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# *Hola hola Tawûsî Melek, hola hola şehidêt Şingalê*: Persecution and the development of Yezidi ritual life

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**Abstract**

Holidays and associated rituals have always played a crucial role in Yezidi religious life. The attack of ISIS on Yezidis and the subsequent displacement of more than half the community has had a profound impact on the way these holidays can be celebrated. The fact that the Sinjari Yezidi community has lost access to its sacred landscape, which is the traditional focus of much ritual activity, as well as a semi-official ban on any public form of rejoicing at a time of mourning, constitute a threat to the continuation of ritual life. However, contrary to expectations, Yezidi religious and ritual life has become more intense rather than declining in the wake of the ISIS attack. The driving forces behind this phenomenon are the need for supernatural help, new opportunities, and a sense of defiance. The daily mixing of the two communities, local Yezidis and Sinjari refugees, with diverse traditions, has also led to an enrichment of ritual life and a new awareness of the multiform nature of Yezidi traditions as people exchange and adopt new customs.

**Keywords**: Yezidis; religion; rituals; ISIS; syncretism.

**Abstract in Kurmanji**

**Hola hola Tawûsî Melek, hola hola şehidêt Şingalê: Zulm û pêkhatina jiyana ayînî ya êzdî**

Cejn û merasimên li wan rojên cejnan bi rê ve diçin hergav xwedanê roleke serekî bûne di jiyana dînî ya êzdiyan de. Êrîşa DAIŞê bi ser êzdiyan û koçberbûna zêdetir ji nîvê cemaeta êzdiyan li dû wê êrîşê tesîreke mezin li ser awayê pîrozkirina wan cejnan kiriye. Cemaeta êzdî ya Şingalê ji devera xwe ya pîroz qût bûye, ku piraniya çalakiyên dînî lê bi rê ve diçin, û herwiha qedexeyeke nîv-resmî li ser her çi awayekî xweşhaliyê heye di vê dema şînê de. Ev herdu eger gefeke mezin in li ser berdewamiya jiyana ayînî an dînî ya cemaetê. Ligel vê jî, ber'eksê ya ku mirov li bendê be, jiyana dînî û ayînî/merasimî ya êzdiyan li dû êrîşa DAIŞê lawaz neketiye, belkî kûrtir û berfirehtir bûye. Li piştê vê diyardeyê sebebên wek pêdiviya alîkariya xwedayî, îmkanên nû, û hesta berxwedanê hene. Têkilbûna herdu cemaetên êzdiyên xwecih û koçberên ji Şingalê, ku xwedanê nerîtên cuda ne, rê li ber dewlemendbûna qewareya merasiman vekiriye û her ku endamên cemaetan dikevine danûstandinê û dab û nerîtên nû dinasin têgihiştineke nû ya tebîetê pir-şiklî ya nerîtên êzdî jî li bal wan peyda dibe.

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**Abstract in Sorani**

هۆلا هۆلا تاووسی مەلەك، هۆلا هۆلا شەهیدێت شنگالێ: ئازار و گەشەکردنی ژیانی سرووتی ئێزیدی

بۆنە و سرووتەکان بەردەوام رۆلێکی کاریگەریان لە ژیانی ئایینی ئێزیدی گێڕاوە. هێرشی داعش بۆ سەر ئێزیدییەکان و جێگۆرکێی دوا بە دوای زیاتر لە نیوەی کۆمەڵگەکەدا، کاریگەرییەکی قوواڵی لە سەر چۆنیەتی بەسەربردنی ئەو بۆنانە داناوە. ئەو راستییەی کە ئێزیدییەکانی شنگال پێوەندییان لە گەڵ خاکی پیرۆزیان لە دەست داوە، کە تەرکیزی زۆربەی کردەوە ئایینیەکانی بووە، و هەر وەها جۆرە قەدەغە کردنێکی نیوە فەرمی لە سەر هەر جۆرە شێوازێك لە شایی گێشتی لە کاتی ماتەمینیدا، مەترسییەکی لە سەر بەردەوامی ژیانی ئایینی دروست کردووە. بەڵام بە پێچەوانەی چاوەروانیەکان ژیانی سرووتی و ئایینی ئێزیدی بە جێگەی کاڵ بوونەوە لە دوای هیرشی داعش لە جاران خەستر بوونەتەوە. ئەو هێزە هاندەرەی لە پشت ئەم دیاردەمیە، نیاز بە یارمەتییەکی سەرووی سرووشتی، دەرفەتگەلی نوێ، و هەستی بەرهەڵستاکرییە. بە هۆی تێکەڵ بوونی رۆژانەی دوو کۆمەڵگە، واتا ئێزیدییە خۆماڵییەکان و ئاوارەکانی شنگال، بە دوو تراديسیۆنی جیاواز، ئاڵ و گۆڕ و وەرگرتنی نەریتی نوێ، ژیانی سرووتی دەوڵەمەندتر بووە و هوشیارییەکی نوێ لە سەر سروشتی فرەفۆرمی تراديسیۆنەکانی ئێزیدی دروست بووە.

## Introduction

On the 3rd August 2014, the "Islamic State of Syria and Iraq" (ISIS) overran the Yezidi community of Sinjar in Northern Iraq, killing and capturing thousands and sending hundreds of thousands of others into exile in the Kurdish Region of Iraq. The ISIS attack ruptured the life of the entire Yezidi community of Iraq, Sinjaris as well as those living in the Kurdish Region.[1] This article studies the impact of the ISIS attack and the subsequent mass displacement of Yezidis on ritual life in Northern Iraq.[2]

Ritual life has always played an important role in the transmission of Yezidi religion and in maintaining the cohesion of Yezidi socio-religious life. Given the lack of written religious texts and therefore of formal religious education, participating in the various rituals during holidays has been an important means of sustaining and perpetuating the sense of Yezidi identity as a distinct religious community. As Philip Kreyenbroek writes in his seminal work on Yezidis (1995: 18–19), the oral character of the Yezidi religion has meant that a much greater emphasis is laid on orthopraxy than on orthodoxy. This orthopraxy included, among other things, the dutiful observance of Yezidi holidays and associated private and public rituals. These holidays and rituals are closely tied to the land itself and its sacred sites, that is, Yezidi holy

[1] Though legally Sheikhan is not (as yet) a part of the Kurdish Region, *de facto* it is. For the sake of simplicity, I shall refer to the Yezidi villages east of the Tigris, including Dêrebûn, the Duhok region and the Sheikhan as the Kurdish Region in this article.

[2] My field research was carried out in the collective villages of Khanke and Shariya, and I also visited the village of Bozan (in the Sheikhan district) as well as the holy valley of Lalish several times. The primary focus of research was Khanke, as Khanke did not only have an official refugee camp on its outskirts (as did Shariya), but there was an unofficial camp as well (where I did not need the permission of the authorities to visit), and people also erected tents in any empty space they could find, as well as inside a huge, unfinished wedding hall. I had also previously established contact with some families in Khanke who were hosting relatives from Sinjar. The field research took place in April, which is perhaps the month that offers the most opportunities to participate in religious events. Yezidi New Year takes place on the "first" Wednesday of April (third Wednesday by the Gregorian calendar). New Year itself is preceded by a number of religious events, and then is followed by a cycle of *tiwaf*s or shrine feast. Consequently, I had plenty of opportunity to observe the ritual life both among locals and refugees.

places, which traditionally "offer a focus for devotions" (Kreyenbroek, 1995: 69).

