


Article

The Influence of the Diaspora on the Transformation of the Main Elements of the Yazidi Religion

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Abstract: This article discusses the transformations of the main elements of Yazidi religion in the diaspora—especially among Caucasian Yazidis, Yazidis in Central Asia, and Yazidis in Western European diasporas. The article focuses on the primary features of the Yazidi religion and highlights their distinctive stabilising social and religious functions. The functions of these various religious elements considered important by Yazidis vary considerably not only over time but also over geographic space. The same religious elements and precepts (e.g., an emphasis on marriage rules) that can significantly stabilise Yazidi society in Iraqi Kurdistan can just as significantly destabilise it in the diaspora (especially in Western Europe).

Keywords: Yazidis; religion; transformation; diaspora; Caucasus; Central Asia



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1. The Aim of the Work

This article discusses variability of the main elements of the Yazidi religion in the diaspora and the function of these elements as important stabilising (or destabilising) factors for the Yazidi community. In fact, the Yazidi religion is not very centralised, leading to significant differences between Yazidis living in geographically distinct areas—the religious centre in Iraqi Kurdistan, post-Soviet republics (especially Armenia and Georgia) where Yazidis have migrated since the nineteenth century, and in Western Europe, especially Germany, where the largest diaspora of 200,000 to 250,000 Yazidis is currently located (Aldonani and Agojan 2021). The latter is the region to which they have migrated in the largest numbers, especially following genocide by the Islamic State and the largest massacre of Yazidis in 2014. Despite vast religious differences, Yazidis in various parts of the world maintain remarkable unity in relation to the global Yazidi community—withstanding significant variation, they consider themselves members of a single (Yazidi) religion. Religious unity, however, does not in any sense create ethnic unity. Ethnicity is extremely diverse among the Yazidis and includes both an emphasis on the link between ethnicity and religion (Yazidis are in this sense both followers of the Yazidi religion and members of the Yazidi nation speaking the Yazidi language) and their ethnic perception as Kurds or even Arabs. Conversely, there is an attempt on the part of some Kurds (who do not profess religious Yazidism) to use the Yazidi religion to reinforce the antiquity of the Kurdish nation (citing Yazidism as the original religion of the Kurds).

2. The Research Method

This paper is based primarily on field research and the collection of qualitative data (with semi- and un-structured interviews) from Yazidis (and Kurds) in post-Soviet republics and Germany:

- 2018 Georgia (Tbilisi, Adigeni—near the Turkish border). In Georgia, the Yazidi community is concentrated in the capital. Only a few Yazidis live scattered in the Adigeni region and mostly associate their ethnic identity with the Kurds. This Georgian region

is characterised by a higher proportion of Muslim residents—around 20% (Saqartvelos Mosaxleobis 2003).

- 2019 Kazakhstan (Zhambul, Taraz, Astana, Almaty) and Kyrgyzstan (Talas, Maymak, Pokrovka, Bishkek). In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, respondents were chosen mainly in Kurdish associations and on the basis of recommendations from representatives of other religious groups (Catholic and Orthodox priests, mullahs) who had a good overview of the religiosity of the area in which they worked.
- 2021 Armenia (Aknalich, Rya Taza, Vagharshapat/Etchmiadzin, Yerevan). Since Armenia is considered a centre for the Yazidis in the Caucasus and the place from where the Yazidis migrated further to the territory of present-day Georgia or to Russia, a large number of contacts to Yazidis living in the German diaspora were obtained there and through them further contacts to Iraqi Yazidis were obtained.
- 2021 Germany. Although most Yazidis are settled in southern Lower Saxony (Hanover, Oldenburg), Göttingen (Lower Saxony), and Bielefeld (North Rhine-Westphalia), where they form large, compact communities, efforts were also made to recruit Yazidi respondents from areas where they live dispersed (Munich—Bavaria).

Regions where the Yazidi minority forms a compact settlement were chosen for the research. In this, the clear choice was in Armenia, where there are several villages with a majority Yazidi population. Additional respondents were obtained in the capital city, where Yazidi organisations are also headquartered. In Georgia, there is a lack of significant village compact settlements and the majority of Yazidis are connected only to the capital. Tbilisi, however, is a very important city for the Caucasian diaspora because the Yazidi Academy is located there. In Central Asia, it was only possible to select areas according to Kurdish settlement. In Germany, the distribution of Yazidis is very uneven and the Yazidis are mostly an urban population.

The largest number of respondents was obtained in Armenia (also due to the fact that the Armenian Yazidi diaspora is the oldest in the Caucasus and the other Yazidi diasporas are based on it). The individual interviews can be divided according to length—predominantly, shorter interviews of around 15 min were conducted. These interviews were often superficial due to their scope, taking place in random places, but it was still possible to record important responses (e.g., relationship to the Yazidi community, relationship to the majority society, relationship to the centre of Yazidism). Interviews of around one hour in length ranked second in terms of number. These interviews took place during visits to religious celebrations or during visits by invitation to Yazidi families. Only seven interviews lasted for several hours and these interviews were followed up later on—these were mainly interviews with representatives of religious life or representatives of Yazidi associations.

A common issue for all interviews was the perception of Yazidi identity:

- what each Yazidi must fulfil in order to be labelled as a Yazidi (or what members of the majority society consider to be the main features of Yazidis) and
- what the main similarities and differences are perceived to be in relation to their surroundings.

These main questions then set the further direction of the interviews and the accentuation of different elements of Yazidi identity. The advantage of this research was that, thanks to long-term contacts, it was possible to obtain insights from the highest spiritual leaders of the Yazidi community and the heads of Yazidi associations, as well as from ordinary representatives of the Yazidi community. In Iraq, information about the Yazidi community was mediated, as Iraqi Yazidis were contacted during their visits to settled relatives in Germany. Further information on the situation in Iraq was obtained from Armenian Yazidis undertaking regular visits to Yazidi settlements in Iraq.

Emphasis was placed on qualitative methodology and data collection from respondents, who are members of ethnic minority and majority ethnic groups, through semi-structured interviews. The selection of respondents was carried out using the snowball sampling method (non-probability sampling method), first through representatives of

ethnic associations who then approached their acquaintances. In conducting the interviews, an attempt was made to select respondents in such a way that generational differences would be apparent. This enabled trends in cultural elements for this study to be identified. Although another aim during the interviews was to have parity between male and female respondents in the pre-productive, productive, and post-productive age groups, this effort was not fully realised. This is mainly due to the traditional division of roles in families. The male head of the family was almost always present during the interviews and other family members were much less involved. This imbalance was partly redressed by having women conduct some of the interviews. However, this was not a stable research team, but the interviewers were either local women, international students, or experienced researchers in cultural studies. However, they faced frequent rejection from Yazidi women in Georgia and Armenia. In Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and among Yazidis in the German diaspora, this problem hardly occurred at all. On the contrary, there was an extraordinary friendliness in the conduct of conversations among Yazidi men across social and religious hierarchies.

