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An Ethnography of a Community's Re-appropriation of Yārsān in Cyberspace: The Facebook Phenomenon

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Abstract:

This article presents a nuanced approach for qualitative research on the Internet, based on the synthesis of qualitative data-gathering methodologies both online and offline, and contributes to recent knowledge of changing practices within Yārsāni communities around the world. Yārsān is a religious belief of Indo-Iranian origin that traces back to Hooraman, a region in Iranian Kurdistan. Yārsān thought, which Islamic Shiite authorities treat as heretical, has extensively used processes of adaptation and strategies of survival throughout the course of its history.

The research presented here makes a case for the significance of the Internet and, more specifically, social network sites in connecting Yārsānis in their homelands and in the diaspora. How does Facebook provide a new space for this minority group to disclose their beliefs to the world, thereby reassessing the clandestine nature of their religion, which is a tenet required by traditional belief and defined by their adage, “don’t tell the

secret”¹

About the author:

Seyedeh Behnaz Hosseini completed her doctoral research with a focus on Yārsān, a religious minority in Iran, and forced migration in the Department of Islamic Studies at the Institute of Oriental Studies in University of Vienna. Her research interests include religious minorities in Iran and Iraq, forced migration and integration. Currently she is a visiting researcher in the Department of Sociology in the University of Alberta, where she is working on a research project about Iranian religious minorities.

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1. Introduction

The Yārsāni people have experienced huge technological developments in a very short period of time. This has afforded them a new opportunity to form and express their own viewpoints, which concerns of ethnic and religious prejudice had previously impeded. In this case, technology has played a central role for their reawakening from the silence of community obedience and provides for them an imagined community in which to present and take pride in their ethnic identities. This observation yields the central research question of this study: Why has the Yārsāni community in and outside of Iran been willing to state their beliefs in recent years, especially through online media such as Facebook, while in the past they have remained secret?

Previous research on Yarsanis (Kreyenbroek and Allison 1996; Mir-Hosseini 1997, 1998; During 1998; Hamzeh'i 1999; Omarkhali 2014; Van Bruinessen 2014, 2015) has argued that the Yārsānis' belief in secrecy surrounding their religion arose because speaking about their beliefs has been impossible within their society, dominated by majority religions (e.g. Islam, Christianity). Hence, presenting their opinions in the safety of a virtual environment could be a great advantage. Online building of certain forms of

¹ Field work in the region, Mir-Hosseini 1997, 1998, Hosseini 2015

group solidarity, especially for the Yārsāni minority, can provide an opportunity to defuse negative connotations around the religion and to reevaluate it positively. As this article will demonstrate, the Yārsāni group employs Facebook both to introduce their religion to the international community as an independent one and as a tool for protest campaigns, risk awareness, and to structure support for their objectives.

The prevalence of Facebook use provides an example for how online activity could deepen the ethnographic imagination. Virtual ethnography is a well suited approach for generating an understanding of the significance of the Internet in the experience of Yārsānis, particularly if researchers can synthesize both offline and online ethnography. This is the methodological approach taken in the present study.

This article begins by introducing some background and historical context of the Yārsānis, then reviews academic literature on digital media use in diasporic communities, introduces the theory of re-appropriation, and summarizes the methodology of virtual ethnography. I then introduce research findings from Facebook ethnography and face-to-face interviews, identifying key themes of community discussion around the concept of secrecy.

2. Yārsān: People of Truth

Yārsān, or “People of Truth,” is a syncretic religion established by Sultan Sahaklate in the 14th century in western Iran (Mir-Hosseini 1997, 1998, Hosseini 2016a, 2016b). Many of its followers identify ethnically as Kurds and are now predominantly located in the Kermanshah Province of Iranian Kurdistan. There are also large concentrations living near Tehran and in the northern parts of Iran and Iraq, yet many Yārsānis are now dispersed around the world in diaspora because of forced emigration. There are over three million Yārsānis estimated to reside in Iran.

Followers of Yāri, or Yārsān, refer to their religious verses as Kalām. Each period of their history is marked by its own kalām, and in its entirety the “religious manuscript” is known as the Kalām. Yārsānis traditionally conveyed the Kalām and their religious principles orally, until it was written as a manuscript 200 years ago. Yārsānis believe in the eternity of their faith. They are also guided by a precept known as Doon-a-Doon (Doon is a Turkish term meaning “garment”), which holds that humans’ souls are circulating in different bodies, or “clothes” (Doons), and one sees the results of a previous life's actions during their present life. A person’s soul transmigrates, or “changes clothes,” 1001 times, and then that soul dies and is joined to eternity (Hosseini 2016a).

