

Chapter 9

Princes, Thieves and Death: The Making of Heroes amongst the Yezidis of Armenia¹

Christine Allison & Estelle Amy de la Bretèque

Abstract

This article discusses for the first time the production of heroic paradigms among the Kurmanji Kurdish-speaking Yezidis of Armenia and adds to the existing literature on masculinities in the Middle East and the former Soviet Union, using an approach derived from the ethnography of speaking. It identifies *ciwanmêrî*, a ‘traditional’ paradigm resembling the classical ‘princely virtues’ and identifies a newer contemporary paradigm coming from the post-Soviet ‘thieves in law’ model. It is not the values themselves, but the enactment of heroic feelings through the specific speech genre of *kilamê ser* which produces the heroes.

I. Introduction

In line with the theme of idealized masculinities presented by *javānmardî*, this article will discuss for the first time in print the production of heroic paradigms in a subaltern community, the Yezidis of Armenia, using an approach derived from the ethnography of speaking. The Yezidis, speakers of Kurmanji Kurdish, originate from Eastern Anatolia; we aim to add to the evolving literature on masculinities in the Middle East and the former Soviet Union.² We argue that the paradigm of traditional virtue known as *ciwanmêrî*, (which bears some resemblance to classical Persian discourse of ‘princely virtues’) still exists, embodied by Cihangir Agha, a Yezidi tribal chief originating in Kurdistan of Turkey who is also a national hero in Armenia. However, alongside this exists a newer heroic paradigm derived from the *vory v zakone* ‘thieves in law’ culture which developed in Soviet prisons and expanded massively during the 1990s. Our example of this is Çekoê Xidir, a young *mafioz*, who is widely commemorated and mourned. These cases are not everyday examples of desirable masculine behaviours but heroic paradigms attributed only to the dead. These personalities are remembered not only in everyday talk but also in heroic songs known as *kilamê ser* which bear many similarities in form and content to funeral lamentation. We

will focus not only on the qualities glorified but also on their means of production and distribution through socially constituted texts which use different speech genres.³ We will also consider the reasons for the formation of these paradigms. Although the ‘thief’ paradigm is relatively easy to account for in socio-economic terms, we will argue that the apparently old ‘princely virtue’ paradigm in fact serves very contemporary concerns for the Yezidis. However, we argue that it is not the values themselves, but the enactment of heroic feelings through the specific speech genre of *kilamê ser* which produces the heroes.

We wish to emphasise that the data presented here was collected before the attacks by so-called Islamic State on the Armenian Yezidis’ co-religionists in Sinjar, Iraq, in August 2014. Since the attacks and the mass abduction of women, female victims have spoken out and other Yezidi women have taken up arms and joined guerrilla groups; the subsequent development of a new internationalised Yezidi female heroism is beyond the scope of this article.

I. 1 The Production of Heroism Through Discourse

Although we are considering an aspect of masculinity – defined by Connell as ‘a configuration of practice within a system of gender relations’⁴ – it is important to note that these paradigms of heroism are an idealised *representation* of masculinity, taking place after death. The ultimate barrier of death has the potential to open up different gender behaviours and ways of speaking; Herzfeld notes that after death has occurred, men, usually the spokesmen for communities, cede their ‘voice’ to women, who command specific forms of expression in the form of lamentation.⁵ In Kurmanji (Northern Kurdish)-speaking communities, including the Yezidis, the expressions of grief, imagery and even the melodisations used by women in their lamentations are also a noticeable feature of the eulogies for heroes forming part of the ‘folkloric’ canon performed by men.⁶

Among the Yezidis of Armenia, stories about heroic figures are often narrated in a melodized tone of voice, which the Yezidis call *kilamê ser mêranîê* (“words about the hero”). According to most of the Yezidis Estelle met, “heroic songs” were at first laments. Both kinds of enunciations are described in the same manner: *kilamê ser...* (“words about...”). Some are “words about the dead” (*kilamê ser mirya*), others are “words about the hero” (*kilamê ser mêranîê*). In both cases, these narratives evoke dead people. In fact, among the Yezidis of

Armenia, to become a hero, one has to be a man, and to face a fatal and tragic destiny. As a result heroes are always dead! But the similarities are also to be found in the emotional content of both kinds of utterances as well as in their semantic and acoustic features. In the local typology of voice production “words about...” are always associated with feelings such as loss, mourning or exile, and are considered as liminary utterances at the border between music and language. Indeed, among the Yezidis *kilamê ser* is not considered as song (*stran*), but as speech. Nonetheless, these utterances differ from normal daily speech (*axavtin*) semantically, poetically, as well as in a specific treatment of pitch (which we call melodization).⁷

A *kilamê ser mirya* performed at the deceased’s bedside can be remembered and performed outside of the ritual context. By doing so, words melodized over the coffin during funerals tend to turn the dead body into an exemplary figure and are transformed little-by-little into heroic songs. This is particularly true in the case of the violent and/or tragic death of a man. But another important way to become a hero is to have a big family (sisters, daughters-in-law, sons, nephews, etc.) and more generally a social network where the life and death will be narrated in melodized speech. Delocalized from the funeral space and time, exemplary “words about the dead” still recall the deceased that gave them birth, but as they spread outside the household and the village, they become more and more autonomous and constituent of a shared Yezidi culture, just like epics. The words *kilamê ser* thus refer to utterances that would be described in English as heroic songs, or in other cases, as laments. In acoustic and semantic terms, all these utterances share important similarities. But the main difference is that epic narratives are not attached to their specific context of enunciation. The topic of the narratives deals with heroes who died a long time ago, far away and with whom the speaker does not have personal links.

Besides the *kilamê ser*, which were the object of Estelle’s research, we will draw on examples of other forms of discourse more familiar to readers. Christine’s participant observation elicited many comments and anecdotes about Cihangir Agha within the context of ordinary ‘talk,’ a rich source not only of embedded anecdotes but also of reflections on morality and identity.⁸ More formal oral history interviews, especially that with Cihangir Agha’s son Suren Agha, have also been used, alongside published articles by Yezidi writers. The ‘ethnography of speaking’ approach, pioneered by Dell Hymes, considers socially constituted texts, which may be written or oral, examining them within their social context considering form, content and pragmatics (the latter encompassing production, diffusion and

reception).⁹ We use as a starting point the notion of text used by linguistic anthropologists Karen Barber and Richard Bauman – a constructed piece of discourse rendered detachable from its context (which enables us to consider the oral and the written). We will show how these texts, which here include not only the heroic *kilamê ser* but also the more humble anecdotes and family stories, are produced, circulated and used. Barber says that texts can serve as a medium for the crafting of new selves: our analysis will show both continuity and innovation in heroic paradigms which are intimately linked to Yezidi identity.¹⁰

I. 2. Producing the Heroic Paradigm: Studio Recordings

In the last 20 years it has become more and more common for Yezidis to film funerals.¹¹ Families keep tapes recorded of funerals, along with those of weddings, in memory of the deceased. These tapes are also often duplicated and sent to villagers in “exile” - i.e. abroad¹² - who could not attend the ritual. The post-Soviet period is indeed characterized for the Yezidis of Armenia by a massive emigration (mostly towards Russia, Ukraine and Germany). The links with the village are strongly kept, in particular where funerals are concerned. Even now, the “exiled” members of the community hope to be buried in their village in Armenia (it is much more common -and less tragic- to get married in exile than to be buried in exile). And they also very often go back to the village for the ‘Graveyard Day’ commemorating the dead in June or September. But when it is impossible for the exiled villagers to come back to attend funerals, the family sends the recording to the relatives abroad.¹³ As a result, this massive emigration gave a new space to the funeral ritual, spread out over borders and timescales.

Nowadays a *kilamê ser* performed locally over the deceased may be spread in two ways. First, as we have seen, funerals are filmed by families (and sent to the relatives who live abroad). And secondly, members of rich or influential Yezidi families may have their *kilamê ser* recorded in studios by professional musicians and distributed on compilations of mp3 sold on street-markets in Yerevan and in Russia. This use of new formats (mostly mp3 or video clips) for melodized speech accelerates the autonomisation of melodized speech from a local context. They enable a wider diffusion, thus inscribing this phenomenon in a regional political process.