In the face-to-face interviews, no recording material was used, but the recording of data took place after the interviews were completed—this method has both a distinct advantage (a very informal two-way interaction between interviewer and respondent, which cannot be induced, for example, when using a dictaphone) and a partial disadvantage (possible inaccuracy in the subsequent recording). To eliminate these possible inaccuracies, the interviews always involved at least two interviewers, one of whom led the discussion and the other (or a third or fourth) tried to remember the interview as accurately as possible. The interviews were transcribed, and sub-themes were extracted from these transcripts, always linked to a specific respondent (a thematically coherent paragraph was tagged with specific keywords). Using these keywords, it was then possible to cluster paragraphs according to the same focus.

After the face-to-face interviews had been conducted, there was a long period of clarification via electronic communication (especially video calls), and in this respect, all interviewees were again extremely helpful. These interviews were conducted in the vast majority of cases as dialogues between interviewer and respondent only.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Yazidism

Yazidism has no clear founder and, according to the Yazidis themselves, is one of the oldest religions in the world, probably because of its connection with Zoroastrianism. In this context, some authors (e.g., [Kaczorowski 2014](#)) point to the interconnectedness of Yazidism with other religious systems—the creation of the Seven Divine Beings and the mediating forces at the beginning of time leading to the establishment of a hierarchy of supernatural beings is almost identical in Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, and Yazidism, namely regarding supreme beings, holy beings, and anthropomorphic beings.

However, the earliest information about the Yazidis can be found only in the writings of medieval historians and geographers of the Near East, such as Al-Shahrastani or Ali ibn al-Athir from the time when one of the most prominent representatives of Yazidism, Sheikh Adi (Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir), lived at the turn of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Although for Iraqi Yazidis this sheikh was a direct incarnation of God and his companions an earthly manifestation of one of the angels ([Spät 2005](#), p. 54), as a spirit he remained in paradise for seven years and is also the last Yazidi prophet. Armenian Yazidis are much more cautious in defining him as a direct incarnation of God. According to the Armenian respondents, Adi cannot be spoken of as a prophet, because if he lived only in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, he would have addressed only a small section of the people—only the Old Testament prophets are true prophets because they address all people and their prophecies have a global reach (Sheikh from Armenia, 56 years old, 2021), yet Sheikh Adi's grave in Iraq's Lalish Valley is an extremely sacred place for both Iraqi and Armenian Yazidis.

It is noteworthy that Adi was considered by Muslims (for example, by Ibn Taymiyyah in the 14th century) to be a sincere Muslim who followed the Prophet's Sunnah—indeed, the Yazidis themselves were accused by Muslims of heresy from Islamic orthodoxy. Numerous prominent Islamic historians, jurists, and geographers have therefore written about the “strange” beliefs of the Yazidis (Maisel 2013). To this day, opinions continue to be expressed in the Muslim press that Yazidism is a “deviant and misguided sect” (Alyazidiat 2013). However, from the Yazidi point of view, Adi is considered the prime figurehead and innovator of the Yazidi religion, who came to help the Yazidis when circumstances were difficult.

With regard to the origin of the world and humanity, the Yazidi religion does not separate a mythical time which cannot be dated from historical time (Finley 1965). In Christianity, for example, and similarly in Judaism (with some exceptions in Rabbinic Judaism, for example), events of a mythical nature are strictly separated. Events that are not dated (the creation of the world and man, the establishment of God's order, man's violation of that order and punishment) are followed by events that are relatively well defined in time—the emergence of the Chosen Nation, the prophets, and so on, until, in the case of Christianity, the coming of the Redeemer. The horizon of myth is clearly visible here, in contrast to the origins of the Yazidi religion, which the Yazidis associate with the creation of the world. All these events have a highly specific date, such as the creation of the first man, Adam. The consummation of history, including the dates that point to this, is also defined by a specific time and date.

According to one of the interviewees, a Yazidi fakir (i.e., one of the highest-ranking Yazidi clerics) from Armenia (interview conducted in Yerevan in 2021), the world lasts 7000 years. Of this, 6047 years have already passed (in 2021), and thus 953 years remain until the consummation of history. The important dates defining the “century of horrors” are from 1914, when the events associated with the persecution of the Yazidis by the Ottoman Turks began, to 2014, when the massacre of the Yazidis in Iraq by the Islamic State took place. This precision in dating may be difficult for some outside observers to accept, but for Yazidis it is of immense importance to place events in a certain unified framework in which nothing happens randomly but according to a given order.

Literalism, however, need not be truly literal. The religionist Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard (1939, p. 215) warned against hasty rejection of religious ideas that are outside our own worldview. Religion cannot be understood from the writings of authorities alone; it must be “experienced”. As an illustration, he gives an example that is extremely close to the Yazidi religion: the symbol of the sun. Although some cultures call the sun a god, they may not actually consider it a god at all, but believe that its qualities (power, light, energy) remind them of God and thus symbolically represent him.

This is exactly the case in the Yazidi religion, in which one of the most prominent symbols is the sun, to which the Yazidis regularly turn in their prayers. There was an overwhelming consensus among all respondents that they do not pray to the sun, yet for them the sun is a symbol and manifestation of the one God (“we see the sun and thus we are reminded of the greatness of our God”—Armenian respondent, 2021, Rya Taza village, female, 45 years old).

3.2. Typical Elements of Yazidism

It is only partially possible to identify universally valid and typical elements of Yazidism because Yazidis living in geographically different areas sometimes understand these elements very differently. The field research conducted has demonstrated quite convincingly that the main formally declared elements of Yazidi identity (faith, endogamous marriage, language, celebration of festivals) have a number of differences depending on different geographical areas: the greatest emphasis on formal observance of all the declared elements (orthopraxy) is in the centre of the Yazidi religion in Iraqi Kurdistan. In the diaspora, where there are very good relations between Yazidis and Christians due to more than a century of coexistence with the majority society (especially in the Caucasus

region), the emphasis on orthopraxy is mainly on endogamous marriages, while the Yazidi faith has adopted many elements from Christianity, which has influenced the celebration of a number of festivals. In addition, the youngest Yazidi diaspora in Germany has to respond very intensely to the differences resulting from the requirements for endogamous marriages, which are culturally unacceptable to the majority society.

Beliefs. Man is a being created by God who has handed over control of the world to seven angels, chief among whom is the Peacock Angel Melek Taus. Even in this case, there is no complete unity among the Yazidis—the Iraqi Yazidis grant the angels real rule over the world, while the role of God appears to be rather passive. By contrast, the Caucasian Yazidis, probably also influenced by their Christian surroundings, understand God and his manifestations in a much more dynamic way. Angels are much closer in their conception to the angels of the Judeo-Christian tradition in their role as messengers and close servants of God. Also, the role of the Angel of the Peacock differs for all Yazidi groups. According to some Armenian Yazidis from the highest spiritual group of sheikhs, there has been a miscommunication and misunderstanding of the faith over time—according to them, the Peacock Angel is a nickname, a symbolic designation of the biblical archangel Michael, the warrior against the devil. Because the devil is symbolised by a snake and the peacock is, for example, referred to as Mayura/Mayūra (snake killer) in Sanskrit, the archangel Michael acquired the nickname of the Peacock Angel. Some Yazidis, according to this respondent, have deified the Peacock Angel to the extent that they worship him in a way that is reserved only for God (respondent from a group of sheikhs, 58 years old, Yerevan 2021).