Because of the growing dominance of Islam at the time of their faith’s conception, adherents of Yārsān chose to isolate themselves from society and emigrated to mountainous areas to seek sanctuary to preserve their religion and protect their

population. Mir-Hosseini (1994b, p.214), referring to the Yārsānis as the Ahl-i Haqq, describes their struggle:

The followers have reacted to outside pressure in two ways. First, they isolated themselves: until recently most Ahl-i Haqq communities were to be found in remote places where they could practise their creed more freely. Secondly, they adopted a strict code of secrecy, which in time came to define the faith as a *sirr*, a mystery that was to be guarded from the outside world at all cost. The 'mystery' was both preserved and transmitted orally in Gurani and other Kurdish languages as well as in Turkish, in the form of poetry, known as *kalām* (lit., word, discourse).

Though it is not expressly written in their Kalām, they have traditionally shrouded their religion in secrecy because of the oppressive conditions in which they live (and have lived for centuries) and because they believe people not of their religion do not have the capacity to understand its mysteries. According to their narratives about their secret, Yārsānis do not hide their belief because of the contents of its message. Instead, the secret was initiated as a collection of values that, if not shared, cannot be used to connect with outsiders who may seek to do harm. That is why people not of the religion may see the Yārsāni community as attempting to hide something by keeping silent, why others cannot understand what Yārsānis believe, or why they prefer not to talk about their religion.

To the traditional Yārsānis, telling their secret means to divulge their world to those who may not, or cannot, understand. Their secret is not a world, but a world “outlook.” It is a collection of opinions, faiths, and beliefs that cannot be expressed verbally alone; understanding individuals’ secrets is different altogether. Some people interpret the clandestine nature of their religion as hiding, but the majority of Yārsānis do not perceive it this way.

Yārsānis, particularly the younger generation, do not ask their elders about their religious questions because of this belief in secrecy. They did not possess real knowledge of the mysteries of their religion until access to online media granted these revelations in a space where they were protected from outside eyes.

According to Mir-Hosseini (1994a), the Yārsānis, or Ahl-i-haqq, were, and to some extent still are, labeled heretics and subjected to religious persecution by their neighbors. Their reactions were to isolate themselves geographically and to adopt a strict code of secrecy about every aspect of their dogma and ritual. Indeed, ‘the Ahl-e Haqq believe that their religion – which is a *serr*, a mystery – is embodied in their *kalām* (“word(s)”), which exist in the form of poetry, mainly in Guarani but also in other Iranian languages’ (Mir-Hosseini 1994b, p.188). There was no published account of the sect’s dogmas and practices by an insider until Nur Ali Elahi, an Ahl-e Haqq spiritual leader, published

Borhanol-Haqq in 1963 (Mir-Hosseini 1997,p.175). Mir-Hosseini explains:

By the early twentieth century, it had become increasingly difficult to keep the “mystery” intact. The edges of the “seal”, literally, started to crack with the integration of the Ahl-i Haqq communities into wider Iranian society and the expansion of literacy. (1994b, p.214)

Under repressive political regimes, Yārsānis have preferred to hide their real beliefs, yet they also feel that the Yārsāni faith needs to be introduced to the world. Global communication has also led to new interactions within Yārsāni communities themselves. As this article will demonstrate, the Yārsānis subscribe to different groups and events on Facebook to connect and reconnect with each other, strengthening their ethnic solidarity. Users participating in my research explained that they consider Facebook an important tool for stating their identities, using a variety of expressions to increase a sense of self-possession and pride. This function of social media is especially important in the face of political and religious oppression in their traditional homelands. By sharing symbols and pictures on Facebook, Yārsānis are able to build (and rebuild) their ethnic identities.

The recent re-appropriation of Yārsān cultural products by its Facebook users, as well as those who employ other technology, internet connectivity, accessible media-editing software, and file-sharing software, was not imaginable throughout their prior history. Today, however, cyberspace provides them an environment to build their previously ignored identity. The Yārsāni community on Facebook reveals the impact of their political and social lives, stating that their beliefs must remain secret, but explaining why they want to reveal it. The Yārsāni community, through their position as the “other,” moves towards a re-appropriation and revision of the binary relationship that exists between the self and community.

3. Literature Review: Digital Diasporas

Internet accessibility around the world has increased tremendously, and users are now able to capitalize on many different platforms to connect with their peers, conduct online research, and engage in social networking. According to Sade-Beck (2004, pp.46-47), ‘online communication enables users to freely express emotions and reach a high level of self-disclosure... The Internet is a very broad medium with extensive, or no, borders.’

There has been a great deal of research into transnational online connections, and Khayati (2008, p.37) refers to scholars (Carter 2005; Eriksen 2006) who have adopted various metaphors to conceive of transnational human relationships in cyberspace: “virtual imagined community,” “informational city,” “cyber culture,” “digital diasporas,” “nations in cyberspace,” “virtual province,” and “cyber city.”

