JEMIE

Journal on Ethnopolitics and
Minority Issues in Europe

Authors:
Boris Komakhidze
*PhD Candidate in
Anthropology
Institute of Ethnology /
Anthropology, Faculty of
Humanities, Ivane Javakhishvili
Tbilisi State University*
Boris.Komakhidze180@hum.ts
u.edu.ge

Sayedehnasim Fatemi
*PhD Candidate in Ethnology
Institute of Oriental Studies,
Russian-Armenian (Slavonic)
University, Yerevan*
saramn834@gmail.com

Facing Post-Communist Religiosity: Questioning And Shifting Religious Identity Among Yezidi Women From Armenia and Georgia

Boris Komakhidze

Ivane Javakhisvhili Tbilisi State University, Georgia

Sayedehnasim Fatemi

Mesrop Mashtots Institute of Ancient Manuscripts, Armenia

Abstract

This paper aims to understand the post-Communist religious transformations that determine the process of questioning and shifting religious identity among Yezidi women from Armenia and Georgia. We discuss gender and religiosity in relation to the internal and external social and political context as influenced by Soviet atheism. The status of women among Yezidis is constructed by traditional religious norms and societal structures, which are influenced by the ideological politics (Communism, post-Communism) of the state of residence. Our findings show that Yezidis, like other religious communities in post-Soviet Armenia and Georgia, are actively involved in the institutionalization of religious norms. The institutionalization of religion within transitive society seems to have the potential to lead to a decline in trust, resulting in the establishment of new institutions, the separation of personal attribution and religious normative practices, and serves as a catalyst for questioning and changing religious identity. In particular, the article aims to understand how post-Communist religious transformations have re/shaped the identity of Yezidi women from Georgia and Armenia, as

well as how the internal and external social contexts impact this course of action. We argue that changing political ideologies (Communism, which granted rights to Yezidi women), the pluralization of religiosity, and the systematization of religious norms pushed Yezidi women to question their religious identity, which was permitted after the disintegration of the Soviet Union and circulates the social norms (caste system, religious restrictions, the status of women) of Yezidism.

Keywords: women; post-Communism; religiosity; converted Yezidis; Georgia; Armenia;

Introduction

The article addresses the peculiarities of post-Communist religious pluralization that determine the questioning and changing religious identity among Yezidi women from Armenia and Georgia. The problems of identity and the status of women within the Yezidi ethnoreligious community are characterized by the gender roles and social structure of traditional Yezidi religious society, which are influenced by the geopolitics (Communism, post-Communism) of the Caucasus region. Understanding religious identity is a complex subject that should be discussed in conjunction with other social factors such as gender. Gender is a cultural variable that is perceived through the lenses adopted during socialization, which encompasses traditionalism as a strong and constant predictor (see Acevedo & Shah, 2015; Heidemarie, 2019). According to Fletcher, religion is a complex set of beliefs, symbols, and practices that shape the markers for social attribution as well as the life experiences of believers. Alongside other social actors, gender identity dominates an individual's understanding of religion. The experience of 'being a woman' can only be expressed in a way that is formed by the actors of personal identity (Fletcher, 2003, pp. 13-18). The experience of being a Yezidi woman in Armenia and Georgia is formed by state politics toward religion and the Yezidi religious community. This policy was based on Communist ideology that shaped the social status of women during and after Communism, as all citizens were required to actively participate in the labour market (see Mikołajczak & Pietrzak, 2014, p. 390). In this respect, the purpose of this article is to understand how post-Communist ideological transformations have led to the process of questioning and shifting religious identity among Yezidi women from Armenia and Georgia. We discuss gender and religiosity in relation to the internal and external social and political context, influenced by Soviet militant atheism (Pelkmans, 2009), which determines

the status of Yezidi women in Armenia and Georgia. Religious groups in the former Soviet republics aspired to declare public religious identities, which reshaped the contemporary lifestyles of post-Soviet societies. 'Owing to the reassessment of Soviet priorities, personal and public predilections changed considerably and religiosity became the determining factor of public life. In the post-Soviet societies of a transitive type, the interest towards religion sharply increased, and the factor of the influence of religion has accordingly increased' (Khutsishvili, 2016, p. 197). As evidenced by the transformation of religious norms and practices shaped by pluralisation, secularisation, and religious renewal (Rosta, 2012, p. 98), gender and the political context emerged as religious factors in everyday life. In the post-Communist space, concentrating on Georgia and Armenia, Yezidi authorities have endeavoured to homogenise the private, domestic religious system and to re/shape the normative identity of Yezidism in Georgia and Armenia, while taking religious rules dictated from the historical motherland (Lalish, in Iraq) into consideration (Mollica, 2016; Melkumyan, 2016; Arakelova, 2018; De La Breteque, 2021). Many Yezidis who lived through the Soviet era have not been able to comprehend the new norms offered by the new generation, which took its religious guidance from Iraq (Lalish) after the fall of the Soviet Union. The new orders suggested by religious officials have compelled some Yezidis in Armenia and Georgia to convert to other religions or to maintain Yezidism without engaging in its religious practices (see Ankosi, 2009).

Our ethnographic inquiry illustrates that, similarly to other religious communities in the post-Soviet area (and particularly in Armenia and Georgia), Yezidis are actively involved in the institutionalization of religious norms. This process can lead to a decline in trust, resulting from hopes and disappointments with the transition. It can lead to the formation of new institutions, as well as to the separation of personal attribution and religious normative activity. Considering our findings, we argue that it is difficult to distinguish between religious and non-religious behaviours within the Yezidis of post-Soviet Armenia and Georgia, because the religious markers are entwined with ethnic criteria that might entirely preclude religious identity and practice. During our fieldwork in Armenia and Georgia, we encountered women of Yezidi origin who have become Orthodox Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals, and atheists.

We aim to understand how post-Communist religious transformations have reshaped the religious identity of Yezidi women in Georgia and Armenia, and how the external and internal social and political contexts have influenced this process. We contend that changing political ideologies (Communism, which gave rights to Yezidi women), the pluralization of

religiosity, and the systematization of religious norms compelled Yezidi women to question their ethnic and religious identity, which was permitted after the disintegration of the Soviet Union and circulates the social norms (caste system, religious restrictions, the status of women) within the Yezidi society.

The article is based on ethnographic fieldwork in Georgia and Armenia. Boris Komakhidze from Georgia supplied ethnographic materials, as did Sayedehnasim Fatemi from Armenia. The empirical findings presented here relate to the literature on the religious identity of Yezidis, particularly Yezidi women, in Armenia and Georgia (Arakelova, 2018; Melkumyan, 2016; De La Breteque, 2021 etc.). The ethnographic research was conducted between 2014 and 2019, using the methods of 'field ethnography', during which we collected up to one hundred interviews about everyday life, religious practices, and social structure. We used semi-structured and unstructured interviews, both with individuals and with focus groups. The research was based on the 'snowball principle'. We also used ethnographic observations to better understand the social and cultural context and structures of Yezidis in Georgia and Armenia, through attending commemorations, social events and exhibitions related to Yezidi issues, religious ceremonies, etc.

