

Main Article

Yezidis: An Ethno-Religious Group in Turkey

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Abstract *The most distinguishing feature of the Yezidi religion is its ethno-religious character. For Yezidi belief and its practices and symbols have heavily influenced the Yezidi culture and shaped its organizational structures. Its exclusive character, confining the privilege of being a Yezidi only to those born of Yezidi parents, further supports the conception of ethno-religion. This article draws upon the author's fieldwork among the Yezidis of Viranşehir (Şanlıurfa), Mardin and Batman in Turkey.*

Key words: Yezidism, Yezidi, Kurd, ethno-religion, Malak Tawus (Peacock Angel), Angel

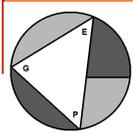
Introduction

One may consider the question of who the Yezidis are. Many Kurdish researchers argue that The Yezidis are non-Muslim Kurds (e.g. Tori 2000; Mihotoli 1992; Bender 2000; Şanak 1997). Or are they Turks? Some of Turkish researchers argue that there are shamanistic items in Yezidi faith and therefore Yezidis are a Turkish group (e.g. Başbuğ 1987). Or do they belong to an entirely different identity (i.e. community or group with an identifiable identity)? In this respect how can the Yezidis be defined?

It is generally considered that there are two basic approaches that are applied in defining ethnic identities. First of these is the emic perspective in which the group defines itself basically in terms of “who we are” or “what we are”. The important thing in this definition is the self-acceptance of the groups’ intention. The racial and language (linguistic) characteristics of the group do not play a determining role in this definition. The second perspective (definition) is an etic one which is based on the definition of the group by the understandings of the other groups (see Aydın 2003).

Definitions and names, which are provided by groups within themselves (*emic*) and perceptions by the others (*etic*), differ largely. While a person looking from an outside point of view takes the physical criteria as the basis, whereas a person from the inside takes the common grounds as a basis which the group members consider to be common among themselves (Somersan 2004: 23).

I have paid attention to conclude the analyses of the collected data with the *emic* approach by considering how groups perceives themselves. In this respect it is necessary to divide the Yezidis into two groups in terms of considering their social and religious perspectives. The first one is the intellectual group who have read written sources about their religious beliefs and other social problems, who have generally received higher education and are living abroad. This group could narrate the negativities which they see in the religious structure



due to manipulation. Thus, their personal opinions are overriding especially in the field of belief. The second group consists of the ordinary followers who are illiterate, who are mainly living in Turkey, and the verbal tradition predominates in the religious beliefs of this group. Although the author has tried to benefit from the knowledge of both of these groups in this article, the second group forms a better sample considering the purity of the information given in general.

Fieldwork

This article is based on the fieldwork I have carried out at different times between the years 1999-2010. I have started my research in 1999 in Beşiri district of the province of Batman located in the south-eastern region of Turkey. The fieldwork has been expanded by including the settlements located in the provinces of Mardin and Şanlıurfa in light of the former references.

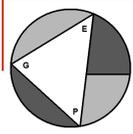
I have paid strict attention to find references in order to be accepted in the research place before going to that place where the research would be carried out. Among these references, I arranged a preliminary meeting with Veysi Bulut who is one of the notables of the Yezidis who are living in the district of Beşiri. Beside this meeting, I arranged a preliminary research in the region and these formed the background of the fieldwork.

The Yezidis coming from abroad in recent years and Yezidis who preferred to remain in their own lands, have formed suitable sample groups for a comparative research. For this reason, all efforts have been made to talk with any Yezidi of any age that could be reached during the research. Unfortunately, many of the Yezidi villages have been evacuated over time. Many of these Yezidi people have immigrated to the Western countries. For this reason, an intense and rapid dissolution is observed in the traditions and beliefs of the Yezidi people.

The Yezidi people whom I have met with, just mainly gave idealized information about the traditions and beliefs of these people which belong to the past. Many of the traditions are tried to be kept by group of Yezidis living in Turkey. Thus the information given in the article must be evaluated by considering these changes.

I have paid attention to use a number of data collection methods at the same time for making a grounded research. I have benefited from one to one interviews and life stories beside the participant observation method. I have made every effort not to ask limiting questions to the people during the interviews, and I have preferred the dialogical approach which provides the interaction within the group, in the form of mutual interviews.

I have observed that, while there was a physical oppression on the Yezidi people in the past, now there is a more purely psychological pressure being applied on them. The Yezidi people whom I wanted to talk with were previously shy and distrustful towards me. However, a calm ambience could be created after a mutual conversation.



On this subject, a Yezidi follower stated that previously other visitors had visited their villages and talked with them and upon this, the security forces of the state had arrived at their villages and interrogated them about these visitors with questions like 'why have these visitors come to the village' and 'why have the security forces not been informed of the situation' and even detained them.

This distrust among the Yezidis towards outside visitors can thus be traced back to this psychological oppression as well as the physical attacks held in the past—and has been a tool for adhesion which keeps their identity or identities alive. Consequently the Yezidi people are keeping their sorrows alive in order for the following generations to learn about these sorrows. In this way, they can protect their group identities despite the existing psychological oppression.

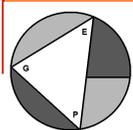
Yezidi Territory and Etymology of the Name “Yezidi”

Yezidi people live in a wide geography stretching from Syria to Iraq and from Turkey to the Caucasus. Besides, it is known that a great number of Yezidis have immigrated to Western European countries, mainly to Germany. In accordance with the estimations carried out in recent years (Suvari 2002: 26), it has been recorded that between 200,000 (Khenchelaoui 1999: 20) and 750,000 Yezidi people are living in the Near East and Middle East, mainly in Iraq and Syria as well as Turkey, the Caucasus and Russia. However the main part of the Yezidi population is located in the lands of Iraq.

