

Yezidi identity in the last century: Ethnic, national or religious?

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The Yezidi depiction of God takes the form of a peacock, symbolising the colour and beauty of the natural world. The village of Lalash, an important site for Yezidi ritual and a symbol of the distinctiveness of the people.

The aim of this paper is to explore how identity and ethnicity as distinct from other groups in the area has been seen by Yezidi Kurds throughout the last century. After the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the division of its lands into a number of countries where Yezidis live there have been many political and social changes which have had direct impact on the lives of the community, and the ways they practice and express their faith. Lalash and Jayia shangar where I spend some days to do field work and document what you read .

In Iraq, the birth place of Yezidism, where current religious leaders and pilgrim sites are based, Yezidis have been forced to show their loyalty and acceptance of the government's political demands to form a sort of coalition with the central government. After the fall of Saddam once again the Yezidis have changed their sense of affiliation, and now publicly announce that they are of Kurdish descent.

There have been seventy two genocides ordered by the Muslim rulers in the past, before the fall of the Ottomans, in order to wipe out the Yezidi community, who were often viewed as devil worshippers. After the creation of the modern states in the Middle East, these practices stopped. Therefore, Yezidis viewed the creation of these nation states, unlike their fellow Kurds or ethnically oriented minorities, as bringing a sense of security for their religious rights. It is true that these developments served to protect them from local warlords and Muslim rulers. Also, the political situation and the centralised government created opportunities in which the Yezidis began to freely express their religious ceremonies in terms of Haj and large annual gatherings attended by thousands. The government even assisted with this, allowing Yezidis to build shrines and pilgrim sites in Sanjar, a place called Lalash where the teaching of Yezidi religion takes place. The physical isolation of the place, along with its ritual significance, has helped the Yezidi communities there to develop a sense of identity separate from their neighbours which is also acceptable for the regimes in power.

Yezidi Kurds from Iraq are mostly based in an area call Jayi Sanjar (Sanjar Mountain) which was the battle ground in the war between Kurdish militias and the Iraqi regime in the past. Yezidis were in a perfect position to be manipulated in a 'divide and rule' approach to maintaining power in the area. Throughout the recent historical eras since the fall of the Ottomans, the Yezidi community has kept itself closely aligned with the changing powers in the area, Arab or Kurdish, and regardless of their particular focus on religion in the public domain. This strategy has enabled them to survive as a coherent and bounded group, and kept them safe from local religious antagonisms. (*Fuccuro, 1997:565*) As Islam is the predominant religion in the countries where Yezidis reside and practise, the hostility between Yezidi and Muslim communities discouraged Yezidis from engaging with surrounding social and political developments. This has meant the community largely maintained traditional tribal structures, and in terms of education for example, they remain largely illiterate. As the schools did not allowed the religion of Yezidi thought into the curriculum, communities have often responded by not sending their children to schools. Endogamy is practised by these Yezidi communities, and intermarriage with any one out side yezidi religion is strictly forbidden. On occasions, acting in contradiction to this has even carried death orders from the Yezidi religious leadership.



The traditional Yezidi livelihood of semi-nomadic herding persists. Yezidis have been persecuted historically for their perceived 'devil worship', partly due to the importance of the symbol of the black snake and the use of fire to their rituals and beliefs.

Given the religious differences between Yezidi Kurds and other Muslim Kurds, which worked to their advantage, the government started by 'Arabising' the Yezidi Kurds, encouraging them to change their identity on their Iraqi ID cards from Kurdish to Arab ethnicity. Their religious book was published in Arabic, and their religious leader offered a seat in the Iraqi National Parliament. As well, financial development grants have been offered to the area in a bid to ensure the loyalty of the Yezidi Kurds to the government.

After the fall of Saddam, past developments with respect to Yezidis which had taken place under his regime began to unravel. The Yezidis began to reinvent themselves as Kurds, to the extent that changes to their formal dress code (which used to be Arabic in style) in a Kurdish style have begun in a few short years. Also, their religious books are now printed in Kurdish by the Iraqi Kurdish authorities, and the community has now been giving special treatment socially and politically by the new regime.