The research aimed to study the everyday life of Yezidis, through which the problem of religious attribution was portrayed. This issue was related to religious identity, marriage restrictions, and social differences. Every interviewee emphasised the abovementioned issues. The informants were representatives from three social castes (Sheiks, Pirs, and Murids), organizational leaders, practitioners and non-practitioners of the Yezidi religion, and people who changed their religious identity but maintained a connection with Yezidism. We interviewed sixteen women who had changed their religious identity. In this article, the analyses of eleven in-depth interviews are presented. Their reflections are representative of the problems of Yezidi women related to the questions of religious norms in the Yezidi religion. After discussing the problem of questioning and shifting religious identity among Yezidi women from Armenia and Georgia, we will extensively discuss two biographies (case studies) of young Yezidi women from Yerevan and Tbilisi.

The biographies of our interviewees (both single women aged 18) express the attitudes of Yezidi women who change and conceal their religious identities, as well as those women who change and express their views radically. The woman from Tbilisi self-identifies as an atheist, while the woman from Yerevan has joined the Jehovah's Witnesses. The woman from

Tbilisi actively participates in social activities organised by the House of Yezidis of Georgia; the woman from Yerevan distances herself from Yezidi religious practices and preaches the teachings of the Jehovah's Witnesses to Yezidi people. From a religious perspective, the woman from Tbilisi still belongs to the Yezidi religious community until she marries. The woman from Yerevan, however, has deviated from the Yezidi religious community and is outside of their religion. The interviewees' reflections represent responses to the challenges that Yezidi women face in post-Communist Georgia and Armenia, influenced by the religious experiences of their families – in the case of the Yezidi woman from Tbilisi, a religiously inactive family; in the case of the woman from Yerevan, a non-Yezidi but religiously active family (her relatives are Jehovah's Witnesses and Pentecostals). Therefore, we suggest that the strategies which Yezidi women use to negotiate religious concerns (induced by internal and external problems) related to their status and place in society are characterised by the family-based religious experiences and the social backgrounds of Yezidi women in Georgia and Armenia.

1. The Yezidis – religion, social structure, and resettlement in Armenia and Georgia

Yezidism is an ethnic religion that developed among the Kurdish-speaking peoples and was influenced by Judaism, Islam, Christianity and Zoroastrianism (Szakonyi, 2007, p. 3; Açılcıyıldız, 2009, p. 103). Yezidis consider the Temple of Lalish (northern Iraq) as their religious centre (Mollica, 2016, p. 44). Yezidism is a monotheistic religion. Yezidis believe in the supreme deity ('Xwede'), its seven angels (the highest angel is Tawûsê Melek – the peacock angel), and Sheikh-adi (the incarnation of the peacock angel) (Amoevi, 1999, p. 7; Komakhidze, 2021, p. 137). Yezidism is not a written religion; its teachings are transmitted orally. Due to the ethnic characteristics of their religion, Yezidis consider themselves as an ethnic group distinct from the Kurds, especially since the majority of Kurds adopted Islam over the centuries. Yezidis have included language as a factor of their identity, claiming Kurmanji to be the Yezidi language that was misappropriated by the Muslim Kurds (Abrahamian, 2005, p. 112; Arakelova, 2001, p. 321). Yezidism is a non-proselytizing religion characterized by social restrictions and endogamy (Mollica, 2016, p. 45).

In Yezidism, society is divided into three castes: Sheikhs and Pirs (the highest religious castes), and Murids (the lowest caste) (see Mollica, 2016; Melkumyan, 2016; Komakhidze, 2021). Three castes are represented by sub-clans (see Omarkhali, 2008). Marriage outside of Yezidism and other religious castes is unacceptable (Komakhidze, 2021, p. 137). Each Murid

has a Sheikh and a Pir who stand with them at critical junctures in their lives. The Yezidis have a prince, who is a Mir from the Sheikh caste, as well as a religious leader – Baba Sheikh (Allison, 2017).

Mass migration of the Yezidis to the territory of Armenia and Georgia occurred at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries when the Russian Empire expanded its territory into the South Caucasus (Pohl, 2017, p. 45). To avoid massacres by the Ottomans, they migrated to Armenia and Georgia (Arakelova, 2015, p. 7). They settled in the Aragatsotn, Ararat, and Armavir provinces of Armenia (De La Breteque, 2021, p. 459). In Georgia, Yezidis settled in Tbilisi, Kakheti, Samtske-Javakheti, and Adjara. At the beginning of the twentieth century, another group of Yezidis migrated to Georgia from Turkey. In the 1950s, several Yezidi families moved from Soviet Armenia to Soviet Georgia in search of better economic opportunities; the migrants were illiterate and had poor living conditions (Szakonyi, 2007, pp. 5-6).

On the one hand, Kurds/Yezidis – which were counted as one in the USSR had good living conditions and developed cultural centres in the region; on the other hand, Kurds/Muslims faced difficulties because they were subjected to several waves of resettlements in the Middle East during the Soviet period (Pohl, 2017, p. 34). Following the fall of the Soviet Union, the Yezidis of Georgia struggled to maintain cultural traditions and remain united (Szakonyi, 2007, p. 1). Since then, spiritual Yezidism has replaced the Soviet Kurdish cultural movement. The Soviet economic decline pushed Yezidis to seek new ways of increasing their financial capacity in order to establish cultural organisations in Armenia and Georgia (Szakonyi, 2007; Komakhidze, 2021). On 29th September 2012, Yezidis opened the first sanctuary in Aknalich, Armenia, which was called 'Ziarat', and the largest Yezidi sanctuary in Armenia opened in 2019 (see Vardanyan, 2021). In 2015, a Yezidi religious and cultural centre was established in Tbilisi (see Komakhidze, 2021). Though Yezidis did not previously have places of religious devotion in Tbilisi, Yezidi religious authorities – Sheikhs and Pirs - traditionally visited the houses of believers and were offered a fee for their work. In the 1990s, Yezidis did not visit their parishes as they could not pay money to their spiritual leaders. 'One Yezidi-Kurd woman even commented that she and her family felt embarrassed in their inability to 'repay' the Sheikh for a ceremony he performed in her apartment' (Szakonyi, 2007, p. 8). Concerning the relationship between the spiritual castes (Sheikhs and Pirs) and the Murids during and after the Soviet period, the authority of the religious leaders has declined and religious practices have faded.

In Soviet Armenia, the caste system was transformed as a result of social equality policies. The highest Sheikh caste was subject to more intensive Stalinist oppression than the other castes. As the authority of the religious leaders diminished, Yezidi Murids were able to obtain an education which had previously been restricted (Melkumyan, 2016, p. 179). Soviet ideological diminution towards religious leadership had an impact on religious reorganisation in the post-Soviet era – the Yezidis did not trust their religious leaders (Sheiks), who had to reorganise the spiritual way of life and the status of the Yezidis in post-Communist Armenia and Georgia (Melkumyan, 2016, pp. 179-182). Szakonyi (2007, p. 9) argues that in post-Soviet times, many of the self-imposed boundaries that have kept the Yezidi faith alive for centuries are now crumbling under the pressure of globalisation and Western values.

