

DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

From Orthopraxy to Orthodoxy:

The Yezidi Identity in the Face of the Challenges of the Modern World

The project I would like to propose as part of “Excellent Initiative – Research University” Programme (“Global History – Non-European Contexts of the Modern World”) I have tentatively titled *From Orthopraxy to Orthodoxy: Yezidi Identity in the Face of the Challenges of the Modern World*. Its main objective is to investigate the changes that are currently taking place in the culture and religion of the Yezidis.

This endogamous community, which has lived in western Asia since the 11th century, remained faithful to the religious prohibition of using writing until the mid-20th century. The Yezidis transmitted their religious knowledge only orally, in the form of sacred hymns (*qewls*)¹, and entrusted clerical functions to representatives of one of the two religious castes (*Sheikhs* and *Pirs*), solely on the basis of birth and not specific knowledge.

The ban on writing was first broken under the influence of the USSR’s education policy in the South Caucasus, where, beginning in the 19th century, the Yezidis migrated fleeing persecution by the Ottoman Empire and were used by the Russians in the war against the Turks.² Here, the Yezidis slowly blended into the social fabric of Transcaucasia, and here, over time, they came to recognize themselves as an independent nation that is linked to the Kurds only by its geographic area of settlement.³ However, at the cost of security, they were forced to shed their specific cultural features, which included a ban on writing. At the time the ban was violated, Transcaucasia was inhabited by around 25,000 Yezidis.⁴ The Russians incorporating

¹ Kh. Omarkhali, *The Yezidi Religious Textual Tradition: From Oral to Written: Categories, Transmission, Scripturalisation and Canonisation of the Yezidi Oral Religious Texts*, Wiesbaden 2017; Ph. Kreyenbroek, *Orality and Religion in Kurdistan: The Yezidi and Ahl- e Haqq Traditions*, in: *Oral Literature of Iranian Languages*, ed. Ph. G. Kreyenbroek, U. Marzolph, London –New York 2010, pp. 70– 88; A. Rodziewicz, *Kelle, święte hymny Jezydów*, “Przegląd Orientalistyczny” 265–266 (2018), pp. 73–90.

² Д. Пирбари, *Езиды Сархада*, Тбилиси – Москва 2008.

³ A. Rodziewicz, *The Nation of the Sur. The Yezidi Identity between Modern and Ancient Myth* [in:] *Rediscovering Kurdistan’s Cultures and Identities: The Call of The Cricket*, ed. J. Bocheńska, Cham 2018, pp. 259-326; idem, *Milete min Êzid. The Uniqueness of the Yezidi Concept of the Nation*, “Securitologia” 1 (2018), pp. 67-78.

⁴ www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/sng_nac_26.php?reg=2330;
www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/sng_nac_26.php?reg=2333 [16.11.2022]

their colonial policy in the South Caucasus subjected the Yezidis to a Soviet system of universal and compulsory education. Several decades later, the first publication (without translation) of several Yezidi sacred hymns took place – in 1978 in Yerevan and a year later in Baghdad.⁵ Their first translation into Russian was published in Georgia only in 2016.⁶ In turn, the first Polish edition of two of them (along with my translation), appeared only in 2018.⁷ This shows the extent to which the study of several hundred years old Yezidism is a difficult area of study and relatively new at the same time.

The Yezidis, both because of the metaphysical tenets and fear of persecution,⁸ have not yet codified in writing the principles of their religion and have not developed their own system of exegesis and theology. Radical changes are currently taking place in this area, affecting the shape of the entire religion and its organization. Significantly, the initiators of the changes that affect the entire community are the leaders of the Yezidi diaspora living in Georgia, where the establishment of the International Academy of Yezidi Theology took place in 2019. Its establishment was a response to the great hunger for knowledge of their own identity among the Yezidis. The students of the Academy include Yezidis from Georgia, Armenia, Iraq, Turkey, Syria, as well as from Germany, France, the Netherlands, Belgium and Russia.

