

STUDIES IN ORIENTAL RELIGIONS 68

Religious Minorities in Kurdistan:
Beyond the Mainstream

Edited by
Khanna Omarkhali

HARRASSOWITZ VERLAG

STUDIES IN ORIENTAL RELIGIONS

Edited by Wassilios Klein
and Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz

Volume 68

2014

Harrassowitz Verlag · Wiesbaden

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Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen
Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet
über <http://dnb.dnb.de> abrufbar.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek
The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche
Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the internet
at <http://dnb.dnb.de>.

For further information about our publishing program consult our
website <http://www.harrassowitz-verlag.de>

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Printed on permanent/durable paper.

Printing and binding: Hubert & Co., Göttingen

Printed in Germany

ISSN 0340-6792

ISBN 978-3-447-10125-7

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Introduction

Religious Minorities in Kurdistan: Beyond the Mainstream

KHANNA OMARKHALI

This anthology represents an account of the religious milieus flourishing beyond the Islamic mainstream in all parts of Kurdistan. Although nowadays Kurdistan is mostly identified with Islam, practiced by the majority of Kurds, it can be called a reservoir of religions because various religious groups of minority faiths coexist there.

During this period of profound and rapid change, especially in the last few decades, various economic, political, and social transformations have taken place throughout the Middle East. The Kurds are now living under very different political conditions and the profound changes in the political landscape of each of the involved regions during the past few decades have affected the religious minorities in the Kurdish regions in various ways.

Religious minorities have always remained beyond the mainstream both in Kurdistan itself and elsewhere. Most of the literature on religious minorities in the Middle East that has appeared in recent years is dedicated to the Judeo-Christian-Islamic religious tradition, while many other religious minority groups are frequently overlooked in this research. Until now very little has been published in the field of study of the non-Christian and non-Jewish minorities in the Middle East.¹ Moreover, the focus of the scholarship, as well as that of international human rights institutions, has primarily been on the rights of religious and ethnic minorities.

The idea to publish this volume was partly inspired by the courses on religious traditions in Kurdistan which I have taught at the Georg-August University Göttingen in previous years. Except for the collection of articles by Prof. Martin van BRUINESSEN Mullahs, Sufis and Heretics: The Role of Religion in Kurdish Society,² it was difficult to recommend any other single volume that

1 There is a great amount of literature studying the Aramaic dialects of Christian and Jewish groups in the Kurdish regions. This level of attention is unmatched by any of the other language groups.

2 BRUINESSEN, Martin van, Mullahs, sufis and heretics: The role of religion in Kurdish society, collected articles, Istanbul, The Isis Press, 2000.

would cover many (or at least some) religious groups in the Kurdish areas in one book. The majority of works on the religious minorities in Kurdistan can be found in the form of separate book chapters, journal articles, or monographs usually dedicated to individual religious communities. The Alevi is a good example; over the last few years a number of collections of articles and monographs studying this religious group have appeared.³ Moreover, it bears mentioning that the Kurdish Sunni majority has received rather less attention than the different minorities of Kurdistan. The varieties of ‘orthodox’ Sunni and Shi‘a Islam, however, are worth a volume of their own.

Some of the works study religious minorities in different countries,⁴ while others are dedicated to the investigation of religious minorities all over the Middle East.⁵

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- 3 Cf. e.g. KEHL-BODROGI, Krisztina, KELLNER-HEINKELE, Barbara, OTTER-BEAUJEAN, Anke (eds.), *Syncretistic religious communities in the Near East*, collected papers of the International Symposium “Alevism in Turkey and comparable syncretistic religious communities in the Near East in the past and present”, Leiden, Brill, 1997; OLSSON, Tord, ÖZDALGA, Elisabeth, RAUDVERE, Catharina (eds.), *Alevi identity: Cultural, religious and social perspectives*, Istanbul, Swedish Research Institute, 1998; WHITE, Paul Joseph, JONGERDEN, Joost (eds.), *Turkey’s Alevi enigma: A comprehensive overview*, Brill, 2003; SÖKEFELD, Martin (ed.), *Aleviten in Deutschland. Identitätsprozesse einer Religionsgemeinschaft in der Diaspora*, Bielefeld, Transcript Verlag, 2008; LANGER, Robert, AĞU-İÇENOĞLU, Hüseyin, KAROLEWSKI, Janina, MOTIKA, Raoul (eds.), *Ocak und Dedelik. Institutionen religiösen Spezialistentums bei den Aleviten*, Frankfurt, Peter Lang, 2013; DRESSLER, Markus, *Writing religion: The making of Turkish Alevi Islam*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013.
- 4 Eliz SANASARIAN’s monograph *Religious minorities in Iran* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000), for example, explores the political and ideological relationship between non-Muslim religious minorities in Iran (the Armenians, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Jews, Zoroastrians, Bahā’īs, and Iranian Christian converts) and the state from the formative years of the Islamic Republic to the present day. Another publication by Richard FOLTZ (*Religions of Iran: from prehistory to the present*, London, Oneworld Publications, 2013) noteworthy here in so far as he specifically mentions, although offers no new information, Kurdish minorities: Yezidis and Ahl-e Ḥaqq. His book aims to demonstrate the influence of Iranian ideas throughout the history of the world’s religions.
- 5 An important contribution to Religious Minority Studies is the miscellany *Religious minorities in the Middle East and North Africa* edited by Prof. Erica C.D. HUNTER, which is currently under print (I.B. Tauris, forthcoming). It focuses on the present socio-political situation of the minority religious groups in the contemporary Middle East and North Africa. The book classifies these communities according to their status of *dhimmī* and belonging to ahl al-*kitāb* (“People of the Book”): recognised as *dhimmī* (such as Judaism and Christianity), being later (some partly) recognised as *dhimmī* (e.g. Zoroastrians and Samaritans) and those that were not recognised as such (e.g. Bahā’īs, Druzes, etc.). The volume aims to illustrate how these communities are accommodated within the Islamic system. I am indebted to Prof. Erica HUNTER for this information.

The need to publish a miscellany dedicated to the different religious minority groups in all parts of Kurdistan is shared by the scholars interested in this issue. The novelty of this collection is its focus on religious minorities in Kurdistan, rather than throughout the entire Middle East, or in existing states such as Turkey, Iraq or Iran. There are a number of publications on the different minority groups among the Kurds; however, their current situation throughout Kurdistan has not been a separate subject of detailed research.

Though the book includes some material based on the historical data concerning the religious groups (e.g. Kurdish Jews), its primary purpose is to bring together and to examine the changes religious minorities have been undergoing in the 20th and (mainly) in the 21st centuries. This volume emphasises recent developments and is intended to make new information available to scholars and improve understanding of developments affecting these communities, in particular their social and religious lives. The miscellany describes how these religious minority groups operate within the Kurdish regions, which themselves have been subject to many conflicts and transformations at the turn of the 21st century. With the current anthology we hope to set the starting point for more extensive studies in this field.

