

Transnational Religious Practices on Facebook

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Abstract:

Access to cyberspace by Yezidi populations has given this group a platform for rebuilding their religious identity, which, in turn, has enabled them to challenge existing geographic, political and cultural constraints in Iraq. The Yezidi in Iraq have to live with the threat of discrimination and even violence. On the Internet, self-identification as Yezidi is done much more freely. The rise of the Yezidi in Iraqi media and in foreign media (via the diaspora) is closely interconnected. Experiences of persecution and of persistent libel and prejudice by the Muslim majority has forced the Yezidi to adopt distinctive religious practices due to forced migration to foreign countries. This article is an exploration of whether notions of sacred spaces and perceptions and practices of religious rituals are transformed in digital media, i.e. when moving from physical to virtual spaces. I will do this by applying visualization through visual imagery and virtual ethnography. This paper represents a theory on the Internet and religion: asking what implications the Internet holds for spiritual identities, worship and sense of ethno-religious community.

Keywords:

study of religion, ethnography, Iraq, cultural studies, Yezidi, social media

Introduction

Yezidi are a small ethno-religious group of approximately five hundred thousand persons around the world. They constitute a minority in a dual meaning. First, as Kurds, they represent an often-persecuted ethnic minority within their countries of origin; second, as followers of the Yezidi religion they are a religious minority within the Muslim majority, having often been denounced as ‘devil-worshippers’ (Klaus 1967:329). Additionally, about five thousand Yezidi live in northern Syria, mostly in the area around Aleppo. Many of the approximately ten thousand Yezidi of eastern Turkey were, by the second half of the twentieth century, living in small, poor villages surrounded by hostile neighbors. They were often reduced to practicing secretly their religious and cultural rituals.

The Yezidi are geographically dispersed across several areas of Kurdistan. The largest Yezidi communities are currently found in the Duhok, Mosul and Sinjar areas of northern Iraq. In the Ottoman Empire, Yezidi had great influence in Kurdish tribal confederations. Successive persecutions have reduced their numbers and driven waves of immigrants into the Caucasus, where they played a notable role in the republics of Armenia and Georgia. In these locations, they currently number around forty thousand (Kizilhan 1997). It seems, however, that recent nationalist movements in Georgia have made the situation difficult for the Yezidi. As a result, more and more people from Georgia, in particular, with Yezidi heritage seek asylum in Germany.

A number of Yezidi moved to Europe during the 1980s: mainly to Germany. The present troubled situation in northern Iraq has prompted many prominent members of the community there to follow them to Germany. It is assumed that about thirty thousand Yezidi currently live in Germany (Ackermann 2004:156; Gökçen 2010:423).

Schiller, Basch and Blanc (1995:7), when defining Transnationalism, stated that

Many immigrants today build social fields that cross geographic, cultural and political borders. Immigrants who develop and maintain multiple relationships – familiar, economic, social, organizational, religious and political – that span borders we call Trans-migrants.

Levitt (2001:6): “[T]ransnational religious practices also involve the transformation of identity, community and ritual practices.” Yezidi use of Facebook in different countries is illustrative of the fact that cyberspace is a virtual space that is used for connections among individuals who are otherwise diasporic and transnational. Facebook research corroborates the idea that online identity helps build group solidarity; especially for the Yezidi minority. The Internet could be a starting point for the Yezidi community’s becoming transnational. Transnational connections consist of actual flows of people and information across national boundaries. So far, the term *transnational* has not been used in the discussion of the Yezidi diaspora, as it did not appear to apply. Indeed, it is clear that this definition may be relevant only to the present situation of the German Yezidi community; and this in

a very limited sense. They are relatively confined in their ability not to be transnational, mostly because of the situation in their separate countries of origin. There is not much information regarding the Yezidi in other parts of Europe and elsewhere (Ackerman 2004:165). Visual practice may not only encourage the Yezidi to provide images, but also allow them to integrate with their own personal meanings and interpretations. It provides the Yezidi minority the opportunity to enter into a whole new set of relationships that can be close or faraway: yet all inherently interactive. Cyberspace broadens the social base of religious life, reducing the need to be physically present in the location of a temple in order to worship. This is especially important for the Yezidi in diaspora. The Internet creates space for solidarity among individuals that are far away from home and are not able to gather together in their homeland for political reasons. It also provides sanctuary for those individuals who did not previously have the freedom to talk about their rituals openly.

Yezidi Facebook pages allow for increasingly communicative relationships between people. Since the great majority of displaced Yezidi live in Germany, most of the material hosted on Yezidi Facebook pages refers to that country. In general, the pages represent the Yezidi as a cultural or religious tradition that is tightly attached to the spatial, historical and cultural context of Iraq. Many pages for both individuals and organizations introduce the Yezidi people and provide basic information. Some pages contain images: most often of the Sinjar attack in 2014 (Ahram 2015:57). Most of these pages first refer to Lalish, a small village in a mountain valley situated in the Sheykhhan District of the Dohuk Province in northern Iraq. This is a central location for reminiscing about religion and rituals.