First we will give a general account of *ciwanmêrî* in Kurdish society of the 19th and early 20th centuries, and then a brief profile of the Yezidis in Armenia. We will then describe the salient points of the life-story of Cihangir Agha (Cangîr Agha) as told by Yezidi writers, family and community memories given in conversation, his commemoration through a monument and a *kilamê ser* text collected by Estelle sung in his memory. Next, we will draw further on Estelle's research to examine the construction of a new kind of heroism, the 'thief in law,' through the texts commemorating Çekoê Xidir.

II. The Ciwanmêrî Paradigm

Ciwanmêrî, sometimes abbreviated to *camêrî*, is obviously the lexical Kurdish equivalent of *javanmardi* though a comparison between the two is beyond the scope of this article. It is still used in secular and modern contexts which are very far from the more classical environment normally associated with *javanmardi*. There is very little scholarship on either its historical or contemporary meanings in Kurdish; whilst gender is certainly becoming an important topic in Kurdish studies, most writings so far have dealt with the performance and construction of femininity, the honour system of *namûs* which deals primarily with relations between men and women and constrains women's sexual behaviour, and the problems of violence against women currently prevalent in Kurdistan of Turkey and of Iraq.¹⁴ For the moment – though probably not for long, because Kurdish studies is a fast-evolving field – very few studies deal specifically with masculine codes of behaviour or with concepts of honour such as *qedir* and *qîmet* (social worth and respect) which do not necessarily foreground relations between the sexes. However, works of anthropology and oral history present us with many examples of Kurdish discourse on manly virtue. These tend to occur in discussions of the virtues and faults of local notables, landowners and chieftains.

Denise Sweetnam, who based her "cross-cultural" guide to Kurdish culture on consultation with Kurds from across Turkey, Syria, the Caucasus and Northern Iraq, translates *ciwanmêr* as "gentleman";¹⁵ a useful definition, since it may also be a comment on personal comportment. Thus Edmund Leach notes that a local *agha* in Northern Iraq who, because of his personal behaviour, was much more respected for his "manliness" than the chieftains who outranked him in wealth and conventional social status. Martin van Bruinessen draws a distinction between a Turkish ağa, who is "the rich man of the village" and the Kurdish agha, who rules but may be poor.¹⁶

Generosity is one of the keynotes of *ciwanmêrî*. Cited by van Bruinessen, the British political officer Rupert Hay (who worked in Iraq during the British mandate), writes: “It is on his guesthouse that a chief’s reputation largely depends. The more lavish his hospitality, the greater his claim to be called a *piao* or man.”¹⁷ Martin van Bruinessen adds to this:

In Kurmanji (Northern Kurdish) there are two forms that correspond to the Persian “mard:” “mêrd” and “mêr”. The first means generous, the second means “man”, but with strong overtones of “courageous”. An agha must be both *mêr* and *mêrd*.¹⁸

Despite variations in terminology the association of both generosity and courage in formulations of manly virtue is a common feature across Kurdish-speaking regions. The “courage” or *mêr* aspect of this nexus of masculine virtues encompassed by *ciwanmêrî* is *mêrxasî*, which is a key part of Cihangir Agha’s persona. In fact it may be more accurate to say that he is *mêrxas* than *camêr* (*ciwanmêr*); however, the two notions are closely connected and often expressed through the same repertoires of behaviour. Another word very close in meaning is *xweşmêr*, which is heard in the dialect of the Caucasian Yezidis. Aghas and tribal leaders were responsible for the guest-house (called *dîwanxane/ode*) - formerly an important social space - and obviously, for protecting their clan or tribe and enhancing its prosperity, as an emanation of his own personal capital. Sometimes this was done by acquiring persons or wealth from other groups – sources show that tribal groupings waxed and waned considerably.¹⁹

Also crucial is the leader’s function in regulating the community, in making judgments when petitioned by those of lower social status, and in meting out punishment for transgressive behaviour. A particularly rich source of relevant anecdotes is Zaken’s rich and varied collection of oral history interviews with Kurdish Jews from Northern Iraq living in Israel.²⁰ These recalled a the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in a region not very far from Cihangir Agha’s home in Eastern Turkey. In rural areas, outside the control of government administrators, Jews living under the protection of a local agha were felt to *belong* to that agha. A number of anecdotes recounted incidents where “their” agha punished those who had stolen from or molested them, either by insisting on reparation, or if the offenders were members of his own community, by public humiliations. The cordial relations described were not simply due to philanthropy on the aghas’ part; within the system of values, a manly agha would view attempts by other tribal leaders or urban administrators to interfere with “his”

Jews as insults to his own honour, the maintenance of which required strong action. Offenders against the Jews who were beaten, fined or humiliated paid in public with their own dignity for their insult to the dignity of the agha.²¹

II. 1. Cihangir Agha: Traditional *Camêr* and Post-Soviet Hero

Unlike the Muslim aghas remembered by the Jews, Cihangir Agha was a Yezidi. This religious minority, almost entirely Kurmanji (Northern Kurdish)²² speaking, now numbers several hundred thousand souls worldwides. The largest communities live in Northern Iraq, where the most holy sites are located; until the First World War, however, many lived in Eastern Anatolia, forming Yezidi sections within wider Kurdish tribal confederations around Kars, Van and Doğubayazit. Groups of Yezidis migrated out of the Ottoman Empire into Transcaucasia at times of crisis, especially during the Russo-Turkish war of 1828-9 and (alongside many Armenians) in 1918; this last migration, on a much larger scale than previous ones, included Cihangir Agha and his clan.

II.2 Yezidis in Armenia

Much has been written elsewhere on the origins and intricacies of the Yezidi religion, which lies beyond the scope of this paper.²³ However, to contextualise our contemporary Yezidi hero-cults, we must outline the position of Yezidism in the late Ottoman empire (when Cihangir Agha was active) and more recent debates on Yezidi identity and religious origin. It is safe to say that the religion is highly syncretistic and its belief system probably derives from an ancient Iranian faith somewhat akin to Zoroastrianism (or possibly based on a “heretical” Zoroastrianism)²⁴ with many observable elements of Islam (especially Sufism), Christianity, Gnosticism and others, interwoven in a highly complex fashion.²⁵ Yezidis have a system of religious status groups determined by birth; traditionally they marry within these groups and do not practise exogamy at all. For centuries they were not viewed as “People of the Book”, though by the end of the Ottoman period they had acquired some official status under the *millet* system.²⁶ Nevertheless the Ottoman government made many attempts to control them, culminating with their appointment in 1892 of a provincial governor, Omar Wahbi Pasha, who initiated programmes of forced conversion to Islam with the aim of forming Yezidi *Hamidiye* units.²⁷ Under the CUP, various plans were developed for the different *millets*; although Muslim Kurds were considered potentially trustworthy citizens, in

need of some civilisation, for Yezidis the policy was integration through conversion in the longer term.²⁸ After the great rupture of World War One, however, those Yezidis who crossed into Armenia encountered different social policies. In the Soviet Union communities were marked by “nationality” rather than religious creed (though in the early years at least religion was not disregarded).²⁹ Yezidis were considered “Kurds” alongside the Muslim Kurds already in Armenia; after 1926, this classification was reflected in Soviet census figures which no longer distinguished them.³⁰ Since both Yezidis and Kurds were members of the Kurdish “nationality,” distinctions were not in general made between their cultural productions.³¹ Folkloric songs and stories broadcast on Radio Yerevan were labelled simply “Kurdish”. As with many of the nationalities of the Soviet Union, Kurdish cultural production in Armenia underwent an eclipse in the late 1930s but resumed in the early 1950s.³²

However, during the late 1980s and early 1990s, when Armenia became independent and the Karabagh “problem” deepened into armed conflict, the prevailing anti-Muslim discourse represented Kurdish Muslims as suspect, in common with Azeris and Turks in general. Almost all Muslim Kurds left Armenia, but the Yezidis negotiated the issue in different ways, dividing themselves between those who claimed Kurdish nationality and Yezidi religion, and those who considered Kurdishness as Islamic, and that they as Yezidis belonged to a separate *ethnie* (calling their language not Kurmanji – which was Kurdish - but “Ezdîkî”). According to the “Ezdîkî” camp, long-felt and legitimate Yezidi claims to a separate identity had been repressed by the Soviet system; the “Kurdish” Yezidis, by contrast, asserted that the problem was new and a product of the political climate of the Karabagh war.³³ The schism was bitter in the early 1990s and the most notorious violent incidents occurred in this period.³⁴ The situation is now much calmer; both sides interact and attend each others’ celebrations. However, some tensions persist, especially on matters such as schooling.³⁵ Radio programming remains divided between broadcasts in “Ezdîkî” and Kurdish (Kurmanji).

