

PalArch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt / Egyptology

EPISTEMOLOGICAL VIOLENCE AGAINST THE YAZIDI COMMUNITY: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Shakir Muhammad Usman¹, Dr. Abdul Ghaffar Bhatti², Dr. Muhammad Imran³

¹CGDS-Center for Gender & Development Studies, American University of Iraq, Sulaimani.

²University of Education, Lahore, Multan Campus.

³Government College Havelian, Abbottabad, KPK Pakistan.

E.mail: ¹muhammad.usman@auis.edu.krd ²abdul.ghafar@ue.edu.pk

³imran.pk756@gmail.com

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Palarch's Journal Of Archaeology Of Egypt/Egyptology 18(8), 3585-3602. ISSN 1567-
214x**

Key Words: Yazidis, Epistemic Violence, Othering, Marginalizing

ABSTRACT

Yazidis are an ethno-religious group originating from Greater Kurdistan, which includes parts of modern-day Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey. They have been victimized heavily in the recent past. This research deals with the issues related to the peculiarities of epistemic violence that resulted in socio-religious conflicts, genocides and persecutions of the Yazidis as a socio-religious minority at the hands of Muslims, Christians and others. It explains how physical violence and epistemic violence go hand-in-hand and how religion was used to other Yazidis by declaring them adversaries and devil worshippers, and subjecting them to persecution as well as epistemological violence in the Mesopotamian region. From Gayatri Spivak to Kristie Dotson, many scholars have explained and analyzed the concept of epistemic violence, applying this theory to different empirical cases. This paper analyzes the mysterious case of the Yazidis through the lenses of epistemic violence. The researchers have used empirical evidence and scholarly reviews to highlight and elaborate the case of othering, marginalizing and victimizing Yazidis by using religion as a tool.

INTRODUCTION

Much has been written on both epistemic violence and on the Yazidi community, but it is difficult to find research that focuses on epistemic violence committed against the Yazidis. Yazidis are a socio-religious minority originating from the ancient Mesopotamian region, and constant persecutions have forced them to migrate in order to survive. While they have often suffered

to some extent, Yazidis have been victimized the most in the recent past. Before 2014, the repeated genocides and acts of violence against them had never been considered or documented systematically from an academic perspective. This research deals with the issues related to the peculiarities of epistemic violence that resulted in socio-religious conflicts, genocides and persecutions of the Yazidis as a socio-religious minority at the hands of Muslims, Christians and others. In this paper, first, we have reviewed the literature to support their arguments. Then, we have explained the theoretical framework with to analyze the available data. The concept of epistemic violence is the backbone of this research, therefore we have given an operational definition of the term epistemic violence. After that, we have described the kinds of epistemic violence faced by Yazidis in Kurdistan. As part of this discussion, for the understanding of our readers, we have presented some historical facts about Yazidis/Yazidism, and then analyzed the counter-strategy of Yazidis against the epistemic violence that they faced.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Middle East, being the home of various prophets, has always been a land of extreme historical and religious significance, but since the arrival of Islam in the sixth century this region has also been a hotspot and a battle-field. It has become one of the most violent areas in the world. Whether the Cold War or a proxy war between East and West, Middle Eastern territory has always been a battle-field. It has seen not only ancient battles, but also has witnessed numerous modern day wars (Tucker & Roberts, 2010). In this section of the research, some notable scholarly contributions have been discussed that highlight the theory of epistemic violence and why Yazidis have been targeted. Epistemic violence is a relatively new term that can be used in the empirical social sciences to discuss the impact of the violence of knowledge or cognition and intellectual violence. It highlights the possibility that violence is rooted in knowledge itself and can be witnessed in the denials and in the process of dominance by one intellectual against the other. The term epistemic violence has been explored with the help of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's work (1998) *Can the subaltern speak?*. Spivak originated the term epistemic violence, and used it to identify the silencing of marginalized people. Another writer whose ideas have been used as ancillary reading to explain and analyze the concept of epistemic violence and its impact among Shias, Sunnis and Yazidis is Kristie Dotson (2011).

As we look for new ways of getting deeper into the history of political, social and religious domination, manipulation and transformation through the hearts and minds of people who use knowledge as a tool for their personal and political gains, we have used Jason Beckett's (2011) *The Violence of Wording: Robert Cover on Legal Interpretation*, Miranda Fricker's (2007) *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, Jan Ilhan Kizilhan's (2017) *The Yazidi - Religion, Culture and Trauma* and Michael Gunter's (2008) *The Kurds Ascending*.

Theoretical Framework

While conducting research about sensitive and complex phenomena like religion, culture and politics one needs to be cautious, as it involves social and

ethical issues. This research uses qualitative and empirical methods. We have used a combination of literature, in-depth interviewing and hermeneutics to analyze the collected data. The data are further analyzed and compared through the lenses of the theory of epistemic violence. This analysis enables us to understand how Yazidis have been subjected to violence that originates from knowledge, as the theory of epistemic violence looks at the claim of “who can know” (Hunter 2002, p. 120) or who can and should possess the knowledge.

