

**Theatre and Cultural Nationalism:
Kurdish Theatre under the Baath, 1975-1991**

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the role played by Kurdish theatre in the Kurdish national struggle in Iraq especially between 1975 and 1991. First, it traces the development of Kurdish theatre, within the socio-political context in Iraqi Kurdistan, from its emergence in the 1920s to the defeat of the Kurdish nationalist movement and the fall of the Kurdistan region under the direct Baath rule in 1975. It will then explore the Kurdish resistance theatre during the Baath rule and will analyse the representation of Kurdish nationalist identity in four dramas produced during the Baath rule between 1975 and 1991. By analysing the nationalist themes in the works of Ehmed Salar and Telet Saman, two prominent playwrights and directors of the late 1970s and the duration of the 1980s, I will argue that despite strict censorship during most of this period, theatre played a critical role in the Kurdish national struggle by staging Kurdish history, mythology, folklore, and re-enacting oppressed histories. Along with the thematic analysis of representative dramatic texts from the period and interviews with Kurdish theatre artists, this research draws on Kurdish theatre histories, historical documents, and journalistic accounts, to reveal how theatre participated in the Kurdish national struggle and how it responded to political changes in different historical periods.

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Translation and transliteration

The playtexts, theatre histories, and most other sources used for writing this research are all written in Kurdish Sorani and in Arabic script. The transcription system which has been used for the texts in this work follows the scheme developed by Bedirxan for writing Kurmanji in Roman script. In this system letters are pronounced as in English with the following exceptions: Long vowels ê as in the French mère, î as in keen, û as in pool, and short vowel e as in pat. The vowel *i*, as in tip, is the same as the [ɪ] symbol in the IPA and *u* is the same as the close back rounded vowel [u] in the IPA. Other exceptions include ç as in chip, ş as in ship, *c* as in jail, *q* as pronounced in the Arabic Quran, and *x* as in loch.

For the sake of consistency, I have tried to remain faithful to this transcription system and Kurdish pronunciation for all Kurdish proper names including well-known figures such as Mela Mistefa Barzanî whose name is usually written as Mulla Mustafa Barzani. However, to avoid confusion regarding placenames, such as Erbil and Sulaymaniyah, and Kurdish speech varieties, such as Kurmanji and Sorani, I have chosen to keep to common English norms. However, for lesser known places, such as Pîremegrûn Mountain, I have chosen to use Kurdish transcription system.

Also, translations of all plays and most poems are my own unless otherwise stated.

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Introductory Remarks

This dissertation is an attempt to contribute to the scholarship on Kurdish culture and nationalism by studying the development of Iraqi-Kurdish theatre within its historical context. Its main purpose is to delineate the role theatre has played in formulating and representing notions of national identity and in engaging with Kurdish struggle for independence in Iraqi Kurdistan especially between 1975 and 1991 during the rule of the Baath regime when Kurdish theatre was in opposition and resistance to the central government. While the development of Kurdish theatre since its emergence to the defeat of the Kurdish nationalist movement in 1975 is also explored, the later chapters investigate the Kurdish theatre of resistance from 1975 to the Iraqi government's withdrawal from Kurdistan in 1991. The representation of Kurdish nationalist identity in Kurdish dramas produced between 1975 and 1991, when Kurdistan was under the direct Baath rule, will be explored through close analysis of representative plays written and directed by Telet Saman and Ehmed Salar, two prominent Kurdish playwrights and directors of the period.

My approach to Kurdish theatre in this study is a historical one and I am interested in the relationship between politics and theatre because Kurdish culture has always been a locus of contention due to the homogenising policies of the nation-states in which the Kurds live. In fact the assimilative policies of these nation-states and their denial of Kurdish identity have been determining factors behind the Kurdish cultural nationalism. In the case of Iraq where, unlike in other nation-states, the Kurds were recognised as a separate nation, the denial of their right to self-determination and the politically turbulent history of the country have made nationalism an important shaper of Kurdish culture in general and theatre in particular. Kurdish theatre, as will be shown later, expresses a period's identity and thus cannot be understood apart

from its social conditions. Therefore excluding the non-textual elements from analysis and separating textual from contextual, would displace the history of political forces that have shaped the theatre in Iraqi Kurdistan.

In my investigation of the development of Kurdish theatre in Iraq, I place the primary focus on the theatre as a social and cultural institution and concentrate on theatre as an expression of social-political forces of the time and place. I show that, since its emergence in Kurdistan, theatre had become a tool of national identity-building and modernisation by promoting literacy, education, and women's rights. Drama also became one of the most visible forms of Kurdish cultural nationalism by exploiting folklore, myths, legends and local history and celebrating heroes of the past. As time went on, by staging anti-feudalist and anti-monarchist plays, theatre became engaged in representing and legitimising the wider political movement in Iraq that ultimately led to the overthrow of monarchy.

My analysis of the Kurdish drama between 1975 and 1991 in chapters six and seven, which serves to authenticate the role of theatre in the nationalist struggle and resistance against the central government, demonstrates that under the Baath rule Kurdish theatre, despite strict censorship, continued to courageously promote Kurdish nationalism and resistance through the use of Kurdish folk culture and literature. This reaffirmed Kurdish nationalist myths and reassured a disenfranchised, persecuted and denigrated people of their self-worth as a nation. More importantly, it brought the public together and aroused a spirit of resistance by portraying legendary and heroic national characters from the past. The close reading and thematic analysis of Telet Saman's and Ehmed Salar's plays reveal their recurrent use of such nationalist myths and symbols.

In chapters six and seven, I analyse representative dramatic texts of the period between 1975 and 1991 and focus on the socio-political contexts of the dramatic works and, when available, accounts of their performances and reception which can reveal much about the role of theatre in the Kurdish nationalist movement. I examine the texts of the plays within their historical context and logically infer Kurdish

theatre's contribution to the Kurdish nationalist movement through representations of nationalist myths and encouraging audiences to envision a Kurdish nation and to aspire for its freedom. I have extensively drawn on the social history of the region and have also valued the personal accounts of theatre-makers and witnesses of the past events to explore the role of theatre in the Kurdish nationalist movement in Iraq and the role of nationalist ideology in shaping the meaning of performances for the audience.

1.2 Research Questions

I take a historical approach to discussing theatre in Iraqi Kurdistan, focusing on the relationship between socio-political factors and theatre and drama. The main question behind this research is how Kurdish theatre in Iraq has taken on issues of national identity and nationalism at moments of profound change during 1975-1991 such as the loss of the Kurdish autonomy, the rise of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) party, the resurgence of the Kurdish guerrilla struggle, and the genocidal Anfal campaign. Considering the extensive literature that affirms the role of theatrical performance in constructing or contesting notions of national identity, I am interested in exploring whether theatre played any role in the national identity-building and the Kurdish nationalist struggle in Iraq especially between 1975 and 1991 when Kurdistan was under the Baath rule. If so, how was theatre utilised for nationalist purposes by the Kurdish theatre-makers? And did their productions enjoy grassroots support or were they mainly an elite obsession?

There are other questions that have informed the writing of this thesis including, how have national experiences affected the development of Iraqi-Kurdish theatre? Can the presentation of theatre be characterised in specific periods in view of political changes? How did the decades of Kurdish struggle for independence influence the development of theatre? How has Kurdish theatre functioned in changing social and cultural conditions? How can a knowledge of history help us understand the Kurdish theatre history and vice versa?

By answering these questions I hope to demonstrate whether theatre is a genre capable of providing evidence germane to the understanding of Kurdish history and whether exploring the history and voices of the people involved in making theatre can bring to light hidden, suppressed or marginalised narratives and moments that indicate the critical importance of the theatre as a charged political space for the development of Kurdish nationalism. This will contribute to a revisionist historiography of the Kurdish national struggle that takes into account and underlines the agency of theatre-makers in the Kurdish national struggle.

1.3 What is meant by Kurdish theatre?

In the *Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Historiography*, Thomas Postlewait explains that by theatre he means “the comprehensive field of the performing arts, including theatre, dance, opera, folk theatre, puppetry, parades, processions, spectacles, festivals, circuses, public conventions, and related performance events” (Postlewait, 2009, p.2). Theatre, therefore, usually refers to live performances for live audiences which may or may not take place in purpose-built theatres. The term “performance”, however, is a broadly inclusive term which, in the field of Performance Studies, can be applied to a variety of human actions “ranging from ritual, play, sports, popular entertainments, the performing arts (theatre, dance, music), and everyday life performances to the enactment of social, professional, gender, race, and class roles, and on to healing (from shamanism to surgery), the media, and the internet” (Schechner, 2002, p.2). Theatrical productions in purpose-built buildings, therefore, are only one of many kinds of cultural performance.

In Kurdish literary discourse, according to Pîrbal, the word theatre first appeared in a late 19th century poem by Mehwî:

Dinya tiyatroye, meweste tiya biro

The world is a theatre (stage), do not pause in it, keep going

Kê mayewe ke nebûbê tiya tiro

No one has stayed forever in it (Pîrbal, 2001, p.11)

In the early twentieth century, more European words, such as *pièce* (play) and drama, appear in Kurdish papers and journals. In 1919 when *Memê Alan*, the first play in Kurdish language, was published in Istanbul, its author, Ebdulrehîm Rehmî Hekarî (1890-1958) described it both as a Kurdish *pièce* and *teatro*. This influence of Italian and French can be attributed to the fact that the Italian and French theatre troupes were the first and frequent visiting troupes to Istanbul in the nineteenth century (Faroqhi, 2005, p.260).

In Iraqi Kurdistan, the Persian word, *namāyish*, and the Arabic *tamsil* were used, along with the European terms, to describe theatrical performances in the late 1920s. It seems the use of these loan words continued until the mid-twentieth century when the word *şano* appeared in Kurdish. Pîrbal suggests that the word *şano*, which has come to replace other non-Kurdish words to describe theatre, was first introduced to Kurdish language by the poet Goran in 1950 (Pîrbal, 2001, p.13), only eight years before the publication of Hesên Tenya's *Şanoy Kurdewarî* (1958), the first history of Kurdish theatre. The use of the term in Goran's poem, *Cîlwey Şano* (the glory of drama), according to Pîrbal, appealed to Kurdish writers who continued to use it in their publications. The term itself is said to be a derivation of the Italian *scena* (Pîrbal, 2001, p.14). The addition of the suffixes *name* and *gerî* has produced the words *şanoname*, which means play or drama, and *şanogerî*, which means theatre-making.

Although the term *şano* has been used to denote both drama and theatre (See Subhan, 2012), it seems the term *şano* in Kurdish literary discourse is not as inclusive as the terms "theatre" or "performance" in English are. It carries the implicit sense that in order to be worthy of the term *şano*, theatrical performances have to be based on plays which are printed literary texts, to be read as "dramatic literature" apart from performance. Tenya who wrote the first book on Kurdish theatre history in Iraq starts his book with the Greek drama as the beginning of world drama and goes on to trace the history of Kurdish drama mainly in Sulaymaniyah, but also in Baghdad, Qaladze, Koya, Erbil, Kirkuk, Khanaqin, Duhok and Halabja. He argues that like other Middle Eastern nations, Kurds have not had a drama tradition and that they were first introduced to drama mainly through their Arab and Turkish

neighbours. Although he mentions old rituals and games such as *Bûke Barane* (Rain Bride) and seasonal festivals of *Semenî*, *Sawerkotan Diroyne*, and *Seyrekanî Behar* (Spring Excursions), he rejects any claim that purports to the existence of a native theatre tradition in Iraq by arguing that these folk performances do not conform to Aristotle's definition of drama. He states that the lack of theatre in Kurdistan was the result of the feudal governing system which, according to Tenya, opposed any intellectual endeavour, and also wars and occupation by foreign powers. He also refers to Claudius James Rich (1787-1821) and his narrative of his residence in Kurdistan in 1820 in which he does not mention anything about theatre in the region (Tenya, 1958, p.44).

In other Kurdish theatre histories, which have all relied on Tenya's accounts of the early years of Kurdish theatre and also the archives of old Kurdish periodicals, the names of certain performances, actors and directors are repeated thus constructing the canon of early Kurdish theatre tracing its beginning to the 1920s when Western-style, text-based theatre emerged in Iraqi Kurdistan.¹ These works, like Tenya's, are conservative histories of theatre which consider the Greek drama as the beginning of Western theatre and likewise consider that Kurdish drama was born in 1919 with the publication of Hekarî's *Memê Alan* in Istanbul (Pîrbal, 2001, pp.47–56).² For the purposes of this research, the history of *şano*, or theatre in the western-sense of the term, which appeared in Iraqi Kurdistan in the 1920s, is considered for analysis.

1.4 Which Kurdish speech variety?

¹ Postlewait draws attention to the processes that identify an event as significant, thus giving it historical status to the exclusion of other events: "Certain events, at the time they occur, are characterised by participants and observers as significant. They are given a meaning, a place and import in the cultural narratives and practices of the age" (Postlewait, 1991, p.171). Once an event attains historical significance, subsequent historians are drawn to it and comment on it, thus creating a bulk of work around the same events that their predecessors described and analysed (ibid., pp.172-174).

² Hewramî believes the birth of Kurdish drama in Iraq to be in 1952 as it was the first time that a Kurdish play appeared in print in Iraqi Kurdistan (Hewramî, 2001, p.305).

In Iraqi Kurdistan there are two major speech varieties spoken by Kurds: Kurmanji and Sorani.³ Kurmanji is spoken mainly in the Duhok governorate and its speakers constitute about 20-25 percent of Iraqi Kurds while the rest mainly speak Sorani. Due to socio-political conditions, these two speech varieties have not developed equally in Iraqi Kurdistan. In 1784 when the princes of Baban found the city of Sulaymaniyah, the speech of the city gained prestige, becoming the language of poetry and the basis of standard Sorani in the twentieth century. Sorani was recognised as the official language in Kurdish administration and education in the 1920s and in 1970 it was recognised as the second official language in Iraq. Therefore, Sorani gradually came to dominate the cultural milieu while it was only after 1991 that Kurmanji became the language of schooling, media and public institutions in the predominantly Kurmanji-speaking province of Duhok.

The unequal status of Sorani and Kurmanji in Iraqi Kurdistan may reflect other differences between the speakers of these two varieties. Martin Van Bruinessen, for example, claims that the Kurmanji-speaking Kurds are more tribal and less economically and culturally advanced than the Sorani-speakers who are more urban and educated (Bruinessen, 1986, p.16). It cannot be denied that two important Kurdish cities of Erbil and Sulaymaniyah are located in the Sorani-speaking zone, and that most intellectual discourse among the Iraqi Kurds has been in Sorani.

In this research, due to the centrality of the cities of Sulaymaniyah and Erbil to the discussion of theatre, the availability of materials on theatre in these cities, and my familiarity with Sorani speech variety, I only explore the history of Kurdish theatre in Sorani and analyse plays which have been written and performed in Sorani. This is not to deny the existence of Kurmanji-language theatre in Kurdistan whose history has been documented by Refet Receb Cemal in his *Bizava Şanoyê Li Dihokê 1930-2006* (Theatre Movement in Duhok 1930-2006, 2007). Therefore, this study should not be considered an authoritative source on theatre in the entirety of Iraqi Kurdistan.

³ While some scholars such as Kreyenbroek (1992) have suggested that Sorani and Kurmanji are two different languages, others, mainly Kurdish nationalists, have emphasised on the singularity of Kurdish language and have referred to Sorani and Kurmanji as two dialects of the same language. I have decided to follow Sheyholislami (2011) and his use of the more neutral term, speech variety, to refer to Sorani and Kurmanji.

1.5 Why Study Kurdish theatre?

In his study of Irish drama and cultural nationalism, Levitas points out that in attempting to follow the relationship between literature and politics, there is perhaps no form more appropriate for investigation than drama and its performance (Levitas, 2002, p.5). Drama, as Levitas highlights, is a public art which shares the immediate benefits and also the risks of speaking directly with its audience (ibid.). Because of the ability of a play's performance to generate a shared public response, tracing the interaction between literature and politics can be more reliably done through theatre than the printing of essays, poems or novels which have so often been used by the Kurdish Studies scholars to judge the mindset of the Kurdish society and the relationships between politics and literature in Kurdistan (see Vali, 2003; Hassanpour, 1992; Ahmadzadeh, 2003, 2013; Strohmeier, 2003).

For the reasons mentioned above and for the lack of any such study in the Kurdish context, I became interested in an integrated study of Kurdish theatre and politics in Iraq especially between 1970 and 1990, the height of the Kurdish nationalist struggle against the Baath regime. In the preliminary stages of my research, I was drawn to the role of drama in the Kurdish liberation struggle and the seriousness and courage with which theatre-makers pursued their goal of promoting national Kurdish identity, solidarity and consciousness, and also encouraging resistance against the tyranny of Iraqi regime. A review of Iraqi-Kurdish theatre history shows that theatre consistently participated in providing possibilities for resistance through the use of Kurdish mythology and folklore, re-enactment of oppressed histories, and revival of Kurdish historical stories.

In the presence of theatre as a powerful cultural force, Iraqi authorities resorted to keeping theatre under control by not only censoring the texts of the plays but also by observing the rehearsals and performances of those playtexts which had been approved, and banning those which were deemed subversive and punishing those involved in them. The state response to theatre in the form of banning orders,

censorship, and imprisonment reflects the regime's anxiety and fear of the power of theatre to influence and mobilise the masses. Therefore, while the distinctive features of drama as a nationalist tool informs this study, the Iraqi government's attention to theatre and its regulation and censorship of it, invite further emphasis on the genre.

1.6 Previous Research on Kurdish Theatre

In his introduction to *Literature and Nation in the Middle East: An Overview*, Yasir Suleiman emphasizes the role of novel and poetry in constructing, articulating or challenging notions of national identities in the Middle East. He mentions that drama is not dealt with in his edition because of its 'marginal' position in the national cultures of the region (Suleiman and Muhawi, 2006, p.1). This position may be because it is easier for the literary historian and critic to access, document and study written and published literature rather than the fleeting world of theatrical performance which so often lacks archived scripts, especially in the case of stateless Kurds who lack national institutions to safeguard and promote their cultural heritage, or even the freedom to keep and develop a written language. Precisely due to the lack of such institutions, theatre assumes greater importance not only as a means for cultural survival but also as a vehicle for commenting on the political scene and even disseminating resistance within the community.⁴

Despite its important role in the Kurdish cultural and political nationalism, Kurdish theatre has received no attention from Western scholars whose primary focus has been on the dominant languages and literatures in the region, at the expense of the state-less Kurds who have been left in the shadows produced by four powerful nation-states that each rule over a distinctive corner of their lands. One of the first books on the Middle Eastern theatre, Zuhur's collection of articles on the visual and performing arts of the Middle East (Zuhur, 2001), is an example of such disregard. From the nine articles that are devoted to theatre in the region, eight deal with Arabic theatres and one with Persian theatre. Yasir Suleiman's and Ibrahim Muhawi's

⁴ On theatre's potential to disseminate resistance see (Bhatia, 2004).

edition of *Literature and Nation in the Middle East* (2006) too focuses almost exclusively on the Arab-speaking world with two articles examining the Israeli Hebrew literature. More recently, Kurdish cultural and literary tradition has been absent in the third edition of the ground breaking book by the distinguished historian, Ilan Pappé, *The Modern Middle East: A Social and Cultural History* published in 2013. This lack of attention to the Kurdish people, at least in Northern Iraq where they have had autonomy in the past two decades, is evident in that the word “Kurdistan” is not mentioned at all in the entire book.

Even the studies of Kurdish literature and culture have almost all ignored the existence of Kurdish theatre in Kurdistan. There are few book-length studies of Kurdish culture in English. Kreyenbroek and Allison’s edition of *Kurdish Culture and Identity*, one of the first books on the subject, deals with Kurds’ written and oral literature, publishing and media, religious beliefs, material culture but not theatre. Also, in its chapter on Kurdish written literature, the growing interest in and publication of plays in Iraqi Kurdistan, especially since the 1970s, have been ignored (Blau, 2010). Within the small scholarship on Kurdish culture, theatre is doubly ignored as a repository of Kurdish culture and also as a social space utilised by Kurdish intellectuals to reflect and comment on the turbulent political history of the Kurdish nation.⁵

The lack of attention to Kurdish theatre in academic texts is understandable given the historical marginalisation of the Kurds in the Middle East, the Western scholars’ unfamiliarity with Kurdish language and literary texts, and the fact that text-based theatre emerged in Kurdistan only in the early twentieth century. Theatre in the Arab world has itself only recently received attention from Western scholars with Egypt dominating most studies (see Badawī, 1987, 1988, 1992; Sadgrove, 1996).⁶

⁵ The only book written on this subject in a European language is the German *Theater als Form des Widerstands in Kurdistan* by Hawre Zangana. See, (Zangana, 2002).

⁶ Within the growing field of Middle Eastern theatre, there have been a few studies on the relationship between theatre and politics in the Middle East. Some examples of these studies are Stone’s *Popular Culture and Nationalism in Lebanon* (2007), Shiva Balaghi’s chapter on Theatre and Nationalism in the nineteenth-century Iran (Balaghi, 2002), Hammond’s *Popular Culture in the Arab World* (2007) and Khalid Amin and Marvin Carlson’s *The Theatres of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia* (2011). All these

An examination of the scholarship on Kurdish culture and nationalism shows that the emergence and development of Kurdish identity is usually analysed within written texts, from Ehmedê Xanî to Hacî Qadirî Koyî who inspired the Bedirxan brothers in their nationalist struggle, and also the nationalist twentieth century poets, Pîremêrd, Cegerxwîn and others. Studies of Kurdish identity and nationalism in literature usually refer to the works of poets, essayists and, more recently, novelists (see Vali, 2003; Hassanpour, 1992; Ahmadzadeh, 2003, 2013; Strohmeier, 2003). These works have mainly focused on written texts and their relationships with politics and identity in Kurdistan. Oral and popular culture, which has played an important role in the preservation of Kurdish cultural identity, had until recently remained largely understudied partly due to the prioritisation of the written word in Western discourse (Kreyenbroek and Allison, 1996, pp.1–6).

In recent years, the field of Kurdish studies has witnessed a growing interest in Kurdish oral and popular culture, the most vital component of Kurdish identity. Kurdish culture, especially in Turkey, has received increasing attention for the important role it has played in constructing a unified Kurdish national identity. The relationship between Kurdish culture and nationalism has been the subject of several studies in the field of Kurdish Studies which have explored the elements of Kurdish language and oral performative culture, including traditional performance forms of storytelling, singing, and dancing, and their relationship with Kurdish nationalism and resistance. In their studies on Kurdish music, Saritaş (2010) and Dönmez (2012) have shown the politicisation of Kurdish music and its function in creating an imagined Kurdish nation.⁷ Hassanpour (1997) and Sheyholislami (2011) have

studies place the development of theatre into a wider socio-political context of the region by showing the use of theatre by artists to propagate nationalism (Balaghi, 2002), states' sponsorship of theatre as a propaganda tool (Hammond, 2007, p.365), and the relation of theatre to the production of national identity (see Stone, 2007; Amîn and Carlson, 2011, pp.131–216).

⁷ Saritaş has analysed the articulation of Kurdish identity through music by the Kurdish political music groups that emerged in 1990s and concludes that, in the absence of other means of expression and communication such as TV or radio broadcasts, music played a significant role in popularisation of Kurdish nationalist ideology. Through politicised music, which could be easily copied and transmitted to large segments of the Kurdish population, the movement communicated its cause, told the struggle of the movement and aimed to mobilize the masses.

pointed to the creation of Med-TV and other Kurdish Satellite channels as national channels that have had the effect of raising the status of the Kurdish language among native speakers themselves, improving their linguistic skills and strengthening their sense of a distinct Kurdish identity. Even the production of humorous video sketches in Turkey in the 2000s has been explored by Çeliker (2009) as instances of Kurdish self-identification.⁸

The tradition of dengbêj (Kurdish storyteller) in particular has been the subject of a few academic studies which all contribute to a better understanding of how power relations and everyday politics are articulated through and played out in cultural productions and cultural activism. Hamelink (2014), for example, investigates the lives and songs of dengbêjs to understand the socio-political transformations Kurdish society in Turkey went through over the last decades. Likewise, Metin Yüksel's thesis delineates the dengbêj tradition as one of the important means in the dissemination of Kurdish culture, history and memories in the public sphere through generations, and in the preservation of Kurdish identity and cultural forms (Yüksel, 2010). According to Yüksel, the Turkish state's denial of Kurdish identity, language and culture has reinforced the already existing and strong Kurdish oral culture which has come to be the only communication channel, instrument and/or means through which Kurds could have expressed themselves. The importance of dengbêj tradition as a medium of expression is confirmed by Aras (2013) who has examined the role of oral narrative genres of lament, and dengbêj performance as the medium of traumatised people in the Kurdish community to speak about, share and disseminate stories of their experiences of enduring pain and suffering. He also shows how dengbêj tradition became a politicised narrative genre and performance through which performers criticised and attacked the Turkish state policies by glorifying the Kurdish revolts and praising leaders of the revolts, Kurdish history, culture and language (p.127). Scalbert-Yücel has also analysed the reconstruction of the tradition of dengbêj in Diyarbakir partly due to its selection and revitalisation by

⁸ By making use of Kurdish folkloric elements and portraying a timeless rural Kurdish society and also resembling the dengbêj tradition in the form of their reception in large gatherings, Çeliker argues, these sketches allow Kurdish viewers of diverse backgrounds to experience a sense of ethnic community.

Kurdish nationalists as part of the process of building a distinct national culture and “construction of a specifically Kurdish tradition” (Scalbert-Yücel, 2009).

This study affirms that Kurdish theatre, like storytelling, its traditional predecessor, participated in the preservation of Kurdish culture, history and memories and their promotion in the public sphere. Not only that, theatre promoted resistance against the tyrannical Iraqi regimes and called for revolution. Like the above-mentioned studies of dengbêj tradition and their methodological approach, this research prioritises the voice of the Kurds themselves in its analysis of Kurdish society, culture and history. The use of audio recordings of dengbêj’s songs in Yüksel’s research and interviews in Aras’s and Scalbert-Yücel’s studies highlights the agency of the non-elite Kurds and helps understand Kurdish society in its own terms. One of the aims of this study, too, is to contribute to the body of literature in Kurdish Studies which places particular emphasis on Kurdish culture as an important terrain for retrieving marginalised voices of dissent. The idea of concentrating on the experiences and perspectives of ordinary people, rather than their political leaders, was a major drive behind this study whose aim is to locate and retrieve experiences and voices of those engaged in powerful acts of theatrical resistance. This is especially important in the case of the Kurds because academics and historians of the Middle East, tend to focus on the region’s major powers to the exclusion of the marginalised Kurds whose “version of, or role in history is not really covered” in mainstream histories (O’Shea, 2004).⁹

Due to lack of sources on Kurdish theatre in other languages, I have relied almost exclusively on Kurdish sources to explore the emergence and development of theatre within the socio-political context in which it was produced and performed. For chapters four and five which provide a historical survey of Iraqi-Kurdish theatre, this

⁹ Recently, scholars have pointed out the need to acknowledge the role of the common people in social movements and to examine oral cultural forms in order to recover “history from below”. This concept was developed by British Marxist historians such as E. P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm who embarked on writing the history of the common people in their edition of *People’s History of England* (1938). The idea of writing history from below was later developed by the South Asian Subaltern Studies school which aimed to re-inscribe into history authentic accounts by subaltern classes and thus restore their agency in contributing to the dynamics of historical change.

research is guided by previous work by Kurdish researchers of Kurdish theatre, including Yasîn Berzencî's (2007), Hesen Tenya's (1958), Kawe Ehmedmîrza's (2011), and Ferhad Pîrbal's (2001) theatre histories and Hawrê Zengene's (2002), Heme Kerîm Hewramî's (2001), Ibrahîm Ehmed Simo's (2007), and especially Selam Ferec Kerîm's (2009) studies of Kurdish dramatic texts and performances.

While Berzencî's, Tenya's, Ehmedmîrza's, and Pîrbal's theatre histories are useful general sources, they do not provide in-depth discussions of performances or dramatic texts. Hewramî's and Simo's studies, on the other hand, devote large sections to the discussion of drama and play-writing in general and only discuss certain Kurdish texts with regards to their dramatic characteristics. From among all these sources, Selam Ferec Kerîm's doctoral study on the burgeoning of Kurdish theatre between 1975 and 1995 provided this research with a better understanding of the relationship between the different phases of theatre in Iraqi Kurdistan and the political developments in the region. He distinguishes between five different phases of development between 1975 and 1995 while taking into account political factors such as the defeat of the Kurdish struggle in 1975, its revival in 1977, the onset of Iran-Iraq war, the genocidal Anfal campaign and the Kurdish uprising in 1991. However, he devotes a relatively small section to these categorisations and a much larger section to the stylistic analysis of individual dramatic texts. Neither Kerîm, nor any other Kurdish scholar, has written specifically about and delved deeply into the relationship between Kurdish theatre and nationalist struggle in Iraqi Kurdistan. An important exception is Hawre Zangana whose German book on theatre and resistance in Iraqi Kurdistan in the 1980s is an original contribution to an understanding of Kurdish resistance theatre under Saddam Hussein. However, due to his lack of access to source materials, he mainly draws on the archives of a few Iraqi Kurdish artists such as Kemal Hencîre, Şemal Omer and Nîgar Hesîb. Therefore, he devotes a relatively large section to Omer's and Hesîb's Experimental Theatre and the analysis of one of their productions entitled *Xec û Siyamend*. While my study of Kurdish theatre under the Baath is more extensive, I have relied heavily on Zangana's work for my discussion of guerrilla theatre in chapter five.

1.7 The Significance of This Study

Apart from being the first work to be written on Kurdish theatre in English and the first work to be written on the relationship between Kurdish nationalism and theatre, this study offers several significant contributions to the field of Kurdish studies. First, it approaches Kurdish history through its own culture and literature. By its engagement with Kurdish history through the history of its theatre, this study challenges the predominant focus on the Kurds from within the framework of politics and from the viewpoint of the political elite. Second, it is a contribution to a revisionist historiography of the Kurdish national struggle which takes into account oral and performative genres at the grassroots level.¹⁰ It underlines the agency of Kurdish theatre-makers in the Kurdish national struggle and resistance against the oppressive Iraqi regimes and brings us to a more accurate picture of Kurdish history by reliance on Kurdish sources rather than works written about the Kurds from the point of view of the Europeans. Last but not least, this study is a contribution to the theatre history of modern Iraq as it contributes to rewriting the history of the period under consideration from the perspective of its Kurdish minority and their cultural resistance in the form of theatre and performance.

1.8 Theoretical Overview

I focus mainly on cultural nationalism which derives its strength from history, myths, folklore, legends, and symbols in order to demonstrate cultural uniqueness and thereby stimulate national consciousness. However, a culturally imagined unification in Kurdish drama, I will argue, worked side by side with mass mobilisation, because the primary motive was always the liberation of the Kurdish lands from foreign yoke.

¹⁰ In his famous notion that nations can be considered “imagined communities” (Anderson, 1991), Anderson proposes that the invention of printing press and the rise of print media provided the technological means for the dissemination of nationalist ideas. Anderson remarks that the regular shared reading of novels and newspapers created awareness of a wider community and produced the idea that readers shared a set of interests as members of the same nation (ibid., pp.39-40). Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* has been criticised for excessive focus on literacy and printed media and offering a reductive view of culture which, among other things, ignores the role of the embodied performances in imagining the nation (see Edensor, 2002). For a critique of Anderson’s print-capitalism model in the context of Kurdish studies see, (Allison, 2013).

While this study relies on theories of cultural nationalism to emphasise the role of theatre and theatre-makers in promoting nationalist symbols and myths, it also acknowledges that the ultimate goal of Kurdish theatre-makers, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, has been a political one; namely, independence for Kurdistan. The textual analysis of representative plays from this era shows that the myths of Kurdish nationalism have been used not only to affirm the existence of the nation and reassure the nation of its self-worth at the time of political despair, but also to encourage resistance to the central authority by representing historical legends of Kurdish heroes and their self-sacrifice in the face of foreign invasion. Therefore, Kurdish theatre under the Baath rule exhibited features which cannot be reduced to a mere desire to preserve and promote the culture. While it certainly glorified the national culture, it also expressed the need for political liberation and self-determination.

This study confirms Anthony D. Smith's (Smith, 1986, 1991, 1999) and John Hutchinson's (Hutchinson, 1987, 1994a) cultural nationalist approach to the study of nationalism by stressing the role of the intellectuals and intelligentsia in introducing and promoting Kurdish theatre since its early years and their utilisation of theatre as a modernising tool which helped promote literacy, education and women's rights and also retrieve national cultural heritage. I will also argue that throughout its history, Kurdish theatre often acted as a site for staging national history, folklore, and myths and for formulating nationalist ideology, and thus played an important role in the construction and promotion of Kurdish nationalist identity, especially during the rule of the Baath regime.

On the relation between theatre and nationalism, I have been guided by such contextual studies of theatre and nationalism as in *Staging Nationalism: Essays on Theatre and National Identity* (Gounaridou, 2005), *Theatre and National Identity: Re-Imagining Conceptions of Nation* (Holdsworth, 2014), *The National Stage: Theatre and Cultural Legitimation in England, France and America* (Kruger, 1992), *The Politics of Performance* (Kershaw, 1992), and writings by S. E. Wilmer in such editions as *Writing and Rewriting National Theatre Histories* (Wilmer, 2004) and

National Theatres in a Changing Europe (Wilmer, 2008). The contributors to these volumes all affirm the relationship between performance and national identity and explore the role of theatrical performance in constructing or contesting notions of national identity in the context of specific countries, a topic which will be dealt with in detail in the next chapter. Apart from Kurdish studies, theatre studies, and studies of cultural nationalism, this research also briefly draws on feminist studies of female representation in nationalist discourse by Afsaneh Najmabadi (1997) and Diana Taylor (1997).

1.9 Methodological Overview

Although the surveys of Kurdish theatre provide invaluable insight into the history of theatre in Iraqi Kurdistan, most of them remain silent on the conditions of the production of the plays at the time of their performance. Also, apart from occasional plot summaries, they do not provide detailed analysis of the plays. Tenya, who wrote the first book on Kurdish theatre history, claimed the lack of resources made him unable to write about all theatrical performances from early years of Kurdish theatre history to the date of his writing. Therefore, he relied heavily on interviews with those who had participated in theatre activities in the past, and to a lesser extent on newspapers of *Brayetî* (Fraternity) and *Jiyan* (Life).

The problem of writing about a theatrical event in the past is tackled by Thomas Postlewait who observes that the historian always has to construct a historical event based on existing documents, artefacts and reports which offer partial perspectives on the event and as such there is always a gap between the event and our knowledge of it (Postlewait, 1991, p.160). In the case of the European theatres' historiography, he stresses that "very few theatre events before the modern era provide us with enough documentation for a reliable reconstructive history" (ibid., pp.170-171) and therefore we are forced to construct the event out of partial evidence that limits our interpretation of the historical event.

In the case of Kurds, the lack of national institutions to safeguard their culture and national heritage poses difficult challenges for researchers of Kurdish theatre. Many theatre events in Iraqi Kurdistan have gone unrecorded and therefore much of the Kurdish theatre history has been lost and is unrecoverable or remains hidden. Although since 1991, with the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government, attempts have been made to rectify this problem by publishing books and journals on Kurdish theatre and its history, these publications are not widely circulated and easily accessible. I for one was not able to find any books on Kurdish theatre in any bookstore in Erbil and the ones that I obtained were either given to me by individuals or were printed and distributed on the occasion of the third annual Erbil Theatre Festival.¹¹

For writing about the history and development of Kurdish theatre since the 1920s, I relied on Salahaddin University's library, the Central Library of Erbil, and personal libraries of Ehmed Salar, Telet Saman and Muhsin Mihemed to obtain the above-mentioned histories and studies of Kurdish theatre and the texts of Salar's and Saman's plays. To address the inadequate documentation of theatrical performances, I have drawn upon historical documents and journalistic accounts to reconstruct the links between Kurdish theatre and history. I have consulted all issues of *Beyan* and *Karvan* periodicals which were published during the 1980s and are preserved in the Erbil Central Library. These periodicals not only contain the texts of several plays and occasional photographs of certain performances but also provide accounts of past performances and valuable insights into the history of Kurdish theatre. Other materials that have been used include, the existing historical, biographical, and critical accounts, biographies of persons associated with theatre, critical accounts of the work of playwrights, actors, and directors, general histories of theatre, personal commentaries in papers and on internet, interviews with theatre artists published in journals, Kurdish histories, legal documents, official records, and visual records of performances, such as photographs. The bulk of this material

¹¹ On the low circulation and consumption of print materials in Iraqi Kurdistan see, (Sheyholislami, 2011, p.81).

provided a sufficient background for the study of the development of Kurdish theatre in Iraq and its relationship with political developments in the region.

1.9.1 Thematic Analysis

My main methodological approach to analyse the nationalist discourse in the Kurdish theatre between 1975 and 1991 is text analysis. To show the role of theatre in the representation of Kurdish national identity during the rule of the Baath regime in the 1970s and 1980s, this study focuses on representative plays by Telet Saman and Ehmed Salar, the two dominant dramatists and directors in Kurdish theatre in the 1970s and 1980s. Saman and Salar are considered pioneers of the Kurdish theatre movement respectively in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah. Apart from being a director, Saman, who started his career in Erbil in the early 1970s, was the first theatre artist in Erbil to write plays for theatre. Working both in theatre and in TV, he was also the most prolific director in Erbil. As one of the few drama graduates at the time, Saman co-founded several theatre groups in Erbil between 1970 and 1974. In Sulaymaniyah, Salar, as a playwright, director and actor, dominated the stage in the 1980s. Also, as a professor at the Sulaymaniyah Fine Arts Institute, he trained a new generation of successful Kurdish theatre actors such as Kameran Reûf, Erselan Derwêş and Xerman Hîranî. With over a hundred plays, Salar is the most prolific dramatist in Iraqi Kurdistan and the pioneer of a new mode of writing for theatre which relied exclusively on Kurdish themes, history, culture, literature, folklore and especially music. Salar's theatre, therefore, as will be discussed later, has been seen as the first instance of a quintessentially Kurdish theatre.

The plays written and directed by Saman and Salar engaged with issues of Kurdish nationalism and national identity during the rule of the Baath regime and the ongoing war between Kurdish guerrillas and the central government. Their utilisation of theatre as a site for the representation of Kurdish mythology and folklore, and revival of Kurdish historical narratives, at a time when Kurdish nationalist sentiment was at its peak, drew large crowds to theatres. To understand theatre's engagement with issues of national identity, I have selected two plays by each of the above-mentioned

directors in order to thematically analyse based on the fact that they are their most popular works staged between 1975 and 1991 and are more illustrative examples of their writers' methods. They are mainly selected on the basis that they demonstrate Kurdish theatre's engagement with nationalism and national identity at critical historical moments during the 1970s and 1980s. Saman's *Mem û Zîn* (Mem and Zîn, 1976) and *Qelay Dimdim* (Dimdim Fortress, 1982) and Salar's *Nalî w Xewnêkî Erxewanî* ("Nali and a Violet Dream, 1987") and *Katê Helo Berz Defrê* ("When the Eagle Flies High, 1988") are plays selected for analysis.

I have selected Telet Saman's *Mem û Zîn* based on the fact that it is an overtly nationalistic work which was staged in 1976 only one year after the Kurds' loss of autonomy and the defeat of the fourteen year old Kurdish armed struggle during an era of strict censorship. *Qelay Dimdim* was staged during that period when the Iraqi Kurds, demanding autonomy and a halt to deportations, rose up in a massive uprising throughout Kurdistan which resulted in the release of thousands of political prisoners. This play which was written based on historical accounts, oral narratives, and modern adaptations of the story, was another overtly nationalistic production whose appeal to the Kurdish public can be surmised from its successful twenty-five-day run in Erbil in 1982.

I have selected Ehmed Salar's plays in order to explore the Kurdish theatre's response to the atrocities committed against the Kurds in the later years of the Iran-Iraq War, known as the Anfal Campaign. *Nalî w Xewnêkî Erxewanî* was his first serious attempt at a quintessentially Kurdish drama which was inspired by the Baath regime's genocidal campaign against Kurdish civilians. The play which is considered to be the cornerstone of an original Kurdish theatre was staged both in Baghdad University and in Sulaymaniyah in 1987 and was very well received. Salar's next work, *Katê Helo Berz Defrê* enjoyed greater success as it was staged twice a day for three days in Baghdad and for over two weeks for an eager audience in Sulaymaniyah in 1988.

I will be giving these texts a close reading, viewing them in their geo-political contexts. Also taking into account their authors' comments regarding their intention behind writing those plays, my analysis will be within the framework of what Saman and Salar were trying to do in terms of defining and promoting Kurdish identity and legitimacy and championing their goals. The examination of themes, symbolism and imagery in *Mem û Zîn*, *Qelay Dimdim*, *Nalî w Xewnêkî Erxewanî* and *Katê Helo Berz Defrê* constitute the main chapters of the thesis which explore the construction of a Kurdish nationalist identity through theatre. The thematic analyses of these plays shows the frequent use of nationalist myths, folklore and historical narratives, such as the golden age of the Baban rule and the Kurds' heroism in protecting the *Dimdim* fortress against foreign powers. The recurrent use of these ethnic myths and symbols will be interpreted according to Smith's ethno-symbolist model which elaborates on different myths propagated by nationalists. The study of Kurdish theatre history, in general, and plays written and directed by Saman and Salar, in particular, reveals the importance of such myths to Kurdish theatre-makers and also the important role played by theatre in propagating nationalist myths and symbols.

1.9.2 Interviews

In this research, interviews are used as contextual source for the plays and also based on the desire to understand the viewpoints of their directors. Upon my arrival in Kurdistan I conducted informal interviews with students and staff at the University of Salahadin, among others, regarding the leading theatre directors between 1975 and 1991. My interviewees guided me to Ehmed Salar and Telet Saman whom I interviewed later to better understand the socio-political context within which they were working and to recover the oral history of theatre as told by prominent figures involved in it. My choice of Ehmed Salar and Telet Saman as leading figures in Kurdish theatre in the 1970s and 1980s was later confirmed by my review of literature obtained during the fieldwork.

Apart from Saman and Salar, I also conducted interviews with the theatre critic and historian, playwright, and actor, Muhsin Mihemed, and theatre director Fetah Xetab.

Mihemed was familiar with the history of Kurdish theatre and had witnessed the performances of Saman's and Salar's plays at the time. He was also building an archive of Kurdish theatre history which I used to obtain the texts of Saman's plays and records of government censorship of his plays. On the section of the thesis which deals with guerrilla theatre, in addition to interviews with Salar, and reliance on Zangana's book on Kurdish resistance theatre (Zangana, 2002), I have conducted interviews with Fetah Xetab who was an active theatre director during his involvement in guerrilla struggle in the 1980s.

All interviews were conducted in semi-structured format which allowed participants to talk freely about their experiences, perceptions and values. Their oral accounts brings light to marginalised narratives of cultural resistance and helps answer questions such as: what they thought about the social phenomena they were involved in, why theatre mattered to them at the time of strict cultural censorship and political repression, and how the audience responded to their works.

Therefore, this study relies both on theatrical texts and on oral history in the form of interviews with the main figures in the Kurdish theatre history to understand the contexts and meanings of plays, and generally to explore the history and voices of the people whose role in the Kurdish national struggle has rarely been acknowledged. In what is called recovering a "history from below", the study of the theatre history of an oppressed group helps uncover "forgotten stories of powerful theatrical resistance" (Bhatia, 2004, p.3) which are undermined by the dominant focus on the written genres of novel, poetry, essays or political journals and pamphlets. Although the focus of this study is on text analysis, the need to examine oral history of Kurdish theatre is felt particularly in the case of the stateless Kurds who have historically lacked national institutions to safeguard their culture and national heritage. Theatre's impact is not in the literary text but in the live performance, especially in the case of the scarcely published Kurdish drama in the 1970s-1980s. While I have tried to take into account the reception of the selected plays, more oral history research needs to be done to understand the significance of Saman's and Salar's theatre in its interaction with society.

1.10 Overview of Chapters

After laying out the theoretical framework in the next chapter, this thesis follows a chronological order to provide a sense of theatre's transformation coinciding with political and cultural change over the years. The **next chapter** "culture and nationalism", provides an overview of different ways in which thinkers have conceived the term cultural nationalism and also how the nation, national identity, and nationalism have been manifest in a range of theatre practices. It also reviews the history of Kurdish cultural nationalism to show its simultaneity with Kurdish political nationalism, throughout the movement. This sets the ground for chapter four where I argue that the emergence of theatre in Iraqi Kurdistan was the direct offshoot of several political factors and also chapters five, six and seven where I show that theatre provided a means to challenge the political order to which the people was subjected.

Chapter three offers an outlook on traditional performance practices in Kurdistan prior to the emergence of western-style theatre in the region. There are two main reasons behind writing this chapter: first, to describe in more detail traditional performances which influenced the history of Kurdish theatre, especially during the 1970s and 1980s, and second, to show the existence of a rich native performance tradition prior to the early twentieth century and demonstrate that Kurdish people were already familiar with the basics of theatre prior to the emergence of Western-style theatre in Iraqi Kurdistan. Also, this chapter is a contribution to the field of Kurdish studies as it is, to my knowledge, the first detailed review of Kurdish performance traditions in English. Whilst it is accepted that theatre in the Western sense (a story performed in a purpose-built building before an audience) was introduced to the Middle East during the late nineteenth century and to Kurdistan during the early twentieth century, this section demonstrates that there already existed a rich oral performance tradition long before the arrival of Western-style theatre in Kurdistan. Moreover, traditional performance traditions such as *Kawey Asinger* (Kawa the Blacksmith) and storytelling have left their marks on the Kurdish

theatre history and as such merit attention. Therefore, despite drama being the main subject of this study, I deemed it necessary to review the performance traditions of Kurdistan in a separate chapter.

Chapter four covers the history of Kurdish theatre in modern day Iraq from its emergence in 1926 to the fall of the Autonomous Kurdistan Region in 1975. Since the majority of plays from this period do not survive, this chapter offers only a historical survey of performances but locates them within the socio-political conditions that help to define and explain aspects of their productions. The chapter explores the socio-political developments that led to the emergence of theatre in Iraqi Kurdistan and examines the early debate over the need for a Kurdish theatre and the social complexity of a Kurdistan that had begun to consider issues of national identity, class and gender. It examines the effects of the growing sense of Kurdish nationalism and left-leaning tendencies from the 1930s to the late 1950s on theatre productions in Kurdistan. While theatre activities declined and disappeared in the 1960s due to political turbulences and instabilities, they re-emerged in 1970 when the Kurdish armed struggle finally bore fruit and resulted in the creation of autonomy for Kurdistan. In the vibrant socio-political atmosphere following the autonomy, Kurdish theatre enjoyed the freedom to express nationalistic sentiments which will be demonstrated within certain performances of the period. This short era of freedom from censorship was brought to an end in 1975 and the resumption of the Iraqi rule over Kurdistan.

Chapter five examines the relationship between the Kurdish political struggle to cast off the Iraqi rule and the growth of radical performance culture in Kurdistan between 1975 and 1991. It shows that even after the loss of autonomy in the mid-1970s, a failed uprising, and continued rebellion against the regime, Kurdish nationalist and leftist themes continued to appear in Kurdish theatre productions. This chapter delves into the political developments of the 1970s and 1980s in Iraq and its influence on Kurdish theatre including the emergence of the guerrilla theatre groups and also theatrical performances in refugee camps.

To better understand the role of Kurdish theatre in the nationalist struggle and resistance during the Baath rule, the next two chapters examine representative plays from 1975 to 1991. **Chapter six** examines two important plays directed by Telet Saman, one of the first graduates of drama in Baghdad University and, arguably, the most successful director of the 1970s. Saman was the biggest name in Kurdish theatre in Erbil at the time and his productions were often very well received. From these, *Mem û Zîn* (Mem and Zîn) and *Qelay Dimdim* (Dimdim Fortress) will be analysed closely in this chapter as they are great examples of the politicisation of Kurdish theatre in the 1970s. They are also evidence of the courage Kurdish theatre artists had in producing nationalist works immediately following the loss of autonomy in 1975. The leftist-nationalist themes in these plays will be studied by reference to the influence of increasingly politicised Arab theatre, the growing interest in socialist ideologies in the Middle East, the loss of Kurdish autonomy in 1974 and the failure of the Kurdish uprising in 1975.

The most successful Kurdish author and director in the 1980s was Ehmed Salar whose theatre had become more and more politicised with the increase in state brutality and the onset of the Kurdish genocide by the Baath regime in the late 1980s. By examining Salar's construction of a distinctively Kurdish nationalist theatre in *Nalî w Xewnêkî Erxewanî* ("Nali and a Violet Dream, 1987") and *Katê Helo Berz Defrê* ("When the Eagle Flies High, 1988"), **chapter seven** argues that Salar's theatre not only acted as a site for staging national history, folklore and culture, and thus strengthening a sense of Kurdish national identity, but also served as a cultural medium which implicitly called for revolution by glorifying the Kurdish national heroes and their struggles against foreign invaders. These plays exemplify Salar's extensive use of Kurdish myths, historical figures, poetry, folkloric songs, musical instruments, and dance. They show how Salar utilised theatre as a public medium for collective expression and experience of a distinct Kurdish identity and fostered a sense of pride in Kurdish cultural traditions which were shown to be appropriate components of a distinctively Kurdish theatre. Further, by staging myths of a Kurdish heroic age, its loss, and the need for its restoration, Salar's plays are shown to conform to Smith's

argument that myths of origin and descent place “the act of liberation in an ideal world of heroic imagery and naturalistic metaphor” (Smith, 1999, p.68).

In **conclusion**, I affirm that theatre is an appropriate site to look for and access evidence of Kurdish national identity and that this study contributes to the scholarship on Kurdish culture and nationalism by studying the formulation and reformulation of national identities in the history of Iraqi Kurdish theatre. The study confirms Anthony D. Smith’s and John Hutchinson’s cultural nationalist approach to the study of nationalism by stressing the role of the Kurdish theatre as a site for staging national history, folklore, and myths and for formulating nationalist ideology, and thus its role in the construction and dissemination of Kurdish nationalist identity.

Chapter Two

Culture and Nationalism

This research is based on the idea that the Iraqi-Kurdish theatre has been implicated in the Kurdish national struggle in Iraq. But before delving into the relationship between Kurdish theatre and national identity, I provide an overview of different ways in which thinkers, Anthony D. Smith and John Hutchinson, in particular, have conceived the term cultural nationalism and the role played by culture in constructing and formulating notions of national identity. I will also look at how the nation, national identity, and nationalism have been manifest in a range of theatre practices. These ideas provide a theoretical framework for my investigation of Kurdish theatre. In the last section of the chapter I will review the role played by culture in Kurdish nationalist movement and describe the way I define the term cultural nationalism for the purposes of this research. Firstly, the following section explores the ways in which some of the best known writers on cultural nationalism have considered the cultural and its relationship with the national.

2.1 Theories of Cultural Nationalism

There are different approaches to the definition of cultural nationalism which often denotes a romantic belief in the importance of the cultural traditions of the common people. Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) is often credited with elucidating the principles of cultural nationalism. He encouraged German-speaking people to take pride in their own cultural past, their native languages, and their peasant culture which, he argued, had remained untainted. Herder believed in national distinctiveness and encouraged all nations to express themselves in their own individual ways.

Herder's ideas impelled intellectuals in countries throughout Europe to search for unique aspects of cultural expression among their own peoples that would testify to separate and distinct identities. This was the beginning of cultural nationalism in Europe where "the struggle of various European tribes, ethnic groups, principalities

and enclaves to become independent nations was commonly bound up with the promotion of the arts, literature, music, folklore and other cultural manifestations peculiar to the struggling minority” (Senelick, 1991, p.2).

There has been much debate about the nature of cultural nationalism and its relationship to political nationalism. Hans Kohn (1944), for example, distinguishes between political nationalism in the advanced industrial countries such as the United States, France, Britain and the Netherlands, and cultural nationalism that, according to him, is a transient phenomenon in the socio-economically backward central and eastern European countries. Kohn’s dichotomy has been criticised by those critics who believe that all national movements tend to contain both political and cultural elements (e.g. Zimmer, 2003) and others who have taken issue with the view of cultural nationalism as anti-modern (e.g. Hutchinson, 1987; Smith, 1986, 1991).

Anthony Smith has had great influence on scholarship in the area of cultural nationalism. Smith’s ethnosymbolist approach to nationalism focuses on the cultural aspects of nations and nationalism such as the role of myths, memories, values, traditions and symbols, as powerful differentiators and reminders of the unique culture of the ethnic community (Smith, 2009, p.2). Against the state-oriented approach of scholars such as Ernest Gellner (1983) and Eric Hobsbawm (1990) who emphasise the role of industrialisation, modernity, public education and the ruling elite in shaping nationalisms,¹² Smith proposes an alternative paradigm which rejects the notion that nationalism is purely a product of elite manipulation. For Smith, nationalism is the rediscovery and reinterpretation of myths, memories, traditions and symbols of ethnic heritages that give nationalism its power and durability.

¹² While Gellner highlights the role of industrialisation, Hobsbawm emphasises the role of the ruling elite in inventing nationalist traditions which support imperial expansion and secure the loyalty of the working population. In *The Invention of Tradition* (1983), Eric Hobsbawm and co-editor, Terence Ranger, contend that the nation is essentially a modern construct. They focus on the ways in which the powerful “invent” traditions to symbolise a cohesive sense of belonging, to legitimise the power vested in institutions, elites and ruling authorities, to transmit ideologies which sustain common values and beliefs.

According to Smith (2009), modernist approaches to nationalism fail to consider the pre-modern cultures and ethnic ties of the nations that emerged in the modern epoch. While acknowledging the modernity of nationalism, Smith believes that prior, pre-modern ethnic ties and ethnies have influenced and even formed the basis for subsequent nations and nationalisms. An ethnie according to Smith is “a named and self-defined human community whose members possess a myth of common ancestry, shared memories, one or more elements of shared culture, including a link with a territory, and a measure of solidarity, at least among the upper strata.” (2009, p. 27).

A student of Smith's, John Hutchinson, has contributed significantly to the understanding of cultural nationalism. Hutchinson's seminal book in the study of cultural nationalism based on the case of Ireland draws on Smith's approach to nationalism. In *The Dynamics of Cultural Nationalism* (1987), Hutchinson defines cultural nationalism as a recurring ideological movement that arises in response to the erosion of traditional identities as a result of a modernising state. Its key actors are scholars and artists whose activities focus on the regeneration of the national community through the cultivation of a unique national history and culture. Cultural nationalist, according to Hutchinson, believes that a nation is an organic being that is the product of its unique history, culture and geography. The cultural nationalists typically establish cultural societies and journals to “inspire a spontaneous love of community in its different members by educating them to their common heritage of splendour and suffering” (Hutchinson, 1994a, p.27). They engage in naming rituals, celebrate national cultural uniqueness and reject foreign practices, in order to identify the community to itself, embed this identity in everyday life and differentiate it against other communities. Hutchinson stresses the important role of cultural nationalism by stating that “the struggle for nationhood in the modern world has everywhere been preceded by emerging cultural nationalist movements” (1987, p.2) which have inspired rising social groups to collective political action.

Anthony Smith and Hutchinson both agree on two groups that are fundamental to the emergence of cultural nationalism: secular intellectuals and intelligentsia

(Hutchinson, 1987; Smith, 2009). Hutchinson uses the term intellectual to describe those (mainly historical scholars and artists) who formulate the cultural ideals of the movement, and those (generally journalists and politicians) who transform these ideals into concrete political, economic and social programmes (Hutchinson, 1987, p.3). The term intelligentsia is used by Hutchinson to denote an occupational group that forms from the modern professions and tertiary educational institutions and is more concerned to serve the practical needs of the community (p.4). These two groups, Hutchinson believes, have different interests but combine to form “ethnic revivalist” movements: “for the revivalist, the past is to be used not in order to return to some antique order, but rather to re-establish the nation at a new and higher level of development” (p.10).

Thus, in their examination of the development of cultural nationalism, Hutchinson and Smith both focus on the role of scholars and artists in the revival of national histories and cultures. They emphasise the role of intellectuals in promoting cultural nationalism particularly by interpreting historical memories and tracing a distinguished pedigree for their nation. In doing so, the intellectual, “also enhances the position of his circle and activity; he is no longer an ambiguous 'marginal' on the fringes of society, but a leader of the advancing column of the reawakened nation, the leaven in the movement of national regeneration” (Smith, 2009, p.84). According to Smith, intellectuals hold a seminal position in generating and analysing the concepts, myths, symbols and ideology of nationalism, and play a primary role both in generating cultural nationalism. The cultural nationalism propagated by intellectuals provides the intelligentsia with opportunities for their skills to be used and rewarded. Smith contends that professionals, including artists, have played an important part in the formation of nationalist movements by disseminating nationalist myths and symbols, and thus creating the “authentic” image and ideals of the nation in imaginative and memorable forms (pp.84-90).

Cultural nationalist movements, according to Hutchinson, have their shortcomings: They are small-scale movements that generally remain the enthusiasm of a minority of young intelligentsia (Hutchinson, 1987, pp.16-17). And they fail to communicate

their goals to the masses and extend beyond the educated strata. This may not hold true in the case of theatre which is an oral performative form that can speak to the literate and illiterate alike. As the following shows, the importance of drama and theatrical performance in contributing to the process of representing and challenging notions of national identity has been demonstrated in several important works in recent scholarship (e.g. Wilmer, 2002; Gounaridou, 2005; Levitas, 2002).

2.2 Cultural Nationalism and Theatre

Nationalism, as Steve Wilmer points out, has been an important facet of theatrical expression particularly since the nineteenth century (Wilmer, 2009, p.77). Cultural nationalism, and with it the notion of staging the nation and representing the people in theatre, emerged in the eighteenth century Romantic theory. In the late eighteenth century, German nationalists had expressed the need for national theatre in order to fortify the language, improve manners and morals, educate the people and, ultimately, validate the credentials of the nation (Senelick, 1991, p.3).

In the nineteenth century, nationalist movements developed in many nations of Europe, in some cases calling for independence from a foreign oppressor. Theatre was recognized as a useful means for formulating and solidifying notions of national identity. Schiller believed not only in the idea that theatre could represent the national character but also that theatre could be a vital tool of nation-building. He said in 1783, “had we but a national theatre, we would become a nation” (Edwards, 1979, p.192). Written in a genre well-liked by cultural nationalists, Schiller’s historical plays such as *The Maid of Orleans* and *William Tell* depicted nationalist heroes striving to free the nation from oppression. They were written when there was not yet a German nation-state and Germany was fragmented amongst many principalities (Wilmer, 2009).

The nationalist theatre of German Romanticism encouraged the rise of nationalist drama and opera in most European countries throughout the nineteenth century (Wilmer, 2005, p.6). National theatres, especially in countries that were not yet

nation-states, were established to further the aims of nationalists. Senelick has emphasised that most European national theatres arose in reaction to a dominant culture imposed from without: “they were a means of protest as well as of preserving what were considered to be salient features of the oppressed group” (Senelick, 2004, p.50). Marvin Carlson, similarly, affirms that most emerging national groups of the nineteenth century utilised the drama “as a powerful tool for awakening a people to a common heritage” and also “to seek both national identity and national liberty in opposition to the demands of dominant external political and cultural influences” (Carlson, 2008, pp.21–33). According to Carlson, the Romantic dramatist found in national history, legend, and myth a fertile source of subject matter and in the struggles for national freedom and identification important sources of dramatic power, while the emerging nationalist consciousness found in the Romantic drama a highly useful means for encouraging national enthusiasm, pride, and solidarity (Carlson, 1994).

The Romantic drama thus contributed significantly to the shaping and development of modern nationalism. The relationship between Romantic idealism, political liberalism and emerging nationalisms can be seen in the case of several European countries as affirmed by the contributors to *Staging Nationalism* which enhances the discourse on theatre and nationalism from the point of view of different countries, distinct historical periods and diverse cultures (Gounaridou, 2005). For example in the case of the nineteenth century Polish theatre, through its material representations of Polish national culture and its construction of a coherent cultural identity, the stage would affirm the existence of a Poland that had been partitioned between Austria, Prussia and Russia (Baldyga, 2005). Similar studies have been done on the early twentieth century Irish theatre, specifically the Abbey Theatre, and the role it has played in the politics of identity in Ireland by staging historical struggles, folklore, myths and stories of idyllic rural life (see Levitas, 2002; Murray, 1997; Cusack, 2009).

