with efficiency and reduced costs. Also, as he approaches the KRI as 'a weak state', which lacks 'a monopoly of force over their territory' in Weberian sense (p. 131), he considers the privatisation of security as an opportunity for the KRI to provide security through the use of the PMSCs. Since he accepts the principles of accountability and transparency as the fundamental pillars of liberal democracy (p. 106), he narrows his explanations on consequences of the lack of regulation on the PMSCs to abuses and ill-treatment of civilians, and exploitation of natural resources including gas and oil (p. 147). Furthermore, he narrows the

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International Relations, 4(2), 226–255; Krause, K. and Williams, M. C. (1997). *Critical Security Studies: Concepts and Strategies*. London: UCL Press; Leander, A. (2005). The Power to Construct International Security: On the Significance of Private Military Companies. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 33(3), 803–826.

2 Albrecht, P. and Jackson, P. (2014). State-Building through Security Sector Reform: The UK Intervention in Sierra Leone. *Peacebuilding*, 2(1), 83–99; Herring, E. (2009). Iraq, Fragmentation, and the Global Governance of Inequalities. *Globalizations*, 6(1), 91–97; Herring, E. and Rangwala, G. (2005). *Iraq in Fragments: The Occupation and Its Legacy*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press; Jackson, P. (2012). Security Sector Reform and State-building: Lessons Learned. In Schnabel, A.; Farr, V. and Verlag, L. (Eds.), *Back to the Roots: Security Sector Reform and Development* (251–270). Geneva: Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces; Leander, A. and Munster, R. V. (2007). Private Security Contractors in the Debate about Darfur: Reflecting and Reinforcing Neo-Liberal Governmentality. *International Relations*, 21(2), 201–216.

process of state-building with maintaining security to enhance foreign investment and economic growth of the region. This weakness stems from his vague and paradoxical approach to the KRI. Indeed, he problematically defines the KRI as 'a transitional state within a state' (p. 9), and he maintains that '[the KRI] is widely considered to be in a period of transition leading to a new form of governance' (p. 24). Since he compares the KRI with Kosovo (p. 31), and since he underlines the existence of territory, government and capacity to be represented in the international arena (p. 155), it can be argued that he considers the KRI as an autonomous region in the process of state-building whose legitimacy depends on international recognition. However, he still does not explain what kind of *state* or *governance* he refers to.

Bawa, arguably unintentionally, further credits the problematic role of the PMSCs in the process of state-building in post-conflict zones, particularly the KRI, both at the international and domestic levels. At the international level, he fails to problematize the call for an 'apolitical approach' to the international law on the PMSCs (p. 199). This statement demonstrates that he does not accept the political nature of the notion of security. In this way, he fails to acknowledge the arbitrary nature of international law, which aims to protect long-term interests of capital, embedded in the global capitalist system. Furthermore, he fails to critically examine the relationship between the Western core countries, such as the USA and the UK, and (semi)peripheral countries, such as Iraq. Consequently, he legitimises the construction of post-conflict zones as marketplaces for both domestic and international capital to buy and sell the commoditised security. Thus, he arguably unintentionally legitimises the reproduction of post-conflict zones as (semi)periphery of the global capitalist system. In other words, he arguably unintentionally contributes to the reproduction and reinforcement of weak states.

At the domestic level, he fails to acknowledge the relationship between neoliberalism as a particular moment of capitalist modes of production and accumulation, and the transition of state. In this sense, he not only legitimises the purge of the welfare state's role to provide security as a public good, but seeks further transition to the regulatory state whose role is limited to control conditions under which both domestic and international capital functions to increase profit to the detriment of subordinate classes. At this point, he fails to present a critical understanding of the relationship between privatisation of security and labour rights – except mentioning the difference between wages of international and local personnel of the PMSCs (p. 170). It should be noted that he has already conducted interviews with local workers of the PMSCs. Thus, this book review argues that he could have dealt with the (lack of?) legal framework to solve possible tensions between the international

PMSCs and domestic labour unions in the KRI. Furthermore, his engagement with gender issues remains very limited. He underlines the need for the use of female workers in the PMSCs by giving reference to an interviewee's statement that 'in [Kurdish] culture only a female is allowed to search another female' (p. 240). As a result, he fails to critically engage with the LGBTQ issues, either in relation to labour relations or the militarist role of PMSCs in the state-building process.[3]

To conclude, aside from these flaws Bawa's book is significant by providing a comprehensive insight on a legal framework for the regulation of the PMSCs in the KRI. His extensive research is vital for researchers who focus on the Middle East, including Iraq and the KRI, to examine both primary and secondary sources. This book review argues that Bawa's book serves as one of crucial contributions to the literature to be challenged and broadened with critical approaches to the role of PMSCs in the process of state-building in the KRI in the neoliberal era.

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3 See Stachowitsch, S. (2013) Military Privatization and the Remasculinization of the State: Making the Link between the Outsourcing of Military Security and Gendered State Transformations. *International Relations*, 27(1), 74–94.

Marianna Charountaki, *The Kurds and US Foreign Policy: International Relations in the Middle East since 1945*, Routledge, London and New York, 2011, 320 pp., (ISBN: 978-0-415-58753-2).