Yezidi holy places, especially village shrines, play an important part in the cycle of Yezidi holidays and ritual life. Each Yezidi village "belongs" to a sacred space, which may be a shrine or a holy place containing several shrines. The dead of the village are buried in the cemetery surrounding this sacred space, and new brides are taken there on their wedding day, as a symbol of their acceptance into the community. Some villages have their own "central" shrine, which may be inside or next to the village, or even some distance from it.[3] In other cases, several villages "belong" to one shrine or sacred space. Thus several villages take their dead (and their brides) to the small hill consecrated to the holy being Mem Şivan in the village of Khanke, thirteen villages belong to Mehderi, a collection of shrines and graves next to the village of Bozan, while many Sinjaris take their dead to be buried at the shrine of Şerfedîn.

These shrines and the graves around them are also visited on all important holidays. Most works on Yezidi ritual life mention the New Year tradition of women going to the cemetery at dawn to mourn the dead. The women first lay the graves with special holiday food (as well as chocolates, biscuits and canned soft drinks these days) and then sing dirges, wailing and beating their chests. In some villages the mourners are accompanied by the *qewwal*s,[4] in others just by the local *zurna* players.[5] Once the dead have been dutifully mourned, women partake of a ritual meal among the graves. The existing literature, however, generally fails to note that the custom of visiting the graves (and the shrine next to which they can be found) and taking food there is observed not just on New Year, but on a number of different holidays as well. For example, on *Cejna Êzîd*, a major holiday in December following a period of fasts,[6] women flock to the cemeteries, taking food to the graves,

[3] For example, the shrine of Sheikh Anzarut of the village of Herşenî (today a part the collective settlement of Shariya) rises on a mountain ridge. Khanke's shrine of Bayazid and Babire's shrine of Şexsê Batê were originally several kilometers away by the Tigris. After the original villages and shrines were inundated by the water of the Mosul reservoir, the shrines were rebuilt next to the new villages.

[4] The *qewwal*s are the singers of Yezidi hymns (*Qewl*). They alone can play on the sacred musical instruments, the *def û şibab* (tambourine and flute), and their presence is indispensable for certain rituals.

[5] In Shariya, near Duhok, there is no music, and local tribal leaders have banned the participation of *qewwal*s, saying that their presence and music leads to excessive mourning. This, however, is a novel development and shows the impact of the non-Yezidi world.

[6] The holiday itself is preceded by a three-day fast for the holy being Êzîd, but in the previous weeks people may do a one-day fast for various holy beings. People usually fast for their own *xudan*, that is the holy being of the sheikh linage they belong to as *murîd*s, for Tawûsî Melek (the Peacock Angel), for the holy being of the shrine where they bury their dead, and any other holy being they feel they are connected to for one reason or another. Thus, in one family I know, the man fasts for Sheikh Mend (the *xudan* of his lineage), for Bayazid (next to whose shrine his relatives are buried), for Sheikh Şems (considered a very important holy being) and for Tawûsî

though admittedly there is much less feasting, perhaps on account of the cold weather.[7] The same happens on the holiday of *Belinda* in January, when small fires are lit not only in front of the doors of the homes, but also next to the graves.[8]

*Tiwaf*s or the yearly feasts of shrines and their holy beings are also of tantamount importance in Yezidi religious and communal life. *Tiwaf*s are accompanied by various rituals, varying from shrine to shrine: there may be a performance by the *qewwal*s on their musical instruments, the coloured strips of cloth (*perî*) hanging from the spire of the shrine may be changed for new ones, there may be a ritual meal (either for the heads of the households or for the whole village), while at other shrines cooked pieces of the sacrificial sheep may be auctioned off to bidders amidst a cheering crowd. In other places, the *tiwaf* includes a trip into nature in order to reach a sacred spot, lending an air of picnic to the occasion.[9] Finally, in many places, a huge, communal dance may be a part of the celebrations. *Tiwaf*s are attended not only by the people of the village itself, but also many other Yezidis (especially those who have relatives in the village, or have some attachment to the holy being to whom the shrine is dedicated.) Thus *tiwaf*s serve not only to keep alive Yezidi religious ethos, but also to strengthen social ties between families and to reinforce communal solidarity, both on the village and inter-village level.[10]

A holy place that all Yezidis share, or rather the holiest place of all for Yezidis, is the valley of Lalish (usually referred to by Yezidis as "Sheikh Adi" or "*ziyaret*" or (place of pilgrimage). Lalish is the spiritual centre of the Yezidi religious universe, with numerous shrines and sacred spots dedicated to the 365 (that is, the totality of) Yezidi holy beings. Ideally every Yezidi should visit Lalish once a year, and the Autumn Assembly or *Cema'iye*, a one-week festival in Lalish at the beginning of October, when crowds of pilgrims congregate in the valley to take part in the rituals, is one of the most important events of the Yezidis religious calendar.[11]

Finally, there is the Parading of the Peacock or *tawûs gêran*, when the *sencaq* or standard of the Peacock Angel (with the image of the Peacock on top) is taken around Yezidi villages accompanied by the *qewwal*s who give sermons and sing the sacred hymns to their captive audience. Traditionally, before the introduction of Yezidi religious lessons at school and the appearance of

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Melek. His wife in addition also fasts for Xatûna Fexra (who takes care of women during pregnancy and child birth) and of course, they both observe the three-day fast for Èzîd.

[7] People mostly just invite other women to taste some dried figs or distribute chocolates, but nobody sits on the grass to eat as during New Year. The packages of food are often not even unwrapped these days, but are put on the graves still in black nylon sacks.

[8] At least this is the custom observed in some villages.

[9] For example, the *tiwaf*s at the shrine of Kerecal near Shariya is on a mountain, or at the sacred rock of Sexrê Cinê which lies deep in the Valley of Jinn near Bozan, attract great crowds.

[10] For a more detailed account of *tiwaf*s see Spät (2005: 68–69).

[11] For a more detailed account of the Autumn Assembly see Kreyenbroek (1995: 152–154), Spät (2004: 147–157), Spät (2005: 50–60).

various printed materials on Yezidi religion, this was the only or at least the primary source of religious education and spiritual food for most lay Yezidis.[12] While the Parading of Peacock is not tied to shrines or sacred places, as the *sencaq* is always set up in private Yezidi homes, the Peacock Standard only walks in times of peace. Should the roads be unsafe or should the community be in mourning, the Peacock does not walk.