Virtual places are incredibly important to diasporic communities. According to Georgiou, the Internet has allowed most diasporic communities to discover and rediscover shared imagination and commonality or to develop diasporic cultures that are mediated, transnational, and partly free from state control (2002, p.5; cited in Kissau and Hunger 2010, p.261). Some diasporic users have even said “Facebook is my second home” (Jacob 2013, p.67). Jacob shows that:

the participants ... share various items on Facebook to reconnect ... and reinforce their national identity. They consider it ... important ... for expressing identities and increasing their self-possession and cultural pride because of the oppression they experienced in their homeland. (2013, p.32)

Sokefeld examined the Alevi cyberspace communities in diaspora and in Turkey (2002). He found that they stay connected in a virtual place where they are able to rebuild old networks or re-imagine themselves online – whereas, in a physical space, they are integrated into Turkish society (2002, p.112).

There is no published research specific to Yārsānis’ online activity. However, several researchers have discussed digital Kurdish diasporas and explain, to some extent, the advantages the Internet can serve. Jacob (2013) conducted research on Kurds and Facebook that reveals why Facebook is important for their diasporic communities around the world, and Hajin (2013) has shown that this is especially true for those living in Iran. Sheyholislami elucidated that Kurds have long been denied the right to express themselves socially, politically, and culturally (2011, p.90). Access to the Internet has drastically changed these aspects of daily life for Yārsānis, too, both at home and transnationally.

Language is used to construct greater unity between the Kurds so they can think as one people. It connects the Kurds directly with their history, culture, and especially their identity. Facebook groups have also played an important role for the Kurds because they are able to create different forums about various topics to express themselves (Jacob 2013). Groups sponsor and support discussions in the Kurdish language, leading to greater mutual understanding among Kurdish participants. In this way, they keep each other abreast of the issues and topics they find important.

4. Theoretical Framework

This article deals with the theoretical framework of re-appropriation, the cultural process by which a group reclaims, or re-appropriates, terms or artifacts that were previously used to conceal that group (Galinsky et al. 2003, pp.222-243). Yārsānis have shaped a religion of their own, not a subset of a larger Islam or Christianity. There is perhaps a

great deal of pain in being a minority, and there is just as much, if not more, pain in being called a “devil-worshipper” (a term of abuse cited in Bruinessen 2014, pp.24-34). This categorization signifies that one is a member of a stigmatized out-group; a community that is not worthy of respect and is given limited possibilities for access to media. These Yārsānis were raised understanding that the knowledge and power to reveal their secret would be repressed throughout their life because of the dominating surrounding society.

When a stigmatized group protests its persecution, re-appropriation is one possible tactic. Re-appropriation may be more likely to occur when group cohesion is high, but it is also likely to increase that same feeling of cohesion. This is a state of mutual support and solidarity along with a perception that the group is a tightly knit, self-contained entity (Galinsky et al. 2003, p.239).

Previous research has also established that Facebook can be used as a place to share secret or marginal identities, making it particularly suitable as a place for re-appropriation. Zhao (2008, p.1829) wrote on the process of identity establishment (Suler, 2002) on Facebook:

Facebook encounters are mediated and the technological mediation can create a sense of freedom that encourages the limited expression of some type of “hidden selves” that are commonly seen in anonymous online environments. We did come across identity claims on Facebook that might be construed as outside or marginal to dominant social norms.

This study also relies on Hall’s concept of representation, which emphasizes ‘[the] general use of language and discourse as models of how culture, meaning and representation work’ (1997, p.7). The signifying process of his concept is the result of a number of representations using ‘signs ... organized into languages of different kinds to communicate meaningfully with others’ (Hall 1997, p.28). Using pictures to represent their beliefs and their personal interpretation of the image corroborates Hall’s description of how groups represent themselves and give objects meaning; they construct purport through language, using signs to communicate meaningfully with others (1997, pp.3-28).

5. Methodological Approach

Crichton and Kinash assert that virtual ethnography offers a method to actively engage with people in online spaces, and these interactions involve a researcher and users participating in mutual conversations that support reflection and renewal (2003, p.2). In recent years, cyber-ethnography has become one of the most fitting research tools for exploring virtual communities, with considerable ethnographic or cultural advantages (Sade-Beck 2004; Carter 2005; Mazumdar and Mazumdar 2009; Schrooten 2012).

Virtual ethnography is, by necessity, partial: the term “virtual ethnography” conveys a concept of being “not quite,” or not entirely, the real thing (Hine 2000, p.65). Mann and Stewart explained that online interactions need ‘to be expressed as words, not silence’ (2000, p.5), and it is difficult to detect anything not directly expressed and visibly, openly “there” (2000, p.141). A holistic description of any informant, location, or culture is therefore impossible. Strategic relevance is the ideal, rather than faithful representations of objective realities.

In this research, I have been present as a curious observer while acting as a participant – observing, recording and organizing information to make it flow smoothly. I make no excuses for dwelling upon the way that my role as a Facebook user has shaped my research, because my different roles as “researcher,” “friend,” and “page member” have all impacted the kinds of people I have met and the nature of those interactions. The Internet is a new and conflicted space for ethnographic studies, but in these respects, web studies look much like traditional ethnography (Hine 2000).