This "book investigates the role of the Kurds in US foreign policy from World War II until Gulf War III (March 2003) and its aftermath" (p. 1), and is "an extended version" of the author's "PhD thesis, submitted to the University of Exeter (Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies) in March 2009" (p. x). The "Introduction" or first chapter constitutes of a review of the literature and also surveys the various methodologies and schools of thought used in the study of International Relations. While this may be useful, what is one to think of such conclusions regarding the inadequacy of realist theories regarding "the interaction between state and non-state actors" that "even post-positivists critiques though as meta-theories have been limited so far into the criticism of the realist paradigms rather than provide the IR [International Relations] with a new theoretical stance" (p. 13).

After spending the bulk of her analysis on US-Kurdish relations, Charountaki returns to theory as her final chapter on "Conceptual implications and general conclusions" suggests that "for an alternative outlook for IR" as "multidimensional" and "interactional" as well as "inter-relational". This means that it embraces on one hand the inter-relation among politics, IR and foreign policy and on the other the interaction between state and non-state actors other than structures and policies (pp. 246–47). Maybe it would have been best for the author in the published version of her thesis at least to have concentrated less on theory and more on policy.

In her analysis of "US foreign policy towards the Middle East", the author identifies "five major changes": 1.) "US economic interests in the Middle East which were enriched by political interests in the period from World War II until the 1970s"; 2.) "from the 1970s until 1990 … the gradual militarization"; 3.) "the collapse of the USSR" and "direct political intervention by the United States … and the US use of force alongside its interactions with such non-state actors as the Kurds of Iraq"; 4.) "Clinton's era … constitutes the foundation of the US 'containment' of both state actors *vis-à-vis* [the] Iraq Liberation Act and non-state ones, namely terrorist groups, continued with great zeal by George W. Bush"; and 5.) "under the Presidency of George W. Bush … the direct interventionist policy … rather than a limited use of force [that] … have overtaken the humanitarian foreign policy discourse" (pp. 102–103). Elsewhere the author adds that "internally, the formulation of US policy appears to depend on four factors: the Constitution; the ideologies of US Presidencies; the particular

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system and staff allocation for the functioning of the administration and the personalities of the bureaucrats" (pp. 138–39). Together these "five changes" and "four factors" provide the author's analytical roadmap.

Thus, "whereas US interest in the Kurdish issue was confined, until the 1950s, to minimal and covert aid undertaken mainly by the US embassies in each country with a Kurdish population, there was no such a thing as a US-Kurdish relationship. … It is not until the post-Cold War period that a more structured relationship with the United States emerges" (p. 127). While Chapter Two "focuses on the Kurdish Issue as the link between the Kurds and international relations, Chapters Three, Four and Five concentrate on the dynamics of US foreign policy and its relation to the Kurds" (p. 43). In addition, as she analyses US foreign policy from 1945–1990, the author finds that "this foreign policy preoccupation with regional conflicts and particular threats, as well as the advantage to regional states of weakening each other through the Kurdish Issue contributed further to the deteriorating status of the Kurds, while the focus of the United States on regional stability at the expense of the Kurdish cause explains Kurdish marginalization" (p. 132).

There is much positive food for thought in the author's findings. For example, "unless the regional states and the international community address all aspects of the Kurdish Issue, political turbulence in the region is unlikely to be resolved, which will lead to further political and economic repercussions. The United States has been the only major power in a position potentially to mediate in the issue" (p. 165). However, "such complexities mark the Kurdish Issue as a complex phenomenon in international relations whose solution seems problematic and, as such, calls into question any kind of political settlement" (p. 261). Although it midwifed the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq and has come to support it up to a point, the United States still maintains that Iraq must be kept intact to maintain regional peace and security. Thus, "the original US principle … was that it would in no way be associated … with the 60 year old Kurdish rebellion in Iraq or oppose Iraq's legitimate attempts to suppress it" (p. 171) remains operative today.

Valid also is the author's conclusion that "Turkey's persistence in interpreting the Kurdish Issue as a 'PKK problem' that must be fought against seems to have deprived the Turkish bureaucracy of the possibility of reaching a *modus vivendi* by applying political and diplomatic means" (p. 180). The veracity of this maxim was illustrated once again when Turkish air power was launched against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in July 2015 and the once promising Turkish-PKK peace process was terminated. Thus, notes the author, the paradox that "while the PKK elevated Turkey's Kurdish Issue and boosted

Kurdish aspirations for political and cultural rights, it had a disastrous impact on Turkey's Kurdish policy from early 1984 onwards through its militarization strategy" (*ibid.*).

Further worth restating is that the "Turkish belief that recognition of the Kurds, or any other non-Turkish ethnicity, is deeply equated with separatism … constitutes the core of the Turkish ideological discourse" and that "Turkey's Kurdish policy of war and violence further endangers the state's democracy project on the one hand, and reinforces the Turkish-Kurdish engagement in a never-ending armed struggle even more strongly on the other" (p. 197). As the author points out, "the armed struggle had not been the PKK's choice but was the only way out, having been imposed through force by Ankara, and that the movement was not looking for a solution simply in the context of war, as the international community or Ankara appeared to think" (p. 180). On the other hand, insightful too is the author's finding that "there is a certain irony in the Turks having contributed to the renaissance of Iraq's Kurds while at the same time Turkey's own Kurdish policies were so restrictive" (p. 181).

