Genealogies of the Kurds: Constructions of Nation and National Identity in Kurdish Historical Writing

Abbas Vali

4

Genealogies of the Kurds: Constructions of Nation and National Identity in Kurdish Historical Writing

Abbas Vali

The concept of Kurdish nationalism deployed in contemporary nationalist historical and political discourse is essentialist. It refers to the multiplicity of discourses and practices which define the Kurds as a uniform nation with sovereign rights to their homeland, Greater Kurdistan, currently ruled by the four sovereign states of Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey. These discourses and practices are forms of articulation of the "national" claim as well as the means of its realization. The concept designates a common national "origin", the foundation of a political community with a uniform identity given to history, and a political project involving state formation. Although nationalist discourse recognizes the current fragmentation of the nationalist political project resulting from the division of Kurdistan, it retains the notion of uniform community and identity, conceived as expressions of the common origin, which supersede the existing political boundaries and the structural diversity of Kurdish societies in the region. This transcendental national origin informs the historicist narrative and essentialist conceptual structure of nationalist discourse. The essentialist definition of Kurdish nationalism has also found currency in academic discourses on Kurdish history and politics, which have proliferated since the Iranian revolution of 1979 and especially since the Persian Gulf War in 1991.

But this essentialist definition, I shall argue in this essay,

is too general and simplistic to render the historical specificity of Kurdish nationalism and grasp its political and ideological diversity. It fails to address the wide conceptual and political variations which have marked Kurdish nationalist discourse and practice since its inception in the early decades of the present century. These variations reflect the persistence of different conceptions of "origin" in the nationalist discourse, which inform different and competing notions of Kurdish history, community and identity. This essay will consider the two major forms of nationalist discourse which have dominated historical and political writing among the Kurdish intelligentsia both in Kurdistan and in the diaspora since the early decades of the present century: the "primordialist" and the "ethnicist" discourses. The analysis will focus on their respective genealogies of the Kurdish nation and the manner in which these are used to construct conceptions of national identity and history. This will be followed by a critical investigation of the "modernist-constructionalist" critique of primordialist and ethnicist conceptions of nation and nationalism currently prevalent in the Western academy. This critique, though it successfully subverts the theoretical premises of nationalist discourse, is not without its problems. The empiricist epistemology of the constructionist discourse, this essay argues, leads to another and equally misconceived form of essentialism: the empiricist conception of historical fact as both the object and the means of validation of nationalist discourse reduces nationalism to a discourse of origin, leaving no room for the conceptualization of national identity as the strategic locus of nationalist politics. This argument, finally, is deployed to develop a fresh theoretical approach to Kurdish nationalism and national identity.

Primordial and Ethnicist Conceptions of Kurdish Nationalism

The mainstream Kurdish nationalist, hailing from

Diyarbakir, Mahabad or Arbil, is "primordialist". For him/her the Kurdish nation is a primordial entity, a natural formation rooted in the nature of every Kurd, defining the identity of people and community throughout history. The "primordialist" conception of origin not only prevails in nationalist political circles, but is also espoused and nurtured by an established trend in nationalist scholarship[1] which conveniently identifies national identity with human nature, as a quality inherent in the human individual, defining his/her social and political existence. The primordial presuppositions of this conception of Kurdish nationalism transcend the structural and cultural conditions of the nationalist political project. Nationalist political practice is thus perceived as the objective manifestation of the national will latent in history. The primordialist political project is revivalist.[2]

---

1. See e.g. J. Nebez, "The Idea of the Kurdish Nation", Stockholm 1984, and "*Nishtiman*: the Language of Komala JK and the Ideology of the Petty-Bourgeois Nationalist Intelligentsia in Kurdistan", Stockholm 1985 (see n. 19); Ferhad Shakeley, *Kurdish Nationalism in Mam-û-Zin of Ahmadi Khani*, Sweden: Uppsala 1983; Havar, *Shaikh Mahmoud Gharaman*, London 1992.

2. Primordialist conceptions of nation are also popular in the Western academy, especially in the disciplines of political theory and anthropology. Political theorists have often invoked the primordial origins of the nation to attack nationalism, to treat it as an instinctive, primordial and anti-rational discourse that does not deserve to be accorded the status of "thought", as the object of theoretical investigation. Karl Popper and Isaiah Berlin represent such a tendency most clearly. See K. Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, London 1962; I. Berlin, "The Best Twig: A Note on Nationalism", *Foreign Affairs* vol. 51, 1972, pp. 11-30. Anthropologists, on the other hand, have referred to the primordial origins of the nation in order to emphasize its persistence in human history as a "natural" and universal entity, an extension of kinship relations. The nation perceived as such is not a historical or political construct; but its rise and fall depend on political and historical conditions. See C. Geertz (ed.), *Old Societies and New States*, New York: Free Press 1963; R. Shils, "Primordial, Personal, Sacred and Civil Ties", *British Journal of Sociology* no. 7,

The primordialist conception, though still prevalent in political circles, has been challenged by a slow but steady stream of scholarship seeking to locate the national origin in Kurdish ethnicity. The distinctive feature of the "ethnicist" approach is the use of theory in historical argument, which means that their nationalist argument is usually informed by other political and ideological discourses, mainly Marxism, liberalism and democratic theory.[3] In ethnicist discourse, notions of Kurdish community and identity are both premised on the common national origin, defined in terms of a uniform Kurdish ethnicity. Ethnic categories are in this sense the common constituent elements of Kurdish national origin and identity. Ethnicist constructions of the common origin thus provide the discursive field for the construction of the uniform national identity, while national identity always involves essentialist claims to the common origin. This coincidence of the discourses of origin and identity in the ethnicist approach means that ethnic categories alone define the boundaries of the Kurdish community. They delineate a historically and culturally defined zone of inclusion and exclusion which persistently affirms the uniform identity of the Kurdish community by contrasting its ethnic origin to those of the surrounding Arab, Persian and Turkish communities.[4]

1957.

3. See Kamal Madhar Ahmad, *Mejou* ("History"), Baghdad 1983, and *Chand laparek le mejoui geli koord* ("Some pages from the history of the Kurdish people"), Baghdad 1985; Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou, *Kurdistan and the Kurds*, London: Collet's Publishers 1965; Kendal, "Kurdistan in Turkey" and "The Kurds in the Soviet Union", in G. Chaliand (ed.), *People Without a Country: the Kurds and Kurdistan*, London: Zed Press 1980; A. Hassanpour, *Nationalism and Language in Kurdistan 1918-1985*, San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press 1992.

4. "Nation", as Hassanpour defines it, "is used consistently in the social or "ethnic" sense". It is "an historically formed community of people bound together by common language, culture, homeland, and community of economic life (i.e. existence of division of labor among various parts of the territory, and especially the existence of a middle

This uniform Kurdish identity is, for the ethnicist approach, the core of the nationalist political project. It is the vehicle for the expression of the national claim, historicized by invoking instances of rebellion and uprising as instances of the expression of the common ethnic origin, a natural quality given to history awaiting realization. The expression and realization of the origin, however, is not a natural process; it requires specific social, economic and political conditions. The conceptions of Kurdish origin and identity in this approach, though clearly essentialist, are not transcendental. The uniform Kurdish origin expresses itself through the intentions and actions of social classes and political and cultural elites and organizations. Some recent ethnicist approaches, grounded in Marxism, place a strong emphasis on historical conditions and structural constraints in the revivalist project (see Hassanpour, op. cit.).

Further, ethnicist approaches to Kurdish nationalism are generally constructed as genealogies of the nation,

---

class)". Nation-building is thus "the process of consolidation of "ethnic peoples" or tribal/rural societies into modern nations". A. Hassanpour, *Nationalism and Language in Kurdistan*, p. 44. This definition, it will be shown, runs the risk of conflating ethnic identity with national identity. For once ethnicity is perceived as the origin of the nation both before and after its formation, it would be impossible to account for the process of transition—"the process of consolidation of "ethnic peoples" or tribal/rural societies into modern nations", in his phrase. It will be seen that Hassanpour's genealogy of the Kurdish nation, his periodization of Kurdish national history, and especially his problematic conception of feudal nationalism, easily subvert the conditions of existence of nationalist movements given in his ethnicist definition. This theoretical/conceptual error is central to all ethnicist approaches to nation and national identity. The works of Smith and Armstrong, two better-known studies of nation and nationalism in the Western academy, suffer from the same shortcoming: in their analyses of the origins of the nation, ethnic and national origins constantly overlap, undermining the basis for a conceptual distinction between ethnic and national identity. Nationalist movements and ethnic rebellions are virtually indistinguishable in political and conceptual terms. See J. Armstrong, *Nations before Nationalism*, University of North Carolina Press 1982; A.D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, Oxford 1986, and *National Identity*, Penguin 1991.

explained in terms of ethnic categories. In the ethnicist genealogies of the Kurdish nation ethnic and national origins are often treated as identical categories, leading, in effect, to the common but erroneous identification of ethnic with national identity. The result is the equally erroneous conflation of nationalist discourse with the discourse of (ethnic) identity, the hallmark of all ethnicist approaches to Kurdish nationalism, regardless of their different political stance and ideological persuasion. This, in effect, obscures the already murky line separating ethnicist and primordialist conceptions of Kurdish nationalism, as witnessed by their essentially similar approach to Ahmadi Khani, the seventeenth-century poet, who is commonly hailed as the founding father of Kurdish nationalism. Khani's work *Mam v Zin* is central to the contemporary conceptualizations of Kurdish nationalism, and will be considered in some detail in the following section.[5]

Primordial and ethnicist conceptions of Kurdish nationalism, it should be emphasized, are both historicist. Their essentialist claims to national origin invoke historical teleologies constructed in terms of the intentions and activities of the Kurdish nation. Historicism has thus largely determined the form of nationalist scholarship since its inception around the turn of the century: the bulk of nationalist writing on Kurdish

---

[5.] The unanimity of opinion between primordialists and ethnicists on the status of Ahmadi Khani as the ideological pioneer of modern Kurdish nationalism (*kurdayati*) is striking. The main thrust and conceptual premises of the works of Nebez and Hassanpour on the origins of the Kurdish nation and nationalism are essentially the same; they differ only in the mode of historical interpretation, which is closely tied to their ideological and political positions. It will be seen that their erroneous perception of Khani as a forebear of Kurdish nationalism leads them to the notion of feudal nationalism, which will be shown below to be a historically anomalous and theoretically contradictory construct. Hassanpour's recent review of Shakeley's work on Khani's *Mam û Zin* is another example. Hassanpour criticizes Shakeley's interpretation of the text, and disagrees with his more than liberal handling of the historical and literary commentary. But Shakeley's principal argument, on the quintessentially nationalist character of *Mam û Zin*, is not questioned. On this they are fundamentally in agreement. See *Gzing* no. 9, October 1995, pp. 4-12.

nationalism is historical. This in turn has been used effectively by the critics of nationalist historical discourse in recent years, who maintain that nation and national identity are political constructs rather than historical antiquities; for the specific form of the nationalist discourse and the historicist character of its narrative immediately call into question the historical accuracy of its argument, that is, its correspondence with the facts of Kurdish history. It is to the consideration of this method of inquiry that we shall now turn.

The Constructivist-Modernist Critique of the Ethnicist Conceptions of Nation and Nationalism

This mode of criticism, whose intellectual ancestry may be traced to the pioneering work of Ernest Renan on the nature of nations and nationalism, entails two major assumptions: first, that nations misrepresent their own history; and second, that this misrepresentation of the history of the nation is an indispensable prerequisite of the nationalist ideology. As Renan puts it, "Getting its history wrong is a part of being a nation".[6] An impressive array of historical and political commentary has since echoed Renan's subtle remark, relating the distortions of nationalist historiography to the nature of nationalist ideology.[7]

The main target of much of the contemporary critique of nationalist historical discourse is thus the fictitious and contentious character of its subject, the nation. It is not my intention here to question the validity of this criticism, or its political and indeed methodological import. The contention that the nation is a modern political construction rather than a "subjective antiquity" is beyond reproach.

