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# VOICES OF SORROW: MELODIZED SPEECH, LAMENTS, AND HEROIC NARRATIVES AMONG THE YEZIDIS OF ARMENIA

*by Estelle Amy de la Bretèque*

Among the Yezidis of Armenia, sad thoughts are often narrated in a melodized tone of voice, which the Yezidis call *kilamê ser* ("words about"; pl. *kilamen ser*).[1] Used in ritual contexts (especially funerals) as well as in everyday conversations, *kilamen ser* are the preferred way to express sadness and talk about traumatic events. Always linked to sorrow, death, or exile, these utterances differ from normal daily speech (*axavtin*) semantically and poetically; but it is Yezidis' use of vocal intonation in *kilamê ser* that is most striking. Their specific treatment of pitch is what I call melodization. When I started research among Yezidis, I quickly observed that melodized speech was omnipresent and considered extremely important. It was not only a way to express sad feelings in daily life and at funerals, but it was also recorded on MP3 files and distributed in street markets. This article is an attempt to understand the construction of a Yezidi typology of voice production, Yezidis' experience of an emotional investment in melodized speech, and the status of words enunciated in this manner.

The Yezidis are a Kurmanji-speaking (northern Kurdish) religious minority scattered between northern Iraq, Syria, the Caucasus (Armenia and Georgia), and Western Europe. The largest group lives in northern Iraq, where most of their holy sites are located.[2] The Yezidis living in Transcaucasia fled from Anatolia in several waves, especially during the war of 1828–29 between Russia and the Ottoman Empire and the massacres of 1915–16 that victimized Armenians and Yezidis. The religion, Yezidism, is highly syncretic and probably derives from an ancient Iranian faith akin to Zoroastrianism, with many elements interwoven in a complex fashion from other belief systems such as Islam, Christianity, and Gnosticism. Two striking

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1. The materials used and discussed in this article are based on ethnographic research I conducted in Armenia between 2005 and 2010. During this period I spent altogether more than a year and a half in Armenia, divided into several field trips. I was based mostly in the village of Alagyaz, but moved frequently to other villages (for ceremonies or to visit friends) as well as to the capital, Yerevan. Many of the materials used in this article are drawn from my doctoral dissertation (Amy de la Bretèque 2010a), but the argument was further developed within the framework of a postdoctoral grant from Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia (Foundation for Science and Technology) held at the Instituto de Etnomusicologia–Centro de Estudos em Música e Dança (Ethnomusicology Institute–Center for Studies in Music and Dance INET-MD) at the Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Portugal. I am grateful to Salwa El-Shawan Castelo-Branco for her very inspiring comments on an earlier version of this paper.

2. According to Kreyenbroek and Rashow (2005:5), there are c. 60,000 Yezidis in Armenia and Georgia, 15,000 in Syria, and 120,000 to 250,000 in Iraq. Almost all Yezidis who lived in Turkey emigrated to Germany in the 1980s. The number of Yezidis in Western Europe is estimated at 40,000. Since the fall of the USSR, there has been an important wave of migration from the Caucasus to Russia. However, no census numbers are available.

features of Yezidism are: (*a*) belief in the reincarnation of the Seven Holy Beings (who serve God) and (*b*) the importance of purity, which is expressed in the social order of endogamous groups[3] and in many taboos concerning food, dress, and personal habits. Another specificity of Yezidism is the absence of a holy book; until recently, writing was even prohibited. As a consequence, all sacred and secular knowledge is part of an oral tradition, and many differences are witnessed in the orthopraxy between Mesopotamian and Transcaucasian Yezidis.[4]

Yezidis from the Caucasus often define themselves as Kurds or Yezidi-Kurds (to differentiate themselves from Muslim Kurds). As Kurmanji Kurdish speakers,[5] they share many cultural features with Muslim Kurds from the Caucasus and Anatolia. However, their religion is distinct. Yezidis share with Armenians memories of persecution perpetrated against them by Muslims in Anatolia and exile towards the Caucasus in search of Russian protection.[6] This often makes them feel closer to Armenian than Muslim Kurds. During the Soviet period, religious creed was not regarded as a relevant category; as a result, censuses since 1926 have designated Yezidis as Kurds, alongside Muslim Kurds already living in Armenia. But during the upsurge of Armenian nationalism in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which was strongly linked to the Karabakh conflict (1988–94), the situation was reversed: the word “Kurd” became synonymous with “Muslim,” and Kurdish Muslims were perceived as suspect, having much in common with Azeri Turkish Muslims.[7] Therefore Kurds were considered potential allies of the Azeris or Turks and consequently potential enemies of Armenia. The majority of Muslim Kurds living in Armenia fled the country to Azerbaijan. In this anti-Muslim climate, a schism developed between those who considered themselves to be Kurdish and those who saw Kurdishness as implying an Islamic identity. These people wished to claim for Yezidis a separate ethnicity, calling their language not Kurmanji but Ezdîkî. In 2001, the first population census conducted after the fall of the USSR emphasized

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3. Two groups of religious leaders (*pîr* and *şêx*) and a group of followers (*mirîd*). For a detailed analysis of Yezidi social organization, see Allison (2001), Kreyenbroek (1995), Kreyenbroek and Rashow (2005), and Omarkhali (2005).

