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Manifestation of the Yezidi Identity

Cemetery, Symbol, and Memory

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Abstract

This article aims to examine the relationship between cemeteries and Yezidi identity by focusing on the Goristana Hesên Begê (Hesên Beg Cemetery), which belongs to the villages of Geliyê Sora (Güneli), Mezre (Çilesiz), Xanik/Berhokê (Mağaracık), and Efşe (Kaleli), and is located in Nusaybin in southeastern Turkey. It will analyse the tombstones' architectural features and symbols and question how the Yezidi identity reconstructs and transforms itself in modern monumental funerary architecture in southeastern Turkey. Ritual practices in the Goristana Hesên Begê indicate that death rituals can be employed to strengthen and integrate the social boundaries of the community. Thus, it will discuss the meaning of places of memory and mortuary practices for the exiled Yezidis and their roles as identity markers in the reproduction of social relations within the Yezidi community.

Keywords

Yezidis – cemetery – memory – symbol – Mesopotamia – Turkey

The Yezidis were exposed to pressure, slaughters, massacres, and deportations over the course of history. As a result, the meanings attributed by the Yezidis to massacre-related, sudden, and tragic death, and their reflections on funerary architecture have been different from those associated with natural death. Also, it is probable because of these catastrophic deaths that funeral architecture has come to have a prominent place in Yezidi culture throughout their history. The tragic lives of the Yezidi community continue even today and the