---

6. Renan's much-quoted remark is to be found in his classic "What Is a Nation?", written in 1882. For a recent translation see H. Bhabha (ed.), *Nations and Narrations*, London 1990.

7. See E. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1992; E. Gellner, *Thought and Change*, Weidenfeld & Nicholson 1964; idem, *Nations and Nationalisms*, Oxford 1988; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso 1983.

Evidently, the conceptual structure and the narrative of nationalist historical discourse depend strictly upon the historicization of this fictitious subject. In this sense, therefore, nationalist historical discourse is not only the misrepresentation but also the misconception of the real. It is erroneous conceptually and factually, and this error is necessary. It provides for a reversal of order of causality between the nation and nationalism, a discursive strategy which underpins the nationalist claim to power.

The modernist-constructivist conceptions of nation and nationalism offer a rigorous and incisive critique of the primordial and ethnicist approaches, effectively undermining their appeal to the authority of nationalist history, and with it their intellectual credibility. The constructionist critique which encounters nationalist claims with historical "fact" has had a profound influence on contemporary scholarship on ethnicity, nationalism and national identity, and its theoretical presuppositions, especially its mode of validation of nationalist discourse, are now widely used. Contextualizing the nationalist discourse to prove its inaccuracy, its non-correspondence with the facts of history, is commonplace; but only at the cost of some serious theoretical and conceptual oversights. For this mode of validation of discourse, effective as it is, depends strictly on the empiricist conception of the fact as given and identical with the real signified by it. It can no longer be sustained if the epistemological basis of this concept is proved inconsistent and therefore untenable. The historical criteria will not be valid if facts too are discursive constructs, no more real than the subject of nationalist historical writing.[8]

The empiricist assumptions of the modernist-constructionist critique of nationalist discourse lead to

---

[8.] I have discussed this issue in some detail in my work *Pre-Capitalist Iran: a theoretical history*, London 1993; see Preface. See also P. Q. Hirst, "The Necessity of Theory", *Economy and Society* vol. 7, 1979; R. Young, *White Mythologies: Writing and History in the West*, Routledge 1993, especially Preface and chapter 1.

another and no less problematic essentialism: the essentialism of historical subjectivities signified by capitalism and modernity.[9] For the appeal to the authority of the fact as the object and the means of validation of nationalist discourse effectively reduces that discourse to a mere reflection of specific historical objectivities constituted by capitalism and modernity, seeing it as the ideological expression of these determinate historical processes. Hobsbawm, for instance, conceives it as sheer ideological rhetoric for the justification of the doctrine of popular sovereignty, shaped by the democratic processes and practices associated with modern capitalism.[10] Similarly, for Gellner nationalist discourse is above all a doctrine of legitimacy suited to political and cultural processes brought about by industrialization and modernity, and its application to societies where these conditions do not exist or are in a state of infancy would necessarily have adverse results. These essentialist arguments, grounded respectively in the Marxist theory of modes of production

---

[9.] For the conception of empiricism deployed in this essay see Vali, *op. cit.*1993. It refers to the common consequences of diverse theoretical and philosophical traditions which identify knowledge with the essence of the real as present in the fact, given and self-explanatory. This doctrine of method is the hallmark of the constructionist critique of nationalist historical discourse, primordialist and ethnicist. It insists on the unassailable status of the fact as both the object and the means of evaluation of historical knowledge. The validity of the doctrine as such depends on certain key assumptions: that the fact is identical with the real signified in it; that the evidence of the historical past is identical with the past; and the past, the object of historical knowledge, exists as a presence in discourse. The centrality of these assumptions to the constructionist critique of nationalist historical discourse reduces its anti-essentialism to the metaphysics of the real—the metaphysics of "being" as "presence", to paraphrase Derrida's characterization of the bulk of the Western philosophical tradition before Heidegger. On this see J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Baltimore 1970. For this concept of empiricism see also his discussion of the works of Claude Levi-Strauss in the same volume, largely recapitulated in his often-quoted essay, "Structure, Sign and Play", in *Writing and Difference*, London 1976.

[10.] See Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, especially the introduction.

and in modernization theory, are both reductionist.[11]

The crux of my argument is that the empiricist assumptions of the modernist-constructivist critique of nationalist discourse create a discursive closure, effectively preventing the possibility of a theoretical evaluation of the historicist narrative of nationalist discourse. The case in point here is the conceptualization of national identity, which is in nationalist discourse the bearer of rights and obligations.[12] The constructionist conception of national identity is reductionist: it reduces national identity to the discursive effect of the nationalist claim to the uniform (mythical) origin, a subjective construct constituted by capitalism and modernity, which also endow it with rights and obligations defining the nationalist project. For the constructivists, needless to say, the nationalist project is strictly modern; it depends on political and cultural processes and practices historically associated with capitalism and modernity. The point, however, is that while the ethnicist approach derives national identity from a uniform ethnic origin given to and ever-present in history, the constructivist conception reduces it to a mythical origin constructed by capitalism and modernity. In both cases national identity has no discursive autonomy; it is an effect or expression of the real or assumed national origin. The historical reductionism of the constructivist conception too leads to the conflation of the discourse of identity with the discourse of origin, though its notion of national origin is fundamentally different to that espoused by the ethnicists.

This argument thus suggests that the constructionist approaches to national identity are equally historicist; for the conceptualization of national identity presupposes a reduction of the nationalist discourse to the historical conditions of its formation. This historicism, which

---

[11.] Gellner wrote extensively on nations and nationalism. See works cited in n. 7 above; also *Culture, Identity and Politics*, Cambridge 1989.

[12.] Hans Kohn was the first to make this crucial point in his seminal work *The Idea of Nationalism*, Macmillan 1946.

dominates the most incisive critique of nationalist discourse, is inseparable from its empiricist epistemology, and together they form the two pillars of constructionist essentialism indicated above.[13] It fails to distinguish between nationalism as discourse of origin and nationalism as discourse of identity. The latter cannot be simply reduced to an expression of the fictitious origin, the national myth historicized in the nationalist discourse. Although national identity entails a notion of origin, the status of this notion in the discourse is determined by strategies other than historicization. That is, it involves the inscription of the origin in a complex and changing relationship with other national identities competing for hegemony. This relationship with the "other" signifies the pivotal role of "difference" in the construction of national identities.[14] If, therefore, national identity cannot be

---

13. For the intrinsic relationship between historicism/essentialism and empiricism as the philosophy of presence see Derrida *op. cit.* 1970, 1976. Derrida argues that the concept of history as objectivity "has always been in complicity with the philosophy of presence... The thematic of historicity... has always been required by the determination of Being as presence". If the fundamental logic of this argument is correct it follows that the constructionist concepts of nation and national identity can hardly avoid the question of the origins of the nation or the inevitable essentialism of genealogy. For the question "what is the nation?" means essentially "where and when did this nation begin?" These critical remarks on the constructionist conceptions of nation and national identity also entail the elements of a non-essentialist non-historicist conception of the nation as a political entity, the boundaries of which are defined by citizenship, which supersedes ethnic, racial and sexual relations. This theoretical argument for the non-essentialist notion of the nation forms the subject of a forthcoming essay.

14. Hugh Seton-Watson in an earlier commentary on nationalism considers the doctrine of popular sovereignty as the very essence and foundation of nationalist discourse. Nationalist ideology, he contends, is but rhetoric justifying the application of this doctrine to the nation. The ambiguous relationship between nationalist ideology and democratic doctrine is noted by Seton-Watson, though only in passing, and the archaic nature and irrational character of the former is blamed for it. See his *Nations and the State*, London 1977. Hobsbawm, on the other hand, explores this relationship in some detail, providing a

reduced to a given/natural (primordial/ethnic) origin, neither can it be deduced from the objective structures of industrial capitalism and the culture of modernity.

Nationalist discourse is not a discourse of origin, given or constructed. Rather it is primarily a discourse of identity in which the popular claim to sovereignty is posed. National identity is constituted in a relationship of "otherness" with existing and emergent identities, that is, in a system of differences with the "other" in which it is inscribed, and which threaten to undermine its internal unity from the outside. This definition of nationalist discourse as the locus of the claim to popular sovereignty refers to the significance of modernity and its achievements, in particular the institution of the modern nation-state and democratic theory, in the construction of modern national identity: modern national identity is intrinsically tied to political sovereignty. Nationalist discourse is thus a discourse of rights premised on sovereignty. As discourse of rights, nationalism presupposes an ideal type of the nation state, an entity in which all citizens will be members of its uniform national community. The nation-state as such is the condition of realization of national rights and its boundaries are defined by ethnic relations. In fact, the correspondence between the political and ethnic boundaries of the state is essential for the legitimacy of the nationalist cause and the national state. The relationship between nationalist discourse and democratic theory as such has important implications for the conceptualization of the modern national identity. For it suggests, above all, that the construction of national identity presupposes specific conditions, mainly the emergence of a public sphere historically associated with

---

historical account of the fusion of nationalism and democratic theory. Although his historical narrative refers to the ambiguities of the doctrine of popular sovereignty, they are attributed to its "interpretation" in the nationalist context; it is "politics" rather than the conceptual structure of the theory that he blames for those ambiguities (1992, op. cit.).

the foundation of a burgeoning field of discourse and practice commonly known as civil society.

The relevance of civil society to the construction of national identity arises from the historical specificity of the national difference and the conditions of its expression and articulation in the political and cultural process. Civil society is the site of the systems of difference and signification in which the subject of nationalist discourse is inscribed. In other words, it defines the "internal" process and the "external" condition of the construction of national identity. This argument alludes to two important points concerning the construction of national identity. First, the boundaries separating the private and public spheres also specify the relationship between the self and the other, and hence the major contours governing the construction of national identity within the community. Secondly, these boundaries are unstable; they shift subject to the mutation in the balance of forces in the community, a mutation which underpins the changing relationship between the self and the other and defines the essentially unstable character of national identity.

Nationalists are of course averse to this latter point. The unstable character of national identity is forcefully denied in nationalist discourse, as it is opposed to the very logic of the nationalist claim to power. But the fact that national identity is constituted by difference means that it is "ever haunted by the other" which it seeks to deny as a condition of its own confirmation. This denial of the other as the condition of the affirmation of the self is intrinsic to nationalist discourse. It targets the difference, denying ethnic, cultural and ultimately national difference in the community by transforming them into otherness. The construction of difference as otherness in nationalist discourse is a discursive strategy accompanying the politics of national self-affirmation. The emergent "national culture" thus serves to express the intrinsic unity and stability of the national identity; hence the proliferation of historical discourse indulging in genealogies of the nation.

Although these theoretical remarks may be taken to apply to the conditions of the construction of political identity in general, the pivotal role played by the concept of popular sovereignty in the conceptual structure of the nationalist discourse suggests that the construction of national identity presupposes different discursive conditions. To be more precise, democratic theory plays a major role in the discursive construction and representation of national identity. It is, in fact, instrumental in both the construction of difference as national identity and its transformation into "otherness" in the political and cultural processes of national self-affirmation. This dual inclusive-exclusive mechanism of the concepts of popular sovereignty and citizenship, the chief regulators of the relationship between the ruler and the ruled in democratic government, results from the essentially ethnic identity of political power in democratic theory. Hence the different functions of these concepts in nationalist discourse in its various forms, namely the oppositional and official nationalisms—commonly though erroneously known as minority and majority nationalisms—which usually obtain before and after the creation of the national state respectively. A brief explanation here is in order.