Yārsāni support communities on the Internet are constructed in a virtual space in which Yārsānis meet and interact, often in response to events in the real world. Studying data through virtual fieldwork, however, is one-dimensional. To fully study the communities in all their complexity, fieldwork requires integrated online and offline methodologies of qualitative data-gathering that complement each other (such as online observation, offline interviews, and analysis of a mixture of data). This research chiefly employed qualitative methods using both a virtual ethnographic approach online as well as personal interviews during my offline fieldwork.

Yārsāni online communities are the main subject of this research; they are incorporated into Facebook groups, where their members communicate through personal and group pages and other features. I chose to gather more information about Yārsānis and observe Facebook activity through the *Dallahoo* Facebook page because it has the largest number of members, with over 9000 followers. It also belongs to one of the major tribes in Dallahoo, Iranian Kurdistan, making it a valuable source of information and Kurdish language.

I used Facebook to conduct online interviews in Farsi and Kurdish through private messages. I also posted questions to the *Dallahoo* Facebook group page and drew out many responses, subsequently encouraging participants to reply to my queries and discuss the issues amongst themselves. In this sense, this method closely resembles a focus group. Berg (1995) showed that researchers must play an important role in the group debate; if the researcher only gives orders, the dialogue loses its direction (see Berg 1995 for a discussion of focus groups). The answers to my Facebook posts contained a mixture of approximately 50 open and closed responses that provided rich data for later analysis.

Because of the nature of my research, delving into the question of secret keeping and

its changing interpretation among Yārsānis, there were some unavoidable limitations on the research. These are due to possible participants' disengagement from conversation before responding with their viewpoint and lack of interest in agreeing to participate in the private message interviews. I attempted to resolve this conflict by gaining permission from the administrator of the *Dallahoo* page prior to posting any questions. Because the admin knew about the post and accepted it, I hoped it would be more accepted by other members and viewers. Through my post on Facebook, users were made aware that they could answer or choose not to, and their responses may be published, again with the permission of the administrator of the page.

My connection with Yārsānis began through online friendships on Yārsāni Facebook pages, and they connected me to each other when I explained about my research. Through this network I was able to recruit online and face-to-face interview participants. The online research participants were of various ages, both men and women, predominantly living in Iran. Most of the responses garnered were from Iranian men. One problem I encountered with cyber-ethnography regarding the Yārsāni presence on Facebook is that the number of male visitors is much higher than that of female visitors. Online ethnography gives the researcher a large amount of information about the subject they are investigating over a great physical distance, but in this case it was highly limited by gender.

My virtual ethnographic investigation took place over six months, between April and September 2015. During that time, I visited the online community at least once a day and at varying times, as this is a community with citizens from all over the world and across many time zones. As a result, I met people from Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Germany, Canada, Norway, Belgium, and Finland – a predominantly Western sample outside of those living in Iran.

At a more advanced stage of the research, I conducted 12 interviews face-to-face in Kurdish and Farsi with research participants. These offline interviews provided me with a means to attain information about individuals and the wider social-cultural context in which they live. In the interview setting, participants acted both as respondents, describing their personal experiences, outlooks and positions within the virtual support community, and as informants, when they described themselves in general and their activity on the Internet. The interviews also included Yārsānis of varying age groups, and I conducted this fieldwork in Sweden among a Yārsāni diaspora including women as well as men.

For both the online and offline data collection, I used engaging questions during semi-structured interviews to collect a wide variety of data. The interviews were designed to yield data that would allow me to concentrate on how online communication can provide virtual closeness and also to provide a close inspection of the communication and interaction in online Yārsāni communities.

6. Yārsāni Society on Facebook

Yārsāni followers became known as those who “don’t tell secrets” primarily because they were not allowed to promote and advertise their religion in public and were forced to keep their doctrine private. However, this practice of religious secrecy has begun to change. My goal in this research was to capture the motivations, interests, and perceptions of the respondents, in order to explain what it means to be in secret in the Yārsāni world of Facebook users.

The Yārsāni community on Facebook plays a vital cultural and political role for Yārsānis worldwide. I aim to show that these Facebook users have contributed fundamentally to the development of Yārsāni religious consciousness, both online and in the homeland. Despite political bans on religious freedom, this community is still established in cyberspace; websites and weblogs have proliferated throughout the Yārsāni diaspora. Yārsāni members on Facebook set important and valuable precedents for protecting and developing Yārsāni culture and their religious manuscript.

Offline, many Yārsānis try to form special local groups for discussing their religion, culture, literature, language, and politics in person throughout their homelands and diaspora. However, the virtual ethnography conducted for this study shows that Yārsānis had no previous access to platforms on which they could express their opinions. A member of the Yārsāni community explained to me the problem of being largely unknown to the wider world:

We are suffering due to a lack of disseminated information about us, and we have not been able to talk about what we deserve [politically]... Most people do not even know who the Yārsānis are. People know the Kurds as simply Sunni or Shia.
(personal communication, 10 November 2014)

Now, Facebook and the Internet help them broadcast their news and their identities. This has had important effects on how Yārsānis interact with outsiders and with each other.