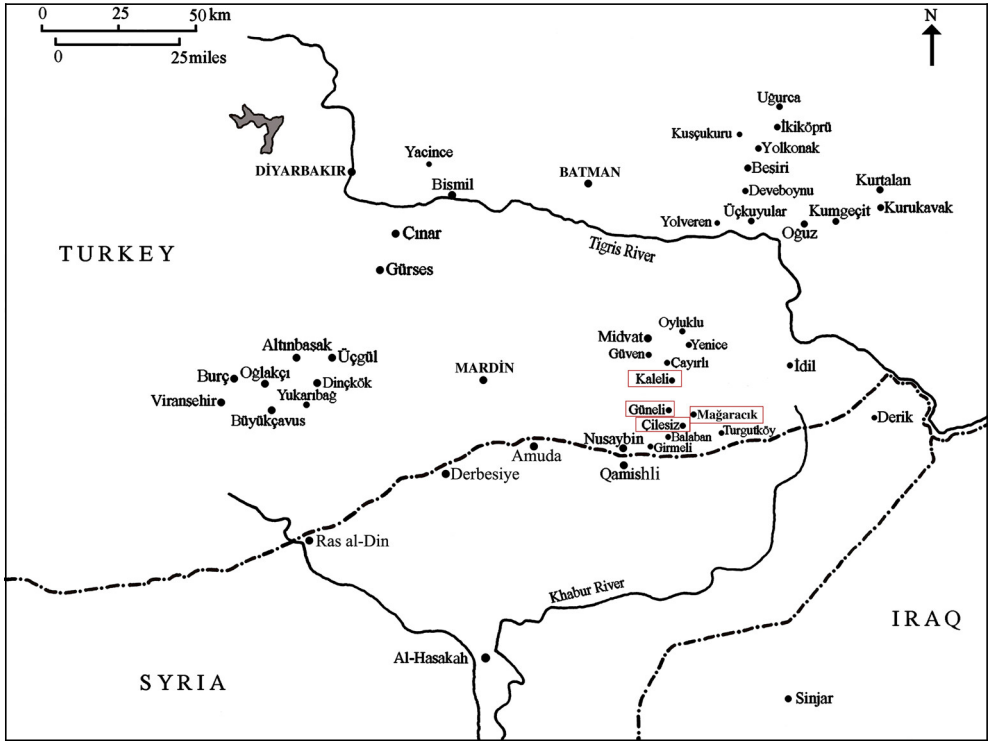


FIGURE 1 Map of the Yezidi settlements in eastern Turkey

Yezidis maintain the symbolism of their existence through cemeteries. Similar developments and reactions can be observed in all the Yezidi settlements today. However, in the limited scope of this essay, I shall deal merely with the Yezidis of Turkey, more precisely, I shall focus on the Goristana Hesên Begê (Hesên Beg Cemetery), where the people of the villages of Geliyê Sora (Güneli), Mezre (Çilesiz), Xanik/Berhokê (Mağaracık), and Efşe (Kaleli) in Nusaybin lay at rest (fig. 1). The populations of these villages, which are entirely Yezidi, are on the point of extinction today. The Yezidis who emigrated to Europe from these villages continue to bury their departed in this cemetery. The Yezidis who had to leave their country and emigrate to Western countries cannot still return to their homelands, because of the political instability of the region and hostility.

One significant character of the rites is that these funerary rituals unite the community members with each other, relatives, ancestors, and new generations (Myerhoff 1984: 306). Besides their aspects of honouring the dead and supporting the mourners, death rituals also serve as mediums for the construction of individual and collective identity (Reimers 1999: 148). Therefore, following Baudrillard, I argue in this study that death is not the endpoint of

life and is not negativity, but rather is charged with symbolic meaning as part of a constant exchange procedure, always part of life, and a social line of the boundary separating the 'dead' from the 'living' (Baudriallard 1993: 127). In the same way, the burial of the dead is not only a matter of the deceased and their family, but it implicates the entire community in overcoming the loss of one of its members. The funerary rituals associated with death are also the representation of an ideological act conducted by the living beings and there is a strong relationship between mortuary beliefs and practices and the legitimisation of the social order and its authority structure (Bloch/Parry: 41). And it is only through the performance of the rituals that individual human beings can surmount the crisis that happens as a consequence of death and rejoin the social collectivity (Laneri 2007: 5, 7). Although each community has its rites of passage specific to death, which are characterised due to communities' beliefs and traditions, common features of the rites of passage are that they are a social phenomenon because communities participate in it. Furthermore, as Warner affirms, the graveyards indicate the evidence and representation of the existence of the community of the dead on the piece of land where the grave is located. In this sense, the graves constructed for the deceased serve as an emblem and symbol witnessing the life and existence of the community and consolidating the divided groups of the community (Warner 2011: 164). Graves also have political importance and can serve as a device representing the struggle for existence. For those who resist the authorities, the creation of places of memory helps their society to continue. This is why authorities resort to all kinds of spatial management to destroy, tame or restrain unwanted memories or subaltern histories, stopping them from claiming and appropriating a space, and leaving any evidence there (Özsoy 2013: 195).

The theoretical basis of the study is founded on the approach of ethnicity, as described by Barth. Ethnicity is not considered as an innate, naturally possessed quality, and a shared cultural heritage, but as an aspect of social organisation. This term refers to a social boundary that individuals and collectives employ to attribute to themselves a shared culture in their everyday lives, that shapes their actions and mental orientation compared to other social collectivities (Barth 1994: 9–38).

In this essay, first I will give some background to the Yezidi people, their religion, a brief history of the Yezidis in Turkey and Germany, and describe and analyse the tombstones' designs and symbols in the Hesen Beg Cemetery. Then, I will discuss how the Yezidis respond to exist in their homelands, where they no longer live, through burial traditions, and question how the Yezidi identity is reconstructing and transforming itself in the monumental funerary architecture and funerary rituals in the post-1990 era.

