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The Yezidi Religious Textual Tradition:
From Oral to Written

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

with Samples
of Oral and Written Religious Texts
and with Audio and Video Samples
on CD-ROM

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Introduction

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

The Hymn of the Weak Broken One
(*Qewlê Zebûni Meksûr*)¹

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

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

¹ See Excursus I.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The cultural framework within which the Yezidi religious textual and oral commentary traditions have existed, i.e. both its content and its 'pre-modern' cultural context, need to be studied in order to achieve a proper understanding of the original Yezidi religious tradition⁴ and of the modern transformational processes occurring in Yezidi society. Scholars of Yezidi Studies are now at the stage where they need to document as much information as possible, and to review, and in some cases to reinterpret, what has already been published. The history of the publication and study of Yezidi religious and semi-religious texts can be divided into four periods, i.e. up to 1978, from 1978 to 1993, from 1993 to 2005, and from 2005 onwards. During the period prior to 1978 earlier authors were mainly concerned with discovering the 'roots' of Yezidism, but a few oral religious texts were also published. In 1978 and 1979 three collections of Yezidi religious texts both in Soviet Russia and in Iraq were published by four Yezidi intellectuals (the CELÎL brothers in Russia and SILÊMAN and CINDÎ in Iraq).⁵ These collections, however, were virtually unknown to scholarship and not referred to until much later. An important stage of the development is marked by the appearance of the English translation of the texts and the study of the Yezidi religious textual tradition in the West in the early 1990s by MURAD 1993⁶ and KREYENBROEK 1995,⁷ resulting in the profound work by KREYENBROEK and RASHOW in 2005.⁸ Since these books appeared there has been a tendency to base accounts of Yezidism on an inductive approach and on factual observations. In 2005

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

- 4 The Yezidi religious oral tradition, which comprises both oral 'texts' and other aspects of Yezidi religious knowledge, is handed down through practices, religious values, etc. that are considered by all Yezidis to be 'old', fundamental and valued information, and are shared by everyone in the traditional society. See also *Notes on terminology* in Chapter II.
- 5 CELÎL, O. and CELÎL, C., *Zargotina Kurda* (Kurdish Folklore), Moscow, 1978a. Religious texts: pp. 5–53 (numbered 711–728); CELÎL, O. and CELÎL, C., *Zargotina Kurda* (Kurdish Folklore), Yerevan, 1978b. Religious texts: pp. 302–464 (numbered 1677–1714); SILÊMAN, X. and CINDÎ, X. [RASHOW, Khalil Jindy], *Êzdiyati: liber Roşnaya Hindek Têkstêd Aîniyi Êzdiyân* (Yezidism: in the Light of some Religious Texts of the Yezidis), Baghdad, 1979.
- 6 MURAD, J. E., *The Sacred Poems of the Yazidis: an Anthropological Approach*, unpubl. thesis, University of California, Order No. 9422024, Los Angeles, 1993. As MURAD's thesis has not been published and is known only to a limited number of scholars, it did not have such an effect as the book of KREYENBROEK 1995.
- 7 KREYENBROEK, Ph. G., *Yezidism: Its Background, Observances and Textual Tradition*, Lewiston New York, 1995.
- 8 KREYENBROEK, Ph. G. and RASHOW, Kh. J., *God and Sheikh Adi are Perfect: Sacred Poems and Religious Narratives from the Yezidi Tradition*, Wiesbaden, 2005.

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

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

Methodological Considerations: Sources and Research

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

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

⁹ KREYENBROEK and RASHOW 2005: XIV.

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