In empirical field research, if one couples interviews with literature, the result can be specific and purposeful. On the one hand, literature review can provide a critical analysis of the context and on the other hand, interviews can give a personal and subjective understanding of the context, because interviews are a sophisticated way of getting access to rich information (Berg, 2001). For the researcher and for the research work, it is useful to have theoretical objectivity gained with the help of literature as well as empirical subjectivity achieved through personal interviews; having both insights enhances the quality of research and enriches the process with diverse experience.

Understanding Epistemic Violence

Postcolonial Indian theorist and scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak coined the term epistemic violence and the concept around this term, and later other authors such as Kristie Dotson took it up. Before going into the discussion about epistemic violence, it is important to establish the understanding of the terms epistemic and violence. First, we have explained the meaning and the background of these terms, after which we will move on to a detailed discussion about epistemic violence.

Episteme

Episteme is a term that has been used in philosophy to define a system of understanding, a scientific understanding or scientific knowledge. It determines in a scientific way what can be considered as a piece of knowledge and what does not qualify. So, a simple definition of epistemology would term epistemology as an expression of knowledge. It is a structure or a system in which knowledge is attained through observation, veracity, fact, experience, justification, trust and/or logic. In broader terms, episteme is a worldview, a theory or a concept of discursive practices that pertain to social or cultural significance. Epistemology is a philosophical term that is used “to describe theories of knowledge adopted by individuals and created in collective contexts. Epistemologies are theories of knowledge that make basic claims about the nature of knowledge: who can know, how we know, and what counts as evidence for our claims” (Hunter 2002, 120). There are two main components that work as a base of epistemology: first, knowledge, logic or justification, and second, the limits of knowledge and justification. Knowledge or justification is the main part of epistemology because it gives the sense and significance to its practices. All the experiences, observations and reasons have certain limits that determine how epistemic systems function and what is allowed. As Hannah Arendt (1970) explains in her book *On Violence*, “Legitimacy, when challenged, bases itself on an appeal to the past, while justification relates to an

end that lies in the future” (p. 52). Epistemology is clearly a useful tool that is applied to see the possibilities of a piece of knowledge being accepted or not. Arendt goes on to say that

I would define the episteme retrospectively as the strategic apparatus which permits separating out from among all the statements which are possible those that will be acceptable within, I won't say a scientific theory, but a field of scientificity, and, which it is possible to say are true or false. The episteme is the “apparats” which makes possible the separation, not of true from the false, but of what may from what may not be characterised as scientific (ibid, p. 197).

Violence

The word violence is derived from the Latin word *violentia*, which means a force used to cause harm, injury or destruction. It is a level of aggression that inflicts psychological, emotional, sexual, and gender-based violence, child abuse, and verbal, spiritual, financial or physical impairment and damage. Violence is a tool to enforce dominance, control and authority over others in an abusive way. There are various reasons for violence around the globe and they vary from culture to culture and community to community, but certain types are very common everywhere, such as workplace violence, being exposed to violent content, being exposed to domestic violence and peer pressure.

During the 49th session of the World Health Assembly in the year 1996, violence was announced as one of the world's main and fastest growing health issues (WHA49.25 1996). It is important to clarify that an act of violence is considered violence only if the intention of the person is to employ influence, authority, power or force over the other to achieve a certain objective. Any type of verbal threat, physical force or abuse of power falls under the category of violence, but an action that causes any damage or injury unintentionally will not be considered violence. The World Health Organization describes violence as “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation” (Krug et al. 2002).

Epistemic Violence

As mentioned above, the term epistemic violence was coined by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Simply speaking, epistemic violence means an act of deliberately, intentionally, actively or consciously refusing, ignoring, neglecting, obstructing or/and undermining someone's approach, understanding or interpretation of an event or a piece of information and knowledge. When we use the term intentional, it means that our conscious functions intentionally and it is guided towards an objective (Chalmers, 2004). So, intentionality explains how our consciousness is intended or guided towards an objective and it also describes the pattern of our capacity or skills to focus our attention through

conscious agency (Trevarthen, 1998), while unintentional refers to an action that is not deliberately guided towards an objective.

According to Dotson (2011), when “someone’s intellectual courage” is compromised, rejected or not taken seriously because this person is considered a “non-knower” (Dotson, p. 243), it undermines that person’s capacity and ability to hold such information. It is a way of interpreting or considering someone’s knowledge or understanding as inferior or not legitimate or trustworthy, and it falls into the category of epistemic violence. If a certain act of refusal of someone’s knowledge and intellect or ignorance of someone’s ability, capacity and understanding of a particular issue turns into a harmful act, it is considered epistemic violence. There are various kinds of epistemic violence, but in this paper, I will focus on pernicious ignorance, silencing and quieting.