The collection is not only significant because it adds new information to research, but also because many of the contributions' conclusions were drawn from personal interviews with members of the different religious communities and field research conducted either in Kurdistan or in diaspora.

This book project brought together German scholars with fellow colleagues from Austria, France, the Netherlands, Poland, Russia, the United States of America, and the United Kingdom. The collection comprises six chapters and it starts with three chapters investigating religious traditions found predominantly among the Kurds and in the Kurdish regions, such as Ahl-e Ḥaqq (Yāresān/Kākā'īs), Yezidism and Alevism. They are followed by a chapter on some Sufi traditions found among the Kurds (the Ḥaqqā⁶ and Khāksār) and the Shabaks. The last two chapters are dedicated to a research of the Jewish and Christian communities in Kurdistan. Each essay addresses specific aspects of that particular religious group. The volume includes information on the communities that have lived in Kurdistan and in diaspora and reflects the situation of both sub-types of the ethno-religious groups of Kurdistan, i.e. “settled” and “displaced” residents.

In spite of the fact that religious minority groups used to live near each other throughout Kurdistan, sometimes sharing the same village, they have had relatively limited mutual contacts, and often having practically no information about the beliefs and rituals of the other group and harbour stereotypes about each other. Along with that, a number of communities lived side by side for centuries

6 In the Kurdish literature it is often written as Haqqa and not *Ḥaqqā*.

and were good neighbours. Some of them, e.g. Yezidi Kurds in the former Ottoman Empire, established a *kirîv* institution with Muslim Kurds or Armenian Christians, which played a key role in Yezidi life. The institution is known in many parts of the Middle East. Most significant was the relationship between a Yezidi and his *kirîv*, who was frequently an older man on whose knees a child was circumcised. This relationship brings forth the life-long obligations of mutual support not merely between these two individuals, but also between two families. Inter-marriage between these families was impossible and it was also one of the reasons why *kirîvs* were usually chosen from the groups with whom inter-marriage was impossible: usually Muslim Kurds,⁷ or sometimes Armenian Christians. The most important reason for Yezidis to choose Muslim Kurd neighbours as *kirîvs* seems to have been a guarantee of safety. Besides the *kirîv* institution, many Yezidis helped Armenian Christians by hiding their children in their homes to save their lives during the Armenian genocide at the beginning of the 20th century in the Ottoman Empire, and vice versa.

The constitutions of Iraq, Turkey, Syria and Iran contain a bill of rights including protection for religious freedom, but in all of these countries Islam is given priority over other religions. The law remains on the constitutional level, but in daily life the members of the religious minority groups face different kind of challenges, e.g. problems of employment, social communication, trade, etc. Moreover, the Muslims often designate the representatives of many religious minority groups as *kāfir* (Ar. “unbeliever”, “infidel”).

The Kurdish government in Iraq had increased their efforts to protect religious minority groups in Kurdistan for last years; however, in daily practice representatives of religious minority groups still face the above-mentioned daily discrimination. Many Yezidis, Ahl-e Ḥaqq, and Mandaean⁸ fled the homelands and formed minorities in diaspora.

The majority of the Kurds are Sunni Muslims, and there is also a Shi‘a minority. The overwhelming majority of the Kurdish Sunni Muslims belong to the Shafi‘i madhhab (Kurd. *mezheb*, a school of Islamic religious law), where, as opposed to their neighbours, it does play an important role in forming a Kurdish identity. The role of the Kurdish madrasas⁹ (Kurd. *medresê*, Islamic religious

7 Among the Caucasian Yezidis, *kirîvs* were mostly their Muslim Kurd neighbours from the Brûkî tribe that still lived close to the Ottoman Empire. Cf. KREYENBROEK, Philip G. in collaboration with KARTAL, Z., OMARKHALI, Kh., RASHOW, Kh.J., *Yezidism in Europe: Different generations speak about their religion*, GOF, III. Reihe: Iranica, Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden, 2009, p. 20.

8 Although in the 21st century some Mandaean in Iraq moved to the Kurdistan region for safety, this book does not include a chapter on them, or on the Bahā‘īs, while their communities lived and live predominantly out of Kurdistan.

9 More about Kurdish madrasas read in ZINAR, Zeynelabidin, *Xwendina medresê (Madrasa education)*, Stockholm, Pencînar, 1993. The English translation of the abbreviated version

school) in Kurdish religious and cultural life can hardly be overestimated. Kurdish madrasas of the traditional type (e.g. the Sitrabas madrasa in Diyarbakir, the Red madrasa in Jizire, in Bayazid, Shemdinan, and others) were important centres of education and cultural transmission especially in northern Kurdistan, some of which still exist today. Many scholars and intellectuals were among the Kurdish madrasa graduates, for example, the founders of the Kurdish Kurmanji literary tradition, ‘Elî HERÎRÎ, Melayê CEZÎRÎ, Melayê BATÊ, Feqî(-yê) TEYRAN, and Ehmedê XANÎ. These schools also educated some Turks, Persians and Arabs in addition to Kurdish pupils. The role of the Kurdish madrasas was not exclusively religious education, but also the preservation and development of the Kurdish culture, language and identity; it was the only place where reading and writing Kurdish was taught, as well as obligatory Arabic and some Persian. Besides the entire Quran, explanations of which were given in Kurdish, the children were to learn the devotional texts in Kurdish by heart.¹⁰

The religions practiced in part or exclusively by Kurds include Yezidism, Ahl-e Ҳаqq, and Alevism. Yezidism does not accept any converts. Yezidis are ethnic Kurds and it is entirely Kurdish religious group because of the endogamy on which their social structure is based and consequently intermarriage is possible only between the members of the individual groups of Yezidis: pîrs, şêxs, or mirîds. In addition to the Kurds, the Ahl-e Ҳаqq and Alevis have also Turkish, Persian, Turcoman, as well as a small number of Arab adherents. There are a number of significant similarities both in ritual and belief between these three religious groups. Moreover, all of these religions are predominantly based on oral tradition, although new forms of literary communication and technological media are now also playing an important role in these communities.

Ahl-e Ҳаqq (Yâresân / Kākā’î)

The representatives of the Ahl-e Ҳаqq (lit. “People of the Truth”) religious group, whose members are mostly ethnic Kurds, live in Iran, where they are named Yâresân (Yârisân or Yâristân) and in Iraq, where they are known as Kākā’î (Kurd. Kakêyî or Kakaî). The Ahl-e Ҳаqq people in Iran often call themselves a *tâyefe* (“tribe”, “group”). They live predominantly in the Germiyan, Guran, and Bahdinan regions in Iraq, and in Hawraman and the outskirts of

of the text: ZINAR, Zeynelabidîn, *Medrese education in northern Kurdistan*, translated and annotated by Martin van BRUINSEN, in *Les Annales de l’Autre Islam* 5, L’Islam des Kurdes, 1998. See also LEEZENBERG, Michiel, Elî Teremaxî and the vernacularization of madrasa learning in Kurdistan, in IS, forthc.

