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**‘They Took Revenge on History, They Lit
the Mountains’: The Construction of
Kurdish National Identity Through Poetry**

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'They Took Revenge on History, They Lit the Mountains': The Construction of Kurdish National Identity Through Poetry

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Introduction

*'The Kurds have no friends but the mountains'*¹

This is perhaps the most recurrent phrase one will encounter when learning of the Kurds: be it either from the mouth of an impassioned Kurdish nationalist on the news, or from the pen of a disinterested scholar. It may seem a fairly cosmetic slogan; a cheap means by which a Peshmerga warrior can affirm their national identity, or a snappy line to be trotted out in front of BBC cameras. These words, however, succinctly encapsulate the Kurdish national myth, and, to some extent, the physical realities the Kurdish people have faced throughout their history.

The Kurds inhabit a mountainous zone between the power centres of the Mesopotamian plain and the Anatolian and Iranian plateaux. They have, for essentially the entirety of their history, been marginalised within the territorial domains acquired by various empires and nation states emanating from said power-centres. For roughly five-hundred years² prior to the victory of the Allies in the First-World-War, the vast majority of Kurds existed within the domain of the Ottoman Empire. Kurdish nationalism flourished towards the latter half of the nineteenth century, with the revolt of Sheik Ubdalayah in 1878, and the publication of the first Kurdish national newspaper, the *Kurdistan*, two decades later.³ Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War, it was stipulated in the treaty of Sevres that there would be a referendum presented to the Kurds on the establishment of a free and independent Kurdistan. This promise, however, never manifested itself, and the Kurdish region was incorporated into the new nation states of the Middle East – namely Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria and a small portion of Armenia. The twentieth century would see the Kurds oppressed arguably to a greater extent than they had been under the relatively laissez-faire Ottoman Empire; the nationalistic zeal of Kemalist Turkey and later Ba'athist Iraq and Syria proved tragically inimical to the increasingly nationalistic Kurdish people.

The origins of the Kurds, however, are muddled. The term 'Kurd' is encountered first in Arabic during the first centuries of the Islamic era; it seemed then to refer to a specific variety of pastoral nomadism rather than to an ethnic group.⁴ Others have theorised, however, that the word derives from the middle Persian 'kwrt' (کردی), again denoting a brand of pastoral nomadism rather than a

¹ Kurdish proverb with unknown origins

² Amir Hassanpour, *Middle East Report* No. 189, 'The Kurdish Experience' (USA, 1994) p3

³ Robert Olson, *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism and the Sheikh Said Rebellion, 1880–1925*, (USA, 1989), piii

⁴ Martin Van Bruinessen, *The Ethnic Identity of the Kurds in Turkey*, https://web.archive.org/web/20151216000304/http://www.let.uu.nl/~martin.vanbruinessen/personal/publications/Bruinessen_Ethnic_identity_Kurds.pdf, (accessed 01/03/2019) p4

socio-political entity or ethnicity.⁵ The overwhelming majority of Kurdish nationalists seem to ascribe their origins to the fall of the ancient Median Empire, the Kurds in this narrative being the descendants of the Medians. This, however, is difficult to prove, and has been contested by various non-Kurdish scholars - such as Martin Van Bruinessen - who argues that this claim is backed up by no supporting evidence whatsoever.⁶ Despite the lack of a concrete, historically affirmed foundation for the origin of the Kurds as a distinct ethnic and political grouping, there exists a very strong national consciousness, and there has done at least since the fifteenth century – if not in the past among the peasantry then among the spiritual elites⁷.

This dissertation will be focussed on how this nationalism is expressed was Kurdish poetry, and how symbiotically poetry plays a role in constructing a metaphysical base for Kurdish self-affirmation. Poetry has, at least until the late twentieth century, constituted the vast majority of the region's literary output.⁸ The epic poem *Mem U Zin*, written in the late seventeenth century by Ehmed Xani, is considered by most to be the foundation of Kurdish nationalist literature.⁹ Besides explicit calls for the rejection of Arab and Turkish influence in chapters five and six, the poem is considered by many to be allegorical: telling the tale of two lovers, whose dreams of marriage are dashed by a jealous prince. Even if the tale was not intended to be allegorical, it has consistently been used by nationalists as an analogy for the separation of the Kurds from the possession of their homeland. Poetry in Kurdish culture, however, is generally performed orally rather than published textually. As is stated by the Kurdish nationalist and academic Abbas Vali, the Kurdish literary canon is 'severely lacking', owing partly to the destruction of manuscripts and partly to the region's historic low literacy rates.¹⁰ Thus, a cornerstone of Kurdish poetic culture is *Dengbej* performances, the word '*Dengbej*' roughly translating to the word 'bard' in English. These performances, with the accompaniment of music, frequently feature nationalistic stories, and less specifically reinforce Kurdish cultural myths – such as the aforementioned idea of a rugged warrior people acquainted to the harshness of the mountains.¹¹ Kurdish poetry became distinctively modernised in the early to

⁵ G. S. Reynolds, *A Reflection on Two Qur'ānic Words (Iblīs and Jūdī), with Attention to the Theories of A. Mingana*, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 124, No. 4 (USA, 2004), p685

⁶ Martin Van Bruinessen, *The Ethnic Identity of the Kurds in Turkey*, https://web.archive.org/web/20151216000304/http://www.let.uu.nl/~martin.vanbruinessen/personal/publications/Bruinessen_Ethnic_identity_Kurds.pdf, (accessed 01/03/2019) p4

⁷ Martin Van Bruinessen, *The Ethnic Identity of the Kurds in Turkey*, https://web.archive.org/web/20151216000304/http://www.let.uu.nl/~martin.vanbruinessen/personal/publications/Bruinessen_Ethnic_identity_Kurds.pdf, (accessed 01/03/2019) p5

⁸ Farangis Ghaderi, 'The challenges of writing Kurdish literary history: Representation, classification, periodisation', *Kurdish Studies* vol 3, (London, 2015) p5

⁹ Amir Hassanpour, *Middle East Report No. 189, 'The Kurdish Experience'* (USA, 1994) p7

¹⁰ Abbas Vali, 'Nationalism and Kurdish Historical Writing'. *New Perspectives on Turkey*. (USA, 1996) p14

¹¹ Robert F Reigle, 'A brief history of Kurdish music recordings in Turkey', *Hellenic Journal of Music, Education and Culture*, (USA, 2013) p42

mid-twentieth century, however. Many of these poets were passionate nationalists. Kurdish poetry adopted many Western qualities – featuring, for instance, socialist, anti-theistic themes.

Increasingly, also, Kurdish poetry became transcribed. Kurdish literary historians generally present modernism as emerging in the thirties and forties, spearheaded by Abdullah Goran.¹² As will be discussed in the methodology, this dissertation will refer to *Mem U Zin*, a selection of transcribed Dengbej performances, and various modernist poems.