Although the Yezidi community in Armenia remains deeply divided on the question of identity, local politics are complex. Armenia does not have the resources of her Transcaucasian neighbours; Yezidis, never a high-status community, have been hit hard by the economic situation in the South Caucasus over the last twenty years. Not only are festivals and celebrations organised by one side or the other often attended by those whose

“public” allegiance lies elsewhere, but Yezidi citizens may seek help from politicians or notables representing the “other” side if this might bring more chance of success.³⁶ Like their Armenian neighbours, most families find themselves scattered over wide distances, with many earning a living in Russia, Ukraine, Siberia or Western Europe.³⁷ With the young members of the community so widely scattered and many exposed to urban life far from home, elders fear for the survival of the community.

II.3 The Life of Cihangir Agha: Written Histories

Cihangir Agha is remembered in Armenia mainly for his role at the battle of Sardarabad (see below). However, he is only mentioned in passing in the standard accounts of the battle; most of the detailed sources on his life have been written by Yezidi scholars during the post-Soviet period using data from oral history. In our own experience, knowledge of tribal genealogy, chronology and the places of origin in Turkey remain strong within the community. Here we have drawn on a book by Tharê Emer Abasyan,³⁸ who makes a distinction between Yezidis and Kurds, and an online account from Eskerê Boyîk,³⁹ a well-known writer in the Kurdish diaspora, which was first published in an Armenian literary journal. Both writers cite their oral sources at many points and cover much the same ground. Abasyan’s book, written in Kurdish and published locally, whose preface declares its intention to teach the young generation of its heritage, is of course more detailed. However we have favoured Boyîk’s account. Aimed at outside audiences, it was written first in Armenian (thereby convoking a wider audience) and then published in Kurdish online. It clearly aims to capture the most salient points and is thus more revealing of the public myth.⁴⁰ It is this myth which is our focus here, rather than a correct and balanced historical understanding of religious politics at the end of the Ottoman Empire.

Boyîk presents a picture of steady worsening of relations between the Yezidis and the Muslim Kurdish tribes through the nineteenth century and attributes this to the Turkish government and military forces. He recounts the death of Cihangir Agha’s grandfather in about 1830, also called Cihangir but known as Midur Agha, poisoned by the rulers of the *vilayet* at a military gathering “to sow enmity among the Kurdish tribes”.⁴¹ Later on, the accounts are dominated by conflict with the Hamidiye troops of irregular Kurdish cavalry⁴² and attempts to force the Yezidis to convert under duress, which reached their peak under Omar Wahbi Pasha in 1893 when the Yezidi Mir (the paramount prince) in Iraq converted

and the shrine of Lalesh was seized, causing consternation and disbelief among the Anatolian Yezidis.⁴³

Both Boyîk and Abasyan note the shrewdness and foresight of Khetiv (Khatib) Agha, the leader of the Zuquri tribe of Yezidis and son of Midur Agha. Cihangir, his second son, was born in 1874 and grew up between Lake Van and the Iranian border. Khetiv Agha died between 1904-1906, having spent years consolidating the wealth of the tribe. At the end, foreseeing future difficulties, he advised Cihangir to use the wealth to buy horses and weapons and train good cavalry fighters.⁴⁴ Moreover, Boyîk observes, his influence undermined the government's attempts to sow disunity among Kurdish tribes.⁴⁵

Boyîk's initial character-sketch of Cihangir sets out the key virtues of the tribal leader clearly: "Even in his childhood, he distinguished himself among the children of (Khetiv) Agha by his courage, adeptness and acumen...He knew no fear. He did not accept aggression, injustice, or enslavement."⁴⁶ To this he adds truthfulness, lack of affectation, and clean and honourable behaviour. On winter nights in his childhood, we are told, he used to sit in his father's hall with "storytellers and greybeards" and hear tales of heroism *mêrxweşî û qehremanî*, among his forefathers. "He wanted to be like them".⁴⁷ Most of the episodes told illustrate one or other of these virtues.

Cihangir took his father's advice, selling most of his livestock and buying horses in Aleppo and firearms from his Russian and Armenian contacts. Some notable skirmishes took place; during one surprise night attack all his own village guards were killed; he and his wife (a doughty soul named Almast) defended their house with limited weapons and ammunition, but he possessed the presence of mind to taunt the enemy into challenging him verbally so that he could identify their position, and the marksmanship to strike them.⁴⁸ On another occasion, he was attacked by Hamidiye cavalry whilst burying his brother Temer (a shocking intrusion as funerals are especially sensitive for Yezidis); Boyîk stresses that Cihangir was obliged to leave the corpse behind to see off the attackers, and come back to it later, and that this incident made him decide to leave his village to join his wife's clan by the Iranian border.⁴⁹ Around this time he strengthened his links with the Armenian leader Andranik Ozanian and the Russian military. He fought off Kurdish tribal leaders, Hamidiye forces and the Ottoman military with his Armenian allies at the battle of Dercemed (the subject of a song to be presented below),⁵⁰ moving on with his Yezidi followers and some Armenians into the Russian-controlled zone. En route their column was ambushed in a steep gorge which was so narrow that the Yezidi fighters could not defend their families. Boyîk does not question the leader's strategy but moves swiftly to a heroic anecdote; Cihangir Agha found himself

isolated, fighting alongside a young Armenian. The boy, Misak, gave him his last bullets, saying that if he were killed it did not matter, but that if Cihangir Agha were killed, all would be lost. And Misak was killed, but Cihangir Agha managed to kill a Turkish commander, gaining a breathing-space so his forces could regroup. They limped on with almost all their wealth gone and many of their families lost, and years later, Cihangir Agha recalled how that young man's death weighed on him.⁵¹ This time they settled in Russian-ruled Kars province, and united forces with the Yezidi Usib Beg of the Heseni tribe.

In 1917, Russian forces withdrew from the Kars area, and the Turkish army began to advance, hoping to reach Baku and secure territory across the South Caucasus. Armenian soldiers formerly serving in the Russian armies (which included Andranik) hastily regrouped in the area, their irregulars fighting alongside and escorting the retreating lines of refugees. Cihangir Agha, Usib Beg and Andranik fought at Kars and Sarikamiş but were pushed back across Transcaucasia. The offensive continued even as peace talks in Georgia were begun. Turkish columns were advancing from different directions; one of Cihangir Agha's exploits was to blow up the bridge over the Araks at Markara, in a bid to prevent the Turkish forces coming from the South from uniting with their compatriots. Meanwhile two other Turkish columns were making for the Yerevan area, with a view to capturing the strategic railway line leading into Persia; each took a different route around Mount Aragats. Only one had arrived at Sardarabad (to the south-west of Yerevan) when battle was joined in May 1918, but even these outnumbered the Armenian forces. Cihangir Agha, we are told, was dismayed at the disarray of the Armenian side; he quickly noted the Turks' weak points and recommended a dawn attack. Without the consent of the Armenian command he and his horsemen attacked the enemy; we are told that he did this through solicitude for his horsemen, knowing if the enemy won, not a man of them would be spared.⁵² The battle was desperate and bloody but the Armenian side prevailed.

