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Mari R. Rostami

KURDISH NATIONALISM ON STAGE

Performance, Politics and Resistance in Iraq

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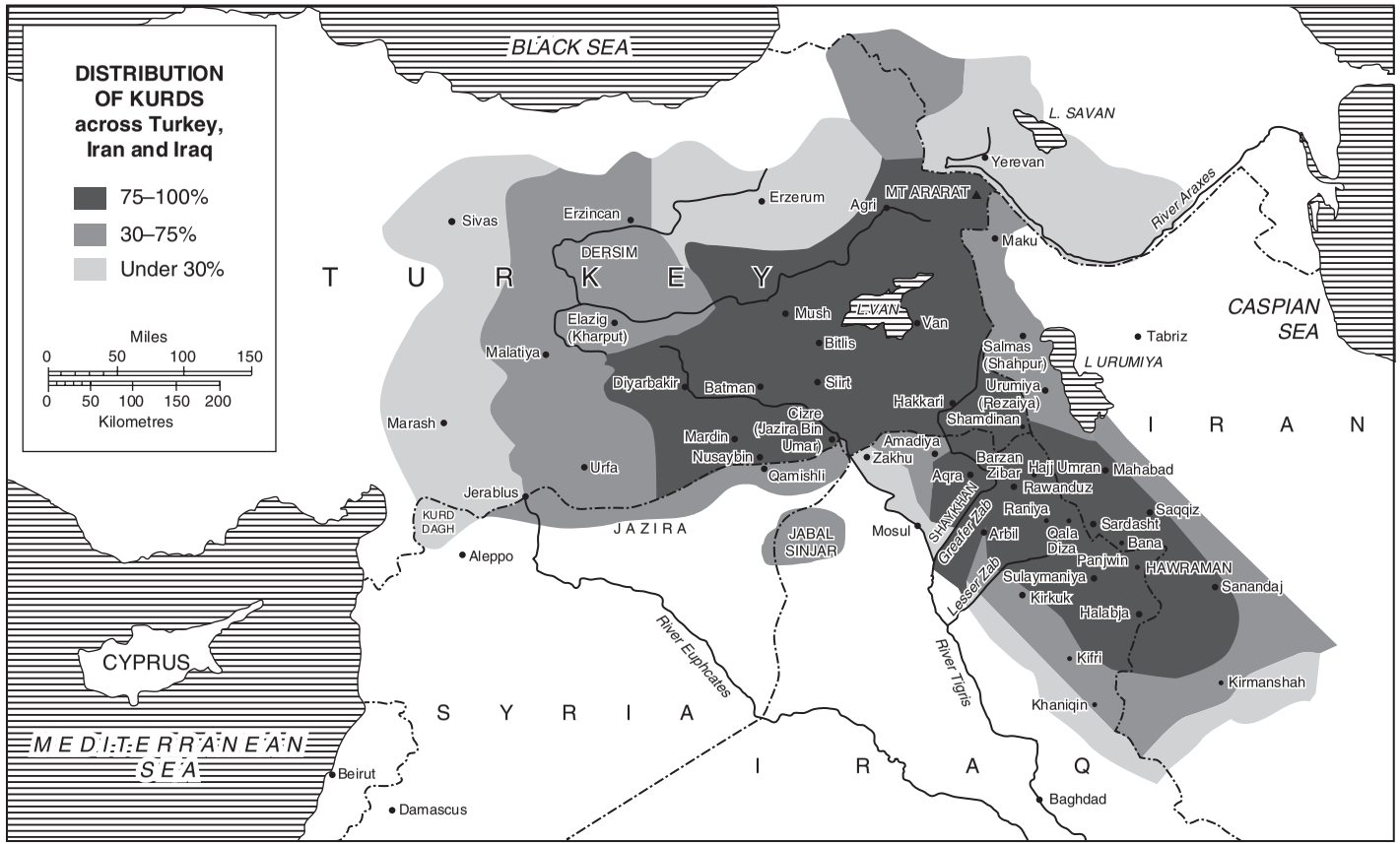

Map 1 Distribution of Kurds across Turkey, Iran and Iraq. *Source*: McDowall 2004, p. xiv.

Map 2 De facto autonomous Kurdish region. *Source*: McDowall 2004, p. 374.

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I would like to extend my most sincere gratitude to all the theatre artists, academics, family and friends in Kurdistan without whose unfailing support this book would not have come to fruition. My dear friend Siham Mamand not only helped me with my research but, more importantly, made me feel at home during my time in Erbil. I am forever grateful for her and her family's kindness and hospitality. Among the theatre artists, I should particularly thank *mamosta* Ahmad Salar and Muhsin Muhammad who made time to sit with me and answer my many questions about theatre under the Baath rule. I also interviewed veteran director and playwright Talat Saman who, to my utmost regret, passed away recently. I am deeply sorry that I cannot share this book with him and so I would like to dedicate it to his memory instead.

I should also thank Dr Ben Boulton for his careful reading of the manuscript and his extensive comments and corrections. Any errors that remain despite his assistance are, of course, my own.

