

# **METHODOLOGICAL NOTES ON INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH ON NEAR EASTERN RELIGIOUS MINORITIES<sup>1</sup>**

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In recent years there has been widespread criticism of traditional Orientalism from various quarters. Many scholars, who probably have never identified themselves with the traditional orientation of Orientalism, have been thinking of revising the subject and changing its perspectives. But this task does not seem to be one that can be easily achieved due to the fact that until now there has not even been a valid definition of Orientalism. Previously, it was a field in which historical and linguistic research was done. Since such scholars could simply be called either historians or linguists, Orientalism did not have a justified identity of its own.

Recently some attempts have been made to correct this defect by including all aspects of Oriental societies under the general term Orientalism. This automatically makes Orientalism an interdisciplinary subject, no longer limited to history and linguistics alone, and takes the discipline one step further beyond scholars who have become aware of the serious problems involving specialization; but have not yet been able to apply interdisciplinary methods.

The symposium “Alevism in Turkey and Comparable Syncretistic Religious Communities in the Near East in the Past and Present”, Berlin, 14-17 April 1995, was a successful attempt in this direction. The important questions which the Symposium put at the center of its considerations had, until then, not found a place in scholarly discussion. I will be referring to these questions later in this article. At the same time, the symposium did expose problems regarding interdisciplinary research, which also encouraged me to revise my original article.

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<sup>1</sup> I am thankful to the following scholars and friends for their suggestions and correction of this article: Anthony Hornby and Barbara Klimmeck.

It is evident that interdisciplinary research has limitations and difficulties; depending on the subjects and disciplines. Here we are concerned with the study of Near Eastern religious communities, and I will therefore limit myself to some of the interdisciplinary questions with which I myself was confronted. Although many of the points that I will be trying to make here will be quite obvious to many, they still need to be discussed; especially as there does not seem to be any writing on this subject by scholars working in this field. This article does not have any claim other than to be an attempt to start a methodological discussion in research on religious minorities of the Near East. The methodological problems discussed in this article occur commonly in the area of our concern, so it will not be necessary to mention them all. I am limiting my remarks to my own work and those authors who have referred to them. I am sure these authors appreciate critical and objective discussion in the classical scientific spirit.

## RELIGIOUS MINORITIES AND INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH

I became aware of the obstacles that hamper communication between scholars with different scientific backgrounds for the first time during a congress on Iranian studies in Bamberg in 1992. But it was only later on that I realized the seriousness of the problem. It was the reaction to my recent articles about the Yâresân, or Ahl-e Haqq community of Iran, that confirmed my view that there is a critical communication problem. At least I felt there were obstacles in the understanding of my work. I could not immediately identify the cause of misunderstanding by scholars whose ability and accuracy I admired. My later contemplation on the subject led me to conclude, that, despite existing obstacles, no methodological discussion has yet occurred that would clear the way for communication.

## DIFFERENCE OF PERSPECTIVES

One of the problems of interdisciplinary research is the difference in general perspective among scholars with differing scientific backgrounds. One such difference surfaced during the above-mentioned symposium in Berlin, where it was easy to observe the tendency of Oriental historians to specify as opposed to the tendency of sociologists to generalize.

## METHODOLOGICAL NOTES ON INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH

Examples of such tendencies can be observed in recent writing about the Yâresân. Van Bruinessen<sup>2</sup> and subsequently Mir-Hosseini<sup>3</sup> have in their articles strongly criticized those scholars who in their opinion have neglected the difference in religious ideas among the various Khândâns<sup>4</sup> of this community. They both claim that this has been the case not only in earlier publications but also recent work. They both consider their own articles to be exceptions.

I do not agree with these claims: not only were most of the scholars writing about such groups Oriental historians with a tendency to specify, but it can also be easily established that they were aware of the fact that differences exist between most branches of the community. Even in the case of those early scholars who possessed too little information about the religion of this community, the same tendencies toward specification and diversification can be found.

It was actually the complete domination of the tendency to specify which attracted my attention to the fact that the general principles existing in such social phenomena have been completely neglected, something Orientalists have done ever since they first started reporting on religious groups.

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<sup>2</sup> Van Bruinessen, "Satan's Psalmists".

