

An Overview of 19th Century Yezidi Women

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Abstract

In 19th century Yezidi society, women were seen as second class members of the family due to patriarchal family structures, and were married by their fathers in return for a bride price, often against their will. The most important status a woman could attain in Yezidi society was being loyal to her family and managing the household.

Women usually had long hair, covered their heads and wore long dresses. Yezidis were very fond of the color red in their dresses and avoided the color blue. Literacy was prohibited both for men and for women. The social status of women remained the same, even in the 19th century, because Yezidi society held on to its traditions. As the Yezidi faith saw literacy as a taboo and prohibited it in the same century, all women remained illiterate.

Keywords: Yezidi, women, bride price, social status

1. Introduction

This article takes up the issues of the social status of Yezidi women and their place in family hierarchy to seek answers to the following questions: “How are women perceived in Yezidi society? What is the role of women in social life?”

As 19th century Yezidi culture was not put into writing by the Yezidis themselves, and because they were a fairly small and secretive society, our knowledge of the Yezidis is very limited. Most of what we know about the Yezidis is based upon the accounts of Western travelers and missionaries, which are among the main sources of this article as well. Although a few references were made to the 20th century as well, the scope of the article is largely limited to the 19th century.

2. Who Are the Yezidis?

There is a plurality of views on the origins of the Yezidis, who are part of the great mosaic of the Middle East, but no consensus. Studies on the Yezidis generally accept that they are Near Eastern in terms of language and ethnicity, but that their religion is mixed throughout history with Shamanism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity and Islam. Having a faith that exalts Satan, the Yezidis have always drawn the attention of theologians and missionaries (Dominian, 1915; Joseph, 1909; Arakelova, 2001; Jackson 1904). Although some writers like Millingen claim that the Yezidis are Kurdish in origin (Millingen, 1998) (Note 1), other historians and researchers argue that the Yezidis are descended from Arab tribes which were part of the Umayyad dynasty, and that even the name Yezidi comes from Yezid b. Muaviye (Kaşgarlı, 1994; Fıçlalı, 1999; Sarıkaya, 2001). Thus, Armenian writers Camiçyan and Aboviyan claim, based upon Kaşgarlı Mahmut’s *Divan-ı Lügatit-Türk*, that this community consists of Armenians who did not accept Christianity (Fıçlalı, 1999). The Yezidis speak Kurdish, but their exact origins are not known (Badger, 1852).

Although their faith contains elements of many different religions, the Yezidis jealously guarded the specifics of their principles of faith, which was noted by many as a curious phenomenon. W.B. Heard observes that from the late 19th century onwards, the Yezidis were subjected to propaganda by Christian missionaries, and began converting to Christianity (Heard, 1911). Because the Yezidi faith contained elements of Christianity, they were an attractive target for the missionaries (Jackson, 1904) (Note 2).

In 1911, regions where the Yezidis were settled in large numbers, called Sanjak by the Yezidis themselves, were as follows: 1-Sheikhan (Mosul and its vicinity), 2-Sinjar (Mountain Sinjar), 3- Aleppo, 4- Khatta (Mardin and

Diyarbakır and their vicinities), 5-Zozan (Tigris and Batmansu regions, and Şırnak's vicinity) 6- Haweri (Jezireh-ibn-Omar, on the two sides of Tigris), 7-Moscow (Trans – Caucasia) (Joseph, 1909; Heard, 1911; Millingen, 1998) (Note 3). According to researcher Isya, the Yezidi population in the 1900s was around 200,000 (Joseph, 1909) (Note 4) and they usually lived in tents (Joseph, 1909) (Note 4). Although they originally earned their livelihood through animal husbandry, they also used to exact tribute from caravans that passed their way, and from foreigners (Shiel, 1838; Pollington, 1840; Ainsworth, 1842). Towards the end of the 20th century, most of the Yezidis, especially those in Anatolia, migrated to European cities (Bruinessen, 2005; Bruinessen, 2006) (Note 5).

