

KURDISTAN & KURDS

TOWARD A CULTURAL DEFINITION

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PREFACE

Dear Reader

The stability of the Middle East has long been a focus of international concern.

Recent events highlight the continuing importance of this focus: The Iran-Iraq War, the invasion of Kuwait, the Gulf War, the contemporary disputes over water supply between Turkey on one side and Iraq and Syria on the other, the new economic and ideological competition between Iran and Turkey for influence in the newly independent states in Central Asia, and the subsequent turmoil in Iraq all make clear the ongoing need for further attention to the problems of states in the region.

Since the Gulf War, the significance of the Kurds for Middle East stability is clearer than ever before. As the Kurds have no state and thus are not “national” participants in the region, their presence in four of the major countries (Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey) of the Middle East makes them an important factor in any plan aiming for peace. The long- oppressed Kurds are potentially a potent military and political force in the region: their alignment with any camp brings with it a shift in regional influence.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and Marxism, the emerging new independent states in the Balkans and Central Asia, the New World Order, and the extensive publicity of the Kurdish cause challenge the Kurdish political parties to redefine their political goals and to rethink their methods.

In Turkey and Iran, there are bloody wars between the armies of the two states and the Kurdish fighters of the Kurdish Worker’s Party (PKK) and Kurdish Democratic Party- Iran (KDPI), respectively. Thousands are dead as a result of these conflicts. Both countries, as well as the Kurdish parties, are searching for solutions. In Iraq, the Kurdish- controlled area is suffering from the Iraqi and international economic blockade and from regional military threats. In addition, the Kurds of Iraq have yet to gain recognition for their newly elected parliament and government.

At this critical time in history, the Badlisy Center called for an international conference, “The Kurds: political Status and Human Rights” The conference aimed to review the political situation of the Kurds, generate some ideas that might help the Kurds and their neighbors to find solutions that will bring peace and coherence to the region, the international community in the Kurdish issue.

I would like to acknowledge Dr. William Spencer for co-directing this project, Linda Thorne for editing the conference papers, and the SAAR Foundation and United States Institute of Peace for providing the major funding.

Salah Aziz

President

The Badlisy Center for Kurdish Studies

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- International Human Rights law Group (Washington, D.C.)
- Kurdish National Congress of North America (Maryland)
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* * *

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KURDISTAN: TOWARD A CULTURAL-HISTORICAL DEFINITION

Kamal Mirawdeli

Introduction

Kurdistan means the land of the Kurds. And both the land and the people, of course exist. Yet, as Paul Rich (1991:Vii) has written. In political terms: “Kurdistan does not exist, which is why it is so important. This anomalous structure has long been part of the Middle East conundrum”, the understanding of which entails understanding the politics of power and the relationship between power and knowledge. It is power which creates the conditions for the production of knowledge about peoples, and which ultimately defines its boundaries, scope, and even nomenclature. If Kurdistan is and has been absent from the political discourse of the Middle East, if the problem of the Middle East has been reduced to the case of the Palestinian Arabs against Israel, it is not because in reality, in its political significance, historical legitimacy, and humanitarian urgency, the Kurdish cause is inferior to that of the Palestinians. It is because the whole political system of the Middle East and the power-knowledge strategy resulting from it has been based since 1920 on this hiatus: the absence of Kurdistan, the silence of the Kurds, the persistence of an ongoing human tragedy. In the same way as the political system of the Middle East survives on the suppression of the Kurdish people, its political discourse thrives on the omission or distortion of the Kurdish discourse.

Kurdistan, even as a mere vocal entity, is a dangerous word. It should not be uttered. It means the land of the Kurds. But this dangerous seminal semantic combination is supposed not to exist, and it is exactly this that the Turks have been trying to convince themselves and the world of for the past 70 years. In the process, they have brutalized and dehumanize themselves as much as the Kurds. This is why the Arab regime in Iraq has been using the most sophisticated modern lethal weapons to prove that there are, in what it calls the north oh Iraq, only bare rugged mountains with no trace of fauna or flora, let alone human beings. In Iran, both Persian chauvinism and Islamic fundamentalism have banished the Kurds from their cultural existence and arrested them in the darkest of medieval moments. In Syria, there is a belt of extinction tightened around them. In the former Soviet Union, they are driven from one exile to another. And the West, and the world, have been conspiring and conniving in all this, simply because the Kurds do not have a state, and therefore they do not have the power to control their economy and rich resources. Therefore they do not really exist. Referring to the West’s attitude toward the Kurds, Howell (1965:6) writes:

The prevailing attitude toward the Kurds is a mixture of ignorance romanticism, and suspicion. They are in the popular mind, the perpetrators of the Armenian massacres, gallant brigands of epic

proportions, or the nefarious agents of Soviet imperialism.”

Twenty years after Howell’s words, we saw, for example, the same attitudes prevailing in apparently a very important scholarly book written about a very important timely subject: the position and role of the Kurds in the context of the Iran- Iraq war. The writer Stephen Pelletiere has entitled his book *The Kurds: An Unstable Element in the Gulf*. Consider this definition of the Kurds. For Pelletiere the Kurds are not a nation or a group of human beings but an element with a destabilizing function in the harmonious chemistry of power and political order of the Middle East. To the author, they have always exhibited the same essential characteristics as mercenaries, warriors, and troublemakers. He writes (Pelletier: 11): “A number of factors contribute to this trouble- making ability. First, the Kurdish society is basically anarchic, and the Kurds have long tradition of serving as mercenaries in the armies of Europe and the Middle East- which is to say the Kurds are a fighting people. Second, the Kurds traditional homeland Kurdistan, is crucially located where the superpowers confront each other in the Gulf region. Finally, Kurdistan is an inhospitable land that is hard to penetrate. Particularly with modern mechanized armies. Taken in combination what do these three factors tell us? The Kurds are a fighting people who could be difficult to rout, even though they are continually disrupting the peace in an area that is adjacent to the Gulf where the superpowers want to maintain stability.”

What is the writer’s message? To rout such unroutable and dangerous destabilizers in such a significant

geopolitical area, every method is justified, perhaps even chemical weapons, which the West so generously supplied Saddam with in the late 1980s. It is astonishing to find a writer so strongly adhering to these assumptions while he is writing during the first Gulf War, a war in which the most brutal old and new methods of human butchery were used, the war of cities, chemical weapons, human waves: and which caused more than one million casualties and the almost total ruin of two countries. Were Iraq and Iran defenders of peace, and the Kurds “disrupting the peace in the area”? Weren’t the Kurds victimized and murdered by both these two powerful countries without having even the most basic weapons to defend themselves? I mention this as an example of the grave misrepresentations the Kurds have been subjected to in the West. Perhaps the end of the Cold War and the experience of the second Gulf War and its aftermath will change this and a new beginning for the Kurdish discourse in the West will obtain. I hope that this conference, together with many other indicators, will be an example and evidence that this new beginning is already happening.

It is not my aim in this paper to delve into the political intricacies of the Kurdish question. I want simply to define Kurdistan on the basis of the existential historical reality of the land and the people who continued throughout many millennia to inhabit it in one way or another, creating with their labour, blood, and imagination many interesting phases of the drama of human existence.

I am going to address the cultural-historical identity of Kurdistan in the light of several discourses. By “culture” I mean all the material and spiritual

aspects and expressions of the life of a people. By “discourse” I simply mean a domain of knowledge with its own paradigms of research and production. The aggregate result of the discourses, I hope, will provide the elements which can define the specificity and actuality of the Kurdish discourse. I want to explain further that my focus is primarily on Kurdistan and not on the Kurds as a “race.” The concept of race itself is an invention of power, just as racial homogeneity is a myth. Therefore, I shall use “space” or geography as the principal category of description and analysis. Historical realities unfold themselves in geographical space. In geographical space, too, we can find the recurrent patterns that account for the nature of Power relationships.

