Oral Tradition, 35/2 (2022):267-92

Singing the Pain: Yezidi Oral Tradition and Sinjari Laments after ISIS[1]

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Our girls fell into the hands of the kafir
They sold our girls to strange countries
This girl ran to the mountain to flee the kafir and she fell
Hadiya escaped the kafir, but she fell, she threw herself
It is a Great Holiday,[2] *but those in the hands of the kafir have no one*
The Holiday came, but no one visits our dead in Sinjar
The captivity of our girls and youth is even worse than death
The refugees[3] *are sitting in front of the street doors of strangers*
We have become blind from the pain.

The words of the old Sinjari[4] woman echoed among the graves in the Sinjari section of the Yezidi cemetery of Mem Şivan, in the Kurdistan Region, as she mourned for her granddaughter on the eve of Yezidi New Year.[5] The melody to which she composed her words

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[1] This article is based on repeated research trips in the Kurdish Region of Iraq between 2011 and 2017. Two of the *xerîbîs*, or laments, included below were collected in the course of my 2017 fieldwork supported by a generous grant from the Fritz Thyssen Foundation (grant number 2017-00830). I would also like to express my gratitude to George Soros for funding the late Central European University of Budapest, which used to provide a space for my research. My special thanks to Khanna Omarkhali for her invaluable help in transcribing and translating the laments in the article, and to Gulie Khalaf for her useful explanations and comments on the Sinjari expressions and images utilized in the laments.

[2] The New Year of Yezidis.

[3] *Muhacir*; interestingly, Yezidi refugees use this word to denote themselves, though in Muslim societies *muhacir* is usually exclusively used for Muslim refugees.

[4] I shall use the expressions "Sinjari" for Yezidis from the Sinjar region (near the Iraqi-Syrian border) and "Welati" for Yezidis from the region lying east of the Tigris (traditionally referred to as *Welat* or "Homeland").

[5] Yezidi women visit the graves of their dead on New Year and other holidays to perform ritual mourning. However, people said that this old Sinjari refugee, Dêy Şîrîn, came almost every day at sunset, to sing laments at the grave of her granddaughter, who died as a result of an accident after fleeing ISIS. For Yezidi names and geographic names that are not well known, I shall be using the Kurdish alphabet and orthography developed by the brothers Bedirxan. (For pronunciation see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kurdish_alphabets#Comparison_of_Kurdish_alphabets.)

was traditional, and so was the way Yezidis referred to the lament: *xerîbî* or *dîrok*,[6] the expression of longing, exile, and estrangement. However, the words themselves were new, composed in the wake of the ISIS attack. Her *xerîbî* or lament attested both to the trauma suffered by the Yezidis, a religio-ethnic minority with its unique traditions, and to the creative vitality of a genre which has a special place in Yezidi oral tradition. This article studies the changes Yezidi lament underwent in Northern Iraq in the past few years, reflecting the transformation of the Yezidi community itself. It pays special attention to the impact of the ISIS attack on the Yezidis of Sinjar.

Yezidi Funerals and the *Xerîbî*

Dirges or laments sung at funerals and wakes are, or at least used to be, an important part of Kurdish culture. At the same time, however, laments represent a literary genre that enjoys little prestige and has received limited scholarly attention in Kurdish studies. This is also true for Yezidi laments. While various collections of Yezidi sacred texts have been published lately,[7] there has been much less interest in laments.[8] This lack of scholarly interest possibly reflects Yezidis' attitude toward this genre. As Allison has pointed out in her book on Yezidi oral tradition, "Women's lament does not appear to enjoy the relatively high status of the historical *stran* [song], in Kurdish society" (1996:176). There may be various explanations for this phenomenon. Laments are traditionally perceived as an exclusively female genre. They are sung and listened to by women, which no doubt contributes to their lower social status in the eyes of local informants.[9] Furthermore, as dirges are sung only at wakes and at other commemorative

[6] In her book, *Yezidi Oral Tradition*, Allison refers to Yezidi laments as *dîrok* or *stranêd şînî* ("songs of mourning") (2001:75-76, 176). Estelle Amy de la Bretèque states that the expression *kilamê ser* ("words about") is used for the genre of laments among Armenian Yezidis (2012:131-32 and 2017 passim). According Khanna Omarkhali, Armenian Yezidis use *sitranên şînî* or *stranên ser şînê* (personal communication). During my fieldwork in the Kurdistan Region, the term women usually used to refer to laments was *xerîbî* (as in "they say *xerîbî*," *xerîbî dibêjin*). Some Sinjari women also used the term *dîrok*. Therefore, in this article I shall follow local usage and use *xerîbî*.

[7] English translations of Yezidi sacred texts have been published by Philip Kreyenbroek (1995), Kreyenbroek and Kh. Jindy Rashow (2005), and Khanna Omarkhali (2017). Many sacred texts have been published in the original Kurdish in Iraq, in Armenia, and by the diaspora community in Germany. Beside volumes containing collections of sacred texts, periodicals like *Lalish* (published in Duhok, Iraq) also regularly print transcriptions of sacred texts.

[8] The rare exceptions are Christine Allison in Iraq and Estelle Amy de la Bretèque in Armenia. Allison devoted a detailed chapter to Yezidi laments in her book *Yezidi Oral Tradition* (2001). She also published an article on Yezidi and Muslim Kurdish laments in Iraq (1996). Estelle Amy de la Bretèque carried out extensive ethnomusicological work among the Yezidis of Armenia. It is the topic of her monograph, *Paroles mélodisées: Récits épiques et lamentations chez les Yézidis d'Arménie* (2013). For her other articles on the topic and examples of her audio recordings, see her page, http://www.ethnomusicologie.fr/parolesmelodisees/. Soviet kurdologist Margarita Rudenko published a chapter on laments in a book on ritual poetry (1982). The Celîl brothers also included extracts from Armenian laments in their collection, *Kurdish Folklore* (1978:490-503).

[9] For example, while Sinjari IDPs drew my attention to their acquaintances and friends known as accomplished *tembûrvan*s, no one remembered to mention those who were known to be expert singers of laments, even though due to the frequent funerals and wakes held in the IDP camps, all knew such women.

occasions honoring the dead, not at festive events (weddings, parties, picnics), and as they cannot appeal to national pride, it is hard to find a niche for them in the modern commercial music market. Recordings of laments are not sold in the bazaar, unlike Kurdish pop music or the recordings of traditional singers. Finally, with the fast transformation of Yezidi society, there are regions where the tradition of laments seems to be on the wane. However, as shall be shown in this paper, laments still fulfill an important role among the Yezidis of Sinjar. While other aspects of oral tradition are threatened by the displacement of Sinjari Yezidis after the ISIS attack of 2014,[10] laments not only continue to be sung, but new laments are being composed as Yezidi women try to process and express their traumatic experiences. While these women and their artistic talent receive little or no recognition outside their own social circles, the songs I have recorded demonstrate that laments are a living artistic form of self-expression and literary creativity within an oral cultural framework.

Christine Allison, who carried out her research among the Yezidis of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq[11] in the early nineties, described the singing of laments as still an important constituent of Yezidi culture. Laments were, as a rule, sung at wakes after funerals by relatives, as well as at New Year in the cemeteries, and in her book she describes her experience of a widow performing laments in her home, in the company of women, in the memory of her husband (2001:76, 187-90). According to her, semi-professional singers of laments (that is, singers known for their skills, who were formally invited to sing at *tazîs* and were remunerated for their trouble), still existed and were being invited to sing *xerîbîs* at wakes in the region (2001:76-77, 177 and passim).

By the 2010s, the time of my own fieldwork, the situation had changed, at least in the Kurdistan Region. Though I repeatedly expressed my interest in hearing *xerîbîs* to various Yezidi friends, eager to help me with my research, this turned out to be difficult. As my acquaintances explained, it was no longer felt important to sing *xerîbîs* at the wakes held for elderly people. Singing *xerîbîs* was considered important only in the case of young people who passed away before their time, often under tragic circumstances, or for people whose social position was considered elevated. Women singing in their own homes in memory of beloved ones who had passed away, as described by Allison, no longer seemed to be a practice. As a consequence, the art of singing laments considerably declined in the roughly two decades following the fieldwork of Christine Allison. Even when *xerîbîs* were being sung, these mostly consisted of simple, repeated phrases, rather than the elaborate texts described in Allison's book. Going to the funeral of a young person, whose death was untimely and tragic, was not something I felt comfortable doing, but I could repeatedly observe women singing at the graves during Yezidi holy days. The Yezidi tradition is for women to visit the cemetery either on the eve or at the dawn of Yezidi holidays, taking food for the deceased. Some of the women who were still in mourning for the recent death of a young person, for example a daughter who died of cancer, or a son/brother who

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[10] See Spät 2021.

