

CONSTRUCTION OF KURDISH AND YEZIDI IDENTITIES AMONG THE KURMANJ-SPEAKING POPULATION OF THE REPUBLIC OF ARMENIA¹

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The article discusses the problems of constructing the Kurdish and Yezidi national identities among the Kurmanj-speaking population of the Republic of Armenia (RA) in the post-Soviet period, marked by the intensification of ethno-confessional processes throughout the territory of the former Soviet Union. The term “Kurmanj-speaking population” derives from the Kurmanj language spoken by Kurds and Yezidis and relates to those citizens of the Republic of Armenia, who consider the Kurmanj language² as their mother tongue or the language of their ancestors. To a certain extent, this term may offend the majority of our informants, as, according to the 2001 census, most of the Kurmanj-speaking population of the Republic of Armenia consider themselves Yezidis (40,620 persons). However, others (1,519 persons) prefer to be called Kurds, although they speak the same language and profess the same religion – Yezidism. Thus, for the purposes of this article, the use of the term “Kurmanj-speaking population” will replace the differing, often contradictory endonyms of this particular community.

The Kurmanj-speaking population represents the largest minority group in the republic of Armenia (RA).³ The 2001 census (as the previous censuses)

¹ The author gratefully thanks Alexander Iskandaryan (Caucasian Institute, Armenia), Levon Abrahamian, Hranush Kharatyan and Gayane Shagoyan (Department of Modern Anthropological Studies of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of the Academy of Science of Armenia) for their valuable advice and guidance.

² We do not include several thousand Kurmanj-speaking Armenians in this category who are immigrants from Western Armenia. Professing Christianity, they used Kurmanj in family settings (although, apparently, did not consider it as their mother tongue), but have now all learnt Armenian.

³ According to the results of the latest 2001 census, this group amounted to only 42,139 people (little more than 1.3% of the total population of Armenia). There are about 200,000-250,000 people around the world professing Yezidism, although some sources put this number as high as 80,000 (see, for example, http://www.commission-refugies.fr/IMG/pdf/Georgie_-_les_Kurdes_yezidis.pdf).

do not differentiate the numbers of the persons who consider themselves as “Kurds-Yezidi”, and those who identify themselves as “Yezidi-Kurds”. But our personal discussions with the supporters of “the Kurdish orientation” demonstrated the dual identities professed by the majority of the group members: by naming their national identity (a Kurd), they were at the same time underlining their religious attachments (Yezidi-Kurd, or Kurd-Yezidi), thus emphasizing the fact that they are not quite identical to the Muslim Kurds. According to data of Gr. Kharatyan, the former Chairperson of the Office for National Minorities and Religion at the government of Armenia, currently there are only about two dozen Muslim Kurds residing on the territory of the RA⁴. Given their effective absence from the socio-political life of Armenia, our research does not involve the Muslim Kurds.

It should be noted that the Kurmanj-speaking Muslim Kurds live mostly in Turkey (10-15 million persons) in so-called Turkish Kurdistan and in historic Western Armenia, as well as in northern Iraq (4-6 million persons), in Syria (about 1-2 million), in Azerbaijan, Russia and European countries (mainly in Germany, France, Belgium, Denmark, etc.). Groups professing Yezidism live in the same countries, except in Turkey and Azerbaijan. About 14,000 Yezidi migrants from the RA also reside in Georgia (mostly in Tbilisi). These migrants maintain close contacts with their relatives and tribesmen in the RA. The considerable fragmentation of the Kurmanj-speaking community into numerous tribal groups is a significant obstacle on the road to acquiring independent statehood.⁵

From a scientific point of view, studying issues of (national) identity of ethnic and religious groups scattered throughout the world is not very productive within the boundaries of one country. However, since our study is based not only on scientific materials accumulated by various scientists, but also on personal

⁴ Prior to the Karabakh war, several thousand Kurdish Muslims lived in Armenia. According to 1989 census, 0.1% of the population of the Armenian SSR (4,151 people) called themselves Kurds. Moreover, most Kurds were Muslims. Most of the Kurds living in the Armenian SSR professed Sunnism, specifically the Shafi variety of orthodox Islam. Muslim Kurds migrated to Azerbaijan, where they almost lost their own language and were assimilated by Turkic Azerbaijanis. According to unofficial data, currently there are about 150,000 Muslim Kurds living in Azerbaijan.

⁵ For information about Kurds and the Yezidis in the world, see, e.g., Bois Th., *The Kurds*, Beirut, 1966; Lescot R., *Enquête sur les Yezidis de Syrie et du Djebel Sinjâr*, Beirut, in 1938 (1975); Guest J. S., *The Yezidis, A Study in Survival*. London. New York, 1987; Guest J. S., *Survival Among the Kurds: A History of the Yezidis*, London u.a., 1993; Andrews P. A., *Ethnic Groups in the Republic of Turkey*, Wiesbaden, 1989; Bruinessen M. van., *Kurds and Identity Politics*, London, 2001; Kreyenbroek Ph. G., Allison C. (eds.), *Kurdish Culture and Identity*. London, 1996; Kreyenbroek Ph. G., *Yezidism in Europe: Different Generations Speak about their Religion* (in collaboration with Z. Kartal, Kh. Omarkhali and Kh. Jindy Rashov), Wiesbaden, 2009.

observations and field data collected in Armenia⁶, the scope of the study was deliberately narrowed to one country. Nevertheless, the inevitability of parallels with other countries led us to use comparative materials for our study.

In the first part of this article we will try to consider the basic mechanisms and strategies for constructing the Kurdish and Yezidi identities among the Kurmanj-speaking population of the RA, and will also examine the problem of dual identity. The second part will analyse the basic cultural elements which contribute to the formation of the identity of Kurmanj-speaking Kurds and Yezidis.

“Kurds” and “Yezidis” in Armenia: One nation or two?

When considering the Kurmanj-speaking population of the RA as a single community, it is still necessary to take into consideration contradictions existing among the members of the group. And even if they speak the same language, follow the same religion, have the same literature (in the broadest sense of the concept, having in view the written and literary tradition, rather than a writing system, which now is no longer the same for the Kurdish and Yezidi orientations) and folk customs, the Kurds and the Yezidis in the RA are trying to define themselves as separate ethnic and cultural groups. We will analyse the causes and the factors of this split.

