Yezidism

Victoria Arakelova

1 Introduction

Yezidism is a syncretic product of the Near Eastern non-dogmatic milieu, having its own unique characteristics and sharing certain aspects with other non-dogmatic trends. The Yezidis¹ or Yazidis (Arab. *yazīdīya*, Kurd. *ēzdi*) form a separate ethno-religious group, which have preserved its complex ethno-religious identity through the centuries, in the historical motherland and elsewhere on the territories of the habitat—both in the hostile environment and in safe and benevolent societies, having remained a closed, esoteric society.

The Yezidis are found scattered over a vast area: the northern part of Iraq (north-west of Mosul and Jebel Sinjar [*Ĉyā Šangālē*], west of Mosul), Syria (Siruj, Birjak, Klis, Afrin, Amuda, and Qamishli), Eastern Turkey, Armenia (the districts of Aragatsotn, Artashat, and Talin, as well as the city of Yerevan), and Georgia (the city of Tbilisi). There are also relatively new communities in Russia (Krasnodar kraj and other regions) and Europe (Germany in the main, but also other countries such as Sweden), which are the result of economic migration (from Armenia and Georgia, largely to Russia), persecution, and military conflicts (from Iraq, Syria, and Turkey). Indeed, almost the entire Yezidi population of Turkey, based previously in compact settlements in the rural centers of Tur-Abdin, Nisibin, Diarbekir, Mush, Sasun, and Bitlis, as well as on the upper shores of the Tigris river, has moved to Syria, Germany, or other Western-European countries. The main religious center of the Yezidis is situated in the valley of Lalish in the Sheikhan region (North Iraq), where the sanctuaries of most of the Yezidi saints and holy men are located. The seat of the Yezidis' spiritual leader, the Prince (or *mīr*), is in the nearby village of Ba'dre. The Yezidis speak a local variant of Northern Kurdish (Kurmanji), which they

1 On the early encounters and history of the community, as well as the historiography of the subject, see: Guest (1987); Arakelova (2006a; 2011a); and Açıkyıldız (2014). On the Yezidi religion, rites, rituals, and textual tradition, see: Furlani (1936); Drower (1941); Kreyenbroek (1995); Kreyenbroek and Rashow (2005); Asatrian and Arakelova (2014); and Arakelova (2015a).

call *ēzdiḱī* ('the Yezidi language'). The community usually leads a sedentary lifestyle, but also includes nomadic clans.

It is virtually impossible to determine any precise population figure for the Yezidis for at least two reasons: 1) the sparsity of information on the territories inhabited by the Yezidis (particularly in Iraq); and 2) identity problems, for example the Yezidis have often been grouped together with other religious or ethnic groups (the Qizilbash and the Kurds) when population counts have taken place (Arakelova 2001a: 320–321). The total number of Yezidis, therefore, can be estimated only approximately: around 200,000 in Iraq, 80–100,000 in Syria, 45–50,000 in Armenia, 20–25,000 in Georgia, 10–15,000 in Russia, and 45–50,000 in Western Europe; all in all, this totals some 450–500,000 people.²

2 Formation of Yezidism as a Separate Ethno-Religious Group

The formation of the Yezidis as a separate ethno-religious group took place from the eleventh to the thirteenth-fourteenth centuries (the fifth to the seventh-eighth centuries AH) in the region of Sinjar in Northern Iraq. The new community was shaped on the basis of the Adawīyya Ṣūfī order, whose leader, the Ṣūfī *murshid* and *shaykh* 'Adī bin Musāfir later became approached in the Yezidi legendary history as founder of the first Yezidi community and deified in the Yezidi tradition as incarnation of God (see below).

The consistent dissociation from the local Muslim milieu and the gradual closing of the newly shaping community, with its further shift to endogamy, was occurring amid the very colorful religious scenery of Mesopotamia. Different versions of Islam and Christianity resided alongside Old Iranian religious elements tightly interlaced with Gnostic ideas and substrate heathen beliefs, while the still strong cult of the Omayyads coexisted with other, rather marginal religious-political movements. This eclectic atmosphere led to different and often contradictory elements being incorporated into the Adawīyya Ṣūfī order. Many of them can be found in Yezidism, having been either borrowed from diverse trends of the syncretic religious landscape of the time or inherited directly from the Adawīyya. Followers of the Ṣūfī *murshid* Sheikh 'Adī, came from diverse groups and, ultimately, this led to the development of a fundamentally new syncretic religious teaching that lacked a set doctrinal

2 The data is from Asatrian and Arakelova (2014: vii); recent mass migration from Iraq and Syria caused by ISIS' persecution of the Yezidis in the Middle East is not taken into consideration here.

basis. Thus, the Yezidi religion can be defined as a product of the Near-Eastern non-dogmatic milieu, which is deeply rooted in a form of Sūfism, but has had multiple elements superimposed onto it as a result of being exposed to the then-Mesopotamian religious landscape (Guest 1987: 15–28; Kreyenbroek 1995: 45–68; Arakelova 2006a).