For the majority of the twentieth century, Kurdistan was a region on the far fringes of Western attention – in terms of both foreign policy and academic research. While various Kurdish scholars had been producing literary histories of the Kurds from the early fifties,¹³ such histories were few and far between, and were seldom published in a European language. The scene was dominated entirely in the West by ‘top-down’, geopolitical histories of the Kurds. While Western historians – most notably C.J. Edmunds and Robert Olson – provided comprehensive histories of the Kurds, their sources almost always derived from European archives, and they rarely interviewed anyone.¹⁴ The histories appear externalist and uni-dimensional, in the words of Donald Quataert the Kurds ‘remain a supporting cast in their own play’.¹⁵ The few times the creative arts are referenced in these histories, it seems only direct expressions of Kurdish nationalism are commented on, such as chapters five and six of *Mem u Zin*.¹⁶

The early eighties seem to present a turning point in the study of the Kurds, among specifically Kurdish academics. Where there had scarcely been any publication of Kurdish literary history since ‘Elaedîn Secadî’s *Mêjûy Edebî Kurdî* (1952), we witness the publication of Qenatê Kurdo’s *Tarixa Edebyeta Kurdi* (History of Kurdish literature, 1982). This was followed by a succession of other histories, the most significant being Xeznedar’s *Li Babet Mêjûy Edebî Kurdîyewe* (On Kurdish Literary History, 1984) and Îzzedîn Mustefa Resûl’s *Edebiyatî Niwêy Kurdî* (Modern Kurdish Poetry, 1989).¹⁷ This was later paralleled roughly a decade later in the West, with scholars such as Michiel Leezenberg and Maria O’Shea producing commentaries on Kurdish literature and poetry – such as Leezenberg’s *The Consecration of a Kurdish National Epic* (2005) and O’Shea’s *Trapped Between Map and Reality*. We also witness the large-scale establishment of institutions fixated on the study of

¹² Farangis Ghaderi, *The Emergence and Development of Modern Kurdish Poetry*, (Doctoral Thesis, University of Exeter, 2011) abstract

¹³ Farangis Ghaderi, ‘The challenges of writing Kurdish literary history: Representation, classification, periodisation’ p8

¹⁴ Abbas Vali, ‘Nationalism and Kurdish Historical Writing’. *New Perspectives on Turkey*. (USA, 1996) pii

¹⁵ Donald Quataert, Review of: *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism and the Sheikh Said Rebellion, 1880–1925* ‘International Journal of Middle East Studies’ (volume 23, issue 4), (Texas, 2001)

¹⁶ Olson speaks of this *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism*, though only for around one quarter of a page

¹⁷ Farangis Ghaderi, ‘The challenges of writing Kurdish literary history: Representation, classification, periodisation’, 10

Kurdish culture. The *International Journal of Kurdish Studies* (founded as the *Kurdish Times*) was established in 1993, and the *Kurdish Studies Network* was established in 2008. Both have been central pillars in academic investigation of Kurdish culture and history.¹⁸ Study of the Kurds has hence broadened thematically, and there is less of a fixation on the geopolitical dimension to Kurdish studies.

This dissertation will add to this promising trend in the study of Kurdish history. Many of the issues I will occupy this dissertation with, however, remain relatively untouched by modern Kurdologists. I have not yet encountered a work on the historical role of poetry in Kurdish self-identification via their relationship to the mountains. The Kurdish man-mountain relationship is a crucial feature of Kurdish national identity, as O'Shea documents in *Trapped Between Map and Reality*. Modernist poetry played a hugely significant role in tying individual relations with the mountains to a romanticised, nationalist conception of Kurdistan. Similarly, the idea of being an 'eternal stateless nation', and the historical role of poetry in disseminating this myth, seems untouched upon, besides analyses of *Mem U Zin*. The depiction of other people-groups throughout history, specifically in relation to poetry, has not been examined. It is my hope that this work will shed light on the significance of poetry in constructing the imagined Kurdistan in these respects. It is also important to add to the contemporary trend of investigating Kurdistan via analyses of Kurdish culture in itself, rather than through European archives. My work should hopefully provide an understanding on the emergence of Kurdish nationalism from a sociological level, rather than a top-down, geopolitical perspective.

In the first chapter, I shall argue for the significance of poetry in the formation and dissemination of historical national myths. While Kurdish nationalism drastically evolved during the twentieth century, various mythological narratives have remained. Poetry plays a role in disseminating these narratives, which serves to construct an imagined 'Kurdistan'. The second chapter will revolve around modernist poetry and the aforementioned man-mountain relationship. The third chapter will demonstrate the significance of poetry in establishing Kurdish identity directly through the 'othering' of Arabs, Turks and Persians. In this way, given poetry's agency in the formation and entrenchment of the imagined nation of the Kurds poetry can and has united the disparate land of 'Kurdistan'. The Kurdish people lack a *Lingua Franca*, their political realities vary from state to state, it is not an

¹⁸ Farangis Ghaderi, 'The challenges of writing Kurdish literary history: Representation, classification, periodisation', abstract

economically distinct region and has few economic and communication links between its parts.¹⁹ For the nationalist, these obstacles can and have been transcended by the existence of Kurdish poetry.

¹⁹ Maria T O'Shea, *Trapped Between Map and Reality*, (New York, 2004), p2

Methodology

It is first worth making clear what I will define as poetry in this project. Kurdish conceptions of poetry are, of course, not necessarily in accordance with Western conceptions. Kurdistan has a rich history of oral poetry; written works are relatively scarce. I will hence be including analysis of transcribed *Dengbej* performances. These are essentially stories sung with the accompaniment of music. Such performances are retold time and again, though with improvisation to the lyrics. The music, however, is of subsidiary importance to the story, and the lyrics of the performances are often read aloud without musical accompaniment.²⁰ *Dengbej* performers are often referred to as poets, and neglecting them in an analysis of Kurdish poetic history seems myopic. Lacking a knowledge of the Kurdish language, I will be relying on secondary sources for translated transcriptions of *Dengbej* performances. Two of them, of which I am most reliant, are essentially anthologies, featuring numerous transcriptions of twentieth century performances.

Owing to the lack of an English translation of much Kurdish poetry, most of the other poems I will feature derive from secondary sources produced predominantly by Kurdish academics. My use of *Mem U Zin* is an exception to this, with various English translations being readily available online. I use the translation composed by the academic Salah Saadallah²¹, though in the interests of avoiding potential bias I have corroborated this with the translation appearing in Van Bruinessen's *Ehmedê Xani's Mem û Zîn and its role in the emergence of Kurdish nationalism*.²²

²⁰ Pieter Verstraete "'Acting" under Turkey's State of Emergency: A Conversation with Kurdish Artists about Theatre, the Dengbêj Tradition, and the First Kurdish Hamlet', *Journal of Performance Matters*(vol 4, n3), (Verstraete, 2018), p3

²¹ Available at: https://archive.org/stream/AhmedKhaniMemAndJinTrans.BySalahSaadalla/Ahmed+Khani-Mem+and+Jin-trans.+by+Salah+Saadalla_djvu.txt

²² Martin Van Bruinessen, 'Ehmedî Xani's Mem û Zîn and its role in the emergence of Kurdish nationalism', *Essays on the origins of Kurdish nationalism* (US, 2003)

Chapter 1: Kurdish National Mythologies

To begin with, it is worth making clear what is meant by 'national mythology'. A basis for this can be taken from Renan's conceptualisation, that a national myth is a legend or fictionalized narrative which has been elevated to a serious mythological, symbolic, and esteemed level so as to be true to the nation.²³ I would add, however, that myths can be based on real historical incidences, though may feature the omission of important details or over-dramatisation of key events. Conversely, as Arash Abizadeh notes, myths may simply be a fictional story that no one takes to be true literally but contain a symbolic meaning for the nation, in the case of the Kurds an 'eternity' of subjugation.²⁴ This definition can be further expanded to include dramatized forms of self-perception not just deriving from history, but from geography. As mentioned, this manifests itself in the case of the Kurd's in their self-perception as a distinctively mountainous people.

