Palliative prophecy: Yezidi perspectives on their suffering under Islamic State and on their future

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Introduction

On 20 April 2016 (the first Wednesday of Nissan), the Yezidis of northern Iraq celebrated the beginning of their New Year. The holiday is an occasion for the community to reflect on the past as well as on future prospects. The Yezidis’ recent past has been fraught with violent persecution, culminating in the attacks by Islamic State (IS) that drove tens of thousands to the mountains of Sinjar, in the northwestern corner of Iraq, in the late summer of 2014. After the fall of Mosul to IS, the aspiring caliphate aimed to expand and consolidate its control over the region by exterminating the thinly protected enclaves of Yezidis and other ethno-religious minorities on the Nineveh Plains. The assault on Sinjar displaced roughly 200,000 civilians and forced almost 50,000 Yezidis to flee to the mountains.

As IS set fire to Yezidi villages, obliterated their shrines with explosives, abducted women and children, and executed men who resisted conversion to Islam, the Yezidis who escaped to the mountains of Sinjar found themselves besieged by IS forces. The week-long siege was broken, if only temporarily, when Kurdish and Iraqi military forces, with support from US airstrikes and humanitarian airdrops, managed to usher most of the displaced Yezidis to the relative safety of camps in Iraqi Kurdistan or Kurdish areas of Syria and Turkey.

In the aftermath, amid mass graves and ongoing efforts to rescue the thousands of Yezidis still in captivity under IS, observers have struggled to take stock of the sheer scale of the atrocities: an estimated 3,100
Yezidis were massacred in the attacks of August 2014, while 6,800 more were taken captive, and as many as 400,000 were forced to abandon their homes – numbers that might ultimately prove to be a conservative estimate (Cetorelli et al., 2017). In short, the Yezidis have been the target of an ongoing genocide that the international community – including the UN, the European Parliament, the Council of Europe, the British Parliament and the United States Congress – finally, formally recognized as such.

The Yezidis survived as a peripheral minority in the upper reaches of Mesopotamia during centuries of the Ottoman Empire, the British Mandate, the Baathist era, the American occupation and withdrawal, and the ascendancy of IS. In northern Iraq, which has long been the centre of Yezidi devotion and the area where their population is most highly concentrated, the shifting political and military tides have been punctuated by recurring hostilities and devastation for their communities. Despite the Yezidis’ claims to monotheism, their reverence for angelic beings and the syncretic features of their religion have caused neighbours of other faiths to regard them as apostates or, worse, as devil-worshippers – legitimate prey for persecution.

IS’s own propaganda in its slick English-language magazine, Dabiq, justifies the mass murder and enslavement of Yezidis on the grounds that they are ‘a pagan minority’, ‘mushrikīn’, whose ‘worship of Iblīs [that is, Satan]’ makes them fit only for forced conversion, ‘the sword’ or slavery; ‘the Yazidi women and children were then divided according to the Sharī‘ah amongst the fighters of the Islamic State who participated in the Sinjar operations, after one fifth of the slaves were transferred to the Islamic State’s authority’ (Islamic State, 2014: 14–17).

Yet the religion that has rendered them a target for extremists has also proved resilient and adaptive in significant ways.² Shamanic prophecy is one feature of the Yezidi religious tradition that has undergone a self-reflexive reinterpretation following genocidal onslaughts by IS. Yezidis maintain that shamanic personages, some in the distant past and some still practising today, had articulated certain prior prophecies concerning a disaster – prophecies that, in effect, had foretold the destruction of Sinjar and, some say, had forecast what would come thereafter. In the light of recent events and the current situation, Yezidis are revisiting their recollection of these prophecies, and some are adjusting their expectations of their future accordingly. Thus, as they hailed their New Year, they conversed about the messages that they had heard in the past and reflected on the implications for the coming year. Taken together, their reflections convey a mingling of credence, doubt and qualified hope – a sense of cautious optimism regarding the prophetic legacy, tempered with disillusion and trepidation born of harrowing experience.
This chapter seeks to document and understand Yezidis’ perspectives on their community’s recent suffering and on their future. In doing so, it aims to present the perspectives of this ethno-religious minority and to record some of their responses – individual and collective – to their persecution. Providing a space for the voices of Yezidis themselves to be heard (or at least ‘read’), on their own terms, is especially important and timely because misrepresentations and misperceptions have, in large part, given rise to the atrocities inflicted on them over the ages, as we have seen most recently in the pages of *Dabiq*.

Recording Yezidi experiences and self-perceptions constitutes, moreover, a critical reminder that they are more than merely numbers in the international newsfeeds’ tally of humanitarian crises. By documenting, in particular, their reflections concerning shamanic prophecies in the aftermath of the IS attacks, this chapter foregrounds the personal and communal aspirations, nuanced apprehensions and complex human experiences behind the numbers. The shamanic prophecies about ethnic violence are one aspect of Yezidi culture that has direct bearing on how they perceive and represent themselves, and how they are striving to make some transcendent sense of their situation. This is the rich vein of interpretive insight that the following pages examine.

Although first recorded by an outside observer in the late eighteenth century, the shamanic element in Yezidism has received relatively little scholarly attention. Major ethnographic studies of Yezidism give it little more than a passing mention (Guest, 2010: 34–5; Allison, 2001: 31, 88; Spät, 2005: 48; Spät, 2009: 133). In fact, one of the most thorough, monographic treatments of Yezidi religious culture, *The Religion of the Peacock Angel* (Asatrian and Arakelova, 2014), does not include any discussion of Yezidi shamanism. Philip Kreyenbroek, the scholar who has done the most to document and elucidate Yezidi creeds and customs, characteristically provides a more thorough, albeit brief, treatment of the ‘visionaries, diviners and miracle-workers of the community’ (Kreyenbroek, 1995: 134–5). He was, however, unable to gather first-hand evidence in relation to these shamanic personages because ‘such activities have stopped now’, and he reports a taciturn reluctance regarding the subject because the practitioners ‘are ashamed’ (ibid.: 142, n. 127).

