



The Public Defense of the Doctoral Thesis in Medieval Studies

by
Eszter Spät
on

Late Antique Motifs in Yezidi Oral Tradition

will be held on

Thursday, 11 June 2009, at 14:00

in the

Senate Room – Monument Building
Central European University (CEU)
Nádor u. 9, Budapest

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Members:

Gerhard Jaritz Supervisor (Department of Medieval Studies, CEU)
Christine Allison (Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, University of Exeter)
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The doctoral dissertation is available for inspection in the CEU-ELTE Medieval Library,
Budapest, 6-8 Múzeum krt.

Abstract

This thesis contains the results of my research on the presence and use of late antique motifs in the oral religious tradition of the Yezidis of Northern Iraq. Such a quest simultaneously contributes to a better understanding of Yezidi religion, orality in the Middle East, and the influence of late antique religiosity on the religious development of the region.

Yezidis are a Kurdish speaking religious minority of a few hundred thousand souls, living throughout the Middle East, with the highest concentration and their religious center in Northern Iraq. Yezidis are not Muslims, neither may they be considered Jews or Christians. Rather they follow a highly syncretistic oral religion of their own, which shows a strong Sufi influence, though its core mythology retains the imprint of a pre-Zoroastrian Western Iranian mythological thinking. Vestiges of other religions once flourishing in the region may be detected as well.

Yezidi mythology and religious imagery have also incorporated and adapted to their particular religious system certain myths and motifs which once enjoyed widespread popularity among the interrelated religious movements of Late Antiquity, from Judaism through Christianity (or rather the varieties of Christianity) to Gnosticism and Manichaeism, but which have since been mostly relegated to oblivion. The study of such motifs and myths help to explain some elements of the Yezidi faith which have previously been considered obscure and confusing, or even childish. Such elements were deemed to be the results of Yezidis' misunderstanding or distorting legends or myths taken from other religions, or were simply dismissed since interpreting them proved too difficult. These motifs fall into place within the Yezidi system of beliefs and become easier to understand once light is shed on their origins.

It must also be emphasized that Yezidis are not an exceptional, isolated case within the region. The thesis demonstrates that these motifs can be found in

the religious lore of numerous other groups, both medieval and contemporary, in the Middle East, strengthening the argument that they derive from a common substratum shared by the people of the region. Placing these motifs within the context of a religious language originating in Late Antiquity is not only the key to a better understanding of Yezidi religion, but also to the way it developed and the working of oral tradition in the Middle East in general. In this context, establishing the late antique origins of some motifs reveals the way literacy interacted with orality in the region. Finally, such a study highlights the long lasting influence late antique religious thought had on religious development of the area, even in a region that used to be the periphery of the Hellenistic world.

The study of Yezidi religion is made harder by the fact that it is a religion based on orally transmitted tradition instead of written works. This prevented the development of a canonized corpus of texts, a coherent system of theology, or even a theological language. Furthermore, Yezidis have until recently practiced *taqiye*, that is, dissimulation or secrecy, as far as the outside world was concerned. As a result little is known about their religious system, and scholarly works on Yezidis have been very limited both in number and range. The present study was mainly based on material collected during my repeated field work among the Yezidis of Northern Iraq, and the sacred texts recently translated and published by Philip Kreyenbroek.

Following the introductory chapters, the thesis analyzes the nature of Yezidi religion and oral tradition. Special attention is given to the question of how oral tradition changes, the motivations triggering the adoption of new elements and the rejection of old ones, and the need to transform and adapt in conformity with the demands of the external world. As there are no written sources available describing how oral tradition, especially Yezidi oral tradition, worked in the past, examining the way Yezidi oral tradition functions today and how it is influenced by external impacts, especially by literacy and literate traditions, has been of crucial importance. The thesis argues that the same

factors which generate these changes must have been at work in the past too, making it easier to understand the incorporation of late antique motifs discussed in detail in the subsequent chapters.

