

Princes, Thieves and Death: The Making of Heroes amongst Yezidis of Armenia¹

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Abstract

This chapter discusses for the first time the production of heroic paradigms among the Kurmanji Kurdish-speaking Yezidis of Armenia and adds to the existing literature on masculinities in the Middle East and the former Soviet

¹ This article builds on a joint presentation at a BIPS/AHRC funded workshop on *javanmardi* held in 2012. In the presentation, we drew on our respective data gathered through fieldwork with the Kurmanji-speaking Yezidi community of Armenia. Christine spent a total of three months from 2005 to 2007 researching oral history and community memory, using both oral and written narrative accounts; Estelle spent a total of 15 months researching melodised narratives and songs in the years between 2006 and 2010 for her PhD dissertation in anthropology, submitted in 2010 and published in 2013.

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Transcription: We have tried to make Kurdish and Armenian words as easily pronounceable as possible without straying too far from accepted transcriptions. For Kurdish, most letters are recognisable to the English speaker, with *ç* as in English *church*, *ş* as in *shout*, *c* as in *jam*, and *x* as in *loch*.

Union, using an approach derived from the ethnography of speaking. The authors analyse *ciwanmêrî*, a ‘traditional’ paradigm resembling the classical ‘princely virtues’ and identify a contemporary parallel originating from the post-Soviet ‘thieves in law’ model. Ultimately not the values themselves, it is argued, but the enactment of heroic feelings through the specific speech genre of *kilamê ser* contributes to the production of heroes.

Introduction

In line with the theme of idealised masculinities represented in *javanmardi*, this chapter will discuss for the first time in print the production of heroic paradigms in a subaltern community, the Yezidis of Armenia – who speak Kurmanji Kurdish² and originate from Eastern Anatolia – using an approach derived from the ethnography of speaking. Our aim in this research is to add to the evolving literature on masculinities in the Middle East and the former Soviet Union.³ We argue that the paradigm of traditional virtue known as *ciwanmêrî* (which bears some resemblance to the classical Persian discourse of ‘princely virtues’) still exists and has been embodied by Cihangir Agha, a Yezidi tribal chief originating from Kurdistan of Turkey, who is also a national hero in Armenia. However, alongside this model exists a newer heroic paradigm derived from the *vory v zakone*, ‘thieves in law’, culture which developed in Soviet prisons and expanded outward during the 1990s. Our model for this newer paradigm is Çekoê Xidir, a young *mafioz*, who was widely commemorated and mourned. These two cases do not represent everyday examples of desirable masculine behaviour, but heroic paradigms attributed only to the dead. These personalities are remembered not only in everyday conversation but also in heroic songs known as *kilamê ser*

2 Kurdish is a Western Iranian language, whose major dialects are Sorani – spoken in most Iraqi and Iranian Kurdish regions – and Kurmanji – spoken in Turkey, the northernmost parts of Iraqi and Iranian Kurdistan, Syria, the Caucasus and Khorasan. Although Kurmanji speakers are more populous, Sorani has been the culturally dominant dialect since the First World War, due to a more favourable cultural climate in Iraq, which included schooling in Kurdish in the Suleymani area. State schooling in Kurmanji was confined to certain areas in Armenia. See, for example, Hassanpour, *Nationalism and Language in Kurdistan, 1918–1985* (San Francisco, 1992); G. Haig and Y. Matras, ‘Kurdish linguistics: a brief overview’, *STUF* 55/1 (Berlin, 2002), 3–14.

3 For other examples, see Ghoussoub and Sinclair-Webb, eds, *Imagined Masculinities: Male Identity and Culture in the Modern Middle East* (London, 2000); Lahouchine Ouzane, ed, *Islamic Masculinities* (London, 2006); R. Friedman Clements and D. Healey, eds, *Russian Masculinities in History and Culture* (London, 2002).

which bear many similarities in form and content to funeral lamentation. We focus not only on the qualities glorified but also on their means of production and distribution through socially constituted narratives which use different speech genres.⁴ We also consider the reasons behind the formation of these archetypes. Although the ‘thief’ paradigm is relatively easy to account for in socio-economic terms, we argue that the apparently old ‘princely virtue’ template in fact serves very contemporary concerns for the Yezidis. However, we argue that it is not the values themselves, but the enactment of heroic feelings through the specific speech genre of *kilamê ser* that produces heroes.

We wish to emphasise that the data presented here was collected before the attacks by so-called Islamic State on the Armenian Yezidis’ co-religionists in Sinjar, Iraq, in August 2014. Since the attacks and the mass abduction of women, female victims have spoken out and other Yezidi women have taken up arms and joined guerrilla groups; the subsequent development of a new internationalised Yezidi female heroism is beyond the scope of this article.

Production of heroism through discourse

Although we are considering an aspect of masculinity – defined by Connell as ‘a configuration of practice within a system of gender relations’⁵ – it is important to note that these paradigms of heroism are an idealised *representation* of masculinity, which materialises after the death of the individual. The ultimate barrier of death has the potential to affect different gender behaviours and ways of speaking; Herzfeld notes that after death has occurred, men, usually spokesmen for communities, cede their ‘voice’ to women, who command specific forms of expression in the form of lamentation.⁶ In Kurmanji-speaking communities (Northern Kurdish), including the Yezidis, expressions of grief, imagery and even the melodies used by women in their lamentations are noticeable features of eulogies recited for heroes, forming part of the ‘folkloric’ canon mainly performed by men.⁷

Among Yezidis of Armenia, stories about heroic figures are often narrated in a

4 For an account of the intimacy of the links between text and social context, see R. Bauman, ‘The philology of the vernacular’, *Journal of Folklore Research* 45/1 (2008), 29–36.

5 R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (2nd ed. Cambridge, 1993), 243.

6 M. Herzfeld, ‘In defiance of destiny: The management of time and gender at a Cretan funeral’, *American Ethnologist* 20 (1993), 243.

7 See most recently Amy de la Bretèque, *Paroles mélodisées. Récits épiques et lamentations chez les Yézidis d’Arménie* (Paris, 2013); W. Hamelink, *The Sung Home: Narrative, morality and the Kurdish Nation*, PhD thesis, University of Leiden, 2014.

melodic tone, which the Yezidis call *kilamê ser mêraniê* ('words about the hero'). According to most Yezidis Estelle met, 'heroic songs' at first functioned as lamentations. Both kinds of enunciations are described in the same manner: *kilamê ser...* ('words about...'). Some are 'words about the dead' (*kilamê ser mirya*), others are 'words about the hero' (*kilamê ser mêraniê*). In both cases, these narratives apply to dead individuals. In fact, among Yezidis of Armenia, to become a hero, one has to be a man and face a fatal and tragic destiny. As a result, heroes are always dead! Further similarities are to be found in the emotional content of both kinds of utterance as well as in their semantic and acoustic features. In the local typology of voice production 'words about...' are always associated with feelings such as loss, mourning or exile, and are considered as liminary utterances, lingering at the border between music and language. Indeed, among the Yezidis *kilamê ser* is not considered a song (*stran*), but a speech. Nonetheless, these utterances differ from daily speech (*axavtin*) semantically, poetically, and in their specific treatment of pitch (which we call melodisation).⁸

A *kilamê ser mirya* performed at the deceased's bedside can be remembered and performed outside of the ritual context. By doing so, words intoned over the coffin during funerals transform the dead body into an exemplary figure and are converted little-by-little into heroic songs. This is particularly true in the case of the violent and/or tragic death of a man. But another important way to become a hero is to have a big family (sisters, daughters-in-law, sons, nephews, etc.) and more generally a social network who can recount the individual's death in melodised speech. Removed from the funeral context, exemplary 'words about the dead' still recall the deceased, but as they spread outside the household and the village, they become more and more autonomous and, just like epics, constituents of a shared Yezidi culture. The main difference is that epic narratives are not attached to their specific context of enunciation. The topic of epic narratives pertains to heroes who died a long time ago, in a faraway land, and with whom the narrator does not have personal links.