Distinct roles are also attributed to prominent figures in Yazidism, ranging from deifying them to understanding them as prophets, or seeing them “only” as prominent people. The monotheism of the Yazidis is evident, for example, in the prayer of the Iraqi Yazidis, which has been adopted as a symbol of faith (Shahdā dīnī): “The testimony of my faith is One God, Sultan Sheikh Adi is my king, Sultan Yezid is my king, Malak-Tawus is the Symbol 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” (Asatrian and Arakelova 2003). The religion is closed to outsiders and conversion is not allowed.

Yazidism is a monotheistic religion with multiple elements taken from the pre-Islamic Old Persian period with influences from Sufi mysticism and contains features of Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The influence of a number of religions on Yazidi beliefs is acknowledged by almost all Yazidis, and Yazidi religious authorities recommend careful study of the Bible (Old and New Testaments), the Qur’an, and the Avesta for a proper understanding of their religion (Sheikh respondent, 58 years old, Yerevan 2021).

Marriages. It is a closed religion where marrying outside the community (and caste) leads to exclusion from society. It is common and highly desirable to marry a cousin. Yazidis who marry outside the community are ostracised.

On the one hand, strict endogamy counteracts the assimilation of Yazidis by the majority society; on the other hand, rigid adherence to this can lead to human misery. In traditional Yazidi culture, the community prefers women not to keep children who have been conceived as the result of rape. This was evident, for example, after the 2014 genocide of Yazidis in Shingal/Sinjar, Iraq, when Yazidi religious authorities clearly stated that children conceived as a result of rape by non-Yazidi men had no right to be born (Greaser 2018). Yazidi women are then compelled to choose between abandoning their children and returning to their Yazidi communities or staying with their children. The consequence has been a high abortion rate among Yazidi women survivors and a correspondingly high abortion-related mortality rate (Goodman et al. 2020).

The emphasis on endogamy has become highly problematic among Yazidis living in Western European communities, as they have at times had to endure ridicule from members of the majority society, who in some instances have associated Yazidism solely with the injunction of endogamy (Iraqi-born respondent living in Germany, female, aged 32).

Language. This is a group that speaks “Kurdish”, although many Yazidis disagree and consider their language to be Yazidi (ezdiki). Because the largest number of Yazidis live in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, where the main Yazidi centre is located in the Lalish Valley, most Yazidis consider the majority language of the area—Kurmanji, a dialect of Kurdish—to be their mother tongue. This dialect is also used by Kurds in the eastern regions of Turkey and northern Syria. Yazidi respondents living in the territories of the former Soviet republics (Armenia, Georgia, Russia) overwhelmingly asserted that their language is Yazidi, while Yazidis from Kazakhstan consider themselves ethnic Kurds whose native language is Kurdish, but in many cases also have Russian as their mother tongue.

Holidays and family ceremonies. For many Yazidi holidays, there is no consensus on whether they are “truly” Yazidi. Many of the holidays celebrated by Yazidis in Kurdistan are indeed known among Yazidis in the diaspora, but only among the older generation—there are numerous holidays young people do not even know about. Most are celebrated rarely or not at all.

An important ceremony in the Yazidi religion is circumcision. This is associated in some places with a special custom known as “karif”/“kiruv”, in which a Yazidi boy in northern Iraq may be subjected to circumcision on the knee of a Muslim man, thus creating a patronage between them (Guest 2012, p. 37). Indeed, an adult male from among the non-Yazidi neighbours is chosen as the patron of the young Yazidi being circumcised and then hosts the feast. Today, this is most often an Arab or Kurdish Muslim, but in the past, it was often a Christian or Jewish friend or colleague of the father. The key point is that the ritual establishes and further strengthens the ties between the two families with different religions, who continue to visit and support each other (Edmonds 2002, p. 45).

Circumcision, on the other hand, was strictly rejected by the Yazidis who came to Armenia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries because of persecution from Muslims (often Kurds) and they wanted to distinguish themselves from their oppressors. To this day, Armenian Yazidis do not perform circumcision, even though other Yazidis do not consider them full Yazidis because of this—for example, when visiting sacred sites in Iraqi Kurdistan, local Yazidis have prevented them from participating in the sacrifice of a sheep (kurban) because they contend that only those who are circumcised can do so (respondent from Armenia, male, 30 years old).

Originally, another family ceremony was associated with circumcision—the first hair cutting (bisk) by the sheikh. In areas where circumcision is not performed (the Caucasus), the bisk itself remains the most important family ceremony (respondent from Armenia, 30 years old).

Some holidays are celebrated only by certain Yazidi families, both in Kurdistan and in the German diaspora. For example, the Batzmi holiday celebrated at the end of December, during which “basmbari” knitted threads are distributed, is prepared only by Yazidis belonging to the Yelka family, although Yazidis from other families and castes also attend the celebrations.

Yazidis in the Armenian diaspora celebrate a number of festivities along with Christian Armenians, and the content of these celebrations can be explained as a reminder of some of the elements of the Yazidi religion. Because Yazidism incorporates several Christian elements, these may be celebrations of specifically Christian holidays (for example, Christmas, during which many Armenian Yazidis attend Christian services, or the so-called Feast of Love, which overlaps with St. Valentine’s Day). For Georgian Yazidis, it is no surprise that they celebrate St. George’s Day, which is a national holiday throughout Georgia (respondent from Aknalich, Armenia, male, 42 years old). Nevertheless, there are also several holidays among Armenian Yazidis that are typically Yazidi—most notably, the Yazidi New Year, which is celebrated on the first Wednesday of April. On this holiday, “kloche”/cakes are baked and eggs are painted. Another typical Yazidi holiday in the Caucasus is the Feast of Creation (Aida Ezid) in December. Some festivals began to be celebrated after the collapse of the Soviet Union when Armenian Yazidis were able to visit Kurdistan and introduced the regional celebration, the festival of Charshi Masur, upon their return home.

In addition to these holidays, the Yazidi ritual includes the remembrance of the dead, where cemeteries are visited and then followed by a feast, and although the content of this holiday is the same in Armenia and Iraq, it is celebrated in different months (respondent from Yerevan, male, 30 years old).

