

## Rituals and Customs of Yazidi Herding (Pastoralism) from the 19th to the 21st Century

It has been a common practice since ancient times for tribes to adopt animal names or trace their origins to animals considered sacred. In discussing the practice of naming tribes after animals, it is noteworthy that in ancient times, among the Armenians, the kinship and origin of human tribes were often linked to animals and plants. This is reflected in Armenian mythological stories, such as the bull origin of Yervand and Yervaz, the water origin of Sanasar and Baghdasar, the serpent (or dragon) origin of the Mars, and the descent of the Artsruni clan from an eagle. These mythologies also include tales of persecuted and oppressed peoples, as well as transformations of humans into various animals and birds<sup>1</sup>.

When examining the economy of the Yazidi ethnic minority, it is important to note that their primary occupation was animal husbandry. Over the centuries, they've become so adept at this practice that they now spend the majority of their time in the mountains. They live there in tents(*kon*) with their families, and children are often born there too. It is noteworthy that animal husbandry has left its deep mark on the material and spiritual culture of the people. Among domestic animals, the ox is said to hold a special place as a totem in Yazidi belief and is considered sacred. Ox worship is associated with farming and is occasionally connected to sun worship. Another animal in Yazidi belief is the female wolf, portrayed as a force that fights against evil. Many peoples, including the Kurds and Yazidis, regard the wolf as a symbol of a brave warrior. Some elements of Yazidi tradition may suggest traces of earlier symbolic systems, associated with the cultural significance of animals like the wolf. The Yazidis have always spoken of oxen and bulls with reverence. According to some beliefs, the Yazidis attached bull horns to the entrances of their homes, considering them a symbol of fertility. *Today, the Yazidis hang a horseshoe at the entrance of their homes.* A comparison between Armenians and the Yezidi minority reveals that, the bull is considered a sacred animal among Armenians. The domestic bull was associated with the mythical sea bull, a creature from local mythology. It was believed that the walrus was born from a domestic cow, and that the պալ, which grazed with the cattle, was descended from a human. N. Shnorhali testifies that, during his lifetime, even the priests took part in the rituals "In accordance with the ancient law." According to 19th-century sources, the animal decorated in the same manner was the draft

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<sup>1</sup> S. Harutyunyan, *Ancient Armenian Beliefs, Religion, Worship and Mythology*(2001), Yerevan, Armenia, pp. 7–8.

ox<sup>2</sup>. During the sacrifice of an ox at holy places, its blood was smeared on the forehead of an infertile woman to help her conceive. However, this custom is no longer practiced among the Yazidis. During rituals, the Yazidis used cow's blood while praying for a good harvest. In comparison, our field studies indicate that cow's blood was collected and poured out during weddings to prevent anyone's feet from touching it, otherwise it would be considered a sin<sup>3</sup>. A similar phenomenon is also found in Zoroastrianism, where the god Mithra appears alongside an ox. In Yazidi beliefs, Mithras is replaced by Malaktaws. The cult of the sacred bull was also practiced by the ancient Greeks and Romans. In the beliefs of many peoples, including the Yazidis, the ox was regarded as a totem; according to some sources, totems were seen as embodiments of the spirits of their ancestors<sup>4</sup>. We can note that, in the past, the Yazidis primarily led a nomadic and semi-nomadic lifestyle, with cattle breeding being their main economic activity. Therefore, it is clear that they held these animals in great reverence, and they became totems in their beliefs. Yazidis in Iraq and Armenia have presented **գործիկեր** and goats with unusual markings as gifts to their holy sites. Sheep and goats were the most commonly raised domestic animals by the Yazidis. According to our field research, the Yazidis state that they sacrifice a goat to a single angel, Daube Derman, who is regarded as the angel of lightning. In all other cases, sheep are sacrificed to the angels<sup>5</sup>. There is no doubt that these animals were revered, and in their beliefs, sheep and goats are also considered totems. Traces of the worship of sheep (rams) and goats can still be found in the areas where the Yazidis reside in Armenia. For example, in the cemetery of the village of Mali Jamishlu, many graves have tombstones shaped like rams. There are tombstones shaped like horses, having they own significance. The goat was also a revered animal among the Armenians. The white he-goat was also considered one of the sacrificial animals in myths. "In the work of Hovhannes Mamikonyan, we find the names *Aytsyan Dzor* and *Aytsitsberd*, which are believed to originate from goat worship (ayts means goat in Armenian). The existence of goat worship and festivals dedicated to goats may help explain why a Persian stablemaster, intending to insult Armenian King Arshak II, mockingly referred to him as the "king

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<sup>2</sup> *The worship of the dragon, ram, horse in ancient Armenia.* <https://azatdzayn.com/%D5%BE%D5%AB%D5%B7%D5%A1%D5%BA%D5%AB%D5%AD%D5%B8%D5%B5%D5%AB%D5%B1%D5%AB%D5%B8%D6%82%D5%BA%D5%A1%D5%B7%D5%BF%D5%A1%D5%B4%D5%B8%D6%82%D5%B6%D6%84%D5%A8%D5%B0%D5%B6%D5%A1%D5%A3%D5%B8%D6%82%D5%B5%D5%B6%D5%B0%D5%A1%D5%B5%D5%A1%D5%BD%D5%BF%D5%A1%D5%B6%D5%B8%D6%82%D5%B4/> (accessed 16 June 2022).