In the twenty-first century, National Theatres continue to play an important role in conserving national cultures, especially in Europe, and cultural nationalism remains

a recurrent motif. Despite claims that the era of the National Theatres is soon to end, there is evidently an ongoing interest in National Theatres in the twenty-first century with countries such as Spain, Italy, Wales, Scotland and Ireland creating new National Theatres in recent years (Kotte et al., 2009). In smaller European countries where independence has recently been achieved, National Theatres have managed to survive and increase in number because citizens and governments of these countries might feel more vulnerable to major international movements such as globalization and Europeanization (ibid.). Whereas in the twenty-first century, due to the effects of globalization and Europeanization, the concept of a National Theatre seems to have lost its meaning, in smaller countries, the fear of losing the national cultures and even the nation-state itself results in the urge to promote national cultural values through arts, exhibitions, museums and literature. There are observable instances of the cultural nationalist movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the twenty-first century. For example, the creation of the National Theatre of Scotland heralds a Romantic nationalist spirit at a time when the possibility of political independence has appeared on the horizon.¹³

Steve Blandford (2013) has drawn attention to how the political impetus to assert cultural identity, legitimacy and status in relation to larger and more powerful nation-states has played a significant role in the theatre and performance of small and stateless nations such as Scotland and Wales. He maintains that, for stateless nations, cultural practice including theatre becomes an especially crucial and potent site where contested definitions of national identity are played out (ibid.). He also argues that in small nations the scope for meaningful proportions of the population to be involved with and affected by theatre's role in the construction of national identity is genuinely significant, extending beyond those that work in the theatre or attend performances. In fact, a key justification for Blandford's edition of *Theatre and Performance in Small Nations* (2013) is the proximity of the citizen to the decision-making process suggested by Bjorn Olafsson (1998, p.14). The idea of theatre and

¹³ Although in a close race, Scotland voted against independence on September 2014 referendum, the spirit of Scottish nationalism is still very much present. The National Theatre has produced several productions with national historical themes about Scotland such as Gregory Burke's *Black Watch* "a nationalist performance, expressing pride in a distinctive aspect of Scottish history and culture (Wilmer, 2009, p.82).

performance as significant contributors to “national conversations”, particularly in small and stateless nations, has informed all the chapters of this book whose writers have explored the use of theatre and performance as a means of scrutinising questions of nationalism and national identity in cultural contexts as diverse as Ireland, Catalonia, Malaysia and New Zealand.

My research is a supplement to such studies of theatre in small and stateless nations. It confirms the role of theatre in asserting a distinct cultural and national identity and legitimising the political claim to independence in the Kurdish context. Considering the size and population of the cities of Erbil and Sulaymaniyah, the attendance of performances by all social classes, and the popularity of theatre particularly in the 1970s and 1980s as a medium of cultural and political expression, this study also concurs with Blandford’s argument that theatre’s role in the construction of national identity is especially significant in small nations and therefore rejects Hutchinson’s suggestion that cultural nationalist movements are small-scale and fail to communicate their goals to the masses. Theatre, as one of the most social of art forms, and therefore, one of the most politically effective art forms, has the potential to create an immediate and lasting impact on a large number of people at the same time, especially when it addresses issues of group identity and liberty in politically oppressive environments. The denial of Kurdish identity and the homogenising policies of the nation-states in which the Kurds live have in fact made not only theatre but all Kurdish cultural practice a locus of contention where narratives of nationhood and national identity have historically been constructed and disseminated.

2.3 Kurdish Culture and Nationalism

Estimated at between 25 and 30 million people, Kurds constitute the largest stateless nation in the world whose lands comprise parts of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. Divided between the Ottoman and Safavid Empires in the early sixteenth century, these lands were ruled by Kurdish dynasties and principalities up to the mid-nineteenth century when they were overthrown by their ruling empires. Kurdish

regions were divided again between the Republic of Turkey, Iraq and Syria after the First World War and the partition of the Ottoman Empire. Despite these territorial divisions, which have caused many cultural, linguistic and political fragmentations, a sense of belonging to a Kurdish nation, albeit locally and within one's native area, has existed among the Kurds for a long time (Nezan, 1996, pp.10–12). The existence of Kurds as a distinct ethnic group is confirmed by the Ottoman and Persian administrators of the Sixteenth century and the travellers who spent time in various parts of Kurdistan (see Fraser, 1840; Southgate, 1840; Rich, 1836; Bruinessen and Boeschoten, 1988). However, most prominent historians of Kurdish nationalism trace the origins of the modern Kurdish nationalism to the early twentieth century (see Bruinessen, 1992; McDowall, 2004).

For many critics such as van Bruinessen and Vali Kurdish nationalism emerged only at the beginning of the last century mainly as a reaction to Turkish, Persian and Arab nationalisms and the denial of the Kurdish identities by the four states which were aiming at the assimilation of the Kurds and other ethnic groups in Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria (Bozarsalan, 2003; Bruinessen, 2000). Yavuz agrees that Kurdish nationalism in Turkey, Iraq, and Iran evolved in response to modernising nation-states (Yavuz, 2001). He argues that Kurdish ethno-nationalism in Turkey was the result of the state's policies of forced assimilation which was in contrast to the multi-ethnic, multi-cultural realities of the Ottoman Empire. Ataturk's modernisation project which was aimed to homogenise the society helped to create a conscious Kurdish elite and politicise Kurdish identity. The Kurdish intellectuals, according to Yavuz, functioned as interpreters of Kurdish cultural identity in order to historicise and legitimise Kurdish nationalism.

However, van Bruinessen and Yavuz affirm that the modern Kurdish nationalism is not merely the creation of modern nationalists but is the successor of a Kurdish ethnies which shared "certain myths of origin and descent, the association with a certain territory and at least some common elements of culture, but also a sense of solidarity among (most of) their members" (Bruinessen, 1994, p.12). The ethnic myths, collective memories and values were utilised by the early Kurdish nationalist

intelligentsia who, although of elite backgrounds, began idealising the Kurdish peasantry and incorporating their culture into the dominant ethnies (ibid., p.14).

The role of popular culture as a locus of nation formation was affirmed by the European orientalist who glorified oral culture in a Volk-oriented definition of cultural distinction. This approach influenced the Kurdish nationalists to focus on the existing Kurdish oral culture as a rich and valuable source of cultural distinctiveness which could help the nationalists' claims of political independence. Among the pioneers of Kurdish cultural nationalism were the Bedirxan princes, Celadet and Kamuran¹⁴ heirs to the ancient Bohtan principality, who played an important role in the construction of Kurdish national identity based on oral literature in the 1930s and 1940s.

The Bedirxan family were involved in Kurdish identity-building from the late nineteenth century. In 1897, Miqdad Midhat Bedirxan founded *Kurdistan*, the first Kurdish journal which was meant to awaken the Kurds and encourage the study of the arts (Strohmeier, 2003, p.21). The editors of *Kurdistan* attempted to instil notions of national identity and the value of education in their readers as necessary tools to have in order to survive as a nation in the modern world. They hoped to create a national identity based not on tribal or religious affiliation but on a shared culture and language. The authors of *Kurdistan* already believed that Kurds were a separate national group with their distinct history and to prove this, they presented evidence from ancient Kurdish history, great Kurdish leaders such as Saladin, and most importantly, literary classics. In their efforts to build a Kurdish literary canon, *Kurdistan* writers published poetry by Kurdish writers, among them Hacî Qadirî Koyî (1817-1897), the nineteenth century Sorani speaking Kurdish author and tutor to Bedirxan princes, “whose poems they could quote to give expression to their own nationalist sentiments” (Bruinessen, 2003, p.48).

¹⁴ Bedirxan brothers, Kamuran (1895- 1978), Sureyya (1883-1938), and Celadet (1893-1951), were descendants of the last emir of Bohtan, Bedirxan Beg.

In 1908, the Bedirxan family helped form in Istanbul a Kurdish society called *Kurd Teavun ve Terakki Cemiyeti* (The Kurdish Society for Mutual Aid and Progress). The society published a gazette which stressed the distinct Kurdish identity and the importance of education and writing a history of the Kurds for liberation of the nation (Strohmeier, 2003, pp.39–40). Kurdish students in Istanbul continued to promote Kurdish identity by attributing Kurdishness to prominent historical figures such as Saladin and Karim Khan Zand and also by publishing Kurdish nationalist poetry (ibid, pp.45-46).

The Kurdish nationalists' hope for an independent Kurdistan was about to be fulfilled by the Treaty of Sèvres which recognised the Kurdistan region and called for a referendum to determine its establishment. However, the replacement of this treaty with the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 meant that all hopes for an independent Kurdistan were crushed. The newly formed Republic of Turkey denied the existence of non-Turkish peoples in the country and thus suppressed all expressions of a distinct Kurdish language and culture. In 1927 and following the victory of Kemalists in Turkey, Celadet and Kamuran Bedirxan, together with some other Kurdish intellectuals, moved to Syria where they established a new Kurdish national organisation called *Xoybûn*. Their cultural and political activism turned Damascus into a major centre of Kurdish culture and politics, contributing immensely to the shaping of a worldwide awareness of Kurdish culture and history.

Celadet and Kamuran were assisted in this nationalist movement by the works of French orientalists, in particular the Kurdologists Roger Lescot and Pierre Rondot who contributed significantly to the discovery of the rich Kurdish oral literature (Tejel, 2009, pp.23–25). Lescot, for instance, provided Celadet Bedirxan with ethnographic materials such as stories and proverbs in his publication of the journal *Hawar* ("The Call," 1932–43) which aimed to serve the Kurdish culture and identity by distributing literary classics and publishing contemporary poetry, prose and folklore (ibid., p.24). Kamuran Bedirxan also incorporated elements of Kurdish "low" culture by drawing from the traditional Kurdish tales in his nationalist novel *Der Adler von Kurdistan* (the eagle of Kurdistan) (Strohmeier, 2003, p.153). This novel which was written to

promote the image of Kurds in their brave and just struggle for freedom, presented the image of 'Kurdishness' through the Kurds' "heroism, patriotism, reverence for their land, identification with their mountains; their pride in their language and heritage, the beauty of their folk tales and songs, the rich variety of their material culture; their strong and patriotic women; the solidarity among Kurds from all backgrounds" (ibid., p.203).

Kurdish cultural nationalism continues to be an important and resonant aspect of national identity-construction especially in contemporary Turkey and Iraq where the Kurdish intellectuals and intelligentsia have enjoyed a relatively greater freedom to promote Kurdish culture than in Syria and Iran.¹⁵ Efforts have been made to standardise the Kurdish language, and these efforts as Hassanpour has shown in his seminal work, *Nationalism and Language in Kurdistan, 1918-1985* (1992), have served as a major thrust in the Kurdish struggle for nationhood. While folklorists continue to collect Kurdish *beyts*, stories, anecdotes and songs (e.g. Akyol, 2008; Fîdan, 2014), printing houses in Iraqi Kurdistan and in Turkey continue to publish national classics such as *Mem û Zîn* while this seventeenth-century romance continues to inspire the modern genres of novels and plays (e.g. War, 2011; Boynukara, 2008).

Kurdish dramatists and artists everywhere, at home and diaspora, have revisited their national history, literature, and folklore for inspiration. Kurdish Theatre of Tbilisi's production of *Xanê Çengzêrîn*, based on the Kurdish epic *Dimdim* (Jafarova, 2000), Shwan Jaffar's production of *Mem û Zîn: Une Histoire d'Amour Kurde* in France in 1994, the BOTAN theatre group's production of *Mem û Zîn* in Germany in 1991 (Farshi, 1993), and Fethi Karakeçili's Kurdish ballet dance based on the *Mem*

¹⁵ In the past decades, compulsory education in the official languages, military service, national radio and television and massive migration and urbanisation have further divided the Kurds of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. Aware of these cultural divisions, Kurdish nationalists, since the early twentieth century, have tried to prove the Kurds' status as a nation and thus their qualification for self-determination by emphasising their common history, language, territory and culture. This approach which has much in common with the state policies of Turkey and Iran tends to downplay cultural differences between the Kurdish regions in favour of a majority language and culture in order to create a unified national identity. In the Kurdish nationalist discourse, public recognition and political representation of minority identities is perceived to undermine national unity and foment polarization. See, (Tezcür, 2009).

û Zîn love-story in Canada in 2011 are examples of the continued appeal of folklore to Kurdish artists.

Hutchinson claims it is the artist who is the paradigmatic figure in the cultural nationalist movements, because it is him/her who “dramatizes the rediscovered myths and legends, projecting them to a wider audience” (Hutchinson, 1994b, p.45). For stateless nations and countries seeking political autonomy theatre plays an even more vital role in asserting a distinct cultural identity as a form of empowerment and confidence building (Holdsworth, 2014, p.6). Unfortunately, despite the visible role played by theatre-makers in the Kurdish cultural nationalism, Kurdish theatre and performance has received little attention from scholars. This study will not only affirm theatre’s role in asserting a distinct national identity in the context of Iraqi Kurdistan but will also show the use of theatre as a political medium to incite rebellion against the Baath regime by promoting myths central to Kurdish nationalism.

2.4 Cultural Nationalism and Kurdish Theatre

Cultural nationalists, according to Smith, draw on several myths in forming their belief-system: Myth of common ancestry which links all members of the present generation of the community and between this generation and all its forebears; Myth of the heroic age which provides models of virtuous conduct and inspires faith and courage in the face of oppression and decadence; Myth of decline which tells how the community lost its grandeur and fell into a state of decay; Myth of regeneration which explains how to restore the Golden Age and renew the community as in old days (Smith, 1999, pp.62–68). Smith goes on to elaborate on the consequences of collective action entailed by nationalism’s belief-system. These are claims to a special identity, a special dignity, specific territories, and a specific autonomy. A special identity, as described by Smith, is the typical demand of cultural nationalism and claims the right of developing a specific ethnic culture. The claim to a special dignity is made in virtue of a community’s antiquity and pedigree and makes its members ‘feel’ they are entitled to a certain respect. The claim to specific territories is the characteristic of the quest for a recognised homeland by stressing ethnic myths

of descent. The claim to a specific autonomy is made in virtue of liberty in a golden age which is now lost through oppression and neglect. Thus, the struggle for autonomy is reinforced by the desire to recover the liberties and rights enjoyed in the past (ibid., pp.68-70).

The Kurdish nationalist myths that have contributed to the creation of a distinct Kurdish identity, including the myths of common origin and history, a lost golden age, and the need to restore the golden age, are abundant in the Kurdish theatre history. In fact, since the emergence of drama in Iraqi Kurdistan, theatrical performances often took subject matter from traditional Kurdish folklore and myth. Some of the well-known examples of such myths such as the myths of Kawa, Zuhak and Newroz, together with the nationalist poetry of Ehmedê Xanî and Hacî Qadirî Koyî, among others, have all been recurrent in Kurdish theatre history. By incorporating into their works the stories and characters of Kurdish origin, Kurdish theatre-makers endeavoured to encapsulate the national character of their homeland. The reasons and motivations for their use of Kurdish themes can be understood in terms of theatre-makers' sense of nationalism and years of Kurdish nationalist struggle. Theatrical performances of the 1970s and 1980s, in particular, share the common themes of Kurdish folklore and mythic symbols and move towards a distinctly Kurdish sensibility with regard to love of country and the necessity of resistance in the face of oppression. The theatre of this period not only contributed to asserting Kurdish identity and legitimacy, but also sought liberty by calling upon the Kurdish youth to join the resistance movement. In this sense, the Kurdish theatre of 1975-1991 conforms to Mda's definition of Theatre for Resistance: a theatre performed with the overt aim of rallying or mobilizing the oppressed to fight against oppression (Mda, 1998). As the close reading of Telet Saman's and Ehmed Salar's plays will show, theatre in Iraqi Kurdistan between 1975 and 1991 consistently participated in providing possibilities for resistance to the Baathist dictatorship through multiple methods of engagement ranging from mythology, folk forms, re-enactment of oppressed histories, and revival of native histories.

Therefore, while in this study I make use of Smith's and Hutchinson's elucidations on the role of national myths, legends, folklore and histories in nationalism and national identity and the contribution of intellectuals and artists to nationalist movements, I do not subscribe to Hutchinson's proposed dichotomy between cultural and political nationalism as two distinct movements with different goals. Hutchinson who divides nationalists into cultural nationalists and political nationalists believes that while the aim of cultural nationalists is to preserve the cultural individuality of the nation by returning to their unique history and culture, the latter's aim is to achieve political autonomy to which they subordinate all other causes.

Political nationalists have as their objective the achievement of a representative national state that will guarantee to its members uniform citizenship rights...for a cultural nationalist...the state is regarded with suspicion as a product of conquest...the glory of a country comes not from its political power but from the culture of its people and the contribution of its thinkers and educators to humanity. The aim of cultural nationalists is rather the moral regeneration of the historic community, or, in other words, the re-creation of their distinctive national civilization. (Hutchinson, 1987, pp.15–16)

Despite Hutchinson's fundamental distinction between cultural and political nationalism, he acknowledges that cultural nationalists are not hostile by definition to independent statehood and are frequently driven into state politics to defend the cultural autonomy of the nation. However, this dichotomy between cultural and political nationalisms does not hold in the case of Kurdistan. A review of Kurdish nationalist movement shows the simultaneity of two kinds of nationalism, the cultural and the political, throughout the movement. The first Kurdish cultural and literary organisations, as Smith notes, came into being in the wake of the Young Turk coup in the early twentieth century and the campaign to standardise and modernise the Kurdish language was conjoined with a wider political struggle which involved guerrilla campaigns against central governments (Smith, 1991, p.132).

In this study I argue that there is no linear progression from political to cultural to military nationalism and that cultural discourse was central to national identity. Political nationalism was an ever-present element of the cultural milieu that formed the context for the cultural revival. The emergence of theatre in Iraqi Kurdistan was

the direct offshoot of several political factors including the forced return of the Kurdish elite from Turkey to their hometown of Sulaymaniyah where they continued their nationalist cultural activities. There they initiated what Smith describes as “vernacular mobilization”, search to rediscover their ethno-history and mobilise their people through vernacular culture (ibid, pp.127-129). The returning Kurdish elite, translated Kurdish literary books into the Sulaymaniyah dialect, collected local proverbs, documented local history, romanticised the local landscape and the lives of local characters, promoted education and also theatre in Kurdish. As the following chapters will show, the ultimate aim and hope of the Kurdish intellectuals and intelligentsia, including theatre makers, was the simple establishment of political sovereignty for the Kurdish nation not simply safeguarding of a cultural identity.

Therefore, for my purposes, I define cultural nationalism in the Kurdish context broadly as an ideological stance that casts a minority group as a nation with a particular national culture. The cultural nationalist’s stance involves a concept of liberation and self-determination. It also entails some notion of the recovery of a true national culture that is linked to an existing folk or popular culture. In short, I do not see any ideological divisions between cultural and revolutionary nationalists as many theatre artists were also at times directly involved in the guerrilla struggle. By examining the development of Kurdish theatre, I affirm the link between culture and politics as a key element of national mobilisation and Dieckhoff’s view that “one cannot consider as irreducibly opposed two types of nationalism – one entirely political, the other cultural --” (Dieckhoff, 2006, p.75). Dieckhoff argues that the use of culture was an unavoidable step in the politicisation of nationalism, and not an outcome. He claims that culture served two functions: first, as testimony to the existence of the nation despite its political subjection, and endowing it with its specific identity. Second, culture provided a means to challenge the political order to which the people was subjected (Dieckhoff, 2006, p.72). This will be affirmed in the context of the Kurdish struggle for independence and theatre artists’ involvement both in political activism and in moral regeneration of the masses through theatre.

2.5 Conclusion

Hutchinson's and Smith's theories are useful for their delineation of the role of intellectuals and intelligentsia in nationalist movements. In this dissertation, I will refer to these theories about cultural nationalism in order to explain the emergence of theatre in Iraqi Kurdistan, the construction of Kurdish nationalist identity and the reformulation and revision of these notions in the works produced by the young generation of theatre artists. The role played by intellectuals and intelligentsia in introducing theatre to Kurdistan and promoting it will be explained with reference to Hutchinson's and Smith's model of the role of intellectuals and intelligentsia as fundamental proponents of cultural nationalism.

While this study relies on theories of cultural nationalism to emphasise the role of theatre and theatre makers in promoting nationalist symbols and myths, it also acknowledges that the ultimate goal of Kurdish cultural nationalists in general and theatre makers, in particular, has been a political one; namely, independence for Kurdistan. Chapters four to seven confirm not only the role played by theatre makers in constructing notions of national identity but also the way the myths of Kurdish nationalism have been used to affirm the existence of the nation, reassure the nation of its self-worth at the time of political despair, and encourage resistance to the central authority by representing historical legends of Kurdish heroes and their self-sacrifice in the face of foreign invasion.

Chapter Three: Performance Traditions of Kurdistan

Although the focus of my research project here is on theatrical texts or drama, this does not mean there is a lack of a rich performance culture in Kurdistan or that the Kurdish people were unfamiliar with theatrical spectacles prior to the emergence of Western-style theatre in Kurdistan. In fact, more often than not, traditional and folk performances have served as a major source of modern Kurdish theatre. This is evident in the Kurdish theatre of the 1970s and 1980s and in particular in Telet Saman's and Ehmed Salar's plays which are the subject of analysis in this study. Saman's plays are mainly inspired by folktales while Salar's plays draw heavily on folk dance, storytelling, and music, among other performance traditions. Therefore it is essential to look at these traditions in depth. Moreover, the lack of such a review of traditional performances of Kurdistan, at least in English, makes this chapter a contribution to the field by covering a wide variety of Kurdish performance practices, from dance to spring festivals and rain rituals.

Western theatre studies had long considered theatrical production to be text-centred and playwright-driven. Historians of theatre and performance usually focused on European theatre tradition where evidence existed in the form of written texts or in archaeological ruins of purpose-built performance structures, thus overlooking many parts of the world where performance in itself has long been regarded as an important "text" and performers as respected as writers (Zarrilli and Williams, 2010, pp.xx-3). This, however, shifted radically in the 1980s with the advent of the field of Performance Studies and its recognition that European theatre is only one manifestation of a very broad spectrum of performed cultural activity. The one overriding and underlying assumption of Performance Studies is that "anything and everything can be described 'as' performance" (Schechner, 2002, pp.1-2). This definition means that a broad spectrum of human actions ranging from ritual, play, sports, popular entertainments, to theatre, dance, and music, and even everyday life performances can be subject of Performance Studies.

The growing interest in performance within non-European cultures in the late twentieth century resulted in research into the performance and theatre traditions of Latin America, Africa and Asia and lastly the Arab World. Theatre in the Middle East was long ignored by Western theatre scholars who mistakenly assumed that the representation of human body and therefore, theatre, was equated with idolatry and therefore prohibited in Islamic thought. This simplistic assumption is gradually dying away as the rich theatre and performance traditions of the region receive increasing attention from scholars. Badawi's (1987; 1988, 1992) and Sadgrove's (1996) works on Arabic drama, particularly in Egypt, Amine's and Carlson's *Theatres of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia* and the volumes of *Routledge World Encyclopaedia of Contemporary Drama* are examples of the growing acknowledgment of theatre traditions in Muslim countries.

Although the studies of theatre in the Middle East have contributed greatly to our understanding of performance traditions in the region, the marginal position of Kurds as a stateless nation has resulted in their complete exclusion from all theatre histories. Kurds constitute significant minorities in Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria, yet their contributions to the literary and cultural histories of their countries are rarely acknowledged or recorded. This omission is in part due to language. Kurdish language has a variety of dialects, the main two ones being Kurmanji, spoken mainly in Turkey and Syria, and Sorani, spoken in Iran and Iraq. The result of speaking a minor language in monolingual states is the removal of Kurdish dramatists from the attention of Turkish, Iranian and Arab scholars of drama in theatre histories and reference works.

This study is an attempt to respond, at least partly, to this gap in the current scholarship in English concerning Kurdish theatre by presenting, for the first time, a history of performance and theatre in Iraqi Kurdistan. From what has been written about Kurdish theatre it appears that theatre in the normal Western sense (a play acted on a stage before an audience in a purpose-built building) was introduced to Iraqi Kurdistan in the early years of the twentieth century. However, long before the

arrival of Western-style theatre, a rich performance tradition already existed and continues to exist.

As mentioned before, more recent theatre scholarship has recognised that theatre exists in many forms beyond the specific European tradition. In Kurdistan as elsewhere in the Middle East, a wide variety of performance activity existed long before the introduction of European-style theatre in the twentieth century. These performance traditions were not based on written texts and as such were disparaged or disregarded by conventional Kurdish theatre histories which trace the beginnings of Kurdish theatre only to the early twentieth century.¹⁶ While it is true that these performances cannot be described as theatre practices by Western standards, their impact on contemporary Kurdish theatre, as seen in following chapters, has been very strong. In Kurdistan, where oral performance and verbal art have a long tradition, modern text-based theatre, as will be discussed later, has been greatly influenced by folk performances and oral literature of the region.

While the European theatrical tradition from the Greeks onwards has been dominated by the written text, oral performance was the dominant form of performance in Kurdistan, as in the rest of the Middle East. This orality coexisted alongside the Islamic emphasis on literacy since the seventh-century Islamic conquest of the region. In fact, in Kurdistan there is no great divide separating the oral and written cultures which have always interacted with each other and also with the cultures of the Kurds' neighbours (Allison, 2010). Jwaideh divides the themes of Kurdish folklore – stories, fables, fairytales, epics, lyrics, proverbs, anecdotes, charms and riddles – into three categories: (1) those that are the product of Kurdish experience; (2) those that are based on the folkloric heritage of the whole Middle East; and (3) those that are borrowed or adapted from neighbouring peoples (Jwaideh, 2006, p.22). For instance, Kurdish oral ballads such as *Dimdim*, *Mem û Zîn* and *Xec û Siyamend* have inspired several literary creations in classical and modern literature while many other popular ballads have drawn on narratives

¹⁶ All Kurdish theatre histories that will be mentioned in the next chapter are conventional theatre histories that consider the emergence of European-style theatre in Kurdistan as the beginning of this art form in the region.

common in Arabic and Persian literatures including, *Lêylî w Mecnûn*, *Şêxî Senan*, *Yûsif û Zilêxa*, and *Ferhad û Şîrîn*.

The Kurds have some of their performance traditions in common with their Persian and Turkish neighbours. There are performance practices in Kurdistan which are largely satirical, and involve stock characters and a great deal of improvisation. For example there are references to a Nasreddin¹⁷-like comedian in the city of Sulaymaniyah in the second half of the 19th century called Ehmedî Korno who is described by Tewfîq Wehbî as “a great comedian” (cited in Rêsuł, 2004, p.78). He narrated comic stories and played out the plots along with few others like Ferec Kurdî and Cefer Leqleqzade (Kerîm, 2009, p.61). From what is written about Korno it seems he was a very well-known figure at his time and one who was invited by the notables of Sulaymaniyah, such as Osman Paşay Caf and Şêx Mistefay Neqîb, to perform at their houses (ibid.).

There have also been other forms of traditional spectacles like puppet shows, an example of which Tenya mentions briefly in his book, *Şanoy Kurdewarî* (Kurdish Theatre, 1958, p.27). There is not much written about this puppet show apart from the fact that it took place in 1944 in Halabja (ibid.). Shadow theatre was introduced to much of the Middle East and North Africa by the Ottoman garrisons who traditionally performed it for the Festival of Ramadan (Amîn and Carlson, 2011, p.38). The most popular form of shadow theatre throughout the Ottoman Empire was the traditional Karagoz (black-eye) which, in the Turkish form, concerned the conflict of the peasant Karagoz and his higher class but slow-witted rival Hacivad (ibid., p.39). This Middle Eastern puppet show used a stand set up in public squares, coffee houses, and on special occasions in private homes. A canvas was stretched across the front opening and illuminated from behind by an oil-lamp. The shadow player pressed the puppets against the canvas using guiding rods inserted into the figures (ibid., pp.38-39). Karagoz became a popular art form in the Ottoman Empire from the late sixteenth century on, coinciding with the rise in popularity of coffee houses (Smith, 2004, p.188). Karagoz shows were especially popular during Ramadan, the

¹⁷ A 13th century satirical sufi in today's Turkey remembered for his funny stories and anecdotes.

month of fasting. After sunset, when the fast is broken, feasts were held and people would come to coffee houses for the feast and to enjoy a *karagoz* show at the same time, with a different show being performed every night of Ramadan (ibid., p.189).

These centuries-old exchanges between Kurds and their neighbours have resulted in a rich folklore which has served as a major source of modern Kurdish literature and culture and much of the imagery of Kurdish nationalism (Allison, 2010, p.33). What follows is a summary of some of Kurdish performance traditions ranging from festivals to everyday life performances such as lamentation. Some of these performances veer heavily towards drama by including not only a dramatic format but also spoken dramatic interludes.

3.1 Dance-drama

The most well-known of Kurdish performance art is undoubtedly the Kurdish dance. Locally known as *helperkê* or *govend*, Kurdish dance is a form of hand-holding circle dance similar to those from the Balkans and Eastern European countries. It is noteworthy that these folkloric dances are mixed-gender and are known in Kurdistan as *reşbelek* or *genim-û-co* (wheat and barley). Some Kurdish dances appear to be forms of labour dances which grew out of communal grain planting and harvesting. These dances seem to have developed as a form of celebration or thanksgiving for the successful completion of the agricultural cycle.

There are other forms of Kurdish dance which are celebratory, as for a marriage, or a battle victory. There is also a religious type of dance which is part of *sema*, a spiritual Sufi ceremony performed at homes or in the *khanqahs* of Sufi brotherhoods or *tariqa*. Such type of dance which constitutes of moving the body or just the head backward and forward is performed in a state of trance and is accompanied by the rhythmic sound of *def*, songs and saying of *dhikr* (usually just the repeated saying of the word Allah). These spiritual Sufi ceremonies are performed in *khanqahs* in two separate rooms, one for male *def*-players, singers and participants and the other for their female counterparts. Followers of *tariqa* may

hold *Mewlûdî* to celebrate Prophet Mohammad's birth at their homes with *sema* being an essential part of it.

3.2 Newroz Carnival Performances

There are folk performance traditions which are specific to Kurdistan. Most notable of these are the ones that are performed during Newroz, the Kurdish New Year. Two important examples of these performances which are part of the Kurdish springtime festival are *Kawey Asinger* (Kawe, the Blacksmith), and *Mîr Mîran* (King of Kings). *Kawey Asinger* takes place during the celebration of *Newroz* (Kurdish New Year) on 21st of March. While *Newroz* is celebrated throughout several countries in the Middle East as the beginning of spring, in Kurdistan it has taken up political significance by being associated with the story of *Kawey Asinger* and the victory of the oppressed against the oppressor. Each year on this date, in all towns and villages of Iraqi (and Syrian) Kurdistan, amateur theatre groups stage the legend of Kawe, the blacksmith who rebelled against the tyranny of Zuhak, the Assyrian king. In Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, King Zuhak is possessed by two snakes growing from his shoulders, which require the brains of two young persons per day. Zuhak's cooks manage to rescue one person each day and send them to the mountains where they continue to live and found the Kurdish nation. In the folk performances of this mythical account of Kurdish origin, the characters included Zuhak, the king, a few guards and councils, Kawe, the hero, three boys as Kawe's sons, and others who played the role of townspeople (Jaffar, 1992).

Mîr Mîran, or *Mîri Nawrûzî* in Persian, is another folk performance which bears striking resemblances to the Feast of Fools in medieval Europe. It was enacted in Kurdish regions of Iraq and Iran during Newroz at the beginning of spring. In the nineteenth century, each Kurdish area was governed by a ruler. During *Mîr Mîran* this ruler is substituted by an ordinary, sometimes even ridiculous, person chosen from the people of that area for a few days to perform in this play, the props of which were provided by the people themselves. The lords and nobility would lend the new king their lavish clothes, accessories, horses, boots, swords and other valuables

(Ashurpur, 2010, p.32). Tenya writes that in 1912 Sulaymaniyah, a witty mullah called Mela Biçkol (Little Mullah) was chosen as king and his coronation was a joyous three-day-long festive occasion (1958, p.45). In the 1920s, Ferec Kurdî, a local comic figure, would become king and would wear the clothes given to him by Mistefa Paşa Yamulkî (1866-1936), the Ottoman military officer and later minister of education in Şêx Mehmûd Berzencî's self-proclaimed Kingdom of Kurdistan (ibid., p.46).

It was also customary for the substitute ruler to have some witty and jovial people as his helpers. In this play, there are character types known to the people such as the grand vizier, the right and left vizier, (responsible for carrying out logical as well as ridiculous orders respectively), secretary, soldiers, executioners, chorus, clown, and so on. According to Ashûrpûr, the right-hand vizier was in charge of giving reasonable orders, while the left-hand vizier executed unreasonable and ludicrous orders. For example, the right vizier would declare on behalf of the king that innocent prisoners must be freed, families who were not on good terms had to reconcile, the rich had to pay their due "zakat" to the poor and everyone had to clean the front of their houses. The left-hand vizier, on the other hand, would give absurd orders such as these: every man has to shave half of his moustache, all young boys over the age of 13 have to get married by tomorrow, all city-dwellers have to move to the countryside and the country dwellers have to move to the city (ibid., p.37).

In his *History of Theatre in Iran*, Floor states that this festival of "false emir" was a three day festival which was most recently celebrated in the 1890s in the springtime in the Kurdish town of Mahabad (Floor, 2005, pp.92–93). However, different sources give different figures for the length of the festival which according to some ran for the entire holiday season which was thirteen days (Ashurpur, 2010, pp.44–45, 92–93). According to Pîrbal, the false emir festival started five days before Newroz and ended on the thirteenth (Pîrbal, 2001, p.19).¹⁸

¹⁸ In his monumental study of religion and mythology, Sir James Frazer describes the old tradition of temporary kings as a modified form of the old custom of regicide which was practiced in as diverse places as Cambodia, Siam, Samarcand, Egypt, Morocco, and Cornwall. This tradition, according to

Edmonds writes that in Sulaymaniyah he was “often regaled with stories of an annual spring carnival of ancient origin, a kind of saturnalia, which had fallen into desuetude either during or only shortly before the War” (Edmonds, 1957, p.84). During Newroz, Edmonds says, “the whole population of Sulaymaniyah would flock out to the Sarchinar springs for a festival which involved the appointment of a Lord of Misrule with very real powers, the temporary upsetting of many of the canons of ordinary behaviour, and the almost complete suspension of normal administration” (ibid.). This upsetting of official hierarchy of power and norms of behaviour was sanctioned by the highest authority of the Sulaymaniyah region which was the Baban pashas until mid-nineteenth century and after that Şêx Mehmûd Berzencî who not only licensed the festival, but also, took part in it too. Every year in Sulaymaniyah, Şêx Mehmûd himself would give the order to hold the fake emir festival and would respect the new king as everybody else (Teymûr, 1988, p.64).

The ruler’s licensing of the festival legitimised the whole representation wherein the hierarchy of the official order was overturned. This is similar to the sort of performance Terry Eagleton describes as “a permissible rupture of hegemony, a contained popular blow-off as disturbing and relatively ineffectual as a revolutionary work of art” (Eagleton, 1981, p.9). The subversive play of the carnival consists of temporarily suspending the hierarchical power-structure inherent in the practice of everyday life. It proves the importance of such representation wherein the ruler sees himself reflected through the mirrors of carnivalesque representation. In her review of a similar African performance, Plastow notes that this type of performance presumably was not only cathartic for the participants but also created an acceptable conduit for public opinion to be passed on to higher authorities (Plastow, 1996, p.26).

A relatively well-documented instance of this festival in Iraqi Kurdistan dates back to the 1920s and again to the city of Sulaymaniyah. Here is how Thomas Bois (1900-

Frazer, is a fertility cult common to almost all mythologies in which the death and resurrection of the king/god is the personification of the rebirth of earth in the spring (Frazer, 2009, pp.283-289). These rites, as Frazer states, have been most widely and solemnly celebrated in Western Asia and Egypt where the gods of Osiris, Tammuz, Adonis, and Attis represented the vegetable life and its yearly decay and revival (ibid., p.325).

1975), the French orientalist, describes this false Emir "carnival" based on Tewfiq Wehbi's account of its performance:

The preparations are entrusted to a special committee, and on the day fixed the people of Sulaymaniyah leave the town for a place where the ceremony is to take place. A king is enthroned and courtiers and a guard are assigned to him. The 'king', sitting astride an ox and accompanied by his court and a large crowd, goes to the encampment where tents and divans have been set up and cauldrons put on the fire. Individuals, disguised as sheep or goats, play the part of these animals during the whole period of celebration, which lasts three days. The "king" is obeyed without question; he even imposes taxes on people, whether they are present or not. He retains his title until the following year when a successor is nominated (Bois, 1966, p.68).

For the occasion of this festival royal domes were built and decorated along the streets of Sulaymaniyah and people would stand across the street to see their new king. The king would sit on the throne at Sarchinar, near Sulaymaniyah, where fifty springs form a stream which runs through Sulaymaniyah. There, various sorts of games would start with the royal accord. Enwer Begî Tewfiq Beg who was, for a while, the governor of Sulaymaniyah in the 1920s had approved of the king's rule in all but two things: freeing slaves and killing people. To mock the king and his authority or to ignore his orders was punished regardless of the offender's rank. For example, once a British political officer to Kurdistan, allegedly Major E. B. Soane, was charged five hundred Rupees for drinking (Tenya, 1958, p.47).

Ewrehman Xame was the last king of these festivals which ended in 1922 after the British ban on the festival. According to Hewramî, Xame in an interview stressed that his rule was not an act and it was only called a game to fool the British colonisers (Hewramî, 2001, p.296). However, it did not take them long to sense the seriousness of the king's rule and thus put an end to it. It is also possible that the arrest of two Englishmen provoked the British rulers. According to Hewramî, after two Englishmen laughed at the spectacle they were arrested and only freed after they paid compensation for their disregard of Xame's rule (ibid.). This might have angered the colonisers of the land who could not tolerate punishment in the hands of the natives. According to Fetah, the British colonisers who watched the festival games and performances from a distance on horseback disapproved of the representation of

king in those performances and as such banned them not only in Sulaymaniyah but in all Kurdish regions. This however was not the end of false emir festival. Between 1927 and 1930, in Qeladze, north of Sulaymaniyah, the festival was held and a Bekir Qesab ruled for forty days before his rule was forcefully terminated.¹⁹

As Amine and Carlson suggest, the banning of local festivals by the European colonisers could be due to their carnivalesque and satiric nature. According to them, the Europeans, with their culturally conditioned idea of theatre, based upon the European tradition, viewed these activities as, at best, quaint local customs unworthy of the name of art, and at worst, as “perverse and unpatriotic locations for the expression of subversive and anti-colonial expression” (Amīn and Carlson, 2011, p.52). Thus, the official colonial attitude towards such performance traditions was either to ignore or as in the case of the Kurdish false emir carnival, to outlaw them.²⁰

3.3 Seasonal Festivals and Work Songs

In addition to the more communal Newroz festival of *Mîr Mîran* and *Kose-geldî*, Bois describes seasonal festivals which were celebrated by the shepherds. These rural festivals include *serepêz* at the first lambing time, *barodan* at the time of departure for the *zozan* or summer pastures, *berxbir* for the sheep-rearing, and the greatest festival of all *beran-berdan* when estivation ends and the rams are loosed among the ewes (Bois, 1966, p.66). This native pattern of life and activity provided occasions for a variety of folksongs: the *serêle* or songs of spring, the *paîzok* or autumn songs sung by young men and women at the time of the nomads' descent from their upland summer retreats (*zozan*) to the plains, the *bendolavî* are sung by young women at the spinning wheel as they weave their multi-coloured carpets, the *lorî* or cradle songs, the *lawêj* or short poems telling of marital deeds, chivalrous exploits, and love affairs, *hevalê* or songs that accompany the young bride as she enters her new home, and various dance songs or, *dîlok*, which are sung to the accompaniment of drum and flute (ibid., pp.60-61). Women, in particular, have a

¹⁹ It is not clear by whom and for what reasons. See, (Teymûr, 1988).

²⁰ I will return to this point in the next chapter.

variety of household duties in villages which they perform with songs to help accomplish specific tasks and reduce feelings of boredom, or to express plaintive or melancholic feelings. An example of the latter is *bertewnane* which is a type of plaintive song sung during carpet-weaving. Such melancholy songs can be sung during other tasks such as milking cows, carrying things, or spinning. Women's work songs are by no means only melancholy and woeful. During *meşkejenî*,²¹ a woman might sing a joyful song which alludes to the beauties and blessings of nature in spring or, as in the following example, praise her *meşk* and narrate her daily chores to it:

Desewxord meşkem hercine
 The stand of my *meşk* is made of almond tree
Meşkejenem pirçine
 My *meşkejen*²² is long-haired
Desewxord meşkem henare
 The stand of my *meşk* is made of pomegranate tree
Meşkejenem nazare
 My *meşkejen* is lovely
Meşke bijinyê jinyaiy
Meşk beat the milk
Be kef û kerê kinyaiy
 Separate the butter
Meşke bijinyê dêrme
Meşk hurry up, I'm late
Hengley ga w gwêrme
 I'm worried about my cows and calves
Kerêkey bo werzêrme
 I want the butter for the farmer
Dokey bo şûe kwêrme
 And the buttermilk for my blind husband

Bois gives an account of a popular mid-winter festival witnessed by Ereb Çemo (1897-1979) when he was a child. In this festival which is called Kose-geldî, "a young man is disguised as a sheik or mullah while another is dressed up as a woman. The two then go from house to house collecting butter, cheese and money... Everything which has been collected in this manner by the young men is distributed to poor

²¹ Traditional way of processing milk by transferring yogurt to an inverted sheepskin (*meşk*) which acts as a churn. The churn is suspended by a tripod and rocked back and forth until butter granules form. The butter can be scooped out by hand or the buttermilk can be drained off by pouring.

²² The person who rocks the churn

families” (ibid., pp.68-69). Kose-geldî, which was practiced in Iranian towns and villages until recently, has been described in Iranian sources as the shepherds’ celebration of the end of the first forty days of winter. Playing musical instruments, ringing bells and singing songs, a group of shepherds would boisterously pass through the alleyways and streets performing the roles of Kose, Kose’s bride, and goats. Kose would wear a long inside-out robe covered with small bells. The person playing the role of Kose would paint his face white and would wear a mask made of goat skin with eye and breathing holes. He would also wear a big leather belt and hold a big stick to represent shepherds. The person playing the role of Kose’s bride was usually chosen from among teenage boys aged between twelve and sixteen. The bride would wear women’s dress (sometimes a colourful chador) and heavy makeup and would tie bells around his waist and hands. Kose, his bride and the goats, accompanied by musicians, would knock on people’s doors to wish them abundance, wealth and God’s blessing. They would perform different plots at their hosts’ homes where they would receive money and gifts especially from the nobility and the rich (Heidari, 2013).

Salimi (2003), in his book on Kurdish winter rituals, describes several instances of kose-geldî in different towns and villages of Iranian Kurdistan. According to Salimi, Kose is mainly a comic figure who entertains the village people with his make-up, costume, dance and humour (Salimi, 2003, pp.99-101). But in some occasions, the village youth, change the Kose tradition by turning the Kose into a scary figure, usually with the help of fake moustache and beard and a large fur coat. Then they hide themselves while Kose knocks on people’s doors and frightens the ones unfamiliar with the tradition (ibid., p.104).

In villages of Sanandaj, the shepherds hold a Kose-Kose celebration in which some of the shepherds and cowboys are made up in the mosque’s çeqexane (a little room by the side of the main hall). Kose’s make-up and costume is meant to make him look frightening. Accompanied by the boisterous youth and children of the village, he starts walking through the streets and knocking on people’s doors. A series of questions and answers are exchanged between Kose and the landlord such as:

Kose: *pez be yekane, bizin be dwane,*
 May your sheep and goats be bountiful,
Xua bereket bida bew derk u bane,
 May God bless your household,
Selam xawen mal, koset mêwane,
 Hello landlord, Kose is your guest,
Nabê bêbeş bê, lew xanedane,
 He shouldn't be deprived of your blessings.
 Landlord: *Kose Xoş hatî, fermû danîşe,*
 Welcome Kose, come on in,
Le kwêt hênawe em gişte rîşe?!
 From where have you found this beard?!

Here, the shepherd who is standing behind Kose sings comic folkloric songs while Kose knocks his long clutch a few times on the ground and makes funny gestures at which the crowd start to laugh. The shepherd sings:

Kose hat û Kose çû, Kose mird û kifnê new
 Kose came and Kose went, Kose died and had no grave-clothes
Kifn le Kaşan bû, Kaşan rêbenan bû
 The grave-clothes were in Kashan, and the road to Kashan was closed
Koseyan nabe taqew, çawî cube zaqew
 Kose was put on the shelf, with his eyes wide open

Therefore, the tradition of Kose-geldî in Kurdistan is a form of street theatre performed by a shepherd or shepherds during the last days of winter. Kose's witticism and horseplay is the main characteristic of the tradition. But Kose-geldî is not just entertainment. By obliging the wealthy farmers to share their wealth with the poor shepherds, Kose-geldî is a reminder of communal values of caring for each other at the beginning of each year.

3.4 Rain Rituals

Kurdish rituals such as those of Garwanekî (Cattle-Raid) and Bûke-Barane (Rain Bride) are highly performative and theatrical in nature. Garwanekî is a cattle-raid ritual which used to be performed in many villages of Kermanshah, Ilam and also

Lorestan (western Iran).²³ This ritual which went out of practice only fifty years ago was performed by women during drought to invoke rain. Garwanekî, also known as “Gorwatenî”, “Gaberan”, “Gareba”, “Gabrwa”, and “Gayl rifanin”, literally means stealing cows. This ritual was performed mainly by women in spring and autumn in case of drought or delay in raining. When there was a delay in the onset of raining, women and girls of the village would gather together to arrange the ritual. They would elect a leader among themselves and move to the pastures where the cattle belonging to the neighbouring village was grazing. They would drive the cattle to their own village and if the cowboy or farmers working around that area intervened they would be beaten by the women. On hearing the news, the women and girls of the village to which the cattle belonged would immediately set off to fight the cow-thieves and take the cattle back. The collector of the ritual suggests that in any case the cow-stealers would ultimately win because they would be more prepared for the fight (Zarifian, 2009, p.206). However, one might suspect the seriousness of the fight and want to measure the theatrical nature of the ritual. Unfortunately the information existing about this ritual has been collected only after it went extinct which makes a careful observation of it out of the question. In any case, when the victorious group entered their village with the stolen cattle, the celebration would start in the village. The cows would be milked and the milk would then be boiled on fire, mixed with tea and served for all. A pot of milk would also be poured down the rainspouts to create the illusion of rain. In the meantime, the elders of the neighbouring village would come to plead for the release of the cattle. After they succeed in persuading the women to return the cattle they all stand in prayer to pray for rain and the ritual would end with the return of the cows to the neighbouring village.

Bûke-Barane is another Kurdish rain-ritual which used to be performed by young girls in Kurdistan at times of drought. In this ritual, a wooden doll dressed in a Kurdish women’s costume is surrounded by young girls who sing songs asking her to make

²³ All the information about Garwanaki here is based on fieldwork done by Mahmoud Zarifian (2009), Professor of Linguistics at the University of Tehran and the director of Radio Kermanshah. He has conducted his fieldwork in villages of Kermanshah, Ilam and Lorestan provinces in western Iran.

rain. In some versions of the event, children take the wooden doll door-to-door and people respond by pouring water over the doll.²⁴ Some of the songs sung during the ritual go like this:

Bûke Baran Awî Dewê
Rain bride wants water
Awî Naw Dexlanî Dewê
She wants the water for crops

Or;

Helaran Melaran
Xwaya Dayke Baran
O God make rain
Bo Feqîran û Hejaran
For the poor and the wretched

The association of women to water is seen in another rain-ritual which, however, is not particular to Kurds as it has been seen to have taken place in other Iranian towns as well.²⁵ This ritual is characterised by marrying girls to lakes that were drying up. It is recorded by the Kurdish-Iranian writer, Ali-Ashraf Darvishian in his autobiographical novel, *Sāl hāyi Abrî* (Cloudy Years). In the novel we read about Nazke, an old woman who was wedded to a lake when it was about to dry. Nazke narrates,

They sat me on a horse and took me to the lake and performed the wedding sermon. I slept at the lake for forty days and each day I woke up before sunrise, undressed and washed my body in the lake seven times. A small hut was set up for me and Kaw Lake...But it did not help...The lake dried out little by little. People lost their farms to drought. (Darvishian, 2000, p.559)

3.5 Ta'zieh and Kurdish Lamentation

A text-based poetic traditional performance in the region is ta'zieh which is a religious performance that occurs each year on the day of Ashūra by Muslim Shiites, including

²⁴ Some claim that the doll in this ritual is the symbol of Anahita, the goddess of water, and that the ritual dates back to the Zoroastrian era (Azimpur, 2006).

²⁵ This tradition which might have its origins in Mithraism has been performed in the Iranian villages of Golpaygan, Arāk, Tafresh, Malāyer, Tūyserkan, Mahalāt, Khomeyn, Delījāan, Isfahān, Dāmghān, Shāhrūd, Yazd, Shahrekord and Chārmahāl. See; (Afāzelī, 1998).

Shiite Kurds who live mainly in Kermanshah, Ilam, Khanaqin and villages near the Iraqi-Iranian border. Ta'zieh is a type of religious dramatic musical performance with several elements such as music (vocal and instrumental), recitation, poetry, narration and drama which originated in Iran. However, it belongs more to a religious group than a specific ethnic group. Literally, the term ta'zieh means mourning rituals held in commemoration of deceased dear ones, but in this case, it refers specifically to a type of religious performance commemorating the event of Karbala and the death of Hussein, Prophet Mohammad's grandson.

Like the Western passion plays, ta'zieh is usually performed in public spaces where large crowds may gather around the performers. It has been suggested that the commemoration of Hussein, at the beginning, comprised only of the narration of the events of Karbala (nohi-sarā'ī) (Sattari, 2008, p.94). Later it evolved into a dramatic ritual which comprised of detailed descriptions of the sufferings of Hussein and his supporters (rozi-khānī) and their enactments, as well as the enactments of the cruelty of Hussein's enemies (ibid.). In this religious performance, actor/singers with pleasant voices (and faces) who are dressed in green represent characters such as Hussein, and Ali-Akbar, while Shimr, Hussein's killer, and other "evil" characters are represented by actors with rough voices who are dressed in red and are armed with helmets, body armours, swords, spears and so on (ibid., p.100). The heart-wrenching singing of young boys and men from Hussein's family who are brutally murdered by the Caliph's army is meant to bring the audiences to tears. Indeed, ta'zieh performances are usually accompanied by the loud sobbing of the audiences.

The tradition of ta'zieh is said to have been greatly influenced by the ancient Iranian tradition of Sūgi Sīyāvash (Mourning Sīyavash) (see Maskūb, 1971; Sattari, 2008). In Ferdowsi's epic *Shahnameh* (The Book of Kings), Sīyāvash is a splendidly handsome and honourable prince, son to Kāvūs Shāh, king of Iran. Sīyāvash is coveted by his stepmother, Sūdābeh. When she is rejected by him, she makes her husband grow cold and turn against his son. Sīyāvash finds no alternative but to go into self-imposed exile in the mythical land of Tūran, and seek shelter under the rule of Afrāsīyāb, the tyrannical arch enemy of the Iranian Shah. Deceived by his envious

brother, Afrāsīyāb becomes suspicious of Sīyāvash and eventually sentences him to be beheaded. The news of Sīyāvash's death in exile prompts outbursts of grief and anger in Iran and results in several years of war between Iran and Tūran ending with Afrāsīyāb's defeat and death in the hands of Kay-Khosrow, Sīyāvash's son.

The tradition of Sūgi Sīyāvash is much older than *Shahnameh*. According to the tenth century historian, Narshakhī (ca. 899–959), Sīyāvash had been mourned in Central Asia for thousands of years: “people of Bukhara have strange hymns about the murder of Sīyāvash and musicians call those hymns Kīni Sīyāvash (The Vengeance of Sīyāvash)...Every year, on the dawn of the new year's day, the magi of Bukhara...sacrifice a rooster for Sīyāvash. The people of Bukhara have several hymns about his murder which are known in the entire realm... The qawwals (storytellers) call them the Crying of the Magi” (Narsakhi, 1938, pp.19-20,32).

Kurdish funeral rites contain traces of Sūge Sīyāvash which as described in *Shāhnāme* involved crying, scratching and injuring the body, pulling or chopping off of women's hair, cutting off the tail of the deceased hero's horse, wailing, asking rhetorical questions about the person's death, describing the good features and traits of the deceased, singing and playing musical instruments. This tradition is more elaborate among the Lor and the Lek (mainly in the Iranian provinces of Ilam, Lorestan and Kermanshah), whose tradition of Çemerî or Çemere, bears striking resemblances to the ancient mourning ritual (Farokhi and Kiyayi, 2001, pp.22-25; Sagvand, 1999, pp.10-13). An account by Rich (1787-1821) who was in Iraqi Kurdistan in 1820 attests to the deep roots of Çemerî tradition:

As I was going to the palace today, I saw at a distance three military standards moving along. I imagined a large body of troops was on the march; but to my great surprise, I was informed it was a funeral. This custom is peculiar to Koordistan. In Kermanshah they accompany the body to the grave with music and singing. (Rich, 1972, p.301)

At typical Kurdish funerals, the rites are not as elaborate as in Çemerî which itself is losing popularity among the Lor and the Lek. However, crying, injuring the body, pulling off of women's hair and lamentation are still considered social duties by many.

Kurdish lamentation is performed by women who may or may not be related to the deceased. Without musical accompaniment, the women usually sing about the deceased and his good features and traits, coaxing the funeral attendants to cry. Such ritual mourning services, which usually take place during the first three days, the seventh, and the fortieth days and a year after the death, serve as a valuable mechanism for remembering the deceased and the purging of grief.

3.6 The Mosque Performances

Pîrbal describes a type of performance which used to take place in mosques in Kurdistan. According to him, the students of Islamic jurisprudence or, *fiqh*, would entertain themselves on Tuesday and Friday nights, especially in winter, by games and dramatic performances (Pîrbal, 2001, pp.17–18). These performances represented the traditions and habits of the different Kurdish towns and cities where those students came from. Some of the people from the neighbourhoods would also participate in the performances which included: *Mamosta w Feqê* (The Teacher and the Faqih), *Westa w Şagird* (The Master and the Student), and *Bawk û Ewlad* (Father and Children). They would also wear costumes and act out various fables, stories featuring animals which illustrated different moral lessons (ibid.).

Tenya also explains that, in the past, in the mosques and other religious sites, the clergy, who were the educated elite, acted out simple plays in the form of operettas which criticised the ills and the wrong manners of the society. It is suggested by Tenya that these performances, which were customary in many towns in Kurdistan including, Xoşnawetî, Deştî Dizeyî, Hekarî, Rowanduz, Balekayeti, and Şukak, were the beginning of drama in Kurdistan (Tenya, 1958, p.49). In Iraqi Kurdistan, Islamic preaching in the form of performance was supported by Şêx Mehmûd Berzencî (1878-1956), a popular leader of the Sulaymaniyah region. Şêx Mehmûd's family, which was an important religious family in Sulaymaniyah, had historically supported dramatic performances in mosques which, as described by Teymûr, celebrated the occasion of the graduation of students of Islamic jurisprudence or the *faqih* (Teymûr, 1988).

Islamic preaching in the form of performance and storytelling is not particular to Kurds. According to Amine and Carlson, in the first centuries of Islam, a form of official storytelling, called the *qissa*, was sanctioned by the leaders of the faith to provide religious and moral guidance to the illiterate majority, and these were widely circulated and presented, often to enormous crowds, in streets, markets, and public spaces (Amīn and Carlson, 2011). Islamic preachers have been divided to separate categories such as *qass*, *mudhakkir*, *waiz* and *meddah*. It seems that the operettas mentioned by Tenya fall in the category of *qissa* whose presenters are described to have drawn upon “many techniques of the popular storyteller such as song, mimicry, accessories, and character interpretation” (ibid., p.24).

3.7 Storytelling

The dramatic storytelling which is a common tradition across most countries in the Middle East may be considered the native theatrical tradition of the region and the closest to the Western-style theatre.²⁶ The storyteller is known by names such as *qawwal*, *gouwâl*, *meddah*, and more commonly, *hakawati* in Arabic, *aşik* in Turkish, and *naqāl* in Persian. In Kurdistan, the narrator-performers who tell long epic songs without musical accompaniment before a live audience are known as *dengbêj* or *sha'ir* (Chyet, 1991, p.9). In the past, because most of the *dengbêjs* were illiterate and a large proportion of Kurdish folk literature was still unwritten, these performers specialised in memorising and reciting vast repertoires of songs, legends, and poems of Kurdistan. Trained in certain schools (Jwaideh, 2006, p.24), the *dengbêjs* used to have patrons who supported and took care of them and were, in return, praised in their *dengbêjs'* songs. In Turkey the *dengbêj* tradition came under attack by both the Turkish state and the Kurdish movement (PKK). The state's clampdown on expressions of Kurdish identity especially since 1980 and Kurdish movement's dislike for *dengbêjs'* association with feudal system resulted in the decline of the

²⁶Izedîn Resûl, the distinguished Kurdish scholar, believes the traditional storytelling to be an apt introduction to any study of Kurdish theatre (See Rasul, 2010, p.42).

tradition (Scalbert-Yücel, 2009). On the Kurdish dengbêj in the first decade of the twentieth century, Oscar Mann writes,

It seems that among the Kurds...there was and still is a type of singing school, in which they cultivate popular epic poetry. Young people with fine singing voices betake themselves to a master...to follow his instruction, and learn the repertoire of these masters exclusively by oral tradition...the field where the art of recitation thus learned may be first practiced is in the houses of notables, who gladly pass the evening by listening to the singing of bards and generously repay the latter with Khalat (=gifts). Moreover, in the villages the bard contents himself with a plate of rice as payment for his recitation. In the towns, there are also coffee houses in which only tea is served which are packed full with people who have come primarily to hear the performance of whatever singer happens to be there (cited in *ibid.*, pp.10-11).

The story-tellers would employ a range of dramatic techniques such as gestures and different voices for different characters. For example, in his study of voice and the speed of verbal discourse during the storytelling of Mem û Zîn, Chyet writes, “when Mem awakes to find that Zîn is gone, the narrator-performer loudly interjects Ey-wah! (woe is me): he alters the pitch of his voice...moreover, although at the beginning of the story the narrator-performer speaks slowly and deliberately, when he gets to Mem and Zîn’s argument over who has come to whom, he is speaking quickly and excitedly: thus he alters the speed of his verbal discourse” (*ibid.*, p.110).

Traditionally in the Middle East, storytelling was highly interactive, as audiences were encouraged to comment upon or even participate in the presentation of the story, which was interrupted from time to time in order for the performers to collect donations from the spectators. The material in such performances varied from legends, folktales, history to popular anecdotes (Amîn and Carlson, 2011, p.18). In Kurdistan, apart from countless folktales, folk songs, folk dances, poems, riddles, and proverbs, there are a number of widely known folk romances told in a combination of prose and sung verse. Some of these narratives including *Leylî û Mecnûn* and *Yusuf û Zilêxa* are also shared by neighbouring peoples such as the Armenian, Nestorian, Chaldean, and Jacobite Christians, as well as by the Kurdish

Jews. There are also long Kurdish narratives, such as *Mem û Zîn*, *Dimdim* and *Xec û Siyabend* (Allison, 2001, p.13).

Storytelling has been the most common and popular form of performance in many parts of Kurdistan. Many of the Kurdish emirs and feudal landlords were patrons of the arts, and hosted performances of both literary and oral material, and had their own court poets to sing their praises, as befitted their status (ibid., pp.10-11). The best season for storytelling was long winter evenings and the holy month of Ramadan, just after the breaking of fast when the local people would gather in coffeehouses. The stories told and enacted by the storyteller were mainly folktales and histories of local heroes. A popular saying among Kurdish Jews is: "Two things are necessary in winter, fire and folktale; fire to warm the body and folktale to warm the heart" (Floor, 2005, p.101). In Iranian Kurdistan, reading stories from Ferdowsi's epic *Shāhnāme* (Book of Kings) was so popular that each great family in Kermanshah had their own *Shāhnām-i-khān*. Many verses of *Shahnameh* stories told by Kurdish storytellers, according to Floor, were translated into Kurdish (ibid., p.103). Izedîn Mistefa Resûl recounts how during the nights of Ramadan, the storytellers would narrate stories about the heroes of *Shahnameh* such as Rustemî Zal and Zorab in the big coffeehouses of the Kurdish cities (Rasûl, 2010, p.41). He describes how the performers were able to completely engage their audiences who would divide into separate groups that cheered for different characters and grieved for their demise (ibid., p.42).

In Kurdistan, the performers of prose narratives are called *çîrokbêj*. The *çîrokbêj* were usually itinerant performers who wandered on foot from city to city, selecting public places to present their tales, with a strong theatrical element including improvised dramatic action, impersonation, singing, and dancing, usually accompanied by a tambourine and flute. Such performers enjoyed lower prestige than the *dengbêj* and, like the *aşik*, seem to have disappeared (Allison, 2010).

Perhaps the most prestigious and popular oral genre in Kurdistan is poetry. The long narrative poems are called *beyt* in Sorani and *qewl* or *hozan* in Kurmanji (ibid.). Some beyts are about the history of a region and important events in the lives of the noble families who ruled the region. These are told by the *beyt-bêj* who are considered to be local historians. They recount the glories of the past and so imbue their people with a sense of local pride and unity. However, praise-poem and heroic recitations were particularly used to honour the nobility who were patrons of local poets and artists. Every great house in Kurdistan had its own poet who would narrate their oral history. The *beyt-bêj* would sometimes narrate romantic epics or historical narratives in public places such as mosques and tea-houses. In Between 1901 and 1903 and in collaboration with Javad Qazi, Oskar Mann, the German Kurdologist, collected nineteen *beyts* as told by a local *beyt-bêj* named Rehman Bekir in Mahabad, and along with six Kurdish legends published them in a book called *Die Mundart der Mukri*.²⁷

According to Amine and Carlson, although storytelling is not text-based, it clearly contains many features of drama including, role-playing, epic narrativity, body language, interplay between illusion and reality, high/low rhythms, songs as instruments of blockage and structural fragmentation and a committed audience (Amīn and Carlson, 2011, p.20). Friederike Pannewick's description of narrative characteristics of *hakawati*, as quoted by Amine and Carlson, demonstrates its similarity to and difference from standard Western theatre:

1. His performance therefore has an animating quality, as, much more so than within an institutional framework of a conventional theatre building, he has to take into account that his clientele will desert him if his performance does not meet their expectations, his success will only be guaranteed if he is able to turn his narration into an event; something has to happen between him and the audience.
2. in order to comply with the demands of the situation, he will demonstrate a great deal of flexibility: his narrative performance is designed in such a way that he can shift from the mode of straight-forward narration to addressing the audience directly at any time. This way, he can prevent his audience from

²⁷ In Iran, several researchers including Hêmin the poet, Abdullah Ayübîyan, and Qader Fattahî Qazî have embarked on collecting local beyts which are at risk of disappearance.

losing interest by increasing the dramatic tension whenever necessary (ibid., p.21).