3.3. Stabilised Religion—Elements of Stability

An established religion (i.e., one that has gained some status in society and tends to reject radical practices) is often assumed to contribute to social stability (Simmel 1898). In the case of Yazidism, however, the question of whether Yazidism has a certain positive status in a particular society and is an established religion in a given area is often problematic. This appears to be the case only in those areas of Iraqi Kurdistan where Yazidis are a majority—especially around Sinjar, where their sense of their own ethnic identity is strongest (Černý 2017, p. 93). In other areas, Yazidis are more likely to convince the majority society that their religion is “established” and “wholesome”. In this respect, they succeed most easily in Armenia and Georgia, whereas in Germany, for example, they often have to defend themselves to the majority society by claiming that they are not a sect and thus a de facto destabilising element. A similar need to defend their religious beliefs and the resulting way of life exists in areas with an Arab (Muslim) majority.

Patrick Fagan (2006) presents multiple examples of the benefits of religious practice in society (more stable family life, more stable marriages, lower incidence of domestic violence and crime). He argues that this is evident in the present as well as in past centuries, where he points to the approach of the “Founding Fathers” of the USA, who were also aware of the stabilising function of religion for society.

In the context of introducing religion as an important stabilising element, it is necessary to mention the other side of the coin, namely that religion can in some cases be a significant destabilising factor. As an example, Miles (1996) cites geographically distinct regions: in some, religion can be a common ground between previously antagonistic state entities (such as Iran), while in religiously plural societies, the increased emphasis on religion as the basis of state identity is a destabilising factor (e.g., Serbia, India, Nigeria).

For this reason, one must always ask whether it is religion as a primary or derived factor that brings social stability (or instability). When considering demographic data in the Caucasus region (e.g., divorce rates) in relation to religion (religiosity rates), there appears to be a clear and statistically verifiable interdependency between these elements. Simply put, the higher the religiosity, the lower the divorce rate. In those Caucasian republics where religiosity is very high (Armenia), the divorce rate is very low (9–10%) and occurs mainly in the urban population. By contrast, in those parts of the Caucasus where religiosity is much lower (Stavropol region), the divorce rate reaches 60% (Kokaisl et al. 2010, pp. 170–75).

Thus, religion should cause spouses to treat each other better, as a result of which the whole family will be happier and more stable. Certainly, this can happen, but the situation can also be quite different. Research conducted on “stable marriages” in Central Asia indicates that strong environmental pressures often make divorce impossible. Divorce as a solution to marital discord is often not an option for either spouse, and women in particular choose other solutions: to escape from the family or commit suicide, for example. Indeed, the suicide rate is significantly higher among women in these societies, and up to six times higher in rural areas than in the largest cities (Smertnost’ ot Samoubiystv 2021).

Thus, a collectivist society in which social ties to the wider environment are vital (and in which adherence to religious customs, which may or may not be related to religious beliefs, is an essential element) does not permit certain behaviours (in this case divorce) and sanctions them heavily (Call and Heaton 1997). Černý (2020) reports that some Yazidi women first encountered the condemnation of domestic violence and the possibility of divorce in the refugee camps where they arrived after the 2014 Islamic State massacres. This inevitably undermined the authority of traditional law that was typical of Yazidi society.

3.4. The Main Stabilising Elements of the Yazidi Religion

Yazidi communities have a rich historical experience of multiple attempts to assimilate them into mainstream society. Nevertheless, the Yazidis have largely been able to resist assimilationist pressures due to the specific role of the Yazidi religion. This is due not so much to the creed, which is not strict, but more to the fact that Yazidism is a religious–social system that extends into all areas of human life.

The Yazidi religion is a remarkably complex system, encompassing and addressing both the transcendent needs of people and, in a very precise manner, the nature of non-religious everyday life. The two components are not separate but closely intertwined. Thus, Yazidism creates a specific culture that includes elements ranging from religious expressions and moral principles to the use of language and methods for choosing partners. Knowledge of, and adherence to, these principles acts as an exceptionally strong stabilising and anti-assimilation factor and leads to the maintenance of a distinct religious-ethnic awareness.

3.4.1. Endogamy

What kept the Yazidi community compact in the past was undoubtedly its marriage rules and the considerable emphasis on endogamy. Because we do not have enough information about the main manifestations of Yazidism before the time of Sheikh Adi (eleventh to twelfth centuries), the origins of the main Yazidi rules and laws come from the period during which he was alive.

Certainly, strict marriage rules are not unique to the Yazidis—many religious minorities in the Middle East (Christian Armenians, Alawites, Druze) also forbade marriages outside their religious group (Kamrava 2018). However, these marriage rules were strictest among the Yazidis. There were three main hereditary groups (often referred to as castes) anchored in Yazidi doctrine. Given that a member can only be born into his or her respective hereditary group and transfer between groups is out of the question, a clear division of roles between the different clans has existed for centuries. This strict separation was also intended to prevent power struggles between groups and promote effective and coordinated coexistence among all Yazidis. Owing to the imperatives of endogamy, which are deeply rooted in the religious system and embedded from birth, the Yazidis have been able to organise themselves socially for centuries, despite numerous extermination campaigns.

The three groups every Yazidi belongs to from birth until death are as follows:

- The “sheikh” group, which is divided into three lineages and whose members are not allowed to intermarry; marriages can only be contracted within the same lineage.
- The “pir” group consists of two lineages, whose members may between marry each other, with exceptions (Aldonani and Agojan 2021). Kreyenbroek (1995, p. 132) lists four main groups within the pir group, which are further subdivided into two to three subgroups.
- The third and largest group is the “mirids”; they are allowed to marry within this group without further restriction (Aldonani and Agojan 2021).

Sheikhs and pirs have the special task of looking after the mirids religiously and spiritually, teaching them religious doctrines and performing social functions. However, the responsibility of the various hereditary groups extends exclusively to religious matters and does not explicitly apply to the secular hierarchy. The relationship between the three main groups corresponds to that of a spiritual-religious sibling relationship; for this reason, the marriage of two people from different hereditary groups is considered religious incest. Consequently, the Yazidis, who are firmly rooted in their religion, are extremely strict in this regard.

According to the respondent from Armenia (male, 59, member of the mirid group, 2021), the emphasis on endogamy is absolute in the Yazidi community. Back in the times of the USSR, he studied in Ukraine, where he met a Ukrainian woman to whom he became engaged. However, after his return to Armenia, his relatives and the entire community informed him that there was no way he could marry a woman outside the Yazidi community.

Because he did not want to sever ties with the community, he agreed to marry a Yazidi girl from the mirid group, to which he also belongs.

By contrast, in the contemporary diaspora in Germany, the strict rule of endogamy is increasingly violated and the emancipation of women is growing. The preference for traditional marriage by older generations and high bride prices are creating an economic gap; consequently, there are now conflicts within families and in some cases young people are leaving home—this is significantly dividing and weakening the Yazidi community in Germany (Doboš 2021). In some Yazidi communities in Europe, the spiritual link between sheikhs and mirids is also disappearing and is reduced to the collection of a religious fee (*fito*) that mirids are obliged to pay to sheikhs (Kreyenbroek 2009, p. 184).

