

The Life of Sinan Tolan: Story of a Third Generation German Yezidi

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INTRODUCTION:

“There is a clash of cultures that I have to challenge with every day, but I know where I come from” (Tolan, personal interview, January 24, 2016).

The individuals who identify themselves within an ethno-religious minority group in industrialized, urban, complex and multicultural societies often have unique and distinctive life narratives. Sinan Tolan is a third generation German Yezidi from Oldenburg, a Northwestern German city which has been a hotspot for Yezidi migrants since the early-1980s. He currently lives in the Netherlands, studying International Business at Maastricht University. He identifies himself within the Yezidi community, a small ethno-religious minority group predominantly speaking Kurdish, which is estimated about 30,000 members living in Germany and 300,000 worldwide. The German anthropologist Andreas Ackermann defines the Yezidis as a ‘double minority’, who have been persecuted by Arab and Turkish nation-states for being ethnic Kurds, and at the same time, by the Muslim Kurds for being non-Muslim.

This paper is an analysis of Sinan’s life narrative based on a series of biographical interviews with an aim to understand how his Yezidi heritage and identity played a role in his life in the complex multicultural society of Germany, and the challenges he had to confront with in the past and present. Chakrabarty’s notion of ‘subaltern pasts’, Brewer & Gardner’s theory of ‘self-concept’ and Ackermann’s study on Yezidi Diaspora in Germany will serve as the theoretical framework for the analysis. The preemptive significance of this research is that Sinan is a member of a considerably underrepresented social group in the mainstream media and academic world, and this limited attention is primarily focused on their persecution by the Islamic State and their horrific survival stories. Thus, the

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Yezidis' daily life experiences are considerably different from the mainstream debate around migration and integration related issues in Germany and the entire EU which predominantly focuses on the Muslim migrants and the refugees. This research will highlight the life experiences and challenges faced by Yezidis who were born and raised in Germany as well as how this complex multicultural society affected their identity and religious practices.

THEORY, CONCEPTS AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

First of all, the interviews were originally planned to be conducted in two sessions based on personal and community-related questions. However, the answers and stories Sinan gave were too interrelated, and at the end, the entire interview was given in a single session which lasted about seven hours including short breaks. Before moving on to the analysis of Sinan's life narrative, several methodological aspects and the concepts used in the analysis and interview will be explained, as well as some information about Yezidi Diaspora in Germany will be given in this section. According to Ackermann in his article *A Double Minority: Notes on the Emerging Yezidi Diaspora*, Yezidis are ethnic Kurds who follow Yezidism, an orally transmitted religion which is often referred as the native religion of Kurds before the spread of Islam, where such elements as sun, light and fire are considered holy. In the pre-modern era, Yezidis were frequently persecuted by their Muslim overlords as they were often described as 'devil worshipers' in the Islamic political discourse. They began to migrate in mass numbers to Germany mainly in Oldenburg and Hannover in the early-1980s fearing of the increasing ethnic and religious tensions in Iraq and Turkey (Ackermann, 2004, pp. 156-158).

The established Yezidi diaspora in Germany is not concerned any longer with religious or ethnic persecution as they did in their native homelands; however, they face a new series of challenges in their new homeland. Yezidis became significantly more urban and literate in Germany. This pursued the diaspora Yezidis to adapt their religious practices to their new society, thus to seek for recognition and intellectual debate about their culture and religious practices Furthermore, due to these circumstances, Yezidism is gradually transforming from an orally transmitted religion into an orthodox religion based on scripted literature, and several elements such as strict rules of endogamy are slowly becoming open to debate. Thus, Yezidi identity

is becoming more and more homogenized as the ordinary Yezidis are no longer dependent on their clergy for information about their religion (pp. 164-168).

Chakrabarty's notion of 'subaltern pasts' refers to the 'history from below' of marginalized social groups who are frequently ignored in the popular history-writing. It is a form of biographical analysis that is instead of focusing on the individual's views on themselves, subaltern pasts focus on the relationships between the subaltern and elite and between the subalterns (Chakrabarty, 2000, pp. 98-101). Based on this analytical framework, the primary focus of the interview will be Sinan's relationship with other Yezidis, Kurds, and other members of the multicultural German society. According to Brewer & Gardner;

"Individuals seek to define themselves in terms of their immersion in relationships with others and with larger collectives and derive much of their self-evaluation from such identities (p.83)".

The theory of self-concept defines identity formation –or self-definition- as a social construct which operates in three fundamental ways; the individual self, relational self and collective self. The individual self refers to how individuals distinguish themselves from those who surround them. The relational self refers to individuals' position within relationships with significant others, such as family members, friends and romantic partners. Finally, the collective self is understood as the individuals' sense of inclusion in a social group and common identification with its members (Brewer & Gardner, 1996, pp. 83-84). Based on these theoretical and analytical conceptions, Sinan's life narrative will be analyzed in the next section.

