

GENIUS LOCI

LASZLOVSZKY 60

edited by
Dóra Mérai
and

Ágnes Drosztmér, Kyra Lyublyanovics,
Judith Rasson, Zsuzsanna Papp Reed,
András Vadas, Csilla Zatykó



ARCHAEOLOGUA

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Constructing Religio-Ritual Heritage: The New Shrine of Shekhsê Batê in Khetar, Northern Iraq

ESZTER SPÁT*

The landscape of Northern Iraq is dotted with small structures, shrines belonging to the Yezidis, an ethno-religious group indigenous to the region. Some of the shrines are just small stone huts or a heap of stones, others are small, square structures with a conical spire on top—the *qob*, which came to be a symbol of the Yezidi faith in the last half a century or so. In fact, many of the more simple shrines have been rebuilt in the form of a *qob* in the past few decades, a sign of the devotion Yezidis show to the holy beings (*khas*) to whom the shrines are dedicated. Replacing a simple edifice with a more grandiose one, preferably one with a spire, is a sign of respect and no one laments the disappearance of the old structures. The newer the better, as far as the community is concerned. There is, however, one (theoretically) infrangible rule: a shrine can be rebuilt in a new form, but no new shrine can be created in a new location. Such an act would go against the Yezidi belief that it is the presence of a holy being which makes space sacred. Sometimes a holy being is believed to be buried there, but more often the holy being merely resided in the place, paid a quick visit, or perhaps just took a short rest on his way somewhere “smoking a cigarette,” to quote the words of the guardian of a small heap of stones that allegedly commemorate just such an event.

Yezidis agree that humans cannot create sacred space. As one religious leader told a journalist: “We cannot make new ones [shrines]. These are all originals. Muslims will build a mosque on top of a dump site after clearing the garbage. We could never do this.”¹ People agree that such an act would be a “heavy burden” and would call

down the anger of the holy beings. Consequently, existing shrines have been in their places since time immemorial or at least since their “owners” lived or died there. Theoretically, that is. Reality is very different. In practice, there are numerous instances of creating new sacred space. Political conflicts, communal rivalries, personal ambition, and a combination of all three may all lead to the creation of new shrines, complete with their own myths and rituals. Of the many different examples, there is space here to mention only one, the new shrine of Shekhsê Batê in the village of Khetar,² which may be considered paradigmatic of how political upheavals (the destruction of Yezidi shrines and settlements) combined with rivalry between villages can give birth to new sacred space and lead to the creation of new religio-cultural heritage.

The original shrine dedicated to Shekhsê Batê³ stood by the Tigris River, next to an Arab village. The *mijawirs* or guardians of the shrine lived in the Yezidi village of Bapirê, two hours away, and had to walk to the shrine and back every Wednesday and Friday (the Yezidi holy days of the week). But, as they recalled, building a new shrine was not even an idea that would have occurred to them—until the shrine disappeared under the waves of the “Sea.” This is how Yezidis refer to the reservoir created in 1985, when the Mosul Dam (formerly the Saddam Dam) was finished and the Tigris inundated scores of villages along its shore. The shrine of Shekhsê Batê and Bapirê disappeared under the lake. As the village was rebuilt, a new shrine was also built next to it, dedicated to the holy being Shekhsê Batê (Fig. 1). As the current guardian said, this was not really the same thing as building a new shrine in a new location (that is, creating new sacred space), as the shrine of Shekhsê Batê “had already existed.”

It must be mentioned that despite what was said above, the rebuilding of an existing shrine in

* Cultural Heritage Studies Program, Central European University, Budapest. The paper is based on field research among the Yezidi community in Northern Iraq, supported by the Hungarian Research and Science Foundation [OTKA, PD 83921] and the Gerda Henkel Research Foundation [AZ 28_F_10].



► **Fig. 1.** Shrine of Shekhsê Batê in Bapirê during the shrine feast in April 2011 (photo: E. Spät)

a new location was not an isolated phenomenon in the late twentieth century. A decade later, when Saddam Hussein destroyed many Yezidi villages and moved their inhabitants into easy-to-monitor collective settlements (in order to prevent support for the Kurdish guerilla movement), rebuilding existing shrines in new locations became an accepted practice. Shrines are traditionally the foci of much religious as well as social activity and the Yezidi community's need for continuity overrode the old ban on creating sacred space. As Yezidis themselves say, including religious leaders (whose consent is needed for building or rebuilding any shrine), "the villagers just could not be without their shrines." In such cases, sacred objects belonging to the shrine, the metal *hîlal* (literally "half moon") decorating the spire, and some sacred earth from the old location were transferred to the new spot. In this way the divine essence conferred by the presence of a holy being who once inhabited the original sacred space is believed to have been transferred to the new place.

This is what happened in the case of Shekhsê Batê. The new shrine is said to resemble the structure of the old one, with a central spire for Shekhsê Batê himself and smaller spires around it for other holy beings. Rituals were also transported to the new place along with the ritual objects.⁴ These included the "wishing balls," three metal balls balanced on top of each other. A member of the guardian family has to lift the top ball three times, murmuring a short blessing for the pilgrims,⁵ so their wishes may come true (Fig. 2). There is also the "tent" of Shekhsê Batê, symbol-



► **Fig. 2.** Wishing balls in the shrine in Bapirê (photo: E. Spät)

ized by a circle of stones. In its original location there was a small hill some distance from the shrine on top of which the tent of Shekhsê Batê is thought to have stood. People visiting the shrine had to climb this hill and circumambulate the place of the tent, symbolized by a circle of stones three times, kissing the stones. In the new spot there is no hill and the stones symbolizing the tent are placed in a circle right next to the shrine, but the ritual act of circumambulation still persists (Fig. 3). Soil taken from the precinct of the shrine is smeared on the foreheads of pilgrims and distributed in small packets to take home,⁶ just as at other shrines. The guardians' answer to the query about where the soil came from, that "it cannot be brought from anywhere else [but the grounds of the shrine]," clearly indicates that the new site is believed to be imbued with the power of Shekhsê Batê, just as the old (original) site was.

