


2021

## Traditional Healing Beyond the Homeland: Yezidi Shamanic Healing in the Diaspora

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### Recommended Citation

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<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/honorsthesis/1031>

TRADITIONAL HEALING BEYOND THE HOMELAND:  
YEZIDI SHAMANIC HEALING IN THE DIASPORA

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for Interdisciplinary Honors Undergraduate Thesis in Anthropology  
in the College of Sciences  
and in the Burnett Honors College  
at the University of Central Florida  
Orlando, Florida

Summer Term  
2021

Thesis Chair: Tyler Fisher, Ph.D.

## Abstract

The goal of this qualitative study is to evaluate whether shamanism, practiced by *koçeks* and *faqrya* (the Yezidi terms for traditional shamanic practitioners), continues as a practice among diasporic Yezidis, and, if so, in what manner. I accomplish this through a series of oral, remote interviews with Yezidis living in Germany. The interview subjects comprise a cross-sectional sample that includes men and women from the three Yezidi castes (Sheikh, Pir, Murid). Through the multiple testimonies these interviews garnered regarding shamanic praxis in the context of Germany, I determine that, in spite of the disruptions of forced migration and geographical distance, the Yezidis' practices of prophecy and healing parallel those described in Tyler Fisher, Nahro Zagros, and Muslih Mustafa's prior research in 2016 in Iraqi Kurdistan, the Yezidi homeland. The continuations of the shamanic tradition in the Yezidi diaspora evince strong connections to its origins in Iraqi Kurdistan, principally maintained through travel and remote communications. These practical factors facilitate ongoing connections and continuities. More importantly and of greater interest is the versatility inherent in the Yezidis' perceptions and practice of shamanism— a versatility that illustrates a broader propensity for adaptation characteristic of the Yezidis' belief system, which has enabled them to survive as a vulnerable ethnoreligious group even when far removed from the principal religious sites of their homeland.

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## Introduction

This chapter presents an overview of the cultural and historical background of the Yezidi ethnoreligious group, their unique belief system, and the state of their diasporic population insofar as it pertains to the present research. I also present the anthropological paradigm for “shamanism.” Finally, I will discuss the most relevant academic precedents for my research: Tyler Fisher, Nahro Zagros, Muslih Mustafa’s 2016 investigation of Yezidi shamanic practices in Iraq and Philip Kreyenbroek’s 2009 work on Yezidi traditional healing techniques amongst the European diaspora.

### Background: Who are the Yezidis?

The Yezidis are a community whose traditional homeland straddles Iraqi Kurdistan and the Sinjar region of Northern Iraq. Although population estimates are wide ranging, a recent, reputable source approximates 500,000 (Allison 2017). However, Yezidis themselves tend to give a much more generous estimate of their population, regularly citing one million as their approximation (Cultural Committee 2015, p. 3). Yezidis are strictly endogamous and have a rigid caste structure consisting of three groups— *Sheikhs*, *Pirs*, *Murids*— denoting various degrees of socio-religious authority and within which marriage is also limited (Spät 2005, p. 45). The Yezidis practice a syncretic religion that incorporates elements from the major Abrahamic faiths (Christianity, Judaism, Islam), as well as from Zoroastrianism, among other influences from neighboring religions of the Northern Mesopotamia region. However, the Yezidis have reinterpreted these influences to fit into their unique belief system (p. 32). At its core, Yezidism is a monotheistic religion believing in one Creator God, yet theirs is a deity that is entirely transcendent and works through angelic and human intermediaries. A Yezidi creation myth

explains that the Yezidi ancestor was conceived from Adam in an earthen jar, without Eve's participation, leading to their bloodline being pure and separated from other human groups (p. 32). This concept of a sharply distinct human lineage is reflected in the Yezidi insistence on endogamy, accepting no converts to Yezidism and prohibiting departures from the community.

Despite being monotheistic, the central figures in their religion are the Divine Heptad, a group of angels who work to execute God's will on Earth and who were manifested in human form as certain Yezidi historical figures. At the forefront is Melek Tawus, the Peacock Angel, who is primarily worshiped and revered as the protector of the Yezidis (Spät 2005, p. 32, Kreyenbroek 1995, p. 55). Another significant figure for the Yezidis is the prominent reformer, Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir, a Sufi leader who lived in the early twelfth century and is alternatively seen as a saint, a quasi-divine being, or an angelic incarnation (Kreyenbroek 1995, p. 50).

An important aspect of the Yezidi faith is that it is predominantly based on oral tradition and lacks a major canonical text (Spät 2005, p. 33). Because illiteracy has historically been widespread in the community, it has been up to itinerant religious figures known as *qewals* to reinforce and disseminate knowledge of the faith through the medium of oral hymns and prayers, especially during religious rites (p. 33). In spite of or because of this oral lineage of teaching by the *qewals*, the religion's oral tradition has led to great variation in practice and belief between different Yezidis. In the midst of this variety and evolution over time, the Yezidis' geographical points of reference have remained fixed. Lalish is their most sacred site—a valley honeycombed with shrines, tombs, and sacred springs, to which a Yezidi is expected to make a pilgrimage at least once in his or her lifetime. Beyond Lalish, towns and villages in the region that have a significant population of Yezidis will often have at least one shrine, with a characteristic white, fluted conical spire rising above the local cemetery or on a prominence in the landscape. The

shrines themselves, as sites of religious significance, are connected with devotion and healing, with individual shrines being renowned in the area for specific cures for maladies ranging from infertility, madness caused by *jinn*s (malignant spirits), or snake bites and scorpion stings (p. 34).

