Peter Nicolaus

Retired United Nations Official,
Salzburg (Austria) and Washington D.C. (USA)
ORCID: 0009–0006–6885–9139

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Benjamin Raßbach, *Landscapes of Resistance: Narratives around Sacred Places in Sinjar (Iraq) and the Islamic State's Genocide against the Yezidis*, Iran and the Caucasus Monographs, vol. IV (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2024), 385 pages.

Raßbach's work stands as a remarkable contribution to the study of Sinjar and its Yezidi populace, offering a rich tapestry of analysis, theory, and oral tradition. As he unfolds his exploration of sacredness, he weaves together a diverse collection of folk tales and narratives – often told from differing, sometimes contradictory perspectives – that cover the mosaic of the solemn shrines in Sinjar like a colourful oriental carpet. His book presents a compelling perspective through a uniquely innovative approach, providing a narrative mapping of sacred places in Iraq's Sinjar region while critically examining their intricate role in Yezidi and Kurdish identity building processes. The author persuasively demonstrates that these sacred sites function both as catalysts for internal divisions and particularist political agendas and as symbols of a cohesive and unified Yezidi religious identity. However, this identity may be conceptualised either within or beyond the framework of Kurdishness. In this context, Raßbach observes that in recent decades, Yezidi sacred places and their associated identities have undergone significant homogenization, with exclusive and unambiguous religious interpretations gaining prominence in response to political upheavals and military conflicts. He suggests that across all Yezidi political formations, religious symbolism serves as a means to advance their respective agendas, with each faction claiming to represent the entire community.

As the author convincingly demonstrates in Part 3 of his book, narratives of divine interventions, such as the Miracle of Sherfedin, derive their authority – much like the early Greek usage of mythos – from collective memories of violence and serve to transmit accounts of heroic resistance. In this sense, they also function as communal coping mechanisms. These narratives are far from homogeneous, as different groups and

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political parties interpret and utilise them to emphasise the favouritism, they claim to have received from the holy being. Similarly, conflicts – both between Yezidis and Muslim adversaries and within the Yezidi community itself – are frequently framed in religious terms. However, beneath these religious narratives lie deeper layers of contention, particularly the long-standing rivalry between Yezidi factions affiliated with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and those aligned with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). As the author emphasises, these conflicts often originate from historical divisions within political affiliations or tribal structures, yet they are frequently obscured in the collective memory of narrators. This phenomenon underscores that while disputes over sacred sites or objects are not necessarily rooted in religious differences, religion frequently serves as the primary framework through which they are articulated and understood.

The author's analysis of the structure and background of narratives concerning divine interventions is followed by a detailed examination of the perception of traditional sacred places, or *mazars* (as termed by his Yezidi interlocutors), and of the ways in which these perceptions are articulated through ritual practices and social relations. These places derive their significance from their association with specific Holy Beings and their deeds. The lives of these figures are often recalled in a schematic manner, with their sacredness primarily linked to their primordial presence at particular sites – an aspect that, according to Raßbach, is reflected in the architectural uniformity of Yezidi shrines today. The geographic placement of these sacred sites, frequently intertwined with natural landscape features, remains, as he emphasises, of paramount importance. Such locations serve as anchoring points for an otherwise fluid and evolving oral tradition, reinforcing the notion of an unaltered transmission of specific religious narratives. Furthermore, the analysis explores how beliefs about sacred places are not necessarily rigid; rather, their significance often lies in the rhetorics of identity, which are strategically employed in intra-community discussions. Discourses rooted in communal history and tradition have the potential to transcend politics, integrating into a broader and more inclusive religious framework of Yezidism. Raßbach also introduces a second category of shrines that seems to challenge the uniformity of Yezidi sacred buildings. These sites are tied to specific narratives and localised knowledge, often emerging from recent politically driven events. As a result, they function, according to the author, as intermediaries between standardised Yezidi *mazars* and politically affiliated sacred sites – the latter, frequently denied *mazar* status due to their recent origins.

