

The following informative and enjoyable description of a visit to Lalish/Lalesh was received in response to the previous bulletin. Not too far from Erbil, Lalesh is a very pleasant and interesting destination point. About a 2-hour non-stop drive.

But along the way to Lalesh are a four other places worth visiting:

- Mar Matti (St. Matthew) Monastery, a massive complex high up on the side of Maqlub mountain that dates from the 4th century.
- On the other side in the plain down below is where Greek-Macedonian Alexander (the Great) defeated Persian King Darius III in 331 BC in the Battle of Gaugamela. The battle is well-portrayed in the film '*Alexander*' with Colin Farrell and Angelina Jolie.
- Before reaching Lalesh there are impressive Assyrian rock sculptures at Khennis at the headwaters of a long canal
- that ran over the oldest aqueduct in the world at Jerwan constructed by Sennecherib in 700 BC.

All in a day.

An academic paper on the Yezidis is also below.

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photos: Inside the Yezidi Temple

<http://www.thedailybeast.com/galleries/2014/08/21/inside-the-yezidi-temple-photos.html>

## Fighting Back With Faith: Inside the Yezidis' Iraqi Temple

By Michael Luongo

On a visit to the Yezidi Temple Complex in Lalish, Kurdistan, in northern Iraq, a colorful, happy day of worship unfolds, for a group whose faith and way of life is grievously threatened.

It was a religion I had never heard of before 2007. During visits to Kurdistan in the north of Iraq that year, I met members of the religious sect the Yezidis (sometimes spelled Yazidis). Never having heard of the religion before, there was nothing obvious to physically distinguish them from among anyone else in the region, nothing to say, "This is a Yezidi, this is what marks him as different from other Kurds, whether Sunni or Shia Muslim, or Christian."

While it was clear that they were discriminated against, other Kurds explained many people thought they were devil worshippers. Sometimes, this would come up in a joking manner. One time in a banquet hall the workers, all clearly friends, were introducing me to the one who was the Yezidi, calling him the devil worshipper among them as he broke into nervous laughter.

Of course, now with the current ISIS or Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (or Sham) crisis, in which Sunni extremists have conquered parts of Syria and northern Iraq, the Yezidis have come to the attention of the world.

The Yezidis trapped on Mount Sinjar, many dying of starvation until airdrops aided them, escaping ISIS, are among the main reasons the United States has sent troops back into Iraq. The ISIS forces have killed hundreds of Yezidis, along with Shias and Christians—really, anyone who does not want to follow their strict form of Islam.

Yet while the Yezidis are in the news because of this intense persecution and suffering, the horror of the images and the stories doesn't really explain much about who the Yezidi people are. During a third visit to the country last year, while staying in a Yezidi-run hotel in Ain Kawa, a suburb of Erbil, the capital of the Kurdish Autonomous Region in the north of Iraq, I began to develop an understanding of the Yezidi people.

Ain Kawa is known as a Christian district, with Ziggurat-style churches dotting the horizon. It serves as home base for the United States Consulate and other foreign offices. With its countless bars and liquor shops, it's the location of choice for most foreigners living in Erbil, famed for wild nightlife, a counter to what you might think living in Iraq entails.

The owners of the hotel where I stayed were Yezidis, eager to talk about their religion. The chatty desk worker said I would never be able to guess his religion, saying he wasn't Muslim and he wasn't Christian. "Well, you certainly can't be Jewish, what are you?" I responded. It turned out almost the entire staff of the hotel was made of Yezidis.

The Yezidi religion predates Islam and Christianity, but incorporates certain components of Abrahamic faith. These are combined with aspects of the Zoroastrian religion, the ancient Persian faith still practiced in the region.

The staff showed me websites full of images from religious ceremonies, and most of all, the main Yezidi Temple Complex, in Lalish, a city about four hours from Erbil near the Kurdish border with Arab Iraq, close to Mosul. Even then, before the ISIS crisis, Mosul was a dangerous, disputed city with an insurgency movement.