<sup>3</sup> *Field research*, Interview with a male, approximately 50 years old, from the village of Shamiram, conducted on 20 September 2022.

<sup>4</sup> W. Wunelt, *Myth and Religion*, Leipzig, 1905, p. 111.

<sup>5</sup> *Field research*, interview with a male, approximately 50 years old, from the village of Shamiram, conducted on 27 July 2022.

of the goat-Armenians”<sup>6</sup>-a phrase that paradoxically implied strength, power, and wealth.

### ***Animal-related magical rituals and their meanings.***

To promote the growth of their livestock and ensure an abundance of dairy products, Yazidi herders have also turned to magical tricks. Over the centuries, they developed a variety of rituals for this purpose-many of which, though sometimes only as remnants, have been passed down through generations and are still observed today. Folk festivals and traditions related to livestock farming are closely linked to the animal-raising economic cycle. The economic year of the Yazidi people begins in spring, when small cattle are moved from their winter settlements to early spring pastures. It is during this period that the New Year<sup>7</sup> is celebrated, which lasts from March 13 to April 13, according to our field research<sup>8</sup>. The New Year celebration was associated with the awakening of nature, fertility, and, most notably, the growth and birth of young livestock. On this occasion, sacrificial rituals are carried out, the purpose of which is to influence the spirits of nature that protect both people and animals, and to ask for their goodwill<sup>9</sup>. The spring Easter is dedicated to animals. On New Year's Eve and on Navruz Day (which falls on a Wednesday), the Yazidis lit fires on the roofs of their houses, around the hearth, and on nearby hills. This ritual fire was called a *gurgurik*. As they jumped over the fire, young men and women appealed to supernatural powers, saying: “May everyone's milk go to my mother, may my mother's milk be abundant”. After the fire was put out, they hung a tripod over the hearth with its ends tied together. From it dangled two small figures-one shaped like a butter churn, the other like a woman wrapped in clothing-symbols of food and the hostess, meant to ensure

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<sup>6</sup>The worship of the dragon, ram, horse in ancient Armenia  
<https://azatdzayn.com/%D5%BE%D5%AB%D5%B7%D5%A1%D5%BA%D5%AB%D5%AD%D5%B8%D5%B5%D5%AB%D5%B1%D5%AB%D5%B8%D6%82%D5%BA%D5%A1%D5%B7%D5%BF%D5%A1%D5%B4%D5%B8%D6%82%D5%B6%D6%84%D5%A8%D5%B0%D5%B6%D5%A1%D5%A3%D5%B8%D6%82%D5%B5%D5%B6%D5%B0%D5%A1%D5%B5%D5%A1%D5%BD%D5%BF%D5%A1%D5%B6%D5%B8%D6%82%D5%B4> (accessed 16 June 2022).

<sup>7</sup> The Yazidi Kurdish New Year celebration traditionally lasted about three weeks during the first month of spring (March). The Muslim Kurds of Transcaucasia celebrated their New Year (Navrosh), according to the Muslim calendar, on March 21–22. Both celebrations included various rituals. The term *Navrosh* in Persian means “New Year,” while *Navroz* refers to a flower symbolizing the arrival of spring.( A. Avdal, *The Life of Transcaucasian Kurds*, Yerevan, 1957, p. 96.; T. P. Aristova, *Kurds of the Caucasus*, Moscow, 1966, p. 175; M. B. Rudenko, “New Year's Ritual Celebrations among the Kurds,” *Folklore and Ethnography*, Leningrad, 1974, p. 119; K. R. Eyubi, I. A. Smrnova, *Kurdish Dialect of Mukri*, Leningrad, 1968, pp. 212–222.

<sup>8</sup> Field research, Shamiram village; interview with a 40-year-old male, 25 July 2022.

