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Healing Practices among the Yezidi Sheikhs of Armenia

Abstract

The Yezidis, speakers of a Kurdish dialect living mainly in northern Iraq, are distinguished from the (Muslim) Kurds and other neighboring communities by their religion, a syncretism of Islamic and Christian elements with local indigenous cults. They are at pains both to distance themselves from the Kurds and to keep their rituals secret from outsiders, having gone so far as not to adopt Arabic or any other writing system and to stigmatize literacy. This report of field research among the “exilic” Yezidi communities of Armenia and southern Russia sketches the relationship of their traditional healing practices with their social structure and describes both a sanctioned treatment by a sheikh of one of the clerical castes and the practice of a non-traditional, but tolerated, woman healer and fortune-teller.

Keywords: Yezidism—Armenian Yezidis—Yezidi social structure—religious communities in diaspora—folk medicine

THE YEZIDIS ARE A KURMANJI Kurdish-speaking ethno-religious group, living mainly in northern Iraq (specifically, in Sinjar; Čia Šangale, in Kurdish), which is their original homeland, as well as in Armenia, Georgia, and Russia. The Russian communities have appeared in recent years and are still multiplying in number (mostly in southern Russia, e.g., the Krasnodar region, as well as in Moscow and Yaroslavl regions) as a result of massive emigration from Armenia and Georgia conditioned by the economic hardships of the post-Soviet period. Some of the Yezidis have emigrated to Europe (notably Germany), where small Yezidi communities consisting of emigrants from Turkey have existed from the 1980s.

It is virtually impossible to determine any precise population figure for the Yezidis (estimates vary according to different sources between 250,000 and 700,000), for several reasons. One is the sparsity of information on the territories of northern Iraq inhabited by the Yezidis; indeed, no definitive or reliable census data have ever been collected. Another problem is that of their identity. The fact that the Yezidis, despite their clear and quite unique self-identity, as a Kurmanji-speaking group have often been regarded as Kurds, means that there was little possibility of obtaining exact data on their numbers even in Armenia and Georgia, where population censuses furnish precise information about many other nations and ethnic groups living in the regions.

In the statistics of pre-revolutionary Russia (e.g., the Census of 1914), the Yezidis were considered a separate group, though sometimes, particularly with reference to the Yezidis of western Armenia (eastern Anatolia), they were counted together with the Qizilbaş (various extremist Shi'i sects). The first official census carried out in the Armenian Soviet Republic (1922) also made a distinction between Yezidis and Kurds, presenting their numbers respectively as 7,845 and 705. But from the Census of 1936 until 1989, Soviet statistical surveys placed the Yezidis under the heading of "Kurds," considering them the same people. Moreover, the word "Yezidi" itself was completely excluded from the demographic reports as being obsolete, supposedly denot-

ing a purely religious category, while at the same time, in most cases, the very same term was used in the Soviet passport to denote a national identity.

The 1980s were characterized by the rise of national self-consciousness for many nations, resulting in the revival of Yezidi identity, the removal of the ideological taboo on their religion and self-awareness, and finally their appearance in the 1988 Population Census of Armenia as a separate unit, totaling 52,700 (USSR POPULATION ANNUAL 1989).

The identification of the Yezidis with Kurds, in the first place, raises the question of the definition of the Kurds, for the latter are not monolithic, whether ethnically or by religion. As for their language, the Yezidis themselves, in an attempt to avoid being identified with Kurds, call it *Ezdiqi*.

Thus it is precisely this unique religion and very specific culture, currently the most reliable components of the identity of this "stateless people," which permits the Yezidis to be considered a separate ethno-religious group. Without these factors, which are sometimes insufficiently appreciated or neglected altogether, we cannot speak about the self-consciousness of many groups in present-day multi-cultural societies; how else can we explain the emergence of new identities, without any linguistic or ethnic shifts?

