



## THE FESTIVAL OF SHEIK ADI IN LALISH, THE HOLY VALLEY OF THE YEZIDIS

*Eszter Spät*

Lalish, the holy valley of the Yezidis in the Kurdish mountains a few hours drive from Mosul, Iraq, is a place where time seems to stand still. If the feel (and look) of the Middle Ages has survived anywhere in the Middle East, it is here, in the valley made fertile by two sacred springs. There are reasons to believe that this idyllic place has been favored by the gods (or rather by their worshippers); in all probability it was the site of a Nestorian monastery for centuries, and it is the resting place of the greatest patron saint of the Yezidis, Sheikh Adi, a twelfth-century Sufi mystic.

The Yezidis are an enigmatic and little known Kurdish sect who have incorporated a wide range of religious motifs into their unique belief system, from Zoroastrianism through Gnosticism to Sufi Islam<sup>1</sup>. They believe that once every year the Seven Angels, emanations of the Godhead, congregate above Lalish and decide the fate of the world for the coming year. This occurs during the week-long Autumn Assembly, also known as the Festival of Sheikh Adi, and for centuries attendance at the Autumn Assembly held in Lalish was considered a religious duty for Yezidis. Today it is a spiritually fulfilling pilgrimage rather than a requirement, and a meeting place for the whole community—a matter of immense importance during the years of Kurdish Autonomy (1991–2003). At that time the Yezidi community was cut in two by the Iraqi variant of the Iron Curtain, which could only be crossed on this occasion provided that the Iraqi government and the Arab border guards were in a lenient mood toward “this bunch of heretics.” Such an event was not one that a self-respecting doctoranda at a medieval department could miss.

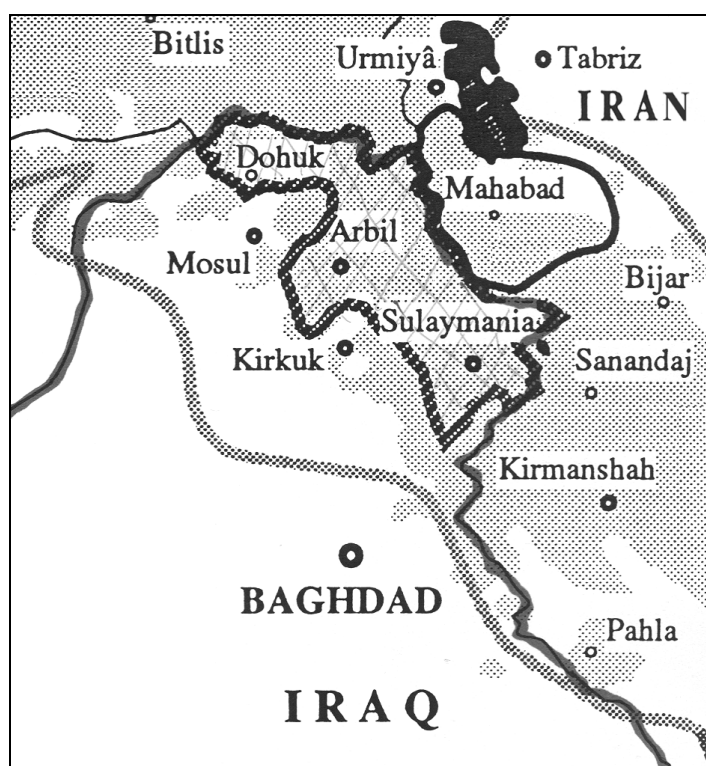
Admittedly, observing such a ceremony is not *stricto sensu* part of my research as a doctoranda, given the fact that my PhD thesis deals with the incorporation of Gnostic motifs in Yezidi mythology, an interesting but rather quaint and elusive topic. Bona fide researchers of Gnosticism may sigh over their inability to observe an authentic Gnostic ritual sometime in the first centuries of our era, to help them reconstruct the atmosphere of Gnostic

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<sup>1</sup> The most important publications describing Yezidis are: E. S. Drower, *Peacock Angel* (London: John Murray, 1941); C. J. Edmonds, *A Pilgrimage to Lalish* (London: University Press Aberdeen, 1967); Nelida Fuccaro, *The Other Kurds: Yazidis in Colonial Iraq* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 1999); Philip Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism – Its Background, Observance and Textual Tradition* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1995).

