

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

bog-8

Peter Byrd Martin
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover NH 03755

July 14th 1991

Dear Peter,

I would submit to you yet another tale from deepest, darkest Kurdistan, a pending chapter in a pending book, to wit:

Among The Devil Worshipers

A journey to the throbbing center of the Yezidis at Lalesh

by Thomas Goltz

Lalesh, outside Sheikhan, Iraq:

The mean-looking man in the red beret leveled his automatic weapon at our windshield while the other, skinny fellow with two stripes but no unit designation came up to inspect our papers.

"Passport," snarled the officer from the Mukhabarat, or secret police.

The moment would have made me tense and worried a day or two before but now it seemed normal. As a matter of course, the Iraqi special forces and intelligence units would comb my vehicle and person, make a few nasty noises and then let me go. It had happened a dozen times if it had happened once before, and now it was happening again.

But with a twist.

My personal papers were in order, if not those of the car: a hijacked Nissan pick-up truck from Kuwait, it had no papers at all. But this worried me less than the fact that the two youths I had picked up in Acre as quasi-guides for this last leg of my journey through the Iraqi-controlled sector of Kurdistan were traveling on false documents. They had deserted from a Republican Guard work battalion one week before the Pentagon's smart bombs started raining on Saddam's bunkers in Kuwait, and the two were understandably made a little nervous whenever we were pulled over by a security detachment or ran into a barrier; a false wink could mean a trip to the gallows, or in Saddam's Iraq, worse.

On a main traffic artery, this did not seem to be a real problem. The eyes of the world were still on Iraq, and a few of them had lenses in the big cities and sometimes in between.

Thomas Goltz is an ICWA fellow studying the Turkic Republics of Central Asia, but who became side-tracked in Iraqi Kurdistan

Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

tcg-9

But we were no longer traveling down one of the main thoroughfares where one might hope for intervention of some sort, like by the totally useless U.N peace keepers in country.

We were a single, solitary Nissan pick-up with no papers and two internal refugees and a driver who looked for all the world to be an itinerant spy, or fool, or both: me.

And we were moving down a seldom used bi-road that represented a short-cut between the flat, hot plains between Acre and Ain Sifni and the foothills of the Zagros range, and thus totally at the mercy or whim of any Iraqi guard we might meet along the way.

It was a little scary, but still a far more pleasant route than the main Mosul-Dohuk highway through the broiling flats. Here, the air was cooler; there were trees; there were babbling brooks and singing birds. The huge, five-inch mountain grasshoppers had begun to reappear, creeping across the road like miniature monsters hybrids between a scorpion and aameleon (you had to wonder if this was a genetic trick induced by chemical bombs, but didn't want to ask).

In a word, we were back in the mountains of central Kurdistan, an area where the Iraqi check-points were set up every ten or twenty miles, where the guards knew they were unwanted occupiers in a rebellious land, and where none of the exceedingly few foreigners in northern Iraq had any right to go.

It had taken some time and thought and a lot of luck to get this far and now, faced with the penultimate Iraqi check-point just a few miles short of no-man's-land and the first Kurdish nationalist control point, I had no intention of letting the Iraqis prevent me from reaching my goal.

"Where do you think you're going, Dohuk?" snarled the security officer, referring to the main city in the allied security zone beyond his lines.

"No," I replied, "I am going to Lalesh."

"Lalesh?" the security man remarked with surprise. "What in God's name do you want to do in Lalesh?"

His voice evinced less suspicion than mystification over my destination, and I could sense that my two Kurdish guides were equally taken aback by the notion--and rightly so, for I had not informed them of this detour before setting out.

"I've come to see the Yezidis," I replied, "I've come to see Lalesh."

"What are you," the security man asked with growing suspicion, "A devil worshipper?"

This was better than being accused of being a spy, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

"No," I replied, "But I have come to see some."

"What for?"

"Because they are there," I answered, "Why don't you come, too?"

"Well," said the security man, now thoroughly confused, "Why should I?"

"Why not?"

"Yes," the man paused, "why not?"

tcg-9

It was perfect.

His curiosity had gotten the better of him and I now had an armed guard--and an officer at that--provided by the State of Iraq to penetrate the last barrier to one of the most curious religious shrines in the world--Lalesh, the throbbing heart of the "devil worshipping" Yezidis, and on the first day of their annual 40 day fast, leading up to the festival of their putative founder, Sheikh Aday Musafir.

My Kurdish guides were mute with fear and trepidation, but as the officer climbed in the back of the pick-up, I knew I had finally arrived.

"Let's go," he said from the back by banging on the cab roof with his fist, and off we went, wending out way up the narrow gorge to Lalesh.

Outsiders call them devil-worshippers, kafirs and worse, and say that they do not wash, are beyond filth and that they propagate in orgies.

Curious, then, that all the ethnic groups of the area lay claim to them as their own, hopelessly misled kinsmen:

The Arabs call them Arabs, descendents of a branch of the Umayyid Caliphs of early Islam, while nationalist Kurds maintain they represent the purest form of their own original ethnic strain.

They refer to themselves as the Ezdiyan but do not go much further, forbidden by their creed from giving information about themselves and thus used to relating what they think their most recent interlocutor (or inquisitor) wants to hear.

They are the Yezidis--members of what is arguably the most bizarre and controversial religious group in the entire Middle East, an area famous for religious intolerance, persecution and forced conversion.

Today, they number a mere 300,000. And aside from a few migrant colonies in Europe and a few pockets of assimilation-resistant co-religionists in southeastern Turkey and the Soviet Union, the majority of the world's Yezidi population are to be found in the foothills of the Zagros mountains of northern Iraq, kept under wrap and key in for decades and off-limits to all but the most persistent traveling scholar of comparative religions.