In collaboration with Khalil Jindy Rashow, Kreyenbroek later added an important distinction between the two very different applications of the term *koçek* as ‘servants of the sanctuary … at Lalish’ and as the ‘community’s seers’ (Kreyenbroek and Rashow, 2005: 8), an aspect that seems to have confounded many previous observers. In short, the lack of a thorough, scholarly treatment of this facet of Yezidi culture is perhaps not
surprising. Existing inside and alongside the Yezidis’ syncretic religion, the shamanic phenomenon constitutes a quasi-heterodox or unofficial element. It does not, for instance, receive a mention in the Yezidis’ own series of school textbooks designed to instruct their children in the principles of Yezidism (Silêman, 2012–13). What follows, then, is an ethnographic approximation, which redresses this relative neglect while also preserving the contemporary perspectives and voices of this vulnerable ethnicity.4

Research methodology

The authors interviewed 39 Yezidis over the course of three days, 19–21 April 2016: the day immediately prior to, the day of and the day after the Yezidi New Year, called Çarşema Sor or Serê Sal (‘Red Wednesday’ or ‘Head of the Year’, respectively).5 The New Year’s celebration afforded optimal circumstances in which to obtain a varied cross-section of the community’s perspectives. Not only does the New Year celebration traditionally entail communal gathering – with the largest gathering taking place at Lalish, the Yezidis’ principal shrine, in the far north of Iraq – but this occasion also saw the arrival of Yezidis from further afield than would normally be the case, as many have been forced to migrate to the relative security of the regions around Lalish. Some of these displaced people, particularly from the Sinjar District, commented that this New Year’s Day marked their first visit to Lalish.

The interviews took place in Lalish itself, and in the nearby towns of Shaykhān and Māmrashān, in the Badinan province of the region called Iraqi Kurdistan at the time of this writing. By deliberately interviewing at least two members (at least one woman and one man) from each of the three Yezidi castes (mirîd, pir and sheikh), we gathered a broad array of perspectives, personal anecdotes and conceptualizations of the Yezidis’ shamanic traditions. The interviewees ranged in age from 15 to 70 years old, and varied in the degree of status that they hold within the community, including those who occupy positions of religious and political authority as well as those who have no such rank. Additionally, we conducted an extensive interview with one shamanic practitioner, a 46-year-old faqra, who provided key perspectives as a seer who claimed to have foreseen her people’s suffering. In spite of the ample variety among our informants, however, this study does not pretend to be in any way comprehensive or definitive, nor does it necessarily reflect the diversity of perspectives in the wider Yezidi diaspora. It does, however, offer an illustrative sampling of dynamic attitudes, memories and beliefs among the Yezidi community at a critical point in its history. Now, before delving
into their responses, we must first situate Yezidi shamanism in the context of theory and practice more broadly.

Shamanism among the Yezidis

The complex of spiritual praxis and religious personae that anthropology conventionally labels *shamanism* takes diverse yet recognizably similar forms across cultures, even among those separated by time and geography. Without digressing into the debates concerning narrow or broad applications of the term, we can usefully apply, with some necessary particularizations, Mircea Eliade’s now classic, succinct definition: ‘shamanism = technique of ecstasy’ (Eliade, 1989: 4). Eliade usefully identifies the ecstatic technique and trance, or altered state of consciousness, as the essence of shamanism, without attempting, as other scholars have
done, to tie a definition to the issue of whether the shaman controls spirits or is controlled by spirits:

the specific element of shamanism is not the embodiment of ‘spirits’ by the shaman, but the ecstasy [that he or she attains]; incarnating spirits and being ‘possessed’ by spirits are universally disseminated phenomena, but they do not necessarily belong to shamanism in the strict sense. (Eliade, 1989: 499–500)

In the most general terms, a shaman is a type of ‘religious specialist’, an extraordinary mediator who acquires and conveys supernatural insight, which may entail clairvoyance (predictions, diagnoses or other kinds of divination) and healing or other supernatural aid; ‘the crucial elements of shamanism include direct contact and communication with the supernatural through trance, the use of spirit helpers, the use of a specific culturally recognized and transmitted method and paraphernalia, and a socially recognized special position for the shaman’ (Stein and Stein, 2016: 120–1).

With reference to Yezidi shamanism, the particulars of the ‘culturally recognized and transmitted method and paraphernalia’ are not always entirely consistent. For instance, our informants did not uniformly agree that their shamans’ altered state of consciousness is necessarily accompanied by physical, bodily manifestations (for instance, convulsions or fainting) or that their messages are necessarily accompanied by speaking in tongues. Nevertheless, a sufficient number of them acknowledged commonalities among the conspicuous features of Yezidi practice and conceptualization to allow a coherent, composite picture to emerge. We will address, in turn, the persons, the techniques and circumstances, and the messages that constitute Yezidi shamanism today, in relation to the attacks of August 2014.

Persons

The most common terms for Yezidi shamans is koçek, or faqra for a female shaman (faqrya in the plural). An alternative, generic term, chavron, encompasses both sexes and refers to a person who can see the future. They can come from any caste among the Yezidis (ShMS61), and their shamanic status and abilities are not considered hereditary (BaBāFMi46). For some koçeks and faqrya, fortune-telling is how they make a living (ShMPi64).
The Yezidis frequently mention – sometimes enumerate – particular names of renowned shamans of the past. Their lists are not identical, but there is apparent overlap. ‘Koçek Saeed, Koçek Shamo, Koçek Silo, Koçek Hajo, Koçek Hasro, Koçek Karo’ is one such list (ShMS68), and of these names, Saeed, Shamo, Hajo, and Karo were most frequently cited as shamans who had attained a significant reputation for efficacy among the Yezidis. The common factor among these is that they all pertain to previous generations and are deceased; some Yezidis named a koçek or faqra of the present day, even noting one or two that they themselves had consulted, but not in the form of a rote list.