The largest groups and most useful for my research groups and association pages for obtaining information about Yārsānis on cultural and religious subjects, pertaining to both the diaspora and homeland, were *Dalahoo*, *The Roundtable of Yārsan*, *News of the Yārsan*, *Ahl-e-Haq*, and *Yārsān Media*. The cultural activity of Yārsāni groups and organizations are documented on these pages and discussion forums in Kurdish and Persian languages, and most of the users report about current political situations in Iraq and Iran. Users denote Iran, Iraq, and European countries as locations on their private pages.

These online pages offer online language training, display virtual round-table

discussions, and pose cultural and political questionnaires. Users in all their lands of ancestry as well as in diaspora can exchange information about threads such as Yārsāni identification, culture, politics, language, religion, and the history of Yārsān. It is the first time in Yārsāni history that its followers can interact in such a way. The Internet has succeeded in providing a virtual space for this religious minority, allowing users from the four corners of the world to convene – even those from small towns and villages in Hurāman (Hooraman), western Iran. They can send comments to one another without strangers seeing them.

The explosion of internet usage among Yārsānis has initiated a broadening of cultural knowledge about both themselves and the wider world. A Yārsān community member named O.M. wrote in Kurdish in my question post that the Internet is having a profound effect ‘because [the] younger generations are increasing their knowledge.’ As demonstrated in the literature review above, the Internet has facilitated interaction between members of marginalized and diasporic communities by creating new platforms for communication and community outreach. These interactions are of particular interest here, as they demonstrate new means for ethno-national groups to join in the struggle for freedom of religious expression and equal rights (Santianni, 2003).

7. Results: Themes of Fieldwork Interviews

In my offline fieldwork among the Yārsāni community in Sweden, I uncovered different ideas about the concept “don’t tell secrets.” One of the interviewees stated in Farsi,

We have problems with Shi’a, Sunni, and Islamic society in general in our homelands. We have to be first human before we believe in Yārsān. Yārsān is not only our religion; it is for all of Iran. But we isolated ourselves in the mountains because of fear of assimilation, Yārsānis in other parts of Iran assimilate to Islam. We fear sharing about our tradition. We have our secrets in our religious manuscript but we cannot publish it. The books published in Iran aren’t the same as our original texts.

Another of my informants explained,

“Don’t tell secrets” was because of survival in social dominance, and our religious manuscript was not published. We [understand this] in Iran now. In Iraq, the Yārsāni people don’t like to talk about our beliefs because they believe in “don’t tell secrets.” Besides, they will have problems if they talk about our religion.

A.L. reported a different attitude: “Don’t tell secrets” is life now. We have secrets; we

cannot say anything about Yārsān. We have to hide it in order to find jobs.’ His response shows that the minority religion is forced to remain hidden in the face of majority religions and their repressive state counterparts.

One expert in the religious manuscript of Yārsān, N.Z., referred to religious verses and conveyed his views with a verse from the *Nouroz* manuscript:

Amā ō sad amān yā shāh ō to man Tā kay man mahbos ser magō man

نوروز میفرماید .. امان صد امان یا شاه و تومن----- تاکی من محبوس سر مگو من...

This verse reports that *Pir* Nouroz complained, ‘Until when do we have to be secret?’ Thus it appears that the philosophy of secrecy is not derived directly from manuscripts, but evolved in Yārsān society because of their, at times dangerous, place as a minority in Islamic society.

One of my informants was a 58-year-old man, active in political associations of the Yārsānis in Sweden. He explained:

“Don’t tell secrets” is more common in Iraq between Kake-i [Yārsānis in Iraq], because they are under more pressure given the religious situation around them. They hide their religion and, especially after the recent ISIS attacks in Iraq, they are trying to assimilate to Shi’a. The most important issue is that they are easily assassinated because of their religion.

One informant, during a personal interview, explained that ‘We don’t say where our meeting is, because we still aren’t safe.’ They did not disclose their participation in conversations with me to their communities. According to my informants, ‘Our secrets are in our books.’ Mir-Hosseini has explored the context for such secrecy: ‘[For the] Ahl-e-Haqq, *kalām* are divinely revealed and historically factual sacred narratives’ (1997, p.177).

8. Results: Themes of Facebook Ethnography

“Don’t tell the secret” or “سیرمگو”

I received a great variety of answers to the first question I posed on the *Dallahoo* Facebook group page. I posted the question in Persian with a picture of a *Jam* Ceremonyⁱ, Figure 1, and users initially answered in both Kurdish and Persian:

“Why has the Yārsāni community in Iran and outside of Iran been willing to state their beliefs in recent years, while in the past they have remained secret? In

particular, what about online media such as Facebook has led to the suspension of their secrecy?"