Interesting too is that despite the US unwillingness to support KRG independence, "starting from David Schwartz [whose dates unfortunately are not listed] there has always been an official in the Iraqi section of the Northern Gulf Affairs Office in the [US] State Department's Near Eastern Bureau in charge of Iraq's domestic portfolio, part of which was the Kurdish file as well" (p. 190). Since Charountaki's book was completed in 2009, more than two years before the outbreak of the Syrian civil war brought the Kurds of Syria to the attention of many observers, prescient is the author's statement about "the Kurds of Syria whose vociferous claims for citizenship rights have started to be heard on numerous occasions" (p. 172). "However, should US regional policy need the Kurds of Syria, Turkey, and Iran as an indispensable means for promoting US national interests in the near future … then the start of US-Kurdish relations might indeed become a reality" (p. 174). Indispensable US air support for the Syrian Kurds while they battled ISIS for Kobane in 2014 and subsequently elsewhere have made the author's insight here valid.

Unfortunately, the author's manuscript needed one more good editing – possibly by another knowledgeable eye – to catch what are too many galling errors. One in particular was the repeated and totally inexplicable erroneous citations (pp. 62/n. 88, 69/n. 176, 155/n. 21 in the notes and p. 296 in the bibliography) of the well-known classic by Gerard Chaliand ed., *A People without a Country: The Kurds and Kurdistan*, 1980 and with new chapters, 1993, as instead being somehow co-edited with David McDowall. However, McDowall merely wrote a very brief two-page foreword to the 1993 edition and was certainly not a co-editor. The author's error here is compounded by her

listing McDowall's name first despite its being alphabetically subsequent to Chaliand's, thus implying incorrectly that McDowall was even the senior editor. (David McDowall, of course, is the well-known author of *A Modern History of the Kurds*, which has appeared in several different editions since 1996 and which along with Martin van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan*, 1992 are arguably the two leading studies in modern Kurdish studies.)

Equally problematic is the author's repeated mix up between George H. W. Bush (the father) and George W. Bush (the son) on pp. 185, 187, 189, 191, 199, 200, 202, 220, and 235 where the father is said to have been the President Bush who fought the Iraqi war in 2003, instead of the son. However, on other pages the author manages to get the two correct and also has separate entries for them in the index, but of course with the confusion between the two.

Some other unfortunate infelicities follow. A non-existent "Abbas Vanli", (instead of Ismet Cheriff Vanly, who is arguably the dean of modern Kurdish scholars) is incorrectly said to have discussed certain "secret agreements" (p. 41). On page 147 the author confuses the PKK and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), and refers to "Operation Safe Heaven" (p. 147 and again p. 318 in the index), instead of Operation Safe Haven, which she does get correct elsewhere in the manuscript. Elsewhere, the author tells us correctly that Iran assassinated the KDPI leader Abdul Rahman Qassemlou, but then erroneously also the religious leader Shaikh Ezzedin Hosseini (p. 150) when she really means Qassemlou's secular successor, Sadiq Sharafkindi. Former US secretary of state and earlier chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell is somehow incorrectly identified as "Deputy Secretary of Defense" (p. 99), which of course he never was.

On at least two occasions the author also mentions "President Massoud Barzani" (pp. 172 and 200) several years before he assumed this position. Kirkuk is said to contain "70 per cent of Iraqi oil outputs" (p. 159/n. 136), a figure which is much too high given the Basra and other KRG resources. In the discussion of the Iraqi Kurdish refugees following the 2003 war, the author at first mentions a mere "60,000" (p. 168), a confusion with the figure from 1988 at the end of the Iran-Iraq war. Subsequently, the author gets the 2003 tally correct when she mentions "the mass exodus of two million refugees who feared a second Halabja" (p. 169). "[Ahmed] Chalabi and [Hoshyar] Zebari" (p. 201) are said to be the Kurdish representatives to an important Iraqi opposition meeting in New York, when, of course, Chalabi was instead the notorious Shite Arab opposition leader who so egregiously misled US policy makers about the nature of the Iraqi situation leading up to the war in 2003. "Salam Arif and Mullah Mustafa Barzani" appear as the two main Iraqi Kurdish leaders (p. 131), when

clearly Jalal Talabani was intended instead of Arif, who is mentioned correctly a few lines later as one of the Arab leaders who overthrew Abdul Karim Qassim in 1963. The current reviewer has a list of several other infelicities.

Despite these unfortunate problems and given the many important subsequent events, the author might be encouraged to write an updated second edition that would include her analysis of the Syrian civil war, the rise of Rojava (Syrian Kurdistan) and the Democratic Union Party (PYD), and their existential struggle against ISIS, epitomised by the battle for Kobane in 2014. Equally important would be an analysis of the now failed Turkish-PKK peace process and the rise of the pro-Kurdish Peoples Democratic Party (HDP) and its charismatic leader Selahattin Demirtas in Turkey, among other major events, which have involved US foreign policy.

