

ON SOME TRANSFORMING ELEMENTS OF TRADITIONAL YEZIDI WEDDINGS PERFORMED IN ARMENIA*

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Abstract

The Yezidi wedding, due to its unique and different colours and elements, has been a subject of interest for their non-Yezidi neighbors. From time to time, it has been an object of interest for journalists, researchers and scientists as well. However, the transforming elements of the Yezidi traditional wedding have not been properly studied as of yet. In the framework of this article, some elements of Yezidi traditional weddings are examined: those elements have undergone various transformations due to external influences over the last few decades. The wedding ceremony is a more open, easily influenced and transformable ritual. Therefore, many elements of the traditional Yezidi wedding have partly been influenced by the Armenian wedding ritual and partly influenced by modern wedding trends. Many elements have been given a new appearance and interpretation, while some old ceremonies have been reborn and are performed in a new way. Additionally, some traditional forms of marriage (polygamy, levirate) have been forgotten among the Yezidis of Armenia. The study of the transformation of some elements of the traditional Yezidi wedding is important, as it can greatly contribute to the study of the dynamics of other ethnic transformative processes.

Keywords: Yezidi, wedding, element, transformation, bride, groom, custom, tradition, ritual.

The Yezidi wedding, due to its unique and different colours and elements, has been a subject of interest for their non-Yezidi neighbors. From time to time it has been an object of interest for journalists, researchers and scientists too [5; 12; 2]. However, the transforming elements of the Yezidi traditional wedding have not been properly studied as of yet. Therefore, in the framework of this article, we will present and examine some elements of Yezidi traditional weddings that have undergone various transformations due to external influences over the last few decades.

We have used the historical-comparative and qualitative research methods and made observations. We collected field ethnographic material in December 2021 and January 2022 in the Armavir and Aragatsotn provinces, as well as in Yerevan. Interviews were conducted with Yezidi men and women between the ages of 60-85.

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While studying the subject, we focused not only on the wedding ceremony itself but also on pre-wedding ceremonies and customs. In Yezidi traditional communities in the past (about 50-60 years ago), the wedding ceremony itself was not the only important part, but the ceremonies held before the wedding were also critical. For instance, a custom called *bindārūk* (lit. “under the tree”) was an opportunity for young boys and girls to get acquainted and communicate. *Bindārūk* was organized during the Spring or Summer. Young boys and girls gathered under a tree, got acquainted, and spent time together [14: 45]. During *bindārūk*, they played various games, had fun, enjoyed fortune-telling, and also managed to choose their future spouse [4: 239-240]. The existence of *bindārūk* shows that the will and the desire of young people was important in marriage issues as *bindārūk* was an opportunity for young people to get acquainted openly, communicate, and get closer to their future spouse before marriage. During the interviews, our informants mentioned that they used to perform *bindārūk* not only under a tree, but anywhere in nature, for example, on the bank of a river, on the slope of a mountain, etc. Many informants mentioned that wedding ceremonies were also a convenient place for young people to get acquainted, to get closer, and openly express feelings. Our informants also mentioned a custom called *barfōlān* (lit. “near the crib”) and *dōlādāng* (lit. “crib”). On the eve of the feast of *Xidir Nabī* (*Khdr Nabi*)¹, young boys and girls gathered in one of the houses in the village, sat near a crib, talked, made jokes, played games, tried to predict the future, and got acquainted with their future spouse. Today, the above-mentioned customs have been forgotten. One of the reasons is not only that the Yezidis do not live close together in some places as before, but also that young people have different and new environments and opportunities to get acquainted.

Yezidis call matchmaking or proposals *xwazgīnī* or *xwāzgīnī* (lit. “matchmaking”). The young boy’s father or uncle with other male and female relatives go to the girl’s father’s house to ask them to marry their daughter to the boy. The guests introduce the purpose of their visit, then one of the guests asks for a cup of water. The girl gives water or tea to the guests. At present, it is customary for a girl to serve coffee and sweets to the guests who come to their home for matchmaking.