PART II

The Yezidi religion is a combination of Islamic and Christian elements infused with local indigenous cults. Some scholars have described this circumstance as akin to the birth of a new religion "out of ill-digested doctrines and ceremonials practiced by Christians and Moslem sects" in the chaos of the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries (GUEST 1987). The Yezidis themselves tend to prefer the more dramatic idea of an old religion whose roots are "lost in the mist of antiquity," and which "was able to survive over the centuries because its devotees would allow themselves to be nominally converted to new religions such as Christianity or Islam" (GUEST 1987, 28). But the latter version is found rather at the level of folk tradition, and only because of the specific perception of evil in the Yezidi worldview, as well as because certain parallels between the main personage of the Yezidi pantheon, Malak-e Tavus (The Peacock Angel), and the devil and the peacock can be found in the old Iranian tradition and are attested in medieval Armenian sources (EZNIK 1826, 130).

The Yezidis worship one god as the First Cause, who created the universe. It is solely the ambivalent figure of Malak-e Tavus, with some characteristics of the Fallen Angel, who bears the functions of a demiurge. Yezidi tradition attributes to him the following words: "I was and now am and will remain forever. I hold sway over all creatures and regulate their affairs. No place is void of me. I am a participant in all events that heterodox people

consider to be ‘evil’ since they do not correspond with their desire” (ASATRIAN and POLADIAN 1989, 141).

This factor, which was the main reason for the erroneous epithet “devil-worshippers” being applied to the Yezidis, is more evidence of the Islamic mystical roots of this sect. Such apologia for, or rehabilitation of, Satan (and among the Yezidis there is even a taboo on this word) is typical of early Sufis, who consider Eblis (the Devil) more monotheistic than God. Such is Mansur al-Hallāj, who (like Ahmad al-Ghazālī) appealed to learn *tawhid* (monotheism) from Satan (cf also ‘Ayn al-Qozāt Hamadāni, who emphasized that “not everyone can fathom that both Eblis and Mohammad claim to be guides on the Path. Eblis guides one away from God. God appointed Eblis the gate-keeper of His court, saying to him: ‘My lover, because of the jealousy-in-love that you have for me, do not let strangers approach me’” [‘Ayn al-Qozāt Hamadani, *apud* WILSON 1989-90, 45]).

Thus, early Sufism, in which Satan is the lover, “even and especially a tragic lover, one doomed to separation, without whom the Beloved cannot be realized,” no doubt greatly influenced the very origin and development of the Yezidi faith. It is important to emphasize that the Yezidis do not worship the Devil as the principle of evil; unlike Christian Satanists, they recognize him as the principle of energy (WILSON 1998-90, 47).

Apart from this negative definition, one finds (especially in early sources) other names for this sect, e.g., Šarġi, Dasini, and Adabi. The latter is connected with Sheikh ‘Adi b. Musāfer, the Yezidi saintly personage and Sufi leader who is considered to be a divine incarnation and the founder of the ‘Adawiya sect. The significance of this character can be illustrated by the place he has in the Yezidi oral tradition, especially in *qawl* (sayings) such as the following, which can be regarded as a formula of belief (*credo*):

*Šixādī pādšāya,
Šēxubakīr mawlāya,
Šēx Šams čirāya,
Min ša’datiya īmana xwa
Bi nāve Xwada u Tawisī Malaḡ dāya.*

Sheikh ‘Adi is our king,
Sheikh Abu Bakr is our spiritual master,
Sheikh Shams is our light,
I confess my credo
In the name of God and Malak-e Tavus
(DAWRESH 1993, 11).

The term *Yezidi* has a later origin, which the Yezidis themselves explain

by an eponymous connection with Sultan Yezid, a saint who, together with the aforementioned Malak-e Tavus and Sheikh 'Adi, makes up the three main personages of the Yezidi pantheon. The tradition of identifying Sultan Yezid with the Umayyad caliph Yazid ibn Mu'awiya perhaps serves as evidence that the name might have been bestowed initially by their Shi'a neighbors, as a pejorative nickname, on the people whose ancestor they took to be the man responsible for the tragedy of Kerbela.¹