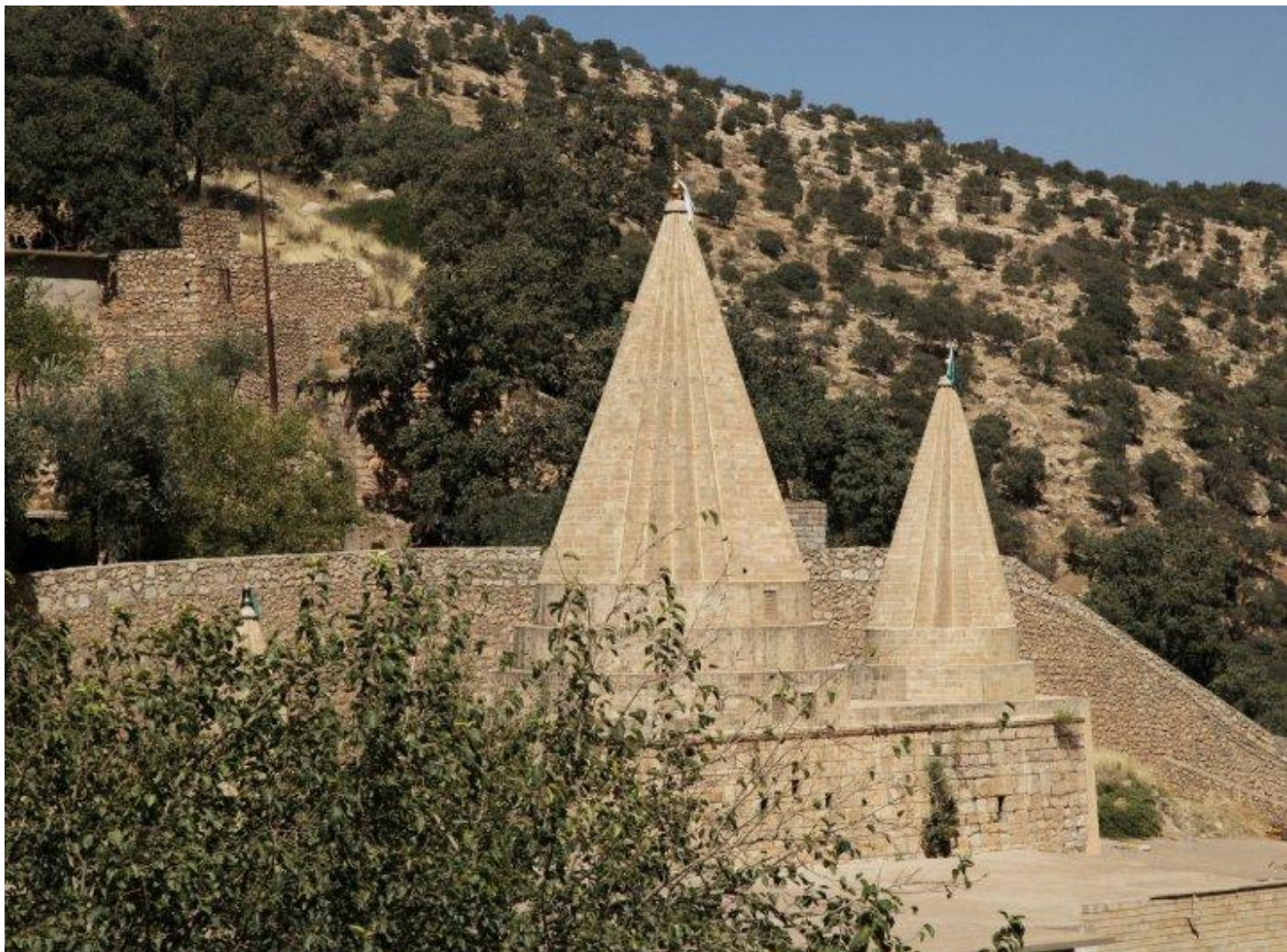
I had seen pictures before of the Temple, with its conical towers set on top of a mountain. Its remote setting added to the exotic allure of its being the principal pilgrimage site for such an obscure religion.

The chance to visit Lalish came on an early September Friday. The most important day of the week for Yezidis from a religious perspective is a Wednesday. Friday, however, the most important day in Islam, runs a close second, and we would be assured of seeing many families at the temple.

When we arrived into Lalish, arches with symbols representing the sun indicated we were nearing the temple complex. It was a busy day, and my driver and translator Sardar parked the car far from the complex's main entrance. We made our way up through a forested, hillside road, as hundreds of families said hello along the way, some curiously taking photos of me, a rare foreign visitor.

I was formally greeted by Luqman Mahmood, a Yezidi journalist who with his moustache, prominent cheekbones and slightly tousled hair resembled a Middle East version of Tom Selleck. Another community leader and writer, Khader Khalat, was with him. The two are behind the website [www.lalishduhok.com](http://www.lalishduhok.com), known as the Lalish Media Network, a news site which also has a tourism component, though it is only in Kurdish and Arabic. In English, a useful site about the religion is [www.yeziditruth.org](http://www.yeziditruth.org).

All the people around me were barefoot. Khader explained that it was tradition to take one's shoes off when wandering the temple complex. "You will be at one with nature and you will feel if the land is hot or cold," he said.



The main temple at Lalish. Photo by Michael Luongo

As a foreigner, I was welcome to break the rules and keep at least my socks on, but I wanted to experience Lalish as fully as possible. It was not easy to walk barefoot over rocky soil, many of the hard trodden patches searing in the direct light of the sun.

As we made our way to the main temple, Luqman and Khader spoke more about the Yezidi religion. They said that while it falls within the Abrahamic traditions, it predates all of its three main branches, and also incorporates Zoroastrian beliefs. The Yezidi calendar begins nearly a thousand years before the Hebrew one, making it among the world's oldest continuing faiths.

The religion had gone through three main stages in its development:

1—before believing in God, they believed in nature and natural incidents

2—believing in God, after Abraham died. God is referred to as “Hoda,” which literally means he who makes himself

3 —period of Sheik Adi ibn Musafir, the main prophet of Yezidis. He had formalized the Yezidi religion into what it is today, and had settled Lalish, making it the center of the Yezidi religion. He died in the 12th century and his tomb is in the Lalish temple complex.

Luqman and Khader said that within the religion there are also seven angels and a belief in reincarnation. Among the angels is Tawuse Melek, who is often called the peacock angel. In explaining him, some Yezidis likened him to Lucifer, whom the main Abrahamic traditions regard as the devil.

However, Yezidis believe this angel did not fall from grace, and it is this difference in belief which has led to their persecution and accusations of devil worship. God is also the bringer of both good and bad to the world, another difference Luqman and Khader point out when compared to other Abrahamic faiths. Yet anyone familiar with the God of the Old Testament and the Torah who delights in constant destruction of humanity can see something akin in the Yezidi treatment of Him.

The two explained that Yezidism is a closed religion, meaning they do not accept converts. One can also not leave the religion. This led to one of the most horrific recent chapters in Yezidi history in 2007. When 17-year-old Du’a Khalil Aswad fell in love with a Muslim boy and was thought to have converted to Islam, she was murdered in a public “honor killing,” which was recorded on cellphones.