Victory at Sardarabad could only be partial as long as Turkish forces remained at Bash Aparan (on the other side of Mount Aragats from Yerevan), held in an uneasy stalemate with the Armenian general Dro (Drastamat Kanayan). For Cihangir Agha, as the Yezidi sources explain, this was a burning issue, as the Turks had occupied Yezidi villages near Aparan, and although they had met with no resistance from the populations, they had massacred civilians of all ages; some of his 100 or so horsemen lived in these villages.⁵³ Having ridden in haste to Bash Aparan, he launched an attack without receiving Dro's permission and the enemy fled, leaving their heavy artillery.⁵⁴ After the victory, Cihangir

Agha settled there, in the village of Cerceris (Dêrik) and distributed his people among the Yezidi villages.

However Cihangir Agha did not fare well under Communism. Foreseeing the difficulties inherent in staying, Andranik had left for the US in 1919.⁵⁵ According to several sources, Andranik encouraged Cihangir Agha to leave too, but he refused to leave his people behind.⁵⁶ Despite his excellent contacts amongst members of the Armenian party élite, Cihangir Agha was unable to survive “dekulakisation” and along with many others, was exiled in 1938. His death is surrounded with some mystery but it appears to have happened in Saratov in 1943.⁵⁷ For his family, the absence of a body and a grave is disastrous as it leaves them without a focus of ancestral commemoration, a crucial part of the contemporary performance of Yezidism.

II.4 Cihangir Agha as Armenian National Hero

Cihangir Agha’s name was rarely mentioned in public discourse for much of the Soviet period. After the re-establishment of Kurdish cultural production in the 1940s, the trauma of the Great Patriotic war continued to resound through the 1950s and into the 1960s. Dominant themes were stories of war and patriotism and also of internationalism.⁵⁸ After the “Thaw” of the 1950s, developing discourses of Armenian memory, spurred on by diaspora activities, began to apply pressure for official commemorations of the genocide; alongside this, we can see that Kurdish literature also commemorated the traumatic events of World War 1.⁵⁹ Chatoev’s standard history of the Kurds of Soviet Armenia, published in 1960, mentions Sardarabad in passing, briefly adding that “Yezidi Kurds” fought at Bash Aparan, with no mention either of Cihangir Agha or Usib Beg.⁶⁰ Kayaloff’s book on Sardarabad appeared in 1973; Afanasyan’s slimmer volume of 1985 contains much more detail on the irregulars, mentioning Cihangir Agha by name.

In independent Armenia, where the Sardarabad conflict is a defining event in national history, Cihangir Agha is the most visible Yezidi in the national commemorative space. The Sardarabad museum, just by the battlefield, features explanations of his role (and that of Usib Beg) in the hostilities and a substantial plaque with his image. He is also commemorated with a monument in the modern town of Aparan (near Bash Aparan) and a statue in a park in the Masif 2 area of Yerevan, depicting him in military style, with an inscription indicating gratitude to him as a friend of the Armenian nation.⁶¹

The significance of Cihangir Agha's current heroic status cannot be overestimated. Although they are the largest minority of Armenia (which unlike neighbouring Georgia, is ethnically very homogeneous), the Yezidis constitute just over 1% of the population - which in 2013 was estimated at a little over three million⁶² - and are socio-economically disadvantaged. Their cultural capital in Armenian national discourse is enhanced by Cihangir Agha's heroism, his opposition not only to Turkish forces but also to Kurdish Muslims, and his association with Andranik. Both sides of the Yezidi identity schism emphasise his role in history, placing strong emphasis on the links of friendship between Armenians and Yezidis. This is hardly new – it was not an uncommon theme in the Soviet period, and fitted the internationalist agenda – but whereas the overarching principle had previously been the struggle against imperialism, the contemporary discourse of Yezidi-Armenian friendship, typically of many developing nationalisms, is concerned with common persecutions and sufferings.

II.5 Remembering Cihangir Agha: the Yezidi community

Many members of Cihangir Agha's extended family still live in Armenia and in 2005, 2006 and 2007 Christine was fortunate enough to be their guest. Most of the anecdotes they told illustrated his heroic qualities in some way, and they mentioned many of the battles which Boyîk describes, most especially the prodigious energy with which, having fought an exhausting battle at Sardarabad, he galloped to Bash Aparan to reinforce the Armenian general Dro. On visits to the Aparan area, locals pointed out the location of various key events in the story. There were also tales of his generosity, when members of other families or communities came to ask him for help. Many of these illustrated the close links he had with members of other groups, including the Armenian establishment.

The substance of the anecdotes, even within the family, were gendered. Men spoke more about the battle exploits. The women, with whom a female researcher was bound to spend more time, often focused on his attention to taking care of his own, and especially to matters of honour within the household. One story, that he ordered a young bride to be sent back to her family for having once smiled at a male servant, was told by more than one source. (Strict rules of behaviour for new brides are very much part of living memory amongst rural Caucasian Yezidis).⁶³ The frequency of such *namûs*-related tales no doubt say as much about the community's current insecurities as about Cihangir Agha's personal qualities.

By contrast, Christine’s interview with Cihangir Agha’s only surviving son, Suren Agha, had a different emphasis. Speaking in 2006, by the monument to his father; he dealt mainly with the public legend; clearly, he saw himself as a guardian of his father’s memory. He retold the story of how his father had come from Turkey, had fought at Sardarabad and Bash Aparan, had refused to leave with Andranik, had died in exile. He emphasised the symbolic importance of the public monument (which had been paid for by the Armenian authorities) for Yezidis in general, on both sides of the identity schism.⁶⁴

Suren Agha was the last of Cihangir Agha’s seven children, born in 1936 when his father had just gone into exile. He had grown up first among his mother’s kin, the family of Egid Beg, and then with his elder brother. In the absence of a grave, the monument clearly functioned as a *lieu de mémoire* for him. The fact that it had been funded by a grateful Armenian public was clearly very important to him. He spoke little of the consequences of growing up the child of a “kulak” in the 1940s and 1950s, beyond hints at the difficulty of pursuing his ambitions to reach higher education and the impact of the destruction of his father’s papers.

Beyond the circle of family and close friends, Cihangir Agha is often spoken, and sung, about. After his reappearance in public discourse after the end of the Soviet period, traditional folkloric songs commemorating his exploits are again performed. During fieldwork in the Yezidi villages of Armenia, Estelle had the opportunity to listen to “words about Cihangir Agha” (*kilamê ser Cangîr Ax'a*) performed in gatherings between friends and co-villagers. Here are the words uttered by Binbaş, a 60-year-old man from Elegyez, in a *kilamê ser Cangîr Ax'a* he performed in April 2006 at his place. It recounts the battle of Dercemed, near the Iranian border.⁶⁵

Wî lo, lo, lo...

Wî lo, lo, lo... father of fathers

Wî lo, lo, lo...

*Hey father, my head is burning as if it
was on fire*

*Wey, my dearest, my head is burning
as if it was on fire*

Cihangir Agha, father of fathers

Wî lo, lo, lo...

Wî lo, lo, lo..., bavî Bava

Wî lo, lo, lo...

