

Yezidi (Agri) Cultural Heritage and Practices

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ABSTRACT: Yezidis are a unique ethnic and religious group with a distinctive cultural and religious background. The Yezidi religion is one of the oldest religions in the world. The Yezidi community is originally agricultural in nature as they, throughout their history, have depended on agriculture for their livelihood. This paper investigates the (agricultural) cultural heritage and practices of the Yezidi community in Iraq. It also introduces how the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) destroyed Yezidi cultural heritage and agriculture. In order to achieve these aims, a literature review has been conducted to gather existing knowledge and findings related to this topic. The paper has found that Yezidis have a distinctive cultural background, and many of their religious practices and rituals have been linked with agriculture. Finally, ISIS has wrought destruction on their culture, agriculture practice, and religious symbols.

Keywords: Yezidis, Yezidi Religion, Yezidi Agricultural Practices, Cultural Heritage destruction, ISIS

1. Introduction

The Yezidis (also spelt Iyzidis, Yazidis, Ezidis) (Spat ,2005; Kizilhan ,2017; Omarkhali,2017) are an ethnic and religious community with a unique cultural and religious heritage who practice a religion influenced by pre-Islamic Assyrian traditions, Sufis, Nestorian Christianity, and Zoroastrianism. They have retained their original and ancient religion. They live in northern Iraq, northeast Syria, and southeast Turkey as well as in the ex-Soviet states, mostly in the Caucasus (Armenia and Georgia) (Guest ,1987; Izady, 1992; Kreyenbroek, 1995; Asatrian & Arakelova, 2014; Omarkhali, 2017; Spat, 2018). They often hold Kurdish nationality, speak the northern dialect of Kurdish (Kurmanji), and conduct almost all their prayers in in this dialect.

There is no reliable data available about the exact number of the Yezidi population. According to unofficial estimates, the number of the Yezidis in the world varies between 1.5 and 2 million (Kreyenbroek, 1995: 5). The U.S. State Department, depending on Yezidi leaders, confirmed that there are 500,000 to 700,000 Yezidis in Iraq (Henne & Hacket ,2014), while their number is estimated to be 600,000 of whom 400,000 live in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps and about 100,000 emigrated (mainly to Europe, Australia and North America) after the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) attacked them in Sinjar and the surrounding areas on August 3, 2014 (Aaydo, 2016; Al-Tae, 2019; Khalid, 2019). Those who live in the Nineveh governorate constitute 90% of the Yezidis in Iraq and the rest living mainly in Duhok (O'Driscoll & Fazil, 2020).

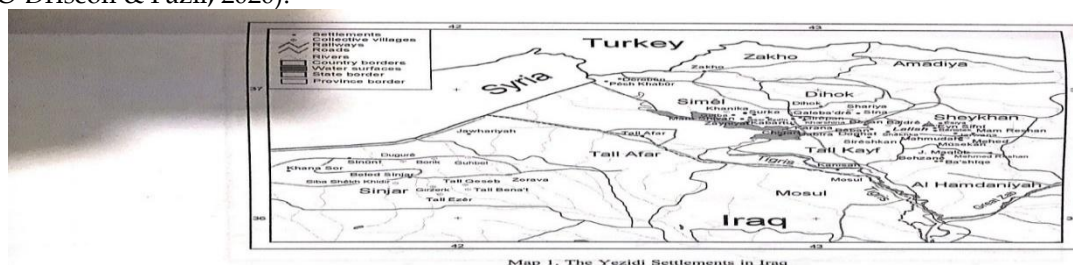


Figure 1: Source: (Omarkhali ,2017)

This paper aims at investigating the (agri) cultural heritage and practices of the Yezidis in Iraq in general and in Nineveh plains in particular. It also aims at shedding light on how this unique community relates their socio-religious practices to agricultural practices. Finally, the paper aims to show how ISIS devastated their culture at different levels but mainly targeting agricultural and cultural heritage and cultural symbols. In order to achieve the above mentioned aims, the paper makes use of the available academic literature that deals with Yezidis, their history, religion, socio-cultural practices, socio-religious practices, norms and traditions, heritage, genocide campaigns throughout history, language, and economy. In doing so, this paper tries to address a gap in the literature on Yezidis in relation to the link between Yezidi cultural practices/heritage as well as the gap that considers this triangular relationship of agriculture in traditional communities as cultural practice and as economy (i.e. survival and livelihood strategy). Moreover, it hopes to add something to the existing literature on this community.

2. Historical background of the Yezidis

The Yezidi religion is one of the oldest religions in the world. It existed in Mesopotamia thousands of years BC. It is a relic of those ancient religions which believed in nature and natural phenomena and goes back in history to the Sumerian era when people began to believe in natural phenomena as the root of man's existence (Guests, 1987; freeyezidi.org; Barany, 2008; Asatrian & Arakelova, 2014; Omarkhali, 2017; Spat, 2018). Those religions looked upon the sun, the moon, the stars, light and fire as sacred elements, which they believed to be revelations of the creator. The sun, in particular, has a special and distinguished status in Yezidism as it is one of God's revelations according to Yezidis (Spat, 2016, 2018). Accordingly, the Yezidi religion can be related to those religions which existed in Mesopotamia, Syria and Asia Minor which believed in the sun as the most sacred element (Kunji 2007; Barany, 2008). However, there are different opinions and controversies about its origins. It seems that the most reliable evidence suggests that this religion developed from the foundation of ancient Indo-Iranian beliefs which were probably close to Indo-Aryan ones, but they were interlaced with ancient Mesopotamian religions. In Yezidism one can find a number of elements inherent to other religions, and also some extraneous features, while the cosmogony, and many of the rituals go back to the ancient Indo-Iranian religious substratum (Asatrian & Arakelova, 2003; Acikyildiz, 2010; Omarkhali, 2017). Yet, like any other religion, Yezidism developed and transformed throughout history (Freeyezidi.org; Guest, 1987; Kjelen, 2007; Kreyenbroek & Omarkhali, 2016; Omarkhali, 2017).