As a “minority within a minority” the Yezidis exist at cultural intersections: most are Kurmanji or Badini Kurdish-speakers, yet the group’s unique religion separates them from other Kurds, who are mainly Sunni Muslims (Spät 2005, p. 17). The double-minority status of the Yezidis has contributed to their being recurring targets of ethnic conflict, displacement, and political oppression. They have historically been affected by violent and horrifying anti-Kurdish action. In one case, they faced injustice and ethnic dispersion under “Arabization” policies of the Ba’athists, a pro-Arab nationalist party in the 1970s. Some effects of these policies were that Kurds were displaced from their territories and Arabs were made to settle in the area, and Arabs were encouraged by the party to marry Kurdish woman with the goal of ethnic dispersion (Craig 2018 p. 827). Then, in the 1980s, they were subjected to further violence as former Iraq president Saddam Hussein sought to suppress “infidel” Kurds through various means culminating in the genocidal Al-Anfal campaign (p. 818).

Aside from their Kurdish affiliation, which includes language, food, and clothing styles, Yezidis’ distinctive religious tradition has made them a target. Starting under the Ottoman and Safavid Empires in the late 1600s, outsiders’ interpretation of their beliefs led to the propagation of the idea that Yezidis were “devil worshippers,” resulting in further persecution (Asher-Schapiro 2014). This idea stemmed from similarities between the Yezidi figure of *Melek Tawus* and the Islamic *Ibliis*, or the devil (Asher-Schapiro 2014). Additionally, the Yezidis, alongside other religious minorities such as Christians, were targeted by the self-proclaimed caliphate, Islamic State (IS), as their forces closed in on the Sinjar region in 2014. In the ensuing genocide,

tentative estimates put the number of killed or kidnapped Yezidis at up to 10,000. Many men and boys were killed or sent to IS training camps, while women and girls were kidnapped and enslaved (Cetorelli & Ashraph 2019, p. 6).

The Yezidis refer to the periods of persecution as *ferman*, a term referring to an order or edict, originally in reference to decrees from the Ottoman authorities. The IS attacks are considered by many Yezidis to be the 74th *ferman*, a number that is symbolic of completion to the Yezidis, hopefully ushering in a time of peace (Fisher, Zagros, & Mustafa 2020, 260).

### The Yezidi Diaspora

Due to frequent persecution under various regimes over history, many Yezidis have fled their homeland to neighboring countries and the West. Sizeable populations have settled in Syria, Turkey, and Western countries such as Germany and the US (Kizilhan 2019, p. 4). In the paper “Yeziden in Deutschland,” Andreas Ackermann (2003) categorizes the Yezidis as a “diasporic community” using Robin Cohen’s 1997 criteria: dispersion from a homeland to at least two new regions (usually as a result of violence or coercion), a pronounced cultural identity that is often marked by endogamy, empathy and solidarity between members of the group in different areas outside the homeland, and, finally, that the new countries provide the opportunity for an independent and enriching life. Existing within a diasporic community also means that traditions of conventional praxis face pressures to adapt, attenuate, or otherwise become obsolete. Ackermann concludes that the Yezidis, specifically those who settled in Germany, meet these criteria (2003, p. 157-8).

My research will focus on Yezidis in Western countries, specifically Germany, where their population is estimated to be as many as 200,000. In the 1960s and 1970s, large numbers of Yezidis fled to Germany from Turkey, fearing persecution. In total, however, the majority of the



Yezidis currently residing in Germany have come from Iraq, displaced by persecution at the hands of Al-Qaida and IS more recently (Kizilhan 2019, p. 4).

The Yezidi community as a whole bears generations of trauma from which to recover, and the IS attacks have intensified this. While many men were killed, women were subject to slavery and widespread sexual violence (Cetorelli et. al. 2017, p. 3). The trauma from these events has manifested in severe, widespread instances of mental illnesses and stress that has led to physical illnesses. A study found disproportionately high rates of non-communicable diseases in displaced people in Northern Iraq—diseases such as hypertension, cardiovascular disease, and musculoskeletal problems, which are exacerbated by stress (p. 3).

However, the toll of these events did not stay in the homeland: Yezidis who have found refuge in other countries continue to struggle with similar problems. A German program in the state of Baden-Wuerttemberg was created to allow asylum for 1,100 of about 3,200 Yezidi women that had escaped IS captivity. Women had the support of social workers and were able to start a life far from where the attacks took place. However, even two years after the events, around half of the women showed signs of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and/or depression, and almost 70% had some somatoform disorder (“heavy heart” and “burning liver” are commonly used phrases by Yezidis expressing psychological burden) (Underwood 2017), and many suffered from anxiety and dissociation (Kizilhan 2018, p. 4).

Yezidis have been resilient in the face of persecution, and psychologist Jan Kizilhan, who has worked extensively with survivors living in Germany, credits much of that to “tight-knit communities and [...] rituals and storytelling traditions” (Underwood 2017). Knowledge of this has led to more effective treatment: by integrating community and narrative exposure therapy

into treatment, rather than traditional Western approaches, psychologists have made better progress with Yezidi patients (Underwood 2017).

This is an important precedent for my own research, which focuses on how Yezidis have transported and translated traditions regarding supernatural healing from their geographical homeland into places of diasporic displacement. Sources of traditional healing include household shrines, *barat* (handmade balls of dried mud from the sacred springs of Lalish), and other materials collected from Yezidi sacred sites (Kreyenbroek 1995, p. 77). However, I will specifically investigate their recourse to shamans as a source of alternative healing.

### An Anthropological Paradigm: Shamanism

The following section briefly reviews pertinent works on shamanism to establish a working definition to which I compare Yezidi *koçeks* and *faqrya* (Yezidi terms for shamanic healers and seers).

