

Threads of Yazidi History

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Tawûsê Melek, the Peacock Angel

“It must not be forgotten that the Ezidis do not descend from the Zoroastrians, as some scholars write; on the contrary, the Zoroastrians are descended from the Ezidis.” Tosine Reshid, Yazidi scholar

INTRODUCTION

The ancient history of the Yazidis, who are ethnically Kurds, is not well understood. Many modern writers insist that prior to accepting Islam the Kurds were Zoroastrians. But according to the Yazidi scholar Tosine Reshid, the Yazidi religion predates Islam by at least a thousand years, and its roots are ancient:¹ “Yezidis believe that prior to accepting Islam, all Kurds belonged to Yezidism.” Reshid is speaking of the tradition of the Yazidi Kurds, for elsewhere he indicates that while the Kurds to the east may have embraced Zoroastrianism early on, those to the west held on to Yazidism, an older religion. This article will try to trace various threads of Yazidi culture to provide an answer to the question of the origins of the Yazidi

religious tradition.

The Yazidis speak a northern dialect of the Kurdish language, which some call a separate language with the name Ezdiki. Their religion, Yazidism, is also called *Sharfadin* (the religion of the cultured folks). Reviled as devil worshipers for centuries by their Muslim and Christian neighbors, they have endured over 70 genocides in which millions died and most others were compelled to abandon their culture.

The Yazidis were denounced as infidels by al-Qaeda in Iraq who sanctioned their indiscriminate killing. In 2007, a series of coordinated car bombs killed nearly 800 of them.

The Islamic State began a campaign of destroying their cities and villages in 2014. It murdered nearly 3,000 of them, abducted 6,500, and sold 4,500 Yazidi women and girls into sexual slavery. Many of the abducted girls committed suicide. Nadia Murad, the Yazidi human rights activist and 2018 Nobel Peace Prize winner, was kidnapped and used as a sex slave.

There are fascinating cultural connections between Yazidis and Indians. We are speaking here of the links that go beyond the commonalities of the overarching Indo-Iranian language family, but even there it should be noted that in this family the earliest node on the Iranian side is Avestan, which is literally identical to late Vedic Sanskrit, and so the family should really be called the Vedic family, of which Indo-Aryan and Iranian are two daughters. These two subfamilies are connected in multiple ways through shared notions and history.



Dancing peacock, 2nd century BCE, Bharhut, India

In the second millennium BCE, we have the Mitanni of Syria worshiping Vedic gods. Even prior to that in the third millennium BCE, the figure of Paśupati (Lord of Animals), an epithet of the Hindu deity Śiva, is seen in the famous eponymous seal of the Sarasvati-Sindhu Civilization, a memory of which was

retained in the Indian and Iranian groups who lived across Central Asia.² Śiva's son Skanda (also known as Kumāra, Murugan or Kārttikeya), the general of the gods, has peacock as his mount. The main deity of the Yazidis is the *Peacock Angel*, Taus Melek.³



Skanda, 2nd century CE, Gandhāra, northwest India

The peacock is native to the Indian subcontinent and it has long served as a symbol of royalty. We find images of the peacock going all the way back to the 3rd millennium BCE sites of the Sarasvati Civilization. The peacock is worshiped in the Pongal Festival in Tamil Nadu and revered all over India.



Skanda on peacock, 8th century, Aihole

The Atharvaveda describes Kumāra as *Agnibhuh* or born of Agni, the fire

god who is also seen as a form of Rudra or Śiva. The Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa refers to him as the son of Rudra and the ninth form of Agni. The Taittirīya Āraṇyaka contains a Gāyatrī mantra for him. The Chāndogya Upaniṣad refers to Skanda as the “way that leads to wisdom.” The Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra provides additional names of Skanda, such as Mahāsenā and Subrahmanya. The Skanda Purāṇa is devoted to his feats.



12th century image of Skanda from Andhra Pradesh

VEDIC GODS IN WEST ASIA

The Mitanni ruled northern Mesopotamia (including Syria) for about 300 years, starting 1600 BCE, out of their capital of Vasukhāni.⁴ In a treaty between the Hittites and the Mitanni, Indic deities Mitra, Varuṇa, Indra, and the Nāsatyas (Aśvins) are invoked. Their chief festival was the celebration of viṣuva (solstice) very much like in India. It is not only the kings who had Sanskrit names; a large number of other Sanskrit names have also been unearthed in the records from the area.

