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WHAT DOES FACEBOOK MEAN FOR THE YĀRSĀNI¹ PEOPLE?

ABSTRACT

Yārsān² is a syncretic ethnic-religious belief of Indo-Iranian origin established by Sultan Sahak in western Iran in the late 14th century. Over three million Yārsānis are estimated to reside in Iran and others inhabit regions in northern Iraq. Most Yārsānis are Kurd and live in, or originate from, Iran and view the Yārsāni territory as being part of Iran. Few studies have been undertaken to explore how the Kurdish diaspora uses new social media technologies. In this article we look at the Internet as a virtual network in which the Yārsāni, in Iran, and diaspora meet. We also consider the Internet as a tool for making offline assignments. Internet and past research confirms that the people can meet online is indeed a real phenomenon, especially in the case of diaspora communities. In this article I reflect upon my own use of the Internet in my research on Yārsāni communities in different countries, suggesting that Facebook has made it possible to reach out to and work with a

¹Yarsanis in Iraq are called Kake-i. and in Iran as Ahl-e-Haqq, Ali-Allahi

²Yarsanis in Iran are also known as Ahl-e-Haqq, or Ali-Allahi, and in Iraq they are called Kake-i. Most Yarsanis live in Hooraman, the Kermanshah Province of Iranian Kurdistan.

wider variety of Yārsani people than ever before. I applied visual analysis methods that describe how an object and its representation are linked indexically in a photograph. This cultural research applies anthropological methods to Yārsani Facebook by using visual research methods and interview with Yārsani in Sweden. I am using available data on some users' interactions with digital media tools that record the interaction and details of individuals' exchanges. Moreover, Yārsanire-appropriation in Facebook, constructing communication and freedom among them.

KEYWORDS

Yārsani, Facebook, Internet, ethnography, religion

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INTRODUCTION

Many followers of Yārsān, known as Yārsānis or Yāris, identify ethnically as Kurds. Over three million Yārsānis are estimated to reside in Iran and others inhabit regions in northern Iraq. Most Yārsānis live in, or originate from, Iran and view the Yārsāni territory as being part of Iran. Forced emigration has dispersed the Yarsani population throughout the world, particularly to Europe and Canada. In Iran, the growing dominance of Islam at the time of their faith's conception caused adherents of Yārsān to isolate them from society and migrate to the mountainous areas of what is now Iranian Kurdistan. This was done to preserve the Yārsān religion and protect the Yārsāni population from Iran's Islamic government and Muslim population. Traditionally, the Yārsāni religion has been shrouded in secrecy and has depended on oral communication of religious principles because of the oppressive conditions in which they have been living for centuries (Hosseini,2017) The emergence and revival of the Yārsān religion answers questions, opens topics, and amends various opinions regarding the religion; in the past Yārsānis were prevented from publically speaking about their religion, but today, social media provides this opportunity. The Yārsān religion, in general, and Yārsānis' online activities, in particular, have been inadequately represented through previous research into new media. I intend to shed light on the online activities of this religious community and their presence in social media, and examine how members of the Yārsāni community use the Internet as a means to share their ideas about religious beliefs, often through pictures. I will also evaluate the role of Yārsānis as portrayed through the criteria by which their communities and special practices are imagined online.

The Yārsanis's use of Facebook in different countries is illustrative of the fact that cyberspace is a virtual space for connection among individuals who are otherwise diasporic and transnational. Facebook research corroborates that online identity building creates group solidarity, and this is true for the Yārsani minority. As the most widespread and famous social network, an unprecedented number of families and young people use Facebook for communication and entertainment. Facebook's importance has prompted many researchers to undertake various studies about its use. (Farquhar,2009,shanyang and Et al. 2008, Noelle J. Hum and Et al.2011, Wilson and Et al2012)

Religious ethnic groups, including Yārsanis, have created various Facebook pages to maintain their active presence in cyberspace. They use this media outlet to enliven their customs and traditions, and to play their historical role to survive their religion³. Research on Yārsānis in cyberspace reveals why Facebook is important for Yārsāni communities around the world, especially for those living as an oppressed minority in Iran. Approaches of virtual ethnography have shown that Yārsānis had no previous access to media with which they could express cultural or religious beliefs. Now, Facebook and the internet help Yārsānis to broadcast news and beliefs. This has had important effects on how Yārsānis interact with outsiders and each other. They use media outlets to enliven their customs and traditions and to play their historical role of ensuring the survival of their religion. By taking advantage of media and by portraying themselves in cyberspace through the use of modern technology, Yārsanis seek to express their objections to a dominant religious society. This study considers Yārsani Facebook users, either living in Iran or other countries, as well as non-Yārsani users who are members of Yarsani Facebook pages and groups such as Dallahoo⁴ that contain more than 9000 members, Facebook has enabled new research that would be impossible otherwise.