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spirituality. However, I thought that my experience would not be irrelevant. One cannot understand the ethos of a religion without getting to know that religion, the people who practice it, and the way they practice it. And what better way of gathering knowledge, than to breath the heady air of mysteries performed and join in the profane pleasures offered by such a festival? At best, such an experience can furnish new details for one's thesis; at least, it brings the researcher closer to the researched object. With this mind I set out to witness the Great Assembly of 2002, October 6–13.<sup>2</sup>



*Fig. 1. Territories of Kurdish autonomy on both sides of the border.*

<sup>2</sup> The most detailed descriptions of the Autumn Assembly are given by Kreyenbroek, Edmonds, and Austen Layard, *A Popular Account of Discoveries at Niniveh* (New York, 1854). It must be noted that there seems to be no fixed script for the festival. Descriptions seem to vary with each traveler or researcher. Therefore I observed some rituals (like displaying the sacred standards, or baptizing the Throne of Sheik Adi – see below) that some of my predecessors did not see, while I failed to observe some rituals described by them.

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I caught my first sight of Lalish in semi-darkness. It is a lovely place, in a small green valley between three pretty hills covered by trees—a rare sight in Kurdistan. A number of small sacred brooks run through it and finally converge in the valley, where fig trees grow on the banks and people have picnics. An idyllic sight and described as such by travelers throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.



*Fig. 2. The sanctuary of Sheikh Adi in Lalish. The conical spire of the shrine is a characteristic of Yezidi shrines in the region (photo by the author).*

When A. Henry Layard (1817–1894), English diplomat and archaeologist, visited the festival over 150 years ago, the number of pilgrims was around 5000. Today this number seems to have swollen to an immeasurable extent; it seemed that throughout the week an ever-increasing crowd kept arriving, while none of them left. There were even Yezidis from Syria. The majority came from over the border, that is from Sheikhan in what used to be Saddam Hussein's Iraq, and some even more excitingly from the Jebel Sinjar, a mountain in the Syrian plain, traditionally isolated from external influences and for over a hundred years a stronghold and refuge of Yezidis. Most of the people coming from Sinjar still wear their traditional dress; the men wear Arab style headgear and long robes, with the capes of the rich or important embroidered in gold on the edges. Some of the Sinjaris of a more conservative turn of mind even have long plaited hair

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hanging down at their temples, as described by travelers in the early nineteenth century, not to mention the obligatory mustaches of the Yezidis that reach awe-inspiring proportions among Sinjaris.



*Fig. 3. Woman from Sinjar at Lalish, wearing the traditional white dress of Sinjaris (photo by the author).*

All these people arrived carrying food for days, mattresses, blankets, cooking pots, and sometimes even tents, although more often the many-coloured patchwork sheets pilgrims bundle their things into when carrying them



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on their heads are later used as a kind of tent, erected over four poles. By the end of the week such colourful “tents” were set up even on the roof of the sanctuary guesthouse, that is, the house of the leading faqir, who takes care of the sanctuary throughout the year. Whole families were living, sleeping, cooking, and eating under the protection of such tents. The families camping out in such a nomadic style belonged to the most noble lineages. Each *ojax*, or family line, has its own allocated place to camp in Lalish, the precincts of the sanctuary complex being reserved for the most important members of the community. Since the main diet is goat meat, many of these long-robed “Arabs” arrived tugging an unfortunate, reluctant goat or two on the end of a rope. As the consumption of meat was high in the guesthouse, where entertaining the noble guest is the sacred duty of the faqir in charge of the sanctuary, one side of the sanctuary soon became slippery with the blood of the victims, who were killed and cut up in front of the stairs leading to the rooms of the prince.