The self-identification of Yezidi-Kurds is a major concern between Yezidis and Muslim Kurds. Yezidis distinguish themselves from the Kurdish ethnic group due to waves of persecution of Yezidis by the Muslim Kurds in the Middle East. They consider Yezidi as a term for ethnic and religious identification. During the Soviet period, Yezidis were referred to as Kurds, Yezidis, or Yezidi-Kurds. The rise of Kurdish nationalism in the Middle East at the end of the twentieth century meant it became more popular to identify as Kurdish. This tendency has changed as Yezidis have faced a series of massacres in recent decades. They aim to establish a faith-based autonomous entity or an independent state in the Middle East. During the final decades of the Soviet Union, a broad Yezidi movement arose in Armenia, initiated by the Yezidi authorities. They contended that the term Yezidi should have been addressed as an ethnic grouping (separated from the Kurdish identity). In 1989, Yezidis were registered as a separate ethnic group from the Kurds. The first conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh (1988-1994) affected Yezidi-Kurdish relations in the South Caucasus – Muslim Kurds supported Azerbaijan, while Yezidis were for Armenia. It strengthened feelings of ethnic distinction between the Kurds and the Yezidis of the South Caucasus (De La Breteque, 2021, p. 467; Allison, 2017; Omarkhali, 2013). The distinction between Yezidis and Kurds in Armenia was reinforced during the second Nagorno-Karabakh war in 2020. Armenian Yezidis formed a military unit and gathered in front of the Yezidi sanctuary ('Quba Mere Diwane') to participate in the conflict. Rzgan Sarhangyan, a veteran of the first Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, led this reservist unit, which consisted of 50 men ranging in age between 18-55 (Shehadi, 2020). All of the conflicts in which Armenian Yezidis participated had an impact on Georgian Yezidis and their attitudes. The Yezidis of Georgia declare themselves to be a distinct unit from the Muslim Kurds and other Kurdish groups. They support the views of the Armenian Yezidis

since they are linked to them.

In 1922, the Armenian Soviet Republic conducted the first census, which estimated there to be 7,845 Yezidis and 705 Kurds. Between 1939–1989, Yezidis and Kurds were considered as the same nationality with no religious affiliation (Arakelova, 2001). The census of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1989 counted 52,700 Yezidis and 7,300 Kurds. Armenia was the first state to recognise Yezidis as an ethnic group in the census columns (Arakelova, 2001). According to the 2001 census, 40,620 Yezidis and 1,519 Kurds lived in the country (Dalalyan, 2011, p. 177). In 2011, 35,308 Yezidis and 2,162 Kurds lived in Armenia[1]. The first census of the Georgian Soviet Republic in 1926 estimated that there were 2,262 Yezidis, and 7,955 Kurds. In the following censuses, Yezidis and Kurds were counted jointly with those of no religious attribution. In 1959, 16,200 Kurds lived in Georgia; in 1970 the number was 20,700; in 1979 – 25,700, and 30,300 in 1989 (Phirbari & Komakhia, 2008). According to the first national census (in 2002), a total of 20,000 Yezidi-Kurds lived in the Republic of Georgia; counted separately, approximately 18,000 citizens were considered to be ethnically Yezidi, while 2,000 were estimated to be Kurds (Beridze, 2003). According to the national census of 2014, there were 12,200 Yezidis in Georgia (Yezidi was identified as nationality, rather than ethnicity). In the religion column, 8,600 Yezidis were listed (Todadze & Shavishvili, 2018).

Yezidis comprise the second major religious and ethnic group in Armenia. Armenians have a particular interest in Yezidis because they consider them to be an integral part of the state. During the last two centuries, Yezidis shared the fate of the Armenians: the Ottoman Empire persecuted both, and Yezidis fought against Azeris and Muslim Kurds during both Nagorno-Karabakh conflicts in 1991-1994, and 2020. The state's policy towards Yezidis characterises official opinion towards religious and ethnic minorities. The Ministry of Education of Armenia has approved textbooks on 'Ezdiki' (the Yezidi language) for schools in Yezidi districts (Oganova 2012). The Department of the National Minorities and Religious Issues of Armenia (established in 2004) deals with issues concerning ethnic and religious minorities[2]. Two of the official organisations for communicating Yezidi issues at the state level are the Council of the Ministry of the Republic of Armenia and the Clerical Council of the Yezidis of Armenia (*Hayastani Yzdineri hegevorkhorurd)*. There are several Yezidi non-governmental organizations and religious and cultural centres that engage with the Department of the National Minorities and Religious Issues of Armenia, including the 'Yezidi National Union ULE' (*Yezdineri azgayin miutyun himnadervele)* (established in 1989). The areas of

activity of this organization include educational and cultural issues concerning the Yezidis. The Yezidi National Union aims to promote the development of the national culture of the Yezidis. The Yezidi Centre for Human Rights (*Mardu ieavunkneri Yezdiakan kendrone*) (established in 1989) promotes programmes to enhance the participation of Yezidis in social and political activities at the state level[3].

In 2018-2019, the 'Armavir Development Centre' *(Armaviri zaigatman kendron)* implemented awareness-raising programmes related to promoting educational rights for Yezidi girls and women in Aragatsotn and Armavir provinces (Fifth Report by the Republic of Armenia, 2020).

The first Kurdish organisation in Georgia, 'Ronai', was established in 1988; in 1998, the organisation was renamed and was split into two parts – the 'Union of Georgian Yezidis' *(Saqartvelos Ezidta Kavshiri)* and the 'Union of Georgian Kurdish Intellectuals' *(Saqartvelos qurti inteligentsiis kavshiri)* (Pirbari & Komakhia, 2008, pp. 82-83). In the early 2000s, several organisations were founded in Georgia, including the 'National Congress of Kurd-Yezidis'*(Qurt-ezidta erovnuli Kongresi)*, the 'International Foundation for Protecting Rights, Religion and Culture of Kurds' *(Qurtebis uplebebisa da religiur-kulturuli memkvidreobis dacvis saertashoriso pondi)*, the 'Youth Union of Yezidis of Georgia'*(Saqartvelos ezidta akhalgazrduli kavshiri)*, the 'Independent League of Georgian Kurdi-Yezidi Women'*(Saqartvelos qutr-ezid qalta damoukidebeli liga)*, the 'Union of Georgian Kurdish Intelligentsia'*(Saqartvelos qurti inteligenciis kavshiri)*, the 'Centre for Protecting Yezidi Traditions - Razibum'*(Ezidta tradiciebis dacvis centri - razibumi)*, the 'International Centre of Kurdistan Studies'*(Qurtistanis kvlevis saertashoriso centri)* the 'Union of Georgian Kurds'*(Saqartvelos qurtta kavshiri)* etc. All of the above-mentioned organisations are currently less influential than the 'Yezidi Spiritual Council of Georgia' *(Saqartvelos ezidta sasuliero sabwo)*, which was established in 2011 as a branch of the 'House of Yezidis of Georgia' (Saqartvelos ezidta sakhli). The House of Yezidis of Georgia was formed by three organizations: the Yezidi Cultural Centre *(Eziduti kulturis centri)*, the Yezidi Spiritual Council of Georgia *(Saqartvelos ezidta sasuliero sabwo),* and the Women's Rights Initiative Community of Georgia *(Qalta ubflebebis satemo initsiativa).* These entities were particularly supportive of the construction of a Yezidi sanctuary and cultural centre in Tbilisi. Recently, the House of Yezidis of Georgia has been split up. The organization, focused on women's rights, has developed as an independent actor, collaborating with the Kurdish-Georgian Socio-cultural Platform *(Qurtul-qartuli socio-kulturuli platporma)*. It is a less influential organisation that