Two of the chapters dealing with late antique inheritance are primarily based on the Yezidi myth collected during my fieldwork, on the creation of Adam and his divinely conceived son, the forefather of the Yezidi race. This composite myth, much ridiculed by earlier researchers, in fact, retains many motifs popular in Late Antiquity. The notion of divine essence being enclosed in a human body, the positive interpretation of tasting the Forbidden Fruit, and the creation of the forefather of a chosen race through the agency of divine beings and from the divine power lost by Adam, can all be traced back to the dualistic mythologies of Late Antiquity, where they formed the backbone of Gnostic and Manichaean anthropogony. Other motifs, such as the angelic clothing, or *khirqe*, worn by Adam in Paradise and then lost, can be connected both with dualistic religions and Judaism and Christianity, from which the former ultimately drew many of their ideas. The same is true for the symbolism of the *khirqe* in Yezidi sacred hymns and in traditional lore analyzed in a separate chapter. Detailed comparison shows pronounced parallels between the multilayered meaning of the Yezidi *khirqe* and the extremely rich late antique tradition of “garment theology,” which produced many diverse forms. The *khirqe* is, among other things, an eschatological garment, and appears as such in the next chapter concerned with the “Song of the Commoner.” This hymn, ceremoniously sung every morning, calls on the believer to wake up, abandon sinful sleep and offers heavenly reward to those who spurn sleep. It fits into the literary tradition of the Call or Awakening (or Gnostic Call) developed in Late Antiquity, where sleep and night stand for spiritual ignorance, while awakening symbolizes religious conversion or gaining of spiritual consciousness. The Song of the Commoner contains not only the sleep-awakening symbolism, best represented in late antique dualistic as well as Mandaean literature, but also the

three usual doctrinal elements associated with the Call of Awakening: The *Call*, followed by a *Moral Instruction* and a *Promise of Heavenly Reward*, which includes the donning of the *khirqe*, or angelic garment discussed in the previous chapters. The quest for late antique elements is rounded off by the chapter dealing with the trimorphic, or three-form appearance of the divine in the Yezidi myth of the birth of Prophet Ismail and in late antique (both Christian and Gnostic) as well as medieval works. While it would be difficult to pinpoint a single source for these motifs, as many of them were shared by various groups with diverse ideologies, it is safe to conclude that their ultimate source was the religious and cultural milieu of Late Antiquity.

How these legends were transmitted from the peoples of Late Antiquity to the Yezidis, a group that did not appear on the historical scene before the twelfth - thirteenth centuries, would be hard to answer given the present level of knowledge of the religious history of the region. It is widely accepted that there existed countless connections between Jewish, Syriac Christian, Gnostic and Manicheans legends and religious motifs, while very little is known of the way these elements were transmitted. Similarly, one can see the connection between Late Antiquity and the Yezidi belief system of today, but the chain of transmission must remain obscure. It is quite possible that already in Late Antiquity (and even earlier) such legends were transmitted, not only through texts, but orally as well. The key may lie not with the Yezidis in particular, but with the various, often orally transmitted, traditions of the Middle East in general.

Comparison with the religious traditions of other groups, whether oral or written, demonstrates that these motifs once enjoyed widespread popularity in the region. It is this popularity, often coupled with an ability to confer prestige in the eyes of the outside world, which accounts for their incorporation into the Yezidi system. This incorporation can be compared to the process of change effecting Yezidi religion today, where popular motifs from present day Western

or Westernized culture are being integrated into Yezidi lore. These motifs can be scientific, historical or moral, but they all are well-known ideas from mainstream culture. As a matter of fact, today many of the late antique motifs analyzed in this work are being discarded, exactly because they are no longer part of the common culture surrounding the Yezidis, and are believed to make Yezidis seem outlandish and ridiculous. In their place new motifs are being adopted and new myths are being built around them.