The incident is thought to have sparked a series of attacks against Yezidis, including the hijacking of a textile workers bus in Mosul in which more than 20 Yezidis were executed.

Luqman explained that since the instability created after the U.S. invasion of 2003, over 1,000 Yezidis had been murdered. This was even before the current ISIS crisis in which many more have perished.

There are nearly a million followers of the Yezidi religion throughout the world, with many now in Europe, primarily Germany. The Yezidis consider themselves ethnically Kurdish, the majority in areas surrounding Mosul, within Arab Iraq. It is these who are the most at risk, according to Luqman, but make up the vast majority of visitors at the temple the day of my visit. Indeed, the Yezidis who lived near Mosul are the ones who had to flee ISIS onto Sinjar mountain and are now taking refuge in Kurdistan.

The temple complex is a series of courtyards, some lined with walls and stairs leading to other structures. Near the entrance to one of the structures, I caught the attention of a multi-generational family, grandparents, parents and their children within a low alcove.

I was allowed to sit with them outside of an entry way on a padded stone bench, but I didn’t myself enter. All of them were barefoot, their clothing, especially that of the women and children, elaborate, the mother festooned in a silver beaded dress, her older daughters in red dresses with black vests, the youngest ones in white layered frilly concoctions, resembling Catholic communion dresses.

Luqman explained that there was a baptism for a newborn baby. The boys of the family were a complete contrast, running around in jeans and sweatpants, as if they had no concern for the special sacredness of the site. The bearded family patriarch was dressed in a radiant white dishdasha, or long robe, his head covered in a white ghutra or veil-like

covering, a round, black igal holding it in place, a typically formal outfit for men in the Middle East.

Set on a mountaintop, the complex is layered, with platforms, walls, and other areas where people line up to watch those entering. The atmosphere was festive that day. Families were sitting picnic-style, meals of lamb and rice on large plates, scooped up with the flat bread nan. Candy and ice cream vendors waited near access points where the pathways meet. There was even a cotton candy machine that children gather around.

Luqman and Khader took me into a tightening series of courtyards. One was overgrown with trees, where young men rested in the shade. At its center was a monument, perhaps just over six feet high. It was shaped like the tops of parts of the temples around me: a conical pyramid-like roof, over a round base, at first reminding me of stone housetops in Italy's Puglia region. But these cones are faceted. Luqman explained that they represented the sun shining down on Earth, facets mimicking rays of light.

There was an entryway near here to another courtyard, itself a prelude to the heart of the main temple. The courtyard was sunken, shaded by trees. From a balcony on one side, a few people looked down on us as we entered, waving hello. Older men and women made their way through the courtyard, stopping at what seemed to be sacred sites throughout: a grated opening in the ground, an open-air altar with niches for candles, blackened wax slickening its opening.

Finally, we came to the ornately carved temple portal itself, adorned with an image of a snake to its side. A turban-covered old man sat just inside the entryway, a small bowl for collecting change against the door jam. The snake was particularly kissed and touched as worshippers entered.

"You enter with your left foot first," Luqman said, something which actually took some getting used to as I moved through various thresholds within the complex.

Through this entryway, we came into a broad long room, really a series of light-filled archways. The left side was draped in sheets of colorful fabric, most of it red and green. People tie the corners of it as a way of marking that they were here.

One of the most important rooms in the temple is the shrine of Sheik Adi ibn Musafir. He was a practitioner of Sufism, a particularly liberal, mystical form of Islam, and a sometime hermit who had moved to the Kurdish region seeking isolation from Baghdad during the 1100s, a time when that city was among the largest in the world. Yezidis believe Sheik Adi was the possible reincarnation of Tawuse Melek.

He formalized the religion, creating the priest system and closing the religion to outsiders so that there could be no new converts. His tomb is festooned with fabric, wrapped in green damask, balls of satiny fabric thrown over its top, sitting within a square, dark gray marble-lined room, topped with an enormous dome.

The ceiling was in bad shape, tiles coming off of it, and Khader talked of a restoration project under way. Though neither Khader nor Luqman knew the date of the room, the dome looks Ottoman era, perhaps from the 1600s, even if the temple complex's origins must be from the 12th century, when the prophet had died.

In another chamber beyond this one, the atmosphere changed completely. It was dark, dank, the walls charcoal-colored, the feeling of a cave. The room was full of dozens of urns,



each full of olive oil, used in some of the Yezidi rituals. A man stood at attention here to greet us, a giant ladle in hand as he moved the precious Mediterranean liquid between larger into smaller vessels.

Here Luqman also pointed out a curious structure, a mound rising on the side of the wall in front of all the urns. Yezidis play a sort of basketball game here, balling cloth up and tossing it onto the top of the mound.

In another chamber there was a hole inside of a ledge we put our hands through. It's nothing at all like it, but it made me think of Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, and its silver-encased hole where visitors line up to touch where legend states Jesus was born.

We headed out soon after, back into the sunlight-dappled gardens of the temple complex, to join worshippers picnicking. There's even a special visitor among them: Sheik Shamu, a political candidate for office doing a pressing of the hands.

"There are people who come to write wrong things," Luqman said of some journalists. "We don't want extra than the truth. Only the truth. We just want them to talk the truth, only the reality." In Kurdistan, Luqman said he felt safe, but that for others living in and around Mosul, the creeping feeling that everything can be taken away from them hovers at every moment, with land seizures, bombings of Yezidi villages, and discrimination in employment.