focuses on women from both the Yezidi and non-Yezidi communities. The Yezidi Spiritual Council and Cultural Centre are stronger institutions. They are located in the buildings around the sanctuary. These two organisations have a significant impact on state policy toward Georgian Yezidis. The office of the State Ministry of Reconciliation and Civic Equality of Georgia facilitates official communication between ethnic and religious minorities and the state[4]. The State Agency for Religious Issues of Georgia (founded in 2011) is another national organisation that includes all of the religious associations in Georgia, including the Georgian Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church; the Administration of Muslims of All Georgia; the Diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Holy Church in Georgia; the Apostolic Administration of the Caucasus; the Union of Georgian Jews (Jewish Union of Georgia); the Union of Evangelical Christian Baptist Church of Georgia; the International Baptist Church of Tbilisi; the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Georgia; the Evangelical-Protestant Church in Georgia; the Spiritual Council of Yazidis in Georgia; the International Society for Krishna Consciousness; the Evangelical Faith Church of Georgia[5]. Communication between the State Agency for Religious Issues and the Yezidi Spiritual Council of Georgia determines policy toward Yezidis. The latter is a cultural-educational organisation that organises educational events and assists Yezidis in their pilgrimage to Lalish (Iraq), etc[6].

2. Questioning and shifting religious identity

Official Soviet atheism forced people to maintain their religious beliefs by performing prayers and rituals in private domains (Dragadze, 1993). The lack of awareness of normative religious behaviours among Soviet citizens had a huge impact on the vernacularisation of religious activities. Religious knowledge was detached from everyday life and ensured that people were distanced from religiosity (Khutsishivili, 2004, p. 12). Even Yezidism, which involves religious practises in the domestic sphere, shifted its arena of daily application (see De La Breteque, 2021, p. 462). The Soviet system, which equalized the strictly differentiated gender roles and social castes of Yezidi society, engendered social disorientation and ambiguity among the post-Soviet Yezidis. The trend of converting to Christianity has been revealed among the Yezidis of post-Soviet Armenia and Georgia (Arakelova, 2018, p. 345; p. 356).

In the post-Soviet period, religious practice actively re/appeared in public life - 'the domestic and public, vernacular and normative' have all become contested. In the post-Communist era, when new knowledge was a topic of discussion among Yezidis, representatives of the older generation argued against considering the daily spiritual agenda

ordered from Lalish. One of the Georgian Yezidi Murid interviewees (with a high level of education) was opposed to participating in religious activities organised by Sheiks and Pirs. The misunderstanding of internal reforms within the Yezidi community – the new norms that directed them to organise their religious lives in a specific way during the post-Communist era – have motivated several Yezidis in Armenia and Georgia to change their religion (Szakonyi, 2007). These people seek to believe in what appeals to them. In the post-Soviet period, a lack of awareness of religious norms, which were ambiguous even for the religious 'elites', led to the conversion of Yezidis (Ankosi, 2009, p. 64). The religious norms are ambiguous for Yezidi women, who are powerless in Yezidi ethnoreligious society. During Soviet times, the status and working rights of both sexes were equalised. The right to study was granted to Yezidi women. Nonetheless, some conservative families used to limit women's roles to domestic work. In the 1980s and 1990s, Yezidi women applied to become Georgian and Armenian Orthodox Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals, etc. (Gues, 1987, pp. 49-50; Arakelova, 2018, pp. 353-365). Even Sheiks do not understand Yezidi religious traditions – they give their children non-Yezidi names, disregard religious practices, and convert to other religions. Most of those converted people continue to consider themselves Yezidis: 'there is no exact name given to this new identity among such Yezidis' (Arakelova, 2018, p. 365). When Yezidis change their religion, they conceal their new religious identity and uphold Yezidi identity as an ethnic and/or national marker. It is difficult to predict the number of Yezidi men and women who have changed religion. During our ethnographic fieldwork in Armenia and Georgia, we found families where at least one member had adopted a different religious identity. Based on our ethnographic materials, we identified internal and external motives for questioning religious identity among Yezidi women in particular.

2.1 Internal motives

The status of men and women: A Yezidi man has higher social status than a Yezidi woman. According to Dalyan & Dogan (2013, p. 119), although negative attitudes are minimized, women are still considered as sex objects and as sources of economic profit for their families, which is sanctioned by their isolated way of life. Thus, Yezidi women in Armenia and Georgia, who were born after the disintegration of the Soviet Union and live in the urban areas of these two republics, refuse to believe traditional norms without asking questions about their rights within the Yezidi community. This process has resulted in Yezidi women adopting comparatively 'liberal' religious norms or atheism.

The caste system: The castes of Sheiks and Pirs are the highest, with religious and social authority; the cast of Murids is the lowest, with no religious and social authority. Soviet secularist policy equalized these three castes. During the post-Soviet era, some Murids (we observed such cases in both states) protested about following the rules of the 'uneducated' religious authorities. As a consequence of this, as well as marriage restrictions across castes, we encountered Murid women who adopted other religions. Women are unable to deal with their difficulties and cannot seek advice from their spiritual leaders – Sheikhs and Pirs: women from the families of Sheikhs and Pirs are subjected to violence. Thus, they seek salvation in conversion as they are helpless without the right to express their feelings and opinions (Fatemi, 2019, p. 153).

Marriage restrictions: Marriage restrictions are one of the problematic issues that Yezidi women face. Young Yezidi women in Armenia and Georgia are challenging these prohibitions either by adopting alternative religious identities or by formally adopting atheistic ideas that empower them to marry without ethnic barriers. Yezidi women in Georgia still face gender-based discrimination due to the caste system and inter-ethnic marriage restrictions that keep women attached to their place of origin; dowry payment and external financial pressures on the grooms' families are maintained, which leads to the shrinkage of Yezidi religious communities (Peinhoph, 2014, pp. 131-134). According to Yezidi tradition, a girl can be married at the age of 14-15 even against her wishes. In 2012, Armenian Yezidis criticised a new law restricting child marriages. They argued that marriage at a young age for females was a way for maintaining the Yezidi family traditions (see Grigoryan, 2012).

