

# Culture of Vagueness

A Study of Ezidis in Denmark

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# COLOPHON

## **Culture of Vagueness - A Study of Ezidis in Denmark**

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**Authors:** This study is conducted by Sara Boye Lester and Gitte Limskov Stærk Christiansen. We share an interest in minority and cultural studies with a special focus on vulnerable groups. The past six months have allowed us to go in depth with this interest and strengthen our academic knowledge and qualifications.

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# Abstract

The master thesis “Culture of Vagueness: A study of Ezidis in Denmark” investigates the ethnic identity of Ezidis in Denmark. Based on interviews with Ezidis living in Denmark and participant observation, we describe the ethnic identity of Ezidis as *an empty shell*. Through Fredrik Barth, Benedict Anderson, Robin Cohen, Judith Shuval, Barbara Tint, Jack David Eller, Robert Bellah, David Middleton & Derek Edwards’ theoretical perspectives on ethnicity and diasporas, we find that Ezidis define themselves through an ethnic boundary by emphasizing how they are different from Muslims. This ethnic boundary makes up *the shell*. In relation to this, we find that Ezidis identify through a collective memory of the sufferings of Ezidis caused by Muslims. Furthermore, we encounter various identifications with a Kurdish identity.

We describe the ethnic identity as *empty* as the narratives of the informants are often incoherent and ambiguous. The informants tell various interpretations of the traditions and tales. They emphasize the importance of their religious holidays, but do not celebrate them. We describe these, along with additional incoherent narratives we encounter, as a *gray area* that the theoretical perspectives on ethnicity and diasporas are unable to capture. Therefore, we develop the concept of *vagueness* which challenges a tendency of clear representations within cultural studies. Our conceptualization of *vagueness* draws inspiration from anthropologists Kathleen Stewart and Rane Willerslev’s research of the unfinished and incoherent. With the concept of *vagueness*, we argue for the importance of taking the vague and incoherent into account as it can take on meaning of its own.

We find that the ethnic identity of the Ezidis in Denmark is both situational and instrumental. The boundary making is relevant for the Ezidis’ current situation in Denmark. It serves as a tool to advance their interests by separating themselves from the negative discourse on Muslims. Furthermore, by defining themselves as a vulnerable group through their collective memory, Ezidis utilize their ethnic identity for the purpose of a certain agenda. Similarly, we find that the *vagueness* in the ethnic identity of Ezidis is instrumental. The *vagueness* enables Ezidis to keep their religion alive as it allows for flexibility. We see flexibility of the religious traditions and rules. Yet, we also find that the relationship between Ezidis in Denmark and co-ethnic members in other countries maintains the endogamy as it provides the Ezidi men with marriageable women. Furthermore, we find Ezidis keep the religion alive as the *vagueness* allows them to maintain the idea of *an imagined community*.

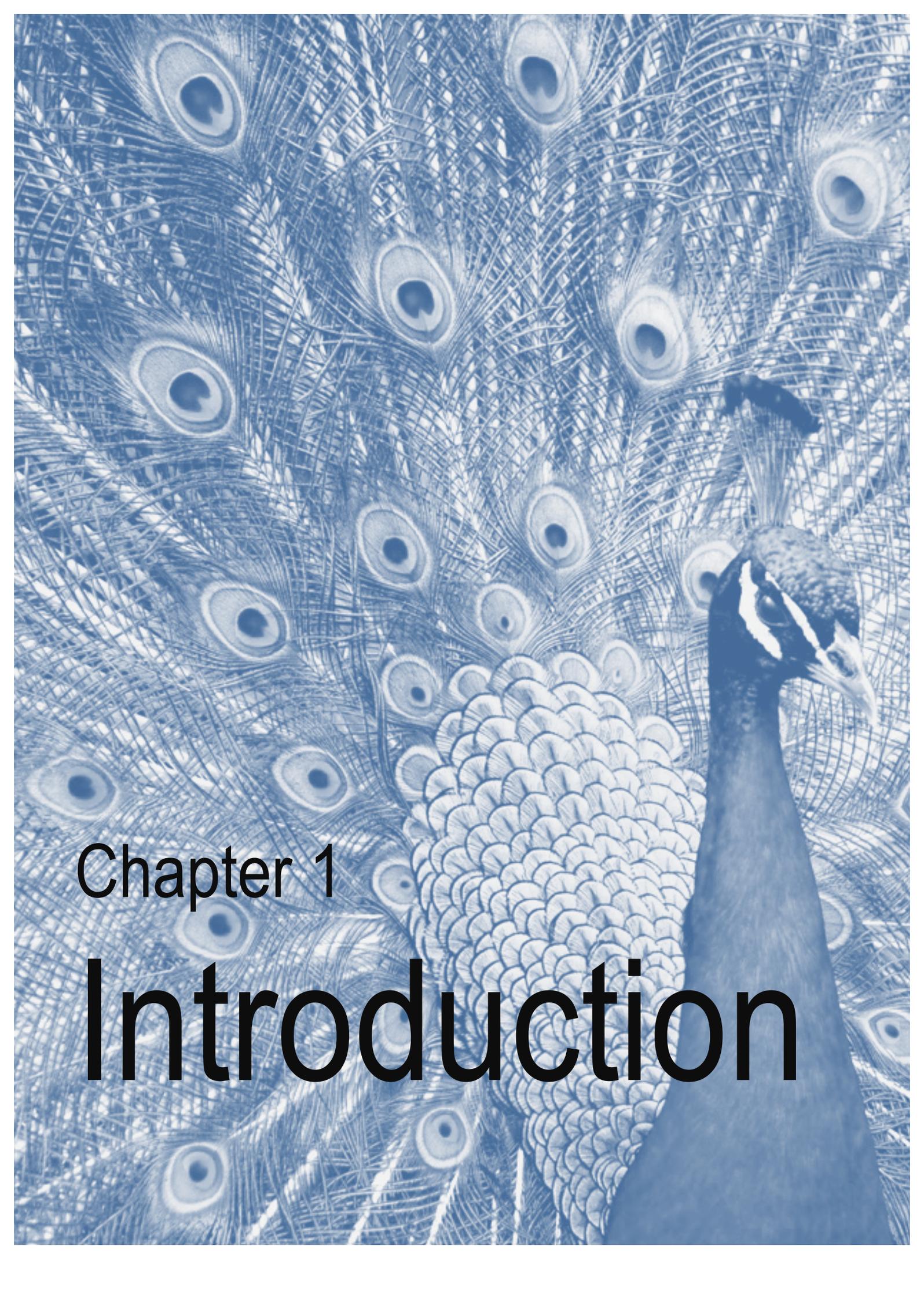
**Keywords:** Ezidi, Yezidi, Yazidi, Ethnicity, Imagined Community, Ethnic Boundaries, Diaspora, Collective Memory, Vagueness, Religion, Culture, Minority Studies.



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A blue-tinted image of a peacock's tail feathers, showing the intricate patterns and 'eyes' of the feathers. The peacock's head and neck are visible on the right side of the frame.

Chapter 1

# Introduction

## Introduction

*The tradition of handing down orally is difficult in Denmark. Sometimes we even forget our religious holidays. The religion itself we don't even know ourselves, so we can't tell it to our children.*

(Khalil, M, 55, Iraq)

During our conversations with Ezidis<sup>1</sup> living in Denmark we encounter various, vague and incoherent narratives about their religion and traditions. They emphasize the approaching Ezidi New Year, Red Wednesday, as the most significant religious celebration of the year. They invite us to join. However, nothing comes of the celebrations. They simply omit the New Year celebrations.

The Ezidis are a religious minority originating from the Nineveh province of Iraqi Kurdistan. They practice an ancient monotheistic religion with unique traditions and culture. A strict caste system divides the Ezidis into three main castes; *Sheikhs*, *Pirs* and *Murîds*. The Ezidis can only marry within their own caste and marrying outside of the religion is prohibited. Ezidism is a non-proselytizing religion and outsiders cannot convert to the religion (Maisel, 2008). Their belief in the Peacock Angel, Taus Melek, has given the Ezidis a label as 'devil-worshippers', which has resulted in a long history of persecution and oppression from their Muslim neighbors. "As a result, the Yezidis remain a small, oppressed community, but one that has stubbornly survived to this day" (Açikyldiz, 2010, p. 1). In the recent years, the Ezidi community has also found themselves a target of the terror of Islamic State (ISIS).

The majority (about 400,000) of the Ezidis live in Northern Iraq, which is also the home of their holy place, Lalish. Ezidis are also found in Syria, Turkey, Armenia and Georgia. For protection and economic safety, a large number of Ezidis have, however, migrated to the West, especially Germany and Russia (Maisel, 2008, p. 1). They live far away from their homeland, Kurdistan, and sacred places. They (and their holy leaders) are spread out in

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<sup>1</sup>*Ezidi/Ezidism, Yazidi/Yazidism and Yezidi/Yezidism* are often used interchangeably to refer to members of the ethnic, religious minority. However, we have deliberately chosen to use the terminology of *Ezidi/Ezidism* on the encouragement of our informants. Many scholars tend to wrongly, according to our gatekeeper Yosef, use the term Yazidi. This name is resented by many Ezidis, as this is the name of the Arabic Caliph Yazid Ibn Muawiyah, who is said to have killed Hussain, a descendant of the prophet Muhammad (Allison, 2016, p. 2; Nicolaus, 2014, p. 318). Also, it resembles a Shi'ite group from Yemen, which the Ezidis have no affiliation with (Maisel, 2008, p. 5). Ezidi is, furthermore, the term used in the name of the Ezidi Culture Association in Denmark, which the majority of our informants are members of.

smaller groups in new countries. Approximately 500-700 Ezidis now live in Denmark<sup>2</sup>.

In our attempt to map the Ezidi culture, we are welcomed by the Ezidi community in Denmark. We want to map their culture, yet we do not find what we are expecting. Despite relentless attempts we are not able to pull their “culture” out of them. We try to join them for their religious holidays, but this is not possible because they omit the celebrations. They tell us four different stories about some vegetable they are not allowed to eat. The conversations with the Ezidis point in all different directions and we wonder: *Why are they not telling us the same? Why do they omit to celebrate their traditions? Why do they not agree?* We ask ourselves if it is possible for the Ezidis to continue their religion in Denmark. For us the future looks apocalyptic for their ancient religion.

Our initial interest was to examine the ethnic identity of the Ezidis through an old school cultural studies approach, however, the incoherence, ambiguity and vagueness we encounter in the narratives changes our study. We encounter a *gray area of vagueness* that is not readily understood. We find that this *gray area* in the ethnic identity of the Ezidis cannot be investigated through classical theoretical perspectives of ethnicity and diaspora. Through an investigation of the incoherent and vague, this study challenges a classical cultural studies approach that aims at making clear representations of cultures. This current study aims at investigating the ethnic identity, both clear and vague, of the Ezidis living in Denmark through the following research question:

### ***How do Ezidis in Denmark define their ethnic identity?***

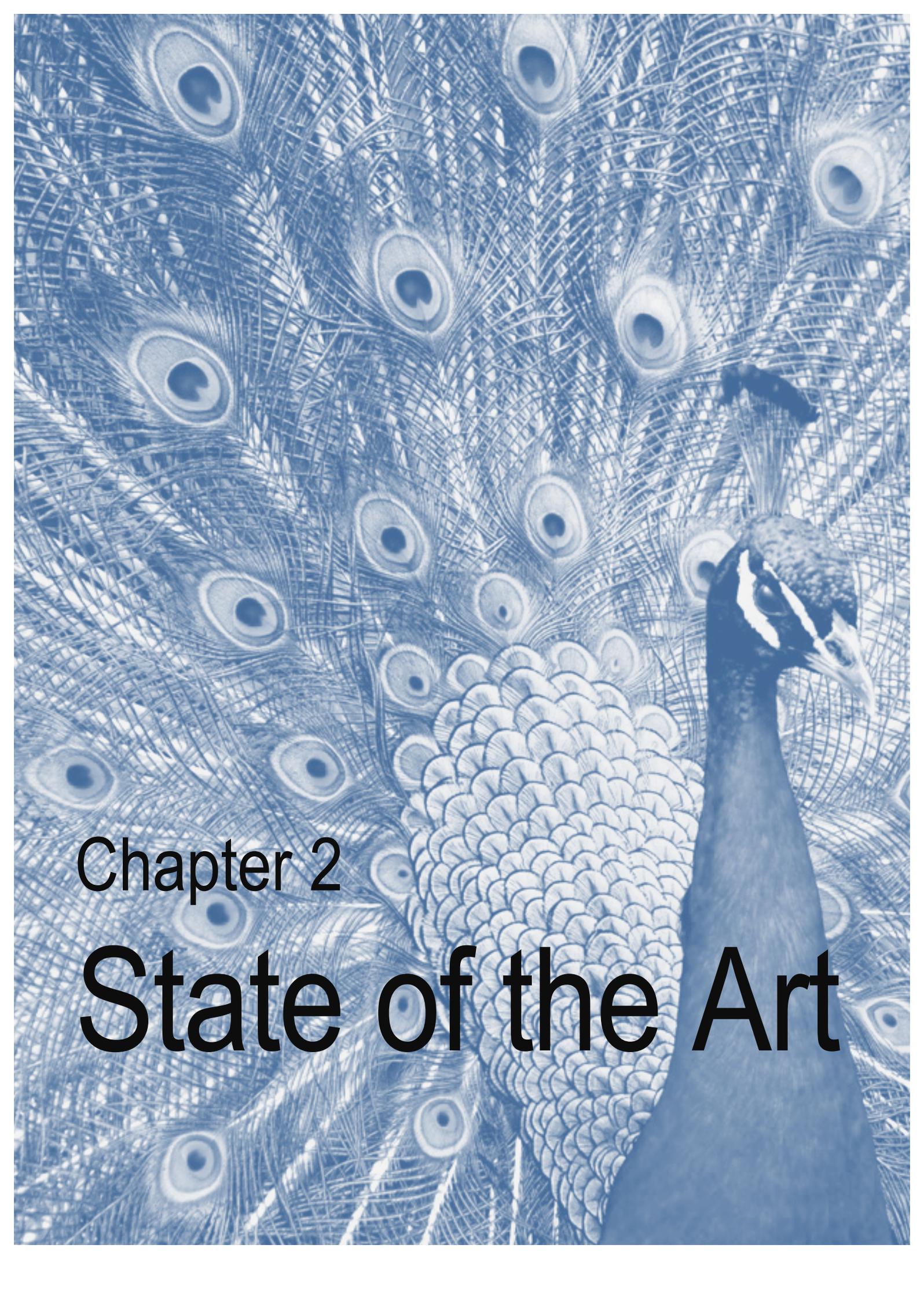
Our apocalyptic view on the future of their faith form the basis of a general wonder throughout the study. Therefore, the study, furthermore, aims at investigating:

### ***How do Ezidis in Denmark keep their religion alive?***

These questions are approached by looking at their sense of belonging, how they see themselves different from others, their relationship with Ezidis in other countries and their homeland, their collective memory, the vagueness in their narratives and the significance hereof.

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<sup>2</sup> Based on the information provided by the informants as well as a count made by the Ezidi Culture Association in Denmark in 2009: <https://www.kristeligt-dagblad.dk/kirke-tro/vi-er-ikke-muslimere-som-mange-ellers-gaar-rundt-og-tror>

A blue-tinted image of a peacock's tail feathers, showing the intricate patterns and 'eyes' of the feathers. The text 'Chapter 2' is overlaid in the lower-left quadrant.

Chapter 2

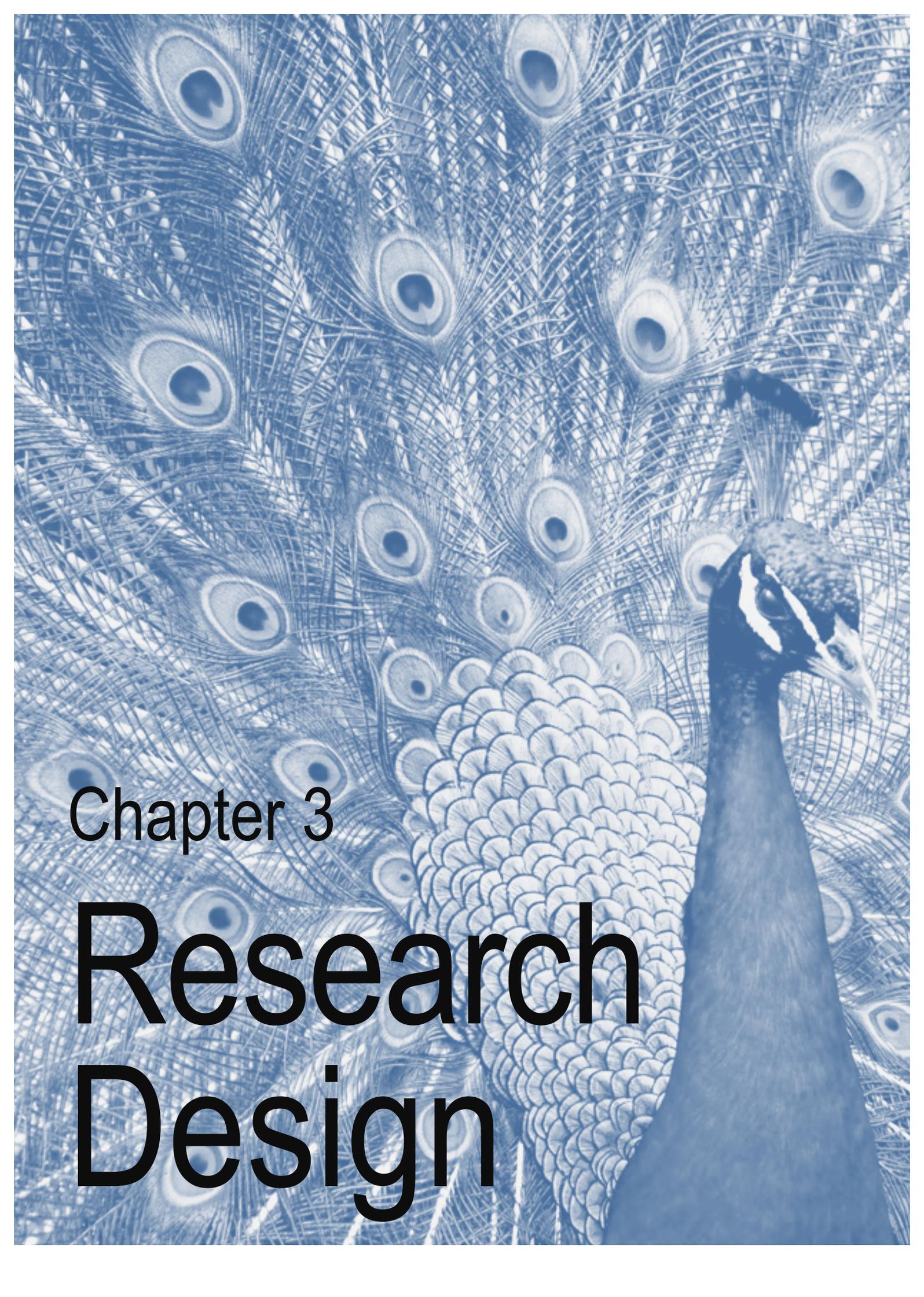
# State of the Art

## State of the Art

With this study we enroll in an existing scholarly literature on Ezidis, which is limited and mainly focused on historical and religious descriptions. Many of the scholars before us have based their study of the Ezidis on extensive research conducted in the homeland and/or diaspora (Acikyildis (2010); Allison (2001 & 2016); Spät (2008); Arakelova & Asatrian (2014); Kreyenbroek (1995 & 2009); Maisel (2008); Nicolaus (2008 & 2014); Wiingaard (2016)). These studies serve as the backdrop of our study. Presenting a comprehensive assessment of Ezidism studying Ezidis in Iraq, Turkey, Syria and Transcaucasia, Acikyildis (2010) examines the origins of the religion up until the present development. Also focusing on Ezidis in the homelands, Wiingaard (2016) tells a story of the culture of the Ezidis, who he encountered during a visit in Northern Iraq before the genocide in 2014. In her work on the oral tradition of the Ezidis, Allison (2001) attempts to map as well as analyze the central features of the tradition. In her appraisal of the Ezidis in the Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World a decade later, Allison (2016) focuses on the history, religion and social organization of the religious minority and concludes with her view on the future for the Ezidis. Eszter Spät (2008) examines how the emerging literacy among the Ezidis in Iraqi Kurdistan is affecting the oral tradition. Arakelova and Asatrian (2014) base their study of the Ezidi pantheon on their fieldwork among Ezidis in Armenia. Based on the study of Arakelova and Asatrian (2014), Nicolaus (2014) presents a discussion on the Ezidi identity. In his earlier work, Nicolaus (2008) accounts for the lost Sanjaqs, images of Taus Melek<sup>3</sup>, based on qualitative research amongst Ezidis in Armenia. Based on his own research amongst Ezidis in Syria, Iraq and Germany, Maisel (2008) raises a number of questions concerning the Ezidis after the fall of Saddam Hussein and the protection of this ancient faith in the future. In the first half of his book from 1995 Kreyenbroek (1995) examines the sacred hymns of Ezidism. In the second half of his book, Kreyenbroek (1995) translates some of the hymns and presents views on their theological meaning. A decade later, Kreyenbroek (2009) elaborates on his study of Ezidis. Based on extensive research among Ezidis in Germany and Russia Kreyenbroek (2009) addresses differences between Ezidis who mainly lived in the diaspora and those who grew up in the homelands. The aim of Kreyenbroek's (2009) research is to allow other scholars to build on his findings.