Pernicious Ignorance

Before starting the journey to explore this philosophical term, we would first like to define what we mean by the term pernicious, and what ignorance means. The word pernicious is derived from the Latin word *pernicies* that means ruin, and the term ignorance is also taken from Latin, consisting of two parts, in, which negates, and *gnarus*, which means “knowledgeable” (Peels, 2010). On the basis of this definition, we can understand that ignorant means “to lack knowledge” (ibid).

Based on the above mentioned explanation, pernicious ignorance is an ignorance that causes harm (Dotson, 2011, p. 239). Pernicious ignorance, also called reliable ignorance, is a kind of ignorance that exists due to the gulf between someone or something’s expression of knowledge, information or emotion and the way this information or emotion is received, perceived and understood by the receiver. When reliable ignorance turns into something destructive or harmful, it becomes pernicious ignorance. Additionally, Kristie Dotson distinguishes between pernicious and benign ignorance. She says that pernicious ignorance is destructive and purposeful, while benign ignorance is not necessarily bad or destructive (Dotson 2011, 243). Thus, pernicious or reliable ignorance can cause some sort of harm (not always) in order to qualify as pernicious ignorance. The harm caused by pernicious ignorance can be emotional, physical, social, institutional, organizational, racial or communal. An important factor that one may keep in mind while identifying, determining and classifying pernicious ignorance is that it should not be assessed only on the basis of someone having it, but it should also be assessed on the basis of harm caused or contributed by this kind of ignorance. One of the results or causes of pernicious ignorance is the very harmful use, implementation or practice of silencing others and their voices. That, in its core, can cause extreme emotional, physical, social, institutional, organizational, racial or communal harm.

Silencing

Silencing is a kind of epistemic violence or testimonial injustice that interrupts, damages or distorts the communicational ways between the messenger or information giver and the receiver. Dotson (2011) divides silencing into two categories, instances of silencing, and practices of silence. “An instance of silencing concerns a single, non-repetitive instance of an audience failing to meet the dependencies of a speaker, whereas a practice of silencing, on my account, concerns a repetitive, reliable occurrence of an audience failing to meet the dependencies of a speaker that finds its origin in a more pervasive ignorance” (Dotson 2011, p. 241). Testimonial injustice is an act of prejudice when a listener or an observer gives subdued, little or no credit to the speaker. According to Miranda Fricker (2007), testimonial injustice is “a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower” (p.1). A simple example of testimonial injustice is to discard or devalue a testimony because of someone’s race, gender, age, profession, social class, national background or any other social identity.

For example, Ms. A is giving a talk about the financial matters of a multinational company, while Mr. Z does not pay attention, thinking that a woman is not capable of handling financial matters of a multinational company. As another example, women and African-Americans were not allowed to vote or take part in U.S. political processes because of their perceived lack of knowledge or capacity to understand the complexities of the sophisticated political system. Both examples also illustrate testimonial injustice. Mr. Z undermines, devalues and silences Ms. A’s opinion on the basis of her gender. Therefore, this is an act of epistemic violence.

The practices of silencing occur when a listener or an observer ignores, oppresses or does not believe information passed on through a message or a piece of knowledge because of various prejudices such as messenger’s race, gender, age, profession or any other form of identity, and as a result these practices qualify as epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007, p. 1). At the same time, when a listener silences a speaker due to ignorance, this practice of silencing causes further ignorance by preventing or depriving others from obtaining information or knowledge. There are various kinds and practices of silencing, but one, very relevant for this paper, is called testimonial quieting, which I explain in the next section.

Testimonial Quieting

Testimonial quieting is a conscious or unconscious decision of an individual or a group to set aside, ignore or dismiss the testimony, witness or attestation of the messenger or information giver, who is there to reveal something important, by saying or believing that the messenger or information giver is not capable of passing on this piece of information or knowledge (Dotson, 2011, pp. 242-43). In this type of epistemic violence, writers’, knowers’ or speakers’ information is devalued by thinking that their testimony is not worth considering. Testimonial quieting is a form of violence that uses repetitive

conscious or unconscious devaluation of knowledge as one of the main ideas behind an act of violence, but “it is a context-dependent exercise” (ibid). While explaining the role of knowledge in this act of violence, Dotson uses the expression “the devastating effect of the disappearing of knowledge,” and she explains that during the process of colonization, “local or provincial knowledge is dismissed due to privileging alternative, often Western, epistemic practices” (ibid, p. 236). On the other hand, “a three-year-old child is ordinarily reliably ignorant of voting practices,” which is a “gap in knowledge” that is not necessarily harmful (ibid, pp. 238-39). Testimonial content is very risky, as it needs highly competent receivers to carefully listen, collect and accept the piece of information or knowledge passed on to them, and take the messenger or information giver seriously. “One can imagine circumstances in which one’s intellectual courage is undermined through routinely being taken as a non-knower as a result of social perceptions of one’s identity. One can also imagine circumstances in which one’s epistemic agency is undermined through testimonial quieting” (ibid, p. 243). As testimonial quieting is “context-dependent” and occurs while undermining someone’s intellect, according to Dotson, “by nature, examples of silencing are difficult to locate and make evident” (ibid, p. 251), but in my opinion, it is also important to mention that it does not occur when someone denies a fact, for example, that it is raining today. In a nutshell, then, epistemic violence is something that the receiver commits against the messenger or information giver when the receiver does not do the job of receiving effectively.