However, not much of this fervent activity could be seen or guessed on the first night: Lalish was still peaceful and clean. Hygiene is one of the major flaws of this feast. There is no sewerage in Lalish. Water for drinking, cooking, and washing is carried in containers from the Sacred White Spring—surrounded by a jostling crowd all day long—and dirty water is splashed on the ground.

I was taken to the main hall of the guesthouse adjoining the sanctuary, and invited to sit in the part reserved for men, a many-columned long hall with one side open to the courtyard. This was a great honor, for women invariably sit in their own section—though men can and do come visiting there. After having consumed some boiled goat-meat, boiled chicken and rice (the staple food for the week) for dinner, we went to witness the *Sema Evari* or the evening dance of the religious men, accompanied by the music of three *kevels*, sacred singers. Twelve men dressed in white walked in pairs with curious, ceremoniously choreographed steps following an old faqir, who was wearing a sooty black, long fur cape and hat (allegedly the one worn by Sheikh Adi). While the *kevels* played their plaintive tunes, the dancers slowly circled around the holy fire lit in the middle, said to symbolize both the Sun and the Godhead. Outside the circle stood a *faqra* (Yezidi nun) holding a small pail with what looked like smoking coals.

On the morning of the second day people were still just starting to arrive, so I had plenty of time to look around inside the sanctuary. I was accompanied by a number of enthusiastic youths, who immediately took me to see all the places non-Yezidis are not supposed to see, including the underground cave where the Zemzem River (or rather brook) springs forth from a rock—allegedly a miracle of Sheikh Adi, who made the water spring up from the rock in this previously barren place. The Zemzem is identified with the sacred river of



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Mekka, and Yezidis claim that Sheikh Adi made the spring divert to Lalish. There is also “a wishing rock” in the cave opening from the cell of Sheikh Adi’s tomb—if one manages to throw a piece of cloth on top of this rock over a lit candle, his or her wishes come true. At the holiest of holies, I saw the sacred *sanjak* (bronze image) of *Tannusi Melek* (the Peacock Angel, chief of the Seven Angels, and special protector of the Yezidis) displayed inside the sanctuary and kissed by fervent worshippers. For centuries outsiders were forbidden to see this bird image, although in the last 150 years there have been a few travelers and missionaries who claimed to have seen the Peacock. As their descriptions of the *sanjak* contradict each other, however, it may be assumed that at least some of them were shown a fake *sanjak*. The Peacock is taken around the Yezidi villages twice a year, accompanied by the *kevels* who pray and collect alms.

On the third day, the religious school from Bashiqe-Behzani came to visit. Bashiqe-Behzani are twin villages (on what used to be Saddam’s territory) where the *kevels* traditionally reside and traditions are much valued there. I first saw the students next to the sanctuary of the White Spring. They were dressed in pure white, except for the usual red checkered turbans of the boys. I thought they were going to be baptized, for the White Spring is the place for baptism, but was later disappointed to learn that it was not so. For my sake the *pir* (aristocrat) in charge of the White Spring sanctuary and baptism caught hold of a child and baptized him saying the appropriate prayers. Luckily Yezidis can be baptized repeatedly.

The principal of the school, when he learned of my presence, went into an ecstasy, along with his fellow teachers. A foreigner interested in his school! I was feasted and fed on home cooking from Bashiqe. I spent the afternoon sitting on the right of Kameran beg, the “viceroy” of the Yezidi prince, in the central square in front of the sanctuary watching and recording the schoolchildren reciting religious texts, poems, and songs and performing dances. Later I was introduced to the Baba Sheikh (the Yezidi “pope”), sitting with his court in front of the sanctuary under a sort of gazebo.

Mount Arafat, which Muslims believe to be in Mecca, is another important station of the yearly pilgrimage. Pilgrims walk in a circle around the sacred white stone on top of the mountain seven times, kiss it, then give some money to the faqir guarding the site.