Besides the *kilamê ser*, which were the subject of Estelle's research, we drew on examples from other forms of discourse perhaps more familiar to the readers. Christine's participant observation elicited many comments and anecdotes about Cihangir Agha within the context of ordinary 'talk', a rich source not only of

⁸ For a detailed analysis of the local typology of vocal production, see Amy de la Bretèque, *La Passion du Tragique: Paroles Melodisées chez les Yézidis d'Arménie*, PhD Thesis, Paris X, Nanterre, 2010; idem, 'Le pleur du *duduk* et la danse du *zurna*. Typologie musicale des émotions et fêtes calendaires dans la communauté yézidie d'Arménie', *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica* 56/2 (2011), 385–401; idem, *Paroles mélodisées* (2013).

embedded anecdotes but also of reflections on morality and identity.⁹ Formal oral history interviews, especially those conducted with Cihangir Agha's son Suren Agha, have also been studied, alongside published articles by Yezidi writers. The 'ethnography of speaking' approach, pioneered by Dell Hymes, considers socially constituted texts, which may be written or oral, and examines them within their social context with respect to form, content and pragmatics (the latter encompassing production, diffusion and reception).¹⁰ We use as a starting point the notion of text defined by linguistic anthropologists Karen Barber and Richard Bauman as a constructed piece of discourse rendered detachable from its context, an approach which allows us to consider both oral and written material. We show how these texts, which here include not only the heroic *kilamê ser* but also the more humble anecdotes and family stories, are produced, circulated and used. Barber maintains that texts can serve as a medium for the crafting of new selves: our analysis examines both continuity and innovation in heroic paradigms which are intimately linked to the Yezidi identity.¹¹

Producing the heroic paradigm: studio recordings

In the past 20 years it has become more and more common for Yezidis to film funerals.¹² Along with recordings of weddings, families keep recordings of funerals in memory of the deceased. These recordings are often duplicated and sent to villagers who are in 'exile' – i.e. abroad¹³ – who could not attend the funeral. The post-Soviet period is indeed characterised for the Yezidis of Armenia by a massive emigration (mostly to Russia, Ukraine and Germany). The links with the village

9 For a sensitive analysis of anecdote and other forms of talk, see N. Ries, *Russian Talk: Culture and Conversation during Perestroika* (Ithaca and London, 1997).

10 Bauman, 'The philology of the vernacular'.

11 K. Barber, *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics: Oral and Written Culture in Africa and Beyond* (Cambridge, 2007), 22; 103–9; 150–61.

12 This practice has existed at least since the 90s. During fieldwork conducted between 2005 and 2010, Estelle watched video tapes recorded by families from 1995.

13 On the Yezidi understanding of the concept of exile as opposed to the household or the village, see Amy de la Bretèque, 'Chants pour la maisonnée au chevet du défunt: La communauté et l'exil dans les funérailles des Yézidis d'Arménie', *Frontières* 20/2 (2008); idem, *Paroles mélodisées*. The cultural importance of exile on a larger geographic scale is explored by C. Delaney, *The Seed and the Soil: Gender and Cosmology in Turkish Village Society* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1991); H.G. Delaporte, 'De l'enterrement à la fête, Parcours d'un texte funèbre en Épire. Grèce', in F. Dupont, C. Calame, B. Lortat-Jacob, and M. Manca, eds., *La Voix Actée. Pour une nouvelle ethnopoétique* Kimé (Paris, 2010); and B. Fliche, *Ghurba/gurbet: Variations autour de l'exil* (Paris, 2003).

are strongly kept, however, in particular where funerals are concerned. Even now, the ‘exiled’ members of the community hope to be buried in their particular village in Armenia (it is much more common, and less tragic, to get married in ‘exile’ than to be buried in ‘exile’). And they also very often go back to the village for the ‘Graveyard Day’ commemorating the dead in June or September. But when it is impossible for the ‘exiled’ villagers to return and attend funerals, the family sends a recording to the relatives abroad.¹⁴ As a result, this massive emigration has provided the funeral ritual with a new domain, surpassing borders and timescales.

Nowadays a *kilamê ser* performed locally for the deceased may be spread in two ways. First, as we explained, funerals are filmed by families (and sent to the relatives who live abroad). And second, members of rich or influential Yezidi families may have their *kilamê ser* recorded in studios by professional musicians and distributed as CD compilations on street-markets in Yerevan and in Russia. This use of new formats (mostly mp3 or video clips) for melodised speech accelerates its independence from a local context. They enable a wider dissemination, thus transforming this phenomenon in a regional-political process.

We now proceed to give a general account of *ciwanmêrî* in Kurdish society in the 19th and early 20th centuries. After a brief account on the life of Yezidis in Armenia, we describe the salient points of the life-story of Cihangir Agha (Cangîr Agha) as told by Yezidi writers, family and community memories given in conversation, and his commemoration through a monument and a *kilamê ser* sung in his memory whose text has been collected by Estelle. Afterward, we draw further on Estelle’s research to examine the construction of a new kind of heroism, the ‘thief in law’, through the texts commemorating Çekoê Xidir.

The *ciwanmêrî* paradigm

Ciwanmêrî, sometimes abbreviated to *camêrî*, is obviously the lexical Kurdish equivalent of *javanmardi*, though a comparison between the two is beyond the scope of this article. The term is still used in secular and modern contexts which are very different from the more classical environment normally associated with *javanmardi*. There is very little scholarship on either its historical or contemporary meanings in Kurdish; whilst gender is certainly becoming an important topic in

¹⁴ More recently, mobile phones have found their way into funeral rituals. People who live abroad tend to attend funeral rituals through applications on their mobile phones (listening to laments and sometimes even performing them). Members of the audience frequently takes pictures of the dead and send them to the relatives via SMS/MMS.

Kurdish studies, most writings so far have dealt with the performance and construction of femininity, the honour system of *namûs* which deals primarily with relationships between men and women and the constraints placed on women's sexual behaviour, as well as the problem of violence against women currently prevalent in Kurdistan of Turkey and Iraq.¹⁵ For the moment – though probably not for long, because Kurdish studies is a fast-evolving field – very few studies deal specifically with masculine codes of behaviour or with concepts of honour such as *qedir* and *qîmet* (social worth and respect), which do not necessarily foreground relations between the sexes. However, works on anthropology and oral history present us with many examples of Kurdish discourse on manly virtue. These tend to occur in discussions on the virtues and faults of local notables, landowners and chieftains.

Denise Sweetnam, who based her 'cross-cultural' guide to Kurdish culture on consultation with Kurds from across Turkey, Syria, the Caucasus and Northern Iraq, translates *ciwanmêr* to 'gentleman';¹⁶ a useful definition, since it may also be a comment on personal comportment. Edmund Leach notes that, because of his personal behaviour, a local *agha* in Northern Iraq was much more respected for his 'manliness' than the chieftains who outranked him in wealth and conventional social status. Martin van Bruinessen draws a distinction between a Turkish *ağa*, who is 'the rich man of the village' and the Kurdish *agha*, who rules but may be poor.¹⁷

Generosity is one of the keynotes of *ciwanmêrî*. Cited by van Bruinessen, the British political officer Rupert Hay (who worked in Iraq during the British mandate), writes: 'It is on his guesthouse that a chief's reputation largely depends. The more lavish his hospitality, the greater his claim to be called a *piao* or man.'¹⁸ Van Bruinessen continues:

15 E.g. see R. Aras, *The Formation of Kurdishness in Turkey: Political Violence, Fear and Pain* (London, 2014); C. Hardi, *Gendered Experiences of Genocide: Anfal Survivors in Kurdistan-Iraq* (Farnham, 2011); A. Fischer-Tahir considers the construction of both femininity and masculinity in *Brave Men, Pretty Women? Gender and symbolic violence in Iraqi Kurdish urban society* (Berlin, 2009); Gendered masculine memory is explored in A. Fischer-Tahir, 'Gendered memories and masculinities: Kurdish Peshmerga on the Anfal campaign in Iraq', *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 8/1 (2012), 92–114.

16 D. L. Sweetnam, *Kurdish Culture: A Cross-cultural Guide* (Bonn, 2004), 24.

17 M. Van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State: The Social and Religious Structures of Kurdistan* (London, 1992), 127, n. 58.

18 W. R. Hay, *Two Years in Kurdistan. Experiences of a Political Officer 1918–1920* (London 1921), 47, cited in van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State*, 127 n. 59. Although it is a point of honour that the hospitality of a *ciwanmêr* should never cease, performance of *ciwanmêrî* is more complex than displays of unlimited lavishness (Leach, *Social and*

In Kurmanji (Northern Kurdish) there are two forms that correspond to the Persian ‘mard’: ‘mêrd’ and ‘mêr’. The first means generous, the second means ‘man’, but with strong overtones of ‘courageous’. An *agha* must be both *mêr* and *mêrd*.¹⁹

Despite variations in terminology, association of both generosity and courage in formulations of manly virtue is a common feature across Kurdish-speaking regions. The ‘courage’ or *mêr* aspect of this nexus of masculine virtues encompassed by *ciwanmêri* is *mêrxasî*, which is a key part of Cihangir Agha’s persona. In fact, it may be more accurate to say that he is more of a *mêrxas* than a *camêr* (*ciwanmêr*); however, the two notions are closely connected and often expressed through the same repertoires of behaviour. Another word which is very close in meaning is *xweşmêr*, which is heard in the dialect of Caucasian Yezidis. *Aghas* and tribal leaders were responsible for the guest-house (called *dîwanxane/ode*) – formerly an important social space – and obviously, for protecting their clan or tribe and enhancing its prosperity, as an extension of their own personal capital. Sometimes this was done by acquiring persons or wealth from other groups – sources show that tribal population waxed and waned considerably.²⁰

Also crucial is the leader’s function in regulating the community, in making judgments when petitioned by those of lower social status, and in meting out punishment for transgressive behaviour. A particularly rich source of relevant anecdotes is Zaken’s varied collection of oral history interviews with Kurdish Jews from Northern Iraq living in Israel.²¹ They recalled the late 19th and early 20th centuries in a region not very far from Cihangir Agha’s home in Eastern

Economic Organization of the Rowanduz Kurds, London, 1940, 28, cited Van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State*, 87). However, there is also a responsibility on the guest, especially a person known to the host, to respect the host’s dignity by not making claims on the host’s hospitality which are disproportionate to the guest’s status, or which might cause the host any discomfiture. In modern, urban society as much as in the ‘old’ village environment, a dignified guest knows when to visit, where to place him- or herself, and what kinds of gifts to bring. Properly conducted behaviour honours both parties. For ‘generosity’, see Sweetnam, *Kurdish Culture*, 7–22. For ‘hospitality’, see *ibid.*, 23–58. For a discussion on contemporary gender discourse and performance in Iraqi Kurdistan, see Fischer-Tahir, *Brave Men, Pretty Women?*

19 Van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State*, 87.

20 Van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State*, 50–132; on a specific example, the Fuqara’ (Feqîran) of Sinjar, see N. Fuccaro, *The Other Kurds: Yazidis in Colonial Iraq* (London, 1999), 62–65.