Though this seems a diffuse definition of 'national mythology', encapsulating the above in one phrase is challenging. Kurdish nationalist narratives, as they appear in poetry, feature every element of the above. These elements all serve to create the concept of a 'Kurdistan' beyond the realms of fact.

The myth of Kurdistan as an 'eternally stateless nation'²⁵ is frequently disseminated in poetry. The injustice of this perceived fact is cited as reason for the Kurdish people's plight and is henceforth used by nationalists to justify the establishment of Kurdish sovereignty. For instance, in 1880, writing a letter to Miqdad Mîdhat Bedir Xan (who would go on to publish the first Kurdish newspaper in 1898) the nationalist Haji Qadir of Koi (1815-1892), lamented that the 'torpor of our people resides in an eternity of subjugation'. Qadir goes on to declare that 'we are alone in being eternally subject to the law-making of those more ferocious than ourselves'.²⁶ Key to note here is the idea of eternity. While this may appear an unrelated rhetorical device, this idea of a people 'eternally' devoid of sovereignty over their homeland seems to be a key feature in Kurdish national mythology, which features heavily in poetry. Notions of 'eternity' are symbolic, and the weight of the idea of eternity

²³ Ernest Renan, *What is a Nation?*, (Paris, 1882)

²⁴ Arash Abizadeh, 'Historical Truth, National Myths, and Liberal Democracy'. *Journal of Political Philosophy* 12 (3), 291 - 313

²⁵ Jaffer Sheyholislami, 'Kurdish Identity', *Kurdish Identity, Discourse, and New Media*, (New York, 2011), abstract;

This exact phrase used here can be observed in many other narratives on the plight of Kurds, it has almost become a catchphrase

²⁶ Cited in C. J. Edmonds, 'Kurdish Nationalism', *Contemporary Journal of Kurdish history* Vol. 6, No. 1, (London, 1972), p53-54

itself fashions an identity for the Kurds. This, of course, is not based on a historical truism. The implication, also, of the unquestionable unity of the Kurdish people – extant in Qadir's lamentations -again is not grounded in reality. Kurdistan has historically been a region consisting of various different nomadic tribes with differing dialects. These elements, nevertheless, are crucial in metaphysical nation-building, and continuously appear in Kurdish poetry.

Qadir, for instance, was tremendously influenced by Ehmed Xani, who composed the 17th century national epic *Mem U Zin*.²⁷ Xani's poem tells the tale of two lovers (Mem and Zin), whose dreams of marriage are dashed by a jealous prince (Bayezid). This poem, however, has frequently been regarded as allegorical. In various interpretations of the love story, Mem (the male) represents the Kurdish people, and Zin (the female), represents the land of Kurdistan. The interpretations drawn from the final lines of the poem clearly reproduce the myth of Kurdistan as an eternally stateless nation. These lines are as follows:

Thus it was that over Mem's and Zin's grave
Grew with the cultivation of love of the two
Two rebellious shoots proceeded to bloom
And rise with the drunken passion
One of lofty cypress and one of slender pine
Green, pretty and highly shading
And at last put their arms around each other
Standing as a stature side by side together
But the one who had been devoid of honour
Brew into a twisted and bitter juniper
That tree never experiencing a moment's peace

²⁷ Edmonds, *Kurdish nationalism*, 54

As one who is covered completely by thorns

It rose and managed to reach the other two trees

Becoming an obstacle to the union of the two lovers

It was devoid of tranquillity

And showed its hostility

Once again reaching these two lovers

Once again spying on them censoriously²⁸

The 'bitter and twisted juniper' here was planted by Bayezid, which separates Mem from Zin even after death. Bayezid is interpreted by many as a representation of Kurdistan's hostile neighbours, most obviously the Turks. The language employed – even if not intended as such – can clearly be interpreted in a way that renders the text analogous to this mythology of eternal stateless nation. Mem and Zin's union is pre-ordained; before their separation at death, the shoots '*at last* put their arms around each other'. This matrimony is cultivated by the 'love of the two'. The Kurd's right to their homeland, here, is predicated on the love that they have for it. The Kurd's unity, also, is embodied in their representation as a single character, Mem. And despite Mem's proximity to Zin, after death, their full union is eternally dashed by 'the one who had been devoid of honour', i.e the Turks. In this sense the Kurds are *eternally* deprived of their homeland, despite the fact they inhabit it. This poem, recognised as being at the foundation of Kurdish literature, can thus be interpreted in such a way that disseminates a very powerful national myth: that the Kurds are a single people (or 'nation'), who are spiritually bound to their homeland, though this union has been eternally tainted by hostile neighbours. While the idea of 'eternal' deprivation of the right to possess their homeland seems paradoxical when appearing in nationalist discourse, it should not be taken literally. The sheer emotive power of this phraseology grants the Kurds a strong national cause. Likewise, the myth of Kurdistan as a 'stateless nation' paradoxically enshrines them with a distinctive national identity. As Maria O'Shea observes, 'Kurdish identity resides most strongly in what the Kurds do not possess'.²⁹

Haji Qadir of Koi, indeed, considered the poem deeply allegorical in this respect, describing Mem U Zin as 'the book of our nation' and stated the work contained 'many meanings and much wisdom on

²⁸ *Mem U Zin*, 226

²⁹ Maria T O'Shea, *Trapped Between Map and Reality*, (New York, 2004), p2

our plight.³⁰ Qadir was himself a poet, and fiercely condemned the Kurdish literary elite for 'neglecting their mother tongue'.³¹ Qadir composed an anthology of Sorani dialect poetry in 1858 and stated in its preamble of the need for the Kurdish people to become acquainted with their own poetry, in order to foster national awakening among the literate.³² Miqdad Mîdhat Bedir Xan – the first editor of the nationalistic paper the *Kurdistan* – shared this interpretation. Bedir Xan, indeed, promised to print a fragment of Mem U Zin in every issue of the newly established journal, stating that a reading of the poem 'awakens the spirit of Mem living in all of us', thereby equating Mem to every Kurd. Bedir Xan also stated that it was a piece that rendered the Kurds 'worthy as a nation'.³³ The national myth of eternal stateless nation latent in this interpretation of *Mem U Zin*, then, was of great significance to these figures. This myth, to them as nationalists, was clearly an important tool in the fashioning of the Kurdish nation.

This myth is alive in much of the Dengbej poetry of the late twentieth century. While these performers were preoccupied with more earthly matters than the aforementioned intellectual pioneers of Kurdish nationalism, their performances nevertheless disseminate the same national myth – that of the Kurds 'eternally' being a 'stateless nation'. A 1992 Dengbej performance commemorating the life of a young rebel, with lyrics deriving from a poem written at some point in the previous decade, features this myth:

Kurdistan is under invasion for all of history

Kurdish youngsters rebel

To break the chain of colonialists³⁴

The idea of Kurdistan in an eternal struggle is drawn upon, as emotive weight, for the deliverance of the final line 'to break the chains of the [Turkish] colonialists.' Resistance to the Turks is justified through conjuring this national myth.