There is a widespread perception among the Yezidis that the shamans of the past were more authentic and credible, and greater in number, power and predictive accuracy. Conversely, Yezidis view those of the present day as fewer in number and more suspect, more likely to be shams than genuine shamans and more likely to be motivated by financial gain – to the extent that some of our informants categorically dismissed anyone who purported to be a koçek or faqra in the present day. One servitor at the Lalish shrine succinctly expressed this view:

Don’t believe those koçek and faqra today. Some of the koçek in the past were blind and deaf, yet they could hear voices and see the future. Their predictions were always correct and you could rely on them. People had absolute faith in those faqra and koçek, but today there are no genuine ones, and the majority of their predictions are incorrect. People used to believe in them more. (ShMMi60)

‘I don’t believe in koçeks and faqrya,’ another woman declared, ‘[but] the ones from the previous generation were very good. Whatever they said was true’ (ShFPi68). An elderly sheikh, whose father and grandfather had served in Lalish before him, recalled having to chase a charlatan out of the shrine for making fraudulent claims of shamanic abilities within the last two years (ShMS68). ‘There are people who have this power, to predict the future, but the majority of them are not genuine. They are doing it for money’ (ShMMi50). ‘People don’t believe in them like they used to. It’s like Pepsi-Cola’, another sheikh quipped, ‘It used to taste better before, but now Pepsi-Cola doesn’t taste as good. People don’t believe in koçeks and faqrya now because they don’t sound genuine’ (ShMS61). 8

Nonetheless, a purported koçek or faqra in the past was not necessarily above suspicion. One mirîd recalled that the shamanic phenomenon ‘was very common thirty to forty years ago in Ba’shîqa [his hometown]. There were three or four people who would lose consciousness,
go into a trance, as if going to another world’, and he added the following anecdote:

My cousin and I once, when we were about fifteen years old, were naughty boys, and a woman went into a trance. She was not a faqra, she was cheating people, and she thought she was a spiritual lady or something like that. And we attended that incident. And then I asked my cousin, who’s dead now, his name was Asa, ‘let’s take out her underwear’. And she suddenly came out [of her feigned trance]! (BaBāMMi65)

The practising faqra whom we interviewed, a middle-aged mirīd mother of five sons, was born in Ba’shīqa Bāzān but has lived in Māmarshān for the past 28 years. No previous shamans, to her knowledge, were in her family line, but her family has been associated with serving at Lalish and as qawwals, itinerant singers and musicians who preserve the Yezidis’ sacred lore. She identified herself as one of only two faqrya practising in the village, and noted as a point of pride that she has been practising for ten years in comparison to her counterpart’s three. She claimed, moreover, to have Yezidi, Muslim and Christian clients, some of whom travel from Syria, Iran and Jordan to seek her services. As is typical of shamans across cultures, she associated the onset of her shamanic abilities with a severe illness and recovery:

It’s a gift from God. One day I was ill. I was ill for three years. Very ill, and I was losing my mind. And one day I felt better, but I also felt that I possessed a power. It was like wearing a large, new jacket. You know you are wearing it. It was that obvious I possessed a power. And from then on, whatever I predict, it must happen.

Techniques and circumstances

The shamanic phenomenon among the Yezidis is often accompanied by unusual behaviour: screaming, trembling, convulsions, sometimes falling down or reclining while receiving spiritual revelation in a trance-like state – these are recurring features in Yezidis’ descriptions (ShMPI64, ShMPI65, BaBāMMi65). The tendency of a köçek or faqra to speak in a foreign or unidentifiable, incomprehensible language was also frequently noted as a feature of their practice (ShMMi30, ShMMi50, ShMPI64). ‘Those people speak in a language – it could be English or anything. It is
a language we cannot understand’ (ShMS61). One widow, who has lived at Lalish as a faqir (servitor at the shrine) for three years, described the behaviour as follows:

It is very strange when you see them fall down, and they speak in French, foreign languages, Turkish, maybe twenty languages. It is baffling. You would be scared to look at them. You listen to them and look at them and are unable to understand what they are saying. (ShFMi55)

Other practices include laying hands on a client’s forehead (ShMMi70). A Yezidi shaman may also exhibit uncommon physical strength: ‘they go into a trance, and they become physically very powerful. They could lift you and hurl you some distance’ (ShMMi50).

In stark contrast to the eccentric behaviour noted above, however, the faqra in Māmrashān described more subdued scenes of revelation, yet she does receive her clients in a room specially designated for the purpose and noted that she conceals her face, as Leondardo Garzoni observed in the eighteenth century:

It’s how we are talking to each other now. There is no secrecy about that. I only talk in a normal voice. I will ask questions, and when I receive the message, I will tell it in a normal way. … I am always normal. I sit like I am sitting now. The only thing is, I don’t let people see my secrets. I don’t let people look me in the eye, when I receive the message. I cover my head. That is the only thing I do.

Although the faqra claimed to speak to her clients in an ordinary manner, she asserted her preternatural knowledge of 12 languages, and described herself, in the first-person plural, as part of a prophetic collective:

We have twelve languages: Hindi, English [here, her voice trailed off as she listed the others], and the most important one is the one no one can understand, the language of the prophets. When we sit together, when the prophets talk – and I can tell you when they gather: when it’s a full moon – the prophets from all religions will talk, in a language that only they, and no one else, can understand.

Her special abilities she described as ‘possess[ing] God’s secret’, but made a point of clarifying that God does not communicate with her directly:
I receive voices. God has never spoken to me. [The voices come] from angels, via two birds. When someone comes to me [for shamanic aid or revelation], one of the birds will bring the message to me in a voice. I see them [that is, the birds] most of the time, and hear the voice.