21 M. Zaken, *Jewish Subjects and their Tribal Chieftains in Kurdistan: A Study in Survival* (Leiden, 2007).

Turkey. In rural areas, outside the control of government administrators, Jews living under the protection of a local *agha* were said to *belong* to that *agha*. A number of anecdotes included incidents where ‘their’ *agha* punished those who had stolen from or molested the Jews, either by insisting on reparation, or if the offenders were members of his own community, by public humiliation. The cordial relations described were not simply due to philanthropy on the *aghas*’ behalf; within the system of values, a manly *agha* would view attempts by other tribal leaders or urban administrators to interfere with ‘his’ Jews as an insult to his own honour, the maintenance of which required decisive action. Offenders against the Jews who were beaten, fined or humiliated paid in public with their own dignity for the insult proffered to the dignity of the *agha*.²²

Cihangir Agha: traditional *camêr* and post-Soviet hero

Unlike the Muslim *aghas* recalled by the Jews, Cihangir Agha was a Yezidi. This religious minority, almost entirely Kurmanji-speaking, now numbers several hundred thousand souls worldwide. The largest communities live in Northern Iraq, where the most holy sites are located; until the First World War, however, many lived in Eastern Anatolia, forming Yezidi sections within wider Kurdish tribal confederations around Kars, Van and Doğubayazıt. Most Yezidis migrated from the Ottoman Empire into Transcaucasia in times of crisis, especially during the Russo-Turkish war of 1828–29 and (alongside many Armenians) in 1918; this last migration, on a much larger scale than previous ones, included Cihangir Agha and his clan.

Yezidis in Armenia

Much has been written elsewhere on the origins and intricacies of the Yezidi religion, which lies beyond the scope of this chapter.²³ However, to contextualise our contemporary Yezidi hero-cults, we must outline the position of Yezidism in the late Ottoman Empire (when Cihangir Agha was active) and in more recent

²² Ibid., 127–84, for many anecdotes illustrating different aspects of the relationship between Kurdish *aghas* and ‘their’ Jews.

²³ See P. G. Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism: Its Background, Observances and Textual Tradition* (N.Y. Lampeter, 1995); idem, *Yezidism in Europe: Different Generations Speak about their Religion* (Wiesbaden 2009); P. G. Kreyenbroek and K. J. Rashow, *God and Sheikh Adi are Perfect: Sacred Poems and Religious Narratives from the Yezidi Tradition* (Wiesbaden, 2005).

debates on Yezidi identity and religious origin. It is safe to say that their religion is highly syncretistic and its belief system probably derives from an ancient Iranian faith somewhat akin to Zoroastrianism (or possibly based on a 'heretical' derivative of Zoroastrianism)²⁴ with many observable elements of Islam (especially Sufism), Christianity, Gnosticism and others, interwoven in a highly complex fashion.²⁵ Yezidis have a system of religious status groups determined by birth; traditionally they marry within these groups and do not practise exogamy at all. For centuries they were not viewed as 'People of the Book', though by the end of the Ottoman period they acquired some official status under the *millet* system.²⁶ Nevertheless the Ottoman government made many attempts to control them, culminating with the appointment in 1892 of a provincial governor, Omar Wahbi Pasha, who initiated programmes of forced conversion to Islam with the aim of forming Yezidi Hamidiye units.²⁷ Under the CUP (Committee of Union and Progress), various plans were developed for the different *millets*; although Muslim Kurds were considered potentially trustworthy citizens who were nevertheless in need of some civilisation, for Yezidis the policy implied integration through conversion in the longer term.²⁸ After the great rupture of the First World War, those Yezidis who crossed into Armenia encountered different social policies. In the Soviet Union, communities were marked by 'nationality' rather than religious creed (though in the early years at least religion was not entirely disregarded).²⁹ Yezidis were considered 'Kurds' alongside the Muslim Kurds already living in Armenia; after 1926, this classification was reflected in Soviet census figures

24 Cf. P. Crone, *The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran* (Cambridge, 2012).

25 Two striking features of Yezidism are belief in the reincarnation of the Seven Holy Beings (who serve God) and the importance of purity, which is expressed in a social order of endogamous castes and many taboos concerning food, dress and personal habits. See Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*.

26 See J. S. Guest, *Survival among the Kurds: A History of the Yezidis* (London, 1993), 104–5 for the 1849 edict negotiated, among others, by Layard.

27 Guest, *Survival among the Kurds*, 134–44; C. Allison, *The Yezidi Oral Tradition in Iraqi Kurdistan* (Richmond, 2001), 94–97.

28 F. Dündar, 'L'Ingénierie ethnique du comité union et progrès et la turcisation de l'Anatolie (1913–1918)', (PhD thesis, EHESS, Paris, 2006), 379, cites a document itemising the Yezidis as a *mezhep* of the Kurds alongside Sunnis and Kizilbash, and therefore deemed assimilable.

29 However, the issue of religion was not disregarded. For the travails of those attempting to define the terms of the 1926 Soviet census, see F. Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge & the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca, 2005), 108–23. Confessional group and mother tongue (itself not easy to define) were seen as important elements of nationality (both *nationalnost'* and *narodnost'*) at this point.

which no longer distinguished Kurdish peoples based on their religion.³⁰ Since both Yezidis and Kurds were members of the Kurdish ‘nationality’, distinctions were not in general made between their cultural productions.³¹ Folkloric songs and stories broadcast on Radio Yerevan were simply labelled ‘Kurdish’. As with many of the nationalities of the Soviet Union, Kurdish cultural production in Armenia underwent an eclipse in the late 1930s, but resumed in the early 1950s.³²

However, during the late 1980s and early 1990s, when Armenia became independent and the Karabagh ‘problem’ deteriorated into armed conflict, the prevailing anti-Muslim discourse characterised Kurdish Muslims as suspect, in common with Azeris and Turks in general. Almost all Muslim Kurds left Armenia, but the Yezidis negotiated the issue in different ways, dividing themselves between those who claimed Kurdish nationality and Yezidi religion, and those who considered the Kurdish heritage and Islam to be interconnected and claimed that as Yezidis they belonged to a separate *ethnie* (calling their language not Kurmanji – which was Kurdish – but ‘Ezdîkî’). According to the ‘Ezdîkî’ camp, long-felt and legitimate Yezidi claims to a separate identity had been repressed by the Soviet system; ‘Kurdish’ Yezidis, by contrast, asserted that the problem was new and a product of the political climate generated by the Karabagh war.³³ The schism was bitter in the early 1990s and the most notorious violent incidents occurred in this period.³⁴ The situation is now much calmer; both sides interact and attend each

30 There were probably some 40–50,000 Kurdish speakers in the Caucasus for most of the Soviet period; D. Müller, ‘The Kurds and the Kurdish language in Soviet Azerbaijan according to the All-Union Census of December 17, 1926 (A contribution to the history of the so-called “Red Kurdistan”’, *Journal of Kurdish Studies* 3 (2000), 61–84. The 1959 census listed 59,000 ‘Kurds’ in the USSR, with 26,000 in Armenia. See K. M. Chatoev, *Kurdy Sovetskoi Armenii. Istoricheskij Oчерk (1920–1940) (The Kurds of Soviet Armenia. A Historical Sketch)* (Yerevan, 1965), 9; T.F. Aristova, *Kurdy Zakavkaz’ja (The Kurds of the Caucasus)* (Moscow, 1996), 19.

31 A typical example is O. Celil and C. Celil, *Zargotina K’urda (Kurdish Oral Tradition)* (Moscow, 1978) where ‘Yezidi *qewls* and *beyts*’ (religious poems) form a sub-section of their larger work on Kurdish folklore.