³⁰ Cited in: Michiel Leezenberg, 'The consecration of a national epic' Routledge handbook on the Kurds, (Amsterdam, 2018) p8-9

³¹ 'Kurdish Written Literature', IranicaOnline, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/kurdish-written-literature>, (accessed: 01/04/2019)

³² 'Kurdish written literature', (accessed 03/04/2019)

³³ Martin Van Bruinessen, 'Ehmedî Xani's Mem û Zîn and its role in the emergence of Kurdish nationalism', *Essays on the origins of Kurdish nationalism*,

³⁴ (1992) cited from: Wendelmoet Hamelink, *The Sung Home: Narrative, Morality, and the Kurdish Nation* (USA, 2017), p15

Likewise, a 1997 Dengbej poem, paying homage to the first female PKK fighter to set herself on fire, Zilan, disseminates a similar national myth:

Zilan is the thunder during summer

Zilan is the voice of angry hearts

Zilan is a Med daughter

Zilan Zilan Zilan Zilan.³⁵

Zilan here is presented as a descendent of the ancient Medians. This myth, of Kurds being descendants of the Ancient Medians, appears frequently in nationalist discourse, though is probably not historically accurate. Nevertheless, this idea is used as justification for nationalistic struggle, as is the case in this homage to Zilan. Through such a link to the Medians, the myth of 'eternal resistance' is constructed. The equivalency of the Kurdish homeland to the domains of the Medians transplants the struggle to a plane beyond historical verification; as Van Bruinessen states, the Kurd's Median heritage 'grants [the Kurds] a mystical genesis, their origins on the fringes of recorded history.'³⁶ The 'eternal struggle' against those occupying the Kurd's rightful homeland, is disseminated in poetry through this connection to an empire so detached from historical memory.

This myth persists even in the radically Marxist nationalistic poetry of the revolutionary Seyde Cigerxwîn. Written in 1976, the poem 'Who Am I' is vehemently anti-theistic, which represents a radical break from the reverent tone of the poet's nationalist forefathers. Nevertheless, the myth of Median heritage remains, and imbued in this the mythological symbol of eternal suffering:

I am the Mede, the Gosh, Hori and Gudi;

I am the Kurmanc, Kelhor; Lor and Gor;

who have lost crown and reign

³⁵ (1997) cited from: Wendelmoet Hamelink, *The Sung Home: Narrative*, p17

³⁶ Martin Van Bruinessen, 'Shifting national and ethnic identities: the Kurds in Turkey and the European Diaspora', *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, (volume 18, issue1), (Rotterdam, 2007) p4

to become powerless,
betrayed in the name of religion [...]
yes, I have always been and remain the Kurd.
Enduring endless suppression
in a country by force divided.
Who am I?³⁷

Again, Kurdish identity appears intrinsically linked to 'endless suppression', despite an ancient, noble heritage.

Even in poetry unrelated to Kurdish nationalism, this myth is disseminated. A romantic Dengbej performance, sung in 2005 by Koma Gulên Xerzan, equates his love for his bride to the thousands of years of history of love for the 'country':

The dreams you have given me
My smiling one
Are like a thousand years old song
Are like the love of Mem and Zin
You are the love of the country
You are the love of my forefathers
My smiling one³⁸

³⁷Cited from: Patrick MacManus, *Five poems and one song from Kurdistan*, <http://www.pen-kurd.org/englizi/varia/five-poems-and-one-song-from-kurdistan.html>, accessed (04/04/2019)

³⁸ (1997) Cited in: Hanifi Baris, Wendelmoet Hamelink 'Dengbêjs on borderlands', p50

Here is evidence, also, of the timeless significance of *Mem U Zin* in constructing Kurdish national identity. The Kurds are a single 'country', and their love for the homeland is as tangible as the love between man and wife. The 'thousand years old song' imbues a sense of gravity to this love, in a similar way to notions of eternity. The central importance, for the Kurds, of the allegory for the struggle for their homeland embedded in *Mem U Zin*, transcends even nationalist discourse, appearing in a love poem over three hundred years after it was written. This is surely evidence for the great significance of poetry in disseminating this myth of unity among Kurds, of timeless oppression and of an essentialist right to their homeland. References to *Mem U Zin*, it must be said, appear countless times in other *Dengbej* performances.³⁹ Though sometimes this occurs merely in relation to the direct reading of *Mem U Zin* as a love poem, love is often tied up with love of the country, as we see here. It should also be mentioned that, these days, most Kurds seem to interpret the poem as allegorical in this respect⁴⁰; as will be discussed later, chapters five and six (after a tribute to God and before the actual story) *directly* call for the Kurds to rule themselves.

This myth of being throughout history a coherent 'nation', though deprived of their homeland for a great deal of time, has thus continually been extant in poetry. It is worth re-iterating that the myth of 'eternity' is symbolic to my judgement. The Kurds often define themselves, as has been shown, by generation-upon-generation of suffering, since the fall of Medes over two thousand years ago. 'Eternity' almost implies that suffering is an inherent part of being a Kurd. This, and the myth of being continuously one people-group, has frequently been relayed in poetry, which has played a crucial role in Kurdish self-affirmation.

³⁹ B. Sinyem Ezgi, *Articulation of Kurdish Identity Through Politicised Music of Koms*, <https://etd.lib.metu.edu.tr/upload/12611651/index.pdf>, (accesses 05/04/2019)

⁴⁰ Farangis Ghaderi, 'The challenges of writing Kurdish literary history: Representation, classification, periodisation', p34

Chapter 2: Kurdistan and the Mountains

Another myth central to Kurdish identity is the notion that Kurds are a distinctively mountainous people. This idea, of course, is rooted to a great extent in reality. Kurdistan, in most conceptions, encompasses the north-western Zagros and the eastern Taurus mountain ranges.⁴¹ Much of Kurdish culture derives from the realities of inhabiting such an environment; e.g. the widespread consumption of goat's meat and dairy produce.⁴² To some degree, the Kurds owe their very existence to the mountains; not just through the provision of protection from hostile empires, but through what it means to be Kurdish in itself. As stated, the term 'Kurd' most likely derives from a description of a particular variety of pastoral-nomadism frequently observed in the mountains, rather than a socio-political entity.⁴³ In this sense, being a mountain people has great influence on what it means to be Kurdish; the imagined Kurdistan is intrinsically linked to the myth of a 'mountain people'. One Kurdish writer forcefully asserts that 'To a Kurd the mountain is no less than the embodiment of the deity: mountain is his mother, his refuge, his protector, his home, his farm, his market, his mate, and his only friend.'⁴⁴ According to Maria T O'shea – who provides an interesting theory relating Kurdish national identity to topophilia - the 'intimate man-mountain relationship shapes the physical, cultural and psychological landscape more than any other factor.'

