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For over sixty years, we have offered a wide range of innovative, high-quality educational and cultural programs, along with social and culinary events where participants share their knowledge and enthusiasm. SAA's popular Arts of Asia Lecture Series, open to all, has been the core of the museum's docent-training curriculum. We sponsor international and domestic travel, visits to private art dealers and collections, in-depth study groups, special lectures by leading scholars, literature courses and symposia. Much of our programming supports specific exhibitions. During restrictions imposed by COVID-19, the SAA's programs have continued through online streaming.

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Miraculous Cures in the *Legend of the Crying Fudō*

By Laura W. Allen



Figure 1-1 Abe Seimei performing a ritual, from *Legend of the Crying Fudō* (*Fudō riyaku engi*), 1333-1392. Hanging scroll; ink and colors on paper, 12 ½ x 25 1/8 in. Asian Art Museum of San Francisco. *The Avery Brundage Collection*, B65D46.

“...life in premodern times was defined by illness rather than by health. Being ill or afflicted, rather than consistently healthy, was the normal expectancy for living”—Andrew Goble¹

The coronavirus pandemic reminds us of an inconvenient truth: contagious diseases have always been with us, a fundamental threat to human life. In visual art, scenes of illness can offer a window into the varied ways society coped with medical crises in the millennia before modern surgery, antibiotics, and vaccines. The best-known depictions of illness from Japan appear in

a twelfth century handscroll known as the *Scroll of Afflictions* (*Yamai no sōshi*),² Yet while the pictures of the *Afflictions* scroll are full of vivid detail, chronicling conditions from mild to horrific, they do not shed much light on treatments or cures. In fact, though medieval physicians had an arsenal of medicines, poultices, and other options for dealing with illness,³ many people must have relied on faith-based remedies, especially when faced with intractable ailments. Illustrations of a tale popularly known as the *Legend of the Crying Fudō* (*Naki Fudō engi*) (Figure 1-1) stand out for their focus on non-medical efforts to relieve a grave illness—and for the fact that visual art itself



Figure 1-2 Detail, Abe Seimei performing a ritual, from *Legend of the Blessings Bestowed by Fudō* (*Fudō riyaku engi*), 1300-1400. Handscroll; ink and colors on paper, 11 x 373 in. Tokyo National Museum.

plays a role in the cure. A fragment from a fourteenth century version of this story, preserved today in the Asian Art Museum (hereafter AAM) collection, is the focus of this essay.

A tale of miraculous cures

The *Legend of the Crying Fudō* describes a technique for eliminating illness that might seem foreign today. It rests on a concept known as *migawari*, roughly the “substitution” of one being for another—in effect, passing the disease to someone else, preferably someone stronger, or possibly someone less important. The story begins when Chikō, a senior monk at Miidera temple,⁴ falls gravely ill and summons Abe Seimei (921-1005), a practitioner of the Way of yin-yang (*Onmyōdō*), to his side for help.⁵ Seimei informs Chikō that while he cannot alter an individual’s karma, if a volunteer were to be found, he could perform a ritual to transfer the illness from Chikō to

that person. At first the disciples decline to undertake this duty, but at last a young monk named Shōkū steps forward. The handscroll fragment in the AAM collection depicts the scene in which Seimei performs the ritual that will transfer the illness from Chikō’s body to Shōkū’s. [Figure 1-1](#).

Versions of this story appear within Japanese anthologies of tales, myths, and legends (*setsu-washū*) as early as the twelfth century. *Tales of Times Now Past* (*Konjaku monogatari-shū*), compiled circa 1120, includes a story in which Abe Seimei takes credit for “curing” both Chikō and then subsequently Shōkū, when he in turn falls ill.⁶ By the late 1100s, however, a new storyline surfaces in some versions of the tale: while Seimei successfully transfers the illness from Chikō to Shōkū, it is the latter’s devotion to the Buddhist Wisdom King Fudō Myōō that saves his life rather than Seimei’s efforts.⁷ The climactic moment comes when Shōkū, near death, prays before a painting of the deity. Tears spring forth from the god’s eyes in response to the young monk’s plight

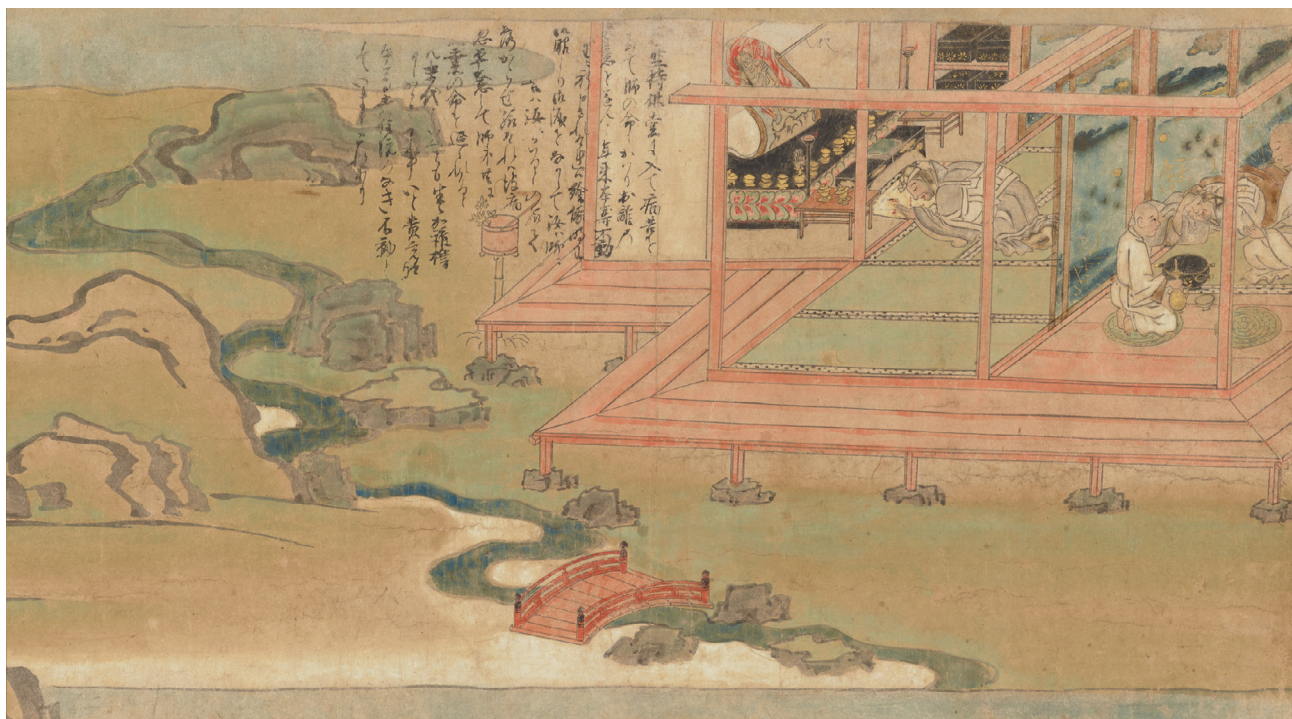


Figure 1-3 Fragment from Illustrated Legend of the *Crying Fudō* (*Fudō riyaku engi emaki zanketsu*). Hanging scroll; colors on paper, 31.4 x 57.7 cm. Hankyu Cultural Foundation (Itsuo Art Museum), Osaka.

(thus the name “Crying Fudō”), and in an instant his symptoms vanish. This version of the tale recurs in many later sources and was illustrated in several medieval picture scrolls (*emakimono*).

Picturing the story

The oldest surviving illustration of the tale comes in the form of a picture scroll known as the *Legend of the Blessings Bestowed by Fudō* (*Fudō riyaku engi emaki*), in the Tokyo National Museum (hereafter TNM) collection (Figure 1-2).⁸ Dated to the fourteenth century, the TNM scroll consists of three paintings interspersed with four sections of text (*kotobagaki*); at least one other scene was originally included, but was lost over time.⁹ A second illustrated version survives in only two fragments, one in the AAM collection (Figure 1-1) and the other held by the Itsuo Art Museum (hereafter Itsuo) in Osaka prefecture (Figure 1-3). The AAM fragment shows Abe Seimei performing

the ritual to transfer the illness from Chikō to Shōkū. The Itsuo fragment depicts the scene in which Shōkū prostrates himself before a painting of Fudō, praying for relief from his suffering. In both fragments, explanatory captions are inscribed directly on the paintings, rather than being written out on separate sections of paper as they are in the TNM scroll. Careful inspection of the AAM and Itsuo fragments reveals that they are actually two halves of a single composition: the left edge of the AAM fragment includes a view of the exterior of Shōkū’s residence, as well as a glimpse of the robe worn by a monk seated inside, details which correspond to the composition at the right edge of the Itsuo fragment. The separation of the scenes might seem surprising, but in fact many old handscrolls have been divided up and mounted as individual hanging scrolls,¹⁰ sometimes to better preserve the fragments, or for easier sale. When these two fragments were severed is unknown.