Various factors such as urbanisation, education, arrival of electricity, radio and television and new forms of entertainment contributed to the decline of dengbêjî and other forms of traditional entertainment in the Middle East in general and Kurdistan in particular. An excerpt of Naguib Mahfouz's novel *Zuquq al-Midaqq* ("Midaq Alley") brilliantly illustrates the decline of the storyteller phenomenon in the Middle East and its replacement by the radio:

He picked up his instrument and began to pluck its strings...he played a few introductory notes just as the coffee-house had heard him play every evening for twenty years or more...then he cleared his throat, spat and said: 'in the name of God...we are going to begin today by saying a prayer for the prophet. An Arab prophet, the chosen son of Adnan. Abu Saada, the Zanaty, says that...' he was interrupted by someone who entered at that point and said roughly: 'Shut up! Don't say a single word more!...are you going to force your recitations on us? That's the end — the end! Didn't I warn you last week?...we all know the stories you tell by heart and we don't need to run through them again. People today don't want a poet. They keep asking me for a radio and there's one over there being installed now. So g/o away and leave us alone and may God provide for you...' the old man's face clouded and he remembered sadly that Kirsha's café was the only one left to him and indeed his last source of livelihood...old as he was, and now with his living cut off, what was he to do with his life? What was the point of teaching his poor son his profession when it had died like this? (Maḥfūz, 1975, pp.4-6)

3.8 Conclusion

Despite a wealth of traditional folk performance, modern text-based drama was introduced to Iraqi Kurdistan only during the early twentieth century. In fact with all the restrictions on Kurdish cultural expression it is amazing that Kurdish has survived and flourished to become a literary language. Despite their ability to write in dominant languages, Kurdish writers and playwrights have continued to write in their native language and sometimes have paid the price with their lives. Divided up between Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria, the Kurdish land has been a conflict zone for years and as such Kurdish writers have been preoccupied with issues of national identity and

oppression. In a context in which the Kurds are still an oppressed minority, theatre provides a space for reviving and reclaiming their heritage and also commenting on issues of national identity and political oppression. The following chapter contextualises the emergence of theatre in Iraqi Kurdistan and explores its developments up to 1975.

Chapter Four:

The Development of Kurdish Theatre in Iraq, 1926-1975

Hewramî (2001) argues that the emergence of drama in Kurdistan began immediately after the banning of the traditional spring festival, described in the previous chapter and this means that the Kurdish drama was born out of the need to play in a society which had lost its traditional form of theatre to the colonisers' whim. The loss of the traditional Kurdish festival might have had an impact on the acceptance of theatre in Kurdistan in the 1920s. However theatre would not have emerged in Kurdistan if it was not for the following reasons:

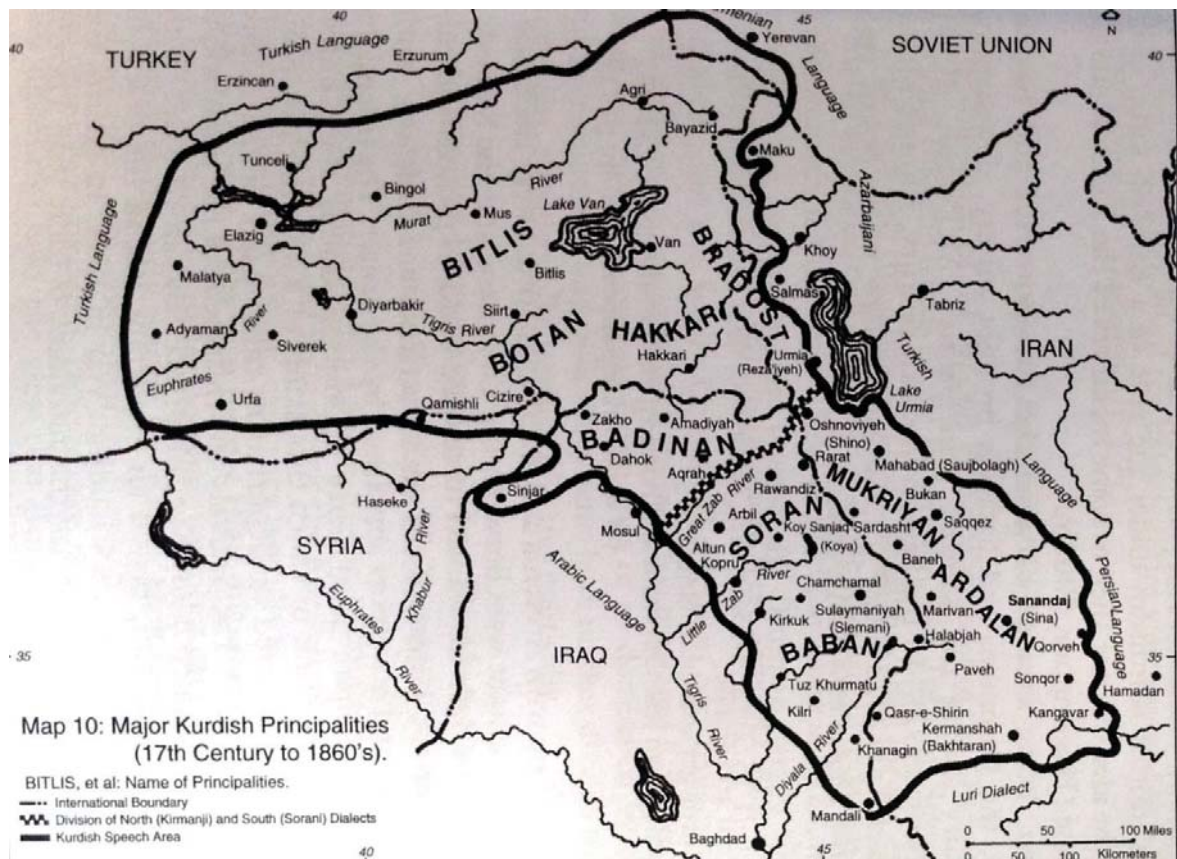
First, theatre emerged in Sulaymaniyah which was historically a socially and culturally vibrant city with its bazars, roads, mosques, schools and caravansaries built with the support of its rulers (ibid., p.294). Second, Sulaymaniyah was the most nationalist locations in Iraqi Kurdistan. Last but not least, the return of Kurdish intellectuals and notables from Istanbul to their hometown, Sulaymaniyah, in the 1920s following the ban on Kurdish language and culture in Turkey, played an important role in the revival of cultural life in Iraqi Kurdistan. In order to better understand the context in which theatre emerged in Kurdistan, the following offers a glimpse into the history of the city of Sulaymaniyah since its foundation and the socio-political developments that led to the emergence of theatre.

4.1 Socio-political Developments Leading to the Emergence of Theatre

4.1.1 Sulaymaniyah under the Baban Rule

Sulaymaniyah, was built during the reign of Ibrahîm Paşa of the House of Baban, the last Kurdish principality that ruled parts of Iraqi (and Iranian) Kurdistan. This powerful dynasty was founded by Baba Sulayman who in the seventeenth century, rendered important services to an Ottoman Sultan in a war with Persia and as such was rewarded with all he could conquer (Edmonds, 1957, p.81). In 1783, Ibrahîm Paşa (1783-1803) moved the Baban capital to Sulaymaniyah, a new town he had

built and allegedly named after the then Pasha of Bagdad. At the time of C. J. Edmonds' visit to Sulaymaniyah in the early 1920s, it was the reign of Ebdurrehman Paşa, cousin and successor of the founder of Sulaymaniyah, that was remembered in local memory as "a period of sturdy Kurdish independence" (ibid., p.54). After Ebdurrehman, Baban rule started to weaken, yet as Edmonds notes, "to the last the character of the administration remained essentially Kurdish and the rulers maintained their own regular army and other signs of petty royalty" (ibid.) Ultimately, with the defeat of Ehmed Paşa (1838-1847) by Najib Pasha of Baghdad in 1847, Baban autonomy came to an end and Sulaymaniyah fell under the direct rule of Ottoman Turks.



Major Kurdish Principalities

Source: (Hassanpour, 1992, p.51)

According to the historians, Ehmed Xace, and Şakir Fetah, traditional Kurdish festivals and celebrations which involved dramatic performances were supported by Baban rulers who controlled Sulaymaniyah from mid-seventeenth century to mid-nineteenth century and by Şêx Mehmûd Berzencî in the twentieth century (Teymûr, 1988, p.68). In his narrative of residence in Kurdistan, C. J. Rich describes his visit to the Baban court in Sulaymaniyah during the rule of Mehmûd Paşa (1813-1834), his conversations with various personalities, antagonisms between the Babans and the Ottoman Turks, weddings, funerals, dancing and daily sporting events such as displays of swordsmanship, shooting, dog and partridge fighting, horse-racing, and wrestling. His accounts of the favourite pastimes in Sulaymaniyah are also interesting in that they reveal much about the importance of communal life in Kurdistan:

The Koords are the only orientals I ever knew who sit up late at night, and rise late in the morning. Few gentlemen in Sulaimania go to bed till two or three o'clock...When it grows dark they begin going to each other's houses, where they amuse themselves with conversation, smoking and music...About an hour before sunset also, a kind of club or assembly is held before the house of the Masraf,²⁸ in an open place in the town called the Meidan. Friends meet and chat on various subjects; arms or horses are displayed; and sometimes matches are made of wrestling, partridge or dog-fights...The Koords are the most determined sportsmen I ever knew...it is the favorite passion of the nation. (Rich, 1972, pp.104, 128)

Open-air amusements and celebrations, as Edmonds states, have always been popular in Sulaymaniyah (Edmonds, 1957, p.84). The annual spring carnival which involved the coronation of the false emir had an ancient origin and was celebrated vigorously in Sulaymaniyah until the First World War (ibid.). These festivals were only interrupted by important events such as the death of Şêx Seîd Berzencî, the highest religious authority in the region. His death brought a halt to celebrations, storytelling and gramophones at teahouses (Teymûr, 1988, p.68). After the due period of grieving over his death, the carnivals and celebrations were resumed.

²⁸ A prominent family in Sulaymaniyah

During the spring carnival, it was customary that the elders of Sulaymaniyah would take control of the city for three days and all their orders were implemented. This was an occasion for three days of festivities which would start from the City Centre where people danced to the sound of *Dehol* and *Zurna* for two days. Later, they would all walk towards *Sarchinar* springs where the false emir festival, as described in the previous chapter, was held and the new king was crowned. The festivities would end with people's joyful return to the city to the accompaniment of music (Tenya, 1958, pp.45–46).

The court of Ewrehman Paşa, one of the greatest Baban rulers, was always well attended by the beytbêj, singers and poets such as Elî Berdeşanî, Cemşîd and Heme Asmanî whose poems, known as *beytî meclîs*, recorded the events and epic battles fought by the Kurdish emir (Resul, 2004, p.10). The peaceful reign of Ehmed Paşa further paved the way for the economic and intellectual revival of the city of Sulaymaniyah. In Kurdish literature, the two centuries of Baban rule has been celebrated as glowing days of Kurdish independence. A poem by Şêx Reza Talebanî (1842-1910) is a notable example of such widely shared feelings a few decades since the extinction of Baban rule:

Le Bîrim dê Slêmanî ke Darûlmûlkî Baban bû
(I remember Sulaymaniyah when it was the capital of the Babans)
Ne Mehkûmî Ecem ne Suxrekêşî alî Usman bû...
(It was neither subject to the Persians nor slave-driven by the House of Usman...)
Le Ber Tabûrî Esker rê Nebû bo Meclîsî Paşa
(By reason of the batallions of troops there was no access to the Pasha's audience chamber)
Seday Mûzîqe w Neqare ta Eywanî Keywan bû
(the sound of bands and kettle-drums rose to the halls of Saturn)
(cited in Edmonds, 1957, pp.57–58)

Due to many years of self-rule, Sulaymaniyah developed a unique sense of Kurdishness which later paved the way for the emergence and development of theatre in Kurdistan. As Edmonds notes, at Sulaymaniyah, an abiding conviction that the town contained the germs of a revived and extensive Kurdish state of which it was the fore-ordained capital was present among all classes of the population. This

belief, according to Edmonds, was always in the air and seemed to give to Sulaymaniyah a “personality”, so strong that few Kurds could stay there very long without succumbing to its heady influence (ibid., p.59).

4.1.2 Sulaymaniyah after the First World War

An important factor that contributed to the development of Kurdish national identity and the revival of cultural life in Sulaymaniyah was the events that followed the First World War and the fall of the Ottoman Empire. The decentralized policies of the Ottoman state in the late eighteenth century had resulted in the increasing independence of Kurdish principalities, the notable ones among them being, the Botan, the Baban and the Hakkari emirates (ibid., p.65). The notable families of the Ottoman Empire became a significant political force particularly after the eighteenth century. In the Kurdish provinces, the notables were composed of the Sufi sheikhs especially from the Naqshbandi branch, the tribal nobility, and families with local administrative positions (Özoğlu, 2004, p.12). In the early nineteenth century, the Ottoman and Persian Empires adopted a more centralized approach to cope with international threats. In the early 19th century, Sultan Mahmud started the process of eliminating the emirates and subjugating Kurdistan which could provide a bulwark against Russian expansion (Strohmeier, 2003, p.10). By 1850 the last Kurdish principalities were abolished and the Kurdish provinces were governed by centrally appointed administrators. The Kurdish revolts against the Ottoman state proved fruitless and Kurdish leaders were exiled to Istanbul where the state could keep a close eye on them. However, the cultural, political and intellectual atmosphere of Istanbul following the Young Turk Revolution in 1908 provided the exiled Kurdish notables with the opportunity to establish Kurdish cultural and political organisations such as *Kürt Teavün ve Terakki Cemiyeti* or the Society for Mutual Aid and Progress of Kurdistan and *Kürdistan Teali Cemiyeti* or the Society for the Advancement of Kurdistan.

In 1918, the nationalist aspirations of non-Turkish peoples of the Ottoman Empire, especially the notable families who lost their power and privileges, were encouraged

by the Ottoman Empire's military defeat and Point 12 of President Woodrow Wilson's 14 point "Programme of the World Peace" which stipulated that they should be "assured of an absolute, unmolested opportunity of autonomous development."

4.1.3 Şêx Mehmûd's Rebellion in 1919

The most important family in the early Twentieth century Sulaymaniyah was that of the sheikhs of Berzence. As Edmonds notes, in Kurdistan, sheikhs, sayyids and dervish orders loomed large in the daily life of Kurdistan. It has been argued that the rise of Islamic mystic brotherhoods of Naqshbandi and Qadiriya in Kurdistan could be related to the loss of traditional power structures (Strohmeier, 2003, pp.12–13). While the brotherhoods, particularly the Nagshbandis, had enjoyed the support of the Ottoman sultans, the fall of principalities and the power vacuum that resulted from it, arguably, enhanced the importance of sheikhs. With their authority depending on their charisma and metaphysical abilities, the sheikhs transcended local tribal chiefs in forging alliances and consolidating support.

In the mid nineteenth century, the most numerous and most influential Sayyid family of Iraqi Kurdistan came from the village of Berzence. The founder is said to have been a certain Isa Nûrbexş from Hamadan in Iran who settled in Berzence in 1258. By 1792-3, the Berzencî sheikhs were so influential that their leader, Sayyid Taha, received revenues from Sultan Selim III to upkeep the Berzence mosque.

Şêx Mehmûd Berzencî (1881-1956) came from the Nodê branch of the Berzencî family. His great-great-grandfather, Şêx Merûf, rose to prominence in 1820 after he allegedly defeated his rival, Mewlana Xalid Neqşendî, in a miracle-working challenge. Mewlana Xalid who highly revered and considered a saint by his disciples fled from Sulaymaniyah where the Berzencî family was soon to become the most powerful political force. Şêx Merûf's son, Kak Ehmed, secured his family's privileged

position by performing miracles for Sultan Abdul Hamid who granted him the revenues of five villages of Nodê, Bizenyan, Ezeban, Xeracîyan and Weladar.²⁹

Following the First World War, the Ottoman administration in Kurdistan officially terminated thus leaving Şêx Mehmûd in sole control of Sulaymaniyah and the surrounding countryside (Jwaideh, 2006, p.163). Shortly thereafter, he was appointed governor of the Sulaymaniyah district and head of the new South Kurdish Federation (ibid., p.164). Convinced of his right to be recognized as the leader of an independent Kurdish state, he rose against the British by imprisoning British officers and appointing his own administration in Sulaymaniyah in May 1919. His rebellion sparked similar incidents across the border in Iranian Kurdistan where tribes declared their solidarity with Şêx Mehmûd's plan for a free and united Kurdistan (ibid., p.180). Şêx Mehmûd was, however, swiftly defeated by the British in June 1919 and banished to India in 1921.



Şêx Mehmûd Berzencî

²⁹ A biography of Kak Ehmed is collected by Pîremêrd in his edition of *The Miraculous Acts of Shaikh Kak Ahmad*.

4.1.4 Sulaymaniyah under Major Soane

After Şêx Mehmûd's defeat, Major E. B. Soane, who was the political officer in charge of the Sulaymaniyah district, resumed his authority. Though he ruled with an iron fist, Soane was sympathetic towards Kurds and Kurdistan in general. During his office, Sulaymaniyah achieved greater prosperity than it had known before (McDowall, 2004, p.158). He encouraged agriculture and the cultivation of tobacco and protected the poorer classes. He rebuilt the town which had been destroyed by the Turks. He recognized the Kurdish character of Sulaymaniyah and helped maintain and strengthen it. Schools were opened in which Kurdish, not Arabic or Turkish, was the medium of instruction. He encouraged writing in Kurdish by launching Sulaymaniyah's first Kurdish newspaper *Pêşkewtin* (Progress). Soane believed in Kurdish self-determination and as such did his best to give to the local administration a Kurdish trend. Not only were all his officials Kurds, but Kurdish dress was made compulsory. These policies helped "secure a degree of local autonomy which was not enjoyed by any other part of the occupied territories" (ibid., p.159), thus boosting Sulaymaniyah's image as the Kurdish political and cultural centre in Iraqi Kurdistan. However, Britain's policies towards Mesopotamia were about to change towards the end of the 1920s. The British government decided to abandon the Mandate to set up a unified Iraqi government. Therefore, Soane's services, now in conflict with the policy of creating the state of Iraq, were dispensed with.

4.1.5 The Return of Şêx Mehmûd

By 1922, Turkish agitations in Iraqi Kurdistan had challenged the British administration's authority to such an extent as to force them to bring back Şêx Mehmûd and reinstate him as the governor of Sulaymaniyah. He formed a cabinet composed of local notables, issued postage stamps and published a newspaper *Rojî Kurdistan* (Kurdistan Daily). However, it did not take long before Şêx Mehmûd repeated his previous ambitious move to create an independent Kurdistan. This time

he claimed authority over all Kurdish areas within Iraq and declared himself King of Kurdistan. He replaced *Rojî Kurdistan* with *Bangî Heq* (Call of Truth) wherein he called for war on British occupation. His rebellion was again crushed by RAF and the Iraqi army and Sulaymaniyah was occupied in 1924.

By now, Sulaymaniyah had developed a distinct personality which is evident in that it was the only city in Kurdistan which had clearly refused the Arab-Iraqi dominance and rejected any form of inclusion under an Iraqi government (ibid.). It refused to participate in the referendum held in 1921 to determine the validity of Faysal's choice as king of Iraq (Jwaideh, 2006, p.187). It had enjoyed special status under the British mandate as the only occupied territory with a Kurdish governor in charge (ibid., pp.155-156) and Kurdish was introduced as the language of administration and instruction in schools (Edmonds, 1968, p.513). Şêx Mehmûd Berzencî, the governor of Sulaymaniyah, declared himself the ruler of all Kurdistan and demanded independence from Iraq. Although his rebellion was crushed, the nationalists in Sulaymaniyah continued to petition for the recognition of the independence of Kurdistan before Britain's betrayal of its promises in the Treaty of Lausanne.³⁰ Before anywhere else in Kurdistan, Sulaymaniyah became home to a new class of young educated and urban Kurdish nationalists who would later on form left-leaning nationalist groups such as *Komeley Brayetî* (Brotherhood Society), *Darkar* (Woodcutters) and *Hîwa* (Hope).

4.1.6 Events following the Treaty of Lausanne (1923)

The Treaty of Sèvres, signed in August 1920, included provision for the recognition of a Kurdistan and an Armenia state in Eastern Turkey. This independent Kurdish state was to be carved out of south-east Anatolia, with the Kurds of the Mosul vilayet (in Iraq) given the option of joining the new state at a later date (Section III, Articles 62-64). This treaty, however, was not ratified owing to the rise of Mustafa Kemal in Turkey. Instead, it was replaced by the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) which included provisions for the creation of Iraq and Syria with no mention of Kurdistan or Armenia.

³⁰ For details about the rebellion of Şêx Mehmûd Berzencî, see (Jwaideh, 2006, pp.160-203).

Therefore, Northern Kurdistan was recognised as being Turkish territory, with the Mosul vilayet falling under the de facto control of the British-mandated Iraq. The two major reasons behind the change from Sèvres to Lausanne were London's desire to ensure the unity of Iraq, first, to control the oil reserves around Kirkuk which were of great value to Royal Navy's new oil-fired vessels, and second, to avoid further financial loss on overseas projects following the World War.

The Turkish-Iraqi border was identified by a League of Nations commission in December 1925. The commission recognised that the Kurds form five-eighths of the population of the Mosul vilayet and that they are neither Arabs nor Turks. It awarded the Mosul vilayet to Iraq, provided that Britain was prepared to extend its mandate over Iraq for 25 years, and appointed Kurdish officials, judges and teachers and used Kurdish language; the reason for these provisions being the unstable internal conditions of the kingdom (*Question of the Frontier Between Turkey and Iraq*, 1925).

In Turkey, however, the liberal political environment that had allowed for the establishment of pro-Kurdish organisations after the Young Turk Revolution did not last long as the ruling Committee for Union and Progress (CUP) party reversed its liberal multi-ethnic policies and adopted a strict Turkish nationalist approach following the creation of the Republic of Turkey. The crush of subsequent Kurdish rebellions and the ban on expressions of Kurdish culture and language led many Kurdish notables into exile, an event which influenced the emergence of theatre in Iraqi Kurdistan.

4.1.7 The Creation of Iraq and its Consequences for Kurdistan

As the Kurdish nationalist aspirations were at odds with British policy, the Kurds led by Şêx Mehmûd revolted against the British-Arab rule but were swiftly defeated as Kurds became one of the first victims of the Royal Air Force's aerial bombardments in history. The Treaty of Lausanne of July 1923 partitioned Kurdistan into a Northern region recognised as Turkish territory and the oil-rich Mosul province under the control of British-mandated Iraq. Britain, however, devised a new policy of rapidly

liquidating the mandatory regime in Iraq which resulted in several petitions addressed to the League of Nations by Kurdish notables of Sulaymaniyah. In nine petitions dating from July 1930 to April 1931, the signatories demanded the formation of a Kurdish Government under supervision of the League of Nations in the event of the mandatory regime in Iraq being brought to an end ('The admission of 'Iraq to membership of the League of nations and the problem of the non-Arab minorities', 1935, pp.130–131). The League, however, rejected the petitions and thus removed the possibility of a Kurdish state in Northern Iraq. Clashes erupted again when Iraq secured its independence from Britain in early 1930s with Sulaymaniyah becoming the site of mass demonstrations and stone-throwing as a result of which fourteen civilians were killed by the Iraqi troops (McDowall, 2004, p.176). The Hashemite monarchy was established and Iraq became officially recognized as the Kingdom of Iraq in October 1932.

In 1932 the Council of the League of Nations gave its approval to admit Iraq to membership of the League on condition that the Iraqi government gave formal guarantees for, among other things, the protection of minorities. In accordance with this decision the Iraqi government issued a declaration which safeguarded the rights of indigenous minorities including full protection of life and liberty, equality before the law, civil and political rights, freedom in use of any language, and right to maintain their own institutions and educational establishments. Even before this declaration the Iraqi constitution of 1925 had guaranteed the equality of all Iraqis before the law, freedom of worship, and instruction in their own languages. The Local Languages Law of 1931 provided that the official language should be Kurdish or Turkish in a number of districts and that in all elementary and primary schools in those districts the language of instruction should be the mother-tongue of the majority of the pupils.

However, the Iraqi government failed to enforce its constitutional provisions to provide minorities with adequate share in government and army appointments and subsidies to schools. This was anticipated by Kurds who had expressed their concerns about how they would be treated by the Arab-Iraqi government and had sought autonomy under British auspices. Revolts broke out in Kurdistan first under

Şêx Mehmûd and then under Şêx Ehmed of Barzan due to partly political and partly personal reasons. These revolts were suppressed only with the support of RAF. At home, however, experienced British officers and politicians had started to question the validity of Britain's stance towards the Kurds in Iraq. In 1933, Captain P. S. Mumford voiced his concern about the situation of minorities, including the Kurds who, according to him, "disliked being under an Arab Government and claimed that the promise of limited autonomy held out to them by the Mandatory Power...had not been honoured," the continuous operations against them since the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty proving the truth of their contention (Davidson, 1933, p.76).

From 1932 to 1943 the Kurds did not revolt again but continued to refuse the authority of the Government. According to Hourani (1947, p.98), there were two main reasons for the Kurds' unwillingness to accept the rule of the Iraqi government: The first was the growth of Kurdish national spirit, due partly to the gradual appearance of a class of educated Kurds, partly to a natural reaction against Pan-Arabism. The second and more fundamental reason was the administrative grievances of Kurds. As Hourani mentions,

The Iraqi Government made little attempt to carry out the provisions of the various laws passed during the mandatory period. Government departments in Bagdad tended to neglect the claims of districts so far away from the capital; and the Kurds had no way of making their voice heard effectively...In general, Arab officials in the northern provinces failed to understand the mentality and needs of the Kurdish people (ibid.).

The Government's neglect of Kurdish concerns showed itself in various spheres. According to a British foreign office document on Iraqi Kurdistan, in May 1944, there were few facilities for education, and those which existed were mainly for education in Arabic:

[...] out of a total population of 180,000 souls, there are only some 3500 receiving education. There are 43 primary schools (of which 12 are in Sulaymaniyah town) with 165 teachers between them, and two intermediate

schools (respectively for boys and girls) with a total of 23 teachers. Of the 165 primary teachers, 43 speak no Kurdish and in one or two cases a single non-Kurdish speaker is the only teacher in the school. The teaching in intermediate schools are in Arabic ('1946 British Foreign Office Documents on the Kurds', n.d.).

The problems in Kurdistan were not limited to education. As Hourani states, nothing was done to extend and improve the cultivation of the land and raise the standard of living in Kurdistan which had serious consequences at the time of war: "The mountain districts did not produce enough cereals to feed the population and importation on an adequate scale was rendered difficult by the poverty of the Kurdish peasants, the lack of a food-supply organization and the insufficiency of transport" (Hourani, 1947, p.99). Edmonds confirms Hourani's assessment by saying that the guarantees given to the League in 1925 and 1932 were either being ignored or at best grudgingly implemented and that "the Kurdish districts were not getting their fair share of social services, particularly education at all levels, or of development projects" (Edmonds, 1968, p.514).

4.1.8 The Return of the Elite to Sulaymaniyah

With Iraqi Kurdistan enjoying recognition as a Kurdish region, several Kurdish notables from Sulaymaniyah who were involved in pro-Kurdish activities in Turkey returned from Istanbul to their hometown or Baghdad, where some of them were appointed to high-ranking government offices. The educated elite who returned to Sulaymaniyah took great interest and took part in political and cultural developments in the region. Salih Zekî Beg, Refîq Hilmî and Pîremêrd are examples of the elite's involvement in pro-Kurdish affairs. Salih Zekî Beg was from the prominent Sulaymaniyah family of Sahibqiran. The family descended from a certain Ehmed Beg Sahib-Qiran whose son Mehmûd was Commander in Chief of the armed forces under one of the later Babans. Distinguished members of this family were the poets "Kurdî" and "Salim", Ehmed Begî Fettah Beg, and Lady Adila of Halabja. Salih Zekî Beg himself was a colonel in the Ottoman army until 1921. He joined Şêx Mehmûd's movement and became the commander in chief of the National Armed Forces. After the crush of Şêx Mehmûd's rebellion, Salih Zekî was exiled to Baghdad where he

published a literary, cultural and social journal called *Diyarî Kurdistan* (The Gift of Kurdistan) between 1925 and 1926. This was the first Kurdish journal in Iraq to be printed in colour.

The Kirkuk-born Refîq Hilmî was the renowned Kurdish cultural and political figure and the leader of *Hîwa* party. He studied engineering in Istanbul and returned to Sulaymaniyah in the 1920s where he had an active role in the political and cultural life of the town. For his rare intellectual qualities and his mastery of several languages including Kurdish, Persian, Arabic, Turkish, English and French, he had become a close friend of Şêx Mehmûd's who called him Refîq Hilmî, the Enlightened (*munewer*) .

Perhaps the single most important literary figure in Kurdistan for three decades was Pîremêrd. The role played by Pîremêrd is of particular importance to this study as he printed the first plays in Iraqi Kurdistan, wrote plays himself, helped promote education and building of schools which became the first places where theatrical works were performed, and was the first to promote theatre and write critically about it. For his important contributions to an emerging Kurdish theatre, his life and achievements are dealt with in more details in the following.

4.1.9 Tewfîq Mehmûd Hemze, Pîremêrd (1867-1950)

Tewfîq Mehmûd Hemze (1867-1950) known as Pîremêrd (the old man), was the most prominent literary figure in Iraqi Kurdistan until his death in 1950. Sulaymaniyah owed much of its cultural and literary revival in the early twentieth century to Pîremêrd's efforts as an ardent advocate of education and modernisation. A lawyer, diplomat, poet, writer, and journalist, Pîremêrd was a man of varied interests and tastes, with his works embracing literature, history, economy, philosophy, religion and politics. In the course of a long literary career, Pîremêrd produced a great number of poems, stories, essays, proverbs, and some translations. For many years, he was the editor of *Jîn*, the outstanding literary magazine in Iraqi Kurdistan. He was

a talented poet with a whimsical sense of humour that endeared him to all who knew him (Jwaideh, 2006, p.25).

Pîremêrd was born in 1867 in Sulaymaniyah to an influential landowning family. His great grandfather, Mehmûd Mesref, served as prime minister and minister of treasury to Mehmûd Paşa of Baban. At the same time, he was the chief impresario of the sporting events organised for the entertainment of distinguished guests, such as C. J. Rich, the British traveller who recounts his visit to Mehmûd Paşa's court in his *Narrative of a Residence in Koordistan*. Pîremêrd's grandfather was the minister of treasury (*wakil xerc*) in the court of Ehmed Paşa, the last emir of Baban principality.

After finishing his primary education, Pîremêrd became a faqih (cleric) and like all the clerics at the time, left his hometown to study under the well-known faqihs of the time. He returned to Sulaymaniyah after finishing his studies in *Baneh* in Iranian Kurdistan. At the age of fifteen he started his first government job in Sulaymaniyah civil registry and soon after in Sulaymaniyah judicial court. After several years of government service he quit his position as associate administrator to Karbala to become adviser to Şêx Mehmûd's uncle, Şêx Mistefay Neqîb.

Upon receiving an invitation by the Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid II, the prominent sheikh of Sulaymaniyah, Şêx Seîdî Hefîd along with his brother Şêx Mistefay Neqîb, his son Şêx Mehmûd (the future King of Kurdistan), and about forty others, including Pîremêrd, set out to Istanbul where they were hosted by the Sultan himself. At his court, Pîremêrd's mastery of Persian and his handwriting impressed the royal secretary Izzat Pasha who sought his help in writing the reply to a letter sent by the king of Iran, Nasseredin Shah. In 1899, by the royal order Pîremêrd was appointed to the Senate, the upper house of the Ottoman Parliament. At the same time he entered the college of law in Istanbul. Between 1909 and 1918 he was the governor of several districts such as Hakkari, Qeremursil, Balawa, Beytüşşebap in Şırnak, Gümüşköy, and Adapazarı in Sakarya. In 1918 he was appointed by the Sultan as the mutasarrıf of the city of Amasya where he remained until 1923.

During the twenty-five years of his life in Turkey, Pîremêrd was keenly engaged in literary activities. Between 1904 and 1912 he and his son wrote for *Ijtihad*, a monthly paper concerned with literature, science, economics, and social issues published by Abdullah Jawdat, the Kurdish physician, poet, man of letters and political thinker (ibid., p.329). He even contributed to Persian newspapers and periodicals in Iran, including *Shams*, *Farhang* and *Shafaqi Surkh*. In Istanbul, Pîremêrd lived in close proximity to and befriended some of the greatest Turkish writers and playwrights including, Recaizade Ekrem Beg (1847-1914), Halit Ziya Uşakizâde (1866-1945), Hüseyin Rahmi (1864-1944), and Rıza Tevfik (1869-1949) (Pîrbal, 2001, pp.105–106). Their literary works and conversations had a great impact on Pîremêrd who was fascinated and inspired by both the Ottoman literature and the translations of European literary works.

Along with literary activities, Pîremêrd was also actively engaged in politics. In 1907, he became a member of the Istanbul-based pan-Kurdish organisation called *Kurd Teavun ve Terakki Cemiyeti* (Kurdish Society for Mutual Aid and Progress) and the license owner and head writer for the organisation's gazette published between 1908 and 1909. This organisation was founded by Kurdish notables, most importantly, the Bedirxan family, who espoused the idea of a distinct Kurdish identity (see Özoğlu, 2004). In *Jîn*, published between 1918 and 1919, he contributed with his own writings, poems and translations. The theme of awakening the Kurds to restore their lost glory was dominant in the first Kurdish journals including *Kurdistan* and *Jîn* (Life). Founded in 1918, *Jîn* pursued the same agenda as laid down in *Kurdistan* and continued to criticise the deplorable situation of Kurds and demand their national awakening by reminding them of their distinct history, language and culture. Abdullah Cevdet, for example, wrote in the first issue of *Jîn*:

Kurds, is it possible to sleep in such a tumultuous era? I do not consider it necessary to shout: Hey, Kurd, awaken! Because if the Kurds are still asleep, that means they died long ago. The Kurds are awake and they will awaken the masters who have kept them asleep for centuries. They (the Kurds, MS) will repay evil with goodness. 'We are living in an era in which to sleep for an hour means the death of a nation. (Strohmeier, 2003, p.58)

This of course was written at a time when old empires were disintegrating into new nation-states and a powerful claim to nationhood could result in the establishment of a new nation-state. Austro-Hungarian Empire had been partitioned into several states largely on the basis of ethnicity and the Ottoman Empire was about to be divided by the Allies of the Great War. Even Şêx Seîd, in his call to the nation to rebel against the Turkish rule, evoked the myth of the decline of the Kurdish golden age and the Kurds' duty to restore it: "we have not organized our lives; we have not made the spirits of our ancestors happy. We have not fulfilled the wishes of Ehmedê Xanî. That is why we live in misery and make our enemies glad" (ibid, p.90)

From his accounts in *Jîn* it appears that Pîremêrd was a member of the committee for Kurdish Independence which was established in Erzurum in late 1922. After the ban on all Kurdish publications and organisations and the crush of Şêx Saîd's rebellion³¹ against the Turkish government in 1925, many Kurdish nationalists, including Pîremêrd, were sentenced to death by an Independence Tribunal.³² He writes, "in the Erzurum committee along with Xalid Beg (Jibran) and Yusuf Zia (the prince of House of Bitlis), and Dr. Fuad and Kemal, I was in the service of Mela Seîd Bediüzzaman³³ and was sentenced to death by the Istanbul tribunal" (Aşna, 2009, p.103).

To escape the death penalty, Pîremêrd was forced to move back to Sulaymaniyah where he resumed his literary activities first in a literary journal called *Jiyan* which was published between 1926 and 1938 and later in *Jîn* from 1938 to 1950. *Jiyan* was a weekly paper in Kurdish published by the Sulaymaniyah municipality first in 1926. In 1932 he became the manager and in 1934 the license owner of the paper. In

³¹ This was the first Kurdish uprising since the creation of the Republic of Turkey in 1923. This revolt which came after the abolishment of Caliphate by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk was led by Şêx Seîd of Palu who was executed following the defeat of the uprising.

³² Independence Tribunal was formed following the First World War to punish those who had collaborated with the Allies or supported the old regime against the Kemalists.

³³ Bediüzzaman Seîd Nûrsî (1878-1960) was a Kurdish Sunni Muslim theologian whose *Risale-i Nur Külliyyatı*, a body of Quranic commentary exceeding six thousand pages, was meant to bring about a religious revival in Turkey.

March 10, 1938 he was accused of promoting anti-Islamic and pro-Zoroastrian ideas for using Latin letters in his paper and making bonfire on Newroz. As a result *Jiyan* and also Pîremêrd's school of *Komeley Zanistî* were closed down by the mutasarrif of Sulaymaniyah, Majid Ya'qubi. *Jiyan* was soon after revived under the name of *Jîn*. Despite financial difficulties and lack of support which made him mortgage his house to buy paper, Pîremêrd continued to publish his *Jîn*, the 1015th and last issue of which was published four days before his death in 1950.

Until his death in 1950, Pîremêrd was the most prominent literary figure in Kurdistan and played an important role in the promotion of literacy and education and the revival of Kurdish literature. In his writings which covered literary, philosophical, social, economic and historical fields, he advocated reforms in his homeland which had progressed little since his departure in 1898. During his lifetime, he collected and translated poems by Mewlewî, Welî Dêwane, Bêsarani, and several others from Gorani to Sulaymaniyah dialect and published literary works which were long forgotten. He also wrote several histories of Kurds, the Baban principality, the Jaff families and important historical events in Kurdistan. Moreover, he revived the Newroz celebration, including the lighting of bonfires in public spaces, as an important national festival (Aşna, 2009).³⁴

³⁴ In reviving the Newroz celebrations, Pîremêrd was accused of promoting the pre-Islamic religion of Zoroastrianism and the rite of fire-worshipping. He was also accused of being an agent for the British government that had allegedly ordered Pîremêrd to celebrate the Newroz. For more detail on this and Pîremêrd's responses to these accusations in his newspaper and poems see, (Aşna, 2009, pp.82-90).



Pîremêrd at a gathering to celebrate Newroz

Source: www.kurdpress.com

In 1926, Hacî Tewfîq Pîremêrd, along with others such as, Ismaîl Heqî Baban (1876-1913), Refîq Hilmî (1898-1960) and Emîn Zekî Beg (1880-1948), joined to form a society for the promotion of literacy and education in Kurdistan. *Komeley Zanistî Kurdan* (“Kurds’ Literary Society”) which was founded in Sulaymaniyah played an important pioneering role not only in public education but also in promotion of arts and literature (Pîrbal, 2001, p.31).

4.1.10 *Komeley Zanistî Kurdan* (Kurds’ Literary Society)

The foundation of *Komeley Zanistî Kurdan* was an important step that Pîremêrd and other intellectuals, such as Ehmed Beg Tewfîq Beg and Cemal Baban, took to address the educational backwardness of their land. Pîremêrd celebrated this occasion in a poem which portrays his high hopes for the society and especially the role it could play in building a Kurdish nation visible to the outside world, especially,

the Europeans who were determining the fate of the Middle Eastern nations at the time:

Emşew gulî 'umîdî wetenman epişkwê
Tonight the flower of our nation's hope blooms
Mîllet umêdware be zanistî pêşkewê
The nation is hopeful to progress through *Zanistî*
Zanistiye sewiyey millet bilind eka
Zanistî moves the nation forward
Zanistiye ke ême binasêt be ewrûpa
It is *Zanistî* that can make us known to Europe (ibid., p.119)

As Strohmeier notes, early Kurdish nationalists, who had to define and present their nation, hoped to both inspire an inner Kurdish identification and also enhance the image of Kurds as they were perceived in the West. The first step in this direction was to promote education in Kurdish. In 1919, Mehmed Osman Bedirxan had called on Kurdish intellectuals and youth to unite to establish Kurdish education, because “education is the prime mover of everything” and “the sustenance to prolong and develop the life of the Kurds and Kurdistan” (Strohmeier, 2003, pp.236–237).

Komeley Zanistiî Kurdistan was founded in order to promote education and literacy in Kurdistan through: publishing newspapers, translating and compiling textbooks, opening schools and libraries, dispatching students to complete their education in developed countries, enlightening people through seminars and lectures, and publishing historical, geographical and ethnographical narratives about the Kurds. *Zanistî* soon embarked upon fulfilling its promises by opening a boys' school and holding free evening classes. It formed theatre and music groups. The writers, poets and intellectuals of the town served the society by holding four seminars every month and poetry recitations, speeches and discussions on Tuesdays. In *Jiyan*, an appeal was published which gave great tidings to all Kurds. It read,

It is known to you, our dear readers, that all we want is to disseminate the knowledge of sciences, and today we thank God to have achieved our wish as we proudly show the public the result of the efforts of some of our countrymen, certified by the Ministry of Interior and supported by the governor and the administrative inspector... We announce this news hoping that this society becomes a basis for our scientific development by educating the

masses and also a good omen for our people and our nation; we hope that its steady march will be ensured with the help of notables, scholars, businessmen, and intellectuals (Mazīrī, 2006).

By 1933, *Zanistî* had managed to teach hundreds of housewives how to read and write. Despite the fact that *Zanistî* had declared itself an apolitical society, on September the 6th 1930, known as Black September, *Zanistî* teachers led their students in the Sulaymaniyah uprising against the central government. In 1937, the school was closed down and only reopened in 1942 by Kurdish intellectuals who ran the school until 1945 when government extended its control over it and turned it into a public school.

One of the ways *Zanistî* embarked on its intellectual movement was through theatre. *Zanistî* was supported by the general public and for the maintenance of its school it relied on public funding. The first group of Kurdish graduates of Baghdad House of Teachers (or Teacher Training Institute) who started work in *Zanistî* School were the first in Kurdistan to stage plays in Kurdish. They were not only passionate about theatre but used it as a means to support the school and students from low-income households.

4.2 The Emergence of Kurdish Theatre

At the time when drama first appeared in Kurdistan, there were no drama schools in Kurdistan nor in Bagdad. When the Institute of Fine Arts opened in Baghdad University in 1940 and introduced Theatre Arts programme in 1967, few Kurdish students attended it due to the high costs of commuting to the capital and also the social stigma associated to acting.³⁵ There were no real play-writing and most early plays were either duplications of Arabic plays (which were themselves based on European classics) or experimental attempts by the educated elite who were not familiar with the craft. The main purpose of these early theatrical productions was to raise funds for schools and students of low-income households. In order to keep the

³⁵ The social stigma associated to acting was still existing several decades later in the 1970s. see, (Kerîm, 2013).

audiences interested, the plays were usually short and were divided into scenes rather than acts.³⁶ The actors were mainly schoolboys and the plays were mainly Kurdified versions of performances witnessed by their teachers in Bagdad. Also, they were staged at the boys' school or other public spaces as there were no purpose-built theatres in Kurdistan until after Qasim's rise to power in 1958. Direction did not play an important role in productions and actors relied on their own talents and followed their own instincts. Directors, who were usually schoolteachers, only gave advice on occasion and praised when it was due. At its early stages, theatre audiences were mainly male students and the higher classes but soon women and lower classes, too, started to attend the performances.

The early history of drama in Iraqi Kurdistan is bound up with the history of education. In the 1920s, we see the emergence of the teacher/director who staged plays in schools and acted in them along with his students who played both male and female roles. During the 1920s, a group of Kurdish teachers who had studied in Bagdad were introduced to Arabic and Turkish theatres which performed in Bagdad at the time. This group of young men mostly encountered drama for the first time as students at the educational institutes in Bagdad where they became involved in acting. It was with the efforts of some of those teachers including Mehmûd Cewdet, Mistefa Saîb, Salih Qeftan, and Fuad Reşîd that theatre movement started in Kurdistan

Reşîd was one of those teachers who, at the age of nineteen, had graduated from Bagdad House of Teachers (1923-1958) where he was an active member of the school's theatre group. Upon his return to Kurdistan, Reşîd brought the first Kurdish play on stage in Sulaymaniyah. This play entitled *Îlm û Cehl* (Knowledge and Ignorance), written and directed by Reşîd himself, was an adaptation of a play performed by the Egyptian George Abyad Troup that had visited Bagdad in 1926. Later the same year, Reşîd directed *Îlm û Cehl* which was performed by his students for three days in the house of Behiye Xan, Şêx Mehmûd Berzencî's wife. The play

³⁶ This has continued well into the recent decades. In fact, I have not yet come across a Kurdish play which is divided into acts.

concerns two brothers, one of them idle and the other hard-working whose lives parallel Aesop's fable of the ant and the grasshopper with the difference that in the end the hardworking son bails his brother out of difficulty. The performance was followed by two comic skits, one about a clever and cunning servant and the other about a schoolteacher which was played by Reşîd himself.

The tickets sold were of different values of three, five and ten rupees which were bought only by the town notables who, according to Tenya, attended the performance not for its own sake, but mainly as a chance to meet up (Tenya, 1958, p.53). As reported in the newspaper *Jiyan* the profits made by the performance were given to the students of the school. Therefore, the first proper Kurdish play was staged only for the upper-class mainly in order to raise funds for boys' school and thus to promote literacy in the highly illiterate city of Sulaymaniyah.



Fuad Reşîd

Nîron (Nero) or *Zulmî Qeyser Nêron* (The Tyranny of Emperor Nero) was another play which had been presented by George Abyad troupe and adapted by Reşîd who also played the role of Nero's wife (Pîrbal, 2001, p.71). One of the first plays staged by *Zanistî*, *Nîron*, was performed for two days in Sulaymaniyah in 1926. Again the profits made from the staging of *Nêron* were distributed among boys' school. The profits also contributed towards buying musical instruments for the first music group

in Sulaymaniyah co-founded by Reşîd in the same year.³⁷ From Pîremêrd's report in *Jiyan* it seems the play depicts the Roman emperor's tyranny and his fall in the hands of "the Roman patriots" who according to Pîremêrd "liberate their nation" (cited in Berzencî, 2007, p.50). Pîremêrd praised this performance highly in his newspaper, his comments being the first piece of theatre criticism published in Iraqi Kurdistan. He wrote in an article published in the newspaper *Jiyan*, "this art has a great impact on the nation's morality, the customs of the country, and the minds of the individuals...Theatre teaches those who carry the virus of despotism and dictatorship a moral lesson and serves as a reminder of history" (ibid., pp.18-19). This kind of theatrical discourse which, in the words of Janelle Reinelt (2008, p.228), pretends that the nation exists by addressing – or even implying – the audience as a national citizenry, continues in the following decade when the Kurdish elite call on their 'nation' to support theatre as a service to their 'homeland.'

³⁷ In the history of Kurdish theatre in Iraqi Kurdistan, theatre and music went hand in hand as many theatre artists were also musicians. These artists performed plays and played musical instruments on special occasions. The Kurdish Society for Fine Arts founded in 1957 and Sulaymaniyah Theatre and Music Group founded in 1969 are examples of the collaboration between theatre artists and musicians in Kurdish arts history.



Nîron (Rawanduz, 1931)

Source: (Karwan, no.64, 1988, p.62)

4.3 Theatre between 1930s and 1960s

It is understandable that under the social and political circumstances discussed earlier theatre could not have a chance to develop in Kurdistan. Still, Kurdish intellectuals and intelligentsia continued to promote literacy and education by raising funds for schools through theatre. Later on in the 1950s and 1960s, a group of theatre enthusiasts embarked on creating a society for fine arts and devoted themselves to the difficult task of making theatre in Kurdistan. At the time, there were no technical sound equipment or complicated stage designs. A microphone on a stand was sometimes the only sound equipment while stage design was simply limited to scenic paintings and basic furniture (see figures 1 and 2).³⁸ Voice training did not exist and sometimes the actors could not be heard at the hall due to the noise

³⁸ It was in *Pîskey Teŕpîr* that a more elaborate stage scenery was used for the first time.

by the audiences. Therefore, the actors mostly had to shout except for those who could sing beautifully as music was an important and popular part of early theatre performances.³⁹

Theatre events usually took place in schools and during the Ramadan Eid, reminiscent of traditional Kurdish storytelling which took place in coffeehouses during Ramadan. Theatre replaced traditional storytelling in both providing entertainment and teaching moral lessons. It also resembled the traditional storytelling in that the performers were from the lower classes of society and Ramadan provided an opportunity for them to collect money from the upper classes. However, unlike traditional storytelling, theatre was more about serving the community rather than providing mere entertainment. The intellectuals who were the proponents of theatre assumed the necessity to defend theatre, not as an art for its own sake, but for its utilitarian, didactic and moral functions. Theatre was a means to fundraise for schools and victims of natural calamities. It combined the entertainment value of the performing arts with their capacity to highlight issues in relation to community development. Theatre taught the populace the values of hard work, education, women's rights and condemned the despotism of kings and feudal lords. However, the Kurdish theatre between 1930s and the late 1960s, as attested by Kurdish critics, was not based on any academic understanding or knowledge of theatre or the art of playwriting (See Ezîz, 2013, p.21). It was the passion of a small educated elite who aspired to spread education and bring about change in the Kurdish society. For example, Şêx Nûrî Şêx Salih who wrote a play in 1930 was one of the members of the Kurds' Literary Society and also a newspaper editor, activist, and poet. He was related to Şêx Mehmûd Berzencî under whose reign in 1922, Salih became the editor of the Persian section of the *Bangî Kurdistan* (The Call of Kurdistan) and the editor in chief of the *Rojî Kurdistan* (The Day of Kurdistan) newspapers. The former was owned by the retired Ottoman general and Kurdish nationalist, Mihemed Paşa Kurdî, and the latter was the nationalist mouthpiece of Şêx Mehmûd himself (McDowall, 2004, p.174). Writing dramatic stories to be

³⁹ Refîq Çalak, for example, not only had a beautiful voice but wore a microphone on his costume which would immediately silence the audiences. Some of his popular songs are those that he sang on stage including *Xaley Rêbwar* in *Gilkoy Tazey Lêyl*. See (Mîrza, 1983, p.50).

performed by school theatre groups, fit along the same lines of nationalism, as it promoted changes necessary for the development of Kurdistan. It also signifies the seriousness of the theatrical endeavour for the elite who saw theatre as a legitimate and valuable cultural tool that offered engagement with the nation and national concerns.

4.4 Early Kurdish Theatre and National Identity-Building

In his study of Irish nationalism, Hutchinson argues that cultural nationalism in Ireland was essentially an educational movement. Its earliest constituency being among the educated strata in the urban centres, cultural nationalism was a modernizing movement that sought to regenerate the nation from decay by scientific advance to its culture. By education rather than by machine politics, cultural nationalists aspire to create “an integrated, distinctive and sovereign community, capable of competing in the modern world” (Hutchinson, 1994b, p.51).

Likewise, theatre emerged in Kurdistan mainly as a means to an end: to promote literacy and education in the highly illiterate city of Sulaymaniyah. The value of education as a necessary requirement for the creation of a strong national identity had been emphasised by early Kurdish nationalists such as the Bedirxans who hoped to create a Kurdish national identity based on a shared culture and language. In order to do so, education had to be promoted, Kurdish history had to be documented and literary classics had to be revived (Strohmeier, 2003, pp.21, 39, 40). In Iraqi Kurdistan, theatre became the vehicle to do all these at the same time. In the 1930s, the educated elite of Sulaymaniyah started to contribute to the process of Kurdish national identity-building by supporting theatre, and through that, education for children. Although untrained in the art of playwriting, they created texts for live performance with Pîremêrd's adaptations of folk tales and local history being the most notable of them. He promoted Kurdish theatre in its early years and utilised it as a modernising tool which helped not only promote education but retrieve national cultural heritage. In doing so, he drew on his knowledge of the Kurdish folktales which he had heard as a child. As he himself says about writing the story

of *Dwanze Swarey Merîwan* (The twelve riders of Mariwan), he had no sources or documents to base his story upon apart from what he remembered from his father's narration of the old *beyt* (cited in Rasûl, 2010, p.30).

Pîremêrd drew on folktales and the history of the region as material for his plays. His historical plays include *Mehmûd Aqa Şêwekel* (1936), which he printed and published in 1942 under the title "A true historical play which has happened in our own country" (Melakerîm, 2009), and *Şerîf Hemewend* (1936). The former is about the murder of the Kurdish ruler of Sharbazher⁴⁰ by the Ottoman governor who is suspicious of the relations between the Kurds of Sharbazher and Baneh, a Kurdish town in Persian territories. The latter play is based on the historical tale of the title character, a fearless and renowned warrior of the Hemewend family, who wages war against the mighty Ottoman Empire for the control of the Baban emirate following the Babans' fall (Emîn, 2008, pp.15–16); a reckless but heroic action which leads to his death. *Şerîf Hemewend* was staged in 1936, again partly to raise money for Kurdish schools.⁴¹ According to Izedîn Mistefa Resûl, no printed copies of this play exist but it was reportedly banned at the time when it was staged (Ibid., p.29) which shows the impact that Kurdish theatre could make even in its early years and how the public representation of a national Kurdish hero who rebelled against the central authority could cause unease on the part of the Iraqi government .

According to Hutchinson (1987), by invoking the past, cultural nationalists seek to inspire their community to higher stages of development, providing 'authentic' national models of progress. Historical memory, as in the case of Pîremêrd's plays, serves to define the national community by reminding it of its history, heroes of the past, and their noble ideas for the development of the nation. He revived national histories of local Kurdish rulers and heroes as part of a larger process of the moral regeneration of the national community which also involved promoting the "western-style" theatre, promoting education, and fighting outmoded traditions, especially the ones that hindered women and their participation in public spaces. It is the moral

⁴⁰ A district in Sulaymaniyah Governorate

⁴¹ Unlike *Mem û Zîn* and *Mehmûd Aqa Şêwekel*, no printed or handwritten copy of this play has survived.

regeneration of the national community rather than the achievement of an autonomous state which, according to Hutchinson, is the aim of cultural nationalists. The ending to Pîremêrd's *Mehmûd Aqa Şêwekel* might prove Hutchinson's definition of cultural nationalism. In the final scene of the play, Mehmûd Aqa who is poisoned by the Ottoman governor of Sulaymaniyah and is on the verge of death advises his friends not to take action against the governor because "one cannot serve the [Kurdish] nation without the support of the [central] government" (Melakerîm, 2009, p.90).

The main reason behind the underdevelopment of Kurdistan, according to Mehmûd Aqa, is political instability and wars in the region caused by the heads of great families who are too self-centred to think of the future of their nation and what they can do towards its development. It is the pettiness and greed of these families which in the end results in Mehmûd Aqa's death. Without doubt, Pîremêrd, himself, intended his play to be read in such directly political terms as he, in the preface to the play, specifies six lessons inherent in it, one of which is that "greed and schism within a nation leads to the loss of their great men" (ibid., p.55). Pîremêrd, who had identified the disunity among the nobility as the main reason behind the underdeveloped state of Kurdistan, also recognised the role of education in the development of the nation and intended this play to be a lesson in the value of education for both men and women exemplified by the characters of Mehmûd and his bride (ibid.).

Despite Pîremêrd's preference for cultural rather than political nationalism, one cannot categorise him and the other elite simply as cultural nationalists because the Kurdish elite who initiated nationalist cultural activities in Iraqi Kurdistan had already been engaged in political and cultural nationalist movement in Turkey. It is evident that the Iraqi Kurdish elite who engaged in promoting theatre, including Şêx Nûrî Şêx Salih and Pîremêrd, had already been involved in politics through their association with Şêx Seîd and Şêx Mehmûd. Therefore, one can conclude that in the early twentieth century Iraqi Kurdistan, cultural and political nationalisms were simultaneous.

Both Smith (2009) and Hutchinson (1987) contend that intellectuals have a seminal position in generating and analysing the concepts, myths, symbols and ideology of nationalism and as such play a primary role in both generating cultural nationalism and providing the ideology, if not the early leadership, of political nationalism. The cultural nationalism propagated by intellectuals – literary men, in the case of Iraqi Kurdistan -- provides the intelligentsia who comprise new occupational categories arising from the rise of science – teachers in the case of Iraqi Kurdistan -- with opportunities for their skills to be used and rewarded. The early Kurdish theatre fits Smith's and Hutchinson's theories of cultural nationalism by showing the role of the intellectuals as promoters of modernisation including the construction of an indigenous Kurdish theatre and the intelligentsia (teachers) as directors of early theatre groups.

At a time when Kurdistan suffered from a high culture which was prerequisite to the achievement of political independence, the small circle of Kurdish elite invested in and exploited culture, and specifically theatre, in order to create a collective identity which could compensate for the lack of a state. They ran schools with Kurdish as the medium of teaching. They engaged in writing the local history including the biographies of Kurdish notables and set out to enrich the local language by translating Kurdish literary works into the Sulaymaniyah dialect. Individuals founded printing houses and published journals and at times, literary works, in Kurdish. This was never an end in itself but was a preliminary to establish the foundations for a national character. Members of intelligentsia and intellectuals engaged in these cultural activities in order to spread the sense of belonging among the masses. The ultimate aim was always the achievement of political independence.

Despite the failure of political attempts to create an independent Kurdistan and the official annexation of this region to Iraq in 1932, Kurdish intellectuals spoke of the role that theatre could play in serving the Kurdish "nation" and "homeland". Evoking the name of the nation, is one of the techniques by which a national identity is constructed (Hutchinson, 1994b, p.46). This technique was frequently employed by

the Kurdish intellectuals who called on their community to support the burgeoning art of theatre by stressing the importance of theatre in showing the high moral standards of their common ancestry, preserving their history and folklore and reviving their great literature (Berzencî, 2007, p.86). They stressed the value of theatre by stating that “a city without theatre is like a graveyard” and that “theatre is the nation’s school” (ibid.). The writers of *Şefeq* periodical called on the Kurds to support the arts as a means of revival which should be respected by all. This rhetoric, according to Loren Kruger, “rests on the assumption that the nation-to-be-created is already present, singular, and distinct in the minds of those creating it, even though its actual absence from their lives suggests that its distinctive character is as yet imagined – or invented” (Kruger, 2008, p.37).

4.5 Pîremêrd’s *Mem û Zîn* and the Beginning of a Distinct Kurdish Theatre

Pîremêrd wrote the oldest printed Kurdish play in Iraqi Kurdistan, *Mem û Zîn*, which dates back to 1934. This play, which was inspired by the famous Kurdish epic of the same name and the folkloric narrative of *Memê Alan*, was staged in 1935 by the Kurds’ Literary Society in order to raise funds for the school run by the Society. This, along with other plays written by Pîremêrd in the 1930s, marked the beginning of a distinct Kurdish theatre in Sulaymaniyah where Arab theatre troupes had formerly performed on occasions. In 1923, Bishara Wakim (1890-1949), the Egyptian director and actor, staged several plays in different Kurdish cities and towns (Pîrbal, 2001, pp.72–73, 78). Haqqi al-Shibli (1913-1985), the Iraqi actor and director, visited Erbil and Sulaymaniyah in 1929 and 1932 (ibid.). In his first visit, he acted in and directed three plays and eight plays in his second visit, with *Selahiddînî Eyyûbî* (Saladin), the story of the Kurdish-Muslim commander’s heroism, being staged each time (ibid.). The Egyptian Fatma Rushdi and her theatre group also visited Erbil in 1934 where they staged *An-Nasr is-Saqeer* (the short victory), the male protagonist of which was, interestingly, played by Fatma herself (ibid., p.79). In his writing on theatre in Erbil, Feyzî mentions that Egyptian and Lebanese theatre groups had also visited this city in the early and mid-twentieth century (Feyzî, 2006, p.147). A number of British and Indian theatre companies had also played in Baghdad during the British mandate in

Iraq (al-Mufraji et al, 1998, p.105) and from the reports published in *Jiyan* newspaper it seems they had also visited Kurdistan in 1927 (Feyzî, 2006, p.71). However, according to Pîremêrd, “because their stories were not about this land and because not everyone spoke their language”, it was not until the Kurdish youth staged *Mem û Zîn* and other Kurdish stories that the Kurdish public started to show passion for theatre (Berzencî, 2007, p.50).

Pîremêrd considered the performance of *Mem û Zîn*, during the four days of Ramadan Eid in 1935, as the first instant of serious theatre in Kurdistan (Berzencî, 2007, p.50). *Mem û Zîn* which was based on an old Kurdish folktale and was played by well-trained actor-students went onstage for four days during the Ramadan Eid. It is important that “the first instant of serious theatre” in Iraqi Kurdistan should be based on a folktale that inspired the seventeenth century epic of the same name, also one of the most frequently quoted texts in the Kurdish nationalist literature. Written by Ehmedê Xanî (1650-1707), this tragic tale of love draws on one of the best-known stories of Kurdish oral literature among the Kurmanji-speaking Kurds.⁴² Xanî’s version differs from the oral tradition in that he had a political objective in mind when he wrote his adaptation of *Mem û Zîn*. His purpose, as he himself attests to in the introduction to the poem, was to establish a literary tradition in Kurdish to rival those of the surrounding peoples, i. e. the Persians, Turks, and Arabs.