During the visit, it was hard to get a sense of why the Yezidis are persecuted. One simply sees families enjoying the day out, making sure a foreigner feels welcome. Would you necessarily get a sense of the thousands of years of persecution Jews have suffered from a few hours in a synagogue, or an understanding of the violence that tore Europe apart during the Reformation seeing a ceremony inside of a Protestant church?

My visit could not make me fully understand all the aspects of the Yezidi religion but it was clear the practitioners felt misunderstood and persecuted within their Middle East homeland. If this was not in high relief while I was in Iraq seeing the Lalish temple complex, the current ISIS crisis has made that abundantly so. It's been nothing short of a genocide for them.

Speaking by phone in recent days, Luqman said there are still Yezidis trapped on the Sinjar mountain, and that babies have died in their mothers' arms from lack of milk to drink. He also said more than 450 families were at the temple on a recent Friday, continuing to practice their faith in spite of all the adversity.

The tragedy is that it is only with the murderous attacks on the adherents of this unusual religion that the Western world has come to know the Yezidis, the people who call this beautiful mountaintop temple complex in Lalish their spiritual home.

Leaving the complex that September Friday, Luqman told me, "Tourists and foreigners are welcome anytime. Yezidi people love when foreigners come here. We want you to take the message of us to your home."

With tourism in Kurdistan still something for the adventurous, very few foreigners will ever likely see the remote temple complex here in Lalish. However, letting the world know of the reality of life for those who follow this obscure religion may be one of the key ways to ensure it survives its current, appalling crisis.

<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/yazidis-i-general-1>

## YAZIDIS i. GENERAL

The Yazidis are a heterodox Kurdish religious minority living predominantly in northern Iraq, Syria, and southeast Turkey, with well-established communities in the Caucasus and a growing European diaspora.

YAZIDIS, a heterodox Kurdish religious minority living predominantly in northern Iraq, Syria, and southeast Turkey, with well-established communities in the Caucasus and a growing European diaspora. Anecdotal evidence of the existence of Yazidi groups in northwestern Persia has not yet been proven. There are probably some 200,000-300,000 Yazidis worldwide.

### i. GENERAL

The Yazidis have long been the object of fascination among orientalists, largely due to their erroneous description by outsiders as 'devil-worshippers' (see below). The literature devoted to their religion is disproportionately large, considering how few they are in number by comparison with the large majority of Kurdish Muslims. Their name for themselves is usually, *zidi*, *zidi*, or, in some areas, *D sini* (the last, strictly speaking a tribal name). Some scholars have derived the name Yazidi from Old Iranian *yazata* (divine being), though the current consensus among Western academics is a derivation from Yazid b. Mo'wiya, revered by the Yazidis as an incarnation of the divine figure Sultan *zi*. (Kreyenbroek, 1995, p. 3.)

Origins. The Yazidis' cultural practices are observably Kurdish, and almost all speak Kurmanji (Northern Kurdish), with the exception of the villages of Ba šiqā and Ba z n in northern Iraq, where Arabic is spoken. Kurmanji is the language of almost all the orally transmitted religious traditions of the Yazidis. Religious origins are somewhat complex. The religion of the Yazidis is a highly syncretistic one: Sufi influence and imagery can be seen in their religious vocabulary, especially in the terminology of their esoteric literature, but much of the mythology is non-Islamic, and their cosmogonies apparently have many points in common with those of ancient Iranian religions. Early writers attempted to describe Yazidi origins, broadly speaking, in terms of 'Islam', or 'Iranian,' or sometimes even 'pagan' religions; however, publications since the 1990s have shown such an approach to be oversimplistic. The origin of the Yazidi religion is now usually seen by scholars as a complex process of syncretism, whereby the belief-system and practices of a local faith had a profound influence on the religiosity of adherents of the Adawiyya sufi order living in the

Kurdish mountains, and caused it to deviate from Islamic norms relatively soon after the death of its founder, Shaikh Adi b. Mosfer.

History and Development. Adi b. Mosfer, who was of Omayyad descent, was born c. 1075 CE in the Bekáa valley. After studying in Baghdad under Abu'l-ayr amm d al-Dabb s and alongside Abd-al-Q dir al-Jil ni, he settled in the valley of L leš (some thirty-six miles north-east of Mosul) in the early 12th century. Groups who venerated Yazid b. Mo wiya and the Omayyads—already known as Yazidis—had existed for some time in the area; beliefs and practices which were apparently part of an ancient Iranian religion were also retained by some of the local tribes. Shaikh Adi himself, a figure of undoubted orthodoxy, enjoyed widespread influence; he died in 1162 and his tomb at L leš is a focal point of Yazidi pilgrimage. His name, pronounced di or even H di, passed into Yazidi oral tradition, though full knowledge of his identity was lost within the community. Yazidism grew during the period of Atabeg and Mongol rule. Only two generations later, led by asan b. Adi, the community had grown large and powerful enough to come into open conflict with the Atabeg of Mosul, who killed asan in 1246. At about the same point, it seems, the community began to incur the opprobrium of more orthodox Muslims for its excessive veneration of both Shaikh Adi and Yazid b. Mo wiya. During the fourteenth century, important Kurdish tribes whose sphere of influence stretched well into what is now Turkey (including, for a period, the rulers of the principality of Jazira) are cited in historical sources as Yazidi (Guest, p. 45). Muslim leaders clearly perceived Yazidis as a threat; a significant battle took place in 1414, during which Shaikh Adi's tomb was razed. After the battle of Uder n (1514), Yazidi influence at first remained considerable; a Yazidi was appointed 'emir of the Kurds' by the Ottomans, and, in the 1530s, Yazidi emirs ruled the province of Sor n for a time. The current family of Yazidi mirs (emirs), claiming Omayyad origins, replaced the descendants of Shaikh asan in the sixteenth or seventeenth century. However, as time passed, conversions to Islam became increasingly common and Yazidi power declined. By the end of the Ottoman Empire many important tribes and confederations still had sizeable Yazidi sections, and the dynasty of Yazidi mirs remained dominant within a limited geographical area, but Yazidis had suffered enormously from religious persecution. Until 1849, when provision for their protection was made under Ottoman law, they had not had the status of 'People of the Book' (Guest, pp. 103-107; Edmonds, pp. 59-60). In the 19th century complex social and political changes, many related to the Tanzimat reforms, produced an environment of increasing religious intolerance culminating in large-scale massacres of the Christian minorities. The Yazidis, also targets of militant Sunnism, suffered at the hands of Kurdish tribal leaders such as Mo ammed Beg of Rowanduz (1832) and Bedir Khan Beg (1840s ), as well as Ottoman officials, such as Omar Wahbi Pasha (1893; Guest, pp. 96-97, 134-9; Edmonds, p. 60). There was some co-operation between the minorities; Yazidis of Mount Senj r sheltered Armenians during the massacres of 1915-16. During the nineteenth