If the family members of the girl agree to marry their daughter to that boy, they express their consent. The expression of the consent was called *arēkirin* (lit. “approval”, “consent”). Few days later an engagement - *nīšānī* (lit. “[putting a] mark”) could be arranged. The family members of the boy came to the girl’s house with gifts: they usually gave a piece of gold jewelry (bracelet, chain, necklace, or earring) as a symbol of the engagement. After that, the girl’s family members entertained the guests. Though nowadays a variety of gold jewelry could be presented during the engagement, in the last few decades the main symbol of an engagement has become the gold ring. After the engagement, the family members of the boy

¹ In the Yezidi religion, *Khdr Nabi* is considered to be the patron saint and protector of people in love [1: 238].

usually open a bottle of brandy they have brought with them and drink with the hosts. The latter habits are definitely a result of the influence of modern Armenian customs.

During the engagement, very often, the size of the *qalan* (lit. “bride price”) was determined by mutual agreement. The process of determining the amount of the sum was called *qalanbirin* (lit. “to cut the *qalan*”). It was also customary among the Armenians of Aghdznik to give money to the bride’s family; the process of determining the amount of that money was called “cutting the *ḡālān*” [9: 56]. *Qalan* could be in the form of money, gold, or domestic animals (cows, sheep) [3: 48-49]. Many families now gradually give up the custom of giving and receiving *qalan*, and sometimes the amount of the *qalan* is small or symbolic. It can be said that giving or receiving *qalan* is a custom that is in the process of being forgotten.

Some 10-15 days after the engagement, a visit to the bride’s family took place: that visit was called *lēpirsyār*. During this visit, the groom’s family brought gifts for the bride and her family members. Our informants often mentioned that during *lēpirsyār* they used to take fruits, biscuits, and sweets placed in large baskets, even in big suitcases, to the bride’s father’s house. Some informants also emphasized that they took different gifts for the bride and her relatives.

A few months after the *lēpirsyār*, a ceremony called *šīrānī* (lit. “sweet”) took place. On the day of *šīrānī*, the family members of the groom took some gifts and also a part of the *qalan* to the bride’s father’s house. The girl’s family entertained guests in a proper fashion. At present, many families do not organize *lēpirsyār* and *šīrānī*. Instead, they have a more luxurious *nīšānī* – engagement ceremony. Thus, it can be said that *lēpirsyār* and *šīrānī* have partially merged.

Before the wedding, they chose a *sardawāṭī* (lit. “the person leading the wedding”). The *sardawāṭī* not only played the role of toastmaster during weddings, but was also considered to be a person of equal status as the groom’s father. *Sardawāṭī* usually participated in the organization of the wedding, sometimes shared expenses with the family of the groom, and gave gifts to the bride and groom. The wife of the *sardawāṭī* was called *barbūk* (lit. “near the bride”, “[the person] accompanying the bride”). *Barbūk* accompanied the bride during the wedding ceremony and helped her, etc. In the last few decades, the concepts of the Yezidi *sardawāṭī* and *barbūk* have been greatly influenced by the image of the godfather and godmother of the Armenian wedding. Traditionally, there were no bridesmaids in Yezidi weddings. At present, however, the bride is often accompanied by her unmarried sisters or unmarried female friends. This is also an obvious influence from Armenian weddings.

The groom’s unmarried brothers or friends that accompany him during the wedding are called *birāzavā* (lit. “the brother of the groom”). Previously the groom was accompanied by one *birāzavā*, but now there may be several young, unmarried men with the groom. They can be the groom’s unmarried brothers or friends. Yezidis, like Armenians, sometimes call the *birāzavā* an *āzāb yēḡbāyr* (lit. “groomsman”). This is also a result of being influenced by Armenian weddings.

In the past, wedding ceremonies lasted two or three days. The groom's relatives gathered at the groom's house. On the first day animals were slaughtered for the feast, and that day was called *rōžā gōšī* (lit. "the day of the meat"). On the second day, the bride was taken to the groom's house and the party continued. On the third day, the groom's closest relatives gathered at his house for entertainment. At present, Yezidi weddings usually last one day. The custom of celebrating weddings for several days has not been forgotten among the Yezidis. However, they no longer do that for the sake of convenience.