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<sup>3</sup> The main religious figure of Ezidism (often translated as the Peacock Angel)



Chapter 3

# Research Design

# Research Design

The figure to the right illustrates the overall structure of the study and the thesis at hand.

The sections of Research Methodology and Theoretical Perspectives are emphasized in the figure as these will be described in the following.

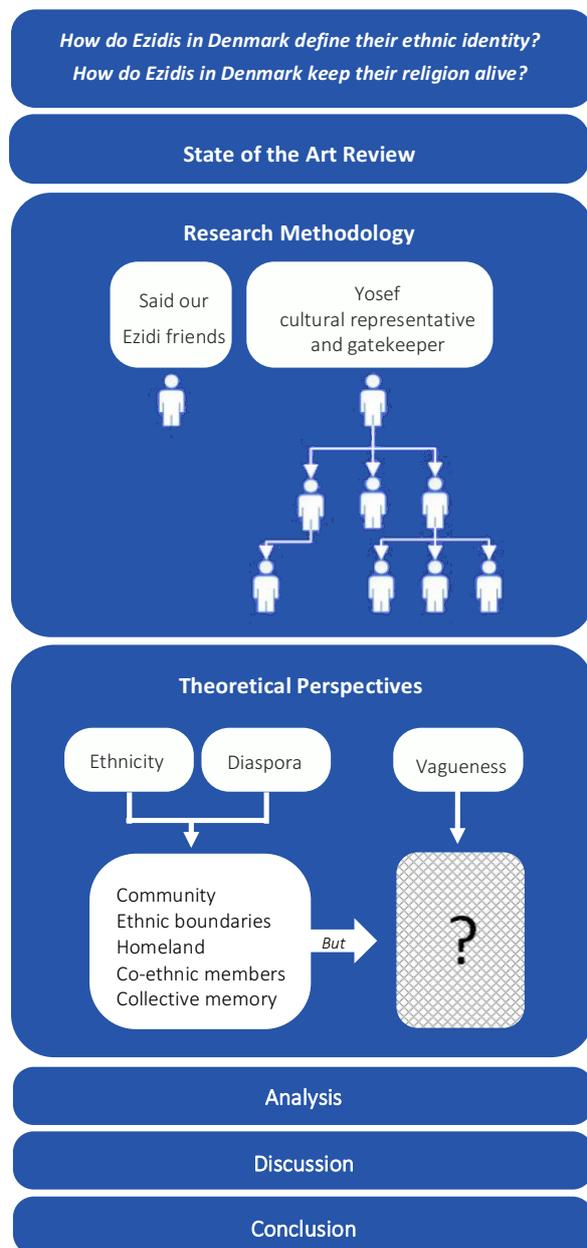
It illustrates our meeting with Ezidis and how they introduced us to additional Ezidis. Through a qualitative research approach, we were presented with personal narratives from Ezidis in Denmark.

These narratives led to our choice of theoretical perspectives to help us investigate the research questions. The theoretical perspectives on ethnicity and diaspora proved useful for the investigation of some of the data. However, we encountered an incoherency in the data, which called for additional perspectives.

Therefore, we developed our concept of vagueness in order to investigate the incoherent.

In the following, we will further elaborate on our research method and the theoretical perspectives.

In continuation of this, the study will proceed to the analysis itself, which is presented in two parts. This is followed by the discussion and finally a conclusion, highlighting our main findings.



## 3.1. Research Methodology

The following will describe our methodological approach to the research. It includes a critical presentation of the qualitative research, among this our access to the informants, data collection and coding. Furthermore, we introduce meta reflections of details we encountered during the research, which encouraged our apocalyptic view on the future of the Ezidi religion.

### 3.1.1. Meeting the Ezidis

We approached the field of interest with questions about the religion, traditions and a wondering of the ethnic identity of Ezidis in Denmark. We were welcomed by our friend Said, who, prior to the research had told us about his religion, where the followers are not allowed to eat pointed cabbage. We had very limited knowledge about this religion, but Said was happy to enlighten us despite of his own limited knowledge about the religion. To our surprise, Said did not know any Ezidis in Denmark. Apart from one friend, who Said was unable to get a hold of, Said did not know any Ezidis living in Denmark. This was a surprise to us and made us wonder how someone who, as Said told us, finds his religion very important does not associate with fellow members of the Ezidi community.

As our Ezidi friend, Said, had no connections to other Ezidis in Denmark, we started out by searching the internet for contacts to the Ezidi community in Denmark. During this search, we found the Culture Association of Ezidis in Denmark (from now on referred to as 'the Association'). We sent an email to the Association where we expressed our interest in the community and asked to arrange a meeting.

#### **The Culture Association of Ezidis in Denmark**

Out of the 500-700 Ezidis residing in Denmark<sup>1</sup> about 80 are members of the Association including children<sup>1</sup>. The members mainly reside on the island of Zealand. The Association arranges social events for its members and celebrates religious holidays. In 2016, the Association arranged a large event for the commemoration of the genocide in Sinjar, Iraq in 2014. In addition to this, the members hold an annual general meeting. According to the informants, a large group of Ezidis live in Odense as well as Randers, Aalborg, Vejle and other smaller towns around Denmark. These Ezidis have organized in separate Ezidi associations.

Shortly after we had sent the email, Yosef, a member of the Association, replied and we arranged a meeting. Yosef was very welcoming and expressed to us that he was very happy about our interest in his faith.

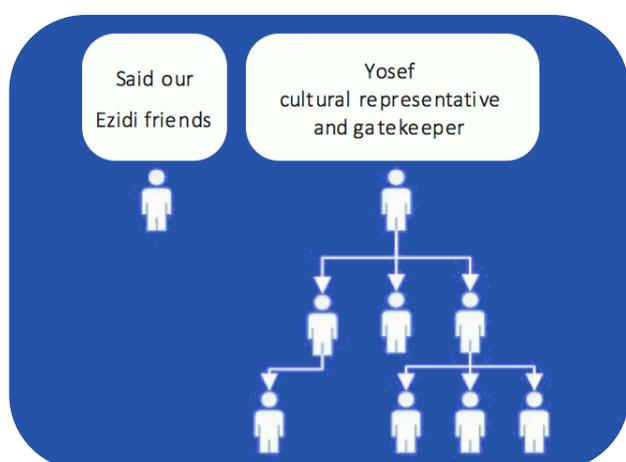
## Gatekeeper

Yosef became our gatekeeper to the Ezidi community in Denmark (cf. DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011, p. 42). He agreed to contact some of the Ezidis from his network in Denmark, who he thought would be interested in meeting up with us for a conversation about their religion and traditions. He asked us to write down our questions so that the informants were aware of our interest. This was not in our initial plan because we wanted the framework for their personal perspectives to be as unstructured and loose as possible. In this way, Yosef's role as our gatekeeper meant that the meeting with the informants was structured from the start, which prevented the amount of flexibility as was our initial aim. However, since Yosef was our only access to the community, we agreed to structure our conversations with the informants and we sent a list of questions to Yosef (see interview guide in section 3.1.2.).

After a few days Yosef sent a list of names and contact information of Ezidis, who had agreed to be contacted. Yosef's role as our gatekeeper gave us access to all the informants other than Said, who we knew prior to starting the research process. In this way, it was not solely our decision of which narratives to base our study on. A representative of the culture, such as Yosef, arguably, has a given interest in facilitating contact to a specific segment within the community. He provided us with contacts to "culture experts" and the "high-ranking" Ezidis, e.g. the Sheikh and the doctor, all from the older generation. Yosef did not provide us with access to the younger generation and the "common, non-expert" Ezidi. Our access to the community was, hereby, restricted. However, Yosef provided us with access to the community, which otherwise would have been difficult to gain ourselves.

## Snowball Sampling

Yosef's role as a gatekeeper and our first contact within the community initiated a *snowball sampling*, which provided us with the remaining informants of this study. *Snowball sampling* refers to the technique in which the researcher finds a few informants relevant to the research question. These informants will then propose other informants, who they find relevant for the study, who will then propose other informants and so on (Bryman, 2016, p. 415; Bernard, 2006, pp. 192-193). Yosef provided us with three informants. They proposed four additional informants for us to talk to (see illustration below). This enabled us to compensate for the restriction in access to the community laid upon us by our gatekeeper, Yosef. Through the *snowball sampling* we got in



contact with the young Ezidis and "the common non-cultural experts".

Our gatekeeper and the *snowball sampling* did, however, only provide us with members of two of the Ezidi castes. The Ezidis are divided into a caste system with three main hierarchical castes; *Sheikh*, *Pir* and *Murîd* (Maisel, 2008, p. 2). The majority of the informants belong to the *Murîd* caste, the laymen. One informant, Soran from Iraq belongs to the *Sheikh* caste,

the clergy. Said from Syria does not know which caste his family belongs to as, according to him, the caste system has been abandoned in Syria. The remaining informants belong to the *Murîd* caste. It was our hope to include narratives from the *Pir* caste. However, it was not possible for us to get in contact with any *Pirs* living in Denmark. When we asked our informants they said that maybe there was a *Pir* family in Odense. None of our informants were sure of this and none of them were able to provide us with a contact to the 'perhaps *Pir* family'.

### The *Pirs*

According to the informants and the literature on Ezidism, the *Pirs* have a special role as religious counselors within the Ezidi communities (Maisel, 2008, p. 2). Therefore, the fact that the informants did not know if there were any *Pirs* in Denmark, encouraged our apocalyptic view. We wondered who maintains the role of religious counselors in Denmark if there are no *Pirs* - who guide the community? Furthermore, the informants, as well as the literature, told us that every *Murîd* has a *Pir* and a *Sheikh* to guide them in religious matters, and whom also obtain a special role during some of the religious holidays (Allison, 2001, p. 30). It made us think that a number of the traditions within Ezidism are difficult for the Ezidis living in Denmark to preserve as they require the attendance of *Pirs*.

All informants, except one, live on the island of Zealand in Denmark and the majority in the city of Copenhagen. Due to the strict laws on family reunification, Soran lived in Sweden at the time of research, waiting for his wife from Iraq to be allowed in Denmark. As a result of Yosef as our gatekeeper and the *snowball sampling*, the majority of our informants are members of the Association. Only Said, who we knew from elsewhere, is not a member of the Association. Therefore, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to tell of the ethnic identity of every Ezidi living in Denmark. Furthermore, the current study reflects our constructionist view that ethnicity and ethnic identity are dynamic social constructions. Thus, our findings will present a snapshot of the ethnic identity of the informants studied. Nonetheless, the findings of the ethnic identity of the informants at the given time provide us with a new perspective to understand and examine ethnic identity, which is relevant for further research of ethnic groups. In the following section, we will further describe the method through which the data behind this study was collected.

### 3.1.2. Mixed Qualitative Methods

In our research, the personal narrative is the focus of our examination of the ethnic identity of Ezidis in Denmark. Thus, the research question was approached through qualitative research methods. This approach allowed us to gain access to the personal stories and perspectives of the group in focus. This is because it is "the perspective of those being studied - what they see as important and significant - [that] provides the point of orientation (Bryman, 2016, p. 401). The ethnographic field study was conducted over a period of 4 months from

February 2017 to May 2017 and included nine informants mainly from Copenhagen and the surrounding areas (see Appendix 1 for details of the interviews). The research question has been studied through an inductive approach, in which theory is generated from research (Bryman, 2016, p. 375). This means that our qualitative research stands as a tool to generate theory. In the following, a critical review of the methods used to research ethnic identity of Ezidis in Denmark will be presented.

## Interviews and Participant Observation

Our source of data was a combination of interviews and participant observations. We participated in the everyday life of the informants. We socialized with our informants over home-cooked dinners, coffee, casual conversations and celebrations. This can be seen as a degree of participant observation as we participated in everyday activities, interactions and events with our informants (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011, p. 1). Our initial strategy was to socialize with the informants even more. We were hoping to participate in activities within the Association, however, this was not possible. We were not able to attend the celebration of the International Women's Day held by the Association. Therefore, we made sure to clear our calendars completely in the week of the celebrations of *Charshama Sor* (often translated as Red Wednesday), the Ezidi New Year and according to our informants the most important religious holiday for Ezidis. However, nothing came of the celebrations.

### No Religious Celebrations

We were surprised by the inactivity of the Association. During the 6 months of research the Association only met to celebrate International Women's Day and the compulsory annual general meeting. Both events had no specific connection to the religion. The Association omitted the only religious celebrations of Red Wednesday. This was a paradox that further sparked our thoughts about Ezidis and their identity, or the *vagueness* of it. We thought to ourselves; *why do you not celebrate the most important day of the year?*

In order to look into the ethnic identity of Ezidis, we found the mix of participant observations and interviews beneficial because it allowed us to interact with our informants on a higher level than in regular interview. Furthermore, we sought to make the research method more personal, observing and informal by suggesting to meet the informants in their homes. Meeting the informants in their homes allowed for a more informal structure as well as it provided us with the opportunity to meet and talk to their family members, make observations within their homes, and of the interactions between them. Only Soran and Said were not interviewed in their homes. Soran lived in Sweden at the time of our meeting and, therefore, he invited us to his brother's café in Copenhagen. Since Said lives an hour from Copenhagen, we met him at a café in the city and after talking for a few hours joined him for the celebration of the Kurdish New Years, Newroz, which was an important event for Said.

like Yosef and Said, the remaining informants welcomed us with with open arms. They were thrilled about our interest in their religion and expressed a need for us to write about them and their history. Enthusiastically, they told us about their religion, history and people. We were intrigued by their stories, but also confused.

### Please Write About Us

The informants' enthusiasm about our interest in their religion suggested that they needed us to write about their traditions. Combined with the informants' vague and ambiguous narratives about their religion, rules and traditions, we wondered if they needed us to write it down for them, so they do not forget it.

An important note to make here is that our study may not get to the same conclusions as our informants may have hoped for. On numerous occasions the informants told us how important it is for them that everyone knows about their religion, history and sufferings. Yet, this is not the sole aspect relevant for the investigation of their ethnic identity. Furthermore, the aim of the current study is not to account for the Ezidi religion and the sufferings of the Ezidis. Instead the aim is to examine the ethnic identity through an analysis of the themes identified in the data.

Qualitative interviews are the prime source of data behind this research. The interviews are amplified by our observations during the meetings with the informants. This combined research method was chosen because it allows us as researchers to get detailed insight into the Ezidi community within the time limits of the study.

The conducted interviews are a mix between *the semi-structured interview* and *the unstructured interview*. The interviews were *semi-structured* in the way that we wrote a list of relevant topics and questions to cover prior to the interviews (Bryman, 2016, p. 468). We formulated 9 broad questions that gave the informants an understanding of the direction of our study (see "Interview Guide" below). We made the questions purposely broad so that informants were still free to talk about what was on their minds. Although these questions were not referred to during the interviews, the topics were in our minds and influenced which points made by the informants we found important to follow up on.

The interviews were also *unstructured* as we, in the meeting with the informants, made an effort to keep away from the questions by initiating the interview with a single question - *what does it mean to you to be Ezidi?* - which we allowed the informants to respond to freely. Thereafter, we responded to points made by the informants, which we found relevant to elaborate on. In this way, the interviews resembled a conversation (Bryman, 2016, p. 468). This combination of *the unstructured interview* and *semi-structured interview* turned out beneficial for our data collection. It enabled us to create a safe setting in which the personal stories of the informants could flow. Yet, at the same time it helped us zoom in on the points relevant for our research of the ethnic identity of Ezidis in Denmark.

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<sup>4</sup> All questions were sent to the informants in Danish.

### Interview Guide<sup>4</sup>

- What does it mean to you to be Ezidi?
- What does it mean for your everyday life that you are Ezidi? (And what does it mean to your family?)
- Which traditions and religious holidays are important to you?
- How did you learn about the religion?
- How do you hand down your religion and traditions to your children?
- How do you view the future of the religion? Do you see any challenges?
- Is it important for you to meet with other Ezidis here in Denmark? Why/why not?
- What do you think has been the significance of the sufferings that the Ezidis have experienced over time?
- What are your thoughts on being Ezidi and Kurdish?

### The Notebook Strategy

All interviews were conducted by both researchers. We each had a notebook in which we noted down what was being said by the informants. We chose this strategy for a number of reasons. First, as noted earlier, our aim was to create a setting in which the informants felt safe to tell their personal stories and perspectives. We found that a recorder interrupts such a setting by formalizing it. Second, we did not want to risk that a recorder would put off the informants by making them “self-conscious or alarmed at the prospect of their words being preserved” (Bryman, 2016, p. 480). Third, we did not find recording favorable for our role as participators in dinners, around the coffee table and at celebrations. Before beginning the interviews, we made sure that all informants were fine with us writing down their statements. A consequence of the ‘notebook strategy’ was a limitation of direct quotes made by the informants. However, the meaning of their utterings were still captured. Where we were able to note down direct quotes we marked it with inverted commas. Therefore, the statements of the informants included in the study is a mix of direct quotes and paraphrasing. When direct quotes are used in the study, we have translated them from Danish to English.

Although none of the informants objected to being named in the study, we have chosen to anonymize them. We found it appropriate due to the unforeseen consequences this study may have for the informants in the future. The main reason for this was the fact that a majority of the informants emphasized a differentiating between Ezidism and Islam - an “us vs. them” analogy - which in more than one case turned into the representation of Muslims as the ‘bad guys’. As a result, we have chosen to refer to the informants through nicknames. Thus, when quotes are included, the informants are indicated by their nickname, sex, age and country of origin, as such (Khalil, M, 55, Iraq). First is the nickname. The second letter refers to the informant’s sex (M = male; F = female). Then the age and lastly the country of origin.

## Coding the Data

As noted above, our qualitative and narrative approach to the research, generated a collection of data based on what the informants viewed as important and significant. This became the basis for the categories, which the data was coded according to (cf. Bryman, 2016). We used the software programme NVivo to code the collected data of this study. In the process of coding our data, we started off with an initial coding in which we read through our notebooks and found paragraphs worthy of noting. These paragraphs were transcribed in NVivo and given an appropriate name. Thereafter, we went through the data again to reduce the number of codes. Data with common elements were then raised to a higher-order codes. Finally, we evaluated the codes and did a final combination of codes into the following themes; Ethnic boundaries, Endogamy, Handing down, Memory and Diaspora community. In this way, the data collection was reduced to nodes, which then along with our observations, were reduced to themes. These identified themes serve as the structure of the analysis. Thus, the coding of the data and the identified themes became the basis of a thematic analysis of the ethnic identity of Ezidis in Denmark.

In the following, we will present the theoretical perspectives that helps us examine the collected data in order to be able to answer our research question.

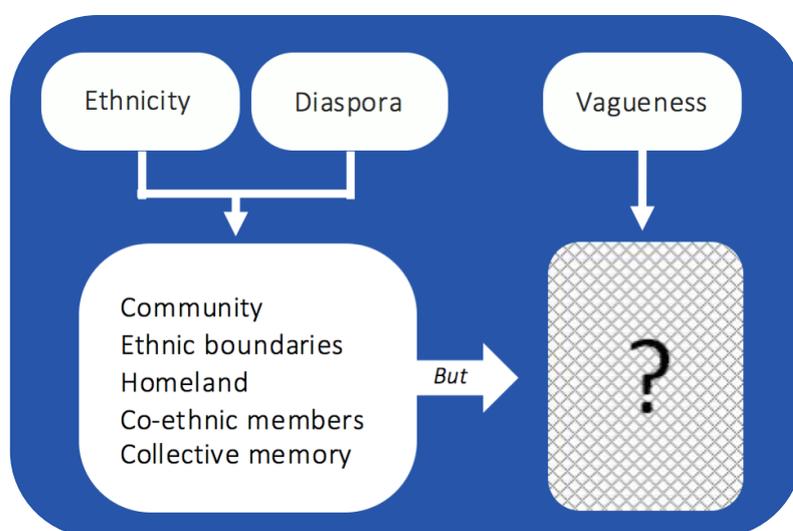
## 3.2. Theoretical Perspectives

Within the fields of ethnicity and diasporas we find various perspectives that can prove useful for the investigation of ethnic identity. However, we have chosen to include the classical theoretical perspectives of Anderson (2006), Barth (1969), Cohen (1997), Shuval (2000), Tint (2010), Eller (1999) Bellah (1985) and Middleton & Edwards (1990) in combination, because they respectively; help us understand what binds the Ezidis together and how a feeling of belonging to a community influences their ethnic identity (Anderson, 2006); provide us with a grasp to examine the ethnic boundaries presented by the informants and how ethnicity is instrumental (Barth, 1969). Theories on diasporas is included as a tool to understand their relationship with their homeland, the importance of associating with other Ezidis as well as their collective memory and how memory is instrumental (Cohen (1997); Shuval (2000); Tint (2010); Eller (1999); Bellah (1985); Middleton & Edwards (1990)).