32 For further details see C. Allison, ‘Memory and the Kurmanji novel: Contemporary Turkey and Soviet Armenia’, in P. G. Kreyenbroek and C. Allison, eds., *Remembering the Past in Iranian Societies* (Wiesbaden, 2013), 139–218.

33 J. Flint, *The Kurds of Azerbaijan and Armenia, Kurdish Human Rights Project* (London, 1998), 77–83.

34 There are two notorious events – the murder of Yezidi ‘pro-Kurd’ paediatrician Seid Iboyan – see G. Lennox Lennox, *Fire, Snow & Honey: Voices from Kurdistan* (Halstead, NSW, 2001), 418–23 – and the celebration, in which Yezidis participated, of the capture of the (still disputed) Lachin corridor, after the ethnic cleansing of its partly Kurdish population.

other's celebrations. However, tensions still persist, especially on matters such as education.³⁵ Radio programming remains divided between broadcasts in 'Ezdîkî' and Kurdish (Kurmanji).

Although the Yezidi community in Armenia remains deeply divided on the question of identity, local politics are complex. Armenia does not have the resources of her Transcaucasian neighbours; Yezidis, never a high-status community, have been hit hard by the economic situation in the South Caucasus over the past twenty years. Not only are festivals and celebrations organised by one side or the other often attended by those whose 'public' allegiance lies elsewhere, but Yezidi citizens may seek help from politicians or notables representing the 'other' faction if it promises a higher chance of success.³⁶ Like their Armenian neighbours, most families find themselves scattered over wide distances, with many earning a living in Russia, Ukraine, Siberia or Western Europe.³⁷ With the young members of the community so widely scattered and many exposed to urban life far from home, elders fear for the survival of the community.

The life of Cihangir Agha: written histories

Cihangir Agha is remembered in Armenia mainly for his role at the battle of Sardarabad. However, he is only mentioned in passing in the standard accounts of the battle; most of the detailed sources on his life have been written by Yezidi scholars during the post-Soviet period, using data from oral history. In our own experience, knowledge of tribal genealogy, chronology and the places of origin in Turkey remain strong within the community. In this research we have drawn on a book by Tharê Emer Abasyan,³⁸ who makes a distinction between Yezidis and Kurds, and an online account from Eskerê Boyîk,³⁹ a well-known writer in the

35 In 2008, Christine was told that schoolbooks in 'Ezdîkî' designed by senior members of the 'Ezdîkî' side of the community had been rejected by schools in Aparan district, which continued to use Soviet-era learning materials in Latin and Cyrillic scripts.

36 A member of a Yezidi family on the 'Kurd' side did not hesitate to approach Aziz Tamoyan, leader of the 'Ezdîkî' movement (again, our term – he called his organisation the World Council of Yezidis), for support in a dispute with a neighbour. He duly received aid; it was explained to Christine that regardless of political position, Tamoyan was a good and conscientious advocate for all Yezidis in such matters (personal conversation, summer 2006).

37 For a map showing Yezidi settlements across the former Soviet Union, see K. Omarkhali, *Jevidizm: iz glubiny tysjacheletii (Yezidism: From Deepest Millennia)* (St. Petersburg, 2005).

38 T. E. Abasyan, *Cangîr Axa* (Yerevan, 2005).

39 E. Boyîk, 'Êla Zuqurya' (2006) <http://www.yeziden-colloquium.de/inhalt/kurdish/boyik_einleitung.htm> [accessed 13 March 2014].

Kurdish diaspora, first published in an Armenian literary journal. Both writers cite their oral sources at many points and cover much the same ground. Written in Kurdish and published locally, Abasyan's book, whose preface declares its intention to teach younger generations about their heritage, is of course more detailed. However, we favour Boyîk's account. Aimed at national audiences, it was written first in Armenian (thereby addressing a wider audience) and then published in Kurdish online. It clearly aims to capture the most salient points of Cihangir Agha's account and is thus more revealing of the public myth.⁴⁰ It is this myth which is our focus, rather than a correct and balanced historical understanding of religious politics at the end of the Ottoman Empire.

Boyîk presents a picture of a steadily worsening relations between the Yezidis and the Muslim Kurdish tribes throughout the nineteenth century, and attributes this to the Turkish government and military forces. He recounts the death of Cihangir Agha's grandfather in about 1830, also called Cihangir but known as Midur Agha, who was poisoned by the rulers of the *vilayet* at a military gathering, an act which intended 'to sow enmity among the Kurdish tribes'.⁴¹ Later on, the accounts are dominated by conflict with the Hamidiye troops of irregular Kurdish cavalry⁴² and attempts to force Yezidis to convert under duress, which reached their peak under Omar Wahbi Pasha in 1893 when the Yezidi Mir (the paramount prince) in Iraq converted and the shrine of Lalish was seized, causing consternation and disbelief among Anatolian Yezidis.⁴³

Both Boyîk and Abasyan note the shrewdness and foresight of Khetiv (Khatib) Agha, the leader of the Zuquri tribe of Yezidis and son of Midur Agha. Cihangir,

40 We used the Kurdish online version here, rather than the earlier Armenian version published in the literary periodical *Grakan Tert*.

41 Boyîk, 'Êla Zuqurya', 2–3.

42 For a detailed study of the Hamidiye, see J. Klein, *The Margins of Empire: Kurdish Militias in the Ottoman Tribal Zone* (Stanford, 2011).

43 Boyîk, 'Êla Zuqurya', 4, includes the following anecdote:

They [the provincial governorate] told the Yezidis that the Mir of Sheikhan [the paramount prince of the Iraqi Yezidis] was converting with the Yezidis of Lalish and Sinjar and called on all the Yezidis to convert and take up Islam. The leaders encouraged the Yezidis to choose three men who would go to the Mir and see for themselves. Three were chosen but were arrested at Sivas, on the way to Iraq. One escaped but the other two were arrested and told to convert and return to deceive the Yezidis, on pain of death. One converted, but the other, Pir Haji, died calling on the Yezidi holy being, Sultan Êzdi. The man who had escaped told the Yezidis of Sinjar who buried Pir Haji in Yezidi sacred earth; the other returned home and confessed all but his son handed him to the Yezidi authorities, who had him killed.

For the events surrounding Mir Ali Beg's conversion, see Guest, *Survival among the Kurds*, 133–44.

his second son, was born in 1874 and grew up between Lake Van and the Iranian border. Khetiv Agha died between 1904 and 1906, having spent years consolidating the wealth of the tribe. In the end, foreseeing future difficulties, he advised Cihangir to use his wealth to buy horses and weapons and train good cavalry fighters.⁴⁴ Moreover, Boyîk observes, his influence undermined the government's attempts to sow disunity among Kurdish tribes.⁴⁵

Boyîk's initial character-sketch of Cihangir sets out the key virtues of the tribal leader clearly: 'Even in his childhood, he distinguished himself among the children of (Khetiv) Agha by his courage, adeptness and acumen... He knew no fear. He did not accept aggression, injustice, or enslavement.'⁴⁶ To this he adds truthfulness, lack of affectation, and pure and honourable behaviour. On winter nights in his childhood, we are told, he used to sit in his father's hall with 'storytellers and greybeards' and hear tales of heroism, *mêrxweşî û qehremanî*, among his forefathers. 'He wanted to be like them.'⁴⁷ Most of the episodes illustrate one or another of these virtues.

Cihangir took his father's advice, sold most of his livestock and bought horses in Aleppo and firearms from his Russian and Armenian contacts. Some notable skirmishes took place. During one surprise night-attack all his village guards were killed; he and his wife (a determined soul named Almast) defended their house with limited weapons and ammunition, but he possessed the presence of mind to taunt the enemy into challenging him verbally so that he could identify their position and the marksmanship to strike them down.⁴⁸ On another occasion, he was attacked by Hamidiye cavalry whilst burying his brother Temer (a shocking intrusion as funerals are especially sacred for Yezidis); Boyîk stresses that Cihangir was obliged to leave the corpse behind to fend off the attackers and return later, and that this incident made him decide to leave his village to join his wife's clan by the Iranian border.⁴⁹ Around this time Cihangir strengthened his links with the Armenian leader Andranik Ozanian and the Russian military. He fought off Kurdish tribal leaders, Hamidiye forces and the Ottoman military with his Armenian allies at the battle of Dercemed (the subject of a song to be presented later in the chapter),⁵⁰ before moving onward with his Yezidi followers

44 Boyîk, 'Êla Zuqurya', 5.

45 Ibid, 4.

46 Ibid, 5.

47 Ibid, 5.

48 Ibid, 6.

49 Ibid, 7.

50 Ibid, 8.

and some Armenians into the Russian-controlled zone. *En route*, their column was ambushed in a steep gorge which was too narrow to allow the Yezidi fighters to defend their families. Boyik does not question the leader's strategy in this instance but moves swiftly to a heroic anecdote. Cihangir Agha found himself isolated, fighting alongside a young Armenian. The boy, Misak, gave him his last bullets, saying that if he were killed it did not matter, but that if Cihangir Agha were killed, all would be lost. And Misak was killed, but Cihangir Agha managed to kill a Turkish commander, gaining a breathing-space for his forces to regroup. They limped on with almost all their wealth gone and many of their families lost, and years later Cihangir Agha recalled how that young man's death weighed on his conscience.⁵¹ This time they settled in the Russian-ruled Kars province, and united forces with the Yezidi Usib Beg of the Heseni tribe.