The fact that Xanî chose to write his epic in Kurdish and not in the dominant literary language of Persian meant that he deliberately opted for the Kurdish language despite its smaller readership to “raise the standing of Kurdish culture in the eyes of the Kurds’ neighbours” (Bruinessen, 2003, p.42). In his own words, he chose to write in Kurdish so that:

Da xelq-i nebêjîtin ku Ekrad (“people won’t say that the Kurds”)
Bê merifet in, bê esl û binyad (“have no knowledge and no history”)
Enwaê milel xwedan kitêb in (“that all nations have their books”)
Kurmanc-i tenê di bê hesêb in (“and only the Kurds are negligible”)

⁴² Both Chyet and Hassanpour agree that *Mem û Zîn* existed in oral tradition before Xanî composed his literary version.

Xanî believed that the Kurds had the makings of a great nation in their own right, yet suffered from a lack of unity which prevented them from having their own rulers and subsequently patrons who would revive the Kurdish culture and language. Likewise, Pîremêrd, believed that his nation was capable of progress if only it had not fallen victim to the tyranny of the feudal landlords and the ruling regimes and had patrons who supported public education. He believed that education for the masses was the key to a better future for the Kurds and Kurdistan. That was the reason behind the establishment of the Kurd's Literary Society and all his future attempts to support it.

Pîremêrd's *Mem û Zîn* was written at a time when the municipality had cut the budget of the Kurds' Literary Society, which was one hundred and fifteen rupees, and the directors of the society were in dire need of money to support their school. Pîremêrd's play was staged in order to raise funds for the society (Berzencî, 2007, p.44). The income of the performance was later published in detail in *Jiyan* newspaper under the title of "We Are Accountable to the Nation", again illustrating the fact that for Pîremêrd and other intellectuals who had formed the Society, the Kurds were, in fact, a nation and what they were doing was of national importance. For Pîremêrd, *Mem û Zîn* was a national work which served the interests of the nation by both celebrating its literary masterpiece and providing financial support for the education of children. Prior to the staging of the play Pîremêrd had written, "Anyone who declines this invitation (to attend the performance) lacks national commitment" (cited in *ibid.*, p.41).

Strohmeier stresses that Xanî's *Mem û Zîn* constituted the backbone that Kurds are a nation capable of attaining a high level of civilisation and possess a language which can yield great literature (Strohmeier, 2003, p.27). If for Xanî writing a *mathnaw*⁴³ in Kurdish was a *bid'et* (dissent) against tradition (Hassanpour, 1992, pp.86–88), for Pîremêrd writing plays in Kurdish was a *bid'et* which he did not only to promote theatre in Kurdistan but to support public education. Without a patron, like his predecessor, he moved to raise the standing of Kurdish culture, and in so doing,

⁴³ Long narrative poems in Arabic, Persian and Turkic, consisting of many distichs, each with its own rhyme

strengthen claims to national identity and liberty. Pîremêrd's *Mem û Zîn* was a plea for public education which could pave the way for the development of Kurdistan. As attested by Pîremêrd, the public came and paid to see the performance of *Mem û Zîn* with all their heart and soul (Berzencî, 2007, p.43), thus making it one of the first successful plays to be performed in Kurdistan. According to Pîremêrd's report in *Jiyan*, the four-day run of *Mem û Zîn* sold 328 tickets of different values: 180 thirty-fils tickets, 103 fifty-fils tickets, thirty-three 100-fils tickets, and twelve 250-fils tickets (ibid., p.51). The success of Pîremêrd's *Mem û Zîn* proved that Kurdish language could be the medium of theatre, in the same way that Xanî's *Mem û Zîn* had proved Kurdish could be the medium of *mathnawi*.

Pîremêrd's writings in *Jiyan* also shed light on the condition of the early Kurdish stage actors and how the establishment of the Zanistî School contributed to the rise of theatre in Kurdistan. "We are proud," Pîremêrd writes, "that these young boys, the children of Zanistî, who performed this art, were among the illiterate who a few years ago were working in bakeries and groceries in the bazaar. Now, thank God, they write their own speeches and songs for the stage and even correct the original play by Pîremêrd" (ibid., p.43). Although the young actors were unschooled in the ways of drama and Pîremêrd was unschooled in the ways of drama criticism, his celebration of this art form and praise for the actors, along with the enthusiasm of his reports, mark the honest excitement of a sensitive viewer who sees, for the first time, the possibility of creating a national drama.

4.6 Early Kurdish Theatre and Education for Women

During the 1930s, but only sporadically and usually on the Eid of Ramadan, the Kurds' Literary Society continued to stage plays to collect money for the poor students and support the Kurdish school of Zanistî. Among the plays staged by the society were *Dildarî w Peyman Perwerî* (Love and Faithfulness, 1933) written by Hewrî (1915-1978), and *Serbazî Aza* (The Brave Soldier, 1935). The former was a love story which was written to teach the Kurdish youth the virtues of faithfulness in love and the importance of the family unit in "elevating their poor homeland"

(Berzencî, 2007, p.32). The latter was upheld in *Jiyan* for nurturing the traits of bravery and courage in the battlefield in hearts and minds of Kurdish youth, who would, if the time came, happily sacrifice themselves for their land (ibid., p.40). This was written by Pîremêrd who had become the first theatre advocate and critic in Kurdistan. Pîremêrd's writings provide us with valuable insight into the early Kurdish theatre in Sulaymaniyah. On the production of *Serbazî Aza*, Pîremêrd wrote an article entitled "Temsîl, Serguzeştênimayî" in *Jiyan* in which he documented that the performance took place on the days of the Ramadan Eid by the students and teachers of the Zanistî school (ibid., p.39). It is also noteworthy that Pîremêrd describes the performance as *tamsîl* and also devised the word *Serguzeştênimayî* (performing narrative) as a Kurdish synonym for it, making it clear that the word *şano* had not yet entered the literary discourse at the time.⁴⁴ He also proves to be an attentive viewer by taking note that on the first night of the performance, the hero of the story, played by Şakir Efendî, the teacher of the Zanistî school, showed weakness and desperation when he was captured but "he corrected it on the second night" (ibid.) also showing that Pîremêrd, and perhaps other spectators, attended the theatrical performances more than once. Pîremêrd's witty remarks about the male actor who played the female role of the hero's fiancée is also a testament to the difficulty of finding suitable male actors and the impossibility of finding female actors to play female roles in early years of Kurdish theatre. He writes, "Nazdar, the hero's fiancée was not *nazdar* (delicate) at all! They must not have found anyone else that they chose a dull indelicate oaf. Even so, I admire and thank him for taking on this role as this noble craft is still seen as a disgrace (*neng*)" (ibid., pp.39-40).

⁴⁴ As I pointed out earlier the word *şano* entered the literary discourse in the 1950s after Goran used it in his poetry.



Serbazî Aza (1935)

Source: (Berzencî, 2007, p.38)

Pîremêrd was a staunch critic of outmoded customs and beliefs in the Kurdish society which had, for long, hindered women's freedom and participation in public spheres including theatre. He had voiced feminist sentiment in his play *Mem û Zîn*, the first printed Kurdish play in Iraq. Although I failed to obtain a copy of this play, according to Marif Xeznedar (2005, p.115), Pîremêrd's *Mem û Zîn* differs from Xanî's *Mem û Zîn* in content. It is also written in prose with the exception of the final monologue by Zîn who wails over Mem's dead body. Her long heart-wrenching monologue ends with her plea for an end to the forced marriage of girls which was common in Kurdistan at the time. The last lines of the monologue read,

Ax bo dengxoşê le jûr serînman
How I wish there was someone who would sing at our grave
Be beytî kurdî bida telqînman
A Kurdish beyt to mourn us
Bilê ax dilî dilxwaz meşkênin
And bemoan "don't break the lovers' hearts
Be zoremilî kiçan memrênin
And don't force the girls to their demise" (ibid., p.116)

Pîremêrd's concern for the rights of women found expression in his next play, *Mehmûd Aqa Şêwekel* (1936). Although the plot of *Mehmûd Aqa Şêwekel* revolves around Mehmûd Aqa, an enlightened son of a local ruler who is betrayed by other Kurdish tribal leaders and ultimately killed by the Ottoman governor of Sulaymaniyah, an important theme of the play is the forced marriage of girls and their lack of education. In the words of Perîçîhre, the female character expected to marry Mehmûd Aqa in an arranged marriage, Pîremêrd complains, "They think women are created for the pleasure of boys who lust after them like they are sweets and make them feel unsafe. I wish God hadn't created women or I was an illiterate girl, without any noble thought or feeling, whose mind was nurtured by old wives' tales" (Melakerîm, 2009, p.67). The well-read Perîçîhre is not only against arranged marriages, but is also against women's lack of education and even aspires to play *oud* and sing. She is also critical of the outmoded traditions in Kurdish society and the conventionalism of "village" women who even refrain from calling their husbands by their first names and harass an educated girl who considers herself equal to her husband (ibid., p.74).

The Kurdish historian, Mihemed Emîn Zekî Beg, who was the minister of public works and transportation at the time had played a leading role in founding the first school for girls in Sulaymaniyah in 1926 (Berzencî, 2007, p.22). This was considered a great step forward in the progress of the Kurdish "nation". One year after the foundation of the school, one of the students wrote an open letter to "our fathers and brothers" asserting that if they had sooner thought of education for girls, they would have never had to fear oppression as there would have been thousands of women and men who would sacrifice themselves for their homeland and serve the nation and its sciences" (Ibid., p.25). She advised her male compatriots not to follow outdated customs, to send their daughters to school, and, from the foreigners' books, learn to love their homeland and the pleasure of sciences (ibid.).

According to Pîremêrd, the education of women in Kurdistan was traditionally done through Quran recitations at home so that they would not leave their homes and would get accustomed to religious ideas. They were not allowed to learn how to read

or write so that they could not read the boys' love letters and respond to them. If they wore makeup, they were accused of immorality. Their confinement to their homes and their lack of education, Pîremêrd believed, resulted in the poor upbringing of their sons (Aşna, 2009, p.26). Weary with such customs, he wished "for an educated class of girls and women who raise the sort of children who can serve their nation and homeland" (ibid.).

In his writings and poems he not only advocated education for women but also criticised the forced and arranged marriages of girls. "We have been saying for years that if the fair sex is recognized as equal to man and if women work hard for their education they won't fall short of men" (ibid.). He proposed that for a healthy marriage it was necessary for girls to have the choice whom to marry. He went so far as to suggest stoning "those fathers who force their girls to get married" (ibid., p.27). If woman was free to choose her husband, Pîremêrd contended, we wouldn't have the problem of divorce which is so easy for men to get (ibid., pp.26-28).

In 1930, four years after the first school for girls opened in Sulaymaniyah, the school teachers, Gozîda Xanim Yamulkî and Fatima Mehyeddîn, inspired by the boys' school and their performance of *Nêron*, wrote a play for their students to perform (Berzencî, 2007, p.26). They also asked the Kurdish poet, Şêx Nûrî Şêx Salih (1896-1958) to write for them a play in verse (ibid.). In the play that he wrote for the girls' school, which was entitled *Dayk* (Mother), he critiqued the wrong beliefs and habits resulting from women's illiteracy and lack of education. This play was performed together with Gozîda Xanim's play by her students in the school for three days. The latter called *Însan Ewe Eyçinê Ewe Edirwêtewe* (One Reaps What One Sows) emphasized the importance of education for girls the same way that *Elm u Cehl* had done for boys a few years before (ibid., pp.27-28). These advances in public education were welcomed and supported by Kurdish intellectuals who had formed the Kurds' Literary Society.

4.7 Theatre as a National Fundraising Tool

Kurdish theatre which had started partly as a means to support schools, continued to serve the immediate needs of the community when an earthquake struck the town of Penjwin in 1946. At the time, a number of theatre artists in Sulaymaniyah staged a translation of the Arabic play *Fî Sebîl it-Taj* ("For the Homeland") to raise money for the victims of the earthquake. This play, which had managed to raise two thousand dinars in Sulaymaniyah, was followed by an operetta based on Goran's *Gûlî Xwênawî* (Blood Red Rose). The operetta, which is compared by Thomas Bois to Shelley's "Ode to the Skylark" (Jwaideh, 2006, p.25), is a conversation between a boy and a girl whose role was played by a male actor. The girl dares her lover to pick red and yellow flowers for her from the king's garden which is surrounded by the enemy forces. The boy risks his life only to find yellow flowers in the garden. He returns to his beloved who treats him coldly for not bringing her red flowers. The boy pulls down his collar and shows a gun wound to his shocked lover and asks if she will accept the redness of his blood instead. These two plays were also performed in the city of Erbil and thus became the first Kurdish plays to go on the road in Iraqi Kurdistan. Those involved in these plays were celebrated by Pîremêrd who wrote,

Êsta emane hatûne jêr balî êmewe
 Now these (survivors) have come under our protection
Hawxwênekan xoyan exene malî êmewe
 Our flesh and blood take refuge in our homes
Lawan be jarê kewtûne ços û xroşewe
 The youth have stirred up
Temsîl û barbûyane be hewl û peroşewe
 They stage plays with passion
Awatekem ebînim ewa hate dî be çaw
 I see my dream has come true
Destey koran be meş'elî firyawe kewtne naw
 The boys have stepped up to help out (Aşna, 2009, p.136)



Participants in the performance of the play “For the Homeland”

Source: (Berzencî, 2007, p.58)

4.8 Theatre after the Second World War

With the start of the Second World War, cultural life declined nearly to the point of extinction. Theatre only reappeared in the end of the War in 1945. Interestingly the first play that was staged in 1945 was an adaptation of Xanî's *Mem û Zîn*. Although this performance is not documented, it is not difficult to understand why this old Kurdish masterpiece reappears at the time as the first choice for stage. The outbreak of the Second World War had revived and intensified Kurdish nationalist activity (Jwaideh, 2006, p.272). The growth of a Kurdish town-population with stronger national ideals than tribal loyalties, and the emergence of a Kurdish intelligentsia mainly in Baghdad and Sulaymaniyah paved the way for the formation and promotion of ideals of Kurdish independence and unity.

Mela Mistefa Barzanî had started his attacks on government forces in 1943 and by 1945 established himself as the champion of Kurdish people and the embodiment of

their cause (ibid., p.231). He demanded the creation of an all-Kurdish province run by Kurdish officials and the adoption of Kurdish as an official language. He allied with the new political parties which had emerged in cities of Sulaymaniyah and Erbil with leftist and nationalist orientations. The Kurdish *Hîwa* (Hope) Party which was formed in 1935 was brought back to life to support Barzanî's rebellion. The programme adopted by the party in its first meeting shows that unity among Kurdish tribes is still the primary concern for Kurdish nationalists who sought to form an autonomous Kurdish state (ibid., p.239). The revival of Xanî's *Mem û Zîn* was a reminder of Kurdish national heritage and the legitimacy of Kurdish political demands. If it incorporated Xanî's national and political discourse, the play could also serve to repeat Xanî's call to unity among Kurdish tribes to rise against the Iraqi government.

4.9 Theatre and the rise of leftist nationalist sentiments

Following the Second World War the whole character of Kurdish political leadership underwent change. While Kurds' loyalties were primarily attached to their family, tribe or religious sheikh, they now lied with his nation, political party and leaders. With ascendance of political parties and intellectual cadres, demands were no longer local but were either for autonomy, federation or self-determination. New leaders were urbanised professional intellectuals (though at times obliged to share power with traditional leaders). With urbanisation, peasants, workers, women, students, artists, teachers and other organisations started to grow. Their demands included land reform, women's rights and social welfare programs. Due to the oppression experienced at the hands of old colonial powers and post-colonial governments, the Kurdish movement acquired radical anti-traditional anti-reactionary, anti-imperialist and anti-dictatorial progressive and democratic tendencies. It also moved towards building a common front with other oppressed groups and classes within Iraq for achieving universal liberation.

Earlier in the 1930s, the first generation of secular educated and urban Kurds which hoped for a degree of independence was coming into existence. In the absence of

a Kurdish party, many of these young nationalists joined the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) and many others joined Al-Ahli which sought social reform for urban and rural workers (McDowall, 2004, p.288). In Sulaymaniyah, left-leaning Kurdish nationalist groups began to emerge such as *Komeley Brayetî* (Brotherhood Society, 1937), and *Darkar* (woodcutters, 1937). From *Darkar*, the nationalist party *Hîwa* (Hope, 1940) was formed in Kirkuk. Led by Refîq Hilmî, *Hîwa* comprised of left-leaning intellectuals who supported Mela Mistefa Barzanî's revolt against the Iraqi government and the Iranian Kurdish nationalists in Mahabad. *Hîwa* dissolved after Barzanî's exile and from it developed *Şoriş* (Revolution) and *Rizgarî Kurd* (Kurdish Liberation) in 1945. *Rizgarî*'s nationalist and leftist objectives were clearly stated in its national manifesto in which it mentioned its highest aim as to "unify and liberate Greater Kurdistan" but stressed its dislike of "imperialism and reactionary governments" (Jwaideh, 2006, p.241). Naturally, reviving Kurdish language, history and literature, was also among *Rizgarî*'s aims to tackle Kurdish cultural problems (ibid.).

The plays performed during 1946 show the leftist nationalist feelings that were growing in Iraq at the time. The dominance of leftist-nationalist ideas in the 1940s is evident in the anti-imperialist and nationalist themes of *Manga* (The Cow), and the leftist theme of *Cwamêrî Kafir* performed by Sulaymaniyah students in Penjwin in 1946 (Berzencî, 2007, p.59). *Manga* dealt with the meetings between the Allies of the Second World War (UK, France, US and Soviet Union) after the war to decide the fate of the nations. The play was ended with Goran's *Demî Raperîne* ("It Is the Time of Uprising") (ibid.). The other play called *Cwamêrî Kafir* was about the workers' struggle against the feudal lords. From Berzencî's book it seems that the first play was performed in Arabic, to appeal to the Arab population of the town, and the latter in Kurdish (ibid.).

Landlords and notables had grown stronger since the British mandate and under the Hashemite rule. Due to "the questionable loyalty of an army led increasingly by officers of middle or lower middle class origin with little affection for the monarchy" (McDowall, 2004, p.297), the regime had to collaborate with tribal chiefs in order to ensure the security of Kurdish countryside. In return, the landlords were well

represented in parties and parliament. The abject rural poverty resulting from corruption and changing social circumstances led to the first peasant rising in Sulaymaniyah countryside in 1947 (ibid., pp.297-300).

Sulaymaniyah became the principle centre of communist activity in Iraq as the younger generation became increasingly driven to communist ideas. As explained by Jwaideh, there were several reasons for the rise of Sulaymaniyah as the centre of communist activities:

Sulaymaniyah, for many years a citadel of Kurdish nationalism, had a long tradition of opposition to Baghdad. This strongly developed anti-government sentiment, coupled with the fact that Sulaymaniya was more literate than any other Kurdish center, made it a promising field for communist proselytization [...]. Furthermore, [...] Sulaymaniya was conveniently located near an international frontier. Contacts with Communists in Iran and beyond were easy and unhampered (Jwaideh, 2006, p.271).

By the late 1940s, Sulaymaniyah had become a hotbed of dissent for Kurdish nationalism and Kurdish communism alike. It was here that the leadership of Kurdish masses gradually passed from the feudal lords, sheikhs and older nationalists to the intelligentsia who also used theatre as a medium for the expression of their leftist ideas (ibid.). An important example of this can be found in the successful performance of *Kerelûtî Menûçer* by the Sulaymaniyah youth in reaction to the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty of Portsmouth (1948). This treaty, which effectively made Iraq a British protectorate, sparked al-Wathba, a massive urban uprising led by school and university students in Baghdad. According to Omer Elî Emîn (2009, p.50), a veteran Kurdish actor and writer, Sulaymaniyah was not unaffected by these political developments in Baghdad. "At the time, politics was a trendy subject," said Emîn, and *Kerelûtî Menûçer* expressed concerns which were part of a larger national anxiety that combined class struggle with the struggle for national independence (Emîn and Daniş, 2009, p.50). During the 1940s and 1950s, as Marion Farouk-Sluglett and Peter Sluglett describe, the relationship between the nationalist and the class struggle was a key factor of opposition movement as "Almost all manifestations of opposition by organised labour during the 1940s and 1950s" often concentrated

their strikes against British-owned and British-controlled concerns” (Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett, 2001, p.41).

Although the Portsmouth Treaty was annulled by the king of Iraq, the al-Wathba revolt was violently crushed by the government. The police fired onto the crowd of demonstrators and killed hundreds while many communist leaders were imprisoned. The government’s reaction to theatre was similar as it soon discerned the threat it posed in promoting anti-monarchist and communist ideas. May 1948 saw the first Kurdish theatre performance interrupted by the government forces and the artists involved in it arrested. The play called *Têkoşanî Rencberan* (“The Toilers’ Struggle”), told the tale of a group of working class men who rebelled against the monarchy. This play which went on stage twice a day for fifteen days⁴⁵ was stopped on the last day by the government forces who arrested some of the participants including the director of the play, Reûf Yehya (Berzencî, 2007, p.61).

In 1946, the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) was established which was an important event in the development of the Kurdish political system within Iraq. Under the leadership of Ibrahim Ahmad, the leftist intellectual, KDP adopted a leftist program and in 1953 called for agricultural reform and recognition of peasants’ and workers’ rights. The party enjoyed the support of students and intellectuals but not the tribal leaders (Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett, 2001, p.30). The leftist KDP grew as more Kurds became disgruntled with economic conditions. During the 1950s, despite the increased oil wealth, more peasants were out of work, landlords grew wealthier, and class divisions were exacerbated. Therefore, KDP and the communists became more popular in rural regions (McDowall, 2004, p.299).

The theme of struggle against injustice is the unifying thread woven throughout many plays performed in the 1950s including *Klolan* (Les Misérables) in 1952 whose success led to the showing of its English film version in the local cinema and *Brûske w Şîrîn* (“Bruska and Shirin”) in 1954, which was about the love of a peasant boy for the daughter of a despotic landlord (Berzencî, 2007, pp.62–63, 66–68). *Elî Efenî*

⁴⁵ According to Tenya, the play was staged for nine days.

staged in 1958 was another play which showed the corruption of the rich landlords who lacked principles or moral scruples.

The anti-feudal sentiment found a strong advocate in Şakir Fetah the governor of Chamchamal in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Fetah tried to revive the city's theatre by staging plays such as *Mem û Zîn*, *Nûştew Cadû* (*The Spell*, 1948), *Minim Mîkrofon* (*I Am Microphone*, 1949) and *Gulî Xwênawî* (*Blood Red Rose*, 1952). It is interesting to note that Fetah had to stage *Mem û Zîn* in Arabic because the people of Chamchamal could not understand Sorani dialect very well. Fetah continued his promotion of Kurdish theatre in Akra where he revived the local theatre group and staged several plays during 1955-1956. Most Fetah's plays were attacks against the feudal lords and narratives of people's suffering and oppression. Staging such plays required great courage as according to Tenya, "at the time, even speaking unfavourably about the lords was punishable; let alone criticising them publicly on a theatre stage" (Tenya, 1958, pp.60–61).

When the plays did not attack the landlords directly they would expose the ills of the society caused by poverty and lack of education. *Kar Kirdinî Be Kelk* (1952) and *Afret û Niwîşte* (1956), two plays whose texts have survived, show Kurdish intellectuals' frustration at the underdeveloped state of Kurdish society and the miseries that lack of education brought upon the masses. In *Kar Kirdinî Be Kelk*, a poor village is plagued by a disease which is caused by inadequate hygiene standards. The local mullah who is a quack doctor takes advantage of the situation by trading his pills in exchange for his poor patients' chickens or calves. His scam is exposed when a doctor is sent to the village who cures the disease and tells the villagers to burn the piles of cow dung and manage the waste water to prevent the spread of infections. *Afret û Niwîşte* (Women and Spell-Writing) is similar to *Kar Kirdinî Be Kelk* in its criticism of people's belief in superstitions and their naivety to trust clergies with important matters in their lives. Not long ago, Muslim clergies used to write spells, love charms, and hexes for a fee such as a goat. In this play the belief in a cunning mullah's magical abilities leads to three women's comic humiliation at the end of the play. Gêlas, Heme Wefenî's wife, who desperately

wants a child and her two friends, Gelawêj and Askol who both have domestic problems are visited by the local mullah at Gêlas's home. The Mullah asks them to put their head in three pots and be quiet while he writes their spells. In the meantime he steals their gold and takes off. Heme Wefenî returns home and shocked at the sight of the women, with their heads in pots and their bottoms up in the air, yells at them and swears to divorce Gêlas if she does not come to her senses and renounce this outmoded belief.

In the 1950s, an increasing number of European plays which had been adapted into Arabic started to make their impression on the Kurdish stage. These plays which were mainly social satires include Nikolai Gogol's *The Government Inspector* ("Cinabî Mufetiş", 1954), *Oteyl* ("Othello", 1956), *Bazerganî Vînîsîa* ("The Merchant of Venice", 1956) and Moliere's *L'Avare* ("Pîskey Teŕpîr", 1956). The income of these and other plays which were performed in the 1950s, were, as usual, distributed among the students from low-income families.



Refîq Çalak in "Gilkoy Tazey Leyl"

Source: (Berzencî, 2007, p.84)

4.10 Kurdish Society for Fine Arts (1957-1963) and the First Female Actors

One of the earliest Arabic plays, written by the Lebanese Marun an-Naqqash in 1894, was an adaptation of Moliere's *L'Avare*. The Kurdish adaptation of this play known as *Pîskey Terpîr*, directed by Refîq Çalak in 1957, played an important role in bringing the public closer to theatre and making them sympathetic towards theatre actors. Although the play was based on Moliere's *L'Avare*, it was Kurdified to a degree that, according to Bêkes, "if Moliere was brought to life and witnessed the play he wouldn't recognise it as his own" (Bêkes, 2008, p.9). The play also made Çalak's charismatic character and stage presence known to a larger public.

Refîq Çalak, born in 1923 in Sulaymaniyah, graduated from House of Teachers in 1941. When the Allies established a Radio Station in Jaffa, Palestine, during the Second World War, Çalak, along with Goran, the well-known Kurdish poet, served as Kurdish presenter at the Radio for almost three years. Upon his return to Iraq in 1944, he joined the Baghdad Kurdish Radio. He was expelled from the Radio after only a month due to writing a revolutionary piece called "China's Song of Freedom". He returned to Sulaymaniyah where he became a teacher. But he was expelled again, this time because of a speech he made in public in 1947 on the occasion of the fall of the Mahabad Republic and the execution of the Kurdish leader and army officers. He returned to Baghdad Kurdish Radio in 1950 and stayed there until 1956. During this period, he presented several Kurdish radio plays which established his reputation as a great artistic figure in Kurdistan. But it was the production of *Pîskey Terpîr* that made Çalak into a popular public figure. According to Şêrko Bêkes, who was made prompter by Çalak in the production of *Pîskey Terpîr*, he usually diverged from the text of the plays and extended his dialogues from two paragraphs to two pages! He was an eloquent speaker, was never short for words, and had an agile body and a sharp mind. He had made drama an alternative to politics in which he had faced defeat, devoting his life to acting, writing and singing (Bêkes, 2008). The great Kurdish poet, Bêkes, describes Çalak's impact on the Kurdish culture during the 50s and 60s as such:

Before Refîq Çalak, theatre was not alive, it was weak and cold. Refîq Çalak was the first to warm it up. Also, it was him whose voice in Bagdad radio introduced the love of drama into every house in Kurdistan in the 1950s when people waited impatiently to hear his voice...We cannot talk about Kurdish radio plays and poetry recitations and presenters of those times without mentioning Refîq Çalak. Neither can we talk about Kurdish music or journalism. He covers twenty four years of our theatre history. He was the pathbreaker at a time when in this land there was no cultural movement or support for such movements ('Bernamey Taybet Be Mamosta Refîq Çalak on KNN TV (KNN TV's Special Programme on Refîq Çalak)', n.d.).



Refîq Çalak

In 1957 and following the success of *Pîskey Teŕpîr*, Çalak, along with his friends, founded the first Kurdish Society for Fine Arts (1957-1963) which he himself chaired. Kurdish Society for Fine Arts was the first of its kind in Kurdistan. It was founded mainly by the members of the *Tîpî Mosîqay Mewlewî* (Mewlewi Music Group) who held several musical and theatrical evenings (Tenya, 1958, p.64). The Society also held musical and theatrical fundraising events in Sulaymaniyah, Erbil, and Koya, in 1957 to help the victims of flood in Sulaymaniyah (ibid., p.67). The fliers for advertising the events were dropped by plane which attracted a wide public. The

success of the events proved, one more time, public's support for Kurdish art especially when it served national interests.

The theatre movement initiated by Refîq Çalak and others developed further as the Kurdish Society for Fine Arts called on women to join the theatre. It should be noted that in the early instances of theatre, the schoolboys and their teachers took on both male and female roles as it would have been a social disgrace for girls to flaunt themselves in the arena of public performance. In the 1935 production of *Mem û Zîn*, the role of Zîn was played by a male actor named Şêx Nûrî Şêx Celal who had played female roles in a few other performances before. His cross-gender acting was not without its difficulties as like many other patriarchal societies, the Kurdish society had a rigid gender system at the time and looked down on men who showed feminine traits. Therefore, Şêx Celal and another actor who played the role of Zîn's maid were subject to people's scorn and humiliation and were even refused female costumes (ibid., p.44).



Şêx Nûrî Şêx Celal

In 1958 *Mem û Zîn* was successfully staged again and this time an actress played the role of the heroine. Before every performance, Gulzar Omer Tewfîq, who played

Zîn, would address the audience members and read from a paper -- ironically written for her by a male actor -- lecturing them about women and theatre. She showed the public that to be an actress is not tantamount to being loose and immoral. Also, by representing a folkloric Kurdish character such as Zîn, she showed the nobility of her profession in honouring Kurdish tradition and cultural heritage. Her appearance on stage was welcomed by Kurdish intellectuals who celebrated the performance both for reviving a national heritage and for introducing women to acting (Berzencî, 2007, p.96).



Gulzar Omer Tewfîq

Nermîn Nakam's role in a stage performance called *Tawanî Çî Bû* ("For What Crime Was She Punished?") in 1958 was another instance of women's acting in Kurdish theatre which was welcomed by Kurdish intellectuals. The play shows the life of a young man called Helo who is expelled from school due to his political activism. He then has to join the army and leave his hometown where his lover Şewbo lives. Şewbo marries an army officer and by chance they move to the same town where Helo is serving. Helo and Şewbo meet and engage in a conversation about their lives when Şewbo's husband sees them and immediately pulls out his gun and shoots Şewbo dead. As the title of the play shows, *Tawanî Çî Bû* was another attempt by Kurdish theatre makers to attack the rigid patriarchy in Kurdish society

which senselessly justified violence against women and also inhibited their active engagement in society in general and in theatre in particular. Nakam's body language in the photos from her performances in both *Tawanî Çî Bû* and *Emrekey Begim* clearly show the submissiveness of her character while the body language of the male characters in the same photos show their dominance, authority and even aggressiveness (See figures 3 and 4).

The records show that Nermîn and Gulzar were not the only female actors in Kurdistan in the 1950s. Hacî mentions the names of other actresses in different Kurdish towns including, Necatî Mehwî in Sulaymaniyah, Pakîze and Şukriye in Rowanduz, Suheylya and Nesrîn in Erbil, Ferîde and Nazenîn in Kirkuk and Marî in Koya (Hacî, 1989, p.97).

Despite the gradual appearance of women actors on stage in the late 1950s, the stigma associated with female acting remained strong even a decade later as evident in Omer Elî Emîn's account of his group's difficulties in finding, or rather keeping, female actors (Emîn and Daniş, 2009, p.51). In 1969 the more relaxed political atmosphere allowed the appearance of theatre groups such as Tîpî Nwandin û Mosîqay Silêmanî (Sulaymaniyah Acting and Music Group). This group staged a play called *Serînî Badarî* (A Pillow for Joints Pain) in which a girl named Rûnak Heme Reşîd participated. According to Elî Emîn, at the beginning, Rûnak's parents were not happy with their daughter's choice to appear on stage. Therefore "just like asking for a girl's hand for marriage," the theatre group had to ask for Rûnak's parent's permission before she could perform in the play (ibid.). Even then her mother would always accompany her to the theatre, and even to other cities where the group took the play. This was Rûnak's only work as she did not continue acting (ibid.). Due to such social restrictions against women, cross-gender casting in Kurdish theatre continued even to the early 1970s. Omer Çawşîn is the actor most famous for his cross-gender roles in the 1960s and 1970s, with memorable performances both on

stage and on TV such as in the TV drama, *Mame Xeme*, produced in 1971 for Kirkuk TV.⁴⁶



Bûkî Jêr Dewarî Reş (The Bride under the black Tent), Sulaymaniyah, 1961

Directed by Refîq Çalak

Source: (Berzencî, 2007)

4.11 14 July Revolution and Kurdish Theatre after Qasim

In 1958, a coup put an end to the Hashemite monarchy which had ruled Iraq since its creation in early 1920s. This coup came after the Egyptian Revolution of 1952 which had ended the British occupation of the country leading to the rise of Arab nationalist and anti-imperialist sentiments in the Middle East. The Hashemite monarchy which was seen as the stooge of British imperialism was overthrown by Brigadier Abdulkarim Qasim and his fellow Free Officers.

⁴⁶ A video record of this drama can be found in the archive of Sulaymaniyah's Old Pictures available on Facebook via: <https://www.facebook.com/Slemani.Photos/videos>

The Republic of Iraq was established promising a better future for Kurds as Qasim pledged to establish a democratic republic with freedom and equality for the Kurds and Arabs alike. Indeed the provisional constitution that followed recognised that “Arabs and Kurds are partners in the Homeland, and their national rights are recognised within the Iraqi entity” (McDowall, 2004, p.302). Barzanî and hundreds of exiled Kurds returned to Iraq from the Soviet Union. The Kurds were allowed to broadcast in Kurdish and to publish books and periodicals. Elementary schools in Kurdish-speaking areas were allowed to use Kurdish as the medium of instruction. Kurdistan’s first proper theatre, Holî Gel (People’s Hall) was built. Kurdish departments were also established in some of the Iraqi universities. In Kirkuk, theatre groups such as Tîpî Hunerî Xebat (Khabat Art Group) and Tîpî Lawanî Kerkûk (Kirkuk Youths Group) were formed.





Kurdish delegations showing support for the 1958 revolution

Source: (Gelawêj, 2009)

The optimism of the post-revolution era is evident in theatre activities across Kurdistan at the time. In Kirkuk, Tîpî Lawanî Kerkûk staged a play called *Şewî Kotayî* (The Last Night) on the anniversary of the 14 July Revolution. This play, which had first been staged in Sulaymaniyah, depicted a corrupt monarchy which was oblivious to the ills of the nation. It glorified the Free Officers who overthrew and killed the king at the end of the play. Ebdurrehman Hekîm who played King Faisal in the Sulaymaniyah production of the play narrates that in the final act he was actually beaten badly by Teha Xelîl who played the role of a revolutionary. The anti-monarchy sentiments were so high at the time that the artists involved in this play had to sneak a picture of King Faisal into the theatre that they used as a basis for their make-up (Berzencî, 2007, p.98). Another play that went on stage at the time and dealt with the fall of a despotic king was *Kawey Asinger* (Kawe the Blacksmith), the hero of the old Kurdish legend. The story which described the victory of an oppressed people over their monstrous king who lived off the brains of the youth appealed to large crowds who attended the performance for nine days in Sulaymaniyah (ibid., p.99). The poet Goran, who had spent several years in Iraqi prisons and was only freed after the 1958 coup, also wrote an operetta entitled, *Encamî Ejdehak* (The Fall of Ejdehak) to be performed on the occasion of the Kurdish New Year in 1959. Although

the Society for Fine Arts was not able to stage it, the first act of the unfinished operetta was published in the same year in *Beyan* periodical (Goran, 2005, p.262). This act reveals the anti-monarchist, revolutionary, and mainly the Kurdish nationalist nature of the work, with legendary national heroes such as Kawa calling for revolution to free Kurdistan and predicting the decades of guerrilla struggle in the mountains of Kurdistan:

Cûle be zistan etezê (Winter has slowed us down)
Serma wekû mar egezê (The cold stings like a snake)
Ta gulale deşt sûr neka (Until the red tulips cover the land)
Piyaw asan xwar û jûr neka (and men move around freely)
Destdanî şoriş girane (an uprising will be costly)
Lem wilatî Kurdistanê... (in this country of Kurdistan)
Hat û pelamar ser nekewt (If the attack fails)
Mil enêyn bo şax û eşkewt... (we'll go to the mountains)
Birakanim! Emro rojî dan bexoda girtine... (oh brothers! Today we need to be patient)
Eger dilsozî rastîn, ebê hergiz newestîn (if you are real patriots, you must never rest)
Asin bikotîn be asin, das drûst keyn û gasin (Let's pound iron against iron, make sickles and ploughs)
Şemşêr û tîr û xencer, fîrya xeyn bo şorişker (swords, arrows and knives, for the rebels)
(ibid., pp.267-268)

Although Goran was optimistic about the consequences of the 14 July Revolution for the Kurds and had probably intended this operetta as a celebration of it, it did not take long before the relations between the Kurds and the central government deteriorated. During the early 1960s, Qasim showed no intention to make concessions to Kurdish autonomy. Months went by without any serious attempt to implement the promises implicit in the Temporary Constitution. The disillusionment of Kurds was exacerbated by Baghdad's growing denial of the rights of the Kurds to any recognition at all. The KDP was declared illegal, some of its members were arrested, and several newspapers were closed down. Fighting broke out in July 1961 with Kurds enjoying a series of victories at the onset of the war. Qasim retaliated with brutal air operations, inflicting great suffering on the civil population. These attacks helped unite all shades of Kurdish opinion and give the revolt the character of a national uprising in September 1961.

Qasim was overthrown after a coup by the Baath party on 8 February 1963 which also crushed people's pro-Qasim rebellion across the country. What followed after the Baathist coup was several months of indiscriminate murder and terror carried out by the National Guard who rounded up and killed Communist party members and sympathisers in their homes.

Many thousands were arrested, and sports grounds were turned into makeshift prisons to hold the flood of detainees. People were killed in the streets, tortured to death in prison under atrocious conditions. The killings, arrests and torture continued throughout the Baathists' period...almost every family in Baghdad was affected... (Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett, 2001, p.86)

The Baath government had also reached stalemate in negotiations with the Kurds over autonomy for Kurdistan and resumed hostilities:

On 5 June Baathi troops surrounded Sulaymaniya, imposed a curfew and began rounding up wanted men. When martial law was lifted three days later the population found the streets littered with dead people and a mass grave containing 80 bodies. Many others had also disappeared." A few days later the Kurdish delegates in Baghdad were arrested and an offensive towards Amadiya, Rawanduz and Koi-Sanjaq was launched. (McDowall, 2004, pp.314–315)

In November the Baath government was overthrown but new governments were no better disposed towards the Kurds. They successively launched campaigns against the Kurds which all ended in stalemate. The Iraqi army even resorted to napalm and chemical weapons against the Kurdish forces but still failed to crush the rebellion. However, in 1968 the Baath, which had resumed power after a successful coup, soon decided to reach an agreement with Barzanî whose success in holding control over the Kurdish rebellion forced the Iraqi regime to negotiate with him. Thus after years of fighting against central governments, autonomy in Kurdistan was finally recognized as the Kurdistan Autonomous Region which encompassed the governorates of Duhok, Erbil and Sulaymaniyah. This formed the basis of the March Agreement of 1970.

As a result of political instabilities in the 1960s and despite the intellectuals' efforts, cultural activities in general and theatre in particular declined immensely in Kurdistan. According to the historian Kawey Ehmedmîrza, the Kurdish theatre archives do not contain any records pertaining to the existence of any theatre activity in Sulaymaniyah between 1961 and 1968 (Ehmedmîrza, 2011, p.30). He believes the socio-political conditions resulting from the onset of Kurdish uprising in September 1961 are the reason behind the decline of theatre (ibid.). Things however changed for the better as the establishment of autonomy in Kurdistan, albeit short-lived, led to the revival of theatre activities in Iraqi Kurdistan. Also, it was only then that Kurdish plays reappeared in print.

4.12 Kurdish Theatre during the Autonomous Era, 1970-1974

The early 1970s is considered a golden period and a high point in the history of Kurdish national movement in Iraq – a high point which arguably was not surpassed until the late 1990s (Stansfield and Resool, 2006, p.102). With the establishment of autonomy in Kurdistan in March 1970 the lives of the people changed drastically. The Kurdish cities were governed by Kurdish authorities and Kurdish was spoken in schools, universities, media, courts, etc. Ten days later the traditional Newroz festival was celebrated in all Kurdish cities. In Kirkuk around one million people participated in the festival where there was music, dance and theatre performance (Zangana, 2002, p.48).

The radical changes brought about by the autonomy agreement ushered in a honeymoon period for Kurdish cultural life which experienced a renaissance with the establishment of many cultural centres, a university, publishing houses, a Kurdish television channel, and several theatre troupes including *Komeley Huner û Wêjey Kurdî* (the society for Kurdish art and literature), *Tîpî Pêşrewî Şanoy Kurdî* (the progressive Kurdish theatre group), *Tîpî Hunerî Hewlêr* (Erbil Art group), and *Tîpî Nwandinî Silêmanî* (Sulaymaniyah Acting Group).

The first official Kurdish theatre group called *Tîpî Nwandin û Mosîqay Silêmanî* (Sulaymaniyah Acting and Music Group) started work in February 1969 in Sulaymaniyah. As its name suggests, this group was made up of two separate groups of actors and musicians who soon parted ways to form their independent groups. In September, the same year, the actors formed *Tîpî Nwandinî Silêmanî* marking the beginning of attempts to create a serious Kurdish theatre as an independent art form which did not need music to help with its popular reception. It is noteworthy that in their first dramatic performance, the group distributed leaflets which described its aim as to serve the Kurdish art and called on educated women to join their group and not be afraid to refute ignorance “in the service of the nation and the homeland” (Ehmedmîrza, 2011, p.55). This demonstrates the importance that the founders of the first official Kurdish theatre group attached to their task as a national undertaking. Theatre could be a vehicle of change and progress not only as an art in itself but by tackling one of the most deep-rooted and challenging social ills which was the oppression of women and their restricted rights to participate in or even access public spaces.

Perhaps a positive move towards honouring women in society was the creation of a theatre group called *Hawrêyanî Gezîze* or Gezîze’s friends whose works largely drew on Kurdish folklore. This group was formed in 1970 by Omerî Elî Emîn who named his group after its only female member, his young daughter Gezîze, who had become a popular actor both on stage and on TV. Although due to financial difficulties the group lasted less than two years, Gezîze’s talent and acting abilities won her the hearts and minds of the Kurdish public who still fondly remember the young actor’s performances in the early 1970s (*‘Hawrêyanî Gezîze’*, 2009, p.49). The legacy of honouring female actors by this popular theatre group continued three decades later as Gezîze, who graduated from Baghdad academy of fine arts in 1988, revived *Hawrêyanî Gezîze* in 2004, but this time in the form of an all-female theatre group.



Gezîze's Friends Theatre Group

Source: kurdipedia.org

Hawrêyanî Gezîze was not the only theatre group that drew on Kurdish folklore as material for its performances as many saw in national myths and legends the ingredients to express politically charged messages. The new wave of Kurdish theatre groups created during the autonomous era embraced the newly-found freedom to address political topics openly. Their works largely celebrated the fall of despots and called on the spirit of revolution. During the four year period of relative peace and autonomy in Kurdistan, many plays presented by Sulaymaniyah Theatre and Music Group dealt with patriotic themes, and the history of Kurdistan.

An important example of theatre-makers' engagement in promoting and solidifying Kurdish national identity can be seen during these years. Every year on Newroz, the story of the victory of Kawa, the mythical blacksmith who rose against the tyranny of the king Zuhak, was dramatized by different theatre groups in such performances as

Kawey Asinger (Kawa the Blacksmith) and *Dwarojî Zuhakî Zordar* (The Fall of the Tyrant Zuhak). The Kurdish New Year (Newroz) and the legend of Kawa are examples of the Kurdish myth of origin that has become a key element of the Kurdish national identity and an important factor in the Kurdish nation-building projects (see Bozarsalan, 2003; Hirschler, 2001). Celebrated by several nations throughout the Middle East, Newroz has been reconstructed by Kurdish nationalists to stand for the victory of the oppressed over the oppressor and thus symbolise the contemporary nationalist movement. What was an antique festival transformed into a modern and influential ideological tool in the political arena for the identity construction of the Kurds (Aydin, 2014). The myth of Newroz and the legend of Kawa had in fact contributed significantly to the Kurdish nationalist movement in Turkey where the PKK thinkers promoted shared myths of common ancestry, territory, and history to counter decades of assimilationist policies pursued by Ankara (Romano, 2006, pp.130–131). While in the 1970s in Turkey it was the PKK that built on national Kurdish myths of common ancestry to justify its socialist-nationalist claims (Aydin, 2014), in Iraq it was the theatre-makers who constructed the myth of origin and resistance around the Newroz festival and the legend of Kawa and utilised them as symbolic representation of Kurdish unity and revolt against foreign dictatorship. This was, in fact, the continuation of the springtime folk festival which, as explained in chapter three, was traditionally held in the villages of Iraqi Kurdistan and involved the performance of the legend of Kawa by amateur actors.

Kotayî Zordar (The Fall of the Tyrant) directed by Qazî Bamernî is another example of plays produced after the autonomy agreement that celebrated the Kurds' struggle to achieve independence. The play told the story of Mihemed Paşa Kore – meaning blind, as pasha was blind in one eye – the ruler of Soran emirate who assumed control in 1814 and gained control over much of Iraqi Kurdistan by 1833. For probably the first time in the region, some form of centralized government was established as Mihemed Paşa successfully subdued the local tribes and went so far as to mint his own coins. Despite his brutality, Mihemed Paşa had been able to create a real and genuine administration, bring law and order to the Kurdish lands, keep trade routes secure from brigandry problems and have excessive taxes levied

by local notables. His rule presumably heralded a 'golden age' if he had not surrendered to the Ottoman forces and been subsequently killed in 1837. His fall was the beginning of instability in the Kurdish emirates as well as the end of Kurdish semi-autonomy. Despite his fall, Mihemed Paşa's ability to seemingly create the first genuine Kurdish 'Kingdom' catapulted him into immortality as Kurdish nationalists would later discover stories of *Mîrê Kor* in folklore and elevate him to the status of a national hero. Bamernî's description of his aim in directing *Kotayî Zordar* clearly shows such nationalist interpretations of wars fought by Kurdish rulers:

At all times, the literatures of nations testify to the existence of those nations. Although we are staging a true historical tale, our aim is to tell our thoughtful audience to free themselves from the chains of the dark past and strive to achieve their human rights. It is upon us to sacrifice to any measure so that we do not suffer under a brutal merciless enemy. Therefore, our youth should look up to their ancestors and follow our national heroes in the struggle for justice. 'Mihemed Paşa Kore' of Rowanduz is the best example of such heroisms (ibid., p.67).

Bamernî was one of the graduates of Baghdad Fine Arts Academy who along with Ehmed Salar, Telet Saman, Ferhad Şerîf and others, played an important role in developing Kurdish theatre in the 1970s and later. He was born into a nationalist peasant family in the village of Bamernê. His uncle Ebdulcebar who was a prominent intellectual in the village was exiled to Nasiriya in Southern Iraq. After the Kurdish uprising in the early 1960s, Qazî joined his uncle in Nasiriya. Bamernî graduated from Bagdad Academy of Fine Arts in 1969-1970 the year when autonomy was recognised in Kurdistan. He returned to Duhok where many Arabs of Mosul and Baathists resided. Qazî who was trained in his uncle's Marxist, Kurdish nationalist school of thought found it impossible to work in Duhok and as such moved to Sulaymaniyah which was home to many Kurdish intellectuals, poets, artists and politicians from all parts of Kurdistan (Bamernî, 2011, p.85).

In Sulaymaniyah, Bamernî became the head director of student guild and taught drama and acting classes. He directed several performances for Sulaymaniyah Theatre and Music Group including one of the group's most successful performances which was *Nirxî Azadî* (The Cost of Freedom) (ibid.). This was based

on a play called *Montserrat* (1948) by Emmanuel Roblès (1914-1995), the Algerian-French author. The play was set during the Spanish occupation of Venezuela in 1812 and told the story of a Spanish officer, who repulsed by the atrocities committed against the natives, stood up against his commanders and refused to give up information on the whereabouts of the Venezuelan revolutionary leader, Simon Bolivar.

In 1970-1971, the Kirkuk branch of Kurdish Art and Literature Society opened. Among their performances were *Mereze* (Rice) and *Beharî Dizraw* (The Stolen Spring, 1972) which they staged in a school called *Şoriş* (Revolution) (in Şano, no.11, 2008). The latter was a political play about social injustice depicting a callous landlord and his poor tenant, Rustem, whose wife the landlord covets. The landlords' sons, Wurya and Blend, are, on the other hand, political activists in an underground anti-government organisation. Blend is arrested by the police while distributing leaflets and is assisted by Rustem to escape. Rustem is, however, attacked and killed in a plot by Blend's father. Before his death, Rustem tells Wurya and Blend: "At some point we will prevail and drive the foreign invaders out of our land and live in freedom." The play ends with Wurya singing: "Our spring was stolen, our moon was stolen, our stars were stolen ..." The singing is accompanied by drums (Zangana, 2002, pp.52–53). While the creation of organisations is presented here in the form of Agitprop theatre, what is foregrounded is the liberation of the homeland from foreign rule which was the common theme among most political plays of this period.

Other plays show the artists' concern with social injustice and the poor living conditions of workers at the time. The play *Lanewazan* (The Homeless) is an example of a play which shows the lives of those who live in cheap pensions. Refîq works for the owner of a pension and a teahouse, a stingy man who treats his workers inhumanely, insulting and accusing them of stealing his money. Refîq who cannot bear such treatment quits his job and joins an underground organisation. His desire is to build a new house that can benefit all. The fates of the people who live in the pension shed light on the poor living conditions of many. As in the previous

play, *Lanewazan* exposes the existence of socialist and nationalist underground organisations.

As with *Kotayî Zordar* (The End of the Oppressor) and *Kawey Asinger* (Kawe the Blacksmith), several plays staged during this period show the downfall of despots and the liberation of people. Some of them treat world events such as the Vietnamese liberation movement in a play written by Dilşad Merîwanî (1947-1989), the Kurdish writer and teacher. During his short life, Merîwanî was imprisoned and tortured several times for his activities in underground organisations. He joined the 1961 uprising and between 1962 and 1966 worked in the Society for the Revival of Kurdish National Resources (*Komeley Bûjandinewey Samanî Netewayetî Kurd*) which he had cofounded. This underground literary and artistic society distributed resistance works by several Kurdish writers and translations of Arabic, Persian and European resistance poetry. He joined the 1975 uprising and lived the life of a pêşmerge in the mountains of Kurdistan between 1983 and 1985. He was finally executed in 1989 after several years of publishing political plays, poems, and essays. Among his resistance works is a play called *Çawî Vietnam* (Vietnam's Eye, 1973) which was staged in Kirkuk. In the play, Merîwanî shows how the oppressors are afraid of the eyes of the nation and thus gouge out the eyes of those freedom-fighters they capture. The fight for freedom, however, goes on despite all tyranny (ibid., p.54).



Dilşad Merîwanî (1947-1989)

The Kurdish struggle for freedom found a platform in *The First Kurdish Art Festival* in Baghdad in 1974. The festival's organising committee held their first meeting in 3/2/1974 when they determined the festival's motto which was "for an original contemporary Kurdish art, peace and fraternity, and autonomy for Iraqi Kurdistan". Apart from the main motto, there were four other key mottos which were written on posters and were distributed, including:

- Our songs, our dance, our theatre is in the service of the Kurdish nation's wishes.
- Art is a means of revolution and a mirror of civilisation.
- Kurdistan is a love song for artists.
- Give me bread and theatre, and I give you a free and thoughtful nation (Ehmedmîrza, 2011, p.73).

These mottos clearly reflect the endorsement of nationalist discourse by theatre-makers and the importance that the organisers of the festival attached to theatre as a vehicle for promoting nationalist ideas. The political nature of the festival is also reflected in the eleven plays performed in it, most of which dealt with such themes as freedom-fighting, martyrdom, political oppression and other themes relevant to the Kurdish political life at the time. Among those dramas were, *Pirdî Welat* (The Bridge of the Country) performed by the Progressive Kurdish Theatre Group, *Nirxî Azadî* (The Cost of Freedom) presented by the Sulaymaniyah Acting Troup, *Teqînewe* (The Explosion) written by Elî Kerîm and presented by Kirkuk Art and Literature Society, *Şaxewanî Mezin* (The Great Mountaineer) by Qazî Bamernî presented by Sulaymaniyah Acting Group and *Dîwar* (The Wall) based on a story by Jean Paul Sartre, presented by Sulaymaniyah Society For Kurdish Art and Literature (ibid., pp.73-84).

4.13 Conclusion

According to Smith, there are a variety of factors that tie a nation together, such as song, dance, costume, ritual object, artwork, as well as landscape and monuments. Through the material representation of these shared cultural elements, the Kurdish

stage provided a means by which national identity was affirmed and national consciousness and solidarity was promoted. Nonetheless and despite the lack of a Kurdish state, the growing sense of Kurdish nationalism continued to shape theatre productions in Kurdistan. Pîremêrd's *Mem û Zîn* (1935), *Şerîf Hemewend* (1936), and *Mehmûd Aqa Şêwekel* (1936) and performances of Goran's nationalist poetry on theatre stage are instances of how theatre was utilised by Kurdish intellectuals and intelligentsia as a site to construct national cultural identity and retrieve national cultural heritage by staging folklore, myths, legends and history. Not only did theatre serve as a tool of nation-building but it also served as a means of contributing to the leftist political campaigns in Iraq. By staging anti-feudalist and anti-monarchist plays, Kurdish theatre engaged in representing and legitimising the wider political movement that had resulted in the creation of Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) and several leftist Kurdish groups in Kurdistan in the 1930s. The Kurdish theatre moved from staging folkloric tales in the 1930s to socio-political themes that reflected the realities of the time in the 1940s and the 1950s. Most of these plays were in line with the revolutionary leftist sentiments which ultimately led to the overthrow of monarchy. These 'serious' plays proved to attract enough attention to finally lead to government's violent intervention.

Despite the fact that drama had already become a tool for modernising the society and highlighting social and political issues in previous decades, theatre was still not a serious art and was mainly a school event on special occasions such as the Ramadan Eid. Due to the difficult social and political circumstances, it had ceased to exist for the most part of the 1960s. In the 1970s, the creation of autonomy for Kurdistan and the resulting stability led to a vibrant socio-political atmosphere in which theatre groups started to form. It was only then that, for the first time, a small group of theatre graduates started to work and form theatre groups. Their small number was due to the social stigma associated to acting which had prevented families from allowing their children to study drama (Kerîm, 2013, pp.75–76). Despite social and financial difficulties, the theatre-makers of the early 1970s managed to turn theatre into a serious and popular medium which was made relevant to the lives of its audiences by addressing the current political issues and its strong sense of

nationalism. The socialist trend of the Kurdish theatre continued in the early 1970s with nationalist messages stronger than ever in the free era of Kurdish self-rule.

Chapter Five

Kurdish Theatre and Resistance, 1975-1991

This chapter examines the relationship between the political developments in the second half of the 1970s and the duration of the 1980s and the Kurdish theatrical outputs of the period and shows how the political struggle to cast off the Iraqi rule was simultaneous with the growth of radical performance culture in Kurdistan between 1975 and 1991. Scholars of Kurdish nationalism generally agree that “the hardships suffered by the Iraqi Kurds in the second half of the 1970s and the duration of the 1980s was of catastrophic, even genocidal, proportions” (Stansfield and Resool, 2006, p.103). In spite of all the tragic events that was brought about by the Baath regime, the late 1970s and all of the 1980s is nostalgically referred to by scholars and artists who were active in the period as the golden age of Kurdish theatre in Iraq (see Kerîm, 2009; Reûf, 1995; Kerîm, 2011). It was a period when theatre was a popular medium in cities of Erbil and Sulaymaniyah. The eager audiences were made up of not only the educated elite but also the lower classes who were willing to spend their meagre income on tickets which sometimes equalled the total earnings of their day (Mihemed, 2013, personal communications, 8 Oct).

Allison argues that “in the authoritarian states of the Near and Middle East, where written material is rigorously censored, points of view which contradict the government are usually by necessity expressed orally” and oral communication “is often the vehicle of minority discourses, of tendencies deemed to be subversive” (Allison, 2001, p.5). Kurdish theatre under the Baath rule clearly illustrates this point as, despite the censorship of dramatic texts prior to their public performance, Kurdish theatre-makers managed to maintain the nationalist tone of their works through the use of oral tradition and its fund of folklore and mythology which justified “political courses of action” and fuelled revolutionary fervour (ibid.).

I argue that it was through theatre that cultural nationalism made its greatest impact in the 1970s and 1980s Iraqi Kurdistan because the impact that theatre made was not through print, which had a small readership, but through live performance,

accessible to all. In fact, most Kurdish plays that were staged in the 1970s and 1980s were only printed after the establishment of autonomy. Those which were printed in journals such as *Karan* and *Beyan* did not have a large readership either due to the obstacles faced by the Kurdish press. As Sheyholislami notes, printing in Kurdish has been by small groups of intelligentsia for larger groups of the intelligentsia and even for these small groups access to Kurdish print materials was not easy until very recently (Sheyholislami, 2011, p.83). To the end of the 1980s, the Kurdish press was characterised, according to Hassanpour, “by the absence of enduring dailies, low circulation, poor distribution facilities, dependence on subscription and single copy sales, lack of or insignificant advertising revenue, poor printing facilities, shortage of newsprint, and limited professionalization and specialization” (Hassanpour, 1992, p.276).

Therefore, while it is unlikely that printed materials were able to make an impact on the Kurdish society at large, live theatrical performances drew large crowds to the theatres. During the 1970s and 1980s, theatre became increasingly politicised in nature and nationalistic in tone. After a decade of autonomy war and a failed uprising and continued rebellion against the regime, Kurdish theatre started to reflect the growing sense of Kurdish nationalism and the wider socialist movement in Iraq. Anti-monarchist themes gave way to Kurdish nationalist and socialist themes which continued to appear in Kurdish theatre productions even under strict censorship. Some consider the late 1970s and 1980s to be the golden years of theatre because of the commitment of the artists to their art for which they had to make grave sacrifices. They were willing to do so because for them, theatre making was as important as the pêşmerges’ armed struggle (Kerîm, 2013). In fact, many theatre artists were themselves involved in the political struggle and had joined the guerrilla movement at one point or another.

The Kurdish theatre under the Baath regime between 1975 and 1991 responds to the loss of autonomy in 1974 and the resultant sense of loss of self-worth by taking part in the healing process of asserting a distinct Kurdish culture and identity. The very act of making theatre in Kurdistan was important in that it celebrated the

language and identity of a people who had continuously been displaced and denigrated, and made invisible to the outside world. A history of loss, defeat and denigration can ultimately lead to a people's self-annihilation. For one of the greatest evils of colonialism, according to the Kenyan novelist and playwright, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, is "to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity and ultimately in themselves" (Thiong'o, 1986, p.3).

Theatre not only contributed to asserting Kurdish identity and legitimacy, but also played a significant role in mobilizing the populace toward political activism by courageously calling upon the Kurdish youth to join the resistance movement. In this sense, the Kurdish theatre of 1975-1991 conforms to Mda's definition of Theatre for Resistance: a theatre performed with the overt aim of rallying or mobilizing the oppressed to fight against oppression (Mda, 1998). As the following will show, theatre in Iraqi Kurdistan between 1975 and 1991 has consistently participated in providing possibilities for resistance to the Baathist dictatorship through multiple methods of engagement ranging from mythology, folk forms, re-enactment of oppressed histories, and revival of native histories. It was also used by the Kurdish guerrillas themselves as a propaganda tool and as a means of struggle against despotism and injustice.

5.1 The Collapse of the Kurdish National Movement

Soon after the First Kurdish Art Festival the negotiations between the central government and the Kurdish politicians reached an impasse. Many Kurdish men including theatre artists such as Ehmed Salar and Simko Ezîz and their theatre groups went to the mountains to join the resistance.⁴⁷ Baghdad launched an offensive against the Kurdish region in April 1974 and won the war immediately after the Algiers Agreement with Iran in March 1975. With the withdrawal of Iranian support for the Kurds, the resistance was shattered. Mela Mistefa Barzanî was forced to abandon the fight and along with over 100,000 Kurds, fighters, their families

⁴⁷ This will be dealt with in more detail in the section on guerrilla theatre.

and others, crossed into Iran to join the 100,000 Kurdish fighters already there. Thousands of others surrendered to Iraqi forces and the uprising ended within a short time (McDowall, 2004, p.338).