2.2. External motives

Changing regional politics: Decades of social changes, new post-Communist lifestyles, religious pluralisation, and information flows have provided opportunities for Yezidis in Armenia and Georgia to discuss their religious and cultural values. 'Attractive' methods of expressing themselves in contemporary post-Communist neoliberal Armenia and Georgia lead them to ask questions about their identity. The adoption of multiple cultural and religious identities and practices is characterized by the post-Soviet transformations in Armenia and Georgia, which resulted from a lack of religious knowledge as well as the 'quarrel' between vernacular and normative rules in Yezidism. One of the instances for the questioning of religious identity has been the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict of 2020, which constantly raised the question of ethnic distinction between Yezidis and Kurds in the Caucasus region.

The flow of knowledge from Lalish: The way post-Soviet Armenian and Georgian Yezidis institutionalise their religion and ethnicity is linked to traditional norms adopted from Lalish, the religious centre in Iraq. These rules are unclear for Yezidis who have not had direct contact with Lalish. Armenian and Georgian Yezidis experienced Soviet militant secularism, which still plays a pivotal role in perceptions of social structure and religious practice.

Institutionalization of religious norms: Religious organisations are less powerful among the Yezidis of Georgia and Armenia because they are less focused on the problems of the whole community and more on the interests of the NGO affiliated people and their families. For most traditional families, changing their religious identity becomes the best way thus to overcome social restrictions. The governments of Armenia and Georgia address the problems faced by Yezidis (especially Yezidi women) on the basis of information from the Yezidi religious and cultural organizations, which do not address the full scale of problems of the Yezidi majority. Discussions about the rights of women, education, etc. are shared and accepted by people who are for the most connected to the Yezidi elites.

3. The practices of changing religious identity among Yezidi women from Armenia and Georgia

During the fieldwork in Armenia, we found women who had adopted the teachings of the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Pentecostal faith. Seven women were interviewed. Four of them were Jehovah's Witnesses, and three of them were Pentecostal. They identified themselves as Yezidis (ethnic attribution) but also as Jehovah Witnesses and as Pentecostal (religious attribution). One of the Jehovah's Witnesses was single, and her family members had converted to the faith of Jehovah's Witnesses (Interview 1: 25.05.2018). The other two women were widows, while the remaining four were married. Following the loss of their husbands, they converted to a new faith. They stated that they previously used to follow the Yezidi way of life which they did not like:

> 'My husband treated me violently. I felt more like a slave than a woman. He didn't respect me. He had Russian girlfriends. For a long time, I could not get rid of the hatred that oppressed my heart. As a Jehovah's Witness, I was able to eradicate my hatred against my ex-husband. I have witnessed Jehovah's Witnesses treating their wives with respect. I grew up in a family where Yezidi rules were not followed; the only thing my parents told me was that we only had to marry a Yezidi man' (Fatemi, 2018, p. 69).

Family connections dominated the reasons behind the interviewees' conversion to the Pentecostal religion. One of the interviewees stated that her daughter introduced her to the Pentecostal faith: 'she told me that if I studied religion, I would understand the truth – she arrived in Armenia to introduce the Pentecostal teachings and explain the Bible to me' (Interview 2: 20.07.2018).

When married women converted to a new faith, they faced hostility from their husbands, but after their 'resistance', their husbands accepted them as long as the converted women participated in domestic Yezidi rituals (Fatemi, 2019, p. 152). A Pentecostal woman explained that her husband did not accept the Pentecostal faith, but when the Pentecostal pastor visited their house, he listened to the preaching (Interview 3: 30.06.2019).

During our fieldwork, we found women who had divorced after their conversion. One of the interviewees divorced her Yezidi husband after adopting the teachings of the Jehovah's Witnesses and remarried to a man with the same religious identity (Interview 4: 21.06.2018). Another one of the Yezidi women was married to a Yezidi man. She changed her religious identity after her husband's family requested her to become Pentecostal as all of his family members had converted to the Pentecostal religion (Interview 5: 05.08.2019).

During our fieldwork in Georgia, we met women who converted to Orthodox Christianity, Jehovah Witnesses, or were atheists. Nine women were interviewed - five women were single; four women were married to Yezidis - they identified themselves as both Yezidis (ethnicity) and Christians (religion): 'I am Christian, my husband is Yezidi. I was baptized as a Christian. My religion does not prevent me from following Kurdish (Yezidi) traditions' (Interview 6: 9.07.2017).

The popularity of the Georgian Orthodox Church, which dominates over its neighbours, is one of the motives for Yezidi women to join other religions. One of the women was a Jehovah's Witness who was married to a Georgian man. Her husband was a Georgian Orthodox Christian. She explained that in the 1990s she changed religion due to religious restrictions. She wanted to marry her Christian fiancé. At first, she was baptised as a Georgian Orthodox Christian, but later she discovered the 'truth' with the Jehovah's Witnesses (Interview 7: 14.10.2014). Among the five single women, one was an atheist, who hid her lack of religion while continuing to practice Yezidi religious rituals. She did not want to follow the religious norms as ordered by her parents and the religious authorities; she wanted to 'marry for love' (Interview 8: 18.04.2018). Three single women were Georgian Orthodox Christians; two of

them changed their religion with their family members. One woman wished to practice religious rituals that were popular among her friends. Throughout the discussion of the reasons for changing religious identities, the key point was: 'we want to feel free' (Interview 9: 17.04.2016, Interview 10: 20.09.2017, Interview 11: 3.10.2018). Every interviewee identified themselves as Yezidis (ethnic criteria), although with different religious identities. The interviewees mentioned that in several situations Yezidi women have changed religion, but they remain hidden from their families and the Yezidi community while maintaining contact with other Yezidis.

In the next section, to better understand the strategies Yezidi women adopt to overcome gender issues in the Yezidi religious community, we dig deeper into the biographies of two Yezidi women from Armenia and Georgia.

4. Case studies

In this section, we present two biographies of our interviewees for a more in-depth understanding of the subject. One woman is from Yerevan (Armenia) and another from Tbilisi (Georgia). Three criteria were utilised in the selection process: 1) Age - both were 18 years old at the time of the interview and were born after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Their reflections encompass questions that Yezidi young women consider when discussing ethnic and religious identities. 2) Marital status – both were single. They inquire about their future, and relationships with men which are forbidden in Yezidism. 3) Connections to their traditional religious identity (Yezidism) –both have maintained their connection with Yezidi religious groupings.

The Yezidi woman from Georgia (self-identified as an atheist) has maintained a connection with Yezidis by actively involving herself in Yezidi religious rituals and events that are organised by the House of Yezidis of Georgia. Her concealed opinions reveal prevalent thoughts among young Yezidi women who are seeking to find their place in society. In the Armenian example, though the interviewee converted to the Jehovah's Witnesses, she still considers herself Yezidi (ethnic criteria). She has maintained contact with other Yezidis while aiming to promote the teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses to the Yezidi people.

