

Book Review: The Yezidis by Birgul Acikyildiz

“The Yezidis: The History of a Community, Culture, and Religion” by Birgul Acikyildiz is a scholarly work based on her doctorate studies at the University of Paris. Acikyildiz is an expert in medieval Islamic art and architecture and an expert on Yezidi religion and culture and is a Professor of the History of Art at Mardin Artuklu University, Turkey. The book is based on the author’s extensive travels through northern Iraq, Turkey, and Syria, to discover who the Yezidis are - their history, culture, and beliefs – all of which is tied to a complex history of politics, tribes, empires, allegiances, invaders, and religious influences. And while their intricate system of beliefs appears to have been influenced by Zoroastrianism and Sufiism, as well as regional paganism, Yezidism has remained distinct and unconnected to any other religion.

The author’s travels took place between 2002 and 2005.

I previously tried to expand my understanding of the Yezidi and their history through conversations with the Yezidis supported by Project Abraham. While such conversations have added details to my understanding, I was left with many gaps. Alan Frank¹ suggested that I read this book, and while it does not cover the devastation caused by ISIS and the aftermath, it helped me understand the complexity of Yezidism.

Through reading this book I now understand that Yezidism is a religion that does not separate belief and practice from social structure, or tribal traditions and responsibilities. The religion is tied to places of veneration of their saints – cemeteries, temples, rocks, trees, streams, a bridge, and a valley. To add to the difficulty is a lack of portability. Yezidis do not have a culture of group prayer. Prayer is private and an optional matter for them. There is also little centralized collective worship outside of the observation of festivals and events such as weddings. However, the religion does include personal goals of pilgrimages to temples, and other holy sites, that venerate their saints and are related to their creation story.

Although Acikyildiz provides much insight and detail, the history and religious development of the Yezidi people is still much of a mystery. The Yezidi believe Yezidism has existed for over 6,000 years², yet the Yezidi are a non-literate culture. Traditionally, very few were taught written language. The records exist in songs, ceremony, and physical artifacts ranging from art to architecture. Our understanding is sketchy at best. The Yezidi have also been repeatedly attacked, and their religious sites and relics have been repeatedly destroyed. Most early written records exist in the histories of the attackers. And now with the 2014 Genocide by ISIS, in their homeland of Shingal³, this loss of knowledge was exacerbated by the systematic slaughter of both the Religious and Civil leadership of the Yezidi.

A dominant route through the complexity that Yezidism is to understand the great influence of their most venerated saint, Sheikh ‘Adi (d. 1162 [Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir - Wikipedia](#)). Sheikh ‘Adi, from what I understand, was a Sunni Muslim who became a Sufi mystic and then moved with his disciples from Bagdad to the Lalish Valley. Today the Lalish Valley is the holiest of all Yezidi sites, with its own attached

¹ Alan Frank is a volunteer working with both Project Abraham and the Yazidi Legal Network.

² According to Wikipedia ([Yazidis - Wikipedia](#)) there is genetic data that supports the Yezidi claim that the Northern Iraqi Yezidis have a genetic continuity with the original Mesopotamia people.

³ Sinjar (Shingal in Kurdish)

myths. The Temple, dedicated to Sheikh 'Adi, – also his tomb -- in the Lalish Valley, is the holiest pilgrimage site for the Yezidis. The Yezidi ethno-religious culture evolved through the veneration of the disciples of Sheikh 'Adi. Many are known today as Yezidi saints, and their tombs (temples) are sites of pilgrimage and veneration

Some Yezidi bloodlines trace their origins to one of the saints. Many customs and traditions, religious practices, marriage restrictions, and social orders, are governed through those bloodlines. The bloodlines are formalized through a caste system. There are three principal Yazidi castes: Shaykhs or Sheikhs, Murids (laymen), and Pyir (clergy). Yezidi marry only within their caste. Murids or Myur belong to the lay caste, regardless of the wealth or position of the individual members. Each caste has its social and religious responsibilities. Your caste is acquired by birth, and intermarriage between castes is not allowed. However, the castes are not a system of servitude. The castes can mix socially without prejudice (as far as I can tell).

Perhaps the simplest of all that is described in the book, are the Yezidis' religious beliefs. The most complete documentation seems to exist in books written by non-Yezidis in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (They may be original works or translations from earlier texts that survived the destruction of earlier attacks by other cultures, such as the Ottoman Empire.). Part of the books consists of the only recent documentation of anything recent the writers could find, such as a petition from 1849 to argue the religious basis of why the Yezidis should be exempt from being conscripted into the Ottoman army. This exemption was only being given for People of the Book (Jews, Christians, Sabians, and Zoroastrians who paid the necessary dhimmi tax). This petition consists of 14 short clauses that have since become accepted as a description of Yezidi beliefs and practices (the petition was successful).

The book also outlines the complexities of the Yezidi social/religious order in greater detail, including their social practice for obtaining advice and support, their religious leadership, geographical differences in practice, the effect of the Ba'athist regime, and numerous other aspects that substantially add to the understanding of who the current Yezidis.

What is also interesting, if that is the right word to use, are the historical and religious reasons given why Islam rejects the Yezidis and calls them 'devil worshippers'. The book also documents one Yezidi tribe with roots and traditions that are traced back to a disciple of Sheikh 'Adi that have kept their Islamic beliefs. This tribe also has its role in ritual within Yezidism.

So what does this all imply for 'communities' of Yezidis displaced and thrown into the West through no fault of their own? Will they evolve a new Yezidi culture, or will they eventually assimilate? What is our role as advisors, helpers, and teachers to a people who have suffered so greatly? These are questions with no clear answers.

The Yezidis by Birgul Acikyildiz is available on Amazon.

Gary Rose
March 29, 2022