Brian Hayden's chapter on shamanism in the book *Shamans, Sorcerers, and Saints: A Prehistory of Religion*, provides a solid foundation for understanding the practice. For a definition, he quotes Åke Hultrantz's: a shaman is "a social functionary who, with the help of guardian spirits, attains ecstasy in order to create a rapport with the supernatural world on behalf of his group members" (Hayden 2003, p. 46). The purpose of shamanic practices, often construed in terms of a journey, can be "healing a person by recovering their soul, fighting off destructive spirits, obtaining information about game, or guiding the dead to the land of spirits," among other things (p. 46). Hayden specifies that shamanism itself is not a religion, but rather a religious technique that can be a part of many different religious belief systems (p. 48). By defining the practice broadly as one associated with trances and spiritual encounters, shamanism remains open to interpretation in many cultural contexts (p. 48).

Hayden notes that it is common for shamans to have previously experienced extreme stress or illness themselves, and, in overcoming these, they can access an altered state of consciousness (p. 48). Altered states of consciousness can be brought on by near-death experiences, drugs, and many other ways as well. A few criteria he links to the experience include cognitive disturbances, the feeling of time accelerating or slowing, hallucinations or perceptual distortions, or attaching meaning to subjective experiences, ideas or perceptions (p. 62). These temporary departures from “ordinary reality,” however, do not necessarily constitute mental instability; Hayden writes that shamans are often a source of wisdom and guidance for their communities. In many cases, they are the ones to tell or develop a group’s cultural myths and organize group activities to communicate with spirits using music, drumming, dancing, or other techniques (p. 48).

Hayden also offers a detailed description of the physical costume of a shaman. He says that most of their costume “assist[s] in making connections to sacred forces or assist in controlling them” (p. 49). Many parts of their clothes have specific symbolic value in their culture, but some commonly seen motifs include objects like bones or feathers. Drums are also frequently used and can aid in achieving an ecstatic state (p. 49). Although such accoutrements are not directly relevant to the Yezidis’ shamanic praxis, *koçeks* also do have a distinct costume that will be described below.

Finally, Hayden considers whether or not there is a medical basis for shamanic healing. While he does not cite studies that measure the effectiveness of shamanic healing directly, he does draw attention to how doctors and researchers have highlighted the importance the mind has in “catalyzing the healing process using the body’s immune system and other internal resources” (Hayden 2003, p. 82). A person’s *perception* of treatment is almost equally important to the

treatment itself, as shown by studies on the placebo effect (p. 82). Further studies on therapies such as “laying on of hands,” hypnosis, and suggestion have corroborated these findings, and have shown that shamanic techniques can have “predictable, measurable, and beneficial effects on the human biological body” (p. 83). Although this may point to efficacy in treating psychosomatic maladies, the effects of alternative healing similar to shamanism have even been shown to improve physiological conditions such as allergic reactions (p. 82). Although there is no scientific basis for the spiritual aspect of shamanism, it is plausible that the ancient practices have some tangible effects.

Chapter 6 of Margaret Stutley’s *Shamanism: An Introduction* also focuses on shamanic healing. She notes that some illnesses, such as comas, fever, or delirium, are often considered to be caused by soul loss, while physical illnesses or injuries are attributed to intruding spirits. The shaman intercedes on behalf of the patient to restore them to spiritual balance (Stutley 2003, p. 84). Stutley points out that many diseases that shamans heal are psychosomatic maladies, and that the healings are often looked down upon as “faith healing” by Western medicine (p. 85). Additionally, the atmosphere of healing, Stutley writes, often is used to induce excitement and exhaustion in a patient. The result of this atmosphere is “alteration in brain function [that] can work miracles on its own” (p. 89). This is often achieved through music and dancing, which is a practice that Hayden also described.

### Koçeks as Shamans

As previously mentioned, Yezidism itself does not have a formal, canonical religious text. Its oral tradition has allowed for wide variation in practice and the acceptance of a multitude of different traditions. However, even in relation to this highly varied and syncretistic religion, shamanism is an unorthodox practice for the Yezidis. Those in a shamanic role are known as

*koçeks* in gender-neutral terms, while a female *koçek* may also be referred to as a *faqra* (plural: *faqrya*). These individuals may be born into any caste and are not said to inherit their abilities, which differs from many other Yezidi religious roles, which are hereditary (Fisher, et. al. 2020, p. 254).

*Koçeks* bear much resemblance to the previously surveyed definitions of shamanism, and they perform functions that encompass prophecy and healing. Phillip Kreyenbroek, a scholar of Yezidism, writes that *koçeks* are the “visionaries, diviners, and miracle-workers of the community” (Kreyenbroek 1995, p. 134). Using dreams and trances to communicate with the “World of the Unseen,” they can use their powers for healing, predicting the future, predicting how a person’s soul will reincarnate, marriage advice, and more (p. 134). This description is similar to Hayden’s definition that shamans use altered states of consciousness to access the spirit world, through which they can intercede on behalf of their client (Hayden 2003, p. 46). Many *koçeks* also fit into the pattern of having received shamanic abilities after a period of severe illness (Fisher, et. Al. 2020, p. 256). However, *koçeks* differ from Hayden’s definition that shamans can play a central role in a group’s religious activities by facilitating the cultural traditions of their group and bringing the community together for spiritual rituals (Hayden 2003, p. 48). In the Yezidi culture, this role is filled by *qewals* who recite Yezidi’s sacred lore and music (Fisher, et. Al. 2020, p. 256), while *koçeks* inhabit a more peripheral role, with their predictions carrying no dogmatic weight (p. 268). Some *koçeks* also fulfill Stutley’s description of healing taking place in a high-energy atmosphere; accounts of *koçeks* often include “screaming, trembling, convulsions,” and some form of speaking incomprehensible languages or glossolalia (p. 256).

