

Yezidi religion and society

Yezidis are a small group. They mainly live in North Iraq. Some of them live in Turkey, Armenia, Yemen and Iran. About thirty thousand of them immigrated to Germany, because of bad conditions in Turkey. Despite all troubles they have encountered in their past, they have succeeded to survive. Their survival both in terms of religion and society among mountains has the basic struggle for peace and humanity. The Middle East region has had many religions and sects. One of them is Yezidism and it has many different as well as common aspects with the others, Islam, Christianity etc. Their survival for centuries and their interesting religion have attracted many Westerners' attention. The most stressed idea in these Westerners' writings and recent researches on them is that Yezidis are a religious Kurdish group, which has survived for thousand years in the nature and has an original religion that has many aspects emerging from the natural sources.

Before focusing on the survival of Yezidis and the aspects of Yezidi Religion and Philosophy, some general characters which are essential to determine in the beginning of such study should be introduced.

First of all, Yezidis belong to Kurdish race and regarded as Kurds who keep their original and ancient religion. They speak northern dialect of Kurdish (Kurmanji). Except some Arabic poems, their all oral prayers, hymns(qewl), sacred songs and whatever they recite in their special days are in

Kurmanji. All Scriptures and texts that they have are also in Kurdish.

Another important character of Yezidi society is the oral character of the transmission of faiths and traditions. This point cannot be neglected when studying on the Yezidi society. Because, their religion and society have been shaped widely depending on this feature of transmission in many situations. Philip G. Kreyenbroek says that; “The Yezidi tradition can only be understood as the product of a long period of oral transmission”(19). Most of points in Yezidism are hidden in their oral based texts and prayers. The oral character of transmission has brought a non-literal understanding of the religion.

Because they pay more interest in the oral teaching of religious texts and traditions, Yezidi people lack the means of training priests in the type of theology usually found in the literate traditions (Kreyenbroek 19). They have no religious schools to teach generations the bases of the religion. They also did not respect any school possessed by any other society or state. Because they considered getting such education the same as to be a member that society or religion. Even they have two sacred books and some texts, they do not have an efficient way of teaching and learning them like as of Qur'an in Islam or Bible in Christianity. These two important books, which we may find the bases of Yezidism, are introduced below. Some aspect of the religion and society are also explained in the light of these books ahead of the papers..

There are two books that yezidis confirm and consider as sacred books; Jilwe and Mishef Resh. The author of these books are unknown. It is a debate whether these books are Scripture or oral based texts. The only known thing is that these books found in the written form and can be recited like other texts. In the Jilwe, Melekê Tawûs speaks while in the Mishef Resh, it is understood that a man, a prophet perhaps, speaks. The Jilwe has five parts and in the book Melek Tawus warns Her selected people. She says to prevent Her people from sins and mistakes, She sends her helpers to them. The other book, Mishef Resh, contains accounts of Cosmogony, the origin of mankind, the ancient history of the sect, and a list of prohibitions(Sever 56).

After introducing some general points about Yezidis, their survival in terms of faiths and their exstance is to be dealt. Although Yezidis are a small group having a religion opposing the other religions present in the Middle East in many aspects, they have survived until now. The reasons for this vary. The most efficient way for Yezidis to defend from attacks has always been sheltering with mountains. Yezidis usually preferred mountainous places to build their shrines and temples and also to live. The nature provides them with this favour, indeed. Their survival in nature has also supported by Yezidi wisdom and unique social charecters. They have arranged the relationship with the others in such a way that they could protect their faiths from other religions, and decline the hate against them and conflicts with the others to the minimum degree. First they always fallowed a peaceful attitude toward the others and respect all the other religions. They adopted some special

festivals and ceremonies into their traditions. For example, they celebrate Khidr-Ilyas which is celebrated by many communities in Middle East and Saint Sergious, an Armenian Christian festival(Kreyenbroek 156).

They also have developed some special relationship with the other communities, especially muslim Kurds. When a Yezidi family decide their male child to be circumcised, they invite a Muslim Kurd for the child to be operated on that stranger's knees. This event provide a very important relationship, Kirîvantî, which arise far-reaching and life-long obligations of mutual help and support. Among Kurds, this relationship is more important than those of with close relatives.