After the collapse of the Kurdish movement in 1975, the Iraqi government embarked upon a policy to placate the Kurdish public by issuing amnesty to the guerrilla fighters and implementing economic development projects. Such projects, that were the result of the 1970s oil boom and Iraq's subsequent economic growth, were aimed at conciliating those segments of Kurdish society that had not directly experienced government repression. At the same time, however, the Iraqi government started a massive campaign of Arabisation, Baathisation, cultural suppression, comprehensive mass deportation, arrests and large-scale executions.

The "Arabisation" of the oil-rich districts of Kirkuk and Khanaqin, as well as the border areas (Sheikhan and Sinjar) continued to strike against any revival of Kurdish hostilities. Kurds were deported and Arab peasants settled in their stead. Here and there the villagers tried to resist. In 1976 the regime started to create a security belt along the Iranian and Turkish borders, which meant evacuating a zone of 10 to 20 kilometres wide along the Iran-Iraq border. In the north, too, government forces destroyed many villages, cutting down fruit trees and filling water wells with concrete. By 1978, at least 1,400 villages were completely razed and their inhabitants were forced to leave. Hundreds of thousands were deported to *mujama'al*, or 'collective' resettlement camps near the cities. These camps were "drab townships located near major towns, with long wide avenues to permit control by armoured vehicles" (ibid., p.339). Many others were sent to southern Iraqi cities of Diwaniya, Nasiriya and Afak. Over one million residents of the disputed districts of Khanaqin, Kirkuk, Mandali, Sheikhan, Zakho, and Sinjar were deported and replaced with Egyptian and Arab Iraqi settlers (ibid., pp.339-340). Kurdish civil servants, soldiers and police were transferred to south of Iraq and replaced by Arab civil servants. Kurdish names of villages and towns were changed to Arabic names and Kurdish was completely banned or mainly replaced by Arabic in different levels of education in some areas causing mass demonstrations in Sulaymaniyah and Koya (in *Spark*, vol.1, no.12,

Dec 1977). The underground Kurdish Students' Union played an important part in organising such activities including a new wave of mass demonstrations which successfully led to the release of 250 students and 70 teachers who had been arrested in October 1977 (ibid.).

5.2 Cultural Suppression under the Baath Regime

One of the Baath party's first acts was to confiscate or close down Iraq's major newspapers and execute Aziz Abdel Barakat who was both the head of the Journalist's Union and the publisher of the independent *Al-Manar* ("The Lighthouse"), one of the most professionally run and widely distributed dailies in Iraq at the time (Isakhan, 2012, p.103). Following this, in 1969 the Baath party established a publications law which made the Iraqi media industry quickly transform into one that was more controlled, monolithic, mobilized and almost completely stripped of any critical approach (Bengio, 2002, p.110). This meant that by the early 1970s Iraq had only five daily newspapers, each of which was heavily influenced, if not completely controlled by the state. Baath's view on democracy and freedom of expression is evident in the party's 1965 program which declared, "(while) the masses have the right of constructive criticism within the limits of the nation's progressive line of destiny... (such) criticism under the socialist revolutionary regime cannot become an end in itself, nor can it be allowed to proceed unchecked to the limit of undermining the nationalist socialist line itself" (cited in Thoman, 1972, p.32).

After the Baath party resumed power in all Kurdistan, it sought to eradicate notions of Kurdish nationalism had taken hold in Kurdish political culture (Stansfield and Resool, 2006, pp.108–109). The Baath party reopened offices in Kurdish towns and cities and Kurds were forced to join the Baath party and enrol in state run social and professional unions and organizations (ibid, p.109). Arabic became the official language in schools and Kurdish media, like those in the rest of Iraq, became subjected to strict censorship. Mass media was strictly monitored and controlled by civilian and military secret service. After the amnesty granted following the 1974-75 uprising most Kurdish theatre artists returned to their towns but faced strict

monitoring in their works. The freedom enjoyed during the autonomous phase had ended in 1975 when the age of censorship started. Theatre performances had to be approved by the ministry of culture. Every literary publication, including all plays, had to be sent to the censorship office where every page of the play was scrutinised and then stamped “approved” or “not approved” (see appendices 1,2,3). In an interview, director Fetah Xetab described how the loss of autonomy affected theatre production in Kurdistan:

From mid-1970s, one person would become in charge of giving permission and budget to theatre performances or TV shows. He would also become the leading manager of the theatre groups without necessarily having knowledge about the art. Or he would become ‘responsible for communications’ which meant he would visit the secret service and participate in meetings which decided the fate of dramatic texts...we wouldn’t take the rehearsals seriously because they were watched and we feared they would ban our works (Xetab, 2014, personal communication, 4 August).

In the Arabised cities of Kirkuk, whose name was changed to the Arabic *at-Ta’imim*, and Khanaqin, Kurdish theatre was banned and many theatre artists from Kirkuk, such as Mehdî Umîd and Celîl Zengene, had to move to Erbil and Sulaymaniyah while many others opted for exile (Kerîm, 2011, p.147). Working in Kirkuk’s TV station, *Ta’imim*, also became increasingly difficult. In 1976 in Sulaymaniyah, Bamernî had directed a successful play called *al-Azrab* which was about the workers strike and which he had set before the rise of Baathism and Arab nationalism to avoid any association. At the time, the Baathists were determined to claim the leftist and communist struggle as their own struggle. In the early days of the Baath regime, it began creating an aura of radical political change by allowing several communist works to be translated into Arabic and courting left-leaning intellectuals and activists. As such, a Baathist group from Kirkuk television approached Bamernî and offered him the generous sum of 1500 dinars for a TV production of his play. Halfway through recording, Bamernî halted the production after he was told that as per an order by the Revolutionary Command Council all TV productions had to hang on the wall portraits of Ahmad Hassan al-Bakr, the president, and his deputy, Saddam Hussein. Bamernî and his Sulaymaniyah Acting Group protested to this demand based on the time-set of the play and returned to Kurdistan. Soon after, in October 1977, Bamernî

went into exile to France where he stayed until the fall of Saddam Hussein (Bamernî, 2011, pp.86–87).

As a result of strict censorship, Kurdish theatre had to veil its true targets and hide its political message behind symbols and allegories. The playwrights had constantly to tread a fine line, exploring which critical allusions would be allowed to pass and which would result in censorship and banning. The ministry of culture usually demanded many alterations in the texts of the plays before their publication or presentation on stage. Despite this, theatre became an important medium for representing the Kurdish history of resistance and showing the oppression and persecution of the Kurds to motivate them to struggle for liberation (Zangana, 2002, p.57).

5.3 Kurdish Theatre and the Defeat of 1975

Despite all difficulties, Kurdish theatre-makers continued to persevere in their art and achieve success even on national stages. In the spring of 1976, Salar, along with Simko Ezîz and others, founded a theatre group in Sulaymaniyah University called Tîpî Şanoy Zanko (University Theatre Group). This group produced several successful works including *Dwa Goranî* (the last song), *Waney Reşbelek* (dance lesson), *Othello*, *Raport* (report), and *Qulapî Çawekan* (the hook of the eyes). Their *Xec û Siyamend* (Xec and Siyamend) won Salar the best director award in the First Theatre Festival for Iraqi Universities. The jury committee in the festival were great Iraqi theatre directors and professors such as Ibrahim Jalal, Ja'far al-Sa'di, As'ad Abdulrazaq and Fazil Khalil (Daniş, 2009c).

Xec û Siyamend, written by Fuad Mecîd Misrî, was based on a folkloric tale belonging to the Mukriyan region and was about the tragic fate of *Xec*, the daughter of a khan, and *Siyamend*, a poor peasant, whose love for each other has no place in the feudal society in which they live. Presented by the Progressive Kurdish Theatre Group in Sulaymaniyah in 1978, *Xec û Siyamend* was received passionately by the audience who saw in this tragic love story reflections of their own national

loss. Hêmin Mukriyanî (1921-1986), the great Kurdish poet from Iran who lived in exile in Sulaymaniyah following the fall of the Mahabad Republic, was so overwhelmed by this performance that he burst into tears after the concluding lines. These lines resonated strongly with the audience who saw in Xec the image of their nation and in Siyamend, a hero to save the nation from the tyranny of a despotic regime (Berzencî, 2007, p.229);

Eger be dil mebesttane (if you wholeheartedly desire)
Xecî şeyda helnedêrin (to save lovelorn Xec)
Ba hemûman aşqî bîn (let's all love her)
Xec kîjêkî derûn û dil firawane (Xec is a kind-hearted girl)
Xec kabanî miskînane (Xec is the lady of the poor)
Xatûnêkî emekdarî hejarane (...and the wretched)
Xec dulberêkî şeydaye (Xec is a lovelorn sweetheart)
Heta êstaş çawî le rêy siyamendêkî wiryaye (to this day, she is still waiting for a caring Siyamend)
(ibid., p.230)

Before *Xec û Siyamend*, the Progressive Kurdish Theatre Group had expressed the Kurdish national despair following 1975 in a play called *Receb û Piyawxoran* (Receb and the Man-eaters). Written by Simko Nakam and directed by Ehmed Salar, this play told the story of a poor man called Receb who was tormented by his neighbour, Faysal, a bully coveting Receb's house. Meanwhile, members of a society "for helping the helpless", made up of a lawyer, an engineer, a businessman, a thug and a court poet, offered to rescue Receb from his neighbour only to reveal later that they were after a winning lottery ticket presumably in Receb's house. In the end, Receb dies in his house but there is hope that one day his son, Mehdî, a blue-collar worker who lives in another town, will return and avenge his father's death (ibid., pp.218-222).

Receb û Piyawxoran clearly stands as a metaphor for the predicament of the Kurds in Iraq and represents the playwright's outlook towards contemporary political events at a time when Iraqi Kurdistan was plagued by disappointment and despair. This is reflected in the final scene of the play when the only character left on the stage is a sleepy policeman who arrested the wrong man for Receb's murder and the only sound that is heard is of an ambulance carrying Receb's dead body. Despite Receb's

death in the hands of the bourgeoisie, a metaphor for the demise of Kurdish nationalist movement, there is still hope that his son, a metaphor for a new proletarian movement, will fight and defeat Receb's oppressors. *Receb û Piyawxoran* heralded the revival of the Kurdish national struggle which in fact took place shortly in the form of a socialist party.

5.4 The Resumption of the Kurdish National Struggle

The repressive measures carried out by the government against the Kurds after the Algiers agreement led to the early resumption of guerrilla warfare. Several Kurdish organisations were being established abroad. In May 1975 the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) announced its establishment from Damascus and started a new armed resistance movement. Former pêşmerges who lived abroad or who were frustrated after they had accepted Baghdad's amnesty in 1975 made their way to Kurdistan and joined the movement (Bruinessen, 1986). By 1977, the PUK's new uprising (*şorişî nwê*) asserted its existence in Kurdistan and clashes between the Iraqi army and Kurdish guerrillas were renewed.

The defining characteristics of the PUK were anti-feudalist, anti-tribalist, anti-bourgeois-rightist, and anti-imperialist. The PUK had recognised the role of different social classes in the national liberation movement and sought to unite the peasants, the working class and the petit-bourgeoisie in the struggle. The party described the Kurdish liberation movement as an essentially socialist movement: the uprising of the people and its toiling masses against imperialism, feudalism, and oppressive regimes for the achievement of their right to self-determination ('*Revolution in Kurdistan*', 1977, p.45). In keeping with its founding manifesto, the PUK declared solidarity with Palestinian Revolution and condemned all reactionary and imperialist plots aiming at destruction of their struggle. In its 19th congress, Kurdish Students Abroad (AKSA) held a pro-Palestinian congress in which it declared full support of Palestinian uprising, calling the Kurdish movement a "permanent ally of the Arab liberation movement and the Palestinian revolution" (*Spark*, 1978, p.6). The PLO representative, likewise, compared the Kurdish struggle to the Palestinian struggle

and stated that they are both in the same trench of regaining their national identity, the liberation of their land and fighting against imperialism, Zionism, and reactionary puppets (ibid.).

The PUK blamed the KDP for the downfall of Kurdish uprising in 1975 and strongly condemned the “capitulationist” and “tribal-minded” Kurdish leadership for abandoning the 14 year old Kurdish struggle (1961-1975) and placing all their hope on US imperialism and its stooges for support (*The Torch*, 1984, p.7). Ever since the establishment of the PUK, its leader, Celal Talebanî, on one hand, and Barzanî and his sons, on the other, have represented the opposite poles in the Kurdish movement. While Barzanî mainly depended on tribal support from Kurmanji-speakers of Badinan, Talebanî enjoyed the support of urban, educated Sorani-speakers. The PUK found its strongest support in the Sulaymaniyah region among the young urban population of the Sorani-speaking districts who were attracted to Talebanî’s radical and progressive political pronouncements (Bruinessen, 1986).

This division of political spheres of influence exemplified the constant conflict between the Sorani-speaking southern part of Iraqi Kurdistan (“Soran”) and the Kurmanji-speaking north (“Badinan”) which was firmly in the hands of the Barzanîs and their KDP. Economic, linguistic and cultural differences between these regions had caused major frictions within the Iraqi Kurdish movement at least from the early 1960s on. Badinan was economically backward and strongly dominated by tribes, while the southern districts were more urbanised and scored higher in education.

Linguistically, it was the Sorani Kurdish dialect that acquired official status in Iraq and was fostered as a literary language and a medium of education, while Kurmanji was neglected and the teaching language in Badinan was Arabic or Sorani (Bruinessen, 1994, pp.11–37). The reason for this partiality in favour of Sorani was of course not due to its inherent superiority to Kurmanji but to the political environment within which the Kurds had been living. In Turkey, where the majority of Kurmanji-speaking Kurds live, any expression in Kurdish was absolutely forbidden for decades leaving Kurmanji weak and underdeveloped. On the other hand, most

of the important Kurdish towns of Iraq and Iran are located in the Sorani-speaking zone, and due to the fact that Iraq was the only country where it was possible to publish books, journals and newspapers in Kurdish, most intellectual discourse among the Kurds during the past century, as well as most theatre, has been in Sorani (Bruinessen, 1986).

5.5 The Influence of the Arab Theatre on Kurdish Theatre

The influence of the general progressive tendencies in Iraq on the Sorani-language Kurdish theatre produced in Sulaymaniyah and Erbil is evident in radical and progressive themes that were addressed by theatre groups. Kurdish theatre of the 1970s reflects the wider concerns with the liberation of the fatherland from imperialist yoke, the liberation of the masses of the people from feudalism, the reactionary regimes, and the repressive bureaucracies of the ruling nations that oppress their masses. Pro-Palestinian themes feature prominently in Kurdish theatre of the 1970s as in the Arab-Iraqi theatre of the period in general. To escape the sharp blade of censorship, Kurdish theatre-makers resorted to symbolism in plays which had previously been produced by Arab Iraqi theatre artists. For its likeness to the Kurdish situation, Palestinian life under occupation and struggle for freedom, which was a highly popular cause in the Arab world at the time, provided the best substitute. Several translations of Arabic plays staged during this time, such as *Rizgarî* (Freedom), *Faylî 67* (File no. 67), and *Felestin Welatî Qesan Kenefanî* (Palestine, Qassan Kanafani's Homeland), dealt with the occupation of Palestine. These plays not only showed the brutality of the occupation but also celebrated the fight for freedom which resonated greatly with the Kurdish audiences. Although the wrongly accused and tortured Palestinian prisoner dies at the end of the *File no. 67*, the play ends with the hopeful speech by the narrator that, "there is a truth, be aware of it...when a child is killed, another is born and so long as there is Palestinian blood in a mother's children, they will fight until they achieve freedom" (Çêwar, 1980, p.95). The revolutionary language of such plays could not be hidden from the Iraqi Intelligence Service who finally put an end to the production of pro-Palestinian plays by Kurdish artists. For instance, in 1983 the successful production of *Faylî 67* was

followed by harsh interrogations of the cast and the director, Telet Saman. According to both Muhsin Mihemed and Ehmed Salar, Baghdad was right to be suspicious of pro-Palestinian plays because they were staged only because of their similarity to the Kurdish situation. At the time, Palestine served as a suitable substitute for the depiction of the oppression of the people in Kurdistan.

Now we wonder how we could stage those plays under those circumstances and the level of censorship. But we used techniques that avoided direct expression. We sometimes referred to the Ottoman rule, British occupation of Iraq, or Palestine. Until one day they forbade us from doing any work related to Palestine. You are lying, they said. You are referring to yourselves through Palestine (Salar, 2013, personal communication, 5 May).

Theatre artists continued to resort to foreign plays to implicitly comment on the Kurdish situation and also express their socialist ideals. These plays, which were previously performed by Arab-Iraqi artists were translated from Arabic. They usually dealt with the universal values of justice and freedom, such as Yaşar Kemal's *Teneke* directed by Ehmed Salar, and Osvaldo Dragun's one-act plays, *A Toothache*, *A Plague*, *A Dog* which had been translated into Arabic by the prominent Iraqi director, Qasim Muhammd (1936-2009). There were also original Arabic plays that were translated into Kurdish and staged including Mahyadin Zangana's *As-Sirr* (The Secret, 1968) and *Al-Ijaaza* (The Holiday, 1977), and Adil Kadhim's *Al-Hisaar* (The Siege). All these plays were political in nature and although they were staged with success, due to the political situation in Kurdistan, the theatre artists faced immense difficulties to obtain official approval for each of them (Kerîm, 2009, p.97).

The translations of world and Arab theatre into Kurdish and the new dramaturgies of the Arab artists made a great impact on Kurdish stage in the 1970s and the 1980s. Already in the 1960s, the Arab dramatists, led by the Egyptians, had started to search for a specifically Arab drama based on the indigenous folkloric theatrical tradition.⁴⁸ In the late sixties, the Arab defeat of the 1967 war with Israel, resulted in the creation of a new level of awareness among intellectuals and artists in general

⁴⁸ For information on Egyptian theatre artists' attempts to create an indigenous theatre by drawing upon local traditions of al-samir and al-maqama see, (Badawî, 1987).

and theatre artists in particular, whose desire to raise Arab nationalist consciousness, strengthen national unity and fuel anti-colonial sentiments led to the emergence of a new wave of Arab nationalist and anti-Zionist dramas such as Alfred Faraj's *an-Nar waz-Zaytun* (Fire and Olives, 1970) and Yusuf al-Ani's *al-Kharaba* (the Wasteland, 1970).

The period saw growing tendencies for creating an indigenous Arab theatre by relying on local culture and history. The call for an indigenous theatre first started in Egypt where attempts were made to draw on the Arab performance tradition of *hakawati* (story-teller) and legends and histories of the Arab world. This trend found soon appeared in Iraq where writers had traditionally shown a tendency to find their plots in myths, legends, folklore and history. Partly under the influence of the Egyptian theatre and partly inspired by the western experiments in theatre, there developed in Iraq a similar search for a specifically Arab dramatic forms based upon traditional folk modes of entertainment. The Iraqi dramatists of the 1960s started to seek their themes in the ancient past and semi-legendary kingdoms. The echo of the past can be found in plays by Yusuf al-Ani, Adil Kadhim and Qasim Muhammad whose plays express hopes of unity for the Arab-Muslim community.

Also the growing interest in socialist ideologies in the Middle East resulted in the increasing popularity of Brecht in theatres of Syria, Iraq and Egypt. In Egypt, the dramatists, inspired by the experiments of Brecht and Pirandello, drew on shadow theatre, the story-telling tradition and other distinctly folk features. Alfred Faraj is among those who sought his inspiration in Arab popular and folk literature such as the Arabian Nights and the medieval romances. Influenced by Brecht, Faraj used these folk elements to comment on contemporary social and political reality. The Syrian Sadallah Wannus, a pioneer of contemporary Arab theatre, was a key figure in introducing Brecht to the Arab theatre. In the Arab Festival for Theatre Arts in Damascus in 1969, Wannus spoke of the need for a "theatre of politicisation", a theatre that could provoke the people to think critically and seek change. His call for political change is evident in his dramatic productions, such as *Elephant, the King of*

All Times (1969) and *The Adventure of Jaber's Head* (1970), which significantly contributed to the evolution of political theatre.⁴⁹

Wannus's plays achieved great success in Iraq where National Theatre Company produced many of his plays and also those of Brecht. The Company also produced many successful works by Yousif al-Ani, the Iraqi playwright who was heavily influenced by Brecht.⁵⁰ In Iraq, the works of such theatre directors as Yusuf al-Ani, Ibrahim Jalal (1921-1991), and Sami Abdulhamid marked the beginning of Iraqi artists' interest in Brecht. As Abdulhamid remarks, the majority of Iraqi intellectuals, including the theatre artists, at the time believed in the Marxian dialectical materialist philosophy and as such they found the Brechtian theatre appealing (Abd al -Ḥamīd, 2010, p.87). The Egyptian *al-Masrah wal-Sinema* (Theatre and Cinema) periodical was an important introductory source on Brecht in Iraq. Jalal, too, who had just finished his studies in the US, played an important role in introducing Brechtian theatre to Iraqi theatre students in the early 1960s. *Furqa tal-Masrah al-Hadith* (Modern Theatre Group) that Jalal cofounded with his student, al-Ani, in 1952, was not only one of the first theatre groups in Iraq but also the first theatre group that used Brechtian techniques in its productions (ibid.).

Brecht's influence was seen in the way the Iraqi dramatists made use of the vernacular dialects and folk elements. The use of the classical Arabic narrator created the Brechtian alienation effect by interspersing the dramatic action with his remarks. The narrator, actors and choirs commented on events and linked the loosely connected dramatic images which was popular in this type of drama. The Iraqi hakawati (story-teller), who traditionally performed in cafés during the Ramadan, appeared in Yusuf al-Ani's *al-Miftah* (the Key) and *al-Kharaba* (the Wasteland) and Qasim Muhammad's *Baghdad al-Azal* (Bagdad the everlasting) and

⁴⁹ For more information on Brecht's influence on Arab theatre see, (Bū Shu'ayr, 1996).

⁵⁰ Al-Ani was the most prominent 20th century Iraqi playwright and one of the strongest voices in Iraqi theatre from the 1950s to the 1980s. His play *Shakir, I'm Your Mother* (1955), which portrays the misery of the Iraqi people in the period before the downfall of the monarchy in the revolution of 1958, was staged several times in Kurdistan. In the play the persecution of political dissidents was depicted as Umm Shakir, the main character, saw her children suffer and die in the struggle for liberation but still insisted on the rightness of the nationalist cause. See, (Tenya, 1958, p.71).

Kan Ya Ma Kan (Once Upon a Time). In *Baghdad al-Azal*, the narrator who also acted in the play was called al-Muqazeli, the old well-known Iraqi hakawati. In al-Ani's *al-Kharaba*, a chorus of five narrated the events and also acted as different characters. Folk songs were used, for example by Adil Kadhim in his *Maqamas of Abi al-Ward* to illustrate the events in the Palestinian conflict and by Qasim Muhammad in *Maqamat al-Hariri*. The stories of One Thousand and One Nights, too, inspired several plays including Mahyadin Zangana's *as-Su'al* (The Question) and Falah Shakir's *Layla Alf Layla wa Layla* (The One Thousand First Night).⁵¹

The Kurdish drama graduates of Baghdad University in the 1970s were introduced to these Brechtian techniques and influences by the like of Ibrahim Jalal and Sami Abdulhamid who taught at Baghdad University at the time. As for the Arab theatre, the influence of Brecht, as well as other twentieth century European dramatists, brought the Kurdish drama closer to the Kurdish performance tradition of storytelling by emphasising drama's communal nature and obscuring the boundary between the performers and the audience. The use of folk elements, the traditional Kurdish narrators, and actors and choirs who commented on events and directly addressed the audience soon appeared in the works of these graduates who became leading dramatists in Kurdistan. Their plays did not utilise act-divisions and were usually divided by scenes (dîmen) which were loosely connected dramatic images. It had become customary for the plays to begin with a character who addressed the spectators, welcomed them to the theatre and introduced them to the story that they were about to witness. In *Şarî Evîn* (The City of Love), an actor welcomes the audience as "the dear friends of *şano* (drama)" before relating the introduction of the story while in *Heme Dok* (Hama Dok) a character welcomes the audience and introduces himself before narrating the life-story of the title character. Developments in the twentieth century drama which had inspired new techniques in Arab theatre

⁵¹ The late 1960s was also the beginning of Expressionist drama in the Arab world where the theatre of absurd and especially the works of Beckett and Ionesco made a great impact. The popularity of absurd among the Arab writers is understandable given the period of embitterment in the Arab world following the defeat against Israel in 1967 and the intensification of political struggle in Egypt. In Iraq Taha Salim and Abdilmalik Nuri, and in Syria Sadallah Wannus show a tendency for absurd in their one-act plays. Their plays are full of faceless heroes, reduced to the abstract of man dragging his fate with utmost difficulty.

also brought the Kurdish drama closer to the the eclectic and hybrid nature of indigenous performance forms by combining dramatic and narrative elements and fusing song and dance into the performance. As we will see later, the fusion of song, dance and mimicry found its main proponent in Ehmed Salar who, in the 1980s, became the pioneer of *Şanoy Ahengsazî* (Ceremonial Theatre) in Kurdistan.

The influence of the Arab theatre on Kurdish theatre can be seen not only in the stylistic features of the plays produced at the time but also in its increasing politicisation. According to Saman, “after the 1970s and the rise of the demand for democracy in the region, Brecht became the main influence (on Kurdish theatre). These influences came through Arab literature, plays shown on the TV or the books translated into Arabic (Saman, 2013, personal communication, 9 October). In the late 1970s, Kurdish writers openly spoke of the role of theatre in addressing the sufferings of the nation. Osman Çêwar, who had adapted *File no. 67* from Arabic into Kurdish, wrote in *Beyan* that, “now is not the time for theatre to be only a means to entertain. All artistic works must address the pain, the sufferings, the hopes, the dreams, the happiness and the misery of the people...the end of all these works has to be to serve the people” (Kerîm, 2009, p.97). Indeed the Kurdish theatre artists and critics not only promoted nationalist and socialist ideas in their works but also actively took part in political activities. The Kurdish Art and Literature Group which was established in 1972 in Erbil had become a meeting place for members of different parties such as KDP, PUK, and the communists (Saman, 2013, personal communication, 9 October).

Despite strict censorship and government propaganda which promoted a kind of theatre that conformed to the ideals of the Baathist 17 July Revolution and Saddam Hussein’s pronouncements (Kerîm, 2009, p.96), Kurdish theatre-makers of the second half of the 1970s courageously continued to produce works which in inevitably allegorical terms upheld the Kurdish nationalist struggle and even called for national uprising against tyranny. As Kerîm notes, an important characteristic of the Kurdish theatre of the late 1970s is that in most plays, the hero is not an individual but the “nation” itself. They were written for the people and about the people. This is

most evident in Telet Saman's dramatic works such as *Mem û Zîn* (1976) and *Pîlan* (1977). While the former is the subject of detailed analysis in the next chapter, the latter also exemplifies a modern nationalist interpretation of the *Mem û Zîn* love-story in Kurdish drama by calling for national unity and solidarity. In the final scene of the play, the chorus sings, "on a day like this, one of these months or years, thousands of you and thousands of flowers bloom; the lovers will again embrace each other; Today Mem and Zîn hold hands. Do not let go of each other's hands. Do not let go of each other's hands" (Saman, 2010, pp.114, 117-118).

The last two years of the 1970s saw a significant increase in the number of printed plays. While between 1974 and 1977 only one Kurdish play was published, this number reached eleven only from 1978 to 1980. Kerîm believes that the reason for this sudden increase in cultural and dramatic production can be partly attributed to the revival of Kurdish uprising in 1977 (Kerîm, 2009, p.102). According to him, while the 1975 defeat had resulted in inertia in the Kurdish society in general and in the intellectual circles in particular, the revival of the Kurdish nationalist struggle in the form of *şorişî nwê* breathed a new life into the Kurdish society which was once again reassured of itself and its national identity (ibid.). This period of cultural rejuvenation coincided with the Iraqi regime's brutal policies against Kurdish villagers in order to crush the uprising. However, the more the government resorted to violence against the Kurds in the countryside, the more persistent the city-dwelling Kurdish theatre-makers became in producing radical pro-revolutionary dramas. This correlation manifests itself more intensely in second half of the 1980s and the onset of the genocidal Anfal Campaign against the Iraqi Kurds.

5.6 Iraq in the 1980s

The end of the 1970s was the beginning of a dictator's rule in Iraq. After becoming president of Iraq in 1979, Saddam Hussein embarked on consolidating his power by eliminating Iraq's civil society and opposition movements. His presidency is significant in Iraqi history for the wars he initiated against the neighbouring countries

of Iran and Kuwait and also the genocidal campaign he authorised against the Iraqi Kurdish population.

The Iran-Iraq war brought major changes to Iraqi policies towards Kurdistan. “Major military operations in the south forced the Iraqi army to relinquish its close control of Kurdistan and placate its population” and “many Kurds who had been deported to southern Iraq were allowed to return to Kurdistan where they were housed in camps. Thousands of them escaped to zones controlled by the Kurdish parties” (Bruinessen, 1986, p.19). Iran stepped up its military and financial support of the KDP and other guerrilla groups. In early 1983 Iraq admitted to 48,000 deserters, many of whom Kurdish and now in the mountains (McDowall, 2004, p.348). Faced with the mass desertions by its Kurdish soldiers, Iraqi government amnestied the deserters and ruled that the Kurds could serve in Kurdistan instead the dangerous southern front.

However, the state continued its repressive policies against the Kurds. The Kurdish student organisations voiced their opposition to these policies by organising protests in major cities. In April and May 1982, mass demonstrations in Sulaymaniyah and Erbil took place in which thousands of Kurdish youth demanded autonomy and a halt to deportations (*Spark*, no.1, 1982, p.3). Several students were killed in these demonstration but this massive uprising forced the Iraqi government to release thousands of political prisoners and start negotiating with Kurdish parties (Stansfield and Resool, 2006, pp.118–119).

When the war reached Kurdistan in 1983 the KDP sided with Iran and received military and financial support from it. By 1986, the PUK, like KDP, was receiving weapons and financial support to fight against the Iraqi forces. The result of these collaborations was the expansion of Kurdish-controlled areas which were seized by the KDP in the north and by the PUK in the south.

The Kurdish revolt eventually ended with a genocidal campaign by Saddam Hussein in 1986-1989. The Iraqi regime took severe reprisals, against Kurds especially the Barzanîs. Eight thousand Barzanî men living in the camps of Qushtapa and Diyana

were taken to an unknown destination while relatives of Barzanî who lived in Baghdad also disappeared (Bruinessen, 2000, p.206). Summary executions, mass deportations and Arabisation of place names continued. Thousands of families of pêşmerge were arrested, hurdled into lorries and sent to camps in the south of Iraq.

In April 1987, Iraqi Air Force started dropping chemical bombs over villages and fields in the provinces of Erbil and Sulaymaniyah, then bombing them for an entire week, demolishing and burning entire villages and wounding and killing hundreds (*The Torch*, no.7, 1987, p.1). Between April and September of 1987, 500 villages were razed in order to deny the pêşmerge food and shelter (McDowall, 2004, p.353). With the end of the Iran-Iraq war, the Iraqi forces now had the opportunity to suppress the Kurdish rebellion. In 1988, the genocidal Operation Anfal started, claiming the lives of an estimated 182,000 Kurds and creating over a million refugees. Chemical weapons were used by the Iraqi government forces in the Kurdish town of Halabja killing nearly 5,000 people in a matter of minutes.

5.7 Kurdish Theatre in the Cities of Sulaymaniyah and Erbil in the 1980s

The Baathist government's strict censorship of media continued under Saddam Hussein as the media became an important tool to promote state ideology and also "to generate a complex matrix of discourses that served to obfuscate state tyranny" (Isakhan, 2012, pp.110–117). Iraq's entire media industry came under the authority of the government and all journalists had to declare their loyalty to the Baath party. Careful monitoring of the media ensured that all Iraqi papers became state-run propaganda machines, "reciting official policy and praising governmental action" (ibid., p.105). All papers and journals, including the Kurdish journals studied for this research, had to feature Saddam's photograph daily on page one and print each of his speeches in full (ibid.).

Theatre was similarly under strict state control. Jaffar states that during the Iran-Iraq War, several Kurdish artists were called before the committee of censorship for "endangering the Iraqi identity" (Jaffar, 2012, p.127). The artists soon learnt to

maintain a veneer of Baathist loyalty while advocating the ideals of freedom and justice which had been denied to them. To do so, many resorted to foreign plays. More and more western plays were translated into Kurdish including, Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* and *Hamlet*, Chekhov's *The Seagull* and *On the Harmful Effects of Tobacco*, Clifford Odets' *Waiting for Lefty*, Gogol's *The Government Inspector*, and Lorca's *Blood Wedding*.

However, staging foreign plays did not always guarantee the state's disinterest. For example, during the Iran-Iraq war, *Mangî Awa Bû* a play based on John Steinbeck's anti-war novel, *The Moon is Down*, ran successfully for a month in Sulaymaniyah but was banned in Erbil after only two days (Ehmedmîrza, 2011, pp.99–100). This and other plays staged during the war show how Kurdish theatre refused to become a propaganda tool for the state's belligerence. This also confirms Isakhan's assessment that despite the brutality of the Iraqi regime, a strong culture of clandestine dissent and opposition and a variety of counter-discourse emerged in the country that advocated a more open and democratic Iraq.

In 1984 the first conference on Kurdish theatre took place in Erbil. In this five-day long conference, several organs including Dezgay Roşinbîrî w Blawkirdinewey Kurdî (Kurdish Culture and Publication Organisation), Emîndaretî Giştî Roşinbîrî w Lawan (General Directorate of Culture and Youth), Yekyetî Nûseranî Kurd (the union of Kurdish writers), Neqabey Hunermendan (Artists' Guild), Komeley Hunere Cwanekanî Kurd (the Kurdish society of fine arts), Tîpî Hunerî Hewlêr (Erbil Art Group), and the students of the fine arts academy participated (Ebdulrehman, 1984). The problems facing the Kurdish theatre, including lack of original dramatic texts, lack of theatres, and society's defamation of women actors were among the subjects discussed in the conference. But what is interesting is that in the closing statement published by the host, the Kurdish Culture and Publication Organisation, Saddam Hussein is praised as the supporter of arts in general and theatre in particular. He is also celebrated as a gracious leader who cares about the progress of Kurdish society and its cultural, intellectual and artistic life. The final words of the statement read, "We hope theatre artists continue their activities to further the theatre movement and

contribute to Iraqi people and the civilised society at the time of Iraq's victory and progress under our great leader, comrade Saddam Hussein, may God protect him" (ibid., p.87).

Despite the fact that Iraqi and Kurdish artists were forced by the state to praise and promote the Baathist ideology, they managed to utilize subtle imagery, clever analogies, allegory or double-entendres to expose the authoritarian and repressive culture of the Baath and force their fellow citizens to ponder alternatives such as democratic rule.⁵² During the 1970s and 1980s, several plays were printed and published in *Beyan*, *Roşinbîrî Nwê*, and *Rojî Kurdistan* periodicals. Although all periodicals had to devote their first pages to Saddam Hussain and eulogies of him, many of the plays they published dealt, albeit metaphorically, with political themes. For example, in *Cenabî Canewer* (Mr Animal, 1981), Hisên Arif, "the greatest story-writer of his time" (Salar, 2013, personal interview, 5 May), wrote about the general manager of a company which produced magnifying glasses. This was an allusion to Osman Fayeq, the Director General in the Ministry of Culture in Baghdad who was one of the first and most ruthless Baathists. Despite being a Kurd himself, he was strongly against any expression of Kurdish nationalism and made sure any books that signalled such sentiments were burnt and destroyed. *Cenabî Canewer* is an account of Arif's experience as an employee at the Ministry who along with other employees was routinely mistreated by Fayeq (ibid.).

An important development which paved the way for future theatre endeavours was the opening of Sulaymaniyah Academy of Fine Arts (Peymangay Hunere Cwanekan) in 1980. The Academy comprised of two departments of painting and drama. The period of study was five years after which the students would receive diploma in acting or directing. Before long, the Academy succeeded to draw the attention of Iraqi theatre artists and critics to itself by holding an annual nation-wide theatre festival. Among the Academy's productions were, *Julius Caesar* and the *Merchant of Venice* directed by Bediye Dartaş, and *Mem û Zîn* directed by Ferhad

⁵² For example see my review of Telet Saman's *Qel û Rûte* (The Raven and the Poor) in the following chapter.

Şerîf ('Peymangay Hunere Cwanekanî Silêmanî (Sulaymaniyah Institute of Fine Arts)', 2009).

Another important development was the growing number of theatre groups. The wave of new ideas brought back by Baghdad graduates led to the foundation of several theatre groups in the 1980s including, *The Progressive Kurdish Theatre Group* (Tîpî Pêşrewî Şanoy Kurdî), *Salar Theatre* (Şanoy Salar), *Kurds' Fine Art Society* (Komeley Hunere Cwanekanî Kurd), and *Experimental Theatre* (Şanoy Ezmungerî). Kurdish language television programmes also, despite the censorship, played a very important role in promoting Kurdish drama.

The mid 1980s was a time when attempts were made to create a distinctly Kurdish theatre. During this period, Kurdish graduates of Baghdad University, influenced by the broader theatre movement in Iraq, sought to create an original authentic Kurdish theatre by relying on Kurdish cultural heritage. Folk culture provided a new form of expression and a code with which to encourage the audience to think and raise political awareness. The most prominent among this group of Kurdish artists was Ehmed Salar who was particularly inspired by Abdelkarim Berrchid's *masrah al-ihitfali* (Festive or Ceremonial Theatre) which drew heavily on indigenous theatrical forms and made allusions to local historical/imaginary figures to address the problem of identity in the postcolonial Arab world. Influenced by Berrchid's theatre, Salar relied on local historical characters and indigenous performance traditions to address the themes of Kurdish struggle for freedom in such plays as *Nalî w Xewnêkî Erxewanî* (Nali and a Violet Dream, 1987) and *Katê Helo Berz Defrê* (When the Eagle Flies High, 1988). As discussed later, these plays rely on traditional Kurdish love stories, nationalistic poetry, and music to both revive a sense of pride in Kurdish culture and strengthen a sense of national unity to fight oppression and liberate the homeland.

While Salar believed that in order to create an authentic Kurdish theatre, it was necessary to write original plays in Kurdish (Salar, 2012, p.13), another group of young Kurdish artists moved away from text-based drama altogether. The new

experimental theatre in Kurdistan was pioneered by Şemal Omer, Nîgar Hesîb Qeredaxî and Dana Reûf in the mid-1980s in Sulaymaniyah. Experimentalism, in Kurdish context, meant the desire of the new generation of theatre artists to break away from traditional forms of drama and create new ones. At first, they relied mainly on foreign texts and started out by staging several modernist works such as Eugene O'Neill's *Hairy Ape* (1922) which they staged in 1986 in both Sulaymaniyah and Erbil. Later they staged plays like *Waiting For Godot* (1948) by Samuel Beckett, *Marat/Sade* (1963) by Peter Weiss, *Black Stories* (1948) by Leopold Sedar Senghor, *Zoo Story* (1958) by Edward Albee, and several others. The difference between these plays with the ones that were traditionally performed in Kurdistan was the difference between modernist literature and traditional modes of storytelling. Experimentation with style took precedence over thematic or ideological concerns. The hero became individualistic and his/her experiences of life became more important. Theatre disengaged from society and the didacticism of old theatre disappeared. This was only the beginning for the Experimental Theatre Group as they soon dispensed with narrative structure in their attempts to create an authentic Kurdish theatre.

The founders of the Experimental Theatre Group were all graduates of Baghdad University where they were particularly influenced by Salah al-Qasab's Theatre of Images (Reûf , 1995, p.19). The approach to performance known as Theatre of Images is associated with the works of American avant-garde directors of the 1970s, Richard Foreman (b. 1937), Robert Wilson (b. 1941), and Lee Breuer (b. 1937) (see Marranca, 1996). By turning away from a priori text and language and relying on visual and aural sensory images, these directors challenged conventional understanding of performance, which relied on narrative structure, in order to involve the imagination of the audiences in finding the significance of the performance themselves (ibid.). Inspired by Theatre of Images and its substitution of language by tableaux and gesture, the young Kurdish graduates of Baghdad University tried to change the Kurdish theatre scene by breaking away from dialogue and narrative and focusing on body language instead. The emphasis shifted to abstract and distorted movement, costume and scenic elements. The boundary between actors and

spectators was reduced to give the audience the feeling that they participated directly in the performance, and also to intensify the eye contact between actors and spectators. The main focus of the performance was no longer the meaning of the literary work, but the image, sound, and colour.

In 1989, the Experimental Theatre Group took an important step toward applying these avant-garde performance methods to classic Kurdish texts by staging *Le Çawerwani Siyamendda* (waiting for Siyamend, 1989), a play based on the Kurdish folktale of *Xec û Siyamend* (Xec and Siyamend). Although influenced by Fuad Mecîd Misrî's play, *Xec û Siyamend*, the two female actors and directors of *Le Çawerwani Siyamendda*, Nîgar Hesîb and Mîdiya Reûf, only retained the core idea of the play and dispensed with other elements, such as the traditional storyteller who narrated the story in Misrî's play (Zangana, 2002, p.122). By relying on gestures and body language, Hesîb and Reûf communicated the pain of Xec's subjugation by men and the power of her resistance against their tyranny.⁵³ Moreover, the fact that both the characters of Xec and Siyamend were played by women, contrary to the traditional male dominance in the Kurdish theatre and in the Kurdish society, reinforced the concept of resistance against outmoded political and traditional social structures.

The emphasis on form and style to the disadvantage of text and content in the experimental Kurdish theatre (Qerîb, 2009), however, alienated the average Kurdish theatre-goers who were more interested in classical narrative structure with a beginning, middle and end. The production of Western modernist plays were often criticised for not representing the realities of Kurdish pain and oppression, which could only be represented through original Kurdish texts (Zangana, 2002, p.116). According to Muhsin Mihemed, the reason Iraqi experimental theatre was growing in the 1980s was partly because the Iraqi government supported it (Mihemed, 2010). "The Iraqi dictatorship," Mihemed says, "promoted experimentalism in theatre because they did not want theatre to become popular" (ibid., p.73).

⁵³ For a detailed analysis of the play which locates it within the wider Kurdish resistance movement in Iraq, see, (Zangana, 2002, pp.121–128).

This type of drama (experimentalist or modernist drama) has its own special audience. With regard to Kurdish theatre, as I have witnessed in the past twenty years, the intellectuals, artists, men of letters and journalists make up the special audience in Kurdistan. We were a small number...and we all knew each other. Many times one would see the same faces in Erbil theatres as he/she had previously seen in Sulaymaniyah ones (ibid., p.72).

Dana Reûf, on the other hand, defends the new experimental theatre in Kurdistan as a source of hope and excitement for a young generation who was deprived of both. "We were a group of youth who dreamt at a time when there was no joy; we believed in future at a time when we had no future," said Reûf (2010, p.97). Here, Reûf is referring to the 1980s, the life under Baathist dictatorship and conscriptions during the Iraq-Iran war.

We lived at the time of war, but we staged *Marat/Sade*; we had deserted the army and performed the *Zoo Story* and discussed the creation of an original Kurdish theatre. Those efforts were not only for the sake of theatre, but for the sake of survival. It was a way to emphasise our existence and our national and intellectual identities (ibid.).

It seems that for Reûf and other experimentalists, the production of avant-garde works on the Kurdish stage was in itself an act of self-affirmation. Although these plays did not receive popular attention and remained within the limited interest of intellectual circles, Reûf's statement regarding the importance of experimental theatre to theatre-makers themselves, is reminiscent of the concept of "beautiful resistance" developed by the Palestinian theatre group, Alrowwad (Thompson et al., 2009, pp.56–67). According to this concept, theatre provides an environment in which those afflicted with daily experience of political oppression may develop self-esteem, self-confidence and self-expression. Similarly, the translation of modernist plays into Kurdish and their production on stage affirmed the national identity and intellectual capabilities of the Kurdish youth who sought to assert their existence and their capabilities through modernist theatre. Experimental theatre also provided an escape from the bleak realities of war and destruction. This, as Thompson, Hughes and Balfour note, confounds simplistic categorisations of performance as political, escapist, or aesthetic (ibid., p.60).

To sum up the discussion on the 1980s Kurdish theatre, also known as the Golden Age of Kurdish theatre, it is worth reviewing what the leading Arab theatre directors and critics thought of the Sulaymaniyah Fine Arts Institute's fourth theatre festival held in May 1990. The Egyptian Kamal Eid (1931-2008), who was the first to introduce Chekhov, Gorki and Brecht to the Egyptian theatre, praised the Kurdish entries at the festival both technically and artistically and also ranked the critical debates around performances higher than those common in Arabic theatre festivals at the time (Kerîm, 2009, p.112). Fadhil Thamir, the Iraqi critic, also praised the Kurdish productions and asserted that judging by the festival the Kurdish theatre was on par with its Arabic counterpart (ibid., p.113). It seems what appealed to the Arab guests the most was the large number of spectators who eagerly attended the performances from early hours. Kamal Eid said the passion he saw in the Kurdish audiences he had not seen anywhere else in Iraq (ibid., p.112). Likewise, the Iraqi journalist, Hasaballah Yahya, who had attended the first Erbil Theatre Festival stated his amazement and pride at the sight of the large crowds waiting to enter the theatres (ibid., p.113).

5.8 Guerrilla Theatre, 1974-1991

In his *The Wretched of the Earth* (1967), Frantz Fanon argues that in a revolutionary nationalism "cultural action cannot be divorced from the larger struggle for the liberation of the nation" (cited in Holdsworth, 2014, p.6). This conjoining of the cultural and political can be visibly witnessed in the Kurdish guerrilla theatre of the 1970s and 1980s in a rare case of the use of theatre by the guerrillas themselves.⁵⁴ Theatre by Kurdish guerrillas dates back to the 1974 uprising when the urban artists who had gone to the mountains to join the pêşmerge presented their works to the

⁵⁴ Guerrilla theatre in the Kurdish context should not be confused with the American Guerrilla Theatre initiated in 1965 by the American San Francisco Mime Troupe who engaged in surprise performances in public spaces to draw attention to current social and political issues. Guerrilla Theatre in the American context has been applied to theatrical events of the late 1960s through mid-1970s which addressed the Vietnam war and capitalism and also the agitprop theatre of the 1930s. For more information see (Doyle, 2002). In my research I only came across one instance of a guerrilla theatre actually produced by the guerrillas as in the case of Iraqi Kurdistan. This was in Jane Plastow's study on the theatres of Ethiopia, Tanzania and Zimbabwe (Plastow, 1996).

villagers of the liberated areas and to the pêşmerge in the guerrilla camps. As Stansfield and Resool point out, by March 1975, “the vast majority of Kurds were involved directly or indirectly with some aspect of the Kurdish movement” (Stansfield and Resool, 2006, p.103). The increasingly nationalist-minded urban centres of Kurdistan contained thousands of sympathizers willing to aid the pêşmerges against the Iraqi government. In the space of days in March 1975, nearly 100,000 patriotic Kurds, mostly from the towns, left their jobs and ventured to areas of Kurdistan controlled by the pêşmerges, swelling their ranks considerably (ibid.). This wave of volunteers from urban centres contained, among others, theatre-makers such as Simko Ezîz and his Sulaymaniyah Acting Group and Ehmed Salar and his Progressive Kurdish Theatre Group. Salar presented several nationalistic plays including *Pirdî Welat* and *Çalî Cergî Pîrejîn* (The Hole in the Old Woman’s Heart). But the 1974 uprising was short-lived: guerrilla theatre groups soon dissolved and the artists returned to their hometowns following the amnesty issued by the Iraqi regime. It was in the 1980s, however, that guerrilla theatre became an important propaganda tool following the resumption of guerrilla war in the late 1970s.

During the Iraq-Iran war (1980-1988), a large number of young Iraqi Kurds deserted the army and fled into the mountains to join the pêşmerge. Among these were young artists, authors, translators and amateur theatre actors. They were joined by Arab, Turkoman, Christian, Shiite, Sunni, Yezidi, and Marxist revolutionaries who found refuge in Kurdish mountains. There, they formed societies, organised seminars, wrote, translated, printed and published, opened painting exhibitions, recited poetry, and formed music, dance and theatre groups.

Most of those who joined one of the theatre groups of resistance were, before joining the pêşmerge forces, drama students or had worked in a drama group or in a school theatre group. Others were simply interested in acting. Some groups, mostly amateur, were only set up for performances at special occasions, such as the celebration of Newroz, and were quickly dissolved after the events. The solid theatre groups, however, were formed by professionals who aimed to apply acting methods they had learned before in ways that suited the realities of resistance in Kurdistan.

The directors put great demands on actors and taught them acting techniques. This was not an easy task considering all the military and daily tasks of the peshmerge which left little time for practice. Zangana mentions a director called Abu Arwa who accepted the difficulties of teaching acting methods in guerrilla camps because of the use of theatre as a form of resistance: "Through the trainings and discussions," Abu Arwa stated, he wanted "to convince the actors of the importance of art in resistance so that a beautiful relationship could emerge between us as a group" (Zangana, 2002, p.81).

Since they lacked access to literary books, some guerrilla theatre groups chose to stage themes directly related to Kurdish experience. Since there were hardly any libraries or bookstores in villages and books were hard to come by, these groups sometimes used their own personal experiences as material for their plays. Other plays thematised the suffering of people under the Iraqi regime, some satirising and ridiculing Saddam Hussein and his followers (ibid., p.76).

The performances took place wherever it was possible: in teahouses, caves, or on mountain slopes. For security reasons, the venues remained secret until a few hours before the show. In case of an attack, the partisans had to protect not only themselves, but also the audience therefore there was a constant state of emergency. The actors carried their weapons with them or hid them close at hand so that they were immediately ready to fight against an unexpected attack. Therefore, while they played their roles, the actors were not allowed to forget that they were peshmerge: "The actor always has his weapons ready during the performance; you always have to expect everything" (ibid., p.86).

If the performance took place in the open air, the location was chosen so that the spectators could see well, but mainly so that in case of an attack both the audience and the fighters could be protected. Performances usually took place late in the afternoon or in the evening when villagers were back from farm work and enjoyed their leisure time. Also, the risk of an air attack was lower at nightfall, and if it took

place, the camouflage worked better. The stage was lit by nothing more than an oil lamp to avoid the danger of being discovered by the enemy. Only at very large events an electric generator or a flashlight was used (ibid.).

The costumes were simply what the pêşmerge wore in everyday life or whatever else that was available. Also the costumes had to be such that did not inhibit fighting in case of a sudden attack. The same was true for the props which were all objects of everyday life and struggle including the pictures on the walls, the weapons or the shelves. In the back of the stage a blanket was hung from behind which the props were handed to the actors. The stage was minimal since everything had to be transported on animals, if the group wanted to play at a different location. When a play was performed in different villages, the march often took several hours. Considering the everyday dangers and stresses of life as a pêşmerge, it is fascinating that theatre groups believed so strongly in their work that they were willing to accept more hassles such as the constant change of location and the provision of additional security personnel to protect the spectators (ibid.).

One of the theatre groups formed by the guerrillas was the Partisan Theatre Group. Founded by Fetah Xetab, the dramatist, director, and literary critic, this group was made up of “experienced theatre artists, filmmakers, musicians, painters, writers, poets and journalists.” According to Xetab himself, the Partisan Theatre Group was made up of pêşmerge artists, writers and intellectuals who were not co-opted by the regime (Xetab, 2014, personal communication, 4 August).

The Partisan Theatre Group utilised the Living Newspaper, a technique used for propaganda in the USSR in 1917 and later adopted by Piscator in Germany in the 1920s (ibid.). The Living Newspaper was a method of acting out the news for largely illiterate audiences in a series of short vignettes. It emerged in the United States in 1935 as part of the Federal Theatre Project. The proponents of this project believed in the value of drama as an instrument of social change and wrote and presented a number of Living Newspapers on social issues of the day. This form of drama resembles the Brechtian epic theatre in its use of simple sets, props, and costumes

and acknowledging audience members. It dramatizes current events, social problems, and controversial issues, with appropriate suggestions for improvement.

For its agitprop style and its minimalist scenery, Living Newspaper was a convenient dramatic technique for the guerrilla camps. Xetab describes the guerrilla artists' search for the right dramatic technique in these words:

As early as the beginning of the 1970s, we...were aware that one day the doors of the state-sponsored cultural organisations will shut down on us because of the political mafia's monopoly on them which would not allow the expression of anything other than the Baath party propaganda...therefore, we searched for an artistic method that would suit our literary and artistic aspirations; a method that would allow for a dialectic educational theatre... since the 1970s we have been looking for a theatrical method immune to and independent of official supervision and financial support. This can be done through partisan theatre...an inexpensive theatre that is possible everywhere, in streets, teahouses, prisons, parks, libraries, villages or mosques (ibid.).

Xetab and his group found their ideal in the epic theatre of Brecht and Piscator, and others such as Heiner Müller, Peter Weiss, Oswald Dragun, Sadallah Wannus, Ghulām-Husayn Sā'idī, Sabah Mandalawi and the poetry of Se'di Yusuf, Fazil Azawi, and Muzafar Nawab. What most these dramatists and poets have in common is their leftist leanings and their socially committed works. Sā'idī was a leftist writer who wrote socially critical plays in Iran. He was arrested and tortured by the Shah's secret service and ultimately left the country after the foundation of the Islamic Republic. For their social and political themes, simple language, and minimalist stage scenery and props, his plays were frequently staged by professional and amateur theatre groups in the 1960s and 1970s. Likewise, Dragun's drama dealt with political issues such as the US-back coup against the leftist Guatemalan president, Jacobo Arbenz.⁵⁵ Yusuf, Azawi and Nawab were all Iraqi poets whose works reflected the contemporary politics of their country and the world. Yusuf and Nawab even went to prison for their leftist beliefs. Azawi went to exile as the Baathist control over the country grew stronger.

⁵⁵ *La peste viene de Melos* (The Plague from Melos)

According to Xetab, it was a historical necessity that Kurdish artists would follow the legacy of the aforementioned dramatists and poets. “They showed us”, Xetab says, “the way forward in the process of founding a partisan theatre during our nation’s freedom fighting against the Iraqi regime” (ibid.). The leftist ideology dominant in Iraq and promoted by the Kurdish PUK party at the time, is evident in Xetab’s theatre productions as they never dealt directly with Kurdish struggle; instead they grappled with universal social and political problems through foreign plays, because as Xetab confirmed in an interview, he saw the Kurds as part of a larger world sharing common dreams, sufferings, and goals with all other nations (ibid.).

The Partisan Theatre, according to Xetab, followed the techniques of the Living Newspaper drama as explained by Peter Weiss. It seems here Xetab is referring to the German documentary theatre which emerged in the mid-1960s in the works of Peter Weiss, Hiener Kipphardt and Rolf Hochhuth. Their theatre used factual reality and historical documents as the source of plays in order to investigate the political reasons behind historical events.

A predecessor to Weiss’s documentary theatre was Erwin Piscator who incorporated film footage and scenes from recent history and political events into his agitprop productions on the class struggles of the 1920s. In his agitprop theatre, the stage-equipment was moveable and therefore makeshift. Scripts were easy to learn and the performances less than thirty minutes in duration. Themes had to be suitable for awakening the audiences’ awareness of the class-struggle, or for clarifying the official party line. The plays had to deal with social injustice in general terms and end with a call to revolution. This is similar to Weiss’s documentary theatre in that Weiss’s theatre did not present individual conflicts but struggles between opposing socioeconomic forces, the oppressed groups against the oppressors.

The legacy of documentary style theatre, the Living Newspaper and the Brechtian epic and the one-act plays by the aforementioned socially committed dramatists, inspired the Partisan theatre in its use of direct address to the audience, the use of music and songs as a form of commentary to stage action, its lack of scenery and

costumes and the low number of characters. This group, along with other pêşmerge theatre groups, staged its plays on political or national occasions such as the celebrations of Newroz, the International Workers' Day, and the 14 July Revolution (ibid.). Every year on the occasion of the World Theatre Day on 27 March, resistance theatre groups held big celebrations, organised lectures on the history of world theatre and Iraqi theatre (Zangana, 2002, p.84). On Newroz, the folk play, "Kawa the Blacksmith", was performed for the public in liberated villages (ibid.).

Because the revolutionaries in guerrilla camps were from diverse backgrounds, the plays were written and performed both in Kurdish and Arabic. Most actors were amateur and from among the young educated Kurds who had joined the pêşmerge. Music played an integral role in Brecht's theatre to magnify and focus the Gestus of a dramatic action (Weill, 2000, p.7). In the Partisan Theatre, live music was used to create atmosphere, to underscore situations and to accentuate the dramatic action. Dehol,⁵⁶ senc,⁵⁷ bilwêr,⁵⁸ oud,⁵⁹ and keman⁶⁰ were also used for singing songs.



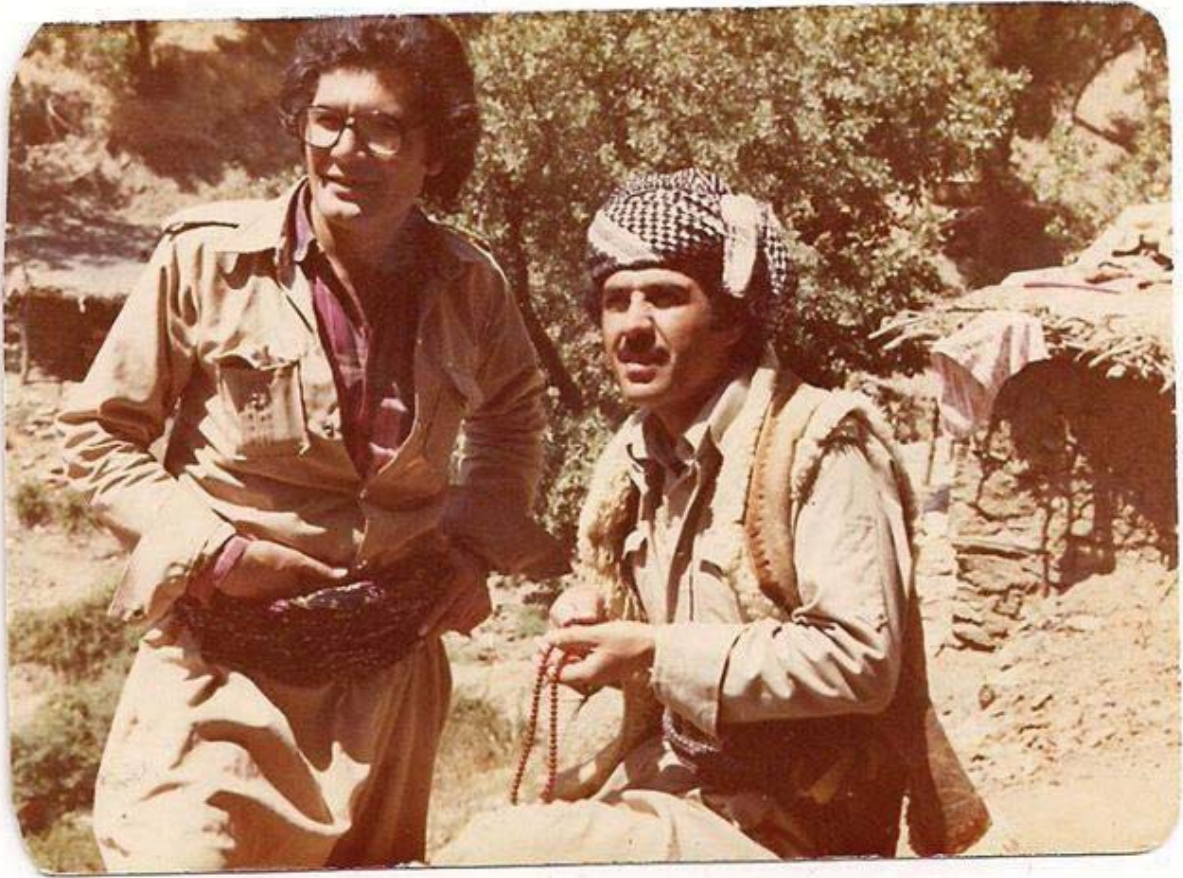
⁵⁶ A large cylindrical drum with two skin heads

⁵⁷ A metallic percussion instrument like a cymbal but larger in diameter

⁵⁸ An end-blown flute

⁵⁹ A pear-shaped stringed instrument

⁶⁰ A bowed stringed instrument



Fetah Xetab as a pêşmerge (Left)

Political theatre, and especially documentary theatre, might mean preaching to believers because one would not expose himself/herself to it if he/she was not already convinced of its validity. The Kurdish guerrilla theatre, however, was a different case as its audience was made up of not only the pêşmerge but also the inhabitants of the liberated villages who attended the performances voluntarily and showed great enthusiasm for the plays. Through theatre, the pêşmerge entered into communication with civilians. This reduced the distance and increased the understanding between the two, strengthening people's solidarity with the fighters. The effect that theatre produced was greater and more thought-provoking than anything that could be achieved through a mere political speech. Moreover, theatre enabled the Arab-speaking members of the pêşmerge to communicate with the Kurdish country dwellers through body language and mime (Zangana, 2002, p.73). A quote by a former guerrilla theatre director clearly illustrates people's interest in

guerrilla theatre and its role in creating solidarity between the civilians and the pêşmerge:

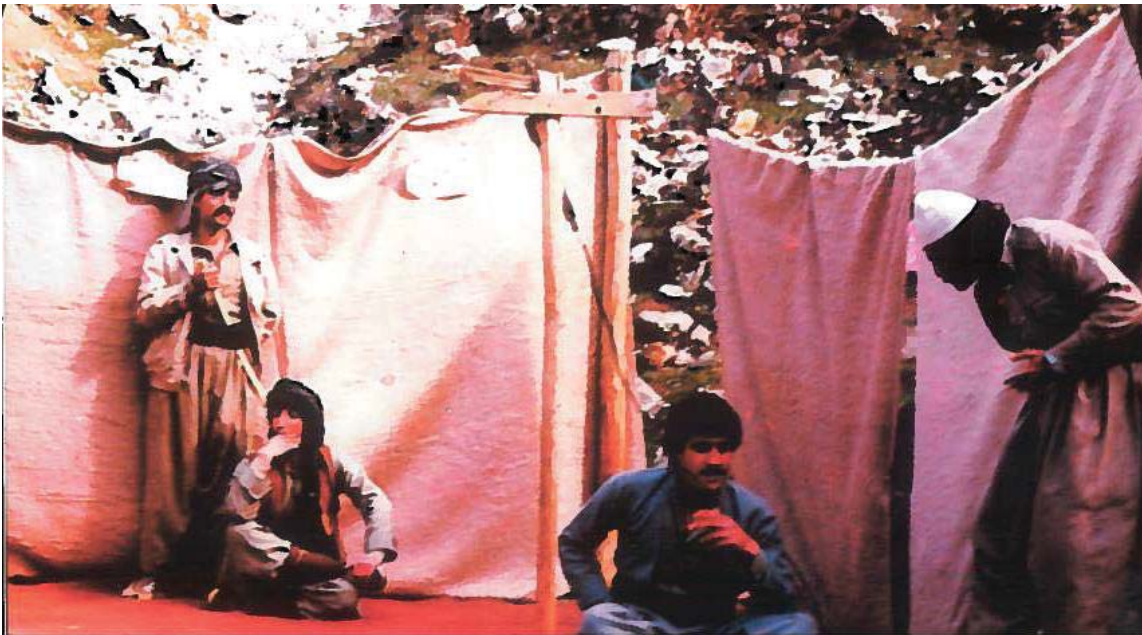
You, in your pêşmerge costume, come to a place where no one knows you. But after the performance, the audience becomes interested in you and wants to meet you in person. Later they write you letters and visit you. They invite you back and bring you presents...Playing in the countryside, you see and feel the spectators' love for your theatre in their faces. You are touched by their invitations and their gifts and see the pure emotion that they feel for you (ibid., pp.73,79).