Throughout their history, Yezidis have greatly suffered from religious persecution, and have been subjected to many genocide campaigns where millions of them were killed (Guest, 1987; Kunji, 2007; Saydo, 2016; Spät, 2016; Omarkhali, 2017; Beam, 2018; Cheterian, 2021; Khalid, 2019; O'Driscoll, et al., 2021). Partly and due to this, they have become a closed religious community, which has also led to many false accounts about them in literature, as well as many misunderstandings of their religion more broadly (Ali, 2019; Beam, 2018; Schmermund, 2018; Shand, 2018).

According to Can Emmez (2020), Yezidim needs to be defined as an ethno-religion and ethno-culture due to the fact that Yezidi religious ideas that dictate social status, such as belief in being chosen and a lineage that forbids exogamy permeate all aspects of culture.

3. The Yezidi religion

One of the fundamental components of the Yezidi cultural legacy is the Yezidi religion. A syncretic religion, it incorporates Sufi practices, Kurdish folklore, and several old Mesopotamian religions (Guest, 1987; Barany, 2008; Arakelova, 2014; Kreyenbroek & Omarkhali, 2016; Omarkhali, 2017). Its hierarchy-based religious organization is headed by spiritual leaders, and it has its own sacred scriptures, ceremonies, and practices. Its own philosophy and religious system focuses on angels in particular (Izady, 1992). Because its adherents let themselves to be apparently converted to other religions like Christianity or Islam during genocidal campaigns while maintaining their traditional beliefs, the faith was able to survive over the ages (Guest, 1987; Acikyildiz, 2010; Kreyenbroek & Omarkhali, 2016; Omarkhali, 2017).

Yezidis have a distinctive ethno-religious identity; they are monotheists and believe in a single, everlasting God, who is omnipresent and has complete control over the entire world. They refer to this

God as "Xude" in Kurdish, and they revere him as the universe's primary cause and primary source of universe. Each feeling and emotion that exists on earth belongs to him. But he has given seven angels (the Heptad of seven holy creatures), who serve as his helpers, the authority to act on his behalf. To oversee global affairs and human fate, He designated the Peacock Angel, Melek Tawus (Guest, 1987; Asatrian & Arakelova, 2014; Açıkyıldız, 2010; Kreyenbroek & Omarkhali, 2016; Omarkhali, 2017).

It is important to note that there are actually four socio-religious castes within Yezidism; the Mirs, Sheikhs, Pirs, and Murids. The Yezidis' temporal and spiritual leader is known as the Mir. His position is inherited. Baba Sheikh is the Yezidis' spiritual leader. The highest and most revered caste is that of the sheikh. The Pirs are spiritual leaders who carry out common religious rituals including baptizing believers. Both Sheikh and Pir caste membership is inherited and frequently comes with unique skills. For instance, each Sheikh and Pir family has some form of healing talent. Some families have the ability to treat ailments like snakebite, lunacy, fever, headache, arthritis, etc. (Swoilo, N. (n.d.) . Recarnation, the Sanjak ; Servant Group International).

In Yezidi tradition, the Seven Angels are held in high regard and reverence. Sheikh's family is thought to -have descended from the blood of the Seven Angels, who are said to periodically visit the earth to bring new laws. Moreover, these seven angels who are involved in world's events were given the job of creation and the formation of plant and animal life on earth. Their names are: Esrael, Gibrail, Mikail, Dirdail, Simkail, Azazil, and Esrafil.

The universal ethical and moral concepts of right and wrong, justice, truth, loyalty, mercy, and love are all incorporated within the Yezidi faith. It will be a long time until Yezidis are repaid for their faith in Melek Tawus, but in the meantime, souls continue to travel through other bodies through transmigration. Evil is acknowledged as a reality and is not thought to be the creation of any supernatural being; human beings themselves are responsible for their own actions (Jind, 1998; Alison, 2017 as cited in Kizilhan, 2019). The Yezidi tradition includes the story of Adam and Eve, but rather than focusing on Adam's fall, the angel is shown as a provider or offering helpful guidance on the function of the body; i.e. human reproduction (Guest, 1987; Barany, 2008).

In Yezidism, fire, water, air, and the earth are sacred elements that are not to be polluted. During prayer a Yezidi faces towards the Sun, so they are often falsely called 'Sun Worshipers' (Guest, 1987; Barany, 2008; Omarkhali, 2017). The Yezidis genesis story begins with the depiction of the emptiness and the absence of order in the universe. Prior to the creation of the world, God created a white pearl, called 'Dur' in Kurdish, in the spiritual form from his pure light and resided in it (Sfameni Gasparro 1974; Açıkyıldız, 2010). One important fact of the faith is the belief in the oneness with nature. The Sun is revered because it stands for the source of power or absolute truth. It is revered and regarded as God's manifestation (Guest, 1987; Barany, 2008; Omarkhali, 2017). Interestingly, Yezidis also share the tale of the Flood, and according to Yezidi legends Ain Sifni, the Arabic name for Sheikhan, is the place where the Ark was assembled (Guest, 1987: 29); the Arabic name means "spring of the sailor". According to Yezidi legend, a serpent raised Noah's ark and transported it through the water to Mount Sinjar's summit, where humankind was saved from the deluge owing to the snake's assistance.

Fridays and Wednesdays are holy days for the Yezidi community. On these days, specific rituals are not carried out, but believers visit holy locations, mostly sacred buildings like mausoleums or shrines, to pray to the saints. To be recognized as a member of the society, every Yezidi must take part in a certain set of rites and ceremonies. The birayê axretê, the brother (or sister) of the hereafter, who helps the person in rites, is a significant figure in each Yezidi's religious life: They are often two – a sheikh and a pîr, who is identical to the sheikh but is less influential politically – and are regarded as guardian angels who support their protégés throughout life (Açıkyıldız 2010: 100).

