CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

THE SONG OF THE COMMONER:
THE GnostIC CALL IN YEZIDI ORAL TRADITION

ESZTER SPÄT
Central European University, Budapest

The Yezidis are a little-known Kurdish-speaking religious minority, with a religion based exclusively on oral tradition. The majority of Yezidis live in Northern Iraq, while smaller groups may be found in Syria, Turkey and the Transcaucasian states. The religion of the Yezidis shows a strong syncretism. While Sufi Islam has undoubtedly exerted a strong influence on it, traces of other religious traditions once flourishing in the region can also be detected. Such pre-Islamic influences include Gnosticism and Manichaeism. Due to the many-sided connection between these two systems of religious thought, it is not always easy to tell whether a motif has reached the Yezidis (or rather their ancestors) from Gnosticism or

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1 In honor of Johannes van Oort, on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday.
2 Today there is a sizeable diaspora in the West, primarily in Germany. For lack of census, the exact number of Yezidis is not known, though the Iraqi community is estimated at a few hundred thousands.
3 In today's Western scholarship it is generally assumed that it was a Sufi order, the al-Adawiya founded by Sheikh 'Adi b. Musāfir (the central figure of Yezidi mythology) in the 12th c. in the Kurdish mountains, which made possible the beginnings of the Yezidis as an organized religious community with a conscious sense of identity.
5 The emergence of the Yezidi community and the gradual formation of its peculiar religious system cannot have started before the 12th century or later, thus direct contact between Yezidis and the dualistic groups of late antiquity is unlikely. However, the followers of this Sufi order fast developing heterodox tendencies must have drawn many of their ideas from a cultural substratum shared by many peoples of the region. That this common cultural substratum contained motifs of a Gnostic/Manichaean origin is
Manichaeism, but there can be little doubt that Yezidi religion contains myths and motifs that ultimately derived from these dualist movements.\(^5\) An eloquent example of such Gnostic/Manichaean themes permeating certain aspects of Yezidi religious language is the Song of the Commoner (Beyta\(^6\) Cindi), one of the most sacred and respected oral texts of the Yezidis.\(^7\) The Song of the Commoner, calling on the believers to awaken, has to be sung every morning by men of religion just before sunrise.\(^8\) Translating the word cindi\(^9\) poses some difficulties of interpretation. Cindi literally means ‘soldier’ in Kurdish\(^10\)—however, as Yezidi hymns apply this word to ‘ordinary, hard-working people of no particular distinction,’\(^11\) or to ‘a godfearing Yezidi, with a connotation of poverty, discipline and simplicity,’\(^12\) Kreyenbroek, who translated the beyt into English, opted for translating it as ‘commoner.’\(^13\) Notwithstanding, cindi as a general rule appears in sacred texts where there is a reference to the need to fight for the faith, and especially to the final, eschatological battle between

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\(^6\) Beyt is originally an Arabic literary genre, adopted by the Yezidis.

\(^7\) The text of the Song of the Commoner and its English translation can be found in Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 231–239.

\(^8\) I heard the Song of the Commoner only once, at the great, week-long Festival of Sheikh Adi in October in the holy valley of Lalish, just west of Niniveh/Mosul. It was being performed by religious dignitaries in the courtyard in front of the Central Shrine before dawn.

\(^9\) English pron. ‘jindy.’

\(^10\) It is a word of Arabic origin.


\(^13\) Commoner here corresponds to the English translation of mirid, a Yezidi layman. Mirid originally denoted the followers or disciplines of a Sufi order. Today among Yezidis it refers to ‘commoners’ (those who do not belong to the higher, religious casts, like that of the sheikhs and pîrs.)