Two other illustrated versions of the Legend of the Crying Fudō survive from the fifteenth century.



Shōjōkein temple in Kyoto owns a version that is close in many respects to the TNM version but lacks a written text. Nara National Museum owns what appears to be a close copy of the Shōjōkein scroll. The two fifteenth century versions share some compositional changes with the AAM and Itsuo museum fragments, most significantly the size and orientation of Shōkū's residence, but their lineal relationship remains unclear.¹¹

Faith-based cures

The AAM and Itsuo fragments offer fascinating visual evidence of two faith-based approaches to combatting disease. The first is Seimei's Way of yin-yang ritual, performed outdoors opposite an altar laid with offerings. His costume consists of a round-necked black robe (*nōshi*), white trousers, and "hanging tail" hat (*suiei no kan*) of the type worn by noblemen and court officials during the Heian period, when this story is set. A reed mat protects his trousers from the ground and emphasizes his relative importance. In the AAM fragment, an inscription to the right of the figure tells us that Seimei is making offerings so that the monk Shōkū may take his master's place.¹² The setting accords with what we know from written sources about the rites connected with the Way of yin-yang: they typically took place not in a temple or shrine, but out-of-doors in a dry riverbed or private garden, mostly at night.¹³ Here the venue is a garden in early spring, as indicated by the blossoming plum tree at left.

The yin-yang practitioner, Abe Seimei, is something of a celebrity today, his magical powers the subject of many manga, computer games, and films. These modern renditions are loosely based on a real-life figure who was famous in his own time. Seimei was described by one of his contemporaries, the calligrapher Fujiwara Yukinari (972-1027), as the "preeminent practitioner of the 'Way of yin-yang.'"¹⁴ According to scholar Shigeta Shin'ichi, Heian aristocrats relied on *onmyōji*, individuals skilled in the Way of yin-yang, to protect them from natural disturbances, to determine

taboos, and to promote their well-being. *Onmyōji* were civil servants who served at a government bureau, *Onmyōryō*, which was established during the Nara period (710-794). Although their profession drew loosely on concepts from Chinese philosophy, including the Five Elements and the concept of yin and yang, those elements "constituted nothing more than one among many fragmentary theories upon which *onmyōji* based their divination and other techniques." The tools of their trade included "sorcery-type techniques."¹⁵ Heian-period sources document Seimei's attendance at court, where he performed such varied tasks as selecting auspicious times and dates; *tsuina* and *henbai* ceremonies to expel demons from the palace; and a *kiki-sai* ritual to drive out illness-causing demons. Of particular significance in connection with our tale are two recorded instances in which Seimei intervened during an illness at court. In the first month of 989, Seimei performed a divination and purification related to the emperor Ichijō's (r. 980-1011) illness.¹⁶ The following month he conducted a ritual called the *Taizan fukun sai* to ease the sickness of the Empress Dowager Fujiwara no Senshi.¹⁷ As it happens, the same ritual may be the very one depicted in illustrations of the *Legend of Crying Fudō*.

Seimei's reputation was burnished and transmitted after his death through the medium of anthologies like *Tales of Times Now Past*. The latter is especially valuable for the details it provides about the ritual Seimei performs on Chikō's behalf. Even if fictional, the story told there does bear some connection to the duties described in historical accounts. For example, it names the god to whom Seimei's prayers were directed:

"Now there was a Taoist doctor named Abe no Seimei, the most eminent practitioner of this science, employed on that account both by the emperor and by private individuals. The disciples summoned this man in order to have him perform ceremonies to the Lord of Mount T'ai and thereby cure their master's illness and save his life. Seimei came to them and said, 'I have divined the course of this illness: it will be mortal. Even

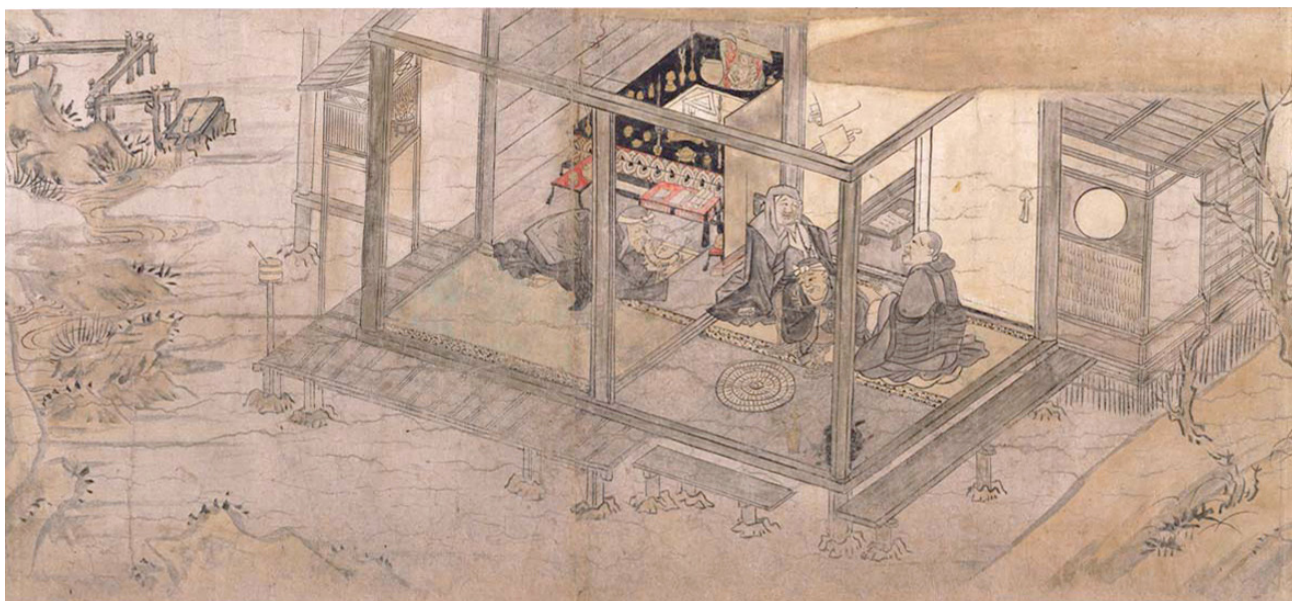


Figure 1-4 Detail, Shukōkū's appeal to Fudō Myōō, from *Legend of the Blessings Bestowed by Fudō (Fudō riyaku engi)*, 1300-1400. Handscroll; ink and colors on paper, 11 x 373 in. Tokyo National Museum.

though I pray to the Lord of Mount T'ai I cannot save him. There is only one remedy: put forth one of your number who will die in place of the sick man. If you do, I will enter that monk's name on a petition to the god, proposing him as a substitute. Otherwise there is nothing I can do."

After some delay when none of the disciples were willing to risk their lives to save their master, Shōkū volunteers to be the substitute. The text continues,

"When Seimei heard this, he entered the monk's name on the petition of worship and performed the ceremonies with great care...As soon as the ceremonies were over, the master's illness subsided markedly: it appeared that the prayers were efficacious."

The ritual used to invoke the Lord of Mt. Tai, mentioned in this account, is undoubtedly the same *Taizan fukun sai* used by Seimei to ease an Empress' illness in 989. Known in Japanese as *Taizan Fukun* (Ch. Taishan Fujun), the Lord of Mt. Tai was a Daoist spirit believed to govern a

person's life span, happiness, and prosperity.¹⁸ Through Buddhist syncretism, *Taizan Fukun* was seen as the Daoist equivalent of Enma, King of the Underworld (Skt. Yama). Thus, illustrations of Seimei's ritual to transfer the illness to Shōkū are depictions of the *Taizan fukun sai*, and the paper scroll held by Seimei in the AAM fragment may be the petition of worship, in which the monk Shōkū's name has been entered.

Though their historical accuracy is hard to pin down, other intriguing details of the ceremony are included in the scroll paintings. The AAM fragment shows Seimei as the leader of a small team composed of three attendants. To his immediate left a figure in a white "hunting robe" (*karigunu*) and tall lacquered hat (*eboshi*) tends a fire that emits a large plume of smoke, while two figures in less formal costume sit chatting behind him. Other elements of the ritual include a large altar table with offering dishes and *gohei* (wands decorated with paper streamers), set out opposite Seimei. A white substance, possibly rice, is mounded in some of the dishes. An empty box next to the attendants may be the container in which the implements and offerings were carried



to the site by the two chatting men.

The TNM handscroll (Figure 1-2), earlier in date, has a similar composition but provides two additional details worth mentioning here. First, the scroll held by Seimei is complete with markings that though illegible, help to confirm that he is reading a document, sacred text, or petition. The other significant difference is that there are six small sheets of paper suspended from the edge of the altar. Lines of writing cover three of the sheets, and sketches of horses and grooms fill the other three.