4.1. Armenia

The first case is about an 18-year-old Yezidi woman from Yerevan (Armenia). The interview took place on 25th May 2018, in Yerevan. She spoke about the common problems that Yezidi

women have encountered, as well as described the challenges that young Yezidi women face in private and public life. Because of social boundaries such as marriage limitations, lack of religious awareness, gender inequalities, etc., young Yezidi women seek solutions to their everyday difficulties outside of Yezidi religious groupings. During the conversation, the interviewee discussed her family history, which has influenced her social and religious life:

> 'When my parents divorced, my mother moved back into her parents' house. Since then, I have been living with my maternal grandmother. My grandmother helped me and my mother in meeting the Jehovah's Witnesses. After a few years, my mother remarried; her husband is a Yezidi (originally) who serves as a Pentecostal pastor. My mother moved to another village to live with her husband. I stayed with my grandparents and spent my time taking care of the house' (Interview 1: 25.05.2018).

While discussing the reasons for religious conversion, she emphasised how difficult it was for the young Yezidi women to obey the religious restrictions declared by the Yezidi religion. The woman had been involved in the activities of Jehovah's Witnesses since she was five years old, but as she grew older, she left the community due to a misunderstanding with her friends who were not Jehovah Witnesses. She eventually returned to this religion with the assistance of her grandmother and her relatives. The informant values the meetings with the Jehovah's Witnesses. The Yezidi (Kurmanji) language, which is used during the meetings of the Jehovah's Witnesses, was highly valuable to the interviewee.

The informant critically evaluated the answers she received from the Yezidi religion regarding life and death, which she considered as one of the crucial reasons for changing religious identity:

> 'I was constantly asking myself the question concerning life after death. I did not find the answers in the Yezidi religion. Afterwards, I asked those questions to my grandmother, who gave me literature from Jehovah's Witnesses. Those works of literature helped me to find all of the answers to my questions. Following that, I gradually learned the major teachings of the Jehovah's Witnesses and eventually became a preacher' (Interview 1: 25.05.2018).

For the informant, becoming a preacher of the Jehovah Witnesses was not easy, especially due to the attitudes other people had towards 'unacceptable' religious teachings:

''My friends, schoolmates, and neighbours were unsympathetic to me. Preaching, they said, was a disgrace for a woman. It was challenging in the beginning. Nonetheless, I realised I was preaching to God and was able to overcome all difficulties. I used to be constrained and self-contained, but the Jehovah's Witnesses assisted me in overcoming fear and gaining personal confidence. I attended meetings of the Jehovah's Witnesses with my grandmother. I enjoyed reading the Bible and various religious books. But then, due to bullying at school, I left the spiritual life; fear of further troubles enforced me to turn away from its doctrine. But once, my grandmother's sister, who is a Jehovah's Witness in Russia, came to visit us for two months. She encouraged me to re-attend Jehovah's Witnesses meetings. Since then, I have been actively involved in religious activities. Finally, I was baptised and began serving God' (Interview 1: 25.05.2018).

The interviewee has reached Yezidi devotees since she is a preacher. She aims to preach to members of the Yezidi religion, with whom she has common life experiences. She recalled her hesitancy on the first day of preaching, which was induced by Yezidi religious restrictions that require a woman to be humble and modest. She eventually overcome her anxieties:

'People tell me that I should not preach because it is not the right thing for a Yezidi girl. I am confident in the way I have chosen. I wish to promote the right religion to the Yezidi nation (for the interviewee the term is an ethnic criterion) and show them the right way' (Interview 1: 25.05.2018).

During a comparison of the religious norms of the Yezidi and the Jehovah's Witnesses, the interviewee stated that she felt freer as a woman within the Jehovah's Witnesses religious community:

'If I am Yezidi, I have to accept the advice of my parents, but choosing a life-partner and managing my life largely rests on my judgments. I have to make a choice. I did not get a higher education, but I did learn about fashion design. As a Jehovah's Witness, I wish to serve God and to help my nation to acknowledge the right way' (Interview 1: 25.05.2018).

As the informant is not aware of the normative knowledge of the Yezidi religion, she identifies as ethnically Yezidi. The mother tongue, Kurmanji, and her family lineage are markers for Yezidi identity. She identifies herself as a Yezidi with the faith of Jehovah's Witnesses:

'I self-identify as a member of the Yezidi nation (Yezidi is a national (ethnic) marker for her) since I speak Ezdiki (Kurmanji), but my religion is Jehovah's Witness. I am not thinking about getting married. Right now, I want to serve God. My husband would be a Jehovah's Witness, but his nationality (Yezidism also means ethnicity to this particular interviewee) would not matter for me' (Interview 1: 25.05.2018).

4.2. Georgia

The second case includes the life history of an 18-year-old woman from Tbilisi (Georgia), who was interviewed on 18th April 2018. The interviewee is a representative of a Yezidi family that has lived in Tbilisi since her ancestors left the historical homeland in the 1920s. She reflected on the Yezidi religion and the difficulties that young Yezidi women face in Georgia. The information she emphasised demonstrates how young women start the process of gaining a better understanding of religion. The points she raised demonstrate that the vernacular knowledge of traditional religion is insufficient to provide in-depth information about the Yezidi religion. A newly established Yezidi sanctuary in Tbilisi, which is considered the centre for sharing normative Yezidi religious knowledge, is an alternative space where they can acquire information about their religion (Komakhidze, 2021).

'When I was at school, I used to attend the educational programmes at the Youth Art Palace of Tbilisi. There, I gave a presentation about the Yezidis of Georgia. The chairperson of the section suggested assisting in producing a documentary about the Yezidis of Georgia. We completed our task by presenting the film to Caucasus University (in Tbilisi). It was the first time that I got interested in Yezidi traditions. I did not have clear information about Yezidism and its people. I knew from my parents and relatives that I was Yezidi, but I did not know who these people were. During the making of the documentary about the Yezidis, I met the religious leader of the Yezidis of Georgia. It was a holiday in the Yezidi sanctuary of Tbilisi. I filmed several scenes and then I spoke to him. The leader asked me to become involved in the activities of the youth organization. Since then, I have been actively involved in all of the events organised by the cultural centre' (Interview 8: 18.04.2018).

The parents of the interviewee are representatives of the generation that grew up during the post-Soviet political and economic transformations in Georgia:

'My mother is 35 years old, and my father is 40. My mother married when she was 16 years old. My mother is the second wife of my father. My siblings include a half-brother, a half-sister, and a younger brother. We belong to the caste of Murids' (Interview 8: 18.04.2018).

The family does not engage in traditional religious activities – while Yezidism is perceived as the sole criterion for ethnoreligious attribution:

'We do not celebrate Yezidi holidays or pray. We are a Yezidi family but do not practice any religious activities. To be honest, many Yezidis in Georgia are not familiar with the traditional religion. They only know that they are Yezidis. Many people and families in the Yezidi community have changed religion, many of them converted to Christianity. They believe if they are not Christians, they are unable to work or get an education. If a young person in our society is baptised as a Christian, then (s)he will ask other friends about the Yezidi religion. They do not have enough knowledge to adequately answer the questions. They do not know what the teachings of the Yezidi religion are. Thus, to avoid humiliation, they adopt other religions' (Interview 8: 18.04.2018).