In 1917, Russian forces withdrew from Kars, and the Turkish army began to advance, hoping to reach Baku and secure territory across the South Caucasus. Armenian soldiers formerly serving in the Russian armies (which included Andranik's forces) hastily regrouped in the area, their irregulars fighting alongside and escorting the retreating lines of refugees. Cihangir Agha, Usib Beg and Andranik fought at Kars and Sarikamiş but were pushed back across Transcaucasia. The offensive continued even as peace talks in Georgia had begun. While Turkish columns advanced from different directions, one of Cihangir Agha's missions was to blow up the bridge over the Araks at Markara, in a bid to prevent the Turkish forces arriving from the south from uniting with their compatriots. Meanwhile two other Turkish columns were heading for Yerevan, with a view to capture a strategic railway line leading into Persia; each took a different route around Mount Aragats. Only one troupe arrived at Sardarabad (to the south-west of Yerevan) and joined the battle in May 1918, but even the addition of this one column was enough to outnumber the Armenian forces. Cihangir Agha, we are told, was dismayed at the disarray in the Armenian forces; he quickly noted the Turks' weak points and recommended they attack at daybreak. Without receiving consent from the Armenian commander, he and his horsemen attacked the enemy; we are told that he did this through solicitude for his horsemen, knowing if the enemy won, not a single horseman would be spared.⁵² The battle was desperate and bloody, but the Armenians prevailed.

Victory at Sardarabad could only last as long as Turkish forces remained at Bash Aparan (on the opposite side of Mount Aragats from Yerevan), held in an

51 Ibid, 9.

52 Ibid, 11.

uneasy stalemate with the Armenian general Dro (Drastamat Kanayan). For Cihangir Agha, as the Yezidi sources explain, this was a burning issue, as the Turks had occupied Yezidi villages near Aparan, and although they met with no resistance from the populations, they massacred civilians of all ages; some of his 100 or so horsemen came from these villages.⁵³ Having ridden in haste to Bash Aparan, he launched an attack without receiving Dro's permission; the enemy fled, leaving behind their heavy artillery.⁵⁴ After the victory, Cihangir Agha settled there, in the village of Cerceris (Dêrik) and distributed his forces among the Yezidi villages.

Cihangir Agha did not fare well under Communism. Foreseeing the difficulties inherent in staying, Andranik left for the US in 1919.⁵⁵ According to several sources, Andranik encouraged Cihangir Agha to leave too, but he refused to leave his people behind.⁵⁶ Despite his excellent contacts amongst elite members of the Armenian party, Cihangir Agha was unable to survive 'dekulakisation' and along with many others, he was exiled in 1938. His death is surrounded with mystery, but it appears to have happened in Saratov in 1943.⁵⁷ For his family, the absence of a body and a grave is disastrous as it leaves them without a focus of ancestral commemoration, a crucial part of the contemporary performance of Yezidism.

Cihangir Agha as an Armenian national hero

Cihangir Agha's name was rarely mentioned in public discourse for much of the Soviet period. After the re-establishment of Kurdish cultural production in the 1940s, the trauma of the Great Patriotic war continued to resound through the 1950s and into the 1960s. Dominant themes were stories of war and patriotism and also of internationalism.⁵⁸ After the 'Thaw' of the 1950s, developing dis-

53 In 1918, according to Yezidi sources, about seventy men were massacred in cold blood in Camûşvan village (now Alagyaz) alone, while those who could sought sanctuary in the clefts of the mountain. Meanwhile their goods were plundered (Boyik, 12). Heciê Cindî, who lived through this as a child, remembered it vividly, as his daughter recalled (Christine's interviews: with villagers of Ortachiya, Summer 2005; with Ferida Heciyê Cindî, Summer 2007).

54 For an Armenian perspective on Bash Aparan, see S. Afanasyan, *La victoire de Sardarabad, Arménie (mai 1918)* (Paris, 1985), 61–62.

55 Andranik died in Fresno, California in 1927, and was buried in Père-Lachaise cemetery, Paris, in 1928, but his remains were reinterred in Armenia in 2000.

56 Boyik mentions this, as did Suren Agha, in 2006.

57 K. Omarkhali, 'On the structure of the Yezidi clan and tribal system and its terminology among the Yezidis of the Caucasus', *Journal of Kurdish Studies* 6 (2008), 111.

58 L. Japharova-Brutti, *Littérature Kurde de la Période Soviétique (années 1930–1990)* (PhD thesis, INALCO, Paris, 2001), 131–32.

courses of Armenian memory, spurred on by diaspora activities, began to apply pressure for official commemorations of the genocide; alongside this, Kurdish literature commemorated the traumatic events of World War I.⁵⁹ Chatoev's standard history of the Kurds of Soviet Armenia, published in 1960, mentions Sardarabad in passing, briefly adding that 'Yezidi Kurds' fought at Bash Aparan, with no mention either of Cihangir Agha or Usib Beg.⁶⁰ Kayaloff's book on Sardarabad appeared in 1973; however, Afanasyan's slimmer volume of 1985 contains much more detail on the irregulars, mentioning Cihangir Agha by name.

In independent Armenia, where the Sardarabad conflict is a defining event in national history, Cihangir Agha is the most visible Yezidi in the national commemorative space. The Sardarabad museum, situated immediately outside the battlefield, features explanations of his role (and that of Usib Beg) in the hostilities and a substantial plaque with his image. He is also commemorated with a monument in the modern town of Aparan (near Bash Aparan) and a statue in a park in the Masif 2 area of Yerevan, depicting him in military style, with an inscription extending gratitude to Chinagir Agha as a friend of the Armenian nation.⁶¹

The significance of Cihangir Agha's current heroic status cannot be overestimated. Although they are the largest minority in Armenia (which unlike neighbouring Georgia, is ethnically quite homogeneous), Yezidis constitute just over 1% of the population – which in 2013 was estimated at a little over three million⁶² – and are socio-economically disadvantaged. Their cultural capital in Armenian national discourse is enhanced by Cihangir Agha's heroism, his opposition not only to Turkish forces but also to Kurdish Muslims, and his association with Andranik. Both sides of the Yezidi identity schism stress his role in history, placing strong emphasis on the links of friendship between Armenians and Yezidis. This is hardly a new phenomenon – it was not an uncommon theme in the Soviet period and fitted the internationalist agenda rather well – but whereas the overarching principle had previously been the struggle against imperialism,

59 For more detail, see Allison, 'Memory and the Kurmanji novel'.

60 Chatoev, *Kurdy Sovetskoy Armenii*, 30. Murgul's account of the battle (55–56), which draws on a number of Russian and Turkish language sources, does not mention Cihangir Agha or the Yezidis.

61 For a more detailed description of these monuments, see C. Allison, 'Addressivity and the monument: Memorials, publics and the Yezidis of Armenia', *History & Memory* 25/1 (2013).

62 Statistics from CIA online world factbook: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/am.html> [accessed 2 March 2014]. Although Armenian sources such as Professor Garnik Asatrian (personal conversation with Christine, 2004) have estimated the number of Yezidis in Armenia at about 40,000, it is likely that in the current climate many are now resident in Russia or the diaspora, for economic reasons.

contemporary discourse of Yezidi-Armenian friendship, typically of many developing nationalisms, is concerned with common persecutions and sufferings.

Remembering Cihangir Agha: the Yezidi community

Many members of Cihangir Agha's extended family still live in Armenia and in 2005, 2006 and 2007 Christine was fortunate enough to be their guest. Most of their anecdotes illustrated his heroic qualities in some way, and they mentioned many of the battles that Boyik describes, most specifically the prodigious energy with which, having fought an exhausting battle at Sardarabad, he galloped to Bash Aparan to reinforce the Armenian general Dro. On visits to the Aparan area, locals pointed out the location of various key events in the story. There were also tales of his generosity, when members of other families or communities came to ask him for help. Many of these illustrated the close links he had with members of other groups, including the Armenian establishment.

The content of the anecdotes, even within the family circle, was gendered. Men spoke more about battle exploits. The women, with whom a female researcher was bound to spend more time, often focused on his attention to taking care of his own, and especially to matters of honour within the household. One story was recounted by more than one source: that he ordered a young bride to be sent back to her family for having once smiled at a male servant (strict rules of behaviour for new brides are very much part of living memory amongst rural Caucasian Yezidis).⁶³ The frequency of such *namûs*-related tales no doubt says as much about the community's current insecurities as about Cihangir Agha's personal qualities.

