

Introduction

Whilst the study of “oral verbal art” in the literary sphere is now receiving a certain amount of academic interest, much less attention has so far been paid to the dynamics of orality in the sphere of religion, not least in non-Western traditions.¹ Many specialists in such fields as religious studies and theology were trained as philologists, and some regard arguments based on orality with suspicion. This relatively discouraging academic environment, combined with the hazards of embarking on a novel approach and, in the case of the “great world religions,” the vastness of the terrain to be covered and the minute contribution even the most successful piece of “oral” research could make, have led to a comparative lack of academic curiosity about the role of the spoken word in the history of religious traditions and the dynamics of their current developments.

In several branches of Iranian studies, however, demand created supply: in the study of smaller religious traditions in the Iranian-speaking world,² the role of orality became so evident that a growing number of scholars are now seriously engaged in the study of various aspects of orality in religious traditions. Several cultures in the Iranian-speaking world were either very slow to accept the use of writing when it came to religious texts, or did not have the means to develop a strong written culture. Points of focus in current research include the orally transmitted religious/cultural heritage informing the life of religious communities and the modes and implications of oral transmission of sacred texts, as well as those of the process of scripturalization that is currently taking place in some traditions. As will be seen from the articles in this volume, both research questions and methodologies represented here are varied and exploratory.

It should be pointed out here that the editors have adopted a very broad view of the concept of “religion” in mainly “oral traditions.” Several of the traditions covered here have not developed an explicit theology, and the boundaries between “religious” and “non-religious” elements are vague. Religion is widely seen as tradition, and much of the tradition is felt to be religious. Texts with a moral or traditional component, such as Yezidi “laments” or wedding songs (see below), though not regarded as sacred, are definitely felt to be based on or related to “religion.”

Two papers on the close cultural contacts between Christian and Muslim communities are included here to show that, in some largely “oral” cultures, linguistic and religious boundaries between communities are far more porous than in their “scriptural” counterparts.

Before the advent of Islam in the seventh century CE, the dominant religion in much of the “Iranian” world was Zoroastrianism. Sacred texts of that religion were transmitted orally from the second millennium BCE until sometime between the third and seventh centuries CE, when an adequate alphabet was devised to write their language. Because the Avesta, the sacred

¹ For studies on oral verbal art in “Iranian” languages, see Kreyenbroek and Marzolph 2010. Despite its title, with which the Editors did not agree, the work does not deal exclusively with orality, but also with written literatures in modern “Iranian” languages other than Persian.

² The word “Iranian” refers to a branch of Indo-European languages including Persian, Kurdish, and other modern and ancient languages.

“book” that contains most of these texts, now exists in written form, manuscript-based philological research has long been the sole approach to the study of early Zoroastrianism, ignoring the immense importance of the role of orality in the early stages of the religion (Kreyenbroek in this volume) and disregarding the fact that orality continued to play a key role in the transmission of the texts later on (Cantera in this volume). In the traditional study of Zoroastrianism, the focus was mainly on the remote past. The immense value of oral history-type research as a way of discovering what religion means to modern Zoroastrians (Stewart in this volume) is only coming to light now (see further below).

Kurdish is an “Iranian” language among whose speakers we find a number of religious minorities,³ including the Yezidis,⁴ the Yārsān or Ahl-e Haqq, and the Alevi of Turkey. Most Yezidis reject any connection between their faith and Islam, whilst only some groups of Yārsān do so, and Alevism is generally regarded as being within the fold of Shi’ite Islam. Despite such differences in self-identification, Yezidism, Yarsanism, and the Alevi tradition of the Dersim area have a range of striking common characteristics that do not go back to Islam, which suggests they have common roots in the remote past. One of these common features is that music forms a key part of their religious life; in the case of the Alevi, so does dancing.

Yezidism was mostly transmitted orally until recently, and the tradition of teaching the sacred texts by word of mouth is still alive, showing many common features with what is known of oral teaching in early Zoroastrianism. The Yārsān believe they once had a holy book comprising their religious texts. In practice, only individual texts were sometimes written down in the past, and such manuscripts were handed down in priestly families as sacred objects, rather than sources of information. There is no evidence that such manuscripts or other written texts played much of a role in the transmission of the sacred texts until a process of scripturalization began in the late-twentieth century. For the respective roles of orality and writing in the tradition of the Alevi of Dersim more research is needed, though it has been shown that in Alevism generally the role of oral transmission far outweighed that of the written word until recently (see Şahin 2005:465-85).