The Shōjōkein Temple website notes in an essay on the *Crying Fudō* scroll that historical accounts of the *Taizan Fukun sai* ritual mention gold and silver staffs with plaited paper streamers, silver coins, and white silk among its votive offerings.¹⁹ Although plaited paper streamers shown in the TNM version and AAM fragment conform to this description, it is difficult to tell whether the objects on the altar include offerings of coins or silk. Some accounts of the ritual also mention such items as “saddled horses” and “muscular servants,” which may explain the horse and groom sketches that appear in the TNM version. Possibly such items relate to the Daoist custom, seen even today, of making and burning offering goods made of paper, including paper dolls and printed pictures.²⁰ Why the AAM fragment and other subsequent versions omit this detail is unclear. As narrative paintings were transmitted from one copy to the next, many small details often change, often for inexplicable reasons.

The most endearing features of the ritual scene, faithfully repeated in each version, are the seven supernatural creatures behind Seimei and on the opposite side of the altar. In writing on the scene of Seimei’s ritual in the Tokyo National Museum version Takasaki Fujihiko identifies the two figures kneeling behind Seimei as *gohōten*, a term used to refer to deities (*deva* in Sanskrit, or *ten* in Japanese) dedicated to defending the Buddhist law, or more specifically beings with the power to dispel demons and diseases.²¹ They have staffs with plaited streamers at their waists and look on attentively, their hands clasped in prayer

(only one carries a staff in the AAM version). The previous scene in the TNM scroll shows a trio of similar-looking creatures flying through the air near Chikō’s residence; one figure holds a staff with plaited streamers as another thrusts a flaming trident toward the ailing monk and the third leaves the scene with his hands clasped before him. These may be illness demons or protectors who have tried and failed to battle the illness; in either case Seimei’s ritual is necessary to effect a cure.

What about the five furry creatures seated on the opposite side of the altar? In its chat on the TNM scroll, the website e-Museum identifies these figures as ghosts or specters (*mononoke*).²² During the Heian period, the term *mononoke* was used to describe all sorts of mysterious and strange phenomena, frightening in their unpredictability.²³ More broadly, the term can be understood to include numerous varieties of “transformed beings”—including ghosts, supernatural beings, demons, and household objects that have become animated by spirits. The two creatures on the right side of the group clearly fall into the latter category, known in Japanese as *tsukumogami*: the one on the left seems to have a three-legged lacquered tray for a head, and his grinning neighbor is part-beast, part lacquered basin (a similar basin appears in Shōkū’s home in the Itsuo fragment, Figure 1-3). An eighteenth century source, *Notes of an Antiquity Lover (Kōko shōroku)* by Tō Teikan (1732-1797), identified the creatures in the ritual scene of one illustrated version of the *Legend of the Crying Fudō* as *tsukumogami*, saying “[when] Abe Seimei prayed to the *tsukumogami*, the monk Chikō’s illness was transferred to Shōkū.”²⁴ Teikan’s text also refers to a comment in the diary of Nakayama Tadachika (1131-1195), *Record of Sankai (Sankaiki)*, that recalls a priest’s using magic or ritual during childbirth to transfer an evil spirit into a woman, then moves it to a “thing” (*mono*). He goes on to say that Buddhist priests and *onmyōji* were skilled in such methods.²⁵ In her study of *tsukumogami* Noriko Reider identifies the creatures opposite the altar in pictures of the *Crying Fudō* story as “illness deities.” She argues that illness deities

may have “possessed” the tray and basin, or possibly that they became “vengeful tool spirits” after being used during an illness. Reider cites a text on incantations that describes a healing ritual in which a priest sets food aside from the patient’s meals and then addresses the utensils as though they are animate, saying “attached spirits, eat this and leave this place.”²⁶ The exact role of the *tsukumogami* in scenes of Seimei’s ritual is unclear, but these sources suggest that they were understood as agents active, even essential, in the process of transferring the illness from Chikō to Shōkū.

The other three creatures seated beside the *tsukumogami* are demon-animals, with cute-looking fur-covered bodies and monstrous faces. One has a red head whose distended skull has three extra pairs of eyes, the second has a green face, and the third a face with bird-like features and a long beak. Similar furry demons appear in many handscroll paintings, but they are perhaps most familiar from versions of the scroll known as “Night Procession of 100 Demons” (*Hyakki yagyō emaki*). Like the two utensil-creatures, the demon-like figures opposite Seimei’s altar may simultaneously embody Chikō’s illness while being entities summoned to assist in its relief.

Shōkū’s appeal to Fudō

As noted earlier, the Itsuo fragment carries the narrative forward with a scene showing the aftermath of Seimei’s ritual: the appeal to the Lord of Mt. Tai was effective, so Shōkū is now deathly ill instead of Chikō. On the right side of a two-room structure the young monk lies on his sickbed, one hand to his forehead, while a priest attends him. To the left, Shōkū appears a second time, prostrating himself before a large, lacquered altar.²⁷ As he bows down, a painting of Fudō Myōō tumbles down from the wall above the altar, its dramatic S-curve punctuated by a fluttering cord. The words inscribed on the painting report that tears sprang from Fudō’s eyes as he promised to take Shōkū’s place; the young monk’s suffering

stopped in an instant, and he was restored to health. In pictorial terms, the painting’s fall from the wall manifests the intensity of Fudō’s response to Shōkū’s plight. In the TNM and other versions, the next scene moves to the underworld, where the King of Hell reacts in surprise as a manacled Fudō shows up for judgment instead of Shōkū.

The scenes at Shōkū’s residence in the TNM scroll (Figure 4) and in the Itsuo fragment diverge in ways that reveal a shift in the narrative over time. In the TNM scroll, Shōkū’s residence is a fairly humble space fitted with just two tatami mats, but in the Itsuo fragment it is both larger and more richly appointed. The accoutrements include more tatami mats, paintings on the fusuma sliding panels, and shelves holding expensive lacquer and gold boxes. In the garden outside a decorative red bridge crosses a stream (the plain wooden or bamboo pipes that feed the stream in the TNM version are gone). One interpretation of this change is that the later artist sought to emphasize Fudō’s powers and the benefits that accrue to those who worship him—and, perhaps, the sites associated with his miracles. Shōkū’s residence is also well equipped in the 15th century versions kept at Shōjōkein Temple and the Nara National Museum.

Conclusion

As we have seen, illustrations of the *Legend of the Crying Fudō* feature two different methods of combatting illness: summoning a yin and yang practitioner to perform magical incantations vs. direct appeals to a powerful Buddhist god. On its merits, the second method seems superior, inasmuch as it restores Shōkū to health without causing another person to fall ill. The story demonstrates the value of faith in Fudō Myōō when illness or other misfortune threatens human life. Implicit in the tale, however, is a prompt to compare the older monk Chikō’s behavior to that of the young disciple Shōkū. On one hand, Chikō relies on a functionary to perform incantations on his behalf and is willing to sacrifice his disciple’s well-being. As viewers, we are happy that his life is saved,



but shocked by the cost of the transaction, Shōkū's illness. By contrast, Shōkū's exemplary conduct is offered up as a model for others: he selflessly volunteers for a hazardous duty when his fellow disciples demur, and his unremitting devotion to Fudō bears fruit when the god himself is moved to tears—and action—by Shōkū's plight. In the most stressful of circumstances, when lives hang in the balance, it is the young monk's universal example of duty to others, compassion, and religious faith that we are invited to admire.

Laura W. Allen is Chief Curator and Curator of Japanese Art, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco. Her longstanding interest in narrative handscrolls dates to her doctoral research on the 13th century *Illustrated Life of Saigyō* (*Saigyō monogatari emaki*). Investigating this fragment of the *Legend of the Crying Fudō* in light of attitudes to disease and healing was prompted by an earlier study of prints related to disease in the UCSF Medical Center Library collection (published online, <https://japanesewoodblock-prints.library.ucsf.edu/>).

Notes

1. Andrew Edmund Goble, "Images of Illness: Interpreting the Medieval *Scrolls of Afflictions*," in Gordon M. Berger, Andrew Edmund Goble, Lorraine F. Harrington, G. Cameron Hurst III, eds. *Currents in Medieval Japanese History* (Los Angeles: Figueroa, 2009), 164. I would like to thank the Society for Asian Art for inviting me to delve more deeply into the topic of this essay, which I introduced to the Asian Art Museum's members in video form shortly after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. For a discussion of the *Scroll of Afflictions* and a later handscroll known as the *Scroll of Gross Afflictions* (*Ihon yamai no sūshi*), see Goble, "Images of Illness," 163-216.
3. For more on this topic, see Andrew Goble, *Confluences of Medicine in Medieval Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011).
4. Formerly known as Onjōji, Miidera is a Tendai sect temple located near Lake Biwa in Shiga prefecture.
5. Seimei's fame during his own lifetime is noted in the diary of a contemporary, Fujiwara Yukinari (972-1027). For more on Seimei's activities, see Shin'ichi Shigeta, "A Portrait of Abe no Seimei," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 40, no. 1 (2019): 77-97.
6. For an English translation, see Marian Ury, *Tales of Times Now Past* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1979), 124-126.
7. Versions of the tale appear in many anthologies, including the *Tales of Times Now Past*; the *Collection of Treasures* (*Hōbutsushū*), 1177-1181; *Tales of Awakening* (*Hosshinshū*) (by 1216); and *Mii[dera] Biographies of Those Who Have Attained Rebirth in the Pure Land* (*Miijōden*), 1217. See Hanako Kinoshita, "Hosshinshū no Nakifudō setsuwa," *Seishin gobun* 16

(Sept., 2014), 1-19.