Birāzavā and friends of the groom cut a branch from a fruit tree without using a saw or an ax and bring it home. Young girls and boys decorate the branch with fruits, sweets, colorful ribbons. Then they tie a beautiful cloth or a scarf on the branch, and the guests can put gifts or money on that scarf. That gifts and the money are then given to the *birāzavā*. That branch is called *dārā mirāzā* (lit. "the tree of the dreams") or *dārā zavē* (lit. "the tree of the groom"). Now, in addition to fruits, people decorate the tree with candies. Usually, the *birāzavā* takes the branch and dances with the guests. People used to leave the tree near the groom's house for a few days. As nowadays weddings are not often performed at home (but rather in restaurants or wedding halls), the branch can also be put near the wedding hall.

In Yezidi traditional weddings, the groom did not go to the bride's house to bring her. Usually, the groom's relatives went to bring her. They often went to the bride's house on horses. There was usually a small table near the bride's house full of food and beverages. The men gathered near that table, drank, and wished for the newlyweds to be happy. The women danced and entered the bride's house and brought gifts for the bride, which were put on trays. The red veil called *xēlī* was very important. The women helped the bride to put on clothes. The Yezidi wedding dress of the bride was not white, it was a colorful dress in accordance with traditional costume. After the bride had dressed, one of the groom's female relatives or *barbūk* placed the *xēlī* on the bride's head. It covered the bride's head and face. At present, Yezidi brides put on white clothes and white veils that do not cover their faces. This is also obviously the result of the influence of modern wedding trends.

In the past, the bride's relatives used to give a *gateaux* (Arm. *gata*) to unmarried girls. They danced with the *gateaux*, then put it under their pillow and had a dream. Nowadays the custom of giving a *gateaux* is almost forgotten, and unmarried boys and girls are given candies and *tārōsīks*.² Giving a *tārōsīk* is also the result of influence from modern Armenian wedding rituals.

Before the wedding, the parents of the bride prepare the dowry in advance, which is called *jīhēz*. *Jīhēz* is the property that the bride takes with her to the groom's house. The custom to give a dowry is not unique to Yezidis, but is present in the cultures of other peoples in the region [19: 35]. In general, the dowry con-

² *Tārōsīk* is a decorated sweet or a candy, which during the wedding ceremony is given to the unmarried young people.

sists of bedding, fabrics, furniture, clothes, and personal items [4: 259]. Some women informants emphasized that their dowries included not only the items bought by their parents, but also socks, and even carpets woven by themselves.³ Nowadays, many people also include furniture in the dowry.

Before taking the bride to the groom's home, the *sardawāṭī* and another male relative show the dowry to the guests, praise it and thank the bride's paternal family for everything.⁴ The men who present the dowry are considered to be special guests called *xwandī* (lit. "invitee", "special guest"). The dowry is then sent to the groom's house. The custom of presenting the dowry is popular among the Yezidis to this day. Some families, however, do not provide a very big dowry and prefer to provide financial support to a young couple instead of a dowry. A special part of the dowry is an embroidered pillow from the family of the bride. It is given to the young couple and is called *balgīyē būkē* (lit. "the pillow of the bride"). This pillow symbolizes the idea of growing old together. That pillow is decorated, and young people often pass it to each other when dancing.

Guests used to enter the house or a tent. Men and women sat at separate tables and were entertained. Nowadays, while leaving the house of the father of the bride the guests are either entertained at the bride's father's house and then go to the house of the groom and are entertained there too, or they go to a restaurant or wedding hall together. When the bride is about to leave the house, her younger brother or another male relative stands near the door with a knife, keeps it on the door, and does not allow the bride to go out. The *sardawāṭī* or *birāzavā* give money and gifts to the child, then he opens the door and allows the bride to leave. According to our elderly informants, the custom to stand near the door and to hold a knife on the door is also an influence from Armenian wedding traditions.

Traditionally, the brother or a male relative of the bride took her hand, and they went out of the paternal home. Then the wife of the *sardawāṭī* called *barbūk* took over and accompanied the bride. Nowadays the bride's brothers take the bride near the groom's car and see her off. Once it was popular for the bride to ride a horse and go to the groom's home. If their homes were near each other or were in the same village, all the guests with the bride walked to the groom's house. Before going to the groom's home, the bride was first taken to the house of the *sardawāṭī*. The *sardawāṭī* and *barbūk* gave presents to the bride, then they continued on their way [3: 59; 4: 260-261]. As mentioned, weddings nowadays are generally organized in restaurants or wedding halls, so the cars of the guests go directly to the restaurant or the wedding hall.