The fact that only one contribution to this issue concerns a Persian-speaking branch of Islam reflects the state of the art in Iranian studies. This is the more regrettable because few approaches could contribute more to our understanding of Sunnite and Shi’ite religious groups in Iran, the Kurdish Autonomous Region, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan than oral-history type projects of the kind discussed by Stewart in this volume.

In the field of ancient Zoroastrian studies, methodological debates concerning orality are now emerging. For a time, the theories of P. O. Skjaervo, who seeks to apply the oral-formulaic theory of Milman Parry and Albert Lord to these religious texts, have found a certain acceptance, particularly from traditional philologists. Kreyenbroek’s article in this volume challenges these

³ We are aware of the objections some people have against this term, arguing that it represents the view of a majority and may have negative effects on the communities concerned. However, not only do some of these groups use the term to describe themselves, but international efforts to ensure their safety in recent years have argued for the need to protect religious “minorities” that experienced the fury of the Islamic State (IS) or were likely to do so. As minority status plays a key role in the culture of these groups, this term will be used here whenever appropriate.

⁴ Many Yezidis in the Caucasus reject an identification as “Kurds,” and after the IS brutalities against the Yezidis in the past decade, there is now a modest tendency in other Yezidi communities to do the same.

views, arguing that the sources show that the early religious texts were carefully transmitted by priestly lineages and not extemporized on the basis of a known storyline (which rarely exists in the case of religious texts) and some well known passages frequently repeated as “building blocks.” Cantera, on the other hand, accepts Skjaervo’s theory in principle, but his contribution in this volume is not directly concerned with it. What he proves is that, when a written tradition of the Avesta had existed for several centuries, the variations in the extant texts can only be explained by postulating that oral transmission still played a key role.

In sharp contrast to these papers about the distant past, Stewart’s paper deals with the many points that arose when she was conducting a research program on modern Zoroastrians in Iran based on oral interviews. The idea of qualitative oral research in Zoroastrian communities—in order to discover what the religion actually means to its followers—was first attempted by Kreyenbroek (2001) with a great deal of help from Sarah Stewart, who has now perfected both methodology and technique, suggesting that this approach may indeed have a future.

In the section on Yezidism, Eszter Spät, using her extensive fieldwork among Yezidis in Northern Iraq, describes in detail how the community uses the traditional genre of “lament” (*xerîbî*) to deal with its feelings about the IS genocide of the Yezidis of Shingal in Kurdistan.

Focusing on the Yezidi tradition in the diaspora, Stuewe analyzes Yezidi wedding songs performed in Germany. On the basis of Bakhtin’s concept of the “chronotope” (that is, the way meaning is put into words in a given time and space), Stuewe examines the Yezidi “village chronotope” (that is, the mental image of the good, traditional village life) in order to analyze how Yezidis in the diaspora construe their idea of a “good Yezidi.”

Another ground-breaking and important article is Amy de la Bretèque and Omarkhali’s “exploratory study . . . of the acoustic shape of the Yezidi religious hymns.” Many of the main religious compositions of Yezidism, the *Qewls*, are performed to music; many of these *Qewls* have their own *kubrî* or “melody,” some of which are analyzed here.

In the section about the Yārsān or Ahl-e Haqq, both authors focus on the tradition of the Guran region, which rejects any connection with Islam and has preserved many ancient traditions. This focus reflects the interests of two scholars who are actively engaged in research on this community at the time of writing and is in no way intended as a value judgment on this and other Yārsān communities.

Kreyenbroek introduces the Yārsān and their worldview, discusses the problem of communicating with local informants whose vocabulary and categories differ from those used in academic publications, the process of scripturalization that is currently taking place among the Yārsān, and the various categories of “religious” texts.

Hooshmandrad uses the rich experience she gained over many years of fieldwork focusing on the musical tradition of the Yārsān of Guran, to offer fascinating insights into the interplay of music, text, and meaning during religious performances.

For the section on Alevism, we were fortunate to secure the collaboration of two scholars whose contributions throw important new light on aspects of Alevi culture. Gezik has offered us his translation of a story about the cosmogony by a member of the Alevi group of Dersim. The text is unique and illustrates the links between the cosmogonies of the Dersimi Alevi, the

Yārsān, and the Yezidis, by showing, for instance, that the Peacock Angel (Melekî Tawûs) plays an important role in Dersimi Alevi culture as well as in the other two traditions.