Some sacred sites in Sinjar are particularly tied to local Yezidism, often reinforcing the religious significance of the Mountain. The author examines how these discourses

unfold within what he terms a "spatialised symbolic order of the sacred" – a framework in which the sacredness of the landscape, place-bound memory, and spatial imagery become integral to Yezidi religious identity. In this context, Raßbach analyses smaller replicas of the sacred centre of Lalish and other features of Sinjari Yezidism, highlighting the role of "conflictual mimeses" in shaping local identity. A similar, though more pronounced, dynamic he observes in the relationship between Yezidism and Islam. While many elements of Yezidi sacred sites reflect a shared historical development with Islamic traditions, these similarities are now largely understood within an emic perspective as markers of Yezidism's primordial distinction and superiority over Islam. According to the author, the ongoing tension between Sinjar and the Shekhan region, as well as between Yezidism and Islam, is reflected in the architecture and symbolism of sacred sites, continuously influencing and being influenced by contemporary political struggles.

The author argues that, whether ancient or recent, these sacred sites function as territorial claims. The graves of martyrs symbolically mark the land, echoing traditional beliefs that associate landscapes with sacred traces left by Holy Beings. The plurality and contestation of memories, traditions, and imaginaries within contemporary Yezidism are evident in ongoing discussions about sacredness. Moreover, images from the oral tradition remain deeply intertwined with the land, continuing to anchor spatial and historical imaginaries at specific sites.

Sinjar Mountain occupies a central place in both local and external perceptions of Sinjar and Iraqi Kurdistan, its enigmatic qualities in local beliefs closely tied to its strategic significance and its role in Yezidi religious thought. The present book explores sacredness as a situational and interpretative category and while scholars such as Claude Lévi-Strauss conceptualise sacredness as a "floating signifier", the author argues that this perspective fails to fully capture the emic significance of Yezidi sacred concepts. The distinction between religious and politically sacred sites underscores a fundamental belief that sacredness is not merely constructed in the present but must have been established in the past. By integrating constructivist and essentialist perspectives, the study aims to navigate the complexities of both emic and etic approaches to sacredness in Yezidism.

As the author further examines the evolving landscape of sacred spaces in Sinjar, particularly those shaped by political and historical upheavals rather than traditional religious frameworks (as explored in his Chapter 8 on Monuments, Martyrs, and the PKK in Sinjar), he argues that Yezidis distinguish between religiously sacred sites and those imbued with political significance. While both categories serve as commemora-

tive markers of past events, their reference points are perceived as immutable. In contrast, he argues that essentialist interpretations – such as those put forward by Mircea Eliade and Rudolf Otto – conceive sacred places as manifestations of an independent metaphysical reality, an approach more closely aligned with traditional Yezidi understandings of sacredness. Raßbach's study offers a nuanced analysis of how Yezidi sacred spaces are perceived, contested, and reaffirmed within shifting political and social landscapes.

He highlights how perceptions of sacred places in Sinjar reflect the broader divide between situational and essentialist approaches to sacredness. He argues that in Yezidism, a *mazar* is traditionally regarded as sacred due to its connection to the deeds of Holy Beings in a primordial or essential dimension. At the same time, he notes that certain sites, such as the Kocho school, have acquired sacredness through recent historical events, demonstrating that places can be sacralised within generational memory. According to Raßbach, both perspectives coexist in Yezidi narratives about sacred places, yet they are often framed separately within identity discourses, illustrating the tension between inherited religious tradition and the evolving significance of contemporary historical experiences.