Ideology of the Kurdish orientation: From religion to politics

For as long as the Muslim-Kurds lived in the territory of the Armenian SSR, it was important for the Kurmanj-speaking population to contrast their interests in the religious sphere. After the Muslim Kurds left, a new “subject of tension” was formed – the part of the population confessing Yezidism as a religion, but ethnically identifying themselves with the Muslim Kurds – though without converting to Islam. At this stage, most of the Kurmanj-speaking population of the RA continues to identify themselves as Yezidis, considering this to be a designation of their nationality (ethnicity). However, a small group considers themselves as Kurds, and the term “Yezidi” is used only for denoting their religion. “Do you also feel that we are

⁶ Our fieldwork was undertaken from 2002 to 2008 in the Kurmanj-speaking villages of Armenia and in Yerevan.

different people?” – This was the first question, asked of me by the acting editor of the Kurdish newspaper “Rya Taza” when I entered his office and said hello to him. “Unfortunately, there are stupid people in our nation who call us Yezidis. They do not realize that this is our religion, not nationality”, the editor continued. “We are all Kurds; we just kept our pre-Islamic ancient religion”.

Differences in the interpretation of the terms Kurd and Yezidi reflect a division that has occurred in the community of the Kurmanj-speaking population of the RA. Two parallel events taking place in Yerevan in late August 2007 can serve as an illustration of this split in identity. A group identifying themselves as Yezidis organized a large demonstration at Republic Square in Yerevan, protesting against the violence and killings of the members of their religion by the Muslim Kurds in the northern Iraq. At the same time, representatives of the Kurmanj-speaking population, considering themselves Kurds, gathered near Shaumyan Square in solidarity with the Muslim Kurds in Iraq and to protest against threats of military attack by Turkey. Media covering these events could not understand who the Kurds were and who the Yezidis were in Armenia and how they related to each other. Not all reporters knew that, for example, two close relatives could participate in the two different demonstrations. One of them considers himself/herself Yezidi, and the other – Kurdish, despite the fact that they came from the same environment and even from the same family. This example clearly shows that “the choice of their own nationality” among the Kurmanj-speaking population is largely determined by political views and sympathies.

Those identifying themselves as Kurds thus seek to become a part of “the Kurdish national movement” in Turkey and Iraq. Commenting on their choice, they underscore the real advantages of choosing this “orientation”, most importantly the notion that it will give the Kurds a greater chance of acquiring their own state. For the sake of the independent statehood the representatives of the Kurmanj-speaking population of the RA, choosing the orientation of the Kurdish “are ready to forget the recent historical past of their ethno-confessional groups and the profound religious antagonism existing between the Muslim Kurds and the Yezidi Kurds”.

“It is right to be a Kurd [the word right could be understood as “profitable” – T. D.], because this way we will have our own land [i.e. country]”.⁷ Proponents

⁷ The Situation of School Education among National Minorities in Armenia: The Armenian Centre for Ethnological Studies Azarashen, ed. Kharatyan L. and S. Saratikyan, Yerevan, 2005, p. 18 (in Armenian).

of the “Kurdish orientation” held regular demonstrations of solidarity requesting protection of Abdullah Ocalan, the leader of the Kurdish national movement in Turkey.

However, members of the aforementioned first demonstration – the supporters of “Yezidi orientation” are also regularly holding various activities (press conferences, marches on embassies, demonstrations), during which they demand autonomy for the Yezidi people in Iraq within the Kurdish or any other state. The organizers of these events believe that their compatriots and coreligionists in Iraq are under the threat of extinction and that the only guarantor for the preservation of their religion and the “Yezidi” national identity is real cultural and economic sovereignty.

Factors perpetuating the Yezidi identity: The problem of education

As our research demonstrated, the ideologists of the Kurdish orientation are mostly people with higher education, representatives of the intelligentsia of the Kurmanj-speaking population of the RA, for whom religion is not important. They see the future of their ethno-religious group in general in a secular state together with the Kurds, where Islam or Yezidism will not play a significant role.⁸ On the other hand, those representatives of the Kurmanj-speaking population of the RA who continue to consider themselves Yezidis do not agree to build the future of their group on the principle of forgetting the past. They believe that religion is the foundation of their identity and that it must be decisive in the choice of political affiliation, otherwise the identity of the people will be threatened. Ideologists of the “Yezidi orientation” are mainly members of the clergy who belong to the Sheikh or Pirs families, and, to a lesser extent, intellectuals from these families.⁹

Considering that education affects the religiosity of a nation, and hence threatens their identity, they seek to strengthen and to extend the tradition-

⁸ But at the same time they have been reluctant to talk about their possible relocation to an independent Kurdistan (the propagandists of this ideology are based in Moscow and other Russian cities. They have a good command of Russian along with Armenian and Kurmanj).

⁹ Today, relics of the caste devices are not so tenacious, yet everyone knows which family belongs to which caste. The whole nation is divided into two large groups – murids (laymen) and the clergy. The clergy has two divisions – the sheikhs (the highest degree of the priesthood) and the peers (Yezidi leaders, the lower the degree of the priesthood, associated with lower origin).

al view that education is a “devilish” notion, harmful, or even incompatible with religious feelings. Traditionally, the ideologists of the Yezidi orientation explained “their negative attitude towards education” by ethnic customs (adat) and historical inertia: “Our ancestors lived surrounded by the Muslim population. Attending a school meant learning Arabic and reading the Koran, and raised the undesirable prospect of becoming a Muslim”.¹⁰ To date, the cautious attitude towards education among the older generation of the Kurmanj-speaking population is explained by the concern that by obtaining education, their sons would be compelled to reject their roots, their nationality thus becoming... Kurds.

Notably, the negative attitude towards education is associated not only with religious directives, but also with the economic system of the Kurmanj-speaking family. Since the representatives of the Kurmanj-speaking population mostly engage in seasonal cattle rearing (traditionally gardening had little significance and there were virtually no craftsmen and traders among them), education was considered an unnecessary luxury.¹¹ To date, lack of education is quite common also among the wealthiest families of the Diaspora. According to the researcher, Yezidi parents achieving during so called “wild businesses” in the 1990s usually do not have higher education and cannot serve as an example of the usefulness of a high school diploma for their children.¹²

The main focus of raising children in the Kurmanj-speaking families, especially in rural areas, until recently remained the oda (room, bedroom with a shed). In this room, the older members of the family recounted stories about their ancestors, the heroism of national heroes, the abduction of women, tribal feuds and other elements of the traditional life. All these left a deep impression

¹⁰ In the early 20th century, the British attempted to open a special school for Yezidis in the northern Iraq, but the process encountered many difficulties. First of all, Arabic letter “sh”, words beginning with that letter and sounding like the Arabic word Shaitan (Satan) had to be removed from the textbooks. This is due to the fact that according to the sacred “Black Book” Yezidis are forbidden to utter the word Satan (this is the name of a Yezidi God) and similar-sounding words (§ 24). So, for example, the word Shatt “river” has been replaced by a synonym Nahr. Nevertheless, the opening of the Yezidi school was accompanied by protracted local conflicts. Within weeks, four students were drowned in the river, and Yezidis attributed this to God’s unhappiness and dissatisfaction with their education (see: Luke H. Ch., *The Worshipers of Satan: Mosul and Its Minorities*. London, 1925. p. 35).