I was not one of those.

I was a johnny-come-lately Yezidologist.

You might even say that I had no right to be the first foreigner in decades to visit the tombs of Sheikh Aday at Lalesh or that of the eponymous founder of the religion, Yezid himself, in the off-pis town of Hatara Kabeer.

But I was that guy.

Almost by accident, I stumbled upon various parts of the curious sect in the allied security zone of Iraqi Kurdistan and then took advantage of the unusual political situation pertaining in the North of the country to get to some of the shrines where few have had the chance to go.

tcg-9

And, although I did not meet Mir Tahsin Chol, the Yezidi-leader sanctioned by the state of Iraq, I did spend a pleasant afternoon in Sarsenk, the exile home of his half-brother Prince Khairullah--a former flunky to the Baath regime who has now cloaked himself in Kurdish nationalist clothes.

And in addition to the Yezidis I met, I heard even more about them from others. These sources ranged from fellow Kurds who regard the Yezidis as the purest form of Kurdishness to Shiite Arabs--like the intelligence officer in the back of my truck--whose contempt and atavistic hatred reserved for Yezidis is equally on the other side of rationality.

Other gaps were filled with the unknown aid of Mr John Guest, author of the only serious book on the clan that I have found, and I can only wish that he had been with me on my trip to exactly the areas of Yezidistan where he has been unable to go.

These are, in short, my notes from the land of the Ezdiyan, a small but important section of Iraqi Kurdistan. And for once, if my information is found lacking or inaccurate, I will let the blame fall directly on my interlocutors, whose time-honored tradition of dissembling I will make responsible for any errors in my text...

In the beginning was the White Pearl of God's Essence and it was put upon the back of the Great Bird and then God created the seven ange/s, the first of whom was Azrail/Azazil--the Melek Al Malaik, the Peacock Angel--and then the rest and then came Adam and then came Eve from a bone in his shoulder...

Such is the Yezidi account of the creation of the world, differing in one essential way from those shared by the monotheistic religions of the Middle East: Azrail, the leading angel who was jealous of God's creation of Man, repented his initial fall and was forgiven and restored to his original place in the heavens:

Azazil was, or had been the devil, Shaytan, but in repenting, was no longer. To the Yezidis, he thus became a symbol of good and rather than to be feared or loathed or scorned, he was found to be deserving of praise, respect and yes, adoration.

Another school of thought has it that the Yezidis stem from the ancient religion of Sassanid Iran, Zoroastrianism, that splits the world into Darkness and Light.

Proponents of this theory of Yezidism say that it is one of the few valid attempts at explaining the presence of Evil in a universe dominated by an omniscient and all-powerful Good God; the Yezidis have merely eliminated the concept of Evil altogether, making the symbol for it--Shaytan--co-existent and identical with Good.

Like the God-fearing Hebrews of old who could not mention the name of their Yawe, Yezidis were enjoined to never mention Azazil's name, or even come close: members of the sect are to eschew all words that contain the consonants sh and t, especially in that sequence, in order to avoid mistakenly mumbling "Shaytan".

Additionally, the religion also enjoins believers to uphold a number of dietary prohibitions, familiar in theme with the

tcg-9

kosher/hilal practices of Muslims and Jews, if totally different in content: Yezidis are to eat no lettuce, for the Kurdish word for it, Khass, is uncomfortably close to the name of an early prophetess of the faith, Khassa; pumpkins, too, are off-limits but for more obscure reasons that were never adequately explained to me. Fish are not to be eaten out of respect for the prophet Jonah, while the meat of the gazelle is likewise haram because of an association with another angel-cum-sheikh. It goes without saying that the flesh of the peacock--the symbol for Azazil and indeed the primary totem of the faith--is off-limits, and some Yezidis extrapolate from this that all male birds are taboo.

Yezidis are also instructed not to urinate while standing or to perform their ablutions like Muslims, leading to the familiar and frequent charge that they do not wash; although it is not a part of their public creed, the fact remains that the Yezidi men favor long and lusty moustaches in sharp distinction to the neatly trimmed hairs allowed the pious believers of Islam: any hair that falls below the lip, according to the Muslim prophetic tradition called hadith, is haram, or unclean. Yezidis are also enjoined to wear a white, tunic-like undershirt, rather reminiscent of that worn by the heretical Sikhs of India.

Such is the sacred hagiography and code of conduct of the Yezidis--similar to and yet decidedly different from those of the three main religions of the Middle East--Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

It is more than unfortunate that these traditions have never been sanctified by the dominant religion of the region, Islam, as falling under what is religiously acceptable; for being outside the Ahl al-Kitab, or "People of the (Divine) Book" (a concept that includes Christians and Jews as belonging to divinely inspired if hopelessly mislead monotheistic religions), the Yezidis have been subject to unmitigated and violent persecution ever since the religion emerged in the mountains of central Kurdistan in the 15th century, bearing the name of a Muslim Arab Caliph who had been dead 700 years and citing belief in the prophecy of a mendicant Sufi sheikh from the Lebanon who died 400 years after that.

The early Muslim Arab Caliph was named Yezid, and the Sheikh was called Aday Musafir, and together with the unmentionable Shaytan, they are the unknowing founders of the religion of the Ezdiyan...

It is not profitable to trace a line from the Caliph Yezid to the Prophet Yezid because unless you are a Yezidi there does not appear to be any connection at all.

For the record, the historical Yezid was the son of Muawiya, the governor of Syria who founded the Umayyid dynasty in Damascus in the mid-7th century.

Yezid is better known, however, as being the butcher of Karbala--the man who in killing The Prophet Muhammad's grandson Hussein bears the brunt of responsibility for the splitting of the Muslim Ummah into Sunnis and Shiites.