A Brief History of Yazidis

The terms Yazidi and Kurd were first used definitely when Muslims invaded the ancient Mesopotamian region (Kizilhan, 2017, Gunter, 2008 and Shakir, 2021). Yazidis are an ethno-religious group originating from Greater Kurdistan, which includes parts of modern-day Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey. Most Yazidis speak the Kurmanji dialect of the Kurdish language. In the past, they considered themselves Kurds, but after going through repeated violence, persecution and genocides, members of the younger generation do not consider themselves Kurds anymore (Murad, 2017 and Saeed’s Personal Interview of 2020). It does not matter which country they are living in: they always speak Kurmanji (Omarkhali, 2017). One reason why Yazidis cannot give up their native language is that all their prayers are in Kurdish, which means that even if Yazidis speak any other languages; they have to pray, at least, in Kurdish. They have been targeted and persecuted several times, which is why they have migrated to Caucasus, Germany, Armenia, Belgium, Georgia, France and many other western regions (ibid). Most Yazidis believe that since Omar ibn Al-Khattab’s invasion of Kurdistan, they have suffered approximately 72 to 74 genocides (Morris, 2014, Gunter, 2008 and Omer, 2016). Many people believe that Yazidis are somehow related to Muslim caliph Yazid ibn Mu’awiya (known as: Yazid-I) of the Umayyad caliphate, but Yazidis are not Muslims (Ismael “Personal Interview” September 25, 2020). Yazidis believe their name comes from Yezdan or Ezid, which means God or worshippers of God (Comerford, 2014).

In Yazidism, three figures are of the utmost importance; Ezid (God), Malak Tawus (the Peacock Angel) and Sheikh Adi (a 12th century reformist). These holy figures appear in most of the Yazidi prayers, but in the Yazidi declaration of faith only *Khuda* or *Khude* (God) appears. The Yazidis' holiest shrine is called Lalish. Similar to Muslims, Yazidis fast, and they perform pilgrimage once in their lifetime. The Yazidi religion is very secretive and because of this, and their worship of an angel called Malak Tawus, the Peacock Angel, they have been called devil worshipers (Asatrian and Arakelova, 2014). Upon asking one of the interviewees about this, he replied that “the mythology of Yazidi religion believes in one God, called *Khude* or *Khuda*, and we have a *Sabaqa Qawl*,¹ declaration of faith, *Khude eka be shriqa be hawala*,” meaning “God is one and he does not have any partner” (Jundi, 2020). He continued, saying that “keeping in mind this Yazidi belief, how can someone say that we are the devil worshipers? We do not worship the Devil, so this claim is baseless” (ibid).

Yazidis have been fighting this epistemic victimization for centuries and totally refuse this claim, but few accept their testimony. The testimony and the claim of Yazidis that they are not devil worshippers has been ignored consciously by the members of the international community in general and Muslims in particular. There is almost no Yazidi who has never been asked if he or she worships the devil or not. Interestingly, the Yazidi answer for the question has never been convincing to the Muslim neighbors. As Kristie Dotson explains, the refusal of a claim or a testimony, or ignoring such a claim, is an act of epistemic violence. “Epistemic violence in testimony is a refusal, intentional or unintentional, of an audience to communicatively reciprocate a linguistic exchange owing to pernicious ignorance” (Dotson 2011, p. 238). A large group of people have been committing an act of epistemic violence against Yazidis for centuries.

For Yazidis, contrary to the claim of Malak Tawus being the devil, they believe that the Peacock Angel is the head of all the angels and God's earthly assistant. Similar to Jesus in Christianity, Malak Tawus is considered the savior of the Yazidis. According to Yazidi legends, to test Malak Tawus' love, God put him through a trial by asking him to bow before human beings, but he refused, saying that he loved God so much that he would only bow before God. After hearing this God was very happy and made him the head of all the angels. This story somewhat resembles the Muslim, Christian and Jewish belief that an angel called Satan or Lucifer refused to bow before human beings and was cursed by God. Interestingly, some Sufi beliefs such as those of Ahmad Ghazali, his student Ayn al-Qozat Hamadani and Farid ad-Din Attar, also resemble Yazidi beliefs (Wilson, 1993 and Nurbakhsh, 1986), but no one calls these Sufis devil worshipers.

