# The Yazidis

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# Introduction

The Yazidis are one of the world's oldest surviving ethnoreligious communities, possessing a rich and vibrant cultural heritage that has endured across millennia and withstood immense challenges. Indigenous to the mountainous region of Kurdistan—spanning modern-day Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran—the Yazidis have maintained a unique religious faith, Yazidism, characterized by its blend of ancient Iranian spirituality and later influences from Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. For most of the outside world, the Yazidis remain enigmatic, often overshadowed by misunderstanding and tragic histories of persecution. Yet, their story is more than one of survival; it is also one of profound resilience and spiritual depth.

Their spiritual center at Lalish, with its sacred springs and ancient temples, stands as a testament to Yazidi endurance and piety. Rituals involving fire, water, and the sun speak to their primal reverence for the natural elements, while the figure of Tawûsî Melek, the Peacock Angel, illustrates the Yazidis' distinctive interpretation of good, evil, and divine oversight. The vibrancy of Yazidi religious life is sustained largely through oral tradition—hymns, prayers, and sacred stories passed from generation to generation in Kurmanji, their ancestral tongue.

Yet, the Yazidis' persistent fidelity to their faith and customs has set them apart, often to their detriment. Throughout history, they have been mischaracterized and marginalized, enduring repeated bouts of displacement, massacre, and enforced conversion. From the campaigns of the Ottoman Empire to the genocidal violence of ISIS in the 21st century, Yazidi communities have withstood cycles of destruction that have decimated populations and scattered survivors across continents. Each episode of suffering has left indelible scars, as well as a reinforced determination to retain community, memory, and identity.

In the wake of the ISIS genocide, the Yazidis have confronted an overwhelming challenge: how to heal, rebuild, and carry their traditions forward in a fractured world. In camps and diaspora communities from Iraq to Germany to Canada, Yazidis work to reconstruct the rhythms of daily life, navigating new landscapes of identity politics, language loss, and generational trauma. At the same time, they seek justice and recognition on a global stage, determined that their suffering—and their hopes—should neither be ignored nor misunderstood.

This book endeavors to offer a comprehensive portrait of the Yazidi people: exploring their ancient roots, intricate social structure, rituals and sacred spaces, historical traumas, and the ongoing struggle for cultural survival. It examines not only what it means to be Yazidi in the contemporary world but also the wider significance of their

story for conversations about religious diversity, human rights, and the endurance of minority communities.

By tracing the Yazidis' journey from remote mountain villages to the heart of international advocacy, this work seeks, above all, to give voice to a people who have too often been relegated to the margins of history. Their perseverance offers a testament to the strength and complexity of human culture—a testament both urgent and universal, for Yazidis and for all.

# CHAPTER ONE: The Yazidis: Origins and Identity

The Yazidis, known to themselves as Êzidî or, in some distinct communities, Dasinî, are a people whose very existence defies simple categorization. They represent a vibrant, ancient thread woven into the intricate tapestry of Kurdistan, the rugged geographical expanse that cradles parts of modern-day Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran. To truly grasp the essence of the Yazidis is to embark on a journey that begins not just with their unique faith, Yazidism, but with the fundamental question of who they are, how they came to be, and how they define themselves in a world often eager to define them.

At the heart of understanding the Yazidis lies their name itself, a linguistic puzzle that has fueled academic debate and, at times, considerable misunderstanding. One school of thought suggests the name "Yazidi" is rooted in the Old Iranian word "yazata," signifying a "divine being." This etymology would neatly connect them to an ancient lineage of spiritual reverence, hinting at origins steeped in the deep religious traditions of pre-Zoroastrian Iran. It lends an air of timelessness, embedding their identity firmly within the spiritual landscape of the broader region's earliest faiths.

Yet, a more prevalent academic theory proposes a different, and perhaps more contentious, origin. This view links the name to the Umayyad Caliph Yazid ibn Muawiyah, or Yazid I, a figure whom some scholars suggest the Yazidis revere as an incarnation of the divine figure Sultan Êzi. If true, this connection would ground their origins more firmly within a specific historical Islamic context, albeit one that predates the common understanding of their faith’s later development. It’s a fascinating, if historically charged, proposal that points to potential syncretic influences in their early formation.