Figure 1 Gathering (Jam) Ceremony. This picture accompanied the above questions posed to Yarsani participants on the Dallahoo Facebook page.

The statements following are a reaction to the image titled “Gathering (Jam) Ceremony” (Figure 1); the picture evokes memories of their religious beliefs. The comments about cultural religious aspects can be ambivalent and critical. S.A. wrote, ‘I don't think the same way you do. It's not acceptable for me that we don't keep our secret anymore.’ But other voices showed more open attitudes, and lacked critical edges. One user referred to Divan Gureh, another section of the Kalām in *Daftar Nouroz*:

Na kano Makan Matarso bego

دفترنوروز میفرمایدنه کان و مکان مترس و بگو

This means, “do not be afraid to reveal religion and talk about your beliefs.”

O.M., writing in Kurdish, commented,

In the early times, we didn't have internet. Media helps us with the emergence and revival of religion, to answer religious questions, open [discussion on] religious topics, and amend various opinions about religion, because Yārsāni society did not have this capacity of words in the past.

The answers above demonstrate that the Internet has led to increasing awareness or freedom for Yārsānis regarding their practices and their self-expression. They also show a range of reactions and views.

In addition to the above statements, O.M declared that using Facebook is illegal in Iran, and that limited internet access causes difficulties. Hajin (2013, p.3), in her research on the use of Facebook in Iran, noted this as well: ‘Access to the Facebook website since

the 2009 election onwards has been blocked and its usage is considered as illegal in Iran. Its use might be considered as a “cultural crime.” Current universal internet use occurs within a wide range of cultural streams, and these flows connect different consumer cultures in complex ways. Re-appropriation of religion and culture is a process that occurs after prohibition is lifted, or rendered ineffective because of the kinds of freedom that the Internet permits. On Facebook, one can see this process and how such re-appropriations create the crossing and re-crossing of ideas, which in turn impact the beliefs and identities of the Yārsānis.

Fear of revealing the secret

A.S. commented on the post accompanied by Figure 1 with a poem: ‘Have you heard about this sentence? “When knowing about secrets, they sewed your mouth.”’ His comments regard the Yārsāni concept of religious secrecy, the secret words of God, and according to Yārsāni religious thought, these ideas, or secrets, cannot be revealed: hence the adage, “Don’t tell the secret.” Mir-Hosseini pointed out that:

only an inner circle of initiates, namely *Sayyids* (the sect's religious leaders) and *Kalām* Khans (experts in *kalām*), had access to these [religious] manuscripts [*kalām*]. It was believed that whoever learned the ‘mystery’ as embodied in *kalām* had their lips ‘sealed’ (*muhr*). (1994b, p.213)

Poetry is a powerful vehicle for religious and cultural meaning. Some of the Yārsāni contributors to the online discussion circulated poetry in their comments. They drew their poetic responses largely from the “holy verses” (*kalām*), which have significant cultural value, and this sharing of sacred, formerly secret texts helps give shape to a new Yārsāni cultural identity.

S.A. continued the response seen above with one verse from the religious book, *Kalam of Pardivari*ⁱⁱ:

hanatgorûêyârîmawânâ....wîšanwasayêd o mûrsêlmazânâ
šamqâlanîwêšânâbâlâmanmânâ....najoâomadânnachîwarânâ

These verses are interpreted to mean that if you ask elders questions about what they mean by “don’t tell secrets,” some elders will refuse to answer, or they will give incorrect answers. In fact, because of the reasons mentioned for religious Yārsānis concealing their beliefs, it has been asserted by Yārsani that there is a lack of knowledge by Elders of Yārsāni.

S.A. also wrote that ‘in the time of Sayed shams Heydariⁱⁱⁱ there was diffusion between the people and the *Kalām*...’ and followed with these verses:

aydaftarwânândaftarbûânân wamanâîdaftarkâmelbêzânân
harkasnawânûpaşîmânîan....sawâîbâzxâstbâesbânîan

Translated, these mean, “Hey, fellowship. Read the holy Manuscript of Yârsân, and learn about the interpretation of the holy verses; if anyone doesn’t read *Kalâm*, and doesn’t learn [its correct] interpretation, he will regret it.”

S.A. added material from another important text within the *Kalâm*, the *Nouroz* manuscript:

dânaîfarangîşahrêarzhangem....nagêştmaskanîmaxîzûdangê
dânaîfarangîşahrêmâhlêm....nagêştmaskanimaxizûqâlêm
dânaîfarangîşahrêabjadêm....nagêştmaskanîmawânânxatêm
dânaîfarangîşahrêmafrûzêm....nagêştmaskanîdangênawrozêm

This *kalâm* translates to mean, ‘The future Yârsân religion will not be secret and the whole world will know about Yârsân.’ K.H., another user, made a similar claim about the future using excerpts from the *Nouroz* manuscript:

yanawrozwâtanwaâwâzebarz.....qâsedoshalâqpemanmaiodars

This means, ‘these verses are coming from orders of *Pir* Nouroz,
iv

he called with a loud voice, all these verses are a message for the future.’