Any visit paid to a holy shrine or site entails a gift of money. At the White Spring one pays for baptism or the ablution of sins (or for recording the prayer said at baptism). At the main sanctuary of Sheik Adi a faqir sits by the door collecting alms from visitors, who may also donate money inside. For example they give money to the guardian of the sacred *sanjak* or standard, a bronze image of the Holy Peacock, the guardian angel of the Yezidis, that they kiss reverently.



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They pay to the man who owns the piece of cloth one has to throw on top of the “wishing stone.” Finally, on leaving the sanctuary, they give further alms to the aforementioned faqir at the door in exchange for one of the little dried balls of earth and dust taken from Sheik Adi’s grave. Among the Yezidis, it is believed to bring blessings and divine protection to the members of the household; it is held in a bag specially made for this purpose and quite often conspicuously displayed hanging on the wall. One middle-aged Yezidi woman (incidentally the wife of a teacher with strong communist convictions) told me how, if she could not sleep for her worries, she fetched the bag and put it under her pillow and then slept like a baby.

I was just about to return to the sanctuary when a ‘concert’ seemed to have started around the white stone. A group of *strangbej* (traditional Kurdish singers) from the Sinjar (a place of traditions, as we have seen) had just arrived on a pilgrimage to Mount Arafat and held a traditional “contest of the bards.” At the concert I also made the acquaintance of a young man from the lineage of Alu Bakr, a holy ancestor of a *pir* family (*pirs*, like *sheikhs*, are the aristocrats of the Yezidis.) Through him, I learned something about being a *pir*. The *pir* descendants of the sainted Alu Bakr (or any other holy man) are in possession of a bag that is decorated with a number of medallions and metal pins cast in exotic forms, said to be “the signs” (or symbols) of Alu Bakr and his special descent. The *murids* (followers or subjects) of the *pirs* of Alu Bakr traditionally come to “visit” these signs, sometimes from quite far, and then leave a donation with the guardian of the bag, usually the oldest male child. It is also believed that the descendants of this lineage have curative power, as in fact do all those descending from sheikh or *pir* lineages.

Meanwhile, Tahsin Beg, the ruling *mir* or prince had arrived. He is something of a historical figure; he was elected a prince at the age of 13 in 1944. Today he is 73, but married his third wife, a 25-year-old schoolteacher, just a few years ago. He took up residence in my old room and held court sitting in an armchair on the landing in front of it, receiving people, giving blessings and arbitrating in disputes. In due course I was introduced to him, our conversation, however, was constantly interrupted by his fervent subjects, and once by a whole squad of *peshmerges* (Kurdish fighters) clad in their traditional garb. Each of them ran up to the *mir*, kissed his hand, then ran to the wall and sat (or rather dropped) down cross-legged on the floor with his gun in his lap. This action was repeated, without the slightest variation, about twenty times. The next day, when I was invited to have some fruit and tea with the prince after lunch, I witnessed more of his “holding court.” It had a definite medieval flavor to it. First a few sheikhs appeared, evidently from the Sinjar region, in traditional dress: Flowing robes, gold-edged capes, dignified behavior. They kissed the hand of the *mir* and



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then sat down on the mattresses opposite him. They were courteously offered some food and the *mir* inquired after their well being in a ceremonious manner. In the middle of all this polite and courtly conversation, two plaintiffs appeared bringing their case to the *mir* for arbitration: Harun al Rashid in the twenty-first century. As it turned out, one had sold to the other the ox to be sacrificed the next day according to an age-old ceremony; the buyer had paid with ‘bad’ money.<sup>3</sup> They could not settle their dispute, and went on arguing with each other and the prince until the latter finally got fed up and angrily chased them away.