Some elements of Yezidism are extremely specific, even unique, which makes them the main markers of the Yezidis' particular self-consciousness (Arakelova 2010: 6–17). The group's identity is based, *ante omnia*, on following a non-proselytising religion, called Sharfadin (Arab. *Šarfadin* or *Šaraf ad-dīn*, literally 'the honor of religion'). The peculiarities of this religious system are limited not only to its syncretism, in which elements are borrowed from, or shared with, other doctrines; they also include the particular features that are solely characteristic of the Yezidi faith. For instance, its followers are defined as belonging to the *Ezdikhana* (*Ēzdīxāna*): the esoteric community of the Yezidis. The specific parameters of belonging to this community are determined by *Farzē brātīyē* ("The Canon of Spiritual Guidance"; lit. 'Brotherhood'), which can be said to define the character of the Yezidi tradition. The Yezidi community confines itself to three major proscriptions: the prohibition of marriage with adherents of a different faith, providing purity of religion; the prohibition of marriages between representatives of different castes, providing caste purity; and the following of the basic precepts of the religion, aimed at preserving the faith's traditions. Breaking these rules is seen as a dreadful sin; a Yezidi who has ignored at least one of those precepts is considered an apostate and must be expelled from the community (Ankosi 1996: 12–15).

The caste of a Yezidi determines the role of the follower in the *Ezdikhana*. The clergy (*tariqat*, Arab. *tarīqa*, meaning '[spiritual] path') includes the casts of the *sheikhs* or *shaykhs* (*šēx*, Arab. *šayx*) and the *pīrs* (Pers. *pīr* 'elder, saint'), and their families. The other community members are the laymen—*mirīd* (Arab. *murīd*, meaning 'disciple'). This structure also determines the system of spiritual guidance within the community, which is very specific (and even includes members entitled 'brother/sister of the hereafter' (Asatrian 1999–2000: 79–96; see also Nicolaus 2016). Of course, the structure elaborated here is a simplification of the hierarchy of Yezidi society, which includes other titles like *Kochak*, *Faqir*, *Qawwal*, *Farrash*, and *Kebani* that are meaningful within the spiritual aspect of Yezidism and are functionally significant (within the contexts of the temple service and the organisation of religious festivals, for example). It has been argued that in diaspora in particular, coordination between the three basic castes—the *sheikhs*, *pīrs*, and *mirīds*—is absolutely necessary (see Kreyenbroek 1995: 125–137). Spiritual tutorship is a crucial element within

an esoteric group that protects its secret knowledge zealously from strangers, as is the case with the Yezidis. The system is supposed to guarantee cultural and religious preservation and self-awareness.

In the early stages of the development of the faith, affiliation with the community could lead to initiation into the esoteric group. At present, however, due to the ethnic vector of the Yezidi identity, it is presupposed that members will be born to Yezidi parents (although membership is not necessarily guaranteed for descendants; they must still follow the above-mentioned prescriptions.³

Deprived of their own sacred scriptures, this closed community has developed through centuries a rich and multi-genre lore, which has fixed its religious traditions and represents the most reliable source for research into the group. The texts were predominantly recorded in the twentieth century in Armenia;⁴ their dating seems to be virtually impossible, though some features and contexts allow to distinguish between earlier and later texts (see, for example, Rudenko 1982; Arakelova 2008a). The so-called 'holy books' of the Yezidis—*Kitēbā Jalwa* ('The Book of Revelation') and *Mashafē Raš* ('The Black Book')—can be considered late forgeries (compiled, most probably, in the eighteenth century and recorded in the nineteenth century), rather than authentic original texts, although they definitely reflect the group's genuine religious and folk traditions, nonetheless (Marie 1911; Bittner 1913). While containing much less information about Yezidi sacred knowledge than the elements of religious lore, these short texts have gradually become part of tradition, and are now treated as holy writings by the Yezidis themselves.

3 The One God and the Yezidi Triad

Although sometimes classified as polytheistic, the Yezidi religion is based on the idea of one god and his three incarnations, with the so-called 'folk pantheon' being represented by Yezidi deities, saints, holy patrons, and deified personalities. The Yezidis themselves approach their faith in a monotheistic

3 Historical analyses of various ethno-religious communities have shown that their development involves a clearly expressed drive for ethnicity (Arakelova 2010).