One of the beliefs that Yezidis uphold is reincarnation; they think that the soul will keep reincarnating until it reaches a particular degree of soul purity. Reincarnation, also known as kiras guhorîn ('changing the garment') in Kurmanji, is described using the metaphor of a change of clothing. Following death, the body undergoes a number of purification rites so that the soul can get ready to go before being buried. The soul stays with the body even after the physical body has died, ready to enter the afterlife. Clay or water 'barat' from Lalish is placed in the deceased's mouth after the body has been cleaned. The deceased is then buried with the head towards the North Star and pointed east. The star of Melek Taus, often

known as the North Star, is where after-death spirits ascend (Swoilo, n.d.). There is also a belief that some of the events from the time of creation repeat themselves in cycles of history.

4. Yezidi agricultural - cultural practices

In the anthropological exploration of culture as a way of life, its significance transcends mere customs and rituals; it forms the very fabric of societal cohesion and temporal continuity. Socially and chronologically, culture serves as a unifying force, weaving individuals into a cohesive whole through shared symbols, experiences, and actions (Dillabough, 2000). As noted by Kültürel (2018) and cited by Can Emmez (2020), this symbolic realm fosters trust and solidarity among members of society, providing a foundation for mutual support. Moreover, culture manifests as tradition, embodying a continuum of beliefs and practices that not only shape individual and collective identities but also serves as potent political imagery (Can Emmez, 2020). Through this lens, culture emerges as a dynamic force, perpetuating social bonds and inspiring communities with a sense of belonging and purpose.

The majority of people in Iraq, including Yezidis, have the sense of belonging to their communities as they can practice their culture. However, Yezidis have more cultural traditions that are more closely related to aspects of agriculture (O'Driscoll, et al., 2021).

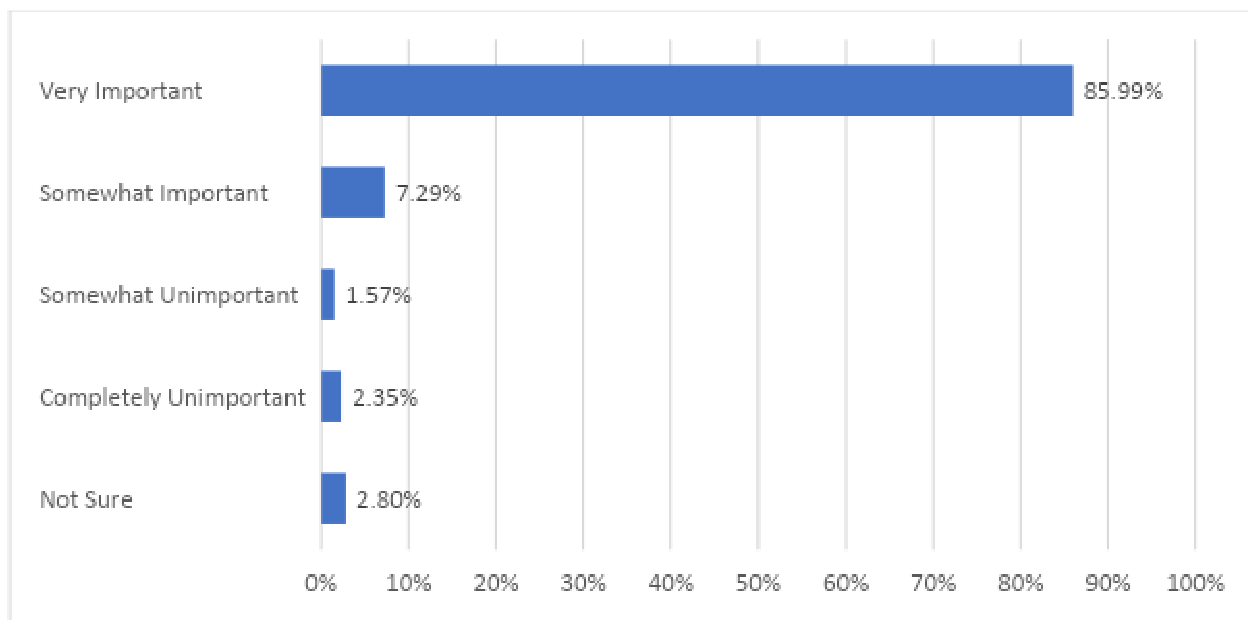


Figure 2: Importance of freedom to practice culture in relation to a sense of belonging (O'Driscoll, et al., 2021:17)

In the above figure, which was taken from a report by O'Driscoll, et al. (2021), when asked how important freely practicing culture is in the sense of belonging to the minorities, including Yezidis, in Nineva plain, 85.99% of the participants thought it was very important to freely practice their culture, with a further 7.29% thinking it is somewhat important. According to a report by O'Driscoll et al. (2021), when asked about the importance of freely practicing their culture in fostering a sense of belonging, 85.99% of minority participants, including Yezidis in the Nineveh Plain, considered it very important, while an additional 7.29% deemed it somewhat important.

Since the Yezidi community is agricultural in origin, many religious practices and rituals include agricultural elements (Khatami n.d; Lalish Media Network, 2014; Khalat, 2007a; Khalat, 2007b). Plants play an important role in Yezidi culture where wild plants are collected both to eat and for medicinal purposes (Hovsepyan et al., 2016). Since the Yezidi community has mainly depended on agriculture for generations, they have linked their agricultural practices with their religious practices and rituals. The Yezidi community has long depended on agriculture, intertwining their farming practices with their religious traditions and rituals. Yezidis relate most of their religious ceremonies and events to nature of

which agriculture is a part (Khatami n.d; Lالش Media Network 2014; Khalat 2007 a; Khalat 2007b as cited in the O'Driscoll & Fazil, 2020).

4.1 Yezidi cultural and religious celebrations which have agricultural implications

The following Yezidi cultural and religious celebrations, occasions and events are elements of the Yezidi cultural heritage, which are also related to agricultural – cultural practices.

