



YAZIDIS II. INITIATION IN YAZIDISM

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ii. Initiation in Yazidism

Three different rites can mark the initiation of a Yazidi child as a member of the community: (1) the cutting of a baby boy's first locks (*bisk*); (2) *mor kirin*, lit. "to stamp, seal," and (3) for boys, [circumcision](#) (see also Wensinck; in Kurdish *sunnet*, Pers. *sonnat*, Turk. *sünnet*). The relative importance attached to each of these ceremonies varies to some extent from region to region.

(1) The *bisk* ceremony takes place in babyhood: according to the older literature it should be done on the fortieth day after a birth; modern Yazidis generally have it done when the boy is seven, nine, or eleven months old. The ceremony essentially consists in the cutting off of two or three of the child's locks by the family's shaikh. Traditionally, one lock is said to be for the child's shaikh and one for its *pir* (for these social groups, see [YAZIDIS](#) at *iranica.com*), but in modern practice the locks are usually preserved by the family. The *bisk* ceremony is regarded as the central initiatory ritual by most Yazidis from Turkey, Armenia, and Syria. In the European Diaspora, the term is often translated as "baptism." The ceremony is reminiscent of the Moslem *'aqiqa* celebrated on the seventh day after birth, when a boy's hair is cut and a name is given (see Juynboll and Pedersen). The origins of the *bisk* may have



been inspired by the Islamic rite, but the Yazidi ceremony takes place at a later stage, when the child has already been named.

(2) Those whose place of origin lies within easy reach of the Yazidi religious center Lalish (Pers. Lāleš, in present-day Iraq; see Dengê Ezîdiyan) tend to use the translation “baptism” for the ceremony of *mor kirin*, which in fact shows similarities to Christian baptism. This ceremony should ideally take place at Lalish, since water from the holy Kaniya Spî (White Spring) or the only slightly less holy Zimzim spring (cf. the Islamic *Zamzam*) must be used. The rite is performed by a man or woman from a shaikh or *pir* family who is officiating at Lalish as a Mijêwir “custodian” (*Micêwirê Kaniya Sipî*) at the time. Essentially, it consists of pouring holy water from either spring on the child’s head three times. Ideally, *mor kirin* should be done when the child is nine or ten years old, but, if this is not possible, it may be done at any stage during a person’s life. According to Iraqi Yazidi tradition, the corpses of those who die without *mor kirin* should be especially washed by their shaikh, *pir*, or “Brother/Sister of the Hereafter” (Kurd. *Birayê/Xushka Axiretê*) or, failing that, by someone else in their name. For those who are unable to get to Lalish, the ritual may be performed with water from the Lalish springs which has been brought to their dwelling places by someone else. Nevertheless the custom is more widely observed by Yazidis whose places of origin is near Lalish than by those from Turkey or Armenia. The latter no longer appear to regard it as an essential part of Yazidi life. The Yazidi ceremony may owe its origin to Christian practice, but, since water probably played an important role in pre-Islamic Iranian religions, the question of its roots must remain a matter of speculation.

(3) Circumcision, the third initiatory ritual for boys, is, with certain exceptions, generally practised among Yazidis. The operation is usually performed soon after birth. It takes place on the knees of the *kerîf* (approximately “godfather”), with whom the child will have a life-long formal relationship. A range of obligations arises from this relationship, and the two families may not intermarry for seven generations. The *kerîf* is therefore generally chosen from a group with whom intermarriage would in any case be impossible, such as a caste other than one’s own or a Moslem family. Circumcision is said to have been traditionally rejected by the prominent Kālitiya tribe, which seems to have been more strongly exposed to Christian influences than most other Yazidi communities. It is not, or no longer practised in Armenia. This suggests that, although most Yazidis regard the rite as essential, it is perceived by



others as being of Islamic origin and therefore not obligatory on Yazidis.

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