10 Such as the *Mawlūd* (narratives of Muhammad’s birth) of Mela Ehmedê BATÊ(YÎ) (d. 1491), Mela Xelîlê SÊRTÎ’s (1754–1843) *Nahj al-an’ām* on Muslim doctrine, also *Nūbihārā bichūkān* (“First fruits of spring for the young”) and *‘Aqīdayā Īmāne* (“Ideological belief”) of Ehmedê XANÎ (1651–1707), etc. See ZINAR 1998.

Kermanshah in Iran. The overwhelming majority of the religious texts of Yāresān in Iran, as well as of Kākā'īs in Iraq, are composed in Gorani (or Gurani). Kākā'īs claim to speak Mācho,¹¹ a variant of Gorani. The Ahl-e Ḥaqq possess a rich corpus of religious oral texts, known as *kalām*. They believe that these texts are divinely revealed poems (as well as Yezidi religious hymns, Kurd. qewls).

While, for example, the position of Yezidis in the autonomous region of Kurdistan has greatly improved during the last decade, similar liberalizing trends do not seem to have affected the Kākā'īs. In Iran, the dominance of Twelver Shi'ism in state ideology has impacted minority groups in various ways. The Ahl-e Ḥaqq of the Guran area, for instance, are exposed to strong pressure to follow the example of some of their coreligionists elsewhere, and accept their faith as a branch of Shi'a Islam. The modern situation of the Ahl-e Ḥaqq in Iran seems to be quite complicated.¹²

Philip KREYENBROEK gives a general overview of the Yāresān community, describing its history, the sacred history, worldview and beliefs, texts and narratives, social structure, and the rituals and festivals in his contribution "The Yāresān of Kurdistan". Like Yezidism and some branches of Alevism, Ahl-e Ḥaqq has preserved many ancient Iranian elements, especially in the spheres of belief, Cosmogonic myths and ritual.¹³ There were and are different branches in the Yāresān tradition, some of which emphasize the pre-Islamic substratum of their religion; others stress their closeness to Islam.¹⁴

11 *Ew mācho* means "s/he says, s/he is saying".

12 According to a report by Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA), on June 4, 2013, two followers (Hassan RAZAVI) of Ahl-e Ḥaqq in Kurdistan province in Iran set themselves on fire in protest to the persecution of another member of this group. It was a protest to while Keyumars TAMNAK in Hamadan Prison had been forced to shave off his facial hair which is revered by the followers of Ahl-e Ḥaqq. Another member of Ahl-e Ḥaqq, Nimkard TAHARI, set himself on fire in front of the same building (the main administrative office in the Kurdistan Province) on June 5, 2013 and died soon afterwards, when heard that TAMNAK was forced to shave off his moustache.

13 Read more in KREYENBROEK, this volume.

14 More about Ahl-e Ḥaqq tradition see BRUINESSEN, Martin van, When Haji Bektash still bore the name of Sultan Sahak: Notes on the Ahl-e Ḥaqq of the Guran district, in MULLAS, sufis and heretics: The role of religion in Kurdish society, collected articles, Istanbul, The Isis Press, 2000, pp. 245–269, (first published in POPOVIC, Alexandre, VEINSTEIN, Gilles (eds.), *Bektachiyya: études sur l'ordre mystique des Bektachis et les groupes relevant de Hadji Bektach*, Istanbul, Éditions Isis, 1995, pp. 117–138); BRUINESSEN, Martin van, Ahl-i Ḥaqq, in KRÄMER, Gudrun, MATRINGE, Denis, NAWAS, John, ROWSON, Everett (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Islam 3*, Brill, 2013. Available at: http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-3/ahl-i-haqq-COM_22840 [Accessed: 07.06.2013]; MIR-HOSSEINI, Ziba, Inner truth and outer history: the two worlds of the Ahl-i Ḥaqq of Kurdistan, in IJMES 16, 1994, pp. 267–285; MIR-HOSSEINI, Ziba, Faith, ritual and culture among the Ahl-e Ḥaqq, in KREYENBROEK, Ph., ALLISON, Ch. (eds.), *Kurdish*

Not all of the Ahl-e Ḥaqq religious texts are composed in Gorani; some religious teachers used also the Farsi language in their writings. Ḥājj Ne‘matollāh JAYḤŪNĀBĀDĪ¹⁵ was an influential mystic who collected and recorded the previously oral traditions of the Ahl-e Ḥaqq and was considered to be a reformist of the Yāresān tradition. The new tradition he established has become known under the name ‘Alī Elāhī. He was the author of a number of books (in Farsi) including *Shāhnāme-ye Ḥaqīqat*¹⁶ (“The Book of the Kings of Truth”) and *Forqān al-Akḥbār*¹⁷ (“Criterion for Distinguishing the Traditions”).

The chapter of Mojan MEMBRADO “Ḥājj Ne‘matollāh JAYḤŪNĀBĀDĪ (1871–1920) and His Mystical Path within the Ahl-e Ḥaqq Order” is dedicated to the life and works of JAYḤŪNĀBĀDĪ. The paper represents different aspects of JAYḤŪNĀBĀDĪ’s life and examines his impact on the Ahl-e Ḥaqq order. The consequence of Ḥājj Ne‘matollāh’s public revelation was the establishment of his own “mystical path” (*reshte-ye faqr*) within the Ahl-e Ḥaqq tradition, complete with its dervish followers and its own *khānaqāh* (religious centre). Ḥājj Ne‘matollāh did not have a spiritual master during his lifetime, and proclaimed that his source of inspiration was the Lord of the Age (*Šāheb[-e] Zamān*). He therefore named his branch *Khān(a)dān-e Šāheb-zamānī*, which became the twelfth *khān(a)dān* within the consecrated Ahl-e Ḥaqq dynasties. MEMBRADO also discusses the question of religious authority among the Ahl-e Ḥaqq communities and some interesting aspects of the transition from oral to written tradition.

Sacred music plays an important part in the religious tradition of Yezidis, Alevis and Ahl-e Ḥaqq. Partow HOOSMANDRAD’s article on the sacred music of the Kurdish Ahl-e Ḥaqq of the Guran region is dedicated to the role of devotional music from the ethno-musicological perspective. Her article sheds light on the devotional practices of the Kurdish Ahl-e Ḥaqq people of the Guran region in the Kermanshah province of Iran, with special focus on aspects of musical expression in the Yāresān tradition, which include the musical repertoire, the *tanbūr* (long-necked string instrument), the religious texts, and the rituals. In this paper HOOSMANDRAD gives an ethnographic portrayal of the musical practices of the Ahl-e Ḥaqq and argues that the life of the Ahl-e Ḥaqq may be seen as a “constant staging” of a ritual with strongly intertwined pieces, through which a distinct liminal state is maintained. This constructed ritual serves to keep the community at a nearly constant liminal state, which helps to create “a

culture and identity, 1996, pp. 111–134.

