Khanna Omarkhali

The Yezidi Religious Textual Tradition: From Oral to Written

Categories, Transmission, Scripturalisation and Canonisation of the Yezidi Oral Religious Texts

with Samples
of Oral and Written Religious Texts

and with Audio and Video Samples
on CD-ROM

2017
Harrassowitz Verlag · Wiesbaden

Contents

Excursus

Part II

Introduction

My poor one of little patience
If agreements come from the dear Angel Fexredîn
We shall give descriptions of the deep oceans
(i.e. religious knowledge).

The Hymn of the Weak Broken One
(*Qewlê Zebûnî Meksûr*)[1]

The academic study of the religion and culture of the Yezidis has made great advances, notably in the past twenty years. Nevertheless, several lacunas are still to be filled. The main considerations that led the writer to undertake the research here were, firstly, that the religious traditions and practices of the Yezidi community as a whole, and various local communities individually have in the past decades been subject to many profound changes, not least in areas affecting the transmission of their sacred texts and religious lore. Secondly, at the time of writing, academic literature lacks a detailed systematic description and analysis of several factors informing that transmission and its reception, both in more traditional and progressive environments. Part I of this study mainly elucidates both how the Yezidi religious textual tradition functioned, and to a certain degree still functions in its 'pre-modern' way, and also the new transformations that it is undergoing. Many aspects of the Yezidi religious textual tradition are studied here for the first time, and the work provides a comprehensive or near-comprehensive survey and analysis of the 'mechanisms' of the transmission and reception of the tradition by its followers. Part II is the first attempt to list and categorise the extant Yezidi religious oral texts with all their known variants. It thus provides material that may serve as a basis for further detailed scientific analysis of the different aspects touched upon here.

Yezidism, traditionally based primarily on orthopraxy, is undergoing profound changes as it finds itself in new circumstances resulting from migrations, modernisation, globalisation, the role of the media and other external and internal influences. These developments can only be judged on the basis of detailed information, gathered with the help of inductive fact-orientated approach. An important reason for the lack of a detailed study of these topics may be found in the fact that such a task requires intimate 'emic' and 'etic' knowledge of the Yezidi tradition. The present author combines academic qualifications as an Iranist and specialist in Religious Studies with the status of a Yezidi Pîr, and grew up in an atmosphere of religious learning. This meant that she had access to first-hand knowledge of many aspects of

1 See Excursus I.

the Yezidi religious tradition. Moreover, some of her interlocutors spoke to her with greater openness than they might have done to an outsider.

The Yezidi religious tradition, both sacred texts and priestly learning, was transmitted orally in a non- or semi-literate milieu until recently. Apart from Armenia, it was not until the mid-20th century that literacy became widespread among Yezidis (or at least Yezidi males), and started to affect community culture. Furthermore, a large percentage of the Yezidi inhabitants of Turkey, and somewhat later many Yezidis from Iraq, migrated to Western Europe in the second half of the 20th century. The development of increased literacy accelerated acceptance of Western ways and concepts, which was to lead to a profound change in the way the leadership of the community thought of and defined its religion. Whereas orthopraxy and the individual spiritual authority of hereditary religious leaders had traditionally been key factors defining the Yezidi tradition, now questions began to be asked about general religious principles and teachings, and about the basis of religious knowledge and authority generally. Members of the traditional 'priestly' classes, who were mainly responsible for transmitting the oral sacred texts, have been forced to yield much of their authority to community members who are more highly educated within the Western system. Many Yezidis, both in the Middle East and Armenia and in the Diaspora now regard the lack of a written tradition as a severe impediment to the religious 'emancipation' of the Yezidi community. Given that a few sacred hymns began to be committed to writing in the 1970s, and that this process has continued, this is a unique opportunity to witness the transformation of a body of orally transmitted religious texts into a collection of written texts that may come to be regarded as a Yezidi equivalent to the Scriptures of other religions.

Yezidism is based in the Kurdish-speaking areas of the Middle East and the Caucasus as well as in Europe. As Yezidis have not a written Sacred Book, they are not considered by Muslims *ahl al-kitāb* ('people of the Book').[2] From August 2014 onwards, the Yezidis of Shingal (Ar. Sinjār) have been subjected to severe persecution by the 'Islamic State of Iraq and Syria' (ISIS), which refers to Yezidis as 'infidels' (*kāfir*) and 'devil worshippers', whose only options are to convert to Islam or be killed.[3] Many villages located in southern Kurdistan have become ghost towns in

2 *Ahl al-kitāb* 'people of the Book'; a term used to designate non-Muslim adherents to faiths which have a revealed scripture, usually referring to Jews and Christians. According to this, 'people of the Book' can choose between staying in their religion and paying *jizyah* (a religious tax), or converting to Islam.

3 As of 3 August 2014, thousands of Yezidi men had been publicly executed for not converting to Islam; about 6,000 women and girls (some even not more than 8 years old) were kidnapped and brought to the slave market. Practically all Yezidis from Shingal (approximately 350,000) have fled the area. On 10 January 2016 158,421 people were registered in the camps of Iraqi Kurdistan; about 322,225 people remain outside of the camps. Of the total number of these people, about 90% are Yezidis. At the same time, 21,632 people are staying in Shingal. The author owes this information to Mr Dayan Cefer Hamo, the refugee camp manager in Khanke, Iraqi Kurdistan (p.c. on 14 January 2016). See also DULZ, I. 'The displacement of the Yezidis after the rise of ISIS in Northern Iraq', *Kurdish Studies* 4(2), Special issue: Yezidism and Yezidi

the aftermath of the ISIS attacks. These attacks have not merely precipitated mass killings and forced conversion to Islam, as well as migrations and dislocations, but have also caused grave disruptions in Yezidi community life, which have in turn given rise to great changes in the Yezidi worldview and their religious practice and have led to the further erosion of the traditional religious system which may have consequences for the way the religion and its texts will be transmitted in future.