Apart from this resemblance, there is no ritual or sacred text that supports the claim that Yazidis are devil worshipers, and Yazidis refuse all such claims. So all in all, a clear act of epistemic oppression can be witnessed here. It is nothing more than an attempt at undermining, discrediting, quieting and othering an

¹ The term *Sabaqa Qawl* is used to describe religious texts of Yazidis. One verse is one *Sabaqa*.

already marginalized group of people. Christine Allison (2011) also highlights in her book about Yazidi oral traditions that:

Both Oriental and Western scholars and travellers of the past, conditioned by contact with religions of the Book, usually came to the Yezidis with a preconceived scheme of religious categories in their minds, into which they sought to fit the Yezidis. The Yezidis' answers were determined by the researchers' questions, and where entire Yezidi accounts of events or beliefs were collected, these were not interpreted in the light of the Yezidis' world-view, but according to the researchers' own preconceptions. Until the recent emergence of an educated younger generation, they only reached a reading public at second hand, via others' descriptions. As a result, the Yezidis became one of the more misunderstood groups of the Middle East, the exotic devil-worshippers of Kurdistan" (p. 37).

Allison's claim that Yazidis were "preconceived" or "categorized" according to people's perception and not according to the "Yazidi worldview" is exactly what Kristie Dotson (2011) elaborates in the following lines, and it describes fully the situation that Yazidis have been experiencing. "One can imagine circumstances in which one's intellectual courage is undermined through routinely being taken as a non-knower as a result of social perceptions of one's identity. One can also imagine circumstances in which one's epistemic agency is undermined through testimonial quieting" (p. 244). Keeping in mind Dotson's words, while looking at the situation Yazidis have been through, we realize that although they were the specialized authority in their religion, Muslims and even some western scholars have dismissed their testimony in a violent way, considering them non-knowers. Non-knower is a term that Dotson uses to explain someone who has less knowledge about a particular topic or someone who has no authority whatsoever in talking about a certain subject. If we analyze the facts about Yazidis in light of the terms knower and non-knower, we can see that the indigenous population of the ancient Mesopotamian region is more than 4,000 years old, and probably a branch of Zoroastrians and Yazdanism (Izady, 2015), neither of which worshiped the devil. Yet as described by Allison, local people, invaders, and some western writers challenged and dismissed the Yazidis' epistemic agency on the basis of preconceived ideas.

Epistemological Violence against Yazidis in Kurdistan

The invasion of Kurdistan by the Muslim leader after the death of Prophet Muhammad brought a lot of misery to Kurdish people and to the followers of Zarathustra, an ancient Iranian or Magian religion (Bearman et al, 2002), who were forced to convert to Islam. As it has been mentioned earlier, various incidents involving epistemic oppression, practices of silencing, marginalization and testimonial quieting through religious intolerance and false propaganda pushed Yazidis to be a very secretive, restricted and limited community, because otherwise they would face persecution (Saeed, 2020). The Yazidis have the opinion that in order to hide their identity, protect their race and prevent their extinction, the followers of Yazidism decided to make it a

discreet and secret religion, although the sparse written record does not confirm or deny. We assume that Yazidis have hidden their religion from their surroundings due to various circumstances, but it is difficult to determine if Yazidism was a secretive religion or if history simply ignored it. In any case, their image of being devil worshipers resulted in several persecutions, campaigns of victimization and incidents of epistemological violence against them. Community members, leaders and historians dismissed their epistemic agency, not believing that they were not devil worshipers, which gave free license to the perpetrators who inflicted 74 genocides (Omer 2016, p. 3).

Repeated victimization and persecution on bases of false accusation and propaganda made Yazidis think that teaching their children would put their religion under a spotlight, because the children would be in schools, interacting with others, so it forced them to keep their children illiterate (Ismael, 2020, Insulander & Bott, 2019). The phenomenon of Yazidis silencing themselves is a distinct consequence of testimonial quieting. Dotson explains that silencing does not happen in any one particular way, but “the epistemic violence is present when silencing occurs can help distinguish the different ways members of oppressed groups are silenced with respect to testimony” (Dotson 2011, p. 236). It shows that not only did the oppressors silence the testimony of Yazidis, but also to avoid further persecution, they started silencing their own voices and the voices of their children by not educating them. This was an interestingly sad way of countering violence and suffering epistemic violence through the practices of silencing and pernicious ignorance, and until the 1960s, the community remained illiterate (Ismael, 2020). As mentioned, silencing and pernicious ignorance are two-edged swords. They not only exist due to ignorance, but they also cause ignorance because the pernicious ignorance of the people who did not believe in the testimony and epistemic agency of Yazidis caused further ignorance as they forced themselves and their children to avoid learning.