**Yezidi ritual life and the upheavals of the past decades**

As can be seen above, it is not abstract religious knowledge but participation in rituals which constitutes the backbone of religion as experienced by the majority of Yezidi community. This fact makes the Yezidi religion extremely vulnerable to the political upheavals that have characterised the region for decades and have disrupted the life of the Yezidi community repeatedly. The first serious disruption was brought about by the Kurdish policy of the Ba'athist regime. The notion that Saddam suppressed and persecuted the Yezidi religion is a staple part of the official discourse on Yezidis' recent past and it is dutifully repeated by various journalists writing about the Yezidis. However, the reality is far more complicated. Interviews with various Yezidis make it clear that Saddam did not persecute the Yezidi religion as such.[13] What is more, many Yezidis recalling the Saddam era even claimed that Saddam liked Yezidis (and Christians) and trusted them more than Muslims. What, however, brought strict retribution was identifying as a Kurd and supporting the Kurdish cause. Consequently, the participation of at least a part of the Yezidi community in the Kurdish movement had serious consequences. As part of the Ba'athist fight against Kurdish guerrillas and their supporters, Yezidi villages at the foot of mountains were destroyed and their inhabitants moved into huge collective settlements where they could be monitored with more ease.[14] Apart from the social, economic and psychological impact of the destruction of their ancient villages, in the case of some villages this also meant the loss of the village shrine(s.) Many shrines were even destroyed by Saddam's army, when the villagers were moved. In some cases, these shrines were rebuilt in the new villages,[15] despite the

[12] On the Parading of the Peacock see Spät (2005: 66–68) and Spät (2009: 105–116). For the impact of literacy and school education on Yezidi oral tradition see Spät (2008: 393–404).

[13] A very interesting example of contrast between official discourse and personal memories was supplied by a middle aged man, who currently works as a party officer for the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). He stated that Saddam wanted to make Yezidis Muslims, but later on, talking about his recollections as a soldier during the Iraq-Iran war, he mentioned that Yezidis were given leave from the army for Yezidi holidays, provided they brought a certificate from the Baba Sheikh, stating they were indeed Yezidis and when the Yezidi holiday was going to take place.

[14] Yezidis in the Sinjar were moved into collective settlements in the mid-1970s, while Yezidis East of the Tigris were moved between 1985-1988. On the policies of "collective towns" in the Kurdish Region see Wachtmeister (2010); and Allison (2001: 29–31).

[15] For example, the shrines of Bayazid and Memhedê Cindar (now under the Mosul water reservoir, were rebuilt in new Khanke, and so was the shrine of Çawûş in new Keberto. The

traditional ban on building shrines in new places, for only the presence of a holy being can make space sacred, but not humans.[16] Other communities, however, were left with no access to their holy spaces, for example, in the collective village of Shariya, lying just on the Kurdish side of the internal border between the Kurdish Autonomous Region and "Iraq" after 1991.[17] The shrines of several former villages moved into the collective settlement of Shariya (Girêbanî, Herşenî, Rêkava) remained either in the Arab-controlled region or too near to the heavily militarised border zone for villagers to attempt to carry on ritual activities or bury their dead there. Even in villages which stayed on the Kurdish side, villagers opted not to rebuild their shrines until 2003, arguing that any day Saddam may come to destroy them again. Such rituals which were supposed to be carried out at a shrine (for example, the ritual of auctioning off the sacrificial animal or consuming a ritual meal at a *tiwaf*), were instead performed at the house of the *micewir* or guardian of the shrine, while the dead had to be buried in the cemeteries of other villages (as a new cemetery can no more be created than a new sacred space). The internal border between the two political entities also cut the Yezidi community in half. This meant that people living on the two sides of the borders could no longer easily participate in each other's religious rituals, like the *tiwaf*s (which usually act as magnets for people from numerous villages.) More importantly, those left on the Baghdad-controlled side (the majority) faced serious difficulties if they wanted to travel to Lalish, the holy valley of the Yezidis, which had remained in the Kurdish Autonomous Region. In the years between 1992 and 2003, people living in "Iraq" were officially forbidden to cross the border into the Kurdish controlled areas.[18] This also applied to Yezidis wishing to make the pilgrimage to Lalish, although the Iraqi authorities usually relented on the occasion of the Autumn Assembly. For example, in October of 2002, pilgrims traveling to Lalish were not allowed to cross the border on the first day of the festivities. The next day, however, Iraqi authorities yielded, and people were let through. One could never be certain, however.

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shrine of Şexsê Batê (also under the water reservoir) was rebuilt in Bapirê as well as in neighboring Xeter (following a dispute between the two villages.)

[16] On this, see more below. However, as several religious experts and leaders have noted, this was a special situation, because it was not acceptable to leave the community without its holy places.

[17] When I first arrived in Kurdistan in the fall of 2002, the people of the Kurdish Region routinely referred to the other side of the internal border (non-accessible to many of them) as "Iraq", implying that they did not really see their own autonomous region as a part of Iraq.

[18] People living in the Autonomous Region were allowed to go to Iraq. However, for those who were in some way affiliated with the Kurdish parties or for young men registered as originating from the territories under the control of Baghdad, and therefore expected to do the compulsory military training, it was not advisable to cross the border.

Following the 2003 war and the collapse of the Saddam regime, the two communities were unified, or at least the internal border ceased to exist[19] and Yezidis were free to travel wherever they pleased. On the other hand, Islamist fundamentalism and banditry masquerading itself as Islamic jihad was soon to rise after the war, and Yezidis were often the targets of terrorist activities. Shootings, explosions and kidnappings created a security situation where many were too careful to avail themselves of the theoretical freedom of movement provided by the fall of the previous regime. This could not but affect ritual life. The Autumn Assembly was repeatedly cancelled in the years following the war (and then, after a few years of consolidation, again in 2013).[20] Similarly, communal dances during *tiwaf*s were repeatedly forbidden for fear of the crowd attracting a terror attack. In some villages *tiwaf*s were also "scaled down", with only the heads of households congregating at the private house of the shrine guardian, instead of the whole community (and their guests) jostling around at the shrine.

Paradoxically, at the same time, despite the terror threat, there was also a renaissance of religious life. Previously it could be assumed that in villages, where the rituals could not be celebrated at the sacred places for over a decade, these rituals would sink into oblivion and ritual life would decline. However, after Saddam's fall, these rituals were resumed, especially as the economic boom made it possible to rebuild the destroyed shrines, often in a grander form. Some of these shrines were originally no more than small stone huts, but were now rebuilt as a proper *qub*s, that is, shrines with conical spires,[21] with enough rooms inside for an imitation grave that people can circumambulate during *tiwaf*s. For *tiwaf*s, when permitted, were once again celebrated at these places, attracting many people.

Yezidis formerly living under Saddam's rule could now also now travel freely to Lalish. A growing economy meant that new asphalt roads were being built (including the former unpaved path leading to Lalish) and many Yezidi households could afford to buy a car. Toward the end of the decade, as security appeared to improve, the number of visitors to Lalish grew exponentially, especially during holidays. In 2011, such crowds arrived for the Autumn Assembly (primarily from Sinjar) that at one point cars were no

[19] Both the Sheikhan and Sinjar belong to the territories contested between Baghdad and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). The question was meant to be decided by a popular referendum according to the article 140 of the new Iraqi constitution, but this has been repeatedly delayed.