Birds, of course, have been associated with the spirit realm and as emissaries between heaven and earth since ancient times. For the Yezidis, whose principal angel is represented as a peacock, the association is even stronger. In addition to the avian messengers, the faqra went on to say, ‘Sometimes I see Jesus Christ talking to me, and sometimes I see Mohammed advising me. Sometimes when I face a difficult problem, I see all three prophets talking to me.’ (The third prophet here is likely Sheikh Adi, the Yezidis’ pre-eminent religious figure.)

Messages

A Yezidi koçek or faqra can make predictions concerning, among other things, employment prospects and travel (BaBāFMi46), matrimony (ShFMi52, SinFMi60, SiFMi64), conception (BaBāFMi46) and technological developments (ShMS68, ShFP68). They may give prognoses concerning health (BaBāFMi46, ShMMi50, ShMS68), diagnose or cure people who are suffering nightmares (TallQFMi14, ShMMi50), restore personal relationships (BaBāFMi46, ShFMi52), predict the results of academic examinations (even providing supernatural assistance in academic performance [TallQMi19]), predict when people will die (ShMMi50, ShMS61) and forecast cataclysms. This last subject of prophetic foreknowledge is most relevant here.

Specifying and spreading the prophetic messages

No single statement concerning the relevant Yezidi prophecy included all of the components that emerged in the course of the interviews. Nevertheless, considering the varied responses in the aggregate, we can delineate recurring motifs and configurations, beginning with a notably detailed account as an example. One woman of the mirîd caste offered a description of how, ‘two months before the incident in Sinjar’, a faqra from Sinjar came to her in-laws’ house in Shaykhān on a Wednesday evening (Wednesday is the holy day of the week for Yezidis) and prophesied impending disaster, speaking in the prophetic present tense:
She entered into a trance, fell down, and spoke in a language that nobody can understand. [The faqrya] can’t control their speech. She was crying and screaming, saying, ‘Come, come! Everyone, behold the fire that is burning Sinjar. Dignity is gone, humanity is destroyed, people are fleeing. The fire is so vast it is spreading all the way to Ba’shīqa Bāzān’. She even said, ‘Blood is all over the place. They are seizing girls!’ (ShFMi47)

This informant was not present when the faqra delivered her message but gave a vivid, second-hand recitation. As was typical for those who related prophecies that they themselves did not directly witness, she emphasized her particular, personal connections to the place and to the witnesses present. The site was, specifically, her husband’s maternal uncle’s home, where her husband’s family and her own sister, along with others, were witnesses on the occasion.

Others described having heard such messages in person from a koçek or faqra in the months just prior to IS’s onslaught, and connected those predictions with prophecies that they recalled from decades earlier. The following is a representative dialogue between two Yezidi men from Bahrī, near Sinjar. The older of the two recalled having witnessed a koçek deliver his prophecy:

They [that is, the koçeks] were correct. They said a ferman would come and for three days the Yezidis would see hell. I heard this prophecy around twenty years ago. I was present when this was prophesied. They said after the ferman, life would be much, much better. Only God knows, but we hope it will be better. The same koçek said there would come a time when the Yezidis would face the most difficult time in their history. And this is a fact, because I was present there. (BahMMi49)

The younger man corroborated his elder’s recollection:

Yes, before the ferman, a [servitor of the shrine at Lalish] came to [his] house and said that he heard this from them a long time ago, that a ferman would come upon the Yezidis. I was there, as well as many other people. (BahMMi30)

This brief exchange also touches on the process by which the messages of individual shamans can be transmitted by non-shamans and become forecasts repeated among the wider community as messages unattributed
to particular shamans – although some Yezidis were careful to make a
distinction between messages that they had heard directly or via family
and those that were simply widespread hearsay. ‘I don’t know’, one pious
pir, the Yezidis’ principal baptismal officiant, admitted, ‘I’ve heard people
talking about it, but I have never heard it myself. People are saying that
years ago it was widely acknowledged that a ferma n would come, but I
haven’t heard it myself directly from anyone. I’ve never been present in
these conversations’ (ShFPi68).

Ferman (or firman), the specific term that these Yezidis used for the
wave of attacks of August 2014, denotes a hostile incursion, a campaign
of armed aggression. In its strictly literal acceptation, this term – which
is found in Persian, Turkish and Kurmanji – refers to an order or edict,
historically issued by the Ottoman authorities. Ferman is a metonym: the
cause (the order to attack) has come to represent the effect (the ensu -
ing massacre, abductions and destruction). It is the word by which the
Yezidis designate and conceptualize the recurring outbreaks of persecu-
tion that have punctuated their history.

Writing in 2005, Eszter Spät records that ‘Yezidis themselves
talk about seventy-two fermans, or persecutions against them – a term
that could aptly be likened to “pogroms”’. Spät suggests the following
interpretation:

In fact, this is a symbolic number, for according to Yezidi mythol-
ogy the nations of the earth are seventy-two, corresponding to the
seventy-two sons and seventy-two daughters of Adam and Eve. The
Yezidis, created in a unique way, are not included in this number. So
repeating the number seventy-two is a way of expressing the Yezidi
sense of constant persecution by all outsiders. (Spät, 2005: 26)

The parallel drawn by Spät makes her interpretation persuasive. In the
aftermath of IS, however, we found that the Yezidis now number the fer-
mans as seventy-three or seventy-four; there is disagreement on the total,
although most of our informants seemed to favour the latter number. If
we follow Spät’s interpretation, the sum now implies not only repeated
persecution by all other nations but persecution that has exceeded the
limits of any normal expectation or reckoning. In the words of one Sinjari
woman now living at an IDP camp in Khanke, on the Mosul Dam Lake,
the traditional prediction was ‘that the Yezidis would face seventy-four
fermans. My ancestors had faced seventy-three, and my generation
never thought that the seventy-fourth ferma n would come in our time’
(SinFMi60).
Predictions of flood and fire

As for the particulars of this most recent ferman, Yezidis recalled that the prophesies employed imagery of conflagration and deluge, they predicted the geographical directions and parameters of the attacks, and they foretold how the trauma would elicit extreme emotional reactions among the Yezidis. We will now discuss, in turn, each of these various dimensions of the vatic message, which the shamans often couched in figurative language and oblique expression.