PART III

Yezidi society (*Ezdixāna*) is divided into three castes: Sheikhs (Arab., *šayx*, "elder"), Pirs (Pers., *pir*; "elder"), and Mirids (laymen, Arab., *murīd*, "postulant"). Each Yezidi is supposed to have spiritual masters from the first two clerical castes. The importance of the Sheikhi family in the Yezidi community can hardly be overestimated, taking into consideration the great number of functions that the Sheikhs have in the lives of their spiritual disciples. Not a single significant event can occur in the life of a Yezidi family without the presence and active participation of their spiritual guides—be it a wedding, a funeral, or anything else. The Sheikh's house has in fact taken on the function of a temple, as a result of the Yezidi tradition of prohibiting the building of temples anywhere outside Lalesh (northern Iraq), the religious center and main goal of pilgrimage for the Yezidis; a fact for which the Yezidis offer the emotional explanation that "there can be only one Mecca."²

In the absence of any spiritual institution regulating orthodoxy and religious practice, the Sheikhi families have for centuries remained as the true custodians of the Yezidi traditions and way of life. One can imagine what great services the Yezidi Sheikhs have rendered to their communities, especially those outside Iraq, where even in a friendly milieu (for example, in Armenia), they are nevertheless exiled from their spiritual centers and isolated from contact with their compatriots abroad.

In Armenia, where the Yezidi communities have existed for more than two centuries, there are absolutely no Yezidi shrines or pilgrimage places, in sharp contrast to the Yezidi-inhabited regions of Iraq and Turkey, where such sites abound.³ Thus the entire responsibility for preserving *Šarfadin*, as the Yezidis call their religion,⁴ and its culture, as well as all spiritual and traditional values that collectively determine the identity of this group, has fallen mainly on the families of the Sheikhs.

The problem is compounded by the strict prohibition of literacy among the Yezidis, which was in force almost up until the beginning of the twentieth century. The Yezidis, in trying to distance themselves from Islam and to prevent their people from gaining access to the Muslim sacred books, did not adopt the Arabic script as being associated with Islam, nor did they adopt

any other writing system in order to preserve their scriptures, which thus consigned them to illiteracy and obscurity (ARAKELOVA 1999-2000). Hence in a community where literacy had for centuries been considered a great sin, the need to preserve doctrine and culture obviously necessitated the development of folklore and oral traditions, the principal practitioners of which have been the sheikhs.

In this way the *qawls* and *beyts* (verses) that accompany almost all the rites, which until recently had been handed down only through oral transmission, still remain the basic canon, occasionally designated by some scholars as the Yezidi equivalent of the Bible or the Koran (KREYENBROEK 1999). The Yezidis possess two so-called holy books: *Kitēbā jalwa* ("The Book of Revelation") and *Mashaf-e raš* ("The Black Book"); both are rather late, artificial scriptures, containing less information about Yezidism as a religion than the older folk tradition (for details, see ASATRIAN and POLADIAN 1989).

PART IV

As an illustration of the above-mentioned situation, I offer an example from my own field materials and observations of the Yezidi communities in southern Russia. Most of these communities are incomplete, i.e., they consist of the Mirid families only. Thus, the community, deprived of their spiritual leaders, has had to either invite them for each occasion from their native lands (in this case, from Armenia), which is often impossible because of financial difficulties, or perform the pertinent rite without them, which is essentially absurd, as the officiants must be Sheikhs. Besides, the multi-ethnic nature of Russian society, as well as the necessity of rapid integration into a new milieu, necessitates assimilation—a danger they had never faced before in Armenia, where they had lived their traditional life as cattle breeders. Being a significant constituent of Armenian society (the second largest minority, after the Russians, during the Soviet period, and the largest minority at present), the Yezidis have always been well adapted but never integrated. They have not had to choose between survival and integration, or even assimilation. That is probably why the Yezidis of Armenia were able to preserve their characteristics and unique features so well.