These theoretical perspectives help us investigate some of the data. Yet, it proves inadequate to investigate everything we encounter. Our empirical material goes beyond what the classical theoretical perspectives on ethnicity and diasporas can help us examine. The narratives of the informants are often confusing and ambiguous. Examples of the confusion and paradoxical we encounter in the narratives, is how the informants tell several varying interpretations of why it is forbidden for Ezidis to eat a certain vegetable. Even what kind of vegetable that is forbidden the informants do not agree upon. Furthermore, the Association omits the celebration of their main religious holiday. Also, Said does not know any other Ezidis living in Denmark. These confusing narratives cannot be investigated through the classic theories of ethnicity and diasporas and an analysis of the narratives through these perspectives will not make sense. Therefore, an investigation of the

ambiguous and confusing paradoxes that we are presented with in our meetings with the informants call for an additional theoretical perspective. We develop the concept *gray area* to be able to refer to the confusing, vague, ambiguous and incoherent narratives of the informants. We describe it as a *gray area*, because it refers to something which is blurry and ill-defined and not conforming to a set theory. In order to be able to look at the *gray area* we develop the theoretical concept of *vagueness*. *Vagueness* is a concept that challenges a tendency of clear representations within a cultural studies approach and underlines the significance of the *gray area* for the Ezidis. We draw up the concept of *vagueness* with inspiration from studies of the incoherent and unfinished (Willerslev, 2004; Stewart, 2008).

Therefore, we employ three theoretical perspectives in the analysis, respectively ethnicity, diaspora and *vagueness* (see illustration below). The latter is conceptualized by ourselves in order to investigate the *gray area* in the informants' narratives.



### 3.2.1. Ethnicity

Generally, theories on ethnicity are divided into three schools of thought; *primordialism*, *constructivism* and *instrumentalism*. Scholars who first began to study ethnicity described ethnic groups through the primordialist assumption that held ethnicity to be a static entity (Geertz, 1973; Isaacs, 1975; Van den Berghe, 1981). According to Philip Q. Yang (2000) the three main arguments of the primordialist school on ethnicity are: (i) “ethnicity is ascribed identity or assigned status, something inherited from one’s ancestors[, (ii)] ethnic boundaries, which demarcate who is a member of an ethnic group and who is not, are fixed or immutable[, and (iii)] people belong to an ethnic group because members of that group all share common biological and cultural origins” (p. 42).

Until the 1970s, the primordialist school was the common way of thinking about ethnicity. However, in the 1970s a new school of thought emerged - the constructionist school - that stood in opposition to the primordialists (Yang, 2000, p. 43). The constructionists put forward three main arguments on ethnicity: (i) “ethnicity is a socially constructed identity, something that is created[, (ii)] ethnic boundaries are flexible or changeable. Ethnicity is dynamic[, and (iii)] ethnic affiliation or identification is determined or constructed by

society. Ethnicity is a reaction to changing social environment” (Yang, 2000, p. 44). Scholars of the constructionist school of thought include Fredrik Barth (1969) and Benedict Anderson (2006).

In addition to the primordialist school and the constructionist school, scholars of “the instrumentalist school view ethnicity as an instrument or strategic tool for gaining resources” (Yang, 2000, p. 46). Scholars of the instrumentalist school argue that people become ethnic and maintain their ethnicity if it benefits them: “ethnicity exists and persists because it is useful” (Yang, 2000, p. 46). In this line of thought, “ethnic groups are also interest groups” (Yang, 2000, p. 46).

This study builds on a constructionist view on ethnicity. We view ethnicity as a dynamic social construction, which is never absolute. We understand *ethnicity* and *ethnic identity* as two interconnected phenomena. We refer to *ethnicity* as a categorization of people based on markers of similarity and differences made significant by members of an ethnic group. *Ethnic identity* is then how individuals or groups of individuals relate to a specific ethnic group. We see ethnic identity as the process of identification that happens over time and is never fixed. We find it relevant to look further into the constructionist thoughts of Anderson (2006) and Barth (1969), because they respectively help us understand the cohesiveness of the Ezidi community, and how boundaries between groups construct ethnic identity.

In Benedict Anderson’s (2006) study of nations and nationalism, he defines a nation as an *imagined community*:

*It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.*

(Anderson, 2006, p. 6)

Despite Anderson’s focus on the nation state, we find his idea of *imagined communities* useful for the study of ethnic identity. He argues that the notion of an *imagined community* not only defines nation states, however “all communities larger than primordial villages of face to face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined” (Anderson, 2006, p. 6). Thus, Anderson’s (2006) notion of an *imagined community* helps us examine how the consciousness of being a part of an *imagined community* affects the construction of ethnic identity of Ezidis.

Anthropologist Fredrik Barth’s (1969) perspective on ethnic groups and ethnicity differs from Anderson (2006) by focusing on the dissimilarities between ethnic groups and not what binds a community together. Barth (1969) describes ethnic groups not through their cultural characteristics (as primordialists), but through the markers that make them different from other ethnic groups (pp. 11-12). Barth’s (1969) perspective allows us to look at the social factors that entail membership of the group, because it is, according to Barth, these factors more than the ‘cultural stuff’ that define them as an ethnic group.

Barth (1969) argues an ethnic group is defined by, “ascriptions and identification by the actors themselves” (p. 10). The individual needs to identify themselves as a part of a specific group and the group needs to define the individual as part of their group (Barth, 1969, pp. 13-14). In this way, Barth (1969) argues “when defined as an ascriptive and exclusive group, the nature of continuity of ethnic units is clear: it depends on the maintenance of a boundary” (p. 14).

Ethnic groups might share some similarities, but what is important is that the groups see themselves different from one another. In this way, “the [cultural] features that are taken into account are not the sum of ‘objective’ differences, but only those which the actors themselves regard as significant” (Barth, 1969, p. 14). Barth (1969) hereby, argues that what is important is “the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses” (p. 15). Barth (1969) does not describe boundaries as cultural boundaries, but as social ones. They become visible in the interaction between members of different ethnic groups. Boundaries between ethnic groups are porous, yet “the boundaries persist despite a flow of personnel across them” (Barth, 1969, p. 9). In this way, Barth (1969) argues how goods, ideas and even people can move across boundaries and, thereby, change the form of the ethnic groups over time. But, the boundaries will remain.

While Barth is a constructionist, he also takes an instrumentalist view on ethnicity assuming ethnicity as a tool for ethnic groups to gain specific goals. Barth can be criticized for his highly instrumental, almost market logic view on ethnicity, that one utilises ethnicity as a mean to gain something in return. That ethnicity and ethnic boundaries are something you construct in order to set yourself apart from other groups. Yet, Barth’s theoretical perspective becomes relevant for the current study as we encounter a level of instrumentalism in the construction of ethnic boundaries. This instrumentalist view of ethnicity is not excluded by constructivist scholars, yet it can supplement the understanding of ethnicity. The instrumentalist thought on ethnicity, furthermore, assumes that certain elites have an interest in mobilizing ethnic identity as a tool to advance their interests (Eller, 1999). This perspective is, however, separate from the current study as our focus is not on the instrumentalism of the elites and powerful, rather we include instrumentalism as a view on ethnic identity in the everyday life of Ezidis in Denmark.

The theoretical perspectives on ethnicity presented above are relevant for the current study as Anderson’s (2006) notion of an *imagined community* allow us to examine the sense of belonging we encounter in the narratives of the Ezidis. Furthermore, Barth’s (1969) arguments provide us with a tool to understand the significance of the ethnic boundaries emphasized by the informants.

### 3.2.2. Diaspora

In order to examine the ethnic identity of Ezidis in Denmark, it is relevant to understand the characteristics of a diaspora and how it influences ethnic identity. It is, however, not the aim of our study to present the Ezidis through a classical diaspora study. This because such a classical study will not allow us to investigate the confusion and ambiguity in the narratives of the informants. Through a classical perspective on diasporas the Ezidis in Denmark appear to be an unusual diaspora. The informants’ statements tick some of the boxes, yet other boxes appear extremely vague. Nonetheless, it is relevant to draw on part of the theoretical perspectives on diasporas as the ethnic identity of the Ezidis in Denmark are related to their diasporic state. However, a one sided analysis of the data will be unjustifiable. Therefore, we draw on parts of the classical diaspora theory that are relevant such as collective memory and group identity.

Scholars studying diasporas generally tend to highlight three actors relevant for the study of diasporas, which are; “the diaspora group itself, the host society and the homeland which may be real or virtual” (Sheffer, 1986 in Shuval, 2000, p. 46). In their extensive research on diasporas, Cohen (1997) and Shuval (2000) note characteristics defining a diaspora. Relevant for the current study are: being dispersed from homeland, idealizing the ancestral home, longing for the homeland, having a strong group identity, having a relationship with co-ethnic members in other countries and having a collective memory (Cohen, 1997; Shuval, 2000). The latter, collective memory, is especially relevant for the study of Ezidis in Denmark. This because all informants highlight a memory of the sufferings of Ezidis. Therefore, theoretical perspectives on collective memory that contribute to the study will be elaborated in the following.

## Collective Memory

In their work on collective remembering, psychologists David Middleton and Derek Edwards (1990) note how the social practice of commemoration describes the practice where “people recall and celebrate events and persons that are part of their jointly acknowledged generational and cultural identity and common understanding” (Middleton & Edwards, 1990, p. 8). Middleton and Edwards (1990) are presumably right, however, they do not take into account the aspect of power that goes into the phenomenon of collective memory.

In her research on the significance of memory in conflict, Barbara Tint (2010) notes the importance of memory in the creation of identity. She argues identity both informs and is informed by memory (Tint, 2010, p. 245). Thus, to understand the identity of a specific group, their memories or collective memories are important. Collective memories are described by Tint (2010) as memories held by groups. Tint notes how “it is the memories that are commemorated that are being remembered by groups in society” (Tint, 2010, p. 243). She allows for the aspect of power as she describes commemoration as “the process of acknowledging, honoring, and recycling certain events of the past. Often utilized by governments, political powers and groups for the purpose of a certain agenda” (Tint, 2010, p. 243). In this way, collective memory serves as an instrumental tool to advance a group’s agenda. The events that are commemorated become the defining forces in group memory and, thus, significant for the construction and maintenance of identity (Tint, 2010). Thus, collective memory is linked to the instrumentalist assumption that ethnicity and ethnic identity serve as means to a specific goal.

In his work on ethnic and racial groups, sociologist Robert N. Bellah (1985) talks about ‘communities of memory’ as communities that “[...] in an important sense are constituted by their past” (p. 153). He argues how “in order to not forget that past, a community is involved in retelling its story, its constitutive narrative, and in so doing, it offers examples of the men and women who have embodied and exemplified the meaning of the community” (Bellah, 1985, p. 153). These communities tell stories of success through the exemplification of what it is to be a good person, however “a genuine community will also tell painful stories of shared suffering that sometimes create deeper identities than success” (Bellah, 1985, p. 153). Anthropologist Jack David Eller (1999) argues that such stories of suffering is often remembered, because what people remember best are episodes where people have ruled over or has been ruled by others (p. 31). According to Eller (1999), what is commemorated and what is forgotten have everything to do with the present (p. 42). Memories that are being

remembered will tell you a lot about the current situation of the specific group (Eller, 1999, p. 47). Like Tint (2010), Eller (1999) argues how memory is instrumental as ethnic groups use it as a means to accomplish certain goals (p. 42). One can therefore see, collective memory as a window into current experience. Thus, memory becomes a tool to explore a group identity.

The theoretical perspectives on diasporas are relevant to include in the current study as the informants' statements indicate that their diasporic state is significant for their ethnic identity. Especially relevant for the study of Ezidis is their collective memory. The perspectives on collective memory presented in the above provide us with a tool to understand the collective memory of Ezidis and how it affects the ethnic identity of the group. Furthermore, they contribute with a perspective on how collective memory can be instrumental.

The Ezidis living in Denmark tick the boxes of collective memory as well as other diaspora characteristics. However, some of the diaspora characteristics (even at times their collective memory) are extremely vague in the narratives of the informants. A classical diaspora study proves unable to capture the vagueness that we encounter.

### 3.2.3. Vagueness

Given that our informants' many different and often incoherent statements presented an obstacle, we found that the theoretical perspectives on ethnicity and diaspora were inadequate. We use *gray area* as a concept to refer to these incoherent statements that are not readily understood. Therefore, we include the concept of *vagueness* as an additional perspective, which allows us to investigate the significance of this *gray area*. Furthermore, the concept of *vagueness* helps us investigate how *vagueness* is necessary for the idea of an *imagined community* (cf. Anderson, 2006). We argue that some level of *vagueness* is a condition for the idea of an *imagined community*.

Within a cultural studies approach we see a tendency to make representations of cultures. There is a focus on recording and representing a culture as coherent (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Smelser, 1993). This tendency is also present within previous studies of Ezidis. In his research of doubt, Maurice Bloch (2013) states the consequence of this tendency to make representations: "There is indeed a tendency to try to misleadingly push informants to explain things until these are clear and categorical, thereby obscuring the equally important ethnographic fact of the presents of uncertainty" (Bloch, 2013, p. 55).

### Studying the Vague

This investigation of the vague and confusing proved challenging and confusing to us as we are so accustomed to the classical way of studying cultures through clear representation. Time and time again we found ourselves confused by the informants' confusing and ambiguous statements. The statements could not easily be analyzed and let alone described. Perhaps this is also why the study of vagueness, incoherency and ambiguity is so rarely found.

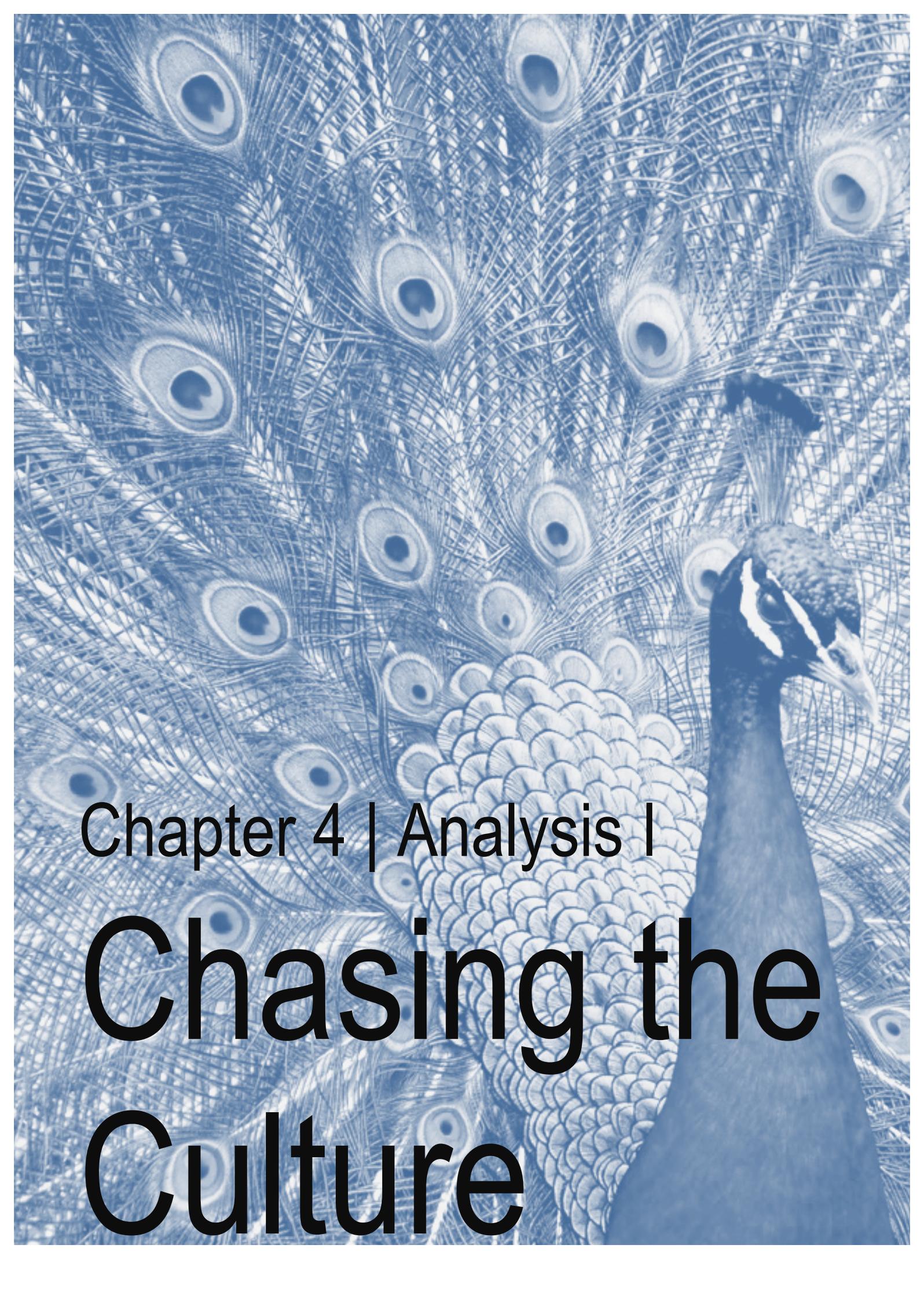
Being aware of the tendency to make representations, made us wonder how social scientists deal with the incoherent - the *gray area*. Our conceptualization of *vagueness* draws inspiration from the research of anthropologists Kathleen Stewart (2008) and Rane Willerslev (2004), who both go beyond the traditional cultural studies approach of studying forms of living through representation. In their research of the incoherent, confused and vague they challenge an absolute representation of culture and cosmologies. They argue the world is unfinished and that this fact needs to be taken into account when attempting to record and comprehend it. In the same way, we have to take the incoherency in the narratives of our informants into account.

In Stewart's (2008) study of everyday life in West Virginia, she draws a parallel to Eve Sedgwick's (1997) idea of 'weak theory'. Weak theory is described as theory that considers the incoherent in contrast to 'strong theory' that aims to account for coherence between analytical objects and the world (Stewart, 2008, p. 72). Stewart's (2008) aim is not to get a correct representation but rather to follow "the things that don't just *add up*, but takes on life of their own" (p. 72) She emphasizes the world as unfinished arguing that everything in this world is indefinite (Stewart, 2008, p. 80). She argues for the value of looking at "the moment itself when an assemblage of discontinuous yet mapped elements throws itself together into something" (Stewart, 2008, p. 73). Stewart's (2008) opposition to an absolute representation in an unfinished world supports our focus on the incoherent and how it can take on meaning of its own.

In the same way, Willerslev (2004) looks into the incoherent in his research of the cosmology of the Yukaghirs, a small group of indigenous hunters in north-eastern Siberia. During his fieldwork among Yukaghir hunters, Willerslev (2004) finds their spiritual knowledge to be vague and confused. Contrary to a previous study of the Yukaghir that outline a clear-cut representation of the spiritual beings, Willerslev (2004) encounters no such representation. Instead he finds that the Yukaghir hunters have limited and confused knowledge about the spirits. Yet, he argues that despite the lack of linguistic representation the knowledge takes on life in the everyday activities of the Yukaghirs (Willerslev, 2004). Willerslev's (2004) study of the meaningful in the vague and incoherent substantiates our concept of *vagueness*.

The research of Stewart (2008) and Willerslev (2004) emphasizes the importance of investigating the vague, incoherent and confusing - the *gray area*. Their perspectives support our argument that the *gray area* can take on meaning and become important for the investigation of the ethnic identity of Ezidis in Denmark.

The theoretical perspectives presented in the above will serve as analytical tools in the following analysis. Each perspective contributes to the investigation of the ethnic identity of Ezidis in Denmark. The views on ethnicity and diasporas respectively provide us with a grasp to examine the significance of a sense of belonging, ethnic boundaries, diaspora characteristics and collective memory, we encounter in the narratives of the informants. Yet, they proved inadequate in capturing the many ambiguous and often incoherent statements that we encountered. Therefore, we have included our concept of *vagueness* which allows us to examine the significance of the *gray area*.



Chapter 4 | Analysis I

# Chasing the Culture

## Analysis Part I: Chasing the Culture

In the following two chapters (4 & 5), the informants' narratives and our observations will be analyzed through the theoretical perspectives presented in the above. The analysis is divided in two main sections, which represent our attempt to find out how Ezidis in Denmark define their ethnic identity. In the first chapter (4) we cover our attempt to capture their culture. As we chase their culture, the informants emphasize who they are different from and it proves difficult to learn about their culture. We find that the ethnic identity of Ezidis are defined through ethnic boundaries to Muslims and that they in various ways identify with a Kurdish identity. In the second chapter (5), we describe the vagueness we encounter in the informants' narratives about their religion, traditions and culture. We include an analysis of how this vagueness allows for a flexibility necessary for the survival of the religion.

In our attempt to capture the ethnic identity of the Ezidis, we struggle to find out who the Ezidis are. When we ask the informants what it means to them to be Ezidi, most reply by stating who they are not. They stress that they are not Muslim. Their statements' emphasize an identification based on who they are not, instead of who they are. Hereby, constructing ethnic boundaries that become identifying for them as a group and as individuals (cf. Barth, 1969). The following will examine how the Ezidis construct these ethnic boundaries through the informants' narratives about Muslims and a Kurdish identity. Furthermore, a focus will be on how the ethnic boundaries or lack of these are instrumental in their current situation. We will draw on Barth's (1969) theory about ethnic groups and boundaries to examine how the informants construct and maintain boundaries and how these can become instrumental. Moreover, we will include theoretical perspectives on diasporas and collective memory. Parallels will be drawn to studies of Allison (2001), Collie, Kindon, Lui & Podsiadlowski (2010) and Kreyenbroek (2009) to support our arguments.