Charountaki's study also contains rich documentation, an extended bibliography, maps, an index, a list of acronyms, figures, and an appendix containing a report on the Kurds referenced in the US Congress.

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Ramazan Aras, *The Formation of Kurdishness in Turkey. Political Violence, Fear and Pain*, Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2014. xii + 227 pp., (ISBN: 978-0-415-82418-7).

Ramazan Aras is an anthropologist teaching at Artuklu University in Mardin. He grew up in the ethnically mixed (Kurdish and Syriac) town of Kerboran in Mardin in the years of rapidly escalating violence between the PKK and Turkey's military and police forces during the 1980s. He studied sociology and history in Turkey and did a PhD in anthropology in Canada, specialising in the study of collective violence, emotions, pain and fear. He has carried out oral history research on communal violence between Muslims and Christians as well as state-society violence and trauma in Kurdistan. In this book, which is based on his Ph.D. dissertation (at the University of Western Ontario), he investigates how Kurdish subjectivities in Turkey have been shaped by the experience of violence (both from the side of the state and the PKK) and memories of suffering and fear. He writes from the position of those who were caught in the middle and were fearful of the military as well as the guerrillas. If his narrative takes sides, it is with Islam, the primary identity of many Kurds, rather than secular nationalism. This study is informed by Aras's own experience of witnessing violence, knowing fear and feeling threatened as a Kurd and a Muslim.

His chapter on the state and the politics of fear opens with a violent incident that took place in Kerboran when the author was still a child. His family were sleeping on the roof, as is common in the hot summer months, when they were woken up by bursts of gunfire and the sound of women crying. Trembling with fear, they locked themselves in the house until daybreak, unable to sleep and seeking protection in reciting verses from the Qur'an. The following day they heard that guerrillas had entered the town that night and wiped out a family – killing the women and children but missing the husband, who was not at home. The man was a traitor, people said, a police informer, who worked for the state against his own people. The laments of the dead women's relatives and the intimation of more violence to come imprinted themselves on the child's mind. Assassinations, disappearances, arrest and torture, gunfights and bombs, demonstrations and massive house searches by police and army soon became everyday experiences, which, as Aras writes, shaped his memories and his personal identity.

Twenty years after that first experience with fear and violence, having prepared himself by reading a wide range of relevant theoretical and comparative literature, Aras returned to Turkish Kurdistan to carry out fieldwork for his dissertation. He interviewed close to a hundred respondents from across the political spectrum about the traumatic events they had lived through in the

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past decades. The analysis of these interviews, along with published memoirs of the period, constitutes the main body of this book. This material is organised in three core chapters dealing with the politics of fear, pain and gendered suffering, and violence against the body in the form of imprisonment and torture, respectively.

These chapters are preceded by a theoretical chapter on the nation state and political violence, in which Foucault on bio-power, Agamben on sovereignty and the state of exception, Talal Asad on agency and pain, cruelty and torture, and Veena Das on bodily affects, hate and pain in communal conflict loom large, besides studies of collective violence, memory and reconciliation in South Africa, Ireland and Palestine. A second chapter on the genealogy of Kurdish suffering in Turkey places the events of the 1980s and 1990s against the background of (memories of) the Sheikh Saʿid rebellion and the violent suppression of Kurdish and Islamic identities, the genocidal Dersim campaign, mass deportations, random state violence and the emergence of a more ideological Kurdish movement from the 1960s onward and a more deliberate recourse to violence in the following decades.

Many of Aras's interviewees, like traumatised people elsewhere, found it painful and almost impossible to speak of their own traumatic experiences and had remained silent about them to their relatives and acquaintances. When interrogated, they tended to hide the most intimate memories and to depersonalise their narratives, shifting from "I" to "we" and then to "the Kurds"; the memory of their personal suffering appeared to be more tolerable and become more meaningful when part of an anonymous, generalised narrative. "Inner and intimate experiences and feelings", in the words of Aras, were thus "attach[ed] to the collective experience and suffering of the local community, and then of the Kurdish people" (p. 105). Aras suggests that this retelling of personal experiences as "packaged stories" may be a strategy of coping with fear and insecurity as well as a way to sustain the struggle in making oneself part of a larger whole. He also notes the importance of religious metaphors of suffering and martyrdom as well as the oral tradition of laments and heroic tales as templates for understanding individual suffering.

In the 1980s and 1990s, detention and torture were defining elements of the Kurdish experience in Turkey, with the notorious Diyarbakır prison as the iconic theatre of horror. Many testimonies of the prison experience have been published (and were studied by Aras, besides his own interviews). The vast majority of testimonies are by men and, as Aras observes and attempts to explain, women's narratives of detention and interrogation have tended to be silenced or marginalised. He relates the silence to "certain cultural and religious values and norms in the Kurdish community". Stated less cautiously, the issue is one of honour and shame; rape and other forms of sexual torture

violate the honour of the victim's male relatives (which is of course one of the reasons why it has taken place systematically). Short of killing their daughter or sister themselves, which traditionally is the ultimate way in which male relatives may restore their honour, families have had a strong interest in silencing accounts of her prison experience.