Yārsani access to cyberspace has given them a platform for identity-making, which, in turn, has enabled them to challenge the existing geographic, political and cultural constraints in Turkey, Iraq, and Iran. The Yārsani in Iran have to live with the threat of discrimination and even violence, on the internet, self-identification as Yārsani is practiced much more freely. The rise of a public Yārsani identity within Iran and in the diaspora are closely interconnected. The experience of persecution and of persistent libel and prejudice on the part of the Muslim Shia majority in Iran forced the Yārsani to practice in secret. The Yārsani have experienced problems on Facebook such as disagreement among Yarsani groups and various tribes⁵, too, so the creation of virtual communities has not been free of negative consequences.

The majority of Yārsani live in Iran, and most of the material hosted on Yārsani websites refers to that country. In general, the websites represent Yārsanism as a cultural or religious tradition that is tightly attached to the spatial, historical and cultural context of Iran. Many Yārsani Facebook pages intend to introduce Yārsanism and provide basic information. Organizational websites also have the task of providing more in depth informa-

³Personal communication,12 August, 2014

⁴ Or Dallahu is a village in Kermanshah Province in west of Iran. The village is home to a population with a Kurd majority who share Yārsani beliefs. Their main places of pilgrimage are located in the Dallahoo Mountains. For all Ahl-e Haqq this area is what Mecca is for the Muslims.(Minorisky, quoted in Bruinssen 1992:125)

tion about Yārsanism. Most of the websites have a typical textual format. Some pages contain images, frequently pictures of their shrines in Kurdistan, Iran or their religious manuscripts. The content of the sites displays what the author considers important elements of the Yārsani tradition. Most of these pages refer to *Dallahoo* as the central location for reminiscing about their religion and rituals around the world. I posed my questions to Yārsani on this website asking about their members around the world and their focus on representing their community.

Yārsani people illustrate their own culture, voice their identity, oppose dominant cultural discourse, provide alternative cultural resources and reconstruct their distinctiveness through their representations. They create an imagined community that is broadly supported and supporting. Yārsani build their imagined community through Facebook activity and offer suggestions about opportunities for other Yārsani to get involved in propagation of their religious beliefs. I argue, therefore, that the greatest freedom of expression available to the Yārsani is online.

Facebook is utilized as a site of transmission for an “imagined community”, an indicative system of representation and a statement of ethnic-identity. Its users construct and reconstruct their conception of Yārsani identity through cyber-communication. These imagined communities form through the interaction of groups and rest on a sense of belonging among users.

This research stems from the work of Benedict Anderson (1991) who developed a theoretical framework of communication technologies in the formation of “imagined communities”. New communication technology such as Facebook has made the formation of imagined communities among people living far away and without face-to-face interaction possible. The presence of a minority website functions in the same way as Anderson’s imagined community. The Kurdish imagined community in Facebook and the sense of belonging which the Yārsani have cultivated there, has many resemblances to that of Benedict Anderson’s theory (Anderson, 1991: 224)

Hall’s theories (1997:6) of representation proposes that there is a direct and transparent relationship of imitation or reflection between words and objects that induce thought and language and how representation works in the production of meaning. Here is Hall’s summary:

Re-presentation into three theories:

1. Reflective: where the language reflects a meaning, which already exists in the world of objects people and events.

⁵ Sultan Sahak established seven families or “tribes” in the “name of truth” for future generations of Yārsani followers to, at any time have “Dalil” and “Pir” for guidance. The seven families established during the time of Sultan were Shah Ebrahim, Baba Yadegar, Ali Qalandar, Khamush, Mir Sur, Seyyed Mosaffa, and Hajji Babu Isa. The five families established after Sultan Sahak are Atesh Bag, Baba Heydar, Zolnour, Shah Hayas, and Hajj Nematollah (Mir-Hosseini 1994a; Hamzei’ii 1999; Bruinessen 2009). They are also called tayfe, “the family.” (Bruinessen 2009: 61).

2. Intentional: where language expresses the speaker's personal intended meaning.

3. Constructionist: where meaning is constructed in and through language. Hall (1997) mentions how language is "central to meaning and culture and culture and has always been regarded as the key repository of cultural values and meanings, language works through representation, and how Meaning gives us a sense of our own identity, of who we are and with whom we 'belong' - so it is tied up with questions of how culture is used to rank out and maintain identity within and difference between groups" (ibid).

Furthermore, this study considers Facebook as a virtual society in which members treat themselves as citizens of an international virtual community. It also explores if and how Facebook has an impact on Yārsanis in rebuilding and strengthening their ethnic identity, as its members try to express their cultural and intellectual identities, which is not always possible in real society. Taking advantage of imagined communities across cyberspace, this research tries to shed more light on the subject. In order to achieve this, I decided to gather information about the Yārsān community and to observe Facebook activity. In this research, I employed the ideas of Hall, mentioned above, to find out how Yārsani use language or images implicate their beliefs and reconstructing their identity in Facebook.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

During this research, I was both an outsider and an insider, depending on my role. I participated as an observer, from the outside, as a non-Yārsani, and on the insider as a social media user, active on Facebook. Yārsāni support communities on the Internet, are constructed in a virtual space in which Yārsānis meet and interact regarding events in the real world. Studying data through virtual fieldwork, however, is one-dimensional. To fully study the communities in all their complexity, fieldwork requires integrated online such as observation (interviews), and offline methodologies of qualitative data-gathering that complement each other. Content analysis was employed as a technique to analyze the interview material and the relationship between the researcher and the research participants. This research chiefly employed qualitative methods using both a virtual ethnographic approach online as well as personal interviews during my offline fieldwork. My Yārsani friend introduced me

to other individuals that were Yārsani, and my first questions were: How important is using Facebook for Yārsani? Do they use Facebook to play with their identities? Why don't they speak about such beliefs in their society?