[20] This last followed an attack against a military checkpoint in Erbil. As it was not targeting Yezidis, the decision to cancel the Autumn Assembly was probably made for political rather than security considerations.

[21] *Qub*s with conical spires, though originally a part of Muslim funerary architecture, have in the past decades become a symbol of the Yezidi religion and a great number of older sacred structures were rebuilt in the form of a *qub* with conical spire. Yezidi jewellers sell medallions in the shape of a *qub*, and such conical spires are embroidered on many of the special bags hanging on the walls of Yezidi homes which contain balls of sacred soil from Lalish (the *berat*).

longer allowed to enter the road (full of parked cars) leading to the holy valley, but had to park on the main road, some two kilometres from Lalish, and the pilgrims had to proceed on foot.[22] As a consequence of the increased ease of travel, more people also came to Lalish for other holidays (leading to the development of new ritual events),[23] as well as on Fridays.

The Parading of the Peacock was continued in Sinjar (except for the year 2003), though according to the *qewwal*s and the *sheikh el-wezir*,[24] it was reduced to once instead of twice a year. (The explanation they gave was that the event put too much financial strain on the community, as a ceremonial meal had to be provided and people brought *fito* or alms for the Peacock.) In the Kurdish Region the Parading of the Peacock happened only intermittently, and years passed without *tawûs gêran* taking place. In 2013 a number of differences[25] between the Princely family,[26] traditional religious leaders and the new Yezidi intelligentsia were settled and it was decided that from then on the Peacock would walk regularly. Hardly a year after this was announced, the ISIS attack overturned the lives of the whole Yezidi community.

**The ISIS attack and its aftermath**

In August 2014, ISIS attacked and occupied most of Sinjar. The majority of the Sinjari community fled and took refuge in the Kurdish Region, settling in official and non-official camps, half-finished houses (*heykel*s) or the lucky ones with their relatives and in rented homes. ISIS also occupied the twin-villages of Beʿshiqe and Behzane near Mosul, destroying the shrines that dominated the skyline and making the inhabitants, including the *qewwal*s, flee. This forced displacement cut off the greater part of the community from its holy places and cemeteries, making it impossible for them to observe their rituals. Furthermore, various Yezidi religious as well as secular leaders repeatedly declared that Yezidi holidays were cancelled (*betil kirin*) for the foreseeable future. Firstly, the community was in mourning for all those killed by ISIS. Secondly, the whole community was in suspense over the fate of those taken captive, especially the women. As a high-ranking member of the Yezidi *Haraket* party (which was essentially a Sinjari party) declared on Mosul-

[22] Though traversing the Mosul plain, especially at night, still held some dangers, and according to the Sinjari pilgrims some people had just been kidnapped at one of the settlements, compared to previous years the situation had improved enough for many Sinjaris to undertake the journey.

[23] On the lamp lighting ceremony at Lalish, see below.

[24] The Sinjar Peacock is usually accompanied by the religious dignitary, the Sheikh el-wezir and his son.

[25] Mostly financial in nature.

[26] The Prince or *Mîr* is the supreme religious and secular leader of the whole Yezidi community. The Prince and members of his extended family, the *Mala Mîra*, used to enjoy a great respect. However, these days their authority is declining, especially in the political sphere. The present incumbent, the elderly Mîr Tehsîn Seîd Beg now resides in Germany and has delegated running the community in Iraq to his son, Hazim Beg.

TV[27] before New Year, it was not possible to celebrate while the voices of the kidnapped girls echoed in their ears. Finally, any rejoicing was also banned out of respect for the *pêşmerge* dying on the battlefield against ISIS. (Muslim celebrations, especially huge weddings with music and dancing were also being cancelled throughout the year.) Naturally, the ban itself was not aimed at the performance of obligatory religious rituals themselves. As the Baba Sheikh declared, these had to be observed, lest Yezidi religion be lost (just as ISIS wanted). Rather it was acts of rejoicing (dancing, visiting, etc.) and events attracting crowds (and thus possible targets of terrorist attacks) that were at the centre of the ban. However, as most rituals involve the presence of a considerable number of people, it was highly uncertain how much of ritual life could actually be observed. For example, the Autumn Assembly at Lalish was cancelled in October of both 2014 and 2015. Before my trip to Kurdistan I asked a member of the Princely Family living in Germany about the upcoming New Year, and she declared with confidence: "no, this spring there will be no New Year. This was the decision of the Prince."

Considering the importance of holy places in everyday Yezidi religious practice, the virtual ban on celebrating holidays, the psychological trauma caused by the ISIS attack and the hardship of life in the refugee camps, it was natural to fear that a general decline of ritual life would follow. However, contrary to expectations, when I visited the Kurdish Region in the April of 2015, I found an intense ritual life taking place. Once again, the Yezidi religion proved itself more resilient to adversities than expected. In fact, the adversities seem to have added a new life and vibrancy to the way Yezidis saw and experienced their religion and rituals.

**Need for supernatural succour, opportunity and defiance**

There were three major driving forces behind the intensity of ritual life: The acute spiritual need for supernatural succour, opportunity and finally a sense of defiance. The need for supernatural succour does not need much explanation. Around 300,000 Yezidis had lost their homes and were uncertain about when they could return and to what.[28] They were living under dire conditions. Many people had been killed, children left orphaned and women left widowed without a source of income. Even worse, many Yezidis were missing, still in the captivity of ISIS. Most painful was the knowledge of the fate of captured Yezidis girls and young women. There was plenty to pray for, and during my visit I repeatedly heard: we went to Sheikh Adi/*ziyaret* to pray so that ISIS would be defeated, so that we could return to Sinjar, so that those enslaved would be freed.

Coupled with this need for supernatural help was an opportunity to go to Lalish, rare in the life of many in the Sinjari community, which was

[27] Run from the Kurdish Region since ISIS took over Mosul.
[28] See article by Irene Dulz in this volume.

paradoxically provided by their situation as refugees in the Kurdish Region. This opportunity meant easy access to Lalish, the sacred valley of Yezidis. Though literature on Yezidis says that each Yezidi should visit Lalish at least once a year (and many Yezidis from the Kurdish Region do so), for many Sinjaris travelling to Lalish was not viable. Despite the fact that the number of pilgrims had grown in the past years, the relative distance from Sinjar, economic difficulties and various other reasons prevented many people from visiting. It was not only the young who have not yet had the chance to go. Some older people told me that they had not been to Lalish for over a decade or even since they were children. Lack of money and even more having to work, especially housework and taking care of children in the case of women, made it impossible for them undertake such a trip. Middle-aged women talked about how their children had not been baptised,[29] as Yezidi children can only be baptised in the White Spring in Lalish.[30]

Now that Lalish was just a short car ride away and they also felt a great need for spiritual solace, many people availed themselves of the opportunity, and even the more impoverished refugees were planning to organise a trip to Lalish (and take their children as well.) Small wonder that each time I visited Lalish, even on ordinary Fridays, the valley was full of pilgrims, and there was a certain air of festive outing to their behaviour, even if many of them referred to the tragedy suffered by the Yezidis when asked for the concrete reason of their visit.