Because *koçeks* do not constitute a major, formal part of the Yezidi religion, there is little academic scholarship on *koçeks*. To my knowledge, my thesis advisor Tyler Fisher’s “Palliative Prophecy: Yezidi Perspectives on Their Suffering under Islamic State and on Their Future” is the most comprehensive work on Yezidi shamanism. This paper is the foundation of my research, as it is a detailed investigation of modern and shifting views on *koçeks* among Yezidis in Iraq. It also contains first-hand accounts of practicing *koçeks*.

Aside from clarifying the practical aspects of how Yezidi shamans operate, the paper revealed some interesting trends. First, there was a common trend of Yezidi’s venerating *koçeks* from previous generations as powerful seers, especially a few oft-named figures such as Koçeks Saeed, Shamo, Hajo, and Karo (Fisher, et. Al. 2020, p. 255). However, modern-day *koçeks* were much more likely to be viewed as financially-motivated and fraudulent (p. 255). However, they were indeed still utilized, assisting with predicting everything from matrimony or conception to technological development (p. 258). It was also stated that they “may give prognoses concerning health” or “diagnose or cure people who are suffering nightmares” (p. 258).

The aspect most focused on, however, is that before 2014’s IS attacks, multiple *koçeks* and *faqrya* had been witnessed predicting the upcoming *ferman* (p. 258). Motifs of conflagration or deluge, as well as more specific parameters regarding the future attack, were predicted (p. 261). Although their words were not widely heeded at the time, in retrospect many Yezidis credited the *koçeks* for having accurately foreseen the genocidal campaign against them. This, coupled with the *koçeks*’ prophecies concerning a better era to follow the *ferman*, has raised their status in the Yezidi community. Yezidis in the diaspora have even been reported to telephone *koçeks* in Iraq for spiritual counsel and healing.

## Kreyenbroek's Discussion of Yezidi Traditional Healing

Aside from Fisher's research, the work of Philip Kreyenbroek serves as a starting point for my research, due to its contradiction of my hypothesis that *koçeks* remain an aspect of Yezidi culture in the diaspora. Kreyenbroek is one of the most prominent scholars of Yezidism, especially of those living in Germany. Although his first monograph on Yezidi faith and culture notes the phenomenon, as I previously mentioned, he failed to gather first-hand evidence in relation to Yezidi shamanism because "such activities have stopped now," and reports a taciturn reluctance among the Yezidis regarding the subject because the practitioners "are ashamed" (1995, p. 142, n. 127). His view that Yezidi shamanism is nearly obsolete also colors his perceptions in his later monograph, *Yezidism in Europe*, in which he defines "Koçek" in passing: "a term which used to denote visionaries who could communicate with the World of the Unseen. Very few such visionaries still exist now" (2009, p. 21). Fisher's work questions Kreyenbroek's findings by showing that *koçeks* and *faqrya* do maintain a notable presence as active, recognized practitioners among the Yezidis in Iraq. Additionally, although Kreyenbroek's books discuss various traditional healing modalities among the Yezidis, he makes no mention of *koçeks* association with healing. Multiple interviews I conducted did, in fact, connect healing to *sheikh* or *pir* families, as Kreyenbroek mentions in his book. However, *koçeks* also came up often in relation to healing, especially in the context of psychological or spiritual maladies. There is little formal research examining Yezidi traditional healing through shamans, and none that takes into account shifting perspectives in the diaspora. My project builds on Fisher's research on modern views of *koçeks* within Iraqi Yezidi communities and challenges Kreyenbroek's assertion that the practice itself is nearly obsolete.

Fisher's research points to some changed perspectives among the Yezidis regarding *koçeks* in the aftermath of the Islamic State's atrocities, and my research will examine if the same holds outside of the Yezidi homeland in relation to broader upheavals prior to and concurrent with the Islamic State's genocidal campaigns of 2014. Going further than this, I delve into Yezidis' perceptions of generational trends. I also extend Fisher's and Kreyenbroek's research to focus on healing practices, whereas their fieldwork primarily dealt with the Yezidi shamans' functions as seers and visionaries—a gap concerning shamanic healing, which my research endeavors to fill. At its core, my research is an examination of how Yezidi traditions, conventionally bound to specific geographies of shrines in Kurdistan, carry over into new, more secular contexts abroad.

The Yezidis have carried their beliefs with them into diasporic contexts, but, like any religion, the complex interplay of creed and praxis evolves over time and geography. My thesis examines how one aspect of this vulnerable minority's culture has been forced to adapt after great adversity and over vast distances. The Yezidis are left to reckon with the great health toll that has resulted from generations of persecution—PTSD, depression, anxiety, and all of their physical manifestations. I seek to find out the extent to which the community turns inwards as a result—how they look to tradition for healing and recovery.



## Yezidi Shamanism in Germany: Voices in the Diaspora

In this qualitative case study of Yezidis living in Germany, I found that the practices have not become obsolete through multiple testimonies of use in foreign context. In the following sections I describe the methodology of my research, as well as evidence of a continued shamanic tradition in Germany.

### Methods

My research consisted of remote surveys to elicit discursive responses for analysis. I analyzed prominent patterns of similarities and differences between Iraqi contexts and past accounts and those in the Western diasporic population. The goal of this examination was to broadly record shifts in traditional healing practices, specifically examining how individual Yezidis view and/or utilize the shamanic figures of *koçeks* and *faqrya*. To avoid personal bias in recruiting and selecting interview participants, I initially requested recommendations of contacts from a Yezidi cultural center in Germany, Jezidische Gemeinschaft Oldenburg, and then followed up with additional contacts which my first participants provided.