The cultural framework within which the Yezidi religious textual and oral commentary traditions have existed, i.e. both its content and its 'pre-modern' cultural context, need to be studied in order to achieve a proper understanding of the original Yezidi religious tradition[4] and of the modern transformational processes occurring in Yezidi society. Scholars of Yezidi Studies are now at the stage where they need to document as much information as possible, and to review, and in some cases to reinterpret, what has already been published. The history of the publication and study of Yezidi religious and semi-religious texts can be divided into four periods, i.e. up to 1978, from 1978 to 1993, from 1993 to 2005, and from 2005 onwards. During the period prior to 1978 earlier authors were mainly concerned with discovering the 'roots' of Yezidism, but a few oral religious texts were also published. In 1978 and 1979 three collections of Yezidi religious texts both in Soviet Russia and in Iraq were published by four Yezidi intellectuals (the CELÎL brothers in Russia and SILÊMAN and CINDÎ in Iraq).[5] These collections, however, were virtually unknown to scholarship and not referred to until much later. An important stage of the development is marked by the appearance of the English translation of the texts and the study of the Yezidi religious textual tradition in the West in the early 1990s by MURAD 1993[6] and KREYENBROEK 1995,[7] resulting in the profound work by KREYENBROEK and RASHOW in 2005.[8] Since these books appeared there has been a tendency to base accounts of Yezidism on an inductive approach and on factual observations. In 2005

Studies in the early 21st century, guest edited by OMARKHALI, Kh. and KREYENBROEK, Ph., London, 2016, pp. 131–147.

4 The Yezidi religious oral tradition, which comprises both oral 'texts' and other aspects of Yezidi religious knowledge, is handed down through practices, religious values, etc. that are considered by all Yezidis to be 'old', fundamental and valued information, and are shared by everyone in the traditional society. See also *Notes on terminology* in Chapter II.

5 CELÎL, O. and CELÎL, C., *Zargotina Kurda* (Kurdish Folklore), Moscow, 1978a. Religious texts: pp. 5–53 (numbered 711–728); CELÎL, O. and CELÎL, C., *Zargotina Kurda* (Kurdish Folklore), Yerevan, 1978b. Religious texts: pp. 302–464 (numbered 1677–1714); SILÊMAN, X. and CINDÎ, X. [RASHOW, Khalil Jindy], *Êzdiyatî: liber Roşnaya Hindek Têkstêd Aîniyî Êzdiyan* (Yezidism: in the Light of some Religious Texts of the Yezidis), Baghdad, 1979.

6 MURAD, J. E., *The Sacred Poems of the Yazidis: an Anthropological Approach*, unpubl. thesis, University of California, Order No. 9422024, Los Angeles, 1993. As MURAD's thesis has not been published and is known only to a limited number of scholars, it did not have such an effect as the book of KREYENBROEK 1995.

7 KREYENBROEK, Ph. G., *Yezidism: Its Background, Observances and Textual Tradition*, Lewiston New York, 1995.

8 KREYENBROEK, Ph. G. and RASHOW, Kh. J., *God and Sheikh Adi are Perfect: Sacred Poems and Religious Narratives from the Yezidi Tradition*, Wiesbaden, 2005.

KREYENBROEK and RASHOW stated that "We have almost no adequate descriptions of traditional Yezidi culture at present..." and added that it was to be expected that much traditional knowledge would be lost within the coming two or three decades.[9]

During fieldwork among the Yezidis of Iraq, Armenia and Europe for an earlier project (2006–2010), the present author witnessed profound changes taking place that can be discussed only once the gaps in our knowledge of the 'mechanisms' of transmission and developments of the Yezidi religious textual tradition are filled. This work aims to improve our understanding of the data at our disposal so far by presenting a detailed account of the 'mechanisms' underlying various aspects of the Yezidi religious tradition. It also aims to provide its readers with a clear view of what is preserved, and what is lost or changed in the period of transmission of the Yezidi religious knowledge. Finally, it examines the themes and processes involved in scripturalisation and the debates among Yezidis on the formation of a Canon.

Methodological Considerations: Sources and Research

The Yezidi religious tradition itself, as well as the transformation processes occurring in the different communities, is not universal for Yezidis in all places. This research has been done mainly on the basis of the two Yezidi communities of Iraq and Armenia,[10] as well as in the Diaspora (Germany and Russia). There are core aspects of the religious tradition common to all communities, while minor features might vary, or rather, dominate in one place and be ill-defined or absent in another. In the present work, the author will differentiate which community is referred to whenever the differences between them are relevant.

Nowadays, two types of the current Yezidi tradition co-exist, frequently confronting each other, i.e. 'traditional' and 'modernist'. It should be stressed here that the author does not intend to present the Yezidi tradition as comprising a strict dichotomy between 'traditional' and 'modern' types, but rather to show that these are extremes in a fluid spectrum. However, the important difference between these ways of understanding the tradition, which are often intertwined with and supplementing each other, is still ignored by many researchers. The present work will seek to describe both 'traditional' Yezidism, or rather, its various traditional local forms, and the 'modern' form or forms that are now emerging. Though contacts between different local forms of Yezidi tradition(s) have intensified, the traditional, generally accepted form of the religion, as exemplified by the standards found at Lalish, is still dominant in most communities.

9 KREYENBROEK and RASHOW 2005: XIV.

10 It seems plausible to assume that the Yezidi tradition in Armenia preserved many elements that are absent among Yezidis in other communities and that are surprisingly remnants of what could be called the Indo-Iranian substratum. More fieldwork is, however, needed to verify these assumptions.