The ceremony of taking the bride from her paternal house was called *būk sīyārķirin* (lit. "to [make] the bride ride"). The existence of such an expression is

³ It is noteworthy that among Armenians, the dowry often included not only made items, but also items made by the bride [7: 10-18].

⁴ In the Armenian environment, it is customary to present a dowry in some regions. For example, the people of Karabakh used to present the dowry and said: "Long live"/"Good for you" [17: 121].

probably due to the fact that the bride traditionally went to the home of the groom on horseback. At present, though the bride is not taken on horseback, they still continue to use the term *būk s̄yārkin* for taking the bride from her paternal home.

A “hero” called a *řūvī* (lit. “fox”) had an interesting role in Yezidi traditional weddings. A male relative of the groom who first arrived at the groom’s house and informed them that the bride will soon arrive was called a *řūvī*. The mother of the groom gave money or gifts to the *řūvī* who brought good news. Nowadays, one of the groom’s friends or relatives sometimes tries to reach the groom’s home and inform them that the groom and bride are coming.

At the entrance to the groom’s house (or at the entrance to the wedding hall), the mother of the groom meets the young couple, puts *lāvāš*⁵ on their shoulders, and gives them honey to eat. When the bride and the groom enter the building, the groom’s mother puts plates under their feet, and they break the plates. People believe that by breaking the plates, evil is destroyed. This is also an innovation in the Yezidi wedding and an obvious influence from the Armenian wedding. Nowadays green and red ribbons are very often tied cross-linked to the groom’s chest. The ribbon is called a *kōsband*. This ribbon is an obvious innovation in the Yezidi wedding and is unique to the Armenian tradition.⁶ As a rule, the green ribbon is tied at the groom’s house, and the red one is tied at the bride’s house. Our informants insisted that the *kōsband* was not popular before among Yezidis.

After the bride arrives, the groom and *birāzavā* stand on a high place (they used to stand on the roof of the house), where a decorated branch called the *dārā mirāzā* is placed. The *birāzavā* throws a pillow called *balgīyē būkē* to his friend three times, who returns the pillow each time. Then the *birāzavā* dances and hits the pillow on the head of the groom three times. The groom shakes the branch, then throws an apple at the bride. Some people consider the apple to be the symbol of fertility. However, others consider it to be a symbol of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. By throwing the apple the man seems to exact revenge upon the woman who persuaded him to eat the apple and become exiled from the Garden of Eden.

After entering the house of the groom, the bride was traditionally taken to a separate room. The groom entered the room, opened her veil and left. A table was prepared for entertainment at the groom’s house or in a tent. Men and women sat at separate tables. The *sardawātī* played the role of toastmaster. The wife of the *sardawātī* accompanied the bride and then took her out to dance. Now the table is mainly put in the wedding hall, and there are separate tables for men and women. Nowadays aside from the wife of the *sardawātī*, the bride is accompanied by her unmarried sisters or female friends. They are called bridesmaids, which is also an

⁵ *Lāvāš* is a thin bread which is traditionally baked in a *tonir* oven.

⁶ In Karabakh (Artsakh), during weddings people used to tie red and green woven threads to the neck of the groom and the right hand of the bride. The people of Artsakh called it *kārmīr-kānāč* (lit. “red-green”) [17: 119].

obvious influence from Armenian weddings. The bride and the groom did not sit next to each other. Now, however, the bride and the groom sit next to each other in the wedding hall.

The custom of painting the fingers of the guests with *henna* had a special place in the Yezidi traditional wedding. As a rule, prepared *henna* was passed around by the guests, and people dipped their fingers into the *henna*. The color of the *henna* remained on their fingers for several days as a symbol of the wedding. Now, the custom of painting the fingers with *henna* has been partially forgotten. Some families, however, keep that custom in a modified way. For example, they paint a tree, a heart or a fruit on the hands or nails of young people using *henna*.

During traditional Yezidi weddings, national melodies were played, and people danced the *gōvand*. People usually dance the *gōvand* holding each other's pinky fingers, putting three steps to the right, two steps to the left. Now young people dance not only the traditional *gōvand*, but also various rhythmic dances.