Yezidi New Year and the rituals connected with this holiday were another example of how Sinjaris enthusiastically made use of the opportunity to participate in rituals they would under normal circumstances have had little chance to partake in.

A week before New Year I was visiting some local friends in Khanke, who had Sinjari relatives staying with them. While I was there, one elderly refugee was busy making a rope on the traditional wooden spindle. (These days the wooden spindle or *taşî* is mainly used for making ritual objects that must still be made in the traditional way,[31] and not bought in stores, unlike most other household items.) The rope was for her son, she said, who was staying in the refugee camp set up on the outskirts of the Yezidi village of Baʿdre (not far

[29] A symbol of being taken into the community.

[30] Naturally, in the past, before the modern travel, most members of the far-flung Yezidi community would not have been able to come to Lalish, so the *qewwal*s carried water from the White Spring with themselves for this purpose during *tawûsî gêran* or the Parading of the Peacock, when they visited the villages (Kreyenbroek, 2009: 31). Interestingly my Sinjari informants did not know of this possibility, or else they felt it was not sufficient these days, and insisted it could only be done in Lalish. When I asked how people managed in the past, before cars, some told me that "before" everybody used to go, on horseback, reflecting the idealisation of the past.

[31] For example, wicks for oil lamps to be lit in holy places on holidays, ropes to be used in a ritual setting, or – in the case of the priestly caste – *dêzî*s, the sacred thread. (On *dêzî*s, see more below.)

from Lalish). Her son telephoned her and asked her to make such a rope for him, as he was planning to go with the inhabitants of Baʿdre to participate in the ritual of *Sefera Kola*. During the *Sefera Kola*, which precedes Yezidi New Year, people go to the valley of Lalish where they climb the hills to collect firewood for the guesthouse of the Sanctuary. The wood, fastened with the help of ropes to their backs, is then carried back in a picturesque procession to the Sanctuary, to be used throughout the year for cooking large meals for the pilgrims. Participating in the *Sefera Kola* is a *xêr*, a good religious deed bringing blessing. People from each Yezidi village in the Sheikhan go on *Sefera Kola* on a different day, and this young man from Sinjar was planning to go with the inhabitants of Baʿdre, since he was staying in the refugee camp there.

Another good example of opportunities to participate in hitherto not easily accessible aspects of religious life is that of the lamp lighting ceremony (*çira helkirin*) on New Year's Eve at Lalish.[32] The lamp lighting ceremony is itself something of an innovation. That is, the practice of lighting oil lamps all over the holy valley on the eve of New Year is a traditional ritual. However, in the past it was only men (and women) of religion, religious leaders and their household who assembled in Lalish for this ceremony. Going to Lalish was not so easy, and in any case tradition dictated that women be at home in order to go to the cemetery at dawn.[33] New Year was typically a feast people celebrated in their home villages. However, this slowly started to change as transport became easier. In 2003 the internal border between Lalish and the Yezidi community disappeared. In the second half of the decade, as security improved (at least temporarily), the new road to Lalish was built and more people bought cars, common Yezidis suddenly "discovered" the ceremony. Lalish became the scene of a new ritual (that is, new for most people) that was both religious and social in character, and the number of pilgrims rapidly grew year after year. In the spring of 2011, when I went to see the ceremony, there must have been thousands of pilgrims in Lalish.[34] Most of them came from nearby villages and towns, but a few even came from Sinjar, equipped to camp out in Lalish for a few days. Many of the people I talked with came for the first time in their life (and quite a few youngsters openly admitted that they came for the "party" (*hefle*), as the ceremony was seen as fun, rather than a spiritual event, followed by singing and dancing in the night.) The ritual itself took place just before sunset, when the Baba Sheikh and other religious

[32] Yezidis calculate the days from sunset, so New Year actually starts on the evening of the previous day, Tuesday.

[33] And elderly female member of the Princely family – probably in her late fifties – told me that she had always attended this ceremony. First she insisted that so did other Yezidis, who had cars. When I asked her, if many other Yezidis had cars in her native town of ʿEin Sifni, she recalled when she was young, only her family did, and common people never participated in the ceremony.

[34] A Yezidi friend attended in 2007 and sent photos. It is apparent from the photos that the number of people participating was much smaller in 2007 than in 2011.

dignitaries left the Sanctuary of Sheikh Adi and went to the "main square" in front of it, where they lit the sacred fire. The light was then passed through the waiting crowd, who all lit their own lamps, or in most cases the simple wicks soaked in oil and placed on pieces of stones which were then held aloft above their heads. Saying that the atmosphere was festive would not be adequate to describe the enthusiasm of the crowd, which went on cheering and ululating until well after dark.

When, before New Year, people discussed what the cancelling (*betil kirin*) of the New Year, announced on TV, exactly constituted, most were of the opinion that the rituals (mourning at the graves, sacrificing an animal) would be observed, but the joyous aspects, such as visiting or the lamp lighting ceremony in Lalish would be banned. (Or at least people would be banned from participating in the latter, as the guardians of the shrine would naturally have to light lamps all over the valley as is the custom.) Given the relatively new nature of this ritual and that for the majority it was a social rather than a spiritual event (if such distinctions can be made, of course) and the rather festive nature of the occasion, this seemed a natural conjecture.[35] As it turned out, we were wrong. Apparently the lamp lighting ceremony was observed attracting even greater crowds than ever before. At least, this is what those who had taken part told me. A Yezidi taxi driver from Duhok (originally a native of the village of Bozan) declared that he had never seen such a crowded lamp lighting ceremony, though he "goes every year". (Or to be more precise, as I ascertained, he had been going for the last four years.) The guardians of the shrine of Sheikh Şems, up on the hillside and some distance from the Sanctuary, recounted how there were so many people this year that they filled not only the big square in front of the Main Sanctuary,[36] but they were standing with lit *çira* in hand even in front of their shrine.

In fact, despite the ban or "cancelling," at first glance New Year did not seem to significantly differ from the celebration in other years. Women went to the graves in the morning, mourned the dead and then settled to eat some of the food. Children went around the graves clutching black plastic bags filled with dyed eggs and sweets collected from the mourners. People dyed eggs and did after all go visiting each other. Even Muslims came to express their good wishes to their *kirîv*s for the New Year. The differences were subtle: instead of the usual small talk, visitors discussed the tragedy that befell Yezidis, exchanging information on what happened to various relatives and friends. Men did not sit around sharing bottles of whiskey, though they consumed a huge New Year lunch as usual. Some painted eggs with the patriotic words *bijî Kurdistan* or *bijî pêşmerge* on them. In the cemeteries, where new sections were provided for the dead of the refugees, old Sinjari women came to mourn the dead. A few of them, moved by the solemn occasion, sang

[35] I therefore decided against trying to organise a trip to Lalish, which would have only be possible by private car or taxi so late in the day.
[36] As when I participated in 2011.