3. Bride Price

As was the case in all other Middle Eastern societies, fathers married their girls to a groom of their caste in return for bride price, without regard for their own choices. The most important determinants of bride price were the beauty of the girl, the economic position of her family, and their status within the tribe hierarchy (Note 6). Thus, bride price could be higher or lower on the basis of the social status of the family. Bride prices were higher among the higher strata, and lower among the lower strata. However, the bride and the groom had to be of the same caste, no matter the amount of the bride price. In the early 19th century, Sinjar Sheikh Hamo Şero set the bride price of a girl from the Sheikh stratum at 1500 rupee/cents. During the same period, the bride price of a wealthy girl from the higher strata was 30 sheep or goats (Note 7).

The amount of bride price also varied on the basis of whether the bride was a virgin or a widow. Generally, a widow's bride price was half that of a non-married girl. When the husband of a woman died, her family could re-marry her to someone else, in return for another bride price. Punishment for marrying outside of one's own caste was death (Note 8). In later years, however, Qawwals, one of the religious castes -the traveling group who sang hymns- were not able to find girls to marry from their own caste, and their population decreased; then they were allowed to marry girls from one caste below.

Bride price could be in money, property, or animals. However, because bride prices were often too heavy a burden for many, families also engaged in "berdel", also known as sister swapping, parallel weddings, or bride exchange. Thus, both sides were able to marry without paying a bride price, which made marriages more affordable. In cases where berdel was not applicable and the sides were not able to agree upon the terms of the bride price, the youngsters could also elope. However, this was considered to be a disgrace for the family and the tribe of the girl, and the girl's side took various measures to make the other side pay. To avoid a blood feud between the families or the tribes involved, the groom had either to pay the bride price, or offer his sister or mother as berdel to the other side (Note 9). Otherwise, the youngsters could be killed by the family of the girl to save the honor of the family and the tribe. As elopement was so heavily sanctioned by society, the youngsters who ran away often sought protection from an emir or sheikh, who would then act as a mediator to achieve a deal between the families. If the mediation was successful, the sides would make peace in return for a set amount of money to be paid to the girl's family, and a wedding ceremony would be held. However, this price would almost always be higher than the normal bride price of the girl, because the honor of the tribe would be at stake. Otherwise, blood would be spilled between the tribes, and long-lasting blood feuds would start (Note 10). However, there were also times when the fugitives were not caught, things cooled down, and everything just settled (Note 11).

If girls did not wish to be married, it was understood that they had to serve their fathers to compensate for the amount they would otherwise have received from grooms-to-be (Note 12). In 1909, Yezidi Mir İsmail Bey set up a ceiling price to regulate bride prices, which caused various problems within the society (Note 13). Elopement as a result of high bride prices continued into the 20th century.

4. Marriage and Weddings

Various factors were taken into consideration when marriages were being arranged in Yezidi society. The most important of those was that the bride and the groom had to be members of the same caste. Thus, a woman could not marry a groom whose caste was higher or lower on the ladder than her own stratum (Note 14). Someone from a Sheikh family could only be married to someone from another Sheikh family. If there were no suitable girls available for marriage from a Sheikh or a Mir family, then marriage to another girl was allowed, but she still had to be of the same stratum. This resulted in the phenomenon of betrothal in the cradle, that is to say, marriage arrangements made when the respective bride and groom were only infants. Those who failed to observe these rules were sentenced to death by the leaders of the society (Note 15). According to Roger Lost, the only rationale behind the principle of not marrying outside one's own caste and the prevention of inter-stratum mobility was to protect the privileges of the higher strata (Note 16). The caste system still in place in today's

marriage arrangements within Yezidi society constitutes one of the most important points of criticism against the Yezidis (Note 17).