Nationalist discourse and democratic theory are locked in an intimate but ambiguous relationship. This ambiguity has been widely noted in the contemporary literature on nationalism and state formation, and is usually attributed to the specific character of nationalist ideology, as a modern and an essentially populist ideology with an archaic conceptual structure. Relatively little had been said about the contribution of democratic theory to this continuous ambiguity before the recent proliferation of multi-culturalism, which highlighted its restrictive effects on civil society, political participation and citizenship in Western democracies. Multi-culturalism, more than any other factor, has pushed the boundaries of the contemporary debate on democratization and civil society in social and political theory. Although the contemporary attempts to radicalize

democratic governance widely recognize the ethnic boundaries of the concept of democratic citizenship and hence its exclusionary character in liberal democracy, little is said about the theoretical foundations of this anomaly in democratic theory; the ethnic identity of political power in democratic theory resulting primarily from the preponderance of the doctrine of popular sovereignty. The concept of popular sovereignty, which defines the identity of political power in democratic theory, has an ethnic identity defined by the dominant ethnicity in the nation-state. The concepts of right and citizenship associated with this doctrine are thus exclusive and cannot account for non-sovereign ethnic, racial and sexual differences within the boundaries of the nation state. In other words, in democratic theory the dominant ethnicity is the locus of political sovereignty, whose ethnic identity also defines the boundaries the national political process and participation within the polity. Normative concepts of citizenship and right deny the other, the ethnic, racial and sexual identities/differences within the political boundaries of the nation-state which threaten to subvert the unity of the sovereign and destabilize its hegemonic domination.[15]

[15.] The recent proliferation of theoretical discourse on "democratic exclusion" is prompted in no small measure by the increasingly problematic nature of the democratic political process and citizenship in the multi-ethnic, multi-racial and multi-national societies of western Europe and north America. The pioneering works of Charles Taylor, published in the 1990s, remain a decisive influence on the development and direction of the normative argument on democracy and diversity in philosophy and political theory; see his influential essay in A. Gutmann (ed.), *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1994. See also Taylor's essay "The Dynamics of Democratic Exclusion" in *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 9, No. 4 1998. Will Kymlicka's *Multicultural Citizenship*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1997, is another important contribution to the normative literature on democracy and multiculturalism, which has generated a considerable discussion in the field of political and social theory. For an informed and intelligent discussion of multiculturalism see B. Parekh, *Rethinking Multi-culturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory*, Macmillan Press 2000. I have indicated elsewhere

This democratic anomaly is particularly significant in modern multi-ethnic and multi-cultural states, where the ethnic identity of the sovereign serves to redefine not only the conditions of citizenship and political participation but also the boundaries of the nation, and hence the means and conditions of inclusion in and exclusion from it. In other words, they define the juridico-political conditions of "otherness" of the non-sovereign ethnicities within the framework of the "national" state. For the emergent "national" identity becomes the locus of rights and obligations predicated on the dominant ethnos as sovereign, hence excluding/ denying other ethnic, racial and cultural identities, which are regarded as non-sovereign/national and therefore subversive. This process in turn leads to a redefinition of the normative concepts of public and private in the official (nationalist) discourse. The public sphere is thus identified with the "national" domain, whose boundaries are defined by the dominant/sovereign ethnic relations. The private sphere, on the other hand, encompasses all non-national/non-sovereign political identities, whose appearance in the public sphere so defined is a perverse intrusion, destabilizing national/ sovereign

---

that the normative critiques of democratic theory pose important questions regarding the representation of the "marginal" and excluded identities in the political and legal process, but fail to provide appropriate answers to them. For example, for Kymlicka the inability of the democratic process to represent ethnic and cultural difference is rooted in the inadequacies of the concept of citizenship, that is, the rights and the conditions of their realization in society. But in making this point he fails to relate it to political sovereignty and its restrictive effects on the democratic political process, thus arguing for a change in the conditions of citizenship without a change in the "ethnic" identity of the sovereign, the identity of political power in democratic polity. The discourse of rights within which Kymlicka poses and answers his questions is defined by the discourse of sovereignty which leaves no room for non-sovereign identities; the marginal, the excluded and the stateless remain unrepresented and unrepresentable. See A. Vali, "The Kurds and Their Others: Fragmented Identity and Fragmented Politics" in *Comparative Studies of Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. XVIII, No. 2, 1998.

identity. Thus this theoretical anomaly, more recently termed the "homogenizing" function of liberal democracy by its normative critics, refers to a deeper paradox in the conceptual structure of the democratic theory. A consideration of the "democratic paradox" and its effects on the conceptualization of the nation and national identity, as was seen, supersedes the theoretical limitations of the constructivist theories of nationalism.[16]

---

16. Contemporary political and social theorists working outside the restrictive domain of normative presuppositions of foundationalist discourse have produced more constructive criticism of the "democratic exclusion" and the conditions of representation of the non-sovereign identities, especially in relation to the denial of sexual, ethnic and racial differences in democratic polity. See for example B.S. Turner (ed.), *Citizenship and Social Theory*, Sage Publications 1994, especially Turner's introduction and B. Hindess's contribution to the volume; W.E. Connolly, *Identity and Difference: Democratic Negotiation of a Political Paradox*, Cornell U. P. 1991; G. Calhoun, *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity*, Blackwell 1994; E. Laclau (ed.), *The Making of Political Identities*, Verso 1994. Connolly's work is a Derridean attempt to outline and rectify the inconsistencies of democratic theory. The essays in the collection edited by Calhoun, especially his own, are still negotiating a compromise between critical theory and deconstruction, between Habermas and Derrida, although there are indications of the abandonment of the former in favour of the latter. Laclau's collection opens with an essay on "Minding the Gap: the Subject of Politics", by himself and Lilian Zac, mapping out the theoretical crisis concerning the constitution of political identity, which is variously taken up by subsequent contributors. Bobby Sayyid's contribution to the collection is particularly noteworthy: this essay, which proudly holds the editor (among others) "accountable for its shortcomings", is an immature attempt to explain the complex issue of the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the contemporary Middle East. It constructs an almost binary opposition between an authentic Islam and a Westernized (modernist) Kemalism. The result is a sad restatement of the modernization theory in reverse, in which the author demonstrates his ignorance of both political Islam and Kemalist ideology. Political Islam is inconceivable without the "conditions of modernity"; nor can Kemalism be conceived without a discourse of origins which constructs a genealogy for the "Turkish Nation", tracing its uniform origins to a distant past, and stretching history far beyond the advent of Islam. It is Kemalism as the discourse of authenticity which defines the Kurd as the "mountain Turk".

These theoretical remarks will serve to outline the discursive condition of the formation of Kurdish identity in the final section of this essay. It will be shown that the political and cultural processes and practices constituted by the triumphant nationalist movements and emergent "national" states in Turkey, Iraq and Iran set the stage for the emergence of modern Kurdish national identity in three parts of the Kurdish territory after the First World War. The national states in these countries, and the official nationalisms which were constructed to legitimize their increasingly authoritarian rule and hegemonist political culture, varied in form and character. Their structural dynamics charted diverse paths of modernization and development, with diverse effects on the general course and the modality of development of Kurdish societies in their respective "national" territories. Kurdish identity has borne the mark of this political and cultural diversity of the other; it has been deeply fragmented since its inception. But let us now return to the ethnicist and primordialist constructions of Kurdish national history and national identity.

Genealogies of the Kurds

In the following I shall consider three major nationalist attempts to construct Kurdish history and identity. The works of Zaki and Hassanpour offer variants of the ethnicist conception of Kurdish nationalism, while Nebez exemplifies the primordialist approach. Differences between the three accounts show the influence of other political discourses and practices on each author's constructions of the origin and genealogy of the Kurdish nation, as well as revealing the crucial effects of the prevailing political and ideological conditions—specifically the state of nationalist discourse and practice in parts of Kurdistan—on the authors' presentations of the nationalist project. Zaki's work is largely liberal in perception, displaying a very tenuous relationship with democratic

theory and the doctrine of popular sovereignty. Writing in Iraq under the British mandate and in the early years of the Hashemite rule, his nationalist project, in so far as he has one, is clearly cultural and autonomist. His assessment of the rise and fall of the Kurdish movements since the early nineteenth century leaves him in no doubt that the quest for independence lacks the requisite internal and external conditions. Nebez and Hassanpour, on the other hand, write in exile, as part of the growing Kurdish diaspora in the West whose existence signifies above all the repeated defeat of the autonomist movements and projects by the four sovereign states, and their increasing violence in the face of rising dissent and opposition. Nebez's genealogy of the Kurdish nation involves a transcendental notion of nation and national identity, which lays the ground for a political project excluding all but an independent state in Greater Kurdistan. His nationalist project clearly espouses the doctrine of popular sovereignty, but his obsessive reiteration of the uniqueness of the idea of Kurdish nationalism and an entirely mythical notion of freedom militate against the precepts of democratic theory in his work. For Hassanpour, however, the uniform ethnic origin is latent in the historical development of Kurdish society, and expresses itself in the thoughts and actions of dominant social classes and strata in each period of its history. His genealogy of the Kurdish nation is grounded in the Marxist theory of the modes of production, which also specifies the discursive conditions for the theoretical categories of democratic theory in his approach. Hassanpour's discourse, as will be seen, provides for both cultural and political nationalism; the argument for a Kurdish state does not exclude programmes for regional autonomy.

However, the Kurdish historical writings and the genealogies of the Kurdish nation considered below, despite such conceptual and political differences, share common characteristics. They are determined by two main factors: the violence of the "sovereign identity" perpetrated by the modern territorial state in Turkey, Iraq and Iran; and

the political and ideological development of the Kurdish movements. The constant interaction between these two factors is reflected in the conceptual mutations and development of Kurdish historical discourse.

In the opening chapter of his influential work *A Brief History of the Kurds and Kurdistan*, Zaki explains the circumstances which precipitated the writing of the book.[17] "How did I come to write this book?", he asks, and informs the reader:

> Following the replacement of the general concept of Osmani [Ottomanism] by the notion of Turani [Turanism] in Turkey, naturally I too, like members of the other *millets*, took pride in my own roots within this [Turkish] community more strongly, and national pride impelled me to express my feelings on every occasion. I did not however know anything about the origins and the history of the [Kurdish] nation, since we had not been introduced to such an idea at school, nor had we felt the necessity of investigating Kurdish history after we left school. The concept of Ottoman society had to some extent weakened the feeling of national solidarity amongst all of us. So I

[17.] Muhammad Amin Zaki was born in 1880 in Sulaimaniya as an Ottoman subject, and was educated in the military academies at Baghdad and Istanbul at the end of the nineteenth century. During the First World War he was an Ottoman military officer in Iraq, an aide to Mustapha Kemal Pasha, commander of the Ottoman Seventh Army in Syria. After the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire he joined the administration of the British Mandate in Iraq, holding his first Cabinet post in 1925, and rose to prominence after independence. It is reported that Zaki could not to the end of his life speak Arabic properly: Kurdish and Ottoman Turkish remained his main languages. Zaki's most influential work is his *Kholasa-ye ki Tarikh i Kurd va Kurdistan* ("A Brief History of the Kurds and Kurdistan"), 2 vols., Baghdad 1931 and 1937; volume and page number references are given in the text. Passages quoted are my own translation.

> kept asking myself: what is the natural origin of the Kurds, and what has happened to them [in history]? (vol. I p.1)

Thus according to Zaki, the demise of Ottoman universalism and the subsequent rise of Turkish nationalism set the stage for the emergence of modern Kurdish historical writing. This crucial transformation, which released the tide of ethnic self-awareness from the restraining influence of the primordial (Islamic) ethos of the *millet* system, led Zaki to a search for his Kurdish identity. In this sense writing a history of the Kurds and Kurdistan is as much an exercise in self-awareness as an attempt to construct a genealogy of Kurdish nationalism.