The Yezidi group uses Facebook to introduce their religion, as an independent one, to the international community. They try to use Facebook to help with digital leverage (via online appeals), protest campaigns and risk awareness. They seek to structure support for their objectives. The rising presence of the Yezidi community on Facebook has become a new context for social interaction; demonstrating an opportunity on digital media. By visually expressing beliefs through pictures of their sacred shrines and symbols, this helps to manufacture their online cultural status. This paper represents a step towards a theory on the Internet and religion, Specifically, I will investigate three questions regarding the Internet and the Yezidi reli-

gion: firstly, how has the Internet changed religious practices for the Yezidi and their sense of religious community? How does the Internet provide a feeling of spirituality and solidarity for the Yezidi? They can worship online and therefore individuals in diaspora can feel a sense of community. Online religion allows believers to take part in religious life when located in different geographical spaces; as a result, ritual activities can be carried out in non-traditional spaces. The Virtual Temple can be viewed as a representation of the physical temple and can play a similar role to domestic shrines. In this way, Facebook pages can be considered successful in that they fulfill the main intent of their designers. The Internet is a medium that can go beyond both spatial and provisional boundaries. This paper will examine online visualizations of Yezidi sacred symbols such as the Lalish as a main Temple and Yezidi shrines or the peacock¹ which, in Yezidi tradition, is the true creator and ruler of the universe and therefore a part of their religious practice.

Materialized beliefs: Material culture and anthropological perspective

The peacock has been one of the traditional, religious symbols of Yezidi culture for thousands of years. I describe the peacock from a material culture perspective, combining religious, cultural and material elements. Analyzing and interpreting images and the ways of seeing particular material, in light of current literature, point to the merging of themes such as media and religion in recent years on Facebook. It will contribute, specifically, to the way materials are perceived in spiritual contexts: such as ritual, healing and belief. The peacock is an essential part of traditional healing in the Yezidi religion. In spite of current and future interest in material culture (Skuse 2005; Poulter 2011; Douny 2011), there is a lack of research dealing directly with the peacock as a religious symbol.

Early on, the field of anthropology accepted material culture. Ethnographers in the beginnings of modern anthropology applied material relics to investigate better a culture's morality. Franz Boas was one of the first to discover material objects' complex properties. In Boas' view, objects are not always actionable, giving them the capacity to give pleasure to their owners (Ventura et al. 2014:33).

Appadurai remarked:

We have to follow the things, because their meanings are subscribed in their uses, forms and trajectories. It is only through the analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the transactions and human calculus that make things alive. This way, although from a theoretical perspective the actors codified the meaning of the things, the things-in-movement are the ones that illuminate the social and human context from a methodological perspective. (Appadurai 1988:19)

When learning about material containing religious, magical and ritual relics, we thus have to explain its diverse socio-cultural components (Ventura et al. 2014:36) and the outlook of the biography of objects (Appadurai 1988). The target of this outlook points to the making of a wider description of reality that can rehabilitate the communal perspective of the structure of description: through discussion and other processes. This rehabilitation can be observed through social practices, including the interplay between representations that the individuals and collectives deploy to achieve their specific interests (Bourdieu 1977; Ortner 1984). In the current reality, material objects testify not only to society's technological capacity, but also to its application of materials, ethics and norms (Dan 1999). However, in this early phase, objects represent their material being, rather than any concealed theoretical intuition and ideas (Miller 1987).

Material culture is a feature of visual studies. Paying attention to the depictions that are important in people's daily lives opens up a discussion about principles and desires. As David Morgan (1999) contends, the definition of an image is not only the act of viewing it on a wall, but also surviving in its presence and its relationship to flow in the owner's life. Phillip Vannini (2009) attempted to explain the facility and typical personality of interactions between humans and material objects. Objects are meaningful in their practical use; the material world can be perceived as technology and culture: interconnection between social factors and material objects (Vannini 2009:18-23). Employing Daniel Miller's (2005) concept of materiality explains how the Yezidi minority group on Facebook uses visual materiality to express themselves. He defines materiality through the photographic processes of objectification, where the materiality of things is a significant and important feature. This can reveal much about how people think. Particu-

larly, we often overlook routine materiality, since our subjective worlds insist on a “pluralism” of material ties. In the relationship between materiality and immateriality, Miller (2005:18-23) has opined that objects represent people.