This work studies a number of different topics, which required different methodological approaches. During her research for the book the author used methods of research that were appropriate to the nature of a particular investigation. For the study of living oral religious traditions and performances of religion, fieldwork and qualitative research methods were the main approaches adopted. Furthermore, many little-known texts were collected, and the translation and comparative analysis of orally transmitted religious texts played an important role. In order to gain information on the exegetical tradition and several other aspects of 'priestly' learning, in-depth interviews were conducted with Yezidi specialists on religion. It is hoped that deeper analysis will follow the development of the information presented in this work.

The author travelled widely and conducted fieldwork among Yezidis from all parts of Kurdistan, as well as in the Diaspora, in about 90 cities and villages. The main places where the author worked were: Iraq (2006, 2008–2010 and 2011), Armenia (2006 and 2007), as well as Germany (2006–2013) and the Russian Federation (2005, 2008 and 2013). Visits to other communities helped the author to gain a better understanding of the Yezidi tradition and its transformations in the Diaspora: the Crimea (2004), Ukraine (2004), the Netherlands (2005 and 2006), France (2012 and 2013) and Austria (2013).

Observational method

The methods included participant observation, where participation in religious events and performances, sometimes supported by interviews, helped to better understand and describe the function and Yezidis' perception of their religious texts. During her residence in Armenia, Russia and Germany for about ten years in each country, and through fieldwork in the Yezidi communities in Iraq, the author participated in various religious events in Lalish and different villages and towns in Iraq, Armenia, Russia, Ukraine and Germany, where she could observe and record performances of the sacred texts.[11]

Qualitative research

One of the key sources for this research became extensive qualitative interviews[12] with Yezidi experts in religious knowledge in the homeland(s) and in the Diaspora.

11 The events include 1) big religious festivals, such as *ʿEyda Serê Salê* (New Year), *ʿEyda Êzîd* (the feast in the name of *Êzîd*); 2) local feasts, such as *Tiwaf*s in different villages in Iraq; *roja ziyaretê*, i.e. the day of the pilgrimage to the recently built sacred place in Shamiram, Armenia; 3) rites of passage, such as the initiation ceremonies *bisk birîn* ('cut of the lock [of hair]) and *mor kirin* (lit. 'sealing'), i.e. an initiation ceremony in the water of the sacred spring Kaniya Sipî ('white spring'); funeral and mourning ceremonies (*ser miriya*), recitations at a grave (*ser mezela*), during the memorial (*ser xêrê*), etc.; 4) other rituals, e.g., sacrifices of animals (*qurban*) during religious feasts or special events; opening the sacred objects, such as manuscripts *mişûr*, incantation bowls (*tas*), sacred keys (*kilît*), etc.

12 As a result of long hours of semi-structured and unstructured qualitative interviews, much more

The method adopted was that of qualitative non-directive (unstructured and semi-structured), individual (mainly of key informants) and group interviews. In some cases, the author made a second or third trip to a place either to check the information or to obtain specific details. In total, the author interviewed about one hundred people in different countries between the ages of 20 and 94; however, not all of them contributed to this work directly. Besides the experts in religious knowledge, the author also met and interviewed different men of religion important in the community (like Mîr Tehsîn Beg, Bavê Çawîş, Bavê Şêx and others), who helped her to gain a better understanding of the Yezidi religious tradition. She visited and interviewed *qewal*s, performers of Yezidi sacred texts, including the head of all other *qewal*s, Qewal Silêman, in Beʿshiqe and Behzane villages near Mosul city.[13] Most information was obtained from the key informants, i.e. experts in religious knowledge (see List of Informants).

Translation

Practically all Kurdish texts are presented with English translations and in many cases with comments. The book includes also translations of some texts from Arabic, Gorani, and Russian. As Alan WILLIAMS writes, "Until recently, translation was something done without much methodological thinking applied to it...", while in fact it "discloses major methodological problems in our field".[14] The main difficulty in translating the religious oral compositions lies not in the differences between the *source language* (Kurmanji (variants) of the Yezidi texts, Gorani, and Arabic) and the *target language* (in this case, English), but in cultural differences, which can make it difficult to render the nuances of the original in the target language. Although Kurdish and English belong to the Indo-European language family, the Kurmanji of the Yezidi religious texts is not always easy to translate accurately into English. Here the author has provided explanatory footnotes where the nuances of meaning could not be rendered directly into English. In translating the Kurdish texts for this book, the author has regularly consulted Yezidi experts in the religious tradition.

Work with private archives

The information collected during fieldwork was supplemented by the consultation of private archives of Yezidis both in Iraq and in Armenia. Much important material is preserved and kept in such archives; besides 'incantation bowls' (*tas*) and other sacred objects (e.g., *senceq*, *xerqe*, *hile*), their contents may include sacred manuscripts (e.g., *Mişûr*s, *Mişûra Reş Belek*); handwritten collections of religious texts (*keşkûl*, *defter*, *kitêb*); audio cassettes with recordings of recitations of religious texts

information was collected than could be published in a single work.

13 The region was at the time of visiting highly unsafe and in 2014 fell under the control of ISIS, causing the villagers to leave their homes.

14 WILLIAMS, A., 'Translation', in M. STAUSBERG and S. ENGLER (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*, London and New York, 2014 pp. 421–432.

and commentaries, which were usually recorded by an expert on the religious texts for the family in question; video cassettes from 1970s onward, of Yezidi religious events, which often document various types of performances of religious texts as well as sermons. In the author's own family archive she found an unpublished collection of more than 30 handwritten religious texts, and an extensive catechism. These were written down by a *Pîr* from Armenia in 1974 in order to preserve the Yezidi religious texts and their explanation for his family.