In keeping with what we have already seen in one informant’s recollection of a Sinjari faqra’s message, the imagery of fire on Sinjar was the most commonly repeated. Others recounted the prophecies of conflagration as follows: ‘For the last decades and centuries, they have been repeating, “There will be fire upon Sinjar [and] Ba’shīqa Bāzān”’ (ShFMi55).

The first time I saw koçeks was in 1957, when I was very young. It was roughly around the same time I was at Pir Jawa’s Tomb. I saw a koçek shivering and acting in a very strange way. He put his coat on and spoke in a language I did not understand. Then he spoke in Kurdish: ‘The fire hit our mountains’. (ShMPi64)

There was a koçek named Sheikh Braimê Awdi. Around twenty years ago he spoke about these fermans. He said there would come a time when there would be a ferman upon Mount Sinjar and the Sinjar region. Nobody would survive. Even the trees would be burnt. (BorMPI20)

Interestingly, this last young pir from Borek, in the Sinjar District, did not see the prediction of utter annihilation as problematic, even though he himself and many others had, in fact, escaped from the area.

A woman from Zorava, also in the Sinjar District, similarly reported a more recent version of this prophecy, and similarly expressed no doubt regarding the absolute assertion: ‘Less than a month before the ferman, I visited a koçek who said that there would be a ferman and none of the Yazidis would survive’ (ZoFS27). The key matter for these Yezidis was that their shamans had predicted a vast massacre; the prophetic hyperbole, like the imagery of conflagration, gave potent expression to their perception of holocaust.10

Imagery of flooding also served a function analogous to that of the fiery representations, in its capacity to underscore the sweeping devastation of
the attacks. For the *faqra* whom we interviewed in Māmrashān, deluge was the preferred imagery. Like the Yezidis more generally, she too related her predictions to those of previous generations, and claimed that she could foresee, albeit imprecisely, the atrocities of 2014:

My father and grandfather always said that [another *ferman* would come], but I could also predict that a disaster would happen, but I did not know it would be Daesh [IS]. A disaster could be a flood or a disease. I never thought that it would be committed by humans.

She then shifted to the first-person plural, as if to diminish any individual responsibility that foreknowledge of the events might entail:

We could see dark things happening. We knew it was a disaster, but we didn’t know whether it was wind, flood, disease, or what it was. We did not know it would be humans devouring [literally, eating, annihilating by consumption] humans. That flood happened.

While imagery of conflagration and deluge allowed for effective indeterminacy in depicting the destructive agent and the sweep of destruction, the prophecies grounded their forecasts in more specific geographical parameters, indicating the direction and frontiers of the attacks. According to one young woman of the *mirīd* caste, ‘A *koçek* said the *ferman* of the Yezidis would come from the west of Sinjar [that is, from the general direction of IS’s stronghold in Raqqa, Syria]. I was present when the *koçek* made this prediction, and so many other people were repeating the same story’ (TallQFMi21). Naweran, a mountain and village of the same name, lay roughly where Kurdish Peshmerga and coalition forces halted the IS advance and, with coalition forces, marked the frontline. ‘Our *koçeķs* and *faqrya* told us that fire would come to Sinjar and Ba’shīqa Bāzān and would stop in Naweran, and it was proven to be right. This was told us by our ancestors’ (ShFMi55). “The border between Yezidis and others will be Naweran … ” That was Koçek Saeed, twenty or thirty years ago. It is deeply rooted in our traditions’ (ShMPi65). A Sinjari woman now living in the IDP camp in Baadre recounted the following prophecy, which she had heard from her father-in-law: ‘Behind Sinjar there is a long road. If the Yezidis can escape beyond that road, they will be safe. If not, they will be captured by the Muslims. They will be slaughtered just like poultry’ (SiFMi64).

In the event, many Yezidis did escape to relative safety behind the front lines during and after the attacks of August 2014, yet their physical
safety belies profound feelings of estrangement, displacement and dishonour. Reportedly, koçeks and faqrya had foretold sentiments that their listeners had found difficult to imagine before the fermand all too apposite in its wake. One young sheikh, for instance, was ambivalent about how much credence to grant the shamans, but he explained how their prophecies helped to verbalize the physical and emotional disintegration of families:

Five to six months before the massacre at Sinjar, people talked about how koçeks and faqrya repeated this story in the past, about how a koçek said that there would come a day when a father would not want to know his son, nor his son want to know his father. It’s true: so many people left their family members behind in Sinjar. (SiMS26)

Another woman related an anecdote on this point, concerning a mother:

who had four daughters and prayed always to have a son. God gave her a son, and when they had to flee, she left her son under a tree and ran away to seek refuge. I can tell you openly that we have seen people leaving their children behind and fleeing. (ShFMi55)

The instinct to preserve one’s life, even to the point of forsaking what one most cherishes, had its counterpart in a depleted will to live. The shamans predicted that ‘there would come a day when every Yezidi wishes he were buried alive, and it was true. With what we faced, some people wished they were dead rather than alive’ (SiMS21). The same woman who reported seeing parents abandoning children in the midst of the terror also concurred with this prediction, and added:

I wish that our affliction was more like that of Halabja [where Saddam Hussein’s regime killed some 5,000 Kurds in a chemical attack in 1988]. It would have been better, less painful, than taking our dignity. We always repeat this: we wish we had been gassed like Halabja. It would have been less painful. (ShFMi55)

Again, the prophecies were apparently vague or silent regarding the factors that would give rise to such sentiments, but their ostensible fulfilment provided these Yezidis some basis for articulating unthinkable reactions to inconceivable suffering.
In summary, the general content, characteristics and contours of the shamans’ messages have facilitated retrospective, collective recognition in the aftermath of IS. Their language – which makes use of metonymy, metaphor and other figurative devices – is sufficiently oblique and imprecise to achieve a highly adaptable oracular expression, yet sufficiently specific and explicit to achieve a highly memorable impression of the Yezidis’ ordeal, its scale and effects. Alongside the style and substance of the messages themselves, there is a significant element of ellipsis in the shamanic revelation, a sense that the revelations omit or suppress some information.