But what does all this have to do with Yezidism?

tcg-9

Nothing, save one small particular: Yezid is a name that can send religious Shiites into paroxysms of pious agony and chagrin. By definition, Shiites hate Yezidis as only the irrational can--and the Shiites have usually been in the majority in areas where Yezidis live.

Still, a quick review of the time might be instructive for other reasons, and so the reader will permit me to reiterate the nuts and bolts of early Islamic history.

The mid-7th century were heady days for the expanding Muslim empire, filled with events and people whose names and image continue to dominate or influence Middle East politics even in our own day.

Following the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 643 AD, the community of Muslims elected by consensus, or Sunnah, four Khalifa, or "successors" to guide the inchoate Muslim community. Known as the four "pious" Caliphs, they were Abu Bakr, Othman, Omar and Ali.

The last was the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet and one of the first followers of his mission and there has been debate in the Muslim world for 13 centuries about why Ali was not selected as the first successor.

The proof, perhaps, is in the pudding.

For no sooner had Ali assumed the Caliphate and thus established a "royal" line of future succession (Shiiah) than he was murdered in a mosque, thus setting up a show-down between the partisans of the bereaved family of Prophet (the Shiites) and the partisans of consensus (Sunnites) who supported the fifth Caliph--Muawiya, the strong-man of Damascus.

In a series of events known by Muslims the world over, the partisans of Ali announced a rival Islamic capital at the southern Iraqi city of Kufa and invited Ali's son Hussein to join them there to reign over the community. The Sunni majority under Muawiya responded with force and quickly crushed the "royalist" rebels in Iraq.

Sadly for future Islamic unity, word of the end of the rebellion did not reach Hussein before he had set out across the Arabian desert with 60 followers and 17 family members, bound for Kufa.

He never made it.

Upon their arrival at the plain of Karbala, the proto-Shiites were met by Muawiya's Sunni forces and asked to submit. Hussein refused, and Muawiya's commander killed everyone in the small group and sent their heads to Damascus. A cleft had been made in the Muslim community that would never be healed.

And it also led to further heresies as Islamic history progressed.

Shiism first split into 12er-ism and 7er-isms, according to which sequence one believed the "hidden Imam", or Mahdi, would emerge to signal an end to time. In Egypt, the 12-er Fatamid dynasty gave birth to its own bastard step-child--Druzism in the Lebanon, a secret creed which is essentially outside fundamental Islamic belief in that adherents believe that the Mahdi already arrived in the guise of the Fatamid Caliph Hakim, a gentleman known to wander the streets of Cairo incognito until he vanished one day. In parts of Asia Minor and Syria there arose another, bizarre spin-off of Shiism--the Alawites, a mysterious mixture of pre-Christian and then heretical Christian belief mixed with repressed Shiism that elevated the person of Ali

tcg-9

above that of the Prophet and in some instances even went so far as to suggest that Ali was part of the God-head.

There have been other heresies that came and went and small elements of which remain: the 19th century's Bahai-ism ("Babism") might be regarded as an Islamic off-shoot, as could be Sikhism in northern India; other cults-cum-religions also evince elements of fractured Islamic belief, ranging from Joseph Smith and the Mormons to Ma Prophet and her Montana-based Church Universal Triumphant, the latter especially due to its attachment to the oriental prophet Al Moriyah, whoever he might be.

Again you will ask: what does all this have to do with Yezidism or even the historical person of the Caliph Yezid?

Very little.

In addition to his connection to the massacre at Karbala, the Caliph Yezid (for this is what Yezid became upon Muawiya's death) was known for his delight in the desert solitude as well as for having led the first campaign against Byzantium when the Arabs nearly captured the Byzantine capital of Constantinople. Yezid's ultimate failure left the capture of the jewel of Christendom postponed by more than 700 years, when the Ottoman Turks under Fatih Mehmet (the Conqueror) finally breached the walls of the city in 1454. That this occurred at essentially the same time as the first, public expression of "Yezidism" in deepest, darkest Kurdistan must be a totally coincidental connection and I am almost embarrassed to include the reference here.

Yezid died on November 11, 683, and the Umayyad Empire did not long outlast him.

To the East, another clan claiming relation to the Prophet through his uncle Abbass declared holy civil war against the Umayyids and the Damascene dynasty finally collapsed in 750 AD.

The Abbassids, as the new dynasty was called, established their capital at Baghdad and proceeded to mount a veritable witch-hunt of Umayyid survivors throughout the Muslim world. (One clan member did get as far as Spain where he founded a sub-dyanasty of the Umayyids which would last until the time of Isabella and Ferdinand).

As part of the anti-Umayyid policy, the graves of Muawiya, Yezid and other Umayyid luminaries were destroyed and a general defamation against the Damascene dynasty begun. For the next 300 years, the Umayyids would be officially remembered by believers not for their cultural achievements but as a clan of usurpers who had shed the blood of Hussein after seizing power from the legitimate heir to Muhammad, Ali. And the name Yezid became a red flag for the Shiite bull.

Curiously, though, the Abbassids were not Shiites per se: using the symbols and images of the martyred Ali, they achieved power; but once it was theirs they attempted to keep as much distance from direct descendants of the royal family of the Prophet Muhammad as humanly possible.

tcg-9

Again, one searches in vain for a solid connection to Yezidism, but finds none.

The Islamic world continued to expand and reached, arguably, its highest cultural achievements under the Abbassid Caliph Harun Ar-Rashid of the 1001 Arabian Nights fame.