and early twentieth century many Yazidis fled to Georgia and Armenia. In the second half of the twentieth century, most of Turkey's Yazidis, who still lived in fear of religious persecution, emigrated to Germany, and in the 1990s many of Iraq's Yazidi intelligentsia arrived there, where they play an active role in diaspora affairs, maintaining contact with co-religionists in Iraq and the Caucasus (Guest, pp. 193-203, Ackermann, forthcoming).

Geographical distribution and identity. The Yazidi heartland is in Northern Iraq. A substantial community known for its conservatism lives on Mount Sinjar some 80km west of Mosul on the border with Syria. A collection of farming villages and small towns lies in the Sinjar area, in the foothills north-east of Mosul; this area is adjacent to the shrine of Lalish and contains the home of the mir and the settlements of Ba'sha and Bazna, home of the qawwals, reciters of sacred texts. In the 20th century both Sinjari and Sinjar communities struggled for religious dominance. In Syria there are also two main groupings, in the Jazira and the Kurd Dikar areas (the latter including the Sem'an and Afrin communities). However, these are much smaller, probably totaling only about 15,000. In Turkey some Yazidis still live in the villages of the Sur Abdin, southeast of Diyarbakir, remnants of a much more widespread community. The Transcaucasian communities, which once numbered some 60,000, have also declined due to economic and political factors, though accurate statistics remain unavailable. During the 1990s the population in Georgia decreased from some 30,000 to under 5,000, though numbers in Armenia have apparently remained more constant. Diaspora communities have increased correspondingly; most importantly, some 40,000 Yazidis now live in Germany, mainly in the Western provinces of Niedersachsen and Nordrhein-Westfalen. Most are from Turkey, with arrivals during the 1990s from Iraq including some influential figures. This profile may change as the situation in Iraq evolves following the fall of the Saddam regime. A much smaller community exists in the Netherlands. Other groups of Yazidis, in Belgium, Denmark, Sweden, France, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and in the United States, Canada, and Australia, are extremely small, and probably total well under 5,000.

Many attempts to define the Yazidis' ethnic identity (notably the policies of the Ba'athist government in Iraq, which designated them as Arabs) have been politically motivated. Apart from a few Arabic-speaking clans, Yazidi communities speak Kurmanji (Northern Kurdish) as their first language, and their cultural practices are Kurdish. Most Yazidis claim Kurdish identity; in Iraq, this view has had the support of the government in the Kurdistan Autonomous Region since 1991. In the Caucasus however, particularly in Armenia, to be 'Kurdish' is often popularly associated with an Islamic (and thus pro-Azeri) identity. Many Caucasian Yazidis, therefore, claim to belong to a separate ethnic group, though the politicization of the Kurdish question in Turkey and the influence of the PKK have reportedly caused a number in Armenia to redefine themselves as Kurds. In the diaspora, the Yazidis' status as

Kurds is not debated so much as their religious origin. In nationalist discourse, the Yazidi religion is seen as the 'original' Kurdish faith, a view that distinguishes the Kurds from Arabs and Turks. It is sometimes inaccurately presented as a form of Zoroastrianism or, spuriously, as a 'Cult of Angels.' In the Caucasus, a hypothesis of Babylonian origins is favored. Such different interpretations of the Yazidis' origins are closely interlinked with expressions of identity, and tend to be explicable in terms of the prevailing political climate.

Religious belief and practice. Contemporary Yazidism is a religion of orthopraxy. Practice, in terms of careful adherence to rules governing all aspects of life, is more important than the role of scriptural text, dogma and professions of personal belief. Two key and interrelated features of Yazidism are: a) a preoccupation with religious purity and b) a belief in metempsychosis. The first of these is expressed in the system of caste, the food laws, the traditional preferences for living in Yazidi communities, and the variety of taboos governing many aspects of life. The second is crucial; Yazidis traditionally believe that the Seven Holy Beings (see below) are periodically reincarnated in human form, called a *šá*. Not only does this reinforce the caste system, as the members of the dominant religious castes are the descendants of the most recent manifestations of the Holy Beings in Shaikh Adi and his companions, but it also provides a mechanism for syncretism, as figures from other traditions can be said to be earlier manifestations of the *šá*. A belief in the reincarnation of lesser Yazidi souls also exists; like the *Ahl-e aqq*, the Yazidis use the metaphor of a change of garment to describe the process, which they call *kir s gehorrin*, 'changing the shirt.' Alongside this, Yazidi mythology also includes descriptions of heaven and hell, and other traditions attempting to reconcile these ideas with the belief-system of reincarnation.