8. The Tokyo National Museum translates the title as "Narrative picture scroll about the priest Shōkū's devotion to his master priest in a serious illness." e-Museum webpage for Fudo Riyaku Engi Emaki.
9. The text at the head of the TNM scroll refers to a scene, now missing, in which Shōkū returns to his home to inform his mother about his decision to substitute for his master. A later version of the scroll kept at Shōjōkein Temple includes another scene at the end, in which Shōkū is reunited with his mother.
10. Another example in the AAM collection is the *Legends of the founding of Jinnoji Temple* (*Jinnoji engi emaki*), B66D3.
11. Further research is necessary to resolve this question, which is complicated by discrepancies in the ordering of scenes in the TNM and Shōjōkein versions. Due to the pandemic I was unable to access one potentially valuable resource, volume 4 of the series *Zokuzoku Nihon emaki taisei* (Tokyo: Chūō Koronsha, 1993-1995). If possible, I will add an addendum in a future issue of this publication.
12. The text has been transcribed as follows: 証空阿闍梨師道内供の命にかはるべきよし晴明朝臣祭賛す. Captioning a scroll in this fashion supported the verbal narration of a religious tale by monks during public gatherings.
13. Katsuaki Yamashita and Joseph P. Elacqua, "The Characteristics of On'yōdō and Related Texts," *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie* 21 (2012): 90.
14. The comment appears in the *Diary of Gon* (*Gonki*), cited in Shigeta, "A Portrait," 78.
15. Shigeta, Shin'ichi, "Onmyōdō and the Aristocratic Culture of Everyday Life in Heian Japan," *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie* 21 (2012): 67-68.
16. Shigeta, "A Portrait," 82-83.
17. These events are cited in the diary of Fujiwara no Sanesuke (957-1046), known as *Shōyūki* or *Ouki*. Yamashita and Elacqua, "Characteristics of On'yōdō," 97.
18. In China, Taizan Fukun (Chinese: Taishan Fujun) was the most important spirit associated with Mt. Tai in Shandong province. As a magistrate in the realm of the dead, he judged human behavior and misdeeds. The Taizan Fukun sai was the most popular of several Onmyōdō rituals based on Chinese beliefs related to the realm of the dead. Masuo Shin'ichirō and Joseph P. Elacqua, "Chinese Religion and the Formation of Onmyōdō," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 40, no. 1 (2013): 35-36.
19. "Nakifudō engi no naka no Abe Seimei—Taizan Fukun sai," Shōjōkein website, accessed December 20, 2020, Shōjōkein website. Unfortunately, the website does not name the record.
20. Shōjōkein website. The terms used are 鞍馬 and 勇奴.
21. Fujihiko Takasaki, "Fudō riyaku engi," in *Nihon emakimono zenshū*, vol. 30 (Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 1980), 52.
22. e-Museum webpage for Fudo Riyaku Engi Emaki
23. Michael Dylan Foster, *Pandemonium and Parade: Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yōkai* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 6-7.
24. Takasaki, "Fudō," 52.
25. Noriko T. Reider, "Animating Objects: Tsukumogami ki and the Medieval Illustration of Shingon Truth," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 36, no. 2 (2009): 251. The passage is cited in Takasaki, "Fudō," 52.
26. Reider, "Animating Objects," 250.
27. The technique of representing a sequence of two or more events in a single setting (*iji dōzu* in Japanese) is used in many narrative scrolls.

The Yazidis, People of the Peacock Angel

by Mitra Ara Ph.D.



Figure 2-1 *Malak-Tawus: The Peacock Angel of the Yazidis* (detail) by Garnik Asatrian and Victoria Arakelova, the Caucasian Centre for Iranian Studies, Yerevan, Armenia.

Origins

The Yazidis, also known as Ezadis/Izadis, are one of several religious communities in the history of the Islamification of West Asia (Middle East) often oppressed by the political powers of the time and region. Yazidis are ethnically Kurds who follow the religious tradition of Yazidism, one of the surviving Kurdish religious communities.

The history of the Kurds extends back more than three millennia. They are of Iranian genetic and historical origin, descendants of the Iranian branch of the Indo-European peoples who migrated into West Asia. Their languages, religions, and mythology are closely associated with all other nations of Iranian origin. The Kurds are one of the largest Iranian ethnic groups, native to Western Asia, and they mostly live in the Zagros



Figure 2-2: Distribution of Kurdish population in West Asia, marked in orange. (Source: <https://eaworldview.com/2013/11/turkey-spotlight-kurds-ankaras-foreign-policy-dilemma/>).

mountain range of western Iran, in four neighboring countries: southeastern Turkey, northwestern Iran, northern Iraq, and northern Syria, a geographic area sometimes referred to as Kurdistan. See [Figure 2-2](#). There are also communities of Kurds in other parts of these countries, in the Caucasus (primarily Armenia and Georgia), and in diaspora. Overall, the Kurdish population is estimated to be 35 to 45 million, with the majority still living in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria.

Kurds speak Kurdish (in three distinct dialects) and Zaza–Gorani languages, all of which belong to the Western Iranian branch of the Indo-European language family. The oldest written records

in Kurdish used Aramaic script. Later writings are recorded in New Persian, Latin, Cyrillic, or Arabic scripts, depending on the national writing system of the region. In addition to a Kurdish language as a mother tongue, Kurds may also speak the language of their respective nations, such as Arabic, Persian, and Turkish.

The ancient history of the Kurds goes back to Mesopotamia, and many Kurds consider themselves descended from the Medes, an ancient western Iranian people, and even use a calendar dating from the 7th century BCE, when the Assyrians were defeated by the Medes. The claimed Median descent is reflected in the words of the



Kurdish national anthem, “We are the children of the Medes and Kay Khosrow” (a legendary Iranian king).¹ The cultural and religious traditions of the Kurds are an amalgamation of the ancient and pre-Islamic Iranian traditions of Zoroastrianism, Mithraism, Manichaeism, and Gnosticism, along with the later influences of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Muslim Kurds mostly belong to the Shafi’i school of Sunni Islamic law and Sufi orders of Qadiri and Naqshbandi. There are also many heterodox Shia Muslim, Alevis, and others.

There are different interpretations of Kurdish origins, all linked with expressions of identity and justified in terms of a given dominant political environment. Their recent history includes numerous genocides, and armed conflicts continue for autonomy and independence in the Kurdish-populated provinces in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. The oppression of Kurds in Turkey, the politicization of the Kurdish identity, and the influence of the PKK, the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (*Partîya Karkerên Kurdistanê*), have united the ethno-religious Kurdish minorities, including Yazidis, to redefine themselves as Kurds. The PKK is a Kurdish militant and political organization based in Turkish and Iraqi Kurdistan. Founded in 1978, the PKK’s ideology was originally a fusion of revolutionary socialism and Marxism-Leninism with Kurdish nationalism, seeking the foundation of an independent Kurdish State of Kurdistan.

Yazidis

Most Kurds adhere to Sunni or Shia Islam, but small minorities are Alevis, Yarsanis, Yazidis, Zoroastrians, Jews, Christians, and Baha’is. The precise origins of the Yazidi tradition are unknown as no written early history survives. The Yazidis call themselves “Ezidi,” “Ezi,” “Yazdani,” or “Dasini” (related to the early Nestorian Christians of Daseni). The etymology of the word “Yazidi” is ambiguous. Some scholars have theorized that the Yazidis originated in the ancient city of Yazd in Iran, which is still a Zoroastrian town today. Western scholars often derive the name from the Umayyad Caliph

Yazid ibn Moāwiya (Yazid-I) of the late-7th century CE. Yazid was responsible for the killing of Caliph Ali’s son Husain, one of the prophet Mohammad’s grandsons. He is thus the arch-villain to Shi’ite Muslims. It is believed that after the fall of the Umayyad caliphate in the mid-8th century CE, some of Umayyad’s descendants took refuge in the Kurdish regions and assimilated into Kurdish communities.