Cohen, in *Two-Dimensional Man* talks about the power order and the symbolic order as interdependent, and points out that this symbiotic nature has often been overlooked by wider social and political science. His explanation suggests that power and symbolism function together to maintain social institutions, and that adaptations in either system can be affected by changes in the other. (Cohen, 1974:23-24)

In the case of the Yezidi community in Iraq, we in fact see that there is a close parallel between political events and the ways their ritual and symbolic order respond or adapt to wider political events. Their position of privilege has always been maintained by a creative manipulation of religious identity, by aligning it at times with Arab leadership, at times with Kurdish ethnicity. Therefore, by creating a distinct boundary of "Yezidi

identity” they can operate in relation to the changing power order regardless of who fills the role of Iraqi leadership.



Yezidi architecture is closely linked to landscape, As power order divides between economic and A Yezidi temple custodian lights 351 torches around the temple each night at 5pm. He is followed by an individual who will bless each light with a kiss.

political powers, the economic and political, are indistinguishable one from the other. They certainly differ in a number of respects. The relationships which they govern are formally regulated by different mechanisms. Political power is ultimately maintained by physical coercion. Economic power is ultimately maintained by reward and deprivation.

Similarly, the institutions of kinship and ritual, though distinct in form, have a great deal in common, and the separation between them is often arbitrary and sometimes misleading. They are both normative, governed by categorical imperatives, or ‘oughts’ that are rooted in the psychic structure of men in society through continuous socialisation.

Cohen’s discussion of the relationship between the ‘two dimensions’ can be a useful tool in looking at the case of the Yezidis. Throughout the last century, Yezidis have not been a politically oriented community, and traditionally kept distance from active political participation. At the same time, they have been present in the political arena by using their alignments to gain privilege, siding with those who were in power. While there has been number of political changes and shifts of power in the area, the Yezidis have maintained they loyalty to the power order. In this way, their symbolic systems have always remained relevant and powerful as a source of identity to the Yezidi population,

while being adapted as a useful political resource in managing relations with other power groups.

Emile Durkheim, on the other hand, says that church members (who here we can understand as any religiously based community), find “...the beliefs and practices of his religious life ready-made at birth; their existence prior to his own implies their existence outside of him self. The system of signs I use to express my thought, the system of currency I employ to pay my debts, the instruments of credit I utilize in my commercial relations, the practices followed in my profession, etc function independently of my own use of them”. (Durkheim 1909:85)



Recent political changes mean the Yezidis have changed from Arabic to Kurdish styles in their material culture, including style of dress and script in religious texts. The recent Iraqi free elections brought a change in power to the Yezidi areas in the north. The Kurds are in power and the Yezidi interests themselves have been voiced. Kurdish identity, in language and other areas, has re-emerged as a factor in the lives.

Durkheim argues that social facts are real because their effects can be felt. People are compelled to live according the rules of their society and violate them at their peril. While Cohen’s ideas about the power order and politics suggest that they always work together, Durkheim’s ideas seems to view religion as fixed in society, and not necessarily associated with other aspects of life. Looking at the case of Yezidis in present day Iraq, we see that while the image of this community is one of isolation and cultural distinctness, they have also adapted to changing social and political situations. Yezidi identity has even been used as a way to maintain good relations with those in power. This can be observed in material culture as much as beliefs, as in the example of the changes to religious texts and dress codes of contemporary Yezidis. We might say that from the perspective of the Yezidis themselves, Durkheim’s ideas seem most accurate, however if we look at things from an external perspective, we see that the close interaction between power order and behaviours surrounding religious practice illustrates Cohen’s ideas about the ‘two dimensions’ of man. Each act and belief is a political one and a symbolic one.



The Yezidi pir, leaders of the Yezidi temples, are both unmarried men and women who officiate at rituals, including sacrifice. Their belief includes many folk traditions such as way to request for blessing and luck. Yezidis believe the bridge symbolises ascent to the heavens.

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