According to one mirîd from Tall Qaṣab, shamans may withhold information: ‘Some [koçeks and faqrya] are correct and some are not. Those who are correct receive messages from God. If they think it is right to tell you, they will do so, otherwise they do not tell you’ (TallQMMi42). The faqra of Mâmrashān likewise maintained that shamans withhold some messages if unable or unwilling to disclose them. As she put it, in addition to not having known how her visions of ‘dark things’ might apply, there are necessary silences and omissions among her prophecies: ‘I can always predict what will happen. Sometimes we know the facts but we cannot say the facts. Sometimes I see people, I know what will happen to them, but I cannot tell them. Some of the facts are bitter.’ Such ellipses are naturally capable of granting freer rein to adherents’ imaginations.

**Forecasting fermans**

If the ferman of 2014 was indeed the seventy-fourth, as the men from Bahrī noted, the prophecies tell of a brighter future. Yezidis perceive the seventy-fourth ferman as a culminating moment of affliction:

People were saying this even during the time of my grandfather and great grandfather, that there would come a time when the Yezidis would face a ferman. And we saw the ferman. We believe that we will face seventy-four fermans, and after that peace and stability will come, but it must be God’s order. Only God knows when and how. In this instance the faqrya and koçeks were proven right. (ShFMi52)

In addition to the numerical total of fermans, two related events, which we have not yet touched upon, were predicted to mark a turning point in what the Yezidis conceptualize as their serial suffering.

One is the destruction of the tomb of Nabi Yunus (the prophet Jonah) in Mosul, a shrine that ISIS rigged with explosives and demolished in July
2014. In the koçeks’ and faqrya’s reckoning, this demolition was to be a sign accompanying the nadir of suffering for the Yezidis, after which their situation would markedly improve (ShMPi39, TallQMMi42, ShMPi64). The second event is the arrival of foreigners of a different complexion. ‘Faqrya and koçeks believed that a ferman would come to the Yezidis, but when the sees [white] and sorê chawshin [red-complexioned, blue-eyed] people come, life would become calm. They meant Americans’ (ShMS68; the Yezidis apply this description to Westerners generally). This was one prophecy, among others, attributed to Koçek Saeed, who figures so prominently in the Yezidis’ recollection of renowned shamans of the late twentieth century:

Koçek Saeed, said, ‘The near future for the Yezidis will be very bad. People with blue-green eyes and blond hair will come. The Americans, the Europeans will come – chawshin, chawkesk – and then, after that, a good period of time will come for the Yezidis. But they have to endure these atrocities against them. They will undergo a long, severe process and suffer, but finally will enjoy a good life’. He experienced a kind of hallucination, shivering for a couple minutes, then talking to himself. People around him understood what he said, and then it was over. The people around him talked to others, reciting the message. Nowadays they write down such things. I heard it word of mouth. (ShMPi65)

The sum of seventy-four fermans and the accompanying signs, then, point to a more favourable future for the Yezidis – or more positive prospects may be simply a matter of a cyclical or oscillating tendency for good to succeed evil, peace to follow destruction. This was the prediction of the faqra of Māmrashān:

There is no more disaster coming. A brighter future is ahead. Nothing will be worse than what we experienced. After every disaster, there will be better life. From now on there will be a better life. Happiness has no limits. When it rains, our rooftops will be wet (in the sense of an inevitable effect following a cause).

**Actions, inaction and reactions**

A prophecy of impending devastation might naturally prompt action in response. The Yezidis’ reported responses to the koçeks’ and faqrya’s
prophecies reflect varying degrees of credence and varying interpretations. Regarding the arrival of ruddy, fair-haired outsiders, the Yezidis did not agree on when or whose arrival fulfilled this prophecy. Was it the US-led coalition’s 2003 invasion of Iraq, or the international interventions to relieve the siege of Sinjar and beat back IS’s territorial expansion? Those whose interpretation pinned the sorê chawshin’s arrival to 2003, long before the ferman of 2014, understandably viewed it as a mistaken prophecy in hindsight, but it had once attracted enough adherents to spur a Yezidi delegation to US diplomat Paul Bremer’s transitional government in Baghdad.

A participant described the incident and the ensuing disappointment:

*Koçeks* said many things. There is one thing that they predicted that did not happen. They said sorê chawshin would come, and Yezidis and Kurds would be free and face no more sufferings. The Yezidis assembled and said that once the sorê chawshin come, we must send a delegation to Baghdad to ask what they will do for the Yezidis. I knew it was pointless because I do not believe in these things. We met Paul Bremer, and Bremer welcomed us. ‘Your rights are with Talabani and Barzani [Jalal Talabani, President of Iraq 2006–14; and Masoud Barzani, President of the Kurdistan Region 2005–17]. Ask them’, he said. The governor of Shaykhān went with the delegation. ‘You are Kurds, you should go there’, Bremer said. But our forefathers had told us that things would be better. Freedom and liberation meant that we would live on our own land and no one would question my Yezidism, when my children study in our own language, when there is equal opportunity for everyone, when Yezidis are not discriminated against. (ShMPi64)

On a less eminent but no less momentous scale, Yezidis recounted the choices that individual families faced whether or not to heed advance warnings or bide their time in their homes. Several reported disbelief that led to inaction. ‘I visited one [köçek] who told me that there would come a time when the Yezidis would face a ferman, but nobody believed it. This was not long before the ferman. So many köçeks before repeated this message, that the Yezidis would face this persecution, but nobody believed them’ (SiFMi45). Another Sinjari woman, whose nephew was killed and whose son was wounded in IS’s onslaught, said:

We never believed [the ferman] would happen. We said that nothing would happen. But we experienced it. We never thought people
would come to do us harm, but we experienced the worst. Some people said that we should prepare for the worst and that Daesh would attack, but we didn’t believe. But one day the electricity went off, and people began to flee. Those who fled survived, but those who did not faced death. (ZoFS46)

Not everyone, of course, was aware of predictions, prophetic or otherwise, concerning imminent attacks. ‘We did not hear anything, or people would have evacuated their villages before’, claimed a woman from the Sinūnī area (SinFMi44).