4. For a detailed description of Yezidi faith and religious practices, see Kreyenbroek (1995). As with most Western researchers studying Yezidism, the author focused, for historical reasons, on Iraqi Yezidis. See also the works of Allison (2001), Fuccaro (1999), Hassan (1976), and Spät (2005). In the USSR, extensive research was conducted in the field of Kurdology, especially on material culture and folklore. Part of this research focuses on Transcaucasian Yezidi-Kurds. See the works of Aristova (1966), Celîl and Celîl (1978), Djindi (1957), Kurdoev (1960), and Rudenko (1982).

5. Yezidis from Armenia also speak Armenian and, in most cases, Russian. During Soviet times, many schools in Yezidi villages provided classes in Kurdish, written in the Cyrillic alphabet. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Kurdish is still the language of teaching in schools in the main Yezidi villages, and Latin script has been adopted. However, in mixed villages (Yezidis-Armenians), teaching is mostly in Armenian.

6. In the nineteenth century, Yezidis were often considered “devil worshipers” by Muslims and were subject to persecution. Western Orientalists widely used this nickname in their writings: see, for example, Ainsworth (1855) and Mingana (1916).

7. In Soviet Armenia, Muslim Kurds and Azeris often lived in mixed villages and intermarriage was common.

the dilemma as it was possible to tick only one answer: “Kurd” or “Yezidi.” Nowadays, this crucial identity debate divides the community into two groups, which some would like to consider as two distinct nations, speaking two different languages. However, as this distinction is not relevant to the practice described in this paper, I will use “Yezidis” to refer to the religious community as a whole.

In the first part of this article, I provide an overview of the Armenian Yezidi distinction between speech and song. In the second part, I survey the semantic, poetic, and acoustic features of melodized speech, leading to an analysis of the specificities of melodized speech as compared with song and the use of language in daily conversation. I then address the question: Why do Yezidis melodize their words? The study of the strategies of elocution used for melodized speech and its efficacy from the audience’s perspective reveals the very close relation between *kilamê ser* and the narration of traumatic events. Finally, I analyse how these enunciations, often shaped by specific local contexts, contribute to cultural forms shared by the entire community.

## Speech and song distinctions among Armenian Yezidis

In his description of Kurdish music, Dieter Christensen (2007) observed that Kurdish music is divided between “sung narratives” and “dances,” a relevant dichotomy even though vernacular terminology changes according to place. Among Yezidis, “sung narratives” are referred to as *kilamen ser*, literally “words about (something or someone),” but are not considered “music.” The local concept closest to music is *stran,* a word directly referring to songs. In local conceptualization, *stran* and *kilamê ser* are opposed in many ways.

*Stran* (pl. *stranen*) is always linked to joyful feelings. Performed at weddings or any kind of joyful feast (like *newroz* or *roja Ezdî*),[8] they are usually accompanied by dance (*govend*). They are mostly sung responsorially by two people or two groups. Melodic lines are repeated many times; the sung words are generally quite simple and change every two or four melodic lines. While performing *stran*, the aim of the singer is to be heard by the audience in order to make everybody dance in a context where people are chatting, joking, and generally not paying much attention to the singers.

There is hardly a shared discourse on vocality among Yezidis, but some singers use the expression “from the nose” (*ji pozê*) to describe their voice in *stran* performances. And indeed, the voice is tense and nasal. The word *stran* is also used for *zurna* playing. *Zurna* is a small oboe, generally played to the accompaniment of a drum (*dohol*). The melodic line of the *zurna* is always composed of small motives with a narrow ambitus repeated many times, just like the vocal *stran*. Yezidis consider the *zurna* an instrument that has the ability to sing (*zurne stran lêdixe*).

In the local conceptualization of sound production, *stran* is opposed to *kilamê ser* (“words about …”). *Kilamê ser* is always linked to sorrow, death, pain, or

8. *Newroz*, the new year, is celebrated on 21 March; *roja Ezdî*, the day of Yezidis, is commemorated around mid-December.

exile. It is performed mostly at funerals or graveyard feasts (*roja mezela*),[9] and may also be inserted into daily conversations when the topic evokes sad memories. Their rhythm is not isochronic,[10] melodic lines are quite free, but generally follow a descending path. The pitch is lower than in *stran* and the voice less tense. Some informants told me that this voice comes from the heart (*ji dilê*).[11] The audience listens carefully to the words, and people comment on them over the following days. And even if nobody can really tell the exact words enunciated by the lower-pitched oboe, *duduk*,[12] Yezidis also grant this instrument the ability to speak (*duduk kilam dixe*).

A non-Yezidi listener would likely identify both *stran* and *kilamê ser* as music. But Yezidis contend that "melodized speech" and "songs" are two radically different modes of enunciation: they belong to opposing sound registers. According to Yezidis, *stran* only expresses joy. And the only way to express sad feelings is through speech. This distinction is not just a matter of vocabulary. It shapes the expression of feelings in the sound realm; it is linked to the calendrical cycle: broadly speaking, summer is the time for enacting *kilamê ser,* and winter is the time for performing *stran*.[13] And it is also embodied in contrasting postures: *kilamê ser* is performed while seated, with slight upper-body swaying, while *stran* is accompanied by dance with fast up-and-down movements. Therefore, *stran* and *kilamê ser* are the enactments of emotions using sound that, in addition to the semantics of the words themselves, set in motion some highly sensitive cognitive processes.