The informant identified herself as Yezidi, which makes her proud. Nevertheless, she does not agree with the rules of the Yezidi religion. Being Yezidi is a tool for her to present herself as different from the majority of Georgians:

'I do identify myself as Yezidi because being Yezidi means being a representative of a different religion. The most beneficial aspect of Yezidism is that it does not matter if you believe in it or not; you must be born a Yezidi' (Interview 8: 18.04.2018).

The informant has dual religious attribution due to religious constraints. On the one hand, she considers herself a Yezidi through her lineage; on the other hand, she considers herself to be an atheist, due to social norms that forbid Yezidis from marrying non-Yezidis or members of other social castes:

'I disagree with the marital restrictions of the Yezidi religion. If a person does not obey these rules or changes religion, s(he) will be expelled from the Yezidi religious community. It makes no difference which caste you represent. Most Sheiks and Pirs are unfamiliar with religious norms and are unable to explain the

meaning of the religious rituals. Some claim that they worship the sun, while others claim to worship fire, Satan, etc. With the Yezidi religion, I do not see my future clearly; I want to marry for love; race, origin, and religion are not important to me.

My parents asked me to marry a man whom they had chosen for me. They told me that he would take good care of me, but I am not going to marry him. My ex-boyfriend was not Yezidi. My parents did not know about him. When I decide to marry, I will disregard the norms imposed by the Yezidi religion. I see myself as an atheist. Many of my friends are not Yezidis; they have different ethnic origins. Many of them are atheists. They are not constrained by religious rules. Nevertheless, I love Yezidi tradition and religion, which distinguishes me from other people' (Interview 8: 18.04.2018).

Conclusion

The problem of questioning religious identity and the status of women among Yezidi ethnoreligious society is characterised by the gender roles and social structure of the traditional community as influenced by the Communist past. Political ideologies and modern social trends have influenced people's values. Soviet atheist rhetoric fostered a strategy of experimentation with religions. Yezidism, which has strictly defined social roles, was transformed into a key element of ethnic and religious identity. Its perceptions have befitted the social requirements of people who live and have lived in Soviet and post-Soviet Armenia and Georgia. Communist policies 'forced' the equality of three social castes of Yezidism as well as the education of all Yezidi believers. Religious leaders, who had dominated the lives of the Murids, lost their roles. In post-Soviet, postmodern times, new understandings of religious pluralisation and gender concerns are shaping the societal perspectives of Yezidi women who are questioning this, and are searching for their identity. As a traditional social variable (see Acevedo & Shah, 2015), gender roles in the Yezidis of Armenia and Georgia have been formed by politics since Soviet times. These politics shaped the cultural and social status of women during and after Communism, when all citizens were expected to engage in the labour market (see Mikołajczak & Pietrzak, 2014, p. 390). This new way of life changed the values of the post-Soviet Yezidis. In post-Communist Georgia and Armenia, Yezidi authorities have attempted to homogenise the private, domestic religious system and re/shape the normative rules of Yezidism according to the religious norms ordered by Lalish.

Our ethnographic findings demonstrate that Yezidis, similarly to the other religious

communities in post-Soviet Armenia and Georgia, are actively involved in the institutionalisation of religious norms. Yezidi women in contemporary Georgia and Armenia face barriers in understanding their role in Yezidi society. Yezidi women aspire to find a way to deal with the questions they have about their religious identity and social status. In some senses, Yezidi women maintain their traditional status and identity, but it is clear that they have questions about their traditional religious structure. The post-Soviet way of life, as well as internal (the status of men and women, caste system, marital restrictions) and external motives (changes in regional politics, the new teachings from Lalish, the institutionalisation of religious norms), push Yezidi women to adopt another religious identity. This new religious identity is merged into Yezidism, as they consider Yezidi as a criterion for ethnic attribution. The two case studies depict women who conceal or radically express their religious attitudes in the Yezidi religious community. For the Yezidis of Armenia and Georgia, the issue of standardising religious teachings represents a challenge, as it raises concerns regarding the role of women in Yezidi society. The two case studies presented in the article demonstrate that the strategies employed by Yezidi women to negotiate religious concerns related to their status and place in society (induced by internal and external problems) are characterised by family religious experiences and the social backgrounds of Yezidi women in Georgia and Armenia.

***

Notes

[1]See http://pop-stat.mashke.org

[2]See https://www.gov.am/en/religion/

[3]See https://www.frontlinedefenders.org

[4]See https://smr.gov.ge/

[5]See https://www.religion.gov.ge

[6]See http://yezidi.ge

References

Abrahamian, L. (2005) *Armenian identity in a changing world.* (Armenian Studies Series No 8) Mazda
   Publishers, Inc. Costa Mesa, California, https://www.isbns.net/isbn/9781568591858/

Acevedo, G., & Shah, S. (2015). Sectarian affiliation and gender traditionalism: A study of Sunni and Shi'a
   Muslims in four predominantly Muslim countries. *Sociology of Islam,* 3, 1-29.
   https://doi.org/10.1163/22131418-00301001

Açılcıyıdız, B. (2009). Sacred spaces in the Yezidi religion. In C. Gates, J. Morin, & T. Zimmerman (Eds.),
   Sacred landscapes in Anatolia and neighboring regions, 103-112. Archaeopress Publishers of British
   Archaeological Reports.

Allison, C. (2017). The Yazidis. *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Religion* [Online].
   https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.254

Amoevi, K. (1999). *Iezidta wminda wignebi (Qeteba cilwe da rishefa Resh).* Tbilisi Institute of Asia and Africa
   Publishing, Tbilisi.

Ankosi, K. (2009). Kurtuli akhalgazrdoba da ieziduri religiis gadarchenis problemebi. *Chveni sopeli,* 2(14), 63-
   64.

Arakelova, V. (2001). Healing practices among the Yezidi Sheikhs of Armenia. *Asian Folklore Studies*, 60(2), 319-328.

Arakelova, V. (2015) *Ezdinere ev nrant krone, Yerevan, iranagidagan govgasyan gentron hradaragutyun.*
   Caucasian Centre for Iranian Studies, Yerevan.

Arakelova, V. (2018). Yezidis and Christianity: Shaping of a new identity. *Iran and the Caucasus*, 22 (4), 353-
   365. https://doi.org/10.1163/1573384X-20180403

Beridze, T. (2003). *Saqartvelos mosakhleobis 2002 tslis pirveli erovnuli sakoveltao agweris shedegebi* (vol. 1).
   Department of National Statistics of Georgia, Tbilisi.

Dalalyan, T. (2011). Construction of Kurdish and Yezidi identities among the Kurmanj-speaking population of
   the Republic of Armenia, in V. Voronkiv (Ed.) *Changing Identities: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia,*
   collection of selected works, 177-201, Heinrich Boell Foundation, South Caucasus Regional Office,
   Tbilisi. https://www.kurdipedia.org/files/relatedfiles/2013/87571/0001.PDF

Dalyan, G. M., & Dogan, C. (2013). An overview of 19th century Yezidi women. *Asian Social Science*, 9(7),
   114-123.