If, as the saying goes, hindsight is twenty-twenty, it is only selectively or illusorily so. As such, hindsight can be a potent corroboration of the shamans’ foresight, as the faithful tend to recall points of correspondence between predictions and experience while discounting or postponing points of incongruity. One pir reflected on this tendency:

We remembered we were told [about the ferman] before. But when it happens, you are more worried about other things. It was said and said again, but did not happen, so people forgot about it, but when it happened the story came back to our minds. When it happens, you don’t think back to the prophecy right away. You have to deal with the immediate consequences of the hardships. People are fleeing, crying, facing death. You have to deal with that first when it happens. But afterwards, when you have time to think, these memories will come back – how all these stories were repeated again and again. (ShMPI39)

In this regard, even among those who reported a prior disbelief the prevailing opinion was that the recent suffering had, in fact, reinforced the community’s belief in the shamanic traditions that had ostensibly foretold it (TallQFMi21, TallQMMi23, BaBāFMi46, ShFMi55, ShMS61, ShMS68):

Sometimes when people predict an event, afterwards you wonder if these people possess a spiritual power because what they predicted came true. People who have the ability to predict probably know what will happen, but in the end only God knows what will happen. (ShFMi47)

The distinction between shamans’ foreknowledge and God’s foreknowledge in the previous quotation points to the manifold complexities of the Yezidis’ perceptions concerning prophecy. While a koçek’s or faqra’s
prediction might ultimately have divine origins, it is subordinate to God’s will and divine providence. Their statements do not necessarily carry any dogmatic weight. Because of the peripheral nature of Yezidi shamanism in relation to the more central tenets of the faith, Yezidis are free to doubt a shaman without doubting their religion, although some informants cited the shamans’ personal religiosity as a reason for placing faith in them (TallQMMi23, TallQFMi19); shamans themselves, however, are not necessarily more religious or pious than their coreligionists (ShMS61).

As we have already seen, belief in the shamans’ abilities and messages is by no means uniform among the Yezidis, especially in the present day. The Yezidis do not evince a facile, uncritical acceptance of their shamans’ utterances, nor do gradations of scepticism and belief have clear generational correlations. Some drew distinctions between doubts based on personal disappointments in unfulfilled messages concerning their individual circumstances, on the one hand, and belief in the messages that concern the broader community on the other.

Yet certain patterns emerge from this complex composite of individual idiosyncrasies and areas of consensus. From the most credulous to the utterly sceptical, our informants expressed an anticipation of better prospects ahead. Some linked these anticipations to the New Year itself, or to the time that had elapsed since the outbreak of persecution. ‘Just yesterday,’ reported a Sinjari mirîd, ‘I met a faqra in Zakho who said that after the month of Nissan, onwards into the New Year, signs of peace will appear. She said this year will bring happiness to us. I have always believed in them’ (SiFMi45). The same young pir who reported the prophecy of koçek Sheikh Braimê Awdi noted, ‘This was not mere hearsay. My father and uncle and many villagers were around when this sheikh predicted it. He said there would be happiness afterwards, three or four years after, and we have now passed two years’ (BorMPI20).

As we have already had occasion to mention in relation to the Yezidis’ notion of recurring fer mans, and as Kreyenbroek has demonstrated more widely (2008: 86), the Yezidi concept of history is generally cyclical. ‘Köçeks predicted that history would repeat itself. History always repeats itself’ (ShMPI64). But a repetitive, cyclical historical paradigm does not require perfectly regular circles. Particular features of this last cycle are notably different. Not only has the tally of fer mans reached its supposed limit but the destruction of Jonah’s tomb and the arrival of sorê chawshin herald a meaningful change in the cycle. In the words of one Sinjari sheikh:
What can I tell you? We’ve seen trauma and persecution. We’ve left our homes, we live in tents, and can’t sleep. When I was a child, my father said that there would come a time when the Yezidis would face the most difficulties, but after that life would be normal for the Yezidis. My father and grandfather used to repeat these stories. Koçeks also believed and repeated these stories: there would come a time, the next cycle, when we would face a massacre, but after that life would be normal for the Yezidis. (ZoFS46)

As noted by Joy Hendry, ‘Explanation of misfortune form part of the cosmology of a society’ (Hendry, 1999: 140, italics in original). In other words, explanatory accounts of suffering can reinforce the broader narratives that a people tell themselves about themselves and about their place in the cosmos. This is especially true of accounts that facilitate retrospective revaluations and anticipatory projections. Such are the recollected messages of the Yezidi shamans in the wake of the 2014 atrocities. If suffering has the capacity to shake one’s faith to its core as some of the most faithful Yezidis, including a cousin of Koçek Saeed, admitted, it also has the capacity to provoke vital re-visions of received wisdom. Whereas the Yezidis’ shamanic tradition had reportedly come to be regarded as outdated, superseded, even shameful, a reconsideration of past prophecies has reinvigorated their sense of teleology, as they strive to perceive transcendent sense in senseless suffering.