4 The first sample of the Yezidi lore was recorded at the end of the nineteenth century and published with the Russian translation by the Armenian scholar Solomon Egiazarov (Egiazarov 1891: 221–227); the same text was republished with the German translation in 1900, by the Hungarian Orientalist Hugo Makas (Makas 1900: 37–38). Then, only around eighty years after, voluminous collections of the Yezidi lore, recorded also among the Yezidis of Armenia, appeared in in Moscow and Yerevan (Celil and Celil 1978a, 1978b).

way, as expressed in the following creed, which is called *Šahdā dīnī* ('symbol of faith'):

Šahdā dīnē min êk Allāh, ...
Silt'ān Šēxadī pādšē minā, ...
Silt'ān Êzdī pādšē minā, ...
Tāwūsī malak šahdā ū imānēd minā ...
Haqa, xwadē kir, [am] êzdīna,
Sar nāvē Silt'ān Êzdīna.
Al-h'amd lillāh, am ži ōl ū tarīqēd xō di-řāzīnā.

The testimony of my faith is one god,
 Sultan Sheikh 'Adī is my king,
 Sultan Yezid is my king,
 Malak-Tāwūs (The Peacock Angel) is the Symbol [of Faith] and my faith.
 Indeed, by god's will [we] are Yezidis,
 We are called by the name of Sultan Yezid.
 God be praised, we are content with our religion and our community.

KREYENBROEK 1995: 226

The Yezidi triad comprises of the following: Malak-Tāwūs, the Peacock Angel (featuring in the Yezidi imagination as a bird, a peacock, or a cock, or sometimes even a dove); Sheikh 'Adī (*Šeyx 'Adī*; i.e., Sheikh 'Adī bin Musāfir), a historical figure and founder of the proto-Yezidi community, represented as an old man); and Sultan Yezid (*Silt'ān Êzīd*, a youthful character). All three characters are considered manifestations of god (*xwadē*, *xwadī*, or *xudā*, the term deriving from New Pers. *xudāy*).⁵

Yezidi ideas on *xwadē* are quite hazy. There are just a few references to him in Yezidi religious knowledge; his will is said to be realised through his manifestations. For the Yezidis, *xwadē* is an utterly transcendent figure, which, together with his function as demiurge, makes him equivalent to the 'one God' of the dogmatic religions, to a certain extent. However, despite being creator of the Universe, *xwadē* is considered completely indifferent to its fate; he is figured as not concerning himself with worldly affairs. Thus, *xwadē* is a typical example of a *deus otiosus*: an impartial and removed god.

5 There are also other variations used to designate god: *xudāvand*, *rab(b)ī*, and *Allāh* (the latter mostly in Arabic formulae). Moreover, in some religious songs, the term *ēzdān* (from New Pers. *yazdān*—"god") appears (Asatrian and Arakelova 2014, Part 1: 1–7).

The emergence of the triad in the Yezidi doctrine, with its ubiquitous presence and multiple functions, seems to have led to the figure of *xwadē* being moved aside. *Xwadē* even seems to be a kind of a tabooed element due to his absolutely sacred nature; in the Yezidi liturgy and oral tradition, there is only one religious text dedicated (or, rather, addressed) to *xwadē* directly: *Madhē Xwadē* ('Glorification of God' or 'Praise to God'. See the two variants of the text with English translations in Asatrian and Arakelova 2014: 4–6). It is Malak-Tawus (*Malak tāwūs*, *Malakē tāwūs*, or *Tāwūsē/ī malak*—that is, the peacock angel) who appears to be not just the most important character of the Yezidi triad, but also the very essence or *raison d'être* of the whole religion. He dominates over all the major and minor divinities in the pantheon. In one variant of the Yezidi Symbol (or Statement) of Faith, he features directly after *xwadē*:

Min ša'datīya imānā xwa
Bi nāvē xwadē ū Tāwūsī malak dāya.

I attest that my faith is given
 In the names of god and Malak-Tawus.

DEWRĒŠ 1993: 11

As such, Malak-Tawus is clearly the main marker or distinguishing feature of Yezidism, lending a unique character to this syncretic religion. No other religious group in the region follows a comparable figure, including some of the dogmatically related, extreme Shī'a sects, in which a similar image of a peacock angel has but a marginal level of representation, for example the Mandaean and the Ahl-i Ḥaqq (see Asatrian and Arakelova 2014: 30–32; Arakelova 2015b: 120–123; Drower 1941).

Malak-Tawus also provides an eponym for the Yezidis: they are referred to as *milatē Malak tāwūs*—'the nation (or tribe) of Malak-Tawus'. In the Yezidi text known as 'The Black Scripture' or *Mash'afē řaş* (Arab. *Kitāb al-aswad*), Malak-Tawus is identified with Azrail, the messenger of death and one of the four archangels nearest to god (*Malēkī xalq kird nāvēna 'Azra'īl; awiš Malak tāwūsa kī gawra hamūyāna*—'[God] created an angel and gave him the name Azrail; that was Malak-Tawus, who [is] the leader of all'; *Li siři Ādam ... milatī li sar arz paydā dibī, li pāštir milatī 'Azra'īl, ya'nī Malak tāwūs kī yazīdiya paydā dibī*—'From the essence of Adam ... the people will emerge on earth from which later the people of Azrail, that is, Malak-Tawus, will be born, which is the Yezidi folk' (Bittner 1913: 24–28; see also Eliseev 1988: 59–74). The genesis of this specific image, his depiction as a peacock, and his identification with