Co-incidentally, perhaps, it was at the time of the decay and slow demise of the Abbassid dynasty in the 11th century that an obscure Sufi mendicant with claims to distant relation to the Umayyid clan moved from the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon first to Baghdad and then, in order to better perform his astatic lifestyle, to a lonely mountain valley and an area historically prone to heretical belief--be it Zoroastrianism, Manicheism or Nestorianism.

His name was Sheikh Aday Musafir, and the venue he chose for his spiritual calisthenics was called Lalesh. It soon became a gathering place for peripatetic Sufis from across the Muslim world.

There was nothing exceptional about this.

The millennium was a time when Sufism was at its peak. There were the Mevlevis in Konya, the Bektashis in Cappadocia, the Qadaries in Kurdistan and numerous other mystic brotherhoods scattered throughout the Dar ul-Islam--the "Abode of Peace" that defined the Muslim world from the Dar ul-Harb, or "Abode of War" that represented everywhere where Islam was not the dominant religion. For Islam, after three centuries of growth and development (seemingly like all organizations of this world ranging from the Catholic Church to the Communist Party) had incrementally changed from being a vehicle of spiritual renewal into being a code of conduct where form was more important than content. Believers wanted a more immediate experience of the God-head than that offered by the ossified, clerical Islam of the day and the Tariqat of Sheikh Aday Musafir represented one such means.

Like many other Sufi sheikhs of the age, Sheikh Aday put much of his spiritual rediscovery down in the form of poems. Four tracts issued by the sheikh are extant today, and they range from sober exhortations to devotees to fast, fast and fast some more, to nearly wild, love songs to the Divine.

Two other short tracts attributed to the Sheikh Aday (albeit lost from the opus for 300 years after his death in 1162) are so strange and utterly heretical that one has to suspect that the good Sufi Sheikh had nothing to do with them, and that they were the creation of another age.

Called the Black Book and the Book of Enlightenment, they form the core of Yezidi belief.

But again, when the good sheikh died there was no such thing as "Yezidism" recorded in local chronicles--the closest references coming a generation or two later when a 13th century scribe complained about "Adawis and Yezidis" dominating the Zagros mountains of Kurdistan and the Sinjar range in the desert flats between the Tigris and Euphrates making trouble for outside authority.

Even in this context, the "Yezidi" reference appears to refer more to loyalists of the house of Muawiya and the Umayyids than to a new, heterodox form of Islam. The "Adawi" reference, though, makes fairly clear that the Sufi brotherhood that had sprung up around the memory of the good Sheikh was already growing into something else entirely,

tcg-9

although none of the sources suggest just what that 'something' might be. But the followers of the Sheikh had attracted attention, and traditionally in the Middle East, attention is not what one wants.

The specific cause remains obscure--meaning probably a mixture of skipping taxes with a little plundering of Hajj pilgrimage caravans on the side--but in 1415 a military mission was mounted by the Mamlukes of Egypt to take control of the areas controlled by the followers of Sheikh Aday, who now were called th Sohbetiye--very loosely translated, the "chatters with God". With the assistance of orthodox Sunni Kurdish Beys related to the great Saladin, the Mamlukes moved in and hunted down and slaughtered all the heretics they could find, and pillaged and defiled and destroyed the tomb of Sheikh Aday Musafir at Lalesh.

Inevitably, some of the mountain men survived.

And when they emerged from their hidden caves and dens and other incognito places a decade later, there was no longer any talk about Muhammad or Ali or Hussein or Sufism or "chatting with God" or even the Holy Quran.

There was only an obsessive belief in Melek Taus--the devil turned bad turned good--and his totem form: the peacock.

Yezidism was born.

Just how and why the group selected the name of the Umayyid Caliph remains a mystery to this day.

Perhaps it was because the Yezidis wished to take physiological delight in putting salt in Hussein's wounds; another theory has it that the name comes from a royal, Zoroastrian doctor of the old Persian Shahs by the name of Yazd. Others suggest that the name is merely one of multiple distortions born of the Yezidi rule of maintaining oral histories while proscribing reading and writing--compulsive ignorance, in a word.

But the bottom line is that today, members believe that they believe in the prophecy of the Umayyid Caliph and celebrate his name and even birthday as a date on their calender.

It drove (and drives) Shiites wild.

The results were totally expectable, and the rest of Yezidi history hardly reads any better than the past: persecutions, enslavement, forced conversion and pogroms.

And with good reason.

Being a Sufi sect was bad enough in the eyes of the clerical class of mainstream Islam, but to become an apostate and reject the True Religion for a return to the (even Quran-tolerated) religions of one's forefathers was punishable by death.

And the Yezidis had gone a step further: they had devolved from being Muslims to something far worse than becoming mere kafirs: they quite literally worshipped the devil in the form of a golden peacock. More than a religious pleasure, it was a duty for Muslims to hunt out and extirpate the abomination in their midst.

It is nearly a miracle that the Yezidis survived.

tcg-9

The worst incident mentioned by Guest is known as the Soran Massacre. The year was 1832, when one Kor Muhammad, the one-eyed Ottoman viceroy from Rawnduz in eastern Kurdistan, sought revenge against Yezidi impetuosity (like their killing of one of his envoys) by attempting to wipe-out the entire sect on the eastern bank of the Tigris River across from the city of Mosul.

He nearly succeeded, and where he failed, inter-tribal faction fighting and manipulation by outside powers (notably the English through such individuals as the redoubtable Gertrud Bell and Henry Layard of Níniva fame) were there to insure that the Yezidis remained divided and ruled.

The last great division occurred early in our own century, when the princely Chol family that had picked up the pieces of the clan after the Soran Massacre was split in two by a series of violent intra-family fighting, leaving the leadership in the hands of two step-siblings, the energetic Ismael (responsible for leaking Yezidi secret doctrine to the outside world) and his iron-fisted elder sister, Mayan Khatun, who ran the clan until her death in 1957.