The stabilising element of Yazidi marriage rules may therefore become problematic in the diaspora as it faces rejection by the surrounding society. Even in diasporas which are considered safe, such as those in Germany, Yazidis are not spared from discrimination and racism. Their traditions and culture are labelled as alien and an obstacle to integration. The majority society, but also other immigrant communities in Germany, often reduce the issue of Yazidism to forced marriage or endogamy and attack the Yazidis with insulting terms such as “inbred sect” (Aldonani and Agojan 2021).

3.4.2. Ethnicity and the Persecution of the Yazidis

It is often the case that religion is a vital element of ethnicity (of which it is a subset), but certainly the reverse is also true—ethnicity can be a subset of religion in that one religion can be typical of a number of ethnicities. Ernst Gellner (1983) mentions one of the definitions of nation, according to which two people belong to the same nation when they recognise each other as belonging to the same nation. The same can be applied to religion as well—there, too, a double recognition of belonging is required.

In centralised religions, formal affiliation to the church is established by baptism and subsequent registration in the baptismal register; for instance, in Judaism, it is necessary to be born to a Jewish mother (which is why conversions to Judaism tend to be difficult and, in some cases, quite impossible). Yazidis adopt a similar approach to religious affiliation, requiring strict endogamy (marrying only within their group).

But, that is only the first step in being a member of a religion: ‘I became a member of a religion by some initiation ceremony or birth, and I acknowledge and do not question that affiliation’. The second, according to the above definition, involves the necessary acceptance of a particular person into a religious group and recognition by that group: ‘Yes, you belong to us; you are part of our community’. The leaders of religious groups have various means by which an individual can be kept in the group or punished by expulsion.

Belonging to a religion then brings other social elements, for example, being a member of a particular religion can increase (or decrease) social status. In the Ottoman Empire, the enslaved Christian population participated in local government only to a limited extent, and only those who converted to Islam could gain a share of national power. Yet the goal of the Ottoman conquerors was not religious homogenisation (although they welcomed converts), but the maintenance of the religious barrier as one that was also social and political (Ayalon 2015).

Here again, we encounter the problem of stability in society reinforced by religion. The nineteenth-century French philosopher and religious scholar Ernest Renan notes the myriad peculiarities in the formation of a nation and asks how it can be possible that ‘Switzerland, which has three languages, two religions, three or four races, is a nation when, for example, Tuscany, which is so homogeneous, is not?’ He metaphorically compares the existence of a nation to a daily plebiscite, just as the existence of an individual is a constant affirmation of life. A nation presupposes the past, but at the same time by its presence it expresses its consent, a clearly articulated wish to continue living together. However, Renan believes the main reason for the existence of a nation is that it engenders such strong solidarity, constituted by a sense of the sacrifices that have been and will be made (Renan 1882, pp. 10, 27).

If we apply Renan's definition to the Yazidis, then they are clearly a nation because for them there is a "daily plebiscite" asking the question as to whether they want to continue living together as a group.

Also, the element of perceived sacrifice mentioned by Renan as central to the creation of a nation is quite typical of the Yazidis. Because their persecution throughout history has primarily been religiously based, it has created a mutual solidarity that exhibits all the elements characteristic of an ethnic group. Thus, religion and the motive of religious persecution necessarily became the main attributes of ethnicity, with language, customs, geography, and nationality becoming secondary attributes.

The motif of the persecuted nation was so strong among the Yazidis that it became an essential part of Yazidi historical memory and of Yazidi identity (religious and ethnic). This generalisation has been published by a number of Yazidi identity researchers (e.g., [Ali 2020](#)) and is also clearly evident in the research conducted. The Yazidis are the eternal and defenceless victims who are often forced to renounce their religion, as the story of the seventy-two genocides (fermans) the Yazidis had to endure symbolically demonstrates. In Kurdish/Yazidi, the term "mass murder" is used instead of 'genocide'; the term "ferman" is of Persian origin and means "decree", referring to several decrees in the Ottoman Empire that legitimised violence against the Yazidis from the sixteenth century onwards ([Six-Hohenbalken 2019](#)). In the twenty-first century, during the Islamic State (ISIS) attacks in Iraq, two more fermans have been added to this symbolic list for which Armenian Yazidis almost exclusively use the term "genocide", as the same term was used by the majority Armenian society for the massacres of the Armenian population by the Ottoman Turks a century earlier.

The motif of Yazidi persecution featured prominently in the construction of the first Yazidi temple in Armenia in the village of Aknalich, which is also the largest Yazidi temple in the world. The path from the main gate to the temple is lined with statues representing important Yazidi cultural figures, but the greatest space is given to sculptures representing the victims of Yazidi (and Armenian) genocides—both in the Ottoman Empire and in what is now Iraq. The motif of the persecuted Yazidi people also appears in the cultural room, where there is a memorial both to the victims of the 2014 Yazidi genocide in Iraq and the deceased Yazidi men who participated alongside the Armenians in fighting for Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020.

The question as to whether the Yazidis are a confessional or an ethnic group cannot be answered unequivocally. The mere posing of this question is based on an understanding of the nation as a specifically European phenomenon. In Europe, the use of the term "nationalism" is understood to denote an identity with a nation defined, among other things, by a common language, as is typical among most European nations but rare on other continents. Given that being a nation is nowadays considered almost universally to be something prestigious, implying certain rights, but also, and above all, involving certain political or power ambitions, the representatives of numerous groups feel the need to prove they have fulfilled all the attributes of a nation ([Hroch 2021](#)).

This is one of the reasons why there is a desire on the part of some Yazidi leaders to codify the Yazidi language and separate it from some of the dialects of Kurdish. Conversely, representatives of the Kurdish ethnic group try to exploit the antiquity of the Yazidi religion and thereby reinforce the cultural antiquity of the Kurds. Thus, Kurdish could be considered the oldest and best language through Yazidism because it is the language of God, with which he spoke to Adam ([Al-Hasani 2017](#)).

There is no consensus among the Yazidis themselves regarding their ethnic self-identification. An estimated 200,000 Yazidis live in the isolated Kurdish valleys and mountains of the Near and Middle East, and the Caucasus and Transcaucasus, divided between Turkey, Syria, Iran, and the Caucasian republics of the former USSR (Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and southern Russia) ([Khenchelaoui and Burrell 1999](#)). Some Yazidis also live in the Central Asian republics of the former USSR—they arrived in this territory as part of Stalin's transfers of unreliable peoples from the Caucasus in the 1930s and 1940s,

along with the Kurds. Some of these Kurds (including Yazidis) had lived in the Caucasus region for several centuries. From the nineteenth century onwards, more Kurds began to arrive in the Caucasus from the Ottoman Empire and Persia. Other Kurds came as refugees from the crumbling Ottoman Empire in the early years of the Soviet state (having fled the massacres of the Young Turks/Jön Türkler) and Persia, where the official authorities forbade them—under threat of imprisonment—from even speaking Kurdish at home. The Kurds first gained a form of autonomy in the territory known as Red Kurdistan in the area between Armenia and Karabakh, where a large Kurdish group already lived. Because the Kurds did not secure their own republic, their national rights were much more limited than those of the Armenians and Azerbaijanis (Nadirov 2003, pp. 11–14).