<sup>3</sup> Mir-Hosseini 1994, 267-285.

<sup>4</sup> This is the name for branches of the community that are connected to one another through various social and religious factors. Cf. Hamzeh'ee 1990, chapter 7.2.1

Differences are not peculiar to our religious group; it is rather the rule that differences exist among all religions, and it is difficult to imagine that authors were not aware of this fact. However, most of what they had collected was useful material but needed to be studied using scientific methods and approaches.

In any case, it does not seem logical to conclude that, due to existing differences between various Khândâns, a common religious system does not exist<sup>5</sup> and that therefore each Khândân is a religion in itself. On the basis of ethnological theories regarding ethnicity and ethnic groups this hypothesis may to some extent be true. Religio-scientifically<sup>6</sup>, it is certainly not so, as diversity exists in all religions. A clear example is Hinduism, which has numerous versions even within the same village. This tendency is naturally stronger among polytheistic religions as compared to monotheistic ones. But even among the latter group I do not know of a single religion which is not divided into several sects (here used neutrally). I will not go into the religio-scientific discussion about the factors contributing to diversification, especially among polytheistic religions. I would only like to point out that the religious tenets of the Yâresân place the religion nearer to polytheistic religions. In spite of this, Hinduism is considered to be one religion; similarly the Yâresân religion should be considered as one.

From a religio-scientific point of view, a religion is defined firstly by the system it follows. In one religious system there are religions and in a religion various sects. Similarly, the existence of foreign words in a language does not change the nature of this language; it is above all the grammar which substantially separates two language groups.

In the early stages of my involvement with the literature about the Yâresân I got the impression that almost all the writers emphasize its diversity. These works were primarily collections of information; not a single one made a scientific study of the community using scientific methods and theories or considering existing approaches in social science. Collecting information, adding personal ideas and publishing it is in itself useful as material for scientific studies, but no more than

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<sup>5</sup> Also cf. Leezenberg 1994, 9.

<sup>6</sup> I use this term in a similar way to the German term „Religionswissenschaft“ and as different from “theology”, which includes spiritual aspects.

that. I therefore attempted to reconstruct the religious structure and systems and social organization of the Yâresân in order to be able to say what they are, using the Weberian method of constructing an ideal type. According to this method, an ideal type, like a term (Begriff), is always more than it is in reality. And there is always the possibility that a part may be dropped or lose its importance or be revived again, depending on changing circumstances. Similarly, words in a language can frequently change in meaning or may even be replaced by others, but changes in grammar or in a religious system are not so common.

Mir-Hosseini provides a very good example of this. After a detailed description of the differences between two Yâresân Khândns, she comes to the conclusion that there has been no change in religious system; she only uses different terms. She writes:

The obvious differences between the Guran and Sahneh versions of the Divine Manifestation clearly relate to differences in the "outer" history of these two Ahl-i Haqq clusters. At the level of inner truth, however, the two versions have much in common. In both we find a conceptual segregation of the two worlds, in line with the very essence of Ahl-i Haqq cosmology in which the two worlds are clearly separated yet closely connected. We have seen how successive manifestations of Divine Essence act as a link between these two distinct worlds without ever bringing them together. The same is even more true of the other cardinal Ahl-i Haqq dogma: the transmigration of souls (dūnādūnī). According to this, human life is nothing but a series of journeys during which the soul migrates from one world to the other. In each of these journeys, the soul takes on a different body, likened to putting on a new garment (dun)<sup>7</sup>.

Another religious dogma of the Yâresân, i. e. the belief in the manifestation of a Divine Essence on earth, provides us with a very clear example of how a religious system remains the same despite changes in outer appearance. After the manifestation of the Divine Essence in Soltân Sahak, each Khândân has its own series of manifestations. What is important is that they all follow the same system, and we know that the names of the personalities used by them may affect the ethnicity of each group but not their religious dogma.

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<sup>7</sup> Mir-Hosseini 1994, 281.