[11] The Kurdistan Region at the time was restricted to the Yezidi villages of Khanke, Shariya, and Baadre. The so-called Sheikhan region, with its many Yezidi villages, was at the time not accessible to people working in Iraqi Kurdistan. After 2003 Sheikhan came under the *de facto* (though not *de lege*) authority of the Kurdish Regional Government.

had been killed in Baghdad for selling alcohol, performed laments at the graves of their beloved ones. These laments were deeply emotional, accompanied by much crying; the text of the laments themselves, however, were very simple and repetitive. Much of it was just repeated phrases (such as: "oh my dear one, my heart oooh; help, help, help oooh"),[12] with the women wailing and ritually beating the chest and face.

It appeared that the art of singing *xerîbîs* declined to such an extent that the presence of experts, or what Allison refers to as "semi-professionals," was no longer felt to be a necessity at important funerals, or perhaps such singers were no longer to be found in the region. During my own research work in Khanke and Shariya, the two big Yezidi collective villages[13] of the Kurdistan Region, no one was ever referred to or pointed out as someone specially accomplished in singing *xerîbî*. Though this does not mean that such person(s) did not exist—after all, *xerîbîs* were not the main focus of my research—this suggests that accomplished singers of laments have either disappeared or were no longer accorded much importance by most of the community. One of the *tazîs* I could observe, held for the mother of an influential and rich Yezidi politician, from a sheikh lineage, provided a good example of this phenomenon. The *tazî* reflected the social importance of the son of the deceased. Great crowds came to express their condolences: not only the inhabitants of the village and members of the tribe of the family, but also members of the emerging Yezidi middle class, as well as non-Yezidi Kurdish politicians, both from the KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party) and the PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan). *Qewwals*, the singers of Yezidi sacred hymns, were invited to perform at the *tazî*, an exceptional event at this settlement.[14] However, no professional *xerîbî* singer was present at the wake. The daughters of the deceased (elderly or late-middle-aged women), seated around the bed of the deceased in the middle of the courtyard, sang laments themselves. However, these were simple laments, merely consisting of the singing of a few stock phrases and sentences, on the pain of becoming orphaned and the loss suffered, repeated over and over again.[15]

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[12] *Oh delalê, dilê min oooooh*; *oh hawar hawar hawar, oooooh*. *Hawar* or help in the context of laments and songs is not so much a literal call for help, rather an expression of pain and hopelessness.

[13] Such Yezidi collective villages were created by the Saddam regime in Sinjar in the 1970s and in the Yezidi regions east of the Tigris ("Welat") in the 1980s. Yezidis were forced to abandon their villages, usually on or at the foot of mountains, and moved into huge collective settlements on the plains, where government control was easier to exert.

[14] Despite the increased ease of travel and communication, it is rare in Khanke to invite *qewwal*s from their traditional home villages of Beshiqe-Behzani near Mosul. In Shariya, another collective town near Duhok, inviting *qewwal*s to funerals and the New Year mourning has been banned outright, or so people said, by community leaders.

[15] Experts, or what Allison refers to as "semi-professional" singers of *xerîbî*s still existed in Sheikhan, bordering the Kurdistan Region. Under the rule of Baghdad until 2003 and separated from Kurdistan by an internal border manned by Iraqi soldiers, the villages of Sheikhan were poorer, less affected by modernization, and more traditional than Yezidi settlements of the Kurdistan Region proper. Once, when visiting the village of Esya in Sheikhan, I ended up, without previously planning to do so, at the *tazî* for a young man who had just been killed in a driving accident. Both *qewwal*s and a semi-professional singer of *xerîbî*s had been invited to perform at the *tazî*. While the mourners themselves sang simple laments, consisting of repeated phrases, just like women did at funerals in Khanke, the professional singer sang several long and elaborate laments.

Sinjari Tradition

The situation was very different in the Sinjar region, near the Iraqi-Syrian border, where a huge Yezidi community has been living for centuries on and around the Sinjar Mountain. Isolated, poor, and suffering from a lack of development, the Sinjari community is widely considered far more traditional and religiously observant than their brethren east of the Tigris, especially the Yezidis of the Kurdistan Region proper. Along with many other aspects of Yezidi culture, performing laments has also so far survived in Sinjar as a living and integral part of traditional customs. The genocidal attack of the Islamic State on Sinjari Yezidis on August 3, 2014, forced most of the Sinjari community into continuing displacement in the Kurdistan Region.[16] While this has had a destructive impact on the cultural heritage of Sinjaris, due to the disruption of traditional social and cultural institutions, performing laments seems to have been one aspect which continues to be observed in the exile. Singing *xerîbîs* is not only seen as requisite for paying respect for the deceased, even if the wake takes place in a refugee camp or some makeshift housing, but it also provides an outlet for female refugees' grief and desperation. During repeated fieldwork carried out after 2014 in the Kurdistan Region, I had the opportunity to get more acquainted with the Sinjari community, now living as IDPs (or internally displaced persons) in and around local Yezidi villages, and learned more about their customs, including their *tazîs*.

Funerals are important social occasions among Sinjari Yezidis. Or maybe one had better say, taking all aspects into consideration, Sinjari funerals (just as funerals among other ethnic and religious groups in the region) are important religio-social-economic occasions. Not only relatives and friends, but generally other villagers and even distant acquaintances, are expected to make an appearance during the *tazî* or the wake period—which in Sinjar may traditionally last three, or preferably five or seven days[17]—in order to pay their respect to the deceased and their family. Failure to attend a *tazî* (or at least to express condolences at a later date together with excuses for not having been present at the *tazî*) is noted and construed as a social offense even among the less (or not at all) traditional.[18] Not only is attendance at a *tazî* a social obligation, but visitors are also expected to contribute toward the expenses of a wake. Such expenses can be considerable, seeing that a huge meal is served each day of the wake. A sheep must be sacrificed right after the body is taken from the house, and its meat is later served to the guests. This is followed by a lunch and dinner every day the *tazî* lasts, up to the last day, the day of the *xêr* (alms, charity), when everybody is expected to come, even if they had been before, and a huge

[16] For more details on the displacement of Sinjari Yezidis, see Dulz 2016.

[17] East of the Tigris, Yezidi funeral wakes officially last three days these days. When Allison carried out her fieldwork, in the early nineties, seven days seems to have been the expected number of days (2001:178).

[18] This social aspect of *tazî* is also noted by Allison (2001:169).

lunch is served. These days it is also customary to rent a huge tent to accommodate the guests.[19] As saying prayers and hymns for the deceased is (at least theoretically) demanded by religious traditions, *'elimdars*, that is, experts of religious texts (literally, "men of knowledge") are also invited. Though there may not be prayers at the funeral itself, which must be carried out as soon as possible leaving little time to locate and invite an *'elimdar*,[20] texts are recited in the evening in the tent, the space reserved for the male guests. Unless the *'elimdar* is a relative or close friend, some form of remuneration is customary for his services. While the religious part of the wake is thus usually restricted to the "male space," *xerîbîs* get to be sung by and for the females in their own separate female space (usually in the house). Some of the *xerîbîs* are sung by the relatives or the friends of the deceased, but sometimes, especially if there are no good singers in the family, women known to be expert *xerîbî* singers are specially invited. Allison refers to such expert *xerîbî* singers as "semi-professionals," as in her understanding they do not make their living from singing, though it is an expected custom to somehow remunerate a singer invited to perform *xerîbîs* at a *tazî*. However, I have found that in Sinjar there are female *xerîbî* singers who sing *xerîbîs* for a livelihood, like Basê Qasim (whose *xerîbî* will be discussed below), from Siba Sheikh Khidir on the southern side of Sinjar. As she explained, she had become a widow with children as a young woman and supported herself through singing laments. However, even she claimed that she never asked for a fixed sum for singing at a funeral, rather people gave what they saw fit.

Transformation of the Genre

Laments are traditionally a genre where each song is composed extempore,[21] even if stock phrases or formulas are used. Thus, despite their traditional nature, *xerîbîs* are subject to dynamical change. Not only are the words recomposed again and again and made to fit the occasion and echo the concerns of the community (as shall be seen below), but the very rules and conditions under which a *xerîbî* may be sung can change, reflecting the economic, social, and technological transformation of society. In fact, the possibilities offered by modern technology

[19] In the Kurdistan Region, the *Bingehê Lalîş* or Lalish Yezidi Cultural Center (which has numerous sub-branches in various Yezidi settlements) built huge community halls in the villages, partly to provide the community with a permanent building to hold wakes. Some families and villages still prefer tents erected in the streets, but others use these community halls (sometimes referred to as *mala miriyan* or "house of the dead") to receive the male guests. Women usually congregate in the house of the deceased.

[20] People claimed that in Sinjar prayers were always said during the actual burial. However, in the displacement this definitely was not the case, and the above claim may reflect what is considered ideal rather than what actually used to take place. Welati Yezidis also claimed that prayers are always said at their burials (unlike at Sinjari funerals, they added), but in my experience this is not the case either.