evil can be traced to the Islamic apocryphal tradition and the early Šūfi idea of the apologia for Satan (Massignon 1922: 869; Soane 1926: 100; Elâhî 1966; Schwartz 1971: 211; Wilson 1989–90: 45; Arakelova 2001a: 321–323; Arakelova 2001b; Asatrian and Arakelova 2014: 26–29). In fact, Sharfadin, the Yezidi religion, should be regarded here as an allegory; a substitute for the taboo name of Malak-Tawus, positioned as the supreme deity of the Yezidis (Asatrian and Arakelova 2014: 29–30). Moreover, it is the ambivalence of the image of Malak-Tawus—and particularly his identification with the Fallen Angel—that led to the Yezidis acquiring the epithet “devil worshippers” (Arakelova 2011b: 35–36).

The two other representatives of the Yezidi triad, Sheikh ‘Adî and Sultan Ezid, represent quite a different phenomenon: that of the deification of historical personalities. Sheikh ‘Adî bin Musāfir (465–555/557 AH) (in the Yezidi tradition, *Šîxādî*, *Šêxādî*, *Šîxândî*, or *Šêx[ê] A’dî [Ādî]*)⁶ was the founder of the Adawîyya Šūfi order, which became the backbone of the future Yezidi community. The veneration of this historical personality, with his well-documented biography as a Šūfi master, within the Šūfi tradition led to his deification by the Yezidis, who honor him as the founder of the first Yezidi community and a representative of *xwade*. Sheikh ‘Adî also provides another eponym to the community, as the members are also referred to as ‘*adabî*’ (Arab. ‘*adawî*’: ‘followers of Sheikh ‘Adî’) and *šarqîs* (from ‘*adawîyê šarqî*’, which means ‘Eastern Adawîyya’).

The third character in the holy triad, Sultan Ezid (25–64 AH) (in the Yezidi tradition, Si/ult’ân Êzîd),⁷ is known as the lord of people and their worldly life, which is the essence of the Yezidi faith (Kreyenbroek 1995: 95–96). Sometimes, he is even associated with Malak-Tawus himself. Historically speaking, Sultan Ezid, the second Umayyad caliph (61–64 AH), was venerated in the early community and also later in the tradition, most probably as a result of the then-common trend of venerating the Umayyad dynasty. In time, Sultan Ezid’s name came to provide the main eponym for the Yezidi community, most probably as the result of an overlap between an endo-ethnonym and a pejorative exo-ethnonym in the Shī’a milieu (Arakelova 2008b: 199–201). According to the Yezidi tradition, Sultan Ezid broke away from Islam and adopted the religion of Šahîd bin-Jarr, the son of Adam (Spät 2002: 27–56); that is, Yezidism. It should

6 For more details on this character, see Guest (1987: 15–16); and Asatrian and Arakelova (2014: 37–44).

7 For more details on this character, see Arakelova (2005); and Asatrian and Arakelova (2014: 45–50).

also be noted that in some marginal trends, Sultan Ezid is not identified with the historical Umayyad caliph at all.

All the three representatives of the so-called triad are often interchanged with each other, with their domains and functions overlapping in various religious contexts. All three appear as the creator, as representatives of a credo, as articles of faith, as providers of eponyms, and as Yezidi saints.

4 Folk Pantheon: Deities and Patron Spirits

Apart from the triad, the Yezidis' folk pantheon includes numerous minor deities, guardian spirits, saints, and holy men, who patronise diverse spheres of human activity or personify natural phenomena. Most of the deities who are thought to control natural phenomena are believed to heal the diseases caused by the spheres that are under their command. The effects of healing are typically ascribed to sanctuaries, shrines, and certain sheikh-connected clans (Arakelova 2001a). The names of deities, spirit guardians, and saints commonly feature the caste-related titles *sheikh* (*šēx*), *pīr* (*pīr*), and dervish (*dawrēš*). All the figures in question are, in fact, predominantly performative entities that are deprived of a constant dogmatic basis and are, in the main, essentially elements of ritual. Many of them have legendary graves in the Lalish Valley, which seems to be the only sign of 'canonisation' by the tradition.

'The Thunderer' as a *denotatum* is represented in several characters or, rather, acts under different names. The actual thunder god is Māma-(Mam) řašan (or Mahmad-řašan, lit. 'pouring, darting Mahmad (Muhammad)'; appearing sometimes with the epithet 'lion' (Šēr Mahmadē řašan or Šēr Mahmad řašan). Šēx A'brūs is the lord of lightning, A'bdī Řašō (or A'bd Řaš) is the god of thunder and lightning, and Bā-raš is the spirit of the hurricane. Mama-řašan is, however, the most generic indication. Mama-řašan controls harvesting and his feast is celebrated in spring. In a drought, when the rain needs to be summoned, the Yezidis use special formulas; traditionally, each village owned a special ritual cup, 'Mama-řašan's cup' (*K'āsā Mama-řašanē*), with the name of Mama-řašan inscribed inside it in Arabic letters, which was employed during the ceremony for calling the rain (Asatryan and Arakelova 2004: 234–242; Asatryan and Arakelova 2014: 54–61; see also Kreyenbroek 1995: 109, 115).