Kurdistan: The Geographical Concept

The word Kurdistan was first used by the Seljuks in the 12th century as a name for the province including the lands between Azerbaijan and Luristan (Senna, Dainawar, Hamadan, Kirmanshah, etc.) as well as certain adjoining areas to the west of Zagros (Shahrazur, Khuftiyan) (Minorsky 1923: 1130). But known by similar names- as we shall see later- Kurdistan has been the traditional homeland of the Kurds since the dawn of history. It is the country where the Kurdish people have been constituted ethnically as a homogeneous community, where they have developed their culture and shaped their destiny.

Kurdistan is a geographically contiguous territory where the Kurdish ethnos predominates. It is an extensive country of about 409,650 square kilometres in size (Qassemlou, 1965:14). The greatest part of Kurdistan is a highland lying

astride the numerous parallel ranges of two mountain systems, the eastern extension of the Taurus and the northern extension of the Zagros: but on the southeast it spreads across a belt of foothills to the Mesopotamian plain. Lake Van in northern Kurdistan lies at an altitude of 1,700 meters in the angle where the two systems meet (Hassanpour, 1989:1). The length of Kurdistan, measured from north to south, is 1,000 kilometres, the average width being 200 kilometres in the south, increasing northwards, where it measures 750 kilometres (Qassemlou, p. 14).

Kurdistan is in its entirety a country of high mountains. The average altitude of the whole country is high ranging from 1,000 to 41,500 meters above sea level. There exist towns situated far higher than that (e.g., Bijar at 1,920 meters), and on the other hand, there are towns situated much lower, such as Arbil (430 meters) lying on the verge of Iraqi desert. If Kurdistan is a country of very uneven relief, it is no less generously watered by numbers of clear springs and many water courses and actual river Araxes (Aras) is in Kurdistan in the plateau of Bingol, with a thousand lakes between the Tigris and Euphrates the two biblical rivers which traverse Kurdistan in particular. The Tigris (1,718 kilometres long) waters Kurdistan in its upper course. It has its source in the region of Lake Hazar to the north of the Maden Mountains, and waters for 300 kilometres of Turkish Kurdistan the towns famous in Kurdish history: Ergani, Diyarbakir, Hasankeyf, and Cizre /Djazira (Enuyclopedia of Islam, 1988:422). Iranian Kurdistan is also traversed by numerous streams, several of which lie in the Chil

Cheshme, a great massif of 2,085 meters in the Mukri country.

There are also several lakes in Kurdistan of which the largest is lake Urme in Iranian Kurdistan: 130 kilometres long and 40 kilometres wide in places: Van in northern Kurdistan: and lake Zrebar to the west of Marivan and southeast of Pandjwin in southern Kurdistan.

Because of its altitude, the climate of Kurdistan is harsh in winter. Snow covers the high summits for many months of the year. In the plains, rainfall varies between 200 and 400 millimetres a year, although it may reach between 700 and 2,000 and even 3,000 millimetres on the plateaux between the different chains of the mountains. But in the valleys of central Kurdistan, the climate is continental and even arid.

Kurdistan's mountains are covered with pastures and vegetation, and its valleys with forests, orchards, and meadows which in spring are dotted with multicoloured wild flower. In the mountains, high mountain-pastures stretch over many kilometres and provide pasturage for herds of goat and sheep. In places, edible wild plant grows, sought after by shepherds and simple folk for their medical properties and carefully collected by women. In spring, flowers cover in abundance the smallest corner literally stupefies and whose perfumes intoxicate the passer by. (The source of the above is Encyclopaedia of Islam, 1988:442.)

The location of Kurdistan-occupying that area of the mountain complex extending from the Caucasus to the Persian Gulf which separates Anatolia from the Iranian plateaux-has earned for Kurdistan a reputation as "the backbone of Middle East" and thus of great geostrategic significance (Howell, 1965:19). In this sense, Kurdistan is a

geopolitical concept as it has been so approached by many writers especially in the context of the Cold War and its strategic location vis-à-vis the Gulf (e.g. pelletiere above).

The fact that Kurdistan is a denied concept also expresses the colonial state of Kurdistan. There is, as the Turkish writer Ismail Besikci (1992:2) has put it, "a Turkish Kurdistan, an Iraqi Kurdistan, an Iranian Kurdistan, and a Syria Kurdistan but the Kurds themselves have no Kurdistan."

According to David McDowell (1990:7): "Although the term Kurdistan appears on few maps, it is clearly more than a geographical term since it refers also to a human culture which exists in that land. To this extent, Kurdistan is a social and political concept."

Finally, Kurdistan is also an anthropological concept. For it is impossible to study and understand the Kurdish people without examining the impact of their mountains upon their character and their history. Therefore, I agree with Howell (1956:19) when he writes: "The mountainous character of Kurdistan has been influential in determining not only the internal development of Kurdish society but also the nature of the relationship between the Kurds and members of adjacent societies. It is, in fact, tempting to explain almost every aspect of Kurdish history and behaviour on the basis of the physical configuration of this environment."

Chris Kutschera (1983:23) expresses a similar opinion: "... it cannot be denied that the geographical environment in which Kurds have been living shaped their soul and continued to determine the course of their history."

The Geological Discourse

Let us start from the beginning of the beginnings: Where was Kurdistan when existence itself was in limbo? The invaluable scientific researches of professor H.A. Wright on the mountain ranges of Kurdistan (Wright 1952, 1961, 1964) have illustrated the fact that certain climatic and ecological transformations occurred in Kurdistan's mountains more than 11,000 years ago, which ended that late Quaternary and created favourable conditions for rainfall, the emergence of forests, and the growth of wild wheat and barley. This enabled prehistoric man to achieve an important historic transition from a hunter to a cave-dwelling being and then settle in agrarian villages about 9,000 years ago. Europe had to wait 6,000 more years to witness these climatic transformations.

The Archaeological Discourse

The real identity of Kurdistan is still hidden in its archaeology. However, there were invaluable archaeological investigations in Kurdistan in the 1940s and 1950s which have unravelled and revealed a number of mysteries not only about the antiquity of Kurdistan but also about the beginning of human civilization. Professor Robert Braidwood, Linda Braidwood, and their colleagues (Braidwood, R. et al., 1960; Braidwood, L., 1953) have a prominent position in this respect. They have established beyond any doubt that Kurdistan was one of the first cradles of humankind which witnessed the Neolithic/agrarian revolution about 9,000 years ago. Commenting on the

findings of professor Braidwood at the Jarmo site in Southern Kurdistan in 1948 and 1955, Georges Roux writes in his book, *The Ancient Iraq* (Roux, 1964:58-59): "Thus, 3,500 years at least before Europe, Northern Iraq was the scene of the Neolithic revolution, the most important perhaps of all times. On the foothills of Kurdistan watered every winter by Atlantic rains, man ceases to be a wandering hunter, depending for his living upon his luck and skill and becomes a farmer attached to the small piece of land from which he obtains a regular food supply. Out of clay he builds himself a house. He secures in sheep and cattle a permanent and easy available source of milk, meal, wool and hide. At the same time, his social tendencies develop, for the care and defence of the land call for close co-operation. Each family probably erects its own farm, cultivates its own field, grazes its own flock, and makes its own tool; but several families are grouped together and from a hamlet, the embryo of a social organization. Later other revolution occur: metal will replace stone, villages will grow into cities, and cities will be united into kingdoms and kingdoms into empires. Yet the essentials of life, the labour of man bent over mother earth and enslaved to its cycle of seasons, has not changed since those remote days.

The occurrence of the agrarian revolution in Kurdistan about 7,000 years ago and the subsequent socio-cultural developments in Kurdish communities had a great impact on shaping the historical patterns of the ethnic constitution and function of the peoples of Kurdistan. This can be rightly understood only in the context of the mountainous character of Kurdistan and

the opportunities and obstacles this afforded its inhabitants.

We argue that, in the context of this geographical environment, the archaeological discourse provides some basic socio-cultural premises upon which we can base the historical process of Kurdish society and the definition of its distinctive identity.

