RELIGIOUS TRANSNATIONALISM OF THE YĀRSĀNI COMMUNITY IN SWEDEN

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Abstract: Concepts of diaspora concerning related factors of social transformation have been investigated with respect to religion and attempts to preserve ethnic identity in society without abandoning group identity. The main objective of this study is to examine the ethnic and religious narrative of the Yārsānis in diaspora and how the dynamics of religious transformation become apparent in a description of diaspora. Reference will be made to the theoretical framework developed by Steven Vertovec and Peggy Levitt on diaspora, transnationalism, and migration in their relation to religion. The article follows two major theoretical premises: How Yārsānis' changing attitudes in new cultural settings necessitate adaptations that affect their religion and culture, and the effects of integration in Sweden due to the ritual encounters between Yārsānis and the, apparently, "secular" Swedish values. How do these new contexts create open space for narrating "Yārsāni-ness"?

Key words: Diaspora, ethnic identity, migration, multiculturalism

Yārsānis in Sweden[1]

The concept of diaspora has been expanded upon widely and has been developed into clear scholarly discussions. The Yārsāni community is one group that, in recent years, has created expulsion communities all over the world. Huge numbers immigrated to Sweden under forced relocation due to suppression and harassment while residing in Iran and Iraq. Iran has been most extreme, and for many years refused to acknowledge the Kurdish community. Sweden is a country that fosters Kurdish diasporic activities and many Yārsānis have chosen to keep their identity in this host country. Because of the political situation in their homeland,

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[1] This research is based on a qualitative research method and uses semi-structured interviews as its main data collection technique. Data in this paper are derived from the Religion, Ethnicity, Immigrant's research (project at the Center for Yārsāni association in Stockholm). Systematic interviews were conducted with experts in religious manuscript, newly arrived immigrants, and the first generation in each congregation.

Yārsāni communities from Iran and Iraq are the main focus of this study. Ethno-religious conflicts tend to be rooted in unsettled political disputes or in conflicts over political, religious, or ethnical resources. Conflicts between the central power and a religious ethnicity may, and in this case do, result in the latter being forced to emigrate from their homeland countries and continue their lives as refugees in other parts of the world. Like any other community, the Yārsāni diaspora has been influenced by various political developments, including wars, genocide, and forced migration. The Kurds in the Kurdish regions of Iran, Iraq, and Turkey have been subjected to many catastrophic events. Since the 1960s, large numbers of refugees have been forced to flee Kurdistan, and, today, many Kurds live in Sweden. Yārsānis in diaspora have the feeling of belonging to their ethnic-community and at the same time share culture and rituals with their country of residence. Studies of transnational religion pertaining to Yārsānis explore the ways in which they use religious ideas and symbols to construct the multiple identities that characterize the diasporic experience by asking respondents to describe how they use religion or culture to situate themselves in the multiple social spaces they inhabit. This article covers the determination of "diaspora" concepts and their implications with the issues of transnationalism, identity, and immigration and seeks to discover how Yārsānis in diaspora express and retain their ethnic-religion. It also aims to find a detailed understanding of the lives and practices of Yārsāni immigrants and their creation of religious spaces. Yārsānis in diaspora feel that they simultaneously belong to the communities of their ethnicity, both of their locality in diaspora and of their homeland.

Diaspora, migration, transnationalism, and their religious aspects

Ethnic and religious conflicts and continuous changes in immigration patterns have become the focal point of scholarly interest for those researching ethnic religious communities. The Yārsānis are the subject of religious conflict and social exclusion, yet their case has been greatly overlooked. Diasporas are characterized by optional or forced migration from a homeland to two or more regions, a memory of imagined relation to an unrealistic homeland, an obligation to improve or hold strong ties to that homeland, a limited area of alliance involvement in the host society, and a sense of connection to one's ethnic group in other places of compromise (Clifford 1994; Cohen 1997). Diaspora is conceded as being forced or voluntary; it can happen as a change of place for a community that passes state boundaries or, "in the common metaphorical extensions of the term," within state boundaries (Brubaker 2005:5). The imagining of a homeland that is lost through one's forced exodus may be

metaphorical (Tölölyan 2007:649-652). In this article, I examine how migration and relocation has affected the religious beliefs and rituals of this particular community of Yārsānis in Sweden. Lambek (2002) discussed religion as a realm of action and thought and as a product of human creativity through religious action and movement in rituals. This product of movement in rituals is focused on the transformative power of ritual, both in its ability to transform peoples' experiences of the world, allowing them to express a sense of control, and to transform religious individuals (Lambek 2002). How religion and personal experience psychologically influence people and the role of rituals in social order and relationships within society also produce religious action and thought, according to Lambek (2002). The task at hand is particularly difficult because the Yārsāni tradition is generally an oral one; they have historically avoided the documenting of canonical texts. Literacy is not a relatively new phenomenon for the community, but they have traditionally adopted concealment as a survival strategy. Therefore, studying how this community's transition has impacted their religious beliefs is extremely complex.

Scholarly discussions have expounded upon and clarified an established concept of diaspora. Brubaker, considering more precision for the term, opposed its globalized use because this endeavor would inconsistently lead to its elimination (2005:3). Safran (1991) argued that the term diaspora can be applied to different issues. He gave examples such as minorities who are refugees or whose ancestors have migrated sporadically and protect the collective memory of their hometown, including its location and achievements; as they cannot believe their acceptance in the host country, they isolate themselves from its society. A sentiment of alienation is constituted among diaspora communities in their new society. James Clifford, however, described a paradoxically empowering aspect of diaspora: "… dwelling *here* assumes a solidarity and connection *there*" (1994:322). Members believe that the diaspora community should be engaged with their hometown and keep their connections with that place, their awareness of ethnicity and cohesion, and the ways in which they define themselves, despite connections outside of their ethnic community and within their new locality (Safran 1991:83-84).