15 Pen name “Mojrem;” b. Kurdish village of Jayḥūnābād, 1288/1871; d. Jayḥūnābād, 7 Jomādā II 1338/27 February 1920. Cf. MEMBRADO, Mojan, Jayḥūnābādī, Ḥājj Ne‘mat-Allāh Mokri (1871–1920), in *Iranica*, vol. XIV, fasc. 6, pp. 641–643.

16 JAYḤŪNĀBĀDĪ, Ḥājj Ne‘matollāh, *Shāh-nāma-ye Haqīqat / Le Livre des Rois de Vérité: Histoire traditionnelle des Ahl-e Haqq*, MOKRI, M. (ed.), vol. I, Tehran/Paris, 1966.

17 Cf. WEIGHTMAN, S.C.R., The significance of the Kitāb Burhān ul-Ḥaqq: additional material for the study of the Ahl-i Ḥaqq, in *Iran* 2, 1964, pp. 83–103.

substituted reality that maintains a sense of pride, identity, and inner piece, an escape from the social realities, and an existence that may be relied upon in an unpredictable world".¹⁸

Yezidis

In the past three decades large steps have been taken in our understanding of Yezidism. Yezidis, adherents of the monotheistic non-proselytising Kurdish religion, live in all parts of Kurdistan. The total population of Yezidis in the world varies, but a number of 550,000 seems to be the most realistic estimate. Yezidis mainly live in Iraqi Kurdistan, Syria, Turkey (a small population), but also in Armenia and Georgia. The majority of them settled in the Caucasus in the beginning of the 20th century, fleeing religious oppression by the Ottoman Empire. Yezidis also live in Iran, where their numbers are estimated from one to a few thousand people.¹⁹ Only little information about them can be obtained, because they have always tried to stay as invisible as possible in Iran.²⁰ A British diplomat and author of a number of novels about the Qajar dynasty in Iran, James Justinian MORIER (1780–1849), mentions how a number of Yezidi tribes moved to Kermanshah and asked for permission to stay there.²¹

From the 1980s on, there were at least three waves of migration of Yezidis from the homelands to European countries: in the 1980s there was migration from Turkey to Germany, in the late 1980s–1990s many Iraqi Yezidis went to Europe, and around 1990 there was a massive wave of migration from Armenia and Georgia to Russia, the Ukraine and Europe.

The Yezidi system of transmission of religious knowledge is currently undergoing changes in response to technical advances and increasing circulation of religious written literature. The scripturalization processes nowadays take place among the different religious groups in the Middle East, which had previously been transmitted orally, such as Ahl-e Haqq, Alevis in Turkey, and Alawites/Nusayris in Syria. In her contribution "Current Changes in the Yezidi System of Transmission of Religious Knowledge and the Status of Spiritual Authority", Khanna OMARKHALI discusses the issues of how writing and media culture have become influential in the daily life of Yezidis both in their homeland and in the diaspora, and shows its influence on the Yezidi oral tradition. Yezidism is

18 See HOOSHMANDRAD, this volume.

19 UPHOFF, Petra, *Untersuchung zur rechtlichen Stellung und Situation von nichtmuslimischen Minderheiten in Iran*, Frankfurt am Main, IGFM, 2012, p. 353.

20 UPHOFF 2012, p. 362.

21 MORIER, J.J., *The adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan*, 3 vols., London, 1824, esp. ch. 26. The work is mainly based on his personal observations while traveling through Persia.

currently going through a new stage in its development, namely the transition to a written and technologically mediated tradition.²²

This crucial change in the tradition leads to significant changes in the status of authority in Yezidi society. The role of the spiritual master (Kurd. *hosta*) in the training of reciters and experts of religious hymns (Kurd. *qewlbêj*) was previously a key one. Now, we are witnessing a renaissance of the tradition, where young Yezidis learn the texts from printed collections (or audio/video recordings) and the authority of the spiritual master is partly replaced by that of printed works. In the Yezidi society of today, there are different ways to transmit religious texts; the traditional mode of verbatim transmission taught by a religious preceptor or a spiritual master now coexists with the use of written texts, audio recordings, the Internet, and TV broadcastings for memorizing the sacred texts.²³

Practically all Yezidis claim a Kurdish identity, while some Yezidis in the Caucasus and the Shangal region in Iraq claim to belong to the separate Yezidi ethnîe and call their religion *Şerfedîn*.²⁴ During the Saddam Hussein period, some Yezidis chose to be counted as Arabs in an attempt to avoid persecution by the Ba'athist regime.

Throughout history the Yezidis have been accused of devil-worship and heresy by their Muslim neighbours, and therefore were persecuted and discriminated against by Arab and Kurdish groups alike. Nevertheless, the Yezidis were able to maintain their identity and are currently finding their place in a changing Middle East. In his contribution “One Community, Two Identities: Syria’s Yezidis and the Struggle of a Minority Group to Fit in”, Sebastian MAISEL discusses the unique position of Yezidis within the Syrian minority context and the present ethnic-religious conflict or civil war. He studies the Yezidi community

22 More about the formation of a Canon among Yezidis, see OMARKHALI, Khanna, *Istoričeskie predposylki formirovanija Kanona v sovremennom jezidskom obščestve* (Historical preconditions for the formation of a Canon in today’s Yezidi society), in *Musul’manskoje prostranstvo po perimetru granic Kavkaza i Central’noj Azii* (Islamic space bordering on the Caucasus and Central Asia), BELOKRENICKY, V.Ja., OULTČENKO, N.Ju. (eds.), Moscow, IV RAN, Kraft+, 2012, pp. 216–223.

23 Read more in OMARKHALI, this volume.

24 A thorough article dedicated to the question of Yezidi identity in Diaspora is published by ACKERMANN, Andreas, *A double minority: Notes on the emerging Yezidi Diaspora*, in KOKOT, W., TÖLÖLYAN, Kh., ALFONSO, Ch. (eds.), *Diaspora, identity and religion. New directions in theory and research*, London, New York, Routledge, 2004, pp. 156–169. In 2009 Ph. KREYENBROEK published a book on the condition of Yezidism in Germany and Russia, where the question of identity is also discussed; cf. KREYENBROEK 2009; see also OMARKHALI, Khanna, *Etničeskaja identičnost’ kurdov i samoidentifikacija kurdovezidov. Vzaimodejstvie s predstaviteljami drugich kul’tur* (Ethnic identity of the Kurds and self-identification of the Kurds Yezidis), in *Put’ Vostoka. Kul’turnaja, etničeskaja i religioznaja identičnost’*, vol. 33, Saint-Petersburg, 2004, pp. 100–105.

in two separate areas of Syria, the Afrin area, and Syrian Jazira. The local division of the communities led to the formation of two Yezidi identities. Yezidi identity in Syria thus proves to be a multi-layered, fragmented and fragile composite whole, which has been shaped in part by external factors. In the paper the author claims that the Yezidis of Syria underwent radical changes in their status, perception, and position within the Syrian minority context. The paper also discusses how historical and religious-doctrinal memory discourses have been built up recently in view of the changes which have taken place since the independence of the Syrian state and the Arab Spring.