<sup>9</sup> A. Avdal, *The Life of the Transcaucasian Kurds*, Yerevan, 1957, pp. 96–97.

the home would always have butter churn(khnotsi) and dairy. This custom has been preserved to this day, and the Yazidis say they do their best to maintain the tradition and carry it out every year. The Yazidis explain the meaning of the tripod this way: three sticks are tied together to support one another, forming a strong structure from which they can hang meat, butter churn, and carry out other everyday tasks. In the past, the ashes from the fire were sprinkled in the corners of the house to invite goodness and prosperity. This custom, however, is no longer preserved today. Fire was seen as a powerful, cleansing force that could drive away evil. That's why, at the start of the New Year, the Yazidis turned to fire to help protect their homes and livestock from evil. The Yazidis light a fire on the evening of the day they bake the *gata* (a traditional Armenian sweet pastry), and it's especially meaningful that they do so on high ground. Particularly interesting is the series of rituals associated with the *gata* baked on the New Year's Eve, known as *Taregloukh*<sup>10</sup>. On New Year's Day, the head of the family would first offer a piece of *gata*<sup>11</sup> to the *son* (ходане мале), who protected the family. Then, portions were given to the shepherd Mame Shvani, guardian of the small livestock, and to the herdsman Gavane Zarzani<sup>12</sup>, protector of the large cattle. The Yazidi herders didn't see themselves as the sole caretakers of their animals-they believed it was Mame Shvani and Gavane Zarzani who truly watched over them. As they would say: *"With your blessing, shepherd Mame, we follow the flock. With your blessing, shepherd Mame, we care for the flock. With your blessing, herdsman Zarzani, we care for the herd"*.

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<sup>10</sup> On New Year's Eve, a large *tareglkhi* (year-start) *gata* was baked, traditionally containing beads (though recently these have often been replaced by metal coins and buttons). The Muslim Kurds would say, "Oh God, may Navruz come well," while the Yezidis wished, "May the coming of the New Year be happy." The Yezidis typically placed a blue bead in the *gata* because, according to popular belief, it possessed magical powers: it kept evil spirits away, protected family members and household property from the evil eye, and removed all obstacles. This led some researchers to refer to it as a "good bead." Interestingly, in the traditional life of Yezidi Kurds, especially in their costume, the color blue was forbidden by religion. In contrast, among Muslim Kurds, blue was a respected and common color. Thus, the presence of a blue bead in the Yezidi New Year's *gata* was an exceptional phenomenon within their broader cultural attitude toward the color. — Mamoe Khalit Darveshyan, *Beliefs related to cattle breeding of the Kurds of Transcaucasia*, p. 73.

<sup>11</sup> "Klojche Sare Sale – New Year's Gata" - On the third Wednesday of March, the Yezidis prepare a *gata* consisting of seven different flavors. Today, the women of the household bake the *gata*, into which they place a bead. The following day, early Thursday morning, the head of the family begins to cut the *gata*, dividing it among family members. Sometimes, some Yezidis divide the *gata* into seven equal parts in honor of the seven Yezidi holy angels. Source:

<https://www.panorama.am/am/news/2021/03/17/%D5%A5%D5%A6%D5%A4%D5%AB%D5%BF%D5%B8%D5%B6/2470687> (accessed 29 August 2022).

<sup>12</sup> A. Avdal, *The Life of the Transcaucasian Kurds*, Yerevan, 1957, p. 97; T. P. Aristova, *Kurds of the Transcaucasian Region*, Moscow, 1966, pp. 175–176. Among the Muslim Kurds, the figures of the shepherd Mame and the herdsman Zarzan are not recognized; instead, they worship the Pirs.

It is no coincidence that the newly appointed shepherds and herdsmen would also turn to Mame and Zarzan, seeking their help and protection, saying: *“Our hope is in you, Shepherd Mame, Herdsman Zarzan”*<sup>13</sup>. Only after this they used to turn to the plowing furrow (*hat jot*) or the plowing oxen, and then to the members of the household. According to our field research, the meaning of *hata jot* is as follows: people were cutting the *gata* called *tarekulukh*, and if the knife touched a coin (or beads, which were placed inside the *gata*), it was considered the ox's portion. The ox, known as the *hata jot*, would be used to plow the land in the spring, with the plow tied to plow the land<sup>14</sup>.

#### ***A custom associated with transhumance***

The herd was led by the chief shepherd, who, to the sound of the flute, guided the flock toward the mountain pastures. Upon arrival, the herders carefully considered the most favorable location for their seasonal settlement. While staying in their previous settlement (*var*), the Yazidis would recite a traditional blessing: “We see you well, homeland. May God bless you and protect you from harm”. If an animal had fallen ill in the nomadic place the previous year, or if there had been an economic loss, the herders would avoid returning to that location the following year<sup>15</sup>. Today, however, this custom is no longer observed. During our field research, we discovered an interesting practice among the mountain herders. When they fall asleep from exhaustion, they use a simple method to ensure they wake up if needed: they tie a rope or thread to the neck or leg of an animal, and attach the other end to their own hand. As soon as the animal moves, the movement of the rope wakes them up. These herders sleep close to where the animals are kept-both to prevent them from wandering off and to protect them from predators such as wolves. The herd is typically led by two individuals. While the herders sleep, it is the dog that keeps watch over the animals. If the dog is injured by other animals, the Yazidis feel deep sorrow. They often say, *“One dog is worth more than a thousand sheep”*, reflecting the dog's vital role in protecting the flock from predators-a true guardian and savior. The reverence for dogs among the Yazidis is especially noteworthy and reflects their deep respect for the animal's loyalty and protective nature. According to the Yazidis, the dog belongs to what they call the jackal breed. However, unlike the jackal, the dog is loyal to humans and their homes. It protects livestock from wild animals and thieves and serves as both a helper and a hunter. For these qualities, people embraced the dog, caring for it, while driving away and destroying the jackal<sup>16</sup>. Among the

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<sup>13</sup> Mamoe Khalit Darveshyan, *Beliefs of the Transcaucasian Kurds Related to Cattle Breeding*, p. 74.