The interviews were conducted with Yezidis living in Germany, in German or English (though some Kurdish answers were translated into English from the audio recordings after the fact). They took place in the form of Zoom or Facetime video conferences, which were later transcribed for analysis.

To establish a strategic cross-section, I adopted the method that Fisher et al. used in their research in Iraq, by seeking to interview at least six adult Yezidis, one man and one woman from each of the three castes (*Sheikhs*, *Pirs*, and *Murids*). This would have been an effective range to cover due to the varying levels of religious authority each caste holds within the community. I ultimately interviewed five out of the six to date, missing a woman from the *sheikh* caste.

This is because I ran into a few constraints in establishing interviews. First, reaching out in English and German through WhatsApp and other social media was met with a lot of nonresponse, perhaps in part due to language barriers, as many Yezidis recently residing in Germany primarily speak Kurdish and Arabic. Additionally, among the three castes, *sheikhs* are those who traditionally possess the highest degree of religious authority but also constitute the caste with the smallest population by far relative to the other two castes. Finally, a barrier I encountered multiple times was the cultural tendency for men to insist on being present when I interviewed women; on several occasions male relatives of the interview subject interjected their own answers, moderated the female subject's responses, and otherwise directed the conversation. This also reflects the fact that I was not able to get direct contact information for any women; instead, interviews were established through their husbands. In both interviews with women, husbands were present, whether to help with translating or otherwise, and this limited the conversation. The digital format of the interviews made it difficult to control the environment. Despite these difficulties, the completed interviews contribute interesting and varied perspectives which will be discussed further.

Questions were asked about past experiences and thoughts about *koçeks/faqrya*. Aside from questions regarding the healing practices, I asked demographic questions, such as when the interview subjects (or their family) left Iraq and how old they were at the time of migration. I anticipated that the experiences of Yezidis that fled post-IS versus those who left earlier would differ, so recording those patterns would also be relevant.

#### *Koçeks and Faqrya in Germany*

First and foremost, the interviews strongly confirmed that *koçeks/faqrya* are present in Germany and are still a functioning part of diasporic Yezidi's culture. All of the people

interviewed were aware of at least one *koçek* or *faqra* living in Germany, even if they themselves had never consulted one directly. One man mentioned that women were more often the ones to seek out *koçeks*, and in my interviews this held true, in that the women I spoke to had personal experiences with *koçeks*, while some of the men did not.

There have, however, been some shifts consistent with immigration and assimilation. The Sheikh I interviewed had previously been acquainted with a *koçek* man living in Germany, because the man was teaching some Yezidi prayers in the community (unrelated to the remit of his abilities or practice as a *koçek*), but the man unfortunately passed away in a car accident a few months later. He said the man was not dressed in the traditional white robes of a *koçek*, but rather wore Western clothes. Regarding this, the Sheik commented, “It does not fit in the European setting to wear Yezidi clothes.”

Although sartorial appearances may have changed, it seems the functions of *koçeks/faqrya* maintain strong parallels to those living in Iraq. The Murid mentioned that a *koçek* was present at a Yezidi conference in Oldenburg, Germany two years ago, when he fell into a trance, began making loud noises and speaking in many languages (glossolalia), which follows a notably similar pattern to the shaman paradigm previously outlined. Additionally, the Murid claimed to have helped a *faqra* gain asylum in Germany but did not have any experience with her spiritual abilities. The Sheikh mentioned that family members of his in Germany consulted with *koçeks*, making appointments and visiting their home in a similar way people continue to do in Iraq.

Similarly, a Pir woman who has lived in Germany for about two decades described how a *koçek* living in Cologne went to a gathering at her sister’s house some years ago, and, over dinner, some people asked him about their futures. At that time he predicted the coming

genocide of Shingal weeks before it started (i.e. in late summer of 2014). After hearing this bad news, people began to reject him, but he said, “What I see, I speak.” To this day, people in Germany visit him, apparently regaining respect for his abilities after what he said came to pass. In Fisher’s “Palliative Prophecy,” multiple *koçeks* in Iraq similarly predicted that a *ferman* would occur, which led to renewed regard for their legitimacy (Fisher, et. Al. 2020, p. 267).

Alternatively, the same interviewee also discussed a *faqra* who lives in Germany but no longer uses her gift:

**Pira:** There is a *faqra* from our village, a *Murida*, now living in Germany. Until now, she has not been able to do things here for anyone. [...] She has told me that she does not have permission here, “My mouth has been locked,” [a very common, literal way of saying in Kurdish that she is unable to speak]

**Pir (Husband):** [translates, and adds] Here in Germany, she says, “For this ability, I have no permission from my owner, from my *khoda* [my inner self, or ancestor, or God].”

Experiences in Germany seemed to be entirely dependent on individual *koçeks*. Traditionally, in the Yezidi homeland, *faqrya* will visit Lalish weekly on Wednesdays, the Yezidi’s weekly holy day, to worship and renew their powers. For this *faqra* whom the Pira and Pir described, her abilities seem to be associated with proximity to the holy site, Lalish, and, in her view, physical disconnection also led to spiritual disconnection.