¹¹ When analysing why he refused to enter university, a respondent belonging to the Kurmanj-speaking community of the RA made the following points: “You have how many students...? 10 or 20 on each course... And how much money do you earn? Okay, do not tell me... Well, so much that even you are not able to feed your family and have children... I have 20 sheep, and they are enough for me to feed my family, parents, my wife and three children” (Among the Kurmanj-speaking population livestock is the main indicator of the wealth of the family).

¹² Savva M. V., *Kurds in the Krasnodar Region, Research*, Krasnodar, 2007, p. 19.

on the psyche of children. The latter, especially girls, to this date are brought up in the spirit of obedience and unquestioning submission to elders and men. Observations made by Azarashen, the Armenian Centre for the Ethnological Studies (Chaired by Gr. Kharatyan) demonstrated that over the past 15 years only one girl from the community of the Kurmanj-speaking families of the RA received a higher education, while the vast majority of mothers “attend school only to grade 6 or 8”.

In many situations, a girl is treated as a “commodity”. The representatives of the Kurmanj-speaking population consider higher education for women not only unnecessary, but also dangerous. It is considered that girls may get abducted by potential suitors on the way to school (although such a fate can befall even married women). Also, it is feared that educated girls might become disobedient wives avoiding the heavy housework for which they are prepared from childhood. The woman has no right to choose a husband herself and is not allowed to resist to the choice of her father or brother. Gender discrimination is also reflected in the fact that feasts are attended only by men, while women serve them and enter the room only to serve a new dish or remove it from the table. An elderly woman – the mother of the head of the household – may stay with guests long enough to talk to them and express views on some issues, but she should stand up all the time. During the busy feasts women always sit in a separate room. Perhaps this explains the lack of toasts pronounced by women within the Kurmanj-speaking population.

It should be noted that the current lack of a sufficient number of relevant scientific and professional personnel greatly complicates the resolution of problems related to education, literature and science among the Kurmanj-speaking population of the RA. Most people are only interested in topics related to business and daily activities. As a result, “labour education” of children prevails among this group. Traditional ideology is transmitted to children and school education is cast aside. Higher education is truly rare among the representatives of the Kurmanj-speaking community of the RA having Yezidi identity.

The problem of a dual identity

Nowadays, among the Kurmanj-speaking population of the RA, the most common terms used for the identification of their own national identity (but not nationality!) are Yazidi/Yezidi, Kurd, Kurd-Yezidi or Yezidi-Kurd. From the point of view of the “semantic ethno-psychology” or “ethno-psychological semantics”, the notions Kurd and Yezidi are in a relationship of confrontation and interjection. Moreover, determined by certain historical and political events of the past, adherents of each of these two groups claim superiority over others and are inclined to see in each other an opposing camp repudiated from the common notion of the nation. The terms Yezidi-Kurd and Kurd-Yezidi represent some form of a compromise intended to soften categorical terms – Kurd and Yezidi. However, the terms – Kurd-Yezidi and Yezidi-Kurd hardly define an identity unequivocally. Rather, their use reflects oscillations of representatives of the Kurmanj-speaking community concerning its national affiliation. Besides, the selection of the self-identification by a specific member of the community depends not only on its social and religious status, or age, but also on geographical and economic circumstances, as well as is determined by the situation in which the conversation takes place.

Levon Abrahamian, anthropologist and the member of the National Academy of Sciences of Armenia very interestingly recalled Mamoe Halite (Darveshyan), also an anthropologist, “who himself experienced the duality of the Yezidi-Kurdish identity: in his society, he was a respected Yezid in everyday life. As a scientist he thought of himself as a Kurd considered Yezidi only by tradition”.¹³ The oscillation of the Kurmanj scientist regarding his identity was also expressed by his use of two last names: the surname Darveshyan pointed to his Yezidi identity. By signing as Mamoe Halit, he emphasized his Kurdish identity. Similarly, Karlen Chachani, the famous Kurdish historian has used the parallel forms of his surnames: Chachanyan/Chachani. However, another Kurmanj-speaking ethnographer and writer, Amine Awdal, did not use other forms of his last name, since he clearly followed the Kurdish identity.

¹³ Abrahamian L., *Armenian Identity in a Changing World*, Costa Mesa, Calif.: Mazda Publishers, 2006, p. 111.

Mamoe Halit wrote about the problem of the dual identity among Kurmanj-speaking population of the RA: “The Soviet Yezidi-Kurds have written “Yezidi” as their nationality in the section of the national passport and consider themselves as Yezidis, and not Kurds. Under the word Kurd they only denote Muslim-Kurds. Even today an elderly Yezidi would get extremely offended if called a Kurd. However, recently, especially after the recent exchange of passports, a part of the Yezidi intelligentsia preferred to call themselves as Kurds”.¹⁴ Mamoe Halit wrote these words in the mid-1980s. In his monograph about Armenian identity, Levon Abrahamian recalls that “in the late 1980s, I witnessed a demonstration of an extremely aggressive Yezidis, who protested in front of the building of the Communist Party of Armenia about the fact that the famous Kurdologist, himself of Yezidi origin [Shakro Mgoyan – T. D.] in a television interview called his people Yezidi-Kurds”.¹⁵ In the early 1980’s, L. Abrahamian personally witnessed an incident in a Yezidi village in Armenia in which an angry man almost killed an Armenian ethnographer (now deceased), who called his interlocutor a Kurd.

A decade later, in the book “Nationalities of Armenia”, published in 1999 by the Academy of Sciences of Armenia, the Kurds and Yezidis are presented as separate communities: an article on the Yezidi community written by Jamal Sadahyan, the Chairman of the National Union of Yezidis in Armenia, and an article about the Kurds was written by Amarike Sardar, the chairman of the organization of Kurdish intellectuals.¹⁶

The National Union of Yezidis in Armenia publishes “The Voice of the Yezidis”, its official newspaper, in the native language. In addition, the national radio of Armenia broadcasts daily 30 minutes-long programs in the “Yezidi language” (a term used by Jamal Sadahyan). The group with the Kurdish identity also has its own newspaper in the Republic of Armenia. The name of the newspaper is “Rya Taza”, published since 1930.¹⁷ In addition, the Union of Writers of Armenia has a section of Kurdish writers. The branch was established in Soviet times.