The two processes, however, are never distinct. They have the same origin and point of reference in Zaki's discourse: the emergence of a uniform Turkish national identity which is rapidly replacing the universalist ethos of Ottomanism in the official discourse. This emergence is the absent cause of his historical narrative. But Zaki's self-awareness as a Kurd, his attempt to understand and define his Kurdish identity, and hence his reaction to the emergent Turkish nationalism and national identity, is quite different to that of a colonial subject experiencing self-consciousness. Unlike the colonized, Zaki shares the pre-history and the ideological baggage of the Turkish nationalist. Both were Ottoman reformers with secular outlooks; both were modernizers who wanted to transform and recast the Ottoman polity on new democratic foundations. But like the colonized, he discovers his Kurdish identity at the moment when the normative assumptions respecting his identity within a universalist system are denied, when ethnic differences are taken to constitute otherness, to become the ideological bedrock of the politics of state formation in the modern Turkey.[18]

[18.] Although Turkish nationalism was the dominant ideological influence on the formation of Zaki's political thought, like most educated Kurds of his generation he was familiar with Armenian

This tension in Zaki's outlook is also reflected in the political ambivalence that marks his historical work, largely written in Iraq under the Mandate and the early phase of Hashemite rule. Zaki begins with a genealogy of the Kurds in which the elements of Kurdish identity appear as givens, defined in terms of their difference from the constituent elements of Turkish, Arab and Persian identities. But this genealogy does not have a premeditated political-ideological (nationalist) purpose. It is not a genealogy of the national present—that is, a rediscovery of the past in order to lay claim to that present. Rather it is primarily an attempt to construct a historical memory which would bridge the inexplicable hiatus between the Ottoman past and the Iraqi Kurdish present, a hiatus which influences Zaki's image of the self in the new political conditions under the Mandate, determining his conception of Arab rule before independence. Zaki's initial hesitations about Arab rule disappear with the consolidation of Hashemite rule in Iraq, and the historical memory becomes indistinguishable from the genealogy of the nation.

Although the genealogy of the Kurdish nation subsequently forms the structure of Zaki's work, the *Brief History* cannot be classified as a piece of nationalist historiography without running the risk of gross conceptual generalization. Zaki argues that genealogy is the point of departure in the historiography of the nation. But to establish the genealogy of a nation, he admits, is a practice fraught with difficulties; the historian is often compelled to rely on the established opinions of scientists and orientalists, who variously emphasize ethnicity, language and territory as the constituent elements of the national origin in history (vol. 2, pp. 1-2). Zaki further contends that these elements, important as they are, are seldom to be found in a single nation; that is to say, there is seldom a nation which speaks a uniform national language, is of a uniform ethnic origin, and occupies a historically defined

---

nationalism, and had been influenced by it as a dynamic political trend in Ottoman society.

geographical entity. Zaki's remarks, in effect, cast some doubt on the nationalist myth of a uniform origin altogether.

These reservations about the possibility of a uniform national origin, as asserted by nationalist historiography, remain an isolated instance in Zaki's discourse. He does not pursue the line of argument to its logical conclusion, that is, the rejection of a uniform national origin in the historiography of the Kurds. Instead Zaki takes up the method adopted by contemporary Arab and Turkish historians, and embarks on a systematic genealogy of the Kurds—their uniform ethnic origin, language and historical habitat (vol. 2 pp. 84-264, and especially pp. 217-37).

It is interesting to note that although Zaki's genealogy is clearly constructed on an ethnicist notion of nation and national origin, his account of the conditions of formation and development of nationalist politics is strikingly modern. His genealogy entails a modernist critique of Kurdish nationalist movements since the mid-nineteenth century, directed above all at the traditional leadership. Political discord and personal rivalry among the leadership, and the primordial relations which are their breeding grounds, are singled out as the main reason for the eventual collapse of these movements (see esp. pp. 216-17, 234-237, 256-257). Zaki's account of these repeated failures indicates that from his point of view the predominance of the traditional leadership and of primordial loyalties is symptomatic of their immaturity; modern nationalist movements require specific objective and subjective conditions:

> We said above that immaturity has been the most fundamental reason for the failure of the Kurdish movements. This is as much true of the present as it is of the past. Two factors are particularly necessary for the creation of an independent state: knowledge and wealth. This is true especially today.

> Any people not possessing these two treasures cannot achieve independence, and all its efforts for independence will be doomed, resulting in nothing but financial and spiritual damage. Even supposing that the prevailing political climate may help such a people to achieve independence, this people will not benefit from the independence; it will not have peace; it will be enslaved, but merely in a different way. Many examples prove the truth of this general rule.

The point of reference implicit in this argument is the conditions of the formation of the modern nation state in Europe. It is therefore no exaggeration to argue that from Zaki's point of view the success of Kurdish nationalism depended on the condition of modernity in Kurdistan, and especially on the modern middle class and the scientific-technical/rational intelligentsia. Jemal Nebez's primordialist approach, by contrast, sees the conditions of modernity, the Kurdish modern bourgeoisie and intelligentsia, as but obstacles to the realization of the historical goal.

Jemal Nebez, in two more recent works on Kurdish history and nationalism, defines Kurdish nationalism as the quest for a Kurdish nation-state in the Greater Kurdistan.[19] The origins of Kurdish nationalism, he argues, are not known to us. Although independent (autonomous) Kurdish

---

[19.] Jemal Nebez, *Bir i Natawa i Kurdi* ("The Idea of the Kurdish Nation"), Stockholm 1984; and *Gowari Nishtiman: Zemani Hali Komali JK v Ideologie Wurde Bourgeoisie Roushanbiri Nasionalist la Kurdistanda (*"*Nishtiman:* the Language of Komala JK and the Ideology of the Petty-Bourgeois Nationalist Intelligentsia in Kurdistan"), Stockholm 1985. Page references in the text to '1984' and '1985'; quotations are my own translations.

states in the form of the Kurdish principalities did undoubtedly exist, it is not known when and how the attempt was first made to establish a united Kurdish state and a united Kurdistan (1984 pp.31-32). The idea of Kurdish nationalism, Nebez nevertheless maintains, is clearly reflected in Kurdish historical writing from the sixteenth century on, especially in *Taj-al-Tawarikh* and *Sharaf Nameh*. He thus concludes that "attempts to establish a Kurdish state predate the writing of *Taj-al-Tawarikh* and *Sharaf Nameh*"(1984 p.33). But the pivotal position in Nebez's argument goes to Ahmadi Khani's *Mam u Zin*; "we also know", he asserts,

> that the Kurdish thinker Ahmadi Khani (1650/1-1706), who wrote *Mam u Zin* in 1694-5, called on the Kurds to unite and establish an independent Kurdish state, to free themselves from the domination of the Turks and the Persians and to seek a Kurdish king, a Kurdish crown, Kurdish currency and Kurdish culture ... At the same time, [remember that] Khani criticized those Kurdish princes who are content with their subjugation to the Turks and the Persians ... It is clear that if we consider all these [issues] there should remain no doubt that the idea of establishing a Kurdish national state to include the Kurdish nation as a whole, in an independent Kurdistan led by a Kurdish king, emerged in Kurdistan itself, without being borrowed from foreigners (1984 pp. 34-35).

Reference to Khani thus serves to establish two points central to Nebez's definition of the concept of Kurdish nationalism: (i) that the idea of Kurdish nationalism is "indigenous", having existed at least since the early seventeenth century; and (ii) that Kurdish nationalism since

its inception has aspired to a *national* state, in contrast to the Turks and the Persians in the sixteenth century, who like the medieval European nations sought to establish a *territorial* state.

The emphasis on the indigenous character of the idea, the assertion that *kurdayati* (Kurdish nationalism) is neither Western nor Eastern but an authentic Kurdish idea, is established and qualified in a comparative historical framework by means of comparison and contrast with Arab, Persian and Turkish histories. The guiding thread of this comparative analysis is a primordialist concept of nation and nationalism which identifies "nation" with a primordial community ever-present in history, and "nationalism" with the political-ideological aspirations and outlook of its rulers, often expressed through state policy in issues related to the defence or furtherance of the real or alleged interest of the said community/nation. Such conceptions of nation and nationalism enable Nebez to dispense easily with their historical determinateness and theoretical consistency, and to apply them in a completely arbitrary manner to Arab history in the Middle Ages, and to Ottoman and Safavid history in the sixteenth century. Nebez's brief discussion of "The Kurd and the National State" (1984 pp.31-37) is preceded by an account of the idea of Arab nationalism in the period of the Islamic state (1984 pp.18-30), and followed by "Nationalism and the Ottoman and Safavid States"; these form the basis and the frame of reference for comparison and contrast with Kurdish history. Hence the representation of the Kurdish nation and the idea of Kurdish nationalism in terms of a series of differences with the Arabs, Turks and Persians; these "national differences" are then absolutized and presented as given historical facts intrinsic to Kurdish society by asserting the uniqueness of Kurdish nationalism.

For Nebez the uniqueness of Kurdish nationalism is located in its historical objective: the quest for a national rather than a territorial state. This position rests on two erroneous assumptions, historical and theoretical.

Historically, Nebez assumes that the Ottoman and Safavid states in the sixteenth century were actually territorial states in the modern sense of the term: that they could institute and exercise territorial centralism, i.e. exercise state power in a uniform manner throughout their territory without giving up their claim to absolute sovereignty—that is, without devolving power in a vertical structure of domination and subordination which tied political power to landownership. But the crucial connection between land revenue and military service which underpinned the politics of territorial centralism in pre-capitalist states such as the Ottoman and the Safavid states in the sixteenth century presupposes a mode of distribution of political power necessarily leading to the parcellization of sovereignty.[20] This error of historical interpretation is founded on another, and a rather elementary theoretical error. Nebez does not realize that the nation-state is the territorial state *par excellence*—in fact the only truly territorial state in history, capable of exercising territorial centralism without compromising its sovereignty. In the modern nation state, the conditions of sovereignty and the conditions of territorial centralism do coincide. These conditions are produced by and rest on the modern capitalist economy, which gradually displaced politico-military relations, replacing them as the most extensive means of territorial centralism in pre-capitalist states. Nebez simply asserts the idea of the nation-state without explaining its conditions of existence, historically or theoretically. The assertion rests on a concept of the Kurdish nation as a given primordial entity, whose actions and intentions define the course of Kurdish history as a ceaseless quest for the realization of the uniform national objective of a Kurdish national state.

Nebez attempts to qualify the alleged uniqueness of Kurdish nationalism with reference to its historical specificity, which, he argues, lies in its strictly non-ideological, non-class and genuinely national character.

[20.] I have discussed this in some detail in my *Pre-Capitalist Iran* (note 5); see in particular chapter 5.