The decision of the Yazidi community not to teach their children and to keep them in the darkness of ignorance so that they would not have to face the ignorance of other communities is a sad but clear example of pernicious ignorance being a two-edged sword, causing double damage. One, it is a violent act against the speaker and second, when a listener silences a speaker due to ignorance, this practice of silencing causes further ignorance by preventing or depriving others from obtaining information or knowledge. To avoid the epistemic violence, Yazidis have not only taken the path of ignorance by not educating their children, but also by trying to find similarities and mix Islam and Sufism’s practices with their practices, so that they would appear similar (Ismael, 2020). The arrival of Sheikh Adi and personification of Yazid left a significant mark on the way Yazidism appears today. “Sheikh Adi renewed the old Yazidi religion and introduced many customs and religious laws to it that made the Yazidi religion similar to the Islamic religion” (Saeed, 2020). As people around Yazidis did not believe what they were saying, to counter the pernicious ignorance of the Muslims who did not believe in the epistemic agency of Yazidis and called them devil worshipers and infidels, Sheikh Adi came up with a new approach. He did not change much in the core of the religion, but he modified the practices and the way the religion appeared from

the outside. His aim was to protect and prevent Yazidism from further persecution. When we analyze this particular incident, we can see that to counter the pernicious ignorance of Shias, Sunnis and other ethno-religious groups of the region and to mitigate their vulnerability, they were forced to modify their religious practices. This is how they were able to survive. “Although Sheikh Adi changed the Yazidi religion a lot and made it appear a different religion from the old Yazidi religion, he saved the Yazidi religion from Muslims and other religions in the region. Without him, there would be no followers of the Yazidi religion today” (Saeed, 2020).

Keeping in mind the discussion above, it is evident that the epistemic agency and the testimony of Yazidis was challenged and dismissed. Ethno-religious groups of the region did not believe in what Yazidis said and they were targeted brutally. It was a combination of ethno-religious hatred and epistemic violence that forced Yazidis not only to modify their religion, convert to Islam or face numerous persecutions, mass atrocities and genocides, but also to migrate from their homeland to the other regions. Due to ethno-religious divides, fights for politico-economic dominance and epistemological violence against each other, Middle Eastern society in general and Kurdistan in particular has been in social chaos for decades. “The entire region is undergoing a deep and dramatic transformation that today is producing more chaos than stability, more violence than peace, more sectarianism than integration and more fears than assurances” (Bardaji 2016, p. 2). The vicious cycle of epistemic violence, through testimonial quieting, testimonial injustice and epistemic oppression, keeps turning, and no one is safe from it. It can be Shiites, Yazidis, Alawites, Christians or Jews; they blame each other and do not believe each other. They consider and call each other infidel, incapable and ignorant, which causes emotional harm. Physical violence and epistemic violence go hand-in-hand. Epistemic violence is an intellectual form of violence. When an oppressor does not want people to see that damage or harm is being done, that is when epistemic violence is applied because, generally, we are not (or at least we were not) aware of the damage or destruction of epistemic violence (Backet, 2011), but we can see and measure physical violence and it is evident that epistemic violence justifies physical violence.

Othering Yazidis by declaring them adversaries, devil worshipers and subjecting them to persecution as well as epistemological violence in the Mesopotamian region was carried out in various ways. Either they were labelled devil worshipers and infidels or they were forced to change their ethnicity and become Arabs. The process of making the Yazidi region an Arab region started in the 1970s when the Kurdish revolution was ended by Saddam’s regime. The process was called Arabisation (ta’rib); it is an Arabic term that means making it Arabic. The process included changing the demography of the region by burning and destroying the Yazidi villages around Mount Sinjar. Saddam’s Army forced people to move to the constructed collective towns far from the mountains. As a result of this forced displacement, 148 rural hamlets were vacated in the northern area of Iraq and south of Mount Sinjar. They also targeted many villages in the Sheikhan region. The other aspect of the process was that the Arabic language was enforced and made the working and

educational language of the region even though more than 90% of the population was Kurdish (Awsman, 2020).

The government brought Arabs from other parts of Iraq and settled them in Sinjar. The main purpose of the Arabisation process was to control Yazidis in collective urban areas because they could not be controlled when they were in the mountains. This process made the Yazidi identity more complicated and harder to name. Kurds started to accuse Yazidis of being Arabs as the Arabic culture became evident in the Yazidi community in the later part of the 1970s. To avoid social victimization and due to Arab social influence Yazidis started giving their children Arabic names, which made it hard to identify them as Kurds. Besides this, Muslim Kurds continued calling the Yazidis infidels (ibid). At the same time, Arabs targeted the Yazidis for being Kurds as well as for being Yazidis, devil worshipers or infidels (ibid). Yazidis have experienced difficult times identifying themselves in the modern history of Iraq. As mentioned, Yazidis were misunderstood religiously for centuries in the region and were continuously persecuted; in the 1970s new misunderstandings arose about Yazidis, especially in terms of ethnicity. This affected the identity of Yazidis over time. Moreover, Yazidis have always been discriminated against for being different because of their religious background and belief system. Arabs wanted them to be Arabs and Kurds wanted them to be Kurds, but none of them wanted to accept and acknowledge their religious differences. As a result, the Yazidis started defining themselves differently and some of them started calling Yazidism an ethnicity as well as a religion (ibid).