According to the comments above, and the clarification of ideas with *kalâm*, it becomes apparent that at least some of these Yârsânîs are revealing their beliefs and no longer fear publishing their religious verses online, while others resist this change. Jacob has explored the context for prior fear and secrecy: ‘Because of the suppression of the Kurdish language by Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria, Kurdish poets could not publish their books of poetry; it was forbidden in Turkey and Syria for decades’ (2013, p.70). Facebook users who write these verses transmit cultural information to the public in moments - something that had not previously occurred over the course of centuries.

A.L. expressed his idea through verses as well, demonstrating that meaning can sometimes be communicated in ways that outsiders cannot understand:

nîyâzqabolmarâyâSayedBenjāmîn

This means ‘the prophet *Benyamin* accepted my demand.’ His response refers to *Pir* Benjamin,
v

who in Yārsāni ideology is the prophet called upon when one wants to pray or has a prayer they wish to be answered. When one calls upon Benjamin in prayer, he or she uses phrases directly out of their religious manuscript, and they may express a wish to one another that ‘God accepts your vow,’ meaning they hope that Benjamin answers their prayer. This implicit usage relies on the explanation, according to Hall (1997), that for any given cultural meaning to be effectively shared between people, they must share the same interpretation of the signs of the language, which happens mainly by assigning a certain sign such as a word or phrase, image, or sound to a specific concept.

A.M. posted the following picture (Figure 2), which contains a verse from the Iranian poet Hafez. Translated, it means ‘don’t tell your secret to other people, or die from the pain of selfishness.’

Figure 2 A Yārsāni Facebook participant posted this verse from the poet Hafez, meaning “don’t tell your secret to other people, or die from the pain of selfishness.”

A.M. also posted another picture (Figure 3) and wrote a sharply critical verse in regard to someone telling a secret to another: ‘If you tell your secret, you will die.’

Figure 3 A Yārsāni Facebook participant posted this picture, which portrays verses stating that death awaits a person who shares the secret of Yārsāni faith.

The picture depicts a person sitting beneath a rope noose and verses regarding the fate of death for anyone who reveals the secret. The image is a self-presentation and self-perception of their ethnic-religious identity representing their need to preserve their secret of God and their inability to reveal it.

Increasing knowledge and increasing confusion through cyberspace

A.O. wrote,

Followers of Yārsān have a lot of questions about their beliefs and their traditions. This is partly because their religion is socially limited in Iran. Due to their current situation, they can't spread information about their religion. Now they can, however, spread the message of the Yārsāni religion in cyberspace on the Internet.

Echoing A.O.'s idea, Khosrawi and Graham (2012) asserted that 'for many Iranians, especially women and members of a number of minority groups, even [being] limited to the Internet marks a significant improvement on their previous situation in Iran ... as [with] Kurds, Armenians, and Jews' (p.229). This is further supported by Jacob's findings that Facebook is an important place for self-expression of identity and improving confidence and pride in their culture for the Kurdish minority that remains oppressed in their homelands (2013, p.67).

I asked A.S., 'What is the reason behind "don't tell secrets?" Why don't they believe in it now? Is it because of the Internet, or for other reasons?' A.S. replied that '[T]hose who don't have knowledge about their religion bring their incorrect knowledge about Yārsānis to the media.' He mentioned that Yārsānis' re-appropriation of their religion in recent years and revealing of their beliefs, especially through media, have encouraged various ideas about Yārsān and claimed that each tribe^{vi} has their own idea. This is shown in the following divergent ideas about the *Jam* ceremony.

I asked about the *Jam* ceremony: "Are there questions asked at the Jam ceremony, and then answers given? And by freedom do you mean the ceremony is less secret than before?"

A.A. stated, '[W]e have started to talk about religion in Jam Ceremony since 2 years ago; we have discussions and questions between people who attend and its procurator.' O.M. answered, '[O]ur religion was secret, and [has] to remain secret, but we say and talk about secret[s] of our friends with others, and it's coming from our beliefs, and it's one of the weakness[es] of faith.' N.L. was the second woman to answer this question: 'The Jam has to be conducted with seven persons. In regard to the words of Sayed Almas, other rules come in the SARANJAM "religious manuscript," but we see a lot of mistakes here.' These responses offer an example of how Yārsānis have different concepts of their religion.