This myth, however, is rarely reproduced in poetry prior to the twentieth century. This is partly due to the great influence of Persian poetry on traditional Kurmanji poetry. While premodern Kurdish nationalist poets were undeniably patriotic, the imagery within their poetry - as poets inheriting this Persian tradition - features heavy prose on luscious green meadows, rivers, fireflies and open skies.⁴⁵ Similarly, Arabic prose had great bearing on Kurdish poetic tradition, though primarily in relation to the less extensive southern Sorani Kurdish tradition. Also, these nationalists, unlike the vast majority of Kurds in their generation, were metropolitan. While they considered fellow Kurds their brethren, they were, to an extent, very detached from the lives of ordinary Kurds. Nali, a Kurdish patriotic poet of the nineteenth century, reminisces in a poem while exiled Kurdistan's: 'rivers, plains and its

⁴¹ Amir Hassanpour, 'The Kurdish Experience', p2

⁴² Amir Hassanpour, 'The Kurdish Experience', p2

⁴³ Antonio Arnaiz-Villena , Cristina Campos 'Genetic HLA Study of Kurds in Iraq, Iran and Tbilisi (Caucasus, Georgia): Relatedness and Medical Implications', *Plos/One*, <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article/authors?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0169929>, (2017), (accessed 01/03/2019)

⁴⁴ Cited from: Maria T O'Shea, *Trapped Between Map and Reality*, (New York, 2004), p5

⁴⁵ Farangis Ghaderi, 'The challenges of writing Kurdish literary history: Representation, classification, periodisation', p56

beautiful picnic spots', as part of a poem in a letter sent to his friend Salim.⁴⁶ Qadir of Quoi references Kurdistan in a similar way:

She is the luminous star in Kurdistan's night,

dancing on our rivers and

illuminating the luscious green plains.⁴⁷

The landscape in Ehmed Xani's *Mem U Zin* similarly does not feature prose on the mountains. There is ample talk of 'meadows laden with flowers'⁴⁸ and, 'poplars by the rivers.'⁴⁹ There is no romanticising of the mountains in Xani's work. While this may seem a minor point, it should be noted that mountains have historically been very significant to the lives of the majority of Kurds. There is, for instance, a longstanding tradition of naming offspring after specific mountains, or after an idealised mountainous environment. The thoroughness to this attachment to mountains is manifested in many folk beliefs that all mountains are inhabited by Kurds.⁵⁰ It was modernist poetry, among other artforms of the twentieth century, that bridged this reality to Kurdish national identity. Modernist poetry romanticised this man-mountain relationship in attempts to evoke nationalism. In this way, the poets of the twentieth century played a great role in aligning the realities of ordinary Kurds to the romanticised ideal of the Kurdish nation. Through modernist poetry, the significance of mountains to tribal factions and families was transcended to a unifying, Kurdish national mythology.

Considered by many the first pioneer of the modernisation of Kurdish poetry, nationalist Abdullah Goran frequently links his identity as a Kurd to the mountains of his homeland. In this way, Goran builds on this myth of the Kurdish nation being defined by its landscape. The following was written in 1950 and disseminates the mythology of the Kurdish people's existence depending on the mountains:

Kurdistan: you are my abode, my abode

of thousands of years,

⁴⁶ Farhad Shakely, CLASSICAL AND MODERN KURDISH POETRY (doctoral thesis, University of Upsalla, 2012), p6

⁴⁷ Cited from: Farhad Shakely, CLASSICAL AND MODERN KURDISH POETRY (doctoral thesis, University of Upsalla, 2012), p4

⁴⁸ Mem U Zin, section 131

⁴⁹ Mem U Zin, section 130

⁵⁰ Cited from: Maria T O'Shea, *Trapped Between Map and Reality*, (New York, 2004), p5

I have been nurtured by these valleys,
summits and hummocks,
My breath is full of the fragrant breeze of
your highlands,
Your love, my mother and mother of my fellow race
Was bequeathed to me from my ancestors,
And it will be inherited by sons and
grandsons,
As long as these high mountains survive.⁵¹

The love of his fellow Kurds, and the continual existence of Kurdish nationality in future generations to come, is here dependent on the existence of these mountains. Kurdish identity, in itself, is therefore dependent on the mountains. This work of poetry disseminates the myth of Kurdish identity residing in the 'man-mountain' relationship, and it does so in beautiful prose designed to arouse national sentiment. Though less obviously nationalistic, Goran's poem *Kurdistan* (1954), features similar motifs:

[...]There is another beauty which is
Kurdistanian
A sort of beauty which the artistic hand of
God has designed
It is the beauty of your formidable
mountains

⁵¹ Karim, Dahir Latif, *A comparative study of free verse in Arabic and Kurdish : the literary careers of al-Sayyāb and Gōrān*, (doctoral thesis, University of Glasgow, 1985) p234

Your deep and still valleys, high summits,
slippery clefts and narrow ravines.⁵²

Here, the mountains are what makes Kurdistan beautiful. The beauty of the mountains evokes national sentiment in Goran. Kurdistan's beauty is projected here, which reinforces the myth of the Kurd's mountain identity.

A later poet, Sherko Bekas, was more actively nationalistic than Goran in his poetry. Composing his works from the nineteen-seventies until his death in 2013, Bekas frequently visited his birthplace in northern Iraq from his home in Stockholm. Latent in much of Bekas' highly political writings is the association of the Kurds with the mountains. In the wake of the holocaust of Saddam Hussein's Al-Anfal campaign, Bekas produced the following:

The morning after the atrocities

The city was a bird, asleep, its neck under its feathers

No cooing pigeons, no chirruping

No murmur

No shrieking

No sound of breathing

No sighing

After eleven o, clock

Only one sound, one loud sound in that city

the sound of the music tape in the room

⁵² Patrick MacManus, 'Our Kurdish Poets', *The Kurdistan Tribune*, <https://kurdistantribune.com/ourkurdishpoets/>, (accessed 01/02/2019)

playing the songs of rifles and Peshmerga

echoed in the mountains.⁵³

The reverberations of defiance echoing throughout the mountains, here, are symbolic of resistance among the Kurds. The mountains here symbolise the Kurds. Again, this grants the Kurds a strong national identity: the Kurds far and wide, despite linguistic difference, are united by their mountainous domain. The emotive power of the above piece is intended to rally the Kurds, in unison, through their collective love of homeland, a homeland characterised by the mountains. A more famous poem of Bekas, the *Whole Sky of my Borders* (1987), disseminates this idea of the mountain's as the Kurd's salvation:

We were seeds

The helmet of Ankara

In a bloody night came

To uproot us

They did,

They took us away long away!

Many seeds were trampled

They were lost and forgotten

There were still seeds among us, the wind took them

The wind returned them

⁵³cited from: Dr Amir Sharifi, *A Tribute to Sherko Bekas, The Kurdish Poet of the Century*, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/opinion/12092013> (accessed 01/02/2019)

They reached the thirsty mountains

They hid among the rocks

Buried beneath the snow of the summits

Embedded In the grass of the valleys

The first rain

The second rain

The third rain

They grew again

We are now a forest again

We are millions.⁵⁴

In this poem the efflorescence of Kurdish life, in spite of persecution from the Turks, has been facilitated by the protection of the mountains. Were there no mountains, there would be no Kurds. In this sense, Kurdish identity is fashioned through the Kurd's relationship to the mountains. The role of the poem, here, is to link the historical experience of man-mountain relationship on an individual level, to the mythology of the mountains on national level. Latent in this poem, too, is the myth of common heritage. 'We' have all been born in the mountains; the Kurds in this respect are one people.