1 Yezidi Religion and History

The Yezidis are a Kurdish ethno-religious group that are monotheistic and have a unique faith practice. They live historically in northern Mesopotamia, and southern Transcaucasia. Today, many Yezidis are scattered in a diaspora and the largest number of whom are concentrated in Germany, where they form a recognised ethno-religious group (Kreyenbroek 2009: 43–44). The Yezidis speak Northern Kurdish (Kurmanji). They believe in one God named *Xwedê* and sometimes *Êzîd*, who created the world, which is now in the charge of seven Holy Beings or Seven Angels. Tawûsî Melek, the Peacock Angel is the highest of the seven angels. In the Yezidi view, God reveals himself as a Holy Trinity in three different forms: Tawûsî Melek (Peacock Angel), Sultan Êzîd and Sheikh ‘Adî (a historical person, d. 1162) (on the Yezidi religion, see in general Asatrian/Arakelova 2014). According to the Yezidi beliefs, the Peacock Angel is the mediator between God and the Yezidi people and brings them directly to God. The Yezidis regard the sun, stars, fire, water, and earth as holy; they pray in the morning and evening towards the sun; they use fire on every ceremonial occasion; and they believe in reincarnation. The Yezidis perform the baptismal rite and have a strict hereditary caste system. All these rituals attest to the possibility of pre-Islamic ancient Iranian religious sources for Yezidism. The Yezidis inherited various cultural and religious beliefs, such as Zoroastrianism, Magism, and Gnosticism, blended with the Sufi teaching of Sheikh ‘Adî in the 12th century. However, this syncretistic worldview specifically distanced the religion of Sheikh ‘Adî’s pupils from doctrinal Islam after his death in 1162, and Yezidism is represented as a religion distinctly separate from Islam. The form of each influence became evident with every new addition. Thus, a syncretic belief system was created, and a unique religious tradition developed (Açıkyıldız 2010: 35–37).

The Yezidis pray to God through statuettes in the form of a peacock. However, the Yezidis’ veneration of the Peacock Angel, and its association with the devil or iblis in Muslim and Christian sources, have led others to label them ‘devil worshippers’ and, thus, ‘infidels and impure’. Because of this association, the Yezidis were vulnerable to crimes and massacres throughout their history. Moreover, Yezidism is not recognised by Muslims as a religion of the Book (*ahl al-kitab*) and thus it is not protected under Islamic law with the status of *dhimmi* like Christianity and Judaism, making Yezidis constantly exposed to attacks by Islamist radicals (Açıkyıldız 2010: 73–80). Besides, the Yezidis were considered to be a Muslim heresy by the medieval Kurdish and Arab Islamic scholars, who argued that they had deviated from the right path (Ibn Taymiyya 1906: 262–317; Ibn Khallikân 1978: 316). Therefore, the Yezidis are considered as

apostates and renegades who must be eliminated or converted to Islam under threat of persecution and massacre. Yezidi ethnic identity also contributes to their vulnerability. Radical movements have targeted the Yezidis as Kurds. The last worst massacre was carried out by ISIL militants on 3 August 2014. ISIL militants invaded the Sinjar region in northern Iraq to eliminate the 'infidels' (Açıkyıldız 2019: 150).

Yezidism was embraced by the Kurdish tribes and dynasties on a large scale; it expanded to wherever the Kurds were living in the Middle East. However, their power declined because of the conversion of the Yezidi dynasties such as Bohtis of Jazirat ibn Omar, Mahmudis of Khoshâb, Dunbulis of Khoy and Janbuladis of Kilis and Alep to Islam between the 14th and 16th centuries for political causes (Açıkyıldız 2016: 370). After the end of dynastic power, Yezidis faced increasing pressures, oppressions and massacres by their Muslim neighbours who maintained their religion (Al-Maqrizî 1943–1972; Kreyenbroek 1995: 34–35). Furthermore, paradoxically, the Yezidis also suffered at the hands of the Muslim Kurds. However, they remained to survive as small groups dispersed amongst Kurds in a large area. Lalish in Iraqi Kurdistan continued to be the centre of Yezidism.

A considerable Yezidi people of the Serhat region under Ottoman rule emigrated to the Republic of Armenia and Georgia, and the population in Karadagh, Rumkale, Mardin and Jazirat fled to Kurdish regions of northern Syria and northern Iraq because of the massacres in 1915 and during the pacification of the Kurdish tribes between 1925 and 1928 (Fuccaro 2003: 147). At this time, Armenia and Georgia adopted a socialist regime and came under the rule of the Soviet Union. Thus, the Yezidis continued to live in these countries within the structure of constitutional rights and the relationships that each country established with its minorities.