The writer as a researcher and a Yezidi Pîr

There were neither language nor cultural or religious barriers between the present author and the informants in establishing rapport, i.e. trusting relationships with representatives of the religious group. The writer's status as a member of the Yezidi 'priestly' class of Pîrs (both her grandfathers being well known *ʿulmdar*s,[15] i.e. experts in religious knowledge) helped to create a rapport easily and quickly amongst Yezidis. For the conservative informants from Iraq, especially from Shingal, besides belonging to the Pîr family, prior knowledge of the sacred tradition was one of the most important factors that enabled the author, being a woman in her mid-twenties to thirty, to interact with the older male experts on religious issues easily. This status also gave her access to community debates and discussions, as well as to the handwritten collections of the religious texts, sacred and 'incantation manuscripts',[16] sacred objects that would not be easily accessible to non-Yezidis or even to Yezidi laymen.[17] Moreover, being a woman, the author had access to both 'worlds', and could participate in the religious observances and record recitations by both men and women, who may often sit separately during the events. It became apparent that some Yezidi women also know the religious texts, and are involved in the process of their transmission, usually performing these before female audiences, but sometimes also before men.

Aims and Points of Focus

It is true that writing has begun to play an increasing role in modern Yezidi society, but the question to what extent writing has played or plays a role in Yezidi traditional society remains obscure. Chapter I aims to demonstrate the status and role of the various types of older Yezidi 'religious' handwritten collections, catechisms and

15 On the terminology of experts in religious knowledge see Chapter IV or Glossary of Terms.

16 The term 'incantation manuscript' may wrongly suggest a manuscript filled with incantations, rather than one which in itself serves as a way of 'magically' contacting the divine. However, the phenomenon probably has no parallels in the English-speaking world, and the author decided to use 'incantation manuscript'. The author thanks Prof. KREYENBROEK for drawing her attention to this term.

17 Information that informants requested remain unpublished and discussed only in inner circles has not been included, as promised by the present author, in this publication.

manuscripts that are still unstudied or even unknown to Western scholarship. It shows that, contrary to general assumptions by Western scholars, Yezidism is not a *purely* oral tradition, but that writing has also played a role, especially in the development of Yezidism in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. It shows that the role of these manuscripts is different from that familiar in the West. Moreover, the use of writing as an *aide-mémoire* is attested among Yezidi experts of the 20th century (see Chapter I). Though the author stresses the predominantly oral character of Yezidism, she would like to avoid overgeneralised claims that it is a *purely* oral tradition. She follows FINNEGAN and others in rejecting a strong polarisation of orality and literacy,[18] and draws attention to the interaction processes between oral and written traditions occurring over the course of time in Yezidism, as well as their reciprocal impact. Even if some written texts have not been read by the Yezidis themselves, they have influenced their religious tradition(s) possibly through other traditions flourishing in the region. A number of 'foreign' elements found in Yezidism have partly arisen through the absorption and successful incorporation of some elements of the popular oral tradition(s) of the region.[19]

Chapter II gives a description of the various categories of Yezidi sacred texts, including the community's own 'hierarchical' classification of these texts. This chapter aims to elucidate the questions of dating, composition, putative authorship and melodies, as well as the structure of these categories. This study seeks to identify the main criteria for classifying a Yezidi religious text as belonging to a particular category – whether they are its traditional classification or its form, content and function.

18 Ruth FINNEGAN argues against the clear division of orality and literacy that was formulated by PARRY and LORD. See FINNEGAN, R., *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance and Social Context*, Cambridge, London, New York, Melbourne, 1977. FINNEGAN (1977: 272) suggests instead "that the oral/written distinction, so far as it exists, is more like a continuum (or perhaps a complex set of continuums) than a sharp break between two separate categories." ALLISON believes that not only do terms such as 'literacy' and 'orality' have different meanings in different contexts, referring to STREET (1984), but in Kurdistan they do not exist in isolation from each other. See ALLISON, Ch., 'Kurdish oral literature', in Ph. G. KREYENBROEK and U. MARZOLPH (eds.), *Oral Literature of Iranian Languages: Kurdish, Pashto, Balochi, Ossetic, Persian and Tajik*, companion volume II: A History of Persian Literature, I.B. London and New York, 2010, p. 35.

19 For more on the influence of Late Antique motifs on Yezidism see for example SPÄT, E., *Late Antique Motifs in Yezidi Oral Tradition*, Piscataway, NJ, Gorgias Dissertations in Religion 52, 2010. For a review of this book see OMARKHALI, Kh., review of E. SPÄT 'Late Antique Motifs in Yezidi Oral Tradition. Piscataway, New Jersey: Gorgias Press LLC 2010. XVII, 549 S. (Gorgias Dissertations in Religion 52.) ISBN 978-1-60724-998-6)', *ZDMG* 164, 2, Wiesbaden, 2014b, pp. 571–574. Moreover, the existence of different passages from the Torah and the Bible in Kurdish in their oral form is known. See OMARKHALI, Kh. (ed.), *Religious Minorities in Kurdistan: Beyond the Mainstream*, Series: Studies in Oriental Religions, vol. 68, Wiesbaden, 2014c. An oralisation of the written texts, not exclusively those of Yezidis, can be observed in the Yezidi religious literature. These texts could be oralised not by Yezidis, but picked up from the neighbouring oral traditions that flourished in the area. The majority of such texts are included in the category *Beyt*, e.g. *Beyt* of Feqiyê Teyran, *Beyta Zembîlfiroş* ('The *Beyt* of the Basket Seller'), and some others.

Yezidi religious knowledge is also transmitted through the *çîrok* ('story, tale') tradition, which supplements the religious 'orthodox' knowledge based on the orally transmitted sacred poems. Chapter III aims to demonstrate the religious *çîrok* tradition, which forms the basis of the Yezidi exegetical tradition and is developed entirely orally. To illustrate the nature and role of such 'stories' Chapter III will include an analysis of a number of *çîrok*s, mainly recorded by the author during her fieldwork, which deal with Cosmogony and Cosmology, including anthropogonical myths, focusing on the transformation from chaos into cosmos. It is shown that the religious hymns, which contain an 'orthodox' or 'official' version of Cosmogony, provide sporadic and extremely brief information about the transformation of chaos into cosmos, and only fragmented references to the creation of Adam, while the commentary tradition, with *çîrok*s as its basis, provides many more details on the issue, which forms an important part of the Yezidi *Weltanschauung*.