On the wedding day, as a rule, the *nakah* or *nakh*⁷ ceremony is performed. During this ritual, the parents and relatives of the bride and groom give their consent for their marriage. The groom's family takes responsibility for taking care of the bride in all situations of the life.⁸ Sometimes the *nakah* is performed on the day of the engagement or wedding. During this ceremony, a Yezidi priest (*sheikh*)⁹ is present. The fathers of the groom and the bride (if there is no father, uncles or other male relatives) join their thumbs, swear to protect the newly formed family, and promise to take care of each other in the case of diseases, failures, misfortunes [4: 257-258]. Very often Yezidis call *nakah* "Yezidi civil registration" (registration of civil acts). In addition to *nakah*, the Yezidis also perform the ceremony *ma'r birîn*. *Ma'r birîn* is an integral part of the Yezidi marriage. The ceremony should be held by a Yezidi *sheikh*. This ceremony is sometimes performed immediately after the *nakah*. During this ceremony, the *sheikh* prays and wishes happiness for the young couple. After *ma'r birîn* the newlyweds are legally considered to be a couple and can enter the nuptial chamber. Among Muslim peoples, the property that the groom gives to the bride during marriage is called *mahr* (Pers. *mēhrīyē*). The *mahr* belongs only to the wife and can be used by her in the case of widowhood or divorce at the request of her husband. It is wrong to equate it with the money given to the bride's paternal family (*qalan* or *kalim*); *qalan* is a remnant of old local customs. As far as the *qalan* resembles *mahr*, it has survived among many peoples who were converted to Islam [16: 164]. In the Yezidi tradition, *mahr*

⁷ In Islam, *nīkāh* means actually entering into a marital relationship, which concludes the entire marriage ceremony. Sometimes the word *nīkāh* is used as a synonym for *zawāj* (lit. "marriage") [16: 190].

⁸ The word *zawāj* in spoken language of the Yezidis is more commonly used for the marriage of male people. When talking about the marriage of women, they use the expression *mēr kirin* (lit. "to go to the man").

⁹ The Yezidi society consists of three castes: *sheikhs* (*šēx*) and *pirs* (*pīr*) are priests, and *mrids* (*mirīd*) are secular Yezidis [1: 76-80].

has become *ma'r* and has a completely different meaning and significance. Apparently, the custom of giving *qalan* was powerful in the Yezidi tradition and has not lost its place to *mahr*. Thus, *mahr* has not disappeared, but gained a new role in the Yezidi ritual system. It is not unusual because many elements of Islamic origin have developed in a unique way in the closed Yezidi community [18: 210].

It has already been mentioned that Yezidi society consists of three castes - *sheikhs*, *pirs* and *mrids*. Marriage between the members of these three castes is prohibited. The marriage of Yezidis with non-Yezidis is also banned [8: 233-236].

In the past there were some marriage forms that are now forgotten among the Yezidis of Armenia. These forms of marriage were: *řavāndin* (lit. "to kidnap", "abduction"), *bēřtkkartma* (lit. "scratch on the crib"), *bardēlī* (lit. "exchange"), polygamy and *levirate* [3: 42].

Řavāndin was the abduction of the bride by the groom or his family. The custom was once popular in the cultures of other peoples in the region [15: 51]. There are many tales in Yezidi folk tradition related to the abduction of girls. Very often after kidnapping a girl, the families of the young people became enemies and fought. The kidnappers gave money to the family of the girl in order to reconcile, and hostilities ceased [4: 230].

Bēřtkkartma was once popular among the Yezidis of Armenia and also among other peoples of the region [13: 12; 11: 70-73]. In this case, the decision to marry was made while the girl and boy were still children and were in their cribs. The cribs of the two children were marked, they were considered to be husband and wife [3: 44].

Bardēlī is the marriage of girls in exchange. In this case, the groom's sister married the bride's brother [4: 250]. Nowadays this form of marriage is not popular at all.