*xerîbî*s or dirges mourning the dead. But instead of the traditional words, now they sang of the slaughter, of the kidnapping of the girls and of the pain of the refugees in strange lands:

Our daughters fell into the hands of the *kafir*s
Our house (family) is in the hands of the *kafir*s
Our families are destroyed
They sold the girls and women to strange nations
This girl ran to mountain to flee *daesh* and fell
She threw herself lest she fall into the hand of *daesh*
She escaped the hand of *daesh*[37]
It is a great holiday (*ʿeyd*), but they are orphaned, in the hands of *daesh*
Our daughters were sold in the bazaar
Our graves are in strange lands
Oh poor me, I am in the hands of *daesh*
The Yezidi nation was destroyed
There was a *ferman*[38] on the mountain
We have no one left, we are captives
The refugees are sitting before the street-doors of strangers
Our dead are left orphaned in Sinjar[39]
There is no help
The people of Sinjar did a lot of *xêr*,[40] why did this happen to them
Our pain has blinded us
There is a *ferman*, there is a *ferman*[41]

In October of 2015, the Autumn Assembly was once again cancelled. However, as a video from the Rudaw news channel showed,[42] this did not stop pilgrims from showing up in Lalish. Each day approximately four or five thousand pilgrims, most of them Sinjaris from the refugee camps, turned up at the holy valley. While the major rituals associated with the *Cema'iye* were not celebrated, the pilgrims themselves performed the numerous small, personal rites that accompany such visits, from the baptism of their children to praying at shrines of holy beings to tying knots on the colourful clothes covering the tombs of the angels in the Main Sanctuary, so that their wishes may come

[37] The daughter of the singer, buried in the cemetery of Mem Şivan at Khanke, fell from the mountain when they escaped. It was not clear if this was an accident or an attempt to escape ISIS, but my local friends told me that many women threw themselves from the mountain, either to escape ISIS or when they heard what happened to their family.

[38] *Ferman* literally means decree, edict by a sovereign, but Yezidis (as well as Muslim Kurds) use the word in the sense of attack, massacre, and "pogrom".

[39] I.e. no one goes to visit the graves on holidays.

[40] I.e. good religious deeds, that is, they observed religious precepts as they should.

[41] *Ferman e, ferman e* is a famous refrain of many Kurdish songs singing about attacks against them.

[42] The video was shared on Facebook by Yezidis. Its claims were also confirmed over the telephone by my acquaintances.

true. In an interview with a Rudaw reporter, Luqman Sileman, a representative of Lalish Cultural Centre, explained that people came in such great numbers for the following reasons: 1. opportunity (in the past Lalish was far and getting there was expensive); 2. a visit to Lalish breaks the soul-grinding empty routine of life in camps; 3. ISIS wanted to make Yezidis disappear from this world, but as a result people's faith only became stronger, greater. This last sentiment was echoed by a young girl *Rudaw* interviewed: "this is a message to the enemy" she said, "that we will never give up our customs."

This sense of defiance in the face of an existential threat to the community was yet another strong driving force behind the intense religious life observed. While both good taste and the edicts of the religious and secular leaders banned the rejoicing that normally accompanies holidays, the religious leaders emphasised again and again: "we are not giving up our religion, our rituals just because of ISIS."

This defiance was most clearly symbolised by the recent construction and ceremonial "consecration" of the new *qub* dedicated to the holy being, Sheikh Mend at Mem Şivan. The expression "new shrine" has to be qualified – as Sheikh Deştî, a religious expert form the village of Khanke reminded me, "Don't say new *qub*, for it is not really new, we only rebuilt the structure. But Sheikh Mend has always had a sacred place there." For Yezidis, it is the presence of a holy being which makes a space sacred, whether he died there, resided in the place, merely rested there for a while, or just appeared to people there in a dream. Consequently, Yezidis cannot create a new sacred place like the followers of other religions,[43] such an act would be a "heavy burden" and would call down the anger of the holy beings. On the other hand, rebuilding an already existing shrine, or replacing an older structure with a newer and grander one is perfectly acceptable and is even considered to bring great religious merit.

In the past decade, several simple older structures were replaced with new ones, thanks to the economic boom enjoyed by the Kurdish Region. Despite the Kurdish Region suffering several serious financial set-backs during the past two years (first the suspension of all payments from the central budget due to an oil dispute between the central and the Kurdish government, then the expenses of the war against ISIS and of the need to provide for over a million refugees), the Lalish Cultural Centre still opted for the building of three "new" shrines in the spring of 2015 at Mem Şivan, near Khanke. This is a small hill dedicated to the holy being Mem Şivan ("Uncle Shepherd"). Yezidis of the region refer to this place as the second *Kuçuk Laliş* or "Little Lalish".[44] They claim that Sheikh Adi, when he came from Syria, first settled

[43] The reality is, of course, more complicated, and there are exceptions, but this discussion cannot be undertaken within the present paper.

[44] The other "Little Lalish" is Mehdari, a piece of land next to the village of Bozan, dotted with numerous shrines with graves around them. This is where nearby villages bring their dead to be buried.

here, then moved on to Bozan, and finally to Lalish. Furthermore, there are said to be 365 *xas*,[45] or spots dedicated to holy beings at Mem Şivan, one for each holy being of the Yezidi "pantheon".

The decision to continue replacing older structures with new ones at Mem Şivan was taken in February. As a member of the Lalish Cultural Centre explained, this was meant as a symbol that Yezidis would not give up their traditions and rituals (*rê û resm*). In March, two small *nîşan*s,[46] dedicated to Sheikh Babik and to Beyazid, were rebuilt as miniature *qub*s and "inaugurated" on 22 March. The really great event, however, was to be the "consecration" of the new *qub* of Sheikh Mend on 10 April. The previous structure dedicated to Sheikh Mend was just a simple stone room with a flat roof, but the new one was a proper *qub*, with a conical spire. (Several people had previously claimed that Sheikh Mend was not supposed to have a *qub* with a spire, this was against tradition. This may be true, but tradition changes fast, and some new shrines built for Sheikh Mend are now in the form of a *qub*.) It was this spire that played the main role in the "inauguration" ceremony referred to as *perî pêve dan* or "attaching the flags". The word "flags" (*perî*) refer to the colourful strips of cloth that hang from the spire of *qub*s (and which are then changed every year as part of the ceremonies connected with the *tiwaf*s). The ritual of *perî pêve dan* is when a copper ornament, the *hilal*[47] and the colourful flags hanging from it are ceremoniously fixed to the conical spire of a shrine. As is the custom, the *perî*, along with the *hilal* were brought by the *ruhanî*, or religious leaders, from Lalish where they had first been "baptised" in the White Spring. Yards of coloured clothes were also brought by local women as a gift to be hung on the *hilal* or on the walls of the chamber inside the *qub*, as well as on a pillar in the centre of the room, a peculiar feature, probably erected in lieu of a grave.[48] In the morning a great, jostling crowd assembled on the hill, waiting for hours for the *ruhanî* to arrive. They finally appeared, slowly climbing the hill and visiting the major shrines to pray. Then there was another prolonged wait, as the *perî* and the *hilal* were being brought by another car. Finally, the *hilal* arrived as well, swathed in the *perî*s so it appeared as a huge bundle of coloured materials solemnly carried to the new shrine on top of the hill on the shoulder of a man. He was closely surrounded by an ecstatically ululating crowd. As he got near to the shrine, the local women who had brought their own *perî*s as gifts, pushed through the crowd to throw them on top of the bundle. The *qewwal*s sang their hymns accompanied by

[45] *Xas* means holy being, but Yezidis often use the word to refer to places dedicated to holy beings. Such places may be marked by various structures, or just some natural feature of the landscape, as a rock, tree or stream, often surrounded by a low wall of stones.