While the author provides valuable insights into the intersection of sacred sites and political struggles, his conclusions may not fully account for regional variations. His argument that Yezidi shrines have been politically appropriated – their significance increasingly linked to recent military conflicts – is particularly evident in PKK-controlled areas and near the *mazar* of Sherfedin, where images of martyrs, political flags, and spoils of war are displayed alongside sacred sites. However, this phenomenon does not necessarily characterise Sinjar as a whole. Many sacred sites remain primarily places of religious devotion, largely unaffected by overt political symbolism. By portraying this dynamic as a widespread development, the author however risks overstating the extent to which political forces have shaped Yezidi sacred spaces, overlooking the more nuanced and varied realities on the ground.

Raßbach further observes that sites newly regarded as sacred are often narratively linked to pre-existing sacred locations, reinforcing their legitimacy. However, whether a particular individual emphasises a site's sacred character or associates it with a political party or militia is largely shaped by political affiliations, and the two designations are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The author states in this context: "While Yezidis affiliated with the PKK and its allies might point out that the Şêx Mend shrine near Sherfedin is a new construction which Qasim Şeşo [a senior military commander now affiliated with the Kurdistan Regional Government, especially the Kurdistan Democratic Party] has perhaps even built for his own financial benefit, he himself would

emphasise that there had already been a certain stone associated with Şêx Mend there which then had been marked with a *qob* [domed structure] so that pilgrims can perform rituals. The perception of sacred places, no matter if they are considered traditional or not, is often situational". This reflects Raßbach's broader argument that the sacredness of a place is not an inherent or fixed quality but rather a fluid and contested category, shaped by shifting political and social dynamics.

Drawing on multiple examples, Raßbach underscores that shared experiences of violence significantly shape how sacred sites in Sinjar are understood. Within the Yezidi oral tradition, numerous accounts of conflict with outside groups serve to legitimise the sanctity of specific locations and even entire landscapes. As the author concludes, "sacred sites" in Sinjar are considered by the Yezidis as "conquered spaces" and aptly notes that narratives surrounding the Yezidis' initial presence in Sinjar and Lalish are often framed as acts of symbolic or territorial appropriation. This interpretation extends to sites connected to recent episodes of violence, particularly those linked to the genocide committed by the so-called Islamic State. Contemporary understandings of Yezidi identity frequently rest on a history marked by repeated persecution and violence at the hands of Muslims. In many of the author's interlocutors described sacredness in terms of the resting places of martyrs – individuals believed to have sacrificed their lives for the protection of the Yezidi people and their homeland. Thus, these sites, whether tied to mythic origins or recent trauma, are widely seen as key expressions of collective identity.

The author puts forward a compelling theory in his analysis of political authority in Sinjar, noting that leadership was traditionally exercised by tribal figures whose influence dominated for centuries. More recently, however, the migration of Yezidis from the Shekhan region has contributed to a shift toward institutionalised religious authority, thereby reshaping communal hierarchies. As Raßbach recalls, many Sinjari tribes historically comprised both Yezidi and Muslim segments, with especially close ties between Yezidis and Shi'a Kurds. He argues that this relatively fluid intercommunal landscape gradually gave way to more exclusive, religiously defined identities – a transformation accelerated by broader geopolitical forces. In particular, Ottoman military campaigns and British colonial policy are seen as instrumental in fostering a supra-tribal, ethno-religious Yezidi identity that increasingly positioned itself in explicit contrast to Islam. In this context, it is worth noting that the author at times refers to the Yezidis as a "Kurdish ethno-religious entity" – a characterisation that appears internally inconsistent, since he employs the label ethno-religious while simultaneously presuming a Kurdish ethnicity for the Yezidis. If Yezidis are indeed to be classified as ethnically Kurdish, they would more accurately fall under the category of a reli-

gious minority within the Kurdish population, rather than as a distinct ethno-religious group. This ambiguity reflects the broader tensions inherent in competing narratives of Yezidi identity – whether framed as a subset of Kurdishness or as an autonomous ethnos with its own religious tradition. In this regard, the author would have done well to engage more thoroughly with the extensive body of scholarship addressing the controversy surrounding Yezidi ethnic, religious, and national identity.