As a case study, the opposition of *kilamê ser* to *stran* raises the broader issue of the relation between speech and song. This is an old question in ethnomusicology. Almost five decades after List's publication on the boundaries of speech and song (1963), it seems that the matter continues to inspire discussion.[14] The reason may be, as Seeger suggested, that the separation of disciplines that study different aspects of "vocal and verbal art has had a disastrous effect on the development of our thinking about them" (1986:59). Vernacular typologies have largely been analysed in the larger scale of cultural representation. And even if the debate is not solved, research conducted on an important number of case studies around the world has made obvious that a type of voice production might be considered part of music-making in one culture but not in another. Beyond vernacular typologies, questions on uses of the voice and its effectiveness remain current. Melodized speech is neither song nor speech. What then does melodization achieve? Why do

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9. *Roja mezela* is a calendar feast at the autumn equinox and summer solstice, during which people gather around family graves.

10. A rhythm is not isochronic when its pulse does not occur at equal time intervals.

11. In Kurmanji Kurdish, *dil* means heart, but it can also be understood metaphorically as soul.

12. Also known as *meya.*

13. For an extensive analysis of the relation between music typology and calendrical cycle, see Amy de la Bretèque (2011).

14. See, for example, Bauman and Sherzel (1989), Brandily (2004), Feld and Fox (1994), Graham (1986), Johnson (2009), Klein (1986), Nattiez (2004), and Revel and Rey-Hulman (1993).

Yezidis melodize their words? To draft an answer to these questions, I propose to follow the melodized narrative of a woman named Hasmig.

## Hasmig's melodized narrative

Hasmig (figure 1) spent all her life in Rya Taze, a village on the road going from Yerevan to Tbilisi. When she married, she moved from her father's household along the main road to her husband's household, the last house on top of a hill. The view from the hilltop is clear and majestic, overlooking the village at the foot of the hill and the snowy peaks of Mount Aragats in the distance (figure 2). Life was not easy though. New Yezidi brides are in charge of the most exhausting household chores, in particular carrying water home from the well downhill. Fortunately, Hasmig soon gave birth to a son; this changed her status, allowing her to work less and enjoy more freedom in private and public spaces. When talking about this period of her life, Hasmig's eyes always light up, especially when recalling her participation in feasts: "My voice was beautiful; in weddings everybody wanted me to sing!" (*Dengê min gelek xweş bu, li dawate her kes xwest stranen min guh kir* (pers. comm., 2006)).

When I first met Hasmig in 2006, she was already a widow and had lost her twenty-five-year-old son in the previous decade. Among Yezidis, bereaved women are called "burning hearts" (*dilşewat*)—they can't get rid of their sorrow. Hasmig has no other son, and her daughters have left for their husbands' households. She has to look after her grandchildren, her son's widow, her mother, and her paternal uncle. And even if her daughter-in-law assists with the most wearying chores, Hasmig feels that the responsibility of the family lies on her shoulders.

**Figure 1**. Hasmig, April 2006 (photo by the author).

**Figure 2**. The view from Hasmig's house: Rya Taze village and Mount Aragats (photo by the author).

As she puts it: "I can't sing anymore, but I tell my sorrow, my suffering" (*Ez êdî nikarim bistrînim, lê ez derdê xwe dibêjim, xem û kulên xwe qisse dikim* (pers. comm., 2006)). She does so at funeral wakes, at her son's grave, and even at home when friends or relatives come to visit her. The following is a transcription of the melodized narrative she told Cemile (the village nurse) and me in September 2006, when we came to visit her (Amy de la Bretèque 2012a). There were three of us in the room listening to Hasmig: Hasmig's mother, Cemile, and me.

| | |
|---|---|
| A crane, I shouted, I am a crane | *Qulingim, diqîryam, ay, diqîryam* |
| I landed up in cursed Russia, wandering, my heart in pain | *Ezê ketim wêrana Ûrisêtê, halê dilê xwera digeryam* |
| My twenty-five-year-old unmarried son and my brother were killed one night | *Kurê minî bîstpênc salî nezewicî taêtenê êvarda birê min kuştin* |
| Unfortunate of God, once more I went back world-weary, I couldn't get any news about him | *Ez, delîla Xwedê, careke dinê porpoşman vegeryam, kesek salixê wî minra neda* |
| I went back slowly with my heart torn | *Ezê halê dilê xwera hêdî-hêdî vegeryam* |
| Valerik, be the father of your aunt | *Valêrîko, bavê meta xwe kiribîo* |
| Father of two dear ones | *Bavê du karî-xezalane* |
| His twelve-year-old daughter, his six-month-old son | *Qîza wî, keç'a wî donzdeh salîye, kurê wî şeş mehye* |
| Don't leave your young wife alone | *Jina wî bûkîne, ber dîwara nehêle* |
| Don't leave her to your old father, don't go | *Hîvya kalê bavê xwe nehêle, neçe* |
| I said: "Poor aunt, I'm so thin, so handsome | *Go metê dêranê, ez usa dilim, yekî xasî-kawame* |