By contrast, Christine's interview with Cihangir Agha's only surviving son, Suren Agha, had a different flavour. Speaking in 2006, next to a monument to his father, he dealt mainly with the public legend; clearly, he saw himself as a guardian of his father's memory. He retold the story of how his father had come from Turkey, had fought at Sardarabad and Bash Aparan, had refused to leave with

⁶³ In a house Christine visited in the village of Hatsashen in 2005, a woman well into her middle-age, who ran a smallholding with her husband, was very inconvenienced when the husband went away on business because it meant she had to speak directly to her elderly father-in-law which custom traditionally forbade her to do. She still found this troublesome, even after decades of marriage. This episode can also be viewed as a reflection of the decline of the villages; in 'normal' times, the family remaining at home would have been large enough to include another appropriate person – a brother or a son – who could act as an interlocutor. But few families can currently afford to keep all their members in the same village.

Andranik, and died in exile. He emphasised the symbolic importance of the public monument (which had been paid for by the Armenian authorities) for Yezidis in general, on both sides of the identity schism.⁶⁴

Suren Agha was the last of Cihangir Agha's seven children, born in 1936 when his father had just gone into exile. He grew up first among his mother's kin, the family of Egid Beg, and then with his elder brother. In the absence of a grave, the monument clearly functioned as a *lieu de mémoire* for him. The fact that its construction was funded by a grateful Armenian public was clearly very important to him. He spoke little of the consequences of growing up as the child of a 'kulak' in the 1940s and 1950s, beyond hints at the difficulty of pursuing his ambitions to achieve higher education and the impact of the destruction of his father's papers.

Beyond the circle of family and close friends, Cihangir Agha is often spoken and sung about. After his reappearance in public discourse after the end of the Soviet period, traditional folkloric songs commemorating his exploits were again performed. During her fieldwork in the Yezidi villages of Armenia, Estelle had the opportunity to listen to 'words about Cihangir Agha' (*kilamê ser Cangîr Ax'a*) performed in gatherings between friends and co-villagers. Here are the words uttered by Binbaş, a 60-year-old man from Elegyez, in a *kilamê ser Cangîr Ax'a* performed in April 2006. It recounts the battle of Dercemed, near the Iranian border:

<i>Wî lo, lo, lo...</i>	<i>Wî lo, lo, lo...</i>
<i>Wî lo, lo, lo... father of fathers</i>	<i>Wî lo, lo, lo..., bavî Bava</i>
<i>Wî lo, lo, lo...</i>	<i>Wî lo, lo, lo...</i>
<i>Hey father, my head is burning as if it was on fire</i>	<i>Hey lo bavo, germa halê serê mida germistanê</i>
<i>Wey, my dearest, my head is burning as if it was on fire</i>	<i>Wey, maqûlo, germa halê serê mida germistanê</i>
<i>Cihangir Agha, father of fathers pitched his tent⁶⁵</i>	<i>Cangîr ax'a – bavê Bava çadira xwe vegirtye</i>
<i>On the plateau of Mûş, at the border with Iran</i>	<i>Textê Mûşê ser sînorê vê Îranê</i>

64 *Êzîdxane qedrê mi digire, ez qedrê millet digirim.* 'The Yezidi community respects me, and I respect (my) people.'

65 The horse is a very important figure in epic narratives: it is sometimes even mentioned as a part of the hero's body. Its importance is also clearly reflected in funeral rituals, such as

Father of fathers, brother of the cavaliers, pitched his tent in the plateau of Mûş, at the border with Iran	<i>Bavê Bava bir'e syara çadira xwe vegirtye textê Mûşê⁶⁶ ser sînorê vê Îranê</i>
When the father of fathers, a Titan, invincible...	<i>Gava ser serê bavê Bava divû xelaya mêra</i>
If only a few horsemen from the tribes of Kurdistan could have come and helped him	<i>De bira pêva derketa çend syarê e'şîreta Kurdistanê</i>
<i>Wî lo, lo, lo...</i>	<i>Wî lo, lo, lo...</i>
<i>Heylo</i> father, I found myself in this abandoned land of Dêrcemed	<i>Heylo, bavo, wezê Dêrcemeda xopan ketim wê bi pûşe</i>
<i>Wey</i> , my dearest, I found myself in Dêrcemed's colourful land	<i>Wey, maqûlo, ezê Dêrcemeda rengîn ketim wê bi pûşe</i>
The horse Kodir Herço, ⁶⁷ under the father of fathers Cihangir Agha flying by like a bird of prey	<i>Hespê K'odir H'erç'o bin bavê Bava Cangîr ax'ada dimeşe mînanî teyrê qereqûşe</i>
It's been already three days and three nights since he defeated 1700 Turkish soldiers	<i>Eva serê sê roja, sê şevane berî h'ezar hevsid mêrê t'irk daye</i>
The dearest drew apart and were killed furtively	<i>Evî maqûlî ji hev qetandye tengilqûşe</i>
<i>Wî lo, lo, lo...</i>	<i>Wî lo, lo, lo...</i>
<i>Heylo</i> , father, father of fathers is riding Kodir	<i>Heylo, bavo, bavê Bava K'odir syar bû</i>
<i>Wî lo, lo, lo...</i>	<i>Wî lo, lo, lo...</i>
<i>Heylo</i> , father, Kodir left in full gallop	<i>Heylo, bavo, K'odir ba bû</i>
He sat astride a new horse, the horse started to walk slowly	<i>Hespekî dinê syar bû, hespê binda dimilmilî</i>

kotel, described by M. R. Rudenko *Kurdsckaja Obrjadovaja Poezija (Kurdish Ritual Poetry)* (Moscow, 1982), 65–68, in which the horse of the deceased participates in the procession to the cemetery. Gravestones were also often sculpted in the shape of horses with the name of the deceased's horse engraved on the stele (see T. F. Aristova, *Kurdy Zakavkaz'ja (The Kurds of the Caucasus)* (Moscow, 1966), 191.

66 The word 'tent' is to be understood here as household.

67 This is geographically imprecise as Dercemed must have taken place at a location east of Van and west of the Iranian border, but Muş is in fact to the west of Van.

The swords of the Hamidiye and the whips of the officers are swiping around him	<i>Şûrê H'emîdiê qamçîê zapitîê ber wêda difitilî</i>
May God kill the enemies' sons	<i>De bira Xwedê bikuje kurê wan neyara</i>
They sent 80 letters, and came from Istanbul to catch Cihangir Agha	<i>Heystê e'rze ser Cangîr ax'a dane textê Stenbolê çîne gilî</i>
<i>Wî lo, lo, lo...</i>	<i>Wî lo, lo, lo...</i>
<i>Heylo, father, father of fathers</i>	<i>Heylo, bavo, bavê Bava</i>
The cavaliers' shots are the tattoos of the youngsters	<i>Gula syara dax'maê xortanî, syaro</i>
<i>Wî lo, lo, lo...</i>	<i>Wî lo, lo, lo...</i>
<i>Heylo, father, I look towards the magnificent lands of Dêrcemed, three horsemen are coming back</i>	<i>Heylo, bavo, ezê Dêrcemeda rengî dînihêrim, sê hev syarê wêda têne</i>
The first horseman looks like the messenger of death	<i>Syarê pêşin rengî mînanî rengê mêrê kulêye</i>
I didn't know that this horseman was the father of fathers, Cihangir Agha, sworn enemy of Mustafa. ⁶⁸	<i>Min nizanbû ev syar bavê Bava Cangîr ax'a kilê ç'evê Mistefêye.</i>

The words uttered by Binbaş in this *kilamê ser Cangîr* do not tell a linear story. There is no clear beginning, nor an ending to the story. And the listener cannot follow the chronology of the events (past and present tenses are mixed). Furthermore, the facts narrated are not linked with each other and are often expressed in metaphors which give to the utterance an impressionist touch of juxtaposed pictures. These features are typical of *kilamê ser*. Among the Yezidis, melodised utterances about heroes are indeed barely narratives, they do not tell a story. They rather arouse strong feelings and moral values, by an accumulation of details, facts and pictures, as well as by the use of a melodised tone of voice.

68 Binbaş is referring here to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, founder of the Turkish Republic in 1923. Promoted general Pasha of the Ottoman armies in 1915, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk represents here the army against which Cihangir Agha was fighting.

Yezidi ‘thieves in law’

In the last decade, among the Yezidis’ ‘best-of’ compilations one can find a number of *kilamê ser* in the memory of soldiers who died in the Nagorno-Karabakh War (1988–1994), others for Armenian and Yezidi heroes who died during the battle with the Ottomans in 1918, or even for mafia leaders killed in Moscow or in Far Eastern Siberia. In houses of the Aparan region, Estelle heard some *kilamê ser* for Abdullah Öcalan, the PKK leader kept prisoner by the Turkish State since 1999.

