THE HOLY BROTHERHOOD
THE YEZIDI RELIGIOUS INSTITUTION
OF THE “BROTHER” AND THE “SISTER” OF THE “NEXT WORLD”

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in Memoriam

The Yezidis are evidently one of the most mysterious peoples of the world or, at least, of our region. And this is, of course, due to their religion - an ideology which is an admixture of Islamic, Christian and local indigenous elements with an eccentric dogmatic system and cultic practice. The Yezidi religion is an esoteric faith, and the Yezidis are a closed society having an elaborate and intricate system of social relations, various prohibitions between commoners and spiritual castes, between members of the society and aliens, strict endogamy in its classic manifestation, restrictions of the matrimonial ties, sometimes even within the same caste, etc.

The Yezidi society has three basic castes: the highest religious elite, sheikhs (šēx, Arab. šayx), pirs (pīr, Persian pир “old man, saint, priest”) and laymen, murids (mirid, Arab. murid “disciple”). Each of the spiritual castes is divided into several endogamous clans and subdivisions.

The closeness of the Yezidis’ life, their strange religious dogmas and practices are the main reason why they have always been the subject of various derogatory characteristics as, e.g., “devil worshippers”, “idolaters”, etc.

The article below is dedicated to an intimate Yezidi religious institution with a dramatic name: the “Brother” and the “Sister” of the “Next World” (bire axirate and or xwayinga, axirate, or yarē/a axirate, Arab. اخ و اخت الآخرة). It is based mainly on my own field materials, collected among the Yezidis of Armenia in recent years.

This important institution having a considerable role in the social and spiritual life of the Yezidis, as far as I know, has never been the object of special research. In the literature dedicated to the Yezidis one can find only some sporadic, mostly indirect indications on this subject. Th. Menzel, for instance, in his summarizing article in the Encyclopaedia of Islam mentioned it inter alia, only in some lines. R. Lescot, E. Drower, C.J. Edmonds and, most recently, Ph. Kreyenbroek also discussed some aspects of this institution but again in very concise terms. This circumstance can be explained by the fact, that the information about this institution is scant and contradictory and, at the same time, there are vague ideas about it among the Yezidis themselves too; even the clerics give sometimes very controversial interpretations on this subject.

The main content and functions of the religious institution of the “Brother” and the “Sister” of the “Next World”, according to the reports of the informants, include the following data. The “Brother” and the “Sister” are the intercessors in the “Next World” before
Sheikh Adi for their murids on the Day of Resurrection or just after death, when they are going to account for their deeds. But before their duties, on the Salât (Arab. Şirât) bridge (the bridge across Gehenna may be crossed only by the pious), the “Brother” and the “Sister” inquire about the moral purity (from the Yezidi viewpoint) of their murids, asking them three questions: 1) if they disturbed the caste boundary, i.e. married a representative of a spiritual caste - đûrî diskå danê? 2) if they fornicated, getting married with an adherent of a different faith - đûrî zi dalingå sîn? 3) if they remained followers of the Yezidi faith - barxe Silt’ân Ezldî? The “Brother” and the “Sister” must get positive answers to these questions with the following formulas: 1) đûrîm diskå danê (literally: I am far from mixing, i.e. from marriage with the representative of another caste; 2) đûrîm dalingå sîn (literally: I am far from fornication, i.e. from marriage with the heterodox; 3) ve dinê, wē dinê barxe Silt’ân Ezldim (literally: In this world and in the “Next World” I’m a lamb of Sultan Yezid, i.e. a follower of his faith). In the case of the positive result of the inquiry, the murid, following the “Brother” or the “Sister”, according to his/her sex, crosses the Salât bridge. Before the entrance to paradise the “Brother” or the “Sister” appeals to Sheikh Adi with the intercession permitting their murids to enter paradise:

Şex Âdi, tu şahîdâ bî,  
Şex Âdi, tu p’adşäyî,  
P’adşäyê qadîmiyêyî erhêdetî,  
Aw silâmata, bê lašâya;  
Bira hara jinate.

Sheikh Adi, be a witness,  
Sheikh Adi, you are a king,  
You are Lord, ancient and primordial,  
He (she) - is sound, flawless.  
Let him (her) enter paradise.

The negative answer to even one of the directed questions causes the immediate refusal of entry into paradise.

Each Yezidi is obliged to have, respectively, a “Brother” or a “Sister” only from the caste of the sheikhs. This choice is hereditary, i.e. the obligation to choose a “Brother” or “Sister” from a given family of the sheikhs moves from father to son and from mother to daughter. In fact, a certain family of sheikhs deals with a certain family of laymen. Such a distribution is intended, likely, to distribute evenly the number of sheikhs among the lay people and thereby to provide a stable income for them, as the sheikh of a family as well as “Brother” and “Sister” must be given regularly offerings of money, help and services from their murids. Originally, perhaps, the murid had chosen the “Brother” or the “Sister” by himself.

As the “Brother” and the “Sister” are close friends of the family, they often are considered to be the “Brother” or the “Sister” for the members of the opposite sex in the family as well. Such a phenomenon creates sometimes a wrong impression that every Yezidi, ignoring his/her sex, has both a “Brother” and a “Sister”.

According to some Yezidi sheikhs in Armenia (e.g. Sheikh Hasane Mamud),

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