Chris Mann and Fiona Stewart's *Internet Communication and Qualitative Research* was useful for online research and for adhering to established methodologies for studies conducted on the internet. (2000) Mann and Stewart have employed online methods, including interviews, observational techniques, participant observation, document collection and qualitative and quantitative methods. Where appropriate, I applied Marcus Bank's visual analysis methods that describe how an object and its representation are linked indexically in a photograph with visual representations of sacred places – shrines, temples, mosques – together with chromolithographs of divinities and other sacred persons. (Bank 2001: 55) In most of these cases, the materiality of the image is marked, sometimes quite literally.

Elizabeth Edwards's *Photographs and Sounds of History* has provided a valuable approach for analyzing photo the relationships between people and images. (Edwards 2006) According to her research, photography comprises not only images but also social objects and “the power of those social objects is integrally entangled with the nature of photography itself.” (Edwards 2006: 27) She explained that photographs are visual objects in sets of relationships that are made meaningful through different forms of apprehension. Bank (2001) stated that the “researcher must ask themselves questions to elucidate the external narrative for instance why does this image exist? Who created it? What is its biography? As well as considering the internal narrative (what is this image of?).” (Bank 2001: 114) With grounded reading of the internal narrative, an analysis can be made, not only covering a description of the image's superficial content, but also the basis upon which that reading is founded.

Online communities has given rise to what Hine (2000) has termed “virtual ethnography.” “virtual communities are computer mediated group[s]”(1995:1) whose relationships are formed and maintained in a conceptual space where “words, human relationships, data, wealth, and power are manifested by people using computer-mediated communication technology”(Rheingold ,1993:5)

My ethnographic work was not limited to observing participants online. I used several methods to collect a wide range of data. I carried out qualitative research utilizing questionnaires, semi-structured interviews.

It is important to note that, for methodological purposes, I did not separate offline and online data: offline data such as social interactions in person are intrinsically related to online data. According to Miller and Slater (2000), the two are inextricably woven together. Therefore, using qualitative content analysis, I analyzed the two datasets as distinct yet inseparable and interrelated subsets. Concretely, I took interviews and carried out participant observation on the pages of *Dallahoo*. At a more advanced stage of the research, I made the connection between the virtual field and the real field through a transition from online data-gathering methods to offline data collection structured around 12 online interviews with Yarsani. Based on the observation and content analysis, the offline interview provided me with a means to attain information about a particular person and the wider social-cultural context in which the interviewees live. In the interview setting, subjects acted both as respondents who described their personal experiences, outlooks, and position within the virtual support community, and as informants when they described themselves in general and their activity on the Internet.

Many religious groups participate in social and theological discussions on Facebook. However, many Yarsani groups fear infiltration into their safe, private virtual environments and entrapment by an oppressive government. They remain restricted and secretive as a result. Facebook groups generally provide a free environment for community discussions, as opposed to official organizational websites. The websites of Iranian Yarsani organizations are apolitical and strictly community-focused, thereby discouraging inappropriate government attention. Facebook groups are far more stimulating in their content. This is because social network sites are semi-private spaces in which community members can explicate the injustices they experience without subjecting public organizations to persecution and intimidation from state authorities. Online platforms have opened spaces for marginalized and recessive groups to unify and communicate. I have found these capacities to be particularly important for at-risk groups, who are often excluded from occupations in the public domain. However the government intends to filter and control online spaces, it is eventually incapable of controlling the parameters of online debate. Online policies have been able to provide comfortable, sensible recovery in the lives of persecuted individuals who wish to display their shrine and share their ideas and identities.

Just as it facilitates Yārsānis to talk about their beliefs and themselves, technology has driven massive improvements in the lives of millions belonging to Iranian minority communities.

Many societal risks that these communities face spill over into online spaces. Although social media platforms provide space for alternative discourse, they are also a channel for the propagation of hegemonic, conservative ideologies. Vulnerable minorities in these spaces can also be verbally abused, or tracked and trapped by authorities. While the future of cyber communities in Iran is difficult to predict, battles between the government and minority groups will be increasingly fought online. For Iran's religious minority communities, the internet exists as a space for free expression that is unique in Iranian society. The case of religious conservatives provides an interesting point of contrast. The establishment's pressure to introduce regime supporters on the web demonstrates the growing centrality of the Internet as a public meeting place in modern Iran. Making use of data gathering online and offline enabled me to collect comprehensive information from various realms, including the sites, and to assemble a complex ethnography.

