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Transformations in the Yezidi tradition after the ISIS attacks: An interview with Ilhan Kizilhan

Khanna Omarkhali[±]

Abstract

Professor Dr. Jan Ilhan Kizilhan is a Yezidi transcultural psychologist. He is the Head of the Department of Mental Health and Addiction at the State University Baden-Württemberg, Germany. In that capacity he has made frequent visits to the Kurdistan Region in Iraq, as part of a project aiming to provide psychological aid to Yezidi women who escaped after being captured and enslaved by ISIS. Under ISIS, Yezidis suffered mass killings, forced conversion to Islam, torture, sexual slavery, and the abuse of their children as ISIS soldiers. In an interview with Khanna Omarkhali, Professor Kizilhan discusses his recent experiences.

Keywords: Transformation of tradition; traumatized Yezidis; Yezidi women; ISIS; slavery.

Abstract in Kurmanji

Veguherînên di nerîtên êzdiyatîyê de piştî êrîşên DAIŞê

Hevpeyvînek ligel Ilhan Kizilhan

Profesor Dr. Jan Ilhan Kizilhan derûnnasekî transkultûrî yê êzdî ye. Li Almaniyayê, li Zanîngeha Dewletî ya Baden-Württembergê, serokê beşa Tendurustiyê Derûnî û Muptelayîyê ye. Bi vî sîfeti wî gelek caran serdana Herêma Kurdistanê ya Iraqê kiriye di çarçoveya projeyekê de ya bi armanca dabînkirina piştgiriya psikolojîk bo jinên Êzîdî yên ji destê DAIŞê xelas bûne piştî ku hatine revandin û bûne kole. Di bin hukmê DAIŞê de, cemaeta êzdî rastî qirkirinên girseyî, koletîya cînsî û îşkenceyê hatin, û bi darê zorê dinê wan hate guhertin bo Îslamê û zarokên wan bi zorê bûne leşkerên DAIŞê. Di hevpeyvînekê de bi Khanna Omarkhali re Profesor Kizilhan behsa tecrubeyên xwe yên vê dawiyê dike.

Abstract in Sorani

گۆڕانی ترادیسیۆنی یەزیدی لە پاش هێرشه‌كاتی داعش: چاوپێكه‌وتنێك له گه‌ل ئیلهان كیزیلخان

پروفیسۆر دوکتۆر یان ئیلهان کیزیلخان دەر‌ووناسێکی فره‌ کۆلتووری ئێزیدییه. ئەو سەر‌وکی بەشی نەخۆشییه دەر‌وونییەکان و ئالوودەبوونه‌ له‌ زانکۆی دەر‌وونە‌ی بایدن-و‌ورتە‌سینێرگی ئه‌لمان. و‌کوو سەر‌وکی ئەو بەشه‌ و‌ بەشێک له‌ پرۆژەیه‌ک که‌ یارمەتی دەر‌وونی پیشه‌که‌ش به‌ ژنه‌ ئێزیدیانه‌ی که‌ له‌ ده‌ستی داعش هه‌ڵاتوون، چه‌ندین جار سەر‌دانی کوردستانی ئێراقی کردووه. له‌ ژێر ده‌سه‌لاتی داعش ئێزیدییه‌کان نازار و‌ نەشکه‌نجه، ژینۆساید، کۆیلایه‌تی سێکسی، به‌ موسوڵمان بوونی ئیجباری، و‌ به‌کار هێنانی منداله‌ک‌نیا‌ن و‌کوو سەر‌بازی داعش یان بێنیوه. له‌ گه‌فت‌گۆیه‌ کدا له‌ گه‌ل خان‌ا عومەر خاڵی، پروفیسۆر کیزیلخان نەر‌موونی نوێی خۆی باس ده‌کات.

Introduction

The interview with Prof. Dr. Ilhan Kizilhan¹, aims to discuss the certain significant changes in Yezidi society that came about as a result of the attacks

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by ISIS, most notably those that occurred following the escape of Yezidi women and girls from slavery after being had been captured by ISIS.

At the hands of ISIS, Yezidis suffered mass killings, forced conversion to Islam, torture, sexual slavery, and the abuse of their children as ISIS soldiers. According to some accounts, around 5,000 Yezidi women and girls (some as young as eight) were kidnapped as “spoils of war” by ISIS from August 2014 onwards, and have been kept and sold as slaves by the “Islamic State”. These Yezidi women were separated from their families and forced to convert to Islam. Yezidi boys and men aged 14 and over were mostly executed. The Yezidi women and girls who escaped from slavery not only have to cope with deeply traumatic experiences, but in addition, given traditional norms in Yezidi society regarding the “purity” of women, they fear being ostracised or stigmatised by their own community. Many young women who escaped captivity, are very anxious, or feel too ashamed to come back to Yezidi society.