The Yezidi poetic, sacred texts have been memorised and transmitted verbatim through the efforts of the experts in religious knowledge, who learn, reproduce and comment on the texts from one generation to the next. The question of what the teaching and learning practices in Yezidi traditional society are like has never been studied. Because of the rapid transformations, it seems that in a few years it will hardly be possible to reconstruct the way an expert in religious knowledge becomes such. Chapter IV provides new detailed information on how professional reciters are trained and the path they follow to become experts in religious knowledge. The types of performances are also studied. This chapter challenges the accepted points of view that, for example, *qewal*s are the main carriers and transmitters of the religious textual tradition; or that the fact that laymen (Mirîds) are also bearers of the religious tradition constitutes a modern innovation; or that women are excluded from the process of transmitting religious knowledge.

The transmission of Yezidi poetic, sacred texts is achieved by the oral tradition through the memorisation and repetition of these compositions and the performance of rituals during which many are recited. The process of passing on sacred texts orally in different religious traditions has been studied less intensively than is the case with epic traditions. Chapter V investigates whether, or to what extent the Yezidis' claim that their religious texts are transmitted word for word is valid. An attempt is also made to discover which aspects or elements of the tradition are comparatively predisposed to changes and which are not, i.e. whether variation is more prone to occur in certain aspects of the textual tradition and of individual texts than in others, and to specify the parameters within which these variations occur. This involves analysis of a number of variants of the orally transmitted poetic texts from different traditions. This chapter includes two exclusive performances of the hymn by the same person, but separated by 31 years, demonstrating not the presumed process of forgetting, but instead a return to a fuller version of the text over time.

As mentioned above, from the late 20th century on, the Yezidi religious texts started to be recorded and published. This process was initiated by the Yezidis themselves from all three 'castes' (the brothers Ordîxanê CELÎL and Celîlê CELÎL –

Mirîds from Armenia – and Pîr Xidir SILÊMAN and Sheikh Xelîl Cindî REŞO from Iraq). The beginning of the 21st century brought a more active textualisation of tradition, especially in Iraq and in the Diaspora, using as a platform various periodicals, e.g. the *Laliş* journal financed by the Kurdish Regional Government, or the *Roj* journal published in Germany.

Yezidism is responding to modernisation and exploiting the new technologies that make it possible to mass-produce and publish Yezidi religious texts. The media have brought new, non-traditional 'vehicles' for transmission of the religious knowledge, which have consequently caused major shifts in the status of authority. Yezidi traditional religious knowledge was kept in the hands and memories of a specially trained group of people (see Chapter IV), whereas it is now available to anyone who is interested. Thus, traditional experts have lost their significance, especially in the eyes of the younger generation, who prefer more established and historically verified explanations that are more appropriate for Western culture. The expectations placed on the knowledge have also changed. There have been attempts among Yezidi intellectuals to reformulate, systematise and partly standardise the Yezidi religion. The initial stages of the process of the scripturalisation of orally transmitted Yezidi religious literature have become one of the reasons for raising the question of forming a Canon. We are in fact in the presence of a unique phenomenon, namely the scripturalising and perhaps canonisation of the orally transmitted tradition, and are witnessing the attempts to create a Canon (see further Chapter VI).

The work has three excursus to Part I: 1) sixteen (including variants) religious texts translated into English and extensively commented; 2) the Yezidi manuscript Mishūr of Pīr Khatīb Pisī ibn Pīr Būtār (Kurd. Pîr Xetîb Pisî Pîr Bûtar), which is thought to have been written in the first part of the 13th century CE in Lalish, and is now edited and translated into English for the first time; 3) two samples of a comparative analysis of two different storylines (*çîrok*s) to demonstrate the transmission of prose narratives in the Yezidi religious tradition, where the first is a comparison of three accounts of the myth (there is a gap of almost 120 years between the first and the third variants) and the second is a comparison of two variants of the myth narrated by the same person with a gap of two years.

Part II of the work presents the most comprehensive survey to date of the extant Yezidi sacred texts. It includes two long tables, the first of which is a list of Yezidi religious oral texts (over 1,150 texts including variants). It comprises both hitherto unpublished texts and those which were published in various alphabets in different places from 1891 to 2013. The second table includes the first survey on the status, performance, putative authorship and melody of about 100 'authentic' religious hymns (*Qewl*s), which is fully based on the author's fieldwork and checked by a number of local experts.

The book is accompanied by a CD with 71 video and audio tracks documenting performances (in religious events) and recordings of religious texts made in the course of interviews, with a total time of 208 minutes. It is the first so comprehen-

sive a collection of the extant distinct melodies of the Yezidi religious oral poetic compositions, a still unstudied area.

The work includes four maps, drawn for this book, showing the Yezidi settlements in 2012 in Iraq, Armenia and the Russian Federation. It also has a glossary of terms with more than 50 items related to this subject, and a list of Yezidi lineages.

Excursus: Some Key Elements of Yezidism

Definitions and identity

Yezidism, which is often called a sect, a denomination or a religion in the literature, is a non-proselytising religion, called *êzdiyatî* or *êzdîtî* by its adherents. It exists in a form that is not systematically classified, but which is fragmented in the minds of different Yezidis (self-appellation: *êzdî*) or rather Yezidi communities. Most Yezidis claim a Kurdish identity, while some Yezidis in the Caucasus and Shingal claim to belong to the separate Yezidi *ethnicity* and often call their religion *Şerfedîn* (Šaraf al-Dīn, 'Honour of the Religion').[20]

Language

Kurmanji, the northern dialect of the Kurdish language, is the mother tongue of the Yezidis, wherever they live, and the language of practically all of their sacred texts. It can be referred to as a sub-dialect of a region, like *behdînî*, and it may also be referred to by some Yezidis in Armenia and Georgia as *êzdikî*. Yezidis in the Beʿshiqe and Behzane villages, however, speak predominantly Arabic and this was the centre where mainly the *qewal*s were responsible for the transmission of some poetic religious texts in Arabic. Most Yezidis, however, can speak at least another language of the country they live in; many 'Soviet Yezidis' have grown up trilingual.