Census data of all the religious minority groups discussed in the book have to be used carefully. The paper “Yezidis in Censuses in the USSR and Post-Soviet Countries” by Nodar MOSSAKI analyzes the statistics of the Yezidi population according to censuses in the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia, Georgia and Armenia,²⁵ which are home to the vast majority of Yezidis from the former Soviet Union. The 1926 USSR census addressed Yezidis as a distinct ethnic group. In the following censuses conducted in the Soviet Union Yezidis are recorded as Kurds. In the census following the collapse of the Soviet Union in Georgia, Armenia and the Russian Federation, Yezidis are again distinguished from Kurds and recorded as a separate ethnic group. The paper, which being fully based on documents from archives, also studies the dynamics of the number of Yezidis in the Soviet and post-Soviet period.

Alevis

Alevis (Kurd. Elewî; Tur. Aleviler) are the most numerous religious minority group in Kurdistan. There are actually several groups that are now called Alevis, and which were historically referred to as *Kızılbaş* (lit. “redhead”). Although a large number of studies on this religious group has emerged during the last decades,²⁶ there is still limited information concerning their dogma, beliefs, and oral literature.

Alevis live mostly in Turkey and are predominantly Turkish-speaking people, but they also speak Zaza (called Zazakî, Dimilî or Kirmanckî), which is often considered a separate West Iranian language by many Western linguists, as well as Kurmanji.

25 The Yezidi community in Armenia is a more conservative and rural one, and consequently drew more attention from the scholars as the community which had preserved the religious and oral tradition better than the others. The Yezidi community in Georgia, meanwhile, was not as well studied as the community in Armenia.

26 On the Kurdish Alevis see in particular BUMKE, Peter J., *Kızılbaş-Kurden in Dersim (Tunceli, Türkei): Marginalität und Häresie*, in *Anthropos* 74, 1979, pp. 530–548; KEHL-BODROGI, Krisztina, *Die Kızılbaş/Aleviten: Untersuchungen über eine esoterische Glaubensgemeinschaft in Anatolien*, Berlin, Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1988.

In Alevism (Tur. Alevilik), religious leaders (pir, rehber, seyit) play an important spiritual leading role in society, as well as in the Ahl-e ʿHaqq and Yezidi societies, and their mediating role is often mentioned by scholars. In all three communities, sacred lineages²⁷ (Kurd. ocax; Tur. ocak) exist, where the male representatives are the major carriers of religious knowledge.

Religion and politics have always been closely intertwined in the Middle East. It is of considerable importance to examine how political, economic, and other changes influence the religious minority groups, which are often spread over different states, and how these religious minorities are included in or excluded from the political life of the respective countries. In his contribution “‘Our Alevi and Kurdish Brothers’ – Some Remarks on Nationalism and Minority Politics in Turkey”, Markus DRESSLER writes about the Alevi Kurds within the constraints of Turkish minority politics. He shows how the hegemonic discourse of Turkish nationhood is defined by ideas of Turkish and (Sunni) Muslim supremacy. DRESSLER sees its main reasons in the formative period of Turkish nation-building, where the othering of non-Muslim groups as minorities had been an important implement of the nation-building process. Alevi and Kurds, in contrast to other non-Muslims, however, were accepted as “original elements” of the country and regarded as Turks and “future-Turks”, respectively. Since the formation of the secularist Republic of Turkey, Turkish nationalist discourse has presented the Alevi as “pure Turks”. However, this role attributed to the Alevi is much more ambivalent, since the underlying supposition is that a “real” Turk is a Muslim is the main principle of the Turkish nationhood discourse.

Lokman TURGUT writes in his paper about the Kurdish Alevi on the basis of a book written by the Kurdish Alevi Pir Ali BALI.²⁸ The main part of TURGUT’s article is dedicated to describing this book. He chose it as an example to demonstrate the faultiness of Irène MÉLIKOFF’s (a French scholar in Religious Studies, d. 2009) statements concerning the Alevi.²⁹ Her conceptualisation of Alevism and finding the origins of Alevism in Turkish Shamanism (“Outwardly Islamized continuation of the old Turkish Shaman”) has also been criticised previously by Markus DRESSLER.³⁰

The Alevi as well as the Ahl-e ʿHaqq and Yezidi traditions are based mainly on oral tradition, even though all three societies have passed or are passing through a period of transition from oral to written tradition. The core part of Pir Ali BALI’s book is dedicated to the description of the corpus of the Alevi’s

27 In 2013, a new miscellany appeared that is dedicated to the investigation of the traditional institute in Alevism in the 20th century. See LANGER, et al. (eds.) 2013.

28 BALI, Pir Ali, *Diwan-a Heq: bi Kurmancî cêmê elewîtiyê* (Diwan-a Heq: The cem [ceremony] of Alevism in Kurmanji), Düsseldorf, Yol erkan Yayinlari, 2005.

29 See MÉLIKOFF, Irène, *Hadji Bektach: Un Mythe et ses avatars. Genèse et evolution du soufisme populaire en Turquie*, Leiden, Boston, Köln, Brill, 1998, pp. 9–13.

30 DRESSLER 2013, ch. 6.

orally transmitted religious texts in Kurmanji, and their rituals, in which he took part himself. Besides nefes (religious hymns), these oral religious texts include the so-called gulbang (ceremonial religious texts), some of which are presented in TURGUT's paper.

Janroj KELES's article "The Politics of Religious and Ethnic Identity among Kurdish Alevis in the Homeland and in Diaspora" investigates the revival and re-construction of the Alevi-Kurdish identity. The paper explores the national and transnational relationships among Kurdish Alevis, and their identities. Alevis, as well as Ahl-e Haqq and Yezidis, have been the subject of discrimination and massacre because of their religious affiliation (sometimes also for ethnic reasons). Persecution was the main reason for the Alevis to practice their religion secretly and to hide their Alevi identity. Until the 1970s, the majority of Alevis lived in rural areas and mostly conducted their rituals in secret. Since the 1970s and in particular the 1970s, however, there has been a shift to express their religion publicly.

Since the 2000s, the media have played a key role in the reconstruction of the Alevi Kurdish identity and of Alevism in general. Moreover, the Alevi Kurdish Diaspora takes an active part in this process by supporting and financing houses of worship (Kurd. mala cem), publishing magazines and books on the issue. The paper of KELES discusses how and in which ways the Alevis create a sense of collective religious and ethnic identity both in their homeland and in Diaspora.

Sufism: The Haqqa and Khāksār movements

The role of Sufism (Ar. taṣawwuf; Kurd. sofferî) in the political and social life of Kurdistan can hardly be overestimated. There were various Sufi (Ar. *ṣūfî*; Kurd. sofi) orders in Kurdistan at different times, but two of them, the Qadiriyya and Naqshbandiyya orders³¹ of Sunni Islam Sufism, especially took root in Kurdistan. The Sufi Sheikhs have often been the leaders of the Kurdish national movements, but frequently with the support of the Kurdish intelligentsia. It was their spiritual authority that often helped to commit people to struggle.