Writing for The Kurdish Project – an initiative aimed at celebrating Kurdish culture and creating closer ties with the West – a *Dengbej* performer, named Zizan, explains the significance of the mountains in his performances. Zizan, like many other poets and *Dengbej* performers, is deliberately evoking national sentiment through relating the Kurds to the mountains: 'You are trying to create a culture. You tell the beauty of the mountains in a poem. You try to make your heart beautiful with those mountains. You want your children to love the mountains. It makes you proud to be a Kurd.'⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Cited from: Dr Amir Sharifi, *A Tribute to Sherko Bekas*

⁵⁵ Cited from: Sinyem Ezgi Saritas Articulation of Kurdish identity through Music of Koms, (Doctoral thesis, Middle-Eastern Technical University, 2010), p134

In this way, modernist poets and performers are playing a role in Kurdish identity formation through affiliation of the Kurdish people to the mountains.

Kurdish identity and nationalism, however, was of subsidiary significance to the *Dengbej* performers of the early twentieth century. Many Kurdish intellectuals, such as Mihamid Zaki, have argued that early Kurdish nationalistic impulse was 'immature' during the early revolts against the Turks during the twenties. Zaki makes the case that the Kurds simply lacked the money and knowledge to press for an independent state. The revolts of the twenties were characterised by 'primordial loyalties to tribal rulers.'⁵⁶ The nationalist poets of this era, and the previous three centuries, were probably exceptional in their patriotism to the Kurdish 'nation'.⁵⁷ The poetry of the localised *Dengbej* performers, in this stage of the development of Kurdish nationalism, does not deliberately seek to disseminate the myth of a singular Kurdish identity characterised by inhabitation of the mountains. The mountains appear constantly in these poems, however, and appear as allies to the heroes of resistance to the Turkish state. To be sure, these heroes are generally not portrayed as 'Kurds', they are most often tribal icons. Nevertheless, the mountains appear as adversaries to the centralising state of Turkey in these poems and performances.⁵⁸ Those 'primitive' rebels of the twenties - while not self-identifying first-and-foremost as Kurds – would later become a feature of Kurdish history; nationalists would evoke the struggles of these noble mountain frontiersmen resisting Turkish authority. As Van Bruinessen states: 'they were acting as the blind instruments of Kurdish political modernization. It would not seem an exaggeration to describe them as 'primitive rebels', unknowingly shaping the myth of Kurdish resistance'.⁵⁹ The *Dengbej* performances of this era, recording these instances of resistance, create an anthology for the Kurdish nationalist, the mountains being portrayed as tools for individual resistance among Kurds become symbols of the historic Kurdish struggle.

'People of the mountains'⁶⁰ was a term used for those who are on the run from the state, and this term is seen frequently in this era of *Denbej* performance. The following poem, probably originating in the 1920's, is from the perspective of a woman in love with a rebel who was forced to flee to the mountains:

⁵⁶ Cited from: Abbas Vali, 'Nationalism and Kurdish Historical Writing'. *New Perspectives on Turkey*. (USA, 1996) p34

⁵⁷ Abbas Vali, *The Genealogy of the Kurds*, (Spånga Apec, 2003), p43

⁵⁸ Hanifi Baris, Wendelmoet Hamelink, 'Dengbêjs on borderlands: Borders and the state as seen through the eyes of Kurdish singer-poets' *The Central and Eastern European Online Library* (Vol1, issue 34),(Berlin, 2010), p55

⁵⁹ Cited from: Hanifi Baris, Wendelmoet Hamelink, 'Dengbêjs on borderlands' p53

⁶⁰ : Hanifi Baris, Wendelmoet Hamelink, 'Dengbêjs on borderlands', p52

I wish in the name of God
That the government of the Republic
would also uproot me
So that all those years
I would have been with Bavê Fexriya
The fugitive in the mountains.⁶¹

Resistance to the Turks, here, is romanticised, and affiliated with fleeing to the mountains. An existence as a fugitive in the mountains is almost a romantic escape from the shackles of Turkish authority.

A similar performance, from the same decade, is from the perspective of the father of the rebel Bişarê Çeto. The father is visiting his son who has been arrested, and is lamenting at the fact that his son could be leading the fugitives of the Pencîna-ran tribe, out in the mountains against the state:

When Bişarê Çeto, Bişar the Agha,
Had become a fugitive in the mountains
I was expecting God's blessings
I thought that he would surely join Elîyê Ûnis' soldiers
And become a part of the mountain people.⁶²

Becoming part of the mountain people, according to Baris and Hamelink, is synonymous with resistance. The mountains are a key feature of tribal resistance. Referencing the resistance movements of this era, the Dengbej performer Selim Temo states in regard to the mountains that: 'Each of them was a shelter for a people that did not own those mountains, but had chosen to belong to them'.⁶³ While this idea of the rebels 'belonging' to the mountains - at that time - did not

⁶¹ Cited from: : Hanifi Baris, Wendelmoet Hamelink, 'Dengbêjs on borderlands', p52

⁶² Cited from: Hanifi Baris, Wendelmoet Hamelink, 'Dengbêjs on borderlands', p53

⁶³ Cited from: Cited from: *Sinyem Ezgi Saritas Articulation of Kurdish identity through Music of Koms*, (Doctoral thesis, Middle-Eastern Technical University, 2010), p45

have much bearing on being distinctively a Kurd and being part of a Kurdish nation, their stories became attached to Kurdish national identity later.

This was achieved by the modernist poets emanating from the mid-twentieth century, with the previously mentioned Goran initiating this movement. Through modernist poetry, the tribal revolts fought in the mountains became a symbol of the Kurdish national struggle. Mazlum Doğan, for instance, was a modernist poet who bridges these mountain rebels of the twenties to the Kurdish national myth. In 1982, writing of the Sheikh Said revolt of 1925, Doğan eulogises the rebels as Kurdish nationalist insurgents:

How many martyrs of Sheyk Said
have devoted their lives
In forging our nation
By resisting in prisons
They took the revenge of the history
They lit the mountains.⁶⁴

Here the mountains are referenced as a symbol of the Kurdish national spirit. Also, the idea of forging the Kurdish nation is used to historically justify Kurdish nationalism, in Doğan's time. Though Sheikh Said made use of elements of Kurdish nationalism in recruitment, the objective of the Sheikh's revolt was to restore the caliphate.⁶⁵ The majority of the participants were primarily fighting for their tribe, and for religion. This was, by no means, a nationalistic rebellion. Regardless, Doğan includes this in the myth of a longstanding struggle for Kurdish sovereignty. The imagery of mountains, here, also serve to relate the revolt to a Kurdish national struggle.

The *Dengbej* performer Koma Azzad tells the tale of a rebel from the same time period. Written in 2001, the rebel addresses his mother:

It is enough mother, look I am going to the revolution

⁶⁴ Cited from: cited from: Wendelmoet Hamelink, *The Sung Home: Narrative, Morality, and the Kurdish Nation* (USA, 2017), p15

⁶⁵ Hakan Ozoglu, *From Caliphate to Secular State: Power Struggle in the Early Turkish Republic: Power Struggle in the Early Turkish Republic*, (California, 1964), p147

All of my friends have gone, I am the only one left; shamefaced

I do not have any more patience; my heart belongs to the mountains.⁶⁶

Here the events of 1925 are characterised as a 'revolution', most likely in a nationalistic sense. Also, the sentimental language directed towards the mountains, as seen here, seems to be a feature of modernist poetry; the Dengbej performances of the twenties do not seem to romanticise the landscape in this way.