These new heroic figures fit perfectly with the moral values that surfaced in post-Soviet Armenia. Martyrs of the Nagorno-Karabakh War and old heroes such as Cihangir Agha sustain the idea of an old and stable friendship between Armenians and Yezidis. Mafia leaders embody the post-Soviet ideal of the *mafioz*, a guy who started with nothing but was clever enough to become rich in a very short time.⁶⁹ And, for many of those who believe Yezidis are Kurds, Öcalan remains an important figure of resistance.

The new post-Soviet heroes, and more specifically the *mafioz*, display some characteristics of old *ciwanmêrî* such as acknowledgment of the importance of clan and family. But they enact as well values which differ from old *ciwanmêrî*. The case of Çeko, a ‘new hero’ from the criminal world, will help us analyse these differences.

Çekoê Xidir, a ‘new hero’ from the criminal world

Çekoê Xidir was killed in 1996 in Moscow. He was a Yezidi from Armenia, married to an Armenian, and father of two young children. A member of the criminal world, Çeko was a *vor v zakone* (literally a ‘thief in law’), a kind of bandit that appeared in the Gulag during the Soviet times.⁷⁰ Çeko died very

69 For a detailed analysis of this ethos in Armenia and a comparison with a similar phenomenon in Romania, see Amy de la Bretèque and V. A. Stoichita, ‘Musics of the new times: Romanian Manele and Armenian Rabiz as icons of Post-Communist changes’, in I. Biliarsky, O. Cristea and A. Oroveanu, eds., *The Balkans and the Caucasus: Parallel Processes on the Opposite Sides of the Black Sea* (Cambridge, 2012), 321–35.

70 Under Stalin, the forced labour camps (Gulag) overflowed with political prisoners and criminals, and a new organised group of top criminals arose, the *vor v zakone*. The term ‘thief in law’ might be more closely translated as ‘thief who follows the law’, figuratively referring to a criminal who obeys the thieves’ code of honour. The professional code of the ‘thieves in law’, based on the idea of brotherhood, is defined by an anti-state ethos and by the moral authority given to some thieves, see V. Volkov, *Violent Entrepreneurs: The Use of Force in the Making of Russian Capitalism* (Ithaca, 2002), 58–60. ‘Thieves in law’ were drawn from many nationalities from a number of post-Soviet states.

young at the age of 26. His death was the continuation of a vendetta between his family and an Armenian family. He was buried in the cemetery of Malatya (a neighbourhood in Yerevan). Among the Yezidis of Armenia, people say that ‘the entire Armenia’ came to Çeko’s funeral.

A few weeks after the burial ceremony, the story of his life and death was recorded in studios by professional musicians. Several recordings, sung by different singers, were released.⁷¹ Sold in mp3 format in Yezidi best-of compilations, these tracks describe with great detail the moment of his death. In addition to these audio recordings, a video clip has been filmed on the site of his grave. Here is a transcription of the lyrics of the *kilamê ser* performed by Alixanê Reşo (a well-known Yezidi singer) in the video clip:⁷²

<i>Heylo, father</i>	<i>Hey lo bavo</i>
Çekoê Xidir, hero belonging to the big tribe, has many malevolent enemies	<i>Neyar, xêrnexazê Ç'ekoê Xidir qeremanê e'şîrê gele, gelek hene</i>
It has already been three days since they gathered in the cursed Moscow	<i>De eva sê roje, sê şeve wêrana bajarê Moskvaêda hev civyane</i>
They are discussing there the murder of Çekoê Xidir, who married three years ago	<i>De dikin şêwra kuştina Ç'ekoê Xidir, ze'vê sê salane</i>
I said: ‘Murderer, Godless man	<i>Go mêrkujê, bêxwedêyo</i>
Do not show your chest to fire, their bullets are without a remedy, wey, orphan...’	<i>Nevî, nevî berê xwe didî ç'eka, gulle û fişekê ser ç'eka bêne ç'are, wey, êtîmo</i>
His fire is sharp like a sword, an arrow, he is so young, he is only twenty-six.	<i>De agirê wî tûjin mînanî şûrê wan kewana, ewî xortekî cihale, e'mrê wî bîstşeş sale</i>
But he has the order to kill, as if it came from Rosteme Zal	<i>De ewê ya bi Xwedê mînanî fermana Rostemî Zale</i>
Miserable one, you will lose the use of your hands, your legs will bend,	<i>De hêşîro, binihêre, destê te wê şilbin, qudûmê çokê te wê bişkên</i>

71 A studio recording about Çeko is transcribed and commented about in Amy de la Bretèque, *Paroles mélodisées*. Audio document is available at <www.ethnomusicologie.fr/parolesmelodisees>: document 10.

72 Source: VHS tape given to Estelle by members of Çeko’s tribe. Recorder unknown, subtitles are my own.

But they will not win by killing Çekoê *De ewê ser Ç'ekora nekevin raê.*

(*duduk*)⁷³

Ah, it was morning	<i>Ax, sive bû</i>
It was a gloomy morning, rainy and windy	<i>Siveke xusûsan bû, ba û baran bû</i>
The murderer was already in position.	<i>Berê ra û tivdîra karûbar bû</i>
In Moscow, Çekoê Xidir, the champion of men, went down from the last floor	<i>Pelewane mêra – Ç'ekoê Xidir – ji wêran Moskvaêda ji qatê jorin</i>
Ah, from the last floor he went down the stairs	<i>Ax, ji qatê jorin berbi qatê jêrin hate xarê</i>
By misfortune, he had left his bodyguards behind, and he went down alone	<i>K'or'a qedera pişmêrî neda pêşîê, ew t'ek-t'enê hate jêre</i>
Like a fearless bear who wanted to go for a walk	<i>Mînanî h'erç'a bê minet xwest derkeve, pêşda here</i>
When Heso and Samo, the hero's bodyguards came after him	<i>De wexta H'eso, Samoê pişmêrê Ç'ekoê xweşmêr hatine dere</i>
Hurry up, the murderers have already put their knives to the door key, and boiling like pots on a flame, they are shooting	<i>De zûbke, mêrkujê kêrê kilîtê danî piş dêrî, mînanî sîtîla çarç'emilî ser alava gur bike bikelînî</i>
This coward suddenly understood that holding his Mauser ⁷⁴ with one hand he wouldn't make it	<i>Wî kafirî nemerde hêja tê derxist pê destekî mawizerê nake ç'arê</i>
Pressing his second hand on the Mauser, like a coward, the traitor fired at our brother Çeko	<i>Destê dinê jêla kire taqet bi nemamî, bi xayîntî berda Ç'ekoê bira</i>

⁷³ The *duduk* is a woodwind instrument with a double reed, often made of apricot wood and common in the South Caucasus. In some areas, including Azerbaijan and Kurdistan of Iraq, it is known as *balaban*.

⁷⁴ An automatic gun invented by P. Mauser, a German arms manufacturer, and in use since 1870.

The Mauser's bullet reached the temple of the hero, passing through him

De gulla mawizerê cênîka mêrxasra daye dere

Ah, the Mauser's bullet reached the hero's temple

Ax, de bila mawizerê cênîka mêrxasra daye dere

This hero left behind him all his household and tribe without support, they became orphans

Vî xweşmêrî temamya êl û e'şîra hiştaye bê pişt, bêxwey, na, welle, xweyo dîsa stuxare.

(*duduk*)

Hey lo, father

Hey lo bavo

Look at the cemetery of Zeytun⁷⁵

Emê bala xwe bidne ser fêza Zêytûnê qibirstane

At Çeko's funeral, there was a sea of people in the squares and the streets

Hewariê Ç'ekoê xweşmêr weke lê-lê miştê k'ûçe û meydanê

In the big city the merchants of death set up traps

Bajarê giran kişyane şivêta bazirgane

The entire Armenia has come to the funeral of our dear hero

Tê qey bêjî şîn û mirina xweşmêr û pelexanê mey e'zîzda hazire temamya Hayastanê

All the women and men of the tribe were dressed in black

De jin û mêrê e'şîrê gişka reş girêdane

Ah, all the women and men of the tribe were wearing black

Ax, de jino, mêrê e'şîrê gişka reş girêdane

From the beginning of time, there had never been such a mourning

Dewir-zemanada ser t'u merî nebûye û neqewimye

As that which happened at Çekoê Xidir's funeral, lion without fear, man with four kidneys, like Rostamê Zal.

De çawa îro hatye kirinê ser Ç'ekoê Xidir, şêrê çargurç'îkî notlanî Rostemî Zale.

⁷⁵ Zeytun is a neighbourhood in Yerevan.

This melodised speech depicts in detail the moment of the drama. The finale section of the *kilamê ser* is dedicated to a description of Çeko's magnificent funeral. The words emphasise Çeko's uniqueness and heroism. Çeko is compared to 'a bear without fear', 'a lion without fear', and even to Rostamê Zal, an Iranian epic hero known throughout the Middle East. He is also painted as an extraordinary creature with non-human features: 'Çekoê Xidir with four kidneys' (*Çekoê xidir çargurç'ikî*).