1. The Yezidi New Year. The celebration of the Yezidi New Year is one of the most sacred events for Yezidis. The day of celebration is also called Red Wednesday, which falls on the third Wednesday of April each year which is the first Wednesday of April according to the Eastern calendar. According to Yezidism, life was sprinkled on the earth by the rain of the sky and is conceived as the marriage of the sky and the earth. Yezidis believe that this sacred marriage took place in April so that they call the month “the bride of the year” and therefore do not practice weddings during this month. A red flower (anemone) that usually appears in April in the region is called *bûke/bûkik* which means bride in Kurdish (Can Emmez, 2020). It is worth mentioning that this flower symbolizes renewal, rebirth and the arrival of spring (Khalid, 2019). Yezidis look upon the month of April as one of the sacred and blessed months of spring as they believe it is the symbol of the nature's flourishing and renovation. The Yezidis believe that Malek Tawus, the Peacock Angel, landed on the earth on this day (Khalid, 2019). The earth froze in honor of the coming of the peacock angel, the fields increased and the flowers and roses emerged in various varieties and colors (Khalat, 2007a). Every Yezidi family begins preparing themselves for the celebration as from Tuesday. Boys and girls go to the fields and mountains near their villages to pick bouquets of red flowers (anemones) to attach to the gates of their houses and rooms; they also start painting eggs with beautiful colors that represent Nature. Every family has to attach the anemones to the doors of their houses and rooms along with the colored eggs. They also start coloring eggs with different colors that represent the beautiful colors of the nature. These eggs symbolize the eternal fertility of the earth which gives birth to every creature (Can Emmez, 2020). Farmers go to their fields to eat the eggs and then spread the eggshells to give blessing to their lands so that they become fertile and productive. On this day, all Yezidi families should sacrifice an animal, depending on their finances the animal can be a lamb, sheep, bull or a hen (Khalat 2007a). This tradition is clearly linked to a purely Yezidi (agri)culture reflecting a Yezid culture in its wider perspective.

2. *Beilanda* reflects a Yezidi cultural heritage and is related to agriculture and agricultural practices. This celebration is observed during the first three days of the forty days of winter, known as “Chilla”; a Kurdish word meaning forty. The celebration continues for three days; Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. A special circular piece of bread called “*Khawlera*” is baked in which one raisin or an olive kernel is placed. The rituals begin on Thursday evening as every house and family lights a fire in their homes burning a wild dry bush called “*Rashk*” to welcome the farmers returning from cultivating their lands. In the past, farmers used to come back home with their oxen which had to jump over the fire. (Khatami, n.d; Lالش Media Network, 2014; Khalat, 2007b).`

It is worth noting that Yezidis observe this religious holiday at a time where farmers start sowing their agricultural lands. They also light fires on agricultural roads and the roofs of their houses; this fire is called in Kurdish “*Gorga Gaie* ‘meaning ‘the flame of the ox’. The ox in turn has a symbolic implication as the power of fertility. Khalat (2007a) believes that this ritual has a philosophical agricultural implication; primitive man had to secure the permanence of the fertility of the land, keeping seeds intact under the soil, and securing the rains necessary for their growth. Thus, he resorted to formal magic that acts as a representation of the fertilization processes in various ways, including the suggestion of the soil in order to speed up the germination of seeds by sacrificing a bloody offering and spraying the blood of the victim in the fields.

3. The holiday of forty days of winter and summer is also a religious ceremony that is linked with agriculture. The forty days of the winter event falls on the twelfth of eastern December, whereas the forty days of the summer falls on twentieth of eastern July. These two occasions have a clear relationship with the four-season cycle and changes in the general climate. The Yezidis observe the forty day summer event believing that during these days the wind, not just the sun, has a role in ripening the various types of summer fruits and vegetables. This period occurs between the completion of the grain harvesting,

filtering them and storing enough for their needs, while keeping enough seed to sow the following year (Khalat, 2007b).

4. The assembly religious celebration is another religious ritual that reflects the Yezidi cultural heritage. One of the important events taking place during this celebration is the sacrifice of an ox. This ritual relates to nature's cycle and symbolizes the end of the summer season and the beginning of winter when farmers start sowing their agricultural lands (Khalat, 2007a).

5. The "Sefra Masta" meaning the "trip of the yoghurt or milk". In this event, Yezidi livestock owners take milk and yoghurt to Lalish temple as an offering. This occasion is observed on the fifteenth of the eastern March. The weather is compatible with the fullness of the udders of livestock with milk, and the flow of this milk requires giving thanks and gratitude to God. The Yezidi owners of livestock look forward to this occasion because it is a sort of declaration to stop providing their livestock with fodder, because weeds and grass start to appear green in the fields, which is good for their livestock to feed on. It is worth noting that a number of people of the Yezidi villages who have olive trees from which they have extracted quantities of olive oil a few days before the milk trip present it to the Lalish temple along with their milk, because olive oil is needed to light the wicks in Lalish (Khalat, 2007b). This (agri) cultural traditional practice is quite useful for the community as it keeps its long historical heritage and, at the same time, it is an opportunity for Yezidi farmers coming from different villages to meet and talk about their farms and plantations.

6. The feast of Kheder Elias and Kheder Nabi. It is thought that Kheder and Elyias, two saintly brothers, meet every year (Can Emmez, 2020). The feast was named after them, due to their strong connection with nature and its preservation. It is believed that these two figures are among the saints and religious followers of the Yezidi religion.

Yezidis believe that the young, those who travel, and those who are in love are also protected by Kheder Nabi. The Yezidi calendar places a lot of importance on the Kheder Nabi event. The first Friday after February 13 is when it is observed, and a three-day "lent" (foziye Xidir-nabi) comes before it (Asatrian & Arakelova, 2014). This feast is celebrated in the context of fertility and blessing. The feast of Kheder Elias differs from other feasts in the Yezidi religion, during which it is forbidden to slaughter livestock and make offerings. Instead, Yezidi women in every family fry wheat, barley, chickpeas, and beans with other seeds. The product is called 'qalank', a Kurdish word meaning "burning grains" (or frying them to a certain degree). Then, the roasted 'qalank' is ground together to make flour which is known as 'Pikhon', meaning "bloodless." The feast of Kheder Elias has a strong relationship with the planting and germination season. It indicates that the season for growing winter crops like wheat and barley is about to come to its end, and it is also an indication of the beginning of a new year (Al-Jundi, 2019; O'Driscoll & Fazil, 2020).