20 The Yezidi textual tradition strongly suggests that Şerfedîn is a saviour figure, who is currently absent from the known world but will return at the end of time (see KREYENBROEK and RASHOW 2005: 4, 33).

Geographical distribution and religious centre

According to unofficial estimates, the world-wide population of Yezidis is slightly above 600,000, i.e. 2.3% of the Kurdish population. They live mainly in Iraq, Syria, Turkey, but also in Armenia and Georgia. The majority of the Yezidis from Armenia and Georgia settled there in the beginning of the 20th century after religious oppression from the Ottoman Empire. There is also some evidence of the existence of Yezidis in Iran.[21]

From the 1980s, at least four migrations of Yezidis from the homeland(s) to different European countries took place: 1) migration from Turkey to Germany in the 1980s; 2) many Iraqi Yezidis returning to Europe in the late 1980s–1990s; 3) there was a massive migration from Armenia and Georgia to the Russian Federation, Ukraine and Europe in the 1990s; 4) and from 3 August 2014 practically all Yezidis from Shingal (around 320,000) were forced to leave the region because of the genocide by the ISIS, which later caused mass waves of migration of Iraqi Yezidis to Europe. Yezidis now also live in other countries of Western Europe and in the United States of America.

The only traditional Yezidi religious centre, Lalish, is located in Iraqi Kurdistan, in the Sheikhan region. It is in Lalish that the tomb of Sheikh ʿAdī ibn Musāfir Hakkārī (see below, further referred to as Sheikh ʿAdî), the main Yezidi pilgrimage site, is located. Besides Lalish, Yezidis have many sacred places and other pilgrimage sites, many of which were destroyed by the ISIS militants in Shingal and the Beʿshiqe and Behzane villages in 2014–2015.

Genesis and history

Throughout their history, Yezidis have suffered greatly from religious persecution, and partly due to this they have become a closed religious community, which has also led to many untrue accounts about them in the literature. In Yezidism one can find a number of elements inherent to other religions, and also some extraneous features, while the cosmogony, and many of the rituals go back to the ancient Indo-Iranian religious substratum. Sheikh ʿAdî (1073/8–1162), who was born in the village Beit Far in the Bekaa valley south of Baalbek, studied in Baghdad with ʿAbd al-Qādir AL-JĪLĀNĪ (Pers. GĪLĀNĪ), and died in Lalish, played an important role in the history of Yezidism in the twelfth century. His followers were commonly known as

21 See UPHOFF, P., *Untersuchung zur rechtlichen Stellung und Situation von nichtmuslimischen Minderheiten in Iran*, Frankfurt am Main, 2012, p. 353. Only a little information about them can be obtained, because they have always tried to stay as invisible as possible in Iran (UPHOFF 2012: 362). A British diplomat and author of a number of novels about the Qajar dynasty in Iran, James Justinian MORIER (1780–1849), mentions how a number of Yezidi tribes moved to Kermanshah and asked for permission to stay there; see MORIER, J. J., *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan*, 3 vols., London, 1824. One of the author's informants, Dîno Heso Bereket from the Dina Mirîds tribe, born in 1919 in Shingal, Iraq told the present author that during World War II he had been a prisoner of war in Iran, where he met a number of Yezidis living in the area. From the interview with Dîno Heso Bereket, 18 April 2008, Khanke, Iraqi Kurdistan.

*ʿAdawī*s. The *ʿAdawī* order acquired new life in Lalish from Ḥasan ibn ʿAdī (b. 1195). Some Yezidi tribes are cited in the historical chronicles as rulers with a sphere of influence stretching into what is now Syria and Turkey.[22]

Belief in rebirth and concept of time

Yezidis believe in rebirth of the soul, which plays an exceptional role in Yezidi religiosity and is called the 'change of [one's] shirt' (Kurd. *kirasgorîn*).[23] There is also a belief that some of the events from the time of Creation repeat themselves in cycles of history.[24] In Yezidism, different concepts of time coexist: an esoteric time sphere (Kurd. *enzel*); a cyclic course of time (Kurd. *bedîl* 'change, changing' or 'turning, revolution' or *dewr* 'rotation, period'); a linear course, which runs from the start of the creation by God to the collective eschatological end point; and three 'storms' (Kurd. *tofan*) which divide the history of Yezidism into four stages. In Yezidism, the older original concept of metempsychosis and the cyclic perception of the course of time is harmonised and coexists with the younger idea of a collective eschatology.[25]

System of belief and implicit 'theology'

The Yezidi oral religious tradition, as KREYENBROEK rightly notes, is the product of a long period of oral transmission.[26] The lack of an advanced written tradition has prevented the development of a formal 'theology', in the Western sense, or the appearance of a single, exclusive system of beliefs. KREYENBROEK adds that it has helped to shape a tradition whose underlying assumption may seem unusual to outsiders, but makes excellent sense in a relatively isolated environment.[27] As Yezidism is based on an oral tradition, one can hardly speak of Yezidi 'theology' or assume the existence of a single codified system of beliefs; they may differ from region to region and the Yezidi 'theology' up to now can be called 'implicit'. Consequently, to study the Yezidi religious tradition, it should be clearly realised that Yezidism is not a single homogeneous tradition. It is not one fixed system of belief and practice. For the modern Yezidi community, the implications of Yezidi religious teaching are now becoming increasingly important. Up to the present, no systematic study of Yezidi sacred texts exists that aims to examine the theological or doctrinal implications of the Yezidi sacred texts. An examination of the implications of this tradi-

22 See GUEST, J. S., *Survival among the Kurds: A History of the Yezidis*, London and New York, 1993.

23 Yezidis in Iraq say if somebody dies: *kiras gorî* ('changed the shirt').

24 KREYENBROEK, Ph., 'History in an oral culture: the construction of history in Yezidi sacred texts', *JKS* 6, 2008, p. 86.