These revolutionary changes not only affect the culture and identity of the Yezidi of Transcaucasia, but are also being vigorously discussed in the Yezidi homeland of Iraq, where most of them reside, as well as in the largest Yezidi diaspora living in Germany (especially in Oldenburg).⁹

I hope that the trust gained among the Yezidis,¹⁰ as well as my scientific position as one of the leading scholars of Yezidism, will bring my research to the highest scientific level.

In the framework of a project carried out at the University of Warsaw, I am planning a study of the changes taking place in Yezidi religion related to its emerging from the oral stage and taking on the form of an institutionalized religion. Over the past few years, I have already done preliminary research on this topic, the importance of which I recently hinted at in the article *Between Orthopraxy and Orthodoxy: International Yezidi Theological Academy in*

⁵ O. Celil, C. Celil, *Zargotina K'urda: Курдский фольклор*, vol. I, Erevan 1978.; [Pir] X. Silêman, X. Cindî, *Êzdiyatî: Liber Roşnaya Hindek Têkstêd Aîniyî Êzdiyan*, Baghdad 1979.

⁶ Д. Пирбари, Д. В. Щедровицкий, *Тайна жемчужины: Езидская теософия и космогония*, Тбилиси 2016.

⁷ A. Rodziewicz, *Jezydzkie hymny kosmogoniczne: "Hymn o Nieszczęsnym Rozbitku" (Qewle Zebuni Meksur) and "Hymn o Be i A" (Qewle Be u Elif)*, "Przegląd Orientalistyczny", 265– 266 (2018), pp. 207– 222.

⁸ Z. Khenchelaoui, *The Yezidis, People of the Spoken Word in the midst of People of the Book*, "Diogenes" 187 (1999), pp. 20-37; N. Siouffi, *Une courte conversation avec le chef de la secte des les adorateurs du diable*, "Journal Asiatique" series 7, vol. 18 (1880), pp. 78-83.

⁹ P. Koikasl, T. Hejzlarová, S. Kreisslová, *The Influence of the Diaspora on the Transformation of the Main Elements of the Yazidi Religion*, "Religions" 13 (2022), doi.org/10.3390/rel13111071

¹⁰ See the interviews in Yezidi media: www.ezidipress.com/fr/2016/05/06/artur-rodzevitch-tant-que-les-yezidis-resteront-fideles-a-leur-culture-ils-seront-forts/ ; www.ezidipress.com/ru/2016/03/26/артур-родзевич-до-тех-пор-пока-езиды-б/.

Tbilisi.¹¹ This research is all the more relevant because it concerns an ethno-religious group whose identity is under threat – both from physical extermination (exemplified by the numerous attacks on Yezidis and the recent acts of genocide by DAESH) and in the form of secularisation and the forgetting of religious knowledge (caused both by the barracking of the Holy Book and the dispersion of Yezidis around the world and the loss of contact with the religious centre in Iraq and its religious leaders).

The research will be conducted in Russian, which is spoken by most of Transcaucasian Yezidis, and in the *Êzdikî* variant of Kurmanji, when it concerns religious hymns and formulas handed down in oral tradition. In turn, their results will be popularized in English.

Within the framework of the project “Global History – Non-European Contexts of the Modern World”, I plan to:

- participate in *Kurdish Studies Conference* at the London School of Economics and Political Science (24-25.04.2023) to share reflections on developments in Yezidism both in Georgia and worldwide;
- observe the most important festival of the Georgian Yezidis, *Tewafa Siltan Êzîd* (10-11.06.2023);
- field research (in 2023 and 2024) in Georgia and Iraq including conducting interviews, attending in Yezidi festivals, and lecturing (*pro bono publico*) at the International Academy of Yezidi Theology in Tbilisi;
- continue editorial work on the “International Journal of Yezidi Studies”;
- launch the journal’s website;
- give lectures (in 2023 and 2024) on Yezidi culture and religion at the University of Warsaw;
- publish research results in the form of articles.

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¹¹ A. Rodziewicz, *Between Orthopraxy and Orthodoxy: International Yezidi Theological Academy in Tbilisi*, “Kulturni studia” 18 (2022), pp. 81–116.

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