| | |
|---|---|
| I am tall with curly red hair | *Bejna mine bilinde, porê minî xûcûcî sorî-sosine* |
| My eyebrows and eyelashes are well drawn, my words are sweet in my smile with white teeth | *Birû-bijangê min qeytanîne, zarî minî şîrine, dev-diranê mine sedefîne* |
| My destiny is a traitor | *Feleke min xayîne* |
| You are trying to get my soul | *Tu were min bive ruhê ber bedena min bistîne* |
| To separate my son and my daughter from me" | *Destê min kur, qîzê min hev biqetîne* |
| Spring, beautiful spring | *Bahare, xweş bahare* |
| On the riverside, roses and lilac are in bloom | *Gul, sosinê devê ç'ema şîn bûne* |
| *Wey*, my sorrow, let's walk on the riverside and pick flowers to prepare a bouquet | *Weyla min dêranê, werin em têkevne devê ava, gula biçînin, têkin destî* |
| *Wey*, my sorrow, I don't know to whom I should leave the care of Valerik's daughter and son | *Weyla min dêranê, nizam, emê keç'ik, kurê Valêrîk k'êr'a têkin carî, berdestî* |
| Those who have lost a sister, *wey* sorrow, *wey* sorrow | *Herç'ê xûşkê wana mirine, wey dêranê, wey dêranê* |
| Suffering is in our heart | *Bextê xema dilê weme* |
| Frida, Cemile's sister was so beautiful[15] | *Frîda xûşka Cemîlê yeke usa xase, kawe-kubar bûye* |
| She was ready to get married, but she stayed on the middle of the road | *Ew ber miraz bûye, nîvê rêda maye* |
| Cemile's sister says: "News is on its way to the cursed Germany | *Cemîle xaê divê: cavekê bide Gêrmanya wêranda* |
| May Frida come back now, her mother died" | *Bira Frîce nesekne bê, dayka wê mirye* |
| *Ax,* I can witness the wonderful relationship between the mother and her daughter | *Ax, ezê bêjim dêtî, qîztî halê dilê mera çiqa xweşe* |
| When the daughter's mother was ready to die | *Wekî dayka qîza dikeve ber mirinê* |
| The daughter was not at her bedside[16] | *Qîzeke helal ber serê wê rûnanê* |
| Death is and will be, death is and will be | *Mirine, ay, wê gelek hebe, gelek hebe* |
| Usiv's grandson says: "I am in a profound gorge | *Ûsivê nevî divê: gelî k'ûre, ez têdame* |
| My mother's sorrow, it is the gorge of Laliş" | *Serê dayka min jêkirîbe, gelî gelîê Lalişane* |

15. Hasmig refers here to Cemile's sister. Frida died at seventeen and was not married. While listening to these words, Cemile's eyes were filled with tears.

16. Reference to the last days of Cemile's mother in 2000. At that time, Cemile had joined the Kurdish guerrillas (PKK or Kurdistan Workers' Party) and was in Iraq. She was not able to come back for her mother's funeral. Since then, this event is frequently mentioned in melodized speech during the village's wakes or in daily conversations.

| | |
|---|---|
| Valerik's mother says: "the coffin's cover was closed on me" | *Dayka Valêrîk divê: derê tabûtê ser min dadane* |
| Valerik says: "Poor aunt, three months passed since | *Valêrîk divê: metê dêranê, eva îdî meha sisyane* |
| The scorpion removed the ring from my finger | *Dûpişkê gistîlka destê min revandye* |
| Lizards gnawed my hair, sorrow of my aunt" | *Mergîskê tûncik-tamûrîê min qusandine, serê meta min jêbe* |
| Aparan's hearth is humid, I'm miserable | *Tu were erdê Ax'baranê avzême, min dêranê* |
| When spring comes, they will flatten my grave, put up the gravestone, and will nail down my grave's cover | *Tu were bahar bê, mezelê min hilînin, kevirê min jî daynin, derê tabûtê ser min bigrin* |
| By God, may the moment when this tall body and these black eyes will ruin be cursed | *Xwedê xirav bike şîşmana bejna bilind, ç'evê belek* |
| My aunt will die, her silhouette only remains | *Meta min bimre, tenê forma min têda maye* |
| *Ay, ay*, destiny, *ay, ay*, destiny | *Ay, ay, felek, ay, ay, felek* |
| Cursed destiny, why did you act like this with us? | *Felekê malneşewitîê, te çira li me wa kir?* |
| You uprooted an aromatic tree | *Teê tûmê hewşanê li me rakir* |
| Why did you take the tent of the youth among all tents? | *Teê çira konê van cahila nava konê komê barkir* |
| *Ay*, why did you send them to the cemetery? | *Ay, te çira berê wan da goristanî giran?* |
| The vast cemetery is a bitter place, but I enjoy the sweetness of it | *Goristanî giran şore, têda lê şakir* |
| *Ay,* world, *wey*, world | *Ay, dinyaye, wey, dinyaye* |
| The world is like a household | *Dinyaye xanimane* |
| Its inhabitants are travellers | *Bendê têda bazirgane* |
| The injured says: "People live there a few years | *Dêranê divê: e'vdê serreş çend sala têda didebire* |
| This world will remain for none of us | *Eva dinya t'u qûl-bendara namîne* |
| The world is like a hotel, a big hotel" | *Dinya heye, xanek, xanek tijî* |
| I said: "Today some are dying, tomorrow it will be others" | *Go îro dora wane, sivê diçe dora hineke dinê jî* |
| There is no world for Îsa Nûranîra | *Dinya nema Îsa Nûranîra* |
| There is no world for the angel Aqûb | *Dinya nema Aqûb pêxemberra* |
| There is no world for people | *Dinya nema bedî ademara* |
| There is no world for our uncle Mame | *Dinya nema Mamê kalkê mera* |
| It is all a lie, it is all a lie | *Tev derewe, tev derewe, tev derewe* |
| Death is like melted snow | *Mirin belekîê berfanin* |
| I said: "Poor mother, they melt and go to the top of the mountain" | *Go dêranê daê, dihelin, xwe didine qûntaxê ç'yane.* |

Hasmig stopped and sighed loudly a few times. Then she asked Cemile about her older brother and his life in Moscow. The conversation moved to another topic.