Young girls in Yezidi society have sometimes been married in the form of berdel without bride price, or without berdel to end conflicts between tribes, to end blood feuds, or to form alliances. In these extraordinary situations, the final say over whom the girl would marry belonged to the father, who was considered to be the head of the household, and the girls could only marry someone he deemed to be appropriate. A Yezidi girl was not allowed to marry someone from another nation either. However, in some periods Yezidi girls are known to have married with Muslim men and adopted their religion. The average marriage age was around 12-13, shortly after the children entered puberty. As polygamy was allowed, women were sometimes co-wives when they married. Differently from Muslims, Yezidi men are allowed to marry up to five women. However, mirs could have as many wives as they liked (Note 18). Thus, when a mir wanted to marry a girl, she almost always had to consent (Note 19). According British missionary Fletcher, who visited Yezidi regions in the 1850s, mirs had about twenty wives on average. The number of wives a mir had was proportional to his wealth.

The families on both sides of the marriage first had to gain the approval of the Sheikh or another leader to whom they were attached, in return for a gift. Otherwise, their marriage would not be considered a respectable one by society. Religion did not play much of a role in Yezidi wedding ceremonies.

In Yezidi society, getting married in April was not allowed, but this rule did not apply to Qawwals (Note 20). They could get married any month of the year. On the wedding day, the bride was let out of her house by her mother, her face veiled with a bridal face, and sent to her husband's house on horseback, with friends and relatives accompanying her. The bride was not allowed to see the groom until the nuptial night (Note 21). When the wedding convoy arrived at the groom's house, a loaf of bread was broken into pieces above the Yezidi bride's head, so that the bond of love between the wife and husband would be eternal. The idea that women need to show absolute submission to men's authority was a powerful norm in the society. Thus, to symbolize a bride's submission to her husband's authority, the groom threw a small piece of rock into the entrance of the marriage house (Note 22). The bride remained in her bridal veil during the whole ceremony, and the marriage was solemnized on the third night of the wedding by a Qawwal or another Yezidi religious scholar. Both sides were asked to take a vow, then their faces were painted red and they were asked to break a branch that they held in their hands. Then, the Qawwal asked the two sides to swallow dust brought from the shrine of Sheikh Adi. During this ceremony, the bride's face was open. After the ceremony, the groom gave the bride a present, which was either a hand-made headscarf, a bracelet, or a ring (Note 23).

At Yezidi weddings, men and women used to dance together. If the bride and the groom lived in different villages, then the bride had to visit all the temples in her husband's village, even if they were churches. At the end of the 19th century, the Ottoman state aimed to keep records of the marriages between Yezidis like those among other Muslims, because they were treated as Muslims by the state and the state wanted to see them kept within the circle of civilization. Thus, from 1877 onwards, all solemnizations were to be carried out by muftis. This arrangement gave hope to those young women who did not want to get married with prospective grooms their fathers had chosen (Note 24). Yezidi leader İsmail Bey, who was at first opposed to this new arrangement, eventually accepted that marriages be performed by qadis, fearing that western modernization would fragment Yezidi society as well (Note 25). However, this regulation was not really followed by the Yezidis. In later years, imams replaced qadis as marriage performers, but they insisted that the Yezidis recite the Kalimah Shahadah (that is to say, profess that they are Muslims) prior to the ceremony, which left the impression among the Yezidis that they were being forced to convert, and so they stopped having imams solemnize their marriages (Note 26). Eventually, official marriages became the norm. Particularly from the final quarter of the 19th century onwards, the average marrying age for women started to increase. More frequent contact with the outside world and more widespread education were the primary forces driving this change (Note 27).

5. Divorce

Like in many other societies, divorce existed within Yezidi society as well, but required the presence of certain conditions, the primary among them being adultery (Note 28). If the adulterer was the wife, she was killed immediately, and the marriage bond was considered severed. If, on the other hand, it was the husband who committed adultery, he had to pay three times the regular blood money to his wife's family. If he did not have the financial means to make that payment, he too was killed immediately. Other than that, if the husband did not attend to the needs of his wife for one year, or left her, these were also considered to be valid reasons for divorce. Thus, if the husband went away, even for work related purposes, he was considered to be divorced upon his return, and was not able to find a woman to re-marry. If people helped him find a girl or a woman with whom he

could marry again, then they were considered his accomplices in adultery (Note 29).