The members themselves are also aware that in many cases the names are not important, and so employ the names of a wide range of personalities from Plato to Soltân Mahmud (who themselves would probably never have imagined being mentioned by such groups). As a matter of fact, the Yâresân religious "system" is a part of what they call their world of bâten. Contrary to the derogatory analyses of earlier authors like Ivanow and by later scholars, the Yâresân have a very sophisticated philosophical religious system. The philosophical nature of a religion is not affected by its followers' classical education, or lack of it. The most fascinating ideas were transferred through oral tradition. Classical education does not necessarily contribute to the artistic and philosophical creativity of a people.

## DIFFERENCE IN APPLYING METHODS

In interdisciplinary research, relevant studies which are available in other disciplines may not be ignored. I myself am an advocate of a holistic approach in all scientific undertakings. But I am all too aware of its limitations if such research is going to be carried out by one scholar. In spite of this, one has to at least consider the general information available in closely related areas if one does not want to fall into the trap of one-sidedness. For instance, it is necessary for scholars engaged in the study of the religions of the Alevi, Yazidi and Yâresân to consult work written about other religious thought in this region. Under the influence of some official political ideologies, several scholars have studied the religious ideas of Central Asia<sup>8</sup>, which certainly may be useful but is done at the cost of being ignorant about the ancient Near East, which has been the birthplace of many religious ideas. There are so many references to the same dogmas current among existing religious minorities from the period predating the invasions of this region by Central Asian nomadic tribes, that, as a Sufi expression says, we do not need to search for water elsewhere when our own jar is full.

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<sup>8</sup> There are also some Western scholars who have taken the same position. Cf. Roux 1969, 61-95.

Another point to be made here concerns the different methods used by scholars with different scientific backgrounds. Historians of the Orient have been reluctant to use certain methods, approaches and theories, even those established in the science of history. This skepticism is perhaps due to the fact that many theories have proved to be wrong. While it is a matter of personal choice whether one wants to apply these theories and methods or not, it is necessary to be familiar with those used by others; because the methods used affect the subject, analysis and interpretation. It means one can understand scholars in other disciplines if one knows their language. Again I give an example from my own research, although there are many other examples. What van Bruinessen sees as a haphazard collection of information from all Yâresân Khândâns is the result of the most common method applied in sociology, i.e. to construct an ideal type<sup>9</sup>. I have used the same method in my study of the Gypsies to construct a model of their economic activities, even though there may not be a single Gypsy group that in actual fact carries out all the economic activities I have mentioned<sup>10</sup>. Similarly, perhaps not a single Yâresân Khândân practices all the rituals or believes in all the dogmas presented as an ideal type.

Differences in method certainly are a factor contributing to the difficulty in communication between historians of the Orient and sociologists; because one of the most important activities of the latter group is the construction of hypotheses and theories. Sociology searches for rules, regularity or „Gesetzmäßigkeit” in social phenomena and, like the natural sciences, does not consider it unnecessary speculation. Compared to the natural sciences, the task of the social sciences is more difficult as the incidence of exceptions is higher. But they accept the exception as a rule. Therefore, they are interested in those principles defining a social phenomenon and the principles of exceptions.

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Hamzeh'ee 1990, chapters 2 to 5.

<sup>10</sup> *M. Reza Hamzeh'ee, Ethnizität.*

Despite the fact that many theories have proved to be wrong, with the merit of showing what was wrong, there are some which have proved to be correct. Here I would like to refer the reader to some of those presented by Ibn Khaldun,<sup>11</sup> the founder of both the science of history and sociology.

Contemporary Oriental historians have their own methods and language clearly going back to the classical Orientalists. These, like others, have their own merits and defects. The most important merit of their methods is their interdisciplinary nature, if they are consciously and critically developed.

## TERMINOLOGY

The most pressing problem at present in interdisciplinary research on Near Eastern religious communities is the problem of applying terms. It has two aspects, social and scientific. There are, of course, difficulties concerning the use of such terms as “extremist”<sup>12</sup>, “syncretistic” or “sect” for the above groups. As pointed out by Elwert, applying such terminology is like leaving an unexploded grenade lying around to be used by anyone and for any purpose<sup>13</sup>.