[21] As Albert B. Lord has pointed out in his seminal book, *The Singer of Tales* (1960), performers of oral tradition do not merely recite or perform memorized texts, but they compose or at least recompose them as part of each performance. This is certainly true of the Yezidi *xerîbî* tradition. No two laments I have heard were the same, and it was clear that each singer was composing her own "text," even if using some commonly accepted formulas and traditional images. Therefore, in this article I shall use the word "compose" instead of "perform," as it is a more fitting description of the artistic process.

seems to have a great impact on the formerly rigid social rules governing *xerîbî* singing. When I was making inquiries about *tazîs* and the singing of *xerîbîs* at *tazîs*, Sinjari acquaintances helpfully offered to procure recordings of *xerîbî* singing for me. *Xerîbî* recordings had become a marketable commodity in the past years, as they explained. In order to understand the novel nature of selling recordings of this traditional genre, one has to recall the observation of Christine Allison in the early 1990s. As Allison writes, "the strict social rules governing the occasion of performance of lament made it impossible for me to make a recording of a semi-professional lament" (2001:178).[22] Allison's words make recent commodification of *xerîbî* recordings all the more striking. The explanation should, paradoxically, be sought in Sinjari Yezidis' adherence to tradition. Sinjari customs demand that relatives visit the grave of the deceased every month during the first year, commemorating the death of their loved one, and then every year on holidays or the anniversary of the death.[23] Such visits traditionally included a sacrifice (ideally of a sheep or lamb), taking food to the graveside,[24] as well as women singing *xerîbîs* while ritually beating their faces or chest and crying. However, not all women possess the talent to sing *xerîbîs*. Modern technology, specifically the spread of smartphones, which have become ubiquitous in Iraq, offered an easy solution for this problem. A semiprofessional singer could be invited by the family of the deceased to sing about the departed either during or even after the *tazî*.[25] Based on the samples procured for me by Sinjari friends, singers try to "personalize" their laments on such occasions. They insert the names of various grieving family members and also some details on the deceased among the songs generally describing the pain caused by the departure of a loved one. These *xerîbî* session are recorded by family members and then, during the requisite visits to the grave, the *xerîbîs* are played on the phone, inducing the women to cry, just as the live performance of a *xerîbî* would do.[26]

The opportunities offered by access to new technology have led to another radical change, impacting the strict gender roles connected to laments. *Xerîbîs* have traditionally been sung only by women, and only for women. As Allison writes, "Informants in Badinan were unanimous that lament was a women's genre, and I found no evidence there of any similar songs

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[22] In personal communication, Allison explained that this was not merely because she did not have the chance to take part in a funeral wake (she did participate in "lament singing sessions" in private homes), but also because of the various social taboos surrounding the singing of laments.

[23] After a year is over, the clothes, *duşek* (thin sleeping mattress), quilt, and pillow of the deceased are given to the sheikh who had washed the body, and people are invited to a commemorative lunch. Following this date, the grave has to be visited only on the occasion of holidays, though some people do invite guests to a commemorative lunch on the anniversary of the death of a person dear to them. This latter is however a personal choice.

[24] Some of the food should also be distributed among the neighbors.

[25] Considering the rather low level of background noise when compared to my own recordings at actual *tazîs*, I concluded that the recordings I was given were made not at an actual wake, but rather on a later occasion, with only a few family members present.

[26] A somewhat similar development can be observed in Armenia, where studio recordings are sometimes ordered by the family of the deceased to be sent to relatives living far away. Some professional musicians also make recordings (on the heroic death of famous persons) for commercial dissemination/distribution (Amy de la Bretèqe 2015:238-39). Furthermore, I was recently sent the video recording of *xerîbî*-singing at a *tazî* for Sinjari refugees, where yet another technological innovation was being utilized: the singer was using a mike and loudspeaker to amplify her voice (with the unfortunate result that her voice became distorted and unpleasant.)

performed by men," adding that this was a genre that men looked down on: "Most of the men I questioned about women's lament asked why I was interested in such a 'miserable' genre" (1996:176). This attitude is easy to understand if we consider that while Yezidi society is in general less gender-segregated than Muslim society, men and women are still strictly separated at funeral wakes, and singing *xerîbîs* is restricted to women whose space is not entered by adult males.[27] Furthermore, wailing, crying, or beating of chests (which accompany the singing of *xerîbî*) would be considered unfitting for men. Consequently, *xerîbîs* can traditionally be sung only by women. However, as playing a recording at a grave does not necessitate the actual presence of the singer, whether male or female, recently male singers have also started singing *xerîbîs* for recording purposes. This, in its turn, may have a long-term effect on gender roles where *xerîbî*-singing is concerned.

While technology has brought about some important changes and innovations in the ways *xerîbîs* are performed, recent events, such as the genocidal attack of the Islamic State, have changed the content of the *xerîbîs* themselves. *Xerîbî* has always been a genre composed extempore. Formulas, traditional motifs, and images were mixed with the personal, and no *xerîbî* was ever performed (or expected to be performed) in the same way twice (cf. Allison 2001:176). Laments with traditional motifs (ranging from the description of the pain of those left behind to the vagaries of fate to religious images) are still being sung, but following ISIS' attack on the Sinjari community on August 3, 2014, women started composing new texts which reflect their recent pain and loss. While *xerîbîs* have always included topics like exile (the literal meaning of the word *xerîbî*, as death is seen as a form of exile), being an orphan, having a loved one killed or wounded,[28] or even fleeing to the mountains,[29] the new style of *xerîbîs* sing very concretely of what has happened to the Yezidis of Sinjar. To the old themes of exile, death, and being orphaned, which have gained a painful poignancy in their present situation, they now add references to the fate of Yezidi girls taken as *esîr* or captives and being sold to infidels (*kafirs*) in the bazaars of Raqqa (used to refer not only to the town itself but to the territory of the ISIS Caliphate as well), the unburied bodies left behind, and their existence as indigent refugees. Some laments even refer to concrete events as well as famous personalities in the fight against ISIS.

My first, deeply moving experience of new *xerîbîs* took place on the Yezidi New Year in April, 2015, at the cemetery of Mem Şivan in Khanke. The small hill dedicated to Mem Şivan and other Holy Beings serves as the traditional burial ground not only for the inhabitants of the village of Mem Şivan (consisting mostly of members of the *pîr* lineage of Mem Şivan), but also for a number of other villages in the vicinity. Each village has its own section on the small hill, among the various shrines, where they bury their dead, and after August, 2014, a special plot was

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[27] This was still strictly observed at *tazîs* I attended, both for Sinjaris and Welatis, the only exceptions being the *qewwals*, if they were invited to a funeral to play on the sacred instruments, the *def û şîbab*.

[28] Not a mere symbol in Saddam's Iraq, but often an actual fate that met a loved one.

[29] Allison mentions how she heard a woman singing going to the mountains with her small children and being under attack. Allison concludes that "her reference here to . . . 'the people of Kurdistan' makes it likely that she is referring to the Iraqi army's suppression of the Kurdish rebellion in 1991 and the subsequent mass flight to the mountains" (2001:192).

given to the Sinjaris.[30] As is the custom, women went to the cemetery on New Year, to take food for their dead and to ritually mourn for them, accompanied by the *qewwals*.[31] After the *qewwals* and most of the local mourners had left, I was walking around the cemetery taking pictures of the graves. On the far side of the hill, at the section set aside for the Sinjari dead, I came across a small group of Sinjari women, with an old woman singing and the younger ones around her crying. This singing was different from that of local women who came to mourn at the graves. While the latter mostly beat their chests and faces and repeated a few stock phases or simply just wailed, the singing of these women was both more pain-filled than those of the ritual mourners and more sophisticated, with what seemed like a complex narrative sung by the old woman. The group was soon joined by another old Sinjari woman (apparently one previously not known to them). As I later learned, Dêy Şîrîn,[32] who was also a *xizmetkar* or servant at Lalish,[33] regularly came to sing at the grave of her granddaughter. The young woman died when the family first fled to the Kurdish mountains near Zakho, having fallen from a rock or cliff-face while collecting firewood on the mountainside. Though Dêy Şîrîn was known to those living near the cemetery hill as someone who came almost every sunset to sing at the grave of her granddaughter, she herself did not claim to be an accomplished singer. As she said, in the past she never sang *xerîbîs*, adding, "I only started after my children became captives."[34] As none of her own children (or grandchildren) had been captured, it was obvious that she used "my children" to refer to any Yezidi who disappeared in the hands of ISIS, seeing them, just as the whole community did, like her own children and sharing in the grief over their fate. She sang of how "our daughters" fell into the hands of infidels (*kafirs*), who sold them in the bazaars to strangers coming from all over world; of how the dead lay orphaned (unburied) in Sinjar; of her granddaughter who threw herself from the mountain rather than fall into the hands of *Daesh*;[35] of the whole community being blinded by pain, destroyed, and having to sit in the street in front of doors of strangers.

Much moved by her singing, I showed my recordings to local friends.[36] As they told me, Dêy Şîrîn was not alone in singing about ISIS and of what they had done to the community.

