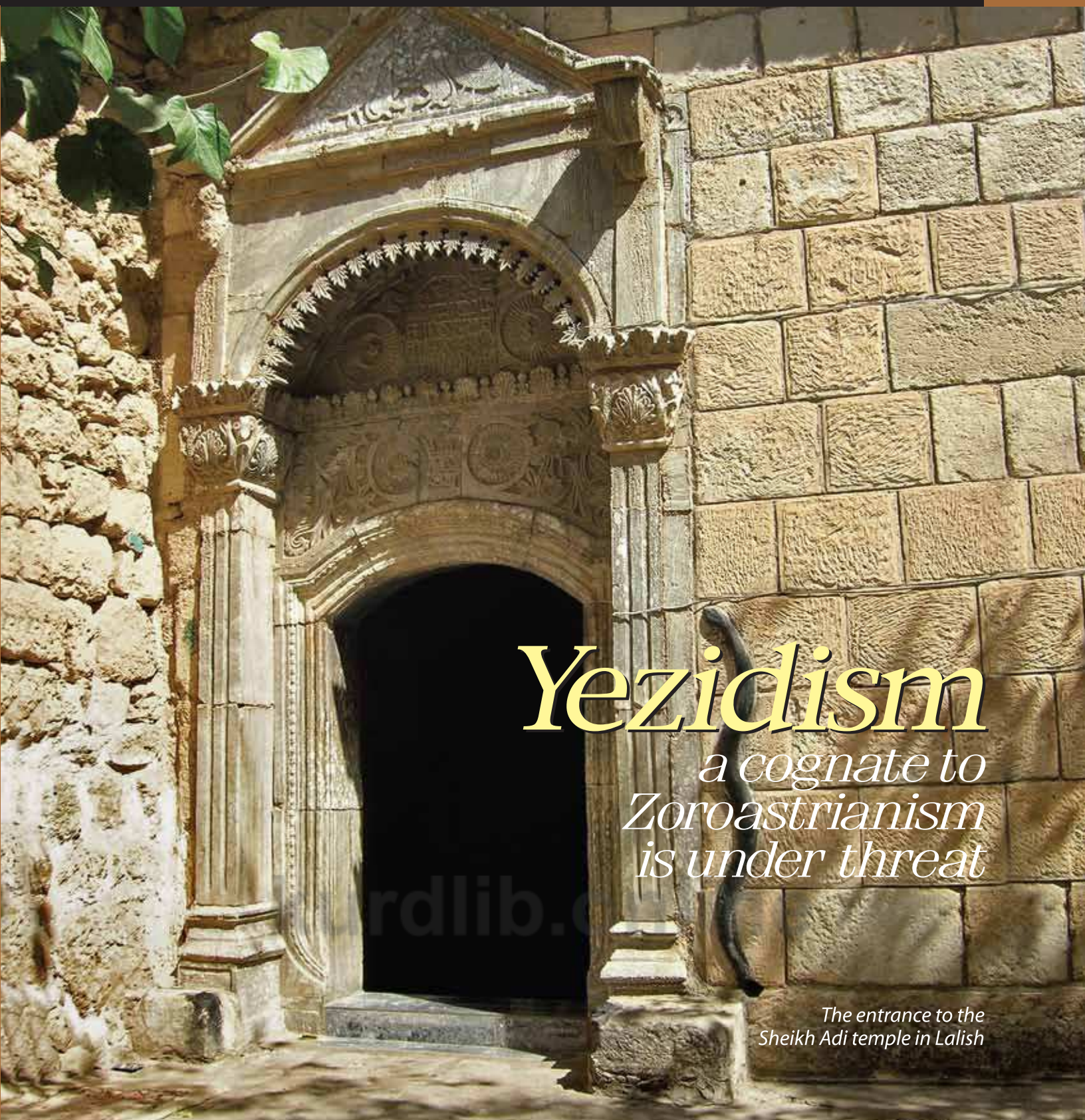
publication of the world zoroastrian organisation

HAMAZOR

4
issue 2014



Yezidism
a cognate to Zoroastrianism is under threat

The entrance to the Sheikh Adi temple in Lalish

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Said Abu Shakra (right) embracing Jewish-Israeli Artist, Rina Peleg (left).
Photo credit: Ofer Miller, p29.

Contents

04 Behram Baxter
06 Mumbai Priests - jehangir mehta
09 The floodgates open on the BPP - bombay bawa
12 A brief exposition of Spirituality in Zoroastrianism - kersey antia
18 The eternal flames of Sogd - farroukh jorat
20 Preserving Intangible Cultural Heritage
22 Convert to Islam or Die - khanna omarkhali
27 WZO's Chairman's letter to The Prime Minister, UK
28 Post War Arab-Jewish Relations - zenobia ravji
32 Bachi Karkaria chats with Cyrus Mistry
38 Zanzibar - two Zoroastians left - farah bala
40 Dadi Mistry - ava khullar
42 An Aerospace Engineer - Cyrus Ostowari - kersi meher-homji
43 Jehangir Pocha : A master story-teller - indrajit gupta
47 Tata Sons : Passing the Baton - late jehangir pocha
54 The Buzzabout

COVER

Photograph taken by Khanna Omarkhali in Ladish, in 2006.