The prince did not arrive alone, but with his family, and it was decided that as a guest of honor I should stay the night with his daughter-in-law and her children and companions. Thus it happened that I also had a glimpse of a modern version of the traditional harem. The daughter-in-law was only 25, but with 4 children, the oldest of whom was 10. She had gotten married at the age of 14. Surprisingly, although from Mosul, allegedly a modern city, all the women were extremely conservative in their dress. They were wearing the traditional long pants under their skirts that no self-respecting town girl in Duhok would wear (unless as a protection against the cold in winter). There was a strange quality to their lifestyle. While their “inferiors” were enjoying the activities outside, the noble women mostly kept indoors, in their separate room, apparently doing nothing. When eating, they just threw the bones and any food they did not want on the cement floor—I guess on the assumption that it would later be swept up by servants. As for their retinue, a number of weathered-looking men with guns and paunches came and went. It was impossible to figure out who were the husbands, who the relatives or friends, and who the bodyguards and attendants. I also noticed later that during the ceremonies that demanded the presence of “guards” armed with sticks for chasing away the people (meant to be a part of the ceremony), the male members of the *mir*’s household were represented among the guards in a high number.

In any case I spent the night with the women of the family. Of course, this had its own advantages. For one thing, from my vantage point of their room overlooking the courtyard, I could safely observe all the goings-on below, like the idyllic scene of at least a hundred sheiks sleeping wrapped in their gold-edged robes on the floor of the men’s hall. I could listen to one of the *strangbej* entertain the assembled sheikhs with his songs for hours on end, while his unattentive audience chatted and socialized, using his songs as a pleasant

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<sup>3</sup> Meaning “Saddam dinars,” that is, the “copy” money issued by Saddam that had no international market value, as opposed to the internationally recognized “Swiss dinar” used in the Autonomous Kurdish Region.



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background noise (much in the way I would imagine medieval bards and the revelry of knights). I was dying to go down and make some more recordings, but of course this was considered most unseemly by the household of the *mir* (a young woman among the men, and in the evening, too!). But a guest is a guest and her whims must be satisfied, and the house of the *mir* has unlimited powers, so the *strangbej* was duly requested to interrupt his performance below, come up and sing his songs to the audience of the harem.

Before retiring to the “royal chamber” for the night, I revisited the *Sema Evari* (Evening Dance), where I struck up a conversation with a *kevel*, one of the musicians for the ceremony, whose face reminded me of a faun or satyr of Greek mythology. He happily acquiesced to sing some *kevels* (hymns) for my sake and invited us back to his room because the over-curious crowd was making even him uncomfortable. His room was one of those very dismal, windowless holes built in the wall or basement (or between the two) of the sanctuary. But the people staying there seemed to be perfectly content with the place. He locked the door on our company (the only way to have some peace), and did a lot of exciting singing, which nobody but he and his wife seemed to understand. At least nobody could translate it for me. After that we climbed up to the house of my new friend, where his family and their *murids* (followers, commoners) did some moonlit dancing. First they danced to music from a tape recorder, but then luckily the battery died so they were reduced to the age-old method of singing for themselves.

On our way down we came across a house (or rather a rooftop), where a young boy was giving a concert of his own for his friends. He was from Baadra (the traditional seat of the Yezidi prince), where he was a well-known singer of “new” songs. “New” here means songs recently composed and sung on festive occasions, as opposed to the style of the *strangbej*, who sing age-old ballads, mostly about Yezidi history—that is, they don’t extemporize. “New” songs are not, however, to be confused with modern songs, the latter being mostly like Turkish *arabesk* (or bus-music) in their style, sweet, sticky love songs, while the former are composed by Kurdish (or Yezidi) poets in the musical style of the traditional songs. In any case, he was overjoyed to be recorded by me, and went on singing until he lost his voice. Then his place was taken by another eager young man who also wished to have his talent recorded by the foreigner.

This is an interesting development, by the way. David MacKenzie, who collected folktales in this region in the 1960s for his book, *Kurdish Dialect Studies*,<sup>4</sup> relates how many problems he had when trying to use a tape recorder. Some

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<sup>4</sup> David MacKenzie, *Kurdish Dialect Studies*. London Oriental Studies, vols. 9 and 10 (London: Oxford University Press, 1961–1962).