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[30] Some of those who have passed away as refugees were taken back to Sinjar, especially after the major shrines became liberated, but others were buried at local cemeteries.

[31] *Qewwals* do not go to all cemeteries, and in many villages women do the ritual mourning accompanied by local men playing on the drum and *zurna* or without musical accompaniment, but Mem Şivan is considered an important sacred site. For more on Yezidi mourning customs at New Year see Kreyenbroek 1995:151 and 2009:23-24; Spät 2005:64-66.

[32] That is, Mother Şîrîn, "Mother" being the traditional title to address elderly people.

[33] That is, someone who goes to Lalish to help to keep the sacred valley clean and also perform other acts of service.

[34] *Zarokên min girtî bûn*.

[35] Though her granddaughter died in an accident, as an indirect result of being a refugee, Yezidi girls are said to have committed suicide after being violated by ISIS fighters, by throwing themselves off rock walls in the Sinjar mountain.

[36] Sadly, the strong wind, bringing a spring storm, made my recordings aesthetically useless and hard to understand.

According to them, after the refugees first arrived, whenever Sinjari women gathered, they would often start singing *xerîbîs*, recounting both their personal loss and the sufferings of the whole community, until they all dissolved in tears. As time passed such "sessions" of singing their grief gradually subsided, and saying *xerîbîs* was once again mostly confined to *tazîs* and visits to graves at the cemeteries. My friends also advised me against asking women to sing *xerîbîs*, saying that it would remind everybody present of what they had been through and what they had lost and make them cry. As the community was trying to adjust and get on with its life in displacement, this was no longer felt fitting.

I did, however, later on have the opportunity to listen to and record Sinjari laments, both new and old, at *tazîs* and also in Lalish, the sacred valley of the Yezidis. In what follows, I shall describe these occasions and the new *xerîbîs* singing of what is known as the latest *ferman*[37] or attack against Yezidis.

Stranbêj **Singing Laments on Mount Arafat**

Among Yezidis, the name *Çiyayê Erefatê* or "Mount Arafat" does not refer to the hill just east of Mecca, one of the sites to be visited during *Hajj*, but to one of the hills rising above Lalish, the sacred valley of the Yezidis at the Kurdish foothills. Mount Arafat is traditionally considered a place where Sinjari pilgrims set up their tents, just above the Central Sanctuary of Sheikh Adi. Mount Arafat is also the traditional place where Sinjari *stranbêj* (literally: "sayers of songs") or bards congregate on a small level square halfway up the hill, just above a wishing tree. During my previous visits to Lalish during the *Cema'y* or Autumn Assembly, when Yezidis come on a pilgrimage to Lalish from everywhere, I witnessed Sinjari *stranbêj*[38] sit down in this spot on Mount Arafat and sing to their enraptured audience. More than once, there were several *stranbêj*, one taking over the singing from the other, in a friendly rivalry.

The situation was somewhat different in the fall of 2017. The *Cema'y* of 2017 was going to be the first Autumn Assembly celebrated since 2012, the four previous festivals having been canceled on account of mourning and also out of respect for those fighting ISIS.[39] However, in the end this *Cema'y* was also canceled by the *Meclisê Ruhanî* or Yezidi Spiritual Council. As I heard, the reason for this decision was no longer ISIS (who had been beaten out of territories in Northern Iraq), but the death of Jelal Talabani, head of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, just a few days before the *Cema'y* and the official mourning announced everywhere in the Kurdistan Region, irrespective of ideological and political loyalties. Though the Assembly was officially canceled and no public rituals were celebrated, the Valley was still full of pilgrims—most of them young Sinjaris. However, instead of the usual male *stranbêj*, I found two women on Mount

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[37] *Ferman*, literally "edict," is used in the sense of attack or "pogrom" among Yezidis. Lately, Yezidis have started to translate the word into English as "genocide."

[38] These days all *stranbêj* seem to be from Sinjar, where traditional *strans* still enjoy a high prestige, unlike in other territories.

[39] The 2013 festival, before the ISIS attack, was canceled in order to show solidarity after a terrorist attack in Erbil, just before the festival.

Arafat. They were not singing the usual songs or *strans*, but *xerîbîs*. They were Basê Qasim and Xanif Muho, originally from the settlement of Siba Sheikh Khidrê on the southern side of the Sinjar mountain. They were both semiprofessional singers of *xerîbîs*, who sang laments not only for relatives and friends, but also for strangers, and during these fateful times, also at Lalish. As Basê Qasim said: "I say [*xerîbîs*] for the martyrs, I go to wakes and I say it for seven days, I go to the graves, I also come to Lalish to say it for seven days; I say it for the dead at the tombs".

It is worth mentioning that both women referred to themselves as *stranbêj*, perhaps to emphasize the professional nature of their singing (as opposed to women who only sing in familiar circles.) When I inquired if they really sang *strans* or songs publicly, the answer was affirmative, though they both added, "now is not the time for *strans*,"[40] meaning that it would have been deemed inappropriate to sing *strans* when the Yezidi community was in mourning for those killed and kidnapped in Sinjar. This also explained the unusual absence of male *stranbêj* on Mount Arafat.[41] Encountering female *stranbêj* was surprising, because all the *stranbêj* I had seen or heard of before were males. Furthermore, while gender segregation among Yezidis is not as strict as among some other ethnic and religious groups in the region, it is hard to imagine women, even if elderly, singing in a mixed company or before men. Though Allison writes that available literature suggests that female *stranbêj* existed at least in some places, and various Yezidis told her about a Sinjari woman named Hezo, "who had been taught various songs of the great *stranbêj* Biroyê Sherqi," she herself never personally met a female *stranbêj* during her extensive fieldwork (2001:78). A young Sinjari man accompanying me also remarked later that even before the ISIS attack women did not sing *strans* publicly, as this would have been considered *'eyb e*, "shameful," that is, not socially acceptable. Singing *xerîbîs* on Mount Arafat seemed to constitute a different category—though as I have said, this was the first time I saw women singing *xerîbîs* on Mount Arafat or in any mixed public space. It seems likely that this was a reflection of what the community had just recently gone through. It may be added that modern technology and the heightened interest in Yezidis and their fate at the hands of ISIS—often presented as an attack on Kurds in general by the Kurdish media—may lead to more changes in attitudes toward the relationship between gender, genre, and public space: the women told me that the following day a German television crew was going to film their singing of laments. This was certainly a far cry from Allison's descriptions of her difficulties in observing and recording laments in 1992, where laments could be performed only under strictly circumscribed conditions and only before a female audience.[42]

On further inquiry as to when and where they sang *strans*, the women went on to explain that they used to sing *strans* "when we were happy in our heart, when we went to collect wood,

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[40] *Ne wextê stran e.*

[41] The Autumn Festival was canceled in 2013, too, following a terrorist attack in Erbil, but some *stranbêj* still came to perform.

[42] Allison writes that "Informants could not simply perform to order; one must wait either for a *taziye* after a death or for a socially sanctioned occasion for the commemoration of the dead." She adds that a semiprofessional singer was requested by a friend to sing a lament for the foreign researcher, but the woman declined saying that singing a lament outside the right context was forbidden (*heram e*). Allison also recalls the Celîl brothers' experience of recording a lament at a commemoration, where they "had to retire from the performance themselves, leaving their recording equipment, as it was an occasion for women" (2001:76).

when we put the wood on our back, we said [sang] *strans*. When we went to fetch water, when we went to the fields, when we went to take care of the animals or to collect wild plants[43]—we sang songs for ourselves." In other words, they sang *strans* when working in a group of women, but not at public gatherings,[44] and certainly not in front of men. One of the women also added, "this was a long time ago, at the time of Saddam and the war of Iran," a reflection on the fact that mechanization of agriculture along with the introduction of modern infrastructure has transformed traditional lifestyle for good even in the Yezidi villages of such a relatively underdeveloped region as Sinjar. As a result, singing while carrying out traditional chores became an obsolete custom, something that people remembered but hardly did anymore.

When asked how and from whom she learned to sing, Basê Qasim said, "my brother was a singer [*şa'er*, literally "poet"], he was a player of the tambur [*tembûrvan*]." She also mentioned a string of names, singers (again referred to as *şa*'e*r*) famous in their own time, claiming them as her teachers (including at least one female, Xazalla Ibrahim).[45] But then, as a counterpoint, she added that she also learned (to sing) from her own "pain and grief" (*ji kul û derda, ji kul û derdêt xwe*) as for thirty years she had "been taking care of her orphans"; her husband had died thirty years previously, leaving her a widow with five children she had to bring up alone. (Xanif Muno's husband had also died, but she had never had any children—a situation that is considered very painful among Yezidis.)