¹⁴ Halit M., *Prohibition of Marital Customs of the Yezidi Kurds / Small and Dispersed Ethnic Groups in the European part of the USSR (The geography of settlements and cultural traditions)*, Moscow, 1985, p. 120.

¹⁵ Abrahamian L., *Armenian Identity in a Changing World*, Costa Mesa, Calif.: Mazda Publishers, 2006, p. 112.

¹⁶ *Nationalities of Armenia* (editors: Hovhannisyan N., Chatoev V., Kosyan A.), Yerevan, 1999, pp. 61, 69. The Kurds and the Yezidis of Armenia are also presented separately in the next book, which appeared three years later: Asatryan G., Arakelov B., *Ethnic Minorities of Armenia*, Yerevan, 2002, pp. 8 and 20 (in Armenian). See also: Mkrtumyan Y. (eds.), *Minorities of the Republic of Armenia Today*, I, Yerevan, 2000, pp. 24-25 (in Armenian).

¹⁷ At one time, “Rya Taza” was the only newspaper in the Soviet Union published in Kurmanj.

The impossibility of clearly dividing the boundaries between the Kurds and Yezidis of Armenia is determined by the complexity of the myriad factors shaping their identity. Often, identities do not coincide and vary not only within one village or kin, but even within the same family.¹⁸ Due to the complexity of this factor there is an ambiguity in the interpretation of national values and ideals within the representatives of these two communities. This process can be described as “an active search for an identity” or “construction of their own nationality”.

A variety of external factors (political and socio-economic) significantly affects the national self-identification of the members of the Kurmanj-speaking community. For instance, activities of the Kurdish emissaries from Europe were mentioned several times as they were distributing popular literature among the Kurmanj-speaking population of the RA. Perceptions of their own national identity for a particular individual may vary not only at the different stages of his/her life, but also under the influence of specific meetings, discussions or events. In other words, there is a lack of common view and perception among the Kurmanj-speaking population of the RA about their identity. Often the definition of the identity is situational, i.e., depends on who is asking about the identity – a foreigner or a local, a young or an elderly person, an educated or an illiterate person.

Thus, the largest national minority of the RA – the Kurmanj-speaking population – is a vivid example of an ethnic group in the process of building its own identity (its new identity).¹⁹ Part of the Kurmanj-speaking population, which now calls itself the Kurds, has a completely new entity, and demands the attention of researchers. We do not deal with the revision of identity in the Caucasus very often, especially within a group that is in many ways archaic such as the Yezidis. In other words, the case of the Yezidis and the Kurds in the contemporary Armenia is ideal for the analysis of an identity within the constructivist paradigm.

¹⁸ During the interviews and surveys conducted by the Armenian Centre for Ethnological Studies Azarashen – 971 people out of 1,912 called themselves Yezidi-Kurd. Interestingly, in 35 cases in which the representative of the community called himself a Kurd or a Kurd-Yezidi, other members of his family defined themselves as Yezidis. It is also noteworthy that during interviews conducted by the same centre among schoolchildren of the Kurmanj-speaking population, children who considered themselves Kurds, in some cases have defined Yezidi as their mother tongue, and conversely, some Yezidis believed that the Kurdish language was their mother tongue. Yezidi parents explained the choice of the term “Kurdish” by their children by the influence of schools as they still continue to have classes in the “mother tongue” written in “Kurdish”.

¹⁹ According to the 2001 census, the total number of national minorities of Armenia was 67,657 people, 73% of whom were Yezidis, 1.5% – Kurds.

The main elements of the construction of identities of the “Kurds” and “Yezidis” in Armenia

As noted by Karl Deutsch, for the formation of a national self-consciousness, first something should be formed that will be consciously recognized.²⁰ Can we attribute these words to the Kurds and the Yezidis in general, and to the Kurmanj-speaking population of the RA in particular?

The part of the Kurmanj-speaking population of the RA, which prefers to be called Kurds, presents the following arguments: 1) “we and the Kurds [reference to the Muslim Kurds – T. D.] speak the same language”; 2) “in our historic homeland – in northern Iraq – the Yezidis, or “those professing Yezidism” live surrounded by the multimillion Muslim Kurdish population”; 3) “we have the same origin as the Muslim Kurds, and 4) “our religion – Yezidism is an early pre-Islamic creed of all Kurds”.

The other part of the Kurmanj-speaking population of the RA, which prefers to be called Yezidis, responds to these arguments with a following proposition: 1) “our language is not Kurdish, it is Yezid and the Kurds simply took it over”; 2) “our historic homeland – that is the area of Lalish (Sinjar) in the Northern Iraq, and the Kurds – non-identical tribes from different regions”; 3) “consequently, we have completely separate origins than the Kurds”; 4) “our religion has nothing to do with the religion of the Muslim Kurds”.

We will try to separately analyse the four above-mentioned ethno-differentiated traits; their different interpretations form the basis for the construction of the Kurdish and the Yezidi identities.

The language of the Kurds and the Yezidis – Kurmanj

The language of the Kurds and the Yezidis belongs to the north-western group of the Iranian languages. The closest related languages to Kurmanji belong to the Caspian sub-group of the Iranian branch.²¹ According to Evliya

²⁰ Hroh M., *From National Movements to a Fully-Formed Nation: The Process of Nation-Building in Europe / Nations and Nationalism* (translated from English), Moscow, 2002.

²¹ On the Kurdish language and dialects, see, for example, Mackenzie D. N., *Kurdish Dialect Studies (I-II)*, Oxford University Press, 1961.

Çelebi, the XVII century Turkish traveller, the Kurds speak 13 languages and 42 dialects. From “the Kurdish languages” the author mentions Sorani, Hikkari, Sinjar, Zaza, Ruziki, etc., at the same time noting that the speakers of these different languages did not understand each other without an interpreter.²² The first language – Sorani, is the language of the Iranian Kurds and is considered a south-western Iranian dialect (not a north-western Iran dialect, like the Kurmanj). The Zaza language also differs from the Kurmanj and belongs to the Caspian group of Iranian languages. Sinjar seems to be the first reference of the Yezidi language, or more precisely – the Yezidi dialect of the Kurmanj language.

In Armenia, people who call themselves Kurds (i.e. supporters of the Kurdish orientation) consider Kurdish or Krmandzhi (in Armenian – K’rderen) to be their mother tongues. People with Yezidi identity consider Ezdki or Yezidi (in Armenian – ezdieren) to be their native language, thus emphasizing the fact that this is their own national language, not the language of the Kurds. In reality, it is a single language. There are even not minor stylistic differences in literary forms. The term Yezd – is actually a secondary form deriving from the name of the ethno-confessional group of Yezidis. People with Kurdish identity, accordingly, do not consider it right to use this term as the name of the language.