Both geological and archaeological data show that Kurdistan has been settled since the epoch of the Middle Palaeolithic culture, which coincides with the first stage of the last glacial period in Europe. The main type of economy was that of wild animals. The communities were formed on the basis of joint labour activity and some degree of kinship. In the Neolithic period, in the 7th or 8th millennium, there appeared dwellings built with clay and unbaked bricks, as can be observed in the layers of the village Gandhi-dearth. It seems that 95 percent of the animal bones found in Charmo were of fully domesticated animals, especially goats and sheep. The buildings of this period had a stone base and it is likely that there was a temple among them. The population produced clay vessels and copper pearls and needles. An important stage of the agrarian development in Kurdistan can be traced in the plain of Sindshar between the second half of the 7th millennium and the first half of the 6th millennium.

The culture of this period was based on productive farming as represented by the remains of the Kul-tepe and some other villages. The most interesting feature of this period is the absence of any hunting weapons. The tools were made out of flint and obsidian. The plant remains belong to fully cultivated wheat and barley, and the bones to domesticated animals only. The pottery of Kul-tepe

was hand-made, baked, decorated in relief and painted. Among the plastic found in the tepee, there are some anthropomorphic and zoomorphic examples very complex in design.

(Kurdo 1988:8)

The emergence of this culture was part of a pattern of changes which characterized the region as a whole:

The rainfall increased and the territory suitable for cultivation grew as well; as a result the settlement gradually moved from the foothills of the plains. The barter among different tribes became constant when the communes became fully farming and stock-breeding. This provided more generous and constant sources of sustenance. The result can be observed in the very rapid increase in the population as well. So the number of settlements continued to grow. (ibid:8).

Gradually, farm and stock-breeding tribes in the Zagros Mountains began to move in a southeast direction and new pastures. The first to move were the herdsmen specialized in pasture but who were familiar with farming as well. Their villages were the first to appear on the territory of the future Elamite state. The remnants of the first villages in Elam are spread in whole territory, which shows that the number of people who came was great and that they occupied a very large area. Diakonov (1985a:2):

No important culture could develop in Elam until the first men who had descended to the plain from highlands established communities in sufficient number and with techniques adequate to turn the water of the rivers to their use and to develop an agricultural civilization based upon river irrigation. The first settlers were attested in a side valley (the site of Ali Kosh, early 7th millennium B.C.). They were goat

herders acquainted with some primitive agriculture processes; they were apparently related to the first herdsman-agriculturalists of the more northern regions of the south mountains.

Diakonov further explains the relationship developed between the Elamite lowland, suitable for irrigation and agriculture, and the Elamite hill-land, suited for sheep and cattle-breeding:

The hill-lands could also serve as a refuge area for the inhabitants of lowlands during times of disastrous inundation or excessive heat and drought. In no period was there was in the neighbouring land of Sumer. (ibid.:5-6)

The people of the hill-lands were the Guti, among the ancestors of the Kurds, who established strong dynasties and played a dangerous role in the ancient history of Mesopotamia.

This brief presentation of the evidence of archaeological data demonstrates obvious patterns and characteristics of the social, cultural, and political development of tribal communities in the mountains of Kurdistan, which we can reconstruct as follows:

1. Their reliance on stock-breeding constituted the most dynamic factor in their behaviour. As the stock increased rapidly and constantly, new pastures were needed. Sheep and goat were a kind of living capital with constant growth and great potential for the accumulation of wealth, leading to the emergence of tribal aristocracies and extended territorial hegemony, leading to the emergence of dynasties or migration and resettlement.

2. This mobility was an important factor for the creation of system of communication, cooperation, confederation, or conflict. Despite the

physical barriers of the mountains, seasonal migration in search of warm territories, farming land, and pastures have been a common feature of the Kurdish way of life for thousands of years.

3. A common culture and way of life characterized mountain communities despite tribal division and regional variation. The mountains were as much a factor of unification as of separation. They both divided and united the population. They provided the cultural and a spiritual/aesthetic factor for national pride. Struggling against the harsh climate of winter, celebrating the blessings of spring, depending on farming and the products of their sheep and goats for food and clothing, Kurds developed some common cultural features: the selection of the site of villages (usually near a spring of water, however mountainous and isolated the site may be; hence, a Kurdish name for village: Awayii, awadani-water settlement); the building of Qalacastles; the architecture of houses; design of costumes and ways of dressing; pottery, handicrafts, and artefacts; ways of baking and cooking; production of Kurdish rugs; hospitality; marriage and kinship relations; the position of women within the family and society; and so on.

4. A spiritual culture came into existence, too. Forms of art, language oral poetry and religious songs and ideas thrived in the pastoral/agricultural communities. While we do not have evidence yet of the written forms of language and dialects of the ancient inhabitants of Zagros, it is known that the migrating Zagrosians in Elam introduced a system of hieroglyphic writing in the early third millennium B.C. however, that was replaced by the

Akkadian when the latter attacked and subjected Elam about 2300 B.C.: "Semitic personal names prevailed over Elamite ones: even prayers to Elamite gods were written in Akkadian. Although the country as a whole retained its Elamite linguistic and cultural character" (Diakonov 1985a:10).

This cultural exchange between the mountain people of Zagros and the Elamites, on the one hand, and the Akkadians, on the other, is also an early illustration of a repeatable historical pattern. Frustrated by the parochial parameters of mountain life, tribes (or even individuals) with large herds of cattle would usually migrate to the plains, bringing their skills and ambitions, and merge with the town communities. Thus while the city-states were developed as centres of a highly developed civilization, Kurdish mountains and valleys were staying at the periphery, subject to both cultural drainage and military threat. However, the culture and civilization of the mountains, though less developed, was more continuous and enduring as it was less vulnerable to the destructions and displacements caused by imperial wars and large-scale migrations. Thus, it was more able in assimilating migrant groups and external cultural influences and, ultimately, in becoming a more essential element in defining the identity of the people. Even in Elam, though the language and writing and administrative system was Akkadised, Semitic names prevailed over Elamite ones and even the prayers to Elamite gods were written in Akkadian. Therefore in Elam, it was more difficult to penetrate into the deep-rooted culture of the population as a whole, which retained its Elamite linguistic and cultural character

(Diakonff:10). While there is much historical evidence of the expansion and settlement of the Zagros population in large number in Elam and Sumeria, there has never been any evidence to indicate that plains-dwellers expanded and settled any part of Kurdish highlands, though definitely there have been many cases of occupation and imposition of foreign rule, tribute, religion, and language, especially in written form.

The Genealogical Discourse

By this we mean discourse concerned with the etymology of the name "Kurd" and the origins of the Kurds.

In his "The name Kurd and its philological connexions," G. M. Driver (1923: 393-403) notes that the earliest trace of the Kurds is to be found on a Sumerian clay-tablet, of the third millennium B. C., on which "the land of Kar-da" or "Qar-da" is mentioned. This "land of Karda" adjoined that of the people of Su, who dwelt on the south Lake Wan, and seems in all probability to have been connected with the Qurtie who lived in the mountains to the west of the same lake.

Driver examines the philological variations of Karda in the Greek, Latin, Syriac, early Arabic, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Persian (such as Cordueni, Gordyeni, Kordyoui, Karduchi, Kardueni, Qardu, Kardaye, Qardawaye, etc.) and finds that the similarities undoubtedly refer to a common descent. Arshak Safarastian (1948:16-17) believes that the patronymic "Kurd" is genuine and correct. The name has derived from the land and kingdom of Gutium and the Guti people, and has assimilated the letter "r" after the vowel "u" (Guti=Gurti), a linguistic rule which

in general applies to most Indo-European languages, particularly those of the East, such as , Armenian, Sanskrit and Greek . Cuneiform inscriptions in the Sumerian language have definitively shown that the land of Gutium was one of the oldest independent kingdoms of the ancient civilized East, contemporary with Sumer, Akkad, Elam and Armenia. The land of Gutium corresponds to the Kurdistan of today and its capital is believed to have been in or around Arrakha (Kirkuk). In 2300 B. C. the Gutis, in alliance with Elam, attacked and conquered Babylon and ruled it for 124 years.