Scientifically, the problem with terminology is the prevailing uncertainty about the nature of the religions of the minorities in the Near East. But the problem of terminology in our field goes beyond the mere use of doubtful terminology. There is real confusion evident in most studies of these communities. Sometimes even on the same page different terms are applied to the same group; apparently the authors do not know whether it is a cult, a sect, a religion or something else. When one is confronted with a term like “modern sects” for these religious minorities, one is also reminded of something like the American Moon sect or other similar groups that can be found

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<sup>11</sup> Ibn Khaldun 1958.

<sup>12</sup> Some have even made this unqualified term the main concern of their scientific research. Cf. Moosa 1988.

<sup>13</sup> Georg Elwert's oral statement during the final discussion in the symposium “Alevism in Turkey and Comparable Syncretistic Religious Communities in the Near East”, Berlin, 14-17 April 1995.



everywhere in the Western world. This is because the term “sect” is one of those terms which has been greatly manipulated by journalists and the so-called “experts”. So I was surprised by an article that claimed that I regard the Yâresân religion as a “Zoroastrian sect”<sup>14</sup>. It is unclear what the author means by “Zoroastrian” and by “sect”. I had attempted to show that there are many analogies between the religious dogmas of the Yâresân and those of the Zoroastrians, but I had concluded that the former is an independent development which, like Zoroastrianism, grew out of the Mazdaistic religious system. The reason for providing examples from Zoroastrianism was mainly because we know more about it than Mazdaism itself. To be more precise, by “Mazdaism” I mean the pre-Zoroastrian religious system which remained strong in Western Iran even after the reform of Zoroastrianism and its adoption by ruling Persian families. As mentioned above, our knowledge of Mazdaism is very limited, but it cannot be completely ruled out that those few religious ideas which exist among the religions of Kurdistan are the remnants of Mazdaism, which were dropped from Zoroastrianism after its reform. Due to the scarcity of written material about Mazdaism, I have suggested improving methodology by using existing materials about living religions in the Kurdish regions as important sources for the study of Mazdaism.<sup>15</sup>

At this stage of our knowledge of religious minorities in the Near East,<sup>16</sup> we should define the terms we use in our studies, at least as long as generally accepted terminology does not exist, so avoiding misunderstanding among scholars of different disciplines. If a term like “sect” is used and defined, the reader would know what the author means. I use the term “sect” neutrally to mean a branch of a certain religion. It is true that members of minority religious communities in the Near East, like the Alevis, have had a strategic interest in being known publicly as Islamic sects. But there are enough reasons to believe that their religious system has nothing in common with Islam.<sup>17</sup> In many respects Christianity has much more

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<sup>14</sup> Van Bruinessen, “Satan's Psalmists”, 2.

<sup>15</sup> Hamzeh'ee 1992.

<sup>16</sup> I am not unaware of the problem with the Eurocentric term "Near East".

<sup>17</sup> Also cf. Kehl-Bodrogi 1989, 503.

in common with Islam than have the religions of these minorities. Here we are caught in a strange dilemma of whether to follow their strategy of calling themselves sects or to respect our scientific ethic, even if our writings might harm the members of these groups in some way. It is a fairly difficult decision; probably the simplest path would be not to write about those groups that may be harmed by such descriptions.<sup>18</sup> In sociology the question about the sense of conducting research is considered to be a part of the methodology. I believe that this should be observed in all other disciplines; whether the natural or the social sciences. Science has, in my opinion, no justification to exist for itself.

### DEFINITION OF A NEAR EASTERN MINORITY RELIGION

I have already pointed out that there is confusion among scholars regarding the nature of the religions followed by minorities in various parts of the Near East. The first step to remove this confusion is to attempt to define the general nature of a religion. First of all, we should find out whether there is enough information available for that purpose. I have the impression that there is, at least about the main groups. The most effective method to define the nature of these religions, I believe, is a religio-scientific reconstruction of their religious system by using the Weberian ideal type. With this method, I attempted to show that the Yâresân clearly follow a Mazdaistic