Because of the country's severe attitude to its minorities, the Yezidis have faced pressure due to their ethnic and religious identity in the Turkish Republic era (1923–). The Republic of Turkey is a nation-state founded on a policy of one nation, one language, and one religion and aimed at creating a homogeneous nation-state by suppressing and assimilating all other native ethnic, linguistic, and religious communities in the country. Therefore, the Turkish state denied the existence of the Kurds and Kurdish identity from 1924 to the 1990s, treated them as Turks of the mountains, who had forgotten their Turkishness, and attempted to assimilate them. The Kurdish language was forbidden, and all kinds of cultural and symbolic manifestations of Kurdishness and expression of Kurdish identity were banned as they were considered as an indication of separatism (Aslan 2011: 81). As for the Yezidis, they did not fit anywhere in the new nation-state that the young Turkish Republic was working to create, either

ethnically or religiously. They were pressured because of their ethnic and religious identity. They were not recognised ethnically by the state and were not acknowledged as a separate religious group, as their religion did not conform to any category recognised by the Republic of Turkey. They were neither Muslims nor People of the Book (*ahl al-kitâb*) like Christians, Jews, and Sabians, but heretics and non-believers. They finally appeared in the category of Muslims. Since the Yezidis had no status in the Republic of Turkey and were not protected by the law of the country, this also paved the way for the Yezidis to be open to more prejudices and subjected to oppression and violence by their Muslim neighbours (Kreyenbroek 2009: 36).

From the 1960s, the Yezidi community, whose population was already highly reduced, began to leave as immigrant labour for European countries, principally to Germany, driven by political, ethnic and religious oppression and economic difficulties. Then, after 1973, the Yezidis continued to emigrate to Germany as asylum seekers. Another extensive influx of Yezidis from Turkey to Germany was provoked by the military coup in Turkey in 1980. Tens of thousands of Yezidis living principally in Urfa, Mardin, Batman and Diyarbakir were forced to seek asylum in Europe (Arakelova 2021: 113). In Turkey, where everything about the Kurds was already forbidden, following the military coup, the pressures increased. People who spoke, sang, or published in Kurdish were arrested, imprisoned, and tortured. The conflicts in the 1980s and 1990s between the Turkish army and the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) likewise encouraged Yezidis to flee Turkey. Many villages (with mixed Muslim-Yezidi inhabitants) were forcibly evacuated in the 1990s; deported populations moved to the big towns and cities, and some of them joined their relatives in Germany (Ammann 2005: 1011).

Germany recognised the Yezidis of Turkey as a persecuted minority and welcomed them in significant numbers (Kreyenbroek 2009: 37, 42). In these and later years, Yezidis from Armenia, Georgia, Iraq, and Syria also joined their coreligionists in Germany. Today, sizeable Yezidi communities live in Berlin, Bielefeld, Bremen, Celle, Cologne, Emmerich, Frankfurt am Main, Göttingen, Hamburg, Hannover, Oldenburg, and Saarbrücken. Their estimated number in Germany range today from 60,000 to 120,000. The third generation Yezidi population was born in Germany. They live in the field of commerce, economy, and craftsmanship (Kızılhan 2008: 51). The Yezidis who settled down in Europe live in better social and economic conditions in host countries than in their homeland. They benefit from freedom of expression and religion in Western countries (Açıkyıldız 2010: 34).

According to the census conducted in 1923, the Yezidi population was 18,000 in Turkey (Sırma 2001: 415). While there were 23,401 Yezidis in Siirt, Diyarbakır,

Batman, Mardin, Urfa, Antep and their villages in 1985, their number decreased to 839 in 2005 (Taşgın 2005: 29–30). Most Yezidi villages were destroyed. There are only a few Yezidi villages that remained in southeastern Turkey. Most standing Yezidi villages are located today around the towns of Nusaybin, İdil, Midyat, Beşiri, Kurtalan, and Viranşehir. Although the Yezidis who emigrated to Germany did not sell their lands, most Yezidi settlements in Turkey were occupied by the Muslims.

Yezidis in the diaspora have close relations with their relatives who have remained in their villages, which are mostly made up of elderly people. The Yezidi population in Turkey fell to around 350 people in 2012 (Ulutürk 2013: 844).