*Hey lo bavo, germa halê serê mida
germistanê*

*Wey, maqûlo, germa halê serê mida
germistanê*

Cangîr ax'a – bavê Bava çadira xwe

pitched his tent ⁶⁶	<i>vegirtye</i>
On the plateau of Mûş, at the border with Iran	<i>Textê Mûşê ser sînorê vê Îranê</i>
Father of fathers, brother of the cavaliers, pitched his tent in the plateau of Mûş, at the border with Iran	<i>Bavê Bava bir'e syara çadira xwe vegirtye textê Mûşê⁶⁷ ser sînorê vê Îranê</i>
When the father of fathers, a Titan, invincible...	<i>Gava ser serê bavê Bava divû xelaya mêra</i>
If only a few horsemen from the tribes of Kurdistan could have come and helped him	<i>De bira pêva derketa çend syarê e'şîreta Kurdistanê</i>
<i>Wî lo, lo, lo...</i>	<i>Wî lo, lo, lo...</i>
<i>Heylo</i> father, I found myself in this abandoned land of Dêrcemed	<i>Heylo, bavo, wezê Dêrcemeda xopan ketim wê bi pûşe</i>
<i>Wey</i> , my dearest, I found myself in Dêrcemed's colorful land	<i>Wey, maqûlo, ezê Dêrcemeda rengîn ketim wê bi pûşe</i>
The horse Kodir Herço ⁶⁸ , under the father of fathers Cihangir Agha flying by like a bird of prey	<i>Hespê K'odir H'erç'o bin bavê Bava Cangîr ax'ada dimeşe mînanî teyrê qereqûşe</i>
It's been already 3 days and 3 nights since he defeated 1700 Turkish soldiers	<i>Eva serê sê roja, sê şevane berî h'ezar hevsid mêrê t'irk daye</i>
The dearest drew apart and were killed furtively	<i>Evî maqûlî ji hev qetandye tengilqûşe</i>
<i>Wî lo, lo, lo...</i>	<i>Wî lo, lo, lo...</i>
<i>Heylo</i> , father, father of fathers is riding Kodir	<i>Heylo, bavo, bavê Bava K'odir syar bû</i>
<i>Wî lo, lo, lo...</i>	<i>Wî lo, lo, lo...</i>

Heylo, father, Kodir left in full gallop

He sat astride a new horse, the horse
started to walk slowly

The swords of the Hamidiye and the
whips of the officers are swiping
around him

May God kill the enemies' sons

They sent 80 letters, and came from
Istanbul to catch Cihangir Agha

Wî lo, lo, lo...

Heylo, father, father of fathers

The cavaliers' shots are the tattoos of
the youngsters

Wî lo, lo, lo...

*Heylo, father, I look towards the
magnificent lands of Dêrcemed, 3
horsemen are coming back*

The first horseman looks like the
messenger of death

I didn't know that this horseman was
the father of fathers, Cihangir
Agha, sworn enemy of Mustafa.⁶⁹

Heylo, bavo, K'odir ba bû

*Hespekî dinê syar bû, hespê binda
dimilmilî*

*Şûrê H'emîdîê qamçîê zapitîê ber wêda
difitilî*

De bira Xwedê bikuje kurê wan neyara

*Heyştê e'rze ser Cangîr ax'a dane textê
Stenbolê çîne gilî*

Wî lo, lo, lo...

Heylo, bavo, bavê Bava

Gula syara dax'maê xortanî, syaro

Wî lo, lo, lo...

*Heylo, bavo, ezê Dêrcemeda rengî
dinihêrim, sê hev syarê wêda têne*

*Syarê pêşin rengî mînanî rengê mêrê
kulêye*

*Min nizanbû ev syar bavê Bava Cangîr
ax'a kilê ç'evê Mistefêye.*

The words uttered by Binbaş in this *kilamê ser Cangîr* do not tell a linear story. There is no clear beginning, nor ending of a story. And the listener cannot follow the temporality of the events narrated (past and present tenses are mixed). Furthermore, the facts narrated are not linked with each other and are often expressed in metaphors which give to the utterance an impressionist touch of juxtaposed pictures. These features are typical of *kilamê ser*. Among the Yezidis, melodized utterances about heroes are indeed barely narratives, they do

not tell a story. They rather arouse strong feelings and moral values, by an accumulation of details, facts and pictures, as well as by the use of a melodized tone of voice.

III. Yezidi ‘Thieves in Law’

In the last decade, among the Yezidis’ “best-of” compilations one can find some *kilamê ser* in the memory of soldiers who died in the Karabakh war (1988-1994), others for Armenian and Yezidi heroes who died during the battle with the Ottomans in 1918, or even for mafia leaders killed in Moscow or in Far Eastern Siberia. In some houses of the Aparan region, Estelle heard some *kilamê ser* for Abdullah Öcalan, the PKK leader kept prisoner by the Turkish State since 1999.

These new heroic figures fit perfectly with the moral values that arose in post-Soviet Armenia. Martyrs of the Karabakh war and old heroes such as Cihangir Agha sustain the idea of an old and stable friendship between Armenians and Yezidis. Mafia leaders embody the post-Soviet ideal of the *mafioz*, a guy who started with nothing but was clever enough to become rich in a very short time.⁷⁰ And, for many of those who believe Yezidis are Kurds, Öcalan remains an important figure of resistance.

The new post-Soviet heroes, and more specifically the *mafioz*, display some characteristics of old *ciwanmêrî* such as the importance of the clan and the family. But they enact as well values which differ from old *ciwanmêrî*. The case of Çeko, a “new hero” from the criminal world, will help us analyze these differences.

III.1 Çekôe Xidir, a “new hero” from the criminal world

Çekoê Xidir was killed in 1996 in Moscow. He was a Yezidi from Armenia married to an Armenian and father of two young children. A member of the criminal world, Çeko was a “*vor v zakone*” (literally a “thief in law”), a kind of bandit which appeared in the Gulag during the Soviet times.⁷¹ Çeko died very young at 26. His death was the continuation of a vendetta still going on between his family and an Armenian family. He was buried in the cemetery of Malatya (a neighborhood of Yerevan). Among the Yezidis of Armenia, people say that “the entire Armenia” came to Çeko's funeral.

A few weeks after the burial ceremony, the story of his life and death was recorded in studios by professional musicians. Several recordings, sung by different singers, were

released.⁷² Sold in mp3 format in Yezidi best-of compilations, these tracks describe with great detail the moment of his death. In addition to these audio recordings, a video clip has been filmed on his grave. Here is a transcription of the lyrics of the *kilamê ser* performed by Alixanê Reşo (a well-known Yezidi singer) in the video clip.⁷³

<i>Heylo, father</i>	<i>Hey lo bavo</i>
Çeko Xidir, hero belonging to the big tribe, has many malevolent enemies	<i>Neyar, xêrnexazê Ç'ekoê Xidir qeremanê e'şîrê gele, gelek hene</i>
It has already been 3 days since they gathered in the cursed Moscow	<i>De eva sê roje, sê şeve wêrana bajarê Moskvaêda hev civyane</i>
They are discussing there the murder of Çeko Xidir, who married 3 years ago	<i>De dikin şêwra kuştina Ç'ekoê Xidir, ze'vê sê salane</i>
I said: “ Murderer, Godless man	<i>Go mêrkujê, bêxwedêyo</i>
Do not show your chest to fire, their bullets are without a remedy, wey, orphan”	<i>Nevî, nevî berê xwe didî ç'eka, gulle û fişekê ser ç'eka bêne ç'are, wey, êtîmo</i>
His fire is sharp like a sword, an arrow, he is so young, he is only 26.	<i>De agirê wî tûjin mînanî şûrê wan kewana, ewî xortekî cihale, e'mrê wî bîstşêş sale</i>
But he has the order to kill, as if it came from Rosteme Zal	<i>De ewê ya bi Xwedê mînanî fermana Rostemî Zale</i>
Miserable one, you will lose the use of your hands, your legs will bend	<i>De hêsîro, binihêre, destê te wê şilbin, qudûmê çokê te wê bişkên</i>
But they will not win through by killing Çeko	<i>De ewê ser Ç'ekora nekevin raê.</i>

(*duduk*)

Ah, it was morning time	<i>Ax, sive bû</i>
It was a gloomy morning, rainy and windy	<i>Siveke xusûsan bû, ba û baran bû</i>

The murderer was already in position

Berê ra û tivdîra karûbar bû

In Moscow, Çeko Xidir, the champion of men, went down from the last floor

*Pelewanê mêra - Ç'ekoê Xidir - ji wêran
Moskvaêda ji qatê jorin*

Ah, from the last floor he went down the stairs

*Ax, ji qatê jorin berbi qatê jêrin hate
xarê*

By misfortune, he had left his bodyguards behind him, and he went down alone

*K'or'a qedera pişmêrî neda pêşîê, ew
t'ek-t'enê hate jêre*

Like a fearless bear who wanted to go for a walk

*Mînanî h'erç'a bê minet xwest derkeve,
pêşda here*

When Heso et Samo, the hero's bodyguards came after him

*De wexta H'eso, Samoê pişmêrê Ç'ekoê
xweşmêr hatine dere*

Hurry up, the murderers have already put their knives to the door key, and boiling like pots on a flame, they are shooting