Research background

James Carey proposed that a connection is composed of two basic perspectives that continue to exist in relationship to one another. For example, sharing details and the ritualistic ties of communion: both emerge from a religious background. Communication is a figurative process where fact is manufactured, preserved, reformed and changed. For Carey, the ritual vision of communion is obtained from a religious imagination that occurs in the form of speech, order and attention and as an alternative. He points out slight activities that show progress in daily procedures, enjoyment, song and prayer (Carey 1989:13-36). Cobb (1998:97) describes cyberspace as a spiritual network that can help humanity’s spiritual improvement and defines the Internet as a medium through which we can experience the elegance of humanity’s journey toward greater spiritual progress. “Media treatments of religion can be seen as a kind of indicator of the broader role and status of religion on the contemporary scene,” notes Hoover (1998:12). The Internet is a space that allows its members to grow in spirituality and belief, to convert and carry out religious duties around the world, and to carry out diverse religious and empirical everyday processes. The Larsen 2000 study indicates that 83 percent of its respondents felt that a selection of websites helped congregational life either by a certain amount or a great deal. Meanwhile, 81 percent accepted that email, on some level, assists the spiritual life of the group. Media are not simply channels for conveying information between two or more environments, but rather they are environments in and of themselves. In this context, religions themselves can be viewed as systems of communication, designed to facilitate and control the exchange of information between the mundane world and the realm of the sacred (Casey 2001:35). Religion and spirituality online are emerging as global phenomena, while the Internet itself is emerging as a medium that transcends spatial and temporal boundaries (Casey 2001:33). The World Wide Web was conceived as a parallel to geographical space (Tække 2002).

Brasher (2004) discusses how likely the conversion from temple to screen is, a following root or context shift, and a resulting reclamation of the religious

contention itself. The term cyberspace is widely used to show a place (space) for real and possible computer-based activity. This is done in a way that is similar to the idea of geographical space as a void for actual and potential physical activity. Sacred places found in geographical space are often identified by particular signifiers: such as architectural style, use of images and envisaged protocols for conduct. This idea may help guide the question of whether virtual signifiers can operate in a comparable fashion; thus delineating sacred cyberspace from non-religious cyberspace (Jacobs 2007:1105). The latter perspective relates to how the diffusion of personal faith stories through digital technology can give rise to a wider variety of articulations of religious identities: such as stories of women, gay people and other groups whose voices have been trivialized in religious communities throughout history (Lövheim 2012:163). Stout observed that “some people...contend that entertainment is not only compatible with religion, but actually promotes faith” (2012:87). Midden and Ponzanesi (2013:97), in research about the online practice of Muslim women, show that faith and religious practices are important to Muslims: both for those that are emancipated and submissive. Thus, the Internet has been framed as a technological landscape, able to transform religious expression and understanding (Campbell 2011:16). It can be asserted that many people employ technologies, such as the Internet, to develop and strengthen their religious individuality (Campbell 2011:16). This is further supported by Christopher Helland’s 2007 work, which shows that members of Hindu and Buddhist religious traditions actively use the Internet to develop connections between their diaspora communities, their places of origin and their sacred sites.

Peggy Levitt explained that “while there is a rich body of work on immigrant incorporation, most of this research does not shed sufficient light on how continued relations between home and host-country institutions transform religious practice” (Levitt 1998:75). Levitt (1998:27) emphasized that these transformations affect religious practice in both the countries of origin and those of residence. Indeed, new technologies such as social media are now having a considerable impact on transnational religious organizations and activities, as well as individuals. The concept of networked religion, which becomes visible in online debates about traditional religion, displays how contemporary religious narratives and practices are able to become more pliable, and transnational, as they reside both online and offline in an information- and technologically-enabled society (Campbell 2011:21).

Methodology

In this research, we aim to analyze the role that visual images in media can play in studying other people as sensory experiences and the roles of the visual research method as well as vision in ethnographic research. Visual sensory data that reference online images was analyzed through discourse analysis. Data was collected from five Facebook pages and through personal narratives expressed by people, through discursive analysis and interviews with Yezidi persons of different ages and sexes. Mostly, I found these individuals through my previous friendships with them on Facebook from 2015-2016. To collect data, I relied on the methods of virtual ethnography for communicating with people in online communities, as well as chatting and online interviews. I shall reflect on the concept of using an advantageous point of view to examine other categories of sensory observation and practices related to them (Stoller 1997:23). Visual research methods employ images of society, and images made by society, to understand social situations better. Scholars using images usually work in the substructure of a qualitative, case study method. Since the 1860s, anthropologists have used photography to supply visual information about their subjects. Historically, photography was considered to document superficial data; as opposed to in-depth data, which needed to be unearthed by other methods (Edwards 1999:4). Harper writes,

Images allow us to make statements which cannot be made by words, and the world we see is saturated with sociological meaning. Thus, it does not seem peculiar to suggest that images enlarge our consciousness and the possibilities for our sociology. (Harper 1998:38)

Grimshaw (2001:42-45) remarks that ethnographers can be consumed by the sensual world. He shows that anthropological practice is a corporeal process that involves the ethnographer engaging not only with the ideas of others, but in learning about their understanding through her or his own physical and sensorial experiences, such as tastes.