After the Gutis other peoples appear in Zagros, such as the Kassites (Akkadian Kassi), the Lullubi, and the Hurrians. South Mesopotamia came fully under the domination of the Kassites in the 16th century B. C., but the Kassites of southern Mesopotamia became entirely Babylonised in culture and were cut off from the Kassites in the mountains.

Diakonov has carefully followed the emergence of the Aryan tribes, including the Medes, in the Iranian highlands. He believes that not later than some time in the first half of the 2nd millennium B. C. tribes speaking Indo-Iranian dialects, known later as Medes, appeared in the Kurdish highlands. Indo-Iranian is a branch of the Proto-Indo-European dialects spoken in eastern-central Europe. It seems that a slow and gradual process of merger between the Medes and the autochthonous population took place with the Medes taking over the culture of the natives, being most suitable for local conditions, while gradually Aryanising the language of the population. There is no archaeological evidence indicating changes in the material culture of the area, which continued without interruption. Also the

ethnic composition of western Media toward the beginning of the first millennium B.C. still indicated vast areas inhabited by a population speaking pre-Iranian languages. The whole expanse to the south of Lake Urmiya and around Lake Van, were probably still inhabited by a population termed Quti- Lullubi by the Assyrians and Babylonians. (Diakonov 1985b:42)

The presence of a Quti population in the western part of historical Media is recorded in Assyrian sources as late as during the reign of Sargon II (722-703 B.C.). Assyrian sources of the 7th century B.C. mention also a certain "Mehranian" language in the western part of the historical province of Media, but it is hard to determine what kind of language this was. More to the south, in the mountains of Luristan, lived Kassites and Lasubigallians. The etymologies of names for the Kurdish highlands, established by cuneiform inscriptions of the 9th and 7th centuries B.C., show that a mixture of languages existed during the 1st millennium B.C., But toward the end of the 6th century B.C., or the beginning of the 5th there was in eastern Media no vestige of any pre-Iranian population and Arya became the general name by which all Indo-Europeans, from Scythia to India, called themselves. Herodotus reports that the Medes too called themselves Arya (1.101.vll.62) (Diakonov: 44). However, the name Karda survived in another form: Karduchi. Xenophon's story of the encounter of the Ten Thousand Greeks, while retreating to Greece after an unsuccessful military enterprise in Persia, is very famous. Xenophon's Persian guides give him the following description of the Karduchi (3.5):

"These people, they said, lived in the mountains and were very warlike and

not subject to the king. Indeed, a royal army of a hundred and twenty thousand had once invaded their country, and not a man of them had got back because of the terrible conditions of the ground they had to go through. However on occasions when they made a treaty with the satrap who controlled the plains, there was mutual intercourse between the Carduchi and them.”

Xenophon clearly shows that the Carduchi had their own language different from the Persians. He had to speak with them via an interpreter who knew their language (4.2). He also refers to “a lot of brazen utensils in the furniture of the houses” deserted by the Carduchis (4.1) and describes their bows which were “between four and five feet long. And the arrows were of more than three feet” (4.2).

Polybius mentions Cardaces (another form of the Carduchi), along with the Medes, Greeks, Arabs, Carmanians, etc., as 1,000 strong javelineers working as mercenaries in Ptolemy’s army (V.6.9,12). Strabo refers specifically to the Carduchian, whose name, he says, had changed to the Gordyaeans. His description of them is compatible with the Xenophonian archetype:

“Near the Tigris, lie the places belonging to the Gordyaeans: and their cities are named Sareisa and Satalca and Pinca, a very powerful fortress with three citadels, each enclosed by a separate fortification of its own, so that they constitute as it were, a triple city. But still it not only was held in subjection by the King of the Armenians, but the Romans took it by force, although the Gordyaens had an exceptional repute as master- builders and as experts in the construction of siege engines: and it was for this reason that Tiagranes used them in such

work.... The country is rich in pasturage and so rich in plants that it also produces the evergreens and spice plants called amomum: and it is a feeding- ground for lions: and it also produces naphtha and the stone called gangitis, which is avoided by reptiles. (16.1.24)

Strabulo also uses the name Cardaces, which is mentioned by Polybius. But he mentions it to describe the Persians’ youth-training schemes. Carda, he explains, “means the manly and warlike.” And it seems that he uses Cardaces to mean a sort of training that makes one manly and warlike. (The training he associated with Cardaces is “training them to endure heat and cold and rains, and to cross torrential steams in such a way as to keep both armour and clothing dry, and also to rend flocks and live outdoors all night and eat wild fruits, such as pistachio nuts, acorns, and wild pears.” Then he goes on:

“These are called Cardaces, since they live on thievery, for “carda” means the manly and warlike spirit. Their daily food after their gymnastic exercises consists of bread, barley- cakes, cardamom, grains of salt, and roasted or boiled meat: but their drink is water.

They hunt by throwing spears from horseback, and with bows and slings: and late in the afternoon they are trained in the planting of trees and in the cutting and gathering of roots and in making weapons and in the art of making linen cloths and hunters’ nets. (15.3.18)

Thus it is not implausible to say that “Cardaces” suggests the institutionalization of the whole Caduchian/ Median mode of life by the Persian ruling power. The activities which are listed above under the term “Karda” are but the integration of the customs of the Medes, especially the highlanders of them, including, in this geographical

sense, the Carduchis (or the Gordyaeans or Cardaces, to use the other variants). It is notable here that “Gord” in Persian too means hero or brave. It is possible that the Persians inherited both the name and the military/ training institution of Karda from the Medes. The Medes, in turn, might have used the Karduchis as the main core force of their army and have given them a dominant military and political position to the extent that this name “Karda” became identified with their military practice and institution as a whole.

It seems that the Medianization of Kurdistan and its pre-Median population occurred during the time of the Zagros people’s common struggle against Assyria under the leadership of the Medes. The success of the Medes— not only in fighting back against Assyria, but also in destroying it and its rule in Kurdistan, establishing in its place a formidable expanded Median empire— must have made people proud to identify themselves with the Medes and to speak their dialect, which was the language of the ruling people. On the other hand, the persistence of the name Karda- Guti- Karduchi leads us to believe that a kind of historical compromise between these two names was a logical possibility, especially after the Medes lost their dominance. Hence, some Kurdologists, such as Soane and the late Kurdish scholar Taufiq Wahbi, believe that the present appellation of Kurdmanji is a combination of the name Kurd and Mad. Soane writes (1913:xi):
Kurdmanji, a word probably originally kurdmahi (many words ending in or a or in ah in old Persian appear in Kurdish as ang or inj), and the syllable mah has been thought by some authorities to mean “Mede”... that theory here receives strong and unexplained

confirmation, for the peculiarity of the name of the race itself had up to the present remained undetected.

Wahbi (1965) argues that after the Sassanid period the name Mad changed in to Mang, Mas, and in the Islamic period into Mah. Then the name gradually disappeared but the people survived. The Parthian King Ardashiri Papakan considered the conquest of the Medes as his greatest enterprise, and he mentions the Medes and the Kurds together as one nation. According to Wahbi, until the 6th century A.D. the Kurds and Mad were mentioned as one people. Then, probably the name Kurd gradually assimilated the name Mad to create the new word Kurdmad- Kurdmah- Kurdmanj.

According to Minorsky (1923:1134): about the period of the Arab conquest a single ethnical term Kurd (plural Akrad) was beginning to be applied to an amalgamation of Iranicised tribes . Among the latter some were autochthonous... some were Semits... and some probably Armenian.

There is no difference in opinion that the names Kurd and Kurdmanj are interchangeable nomenclatures for the Kurdish people. The Kurdish poet Ahmadi Khni (1693) uses them in this way.