### A poetic and sonic space of sadness

In this section I elaborate the semantic, poetic, and acoustic features that set apart *kilamê ser* from normal speech (*axavtin*) as well as from song (*stran*). Compared with song, *kilamê ser* is freer in its semantic, melodic, and rhythmic content. And as described previously, *kilamê ser* is considered speech, but different from normal daily speech. The difference is to be found in the strong emotions associated with *kilamê ser*. The relationship between the enunciator and the listener is also notable: if one usually answers to speech, in *kilamê ser* the audience listens quietly, and marks any opinion or reaction through body postures, tears, and sighs.

In her melodized narrative, Hasmig mentions a large number of relatives. In most cases she doesn't refer to them by name, but by kinship relation. By using the expressions "Usiv's grandson," "Valerik's mother," or "Cemile's sister" she invokes twice as many people in her narrative. She could have said "Frida" for "Cemile's sister," but in this way Cemile is included in the narrative along with Frida, and their relationship is affirmed. The constant mention of a network of relations is among the important semantic processes used in all *kilamen ser*. A central role is given to the missing persons, the exiled, the dead, as well as close family members.[17] During funerals, when several dozen women gather at the deceased's bedside, some enunciations are addressed directly to individuals. For example, the speaker may address someone in the audience (e.g., "Suzan, your brother came to visit us") or even the dead body (e.g., "I'll be your sacrifice"). Other enunciations, more complex, involve several persons. For example, at Kerem's funeral in 2006, Qazê (the wife of the deceased) addressed Xudo, her son: "Xudo, your father lives in Siberia, may he send a letter to his sisters." Later, she continued her melodized speech using the voice of her brother-in-law, saying, "The responsibility of both families is now on my shoulders." In this way, melodized speech is used to weave a network between the family and the audience, between the living and the dead, between the villagers who emigrated to Russian cities and the ones who remained in the village.

In his in-depth analysis of emotional empathy among Transylvanian Roma, Bonini-Baraldi (2010) observed that the mention of relationships in laments is not merely a cataloguing of names or kinship relations, but a complex construction of relationships. The same phenomenon can be observed among Armenian Yezidis. *Kilamen ser* may involve family members as well as people from the audience. The narrator may address a sentence to a specific person in the audience (e.g., "Asmar, your brother died and your nephew hung himself") or to several persons (e.g., "Those who lost a son"). Life stories, memories, and destinies of each self in the audience are potentially linked to the events of the day by the *kilamê ser*.

Another characteristic of *kilamen ser* compared with normal speech is the extended use of an affective topography. Most of the time, places and spaces

17. This has been observed in many lament traditions around the world. See, for example, Bonini-Baraldi (2010), Briggs (1992, 1993), Daniel (1996), Efendieva (2001), Feld (1982, 1990), Savvidou (1996), Seremetakis (1991), and Xanthakou (1990). See also the bibliography in Feld and Fox (1994).

mentioned in *kilamen ser* are characterized in an affective manner. For example, when mentioning the Russian capital city, it is far more common to hear "the cursed Moscow" or "Moscow the traitor," than the single word "Moscow." Steven Feld (1982) mentioned the importance of topography in Kaluli mourning vocalizations. In *kilamen ser*, topography shapes not a geographic space but rather an affective one, clearly dividing the world into two kinds of places—those of the household/village and those of exile.[18] In her melodized narrative, Hasmig mentions two places of exile: Russia and Germany. Towards the end, her words evoke the fact that life itself is an exile that we all have to pass through. Mingled with the network of relations, the affective topography suggests a shared space of sadness where emotions can be lived and shared through many different paths and connections by the network's members.

Other processes help the audience invest in the events' affect. In *kilamen ser*, the use of reported speech is widely used.[19] In daily reportage, one might say, "Since my brother died, I'm so sad," but in melodized speech it is far more common to hear "And I say: since my brother died, I'm so sad." The omnipresence of reported speech increases the number of persons involved in the utterance (e.g., I said "…," they say "…," he will say "…"). In this way speakers interlock utterances to such an extent that the listener often loses track of who is talking and to whom. Through reported speech the speaker may not only quote other voices but also mix the past, present, and future. The feelings and thoughts expressed are left in a state of uncertainty as to their location in time and their attribution to specific individuals.

Finally, *kilamen ser* usually contain a set of poetic images and metaphors. Hasmig evokes the ruin of the body through expressions such as, "The scorpion removed the ring from my finger, lizards gnawed my hair" and "Death is like melted snow." At a 2007 funeral, the aunt of a deceased woman said in melodized speech, "May an eagle from the mountain dig its wings into blood." The same poetic license would certainly not be used in normal daily speech. Combined with the affective topography, the network of relations, and the use of specific grammatical features, metaphors give *kilamê ser* a wide range of possible understandings, thus creating (with the help of melodization) a poetic space of sadness.

As described previously, semantic and poetic characteristics set apart *kilamê ser* from quotidian speech. But it is a change in vocal intonation that is even more striking. This change alone radically modifies an utterance. First of all, words are stretched: the same sentence has a longer duration when it is melodized than when it is spoken normally. For example, Hasmig's melodized narrative lasts for 7′45″, whereas a spoken version would last for about four minutes. The second modification concerns the usual pitch variations of intonation that are replaced by something which resembles a melodic line. This line varies in detail, but always follows more or less the same descending path. Long sentences are uttered on a

18. On the conception of exile as opposed to the household among Yezidis, see Amy de la Bretèque (2008, 2010b). The cultural importance of exile on a larger geographic scale is dealt with by Delaporte (2010) and Fliche (2004).