On a broader scale, my interviews sought to elucidate how *koçeks* have had a healing function in a community recovering from persecution and displacement. As previously mentioned, the circumstances of Yezidis’ displacement led to disproportionately high rates of psychological and chronic illnesses. However, I was surprised to see a strong overlap between their prophetic role and healing role, which suggests an overlap or conflation of these categories

in Yezidi theory and praxis. In regards to the therapeutic role of *koçek* healing and prophecy for new refugees, the Murid said, “Many survived war, genocide, displacement, destabilization of the homeland. In a new, unfamiliar world they search for healing, and maybe the *koçek* heals them and also strengthens morale, including with his prophecies. That could bring inner peace regarding those circumstances.” Multiple interviewees stressed that, in many cases, *koçeks* often have more of a role in healing psychological illnesses. People seek the aid of *koçeks* to assuage fears about family conflicts, illness, and for peace about family members who passed away during the *ferman*.

#### *Fraudulence and Caution*

While *koçeks*' intervention in sensitive matters can bring peace and healing to some, the position of influence they are afforded can also open vulnerable people to duplicity. While the interviewees attached great respect to *koçeks* of the past and those they perceived to retain a supernatural gift, a few also nodded towards the prevalence of frauds or “charlatans” who take advantage of sick people or those who have suffered. Referring to a specific fraudster, the Pir mentioned how the *faqra* will hear the person's questions and tell them to return the next day for clarity. Then, in the meantime, she will find people who are close to this person and ask them for more information about them, in order to seem clairvoyant.

At one point, the Pir expressed doubt that there were any real *koçeks* in Germany, despite some claiming to be. However, his adherence to this sentiment wavered within his interview, and was also seemingly not shared by his wife, who had shared about the seer who foretold the 2014 *ferman*.

A final anecdote shared by the Murid showed the true extent of how respect for these spiritual figures could be abused: “Multiple years ago there was a man here in Germany with a

white robe and long hair [the traditional dress and appearance of a *koçek*]. He would say all kinds of things, and some people even regarded him almost as a prophet. But then, in retrospect, he received a bad reputation because of the way he treated women, in that he sexually harassed women. That's what happened." This led the Murid to believe that many may take advantage of people's fears and anxiety in order to make money. Though he stressed he did not want to disrespect those with a gift, he is personally skeptical of such things.

All in all, this skepticism and wariness of fraud is consistent with the views presented by some Iraqi Yezidis in Fisher's piece and are not a new phenomenon.

### Connections to Kurdistan

As previously mentioned, the *koçek/faqra* practice traditionally has ties to the Yezidi sacred site of Lalish in Iraqi Kurdistan. Initially, this led me to wonder whether or not the practice could continue in foreign contexts. As mentioned, while there were definite examples given of *koçeks/faqrya* who still practice in Germany, there was also an example of a *faqra* who had her "mouth closed" and could not prophesy in Germany. Even some interviewees expressed doubt about how the practice could be sustained in the future, despite knowledge of *koçek/faqrya* living there today: "I have a hard time picturing *koçeks* in the Western world. Really, they need to stay in their home place and be there to be involved with the religion and spirituality. But now there are a few here in Germany..."

However, doubts about *koçek/faqra* functioning in Germany do not necessarily negate their role in diasporic culture. The interviews revealed that the extent of Yezidi use of *koçeks/faqrya* in this diasporic context is not limited to those *koçeks* that reside in Germany itself. In fact, there seems to be a much more fluid exchange between the old homeland and new

place of residence than anticipated. For one, some Yezidis made mention of phoning back to the homeland in order to consult *koçeks*.

Additionally, the Pir, who is a highly regarded academic leader within the Yezidi community, talked about acting as an intermediary between those living in Germany and *koçeks* in Lalish. These days he divides his year between living in Germany and Iraq. He described how sometimes when he and his wife want to return to the homeland, there are some families that ask him to ask a *koçek* about their problems, whether it be family problems, infertility, sickness, or some other issue. They also give him money to pass along, and the amount given is “up to their ability, sometimes 100 euro, 200 euro, or 50 euro. Some might be more. Some of them [those asking in Germany] are poor, so I give from my pocket.” He said he brings back *bharat*, either from *koçeks* and *faqrya* or from other people in Lalish to give to those people as well. *Bharat* are little, white balls made of mud from Lalish and water from a holy spring by some *faqrya* which confer healing and spiritual protection. Yezidis will kiss it and touch it to their forehead three times as a ritual, as well as adding fragments of the *bharat* to their bread dough and yogurts.

However, it is not only wealthy and established Yezidis like the Pir who maintain this connection to the homeland. The Murida moved to Germany more recently, in 2017. When she was struggling with pain in her head, neck and shoulders, Western doctors denied that she had an issue following examination. However, upon consulting a *koçek*, she was told to visit Lalish. She went and sought spiritual help through prayer to Sheikh Adi, Sheikh Shems. After the trip to Iraq, she felt much better and relieved of the pain.

Fisher’s work makes mention of how Yezidis frequently refer back to prominent historical *koçeks* with respect, and this was also the case among the Yezidis now residing in Germany. Along with bringing other artifacts from Lalish, it was mentioned that soil from the

graves of a renowned *koçek* is sometimes collected and brought abroad. According to the Murid, this earth that was in proximity to a powerful *koçek* is said to bring healing and protection from sicknesses, including psychological, as well as protection from unholy spirits. This is an example of how, even when *koçeks* are not active in foreign countries, their influence as a part of the Yezidi belief system is still present.



## Adapting Practice in the Diaspora

My study demonstrated that *koçeks/faqrya* are still utilized by those Yezidis living in Germany, and some *koçeks* even reside and practice in the diaspora. Aside from this, many anecdotes shared in the interviews pointed to the *koçek* tradition holding strong ties to Iraqi Kurdistan and to Lalish, specifically.