The list of the Sanskrit names used in Syria and elsewhere was published by P. E. Dumont in the Journal of American Oriental Society in 1947.⁵ The names of the main kings are (with the standard Sanskrit form or meaning inside brackets): The first Mitanni king was Sutarna I (good Sun). He was followed by Baratarna I (Paratarṇa, great Sun); Paraśukṣatra (ruler with axe); Saustatar (Saukṣatra, son of Sukṣatra, the good ruler); Paratarṇa II; Artadama (Ṛtadhāman, abiding in cosmic law); Sutarṇa II; Tushratta (Daśaratha or Tveṣaratha, having ten or fast chariots);

and finally Matiwazza (Mativāja, whose wealth is thought), during whose lifetime the Mitanni state became a vassal to Assyria.

Across India, Iran and West Asia in the ancient world, the worshipers of Veda were called Devayājñi (or *Devayasni*), or *deva-worshiper*, of which the terms Sanātana Dharma or Vedic Dharma are synonyms. The name by which the Zoroastrians call their own religion is *Mazdayasna* (Sanskrit, *medhā-yajña*), or the religion of Ahura Mazda (Sanskrit Asura Medhā, Lord of Wisdom). Zarathushtra presented his religion as rival to the religion of the devas (spelt now as *daeva* in Avestan), that is *Devayasna*. One can assume that before Zarathushtra, the Indo-Iranian speakers in West Asia were all Devayasni.

DEVAYASNI WORSHIP

The Yazidis call themselves *Daseni* (Dawasen, pl.) which is almost certainly the same as Devayasni, which confirms what we know from the Mitanni records about the history of that period. The word Yazidi is cognate with Sanskrit *yajata* (worthy of worship) which in Old Persian is *yazata*. In modern times, the name is spelt variously as Yazidi, Yezidi, and Ezidi.

According to their folklore, the Great Flood compelled the Yezidis to disperse to many countries including India, and they returned from these adoptive countries around 2000 BCE. The dispersal in such a story is not to be taken literally to mean the entire population and may only imply that some part of the population sought refuge in far lands and became intermediaries for a diffusion of culture. From archaeological record, the most plausible spread of Devayasna from India took place about 1900 BCE, soon after which Vedic gods begin to be mentioned in Mesopotamia and Syria. Zarathushtra came from Bactria near Afghanistan and his new religion split the deva-worshipping communities in the West from the ones in India. The 4,000-year estimate of the Yazidis on when they returned from India is consistent with this figure.

After the rise of Zoroastrianism, Devayasna survived for a long time in West Asia. The evidence of the survival comes from the deva- or *daiva*-inscription of Iranian Emperor Xerxes (Xšayaṛšā) (ruled 486–465 BC) in which the revolt by the deva worshipers in West Iran is directly mentioned. Xerxes announces:⁶

And among these countries there was a place where previously daiva [demons] were worshiped. Afterwards, by the grace of Ahuramazda, I destroyed that sanctuary of daiva, and I proclaimed: The daiva shall not be worshipped!

This, nearly 2,500 years ago, is an early record of the persecution suffered

by the Devayasni, the ancestors of the Yazidis. This accusation of demon or devil worship was repeated later by Christians and Muslims.

The peacock was a sacred symbol to the Jats⁷, an Indic group whose reach extended to the Eurasian Steppe, who served as a mediating agency between India, West Asia, and Europe. Skanda/Murugan, together with the peacock mount, has been a popular deity in South India, which was strongly linked by sea-trade to West Asia and Europe. The story of the spread of the reverence for the peacock from India to Persia and beyond to Europe is well-known⁸.

We see the centrality of Śiva and Skanda in the representation of the coins of the first-century Kushana kings in the deities Οηβο (*Oesho*, Īśa or Viśva = Śiva) and Σκανδο κομαιο (*Skando Komaro*, Skanda Kumara). The rule of the Kushanas extended to regions that border on today's Yazidi lands.



Skanda with his consorts (Painting by Raja Ravi Varma)

The juxtaposition of snake and the peacock in the image above has a parallel in the carving of a black snake as symbol of wisdom and regeneration at the door of a sanctuary at Lalish.