There are different explanations about the source of the Yezidi name. A widely opinion tells that the name originates from the name “İzid” which means Angel in the Avesta language. It is also stated that the name originates from the name “Yezdan” which means God in the Avesta language. In this respect *İzidi* and *Yezdani* mean the believer of angel in the former and the believer of God in the latter (Suvari 2002: 30-32). The name “Yezdan” forms part of all introductory sentences of the Yezidi prayers: “In the name of pure, merciful and generous Yezdan...” (Khenchelaoui 1999: 20).

On the other hand, there are some researchers who claim that the name Yezidi originates from the Caliph Yezid Bin Muaviye (Turan 1993: 3; Fiğlalı 1908: 221). The Yezidi people call themselves *İzidi* or *Ezidi* in Turkey. The names *İzidi* and *Ezidi* have the meanings of “the ones created by God, the ones who worship God.”

Nevertheless, the Yezidi people are called by different names in different countries. For example “Dasnai”¹ in Syria, in Turkey, the Yezidi people especially located within and around the province of Batman are mentioned with the name “Khaldi” (Suvari 2002: 73). Thus “Among the Armenians they are known by the name of Thondrakians² and Policheans (Politians), or alternatively Arevortis, a word that means ‘worshippers of the Sun’ in Armenian” (Khenchelaoui 1999: 21). However, generally all Muslim people use the name Yezidi which has comes to mean “believers of Satan”.

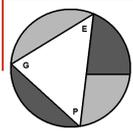


Emergence of the Yezidi belief

The historical background of the Yezidian belief is demonstrated by the appearance of the Adeviye order. Bulut (2000: 58), explains the formation of the Adeviye order and the emergence of the Yezidi belief as follows:

When the Sheik³, deceased in the year 1162, was buried in his temple, his temple transformed into a sepulcher. The nephew of Sheik, Abu'l Bereket bin Sahr was selected as his successor. The followers of the order were mentioned as the "Adavians" under his leadership; the order was named as "Adavi" and also "Sohbeti" in the later periods. His son Adiy bin Abu'l Bereket (II. Adiy) was selected as his successor. Muzafferdin Kökburi, the commander of Saladin of the Ayyubids who reigned over the territories of Syria and Egypt and who was well known for his strikes against the crusaders, became a follower of Sheik II. Adiy and also married to his sister. Hasan bin Adiy born in 1195, who ascended the throne of his religious father, became a religious leader who regulated the Adavian Order located in Laleş. This Sheik, who formed the basis of today's Yezidi belief, also entered into religious discussions. It is told that the second holy book of the Yezidis "Mushaf-ı Reş" (The Black Book) was written by the Sheik Hasan. The integration of the Adavi belief with the ancient beliefs and spreading of this belief among the wide Kurdish tribes located in the mountains of the province of Hakkari, were also seen during this period. The ruler of the Mosul Nureddin Lulu was afraid from the religious and political force of the Sheik Hasan who got many followers from Kurdish origin soldiers of the Saladin of the Ayyubids and thus arrested the Sheik in 1246 and murdered him in a dungeon; also massacred his followers and damaged the Laleş Sepulcher. All tribes and societies affected from the Mongolian invasion, entered into the religious conflicts at the end of the 13th century. The new Yezidi Sheik Şerafeddin Muhammed, got his advantage of the situation and marched forward to the provinces of Malatya, Harput (Elazığ) and Erzincan with the help of his warrior followers from the Hakkari region. The Sheik got into battle with the Mongolians and was defeated and murdered in Kemah. Zeyneddin Yusuf who got the authority of his murdered father, opened convents in Damascus and Cairo and increased his followers. The Yezidi people benefited from the lack of authority in 13th and 14th centuries; and they spread among the tribes located in the regions of Mosul, Hakkari, Laleş, Amediye, Bahdinan (Botan River), Cizre, Nusaybin, Tur Abidin (Mardin), Diyarbakır, Van, and Urmiye. The date when the Adavian order which was named as Sohbeti in the 15th century, was transformed into the today's Yezidi belief is not exactly known. The Muslim historian Maqrizi, tells about a vacant period of 200 years. The Yezidi belief took the current form most probably in the 16th century.

Roger Lescot (2001: 18) who also puts forward similar opinions, explains that the sermons of Sheik Adiy directed the action towards mysticism between the years 1130 and 1160 AD and Adiy formed an order composed of a great number of people. But this order was divided into two groups after a period and the first group which settled in Syria and Egypt was eliminated



after a short time and the other group which remained in the Sincar region forgot the Sunni principles and formed the first core of the Yezidi society (Lescot 2001: 18).

Lescot also claims that after this first stage of the Yezidi period, the belief became a new religion during the reign of Hasan ibn Adiy Şemseddin and states that during the reign of Şemseddin who came to power after his father Şakir Ebul Bereket who was the nephew of Sheik Adiy, the followers got extremely adhered to their own Sheik at the level of defiance and the Sheik ignored this. The ruler of Mosul was disturbed by the situation and sent an army against Hasan ibn Adiy Şemseddin and caught the Sheik and murdered him. But this attack and similar attacks made the Addavian religion more valuable which was then to be protected with weapons; this heterodox cult of Islam then withdrew, went underground, and thus became a new religion (see also Arakelova 2004; 2010).