The issue of drafting a textbook in the native language of the Kurmanj-speaking population of the RA for the same reason led to heated debates and a controversy several years ago: what should the textbook be called – Kurdish or Yezidi? Moreover, a new book by A. Tamoyan and H. Tamoyan designed to teach “the Yezidi language” in elementary schools was banned in the Kurmanj-speaking villages where supporters of Kurdish identity reside. For these communities the term “the Yezidi language” is unacceptable. Such attitudes are primarily formed by village elders, school principals and other influential community representatives.²³

²² Chalabi E., *Book of Travels* (translated from Turkish into Armenian, foreword and commentary by Safrastyan A. K.), Yerevan, 1967, p. 192. Interestingly, in the present the self-definition of Zaza people in Turkey also sounds like Kurmanj – message V. Voskianian, Department of Iranian Studies Yerevan State University. Kurds living in Batumi define themselves in a same way.

²³ Also see relevant to this subject, interviews with public figures with the Kurmanj-speaking community representatives and with officials: <http://groong.usc.edu/orig/ok-20061011.html>.

During the Soviet period (from 1940's),²⁴ all Kurmanj-speaking groups in Armenia used the Cyrillic alphabet, unlike the Kurds and the Yezidis residing in Europe, Turkey, Syria and Iraq (who have been using the Latin alphabet or Arabic script). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, representatives of the Kurmanj-speaking population of the RA professing Kurdish identity began to publish their own newspaper – “R’ya T’eze” (New Way) in the Latin alphabet, thus demonstrating their unity with the Kurds in Turkey and Europe. However, most of the Kurmanj-speaking population of the RA who recognize Yezidi as their mother tongue prefer to use the Cyrillic alphabet. They continue to do so. Groups with the Yezidi orientation publish its newspaper “Dange Ezdiya” (Voice of the Yezidi) in Cyrillic. With this they tend to emphasize their right to have their own Yezidi language – with a script other than the one used by the Kurds.

Historic home

The Kurmanj-speaking population migrated to the territory of modern Armenia mainly during the 19th century, in the period of the Russo-Persian and Russo-Turkish wars. For the majority of Yezidis, considered “infidels” by Iranian and Turkish authorities, the flight to the Russian Empire represented a chance of physical survival. According to some reports, during the Russian-Turkish War of 1828-1829, Yezidis headed by Hassan Aga were fighting on the side of the Russian Army.²⁵ The term “Yezidi” and attribution of the members of this confessional group to “devil worshipers” demonstrate the negative attitude of the dominant nations in the region to the Yezidis. Before becoming an endo-ethnonym, the term Yazidi/Yezidi was an exo-ethnonym and literally meant “wrong”, and

²⁴ In the late Middle Ages, before starting to use Latin or Cyrillic, cases writing short phrases and certain texts by using Armenian alphabet for writing in Kurmanj were known. The most ancient phrases written in Kurmanj deemed the manuscript N 1771 in Matenadaran, which is the Kurdish translation of a passage from the Gospel (Chachanyan K., Contribution of the Armenian Intellectuals in the Study of Kurdish Culture and History (1850-1990), Yerevan, 2004, pp. 25-26, 132, 164-166 (in Armenian). Later, in the early 20th century, a Kurdish alphabet for Kurds living in Armenia was based on the Armenian alphabet. In 1922, when Soviets came to power in Armenia, the Yezidi alphabet was created based on the Armenian alphabet. The author of this alphabet was the Armenian linguist Lazo (Hagop) Ghazarian, who also issued the first Yezidi alphabet – “Shams” (literally – the sun). In Soviet Armenia, the first school for Kurmanj-speaking children was opened in 1929 and the alphabet by Lazo was replaced by the Latin alphabet. In 1944-1945, a Kurdish alphabet based on Russian was introduced and used until the collapse of the Soviet Union.

²⁵ Halfin N. A., Struggle for Kurdistan, Moscow, 1963, p. 68.

contrary to the true believers – Muslims.²⁶ Muslims deemed “infidels” supporters of Malake Tousey,²⁷ the main Yezidi deity, who did not agree to renounce the faith of their ancestors under threat of death and destruction.

In the Middle Ages Yezidis were also referred as Adawa, Sharga and Dasyni. Sharga is the term in Arabic simply meaning “east”. Adawa derives from Sheikh Adi, the founder (or, according to other interpretations, a key reformer) of the Yezidi religion. We could not find an explanation of the term Dasyni in the scientific literature on Kurdology and Yezidology. In the 16th century Kurdish author Sharaf Khan uses the ethnonym Tasnim (amended Dasyni) as the name of one of the Yezidi tribes, along with Khalidi, Basyan, Dumbuli etc.²⁸ Interestingly, until recently there are patronymic groups of Dasyni²⁹ among the Yezidis of Armenia calling themselves Yezidis from modern Syria.³⁰ According to Kh. Ch. Luca, the British Orientalist and traveller, in the beginning of the 20th century the term Dasnayi denoted all Yezidis. Apparently, the ethnonym Dasin/Dasnayi is the most ancient of the Yezidis’ endonyms. It certainly has a connection to the area of Dasn Ghawar, mentioned many times in medieval Armenian sources. This area is located approximately in the same place as modern Mosul and Sinjar. From the south, it bordered the Dothan ridge, which was the southern boundary of the Armenian Arshakouni kingdom in the fourth century.³¹

In the village of Lalish, located in the vicinity of Mosul and Sinjar, is the only place of pilgrimage for devotees of Yezidism – a temple with the tomb of Sheikh Adi. Yezidis believe this region is not only its historic homeland, but also the centre of the universe, where God decided to live after the creation of the world. The groups with Kurdish identity also consider Lalish

²⁶ Such use of the term Yezidi occurs even in the Armenian Ashough poetry, for example in the songs Sayat-Nova says: “From your love, I become a Yezidi, had melted and depleted for you” (ešxemet darril im ezid, halvec'a mašvec'ak'izit).

²⁷ Malake Taus (literally “the peacock angel”), also known as Malak Taus (literally “the peacock angel”, which is interpreted by some priests as “the head of all angels”) is depicted as a peacock. Such a representation of the Yezidi supreme deity played an important role in shaping the stereotype of the Yezidi as followers of Satan as the peacock, was considered a symbol of the devil by many in the East. On the genealogy of the image of Malake Tousey, see: Asatrian G. S., Arakelova V., Malak Tāwūs: The Peacock Angel of the Yezidis / Iran and the Caucasus, 2003, vol. 7, No 1-2, pp. 1-36.