Another way for Yezidis to be survived is to abstain from other communities and religions. They have such prohibitions that avoid them from marrying with members of other religions, entering temples possessed by the others and using tumblers, spoons, or combs belonging to the strangers. Kreenbroek states that, in some cases such subject are licit when they have purified with water from the Zemzem spring in Lalish(Yezidis sacerd place located in Iraqi Kurdistan)(148).

We can say that Yezidis succeeded to survive and to protect their beliefs from being lost in widely accepted religions and avoid attacks of dominant societies and empires which had no tolerance to religious minorities. It is because of such great survival that we have the chance of researching an ancient religion, Yezidism(Êzîdî).

Yezidism is an original religion which has its own philosophy and faith system. The word Ê-Zî-Dî (yezidi) is from Sumerian Language and means that “ones who are in true path”, that is people who follow God(Îsa, Dengê Êzidiyan). The founder of the religion is unknown. The idea, which suggests that Yezidism is very old and the historical details of its foundation are lost in the mists of antiquity, is favoured by Yezidis. According to this theory, the faith was able to survive over the centuries, because its devotees would allow themselves to be nominally converted to never religions such as Christianity or Islam while retaining their ancient beliefs(Guest 29).

In terms of the background and the roots of Yezidism here is a debate whether it is a sect of Islam or Zoroastrianism. Because of some common rituals and being Muslim of the prominent figure, Sheykh Ady who is regarded to have great impact on Yezidi religion and society by his religious poems, Yezidism sometimes considered as a sect of Islam. However, a Yezidi author, Shewqî Îsa, orders a list of differences arise between Yezidism and Islam and then he completely disapprove of this idea(Dengê Êzidiyan).Another Yezidi writer, Dr. Pîr Memo Osman refuse also the other case which says that Yezidism is the present version of Zoroastrianism and which is favoured by many Kurdish intellectuals and movements. He then suggests a third choice; “we can explain the similarity between Yezidism and Mithraism in that way; both religions emerge from one spring. According to theologians, both religions are Indo-German based. It is true that Zoroastrianism had impact on Yezidism, but they differ in

many cases, such as in cosmogony, interment, the future of the sprit, and the most important thing; the life after death and rebirth.”(Dengê Êzidiyan).

To explain the originality and natural roots of the religion, some basic myths should be interpreted.

The myth that express the Yezidi System of faiths and philosophy in more extended and detailed way is the myth of creation. The importance of the Sun and the Moon, main elements of the universe, seven days of a week, the value of mankind and divine beings are all hidden in this myth.

The myth, cosmogony, is explicitly explained in one of the sacred books, Mishef Resh. As it is writes there, the myth has this order; first God created the White Pearl from His own bellowed essence and He created a white dove whom He named Enfer. He placed the Pearl on the bird and He himself waited over the Pearl for forty thousand years. After this period He created the Heptad(Heftan in Kurdish), seven angels, each in a day of a week. The covenant was then described and the role of each of the angels(heftan) was defined at this time. Then God created the sky, the earth, the Sun and the Moon. After this, He created the mankind and all animals and then put them in His cloack and come down from the Pearl. He uttered a cry to the Pearl and the Pearl felled down and divided into four pieces. The water spurted out from the Pearl(Sever 134).

Yezidis believe that the first day which was created was Sundays. On that day God created an angel whose name was Melekê Tawûs, who is the chief of the Heftan. Melekê

Tawûs is a very important cult in Yezidi religion and society. Muaviye bin Ismail el-Yezidi, the leader of Yezidis, in his article published in Erol Sever's book, *Yezidilik ve Yezidilerin Kokeni*, says that; “ God charged Melekê Tawûs with shaping the universe and create the human being. For Melekê Tawûs to carry out her duty, God gave her plenty of dust. Melekê Tawûs first shaped male and female with this dust and then created the world with the remaining.”(115)

Even Melekê Tawûs is an angel, the conception is different from that of Islam. Melekê Tawûs is not sinless. Dr. Pîr Mamo Osman claims that Melekê Tawûs is like fire for Yezidis. He continues his assertion that fire has two faces; one it can light and the other is that it can burn and harm (Dengê Êzidiyan).

E. S. Drower states that, in her book called *Peacock Angel*, “It seemed probable to me [...] the Peacock Angel is, in a manner, a symbol of Man himself, a divine principle of light experiencing avatar of darkness, which is matter and the material world”(6).

Yezidis believe that soul never dies. E. S. Drower says that her informant told her that the “obstinately wicked” were relegated to hell forever, whereas the blessed spent some time in Paradise before entering their next incarnation. Eventually, when they were completely purified, these would become united with God (91).