The Concept of God and the Angel belief among Yezidis

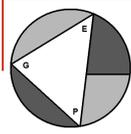
The concept of God in the Yezidi belief is complicated and difficult to understand. There is a religious hierarchy composed of seven angels, in which the *Malak Tawus* (Peacock Angel) is located on top.⁴ These angels are positioned as secondary gods or semi-gods under the leadership of the Malak Tawus. There is a certain and abstract concept of God in Yezidi belief which is named *Khuda*. However the Khuda is in the position of a passive God who left all responsibilities of the earthworks (earthly tasks and creations) to the Malak Tawus.

This Khuda belief locates the Yezidi religion among the monotheistic religions. However the religion is also in the form of a polytheistic religion due to the facts that Khuda distributed his authorities to seven angels, especially to the Malak Tawus, and that the mentioned angels are seen as semi-gods and Malak Tawus is authorized with a divine power and strength. As a matter of fact, the angel concept and the duty partition between the angels in the monotheistic religions are limited with certain boundaries but the Yezidi belief is mainly based on the angel cult.

In this respect, as mentioned before, the Yezidi belief is a religion in which the boundaries between the Khuda and Malak Tawus becomes diffuse, indeed somewhat confusing. Thus it is better to position the Yezidi belief in a place between the monotheistic religions and the polytheistic ones.

Malak Tawus (Peacock Angel)

The Malak Tawus belief was mainly used as a justification by others for the attacks against the Yezidi belief and Yezidi people. Because, the Malak Tawus is thought to be the same creature as Satan, who is damned in the holy books of Muslim, Christian and Jewish religions. The facts that the names "Satan" and "Lucifer" are prohibited in the Yezidi belief, that Malak Tawus is the first angel created by God, that Malak Tawus did not grovel to Adam, that he made Adam eat the forbidden fruit, events which both take part in the semitic



religions and Yezidi belief, are put forward as evidence for the identification of Malak Tawus with Satan.

The Malak Tawus is so important in the Yezidi belief that the prayers are made in his name, and even its sculptures are toured by the Fakirs and Kavals ⁵ in Yezidi settlements and in certain periods of the year. The sculptures which are made in the name of Malak Tawus are called “Sencak” or “Sancak” and are in the shape of peacock or rooster (Turan 1993: 66).

There are many reasons for giving such importance to the Malak Tawus in Yezidi belief. The first and most important of these reasons is the given that God has left the responsibility of all earthworks and the responsibility of the other angels to him. The interpretation of the *Malak Azazil* (Malak Tawus), who is believed to be damned for not groveling to Adam and for making Adam eat the forbidden fruit in other religions, is far different in the Yezidi belief.

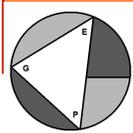
It is told in the Yezidi mythology that Azazil loves God so much and does not grovel to anyone apart from God as God is the only creator (Lescot 2001: 47). The Yezidi people respect this behavior of Malak Tawus and they think that God did not damn the Malak Tawus after the examination for trying him. The fact that Malak Tawus made Adam eat the forbidden fruit is interpreted as the will of God in Yezidi belief. The story is told in *Mushaf-ı Reş* (The Black Book) as follows:

Malak Tawus asked the Khuda “If Adam does not eat this apple, how his generation could reproduce?”. Khuda answered: “I have left the order and providence to your hands”. Then Malak Tawus came to Adam and asked “Did you eat this wheat?”. Adam replied: “No, Khuda has forbidden me”. Malak Tawus said: “Eat!, it would be better for you”. Adam ate this fruit and his stomach grew.

Another reason why the Yezidi people respect the Malak Tawus is the event in which Malak Tawus extinguished the fires of hell with his tears. Malak Tawus who threw himself upon Khuda was sent to hell and stayed there for seven thousand years. He regretted his behavior against God and cried a lot; seven big cubes became full of his tears and these tears extinguished the fires of hell (Turan 1993: 61).

The Yezidi people whom I had conversation with during the field research, also insists that the Malak Tawus is not the same creature as Satan. A Yezidi follower explained that the Malak Tawus is one of the assistants of Ahura Mazda in Zoroastrianism and supports his claim that the peacock figure also forms part of the Zoroastrianism belief. In addition to this, Malak Tawus is certainly not seen as a God. He is only the assistant of Khuda and the one who establishes the relationship between the people and Khuda and the most important angel who has an executive power only to the extent allowed by Khuda.

A Yezidi follower explains the following about the position of the Malak Tawus:



“The great Khuda is independent in our belief, he does not deal with the earthworks; Malak Tawus deals with these works instead of him. The humans can not become prophets in our belief, because the humans have weaknesses; only the angels who were created in magnificent ways can be prophets. Malak Tawus is the biggest and leader of these angels. The fact that Malak Tawus is not the same phenomenon as Satan can be easily understood if you think that believing in God is difficult and even impossible in such a geography where the Muslim religion and Christian religion are mainly dominant.”

When this follower was asked why the words Satan and similar names and expressions are prohibited in the *Mushaf-ı Reş*, he stated that this is related to the hatred against the bad and villainy, and added that:

“This situation is not related with the Malak Tawus. Malak Tawus is not a Satan but an execution force. But Satan is a concept which is related to villainy and the creator of bad actions. This exists in Ahriman in Zoroastrianism and reached from that day till today. The fact that we refrain from pronouncing his name and the reaction we show is based on this historical background.”

Another Yezidi follower made a similar explanation and told that:

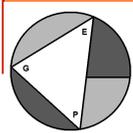
“We are the descendants of our ancestors who refused the villainy thousands of years ago and absorbed the dependence to Khuda, mentioned with special names such as Khuda and Yezdan, who orders goodness and made this belief their life style and we are the successors of the people who escaped from Ahriman, the source of villainy at the time; how could we be now the believers of Satan, the source of bad action after five thousand years.”