Therefore, as shown by Zangana, theatre was used by the pêşmerge not only as a means of struggle, but as a means of communication. Theatre could eliminate many social and societal obstacles. It was common for the pêşmerge to gather the villagers in one place and lecture them on politics. While these lectures were usually attended only by male adults, theatre was attended by men and women, old and young, therefore reaching a wider public. The value of drama as a form of resistance was not always appreciated by the main military leaders in guerrilla camps who showed no understanding of arts. The parties sometimes caused problems for the directors and actors by demanding agitprop theatre that advocated the specific ideology of the party. In contrast, the villagers and ordinary citizens, according to Zangana, much better understood and appreciated the role of art and theatre as a means of struggle against despotism and injustice.



Ragwêz (Transport), a play performed by the PUK pêşmerges in the village of Bilekê in Saqez, Iran, 1989

Source: (Şêx Mehmûd, 2011, p.63)



*Tewbey Gurg Merge (A wolf's penitence is death), a play performed by the PUK pêşmerges
in 1980*

Source: (Şêx Mehmûd, 2011, p.69)

5.9 Theatre in Refugee Camps

According to Salar, his troupe of forty actors, not only staged plays in pêşmerge camps in the mountains but also crossed the border into Iran where thousands of

Kurdish refugees lived in camps. “We had a stage we could dismantle in an hour. We had our own electricity and in case of rain we had a tent”, said Salar (2013). From March 1974 to March 1975, Salar’s theatre group performed in refugee camps around the cities of Sanandaj, Kermanshah, Qasr-e-Shirin, and Ilam. The plays staged in camps were all patriotic plays which sometimes turned into mime due to the fact that the voice of the actors could not reach the large crowd of refugees who were attendant. In Haji Omran, Progressive Kurdish Theatre Group presented Salar’s *Çalî Cergî Pîrejî* and a play called *Katê Wêne Dêtewe Lam* (When the Picture Comes Back to Me) directed by Omer Çawşîn.

It is important to recognise the central position of cultural activity in Kurdish liberation struggle. During the guerrilla war, resistance called heavily on performance arts. For its portability and emotional strength, music was one of the most popular and effective means of cultural propaganda in the liberation struggle. Liberation songs were sung by the theatre troupes for consciousness-raising purposes. Salar stressed that sometimes his group used written slogans and music to get their message across and also revive a sense of identity. During this time, Salar’s theatre troupe survived several bombardments. Salar himself was injured in Qaladiza in Iraqi bomb attack of the region (ibid.).

The story of the Kurds’ displacement continued into the 1980s. Whenever a rebellion was crushed or villages and towns were destroyed new waves of refugees were created many of whom had to flee across the border into Iran. Among the exiled were several theatre directors, actors and teachers. The pêşmerge director and drama professor, Kemal Hencîre, describes how he came to stage plays in the refugee area:

I am a pêşmerge and can fight with a weapon. I am familiar with weapons because I fought for twenty years as a Pêşmerge. But my art, the theatre, was more important to me than weapons. In theatre you can fight without weapons. I could not remain silent as an artist when I witnessed the harsh conditions in the refugee camps, the hunger, cold and misery. I chose the path of art to protest.

The theatre of the displaced was directed not only against the Iraqi government, but also against foreign governments that supported Iraq. It also criticised the mistakes made by the opposition parties. For example in a play called *Nêrgiz û Mergî Helebce* (The daffodil and death of Halabja), the victims of poison gas attack in Halabja are shown as ghosts who watch as their demise serves as headlines for foreign journalists and as a subject for foreign scientists. The play also asks the UN the question of who was responsible for the chemical attack. It also implicitly criticises the PUK party whose collaboration with Iran led to the chemical bombing of Halabja. This play can be described as a documentary drama because it was written based on facts, recording details such as the name of places and the chemical products used in the bombing.

During the performance of *The daffodil and death of Halabja* the spectators started to cry and remained long after the end and wept together. Here, theatre takes a collective function, through which we common stories of loss and pain can be expressed. Thompson, Balfour and Hughes believe that performances in the aftermath of war present opportunities “for the telling and witnessing of narratives of atrocity” committed against “those marginalised, demonised or oppressed” by the dominant discourses and practices.

In the case of the chemical bombing of Halabja and Saddam’s genocidal Anfal campaign against the Iraqi Kurds, the world was slow to respond. The US was reluctant to admit to Iraq’s use of chemical weapons against its own population, even accusing Iran of bombing Halabja. While the world turned a blind eye to the human tragedy that was taking place in Kurdistan, Kurdish theatre artists resorted to performance to make Iraq’s human rights abuses publicly visible. In a process of seeking social justice, *The daffodil and death of Halabja* asks important questions about responsibility for Halabja chemical bombing and the world’s indifference to it. It also offers audiences a chance to mourn and remember and focus on the losses experienced in war “so that lives are not forgotten and justice can be claimed” (Thompson et al., 2009, p.210). Witnessing the loss of homeland, homes, trees, soil, the people and the destruction of their lives onstage is so overwhelming for the

spectators that they pour out their emotions in a collective act of mourning that envelops and unites them. Therefore, telling about the experiences of war becomes a therapeutic act for the survivors who make up the audience.⁶¹

Theatrical performances in refugee camps continued in 1991 when thousands of people were displaced by war and forced to live in the tents of UNHCR along the borders between Iraq, Iran and Turkey. These performances usually took place on special occasions such as the anniversary of Leyla Qasim's martyrdom or Newroz.⁶² Uncovering the forgotten stories of these theatrical performance requires further exploration of oral history as almost no records of them seems to have remained. Oral history can give a voice to those involved in theatre performances in guerrilla and refugee camps and provide new information and invaluable insights regarding the role of theatre in Kurdish nationalist struggle in Iraq.

5.10 Post-*raperîn* Kurdistan

Following Iraq's defeat in the Gulf War, the Iraqi Shiite and Kurds rose in rebellion against the central government, an event referred to in Kurdish history simply as *raperîn* (uprising). The uprisings were followed by mass reprisals against the population and the exodus of nearly two million refugees from the country. To protect the civilians from further government bombardments, the Gulf War Coalition

⁶¹ According to Zangana, this form of theatre in the late eighties led to a debate among theatre artists whether theatre should be used to make people cry or rather to motivate them to fight on. Kemal Hencîre was among those who opposed the function of theatre as a means of collective mourning until he witnessed a performance on the events of Halabja which showed him the benefits of performance as a therapeutic act. This performance is said to have taken place on the anniversary of the bombing of the town of Halabja. Several thousand people had gathered in Halabja cemetery, and made a doll from wood and the leftover belongings of the victims. A picture taken during the performance shows a Kurdish turban cloth, characteristic of the region, wrapped around the doll's head. Among other things visible in the picture are a cradle, small dolls, a woman's handbag, children's dress, prayer beads, scarves, school books, Kurdish men's belts and the colours red, green and yellow, the colours of the Kurdish Flag. A small child can be seen wearing daffodils, symbolising the fact that four days before the bombing of Halabja was the Kurdish New Year. The performers marched through the cemetery singing songs accompanied by music, thus reviving the old tradition of Kotel, in which a deceased person was honoured through a musical parade. For more information on this see, (Zangana, 2002).

⁶² Zangana mentions a play called *Ashtî Daxwazîne* (We want peace), written and directed by Kemal Hencîre, staged at a camp in Zêwe (a village near the border between Iraq and Iran). See, (Zangana, 2002, p.89). Another play called *Leyla Qasim* was performed by Ibrahîm Hekîm and others in Zêwe Refugee Camp on the occasion of her execution in May 1974.

established a no-fly zone over Kurdistan and the Kurdish opposition established the autonomous Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in what is known as Iraqi Kurdistan.

As a result of the Gulf War, Iraq found itself for most of the 1990s under UN sanctions, which led to its political and cultural isolation from much of the international community and “which severely hurt the economy, medical services and not least the country’s theatre and cultural infrastructure” (Al-Mufraji, 1991, p.104). Despite all difficulties, Iraqi theatre in the 1990s continued to produce a large number of state-supported theatre companies, while branches of the Baghdad-based al-Firqa al-Qawmiyya lit-Tamtheel (National Theatre Company) opened in smaller cities such as Basrah, Nineveh, Baabil and Karbala (ibid.)

The realities of life in Kurdistan were much different than the rest of the country. It was shattered by Anfal campaigns of Saddam Hussein, by a civil war that had gone on intermittently since 1961, by eight-year long Iran-Iraq war (1980-88), by the Gulf War of 1991 and its aftermath of uprising and the two million exodus of Kurdish refugees to Turkey and Iran, by looting of institutions by Iraqi Army in the short period of regaining control over cities of Kurdistan in late March and April of 1991, and by the deliberate withdrawal of Iraqi administration and services from Kurdistan by Saddam in October 1991, and imposition of economic blockade against Kurdish areas and finally by UN sanctions against Iraq which included the free Kurdish areas (Sheikhmous, “The Self-made Tragedy in Kurdistan”, p.2). The situation in Kurdistan worsened when rivalry between the KDP and PUK resulted in a bloody civil war which claimed the lives of 3000 to 5000 fighters and civilians. The fight for political hegemony between the KDP and PUK continued, on and off, until 1998 when the two parties signed a cease-fire agreement in Washington. Since then the political power balance between the two sides has been maintained with the KDP administering Erbil and Duhok, and the PUK governing over Sulaymaniyah, Derbendixan and the towns belonging to Kirkuk.

The chaos caused by war and its aftermaths resulted in the drastic decline of theatre in the early 1990s. Kerîm points to the following as the main reasons behind the decline of theatre in Kurdistan during this period:

- The loss of cultural organisations and the withdrawal of government administrations from Kurdistan due to war and the uprising
- High inflation and cost of living due to strict economic sanctions imposed on Iraq and Iraq's economic sanction on Kurdistan. No cultural organisation or group could afford the cost of staging a theatre production which was no less than ten thousand dinars
- The high cost of paper and print which meant the writers were not able to publish their works many of which saw the light of day only in the late 1990s
- A large number of artists were forced by circumstances to find other jobs to make a living and thus have no time for theatre work
- Many artists went into exile
- Some of the artists were killed in the uprising and its aftermaths
- Some of the artists and writers started to work in political organisations or for the media run by political parties (Kerîm, 2009, pp.137-138).

It was only in the latter half of the 1990s and with the establishment of the KRG, the Kurdish parliament and several cultural organisations in Kurdistan, that theatre started to regain some of its lost lustre. Under the auspices of the ministry of culture, cultural and theatre administrations, and also several theatre groups, were set up in different towns and attempts were made to renovate the old theatres and build new ones. The establishment of the Institute of Fine Arts, first in Erbil and then in Duhok, was an important step towards promoting drama education. Budgets were also allocated to theatre work and TV dramas produced for the growing number of Kurdish TV stations. The newly-found freedom to speak of the Kurds' suffering under the Iraqi regime resulted in the production of several TV dramas such as *Firmêskî Reş* (Black Tears), *Erebane* (Carriage), *Gul Omer* (Gul Omer), *Pêlaw* (Shoe) and *Şehîdekan Em Hefteye Degerênewe* (The Martyrs Return This Week) (ibid., p.141). These mainly recounted the story of the Kurds' struggle and resistance in the face of Iraqi oppression.

5.11 Conclusion

For their patriotism and courage in the face of dictatorship, theatre artists of the 1970s and the 1980s are considered by many to be equal to the Kurdish guerrilla and are as highly regarded. Following the defeat of the 1974 uprising, Felekedîn Kakeyî (1943-2013), the author and politician, told the media that although resistance was crushed, it had been replaced by theatre, with theatre artists replacing the pêşmerge as advocates of patriotism (Salar, 2013, personal communication, 5 May). This further proves the point that cultural and political nationalisms in Kurdistan were complementary responses that often formed in with cultural activities becoming a cloak for anti-state organizations where formal politics were blocked.

Indeed, at a time when the pêşmerge were fighting a mortal struggle, theatre artists considered their profession similarly important and were prepared to sacrifice for its sake. Because theatre artists received no support financially or otherwise, they worked with passion and “everybody was willing to pay from his own pocket to stage a play” says Yabe (Kerîm, 2011, pp.145–146). More importantly, they lived with the knowledge that their work could cost them their freedom or even their lives. The closing down of theatres at the time of performance, banning of plays by the censorship department, imprisonment and interrogation of directors, actors and participants by the state officials was often the response to the theatre that took on the state. The commitment of theatre artists to their profession is most evident in guerrilla camps and liberated villages where performances involved grave responsibilities and risks to their lives and the lives of spectators.

But, the ultimate defeat of a nation is its cultural annihilation and theatre can be an important tool to prevent this from happening, as well as, to create national identities. It is important to note that the 1970s and the 1980s saw the Arabisation of Kurdish lands, and the banning of Kurdish in those areas. The existence of several active theatre groups which translated modernist dramas into Kurdish or made use of Kurdish folk culture and literature reassured a disenfranchised, displaced and denigrated people of their culture and identity. Theatre revived people’s sense of self-worth and their belief in their name, language, land, history of struggle, unity and

themselves by both elevating the status of their language and drawing on their folk culture and literature as valid sources of artistic inspiration and material for theatre. The use of Kurdish folklore and nationalist myths and reference to nationalist literature in the theatre of the 1970s and 1980s is the subject of analysis in following chapters which look at representative plays written and directed by Telet Saman and Ehmed Salar.

Chapter Six:
The Construction of Leftist-Nationalist Identity in Telet Saman's Theatre



Telet Saman

To better understand the Kurdish theatre of the 1970s and the role it played in promoting Kurdish nationalism and resistance against the Baath rule, this chapter examines two important plays directed by Telet Saman, one of the first graduates of drama in Baghdad University and the most successful director of the 1970s. Saman was the biggest name in Kurdish theatre in Erbil at the time and his productions were often very well received. From these, *Mem û Zîn* and *Qelay Dimdim* will be examined closely in this chapter as they are great examples of the politicisation of Kurdish theatre in the 1970s. They are also evidence of the courage Kurdish theatre artists had in producing nationalist works immediately following the loss of autonomy in 1975.

6.1 Telet Saman

Saman was born in 1946 in Erbil to an educated family. He went to school in Nasiriyah in Southern Iraq, where his family had been moved to in 1963. He went to Dar ul-Muallimeen (Teacher Training Institute) only to be expelled one day after shouting slogans in support of Barzanî in an anti-Kurdish demonstration. With the intervention of his father, who was a police officer, he escaped punishment not only for that but also for future incidents in his life. As a child, Saman was deeply

influenced by the Kurdish Radios of Baghdad and Kermanshah and the plays and stories told by Şukrullah Baban and other radio presenters. He was also an avid film-goer who would watch at least one film a day in one of the two cinemas in his neighbourhood. Along with Qazî Bamernî, Saman was the first Kurdish drama student to graduate from Baghdad Academy of Fine Arts (1969-1970) where he studied under Sami Abdulhamid, Ibrahim Jalal, Jasem al-Abudi and Ja'far Sa'di. After his return to Erbil, he co-founded the Erbil branch of Kurdish Society of Arts and Literature (Komeley Huner û Wêjey Kurdî) in July 1972. The foundation of this society in Erbil played an important role in the history of Kurdish theatre, music and culture and literature in general. Many actors, musicians, singers, writers and intellectuals of Erbil worked in the society and benefitted from it. It also became a centre where political and revolutionary figures from different parties held meetings. Several of them lost their lives because of their political activities.⁶³

In the Kurdish Society of Arts and Literature and later in the New Kurdish Arts Group (Tîpî nwêy hunerî kurdî) which he co-founded, he directed several plays including *Qelay Dimdim* (the Dimdim Fortress), *Şarî Evîn* (the City of Love), *Pîlan* (Plot), and *Xec û Siyamend* (Xec and Siyamend). All the plays he directed commented on current socio-political issues; they either advocated fight against political dictatorship of foreign rulers or criticised the oppression of the lower social classes by the self-serving landed gentry. His *Pîlan*, for example is a commentary on the meaninglessness of the borders that divide Kurdish lands between different nation-states. A dialogue between the representative of the state and a Kurdish man and a woman named Zêrîn illustrates the anti-colonial message of the play,

Officer: Ho, ho, ho...they are on two sides...they are two villages.

Zêrîn: The two sides are one...they are one village.

Officer: He, he, he...they are two villages in two countries.

Zêrîn: This is one country and we all belong to each other.

Officer: they are two villages, foreign to each other.

The man: We are all related...you are the foreigners.

Zêrîn: those who call us foreign are the foreigners. (Saman, 2010, p.109)

⁶³ All the information in this paragraph is the result of my interview with Saman.

The hope for the reunification of Kurdish lands is symbolised by the marriage between Mem and Zîn from the two Kurdish villages and the play ends with a call for unity between the Kurds as the actors invite the audience members to chant with them, “Do not let go of each other’s hands” (ibid., p.118).

In *Şarî Evîn*, the foreign dictatorship is symbolised by a dragon (ejdeha) who resides across the borders of “the land with tall mountains and green valleys”, a tacit allusion to Kurdistan (Saman, 2011b, p.68). Dragon, here, can be easily associated with the mythical Zuhak, the evil king who lived off the brains of the youth and who was defeated by Kawe the blacksmith. In fact, for its association with this powerful nationalist myth, Saman was forced by the ministry of culture to change the title of the play from *Ejdeha*, which could be (mis)interpreted as a reference to the Iraqi dictator, to a more neutral *Şarî Evîn* (Saman, 2013, personal communication, 9 Oct). In this play, however, criticism is directed not as much against the foreign dragon as mainly against the Kurdish elite who take advantage of the subjugation of the masses. The characters of agha and merchant benefit from the siege of the land by selling water to their withered compatriots. Ultimately, it is a poor young boy who risks his life to end the dragon’s life and free his people. The play ends with his happy reunion with his fiancée, a poor flower-selling girl. For its idealisation of the lower classes and its condemnation of the corrupt gentry and bourgeoisie, *Şarî Evîn* is evidently a leftist work and a plea to all members of society to think beyond their selfish interests and act for the greater good of their community; only then they can defeat the dragon.

The Iraqi Baathist dictatorship became the subject of ridicule in Saman’s *Qel û Rûte* (The Raven and the Poor), which has been called by Muhsin Mihemed “the comedy of election at the time of dictatorship” (Saman, 2010, p.3). Written and directed by Saman, this play, which drew on folk tales, was first staged in 1979 in Erbil by the Kurdish Arts and Literature Group. At the time Saddam had become the president and also the chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC), the ultimate decision making body in Iraq during the Ba’ath’s rule. Saddam greatly changed and controlled the RCC by eliminating any manifestations of pluralism and punishing

those affiliated with political parties other than his Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party. In 1979, he accused dozens of party officials, including five RCC members, of treason and had them executed. This state of affairs is courageously satirized in *Qel û Rûte*.

Like many other Kurdish plays of the time and their Arabic counterparts, *Qel û Rûte* begins with a story-teller addressing the audience. He opens a big old book and starts reading out a story: once upon a time in an ancient city a new king was chosen to rule every year, not by the people but by the ravens. He, whose head the bird sat on, would become the new king. In this city, there was a poor, homeless, hungry man called Rûte who dreamt of all the good things that he would do if he became the king: "I'd cover the cold, I'd feed the hungry...I'd turn this city into a paradise...I'd distribute the lands among the peasants" (ibid., p.10). The narrator returns to stage, this time as another character called Dêwane (Madman), the Wiseman of folk literature. He promises Rûte to be the next king on the condition that he would abolish the raven-based system and replace that with the vote of the nation. However the concept of democracy is so alien to Rûte that the idea of people electing their ruler baffles him. What follows is a series of questions and answers which end with a play with the rhyming words of *Qel* (raven) and *Ge* (nation):

Dêwane: how can the king be chosen by the raven?

Rûte: then by what should it be chosen? You don't mean the stork, do you? I think the raven is wiser than the stork.

Dêwane: what stork?!

Rûte; oh I see, you mean the falcon. Falcons are wiser and smarter...

Dêwane: no!

Rûte: Of course! You mean the rooster.

Dêwane: No!

Rûte: Simurgh?⁶⁴

Dêwane: what?

Rûte: Simurgh. Yes, it must be Simurgh. Simurgh is the king of all birds, it's the biggest and strongest of them all...long live Simurgh and death to the raven...it's a shame that in this land, this important task is given to the raven...long live the Simurgh.

Dêwane: No!

Rûte: Not even the Simurgh?...then which bird is it?...

Dêwane: it is the nation, the nation...it is the interests of the nation which are at stake here, not those of the raven. Who suffers if the king oppresses his

⁶⁴ A mythical bird in Iranian folklores and literatures

people? ...who suffers when the king allies with the aghas, lords and nobility against the peasants and labourers?...the raven or the nation? (ibid., pp.20-21)

In the end, Dêwane grants Rûte's wish and makes him king. The landlords and nobility who are confused and disgruntled by the election of a poor nobody as the new king soon realise that their simple-minded adversary is easy to manipulate. They start swaying his authority by flattering and bribing him. Their ally in the court is the king's deputy who is in fact the main decision-maker in the realm. As his first service to the new king, this cunning figure changes the new king's name from Rûte, meaning naked and poor, to Tewfîq Paşa the son of Şaswarî Selîm. "His one hundredth grandfather is from Ser (up) Xan family who are from the nobilities who are descendants of Jêr (down) Xan," says the deputy (ibid., p.38). The only people who are admitted to Tewfîq Paşa's court by his deputy are the landlords and the nobility who grant him a hundred villages and palaces. Further, Tewfîq Beg is told by his deputy that they should take good care of the ravens to ensure his re-election and long reign. "Therefore, it is the king's order," says the deputy, "that anyone who kills a raven or destroys a raven's nest or commits any crime against a raven should be immediately executed...every household has to take care of one raven." (42) Rûte is soon corrupted by his courtiers and loses sight of his old dreams and promises he had made to Dêwane. He not only fails to abolish the old regime but also strengthens the authority of the ravens and further weakens his already impoverished subjects. In fact, his reign becomes the worst in the history of his people.

Although *Qel û Rûte*, *Pîlan* and *Şarî Evîn*, were all received well at their time, it is two plays that Saman is best known and remembered for: *Mem û Zîn* and *Qelay Dimdim*. The former was written in 1968 but was published in 1975. It was staged in 1976 directed by Saman and Ferhad Şerîf. What is significant about this play is that it was an overtly nationalistic work which was staged only one year after the Kurds' loss of autonomy in an era of strict censorship. "From 1968 onwards," said Saman in an interview, "we dreamt of a greater Kurdistan and a leader to unite all four parts

of Kurdistan. I described this in a love story” (Saman, 2013, personal communication, 9 Oct).

Mem û Zîn and *Qelay Dimdim* both belong to the Kurdish oral tradition and are the two best-known *beyts* performed for hundreds of years by traditional Kurdish storytellers. *Mem û Zîn*, which later became the subject of a tragic love poem by the seventeenth century poet Ehmedê Xanî, has been hailed by Kurdish nationalists as a national epic because of its obvious references to Kurdish nationalist beliefs. Likewise, *Qelay Dimdim*, the tale of the heroism of a small group of Kurds against a large Persian army, is considered by many as a national epic, second only to Xanî’s *Mem û Zîn*.

As folktales which have long been used by Kurdish cultural and political nationalists, *Mem û Zîn* and *Qelay Dimdim* have inspired not only Kurdish poets and novelists but, as we saw in the case of Pîremêrd, Kurdish playwrights as well. The retelling again and again of these stories due to their social and political significance for the public and their already deep resonance with the national culture is evident in the Kurdish theatre history as both *Mem û Zîn* and *Qelay Dimdim* have attracted playwrights, directors, and theatre-makers wanting to engage with certain national preoccupations or anxieties. Saman’s *Mem û Zîn* and *Qelay Dimdim* are examples of modern retellings of these folktales in performance with emphasis on nationalist and socialist themes. To understand the construction of this leftist-nationalist identity in *Mem û Zîn* and *Qelay Dimdim*, the following explores these political plays by reading them against the historical context within which they were written, performed and received.

6.2 *Mem û Zîn* (Mem and Zîn, 1976)

The plot of the story revolves around Mem, a Kurdish prince from the House of Ardalan, who disappointed by his family’s subjugation of their peasants and lack of nationalist feelings, abandons his hometown in search of a more forward-looking ruler concerned with the ills of his subjects. He finds his ideal in Mîr Zênêdîn, the

ruler of Botan. He settles in Botan and starts a new life serving Mîr as his secretary without revealing his noble identity. He becomes a close friend of Tajdîn, the son of Mîr's deputy, Şaliyar.

During the feast of Newroz, the two young sisters of Mîr Zênêdîn, Zîn and Sitî, disguise themselves as men in order to wander among the crowds in the street and form an idea of the men they would like to marry. They take a fancy to two girls they meet. However, the girls are actually Mem and Tajdîn in disguise. Mem falls in love with Zîn but does not have the courage to ask for her hand, as he now lives as a poor subject of Mîr, not a prince of Ardalan. Tajdîn marries Sitî so that Mem finds the courage to ask for Zîn's hand.

Mîr Zênêdîn, a kind but naïve ruler, is beguiled by an Iago-like advisor called Bekir into imprisoning Mem for treason. Bekir conspires with the leader of the Ak Koyunlu, also called the White Sheep Turkomans, to overthrow the Kurdish principality in return for Mîr Zênêdîn's throne. Made aware of his brother's imprisonment, Serxab Beg, the head of the House of Ardalan, sets off with his army to Botan, not to wage war but only to beg for his brother's release. Bekir, however, tries to convince Mîr Zênêdîn to unite with Bêjen, the leader of the Ak Koyunlu Turkomans, against Serxab Beg who Bekir claims is coming to conquer Botan. With the interference of Şaliyar and Tajdîn and upon receiving a peaceful letter from Serxab, Mîr changes his mind and decides to accept Serxab in his court. Serxab visits his brother in prison who wasted away physically and emotionally for weeks succumbs to his death moments later, soon joined by the bedridden Zîn. In the end Bekir admits to his treachery and commits suicide while Serxab and Mîr join troops to fight against the foreign invaders.

This play was written in 1968 but was first staged in 1976 in Erbil. The plot of the story draws upon Ehmedî Xanî's *Mem û Zîn*, which was itself inspired by the Kurdish folktale of *Memê Alan*, one of the best known stories of Kurdish oral literature. The story of *Memê Alan* enjoys extremely widespread circulation among the Kurmanji-speaking Kurds as well as their Armenian and Neo-Aramaic speaking neighbours

(Chyet, 1991) but, as Chyet has also shown in his research, no two versions that exist in oral tradition recount the story in exactly the same way (ibid.). Saman's play is closer to Xanî's adaptation which is different from oral tradition not only in both form and content, but also in that it was written with a political objective in mind. It is to Xanî's *Mem û Zîn* that Saman's play owes much of its political imagery.

Ehmedê Xanî, who had been a secretary at the court of the mir of Bayezîd, wrote *Mem û Zîn* during the conflicts between the Ottoman and Persian empires which had resulted in turmoil in Kurdish lands. The political events in the seventeenth century eventually determined the fate of Kurdistan as the 1693 peace treaty signed between the two empires set the boundary between the two and also divided the Kurdish lands for centuries to come. It was in the Kurdish town of Bayezid on the frontier of the two belligerent occupiers that Xanî bemoaned in his *Mem û Zîn* that, "Both sides have made the Kurdish people targets for the arrows of fate. They are said to be keys to the borders, each tribe forming a formidable bulwark. Whenever the Ottoman Sea [Ottomans] and Tajik Sea [Persians] flow out and agitate, the Kurds get soaked in blood separating them [the Turks and Persians] like an isthmus" (cited in Hassanpour, 1992, pp.53–55). Having identified the divisions among the Kurdish rulers as the main reason for the subjugation of the Kurds, Xanî wrote, "If only there were harmony among us, if we were to obey a single one of us, he would reduce to vassalage Turks, Arabs and Persians, all of them" (cited in Bruinessen, 1992, p.267).

For its appeal to the "disunited, rebellious and split" (*bêtifaq, be temerud û şiqaq*) Kurdish groups to unite, Xanî's prologue to *Mem û Zîn* has become the most frequently quoted text in the nationalist literature and thus contributed significantly to the formation of a Kurdish national identity. It played an important role in the early stages of Kurdish identity-building, particularly in Northern and Southern Kurdistan and, as mentioned earlier, continues to inspire Kurdish cultural activities in different parts of the world.⁶⁵ In Turkey, it had become a great source of inspiration for Kurdish

⁶⁵ More recently, Fethi Karakeçili, Kurdish choreographer and dance instructor, staged the first Kurdish ballet dance based on the *Mem û Zîn* love story in Toronto, Canada in October 2011. This 85-minute performance focused on Kurdish culture but for the purpose of being accessible to the

nationalists in the early twentieth century.⁶⁶ In Iraq, the translation of *Mem û Zîn* into Sorani by the poet, Hejar, which was published in 1960 left an enormous impact on the Kurdish movement there (Bruinessen, 2003, p.53).

Saman's play is similar to Xanî's poem in several respects: it voices criticism against the Kurdish rulers and even promotes rebellion against their authority; it champions the welfare of the common and poor people; and it longs for a unified Kurdistan ruled by a strong, independent leader who cares about the fate of his nation. However, Saman's *Mem û Zîn* differs from Xanî's work in that, while the love story in the latter mainly reflects the writer's sufist and philosophical thinking and the political commentary is mainly the narrator's occasional reflections, in the former, the whole plot of the story serves the political aim of the playwright with Mem, the not-so-heroic hero of the folktale and the sufist martyr of Xanî's *mathnawi*, articulating the most vindictive statements against the self-serving Kurdish rulers. Mem, in Saman's play, is a leftist intellectual who blames the numerous Kurdish lords and princes for all the miseries of Kurdistan. Their short-sightedness and greed, Mem believes, makes them servants of foreign powers and victimisers of their own people. His character, therefore, advocates the complete obliteration of Kurdish principalities in the hope that the lower classes will finally be able to live in peace.

Saman's *Mem û Zîn* represents the leftist tendencies which were strong in the region at the time. In the 1930s and 1940s, two main currents of ideologies emerged in Iraq: communism and pan-Arab nationalism. Many Kurdish intellectuals were influenced by the socialist ideas of the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) which had been founded in 1934. The clash between these urban educated leftist intellectuals and the feudal, conservative, religious tribes played an important role in the history of Kurdish political parties in the years to come.

Canadian audience, it incorporated traditional and contemporary elements to reflect an east/west approach in its music, dance, costume and staging. Karakeçili used three dance styles (folk, contemporary and ballet) with dancers of different backgrounds with a live orchestra composed of musicians from different parts of the world.

⁶⁶ In October 1941, Celadet Bedrxan published an article in which he described Xanî as a prophet: "*Lê Xanî pêxember e jî. pêxemberê diyaneta me a milî, pêxemberê ola me a nijadîn.*" ("Xanî is a prophet; the prophet of our national belief, the prophet of the doctrines of our race." See (Strohmeier, 2003, p.143).

The preeminent party in modern Iraqi Kurdish history, the KDP, was established in 1946 with Mela Mistefa Barzanî becoming its first president. Soon after its establishments, political differences emerged within the party. The nascent intra-Kurdish split was set between the more conservative, traditional and tribal wing of the KDP associated with Barzanî, and the intellectual Marxist wing (the so-called KDP politburo) led by Ibrahîm Ehmed, and his son-in-law, Celal Talebanî. Mela Mistefa “talked freely, with a bitterness amounting to hatred, against the alleged inertia, cowardice, inefficiency and intellectual presumptuousness of the KDP politicians” (McDowall, 2004, p.306). Ehmed, on the other hand, complained of Mela Mistefa’s “selfishness, arbitrariness, unfairness, tribal backwardness and even his dishonesty” (ibid.).

Ehmed became KDP’s secretary general in 1953 despite Barzanî’s disparagement of his “pride and vanity” (Gunter, 1996, p.227). He became the acting leader of the KDP and the Kurdish nationalist movement in the 1950s when Mela Mistefa was in exile in the Soviet Union. However, after the 14 July revolution and Mela Mistefa’s return to Iraq, he soon re-established himself as the most popular and powerful Kurdish figure in Iraq. His old rival tribes of Harkis, Surchis, Baradustis and Zibaris, however, feared Barzanî’s return from exile as they had helped driving him out of Iraq and had exploited his lands. In April and May 1959, the Baradust and Pizhdar rose against the government and Mela Mistefa and were swiftly defeated. On the other hand, Mela Mistefa managed to kill the chief of the Zibaris, and destroy Zibari villages. The Barzanîs also attacked the Harkis, Surchis, Baradustis and others in the northern area. These tribes were supported with arms and money from the government which feared Barzanî’s power over Kurdistan (McDowall, 2004, p.307).

The 1960s proved to be a tortuous decade for the Kurds as the KDP struggled to maintain unity between Barzanî and its leftist members. By 1964, the disagreements between the two escalated into full-scale confrontation as Ibrahîm Ehmed and Celal Talebanî, the leaders of the political bureau, sought to eliminate Barzanî from the KDP leadership. The conflict within KDP intensified in 1964, when Barzanî signed a

cease-fire accord with Baghdad without even informing the politburo. This was criticised by Ehmed and Talebanî whose plea for the principle of Kurdish autonomy infuriated Mela Mistefa who stressed his loyalty to the peace agreement. Ehmed, Talebanî and their followers were soon driven by Barzanî s out of Iraq and into Iran.

Kurdistan was rent with schism. On one side, Ahmad, Talabani and the KDP intelligentsia asserted an ideological position evolved over the previous 20 years, on the other, Mulla Mustafa was able to rally the conservatives, the tribal and religious leaders of Kurdistan. For these it was a contest between the religious and the secular, the primordial and the nationalist, tradition versus atheistic Marxism (ibid., p.316).

In March 1965 war broke out between Baghdad and the Kurds led by Barzanî who was now the head of the KDP. In 1966, Ehmed and Talebanî started to receive support from Bagdad to take up arms against Barzanî who was armed with heavy weapons by both Iran and Israel (ibid., pp.318-319). Thus, two main Iraqi Kurdish parties, supported by two rival states, fought each other for power in Kurdistan. To prove their loyalty, these parties sometimes conspired with their sponsors against their fellow Kurds who fought for autonomy in other parts of Kurdistan. The intra-Kurdish feud continued and culminated in the 1990s Civil War.

When *Mem û Zîn* was staged in 1976, the intra-Kurdish conflict had not subsided since the writing of the play in 1968; if anything, it had worsened as Talebanî's new party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), lost one of its most capable and popular commanders, Elî Eskerî, in a KDP ambush. This loss provoked much anger among the PUK members which is reflected in PUK publications at the time. *Spark*, mouthpiece of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, described the murder as committed by "treacherous and anti-people gang of US and Zionist stooges of provisional KDP" (Spark, 1979, p. 1), a "puppet gang" (ibid.) unmasking itself as "the most vulgar, primitive, and barbarian political group in the world" (ibid.).

Already in 1975, students belonging to the PUK had condemned the KDP for several "crimes" including: submitting to US imperialism and the regime of Shah, being the watch-dog of Yankee imperialism, opening a Kurdish branch of SAVAK called

Parastin in liberated areas which murdered hundreds of progressive Kurds within the rank of the movement, collaborating with Zionist settler state of Israel and stabbing the Palestinian liberation movement in the back (Kurdish Students Society in Europe – UK Branch, 1975). Unfortunately what was true for 1968 was still true for 1976.

The intra-Kurdish conflict is represented in the play as the only way to weaken and conquer the Kurds. At the beginning of the play, Bekir, the collaborator, tells the Turkoman messenger that no power can defeat Botan but schism:

At the time of war, especially against you, all citizens pick up guns...I assure you, no amount of force can conquer a handful of Kurdish soil. If you want to live in peace, shake hands with Zênêdîn, as Tamburlaine and Shahrukh did...Tell Bijan, he will not succeed even if he becomes Hulagu.⁶⁷ Even Hulagu lost two thousand men in Hewlêr (Erbil) and failed to conquer it...it helps if you read a bit about Kurdish history. A nation who has experienced freedom fights for it to its last breath”(Saman, 2011a, pp.13–14).

But, as Mem says, Hulagu finally succeeded in conquering Erbil with the help of a few traitors in the Erbil fortress (ibid., p.31). Şaliyar compares the traitors to “a snake which is hiding in your house and you don’t notice it until it stings you” (ibid.). The problem is those “snakes” are trusted and followed by the Kurdish society which according to Mem is “gullible, honest and naïve” (ibid.). The gullible Kurds can be easily manipulated by the like of Bekir who is well aware of the weaknesses of Kurdish society and its rulers. The only way to conquer Botan, Bekir suggests to the Turkomans, is, “Deceit, killing Kurds by Kurds” (ibid., p.14). In order to make this happen, Bekir advocates peace with Turkomans, telling Mîr, “we are all Muslims. How can we kill each other?...it’s time for peace...you, representatives of this poor nation, never know when to make peace and when to wage war” (ibid., p.28). He advocates peace with the enemies and instead tries to disgrace Mîr’s loyal servants, Mem and Tajdîn. To do so, he accuses Mem of trying to dishonour Mîr’s sister, Zîn, and as proof of her flirtation with Mem, he shows Mîr her necklace which she had dropped at their meeting place. Mîr, who is made aware by Bekir of Mem’s connection to the House of Ardalán, falls for Bekir’s lies and suspects Mem and his

⁶⁷ Hulagu Khan(1218-1265), the Mongol conqueror of southwest Asia.

brother of trying to disgrace his family and to conquer Botan. The domestic turmoil which is created out of mistrust and suspicion leads Mîr to entertain the idea of joining troops with the Turkomans against the Kurdish House of Ardalán. This is reminiscent of the Kurdish parties' alliances with foreign powers against each other. In the 1980s Saddam Husain boasted that, "the Kurdish organisations would never be able to achieve anything since they were hopelessly divided against each other and subservient to foreign powers" (McDowall, 2004, p.347). This is clearly reflected in the dialogues of the characters within the play:

Mem: "our biggest problem is our naivety. We are honest, simple and gullible."
Şaliyar: "that's why I always tell you not to trust the enemy's sweet words. Outsiders are never our friends." (Saman, 2011a, p.31)

Şaliyar's lines also highlight the nationalist myth of common ancestry and descent promoted in this performance. This myth which is central to cultural nationalism, according to Smith (1999), links all members of the present generation of the community as one nation with common forebears and affords a means of identifying one's friends as "kinsmen" in opposition to unfriendly outsiders. Here, the activation of national identity works insidiously as well through assumptions about participants in the performance and the spectators where, as Michael Billig notes, "the term 'we' is unreflexively used as a signifier of 'us' as members of the nation" (cited in. Edensor, 2002, p.11).

While the myth of common descent entails the claim to a distinct national identity and a homeland, what stands in the way of Kurdish nationalism, as diagnosed in the play, is the credulity of Kurdish leaders in believing their enemies' good gestures as well as their lack of unity with and concern for other parts of Kurdistan. Mem represents a young Kurdish intellectual who dreams of unity between all Kurdish regions, representing nationalist aspirations beyond the borders of Iraqi Kurdistan. His dream is "for Kurdish regions to unite and for leaders to think of a unified Kurdistan" (ibid., p.52) and not to differentiate between parts of Kurdistan (ibid., p.63). "I like for Botan to feel the pains of Lorestan and for Soran to support Bidlîs..." says Mem (ibid., p.67). What stands in the way of this unity is the selfishness of

Kurdish lords and princes. Mem abandons his hometown, disappointed and appalled by Ardalan, Soran and other principalities. He goes to Botan hoping there was social justice there, and that Mîr was a progressive leader, independent from foreign influence (ibid., p.88). However, Mîr Zênêdîn proves to be yet another self-centred ruler with little regards for his subjects. When he is warned by his deputy against enmity with Serxab Beg of Ardalan and is told to care about the fate of his nation, he exclaims, “Nation! What nation? Cows, peasants...? I am the nation; my army, my court, my family, my power, me. I destroy anyone who dares to oppose me” (ibid., p.94). That is why Mem’s wish for a unified Kurdistan is directly linked with his desire for equality and freedom for the nation. His last words are cries for a revolution to uproot the feudal lords:

Principalities are like God’s curse on our oppressed people...My brother, Tajdîn, if the lords do not come to their senses and start to think about the future of their nation, if they do not see all parts of Kurdistan as one, strike them with an iron fist. Go to villages, streets, markets, spread the idea of revolution...if the rulers cannot distinguish between friends and foes, if they are preoccupied with building palaces, if they continue to sacrifice the lives of our youths in their futile wars, destroy them Tajdîn, with an iron fist, this is my will, destroy them Tajdîn, with an iron fist (ibid., pp.109-110).

It is here that the play’s divergence from Xanî’s narrative in terms of the characterisation of Mem can be seen. In Xanî’s *Mem û Zîn*, it is the author himself who reflects and comments on the nature and reality of Kurdish politics and political power in general. After Bekir successfully deceives Mîr into suspecting Mem and Tajdîn, Xanî takes the opportunity to give his verdict on politics and say “The rulers externally and internally resemble fire...when they are compassionate they are like the sun, when they hate, they burn the earth, for goodness’ sake don’t trust them! Even if they were your fathers, sons, or brothers” (Mirawdeli, 2012, p.331). Xanî demonstrates his dislike and distrust of rulers in another occasion where he writes, “the rulers are from the race of vipers, they have venom and beaded heads, when they show beads (smile), know it is poison, when they show compassion, know it is hatred” (ibid., p.433).

Xanî's dislike of princes is rooted in his sufist and philosophical worldview that all those who seek material power and entertain the illusion of eternal authority are prone to making wrong choices (ibid., 330). He justifies social revolution against injustice and fighting evil in the world however "as life is transitory and worldly power is insignificant, empty and ephemeral, it is only spiritual love that can ensure eternal happiness" (ibid., p.224). This spiritual journey and transformation is represented through Mem and Zîn whose heroism resides in their courage to endure hardship and even die for the sake of love. This is evident in the final scenes of this dramatic poetry where Zîn visits Mem in a vision and their souls dissolve in each other, a supernatural event which in fact takes place in the prison and is witnessed by other prisoners who see rays of light mixing together and lighting the whole prison. Moments before her death, Zîn talks to her brother about her spiritual journey and inner happiness.

For his Doctorate of Science which he obtained from Moscow University in 1977, the esteemed Kurdish scholar, Izedîn Mistefa Resûl had in detail explored Xanî's mystic and philosophical ideas and his vision of the world by examining the mystic terminology of *Maqâmât wa ahwâl* including, stations and states, reaching martaba and elimination in God, pre-existing of soul, *nafs* and *rûh* and the mannerism of mystics (See Rasul, 1979). More recently Kemal Mîrawdêlî has drawn attention to Resûl's encyclopaedic study of Mem û Zîn in his book, *Love and Existence* (2012). In their studies both Resûl and Mîrawdêlî point out that the character of Bekir is the embodiment of evil which is the necessary part of the various antitheses and contradictions on which the system of universe, the operation of nature and life of man are based. This philosophy which sees evil as a necessary counterpart of good, according to Mîrawdêlî, is definitely Zoroastrian (Ibid., p.318).

Those scholars who have interpreted Xanî's Mem as a symbol of Kurdistan enchained and the story of Mem and Zîn as a metaphor for the situation of the Kurds, have clearly not taken into account the poem's epilogue in which Bekir is seen in paradise where, forgiven by God, he lives near Mem's and Zîn's palace. Hassanpour, for example, has asserted that Mem and Zîn represent the two parts of

Kurdistan with Bekir symbolising disunion. Chyet has seconded Hassanpour's interpretation and claimed that Xanî believed that the Kurds' biggest enemy was from within (Chyet, 1991, p.62) and used the story of Mem and Zîn as a metaphor for the situation of the Kurds. Such statements, of course, reveal the contemporary scholars' and critics' projections onto the seventeenth century poem.

Although Xanî did not intend his story to be interpreted as a metaphor for Kurdish situation, his literary work was written, as he himself says in the prologue, to revive a sense of pride in Kurdish language and culture. By describing Kurdish building and architecture, medicine, music, jewellery and clothes, foods and utensils, weapons and types of calligraphy and writing, he demonstrated the distinct character of his people and portrayed their way of life and by doing so justified their liberation from the Ottoman-Persian yoke (See Rasul, 1979). His choice of a quintessentially Kurdish folktale is a clear sign of the poet's ambition. All these distinct Kurdish characteristics together with the poem's prologue where the poet complains about the subjugation of the Kurds and their lack of unity has contributed to the nationalist interpretations and adaptations such as Saman's play.

Strohmeier asserts that Xanî's "assessment of the Kurdish situation could so effortlessly be applied to the contemporary situation of the Kurds, while lending a prophetic aura and historical legitimacy to the appeals of early proponents of Kurdish nationalism" (Strohmeier, 2003, p.29). Saman has similarly seen in Xanî's work reflections of the Kurdish situation. He has made the characters of *Mem û Zîn* embodiments of weaknesses and strengths of Kurdish character. Bekir is the enemy within, the traitor, disloyal and self-serving, representative of what must be corrected or eliminated before Kurds can reach unity and happiness. Tajdîn, on the other hand, is the nation's brave and honourable soldier, the pêşmerge. Yet his life could be wasted in an unnecessary intra-Kurdish war launched by the gullible emir who proves he can be easily manipulated.

Saman's *Mem û Zîn* was written to both call for Kurdish unity and also contribute to the Kurdish nationalist movement by drawing on one of the most nationalist works in

Kurdish literature. It has to be noted that the play was staged only a year after the failure of the fourteen year old Kurdish armed struggle. The sense of bitterness and sadness which predominated following this event is known among the masses as *Aş Betal*, which literally means to desist. Since the abandoning of the revolution in 1975, this term has become highly negative signifying weakness and cowardice. The terminology reflects the extreme anger and indignation in Iraqi Kurdish society at the time. In fact, the Kurdish defeat of March 1975 was so complete that even the most optimistic did not expect the movement to regain its strength before many years had passed (Stansfield and Resool, 2006, p.108). In Saman's *Mem û Zîn*, Muhsin Mihemed asserts, culture becomes a means to describe this dark time of national crisis (Mihemed, 2011).

It is hard to believe that a performance with such a strong nationalist tone was staged immediately after the fall of autonomy and the failure of the Kurdish nationalist movement. Romantic descriptions of Kurdistan and references to its 'enemies' are abundant throughout the play. "Our nation longs for peace and tranquillity" says Mem, "Our land is rich and full of blessings. Everything in Kurdistan calls for love. If it wasn't for the poisonous sufferings inflicted on us by the enemy, we would not exchange one *heyran*⁶⁸ or *lawik*⁶⁹ with thousands of unfitting conquests" (Saman, 2011a, p.32). Here, nation does not denote Botan but the greater Kurdistan as Mem clarifies later in the play that he does not distinguish between different parts of Kurdistan (ibid., p.63). The "nation" and "homeland" which are referred to several times throughout the play (See ibid., pp. 71,83, 87,94) are surrounded by enemies from outside as Ardalan had to fend off the Qizilbash⁷⁰ while Botan faces the threat of the Ak Koyunlu Turkomans. Plagued by traitors from inside, Kurdish princes lose sight of their common enemies and instead engage in wars of "fratricide", as Tajdîn bemoans (ibid., p.83). The only way out of this confusion, Mem and Tajdîn believe, is the uprising of the masses against the princes, begs and aghas for whom the workers, the peasants and the poor are only fuel for their futile wars (ibid.).

⁶⁸ A type of traditional Kurdish songs usually unaccompanied by music

⁶⁹ A type of long lyrical song

⁷⁰ Qizilbash or Kizilbash (sometimes also Qezelbash or Qazilbash) is the label given to a wide variety of Shi'i militant groups that flourished in Azerbaijan Anatolia and Kurdistan from the late 13th century onwards, some of which contributed to the foundation of the Safavid dynasty of Iran.

It is only after the death of Mem and Zîn that the prince of Botan, Mîr Zênêdîn, finally admits to his mistake and apologises to Mem's brother, Serxab Beg of Ardalan. But the tragic fate of Mem and Zîn serves as a warning for the Kurds and, as Şaliyar says, a reminder for a stronger unity among them (ibid., p.108). The unity among the Kurdish principalities is heralded at the end of the final scene when Botan and Ardalan swear allegiance to fight the "outsiders" and "to send them to hell" (ibid., p.109).

For its condemnation of the feudalist society and its call for uprising against the Kurdish feudal lords and princes, Saman's *Mem û Zîn* falls in the same category as Simko Nakam's *Receb û Piyawxoran* both foretelling the revival of the Kurdish national struggle which took place shortly after the fall of the Kurdish movement in the form of a socialist party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). While the guerrilla fighters fought their battles in the Kurdish mountains and countryside, it was the Kurdish theatre-makers that by producing nationalist works such as *Mem û Zîn*, undermined the government suppression in the cities and brought the clandestine resistance to the public stage, inciting the masses to hold out and keep the revolutionary spirit alive.

6.3 *Qelay Dimdim* (The Dimdim Fortress, 1982)

The story of the fall of the Kurdish Dimdim fortress to the Safavid army during the reign of Shah Abbas is one of the most celebrated stories in Kurdish history and heroic folklore. It is well known among the Kurds in different parts of Kurdistan, with both Sorani and Kurmanji, and even Armenian versions of it existing (Allison, 2010, p.56). An early version was published in Kurmanji by Jaba in 1860 while the first Sorani version was published by Oskar Mann in 1905. Ordîxanê Casimê Celîl collected and printed these and along with other manuscripts translated them into Russian in 1967. In many versions, the commander of the fort is called by the title *Xanê Lepzêrîn* (also *pelzêrîn*), or Prince Goldenhand, and the story is known by his name.

Thanks to the Safavid Shah's historian, Iskandar Big, and Kurdish sources such as Feqîyê Teyran's poetry, which provides the earliest literary record of the event, the accounts relating to the fall of Dimdim fort are recorded in written sources, which, according to Allison, is unusual for a Kurdish oral tradition.

Many versions of the story contain enough details to link them with the siege and capture of a Kurdish fort commanded by Emer Xan, the ruler of Baradost, by the armies of Shah Abbas in 1609 CE. The Shah wished to curb the power of the Mukri and Baradost principalities and Emer Xan had fortified a ruined fort on Dimdim Mountain, some eighteen kilometres south of Orumiyeh in Iran. After capturing the fort and massacring the inhabitants, the shah settled a Turkish tribe in the area which further weakened the Kurdish principalities (ibid.).

As Hassanpour (1996) notes, although Persian historians (e.g. Iskandar Big) depicted the battle of Dimdim as a result of Kurdish mutiny or treason, in Kurdish oral traditions, literary works (e.g. Dzhililov, pp.67-72), and histories it was treated as a struggle of the Kurdish people against foreign domination. In fact, the story of Dimdim is considered a national epic second only to Ehmedê Xani's Mem û Zîn (Hassanpour, 1996). Most of the collected beyts portray the defenders of Dimdim as martyrs in a holy war (see, e.g., Dzhililov, pp. 81, 97, 98).

Recounted differently in different areas, the long oral narrative of Dimdim was sung and performed for hundreds of years in Kurdistan by the beytbêj who treated the siege of Dimdim as a Kurdish struggle against foreign domination. An example of such nationalist rendering of the fall of the Dimdim fortress can be found in the following which is the Kurdish prince's final and heroic reply to Shah Abbas,

Xelqî me nayê rayê
Our people do not accept truce
Hêviya dijmine le meydanê
Which is what the enemies hope for in the battlefield
Mîna şêra ew şer dike
They fight like lions
Hertim dijmina let deke
They always destroy their enemies
Me ne xofê eskerê te

We are neither afraid of you
Me ne xofê xanî tewrêzê
 Nor are we afraid of the khan of Tabriz
Kelê ranakaw ji hembêzê
 Wild goats do not escape and abandon their habitat
Me ne tirs xanê çîn meçînê...
 We are not afraid of the emperor of China
Qir nake xelqê me
 Our people do not kneel
Me ne Xofê xanî teymûriya
 We are not scared of the khan of *teymûriya* (or Teymur khan?) either
Bela nake xelqê me le çiya
 Our people will not run and leave their mountains
Tacê te qibûl nakem
 I do not accept your crown (authority)
Kurdistanê bênav nakem
 I do not bring shame to Kurdistan (cited in Rasul, 2010, p.51)

The audience, unaware of written records, appreciated the narrative as “a historical event fashioned into a romance, aesthetically pleasing and resonant with powerful themes” (Allison, 2010, p.56) Thus in the oral versions of the story, the epithet of Goldenhand, which appears to be a popular figure and much older than Emer Xan, is attributed to him. Although as Allison shows, the versions of *Dimdim* published by Jaba and Mann differ both in plot and in style, they all have a common subject which is the heroic resistance of a Kurdish khan against a foreign oppressor. For its powerful themes, *Dimdim* has inspired a number of modern writers, poets, playwrights, and historians who found in this heroic epic inspiration for the expression of their own nationalist sentiments.

Saman’s *Qelay Dimdim*, as mentioned in the introduction to the play, is drawn not from the oral narratives but from several written sources which are: *The History of Alam Aray Abbasi* by Iskandar Big, Oskar Mann’s *Tuhfayi Mudhaffariyyah* (1906), Erebe Şemo’s *Qelay Dimdim*, and Şeref Xan Bidlîsî’s *Şerefname*. Also, unlike the oral versions of the story which are almost all in the form of the long narrative poem or alternating prose and poetry, the play is written in prose.

Staged in Erbil in 1982, the play is, as in most modern versions of the story (see Şemo, 2007; Celîl, 2011), an overtly nationalistic work which makes use of *Dimdim*

as an allegory for Kurdistan and the plight of Kurds in the twentieth century. By representing national heroes and models of heroic conduct from the golden age of Kurdish history when men were “heroes”, the story of Qelay Dimdim provides its audience with a touchstone of virtue and heroism to guide today’s tasks of regeneration and inspires courage in those charged with those tasks.

Qelay Dimdim proved to resonate with its audience as it was successfully staged for over twenty-five days. It should be noted that this play was staged during that period when the Kurds rose up in a massive uprising and demonstrations that covered almost all the towns and cities of Iraqi Kurdistan in the spring of 1982 (Stansfield and Resool, 2006, p.118). Because of the play’s nationalistic theme, the government, warned by their informants, had tried prior to the play’s public staging to censor parts of it. They notified Saman and his group to make the required changes or he would not receive permission to stage the play. Saman’s group accepted the government’s demand but ignored it when the day came. The performance was, however, recorded and the cassette of the play soon reached the Intelligence Service in Baghdad where it was edited by them. Saman and his group were also interrogated by government officials (Daniş, 2009a).

The play starts in a court where the Goldenhand Khan stands trial for his rebellion against the central government. The play’s nationalistic themes are evident right from the beginning when a chorus, inspired by Brechtian theatre, sings,

Ey Qelaykey Serbestî...Ey Serbestî
Oh the fort of freedom...oh freedom
Gerçî Dujmin Toy Dawete Ber Top û Agir...Burjî Rûxand
Even though the enemy has fired canons at you...destroyed your tower
Şwênewarî Mezarêke le Bîr Naçêt...Ta Gel Mabê...
Your site is a mausoleum, never forgotten...as long as the nation lives
Swêndim Bew Xwêney Rijawe...Swêndim Bew Burjey Rûxawe...
I swear to the blood that has been spilt...I swear to the tower that has fallen
Swêndim Bew Razey Nêjrawe...Dûbare Dîsan
I swear to the secret that is hidden...Once again
Dûbare Hoş û Bazû Bixeme Kar, We Çing Bihênim Ew Behare...
I will exercise my will and strength, to snatch that spring...(Saman, 2011b, p.9)

When the khan is asked about his age, he answers, “as old as the occupation of Kurdistan” (ibid., p.10). He is described by the representative of the state as a vicious ruler, ruling over a vicious people (ibid.). His nation is described as violent, ignorant, barbaric, disunited, ungrateful, and unworthy of self-rule, almost everything the Kurds have historically been accused of. Anachronistically, the Goldenhand Khan draws on the modern ideals of democracy, national self-determination and freedom, to justify his and his “nation”’s actions (ibid., p.24), making it clear from the start that Dimdim should be interpreted as representative of the whole Kurdish nation. When his nation is accused of being lazy and ignorant, he mentions the works of the seventeenth century poet, Xanî, as well as the twentieth century poets, Nalî, Mewlewî and Goran, as instances of Kurdish literary achievements. He mentions the Mahabad Republic (Jan 1946 - Dec 1946) as a tragically short-lived instance of democracy and the rule of law (ibid., p.25). Goldenhand rejects the charges of rebellion by claiming that he only protected his homeland from the occupiers, to which the court responds, “your homeland? Since when have you had a land of your own? Your land has always been parts of the Ottoman and Persian Empires and its protection is the duty of the Sultan and the Shah, not you...according to the modern law of the twentieth century if a land is not owned, it can be claimed and settled by anyone” (ibid., p.37). To this the Khan replies,

Damn your modernity...we don't bow to anyone...we might fall at times but we always rise again...Kurds never bow but to God... I am a mir, I am the Goldenhand mir, I'm the leader of a nation...I struggle to expel the occupiers and to achieve independence for Dimdim. (ibid., p.39)

Social concerns of the play come to the fore when the trial scene is cut short to look back at the events that led to the trial. The first scene serves to both portray an ideal image of the Khan as a humble leader in touch with his people and also praise the lower classes for their patriotism while drawing an unflattering sketch of the landed gentry. In this scene, the Khan is encouraging the workers to finish the reconstruction of the Dimdim fort before the onset of winter. He demands help from a feudal lord called Hemed Beg who is surprised by Khan's sympathetic behaviour towards the labourers and does not understand the reason behind Khan's renovation of the fort. Hemed Beg is humbled by the workers who show a better sense of common purpose

and citizenship as one of them says, “dear Hemed Beg, the lord of all lords, I am not a *beg* but I know what I’m working for...I’m not a *beg* but I know what’s in Goldenhand’s head. I’m not a *beg* but I know what’s going to happen in future” (ibid., p.12). To make the message of the scene even more evident, a chorus comments, “when a nation resorts to uprising...to end oppression, open the prisons...burn the gallows...everyone, from any side, any class...in any village, of any religion or belief, must put their selfish interests aside and unite for victory” (ibid. p.13).

Both common men and women are depicted in the play as noble and loyal to their khan. While men engage in rebuilding the fortress and defending it, women are presented as mothers and wives of fighters. The newly-wed Gulnaz is proud to be soon made a widow of a man who sacrifices his life for the homeland (ibid., p.44). An older woman is shown insisting to sign up all her three sons into Goldenhand’s army, despite the rules against recruiting underage boys (ibid., pp.41-42). In a different scene a woman is informed by a fighter of the death of her second son. Not only does she not mourn her son’s death, but she immediately calls her youngest son to join the khan’s army. He leaves but not before his mother gives him and the messenger the last drops of water they have in their home (ibid., pp.55-56).

The character of Goldenhand is sharply contrasted with that of the Shah of Iran who is depicted as a self-indulgent irresponsible ruler with many palaces and no care in the world than attending to his harem. In fact, it is not him but the mir of Tabriz, Budagh Khan, who shows concern over the renovation of Dimdim and calls the Shah’s attention to it. Shah orders the mir of Tabriz to stop the reconstruction of Dimdim if he does not see it to be in the interest of the government.