The study of the Yārsāni communities that keep their beliefs and cultural practices in secret, and have tried to hide their identity throughout history, provided me with an important perspective on the expression of emotions on the Internet. Whilst maintaining all the foregoing in mind, I turn to my study of specific issues, such as identity-making and re-presentation of Yārsāni on Facebook. The research sought to generate a range of qualitative data that would illuminate media communication in relation to individuals' reproduction of individual identities.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Literature on minority ethnic communities' production and consumption of media has been emerging in recent decades (Husband, 1994; Gillespie, 1995; Cottle, 1997.) Kurdish activity online has been studied by scholars, for instance Sokefold in his research on the Alevi community in cyberspace has examined the diaspora community and Alevi of Turkey. In cyberspace they stay connected in the virtual place where they can rebuild old networks or re-imagine themselves online – as they are integrated into society in a physical space in Turkey. (2002:112).

If its significance was in any doubt, some scholars believe the Internet is the epicenter of contemporary Kurdish culture. Regarding the recent renaissance of Kurdish culture and language, Alini writes: “the Kurdistan on the ground has been supplemented with the Kurdistan of the airwaves and in cyberspace, and much of the Kurdish nationalist struggle is going on in the latter” (2004:200). Candan stated that digital communication of the 21st century mirrors the function and effects of the media in the 18th, 19th, and partly in the 20th century. The acceleration of diffusion and difficulty for state institutions to control the flow of media to immigrant communities diffused around the world has only hastened this trend. (2008:127). Khalid Khayati’s (2008) publication, “From Victim Diaspora to Trans-border Citizenship,” states that:

Kurdish people in recent years have built an online presence through personal communication, and were active in political and cultural activity via multiple websites, such as Kurdish News and Kurdish Media. In other words, a large number of websites offer proof of how the Kurdish people (including the Kurdish diaspora) generally participate in online activity (2008:36). In his research on “Kurdish Identity, Discourse, and New Media”, Sheyholislami provides numerous examples of how the Kurdish diaspora has had difficulties using the Internet for political and cultural activities in the 2000s (Sheyholislami, 2011:90).

Virtual places are incredibly important to diasporic communities. Users have said (Jacob, 2013:67) “Facebook is my second home”: The participants therefore share various items on Facebook to reconnect the ties and reinforce their national identity. They consider it an important part for expressing identities and increasing the self-possession and the pride because of the oppression in their homeland. These symbols and pictures they share on Facebook are used to rebuild their national and ethnic identity.” (Jacob,2013: 32). Hassanpour’s study of media in the Kurdish diaspora emphatically does not support post structural claims about a radical shift in the exercise of state power, or an intercultural Kurdish liberation. He provides a rich analysis of Med TV, the first Kurdish satellite TV station, suggesting it did indeed contribute to a first-ever articulation of pan-Kurdish dialogue and dissent, which undermined Turkish rule, and provoke reprisals. He discloses how the Turkish embassy mobilized the Kurds in England to rail against Med TV’s terrorism or hate propaganda. By making extensive use

of the diaspora and diasporic media opportunities in an interstate world order, Hassanpour argues that the Kurds were able to react swiftly in protest, but failed in their efforts to achieve statehood.(2003) According to Georgiou the internet has allowed most of diasporic communities to discover and rediscover shared imagination and commonality, as well as developing diasporic cultures of mediated, transnational and partly free from state control communication .(2002:5 cited in Kissau and Hunger,2010,p.261)

Nevertheless, none of the aforementioned works discuss the particular role that the Internet plays for the Yārsanis present on Facebook. The following section will discuss this community in relation to cyber-ethnography.

I found that that there are many Yārsani users on Facebook. When I started to study the Yārsani community online, I began utilizing Facebook as an educational tool, by searching different keywords, such as *Yārsani*, *Dalahoo*, and *Kake-i*, finding many relevant pictures and pages. These pages included news about global events relevant for religious minority and Kurdish people as well as interpretations of Yārsani religious manuscripts.

I began to consider the function of narrative and historical contexts in the production of all Facebook pages. It became obvious that the Internet, far from being a simple receptacle of information, was itself a cyberspace with different structure. The Internet is often discussed in terms of its 'global' reach and its frontiers, but it is important to remember that when individuals log-on they do so as real people in actual locations for specific purposes. The use of Facebook is thus partly the product of social context.

USING THE INTERNET TO STUDY YĀRSANI BELIEFS

In this work, I have been absent, acting as a voyeur – observing, recording and organizing information to make it flow smoothly. As a religious minority, Yārsanis' perceptions of Facebook are sometimes different from their daily expectations of other Internet websites, because they have discuss and share religious activity via online

I intend to explain the meaning Facebook holds for the Yārsani people in a new context, its role in the formation of cultural identity, and how I was allowed to participate in their virtual society.

In so doing, I am following in the footsteps Hamzeh'ee (1990), Bruinssen (2014, 1995), and Mir-Hosseini (1994a, b), whose recent work on the Yārsani people has attempted to open up a space within Yārsani studies and to reflect

upon their roles as researchers in the socio-religious milieu. These studies about Yārsani helped demonstrate that communication and information about Yārsani ideas and beliefs is not easy to acquire, as one cannot speak to them without having been introduced. Even on Facebook, if someone poses a question without introducing him/herself, the question will be left completely unanswered or will only be superficially answered.