9. Conclusion

Yārsānis believe that secrecy developed during their history as a religious tenet, not because it was required in the religious manuscript, but because their followers and, especially, the surrounding society do not have the capacity to understand the mysteries contained within their dogma. These inscrutabilities include precepts such as life after death, transmigration of the soul, and the manifestation of God in humans at different periods. Media provides the possibility for Yārsānis to discuss and reveal their beliefs, and to improve and amend their knowledge about their beliefs. They can easily discuss these topics on Facebook and ask each other their questions. Most Yārsānis using Facebook do not perceive these discussions to be in contrast with their principle of secrecy, and some of the older Yārsānis do still believe that they should keep their traditional ways and beliefs. However, although online ethnography provides rich data and a wide range of viewpoints on the subject under research, the present study has limitations: for example, in this case it was highly restricted by gender, because the majority of Yārsāni Facebook users are male.

In this article, I have discussed ways in which re-appropriation occurs, and emphasized how this phenomenon fits into an understanding of the globalization process outside the Facebook community. Global flows spread information about the religion around the world, from Iran to the West. Religion and local identity have re-emerged as fundamental elements of the cultural homeland and as important markers used by individuals to classify themselves. Today's widespread anxieties towards new technologies and the explorative opportunities of cultural forms stem from a deeper cause. The provision of technology for the definition of the self (Zhao 2008, p.1829) plays a central role in the ability of the Yārsāni community to reclaim the aspects of their identities that are based on religion, culture, and traditional beliefs (Hosseini 2017).

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Notes

ⁱ Mir-Hosseini described a *Jam* as a monthly Yârsâni ceremony in which attendants, called *Jam*, hold communion in a temple called *Jamkhane*:

It is the best place to seek silence, comfort, and spirituality as well as the most welcome shelter for the poor and the nomads. In Kurdish regions, there are also a number of cemeteries, of which some are resting places for great religious leaders, called *Jamkhane*.

Whoever intends to take part in the *Jam* is required to obey some mandatory rules. The first and foremost is that any person who enters *Jamkhane* must wear a belt and a special hat. The other essential obligation is that no one is allowed to broach personal and/or public affairs in *Jamkhane*. When a person enters the holy place, they must kneel down as a gesture of respect and recite *YaHaqas* a sign of welcome. The sitting arrangement is a circular one in which everyone must sit on two knees and cross their arms on their chest as a sign of respect and face the *Pardivar*, which is the holiest spot in *Jamkhane* and is a memorial of *San Sahak*. Others who enter the place do the same thing and kiss all the other participants and sit down. The *seyyed* or his vice sits before the gate, and caliph and prayer must sit on on his right and left. Everyone must have their eyes closed and say prayers in silence. After the commencement of the meeting, no one is allowed to leave the place until the end of the ceremony. To begin the ceremony, one of the servants of *Jamkhane* recites some verses and prayers. The Elder begins playing *Tamboor* and singing songs from *Damiar* and *Damiar*. The attendants repeat the verses after a time. The servant must stand still right to the end of the ceremony. The most important reason to attend *Jamkhane* is saying God's praise, prayer, and contemplating over the spiritual realm. (Mir-Hosseini, 1994a)

ⁱⁱ Yari, or Yârsâni, call their religious manuscript *Pardivari* or *Saranjâm*, and in the Kurdish language Gurani or Hawrami (During, 1998).

ⁱⁱⁱ For further information refer to Mir-Hosseini, 1997, p.177.

^{iv} *His Diwan Kalâm Norouz*, one of the Elders of Yârsânis, is the author of poems about the interpretation of the terms and conditions of *Kalâm Saranjâm* or *Divan Gureh* which encourages people to acquire knowledge.

^v *Pir*, who perform certain rituals, resort to the old position determined by the founder of the sect. *Pir* is a title for a Sufi master or spiritual guide. They are also referred to as a *Hazrat* or *Shaikh*, which is Arabic for Old Man (personal communication, 15 November 2014). *Pir* Benjamin holds the position of angel, essence of Gabriel and the leader of salvation, or Benjamin is considered the incarnation of the archangel Gabriel.

^{vi} Yārsānis, according to each religion's followers, are required to have the elder, or *Pir*, and to obey the religion, or *Sar-sepordan*. Sultan Sahak founded Yārsān in the name of truth and seven families, or "tribes" or *khandan*, and future generations of Yārsān followers have *Dalil* (the guide who indicates the way) and *Pir*. The seven families established during the time of Sultan were *ShahEbrahim*, *BabaYadegar*, *AliQalandar*, *Khamush*, *MirSur*, *SeyyedMosaffa*, and *HajjiBabulsa*. The five families established after Sultan Sahak are *AteshBag*, *BabaHeydar*, *Zolnour*, *ShahHayas*, and *HajjNematollah* (Hamzei'i 1990; During 1998). Sayyids are descendants of the sect's founder or one of his later manifestations, and they fall into 11 holy lineages, referred to as *khandan* (lit. House or dynasty). Seven of these *khandans* originated at the time of Sultan Sahak in the fifteenth century; the rest were formed subsequently, when the Divine Essence made further manifestations (Mir-Hosseini 1994a; see also Mir-Hosseini 1997, p.177).