Mayan Khatun was succeeded by her son Tahsin Chol, the current, state-approved Mir, or "prince" of the Yezidi tribe; true to fashion, though, a half-brother, Mir Khairullah Chol, now leads a rival faction associated with the nationalist Kurdish Front.

Khairi, in fact, was the first Yezidi I ever met.

I had been traveling through the southern tier of the allied security zone outside of Dohuk with my companion and guide, General Aziz Aqrabi, and had been visiting with the 103 year old leader of the Sharafhani tribe, Abdullah Agha, when we had heard that a group of recently-returned Yezidi refugees were also down the road outside the town of Sarsenk.

Aziz said we had to go, and I obliged him.

"They are the true Kurds," explained Aziz, "In fact, I have secretly adopted the Yezidi religion as my own, not because I believe in it, but because it is our own ancient beliefs and not this Islamic nonsense propagated by the Arabs."

This was an attractive argument and Aziz added to it by noting that Judaism has become the tie that binds Jews all over the world into an ethnic bond, even if most are not religious. Why not a similar national tonic for the Kurds, also based in an atavistic faith?

We found Khairi and his coterie of Yezidi leaders sitting on the deck of an abandoned hotel which the Yezidis had claimed as their temporary abode and drinking tea and it was not long before Khairi recognized General Aziz. The great bear of a man with the flowing moustache warmly embraced the small but stout former general, and it was a fine moment to behold. Like most Kurdish leaders, they had spent an embarrassingly long time in Baghdad as Saddam's quislings and were relieved to find each other on the right side of the lines.

And, like most of the Kurds, the Yezidis were waiting--waiting for the autonomy negotiations between Baghdad and the nominal Kurdish leader, Massoud Barzani, to be signed so that they could all go home.

tcg-9

But home for the Yezidis did not mean a return to the abodes they left during the great exodus to Turkey.

Like all other Kurdish clans who had been displaced in the upheaval of March, 1991, "home" meant a return to their ancestral lands they had been forced to leave in 1975, after the collapse of the last great Kurdish revolt.

And for the Yezidis, it also meant going "home" to Kurdishness: in the last census taken in Iraq, that of 1978, the Yezidis suddenly appeared as a religious minority among the Arabs, their Kurdishness totally denied.

"To be a Yezidi is difficult in Iraq," Khairi told me, "and that difficulty has three facets: we are persecuted because we are Kurds, we are persecuted because we are not Muslims and then we are subjected to an assimilation campaign designed to change us into Arabs."

What this meant in real terms, Khairi explained, was that the Yezidis were denied even the thin ethnic rights allowed Iraq's Kurds on paper, such as elementary school instruction in their own language. Applying the rigor of inhuman logic to a very human problem, the Baath government had decided that if the eponymous founder of the religion, Yezid, was a Syrian Arab and if the main prophet of the faith, Sheikh Aday, was a Lebanese Sufi, it followed that the Yezidis were not Kurds at all but merely far-wandered Arabs and had has registered them as such in the most recent census.

"But we are Kurds," pronounced Khairi with finality.

"That is exactly what we are," came a chorus of response.

"Well," I finally summoned up the courage to ask, "Just what is Yezidism? Some people say it is that you worship--"

The word Shaytan was on my lips, but a sharp glance from Aziz prevented me from making this incredible faux pas. The Yezidi elders gathered around Khairi had noticed and maybe even expected this and looked relieved that I had not embarrassed myself or them.

"Our religion is like all other religions," said Khairi carefully, "We believe in God."

"They say that your faith derives from the original Kurdish religion of Zoroastrianism..."

"This is true."

"But you have tombs, whereas the Zoroastrians of India put the bodies of their deceased on pillars or in the high places to be eaten by birds."

"This is a difference," Khairi admitted, "But we are the same."

I did not think it wise to ask Khairi if I could see one of the traveling Sanjaks, or peacock statues that travel around the community when not stored by the local prince. Perhaps the holy icon had been left behind, and I did not want to embarrass him further with my foolish questions.

My next encounter with the group also occurred when traveling with Aziz, and also without prior design.

We had gone to the village of one of his oldest friends, a guerrilla leader who lived along the banks of the Mosul Dam Reservoir (one did not like to call it by its name, Lake Saddam) outside the town of Sumail, and along the way I noticed some peculiar, conical structures atop the rolling hills of the region.

tcg-9

"What are those?" I asked Aziz, assuming they were mesjids, or small mosques devoted to some Islamic saint or other.

"Yezidi tombs," answered Aziz, taking no real interest.

Curiosity got the best of me, and so I turned off the road and started cross-country toward the nearest one, which in the event turned out to be three; all were slightly disappointing upon closer inspection--small, white-washed conical structures with a single, stooped door leading into an empty interior--with no inscriptions to assist in determining who was buried here, or when. A knot of children playing in the area were also of little use as sources.

A second tomb complex on a more distant hill was essentially the same, save for the fact that around the tombs of the holy men had arisen a Yezidi cemetery, remarkable mainly for the fact that many of those buried there appeared to have been killed during the course of the Iran-Iraq war: their tombstones bore the likeness of an AK-47 automatic rifle and the Iraqi flag and the word Shahid, or "witness/martyr" was carved over the date of death, invariably in the mid-1980s.

But the link between the lonely, conical tombs and the presence of Yezidi communities nearby had been made and the next time I saw the curious structures from a distance I decided to investigate further, and in doing so, hit gold.