[46] These are small structures, sometimes just a heap of stones.

[47] Literally "half moon", though it comes in many shapes.

[48] Since Yezidi shrines usually commemorate a place where a holy being once stayed, rather than the place where s/he died, they are not considered mausoleums. However, in many of the newly erected *qub*s there is an imitation grave inside, though people are often aware that there is nobody under it.

music, the Baba Sheikh said the requisite prayers, and then a small group of men clambered onto the roof of the *quh* and climbed the ladder laid against the spire. The bundle hiding the *hilal* was lifted, handed up from man to man and fixed to the spire amid a general and clamorous jubilation.

After the *hilal* and *perî* were in place, some of the spectators formed a circle and started dancing accompanied by the *qewwal*s playing on their instruments, in spite of the oft-repeated ban on any kind of dancing during this period of intense mourning. This was not a common dance, however, as people pointed out, but a *govend*, a type of Kurdish dance that in Yezidi tradition forms part of many sacred occasions. It is an expression of religious feelings rather than mere fun.[49] Accordingly, the dancers were not young people either, but middle-aged ones. Their frame of mind, just as that of the whole community, was made clear when they cried out in the traditional way: *Hola hola Tawûsî Melek* (Hola, hola Peacock Angel),[50] but this time one of the dancers added at the top of his voice: *Hola hola şehidêt Şingalê* (Hola, hola, martyrs of Sinjar), a cry picked up by those around him.

**Syncretism**

There is another aspect of the impact the ISIS attack had on ritual life within the Yezidi community, one which perhaps merits mentioning: a fascinating "internal syncretism". Despite their common roots and a more or less constant contact, through the centuries the two communities have developed their own distinct customs and rituals. The enforced mixing of the two groups, however, may eventually lead to their adopting each other's traditions, enriching their religious life and giving it new layers. It also makes Yezidis aware of how varied their own traditions are.[51] In the past decades, the process of scripturalisation and the introduction of religious education at schools, complete with centrally produced books, have gradually been leading to the eventual uniformisation of a previously multiform tradition and to the acceptance of the notion that there must be "a right form" of texts, rituals and holidays. At such a time, experiencing first-hand the various differences may have a great effect on how Yezidis think about their religion and may counterbalance the simplified view provided by books (and recently television programs) on the Yezidi religion.

[49] The majority of those joining in the *govend* (and present at the event) seemed to be locals, as far as it was possible to judge by their clothing, but at least one of the dancers must have been from Sinjar, as he was wearing a white *dishdasha*, the ankle-length shirt of Arabs that many Sinjaris had adopted.

[50] Yezidis cannot explain the literal meaning of the word *hola*, which might possibly be related to Hebrew *hallal*, "to praise" (as in the expression *halleluyah* or "praise God".)

[51] Many Yezidis do not realise this. So for example, when I visited Srechka, a village in the Sheikhan region, a sheikh of the Adani lineage there told us that no Yezidi marriage was valid without an Adani Sheikh celebrating the union. My driver, a Yezidi from Khanke, hardly an hour's car ride away, was amazed to hear this, though he himself was a married man.

When I arrived in Kurdistan in the spring of 2015, I was surprised to see a trendy-looking bracelet, woven of red and white threads, on the wrists (and occasionally the neck) of many of my old acquaintances. While *dêzî*s or thin necklaces made of sacred thread (woven by members of the priestly castes) were traditionally worn by Yezidi babies and toddlers, and occasionally by grownups (especially elderly women) suffering from mysterious ailments,[52] I have never seen this type of *dêzî* with its distinct pattern. What is more, it was often worn by healthy young people, who usually have neither the need nor the inclination to wear traditional healing-protecting *dêzî*s. This new fashion was soon explained: this was the *dêzikê Batizmî* (or *dêzî* of Batizmî), a ritual object made popular by the refugees.

Batizmî, a winter holiday, is an eloquent attestation both to the repeated (forced) migrations of sections of the Yezidi community and to how this has led to an "internal syncretism", merging the different traditions which had evolved in diverse parts of the Yezidi world. Batizmî, celebrated in mid-January, is observed only by the Çêlka tribe, who presently live dispersed in Turkey, Syria and Sinjar. The Çêlka living in Sinjar claim to have migrated from what is today southern Turkey, fleeing persecution there. Sinjaris are perfectly aware of the "foreign" origin of this holiday, and refer to it as the "holiday of the Çêlka". At the same time, while making it clear that this is not "their own" holiday, Sinjaris celebrate Batizmî along with their Çêlka neighbors. Unlike the Çêlka, they do not keep the three-day fast preceding the holiday, but they go and partake in the *simat* (ritual meal) prepared by members of the Çêlka tribe. More interestingly, Sinjaris have themselves adopted the Çêlka tradition of wearing and gifting the red-and-white *dêzikê Batizmî* and distributing it among friends. To be more exact, this bracelet, which is believed to protect against fear, lightning and sickness in general, can only be woven by members of the Çêlka tribe, who then give it as a gift on the day of Batizmî to those who come to wish them happy holiday (as it the custom in the region). However, they may give not just a single bracelet, but sometimes even a small ball of the red-and-white thread. Those who receive the ball, even if they do not belong to the Çêlka tribe themselves, may in their turn make a gift of *dêzikê Batizmî* to others. Sinjaris, fleeing ISIS, have then brought this custom to the Kurdish Region, where it was previously unknown. In the spring of 2015 many local Yezidis, who had never heard of the *dêzike Batizmi* (or worn *dêzî*s) before, sported the red-and-white bracelet on their hand. Thus a tradition brought by Yezidis once fleeing from what is today's Turkey to Sinjar, was then in its turn brought to the Yezidis of the Iraqi Kurdish Region by refugees fleeing ISIS, to become a fashionable novelty there. It is, naturally, too early to tell, but the *dêzikê Batizmî* has

[52] Such *dêzî*s are believed to protect against a number of ills, in accordance with the supernatural powers of healing inherited within sheikh and pîr lineages. See further Spät (forthcoming).

become so popular that it is possible that the tradition of making and gifting it will become a custom in the Kurdish Region as well.