### 4.1. Boundaries to the Muslims

In our first meetings with the informants, we are curious to find out what it means to be Ezidi: *What are their traditions? What does their culture entail? What are their religious tales?* So we begin by asking the informants what it means to them to be Ezidi. It comes as a surprise to us that most of the informants answer this question

by telling us something about Muslims. They identify themselves through who they are not and they describe their group through the markers that make them different from other groups (cf. Barth, 1969). In the following, we will examine how the informants construct ethnic boundaries between Ezidis and Muslims.

## We are Not Muslim

A Monday evening in April we visit Yosef in his home in suburban Copenhagen. We are greeted by Yosef, his son and daughter in the hallway. Yosef's wife has taken their two younger daughters to the playground so there is peace and quiet for us to talk. The two oldest children retreat to their bedrooms again after saying hi to us. Yosef shows us to the living room where he has prepared coffee and cakes for us. We give him the cake and flowers that we have brought for them, which he arranges in the kitchen and adds to the other cakes on the coffee table. We sit down and begin by asking Yosef his thoughts on being Ezidi and he answers by telling us two childhood stories. Both stories do not involve Ezidi traditions or events, but instead describe negative encounters with Muslims. In the first story Yosef tells us about an incident where he and other relatives collected water from a well close to a Muslim village. They could see a few Muslim women hiding not far from them. When Yosef and his relatives had collected the water and left, the Muslim women went to the well to clean it. According to Yosef, the Muslim women believed the Ezidis made their well impure when they used it. Yosef further explains that this was the first time he felt discriminated against and felt like an outcast. He describes it as an experience he will never forget. He continues to the next story which is, likewise, a telling of Muslim neighbors who refuse to eat at his parents' house because they view the Ezidis as impure. By the end of the stories Yosef states:

*This is still the mindset of many Muslims. They regard us Ezidis as impure. This way of thinking is very wrong.*

(Yosef, M, 43, Turkey)

Yosef's identity as an Ezidi is closely connected to his negative experiences with Muslims. When we ask him about being Ezidi, the stories about who he is different to are the first thing that comes to his mind. His ethnic identity is, thus, defined by the boundary between Ezidis and Muslims rather than "the cultural stuff" that Ezidism encloses (cf. Barth, 1969).

Yosef, along with the other informants, base the difference between themselves and Muslims on a number of things, including the faith, prayers and view on women. We have arranged to visit Khalil on a Friday morning. We cycle to his house in suburban Copenhagen, park our bikes in the driveway and ring the doorbell. The door opens and we are greeted by Khalil, his wife, Taghrid, and two of their children, Afran and Sosin. We are invited into their living room, where we sit down on the couches around a coffee table filled with cakes, biscuits and fruit. Taghrid goes to the kitchen to make tea and coffee. Khalil tells us how happy they are to have us and we thank them for having us. Taghrid brings coffee and tea and sits down next to Khalil on the couch across from where we are sitting. We end up staying for the rest of the afternoon and discuss many different

topics with the family. Khalil does most of the talking and Afran acts as an occasional translator when Khalil needs help. We begin the conversation by asking them about their faith and Khalil answers by comparing Ezidism to Islam:

*If the sun goes away we would all die, but if Mecca one day disappeared Earth would still stand and nothing would happen.*

(Khalil, M, 55, Iraq)

This statement suggests that Khalil believes worshipping the sun, as the Ezidis do, is superior to the religious traditions of Islam. Khalil goes on to describe an Ezidi prayer, another religious custom that most of the informants likewise present to us. He tells us that within Ezidism first you pray for peace for all others and thereafter you pray for your own family and yourself. His point is to emphasize how the Muslims only pray for themselves:

*You have to think about others first. You have to respect the important things and you have to be good. This is opposite for the Muslims. They pray to God about all good for the Muslims.*

(Khalil, M, 55, Iraq)

This suggests that Khalil finds Ezidis better than Muslims, as Ezidis pray for all human beings whereas Muslims only pray for themselves.

We visit Alal and Hassan one afternoon in their home in suburban Copenhagen. We are greeted by the couple in the hallway. They have just returned from an Ezidi wedding in Sweden. Alal shows us into a warm living room with sofas all along the walls. In the middle of the room is a coffee table, which is soon filled with baklava, sweets, dates, samosas, tea and coffee. Two peacocks and a picture of the temples in Lalish<sup>5</sup> decorate the living room along with a wide array of souvenirs from various holiday destinations. Hassan is preparing the dinner for us in the kitchen while we talk to Alal in the living room. As we talk to Alal about being Ezidi, she describes a dissimilarity between Muslims and Ezidis. She points out that Muslims want to expand Islam and claims that Muslims want everyone to convert to Islam. This is a clear distinction to Ezidism as it is a non-missionary religion with no option to convert. Ezidism is, thus, displayed in contrast to Islam as a peaceful religion, which does not control others or dictate others' way of living. Through utterances like these, the informants reflect a positive image of the Ezidis and simultaneously build boundaries towards Muslims. They stress that they are not Muslims, and this is an important factor of identification for them.

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<sup>5</sup> Home of the Ezidi holy temples in Iraqi Kurdistan.

## View on Women

Some informants also point out the difference between the Islamic and the Ezidi view on women. Alal explains that Ezidi men have a positive and supportive attitude towards women unlike the Muslim men, who focus on what women are not allowed to do. She says:

*In Islam 'this is haram<sup>6</sup> and that is haram'. Our men do not say this. Our men give us permission. Our men don't hold us back.*

(Alal, F, 53, Iraq)

We meet Soran in his brother's café in the center of Copenhagen. Soran lives in Sweden with his wife from Iraq, so we agree to meet him an evening after he finishes work in the city. He tells us that him and his wife have just bought a house in suburban Copenhagen. He is looking forward to move back as they have only been living in Sweden due to the strict laws on family reunification in Denmark. We ask Soran about his membership of the Ezidi Culture Association in Denmark and their activities. He tells us about the event they just had to celebrate the International Women's Day. In connection to this, Soran mentions the role of the women in the Association and he describes how the Ezidi view on women are different from the Islamic:

*The women could be a bit more active [in the Association]. We push and encourage them to take more responsibility. This is not like the Muslims who pressure their women to step back.*

(Soran, M, 33, Iraq)

The statements above suggest the informants define themselves through the markers that make them different from Muslims. When asked about who they are, they tell us who they are not. This ethnic boundary stands out as a significant marker for their ethnic identity as Ezidis.

## Being Mistaken for a Muslim

Barth (1969) takes an instrumentalistic view on ethnic identity in his theory on ethnic boundaries as he argues how ethnic groups construct boundaries to set themselves apart from other groups. In this way, ethnicity becomes a tool that ethnic groups can use to serve different aims. In the case of the Ezidis, the boundary making becomes useful for them in order to position themselves favourably and distinguish themselves from the negative discourse on Muslims in Denmark. This negative discourse is seen in the media, political debates, national legislation and the general attitude of the Danish citizens. This discourse depicts Muslim migration as the cause for many of the problems in the Danish society. Involuntarily, the informants are a part of this discourse because the Danes do not distinguish between Muslims and Ezidis. This can influence their emphasis

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<sup>6</sup> Islamic term used to describe something which is forbidden.

on the differences between Ezidis and Muslims. Many of the informants' statements indicate that it is not beneficial for the informants to be mistaken as Muslims. In connection to Barth (1969) this can be seen as a reason for the Ezidis to construct and maintain boundaries between the two groups.

As we talk to Alal in her living room, we notice the many academic books on a shelf next to us and the conversation falls on Alal's education and job. Alal studied pedagogy and she now works as a nursery teacher. As we talk about her job, Alal tells us how she is often mistaken for a Muslim and that this is problematic for her in connection to the job market in Denmark. She describes how at job interviews she has to explicitly point out that she is not Muslim. She explains:

*It is true that I have black hair and my name is Alal, but I am not Muslim. I am a nursery teacher. Often I have to say this in the beginning of interviews, because there are many prejudices about Muslims.*

(Alal, F, 53, Iraq)

From Alal's experience, Danes mistake her for a Muslim because of her appearance, origin and name. As she explains, there are prejudices about Muslims and she does not want to be mistaken for a Muslim as it will decrease her chances of getting the job. In her interaction with others she, therefore, describes herself by what she is not, instead of explaining what she is. It is especially interesting that she makes being a nursery teacher the counterpart to being Muslim and not the fact that she is Ezidi. The essential becomes a separation from Muslims. When defining her identity Alal constructs a boundary towards Muslims. According to Barth (1969) it is, in this way, exactly the boundaries which are important in the construction of the ethnic group.

The general negative attitude and antipathy towards Muslims in Denmark are a challenge for the Ezidis as they are often assumed to be Muslim. The informants mention how it is both Danes as well as non-Ezidi immigrants in Denmark who wrongly assume that they are Muslims. Rajo tells us about his experiences in pizzerias: Rajo points to the fact that pizza shops in Copenhagen are often run by immigrants with Muslim background. He explains that when he orders pizza with ham, the employees ask if he is aware that he is ordering pork. Thereby, the Muslims in the pizzerias assume that he was Muslim. Rajo's experience resembles Alal's experience at the job interviews where the interviewer mistake her for a Muslim. Instead of focusing on her professional skills the interviewer asks a question concerning Alal's assumed Muslim background. Alal explains:

*Then they asked the question: 'If there is pork, what do you do?' [I answered] 'I will roll up my sleeves and eat first and show the children how they eat'.*

(Alal, F, 53, Iraq)

The question from the interviewer is connected to a current debate in Denmark concerning a ban on pork in Danish kindergartens. This issue has been a highly discussed matter concerning Islamic influence in Denmark. Alal elaborates how she explicitly has to point out that she is not Muslim and that afterwards the interviewer apologized for asking the question.

A similar example is presented in a study of Assyrian<sup>7</sup> women living in New Zealand (Collie et al., 2010). The study focuses on identity negotiation in everyday situations. This study shows that the Assyrian women, like the Ezidis, are often mistaken for Muslims because of their Iraqi origin. As a result, the women quickly underline that Assyrians are Christians and not Muslim when meeting new people. They, moreover, stress that they are very different from Iraqi Muslims and that they are 'good people' (Collie et al., 2010, p. 213). The Ezidis, thereby, have similar experiences as other minority groups and a focus on being different from Muslims. They build boundaries between them by implying that their group are the better people.

In a further discussion with Alal, she explains that people's attitude towards her is dependent on whether they think she is Muslim or not. She describes this as we talk about an incident at a Christmas party during an internship at a kindergarten:

*I had told them that I was not Muslim and that I eat pork and drink alcohol. But we [Ezidis] fast three days in December [during the time of the Christmas party], so they completely changed their opinion of me: 'but you said that you were not Muslim'.*

(Alal, F, 53, Iraq)

A specific Ezidi tradition in December includes a three-day fast, which Alal's co-workers associated with the Muslim Ramadan tradition. Because she was fasting they assumed she was Muslim and not Ezidi. Alal interpreted the co-workers reaction as a clear example of a Danish negative attitude towards Muslims. Her narrative shows her belief that she is only accepted by the co-workers because she is Ezidi. If she was Muslim she would not be accepted in the same way.

In a likewise manner, both Alal and Soran describe how people they encounter in Denmark have a positive attitude towards them because they tell them they are Ezidi and not Muslim. In connection with our discussions about Muslims and Islam, Alal claims that Muslims have bombs and Soran states that Ezidis do not practice honor killings like Muslims. Hereby, both Alal and Soran demonstrate negative prejudices against Muslims. In his study on the Ezidis, Kreyenbroek (2009) also encounters negative prejudices against Muslims as an informant claims that Muslims will kill to defend their honor (p. 55). The distinction that the informants stress between Muslims and themselves can be seen as a tool to build boundaries between the two groups and to distance oneself from potential negative associations. Thus, during the conversations they identify themselves as not being Muslim.

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<sup>7</sup> The Assyrians are an ethnic religious minority of Christian faith originating from ancient Mesopotamia (today, Iraq and the surrounding countries) (Collie et. al, 2010).

## The Good Immigrants

When discussing the issue of immigration in Denmark with Soran, he argues that Muslim immigrants are creating problems for other immigrants such as the Ezidis. He underlines that Ezidis are 'the good immigrants' and they are affected negatively by the actions of other immigrants, referring to Muslims:

*There are many of these second and third generation immigrants, who are living off benefits in the ghetto. We are not like this. We Ezidis are not Muslims.*

(Soran, M, 33, Iraq)

Later on, when we talk about the strict immigration laws in Denmark, Soran elaborates:

*There are different immigrants. We are the innocent. We didn't do anything, but we suffer from what the others did.*

(Soran, M, 33, Iraq)

Generally speaking, the informants refer to all Ezidis as a 'we' when they stress the markers that make 'us' different from 'them'. Their narratives suggest a sense of being one and the same and a general idea that all Ezidis are the same. This indicates a sense of belonging to an *imagined community* (cf. Anderson, 2006). They do not know every Ezidi, however, their narratives suggest a certainty that all Ezidis are good people. The informants talk about all Ezidis as a coherent group, as a 'we', and as all Ezidis act and think the same.

## Muslim Immigration in Denmark

Further in the discussion, Soran questions why Denmark does not do more to limit Muslim immigration or choose which immigrants are allowed in the country. It becomes clear through the conversation that he distinguishes between immigrants from Muslim countries and other immigrants:

*It is Ezidis and Christians we [in Denmark] have the best experiences with. If you have bad experiences with Turks then maybe you should stop inviting them in.*

(Soran, M, 33, Iraq)

He goes even further in his argument by stating that Denmark should favor Ezidis over Muslims as Muslim immigrants are at risk of becoming islamist:

*Why would you not rather have Ezidis than Afghans? This is not to speak badly about Afghans or others who could become extremist islamists.*

(Soran, M, 33, Iraq)

We are surprised by Soran's straight-forward and quite hostile arguments against Muslims. His opinions are clear and his accusations that all Muslim immigrants can potentially become extremists are rather extreme themselves. However, the current Danish discourse about Muslim immigrants might be influencing Soran's statements. Much of the current public debate and political discussions reflect a general negative attitude towards Muslims in Denmark (Villesen, 2007; Brakstad, 2014; Jørgensen, 2016; Selmani 2017). Moreover, there is a tendency of fearing Islamic influence on society as well as Islamist terrorism. By feeding the negative discourse on Muslims while stressing difference between Ezidis and Muslims, Soran may be constructing his ethnic identity to position himself and Ezidis better in the Danish society.

### Identifying With the Danes

In contrast to the informants' emphasis on the differences between Ezidis and Muslims, we notice how the informants try to approach us "the Danes". Most of the informants stress that they drink alcohol and eat pork like the Danes. When we arrive at Khalil and his family's house in the late hours of the morning, Khalil offers us a beer. We kindly reject his offer as we normally do not drink beer this early in the day. Yet, we suspect that his point of offering us the beer is because we are Danish and he wants to show us that he is allowed to drink beers as well. It becomes a way for him to stress that he is similar to Danes but different from Muslims.

As we talk about the job market in Denmark and the job situation of the informants, some of them mention that it has been hard for them to get a job because of their foreign names. Rajo has taken the consequence and has officially changed his name in 2010, because he found it problematic to have a Kurdish name in Denmark:

*I have officially changed my name to Robert in 2010, because Rajo is problematic. Only my friends and family still call me Rajo. Otherwise I'm called Robert. My colleagues call me Robert.*

(Rajo, M, 35, Armenia)

For Rajo as some of the other informants applying for jobs in Denmark with a foreign name has proved difficult. Thus, he has changed his name in the hope that a Danish-sounding name will increase his chances of getting a job. The name change allows him to resemble the Danes while differentiating from the Muslims, at least on paper.

In this way, the informants aim at telling us how they resemble us and differ from Muslims. This narrative becomes a tool to position themselves within the Danish society by addressing the negative discourse on Muslims. In this way, the narratives of the relationship with the hostland is instrumental in order to ensure a

boundary making towards the Muslims. It is a wish to prove to the ethnic Danes that Ezidis are not like Muslims. Thus reinforcing the making and maintaining of ethnic boundaries analyzed above. Their narratives, hereby, becomes an instrument to fit in, approach the Danes and open up new opportunities.

## Lack of Boundaries

While most informants stress the distinction to Muslims as we have shown in the above, we also encounter some informants who do not define themselves through this ethnic boundary. Rajo, Sosin and Said do not express a negativity towards Muslims. In fact Said does not recognize any significant differences between Ezidis and Muslims. He focuses on their similarities and the Kurdish identity instead. When we ask Rajo about Muslims, he tells us that there are no problems between Muslims and Ezidis in Denmark. These informants are, thus, not constructing their ethnic identity on the markers that make them different from Muslims.

When we ask 17-year-old Sosin whether she has any Ezidi friends, she tells us most of her friends are Muslim as she does not know any Ezidis her age. She chooses her friends on the basis of other qualities. However, she still acknowledges that there is a noticeable difference between her and her Muslim friends:

*I have no Ezidi friends. Everyone at my school are either Muslim or Danish. You know, everyone in Ishøj are immigrants. I am just friends with the people I like. But I can tell a difference between me and my Muslim friends.*

(Sosin, F, 17, Iraq)

To sum up, most informants distinguish themselves from Muslims, yet a few of the informants do not find this distinction particularly important.

## The Ezidi Sufferings: Oppressed by Muslims

Whether or not they explicitly differentiate themselves from Muslims, the statements suggest a clear memory shared between the informants about the sufferings caused on the Ezidis by their Muslim neighbors. They make it a point to tell us that their people has suffered for decades. They have a strong desire to retell these stories and communicate it to more people. They all tell us the story of a continuous oppression from their neighbors:

*There has been almost 80 attacks on Ezidis [...] We were vulnerable everywhere, we were afraid to say that we are Ezidis.*

(Alal, F, 53, Iraq)

Soran also mentions the memory of oppression:

*We have always been oppressed and controlled by the Muslims.*

(Soran, M, 33, Iraq)

The stories are the same. A strong collective memory of the genocides committed by Islamist groups on Ezidis and general oppression by their Muslim neighbors. The informants furthermore emphasize ISIS' current brutality against the Ezidis in the homeland. We are continuously told about the Ezidi girls and women, who are kidnapped by ISIS and sold as sex slaves. Soran explains the necessity to tell their stories of suffering:

*We wish that everyone knows about our sufferings. Otherwise people will think we have mental disorders. And perhaps we have. We are living with a trauma [...] After Daesh, the third of August 2014<sup>8</sup>, I am even more passionate about it. Before that all of the genocides were perhaps forgotten a bit.*

(Soran, M, 33, Iraq)

Soran states how the genocide in 2014 made him more passionate about the Ezidi cause. He wants everyone to know about all their sufferings. Commemoration of past events are important so people in the present know about their sufferings. Last year the Association planned a big event on the 3rd of August to commemorate the genocide in Sinjar. The informants tell us that they are planning to repeat the event this year. The statements suggest that the collective memory on persecution is very clear in the minds of the informants. As Eller (1999) points out, what is commemorated tells us a lot about the present situation of the group. Commemoration is instrumental and becomes a tool for obtaining a specific goal in the future.

Commemoration of the sufferings and persecution by Muslims reflect the Ezidis current situation in Denmark. Their commemoration plays into the negative discourse on Muslims, which prevails in Denmark. In this way, they attempt to create a favorable position for themselves amongst the Danes. Furthermore, some informants mention how they hope Denmark will welcome more Ezidis as quota refugees as Germany has done. Their commemoration can serve as a tool for promoting this agenda. In this way, Ezidis in Denmark share some of the characteristics of other diasporas as they have a collective memory of past events (cf. Cohen, 1997).

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<sup>8</sup> Referring to the genocide by ISIS on Ezidis in Sinjar, Iraq in 2014

### 4.1.1. Significance for Ezidi Ethnic Identity

The construction and maintenance of the boundary between Ezidis and Muslims becomes a significant factor in the ethnic identity of the Ezidis. As Barth (1969) argues, when investigating ethnic groups and what defines them, one must look at the markers that make the group different from other ethnic groups. When we talk to the informants they stress how they are different from Muslims. It becomes more important for them to talk about why they are not Muslim and where this is visible, than describing their Ezidi culture, traditions and knowledge. In their current situation in Denmark, we have seen how their ethnic identity and boundary making are instrumental. It becomes a way for Ezidis to separate themselves from the negative discourse surrounding Muslims. Furthermore, the informants' statements suggest a strong collective memory within the group on the sufferings and oppression of their people caused by their Muslim neighbors. Thus, the collective memory also serves as a tool to uphold the ethnic boundary and promote the Ezidi agenda.