Brah (1996) suggested a set of features considered to be common among groups we can label as sharing a diasporic existence. In Brah's theory, diaspora has three meanings, each with a specific conception and interpretation of processes and developments influencing religious groups. The foremost of these for the present purpose is that diaspora places the "discourse of home and dispersion" and inscribes a homing desire, where "… 'home' is a mythic place of

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desire in the diasporic imagination … a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory as the place of 'origin'" (Brah 1996:188-189). Most works on diaspora have "marginalized the factor of religion and relegated it to second place in favor of ethnicity and nationality" (Baumann 1998:95; cited in Habti 2014:150).

One aspect to be considered is the awareness of diaspora, which creates a beneficial situation from a poor one and serves to defend individuals; another aspect slows the development and strengthens the mass of experiences among foreign communities (Clifford 1994). Diaspora consciousness is a kind of awareness; it can result from experiences of discrimination and exclusion and trained affirmatively by identification with a historical heritage or world cultural or political forces, as in the example of Yārsāni communities in Sweden. Clifford (1994) explained that it "… lives loss and hope as a defining tension …" (p. 312). Cohen advanced that "… awareness of their precarious situation may also propel members of diasporas to advance legal and civic causes and to be active in human rights and social justice issues" (1995:13). Diaspora consciousness is intended to be a source of interaction and resistance to gain perspective in political movements. This is one of the significant points made by different ethnic groups with the aim of clarifying identification in public places (Vertovec and Cohen 1999). According to that approach, the procedure for diaspora stresses analyzing how to survive as a group (Vertovec 1999:130).

Another aspect of diaspora consciousness worthy of mentioning here is authority: Diasporas could have social and political processes in their home countries, via economic remittances and social and political awareness, beginning with refugees. Through recent changes, governmental and international organizations participate in different political processes and projects more than ever before; in the transnational field, Diasporas serve as actors. Their actions are international and inclusive of extraneous actors, covering many political dimensions (see Castles, Hein, and Miller 2009:70-73).

As Smart (1999) indicated, research in diaspora and religious studies has brought attention to the influence that migrants' religious rituals have on those conducted in their homeland and on the identification of ethnicity theories. As such, great attention will be placed here on the influence of the Yārsānis' transition in Sweden.

Levitt (2001), quoting Gardner (1995), stated that

> the study of religious or cultural life across borders raises particular challenges not posed by the study of economics or politics. Religion is not a fixed set of elements but a dynamic web of shared meanings used in different ways in different contexts. (P. 4)

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These elements will be expanded upon, while focusing on the relationship between religion and diaspora in the context of Yārsāni communities in Sweden. Vertovec (2000) argued that religions come into distinction within the fields of migration, minority diasporas, and transnationalism. He contemplated that migration involves the shaping of cultural patterns and social connection; through renewal in an unexperienced setting, migrants as minorities are seemingly isolated by race, language, cultural traditions, and religion. "Diaspora has arisen as part of the postmodern project of resisting the nation-state, which is perceived as hegemonic, discriminatory, and culturally homogenizing" (Vertovec 2000:5).

Facing us, then, is the effective and organized statement of communities' relevance. The Yārsānis have practiced their religion more visibly in Sweden since 2008, after the formation of their cultural and political institutions in public affairs by which they have consciously chosen their perspective. Yārsāni immigration to Europe has increased, especially after the revolution in Iran when emigration changed significantly to forced migration. Environmental pressures and the dominant religion in Iranian society forced religious minorities, including Yārsānis, to emigrate to other countries. Today thousands of Yārsānis live in Sweden.

Diasporic identity and impact on ethnicity

A central focus of this section, as it delves into identity and migration, is the question of what happens to the identity of Yārsānis in Sweden: are Yārsānis integrated culturally, and do they identify with the Swedish or with their Kurdish ethnic-identity? Also, I seek to determine whether they are able to build a positive identity in the country of residence, preserving a sense of roots and feeling of belonging to both the country of residence as well as their homeland, or if the cultural and ethnic components are hybridized in the new society. And are minorities marginalized and excluded from society with the amplification and retention of their ethnicity, or are they caught "between" the two cultures? Principal here is to examine the impact of the Swedish culture on the Yārsānis and to realize whether this ethnic-religious minority has developed an in-between (Bhabha 1996) cultural identity, or if it has built an identity that is part of both the Swedish and the Kurdish cultures.

Cultural hybridity is a term that refers to the mixture of two cultures, as Bakhtin (1981) described:

> Hybridity is a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic

consciousnesses separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor. (P. 358)

The question of the transformation of Yārsānis in diaspora in how they see their religion is naturally of key importance for understanding their reaction to developments in their community. Accordingly, the relationship between identity formation and context is crucial and depends on the cultural principles in special areas such as the connection with people from the host country. Some informants in this study agreed on the influential role of cultural hybridity in the construction of their identities and that this was due to their cultural encounters with the Swedish society. For instance, an informant of fist generation mentions, "I am educated and Swedish society needs me as a teacher." These informants see the Yārsāni culture from a Swedish mindset, and this emphasizes their cultural hybridity and the power of the Swedish culture on their identities. Indeed, in the debate of hybridity, Anthias (2002) claimed that it is essential to "differentiate the existence of cultural mixing from the existence of synthetic identification or new mixed ones" (p. 505).