In this respect, the Azazil is believed to be damned and punished by God in other religions; though he were to be forgiven by God after his repentance as his punishment was not endless and he became the most important assistant of God and the guidance of goodness, a beautiful creature in the shape of a peacock.

Mushaf-ı Reş and Kitab El-Cilve

The Yezidi people have two written sources, the names of which are *Mushaf-ı Reş* (The Black Book) and *Kitab el-Cilve*. The “Kitab el-Cilve” contains the addressing of the holy God to his souls (Turan 1993: 72). Kitab el-Cilve is a small book; the whole of the book is composed of eight pages, and 109 lines and also composed of five sections (Tori 2000: 134).

The “Mushaf-ı Reş” (The Black Book) is bigger in size. The original book of Kurdish origin is in the form of a bundle which is composed of 152 lines and written with an encoded style (Turan 1993: 53). The book was named “Mushaf-ı Reş”, referring to the event telling that God landed on the *Kara Dağ* (Black Mountain) which forms part of this book (Semenow 1931: 53).



The creation of the universe, angels and Adam and Eve; the arrival of Sheik Adiy to Laleş and the story of Malak Tawus and the Flood as well as the issues such as food culture, new year and marriage and information about some of the earthworks (earthly tasks and creations) and the divine orders, are given in the Mushaf-ı Reş.

The issues that form part of both of the books and some of the religious orders were known verbally by the Yezidi people whom I had met with during the fieldwork. The Yezidi people whom I had conversation with, told me that they did not see any of these two books. The Yezidi people living in Turkey who did not read the mentioned texts, stated that they had learned this information from the Kavals and Fakirs who visited their villages in the past.

As a matter of fact, these books which belong to the Yezidi belief are claimed not to be revelation books as in the Semitic religions and some claims put forward state that these books are written by the Yezidi sheiks. "Pir Hıdır", who is a Yezidi of Iraq, stated that he had never seen these books and added that the Yezidi religion does not have any book during an interview in 2006. "Pir" added "our book is our hearth" and told that their religion is not based on writing but on oral discourse.

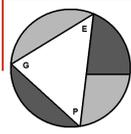
In addition to this, the claims that the Yezidi people wrote an ostensible book against the letter of the Abbasid caliph El-Memnun ordering them to "Either become Muslim or adopt a religion with a sacred book" and also in order to survive in a geography under the dominance of the Muslims ⁶ (Khenchelaoui 1999: 25) correspond to the statements of Pir Hıdır.

Furthermore, the statement "I tell without books" which takes part in section III of Kitab el-Cilve also proves that the mentioned books are not the books of revelations. However this situation does not mean that these books do not constitute a religion and are just written to deceive El Memnun; both books are the ones in which the Yezidi mythology is written down, and which is told verbally and the religious practices and orders are 'collected' by. In this respect, the books are important, indeed primarysources in which the Yezidi belief have been recorded, despite the fact that these are not considered books of revelations.

Yezidi Self History Approach

The Yezidi people whom I talked with, have given variable information and insights about their religious beliefs and religious practices. Still, I observed that they mainly agree on the effect of Zoroastrianism on the Yezidi belief. Muhammet Altan, 70 years old, living in the Kharabiya village in the district of Midyat within the province of Mardin, explained that their religion came from Zoroastrianism. When I asked Altan, who is illiterate, where had he learned this from, he answered that he learned this from the Kavals and Fakirs visiting their villages in the past.

In the same way, Veysi Bulut, living in Beşiri, has also told that the Yezidi belief came from the Zoroastrian religion and claims that in this respect, their religion is the oldest monotheistic religion. Bulut explains this process as follows:



“The origin of the Yezidi belief is Zoroastrianism. There were gods and goddesses taking orders from a great God in Babel and Ninova. This situation reached Zarahustra after the evolution during the historical process. There is the concept of one single God in Zoroastrianism. The King Nebuchadnezzar brought the Children of Israel to the lands of Babel. The Children of Israel met with the concept of a single God here and they returned to Palestine and formed the well known monotheistic religions.”⁷

Bulut hereby states that Zoroastrianism, which he sees as the first monotheistic religion, also effected other monotheistic religions apart from the Yezidi belief. Other Yezidi people like Bulut are seeing themselves as the main representatives or descendants of Zoroastrianism belief. For this reason, they claim that their history dates back to the Assyrian and then to Zoroastrianism and they insist that they are one of the oldest societies of Mesopotamia.

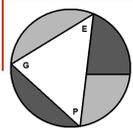
These explanations should made us realize that the effect of the Zoroastrianism on the Yezidi belief is highly remarkable indeed. Some of the Zoroastrian motives within the Yezidi belief also support this idea. The peacock figure, the dualist approach, believing the holiness of sun, the existence of clergy and such motives form part of both religions. However many ancient and new traditions which do not form part of Zoroastrianism, form part of the Yezidi Belief.

For example, traditions such as circumcision, pilgrimage, alms and baptism and various Sufistic order traditions are also as effective as Zoroastrian motives. Apart from these, the most important difference between the Yezidi religion and Zoroastrianism is that the latter is an expansionist religion while the former has no such claims and aims. Because, the Yezidi belief is only allowable for the ones born from a Yezidi mother and father.⁸

The traces of modern history are clearly seen in this belief of the Yezidi people. Because it is widely known that a remarkable rate of Yezidi population is living in the West. Thus, it is quite natural that Yezidis who are educated in the West are inspired from ideas there. The samples of the minimalist method seen in modern history writings can also be observed in the Yezidi history approach. The most remarkable of these samples are the tendency to base their religion on an ancient history and a society of civilization, and their specifications which explain that their religion is the oldest monotheistic religion and other monotheistic religions are formed under the effect of their belief. Besides, it can be observed that they have developed a historical approach in which the Kurds are not included as a reaction to the Kurdish authors and politicians who assert a common historical background with them.