However, the core of the community lives in Iraq, where the question of Yazidi self-identification is probably most serious. The Kurds realised that convincing the Yazidis of their “Kurdishness” would make it easier for them to pursue policies that were not only military and economic but also cultural. Even before the Second World War, Kurdish intellectuals were already trying to label the Yazidi religion as the original religion of all Kurds. Conversely, during Saddam Hussein’s regime, there was an effort to convince Yazidis that they were Arabs, for example, by claiming that the main reformer of Yazidism, Sheikh Adi, was an Arab descendant of the Umayyads (Rodziewicz 2022). Some Yazidi groups in the Mosul area of Iraq still wear Arab clothing today.

The Iraqi constitution considers the Yazidis a religious rather than an ethnic group. Consequently, some identify themselves ethnically as Kurds and refer to themselves as “Yazidi Kurds”, others as “Arabs”, “Iraqis”, or, if they favour the creation of a separate state of Kurdistan, as “Kurdistanis” (‘we are not Kurds, but our language is Kurdish, we do not want to isolate ourselves from Kurdistan, which is our homeland’) (Nicolaus and Yuce 2017, p. 217). In this respect, the Yazidis in Armenia or Georgia, where the state officially recognises the Yazidis as a separate non-Kurdish ethnic group, are probably the most distinct. The vast majority of these Yazidis consider themselves a separate Yazidi nation, as respondents regularly answered: ‘we are a separate nation, we are not Kurds, they have a different language and religion’.

In complete contrast, however, is the view of their ethnicity held by top German Yazidi leaders Hassan Dutar and Hir Fakir Ali, who, according to their statement in 2000, clearly emphasised Kurdish ethnicity:

no matter how much we say we are Yazidis, if it is not combined with Kurdish nationality, it is like a tree without roots and fruits. But the Yazidis are not a nation. It is a faith, a religion, just like Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. Our religion is Yazidism and our nation is the Kurds. Yazidism has been the main religion of all Kurds since the beginning. We say: Blood is not water. The Kurds are united by blood. Faith will come later.

The Kurdish political leader Abdullah Öcalan made a similar statement in 1999:

Yazidism is our millennial faith and we have no right to send it into oblivion. Nor can we exclude other religions. We simply take everything useful with us into future times and reject the impositions, everything that hinders, obstructs or harms us... (Nadirov 2003, p. 209)

These statements and interpretations of Yazidism are based on a certain political understanding of the nation, in this case, subscribing to a particular nation is not primarily a reflection of ethnic sentiment, but an effort to realise political goals. Thus, it is often for political reasons that the Kurdish ethnic identity is accepted or rejected.

The rejection of Kurdish ethnicity by Yazidis, especially in Armenia and Georgia, also has historical roots. Centuries of persecution and discrimination against the Yazidis by their Muslim, fellow citizen Kurds (often to a much greater extent than by other peoples) as well as features of the Yazidi religion (e.g., endogamy) have contributed to isolating the Yazidis from other Kurds. The extermination of Yazidis by Muslim Kurds (but not only

by them) on religious grounds has contributed to the strengthening of Yazidi confessional identity and, to some extent, its ethnicisation.

The second major reason why Georgian and Armenian Yazidis are the most widely regarded as a distinct Yazidi nation is the influence of state intervention. While in other countries the Yazidis have to define themselves in myriad ways in relation to the majority society, in Armenia they are more likely to encounter support and declarations from state leaders emphasising the similar fate of Armenians and Yazidis during the frequent attempts to assimilate or even exterminate them. The overwhelming majority of Yazidis living in the post-Soviet space have ties to Armenia, from where Yazidis left for Georgia (as early as the nineteenth century), Central Asia (as part of the Kurdish settlement during Stalin's repression in the 1930s), Russia, and Ukraine—especially after the collapse of the USSR (Representative of the Yazidi Association in Armenia, Yerevan, 2021).

Indeed, the arrival of the Yazidis in Armenia is most closely linked to the persecution of the Yazidis in the Ottoman Empire. During the Ottoman-Russian War, the Russian army secured the support, albeit partial, of the Yazidis, who established friendships with Armenian officers in the Russian army. These relations with the Armenians on the borders of Russia did not end with the cessation of the Ottoman-Russian War but continued even after the Armenians were forced to leave Ottoman lands in 1915 ([Gökçen and Tee 2010](#)).

However, even in the new region—Tsarist Russia—Yazidi identity was not taken under consideration to any great extent. In the only census from the Tsarist period in 1897, Yazidis do not appear as a nationality nor as a religion.

In all censuses during the lifetime of the USSR, the Yazidi nationality appears only in 1926; according to the data, all Yazidis lived in the Transcaucasian SFSR (the territory of present-day Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan) and numbered 14,523 people—85% of whom lived in the countryside and only 15% in the cities ([Vsesoyuznaya perepis' 1928](#)). Indeed, the 1926 census included all smaller ethnic groups, including those identified as part of larger nations. As a result, 194 ethnic groups were recorded in the 1926 census, the largest number of ethnic groups in the history of Soviet censuses ([Akopyan 2020](#)).

In the 1937 census, the Yazidis were listed as a subset of Kurds ([Slovar Natsionalnostey 1937](#)), but the results of this census were not published due to the significant decline in the population of the USSR—the results were even declared “illegal” ([Chumakova 2012](#)).

Thus, in Soviet times, Yazidis were referred to as Kurds, which changed only after the collapse of the USSR. Armenia is a country where the majority of the population lives in cities (63%), with only slightly more than a third of the population living in rural areas. Yazidis are still clearly a rural population in this respect, as of those who profess Yazidism, 88% live in rural areas ([Population Census 2011](#)), an even higher proportion than in the 1926 census.

The 2011 census in Armenia surveyed both ethnicity and nationality. Yazidi was identified as “Shar-Fadinian” in the census, and Yazidis were allowed to declare their Yazidi nationality—which 35,308 people (1.2% of Armenia's population) duly did. The exceptionally high proportion of believers in Armenia is typical of all ethnic groups (96%), including Yazidis (95.5%). The vast majority of Armenian Yazidis (69%) subscribed to Yazidism (Shar-Fadinian). Approximately 10% of Yazidis subscribed to paganism and about the same proportion to the Armenian Apostolic Church. By contrast, over 30% of Kurds subscribed to Yazidism. These results therefore indicate that Yazidi ethnicity may include membership of another religion.

Thus, Yazidi ethnicity is inextricably linked to the Yazidi religion, even for those Yazidis who do not subscribe to it. For these Yazidis, the link to the original religious tradition and their associated historical awareness remains linked to persecution in the first instance. The motif of persecution and sacrifice thus acts to strongly stabilise the Yazidi community.

3.4.3. Diaspora

Although Yazidis are acutely aware of the differences between the various groups (in the centre of Yazidism in Iraq, in the Western European or Caucasian diaspora), a powerful bond of unity remains between them.