I had just crossed the Kurdish/allied security zone lines with a dubious visa and was on my way to the eastern sector when I glimpsed a number of white, conical objects some five miles East of the main Dohuk-Mosul road, illuminated by the afternoon sun.

Only this time the tombs were not standing alone atop a distant hill but were placed squarely in the middle of a sprawling community--a community, if I were to believe Khairi, that should not have been there, but moved to a concentration camp elsewhere.

The problem was getting to the place, for try as I might to find an access road across the fields, I could find nothing but a tractor track cutting through irrigation ditch after irrigation ditch, each of which threatened to take the oil pan off the bottom of the car.

(To be honest, there were two cars--I was traveling with baggage this time, some light and some heavy. The lightest--even weightless--suitcase was a Syrian-American doctor by the name of Bassam Hakim, a man who combined native Arabic and Middle East sensitivity with an American outlook and sensibility; the heavier baggage included a woman named Dawn--a pleasant but rather too-feminist lab-technician from Oregon, and a male nurse named Don who, despite a nice personality, was totally clueless about Middle East concerns--like not wearing shorts or taking off his shoes when entering mosques or showing the bottom of his feet to a host. With him was his diabetic wife, who didn't get in the way.)

But this was indeed the main road to the village of Hatara Kabeer (Hajji Fars/Vers or Hajji Lokman), a major Yezidi settlement of some 10,000 souls that had been left in tack by Saddam during the relocation project of the late 1970s, but cruelly neglected in the way

tcg-9

of all services perhaps in the hopes that a lack of electricity, water and roads would drive the residents away.

But they had stayed, and the reason for this became abundantly clear after spending five minutes in town.

Hatara Kabeer was the site of four temple-tombs, all sacred to the Yezidis: Melek Fahrattin, Sheikh Sabahtey and no less a personage than the Prophet Noah himself--the Yezidis, like all other people of the region, have their own version of the universal deluge.

But it was the fourth tomb that attracted my attention: for the simple, conical structure belonged to none other than the Caliph Yezid, the eponymous founder of the Ezdiyan. His body and spirit appear to have been miraculously transported to the site from Damascus, or from whatever desert wastes his ashes had been scattered following the Abbassid desecration of his grave in 750 AD.

Possibly as a function of its being a place of pilgrimage and thus linked to the fact that it was one of the largest, purely Yezidi communities in Iraq, Hatara Kabeer was fairly jumping with activity. Indeed, a wedding ceremony was in process, with all the men of the town and outlying districts having gathered in the public foyer associated with the tomb of Sheikh Sabahtey (a gentleman whom the Yezidi elders informed me had 'departed' over 2,000 years ago.) Removing our shoes and making proper gestures, we entered, were seated and were immediately served bitter, green Arabic coffee in tiny ceramic glasses. Formalities finished, I was allowed--no, required--to move around the room and take a series of portrait shots of every elder in the building, and then of every child outside. There was not a single request for me to send the pictures, leading to a sense that no 'tourist' had been in the place for generations. This made sense, as the town had been off-limits to foreigners at least since 1975, like most of the rest of Iraqi Kurdistan.

Filled with a sense of discovery, I decided to pursue my inquiry about the Yezidis further here, and began by asking the basic questions, and again received the standard replies.

"We are really just Zoroastrians," said the village Pir, or elder, echoing Khairi's explanation of what and who the Yezidis really were, "It is the original Kurdish religion and we are the original Kurds--all the others were converted to Islam and have thus lost their way."

Again, I found it ^acurious and attractive argument, and one I had heard before from General Aziz who felt that the only way to restore--or even initially establish--a Kurdish national identity is to embrace Yezidism in the way that Jews the world over embrace Judaism: as a symbol of their separateness and distinction, and not necessarily as an item of "faith".

From the tomb of Sheikh Sabahtey and the men's party, I was moved to a clearing in another part of the dusty village where the young-people were mixing it up with a vengeance, stomping and shouting and dancing around in a circle to the wail of the fife and the banging of the drum. Remarkably, no distinction was made between the sexes, with girls linking their arms with boys all around the circle--an unusual sight indeed in the Arab and Muslim world, especially at the village level.

tcg-9



Portrait of a Yazidi Bride in Hatara Kabeer township outside Mosul

tcg-9

The al-fresco wedding dance was being held in front of the house of the local doctor, in which the bride to be was staying and I asked to be allowed the privilege of photographing her on her wedding day.

A crush of children followed me in through the door into the spacious courtyard--green and lush and clean in comparison to the outside face of the house--and the bride, though flush and exhausted by all the attention being lavished upon her, submitted to come out of her room to have the moment recorded on film: a picture of a confused, dark-haired angel, about to be blessed by the good God Satan...

The groom, a young doctor from Hatara Kabeer but who lived in Mosul, accompanied the car through the rabbit warren of dirt and sand streets to the edge of the village to say good-bye.

"You can see what the government thinks about us," he said, "We get electricity off and on but there is no running water in the village other than that provided by people themselves by pumps and wells. They want us to leave and move to Mosul to lose our religion and identity there and become good Arabs."

"But you live in Mosul yourself."

"Yes, but my heart remains here with Yezid."

"What about other Yezidi sights around here?" I asked.

"You must go to Lalesh," he replied after a while, "It is difficult to get to, but it is the center of our belief."

It took a few days to organize (and discard my human baggage), but it was to Lalesh that I now turned to go.

The good, tarmac road led upwards from the valley floor and into a wide gorge, the slopes of which were covered with pine and dwarf fir trees as well as well-tended vineyards and orchards--figs and pit fruit like peaches and cherries as well as apple and mulberry trees. The air was cool and the ride would have been pleasant but for the presence of the Shiite Iraqi officer in the back who had the nasty habit of banging on the cab roof to get my attention before leaning over the window to shout in my ear.