25 See OMARKHALI, Kh. and REZANIA, K., 'Some reflections on the concepts of time in Yezidism', in Ch. ALLISON, A. JOISTEN-PRUSCHKE, and A. WENDTLAND (eds.), *From Dāena to Dîn. Religion, Kultur und Sprache in der iranischen Welt*, Wiesbaden, 2009, pp. 331–346.

26 KREYENBROEK 1995: 19ff.

27 KREYENBROEK 1995: 19.

tional 'theology', e.g. the implicit understanding of the roles of God, the Lord of this World (i.e. the leader of the Seven – Tawûsî Melek), and other Sacred Beings in Yezidism is of enormous importance.[28] In the traditional Yezidi environment, where Yezidis live in compact settlements, it was not necessary to answer such questions as what the 'essence' of their religion is, usually asked by outsiders. Now many Yezidis live in a non-Yezidi multi-religious environment. It is the first time in the history of Yezidism that its adherents have attempted to find a way to explain their 'theology' by themselves, to do what they have never done before – to put into words their understandings of the theological aspects of their own religion that would bring it in line with Western theologies.

Yezidis believe in one God, whom they refer to as *Xwedê*, *Êzdan*, and, less commonly, *Heq*.[29] In Yezidism, fire, water, air and the earth are sacred elements that are not to be polluted. During prayer Yezidis face towards the sun, for which they were often called 'sun worshipers'. The Yezidi myth of Creation begins with the description of the emptiness and the absence of order in the Universe. Prior to the Creation of the World God created a white pearl (Kurd. *dur*) in the spiritual form from his own pure Light and alone dwelt in it. First there was an esoteric world, and after that an exoteric world was created. Before the creation of this world God created seven[30] Divine Beings (often called 'angels' in the literature), the leader of whom was appointed *Tawûsî Melek* ('Peacock Angel'). God assigned all the world's affairs to the seven Divine Beings. The end of Creation is closely connected with the creation of mankind and the transition from mythological to historical time.[31]

Yezidis believe not only that they are the people chosen by God, who will be rescued at the End of Time, but also that they were created differently from all other peoples.

28 In 2014, the new book on the Yezidi Holy Beings by G. S. ASATRIAN and V. ARAKELOVA appeared from the Routledge publishing house. It is, however, hardly concerned with the realities of the religious life of Yezidi communities. See the review article of the book by KREYENBROEK, Ph. and OMARKHALI, Kh., 'Yezidi Spirits? On the question of Yezidi beliefs: A review article', *Kurdish Studies* 4(2), Special issue: Yezidism and Yezidi Studies in the early 21st century, guest edited by OMARKHALI, Kh. and KREYENBROEK, Ph., London, 2016, pp. 197–207.

29 Ar. *Ḥaqq*. For more details, see OMARKHALI, Kh., 'Names of God and forms of address to God in Yezidism. With the religious Hymn of the Lord', *MO. International Journal for Oriental Manuscript Research* 15, 2, Saint Petersburg, 2009, pp. 13–24.

30 Though the Yezidis do not believe in the existence of the evil spirit in opposition to God, they believe in the existence of seven main *jinn*s. There is, however, no strong juxtaposition of seven angels as good beings and seven *jinn*s as evil ones; the latter do not figure in the Yezidi cosmogonic myths, and not perceived by Yezidis as fully evil beings, so that is why it seems problematic to describe them as opposing forces of good and evil.

31 KREYENBROEK 1992: 57–79; OMARKHALI 2009–2010: 197–219.

Social structures and priesthood hierarchy

The structure of Yezidi society probably underwent the most fundamental transformations in the 12th century during the time of Sheikh ʿAdî. There are three hereditary groups (often called castes) in Yezidism. Yezidism is not a missionary religion: membership in a Yezidi society and a 'caste' is conferred by birth. Pîrs and Sheikhs are the priesthood, which is generally called *terîq* (lit. 'path') or *ruhanî* (lit. 'spiritual; clerical') by the Yezidis from Armenia and Georgia; the term *dunav* ('two names') is also used less often, although the Yezidis from Iraq use *dunav* more frequently. Apparently, the Yezidi priesthood comprises approximately 6–7% of all Yezidis, and the remaining 93–94% are Mirîds, often called *yeknav* ('one name').[32] Yezidis from the former USSR use the term *êzdîxane* to describe all Yezidis, *pîranî* for all Pîrs, *şêxanî* for all Sheikhs, and the term *mirîdxane* for all Mirîds (see their lineages in Lists of Yezidi Lineages and Tribes).

All boys pass through the rites of passage regardless of which caste each belongs to. There is strict endogamy in Yezidism: marriages between castes are forbidden. Marriages in the Sheikh caste are possible only between representatives of three lineages: Adanî, Şemsanî or Qatanî. Marriages in the Pîr group are possible between lineages, with the exception of Pîrs of the Hesmeman lineage.[33] The Yezidi caste endogamy has become a major obstacle for young Yezidis in the Diaspora.[34]

Each group is represented by many sacred lineages (*ocax*). All sheikhs are divided into three endogamous houses: *Şemsanî*, *Adanî* and *Qatanî*, each of which is also divided into families. Şemsanî, in its turn, is divided into four large houses: Şemsedîn, Fexredîn, Nasirdîn and Sicadîn, who are the four sons of Êzdînê Mîr. Each of the aforementioned houses, with the exception of two of them – Nasirdîn and Sicadîn, includes a number of smaller lineages.