At the end of the 19th century some Sufi Sheikhs in Kurdistan started to develop messianic beliefs. In the early 20th century Naqshbandi Sheikh Ebdulkerîm of Sergelu from the village of Shadala (north of Sulaymaniyah, Kurd. Silêmanî) established a movement called *Haqqa* with its different doctrine and practices.³² Dana NAQSHIBENDI, a grandson of Sheikh Ebdulkerîm says: "There were people who tried to make the Kurds Islamic, but others like my grandfather tried to make Islam Kurdish."³³

31 Read more about the Sufi orders in Kurdistan in BRUINSEN 2000.

32 Martin van BRUINSEN mentioned this group in his Agha, shaikh, and state. The social and political structures of Kurdistan, London, Z books, 1992, pp. 212, 326.

33 See SCHMIDINGER, this volume.

After the death of their leader, Sheikh Ebdulkerîm, the community was split into two groups; one was led by Mamê Riza and another one by Hemê Sûr. The followers of the latter were called Hemê Sûrî and they lived predominantly in one village in the Germian region, North Iraq. Taking into account the fact that their village was destroyed during the Anfâl³⁴ campaign and that their beliefs included not having children, it seems that there are no Hemê Sûrî left. Another group of Haqqa people, led by Mamê Riza, lived in different villages and survived the Anfâl. In his contribution “The Haqqa Community: A Heterodox Movement with Sufi Origins”, Thomas SCHMIDINGER focuses on their heterodox beliefs, the well-known equality of men and women, and the history of the community.

Along with the Sunni there are also Shi‘a Sufi orders in Kurdistan. The Khâksâriyye is a large group of dervishes who are normally presented as one of the three most important Shi‘a dervish orders in Iran. Currently a large number of members of this community can be found in different towns in Iran. It is thought that Khâksâr dervishes are representatives of the Qalandariyya. In recent decades some Khâksâr dervishes have joined other Sufi orders for various reasons – the majority joined the Ne‘matollâhî order, named after its founder Shâh Nûr al-Dîn Ne‘matollâh Valî (1330–1431), who was born in Aleppo.

The Khâksâr dervishes possess the manuscript collections themselves and keep them in their homes. Some of these collections have been published recently.³⁵

The work of Shahrokh RAEI does research on the Khâksâr order in Kerman-shah. He studies the history of appearance of the order and its contemporary situation, taking into account the social changes of the last decades in Kerman-shah. Due to the intervention of state authority against the dervish orders in the 1930s, and to the reforms of the order by Mo‘taḥhar, who had widely brought the Khâksâr in line with other Sufi communities, the constitution of the dervish community has changed considerably. In the past, the Khâksâr order was di-

34 The Anfâl campaign, known as the Kurdish genocide, was mostly conducted against the Kurds in northern Iraq, but it also included some other minority communities, such as Yezidi Kurds, Assyrians, Shabaks, and Turkmens. Its culmination was in 1988, after the bombing of the Kurdish city on the border of Iran Halabja. The campaign was led by the Ba‘ath (Ar. ba‘th) regime, by the Iraqi president Saddam Hussein and Ali Hassan al-Majid, known as Chemical Ali, because of his use of chemical weapons against the Kurds during this campaign. On the campaign read more in BLACK, George, *Genocide in Iraq: the Anfâl campaign against the Kurds*, Human Rights Watch, 1993.

35 Cf. e.g. ADHAMI, Tûraj, *Az khâk tâ Khâksâr* (From soil to Khâksâr), Tehran, 1390/2011; AFSHÂRÎ, Mehrân (ed.), *Fotovvatnâmeḥā va rasâ‘el-e Khâksâriyye* (The Fotovvatnâmes and manuscripts of Khâksâr order), Tehran, 1382/2003; MONAJEMÎ, Hüseyn, *Mabâni-ye solûk dar selsele-ye Khâksâr-e Jalâlî va taṣavvof* (The basics of spiritual path of the Khâksâr Jalâlî order and Sufism), Tehran, 1379/2000.

vided into four lineages, namely ‘Ajam, Gholām ‘Alīshāhī, Ma‘šūm ‘Alīshāhī, and Nūrā’ī. Only the Gholām ‘Alīshāhī lineage developed an organization and structure of a dervish order.

The rituals and religious traditions of Khāksār show many similarities with both the Ahl-e Ḥaqq tradition and Yezidism. The Khāksār believe that each person reincarnates after death and their next life will equal their deeds in the previous one. This process continues for 1001 times as in the Ahl-e Ḥaqq tradition, while in Yezidism the number of rebirths is not clear. In another distinctive feature Khāksār members show a similar tradition as the Ahl-e Ḥaqq, it is the fifth level of the Khāksār dervishes’ mystic path, called sar sepordan (“submitting one’s head”) or jawz shekistan (“the cracking of nutmeg”); in order to be initiated on this level, a Khāksār must go to an Ahl-e Ḥaqq master.

Shabak

One of the less studied religious minority groups in Kurdistan are the Shabak. Its members speak different languages and they are ethnically associated with both the Kurds and the Turcoman people. The true religion of the Shabak group is a topic of discussion. Among the Shabak people one can find both Sunni and Shi‘a followers. When I was in the Kurdistan Region in Iraq, I met a number of Shabak families, where some brothers were the followers of the Sunni branch of Islam, while the others were Shi‘a.

The Shabak community is structured by a spiritual hierarchy similar to that of the Ahl-e Ḥaqq, Alevi and Yezidis. Each adult is affiliated with a pīr, his spiritual elder.³⁶

In 1985–1986, some Shabak villages³⁷ were relocated, and in 1988, more than 20 Shabak villages were displaced to Northern Iraq, and many Shabaks were deported. According to our informant, interviewed at the time of writing, in mid-2013, Shabaks live in about 60 villages in Iraq mainly in the regions of Bashik, Bertile, Nemrud, Kelek, and Tilkef.³⁸

36 Cf. BRUINSEN, Martin van, A Kizilbash community in Iraqi Kurdistan: the Shabak, in *Les Annales de l’Autre Islam* 5, 1998, pp. 185–196.

37 In 1967, EDMONDS listed the following Shabak villages: Darāwīsh, Gōragharībān, Gōgjalī, Bāshbitān, Qara Tapa ‘Arab, Bisātli Māzin, Abū Jarwān, Tōpzāwa, Tayrāwa, Mināra Shabak, Kirētākh, Bisātli Pichūk, Qara Tapa, Bāzwāya, Bāzgirtān, ‘Alīrash, Salāmiyya. Cf. EDMONDS, Cecil John, A pilgrimage to Lalish, London, Royal Asiatic Society, 1967.

