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Yezidism in Europe

Different Generations Speak about their Religion

GÖTTINGER ORIENTFORSCHUNGEN

IRANICA

Neue Folge 5

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2009

Harrassowitz Verlag · Wiesbaden

ISSN 0340-6334
ISBN 978-3-447-06060-8

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Preface

The Yezidis are a religious minority group originating in the Middle East, whose shared language is Kurmanji Kurdish. Yezidis now live in Northern Iraq, Eastern Turkey, Syria, Armenia, Georgia, and as Diaspora communities in Western Europe, mainly in Germany, and in Russia, Ukraine and other states that used to be part of the Soviet Union. The Yezidis do not identify with Islam, regarding themselves as members of a separate religion. Many of their neighbours erroneously believe that they worship the devil, and therefore regard them with suspicion. As a result, the Yezidis in the homelands have often been targets of violence and discrimination, particularly from Moslems, and have generally kept themselves apart from other communities.

A number of Yezidi tribes from Turkey sought refuge from such persecutions in the Christian lands of the Caucasus, in present-day Armenia and Georgia, in the course of the 19th and early 20th centuries. As they continued to regard Eastern Anatolia as their true homeland, retained their communal identity, and did not seek to assimilate to the local culture, these groups could be said to constitute the first Yezidi Diaspora. In the course of the latter half of the 20th century, Yezidis from Turkey came to Western Europe as part of the large groups of immigrant workers that were recruited as 'guest workers'. Later, in the early 1980s, political and social conditions in Turkey became so difficult for Yezidis that, exceptionally, they were accepted by the German government as asylum seekers as a group, rather than individually. All this resulted in a massive exodus from Turkey, followed later by asylum seekers from Iraq and Syria, so that a relatively high percentage of all Yezidis world-wide now form a Yezidi Diaspora community there. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, with all this entailed for the economies of some of the former Soviet Republics, many Yezidis emigrated from Armenia and Georgia, mainly to Russia and the Ukraine, thus creating a second-stage Diaspora which looks to Armenia and Georgia for guidance in all religious matters, but still reveres *Roma Resh* ('Black Rome', i.e. Turkey) as the country of origin.

These developments naturally raise questions as to the way the Yezidi religion, or rather the perceptions and practices of its followers, adapted to the realities of the present age in the Diaspora communities in Germany and the former Soviet Union. In view of the very frequent contacts between Yezidis in the Diaspora and communities in the homelands, such developments can be expected to affect perceptions and attitudes in the countries of origin also. The Diaspora Yezidis, well-defined, relatively small groups, offer good opportunities for research, and have been – or are in the process of being – studied from the point of view of a range of social sciences. This adds considerably to our knowledge of Diaspora communities generally, and

the Yezidis in particular. However, few research projects so far have focussed on the question of what happens to a community's perceptions of its religion when the surrounding, dominant culture is very different indeed from that of the homeland. A new concept in the dominant culture of what a 'religion' is, has been shown to affect many people's understanding of their own faith (Kreyenbroek 2001). Community discourse on matters of religion, in short, tends to show deep and fundamental changes under the influence of a new, dominant culture.

With a view to answering such questions a research project was initiated, based at the Georg-August University of Göttingen, to conduct qualitative interviews with Yezidis living outside the homelands, aiming to study and compare the discourse on religion of two groups: those whose views of the world and the religion were predominantly informed by the culture of the homelands, and those who were mainly socialised in the Diaspora or absorbed a predominantly Western world-view after their arrival. These groups correspond to some extent to what might be called the older and younger generations of Diaspora Yezidis. Our original intention was to concentrate on Yezidis living in Germany. The arrival in Göttingen of Dr Khanna Omarkhali (Usoyan), a Yezidi Pir from Armenia who lived most of her life in Sankt Petersburg, offered us an opportunity of comparing developments in Germany with those of another Diaspora community.

The method adopted was that of qualitative, largely non-directive interviews, based on a list of questions intended to guide the interviewer, rather than to determine the interview. Informants were asked to respond to questions at length, briefly, or not at all, depending on their interest in the question and willingness to answer it. Apart from making for a more relaxed atmosphere, this procedure was intended to reduce the risk of obtaining random answers to questions that have little meaning for the informant. The questions were intended to elicit information concerning the world-view of both groups; their understanding of the concept of 'religion'; and their discourse on questions of religion. An important aim of the project was to discover differences and similarities between these groups in their perception of the Yezidi religion. The opportunity to compare such findings, however tentatively, with those from similar research among the Yezidi Diaspora in the former Soviet Union considerably broadened the scope of the work. It should be stressed that the project focused on community discourse, i.e. the things that can be said among Yezidis in more or less public situations, rather than on wholly private perceptions.

Interviews were conducted with a total of 121 Yezidis (from Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Armenia and Georgia) living in Germany, and 24 people from the Diaspora in the former Soviet Union. Numbers of men and women were not too dissimilar (69 females, 76 males); age groups (ranging from 15 to 83) and 'castes' were adequately represented. Levels of education ranged from illiterate to Ph.D. (see further below); social standing from unemployed to professional. It should be stressed that the material presented here is in no way statistically representative of the opinions of the Yezidi Diaspora communities. It can probably be claimed, however, that they reflect

a significant selection of the opinions voiced by Yezidis when discussing their religion in the public sphere.