In Russia the spiritual and psychological dissonance experienced by people in new communities force them to find new ways of preserving their own values, and the most dramatic aspect of the situation is that their attempts in most cases entail practices absolutely forbidden by their own traditions. The Yezidi community of the town of Apsheronk (in the Krasnodar region of Russia) built a temple,⁵ a small copy of the one located in Lalesh. Without doubt this first generation of emigrants, who have lived in Russia less than ten years, is aware of the prohibition of building temples outside

Lalesh. Such “flexibility” and readiness to break dogma is easily explained by the desire to have any symbol of their belief. The attempt to replace spiritual guidance with a non-functioning temple (for even if the community had Sheikhs, these would have no right to serve in the temple, as there is a special hierarchy of temple clerics in Lalesh)—i.e., to replace the essence with the cosmetic—is precisely the intuitive search for a way to preserve their identity, as I have discussed above. This “artificial” strategy cannot of course be regarded as a real solution, but rather as a means to support the religious spirit of the community until it acquires its spiritual leaders again.

The indisputable authority and the prestige of the Yezidi Sheikhs have still been evident at different levels, in accordance with the socio-economic realities in which the communities exist. In modern Armenia, the harsh economic and unstable political situation have forced people to look for spiritual support, and, of course, it raises the role of the spiritual castes to a much higher level. Moreover, the healing gift traditionally attributed to the Sheikhi families sometimes attracts people even from other faiths.

Each family specializes in treating certain ailments. No Sheikh will consent to attempt a cure unless the symptoms demonstrate that they are of “his patient”; if not, the sick person is referred to the proper family (*ōjāx*). For example, *Ōjāxā Sōra-Sōrān*, the family of Sora-Soran (“Dark Purple”) deals with diseases of the joints or rheumatism; *Ōjāxā Gīsne brūskē* (“Plow of Lightning”) with inner organs; *Ōjāxā Mālā jin tayār* (“Flying Jinn”) with mental illnesses, and so on.

Sheikh Hasan-e Mamud (Hasan Tamoyan)⁶ is a descendant of the *Ōjāxā Dara Mraza* (“Tree of Desires”) family. The representatives of this family are well known as healers of migraines, diseases of the breast (in particular, mastitis), navel, coccyx, and feet. Most of the healing secrets were shared with Hasan by his mother, although there were certain rites that she had no right to teach her son directly. It was considered a sin, for example, to show him the procedures used in healing breast disease. In such situations they asked Hasan’s wife, Gulperi, to be a go-between in passing on the knowledge. Generally, a daughter-in-law becomes a full and competent member of the clan and, together with her husband, she is expected to head the whole family in the future.

It is considered a great sin to describe the rites to strangers and especially to the adherents of a different faith, which often denies the researcher access to any information. One must gain the trust and respect of the Yezidis in order to have a chance of conducting field research among them, taking into consideration their zealous efforts to shroud in mystery everything to do with their religious rites. That is why this kind of information presents special interest.

In September 1999 I had an opportunity at Armavir (Armenia) to witness and record the ritual performed by the Dara Mraza Sheikhs in treating a disease, still undocumented in modern medical texts, called *hivē lēxistīya* (lit., “moonstroke”). The ailment, according to the informant, is connected with the lunar phases, and the sick person is called *hīva* (“moon”). Small children, especially those under three years old, are often susceptible to this disease. The main symptoms are an unpleasant odor emanating from the child, and especially from his or her mouth, and children stricken with this disease sleep with their eyes half-open. The child becomes progressively weaker, wasting away from day to day. He or she has vomiting and diarrhea, sometimes fever too, and is constantly thirsty.

Such a child is brought to the Dara Mraza Sheikh’s house on Wednesday, a holy day for the Yezidis. (According to the Yezidi tradition, Malak-e Tavus descended to Earth on the first Wednesday of April; also, on this day the Yezidis celebrate the New Year.) After a thorough examination, the head of the family and his wife start the healing ritual, though other members of the family and the children are also permitted to participate in some of the procedures.

The hosts kindle the stove and collect some ash on a tray. Then they dip a clove of garlic in the ash and put a cross on the forehead, cheeks, chin, abdomen, and back of the patient. Thereafter the child must not be kissed or even cuddled before the next bath, so that the ash stays on his or her body as long as possible. Then they take a coin and snip off a section of it, so that the remaining portion of the coin resembles a crescent. The Sheikh’s children can participate in the coin-cutting rite, which they do with great pleasure. Both parts of the coin are put in a pot with water, which the patient must drink through the next day. During the night, the pot must be under the bed (or cradle) of the patient. On the next day the rest of the water is poured into the bath where the patient is to be bathed. Afterwards the water may not be re-used for any purpose; it must be poured on the ground under a tree, where no one is permitted to step.