The above exposition of the genealogy of the name Kurd demonstrates the fact that the factor of power has been crucial in the survival of the name. The power of the Gutis-Karduchis-Kurds came from their mountain stronghold and their hard but proud way of life. And they have become a persistent element in the consciousness of other powers because of this reality. Hence, the geographical factor is more important in defining the Kurdish identity and culture than defining the Kurds in term of race and

ethnic origin. It is clear that strong communities of autochthonous inhabitants of Kurdistan survived for thousand of years, while entering the processes of merger, cultural exchange, and mutual assimilation with other migrant or occupying groups. Although Driver does not agree that the derivation of the name Kurd from the Guti can be philologically established, he nevertheless, has no doubts that the people described by the ancients as Karduchi Corduneui, Cyrti, and so on, are the same people who were called the Kurds by the Persians and the Arabs. Driver (400-401) writes: "The Sumerian Qarda on Lake Van and Qurti with whom the Assyrians fought in the mountains of Azu- which can hardly be other than be modern Hazzu-occupy precisely the same territory as the Karduchi, who beset the retreat of the Ten Thousand, while the territory described as occupied by the Gordyae or the Cordueni is merely an extension of Karduchia, just as modern Kurdistan is but a vastly expanded Gordye or Corduene."

Another aspect of continuity, according to Driver, is the similarity of the habits of the people as mountain dwellers. To prove his point he quotes Gibbon's stereotypical description of the Kurds as "a people hardy, strong, savage, impatient of the yoke, addicted to rapine, and tenacious of the government of their national chiefs." The continuity of the habit of the Kurds as robbers makes Driver relate the name Kurd to karda and cyrtie, as these are related to the Persian Gurd, which means brave or bandit.

In conclusion, what has become clear to us from this argument is the persistence of the geographical discourse which categorically proves that Kurdistan was,

has been, and ever be the homeland of the Kurdish people:

1. The names used to describe the majority population groups and kingdoms existing in Kurdistan since 3000 B.C. have all similar philological characteristics or very close connection to the name "Kurd" of today. This substantiates common origin as well as the geographical condition of possibility.

Even the names of dynasties that were philologically different from the name Kurd have been used together to refer to one ethnic group (such as the Assyrian' and Babylonian's grouping of the Guti-Lullobi people, and the Sassanids' grouping of the Meds and Kurds as one nation.) It is a tribute to the antiquity of the nation and its formidable mountains that, together with the people, ancient names such as the name Mede survived in the word Kurdmanji or in the name of the Kurdish city Amed (Diyarbakir in Northjern Kurdistan) and Kurdish town Amedi (in South Kurdistan). There are thousands of other ancient names of tribes, mountains, hills, rivers, and places in Kurdistan (such as Mangur, Mamsh, Hamawand, Jaf, Shikak, Lolan, Zebar, Yazidi, Bilbas, Handrin, Asos, Kur-Kur, Kolara, Safin, Qandil, etc.) which have survived until today and whose etymologies are not known but are undoubtedly of a very ancient Median, pre-Median, or pre-Islamic origin.

2. The habitat of all these ancient ethnic groups and kingdoms corresponds more or less to the geography of Kurdistan today.

3. They all had one common culture and common distinctive national characteristics as mountain people.

4. The same pattern of the relationship with the adjacent city-

state/imperial power obtained, namely mutual fear and hostility on the one hand, and cultural exchange and trade on the other.

We can better understand this last point, which represent the external dimension of Kurdish society, by restoring to the beginnings of historical discourse on the Kurds and providing a very broad outline of their history.

The Historical Discourse

By historical discourse I mean historiography, i.e., the emergence of written history books and not just inscription on tablets.

The physical configuration of Kurdland and its location as the backbone of the Near East have always given it a special position within the logistics and strategies of power relationships and imperial/imperialist enterprises. Consequently, what has often been emphasized in the historical discourse on the Kurds is their function as an "element" in the process of power relationships in this strategic area. This has naturally led to a reductive approach: seeing Kurds only as warriors and mercenaries, ignoring or distorting the cultural and civilizational achievements and even the human reality of the Kurds as a nation. Below we will examine the image of the Medes/Kurds in the Greek historical discourse.

The Medes

During the reign of the kings of Assyria, the Medes were a loose federation of separate tribes who had been able to maintain their independence from the Assyrian power. The subjugation of Media was a

challenging enterprise to the Assyrian king. Both Sannachareb and Egarhadon express their pride that they were the first Assyrian king to have forced the Medes into submission and forced them to pay tribute:

"The oration of the prophet Nahum devoted to the last war of Assyrian clearly shows whom the near East regarded as their main enemy: the Assyrian nobility (nozer), including the priests, the military, the officers of the administration (taphsar) and the merchant (rochel). This small clique of men, who had amassed what for those times was great wealth paid for by the people's blood, was recklessly exploiting for its own benefit, the rest of the near Eastern population. The entire orient lived in the hope to see the destruction of Assyrian, "the dwelling of the lions," and the fall of Nineveh, "the blood city." (Diakonov, 1985b:121) The first nation to rise against Assyrian and herald the era of freedom to the other nations of the Middle East was, Herodotus tells us (1.95), Media.

"When the Assyrian had ruled upper Asia for five hundred and twenty years (from 1229 to 709 B.C.), their subjects began on revolt from them, first of all, the Medes. These, it would seem, proved their valour in fighting for freedom against the Assyrians, they cast off their slavery and won freedom. Afterwards the other subject nations too did the same as the Medes." Here, Herodotus establishes two archaic characteristics of the Kurds: love for freedom and valour in fighting.

When the Medes became a united nation, they, Herodotus says, developed a strong military organization. They were, he states, "the first who arrayed the men of Asia in companies and set each kind in bands part, the spearmen

and archers and the horsemen; before this were all blended alike confusedly together” (1.100). In 615 B.C. the Medes conquered Arrapkha (Kirkuk), the old capital of the Gutis. In 614 they conquered the old Assyrian capital of Ashar and finally in 612 the “blood city,” Nineva, and, thus, they replaced the Assyrians in imperial hegemony over Asia. But the Medes did not attack Babylonia. Instead, they lived in peace with each other. And it was during this period that Babylon emerged as the largest city of “the civilized world” (Encyclopaedia Britannica 1974:988). In 539 Media and Babylonia concluded a treaty of defence against the Persian, who had become a growing threat since 559 under their king Cyrus II. However Cyrus annexed Media in 550, and Babylonia surrendered without resistance.

But even in the context of the Persian power, the Medes retained their military power and cultural autonomy. They constituted a large part of Cyrus’s army. They were, in Herodotus’ word, “as many as the Persian” (viii. 113), and they were equipped the same way as the Persian: “Indeed that fashion of armour is Median, not Persian” (viii 113). Throughout his history, Thucydides calls the Battle of Marathon, the first major war between Asia and Greece, “the Median war.” Medism and “Medization” are the charges used against those Greeks who sided with the Persians in the war. In the speeches that take place prior to the Peloponnesian Wars, the Corinthians describe the Medes in this manner: “The Medes, we ourselves know, had time to come down from the ends of the earth to Peloponnesus, without any force of yours worth any force of yours worthy

of name to meet him” (1.3.69, See also ch. Iv.)

The Thebans apologize for their “unwilling Medism” in the Median wars and they talk of Boeotians as claiming to be the only people who “did not Medize when the barbarians invaded Hellas” (3, X, 26-65). In 479 B.C. “the Medes returned from Europe defeated by sea and land by Hellenes,” leaving an enduring impression on the consciousness and history of the Greeks. The Greek writer Aeschylus, who himself participated in this war and later wrote his play *The Persians*, wrote the following quatrain for his own grave in Sicily:

“Here Aeschylus lies in Gelas’ land of corn,
Euphonion’s son, in far-off Athens born;
That he was valiant Marathon could show,
And long-haired Medes could tell it, for they know.”