Both women had seen enough trouble and pain in life to "teach" them to sing *xerîbî*, however, the ISIS attack on their community and its aftermath meant a new level of suffering, both personal and communal, which was reflected in their laments. To quote their words:

> After this *ferman* happened, our songs (*dîrok*) became longer.[46] [We sing about how] they beheaded our children; killed the old people, who had been left behind in their homes; all this killing and dying; those who died from thirst on the road [while fleeing]; our girls in the hands of *Daesh* [ISIS], the ones they took for themselves; our honor (*namûs*) was lost, we lost our mind [lit. "lost our head"]; we are refugees (*muhacir*); they surrounded Siba Sheikh Khidir at two o'clock in the morning, we couldn't flee until seven, it was all filled with the groaning of the dying and the wounded; people threw away their children, people threw away their mother and father by the roadside;[47] until we die, we will feel this grief.

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[43] "*Em çûne matanî, em çûne keringa.*" I was not familiar with the word *matanî*, nor could I find it in the dictionary, but according to Gulie Khalaf, *matanî* means "to bring" and refers to collecting wild plants and mushrooms. *Kering/kereng* is tumble thistle or *gundelia*, a wild plant growing in the spring. Its stalks, fried in oil, are delicious and popular.

[44] An exception may have been weddings, where songs used to be sung at all-female gatherings prior to the wedding, according to my Sinjari informants. However, according to the same sources, this custom is now a thing of the past, though men may still get together to sing (and drink) before a wedding.

[45] If true, this would contradict Allison's observation (based on what she had heard) that "female singers tended to learn songs from members of their families; it would not be considered appropriate to send them out to learn from singers who were not relations" (2001:78-79).

[46] *Ew fermane me rabûye, dîrokê(t) me zêdetir bûn.*

[47] A reference to how people were forced to leave behind those too weak or infirm to keep up, when they were forced to flee on the mountain.

Besides being forced into the life of IDPs living in a ramshackle refugee camp and sharing in the grief of the community, they had also suffered personal losses. Three nephews of Basê Qasim, for example, were captured by ISIS, while another nephew suffered a mental breakdown.

> By God, a nephew of mine, when we first came to Lalish, after we fled, in front of Xefûrê Riya [the Holy Being protecting travelers], right in front of his shrine, he got up and shot himself in the head, his blood ran down the steps. He had eight children. All his children and his wife then went and all left for Germany. His grave is over down there, in the valley.

All this she sings about when singing her laments, she said.

Speaking of their singing since the ISIS attack, Basê Qasim also explained how they incorporated what members of their extended family and their various acquaintances had gone through, bringing several examples. Even being invited to sing laments at a commemoration for a stranger could turn into an occasion where new motifs were added. Every time, as they said, when they were invited to sing for the dead, or even for the half-sad, half-happy occasions when someone returned from captivity and a ritual meal with sacrifice was held to give thanks for the return, they learned new details of what had befallen people and added these to their repertoire. This was also true for the song the women sang for me to record. Before they started singing, they consulted among themselves and agreed to sing what they referred to as *Ser Çiyayê Şingalê* ("On the Mountain of Sinjar), though their singing eventually seemed to incorporate other songs as well. As they said, *Ser Çiyayê Şingalê* was not a new song; "our mothers were not yet born, this already existed." However, "after [what happened] it became longer, after our pain and grief became heavy, it became longer."[48] In other words, they have added new words to the old song,[49] to include and commemorate what they and their relatives, friends, and the whole community had just suffered. It is not possible to reproduce the whole *xerîbî* (some twenty minutes long) here, but a short extract should give the reader a good impression of the content of the lament.[50]

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[48] *Piştê zêdetir bû, piştê kula, derdê me giran bû, zêdetir bû.*

[49] Or so they claimed. I am not familiar with the "original" or pre-ISIS text of this lament, but it is possible, or rather probable, that each performance was an improvisation, with no fixed text.

[50] The following text and the next two *xerîbîs* were translated with the help of Khanna Omarkhali. The video and audio recordings of the lament by Basê Qasim and Xanif Muno can be found at the OSA Digital Archive of Cultural Heritage. The video of the performance was recorded in two separate files, due to technical reasons: https://catalog.osaarchivum.org/catalog/osa:c4157d03-1181-4a0f-95fe-014f67854386 and https://catalog.osaarchivum.org/catalog/osa:3ffbd0bf-99d5-4a8a-b6eb-2b253648e5f8; audio file: https://catalog.osaarchivum.org/catalog/osa:3b368149-53c5-4c06-8c78-5e1e186675a0.

0:10-2:43	
Hey dilo, çiyayê Şingalê bi te re	O heart, the Mountain of Shingal (Arab. Sinjar) is [mourning] with you
Çiyayê Şingalê bi te re	The Mountain of Shingal is [mourning] with you
Here wan kafira pîş Şamê girtin her çar aliya, her çar kenara	Those infidels closed on Syria from all four directions, all four corners
Yê, mi rebena	Oh, I poor one
Keçk-û-jinêd êzîdiya destê hova da mayê	The Yezidi girls and women remained in the hands of the wild [people]
mirinêt kuştiyayê hestî û serêt ber vî baranê mayê	The murdered ones, their bones and heads remained under this rain[51]
Mala xwîşka minê, ew keçkêt Çiyayê Şingalê hemû li Saudiyê, Reqayê firotin, dana maldara	Oh my sister's family, those young girls of the Mountain of Shingal were sold to Saudi Arabia and Raqqa,[52] [they] were given to the rich [ones]
Were dayê, dengê wan keçk-û-şebaba ev sê sal e Lalişa Nûranî dernayê	Ay[53] mother, it is already three years that the voice of those girls and youths does not come (that is "is not heard") in the Luminous Lalish[54]
Çiyayê Şingalê dayê bi te ra	The Mountain of Shingal, the mother is [mourning] with you
Çiyayê Şingalê dayê bi te ra	The Mountain of Shingal, the mother is [mourning] with you
Dora Sîba Sheikh Xidirê, Koço, Girzerê girtin heta gulê Xetarê,	They surrounded Siba Sheikh Khidir[55]
Dora xortê êzîda, keçka girtin ji xwe ra mêra(?)	They surrounded the Yezidi youth, these men took the girls for themselves
Ez rebena, qîrîn û kutina keçk û bûkêd êzîdiya me	Oh poor me, the crying and screaming of our Yezidi girls and brides[56]
Fermana Çiyayê Şingalê me, dev ji berdine dayik û dota, xwişk û birayê me	It is *ferman* (massacre, pogrom) on our Shingal mountain, [our] mothers and daughters, our sisters and brothers were separated

[51] It remains a very sore point for the surviving Yezidi community that many of their dead have not been buried properly and according to traditions. Some remain in mass graves, while others, especially those who died on the mountain, may not have been buried at all.

[52] Raqqa was invariably used to refer not just to the town of Raqqa, capital of the Caliphate at the time, but to all parts of Syria under ISIS rule.

[53] Lit. "come."

[54] This was sung in the fall of 2017 and refers to those who had not yet returned from captivity at the time.

[55] The reference to Khetar, a village in Sheikhan, is not clear.

[56] That is, young married women.

Hatî wê salê çola me,	That year came into our land[s]
Laşê nehatiye gorhan û mezarê me	The bodies (lit. "body") have not been buried in our cemeteries and tombs
Bila be êzîdî nemînin Şingala xwe şîrîn, bila ew nemînin	Let it be so that Yezidis would not remain in their sweet Shingal, let them not remain
Xwedê, çavêt keçk û bûkêt êzîda girêdan	O God, the eyes of the Yezidi girls and brides were blindfolded
Dîn û dewleta weran kin	[They] plundered [our] religion and [our] land
Xwedê, temam hildin ji xwe re	O God, [they] took everything to themselves
Hey, hey xwîşka minê, çi rojeke reş û tarî	O my sister, what a black and dark day
Hey hatin ser me re	They attacked us
Min dît nalîn kete kuştî birîndara	I saw how crying arose among [people because of] the dead and the wounded
Ê bi Xwedê, min dît zarokêt ber derê dayka nalînêt kûştiya ra bi dest û linga li ber xwe da	Oh by God, I saw the children [before?] their mothers cry because of the dead and crawl on all fours (?)
Welle bi Xwedê, keç û jinêt Çiyayê Şingalê, ê di Koço, Girezêr, Telezêr û Sîba Şêx Xidrê girtin bi hezara vêca bi seda	The girls and women of Sinjar Mountain, those from Kocho, Girezer, Telezer, and Siba Sheikh Khidir, who were captured by the thousands[57]

Singing of New *Xerîbîs* at *Tazîs*

Similar "new" *xerîbîs*, along with ones with more traditional themes, are also sung at funeral wakes for Sinjari IDPs. It may be of interest to describe such funerals here, along with some of the laments sung for the deceased.