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<sup>18</sup> Many members of minority groups do not have an interest in publicity, as it can often be used against them by the majority. Many social scientists have encountered skepticism from members of minority groups who may regard them as spies and thus refuse to provide information or try to mislead them by giving wrong information. Jeggle writes: So wäre das Leugnen ein ähnlicher Abwehrmechanismus wie das Verschweigen oder das Vorbeischwätzen, der Versuch des alltäglichen Lebens, Daten zu schützen, über deren Verwendung man sich nicht sicher ist. Hinter den Aussagen stecken anscheinend Geheimnisse, die geschützt werden sollen, und die verschiedenen Formen des Widerstands haben uns auf die Fährte geführt, daß in der Kulturforschung stets damit zu rechnen ist, daß eine Gruppe - und als Kulturforscher untersuchen wir ja auch, wenn wir uns mit einzelnen beschäftigen, stets Gruppen - nicht möchte, daß alles über sie nach außen dringt. Das halte ich für normal, vielleicht sogar, wenn nicht für ein anthropologisches Bestimmungsmoment, so doch für jedermann wünschenswert, daß einer oder zwei oder drei auch ihre Geheimnisse haben." (Jeggle 1984, 104-105).

religious system<sup>19</sup>. Evidence indicates that other groups also follow more or less the same system. One of the characteristic features of Mazdaism is its system of Angelology. The idea has survived in Zoroastrianism too and among most of our subject groups in the Near East. The same can be said about Dualism, although it has lost some of its importance among contemporary groups. Another characteristic feature of Mazdaism is the belief in the Manifestation of the Divine Essence on earth. This has almost disappeared in Zoroastrianism but remains the most important dogma among Near Eastern religious minorities. The third religious dogma to be found in the religious system of most of our subject groups is the belief in the transmigration of the soul, about which we are still not in a position to make as confident a statement as about other dogmas. The idea of the transmigration of the soul is one of the aspects which connects these groups to some forms of Sufism; it does not seem to exist in Zoroastrianism in such a clear form.<sup>20</sup> Many Parsis in India, though, believe in this dogma, which could have come from Hinduism. In spite of this, there has for a long time been a debate among Parsis about whether the idea of the transmigration of the soul existed in an older form of Zoroastrianism. In any case, the easy adoption of this idea by some Parsis shows that the Mazdaistic religious system is compatible with the transmigration of the soul. We have other sources of evidence which clearly point to this fact. In my typological study of Iranian social movements, I have shown that belief in the transmigration of the soul was the main characteristic feature of those movements which emerged in early Islamic periods.<sup>21</sup> If such an idea had not already existed, at least in the Sassanid period, it could not have spread among so many groups throughout the Iranian world. According to Edward Browne, the belief in re-incarnation is endemic to Iran.<sup>22</sup> We also possess many reports about Manichaeans which indicate that the belief in the transmigration of the soul was part of their religious system.<sup>23</sup> Based on existing evidence, Wesendonk also

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<sup>19</sup> Hamzeh'ee 1990, 1992.

<sup>20</sup> There are some other secondary ideas in minority religions in the Near East which we also find in Sufism.

<sup>21</sup> Hamzeh'ee 1991, 65 ff.

<sup>22</sup> Browne 1977, 311.

<sup>23</sup> Jackson 1925, 246 ff.

thinks it possible that the idea of re-incarnation was present in that version of Mazdaism which survived until the Sassanid period.<sup>24</sup>

Another important point to be made here is that the very existence of the idea of the manifestation of the Divine Essence (or: far-e izadi) on earth is in itself evidence of the existence of the idea of re-incarnation. Even if the latter had not emerged before the former, they are so related to each other that the possibility cannot be ruled out that one could easily have given shape to the other. To this we can add that Mazdaism in its early stages was close to Hinduism and it is difficult to believe that it lacked the essential dogma of Hinduism, i. e. re-incarnation. The idea of the transmigration of the soul is so fundamental that it must have existed in most of the early religions before the monotheistic religions became dominant.

## ORAL TRADITIONS IN RELIGIO-SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH

Oral traditions have not received the attention they deserve among social scientists. Unfortunately, one of the most neglected areas in this respect is the Near East. In 1961 Stith Thompson wrote in his introduction to Antti Aarne's book on folktales that Iranian folk narration is "almost completely unexplored"<sup>25</sup>. Even after 35 years, this statement is still valid today. This shortcoming is due to the fact that working with oral tradition is very difficult when compared to written material. Social and political turmoil in the Near East has destroyed the greater part of books and records. Furthermore, many phenomena, ideas etc. were never written down, although it is true that this area did have a very rich old tradition of writing history. It is said that Rashid od-Din's world history was the first of its kind to be completed. But it is also true that all history books were commissioned by rulers and were written in the way that they wanted. Therefore, critical modern historians are doing their best to come nearer to the truth, but these frequently manipulated reports deal only with political events, especially wars and invasions. It is very difficult for social historians to find information about other aspects of the life

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<sup>24</sup> Wesendonk 1922, 225.