2 Goristana Hesên Begê (Cemetery of Hesên Beg)¹

Goristana Hesên Begê is located on the lower slopes of Bagok Mountain in close proximity to the villages surrounding it. It is north of Geliyê Sora (Güneli), Mezre (Çilesiz), and Xanik/Berhokê (Mağaracık) and south of Efşe (Kaleli). Although it belongs to the village of Mezre, the people of Geliyê Sora and Xanik/Berhokê are also buried in the cemetery. Moreover, inhabitants of the villages that were forcefully evacuated, such as Efşe also rest in this cemetery. According to the Yezidis, Hesên Beg was from the lineage of Sheikh Abu Bekir and is assumed to have lived between 1670–1736. His tomb also lies in the old cemetery. The new cemetery began to receive the deceased from the end of the 1990s but it became a proper cemetery in 2001 with the construction of the entrance gate and surrounded by wire fences.

The cemetery is composed of two parts: ancient and recent ones. While the old section is located on the upper part of Bagok Mountain, the new one is in the lower part. Since there was no more space to dig and bury their dead because of the rocks in the upper part, the Yezidis decided to construct a new cemetery not very far from the ancient one on less craggy land and continued burying their dead there from the late 1990s onwards. Both cemeteries are stylistically similar to each other. They display features created gradually, which represent the characteristics and tastes of the periods in which they were

1 This part of the article is based on a fieldwork in the village of Mezre (Çilesiz), Geliyê Sora (Güneli) and the Cemetery of Hesên Begê in May 2015 and October 2021. My informants were Cesur Karaca, a Yezidi and habitant of Geliyê Sora and the responsible of the Cemetery of Hesên Begê, Seyran Karaca and Yusuf Karaca from Mezre. I am thankful for responding my questions and their hospitality.



FIGURE 2 Goristana Hesên Begê (ancient part—mausoleums in the form of fire temple *çartaqs*)

built. They also reflect the multiplicity of the structures of the tombstones. They define a range of stylistic attributes, and display styles of architecture, decorative arts, and symbols. Yezidis' economic resources and the stability in their new life in Germany are likewise manifested in their graveyards constructed during the last twenty years.

Burials, which still take place in the ancient cemetery, are mostly simple (fig. 2). The graves are covered with an elongated mound of earth and marked by small-sized headstones. The graves are all flattened, and headstones are broken and irregular in shape today. Another type of gravestone is in the form of a sarcophagus, constructed by rubble stone and recently strengthened with mortar. A few graves have been monumentalised by the construction of mausoleums on them. These mausoleums are in the form of Sassanian fire temples, "*çartaqs*". These square constructions are in the form of a baldaquin and open on the four sides with large, high arches and covered with a conical dome. These mausoleums, built with irregular cut stone, were also plastered and white-washed in some cases. The last form is the beehive type tomb of which there is only one example in the ancient cemetery. They are all without epitaphs.

The new cemetery continues receiving the dead. It has been designed and arranged in a more orderly and meticulous manner (fig. 3). The cemetery is entered by a monumental semi-circular arched gateway. A peacock pattern is



FIGURE 3 Goristana Hesên Begê (new part—general view)

displayed at the starting points of the arches on both sides and a sun motif on the keystone of the arch. Peacocks are painted in yellow, red, green, and blue. An inscription in Kurmanji, giving a brief history of the cemetery, is found on the entrance wall.

This part follows the same tradition of the ancient one with sarcophagi and fire temple type graves. However, contrary to the ancient cemetery, there are more tombs, and the forms of the tombs vary. Moreover, cut stone and marble have been used in the new cemetery, providing more possibilities for decoration. Thus, rich motifs were carved into stone lately and display more elaborate features. It can be suggested that the forms of most tombs' forms derive their shape from the earlier fire temple type with a baldaquin form. For instance, square tombs are in some cases open on four sides and covered with a small conical dome; in other examples, square tombs are walled on all sides, and there is an arched door and a small ventilation window on the walls. A conical dome is the most widespread form in the Yezidi cemeteries, and it continues to be the preferred mausoleum roof design in the new cemetery. This shape was imitated and new versions were also created. Some of the new mausoleums also refer to the Sheikhan and Sinjar regions in Iraqi Kurdistan with the structure of the fluted conical domes, which is foreign to this Yezidi region. However, as this form with fluted cones is considered the most distinguished element of Yezidi architecture, it is also used frequently in this cemetery. Another variant

of these cones is in spiral form. The spiral dome form, which was widely used in ancient Mesopotamia, appears in one example.