Yezidi lineages (see Lists of Yezidi Lineages and Tribes) still determine the position of a Yezidi person in the society, even in the Diaspora, but in a lesser sense. Yezidi society is not only a complex system, based on a caste-theocratic principle of division, but also a system that is founded on five precepts (*pênc ferz*). This means that all members of the Yezidi community, according to *pênc ferz* ('five duties'), must have their own pîr, *şêx*, *hosta*, *merebî* and *birê/xûşka axiretê* ('brother/sister of

32 For names of nearly 200 Yezidi lineages and clans of Sheikhs, Pîrs and Mirîds, see OMARCHALI, Ch., *Jezidizm. Iz Glubiny Tysjačeletij* (Yezidism. From the Early Millennia), Saint Petersburg, 2005, pp. 166–175; OMERXALÎ, X., *Êzdiyatî: Civak, Sembol, Rîtûel* (Yezidism: Society, Symbol, and Observance), from English to Kurdish: E. OPENGÎN, Istanbul, 2007, pp. 33–65. See also Lists of Yezidi Lineages and Tribes, this book.

33 See OMARCHALI 2005.

34 See KREYENBROEK, Ph. G. in collaboration with Z. KARTAL, Kh. OMARKHALI, and Kh. Jindy RASHOW, *Yezidism in Europe: Different Generations Speak about their Religion*, Wiesbaden, 2009. (*Avrupa'da Yezidilik Farklı kuşaklar dinleri hakkında konuşuyor*, from English to Turkish: Hikmet İlhan, Istanbul, 2011).

hereafter'),[35] who are responsible for their spiritual life and development. The status and functions of *hosta* and *merebî* are less clearly defined nowadays.

The secular and religious head of all Yezidis is the *mîr*, who descends from the Sheikh's lineage of Şêxûbekir and lives in Iraqi Kurdistan. The Yezidi priesthood hierarchy in Lalish also includes *Baba Şêx*, *Pêşîmam*,[36] *Baba Çawûş*, *Micêwir*, *Feqra*, and others.

Religious observances, festivals, and other religious events

The consistent preservation of orally transmitted religious texts is connected with their recitation. Besides the performances of the Yezidi religious texts for teaching and learning purposes as well as 'rehearsals' to prevent the expert from forgetting the texts, they are mainly performed as liturgical texts during religious festivals and other religious events. The main ones that have text recitals are listed below (for further information see Chapter IV). The main festivals universal for all Yezidi communities are *ʿEyda Êzîd* – the first Friday of Eastern December and *ʿEyda Xidir Nebî û Xidir Eylas* – first Thursday (in Iraq for Xidir Elyas), and first Friday (in Iraq for Xidir Nebî) of Eastern February, but in Armenia and Georgia only the Friday. The festivals celebrated by the Yezidi community of Iraq are: *Serê Salê* – the New Year, first Wednesday of Eastern April; *Cejna Cimayê* – Feast of the Assembly, celebrated from 23 September to 1 October, according to the Eastern calendar; *Tawûs gêran* ('Touring of Tawûs') – in the autumn and summer seasons; *Tiwaf*s (in Sheikhan) and *Cema*s in Shingal – a series of local festivals[37] in the names of protectors, saints, holy figures (called *babçak*, *xas* and *mêr*) on fixed days, celebrated after the New Year from April until the end of June;[38] when the Yezidis visit the temple of Sheikh ʿAdî – on 23–30 Eastern September, and on 18–21 Eastern July; *Cejna*

35 Compare with the contraction of *musahiplik*, a kind of ritual kinship in the Alevi tradition. See KEHL-BODROGI, K., 'On the significance of *musahiplik* among the Alevis of Turkey: The case of the Tahtacı', in KEHL-BODROGI, K. et al. (eds.), *Syncretistic Religious Communities in the Near East*, collected papers of the International Symposium "Alevism in Turkey and Comparable Syncretistic Religious Communities in the Near East in the Past and Present" Berlin, 14–17 April 1995, Studies in the History of Religions (Numen Book Series), vol. LXXVI, Brill, London, New York, Köln, 1997, pp. 119–137.

36 In the Yezidi history, a very knowledgeable layman (Mirîd) Koçek Braîm became a *Pêşîmam*.

37 Probably, over the course of history a protector or a particular holy being was more dominant than others throughout different periods of time. The existence of *Tiwaf*s and *Cema*s is evidence that Yezidis also venerated local holy beings.

38 In the Sheikhan area there are such *Tiwaf*s in the following villages: Cerahî (*Tiwaf* of Pîr Mend), Baʿdre (*Tiwaf* of Hacî Alî), Êsiyan (*Tiwaf* of Memê Êsiyan), Bêristek (*Tiwaf* of Hacî Keceb), ʿEyn Sifni (*Tiwaf* of Sheikh Mend), Cerwan (*Tiwaf* of Pîr Cerwan), Sîna (*Tiwaf* of Kerecal, i.e. the brother of Hagî Fêris), Bêban (*Tiwaf* of Şahsiwar), Mehet (*Tiwaf* of Êzî and Pîra Fat), Xetara (*Tiwaf* of Hagî Fêris), Duxata (*Tiwaf* of Sheikh Mihemed; this *Tiwaf* is also celebrated in the villages Beʿshiqe and Behzane), Mem Şivan (*Tiwaf* of Mem Şivan). The first *Tiwaf* starts in the Beʿshiqe and Behzane villages. In Shingal there are no *Tiwaf*s, but the local feasts called *Cema*, e.g. *Cema* Şerfedîn, in the villages Kolka and Simê Hêstir (*Cema* Şebil Qasim (Şêx Abulqasim)), in the village Cefriyê, Bara, Xana Sor (*Cema* Şêşims), etc.

Bêlênda – 25th of Eastern December, etc. The Yezidi community of the Caucasus celebrates *Kloça Serê Salê* – the first Wednesday of Eastern March.