"Look at this!" he howled, "These people should be moved to the desert and the orchards given over to people who praise the true God! Why did I agree to come along!"

After about a half hour of wending our way upward, the road leveled off and turned a corner, revealing what one would have assumed to be a beautiful, monastery retreat: a series of stone-block buildings shaded by plane trees surrounded the dead end road; and through the canopy of green protruded a series of four, conical domes which might have been mistaken for squat, steeple spires in any other context.

But they were not steeples or spires; they were the markers of the throbbing heart of Yedizism--tombs of the founders of the Yezidi creed, of Sheikh Aday and his closest disciples.

We were at Lalesh, the tiny Jerusalem, Rome and Mecca of the world of the devilish Ezdiyan, and all rolled in one.

"I can't stand it," muttered the officer as I parked the car, "I'm going back down."

tcg-9

The sight of so many devil-worshippers milling around apparently had gotten to him to the point that whatever security detail he had taken on in traveling with me was forgotten. I was not sad to see him beat a hasty retreat down the mountain in the first available car.

For me, though, it was the invitation to go forward, and accompanied by my two Muslim Kurdish companions, we entered the main sanctuary, looking for a guide. A sign atop the door noted that the entire complex had been restored by Mir Tahsin Chol, half-brother and rival of Khairi, with the assistance of the state of Iraq.

"Welcome," said a red-haired young man with green eyes, crossing the outer courtyard to greet us, "welcome to Lalesh."

Removing our shoes, we passed inside, careful to step over the threshold stone. Two pilgrims ahead of us had bent over to kiss it, as they would kiss every threshold stone within the complex.

After making our introductions, we followed our guide to the far side of the courtyard and the main entrance to the tomb complex; only one of the animal figures that used to grace the door--a long, black snake--remained to remind the ignorant that Yezidism has also actively rejected the anti-representationalism of Islam, which prohibits the use of human or animal form in art.

I almost began to feel sorry for the Shiite officer. The signs, symbols and even names associated with the creed were so totally anathema to his up-bringing that it was impossible for him to even be curious. It was rather as if a religious Christian were invited to attend a ceremony held by a group who called themselves "Pontius Pilotists" and celebrated their mass using every symbol loathed by followers of Christ--the snake, the pitchfork and the numbers 666.

"Welcome," came another voice, and a vaguely effeminate looking man, his waist-length hair and beard turned into braids dangling over his chest, feebly rose from his perch next to the door to greet us and accompany us on our tour of the establishment. This was the Baba Chawush, or "Gate Keeper"--a celibate gentleman who had not left Lalesh complex in over 35 years.

Immediately to our right as we entered the inner sanctum stood a large, black and rather pungent pool; it smelled of tallow, and upon my inquiry, our guide confirmed that it was used to dip holy candles.

"We call it the knife pool, or the Spring of Nasrettin," explained the green-eyed guide, "It is another name for Azrail, or Azazil--the Melek Al Malaik, the Melek Taus--and this is where he cleans his knife after he has taken one of the people from this world to the next."

By this the guide explained that any and all deaths among the Yezidis is a direct result of Satan's "knife", and thus that the waters of the pools contain the traces of all the life-blood of every Yezidi to have ever lived.

A potent baptismal brew indeed.

Beyond the pool, we crossed another threshold, careful not to tread upon it, and entered a small vestibule with a door to one side and a set of stairs leading down to the source of a spring on the other. This was the Zemzem--the same name as that of the "holy well" visited by pious Muslim pilgrims in Mecca--which rises beneath the tomb of Sheikh Aday and represents another source of holy water for the Yezidis. It was off-limits for foreigners, as was the Room of the

tcg-9

Treasury of the Merciful--the place where the "Sanjak," or peacock idol, is kept during annual festivals and holy days--and I did not think it wise to press the point and try and achieve a special allowance to see it.

The doorway beyond the vestibule opened on to another small, austere chamber, on one side of which stood a large, sarcophagus-like object behind a fenced grill, the actual size and design of the tomb obscured by the many ribbons and pieces of cloth festooned to the grill.

My guides made a quick offering as they entered--too quick for me to catch what was said or what gestures attended the invocation, but one thing was perfectly clear: we had just entered upon the holy of holies, the tomb chamber of Sheikh Aday Musafir, the Sufi mendicant from the Lebanon.

It was less a moving moment than I had expected; I liked the Yezidis, and sympathized with their suffering for their beliefs through the long history of the religion.

But here, obliged to nod sagely and reverently at the guide's every word, the whole thing seemed a little ridiculous: here was a man, Sufi mendicant or not, who had inadvertently started a veritable demon-worshipping creed, however pacific. Sad Sheikh! Rather than be esteemed for the rationality of his effort or his contribution to world philosophy, he is now held up as an example for having made a religious mish-mash in the mountains, even if he bore little or no personal responsibility for the event.

It was a sobering thought, and one no doubt shared by all the greater and lesser philosophers or thinkers of any given age who have watched, if time has eyes, their efforts be adulterated and bastardized after their deaths, or even during their lifetimes. Sheikh Aday and the Yezidi creed seemed only one of the more outlandish examples of this general trend, which might be summed up as the powerlessness of the dead over ideas.

I bowed my head and whispered a few, vaguely appropriate words, and waited for the tour to continue.

Beyond the tomb chamber of Sheikh Aday we crossed another kissable threshold and entered one of the oldest parts of the monastery--a long, redolent, vaulted chamber filled with presumably very ancient olive oil jars that had once supplied the retreat with its fuel and candle needs. At the end of the series of terra cotta jugs (the rims blackened with the crude of the ages) stood another sarcophagus, this one belonging to Sheikh Abu Bakr al Alawi--the Archangel Michael in human guise.