Šēx Mūsē-sōr, 'the Red Sheikh Mūs (Moses)', is another atmospheric deity, who controls the winds and the air. Glorified as Sōrē Sōrān (the attribute *sōr* ['red'] underscoring sanctity), he is addressed to send wind in fair weather during threshing work for winnowing. In addition, the sheikhy families from Ōjāxā Sōrē Sōrān, a branch of the Adani sheikhy clan (who, traditionally, claimed

to originate from Šēx Mūsē-sōr), are known for their ability to cure diseases caused, according to the popular mind, 'by the wind or air penetrating into the body', those of the lungs and joints, such as rheumatism.

The deities of the sun and the moon—Sheikhs Shams (otherwise Šēx Šams, Šēx Šims, Šēšims, or Šēšim) and Faxr ad-Din (or Farxadīn, Faxradīn)—are represented by two brothers. These deified historical personalities were the sons of 'Adī II (Guest 1987: 20–21), the third person to lead the Adawīyya community. Their deification is by no means explained by their historical roles, particular contributions to community life, or any personal merits. In the case of Sheikh Shams, the reference of his name to the sun (Šams = Arab. 'the sun') determined his identification with the deity. Sheikh Shams is considered the third manifestation of Malak-Tawus, corresponding to the Angel Israfil (Raphael). His figure is particularly significant in the folk pantheon. He is endowed with specific characteristics: his epithet *bīnāyā ċavā* ('the eyes' light') is a metaphor for 'godhead', according to the Yezidis. Among his other epithets are the following: *masabē mina*, 'the essence [lit. "confession, doctrine"] of my religion'; *ċirā dīnī* ('the light of the faith'); the *qibla* ('pivot'); *qawatā dīn* ('the power of the faith'); *xudanē ma'rīfatē ū ark'ān ū nāsīna* ('the master of spiritual knowledge'); *mōrā Šēx Šims* ('the owner of the seal'); *ċirā bar sunatē* (the torch of the [Yezidi] community); and *ċavē xwadē* (God's eye). Moreover, Sheikh Shams is accredited power over hell and the *Sirāt* bridge (Celil and Celil 1978a: 33–34). According to tradition, he has twelve children, corresponding to the twelve months of a year. The polyvalence of the sun allows the character to penetrate into numerous domains, even those formally belonging to other deities. The special attitude of the Yezidis to the sun (and, thus, the special place of Sheikh Shams in the folk pantheon) is also confirmed by the fact that Sheikh Shams' name is mentioned in Yezidi lore more frequently than that of any other deity (Arakelova 2002: 57–67; Asatryan and Arakelova 2014: 67–69).

To move on to Faxr ad-Din, the only reason why he was deified as the 'moon' seems to be his blood-brother relation to historical Sheikh Shams. In the folk tradition, the sun and the moon are two celestial siblings. The hymn dedicated to Faxr ad-Din, the *Qawlē Malak Farxadīn* (Celil and Celil 1978a: 329–337), does not even allude to his connection with the moon; in the tradition, however, the moon is called *Māngā Malak Farxadīn* ('The disc of the Angel Faxr ad-Din'). His role as that of the moon deity can be observed, although indirectly, in the ritual of healing from 'lunar disease': *kēma hayyī* or *hīvē lēxistī* (lit. 'the [state of being] moonstruck'; Arakelova 2001a). Malak Faxradīn (Faxr ad-Din) or A'zīz Malak Faxradīn—that is, (Saint) Angel Faxr ad-Din—is identified in the Yezidi tradition with Turail (or Nurail), the seventh avatar of Malak-Tawus. He is considered the creator of Yezidi religious lore, or *Qawl-ū-bayt* (Tamoyan 2001: 148),

and the *qawwals* (reciters) are known as *Jēšē Malak Faxradīn*: ‘the armies of Malak Faxradīn’ (Kreyenbroek 1995: 218–219).

Two deities probably representing the same *denotatum* are Pīrā-Fāt, the foremother of the Yezidis, and Xatūnā-farxā, the patroness of pregnant women and infants. Pīrā-Fāt is the patroness of women in labor and newborn babies: she protects them from the evil demoness Āl (Asatrian 2001; Arakelova 2003). Pīrā-Fāt is thought to have saved the seed from which the Yezidi people originated from annihilation; she is credited with having preserved it for several hundred or thousand years. Xatūnā-farxā has the similar function of being the protectress of infants, but her domain focuses on the so-called *čilla*: the initial forty days of life (Asatrian 2007; Asatrian and Arakelova 2014: 72–77).