Yazidism and its religious content is based primarily on the orally transmitted sacred tradition. However, this has been significantly interrupted or fundamentally transformed in the diaspora. By contrast, the Yazidis in Georgia and Armenia form a largely stable community that has existed for more than a century. Yazidi respondents in Armenia agreed that their current religious situation and their relationship with the majority society are excellent. This is related to the fact that Yazidis, like Armenians, associate their own ethnicity with the motif of a persecuted people. In this respect, Yazidis and Armenians are exceptionally close—according to a respondent from Armenia (Sheikh, Aknalich village, 51 years old, 2021), ‘Yazidis feel almost at home in Armenia’. According to this respondent, it is the word “almost” that should be emphasised, because no place on Earth should be referred to as home by the Yazidis, this can only be in heaven. By contrast, the German diaspora is in many ways unanchored and searching for a proper relationship with the majority society.

In the past, the Yazidi religion was clearly tied to sacred sites in what is now Iraq/Kurdistan. It was a “holy land” in much the same way that the Jews perceived the “promised land”. Only in the Valley of Lalish was it possible to undergo initiation ceremonies, and only here was it possible to obtain sacred objects—for example, shaped white balls of clay called “berat”, prepared by celibate initiates.

After the forced exodus of Yazidis and the emergence of diasporas, the relationship with the holiest Yazidi site began to change, as pointed out by the Yazidi member of the Kurdish parliament, Sheikh Shamo (2016):

Going abroad is always a mortal risk for a religious or ethnic minority. A Christian can go to church anywhere in the world. A Muslim can similarly go to a mosque anywhere. But Yazidi shrines and sacred ground are only in Kurdistan. Only there can our faith and ritual be fully practiced. Migration may save the individual, but it can destroy our community culturally. Now we are thinking of opening Yazidi temples in Europe, which was completely unimaginable for us until 2014. (Černý 2017)

However, the emergence of diasporas and the entirely new realisation that a significant number of Yazidis already live outside the original traditional Yazidi sites has not decimated the Yazidi community. On the contrary, the diasporas in Armenia and Georgia have leaders who are highly educated in the Yazidi faith and have thus become an asset and source of stability for the global Yazidi culture and community. In Georgia, the International Yazidi Theological Academy was established, offering three years of study in Theology and Practical Theology (Ritual Service). It is not a school for the general public as only high school educated Yazidis are eligible to apply. Most students attending the Yazidi Academy are from Germany, Russia, Georgia, Armenia, and Belgium (respondent from Georgia, 45 years old).

This academy may thus become another important educational centre as the traditional teaching of the Yazidi religion in schools in Iraqi Kurdistan has been interrupted for more than a generation. Yazidis received their religious education in the traditional manner during the period in which there was a monarchy in Iraq, until it was halted in 1963 when the Ba’ath Party took power. After Saddam Hussein became president in 1979, the situation for the Yazidis became even worse. It was not until the second half of the 1990s that a complete religious curriculum from primary to secondary schools was established, but this was soon interrupted by the Islamic State government (Iraqi respondent, 2021, 72 years old).

Even in the largest Yazidi Diaspora in Germany, many Yazidis had almost no access to qualified religious education. Unlike other religious groups, there were no organised institutions that conducted research on Yazidism as part of an academic framework. German

Yazidis are aware that the traditional oral form of transmitting theological and historical knowledge is no longer effective in the light of changing living conditions. German Yazidis are therefore striving to create a modern and institutionalised form of knowledge transmission that is relevant to contemporary realities. Today's generation of parents in Germany has also failed to pass on traditions to their children, though through no fault of their own, because they have had almost no opportunity to engage with religious content in their settlements. The young generation of Yazidis in Germany is largely left to itself, intellectually and theologically. The racist experiences that many young Yazidis are increasingly being subjected to have led to a reorganisation in this group. An increasing number of young Yazidis are engaging in Yazidi social networks to identify and develop the right responses and strategies (Aldonani and Agojan 2021).

In Germany, Yazidi cultural centres are being established and are becoming the centre of gravity for cultural events in Yazidi society. Magazines with Yazidi themes are published and forums are created in which the most topical issues are discussed. Gradually, the oral tradition of transmitting culture is being abandoned; Yazidi magazines and forums strive to capture everything already in writing, especially in terms of cultural heritage. The "new Yazidism" is no longer focused exclusively on the holiest site of Lalish in Iraqi Kurdistan, although this remains the "home" of all Yazidis in the world (Doboš 2021).

Although the huge exodus of Yazidis has significantly weakened the original Yazidi community in what is now Iraqi Kurdistan, the activities of Yazidis in the new diasporas have substantially strengthened the Yazidi community.

3.5. Geographical Differences and Their Influence on the Transformation of the Yazidi Religion

If religion is acknowledged to have a stabilising role in many aspects of society, it is necessary to consider the extent to which religion itself is stable, which are the primary elements that should hardly change, and which elements are possible or even desirable to change. In order for religion to play a stabilising role in society, it is necessary to carefully analyse those elements which form its essence (what it really brings to the table, what constitutes its essential, indispensable characteristic) and, conversely, to separate these from elements which may be subject to considerable variation yet do not significantly affect its essence (temporal, geographical, and cultural variations). These two parts can be imagined, for example, like a ball, the centre of which is filled with air, without which the ball loses its function. This—perhaps surprisingly—is the essential substance, the most important thing, even though it is often not perceived. The cover of the ball can be made of a wide variety of materials of many different colours, and it also has an unquestionable role to play, and, in our analogy, this cover represents the variability of cultural expressions in a precise way.

If we apply our analogy to the Caucasian Yazidis (in Armenia and Georgia), then sharing the essential essence of their religion (the belief in one God) with members of other religions poses no problem for them. This sharing is even manifested in the fact that the Yazidis have adopted a number of Christian holidays, which they celebrate together with the Christian majority in Christian churches. But these Yazidis certainly do not want to be labelled as Christians, because pride in their Yazidi traditions is extremely important to them. However, for those Yazidis who live in areas geographically closer to the holiest sites of Yazidism in Iraqi Kurdistan, there is a much greater emphasis on the typical Yazidi traditions (orthopraxy), which in some cases appear to be considered more important than the transcendent component of their religion.

Often, we may encounter a situation where members of the same religion come together over certain differences that lead them to question whether, without this particular attribute, their religion is still "the one". For example, in 1878, when the Austro-Hungarian troops occupied the Turkish province of Bosnia and established their own administration in place of the old Ottoman one, more Jews began to arrive in Sarajevo. The incoming Jews, who were officials and educated people, belonged to the tradition of Ashkenazi Central European Jewry. The local Jews were very surprised that there were Jews who did not speak Spanish, and they wondered whether someone who did not speak Spanish

could even be a Jew (Gauß 2001, pp. 10–11). Another example from the mid-nineteenth century is a conversation between an Italian and an Austrian Catholic priest about the mode of baptism: whether they baptised in very cold churches, even in winter. The Italian priest heated the baptismal water beforehand but only baptised in the church, while the Austrian priest mentioned that more comfortable baptisms in heated private homes were needed. In response to this remark, the Italian priest asked if in such a case the Austrian priest was even a Catholic (Veselák 1875, p. 78). Humorous as these two examples may seem, they vividly demonstrate how the essence of religion is confused with its outward manifestations.