Turning to intra-Yezidi rivalries, Raßbach underscores how various actors in Sinjar construct their narratives within a framework of Yezidi religious identity, frequently employing a rhetoric marked by antagonism and exclusion. Competing factions frequently characterise one another not merely as political opponents, but as inherently illegitimate – framing them as instruments of external powers such as Kurdish, Turkish, or Iranian forces. These portrayals serve to delegitimise the opposing group by questioning their Yezidi credentials. At the same time, each faction asserts its own authority by claiming to represent the true will of the Yezidi community in Sinjar. As Raßbach observes, such accusations are seldom framed as ideological disagreements; rather, they draw on narratives that portray the opposing side as alien to – or complicit in compromising – the Yezidi faith, thereby reinforcing claims to communal authenticity and political legitimacy. He further observes that narratives surrounding the genocide perpetrated by the so-called Islamic State often stress the exclusively Yezidi character of those who took up arms in defence of the community. Military contributions by other factions are either downplayed as insignificant or framed as self-serving political manoeuvres. Within this discursive context, the deployment of religious language serves a particular function: it marks individuals, sites, and actions as emblematic of communal unity, while implicitly distancing them from factional or partisan agendas.

In conclusion, Raßbach's study constitutes a significant contribution to the anthropological study of religion, particularly through its nuanced examination of the interplay between material space and sacrality in the Sinjar region. Throughout the work, the author adopts a dual methodological lens – analysing the material and spatial configurations of sacred places while simultaneously engaging with emic conceptions and translating them into broader theoretical frameworks. Drawing on recent scholarly debates that emphasise the entanglement of religious meaning-making with political, economic, and social realities, the author anchors Yezidi religious discourses within the everyday experiences and structural conditions of Sinjar's communities. This integrative approach not only enriches the understanding of Yezidi sacred geography but also affirms the relevance of classical and contemporary anthropological concepts in the study of lived religion. By engaging both contemporary theorists and classical thinkers – most notably critical geographers and Émile Durkheim – Raßbach concep-

tualises the boundary between the sacred and the profane not as fixed or inherent, but as the outcome of socially embedded processes of ritualisation and symbolic negotiation. In his account, sacred spaces emerge through generational acts of interpretation and ceremonial practice that inscribe meaning onto the landscape. These sites are not exclusively religious in function; rather, they serve as dense social nodes where memory, territorial belonging, and communal identity converge. Particularly in narratives surrounding the genocide, Yezidi shrines function as spatial embodiments of collective trauma and resilience – simultaneously sites of remembrance, social interaction, and political articulation. In this way, the author affirms the continued analytical relevance of categories such as "religion" and "sacred space", while also demonstrating how these concepts are locally constituted, contested, and redefined through lived experience. Raßbach also underscores the importance of emic conceptions of sacred spaces, particularly how local actors invoke memories of violent encounters and heroic resistance to frame their significance. By juxtaposing essentialist and situational perspectives, the study demonstrates that these approaches are not mutually exclusive but rather complementary analytical tools. Together, they allow for a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics surrounding sacred places. The symbolic and political dimensions of sacred space in the Sinjari context are shown to be deeply interwoven – mutually constitutive forces that shape both the lived experience and the representation of these sites.

While a detailed engagement with the methodological challenges of studying oral societies is not beyond the scope of this review, it must be set aside due to the limited space typically allocated for book reviews, is important to note that Raßbach addresses these issues with commendable precision. He persuasively argues that, despite ongoing efforts at canonisation and the homogenising pressures of globalisation, the Yezidi oral tradition remains vibrant, dynamic, and markedly heterogeneous. Its unfixed and evolving nature resists rigid codification. As the author emphasises, any initiative aimed at formalising or systematising this oral heritage must be situated within the broader context of contested claims to religious and cultural authority.

Raßbach has undoubtedly authored a work that deserves a place on the shelf of anyone seriously engaged with the study of Yezidism – and especially those seeking a deeper understanding of the Yezidis of Sinjar.