And when the hero of Platea betrays the Greek cause for the sake of his own personal ambitions and enters a secret alliance with the Persians, he cannot help but express this new behaviour, Thucydides tells us, by changing his lifestyle. He “went out of Byzantium in a Median dress, was attended on his march through Thrace by a body guard of Medes and Egyptians, kept a Persian table” (1.4.1300).

Herodotus shows the strength of the culture of the Medes. He states that after annexing Media, the Persians being keen on adopting alien customs, adopted the cultural customs and institution of the Medes: “They have taken the dress of the Medes considering it superior to their own.” Also in his fictitious biography of Cyrus, *cyroaddia*, Xenophon explains why Cyrus and the

Persians preferred Median dress (viii.i.40-42); “Cyrus chose to wear the Median dress himself and persuaded his associates also to adopt it; for he thought that if anyone had any personal defect, that dress would help to conceal it, and that it made the wearer look very tall and handsome. “Xenophon also draws an effeminate image of the Median king Astyages, and gives an exotic account of the Median dress (iii. 2): “He (the king) was adorned with pencilling beneath his eyes, with rouge rubbed on his face, and with a wig of false hair-the common Median fashion. For all this Median, and so are the purple tunics, and their mantles, the necklaces about their necks, and the bracelets on their wrists while the Persian at home even to this day have plainer clothes and a more frugal way of life.”

Polybius’ geographical sketch Media (Book 5, 6-44) illustrates the mountainous character of the country, its vastness, the warlike character of its tribes, and its numerous towns and villages. About south Media, he writes (5.44): “Its southern portion extends as far as Mesopotamia and the territory of Apollonia and borders on Persia, from which it is protected by mount Zagros, a range which has an ascent of a hundred stages, and consisting as it does of different branches meeting at various points, contains in the intervals depressions and deep valleys inhabited by the Cossai, Corbrenae, Carchi and other barbarous tribes with a high reputation for their warlike qualities. Media itself has several mountain chains running across it from east to west between which lie plains full of towns and villages.”

Strabo, in line with his philosophical-geographical interpretation of culture,

emphasizes the geographical-environmental pattern of other way of life of different peoples in spite of their “races.” Thus, the highlands are very cold, their populations are “migratory and predatory” and able to provide large number of professional warriors, while low-lying lands are very fertile and productive. The most interesting aspect of Strabo’s environmental approach, however, is his interpretation of the organization of cultural customs which, he says, are common among the Medes, the Armenians, and the Persian. He writes (11.13.9): “As for customs, most of theirs (the Medes) and those of the Armenians are the same, because their countries are similar. The Medes, however, are said to have been the origination of customs for the Armenians, and also, still earlier, for the Persians, who were their masters and their successor in the supreme authority over Asia. For example, their “Persian” stole (robe) as it is now called, and their zeal for archery and horsemanship, and the court that they pay for their kings, and their ornaments, and the divine reverence paid by subjects to kings, came to the Persian from the Medes. And that this is true is particularly clear from their dress, for tiara, citari, a pilus, tunics with sleeves reaching to the hands, and trousers, are indeed suitable things to wear in cold and northerly regions such as the Medes’, but by no means in southerly regions; and most of the settlement possessed by the Persian were on the Red Sea, farther south than the country that reached to Media. However the customs even of the conqueror so august and appropriate to royal pomp that they submitted to wear feminine robes instead of going naked or lightly clad, and to cover their bodies all over with clothes.”

Dress styles and national costumes have remained very important elements of Kurdish culture and identity, to the extent that they have also been politicized and subjected to political repression. The Kurdish dress was prohibited in Iran by Reza Shah and in Turkey by the Kemalist regime. Despite centuries of occupation, repression, and attempts of assimilation and genocide, Kurdistan still boasts a diverse range of beautiful and colourful women's and men's dresses: This confirms the position of the national costume as a distinctive characteristic of the Kurdish people, on the one hand, and a vivid embodiment of a deep-rooted culture and civilization, on the other.

With the loss of the military and political power to the Persians, who appropriated and adopted military role, thus preserving their internal autonomy as well as maintaining their autochthonous culture. They remained, generally as a loose regional confederation of tribes leading an independent agricultural/pastoral way of life, migrating seasonally between their winter lowlands (Garmiyan) and summer highland (Zozan, Kwestan). This pattern was threatened or shattered from time to time by external invasion and involvement in the conflicts and rivalries of adjacent imperial power.

ISLAM

In the 7th century, the Arabs invaded Kurdistan to spread the Islamic religion. The Kurds put up a fierce resistance in Fars, Nainawa, Saharazur and many Kurdish communities perished. Because of the Kurds could not stop the waves of Arab invaders, and eventually the majority were converted to Islam. Two factors facilitated this conversion. First,

as an Oriental religion, Islam's basic principles and ideals had much in common with other pre-Islamic religion including Judaism, Christianity, and the religion prevailing in Kurdistan: Zoroastrianism. Second, once they invaded the country, the Arabs, being a desert people, withdrew to the plains and made no attempt to settle in Kurdistan or interfere with the local autonomy of the population apart from imposing Zakat and appointing regional rulers. However, during the first three centuries of Hijra, the Kurds played a considerable part in the events of the Islamic world, on the one hand, and were engaged in a series of insurrections and rebellions, on the other. The Kurds effectively reasserted their independence in different region of Kurdistan in the 10th century through establishing some strong independent dynasties, the most famous one being the great Marwand dynasty of a Kurdish prince who ruled Farkin, Dyarbakir and Jazirat-inm Omar from 990 to 1096 A.D. One of its princes, Abu Nasr Ahmad, ruled for 50 years and endowed his cities with fine buildings, caravansaries, baths, bridges and many other works of public utility.

In the 10th century, the Kurds gave fierce resistant to the Siljuks who invaded Islamic countries and occupied the great Muslim capital of Baghdad. They succeeded in stopping the Seljukian invasion of Kurdistan, which became a bastion of freedom as it gave shelter to thousands of Christians who fled to escape from Seljukian massacre.

Despite the great losses which the Kurds suffered, the Seljuks ruled over Iran, Iraq and Armenia forms a great landmark in Kurdish history.

The Seljuk ruler Sultan Malik Shah, under the influence and political guidance of his tutor, the famous

statesman of that age, Nizam-ul-Mulk, adopted an appeasement policy toward the Kurdish tribes to “lure” them “down their hilly nests” and domesticate them by allowing them internal autonomy. Nizam-ul-Mulk granted independent fiefs to the local Kurdish chieftains. These chiefs (or Aghas) were made completely independent in their internal affairs but had to furnish a predetermined number of well-equipped troops to the Sultan when required. Thus the Seljuks legalized the independence of the Kurdish Aghas (Sheikh Waheed, 1958: 59-60). Under the last Seljuki ruler, Sandjar, the province of Kurdistan was formed of the western part of what the Arab historians used to call “Dijbal,” the country of mountains.

The Kurds played a very important role in the second half of the 11th century, which became the age of intellectual history in the Middle East. The Kurdish historian Ibn Khalakan records that, at both Zizamia Institute at Nishapur and at Baghdad, Kurdish Scholars outnumbered the others (Ibid:59-64).

Salahuddin (Saladin) and the Kurdish Character

The Kurds played an epoch-making role in the military and political history of Islam and the world in the 12th century, when the Kurdish leader Salahuddin Al-Ayyubi appeared on the historical stage. Salahuddin was able to unite the Kurds and the Islamic world against the crusaders, recapturing Jerusalem for the Muslims in 1187. Salahuddin represents a monumental embodiment of the traditional Kurdish character: bravery, boldness, chivalry, generosity and warm humanity. In the era of religious fanaticism, Salahuddin’s kindness and chivalry after the recapturing of

Jerusalem were unprecedented in the history of warfare in the East or in the West, so much so that they made a great impression on the imagination of the European peoples. Various legends were spread in the West about his kindness, courtesy, chivalry and even his imagined Christian origins. Munro (1931:338-39) sums up the image of Saladin in the West in the following: “Saladin was much admired in the West. His merciful conduct and generosity after the capture of Jerusalem, so different from that of the Crusaders in 1099, excited wonder. He was very tolerant. He allowed Latin Christians to have two deacons in Jerusalem, at Bethlehem, and at Nazareth, and to carry on their services freely. He was noted for his courtesy. Between him and Richard the Lion-heart there were many friendly relations. Richard even proposed that his sister should marry the brother of Saladin and that the two should receive Jerusalem as a wedding present thus ending the strife between Christians and Muslim. Many legends grew around the name of the great Saracen leader, who was said to have received a knighthood from a Christian. Tales of his mercy and generosity were spread to the West.