The power to divorce, like in other patriarchal societies, was given exclusively to the men. If a Yezidi man put three pebbles in his wife's hand saying, in the presence of three witnesses, "I divorce you, I divorce you, I divorce you", then he was considered to have divorced his wife. After this stage, the husband was not allowed to come together with his ex-wife, and could not claim any rights over her. Another way to divorce was as follows: if a Yezidi woman left her husband's house and returned to her father's house, she was considered to be divorced and half of the bride price initially paid to her family was re-paid to the ex-husband. If, at this stage, she married another man, the ex-husband collected half the bride price from the new husband. In all matters concerning divorce, the mir was the greatest authority (Note 30).

6. Women in Social Life

Unlike Armenian society, women did not isolate themselves from men or from social life, and communicated freely with men and with strangers (Note 31). The British traveler and diplomat Layard found the opportunity to freely talk to and chat with Yezidi girls, and wrote about it as follows: "*As I was sitting under the trees, girls gathered around me laughing, and started examining my dress and asking questions about new things that appeared strange to them. The more courageous among them would bring me their necklaces made of beads and engraved stones, and let me examine the Assyrian marks on them*" (Note 32). Again, unlike other Eastern women, Yezidi women are described as having well shaped bodies, black hair, black eyes and strong muscles; they covered their heads, but not their faces (Note 33). Yezidi women visited the Sheikh Adi temple during certain periods of the year, just as the men did (Note 34). Only married men and women were allowed to participate in the festivals (Note 35).

In weddings, men and women celebrated together. Layard, who made observations among the Yezidis in the 1850s, stated that he was able to communicate freely with the mir's wives. This, however, did not mean that women were free to do whatever they liked. For example, women were supposed to cover their faces with part of their dresses if strange men stared at them (Note 36).

As a caste system was in place among the Yezidis, women of a higher strata in particular were treated with respect by both men and women of the lower strata (Note 37). Women from emir families had a say in the ruling of their societies, and even ruled their societies from time to time. All the decrees issued by Yezidi Emir Said Bey in 1935 bore his mother's signature, which meant it was actually his mother who ruled the community (Note 38). It was also observed that some Yezidi women smoked, and did not feel the need to try to hide it. As literacy was forbidden among Yezidis, both women and men were illiterate. The right to learn how to read and write was given only to two religious men, with the purpose of protecting religious texts and making use of them when necessary (Note 39). However, in 1909, Yezidi Mir İsmail Bey encouraged the opening and attendance of schools, and partially succeeded in breaking this prejudice against education, especially among men (Note 40). Despite his efforts, lack of education among women was widespread throughout the 20th century, due to the idea that the duty of women is to run the household, not to learn how to read and write (Note 41). Thus, the level of education among the women is very low. The lower social status accorded to women began at birth and continued throughout their lives. When a woman gave birth to a boy, his parents gave presents and sacrifice animals. If the child born was a girl, on the other hand, a deep silence prevailed in the house (Note 42). Women were supposed to follow their husbands a couple of steps behind when walking, and leave their seats to men if men were standing. If there were both men and women in a gathering, women were supposed to be serving. Girls were brought up in accordance with these norms from a very early age onwards (Note 43). Childhood ended at age 4 to 5 for Yezidi girls, who then had to shoulder part of the household work. Girls were married at a very early age, and became mothers very young (Note 44).

Because a patriarchal social system was in place, women were the last adults to express their ideas concerning family matters. They lived under the orders and commands of their fathers and brothers when single, and under the directives of their husbands once they were married. When the husband died, it was the oldest son who became the head of the household. The main tasks performed by women were household duties and care of animals (Note 45). Dinner etiquette required that women make the dinner ready for the whole family, but did not sit at the same table as the men; they ate their dinner at a separate table after serving the men's meals.