What we become aware of here, is the result of the informants' focus on the ethnic boundaries between themselves and others. The result is that the informants ultimately tell us nothing about Ezidis and their culture. They construct their identity of all the things they are not instead of talking about all "the cultural stuff" that their group entails (cf. Barth, 1969). Their identity appears vague and perhaps this is their exact point. It emphasizes the importance of looking further into this vagueness when examining the narratives of the informants. When we ask the informants about "the cultural stuff" their narratives appear vague and ambiguous. Thus, supporting our argument that a classical mapping of the Ezidi identity will not make sense, which is why we include the concept of vagueness to examine how the informants define their ethnic identity and how they keep the religion alive. An extensive investigation of the vagueness of "the cultural stuff" will be presented in chapter 5. Yet, first it is relevant to look at the informants' statements about the Kurdish identity, which is closely related to their statements about Muslims, presented above.

## 4.2. Boundaries to the Kurds

As the informants talk about Muslims, we become aware of overlaps to a Kurdish identity. In the previous studies on Ezidis, the group is often described as a Kurdish religious minority (Allison, 2001; Maisel, 2008). Yet, some scholars suggest that some Ezidis wish to distinguish themselves from the Kurdish identity as they feel betrayed by their Muslim Kurdish neighbors (Allison, 2016; Kreyenbroek, 2009). Therefore, we find it interesting to ask the informants more about their Kurdish identity and we find that some of the informants define themselves as Kurdish whereas other informants define themselves as different from a Kurdish identity. The informants' narratives about a Kurdish identity appear defining for their ethnic identity. The boundary making between (or a lack hereof) the Ezidis and the Kurds will be elaborated in the following. Furthermore, we encounter vagueness in the narratives about a Kurdish identity, which we will look at further in the following.

## We are the Original Kurds

When talking to the informants it becomes clear that there are many different attitudes about a Kurdish identity. The informants' narratives intertwine ethnicity, nationality, religion and culture. In academia, there is a distinction between the Kurdish ethnicity and the Kurdish religions. In her study of ethno-religious communities, Arakelova (2010) argues that the Ezidis are an ethno-religious group, which encompasses "the unity of both the Yezidi (religious) identity and the Yezidi ethnicity" (p. 3). She bases her argument on the fact that Ezidism is a non-missionary religion with a strict endogamy (Arakelova, 2010). In this way Ezidism can be seen as a distinct ethnicity belonging to Kurdistan. However, this becomes confusing since other religions also claim that they belong to Kurdistan. In this way, the Ezidis are confronted with a Kurdish identity. The informants' statements about a Kurdish identity becomes confusing as we are presented with various perspectives. Some informants do not question the fact that Ezidis have a Kurdish identity. They view the Ezidi identity and the Kurdish identity as the same. Others do not identify as Kurdish at all. Thus, some of the informants construct a clear boundary to the Kurdish ethnic group, whereas other informants see the Kurdish and Ezidi identity as inseparable - without boundaries. However, the boundary towards Muslims also becomes noticeable in the informants' statements about a Kurdish identity, as some of the informants create boundaries towards the Muslim Kurds.

A number of the informants present a narrative about the common history between the Muslim Kurds and the Ezidi Kurds. The informants argue that in the past Ezidism was the religion of all Kurds. However, Muslim missionaries forced the majority of Kurds to convert to Islam. As Alal explains to us:

*We are the original Kurds. Muslims have all been Ezidis, but they were forced: 'Will you become Muslim and we protect you or will you die'?*

(Alal, F, 53, Iraq)

She, thereby, refers to Ezidis 'the original Kurds', because she trust they are the only ones still upholding the original Kurdish religion. As Allison (2001) describes, in her work on the oral tradition of Ezidis in Kurdistan, this notion of Ezidis being 'the original Kurds' was promoted by the Kurdish government in the 1990s, because it proved beneficial in the construction of the national myth (p. 38). Allison (2001), furthermore, points out that almost every informant in her research presents the information of being 'the original Kurds' (p. 41). Likewise, this is a general narrative which we encounter in the informants' statements. Yosef tells how Muslim missionaries forced the majority of Kurds to convert. He, moreover, explains that some areas and villages were not affected by this and these places are where you find most of the Ezidis.

When talking to the informants about Kurdistan, we note characteristics typical for diasporas (cf. Shuval, 2000; Cohen, 1997). The informants' statements indicate an idealization of the ancestral home, Kurdistan. Some of the informants mention a desire to return to the homeland and they share reflections on belonging to Kurdistan. All informants note that Ezidis have a right to the homeland. When we ask Soran about his thoughts on his homeland, he claims that Kurdistan belongs to Ezidis:

*If there will be a Kurdistan then I would assume that I'm Kurdish. But then the Ezidis have autonomy. We are the original Kurds. It is our country.*

(Soran, M, 33, Iraq)

Like Alal, Soran also describes Ezidis as 'the original Kurds'. He believes that if Kurdistan becomes a nation the Ezidi have a right to the land. According to Soran, their status as 'the original Kurds' give them the right to govern the nation. Yet, Soran elaborates that this belief might not be shared by the Muslim Kurdish majority, as they do not recognize it. Nevertheless, as we discuss the same issue with Alal, she explains that some Muslim Kurds are aware of their origin. When we talk to Alal about friendships and relationships with Muslims she describes that she has some Muslim Kurdish friends, who told her that their grandparents were forced to convert to Islam. Alal tells us that it is their acknowledgement of this which is the reason she can be good friends with them. Additionally, when we discuss the issue of conversion with Yosef, he, likewise, declares that many Muslim Kurds are aware of their religious origin as Ezidis. Allison (2001) correspondingly describes that many Muslims, who she encounters through her studies acknowledge that they were previously Ezidis and some of them take pride in this (p. 38). The statements above suggest that some of the informants define themselves and other Ezidis as Kurdish by emphasizing a boundary between Ezidis, as the original Kurds, and the Muslim Kurds.

## Kurdish or Not?

Some informants have a strong identification with a Kurdish identity. An example of this is Said. When we arrange to meet Said he invites us to celebrate the Kurdish New Year, Newroz, with him. He is excited that we are going to join him for the celebration and he tells that there will be speeches, bonfire and dancing at the Townhall Square in Copenhagen. We speak to Said about what it means to him to be Kurdish and he explains, that he views himself as, first and foremost, Kurdish:

*I am Kurdish first. My nationality is most important. Then religion comes second. Because countries fall because of religion. All kurds think the same. Religion is number two.*

(Said, M, 25, Syria)

Said, thereby, states that to him being Kurdish is a matter of belonging to a nationality, whereas being Ezidi is a matter of religion only. He, furthermore, states that all Kurds have the same opinion about this. However, this is not what we observe through the interviews. On the contrary, we find a broad variation of different interpretations of being Kurdish amongst the informants. In our further talk with Said, he claims that there are no issues between the Kurds. Said identifies with the Kurdish ethnic group and instead emphasizes a boundary to non-Kurdish Muslims.

On a cold Sunday afternoon, we are invited for a cup of coffee and a talk in Yosef's allotment garden. We are greeted by Yosef and as we shake his hand we notice that he has a ring with a Kurdish flag on his finger. The

garden has a little hut with a few couches and a gas stove, where he boils water for our coffee. The walls of the hut are decorated with the Kurdish flag and Ezidi ornaments. It seems Yosef strongly identifies with a Kurdish identity. Yosef describes that he is involved in various work regarding the Kurdish cause both in different associations and through political work. He explains:

*Kurdish is my ethnicity, but we also have Ezidi traditions which have to be celebrated, you see.*

(Yosef, M, 43, Turkey)

Yosef, moreover, tells us that he sees himself as both Ezidi and Kurdish, but being Ezidi comes first to him. However, it is noticeable how much focus Yosef has on the Kurdish cause. We become aware that he is passionate about political matters, which will be elaborated on later. As Said, Yosef does not create a boundary to the Muslim Kurds, instead his statements indicate a boundary making to non-Kurdish Muslims. When we talk to Alal about her view on having a Kurdish identity, she describes a very different point of view. She states:

*If we say we are Kurds, it means that we are in doubt.*

(Alal, F, 53, Iraq)

When we ask her, she elaborates this point of view through an anecdote from a discussion in the Association regarding their logo:

*We had a big discussion about what our symbol should look like. With or without the Danish and the Kurdish flag. I think it should be a symbol of the culture. Without flags. We don't doubt that we are Danish and Kurdish. Some people wear a flag on a ring or clothes, but it shows that they are in doubt.*

(Alal, F, 53, Iraq)

Thereby, Alal, states that it goes without saying that Ezidis have a Kurdish identity and if you feel the need to state it, it means that you are doubting it. Thus, by needing to expose it you show uncertainty.

Another factor that many of the informants stress when talking about what the Kurdish identity is the fact that Ezidis speak the Kurdish language dialect Kurmanji. Consequently, they are automatically connected to the Kurds. Nevertheless, the connection is not as simple. Despite the fact that all Ezidis speak Kurdish and, as Alal's states, no Ezidi should doubt that they are Kurdish, we note that some informants do doubt their Kurdish identity. As Soran describes:

*I am both Kurdish and not, but what does it mean to be Kurdish? It is a gray area. I speak Kurdish. I am the original Kurd not a Muslim Kurd.*

(Soran, M, 33, Iraq)

As Soran's statement implies, it appears to be difficult for some informants to pinpoint exactly what the Kurdish identity means to them. He explains it as a *gray area*. Here, we find vagueness as he doubts his Kurdish identity. Like Soran, Khalil and Taghrid also make statements about the Kurdish identity that are characterized by ambiguity and vagueness.

When talking to Khalil, we also discuss his view on having a Kurdish identity. Khalil claims that his Kurdish identity is secondary to his Ezidi identity. He elaborates:

*Kurds belong to Kurdistan. Centuries ago I would say Kurdish first, but not anymore. Now I would say Ezidi, because I feel betrayed. We are Ezidis first, but we speak Kurdish.*

(Khalil, M, 55, Iraq)

Thereby, Khalil states that his view on being Kurdish has changed over time. This indicates an instrumental use of the Kurdish identity. As Khalil used to identify primarily as Kurdish, but because he feels betrayed by the Kurds he now identifies primarily as Ezidi. Khalil explains that he feels betrayed by Kurdish Peshmergas<sup>9</sup>, because he does not think they defended the Ezidis during the genocide in 2014, as well as a general feeling of lack of protection by their Kurdish neighbors. The Kurdish identity becomes a matter of choice for Khalil and it is dependent on the circumstances. While we are discussing this issue with Khalil his wife, Taghrid, who is preparing lunch for us, stops and joins the conversation and adds her opinion:

*I really do not understand why we confuse the two. It is two different things. I am not Kurdish. Ezidi is religion. Kurdish is politics. We should not confuse them.*

(Taghrid, F, 45, Iraq)

This information, that Taghrid did not identify as Kurd, was highly confusing to us, because all other informants expressed identification, to some degree, with being Kurdish. Taghrid elaborates that she is from a village in Iraq, not in Kurdistan, which was dominated by Arabs. She, thus, grew up only speaking Arabic, even though she is Ezidi. Because of her background, geographic origin and language she, thereby, does not identify as Kurdish at all. In this way, Taghrid's statement about a Kurdish identity separates her from the other informants. This indicates that one's individual background also influences one's ethnic identity.

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<sup>9</sup> Kurdish nationalist guerrilla organization.

Thus, the way in which the informants identify as being Kurdish are varying. In his research amongst Ezidis living in Germany, Kreyenbroek (2009) observes the same. He notes how the Ezidis describe the relationship between the Ezidi and Kurdish identity in many different ways (Kreyenbroek, 2009, p. 212). All of the informants make statements of belonging to or being separated from a Kurdish identity. Each has a different way of looking at this issue. The boundaries between the Ezidi identity and the Kurdish identity are, thus, everything from non-existent, mixed or unclear to fully drawn. Some informants define the Kurdish identity as a part of their ethnic identity, whereas other informants define themselves as being different from the Kurds. Thus, the statements suggest vagueness in the ethnic identity of Ezidis.

### The Kurdish Identity Becomes Instrumental

Another point of interest related to the Kurdish issue is politics. As Taghrid points out in the quote above, matters of Kurdistan and a Kurdish identity are often related to political interests. When a conversation with Soran turns to the subject of Kurdistan, he is eager to tell us his opinion. Soran underlines that political aspects always comes into play when talking about Kurdistan and being Kurdish. He also believes that it is a matter of pressure from the government in Kurdistan that Ezidis say they are Kurdish. Soran does not explain this in further detail, but argues that all politically active Ezidis claim that they, as well as all other Ezidis, are Kurdish. He supports this argument by saying that Yosef claims that all Ezidis are Kurds, because he is politically active. A few weeks later in our conversation with Yosef he states that all Ezidis are Kurds. When we ask Soran why he thinks Ezidis say they are Kurdish, he explains:

■ *It is to protect yourself or to be accepted that you call yourself Kurdish.*

(Soran, M, 33, Iraq)

Later on in the same conversation with Soran we talk about the children in the Association. Soran arranges events for Ezidi children to encourage them to learn about Ezidism and for them to get to know each other. He explains that when he was a child there were no initiatives like this. He felt lonely and had to lean on the Kurds instead because there were no Ezidis. Thus, when Soran was a child he identified with the Kurds, because he did not have other options. This is an example of how the Kurdish identity becomes situational and instrumental for the Ezidis.

### The Kurdish Cause

Yosef is, as Soran points out, highly politically engaged in the Kurdish cause. In our conversations with Yosef, he emphasizes his political engagement. Yosef tells us that he is a long term member of a Kurdish socialist party and he is the party's representative in Denmark. He is, furthermore, a member of various Kurdish associations in Denmark including the joint union for the many Kurdish associations in Denmark. Yosef tells us that on his initiative the Ezidi Culture Association is also a member of the Kurdish union. He explains that it is highly

important for the Ezidis to be a part of the union as he believes it is an advantage for them and they can help each other. Yosef says:

*When we commemorate [the genocide in Sinjar in 2014], we invite the Kurdish associations. Who else would come? They are helping us.*

(Yosef, M, 43, Turkey)

The link between the Ezidis and the Kurds in Denmark are, thus, valuable for Yosef. It seems that because the Ezidis originate from Kurdistan the Ezidis can, if beneficial, take on a Kurdish identity. In Yosef's case this Kurdish identity gives power and importance to his Ezidi identity, because it provides him with network and support. Allison (2001) supports this as she claims that "Yezidi identity politics are closely tied to their discourses of origin. A perceived past identity is a key part of present identity, and by claiming descent from powerful groups of the past one can increase one's present power" (Allison, 2001, p. 40). This argument can be connected to the theory of collective memory. As Tint (2010) argues memory is important in the creation of identity. Yosef's narratives ascribe to a shared collective memory with the Kurds, which allows him to identify with a Kurdish identity. One can argue that the Kurdish identity is instrumental as it serves as a tool for Yosef to promote his interests as the Kurdish cause entails more international political influence than the Ezidi cause.

Rajo, likewise, claims that the Kurdish identity is connected to political issues. However he argues for the opposite reason than the previous example. Rajo sees himself as Kurdish but he explains why some Ezidis do not:

*The ones who say that they are not Kurds, it is political. It is after the massacre where the Peshmergas left Sinjar that [Ezidis] said they were not Kurds anymore.*

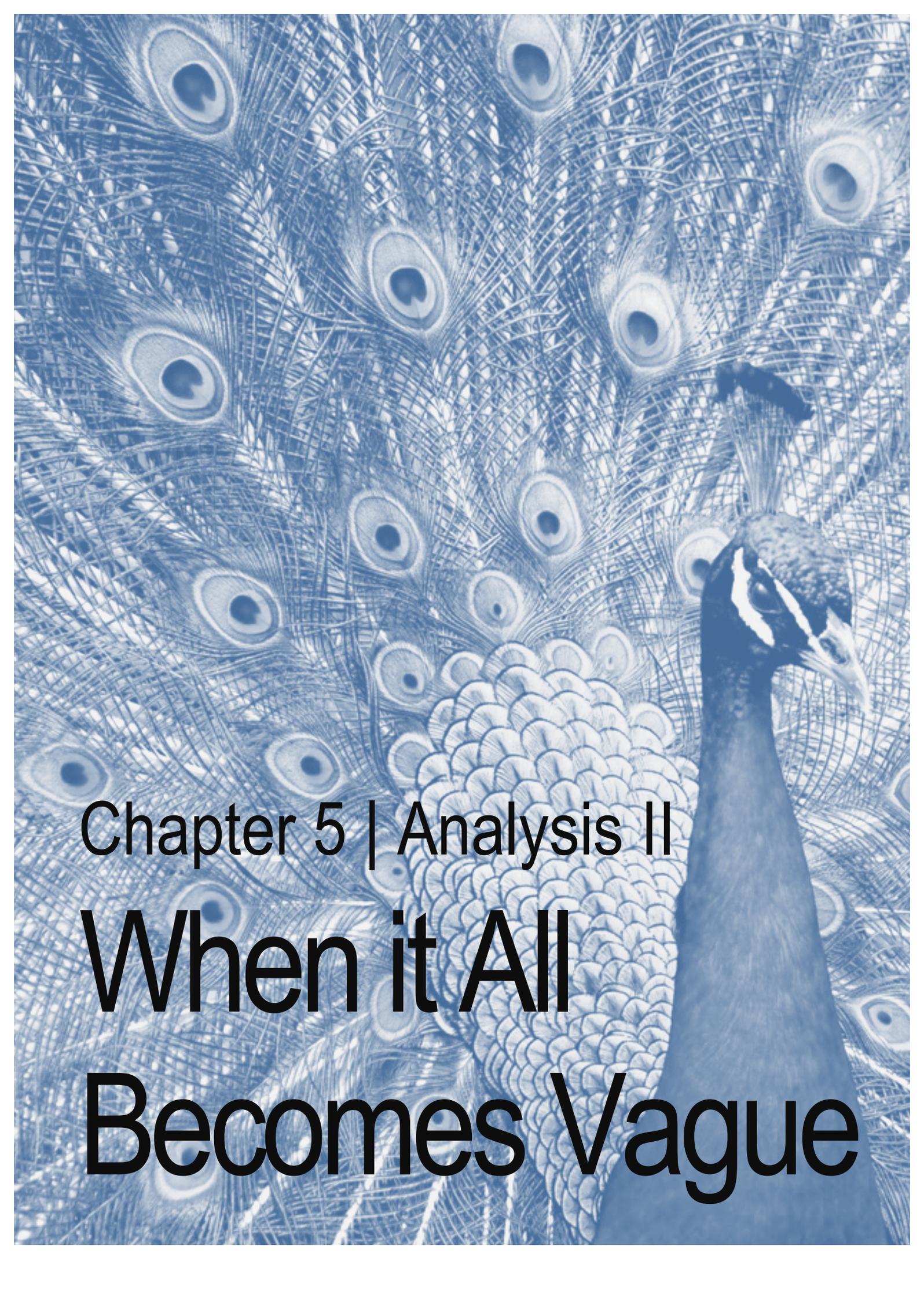
(Rajo, M, 35, Armenia)

Thus, not identifying as Kurdish can also be political, Rajo argues. The same example is brought up by Yosef, who elaborates how some Ezidis felt betrayed by Kurdish militants and hence stopped identifying as Kurds. The event which Rajo and Yosef refer to is Islamic State's attack on Ezidis in Sinjar in 2014, where the Peshmergas fled despite their promise to protect the area. Allison (2016) confirms this narrative, as she describes that many Ezidis who relied on the Peshmergas protection, stopped identifying as Kurdish after this incident (Allison, 2016, p. 6). In this way, our findings support existing research of Ezidis. By constructing this boundary the Ezidis can, arguably, emphasize their vulnerability as an attempt to gain international protection.

#### 4.2.1. Significance for Ezidi Ethnic Identity

We encounter confusion and ambiguity in their narratives about a Kurdish identity, which lead us to an investigation of the vague that further becomes evident in their narratives about "the cultural stuff". Some

informants see themselves as primarily Kurdish and other informants do not define themselves as Kurdish. Their attitudes reflect a mix of interests and different statements of belonging. It becomes difficult to understand the logic behind the answers and confusing to comprehend how it adds up. How, and if, the Ezidis identify as Kurds is ambiguous and vague. The Kurdish identity takes on an instrumental purpose through their vague identification. It seems as though the Kurdish identity can be adopted or rejected when it is beneficial. One can argue, that the fact that the informants define themselves through boundaries or lack of boundaries towards other groups are vague in itself as it says nothing about “the cultural stuff” that the group entails. Barth (1969) argues that it is not “the cultural stuff” that define the group, rather it is exactly the markers that are made significant by the members of a group as making their group different from other groups.



Chapter 5 | Analysis II

**When it All**

**Becomes Vague**

## Analysis Part II: When it All Becomes Vague

In our conversations with the informants, they do not tell us much about their faith, culture and traditions. As seen in the above, we do not know much about “the cultural stuff”. When we ask the informants what it means to them to be Ezidis they tell us how they are different from Muslims and how they identify with being Kurdish. We see two levels of vagueness in their narratives; First, is a vagueness in their various perspectives on Muslim and their identification with Kurds. Second, is a vagueness in their narratives when we ask them about “the cultural stuff”, the Ezidi religion and traditions.

We are presented with the *gray area* that the theoretical perspectives on ethnicity and diasporas fail to investigate. When we ask them about Ezidism, the narratives of the informants are ambiguous, incoherent and vague. The informants present multiple interpretations of the same stories. They omit the Ezidi New Year celebration. They turn to short and vague answers when asked about the rules of marriage. They are flexible in how they practice the traditions. All in all, their narratives are vague.