²⁸ Sharaf Khan Bidlisi wrote: “All Kurdish tribes profess shafi in compliance with Islamic teaching and its Sunni... which are truly old and zeal, except for a few tribes who subordinate to Mosul and Syria, for example [tribes] Tasneem Khalid and Basyan, as well as the [tribal] Boght, Mahmood and Dumbuli who profess Yezidism” (Sharaf Khan ibn Shamsadin Bidlisi. Sharaf-Nameh T. I., translation, forward, notes E. I. Vasilyeva, Moscow, 1967, p. 83).

²⁹ Luce H. Ch., *Op. cit.*, p. 122.

³⁰ Halit M., Ordinance, p. 127, ca. 2.

³¹ Districts Dasn, Nihorakan and Mahkert-tun were part of the province of “strengthened country of Marov” (Marats amur ashkharh).

as their historic homeland, but did not ascribe to it such great ideological significance. Since they mostly are not very religious and atheists, it is not vital for them to emphasize the connection of their historic homeland to Yezidism. By choosing to be called Kurds, they are not inclined to emphasize their connection with Yezidism. Thus, by using the term Kurd as an autonym they try to associate themselves with the millions of Kurds throughout the world. Though, we are not aware of any case of converting to Islam by representatives of this group.³²

Intellectuals with Kurdish orientation associate the genesis of the ethnonym Kurd to the name of the early-medieval district of Korduk and the tribes that inhabited the district in ancient times. The district of Korduk was a part of the Arkashidi Southern Province in close proximity to the abovementioned area of Dasn. However, groups in Armenia who profess Yezidi identity do not agree that the ethnonym Kurd has a geographical origin. At the level of folk etymology (Volksetimologie), they elevate it to the “Yezidi” verb *kært*, meaning “to cut, cut off” and consider the Kurds as splinters of different peoples. Thus, those with “Yezidi orientation” not only show their attitude towards this term, but also create a fertile ground for the construction of their own nationality.

The study showed that representatives of the Kurmanj-speaking population of the RA, both “the Yezidi” and “the Kurds” were well-integrated in Armenia and not planning to migrate to another country. Even those who consider themselves Kurds, very vaguely expressed or were sceptical about possible relocation to an independent Kurdistan. Most of them even preferred not to talk about it³³. Some members of the Kurmanj-speaking community, who have moved to Russia, achieved considerable success in business. They own cafes, shops and other outlets. Sometimes due to the “Armenian” endings of their surnames Yezidi families in Russia are considered Armenians. And because the word “Yezidi” does not mean anything to most people in Russia, to avoid further

³² Rather, they are Jehovah's Witnesses: over the past two decades, the spread of this sect in some Kurmanj-speaking villages was almost endemic. Also, we are aware of cases where Yezidi immigrants (usually illegal) in Europe are Jehovah's Witnesses.

³³ It should be noted that after the proclamation of Armenia's independence in 1991, because of the difficult social conditions, about 10% of the Kurmanj-speaking Yezidi population has left the republic. See: Sadakhyan J., *The Yezidis / Nationalities of Armenia* (eds. Hovhannisyan N., Chatoev V., Kosyan A.), Yerevan, 1999, p. 64. Studies show that during 1989-1999, nearly 10,000 Yezids and representatives of the Kurmanj-speaking communities left Armenia and mostly settled in Russia (Krasnodar, Stavropol, Moscow and Moscow region, Yaroslavl, Vladimir, etc.) and some have moved to Ukraine, Poland, Germany and France. Most of this emigration is in the context of the total emigration from Armenia for earnings in the near and far abroad.

questions, representatives of the Kurmanj-speaking population are simply considered Kurds.

Thus, supporters of the Kurdish and the Yezidi identity in the RA are united in their “attachment to a particular territory”, to a common historical homeland in northern Iraq, or to Armenia, their “second home.” However, groups with Yezidi identity do not feel solidarity towards the groups with Kurdish identity and do not share with them a common history, including the “myth of origin”.

Myths about origin

“How can I say that I am a Kurd, if Kurds killed my grandfather?”³⁴ – is a typical answer of a representative of the Yezidi community to our question: “Who is s/he in terms of nationality – a Kurd or Yezidi? “The Kurds – are not a nation, they are wastes from various nations and nationalities” – say our respondents – “And the word Kurd is an expletive for us. The Kurds are murderers and robbers. How can we be Kurds?”³⁵

Groups with Yezidi identity have their opinions about the historical past of the Kurds. Some representatives of the Yezidi clergy believe some Kurds are actually Islamized Yezidis. At the same time, in their opinion, the great majority of the Kurdish population in Turkey is a mixture of different nations – Arabs, Assyrians, Turks and even the Armenians, who over time became Kurmanj-speaking (in the case of Armenians and Assyrians, they are considered converts to Islam). This is how they explain the fact that they speak the same language while at the same time underlining their different ethnicity. Consequently, they consider wrong the tendency of some Yezidi groups to consider themselves as Kurds.

As mentioned earlier, it is very widespread among persons within the Kurmanj-speaking population having the Yezidi identity to consider that the term “Kurd” comes from the verb meaning “to cut” or “to cut off”. Therefore, Kurds are considered splinters of different nations, including of the Yezidi. In contrast to this opinion, they consider their own genealogy as “pure”, deriving from the

³⁴ The situation of school education among national minorities in Armenia, p. 16.

³⁵ Notably, a Kurdish historian Sharaf Khan, describing his people, writes: “For the most part they are brave and daring, generous and proud. A remarkable bravery and courage, extraordinary courage and zeal, they have earned the reputation of thieves and robbers” (Sharaf-han, Ordinance Op. p. 83).

mythical ancestor common to all Yezidis. Yezidi legend says that Adam and Eva (Hawa) had 72 sons and daughters, who married each other and from them 72 nations were formed.³⁶ All children abandoned their poor parents; only the disabled son Shahid bin Ger (alternatives of the name – Scheid Byndzher, Saidi Byndzher, Said Bndzher) stayed. God Malake Taus (an Angel in the form of a Peacock) sent a heavenly woman, Hopu, to Adam. The parents talked it over and decided to marry the woman to their disabled son. The legend states that Yezidis originate from this marriage.

The Muslim-Kurds have a completely different story of their origin. According to Sharaf Khan Bidlisi, the first Kurdish historian living in the 16th century, the Kurds first appeared during the reign of the Arab despot King Zohhak³⁷ and were named after the ancient Iranian demon Aji Dahaka. Sharaf Khan wrote that in order to save their lives, young men hid in the mountains of Kurdistan and the Kurdish tribe derived from them.