According to Memo Osman, in Mithraism, Mithra(the God of Sun) delivered the meat of sacrificed bull to his followers

and wanted their souls be immortal. Yezidis got this belief from Mithraism and sacrifice bulls in the assembly festival(jejhna Jimaiye)(Dengê Êzidiyan).

In the foregoing paragraphs, Yezidi religion with some myths and cults were focused on. It is clear that those aspects have been shaped and completed to their present form by the effect of nature on these people. In addition to the natural clues and marks on the religion, Yezidis have some direct approaches to nature and get symbolism from nature.

The nature is very important for Yezidis. They believe that human has the duty to repair, plant and cultivate the world that Azda(God) entrusted to them. Respecting nature and protecting the environment are important values for Yezidis (Sever 119). Yezidis consider four elements as the main elements of the universe; the sky, originally thought to be made of stone, later of crystal, and enclosing the world like an egg; Water; the Earth, a flat disc floating on the water which filled the lower half of the egg; and Fire (Kreyenbroek 97). In the Jilwe book, God says that the seasons are four and the elements are four as well. He continues that He created them for his people to supply their needs (Sever 133).

Fire has a very special role in Yezidi tradition. Yezidis light pitch pines in Lalish on Wednesdays. On that day , in Sheykhs and Pîrs' home the fire is sett on as an old custom. This custom came to Mezopotamia before Zoroastrianism (Osman Dengê Êzidiyan).

Yezidis benefit from nature to represent some of their faiths by available things. They symbolise these faiths generally by some animals. The most known thing is cock and peacock. They believe that these animals represent Melekê Tawûs and thus they are sacred and banned to be eaten.

There are some other animals that have special meanings in Yezidi mythology. The picture of these animals can be seen on the walls of Shikhadi shrine and some other temples in Lalish. The imported three of them are listed below. The Bull; Mithra sacrificed a bull and used its meat for souls to immortal. Yezidis kill bulls in autumns. Sacrificing the bull is for humanity, brotherhood and a world without wars and murders. With this sacrificing, people hope the new year to be rainy, snowy and full of plants and trees.

The Snake; In Mithraism, snake represent the orbit of the sun and the moon. In Yezidism the black snake is sacred and represents good men. Sheyks heal the snake stings.

The Scorpion; Scorpion is the symbol of the day in Mithraism. Among Yezidis Pîrê Cerwa(the elder for healing) cures the body bitted by scorpion (Osman. Dengê Êzidiyan).

Having many faiths emerging from nature and blessing many natural aspects, Yezidis show their respect for nature also as prayers. Actually they pray to God, whom they address by the Kurdish name Khuda and worship as the First Cause and Prime Mover of the universe but the symbols they use when praying are still the Sun, the peacock standard etc.

Yezidis pray three times a day; sunrise, noon and sunset. They face the sun each time. They do prayers individually except special days when they gather in Lalish (Guest 38). Sheykh Shems, a prominent figure for Yezidis and represents one of the Seven Angels, Îsrafil, represent the Sun. According to Torî, a Kurdish historian, Yezidis bless the Sun, because it spreads light and they hate the opposite of the Sun, darkness and cold, which result in badness (141).

The Yezidis are spoken of as Devil-Worshipper. The chief of Heftan, Melekê Tawûs is regarded as Satan in other communities. Yezidis have raised a way of reaction to this regard; “terms which mean ‘devil’, words which sounds like these, terms referring to concepts remotely connected with Satan, such as cursing or stoning, and words sounding more or less alike are all forbidden” (Kreyenbroek 151).

As Yezidis respect nature, they have developed some attitudes toward it. Yezidis, firstly apply some prohibitions to care about and protect nature, especially the four elements, which have essential roles in their life.

As mentioned above, Yezidi tradition links four holy beings with the ‘elements’, water, fire, air and earth and the original purpose as a number of taboos may well have been to protect these against pollution. It is forbidden to beat or spit on the earth, to spit into water or fire, to drink water in such a way that it makes a gurgling noise, or to throw impure matter into fire (Kreyenbroek 148).

Among Yezidis it is forbidden to eat the meat of cock. It is believed that cock gives the good news of sunrise and resembles Melekê Tawûs(Sever 93).

Some foods are also forbidden, such as lettuce; fish; pumpkin; broad beans; cabbage; bamiyye and the meat of gazelle (Sever 94).