Goldenhand, on the other hand, is humble and devoid of any selfish motives, his only ambition being the restoration of his homeland. He is fair and tolerant of all people from any origin or belief as long as they serve Dimdim. He protects the alcoholic Armenian who is in charge of making cannons, against the outrage and complaints of the Islamic teacher, arguing that they are both respected as long as they care about Dimdim, because Dimdim needs both the jolly Armenian and the

sombre Muslim cleric. The most important thing, according to Goldenhand, is to protect the independence of Dimdim. Anything else should be subservient to the main cause, otherwise it will undermine the unity of the people (ibid., p.34).

A recurrent theme in the history of Kurdish movement, the lack of unity among the Kurdish leaders against central authorities, is dealt with in *Qelay Dimdim* as it was dealt with in *Mem û Zîn*. Goldenhand is certain of the existence of spies within the walls of Dimdim (ibid., p.19) as Ehmed Beg's treachery in the end proves. From among all Kurdish mirs, only Ebdal Xan, the mir of Mukriyan comes to his help. He says to Goldenhand, "when the sense of nationalism overpowers all trivial concerns, the nation unite like an iron wall against the threat of the greedy enemies. I'm not here as the mir of Mukriyan, helping out the mir of Baradost...I'm here as a patriot, a soldier in the Kurdish army which the Goldenhand khan has the honour of leading at this age" (ibid., p.48). Goldenhand laments, "we are short in numbers but their numbers never change...they always receive support and help each other out, unlike the Kurdish mirs who instead of helping us, bow down to our enemies" (ibid.). The tragedy, according to Goldenhand's advisor, is that most of the enemies' soldiers and commanders are Kurdish (ibid., p.47). The mirs of Hakkari are said to be servants of the Ottomans while Şawêrdî, the mir of Lorestan, and Ehmed Xan, the mir of Ardalán, are said to be the servants of the Shah of Persia. Still, the play expresses hope for a better future,

...we are victims of selfishness and greed...as long as there are Kurds like Ebdal Khan, we can hope that one day, from all four corners, young patriots will rush to our support, under one flag, for one cause, that is the independence of our homeland. (ibid, pp.48-49)

Despite its glorification of Goldenhand Khan and Ebdal Khan, Saman's *Qelay Dimdim* is strongly socialist and anti-feudal in its outlook. While common men and women are depicted as patriotic and self-sacrificing, the feudal lords are depicted as imprudent and greedy, Goldenhand and Ebdal being exceptions to the rule. To reinforce the socialist message of the play, a chorus reappears on stage and addresses the audience directly, asking them to rise against those Kurdish mirs who stand against Dimdim: "The old and new mirs of our history, have always been

obstacles on Dimdim's way to freedom. Neither strong enough to succeed, nor smart enough to unite. They collaborate with the enemies" (ibid., p.24).

Apart from the use of a chorus, the influence of Brecht and also Piscator can be seen in the final scene of the play when a montage of tragic images showing the martyrs of the Mahabad Republic, the Palestinian intifada and the African-American civil rights movement appears with the accompaniment of the sounds of gunshots, cannons, jets, and people's cries (ibid., p.51).⁷¹ This is also a reminder of widespread anti-imperialist sentiments which along with anti-feudalism, anti-tribalism, and anti-bourgeois-rightism defined Kurdish intellectual circles at the time. The confluence of Kurdish nationalism with wider national, anti-racist, or class struggles is highlighted following Goldenhand's trial scene when the UN's declaration of human rights, which was adopted in 1948, is read three times by a chorus. A TV reporter reads Article Two which states, "everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status" (ibid., p.18). A chorus laughs at the declaration and the fact that the world is nothing like the ideal image painted by the declaration. A man and a woman appear on stage and bemoan that, after thirty-three years from the creation of the universal declaration of human rights, racial, class, ethnic, and religious discrimination are common in countries such as the US, Egypt and Iran (ibid.).

Along with other modern recounts of the story of Dimdim, Saman's play illustrates nationalist preoccupations among the Kurdish writers for whom Dimdim remains a national epic that describes Kurdish resistance and struggle in the face of foreign

⁷¹ Erwin Piscator's political theatre started in the early 1920s in Berlin where war, inflation, financial depression and left-wing revolution had led to the intense politicisation of theatre. He introduced film into live stage action by projecting images onto a screen filling the back of the stage set. Later on he developed a documentary style theatre that incorporated feature film, newsreels and other documentaries which influenced theatre worldwide particularly influencing Brecht's epic theatre. Brecht's epic theatre shares many of the characteristics of Piscator's work, particularly offering internal commentary and undermining the naturalistic fourth-wall illusion. However, in contrast with Piscator's use of complex machinery, Brecht's staging was minimalist, making it easier to adopt by Arab and Kurdish theatre groups.

oppression and a broader symbol of the Kurd's resistance against dominant powers. This is evident in the final lines uttered by Goldenhand who remarks, "Remember, we are a nation who never gives up, we never bow down to any power, sultan or shah" (ibid. p.63). The Goldenhand Khan is the symbol of the ideal Kurdish hero, noble, selfless, intelligent, and willing to die for the homeland. The average Kurdish men and women share the same patriotic ideals with their ruler whom they love and admire. In its idealised portrayal of the Khan, Saman's Dimdim resembles modern versions of the story by other writers such as Celîl who writes,

Bejn bilind bû ew Gefat û û mêrxas,
He was tall, brave and courageous,
Hebû me'rifet rehm bû bêqeyas,
A man of honour, of unparalleled generosity,
Alîkar bû ew piştemêr bû Kurda,
Giving help freely, offering support to the Kurds.
Tezkiî bû ew nav eşîreda,
He was much loved among the tribes (cited in Allison, 2010, p.61).⁷²

The idealised description of the Kurdish hero in Saman's play is the continuation of the myth of golden age which has been central to Kurdish cultural nationalism. In the myth of the heroic age, according to Smith (1999) old heroes show the qualities of courage, wisdom and self-sacrifice which are felt to be lacking in the present generation. The liberty enjoyed in the golden age, which is now lost through oppression and neglect, entails the claim to autonomy in the contemporary era. Thus, struggle for the Kurdish autonomy in the twentieth century is reinforced by the desire to recover the liberties and rights enjoyed in the mythical past. The myth of a heroic age provides the playwright with models of virtuous conduct in a community's past which he then uses to inspire faith and courage in the face of oppression and to call out the nation to collective action (Smith, 1999, pp.67–70).

The golden age of Dimdim is, like all other national myths, followed by the age of decline when the community loses its grandeur and liberty mainly because

⁷² Celîl's version also resembles Saman's in its social concerns and implied criticism of class-based hierarchies, evident in the fact that Gulbihar, the Khan's wife, is the daughter of a simple shepherd (See Allison, 2010).

individualism and self-interest win over collective ideals and communal solidarity (Smith, 1999). With no friends from outside and betrayed by self-serving gentry on the inside, Dimdim cannot withstand the pressures of the ruling state and the resistance ends with the fall of Dimdim and the massacre of its inhabitants, the pictures related to the fall of the Mahabad Republic representing only one example of such a tragedy in Kurdish history. But, by making references to the ideals of human rights and democracy and by showing slides related to the Palestinian resistance movement and African-American civil rights movement, Saman makes the socialist message of the play clear that *Dimdim* is not the story of the Kurds alone. It is the story of all oppressed groups.

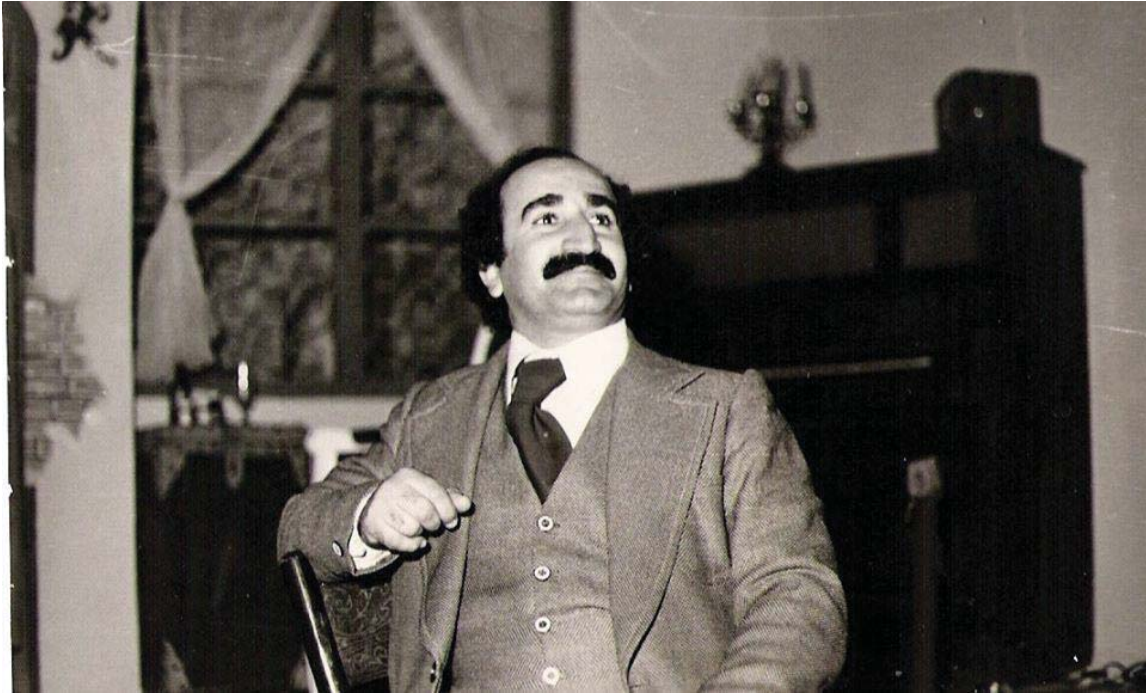
6.4 Conclusion

Nations are legitimated through nationalist discourse which emphasises their homogeneity and distinctiveness. Saman's plays, written in the vernacular language and portraying heroic national characters from the past and images from national folklore, not only asserted the uniqueness of Kurdish culture but also helped disseminate resistance within the disillusioned Kurdish community that had just lost its freedom. Mem and the Goldenhand khan, the nationalist heroes striving to free their nation from oppression, were brought to life when Kurdistan lost its short-lived autonomy and fell under the dictatorship of the Iraqi Baath government. In Saman's productions, Kurdish theatre acted as a site for staging national history, folklore, and myths and for formulating nationalist ideology, and thus played an important role in the construction of Kurdish nationalist identity.

However, Saman's plays should not be read as mere duplications of old national folktales and myths. Hutchinson says that the great artists are those who create out of the collective experience of the people as preserved in its historical legends and who reshape their lessons for the present (Hutchinson, 1994b, p.45). Saman's *Mem û Zîn* and *Qelay Dimdim* are products of their time and as such can show us the prevailing concerns and trends among the playwrights and directors. In fact Saman's emphasis on anti-feudal and socialist themes and their successful reception should

be assessed in relation to major political and social circumstances of the time which led to the creation of one of the two main Kurdish political parties, namely the socialist Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Thanks to the PUK, the Kurdish political struggle was revived following the defeat of the KDP-led uprising and the fall of the Autonomous Kurdistan Region in the mid-1970s. The anti-feudalist, anti-tribalist, anti-bourgeois-rightist, and anti-imperialist characteristics of the PUK were also the defining characteristics of Kurdish intellectual circles at the time who blamed the tribal mindset for the historical lack of unity among the Kurds and the failure of their national uprisings. A review of Kurdish theatre history confirms the leftist environment of the 1970s and helps us understand the Kurdish society through its theatre productions.

Chapter Seven
Ehmed Salar's Theatre: the Mythical 'Golden Age'



Ehmed Salar

Iraqi Kurdistan in the 1980s was characterized by resistance, demonstrations, anger, sadness, and often a feeling of powerlessness. The people suffered, on a daily basis, from experiences of war, the policy of expulsion, destruction of homes, arrests of members of the resistance, execution of juveniles and new and strong waves of violence by Iraqi intelligence. By the end of the 1980s, Iraq's Kurdish policy became characterised by a systematic attack upon the Kurdish population, which was increasingly genocidal in nature (Stansfield and Resool, 2006, pp.117–118). Surprisingly, the late 1980s, in Kurdish theatre history, is also known as the high point of the golden age of Kurdish theatre (see Kerîm, 2009). The theatre of this period is also most associated with the name of one dramatist and director: Ehmed Salar. Salar was the most prolific dramatist of his age and a pioneering director who embarked on creating an authentic Kurdish theatre based on Kurdish folklore, history, culture and literature. His theatre was not only aesthetically innovative but also politically motivated in response to the increase in state brutality and the onset of the Kurdish genocide by the Baath regime in the late 1980s. By examining Salar's

construction of a distinctively Kurdish nationalist theatre in *Nalî w Xewnêkî Erxewanî* ("Nali and a Violet Dream, 1987") and *Katê Helo Berz Defrê* ("When the Eagle Flies High, 1988"), this chapter argues that Salar's theatre not only acted as a site for staging national history, folklore and culture, and thus strengthening a sense of Kurdish national identity, but also served as a cultural medium which implicitly called for revolution by romanticising the "Golden Age" of Kurdish self-rule, epitomised by the reign of Baban rulers in Sulaymaniyah, and glorifying the Kurdish national heroes and their struggles against foreign invaders, thus calling for the restoration of the Kurdish golden age.

7.1 Ehmed Salar

Born in 1947, the prominent Kurdish playwright, director and actor, Ehmed Salar, graduated from the college of fine arts in Baghdad University in 1971, at a time when great Iraqi theatre directors Ibrahim Jalal and Sami Abdulhamid were teaching there. During his undergraduate studies, Salar proved himself to be a gifted actor and won the respect of his teachers including, Jalal, Bahnam Mikhail, Jafar al-Sa'di and As'ad Abdulrazaq (Salar, 2013, p.111). He acted in several productions of Shakespeare's tragedies which later influenced the poetic language of his plays. He was especially influenced by Brecht's narrative style which had become popular among the Arab theatre artists such as Ibrahim Jalal and Yusuf al-Ani.

Upon graduation, Salar returned to Sulaymaniyah where he taught at the college of fine arts in Sulaymaniyah University. In 1973 he founded the Progressive Kurdish Theatre Group and wrote and directed a few plays in Kurdish including, *Pirdî Wulat* (The Bridge of the Country), *Werzî Nwê* (The New Season), *Waney Reşbelek* (The Dance Lesson), and *Dildaranî Baran* (The Rain's Lovers). He also directed several non-Kurdish plays by different writers such as Gogol, Chekhov, Molière, Yaşar Kemal, Shakespeare and Brecht; and also those written by Kurdish writers such as Fuad Mecîd Misrî, Hisên Arif and Mehmedîn Zengene. In 1984 he established and led the Salar Theatre Group. In the late 1980s he started to write and direct his plays in the school of Abdelkarim Berrchid's *masrah al-ihitfali* (Festive or Ceremonial

Theatre) or, in Kurdish, *şanoy ahengsazî*. Berrchid, generally recognised as the most prominent contemporary theatre theorist in Morocco and the Maghreb (Amīn and Carlson, 2011, p.166), has devoted himself to finding an appropriate theatrical form that would reflect Moroccan/Arab cultural identity rather than the western model (ibid.). His Ceremonial theory is characterised, among all, by a rejection of the fourth wall, the dynamism of the dramatic text, and the freedom of the actor (ibid., pp.166-167). Ceremonality appears through creations that anchor themselves in and draw their material from popular memory, myths, literature, and Sufist texts such as al-Hallaj (Berrechid, 2008, p.78). In addition to borrowing characters from folk narratives, the ceremonial theater, inspired by the Arab tradition of *halqa*⁷³ and *hakawati*, puts the characters into a theatrical setting and imbues them with attitudes that are also relevant to Arab culture and history (ibid.).

Salar's first attempt at Berrchid's festive methodology in theatre was *Nalî w Xewnêkî Erxewanî* (Nali and a Violet dream, 1987) which became a tremendous success in Sulaymaniyah as well as in Baghdad where it was staged in Arabic. In Baghdad University College of Fine Arts, it received standing ovations from drama professors and several theatre critics wrote positive reviews about it. Although Salar had written four plays prior to *Nalî w Xewnêkî Erxewanî*, it was this experimental play that got him national recognition.

Salar's next play, *Katê Helo Berz Defrê* (When the Eagle Flies High, 1988), repeated the success of *Nalî*, maybe even in a greater extent. It not only sold out for 10-15 days but even the corridors of the theatre were sold to an eager crowd who, according to Salar, "knew what they came for and understood the meaning of the play" (ibid.). Sometimes, they would shout pro-Kurdish and anti-government slogans which would lead to police intervention and the arrest of Salar himself as in the case of *Katê Helo Berz Defrê*. The arrest of the actors could have fatal consequences as many of Salar's theatre group were young army deserters who were hiding from

⁷³ A circular assembly of people surrounding a performer in a public setting usually in a marketplace or city gate

government authorities. Salar recounted a story that reveals the brutality of the regime and his good fortune to survive those years,

It was Newroz and my group was staging a play at the Labourers' Syndicate Hall. The communist party members had written a big slogan on top of Saddam's picture which hang over the wall. The Baath forces saw it and came to arrest me. Right there and then, Ra'ib Taha, the Baathist commander ordered his soldiers to shoot me. My wife and child started to cry. The man pitied (us) and told his soldiers to lower their guns. I asked permission to talk and explained that I had nothing to do with the place and was only there with my theatre group for a short time (ibid.).

Summary executions were commonplace during Saddam's rule especially during the Iraq-Iran war when any perceived threat to national unity was considered treason and was punished accordingly. The Baathisation of state institutions continued as Baathist teachers were sent to Sulaymaniyah University and students were pressured to join the Baath party. Many students refused to join the army in the Iraq-Iran war. Salar claimed that from eighteen students he would end the term with only four, "they either escaped, were arrested, or killed."

For the Kurds, the end of the Iraq-Iran war was the start of a genocidal campaign against them in rural areas. The history of Kurdish theatre shows that the city of Sulaymaniyah did not remain silent in the face of those massacres. From time to time, theatre revived the sense of rebellion in people by reminding them of their national heritage and a golden age of self-rule that they had had and was now lost. Salar's plays written in the late 1980s are evidence of theatre artists' dedication to their nation despite dangers to their lives. "I have written thirty-two plays", said Salar, "and they all deal with the Kurdish question." It is not surprising that four days before the 1991 uprising in Sulaymaniyah, the ministry of intelligence issued the arrest of several Kurdish writers and artists including Ehmed Salar for their 'subversive activities' (cited in Salih, 2006; see appendix 4).

Ehmed Salar is considered to be among the experimentalist theatre artists of the 1980s. What distinguishes Salar from others, however, is his introduction of a distinctly Kurdish theatre based exclusively on Kurdish history, myths, legends,

folklore and music. For its use of Kurdish history, folklore, culture and performance traditions and its patriotic theme, *Nalî w Xewnêkî Erxewanî*, Salar's first play, has been hailed by many as a breakthrough moment in Kurdish theatre and the cornerstone of an original Kurdish theatre (see Simo, 2007, p.126; Kerîm, 2009, p.259). *Nalî* was first staged in March 1987 in Sulaymaniyah and soon after in Bagdad academy of fine arts where it was enthusiastically received by the audience (Zangana, 2002, p.119) and even moved the great Iraqi director, Salah al-Qasab, to tears (ibid., p.120). On the inspiration behind writing this play, Salar said,

I was a drama teacher at the Fine Arts College in Sulaymaniyah. I was going to college one day when I saw a large number of lorries full of men and women, young and old...all pale and worn-down. I was told they were *Anfal*, people from the villages of Qeredaq taken south to be killed. I had no power. Only my pen and theatre. The same night Iranians were bombing Sulaymaniyah as well. In the midst of bombs and explosions, I vented out my anger in this play (Salar, 2013, personal communication, 5 May).

Nalî w Xewnêkî Erxewanî has been described as a completely Kurdish play and the greatest contribution to the Kurdish theatre movement. Kemal Qembar considers this play to be the first truly Kurdish play in all its features (cited in Kerîm, 2009, p.254). The narrative style, allusion to local historical figures, and the use of folk music and dance, clearly show the impact of Salar's years of education in Baghdad University and the Arab theatre in general on his artistic work. Storytelling emerged as the dominant theatrical form for articulating national identity and political aspirations not only in Iraq and the Arab world in general. The Arab dramatists of the 1960s who had started to search for an indigenous Arab theatre were inspired by Brecht to revive the performance tradition of hakawati (story-teller) and draw on local myths, legends, folklore and history for their plots.⁷⁴

Brecht had also developed the use of a chorus that interrupted and commented upon the play thus serving to reinforce the drama's central message. This also became a common feature among several Arabic plays. Soon it became common to "destroy

⁷⁴ Badawi, p. 160

dramatic illusion by making use of a narrator who addressed the audience directly or other characters that stepped out of their roles to draw the attention of the audience to some point or another.”⁷⁵The same techniques are used in *Nalî w Xewnêkî Erxewanî* where the characters of narrator, teacher, Pîremêrd and the chorus introduce the character of Nalî or relate and comment on the dramatic action. As a result of the impact of Berrchid’s Ceremonial Theatre, music played an important role in Salar’s stage productions in which musicians, and sometimes actors, played instruments such as *nay*, *santur*, and *def*.⁷⁶ As a popular and effective means of cultural propaganda, folk songs, such as the one starting the play, *Nalî w Xewnêkî Erxewanî*, were used to pass on contemporary political messages. In this way, tradition could be called upon to both reassert cultural pride and provide the playwright with protection from state censorship. Therefore, in Salar’s theatre, written and oral literature both served as important sources for re-awakening his artistic creativity and also arousing political awareness.

7.2 *Nalî w Xewnêkî Erxewanî* (Nalî and a Violet Dream, 1987)

Before the audience enter the theatre, the stage is set with several *defs* placed round it. A tray with lit candles in it is set in the middle of the stage and the whole theatre is filled with the scent of incense. An actor holds a sprinkler which he uses to sprinkle rosewater on the spectators who enter the theatre hall. A *santur*-player plays while the actors gradually enter the stage. The lighting dims and when the stage is lit again the actors have each picked up a *def* and walk around the stage singing a famous song by Derwêş Ebdula, a *def*-playing dervish in Sulaymaniyah (Simo, 2007, p.125). This song which refers to the myth of Ferhad and his tragic love story serves as an introduction to the story of Nalî,⁷⁷

Ferhad way lê neqewmawe
Even Ferhad has not been afflicted by this pain
Wek min rencî nekêşawe

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ The singers were Burhan Mihemed and Zahir Celal.

⁷⁷ According to this famous Iranian romance, a sculptor named Farhad, falls in love with an Armenian princess named Shirin who is also coveted by Khosrow, king of Iran. Khosrow sends farhad to Bistun mountain with the impossible task of carving the cliff rocks.

He has not suffered like me
Rencero xom yar torawe
Oh the misery, the beloved is gone
Ba bimrim canane
Let me die valiantly
Sînet baxçe w baxî îrem
Your chest is the heavenly gardens
Seyrangay rom û ecem
Where the Ottomans and Persians trod
Lêt tê nabim maçit nekem
I cannot have enough of you
Ba bimrim canane...
Let me die valiantly...(Salar, 1999b, p.15)

It is in this distinctly Kurdish setting that the story of *Nalî w Xewnêkî Erxewanî* takes place, an account of the life of Nalî (1797-1870), the poet in the court of Ehmed Paşa Baban, the last independent Kurdish ruler of Sulaymaniyah. In particular, his exile in the aftermath of the fall of Babans in the 1840s, and his longing for Hebîbe of Xeredax (Karadag), the object of his affection in several of his poems, serve the playwright's purpose of drawing parallels between Kurdistan's past and present.

Many Kurds have mythologised the period from the sixteenth to mid-eighteenth centuries as a 'golden age' of freedom and political independence. The existence of semi-autonomous Kurdish emirates during this period of relative stability and the rise of Kurdish high culture has led many to see this period as the Golden Age of Kurdish history. According to O'Shea, the importance of dwelling on a mythical 'Golden Age' of the autonomous Kurdish emirates rests on the assumption that in the past Kurds were united and no political divisions existed within Kurdistan (O'Shea, 2004, p.133). *Nalî w Xewnêkî Erxewanî* can be read along the same lines as the rule of Baban princes is represented in the play as the golden of age of Kurdish self-rule which is lost and needs to be restored by those, like Nalî, who are in love with their homeland. The story of Nalî's life is told through several characters in the play including a narrator, a teacher and the Kurdish poet, Pîremêrd, while Nalî himself enters the stage at different intervals to recite lines from his poetry.

It is important that Salar chose Nalî as the hero of his first attempt at an authentic Kurdish drama as he is of particular significance to Sorani dialect and its rise as a literary language. With Baban rulers as his patrons, he initiated a school, named after himself, which utilised the Sulaymaniyah region's dialect and thus elevated it to a literary status, making it the Iraqi Kurds' literary and intellectual language for generations to come. The poets of Nalî School lived through the social and political change and instability that accompanied the fall of the emirates. Thus one of the themes that can be observed in the works of these poets is a sense of loss and affection for the golden days when the Babans of Sulaymaniyah ruled independently from both the Ottomans and the Persians. This includes the writings of Nalî himself whose later poetry became increasingly pessimistic and melancholic. The bitterness and regret of old age is coupled with the pain of exile and foregone love. In an ode written to a his friend and fellow poet Salim (1805-1869), which is recited in the play, Nalî asks about the conditions of life in Sulaymaniyah and whether he should return;

*Qurbanî tozî rêgetim ey badî xoş mirûr
 Ey peykî şareza be hemû şarî şarezûr...
 Aya meqamî ruxsete lem beyne bêmewe
 Ya meslehet tewequfe ta yewmî nefxî sûr?...(ibid., p.26)*

Salim responds to him in verse, telling him about the fall of the Babans and the brutality of the Ottomans, dissuading him from return home. The sense of loss and nostalgia can be found in the work of Şêx Reza Talebanî (1842-1910), another follower of Nalî School whose idealised image of the Baban emirate, as quoted in Salar's play, has been sung wistfully by contemporary singers.⁷⁸ The narrator of the play also recites from another Sorani poet, Kurdî, who lamented the fall of the Baban emirate in the following lines,

*Sa'eqe w berqî nihûset zulmetî da şerq û qerb
 The ominous thunder has struck east and west with darkness
 Berde Barane be mexsûsî le ser mulkî Beban
 Stone falls from the sky, especially on the lands of Baban
 Çawî 'îbret helbire ey dil le wesfî dehrî dîn
 Look and learn my heart, how the cruel world works*

⁷⁸ Among the singers who have sung this poem are Ednan Kerîm and Qadir Elyasî.

Seyr ke sa felek çî kird be zumrey kurd ziman
Look what fate did to the Kurdish-speaking people (ibid., p.34)

It is perhaps possible to regard the poets of the Nalî School as “proto-nationalists” for their affection for their homelands and idealisation of the time when the Babans were the rulers of Sulaymaniyah. For Nalî, Salim, and Şêx Reza the present only offered disappointment and pain of subjugation, while the past was a time of splendour and glory. This resonated well with the late 1980s Iraqi-Kurdish theatre audience who had finally achieved autonomy between 1970 and 1975 and then witnessed the defeat and exile of the leader of their long-lasting national movement.

From the beginning of the play, it is clear the story of Nalî’s love for the beloved and his exile represents a bigger picture. This is done through the character of “teacher” who tells his students, “today’s lesson is about the poet Nalî and his beloved...the poet’s love for his beloved and his homeland are both part of a bigger pain,” the teacher says (ibid., p.16). This bigger pain which is the invasion and subjugation of the motherland is symbolised by the broken body of Hebîbe. The narrator recounts that it is 1847 and Sulaymaniyah has fallen to the Ottomans. Nalî who is leaving the town enters the stage reading the following lines from his poem,

Refîqan min ewa royim le latan
Friends, I am leaving you
Le mezlûman bila çol bê wulatan...
Let the land be empty of the oppressed (ibid., p.20)

The hero’s exile in Salar’s play leaves the heroine helpless and vulnerable. The narrator recounts how after Nalî’s departure, his beloved, Hebîbe, is attacked by a black-clad group of thugs. The chorus informs the audience that “the greedy enemies who had coveted Nalî’s fiancée, cut off her breasts, chopped off her hair, blinded her eyes, and beheaded her” (ibid., p.22). She turns into dust and flies up to the sky becoming the goddess of love, worshipped by all who seek light (ibid.). The graphic description of the violence imposed on Hebîbe’s body, although not depicted onstage, reminds one of Diana Taylor’s criticism of the play, *Paso de dos*, and the fact that the construction of national identity is predicated on female destruction

(Taylor, 1997, p.9). "In the struggle for national identity," Taylor points out, male intellectuals "need the woman's naked and abused body to express [their] objections and redeem [their] audiences" (ibid., p.10). In Salar's play, the ravaged female body is a politically-inscribed entity representing the familiar woman-as-the-nation trope. The image of Hebîbe is deployed as a metaphor for the nation violated by the invaders.

The woman/mother-as-nation metaphor can be located in another female figure in the play, which though absent, her body as a pregnant woman is used to call men to action. Voices are heard which call for help for the pregnant woman: "Be valiant boys, act manly...Night won't pass...Day won't come...Make the birth possible and make the day" (ibid., p.32). The sound of thunder and blizzard is heard and voices that bemoan the dark night that shows no sign of end: "oh that poor woman, when is the baby going to be born? Is that poor mother going to survive?...the pain has lasted too long...she is short of breath...her heartbeat is weakening" (ibid.)

The trope of homeland as a sick pregnant mother is used in the language of "warning and awakening," to use a term by Najmabadi (Najmabadi, 1997, p.461). The neglected weak motherland is in need of cure and care and needs her sons' medical and emotional attention. "The recitation of the suffering of the mother's fevered and tormented body," Najmabadi says, is "employed to incite fear and panic over the loss of the mother, thus arousing her children out of their slumber" (ibid.). In *Nalî w Xewnêkî Erxewanî* the threat of mother's death is invoked as a reason for political action. Salar alludes to legendary heroic figures in Kurdish tradition to boost the morale by asserting, towards the end of the play, that if Nalî returns to retrieve his beloved/homeland, every mother will have a brave son, a *Kawey Asinger* (Salar, 1999b, p.36), to protect her, like the twelve legendary riders of Mariwan who fought and defeated the Persian army (ibid.).

After the assault on Hebîbe, the rest of the play deals with Nalî's grief over Hebîbe/homeland in exile. The characters of narrator, teacher and Pîremêrd appear at different times to answer the students' question about Nalî's life. They all explain

Nalî's love for and loyalty to his beloved and his homeland despite his exile. "Like the mythical lover who survived the cold by staring at a distant fire", says Pîremêrd, "Nalî survived with the thoughts of love for his love and homeland" (ibid., p.34). Throughout, Nalî himself enters the stage to recite a few lines of his poems. On his love for Hebîbe he recites,

Şew hat û emin mestî xeyalatî kesêkim
Night has come and I am drunk with the thoughts of someone
Meşqûlî nefes-girtinî muşkîn nefesêkim...
I breathe in the fragrant air of her presence
Bawer meke roh sextî qemî fîrquetî to bûm
Do not think that I have become accustomed to the pain of your absence
Bo hatinî to baqîye nîwe nefesêkim
My last breaths are taken in the hope of your visit (ibid., p.24)

In the last moments of his life, Nalî sees Hebîbe in front of him and says the following lines which are also sung by the chorus after which the narrator returns to emphasise that Nalî died in exile but he was at home in spirit (ibid.):

Ey taze ciwan, pîrim û uftadew kewtûm
Oh young love, I am old and broken-down
Ta mawe heyatim
While I am still alive,
Destê bidere destî şikestem ke be ser çûm
Give your hand to my broken hand, I do not have long
Qurbanî wefatim
My faithful love (ibid., p.31)

However, in a dream episode, the narrator recounts a different story: that of Nalî's return and his uprising, "Nalî rebelled; he picked up his sword and polished it. He charged his horse and it went so fast that sparks flew from its hooves scaring away the fiends and ogres. It looked like it had already conquered several Erarats,⁷⁹ Helgurds⁸⁰ and Qezubs⁸¹ and would soon turn the world upside down" (ibid., 35). He finally reaches Pîremegrûn Mountain in Sulaymaniyah. There is an uproar and two hundred winters of foreign rule are undone by one spring. This victory is of course,

⁷⁹ A mountain located in the Eastern Anatolia Region of Turkey

⁸⁰ The highest mountain in Iraq at 3607m, Helgurd is located 81 km northeast of the city of Erbil.

⁸¹ A mountain located near Pîr-emran in Iranian Kurdistan

not limited to Sulaymaniyah, or Iraqi Kurdistan, as references to mountains in Kurdish regions of Turkey and Iran make it clear that what is desired by the playwright is the liberation and independence of Greater Kurdistan.

While Nalî's nostalgic longings for Sulaymaniyah under the Baban rule are invoked in order to call for a revolution, the restoration of the golden age of Kurdish self-rule is symbolised by the blossoming of the tree belonging to Ewrehman Paşa, the Baban ruler (ibid., p.36). In the play, the Baban rule is glorified as the mythical golden age when the Kurds lived freely. In one scene, the bygone glory of the Kurdish emirate is celebrated onstage through a traditional Kurdish dance. Furthermore, both the narrator and the chorus recount a time when Sulaymaniyah was free from the rule of Istanbul and Tehran (ibid., p.17). When the approach of the Ottoman army is announced, a chorus sings these well-known lines from Şêx Reza Talebanî's poem,

Le bîrim de Sulêymanî, ke darulmulkî Baban bû
I remember Sulaymaniyah when it was the capital of the Babans
Ne mehkûmî ecem, ne suxrekêşî alî usman bû
It was neither subject to the Persians nor slave-driven by the Ottomans (ibid.)

In the play, the occupied motherland, Sulaymaniyah, and the Kurds in need of rescue are embodied by the image of Hebîbe and the woman in labour pain. In the final scene of the play, the chorus reminds the students/spectators not to forget the woman in labour pain and tell her that the day will come when her baby is finally born (ibid., p.36). At the sound of the school bell, the teacher announces the end of the lesson with the hope that Hebîbe will not be forgotten. The actors pick up the *defs* and leave the stage singing the song they had sung at the beginning of the play.

The image of motherland abused by strangers has a unique precedent in the history of Kurdish theatre. It dates back to 1945 when one of the most prominent examples of drama as a means of nation-building had taken place in the Kurdish town of Mahabad in Iran. This play was called *Daykî Nîştîman* (Motherland) and was staged

before the creation of the short-lived Republic of Kurdistan in Mahabad.⁸²The play which depicted motherland in chains, abused by ruffians, but ultimately set free by her children, was so successful that it went on the road after several months of staging in full houses in Mahabad (Eagleton, 1963, p.40).

The staging of *Daykî Nîştîman* was a direct result of the conviction of Kurdish political leaders (namely the Society for the Revival of Kurdistan or *Komeley Jiyanewey Kurdistan*) that theatre could play a crucial role in mobilising the masses and bringing them closer to the party's ideology. The play was first introduced to the actors by the *Komele*, the dominant Kurdish political party, at their headquarters where a group of young members of the party were asked to stage the play in Mahabad to promote the patriotic ideas of the party. Despite the actors' lack of familiarity with theatre, people's general disdain for light entertainment, and fear of state authorities which had resulted in secret rehearsals, *Motherland* was staged in the summer of 1945. The play which was over three hours long drew heavily on the poems of the late 19th century poet Hacî Qadirî Koyî, a forerunner of Kurdish nationalism. At the first staging of *Motherland*, over 200 people including Qazî Mihemed (1893-1947), the future president of the Republic were present.

The play showed the representatives of Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Afghanistan signing the Sa'dabad treaty⁸³ and consequently, the Motherland in chains reciting a poem which called the nation to unite and rescue her from humiliation and oppression. Motherland's cry for help and rescue from a thousand years of servitude, in the form of a heart-wrenching song, brought tears to the eyes of a Kurdish audience who for the first time were able to appreciate serious theatre and its message and mission. The play ended with the creation of the Republic, the raising of the Kurdish flag and the introduction of the president who gave a speech about Kurdistan's long history of enslavement and the necessity of struggle for liberation. Each act ended with a chorus singing patriotic songs to the accompaniment of

⁸² The Republic of Kurdistan was proclaimed on 22 January 1946 in Mahabad in northwestern Iran with the support of the Soviet Union. The Republic collapsed after negotiations between Iran and the Soviet Union which resulted in the Iranian military attack of Mahabad and the execution of the leader of the Kurdish Republic, Qazî Mihemed, on 31 March 1947.

⁸³ A non-aggression agreement signed between Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Afghanistan on 8 July 1937

drums, trumpet and clarinet. The theatrical speech of the president of Kurdistan was followed by the speech of the real future president of Kurdistan, Qazî Mihemed, who stepped onto the stage with great excitement to speak about the history of Kurdish freedom-fighting, the colonisation of Kurdistan and its division and suppression by different nation-states, as was earlier described by the staged president. *Motherland* was an immediate and resounding success from its first performance not only in Mahabad but also in other Kurdish towns. In fact, the play was so successful in attracting people to *Komele's* policies that the party had to open new branches to respond to a fast growing membership.⁸⁴

Unlike *Daykî Niştîman*, Salar's play does not end with the actual liberation of motherland but with a dream of it. She is still in pain and awaiting rescue. Salar leaves her fate to be decided by the students/spectators. This shows Brechtian influence in that the spectators are turned into observers and made to think about the actions presented on stage. In Brecht's plays, characters ask the audience to reflect on how the play could end differently, exemplifying Brecht's belief that the world is changeable and events are not inevitable. This open-endedness is also a characteristic of Berrchid's works which all end without conclusion so that they continue to be written in the minds of the spectators (cited in Ghazoul, 1998, pp.17-18). In Brecht's *Good Person of Sechzuan*, Shen Te asks the audience,

How can a better ending be arranged?
Can one change people? Can the world be changed?...
It is for you to find a way, my friends,
To help good men arrive at happy ends (cited in Innes and Shevtsova, 2013, p.129).

Similarly, in *The Exception and the Rule* the final chorus sings,

You have seen what is common, what continually occurs.
But we ask you:
Even if it is usual, find it hard to explain.
What here is common should astonish you.
What here's the rule, recognize as an abuse,

⁸⁴ On Iranain government's reaction to this play see appendix 5.

And where you have recognized an abuse, provide a remedy (ibid.).

Nalî w Xewnêkî Erxewanî encompasses three ethnic myths central to all cultural nationalisms: it goes from the glorification of a Kurdish golden age to lamentations about its loss and ends with the myth of regeneration. The myth of regeneration, according to Smith (1999, p.67-68) is a prescriptive account of how to restore the golden age and renew the Community as 'in the Days of Old'. It is a rationale of collective mobilization which informs the central concept of nationalism. As Smith puts it, "regeneration, with its metaphors of 'rebirth' and 'reawakening'," continues the nationalist drama "by placing the act of liberation in an ideal world of heroic imagery and naturalistic metaphor" (ibid., p.68). In *Nalî w Xewnêkî Erxewanî*, the myth of regeneration is presented in the form of the re-birth and heroism of a Kurdish literary icon who experienced the rise and fall of the Baban principality. This historical event, as in all cultural nationalisms, is endowed with a deeper symbolic significance and Nalî re-enacts the drama of liberation by restoring this symbolic golden age.

Although Salar's *Nalî w Xewnêkî Erxewanî* does not end with the liberation of the mother/land, Salar evoked the possibility of a free Kurdistan in a dream episode in which victory in Derbendî Baziyan⁸⁵ and "the defeat of Mongols, Tatars, Ottomans and Persians" were realised (Salar, 1999b, p.36). *Nalî w Xewnêkî Erxewanî* was written at a time when the oppression of the Kurds in Iraq was at its height. In the face of the massive campaign of Arabisation, Baathisation, cultural suppression, comprehensive mass deportation, arrests and large-scale executions, however, *Nalî w Xewnêkî Erxewanî* bore good tidings of the return of self-rule and end of oppression, even if in a dream and thus kindled the patriotic spirit of his audience who were, throughout the performance, reminded of their national cultural identity.

On the impact of the performance on the audience, Kemal Hencîre recounts a scene when Nalî stood among the audience and started screaming and crying and for a few minutes the whole theatre fell into complete silence. "It was as if Nalî still lived among us, as if he lived in us, guiding us like a prophet," says Hencîre who described

⁸⁵ A place near Sulaymaniyah where the fight between the British and Şêx Mehmûd took place in June 1919.

the play as “a ritual on the destruction of villages” and “a ritual for the revolution” (Zangana, 2002, p.99). Reûf also recalls how, in the small auditorium of Sulaymaniyah Fine Arts Institute, the audience was so engrossed in the play as if they were the students attending Salar’s class (Reûf , 1995, p.146). In fact, the audience spontaneously participated in the performance as a chorus, singing along the folkloric songs which were performed on the stage (ibid., p.147). “*Nalî w Xewnêkî Erxewanî* took us to a tour of Kurdish culture, to a spectacular land, full of colour and magic... [The play] in a ritualistic manner, with the sound of def and santur, and scent of incense and wistful longings of the characters, immortalised the story of Nalî’s exile and his love for Hebîbe” (ibid., pp.147-148). *Nalî w Xewnêkî Erxewanî* not only upheld the national heritage of an oppressed and denigrated people at a historical moment of national crisis but also proved the role that theatre could play in imagining a better future at one of the darkest times of its national history (Simo, 2007, p.126).

As Holdsworth notes, for stateless nations, countries seeking political autonomy or those in the aftermath of colonial or quasi-colonial rule, theatre plays a vital role in asserting a remembered or emergent cultural identity as a form of empowerment and confidence building (Holdsworth, 2014, p.6). Likewise, in the case of the Kurds who lacked national institutions to safeguard and promote their vernacular language and the cultural heritage, Salar’s indigenous theatre was an important means for cultural expression, boosting morale, and also political mobilisation. Salar’s aim to incorporate local elements in his play was to create a distinctly Kurdish theatre that would uphold and promote the national identity against the assaults made against it under subjugation thus demonstrating the important role of theatre to reaffirm Kurdish identity in the face of subordination and the denial of their historical presence and Arabisation of their lands.

7.3 *Katê Helo Berz Defrê (When the Eagle Flies High, 1988)*

Written and directed by Ehmed Salar, this play was first staged in the Baghdad Festival for Arab Theatre in February 1988. Due to the large number of spectators, it went on stage twice a day for three days. It was well received by the Arab artists

as well. In the March of the same year in Sulaymaniyah, it was staged in the annual festival of the Sulaymaniyah Academy of Fine Arts and in April it ran for several days in Sulaymaniyah Workers' Guild Hall (Niqabey Kirêkaranî Silêmanî) (Daniş, 2009b).

Katê Helo Berz Defrê, like the previous play by Salar, has a nationalistic subject. Also, once again the love of a woman is associated with the love of the homeland in order to construct a national identity based on male bonding among the men and boys of the nation. The play deals with a certain Kurdish family, famous in Kurdish history for their bravery and military prowess: the Hemewend, from which Ehmed Salar himself descends (Simo, 2007, p.190).

The Hemewend family, described by Jwaideh as the most noted fighting tribe in southern Kurdistan (Jwaideh, 2006, p.161), are famous among the Kurds for being brave and skilled warriors. They supported the Baban Emirs of Sulaymaniyah until their rule came to an end around 1850. After the fall of the Kurdish emirate, the Hemewend refused to submit to the Ottomans. They refused to pay taxes to Turks or to serve in their army and demanded local self-rule. They considered those who submitted to foreign rule traitors and their properties halal. As such they started a life of brigandage, raiding caravans and merchants, at times closing the road from Kirkuk to Baghdad and Sulaymaniyah and bringing the trade and transportation to a standstill. For decades, they created trouble for both the Ottomans and the Iranian governments with their systematic brigandage over the whole area between Baghdad, Kermanshah and Mosul. Before the Ottomans lost control over Iraq, they made attempts to put an end to the Hemewend lawlessness by banishing them to places as far as North Africa. According to Lyon,

[The Hemewend] in the past had ranged from Mosul in the north to the gates of Baghdad and eventually so disrupted trade with Persia that the Turks dispatched an expedition to round them up, men, women and children and herd them into exile at Tripoli in Libya some 2,500 miles off. But even there they could not be contained for long, and soon they had stolen enough arms and transport animals to enable them to escape...they rode back to their homes and renewed their forays until the Turkish authorities were obliged to pardon them (Lyon and Fieldhouse, 2002, p.101).

European officers have, in general, made unflattering remarks about the Hemewend. This is understandable considering the role they played in the Kurdish uprisings and the murder of foreign officers in the region. Colonel Lyon describes the Hemewend as a lawless tribe of notorious rievors [robbers] (ibid.) and Armand Pierre Comte de Cholet, the French officer, describes them as cruel and merciless ruffians (cited in Henning, 2012, p.1).

Kurdish historians, on the other hand, have admired the Hemewend for their valour in the face of Ottoman and Qajar forces, likening the tales of Hemewend bravery and heroism to legends (Emîn, 2008, p.30). A book recently published on the history of the Hemewend claims, “the Hemewend loved and protected their homeland” (ibid., p.16). This is premised on the fact that they served the Kurdish administrators of the region and fought with them against their enemies. As referred to in the play (Salar, 1999a, p.60), the Hemewend always supported the Baban rulers and fought their enemies throughout their rule: in 1787, they supported the mir of Qela Çolan against the Ottoman government; in 1819 they supported Ebdurrehman pasha against Necîb pasha of Baghdad; and in 1834 and 1836 they, respectively, supported Ehmed pasha and Ezîz beg against the Ottomans (Emîn, 2008, pp.16–17). Later in the early twentieth century they became staunch supporters of Şêx Mehmûd Berzencî and his rebellion against Iraq and Britain. To understand the extent of Şêx Mehmûd’s and Hemewend’s popularity among the Kurdish folk, it is enough to say that tales of their bravery are immortalised in traditional Kurdish *lawiks* or mournful singing such as the following:

Babî babim Şêx Mehmûd be melîk danraye
My dear Şêx Mehmûd has become king
Bexoy le çiya w çolan eskerî le sehraye...
He is on the mountains while his army is on the plain
Pêncsed feley teyarê sê hakimî legerdaye
He has five-hundred soldiers and three commanders
Kerîmî Fetah begî eskerî telîm daye...
Kerîmî Fetah beg has trained the army...
Kurdan çek bibestî, pişt meden le fezaye...
Hey Kurds, arm yourselves, do not turn your backs (Resul, 2004, p.29)

Inspired by historical events but retaining the spirit of Kurdish folk tradition, *Katê Helo Berz Defrê* similarly romanticises the Hemewend and elevates them to the status of national heroes. The story of the Hemewends' bravery and their support of Kurdish uprisings against the Ottomans and the British is told in the form of a *beyt* by an old *beytbêj* called Lalo. The stage is decorated in the form of a Kurdish nomadic tent with traditional Kurdish items such as *çîq*,⁸⁶ *mafûr*,⁸⁷ *mêxekbeng*⁸⁸ and *milwankey siml*.⁸⁹ The actors enter the stage singing the folkloric love song *Gulale Surey Ser Kulmî Yarim* (The Red Flower on my Lover's Cheeks). The narrator, who hosts the event, welcomes the spectators/guests and informs them that "tonight they celebrate the reunion of two lovers after the war" (Salar, 1999a, p.39). The *beytbêj*, in the tradition of Kurdish celebration, invites the guests to "light candles, illuminate the place, burn incense, sprinkle rosewater, give out drinks, eat sweets" and dress up. Also, in the tradition of Kurdish storytelling, he asks the guests to curse the Satan and send blessings to the prophet Muhammad at which point the actors start playing *def* and perform the Sufi whirling dance (*ibid.*). The narrator tells the audience that everything is ready: the musicians, the singer (*goranî-bêj*), and the storyteller (*beytbêj*) whose fund of stories include *Mem û Zîn*, *Nasir û Malmal*, *Zembîlfiroş*, *Qelay Dimdim*, *Şîrîn û Xusrew*, *Şîrîn û Ferhad*, *Leylê w Mecnûn*, *Xecê w Siyamend*, *Las û Xezal*, *Memê Alan* and many others (*ibid.*, p.40). Today, the narrator says, he narrates the story of Helo in a *beyt* called *Katê Helo Berz Defrê*.

It is 1924, Mehmûd Xidir of Hemewend, known as *helo* (eagle) is injured in a battle against the British, and is on his deathbed in the village of his birth, Qeretamûre. The British officer, delighted with the news of his fierce enemy's imminent death, pays him a visit to witness the legendary leader's demise. Unwilling to be seen weak and distressed, Mehmûd asks his soldiers to straighten him up before the arrival of "that *kafir* (infidel)" (*ibid.*, p.44). When the officer asks about his health, Mehmûd answers, "Don't you see how firm I am before dogs?" (*ibid.*) Here the chorus enters the stage and sings *Berî Beyane Rûnake Aso*, a nationalistic song by Goran:

⁸⁶ The tent's wall made with reeds, goat hair and wool

⁸⁷ A Kurdish carpet

⁸⁸ Decorations made with carnation

⁸⁹ Long strings of hyacinth

Berî Beyane Rûnake Aso, Asoy Hîway Kurd Mujde Bê Le To
 The sun is rising, the Kurds' dream is coming true
Dengî bang helat le mizgewtî dê, Baldar Hêlaney xoy be cê dêlê
 The call to prayer is coming from the town's mosque, the birds leave their
 nests
Helse ey lawî nîştîmanî Kurd, demî helsane herkesêk nûst mird
 Get up, oh you the youth of the Kurdish land, it's time to get up, those who
 sleep die
Qespeqespî kew aşkira elê, katî fermene Kurd nabê binwêt
 The birds are singing it's time for action, Kurds should not sleep
Ho bextî yarî w serbexoyî gel, le gel hawrêta bel bide le bel
 For the freedom of your people, put your hands in your friends' hands (ibid.)

When Mehmûd dies, wailings are heard in the tradition of Kurdish mourning. An actor recites lines from Pîremêrd's play, *Şerîf Hemewend*, which was written to honour another member of Hemewend family, Heme Şerîf Çelebî, who rebelled against the Ottomans in the nineteenth century following the fall of the Babans. This song, and others similar to it, are in fact folkloric songs which became part of the Kurdish oral tradition after Şerîf's heroism and defiance in the face of the Ottoman occupiers of Sulaymaniyah in the nineteenth century:

Nemirdûwe, Helo namrê, Helo ser xew deşkênê
 He is not dead, Helo does not die, Helo is only sleeping a short spell
Qelqanî zerde, mayinî çon dênê
 Holding a golden shield and riding a mare
Hewrî le serî ba deyşekênê
 So fast that his silk turban flies in the air
Şerîf mekujin lawî germênê
 Do not kill Şerîf, the lad from Garmiyân
Çendem pê degutî meço qelatê
 I told you many times not to go to Qelatê
Şînekem hukme şeşxan detgatê
 You will be shot by a şeşxan⁹⁰ (ibid., pp.44-45)

The last three lines of the above quote can also be found in the Kurdish folklore as found in Şukriye Resûl's study. These folksongs, which also exist in the dialects spoken in Erbil, Koya and Raniya (Resûl, 2004, p.21), reflect both the profound grief felt across Kurdistan over the loss of a native hero and also the Kurdish folk's

⁹⁰ A type of gun

resentment towards the tyrannical Turkish governor of Sulaymaniyah. Below are two examples of these folksongs:

Qelqanî zerde, maynî baleban
He holds a golden shield and rides a mare
Dengî teplyan dê le girdî sîvan
The sound of drums is heard from *girdî sîvan*⁹¹
Şerîf mekujin roley qareman
Do not kill Şerîf, the brave lad (ibid., p.20)

And,

Qelqanî zerde, maynî dênê
He holds a golden shield and rides a mare
Hewrî le ser ba deşekênê
His *hewrî*⁹² dances in the wind
Şerîf mekujin lawî germênê
Do not kill Şerîf, the lad from Garmiyan (ibid.)

The resemblance of Pîremêrd's version with the folksongs means that even if Salar's audience were not familiar with the former, the lines, which retained Kurdish historical memory of national struggle, would have still resonated with them. Following the mourning scene, the story goes back to the two lovers from the Hemewend family, Nûrî Mihemedî Şerîf, referred to throughout the play as the Rider (*sware*) and his beloved, Gulê.

The Rider: Dear Gulê, look at the tulips and how black they are inside. Do you know why their hearts have turned to ash?...They say the pain of separation from their loved one has burned their insides.

Gulê: And who is that loved one?

The Rider: The short-lived spring that died young.

Beytbêj: ...since the Romans (Ottomans) turned the spring of the Baban land to the cold winter of death and plunder, the flowers never saw the spring again, they went blind.

The Rider: And the tulip's redness is the blood that's shed (ibid., pp.45-46).

The beytbêj enters the stage and complains about the pain of separation, reminding the audience of Mem and Zîn and their sad fate, wishing that the story of Rider and

⁹¹ The place where the battle took place

⁹² Traditional Kurdish headwear

his lover does not end similarly. Zîn enters the stage reciting lines from Pîremêrd's play *Mem û Zîn*:

Min wam dewê le dûrewe xomî nîşan dem
I want to show myself to him from a distance
Giyanim be dewrya bigerê w hîç nelêm be dem
Let my heart beat fast and not say a word
Bem eşqe pakewe wekû dû kotirî beheşt
With our pure love, like two heavenly birds
Lem xelke dûr kewînewe rû bikeyne beheşt
We leave this crowd and head to heaven (ibid., p.46)

Now the singer appears on the stage and sings lines from Pîremêrd's play which articulate the pure love between Mem and Zîn:

Xencer bo dile ger rastit dewê
Ax memî tiyaye nek berî kewê
Ba destit le mil keyn, yekcariye
Ne ray bêgane w ne bedkariye (ibid.)

The beytbêj and narrator both, in poetic terms, describe the bravery of Hemewend men who voluntarily fought against the Ottomans. "The Ottomans had coveted this land for a long time, savagely attacking it for hollow reasons since 1830" says the narrator (ibid., p.47). A voice is heard calling the Kurdish youth of the *eşîret* (family) to pick up guns if they love God, their land and their honour (ibid., p.48). The Rider and Gulê enter the stage again, saying their last words to each other before the Rider leaves for the battle. A silent episode illustrates war and martyrdom⁹³ following which Goran, the poet, enters the stage reciting lines from his poetry which link the love of the homeland to the love of the female beloved whose protection is a matter of honour:

Bilê be bûkî tazey yekem şewim ger hate ser ne'şim
Tell my new bride, if she stood over my dead body
Nelê xoy bo weten kuşt û le rêy eşqî mina nejya
Not to complain that I got myself killed for the country and did not live for her
love

⁹³ This is described in the play only as "bînrawî ceng û şehîdbûn" (visualisation of war and martyrdom) with no further explanation.

Wezîfem bû le pênewî wilatêka serim bexşim
 It was my duty to give my head for a country
Ke toy perwerde kird bo min le dawênî çiyaw kejya
 Which nurtured you for me in within its mountains
Eger xway gewre bexşî pêt hetîwê pêy bile: role
 If the almighty God gave you an orphan, tell him: child
Le min firmêskî wîst bawkit, le toş dawa eka tole
 Your father wanted tears from me, and from you revenge (ibid.)

Here, and throughout the play, the love of the beloved is equated with the love of the homeland. "Homeland is one's brother, father and family" (ibid., p.55) and return to homeland is return to beloved. This metaphor is expressed especially in the scenes which deal with Hemewends' exile to Africa which took place in 1896. The narrator recounts how Helo and his followers including the nationalist poet, Feqê Qadirî Hemewend were exiled by the ottomans to Africa and how Feqê Qadir died in Benghazi, away from home and loved ones (ibid., p.52).

Witnessing the Rider's pain of separation from his beloved and his longing for home, Feqê recites lines from Hacî Qadirî Koyî's poetry, written when he was in Istanbul. The Sorani speaking Hacî Qadirî Koyî (1817-1897) who had lived at a time when Kurdish emirates were abolished by the Ottoman government is considered a forerunner of Kurdish nationalism. He is for Sorani literature what Ehmedî Xanî is for Kurmanji, "a predecessor to whom later generations of nationalists could always turn for inspiration, and whose poems they could quote to give expression to their own nationalist sentiments" (Bruinessen, 2003, p.48). Salar's play typifies Koyî's influence on contemporary nationalist literature. In the poem recited by Feqê, the land, and in particular its mountains, are projected as a heavenly place constituting the essence of Kurdishness:

Gorey beharîye êstêke şax û daxî wulat
 Now that it is the height of spring, the mountains of the homeland
Pire le lale w nesrîn û nergisî şehla
 Are filled with tulips, wild roses and daffodils
Le girme girmî sehab û le hajey baran
 And the roar of the thunderstorm
Çîya pir le heraw newaye pir le seda
 The mountains are full of sounds
Pire le seyl û gulaw û kanî rûy zemîn

The lands are full of streams and flowers
Pire le birq û brîqey brîskey cûy sema
And the flash of lightning in the sky (ibid., p.55)

Here, Kurdistan is not only a geographical-topographical entity but also “a sacrosanct, mythic-metaphysical force inspiring a love and reverence” (Strohmeier, 2003, p.160). Romantic descriptions of homeland in exile are both recited by the narrator and sung by the singer:

Bonî gjûgiya, hajey şetawan
The scent of the flowers, the flowing of the streams
Xirney baznî, qulî nazdaran
The rattling of bracelets on pretty girls
Şineşinî werd, rûy mêrguzaran
The dance of the grass in meadows
Behest ebexşî, be diluzaran
Is like a paradise for the beloved.
(ibid., p.58)

In historical plays, female figures have been used for nationalist purposes.⁹⁴ In Salar’s plays, the Kurdish homeland is represented as a female body to construct a national identity based on male bonding among a nation of brothers (ibid., p.67). The beauties of the homeland are envisaged as the outlines of a female body for which the male heroes fight and die. Below are examples of such male bondings:

- “*Be ser kêwî Eraratda be lawik Pîremêrd serkewt*
Elê şwênim kewin kurgel, şewî serkewtine emşew” (ibid., p.66).
(Pîremêrd climbed the Ararat Mountain to the summit singing *lawik* Saying, follow me boys, tonight is the night of victory.)
- “*Eşret, ho kurgel, cam pir bê lêy erjê, wa dagîrkerî xwanenas, le enazey be der kirdûwa, ca ew kesey şeref û xwa w xakî xoş dewê...dest date tifeng...*” (ibid, p.48).
(Oh family, boys,... enough is enough, the godless occupier has gone too far, if you love your honour, God and land...pick up guns...)
- “*Kurîne, demê sale çawyan lem wulate birîwe, bitanbînim rojî êweye*” (ibid., p.62)
(Boys, they have coveted this land for many years, I hope this is your day.)

⁹⁴ In nationalist literature, female figures such as Joan of Arc have been used as metaphors for struggle against foreign oppressors. While characters such as Britannia, Germania and Marianne in France have been represented as militant figures, others have been depicted as motherly figures representing the nation.

- “*Be tifengî birnew senger çolekem
Em şere le ser nerm û nol ekem*” (ibid., p.63).
(I head to the battle with my gun
I fight this fight for the sake of my sweetheart.)

Male bonding takes place in order to liberate the female characters who are mainly used as metaphors for the homeland and the need to struggle against a foreign oppressor. The characters of Nalî’s beloved, Hebîbe, the pregnant woman in pain, and the Rider’s beloved, Gulê, feed into the iconography that depicts women as representing the nation. Nalî’s and Rider’s agony of separation from their beloveds and their eroticisation of homeland as female bodies rearticulate the notion of men’s duty to their homeland as lovers, protectors and saviours.

In 1896, some of the exiled Hemewend managed to escape and return home from Africa. The pain of their exile is highlighted in the play by references to Kurdish poetry and music. Nothing can better convey the sadness of exile and separation from loved ones better than the song, *Xaley Rêbwar* (travelling uncle), which is sung when the returning refugees search for the remaining members of their family in their hometown:

Ho xaley rêbwar, gyana xo minîş rêbwarim
Hey uncle, I am a traveller too
Rêm pê nîşan be, gyana xizmî xutanim.
Show me the way, I am your kin (ibid., p.56).

Still resilient in the face of hardships, Helo declares, “until our last breath, we must persevere...not to become victims of misery and exile” (ibid., p.55). He and his followers resume their fight against the Ottoman forces. In a scene reminding of Hebîbe in Salar’s first play, Gulê is arrested and sent to Istanbul as retribution for Helo’s rebellion. Again, as in *Nalî w Xewnêkî Erxewanî*, a woman in distress becomes the symbol of motherland in need of protection and liberation as Gulê calls on her “heroes” and the Rider to come to her rescue (ibid., p.61). While Gulê wails and calls on “her brave soldiers” and Rider to save her, folkloric music followed by a folk song by beytbêj add to the emotional intensity of the scene (ibid.).