In the folk *Weltanschauung* of many peoples of the region, ash has an explicit connection with the world of demons, primarily as an important constituent of the landscape of Hell. As for garlic, it is a traditional apotropaic means, widespread in folk magic. Thus the process of dipping garlic into ash can be considered as a rite of exorcism. Drawing crosses on a person’s body with ash “purified” by garlic may be interpreted as an attempt to force evil spirits to leave the person in peace and stay away. The cross is an obvious Christian element. As for the coin’s parts, the crescent is pierced and worn as a pendant around the patient’s neck for three years, “until the moon is completely changed,” as the Sheikh says, while the small section is folded

into a piece of new white cloth and sewn into the patient's pillow.

After everything is completed properly, the patient must visit the Sheikh's house from time to time, on Wednesdays, so that the healer may see him or her through the process of recovery.

PART V

In conclusion, I present another interesting case from my field materials, concerning a Yezidi woman who is famous throughout Armenia for her healing and fortune-telling gifts. The following story is a good illustration of a kind of transformation of the Yezidi mentality in the Christian milieu, giving birth to new eclectic elements.

Gulistan, a fifty-year-old woman living in Haxtanak, a village near Yerevan, discovered her abilities after a serious illness coupled with a series of dreams in which Jesus Christ asked her to release him from beneath the ground. For several years, while the same dream was repeated, she could not fathom its meaning, until one day she found out that her house was built on the ruins of an Armenian church, destroyed during the first years of Soviet power. During that period the lots of land were given to peasants who had agreed to join a collective farm. Having extracted from the ground (at different corners of their yard) seven stones that had once been parts of the church's foundations, she felt that she could heal and tell fortunes.

However, Gulistan sincerely confesses that she does not enjoy telling fortunes, realizing that it is forbidden from a religious point of view. At the same time, she admits that it is her gift of fortune-telling that mainly attracts people to her house. She heals diseases caused, in her own words, by the evil eye and curses. Gulistan never takes money for her services; one may voluntarily leave as much as one wants in a special place under the cross.

The most interesting thing about all this is that, although she considers herself a faithful follower of the Yezidi doctrine, Gulistan believes in Christ, convinced of his power by her own experience. In her healing practice Gulistan uses Christian icons and prayers, performing the rites only in Armenian. But despite her satisfaction with her lot, Gulistan still realizes that she can indulge in such a syncretic practice only because she is from a Mirid family. That is why this phenomenon is tolerated by other Yezidis, including Sheikhi families. It is important to note that one should never regard a Yezidi Sheikh as a fortune-teller, because for each Sheikhi family their specific gift of healing is a tradition. Nor should he be compared to a folk healer, whose gift is usually not hereditary, but may originate at any point in his life.

NOTES

A version of this article was presented as a paper at the Third Biennial Conference on Iranian Studies, Bethesda, Maryland, May 25–28, 2000.

1. See ASATRIAN 1999-2000, 92. In the year 61 AH / 680 CE, an army sent by the caliph Yazid ibn Mu'āwiya killed al-Husayn ibn 'Alī, the second imam of the Shi'a, and his followers at Kerbela (Karbālā) in Iraq.

2. From field materials collected by the author among the Yezidis of Armenia.

3. For details on the Yezidi shrines, see KREYENBROEK 1995, 69–91.

4. Named for Šaraf ad-din (or Šeref ed-din), the son of Sheikh Hasan, who is said to have introduced the Jiwane tribe of Sinjar to the Yezidi faith. His status in Sinjar is comparable to that of Sheikh 'Adi (see KREYENBROEK 1995, 33–34, 106).

5. From field materials collected by the author among the Yezidi communities of the Krasnodar region.

6. Sheikh Hasan Tamoyan (Hasan-e Mamud), 42 years old, is one of my main informants.

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