The experience of these attacks, the mass killings of men and enslavement of women, deeply shook the entire Yezidi community. Aside from the deep trauma that these attacks inflicted, they also led to significant developments in Yezidi society. The return of some of the captured women forced the Yezidis to question and re-examine their traditional norms and practices. An illustration of the current transformation of the Yezidi tradition is that Baba Sheikh (or *Babê Şêx*), the spiritual leader of Yezidis in the Kurdistan Region recently made an unprecedented statement, declaring that Yezidi women and girls who suffered captivity under ISIS are entitled to support from the Yezidi community and are not to be excommunicated, as earlier, traditional norms in Yezidi society would have dictated.

Khanna Omarkhali (KO): You participated in a project in Kurdistan that aimed to help traumatised Yezidi women and girls who escaped from ISIS. Could you tell us about the situation and the history of these women, please?

Ilhan Kizilhan (IK): As your readers may know, terrorism has shown an unexpected degree of destruction in recent years, and its fundamental nature is as yet only partly understood; it spreads its terror across the whole world, even though it usually starts out locally. Terrorism increasingly uses new methods, and the number of potential offenders and supporters is immense. Terror wears various religious and ideological faces; it uses the modern media and spans transnational networks; civilian casualties are allowed for as “collateral damage”, or even intended; terror seeks to cause anxiety and horror; suicide bombers kill themselves in attacks, and terrorists abuse, rape, sell young girls, or decapitate people before running cameras and show the

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images on online networks. This new Islamic terrorism, especially that of ISIS, exceeds our human understanding of cruelty and suffering.

However, it has to be mentioned that the Yezidi conflict has been going on for several centuries. Due to the forcible Islamisation of Kurdish areas in Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Turkey, an unbelievable odyssey of persecution and forced Islamisation of Kurds, and thus Yezidis, has taken place until the present day. They have always been victims of massacres under the Ottoman and Persian Empires. Numerous *fatwas* “allowed” for Yezidis to be killed, robbed, displaced, and forced to convert to Islam since their ancient religion was thought not to be accepted by Islam. In our day, ISIS uses the same false arguments to justify its genocide against the Yezidis.

As early as at the end of the Saddam era in 2003, and in particular since 2007, hundreds of Yezidis were murdered by terrorist groups in Iraq. Until the present day, they have repeatedly experienced marginalisation and aggression by the Muslim majority. Since the attacks by ISIS in early August 2014, more than 7,000 Yezidis have been killed, thousands of families were kept hostage in their villages and murdered unless they converted to Islam. More than 5,800 girls were abducted, raped, and sold on Arabic markets, enslaved and killed. More than 20,000 Yezidis have sought refuge in Syria, 30,000 in Turkey, and more than 400,000 in the Kurdish region. The Yezidis have been, and still are, persecuted and murdered on a systematic level.

Thus, ISIS terrorists attacked Yezidi villages, herded their inhabitants in front of large buildings, and took their jewellery as well as other valuables. Then they separated the men from the women. Many men were executed immediately. Then older women, women with children, married women without children, girls, and boys between 8 and 14 years were split up into groups and brought to different places. Older women and women with children were detained in mass accommodation or villages (such as Tel Afar or Mosul) that had previously been inhabited by Shiites. They were guarded by ISIS combatants, humiliated, and raped. Every evening, ISIS fighters, but also civilians from Syria, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Qatar, Tunisia, and other countries showed up to buy and take them along.

The women were forced to convert to Islam and to pray in Arabic every day, although they only spoke Kurdish. The children are drilled and exploited in ways similar to those used on child soldiers in certain African countries. They are trained to be cruel and eventually to turn against their families. In the camps they are trained to beat other children, and to crucify or bury alive those who do not obey to the rules of the ISIS. The ones who are not sent to combat are put to work as servants to the Emir, guards or spies in the villages and camps where Yezidis or other religious minorities are detained.