Even customs associated with holidays shared by both communities may differ. The most striking difference concerns gender roles. This is well demonstrated by the way the two communities celebrate New Year. In the Kurdish Region the traditional "scenario" for New Year is for women to go to the graves early in the morning (or these days, in the afternoon before New Year).[53] Men do not visit the graves (even if they take their female relatives to the cemetery by car, they never participate in the mourning ritual itself.) The rest of the day is taken up with a huge family lunch, visiting and receiving guests. Therefore, it caused a sensation in Khanke when in the afternoon of New Year thousands of Sinjari refugees of both genders headed to the various shrines dotting the landscape around the village. The small hills on which the shrines rose soon filled with people strolling about, especially young ones. Several amazed locals commented on how the event resembled *tiwaf*s or shrine feasts, when crowds congregate around the shrines. A *tiwaf* is exactly what a Sinjari informant compared their way of celebrating New Year to. Just like in the Kurdish Region, on New Year Sinjari women go to the cemeteries at dawn, but once the ritual of mourning is over it is the custom for everybody, men and children included to go. From that time onwards they may stay until the evening, with *dul û zurna*, that is music and dancing. At popular shrines, like that of Şerfedîn, the protector of Sinjar, on the northern side of the mountain, the crowds are immense and the atmosphere highly festive. On the New Year of 2015 in Khanke, given the circumstances, the *dul û zurna* had to be dispensed with, but Sinjaris still observed the custom of visiting the shrines. Older people and families just paid a short, obligatory visit, but many of the young ones stayed milling around. In its turn, the sight of so many Sinjaris parading at the shrines attracted locals (especially younger men), who all felt that they had to go and have a look at the proceedings and take part in the fun themselves. Young men, who would never dream of visiting a shrine or the cemetery next to it on New Year, now went from one shrine to another, enjoying the novelty and excitement.

Similarly, in Sinjar both men and women go to the graves on other holidays, like the Holiday of Êzîd and Bêlinda. Those who have buried their dead in the Kurdish Region since their flight from Sinjar, go to the cemeteries together on these holidays, eat their holiday food there, or make a bonfire next to the grave, according to the occasion.[54] Though, as has been said above, it is not the custom among the Yezidis of the Kurdish Region for men to go to the cemeteries, those who have Sinjari relatives of friends staying with them, or have some other close connection with Sinjaris do sometimes

[53] My acquaintances claimed that this was a new custom, though Lady Drower (1941: 97–98) does give an account of women in Beʿshiqe mourning at the graves on the eve of the holiday.
[54] The information is from my Yezidi acquaintances, as I have not been in Iraq to witness these holidays personally.

accompany their acquaintances to the cemeteries, out of politeness or curiosity.

Yet another curious difference between the ways holidays are celebrated in Sinjar and in the Kurdish Region concerns the discrepancy between the holiday cycle of the *feqîr*s and the holiday cycle of everybody else. *Feqîr*s were originally men of religion, or men who opted to live a life of asceticism. However, in the course of the nineteenth century, *feqîr*s in Sinjar evolved into a special community organised along tribal lines (Fuccaro, 1999: 30).[55] Though they are no longer men of religion (except for the few who opt to don the *xirqe* and live the life of an ascetic), *feqîr*s still occupy a special niche within religious life. All the males wear beards, just like Yezidi men of religion, and older *feqîr*s allegedly pray twice a day.[56] In the past, there were many *qewlbêj* or "sayers of hymns"[57] among the *feqirs* of Sinjar, while others (both males and females) knew many prayers (*duʿa*) for curing various ailments. *Feqîr*s also observe their own calendar of holidays. Some holidays (like the Holiday of Şex Alê Şemsa) are peculiar only to the *feqîr*s, but even more interestingly, for some no-longer remembered reason, *feqîr*s celebrate all the shared holidays a week before others. This is a fact that most Yezidis living in the Kurdish region were formerly not cognizant with, since most *feqîr*s live in Sinjar these days. In the spring of 2015 many locals witnessed *feqîr*s celebrate New Year in style: go on a pilgrimage to Lalish just before New Year, then on the day of New Year mourn at the graves of those who passed away after the flight from Sinjar and were buried in local cemeteries, sacrifice a sheep, prepare a holiday lunch for the extended family, and receive visitors proffering their good wishes for new year – one week early. Similarly, a week before locals celebrated Holiday of Êzîd or Bêlinda, *feqîr* families duly repaired to the graves to consume some holiday food there or to light bonfires. Again, some of these *feqîr* families were accompanied by their local friends or relatives[58] on these occasions.

Though observing *feqîr*s celebrate holidays a week early is naturally unlikely to affect local customs, it is a source of new knowledge and makes people more aware of the varied nature of Yezidi tradition, at a time when other socio-cultural forces, from school education to television programs, are working toward a uniformisation of Yezidi faith and ritual practice.

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[55] Even *feqîr*s themselves are uncertain whether the *feqîr*s constitute a tribe or not. Some people say they are not a tribe (*aşîret*), others say that they are, however, they readily admit that at the same time *feqîr*s belong to various other tribes, which have non-*feqîr* members as well.

[56] That is, they recite long prayers, unlike other elderly Yezidis, who usually just call on the help of the holy beings in a few sentences – if they pray at all.

[57] *Qewlbêj* are lay people who memorise and recite Yezidi hymns (however, unlike the *qewwal*, they cannot play the sacred musical instruments.) This institution seems to be peculiar to Sinjar. I have heard of two *qewlbêj* in the Sheikhan region, but my impression was that this is a recent innovation there, prompted by the decline in the number in the *qewwal*s and the notion, due to the scripturalisation of Yezidi religion, that anyone can become proficient in religious lore.

[58] I.e. relatives through marriage.

## Conclusion

The displacement of the Sinjari community poses a potential threat to the continuation of ritual life as it deprives villagers of access to their holy places, which act as the primary foci of most holiday rituals. Furthermore, mourning and fear of terrorism has prompted official "bans" on the more public and joyous aspects of holidays. However, just as in the past, the Yezidi religion has proved itself resilient and able to adapt to adverse conditions. The need for supernatural succour, a new-found opportunity to participate in religious events at Lalish, and a conscious sense of defiance in the face of an existential threat have contributed to the intensification of ritual life instead of an expected decline. Furthermore, the proximity and daily mixing of local Yezidis and refugees in the Kurdish Region has not only made Yezidis aware of the rich and varied nature of Yezidi religious tradition, but has also led to a kind of "internal syncretism" where people may adopt certain aspects of the other community's customs, eventually enriching ritual life.

Naturally, it is still too early to make a prognosis as to how ritual life and "internal syncretism" will develop in the long run. This depends on a number of factors, such as when (and whether) Yezidis will be able to return to Sinjar, and whether all of them will opt to do so, as some may prefer to stay in the Kurdish Region (due to the much greater level of security, better economic conditions and job opportunities, or because they will have managed to establish themselves there before return to Sinjar becomes possible.)

It must be remembered, however, that what enabled Sinjari refugees in the Kurdish Region to carry on their ritual life with relative ease was the presence of Yezidi holy places in the region. While Yezidi religious tradition maintains that humans cannot and may not create new sacred spaces, utilising the sacred space of other Yezidi communities poses no "theological" difficulties. Consequently, the greatest immediate danger that threatens the continuation of traditional Yezidi ritual life is the potential whole-sale exodus of the community to the West. The complex connection between landscape, social structure and the traditions of an oral religion mean that severing the ties between the Yezidi community and its homeland may accomplish what ISIS has failed to do: bring about the end of Yezidi religion as an actively practiced living faith.

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