19. On the extended use of reported speech in laments, see Argenti-Pillen (2003), Briggs (1992), and Vrinat (1996).

qu- ling- im di- qî- ryam ay- di- qî- ryam

Ez- ê ke- tim wê- ra- na Û- ri- sê- tê ha- lê di- lê xwe- ra di- ge- ryam

ku- rê min- î bîst- pênc sa- lî ne ze- wi- cî ta- ê te- nê ê- var- da birê min kuş- tin

**Figure 3**. First lines of Hasmig's melodized speech.

few pitches (usually two or three) within a narrow range. And finally, the lines are not composed of an equal number of syllables; rather, they vary, and lines do not rhyme with each other. All these transformations set *kilamê ser* ("words about") apart from both *stran* (song) and *axavtin* (normal speech) (figure 3).

## Keeping words away

As far as I have been able to determine, Yezidis do not melodize their words to enhance the singing potential of language. Rather, they use melodization as a way of suppressing the intonation of normal speech. The following arguments support this view. In daily conversation, variations of pitch and accent indicate to some extent the emotions of the speaker. They may also highlight specific semantic dimensions of the words being said. But in melodized speech, the words are moulded into a melodic line quite independent of both their meaning and the particular emotional state of the speaker. Indeed, the same melodic patterns are applied to many kinds of traumatic affects, ranging from the loss of close relatives to the nostalgia evoked by the experience of exile or to the tragic destinies of epic heroes. Hence, pitch and accent variations used by the speakers do not reflect particular shades of personal experience. Viewed from this perspective, intonation is suppressed rather than enhanced. One may wonder why this should happen precisely at moments of high emotional intensity, such as funerals.

It is not easy to ascertain the effects of melodization in the narration of traumatic events since the topic addressed and the mode of enunciation usually go together. When people talk about sorrow, exile, and loss, they usually switch to melodized speech. I only witnessed a few occasions where the articulated words and enunciation mode were separated. One of them occurred in February 2007 in the village of Alagyaz. February is particularly cold in this region and, in each house, people gathered in the main room of the house, where the stove was always kept hot. I had come with my friend Cemile to visit Hbo, a sixty-year-old woman (figure 4). Hbo had no son, and her husband had died a few years after their marriage. As with many women of her generation, Hbo defined herself as a "burning heart" (*dilşewat*)

**Figure 4**. Hbo, February 2007 (photo by the author).

and said she had no hope of treating her illness—the deep sorrow that burned her heart. We were sitting in Hbo's house with some of her relatives, and there was a newborn among us. At some point Hbo started to talk about her brother's funeral. "My brother's wife … I remember exactly what she said. She said about Zînê's brother …" (*Jina birê min … Ewê çawa digo me pera pera heldida. Ewe ser bave Zînê digo …*). Then she glanced at the baby and, exceptionally, chose to not melodize her words. Indeed, Yezidis say that this particular mode of enunciation could affect the health of infants and pregnant women. However, while Hbo said her *kilamê ser* without melodization, she did not use regular intonation either. Instead, she adopted a monotone voice which contrasted with the way she spoke immediately before and after the *kilamê ser*. Rather than reverting to the intonational patterns of everyday speech, her narrative of sadness was delivered in a sequence of monotone utterances—a series of *recto tono* expressions, each pitched at a slightly different level. From time to time, reverting to regular intonational speech, she inserted some comments on her own narrative (Amy de la Bretèque 2012b).

In the following transcription of Hbo's narrative, her monotone utterances are transcribed in side-by-side double columns (English on the left; Kurmanji Kurdish on the right), while the comments she made with regular intonational speech are in a single column that spans the width of the page.

| | |
|---|---|
| Deep nostalgia becomes more present | *Derda da ser derda* |
| By the grace of God | *Şikir mala Xwedêra* |
| Someone would come and would have said: | *Yek dêrîda bihata, bigota* |
| "All the soldiers were sent to exile" | *Saldatê xerîv temam berdan* |
| They sent the soldiers of your father's household to exile | *Hetanî saldat xerîbîê mala bavê te berdan* |

| | |
|---|---|
| The mother and daughter put perfume on | *Dê û qîzê dest ji hev berdan* |
| I said: "Zînê, son" | *Go Zînê, lao* |
| Your father is not alive | *Bavê te divê tebî nîne* |
| The infidel's bullets shine above your father's head | *Gulle barûdê vî kafirî ser serê bavê Zînêra wîle-wîle* |
| The mother and daughter became orphans and martyrs | *Dê û qîz bûne hêsîr û dîle* |

[Hbo stopped for a few seconds and added:] Once I went to funerals in my father's household, and I said (*Careke ez cûm şîneke mala bavê xwe, min go*):

| | |
|---|---|
| Zînê's father is in exile | *Bavê Zînîe xerîbiyê* |
| Nobody can bring him back | *Kes tune cawekî bide bira bêye* |

And after that I said (*Û paşê min go*):

| | |
|---|---|
| Lions from my father's household are buried in foreign land | *Berê şêrê mala bavê min dane axê gorê xerîb* |

And about exile I said (*Û ser xerîbîyê min go*):

| | |
|---|---|
| My brother, we both are in exile | *Birê min, xerîb ez u tune* |
| We are sitting next to the cloudy river | *Em ber ç'emê şêlû rûniştine* |
| May God curse sisters' nostalgia for their brothers | *Xwedê xirav bike, xûşk û bira çiqas hezreta hevdune* |
| I said: "The morning sun heats" | *Go teva sivê lêda* |
| The sister tied her brother's back | *Xûşkê pişta birê girêda* |
| He says: "I'll go to exile" | *Go: ezê herme xerîbîêda* |
| I don't know, will you see me in your dreams? | *Îda nizam, carekê min bivîni vê xewnêda?* |