Apart from daily religious indoctrination, the children's classes consist of martial arts and getting hardened against pain and atrocities. In cities like Tel Afar, Mosul or Raqqa, the children have to watch ISIS combatants stone, flog, and decapitate citizens, or cut off limbs in public squares. Whatever the

children had learned from their parents must become meaningless. They are intended to become new fighters for ISIS. Some of the children who have been set free have changed significantly. They defend Islam and ISIS, although they are Yezidis; they threaten to decapitate their families if they refuse to join ISIS. The children are supposed to infiltrate Kurdish society with the pathologic ideology of the “Islamic State,” in order to hollow it out from within.

So far, some 2,000 young Yezidi women have managed to escape from captivity, or were redeemed by their families. The severely traumatised women now live in refugee camps near Duhok and Zakho. There are about 24 refugee camps housing up to 18,000 people. These women have hardly any access to psychological treatment. They wake up at night, have nightmares, fear being abducted by ISIS again, and often have fainting spells or flashbacks in which they re-experience rape and torture. They are anxious, insecure, nervous, tense, and hopeless, feel shame because of having been raped, and often consider suicide. Some have already taken their lives because they did not want to live with this perceived “loss of honour”. Therefore, these women urgently need medical and psychological help, which unfortunately is insufficiently available in Kurdistan.

KO: Could you tell us more about project of the Baden-Württemberg Federal State Government to help Yezidi women, and your own role in this?

IK: Based on the catastrophic situation in Iraq and Syria as described above, the state government of Baden-Württemberg has decided to fly up to 1,000 people in need of protection, in particular women who were in ISIS captivity, for treatment in Baden-Württemberg. In the beginning, I was advisor to the Federal State Government, then took over the medical-psychological management during a later phase of the project. My task was to psychologically examine people in Northern Iraq as well as to offer vocational training, focusing on Yezidi cultural background and transcultural aspects, for the treatment, care, and consultation of traumatised people in several cities of Baden-Württemberg. I talked to hundreds of young women and even children, and listened to what they had gone through. Their stories were not easy to come to terms with. Whenever I thought I had just been told the “worst story” of terror and utmost inhumanity, I had to listen to even more tragic and horrible stories that were beyond human comprehension.

One of them had happened to 16-year-old Hanna, who woke up at night, worried that the jihadists could return and rape her again. She got up, sprinkled her face with fuel and set fire to herself. The girl survived, but her facial skin and her hands are burned. “If I’m ugly, they will not rape me again”, she kept explaining to me.

Or 9-year-old Samya, who was walking to the bakery when ISIS combatants suddenly stopped her. They abducted the girl and several other

families from her Iraqi-Yezidi village. Samya had to watch the jihadists murder her grandfather. Afterwards, she was sold and kept as a slave for months on end until she and some older women were released after payment by the Kurdish government.

Nevertheless, the strength and hope of the young women, who spent many hours talking to me, impressed me very much. Despite all those unimaginably cruel experiences, they keep fighting. They wanted to survive and now have a chance to get treatment in Germany so as to regain a healthy perspective on their lives.

KO: Baba Sheikh has declared that Yezidi women and girls who escaped from captivity by ISIS should be accepted by the community regardless of traditional cultural and religious restrictions. Will this initiative be accepted by the Yezidi community or do these women risk being excommunicated or ostracised?

IK: The Yezidis traditionally live in a caste system, where marriage or sexual relations with men outside their caste, or with non-Yezidis, are banned. In the past there have been cases where Yezidis who had a relationship with non-Yezidis were excluded from their society.

The current genocide that started on 3rd August 2014 has led to the raping of thousands of young Yezidi women. Given these circumstances, exclusion from their society is scarcely feasible, since nearly every family is affected and the community is so shocked by the suffering of these young women that a majority wishes to reintegrate them. Some conservative Yezidis are rather critical and eye this change with distrust, but due to the great wave of sympathy and support for these young Yezidis, they keep a low profile. For the last 800 years, Yezidi culture has barely undergone any change in its community structure and religion. However, since August 2014, the Yezidis have become a different society than before the genocide. Their culture now needs changes and an acknowledgement of their new realities. In this context, Baba Sheikh, their spiritual head, has shown great courage by being the first to proclaim that the raped Yezidi women are still part of their community and are not to be discriminated against. They are still allowed to marry Yezidi men and continue to be members of the Yezidi community of faith.

In our project, the young women in question are given an opportunity to visit the Yezidi sanctuary at Lalish before they are flown to Germany. There, Baba Sheikh blesses every one of them personally and explains that they continue to be Yezidi and still belong to their community. Whoever says bad things to them is deemed a bad person himself. Baba Sheikh stated: “You are part of us and we are part of you, we share your pain. We are proud that you managed to escape and return to us despite the severe experiences you went through. You are courageous and strong women and I am proud to be here with you today. I bless you and wish you a good and blessed life in Germany.