Representatives of the Kurmanj-speaking population of the RA, who call themselves Kurds of course, know the legend about Scheid Byndzher. They usually do not take seriously such “fairy tales” and believe that they have a common origin with the Kurds. Interestingly, some supporters of the common Kurdish identity would immediately cite the legend of Sharaf Khan. The only difference in their story is that they have forgotten the name of the evil King and young men are finding shelter in the mountains of Yezidistan. The nation descending from these men is called the Yezidis³⁸ (meaning people confessing Yezidism as a religion).

Religion as an element of identity

Representatives of the “Kurdish community” of Armenia confessing the religion Yezidism repeatedly quote the words of Odjolan, the leader of the Kurdish

³⁶ Awdal A., *Beliefs of Yezidi Kurds*, ed. S. Obosyan, Yerevan: Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of the Academy of Science of Armenia, 2006, pp. 17-18 (Armenian). A short version of the legend was recorded by S. A. Yegiazarov at the end of 19th century. According to this version, a man named Ezdi by an order of Malake Tousey, married one of the heavenly Hopu and Yezidis are their descendants (Yegiazarov S. A., *Brief Ethnographic Sketch of the Kurds Erivan Province: Notes of the Caucasus Department of the Imperial Geographical Society*. Book 13. Tiflis, 1891, p. 171). Another version of the same tale has been recorded by us in 2007 from the priest (fakir) Tayara Musaferyana, village Jrashen.

³⁷ Sharaf Khan. *Ordinance*. cit. p. 81. The first versions of this tradition, without mentioning the Kurds, are found in the “History of Armenia”, Moses Khorenatsi (V in.) and “Shahname”, Firdows (X-XI cent.).

³⁸ Awdal A., *Ordinance*. cit. p. 18.

National Movement in Turkey to prove their affiliation to the Kurds. Odjlan appealed to the Kurds to return to their roots and to Yezidism, the religion of their ancestors. Thus, it is assumed that all Kurds in the distant past were followers of the Yezidi religion, which clearly contradicts historical sources left by medieval authors.³⁹

In connection with the reconstruction of the “Yezidi” past of Kurds, it would be worthwhile to quote the words of E. J. Hobsbaum about the historical distortion: “Forgetting history or even distortion of history (*l’erreur historique*) plays an important role in nation building. The progress of historical research often represents a threat to a nationality”.⁴⁰

Representatives of the Kurmanj-speaking population of the RA consider that the term Kurd should be used in a broader sense and should include not only Muslim-Kurds, but also “the Kurd-sun worshipers”. “There are the Catholic-Armenians and Protestant Armenians living in Yerevan,” says one respondent from the village of Shamiram, – “But this does not hinder them from being considered Armenians like the rest of the Armenians, who belong to the Armenian Apostolic Church. Similarly we have Muslim Kurds and the sun-worshipping Kurds. But we all are Kurds”.

However, people with the Yezidi identity do not agree with this thesis. “To say that we are Kurds is to deny the existence of the nation”, said one respondent, a representative of the Yezidi clergy of the village of Ferik. According to the Yezidis, there are approximately 5 million Yezidis living throughout the world. Clearly, this estimate is an exaggeration and statistical data varies from 200,000 to 250,000 persons. Those who profess Yezidi identity believe that religion is a sufficient basis to consider them a separate nation. They often cite the example of Serbs, Croats and Bosnians, who speak the same language, but confess different religions and are considered to be separate nations. According to our respondent: “There are different people in the world who speak the same language... Why can the Croats and Serbs be considered as separate nations? After all, they speak the same language!”

³⁹ According to the latest, the Kurds, before converting to Islam, were considered pagans. This point of view is not shared by scholars.

⁴⁰ Hobsbawm E. J., *The Principle of Ethnicity and Nationalism in Modern Europe / Nations and Nationalism*, Moscow, 2002, p. 332.

Thus, representatives with Yezidi orientation do not accept the opinion that they and the Kurds are a single nation.⁴¹

The data we collected allow us to consider that religion is the most important indicator of the Yezidi identity. According to the Yezidi faith, it is not possible to convert to Yezidism – the status is only obtained by birth. It is prohibited among Yezidis to address strangers with the words: “my brother” or “my son”. Genealogical legends clearly demonstrate the importance of religion in the Yezidi identity (despite the fact that many supporters of the “Yezidi orientation” do not know and cannot explain the main principles and dogmas of their religion).

According to the abovementioned legend of Shahid Byndzher, the husband of heavenly Hopu, from whose marriage Yezidism originated, “Adam, who was a very religious person, conveyed his religion to Shahid and the latter, in turn, to their descendants”.⁴² Another legend which was recorded by us says: “When God was distributing religions of the world, Yezid also approached him. God asked: “What din (religion, faith) shall I give you? Yezid pointed out at one of his parcels and said: el din (Armenian “this religion”) and this is how the nation came to be called: Yezidi”.⁴³

Yezidis call their religion by different names: Sharfadin, Yezidism, Shams and sun worshipping. The word Shams comes from the Arabic word meaning sun. Yezidism – is a secondary form deriving from the name of the religion – Yezidi. “Molitva kochakov” makes uses the term Sharfadin, but the majority of Yezidis do not like it. When asked by strangers and foreigners about their religion, they answer: “We are sun worshipers”. But this term does not exactly characterize the specifics of the Yezidism. Elements of sun worshipping as pagan relics can be also observed in the religions of other nations in

⁴¹ Notably, it is interesting to observe that there is approximately the same number of Muslim Kurds and Yezidis residing in the Krasnodar region and the majority of the Yezidis distance themselves ethnically from Muslim Kurds. This is manifested, for example, by use of the ethnonyms: Yezidis do not usually describe themselves as Kurds. In the list of members of the community, drawn up by residents in the village Neberdzhayevskaya, Yezidis, in the column “nationality” are listed as “Yezidi” and under “religion” – “sun worshiper”. Thus, the differences in the Yezidi faith become the basis of ethnic identity (Sawa M., Ordinance. Op. p. 19).

⁴² Kreyenbroek Ph. G., *Yezidism – Its Background, Observances and Textual Tradition*, New York, 1995, p. 37.