The PKK's discourse, in which honour is located in the nation rather than in the family and women's modesty, and in which gender equality is emphasised and gender separation rejected, was liberating to some but identity-threatening to conservative Kurdish Muslims, including those who supported the PKK because of its struggle for Kurdish rights. The participation of unmarried young women in the guerrilla forces, alongside male fighters, was a revolutionary development that had been seen never before in the Middle East, and it shocked many Kurds – the majority, according to Aras. Resistance in the prison, led by PKK inmates, several times took the extreme form of self-immolation, shocking and unacceptable to believing Muslims. But yet these transgressions had a strong formative influence on Kurdish subjectivities, as did the violent repression by the state.

The strength of this book is that it gives a voice to those who were not active participants in the Kurdish movement and may even have grave reservations about its ideology and rejection of traditional values yet are profoundly influenced by it. The author is at pains to show that these people too are not passive victims of the dominant political forces but active political subjects, with agency in the making of Kurdishness.

The readability of the book, unfortunately, suffers somewhat from its origin as a dissertation and its excessive references to theoretical and comparative literature. I should have liked to read more extensive renderings of the interviewees' narratives, such as we find in Çayan Demirel's impressive documentary film on the Diyarbakır prison, *5 no'lu Cezaevi 1980–1984*, to which Aras also refers as an important document. (The film is available online at Dailymotion but is unfortunately not subtitled.) Aras's ambition has been, of course, to go beyond description to analysis, and he offers much food for thought.

The book was written at a time when there was hope for dialogue and reconciliation, and Aras devotes some hopeful passages to the solution of violent conflict elsewhere and prospects for the Kurdish case. The return, on an unprecedented scale, of violence, fear and pain, traumatising numerous Kurdish communities, makes the reflections on trauma and identity in this study a subject of obvious importance.

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Senem Aslan, *Nation-Building in Turkey and Morocco: Governing Kurdish and Berber Dissent*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015, 250 pp., (ISBN: 1107054605).

Senem Aslan's comparative study on Kurdish and Berber cases brings the state back in explaining ethnic insurgency. Aslan argues that the state policies in governing ethnic dissent are so crucial that they can transform the trajectory of the relationship, resulting violent outcomes in some cases and contentious accommodation in others. Unlike Morocco's accommodating strategy of handling Berber demands – which are initially comparable to Kurdish demands in modern Turkey – the Turkish state pursued an "extreme make-over" policy that inadvertently caused a growing Kurdish insurgency.

Although the book allocates an equal number of chapters to each case, the Kurdish case appears to be more interesting to the reader because of theoretical implications in explaining ethnic insurgencies. In her comparative case selection, the author highlights the similarity of the two contexts: underdevelopment of Berber and Kurdish communities, colonial divide-and-rule policies, absence of a democratic system, contentious ethnic conflict in a neighbouring state, and top-down nation-building projects by the state elites (pp. 11–14, 196–97). The remarkable difference between the two, however, is the Turkish state's extremely "intrusive" nation-building efforts that combined with indiscriminate state violence, contrasted with the Moroccan state's flexibility in defining the boundaries of Moroccan identity as well as a policy of selective repression and co-optation.

Aslan's book is an excellent example of a state-centric approach in explaining ethnic insurgency. Yet, the reader may be surprised to find the author shy in engaging with significant literature. For example, Jeff Goodwin's authoritative study, *No Other Way Out: States and Revolutionary Movements, 1945–1991*, puts two critical factors forth to explain radical insurgency formation in Latin America and the Far East: the weak state and the exclusivist state. In Chapters 2 and 4, Aslan nicely depicts how the Turkish state perceived itself as "weak" in penetrating Kurdish society and pursued policies of discrimination in an exclusivist manner. Goodwin's discussion of neo-patrimonial regimes is also noteworthy because differences in the regime structure may explain divergence in nation-building efforts in Morocco and Turkey. Unlike the Moroccan monarchy, the Turkish elite was reminiscent of the French, who "did not believe indigenous cultures or institutions offered anything of value", and, thus, saw their "civilizing mission" (*mission civilisatrice*) as strongly opposed to local nationalisms (Shafer, 1998: 142; quoted in Goodwin, 2001: 130). Such an attitude

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may also explain why Kurds were not trusted in local administrative positions in the early years of the Turkish republic (pp. 47, 60). Although the regime type was discussed briefly (pp. 16–18), I wish the author had an in-depth theoretical engagement with the relevant literature on these remarkable topics. The limitation, in part, seems to be due to the case selection: A historically rooted nation-state, not monarchic Morocco that established in the Cold War years, may have been a better pick to compare with Turkey.

Aslan should be commended on the utilisation of Turkish government documents in 1930s and 40s. The book is a rare study that employs military officers' reports about the region during Ataturk's reign, the investigative reports by the Republican People's Party (CHP) officials, and rich sources of the People's Houses (*Halkevleri*), which was established in each town to penetrate the Kurdish society for cultural assimilation.