As one Yārsāni explains, Sweden is a secular society in which he has freedom to choose his own identity, religion, and method of worship.[2] Ethno-cultural differences underlie fundamental relations between Yārsānis and Swedish; they perceive themselves as ethnically distinct from one another. Upon perceiving inter-ethnic diversity, protection of ethnic boundaries highlights ethnic in-group membership. A significant number of the young generation urgently feel the need to learn more about their ancestral country. As one mentions, "Swedish society provides the ability to keep our cultural activities and our identity as an ethnic-minority."

In fact, it has been seen that people might experience problems in rebuilding their ethnic-identities, due to the different rates, values, and social aspects in connection with these identities. Therefore, since their childhoods, many Yārsānis in Sweden have learned their own Kurdish culture alongside the Swedish culture. In addition, they measure the present time with relation to the past and refer to their childhoods in their home countries (Hall 1997:46). Eliassi's (2010) claim that "self-identification and understanding is figured in [to a] multidimensional sense of belonging" (p. 47) is, for the Yārsānis in Sweden, caused by the cultural diversity there. Yārsānis feel that their religion and ethnicity do not marginalize them. They do not see a difference between Swedish and Yārsāni regarding the maintenance of diverse identities when

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[2]Personal interview July 2015

facing the host society and a real belief in a common origin. Migrants can be transnational without participating in ethnic or religious boundary-making or support (Rainer and Bauböck 2004:54).

According to Eliassi (2010; citing Larsen 2009) Swedish integration policy contains a problematic understanding of the culture of the others: Different policies and activities related to integration are formulated to facilitate a process of transformation, and addressing minorities is a part of these policies and activities (p. 230). Immigrants should be given the means necessary to integrate while still having the chance to maintain their cultural heritage and their ethnic identity (Khayati 2008:184). This explains collective identity issues, in which the self is embedded in collective idioms and draws important characteristics from them.

It is important to analyze the ways in which the Yārsāni identity develops as it is shaped by the influences of social attitudes and a secular environment. Of additional importance is to examine challenges facing Yārsānis in diaspora: integration discourse or racism often prevents a complete merge with the host community and fosters further concentration on the ethnic-identity. Identity construction in diaspora changes according to the immigrant's history, social position, language, experience, and the oppositions in their life (Sulyman 2014:12). In this regard, it is noteworthy to mention that identity is a self-realization rather than self-centeredness (Brubaker and Cooper 2000:8), and that discrimination and racism directed toward them varies among immigrants in Sweden (Alini 2004:178; Khayati 2008:222). They may experience discrimination by Swedish society, which causes them not to integrate fully into that society, so that, even though they may have lived there for a long time, they have a stronger tendency to identify with their ethnic group. As one informant puts it, after many years, "[I] feel still like a foreigner." Thus, they may remain attached to the Kurdish ethnic culture despite living in Sweden. Raijman and Pinsky (2012; citing Levitt 2003) stated that some religious communities use religion to strengthen and maintain their faith and ethnic boundaries (p. 1961). Anthias (2002) claimed that this

> [implicates] a [created] sense of belonging to an ethnic group; sometimes conceiving shared cultural constituent; sometimes being portrayed as a social place structured by the existence of ethnic pecking order. Moreover, ethnic identity is constructed through social organization and common culture. (P. 497)

In Sweden, the Yārsāni transnational ties as migrants have been problematized as a hindrance to integration. There are different possible explanations for the complications from transnational connections to the host country in the multinational spaces of Sweden, where the

government and society are engaged in the reorientation and reinterpretation of Yārsānis. Although most of them have strongly merged into Swedish society, Yārsānis there maintain relationships with people from their hometown and have a sense of belonging with their ethnic identity, language, culture, religion, and origins. This is one difference between the new generation that was born in Sweden and the old generation that have lived half of their lives abroad.

Religious associations and transnational ties

The creation of cultural associations and organizations in Sweden is the result of a government-supported policy. Some Yārsāni associations such as those that are cultural and political have been created, largely in Stockholm, to foster many types of cultural and religious activities. These community organizations have become shelters where culture, religion, ethnicity, and nationality are interpreted, redefined, and establish a transplanted version of their old religious organization in the new country to help them establish their ethnic identity (Kim 2011:312). They accomplish this by focusing on the ceremonies and affiliations of Yārsānis in Sweden. One of the few European countries that has accepted Kurdish refugees for many years, the Swedish government established equality and human rights policies for people with immigrant backgrounds between 1960-1990. In fact, Yārsāni identity and problems in their homeland represent a link of transnational networks of the Yārsāni diaspora. The absence of Yārsāni rights in Iran, and the plentiful resources that Swedish institutions allocate exclusively to social activity, have led socio-religious associations to extend their networks from the local to the national and transnational levels, while cultural and political networks are supported by Yārsāni Institutions.