Most scholars derive the name from Old Iranian and Avestan *yazata*, Middle Persian *yazat*, and New Persian *e/izad*, meaning “one worthy of worship; divine being”. Most Yazidis do not refer to their religion as “Yezidism”; instead they use the word “Sharfadin” as “Sharaf al-din,” meaning the “Honor of the Religion,” based on the fundamental conviction that reality is made of emanations from God. They believe that everything in creation is personified except evil. The term “Sharfadin” has a wide range of interpretations for Yazidis and comprises all the characters of the religion. It is the name of the first angel, Tāus Malak, the Peacock Angel, the ruler of the earth. [See Figure 2-1](#). It is also recognized as the first principle and religion; it is the name referencing the sacred hymns as well as the name of the Savior who will arrive at the end of time. Because of the worship of angels, the tradition is also known as Yazdanism, the Cult of Angels.²

Yazidis were first recorded by Muslim historians in the 12th century CE, who described the Yazidis of northern Iraq as a cloistered community. Others in the 13th century CE, including Christian scholars, also wrote about Yazidis, describing their religious practices as mainly pre-Islamic with borrowings from ancient Iranian Magian, Zoroastrian, and Manichaean religions. The Yazidis’ cultural practices, far from rooted in Islamic tradition, are noticeably Kurdish.³ The majority speak Kurdish-Kurmānji, a northern Kurdish dialect, except for a few towns in northern Iraq where Kurds speak Arabic as their mother tongue. Kurmānji is the language of the Yazidi oral tradition, including the conduct of religious rituals. Yazidis are recognized as an endogamous community, although not a restrictive one. To maintain the purity of social



Figure 2-3 The interpretation of religion Sharfadin (Yazidi), signifying revered locations and symbols.

classes, belief, customs, and safety, they are encouraged to intermarry with other Yazidis.

There may be 700,000 to 1,000,000 Yazidis worldwide. However, wars and unrest since the end of the 20th century have resulted in considerable demographic shifts and mass emigration. Yazidis have become the victims of a genocide by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant in its campaign to eradicate non-Islamic influences. As a result, in many regions their population can only be estimated, and estimates of the size of the total population vary widely. Continuous persecution and forced migrations have caused Yazidis to become disconnected from their religious and cultural centers as well as their com-

munity. In diaspora, the Yazidis' status as Kurds is not debated, but their religious origin is more controversial. In nationalist discourse, the Yazidis claim their religion is the original Kurdish faith, a view that distinguishes the Kurds from Arabs and Turks. Many attempts to define the Yazidis' ethnic identity as Arabs have been politically motivated. Yazidis assert that Muslim Kurds betrayed Yazidism by converting to Islam whereas Yazidis remained faithful to the religion of their ancestors. Despite any disagreement among scholars on whether Yazidis are a religious class of Kurds or a distinct ethno-religious group universally, Yazidis are officially classified as ethnic Kurds by the governments in Armenia, Georgia, Russia, Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria.

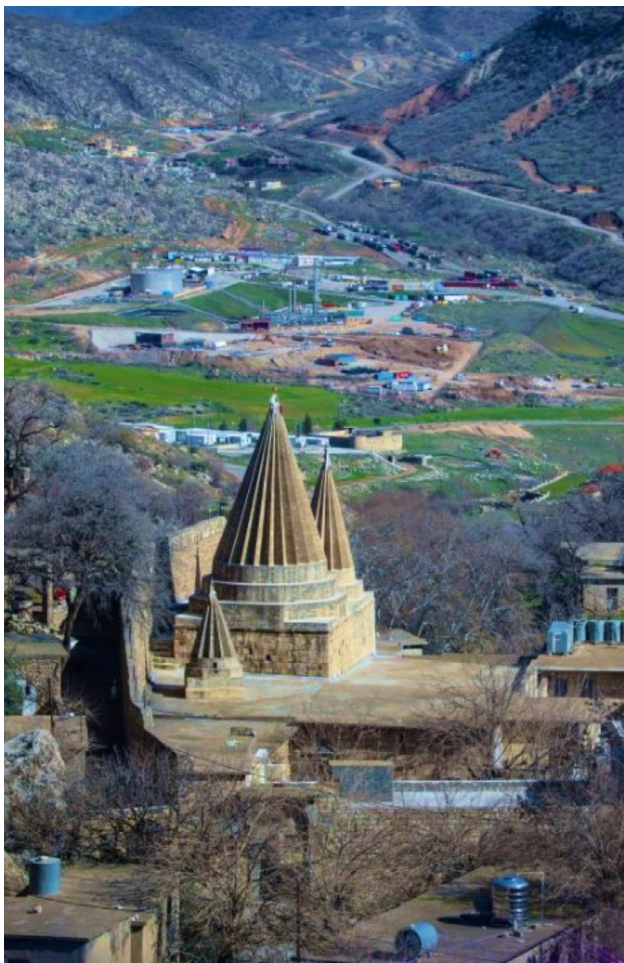


Figure 2-4 Sanctuary of Lalish, in Ninawa city, Iraq, is the holiest temple of the Yazidis.

Yazidism

Yazidism is a unique and remarkable example of ethno-religious identity; centered on a religion, Sharfadin. See [Figure 2-3](#). Outsiders have long been fascinated by Yazidism, largely due to the erroneous description by Muslims labeling Yazidis as ‘devil worshippers.’ Regrettably, many non-Yazidis who have written about the Yazidis’ religious beliefs and practices ascribed facts of doubtful historical legitimacy due to unfamiliarity. This renders it difficult to study existing materials with confidence. What is certain is that Yazidism is a monotheistic faith and a highly syncretistic religion. There are some Islamic influences, such as Arabic religious vocabularies, especially in

the terminology of the Yazidis’ literature, and the existence of spiritual masters and a hierarchy in the social and religious structural systems, but much of the theology is non-Islamic.⁴ Most of the mythology is also non-Islamic, and their cosmogonies appear to have many points in common with those of ancient Iranian and Indian religions.

Yazidi religion has often been described inaccurately as a form of Islam or a mystical Sunni Sufi sect. Much of the confusion comes from the importance of a historical figure, Sheikh Ādi, an 11th-12th century CE Sunni Muslim mystic of Arab origin, who heavily influenced the Yazidis’ religious traditions. While he was studying in Baghdad, then part of the Greater Iran and the center of learning, he met and was influenced by the teachings of Iranian ascetic and theologian al-Gilani, the founder of the Qaderyyah Sufi Order. As he shows in his writings, Sheikh Ādi was also deeply influenced by another great Iranian philosopher, logician, and mystic, Ahmad al-Ghazāli. From Baghdad he moved to northern Iraq, to the Kurdish mountains, and established a community for Sufi Muslim ascetics in the valley of Lālish (northern Iraq, near the city of Mosul) where a combination of ancient Iranian religions was practiced, specifically Manicheanism, the sun-worshipping tradition known as Shamsāni, and Christianity.⁵

Sheikh Ādi preached orthodox Islamic teachings, practiced ascetism, and performed magic. Eventually he gained a number of Yazidis devotees and founded the Ādawiyya Sufi order. Sheikh Ādi followed the footsteps of his teacher, al-Ghazāli, who defended Satan (Quranic Iblis) for not bowing down in homage to Adam as ordered by God because of his pure devotion to God alone. Al-Ghazāli considered Iblis as the epitome of self-sacrifice and pure devotion to God. Similarly, Sheikh Ādi asserted that evil was God’s creation, arguing that if evil existed without the will of God, then God would not be omnipotent. Sheikh Ādi taught his form of Islamic practices until his death in the valley of Lālish. His burial site has become a site of pilgrimage for his followers and one of the holiest shrines for Yazidis.



Figure 2-5 The main entrance of Lalish Temple is decorated with several revered carved symbols including an axe, an animal, wheels, daggers, snakes, a star, and a black snake that saved the Ark in the Flood story.

See [Figures 2-4](#), [2-5](#), and [2-6](#). His story was passed on in the Yazidi oral tradition but hard information about his life has been lost. Tradition says that Sheikh Ādi's grandson, Sheikh Hasan, expanded the tradition in the 13th century CE and recorded Sheikh Ādi's teachings in religious texts.⁶ Because of his heterodox religious activities, Islamic officials captured and beheaded Hasan, and from that time forward, Yazidis have been persecuted as heretical devil worshippers.

The origin of the Yazidi religion is usually interpreted by modern scholars as a complex process of syncretism, whereby the ancient belief-system and practices of a local faith had a

profound influence on the religiosity of adherents of the Ādawiyya Sufi order and caused it to deviate from Islamic norms relatively soon after the death of its founder Sheikh Ādi. Yazidism grew further during the period of Mongol rule. During the 14th century, important Kurdish tribes, whose sphere of influence stretched well into what is now Turkey, were cited in historical sources as Yazidi.

Texts and Recitation

Most Yazidi religious texts have been passed on exclusively by oral tradition, and many features characteristic of oral literature can be identified in them. Yazidis are immensely protective and secretive about their traditions and religious beliefs, which are passed down from generation to generation only by a special priestly class. Yazidism does not have a holy scripture. However, there are notional sacred texts expressing the body of beliefs. There are nine copies of an unknown date of *Ketab al-jelwe* (The Book of Revelation/Splendor), a brief text in Arabic ascribed to Hasan Ādi, and a detailed text called *Mishefa Resh* (The Black Book), discovered in the late 19th century CE and translated into English. It contains the Yazidi account of the world's creation, human origins, and Adam and Eve, and lists the prohibitions of the faith. *Mishefa Resh* also contains two of the cosmogonic myths found in the Yazidi religion. It is generally believed that the copies of texts published in the West during the 20th century (1911 and 1913) were compilations of oral traditions by non-Yazidis rather than actual copies of older existing texts. In any case, the Book of Revelation declares, "I teach without a scripture."