Aslan demonstrates how mutual mistrust and vicious cycles of violence haunted the Republic very early on: "After the 1927 elections, the percentage of the parliamentarians born in the Kurdish areas was 34.7, and it fell as low as 17 percent in the mid-1930s … The single party increasingly nominated bureaucrats and former military officers who were born in the Western provinces to represent the Kurdish provinces" (p. 46). These officers were not only alien to Kurds but also incapable of grasping the region's reality due to the language barrier – a serious problem that was often noted in observatory reports about the region. A report written in 1943 by First Inspector-General, for example, indicates that "the governors were unable to obtain even basic information such as the number of tribes in their regions, who the tribal leaders were, which of these tribal leaders participated in the rebellions against the state, and how many arms these tribes possessed" (pp. 59–60). Aslan depicts how the Turkish state's uncompromising language policy "paradoxically undermined its efforts to build efficient state rule" in the region (p. 69).

In following chapters, the author explains the role of electoral competition as well as military interventions in Turkey's multi-party era. Every major coup (1960, 1971, 1980) has subjugated the Kurds bitterly but the military policy in the early 1980s was remarkably repressive, and, at times, indiscriminately violent. Aslan traces intrusive state policies over the naming of Kurdish children, the ban on Kurdish music and publications, and other forms of Kurdish cultural expression. "Unlike the first few decades of the republic", notes Aslan, "the state's intrusion into daily life of the Kurdish areas could now be more forceful because more Kurds lived in the easily accessible urban areas and the state's infrastructural capacity was higher" (p. 131). As the Kurdish migration increased westward, so did Kurdish grievances and "relative deprivation" as

Kurds became more aware of exclusivist state policies. In this regard, Aslan reads the rise of the PKK in a state-centric approach.

Nation-Building in Turkey and Morocco is a valuable book. It is especially recommended for those who would like to put Turkey's Kurdish issue into a comparative perspective.

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Michael M. Gunter, *The Kurds: A Modern History*. Princeton, New Jersey: Markus Weiner Publishers, 2015, 236 pp., (ISBN: 1558766154).

Michael Gunter's well-structured monograph is an exceptionally accessible study of the Kurds and should be considered a mandatory read for undergraduate students with an interest in international relations. A general readership will also benefit, gaining a deeper understanding of regional intricacies that contributed to the rise of the Kurds as political actors in the region. Gunter's study offers seven self-contained and very manageable chapters that range from insights into the early history of the Kurds to the United States' current relationship with the Kurds and the Kurdish struggle against ISIS ("Islamic State"). In addition, the monograph offers several maps that provide an indispensable geographic context. Gunter also added a number of fascinating personal vignettes about his experiences in the region during the past 30 years. He integrates, for example, personal accounts including his meeting with the now imprisoned Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Öcalan back in 1998 (pp. 47–49). Later, he shares his personal observations of the situation in Irbil in 2014 after ISIS's failed attempts to take the city. He finds life in Irbil almost back to normal despite the harrowing threat, just 50 miles away. Walking through Ankawa, the Christian section of the city, he observes that "modern day religious fanatics would literally like to crucify these very Christians living peacefully with the Kurds!" (p. 85).

Gunter's newest monograph focuses on providing an updated and frank analysis of Kurds in Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran for readers who may be familiar with his 2014 monograph *Out of Nowhere: The Kurds of Syria in Peace and War*. In *The Kurds: A Modern History*, Gunter further develops major themes he initially explored in his earlier work-themes that turned out to have been too fluid to fully explore in 2014. In particular, he investigates the US government's relationship with the Kurds and the experiences of Kurdish fighters in an imploding Syria. One can only assume that Gunter is already in the process of composing yet another monograph that will be available by next year to update the mercurial developments. Among the issues that will need to be addressed, of course, are the dramatically deteriorating situation inside Turkey, which could result in a full blown civil war by the middle of 2016, and a further assessment of the increasingly gruesome sectarian battle in Syria following Russian and Iranian interventions of behalf of the Assad regime.

Several chapters are of particular importance to readers keen on gaining a clearer understanding of the significance of Kurds in the region. Chapter two chronicles the contentious rise of the PKK, talks of peace, and the blunt

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assessment that "heavy fighting between Turkey and the PKK had resumed" (p. 60). Nearly six months after Gunter wrote his last remarks foreshadowing the deteriorating conditions for Kurdish communities in Turkey it is hard to even recall the general optimism supporters of the pro-Kurdish HDP (Peoples' Democratic Party) expressed following the successful June 7, 2015 election. The chapter reminds readers that the basic parameters for peace negotiations between the Turkish state and the Kurds had not been agreed upon despite much rhetoric to the contrary. The tragedy for the Kurds of Turkey is that in 2016 they face a hyper-nationalist Turkish public and a hardened military, which is once again determined to crush Kurdish resistance to state control.