Be sure to behave well in Germany, to obey the laws and to continue living as Yezidi women.”²

Hazim Beg, son of Prince Mîr Tehsîn Beg and spokesman of the Yezidi High Council, announced the Council’s decision to continue to accept all raped women as members of Yezidi society with all corresponding rights.

This is unique in the history of Yezidism, and signifies a long-term paradigm shift. It will undoubtedly bring about developments in the Yezidi community that are as yet difficult to foresee.

Due to the strong migratory movements, the Yezidi community and therefore its social rules is bound to undergo further fundamental change. However, it cannot be foreseen whether this will result in the “annihilation of the Yezidis,” as conservative forces in the community predict, or if the catastrophe of this genocide, will prompt the community to adapt, and thus to survive in a global and rapidly changing world.

KO: What effect do these attacks have on the physical and mental health of the victims?

IK: In the clinical and individual areas, this traumatising often brings about physical suffering in addition to chronic psychological disorders. This includes diarrhoea and frequent colds, but also psychosomatic illnesses such as skin diseases, asthma, or aches. The children who survived this genocide often have migraines and regularly wet their bed. On a psychological level, the personality can change to an extent that the children will never again, i.e. even as grown-ups, be able to develop a sound relationship to other people because they will constantly be unconfident, reserved, and nervous. Or they cannot handle their feelings and develop an emotionally unstable personality. This means that they become aggressive, are unassertive, and have great difficulties to integrate into society. Therefore, especially children, but also traumatised adults, need assistance, support, and a sense of security in order to be able to stabilise and to develop a sound perspective on life.

Apart from the current traumatising, the genocide by ISIS reactivated the Yezidi communal memory of earlier genocides and massacres. They experience a double or multiple traumatising, resulting in the conclusion that they are unable to defend themselves, and are bound to become victims of Islamic terror over and over again. Their antagonism to Islam has increased significantly. Out of fear of their fellow Muslim countrymen they do not speak up in public, but they have lost their trust after suffering from yet another massacre like those of the 18th and 19th centuries.

We see similar ways of behaviour in people who survived the holocaust. They are unconfident, tense, worried that their children won’t survive, and

² Personal interview with Baba Sheikh and Hazim Beg, son of Prince Mîr Tehsîn Beg, on 30.06.2015.

have feelings of impotence and helplessness. They clearly experience a collective trauma.

The treatment of this trauma may take several generations and the process has to be addressed actively, by means of talking, writing, documentation, etc., so as to prevent the suppression of anxieties by shifting them into the subconscious and blocking their accessibility. The latter scenario would collectively pathologise Yezidi society and impede efforts to develop a future. In view of the most recent studies, we have to assume that some 50 % of Yezidis develop a traumatic or post-traumatic disorder or will do so in the future.

KO: Will the extreme traumatic experiences of the recent years have any further effects on Yezidi established religious ideas? What other changes do you see emerging in the community as a result of this trauma?

IK: As mentioned above, this genocide by the ISIS has shaken the Yezidi community to its core, and it has yet to cope with this trauma. A majority of the Yezidis from the Shingal (Sinjar) region lives in camps under inhumane conditions, are still in ISIS captivity, or try to migrate to Europe. Only after there has been a period of rest, we will see which course the Yezidis will take. It also remains to be seen whether or not the caste system and the ban on marriages with non-Yezidis will be preserved. The High Council and Mîr Tehsîn Beg, the secular head of the Yezidis, were not able to protect their people or to offer them a perspective. The old institutions, such as the caste system, the Mir, Baba Sheikh, and the High Council failed to function in the face of the disaster. No network of support and solidarity exists. Rather, Yezidis in Europe and other diaspora areas try to help their peers in Kurdistan, which is nearly impossible given the high number of victims. Currently, the majority of Yezidis from Shingal wish to leave the Kurdistan Region because they don't have a perspective there. Shingal is still under ISIS control,³ and a rift has opened up between Muslim Kurds and Yezidis, in particular because at the beginning of the disaster, Kurdish *pêşmerge* offered the Yezidis no help in the Shingal mountains.

Thus, many Yezidis want to leave Kurdistan in order to survive. Currently, it is hard to predict whether all this will lead the Yezidis to modify their religious rules, and develop a new identity in the diaspora in order to find peace at a new home abroad.

³ This was the case at the time of the interview. Shingal has since been liberated from ISIS control (Editors).