On the occasion of the feast of Kheder Elias, Piri Lebna, a sacred legendary symbol, is also mentioned. This legendary figure is considered the patron saint of young men and women in marriage and love. It is believed that young male and female Yezidis, if they dream during these three days that they are drinking water in a specific house or a specific area, then this means that the Piri Lebna will fulfill their wish to marry from that area or from that family, and thus you see bachelors eating a lot of fried grains and sweets of Kheder Elias on the night of Eid, hoping that they will drink water in their dreams, and Piri Lebna will reveal their luck in marriage. In the morning they talk about their dreams, so we see some recounting their dreams, others keeping them secret, and a third who did not have a dream and wait for the next year, and for this reason it was named that night (a night of Danka), that is, the night of going to the place of drinking water. On the day of the feast, all individuals are adorned with beautiful clothes. Men shave their beards and cut some of their hair, and women cut a little of their hair.

The name of Khader Elias is mentioned in other religions in addition to the Yezidi religion. In Judaism, he is called Elijah, one of the great prophets who ascended to heaven in a chariot emitting fire. In Christianity, he is called George who is a young knight, in Islam he is Kheder Elias, meaning alive, and has a shrine in southern Iraq, in the Hindu religion he is called Khawaja Khadr or Khudri Zinda meaning the immortal (Dinani, 2016).

7. The Yezidis fast for three days a year in preparation for readying the lands for cultivation as well as raising livestock. Two days before fasting begins, Yezidis sacrifice an animal. By sunset, Yezidis bring their livestock back home so that all members of the family, including those who were grazing their

livestock, break the fast together. They break the fast first by kissing a 'Barat,' which is a round piece of clay taken from Lalish, and then by eating a special piece of bread called 'Soak.' For the fasting event and the New Year event, all Yezidi families have to sacrifice an animal depending on their economic and financial capabilities- it can be a lamb, sheep, bull, or a hen (Khalat, 2007a ; O'Driscoll, et al.,2022).

4. 2 Plants

Yezidi culture places a high value on plants, and they harvest wild plants for food and medication (Hovsepyan, et. al., 2016). For Yezidis, the most important agricultural crops are olives and vegetables (Kunji, 2007). The two small towns of Bashiqa and Bahzani have been historically known for their olive trees and local olive soap as well as onions. They are two of the largest towns in Iraq in the production, preparation and cultivation of olive groves whose numbers were estimated at more than 40,000 forty thousand fruit trees which are hundreds of years old. The olives have a distinctive flavor and are important in daily culinary life, but unfortunately now most of the trees have been damaged and destroyed by lack of watering and care during the ISIS occupation (Alouka 2016).

Yezidis make olive oil soap from olives grown in Bashiqa and Bahzani. The Yezidis venerate the olive tree and they consider it as one of the sacred trees that gives great benefit to human beings. Olive oil is also sacred, so it is used in lighting the wicks in Lalish temple in particular and in all Yezidi temples in general (Kheder, 2017). There is an olive grove in the Lalish temple whose oil is used only for lighting wicks and as a medicine. Many Yezidis, both men and women, volunteer every year at harvest time to pick the olives and squeeze them by hand. Following this, a religious service takes place and the oil is stored inside the temple in a place called Hasan Dana. The oil is used to illuminate the 365 lamps that are lit on Wednesdays and Fridays of each week in the Lalish mountain valley. It is also given to people for the purpose of treatment (EKurd Daily, 2014; Kheder, 2017).

Bashiqa onions are considered to be the best onions in Iraq. Alouka (2016) also asserts that Bashiqa and Bahzani have become a full-fledged agricultural and industrial towns with factories, grain processing plants, and an abundance of profitable farms and fields for Rashi/tahini, pickles, and olives. Yezidis also value onion and mandrake. The onion was historically used in ritual practices such as the use of onion juice during funeral rites (Arakelova, 2004); however, it is not clear if this continues.

Cereals are also grown in the villages surrounding Bashiqa, the most important of which are sesame and wheat (Altae, 2019). Grains and wheat are also cultivated there (Khalat, 2017). Mandrake is used in traditional medicines and is also used as an aphrodisiac (Arakelova, 2014). However, references to the mandrake plant mainly concern Armenian Yezidis. Particularly when celebrations are held under them, trees are highly valued. Trees can also be important for where they grow their shape, or their age (Arakelova, 2014).

It is worth mentioning that Yezidis do not eat certain vegetables especially lettuce and cabbage due to vague reasons interpreted differently by different writers though the author of this paper could not find a logical and a religiously accepted interpretation. However, the taboo of cabbages and lettuce are believed to come from an oral tradition about the Yezidi prophets, Sheikh Adi and Sheikh Hasan (Kreyenbroek & Rashow, 2005), yet because it mainly applies to religious classes like the pîr and şîx, the taboo is not widely practiced (Can Emmez, 2020).

According to O'Driscoll, et al. (2021) report, figure 3 below, which includes the minorities in Nineva plains, the use of wild plants is widespread, with 77% of respondents, including Yezidis use them, especially for cooking and for medicinal purposes. Edible plants (47%) and medicinal plants (34%), have cultural importance for both Yezidi men and women. Household income is supplemented through the sale of herbs, truffles, or brooms

Participants noted that edible plants and medicinal plants have the most importance (Figure 3 below). In interviews with community members, people highlighted that wildflowers are used by women for decoration. Young Yezidi men and women collect and exchange flowers, sticking them to the walls or doors of their homes and kitchens. Some species of plants used for household consumption or sold in markets include mallow, gundelia, curry leaves, truffles, turmeric, chamomile, and rosemary. Women mix certain wild plants with henna for cosmetic purposes. Explaining the importance of wild plants culturally, a Yezidi farmer described how, on New Year's Day in April, they collect wild red flowers (anemone) to decorate the gates of their homes and kitchens as part of their cultural and religious

tradition. Women also gather and grind a different plant to use as henna. Additionally, various plants are harvested for making brooms to sell, and some are used to treat conditions such as diabetes, wounds, diarrhea and other diseases (O'Driscoll, et al.,2021:32).