The next scene is the trial of Şêx Seîd of Palu who led an uprising against the Turkish government in March 1924. He is portrayed as a nationalist who sacrificed everything for the sake of his nationalistic ideals. At the court, he is accused of treason and being a stooge for foreign powers. Şêx Seîd denies these accusations and stresses the agency of the Kurds who are not puppets in the hands of others but have their own legitimate national demands for which they sacrifice everything (ibid., p.60). Following a folk music performance, the narrator informs the audience that Şêx Seîd and his followers were executed in 1925, likening their fate to the fate of the mythical heroes of Qelay Dimdim (ibid.). In the tradition of Kurdish lamentation, discussed in chapter four, Şêx Seîd's execution is followed by *lawik* lamenting the martyred heroes:

Were lê, lawolê, lawolê, lawolê, lawolê, lawo
 Come on young man...
Sware mezinê bemin mezinê
 You are a great rider to me
Serit le pola, çing le asnê
 Your head is of Steele, your hands are of iron (ibid., p.61)

The Kurdish mourning tradition of *Kotel* which involves singing to the accompaniment of *def* and *zurna* is also performed for the martyrdom of *Cwamêr Hemewend*, one of *Hemewend*'s most feared fighters who was made ruler of *Qasre-Shirin* and *Zuhaw* by the shah of Iran in 1881. He was killed six years later in a plot concocted by both the Ottomans and the Qajar. *Goranîbêj* (the singer) sings lines from the *beyt* of *Cwamêr Hemewend*:

Dayk be qurban qulî zîneket
 May your mother die for your saddle (mourning expression)
Çekmey Musilî pir le xwêneket
 And your blood-filled boots
Dayk be qurban rojî bêkesit
 May your mother die for your lonely day
Tereqey helnesaw demañçey destit
 For the bullet that did not leave the gun in your hand
Dayk be qurban hey law hey lawit
 May your mother die for your cries
Swar frê danî deştî zehawit

When you threw off riders from their horses in Zehaw plain⁹⁵ (ibid., p.62)

The play goes back to the events following the First World War and the occupation of Kurdish lands by Britain. The British officer, referred to simply as Captain, claims that Great Britain is not the occupier but the liberator of the land and its rule over the region is out of benevolence and pity for the locals, inviting Helo to give up resistance (ibid., p.64). Helo, of course, remains defiant, scoffing at his rival's charade, and refusing London's offer to pardon him in exchange for his surrender (ibid.). The rebellion continues and the narrator names several British military officers who died as a consequence including Captain Walker, Pearson, McDonald, Scott, Lewis, Colonel Leachman, Newton, Captain Salmon and others. Kerîm Begî Fetah Beg, from the Hemewend family, who killed two British officers, Captains Bond and Makant, is depicted on stage as a hero and a friend of Helo's whose conversation with Helo in regards to the killing of Captain Bond, whose duty was to deal with the Hemewend, is followed by (unspecified) jovial music (ibid., p.67).

The scene is immediately followed by the trial of Şêx Mehmûd Berzencî in a British military court. He questions the legitimacy of any decision made by the court saying, "I was fighting against you. Now I am your prisoner, you, the enemy of Kurds. Of course you won't treat your enemy fairly" (ibid., p.68). The sheikh is sentenced to death. The narrator relates, "Upon hearing the verdict...sheikh, who was empty-handed, threw his headgear onto Greenhouse's chest" (ibid.). This has been recorded in Kurdish history to have actually taken place and have changed the court's verdict to a reduced ten years imprisonment ('Şêx Heme Qerîbî Şêx Marîfî Qazanqaye: Jiyan û Beserhatî', 2009). Şêx Mehmûd's brave words and gesture are followed by music and Helo's anti-colonial speech against Britain and his defence of the Kurds' right to self-rule.

Weaving together the themes of the inextricable unity of landscape and nation, and the heroism of the men of the nation, raised by its mothers to fight and die for the country and women whom they love, the play ends with Helo congratulating the

⁹⁵A plain west of Kermanshah

Rider for being a true lover and thus a worthy candidate to protect the land, because “those who want to climb mountains, before wearing their iron shoes and leather shin guards, have to really believe in their goal and be determined to achieve it...their desire should be so great that even the darkness of grave cannot extinguish it” (Salar, 1999a, p.70). He then looks into Rider’s eyes and says, “Well done, this is true love. I can see Gulê’s eyes in your eyes. Now you deserve to be trusted with a holy task” (ibid.).

While the Hemewend continue to live up to their fame as accomplished fighters,⁹⁶ their historical resistance to government pressure has been idealised in Kurdish folktales, as *beyts* of Şerîf Hemewend and Cwamêr Hemewend attest to. Salar’s play is a continuation of the same performance tradition but in a different mode of fiction, enacted in a theatre and for a late twentieth century Iraqi Kurdish audience. In order to reinforce his idealised depiction of the Hemewend as a patriotic family, Salar incorporates the old *beyts*, thus reviving the old myths, memories, values, traditions and symbols (Salar, 1999a, pp.44–45, 62). The Hemewend are represented as true patriots whose rebellions against the Ottomans and the British were for a nationalistic cause. Helo can smell the soil of his homeland when he returns from exile (ibid., p.57) and the Rider is a romantic, seeing visions of his beloved’s image in exile and in all beauties of the nature (ibid., pp.54, 57).

The idealisation of the Hemewend family is done not only through characters’ dialogues and the narrator’s descriptions but also through recitations and choral singing of Kurdish nationalistic poems such as Goran’s and Faiyiq Bêkes’s (ibid., pp.44, 48, 51). The Hemewend’s exile to Libya, for example, is bemoaned by reference to a quote from Şêx Selamî Azebanî’s poem, as an assault on Kurdish people and another tragedy in the long history of the states’ oppression of the Kurds,

⁹⁶ On January 15, 2003, the New York Times published a front-page article on the Hemewend who were engaged in a war of resistance against the armies of Saddam Hussein in northern Iraq and also against Ansar al-Islam, a militant group connected to Al-Qaeda, in the east, led on these two fronts, respectively by Karim Agha and his son Halat. See: <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/01/15/world/threats-and-responses-hussein-s-foes-iraqi-kurds-fight-a-war-that-has-two-faces.html>

Êşî sexte gil eka herdû gilêney çawî Kurd

This is a terrible pain which brings tears to the eyes of the Kurds

Derdî be dermane derdî qewmî lê qewmawî Kurd

This is an illness with no cure, what has plagued the Kurdish people (ibid., p.56)

The idealisation of the Hemewend involves glorification of their main place of activity, the Bazyan Pass, the commercially and strategically important gateway connecting the mountain regions east of the Qara Daq with the Mesopotamian plain and the outside world. The Bazyan valley was where the Hemewend used to loot caravans and entrap Ottoman forces sent against them. Such activities are presented in Salar's play as resistance to the foreign rule and in the service of their homeland (ibid., p.50). The Bazyan valley is of particular importance to Kurdish nationalists because it was also the place where Şêx Mehmûd and his allies, including the Hemewend, fought the British forces.

Historical plays in the vernacular language which portray heroic national characters from the past or images from national folklore or rural life have been part of the common patterns of nationalist cultural expression in the artistic work of the nineteenth century into the twentieth and even twenty-first centuries. By depicting male heroes fighting, and perhaps dying, for the author's native, historical plays assert the uniqueness of their culture and even challenged the dominant discourse of imperial rule. Similarly, Salar's plays exploit the historical legends of local heroes and romanticise the lives of historical Kurdish characters in order to revive and strengthen the sense of national identity among the public and make the spectators feel that they are entitled to be respected as a distinct nation, with a distinct culture, history, and homeland. They also encourage rebellion against foreign invasion at a time of armed conflict between Kurds and the central government.

As in Saman's plays examined in the previous chapter, Salar's theatre at the late 1980s falls within the Kurdish cultural-nationalist discourse. His theatre employed historic struggles, folklore myths, and stories of idyllic rural life as a means of showing the distinctiveness of Kurdish culture and also call out young Kurds to join

the uprising. However, while Saman's plays always had leftist leanings and placed the Kurdish question in the larger context of the universal struggle of the oppressed people against their oppressors, Salar's theatre was unequivocally Kurdish nationalist. Kurdish iconography abounded on his stage, with Kurdish costumes, musical instruments, songs, and handicrafts, providing a strong visual and aural Kurdish presence that contrasted with the state's denial of the Kurds' presence in the region and its policy of Arabisation of their lands.

The shift from Saman's socialist-nationalism to Salar's quintessentially Kurdish nationalism can be understood in the context of the atrocities committed against the rural Kurdish areas in 1987 and 1988. The policies of forced assimilation and elimination followed by the Baathist regime against the Kurds only fed the forces of Kurdish nationalism and strengthened it in the minds of the Kurds as virtually no family or individual remained unaffected by the actions of the Iraqi army in Kurdistan (Stansfield and Resool, 2006, p.121-122). This commonality of suffering acted to consolidate Kurdish identity in the face of the overwhelming oppression (ibid., p.121), a fact that can be witnessed in the theatrical outputs produced by Ehmed Salar in the late 1980s.

Salar's extensive and exclusive use of Kurdish myths, historical figures, poetry, folkloric songs, musical instruments, and dance made theatre a public medium for collective expression and experience of a distinct Kurdish identity which the Baathist regime had sought to dilute since 1975. It fostered a sense of pride in Kurdish cultural traditions which were shown to be appropriate components of a distinctively Kurdish theatre. His musical theatre not only acted as a site for staging national history, folklore and culture, and thus strengthening a sense of national identity, but also served as a cultural medium which implicitly commented on the current political issues by glorifying Kurdish characters from the past who, for one reason or another, fought against foreign rulers of Kurdistan.

Katê Helo Berz Defrê is an example of a political Kurdish drama, in the tradition of Berrchid's Ceremonial and the Brechtian epic theatre. It presents events from recent

history of Kurdistan and casts the characters in a form that comprises drama, dancing, singing, mime, and slides. Following Berrchid's notion of performance, the play takes the form of a collective game wherein stage and auditorium combine together to constitute a unified platform of collective ceremony. The dramatic script is active and alive and an unfinished product that is to be fulfilled within a theatrical festivity (ibid.). Although the effects of this ceremonial performance, as well as other productions by Ehmed Salar, can only be properly judged and appreciated on the stage, the play's political significance can be explored by examining its text and context. By staging myths of Kurdish common ancestry, heroic age, its loss, and the need for its restoration, Salar's plays conform to Smith's argument that myths of origin and descent place "the act of liberation in an ideal world of heroic imagery and naturalistic metaphor" (Smith, 1999, p.68). By constructing a strong nationalist identity on stage, Salar's plays played a powerful role in capturing the public imagination, and even mobilising the general public toward political activism.

7.4 Conclusion

In his quest for an authentic, indigenous Kurdish theatre, Salar's Ceremonial theatre made use of folk culture which includes stories, traditions, dwellings, songs, music, costume and so on. As discussed previously, folklore has constituted one of the key elements of national identities in modern history. The nationalist use of folklore dates back to the eighteenth century Romantic Movement and the works of such as Herder who glorified folk songs, ballads, fairy tales, and legends for their vigour and emotional impact. Ever since, folklore has played an important role in mobilising the masses for nationalistic causes.

In Salar's plays folk songs, dance, and music are combined with modern poetry and history as the basis for a new national theatre. Folk poetry, according to Herder, is the "nation's archive", "a mirror of a nation's sentiments, a channel to the history, language, mores and thinking of a community" (Wilson, 1973, p.30). The combination of this oral national history with Kurdish nationalist poetry of the twentieth century not only nurtures a strong sense of unique identity and national

grandeur, but also perpetuates the national myths which locate the golden age of the nation in the Baban era and the heroes of Hemewend.

The playwright draws on all these symbols and memories to inspire revolt. The loss and the necessity to restore the mythical golden age are reflections of the present day and “a route of vernacular mobilization whereby an indigenous intelligentsia uses folk culture to mobilize middle and lower strata and create ethnic nations” (Smith, 1999, p.18). At a time when this ethnic nation has been conquered and humiliated by foreigners, public performance of its folk culture, literature and nationalist myths to packed eager crowds becomes a call for revolution. Therefore, the production of Salar’s plays in the late 1980s, when the Iraqi Kurds suffered one of the most brutal campaigns against them, is of great significance to any study of Kurdish national struggle that is interested in uncovering marginalised narratives and forgotten stories of cultural and theatrical resistance.

Chapter Eight

Conclusion

Theatre is a significant source and a viable genre for witnessing and studying the construction of identities and the ideological construction of narratives. In the Kurdish context, however, it has not been considered capable of providing evidence germane to the understanding of history. This study shed light on the role of theatre and its potential for an understanding of Kurdish history. By exploring the history and voices of the people involved in making theatre, it hopefully brought to light hidden, suppressed or marginalised narratives and moments that indicate the critical importance of the theatre as a charged political space for the development of Kurdish nationalism.

The study confirms Anthony D. Smith's and John Hutchinson's cultural nationalist approach to the study of nationalism by stressing the role of the intellectuals and intelligentsia in introducing and promoting Kurdish theatre in its early years and their utilisation of theatre as a modernising tool which helped promote education and retrieve national cultural heritage. Yet it also argues that there was no divide between cultural and political nationalism in Iraqi Kurdistan as the ultimate aim of theatre artists was an independent and free Kurdistan. Throughout its history, Kurdish theatre often acted as a site for staging national history, folklore, and myths and for formulating nationalist ideology, and thus played an important role in the construction and dissemination of Kurdish nationalist identity.

Despite the failure of political attempts to create an independent Kurdistan, Kurdish intellectuals spoke of the necessity of a national theatre to serve the Kurdish "nation" and "homeland". Using theatrical representation as a site of cultural formation, artists and scholars have used the theatrical imaginary as a legitimising force to define what Natalya Baldyga calls "a real that is itself imagined" (Baldyga, 2005, p.11). In spite of the failure of political efforts to preserve a sovereign Kurdish state and the fact that Kurdistan would not exist as a politically independent state, the Kurdistan of cultural imagination was maintained in dramatic texts and theatrical performances

through the nationalistic works of the twentieth century, sustaining a belief that the political state would one day be resurrected. Through its representations of Kurdish national culture, the stage would insist on the existence of a Kurdistan that had been partitioned but had not yet perished.

Theatre not only upheld Kurdish nationalism but also helped to create the very idea of the nation itself. In its early years, theatre was recognised as a useful means for promoting education and women's rights, and fighting superstitions and outmoded beliefs. Theatre, therefore, was utilised as a tool for modernisation and social progress and therefore a vital tool of nation-building. It was also utilised for representing the national character and for formulating and solidifying notions of national identity. Early in the twentieth century and despite the political defeat of Kurdish nationalist movement which had led to his return to Sulaymaniyah, Pîremêrd had started the process of maintaining Kurdish national identity by honouring symbols of nation's past and Kurdish national heroes in his plays. This was part of his wider effort to construct a shared national identity and promote national solidarity which included collecting folk tales, translating literary classics into Sulaymaniyah dialect, and his controversial celebration of Newroz, the Kurdish New Year.

As Strohmeier notes, early Kurdish nationalists' main arguments for distinction and pride derived from the glorious days of the Kurdish emirates, the great epic poem *Mem û Zîn*, and important historical figures who could be considered great Kurds, such as Saladin (Strohmeier, 2003, p.200). The repeated staging of *Saladin* during the 1930s, and *Mem û Zîn* between 1930s and 1960s (see chapter six) clearly illustrates the contribution of theatre to the Kurdish nationalist discourse in Iraqi Kurdistan. Moreover, theatre itself, as a Western genre, signified progress and sophistication. As part of their modernisation project, the educated class, especially in Sulaymaniyah, promoted theatre and utilised it to educate the Kurdish masses and enlighten them to wider political developments, remind them of their national heritage and thus solidify their national identification, fight outmoded beliefs and encourage women to defy social taboos by appearing on stage.

Despite attempts by the educated elite, the socio-political context did not allow for the establishment of a strong theatre tradition in Kurdistan until the early 1970s. With the creation of the autonomous Kurdistan region in 1970 and the emergence of a small group of drama graduates, Kurdistan saw the first instances of serious theatre which thrived in the free political environment that had been created. There was an upsurge of national themes in the theatre performances of this era. Theatre makers found in national history, legend and myth, a fertile source of subject matter to celebrate the Kurdish national identity and the ultimate defeat of their oppressors. Mythical and historical heroes such as Kawe in *Kawey Asinger* and Mihemed Paşa Kor in *Kotayî Zordar* were revived in order to express revolt against tyranny while themes of freedom-fighting and resistance in foreign countries in plays such as *Nirxî Azadî* and *Çawî Vietnam* made theatre relevant to the Kurdish political life at the time. These struggles for national freedom and identification provided Kurdish artists with important sources of dramatic power.

The loss of autonomy and the defeat of the Kurdish armed struggle in 1975, along with Iraqi government's massive campaign of Arabisation, Baathisation, cultural suppression, mass deportation, arrests and arbitrary executions, did not put an end to the representation of nationalist themes in Kurdish theatre performances. On the contrary, the increasingly politicised Arab theatre of the post-1967, with its heavy utilisation of folk elements, inspired Kurdish artists to draw on their national heritage as legitimate material for theatre.

Kurdish folklore, myths, legends, and local history became important reservoirs for notions of national identity and were used as raw material for creating dramatic works. The relationship between romantic idealisation of Kurdistan and its history and culture, political liberalism and a strong national consciousness resulted in the creation of several nationalist plays between 1975 and 1991. Drama was utilised as a powerful tool for awakening a people to a common heritage and encouraging to seek national identity and national liberty. This Romantic drama which drew heavily on Kurdish nationalist myths, national folklore and national heroes, thus contributed significantly to the Kurdish national struggle in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Saman's plays, staged in the morbid environment of the late 1970s and the early 1980s, not only asserted the uniqueness of Kurdish culture by using images from national folklore but also, by portraying heroic national characters, helped disseminate resistance within the disillusioned Kurdish community that had just lost its freedom. By demonstrating the absurdity of borders that divide Kurdistan, satirising the presidential-election process, calling for unity among the Kurds in the face of foreign invasions, Saman's repertoire attests to Kurdish theatre's engagement with nationalist themes during the difficult time of the Baath rule. His theatre was the continuation of the Kurdish national struggle in Iraq by acting as a social space for reviving and reclaiming Kurdish heritage, upholding and promoting national Kurdish identity, solidarity and consciousness, and also for encouraging resistance.

It is significant that his first play staged after the fall of the autonomous Kurdistan region was an adaptation of Xani's *Mem û Zîn*, perhaps the most frequently quoted Kurdish literary text in nationalist discourse. Saman's play, however, is not just a retelling of an old folktale but a window to its social and political environment, which following the defeat of the Kurdish movement led by Barzanî, leaned towards socialism, anti-feudalism, anti-tribalism, anti-bourgeois-rightism and anti-imperialism. These were the characteristics of the PUK and also the defining characteristics of Kurdish intellectual circles at the time who blamed the tribal mindset for the historical lack of unity among the Kurds and the failure of their national uprisings. Therefore, Kurdish theatre history can help us better understand the Kurdish society through its theatre productions.

In the theatre of Ehmed Salar, we witness a new kind of theatre whose sole purpose is to celebrate Kurdish identity and heritage and call for their protection. The shift from Saman's socialist approach to the plight of Kurds to Salar's purely nationalist approach is understandable in the context of the genocidal Anfal campaign and the Baath government's increased violence against the Kurds. The attack on Kurdish villages, the destruction and looting of homes, and the displacement and mass

murder of their inhabitants, in fact, triggered Salar's *Nalî w Xewnêkî Erxewanî*, his first attempt at an exclusively Kurdish theatre.

By promoting an ideology of common heritage, tradition, and belief, Salar's theatre established a sense of commonality among the people that overrode the ideological and cultural differences within the national group. Salar's retellings of Kurdish history, myths, and folktales contributed to the cultural discourse which attempted to create what Hobsbawm (1991) terms an "invented tradition" of common cultural history for audiences of different class and backgrounds. Thus, the promotion of Kurdish culture through performance became an important vehicle for asserting a sense of Kurdish identity among the masses.

Ethnic nationalism, according to Smith, may become the vehicle for a new national identity that draws many members of the community into a new type of politicised vernacular culture which creates "the nucleus of the future ethnic nation and its political identity, even when secession is prevented and the community fails to obtain its own state" (Smith, 1991, p.137). This politicised vernacular culture includes songs, dress, poetry, arts and crafts, all of which feature prominently in Salar's plays. In fact both Saman's and Salar's plays demonstrate the politicisation of cultural heritage through both the cultivation of poetic spaces and the commemoration of its golden ages.

Cultivation of poetic spaces is described by Smith as turning national features of the homeland into historical ones by their association with communal myth and endeavour (ibid., p.127). The nationalist myth of poetic landscape, such as the romantic descriptions of Kurdistan, as well as historical monuments, such as the Dimdim fortress, are abundant in Saman's and Salar's plays which evoked powerful sentiments of nostalgia and identification and struck rich chord in the ethnic nationalism of the masses.

These artists were also drawn to the portrayals of public virtue from the past in order to inspire emulation by present generations. Their accounts of 'golden ages' of

Kurdish self-rule and bravery, and idealised heroes and sages such as Mem, Lepzêrîn, and Helo, suggested the nation's antiquity and continuity, its noble heritage and its drama of ancient glory and regeneration, thus bringing the national ideal to life and disseminating it among the people. They also recreated for the audience, a vivid panorama of their current history, by drawing parallels between the past and the present tragedies.

The fact that during the 1980s and the war between Iran and Iraq which caused poverty, misery, death and destruction, the public, especially the working classes, were willing to pay to see theatre performances reveals the appeal that nationalist theatre had for all social classes. It is important to note that the final years of Iran-Iraq war was a period of difficult economic conditions, and for a worker to spend the total sum of his daily earnings on a theatre performance shows the importance attached to theatre as a national medium.

In her *Utopia in Performance*, Jill Dolan asks, "Why do people come to watch other people labor on stage?" (Dolan, 2005, p.36). She believes that, apart from the obvious draw of theatre as a provider of cultural capital, "people are drawn to attend live theatre and performance for other, less tangible, more emotional, spiritual, or communitarian reasons" (ibid.). She explains,

audiences are compelled to gather with others, to see people perform live, hoping, perhaps, for moments of transformation that might let them reconsider the world outside the theatre, from its micro to its macro arrangements. Perhaps part of the desire to attend theatre and performance is to reach for something better, for new ideas about how to be and how to be with each other to articulate a common, different future (ibid.).

Theatre's possibilities as a place of inspiration and vision, "a space of desire, of longing, of loss," (ibid, p.37) can be witnessed in the golden age of Kurdish theatre, when theatre provided one of the few public spaces for the expression of Kurdish nationalism. While Dolan tries to find meaning in Western theatre by appealing to the small, but powerful, moments that performance can provide to make the audience affectively imagine or experience a better world, those who witnessed

plays such as *Katê Helo Berz Defrê* and *Qelay Dimdim*, were so galvanised by them that decades later they still remember the ambience in the theatre. For the Kurds, entering a space wherein their heroes and their golden history were brought back to life was itself magical and utopian.

Ethnic nationalism is one of the most powerful forces of collective identification and action. Identification with a specific nation implies a strong emotional investment able to foster solidarity bonds among its members. When the nation is threatened, humiliated, denied, denigrated and oppressed, what can lift its members more than a public performance of its uniqueness and grandeur? What could assure the Kurdish nation of its antiquity and self-worth more than an enactment of one of its oldest literary texts, *Mem û Zîn*? At a time when many were leaving Kurdistan due to difficult political and economic conditions, what could be more emotionally powerful than witnessing a classic Kurdish poet weep in exile over the loss of his beloved/homeland?

Theatre of the 1970s and 1980s are known as the golden age of Kurdish theatre because, unlike today, there was an eager theatre-going public who was connected to the performers through a mutual pain. Theatre for them was a space in which they experienced “communitas”, a term by Victor Turner, describing moments when audiences “feel themselves become part of the whole in an organic, nearly spiritual way;” their individuality becoming “finely attuned to those around them,” bathing in a cohesive if fleeting feeling of belonging to the group (cited in *ibid.*, p.11). For the Kurdish audiences, this group was definitely a national group because as Abdelkarim Berrchid who inspired Salar’s festive theatre argues, his theatre group was not simply in search of a theatre, but it is a people and a nation, “a nation in quest of its culture, identity, and reality” (cited in Amīn and Carlson, 2011, p.167).

Talking about the affective and political possibilities of theatre, Dolan argues that emotions might move us to social action. Likewise, examples such as *Mem û Zîn*, *Qelay Dimdim*, *Nalî w Xewnêkî Erxewanî* and *Katê Helo Berz Defrê* prove the point that theatre, especially between 1975 and 1991, definitely participated in the process

of collective mobilisation and action by promoting myths central to the concept of nationalism. Despite strict censorship under the Baath rule, Kurdish theatre continued to courageously promote Kurdish nationalism and resistance through the use of Kurdish folk culture and literature thus reassuring a disenfranchised, persecuted and denigrated people of their self-worth as a nation. More importantly, it brought the public together and aroused a spirit of resistance by portraying legendary and heroic national characters from the past. Theatre claimed the validity of many of the nation's myths, effecting a cultural revival through the use of indigenous themes and motifs. Historical events such as the fall of the Dimdim fortress or the crush of the Hemewends' resistance against central governments were endowed with deeper symbolic significance, thus re-enacting the early drama of the loss of freedom and the decline of the golden age. The myth of regeneration, specifically, by implying the rebirth and reawakening of the nation, encouraged the audiences to emulate the heroism they witnessed on stage and bring forth the act of liberation from the realm of dramatic imagery and metaphor to reality.

Images



Figure 1 A Scene from an Unspecified Theatre Performance in Sulaymaniyah



Figure 2 A scene from an Unspecified Performance in Sulaymaniyah



Figure 3 Nermîn Nakam in “Emrekey Begim” (1958)
Source: (Şano, no.12, 2009)



Figure 4 Nermîn Nakam in “Tawanî Çî Bû” (1958)
Source: (Berzencî, 2007, p.87)



Figure 5 “Xec û Siyamend”, Sulaymaniyah, 1978
Source: (Şano, no.11, 2008, p. 85)



Figure 6 “Kêşey Çûn Yan Neçûn” (To Go or Not to Go), written and directed by Ehmed Salar



Figure 7 “Nalî w Xewnêkî Erxewanî”
Source: (Simo, p.213)



Figure 8 A musical ensemble in “Nalî w Xewnêkî Erxewanî”
Source: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/ahmad-salar>



Figure 9 “Nalî w Xewnêkî Erxewanî”

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/ahmad-salar>



Figure 10 “Nalî w Xewnêkî Erxewanî”

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/ahmad-salar>

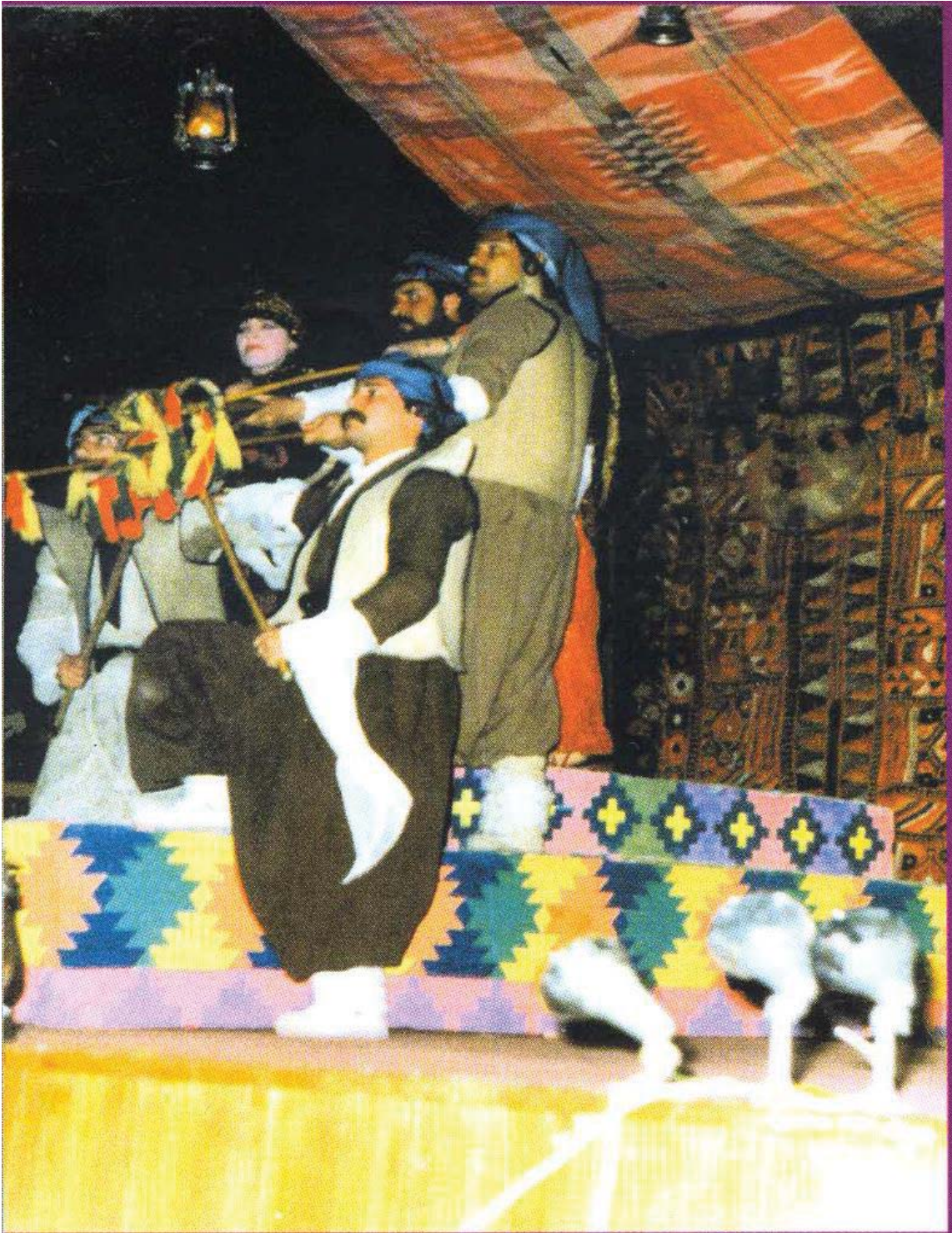


Figure 11 "Katê Helo Berz Defrê"
Source: (Şano, no.12, 2009)

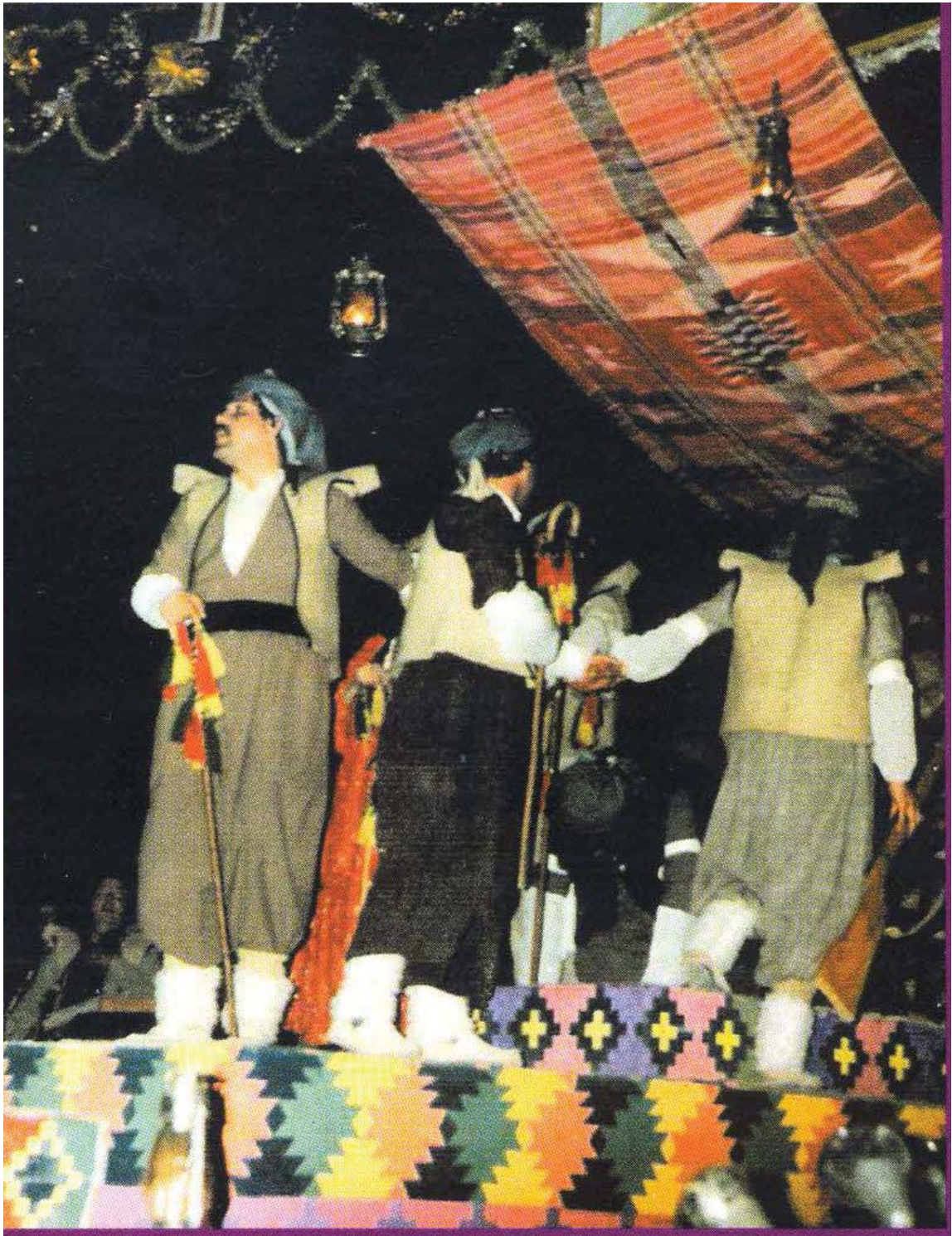


Figure 12 "Katê Helo Berz Defrê"

Source: (Şano, no.12, 2009)

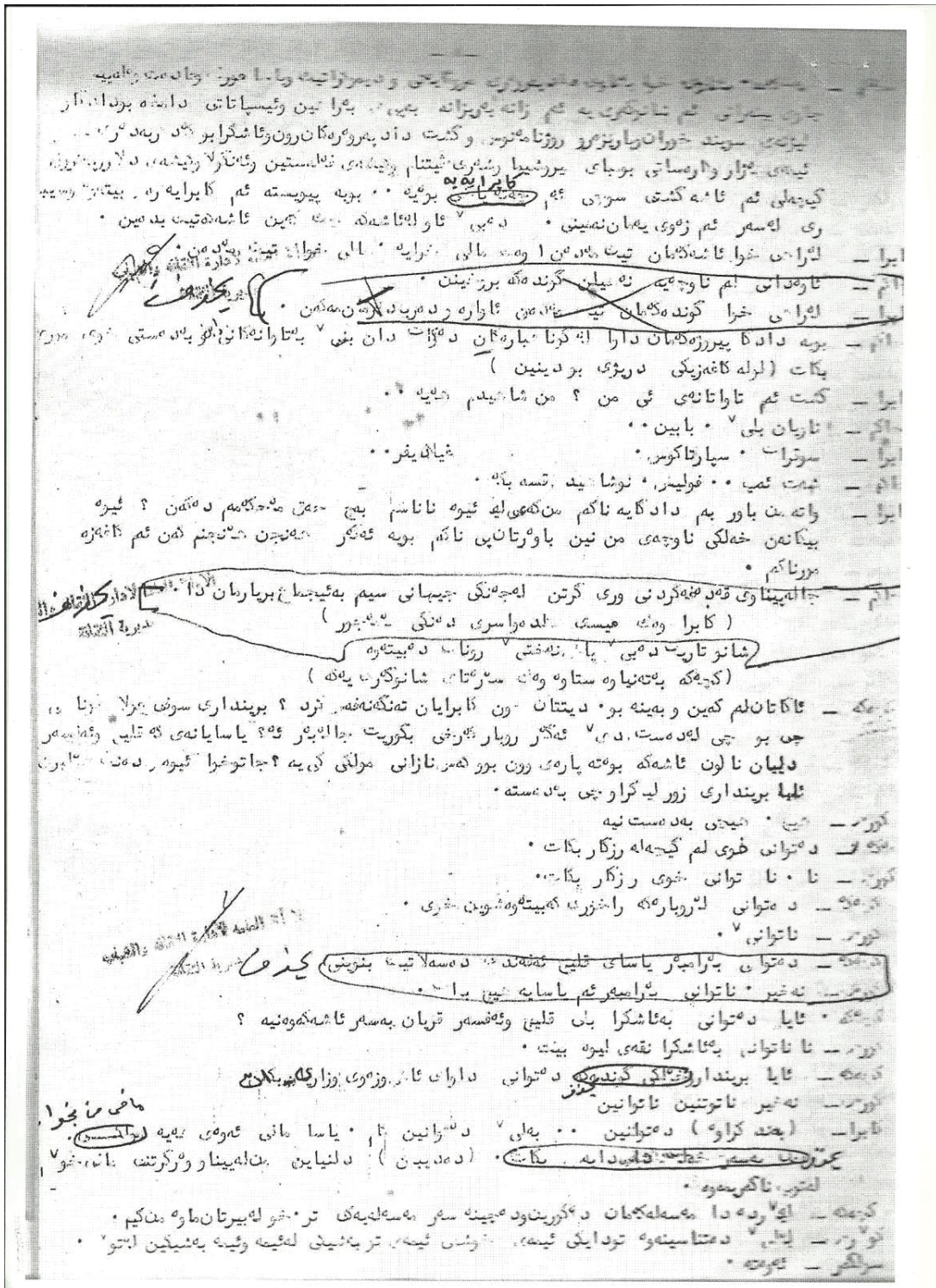


Figure 13 "Katê Helo Berz Defrê"

Appendices:



Appendix 1 The Iraqi ministry of culture's approval for the staging of Telet Saman's Pîlan in 1977 after the implementation of the ministry's alterations to the text



Appendix 2 A Page from the play, *Pilan*, which shows the extent to which the ministry of culture controlled and censored dramatic texts. The circled parts with the Arabic word "yahdhif", meaning delete, next to them re to be completely removed from the play.

له به‌نگه‌نامه‌کانی ئەمنی سلیمانی

چوار روژ بهر له‌راپه‌ڕینی سلیمانی رژێم به‌نیاز بووه

ژماره‌یه‌ك هونه‌رمه‌ندو نوسه‌ر بكاته بارمه‌ته

رئاسه‌ی جمهوری
السكرتیر مديريه‌ الأمن العامة
العدد م.د.م/4/2860
التاريخ 4/3/991

خاص وشخصي

لی امن البلده
م/احتجاج

بعد التشاور مع السيد المحافظ/ رئيس اللجنة الأمنية/ وتقييم الحالة الزامنة وتصورتنا والسيد المحافظ لمحوث نشاطات تخريبية من قبل الزمر المفرقة والعلاء وبغية الحفاظ على ارواح الرفاق المسؤولين وافرادنا، تنفيذ عملية احتجاج الأدياء والفنانين المدرجة أسمائهم في القائمة العرفقة وفق مدلولتنا السابقة. تتم العملية بصورة خاطفة وبدفعة واحدة بعد التأكد من أماكن عملهم ومحلات سكنهم. لإجراء ما يلزم في ضوء إعلاء وإيلاء الموضوع الأهمية القصوى وإعلامي شخصياً بالنتيجة وشكراً.

الموقفات

قائمة بالأسماء

عقيد الأمن

ع. مدير أمن محافظة السليمانية

تبعداً من انبعاثات بعض أفراد جبهة دكرت هسو كاتيك رابویتی خه‌لکی كوردستان له شاری سلیمانیا ده‌ستێبكات. تغمش ده‌قی نوساره‌كه و ناری سه‌ كۆمه‌له‌ هونه‌رمه‌ندو نوساره‌نامه‌ی كه‌ به‌نیازیون هه‌مویان له یه‌ك كاتدا بدن به‌ سه‌ مانه‌كانیانداو به‌وه‌ شویتێكی نادیار به‌یڕین و به‌كرتسه‌ بارمه‌ته‌ له‌كانی بیوتستیشدا تبعداً من انبعاثات.

ناما ده‌كرتی نه‌ه‌رۆ سالی ده‌لۆلی

به‌گۆچوونووی داگیركوان... هه‌بوون له‌سه‌ روژگاراندا به‌زووه‌ندی خویان به‌لاوه‌ گرنه‌گرتبوو له‌سه‌وی گه‌ل و نیشتمان، به‌لام نه‌وانه‌ له‌ به‌غه‌كانی ده‌ست تهنه‌نیه‌یڕین، داخه‌كهم تێستاش له‌یژی پێشویان و رێژی گه‌وه‌یاریان له‌ی ده‌گه‌ی. تا ئێره‌ به‌سه‌ به‌و خوتنه‌ری نه‌م نوساره‌ كه‌ به‌زانیان سه‌نگه‌ری نارشاوه‌كان چس له‌ سه‌نگه‌ری شاخ كه‌مه‌ر نه‌ه‌وه‌، هه‌و یه‌كێك له‌مانه‌ی لێره‌دان نارشان هاتووه‌ به‌ به‌یاریکی (له‌سه‌ی عامه‌) ده‌كرتسه‌ بارمه‌ته‌و سه‌وكمی

به‌گه‌یتنه‌وه‌، نه‌مانه‌ه‌ كۆمه‌له‌ن هونه‌رمه‌ندو نوسه‌رو روژنیه‌ری نه‌م شاره‌ن و به‌یڕین له‌ 24 مه‌رۆسه‌ی خه‌راپه‌ هه‌له‌تێستێ تۆنه‌ی سه‌و كه‌مانه‌ی له‌سه‌نگه‌ری شاوه‌كاندا به‌هونه‌رو قه‌تسه‌م به‌گه‌ژ روژنیه‌ی داگیركوی به‌عه‌سدا ده‌چوونه‌وه‌، كه‌ روژن له‌ روژان نامه‌ساده‌ ته‌به‌یون به‌و كۆترین خه‌مه‌ته‌ به‌و روژمه‌ به‌گه‌ن. نه‌م نوساره‌وه‌ حه‌قیقه‌تێكی به‌لگه‌نوویسته‌ كه‌مه‌نگه‌ری نارشاوه‌ چ روژنیه‌ی سه‌وێنی به‌ییره‌و له‌هوشیار كرده‌وه‌ی جه‌ماوهر روژنیه‌ی گه‌وه‌یاریان به‌و كاری به‌یروژو

بعمه‌یسه‌تی نامه‌ده‌كرتی به‌نامه‌یه‌كی ده‌یكۆمه‌نتی سه‌بارته‌ به‌(ئێسه‌ی موزیقای سلیمانی) نه‌و ته‌یبه‌ی له‌سه‌وانسه‌ری كوردستاندا بوژه‌ یه‌كێك له‌ شانۆیه‌كانی شارێ سلیمانی و كوردستان له‌مانه‌ی هونه‌رمه‌ند خالید سه‌ركار كاتن پێكه‌وه‌ سه‌یری وینه‌ له‌وشییه‌كانمان ده‌كرد نه‌م نوساره‌وه‌مان به‌وچار كوت، كاتل خالید سه‌ركار وتی: سه‌هه‌ژ روژم به‌ی خۆشه‌ سه‌و نه‌م نوساره‌وه‌م به‌وچار كوت روژم هه‌ژنه‌كهم له‌ به‌نامه‌كه‌شدا و كه‌ راستیه‌یه‌كی مێژوویی به‌لای

- نسفه‌ الی
-مشوون سیاسیة / لمتابعة الموضوع ویلاء إلتزامكم الخاص
-المتكبي الخاص/ مع الأیوات كافة
- الأسماء
د.حسین البرزنجی
جلال محمود علی
زه‌یر أحمد سه‌وژة
روؤف حسن
روؤف به‌یگره‌
روؤف عثمان
حسین قرداغی
محمد قریق حسن
عبدالله میده‌یا
شه‌رزاد حسن
عبدالقادر سه‌عید
عمر سه‌روف البرزنجی
- ع. مدير أمن محافظة السليمانية
- فؤاد قرداغی
جمال محمد إسماعیل
فؤاد مجید مسوی
حكمت هنذی
أحمد سه‌الار
صلاح روؤف
خاند سه‌ركار
کریم کابان
عثمان علی
عزت کریم
طه‌ خلیل
دانان علی
- علي تواتا



Appendix 4 Letter by the ministry of intelligence demanding the arrest of Kurdish intellectuals as listed above

رونوشت گزارش دفتر نقده وزارت پست و تلگراف و تلفن

شماره ۱۴

تاریخ: ۲۴/۵/۳

وزارت - محترماً عین گزارش رسیده از دفتر
نقده برای استحضار خاطر مبارک ذیلاً به عرض
میرساند ۱۴ جواهری

پریروز ساعت ۱۳ در حدود چهل نفر از اهالی
مهاباد در یک کامیون به عنوان ارتیست مهاباد^{۱۲}
کومالا به نقده وارد عصر اشنویه حرکت و گویا

چند روز در آنجا متوقف هر روز نمایشاتی داده اهالی را دعوت به کومالا خواهند نمود و در
مراجعت در نقده نیز نمایشاتی خواهند داد از قرار مسموع گویا نمایشاتی خواهند داد از قرار
مسموع گویا نمایشات بر ضد دولت و مامورین لشکری می باشد هر وقت در نقده نمایش داده
شد گزارش به عرض خواهد رسید.

مشیری

استان چوچاق و تلگراف در مهاباد

رونوشت با اصل یکی است . عمل آورده و از هر گونه نظائر گرفتارند چنانچه خبری نماید

Appendix 5 Letter From Naqadeh Office of the ministry of post, telegraph and telephone calling the attention of authorities to the staging of possibly anti-governmental plays by "Mehabad Artists" in Naqadeh and Oshnavieh; Retrieved from: <http://www.weneykk.blogspot.b>

Appendix 6 List of theatrical performances between 1920s and 1960s

Theatrical Performances in the 1920s⁹⁷

No.	Title	Year	Place
1	<i>Selahedînî Eyûbî</i> (Saladin)	1921	Erbil
2	<i>Qeralîçke</i> (The Emperor)	1922	Sulaymaniyah
3	<i>Îlm û Cehl</i> (Knowledge and ignorance)	1922	Sulaymaniyah
4	<i>Cûleke</i> (The Jew)	1923	Sulaymaniyah
5	<i>Serbazî Aza</i> (The Brave Soldier)	1923	Sulaymaniyah
6	<i>Nîron</i> (Nero)	1926	Kurds' Literary Society
7	<i>Dayk</i> (Mother)	1926	Sulaymaniyah Girls' School
8	<i>Yolyosî Qeyser</i> (Julius Caesar)	1927	Kurds' Literary Society
9	<i>Şorişî Ferensa</i> (The French Revolution)	1927-28	Kurds' Literary Society
10	<i>Wênetî</i>	1930	Erbil

Theatrical Performances in the 1930s

No.	Title	Year	Place
1	<i>Selahedînî Eyûbî</i> (Saladin)	1930	Erbil
		1932	Erbil
		1934	Erbil
		1935	Koya
		1939	Kurds' Literary Society
2	<i>Însan Ewey Eyçinê, Ewe Edûrêtewe</i> (One Reaps What One Sows)	1930	Sulaymaniyah Girls' School
3	<i>Daykêkî Cahil</i> (An Ignorant Mother)	1930	Sulaymaniyah Girls' School
4	<i>Jinhênanî Kurdî</i> (Kurdish Wedding)	1931	Baghdad Dar ul-Muallemin

⁹⁷ The following lists are borrowed from (Kerîm, 2009, pp. 342-348).

5	<i>Kiçî Kurdistan</i> (The Girl of Kurdistan)	1931 1932	Koya Koya
6	<i>Nîron</i> (Nero)	1932 1933	Rewanduz Koya
7	<i>Dildarî w Peymanperwerî</i> (Love and Faithfulness)	1933 1939	Sulaymaniyah Halabja
8	<i>Dîktor Fuad</i> (Doctor Fuad)	1933	Koya
9	<i>Mem û Zîn</i> (Mem and Zin)	1934 1935	Erbil Sulaymaniyah
10	<i>Serbazî Aza</i> (The Brave Soldier)	1935	Kurds' Literary Society
11	<i>Şîrîn û Xesrew</i> (Shirin and Khasraw)	1935	Kurds' Literary Society
12	<i>Şerî Qadisiye</i> (The Qadisiyah War)	1936	Erbil
13	<i>Şerîf Hemewend</i> (Sharif Hamawand)	1936	Kurds' Literary Society
14	<i>Mehmûd Aqay Şêwekel</i> (Mahmud Agha Shewakal)	1936	Kurds' Literary Society
15	<i>Afatî Ta'ûn Le Naw Heywanata</i> (The Effects of Plague on Animals)	1937	Kurds' Literary Society
16	<i>Otîllo</i> (Othello)	1938	Kurds' Literary Society

Theatrical performances in the 1940s

No.	Title	Year	Place
1	<i>Mem û Zîn</i> (Mem and Zin)	1944	Sulaymaniyah
2	<i>Gulî Xwênawî</i> (The Blood Red Rose)	1946	Penjwin (performed in Arabic)
3	<i>Dîktorî Dêm</i> (The Barren Doctor)	1946	Penjwin (performed in Arabic)
4	<i>Qijkalî Lêwalî</i> (The Sweet Blond)	1946	Erbil

5	<i>Le Rêy Nîştmanda</i> (For the Homeland)	1946	Sulaymaniyah
6	<i>Kawey Asinger</i> (Kawa the Blacksmith)	1947	Koya
7	<i>Leyl û Mecnûn</i> (Layl and Majnun)	1948	Koya
8	<i>Nuşte w Cadu</i> (The Spell and the Magic)	1948	Chamchamal
9	<i>Peymanî Portsmouth</i> (The Portsmouth Accord)	1948	Chamchamal
10	<i>Têkoşanî Rencberan</i> (The Toilers' Struggle)	1948	Sulaymaniyah
11	<i>Minim Mîkrofon</i> (It's Me, Microphone)	1949	Sulaymaniyah

Theatrical Performances in the 1950s

No.	Title	Year	Place
1	<i>Hamlêt</i> (Hamlet)	1950	Sulaymaniyah
2	<i>Hakimî Dadperwer</i> (The Just Ruler)	1950	Duhok
3	<i>Mem û Zîn</i> (Mem and Zin)	1951	Akra
		1958	Sulaymaniyah
4	<i>Dadperweran</i> (The Just)	1951	Akre
5	<i>Mamostay Ladê</i> (The Village Teacher)	1951	Duhok
6	<i>Kilolan</i> (Les Miserables)	1952	Sulaymaniyah
7	<i>Karkirdinî Bekelk</i> (To Work Productively)	1952	Sulaymaniyah
8	<i>Gulî Xwênawî</i> (The Blood Red Rose)	1952	Sulaymaniyah
		1953	Chamchamal
9	<i>Serî Giloleke</i>	1952	Sulaymaniyah

10	<i>Bûne Xelîfe Be Xeyal</i> (To Become Rich in Dreams)	1952	Sulaymaniyah
11	<i>Sertaşî Gewc</i> (The Stupid Barber)	1952	Koya
12	<i>Koneperestî</i> (Obscurantism)	1952	Koya
13	<i>Otîllo</i> (Othello)	1953	Erbil
14	<i>Şêrdil</i> (The Braveheart)	1953	Koya
15	<i>Şîrbayî</i>	1953	Koya
16	<i>Jin Be Jin</i>	1953	Koya
17	<i>Bûk û Zawa</i> (Bride and Groom)	1953	Kirkuk
18	<i>Omerî Dadperwer</i> (The Just Omar)	1953	Kirkuk
19	<i>Kawey Asinger</i> (Kawa the Blacksmith)	1953 1954	Koya Koya
20	<i>Brûskey Şîrîn</i> (The Sweet Thunder)	1954	Sulaymaniyah
21	<i>Întixabat</i> (The Election)	1954	Erbil
22	<i>Qel û Rêwî</i> (The Raven and the Fox)	1954	Sulaymaniyah
23	<i>Cenabî Mufetîş</i> (The Inspector)	1954	Sulaymaniyah
24	<i>Dildarî w Peymanperwerî</i> (Love and Faithfulness)	1955	Chamchamal
25	<i>Împiryalîzm û Şeytan</i> (Imperialism and Satan)	1955	n.p.
26	<i>Sertaş</i> (The Barber)	1955	Erbil
27	<i>Gerdaweke</i>	1955	n.p.
28	<i>Hêzî Tarîkî Ya Tawanî Dildarî</i> (The Force of Darkness or the Price of Love)	1952	n.p.
27	<i>Kiç û Qutabxane</i> (The Girls' Schooling)	1955 1956	Sulaymaniyah n.p.

28	<i>Xawenî Hewt Sen'et Belam</i> <i>Bextreş</i> (The Unfortunate Craftsman)	1956	Koya
29	<i>Afret û Nuşte</i> (Women and Magic)	1956	n.p.
30	<i>Destî Mandû Le Ser Sikî Têre</i>	1956	Sulaymaniyah
31	<i>Otîllo</i> (Othello)	1956	Sulaymaniyah
32	<i>Gilkoy Tazey Leyl</i> (Leyl's New Grave)	1956	Sulaymaniyah
33	<i>Bazirganî Vînîsiya</i> (The Merchant of Venice)	1956	Sulaymaniyah
34	<i>Nan</i> (Bread)	1956	Sulaymaniyah
35	<i>Zêrîn</i> (Golden)	1956	Halabja
		1959	n.p.
36	<i>Kiçe Neqede</i> (The Girl from Naghada)	1956	Halabja
		1959	n.p.
37	<i>Çon Bûm Be Hunermend</i> (How I became an Artist)	1956	Halabja
38	<i>Zemherîr</i> (The Freeze)	1956	Halabja
39	<i>Hakimî Qereqoş</i>	1957	Koya
40	<i>Pişîley Reş</i> (The Black Cat)	1957	Koya
41	<i>Wişke Mê Bazî</i>	1957	Sulaymaniyah
42	<i>Xom Be Xomim Kird</i> (I Did This to Myself)	1957	Sulaymaniyah
43	<i>Le Rêy Nîştmanda</i> (For the Homeland)	1957	Rewanduz
44	<i>Şehrezad</i> (Shahrazad)	1957	Erbil
45	<i>Tawanî Çî Bû?</i> (For What Crime Was She Punished?)	1958	Sulaymaniyah
46	<i>Serî Gilkoke</i> (On the Grave)	1958	n.p.
47	<i>Emrekey Begim</i> (My Lord's Order)	1958	n.p.

48	<i>Rehêle</i> (The Storm)	1959	n.p.
49	<i>Şewî Kotayî</i> (The Final Night)	1959	n.p.
50	<i>Kolnedanî Qutabîyan</i> (The Resistance of the Students)	1959	n.p.
51	<i>Bê îşî</i> (Sloth)	1959	n.p.
52	<i>Şeş Pencayî</i> (Six Times Fifty)	1959	n.p.
53	<i>Le Encamda Tawanbar Dan Be Tawanekeyda Denê</i> (In the End, the Guilty Admits to the Guilt)	1959	n.p.
54	<i>Tawanê Le Asmanda</i> (A Guilt Committed in the Heavens)	1959	n.p.

Theatrical Performances in the 1960s

No.	Title	Year	Place
1	<i>Hêzî Xoşewîstî</i> (Power of Love)	1960	n.p.
2	<i>Le Naxî Dilewe</i> (From the Bottom of Heart)	1960	n.p.
3	<i>Wişke Mê Bazî</i>	1960	n.p.
4	<i>Çon Bûm Be Hunermend</i> (How I became an Artist)	1960	n.p.
5	<i>Bûkî Jêr Dewarî Reş</i> (The Bride Under the Black Tent)	1960	n.p.
6	<i>Xesûe Ya Ejdîha</i> (Mother-in-Law or Monster-in-Law)	1960	n.p.
7	<i>Şakir, Min Dayktim</i> (Shakir, I'm your Mother)	1960	n.p.
8	<i>Gîsk Niye Bizne</i> (It's not a Lamb, it's a Kid)	1969	n.p.
9	<i>Xebatî Krêkaran</i> (The Workers' Struggle)	1969	n.p.
10	<i>Serînî Badarî</i> (A Pillow for Rheumatism)	1969	n.p.

11	<i>Biryar û Encam</i> (The Final Decision)	1969	n.p.
12	<i>Bilîmet</i> (Ingenious)	1969	n.p.
13	<i>Derbendî Segirme</i> (Sagirma Canyon)	1969	n.p.

Timeline: Iraqi Kurds

A chronology of key events:

1918 - After the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in World War I, British forces occupy the oil-rich Ottoman vilayet (province) of Mosul, bringing extensive Kurdish-populated areas under British rule.

1919 - Mosul area is added to the new Iraqi state, which comes under a British mandate.

1920 - Treaty of Sevres, signed by the defeated Ottoman government, provides for a Kurdish state, subject to the agreement of the League of Nations. Article 64 of the Treaty gives Kurds living in the Mosul vilayet the option of joining a future independent Kurdistan.

1921 - Emir Faysal crowned king of Iraq, including Mosul.

Uprising

1923 - Shaykh Mehmûd Berzencî rebels against British rule and declares a Kurdish kingdom in northern Iraq.

1923 - Kemal Ataturk's newly founded Turkish Republic gains international recognition with the Treaty of Lausanne. The Treaty of Sevres is not ratified by the Turkish parliament.

1924 - Sulaymaniyah falls to British forces.

1932 - Uprising in the Barzan region to protest at Iraq's admittance to the League of Nations, while Kurdish demands for autonomy are ignored.

1943 – Mela Mistefa Barzanî leads another uprising, and wins control of large areas of Erbil and Badinan.

1946 August - British RAF bombing forces Kurdish rebels over border into Iran where they join Iranian Kurds led by Qazî Mihemed, who founds an independent Kurdish state in Mahabad.

1946 - Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) holds its first congress in Mahabad. Within a few months, the "Mahabad Republic" collapses under attack from Iranian forces, and Barzanî flees to the Soviet Union.

1951 - A new generation of Kurdish nationalists revives the KDP. Barzanî is nominated president while in exile in the Soviet Union, but the real leader of the KDP is Ibrahîm Ehmed, who favours close ties with the Iraqi Communist Party.

1958 - Overthrow of the Iraqi monarchy allows Kurdish nationalists to organise openly after many years in hiding. A new Iraqi constitution recognises Kurdish "national rights" and Barzanî returns from exile.

1960 - Relations between the Iraqi government and Kurdish groups become strained. The KDP complains of increasing repression.

1961 - KDP is dissolved by the Iraqi government after Kurdish rebellion in northern Iraq.

Autonomy granted

1970 March - Iraqi government and the Kurdish parties agree a peace accord, which grants the Kurds autonomy. The accord recognises Kurdish as an official language and amends the constitution to state that: "the Iraqi people is made up of two nationalities, the Arab nationality and the Kurdish nationality."

1971 August - Relations between the Kurds and the Iraqi government deteriorate. Barzanî appeals to the US for aid.

1974 March - Iraqi government imposes a draft of the autonomy agreement and gives the KDP two weeks to respond. Barzanî rejects the agreement, which would have left the oilfields of Kirkuk under Iraqi government control, and calls for a new rebellion.

1975 March - Algiers Accord between Iran and Iraq ends Iranian support for the Kurdish uprising, which collapses. Barzanî withdraws from political life.

1975 June - Celal Talebanî, a former leading member of the KDP, announces the establishment of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) from Damascus.

1978 - Clashes between KDP and PUK forces leave many dead.

1979 - Barzanî dies, his son Mesûd Barzanî takes over the leadership of the KDP.

Iran-Iraq War

1980 - Outbreak of war between Iran and Iraq.

1983 - PUK agrees to a ceasefire with Iraq and begins negotiations on Kurdish autonomy.

1985 - Under increasing Iraqi government repression, the ceasefire begins to break down.

1986 - Iranian government sponsors a meeting reconciling the KDP and PUK. Now both major Kurdish parties are receiving support from Tehran.

1987 - Talebanî and Barzanî join forces with a number of smaller Kurdish factions to create the Kurdistan Front.

1988 - As the Iran-Iraq war draws to a close, Iraqi forces launch the "Anfal Campaign" against the Kurds. Tens of thousands of Kurdish civilians and fighters are killed, and hundreds of thousands forced into exile, in a systematic attempt to break the Kurdish resistance movement.

1988 16 March - Thousands of Kurdish civilians die in a poison gas attack on the town of Halabjah near the Iranian border. Human rights watchdogs and Kurdish groups hold the Iraqi regime responsible.

1991 March - After the expulsion of Iraqi troops from Kuwait in March 1991, the uprising grinds to a halt and US-led forces refuse to intervene to support the rebels. Around 1.5 millions Kurds flee before the Iraqi onslaught, but Turkey closes the border forcing hundreds of thousands to seek refuge in the mountains.

Safe haven

1991 April - Coalition forces announce the creation of a "safe haven" on the Iraqi side of the border. International aid agencies launch a massive aid operation to help the refugees. Meanwhile, Talebanî and Barzanî open negotiations with Saddam Hussein on autonomy for Kurdistan.

1991 July - Talks continue in Baghdad, but Kurdish pêşmerge forces take control of Erbil and Sulaymaniyah, in defiance of Iraqi government orders.

1991 October - Fighting between Kurdish and Iraqi government forces breaks out. Saddam Hussein fortifies the border of Kurdish-held northern Iraq and imposes a blockade.

1992 May - Elections held in areas under Kurdish control give KDP candidates 50.8% of the vote, while the PUK takes 49.2%. The two parties are equally balanced in the new Kurdish government.

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