Working with the Internet is completely different from working with print or other texts. Studying the Yārsani people's culture on the web represents a virtual journey that has physical as well as mental repercussions. First, there is the shift from Persian language to Kurdish language because Yarsani mostly write in Kurdish and therefore can be more themselves. There is also a shift away from a restrictive environment where religious minorities, especially Yarsani, are hardly mentioned due to social dominance in homeland.

An analysis of these Facebook pages would undoubtedly prove useful and I have offered some observations in my earlier work. However, in this research, I will reflect on how the ethnographer can participate in this enormous website full of information by joining offline and personal and engaging with users through personal ads. I am particularly interested in what way or manner the ethnographer can participate, despite much discussion on the fluidity of Facebook identities and the scope that virtual interactions give for performativity. New technology has facilitated communication between the Kurds which comprise a diaspora and those residing in homeland. Watts notes that diaspora Kurds have played a significant role in the establishment of a "Kurdish cyberspace" (2004a: 131).

Yārsani online culture relates to offline life, but also constitutes an independent world. It is far more accessible than connections attempted in the field – particularly for international observers and participants. It is possible for anyone with Internet access to develop online relationships with self-identified Yārsanis and to learn a great deal about Yārsani life without ever going homeland Facebook ethnography entails learning how to live and describe events over time. Just a one-hour Facebook search provides us with a great deal of information, because finding and spending time with Yārsani on a virtual page is a new experience. Facebook provides a number of easy ways to communicate with others; for instance, one can be a member of this social network through sending a request, or just by clicking the 'Like' button.

I started my work by communicating with an Yārsani friend through Facebook. I expected difficulties receiving answers or acceptance within the online community as I did not communicate in the Kurdish language, so I enquired with a colleague in order to find the best approach. I was strongly advised not to create a fake account which could cause offence. As mentioned before, Facebook provided me with many facilities to study and research, as I became familiar with pages belonging to Yārsani. Ethnography on Facebook is effective because the community is active. Most Yārsani I know check their pages and participate in discussions every day. In other words, Facebook has become a place to convene for this religious minority. Although users do not know each other and have perhaps never seen each other in person, they are actively in touch and consider themselves members of a community. In his article “Bulgarians,” Luchev considers that:

The textual virtual communities appeared as early as in the middle of the 17th century. Such an expansion of the concept of a virtual community entails analogies with the imagined communities of B. Anderson within the context of the postmodern ethnographic understanding about the virtual communities (Luchev, 2006:82). As Crichton and Kinash state, virtual activity involves people in activity in cyberspace, and which places mutually-engaged users and researchers in conversation (2003:2).

It is the first time in Yārsani society that its followers can interact through Facebook. The Internet has succeeded in providing a virtual space for this religious minority, through which users from the four corners of the world can convene, even those from small towns and villages in *Hawraman* in Iranian Kurdistan. They can send comments to one another without strangers seeing them.

It was much easier to gain access to information about Yārsani people in late 2012 than it was in late 2014, when I first encountered the Yārsani’s Facebook pages. Castel 1996 (quoted in khayati),” the world becomes integrated through far-reaching global networks of instrumentality, as the distinctive social and political trend of the 1990s gives birth to the construction of social action and politics around primary identities, ascribed, rooted in history and geography ” (khayati,2008:36) the extent to which Yarsani beliefs have spread on the Internet is remarkable. Yarsani’s online culture relates to offline life, but also comprises its independent world.

It is far more accessible than connections attempted in the field – particularly for international observers and participants. Much of this interaction takes place in Kurdish or Persian territories, although I have come across different names and places on Yarsani pages dedicated to Kurdistan, for example, *Dallahoo*, and Yārsan. Today, there are many Yārsani in the world who are active on Internet networks, expressing ideas that would otherwise be rejected or repressed in the offline world.

WHAT IS THE MEANING OF FACEBOOK FOR YĀRSANI'S INTERNET USERS?

There were highly contrasting answers of why Yarsani use Facebook. One Facebook user advised me to pose my question on a forum page, focused on discussions and surveys. Unfortunately, due to my being non-Kurdish and that I did not write in Kurdish, users did not answer me. I finally found E.Z., a member of the Facebook page *Dallahoo*, who promised to ask my question. The question was posted to the page and initially received offensive answers. As a non-Yarsani person, I encountered difficulty when approaching Yarsani people online. Even when messaged privately, I received resistance and distrust.

On most Yārsani Facebook pages that are in Kurdish, there are personal boards divided into sections for Yārsani people living in Iran, living outside of Iran, and others who are not Yārsani. As mentioned above, replying as a friend to other people did not work, since many users felt that my role as a researcher would cause problems. It is possible that they did not answer out of fear. However, I was aware that not everyone who submitted a post on the page had a goal and that some of them submit posts and unrelated pictures only to have more 'Likes.'

Facebook users are divided into several groups: users who are active in posting useful materials, users who only use Facebook as a source of entertainment, and users who do not know how to use Facebook pages. Each of these kinds of users interpret personal and private questions and messages differently.