38 In the region of Bashik they are mainly living in the villages Bare ma, Faziliye, Khursibat, Bazwaya, Kukjeli, Omar Qapchi, and Baybokht. In the Bertile area Shabaks are living in the Hamdaniye region in the following villages: Khizne, Ali Rash, Basikhre, Bazkirtan, Minara, Jilyokhan, Tehrawe, Khwitile, Lik, etc. In the surroundings of Nemrud in the region Hamdaniye in Omar Kan, Qirqasha, Khirabe Sultan, Til Yaqub, Qarashur, etc. In the surroundings of Kelek in the region Hamdaniye: Shir Kan, Zahra Khatun, Miftiye, Bidne Gawre, Bidna Hurdi. In the region Tilkef, Shabaks are living mainly in the villages

In part, the Shabak are a tribally structured society, which include the tribes known as Bajalan, Be Jiwan, Dawidi, Hariri, Gargari,³⁹ Rozhbayan, and others.⁴⁰

Their mother tongue has been described as a variant of Gorani, which is also spoken by the Kākā'īs. My informant⁴¹ from Iraqi Kurdistan interviewed in March 2013, also told me that their mother tongue is “Kurdish near to Gorani”, and another informant called it “Hawrami”. They have also been described as Turcomans, or as Kurdish speakers, or even Arabs, and individual Shabak have frequently accepted one or the other of these designations when it was necessary.⁴² Both Kurds and Turcomans consider the Shabak group as a minority within their own ethnic group. When I interviewed some Shabaks in Kurdistan, they answered to my questions concerning their identity that among the Shabaks were Kurds, Arabs and Turkomans (the latter live mostly in the village Tez Khirab). Outsiders, however, have commonly regarded them as Kurds.

Many modern Shabak people say that the Quran is their Sacred Book. Nevertheless, some sources claim that their rituals and oral religious texts are in Turkish, as those of the majority of the Alevis in Anatolia, and that they also have the Sacred Book called Buyruk,⁴³ or the *Kitāb al-Manāqib* (“Book of Exemplary Acts”).

Michiel LEEZENBERG's contribution is dedicated to the Shabak group especially in post-Saddam Iraq. This group has long been the object of rivalling nationalist claims. Until the 1990s, there had been discussions over whether Shabaks were Kurds, Arabs, or Turkomans. Because of their linguistic diversity it was easy to use this multilingualist aspect in the nationalist rival cases. As a result of the 2003 war and in particular of the attacks of the radical Sunni groups against religious minorities in Iraq that have increased in the past decade, another approach to the perception of the Shabak's identity could be observed, where the stress was on their religious identity and not on their ethnolinguistic one. At the same time, one witness that Shabaks emphasize the religious orthodoxy of their views by putting themselves in the frame of the more well-established religious groups such as the Twelver Shi'a or the Bektashi order.⁴⁴

Ba'weza and Sayid Kal. From the interview with the Shabak (Mihemed Hisên Hemze, born in 1973, a teacher, lives in the village Bare ma), Zakho, Kurdistan, conducted by Khanna OMARKHALI, March 2013.

39 One of the Yezidi pîr lineage is also called Gergerî.

40 From the interview with the Shabak (preferred to stay anonymous), Zakho, Kurdistan, conducted by Khanna OMARKHALI, March 2013.

41 From the interview with the Shabak (would like to stay anonym), Zakho, Kurdistan, conducted by Khanna OMARKHALI, March 2013.

42 BRUINSEN 1998, p. 185.

43 The collection of sacred texts of Alevis is also called Buyruk.

44 Read more in LEEZENBERG, this volume.

Jews

Since the overwhelming majority of the Jews in Kurdistan emigrated from Iraq and Iran to Israel in the 1950s, very few have remained in these countries. Relatively little is known about the contemporary position of Jews in the various parts of the Kurdish lands. It is said that around 26,000 Jews are living in Turkey today, but none of them seem to live in the Kurdish parts of the country. It is likely that fewer than 20,000 Jews remain in Iran today.⁴⁵ With the beginning of the early 12th throughout the 20th century, there have been some travelers' and scholars' reports on small Jewish groups scattered over Kurdistan. Jews from Kurdistan, who are often called Kurdistani Jews in the literature, mostly lived in a self-sustaining rural society, and followed a nomadic or semi-nomadic life-style.⁴⁶

The Jews in Kurdistan see themselves as descendants of the ten tribes exiled by the ancient Assyrians and deported in three major waves between the 8th and the 6th centuries BCE. In her contribution "The Kurdish Jewish Communities – Lost Forever", Birgit AMMANN gives an overview of where and how Jews lived in Kurdistan and what social positions they occupied in society. Widely outnumbered by Muslim Kurds and to a lesser degree by Aramaic- and Armenian-speaking Christians, Yezidis and other groups, the Jews have held a clearly underprivileged position within a society that had been both tribal and feudal for hundreds of years. The religious minority groups in Kurdistan lived mostly in separate quarters in the towns,⁴⁷ or even in separate villages. The Jews in Kurdistan, with the exception of a few isolated Jewish settlements, lived mostly in ethnically mixed towns and villages. The Jews were not tribal people and enjoying the status of *dhimmī* (collectively ahl al-dhimma 'the people of the dhimma') they were almost fully dependent on tribal chiefs for protection, whereas other groups were only partly dependent.⁴⁸

A strong influence of orality is a vital facet of all religions found in Kurdistan. Surely there is interdependence between orality and literacy; however, the oral character of the religions in Kurdistan plays a key role even in religions traditionally based on written traditions, such as Judaism and Christianity. The geographical position of Kurdistan, especially its mountainous regions, provided for quite isolated lives of the religious minority groups and fostered a dynamic oral tradition within each group. Dan BEN-AMOS describes how Jews, as a people living in diaspora, were incorporating the folklore of other nations while

45 FOLTZ 2013, p. 93.

46 ZAKEN, Mordechai, Jewish subjects and their tribal chieftains in Kurdistan. A study in survival, Leiden, Boston, Brill, 2007; also AMMANN; SABAR, this volume.

47 E.g. in Zakho there was the Jewish district. Even today, with no Jews left there, it is still called mehla cuhya (lit. "Jewish district").

48 ZAKEN 2007, p. 139f; also AMMANN, this volume.

they were spreading their own internationally known themes among those nations at the same.⁴⁹

Kurdistani Jews have developed a rich oral folk literature. In his contribution on Kurdish and Neo-Aramaic literature of Kurdistani Jews in this volume, Yona SABAR states that even their written tradition found in manuscripts originated in oral tradition. Translations of the Bible into Neo-Aramaic dialects were often transmitted orally without writing. Literacy was available mostly only for the rabbis (*hakhamim*), who used manuscripts for their preparations and ceremonies.