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people flatly refused to speak if the machine was running, while others just could not grasp the idea that they had to wait until McKenzie set up his tape-recorder, and had happily told half of the story by the time he was ready. By comparison, these days, being recorded is seen as a wonderful experience and a great honor. What is more, I was repeatedly asked, in a worried tone, if I had enough space left on my tape. One *strangbej* I recorded kept his eyes on the little red light of the tape recorder. He broke off his performance repeatedly to check if the recorder was really working and when one side of the tape finished he immediately interrupted his singing and called my attention to it.

It was a night of unrest, for just before dawn I was awoken by some strange and insistent chanting of *kevels*. I had no idea what it was, in fact, I was somewhat irritated—what an ungodly hour to sing—until next day, when I learned that what I had heard was in fact nothing else than the *Beyta Cindy*, or “Song of the Commoner.” It is sung by the pious every morning before sunrise to wake the faithful, a song that seems to have an imagery and symbolism rooted in Gnosticism—my research topic. And this was what I missed in my half-slumber! So I had to return two nights later to listen to it with an alert mind as a researcher should and record it!

The wake-up call came at six a.m., when it got light and people started waking up in the courtyard below. My host family also got up and as the leaders of their people dutifully proceeded to contribute their share to the general din. My only compensation was that I had my breakfast brought to the room by an armed guard, like some real medieval Yezidi lady. Following breakfast I spent long hours on a rooftop watching the ceremony of baptizing the pieces of colored cloth from the sanctuary. Each of the Seven Angels has a piece of cloth of a different color that represents him in the sanctuary, and once every year these cloths have to be baptized in the sacred water of the White Spring. In a painstakingly slow procedure, each of the seven cloths has to be transported separately to the spring from the sanctuary, accompanied by *kevels* playing on their instruments and a group of men with sticks in their hands chasing off the crowd. Then, while the *kevels* play outside the sanctuary built above the White Spring, several *faqirs* take the cloths inside to immerse them in the water, and then return to the sanctuary.

On the sixth day the most important ceremony took place, the chasing and killing of the bull. In order to get a good view I climbed up on a wall above the main square, next to the main gate of the sanctuary, together with the princess and her friend. There I spent some of the most uncomfortable hours I enjoyed in Lalish. The ceremony was late and the day was uncommonly hot, with the sun straight above us, and the crowd was jostling and pushing. Finally a group of armed men appeared on the wall and after some nerve-racking moments



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fired their guns, and at last a small group of men burst through the gates of the sanctuary hanging onto a “bull” for grim death. The poor “bull” rather resembled an undernourished dwarf cow. The men ran off with the bull in the direction of the sanctuary of Sheik Shems, where it is traditionally “caught” and killed, cooked and then distributed among the hungry—and with immense relief I backed out of the crowd and the sun.

I had planned to record some more oral traditions of *strangbej* in the afternoon, and climbed Mount Arafat again. Unfortunately, this time there was only one singer there, singing with the aid of an amplifier, which promptly made the song lose its traditional charm and esthetic value. However, I noticed one of the *strangbej* who had played the day before, listening to the meager performance of his rival. Luckily I had a Yezidi friend by my side and he thought nothing of going up to the bard and inviting him to his house for a performance, so that the “foreigner” could record him. The *strangbej* sent someone to fetch his accompanist and his guitar, for it is only when thus accompanied that a *strangbej* can really give his best. People silently emerged from the dark to listen to the singer, who only stopped singing when he lost his voice five hours later. He sang of the history of the Yezidis and their struggles with the Muslims, of doomed lovers, and tales of woe.

The next day was the last day of the festival—something of a relief, if truth be told. As a farewell ceremony the day ended with the baptism of the “throne of Sheik Adi,” a construction of wood and red silk, not looking even remotely like our idea of a throne or even a chair. It is usually kept in Baadra, but is brought to Lalish for the festival of Sheikh Adi, and on the last day it is carried triumphantly to the White Spring to be baptized. Having honourably absolved all my duties as a field researcher I returned to Duhok, where the Middle Ages is cunningly disguised by all the trappings of the twenty-first century.