"REVEALING THEIR IDENTITY"

Dealing with other views regarding the role of Facebook, one of the users said that finding so many idle people in a certain place is difficult. Thirteen responses, such as the ones below, were common:

The interesting thing that attracted my attention was that one of the users started to type in Kurdish, instead of Farsi. Informant A commented:

رەگەئە ئێهە! زێرەب ادین مکی پەلەج لێ ئێهە نەبە و
نەبە ئێهە نەبە ئێهە نەبە ئێهە نەبە ئێهە نەبە
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Translation: “It is interesting question in my idea, do not look for religion, but look for your real Kurdish identity and type your comments in Kurdish.”

Language is considered as an identity marker. Language is the cultural border running between Yārsani and non-Yārsani. Language is a foundation of Kurdish nationalism. Ethnicity is located in the basis of identity theory and indicated with color, race, language, and mode of living. (Phukon,2002) As Sheyholislami points out:

Language is of the most important ingredients of national identity. It is not only one of the most significant indices of collective identity but also one of the principle means of structuring and reproduction that identity (2010:290)... [The] Internet revolution made it possible to communicate in writing in completely new ways, and written communication can now take place in real time such as through social media platforms (Ibid.).

Language is used to construct greater unity between the Kurds so they can think as one people. It connects the Kurds directly with their history, culture, and, especially, identity. Facebook groups, for instance, have played an important role for the Kurds because they are able to create different forums about different topics to express themselves. Groups sponsor and support discussions in the Kurdish language, leading to greater mutual understanding among Kurdish participants. In this way, they keep each other abreast of the issues and topics which they find important.

Informant B was unsatisfied with the answers. He said: “You can go and use Facebook in a better and more useful manner. We didn’t have internet before, and now we want to show our selves as Yārsani to others.” This supports the contentions of Farquhar, who stated that Facebook is a place “to showcase identity, and the important symbols in identity performances” (2009:208)

Informant C., a journalist from Finland, wrote:

“We should take advantage of opportunities. Yārsani people did not already access any source to express their opinions, but now Facebook and the Internet help us broadcast our news. We are suffering from lacking information dissemination databases, so we failed to say what we deserved”

As Sheyholislami’s stressed in “Kurdish Identity Discourse and New Media,” new communication technologies are a great opportunity for Kurds to express their ethnic- identity and battle the repression and persecution they have faced.

Another user from Norway, explained the significance of Facebook:

“Facebook has become a hobby. Only one percent of Yārsanis use it to learn more about their rituals and rules, while 99% of Yārsani only see Facebook as a place to waste their time. As seen here, most comments are posted to gain more ‘Likes’ and people use any trick to achieve more ‘Likes’ rather than searching for discussions about *Kalam* and religious manuscripts of Yārsan”.

Dahlstedt and Khayati believes that “the growing use of Internet among the Kurds is derived mainly from initiatives taken by many dedicated individuals who live in different western states” (2014:61).

However, the multiplicity of the actors involved in how Yārsan lives points to how Yārsani politics have been intertwined with local, regional, national, and global modes of imagining and belonging to the Yārsani world in turbulent post-times.

“FREEDOM TO TALK”

Some users they talk about Internet censorship in Iran as following

Informant D expressed dissatisfaction with my question and answered, “Do you want censorship here, too? We have already been censored in life within the Islamic republic of Iran.”

according to that Hajineja (2013) in her research on Use of Facebook in Iran, “Access to the Facebook website since the 2009 election onwards has been blocked and its usage is considered as illegal in Iran. Its use might be considered as a ‘cultural crime” (3).

It seemed that some users see the Internet as a good place to spend their time. As one user answered informant E, however, it was “because you can’t find this many unemployed people all together.”

Informant E's expression mentions that individuals have more free time and using Facebook for waste their time. According to Hall, representation means using language to say something meaningful, and is the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture via language, signs and image, which stand for or represent things (1997:15).

One of the other users echoed Hall's theoretical view with a practice goal. The user said that his "aim is to learn more and build relations with others."

According to his description of using Facebook, Sokefeld (on his research on Alevism online) asserts, "many communities in real life are constituted less by interaction than by imagination, what we understand and represent as belonging to many more community than face-to-face relationship" (2002:107)

Informant F a user said: "I think Facebook or any other virtual network has provided a good condition for saying your comments and critiques, so it is better for Yārsani to use them to enhance their information and removing their doubts."

Informant F's implication suggests that Facebook provides them opportunities to reveal their beliefs by using their language and talking about their rituals. Zhang (2002) shows that "how history, culture, customs, language symbols provide rich resources for constructing the imagined community" (183).

Facebook has become a major platform for Yārsānis. As Paula Uimonen quoted from Edward L. Schieffelin, "performance can be viewed as the expressive edge of practice or contingent self-presentation, the power of which lies in its interactivity, the relationship between performers and audiences for Yarsani website." (Schieffelin 1998: 200; found in Uimonen 2013: 122)

Zhao writes on this process of identity establishment (Suler, 2002):

Facebook encounters are mediated and the technological mediation can create a sense of freedom that encourages the limited expression of some type of "hidden selves" that are commonly seen in anonymous online environments. We did come across identity claims on Facebook that might be construed as outside or marginal to dominant social norms. (P:1829)

Informant G preferred to answer my question by posting an incomplete picture, maybe due to fear of posting cleric picture online, informant try to hide cleric face with posting half of his face.