Although sitting separately was not as strict a rule among Yezidis as it was among other Middle Eastern societies, men and women still had their own private living spaces in their dwellings (Note 46). Female-only sections were prepared within the tents, separated from the men's section by reed fences (Note 47). As required by their faith, women, like the men, had an "other-worldly brother" with which they were forbidden to marry. These brothers, usually from another stratum, would be treated like real brothers and the women would mingle with them freely

(Note 48). Layard observed that Yezidi women were fond of cleanliness and took frequent baths (Note 49). Similarly, Forbes observed that Yezidi houses were kept very neat and clean (Note 50).

In August each year, the Yezidis, both men and women, gathered around the shrine of Sheikh Adi, sang songs, danced, and celebrated all night long. Only married men and women were allowed at these celebrations. At the end of the night, all fires were put out and everyone retreated into seclusion. These celebrations became the source of various rumors about the Yezidis (Note 51). On this subject, Layard's testimony is as follows: "I have not seen or heard of anything negative about them that would change the good impression they left me with." (Note 52)

7. Dress and Appearance

Travelers usually describe Yezidi women as long-haired, attractive and pretty. Yezidi women, from time to time, were abducted for marriage by their Muslim neighbors. However, such incident became rare towards the end of the 19th century thanks to measures taken by the state (Note 53).

The favorite color among Yezidi women is dark red, which figures prominently in their dresses, fabrics and jewelry. The only color not liked in the Yezidi society and subsequently never worn is blue. A Yezidi wearing blue is thus a rarity (Note 54). The story behind the prohibition concerning the color blue has something to do with a dream a Yezidi had about people wearing blue (Note 55). Women were known to be especially fond of wearing white linen and headscarves (Note 56). The most common dress was a tunic, which almost reached the heels. Yezidi women also wore a rectangular shaped mantle that ran from their left shoulder to under their right arm. There was nothing that would differentiate them from the Turkish, Chaldean, Arab or Kurdish women in the region, except that they did not wear a veil or otherwise cover their faces (Note 57). In his *Seyahatname*, Evliya Çelebi reports that Yezidi women wore colorful dresses and kept their hair so long that it reached their feet (Note 58).

Yezidi women covered their heads and their necks. In addition, some of them had Kofis/head dresses that ran from their temples and were knotted under their chins with ribbons upon them (Note 59). These Kofis/head dresses were sometimes decorated with gold and silver coins (Note 60). It is also known that some wore short sleeved shirts above their dresses, wore kerchiefs around their necks, and wore lots of jewelry, such as rings, necklaces and bracelets. Throughout the 19th century, women were more conservative with regards to dress compared to men. Men started to adopt Western dress codes towards the end of the century, whereas women mostly kept their traditional dresses (Note 61).

Yezidi women were able to freely talk to men and communicate freely within the society and they covered their faces using part of their dress only when strange men stared at them. Single women in particular dressed the way they liked, but married women mostly wore white clothes (Note 62).

Besides rings and bracelets, necklaces made of beads or engraved stones were also very common among Yezidi women (Note 63). Jewelry worn by women sometimes reflected their desires. For example, newly-wed Yezidi women in Caucasia wore long earrings in the shape of a cucumber because this was believed to help with getting pregnant (Note 64). Among wealthy families, belts decorated with pieces of silver were also part of the jewelry of women (Note 65).

Besides jewelry, girls used to wear various flowers in their hair (Note 66). At the beginning of April in particular, which is the beginning of the official Yezidi New Year, girls went up the mountains, and decorated their hair, houses and doors with the flowers they had gathered (Note 67). G.R. Driver reports that red flowers were the most preferred. (Note 68)