Two other important figures are the dual deities of livestock—Mamē-Šivān (or ‘shepherd Mam’ and Gāvānē Zarzān (‘herdsman Zarzān’)—who play crucial roles in the Yezidi religious worldview. When farmers put their animals to pasture, these deities are addressed using the following formula: *Am pištī ta, Mamē-Šivān, dičin bar vī pazī; pištī ta, Gāvānē Zarzān, dičin bar vī dawārī; am pištī ta, Mamē-Šivān, paz xway dikin, am pištī ta Gāvānē Zarzān, dēwēr xway dikin* (‘Relying on you, Mamē-Šivān, we follow that flock (of sheep); relying on you, Gāvānē Zarzān, we follow the herd (of cows); relying on you, Mamē-Šivān, we go after the small animals; relying on you, Gāvānē Zarzān, we go after the cattle’ [Davrešyan 1977: 74]). Their significance is evident particularly in the number of rituals and feasts related to them (Davrešyan 1977: 73; Aristova 1986: 75, Asatrian 2002: 83), although Mamē-Šivān seems to be somewhat more important than Gāvānē Zarzān, probably because the Yezidis are primarily sheep breeders. Indeed, the shepherd deity’s name provides the eponym for the Mamē-Šivān clergy family (Kreyenbroek 1995: 111–112). The deity is also considered the earthly twin of the constellation of the Ram. Its shrine in Lalish, the ‘Wishing Pillar’ (*stūnā mirāza*), is believed to have the power to fulfill followers’ desires, if they place their palms upon it.⁸

A more universal religious figure is Xidir-Nabī (or Xidr-Navī—‘Prophet Xidr’; Arab. al-Xiḍr, Pers. Xizr or Xezr), who appears in the beliefs of numerous peoples in the Near East and Central Asia. Often identified with the Prophet Elijah, Xidir-Nabī is a character with a double name in many traditions, including the Yezidi one—he is also referred to as Xidirnabī-Xidiraylās or simply Xirdaylās (Papazyan 1986; Krasnowolska 1998: 141–60; Celil and Celil 1978b: 308). For the Yezidis, he is one of the sons of Sheikh Shams and is usually represented as a celestial warrior: as *mērē gāz-gēdūkā* (‘the man of mountains and gorges’)

8 For more details about both the livestock deities, see Arakelova (2003); Asatrian and Arakelova (2004: 256–259); and Asatrian and Arakelova (2014: 80–82).

or *haspē sīyārē bōz* ('rider of a white horse'). He is also patron of the young, travelers, and those in love. In these respects, the Yezidi Xidir-Nabī has clear parallels with the Armenian popular saint Surb Sargis (St Sergius), who is also a celestial warrior and is depicted as controlling storms and as a patron of love (Harut'yunyan 2002). Xidir-Nabī's festival, an important date in the Yezidi religious calendar (Šēx K'eleš 1995: 33–34; Davrešyan 1977: 73), is also reminiscent of the Armenian Surb Sargis feast. It can be argued, therefore, that this character of Muslim origin has been shaped as a Yezidi deity by Armenian cultural influences (Asatrian and Arakelova 2014: 95–97). There is also another figure associated with travel in the Yezidi tradition: Šēx A'li Šams (or Šixālī-Šamsān), the protector of wayfarers, captives, exiles, and all those in strange lands. He is addressed mainly via a toast made in his honor (*ašqā Šixālī-Šamsān*) during festive meals or wakes, or before one takes to the road (Asatrian and Arakelova 2014: 90–91).

A further character worth mentioning in the Yezidi folk pantheon is Pirā-stēř or Priki stēř (lit. 'the old woman of bedding'), who, unlike Xidir-Nabī, is unique to Yezidi culture. She is described as an old woman that is invisible to the eye but lives in bedding (*stēř*) and roams about the house at night. Her role is to look out for the welfare of the whole family (Asatrian and Arakelova 2014: 92). Šēx-kirās ('the spirit of the garment') is a less important, almost forgotten figure, but is mentioned in Yezidi literature and was probably responsible for the process of death or the transmigration of the soul (*tanāsux*) (Arakelova 2002: 72–74).

Milyāk'atē-qanĵ (lit. 'the holy angel') is the only example of the *Deus Phalli* in all New Iranian folk pantheons. There is just one written reference to this deity (Avdal 1957: 93–94) but some elements of the phallic symbol can be traced to the Yezidi festival *Barān-bardān* ('the releasing of rams'—see Šemilov 1969; Asatrian 1998). This is another character who has almost been forgotten; he continues to hold significance, however, in relation to notions of fertility (Arakelova 2007; Asatrian and Arakelova 2014: 82–86).