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Convert to Islam or Die: Yezidism - an Ancient Religion under Threat

by khanna omarkhali

When the persecution of the Yezidis in Iraq began in August 2014, many Zoroastrians all over the world, counting Yezidism as a variation of Zoroastrianism, asked to protect the people. The FEZANA president Mrs Katayun Kapadia sent a letter to the Secretary General Mr Ban Ki-Moon, United Nations and to the President of the US, Mr Barack Obama; and the Chairman of WZO, Mr Shahpur Captain sent letters to UK's Prime Minister Mr David Cameron and the President of the United States. We decided to have an inner look at the Yezidi tradition and asked Khanna Omarkhali, a Yezidi from the priestly family herself and an assistant professor in the Georg-August University, to write the following article for the Hamazor. - Ed

Until a few months ago few people had ever heard of the Yezidis outside a select group of specialists. In August 2014, however, the world was shocked by the tragedy that occurred in Iraq involving the Yezidis, a Kurdish religious minority group. On August 3, 2014 the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) attacked Yezidis in Sinjar (in Kurdish *Shingal*) and the surrounding area with the intent to annihilate the Yezidis and their religion.

Yezidis are a Kurmanji-speaking community of ethnic Kurds. Their total population is probably over two percent of the Kurdish population. They live in all parts of Kurdistan and in the diaspora, though the majority of Yezidis still live in Iraq; the biggest Yezidi community was living in Shingal.

Yezidis are adherents of an ancient monotheistic religion which does not accept converts. In Yezidism one can find a number of elements also found in other religions, while its cosmogony, dogma and many rituals trace back to the ancient Indo-Iranian religious substratum. There are several elements connecting Yezidism, as well as the religion of Ahl-e Haqq (known as *Yarsan* in Iran and *Kaka'i* in Iraq), with early Zoroastrianism. When comparing these three religious traditions, it is interesting to know that they live relatively far apart from each other, and that these traditions flourished in different periods. These religious traditions have a number of common elements, especially in their cosmogonical myths. The Yezidis believe in seven Divine Beings and four sacred elements: fire, water, earth, and air (wind). Fire and to a lesser extent water, play a significant role in their rituals. Moreover, the distinctive signs of Zoroastrians and Yezidis are very similar: they are the white shirt called *sudre* in Zoroastrianism and *toka*

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Ezid in Yezidism, with the small pocket called *gireban* in Zoroastrianism and *girivan* in Yezidism groups.

The impossibility of converting to these religions, the division into priestly and lay families and prohibition of marriage between them are further similarities. In Yezidism there are two priestly groups and one made up of laymen, which is the lagest. Intermariages are possible only between the members of the Yezidi groups.

The most esteemed sacred religious texts are hymns called *Qewl*s in Yezidism (*Kalam*s in Ahl-e Haqq; cf. *Gatha*s in Zoroastrianism) that are transmitted orally. Yezidis still perform a bull sacrifice during the autumn feast, which is also performed during the feast of *Mehragan* in Zoroastrianism. These similarities allow speculation about a common origin of these two religious traditions, but that does not necessarily mean that these traditions are identical.

In the 12th century, Yezidism underwent far-reaching reforms under Sheikh ‘Adi b. Musafir (1073/8–1162), who was born in the village of Beit Far in the Bekaa valley south of Baalbek, and died in Lalish. He introduced many Sufi elements, including a rich terminology, to Yezidism, which many Yezidis see as an act that gave the Yezidi community a protective shield in the 12th–13th centuries.

Yezidis believe in one God (*Khweda* or *Ezdan*), in the existence of seven Divine Beings (often called archangels in literature), as well as many protectors and saints. During prayer a Yezidi should face towards the sun, which is one of the reasons why they were often called “sun worshipers”.

Yezidis, as well as Ahl-e Haqq, believe in rebirth of the soul, which plays a major role in Yezidi religiosity and is called *kiras gorin* (changing shirts). Yezidis also believe that some of the events that occurred during

Lalish the eve of the New Year Charshema Sor. 15.04.2008

Creation repeat themselves throughout the cycles of history. In Yezidism, the older original concept of metempsychosis and the cyclic perception of the course of time is harmonized and coexists with the more recent idea of an “apocalyptic” eschatology.

Being Kurds and Yezidis, they have suffered greatly from both ethnic and religious persecution throughout history. Yezidi oral history claims that they suffered from 72 massacres (*ferman*), counting the genocide of Yezidis in Iraq in 2014 as the 73rd one. Partly due to the vast number of religious persecutions, the Yezidis became a closed community, which has led to the many incorrect accounts on them. Their religion was often misunderstood, and Yezidis were described as devil worshipers, both in early Arabic sources and travel notes.