The personal narratives presented in this study are precise through the experience of immigrants in diaspora and their process of establishing identities. A major step in development of a Yārsāni diaspora is to try to establish information about Yārsāni culture and rituals. To pursue this goal, Yārsānis in Sweden are involved in a shared project to preserve their culture and identity, and several cultural institutions have been founded there: the Cultural Forum of the Yārsāni Religious Community and the Democrat Association of Yārsān are two. They attempt to communicate information and create debate about Yārsānism, chiefly through the performance of cultural activities and connections with Yārsānis in Iran and, particularly, Kake-is (Yārsānis in Iraq) as well as through reports on the recent situations of other Yārsāni communities in Sweden and those remaining in respective homelands. They question the

function of immigrant institutions, possibly leading to more permanent immigrant communities that can be described as "transnational communities." Furthermore, the Cultural Forum claims that it works for the protection of the language, history, and cultural heritage of Yārsānis as well as familiarizing Europeans with their history and culture and the current situation from which they are seeking refuge. Diaspora has also conventionally been associated with certain economic and social activities in the host society (Paerrgaard 2010:93). Transnational advocacy networks are often portrayed as promoting universal values such as human rights, democracy, and gender equity (Faist 2010:15). As Vertovec and Cohen (1999) demonstrated, transnationalism is the same as political negotiation: It refers to the diaspora and ethnicity of people that participate in political activities and seek interplay between homeland politics and reception countries. They form human rights and Constitutional rights of Yārsānis here in Sweden, and they claim equal rights in Iran. Narratives about their beliefs with distinction to politics refer to the issues of Yārsānis as a minority in Iran and their struggle for human rights. The narratives also relate that democratic Yārsānis in Sweden are active in their own defense, in diaspora and in the homelands. They also report that the Swedish government aids financially with cultural activities, for instance, buying *Tanboor* (musical instruments of cultural importance) for children and bringing singers from countries of origin for ceremonies. These activities encourage the survival of traditions and promote children's familiarity with ancestral customs. Raijman and Pinsky (2012) noted that religious institutions are important in helping immigrants settle in the receiving society and also in creating places that preserve them from assimilation (p. 1961).

Vertovec (2000) referred to religion in diaspora and described transnationalism as "the actual ongoing exchange of information, money, or resources, as well as regular travel and communication, that members of diaspora may undertake with others in the homeland or elsewhere within the globalized ethnic community" (p. 12). Moreover, Levitt (2003) confirmed that an important aspect of the ethnic minorities policy was financial support of immigrants' associations. She explained that they receive financial support to organize their own cultural activities, which increases their feeling of belonging to their ethnic group. It was believed that by maintaining group-specific facilities, the social cultural release of immigrant groups could be elevated, as Levitt stated, and the policy goal was to improve the position of ethnic minorities in Swedish society (p. 851).

Immigrants generally indicate themselves to be in conditions of hardship and isolation and seek familiar surroundings and associations, which is why migration leads to the

institutionalization of immigrant cultures. Schiller, Basch, and Blanc (1995), defining Trans-nationalism, stated that

> Many immigrants today build social fields that cross geographic, cultural, and political borders. Immigrants who develop and maintain multiple relationships – familiar, economic, social, organizational, religious, and political – that span borders we call Trans-migrants. (P. 7)

People in diaspora engage in efforts to involve an attachment to place and a foundation, and in that place they also need the necessary resources in terms of linguistic, financial, and other forms of capital (Bauböck and Faist 2010:50).

Moreover, the main supporters of diaspora are interactions with institutions, governments, networks, and key persons in the host country. The building of networks with international or transnational institutions facilitates those in diaspora to lobby and achieve political agendas or, in terms of ethnicity or religion, pacify themselves within transnational networks, for instance Kurds in Germany or the Armenian diaspora (Dahinden 2010:55).

The relationships between religion and ethnicity

Another essential issue in the study of groups like the Yārsānis is to examine the relationship between ethnicity and religion, as they have been excluded because of these factors in their home countries. Ethnicity is an aspect worth mentioning, and some scholars have emphasized the religious element in creating and maintaining ethnic groups. Religious and cultural unification raises questions about the maintenance, amendment, or renunciation of religious practices among post-migration generations. Sociologists have long recognized the interrelated functions of religion and ethnicity (Weber 1961). However, "the nature of this relationship and how it developed isn't yet clear" (Smith 1978:1155). In reality, religious identity never completely replaced ethnic identity (Marty 1972). Indeed, Smith (1978) argued that ethnic grouping is determined by immigrants' identification with particular religious traditions more than any other factor such as common language, national feeling, or belief in common descent.

Yang and Ebaugh (2001) expressed that immigrant groups differ in terms of their religious and ethnic identities: "Some immigrant religious communities emphasize their members' religious identity more than their ethnic core, whereas others stress ethnic identity

and use the religious institution mostly as a means to preserve cultural traditions and ethnic boundaries" (p. 387).

Religion can function to assimilate some immigrant members into their host society (Levitt 2003), and Yārsānis strive to keep their ethnic identity. According to Anthias (2002), ethnicity is a highly controversial term: sometimes signaling a sense of meaning to an ethnic group, sometimes indicating shared cultural material, and sometimes illustrating a social place structured by the existence of ethnic hierarchies (p. 497). Therefore, ethnic identity is built through social organization and shared culture (Anthias 2002:497). Immigrant Kurdish ethnicity is determined by identification with particular religious traditions more than any other factors such as language, nationalism, and belief. An ethnic group is generally connected by a "shared heritage and a sense of people-hood. Ethnicity itself is community and identity" (Kim 2011:321).