<sup>14</sup> Field research: Interview with a man, approximately 60 years old, from the village of Shamiram, conducted on 10 August 2022.

<sup>15</sup> Mela Mahmud Bayazidi,, p. 44., S. D. Lisitsyan, *The Armenians of Zangezur*, Yerevan, 1969, p. 144.

<sup>16</sup> According to legend, not only the Yazidis but many other peoples have created numerous stories about the friendship and devotion between humans and dogs. The Yazidis believe that a dog's barking signals the descent of angels or spirits from heaven, as dogs are

Yazidis, a black dog is believed to have the power to chase away evil spirits<sup>17</sup>. Killing a dog is regarded as a grave sin<sup>18</sup>. In Yazidi beliefs, the reverence for dogs is also connected to the worship of the souls of the dead, reflecting their deep-rooted animistic traditions. As previously mentioned, the dog—an animal deeply devoted to humans—is regarded in Yazidi religious belief as the protector of the tribe. Based on the materials discussed, it can be inferred that in tribal society, the dog served as a totem of the ancestors and was revered as a sacred animal not only by the Kurds but also by other peoples. The Yazidis go to the mountains in March or April and return in September. They also take with them a month's supply of food<sup>19</sup>. Returning from the pasture was a significant event in the economic life of the Yazidis, though it wasn't as joyful as going there in spring. To mark the occasion, they sacrificed animals and held feasts, inviting others from the community. They wished each other well, hoping to get through the winter and return to their summer pastures the next year. As they said goodbye to the pasture, the livestock owners expressed their gratitude, saying, "Farewell, we've had no trouble here. May we return to this place again next year in good health"<sup>20</sup>. During our field research, we discovered an interesting ceremony related to sheep milking. The process involves two stages: the first milking, called *ardosh*, and the second, called *pazhdosh*. If the sheep are not milked thoroughly during the first stage, a second milking is performed approximately two hours later. After that, the shepherd is called to let the lambs join the sheep. This is done to help keep the sheep producing milk. About an hour later, the sheep and lambs are separated again. Then, in the second month of summer-between July 20 and 25-the lambs are separated from their mothers. In August, the sheep are milked once, to stop milk production and to help the lambs gradually separate from their mothers. These lambs are then raised to become mother sheep the following summer. After the lambs are separated from the sheep, the occasion is marked with a special celebration. **Halva** is prepared, and the portion is given to the shepherd. This ceremony takes place on July 20<sup>21</sup>. The Yazidis believe that if a white mother sheep mates with the males, the year will be fruitful and prosperous. However, if a black mother sheep does so, the opposite is believed to happen. When they climb a

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considered pure and holy in spirit (*bukurin*). Because of this purity, dogs are thought to perceive both good and evil spirits descending from above.

<sup>17</sup> As soon as the black dog barks, the evil spirits flee in terror. When the angel of death, Azrael, approaches the house of the dying, the dog there first begins to howl, then falls completely silent and sinks into deep torment.

<sup>18</sup> According to a legend, a Yazidi killed a dog, which then repeatedly appeared in his dreams. Occasionally, it took human form and cursed him.

<sup>19</sup> Field research: Interview with a man, approximately 50 years old, from Shamiram village, conducted on 18 June 2022.

<sup>20</sup> Mamoe Khalit Darveshyan, *Beliefs Related to Animal Husbandry among the Kurds of Transcaucasia*, p. 76.

<sup>21</sup> Field research: Interview with a man, approximately 50 years old, from Shamiram village, conducted on 13 May 2022.

mountain, they sacrifice a lamb to the mountain saints. Among these saints is the Saint of the Red Mountain, as well as others, including the Saint of **Mame Shvan**. On the mountain, there is a special place within that sanctuary where they bring the sheep for sacrifice. One important ritual performed on the mountain is the ceremony of melting butter, which symbolizes fertility. Notably, a lamb is sacrificed during this ceremony. The ascent to the mountain pastures in spring was a vital event in the economic life of the Yazidis. For Yazidi cattle breeders, it held great importance and was celebrated with a festive spirit. Before moving to the summer pastures, the herders spent nearly the entire winter preparing—repairing tents, organizing furniture, and gathering everything they would need for their time in the mountains. New clothes were made for young girls and boys. Women prepared pastries (halva, gata, etc.). They also prepared livestock for the spring procession. Bells and brightly colored tassels—called potots—were hung around the necks of prominent sheep (dastak amn), lambs, and goats<sup>22</sup>. The largest bell was placed on the lead goat guiding the herd. These decorations were believed to have protective and magical powers.