Chapter four examines the marginalising experiences of Syrian Kurds. This section is of particular interest to students striving to understand the Syrian complexities. Gunter integrates a detailed examination of the treatment of Kurds as *ajanib* (foreigners) in Syria starting in 1962 based on the proclamation of Decree 93, which resulted in the denial of civil rights to Kurds and their loss of property rights, and also excluded them from accessing a range of employment options. He then discusses the impact of Arabisation policies and the rise of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its military wing, the Peoples Defence Units (YPG), the PKK's sister organisation across the border. This chapter also offers sobering remarks about the Syrian civil war's human toll by focusing on both the appallingly high numbers of casualties, internally displaced populations, and refugees in neighbouring countries. Fascinating are Gunter's observations that the Assad regime was soon expected to collapse, which of course turned out to have been premature as both Iranian and Russian interventions provided essential lifelines for the dictator and his inner circle.

In Chapter six Gunter observes that the United States pursued a number of clear priorities in Syria that failed to intersect with Kurdish interests. He emphasises that the US focuses on curbing the influence of ISIS and other jihadi extremists, but also aims to keep Iran from partitioning the Syrian state. His final chapter frames the regional rise of ISIS and the group's keen interest in destroying Kurdish influences. Gunter's most recent monograph faces an inevitable challenge for authors who analyse ongoing crises: the monograph was completed in April 2015, which means that Turkey's attacks on Syrian Kurds are not addressed and a further evaluation of the potential for hostile acts and clashes between Russia and Turkey are not included. His analysis up to this point, however, elucidates key nuances of a constantly shifting set of complex regional factors.

Gunter's *The Kurds: A Modern History*, just as his prior contributions in the field, adds an enormously valuable and readable study. He reaches an audience that struggles to keep up with the dramatic changes throughout the region.

Gunter convincingly concludes that both Turkey and the United States have been too slow to grasp the profound geopolitical shifts underway by insisting on maintaining the existing artificial boundaries of Iraq and Syria. In essence, Gunter suggests concentrating on the question of self-determination that was raised but inadequately addressed some 100 years earlier during the final years of WWI.

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Djene Rhys Bajalan and Sara Zandi Karimi (eds.), *Studies in Kurdish History: Empire, Ethnicity and Identity*, London: Routledge, 2015, 179 pp., (ISBN: 978-1-138-88468-7).

This edited book is a collection of articles originally published in a special issue of the journal *Iranian Studies* under the name "The Kurds and their History: New Perspectives", co-edited by Djene Rhys Bajalan and Sara Zandi Karimi. The chapters are organised in chronological order. After a brief introduction by the two co-editors (pp. 1–3), the second chapter (pp. 4–33) is a study by Boris James on the use of the word "Kurd" in Arabic medieval sources. Taking issue with the view that the term "Kurd" would be a synonym of "nomadic", he distinguishes two phases in the use of the term: a first phase (8th–11th century) where it is "at the crossroads between [Arab and ʿAjam]" (p. 12) and related to the concepts of "nomadism-bedouinness and Arabness" (p. 16), and a second phase (11th–14th century) where it became "an ethnonym among others" (p. 17). The author then argues that the Kurds were, since the beginnings of Islam, seen as the "archetypal bedouins" (p. 22) for three reasons: the lack of a central power and the failure of Islam and Arabic to fully penetrate Kurdish society (pp. 23–28). The ideas developed by the author in this article have been covered in previous publications (see James 2006 and 2008), but this is the first time a coherent and synthetic overview is made available to an English-speaking readership. The theoretical soundness and critical use of numerous sources make this a very valuable essay; it would certainly be of interest to apply a similar approach to Persian-language sources of the same period.

The third chapter (pp. 34–54), written by Michiel Leezenberg, is titled "Elî Teremaxî and the Vernacularization of Medrese Learning in Kurdistan". It is part of a larger project of the author examining the rise of "new linguistic ideologies" in the 18th century as "one of the central preconditions of language-based nationalism" (p. 42). The study focuses on Elî Teremaxî's *Tesrîf*, a work on *sarf* (morphology) written in and on Kurdish and dated by the author to the late 17th/early 18th century. After describing its contents, the author argues that the *Tesrîf* "embodies (…) the so-called vernacularization of Kurdish" that is the gradual development of a high culture in the language (p. 41). The second part of the article deals with *medrese* learning in Kurdistan, contending that the 17th century witnessed "a broader shift towards using Kurdish as a medium of both spoken and written medrese instruction". The *Tesrîf* is seen as an important part of this "normative" process, which "may have helped in bringing about a sense of a linguistic standard for the Kurdish language" (p. 48). While these arguments are convincingly conveyed, one cannot follow

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the author when he links this vernacularisation process with "an early stage in the rise of a language-based modern Kurdish national identity" (p. 41), concluding, albeit tentatively, that "the roots of Kurdish nationalism (…) do not lie in the late nineteenth century" and European ideologies, but in "new ideologies of Kurdish as a language" which emerged as a result of this vernacularisation process (p. 54).