The idea of the Kurdish national state, he thus argues, neither originated in nor served the interests of a specific social class in Kurdish society; rather it was a genuinely national idea, superseding the structural limitations and the subjective impressions of class relations. Here too Nebez's argument is comparative: it is established by comparing and contrasting the idea of Kurdish nationalism with West European nationalism on the one hand, which he defines as bourgeois in form and character, and Turkish, Persian and Arab nationalism in the modern Middle East on the other (1984 pp. 35-36, pp. 37-145). The idea of Kurdish nationalism, he claims, was first formulated by the poet Ahmadi Khani when Kurdistan was a thoroughly feudal society and there existed neither a Kurdish bourgeoisie nor a petty-bourgeoisie, whether as a class, a nucleus of a class, or a group (1984 p.36).[21] Feudal nationalism in Kurdistan reached its climax in the nineteenth century in the course of the conflict between the Kurdish principalities and the central governments in Iran and the Ottoman empire. These conflicts, in Nebez's view, represented "attempt[s] to

[21.] Nebez here takes issue with the Soviet-trained Kurdish historians who, following the official Soviet line, attributed modern Kurdish nationalism to the rise of a Kurdish national bourgeoisie in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Soviet Marxist view, that there existed in the Kurdish society of the time an autonomous bourgeoisie capable of articulating and representing popular democratic demands and contradictions in a coherent nationalist discourse, is to say the least unfounded. Nevertheless, Soviet Marxism proved a powerful influence on the development of Kurdish historical and literary discourse in Iraq, especially during the 1960s and 1970s and in the framework of the Kurdish Academy in Baghdad. This trend in Kurdish historiography is best exemplified by the works of Kamal Mazhar Ahmad (see n. 3 above), which proposed a view of Kurdish history grounded on the development of productive forces in Kurdish society; this is the *prima causa* of Ahmad's historical narrative, always conspicuous by its absence, imparting rationality and logic to historical process by reducing its rich complexities to a plain unilinear progression. Ahmad's historical narrative is characteristically Soviet-Marxist: marked by an impoverished mechanical causality which presupposes theoretical argument but is unable to provide it, it is theoretically sterile.

establish a Kurdish national state, which had begun in the eighteenth century" (1984 p.36).

But this curious notion of feudal nationalism, whose essence Khani's poetry supposedly represents, is an ahistorical category, resting on a transcendental conception of nation superseding the limits of historical time and political praxis. It can be sustained only if its constituent elements, i.e. the socio-economic structure and political form of Kurdish feudalism, are left unspecified. Accordingly the social structure, economic relations and political form of Kurdish feudalism are neither conceptualized nor even defined in Nebez's writings; rather they are simply assumed as historical facts given to Kurdish history, accounting for its specificity. Nebez's argument for the uniqueness of Kurdish nationalism is founded on another notion, no less anomalous than his conception of feudal nationalism: the notion of the Kurdish classical class, which was, he asserts, the standard-bearer of feudal nationalism in Kurdistan from the seventeenth to the late nineteenth century.

The classical class in Kurdish society, in Nebez's view, consisted of *mirs* (princes) of the autonomous Kurdish principalities, the *aghas* (tribal chiefs), the *shaikhs* of the religious orders, and the urban religious intelligentsia, who dominated the Kurdish nationalist movement from the early seventeenth century. This classical class, he maintains, derived its power and influence from non-economic sources. Lineage in the case of the *mirs* and the *aghas*, and religion in the case of the *shaikhs* and the urban *mullas*, formed the basis of power, authority and domination. In the religious sector, the *shaikhs* were the leaders of the *tariqa*, the religious orders, with a largely rural following; while the traditional religious leadership were the orthodox teachers and followers of the *shari'a*, the body of Islamic religious law, whose support came mainly from the major urban centres in Kurdish society (1984, pp. 159-74; 1985, pp. 3-10). The classical leadership, religious or non-religious, Nebez concludes, "was not dependent on an

ideology; the objective of the classical leadership was to establish and lead a Kurdish national state. It was therefore necessary that all communities of the Kurdish people should participate in [this process]" (1985 p. 12).

But did the so-called classical class indeed lack an economic foundation? Nebez's argument here rests on two theoretical errors concerning the character of the feudal economy and the nature of ideology respectively. With regard to the first, Nebez can hardly deny that land was the very foundation of the predominantly agrarian economy of Kurdistan in pre-modern times. Feudal economic relations resulted from the ownership and possession of the land by the Kurdish landowning class, and as such constituted the basis of the relations of extraction of surplus, which assumed a non-economic form—i.e. the juridico-political and ideological relations of domination and subordination between the landlords and the peasants. The non-economic character of the relations of extraction of surplus easily camouflages the real economic nature of feudal exploitation, leading to their conflation. Nebez also characteristically conflates feudal economic relations with their juridico-political and ideological conditions of existence, taking the latter to account for the absence of economic activity/basis on the part of the Kurdish landowning class, which constituted the main elements of his so-called classical class.

Further, for Nebez ideology is a modern phenomenon, an attribute of social classes and strata historically associated with capitalism and modernity. The absence of these conditions in Kurdistan thus means the absence of political ideology in Kurdish nationalist politics before the beginning of the twentieth century. This erroneous assumption leads him to ignore the fact that in pre-modern societies systems of belief and value arising from or associated with religion, tradition, lineage and kinship play a major role in the constructions of the relations of domination and subordination and the mechanisms of legitimation of power. They are strictly ideological, and

perform the functions of political ideologies *par excellence*. The pre-modern Kurdish society and polity was no exception.

The situation with the religious elements of the classical class was not much different. It is common knowledge that the overwhelming majority of the religious leaders in Kurdish nationalist movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially the leading figures in established *tariqas*, were also tribal landlords: Shaikh Ubaid Allah Nahri, Shaikh Mahmoud Barzanji, Shaikh Said Shamzini, and of late Mulla Mustapha Barzani, are prime examples. Their religious influence amongst their numerous dedicated followers was never separable from tribal lineage and landownership. In fact more often than not landownership provided the necessary foundation for the articulation of lineage and religion in the vertical structure of command and obedience between the classical leaders and their retainers, usually armed men (and their extended families), who formed the bulwark of the leader's political power and military prowess, especially in relation to the states which ruled Kurdistan. Further, in most cases—notably Barzani, the last classical leader, according to Nebez—tribal lineage defined the structure of political authority and the actual organization of power, superseding the formal hierarchy of command and obedience constituted by organizations such as the Kurdish Democratic Party. Of the second category of the religious leadership, the so-called followers of the *shari'a*, the examples provided by Nebez clearly undermine his claim: Ghazi Muhammad and Mam Vasta Hilmi both came from the Kurdish landowning class. This argument should not be taken to mean that the political authority and influence of the traditional leadership was derived from their ownership of the agricultural land. Rather it means that this leadership did have a material class base, which was related, directly or indirectly, to the land; and that the essentially economic nature of its class relations should not be obscured by an emphasis on the non-economic structure of authority and

domination in feudal society in Kurdistan.

What then are the implications of these arguments for Nebez's idea of Kurdish nationalism? First, that Kurdish nationalism is after all an ideology in Nebez's own terms—a historical phenomenon presupposing determinate social, economic and political conditions of existence. Secondly, that the determinate conditions requisite for the existence and functioning of a nationalist ideology cannot be satisfied in a feudal society, Kurdish or otherwise; hence a rejection of the paradox of feudal nationalism central to Nebez's genealogy of Kurdish nationalism. The concept of feudal nationalism is a logical paradox and historical anomaly signifying a desperate but ill-conceived attempt to give a quasi-objective historical foundation to the primordialist conception of Kurdish nation and nationalism.

This primordialist conception of the Kurdish nation also dominates Nebez's consideration of the role of modernity in the development of Kurdish nationalism. Nebez does not deny the transformative effects of modernity in this development; but when he refers to the impact of modernity on Kurdish society at the turn of the century, it is only to point out its adverse and distorting effects on Kurdish nationalism. Modernity for him does not generate the original idea, but rather distorts the authentic non-ideological conception of Kurdish nationalism by turning it to a class-based political ideology. This structural transformation, which was initiated and carried out by the rising Kurdish petty-bourgeoisie from the late nineteenth century onwards, also distorted the original objective of Kurdish nationalism: the quest for a Kurdish national state was replaced by minimalist demands for regional autonomy within the states of Iran, Iraq and Turkey. This distortion of the original objective Nebez then attributes to the espousal by the rising Kurdish petty-bourgeoisie of Western values, especially Marxism-Leninism, (1984, pp.178-9).

The traditional Kurdish petty-bourgeoisie, which entered the political arena in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, subsequently formed the social structure of the

Kurdish nationalist movement after the second division of Kurdistan in 1918. The political prominence of this class, Nebez states, was the direct result of the political and economic backwardness of the Kurdish bourgeoisie, perpetuated by colonial domination (1984, p.161). The petty-bourgeoisie, however, was not an autonomous political class, capable of producing credible national leadership from within its own ranks; it had no choice but to give up the leadership to the most prominent elements of the classical class, who by contrast continued to enjoy popular prestige and support. The Hiva and the Komala, the two modern urban-based political organizations founded in 1939 and 1942 in Iraqi and Iranian Kurdistan respectively, are the examples cited by Nebez: in both cases the traditional petty-bourgeoisie surrendered the leadership of their organizations to recognized and respected figures of the classical class. The founders of the Hiva in Iraqi Kurdistan opted for Mam Vasta Hilmi, while the founders of the Komala invited Ghazi Muhammad to lead their organization soon after its foundation. Both leaders came from the ranks of the traditional or classical class, i.e. the traditional religious stratum—the followers of *shari'a* in Nebez's terms; they were highly respected figures, commanding strong urban support in their respective communities (1984, pp. 9-12).

Nebez claims that the Kurdish petty-bourgeoisie, influenced by Marxism, held minimalist objectives, but that the presence of the strongly nationalist classical/traditional religious figures in the leadership led to the radicalization of the Kurdish movements after the First World War. This trend continued so long as the petty-bourgeoisie remained economically weak and politically dependent on the classical leadership, that is until after the Second World War, when the petty-bourgeoisie underwent a regeneration which gradually tipped the balance in its favour; hence the shift from a position of subservience to the classical leadership to one of alliance and partnership, which characterized the leadership of Kurdish movements in Iraq

and Iran during the 1960s. The defeat of the Kurdish rebellion in Iraqi Kurdistan in March 1975, Nebez contends, signifies the political autonomy of the Kurdish petty-bourgeoisie, expressed by the foundation of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan in the autumn of the same year (1984, p.179).

For Nebez the history of modern Kurdish politics is thus one of persistent distortion of the idea of Kurdish nationalism, its contamination by class aspirations, personal interests and foreign ideologies, and hence its transformation from a genuine historical national demand into a political ideology. Furthermore, this process, which reduces Kurdish nationalist politics to the quest for political power and status characteristic of other Middle Eastern nationalist movements, also effectively distorts Kurdish national identity. This last argument is particularly revealing, and points to the paradox in the very heart of Nebez's discourse. On the one hand, there is a notion of Kurdish *identity* as a given absolute. It is intrinsically linked to a transcendental concept of freedom, as the historical condition of its existence and realization, and as such escapes external determination, whether economic, political or ideological. On the other hand, there is an idea of Kurdish *nationalism*, the dynamics of temporal history, which seeks realization in the establishment of a Kurdish nation-state.

Nebez makes it clear that the two processes and their objectives are fundamentally different, and that the establishment of a Kurdish nation-state may not lead to the realization of the ideal of freedom. But while he goes into some detail to explain the origins, structure and objectives of Kurdish nationalism, he makes no effort to define the nature of the notion of freedom. The conditions of existence and realization of this absolute ideal, which are ostensibly identical with those of Kurdish national identity, are entirely unspecified in his discourse. His attachment to this abstract ideal, which transcends concrete (temporal) political processes and practices, squares with his

transhistorical concept of Kurdish identity, which allegedly overrides socio-economic and political-ideological differences. Both may and in fact do generate ethical precepts to criticize the concrete processes and practices (conduct of the political forces) in Kurdish politics, but they also leave his idea of Kurdish nationalism without a determinate historical formation or concrete politics.[22]

The most detailed and rigorous study of the cultural formation of nationalism in Kurdistan is Amir Hassanpour's *Language and Nationalism in Kurdistan* (1992).[23] For Hassanpour, language is the fundamental constituent element of nationhood and national identity, and literary language the main index of the development of national consciousness in a given culture. The literary use of a language and the establishment of a literary form, he suggests, is an essentially political process, presupposing and depending on specific institutional and social conditions. Hassanpour attempts to maintain this causal relationship between political power and the literary use of Kurdish as a developmental process, which in turn forms the context of his analysis of Kurdish national identity and national consciousness. The discursive primacy of the

---

[22.] Nebez's work, including his discussion of *Mam u Zin* and his characterization of Khani as a Kurdish nationalist of the seventeenth century (initially a series of lectures delivered in the University of Uppsala, and thus widely known before publication in 1984), has proved influential in Kurdish scholarship especially in the diaspora, despite its flawed logic and inconsistent argument. Ferhad Shakely's *Kurdish Nationalism in Mem v Zin of Ehmedi Khani* (n. 1 above) is a case in point. The simplistic manner in which Shakely reiterates Nebez's arguments emphasizes their inconsistencies, albeit in a more detailed narrative, punctuated with awkward expressions which exacerbate its already obvious deficiencies. See e.g. p. 6.