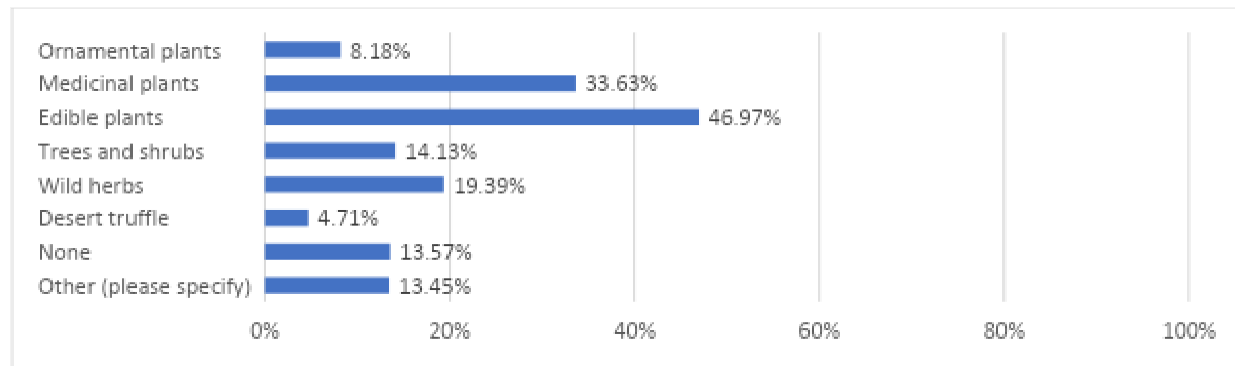


Figure 3: Wild plants with cultural significance (O'Driscoll, et al.,2021:32)

4.3 Yezidi food

As a component of culture, food shapes identity and self-expression (Can Emmez, 2020). One of the cultural behaviors that provide a person with a social context is food, i.e. eating, which is a key marker of personal identity. In addition to providing nutrition, food also serves as a symbol for the social forces that shape how people are constructed. As Fischler (1988 as cited in Can Emmez, 2020) argues, humans identify themselves as part of a culture or a group by claiming that the foods they eat are peculiar to that culture or group, or more specifically by identifying the otherness, the difference, of others. Anderson (2005 as cited in Can Emmez, 2020) maintains that religious food customs may be rationally justified in terms of theological and ceremonial logic as well as ecological considerations since they are pragmatic adjustments to communal life rather than blind ancient traditions.

Food plays an important role in bringing together Yezidi communities (Nianias, 2019). It is seen to have significant cultural importance, as 76% of the Yezidis who were surveyed by O'Driscoll, et al. (2021) saw meals for special occasions, and dishes connected to religious events as playing an important role in their life. Yezidis frequently prepare traditional food using family recipes that have not been recorded but passed down through generations. They appreciate using a range of plant and animal ingredients in their cuisine as part of this component of their culture (Wolf, 2018). For Yezidis, festivals and social events hold great importance and occur at holy sites and shrines where they serve food. Yezidi women also lay special food on graves they visit during religious events and holidays (Spät, 2016).

Yezidi traditional food is rather simple. Animal products (meat, milk, yogurt, cheese, curd, etc.) and cereals (primarily bread wheat) are the main ingredients in Yezidi traditional food. There are, however, several meals that use edible wild plants that were not previously recognized to the scientific community or publicized. For instance, the key ingredients of traditional Yezidi cuisine in Armenia include meat, milk, yogurt, cheese, curd, grains, and wild herbs, all of which highlight the main focuses of their historical agrarian economy and way of life. Sheep herding has always been the primary activity of Yezidis residing in Armenia, and it still is for the vast majority of them (Hovsepian et al., 2016). Likewise, Yezidi dishes in Iraq often include yoghurt, cheese and bulgur. 'Kubbah' is one of the important meals for Yezidis in Iraq. It is a mixture of bulgur wheat, minced onions, spices, and ground meat. On 'Ajwa day', Yezidis give Ajwa sweet (dessert bread) to their friends and relatives (Salloum, 2016). At the New Year, "Sar Sal," every family has to slaughter an animal, and wealthy families share it with poor families who cannot afford it (Allan, 2014).

Food manufacturing was an important source of employment for both men and women in the region. Yezidis place great importance, as mentioned before, on olive oil production, pickle manufacturing, tahini manufacturing, and soap production (which is connected to olive oil production as shown in figure 4 below) (O'Driscoll, et al. ,2021).