Visual methodology, given the availability and contemporary enthusiasm for using media in ethnographic research, makes it a valid choice in this regard (Pink 2005). Pink, in carrying out sensory ethnography, explains that visual technologies and practices might support the work of a sensory ethnographer. These practices might be understood within a theory of eth-

nography as place-making. Several researchers already working with visual representations of data combine the understanding of their practice's sensory nature in relation to visual ethnography (MacDougall 1998, 2005; Pink 2006). According to Pink, visual analysis should be considered "in the context in which the image is produced, the content of the image, the contexts in and subjectivities through which images are viewed and the materiality and agency of images" (2006:31). The material helps evoke the sensorial experience of the research encounter itself: such as texture and smells. "In ethnography, images are as inevitable as sounds, smells, textures and tastes, words or any other aspect of culture and society" (Pink 2006:21).

Grasseni's 2004 work is a good example of how visual media might be used to understand embodied practices that are, by those who engage in them, couched in terms of visual knowledge. Grasseni stated that people who engage in social media are never detached from a certain amount of multi-sensoriality, which might explicitly or implicitly also involve evaluation through touch, smell and sound. Using audiovisual media, Grasseni was able to access, or attune to, the visual (multi-sensorial) practices of the people whom he was seeking to understand. In the author's words, he learned to share an aesthetic code. Grasseni (2004:28) argued that in his research as a visual anthropologist, a broader sense of observation gives one a clearer understanding of symbols and principles. Visual culture stems from images, acts of seeing and associated intellectual, emotional and conceptual sensitivity to build, maintain or convert the worlds in which people live. The study of visual culture is the analysis and interpretation of images and ways of seeing the factors, practices, conceptualities and institutions that put images to work. Scholars make use of images as more delicate, stylistic means of explaining visual culture.

McClintock Fulkerson (2006:50) has established that taking photos can be one way, among others, of observing the use of customs in specific physical practices and the eternal interplay between figures' communication and obvious dialogues. Talking about images gives the researcher a more concrete idea of the participant's thoughts and beliefs so as to better understand their practice of religion.

Yezidi online activities

The growing presence of the Yezidi community on Facebook has become a new context for social interaction, demonstrating a visual opportunity in digital media. The Internet could also be a starting point for the Yezidi community's efforts to become transnational. Technology that facilitates computer-mediated communication has not only affected the spread of information within the Yezidi community, but it also makes possible the presentation of similar information to a virtually unlimited, non-Yezidi audience (Ackermann 2004:166).

Yezidi are given a voice in the present study in order to shed light on their cultural situation. This approach is respectful toward the Yezidis' religious and spiritual beliefs and practices. The Yezidi community can speak as personally or superficially as they choose regarding the images, thus allowing them to control how much personal religious information is shared. The collaborative approach that most contemporary visual methods employ suits a power-sharing approach to research. The visual enables the identification with personal, subjective themes within a lived religion. Society has moved from a textual culture to a compound, multi-faceted culture full of unmediated images. Since people are used to processing visual information, visual diffusions of research findings are made available to a wide range of people. Thus, visual methods also show a move away from the epistemological example of the sociology of religion. This is because signs and information can be used to demonstrate contact via images: even more so than through text alone (Harper 1998).

The study of material culture implies observing the visual landscape and artifacts of Yezidi society, their production, consumption and meaning. This includes photography, files and videos. Religious sacred images can reveal the use and understanding of visual images as ordered by socially-established symbolic codes, which can be assessed through discursive analysis and ethnographic methods. While the sociocultural aspects of the peacock, along with its projection onto beliefs are well discussed in expert literature, I wish to take a different path. It is my intention to focus on the different dimensions of visual religion and material culture in the context of religious material used by Yezidi in diaspora. In this article, I will highlight the complex connection between Yezidi material attributes and their cultural

meaning for the importance of material objects in Yezidi lives and beliefs. By using various viewpoints of material culture, visualization and religious healing, I will paint a broader, more complex depiction of this unique phenomenon.

Visual methods cross cognitive thought processes to capture the controversial, reactive, unconscious ways that people live out religion. The research in this article focuses on the participation of the Yezidi community in religious digital networks and the way in which such participation structures their religious practices and feelings. The aim is to understand the digital activities of the Yezidi and their participation in transnational religious networks.

Participation in the community is essential as is collecting data in a manner that takes into account the context of the community. This means trying to find a balance between the role of cause and effect, self-participation, individual cultural involvement and the structured, objectifying scientist (Kozinets 2010). This method helped me process a rich data source, including archival data from a website and field notes from researcher observations during the investigation. For offline data collection, I mainly relied on statements from interviewees. Interviews usually attempt to capture participants' individual experience in order to understand the experience of other people in similar situations (Flick 2007:79).