*De zûbke, mêrkujê kêrê kilîtê danî piş
dêrî, mînanî sîtila çarç'emilî ser alava
gur bike bikelînî*

This coward suddenly understood that holding his Mauser⁷⁴ with one hand he wouldn't make it

*Wî kafîrî nemerd hêja tê derxist pê
destekî mawizerê nake ç'arê*

Pressing his second hand on the Mauser, like a coward, the traitor fired on our brother Çeko

*Destê dinê jêla kire taqet bi nemamî, bi
xayîntî berda Ç'ekoê bira*

The Mauser's bullet reached the temple of the hero, going across him

*De gulla mawizerê cênîka mêrxasra
daye dere*

Ah, the Mauser's bullet reached the hero's temple

*Ax, de bila mawizerê cênîka mêrxasra
daye dere*

This hero left behind him all his household and tribe without support, they became orphans.

*Vî xweşmêrî temamyê el û e'sîra hiştîye
bê pişt, bêxwey, na, welle, xweyo dîsa
stuxare.*

(*duduk*)

Hey lo, father

Hey lo bavo

Look at the cemetery of Zeytun⁷⁵

*Emê bala xwe bidne ser fêza Zêytûnê
qibirstane*

At Çeko's funeral, there was a sea of people
in the squares and the streets

*Hewarîê Ç'ekoê xweşmêr weke lê-lê
miştê k'ûçe û meydanê*

In the big city the merchants of death set up
the traps

Bajarê giran kişyane şivêta bazirgane

The entire Armenia has come to the funeral
of our dear hero

*Tê qey bêjî şîn û mirina xweşmêr û
pelewanê mey e'zîzda hazire temamyâ
Hayastanê*

All the women and men of the tribe were
dressed in black

De jin û mêrê e'şîrê gişka reş girêdane

Ah, all the women and men of the tribe were
wearing black

*Ax, de jino, mêrê e'şîrê gişka reş
girêdane*

From the depths of time, there had never
been such a mourning

*Dewir-zemanada ser t'u merî nebûye û
neqewimye*

As that which happened at Çeko Xidir's
funeral, lion without fear, man with four
kidneys, like Rostamê Zal.

*De çawa îro hatye kirinê ser Ç'ekoê
Xidir, şêrê çargurç'ikî notlanî Rostemî
Zale.*

This melodised speech draws in detail the moment of the drama. The end of the *kilamê ser* is dedicated to a description of Çeko's outstanding funeral. The words emphasize Çeko's uniqueness and heroism. Çeko is compared to "a bear without fear", "a lion without fear", and even to Rostamê Zal, an Iranian epic hero known throughout the Middle East (Djindi 1977). He is also painted as an extraordinary creature with a non-human feature: "Çeko Xidir with four kidneys" (*Çekoê xidir çargurç'ikî*).

In the video clip the shooting and editing are very basic. The framing is very often centered on Çeko's gravestone. Watching the video clip one has plenty of time to admire Çeko's rather unusual grave. The entire body of Çeko is sculpted in a two-metre high white marble block. Shirtless, draped into a large white sheet of marble "floating in the air", Çeko

is looking far away, towards the hills of Yerevan city. The white color of the marble and the sheet floating around the statue are strongly reminiscent of an angel. While performing his *kilamê ser Çeko*, Alixanê Reşo is alternately sitting or standing next to the grave. Some scenes were recorded at night, lit only by a street lamp. A few pictures from an old recording of Çeko's wedding (on the 27th of April 1991) illustrate the words uttered by Alixan at 3 minutes and 48 seconds. A few seconds later, while Alixan is narrating the moment of the drama, the shooting shows the feet of a man going down the stairs (3'56"). Çeko was killed in the entrance of his building while he was going out for a walk. Watching the video clip, the viewer can only tremble seeing these feet going towards death.

III.2 New Heroes and Ancient *Ciwanmêrî*

Çeko is an interesting case to study the way heroic figures are still built among Yezidis from Armenia. The way Çeko is remembered and commemorated among Yezidis offers many similarities with ancient *ciwanmêrî*: people visit his grave (even if they did not know him), they listen to his story recorded in many versions on mp3 format and distributed in compilations, they also perform songs about him at home. Çeko is remembered as a bandit or an outlaw which are often considered in this region as positive and heroic characters.⁷⁶ But Çeko has little in common with a Robin Hood: the words melodized about him do not mention for example generosity, nor gallantry... The positive values lie more in a deep sense of family and clan, as well as the respect of the “thieves’ code” in which organized crime and anti-state ideology are positive moral values. While conducting fieldwork Estelle could witness that, if the family and clan values are accepted by most (if not all) Yezidis as positive values, the organized crime and anti-state ideology associated to him are much more controversial. In this context it seems unconvincing to define Çeko’s heroism by looking at values. And how then did Çeko become a hero known by all? Rather, it seems that Çeko was mainly turned into a hero through concrete and pragmatic interactional processes. These processes, which are poetic, musical and visual, convey feelings linked to a tragic and heroic mood. My point is that heroic figures are not created just by values but by the enactment of heroic feelings.

Such feelings may be understood as “moral emotions”. Defined as “those emotions that are linked to the interests or welfare either of society as a whole or at least of persons other than the judge or agent” moral emotions propagate moral values and cover a wide range of feelings such as compassion, shame, culpability, anger, contempt or respect.⁷⁷ Moral

emotions thus are reactions to social events that go beyond the direct interests of the self, whereas emotions in general are reactions to perceived changes, threats or opportunities that affect directly the self. In *kilamê ser* moral emotions are central. They enact relationships and call for emotional reaction from the listener who is led to enter the same emotional mood.⁷⁸ These moral values are mainly conveyed in melodized utterances. Conversely heroic feelings appear as an unavoidable feature of *kilamê ser*.

Moreover, as discussed earlier in this article, heroes are mainly created after their death. The agency of the hero in this process is thus quite limited. And if there is no need to accomplish an heroic act to become a hero, which is the case of Çeko, what makes the difference between an “ordinary” death and a heroic one? And in fact, the construction of Çeko's memory uses some processes which are also used for “ordinary” people. Should we then consider, if we think the other way round, that “ordinary” people have a great potential to become heroes after their death? Such an hypothesis could explain, to a certain point, why laments and heroic songs share so many similar features. But the main element that turned Çeko into a hero known by all Yezidis in Armenia is that he had a vast and powerful network which implemented after his death significant means to turn him into a hero commemorated by the entire community.

IV. Conclusions: The Production of Heroism

A comparison between Cihangir Agha and Çeko shows not only the evolution in masculine heroic qualities over the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, but also gives insight into the community's making of heroes. There is no doubt that Cihangir Agha displays princely virtues such as courage, generosity, attention to his honour (*qîmet* as well as *namûs*), which includes being seen to preserve and maintain his own community and honour. In addition he is shrewd and far-sighted, like his father. Such princely virtues are largely consistent in Europe and the Middle East (in the so-called “mirrors for princes” tradition) and as Clark shows, the pre-Soviet Russian paradigms are also similar: “...the typical prince ... was said to be loving, generous, hospitable and good-natured, but is also stern and majestic.”⁷⁹ Thus there is not a total rupture between Soviet heroisms and those values that preceded them – indeed, it was not the possession of princely qualities that disqualified Cihangir Agha from becoming a hero, but his lack of the requisite level of “consciousness” required of the Soviet “positive hero” during the 1920s.