FIGURE 1: FACEBOOK
YARSANI PAGE, CLERIC
IN IRAN



After his reflection on the question, he pointed to the position of the Yārsāni under repression with a picture of cleric man in Iran ,that written” everything is banned under Islamic rule, like as coming to Facebook .. Facebook user display this image instead of write his idea,his image has irony to the question of why Yārsāni using Facebook,user’saim is not answer the question.

Edwards (2006) also expressed that materiality encompasses sets of relationships between photographs, morality and sensory register of photographs beyond the visual. These shared images exhibit that the digital and especially the online world have greatly expanded the scope of visual, as well as material, culture studies. Technologies are constantly providing new ways to enhance imagination from immateriality, so that a material-culture perspective becomes ever more important in the ways that objects and technologies make unclear their own role in our socialization.(Miller/Horst 2012: 26-28) Hall, in visual culture remarked on relation between the viewer and what is viewed, it is concerned with the cultural practices of looking and seeing, it takes as its point of departure the image, which stands at the center of visual culture, and its capacity to function as a sign or text which constitutes and produces meaning, its visual culture is composed of a system of representation, using visual languages and modes of representations to set meaning in place and meaning of the image, for all images are multi-vocal and are always capable of bearing more than one interpretation.(Hall,1999,p.306). Informant G posted another picture, too:



FIGURE 2: FACEBOOK
 YĀRSANI PAGE. CLERIC IN
 IRAN

Use means considering the ban on using Facebook in Iran, still leather of Iran permit people to use internet, so this image is in answer to question of why Yārsani use Facebook. The Internet provides the Yarsani with a new context for identity building. The pictures above mean something entirely different in the context of Yarsani versus Iranian culture and the internet allows minorities like the Kurdish Yarsani to engage in the process of determining the meaning of things in contexts that would otherwise go unseen and unrecognized.

As Khosrawi and Graham (2012) assert “for many Iranian, especially women and members of a number of minority groups, even limited to the Internet marks a significant improvement on their previous situation in Iran like as Kurds, Armenian, and Jews” (229)

Anything that expresses or is associated with a message is considered language. Language is not only verbal, but also visual and emotional. Language is a semiotic system, a cultural object. Meaning is never fixed and changes in new contexts (Hall, 1997).

“USING FACEBOOK AS SOCIAL COMMUNICATION”

Tacchi explained that most marginalized or excluded groups need to be actively and creatively engaged in ways that suit their needs and circumstances. (Tacchi 2012: 230). Uimonen (2013), in research about visual identity on Facebook, elucidated that on “... Facebook, relationships are increasingly communicated through images,

thus rendering the interactive reflexivity of performance rather visible.” (Uimonen 2013: 122)

Informant H. called Facebook a social page and stated his doubts about the intent of the question. He asked me to reveal my intention and goal, then he said, “It is a page to broadcast news, rather than a training page. If your intention is negative, please give up. If you have religious questions, please address them privately to our friends who are expert in *Kalām*.”

Another user, informant I., referred to Facebook as a widespread media source on which numerous users are active. He said,

I spent many hours of my life in Facebook, so for me Facebook can play a significant role in the structure of people’s spirits, especially those who has been addicted to the virtual world. Furthermore, the Internet has also made a variety of people and identities more widely available.

As Miller and Slater point out, the internet offers “expansive potential... the encounter with the expansive connections and possibilities of the Internet may allow one to envisage a quite novel vision of what one could be” (2000: 11).

One of user said, “Facebook is a social media in which users can easily voice their viewpoints.”

Another user, Informant J, talked about his problems caused by being a minority in the city where he was a student. According to him, “Most people do not even know what Yarsani means. When I say I am ‘Kurd,’ they ask if I am Sunni or Shia.” Out of fear of consequences, he prefers to hide his real beliefs. He thinks that the Yarsani faith ought to introduced to all people in the world.

It is important to note that by creating new platforms for communication and community outreach, the internet has facilitated interaction between members of marginalized communities. These interactions are of particular interest here, as they demonstrate new means for ethno-national groups to join in the freedom struggle (Santianni, 2003).

Another user, informant K, said, “Facebook has many positive aspects.”

According to, Shanyang (et al.) research, discovered that individuals online “play-act” at being another person or act out their underlying” negative impulses” in the on-line world (2008,P: 1817).

As Hine states (Wolf,1992:128) fieldwork is important and necessary to the Ethnographer, and, “without

it, the ethnographer would not encounter the context, the smells, sounds, sights, emotional tensions, [and] feel of the culture” (Hine,2000,46).