In the spring of 2016, an elderly IDP woman[58] from the village of Telezer in Sinjar passed away while living as a refugee in Khanke. Unlike many other IDPs, she had relatives in the Kurdistan Region. Her daughter had been married off to a man originally from Khanke at a very young age.[59] The man eventually moved back to Khanke with his new bride, but the family maintained strong ties with her Sinjari relatives. Three of the granddaughters were married to men from Sinjar and returned to live there. When the Yezidi community fled Sinjar in the wake of the ISIS attack, most of the extended family came to Khanke, where they could count on the support of their local relatives. With so many refugees, accommodation was tight, so the matriarch lived with a number of other members of the extended family in the courtyard of a

[57] Other "novel" elements reflecting on the recent experiences of the community include singing about those (possibly as many as a fifth of the Iraqi Yezidi community) who have left their homeland and gone to strange countries, as far as *Almanya*, that is, Germany, the preferred destination of most Yezidi refugees.

[58] Her relatives claimed she was ninety-five years old.

[59] This was a case of forced *bedele* or exchange of brides. A brother eloped with a girl, and the family of the girl demanded restitution in the form of a bride for their son. At first the other family refused, but under immense pressure, they eventually consented to give their daughter, only twelve at the time, in marriage.

house facing that of her daughter across the street, in a complex of tents and a dilapidated one-room mud-brick house.[60]

As she passed away in April, 2016, when the northern part of Sinjar had already been freed of ISIS and the road between Sinjar and the Kurdistan Region was controlled by the Peshmerga and open to traffic, her body was taken back to Sinjar the same day. She was buried at the shrine of Sheikh Abûl Qasim (or Şabûl Qasim), where her mother and father were also buried, according to her wish. Her *tazî* or wake, however, was celebrated in Khanke, where most of her relatives were living at the time. The *tazî* lasted three days and was visited by a great crowd. Those coming to pay their condolences included both locals and Sinjari IDPs, many of the latter coming from camps at other settlements. However, the family later complained that the *tazî* was small; because the community was dispersed, people were too far to travel to the *tazî*, especially as their financial conditions were strained under the circumstances.[61] At home, the *tazî* would have taken seven days, with far more people coming. As usual, the wake was strictly gender-separated. A huge tent was set up in the middle of the street (blocking all traffic for three days) for the men. Sinjari women paid their visit in the courtyard where the old lady used to live. A make-shift tent (with no sides) was put up for the occasion, to shelter the women from the sun, as there was not enough room to receive and feed everybody in the temporary living quarters. Most local women (who did not know the deceased, but were paying their respect to the local relatives) came only on the third day, the day of the *xêr*, and they were received and served lunch in the house of one of the local granddaughters, apart from the Sinjari mourners.

Food, an important part of any Yezidi wake, was being cooked in huge cauldrons in the front yard of the local relatives by the men of the family (who recruited the help of a friend working as a chef). It mostly consisted of rice, *sawar* (or *bulgur*), and boiled chicken and mutton. While the chicken was store-bought, the sheep was slaughtered on the spot. Beside the sheep sacrificed on the first day, as mentioned above, four sheep were slaughtered on the second day, and five on the third, to be served to the guests. All of this lavish feasting would have put a heavy burden on the bereaved family, but guests contributed toward the expenses, as is generally expected. Some brought boxes of frozen chickens, others arrived with living sheep or goats. Most gave money, which a member of the family diligently wrote down in an exercise book (so when it became their turn to visit a *tazî*, they would know how much they "owed").[62] Spiritual needs were also catered to. On the second day, a *feqîr* versed in sacred texts came to the tent of the men to perform *qewls* or Yezidi hymns.[63] In the women's section laments were sung on the

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[60] Such simple, one-room constructions, sometimes made from traditional mud-brick, sometimes from concrete blocks, used to serve as houses after the inhabitants of the village were moved into their present location in 1985. As their economic conditions improved, people moved into bigger, modern houses, but the original structures were sometimes preserved to serve as storage rooms or for some other purpose. After the arrival of the Sinjari IDPs, many were converted back into living quarters.

[61] I heard similar complaints at other Sinjari *tazîs* I attended, despite what seemed to me a huge crowd.

[62] The family received ten sheep and goats as well as fifteen million Iraqi dinars (roughly $12,500 USD). However, all of this is considered *deyn* or debt, which has to be reciprocated on similar occasions.

[63] In Sinjar most *'elimdar* or *qewl* come from the special lineages of *feqîrs*. For more on this see Omarkhali 2017; Spät 2021:111-12.

second and third days. Even though no semiprofessional singer was invited, there was no shortage of proficient singers of laments, all of them elderly or late-middle-aged Sinjari women from the huge refugee camp near the village. All of the singers seemed to compose their own texts (using traditional motifs and images), and all of them included references to the tragic events which befell the community. Some even devoted the whole lament to singing about what Yezidis had suffered (sometimes with no concrete reference to the circumstances of the *tazî* or the person of the deceased).

Of the various singers who sang at the wake, I have chosen the text of Sheikha Kamo Reşo Paço, as her performance outshone that of the other singers (an impression also shared by my Yezidi hosts). She was an Adani sheikh (or a "sheikh of Sheikh Hassan," as she said). Adani sheikhs are the descendants of the lineage of Sheikh Hesen (the physical incarnation of the *sir* or mystery of Melek Sheikh Sin, that is Angel Sheikh Hesen), the Yezidi Holy Being associated with the Pen (and consequently with writing and books). Traditionally, only the descendants of Sheikh Hassan were allowed to acquire the art of writing and reading. As Sheikha Kamo herself proudly boasted, she never went to school, but still could read and write and was able to use her mobile phone[64] and even knew some English. She attributed this to her special abilities as an Adani sheikh and claimed that her father, uncles, and grandfathers had the same abilities, without attending school. She was also knowledgeable about Yezidi religion, which she had learnt from her family,[65] Yezidi oral history, and knew how to sing *strans* or traditional songs. She was also considered a talented singer of *xerîbîs*. Though with several sons serving as officers in the Iraqi army (with steady salaries) she was perhaps financially in a safer place than most refugees, she was deeply affected by the destruction of the Sinjari community. She was chain-smoking (a habit she attributed to the stress she was suffering) and had claimed to have lost several stones in weight since August, 2014. Like others, she had many stories of loss and pain to tell, including the fate of one of her young relatives, recently freed from ISIS captivity, who set herself on fire after dreaming that she was back in the hands of ISIS. The ongoing vitality of the oral tradition of *xerîbî* is demonstrated by her references to Qasim Şeşo and his nephew Heydar Şeşo, who became symbolic figures for many Yezidis as the leaders of armed resistance against ISIS.[66] The Şeşos first took up arms in August, 2014, successfully defending the shrine of the holy being Şerfedîn (considered the protector of Sinjar) on the northern side of the mountain. The defense of the shrine of Şerfedîn gained almost mythical status among Yezidis and various miracles came to be associated with it.[67]

[64] Most Yezidis have their own cell phones these days, but many women, especially the elderly, have to ask for help when trying to call someone, as they cannot read the names in the phone's memory.

[65] Sema TV, a Yezidi program on local Kurdish TV, even made a recording with Sheikha Kamo, where she recites and explains a Yezidi myth (the video in question, accessed on YouTube in April, 2019, has since been removed).

[66] English-language news articles refer to them by the name of "Shesho."

[67] See Spät 2020:24. The lament of Sheikha Kamo Reşo Paço can be found at https://catalog.osaarchivum.org/catalog/osa:ff0f37a9-2d35-46f1-a1b7-69f872a539a8#.

0:10-0:51	
Mixabin fermana wa êzîdiya giran e, min go serê me ferman e!	Oh [such] sorrow, this *ferman* on the Yezidis is heavy, the massacre is on us!
Ezê diçime, ez dikim û nakim Ez xortê wê êzîdiya, va can û cila, wan zarokêt kiçik Ezê ji destê wan kafira tu cara wa ez 'efu nakim.	[Wherever] I go, whatever I do, I will never forgive those infidels [who killed] the youths of Yezidis, these bodies and clothes, those small children.
Me dêrane malêt êzîdiyayê, malêt ê miriyê, Malêt bediliyê, malêt kesiriyê, xortêt êzîdiyayê.	The houses/families of Yezidis, the houses of the dead, the houses of the exhausted, the houses of sorrow, the youth of Yezidis were scattered.
Ezê gêlûka xerbê banê geliyê Şêx Xidrê bikim We ezê bêjim: "Delalê dilê mino, Rabe, geliyê hezarê li mezare".	I will call out in the West of the valley of Sheikh Khidir And I will say so: "Oh, beloved of my heart, Rise, in the valley thousands are in the grave."
1:23-1:56	
Ezê bêjime li serê Çiyayê Şingalê ketim, wêle mala minê wê bi dara çar kinare me xayîn bûyn.	I say, I went to Mount Shingal, Oh poor me (lit. "oh my home"), we were betrayed from all sides (lit. "four corners").
Xwedê, mala Çiyayê Şingalê birine mîratê, Destê me kirine bin dar û bera,	By God, [they] took away (lit. "inherited") the house[s][68] of Sinjar Mountain, [They] put our hands under the trees and stones (i.e., left us helpless).
Me zarokê xwe avîtine ber taqane Welle me avîtine ber dîwara.	We threw our children down by the wall, oh we threw them by the wall (i.e., we became beggars).[69]
Zarokêt me temam li ser Çiyayê Şingalê, Serêt wan qîrîn e, serêt wan qutîn e.	All our children on Shingal Mountain, [They] were crying, [they] were screaming their heads off.
Ez bêjim, Xwedê, de ka em çi bikin, çi nakin, Xwedê, ne parek nan e, ne xetek nan e, mala minê Ne dilopek avê xortê êzîdiya, wêle deyka, nemaye, ti çara me nîne.	I say, oh God, what should we do, By God, there is not a bite of bread, not a piece of bread left, oh poor me. Not a drop of water is left for the youth of the Yezidis, oh mother, we have no solution.