In the following, we will include our theoretical concept of vagueness in order to examine that significance of the *gray area* that we encounter in the narratives. We include the studies of Stewart (2008) and Willerslev (2004) to support our arguments. Furthermore, we include the perspectives of Claude Lévi-Strauss (1969) on kinship in order to investigate statements about marriages within the religion. The findings of Kreyenbroek (2009) and Usman & Amjad (2013) are included to support our points.

### 5.1. The Rules of Endogamy

Our initial research of the religion resulted in an apocalyptic view on the future of the religion, which was mainly triggered by the strict rules concerning the caste system and marriage. When we ask the informants about their faith, they mention the caste system and the marriage rules. It appears to be identifying for them. Therefore, in order to investigate their ethnic identity and how they keep the religion alive, the following will elaborate on the caste system and the rules of marriage.

All Ezidis belong to a specific caste. The main castes are *Sheikh*, *Pir* and *Murîd*. Other castes and sub-castes are mentioned in previous studies of the Ezidis as well as by our informants, yet these three are consistently mentioned as the main castes. Within Ezidism there applies two socio-religious rules of marriages to every Ezidi; “*sheriet*, marriage is permitted only to other Yezidis; *teriqet*, marriage is permitted only to members of your own socio-religious group (caste)” (Maisel, 2008, p. 2). Thus, within the religion there are two levels of endogamy that applies to all Ezidis. If an Ezidi fails to follow these rules, he or she is excommunicated from the

faith. Furthermore, outsiders are not allowed to convert to Ezidism. Thus, you are only Ezidi if both your parents are Ezidis (Allison, 2016).

We immediately thought that these rules must make it highly difficult (near impossible) for Ezidis in Denmark to marry, at least according to the rules. We saw the rules of marriage as a challenge to the existence of the group. In our logic, it will be difficult for the unmarried Ezidis living in Denmark following the rules of marriage to find a partner to marry.

### The Chances of Finding an Ezidi Partner

For the case of the argument we made a hypothetical calculation. Let us say that a 25-year-old Ezidi man named Isaac, from the Murîd caste, wants to get married. There are approximately 600 Ezidis living in Denmark. A quarter of these are unmarried and have the age for marriage (between 18 and 40 years of age). That leaves Isaac with 149 options for marriage. Homosexuality is not condoned in Ezidism since it, according to Khalil, goes against the natural way of things and therefore, you should marry the opposite sex. For the sake of the argument, we will say that there is an equal distribution between men and women. That leaves Isaac with 75 options. However, Isaac also has to follow the rule of teriqet and marry within his own caste, the Murîds. That leaves Isaac with 50 options for marriage. But if Isaac wants to marry someone around his own age (between 20 and 30 years old), there are only 20 options left. The remaining Murîd men Isaac's age are also "competing" for the same 20 women.

With these calculations in mind, we were under the assumption that some degree of flexibility to the endogamy rules must exist in order for the group to survive. Yet, when asked about this, our informants reject our assumption. Khalil tells us how he knew a couple, whose son got excommunicated because he married outside of the rules:

*I know two who said goodbye to their son because he has had a Danish girlfriend. You don't want the others to talk.*

(Khalil, M, 55, Iraq)

Khalil's statement suggests that the rules of marriage are followed. Furthermore, it suggests a social pressure from the family and other Ezidis to marry within the rules. This is also noted by Ahmed Usman and Aisha Amjad (2013) in their research of caste based endogamy in Punjabi villages. They note how social pressure from the community impels villagers to marry within the castes to keep the family name pure (Usman & Amjad, 2013, p. 348). In the same way, Kreyenbroek's (2009) research among the Ezidi diaspora in Germany notes how marrying out is seen as a taboo within Ezidism. People are afraid of talking about impure marriages, because they do not

want other people to talk and to see their family as impure (pp. 164-165). One of Kreyenbroek's (2009) informants even states how "Their doors are open, but their mouths are shut!" (p. 165) suggesting a degree of flexibility to the endogamy rules that no one talks about. Yet, when we talk to the informants we do not find the stories of flexibility to the marriage rules that we had expected. Soran, who belongs to the Sheikh caste, describes his marriage to his wife as him seizing an opportunity that was given to him:

*My marriage wasn't arranged by our families. My wife is also Sheikh. I found the opportunity and seized it. I was lucky to find a Sheikh, so I asked her if she wanted to marry me.*

(Soran, M, 33, Iraq)

Soran's statement indicates how it can be difficult to find a Sheikh and thus marry within the endogamy rules. Yet he finds himself lucky to have found a Sheikh. When we ask him more about how they met, he tells us that his wife was his childhood friend from Iraq and they met again when he went back to Iraq on a holiday and decided to get married. Soran is 33 years old and his wife is 27 years old. He left Iraq in 1994, which must have made his now-wife four years old at the time he left. He would have been almost 11 years old. Thus, whether they were actually childhood friends as Soran describes is questionable. Their families' relationship might have brought them together.

### Flexibility to the Rules of Endogamy

When we drink coffee with Khalil and his wife in their home on a Friday morning, and talk about their family, we ask them how they met. Khalil is a bit secretive when he answers:

*It is a secret [\*laughs\*]. We met each other at a ceremony in Lalish. Then we talked to each other for a little bit.*

(Khalil, M, 55, Iraq)

We wonder if Khalil's secrecy is because he finds our question too personal. Perhaps he does not want to share where he met his wife with us. However, his answer makes us curious as to why he says it is secret. Our subsequent talk reveals that their marriage entails some level of flexibility to the rules of endogamy. Khalil is Murîd, but Taghrîd is from the Qewwal clan. The Murîds and Qewwals are traditionally not allowed to marry:

*My wife is Qewwal, but we got married. Traditionally this is not allowed, but the rules are not that rigid.*

(Khalil, M, 55, Iraq)

This indicates that there is a level of flexibility to the prohibition against Murîds marrying Qewwal. Later in the day, when Taghrîd mentions that she is Arab and not Kurdish, we again note a flexibility within the religion. We think to ourselves that there must be some level of flexibility to the rules of marriage if an Arab Qewwal can marry a Kurdish Murîd.

### The Rules are Meant for Protection

We did, however, presume that the meetings with the informants would present us with further stories of Ezidis defying the marriage rules, stories of flexibility in the rules. Instead we are met with attempts to brush off our questions. Soran explains how the rules of endogamy is a way of protecting Ezidis from Muslims:

*[Marrying a Sheikh] is not something my family has pressured me to do, it is something I feel myself. I feel like I have a great responsibility to not in one generation kick everything down. I have had Danish girlfriends and that has been fine [...] The Muslims once tried to tell us [Ezidis] 'let's just marry each other'. Then they took our women, but didn't give us any women in return. Muslims have taken everything from us. So I will not make that mistake again. Because that was another form of genocide. Now we protect ourselves. They [the rules] have been forced on us by Islam. Islam has forced many things on the Ezidis [...] The rules have been made to protect us from the evil.*

(Soran, M, 33, Iraq)

The rules of endogamy are seen as a way to protect themselves from Muslims. They are a central part of the religion that if abolished Soran claims the religion will dissolve. When we ask Yosef about the endogamy and his thoughts on reformation, he explains how the rules of endogamy are seen as a central pillar in the religion, which if taken away will destroy the religion:

*But it is due to it being a taboo. Sex and reformation of the marriage rules are taboos. You believe that the castes are like a pillar in the religion and if you remove that pillar the religion will disappear. That is, if the castes disappear the religion will disappear.*

(Yosef, M, 43, Turkey)

### Finding a Partner for the Children

It proved surprisingly difficult to get the informants to reflect on our hypothetical calculations on possible marriageable Ezidis for themselves or their children. Instead our questions about the endogamy within the religion are answered with short answers and attempts by the informants to deflect our questions. Many of

their statements turn vague. Taghrid laughing notes how luckily her family is Murîds, so there are more to choose from for marriage:

■ *Fortunately we are Murîds, so there are more girls to choose between for our son.*

(Taghrid, F, 45, Iraq)

She is referring to the fact that the caste of Murîd is the largest within the religion and, therefore, the possibility for her son to marry according to the marriage rules are larger than if they belonged to one of the other castes. Her husband, Khalil, argues they will just find someone in Germany for their son if they cannot find anyone in Denmark:

■ *It is important that we meet [with other Ezidis]. Then we can also meet someone for my son.  
We can also go to parties in Germany to meet other [Ezidis].*

(Khalil, M, 55, Iraq)

Our talk about weddings encourages Taghrid to put on a film on the big TV screen in the living room from an Ezidi wedding Khalil attended with their daughters last year. When we watch the film, we also spot a few other members of the Association. All the guests are dancing and the bride and groom look very happy. Khalil tells us that the bride and groom in the video are both Murîds. As the majority of the Ezidis we have met or heard of, this couple too has complied with the endogamy rules. While we watch the couple dance, we ask their son, Afran, about his thoughts on the rules of endogamy and his possibility of marrying according to the rules. He deflects our question with a short and vague answer:

■ *I'll cross that bridge when I get to it.*

(Afran, M, 24, Iraq)

Afran is not interested in talking about marriage. Later in the day, his little sister Sosin informs us that their parents are already saving for Afran's wedding, which indicates that even though it is not an interest of Afran, it is important to his parents.

All informants from the parental generation hope that their children will marry according to the rules of endogamy. When we ask them what they will do if their children marry a non-Ezidi, their answers turn vague. They continually stress that they hope their children marry Ezidis and they will do everything they can to make it happen. But our persistent questions of how they will react if this fails silence the informants or barely lead to a shrug on the shoulders or an 'I don't know. Time will tell'. In relation to this, Kreyenbroek's (2009) research notes how the young Ezidis in Germany often feel inclined to marry within the religion, not because they believe this is the right thing to do, but because they are afraid of the damage it will do to their relationship with their

families if they do not. A few of the informants even see marrying out as resulting in an active persecution by their families (Kreyenbroek, 2009, pp. 166-169).

## Marriage Across Borders

Our conversations with the informants about marriage suggest a connection of some sorts between the Ezidis in Denmark and Ezidi diasporas in other countries as well as Ezidi communities in the homeland. It is characteristic for diasporas that their members have a relationship with co-ethnic members in our countries (cf. Cohen, 1997). The statements of the informants further indicate that this connection is of a somewhat reciprocal nature. It seems there is a mutual dependency on each other. The relationship with other co-ethnic members in other countries is the provider of women suitable for marriage. Marrying an Ezidi was highly important for Rajo and because he had difficulty finding an Ezidi woman suitable for marriage in Denmark he turned to the diaspora in Russia:

*That's why I went to Russia. We got married in the old fashioned way. The marriage was arranged because my dad knew her family [...] so we went to Russia to get [my wife].*

(Rajo, M, 35, Armenia).

When we talk about marriage, Yosef explains how his wife is a relative, who he met during a visit to his family in Germany:

*My wife is actually my relative. She is my father's aunt's daughter. We met in Germany. She is from Turkish Kurdistan, but has lived in Germany. We decided to get married.*

(Yosef, M, 43, Turkey)

## Women as a Reciprocal Gift

In consequence, the relationship between the Ezidis in Denmark and other Ezidi in other countries gain an instrumental purpose. It serves as a tool for accessing marriageable women and, in that, perhaps a savior of the endogamous religion. In this way, marriages between Ezidis relate to Lévi-Strauss' (1969) idea of the exchange of women as a reciprocal gift. Levi-Strauss (1969) argues that incest taboos, that is the prohibition of incest, encourage exogamy, marriage outside of one's family and, thus, form alliances with outside families. Thereby, Lévi-Strauss (1969) sees incest taboos as something positive. Inspired by Mauss' (1925) work on reciprocity and gift exchange, Lévi-Strauss (1969) compares women to gifts suggesting that women are the supreme gifts as they are essential for the reproduction of the group. He argues that the reciprocal exchange of women creates alliances and social bonds between different families (Lévi-Strauss, 1969). In the same way, the exchange of women within Ezidi communities can be seen as a way of forming alliances with outside families in order to

secure a reproduction that respect the incest taboos as well as the religious endogamy and secure the further existence of the religion.

When we talk to the informants about the endogamy rules, we are not met with a flexibility as we expect must be prevalent within the community. The parental generation do not acknowledge a problem for their children to marry according to the rules. We notice that the relationship of Ezidis in Denmark with co-ethnic members in other countries is instrumental as it serves a reciprocal purpose of providing their young men with women and, thus, secure a reproduction that can keep the religion alive.

## 5.2. Need for Reforms?

Even though the parents are unwilling to talk about the difficulties of their own children marrying according to the endogamy rules, they mention that for future generations it may be problematic. Yosef wants his children to marry according to the rules, however he acknowledges that it may be difficult for the future generations. In the same way we speak to Khalil about this. As we talk about his family and the future, he tells us he hopes that his children will marry other Murîds. Yet, he acknowledges that future generations will not be able to obey by the rules:

*Imagine in 50 years in Denmark [...] Maybe our children will be able to marry a Ezidi, we hope so. But our grandchildren probably won't be. We need reformation. Some say 'no no' but I think it is a good idea. It is good that we are talking about it. It is not dangerous.*

(Khalil, M, 55, Iraq)

Alal also acknowledges how the marriage rules will cause struggles for the future generations. Something that other Ezidi women will not accept according to her:

*It is important that there are talks about marriage. How does one do when you have to marry an Ezidi? I'm not afraid of admitting that it will be a problem for the next generations. I see the issue, but there are many [Ezidis] who are afraid of facing it. It is my communist approach [that allows me to]. It is not all women who dare face the problem.*

(Alal, F, 53, Iraq)

Their statements indicate some worry for future generations and their difficulties marrying within their own castes. Yet when asked about a solution for this the informants have no clear answers. They simply note how there may be a need for reformation of the marriage rules. Some of the informants tell us that some Ezidis are talking about reforming the rules, so Ezidis can marry across the castes. They add that some Ezidis have talked

about including a new caste for the Muslims, who want to return to their 'original religion'. When we ask them further about these ideas, they tell us that it is just talk. With the informants' negative attitudes against Muslim and their emphasis on the differentiation between Ezidis and Muslims in mind, the latter suggestion seems highly absurd.

## Reformation Takes Time

As we share a pizza with Soran in his brother's cafe, we ask him if he finds a need for reforms within the religion:

*I think it is a question about when reforms will come. I'm not afraid of admitting that we need reforms. The rules are made as protection. This was necessary due to persecution.*

(Soran, M, 33, Iraq)

To our further question about reformation, Soran adds:

*Reforms are difficult to make at the moment when our community is in disruption and completely destroyed. We can't hold on to our religion by reforming it entirely.*

(Soran, M, 33, Iraq)

Soran's statement suggests that he identifies as being a member of a threatened and vulnerable group. This identity helps Soran explain why they cannot make reforms. However, Soran and Ezidis in Denmark are not directly threatened by war as the Ezidis in the homeland. In this way, it can be argued that the identity becomes a way to allow for flexibility for Ezidis in Denmark. When we talk to Khalil about reforms, he notes how some Ezidi are talking about changing the rules. Yet, he argues that it is not just something that happens overnight:

*Some Ezidis are starting a revolution. A friend in Germany is talking about starting a revolution so that others can convert to the religion. We are starting to talk about it. Times have changed, but revolution takes a long time.*

(Khalil, M, 55, Iraq)

## The Religious Council

Most of the informants, furthermore, argue that reformation is out of their hands. The Religious Council are the only ones who can carry out reforms, as Yosef explains when we talk about reformation:

*Some Ezidis are debating especially the youth whether it is possible to maintain the prohibition against marrying outside one's caste or the religion. But this is not something the common Ezidi can decide. It has to go through the Council and the highest-ranking religious leader.*

(Yosef, M, 43, Iraq)

Yosef's statements about reforms become ambiguous as he also states that things disappear over time. He tells us how some of the things, Ezidis had to do earlier, such as kiss the hand of the Sheikh, have now disappeared. He continues by stating that the Religious Council probably will not change the rules until they see that the Ezidi communities are already marrying between the castes. Yosef's statements suggest a flexibility to the rules that only the Religious Council can make reforms. His statements suggest that there may be a flexibility or "unofficial reforms" in the everyday life of Ezidis.

The informants' statements suggest a contentment with the fact that some Ezidis are talking about reform, yet that reform can only be brought about by the Council. They brush off our questions by stating that there is nothing they can do about it. Such decisions can only be made by the Council. In this way, they attempt to avoid our questions and our wondering of how the religion can survive without any reformation of the rules of endogamy or at least without any flexibility to the rules. However, Yosef statements suggest an "unofficial" flexibility to the rules. He claims that the common Ezidis have to make changes, before the rules will be official reformed by the Religious Council.

### Flexibility to the Rules in Syria

As we talk to Soran about the Ezidi caste system and the rules of marriage, he mentions that there is an explicit flexibility to the rules in Syria. In the Syrian part of Kurdistan the caste system and rules of endogamy are not as rigid as in other parts of Kurdistan, according to Soran. Soran tells us that he does not see any issue with the Ezidis in Syria having abolished the caste system and the rules of endogamy. When we ask Said from Syria about the caste system, he supports Soran's claim by mentioning how the caste system is not followed in the Syrian town north of Aleppo, where he grew up:

*There are three castes but I don't remember what they are called. My parents didn't belong to the same religion. My mum was Zaradesh. In my town it was alright to marry someone from a different religion [...] You cannot marry across the three castes. I don't know why. But I think it means rich, average and poor. It doesn't matter for us though. My mom says if you find someone then just get married. It doesn't mean anything either whether or not it is a Kurd. We just can't get a divorce.*

(Said, M, 25, Syria)

This statement indicates a high level of flexibility to the rules of endogamy in Syria. Said has been told that it does not matter who you marry, as long as you do not get a divorce. Furthermore, our talk about the caste system seems to confuse Said as well as us. Said seems confused as he is unsure about the basics of the religion. We are confused because his statement contradicts everything we have been told and read about the religion. Said emphasizes that being Ezidi is highly important to him, but his statement leaves us wondering: *How can he be Ezidi if his mother is not? How does he expect to marry out of the religion and stay Ezidi? Why does he explain the rules to us when he does not follow them?* We recognize that the vagueness allows Said to feel a sense of belonging to the imagined Ezidi community and identify as Ezidi even though his statements suggest that he does not follow the rules. Our further questions are tossed off by a laugh from Said and we realize that the vagueness is necessary and even if we try to dig deeper we will not get any clear answers.

When it comes to the rules of endogamy, the statements of the informants suggest that there is limited flexibility to the rules. They have to obey by the rules in order to protect themselves from Muslims. The informants acknowledge that it may be difficult for future generations to marry according to the rules and that, therefore, there may be a need for reformation. Yet, they mention how the rules can only be reformed by the Religious Council and the informants seem content with that. If there exists a flexibility to the rules then at least it is not something that the informants wish to share with us. The vagueness in their answers helps them get around our interest in the endogamy rules. Even though their statements suggest limited flexibility to the rules, their answers and rationalization are incoherent, ambiguous and vague. The vagueness in their narratives suggests that there is in fact flexibility to the rules, which explains why the informants do not share our apocalyptic view on the future of the religion.

### 5.3. Handing Down and Knowledge About the Religion

The vagueness, we see in the informants' statements about the caste system and the endogamy, is reoccurring throughout the conversations with the informants. In contrast to their clear collective memory of their sufferings, the narratives of traditions are unclear, vague and ambiguous. The informants present many various and confusing narratives about the Ezidi traditions. The following sections will include an analysis of the informants' narratives of handing down and their knowledge about the religion and traditions.

#### The Oral Tradition

Ezidism is an orally transmitted religion. Traditionally, many Ezidis were illiterate and schooling was disapproved. Only the well-off Sheikh families were allowed to send their children to school (Maisel, 2008; Allison, 2001). With the oral tradition, the tales and traditions of the religion are handed down through generations. Some of the informants state that the books in which some of the texts were written down were stolen or burned by Muslims. After this incident the religion was solely transmitted orally. The oral tradition results in various interpretations and vagueness is, thus, embedded in the religion.

During our afternoon with Khalil, we talk about handing down the religion to his children. Khalil expresses how the oral tradition affects the ability to hold onto the religion in Denmark:

*The tradition of handing down orally is difficult in Denmark. Sometimes we even forget our religious holidays. The religion itself we don't even know ourselves, so we can't tell it to our children. I can't tell the religion to my children because we almost don't know it ourselves. It is mostly the traditions we talk about. I tell them to my children and they know them.*

(Khalil, M, 55, Iraq)

In hindsight, this statement by Khalil becomes extra bizarre as the Ezidis actually omitted the religious New Year celebrations. We wonder if this is a reoccurring incident. They mention issues with the oral tradition, yet we find it even harder for the Ezidis to hand down the traditions to the younger generations if they omit to celebrate them.