Most of these foods are forbidden, because of the similarity between their name in Kurdish pronunciation and any word related to devil in the Islamic literature (Kreyenbroek 149). In the Mishef Resh, some of these taboos are identified with their reasons of prohibition confirming Kreyenbroek's statement. For example, lettuce (khas in Kurdish) reminds of the Arabic verb which means "to chase away, pelt with stones". Cabbage (lehane in Kurdish) also appears to be similar, in pronunciation, with Arabic root 'la'ane', "to curse". Arabic is formal language of Islamic religion, and that is the reason why Yezidis react to the Arabic terms which are important in Islamic beliefs. This way of reaction shows that they want to protect Satan from another religion.

The fish and gazelle taboos are also reasoned in Mishef Resh. The ban on eating meat of fish is for the sake of respect for the prophet Yunus. Yunus was eaten, according to the legend also known in Islam, by this animal which was actually not a fish but a mammal. The book says that meat of gazelle (khezal) is not to be eaten since gazelles were once herd of one of their prophets.

Another taboo is the ban on the blue clothes. However, Kreyenbroek says that this seldom observed in practice and

argue that Kurds and Westerners appear to define colours in different ways, that is a gift of clothes refused by Yezidis may not called blue by a Westerner(150).

Yezidis have some festivals, which are common with Mithraism and Zoroastrianism; and some other festivals, which can also be found in Islam and Christianity. The New Year (Serisal) is the first festival of the year. This festival is celebrated almost all communities in Middle East. It is widely known as Newroz, the word which means the new day, and refers to a famous legend which tells the survival of Kurdish people from Assyrian ruler Dehhaq. Fire has a big role in this legend and represent the victory. As it is well known, it is celebrated on twenty first of March when night and day last equally. The Forty Days of Summer (Chilleyê Havinan) is celebrated in June and also called 'the feast of Sheykh Ady'. The principal and central occasion of the Yezidi religious year is the Festival of the Assembly (Jezhna Jemaiyye in Kurdish). All the community gathers at Lalish. The bull-sacrifice (qebax) takes place on the fifth day of the festival (Kreyenbroek 152).

Baptism is practiced in Yezidism. The rite takes place at the Kanîya Spî (the White Spring). Sheykhs takes the child into the cistern and immerses three times (Kreyenbroek 159). According to E. S. Drower's observations, only males are baptised in the open cistern, and baptism merely confers sametity, purity, and a blessing (160).

In Yezidism, funerary custom has the following features; the body of the deceased should be washed by his or her own Seykh or Pîr. People bring food to the grave and chant

religious music. People stay there until evening, but a ‘man of religion’ continues to wait to protect the dead’s soul from dark souls(Osman Dengê Êzidiyan).

After all commentaries, it can be concluded that Yezidis live in nature and they have benefited from nature to shape their beliefs, myths and arrange their life. Nature is everything for them, what protect them, what represent their God and all holy beings and what subsist them. Yezidism is an original religion, but it is clear that it has benefitted from many religions and philosophies in cases they suggest respect and peace for nature and mankind. Finally, the Yezidi religion and society can be summarised in that way.

Yezidis are a Kurdish speaking religious group which has an oral based transmission of the religion. They have two sacred books which contain the main aspect of the sect. Yezidis have been facing many attacks from the members of other religions, since they have different faiths and ways of life from the others. However, they have survived for centuries by improving some careful relationship with the others and sometimes by taking refuge with mountains. The Yezidi religion incorporates the universal principles of faiths; cosmogony, reincarnation, prayers. Yezidis respect the nature and consider four elements as sacred and regard some animals having special meanings. Yezidis believe in one God, but worship the Sun and Melekê Tawûs. The Yezidi religion consists of some prohibitions and taboos and suggests some festivals and ceremonies which are still celebrated among Yezidis.

As mentioned above, some Yezidis live in South East Turkey. But they have always been encountering aggressive attitudes from dominant society. Because of unbearable conditions many of Yezidis leave their land and immigrated to Europe. We know that many different cultures can be seen in Anatolia. This has always been the case. However, any cultural, religious and ethnic differences have not been tolerated in this country. Still today we have many differences in terms of religion (Alleviate, Sunnite, Jew) and in terms of nationalities (Kurds, Turks, Lazes) in our country. More democratic and peaceful way of dealing with different cultures must be held.