HOW THE YARSANI COMMUNITINY IN DIASPORA USE FACEBOOK

Yarsani support communities on the internet are constructed in a virtual space in which Yarsani meet and interact in relation to events in the real world. In my interviews with members of the Yārsan community in diaspora I encountered different ideas about the use of Facebook. One of my interviewees, informant L., had the following to say:

Facebook is a mass communication media in the virtual world, and plays an important role in the relationships between Yārsani. It is also the most widely used communication and this Facebook plays a key role in the way Yārsanis are introduced to each other and stay in contact afterward.

Considering the above sentence from one informant, it is made clear how important Facebook is for the Yārsani Diaspora. This provides his idea that Facebook has an important role for people living in Diaspora.

Scholars have noted the power of the internet for groups scattered transitionally. Verhulst claims that electronic communication flows lead to a more immediate, less embedded, more intense and more effective form of transnational bonding (1999:30).

A second-generation Yārsani informant M. said,

Since 2008, because there is so much talk about Yārsan in media, we’ve become more interested in our beliefs. Media have made our life different. I can easily search for information about our religion on the internet, and I can explain it and refer other people to it when they want to know about our religion. In school, when the teacher of my daughter ask me about Yārsan, I show her simply by writing Yārsan into Google.

The statement above shows how the Internet provides an opportunity for Yārsani to reveal their identity in cyberspace. The Yārsan no longer must remain a secret community, because they can express and share their ethnic-identity online. Informant N. answered with a poem critical of Yārsani

نزهار تسدب ی غیت نداد نتخوم آ نف و ملع ار رهگدب
ار سکان ملع دی آ هب تس م یگن ز فک رد نداد غیت
تسدب

امرس نالقاع میب ز و دنتسدش رورس ناقمحا
میلگردهدی شک

“Some of the people in Facebook don’t have knowledge about Yārsan, and give out incorrect information about Yarsan, and some of them follow their tribes, and those people know more prefer to remain silent.”⁶

Informant N. mentions how the internet provides freedom for this marginalized community and causes everybody to come to Facebook and he wants to shows his identity, user aim is to show how revealing that Yārsani beliefs after their attitude about “be secret”, can create a different idea about religion. Every Yārsani in Iran and in diaspora has different knowledge about Yārsan, and it makes different interpretation of religion. As we see in following the idea of another informant O:

Unfortunately, many Yārsani abroad constantly speak separately with each other, there is no cohesion, inside and outside of Yārsan, in the country or outside of it. Now, while some of the Yārsani, who run the page are just absurd and seduced by divisive debate. They want to split up the Yārsan. Each of them consider their own beliefs the only correct ones, and their “Seyyed”⁷, and they call the Yārsanis who believe differently stray and lost. Indeed, the time has come to think about this situation.

Creating a platform for all people, especially minorities that did not have the freedom to talk about their beliefs to voice opinions, set up ground to expand construction for a free and independent media. Open social media able to contact people, and give researcher new field study especially for those minorities are close boundary and do not accept stranger easily.

CONCLUSION

I began this research by discussing the shift in my understanding of the Internet, from a channel of information about the Yārsani people on Facebook to a social space in its own right that can tell us something about how Facebook is negotiated online by members of this minority and the implications that this may have for their face-to-face interactions. My conscious decision to make friends was clear to the Yārsani people via the Internet. This sometimes proved advantageous, but not always.

⁶ Yārsan according to each religion’s followers are required to have the old or “Pir” (eternal Master) and due to capitulate or “Sar-sepordan”, Sultan Sahak seven family or “tribe” founded in the name of truth to future generations of Yarsani followers, at any time have “Dalil” and “Pir”, 7 families established during the time of Sultan were Shah Ebrahim, Baba Yadegar, Ali Qalandar, Khamush, Mir Sur, Seyyed Mosaffa and Hajji Babu Isa. The 5 families established after Sultan Sahak are Atesh Bag, Baba Heydar, Zolnour, Shah Hayas and Hajj Nematollah (Mir-hosseini, 1994; Hamzei’ii, 1999; and Bruinsse, 2009) or tayfe’, ‘the family’. (Bruinssem, 61).

⁷ Refer to note 6.

I was also able to talk with them as a friend and to understand their situation, especially those people living outside of Iran. As is common in interactions between Yārsanis throughout the world, the Internet proved a doorway for a variety of other relationships. The development of the Internet meant that I was able to engage with a larger number and a wider variety of this minority in 2015 than had been possible in 2010. Many of these relationships have continued via Facebook. Our 'virtual' meetings are as much a part of our ongoing relationships as are our face-to-face interactions. The participants subscribe to different items on Facebook in order to strengthen bonds and to solidify their national identity. Users on Facebook consider it an important place for expressing identities and increasing self-confidence and pride because of oppression in their homeland. They use symbols and pictures on Facebook to rebuild their ethnic-identity. Facebook provides them unlimited freedom of expression of their identity.

As Anderson noted, a community can maintain coherence and dependence despite being spread out over a great distance. (1992) The Yārsani community is no exception, being spread over various countries. When Yārsani use the Internet and Facebook to communicate with one another, they reconstruct their identity. In the case of Yārsani, the people accept and construct cultural sources to communicate what it means to be Yārsani. Their ethnic identities are continuously redefined and reinforced in the process of using new media within their imagined community.

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