SINAN'S LIFE NARRATIVE ANALYSIS:

Sinan has always been a strong believer Yezidi since the early years of his life, which he learned almost everything about their religion and culture from his family. Kurmanji dialect of Kurdish has always been the spoken language at home and he spoke German with most of his friends, which made him bilingual in both languages. He never eats pork or lettuce, which are the banned foods in Yezidi religion. Sinan argued that; "People in Germany did not know about Yezidis when I was growing up, and everyone thought first that I was a Muslim because I did not eat pork" (Tolan, personal interview, January 24, 2016). His father, whose family migrated to Germany from Batman, Turkey as guest workers in the late-1960s, has been an important public figure among diaspora Yezidis, and is one of the founding members of *Yezidisches Forum Oldenburg* (YFO), the first organization established for Yezidi affairs and teaching the religion outside their native homeland in Iraq and Turkey. Sinan pointed out that his father's community work did not isolate the family from the German society, but rather it made his father gain more respect from his German friends.

His mother was born and raised in Batman province, moved to Germany around age 17 and lived among the family until she was legally become able to be married. As a result of the fact that she was born and raised in the Yezidi native homeland, she was more embedded in Yezidi culture and religion than any family member, which had a great influence on Sinan. Sinan indicated that his mother, on the one hand, played the most active role in raising him and his embracement of Yezidi identity and culture, as she reflected the culture and knew the religion more than anyone he knew. His father, on the other, had an indisputable influence on him as well as he was the one who did most of the community work and support the family financially.

According to Sinan, one of the most amusing stories he heard about his family's life back in Batman was that almost all elderly members of the village and the neighboring villages were registered on January 1st as their birthdate due to the inefficient bureaucracy in the rural Eastern Turkey. On the contrary, one of the most traumatizing stories he heard from his family was; when his grandfather was living in Batman, his grandmother needed urgent medical attention, and at the hospital in the town center they went the doctor refused to treat her the moment he realized that she was a Yezidi woman. Nonetheless, he traveled to Batman a few years ago with his father for land title registrations, and the main thing he remembered was the great local food he had, rather than the reflections of traumatizing memories of his family members.

Sinan reads his favorite prayer on a daily basis, which he learned from his parents; 'Dear God, please protect the 72 nations first, and then protect us'. Thus he carries a stone from the town of Lalish, the holy pilgrimage site for Yezidis, wrapped in a white fabric which he always carries with him especially at exams and other important events. He argued "I believe that it brings me luck and wisdom in times of need" (Tolan, personal interview, January 24, 2016). Nonetheless, the greatest challenge he had with his identity and religion was the period of four years that he had a relationship with a German girl, who did not have a Yezidi background. According to Sinan, he kept his relationship as secret for a very long time, and eventually he took the risk to introduce her to his father only, who did not reacted irrationally in his opinion, however, he privately told Sinan that 'She is a lovely girl, but you should never forget where we come from and the rules we have to follow'. Sinan further said he could not even consider telling about his relationship to his mother because he knew for fact that she would have been extremely devastated to know her son was in a relationship with

a non-Yezidi girl, which is essentially committing the sin of exogamy in Yezidi religion and the penalty for this act is excommunication.

Evidently, the strict rules of endogamy in Yezidi religious codes and the risk of harming his relationship with Sinan's family, particularly with his mother, eventually led him to end his relationship with his non-Yezidi girlfriend after four years. This memory of Sinan can serve as a great example of how individual self, relational self and collective self are intertwined, and shape the individuals identity formation. Simply, Sinan eventually acknowledged that his relationship with a non-Yezidi girl is not sustainable and contradictory in terms of his individual self as a Yezidi among others, his relational self in terms of his bound with his family members, and his collective self as a member of the Yezidi community. Sinan found himself in a conflict that he was forced to give up either his identity and religion or his relationship with a non-Yezidi girl. At the end, he ended his relationship with a significant other to protect his identity and his membership to the Yezidi community, and most primarily his relationship with the more important significant others; his family members. In Sinan's own words; "There is a clash of cultures that I have to challenge with every day, but I know where I come from" (Tolan, personal interview, January 24, 2016).

In spite of all odds, this experience substantially influenced his views on Yezidi identity and religious practices. In Yezidi religion, once the individual leaves the religion or commits exogamy, there is no return. Sinan argued, many Yezidis leave the religion and cannot return which causes a significant decline in the population of Yezidis. He thinks the strict endogamy rules should be loosened up, and people should be allowed to convert if they understood the religion well and is aware of what it takes to be a Yezidi. According to Sinan; "I wish there was a popular Kurdish nationalist movement that struggles to make Yezidism a major religion among Kurds in the future" (Tolan, personal interview, January 24, 2016). Sinan further

argued that he is extremely convinced by his religion and identity; however, he believes that there is a need for serious reforms in Yezidi religious codes. In his own words; "We say the sun belongs to everyone, but we are not enough embracing and open minded yet" (Tolan, personal interview, January 24, 2016).