⁸⁰ He was precisely the type of tribal leader criticised by Bolshevik Kurdish writers such as Erebe Şemo.⁸¹ The cultural and literary discourse of the Soviet period favoured more enlightened Kurdish heroes such as Ferîk Polatbegov, born of a Yezidi father and Russian mother, who died fighting for the Bolsheviks during the Civil War. (A village in the Hoktemberyan region was later named after Fêrik and he figures in the Soviet literature following the second World-War).⁸² Cihangir Agha's memory would have been preserved within the small Yezidi community though it is unlikely that *kilamê ser* about him would have been widely performed. His rehabilitation came with the development of Armenian national sentiment and the public discourse of the genocide. His current status as a hero of Sardarabad and his association with Andranik gives the Yezidis a public space to commemorate him, emphasising their own belonging in contemporary Armenia and adding a sense of pride in their tribal history which had been impossible during the Soviet period.

Whereas Cihangir Agha, we are told, strove to emulate the heroic examples of the past, Çeko did not accomplish any heroic courageous action to become a hero, although he does display virtues linked to the maintenance of community, clan and family, which are associated with *ciwanmêrî*. But his heroic status comes primarily from his violent death. We have seen that laments for the dead and heroic songs have the same poetic and musical features; both enable feelings linked to an ethos of heroism and tragedy. There seems to be a continuous transition between heroes and “ordinary people” as the processes used to create a hero are also used in funerals for “ordinary” people. But one of the main differences between laments for the dead and heroic songs is the degree of precision. Delocalisation from the space and time of the ritual is central in this matter. Among the Yezidis of Armenia, melodized speech is a central tool for the enactment of heroic feelings. As described previously, moral emotions are not only lived in the self's subjectivity: they also enact relationships and call for an emotional reaction from the listener. In this sense, melodized utterances build shared ideals as much as they express individual feelings. The words uttered and embodied in these narratives gain a consecrative status and mould Yezidis' ideal of masculine heroic qualities.

Both the Anatolian past of the Yezidis and their post-Soviet political and economic present can be discerned through these heroic paradigms; it is not difficult to discern the purpose they serve for this community now. However, our central point concerns the production of contemporary heroes; through violent death, a man may become the subject of *kilamê ser* and

draw on the rich array of emotions and meanings surrounding heroes of the past. We have shown how, through specific forms of discourse, new heroic paradigms have come into being and spread through the community and new selves have been made.

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¹ This article builds on a presentation jointly made at a BIPS/AHRC funded workshop on *javānmardi* held in 2012. In it we drew on our respective data gathered in the field of the Kurmanji (Northern Kurdish)-speaking Yezidi community of Armenia. Christine spent a total of some three months researching oral history and community memory over the years 2005-7, using both oral and written narrative accounts; Estelle spent a total of 15 months researching melodized narratives and songs over the years 2006-10 for her PhD in Anthropology, submitted in 2010 and published in 2013).

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Transcription: We have tried to make Kurdish and Armenian words as easily pronounceable as possible without straying too far from accepted transcriptions. For Kurdish, most letters are recognisable to the English speaker, with *ç* as in English *church*, *ş* as in *shout*, *c* as in *jam*, and *x* as in *loch*).

² For other examples see Ghoussoub and Sinclair-Webb 2000; Ouzgane 2006; Clements, Friedman and Healey 2002.

³ For an account of the intimacy of the links between text and social context, see for example Bauman 2008.

⁴ Connell 1993: 243.

⁵ Herzfeld 1993: 243.

⁶ See most recently Amy de la Bretèque 2013 : Hamelink 2014.

⁷ For a detailed analysis of the local typology of vocal production, see Amy de la Bretèque 2010,2011, 2013.

⁸ For a sensitive analysis of anecdote and other forms of talk see Ries 1997.

⁹ Bauman 2008.

¹⁰ Barber 2007: 22; 103-9; 150-161.

¹¹ This practice has existed at least since the 90s. During fieldwork conducted between 2005 and 2010, Estelle watched video tapes recorded by families since 1995.

¹² On the conception of exile as opposed to the household or to the village among the Yezidis, see Amy de la Bretèque 2008, 2013. The cultural importance of exile on a larger geographic scale is dealt with by Delaney (1991); Delaporte, (2010). and Fliche 2004.

¹³ More recently, mobile phones entered into funeral rituals. People who live abroad tend to attend funeral rituals via mobile phones (listening to laments and sometimes even performing them). Finally, the audience frequently takes pictures of the dead and send them to the relatives via SMS/MMS.

¹⁴ E.g. see Aras 2014, Hardi 2011. Fischer-Tahir 2009 considers the construction of both femininity and masculinity. Gendered masculine memory is considered in Fischer-Tahir 2012.

¹⁵ Sweetnam 2004: 24

¹⁶ Van Bruinessen 1992: 127, n. 58.

¹⁷ Hay 1921: 47 cited in van Bruinessen 1992: 127 n. 59. Although it is a point of honour that the hospitality of a *ciwanmêr* should never be seen to run out, the performance of *ciwanmêri* is more complex than displays of unlimited lavishness (Leach 1940: 28, cited van Bruinessen 1992: 87). However there is also a responsibility on a guest, especially a person known to the host, to respect the host's dignity by not making claims on the host's hospitality which are disproportionate to the guest's status, or which might cause him any discomfiture. In modern, urban society as much as in the "old" village environment, a dignified guest knows when to visit, where to place him- or her-self, and what kinds of gift might or might not be appropriate. Properly conducted behaviour honours both parties. For "generosity" see Sweetnam 2004. 7-22. For "hospitality" see Sweetnam 2004: 23-58. For a discussion of contemporary gender discourse and performance in Iraqi Kurdistan, see Fischer-Tahir 2009.

¹⁸ Van Bruinessen 1992: 87.

¹⁹ Van Bruinessen 1992: 50-132; on a specific example, the Fuqara' (Feqîran) of Sinjar, see Fuccaro 1999: 62-65.

²⁰ Zaken 2007.

²¹ See Zaken (2007: 127-184) for many anecdotes illustrating different aspects of the relationship between Kurdish *aghas* and "their" Jews.

²² Kurdish is a Western Iranian language, whose major dialects are Sorani, spoken in most of the Iraqi and Iranian Kurdish region, and Kurmanji, spoken in Turkey, the northernmost parts of Iraqi and Iranian Kurdistan, Syria, the Caucasus and Khorasan. Although Kurmanji speakers are more numerous, Sorani has been culturally dominant since the First World War, due to the more favourable cultural climate in Iraq, which included schooling in Kurdish in the Suleymani area. State schooling in Kurmanji was confined to certain areas in Armenia. See for example Hassanpour 1992: Haig and Matras 2002.

²³ See for example Kreyenbroek 1995, 2009; Kreyenbroek and Rashow 2005.

²⁴ Cf. Crone 2012.

²⁵ Two striking features of Yezidism are its belief in the reincarnation of the Seven Holy Beings (who serve God) and the importance of purity, which is expressed in a social order of endogamous castes and many taboos concerning food, dress and personal habits. See Kreyenbroek 1995.

²⁶ See Guest 1993: 104-5 for the 1849 edict negotiated, among others, by Layard.

²⁷ Guest, *Survival among the Kurds*, pp. 134-144; C. Allison, *The Yezidi oral tradition in Iraqi Kurdistan* (Richmond: Curzon, 2001), pp. 94-7.

²⁸ Dündar (2006: 379) cites a document itemising the Yezidis as a *mezhep* of the Kurds alongside Sunnis and Kizilbaş, and therefore deemed assimilable.

²⁹ However, the issue of religion was not disregarded. For the travails of those attempting to define the terms of the 1926 Soviet census, see Hirsch 2005: 108-123. Confessional group and mother tongue (itself not easy to define) were seen as important elements of nationality (both *nationalnost'* and *narodnost'*) at this point.

³⁰ There were probably some 40-50,000 Kurdish speakers in the Caucasus for most of the Soviet period (Müller 2000). The 1959 census listed 59,000 “Kurds” in the USSR, with 26,000 in Armenia. See Chatoev, 1965: 9; Aristova 1966: 19.