I followed Bryman's suggestion of "words rather numbers" (2004:266) and thus concentrated on what participants shared. I strived to understand them and paid attention to their words. The websites I analyzed are good examples of how access to media has increased immensely for minorities, allowing them to present and discuss news, experiences and issues related to their own communities: all this on their own terms. The sample for my case study consists of four German Facebook pages where Yezidi people discuss various aspects of their lives in connection to their religious affiliation. This involved pages such as Yezidi time, *يااللهيا طاوس ملك* [*Yā god, Tāwūs Malik*], Yazidi in Australia, Yazidi in Canada Lalish Baadre, Lalish TV, Tāwūs Malek The Peacock Angel; including posts, images, stories and videos. I decided to focus on prominent concepts such as "remembering the past" and "I became stronger in my beliefs," but my research mostly focuses on "relief." I also held interviews with the pages' creators and selected respondents of various ages and educational backgrounds. In the interviews conducted for

the Facebook research, respondents talked extensively about how they use their beliefs about the Yezidi religion on Facebook.

Tāwūs Malek, the “Peacock Angel” or “Peacock King,” is the most important deity of the Yezidi. The Yezidi believe that theirs is the oldest religion on Earth, and that their customs are related to them through the Peacock Angel. They claim that Tāwūs Malek is the true creator and ruler of the universe: and therefore a part of all religious traditions. God created him as an expression at the beginning of time (Guest 1993:208-12; Kreyenbroek 1995:55-6). For the Yezidi, the most sacred place on Earth is located in northern Iraq. They say that here Tāwūs Malek was able to calm the Earth by covering it in his peacock colors.

Sheikh Adi was canonized as a deity by the Yezidi; he is remembered as the founder of the Yezidi religion and died at age 116. He occupies a place in the Holy Trinity: together with Tāwūs Malek and Yezidi. The links between the devil and the peacock date back to the pre-Islamic past, specifically in the account of the creation of the Peacock by Ahreman, which Eznik of Kolb attributes to a pre-Islamic Iranian sect (Zaehner 1955:438).

Spät (quoted in Kreyenbroek 1995, in Spät, 2009:74) remarks that the hymn of the faith depicts the role of Sheikh Adi as the creator of the world. While Sheikh Adi is the most important of all the khās,² whose eventual identity with Tāwūs Malek and god is emphasized by many hymns. He is not the only one whose appearance in Yezidi history is interpreted as the earthly manifestation of the divine light.

A deeper analysis shows that while Tāwūs Malek “existed before all creatures,” he is not, in fact, the creator. Tāwūs Malek, being a manifestation of *xwadē* (the divine), claims quite legitimately. It is the prophetic mission of Tāwūs Malek that indicates to us that he is a manifestation of the demiurge, rather than the demiurge himself (Asatrian and Arakelova 2014:13; 2003:1-36).

In the so-called Book of Revelation (Jilwe), there is also reference to the symbolism of the peacock. They make valuable remarks on etymology; for instance, the connection between the peacock Tāwūs Malek and the Mesopotamian *tammuz*, and comments on the belief that this word in Greek

(ταῶς) is purportedly the root of the Arabic word *tāwūs*. The authors also refer to analogies to the mystic Simurgh bird and the role of the peacock in Sufism and related parables (e.g. in Attar's *Conference of the Birds*). In fact, they venture much further and point to analogies in the Zoroastrian tradition and the association of the peacock with Ahriman and, in other traditions, with the devil. They emphasize that the image of the peacock contains both "divine and infernal attributes" (Asatrian and Arakelova 2014:26).

Observations indicate that the Yezidis' main object of worship is not *xwadē* (god) but the Peacock Angel; they consider themselves his chosen people and speak of themselves as "the Peacock Angel's nation" (people of *Tāwūs Malek*). It is they who looked after him when he was thrown down from the heavens, and so he chose them to be his worshippers and gave them their laws (Rodziewicz 2016:160).

Online religious symbols

Imagine visiting a temple online rather than entering that same building physically, i.e. with it appealing to all of your senses. Facebook simply provides visitors with an image; perhaps one of Lalish.

In the interviews conducted on Yezidi online activity, respondents considered how religion affects all aspects of their life, including their online activities. Here, the *Tāwūs Malek* symbol presents its most minimal of functions: the strength of belief as demonstrated through the visual. The peacock image online, as a material object, is the connection between the faith healer and the patient; it is the material center of the ritualistic belief.

Facebook images also demonstrate the symbolic power of media content in shaping social and religious life for the Yezidi. After the ISIS attack in 2014 and the Yezidis' forced migration to Germany increased the diaspora, thoughts, feelings and actions characterizing sacred forms were possible only through media that gave sacred forms material expressions. Media enables communication about, and interaction with, those forms. Such media include images and sounds, as well as material objects, spaces, institutional practices and places that employ or exemplify the sacred. The article focuses on how sacred forms are expressed among individuals through personal life stories online and on how this new expression of the sacred is packaged and shaped on Facebook.