The Yezidis have built monumental tomb structures for their dead with the main signs of their religion in the new cemetery. The main symbols of the Yezidi religion, such as the image of the peacock as bas-relief on the cut stones and metal sculptures, as well as bird, sun and moon motifs are evident on the head end of the tombstones and façades of the mausoleums. The Peacock Angel (Tawûsî Melek), which is the most distinctive symbol of the Yezidi belief was embodied in only seven metal banners (*sanjak*) in the past. These banners were hidden from the non-Yezidis. They were only taken out of their hiding places during the ceremonies and rituals that they held solely among themselves. It has never been possible for Yezidis to practice their religion freely in their lands. They were unable to build temples or display their religious symbols publicly either. They constructed and used mausoleums, sanctuaries, and shrines to accomplish their rituals instead of the temples throughout their history. Besides, it was not possible to see the figure of the Tawûsî Melek on their mausoleums, tombs, and graves until very recent times. Since the early 2000s, the Yezidis have become much more recognised and accepted around the world; they have had the right to express themselves more freely in Western countries and, having chances to compare their religion with other religions, they have started to display their religious symbols, such as Tawûsî Melek more fearlessly in their graves and homes, and at wedding ceremonies and rituals. The Goristana Hesên Begê is one of these cemeteries, where the Yezidis display peacock figures on tombstones, primarily in bas-reliefs, but also in the form of three-dimensional sculptures. Faravahar, a winged sun disk with a seated male figure in the centre, is also used in a few examples to refer to their association with Zoroastrianism. The triple conical dome of the Lalish Temple in Iraqi Kurdistan, which is the pilgrimage centre of the Yezidis, is depicted as a relief on a few examples. Geometrical and stylised floral motifs have also been used abundantly to decorate and symbolise the tombs. In the same way, they began to show their ethnic symbols more freely besides their religious symbols in this cemetery. It is possible to see poems and hymns in Kurdish on tombstones, a language that has been ignored and forbidden in Turkey for decades.

As stated by Cesur Karaca, responsible for the cemetery since its foundation, these graves were commissioned by the relatives of the dead and constructed by the stonemasons of Midyat and Nusaybin, who are Muslims by faith. Ahmet Bilgiç from Nusaybin is the master builder of the tombstones in the form of sarcophagus built with cut-stones placed on top of each other; Aldulgani from Midyat is the master builder of the graves and mausoleums cut off from Midyat stone, and Ali Dursun from Midyat is the marble and granite

master. The same stonemasons also build and decorate the graves of Christian and Muslim communities of Mardin, Midyat, Nusaybin and other towns and villages in this region. Stonemason Ahmet Bilgiç is also the artisan who created the iron images of the Peacock Angel crowning the tombs and mausoleums, which show highly artistic qualities. Therefore, the graves in sarcophagi shape share stylistic similarities in form and decorative features with Muslim and Christian tombstones in the same region. However, the most characteristic features that distinguish the Yezidi cemeteries from the Muslim and Christian cemeteries are the usage of fluted conical domes and Yezidi religious signs and symbols.

Most people buried in the cemetery are from Germany. Because of the conflict and hostility, the Yezidis have been scared to bring their dead to their homelands. Thus, they entombed them in Germany, but they began to bring their dead back, notably from the 2000s afterwards. There are cases where Yezidis have buried their dead in Germany, but they are rare. For the Yezidis, the homeland is sacred because it belongs to their mother, father, and ancestors whose graves also lie there, and every Yezidi should return to their lands one day. Therefore, they do not want to leave their dead in Europe. The old generation living in Germany regrets leaving their villages and going to Germany and wants to go back to their villages before dying but the new generation who were born, raised, and educated in Germany do not want to return. This generation gap causes internal problems for the community in Germany.