Self Identity Definitions of the Yezidis and Kurds

Another issue concerns how these Yezidis define themselves and what kind of relationships they establish with the Muslim Kurds, as they speak the Kurmanci dialect of the Kurdish language.



The author was telling the Yezidi people that the reason of his visit was to know them, when he was arriving at their villages, but their first reactions were rather negative despite the fact that he had a reference. The unrest, discontent and distrust could be easily observed in the facial expressions of the people.

I was gaining their trust only, and only partly, after long-lasting and relaxing persuasive conversations. I could sense that this reaction of Yezidi people was based on their distrust of and opposition to the official policies, and distrust against the people outside their region.

In such an atmosphere, when I asked how they define themselves, they were putting forward their Yezidi identity. Besides, they trace themselves and their religion back to the oldest ages of human history. A Yezidi stated by giving a certain date: "We are living in these lands for five thousand years and we are keeping this religion alive. Our religion exists since the arrival of Zoroastrianism and is the oldest monotheistic religion of the world. We are children of Şahit bin Car who descends from Adam."

When asked what kind of relationships they have established with the neighbors, the Kurds, a Yezidi follower replied:

"There are deep gaps between us. We have no spiritual unity ranging from the daily life to our behaviors. This does not stem from us. We are more dependent of the principle of laicism because our religion is laic itself." ⁹

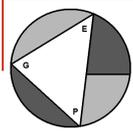
Another Yezidi follower told that "How can we be brothers, they murdered us!"

In addition to the follower telling that, other Yezidis are remembering the things especially Bedirhan did. The same follower added "we can be friends with the Muslims [Here the Muslims are mainly the Kurdish people who are their neighbors] but we never give our girls and never took girls from them". It has been observed that the endogamy tradition is strictly applied among the Yezidi people. So much so that this endogamy rule is strictly applied for both genders.

A follower has described the endogamy tradition as follows:

"Our religion is like milk. White, clean and pure. For this reason, when we give a girl to outside, our girl changes her religion. If we took a girl from outside, we change our religion and go under the religion of that girl. Because if the hands of an outsider touch our pure religion, it will be polluted and damaged."

Unlike the others, Muhammet Altan living in Mardin, Midyat, told that he introduced himself sometimes as Yezidi and sometimes as Kurd. In fact, what Altan has told is valid for the others. Because there is no difference between the Yezidi people and the other groups with respect to their physical appearance. Only the distinctive, long moustaches of some older or middle aged Yezidis are reflecting a specific Yezidi character.



Apart from this, the Yezidis resemble the other people living within the region both with respect to the language and the physical appearance. The people benefit from this situation, because in this way they can camouflage their religion which they keep as a secret and they protect their religion from all kinds of negativities.

When I told the interviewees that some Kurdish authors identify the Yezidis as Kurds, they intensely objected to this view, because they do not establish any connection with the Kurds in today's conditions. They are also explaining that "some of the Muslim Kurdish tribes were Yezidis before but they changed their religion so the Yezidis had no more connection with them".

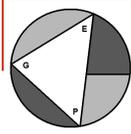
In the same way we see that the Yezidis living in Northern Iraq are also sharing similar ideas. So much so that, despite the Kurdish dominance within the region, the Yezidis in Northern Iraq are intensely refusing the historical and ethnical links between themselves and the Kurds. They even feel themselves closer to the Assyrian people and they claim that they are also of Assyrian origin.

In this respect, a speech of Prince Anvar Muaviye İsmail, Chairman of the Yezidi Religious Center, also forms part of Sever's book (Sever 1996: 127) titled 'Yezidis and Origin of the Yezidis', reflects the opinion of the Yezidis against the Kurdish identity:

Both the Yezidis and Assyrians were founded with a common history, on common lands and with the principle of a single flag and by sharing the same fate [faith]. History has taught us that the Assyrians and the Yezidis are the real descendants of the great Assyrian Empire. They have a common nationality. These two societies have been connected to each other with strong fraternal links during the different ages of history, especially in the times of massacre and disaster. They survived next to each other against the attacks. Fortunately, the proction of common nationalities are permanent as solid rocks. I would like to define once more in front of all related international organizations; the Assyrians and Yezidis have the same fate [faith] and single nationality and they are hoping to live in peace under the same flag. With this announcement, we warn all Kurdish parties especially Mesut Barzani and Celal Talabani to stop representing the Yezidis at all international levels and stop their unfounded lies telling the Yezidis belong to the Kurdish nationality and stop their demands in Sincar and Şekhan under the authority of their administrative regions

The author has observed that even those Kurds who have not seen any Yezidi in their lives know something about the Yezidi people during the conversations the author has made with the Kurds apart from the Yezidis. Some of them told that they were also Yezidis a few generations ago.

Some of the Kurds are telling stories about the Yezidis embellished with negative things. These are generally the stories related to the conflicts in the past. Some of them tried to deter me when they heard that I would visit the Yezidi villages. They were convinced that if



someone visited a Yezidi village, he would be cut down at night. They were denigrating citizens of Yezidi origin with remarks like “his grandfather is Yezidi, They are dirty dogs”. They thus tend to humiliate the latter in a ‘humorous manner’. Another phrase of the Kurds “Eat at the house of a Yezidi but sleep at the house of a Christian” is another sample of the distrust against the Yezidis. When they were asked why a person could comfortably eat at the house of a Yezidi despite this distrust against them, they replied that the Yezidis are so delicate on the issue of cleanliness.