Remembering the past

The Virtual Temple, similar to the real temple, clearly intends to facilitate a hermeneutic conversation between believer and website. One member suggested that the Virtual Temple is a place to visit if you have a particular prayer need. Another member visiting the Lalish Temple website indicated:



Figure 1. The Lalish shrine, the walls are covered with various colors. Each color represents one of the angels in the Yezidi religion (Yazidi Times Facebook group 2014).

An Yezidi Facebook user said

When I see personally (sic) a photo of Lalish temple, I get strange feelings because I don't know what is happening to me. It's the only place where I was happy and mentally relaxed, because of how holy the place is. Lalish also includes terrific nature, with trees and water fountains. It is also surrounded by mountains from all sides. It is considered one of the holiest places with Yezidi religion. Due to this I feel so much pain when I see it and I start to go through so many memories of my family and friends. I remember when we were meeting there to worship and realize our traditions and the beliefs of the Yezidi religion. I am here as a refugee and feel strange for what I mentioned and remembered about Lalish. (A, Hosseini, 6/6/2016)

For this group member, the Virtual Temple is a place that can be visited in a way that is analogous to visiting Lalish in the physical world. In particular, the Virtual Temple functions as a sanctuary from the trials and tribulations of the profane world.

Both the Virtual Temple and the real one draw on conventional signs of their respective traditions to construct sacred spaces. In both examples, there is a relationship between the virtual representation and the real world. However, if we accept Jones's (2000) idea that sacred space must be understood in terms of the encounter with architectural forms, it is necessary to consider how virtual architectural designs perhaps simplify ritual encounters. The Virtual Temple makes use of designs to bring a feeling of understanding to the room; and of living in space. Ritual displays can be imagined in terms of this third aspect of the space: both the Virtual Temple and the real temple seek to make it possible to carry out rituals.

Kinney suggests that the "technical innovations on the Net are likely to encourage the development of new forms of ritual" (1995:763). The Yezidis' visiting of the Virtual Temple clearly allows for the possibility of the performance of online rituals.

A crucial activity of religious organizations is the veneration of symbols, gods and saints, which is experienced differently in online worship. Worship-like phenomena are frequently promoted by the media (Hjarvard

2006:11). Hjarvard (2006:3) believed that, through the procedure of medi- atization, religion is even more arranged by the logic of the media in terms of institutional arrangement, symbolic content and individual practices. The metaphor of media as a channel draws attention to the fact that media transport symbols and messages across distances from senders to receivers.

Speaking about religion in terms of a personal search to find the “right meaning” can be difficult, but these ideas can be expressed through inter- acting with images. Visual material, due to its ability to summarize an ex- perience, opens up opportunities for deeper discussion of what is sacred (Pearmain 2007:76). As one of the members posting Tāwūs Malek pictures wrote,



Figure 2(a). Statues of a peacock (Yazidi Times Facebook group 2014).



Figure 2 (b). An image of a peacock (Yazidi Times Facebook group 2014).

How proud my religion, my God, thank you because you created me Yezidi. Oh Tāwūs Melek it is because of you, my home and my work is safety, I feel happy and the power of Lalish make my faith be more and more comfortable and confident of myself (Facebook user image explanation of images).

According to the above narrative, the user commented on his faith using the images and used words to describe the picture above. Pink (2009) mentioned that it is a kind of visual ethnography to invite people to use image elicitation to produce images. The idea is that there is a close connection between seeing and touching. That said, we might begin, to some extent, to imagine the sensorial and emotional effects of other people's visual cultures (Pink 2009:114).

Relief of practicing religious online

Lalish is a holy place, the tomb of Sheikh Adi, and the center of Yezidi national and religious life. It is situated in a deep, picturesque valley (Isya

1919:195). The Yezidi usually engage in worship of Sheikh Adi when they assemble at his shrine. Sheikh Adi's tomb is within the temple. It lies in a narrow valley and has only one entrance as rocks rise on all sides except in a spot where a small stream forces its way into the large valley beyond. Visual representation or visualization of emotionally traumatic reminders of home may cause users to post a picture of Lalish on Facebook. The virtual temple contains a Guide to Prayer that explains various facets of prayer. A fairly typical example taken from one Facebook member posting about the virtual Lalish on their page reads:



Figure 3. Yezidi celebrate the festival of the New Year at Lalish in April 2015 (Yazidi Times Facebook group 2014).

[Congratulations on people gathering for ceremony and Yezidi ritual on the occasion of the holy mass rejoicing solutions extend our warm standing *Aattr* (fire) blessings to the children of Yezidi religion all over the world, especially the clergy and *qarwali*³ and, the poor and servants clean temple and dervishes and Pir, anyone who provides service in Wash Temple, asking God mighty to bring you their festi-

vals goodness and splendor and peace and perpetuate your days you carefree and Your Excellency that combines all of reunion every year in this holy place, in the light of freedom and peace and that makes this a proper end to the tragedies and pains and return our kidnapped healthy to their mothers].