Arnaud-Demir's equally fascinating paper seeks to integrate the study of oral textual tradition, music, and dance among the Alevis, offering a dazzling new perspective on the potential links between dance and oral verbal art.

Raei, who has done important work on Islamic minorities in Iran, here discusses the 'Ajam dervishes, an interesting group of mystics who are Shi'ites and hold a special position among Iranian Sufis because they do not have a lineage of spiritual leaders (*selsele*); they are regarded as a branch of the equally mysterious Khāksār Order, which in turn has close links with the Yārsān. Raei analyzes their role in the transmission of popular Persian narratives, discussing performances that members of this group gave in public places such as coffee houses. These were influenced by the medieval, semi-religious concept of *fotuwat* (roughly corresponding to the Western notion of "chivalry"), whose importance for the understanding of some modern religious minorities is sometimes underestimated. The paper includes what is perhaps the first analysis of the social structure of this religious group, and the role which "men of speech" play there.

The two final articles deal with the interaction between Muslim and Christian communities in the Kurdish-speaking regions. The authors are part of a Moscow University research project on modern Neo-Aramaic (Turoyo), a Semitic language many of whose (Christian) speakers are in close contact with Kurdish-speaking Muslim communities. The audio recordings accompanying this issue include material related to both these papers.

Lyavdansky shows the close connection between these two cultures, using as an example a tale about the hero Mîrza Mihemed/Mirza Pamat in Muslim Kurdish and Christian Neo-Aramaic oral narrative traditions. Whilst the tales themselves are not religious in nature, the article illustrates the porosity of religious as well as linguistic boundaries in large "oral" cultures.

Furman, Kuzin, and Demir compare the Turoyo and Kurdish versions of a song about a Christian Bishop, Metran Îsa, discuss the historical background of this narrative as well as some linguistic aspects of the Kurdish version, and give short glossaries of relevant terms in both languages.

At the end of this introduction, perhaps we will be allowed to express some of our hopes for the future of this type of research. A fundamental question regarding changes in oral transmission of religious texts and subjects is not so much whether such changes occur, because we know they do; rather, further research is needed as to which aspects or elements of the tradition are particularly "predisposed" to changes and which are not. So far, this question has only been studied on the basis of the Yezidi tradition (Omarkhali 2017), but similar studies on other religious communities could give us a much better understanding of the dynamics of oral transmission.

As was said earlier, the potential value of qualitative oral interviews about the history and identity of religious groups or communities is enormous. Stewart (2018 and 2020) has shown that a strong sense of Iranian national and cultural identity is a key element in contemporary Zoroastrians' sense of religious identity. At the time of writing it would still just be possible, for example, to discover what mental image ordinary Iranians had of "Islam" at the time of the Islamic Revolution of 1979, which might yield important new insights.

Whilst the oral-formulaic theory can be helpful where epic poetry and religion meet,⁵ “sacred” poetic traditions in the Iranian-speaking world plainly do not rely on that type of transmission. It is clear that other ways of transmitting religious poetry exist, ranging from syllable-to-syllable memorization to verse-by-verse (Kreyenbroek forthcoming), from the use of archaic language to that of contemporary speech (or somewhere in between), from home tuition to studying with religious specialists—but we do not yet know nearly enough.

At the time of writing, traditionally conservative and mainly “oral” religions such as Yarsanism and Yezidism are either discussing or engaged in processes of “scripturalization.” This generally means that the oral textual tradition is to be committed to writing so as to produce a book that is expected to be a counterpart of the Bible or the Qor’ān. Among the reasons for this development are the fact that surrounding religions possess a Holy Book; that such a book is believed to be a better source of religious authority than the oral tradition; and a strong sense that the “oral” is inferior to the “written.” Although the scripturalization processes among the Yārsan and the Yezidis take very different courses, it is fair to say that both the followers of these religions and many Western academics could benefit greatly from a better understanding of—and more respect for—the complexity, rigors, and freedoms of oral transmission. More research among the older generation of transmitters, which again is still just possible at this time, may yield information about the earlier oral tradition that would be priceless both for believers and academics.

Our aim in editing this issue was to draw attention to the benefits of the study of oral religious traditions and the need for greater efforts in this field, in the Iranian sphere and probably others. To do so, we edited an issue that illustrates the variety of subjects and approaches in Iranian studies and, we hope, will show the inherent interest and importance of the subject.

Philip Kreyenbroek
Khanna Omarkhali
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⁵ Some heroes of the Iranian National Epic have the status of saints in the Yārsān tradition, and epic performances therefore can have a certain religious connotation.

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