8. Some Beliefs

The Yezidis usually had a nomadic way of life. Belief in the presence of an "Al Karısı" ("Red Woman"), which is present in many cultures and thought to harm pregnant women and newborns, was also widespread among Yezidi women (Note 69). Various rituals were held to protect the pregnant woman, the newborn or the mother from spirits. Wishes were made to a woman named Pira Fat (Mother Fat) or Pira Fatma (Mother Fatma), citing "*Pira Fat Ya Pira Fat Arimin Bika*" (O Mother Fat/Fatma, keep me from evil). In addition, various spells were cast and sorcery performed to help women and girls have a good marriage. These amulets and spells were usually prepared by Hodjas and sayyids they were referred to by their Muslim neighbors. Inside the amulet was a folded paper containing Quranic verses and the names of Allah, which was put inside a silver box and finally wrapped in silk. These amulets were usually attached to the side of a woman's arm (Note 70). According to another Yezidi belief, priests walked through a crowd with lamps in their hands, and men and women waved their right hands above the lamp, thus cleaning it, and then touched their right eye brows with their right hands,

finally moving it to their lips. In the meantime, women with children in their arms would bless them with oil according to the tradition. Those who were not fortunate enough to touch the lamp still extended their hands towards the flames (Note 71). During the pilgrimage, married women who did not have children bought blessed stones from the Kucheks, a religious class, so that they could have children, and the girls did the same so that they could have a happy marriage in the future (Note 72).

9. Nunhood

Like in Christianity, there was a group of women called “Fakriyat” among the Yezidis, consisting of widows or virgins who never married but devoted themselves to religious service. Their most important duties included making candles for the Sheikh Adi temple, preparing candlewicks, and carrying wood to the temple. The nuns were managed by a head nun and their numbers varied over the course of different periods. In some periods, there were as many as 500 nuns (Note 73). These women were differentiated from other women in society by their wearing of long white headscarves (Note 74).

10. Funerals

Women had important duties and responsibilities to carry out at funerals. When someone died in a family, after funeral preparations were made and the walk towards the cemetery began, the wife of the deceased wore all white, then covered herself in dust or mud to show her grief, and accompanied the funeral procession with her friends (Note 75). While the body of the deceased was being lowered into the grave, the women cut their long hair with a scissor or knife of their husband’s as a display of love and loyalty, and this hair would be buried together with the body (Note 76). According to Sabiha Yalkut, the cut hair would be placed on the gravestone or on the grave itself (Note 77). Differently from the men, during burial, only a stone would be placed under the head of the woman. In April each year, women would visit the cemeteries, offer food and beverages to the visitors, and clean around (Note 78).

Yezidi women did not inherit anything from their fathers. When the father died, all the property, including bride prices to come from the girls to be married, was divided between the sons (Note 79).

11. Conclusion

In the transition from the 19th to the 20th century, Yezidi women still had a secondary status compared to men. In traditions and in practice, women were treated as sex objects and as sources of profit by the society. This attitude, although minimized, still lingers on. The most important factor behind the resilience of these practices is the preference of the Yezidi community to live an isolated life. Yet, there were important differences between Yezidis and other communities in the region, the most noticeable of which was the fact that women did not avoid contact with men in social life, and freely communicated with them. By the standards of its age, this was a very advanced practice, unanimously noted by all foreigners who came into contact with the Yezidis.

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- Note 2. A. V. Williams Jackson, "Notes of a Journey to Persia, I", p.181.
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- Note 4. Isya Joseph, Yezidi Texts, p. 113.
- Note 5. Martin van Bruinessen, *Ağa, Şeyh, Devlet Kürdistan'ın Sosyal ve Siyasi Yapısı*, (İletişim Yay., İstanbul 2006), pp. 44-45; Martin van Bruinessen, *Kurdistan Üzerine Yazılar*, (İletişim Yay., 5. Baskı, İstanbul 2005), pp. 24-26.
- Note 6. Roger Lescot, (2001) *Yezidiler Din Tarih ve Toplumsal Hayat Cebel Sincar ve Suriye Yezidileri*, (İstanbul: Avesta Yay.), pp. 144-145; John S. Guest, (2001) *Yezidilerin Tarihi Meleke Tawus ve Mishefa Reş'in İzinde*, (Çev. İbrahim Bingöl, Avesta Yayınları, İstanbul), p. 76; W. B. Heard, Notes on the Yezidis, pp. 209; Isya Joseph, (2007). *Devil Worship: The Sacred Books and Traditions of The Yezidis*, (First Published 1919, Reprinted), p.129.
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