It is noteworthy that, even in the reign of Salahuddin Kurdistan remained outside the control of Salahuddin’s Islamic empire, whose borders stopped at the foothills of Zagros.

The Mongols

After Salahuddin, the Kurds were greatly weakened by a continuing tide of Mongol invasion, which swept across Central Asia and destroyed all that was the product of centuries of flourishing human civilization. However, the Mongols failed to exterminate the

Kurds, who successfully defeated the Mongol force in the mountainous region near Kirmanshah, forcing Genghis Khan to recall his army and give up his venture of occupying Baghdad. But Hulagoo pursued his ambition to the end, sweeping across Kurdistan destroying Arbil, depopulating Sharazur, and occupying and destroying Baghdad in 1258 A.D., followed by further destructive invasions of Kurdistan by the Mongols under the leadership Taimur-i-Lang (Tartar).

The Ottomans and Safavids

In the early 16th century, the Shah of Persia constituted a new threat to Kurdistan. The Kurdsih tribes and Persia were in an almost constant state of war. In the 16th century, the Ottoman and Safavid Empires completely dominated the area: Three-quarters of Kurdistan was occupied by the Ottomans, the rest by the Safavids. Kurdistan, as the buffer zone, was caught in the sectarian war between these two belligerent empires. The Kurds, having more interest and power in Turkish-occupied Kurdistan and being Suni Muslims, were inclined to help the Sultan against the Shi'ite Persian who constantly persecuted the Kurds, in return for the Sultan's recognizing and respect for their local independence. The Persian army was defeated in Chalderan, and a number of Kurdish dynasties were established in the south of Kurdistan. However, both empires tried to gain the loyalty of the Kurdish chiefs in order to use them against each other. Some of the feudal chiefs tried to capitalize on this situation to further their own interest. This had a negative effect on Kurdish society, deepening tribal antagonisms between rival Kurdish dynasties and imposing on

internal Kurdish politics a very detrimental external factor which was to have serious repercussions for the development of the Kurdish national movement.

The war between Persia and the Ottomans resulted in an official partition of Kurdistan into two parts following the Treaty of Erzerum in 1613. Nevertheless, the alliance between the Kurds and the Ottoman Turks continued. Kurdistan as a whole was ruled by autonomous Kurdish principalities:

“For over four hundred years the Kurds of the Ottoman Empire had lived a practically autonomous existence. The control of Sultans over their Eastern Anatolian provinces remained nominal due to distance, rugged terrain, and lack of means of communication. No serious trouble took place between the Kurds and the Ottoman government until the centralizing policy of Sultan Mahmud II (d. 1839) began to antagonize the feudal lords and led to their insurrection. (Joseph, 1961:49)

During these centuries a significant number of Kurdish dynasties came into existence: Kurdish towns flourished: Kurdish classical poetry was born: the Kurdish prince of Bidlis, Sharaf al- Din Bidlisi, wrote in 1597 the first history of his nation: and the Kurdish poet Ahmadi Khani introduced the idea of national liberation and an independent Kurdish state in his Memu- Zin, written in 1693-1694.

Kurdish Language

A strong expression of the antiquity, cultural continuity, and distinctiveness of Kurds is the Kurdish language itself. There have been several theories and assumptions regarding the Kurdish language: its independence, origins, and

mode of existence. It was not only ignorance, as Edmunds has rightly asserted (Edmunds, 1957:7), which made some Western colonial travellers in Kurdistan in the 19th century describe the Kurdish language as a corrupt form of Persian or a motley of Persian, Arabic, and Turkic language. Prejudice and hostility toward the Kurds also had a role in drawing those writers to these ignorant conclusions. That the peoples who inhabited Kurdistan since antiquity—such as the Gutis, the Zagrosian Elamites, the Karduchi, and the Medians—had their own language, which were different from both the language of the plain people in the south of Mesopotamia and later from the Persian, is well substantiated by evidence of ancient inscriptions and historical descriptions. We touched upon some of these in the presentation of archaeological, genealogical, and historical discourses on Kurdistan. There is no doubt that all ethnic groups and communities which inhabited Kurdistan or were in close cultural and military exchange with it have historically contributed to the genesis and development of the Kurdish language in the same way as they have contributed to the ethnic formation of the Kurdish nation. However, it has been established that “from whatever language it (the Kurdish) may have derived, it has certainly in many respects, undergone an individual and peculiar development of its own” (Fossum, 1923:6). This peculiar independent development was both protected and facilitated by the physical mountainous character of Kurdistan. It was this factor which in particular, enabled the Kurdish language to survive but remain little affected by the waves of Arabization which Islam triggered in the Middle East from 7th century

onwards. The great Muslim thinker and historian Ibn Khaldun provides a clever theoretical insight and historical description of this Arabization process, which we wish to quote here for its scientific and historical value. He writes (The Muqaddima, 1987:294): “The dialect of urban population follows the language of the nation or race that has control of (the cities) or has founded them. Therefore, the dialects spoken in all Muslim cities in the East and the West at this time are Arabic... The reason for this is the fact that the Muslim dynasty gained power over foreign nations. Religion and religious organisations constitute the form of existence and royal authority, which together constitute the matter for religion. Form is prior to matter. Religion is derived from the religious law which is Arabic, because the prophet was an Arab. Therefore, it is necessary to avoid using any language but Arabic in all the provinces of Islam. This may be exemplified by “Umer’s prohibition against using the idiom native among the non-Arab dialect, and the language of the supporters of the Muslim dynasty was Arabic, those dialects were avoided altogether in all its provinces. Because people follow the government and adopt its ways, use of the Arabic, the (foreign) nations avoided using their own dialects and language in all the cities and provinces. The non-Arab languages came to seem imported and foreign there.”

Ibn Khaldun clearly expounds on the decisive roles of both power (the state) and religion in the Arabization of non-Arab Islamic nations. The Kurds were not entirely immune from the impact of this powerful dual force. Following the Arab conquest, the Islamic tradition replaced the pre-Islamic traditions in

Kurdistan. This had a great effect on the Kurdish language and culture. Islam introduced literacy into the Arabic language as the language chosen by Allah to convey the message of Islam. And the Islamic law and Quranic studies became the only domains through which one could get educated. In order to replace the pre-Islamic traditions and “propagate the new faith in a language previously unknown to the populace, individuals had to be trained who would read and write in Arabic, and were able to interpret and put into practice religious laws. These men, known as Mullas (Mela, in Kurdish), were local Kurds trained in schools which formed part of the mosque system. The earliest Kurdish poets came, invariably, from the ranks of the Mullas.” (Hassanpour, 1991:47). The result of the state Arabization of literacy in Kurdistan can be observed in massive numbers of books and manuscripts written by Kurdish scholars in Arabic on various subjects of Islamic tradition including Quran, Hadith, Islamic law, Arabic language and grammar, history, and so on. However, this was the case with very small literary elite of the Kurdish society. Otherwise, the Kurdish population as a whole retained its linguistic and cultural character. Popular poets, singers, and story-tellers continued to enrich and develop the Lyrical and epic traditions of Kurdish folk poetry. Even in terms of religion, some pre-Islamic religious communities and traditions survived and continued in Kurdistan. The Yezidis, for example, continued to say their prayers and write their traditions in Kurdish despite continued oppression over many centuries. Also Zoroastrian traditions were preserved in Kurdish in the Gorani dialect in Hawraman. Furthermore, the

Kurds added their own stamp to the Islamic faith. In the same way as the Persians created Shiism, Kurdistan created Sufism. The most famous Sufi orders (tariqat) in Kurdistan are Qadiri (founded by a famous saint, Sheikh Abdul-Qadir al-Gailani: 1077-1161), and Naqish-bandi (founded by Muhammad Baha-ud-Din of Bukhara:1317-1489) (Edmunds,1957:62ff).