3 Manifestation of Identity in the Funerary Practices

Death for the Yezidis means the separation of the soul from the body, the end of life forever and the rebirth of the soul in another body. In the Yezidi faith, man consists of a soul and a body. The body dies, but the soul, which has divine essence, is still alive and is resurrected in another body in this world. The soul is essential, the body is unimportant, and the body is just a garment. They believe in the transmigration of souls and use the metaphor of changing clothes to describe the process of 'changing the shirt' (*kiras gehorin*). The type of dress that the soul will wear in its new life, which is dependent on the lifestyle in its previous life. That is to say, Yezidis believe in reincarnation, which is one of the important beliefs that forms the basis of the Yezidi religion. Moreover, the hereafter does not mean eternal life as in other religions, but the hereafter is the complementary element of the belief in reincarnation (Açıkyıldız 2010: 102). The book of revelation (*Kitêb-i Cilwê*) says thus: "No one can stay in this world longer than the time I have fixed, if I want, I can send him back to this

world for the second and the third time by reincarnation, by putting his soul in another body; it is a universal law". After death, the Great Court decides in which body the soul will be reborn. It is according to the actions that a person has done in the world that determines the decision. The soul passes from one body to another body according to the good and bad actions performed. If the soul has done good, it reincarnates in a good body and if it has done badly, in a bad body.

In communities, such as the Yezidis, who were removed from their historical lands and subjected to violence, extermination, and migration throughout their history, the dead and their graves occupy a crucial place in society, since they bear witness to their existence in their ancestral territories. At the same time, they are regarded as reminders of the 'bad deaths' that the Yezidi community has experienced and are, therefore, ascribed with political connotations. Furthermore, the desire to bury their dead in their ancestral territory is not merely an individual choice, but a social act concerning the whole Yezidi community as death is a feature that covers the social, cultural, and emotional dimensions of living individuals.²

As Baudrillard (1993:127) argues, death concerns both the deceased and their society, as death and life merge at this point. Similarly, Goody (1962: 28–52) and Laneri (2007: 5) highlight that the construction of the funerary ritual itself is based on the creation of a symbolic language that is built upon different forms of communication by the group to which the individual deceased belonged. Therefore, objects constituting the funerary assemblage, the dead body, the mythological tales, the religious beliefs, the words, and lamentations of the living can represent the need to transfer a negative experience, such as death, into a positive one. Moreover, funerary ceremonies tie the sentiments of the living through the succession of generations to early ancestries, and the cemeteries and graves are considered to be the objects of sacred rituals. Therefore, while community ceremonies held at cemeteries and at the graveside increase the strength of the relatives of the deceased to help cope with dying, honouring their loved one's death with final arrangements, they also enable the society to see death as a natural part of life in the life cycle of renewal, as a mediator between the living and the ancestors, and a passage from the living to the dead. Therefore, when graveyards stop taking new burials, they lose their sacred collective representational quality relating the dead to the living and become merely objects of historical rituals (Warner 2011: 164).

² Recent studies display that Alevi and Muslim Kurds also bury their dead in their ancestral villages in Turkey for similar reasons (Balkan/Masarwa 2022: 227–228).

Funerary observances and burial practices in the Yezidi community tie the past and the future together, revive the interaction between memory and place, and reinforce the social boundaries of the dispersed Yezidi community. Furthermore, the cemeteries in the Yezidi villages, such as Goristana Hesên Begê, constantly receiving the dead testifies to their exiled existence. Even if the Yezidis die in exile, they bring their dead to the land where their parents were born, if not their own, and bury them in the ancestral graveyards. This act indicates the temporary character of exile and the desire to return to their lands. These cemeteries and tombstones also serve as the title deeds of the lands they once lived in and as the vanguards of the lands to which they will one day return. This is also a way of teaching their traditions to the new generation born in Europe and binding them to their past and ancestors.