³¹ A typical example is Celil 1978, where “Yezidi *qewls* and *beyts*” (religious poems) form a sub-section of their larger work on Kurdish folklore.

³² See Allison 2013b for further details.

³³ Flint 1998: 77-83.

³⁴ There are two notorious events – the murder of Yezidi “pro-Kurd” paediatrician Seid Iboyan – see Lennox 2001: 418-423 - and the celebration, in which Yezidis participated, of the capture of the (still disputed) Lachin corridor, after the ethnic cleansing of its partly Kurdish population.

³⁵ In 2008, Christine was told that schoolbooks in “Ezdiki” designed by senior members of the “Ezdiki” side of the community had been rejected by the schools in the Aparan district, who continued to use Soviet-era learning materials in Latin and Cyrillic scripts.

³⁶ A member of a Yezidi family on the “Kurd” side, had not hesitated to approach Aziz Tamoyan, leader of the “Ezdiki” movement (again, my term – he called his organisation the World Council of Yezidis), for support in a dispute with a neighbour. He had duly received it; it was explained to Christine that regardless of political position Tamoyan was a good and conscientious advocate for all Yezidis in such matters (personal conversation, summer 2006).

³⁷ For a map showing Yezidi settlement across the former Soviet Union, see Omarkhali 2005.

³⁸ Abasyan 2005.

³⁹ Boyik 2006.

⁴⁰ We use the Kurdish online version here, rather than the earlier Armenian version published in the literary periodical *Grakan Tert*.

⁴¹ Boyik 2006 2-3.

⁴² For a detailed study of the Hamidiye see Klein 2011.

⁴³ Boyik tells the following anecdote: They [the provincial governorate] told the Yezidis that the Mir of Sheikhan [the paramount prince of the Iraqi Yezidis] was converting with the Yezidis of Lalish and Sinjar and called on all the Yezidis to convert and take up Islam. The leaders encouraged the Yezidis to choose three men who would go to the Mir and see for themselves. Three were chosen but were arrested at Sivas, on the way to Iraq. One escaped but the other two were arrested and told to convert and return to deceive the Yezidis, on pain of death. One converted, but the other, Pir Haji, died calling on the Yezidi holy being Sultan Êzdi. The man who had escaped told the Yezidis of Sinjar, who buried Pir Haji in Yezidi sacred earth; the other returned home and confessed all but his son handed him to the Yezidi authorities, who had him killed (Boyik 2006: 4).

For the events surrounding Mir Ali Beg’s conversion, see Guest 1993: 133-144.

⁴⁴ Boyik 2006: .5.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*: 4.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 5.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 5.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 6.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 7.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 8.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 9.

⁵² *Ibid*, 11.

⁵³ In 1918, according to Yezidi sources, about seventy men were massacred in cold blood in Camûşvan village (now Alagyaz) alone, whilst those who could sought sanctuary in the clefts of the mountain. Meanwhile their goods were plundered (Boyik 2006: 12). Heciê Cindi, who lived through this as a child, remembered it vividly, as his daughter recalled (Christine’s interviews: with villagers of Ortachiya, Summer 2005; with Ferida Heciê Cindi, Summer 2007).

⁵⁴ For an Armenian perspective on Bash Aparan, see Afanasyan, 1985: 61-62.

⁵⁵ Andranik died in Fresno, California in 1927, and was buried in Père-Lachaise cemetery, Paris, in 1928, but his remains were reinterred in Armenia in 2000.

⁵⁶ Boyik mentions this, as did Suren Agha, in 2006.

⁵⁷ Omarkhali 2008: 111.

⁵⁸ Japharova-Brutti 2001: 131-2.

⁵⁹ For more detail, see Allison 2013b.

⁶⁰ Chatoev1965: 30. Murgul's account of the battle (2007: 55-56), which draws on a number of Russian and Turkish language sources, does not mention Cihangir Agha or the Yezidis either.

⁶¹ For a more detailed description of these monuments, see Allison 2013a.

⁶² Statistics from CIA online world factbook, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/am.html>, consulted 2 March 2014. Although Armenian sources such as Professor Garnik Asatrian (personal conversation with Christine, 2004) have estimated the number of Yezidis in Armenia as about 40,000, it is likely that in the current climate many are now resident in Russia or the diaspora, for economic reasons.

⁶³ In one house Christine visited in the village of Hatsashen in 2005, a woman well into middle age who ran a smallholding with her husband, was very inconvenienced when the husband went away on business because it meant she had to speak directly to her elderly father in law, something custom traditionally forbade her to do. She still found this troublesome, even after decades of marriage. This is a reflection of the decline of the villages; in "normal" times, the family remaining at home would be large enough for there to be another appropriate person – a brother or son - to act as interlocutor. But few families can currently afford to keep all their members in the villages.

⁶⁴ *Êzîdxane qedrê mi digire, ez qedrê millet digirim.* "The Yezidi community respects me, and I respect (my) people."

⁶⁵ The field recording of this *kilamê ser Cangîr Ax'a* performed by Binbaş in 2006 is available with English subtitles at <www.ebreteque.net/from-ciwanmer-to-mafioz>.

⁶⁶ The word "tent" is to be understood here as household.

⁶⁷ This is geographically imprecise as Dercemed must have taken place at a location East of Van and West of the Iranian border, but Muş is in fact to the west of Van.

⁶⁸ The horse is a very important figure in epic narratives: it is sometimes even mentioned as a part of the hero's body. But this importance appeared also clearly in funeral rituals such as *kotel* described by Rudenko 1982: 65-8, in which the horse of the deceased participates in the procession to the cemetery. Graves were also often sculpted in the shape of horses with the name of the deceased's horse engraved on the stele (see Aristova 1966: 191).

⁶⁹ Binbaş is referring here to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, founder of the Turkish Republic in 1923. Promoted general Pasha of the Ottoman armies in 1915, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk represents here the army against which Cihangir Agha was fighting.

⁷⁰ For a detailed analysis of this ethos in Armenia and a comparison with a similar phenomenon in Romania, see Amy de la Bretèque, and Stoichita 2012.

⁷¹ Under Stalin, the forced labor camps (Gulag) overflowed with political prisoners and criminals, and a new organized group of top criminals arose, the *vory v zakone*. The term "thief in law" might be more closely translated as "thief who follows the law," figuratively referring to a criminal who obeys the thieves' code. The professional code of the thieves in law, based on the idea of brotherhood, is defined by an anti-state ethos and by a moral authority given to some thieves (V. Volkov 2002: 58-60). Thieves in law are drawn from many nationalities from a number of post-Soviet states.

⁷² An mp3 studio recording about Çeko is transcribed and commented in Amy de la Bretèque, *Paroles mélodisées*, 2013. Audio document is available at <www.ethnomusicologie.fr/parolesmelodisees>: document 10.

⁷³ The video clip performed by Alixanê Reşo is available with English subtitles at <www.ebreteque.net/princes-thieves-and-death>. Source: VHS tape given to Estelle by members of Çeko's tribe. Recorder unknown, subtitles are my own.

⁷⁴ Automatic model of gun invented by P. Mauser, a German arms manufacturer, and in use since 1870.

⁷⁵ Zeytun is a neighborhood in Yerevan city.

⁷⁶ For a study on bandits and outlaws among the Kurds, see Nikitine 1956: 75-86. For comparative studies of the positive values attributed to bandits in the Caucasus, in the Middle-East and in the Balkans, see Briant, 1976; Brunnbauer, and Pichler 2002; Herzfeld 1985; Hobsbawm 1969.

⁷⁷ See Haidt 2003.

⁷⁸ For a detailed analysis, see Amy de la Bretèque 2012.

⁷⁹ Clark 2000: 63.

⁸⁰ For a definition of the "positive hero" see *ibid.* 9-10. For his presentation in the 1920s see *ibid.* 68-89.

⁸¹ See Şemo 1931 in Russian, 1932 and 1935 in Kurdish.

⁸² He is a central, though absent, figure in Heciê Cindi's 1967 novel *Hawerî*.