The fourth chapter (pp. 55–118) by Sabri Ateş is an extremely detailed and well-researched study of the 1880–81 rebellion of the Naqshbandi Sheikh Ubeidullah of Nehri, a movement to which virtually all contemporary authors trace "the origins of Kurdish nationalism" (p. 56). The first part of the essay is a comprehensive narrative of the rebellion (pp. 60–106), while the second part consists of an analytical treatment exploring the Sheikh's motives and various other aspects of the movement (pp. 106–118). Seeing the rise of Ubeidullah as "a response of local society to the results of centralisation which had decentralised the elite hierarchy of the region" (p. 116) – a reference to the "power vacuum" created by the removal of Kurdish dynasts in the mid-19th century (p. 61) –, the author argues that the rebellion, as "an early response of the Kurds to the age of nationalism" and "a case of sectarian violence" (p. 117), had decisive implications for the borderlanders and the Ottoman and Iranian states. While the former were forced to "make stark and very public choices" in terms of their preferred identity, the latter seized the opportunity to assert their authority and conclusively establish their hegemony in the borderlands (pp. 82–88). Not only a brilliant essay on a neglected topic, this article is also an important contribution to the field of frontier studies, which intersects in many ways with the study of Kurdish history.

In Chapter 5 (pp. 119–42), Harun Yilmaz studies "the Rise of Red Kurdistan", that is the Kurdish enclave at Laçin, in the first two decades of the Soviet Union. The title of this work is a little misleading as it is mainly focused on the development of Kurdish-language education in the SSR of Azerbaijan. Despite the proactive policies of the early Soviet state, the author explains that in effect, "primary education as well as publications in Kurdish remained an unfulfilled project until 1931" (p. 131). This was due to a combination of economic and cultural factors specific to Azerbaijani Kurds, as well as the convergence of pro-Russian and pro-Turkic sections inside the bureaucracy and state apparatus of the SSR of Azerbaijan. Even after a new push was given in 1930–31, the author concludes that if "in 1938, primary education in Kurdish did exist in some schools (…) its success was very limited" (p. 141). Arguing that "the Soviet minority policies can only be understood through All-Union, republican and regional levels", the author tackles these three layers of complexity

at once, which sometimes proves confusing. The article could have been better structured in this regard. However, this three-layered approach is also the strength of this study. The fact that the topic of Kurds in the former USSR is seldom treated in Kurdish studies outside of Russia only adds to the value of the article.

In the sixth chapter (pp. 143–57), Serhat Bozkurt studies the "continuities and discontinuities" in the settlement policies towards the Kurds of the late-Ottoman and early Republican eras. He specifically compares two constitutional documents, the Ordinance adopted in 1916 by the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), and the 1934 law on settlement policies of the Republican government. The article also includes telegrams sent by Talat Pasha to the provinces about the operations in question. The comparison is clear and straightforward, even though more attention seems to have been devoted to continuities than discontinuities, which are only hinted at in the conclusion of the article. However, nothing is said of the practical application of the policies envisioned by the two documents: How many Kurds were actually relocated? Did they assimilate and if so, to what extent? To this effect, the author only makes vague and unsourced comments about the situation in present-day Ayntab, Maraş and Malatya. Furthermore, only sources in Turkish seem to have been used. A wider array of sources relevant to the subject might have enriched the study (see for example Üngör 2009; Schaller and Zimmerer 2009, among others). This is an informative but limited essay, which would have benefitted from a broader scope in terms of problematics and sources.

In Chapter 7 (pp. 158–74), Jordi Tejel analyses the cultural activities of prominent Kurdish intellectuals in exile and their relations with French authorities in mandatory Syria. The author contends that after the failure of the revolt of Ararat (1926–30), these intellectuals launched "a cultural Kurdish renaissance" on the Armenian model, thus operating a move back to the "intellectual activities of the Ottoman period" (p. 167). This was all congruent with the plans of French intelligence officers, who wished to use the Kurds to further French interests in the region (p. 165). The collaboration ended in 1936 with the signature of the Franco-Syrian treaty; however, further unofficial relations are also alluded to. The essay mainly relies on French intelligence reports and, to a lesser extent, articles published in French in the journal *Hawar*. The author could also have studied articles published in the Kurdish section of this journal, which seem to contradict the assumption that the new "discourse around Kurdish identity", relying on folklore and folk culture, was actually assimilated by the Kurdish intellectuals at that time. Indeed, the articles in Kurdish regularly treat such subjects as Kurdish written literature or Quranic interpretation, thus establishing a continuity with the Kurdish journals of the late-Ottoman

era. This is an interesting article which could have given more space to Kurdish agency in the developments studied.

While this collection of articles might at first seem to lack a clear feeling of unity due to its large chronological spectrum, its main problematic – how to write the history of the Kurds in new ways – is really present throughout the book. In their various chapters, the authors endeavour to assess old questions in new ways, which proves to be a very stimulating approach. The book, however, would have benefitted from a more detailed introduction clearly linking together the different contributions. There are also editorial shortcomings, including numerous typographical errors and discrepancies in the transcription of proper names, even inside individual articles. This could have been avoided with more careful editorial work. Kurdish history is still a nascent field, in which some historical periods have received more attention than others. In this respect, the wide chronological and thematical scope of this book is surely one of its strengths. With the many questions it raises, it stands as a starting point for further inquiry. It is hoped that more such projects will flourish in the coming years.

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