In the Yazidi worldview, God created the world, which is now in the care of a Heptad of seven Holy Beings, often known as 'Angels' or *haft serr* (the Seven Mysteries.) Pre-eminent among these is *šus- Malak* or *Malak šus*, the Peacock Angel, who is equated with Satan by outsiders. Most Yazidis find this identification highly offensive; however, it is clear that *Malak šus* is an ambiguous figure. The *Ketáb Jelwa* 'Book of Illumination' which claims to be the words of *Malak šus*, and which presumably represents Yazidi belief (see below), states that he allocates responsibilities, blessings and misfortunes as he sees fit and that it is not for the race of Adam to question him. The Yazidi taboo against the word *Šáin*, and on words containing *š* and *t/* that might (to their ears) recall it, may indicate some perceived connection between this figure and *Malak T šus*. The reasons for the connection remain unclear. Although some Sufi traditions have presented Satan as a redeemed or holy figure, Shaikh Adi b. Mosfer was apparently orthodox on the matter. However, pre-Islamic Zoroastrian tradition indicates some link between Ahriman and the peacock, and this ambiguity may predate Islam. Yazidi accounts of creation, which have much in common with those of the *Ahl-e aqq* state that the world created by God was at first 'a pearl'. It

remained in this very small and enclosed state for some time (often a magic number such as forty or forty thousand years) before being remade in its current state; during this period the Heptad were called into existence, God made a covenant with them and entrusted the world to them. It has been suggested, on the evidence of pre-Zoroastrian Iranian cosmogony and its similarity to Yazidi cosmogonies, that if the Yazidis' ancestors venerated a benign demiurge who set the world (in its current state) in motion, the role of this figure may have become ambiguous when they came into contact with Zoroastrians, whose cosmogony was essentially similar, but whose demiurge was Ahriman, who polluted the world. Thus Yazidism would be, not a form of Zoroastrianism, but a religion possessing an Iranian belief-system akin to it.

Besides Malak ʿus, members of the Heptad (the Seven), who were called into existence by God at the beginning of all things, include Shaikh ʿdi, his companion Shaikh ʿasan, and a group known as the 'four Mysteries', Šamsadin, Fa radin, Saj din and N ʿerdin. These latter, according to oral tradition, were the sons of an ʿzdin Mir, whom Shaikh ʿdi met at L ʿleš. All these figures are eponyms of clans of ʿd ni shaikhs (see below); in Yazidi accounts of the cosmogony they tend to have other names, and they are also identified in other incarnations, such as ʿasan al-B ʿri as an incarnation of Shaikh ʿasan. Not all listings of the Seven are identical; sometimes, for instance, Shaikh ʿdi himself is identified with Malak ʿus, and Shaikh Obakr is added.

The ʿ and other holy beings are the focus of frequent veneration. The Heptad, under the names of the families of Shaikh ʿdi and his companions, are objects of devotion, but so also are numerous lesser figures, also usually eponyms of clans of shaikhs or pirs (see below), who are requested for help on practical matters. Shaikh Mand, for instance, is believed to cure snakebites, and his descendants may handle snakes safely; the family of Pir Jarw n has power over scorpions. A female figure, ʿtuna Fa ra, is associated with help in childbirth. Help from such beings may be sought by consultation with their descendants, or by veneration of a sacred site associated with them—occasionally a tomb, but more often a shrine consisting of a room with a spire, a small votive altar, a sacred tree, or a pool or cave. Many people who know little of the higher-status sacred texts make offerings at such places. Some of these cults appear to be very localized, but others are respected by members of other religions, and Yazidis also solicit help from local saints associated with other religions, especially Christianity (Kreyenbroek, 1995, pp. 91-123, 145-68; Drower, pp. 24-29, 51-60).

Pilgrimage. The holiest Yazidi site is the valley of L ʿleš, site of the tomb of Shaikh ʿdi. A sacred microcosm of the world, as it were, it contains not only many shrines dedicated to the ʿ, but a number of other landmarks corresponding to other sites or symbols of

significance in other faiths, including *pirr sel t* ( *er* Bridge) and a mountain called Mt. Araf t. The two sacred springs are called Zamzam and *K niy spi* 'The White Spring'. The former rises in a cave below the sanctuary of Shaikh *di*, the heart of the holy place. Water from the springs is mixed with earth from the holy valley to make *bar t*, little molded balls that are taken away and treated with reverence; they play a part in some rites of passage such as marriage and funerary rites. If possible, Yazidis make at least one pilgrimage to *L leš* during their lifetime, and those living in the region try to attend at least once a year for the autumn "Feast of the Assembly" (see below). As for *L leš*, pilgrimages to lesser sites may also be undertaken, to seek intercession, in gratitude for prayers answered, or as a vow.

Prayer. Formalized prayer is largely a matter of personal preference and is not obligatory. The practice of praying facing the rising, noonday, and setting sun which is described by travelers seems not to have been universal and is now seen as an ideal rather than a norm. Such prayer should be accompanied by certain gestures, including kissing the rounded neck (*geriv n*) of the sacred shirt (*ker s*). Those who wear the girdle—the black *resta* for certain dignitaries, the white *šutik* for other Yazidis—say a prayer when putting it on. Prayers have almost exclusively been transmitted orally; their texts have themes in common but vary in details.