Later on, Sinan pointed out that his father received death threats from Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) sympathizers for not sending donations to the party through YFO. Although most of the Yezidis sympathize with the PKK, his father refused to be involved in sending donations to PKK as the group was designated as terrorist by the German state. Thus, his aunt was a volunteer in Northern Iraq to rescue enslaved Yezidi girls from the IS, and she had a very difficult time among conservative Muslim Kurds as a German-born Yezidi woman. These stories made him embrace his religious identity more than his ethnic identity and distanced Sinan from Kurdish identity politics. However, the recent campaign led by PKK and its Syrian ally YPG to rescue Yezidis from IS persecution in Iraq considerably increased Sinan's sense of solidarity and identification with other ethnic Kurds in Europe and worldwide, and his respect to Kurdish identity politics. Yet, he remains cynical towards the idealized cult of personality of PKK's leader Abdullah Öcalan embraced by the group's members and sympathizers. Accordingly, Sinan indicated that; "I do not think Germans interpret in a good way when they see Kurdish protesters on the street or on German TV, holding hundreds of Öcalan portraits and banners but only a few Kurdistan flags" (Tolan, personal interview, January 24, 2016).

Thus, since he moved to Maastricht, Sinan sometimes feels more Kurdish in the time he spends in the Netherlands, because in Maastricht he interacts with a considerable amount of Kurds, both among students and the local population; however, there are no Yezidis in town as far as he is aware of. In Oldenburg, he feels significantly more Yezidi predominantly because of the

family influence. Sinan also believes that he embraced some signs of 'being German', such as the good time management skills and being well organized during the studies and work. These aspects of Sinan could also serve as an example to illustrate identity as a socially constructed phenomenon rather than culturally –or naturally- given. Finally, Sinan pointed out that although the IS insurgency had devastating effects on the Yezidi community; it significantly contributed to the sense of solidarity between the members of the group. Thus, as a result of the successful lobbying activities in the past few years and the intensifying cooperation with other Kurdish groups made Sinan become more optimistic about the future of Yezidis and Kurds.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS:

Up until this point, this essay analyzed Sinan's life narrative by primarily focusing on his identity formation and how this affected his life experience within complex and multicultural German and Dutch societies. It was argued that Sinan's identity was a social construct, which was primarily shaped by his relationship with his family members and the multicultural society surrounding him. Simply, Sinan was raised as a strictly religious Yezidi, and his family members played a crucial role in his embracement of Yezidi identity and religion, however, such experiences as his hidden four-year-long relationship with a non-Yezidi girl challenged his identity and shifted his opinion towards the conventional Yezidi practices. This particular experience of Sinan illustrated how the individuals' relationships with significant others are intertwined with the individuals' self-definition, as Sinan was forced to give up his relationship with his non-Yezidi partner in order to maintain his identity and his relationship with his family members.

This experience also made him acknowledge that the belief system he would rather embrace needed a series of reforms to become more adaptable for a complex society such as the one he lives in. Evidently, Sinan's family, the multicultural society that surrounds him and the Yezidi community play the most crucial roles in his identity formation. Furthermore, several stories of disputes between his family members and other Kurds made him embrace his religious identity more than his ethnic identity. This has been changing in the past few years as a result of the increasing solidarity between Kurds and Yezidis following the IS insurgency, however, he still remains cynical towards the groups that involve in Kurdish identity politics. My experience as the author from Southwestern Turkey was remarkable as this study allowed me to explore a lost and underrepresented part of my country's heritage, which are often considered as 'too sensitive to discuss in public'.

TOPIC LIST OF THE INTERVIEW:

- Brief introduction/who is Sinan Tolan?
- Noticeable family stories/ where did they come from? How and why?
- His impressions of their migrant experience/integration process?
- His parents' noticeable religious-cultural practices/their reflections on him?
- Sinan's experience as a 2nd generation German Yezidi/reflections on his native culture-religion?
- Does he believe living in Germany strengthened Yezidi culture/are there any signs of assimilation?
- What religious-cultural elements does he embrace/ what elements he finds contradictory?
- His experience as a Kurd among German and Turkish/ as a Yezidi among Muslim Kurds?
- Does he feel connected in any terms (kinship, identity, family ties) to Kurds or Yezidis in Turkey and Iraq?
- Any involvement in Kurdish or Yezidi identity politics?
- Any sense of isolation of Yezidis from Muslim Kurds in Germany and worldwide?
- Any sense of intolerance from the German community?
- Has he ever been to Kurdistan? In what circumstances would he consider visiting?
- His reflections on the IS insurgency/does he feel affected on a daily basis from news -or stories?
- His views on the Yezidis' future in Germany and abroad?

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