In the video clip the filming and the editing are very basic. The frame is very often centred on Çeko's gravestone. Watching the videoclip one has plenty of time to admire Çeko's rather unusual grave. The entire body of Çeko is sculpted in a two-metre high white marble block. Shirtless, draped in a large white sheet of marble 'floating in the air', Çeko is looking far away, towards the hills of Yerevan city. The white colour of the marble and the sheet wrapped around the statue are strongly reminiscent of an angel's wings. While performing his *kilamê ser Çeko*, Alixanê Reşo is alternately sitting or standing next to the grave. Some scenes were recorded at night, lit only by a street lamp. A few pictures from an old recording of Çeko's wedding (27 April 1991) illustrate the words uttered by Alixan at the 3 minutes and 48 seconds mark. A few seconds later, while Alixan is narrating the moment of the drama, the shooting shows the feet of a man going down the stairs (3:56). Çeko was killed at the entrance of a building while he was going out for a walk. Watching the video clip, the viewer can only tremble while observing the feet of a man walking towards death.

New heroes and ancient *ciwanmêrî*

Çeko provides an interesting case for a study of the way heroic figures are still produced among Yezidis of Armenia. The way Çeko is remembered and commemorated among Yezidis offers many similarities with ancient *ciwanmêrî* ceremonies: people visit his grave (even if they did not know him), they listen to the many versions of his story recorded in mp3 format and distributed in compilations, they also perform songs about him at home. Çeko is remembered as a bandit or an outlaw, figures that are often considered in this region as positive and heroic characters.⁷⁶ But Çeko has little in common with Robin Hood: the melo-

76 For a study on bandits and outlaws among the Kurds, see B. Nikitine, *Les Kurdes* (Paris, 1956), 75–86. For comparative studies of the positive values attributed to bandits in the Caucasus, in the Middle East and in the Balkans, see P. Briant, 'Brigandage, dissidence et conquête en Asie Achéménide et Hellénistique', *Dialogues d'histoire ancienne* 2/1 (1976), 163–258; U. Brunnbauer and R. Pichler, 'Mountains as "Lieux de Mémoire": Highland values and nation-building in the Balkans', *Balkanologie* 6/1–2 (2002), 77–100; M. Herzfeld,

dised words do not mention any signs of generosity, for example, nor gallantry... The positive values lie more in a deep sense of devotion to family and clan, as well as respect for the 'thieves' code' according to which organised crime and anti-state ideology are positive moral values. While conducting fieldwork, Estelle witnessed that, while the family and clan values are accepted by most (if not all) Yezidis as positive elements of his personality, Çeko's association with organised crime and anti-state ideology is a much more controversial topic. In this context it seems unconvincing to define Çeko's heroism through an ethical lens. Then how then did Çeko become a hero known by all? It seems that Çeko was mainly transformed into a hero through concrete and pragmatic communicational processes. These processes, which are poetic, musical and visual, convey feelings linked to a tragic and heroic mood. Our point is that heroic figures are not created just by values but by a performance of heroic feelings.

Such feelings may be understood as 'moral emotions'. Defined as 'those emotions that are linked to the interests or welfare either of society as a whole or at least of persons other than the judge or agent'. Moral emotions propagate moral values and cover a wide range of feelings such as compassion, shame, culpability, anger, contempt or respect.⁷⁷ Moral emotions thus are reactions to social events that go beyond the direct interests of the self, whereas emotions in general are reactions to perceived changes, threats or opportunities that affect directly the self. In *kilamê ser* moral emotions play a central role. They evoke relationships and call for emotional reaction from the listener who is encouraged to experience the same emotional mood.⁷⁸ These moral values are mainly conveyed in melodised utterances. Conversely, heroic feelings appear as an unavoidable feature of *kilamê ser*.

Moreover, as discussed earlier in this article, heroes are mainly created after their death. The agency of the hero in this process is thus quite limited. And if there is no need to accomplish an heroic act to become a hero, which is the case with Çeko, the question is: what makes the difference between an 'ordinary' death and a heroic one? And in fact, the construction of Çeko's memory uses some processes which are also used for 'ordinary' people. Should we then consider, thinking the other way around, that 'ordinary' people have a great potential

The Poetics of Manhood (Princeton, 1985); E. J. Hobsbawm, *Bandits* (London, 1969).

⁷⁷ See J. Haidt, 'The moral emotions', in R. J. Davidson, K. R. Scherer & H. H. Goldsmith, eds., *Handbook of Affective Sciences* (Oxford, 2003), 852–70.

⁷⁸ For a detailed analysis, see Amy de la Bretèque, 'Voices of sorrow. Melodized speech, laments and heroic narratives among the Yezidis of Armenia', *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 44 (2012), 129–148.

to become heroes after their death? Such a hypothesis can explain, to a certain point, why laments and heroic songs share so many similar features. But the main element that turned Çeko into a hero known by all Yezidis in Armenia is that he had a vast and powerful network which, after his death, employed significant means to transform him into a hero commemorated by the entire community.

Conclusion: production of heroism

A comparison between Cihangir Agha and Çeko shows not only the evolution in masculine heroic qualities over the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, but also gives insight into the community's process of hero creation. There is no doubt that Cihangir Agha displayed princely virtues such as courage, generosity, attention to honour (*qîmet* as well as *namûs*), in addition to being acknowledged as the preserver of his own and his community's honour. In addition, he was shrewd and far-sighted, like his father. Such princely virtues are largely consistent in Europe and the Middle East (in the so-called 'mirrors for princes' tradition) and as K. Clark shows, pre-Soviet Russian paradigms are also similar: '...the typical prince ... was said to be loving, generous, hospitable and good-natured, but is also stern and majestic.'⁷⁹ There is not a total rupture between Soviet heroisms and those values that preceded them – indeed, it was not the possession of princely qualities that disqualified Cihangir Agha from becoming a hero, but his lack of the requisite level of 'consciousness' required of the Soviet 'positive hero' during the 1920s.⁸⁰ He was precisely the type of tribal leader criticised by Bolshevik Kurdish writers such as Erebê Şemo.⁸¹ The cultural and literary discourse of the Soviet period favoured more enlightened Kurdish heroes such as Ferîk Polatbegov, born of a Yezidi father and a Russian mother, who died fighting for the Bolsheviks during the Civil War. (A village in the Hoktemberyan region was later named after Fêrik and he figures in the Soviet literature following the Second World War).⁸² Cihangir Agha's memory was preserved within the small Yezidi community, though it is unlikely that any *kilamê ser* was widely performed for him. Cihangir Agha's rehabilitation came with the development of Armenian

79 K. Clark. *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Bloomington, 1981; 2nd ed., 2000), 63.

80 For a definition of the 'positive hero' see *ibid.*, 9–10. For his presentation in the 1920s see *ibid.*, 68–89.

81 See E. Şemo, *Kurdkij Pastukh (The Kurdish Shepherd)* (Leningrad, 1931) in Russian. In Kurdish see *Kurdê Elegezê (The Kurds of Mount Aragats)* (Yerevan, 1932) and *Şivanê kurmanca The Kurdish Shepherd* (Yerevan, 1935) in Kurdish.

82 He is a central, though absent, figure in Heciê Cindi's 1967 novel *Hawerî*.

national sentiment and the public discourse of the genocide. His current status as a hero of Sardarabad and his association with Andranik gives the Yezidis a pretext to commemorate him, hence emphasising their own belonging in contemporary Armenia and adding a sense of pride in their tribal history which had been impossible during the Soviet period.

Whereas Cihangir Agha, we are told, strove to emulate the heroic examples of the past, Çeko did not accomplish any heroic action in order to become a hero, although he did display virtues linked to the maintenance of community, clan and family, which are associated with *ciwanmêrî*. But his heroic status comes primarily from his violent death. We have seen that laments for the dead and heroic songs have the same poetic and musical features; both enable feelings linked to an ethos of heroism and tragedy. There seems to be a continuous transition between heroes and ‘ordinary people’ as the processes used to create a hero are also used in funerals for ‘ordinary’ people. But one of the main differences between laments for the dead and heroic songs is the degree of precision. Delocalisation from the space and time of the ritual is central in this matter. Among the Yezidis of Armenia, melodised speech is a central tool for the enactment of heroic feelings. As described previously, moral emotions are not only lived in the self’s subjectivity: they also represent relationships and call for an emotional reaction from the listener. In this sense, melodised utterances foster shared ideals as much as they express individual feelings. The words uttered and embodied in these narratives gain a consecrated status and mould the Yezidi ideal of masculine heroic qualities.

Both the Yezidis’ Anatolian past and their post-Soviet political and economic present can be defined through these heroic paradigms; it is not difficult to speculate the purpose they serve for the community. However, our focus in this chapter concerned the production of contemporary heroes; through a violent death, a man may become the subject of *kilamê ser* and conjure a rich array of emotions and meanings associated with heroes of the past. We have shown how, through specific forms of discourse, new heroic paradigms have come into being and spread through the community, resulting in the invention of new selves.

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