[68] *Mal* here refers not just to the house, but to all of the property belonging to a house, including women and children.

[69] According to Gulie Khalaf, in the Middle East destitute people sit around in front of walls and beg money from the passersby. The expression "throw our children by/at the wall" is a way of saying that the children were left on the street as beggars by the walls. That is, the parents could not care for their children and were forced to leave them in the worst conditions.

4:01-4:13	
Xwedê, wa ezî hatim, we ez sekinîm, Lê (bi) çavêt xwe dîtim, el ber Şerfedîn rûniştim. Min got êvarêt di êvara ser me beşera, Min go êvara wê le me be reş û tarî.	By God, I came and I stood, I saw with my own eyes, I sat down in front of [the shrine of] Şerfedîn. I said, the evening of all evenings [is coming] upon us people, I said, an evening will be upon us black and dark.
4:49-5:38	
Bêjin sehabê êzîdiyane ku ciwamêrê Sherfedînê ji me bûye xayî . . .	Say to the holy beings[70] of the Yezidis that the brave men of Şerfedîn became our protector(s) . . .
De gelî dak û xûşka banî Qasimê Şeşo kirê, banî Heyderê Şeşo kin Go mêrî şêfa bike bilezîne xebateke mêra bike.	Oh mother(s) and sister(s), [they] called out to Qasim Shesho, (and said:) Call out to Heydar Shesho Said to the man: Come to the rescue, hurry up, show your bravery (lit. "do the man's job").
Em banî keç û bûka kin, go min bi Xwedê kin, hûn ji xwe re birevin, Bi Xwedê, top û selah heka me xilas bin, Atqateke me nîne.	Let us call out to the girls and brides, By God, escape (lit. "run for yourself"), By God, if we are not to be rescued by the cannonballs and weapons, We will not have hope (lit. "trust") [left].
Go Xwedê, keçа me û bûkê vê êzîdiya Wê qudrê bavê me qelînin Zîret û namûsa me birine.	By God, the girls and brides of these Yezidis, the honor of our fathers were destroyed (lit. "burned"), [They] took our children and *namûs* (i.e., women).
6:50-7:40	
Xwedê mamo,[71] em ketine welatê xerîba, Oooh gelî dak û xûşka, ezê bê(ji)m hatine ba me, sewrandin wan dewletê 'ecnebiya	By God, oh Dear (lit. "oh uncle"), ended up in strange lands (i.e., became exiles), Oh mothers[72] and sisters, I say, [they] came to us [from] those foreign countries to film us.
Xwedê, halê me wê êzîdiya ne xweştir e ji halê kurd û kafira.	By God, the situation of the Yezidis is not better than the situation of the Kurds and infidels (i.e., *kafirs*).
Hey mala minê, Xwedê, min teva . . . iş mal û mezela şekirî bûne muhacir, emê ketine ber kolan û deriya.	Oh poor me, oh God, we all . . . from (our) sweet home and houses became refugees, we found ourselves on the streets and (sitting before) the gates (of strangers) (i.e., because destitute and homeless).

[70] *Sehab* (Ar.), just like *xudan* (Kurd.), means both "owner" and "protector" and can refer to the Yezidi *xas* or holy beings.

[71] According to Gulie Khalaf, the word "Mamo" (vocative form of "uncle") is often used in conversation in Sinjar to address others, even women. According to her the nearest English expression is "Dear" as an expression punctuating conversations.

[72] According to Gulie Khalaf this is addressed to the (female) audience.

Ezê bînim çiyayê Shingalê xanaa çiyayê Shingalê xanaa.	I'll see the Shingal Mountain (which) is visible (?) the Shingal Mountain (which) is visible (?).
Xortê me temama kir bûna qesaba malêt me kiribûne talana.	All our youth were butchered. Our homes were plundered.
Ji me re li Koço hezer û heft sed xelas kir, Mi(n) got ibadet j cema' êzidiya re Hey li mala minê, wa gulî sore li me kiribûne talana.	In Kocho a thousand and seven hundred of us were finished/killed, I said, worship/respect to the feast of the Yezidis.[73] Oh my poor head . . . they plundered (us?) with (red?) bullets.

Tazî in a Refugee Camp

In the fall of 2017, I had the chance of attending another wake held in the huge refugee camp on the outskirts of Khanke. I did not know the deceased, an elderly woman from the village of Gabara on the southern side of Sinjar, or any of her relatives. My attendance at the *tazî* came about as pure chance. Her funeral took place just as I was visiting the *micawirs* or "guardians" of the shrine complex of Mem Şivan, near the collective village of Khanke. While I was sitting with members of the guardian family in front of the shrine of Sheikh Şems (the spot they usually chose to receive the daily trickle of pilgrims to Mem Şivan), men appeared from the sprawling refugee camp on the outskirts of Khanke, to dig a grave in the Sinjari plot. An elderly Sinjari lady had passed away of kidney complications in a Duhoki hospital and, as tradition dictates, the burial was arranged at the greatest speed possible. While the men dug the grave, the women first took the body, wrapped in blankets, to the shrine of Sheikh Şems, from where it was ceremonially carried, amid ritual wailing and chest- and face-beating, to the fresh grave.

Once the body was in the grave, slices of fresh fruit (apple, banana, and orange) were distributed among the mourners, already near a hundred despite the short notice, but no other ritual, whether a prayer or a lament, was performed. These were to take place back in the refugee camp, during the course of the next two and a half days as relatives and acquaintances came from all over the camp and other camps to express their condolences. As in the case of the other *tazî* described above, a special tent was put up for the men on one of the main thoroughfares of the camp, where a local religious expert was invited on the second evening, to perform *qewls* or hymns after sunset. On the first and second days women visited in the "family-compound" and were seated in the "rooms" of the family.[74] On the third day, the day of the *xêr*, a separate tent

[73] This may be a reference to the fact that the ISIS attack took place on a Yezidi holy day, the feast celebrating the end of the forty days of the summer fast. Though this fast is not observed by most Yezidis, the feast itself is an important celebration.

[74] In this particular camp, camp authorities allowed the inhabitants to build small structures, thereby providing them with at least a semblance of private space, unlike in some other camps, which consisted of tight rows of tents erected side by side. These "family compounds" consisted of several small rooms built of concrete bricks ("blocks") with blankets, tent canvas, and nylon sheets spread over thin wooden beams for roofing. The space between the rooms and the tent functioning as a kitchen was covered with nylon sheets, so family members could move around in the "compound" in rainy weather.)

was set up for the women as well to congregate and sing *xerîbîs* in. (At noon, lunch was also served in the various rooms of the family compound, as the tent was too crowded to comfortably feed all the guests there. As in the case of the *tazî* described above, the food was mainly cooked by men in huge cauldrons.)

On the second day, most of the singing was performed by the relatives and friends of the deceased. Unlike in the *tazî* observed a year earlier, this time the events that befell the community received less attention, at least as regards the content of the *xerîbîs*. The sister of the deceased, perhaps in her late seventies, for example sang only laments which appeared to be traditional in content, about fate and the grief at the loss of a beloved one, occasionally making references to Yezidi sacred spots, Holy Beings, and even mythical stories.[75] However, she appeared to make no specific mention of the present displacement or ISIS. Another visitor, in her late middle age, mixed traditional motifs (on the topic of death) with descriptions of the circumstances of the deceased's hospitalization and death, as well as with occasional references to the ISIS attack (including mentioning various persons present who still had relatives in ISIS captivity).[76] However, compared to the *xerîbîs* sung at the *tazî* described above, the *ferman* against Yezidis received limited attention in her singing. When one of the women described how four of her children had disappeared and her husband, uncle, and other family members had been killed, this made one of the expert singers present break out in singing a *xerîbî* to express her emotions and convey her feelings of compassion. The text of her lament, though, was traditional and did not recreate the details just told her. On the third day, the focus of the laments shifted back to the ISIS attack. On this day, the day of *xêr*, most of the singing was dominated by one singer, Şîrîn Ibrahim from the village of Siba Sheikh Khidir, though from time to time, as she took a rest, the other women sang together, forming a choir of repeated phrases. Though she was the "star performer" of the event, Şîrîn Ibrahim was not a professional singer either. In fact, she was yet another one who claimed that before the coming of ISIS she did not sing laments. Seven men of her family were killed by ISIS, with guns in hand, as Siba Sheikh Khidir was one of the few places where locals fought the attackers, giving other Yezidis a chance to flee to the safety of the mountains. The rest of her family then ended up in a refugee camp, with no realistic prospect to return to their village in the foreseeable future. Her songs, however, concentrated not so much on the plight of her own family, but far more on the tribulations of Yezidi women "in the hands of the *kafirs*" (*keçk û jinêd ezidiyan*). One of the central motifs of her laments was the probably apocryphal story of how ISIS militants killed Yezidi babies and served their flesh as food to the unsuspecting mothers, who were told what they had eaten only after the meal. This grotesque story of forced cannibalism was often quoted in conversations as proof of the utter moral

[75] The lament of Esmer Kurto Yunis can be found at https://catalog.osaarchivum.org/catalog/osa:4493ce18-c2d0-434f-a3cb-609c024e2537.