Šēx-kirās, the Spirit of the Garment, an almost a forgotten figure, was probably responsible for the process of death or even transmigration of a soul (*tanāsux*) (Arakelova 2002: 72–74). Other characters of the Yezidi folk pantheon include Dawrēš-a'rd or Dawrēšē-a'rd (lit. 'saint/master/host of the Earth'), who is the lord of the Earth (the underworld) and has the function of preserving people's hidden or pawned possessions; Xatā-jōt ('spirit of the furrow'), who is the patroness of agriculture; Xudāne-mālē ('master of the house'), the spirit of the household, who lives in fireplaces and protects families' welfare and morality; Šēx Mand or P'ir Mandī-gōrā, the lord of graves—a chthonic character who has power over snakes and scorpions and carries the epithet *šēxē řaš* ('the

black sheikh'); Ibrahim-khalil ('the friend of god'), who is the Yezidi version of the Biblical Prophet Abraham and has no specific function but is mentioned in the prayer said before an ordinary meal; Jin-tayār ('the flying jinn'), who is the lord of the genies and cures the mentally ill; and Pîrê-Libinā(n), the 'builder spirit', who is said to have built many of the sanctuaries in Lalesh and is also believed to facilitate marriages.

Important objects of worship for the Yezidis include the avatars of Malak-Tawus: 'Azrail, Dardail, Israfil, Mikail, Jabrail, Shamnail, and Turail (of which 'Azrail, the alleged head of the seven avatars, is usually identified with Malak-Tawus, although they are all considered emanations of him; Edmonds 1967: 4). The category of 'deity' excludes most of the figures within the system of saints—for example, the historical personalities that are associated with the Adawīyya order. Of particular note here are Sheikh Abū Bakr (Šēxōbakr), Sajjad ad-din (Sijḍīn, characterised as *qāsidē ruhē miryā* or 'psychopomp', who is responsible for escorting the souls of the dead to the underworld), and Nasr ad-din (identified with the angel of death—a divinised person who used to be the executor under Sheikh 'Adī and killed everyone who opposed him), who are not considered deities (Asatrian and Arakelova 2004; Asatrian and Arakelova 2014: 51–108).

5 Other Specific Features of the Yezidi Religious Syncretism

The Yezidi tradition has also preserved elements of animal worship (particularly that of the dog, the snake, the chameleon, and the rooster) and plant cults (the onion and the mandrake). Celestial bodies are another essential aspect of folk beliefs—the Milky Way (Kurmanji *Rīyā kādizīyē*—'the road of a straw reaper or thief'), Venus (*Stayrā sibē*—the morning star), Sirius (*Galāvēž*; lit. '([the star] bringing people to perdition)'), and the constellations of Libra (*stayrā Mēzīn*), Pleiades (*Pēwir*), and Aries (*Barān*) all have connotations in the Yezidi tradition, as do lunar eclipses, rainbows, earthquakes, thunder, and lightning (Arakelova 2006b; Arakelova 2014; Asatrian and Arakelova 2014: 109–120).

The Yezidi religion also has other distinguishing features, such as the coexistence of conflicting ideas adopted from different traditions, which have been retained due to the absence of a strict doctrine in Yezidism. For example, there are three legends related to the Yezidis' origins. As explained in the Black Scripture (Bittner 1913: 28), and stated by the Yezidi sheikhy tradition, unlike all other peoples (who originated from Adam and Eve), the Yezidis had

only a primeval father, Adam; Eve played no role in their genesis. Yezidi legend explains that Eve once claimed that children were produced by her alone and that Adam had no part in creating them. In order to test Eve's claim, she and Adam placed their seeds in separate jars. When, nine months later, they opened Eve's jar, they found serpents, scorpions, and poisonous insects, while in Adam's jar, there was a beautiful, moon-faced child. They called the boy Šahīd bin-ĵarr ('Šahīd, the son of the pot'). He later married a *hūrī* and became the forefather of the Yezidis (Spät 2002). This version of Adam and Eve's story, which is clearly apocryphal but has Biblical origins, coexists with the legend of the Yezidi seed preserved by Pīrā-Fāt, the foremother of the Yezidis. The latter version parallels the common mythologeme of the preservation of the primordial seed in the Iranian tradition (Asatrian 2007). The third ethno-genetic myth, though a marginal one, goes back to a plot of the Iranian epic *Shahnameh*; it is, however, not related to any of *Shahnameh* versions in Kurmanji, but rather stands as a separate *sujet* (Arakelova 2017).

A similar example of a contradiction is that the Abrahamic idea of the "hereafter" (Arakelova and Amrian 2012) coexists in Yezidism with a belief in reincarnation (*tanāsux*), which is similar to that held by the shibboleths of the non-dogmatic Near-Eastern milieu, some extreme Shī'a sects (*yulāt-i šī'a*), and the Mandaeanes (see Arakelova 2015b). Indeed, despite its unique character, Yezidism has a number of striking similarities with other syncretic religious systems, first of all, with such extreme Shī'a groups as, for example, the Ahl-i Ḥaqq and the Zaza Alevīs (Kreyenbroek 1995: 53 et seq.; Arakelova 2004; Asatrian and Arakelova 2014: 121–123). Dogmatic Shī'a elements are also present, particularly in the religious folklore, all being either nominally presented in the texts or adapted to the Yezidi Weltanschauung (Asatrian and Arakelova 2016).