The major texts of the religion that exist today are the rhymed hymns of 117 stanzas known as *qawls*. The *qawl* is a type of poetry rooted in a much earlier tradition than Islam and plays a central role in the religious life of the Yazidis. These mysterious hymns, full of obscurities, are chanted to music on solemn religious occasions and are an important source of Yazidi religious



Figure 2-6 Image-drawing, marking the revered symbols as depicted at the entry, extracted from *A journey from London to Persepolis* (1865) by John Ussher. Original is held and digitized by the British Library.

knowledge. Major subjects are covered in the *qawls* such as the early history, holy figures, cosmogony, eschatology, religious rules, and stories associated with Abrahamic traditions. Traditionally, the *qawls* were transmitted orally, mainly by members of the families of hereditary priestly “reciters” (*qawwāls*). On some occasions *qawls* are also chanted to the accompaniment of “sacred” instruments, the hand-held framed drum (*daf*) and flute (*shebāb*). Another sacred text is the *bayt*, which is difficult to distinguish from the *qawl* in formal terms. It is often a praise-poem, an ode (*qasida*) to a holy man. There are seven forms of Yazidi ritual performance (*samā*) consisting of sacred music and the singing of hymns, usually a combination of *qawl* and *qasida*.⁷ A solemn procession is also often a part of these performances.

Creation

The Yazidi creation story has many points in common with those of ancient Indo-Iranian religions blended with elements of pre-Islamic ancient Mesopotamian religious traditions. The similarities between the Yazidis and the ancient Iranians are well established. Some can be traced back to elements of an ancient faith that was probably dominant among Western Iranians, similar to practices of pre-Zoroastrian Mithraic and other Indo-Iranian religions. Yazidi accounts of creation differ from those of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and are closer to those of Iranian Zoroastrianism. Yazidis believe in the existence of one creator, God, who created the entire universe; he is called Khwāde, also written as “*Xwāde/Xwede*.” Khwāde is described as the Universal Spirit, omnipotent,



omnipresent, and omniscient. He is benevolent and all-forgiving, as well as the creator of the universe. Notably, in Modern Iranian languages, the general designation for God is also *khodā* (*xudā*), derived from Old Middle Iraniana **xwa-tāwan-*, meaning “ruler, lord.”⁸ Khwāde’s attributes are elaborated on in the two Yazidi religious texts, the Book of Revelation and the Black Book. As in other orally transmitted traditions, many aspects are left to speculation. In the Book of Revelation: Chapters I-IV, God describes himself as “I was, am now, and shall have no end. I exercise dominion over all creatures and over the affairs of all who are under the protection of my image.... I send a person a second or a third time into this world or into some other by the transmigration of souls.... I lead to the straight path without a revealed book.... I will not give my rights to other gods. I have allowed the creation of four substances, four times, and four corners; because they are necessary things for creatures....”⁹

According to the Black Book, which is believed to have been written by Sheikh Ādi, creation occurred when God created a white pearl and a bird, described in Chapter V as “In the beginning God created the White Pearl out of his most precious essence. He also created a bird name Anfar. He placed the White Pearl on the back of the bird, and dwelt on it for forty thousand years. On the first day, Sunday, God created Malak Azāzil, and his Tāus Malak, the chief of all.”¹⁰ The pearl acquires the value and function of an egg; it is also called the “cosmic egg.” The primordial pearl and its function in the cosmogonic myth corresponds to the cosmic egg, which is broken and gives origin to the act of creation, thus showing a very important common element with Zoroastrianism and Indian religions.

After this, God created the seven angels; one was created each day for seven days. The angel Azrael created the seven skies, the earth, the sun, and the moon. The last angel, Nu’rail, created man, animals, birds, and cattle and put them in the pocket of God’s garment. In the second version of the cosmogonic myth, God sailed the primordial sea on a ship for thirty thousand years.

When he was angry, he stepped on the pearl and from the noise it produced the mountains rose, from the uproar the hills, and from the smoke the sky. In this case too, the pearl is the cosmic egg since its breaking generated the earth and the natural world.¹¹ After the creation of the world and the angels, God announced that he would create Adam and Eve and the Yazidi people.

Yazidis, like Zoroastrians, believe in concepts such as good, evil, judgment, heaven, and hell. They also believe that there will be a final fight between the forces of good and evil, after which the world will return to its original pristine state of existence. Thus, Yazidism is not a form of Zoroastrianism but a religion possessing something akin to an Iranian belief-system.

Peacock Angel

Yazidis are called the Nation of Angel (*malak*) Tāus (Peacock). See [Figure 2-7](#). Yazidi oral tradition states that God ordered the Archangel Peacock not to submit to other beings. God then tested his loyalty by creating Adam, the first man, from dust and then commanding the Peacock Angel to bow to Adam. However, the Peacock Angel refused, claiming that since he was made from the essence of God, he could not submit to another being made of dust. Consequently, God praised the Peacock Angel and made him his earthly representative. Thus, Yazidis interpret the Peacock Angel’s rejection of Adam as the purest act of devotion to God. The Peacock Angel (like the fallen angel) is of the same nature as other archangels but with even more power and authority over worldly affairs.

Muslims, however, view the Peacock Angel’s refusal to submit to Adam as heretical. They equate him with Satan, Iblis (also called Sheitān) in the Quran, and Angra Mainyu and Ahriman in the Zoroastrian religion. Like the Peacock Angel, Iblis refused God’s command to submit to Adam. However, instead of praising him, God cast Iblis into hell for eternity as punishment for

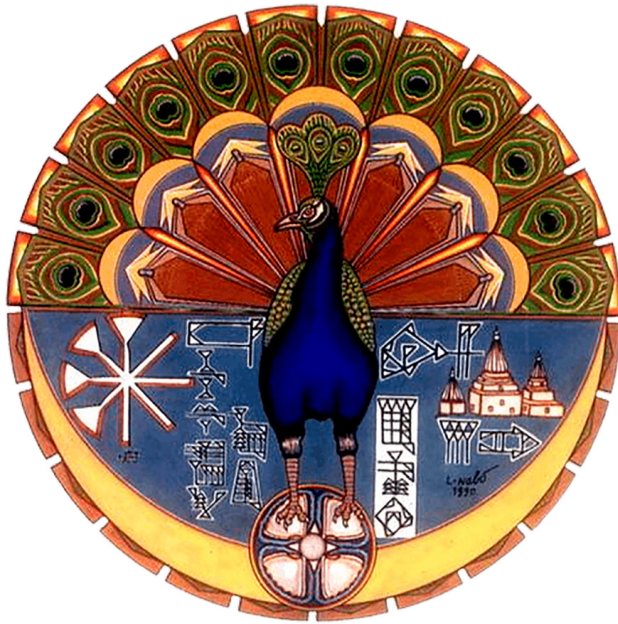


Figure 2-7 Emblem of Yazidism, The Peacock Angel, and other significant symbols including the cosmic white pearl, over which the peacock stands with three feathered crest, and seven and twelve feathered tail, respectively symbolising the triad, the seven archangels, and the twelve months, as the cycle of entirety and completion.

disobeying his command.¹² Because of this parallel between the Peacock Angel and Iblis, many Muslims and Christians have accused Yazidis of being devil worshippers. Ironically, some of the religious elements in Yazidism are Judeo-Christian based, such as the myth of Adam's expulsion from Paradise and the successions of prophets and saints. In early Christian records, the peacock is considered a symbol of resurrection and eternal life, but in general the bird is seen as an embodiment of Jesus the redeemer. Malak Tāus (Tāus Malak, also Tāwus Malak) is similar to the Christian God— “the main thing that makes him equivalent to the One God of the dogmatic religions, and what actually is essential, is his transcendentality and his function of demiurge, as the Creator. However, according to the Yazidi tradition, despite being creator of the Universe, Xwadē is completely indifferent to its fate; he



is not concerned with worldly affairs or human fortune.”¹³ It has been suggested, on the evidence of pre-Zoroastrian Iranian cosmogony and its similarity to Yazidi cosmogonies, that if the Yazidis' ancestors venerated a benign demiurge who set the world (in its current state) in motion, the role of this figure may have become ambiguous when it came into contact with Zoroastrians, whose cosmogony was essentially similar but whose demiurge was Angra Mainyu, later named Ahriman (similar to Satan), who polluted the world and is a manifestation of evil, a parallel of Lucifer/Satan in Christianity.