When we talk to the informants about the religious texts, they express a need for them to be written down. Despite the oral tradition, we encounter a few examples of “common” Ezidis and scholars who have written down religious texts. Khalil reads religious texts that his friend has written down in Kurdish. Yet, he hopes that in the future the religious texts can be written in Danish:

*We have many texts that have been handed down orally, but they are not written down. My friend in Germany has written down 30 texts in Kurdish and sent them to me. I read a text and interpret it and then I tell what I find most important to my kids. I want to understand the texts. I need to use it in my life, my moral and my everyday life.*

(Khalil, M, 55, Iraq)

The origin of the texts from Khalil's friend is uncertain. If his friend has written what he remembers the texts can be highly different from what stories and rules other Ezidis remember. For Khalil the texts seem important and, therefore, he has a hope that they can all be written down. We think to ourselves that if his wish to have the texts written down in Danish is as strong as he makes it seem, he could translate the texts from his friend into Danish himself, at least for himself and his children to read. However, this does not seem to be a thought that has occurred to him.

Like Khalil most of the informants express a need for written texts, yet none of the informants are taking matters into their own hands. This indicates that the need or wish may not be as strong as they make it seem. In Denmark there is limited risk that their records of the texts and teachings they remember would be stolen and burned again. Moreover, we wonder why they do not write down and keep the texts online. There is arguably nothing stopping them from writing them down other than the fact that they cannot remember the full stories. However, writing down the texts conflicts with the oral tradition. As a result of the oral tradition there are multiple interpretations of the tales and traditions within Ezidism. Therefore, it would be challenging to write

down one version for all Ezidis. It would arguably cause internal conflicts between Ezidis as they would not agree.

However, if it is a wish of the informants, as they tell us, to have the stories written down, we wonder why they do not write down what they remember for their own personal use. Perhaps the fact that it is not written down serves a greater purpose. When it is all orally transmitted it opens up for a vagueness, ambiguity and incoherence in the religion, which allow for a flexibility and pragmatism, which enable the religion to survive. The informants have vague and unclear knowledge about the religious texts, yet it seems important to them. This is similar to what Willerslev (2004) experiences amongst the Yugakhir hunters in north-eastern Siberia. The hunters' knowledge about the spiritual beings is highly vague and unclear, yet Willerslev finds that they take on meaning in the everyday activities of the hunters (Willerslev, 2004).

### Knowledge About the Religion

When we ask the informants who taught them about the religion, the majority of informants mention their parents or grandparents. Khalil tells us that he started to look more into the religion when he became ill a few years back. For Said, our interest in his religion, has caused him to seek more knowledge. In the same way, Kreyenbroek (2009) also experiences how young Ezidis sometimes seek more knowledge about their religion if asked by non-Ezidis (p. 137). When we meet Said at a café in the center of Copenhagen, he mentions that he has researched the religion and written a document for us with the correct information. He stresses how it is important for him that the information that he is given us is accurate, because otherwise we will tell the wrong story about the Ezidis. Yet, the information that Said has picked up from his parents and his research is not consistent with the information provided by the other informants or in existing literature. Said's information is frankly a bit confusing. His statements do not suggest a great familiarity with the faith. The same pattern is noted by Kreyenbroek (2009), where the knowledge of Ezidis living in Germany about their faith is often limited or plainly inaccurate (pp. 133-135).

### Handing Down the Religion to the Children

Regardless of their own knowledge about the religion, most informants want their children to know about their faith and traditions. During our afternoon with Rajo we notice that he does not have a great knowledge about the basics of the religion. We sit in his small apartment in Copenhagen, where he lives with his heavily pregnant wife, Mira. They are expecting a baby girl in the coming month. As Mira prepares Kurdish tea for us in the small kitchen, we ask Rajo about the Ezidi religion. Rajo tells us a bit about the religion, but often mentions that he does not know much about it. Yet, he emphasizes a wish for his unborn daughter to learn about the religion and the traditions. When we ask him how he will teach her about the religion, he tells us about his father, who according to Rajo has great knowledge about the religion. Rajo takes down a few books from the bookshelf and hands them to us. He proudly tells us that these books are written by his father about the Ezidi religion. Both books are in Kurdish. His father was invited to Iraq by the Ezidi prince to tell about the books. Rajo explains that he expects his father to teach his daughter about the religion. When we ask him more about his father, Rajo mentions how he is sick and we wonder if the daughter will ever learn about the faith if the father passes away

before the daughter reaches a certain age. We wonder why Rajo does not show any initiative to learn about the religion himself.

When we visit Khalil and Taghrid in suburban Copenhagen, Taghrid has prepared a traditional lunch of *Dolma*, vegetables stuffed with rice and meat, for us. After finishing lunch we sit at the coffee table. We notice a drawing of a peacock above the flat screen TV. As we ask, they tell us that their youngest daughter has made it. This starts a conversation about their children. We ask Khalil how he hands down the religion to his four children and he answers by saying that his children have to know about the Ezidi traditions. Yet, when Khalil a few hours later again explains the traditions of Red Wednesday, his daughter Sosin is clearly not familiar with the traditions:

*S: Dad, can't you tell how you play that egg game?*

*K: We all paint the eggs. Then you hold one egg in your fist like this [\*illustrates how it is done with his hands\*]. Then you hit the other person's fist. The one whose egg is broken has lost. The eggs are a symbol of the world.*

*S: How?*

*K: We see the world as an egg. The yolk is the center of the world where all life derives from.*

*S: Oh that's a beautiful story [\*laughs a little\*].*

(Kamal, M, 55, Iraq & Sosin, F, 17, Iraq)

Since Khalil stresses the importance of his children knowing the traditions, we are surprised that Sosin does not know the tradition with the eggs. It indicates a gap between the generations as the young generation does not have the same knowledge about the tradition. This is similar to the observance in our conversation with Rajo, who has limited knowledge about the basics of the religion and expresses no desire to learn it. In contrast, he mentions that his father has great knowledge about the religion.

Rajo and Soran are both young men starting their families. When we ask them about handing down the religion to their future children, they both emphasize the importance of handing down the faith to their children through the Kurdish language. It seems highly important for them that their children learn Kurdish. However, Rajo notes that his Kurdish is not very good despite it being his parents' mother tongue. In his research amongst Ezidis in Armenia and Germany, Kreyenbroek (2009) sees a similar problem of a loss of Kurdish among the younger generations. Yet, in both communities Kurdish is seen as key for the survival of the religion (p. 124). In the same way, Rajo has lost most of his Kurdish, mainly because he went to a Russian school in Armenia. Therefore, it will be problematic for Rajo to hand down the religion to his daughter in Kurdish.

## The Qewwals

As put forward in historical studies of Ezidism, the religious texts are handed down orally as hymns. Traditionally, it was only the Qewwal clan who was allowed to learn the hymns and perform them at ceremonial events. They

were transmitters of the religious texts and traveled around Ezidi communities to perform and instruct the locals (Maisel, 2008, p. 7). Today, every Ezidi is allowed to learn the hymns (Maisel, 2008, p. 8). In the light of this knowledge, we ask the informants about the Qewwals and the oral tradition. While drinking coffee with Soran, we ask him if he knows any of the hymns:

*No no no, I don't know all our verses and songs. Formerly the Qewwals knew them, but no one knows them now. That's why we have a problem. We are just trying to survive. Everything needs to calm down first.*

(Soran, M, 33, Iraq)

We are sitting at his brother's café in the center of Copenhagen. The café is closed for the day, but across from the café is Soran's brother's pizzeria. Soran asks us if we feel like pizza, but since we have just had dinner before coming, we tell him 'no thank you'. Soran, who has just come from work, walks over to the pizzeria across the road and orders a pizza for himself. Shortly after a man brings over the pizza. Soran tells us that the man, who brought the pizza is a Qewwal, but he does not know the hymns. In fact, Soran states that no one knows the hymns anymore. He explains that nowadays any Ezidis who wants to are allowed to learn the hymns. This suggests flexibility compared to the traditional ways to ensure that the hymns are not forgotten. But, according to Soran, this has not helped as he states that no one knows the hymns. Yet when we ask Soran what they do at ceremonial events when no one knows the hymns, he tells us that one of his friends in Sweden is one of the few that still knows the hymns. People then call him to perform at religious holidays, weddings, etc. We see this as highly problematic. *How can they transmit the religious hymns if no one knows them?*

During our afternoon at Khalil and his family, we find out that his wife is from the Qewwal clan. We quickly think to ourselves that at least there is one family in Denmark that knows the hymns, so they do not have to call Soran's friend in Sweden every time. But to our disappointment and despair for the religion, Taghrid does not know the hymns. She explains how it is only men, who are allowed to play. We ask her if any of the men in her family can play:

*No not in my family, or yes my brother and also some of my cousins in Sweden and my uncle [can play].*

(Taghrid, F, 45, Iraq)

We ask Taghrid further questions about the Qewwals, however, her answers are confusing and we get a feeling that she does not know much about it, because it is only the men, who are allowed to play. She does, however, tell us that the hymns often have a melancholic sound. She is interrupted by her son, Afran, who argues this has nothing to do with the religion. In his opinion it is typical in the Middle Eastern culture to express emotions through melancholic tunes. Afran's statements suggest that he is not familiar with the Qewwals and does not assign the Qewwals, as the transmitter of religious texts and songs to the Ezidi communities, a great importance.

With this in mind and the lack of Qewwals, we ask the members of the family if they see it as a problem that no one in Denmark are able to perform the duties of the Qewwals. Khalil and Taghrid are quick to note that it is a problem. Whereas Afran is indifferent. He says: 'Is it really?'. Here we see a gap between the parental generation and the youth. Afran does not seem to ascribe much importance to the role of the Qewwals. He is not aware or does not seem interested in the fact that they are the ones, who know the religious texts and hymns and without them or anyone taking up their tasks, the religious texts and hymns will be forgotten. Afran's statements do not imply a great knowledge of the fundamentals of the Ezidi faith.

Most of the informants express a hope that the religious texts and hymns will be written down. But perhaps it is solely in the interactions with us and our apocalyptic wondering that they mention this hope. Maybe the informants are not particularly interested in keeping the religion alive. However, this is not the impression we get in the conversations with the informants as their statements suggest that the Ezidi identity is important to them. Perhaps it is a benefit for them that the texts and hymns are not written down and that less and less Ezidis remember them. This because not knowing them allows flexibility. If no one knows the correct story or the correct rules, then one can choose whichever interpretation and no interpretation is more correct than another. Their statements are vague, which may be for their own benefit. If the religious texts are not written down and no one remembers them anymore, flexibility and pragmatism becomes the rule rather than the exception.

## The Forbidden Vegetable

We also find vagueness in the tales about the forbidden vegetable. The first time we are presented with the prohibition on eating cabbage is at the Danish Christmas lunch that we have invited Said to take part in. During the meal, Said says that he is not Muslim, but Ezidi. We ask him about his religion and he tells us that he is allowed to eat pork, however the religion prohibits eating cabbage. He reassures us that it is not the red cabbage that he has been eating all day. It is white cabbage that is forbidden in Ezidism. Said, furthermore, tells us that he does not follow the rule. Said shows a picture on Google of a pointed cabbage, which is, according to Said, forbidden. Said does not know why it is forbidden, so we are not able to come closer to the tale about the forbidden cabbage. However, we are intrigued by this (to us) bizarre story and we are curious to find out why cabbage is forbidden. A Google Search tells us that the prohibition is of lettuce and not cabbage. We are not able to find out more about it. Yet, it turns out that the other informants are able to tell us more about the forbidden vegetable.

Even though none of our informants follow the prohibition, many of them mention the tale. Most of the informants do not believe it is a religious prohibition. Yet, many of their forefathers did not eat lettuce and as children in their homelands they were not allowed to either. The tales about the forbidden lettuce are reoccurring in the narratives, however, highly vague and unclear. Yosef remembers how his grandparents would not allow him and his siblings to eat lettuce. According to him, no one really knew why. He did not know why and he does not think his grandparents knew why either. He tells us that the reasons for the prohibition are various. Yosef shares three variations with us. One story is that during a massacre the blood of Ezidis were spread over the lettuce, so you were not allowed to eat it because it was impure. Another story is that Ezidis

stole lettuce on a field on their way back from Mosul. Complaints were given to the Ezidi Prince, who prohibited eating lettuce. A third story is that a Muslim threw a Ezidi in a well and filled it with lettuce until it suffocated him and therefore it was banned.

When Khalil tells us about Ezidism, he also points to the stories of the forbidden lettuce. He tells us the same story as Yosef that Ezidis stole lettuce on their way home from Mosul. Furthermore, Khalil tells an additional variation of the story:

*Another story is that the word 'khas' refers to both lettuce and a holy man and that's why it is forbidden.*

(Khalil, M, 55, Iraq).

It seems that Khalil's son, Afran has never heard about the prohibition of lettuce before. He laughs at the fact that you are not allowed to eat lettuce or that some say it is forbidden. When Khalil says that his brother, Afran's uncle, does not eat lettuce, Afran is surprised: 'What? Uncle doesn't eat it?' Khalil explains how his brother once had a dream telling him lettuce is not allowed because it is not good for you. Taghrid laughingly says that once she asked him if alcohol is good for him or if he just drinks it because it is better for him than lettuce.

The informants do not seem concerned about the fact that there is no clear story behind the prohibition. Their statements indicate that they are content with having four or more different stories. They seem content with the vagueness and ambiguity of the stories. The narratives of the informants indicate that it does not matter which one is the correct one, just as long as they have a story to tell when people like us ask them about their religion and traditions. As Willerslev (2004) finds in his study of spirituality of the Yugakhir hunters, linguistic representation is not crucial in order to create meaning. Furthermore, the vagueness in the reason of the prohibition may be beneficial for them, because it allows for a flexibility and pragmatism to the rule. If they do not know the exact story behind the prohibition it is arguably more acceptable not to live by it.

## The Practice of Baptism

We encounter a flexibility and pragmatism again when the informants introduce us to the initiation ceremonies within the religion. The practice of *Mor Kirin*, often translated as 'baptism' (Kreyenbroek, 2009, p. 31), is done with the holy water from the sacred well at Lalish. The practice of baptism indicates that at one point new believers could be initiated into the religion, thus, the faith has not always been closed for outsiders. Alal tells us how earlier all who got baptised became a member of the faith. When discussing the religious practice, Soran tells us that every Ezidis must be baptised. Yet, many Ezidis are not. This shows flexibility to the word 'must'. The Ezidis who are not baptised are still seen as members of the faith. Alal's interpretation of the practice underlines such a flexibility:

*You can get baptised, but the only place is with water from Lalish, the White Spring. You should get baptised if you are able to. The practice of baptism is not a mark for us. It is not*

*something you must do, but it is more so, something you want to do because you believe in it. It is not a criteria.*

(Alal, F, 53, Iraq).

We ask Yosef about the practice of baptism for the Ezidis living in Turkey. He tells us that in Turkey the practice of “baptism” involves a Sheikh cutting the first hair of the children:

*When you don't have water from Lalish, then you have to find alternatives, so we had our hair cut by the Sheikh instead.*

(Yosef, M, 43, Turkey)

This statement indicates a flexibility and pragmatism to the practice of baptism in Turkey, because they were not able to go to Lalish. Instead they found an alternative way to “baptise” their children. Soran also notes how the Ezidis in Syria have not been able to go to Lalish and are therefore not baptized. He adds that the Ezidis in Syria have to find alternative ways to keep the religion alive. But, he does not elaborate how this can be done.

The talk about the initiation ceremonies further suggests that there exist some flexibility and pragmatism to the practice of baptism amongst Ezidis in Denmark. Yosef mentions how his children have all been baptised in Denmark. This statement suggests that children can get baptised outside of Lalish with holy water brought from the sacred well in Lalish. Yet, Yosef does not find the practice important. He tells us that the baptism of their children was more important to his wife. It seem that the practice has lost significance amongst Ezidis in Denmark. Soran explains how his mother once brought home a few bottles of holy water from Lalish. Instead of using the water to baptise some of the Ezidis, who had not been baptised, they drank the water during a meeting in the Association. The statements of the informants suggest that the practice of baptism has lost significance for the Ezidis in Denmark. This is also noted by Kreyenbroek (2009) in his study of the Ezidi diaspora in Germany (p. 31). This indicates that perhaps the practice of baptism has become flexible to the point of losing its traditional significance. Their diasporic state can also have an influence on the fact that the practice of baptism is not maintained as they live far away from Lalish.

## Red Wednesday

The celebration of the Ezidi New Year (*Serêsal*, also referred to as Red Wednesday) also turned out to be surprisingly flexible in Denmark. When the informants introduce us to the Ezidi traditions, the New Year celebrations are emphasized. The informants tell us that Red Wednesday is celebrated to honor Taus Melek, the Peacock Angel. As we talk to Khalil about the Ezidi traditions, he highlights Red Wednesday as a highly important religious holiday. Red Wednesday is celebrated in April, when the flowers start blooming. Khalil mentions that the New Year always falls on the second Wednesday in April (the first Wednesday according to the Ezidi calendar). He tells us that they decorate houses with red anemones and paint eggs in bright colors. They use the eggs for the game, described above, to see whose egg will crack first. Khalil describes it as a great celebration

where Ezidis visit each other, dance, drink and eat lots of traditional food. He, furthermore, tells us that the Ezidi women go to the graveyards with flowers to commemorate the dead.

When he tells us about the tradition, we note that he bases the story on an Iraqi context. We ask him how they celebrate it in Denmark. He tells us that they meet with the other members of the Association to eat their packed food and play the game with the eggs. All informants from the Association happily invite us to the celebrations. The event is not planned yet, but they all promise to let us know when they know the date. A week before Red Wednesday, Yosef tells us how the president of the Association is planning to have the celebration outdoors this year, because it is a celebration of the nature. However, the president is on holiday, so the celebration is not yet arranged. Yosef promises to let us know once the date is set. April passes without us hearing anything about the New Year celebrations. When we talk to Yosef in May, we ask him what came of the celebrations and he tells us that the New Year was not celebrated this year:

*Nothing came of the Red Wednesday celebrations this year, since we were unable to find a hall. Our new president started searching for it too late.*

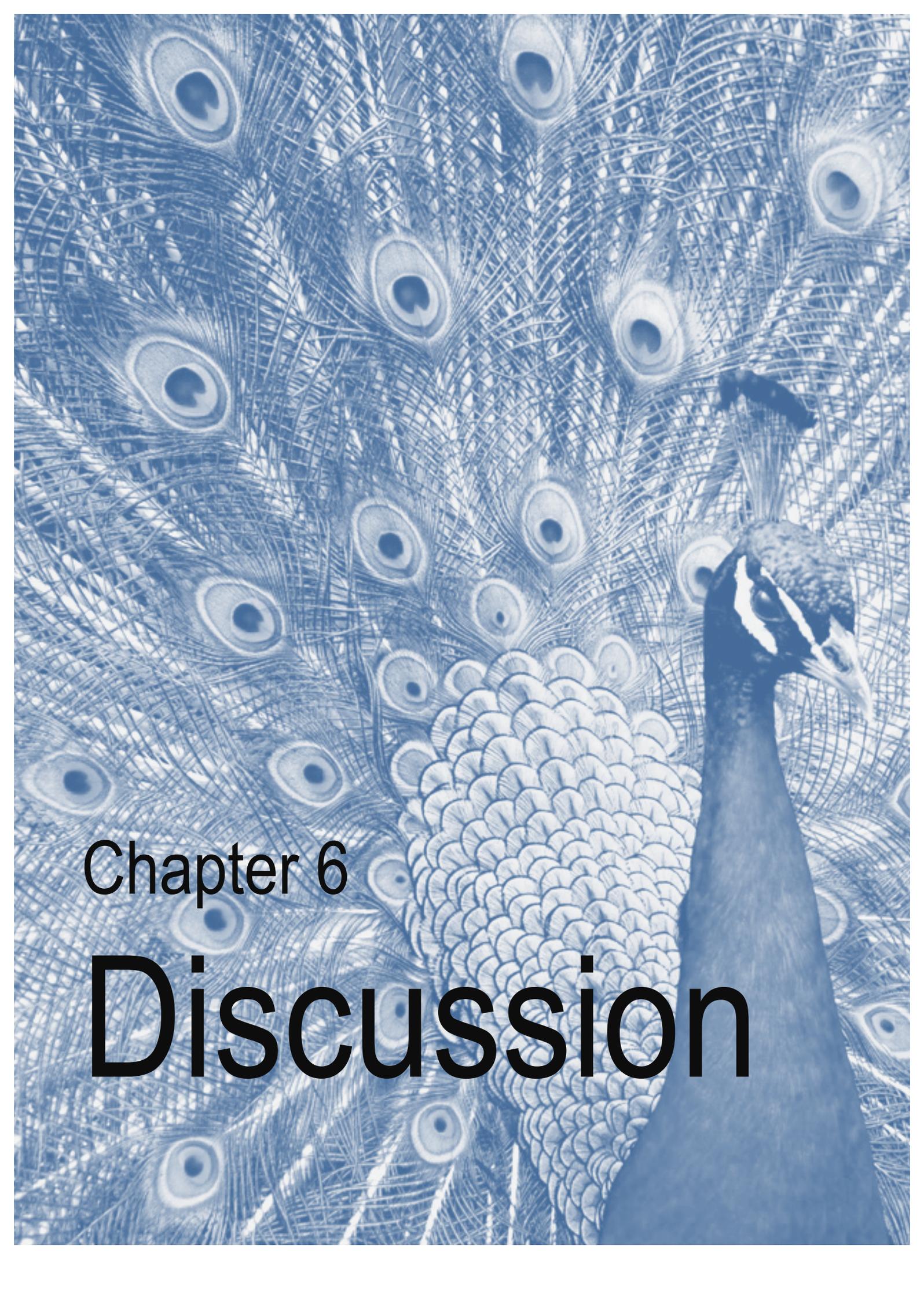
(Yosef, M, 43, Turkey)

This comes as a great surprise to us. We wonder, *why they do not celebrate the most important religious holiday?* In our conversations with the informants they emphasize the New Year celebrations when they explain who they are, which gave us the impression that this tradition was significant for their identity as Ezidis. We find it absurd that they did not celebrate what the informants told us to be the most important religious day of the year. We wonder why none of the other members of the Association took the initiative to arrange the celebrations while the president was away on holiday. When talking to the informants they represented the New Year celebrations in a clear and detailed way emphasizing its significance. However, in reality the celebrations turned out to be vague and flexible as they simply skipped it. Here, we are presented with things that 'don't just add up' but still take on meaning (cf. Stewart, 2008). Their shared story about Red Wednesday contribute to the idea of an *imagined community* in which Ezidis share common traditions (cf. Anderson, 2006). In order to keep the idea of an *imagined community* there is arguably a need for vagueness which maintains the ethnic identity despite flexibility.