The Facebook members of the Virtual Temple clearly believe that a virtual Lalish is possible. In other words, the devotee can see and be seen by the sacred when he or she is online. Jacob stated “The Virtual Temple functions as an in-home-shrine, and just as one can practice from their in-home shrine; the same can be done with a Virtual Temple” (2007:1107).

The images of the various deities are condensations of complex mythical narratives, which in turn condense the Yezidi metaphysical worldview. The performance of the virtual Lalish, similar to the offline Lalish, is characterized by redundancy in that it conveys no new information but does confirm the religious identity of the performer.



Figure 4. A Yezidi man kisses the Lalish temple statues (Yezidi in Australia Facebook group 2015).

According to Kreyenbroek and Rashow (2005:392), Sheikh Adi, Tāwūs Malek and Sultan Ezi are one; they are not regarded as separate and have existed since eternity. Yezidi people pray to Ezi so that he will make their

wishes come true. However, for Yezidi devotees, the peacock is a sign since the peacock is regarded as a manifestation of the deity. The Lalish on the Virtual Temple website is an icon for the peacock on one level, as it clearly resembles the image that can be found in the physical temple. So here we can identify an iconic representation of a symbol.



Figure 5. The qawwal is cleric that brings the symbol of Tāwūs Malek to one region every season. This woman kisses the symbol and prays for her wishes to be granted (YAW Organization Facebook page 2015).

Senjaq or *Tāwūs* is a bronze statue of a peacock. It is revered as a symbol of the peacock and the guardian angel for the Yezidi. It is taken around and shown in Yezidi villages. The peacock *Senjaqis* is the most sacred object for Yezidi, and it is usually well hidden from the eyes of strangers. Originally, there were seven bronze peacocks, corresponding to the seven Yezidi districts (also known as *Senjaqs*). For more information, refer to Spät (2009:62-65).

Sermons⁴ are preached to larger groups by the *gewwal*. They do this when they take the *Senjaqs* around remote communities, playing instruments and

singing as part of a practice called *Tawusgeran*. This, like large gatherings such as the annual autumn festival, is a force for religious classification; part of the income⁵ collected is donated to Mir's family⁶ (Fuccaro 1999:21). *Tāwūs*' image shows that he definitely perceived visual worship as a sacred process: the notion of worshipping in the virtual world is clearly analogous to visiting a *Senjaq* or *Tāwūs* in the "real" world, i.e. physically. Just as a virtual *Senjaq* utilizes various conventional signifiers to convey the feeling of a sacred space, members following the Yezidi page clearly perceive it in terms of a place to visit for their religious needs.

Another member represents his feelings toward *Tāwūs* Malek by showing the image:



Tāwūs Malik to help the Yezidi. Image taken from the Facebook page: *support the yazidi community*. Picture translation: "Oh, God, save all Yezidi. Oh, *Tāwūs* Malek, protect all brave people of Sinjar. Oh, Hegifer,⁷ give health to injured people. Oh, Sheykh Adia, protect the people of the *binkend*⁸ villages. Oh, Ezi (god), bless all the murdered." (YAW Organization Facebook page 2015).

A Yezidi Facebook member that lives outside of his homeland mentioned "it is not unusual for Yezidi to have images of the peacock as symbols and statues. Indeed, some Yezidi have them everywhere, blessing them. But they

do not worship them.” The peacock loses its feathers in the autumn and they grow back in spring. Therefore, it was a symbol of resurrection in early Christianity. In addition, it was a symbol of immortality in antiquity, and it was called a heavenly bird. Peacocks were drawn on lamps, mosaic panels, graves and coffins in Italian cities, as well as on the Lalish temple and cathedral decorations. Mostly, drawings featured two peacocks opposite one other, drinking water from a cup that symbolizes the cup of life. Peacock symbols were found on Coptic coffins, as well as on ancient Roman coins and palaces. The peacock’s name also features in the Mandaean religion’s holy book, the *Baktashi Alavi*. In Iraq, people believe the peacock can move on to another life, i.e. turn into a good person (human) or even a saint (Arakelova 2001:321).

Going against discrimination and living according to strict rules

If the media have become an important producer and distributor of religious imagery, we need to ask what kind of religions the media tend to communicate. In order to answer this question, we will borrow a concept developed by Billig (1995), who stated that citizens of a nation-state feel and see their own belonging. He argued that, in nations today, there is a collective memory and also a plural forgetting. Nationalism is growing in diaspora in what Anderson (1992) calls long-distance nationalism.

As Eriksen (2002:123) points out, symbols that often imply ancient heritages such as flags, anthems and festivals, along with sporting events, represent the nation in modern times. Billig (1995:39) claimed that flags symbolize the sacred character of a nation and are either respected by loyal citizens or ritually defiled by those who wish to protest. Hall (1997:5) describes that symbols such as flags can also be thought of like languages or as symbolic practices that give meaning or expression to the idea of belonging to a national culture and identifying with one’s local community.