[23.] See note 3. Hassanpour's conceptions of Kurdish nationalism, its origins and development are further developed in his subsequent works, notably "The Pen and the Sword: literacy, education and revolution in Kurdistan", in P. Freebody and A. R. Welch (eds.), *Knowledge, Culture and Power: International Perspectives in Literacy as Policy and Practice*, Washington D. C. 1992. References in the text are to *Language and Nationalism in Kurdistan.*

political in this causal developmental process is particularly significant. It shows clearly that from his point of view language and other constituent elements of national identity are not pre-given cultural absolutes, to be historicized in the genealogies of the nation, but rather political-cultural constructs which presuppose specific conditions of existence and development. Although Hassanpour's theoretical position as such should enable him to construct a non-essentialist historical narrative on the genesis and development of Kurdish nationalism, his intellectual commitment to the ethnicist project, albeit from a socialist and democratic stance, subverts the logic of that position.[24]

The concept of the Kurdish nation in Hassanpour's discourse signifies a historical community, internally differentiated into specific social classes and strata, the boundaries of which are defined by ethnic and cultural relations, primarily language and linguistic processes and practices.[25] Ethnic and cultural relations defined as such play a double role in Hassanpour's conception of the Kurdish nation. They not only define the boundaries of the nation in a continuous process of inclusion and exclusion, but also unify the differentiated whole by subordinating internal socio-economic and political differences to a uniform collective identity: that of the Kurd. The different social classes and strata within the Kurdish nation thus possess and express this identity, which informs the cultural and political processes of Kurdish nationalism in various stages of its development; hence the notions of feudal, transitional and bourgeois nationalism, conceived as the phenomenal expressions of the same unitary essence.

[24.] For Hassanpour's ethnicist conception of the nation see above, n. 3.

[25.] The subject of Hassanpour's work is the "literary process (language and culture) of nation-building". He writes, "The two ideologists of Kurdish nationalism, Ahmadi Khani (1650-1706) and Haji Qadir Koyi (1817-1897), argued that the Kurds could achieve sovereignty only if they were armed with two weapons—the "pen" ... and the "sword" ... The "pen" side of the story has been ignored in the literature on the subject. This dissertation deals with the "pen" element in the process of nation-building" (1992, p. 29).

Kurdish nationalists enter in the historical process as political actors expressing this uniform essence and seeking the realization of the common nationalist objective already given in the definition of the national origin. There is in Hassanpour's discourse a continuous correspondence between the historical development of Kurdish society and the development of nationalist politics, *via* the concept of social class. Economically dominant classes in different stages of the historical development of Kurdish society express the national politics, wear the mantle of nationalist politics, become the standard-bearers for Kurdish nationalism. What however sustains this economic reductionism is the essentialist concept of the Kurdish nation. The cultural relations which are said to define the common Kurdish identity of social classes also define their political action as nationalist. It will be shown that cultural essentialism and economic reductionism work in tandem to sustain the teleology of Kurdish nationalist history in Hassanpour's discourse.

Language, as has been noted, is the main element in Hassanpour's representation of the formation and development of Kurdish national identity. Other elements of national identity are systematically subordinated to it, so much so that his genealogy of Kurdish nationalism is presented almost exclusively in terms of the rise and development of the Kurdish literary language, verse and prose, from the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries on. The rise of the autonomous Kurdish principalities during this period provides the setting for the articulation of political power and cultural relations which marks the advent of the Kurdish literary form. Hassanpour thus writes:

> The literary use of Kurdish coincided with the rise of Kurdish political power in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Writing in Kurdish was itself a positive undertaking in that it involved a challenge to the

> established norms of linguistic and literary authority associated with the rule of the Arab Caliphate and its self-appointed successor, the Ottoman Caliphate. Kurdish literature was born in the mosque schools in cities and villages. The princely families and feudal lords were also involved in both literary production and patronage. (p.52)

This articulation of literary and political power, however, is more than a mere historical "coincidence". It is a causal relationship, engendered and sustained by the socio-economic structure of Kurdish society. The structural development of Kurdish society since the late fifteenth century therefore provides the basis for a periodization of Kurdish nationalism constructed in terms of the modality of the articulation of political and cultural, determined by the economic, the dominant mode of production, in the social formation. Hassanpour discerns three periods in the historical development of Kurdish nationalism: feudal nationalism; the nationalism of the transitional period (from feudalism to capitalism); and middle-class nationalism. The period of feudal nationalism runs from the first division of Kurdistan between the Ottoman and Safavid states in 1639 to the demise of the autonomous Kurdish principalities in the mid-nineteenth century, and is signified by the work of the poet Ahmadi Khani. The second, transitory period, dating from the suppression of the last Kurdish principality to the end of the First World War in 1918, is represented by the poetry of Haj Qadir Koyi. Middle-class nationalism, finally, covers the period from the second division of Kurdistan (presumably) to the present, culminating in the rise of *kurdayati* in the 1960s.

Ahmadi Khani's *Mam u Zin*, according to Hassanpour, contains a notion of the Kurdish nation as "distinct from, and at war with, the ruling nations, Turks, Persians and Arabs" (p. 56); Khani is acutely aware of the subservience of the Kurds to their powerful neighbours, and attributes it

to the “absence of a Kurdish state which was itself a result of disunity among the princes”. Khani’s solution to the Kurdish ills, Hassanpour further contends, “was to have a Kurdish King who would protect the Kurds and encourage Kurdish language and literature” (ibid.). But this was not to be, primarily due to the prevailing “feudal” social and economic relations, which encouraged parochialism and sectarian politics, and thus effectively hindered the “consolidation of the Kurdish nation” (p. 56).

Hassanpour, unlike Nebez, seems to be aware of the problematic nature of the concept of feudal nationalism. He deploys the notion to signify a historical anomaly created by the contradictory effects of the Turko-Persian wars and the subsequent policies of pacification and integration on the socio-economic structure, political organization and cultural composition of the Kurdish principalities after 1514. These policies, Hassanpour maintains, on the one hand hindered the political unification and consolidation of the Kurdish principalities as a national unit, and on the other hand bolstered a national consciousness among the educated elite, drawn from the ranks of the landed aristocracy and the clergy, who thought and wrote in terms of a Kurdish nation, exemplified by Sharaf Khan Bidlisi and Ahmadi Khani. The emergence of the new Kurdish literary “elite”, an effect of paradoxical forces operating on Kurdish society, signified the crucial articulation of politics and culture.

So far so good. But the problem is not so much the theoretical consistency of the concept of feudal nationalism as the historical existence of the phenomenon it signifies, that is, the existence of nationalism as a political ideology in Kurdistan in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Why did Khani’s quest for a Kurdish monarch signify nationalism? Hassanpour’s characterization of Khani as a Kurdish nationalist is a result of his ethnicist conception of the Kurdish nation, which leads him to conflate ethnos with nation, and ethnic identity with national identity. This widespread misconception, held almost universally by the

nationalist intelligentsia, suggests that Khani represented the claims of a nation which was already present in history and active in politics: the subject of national history and nationalist politics. But Hassanpour's characterization is clearly betrayed by his conception of nationalism, which, although never theoretically defined, indicates that nationalism is "the process of consolidation of ethnic and tribal societies into modern nations" (p. 44). For this definition amounts to saying that the Kurdish nation is not the subject but the object of nationalist politics; it did not exist in Khani's time, it had to be made. Further, the presentation of Khani as a nationalist also subverts the conceptual structure of nationalist discourse and the logic of nationalist political practice, both derived invariably from the democratic doctrine of popular sovereignty which posits the people as the sole source of political sovereignty and political legitimacy. Khani envisages a process of liberation from foreign domination whose subject is not the Kurdish people or nation, but a Kurdish monarch who is expected to protect the Kurds and promote their culture. The idea of the people or nation as the subject/agent of the historical process of liberation in nationalist discourse is unquestionably absent in Khani's discourse. Nor is Khani's ideal, a Kurdish monarchy established by an autocrat, and by definition antithetical to the concept of popular sovereignty and the associated political processes and practices, a nation-state.[26]

While Hassanpour is certainly right to state that Khani's remarks, especially his quest for a Kurdish monarch, are informed if not precipitated by the contrast between Kurdish society and its Ottoman and Safavid neighbours

---

[26.] Hassanpour's view of Khani and his place in the development of Kurdish nationalism is clearly influenced by Lescot's important commentary on *Mam u Zin*. According to Lescot, Khani "preceded his era by several centuries by proclaiming, in a time when nationalism was unknown in the Islamic lands, the individuality of the Kurds and their right to independence"; see *Historie des Littératures I: littératures anciennes, orientales et orales*, Paris: Editions Gallimard 1977, pp. 795-805.

and rulers—undoubtedly from Khani's point of view the Kurds were distinct from and at war with the Turks and the Persians—he overlooks the fact that Khani's remarks involve comparison and contrast between a stateless society and powerful autocratic states, rather than between a stateless nation and powerful nation-states. Neither the Ottoman Turks nor the Persians under Safavid rule constituted a nation in the juridico-political sense of the term. In fact Hassanpour repeatedly refers to the historical processes of the emergence of Turkish and Persian nationalism and the formation of the Turkish and Persian nation-states in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. If this is the case, then to speak of the Turkish and Persian nations in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is reading history backwards.

Thus Hassanpour's arguments can hardly qualify Khani as a Kurdish nationalist. Khani was not a nationalist, but a patriot. He was evidently disturbed by the subordination and oppression of his community, especially the Kurdish *mirs*, by the Turks and Persians, and closely identified with that community. His identification with the oppressed was founded on a set of shared values which certainly involved liberation, but not popular sovereignty, a crucial absence which disqualifies his discourse as nationalist. Nationalism presupposes a specific discursive formation, determinate conceptual structures and historical conditions, which are not given in Khani's fierce patriotism. Nor can they be satisfied by the predominantly pre-capitalist socio-economic and political structures of Kurdish society in the seventeenth century. Hassanpour's concept of "feudal nationalism" signifies neither a historical anomaly nor a political paradox, but a contradiction in terms.

In Hassanpour's periodization of Kurdish nationalism, the transitional period encompasses the crucial years separating the suppression of the last Kurdish principality from the end of the First World War, 1867-1918. This period is characterized by the extension of direct Ottoman and Persian rule to Kurdistan, and the subsequent attempts

by both states to institute a degree of territorial centralism. But the quest for effective military and administrative centralism which, at least in the Ottoman case, had been precipitated by the encounter with modernity, was undermined by the destabilizing effects of rapid Western economic and political domination. Kurdistan soon turned into an area of inter-imperialist rivalry and of the conflict of interest among the European powers, especially Britain and Russia. In the economic sphere, European influence stimulated urban trade along with an increasing demand for cash crops in agriculture, in particular tobacco. The overall expansion of long-distance trade, regional and international, and the subsequent improvements in the local economic infrastructure and means of communications—new roads and a modern postal and telegraph network were established in major Kurdish towns in the Ottoman territory—signalled the advent of modern capitalist relations in Kurdish society. Hence Hassanpour's characterization of the period as one of transition from feudal to middle-class nationalism, signified by the poetry of Haj Qadir Koyi (1817-1897).