All in all, we can almost parallel this modernist turn in Kurdish poetry with the rise of romantic nationalism in nineteenth century Western Europe. The uniqueness of the Kurdish landscape became sentimentalised; the desire for a free Kurdish state, latent in much of the modernist's works, is predicated on the unity of the people. The mountainous landscape, celebrated in poetry, unites the people. The same cannot necessarily be said for the language, or really for the religion (the majority are Sunni Muslim, at between two-thirds to three-quarters).⁶⁷ Thus through romanticising the Kurds as 'belonging' to the mountains, national identity is affirmed. This is in similar vein, for instance, to Norwegian romantic nationalist artistic representation of the fjords (albeit with higher stakes).⁶⁸ Regardless of these potential parallels, the role of poetry, here, in disseminating this myth of a people united by the mountains, has served to incorporate the majority of Kurds into nationalistic discourse on love of homeland. In this way, modernist poetry has played an important role in building the imagined Kurdistan.

⁶⁶ Cited from: cited from: Wendelmoet Hamelink, *The Sung Home: Narrative, Morality, and the Kurdish Nation* (USA, 2017), p42

⁶⁷ David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, (London, 1997) p 10

⁶⁸ See the artistic works of the Norwegian patriots Hans Gude and Adolph Tideman

Chapter 3: The 'Other' in Kurdish poetry

Where the previous chapters have focussed on how Kurdish nationality is affirmed from within, this chapter will revolve on how Kurdish identity is affirmed from without, through poetry. There is obviously overlap in these distinctions, though compartmentalising elements of identity formation is challenging.

'Othering' an outside people group is a significant factor in self-affirmation. Many argue that national identity becomes meaningful only through contrast with others.⁶⁹ The form this has taken in Kurdish poetry generally varies depending on historical context, though the continuity, that Kurdistan's neighbours are simply more bloodthirsty than the Kurds, has remained a key feature since *Mem U Zin* was written.

Chapters five and six of *Mem U Zin*, precluding the story of the lovers, is titled *Our Plight*. In these chapters, Xani castigates the peoples surrounding the Kurds:

If a crown had been obtained
Prosperity would certainly have been attained
He would have looked after us, the orphans
And would have protected us from the villains
Notice that between the Arabs and the Georgians
Is Kurdish, becoming like the towers
Besieged by these Persians and Turks
In the four corners are all Kurds
The two sides have made the tribe of the Kurds
A target to eliminate with their arrows
These seas of the Turks and the Tajik
Whenever they move or stir

⁶⁹ Anna Triandafyllidou, 'Collective Identity Formation and the International State', *American Political Science Review*, (vol 88, iss 2), (USA, 1994), abstract

The Kurds become stained with blood

They keep them apart like a strait.⁷⁰

The Kurds are represented as being constantly, throughout history, besieged by their neighbours. The Turks are in a sense dehumanised, Xani speaks of being surrounded by 'seas' of these enemies, whose actions constantly shed Kurdish blood. The peoples surrounding the Kurds are 'villains'. This also disseminates the aforementioned myth of Kurdish identity being defined by their history of suffering. Xani's decision to publish his work in Kurmanji was unique, and this poem plays a seismic role in the history of Kurdish nationalism. The idea of writing in a form of Kurdish probably never occurred to Kurdish scholars prior to Xani; not only was Persian considered as the most elegant language for literary purposes, it was also a language that guaranteed a wide potential audience.⁷¹ Xani was consciously building a Kurdish literary canon:

So that people won't say that the Kurds
have no knowledge and have no history;
that all manner of villains have their books
and only the Kurds are negligible.⁷²

In publishing his work in Kurmanji and invoking sentiment against non-Kurds - through convening their barbarity - Xani plays a crucial role in the formation of Kurdish national identity. The twentieth century nationalistic poet and scholar Hejar Mukyriani, for instance, considered Xani's work important in the development of the Kurdish national identity for this very reason. In a rendering of the original antiquated Kurmanji text into a modern format, based on his Mukiri dialect (to be supposedly more accessible for most Kurds) – Hejar states in the preamble that: 'Three-hundred years ago Xani introduced to us the idea of liberation. Xani is the inventor of (the idea of) nationalism in the Middle east [...] We will one day fulfill Xani's dreams of liberating ourselves from

⁷⁰ Mem U Zin, section 23

⁷¹ Martin Van Bruinessen, 'Ehmedê Xani's Mem û Zîn and its role in the emergence of Kurdish national awareness', *Essays on the origins of Kurdish nationalism* (California, 2003), p2

⁷² Mem U Zin, cited from: Martin Van Bruinessen, 'Ehmedê Xani's Mem û Zîn', p2

our hostile rulers.⁷³ This, published in 1989, appears in the context of Hussein's brutal suppression of the Kurds.

Though Hejar was probably incorrect to assert that Xani was the 'inventor' of Middle Eastern nationalism (Xani probably was not a nationalist in the modern sense), his assertions on the significance of the text for the Kurdish national struggle are undeniably true. Hejar's publication, indeed, was censored in Iraq. Hejar's publisher, Emin Borzalan, was imprisoned for thirteen months in Turkey, condemned for instigation to separatism.⁷⁴ The self-identification as 'Kurdish', in Xani's work, revolves around the idea that the 'others' surrounding them are violent and villainous. This simplistic expression was powerful enough to have instigated a Turkish state-sponsored translation of the original work, in 2013. These translations have naturally excluded chapters five and six.⁷⁵ The state-sponsored translation was a deliberate attempt to eradicate the strong association of Mem U Zin with Kurdish national identity. The critical translation theorist Emily Apter states: 'as an act of disruption, translation becomes a means of repositioning the subject in the world and in history [...] Translation is a significant medium of subject re-formation and political change.'⁷⁶ The Turkish government's translation of the epic, then, is testament to the significance of the work in the development of Kurdish nationalism. The government was deliberately influencing the work, via translation, in order to siphon off nationalistic interpretation. And the majority of Xani's explicit reference to being a Kurd is in relation to the hostility of the Kurd's enemies, most significantly the Turks.

These depictions appear frequently in the early twentieth century's *Dengbej* performances, prior to the modernization of Kurdish poetry. As mentioned, these performers generally self-identified according to tribe rather than Kurdish nation. Turks, however, are constantly depicted as 'others', and as violent aggressors. In this respect, while the performances were not necessarily nationalistic, they served to distance tribal communities from the central government. In this respect they were unconsciously part of the process of the development of Kurdish nationalism. Upon visiting Diyarbakir – a city in Kurdish Turkey – the rebel Emîne Pêrixanê laments at the city's forthcoming ruin, in this performance of the thirties:

⁷³ Karal Mirawdeli, *Love and Existence: Analytical Study of Ahmedi Khnai's Tragedy of Mem U Zin*, (London, 2012) p58

⁷⁴ Metin Yuksel, *A Kurdish Revolutionary from Turkey Mehmîd Borzalan and his Intellectual Evolution*, (research paper, University Ankara, 2009) , p14

⁷⁵ Nicholar Glastonbury, *Specters of Kurdish Nationalism: Governmentality and Translation in Turkey*, (Research Paper, Pennsylvania State, 2014), p56

⁷⁶ Emily Apter, *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature*, (USA, 2005), p6

There is no end to the inflow of cutthroat Turks
aghas and landlords, a few Qizilbash [Iranian Shi'ite militant groups]

I felt urged to turn my back
And ascend the distant hills.⁷⁷

The ruin of the city of Diyarbakir is the product of Turkish immigration. Here, the Turks are presented as 'cutthroats', and as imposters in traditionally Kurdish spaces. Though obviously not to be celebrated, performances such as these were a significant stage in the development of Kurdish nationalism. Resistance to the energetically assimilationist state of Turkey, through depiction of Turks as harbingers of destruction, 'othered' Turks. This played a role in alienating these tribes from the state. Another performance, from the perspective of a mother whose son has been killed by Turkish soldiers, laments the following:

Woe to you agha⁷⁸
You, who inflict sorrow upon sorrows and pain upon pains
[...]Stand up, you the murdered but not avenged,
You who is gone with the grief
Orchestrated In [the documents of] the Turkish capital,
In that ruin Ankara
And in the logbooks of Mustafa Kemal Pasha.⁷⁹

Here the Turks, again, are harbingers of sorrow. Mustafa Kemal, the Turkish revolutionary statesman – considered the father of the Turkish nation – is depicted as an enemy, commanding the executions of innocent Kurds. This poem, naturally, would arouse sentiment against the Turkish nation.