<sup>25</sup> Thompson 1961.

of the majority of people and about other social events. There is also no doubt that most of the very important events were never recorded, whether social, artistic, religious or even political. But there is equally no doubt that some of these events left traces in the oral tradition of the people and could be used as valuable source material. As a matter of fact, for the study of Near Eastern religious minorities, oral traditions are the most important source, as these religions are based on them.

In the past decade, the members of these communities have started writing about some aspects of their religion; such reports have been the source for recent studies by outside scholars. In the beginning the existing materials were so scarce that scholars could not use them critically. But now we are in a position to be more critical and careful about our materials. The first point to be taken into consideration is that these materials do not contain the whole truth, because as soon as they are written down they lose many of their important characteristics. The recorders of oral tradition are often also members of religious communities, and if it is a partly secret one, they have to keep political, religious and social considerations in mind, which necessarily modifies the content of their writings. Above all, they had to consider that their writings could fall into the hands of people who could use them against their community. Thus we see that individuals, like Nur 'Ali Elahi, who aim to subjugate their religious ideas to the dominant religion of the society, are more outspoken than others. Therefore, when we use these works we have to bear in mind numerous factors in order not to be misled.

Very recently some scholars have come to realize the extraordinary importance of oral tradition in the study of religious minorities in the Near East. Some years ago, through the efforts of Philip Kreyenbroek, a society for Iranian oral studies was founded in London. Some, like Martin van Bruinessen, have attempted to use these sources and have based their studies on the information they have collected. This method has the merit of being nearer to the original version, but has other defects.

While the information collected by objective scholars may be distorted to a lesser extent than that recorded by insiders, it is not entirely free of manipulation. As long as a scholar is an outsider, his

informants give him a version which does not completely correspond to the version of insiders. On the basis of the same logic, I have argued elsewhere that not every subject can be studied by any scholar. The biography of a scholar should be considered in the social sciences as a part of methodology, not only because it creates the opportunity to become an insider or part-insider, but also because it helps us to understand the phenomena described.<sup>26</sup>

Scientific objectivity is to a large extent a myth. For many years I lived in India and Germany, in many respects the way an insider does, or at least in close contact with insiders for most of the time. In spite of that, I do not claim to be an insider. For my research on “individualization in post-industrial societies”, I found that my long residence in Europe enabled me to observe certain processes in society which I was not able to see fifteen years ago when I was first confronted with this society. Having been brought up in a traditional society, I realized I could study individualization in a post-industrial society only from an outsider's point of view. Although I say "only", it is important to note that I can observe things which I would not have been able to see as an insider. I stand on the border separating the world of insiders and outsiders, i. e. I understand only a part of each side. It has therefore always been surprising to me to find scholars who are completely confident of having found the absolute truth about a variety of phenomena in societies which they have known only briefly. At any rate, a participant's observations<sup>27</sup> are only able to touch one side of reality. But even to reach this stage, many personal resources are required to be mobilized and much work done. Only a few days or weeks spent in a village in the Zagros mountains and a little knowledge of the language do not provide us with the background knowledge which could be considered better than the manipulated writings of an insider. I would consider the latter as being more reliable if critically used by a scholar who has the prerequisites for having insight into the life and thought patterns of the people; in other words, someone who is a good “non-participant observer”. Being an outsider can, under certain conditions, have

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<sup>26</sup> Hamzeh'ee, *Ethnizität*.

<sup>27</sup> For participant observation cf. Girtler 1984, 43 ff.; Lamnek 1989, 245 ff.; Dechmann 1974; Zelditch Jr. 1979, 115-136.

certain advantages which can be consciously used. This was the case in my study of the Persian-speaking Gypsies of India, during which I gathered resources using the methodological advantages of being both an outsider and an insider to make “non-participant observations” of some credibility.