Here is what I said about exile (*Min usa go ser xerîbîyê*):

| | |
|---|---|
| What shall I do with my broken heart | *Ezê çawa bikim xwe vî dilê* şikestî |
| I cut a rose, I prepare a bouquet | *Gula biçinim, têkme destî* |
| I'll be your sacrifice, I don't know where are the lions | *Qurbana weme, nizanim, şêr mane kîjan destî* |
| All lions one day leave | *Her* şêrek çû kete cîkî |

I said a lot also about death … My brother's son said: "Aunt, tell me, how did my brother's daughter die?" (*Ser miriya ji min digo … Kure birê min digo: "Metê, bejê çawa mirî qiza birê min."*):

| | |
|---|---|
| I said: "Lûsîk, son, brother of your aunt" | Îjar mi digo Lûsîk *lao, birê meta xwebî* |
| I saw that the cradle of my brother's daughter is in a willow | *Mi dî bêşîka qîza birê min dara bîê* |
| The newborn was given to his aunt | *Saxî dergûş daye xatîê* |
| She says: "What is that newborn in my house?" | *Go çi dergûşa nava malê* |
| After a thought, they moved the newborn to his uncle's house | *Poşman bûn, birine mala xalê* |

My nephew was killed, the child remained an orphan — *Xarzî kuştin, dergûş bêxwey ma derê malê*

Cemile: “Orphan?”
Hbo: “Yes, his mother died” [and she continues]:

| | |
|---|---|
| I said: “Misfortune, spring came back | *Mi digo nebixêr bahar bê* |
| What shall I do? I will become a hawk and will melt in the sky” | *Ezê çawa bim? Ezê bivim teyrekî qûşî hewa babim* |
| May it be cursed by God, I will pass by the grave | *Bira Xwedê xirav bike, çaxê mezelê teze bêm,* |
| I will walk by the grave | *Ezê ser mezelê te peyabim* |
| Don’t walk by the grave without your aunt, you may recognize it or not | *Bê metê nav mezela bigere, serê xwe kurke, wekî naskî, nasnakî* |
| Look at the picture of the young men, one is seventeen, the other twenty-one. | *Şikilê hîjdeh salî vegere vî alî, naske yê bîstyek salî.* |

This is what his mother said about him (*Daê ser wî ji ra digot*).

Next to me, Cemile was listening to Hbo. Looking with half an eye to the mute TV and to the newborn’s rocking cradle, she had a light smile on her lips and was crumpling the paper wrapper from the candy she had eaten previously with her coffee.

Research on the narration of traumatic events (Argenti-Pillen 2003; Briggs 1992; Grima 1992; Wilce 1998) has shown that the more speakers are emotionally affected by the events they narrate, the more they use linguistic and pragmatic markers of distance to dissociate themselves from their own narratives. Deeply traumatic events have to be kept away in order to be narrated.

This research highlights several distance regulators involved in this process, such as the extended use of reported speech or specific grammatical features. For example, in a village in southern Sri Lanka, the use of the reported speech marker, *-lu*, “builds a connotation of doubt, uncertainty, or critical distance into a statement” (Argenti-Pillen 2003:149). The author mentions as well an “excess of quotation” as a “strategy of non-identification” (ibid.:152). Grima reports the use of the “third-person account,” among female Paxtun speakers, a distanced way of reporting on what happened (1992:139). While grammatical features are, of course, different in each language, both seem to underplay the involvement of the speaker in his or her own narrative. The use of a monotone voice is also reported by Pillen (2012). In this context, melodized speech may well be a different response to a similar need. If music is frequently understood in the Western world as an emotional engagement with sound (Hanslick 1854; Meyer 1956; Nattiez 1987, 2005), melodized speech may be better described as an attempt to disengage oneself from an excessively powerful emotion. If this is so, melodization would be another distance regulator. But, in addition to being a distance regulator, melodization seems to enable emotional sharing with others present.

## Melodized speech and contagious emotions

At some point, while Hbo was narrating her brother's funeral in a monotone voice due to the presence of a newborn in the room, the mother went out with her child. Hbo then started to melodize her narrative. At this precise moment, Cemile left her candy wrapper on the side of her saucer, put down her hand to her knees, and her eyes filled with tears. Simultaneously, several members of the audience burst into tears. While melodized and monotone speech may have been equivalent from Hbo's point of view, melodization obviously generated a greater emotional response.

It is quite rare to hear Yezidis narrate traumatic events without melodized speech. However, this may happen on special occasions, and what these exceptions reveal is that melodized speech achieves two related effects: (1) it distances the speaker from his or her emotions by moulding them into preset patterns, and (2) it increases the ability of the listeners to engage with the story and to reconstruct its emotional impact for themselves. Though apparently contradictory, these two effects may be attributed to the same agent—melodization.