Koyi's poetry shows an acute awareness of the prevailing political conditions in Kurdistan under Ottoman rule; it is critical of the conduct of the traditional Kurdish leadership, aristocratic and clerical, bemoaning their subservience to the Turks. Koyi calls for the formation of a Kurdish state, where Kurdish will be the medium of instruction in a modern and secular education. Although Koyi too perceives political power as the precondition for the independence and development of the Kurds, his conception of the Kurdish state is fundamentally distinct from that entailed in Khani's poetry. Koyi envisages a Kurdish state established by the people, whom he calls to arms to achieve their objective. The traditional leadership from the princely families, hitherto leaders of the Kurdish movements, seem to have no place in the formation of Koyi's proposed Kurdish state. Their place is assigned to the Kurdish people, the perceived agent of historical

change and political independence. Although Koyi's remarks here lack reference to the institutional form of the proposed state, the paramount role assigned to the people in its creation suggests that it would entail some form of popular political process and practice. This view is supported by remarks contrasting the Kurds with other subordinate peoples of the Ottoman empire who had succeeded in achieving independence and establishing their own national states, namely the Greeks and the Serbs.

Hassanpour clearly notes the novelty in Koyi's quest for a Kurdish state, and is justified in considering him the apostle of *kurdayati*. Koyi's faith in the people as the subject of political action and change, his secularism, and above all the historical context of his poetry, marked by the advent of modernity in the Ottoman territories, give a nationalist resonance to his remarks. The modern secular education which followed in the wake of the centralization of power and the subsequent destruction of the Kurdish principalities was instrumental in creating a modern outlook among the Kurdish literati (pp. 78-79). Although Koyi was a cleric and belonged to the ranks of the traditional intelligentsia, he was strongly influenced by the new political and cultural developments in Kurdistan. His political and cultural secularism, modernist outlook, and emphasis on the popular, the Kurdish people, suffice to demonstrate this. Koyi espoused political ideas and cultural tendencies which became integral parts of *kurdayati* in the decades to come.

The introduction of the concept of the Kurdish people as the subject of the political process of change is undoubtedly Koyi's lasting contribution to the formation of *kurdayati*. But does this confirm Hassanpour's argument, which places Koyi in the transitional phase of a teleological history of Kurdish nationalism dating back to the sixteenth century? Hassanpour's characterization of Koyi is another manifestation of his essentialist approach to ideology. His underlying assumption is that the striking disjunction between Koyi's traditional socio-economic background and

his modernist outlook expresses the essence of the age, that of the transition from feudalism to capitalism in the Ottoman Empire. This essentialist assumption is clearly erroneous; it conflates the Ottoman politics of territorial centralism with the process of transition to capitalism in the Ottoman Empire. The two phenomena, which are conventionally interlinked, if not identified with one another (often within a structural-functionalist paradigm of tradition-modernity or a Hegelian-Marxist view of capitalist development in the Ottoman Empire), though they may have had some common primary causes, namely the initial interaction with and subsequent domination by the West, certainly led to diverse and at times contradictory outcomes, especially in the Kurdish territory. The drive to territorialize the centralizing function of the government and exercise effective sovereignty in Anatolia and the outlying provinces in the Eastern flanks of the Empire predated the official inauguration of the Tanzimat reforms. The majority of the Kurdish principalities had been superseded before 1837/8, and the suppression of the last principality in the 1860s consolidated the political trend which effectively determined the political organization and the leadership of Kurdish politics within the Ottoman and later on the Turkish context before the Second World War. It is common knowledge that the suppression of the Kurdish principalities by the Ottoman state was instrumental in the rise to prominence of the Shaikhs, for the most part leaders of the *tariqa* (religious order), in Kurdish politics. The Badir Khan Bey revolt, precipitated by the suppression of the Botan principality in the 1860s, was the last Kurdish rebellion led by a princely family. It was followed by a series of rebellions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in which the religious elements, the Shaikhs of the *tariqas*, played a leading role: the Shaikh Ubaid Allah movement in the early 1880s; Shaikh Mahmoud's rebellion and Shaikh Said's movement, both in the early decades of the present century. The rise to prominence of the Shaikhs in Kurdish politics also

coincided with, and was enforced by, the division and subsequent conflict and power struggle between conservatives and modernizers in the Ottoman leadership.

Hassanpour is undoubtedly aware of the Ottoman policy of territorial centralism, and discusses its effects on Kurdish society—the suppression of the principalities, the institution of direct rule in Kurdish territories, and the rise of the religious leadership—in some detail. But he evidently fails to distinguish it from the process of reform and modernization in the Ottoman Empire. True, the two processes were initiated by the state primarily in response to the political, economic and military consequences of the encounter with the West; but each followed a different logic, and had different consequences as far as the development of Kurdish nationalism is concerned. The politics of territorial centralism ensured the predominance of the traditional leadership, notably the leading elements of the rising religious orders, in the political arena, while the complex process of modernization of the Ottoman state produced the new Kurdish intelligentsia, with its secular modernist outlook. These two forces pursued different political agenda, the form and content of which were determined primarily by the wider context of Ottoman politics at the time, with its ongoing conflict between modernizers and traditionalists. The traditionalist Kurdish leadership largely sided with the conservative forces in the Ottoman polity, who under the general umbrella of pan-Islamism fought a losing battle against the forces of modernization and change. The new Kurdish intelligentsia, on the other hand, threw in its lot with the reformers whose aim was to modernize the Ottoman polity and reconstitute it on a rational constitutional basis. Neither the pan-Islamist project nor the modernist ambitions of the reformers survived the vicissitudes of late Ottoman politics. The emergence and the subsequent victory of Turkish nationalism marked the defeat of both tendencies in Ottoman politics. In Kurdish politics, however, the result was different. The triumph of ethnic nationalism and the

consolidation of the Turkish Republic effectively marginalized the new intelligentsia by ensuring the predominance of traditional forces and relations in Kurdish politics.

The subservience of the new Kurdish intelligentsia to the traditional leadership, whose conservative religious mould ensured its ideological hegemony in a predominantly illiterate peasant society, effectively curbed the drive to modernity in Kurdish politics. The ideological formation and political organization of Kurdish politics in the inter-war period remained fundamentally traditional in cast and rationale. The ideological retardation of Kurdistan was enforced by the economic and educational politics of the new Turkish republic, which led to the marginalization of the Kurdish economy, with military power remaining the most effective means and mechanism of integration in the hands of a state which insisted on assimilation and the denial of Kurdish identity as the only acceptable condition of membership in the new state. The specific development of Ottoman and Turkish politics thus effectively undermined the drive to modernity in Kurdistan. The nascent discourse of popular sovereignty, inaugurated by Koyi, had been deprived of its political, economic and cultural conditions of existence and development. The concept of the Kurdish people remained the constitutive element of a political idea which failed to turn to a popular ideology during the inter-war years.

The obvious contrast between Koyi's traditional socio-economic and cultural background and his modernist political outlook cannot be attributed to the structural dislocations and cultural ambiguities of a transitional social formation, in the manner advocated by Hassanpour. The assumed beginning of this transitional phase is defined by the concept of feudal nationalism, which as we have seen is theoretically inconsistent and historically untenable; while its supposed "end", marked by the advent of "middle class" nationalism in Iranian Kurdistan during the Second World War, is no less problematic. In fact, Hassanpour's concept

of middle-class nationalism, signifying a period marked by the dominance of capitalist relations in the economic structure of Kurdish society, totally undermines the discursive coherence of his narrative of the periodization of Kurdish nationalism, as he provides no explanation to substantiate it. Nor could he do so; it is widely agreed that feudal ground rent in its different forms remained the dominant mode of extraction of surplus in the predominantly agrarian economy of Iranian Kurdistan before the land reform of 1962. Hassanpour's essentialist conception of Kurdish nationalism in this case lacks the requisite economic structure which would qualify it.

Hassanpour may wish to disagree with this interpretation of his genealogy of Kurdish nation and nationalism, and to reject the charge of essentialism. But any such objection cannot be sustained if we take into account the nature of the medium which links the development of nationalist ideology to the evolution of Kurdish society in his historical narrative—that is, the expressive logic of his conceptions of feudal, transitional and middle class nationalism. The medium, the expressive logic of Hassanpour's genealogy of Kurdish nationalism, is an essentialist conception of social class as the intersection of the economic structure and the political-ideological superstructure. Even his own awareness of the pitfalls could not have prevented this slide into essentialism, for it is the theoretical invariant of all constructions of Kurdish history which seek to liberate the modern identity of their subject from the dominance of a primordial origin by entrusting it to the pseudo-scientific safety of objective historical facts.

The Conditions of the Formation of Nationalist Historical Discourse

This examination of the genealogies of the Kurds and critique of the essentialist conceptions of nation and national identity in Kurdish historical writing leads finally

to a consideration of the discursive formation of Kurdish nationalism.

Kurdish nationalist historical discourse is a product of modernity, following the emergence of centralized territorial states in Turkey, Iran and Iraq. The Kemalist state in Turkey and the Pahlavi state in Iran legitimized the violent processes of territorial centralization by invoking the juridico-political principle of popular sovereignty already inscribed in their constitutions. The official discourse in both countries initiated the construction of conceptions of nation and national identity as uniform and indivisible, thereby denying ethnic difference and cultural pluralism. Ethnic and cultural difference thus became the target of the new discourse of identity, and its denial was enforced by the military power which underpinned the politics of territorial centralism.

The Kurds, however, resisted both the politics of territorial centralism and the culture of modernity. Shaikh Said's movement in Turkey and Semko's rebellion in Iran, though quite different in character and objective, had similar effects on the official perception of the Kurd. The Kurd was tribal and primitive, traditional and anti-modern. He/she was different, and the discursive expression of this difference violated the national sovereignty and the territorial integrity of the modern state. The suppression of Kurdish language and culture and the denial of Kurdish ethnic identity were therefore integral to the discursive strategies of national identity, asserting the uniformity and indivisibility of the sovereign. Thus Esat Bozkurt, Minister of Justice in the Kemalist state in the 1930s, stated,

> As your deputy, I feel I can express my real convictions without any reservation: I believe that the Turks must be the only lord, the only master of this country. Those who are not of pure Turkish stock can have only one right in this country, the right to be

> servants and slaves. (*Milliyet*, 6 Sept. 1930)[27]

Contrasting images of the Kurd and the sovereign—the tribal, uncivilized, anti-modern Kurd vs. the educated, civilized and modern sovereign—were invoked to enforce this otherness. The traveller William Douglas, relating a conversation with an Iranian army officer in his *Strange Lands and Friendly People* (1951), gives a telling example of this:

> We sat in the open in the Officers' Club, munching roasted pumpkin seeds and pistachio nuts, drinking cool drinks, and talking of the rumblings of tribal discontent that spread all the way from the Russian border. I turned to an officer and said, "What do you really think of these Kurds?" His answer came in a flash, "A Kurd will cut a man's throat as easily as he will drink a glass of water." And he went on to add, "Give a Kurd a horse, a gun, a mountain and about seven women and he'll be perfectly happy."[28]

Spoken Kurdish was no longer the language of difference, but of otherness—of antagonism and opposition. It questioned at once the identity of the sovereign and the legitimacy of the new order.