As previously mentioned, *koçeks/faqrya* are a peripheral aspect of the Yezidi culture. They and their healing practices are not part of the “official” Yezidi religious system and hierarchy, and despite continued relevance, most of the people I interviewed alluded to their shifting prominence.

### Perceptions of Attenuating Beliefs

For one, multiple people I interviewed were of the opinion that the older Yezidi generation in Germany is more religious or spiritual and are more likely to have belief in *koçeks*. The following answer was given when asked if young Yezidis who specifically grew up in Germany visit *koçeks*:

**Pira:** No, they don't go to *koçeks*. But once in a while, when what a *koçek* says matches reality, the young people [*jhel*, meaning “young people” but also connotes “ignorant ones”] are amazed. During our time, there were fewer *koçeks* but greater belief in them, but now there are many who call themselves *koçeks* but there is less belief in them.

The Murid seemed to be of similar belief, saying “The older generation is very religious and very convinced of the skills of *koçeks*.” He went on to discuss how they allude back to specific historical *koçeks* and speak about the miracles they performed “like turning sand to sugar, and the earth over their grave could bring healing even to Germany.” He also said that “the theme of *koçeks/faqrya* seems to be a big topic in Iraq, not as much in settler communities.”

Although *koçeks* are still present in the diasporic culture, their role may be attenuated in comparison to the past or in the homeland. However, on this point, the Pir offered a salutary note of caution against overgeneralizations when asked if Yezidis in Germany believe in them: “We cannot put them [the Yezidis] in a box.” One cannot assume a universal trend amongst a heterogeneous, diasporic population comprising multiple waves of immigrants of all experiences and religiosity. It seems like it is more widely accepted that the roles are changing, but perspectives are still strongly dependent on individual people and their experiences. The Murida who is middle-aged and recently moved to Germany, still holds strong belief and has consulted *koçeks*. Even the Murid, who mainly grew up in Germany and expressed that he felt some skepticism towards those who claim to be *koçeks*, did not seem to be doubtful that the one *koçek* he saw go into a trance was authentic. Although a larger scale analysis might indicate more trends, my interviews showed diversity in opinions regardless of age.

#### Inherent Versatility, Enduring Adaptability

Amongst these varied opinions, I conclude that there is an inherent versatility to the *koçek* tradition that at once makes it difficult for an outsider to define and categorize, but also serves to promote an openness that, in itself, allows the tradition to survive.

For one, as previously mentioned, anyone can become a *koçek*, regardless of gender or caste. This marks a striking contrast with the strictly hereditary status that governs the assignation of other Yezidi spiritual and healing roles: Pirs and Sheikhs are born into their position and there is no opportunity for inter-caste mobility. However, the fact that no one is “assigned” the role of *koçek* makes the role less structured than these other identities. In fact, there is an interesting way that some of the Yezidis describe *koçeks*: they universalize the practice by bringing up how people from other cultures and religion may prophesy and have

supernatural abilities, and that adherents of those religions would have faith in their abilities. The Pir brought up that he attributes *koçek* healing to alternative healing methods in parapsychology, which is another way of making the phenomenon more generalized to beliefs outside of Yezidism. Therefore, while other religious roles are strictly “Yezidi,” *koçeks* are viewed in a more fluid manner. In a way, this speaks to the syncretic nature of Yezidism, which holds parallels to many different religions, while remaining a unique belief system.

Additionally, while the prophetic aspect of *koçeks* fit many patterns of the previously defined “shaman” paradigm, strengthening the position held by Fisher, the healing aspects stray from this set terminology. In the healings I heard described, as opposed to some descriptions of *koçeks* outside of healing, there were no high-energy ceremonies, trances, or other environments to induce “altered brain function” as described by Stutley. Instead, healing was more often ascribed to prayer at specific holy locations at the behest of a *koçek*, being given *bharats* by one, or finding mental peace as a result of a relieving prophecy or insight. This final example shows a sort of fluidity between the prophetic functions and healing functions that I had not previously considered.

*Koçeks* are also not the sole healing functionaries within Yezidi praxis. As Kreyenbroek outlines, specific Pir and Sheikh lineages are associated with specific forms of healing. My interviews indicate that these caste-based and hereditary healers, as a discernible, identifiable part of the official religious hierarchy, may be more commonly sought out as healers than *koçeks* among Yezidis in German. In the context of discussions of healing, three interviewees mentioned healing by Pirs or Sheikhs.

The Pir mentioned that, in the homeland, his family specialized in healing scorpion stings. They used a practical form of treatment: tying and bandaging off the area, removing the

poison. He attributed the need for Pir healers to a lack of doctors in the area, and said this skill was not needed in Germany, due to the differing environment and (fortunate) lack of scorpions. The Pira also mentioned that her grandfather's lineage healed brain injuries and their effects, such as facial paralysis.

While the Pir's specific practice seemed to be restricted to the homeland, the Murid described a Sheikh healing in Germany: when his son was born he had jaundice. Alongside Western medical intervention, they also sought out a nearby Sheikh, who performed a ceremony involving a small bloodletting and treating the wound with saliva and other ingredients. His son was soon healed.

This anecdote also indicates another point of openness in regards to Yezidi traditional healing that extends to *koçek* practice: in Germany it seems to often be practiced in parallel with, not at the exclusion of, Western medicine. The Pir said that the presence of doctors, medicine, and technology in Germany renders traditional healing less necessary, but the Murid said that, while many will visit a Western doctor first, those that are faithful will still turn to traditional means when necessary. This was true in the example of the Murida, who turned to a *koçek* when Western medicine could not find the cause of her pain.