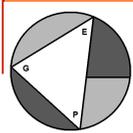
The perceptions and prejudices about each other between the Yezidis and the Kurds are based on mutual denial, and seem as uncompromising as ever. Yet despite the fact that the Yezidis do not recognize any historical and spiritual intimacy with the Kurdish people, they prefer the Kurdish identity if they (have to, are forced to) change their religion and become a Muslim. Such examples can be frequently seen in the region.

For example, the *Sıpkı* tribe was Yezidi one or two generations ago; but their Kurdish identity came to prominence after they became Muslim. Thus they were started to be accepted as Kurdish by the people of the region, and they also started to perceive themselves as Kurds. So much that the *Sıpkı* tribe people living in the regions of Ağrı and Tutak are known with their name adhesion to their Kurdish identity.

Apart from their beliefs and caste systems emanating from their beliefs, the Yezidis share similarities with the Kurdish people: the tribal organization which also forms the basic form of society among the Yezidi people; the Kurdish language they speak; the emirate structure related to a feudalism which is also dominant Yezidi society, as well as their life style. Thus, in case of a change of religion (for so far voluntary), Yezidis do not have any difficulty in choosing the Kurdish identity.

Despite the fact that the Yezidis speak the Kurdish language, they do not see themselves as Kurds and do not even perceive or establish any historical connection with them. This demonstrates that the cultural characteristics which define and differentiate the group-member identities of the Yezidis and the Kurds, as well as the organizational structures of the groups in question, have changed over time due to differences in belief. Each society has specific, different valuing standards as a consequence.

The formation of different ethnical groups becomes easier in line with the difference between these value judgments (Barth 2001: 21). The value judgments of the Yezidis are mostly defined by their belief. The basis of the difference between the Yezidis and the Kurds can be found in the fact that they (the Yezidis) believe they are the descendants of a different generation i.e race or ethnicity; the strict prohibition of marriage with people of other religions for both of the genders; exclusion of any person from the religion in question if he/she violates this prohibition; and the fact that some of their intellectual and practical applications are diametrically opposed to the rules of the Islamic religion.



The exclusion and alienation which have emerged as a reaction to the physical attacks of Muslim(-extremist) groups who do not recognize the Yezidi belief as a Semitic religion, have also played a large role in this difference.

Explanations of the Yezidi belief

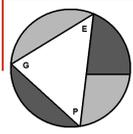
As mentioned previously, none of the Yezidis living in Turkey have read *Kitab El-Cilve* and *Mushaf-ı Reş* (The Black Book), have limited information about these books and received their religious knowledge from the Kavals and Fakirs who once visited their villages. However, the elderly of the villages are now keeping and transferring the religious knowledge to the following generations instead of the Kavals and the Fakirs.

The Yezidi people do not have a common knowledge and judgment in religious affairs, that must be why the people whom I talked with and interviewed gave different information about Sheik Adiy and some of their religious practices. Among these people, only Veysi Bulut knew the real identity of Sheik Adiy and the period he lived and his effects on the Yezidi belief. Bulut also bases the caste system existing in the Yezidi belief on the tribe organization which has remained from the reign of Sheik Adiy. The woman named Nuriye Çelik believes that Sheik Adiy is still alive and residing in Germany. Another follower believes that Sheik Adiy lives in a spiritual form and that he is a Yezidi coming from Iran.

All Yezidis are mainly emphasizing the concept of goodness which forms the basis of their belief. The people define that regularly; they (should) refrain from doing bad actions and they (should) never think bad things. A Yezidi follower has told the following about this aspect of their belief:

“We reply to the bad action with good action. This passed from us to Christianity. The concept of eternity can only be reached by goodness. Wars, battles, fights, treacheries and the destruction of nature and life are great sins in our religion. Badness is never appreciated in our belief. There is no great or small villainy so the punishment of this villainy is inevitably executed by excommunication or with the direction of Khuda after death. The sins can be forgiven among Muslims with repenting and among Christians through confession, but there is no mercy for the sins in our religion and these sins are absolutely punished.”

The same follower also refuses the idea or concept of reincarnation.¹⁰ He believes that the reincarnation statement in the *Mushaf-ı Reş* was said by God only for demonstrating his strength. However the reincarnation beliefs among other followers are very strong. These followers believe that the person who did a bad action shall be reborn in the form of an animal after death.



Another follower said that “we have nothing to do with villainy, we are also against the usury, we never take or give”. Some of the Yezidis, especially the ones who are living in the West and who have received higher education, have put forward that their religion puts emphasis on the mind.

In this respect, these Yezidis demonstrate the faith of Four Elements in order to prove this. The blessing of the air, water, fire and earth which are the basic sources of life is interpreted as the harmonization of the religion which is the metaphysical category with the material world itself. This tradition is recognized as a product of a faith that emerged thousands of years ago with Zoroastrianism, and for this reason they explain that they have the utmost respect for nature i.e. the natural world.

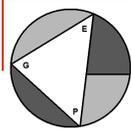
They explain the concept of the superior human being which exist in their religion as follows:

“A person can not be a Yezidi afterwards. Only the ones born from a Yezidi mother and father can be Yezidi. For this reason, our religion is not an expansionist religion. There is expansionism and dominance in other religions. There is no dominance in our religion as there is no expanding. This keeps our religion far from being aggressive. The concept of the superior human being in our religion brings us to God. There is the idea of elevation by committing no bad actions in Zoroastrianism and this continues in the Yezidi religion.”