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Black snake at the entrance of the sanctuary in Lalish

THE YAZIDI RELIGION

The Yazidis have a rich spiritual tradition and their modern culture goes back to the 12th century leader Shaykh Adi (died in 1162), a descendent of Marwan I, the fourth Umayyad Caliph, whose tomb is in Lalish in Northern Iraq that is now the focal point of Yazidi pilgrimage.⁹



Yazidi temple in Lalish

Given the evidence above, it is almost certain that Yazidism is a branch of the pre-Islamic, native religion of the Kurds. There are also similarities between the Yazidis and the Yārisān (Ahl-e Haqq) extending back in time to the pre-Zoroastrian *devayasnīc* religion of West Asia.¹⁰

The Yazidis number approximately 800,000, including about 150,000 who have taken refuge in Europe. They describe themselves as believing in one true God, and they revere Taus Melek, the Peacock Angel who is an embodied form

(avatar) of the infinite God. Six other angels assist Taus Melek and they are associated with the seven days of creation with Sunday as the day of Taus Melek. The seven domes of the modern Yazidi temple that opened in 2019 in Armenia, which is shown below, honor the seven angels.

The peacock imagery adorns Yazidi shrines and houses of worship, and other places. The attacks on them are a consequence of the Christian and the Muslim belief that the Peacock Angel is Satan or Iblis.

The Yazidi religion is a mystical, oral tradition consisting of hymns (qawls), that are sung by qawwāls. Parts of the tradition have now been transcribed as two holy books called the Kitab al-Jilwa (Book of Revelation) and the Mishefa Reş (Black Book).

Given that many Yazidis claim to have originated in India, the veneration of the peacock may be a memory of this origin. In India, apart from the peacock as the vehicle of Skanda, it is also associated with Kṛṣṇa, who wears a peacock feather in his hair or in the crown. Of the seven colors produced from the primal rainbow, Tausi Melek is associated with the color blue, which is also the color of Kṛṣṇa.¹¹

Through his manifestation as a snake, Taus Melek is consistent with the perspective of the yogis of India, for whom the serpent on the tree is a metaphor for the inner serpent (*kundalinī*) that coils around the spine.

Yazidis pray in the direction of the sun, excepting for the noon prayer which is in the direction of Lalish. They believe in reincarnation and they take it that the angels (with the exception of Taus Melek) have been incarnated on earth as holy people or saints. Just like the Hindus, they use the metaphor of a change of garment to describe the process of rebirth.

Like other Indo-European cultures, the Yazidi society is tripartite, with the three classes of shaykh (priests), pir (elders), and murid (commoners) and they marry only within their group. Their society does not allow conversion. The shaykhs are divided into faqirs, qawwals, and kochaks. The secular leader is a hereditary Mīr or prince, whereas Bābā Shaykh heads the religious hierarchy.

The Yazidi calendar goes back to 4750 BCE. It must be noted that the Indian king lists goes back to 6676 BCE, which is mentioned by the Greek historian Arrian in his account of Alexander's campaign,¹² and this remembered great antiquity may reflect earlier interaction between the two groups.

During the New Year celebration, bronze lamps crowned with peacocks, called *sanjaks*, which are similar to the bronze peacock āratī-lamps, are taken from the residence of the Mīr in a processional by the qawwals through the Yazidi villages. It is believed that the sanjaks came from India, and originally there were seven, one for each of the Seven Sacred Angels, but five were taken away by the Turks, and now only two remain.



A modern Yazidi temple in Aknalich village in Armenia

The Yazidis are a symbol of mankind's indomitable will. As a persecuted people in world history, they deserve praise and support for their courage and bravery in the face of the greatest odds.

DISCUSSION

It is clear that the Yazidi collective memory is consistent with historical events that took place in the region in the ancient times. Specifically, the Xerxes Daiva Inscription agrees with their memory that Iranian (most likely Kurdish) tribes to the West held on to the earlier Devayasma religion and continued the worship of the old divinities (which are part of the Vedic religion¹³). Furthermore, the worship of Skanda, son of Śiva, was popular in northwest India 2000 years ago (from the evidence in the Kushan records) and it is quite likely that this popularity extended further west.

The view of Śiva as the highest God in the Śaivite tradition with the peacock riding Skanda as his son has a parallel in that the Angel Peacock is considered second only to God¹⁴ in the Yazidi tradition. Note that the worship of Śiva-like Śvetovid extended also further north into the Slavic world¹⁵.

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NOTES

1. Reshid (2005)
2. The interconnections across Central Asia are summarized in Kak (2003); Kak (2020); and Kak (2021)
3. Drower (1941)
4. Kak (2007)
5. Dumont (1947)
6. Achaemenid Royal Daiva Inscription of Xerxes.
7. Nair (1974); also Kadgaonkar (1993)
8. Horvat (2015)
9. Acikyildiz (2018)
10. Khanna (2011)
11. Kadgaonkar (1993)
12. Mitchiner (2000)
13. Kak (2003)
14. Reshid (2005)
15. Kak (2020), Kak (2021)

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