As Giddens describes, “nationalism is a phenomenon that is primarily psychological, nationalist sentiment rises up when the sense of ontological security is put in jeopardy by the disruption of routines” (Billig 1995:44). Nationalism can be understood as the concept of belonging to a socio-cultural community that has, at times, religiously-driven ambitions to form a nation of its own.

The institutionalized religions actively promote particular religious worldviews through ‘waved’ religious flags, whereas the media through their ‘un-waved’ flags of various religious elements construct a variegated backdrop of religious representations and practices as banal nationalism. (Hjarvard 2006:11)

As Billig (1995) stressed, one of the most hopeful roads of research into transnationalism concerns the “relationship between the new country and the old one” (1995:120) as well as elements usually associated with folk religion; for example, trolls, vampires and black cats crossing the street. Banal religion may combine representations that have no religious meanings: such as upward faces, thunder and lightning and highly emotional music. These may, however, come to be associated with religious meanings through the media’s representational practices. Religious representations serve the particular media genre in question, and the religious meanings are not to be taken too literally. Nevertheless, as banal religious representations, they come to provide a backdrop in modern society for the continued presence and relevance of religious artifacts, meanings and sentiments.

After the rise of ISIS, the Yezidi community started to write more online about the things they feel they must pay more attention to, as concerns their faith. They are morereligious than in the past, and they emphasize telling Tāwūs Malek “we are proud of our Yezidi religion.” Facebook research corroborates the idea that online identity builds some forms of group solidarity: especially for the Yezidi minority.



Figure 7. Yezidi are celebrating Jama in the Lalish Temple (Yezidi in Canada Facebook Group 2012).

الاييزيديون تحدوا داعش في عيد جماو أعلنوا بان الإرادة الايزيدية فوق كل شيء و لا يموتون مهما كلف الامر و يكونوا قناديل في ظلام العراق , يفتحوا كل أبواب بوجه لالش , أعلنوا بان الطوق ابيض دائما , عكس كل الأقوام التي تعرضوا للإبادات الجماعية , كونوا اقوياء دائما

[Yezidi challenge ISIS with an image of the Feast of Jema,⁹ Yezidi Facebook user says “They do not die and they will be lamps in darkness – their clothes are pure white. They stay strong.”]

Discussion and conclusion

The Yezidis’ re-appropriation of their religion in recent years reveals their beliefs more clearly than ever: especially through media. The community uses Facebook as a tool to show its identity in a way that was unimaginable throughout its prior history. Today, cyberspace provides them an environment in which they can build their previously-ignored identity. The online material religion and the Virtual Temple have made a bold attempt

at creating a cyber-facility with the aim of guiding people to virtual places and online individuals to a ritual encounter. However, it is unclear whether these projects demonstrate a transformation of religious practices, as has been suggested (Brasher 2004, O'Leary 2005). It is also unclear whether this is simply a case of "old wine in new bottles." In other words, there is an attempt to recreate online, as much as possible, the experience of being in the "real world Temple" found in a genuine geographical space. The Virtual Temple is clearly an attempt at reproducing a real shrine online. It employs sensory images that are freely available in other formats; especially, the popular, shiny-colored posters of various deities. The Internet has greatly simplified the exchange of information and ideas amongst Yezidi. It has also helped build a sense of belonging for those with this identity and who share a solidarity with the Yezidi people.

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Notes

¹ The Yezidi worship one god who was the first being and created the universe. It is solely the ambivalent figure of Tāwūs Malek, with some characteristics of the Fallen Angel, who has the function of a demiurge. Yezidi tradition attributes the following words to him: “I was and now am and will forever remain. I hold sway over all creatures and regulate their affairs. No place is void of me. I am a participant in all events that heterodox people consider to be evil, since they do not correspond with their desire.” (Arakelova 2001:321).

² There is a belief that divine beings (the “Seven Angels”) can reincarnate themselves in human form. Most recently, this occurred in the predecessors of their main religious tribe. These people are called by the Arabic word “khas.”

³ One of the core texts of the Yezidi is the hymn known as *qawwals* and is read by *qawwali* men.

⁴ or *meshabet*

⁵ Income means that individuals pay a certain amount of money as a vow in order to make wishes.

⁶ *Mir* is one of the Yezidi castes, which also include *Sheykh* and *Pir*. In the *TāwŪsagan* ceremony, every visitor pays to worship *Senjaq*.

⁷ *Hegifer* is the name of a shrine for Yezidi in Khatare.

⁸ An Yezidi area between Sinjar and Sheykhkan.

⁹ The central occasion of the Yezidi religious year is autumn feast of Jema’ye. At this time, all the community members should ideally be present at Lalish, where a seven-day festival is held and their terrestrial meeting is thought to be mirrored by a celestial assembly of god and the seven angels (Kreyenbroek and Rashow 2005:16).