The suppression of Kurdish identity was intrinsic to the self-definition of the emergent nation-states, whose brief history was not preceded by capitalist enterprises or liberal political culture. The suppression of the Kurdish language in Turkey and Iran meant the expulsion of the Kurd from the sphere of writing. It was symptomatic of the imminent death of civil society in Kurdistan, the disappearance of a growing field of subjectivity and signification (of difference) which hitherto had mediated between the private and public spheres. The demise of civil society as such meant that public expressions of the subjectivity and identity of the Kurd could not be without violence.

[27.] Quoted in Kendal, op. cit. 1980, pp. 65-66

[28.] William Douglas, *Strange Lands and Friendly People*, 1951, p. 86.

In Iraq the situation was rather different. The political authority which replaced the Ottoman rule was foreign, with an unambiguous colonial identity which it sought to maintain against the variegated cultural and ethnic relations defining the identity of the natives.[29] Legal recognition of the ethnic and cultural diversity of the natives was essential for the maintenance of the colonial identity of the ruler, and of a power structure geared to indirect rule, at least in tribal lands and especially in Kurdistan. Thus the recognition of Arab (Sunni) political supremacy by the Mandate did not preclude commitment to Kurdish administrative and cultural autonomy (culminating in the turbulent rise of Shaikh Mahmoud in southern Kurdistan). But in practice, the outcome of such commitment depended on the balance of forces in Iraq and in the region: namely, the tripartite relationship between the British, the ruling Arab dynasty, and the traditional Kurdish leadership on the one hand, and the constellation of regional powers and interests in which the Kemalist regime and (to a lesser extent) the Pahlavi state in Iran were principal actors on the other.

Although the demise of Shaikh Mahmoud's movement and the final resolution of the Mosul question had already dampened British enthusiasm for and tolerance of ethnic diversity and cultural pluralism in Iraq, Kurdish administrative and cultural autonomy featured quite prominently in negotiations leading to the termination of the Mandate in 1933. Iraq was admitted to the League of Nations on condition that it respected and implemented Kurdish regional autonomy. But the absence of an effective and united Kurdish leadership capable of mustering internal and international support made it easy for the Iraqi government to drag its feet and eventually renege on the agreement.

---

29. H. Batatu, "Of the Diversity of Iraqis, the Incohesiveness of their society, and their Progress in the Monarchic Period towards a Consolidated Political Structure" in A. Hourani et al (eds.), *The Modern Middle East: A Reader*, London 1993; H. Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq*, Princeton, Princeton University Press 1978; Peter Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq 1914-1932*, London 1976.

The Iraqi government began to question Kurdish identity publicly for the first time after the abrogation of the Mandate. The structural weakness of the state, the lack of national cohesion, and the relative strength of Kurdish tribal leadership were behind the early hesitations of the government in suppressing Kurdish identity.[30] Thus the principal argument which was initially put forward concerned the linguistic unity of the Kurds as a distinct community; in particular the argument about the heterogeneous (dialectal) structure of Kurdish, the persistence of different dialects and their uneven geographic distribution, was emphasized and skilfully deployed to undermine the case for the adoption of Kurdish as the principal language of education and administration in Kurdistan.[31] Although Kurdish thus did not attain official status, it was taught in schools alongside Arabic, which remained the national medium of administration and education. The inter-war period witnessed an unprecedented development of Kurdish literary culture, with the Sorani dialect rapidly filling the vacuum created by the suppression of the Kurmanji literary tradition in Turkey. The structural weakness of the post-colonial state on the one hand, and the rudiments of civil society generated in the final phase of Ottoman rule and surviving under the Mandate on the other, had opened a space in which it was possible for Kurdish to survive and flourish. In this case the difference (ethnic and cultural) had survived the process of the construction of Iraqi national identity, though only temporarily. It is therefore not surprising that Iraq became the only home of Kurdish literary and historical writing in the inter-war period.

Nationalist historical writing, which began in Iraqi Kurdistan under the Mandate, was essentially a

---

30. The Faisal Memorandum 1933 recognizes this structural weakness and national incohesion, and the strategic necessity of creating a uniform Iraqi nation; H. Batatu, loc. cit. 1993, p. 512.

31. Mihamad Amin Zaki, *Dû Teqellay Bêsûd* ("Two Fruitless Efforts"), Baghdad: Mariwani Press 1935.

continuation of an earlier modernist trend in Kurdish politics and culture, initiated by a small but fairly cohesive intelligentsia with a secular outlook in the final phase of the Ottoman empire. The Kurdish intelligentsia, which was deeply immersed in the prevailing political and ideological currents of the time, cherished Ottoman universalism and sought to redefine its status in the polity in the wake of the disintegration of the *millet* system. They wrote in Kurdish and Turkish, within and outside the crumbling state, and their work entailed a cultural conception of nationalism: the notion of the Kurdish nation generally signified an ethnic community whose boundaries were delineated by a set of objective characteristics which distinguished it from its neighbours. These differences constituted the elements of an identity that had remained fundamentally unchanged in the course of a long and arduous evolution. Although Kurdish ethnicity constituted the basis of national identity for these journalists and political essayists, they nonetheless refrain from absolutizing ethnic differences with the neighbouring peoples, and their writings did not involve ethnic stereotypes; language and culture remain the central factors of inclusion in and exclusion from the Kurdish community, and specify its boundaries. The Kurdish nation, perceived as such, was the subject of a historical process culminating in self-rule which, in this context, is distinct from the concept of self-determination associated with democratic theory. It refers to the right of the Kurds to preserve their distinct ethnic identity and mode of existence, individually and communally. The demand for sovereignty, though not entirely absent, remained largely marginal before the rise of Turkish nationalism and the subsequent Turkification of the political field and cultural space.

This small band of Kurdish intelligentsia, mostly from traditional social backgrounds, was a product of the modernization of the Ottoman state and society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It had initially joined forces with the reformist movement, playing a

significant role in the events leading to the revolution of 1908 and the subsequent formation of the Committee for Union and Progress. But the struggle for the recognition of ethnic difference and cultural rights had been stifled on the one hand by internal discord, and on the other by the rise of Turkish nationalism, spearheaded by an increasingly dominant military-political elite who sought to redefine the universalist ethos of Ottoman politics on strictly ethnic (Turkish) lines. The Turkish nationalism which subsequently formed the ethos of the Kemalist state effectively marginalized this nascent modernist tendency in Kurdish politics and culture, thus securing the predominance of the traditional leadership: the religious and tribal elite, whose struggle for Kurdish rights, cultural or political, was seldom separate from efforts to restore their privileged status under Ottoman rule. The predominance of this traditional elite with its distinctly religious outlook in Kurdish politics thus enabled the Kemalist state to present Kurdish opposition to territorial centralism as conservative and reactionary, a backward-looking tendency bent on the destruction of modernity and secularism.

The modernist intelligentsia in Iraqi Kurdistan, and its new written culture which followed the suppression of Kurdish in Turkey in 1919, also lost ground to the traditional leadership, who drew their support and influence from traditional power structures based on primordial loyalties, tribal lineage and religious (sufi) orders. The Mandate actively encouraged this trend, lending support to the tribal and religious leaders in order to incorporate them into colonial power structures geared to indirect rule. The tribal leaders were given material rewards— money, tax reductions and arms—and also recognition of the Ottoman *tapu* (land settlement), which had defined the juridico-political basis of tribal land ownership since 1886, authorizing the registration of large tracts of land in the name of tribal leaders who promised to support the Hashemite rule. The authority of the traditional leadership

was formally sanctioned by the colonial power when the influential *shaikhs* and *aghas* were elected to the Iraqi parliament, constituting one-third of its members (34 out of 99).[32]

> The British Mandate thus actively reinforced the traditional power structure in Iraqi Kurdistan, reversing the process of tribal disintegration which had been at work since the late nineteenth century. It pursued a policy of "retribalization" which laid the foundation for indirect colonial rule. In the words of the British political officer at Sulaimaniya:
> every man who could be labelled as a tribesman was placed under a tribal leader; ... petty village headmen were unearthed and discovered as leaders of long-dead tribes; disintegrated sedentary clans ... were told to reunite and remember that they had once been tribesmen.[33]

The Tribal Disputes Regulation, which had been issued by the British in 1918, was thus inscribed in the constitution of the monarchy in 1925 (articles 113, 114), excluding the tribal lands from the domain of the national law. Subsequently civil and fiscal administration, along with policing and the maintenance of order in tribal areas, was placed in the hands of the tribal leaders). Batatu aptly describes this process of retribalization as a "reversal of history".[34] The supreme authority of the tribal chiefs and the heads of the religious orders (*aghas* and *shaikhs*), often closely intertwined, thus survived both colonial rule and its immediate successor, the Hashemite monarchy.

The nascent Kurdish intelligentsia did not entirely welcome the

---

32. Batatu op. cit. 1978, p. 95.

33. ibid. p. 94

34. Batatu, loc.cit. 1993, p. 571; op.cit. 1978 p. 78; Sluglett op.cit 1976.

increasing domination of the traditional leadership; but it was largely incorporated into the institutional structure of the colonial state and identified with its modern administrative and cultural processes and practices. It was also numerically small, and weak in influence and following. It could not challenge or defy the power of the traditional leadership in the countryside, which historically defined the major contours of political life in Kurdish urban centres. Nor could it join forces with the rising tide of Arab nationalism against the Iraqi state and its colonial master. The emergent Kurdish identity and its bedrock, Kurdish ethnicity, proved a strong link tying it to the traditional leadership. These conditions were reflected in its hesitant, guarded and ultimately losing battles against the entrenched authority of the traditional leadership. Although the advent of modern party organization improved the precarious position of the modern intelligentsia against the authority of the tribal and religious leadership, the cultural sphere remained its only real domain as well as its refuge.

It was thus under these conditions that the modernist intelligentsia became the author of the new written culture, buttressed on the one hand by the spread of the printing press, and on the other by the advent of universal education. The ascendancy of the written literary culture and the subsequent decline of the oral tradition in cultural production and expression, which was a marked feature of Kurdish society during this period, also signified the gradual ascendancy of modernity in the cultural sphere. This crucial link between writing and modernity was forged by the increasing separation of the private and public spheres in Iraqi Kurdistan. The survival of this public sphere in Iraqi Kurdistan, which provided for the existence and development of the emergent written culture and its author, the modernist intelligentsia, depended on the persistence of the emergent civil society in Iraq.

Concluding Remarks

This essay has argued that Kurdish national identity is unmistakably modern. Its genesis is the relationship of the self and other with the emergent Turkish, Persian and Arab

identities in the early decades of the present century. The genesis does not signify a uniform origin; it only points to a beginning, an emergent identity which is divided by politics and culture inside and outside. Never fixed or stable, the divided relationship of self and other is ever-present in every instance of recognition/denial, rebellion/suppression; it is continuously inscribed and reinscribed in a new system of differences and significations.

This paradox of identity and difference defines the conditions of formation of Kurdish nationalist discourse. The concepts of the Kurdish nation and national identity are determinate responses to the discursive constructions of national identity which have accompanied the structural processes of formation and consolidation of the modern nation-state in Turkey, Iraq and Iran since the end of the First World War and the subsequent partition of Kurdistan. The denial of Kurdish identity and the destruction of civil society in Kurdistan were the necessary conditions of the construction of a uniform national identity in these multi-ethnic nation-states. This assigns a specific character to Kurdish nationalism, setting it apart from classical nationalism in Europe. For while classical nationalism in Europe was inaugurated by modernity and accompanied by historical processes and practices which specified the emergence of the modern nation-state and subsequently democratic citizenship and civil society, Kurdish nationalism, as a response to the denial of Kurdish identity, rests by contrast on the suppression of civil society and democratic citizenship in Kurdistan. It is a modern politics which thrives on the suppression of the condition of modernity: a paradox characteristic of the politics of ethnic/national assimilation. This defines the discursive foundation of Kurdish nationalism as well as its political development in the contemporary Middle East.