The use of oral traditions is inevitable, not only for the study of religious minorities but also in the study of other religious thoughts and movements of the region, as I have already attempted to show in the case of Mazdaism and Sufism.<sup>28</sup> The use of oral tradition is as problematic as it is important. It seems, therefore, essential that the methods of collecting and interpreting oral traditions need to be considered perhaps even before serious research is started.

Here I would like to speak only about one of the most important features of oral tradition. As was pointed out earlier, after an oral tradition is written down it no longer completely corresponds to its original form. In the case of the religious literature of minorities, it should be taken into consideration that society is always subjected to strict control. It will also be manipulated, as already mentioned, when it is transferred orally to an outsider. But even if the above two weaknesses are avoided, a written oral tradition is different from an unwritten one. I have seen an interesting point in this respect in one of the writings of a well-known Russian Orientalist. In one of his articles he does not conceal his anger when he speaks about one of his experiences while collecting folktales in Khorasan.<sup>29</sup> There he found that a narrator gave various renderings of the same story. (My impression is that this scholar did not succeed in developing an insight into the life of the peoples which he had chosen for his studies.) We can imagine what a difficult task this story-teller must have had with the angry Russian, wielding paper and pen, insisting that he should narrate slowly and repeat where necessary and then jumping into the air if the narrator changed his sentences! How confused this simple nomad or peasant would have been, not knowing why his foreign guest was behaving like that. We have here a very clear example of what I may call the dynamic nature of oral traditions and the attempt to force it into the static form of written material. This

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<sup>28</sup> Hamzeh'ee 1992.

<sup>29</sup> Unfortunately, the source of this report cannot be traced at present.

dynamic nature has always been a characteristic part of artistic expression in Eastern cultures. A good example of this is to be found in Oriental music. Here too there are certain frames within which the musician moves in spite of this no two renderings of a piece are the same. We see these dynamics in the religious system of minorities in the Near East as well. Such a system is like a “Dastgâh” or “Moqâm”, which remains the same but within which the names, stories and interpretations may change.

*Das Märchen, fast immer in Prosa, erlaubt dem Erzähler, sich an der Ausgestaltung und Wiedergabe des Textes stark zu beteiligen. Er wählt es aus, macht es nach seinem Geschmack oder nach Geschmack der Gesellschaft oder seiner eigenen Beziehung zu bestimmten Gesellschaftsklassen zurecht.<sup>30</sup>*

Therefore, in the collection and interpretation of oral religious stories their dynamic nature should be taken into account at all times, while being simultaneously aware of the fact that this dynamism exists only within a constant religious system.

## AUTHENTICITY OF ORAL TRADITION

It seems necessary to conclude this methodological discussion with some comments on authenticity of oral literature for the study of religious minorities in the Near East. A scholar may ask himself whether it is worth using the long and complicated procedures of oral literature. I suppose a dynamic oral religious tradition is always authentic, but the use of it depends on the subject of the study and the capability of the researchers to understand and interpret the traditions and their contexts. In yet another article I have given some examples showing the stubborn persistence of religious ideas in oral tradition.

Philip Kreyenbrock has recently picked up the interesting case of a Lori peasant who learned English from his master, an English

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<sup>30</sup> Cejpek 1959, 509.



businessman in Tehran.<sup>31</sup> The servant wrote a story in English which had been narrated to him by his father. It surprised the well-known religio-scientist Zaehner<sup>32</sup>, as it turned out to be a Mazdaistic history of creation. I have elsewhere presented another example of the unmatched value of oral tradition by describing a Yâresân religious story which has its analogy in a Hindu religious myth and is probably of Mazdaistic origin.<sup>33</sup>

I suppose there is no need to provide proof of the authenticity of oral tradition. But if we are aware of the extent and speed at which they are being lost, these examples give us an idea of what kind of irreplaceable material will disappear in the near future. This is especially tragic for scholars engaged in the study of Middle Eastern religions who are still preparing to take the first step in interdisciplinary research in this field.

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<sup>31</sup> Kreyenbroek 1992.

<sup>32</sup> Zaehner, "Zoroastrian Survival"; Zaehner 1967.

<sup>33</sup> *Hamzeh'ee, Authentizität*.

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