Therefore, during the fieldwork it has been observed that the basic concept which forms the essence of the Yezidi belief is good action. This gives extreme importance to goodness, the damnation of bad action and even the prohibition of words which connote villainy. This in turn falsifies the notion of resembling or equating the Malak Tawus with Satan in the Semitic religions, which comes from the stories telling that the Malak Tawus is the first angel to be created by God. Malak Tawus is the leader of all other angels and he did not grovel to Adam and made him eat the forbidden fruit which takes part in the other sources written and told by the other Semitic peoples apart from the Yezidis.

The Yezidi people have great respect for the Malak Tawus as they believe that God left all responsibilities of the earthworks (earthly tasks and creations) to the Malak Tawus as well as ruling over the other angels. They also believe that the Malak Tawus is a mediator between the people and God, that he did not grovel to Adam due to his respect for God, that he made Adam eat the forbidden fruit with permission from God and thus provided the reproducing of the human race and that he extinguished the fires of the hell with his tears.

Lastly, we are talking about the word Yezidi. All Yezidis refuse the relationship between their names “Yezidi” and “Yezid” who was the son of Caliph Muaviye. In this subject, they are telling that “we are using the word *Ezidi*, and this originally comes from the word *Ezdan-Yezdan* and it means God. The son of Muaviye, Yezid is a personality who lived in the recent past. The Yezidi in our religion is much older”.



As seen in the previous explanations, the reflections of the historical dissertations peculiar to the modern age can be especially found in the explanations related with Zoroastrianism and the harmonization of the Four Elements faith with modern rationalism.

Concluding Observations on the Identity and Current plight of the Yezidis

Both the written sources and the self explanations of the Yezidi people demonstrate that some practices and ideas of the former Mesopotamian religions, especially Zoroastrianism and the ideas and practices of the other Semitic religions, are observed in the Yezidi religion. The fact that the Yezidi religion emerged in the Middle East—a region acting as a source for many religions and where monotheistic religions developed among the polytheistic religions and expanded around world with universal statements (doctrines)—has played an important role in this.

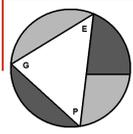
From this point of view, the Middle East is still the religious center of attraction even in today's world. In this way, we can expect the formation of a distinctively independent religion, even considering both the ideas and the practices within such a region where the mentioned religions were harmonized and emerged in history.

The Yezidi people should be recognized as a single and independent ethnical group in the cultural sense because they fulfil all the recognized criteria of an ethnical group identity. The endogamy-type marriage which they strictly apply, their exclusion of themselves from the other groups due to their beliefs, their caste system apart from the tribal organization which defines their group identities, and their self identity perception all constitute an independent Yezidi identity (see also Arakelova 2010).

Moreover, the Yezidis want to establish neither a historical nor a spiritual cooperation with the Kurds with whom they share the same language. The difference in faiths plays an important role in this. But the alienation based on the “Yezidi Massacre” in the 19th century which they solidify with the leader “Bedirhan”, is also an important factor accounting for their hardwon identity. This historical reality is still the reason for their distrust of and often hostile responses against the Kurdish people even today. As a matter of fact, they base their origins on the ancient Assyrian identity even though they are connected to different beliefs, and thus can establish a sense of intimacy with the Assyrians.

The primary statement of being the descendant of a different origin which forms a basic part of the Yezidi religion, is among the most important factors which define the Yezidi perception of their identity. This conviction, which distinguishes and alienates them from the other (neighboring) peoples, constitutes a crucial adhesive source of their group identity.

This statement of being the descendant of a different origin, is the reason why Yezidis are closed to the outside world and possess an endogamic structure. The rule of exclusion from



the religion of a Yezidi married to someone outside their religion in accordance with their belief which they call *White and Pure Milk*, has played an essential role in the formation of the Yezidi religion until today.

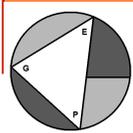
For this reason, we can say that the belief of the Yezidis is the most important reference source in their identity definition. Their society structure and perception of the world have generally been shaped according to the rules defined by their religion. The fact that they do not allow anyone outside their breed to adopt the religion demonstrates the central importance of their belief in their social life. Therefore, their belief which defines the boundaries of the Yezidi identity can also be assessed as their ethnical identity beyond the religion in the narrow sense. In other words, the Yezidi religion ought to be seen and accepted as an “ethnical religion”.

The statement of being the descendant of a different origin which forms such a central part in their mythology, has certainly been spiritually effective. In taking their belief as the basic reference point defining their group identity, it has strengthened this identity however disadvantageous this may have seemed given the harsh reality of recurrent harassment and persecution.

The fact that they have been attacked for centuries because of their religion, their consequent exclusion, and also the fact that they live in isolated mountainous regions in order to be protected from such attacks, have paradoxically been more effective in solidifying their identity than weakening it. As their belief (not their languages or their origins) has been demonstrated as the reason for the Kurdish attacks, the Yezidi people have been connected to their religion more and more and even have started to protect their religion at the risk of their own lives. In this way their religious identity became to be identified above all other (kinds of) identities.

On the other hand, the Yezidis' changing their religion and choosing to be the follower of Islam or any other religion is negatively affecting the population of the Yezidis. Their tradition of not allowing any one outside to choose their religion is also relevant here. Because, due to this belief, the followers of the other cults can not become members of Yezidi religion; at the same time, former Yezidis who have changed their religions can not return to their previous ‘native’ religion. Thus, despite the fact that this tradition has helped the formation and survival of the Yezidi religion to this day, it also has engendered a ‘loss of blood’ for the Yezidi belief considering the demographical situation.