In the spring they sow the fields, and then, leaving some people to care for them, they head up the mountains with their herds to summer pastures. Sometimes these pastures are not far from their winter quarters, but more often they drive the cattle along the same paths that their ancestors have always taken<sup>23</sup>.

#### ***Rituals and traditions related to animal mating and birth.***

Equally fascinating are the rituals associated with the shearing of lambs, symbolizing the end of the milking season for both small and large livestock; the descent of herds from the mountains; the ceremonial release of the ram among the sheep; the confirmation of pregnancy in ewes; and the celebration of lambing. These events evolved into unique celebrations. On all these occasions, young men sang and danced to the accompaniment of the **dhol-zurna**, while women baked pastries for the mountaineers, sharing them also with those who remained in the fields. The herders received gifts—such as handkerchiefs, socks, gloves, and sometimes clothing or hats—as signs of appreciation for their conscientious work. The end of the milking season was marked by mixing the now-mature lambs with the adult flocks. Among the Yazidis, the conception of domestic animals is regarded as a festive occasion. The mating season, which begins on September 15th and continues until its end, is considered a major celebration among the Yazidis, as their livelihood depends heavily on successful animal breeding. At sunset, the Yazidis carefully organize their livestock: mothers are placed in one area, lambs in another, and larger horned animals are kept separately. They decorate the rams and prepare traditional halvah as a sweet treat. When the herders arrive, they give them donations as a gesture of appreciation. Every year, a mother sheep from the herd comes and mingles with the rams. According to

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<sup>22</sup> **Neri** – a male goat leading the herd (*Kurdish-Russian Dictionary*, Moscow, 1957, p. 259). The *Neri* was always castrated (field entries from 1972–1973).

<sup>23</sup> V. Nikitin, *Kurdy*, Moscow, 1964, p. 96.

Yazidi ancestors, if this mother is black, then the harvest that year will be very successful, and likewise, fertilization, birth, and the offspring will all be very prosperous. An important event in livestock breeding was the release of rams into the flock<sup>24</sup>, always accompanied by interesting ritual ceremonies. According to storytellers, the insemination of small cattle typically took place on the 40th day of autumn-that is, after the first ten days of October-so that calving would occur during the early spring grazing period, in the **dolga** (the birthplace of the small cattle). The release of the rams was also an autumn festival that brought great joy to livestock owners, especially shepherds, as it marked the end of their annual lease. This festival was closely associated with the fulfillment of wishes, prompting people to **appeal to** the spirits that protected their livestock through various rituals. They organized games and various entertainments, baked pastries, and prepared festive meals such as rice pilaf, harissa, and erishta. Portions of these were distributed to shepherds and herders, known as “Khoi Hatz” (Ram Bread) and “Tsndkani Hatz” (New mother’s Bread). Neighbors were invited to the feast, and congratulated each other. The Yazidis decorated their rams with tufts of wool dyed in various colors, while the Muslim Kurds used a mixture of red soil and water to dye their animals. They hung bells and charms from the rams’ necks, tied colorful ribbons (pushi)<sup>25</sup>, attached red apples to their horns, and hung tassels from their tail fat, however these practices have not survived to this day. In addition to all this, the Yazidis of the Masis region also hung a mirror on the rams’ foreheads, believing it would ensure successful fertilization-a tradition that has not been preserved to this day. In ancient times, it was a custom among the Yezidis to solemnly bring out a decorated ram, with two festively dressed teenage girls standing on either side of it. They would go out to meet the sheep, holding the ram’s horns, accompanied by jokes, entertainment, and the music of the dhol-zurna. According to tradition, the Yazidis would place a teenage girl on the back of a ram as part of the ritual. Young girls’ participation symbolized the hope for the birth of a female lamb, which was considered especially valuable. Though once meaningful, this custom is no longer practiced today. It’s worth noting that on this

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<sup>24</sup> This holiday was first mentioned by Vikander (T. *Fest bei den Kurden und im Avesta, Orientalia Suecana*, Vol. IX, 1960, Uppsala, 1961, pp. 7–10). He connects this celebration with the Avestan festival of releasing the rams, which took place in September–October and involved the ritual release of rams among the sheep. (M. Mahmud Bayazidi, *op. cit.*, pp. 6, 43).

<sup>25</sup> On that day, young girls also tried their luck by secretly tying փուշի around the necks of rams. Whoever among the gathered young men untied a փուշի was believed to be the girl’s future husband. Sometimes, the parents would even come to an agreement and arrange a wedding. (Шамилов, 1963, p. 66; Talin region, 1973).

day, livestock owners also tried to predict what kind of winter lay ahead. According to Yazidi tradition, if a black sheep was the first to approach the ram, it was taken as a good omen-signaling a mild winter with little snow. If a brown or dark-colored sheep came forward, the winter was expected to be somewhat harsh. But if a white sheep led the way, it was believed that heavy snow and a cold season were on the horizon<sup>26</sup>. The celebration of the 100th day of sheep conception was a significant event for livestock owners, as it served as a reminder to prepare for lambing and the birth of their lambs. Mela Mahmud Bayaghidi writes, "A hundred days after the rams were released, people would once again bake gata and prepare meals to celebrate the good fortune (the pregnancy of the small livestock)"<sup>27</sup>. According to field ethnographic accounts, during these ceremonies Yazidi livestock owners honored the spirits with offerings and especially prepared a meal called **chortanov khashil**. According to storytellers, khashil was prepared to ensure the lambs would be born white<sup>28</sup>. In addition to its symbolic significance, offering this dish likely also held sacrificial and appeasing meaning for the spirits, reflecting hopes for an abundant supply of dairy products in the coming year. On the occasion of this holiday, the Yezidis also organized games, entertainment, and feasts. As a result of our field research, according to a Yazidi storyteller, we uncovered another interesting tip with its fascinating meaning, which is as follows: on August 15, on the solstice (Krkx), the Yezidi draw a cross on the small, large, and horned animals in their tents, so that the star does not hit the sheep and the animals, that is, it protects the animals, which is an ancient tradition. It is believed that if the light of a star touches the sheep, the animals will grow weak and lose the ability to walk. To protect the health and reproduction of their flocks, the Kurds not only relied on skills developed over centuries but also turned to various magical practices. At the time of birth, livestock owners would pray to God, saying, "Lord God, may one become a thousand, may it be for good". According to tradition, they celebrated the joyful occasion by preparing **halva, gata**, and a variety of festive dishes. Friends and close neighbors were invited to share in the feast. After the meal, the guests expressed their gratitude by saying, '*May the home always be full and well-fed, and may the livestock continue to multiply.*' They offered blessings to the hostess as well: "*May your hands never lack a drop of oil, and may your dairy never run out*"<sup>29</sup>. The hosts gave pastries and sweets to the shepherds and herders. During the birth of livestock, each Kurdish family took

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<sup>26</sup> Shamilov, *Noted Work*, Issue 61, Aragats Mountain Range, 1972–1973. Notes.

<sup>27</sup> Mela Mahmud Bayazidi, *cited work*, p. 43.

<sup>28</sup> It is known that the Kurdish population of Transcaucasia, adapting to local conditions, preferred to keep more red and black sheep because these were relatively hardy and easier to care for. However, in Kurdish folklore, white sheep hold a special place. This is likely explained by the fact that, in the distant past—before the Kurds separated from their historical homeland—they primarily kept white sheep, whose wool was used for wedding dowries, fabrics, carpets, and other purposes.

<sup>29</sup> G. P. Chursin, *Azerbaijani Kurds, News of the Caucasian Historical and Archaeological Institute*, Tiflis, 1925, vol. III, p. 11. Materials recorded in Kurdish villages of the Talin and Aragats regions, 1967–1970.

care to ensure that the fire in the hearth did not go out and never gave fire from their own hearth to someone else, fearing that the milk of the sheep and cows would decrease and the newborn calves would go blind<sup>30</sup>. A good hostess, among the Yezidis, was a woman who kept the household fire burning day and night throughout the spring, until the end of lambing season—without ever turning to her neighbors for help<sup>31</sup>. This custom was also observed among the Kurds of Azerbaijan<sup>32</sup>. The milk of a newborn sheep or cow was boiled and shared among several families, with salt and bread placed in the bowl to ward off the evil eye. According to tradition, the bowl was never returned empty<sup>33</sup>—people would pour sugar, rice, or grain into it. Otherwise, it was believed the house would be left empty and the animal's milk would be less in the coming year. Azerbaijani Kurds boiled cow's milk and gave it to young girls with the belief that this would help the cow give birth to a female calf the following year<sup>34</sup>. In the spring, if someone borrowed another's **yogurt maker**, it had to be returned—otherwise, it was believed that blessings and prosperity would pass to someone else. A similar belief is also found in the traditions of the Yazidis of Armenia. Similarly, among Armenians, animals are also protected from the evil eye with fire. For example, when someone from a household with a newborn calf needed to be fed in the evening, they would throw burnt bread or a piece of coal into the fire, so that the calf would not be touched by the evil eye. In the **hupp**, young people were burning the tails of buffaloes so that they would be protected from the evil eye. (**Չաչրոնին**) To protect a cow from the evil eye, the Armenians of Hamshen would place items like coal, garlic cloves, a piece of wild apple wood, hot pepper, dog waste, and chicken droppings into a piece of cloth. They would sew it shut and tie it to its horns<sup>35</sup>. The Yazidis of the Aparan region in Armenia consider sheep's wool sacred. Traditionally, if someone found a piece of wool on the ground, they would immediately pick it up and either hide it under their shirt or place it in the stone walls of their home. Today, however, this custom is no longer widely practiced—people often use the wool to make bedding, and some even burn it. According to a Yazidi proverb, God transformed white wool into black wool, and by this act, the

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<sup>30</sup> S. A. Yeghiazarov, "Brief Ethnographic Sketch of the Kurds of the Erivan Province," *Notes of the Caucasian Branch of the Imperial Russian Geographical Society*, Vol. XIII, Issue 2, 1891, p. 35. A. Avdal, *The Kurdish Woman in the Patriarchal Family According to Ethnographic Folklore Materials*, Works of the State Historical Museum of Armenia, Vol. 1, Yerevan, 1948, p. 225.

<sup>31</sup> S. A. Yeghiazarov, *Short Ethnographic Outline of the Kurds of the Erivan Province, Records of the Caucasian Department of the Imperial Russian Geographical Society*, Vol. XIII, Issue 2, 1891, p. 36.

<sup>32</sup> E. Pchelya, *On the Kurdistan District of Azerbaijan, Soviet Ethnography*, 1932, No. 4, p. 113.

<sup>33</sup> It was considered a bad omen to bring an empty bowl into the house or to take a soot-filled pot or bowl out of the house in the evening. Mela Mahmud Bayazidi, *Customs and Traditions of the Kurds*, Moscow, 1963, p. 44.

<sup>34</sup> Mamoe Khalit Darveshyan, *Beliefs Related to Cattle Breeding of the Kurds of Transcaucasia*, p. 75.

<sup>35</sup> Astghik Israelyan, *Armenian Charms Related to Fire Worship*, Yerevan, 2008, p. 213.

sheikh, the pir, and the mrid swore to accept all clergy as they are, in accordance with law.

### ***Conclusion***

Festivals and beliefs related to animal husbandry, as well as healing methods and techniques, have emerged over millennia as important cultural components of the Yazidi herding lifestyle. These practices were meant to invoke the favor of unseen forces that protected the animals and to ward off evil. There is no doubt that many of the rituals and celebrations have not survived in full detail to the present day. There are now few elders who still remember these traditions. However, the available sources show that festivals and beliefs related to animal husbandry played a rich, diverse, and vibrant role in the economic life of the Yazidis. The study of these materials, however, cannot yet be considered exhaustive. One thing is clear: despite centuries-old religious differences, there are many similarities in the customs of Armenians and Yazidis. Today, changes in lifestyle, economy, and social relations have transformed the Yazidi way of life and livestock economy, gradually replacing many old and magical traditions. While the topic has attracted interest, it still requires further study. Field research has demonstrated that the materials currently available in existing publications remain incomplete and need to be expanded and examined.

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*The worship of the dragon, ram, horse in ancient Armenia.*  
<https://azatdzayn.com/%D5%BE%D5%AB%D5%B7%D5%A1%D5%BA%D5%AB-%D5%AD%D5%B8%D5%B5%D5%AB%D5%B1%D5%AB%D5%B8%D6%82%D5%BA%D5%A1%D5%B7%D5%BF%D5%A1%D5%B4%D5%B8%D6%82%D5%B6%D6%84%D5%A8%D5%B0%D5%B6%D5%A1%D5%A3%D5%B8%D6%82%D5%B5%D5%B6%D5%B0%D5%A1%D5%B5%D5%A1%D5%BD%D5%BF%D5%A1%D5%B6%D5%B8%D6%82%D5%B4/> (accessed 16 June 2022).

*Field research*, Interview with a male, approximately 50 years old, from the village of Shamiram, conducted on 20 September 2022.

Field research, interview with a male, approximately 50 years old, from the village of Shamiram, conducted on 27 July 2022.

*The worship of the dragon, ram, horse in ancient Armenia*  
<https://azatdzayn.com/%D5%BE%D5%AB%D5%B7%D5%A1%D5%BA%D5%AB-%D5%AD%D5%B8%D5%B5%D5%AB%D5%B1%D5%AB%D5%B8%D6%82%D5%BA%D5%A1%D5%B7%D5%BF%D5%A1%D5%B4%D5%B8%D6%82%D5%B6%D6%84%D5%A8%D5%B0%D5%B6%D5%A1%D5%A3%D5%B8%D6%82%D5%B5%D5%B6%D5%B0%D5%A1%D5%B5%D5%A1%D5%BD%D5%BF%D5%A1%D5%B6%D5%B8%D6%82%D5%B4/> (accessed 16 June 2022).

The Yazidi Kurdish New Year celebration traditionally lasted about three weeks during the first month of spring (March). The Muslim Kurds of Transcaucasia celebrated their New Year (Navrosh), according to the Muslim calendar, on March 21–22. Both celebrations included various rituals. The term *Navrosh* in Persian means “New Year,” while *Navroz* refers to a flower symbolizing the arrival of spring. (A. Avdal, *The Life of Transcaucasian Kurds*, Yerevan, 1957, p. 96.; T. P. Aristova, *Kurds of the Caucasus*, Moscow, 1966, p. 175; M. B. Rudenko, “New Year’s Ritual Celebrations among the Kurds,” *Folklore and Ethnography*, Leningrad, 1974, p. 119; K. R. Eyubi, I. A. Smrnova, *Kurdish Dialect of Mukri*, Leningrad, 1968, pp. 212–222.

Field research, Shamiram village; interview with a 40-year-old male, 25 July 2022.

On New Year’s Eve, a large *tareglkhi* (year-start) **gata** was baked, traditionally containing beads (though recently these have often been replaced by metal coins and buttons). The Muslim Kurds would say, “Oh God, may Navruz come well,” while the Yezidis wished, “May the coming of the New Year be happy.” The Yezidis typically placed a blue bead in the **gata** because, according to popular belief, it possessed magical powers: it kept evil spirits away, protected family members and household property from the evil eye, and removed all obstacles. This led some researchers to refer to it as a “good bead.” Interestingly, in the traditional life of Yezidi Kurds, especially in their costume, the color blue was forbidden by religion. In contrast, among Muslim Kurds, blue was a respected and common color. Thus, the presence of a blue bead in the Yezidi New Year’s **gata** was an exceptional phenomenon within their broader cultural attitude toward the color. — Mamoe Khalit Darveshyan, *Beliefs related to cattle breeding of the Kurds of Transcaucasia*, p. 73.

|                                                                                                  |             |             |          |            |               |              |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|----------|------------|---------------|--------------|
| <b>“Klojche</b>                                                                                  | <b>Sare</b> | <b>Sale</b> | <b>–</b> | <b>New</b> | <b>Year’s</b> | <b>Gata”</b> |
| On the third Wednesday of March, the Yezidis prepare a <b>gata</b> consisting of seven different |             |             |          |            |               |              |

flavors. Today, the women of the household bake the gata, into which they place a bead. The following day, early Thursday morning, the head of the family begins to cut the gata, dividing it among family members. Sometimes, some Yazidis divide the gata into seven equal parts in honor of the seven Yazidi holy angels. Source: <https://www.panorama.am/am/news/2021/03/17/%D5%A5%D5%A6%D5%A4%D5%AB%D5%BF%D5%B8%D5%B6/2470687> (accessed 29 August 2022)

Field research: Interview with a man, approximately 60 years old, from the village of Shamiram, conducted on 10 August 2022.

According to legend, not only the Yazidis but many other peoples have created numerous stories about the friendship and devotion between humans and dogs. The Yazidis believe that a dog's barking signals the descent of angels or spirits from heaven, as dogs are considered pure and holy in spirit (*bukurin*). Because of this purity, dogs are thought to perceive both good and evil spirits descending from above.

As soon as the black dog barks, the evil spirits flee in terror. When the angel of death, Azrael, approaches the house of the dying, the dog there first begins to howl, then falls completely silent and sinks into deep torment.

According to a legend, a Yazidi killed a dog, which then repeatedly appeared in his dreams. Occasionally, it took human form and cursed him.

Field research: Interview with a man, approximately 50 years old, from Shamiram village, conducted on 18 June 2022.

Field research: Interview with a man, approximately 50 years old, from Shamiram village, conducted on 13 May 2022.

**Neri** – a male goat leading the herd (*Kurdish-Russian Dictionary*, Moscow, 1957, p. 259). The *Neri* was always castrated (field entries from 1972–1973).

This holiday was first mentioned by Vikander (T. *Fest bei den Kurden und im Avesta, Orientalia Suecana*, Vol. IX, 1960, Uppsala, 1961, pp. 7–10). He connects this celebration with the Avestan festival of releasing the rams, which took place in September–October and involved the ritual release of rams among the sheep. (M. Mahmud Bayazidi, *op. cit.*, pp. 6, 43).

On that day, young girls also tried their luck by secretly tying **փուշ** around the necks of rams. Whoever among the gathered young men untied a **փուշ** was believed to be the girl's future husband. Sometimes, the parents would even come to an agreement and arrange a wedding. (Шамилов, 1963, p. 66; Talin region, 1973).

It is known that the Kurdish population of Transcaucasia, adapting to local conditions, preferred to keep more red and black sheep because these were relatively hardy and easier to care for. However, in Kurdish folklore, white sheep hold a special place. This is likely explained by the fact that, in the distant past—before the Kurds separated from their historical homeland—they primarily kept white sheep, whose wool was used for wedding dowries, fabrics, carpets, and other purposes.

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