Our close examination of the shamanic phenomenon in Yezidism has revealed an inherent, interpretive flexibility in their methods and messages. This flexibility allows for rich complexity and variations in the interpretation and application of their shamans’ forecasts. The patterns of perspectives that emerge, in the midst of variations, point to an enduring coherence in the community’s faith system. As we have previously observed (Fisher and Zagros, 2015), the Yezidis’ distinctive religion, which has made them a target for so much persecution, is also a source of resilience (Ager et al., 2015). Their traditions of shamanic prophecy, although not central to their religion, are also a component of that adaptive resilience in the Yezidi faith and its cultural manifestations. At the dawn of a new year, a vulnerable community, whose way of life is on the brink of extinction via destruction and displacement, turned to palliative prophecies to articulate a qualified yet hopeful sense of reassurance that the flames and waves of genocidal persecution may subside at last.
Appendix (Abbreviations used for castes and places of origin)

Bah Bahrí
BaBā Ba’shīqa Bāzān
Bor Borek
Mi miríd
Pi pir
S sheikh
Sh Shaykhān
Si Sinjar City
Sin Sinūnī
TallQ Tall Qaṣāb
Zo Zorava

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Notes

1. Among the various transliterations of the name of this ethno-religious group, Yezidis is the version that prevails in academic publications, while the United Nations and the mass media – including the BBC, the New York Times, the Guardian, Reuters and the National Geographic – have generally tended to use the alternative Yazidis. One unfortunate, inadvertent consequence of spelling Yazidi in this way is that it reinforces an erroneous association with the Umayyad caliph Yazid ibn Mu‘awiya, with implications of a primordial Arab apostasy; the association carries peril in a region where extremists seek justification for genocide. See Asatrian and Arakelova (2014: 46–8) for an instance of this error. Êzidi perhaps most closely approximates what the Yezidis call themselves. The initial /j/ is probably a reflection of the tendency for native speakers of Arabic to insert this phoneme as a substitute for /ê/. For the transliteration of geographical terms, we follow Cecil John Edmonds’s meticulous survey of Yezidi places and populations, produced for the Royal Asiatic Society (1967: 82–7).
2. On different approaches to ‘resilience’ in studies of and responses to displacement, see Krause and Sharples, and Chatterjee et al., both in this volume; on different forms of significance of faith, religion and spirituality in displacement, see the contributions by Mole, Seguin, and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, all in this volume.
3. On the importance of ‘voice’ in refugee studies, see Haile, and Qasmiyeh, both in this volume.
4. Although our informants were willing for us to record their names, we have chosen not to identify them by name here. As the security situation remains precarious at present, the potential for reprisals is real and caution is imperative. Thus, we have adopted and adapted Kreyenbroek’s method of encoding Yezidi informants’ identities by place of origin, sex, caste and age at the date of the interview (Kreyenbroek, 2009: 13–14); for example, ShFMi47 represents a 47-year-old female Mirîd from Shaykhān. See the Appendix for abbreviations of castes and places of origin.
5. Even the religious authorities among the Yezidis refrain from numbering the incoming year with any certainty. No one knows the number of the current year in Yezidi reckoning, they maintain. This professed ignorance or lacuna reflects, on the one hand, the Yezidis’ turbulent history and vulnerability. Relevant records concerning their reckoning of years have been lost, if any ever existed. It also reflects, on the other hand, the Yezidis’ traditional resistance to literacy as well as the community’s insistence on depicting its origins as stretching back before recorded time.

6. In discussions of shamanic practices, ‘ecstasy’ is the term favoured in the field of comparative religion and ‘trance’ is favoured in psychology and anthropology, but ‘altered state of consciousness’ has gained ground as a usefully elastic designation for the shaman’s distinctive experience (Morris, 2006: 19–20). Its elasticity is especially applicable to shamanism among the Yezidis, for they describe altered states of consciousness that range from utter loss of consciousness to visions, into which the shaman more or less wilfully enters.

7. Yezidis apply the term köçek to shamans of both sexes, though less often to females. Scholars have previously confused female faqir and faqrya, probably because of the similarity of the terms, but these are entirely distinct categories that designate distinct roles. A faqir is a man or woman – often a virgin or widow – who elects to join the community of servants who maintain the principal Yezidi shrine at Lalish, while the faqrya, the female shamans, operate as individuals and do not necessarily have any connection to the holy sites. Examples of this confusion can be found in Allison (2001: 30–1), Spät (2005: 48) and Açıkyıldız (2010: 94–6).

8. As for why this degradation in shamanic abilities or reputation has occurred, Yezidis proposed various explanations. For the cynical, it was a result of increasing education levels and diminishing superstition (ShMMi30). Alternatively, diminishing powers correspond to a degenerate age: ‘Until the 1980s, the earth was more pure and people could predict the future’ (ShMi60). Others noted a declining reliance on shamans for services that medicine now provides: ‘When we were children, we did not have medical doctors and pharmacies here. We would visit köçeks when we had a problem’ (ShMS68). In this vein, the faqra of Māmrashān perceived technological developments as depleting not only reliance on shamans but also their powers: ‘Koçeks and faqrya had more power before. People didn’t have doctors, couldn’t travel far, and didn’t have science. But now science, travel, and medical doctors are taking away power from koçeks and faqrya. Technology is taking power from faqrya now.’

9. One sheikh explained, ‘There are two colours [i.e. two types] of köçeks. We have köçeks in Shaykhān and Bazān [an idiomatic way of saying ‘everywhere’]. Some of them speak normally when you consult them; some [that is, the second type] go into a trance where they see images’ (Sh MS61). In terms of the sheikh’s dichotomy, the shamanic faqra in Māmrashān is of the second type, but this was the only informant to make this distinction. Much more common were distinctions between shamans of the past and present, or between genuine and fraudulent shamans.

10. The faqra of Māmrashān made a comparable statement: ‘We have lost at least one person from every household.’ The statement, on the face of it, is inaccurate, but it accurately conveys the Yezidis’ all-inclusive sense of loss.

11. Bremer’s own account of his time in Iraq makes no mention of this incident. Indeed, he mentions the Yezidis only once, when enumerating the ‘sharp ethnic and sectarian differences’ that characterize the ‘disparate people’ of Iraq (Bremer and McConnell, 2006: 38).

References