After making our obeisances we returned along the rasty-smelling jugs of oil through Sheikh Aday's chamber and to the vestibule area with the stairs, tracing our way back through the monastery entrance and the dank, standing pool where Melek Taus cleans his knife.

But the tour was not yet over.

Huddled around a portion of the wall sat half a dozen men with white beards and peculiar white hats, looking silent and sullen.

"Who are these men?" I asked the guide.

"They are the Pirs, the elders," he explained, "and they are fasting."

tog-9



The Baba Chauwush, or Gate Keeper at Lalesh

tcg-9

As he stood talking to me, the Baba Chawush, or braided-hair door-keeper, left our company and went over to sit with the group, immediately taking on their sad-physiognomies.

It appeared that this was the first day of the Yezidi 40 day fast leading up to the Festival of Sheikh Aday at the end of July, and that the gentlemen huddled around the small, interior courtyard were required to maintain a Ramazan-like fast every year in memory of the good Sheikh Aday's aestic habits. In addition to the prohibition of eating, drinking or smoking during the day, the group was also enjoined not to drink milk or any other milk product at night, for reasons that were not sufficiently explained to my satisfaction.

I asked for permission to take their pictures, and was granted the pleasure and now have in my possession a roll of scowling faces, representative, perhaps, of what happens when any religion enjoins its members to deny themselves food.

"Remembrance" of the God-head may be the object of such a discipline, but the public face of a hunger striker is usually pretty bleak.

Finally, it was time to go, but before that was allowed, the guide and several sub-guides invited me to tea in the monastery's kitchen area.

There, not quite separated into male and female areas, were two, long co-joined rooms, with pillows and small tables for visitors and pilgrims to relax, or eat, or sleep.

And I was not alone.

In addition to the small party of individuals that had collected itself around me and a couple of stray Yezidi pilgrims snoozing on a facing divan sat three men dressed in the white galibiyah gown worn by Arabs. If their dress gave rise to a question of the men's origin, their hawk-like faces and thin moustaches did not: they were very clearly ethnic Arabs from the South and non-Yezidis, briefed not so much to spy or keep an eye on the Yezidis in the area as simply to establish the presence of the Baath state.

Big Brother is Watching, the men said without saying a word.

They didn't need an extra syllable.

We drank our tea, and then bidding our final adieus to the monastic group, my two Kurdish companions and I ambled back over to the car to take our leave.

But a meal was in progress on the steps of the neighboring building and there was nothing else to do but stop in, even if I was able to refuse food by complaining about a funny-tummy stomach.

I did take the occasion, though, to ask a few parting questions, which sounded suspiciously similar to those I had asked when I first started my research.

Just what are the Yezidis, I asked a grey-bearded man.

We are Zoroastrians, he began, followers of Sheikh Aday.

We follow the sun, commented another.

We believe in the eternal goodness of light and abhor darkness, said a third.

We strive for freedom and democracy, a fourth added, rather incongruously.

tcg-9

A fifth man was adding his two-bits to Yezidi hagiography and belief, totally different from the others, and someone was starting to argue with another demanding that he give me "good information" and not just the lies that I wanted to hear.

It was, in fact, time to go, and collecting my companions into the car we headed back down the mountain and to the check point where we had begun where we were greeted by the same Shiite officer, this time with a sneer smeared across his face.

"See? See what I told you," he began after sticking his head inside the car, "They are Arabs, Arabs! Their name is Arab and their Sheikh is Arab and they can pretend to be what they want to be but they are Arab, Arab, Arab!"

"You might be right," I said, and turned the vehicle north and into no-man's-land.

But he wasn't, and neither is anyone else concerning the Yezidis, including me.

Of that, maybe, I am sure.

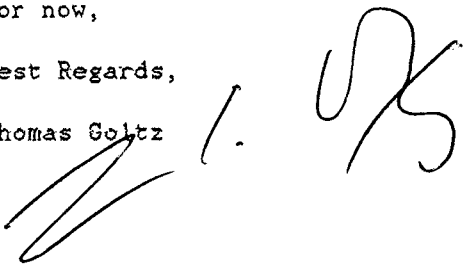
Well, there you have it--maybe. Kind of makes a boy want to start his own cult, don't it?

Incidentally, I am sending you this from Azerbaijan--always a station-stop behind in the dateline! As you might imagine, there is plenty here to report on and you will be hearing about it soonest. As it happens, it is now the Muslim Month of Muharrem, and the 10th is the Ashura--or day of Shiite atonement, and I have been following it step by step. Rather the reverse of this Yezidi business, but of that, more anon.

For now,

Best Regards,

Thomas Goltz



July 14th 1991
Nachivan, Azerbaijan SSR

Received in Hanover 08/05/91

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

THE CRANE-ROGERS FOUNDATION

4 WEST WHEELLOCK STREET

HANOVER, NH 03755

U.S.A

PETER BIRD MARTIN
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

TELEPHONE: (603) 643-5548
TELEX: 953115 SNNS HANOVER
TELEFAX: (603) 643-9599

Dear Reader,

Tom Goltz was right: When I turned this page and discovered what follows, I was taken aback. And so, on your behalf, I am cutting tcg-10 into three parts.

The first will include Tom's pages 1-11. The second will include pages 12-24. And the third will begin with the second half of page 24 and continue to the end.

There are some Goltz-readers who feel that one misses the full flavor of his writing unless one takes it in at a single gulp. (I am one of these.) If you feel this way, put aside the first two sections until all three are in hand and then set aside an hour or two for a good, solid read.

All best,



PBM