De La Breteque, E. A. (2021). The Yezidis in the Soviet Union, in H. Bozarslan et al. (Eds.), *The Cambridge*
   History of the Kurds, 458-474, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
   https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108623711

Dragadze, T. (1993). The domestication of religion under Soviet Communism, in C. M. Hann (Ed.), *Socialism:*
   Ideas, Ideologies and Local Practice, 141-151, Routledge, London.

Fatemi, S. (2018). K voprosu ob ocnovnikh motivakh I prichinakh vstuplenia ezidov v religioznuyu organizaciu "Svideteli iegovi", in Pimonov A.S. (ed.) *Sbornik materialov mezhdunarodngo konkursa kursovikh, nauchno-isledovanikh I vipusknikh kvalifiacionnikh rabot*, 65-70, Zapsibnts Publishing, Kemerovo.

Fatemi, S. (2019). Polozhenie zhenshinikh v ezidskoih semye kak factor prozelitizma, *Region and the world, scientific-analytical journal,* V. 10, No 2, 151-155.

Fletcher, J., H. (2003). Shifting identity: The contribution of feminist thought to theologies of religious pluralism. *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion,* 19(2), 5-24.

Grigoryan, M. (2012). Armenia: Ethnic minority rejects marriage-age requirement. *EurasiaNet*. https://eurasianet.org/armenia-ethnic-minority-rejects-marriage-age-requirement

Guest, J.S. (1987). *The Yezidis: A study in survival*. KPI Limited, Routledge & Regan Paul, London and New York

Heidemarie, W. (2019). Religious cultures and gender cultures: tracing gender differences across religious cultures. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 34(2), 241-251.

Khutsishvili, K. (2004). *Religiuri situaciis tsvlileba da usaprtkhoebis problema tanamedrove sakartveloshi*. Mematiane, Tbilisi

Khutsishvili, K. (2016). Religion and the establishment of the new political elite in late Soviet and post-Soviet Georgia, in Y. Antonian (Ed.), *Elites and "Elites": Transformations of social structures in post-Soviet Armenia and Georgia*, 196-213, Academic Swiss Caucasus Net, Yerevan

Komakhidze, B. (2021). Sultan Ezid in Tbilisi: The Yezidi Sanctuary in discourse of ethnic and religious identity, in Khutsishvili K. and Khositashvili M. (eds.), *Proceedings of the international scientific conference: Ethnocultural diversity and intercultural communication in Georgia* , 136-151, Georgian National Parliamentary Library Publishing, Tbilisi

Melkumyan, H. (2016). Elites between nationalism and tradition: The modernization processes in the Yezidi community of Armenia', in Y. Antonian (Ed.), *Elites and "Elites": Transformations of social structures in post-Soviet Armenia and Georgia*, 175-191Academic Swiss Caucasus Net, Yerevan, http://ysu.am/files/Melkumyan-H__Elites_%20Between-Nationalism-and-Tradition.pdf

Mikołajczak, M., & Pietrzak, J. (2014). Ambivalent sexism and religion: Connected through values. *Sex Roles,* 70, 387–399. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-014-0379-3

Mollica, M. (2016). Ezidi struggle for survival: From the last massacre in Sinjar to the new temple In Tbilisi, in M. Mollica (Ed.), *Fundamentalism: Ethnographies on minorities, discrimination and transnationalism* , 43-64, LIT Verlag, Zürich.

Oganova, N. (2012). Kazdikh ezidskikh rebionok budet govorit na rodnom iazike. N*oev-kovcheg*, 18 (201) https://noev-kovcheg.ru/mag/2012-18/3485.html

Omarkhali, K. (2008). On the structure of the Yezidi clan and tribal system and its terminology among the Yezidis of the Caucasus. *The Journal of Kurdish Studies*, 6, 104-119.

Omarkhali, K. (2013). The Kurds in the former Soviet states from historical and cultural perspective. *The Copernicus Journal of Political Studies,* 2(4), 128-142.

Peinhoph, A. (2014). Ethnic minority women in Georgia – facing a double burden? *ECMI-Working Paper*, 74, European Centre for Minority Issues. https://www.ecmi.de/fileadmin/redakteure/publications/pdf/Working_Paper_74.pdf

Pelkmans, M. (2009). Introduction: Post-Soviet space and the unexpected turns of religious life, 1-16 in M. Pelkmans (Ed.), *Conversion after Socialism: Disruptions, Modernisms and Technologies of Faith in the Former Soviet Union*, Berghahn Books, Oxford

Pirbati, D., & Komakhia, M. (2008). *Qurtebi sakartveloshi*. BTTK – Politikis kvlevis tsentri, Tbilisi

Pohl, O. P. (2017). Kurds in the USSR 1927-1956. *Kurdish Studies*, 5(2), 32-55.

Rosta, G. (2012). Religiosity and political values in Central and Eastern Europe, in G. Pickel & K. Sammet (Eds.), *Transformations of Religiosity*, 37-55, *Veröffentlichungen der Sektion Religionssoziologie der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Soziologie*. VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, Wiesbaden https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-531-93326-9_6

Shehadi, L. (2020). Armenian Yezidis join fight against Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh. *Al Arabiya English.* https://english.alarabiya.net/features/2020/10/03/Armenian-Yazidis-join-fight-against-Azerbaijan-in-Nagorno-Karabakh

Szakonyi, D. (2007). Ethnic mobilization in post-Soviet Georgia: The case of the Yezidi-Kurds. *Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe*, 6(2), 1-19 https://www.ecmi.de/fileadmin/redakteure/publications/JEMIE_Datensätze/Jemie_datensätze_2007/2-2007-Szakonyi.pdf

Todadze G., & Shavishvili P. (2018). *Sakartvelos 2014 tslis mosakleobis sakoveltao agtseris ziritadi shedegebi,* Department of National Statistics of Georgia, Tbilisi https://www.geostat.ge/media/20680/2014-wlis-aRweris-ZiriTadi-Sedegebi.pdf

Vardanian, A. (2021). *How to Visit World's Largest Yezidi Temple in Aknalich (Armavir).* https://absolutearmenia.com/yazidi-temple-in-armenia/

Council of Europe, Fifth Report by the Republic of Armenia (2020), pursuant to article 25, paragraph 2 of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, 15th June 2020 https://rm.coe.int/5th-sr-armen.ia-en/16809eb7b3, last visited 2 December 2021

Republic of Armenia, Third report of the republic of Armenia in accordance with point 1 of article 15 of the European charter for regional or minority languages, Government of the Republic of Armenia, Yerevan N 32, 9th August 2012, https://www.gov.am/u_files/file/kron/qax32-2511_eng.pdf , last visited 6 December 2021

Bespyatov Tim 2008-2021, Population statistics of Armenia, http://pop-stat.mashke.org/armenia-ethnic2011.htm, last visited 6 December 2021