In 2003, as the United States invaded Iraq, religion became a dominant factor in the Iraqi community. Before 2003, ethnicity was the dominant factor and as Arabs were in the majority and the dominating force in the government, other ethnic groups such as Kurds and Turkmen were victimized by the system. However, after 2003, religion replaced ethnicity and became dominant in government, society, and everywhere else. Consequently, the country entered a new era of epistemic violence between Shias and Sunnis, which resulted in a religious conflict. The pattern was the same, defying the testimony of others based on their religious beliefs and calling each other infidels. Neighbors killed neighbors. Friends broke their friendships after finding out that their families were not the followers of the same beliefs (ibid).

Yazidis were not exempt from this new conflict. After 2003, Yazidis were not able to visit Sunni cities because they were afraid that they would be killed, as there were many crimes against Yazidis at the time. In 2007, an interviewee's uncle, his wife and son went to Mosul to get their passports in order to leave Iraq. On their way, a group of Sunni Jihadists stopped them at a checkpoint. The guards sent the wife home to Sinjar and beheaded the uncle and his son. This woman confirmed that they captured her husband and her son after they found out that they were Yazidis. This story is one of the hundreds of similar cases that happened in that period. The Yazidis who were studying in Sunni dominated cities were forced to stop their education and move back to Sinjar. They quit their studies, their work, and they stopped keeping their official documents current. Yazidi cities are far from big city centers, so they lack universities and job opportunities (ibid).

Yazidis were not welcomed socially in Kurdish society for two reasons. First, during the Saddam regime, Yazidis were kept apart from the Muslim Kurds because Yazidi cities were not part of the Kurdistan region that was established in 1991 after the Kurdish Revolution. This geographical distance made the relationship between Muslim and Yazidi Kurds, who speak the same language and belong to the same origins, complicated. Therefore, even though after 2003 there was a major campaign in Sinjar to bring back Kurdish identity to the region, the Arab culture had already planted its seeds too deep in the Yazidi society. Once again, along with the religion, Yazidis were discriminated against and misunderstood ethnically by other Kurds (Jundi, 2020). The second reason was for the Yazidis being unwelcome in Kurdish society was the sudden rise of radical Islamic groups in Kurdistan. Those groups were not open to accepting other religious groups, especially Yazidis, because according to them Yazidis were not People of the Book. It was common for people like Mamosta Ali Bapir, the leader of one of the two biggest Islamic political parties, to tell the media that Yazidis will not enter paradise because they do not have a sacred book, and they are not Muslims. Moreover, in 2016 and on Rudaw, one of the most best TV channels in Kurdistan, he said that Yazidis who were killed by ISIS, even those who were killed fighting ISIS would not be counted *Shahid* (martyrs) because *Shahada* (martyrdom) is only for Muslims.

Other *mullahs*² were spreading ideas about Yazidis such as “Yazidis do not wash themselves for 40 years”; “they do not eat the same way we do”; “they worship the devil and they have no God”; “they are not Muslims and won’t enter paradise”; “May God put them on the right path”; and the list of similar comments goes on (ibid). Interestingly, those *mullahs* were given full freedom to spread hate speech and epistemic violence. The society has been very affected by their words in such a way that the comments mentioned above have become general thoughts about Yazidis in Kurdistan (ibid). In 2014, one of the interviewees started attending school in Sulaimani, one of the three big cities in Kurdistan. She was unaware of how the *mullahs* were talking about Yazidis or how Muslim Kurds in general thought of Yazidis, but it was not difficult for her to find out. Almost everyone at the school was eager to know whether or not Yazidis really wash themselves only every 40 years. Everyone was very sure that Yazidis worshiped the devil and that they would go to hell for not being Muslim (Awsman, 2020). One of her Muslim classmates was interviewed to find out her initial thoughts about Yazidis, and whether or not she changed her opinion.

When I was around 16 years old, I got the chance to know about Yazidi religion from the news on TV. I did not know if they worship or not and in what language they talk. All I knew was that ISIS are targeting them and kill them without even having second thought. I asked my family, and they told me to be aware of them! They worship the devil and they are very dirty, so never

² Mullah is a Muslim cleric or religious leader.

eat from them, and of course never get close to them. I did not know how to research using internet, and I wish I did (Hassan, 2021).

All these illogical and violent thoughts about Yazidis make the life of Yazidis in Kurdistan challenging, especially for those who study or work in Kurdistan. Some get offended at work and often feel inferior because of the continuous questions and bullying they get for being different in a community where the majority is Muslim. For example, one of the interviewees, who is a Yazidi and works at a supermarket in Duhok, one of the big cities of Kurdistan region, describes her daily routine at work and says that she struggles a lot with the questions that her friends ask her during shift.

I always feel offended and bullied by their questions and comments because they just do not make sense to me. They usually say that the most correct religion on the earth is Islam and as Yazidis do not have a holy book, so you do not have a way to define God. They ask me weird questions like why we have certain rituals and they think that our rituals are just nonsense. I have thought a lot about leaving my job just because of these comments and questions, but I think I have the same right like them to work, so I continued (Khalaf, 2021).