The first and native language of the Jews in Kurdistan was Neo-Aramaic, while their second language was Kurdish. Their religious literature was usually translated in Neo-Aramaic from Hebrew sources, while the secular literature mostly derived from Kurdish, Arabic, or other Near Eastern sources.⁵⁰ The majority of the folk songs, rhymes and proverbs were transmitted mostly in Kurdish, and occasionally in Arabic, Persian, or Turkish.⁵¹ The scholars emphasise the heroic aspect of the Biblical narrative in the oral tradition of Kurdistani Jews.⁵²

Christians

The Christians of Kurdistan (often called *fileh* / *feleh*⁵³ or *xaçparêz* in Kurdish) form one of the oldest surviving Christian communities. Living among them are followers of diverse Christian churches, the Holy Apostolic Catholic Assyrian Church of the East (known as the Nestorian Church, often called “Nestorians” or “Assyrians”), the Chaldean Catholic Church (separated from the Assyrian Church of the East, who accepted the union with the Roman Catholic Church, but kept their liturgy and own religious rite), the Syrian Orthodox Church (who often call themselves “Aramaicans”), the Syrian Catholic Church, the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Armenian Catholic Church, and the Greek Orthodox

49 BEN-AMOS, Dan, Jewish folk literature, in OT 14/1, 1999, p. 140.

50 SABAR, this volume.

51 More about oral literature of the Jews from Kurdistan, cf. AVIDANI, Hakham Alwan, *Sefer Ma'aseh hag-Gedolim* (A book about the acts of the Great People), vols. I–V, Jerusalem, 1972–1976; also BRAUER, Erich, *The Jews of Kurdistan*, edited by PATAI, Raphael, Series: Jewish Folklore and Anthropology, Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1993; RIVLIN, Yoseph Yoel, *Shirat yehudei ha-targum* (The poetry of the Jews of Kurdistan), Jerusalem, Bialik Institute, 1959; SABAR, Yona, *The folk literature of the Kurdistani Jews: an anthology*, Yale Judaica Series, 23, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1982; SABAR, Yona, *The folk-literature of the Jews of Kurdistan*, in *Jewish Folklore and Ethnography Review*, vol. 14, 1–2, 1992, pp. 10–11.

52 BEN-AMOS 1999, p. 199.

53 From Ar. *fallāḥ* “agriculturalist”, “farmer”; in Kurdish this term is used in the meaning of Christian. Among Transcaucasian Kurds, however, the term *fileh* is used to determine Christians and often Armenians.

Church of Antioch (also called “Rum Orthodox”). There are Syrian and Armenian Protestants in Kurdistan who have their own churches (mainly Presbyterian, Lutheran, and others).⁵⁴ Moreover, there are also multiethnic churches (e.g. Adventist, Baptist, Pentecostal, etc.) that do not belong to the institutions of the Armenian and Syrian Protestants and include Kurds as well as Syrians and Armenians. The Kurdish Protestants are all recent converts.⁵⁵

As is well known, the Kurdish Regional Government claims that the Christians enjoy relative security in the region under their control. Further research on whether this affects the position of Christians in other “Kurdish” regions would be an important contribution to the study. In her chapter “Coping in Kurdistan: The Christian Diaspora”, Erica HUNTER discusses the situation of Christians who were forced to leave their homes in Baghdad and Mosul, and who have found refuge in the Kurdistan region of Iraq after 2003. Her article explores the situation newcomers have been facing since 2003 in terms of housing, employment, education and health services, as well as the underlying mechanisms that have been providing support for them. The article investigates the effects of the increase in numbers of Christians both on the Kurdish population, and on Christians that had settled in Kurdistan prior to 2003. HUNTER’s contribution also closely examines the Christians in Ainkawa, a town located on the outskirts of Erbil (Kurd. Hewlêr) that is sometimes referred to as “The Vatican of Kurdistan”.

The mutual perception of different religious groups in Kurdistan is an interesting, valuable and also extremely complex subject of research. There are some references to the Kurds in the preserved Syriac manuscripts. Martin TAMCKE’s contribution is dedicated to the problem of stereotypes of Kurds among Syrian Christians concerning their coexistence and how this is reflected in Syriac manuscripts. He examines a few exemplary experiences of Syrians from the Urmia region in the Iranian Northwest from the late 19th century to the end of World War I. Not only civilized Europeans and ambassadors, but also Syrians who settled in Kurdish regions, frequently painted a picture of “thieving Kurds”. According to TAMCKE, though, the sources and references examined in his paper are obviously neither neutral nor objective, they easily allow doubt to be cast upon this depiction. Nevertheless, they demonstrate that the stereotypes of Kurds among Syrians had a function that went beyond building an enemy image, thus making the terrible conditions imposed on them more “comprehensible”.⁵⁶

54 About the Christians in the Middle East read more in TAMCKE, Martin, *Christen in der islamischen Welt. Von Mohammed bis zur Gegenwart*, München, Verlag C.H. Beck, 2008; HUNTER, Erica C.D. (ed.), *The Christian heritage of Iraq*, Piscataway, New Jersey, 2009.

55 I thank Prof. Martin TAMCKE for this information.

56 Read more in TAMCKE, this volume.

The development of Kurdish as a religious language is an important field of study. Various Bible translations into Kurdish are good examples of the changes still occurring in Kurdish religious language. One of the first translations of the Bible into Kurdish was a Kurmanji translation in the Armenian script.⁵⁷ A number of translations of the Bible in the different Kurdish dialects has appeared since the 19th century. The main purpose of Martin RZEPKA's "Text, Religion, Society. The Modern Kurdish Bible Translations in the Context of Socio-political Changes in Kurdistan" is to show the socio-political roots of the Bible translations and the receptions of such translations among the Kurds, as well as the changing role of translations in Kurdish society from "missionary" to culturally constituting texts. Using methodological concepts based on sociology of translation and sociolinguistics RZEPKA raises such important questions as who the users of the Kurdish Bible translations are (Christian minorities in Kurdistan as well as Armenians and Assyrians, Kurds) and what the reaction (of cultural and educational institutions, of religious authorities) to the Bible translations among the Muslim majority is. The position of the Bible translation in the cultural and religious development of Kurdistan is also discussed. Three different modern Kurdish translations of the Bible are studied in his contribution: two in Kurmanji (Kurdish New Testament published in 2000, and the whole Bible translation from 2004), and one in Sorani (New Testament from 1998). Researching the translation of the Bible in Kurdistan one can construct at least three different analytical perspectives focusing: 1) on the role of the Christians living in Kurdistan: Armenians and Assyrians in the Bible translation projects; 2) on "confessional" dependence of the translated text; and 3) on sociopolitical changes as the main mechanism of the Bible translations.⁵⁸

Different religious minority groups in the Middle East have seen enormous religious, political, and cultural transformations in the past decades. The end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century was a period of significant social and political transformations in all parts of Kurdistan, that included several waves of migration, including inner migrations in the home countries often caused by economic factors. Moreover, the turn of the 21st century was a period of individual as well as of mass experiences of religious conversion (e.g. many Yezidis in the Caucasus, Ahl-e Haqq in Iran). These caused immense changes in the population geography and particularly in the religious map of the region.

The post-Cold war era has generally been dominated not exclusively by the rise of globalization, nationalism, and technologization, but also individualization of belief, which certainly brings a new perception of the role of religion in the lives of individuals in Kurdistan.

57 One of the Kurdish translations of the Bible in the Armenian script, cf. e.g. *P'ēymanē nō*, Stambol, 1872 (in Armenian script).

58 Read more in RZEPKA, this volume.

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