Yezidism is a religion of orthopraxy. Participation in religious rituals and adherence to specific behaviours are more important than the role of scriptural text and dogma (Allison 2004). Thus, the practice of various religious festivals and pilgrimages are important for the Yezidi identity. The Yezidi religion cannot survive without these rituals, and the rituals cannot exist without the sites in which they are practiced. Today, no Yezidi cultural and religious heritage sites remain in eastern and southeastern Turkey. All Yezidi sacred spaces have been destroyed completely. Thus, there are no heritage sites in their lands where the Yezidis could worship or perform their religious rituals, practices, and ceremonies, which means the loss of their culture, identity and even the extinction of the Yezidi community in these lands. Thus, the sites of memory such as Goristana Hesên Begê, take the place of the spaces for worship in southeastern Turkey. Graveyards are the prominent symbols of the divided groups of the Yezidi community, serving to reconstruct a heritage and identity, and rebuilding the social community of the dead.

Besides, death and sites of memory also can be utilised as a medium for the production of power and the creation of political domination, resistance, and existence. Since cemeteries and tombstones testify to the presence in those lands of communities that have been subjected to all kinds of violence and forced into exile, those in power attempt to prove their physical absence by removing their graves. Thus, people use the symbol of the cemetery to avoid extinction. The fact that Yezidis bury their dead in their homeland, as they consider the possibility of returning one day, constructing burial places, and performing religious practices there, are also acts of resistance and resilience against the forces that uprooted them from their lands and forced them to become immigrants in foreign countries. So, the creation of memory places helps their society to continue and these places act symbol of resistance in their homelands. The Goristana Hesên Begê, just one of the many examples in Yezidi

homelands, functions for the Yezidi community as both a place of worship and a motherland, where they believe they connect with the divine, their ancestors and each other. They pray there, visit their relatives and ancestors' tombstones, make wishes, perform religious ceremonies, recite hymns and lamentations, sacrifice animals, eat commemorative meals, and meet each other. Thus, cemeteries are considered to bind the past and the future, where Yezidi tradition and culture are transmitted to the new generation, and it is the place of memory, which plays a significant role in the production of power, domination, resistance, and existence.

Similar gravestones, akin in form and size with obvious religious signs, are placed side by side, depicting ethnic and religious traits that deviate from the gravestones of the Muslim and Christian graveyards in the nearby villages. The Yezidis do not construct their identity merely through old ritual practices, but they have incorporated new ones into the old. Many identity marker signs and symbols are used in cemeteries to represent individual and collective identity. These symbols are both historical and modern. The sun and moon are the most commonly used symbols in the graveyards. Yezidis, who pray towards the sun in the morning and evening, believe that their prayers will be transmitted to God through the sun and the moon, which represent life that repeats at certain intervals (Can Emmez 2015: 173–174). The representation of the Peacock Angel, the most important symbol of Yezidi identity, in the cemetery and on the tombstones as relief and as tridimensional sculpture is very new. It is also new to build monumental tombs for ordinary people, a reference to the new social status of the Yezidis in Europe. The use of the Kurdish language for the poems and hymns and the faravahar, best known symbol of Zoroastrianism, point to the new individual and collective identity.

4 Conclusion

The Yezidis, who had to leave their homelands from the 1960s, buried their dead in Germany, but with a little stabilisation of the Kurdish region in southeastern Turkey, they began to bring their dead to their homeland and bury them in their ancestors' cemeteries. The cemeteries where the dead and the graves are found are places where people gather to build a collective identity and belonging, and they can be seen as a device for the reconstruction of the shared identity of the society. Even though the peace process ended in March 2015 and political problems have increased, the Yezidis continue to bring their dead and bury them in their village cemeteries. The Goristana Hesên Begê is one of these cemeteries where people living in Germany bury their departed. The exiled and deter-

ritorialised Yezidi community insists on manifesting their existence in their lands by burying their deceased and carrying out their commemorative rituals there. For many Yezidis the memories of homeland continue to carry individual and social meanings. And as they cannot still return to their former villages in Turkey, they compensate this lack by burying their dead in the homeland. It is also a hope for them to return there one day, so it also means a preparation for the return. Therefore, cemeteries are significant for the Yezidi community not only in the past and today but they also mean the future and more importantly they represent a claim for their existence on those lands.

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