[76] The ability and willingness of women singing laments to extemporize were eloquently demonstrated by her repeatedly singing the phrase, "Oh sister without a brother" (https://catalog.osaarchivum.org/catalog/osa:8424426f-7c38-4b9b-9901-39dc76d2a962#). This was addressed to me (the foreigner recording her), as she was shocked to learn during lunch that I had only a sister, but no brother. (This information was often treated with amazement or even dismay by Yezidis, especially elderly Sinjaris, where having a son, or for a sister a brother to protect her, is considered of great social importance.)

depravity of ISIS fighters. While it is dubious that this has really happened,[77] its frequent retelling reflects the depth of trauma experienced by the community. The *xerîbî* also weaves together two tragic events: the ISIS attack and the terrorist attacks on the Yezidi settlements of Telezer and Siba Sheikh Khidir on August 14, 2007, when coordinated bombings killed at least 796 Yezidis. The lament makes frequent references to a "mother of Ziyad." It is not clear whether she is the singer or someone else, but we are made to understand that Ziyad was killed in the Telezer bombing.[78]

0:45-2:50	
Ezê girîm li ser keçik û jinê êzîdxanê Çavê dayka daydakevit Eger ew keç û jinêd êzîdiya ji xwe re birin.	I am crying over [the fate of] the girls and women of the Yezidis The eyes of the mothers are falling out[79] Since they took the Yezidi girls and women for themselves.
Ew miletê êzîdiya talan kirin Ew şuxulê bê qanûn, ew şuxulê bê delîl bi keç û jinê êzidiya kirin.	They plundered the Yezidi nation They did lawless things, They did things never seen (lit. "witnessed") before to Yezidi girls and women.
Ew miletê êzîdiya talan kirin Ib çep û çengê xorta girtine Il ser şar'e û zikaka kûştin Mala minê, mala minê.	They plundered all Yezidi people They grabbed the young men by their arms[80] They killed them on the roads and on the streets Oh my poor head, my poor head.
Fermana wê êzîdxanê çavê dayka Ziyad derkevê Xwedê fermana li me rakirin.	There is a *ferman* against the Yezidis, may the eyes of the mother of Ziyad fall out By God, they started a *ferman* against us.
Ev çi dayika Ziyad û vê gotinê Ev çi dayika Ziyad û vê gotinê Ew keçk û jinê êzîdxanê bûn Çavê min derkevê! Danîne ber mezetê û biwatil danîne ber firotinê.	What is it that the mother of Ziyad and this one are saying These were the girls and women of the Yezidis. Let my eyes fall out! They were auctioned off, oh pity they were taken to be sold.

[77] None of the women who actually returned from captivity recounted having seen or heard of such a thing; I only heard it from those who did not have a firsthand experience. (The story was also printed in some Western tabloids, but not in fact-checking publications.)

[78] See for example, 4:45-5:25, where it is described how they are looking for Ziyad in the aftermath of the bombing. The details of the text are extremely hard to understand. The lament of Şîrîn Ibrahim can be found at https://catalog.osaarchivum.org/catalog/osa:5e4c0b6e-cc87-403f-b502-0fd021d551d0.

[79] Eyes, as something precious, are part of many Kurdish expressions. Here the words express the pain of the Mother of Ziyad (who may be the singer herself).

[80] According to Gulie Khalaf *çep û çeng* means "arms and wings; the two words together is understood as the whole arm and there is a connotation of rough handling."

Wana birine hudûdê Syriayê pê derbas kirine, birine sûka dekayê bajar û welata geran heta Iranê . . . bajar û gunda hemû pê ve derbas kirin, ish xwe re danîne ber mezatê . . . kuçik baba, çilo keçk û jinê êzidxanê yek û du bar kirin.	They were taken to the border of Syria They passed through (the border), they were taken to the bazaar . . . They were brought through the cities and countries, as far as Iran . . . In all towns and villages that they passed through They took [the women] to auction off among themselves Sons of dogs,[81] how they bargained over the girls and women of the Yezidis.
Ew derdê bê derman e, Go pişta kur û bavê wî êk û dû daxil kirin mala minê şer e axê berdana serî, çavê dayka Ziyad derkevî	The great pain without solace (medicine) is That they tied father and son back to back Oh upon me, it is the war They threw soil over their head (i.e., buried them) Let the eyes of the mother of Ziyad fall out.
Ew destê wan zincir û kilinca kirin çavê dayka Ziyad derkevê, çilo abayê reş il serê keçê êzîdiya kirin	They [ISIS] chained and handcuffed their hands The eyes of the mother of Ziyad are falling out How they covered the Yezidi girls in black *abayas*/veils
Ew şuxulê bê qanûn, ew şuxulê bê delîl bi keçêd êzidxane kirin	They did lawless things to Yezidi women and girls They did things never seen (lit. "witnessed") before
Xwedê, firovîna û taştiya wan çêkirin çavê dayka Ziyad derkevî, gotin zarokêt me birin ji me re	By God, they [ISIS soldiers] made them [the women] breakfast and lunch The eyes of the mother of Ziyad are falling out They [the women] said, bring to us our children
Ma na gotin hûn goştê zarokêt xwe (di)xwin xwînê xwe nas nakin çavê dayka Ziyad derkevê Go ji we re kirine firovîn û taştê hey biwatil ser biwatilê.	Didn't they say, you are eating the flesh of your own children Don't you recognize your own blood? The eyes of the mother of Ziyad are falling out They made lunch and breakfast [of/from the children] for you Ey pity, endless pity.
Hêy fermana, fermana vê Ezidxanê rabû, çavê dayka Ziyad derkevê.	Ey, there is a *ferman*, a *ferman* was started against Yezidis The eyes of the mother of Ziyad are falling out.

Conclusion

Oral tradition has been on the decline among Yezidis in the past few decades, due to the sweeping transformations the whole Yezidi community has been undergoing. Tales told just a generation ago over long nights in front of an enraptured audience have been replaced by television (and lately the entertainment offered by the ubiquitous smartphones). Music bands with modern equipment belt out Kurdish pop music at weddings, instead of the wedding party singing traditional songs. Even the number of those willing to memorize and able to perform the

[81] Lit. "father of dogs," a derogatory expression in Kurdish, corresponding to "son of a dog."

long sacred texts, which form the very basis of Yezidi religion, has been on the decline, and published texts have been steadily gaining ground, changing the face of Yezidi oral religious tradition.[82] However, there is one oral genre that still seems to have retained its vitality and artistic creativity, at least among the Yezidis of Sinjar, namely, that of laments. This may be due both to the immense social and psychological importance of this genre and to its flexibility. Laments are not merely ritual signs of respect toward the departed, who deserve to be mourned in style. They also serve as important tools for expressing grief both on a personal and the community level. This is amply demonstrated by the new Sinjari *xerîbîs*, which sing the sufferings of Yezidis at the hands of the Islamic State. These laments clearly function as psychological safety valves, helping to relieve tension through giving voice to deep-seated emotions and impotent frustration over the loss suffered and the hopeless situation of the community. What enables laments to function as an outlet for pain and loss, giving words to what the community has experienced, is the remarkable flexibility of this genre. Laments have always been a traditional oral genre where traditions don't have to be observed "literally": that is, where the words can be recomposed with each performance and adapted to the situation. This paradox of "non-traditional oral tradition" has made it possible for the *xerîbî* tradition to meet the demands of the changing circumstances of the community, from technological innovations to societal transformation to the psychological challenges of a violently displaced community.

It is hard to make any prognosis on the future of laments as an oral tradition among Yezidis, when the future of the whole community is so painfully uncertain at present. However, one may perhaps hazard that it is an oral genre which may outlive other forms of Yezidi oral tradition. While sacred texts may be taught to the new generation from schoolbooks, tales may disappear for good, and even the *stranbêj* complain of the declining interest in their art, laments, in their thousand forms and recomposed with each performance, will live on as long as Yezidi women see them as the main vehicle to express their grief.

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[82] See Omarkhali 2017:255-96; Spät 2008 and 2021:111-19.

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