At present, polygamy is not accepted in the Yezidi community of Armenia. However, it is mentioned in some sources and in Yezidi folk tradition that polygamy was accepted among them and also had a social component [4: 243]. One of the reasons for polygamy was the infertility of the wife or the fact that she did not have a son after giving birth to several daughters.¹⁰ The lack of sons very often pushed men to have a second wife. The wives of the same man are called *hēwī*. One of the *hēwī*-s was called *jinā sara* (lit. "chief woman") and had special privileges. For example, difficult tasks were mostly performed by the younger women [3: 46].

Another form of polygamy is called *sardāřūniřtin* (lit. "to sit [on something]") [3: 42]. If a woman had an extramarital affair with a married man, she could go and sit in that man's house, on the bed and stay there as a second wife [4: 250]. In such cases, even a wedding ceremony did not take place, but the husband was obliged to give *qalan* to the paternal family of his new wife.

¹⁰ The custom of having a second wife for such a reason is also popular among other peoples of the region [10: 55].

There is evidence that among the Yezidis *levirate* marriage was common, when a man could marry his dead brother's wife. In the case of such a marriage, a wedding ceremony did not take place and *qalan* was not given to the paternal family of the woman [3: 46-47]. This form of marriage has completely disappeared among the Yezidis of Armenia. However, our older informants mention that such marriages took place especially during wars and tragedies when many men had been killed or died. Interestingly, there is no special term in the Yezidi language for a levirate marriage.

The wedding ceremony is a more open, easily influenced and transformable ritual. Therefore, many elements of the traditional Yezidi wedding were partly influenced by the Armenian wedding ritual and partly influenced by modern wedding trends. Those elements experienced a unique development, transformed, and got a new appearance and interpretation. Some elements of the traditional Yezidi wedding have been partially preserved, although they have lost their meaning and former significance. Some old rituals were reborn and are performed in a new way. Additionally, some traditional forms of marriage have been forgotten among the Yezidis of Armenia. The study of the transformation of some elements of the traditional Yezidi wedding is important, as it can greatly contribute to the study of the dynamics of other ethnic transformative processes.

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ՀԱՅԱՍՏԱՆԱԲՆԱԿ ԵԶԴԻՆԵՐԻ ԱՎԱՆԴԱԿԱՆ ՀԱՐՍԱՆԻՔԻ ՓՈԽԱԿԵՐՊՎՈՂ ՈՐՈՇ ՏԱՐՐԵՐԻ ՇՈՒՐՋ

Թերեզա Ամրյան

Բանալի բառեր՝ եզդիական, հարսանիք, տարր, փոխակերպում, հարս, փեսա, սովորույթ, ավանդույթ, ծես:

Եզդիական հարսանիքն իր յուրօրինակ և գունեղ տարրերի շնորհիվ հաճախ է հետաքրքրել հարևան ժողովուրդներին: Ժամանակ առ ժամանակ եզդիական հարսանիքը քննվել է լրագրողների, հետազոտողների և գիտնականների կողմից: Այս հոդվածի շրջանակներում քննության ենք առել եզդիական ավանդական հարսանիքի որոշ տարրեր. վերջին տասնամյակների ընթացքում այդ տարրերը ենթարկվել են տարբեր փոխակերպումների արտաքին ազդեցությունների պատճառով:

Եզդիական ավանդական հարսանիքի վերափոխվող ծեսերը, սակայն, պատշաճ կերպով չեն քննվել:

Հարկ է նշել, որ հարսանեկան արարողությունը բաց ծես է, որը կարող է ենթարկվել արտաքին ազդեցությունների և հեշտությամբ վերափոխվել: Ուստի հայաստանաբնակ եզդիների ավանդական հարսանիքի շատ տարրեր մասամբ կրել են հայկական հարսանեկան ծեսի, մասամբ՝ ժամանակակից միտումների ազդեցությունը: Այդ տարրերից շատերը ձեռք են բերել նոր բովանդակություն և նոր մեկնաբանություն, մի շարք հին արարողություններ էլ վերածնվել են և նորովի են կատարվում: Բացի այդ, ամուսնության որոշ ձևեր (բազմակնություն, լևիրատ) վերացել են Հայաստանի եզդիների շրջանում: Եզդիական ավանդական հարսանիքի տարրերի վերափոխման ուսումնասիրությունը կարևոր է, քանի որ այն կարող է մեծապես նպաստել էթնիկ այլ գործընթացների փոխակերպման դինամիկայի ուսումնասիրությանը: