ELITES AND "ELITES"

TRANSFORMATIONS OF SOCIAL STRUCTURES IN POST-SOVIET ARMENIA AND GEORGIA

Edited by
Yulia Antonyan

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This volume is the result of a joint, Armenian-Georgian anthropological survey of the concept of "elites" in contemporary Georgia and Armenia. The survey has embraced a set of topics related to the process of the formation of new national elites in the course of the construction of the nation-states, genealogy and typology of new elites, mechanisms and principles of organization of power, old and new hierarchical structures, and their continuity with the cultural heritage of previous periods of history. Being both very much alike and very much distinctive from each other, Armenia and Georgia have developed social structures similar by form, yet discrepant through their inner interplay of meanings, interpretations and correlations of the parts of these structures. This study of elites, elitism and the elitist involves different social (and also ethnic and religious) groups, which have been affected by the process of reconfiguration of social structures.

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3.1 "Elites" Between Nationalism and Tradition: The Modernization Processes in the Yezidi Community of Armenia

Hamlet Melkumyan

During my recent field work in Armenia, some of the Yezidi[1] in-

[1] Regarding definitions of Yezidis, Kurd-Yezidis and Kurds, for a reflection of the as yet unresolved problems of ethnicity and confession in Soviet and post-Soviet Armenia, see Dalalyan 2011: 178-180; Abrahamian 2006: 111-15. The problem of ethnic and religious identity is also common for the large Yezidi community in Georgia (Szakonyi 2007). In what is currently the Republic of Armenia, they have varied in nature but can be generalized into two flows – pre-Genocidal (i.e. pre-1915) and post-Genocidal. According to oral histories, many Yezidi families had settled in the eastern areas of the Ottoman Empire close to Mt. Ararat during the Armenian Genocide of 1915. As narrated in family stories, the Yezidis became victims of Kurdish and Turkish massacres and were forced to leave their settlements. In our discussions, my interlocutors were still talking about the Armenian and Yezidi Genocides as a narrative of the hapless "faith" of the two nations. Later on, this narrative included the Turkish-Armenian war of 1918. One may came across carpets and sculptures depicting two national heroes - Andranik from the Armenian side and Jangir Agha from the Yezidi side captured together (field data from Aknalich and Mkhchyan Villages, 2013-2014) as a symbol of "being together" in 1918s. These were famous warriors fighting to survive and save the Armenians and Yezidis from the Turkish massacres (Melkumyan 2014-2015).
The narratives of pre-Soviet settlement describe Yezidis as nomads and/or pastoralists and typically employ both the terms "Yezidi" and "Kurd" to refer to their ethnic background or mention Kurdishness with Yezidi religious identity (Darveshyan 1986, Avdal 1948, Southgate 2014, Parrot 1846). Yezidiness grew into a more prevalent and daily discourse in the late Soviet period while today the overwhelming part of the community chooses to call itself Yezidi rather than Kurd (although this opinion is at times disputed by some scholars). The dominant approach in Soviet times saw Yezidiness only as a creed professed by a group of Kurmanji-speaking Yezidis. This perspective was gradually reformulated in late

terlocutors were asking: "Why do you think this group or that person is the one to consider the community 'elites'? They are not". This question once again helped me rethink the role of a researcher. When I was identifying my field actors, it so happened that I was indirectly "building" an image for a group or a person as the "elites" (cf. Shore 2002: 3). Here, I should mention that the terms "elite" and "elitism" seemed to me quite comprehensive. Among social scientists, one may came across a definition of elites as groups that self-referenced themselves or were seen by locals as the "privileged" ones. In his text "Towards an Anthropology of Elites", Chris Shore says: "…every society has its privileged minorities: those who, for reasons of history, social status, economic position, political office or family connections, are the de facto power holders whose interests and normative values set the agenda and define the 'natural order of things'". (Shore 2002: 2). The academic works on anthropology of the elite and elitism are trying to discuss what shapes the elite and how they legitimize their power, how they reproduce themselves. Or "How do elites in different societies maintain their position?" (Shore 2002: 1). This paper will discuss the discourse of elitism in the daily life of Yezidis in Armenia, trying to show how groups are attempting to accumulate power inside the community in order to play the role of legitimate elites for outsiders. I focus on the questions of what makes elites and that maybe one can find links in the processes pre-

Soviet and post-Soviet texts arguing that Yezidis are a distinct ethnic group, they are not same with Kurds but they share a common language – Kurmanji (Dalalyan 2011). That is to say, the discourses of ethnicity and religious affiliation underwent changes in the Soviet period. Structural-genealogical studies of the Yezidi religion have produced quite interesting patterns, at the same time offering insight into the formation of the social structure of Yezidi society (Joseph 1919).

sented here with Bourdieu's capital accumulation approach (Bourdieu 1989: 17). More specifically, an effort will be made to bring out the prestigious groups in social, religious environments and explain the underlying reasons for their ascent (Abbink and Salverda 2013: 2-3).

The main patterns of prestigiousness and elitism discourse will be examined for Soviet and post-Soviet periods with an attempt to identify possible transformations and new trends of elitism in model creation. This paper is based on the materials[1] gathered from my field investigations conducted among the Yezidis in Armenia.

The Traditional Perception of Elitism: Casts and Clans

The dominant cohesive factor in the process of identity construction of the Yezidi community is religion: Yezidism (which is also regarded as an ethnic identity). The main figure of the Yezidi Pantheon is Malak-Tawus, depicted in the form of a Peacock-Angel (Asatrian and Arakelova 2003). Usually, the Yezidis call their religion Shafradin (Arakelova 2014: 3), although in daily life they describe themselves as sun-worshipers (for further Kreyenbroek 2009; Ahmed 1975; Dalalyan 2011; Langer 2010; Arakelova 2014: 3). The holy place for all Yezidis is Lalesh (in Northern Iraq) where their major pilgrimage sites and temples are located.

The Yezidi community is composed of three castes, based on religious constituents. The Murid caste has traditionally presented the lowest in the social strata of the community. The sheikhs and pirs are

[1] I am grateful to Roman Hovsepyan, Lili Harutyunyan, Nina Stepanyan-Gandilyan and Avetis Keshishyan for their contribution and for the agreement to share the field data gathered within the framework of research project № SCS 13-6F457, supported by the State Committee of Science MES RA.

considered superior due to their authority to organize the religious life of the community. In daily conversations, the House of a Sheikh is described as a “shrine” (“a Saint’s House”), which would typically have a variety of functions depending on the saint for whom it stands. Overall, people speak of 7 shrines, the holiest of them being the one located in Lalesh, while sheikhs in Armenia are their “representatives”[1]. The Sheikhs’ function of organizing religious life adds a prestige to their role and since the titles in the Yezidi community are hereditary, the heirs inherit their fathers’ social status. The everyday life of the Murid community and clans very well reflects the perceptions about both the Sheikhs’ and Pirs’ prestige; however, the image of a Sheikh appears to be more articulated.

Any connection to the sacral world on behalf of Murids is made possible solely through the Sheikh and Pir institutes (Omarkhali 2008: 105, 107). In the strictly conservative community of Yezidis, each Murid clan is assigned to a respective Pir and Sheikh (Asatrian and Arakelova 2004, Arakelova 2004: 20, Kreyenbroek 1995, Omarkhali 2008: 105). Every Murid family or individual should have their Sheikh, who acts as a mediator between the people and the God. The role of the Sheikh starts after the birth of a baby boy, when the Sheikh of that family or clan is summoned to perform the baptism[2] ceremony. Later on, the Sheikh is called upon to legalize marriages and also for ceremonies related to the afterlife. If a Mu-

[1] Sheikhs’ houses usually shelter certain items - “gospels” which are believed to be “representatives” of the shrine to which the Sheikh is bound. Factually, the local “saint’s houses” were instituted when the Iraq-based sanctuaries became inaccessible, particularly in pre-Soviet and Soviet times.

[2] As my Murid and Sheikh interlocutors point out, only male children are baptized because the females are supposed to be “outsiders” or “soulless” and in the future will leave their fathers’ houses to get married (Melkumyan 2014-2015).

rid skips these rituals, he or she is considered to be "unclean" and pushed out of the Yezidi community. The practices and communication with the Sheikhs is regulated according to oral Hymns, but was also canonized and even textualized in the Ottoman Empire in the 1872 Petition: "Every Yezidi must kiss… the hand of his Sheikh or his Pir every day" (Kreyenbroek 1995: 6). The Murid is obliged to have his Pir and Sheikh, and in case this model is broken, the Murid will not be allowed to enter the afterlife paradise (cf. Arakelova and Amrian 2012: 172). In fact, the religious authority also has certain economic aspects: every Murid should think about the wellbeing of his Sheikh and donate an enormous amount of money regularly, on an annual basis and in return for any service the Sheikh provides him or his family (field data, 2014).

During the establishment of the Soviet regime, caste prestige underwent certain transformations caused by the social equality principle advocated and put into effect by Soviet ideology. An analysis of family accounts from all three castes suggests that memories of Stalinist repressions are more frequent for Sheikh families than for the others. There are lots of cases, when Sheiks (men) had been forced by Soviet regime's local representatives to deny their religious status and when sheiks refused to do, they were exiled. One such typical case was from Zovuni village says that the Sheikh was exiled based on the accusation of being a *kulak*, although the family narrative maintains that he simply did not obey Soviet officials and did not renounce his hereditary role and functions as a spiritual leader.

Actually, the Yezidi community was involved in the *kolkhoz* system mainly as stockbreeders. The stockbreeder families were relo-

cated to the seasonal settlements in the highlands, which is why I argue that they experienced the State presence and control in daily life only partially. This circumstance has also allowed the Sheikhs to eventually accumulate economic capital as well, in the post-Soviet period. Narratives of elitism and prestige among Yezidis directly refer to the Sheikh; in any case, this is the situation for an “outsider”. In fact, Sheikhs prove to be the primary makers and carriers of cultural capital, which enables them to acquire economic and non-formal authority as well (the best upland slope pastures belong to Sheikhs).

It appears that parallel to the official discourse of exile, the Soviet authorities attempted to get rid of the circles that were deemed “prestigious” or “elite” in the community. *“In (19) 36 he was a Sheikh leader in Miraq, Sheikh Arab’s son Jamal. He was dispossessed and exiled in (19) 36-(19) 37. Sheikh Arab’s other son Afand was also exiled, but his brother Khalifa, a renowned man among all Yezidis, was left behind. You see, the priests, the wealthy, the Sheikhs were all dispossessed and exiled. My father used to say that when they forced him (a Sheikh) to renounce his title, he replied that their family was a well-known Sheikh clan and he could never deny his legacy. Once he walked out of there, people would address him as their “Sheikh”, he could not be disgraced like that. So they exiled the man to Tashkent. A month later a letter came, a black letter, saying he was dead”.* (Melkumyan 2014-2015).

The totalitarian machine of sovietization virtually succeeded, at least temporarily, to struggle against the “elites”, more specifically to liquidate the prestige of old religious, economic and political elites, immersing the Yezidi community in new fields of educational and economic activity, where the labor community was held in

prestige[1]. The power of Sheikhs was observable in the Murids' lives when they tried to deal with education. This attempted to decrease the power and influence of Sheikhs on community life, and Sheikhs prohibited Murids from getting educated, as it is against canonic Yezidism. At the same time, the Soviet government tried mostly in the early period to overcome total illiteracy, including the Kurdish and Yezidi communities too. These tendencies were also seen in academic texts written in that time by researchers of Yezidis and Kurds. It seems that those academics composed their works in the format of propaganda posters and try to show how "successfully" the processes of social equity and collectivization were implemented, thanks to Stalin's policy. Texts were composed with the usage of that period's language of official media and patterns, like "…collective farms in Kurdish villages, which introduced a turning point in the economy and stimulated the use of advanced technology" or "Today, the Kurds along with other Soviet peoples are developing the ideology of Communism" (Avdal 1948: 226-227). Two marked trends stand out in post-Soviet oral history narratives: a significant part of the

[1] The suppression of the Sheikhs must have been the reason for the creation or revival of alternative sacral spaces. Oral historic accounts about the late Soviet period suggest that religious activity was then unhampered: "So many people used to come here in Soviet times... It was in (19) 59-58" (neighbor of a Sheikh in Miraq). This circumstance is noteworthy in the sense that, after the repressions of the Sheikhs, a time came when the shrine and saint culture gained vast popularity while the Soviet authorities did not try to prevent or hinder the process as vigorously as before. One of possible explanations of this inherent presence of popular beliefs in everyday life is that the Yezidis tried to avoid schooling or had incomplete educations, which allowed them to evade atheist ideology. The other reason is that due to the character of their work activities (seasonal pastorals), the Sheikhs were absent most of the time from their communities and remained "unnoticed". These observations, of course, still require a deeper inquiry in order to understand the prerequisites for the formation of the sanctuary/shrine environment.

Murid community reinstituted the “elite” discourse of the Sheikhs, reviving both rituals and the special attitude towards the Sheikh (annual financial donations). This part of Murids is largely comprised of young people born towards the end of the Soviet Union. The other part of Murids is very critical of the Sheikh institute and tends to think about it as a misleading and exploitative model that enables the Sheikhs to exert their authority over the “common people” and put them under their control. *“We don’t use cabbage… (The Sheikhs say that Yezidi religion prohibits it) Our Sheikhs have blinded us, I don’t believe them. ….Simply put, they wanted to blind us and rule over us. Nowadays, the people are more advanced, nobody cares about them anymore. They preach to themselves. That’s how they wanted to paralyze the people”* (Murid woman), (Melkumyan 2014-2015).

The reasons behind such duality surface in the biographical interviews. As a result of atheistic and egalitarian propoganda, people with Soviet experience “revolted” against the traditional Sheikhdom. Those born in thepost-Soviet and *perestroika* periods tried to “restore” the prestige and reputation of the Sheikh institute, since the Sheikhs are “the spiritual and cultural leaders”. The “revival” of the Sheikhs’ authority could also have other motivators, such as the political situation in the late Soviet period. Actually, the official discourse of the Soviet period did not mention Yezidis as an ethnic unit or religious confession. The official data used to mention mostly all Kurmanji speakers as Kurds (Arakelova 2014: 13). The *perestroika* period, and then the collapse of the Soviet Union, made possible a new tendency when part of the Kurmanji-speaking villages presented themselves as Yezidi. It is noteworthy that being Yezidi first of all means to be part of the religious confession of Yezidism (scholars

usually call this community ethno-confessional). Thus, the invention of "identity" was possible though religion, which was within the capacity of the Sheikhs (Arakelova 2014: 3, 8, 14-15). The bulk of the narratives describe Sheikhs as wielders of mystic powers, intermediaries between this life and the afterlife, bearers of sacral and profane knowledge (Kreyenbroek 1995: 152), (Asatrian and Arakelova 2004). *"We are Murids, we don't really know anything. We are not literate, you see. If you want to know the real truth about us, go see our Sheikh", "Go meet the Sheikh, he will tell you better"*. Thus, the Sheikh has turned into a symbol of absolute knowledge and is represented as the possessor of intellectual capital. This could also be a stimulating factor explaining why the authority and symbolic power of Sheikhs has revived openly.

Religious-traditional and Secular Elites

The deterioration of the Sheikhs' non-formal authority during the Soviet period brought about new tendencies for participation in the public political "authority" rule. A key factor in this respect was the mandatory school education for Soviet citizens, which the Sheikhs were unable to avert and had little influence to hamper (in contrast to the inner-community perception, where education and literacy were traditionally deemed "satanic").

The years of the 1980s *perestroika* saw the inception of national-civil movements in Soviet Armenia. The dominant discourse of the time was about having a sovereign nation-state, with ethnicity seen as its main component. G. Derluguian discussed the regional patterns inherent to these tendencies, focusing on Armenian, Georgian and North Caucasian cases (Derluguian 2004: 178-179), (cf.

Tukvadze and Jaoshvili 2006). In this period, intellectual political leaders (scientists, academicians, writers) with a rhetoric of ethnic-nationalism came to the forefront of public discourse (Derluguian 2004: 61-63). These bearers of intellectual capital set out to accumulate social capital by relying on civic movements. Then the popularity they achieved was rapidly transformed into political and military capital (there are a series of interviews pertaining to these processes in Armenia with a member of the Pan-Armenian National Movement, the Mayor of Yerevan and Minister of Internal Affairs Vano Siradeghyan), (cf. Harutyunyan 1998).

In the period of *perestroika*, the Yezidi and Kurdish communities of Armenia also produced discourses of reunification around the idea of national identity. Several initiative groups were formed, the heads of which eventually strived to assert themselves as the leaders of the minority communities. One of the earliest of these Yezidi organizations, the “National Union of the Yezidis of Armenia”, was founded in 1989. Murids by caste were put forward (some media outlets say “elected”) for the presidency of the organization.

However, the cultural discourse is in fact opposed to the conventional “authority” model and its perceptions because in the traditional class structure Murids are not accepted as leaders, at least by the other two castes. The leadership of Sheikhs in the political discourse is “limited” to religious context. “The Sheikhs and Pirs are the priesthood; we maintain this tradition”, the President of the “National Union of Yezidis” said in an interview (Melkumyan 2014-2015).

The formation of the “National Union of Yezidis of Armenia” is noteworthy in itself, since “Yezidiness” here is formally represented

as ethnicity rather than religion or religious identity. Therefore, what were the means and mechanisms that empowered a person to present himself as the president of all Yezidis based in Armenia, or otherwise what kind of capital did he possess that was later transformed into power? According to the biography of the "President" of the "National Union of Yezidis" published in Wikipedia - "He finished secondary school and was employed as a teacher in the school of a village mostly inhabited with Yezidis. After that, he was director of studies at the secondary school in the same village. Later on, he became the village head. He was a member of the CPSU from 1963 to 1990. Simultaneous to his job commitments, he joined the Department of Arable Farming at an Agricultural College. In the 1970s, he gained admission to the Yerevan Marxism-Leninism University and graduated. During the 1980s, he was the deputy-head of the *sovkhoz* in a village. He was then the Head of the Livestock Provision Office. He also graduated from Yerevan Veterinary Institute" (E.M.[1] 2015).

One of the characteristics of "Yezidiness" in Soviet and early post Soviet times was that education was interpreted as a "satanic" phenomenon and schooling was not encouraged by the force of tradition.

"*You know what they used to tell us? They said we shouldn't send our girls to school, they said according to our (oral) "law", that's a sin. But why would that be a sin* (angrily)*? Why? Learning to read and write, why is that a sin? That's how it was… but the people didn't give in…*" (a Murid woman) .

Currently we can meet another point of view among Yezidi intellectuals, one of my interlocutor, a sheikh by origin and author of

[1] The names and locations have been changed.

Yezidi language handbooks said: “The tendency to refuse getting education is that the Yezidis have always lived side by side with other nations and they avoided schooling for the fear of assimilation” (Melkumyan 2014-2015). The community’s policy of rejecting education is interpreted in oral narratives as a means of protecting ethnicity and identity.

Given the ethno-confessional character of the Yezidi community, the influence of religious leaders is quite substantial in secular life. However, the case of the President of the “National Union of Yezidis of Armenia” proves otherwise, as the traditional perception is bypassed and instead the priority falls on the educational background. For a person from the Murid caste, the status of an intellectual served as a means of overcoming the constraints posed by traditionalism and the clergy towards obtaining leadership. For instance, the first part of the published biography captured mainly the “intellectual” capital of the person – education and employment in the education system, university degrees and ultimately his position as the President of the Yezidis. In this section, the author highlights the diversity of his intellectual capital. This also reflects the Soviet/late-Soviet common perceptions of intelligentia and intellectualism as a prestigious category. This, in turn, fitted into and was encouraged by the public discourse of the Soviet and post-Soviet years.

The policy of accumulation of social capital in the clan and community life grew into the circulation of nationalism and issues of genesis as well as identity (Krikorian 2004).

The Yezidi community functions in a clan system, where the patriarchal model is very prominent. In conservative communities, the prestige of the clan is underpinned by the glorification of the

common or genealogical archaic past and the interpretations of that past in daily life.

This issue is extremely sensitive among the Yezidis due to the fact that the thesis of their emergence from the Kurdish people is a constant matter of public and scientific debate. This approach is categorically rejected by the bearers of Yezidi identity (Dalalyan 2011). A Yezidi journalist told me: "In 1980-1990s when Karabakh Movement was increasing, the modernization of Armenia was tightly intertwined with national narratives under the leadership of intelligentia, at the same time our intellectuals also decided to raise the issue of national Identity and officially recall our population Yezidis, not Kurds". During my fieldwork, the people I encountered would often tell me, "I have only one request: in your story, do not call us Kurds. There were times when people would come, we would talk but in the end, they would write about us as Kurds". It is noteworthy that the Yezidi clergy interprets the genesis of Yezidis from the perspective of Yezidism, thus leaving open the field of scientific-secular and secular interpretation.

The President of the "National Union of Yezidis of Armenia", who is considered to be at the roots of the Yezidi national movements in the 1980s, later on produced a publication entitled "We are Yezidis", where he attempted to speak from the position of a person versed both in scientific and religious discourses. The author presented himself as a "Doctor of Yezidi Religion and History" (*Yezdiner*, published in Wikipedia.org). It's curious that his scientific title was not mentioned in his official biography (the online version was updated in April 2015).

Interpretation of issues pertaining to identity and origin in a na-

tionalistic clan-system creates opportunities for social and symbolic capital accumulation. Yezidi people would usually tell me: “You had better meet E.M., he will cover your questions from A to Z”..

The official media in Armenia prove to be a means of informal legitimization of the status of the “National Union of Yezidis of Armenia”. The media always presents him as the President of all Yezidis, not just as the organization leader. The fact that the press and media don’t offer any kind of discussion on the legitimacy of this status, but take it for granted and actively circulate it, leaves room for speculations about certain agreements with Armenian state institutions. Pledges of mutual loyalty can be traced in E.M.’s addresses to the media, as he regularly emphasizes: “although we are Yezidis, we consider Armenia to be our state”.. The first step of the legitimization of his authority was to enter the public life of Armenia by “sending troops” to the Karabakh battlefront in the 1990s. The second step was the creation of a “medal” legitimizing his symbolic capital. The Catholicos of All Armenians Vazgen I was the first to receive the order.[1] In this case, the Yezidi organization as a micro-model replicated the macro-model of the Armenian government, as the first president of Armenia Levon Ter-Petrosyan had also awarded Catholicos Vazgen I the first title of national hero (Melkumyan 2014-2015).

Parallel to being a caste society, the Yezidis are also divided on a clan basis, which is very typical of its patriarchal environment.

[1] Experts who have had the opportunity to deal with Armenian Diaspora communities H. Kharatyan and Y. Antonyan indicated in private conversations that the community behavior of Yezidis in Armenia has common points with Armenian Diaspora communities, related to how they generate mechanisms of survival through loyalty to the local governments.

On a clan system among Yezidies Omarkhali mentions: *"A key term which is frequently met in Yezidi society, is* oc'ax *('hearth', 'home', 'family'). Among the Yezidis, the representation is maintained of a common origin of a 'clan' from one ancestor. The Yezidis from Armenia and Georgia use the word* cîd *to refer to an ancestor. In this regard, there is a cult of veneration among Yezidis of the founder of a 'clan'. There are tombs or sacred places in honor of Sheikhs and Pirs, of the founders or prominent figures of a clan, which are widely visited by Yezidi pilgrims in Iraq".* (Omarkhali 2008: 108). The clan system plays an important role in everyday life when organizing agricultural or pastoral work: *"They used to come together to organize their agricultural work, that's why they are so productive",* an economist from Tandzut village said. In another case, our research team came across a mixed population in Ranchpar village, where all the Yezidi families were not in the village. "*They are celebrating the wedding party in another village of one of their relatives. This is typical of them - if something happens then all the members of that 'tribe' must take part",* said a fellow villager, a refugee from Azerbaijan (Melkumyan 2014-2015). These are daily fragments of how Yezidi clan members are working together to organize their social life. E.M.'s family also seems is employing this factor. In 1989 they founded the newspaper *Ezdikhan*; it is currently edited by the first deputy of E.M. and his grandson, who are both part of the same big family.

While the media targets the consolidation of social capital, intellectual capital has been secured through books which have aimed to form national identity - school textbooks: "(The co-author) and I created our ABC book – *Aniba*. We wrote this textbook to use in

the schools for the children of Yezidis” (Nazarenko 2012). This instance is related to another manifestation: the Soviet intellectuality discourse is traced here as well: a prestigious and authoritative figure for the public would come from a background of the intelligentsia or education sphere.