The aim of my thesis was to add to the understanding of the nature of Yezidi religion and of oral tradition in the region, by finding the place of some motifs in a religious tradition which can be traced back to the Late Antiquity. Obviously, this study does not pretend to be the last word on late antique motifs, Gnostic or otherwise, in Yezidism. Rather it hopes to be the first of its kind, opening the way to further research. Clearly, there is a lot more to be done in this field, especially as regards the possible influence of Gnosticism and Manichaeism on Yezidi's religion. During the course of my research, a number of motifs I suspected as being of possible Late Antique origin had to be put to one side due to a lack of sufficient corroborating data. As scholarly research (hopefully) gathers more information on the various religious and ethnic groups in the Middle East and their oral traditions, new details may appear that would make finding further connections and refining the ones treated by this work possible.

CURRICULUM VITAE

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UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

- 2000 - PhD student, Medieval Studies (CEU, Budapest, Hungary)
- 1999 MA, Medieval Studies (CEU, Budapest, Hungary)
- 1999 MA, English Language and Literature (Eötvös University, Budapest)
- 1996 MA, Classical Philology (Eötvös University, Budapest)

Fieldwork

- 2006 Three weeks fieldwork among the Yezidis, Kurdish Federation of Iraq
- 2004 Two months fieldwork among the Yezidis, Kurdish Federation of Iraq
- 2002-2003 Ten months fieldwork among the Yezidis, Duhok, Autonomous Kurdish Region, Iraq
- 1999-2000 Five months fieldwork in Eastern Turkey

PUBLICATIONS

Book:

The Yezidis. SAQI Books, London, 2005.

List of Recent Articles:

“The Role of the Peacock “*Sanjak*” in Yezidi Religious Memory.” *Memory in Archeology. British Archaeological Reports* ed. Alice Choyke-Judith Rasson-Irene Barbiera. Forthcoming 2009.

“Religion and Oral History: The Origin Myth of the Yezidis.” In *Discourses of Memory in Iranian Languages*, ed. P. Kreyenbroek. Forthcoming 2009.

“Yezidi Prophet, Trimorphic Christ or Hellenic Aion: Traditional Motifs and the Birth of Prophet Ismail in the Yezidi *Tale of Ibrahim*.” Accepted for publication in *Journal of Kurdish Studies*.

- “Late Antique Literary Motifs in Yezidi Oral Tradition.” Accepted for publication in *Journal of American Oriental Society*.
- 2008 “Religious Oral Tradition and Literacy Among the Yezidis of Iraq.” *Anthropos* 103. no 2, 393-404.
- 2004 “The ‘Teachers’ of Mani in the *Acta Archelai* and Simon Magus.” *Vigiliae Christianae* 58. no.1, 1-23.
- 2004 “Changes in the Oral Tradition of the Yezidis of Iraqi Kurdistan.” *The Journal of Kurdish Studies* 5, 73-83.
- 2004 “The Festival of Sheikh Adi in Lalish, in the Holy Valley of the Yezidis.” *Annual of Medieval Studies at CEU (Central European University, Budapest)* 10, 147-57.
- 2002 “Shehid bin Jerr, Forefather of the Yezidis and the Gnostic Seed of Seth.” *Iran and the Caucasus* 6, no. 1-2, 27-56.
- 2002 “Some Topoi in the Description of Heretics in Early Christian Literature: Simon Magus, pater omnium haeticorum.” (Hung.) In *Studia Patrum*, eds. P. Nemeshegyi – Z. Rihmer. Szent István Publishing House: Budapest, 71-82.

Exhibition

2005 The Yezidis of Iraqi Kurdistan. Photos and Text. Mediawave Festival. Central European University, Budapest. April 28-May 31.

Also exhibited at the Festival of Colourfest, Šála, Slovakia, November 18 – December 8, 2005.

Also exhibited at the Kurdish Institute of Paris, February 19 – March 2, 2007.

Academic Website

“Images and Symbols of the Supernatural among the Kurdish Yezidis.” Text: Eszter Spät
Photos: Christine Allison, Estelle Amy de la Breteque, Eszter Spät, Khanna Omerkhali, Wassfi Haji Suleyman. Page under construction, to be launched soon.