I believe that the relationship between religion and ethnicity should be viewed as a variable for many groups. Hammond and Warner (1993), following Abramson (1973), better clarified the interlacing relationships between ethnicity and religion. When religion is the root of ethnicity or when religion and ethnicity are equals, they referred to Jews. When religion is one of several foundations of ethnicity, they referred to Greek or Russian Orthodox. They also mentioned that ethnic identification can be affirmed without asserting religious identification, or that, vice versa, religious identification can be claimed without ethnic identification. They denoted religious ethnicity, where an ethnic group is linked to a religious tradition that is shared by other ethnic groups, with reference to Irish, Italian, and Polish Catholics. Hammond and Warner (1993) also suggested that the relationship between religion and ethnicity is powerful and of great importance when studying religious-ethnic groups. In the case of Yārsānis, religion equals ethnicity, but these can be distinguished from each other and are separable in diaspora. The analysis of religious and ethnic changes in immigrant religious communities cannot be confined to the home country. It is necessary to go beyond the borders of the host country as well and to take into account the relative status of different faiths in home countries. Yārsānis in Sweden identified various types of relationships between ethnicity and religion; they argued that the identification of Yārsān as a religion is incorrect, and they believed that Yārsān is Kurdish rituals (āiīn) or culture. For them, ethnicity cannot be separated from their identity. They believed that both ethnicity and their rituals (āiīn) were somewhat primordial and could mutually reinforce each other. Therefore, a more effective way of viewing the situation is to affirm that religion and ethnicity are intertwined, that ethnicity plays a function in Yārsāni

society, and has powerful connotations. Yārsān is not restricted to only Kurdish people, but Yārsān is a Kurdish religion.

Religious Practice before and after Immigration

A new concept in the dominant culture of what a "religion" is has been proven to effect many people's understanding of their own faith (Kreyenbroek 2001). The study of religious aspects of Yārsānis in Sweden is important because, according to Smart (1999:421), the study of diaspora groups and their lifestyle in a new society explicate the properties of religious transformation within the group. It is very important to understand what kinds of changes might take place in immigrants' identities through their encounter with another culture. Moreover, it is necessary to know whether those immigrants are still in conformity with their previous understanding of religion, or if they adopt new approaches that might be commensurate with a new context in their host country. It is also important to know the possible ways through which those immigrants might attempt to maintain balance between pre- and post-migration identities. The aim for this paper was to understand how the Yārsānis as an ethnic-group are being appropriated and utilized by the Swedish community during the development of ethnic boundary construction and group self-definition and the role religion plays in this process. Further, diaspora consciousness specific to Yārsāni groups in Sweden, when a kind of self-awareness is operated by conditions of diaspora within religious plurality, often promotes individuals to come to understand that their unclear faith accentuates contexts of the past, where their faith may have been superficial and without real knowledge. This revision of religious self-consciousness is highlighted in Geertz's (1968) explanation about the Muslim diaspora in Morocco: The first question people asked was, "What shall I believe?" which then became, "How shall I believe it?" (p. 61). This move indicates a distinction between how people think about religions and religious thought and how they sustain this concept. Moreover, the believer may justify elements of belief and practice to fellows of other faiths in a way that can be seen as religious diaspora consciousness (Geertz 1968:61; cited in Vertovec 1999:11).

Religion and rituals define Yārsān for its adherents in the home countries, but in diaspora new conditions effect the practice of religious interpretation by temporal exclusivity. The divergence of the concept of the Yārsān religion and the distinction of being Yārsāni in one's homeland and in diaspora became clear during personal interviews and are explained more thoroughly in the following section. In Sweden, Yārsānis can exist without adhering to

the religious roles, and it is not inconsistent with their concept of Yārsān. However, this idea is largely incoherent for the Yārsāni ethnic religious group in Iran. Apart from cultural-national recognition, of which the impact is definitely not abnegated in the current work, religion takes on a very important role for the rebuilding of identity and maintenance of differentiation in a practical commentary (Kim 2011:312).

Habti (2014) gave three reasons that study of the religious aspects of diasporic experience of a particular group is important:

> (i) because the study of diaspora groups and their modes of adaptation elucidates the features of religious transformation of the group; (ii) because diaspora can influence the development of religion in the homeland (e.g. the wealth, education and exposure to foreign influences transferred from diasporas may have great impacts on organization, practice and even faith; and (iii) because in modern diaspora, 'multiplicity is now commonplace' (Smart, 1999, p. 421). (P. 150)

Wuthnow and Offutt (2008) also believed that religion is transnational because human flows so often transcend arbitrary political demarcations and also because religious teachings frequently encourage geographic expansion (p. 212). Immigration and the minority situation stimulate a condition of religious change through self-consciousness. Barbara Metcalf (1996) advanced that "the sense of contrast – with a past or with the rest of society – is at the heart of a self-consciousness that shapes religious style" (p. 7). Indeed, Stephen Warner (1998) stated, "Religious identities often mean more to individuals away from home, in their diaspora, than they did before, and those identities undergo more or less modification as the years pass" (p. 3).

> Habti (2014) claimed, "Migrants often come across members and practices of distinct traditions within their own religion," and "… religious pluralism does not only refer to the co-presence of different faiths" (p. 156). Tweed (2008) explained that "… religions orient individuals and groups in time and space, transform the natural environment, and allow devotes to inhabit the worlds they construct" (p. 82).

> One of the principal researchers who has examined religion for transnational perspective is Levitt (2001): "[T]ransnational religious practices also involve the transformation of identity, community, and ritual practices" (p. 6).