In the last decades, the rich bibliography on death, funerals, and mourning has made it clear that laments are not to be considered normal daily utterances. They are often dangerous and can even cause death if performed inappropriately (Amy de la Bretèque 2005; Andreesco and Bacou 1986; Delaporte 2010; Holst-Warhaft 1992; Tolbert 1990; Wilce 1999). Most ethnographic research locates the danger in the semantic content of the utterance and its association with the performance context (funerals or mourning rituals). Nevertheless, some ethnomusicological studies point to the importance of sonic features in the efficacy of laments. Feld (1982) has written about the powerful connection between poetics, weeping, and songs among the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea. Tolbert (1990) has reported that the "magico-religious power" of Karelian laments comes precisely from the combination of crying, speech, and song. Delaporte (2010) has observed that it is considered less dangerous to pronounce the words of a Greek lament (*miroloï*) without melody (*ikhos*). Feld already pointed out in 1990 the need for a comparative study on laments. And indeed laments are among the few forms reported all around the world that share a considerable number of features regardless of ethnographic context. One of these features is a use of pitch which differs from intonation in everyday speech. *Kilamê ser* shares this feature with other lament forms, and yet one feature which perhaps distinguishes it from other lament traditions is the diversity of its performance contexts, that is, its use at funerals, in daily conversation, and in narrating heroic epics.

## From tears to heroes

Whether enunciated in funerals, calendar feasts, or daily conversations, *kilamen ser* evoke mostly close relatives and co-villagers. In such cases, the speaker and the audience have (or have had) a personal relationship with the persons mentioned

in melodized speech. But one can observe in some *kilamen ser* that the content has no direct relation with the speaker. The emotional content remains sad, and the persons mentioned have been dead for a long time, but the utterance is not linked to the speaker as it is in Hasmig's narrative. Such *kilamen ser* are closer to what in English would be called "epic songs." They differ from melodized speech used at funerals in that they are not attached to a specific context of enunciation. Yezidi epic narratives usually deal with heroes who died a long time ago and far away; in Yezidi typology these too are "words about." Some are "words about the dead" (*kilamê ser mirya*), others are "words about the hero" (*kilamê ser mêranîê*). Recounting more or less historical or "real" events, heroic melodized narratives glorify the courage and honesty of men in usually tragic situations with fatal outcomes, in the distant or more recent past.

To become a hero, one should first be a man and have suffered a violent and tragic ending. But one needs also to have a big family (sisters, daughters-in-law, sons, nephews, etc.) and more generally a social network where one's life and death will be narrated in melodized speech. A *kilamê ser* performed locally at the deceased's bedside may be disseminated in two ways: (1) funerals filmed by families and sent to relatives in exile; (2) rich Yezidis who have had their *kilamen ser* recorded in studios by professional musicians and distributed through MP3 compilations sold in street markets in Yerevan and Russia. This use of new formats (mostly MP3 or video clips) for melodized speech accelerates the autonomization of melodized speech from a local context. They enable wider diffusion, thus inscribing this phenomenon within a regional political process.

Delocalized from funeral space and time, exemplary "words about the dead" still recall the deceased that gave them birth, but as they spread outside the household and the village, they become more and more autonomous, constituting a shared Yezidi culture. Nowadays, on the Yezidis' "best-of" compilations, one can find some *kilamen ser* for the memory of soldiers who died in the Karabakh conflict, others for Armenian and Yezidi heroes who died during the battle with the Ottomans in 1918, or even for mafia leaders killed in Moscow or in far-eastern Siberia.

The analysis of *kilamen ser* reveals a kind of paradox. On the one hand, they are very local forms of speech linked with many pragmatic features of the performance/genre context: the network of relations, the topography which makes sense in a particular village and for particular people. On the other hand, *kilamen ser* seem also to have the ability to break through these local boundaries, to spread more generally, and be enjoyed in an independent way, which may remind one of art works. How should we understand the relation between the very local processes which arouse emotions in the "words about the dead" and cultural forms shared on a much wider scale ("words about the hero")? I believe that the use of reported speech and the fact that speech is moulded into a melodic outline are of particular importance. The use of reported speech already suggests the possibility of a delocalization. Indeed, reported speech is a way of transferring speech from one context (or from one person) to another. The use of the same kind of melodic line in all *kilamen ser* suggests that the melodic line is inscribed in a set pattern or mould.

If the mould stays the same, the semantic content of the enunciation can be easily interchanged. In this sense, the possibility of *kilamê ser* becoming a global form of culture is already inscribed in its precise characteristic features.

In the last fifty years, research in ethnomusicology has underlined the importance of the performance context in the study of musical events, in particular for repertoires like laments, work songs, or lullabies, which are described as integral features of their context of enunciation. But, among Yezidis, these features seem to gain a new dimension: as widespread performances, laments become part of a shared culture, just like epics. As a case study, melodized speech among the Yezidis offers an interesting model for processes of delocalization and globalization.

## Conclusion

In some traditions, pain, loss and death lead to silence (Ariès 1977; Thomas 1975, 1985). In others, as among Yezidis, it is quite the contrary: vocalization is a necessary path to embodying and performing a state of mourning. But the vocal form involved in such cases is paradoxically more formalized than speech. Our analysis of the pragmatic and performative features of *kilamê ser* has shown that the choice of a formalized enunciation may be interpreted as a strategy of distancing and sharing. By moulding its narrative into preset patterns, the speaker distances the utterance from the self, creating a narrative ready to become autonomous and invested by others' feelings. People from the audience may enter the narrative and reappropriate it for themselves. This includes the speakers themselves, who in this way may become listeners to their own stories. As Feld pointed out in 1990, in many cases laments are not to be understood as cathartic performances, but as a "creative 'pulling together' of affect" (1990:257). Among Yezidis, melodization enacts a rich aesthetic of shared sufferings in which (shared) memories are shaped by sound and poetics.

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