All in all, my research found that there is great versatility inherent in the *koçek* role. While *koçeks* have traditionally been associated geographically with Lalish, they have shown the ability to function outside of this area in diasporic contexts. Not only is the role an acquired status outside the formal Yezidi religious structure, but their powers are sometimes generalized even past Yezidism entirely. The healing functions of *koçeks* seem to challenge the previously established definition of "shamanism," and *koçeks* work in tandem with both Western medicine and the other, more structured, forms of Yezidi healing.

This versatility and openness in practice is reflective of Yezidism itself over the course of its history. The religion, which has traditionally been viewed as an unchanging, monolithic relic of a pre-literate period, shows great fluidity in practice. This outsiders' view is exemplified in Ralph H. W. Empson's comments in the 1920s: "[T]hese remarkable people and their rites, their lives being so far removed from the march of civilization. [...] the religion has survived the vicissitudes of at least a thousand years; and [...] their faith in the worship of the Devil remains serenely unchanged by the conflict of the claims of three of the great world religions which surround them" (Empson 1928, p. 7-8). This perception of stasis does not, of course, reflect reality for the Yezidis. Centuries of opposition from contiguous majority cultures have led to a syncretic and adaptable culture that has the ability to withstand social upheaval and change. As Yezidis transition from the "double-minority" status they held in their homeland to a new "triple-minority" status as immigrants in Germany, this flexibility allows them to adapt their beliefs, including the *koçek* tradition, to new geographical and cultural contexts.

## Summary Conclusion

The purpose of my research was to determine if Yezidi shamanic practices, specifically those related to traditional healing, continue to be relevant in the diasporic population residing in Germany. First, I consulted the relevant literature to build a background on Yezidis and their diaspora. Then I reviewed previous works to formulate a working definition of shamanism from which to compare Yezidi *koçeks/faqrya* to. Finally, I reviewed the works of Fisher and Kreyenbroek, which served as foundational works for my own research. Fisher studied *koçek* prophetic practices in Iraq, which helped me determine similarities and differences in praxis within the diasporic community. Kreyenbroek gathered data on other traditional healing practices amongst Yezidis in Europe but asserted that *koçeks* are no longer a prominent or relevant aspect of the culture, an assertion which I challenged with my findings.

Having reviewed the relevant prior research, I conducted my qualitative study, which consisted of a series of semi-structured interviews representing a cross-section of Yezidis living in Germany with individuals from each endogamous caste (Sheikh, Pir, Murid). The interviews revealed that shamanism does indeed continue as a practice among diasporic Yezidis. Although there are some functioning *koçeks/faqrya* residing in Germany, the practice also maintains strong connections to its geographical roots in Iraqi Kurdistan, and to Lalish in particular, by means of personal travel between the locations and remote telecommunications. Yezidis in Germany do not exist in isolation. Instead, there seems to be a fluid exchange between their new home and ancestral lands.

Although there is a prevailing perception among Yezidis that older, more religious Yezidis are more likely to have a high degree of credence in their shamans and to seek out these

healers, even some of the younger people interviewed had first-hand experiences with making recourse to *koçeks*.

All in all, the versatility of *koçek* practices allows the tradition to continue even in diasporic settings. Who can take the role of a *koçek*, the range of their practices, and how they interact with both Western medicine and other forms of Yezidi traditional healing is greatly varied and defies concrete definitions and delimitations. As outsiders, we can understand Yezidism better when we do not approach it with rigid assumptions and categories in mind. Due to a past full of opposition and persecution, Yezidis have learned to adapt their cultural practices and beliefs to the new environments they encounter, and this includes negotiating their perceptions of their shamanic figures of *koçeks* and *faqrya*.

## **APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**



The following is the list of IRB-approved questions that I would ask in a semi-structured interview:

1. Demographic Questions:
  - a) Year/Place of Birth
  - b) Home Village
  - c) Caste (*Sheikh, Pir, Murid*)
  - d) What year did you or your family migrate?
2. How involved are you in the Yezidi community?
  - a) Do you have any leadership roles within the community?
  - b) How many Yezidis live in your area?
3. Do you or anyone you know consult a *koçek* or *faqra*?
  - a) If no, what do you know about them? Why don't you consult them?
4. Tell me about your experience with them.
  - a) What was your purpose for going to them? (Healing, prophecy, etc.)
  - b) Describe your experience.
    - i. What did you see? What was the environment like? Did they provide the service you were seeking? What was the fee for the service?
5. When faced with an illness, would you first try traditional healing techniques or see an Allopathic/Western medicine practitioner?
  - a. Are there specific types of illnesses for which you would first go to a *koçek*?

**APPENDIX B: DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION**

**Murid**

Interview Date: April 23, 2021

Born: 1980

Home Village: Batman, Turkey

Moved to Germany: 1988

Role in Community: Second Chairman of Jezidische Gemeinschaft Oldenburg (Yezidi Community Center of Oldenburg)

**Murida**

Interview Date: June 27, 2021

Born: 1985

Home Village: Ninive, Iraq

Moved to Germany: 2017

**Pir**

Interview Date: March 29, 2021

Birth year: 1952

Home Village: Mosul, Iraq

Moved to Germany: 1997 (Now alternates living in Iraq and Germany)

Role in Community: Author, Scholar of Yezidism

**Pira**

Interview Date: April 14, 2021

Birth year: 1966

Home Village: Khatara, Iraq

Moved to Germany: 1997 (Now alternates living in Iraq and Germany)

**Sheikh**

Interview Date: June 18, 2021

Born: 1980

Home Village: Texerî, Turkey

Moved to Germany: 1989

Role in Community: Religious leader for multiple Murid families around Germany

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