The story of Shekhsê Batê does not end here, however. The social upheaval accompanying the uprooting of whole communities brought old rivalries to the surface, ultimately leading to the creation of new sacred spaces that had not exist-



► Fig. 3. Circumambulating the “tent” of Shekhsê Batê in Bapirê (photo: E. Spät)



► Fig. 4. Pilgrimage to the hill with the “tent” of Shekhsê Batê in Khetar during a shrine feast (photo: E. Spät)

ed before.⁷ Today there is another shrine dedicated to this holy being in the village of Khetar, a few kilometers away. This is not a “historical” shrine, but was built by the people of Khetar recently, just after the rebuilding of the shrine in Bapirê was finished. While the inhabitants of Bapirê, especially the guardian family of the original shrine, claim that this shrine is “wrong” and should not have been built, the present guardian of the “illegitimate” shrine in Khetar is quick to justify the decision of his village. According to him, the people of Khetar, even though the village had its own shrines, also used to pay their respects to Shekhsê Batê. When the old shrine was inundated, they helped the people of Bapirê transport the sacred stones and other things necessary for recreating the sacred space to the new location and rebuild the shrine. But despite their help, they were not invited as guests to the “inauguration” ceremony of the new shrine. This oversight was

perceived as an insult to the whole community. Luckily, at the time Khetar had a *kochek* or seer (who is able to communicate with the supernatural). The seer had a vision,⁸ in which he saw the shrine of Shekhsê Batê fly to their village. This was interpreted as a sign that Shekhsê Batê wished to have his new place in Khetar rather than in the village of Bapirê. The seer and the villagers soon convinced the religious leaders of the Yezidi community to give permission for building a new shrine.⁹

While the legitimacy of the shrine is still questioned by some, it has become an integral part of religious life in Khetar. Its shrine feast is visited by huge crowds who dutifully perform all the traditional rituals. It is not merely the structure of the shrine itself which was rebuilt in Khetar, but the ritual heritage of Shekhsê Batê was also faithfully recreated. The “tent” of Shekhsê Batê, a small circular platform lined with stones, was also rebuilt. The geographic location of Khetar made it possible to build the “tent” on the top of a small hill, just as in the case of the original (Fig. 4). Pilgrims circumambulate the “tent” three times, in a continuation of the old ritual (Fig. 5). The ritual of the wishing stones was also reproduced. Three metal balls were also procured (despite the widely held belief that such sacred objects are passed down as inheritance from holy beings). The guardian of the shrine lifts the top ball murmuring a blessing while the pilgrims kiss the top stone and leave the customary note of paper money, just as in neighboring Bapirê (Fig. 6).

The disappearance of the old shrine of Shekhsê Batê under the waves of a new lake that also



► Fig. 5. Circumambulating the “tent” of Shekhsê Batê in Khetar (Photo: E. Spät)



► Fig. 6. *Wishing balls in the shrine in Khetar (photo: E. Spät)*

consumed a number of Yezidi villages was countered by a flexible interpretation of traditional religious ideas. It resulted in the creation of new sacred spaces not simply in one but in two locations. Though the second location had no legitimate claim to house the shrine of the holy being Shekhsê Batê, the new situation facing the Yezidi community and the need to solve the rivalry between two villages, along with recourse to the authority of the supernatural (communicated through visions), made it possible to create a new shrine and new religio-ritual heritage.

Notes

- ¹ “The Beginning of the Universe,” Michael Totten’s Middle East Journal, accessed August 31, 2018, <http://www.michael-totten.com/archives/001064.html>.
- ² Khetar lies some 30 km north of Mosul, east of the Mosul-Duhok highway.
- ³ Literally, “Person from Bate.” Some Yezidi shrines are dedicated to holy beings bearing the designation “person” (from Arabic *shakhs*) Yezidis claim that in such cases the real name of the holy being is “too heavy” to mention, thus it was safer to refer to them as the “person of such and such place.” According to Philip Kreyenbroek, the name of Shekshê Batê probably refers to a famous fifteenth century Muslim poet, Mela Hesenê Batê, born in the village of Bate in the Hakkari region and one of the first to write in Kurdish. The Yezidi sacred poem “Beyt of Advice” recited on religious occasions, derives from a poem he composed. As Yezidis would have preferred not to call him “Mela” (meaning *mullah*), they used *shekhs* or “person from Bate” instead. (Personal communication from Philip Kreyenbroek, 2018.) For the poem “Beyt of Advice” see Philip Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi are Perfect* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005), 301–316.
- ⁴ I observed the following rituals during the yearly shrine-feast or *tiwaf*, when huge crowds of pilgrims visited the shrine, but such rituals may be observed during any visit to the shrine.
- ⁵ Usually the words “may Shekhsê Batê fulfill your wish.”
- ⁶ Soil from a sacred place imparts a blessing and is also used for healing.
- ⁷ Shekhsê Batê is not the only example of this phenomenon.
- ⁸ Dreams and visions are the traditional way for the supernatural to communicate its wishes. All newly created sacred spaces share the motif of some holy being claiming the place as his own through dreams or visions.
- ⁹ As one such leader told me, in such cases they try to ease the tensions in the community and avoid further conflicts, even if this means accepting somewhat dubious claims for the need to build a new shrine.