However, the Yazidis themselves offer a clear and resolute rebuttal to any direct lineage to the Umayyad Caliph Yazid. Their own religious lore, meticulously preserved through generations of oral tradition, contains no such link, and the notion is consistently rejected within their communities. For many Yazidis, the word "Yazidi" is understood to mean "servant of the creator," a simple yet profound self-description that foregrounds their monotheistic devotion and places their identity squarely within their faith. This internal understanding is paramount, reflecting a self-perception rooted in spiritual service rather than historical political figures.

The historical origins of the Yazidis, much like the genesis of their name, are complex and subject to ongoing scholarly discussion and deeply held community traditions. Within Yazidi lore, stories of their history stretch back an astonishing 8,000 years, positioning them as one of humanity’s most enduring and ancient peoples. Such narratives speak to a deep-seated connection to the land and an unbroken chain of

generational memory, even if external historical records offer a more recent tangible emergence.

Indeed, while the Yazidis' own traditions speak of immense antiquity, their faith became historically tangible from the 11th or 12th century, coinciding with the arrival of Sheikh ʿAdī ibn Musāfir in Lalish, a sacred valley nestled in what is now northern Iraq. Sheikh ʿAdī's presence marked a pivotal moment, providing a structural and spiritual consolidation for a belief system that had been developing independently of surrounding Islamic norms. His influence, though significant, is understood within Yazidi theology as a renewal or clarification of existing truths, rather than the absolute inception of their ancient faith.

One of the most compelling aspects of Yazidi identity is its profound connection to the Kurmanji language. Most Yazidis speak Kurmanji, a dialect of Northern Kurdish, which serves as the vibrant vessel for their rich oral traditions and religious hymns, known as *qewls*. This linguistic bond naturally leads to questions about their ethnic affiliation, sparking an ongoing discussion within academic circles and among the Yazidis themselves: are they a distinct ethnoreligious group, or are they a religious sub-group of the Kurds?

The relationship between Yazidi identity and Kurdish identity is nuanced, often fluid, and sometimes politically charged. Some modern Yazidis readily identify themselves as a subset of Kurds, acknowledging the shared linguistic heritage and cultural proximity. In the autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq, for instance, Yazidis are officially recognized and considered ethnic Kurds, sometimes even referred to as "original Kurds," a designation that speaks to their deep roots in the region and their unique historical trajectory. This perspective emphasizes a broader Kurdish identity that encompasses both religious and secular distinctions.

However, this identification is not universal, and the context often shapes how Yazidis perceive and articulate their identity. In certain regions, particularly outside of Iraq, such as Armenia, the term "Kurdish" has sometimes been associated with an Islamic identity. In such contexts, some Yazidis find it necessary to assert a distinct ethnic identity, emphasizing their religious difference as a primary marker of separateness from their Muslim Kurdish neighbors. This highlights the complex interplay of religion, ethnicity, and political landscapes in shaping self-identification.

Further complicating the linguistic and ethnic landscape are the presence of certain Arabic-speaking Yazidi clans. Primarily found in the villages of Bashiqa and Bahzani in northern Iraq, these communities demonstrate that while Kurmanji is the predominant language of Yazidism and the language of its sacred oral traditions, linguistic diversity exists within the broader Yazidi population. These Arabic-speaking communities maintain their Yazidi faith and cultural practices, illustrating that their identity is not solely defined by linguistic adherence to Kurmanji.

The question of whether Yazidis are an ethnic group, a religious group, or an ethnoreligious group is not merely an academic exercise. It carries profound implications for their political representation, cultural preservation efforts, and even their safety in a volatile region. Their status as an ethnoreligious group, combining distinct religious beliefs with a unique cultural and linguistic heritage, underscores their profound particularity within the mosaic of Middle Eastern peoples. This dual nature of their identity—religious and ethnic—is a cornerstone of their distinctiveness and has historically set them apart from their neighbors, both in times of peace and, tragically, during periods of intense persecution.

Ultimately, the Yazidis are a people who have meticulously preserved a way of life against immense odds, maintaining their unique customs, language, and, most importantly, their faith. Their identity is not a static concept but a living, breathing testament to adaptation and resilience. It is shaped by ancient traditions, by the echoes of their sacred *qewls* whispered across generations, by the enduring connection to their ancestral lands, and by the constant negotiation of their place in a world that has often struggled to understand them. Their distinctiveness, often perceived as a vulnerability, has also been their enduring strength, a beacon of a vibrant cultural heritage that continues to defy assimilation.

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