In this context, Philipp Kreyenbroek and Khanna Omarkhali warn against religious “essentialism”, namely the view of religion as an eternal constant that underlies and inspires all actual expressions of religion. According to these authors, there is a broad consensus that the Yazidi tradition places more emphasis on correct behaviour (orthopraxy) than on matters of true faith (orthodoxy). The Yazidi religious tradition lacks a logically coherent system of religious doctrines, principles, and beliefs. Thus, on numerous topics, one can find different narratives that logically exhibit contradictions. For example, there is a belief in reincarnation among Iraqi Yazidis, yet the concepts of heaven and hell are also very much present in Yazidi religious discourse (Kreyenbroek and Omarkhali 2016).

In the case of contemporary Yazidism, which is increasingly shifting from its traditional place in the Middle East to diasporas in Western Europe, the differences between local traditions are deepening. At the same time, this highlights the fact that Yazidi structures and social norms, long considered immutable, can change quite rapidly.

In the context of the emergence of Yazidi Diasporas outside Iraqi Kurdistan, we are also currently witnessing a slow shift of the main theological centre to places in the diaspora. Kurdistan’s sacred sites (the Lalish Valley) are unquestioned, but the places from which the voices of Yazidi religious authorities are heard are transforming and shifting to the Caucasus and Europe, often with the support of Lalish cultural organisations.

Among Yazidis, one can hear a diversity of views on where the “right” religion is, or on who represents the clear authority on religious decision making. Yazidis in Iraqi Kurdistan often make it clear that they, living in the holiest places of Yazidism, are the bearers of the correct tradition. By contrast, Yazidis in Armenia (and other diasporas derived from Armenia) are far from united in their acceptance and recognition of these traditions.

Some Armenian Yazidis consider Iraqi Yazidis uneducated in matters of general outlook as well as in religious matters. According to one of the Armenian respondents, a member of the senior clergy (a sheikh, 58 years old), most Iraqi Yazidis are influenced by superstitions and doctrines that simply overlay the Yazidi religion (for example, the belief in reincarnation, which is believed to be the result of the influence of Indians who supposedly came to the Kurdistan region centuries ago). This poor state of affairs is due to a complete lack of education in all respects—local Yazidis arbitrarily add elements to their religion that they like and remove those they do not.

The second, largely contradictory, view is represented by another respondent who believes that the Armenian Yazidis have almost abandoned their religion and should return to their true Yazidi roots, which they can discover in the beliefs as well as the customs and rituals of the Iraqi Yazidis (respondent from Armenia, 30 years old). Iraqi Yazidis who have visited Yazidis in Germany report that they are no longer true Yazidis:

German Yazidis have so much freedom in all respects, but that freedom causes them to cease to be Yazidis in many ways because they do not follow the basic Yazidi customs and rules, even though they claim to be Yazidis (respondent from Iraqi Kurdistan, 56 years old). However, the German Yazidi diaspora is different in many ways: it is a relatively new diaspora and also, unlike the former Yazidi diaspora in the former USSR, the German one is not particularly rural-oriented—on the contrary, a significant majority of German Yazidis live in cities. All of this may account for the distinct difference of the German Yazidi diaspora.

It is these disputes over the main elements of the Yazidi religion that can lead to a clarification of their importance. According to one of the Armenian respondents, the newly built Yazidi temples in Armenia (in the villages of Aknalich and Rya Taza) are not true Yazidi temples for a multitude of reasons; rather, they are just cultural centres (they do not belong to the entire Yazidi community, but remain the property of their builders, wealthy Yazidi businessmen; they have the wrong symbolism because the cupolas have the symbol of the sun, and so on), which is a view the respondent took from the Yazidis of Iraqi Kurdistan. Conversely, according to another respondent, the building of any Yazidi temple is an important symbol of the Yazidi community's togetherness but remains just a symbol: the temple is wherever one prays to God. Although a temple is highly convenient for prayer, like the prayer room in Yazidi homes, a temple can also become, for example, a space in a car during prayer.

4. Conclusions

A comparison of Yazidi communities in the Caucasus, Germany, and Iraqi Kurdistan shows the significant transformation of these religious societies.

The search for the main (essential) elements of the Yazidi religion, which would be an important stabilising element, has been (or is still) underway in the newly established communities in the diaspora.

The influence of geo-political conditions is shown to be significant; some stabilising elements of the Yazidi religion, including, for example, the strict requirement to marry only within a given Yazidi sub-group (sheikhs, pirs, and mirids), have indeed had a positive effect on the compactness of Yazidi communities, and this is particularly evident among the Yazidis in their original location in Iraqi Kurdistan. The situation is similar in Armenia or Georgia, where Yazidis have lived with the majority society for several generations. However, the situation of Yazidis living in the diaspora in a Western European country (especially Germany) is quite different. The customs associated with endogamous marriages are often considered very inappropriate by the majority society and are often rejected by the younger generation for this very reason. This is not just a generational conflict, but a question of setting boundaries as to what extent the rules and demands of the majority society should be accepted and to what extent the acceptance of these demands will lead to an erosion of Yazidi identity.

Thus, the most important stabilising factor for the Yazidi ethnicity remains the motif of the persecuted nation, since the persecution was primarily for religious reasons, an extremely strong link between religion and ethnic identity was created. This motif as a strong identity-forming element is present in all Yazidi groups.

Once religion becomes established in any society, its stabilising role for the whole society (from the stability of family, social, and civic life to its desirable transcendent content) is assumed. Yazidism has only attained the status of an established religion in some places in Iraqi Kurdistan, where there has been both recognition of Yazidis and even investment in Yazidi cultural and religious activities, primarily to ensure loyalty to the ruling Kurdish parties. Similar status has been given to Yazidis in Armenia and Georgia, where the state recognises (and supports) a separate Yazidi nationality in addition to religious freedom. Given the very high proportion of believers across all ethnic groups in these countries, the role of the Yazidi religion as a social stabilising factor is not in question. This is also because Yazidism in the region has adopted many Christian elements and is considered a close religion by the majority society. Yazidism certainly cannot be considered an established religion in the German diaspora because of the many elements that are considered too different for the German majority society. For this reason, the Yazidi religion is in some cases considered a sect and thus a destabilising factor for society.

Research conducted among geographically diverse Yazidi communities has also shown that an emphasis on stability and strict adherence to certain cultural and religious elements can, in turn, lead to instability and abandonment of the Yazidi community.

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Informed Consent Statement: All respondents were aware of the research objectives and agreed to participate in the research. In the presentation of the results, the respondents were partially anonymised so that the reader could obtain relevant and truthful information about the respondents, but so that it would not be possible to clearly identify a specific person on the basis of this information.

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