In addition to this, the protection of ethnic identity is still the basic aim for the Yezidi people, despite the loss of population as mentioned before. But this is getting more and more difficult as the Yezidi population is scattered disjointedly across different countries. It has been understood from the data obtained during the fieldwork, that the Yezidi people living in Iraq are much stronger and more strong-minded than the Yezidis living in Turkey considering the effective protection (or lack of it) of their ethnical identities in the respective countries.

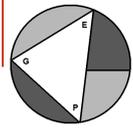


I am of the opinion that the difference between the economical and social structures of Turkey and Iraq, and the ethnic and religious conflicts seen in Iraq, are playing an important role in this respect.

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Endnotes

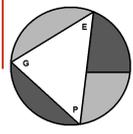
1. *Dasnai* is the name of a great Yezidi tribe who immigrated from the regions of Hakkari.
2. *Thondraki* is a Christian cult emerged among the Armenians during the reign of Byzantium.
3. Sheik Adiy Bin Musafir. He was born in 1075 A.D. in Lebanon. According to Yezidis Sheik Adiy was a prophet.
4. The creation of the angels by Khuda (God) is explained as follows in the first section of *Mushaf-ı Reş*: “Khuda created an angel named Azazil in the first day, Sunday, and this is the leader of all “Malak Tawus”. He created the Malak Dardail on Monday, this is the Sheik Hasan. He created the Malak Israfil on Tuesday and this is Sheik Şems(eddin). He created the Malak Michael on Wednesday, this is Sheik Ebu Bekir. He created the Malak Gabriel on Thursday, this is the Şecaddin. He created the Malak Şemnail on Friday and this is Nasreddin. He created the Malak Nurail on Saturday, this is Yadin (Fahredden). [Khuda] made the Malak Tawus the leader of these”.
5. The social structure of the Yezidis are formed by various castes. The caste system of Yezidis are divided into eight categories in terms of their functions. According to this the following hierarchical system can be defined as: 1-Mirs; 2-Sheiks; 3-Pirs; 4-Kavals; 5-Fakirs; 6-Koçeks; 7-Fakriyats; 8-Mürits (Followers) (Suvari 2002: 108).
6. This situation would make the Yezidi belief a religion with a sacred book and they would benefit from the tolerance of Muslim belief as shown to the Jewish and Christian religions (as they are assumed as religions with sacred books).
7. The empire of David crumbled in a short period of time after his death. The Empire was demolished for a temporary period when Nebukhadnetzor B.C. 586 conquered Jerusalem and exiled many Jewish people to Babel (Harris 1995: 136). And Bulut has made the explanation in question with respect to this historical event.
8. The Yezidi belief which explains that they are coming from a generation or race different from all other humans lies at the basis of this idea. This situation is explained by the creation myth in the 21st Article of *Mushaf-ı Reş* as follows: A discussion appeared between Adam and Eve considering whether the child was born from the mother or the father. Because, each one of them wanted to be the only source of the next generations. This discussion appeared when Adam and Eve saw the animals copulate with each other in order to create a child which resemble themselves and their common relationships. After longlasting discussions, each one of them poured their seeds to a jug and sealed with their own seals and they waited for nine months. After this time, they opened their jugs, there was Şahit bin Car in the jug of Adam. The Yezidis are the descendants of Şahit bin Car. After that Adam and Eve had sexual intercourse. Eve gave birth to a girl and a boy. Jews, Muslims, Christians and other nations and cults are the descendants of these.



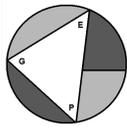
9. The author is of the opinion that this answer was a strategical one in order to soften the historical tension between themselves and the official authorities, as he has been perceived as a representative of the latter.
10. This Yezidi follower stated that he was educated in Europe. Thus he rejects the ideas which he deems irrational or he puts his own interpretations on the religious subjects.

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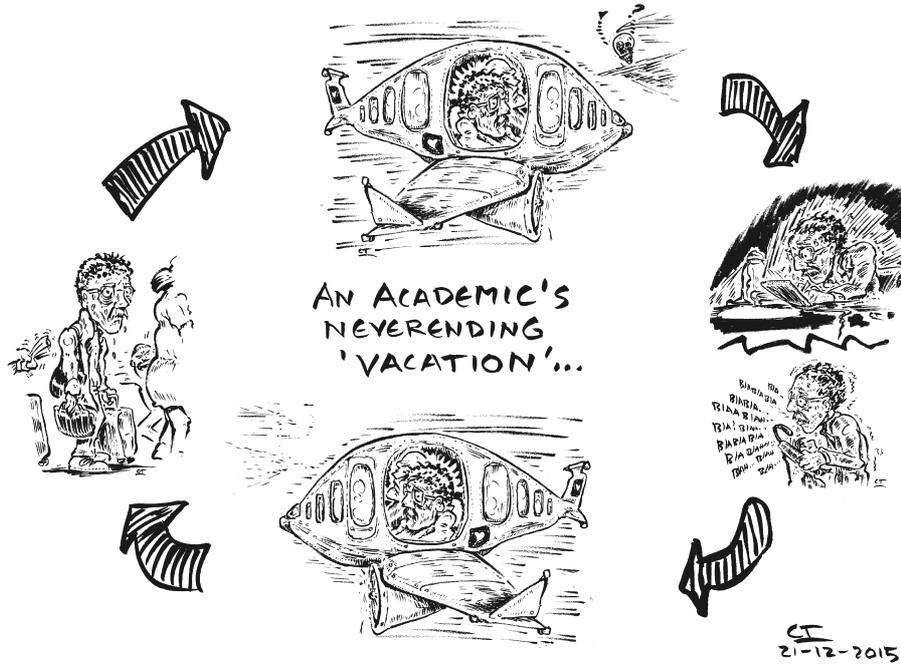
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