⁴³ In a recorded by us in the summer of 2007 version of the genealogical legends, a mother of a tribe is called Leil, which corresponds to the Jewish Lilith (the image of the latter, in turn, goes back to the Sumerian Lilith or Leela). In the Jewish tradition, Lilith is the first wife of Adam, who, having failed to convince him that they are equal, flew and turned into a demon: she takes possession of men against their will to give birth to children, harms pregnant mothers and newborns. In the Yezidi tradition, by contrast, Lail is a beautiful maiden from the sky, which became the second wife of Adam.

the region.⁴⁴

Sheikh Adi ibn Muzaffar (1073-1163) is considered to be the founder (or the reformer) of Yezidism. Yezidi often call him Shihadeh/Hadi. From him, according to legend, derive all Sheikh families. Yezidis consider Sheikh Adi ibn Muzaffar to be the messiah and think that he was created from God's shadow. Sheikh Adi ibn Muzaffar, as a real historical person, belonged to the Arabic noble family of Omeid mentioned in several middle-age Arabic writings. Sheikh Adi ibn Muzaffar was born in the village of Beytnar, located in the Baalbek region of historic Syria. He got his nickname Al-Khakkari after the name of the mountain (now located in Turkey) where he lived for a long time. After long travels he settled in Lalesh, the Syrian Nestorian monastery near Molus. Adi became the founder of the religious movement Adawi.⁴⁵

Yezid religious notions clearly differentiate their religion from the three main world religions. Moreover, Shiite Muslims (Iranians) are referred to as distinct from Sunni Muslims. "The Black Book", one of the sacred books of Yezidism notes: "Until the birth of the Christ, our religion was called Paganism. Jews, Christians and Muslims, as well as Iranians, started to oppose our religion (§ 25)". We nevertheless find the most expressed patterns of rivalry with Sunni Islam traceable in the legends about founder Yezidi and Prophet Mohammed, as well as in "Yezidi and Kadie Shrogh", "the Prophet Mohammed and Ochag Shikhadi", "the Battle Yezidi with Arabs".

As we see, the rivalry of Yezids with Muslim Kurds (mainly with Sunni Muslims) is inherent to the very foundation of the Yezidi world-view. This is why even those who wholeheartedly aspire to the "material and spiritual cultural unity of Yezidis and the Muslim Kurds, recognize certain differences in certain cultural traditions: If Muslim Kurds, who, together with the Islam also adopted written traditions, developed quite early; Yezids, using their secret alphabet ini-

⁴⁴ For example, the custom to pray every morning, turning to the sun, was widespread in historic Armenia among the Armenians in different regions. The Yezidi clergy formulated the so-called "moral code" addressing the Ottoman government with a request to exempt Yezidis from serving in the army. According to the third paragraph of the letter: "Every day, during daylight, every Yezidi should be on their knees to pray on the spot where a sunbeam falls on condition that he did not see any Muslim, Christian or Jew." Indeed, to this day every Yezidi especially at the sunrise turns its face to the sun three times and bows to it.

⁴⁵ Asatryan G. S., Religion of Yezidis (main deity, the sacred books) / Historical-Philological Journal, 1989, N 4 (127), p. 136 (in Armenian). According to written sources, Adi was an outstanding scientist and philosopher, one of the most famous preachers in secular circles of his time. Some of the writings of Sheikh Adi (religious tracts, poems) were preserved, which, however, is still poorly understood and put into scientific circulation.

tially only for religious purposes,⁴⁶ over time have completely forgotten them; most of them were illiterate (literacy was the privilege only for a narrow circle of Yezidi clergy) and instead focused their energy and talents on folklore.⁴⁷

Finally, we should mention that the majority of the Yezidi religious heritage (prayers, traditions and legends, not counting the two holy books, which constitute a small part of this heritage) were passed from generation to generation verbally⁴⁸.

⁴⁶ These are sacramental books of Yezidism – The Book of Revelation (Kiteb-i Jalwa) and The Black Book (Mašaf-i raš). The period of writing is still not precisely determined (see: Joseph I., *Devil-Worship: The Sacred Books and Traditions of the Yezidis*. Boston, 1919, online: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/asia/sby/sby11.htm>). Yezidi cryptography consisted of 33 letters, most of which came from the Syrian Nestorian alphabet.

⁴⁷ Rudenko M. B., *Kurdish Ceremonial Poetry*, Moscow, 1982, p. 7.

⁴⁸ For the latest publications, see: Allison C., *Yezidi Oral Tradition in Iraqi Kurdistan*, Richmond, Curzon Press, 2001; Kreyenbroek Ph. G., Rashow Kh. J., *God and Sheikh Adi are Perfect: Sacred Poems and Religious Narratives from the Yezidi Tradition*, Wiesbaden, 2005.

Conclusion

Analyses of our study revealed that the construction of the Yezidi identity is based on a conservative attitude towards education and traditional upbringing of children. This made possible to maintain Yezidism's considerable influence over all spheres of family and social life. So far, representatives of the Yezidi clergy – the main ideologists of the Yezidi identity – have failed to elaborate mechanisms for modernizing the Yezidi cultural and religious heritage, which could provide a solid foundation for the construction of the Yezidi identity in the 21st century.

The ideologists of the Kurdish orientation among the Kurmanj-speaking population of the RA, by contrast, have a positive attitude towards education and see it as a way to reduce the value of the Yezidism. However, the mechanisms for constructing the Kurdish identity are first and foremost based on political factors and lack serious cultural and historical research. Consequently, the future and the vitality of this orientation are entirely dependent on political developments in the region.

Analysis of the four major ethno-differentiating factors (language, homeland, origin myths and religion) which form the identity of the Kurds and the Yezidis, suggests that the supporters of the Yezidi and Kurdish orientations among the Kurmanj-speaking population of the RA interpret them in different ways to prove the uniqueness of their respective ethnicities. In regard to language, its name and the writing system play differentiating roles. In regard to the issue of historical homeland, the decisive watershed of the identity is considered an approach according to which the large, often even abstract and unreal pre-historical motherland is getting distant from the small historical homeland.

Thirdly, through the modification of the medieval literary tradition, a new origin myth is formed contrasting the existing traditional legend. And finally, the last factor (religion) influences the formation of identities depending on the level of religiousness of a particular individual: people who do not attribute much importance to the religion of their ancestors are thus preparing the ground for the reduction of the influence of the most essential element of the Yezidi identity – the Yezidi religion.

In our research we tried to analyse processes of constructing new identities among the Kurmanj-speaking population of the RA. However, our efforts are not sufficient to examine prospects for the Kurdish and the Yezidi national movements around the world. How is the national consciousness among Kurds and Yezidis in Europe, Russia, the Middle East and the South Caucasus expressed? What similarities can be observed between the groups of the Kurmanj-speaking population living in different countries, and what are the differences? What factors influence the formation and the transformation of the Kurdish and Yezidi identities in the world? All these questions await comprehensive study, one which takes into account the further development of globalization processes that reduce the value of the borders around the world.

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