Levitt (2001) has noted that religion changes in new contexts:

> Many features of religious life are implicit. It is hard to hold them constant or to determine their boundaries. They are deeply felt but often difficult to express … Most

religious groups do not seek to return to or to recreate a homeland for their members. Religions can, however, provide additional glue that reinforces diasporic consciousness. (P. 4)

Schiller et al. (1995) mentioned that migrants stay connected to their homelands through transnational religious practices. These practices all expose the same changes in form, severity, and purpose; they also support improvements in religious organizations, probably in order to support transnational properties of their own. Some migrants maintain long-distance membership in the religious organization that they depended on before emigration (Schiller et al. 1995). Religion does not have inconvertible essence. Religion, as well as the understanding and realization of it, can transform, and we can look at these changes in religion as the manifestation of a new society. Assad (1993) mentioned that religious meanings, whether universal or a specific interpretation, are unstable and depend on local, historical, or contextual influences. "Religion is not a fixed set of elements but a dynamic web of shared meanings used in different ways in different contexts" (Levitt 2001:4; quoted from Gardner 1995).

It can be claimed, as the Yārsānis, together, become more urban and literate, that they seek both a concept and practice of religion that can be not only applied but also discussed intellectually within the community. This interpretation of diaspora, as not only the experience of deportation and relocation but also of a possible inventiveness, fully fits the case of Yārsāni diasporization. In Sweden, the Yārsāni community is free to live openly and to discuss and develop aspects of its religious and cultural identity. People that once led established lives in different nations with little or no contact are, in exile, developing the notion of a common Yārsāni identity, as their opinions about their beliefs are more cultural than religious in a democratic country.

In a distinction between elements of a specific culture and religion, Williams (1984) stated,

that there are some aspects associated with past religious practice that are fundamental and essential to the continuation of the religion and others that are cultural accoutrements that are not so fundamental. Thus, the process of searching for an adaptive strategy becomes the attempt to distinguish what is essential in the religion and what is not. (P. 191)

Diaspora communities and ethnic-groups together hold collective memories of the past, myths about the homeland, and requests for cohesion with co-ethnic members in other countries of establishment. These all depend on the nature of conceptualization of a given religion by the

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religious person; this is also a way for the migrant to negotiate her or his religious belief according to the new contextual influence (Safran 1991:84).

New Interpretation of Yārsān in Secular Society: Religion or Culture?

Research has determined that religion extends to become a significant indicator of identity for Yārsānis in diaspora; however, immigrant groups vary in the ways they complement religious and ethnic identities and their emphasis on one another. Other foci of previous research regarded the ways in which Yārsānis present their faith under urban impact and are involved in their own evolution of reconstruction and appropriation in Sweden. The circumstances of Yārsāni migration to Europe, the situation into which Yārsānis have settled in European countries, and the adaptations being made, especially as the young grow up to be the first European Yārsāni generation, are all investigated through a number of narratives in this study. These narratives, which I relate from personal interviews with Yārsānis, give voice to the Yārsāni people in order to interpret their inner feelings about the formation of their religion in Sweden. The emphasis of the identification of Yārsān can be on the religious manuscript principles or on aspects of the Yārsāni religious rituals. In Sweden, they enjoy the freedom of practicing their rituals and expressing their beliefs as the new social majority becomes much more accommodating, compared to the previous.

In discussing the trans-border aspects of religious faith and identity, we look at the possibilities of religious reform, attachment and detachment to new or previous homelands, and evidence of protection and integration. This can be seen by looking beyond Swedish national boundaries and analyzing important commonalities and emerging differentiations stemming from disparity in the socio-political contexts in which members of the community reside. The foundations for the analysis done in regards to these research questions were obtained through extensive interviews with members of diasporic communities, and diasporic community is formulated in a cultural sense for the aims of the study. For this purpose, religion is defined as a "cultural system" and on the powerful, evocative potential of religious symbolism (Geertz 1973).

According to Bonney (2004),

> Culture may be thought of as a causal factor that influences the development process by specific human means. Whereas with religions, to a greater or lesser extent, there is a

process of revelation and an idea of the stable who receive the message of revelation. (P. 31)

Traditional religions are defined as those religions that, unlike the world religions that have spread into many countries and cultures, have remained in their original socio-cultural environment.

Culture allows "… the self-conscious evaluation of human possibilities in the light of a system of values that reflect prevailing ideas about what human life ought to be" (Bonney, 2004:31; quoted from Honderich, 1995:172). In this interpretation, culture becomes "… an indispensable device for increasing human control over the direction in which our species changes" (Bonney 2004:31; quoted from Honderich, 1995:172). Additionally, as stated by Cohen and Hill,

> … groups of people that share religious identity can be meaningfully viewed as sharing cultural models and indeed as members of different cultures … religious cultures value social connections as an integral element of religious life, and group affiliations are seen as important, even defining, parts of religious identity (Cohen and Hill 2007:712-713).

Ahmed's theory of the dimension-changing reconceptualization of Islam came through intense study of how orthodoxy was organized in early Islam. Ahmed concluded that Islam is not a religion in the usual Western sense, nor is it primarily a system of religious law or a set of orthodox beliefs, as many contemporary Muslims have come to believe. Islam is, rather, a confusion of inconsistencies, including at the same time the custom of orthodoxy and rule and the contrasting, occasionally heterodoxical, historical conventions of philosophy, poetry, and mystical thought. Islam is, consequently, in some ways a kind of culture or humanities, and this inconsistency in Islam is a process for those who entitle themselves Muslims to label definition in the world. Islam is constructed by three elements: the text of the Quran; the context of lived ideas and culture produced by actual Muslims; and the character of the world itself opposed to which the Quran discloses oppositions named in the, "pre-Text." Considering what Ahmad claimed to be the context of lived ideas and culture made by real Muslims, we see how he considered Islam in some ways a type of culture or a civilization (2016:120-170). Obviously, in adapting to Swedish society, a significant share of new immigrants must bridge a substantial religious divide. Religious differences between immigrants and natives are matters of practices as well as preferences. Yārsānis who are relatively secularized and who declare only slight dependences to the faith of their ancestors may be quite close to one another in terms of values, beliefs, and behaviors as keep their ethnic-identity.