But unlike the Shiites, the Kurds, perhaps to their own disadvantage, have never developed their Sufi orders into a religious ideology that promotes Kurdish national power and hegemony.

The Kurdish language belongs to the northern group of Iranian languages. In contrast to modern Persian which falls into the south western groups (Edmunds, 1957:7). The Iranian languages in turn, belong to Indo-European languages. Bildisi in *Sharafnama* (1981), in the 16th century, divides the Kurdish language into four dialects: Kurmanji, Luri, Gurani and Kalhor. This classification is still valid. However, political circumstances and the socio-historical development of Kurdish society have naturally changed the position of these dialects within the mainstream of spoken Kurdish, on the one hand, and in relation to the standard Kurdish, on the other.

Now the Kurds refer to their language as Kurdi and use Kirmanji to identify the variations of the main geographical dialects of Kurdistan. Thus, Hama Khorsid (1983:14-28) distinguishes four dialects on the basis of their geographical distribution and linguistic use:

1. The North Kurmanji (or Kirmanji): spoken by the Kurds of Turkey, Syria, Armenia and by the Kurds of the

districts of Dihok and Zebar in Iraqi Kurdistan.

2. The Middle Kurmanji (which is also called Sorani): spoken by the Kurds of Iraqi Kurdistan and the majority of Kurds in Iranian Kurdistan.

3. The South Kurmanji: Hama Khorshid includes within this group the sub-dialects of Faili (original Luri), Bakhtyari, Mamasanni, Kalhuri and Laki. Thus, it is widely spoken "along the south-eastern region of Kurdistan (Luristan), extending from the high road between Khanaqin-Malaye on the north down to the north-eastern coast of the gulf."

4. The Gurani, which includes the subdialect of original Gurani, Hawrami, Bajilani and Zaza.

The original Gurani is spoken by the population of Karan, Zahaw and Jwanro (Iran) as well as some Kakais of Tauq and some tribes of Zangana near Kifri (Iraq). Hawrami is spoken in Hawraman and the Pawa mountains (Iraq-Iran). Bajilani is a dialect scattered east of Mousl (Shabak tribe), Zahaw and near Khanaqin and Quratu, Hurain and Sshekhan (Iraq). Zaza is one of the branch dialects of the Gurani, but it is located outside the Gurani dialect region very far away to the north, inside the region between Mush, Kharbot (Elazig) and Erzingan in northern Kurdistan: i.e., it is concentrated in the region between the Euphrates tributaries, Murat Su and Furat Su, to the point of their meeting south of Musheer Dagh mountains, within the Dersim region (Hama Khorshid; pp. 31-32. Minorsky; 1943;76).

This classification by Hama Khorshid represents a comprehensive account of the Kurdish dialects and their geographical distribution. There are two

main issues related to the dialectical variations of the Kurdish language: the mutual intelligibility of the dialects and the development of a standard written Kurdish.

The differences between the dialects are at times greatly exaggerated. This is often the result of ignorance or having very little contact with or knowledge of the language and the dialects. Major Noel, having himself mixed with the Kurds and becoming familiar with their dialects, reveals the ignorance and inaccuracy underlying this exaggeration when he writes (Noel: 1919: 9):

"It is often said that the Kurdish language is nothing more than a patois which varies from valley to valley. It is true that the language of S.E. Kurdistan, i.e., Baba Kurdi, is considerably different from Kurmanji, but it is untrue to say that variations of Kurmanji show very fundamental differences. I have with me men from the Bohtan, Diarbekir, and Hakhari. All of them can well understand and make themselves clearly understood in the extreme west of Kurdistan. They would only have to remain here for a few weeks to be perfectly at home with the language. Such differences as exist are chiefly due to changes in vowel sounds. For example, I have heard the word for mother- DYK, DY, DA, DI (Y being pronounced as Y in TRY). This is, of course, somewhat puzzling to a foreigner who has not got his ear attuned to the various sounds. His aptitude to magnify unduly the differences between the dialects is further increased by the fact the words that do alter are adverbs, prepositions, and other words which are being constantly used. For example, for the word "now" we have "AISTA" at Sulaymaniya: "NHA" in the Hakkari, and "ANGOH" in western Kurdistan.

Other variations are, “AISTA HA” “ANEKA,” “NIKA” and “HENU- KA”. Therefore, anybody with a good grounding of the dialect could very easily and rapidly pick up another dialect by memorising a brief list of the common words which differ.”

If, as Noel has rightly observed, only a few weeks are enough to make a Kurd from a distant region of the farthest north of Kurdistan feel at home with the dialect of another region at the extreme west, then it would have clearly been possible to minimize the differences and develop a standard Kurdish language in a very short time indeed, had the Kurds had their own state or even opportunities to use and study in their own language. This takes us to another important issue, which is the standardization of the Kurdish language. Fortunately, this topic has been the subject of a thorough scientific study by Amir Hassanpour, whose doctoral thesis on the subject (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1989) represents the first comprehensive research into the historical background, political context, and the cultural- linguistic process of the standardization of the Kurdish language. He produces the most clear and authoritative statement regarding this important subject. Hassanpour’s approach has the benefit of a global scientific vision of the issue and his ability (in terms of language and background as a Kurdish intellectual) to have access to variety of sources and references which match his vision. This has enabled him to produce a work of a great scientific value which, I believe, will become a classic in its field.

The main thrust of Hassanpour’s study is his explanation of the historical process by which the Sulaymaniyah sub-dialect of the Sorani/ Middle Kirmanji

dialect could develop into a standard Kurdish language in Iraq, and be adopted as such in Iran. He has studied both the linguistic and non- linguistic changes that have taken place within the Kurdish speech community since the language was first used in writing in the 15th century. He produces, for the first time, a wide range of very well-classified and coherent data about different aspects of the use of Kurdish in classical poetry, press and journalism, books, education, broadcasting, local administration, and other cultural manifestations such as theatre and cinema. And on the basis of rigorous historical documentation and scientific arguments, he identifies numerous significant changes in the political context, social base, and cultural environment, as well as the structure and function of the Kurdish dialects since the end of the 19th century and, in particular, in the post- 1918 period which led to the emergence of the Sulaymaniyah sub-dialect. This subdialect, which first became dominant under the Baban dynasty, emerged as the standard Kurdish language in Iraq after achieving official regional status in the newly created state of Iraq (Hassanpour, 413-415).

While Hassanpour acknowledges and establishes the spectacular development of Sorani/Middle Kirmanji as the dominant standardized Kurdish, he explains that this historical development has not happened yet within the Northern Kurmanji subdialects. Neither has Sorani, for obvious political reasons, become a realistic option. Kurmanji has been held back by the linguicide policies of the states of Turkey and Syria. It is in exile in Europe that, in the last few years, the Kurmanji- speaking Kurds of Turkey, the main force for promotion of

this dialect, have started a trend toward unifying the three current variants of Northern Kurmanji (Yerevan, Syria, and Turkey), drawing on the standardization efforts of the Kurds of Syria (1930-1946) and the Soviet Union. In conclusion, Hassanpour rightly defines the current state of the Kurdish language as being bi-standard with the Middle Kurmanji/Sorani dialect being at a much more development state.

The Kurdish language is the most essential feature and socio-historical and spiritual medium of Kurdish identity and culture. However, the strength, development, and prospects of the Kurdish language as the standardized language of about 30 million people will remain contingent upon the political status and future of the Kurdish people in their traditional land, Kurdistan.

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