The Book of Revelation, which seemingly represents Yazidi belief, states that God appointed Tāus Malak to watch over and decide on worldly matters and humanity. Another distinctive myth describing Yazidis ancestry, which helps set Yazidis apart even further from the Abrahamic traditions, describes an argument between Adam and Eve about which of them has the sole ability to procreate. They sealed their seeds in separate jars, but only Adam's jar produced a beautiful boy, named Witness, son of Quarrel (*Shāhed ibn Jarr*). The boy grew up and married a *houri* (heavenly woman). Yazidis were born of this union before Eve produced the seventy-two nations of the world. As part of the creation stories, the Great Flood happened not once but twice. The first flood was to punish the descendants of Adam and Eve, and humankind and animal kind were saved by Noah as described in the Abrahamic religions. The second flood, however, was to punish only the Yazidis for not accepting Adam and Eve's consummation as the origin of Yazidi people. In this scenario, Na'umi (king of peace) as Noah, survives. The flood carries the ark to the top of Mount Sinjar (Iraq), where it crashes onto rocks and is pierced. However, a serpent plugs the hole by curling around it until the ark comes to rest on the Mount of Judi (Place of Descent). Humankind survives the flood because of the serpent, and for this reason, the serpent has a preeminent role in Yazidi religion. The serpent may be represented at the entrance of sacred buildings or embodied by Shahmaran, “Queen of Serpents.” She has a woman's head and a



Figure 2-8 Shahmaran, the Queen of Serpents, is a mythical half woman and half snake associated with the Flood story.

snake's body, with six serpent-shaped legs. She is depicted as a good-luck and protection charm on objects and walls.¹⁴ See [Figure 2-8](#).

Angels and Trinity

God created the *Heptād* (Seven) Angels or *Haft Ser* (the Seven Mysteries), on whom, by a covenant, the care of the created world is bestowed. The seven angels and their functions closely resemble the Zoroastrian *Heptād*, the seven divine entities identified as the Amesha Spentas (Holy Immortals). According to Yazidi cosmogony, Peacock Angel created the material world in seven consecutive days: "He laid the foundation on Saturday. On Friday He finished his work." In the hymn of "Padishah" (Great King/Lord), the godhead speaks as the creator:

*My Padishah is the Mystery of Heaven
Master of night and day and time periods
My Padishah is the Lord of Angels
Lord of all Seven Mighty Mysteries
My Padishah made the World from the Pearl
and jewels
And entrusted it to all Seven Mysteries for
ever and ever
This day He made the Peacock Angel their
leader.¹⁵*

On the first day of creation, Sunday, he created an angel named Azāzil, which is Malak Tāus, the ruler over all and associated with the planet Mercury seen near the sun at sunset and at sunrise. God made six more angels, one on each successive day, after which he made the seven heavens, the earth, the sun, and the moon. The Sun, as one of the seven angels and the manifestation of the Peacock Angel, is also one of the four elements referenced in the creation story as "the Light of God."

*O Lord, in the world there was darkness....
You brought it to life for the first time....
The world was wide, without foundation....
You yourself brought order to it.
In the ocean there was only a pearl,
It didn't progress, it did not progress,
You quickly gave it a soul,
You made your own light manifest in it....
You brought four elements for us....
One is Water, one is Light,
One is Earth, one is Fire....¹⁶*

The seven angels, including the Peacock Angel, are emanations of God, created by God from his own divine light. Their names, closely connected with the angels of the Abrahamic religions, are Jabrail, Azrael, Mikail, Shemnil, Dadrail, Israfil, and Azāzil. The Peacock Angel is identified as Azāzil. In Abrahamic religions, Azāzil was the name of the archangel who became Iblis, or Lucifer after his expulsion from heaven.

In the religious texts, the Peacock Angel describes himself as existing before all other creatures and: "There is no place in the universe that knows not my presence. I participate in all the affairs which those who are without call evil because their nature is not such as they approve. Every age has its own manager [avatar], who directs affairs according to my decrees.... No god has a right to interfere in my affairs."¹⁷

In Yazidism, while God is monotheistic there is also a belief in a divine triad. The original God of the Yazidis is considered to be remote and inactive in relation to his creation. Like the Christian Trinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in Yazidism, God is comprised of a Holy Trinity: the



Peacock Angel (Tāus Malak) as his first emanation and the one who functions as ruler of the world, Sheikh Ādi is the second hypostasis, and Sultan Ezi is the third. Ādi is also viewed as a primary avatar and a reincarnation of Tāus Malak himself.

In this Trinity, Ādi and Ezi are deified versions of their historical counterparts: Sheikh Ādi and Sultan Ezi as Sultan Yazid. The Peacock Angel, however, is the chief member of the Holy Trinity. He is a manifestation of God and the ambassador to humanity, tasked with bestowing divine wisdom upon the Yazidi people every thousand years. As the leader of the angels, the Peacock Angel and his subordinates are responsible for predetermining the future. The Yazidis view him as the symbol of their faith and as the only earthly representative of God, he is deeply revered. The Yazidi Holy Trinity is the only way through which God can be observed so it is the object of veneration. Besides the triad, there is a group that also came into being at the beginning. They are known as the Four Mysteries— Shamsadin, Fakhradin, Sajadin, and Naserdin. These figures are also eponyms of clans that, in accounts of the cosmogony, tend to have other names; they are also identified in other incarnations.¹⁸ Saints are also worshipped in the Yazidi religion and shrines are erected to their names for their devotees to visit and receive blessings such as healing and curing illness, keeping away the bad spirits, or regulating the natural phenomena such as rain and storm. Sheikh Shams (Sun), the divinity of the sun and one of the most popular saints, has five major shrines dedicated to him.

Rites and Practices

Modern Yazidism is a religion of orthopraxy (correct conduct), meaning observance of the rules that govern facets of a devotee's life. Appropriate conduct is far more valuable than religious texts. Religious purity and belief in reincarnations are notable features of the tradition. Purity involves a system of social classes, rules about food consumption, and community

relationships. There are periodic reincarnations of the seven holy beings in human form, and every Yazidi soul is reincarnated in a form called *kassa*. Spiritual purification of the soul is attained through continual reincarnation. However, this process can be interrupted because of expulsion from the community, and re-entry into the faith is not permitted. Believers often seek assistance from adored beings and saints by veneration of a sacred site associated with them. Typically, this is a shrine that includes a tomb consisting of a room with a ritual altar, or a sacred tree, spring or pool, or cave. Devotees may also make offerings to the sacred places and the saints of other religions, particularly Christianity.

Three different rites mark the initiation of a Yazidi child as a member of the community: the cutting of a baby boy's first locks (*bisk*), the stamping or sealing (*mor kirin*), and, for boys, circumcision. The relative importance attached to each of these ceremonies varies to some extent from region to region. The *bisk* ceremony as an initiatory ceremony for boys takes place on the fortieth day after birth. However, nowadays, this is performed when the boy is closer to his first birthday. The ceremony consists of the cutting of two or three forelocks of the child's hair by the child's "brother of the hereafter," a member of one of the religious classes, who preserves the forelocks. The term "baptism" is often used for the ceremony of sealing (*mor kirin*), similar to Christian baptism. It consists of pouring holy water on the child's head three times. This is usually done during childhood but can be done at any age.¹⁹ This too must be done by a member of one of the religious classes. The circumcision ritual for boys is typically performed immediately after birth. However, since this practice is viewed as an Islamic ritual, it is not obligatory.

Formalized prayer is largely a matter of personal preference and is not obligatory. Prayers are said facing the rising, noonday, and setting sun. They should be accompanied by certain gestures, which have been almost exclusively transmitted orally. The sun is a key symbol and is identified with one of the seven angels. It is also the primary



Figure 2-9 Kurdish Flag and the sun emblem.



Figure 2-10 Yazidis heraldry and national symbols, with the rising sun.

symbol on the Kurdish flag and Yazidi heraldry and national symbols. See [Figure 2-9](#) and [Figure 2-10](#).

The Yazidis' concern with religious purity and their reluctance to mix elements perceived to be incompatible are shown not only in their class system but also in various taboos affecting everyday life. However, many Yazidis have now abandoned some of these prohibitions, regarding them as Islamic influences and not part of Yazidism. Like ancient Iranian religious practices, the purity and cleanliness of the four elements—earth, air, fire, and water—are highly protected as are the prohibitions against using certain words, coming in contact with certain animals, and consuming certain foods. The reasons for these prohibitions are not clear.

The Yazidis have their own calendar, and days, weeks, months, and years are determined based on the position of the sun and moon. There are several traditional festivals, the majority of which are connected to their ancient mythology. *Sersāl* (New Year) is a spring festival of light and renewal, celebrated on the first Wednesday in April, called the *Chārshema-Sur* (Red Wednesday). This festive event is characterized by colorful traditional costumes, decorated eggs, meals, music, dancing, and socializing. Wednesday is important because on this day in the creation story, God decorated

the world with living objects ruled by the Peacock Angel. See [Figure 2-11](#) and [Figure 2-12](#).