A further remark on the character of the interviews may be in order. Kizilhan (2006: 39f) distinguishes two types of discourse that are typical of Kurdish society: ‘formal and representative’, avoiding certain frivolous topics (such as women and sexuality), and ‘unofficial’, which is used for gossip and rumour. To some extent this distinction could be said to correspond to the two strikingly different modes of speaking that are found in the interviews: informants either spoke primarily as representatives of community views and attitudes, or tended to express personal points of view. In a minority of cases a ‘formal’ tone was adopted at first, but abandoned in favour of a more personal one as the interview progressed. That community members themselves are aware of this distinction, and capable of referring to it, is shown by the following interchange between Ms Kartal and the informant SMS32:¹

I'd like to hear your personal opinion on this subject [marrying out], I don't want you to speak for the Yezidi community as a whole. Yezidis are often afraid to give their personal opinion.

SMS32: If I give you my personal opinion and say it should be accepted, then people will say, “By God, X the son of Sheikh Y has gone mad, he is giving people some very odd ideas.”

The striking difference in tone between Part I, containing interviews with Yezidis who were brought up in the homeland and mostly belong to the older generation, and Part II, which is mainly devoted to the opinions of those who were socialised in the Diaspora, obviously reflects the discrepancy between these two modes of speech: older people's tendency to speak for the community, and the informal, personal responses of the children of the Diaspora. It is possible, of course, that the personality of the interviewer also played a role. In order to minimise distortions of such a nature, the researchers predominantly interviewed people of similar backgrounds to their own: Dr Khalil Jindy Rashow, a middle aged, male Yezidi Sheikh from Iraq who enjoys considerable standing in the community, concentrated on the older generation; Ms Zekiye Kartal, a much younger Mirid originally from Turkey, on the ‘Diaspora generation’ in Germany; and Dr Khanna Omarkhali, a Pir from Armenia and Russia in her mid-twenties, on Yezidis in the former Soviet Union.

As the work aims to study community discourse on various topics related to Yezidism, rather than individuals' personal experiences of religion, selections from the interviews are arranged by topic. Although most informants stated they did not object to being named, it was felt that such a procedure, which might have unforeseen consequences in the future, was inappropriate, and speakers are indicated by their country of origin, gender, caste and age. The first letter indicates the country of origin: A = Armenia; G = Georgia; I = Iraq; S = Syria; T = Turkey. The next letter

1 See further below, p. 117.

refers to the speaker's gender (M = male; F = female). The third letter denotes the informant's caste or social group (S = Sheikh; Pi = Pir; Pism = Pismîr; Mi = Mirîd). AFPi28 thus stands for a 28-year-old female Pir from Armenia).

Although an indication as to further factors, such as length of residence in the Diaspora, educational background, and social standing, might have been useful in some cases, to include these in the code would have made it too long. For the purpose of this non-statistical study, moreover, it was felt unnecessary to add a reference to educational background, as an informant's level of thought about religious themes (which, given the poor accessibility of schooling in many of the homelands seems more relevant than formal education) is generally reflected by the interviews themselves. The time spent in the Diaspora is indicated to some extent by the Section in which the information is given: Section I contains information that seems typical of 'traditional' Yezidism, while Section II aims to reflect the views of Yezidis who were socialised mainly in the Diaspora. In exceptional cases members of one group offered information that was so relevant for the other Section that their comments are included there.

The amount of material resulting from the interviews was too large to be included in the book in its entirety. Selections therefore had to be made. After we had familiarised ourselves thoroughly with the material, a list of relevant topics was drawn up and those passages which seemed most informative and illustrative of the discourse on each subject were selected. Responsibility for the selection of the material rests entirely with the present writer. Inevitably, such a process involves the need to make more or less arbitrary decisions, albeit on the basis of a comparison of all the available material, and of discussions with Yezidi colleagues.

Interviews were conducted in Kurdish, German or Russian, and were transcribed in the original language by the interviewers. Interviews in Russian, and some in Kurdish, were translated into English by Dr Omarkhali. German and most Kurdish texts were translated by P. G. Kreyenbroek.

In order to make the text more easily accessible to readers who are unfamiliar with Kurdish, Kurdish terms are transcribed in a way that resemble English spelling, using length-marks only when their omission could lead to serious mispronunciations, and sh (as in 'shoal'); ch ('church'); j ('journal'); zh ('Brezhnev'); kh ('loch), and gh (voiced counterpart of kh), instead of Kurdish *ş, ç, c, j,* and *x*. The aspiration of consonants which occurs in some Kurdish dialects is ignored, as is initial *'ayn* in transcriptions of Kurdish; in other positions the latter sound is represented by *'*. Accepted spellings, such as those of Turkish place-names, have been retained. The transition between passages is marked by three dots between the texts.

The author is very much indebted to the Deutsche Forschungs Gemeinschaft for funding the research project, and allowing us to continue beyond the period that was originally foreseen. Special thanks are due to my three collaborators, Dr Khalil Jindy Rashow, Ms Zekiye Kartal, and Dr Khanna Omarkhali. Without their enormous commitment to the project, this book could not have been written. Professor

Christine Allison, Professor Andreas Ackermann and Dr Sarah Stewart kindly read several Chapters and offered valuable suggestions and much-needed encouragement. Dr Ilhan Kizilhan's contribution to our understanding of Yezidi society has been invaluable. Warm thanks are also due to Ms Arezu Tawafi, who was responsible for of the lay-out of the work, and to Mr Ilyas Isa, Dr Mamo Osman, Pir Khidir Silêman, Mr Luqman Turgut and Ms Parwin Mahmoudweyssi for their help in various matters.

June 2009

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