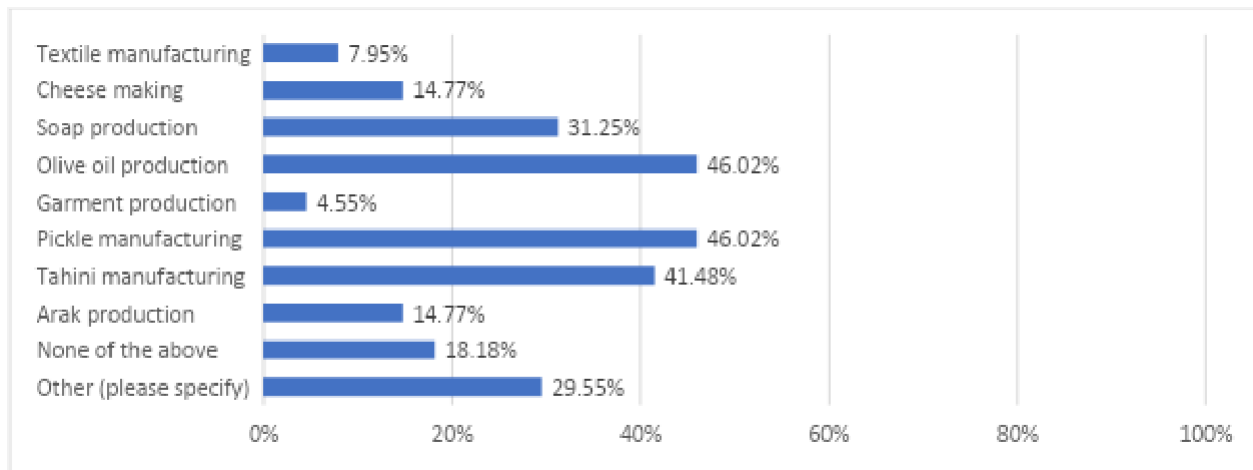


Figure 4: Manufacturing is considered of cultural importance: Yezidis (O'Driscoll, et al.,2021:27)

The above figure shows that both olive oil production and pickle manufacturing constitute the main manufacturing practices of the Yezidis in Nineveh plain making 46.02% of the total manufacturing products followed by Tahini manufacturing of 41.48%. It is worth mentioning that all the above manufacturing products reflect Yezidis' cultural importance. O'Driscoll, et al. (2021) give details on this Yezidi cultural practice.

4.5 Yezidi clothes - 'Kharqa'

Among Yezidis, the 'kharqa' is a sacred garment made of sheep's wool and dyed black with leaves from the Zirgon tree (Walnut tree). Yezidi clerics known as "faqir," (which literally means poor) wear these garments together with black turban (Koro, 2018). Both are dyed black with a substance made from the sacred 'Zirgon' tree. Faqirs are supposed to live a life of piety and abstinence by fasting, abstaining from alcohol, tobacco use, and all forms of violence. Initially, their order must have been accessible to everyone; nevertheless, through time, they became into a hereditary class. Only individuals who freely want to follow the austere path have the right to wear the black robe, even if they were born into a faqir household.

The 'kharqa' was first God's attire and then that of his Seven Angels, or rather their emanations or manifestations, according to Yezidi hymns. It was also worn by Yezidi 'Khas', angelic creatures who took human form by incarnation, as a sign of religious gnosis or spiritual knowledge. Sheikh Adi, the main character in Yezidi religion, wore it. Tradition claims that his 'kharqa' was a source of illumination. Then, the 'kharqa' was reserved for the 'faqirs', those who adhere to the real religion. Finally, in an eschatological sense, it is promised to everyone who perseveres in following the straight path, together with the headdress of the 'faqirs' (Spät, 2016).

5. Destruction of Yezidi cultural heritage by ISIS

Throughout history, Yezidis have been the target of many massacres and mass killings and only a small number of the Yezidi population remains. The most recent massacre was committed in the late summer 2014 by the terrorist organization, ISIS, who tried to eradicate Yezidis (Ali, 2019; Cheterian, 2021; Beam, 2018; Schmermund, 2018; Shand, 2018 among others). ISIS refers to Yezidis as infidels (Kafir) and 'devil worshippers', whose only options are either to convert into Islam or to be killed.

The Ninewa Plain has historically been home to many cultural groups living side by side and represents an important part of Iraq as a multicultural society, which ISIS devastated in 2014. Sadly, hundreds of thousands of Iraqis died and millions more were displaced between 2014 and 2017 because of the ISIS occupation and the following military operations to defeat it. ISIS specifically targeted Christian, Yezidis, Shabak, Turkmen, and Kaka'i minority populations in the northern Iraqi province of Ninewa (Beam, 2018; Schmermund, 2018; Cheterian, 2021). Members of these marginalized groups were beheaded, abducted, sold into slavery, or coercively converted to ISIS' extreme form of Sunni Islam. Agriculture and animal husbandry-based livelihoods in the region- were completely destroyed. ISIS also

damaged several historical, religious, and cultural landmarks, which caused a feeling of spiritual loss and rift within the community (O'Driscoll, et al., 2021).

ISIS has destroyed Yezidi agriculture at different levels. Using the scorched earth technique, they completely destroyed and devastated the Yezidi agricultural infrastructure including lands, farms, and agricultural machinery. ISIS burned all Yezidi orchards and farms, looted all their livestock, agricultural machines and equipment and planted mines on the agricultural land (Amnesty International, 2018).

In Bashiqa and Bahzani, ISIS completely destroyed the olive groves as the trees were left without water for about 3 years, and burned many of them; trees were also burned by air strikes during the liberation of the area from ISIS. According to Mr. Aref Hassan, an official of Bashiqa Farmers' Association, the renewal of the olive groves may require 10 years, and there are still mines and explosive devices in a large area that impede the work of the farmers there (Obelisk, 2017).

ISIS forced Yezidi farmers to leave everything then destroyed their houses and the olive trees. The irrigation systems were looted, from the pump to pipes. This was a clear message that ISIS sent to prevent Yezidis from returning to their homes (alhurra.com, 2018).

According to Khalat (2017), who has written about what ISIS did in Bashiqa, the 'olive capital' has lost its title as ISIS left 150000 fruitful and some thousands of unfruitful olive trees thirsty burning and dying. ISIS did not water the trees which need to be watered at least twice a year. Olives constitute the backbone of the local economy for many people of the town. The areas around the olive trees have also been neglected uncultivated for years as bushes grow wild, which made it vulnerable to fires. This area has actually suffered wildfires more than once. The orchards were also bombed during the liberation. As regard to livestock, Khalid (2016) estimated the revenue previously coming from cows, sheep, and poultry in Bashiqa was about 500 million Iraqi Dinars.

Ethnically, ISIS have destroyed all the Yezidi shrines and temples in the villages and towns they invaded in 2014; they even destroyed the graves to erase the memory of those who were buried. The number of "shrines" that ISIS demolished with the halls in which they are located, as well as the graves of the public and the righteous saints in Bashiqa and Bahzani amounted to 25 shrines and domes, most of which date back to historical and archaeological times rooted in history (Alouka 2016).