Furthermore, we realize that the only activities of the Association during the six months, we have worked on the current study, have been a celebration of the International Women's Day and an annual general meeting. Neither of which are connected to Ezidism. We are surprised about the limited activity of the Association. During a period of six months, they have not had any events relating to their religion. Perhaps this is not the point. Perhaps the Association helps create a community of Ezidis in Denmark and the Ezidi traditions are not so important. Furthermore, the Association can serve as a platform, to encourage future marriages.

## 5.4. Significance for Ezidi Ethnic Identity

In the above, we find a *gray area* in which the informants' narratives are incoherent, ambiguous and vague. We find that despite the strict rules of endogamy, they somehow make it work. Their relationship to Ezidis in other countries provides them with women. Their statements about the endogamy are vague, which arguably allows for flexibility. The informants' do not share our apocalyptic view on the future of the religion and deflect our questions about reformation. They want their children to learn about the religion and its traditions. However, many of them do not know it themselves and they have not succeeded in handing it down to their children either. Most of the informants do not know the religious hymns. They express a wish for them to be written down, but do not take any action to do so. They present us with various and incoherent interpretations of the same tales, which allows for a flexibility to the rules. They are flexible with the religious practices to the point where they lose their traditional significance. They omit the celebrations of their religious holidays. Our concept of vagueness has allowed us investigate the *gray area* and we have found that the vague becomes identifying and meaningful. We argue that the vagueness of their identity allows for a flexibility that keeps the religion alive.



Chapter 6

# Discussion

## Discussion

In our meeting with the informants, we find that the majority define themselves through a boundary to Muslims. Their ethnic identity is defined by how they are different from Muslims. They define themselves and other Ezidis different from Muslims by stating that Ezidis have a positive view on women, Ezidis put others before themselves, Ezidis integrate better and Ezidis are more like Danes. The findings suggest that this boundary making is instrumental as the informants are often mistaken for Muslims in Denmark. Due to the negative Danish discourse on Muslims it becomes beneficial for the informants to define themselves through the markers that make them different from Muslims. The informants aim at separating themselves from Muslims while emphasizing the markers that they have in common with the Danes.

A few of the informants lack this boundary making. They do not define themselves through a boundary to Muslims as they do not emphasize differences between Ezidis and Muslims. For them the boundary making is not beneficial as many of their friends are Muslim. Yet, when talking about Muslims all informants identify through a clear collective memory on the sufferings of Ezidis brought on them by Muslims. The collective memory of previous as well as current sufferings of their people appear defining for their ethnic identity. The findings furthermore suggest that the collective memory and commemoration of sufferings are instrumental as they serve as tools to advance the interest of Ezidis.

The narratives about Muslims become intertwined with conversations about the informants' position on a Kurdish identity. The majority of the informants underline the boundary making to the Muslims by stating that Ezidis are the original Kurds. In this way, we see how the informants define themselves through an affiliation with their homeland, Kurdistan. Yet, the informants' further statements about a Kurdish identity are various. Some of the informants define themselves as being Kurdish. Other informants are unsure about a Kurdish identity or identify with the Kurdish identity to some extent. One informant define herself as being different to the Kurds. Thus, we find a vagueness and ambiguity in the ethnic identity, which does not allow us to get a clear understanding of the significance of the Kurdish for the ethnic identity of Ezidis. Furthermore, the informants' statements suggest that an identification with the Kurdish is instrumental and situational as a Kurdish identification can be beneficial in advancing one's interests.

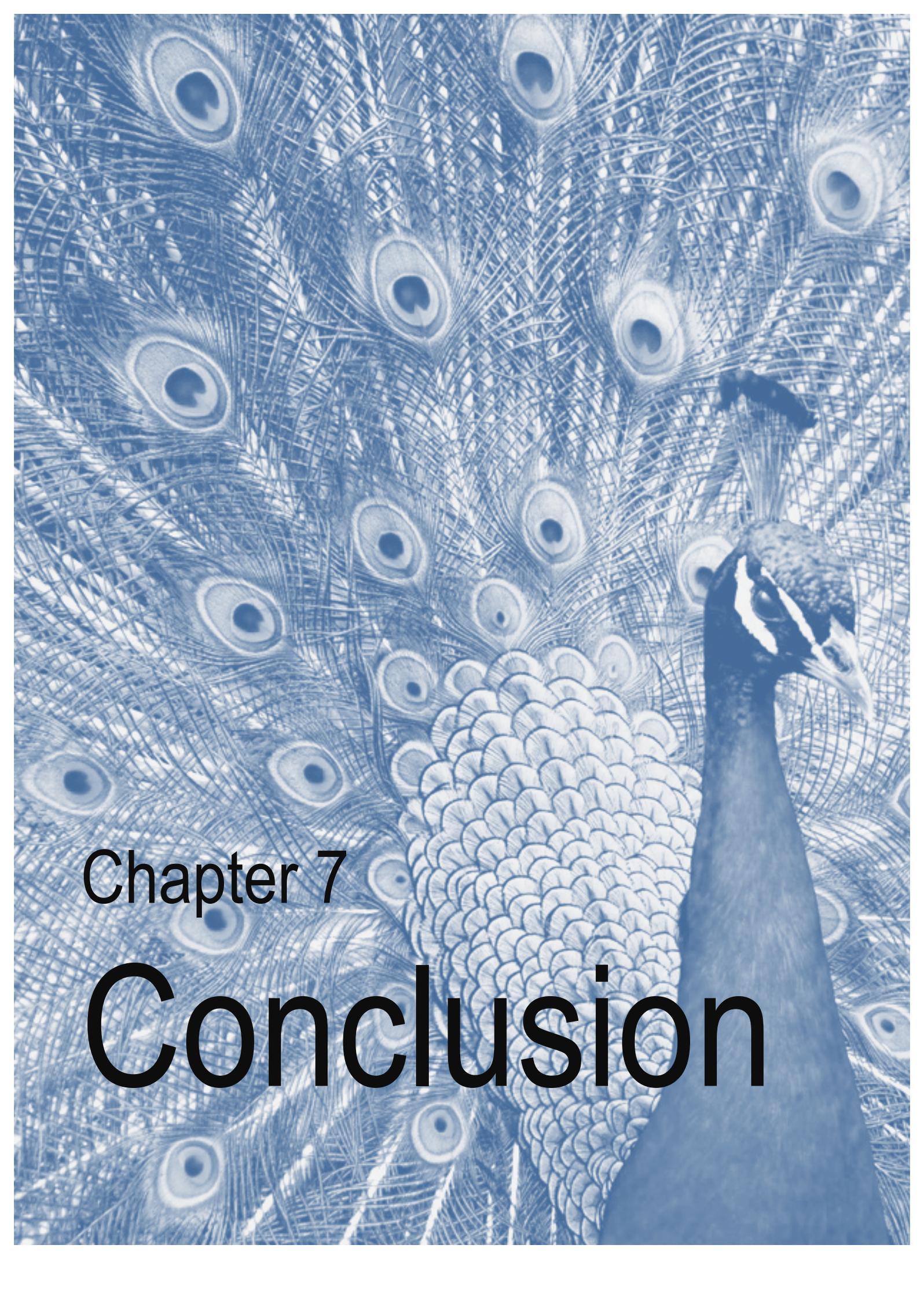
Our findings suggest a flexibility to the assumed apocalyptic rules of endogamy, which, arguably, helps keep the religion alive. Additionally, the relationship with co-ethnic members in other countries provides Ezidis with

marriageable women and further ensures the survival of the religion. Furthermore, the findings suggest vagueness and ambiguity in the narratives about the Ezidi faith, traditions and culture. Some of the statements do not show a great familiarity with the faith. Furthermore, we encounter various interpretations of the tales and traditions. The oral tradition within Ezidism results in these various interpretations and vagueness is thus embedded in the religion. However, the informants' statements do not conform with their actions. The informants do not make an effort to hold on to the things that they *do* remember. All informants emphasize the importance of celebrating the religious holidays, however, in reality they do not celebrate them. Many of the informants express a need and wish for the religious texts to be written down. However, they do not write down their own knowledge. Several of the informants emphasize that they want their children to learn about the religion and traditions, yet the children do not know much about the religion and traditions. The findings suggest a vagueness, which allows for flexibility to the rules and traditions. If the informants do not know the correct interpretation, then they can arguably "choose" which interpretations they want to adopt.

Based on our findings, we argue that the ethnic identity of Ezidis can be described as *an empty shell*. The ethnic boundary towards Muslims forms *the shell*. By *empty* we do not mean that the ethnic identity contains nothing, instead we argue that the content of the ethnic identity is vague and a coherent representation is not possible. Their ethnic identity allows Ezidis to define themselves without saying much about their "cultural stuff". Furthermore, it allows for Ezidis to create a favorable position for themselves in the Danish discourse. The vagueness in their ethnic identity enables Ezidis to carry on their faith. The vagueness of their ethnic identity has an instrumental function; it is not clear what the contents are and, therefore, vagueness allows for flexibility necessary for the survival of the religion. The ethnic identity of the Ezidis has to be vague in order for the ethnic group to persist. There is still several hundreds in Denmark that define themselves as Ezidis. However, we argue that this is only possible because of the vagueness. Even though they have various interpretations and stories, do not know much about the religion and omit to celebrate the traditions, they still define themselves as Ezidis. The vagueness lets them keep it all together.

Furthermore, we argue that vagueness allows Ezidis to maintain the idea of *an imagined community* (cf. Anderson, 2006). Their sense of belonging to an *imagined community* requires some level of vagueness. In fact, we argue that an attempt to make a clear representation of the ethnic identity, may end up ruining it for the Ezidis as it will emphasize their differences. One can discuss that some level of vagueness is always required for the idea of *an imagined community*. Arguably, for you to feel a sense of communion with fellow-members that you will never meet or hear about, there needs to be a level of vagueness to the things you share.

In this way, the current study takes a different approach than previous studies of Ezidis. The aim has not been a representation of the group, rather we have investigated the vague that cannot be clearly described. We have found that the ethnic identity of Ezidis contains vagueness, which cannot be represented but takes on meaning of its own. Vagueness allows the Ezidi ethnic group to persist. We find this approach relevant for future cultural studies. We argue that the incoherent and vague, yet too unclear to analyze and describe, must be taken into account. Due to the limits of the current study, it would be interesting to conduct further research including narratives of more Ezidis to see whether our findings are valid in other contexts.



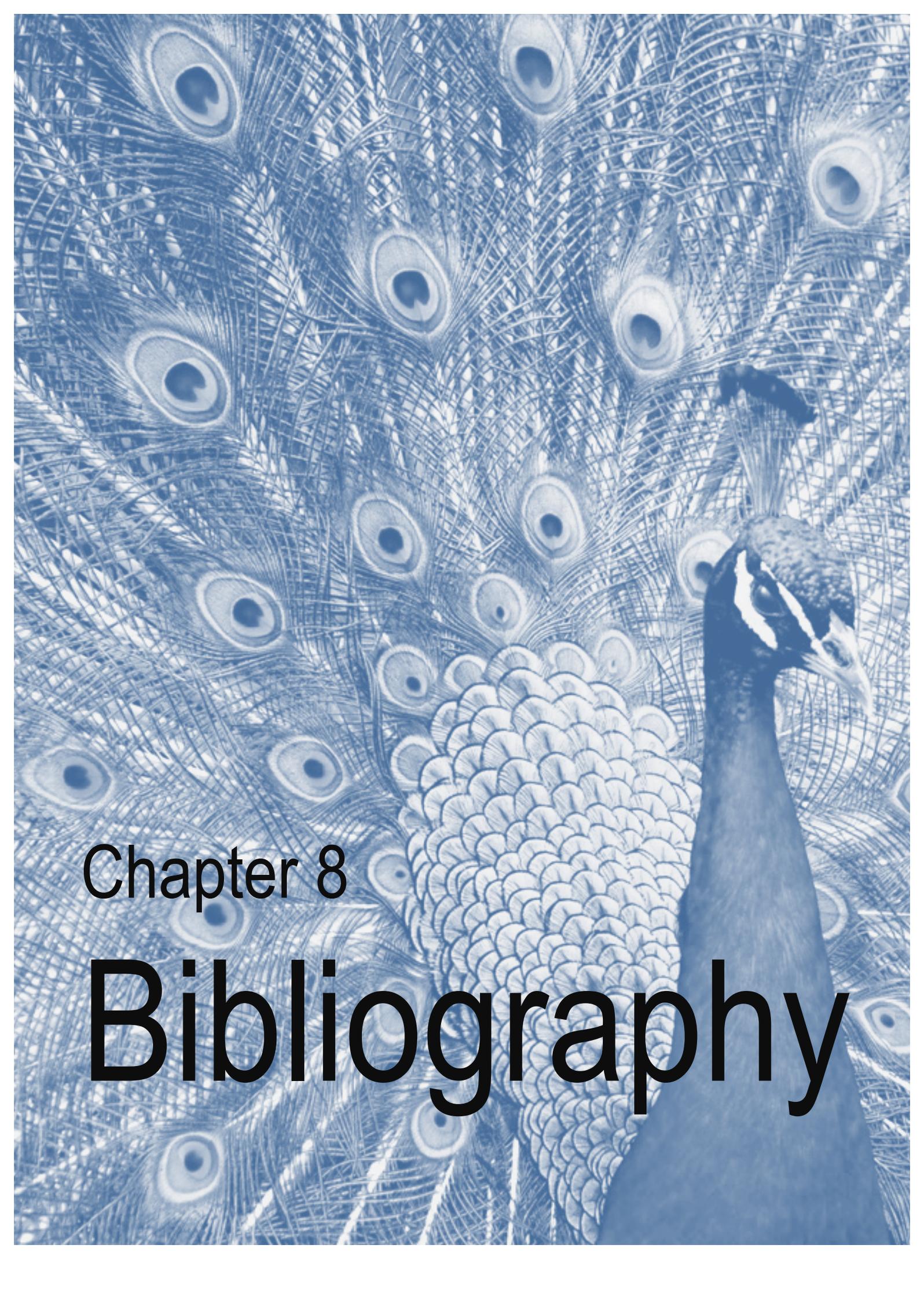
Chapter 7

# Conclusion

## Conclusion

Through conversations with Ezidis living in Denmark, we have investigated how they define their ethnic identity. We find that their ethnic identity can be described as *an empty shell*. They define themselves through an ethnic boundary by emphasizing how they are different from Muslims. This ethnic boundary makes up *the shell*. In relation to this, we find that Ezidis identify through a collective memory of the sufferings of Ezidis caused by Muslims. We describe their ethnic identity as *empty* because the content of *the shell* is vague. As a result, it is not possible to make a clear representation of the ethnic identity, yet we find that vagueness takes on meaning of its own.

We find that the ethnic identity of the Ezidis in Denmark is both situational and instrumental. The boundary making is relevant for the Ezidis' current situation in Denmark. It serves as a tool to advance their interests by separating themselves from the negative discourse on Muslims. Furthermore, by defining themselves as a vulnerable group through their collective memory, Ezidis utilize their ethnic identity for the purpose of a certain agenda. Similarly, we find that the vagueness in the ethnic identity of Ezidis is instrumental. The vagueness enables Ezidis to keep their religion alive as it allows for flexibility. We see flexibility of the religious traditions and rules. Yet, we also find that the relationship between Ezidis in Denmark and co-ethnic members in other countries maintains the endogamy as it provides the Ezidi men with marriageable women. Furthermore, we find Ezidis keep the religion alive as the vagueness allows them to maintain the idea of *an imagined community*.



Chapter 8

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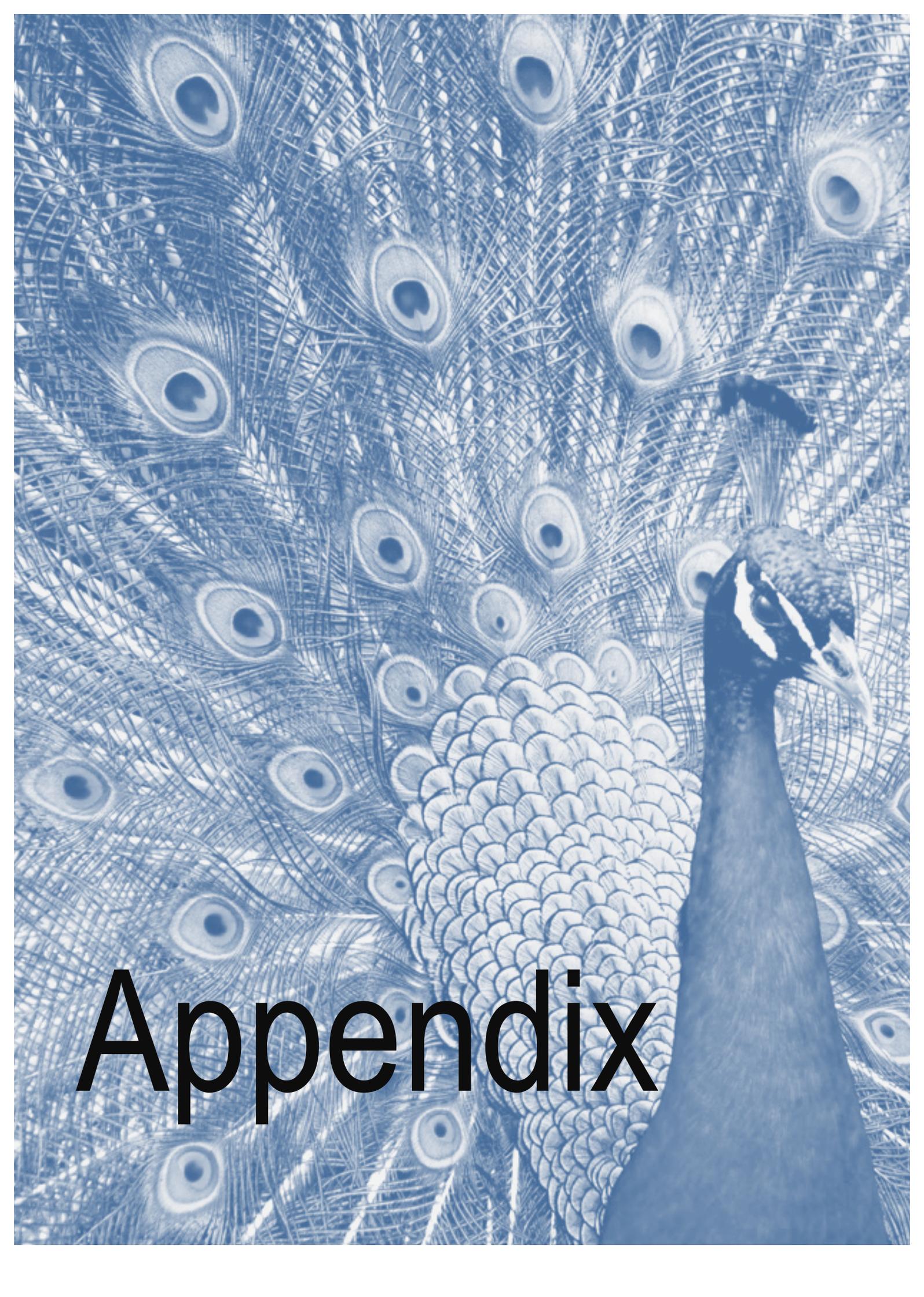
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# Appendix

## Appendix 1

The following is a list of meetings with the informants during the period between February 2017 and May 2017

12/02-2017: 3 hour interview with gatekeeper Yosef in his allotment garden.

15/03-2017: 4 hour interview with Soran at his brother's café.

17/03-2017: 7 hour interview with Khalil, Taghrid, Afran and Sosin in their home.

20/03-2017: 3 hour interview with Said at café in Copenhagen before joining him for the Newroz celebrations.

24/03-2017: 4 hour interview with Rajo (and his wife, Mira) in their home.

26/03-2017: 5 hour interview with Alal (and her husband, Hassan) in their home.

10/05-2017: 5 hour interview with Yosef in his home.