A. Smith argues (1999: 101, 103; 1998; 1991) that in order to present nationalism as an elite and prestigious discourse, a reference is made to one’s own archaic roots and their continuity through the written language. The mechanism of how archaisation of group origin is used in case of Yezidi intellectuals can be observed here: “… in fact we had a script as far back as the 11th century, but it was lost” (Nazarenko 2012). Nevertheless the Murid “Presidency” is not entirely accepted as legitimate, since in post-Soviet years, the non-formal authority capitals seem to have been restored to their former influence, which is particularly true for the Sheikhs. In order to fully wield their legitimate cultural capital and transform it into symbolic capital, Murids need to have the capacity and ability to master the domain of religion. This tendency is already perceptible in the organization of the sacred landscape through the Murids’ attempt (Nazarenko 2012) to acquire the symbolic capital of “clergymen”.

In one of his interviews, E.M. recounted that he was presented with one of the seven saints’ relics of Yezidis – the symbol of Malak-Tāwūs (Nazarenko 2012: 3:50-4:01 min.), while canonicly only the clergy is entitled to hold such an artifact. Hence E.M. becomes an authoritative figure through his possession of religious symbols. Moreover, the article in question was said to be crafted in India, which reinforced one of the narratives about the origin of the Yezidis. This perfectly coincides with Smith’s approach to national-

ism, suggesting the legitimization of prestigiousness of nationalism through claims of its archaity.

The primary means of accumulation of social and cultural capital prove to be the weakening of traditional elitism inherent in the religious and secular casts during the Soviet period, as well as the manipulation of the traditional clan-system. This process is also globalizing and, in 1997, the "Union of all Yezidis Around the World" and E.M. presented the latter as "President of all Yezidis around the world"[1].

However, the process of construction of new social eliteness among the Yezidis underwent changes in 2011. The " 'Sinjar' Yezidi National Union" youth NGO was created in 2011 by a group of young people with backgrounds in law and oriental studies[2]. As in the case of the "National Union of Yezidis of Armenia", founded back in 1989, the uniting factor here was education. Just as the "National Union of Yezidis of Armenia" NGO founded the newspaper *Ezdikhan* newspaper, "Sinjar" NGO maintains its own electronic publication which ensures a larger domain of social accessibility. The names of both organizations suggest that the wording "national union" is central for the activity of these groups i.e. they both work for the construction of a national-ethnic elite. In order to complete this process, the "National Union of Yezidis of Armenia" attempted to bring the religious sphere to their private domain, something that stands at odds with the principles of Yezidi religion. In contrast, "Sinjar" NGO seeks to reinstate reverence towards the institute of

[1] This can be compared to the case of M. Shanibov's claimed leadership of all mountainous communities of the Chechens, described by G. Derluguian (2004).

[2] The Vice-President of the National Union of Yezidis of Armenia, the editor of *Ezdikhan* newspaper, is also affiliated with this organization.

Yezidi Sheikhs and Pirs. They have come up with texts of appraisal or encouragement of the Sheikhs - “the Sheikh is our spiritual father” (fieldwork notes), “However Barzani has made another, more dangerous move in the media industry. He has cut Yezidis not only off of their homeland but also their roots. To that end he needs to turn the Yezidi people against their religious authorities. Barzani has realized that to corrupt the unity of the Yezidi people he needs to discredit and turn their leaders against each other” (Amiryan 2015). In the case of “Sinjar”, intellectual, cultural and social capital are employed to gain political and civil capital. In contrast to the previous initiatives and organizations, the members of “Sinjar” heavily emphasize the mixed political and civil character of their NGO; they initiate civil movements that address the pressing issues of the community in the context of the Constitution and human rights, rather than identity and culture. After several protest-like events held by this NGO (against the parliamentarians from the governing Republican party (Yezidies prepared a gift… 2013), various civil society actors have started to follow the group on Facebook and consider it an innovative initiative engaged in civil society activism (Melkumyan 2014-2015).

The demonstrated cases suggest that the intellectual capital traditionally deemed unacceptable by the Yezidi community, but nevertheless accumulated in late Soviet and post-Soviet period, contributed to the accrual of new cultural and social capital. In the late Soviet period, the already formed and recognized elite group contented itself with the accumulation of cultural and symbolic capital alone.

The group that formed in the post-Soviet period attempted to attain cultural and political capital. This direction of modernization of

the Yezidi community is primarily structured around the creation of civil discourse through nationalism.

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