Some aspects of the Šūfi heritage can be noted, although, in many cases, they are reinterpreted in accordance with Yezidi tradition (Arakelova 2008a; Asatrian and Arakelova 2014: 128–129). Among the latter, especially interesting are such outstanding Šūfi figures as Husseyn al-Ḥallāj (c. 244–309 AH) and Rābi'a al-'Adawiyya (95/99–185 AH). Both are honoured with separate hymns—*Qawlē Husēyīnī Halāj* and *Qawlē Rabi'a al-'Adawīya*—in the Yezidi religious lore, and being approached in the tradition as proper Yezidi saints (Arakelova 2001b; Celil and Celil 1978b: 29; Kreyenbroek and Rashow 2005: 196–200). Moreover, in the text, Rābi'a, a prominent woman saint, is engaged in dialogue with another Šūfi master, Bayazid Bistāmī' (188–262 AH) (Sheikh Bāzīd). Incidentally, despite the absence of the clearly articulated women's role in the tradition, apart from the case of Rābi'a, there is another sample

dedicated particularly to a woman in the Yezidi lore. Bayt'ā Gilāwīyē is a lament for a noble woman, recited during a funeral rite for a woman of a high social status (Arakelova 1999/2000).

Some Yezidi legends and cosmological myths, including mythological figures and rituals are pervaded with gnostic content (see, for example, Spät 2002; Arakelova 2002: 72–74; Arakelova 2014, Asatrian and Arakelova 2014: 124–127; Rodziejewicz 2014, 2016). Various common features and parallels exist at a range of levels—both basic ideas and marginal elements are shared. It is perhaps because of the religious idiosyncrasies and contradictions, having emerged and developed as a result of the complete dissociation of Yezidism from Islam and clear rejection of Islamic roots, that the Yezidis have been viewed as heretics or devil worshippers, being persecuted by the wider Muslim community throughout history. Two of the most severe episodes of Yezidi persecution were perpetrated by the Ottomans (see, for example, Çelebi 1991: 169–171) and the Young Turks, who, apart from the Christians (Armenians and Greeks), also targeted the Yezidis.

6 Conclusions and Current Status

Yezidis remain among the most vulnerable groups in the Muslim milieu. The present-day Near-Eastern conflict and the 'forced conversion campaign' mounted by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant on Yezidi-inhabited territories has resulted in a whole range of crimes being committed against this ethno-religious group: tens of thousands have been killed, are missing, remain in captivity (physical and sexual slavery), or have been forced to convert to Islam. Places of Yezidi religious and cultural significance have been systematically destroyed. The peak of these atrocities was the Sinjar massacre of early August 2014, when several thousand Yezidis were killed in the Sinjar area in Iraq's Nineveh Governorate (see the detailed report in OHCHR and UNAMI 2016). In Turkey, in the recent past, dozens of the Yezidi villages near the Turkey-Syria border have been destroyed or taken over by their Muslims neighbours, predominantly Kurds (see Andrews 1989, 119).⁹

Among the latest trends noticeable in the Yezidi communities of Armenia, Georgia and Russia is the adoption of Orthodox Christianity or Neo-

9 Among numerous recent reports on the issue, see, for example, "The pro-Kurdish *Peace and Democracy Party* deputy Ayla Akat Ata gives the figure of 400 Yezidis currently living in Turkey," *E Kurd Daily*, 19 April, at <https://ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2014/4/turkey4996.htm>, accessed 15/07/2020.

Protestantism, the former being more typical of Russia and Georgia, while the latter, of all the three states. This obvious process allows some representatives of the Yezidi authorities to speak about the crisis in Yezidism caused by globalisation processes and, as a result, rapid transformations in the traditional world outlook among the younger generations. Recent researches based on field work among the proselytes point to the absence of a role model in the Yezidi religion, as a main factor of the conversion (Arakelova 2016, 2018). The mentioned trends will definitely spread, resulting in transformations of the Yezidi identity and shaping of new, syncretic identities.

Principally new challenges Yezidism is facing in the modern period—mass resettlement, forced conversion to Islam and return to Yezidism/attempts to reintegrate to the Yezidi community, formation of new communities in the countries with less traditional societies (primarily in Western Europe), conversion to Orthodox Christianity and Neo-Protestantism in the traditional Yezidi communities of the South Caucasus and Russia, and so forth—inevitably lead to major transformations in Yezidism as integral phenomenon. It will gradually acquire new specific characteristics, giving birth to new syncretic identities.

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