The annual seven-day autumn Festivity of the Assembly (*Jashne Jamāīya*), symbolizing the gathering of the seven angels, is also part of the pilgrimage to the holy site of Lālish, the tomb of Sheikh Ādi, and other shrines in the region dedicated to holy figures. This important event celebrates the act of world creation and sustenance by the sun. On this occasion, in addition to music and dance, a bull is sacrificed and its meat distributed among people as a food offering. This feast day coincides with the great ancient Iranian Zoroastrian feast of *Mehregān*, which honors the Avestan sun god Mithra (Vedic Mitra). The annual winter solstice celebration, the Feast of *Ezī*, takes place in middle to late December. Typically, Yazidis fast for three days and celebrate with meals, music, and dance. Another important event is the procession of the Circulation of the Peacock (*Tāwusgerrān*), performed by notable religious figures, and the sacred peacock effigy called *Sanjāq*, the bird icon of Anzal (the Ancient One), typically made of bronze, is paraded in front of the worshippers. See [Figure 2-13](#). In addition to the Lālish sanctuary in Iraq, there are two other significant Yazidi sanctuaries newly constructed in the Caucasus. The largest is near the city of Yerevan in Armenia. See [Figure 2-14](#)



Figure 2-11 In traditional costumes, Yazidis celebrating the New Year in the city of Duhok, Iraq, 2017.



Figure 2-12 Yazidis celebrating the New Year in the city of Duhok, Iraq, 2017. Source: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/12/how-isis-changed-the-yezidi-religion/548651/>.



Figure 2-13 Sculptured bronze Anzal in paraded in front of the worshippers on special occasions.



Figure 2-14 The largest Yazidi sanctuary, in Armenia, with seven spires symbolizing the seven angels, each topped with a golden sun.

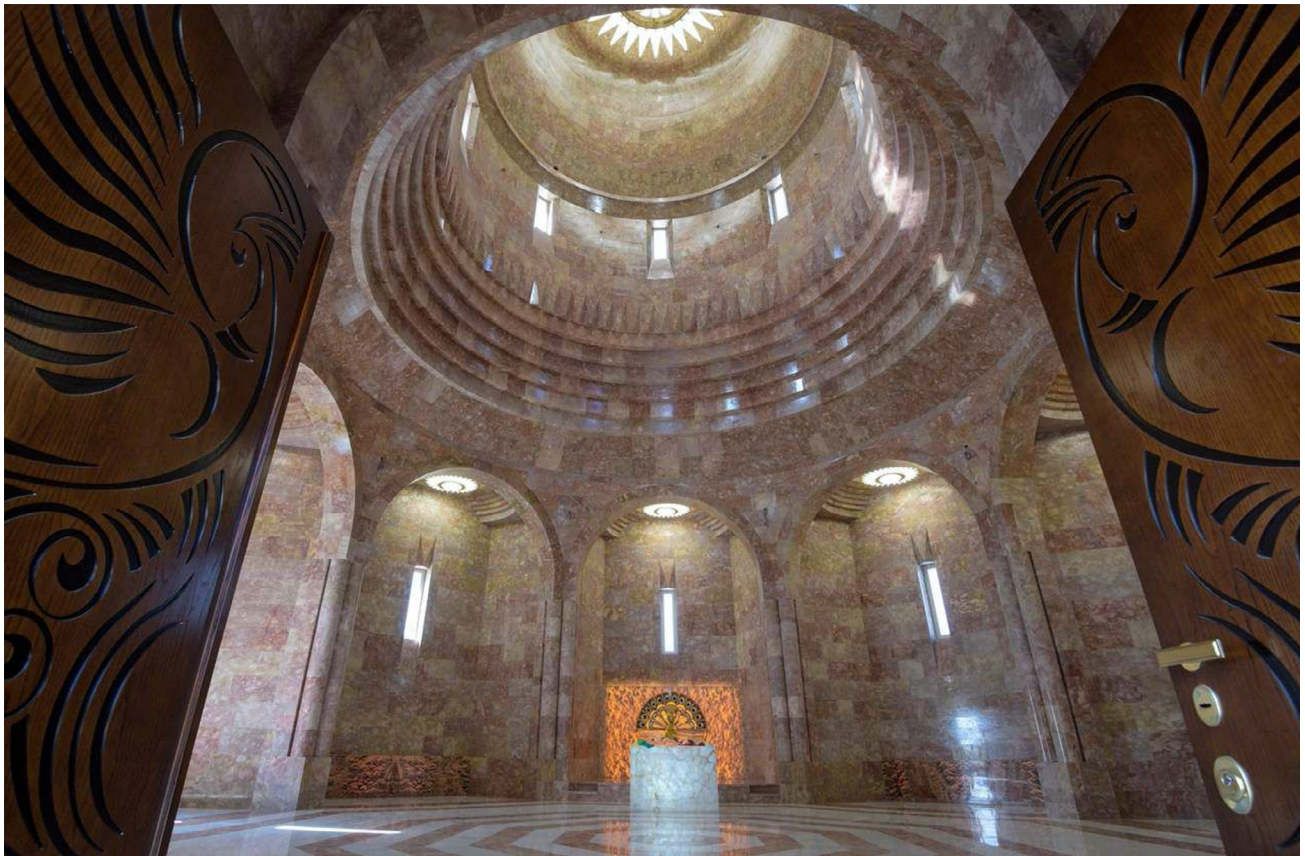


Figure 2-15 Interior of the Yazidi sanctuary in Armenia.



and [Figure 2-15](#). It was privately funded by a Yazidi businessman residing in Moscow. The other, the Sultan Ezid shrine and cultural center in the city of Varketili, Georgia, is considered the third most important site of visitation for Yazidis.

The Yazidis divide themselves into social groups: *Sheikh* (Arabic: leader), *Pir* (Persian: elder), and *Murid* (Arabic: disciple, layperson). Although the majority of the population is from the Murid class, the religious and political leaders are elected from the Sheikh class, such as the Mir (Prince), the leader of the Yazidis. He is the living supreme ruler and advisor to Yazidis in social and spiritual domains. There are several religious duties performed by members of the Sheikh and Pir. They each perform a variety of services, such as teaching the young, performing ceremonies, giving sermons, and presiding at or attending events such as births, initiatory ceremonies, weddings, and funerals. Both groups receive alms from their Murids (laities). The *Peshimam* (head-clergy) is appointed by the Mir and is responsible for conducting rituals and ceremonies. *Faqirs*, like Christian monks, are the ascetics. The *Kochaks* (little ones) are groups charged with the outdoor work of the shrines. In addition to these classifications, the community is also grouped based on social function. For instance, *qawwāls* are the reciters of the sacred hymns or *qawls*, and the players of religious music whose musical instruments are also considered as sacred and worthy of veneration.²⁰ *Qawwāls* have one of the most important functions in the preservation of their oral tradition and their sacred hymns because, for centuries, the Yazidis were faithful to the religious prohibition on writing down their religious principles. The ban was only broken in the 20th century.

The Yazidis Now

The demographic profile of the Yazidis in Iraq, Syria, and Turkey has changed drastically because of the wars and unrest in the region, particularly after the start of the Iraq War in 2003. It is said that the Yazidis have suffered more than

seventy attempted genocides, including the most recent at the hands of the Salafist militant Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as ISIS and Daesh). Many Yazidi villages in Iraq were destroyed and people forcibly relocated. According to reports by the Human Rights Watch, Yazidis were adversely affected by the Arabization and Islamification actions of Saddam Hussein, and later by ISIL.²¹ When ISIL expanded in the regions, it committed atrocities against the Yazidis, whom it characterized as devils and devil worshippers. Thousands fled their homes and took refuge in neighboring countries, or were captured, executed, or enslaved by ISIL. Reports from northern Iraq detail the capture and execution of the sick and elderly who could not make the perilous mountainous treks to escape. United Nations groups have reported that at least 40,000 Yazidi women and children, who took refuge on the mountains, faced slaughter or death by starvation at the hands of the ISIL jihadists surrounding them. In Sinjar, ISIL also destroyed a religious shrine and ordered that the remaining Yazidis convert to Islam or face execution. The United Nations reported that several thousand Yazidis have been murdered and many more abducted, mostly women and children.²²

Captured women were treated as sex slaves or the booty of *jihad* (religious war). Naked Yazidi women carrying price tags have been displayed in markets in Iraq and Syria. In their digital magazine *Dabiq*, ISIL explicitly claimed Islamic religious justification for their actions against Yazidi women and girls. Women and young girls were forced to convert to Islam then sold as short-term brides to ISIL members for sexual exploitation. Those who refused to convert were tortured, raped, and eventually murdered. Babies born of enslaved women were taken from their mothers; it is not clear what happened to them. The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars described the abuse of local women by ISIL militants after they capture an area: “They usually take the older women to a makeshift slave market and try to sell them. The younger girls ... are raped or married off to fighters.... It’s based on temporary marriages, and once these fighters have had sex with these



young girls, they just pass them on to other fighters.”²³ There are numerous reports of Yazidi girls being raped by ISIL members. Witnesses have reported that girls committed suicide by jumping to their deaths from mountains.

Because of conflicts and displacements, the current population of Yazidis in Iraq and Syria is unclear. Most Yazidis in the Caucasus are the descendants of refugees who fled persecution during Ottoman rule, including a wave of persecutions during the Armenian Genocide when many Armenians took refuge in Yazidi villages. The Yazidi population in Georgia is declining, mostly due to economic migration to Russia and the West. The recent mass emigration has established Yazidi diaspora communities abroad. The most significant of these are in Germany, Russia, Belgium, France, Sweden, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

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