The losses due to ISIS within the three year occupancy are estimated to be at approximately 126 billion dinars, not to mention destroyed homes. Furthermore, ISIS had a negative effect on tourism in Bashiqa as the town was a stopping station for tourists from Mosul, Baghdad, Basra, and all the provinces of Iraq, and even those who wanted to go to the Kurdistan Region's summer resorts had to go to Bashiqa to buy food and other items. According to Lalesh Media, "the most common thing tourists wanted was Tarshi (pickles), black and green olives, olive oil and soap." (Lalesh Media News, 2017).

Over half of respondents who came from Nineveh plain residents, including Yezidis, claim more difficulties today practicing their culture, according to the O'Driscoll, et al. (2021) survey (see figure 5 below). The ability to practice their culture and traditions was significant to nearly three-quarters of the displaced respondents when deciding to return home.

Just over 50% of those who participated in a survey included in O'Driscoll, et al. (2021) report believe that after ISIS, practicing culture has become more challenging. As an illustration, a Yezidi community leader showed how "for three to four years that we lived away from our areas especially from Bashiqa and Sinjar, we were grieving as we could not celebrate our feasts and occasions. They were hard days and impacted us a lot both physiologically and financially." (p.16).

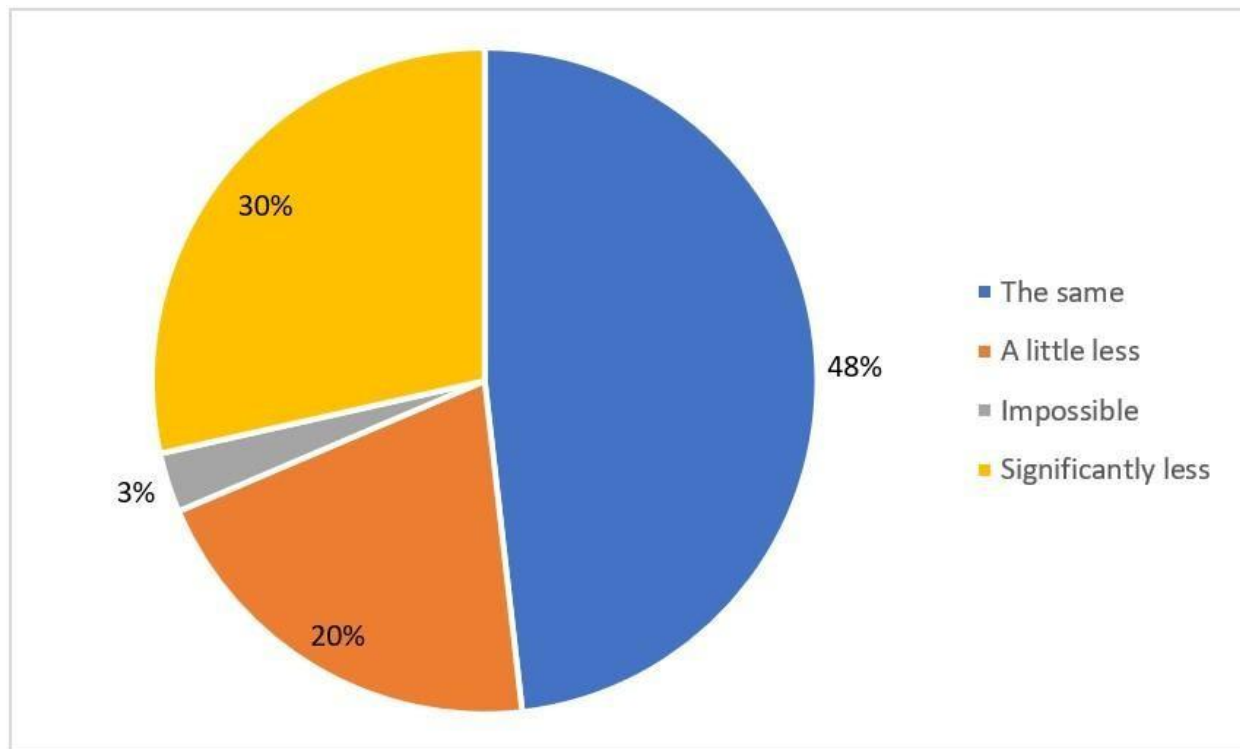


Figure 5: Ability to practice culture (i.e., participate in religious and other cultural events) now in comparison to pre-ISIS (O'Driscoll, et al. 2021, p.17).

To conclude, culture is of great importance to these groups'; Iraqi minorities, sense of belonging in Iraq, "it is a factor in return or not migrating out of the country, and finally, it has traditionally played a part in fostering both intra- and inter- community cohesion" ; it influences decisions on returning or not migrating out of the country and has traditionally contributed to fostering both intra- and inter-community cohesion (O'Driscoll, et al., 2021:18).

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Yezidis, an ethnic and religious group with deep cultural roots, have faced significant persecution and genocide throughout their history. Their identity is intricately tied to agriculture, a fundamental aspect of their livelihood and religious practices. The Yezidi cultural heritage, including religious celebrations and rituals, is intertwined with agricultural-cultural elements such as plants, foods, and clothing.

Tragically, ISIS has inflicted severe damage on Yezidi culture and agriculture, destroying not only the agricultural infrastructure but also ethnically obliterating shrines and temples. The loss extends beyond tangible assets; it encompasses intangible cultural and religious elements that are irreplaceable.

Recognizing the urgency of the situation, this paper appeals to all concerned entities in Iraq, local and international NGOs, and the global community to collaborate in the rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts for the Yezidis. Preserving Yezidi agricultural traditions, cultural practices, and religious heritage is paramount before these invaluable aspects of their identity are lost forever, leading to the potential dispersion of communities and the erosion of ancient traditions. Immediate action is crucial to ensure the resilience and continuity of the Yezidi culture against the destructive forces that have sought to erase it.

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