Many other Yazidis living in Kurdistan have the same issues at work as this interviewee. The misperceptions and misunderstandings that many Muslims have about Yazidis are increasing, and unfortunately, the media and education system, under religious influence, are helping in spreading this hatred and epistemic violence rather than educating people about respecting other religions and accepting differences. Kurdistan is known as one of the safest areas in Iraq, where people with different ethno-religious backgrounds live peacefully, but looking deep into the blind spots of the society, one can see worrisome trends regarding the future of the region. It is easy to show the world an all-is-well image of the society, and is hard to accept that all is not well, unless people accept, respect and acknowledge differences. Currently, Kurdistan is going through very sensitive and tough times as radical groups are getting stronger in surrounding countries. Many Kurds have incorrect knowledge about the Yazidis because this is what the society and education system teaches them. Due to a lack of interaction between Muslim and Yazidi Kurds during the Saddam regime, most of the young generation has heard of the Yazidis from television and other people. Ms Hassan thinks that if people were given a chance to communicate with each other, they would treat each other better, because this is what happened with her.

I went to the university and met Yazidi people. To be honest, they were completely the opposite of what my relatives told me, and I am happy for figuring that out myself. Now, I have close friends who are Yazidis and I know they are even cleaner than most of the Muslims, and they cook the most delicious foods. Also, they are very generous. Proud to have them in my life. As a Muslim, I am very sorry for whatever other Muslims say about

them. They probably heard about Yazidis from a relative who has no idea what Yazidism is (Hassan, 2021).

If we want to make a lasting peace, we can bring everyone together at one table and let them define themselves instead of allowing *mullahs* or people in the media to generalize and propagate the misconceptions and misunderstandings about them.

Conclusion

The world may have only come to know about Muslim-Yazidi conflict, Yazidi genocides and Yazidi persecutions after 2014, but Yazidi history can be traced back to the seventh century. Whether it is the Yazidi resistance against the forces of the second caliph of Islam Omar ibn Al-Khattab, an uprising of the Yazidi leader Mir Jafar bin Mir Hasan Dasni in 838 against the eighth Abbasid Caliph al-Mu'tasim Bi'llah in the north of Mosul (Manucharyan, 2015) or the fight against the Arabisation of Saddam Hussein, this region has always been the center of conflict and since the rise of Islam, the Yazidis have been on the receiving end. It is important to note that not only Muslims, but many researchers, scholars and theologians such as Alphonse Mingana, Peter Lamborn Wilson and others from the West have also played an important role in building the image of Yazidis as devil worshippers. Whatever the intention of these scholars, they have not done any good for the Yazidi community. Similar to other researchers, Garnik Asatrian and Victoria Arakelova in their article "The Yezidi Pantheon" mention that Sheikh Adi is behind the formation of the Yazidi community (2004). As mentioned, the term Yazidi was first used by Muslim clerics and the Muslim invaders: Yazidis existed well before the arrival of Sheikh Adi in the 12th century. Declaring Yazidis devil worshippers and negating their belief system is not only inaccurate but is also an act of epistemic violence committed by both Muslims and western scholars.

An epistemic side of colonialism is the devastating effect of the "disappearing" of knowledge, where local or provincial knowledge is dismissed due to privileging alternative, often Western, epistemic practices. [...] one method of executing epistemic violence is to damage a given group's ability to speak and be heard (Dotson 2011, p. 236).

Yazidis, as the descendants of Zoroastrians, along with Assyrians and Sabians, were the natives of the ancient Mesopotamian region. In the seventh century, during the caliphate of Hazrat Umar, when Muslims invaded this region, they discovered them and used the name Yazidis and Kurds to describe them. Since then the Yazidis have been subject to forced conversions, persecution, genocide and marginalization at the hands of Muslims. Continuous struggle and resistance of the Yazidis forced the rulers to use the religious card against them, and Yazidis were falsely accused of being devil worshipers. This was helped by the Western travelers and researchers, who spread this propaganda. Although Yazidis denied it, a lot was written about them in an attempt to prove that they were devil worshipers. Epistemic violence was used against them when they were told that they worship the devil. This accusation damaged their reputation

and they became an easy target for the Muslims. Due to this, Yazidis believe that they suffered up to 74 genocides.

None of Yazidi religious books, religious tradition or piece of evidence from Zoroastrianism contains any information that supports this accusation of Yazidis being devil worshippers. The only thing that can be found even to suggest such a mistaken idea is the presence of Malak Tawus, the supreme angel, but with the help of a planned propaganda, Yazidis were subject to epistemic violence. This is also reflected in the education system in Kurdistan and Iraq. Whoever has been in power has tried to indoctrinate the population with the help of a biased education system. People were forced to learn and follow the religion and language of the oppressors even though they had nothing to do with either. The research findings confirm the researchers' contention that the epistemic violence is inflicted on Yazidis due to their religious identity. The researchers suggest that the policy of religious tolerance and accommodation must be exercised if we want to have this world a safe place for all human beings disregard of their religious, ethnic, linguistic and cultural differences.

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