⁷⁷ Cited from: Hanifi Baris, Wendelmoet Hamelink, *'Dengbêjs on borderlands'*, p86

⁷⁸ Functionary of the Ottoman Empire but used to define Turkish soldiers

⁷⁹ Cited from: Hanifi Baris, Wendelmoet Hamelink, *'Dengbêjs on borderlands'*, p79

The grandchildren of these *Dengbej* performers would sing songs celebrating resistance to bloodthirsty enemies in the same way. The loyalty of most of these performers, however, would be to the Kurdish nation, rather than to the tribe. This poem, performed by Koma Çiya in 2005, draws on the historical suffrage of the Kurdish people.

Thanks to the Arab, the Turk, the Persian

Everywhere is in the color of blood

My country is wounded

Where is my pen?

In Ağrı, in Dersim

In Kirmanşah, in Mahabad

In Zilan, in Helebçe

It's enough⁸⁰

The towns named here are dispersed throughout Kurdistan – Mahabad in Iran for instance, and Agri in Turkey. In this sense, the poem unites the Kurds far and wide, tying the suffering of Kurds at the hands of non-Kurds into a national myth.

Another modernist poem, characterizing the rebel Sheikh Said as a Kurdish national insurgent, distinguishes the Kurds from the Turks on the grounds of religion. Written at some point in the fifties, this poem, by the *Dengbej* Reso, laments the hanging of Sheikh Said. He frames this as a Kurdish issue, and characterizes the Turks as uncompromisingly modernist, and as having no religious faith:

My chief, I beg you, do not even say it; Kemal has turned away from religion

When they were catching and taking Khalid Beg Cibri [and] Sheikh Ali Riza's father—the old, saintly man—to the rope in Bilîs

⁸⁰ Cited from: : Wendelmoet Hamelink, *The Sung Home: Narrative, Morality, and the Kurdish Nation* (USA, 2017), p42

Then I knew the words of four Turks; see what pain and anxiety and concern it caused for us
They were laughing hard, saying: "Get up [and] look at this old man, he is [supposedly] the sheikh of
the Kurds;" [oh] the guide; may I not remain in the world.⁸¹

The Turks, here, are laughing at the death of this 'Kurdish' martyr. This again is designed to provoke anger among Kurds directed towards the Turks. Anger, in this way, engenders nationalism. The statement of Kemal having 'turned away from religion' is a reference to Ataturk's secularist, modernist national ideal. The Kurds, in contrast, are adherents to Islam. This, again, affirms Kurdish national identity, though in this poem via religious zeal.

One need only look at the Kurdish national anthem, based off of a poem by the modernist writer Dildar,⁸² for evidence of the agency of poetry in the history of Kurdish nationalism; latent as it is with Kurdish national myths, and characterisation of foreign enemies. A segment of the anthem – titled, indeed, 'O Enemy!' – reads as follows:

Oh, enemy! The Kurdish people live on,
They have not been crushed by the weapons of the Turks or Persians
Let no one say Kurds are dead, they are living
They live and never shall we lower our flag
We are descendants of the red banner of the revolution
Look at our past, how bloody it is
Let no one say Kurds are dead, they are living
They live and never shall we lower our flag
We are the descendants of the Medes and Cyaxares
Kurdistan is our religion, our credo,
Let no one say Kurds are dead, they are living

⁸¹ Cited from: Metin Yüksel, 'Oral Poets in Conflict: Âşık Veysel and Dengbêj Reso on the Rope', *Journal of Folklore Research* (Volume 56, Number 1), (Indiana, 2019)

⁸² 'Ey Reqîb -Kurdish National Anthem', *Serbesti360*, <https://serbesti360.com/2015/02/04/121/> (accessed 10/04/2019)

They live and never shall we lower our flag.⁸³

This song is unquestionably modernist; featuring reference to the 'red banner of revolution.' The Turks and Persians also feature in the song, again as instigators of violence. This piece is testament to the application of mythologised aspects of Kurdish history to the Kurdish national identity via poetry. This is testament, also, to the significance of Turks and Persians in Kurdish identity formation. Characterisation of the enemy as instigators of violence, and as being enemies of the imagined Kurdish nation, has frequently been disseminated in poetry, which has thus played an active role in the formation of Kurdish nationalism.

⁸³ 'Kurdistan', *NationalAnthemsInfo*, <http://www.nationalanthems.info/krd.htm> (accessed 10/04/2019)

Conclusion

The concept of Kurdish nationalism is peculiar. The Kurds are highly disparate; speaking in different tongues and inhabiting different political realities. The Kurdish literary corpus is small, relative to those of the surrounding nations. The necessity, for the nationalist, in fashioning for the Kurds a strong national identity is hence tantamount. I have attempted to argue for the significance of poetry in the history of the development of this national identity. Where *Mem U Zin* played a hugely significant role in laying down the framework for Kurdish self-affirmation, the modernist poetry of the mid-twentieth century has carried the torch. Though various individual poets - prior to the modernist turn – have contributed to the nationalistic literary corpus; it was the modernists who produced works capable of uniting the rich, the poor; the urban and the rural.

Chapter 1 demonstrated the means by which Kurdish poetry has disseminated various historical mythologies. The myths of being one people, sharing a common ancestry, though deprived of a homeland and suffering eternally; has frequently been disseminated in poetry, and this has played a significant role in Kurdish self-affirmation. Poetry has, in this respect, played a crucial role in Kurdish nation-building

In chapter 2 I have attempted to argue for the role of modernist poetry in bridging the 'man-mountain' relationship to romanticised notions of Kurdish national identity. This, in a sense, was reminiscent of the Romantic nationalist turn in Europe. The distinctiveness of the Kurdish people was celebrated and romanticised, which included the vast majority of rural, mountain dwelling Kurds in this nationalist myth.

Chapter 3 seeks to argue for the significance of poetry in identifying out groups. Turks, Persians and Arabs, were, originating with Xani's work, castigated for various reasons, though predominantly for their sheer aggressiveness. This, again, constructs a notion of what it means to be a Kurd, through distinguishing themselves from their hostile neighbours.

These elements, all in all, have established a strong nationalistic current in the minds of the people of Kurdistan. Perhaps, in the imminent, future, we will witness the ascendancy of this eternal stateless nation; built on the shoulders not just of paramilitary groups, but of the nationalistic poets, who often gave their lives, in the construction of a Kurdish national identity.

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