Festivals: (see FESTIVALS IV. YAZIDI AND AHL-E AQQ) Apart from individual rites of passage, such as marriage, baptism, circumcision, and death, Yazidis observe a number of communal festivals, some more widespread than others. The Yazidi New Year falls in Spring (somewhat later than Nowruz). There is some lamentation by women in the cemeteries, to the accompaniment of the music of the *qaww Is* (see below), but the festival is generally characterized by joyous events: the music of *dahol* (drum) and *zorn* (shawm), communal dancing and meals, the decorating of eggs. Similarly the village *ewaf* (Ar. *aw f*), a festival held in the spring in honor of the patron of the local shrine, has secular music, dance and meals in addition to the performance of sacred music. Another important festival is the *wusgerr n* (circulation of the peacock) where *qaww Is* and other religious dignitaries visit Yazidi villages, bringing the *senj q*, sacred images representing the peacock and associated with *Malak us*. These are venerated, taxes are collected from the pious, sermons are preached, and holy water distributed. The greatest festival of the year for ordinary Yazidis is the *Ježn Jam iya* (Feast of the Assembly) at *L leš*, a seven-day occasion. A focus of widespread pilgrimage, this is an important time for social contact and affirmation of identity. The religious center of the event is the belief in an annual gathering of the Heptad in the holy place at this time; rituals practiced include the sacrifice of a bull at the shrine of Shaikh *Šams*, the washing of the 'bier of Shaikh *di*,' the practice of *sam* (see below). Other festivals are more likely to be kept by the few than the many. Religious

leaders observe forty-day fasts in summer and winter; a three-day winter fast culminating in the celebration of the birth of the Yazidis is kept more widely. The *Malakani*, a tribe originating in the border areas of Turkey and Syria, keep a winter festival called *Bizmiya*. For some Yazidis at least, the *Malakani* have their feast-days. Counterparts to certain Islamic feasts, including *Id al-Adha*, *Id al-Fitr*, and *Laylat al-Bara* are also observed by some.

**Purity and Taboos.** The Yazidis' concern with religious purity, and their reluctance to mix elements perceived to be incompatible, is shown not only in their caste system, but also in various taboos affecting everyday life. Some of these, such as those on exogamy or on insulting or offending men of religion, are widely respected. Others, such as the prohibition of eating lettuce or wearing the color blue, are often ignored when men of religion are not present. Others still are less widely known and may be localized. The purity of the four elements, Earth, Air, Fire, and Water, is protected by a number of taboos—against spitting on earth, water, or fire, for instance. These may reflect ancient Iranian preoccupations, as apparently do the taboos concerning bodily refuse, hair, and menstrual blood. Too much contact with non-Yazidis is also polluting; in the past Yazidis avoided military service which would have led them to live among Muslims, and were forbidden to share such items as cups or razors with outsiders. The mixing with others brought about by formal education may be a major reason behind the well-known Yazidi taboo on learning to read and write. In the past, only Shaikhs of the *Malakani* lineage group had the right to do so. Certain words are the subject of taboos, such as those dealing with cursing or stoning, or those which are felt to sound like the name *Šaijan*, whose utterance is an unforgivable insult to *Malakani* us, obliging any Yazidi who heard it (in the past at any rate) to slay the speaker. Auditory resemblance may lie behind the taboo against eating lettuce, whose name resembles Kurdish pronunciations of *Šaijan*. The taboo against eating pork appears to be a custom which follows Islam rather than a specifically Yazidi edict. Prohibitions are also attested, in certain areas at least, against fish, cockerel, gazelle, and various vegetables including okra, cauliflower, and pumpkin.

A widespread myth about the Yazidis' origin which gives them a distinctive ancestry expresses their feelings of difference from other races. Adam and Eve quarreled about which of them provided the creative element in the begetting of children. Each stored their seed in a jar which was then sealed. When Eve's was opened it was full of insects and other unpleasant creatures, but inside Adam's jar was a beautiful boy-child. This lovely child, known as *Šahed b. Jarr* (*Šahed*, son of *Jar*) grew up to marry a *hour* and became the ancestor of the Yazidis.

**Social and religious groups.** The Yazidis divide themselves into three endogamous major castes, with religious orders also playing an important role. Most Yazidis belong to

the morid (layman; literally 'disciple']) group, which is endogamous, but, within the group, marriage is not restricted. Every morid must have a shaikhand a pir; the lineage of these is determined by the morid's own heredity. The Shaikhs are divided into three endogamous lineage groups, the Šams ni, d ni and Q t ni, the latter of which also shares its ancestry with the family of the mir. The pirs are divided into four main groups, and forty clans, most of whom may intermarry. Both groups receive alms from their morids. Tithes paid to the Shaikh are more substantial; however, the difference between the two groups lies not in the nature of their religious tasks, but rather in ancestry (the shaikhs apparently associated with non-Kurdish companions or relations of Shaikh di, and the pirs with his Kurdish companions). At puberty, each morid should also choose a 'brother' or 'sister of the Hereafter', ber y or wešk a erat , normally a Shaikh, who performs certain important rituals at transitional points such as marriage and death.

The Qaww ls or reciters constitute a different class, and come from two clans, the Kurmanji-speaking Dimli and the Arabic-speaking Tazhi, settled in the villages of Ba šiqa and Be z n , in the Šai an area. They specialize in the playing of religious music on sacred instruments, the daf (frame-drum) and šeb b (flute), and in the recital of the sacred hymns or qawls. They also carry out the awusgerr n; these were severely curtailed in the twentieth century when crossing international frontiers became more difficult; the Transcaucasian communities in particular were effectively cut off from the Yazidi religious centers.

There are also religious 'orders' whose members may come from different castes.