A key determinant of religious practice in Sweden is likely to be the devotional behaviors that were already established by immigrants in their countries of origin. I will summarize the responses to this query from the first generation and new immigrant participants. According to Yārsānis in diaspora, they rarely attend religious ceremonies, in comparison with those in home countries. For the most part, they only observe traditional practices when they have Niaz (offering), Nazr (vow), or for the important rituals of *khabvandagr* or *Nouroz*. Because of the differences in arrival times of most immigrants interviewed, it was not possible to determine the exact frequency of attendance in religious ceremonies held in a group setting. Many of the Yārsānis lived in the small cities and were not in a position to access associations, and they did not have the proper organization to gather for religious practices prior to 2008. Yārsānis alter and adapt their religious beliefs and behaviors when they migrate internationally. Most of the Yārsānis have successfully merged into Swedish society; many of them sought higher education and have professional careers. Settling into a new country is necessarily a time consuming process and requires persistence to earn money and get ahead economically. These activities unavoidably compete with religious practices for the scarce time at an immigrant's disposal. Because of distant locations and inadequate available time, the practice of religion has changed for Yārsāni immigrants.

The ideas of secularism and essential national identity then represent an alternative to the previously held approaches. They have changed traditional rules for practice of their religion. Respondents mentioned that they spoke with their *Seyyed* (Yārsāni religious leader) in Sweden regarding permission for women to attend and sit in the *Jam circle* ceremony as men do, whereas in Iran it is forbidden for women to sit while the men recite *kalām* (passages from the religious manuscript of the same name) and make vows. The word traditional is not taken to refer to something static or unchangeable, but merely localized. The allowance for women to sit for these sacred ceremonies has transformed and reshaped not only a new attitude toward religion, but also their original customs and the culture produced from it, through transnationalism. They keep their ethnicity such as continuing to speak the Kurdish language, but they do not necessarily continue to believe in fundamental Yārsān concepts such as *Doon-a-Doon* (a philosophy on life after death and one's persistence in other forms of being after the current life). Many now consider the traditional idea of *Doon-a-Doon* unacceptable; their attitude has changed to accommodate the exposure to a new cultural outlook, even as they may know many verses that describe this idea in their books. According to an informant, "*Doon-a-Doon* is a misconception of the foundation of the worldview of Yārsān." The basis of this

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worldview has changed. This refers back to Levitt (2001), who described how religions are ever-changing in new contexts and that their boundaries are difficult to determine and express, but are nonetheless felt deeply (p. 4).

Levitt (2001) cited Vertovec (1997) articulating the following:

> … religious and other socio-cultural dynamics evolve differently when migrants are characterized by minority status, when they form part of diasporas, or when they engage in transnational practices. He [Vertovec] understands diaspora as the imagined connection between voluntary and involuntary migrants, a place of origin, and people with similar cultural origins elsewhere. (P. 4)

Some Yārsānis forgot their beliefs for a certain period as they oriented to Swedish culture, as a kind of integration into the new society. For example, Yārsān men keep a mustache as a symbol of being Yārsāni, for them it means "you are Yārsāni." As one of my informants in Kermanshah told me, "Swedish Yārsānis don't keep mustaches, they are not Yārsāni anymore." Yārsāni children in Iran recite *kalām* and learn to play *Tanboor*, which are principles of the religion. Second generation Yārsānis in Sweden do not have a "mustache," referring to the impact of society on their personal choices and their lack of adherence to the traditional Yārsāni culture. When Yārsānis choose for women to sit in religious ceremonies, traditionally banned, or when the men do not wear mustaches, they are visibly interpreting faith and religious identity in their personal way. Reading *Kalām* and attending religious ceremonies are no longer the norm for Yārsānis in Sweden, contrary to the practices of Yārsānis in countries of origin.

A study by Alinia and Eliassi (2014) has shown that the new Kurdish generation, either born in Sweden or grew up there, depends more on the Swedish society when compared to the first generation immigrants (pp. 74-75). Religious and cultural activities and association in formal places of reverence template the identities and activities of second and third generations (Jackson and Nesbitt 1993). This separates them from their parents and is due to Western education and secular and civil society proceedings, coincidental to Western popular culture (Vertovec and Rogers 1998). Living in secular society for a long time has caused a reduction in religious practice.

Most informants suggested a tendency toward secularization or lack of tradition in the community. Their opinions revealed that Yārsān is not religion of traditions, like Islam, for example, and they are not religious, but are secular and believe in religion in a "cultural dimension." This affirms that secularity cannot be understood as the absence of religion. Asad (1993) pointed out that religion is variable and is part of a cultural system, where culture is a

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pattern of meaning that transfers through history and contains symbols or a system of concepts inherited to humans and expressed symbolically. Asad expressed the essence of religion as that of cultural phenomena in the areas of politics, society, economics, and power (pp. 27-54).