One can find a popular myth about the angel Tawusi Melek, who refused to bow down to Adam, which can be taken to suggest his disobedience to God. The myth shows similarities with the myth of the fallen angel, but there is not a single line about it in any of the existing Yezidi oral religious texts. Yezidis by no means worship the devil, and cannot do so simply because they do not believe in his existence. Before creating the world God created seven Divine Beings or angels, whose leader was Tawusi Melek, represented in the form of a peacock; and it is he who is responsible for all of the world’s affairs.

The main centre of the religion and its ceremonial rituals, Lalish, is located in the Sheikhan region, in Iraqi Kurdistan. According to Yezidi religious literature, Lalish was sent by God from heaven to the place where He first created the core of the Earth. In Shingal, however, a large number of Yezidi holy places and pilgrimages exist, some of which have already been destroyed by IS.

An entrance to Sheikh Adi in Lalish 2006

Yezidi children from Shingal in village Derebun, Iraqi Kurdistan. 26.08.14. Photo credit: K Khanki

The Yezidi religious tradition has a vast corpus of sacred poetry and prose texts, handed down orally, the most respected of which are the religious hymns called *Qewl*s. As Yezidis do not have a written Sacred Book and their religious texts are handed down orally, they are not considered *ahl al-kitab* (“people of the Book”), a term used to designate non-Muslim adherents to faiths which have a revealed scripture, usually referring to Jews, Christians, but also Zoroastrians in Iran. IS refers to Yezidis as

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infidels (*kafir*), whose only option is to convert to Sunni Islam or be killed. Moreover, in Yezidism, there is no such practice as *taqiyya*, which exists in some branches of Islam. It is a practice of religious dissimulation, where adherents are allowed to hide their religion when under threat or during persecution.

Persecution, and in particular attacks by the radical Sunni groups against different religious minority groups in Iraq, including Yezidis, has increased in the past decade. As an example, we may recall 14 August 2007, when one of the attacks on the Yezidis occurred, again, in Shingal. Four suicide bomb attacks killed about 700 Yezidis and wounded twice as many, the majority of whom were from the priestly group.

In August 2014, a large number of Yezidi men were publicly killed for not converting to Islam; about 1,500 girls and women (some even not more than nine years old) were kidnapped and brought to the slave market. Practically all Yezidis from Shingal fled the area. Many villages that are located further south in Kurdistan have already become ghost towns in the face of IS attacks. At the moment around one million refugees (including Christians and Shabaks from Iraq, Kurdish Muslims from Syria, and others) are in the Kurdistan Autonomous Region in Iraq, among them approximately 350,000 Yezidi refugees from Shingal.

From the 1980s onward, a number of Yezidi migrations from the homeland(s) to different European countries took place: in the 1980s mostly to Germany from Turkey, in the late 1980s -1990s many Iraqi Yezidis found refuge in Europe, and after the collapse of the Soviet Union, half of the Yezidi population in the Caucasus left Armenia and Georgia. These migrations have a negative effect on the Yezidi religion and religious practices.

Important centres of concentrated Yezidi religious knowledge have always been Shingal, Bashiq and Bahzan villages, near Mosul. They are now under the control of

Yezidi refugees from Shingal at Derebun, Iraqi Kurdistan. 26.08.14. Photo credit: K Khanki

Yezidi girl from Shingal at Derebun. 26.08.14. Photo credit: K Khanki

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ISIS extremists and the inhabitants have fled to different regions of Kurdistan, Turkey and Syria.

Yezidis, observing the transformations of their religious system under the influence of globalization, media, etc., often used to say that whatever happens to their religion in the diaspora, till there is Shingal, a religion will survive. Shingal is of a great importance for all Yezidis. On this territory there was a Shingal principality. Emigration and settlement of this community in different places will most certainly tragically affect the Yezidi religion as a whole. As Shingal Yezidis are the most traditional community, who still have the greatest number of religious knowledge experts, their genocide may well mean the killing of Yezidism as a whole.

Readers who may wish to have a further insight on the Yezidis, Ms Shahin Bekhradnia has placed her article on WZO's website, www.w-z-o.org titled: *Are the Yazidis Zoroastrian?*

In 2012, the first edition of the Turkish translation of the Avestan texts was published by the best Kurdish publishing house in Turkey, called Avesta. This year they published the second edition of the book. Khanna (Usoyan) Omarkhalİ wrote the introduction to it. See the following link: http://www.avestakitap.com/urun.php?id=11913.

Khanna writes: "It is a good edition, we have even recalled the legend about the writing of the Avesta on the bull skin and prepared the title page according to this legend!"

Moreover, they are planning to publish the English version. A few years ago Hanna also wrote the chapter on Zoroastrianism in the university teaching book on Religious Studies, which was in Russian. This book was republished four or five times.

Khanna Omarkhali is Assistant Professor at the Institute of Iranian Studies, Georg-August University Gottingen. She is a Yezidi from the Pir priestly group. She was granted her Doctor of Philosophy of Science in 2006 by Saint Petersburg State University. Omarkhali's research interests are Kurdish Studies, Religious Studies, Minority Studies, and Oral Literature. Her works have been written in several languages and the most recent volume she has edited is Religious Minorities in Kurdistan: Beyond the Mainstream (Wiesbaden, 2014).

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