The Faqirs become members of their order by an initiation which was once open to all, but as time has passed have become in effect a hereditary group, with initiation undergone almost exclusively by members of faqir families. They are expected to lead a life of piety and abstinence, by fasting, refraining from drinking and smoking, avoiding any violent behavior. Their clothes, especially their black woolen erqa or tunic that recalls that of Shaikh di, are considered to be sacred, and their persons must not be harmed. Some are very learned in religious lore. The Ko aks are a small non-hereditary group charged with outdoor labor for Shaikh di, such as cutting wood and drawing water for the shrine. Some in the past have been clairvoyants, miracle workers and interpreters of dreams; a few have acquired political influence in this way, such as the nineteenth-century Ko ak Mirz of Mount Senj r, who predicted the fall of Islam.

There are a number of important offices in the Yazidi hierarchy. The Mir (prince) is both temporal and spiritual head of the community; his person is sacred, and in theory all Yazidis owe him spiritual allegiance. In practice the temporal influence of the family, based in B dr in Šai n, has declined since the late 18th century, though it remains a substantial landowner, and is active in Kurdish politics. Members of this family are linked to the Q t ni



Shaikhs. The Prince, along with other dignitaries, is a member of the Yazidi Majlesi Ro ni 'Religious Council'. The B b Shaikh (Father Shaikh), is the leader of the Shaikhs and must come from the Šams ni branch. He must lead a pious life; regarded by many as the spiritual leader of the Yazidis, he supervises the Ko aks and many of the ceremonies at L leš cannot take place without his presence. The functions of the Piš-im m (Foremost Imam) are less clear; a representative of the d ni Shaikhs, he leads certain rituals. The B b wuš, (Father Guardian), guardian of the shrine at L leš, leads a life of piety and celibacy. He lives there permanently and has authority over what happens there; he is assisted by the feqrayy t, (celibate 'nuns') who are unmarried or widowed and also care for the sanctuaries. These are very few in number. Successive families of faqirs living there on a temporary basis also look after the fabric of the shrine and take care of guests.

The institution of kar fat, whereby a relationship of sponsorship is created with a man on whose knees a boy is circumcised, exists among Yazidis as for other groups. This often creates close relationships with other communities; since the family of the child may not intermarry with that of the kariv for seven generations, the kariv himself is usually not a Yazidi, and the institution serves to make useful alliances with neighbors. Yazidis in Northern Iraq may also have a mirabbi (literally 'teacher'), chosen from any caste by rules of heredity.

Textual traditions. Most Yazidi religious texts have been passed on exclusively by oral tradition, and many features characteristic of oral literature can be seen in them. It is now generally accepted that the manuscripts of the Yazidi Sacred Books, the Mas af Reš and Ket b Jelwa, published in 1911 and 1913, were 'forgeries' in the sense that they were written by non-Yazidis in response to Western travelers' and scholars' interest in the Yazidi religion, amid a general environment of trading in ancient manuscripts. However, the material within these manuscripts is consistent with the contents of the Yazidi oral traditions, and to that extent they may be considered authentic. Nevertheless, it seems that written texts with the titles Mas ef Reš and Ket b Jelwa were known among the Yazidis long before this date, though they have remained unseen even by the vast majority of the community. The latter title is a shortened form of the title of a work by asan b. Adi, but it currently seems to denote manuscripts used for divination, which are still kept by certain d ni Shaikhs. Other written texts were known; mešur, kept by Pirs, giving accounts of lineages and attached morid families, and kaškul, which included prayers, religious history and some Qawls. These collections may also have included some of the Arabic odes (qa idas) attributed to Shaikh di which are used in the community. However, there is no evidence that the large corpus of sacred texts once existed in the form of a book.

The core religious texts are the qawls, hymns in Kurmanji which are often dedicated to a deity and which make frequent allusions to events and persons not explained in the texts. These have, for most of their history, been orally transmitted, though there is some evidence that not all were orally composed. Knowledge and recitation of the qawls has traditionally been the province of the Qawwāl, though their training school no longer exists in their home villages. Few members of the Qawwāl families now learn either sacred texts or sacred instruments and those with the widest knowledge of the Qawls and their interpretation are now from other classes. In 1979 two young Yazidi intellectuals published a number of the qawls, provoking considerable controversy within the community. (A few had been published in the Soviet Union the previous year, but were presented as part of a folklore anthology and largely ignored). By the beginning of the 21st century more had been published in Armenia and a research program in Germany was almost complete. With the assent of the community, this latter aimed to collect and transcribe the many unpublished qawls for use in academic research and the education of Yazidi children, especially in the diaspora. Yazidism is thus being transformed into a scriptural religion.

The qawls, with their allusions and obscurities, are not easy to understand, and a tradition of interpretation has grown up. Each qawl has a *kir k* or 'story' associated with it, which explains its context. Some of these *kir ks* show signs of having been developed long after the qawl. In general the qawls and the knowledge within them are the province of men of religion, but on certain occasions, a *mo'abat* is given. This is a sermon usually consisting of narrative interspersed with couplets from a qawl, which explains the sacred text, and is aimed at a general audience.

Other types of sacred text exist: the *bayt* which is difficult to distinguish from the qawl in formal terms, but unlike the secular Kurdish *bayt* is used to accompany religious events such as *wusgerîn*; the *qa'ida* in Kurdish, often a praise-poem for a holy man which does not formally correspond to the Arabic or Persian *qa'ida*; *du'ā* and *diroz*, prayers for private and public use. There are seven forms of *Yazidisam*, consisting of music and the singing of hymns, usually a combination of qawl and *qa'ida*; a solemn procession is also often part of these.

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