The narratives of my informants explain the way they position themselves (Anthias 2002) in the Swedish society and how their religion is construed as being different through cultural and social situations. Immigration has changed religious beliefs among Yārsānis in Sweden. In the new environment, among drastically changed conditions of life, their traditional identifications and assignments of identity and culture increasingly make less sense. The Yārsānis are not persecuted and they do not have to hide their religious beliefs and practices; contrariwise, they can define their identity through cultural and religious markers according to the demands of a modern, culturally complex society. Most Yārsānis, until recently, have known very little about their religion, except for the most basic facts about their religious manuscript and some religious restrictions, particularly regarding interpretation of their manuscript. Thus, their religion was completely dependent on oral communication. In diaspora, Yārsānis' understanding of their religion differs widely from the attitudes of Yārsānis in their homelands. In *Hooraman*, Kurdistan, Yārsān entails practicing religious ritual such as attending a *Jam* ceremony every Thursday, pilgrimage shrines, playing *Tanboor* with the reading of *Kalām*, wearing Kurdish clothes, and reciting *kalām*. In Sweden it is different; in their approach, they do not practice the Yārsān religion in the way that Muslims go to mosque. Yārsān is "rituals," a "Kurdish rituals," a "culture," and a "philosophy of life." For them, *khavandgar* and *Nouroz* and occasionally attending a *Jam* ceremony is the religious practice of Yārsān.

It is worthy to note that they all refer to Yārsān as Zoroastrian, Mithraism, or some say Yārsān came before Zoroastrian. One informant stated,

> Yārsān is a 'philosophy for living better.' Yārsān is *Zagros* range's resistance movements. Yārsān is the survivor resistance of Zagros people. They tolerate everything to survive, religion, belief, customs. Being born into a religious family, I respect rituals here because of keeping our customs.

Religion was a bridge that connected the old world with the new, faced with changes and challenges in every other aspect of their lives (Handlin 1973:ch. 5; cited in Hirschman 2007:7). Asad (1993) showed that religious meaning is unstable, whether it is universal or religious interpretations that are local, historical, and contextual. Religion does not have untransmutable essence; it, as well as the understanding and realization of it, can evolve (Asad 1993). Religion is "expected yield to the forces of modernity, in the face of increasing urbanization,

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rationalization, and dominance of science characteristic of modernity" (Kim 2011:313). According to Kim, secularization theory does not mean the decline or disappearance of religion, but its change. Kim (2011) cited Yamane's argument that "post-secularists have misrepresented and unjustly criticized secularization theory to mean the evolutionary decline or disappearance of religion and [Yamane] argues that 'mature, more recent formulations of secularization theorize the "transformation" versus the disappearance of religion' " (p. 113).

Conclusion

These data reveal a remarkable variation of religious practices among Yārsānis of different generations in diaspora and homelands. Swedish society, as well as the rise in awareness of Yārsānis, has transformed their practice of religion and religious behavior. This has yielded a new concept: They call it "āiīn" or "rite," and it is the process of manufacturing one's identity in diaspora. This is what has changed, as explained, because of their location and the experiences and challenges in their lives. Religion is contextual, and a new society transforms the practice of religious expression and marks it with temporal specificity. Not distinct from their interpretation of it, religion as well as identity can differ case by case. Dialects of the Kurdish language can also transform. The reshaping of people and their beliefs due to transnationalism is important and is, itself, a new interpretation of religion. Even more importantly, being Yārsāni prior to diaspora always meant belonging to an oppressed minority and forcibly hiding one's religion, beliefs, and practices. Ethnicity and religion are inextricably intertwined in Iran, but are separable in diaspora, where Yārsānis are an ethnic group that strives to keep their cultural activities and customs.

The group communications of religious affairs portray deep and fundamental changes under the influence of a new dominant culture. The questions posed were intended to extract information about the outlook of both groups, their perception of the concept of religion, and their discourse on questions of culture or rite. An important aspect of this research was to discover differences and similarities between these groups in their attitudes on religion and to analyze, within the concepts of diaspora foundation, the reconstruction of religion in the Yārsāni community in Sweden. The causes that create change in identity or religion for the Yārsānis in diaspora include the distance between people, which prevents the frequent communal practice of their rituals, and that the persecution experienced in homelands and psychological effects from these memories alters their rituals on an individual basis. Those interviewed mentioned that they were under pressure in their homeland because of their beliefs

and that this compelled them to distance themselves from religion. Improved knowledge through education and life in a democratic country are also contributing factors for their changes in their religion. Most interviewees in this study have a sense of reliance on their identity and share culture and social connections through their location and position in the society of the majority. Yet, it in a way, the effects of more than one culture or locality on a trans-local or transnational identity naturally develop when a religious person migrates and begins to reinterpret their religion in new environments. The value of their beliefs play an important role in the life of their identity.

From a theoretical point of view, the result of the process of the Yārsāni community in Sweden becoming fully absorbed into its host society is not that members of this group have lost all memory of an ethnic past. Instead, associations with home country help them to recover, revive, disseminate, and maintain their faith in diaspora as well as to maintain links with the homeland through cultural events; inviting religious and political leaders to settlement countries helps the community of faith recreate religious structures and resources. Traditions constitute the common subject that unites the past, present, and future of an ethnic group, thus enabling ethnic-group members to link with the past, to express themselves ethnically in the contemporary, and to understand a stable ethnic identity in the future. Another important determinant of the special character of the Yārsāni community is constituted tightly-knit kinships with clear-cut boundaries in their respective countries of origin. The processes of migration have shifted the points of reference for Yārsāni identity quite substantially. Until recently, identification as Yārsāni, as a member of the local community, as member of a tribe, and a family had been defined fairly clearly.

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