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Translation and Transliteration

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

To make the reading experience easier and the book more accessible to a wider public, I have refrained from using this transcription system and Kurdish pronunciation for Kurdish proper names. As for place names, such as Erbil and Sulaymaniyah, I have again chosen to keep to common English norms. However, for lesser-known places, such as Pîremegrûn Mountain, I have chosen to use the Kurdish transcription system.

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

Introduction

With an estimated population of over 30 million, the Kurds are the fourth largest nation in the Middle East, inhabiting lands that comprise parts of today's Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey.[1] Divided between the Ottoman and Safavid Empires in the early sixteenth century, these lands were ruled by Kurdish dynasties and principalities up to the mid-nineteenth century when those principalities were overthrown by their ruling empires. Kurdish regions were divided again between Turkey, Iraq and Syria after the First World War and the partition of the Ottoman Empire. Despite these territorial divisions, which have caused many cultural, linguistic and political fragmentations, a sense of belonging to a Kurdish nation, albeit locally and within one's native area, has existed among the Kurds for a long time (Nezan 1996, pp. 10–12). The existence of Kurds as a distinct ethnic group is confirmed by the Ottoman and Persian administrators of the sixteenth century and the travellers who spent time in various parts of Kurdistan (see Rich 1836; Fraser 1840; Southgate 1840; Bruinessen and Boeschoten 1988). However, it was in the twentieth century that the modern Kurdish nationalism emerged as a movement and gained momentum.

While the idea that the Kurds constituted a distinct nation in the modern sense of the word began to gain ground during the second half of the nineteenth century, it was only in the aftermath of the 1908 Young Turk Revolution that an organized Kurdish movement emerged into being. In their attempt to foster a sense of common nationality and pride, the early Kurdish nationalists formed societies and published periodicals in which they drew on collective memories and values, ethnic myths and popular culture. They hoped to create a national

[1] The Kurdish Institute of Paris estimated the total Kurdish population in 2016 to be between 36 and 45 million (see: https://www.institutkurde.org/en/info/the-kurdish-population-1232551004).

identity based not on tribal or religious affiliation but on a shared culture and language. Influenced by the European orientalists' glorification of oral culture, these pioneers of Kurdish cultural nationalism began to focus on the existing Kurdish oral culture as a rich and valuable source of cultural distinctiveness which could help their claims of political independence. Therefore, although of elite backgrounds, these early nationalists began idealizing the Kurdish peasantry and incorporating their culture into the dominant ethnie (Bruinessen 1994, pp. 12–14).[2] In their attempts to create a shared sense of national identity, they established cultural societies and journals that emphasized national themes, propagated the Kurds' common heritage of splendour, and stressed the value of education as a necessary requirement to survive as a nation in the modern world.

Cultural nationalism, which has been defined as the cultivation of a unique national history and culture (see Hutchinson 1994a; Smith 2009), continues to be an important and resonant aspect of Kurdish national identity-construction. Efforts have been made to standardize the Kurdish language, and these efforts have served as a major thrust in the Kurdish struggle for nationhood (see Hassanpour 1992). Folklorists continue to collect Kurdish folktales, anecdotes and songs (e.g. Akyol 2008; Fidanî 2014); and printing houses in Iraqi Kurdistan and Turkey continue to publish national classics while, at the same time, these classics continue to inspire the modern genres of novels and plays (e.g. Ronî War 2011; Boynukara 2008).

This book attempts to contribute to the scholarship on Kurdish culture and nationalism by examining the development of Iraqi-Kurdish theatre and situating it within historical context. It is focused upon the question of how Kurdish theatre in Iraq has engaged issues of national identity, nationalism and the struggle for independence during moments of profound change during the period 1975–91. While the development of Kurdish theatre since its emergence

[2] For example, Kamuran Bedirxan (1895–1978), a descendant of the ancient Bohtan principality, incorporated elements of Kurdish 'low' culture by drawing from the traditional Kurdish tales in his nationalist novel *Der Adler von Kurdistan* (The Eagle of Kurdistan) (Strohmeier 2003, p. 153). This novel which was written to promote the image of Kurds in their brave and just struggle for freedom, presented the image of 'Kurdishness' through the Kurds' 'heroism, patriotism, reverence for their land, identification with their mountains; their pride in their language and heritage, the beauty of their folk tales and songs, the rich variety of their material culture; their strong and patriotic women; the solidarity among Kurds from all backgrounds' (p. 203).

to the defeat of the Kurdish nationalist movement in 1975 is also explored, the 1975–91 period is particularly instructive because it encompasses events such as the loss of Kurdish autonomy, the resurgence of the Kurdish guerrilla struggle, and the genocidal *Anfal* campaign. Taking into account the extensive literature that affirms the role of theatrical performance in constructing and contesting national identity, it is therefore appropriate to ask whether theatre performed this role in Kurdistan during the period 1975–91.

In answering this question, this book seeks to demonstrate that theatre is a genre that is capable of providing evidence that is relevant to the understanding of Kurdish history. It demonstrates that an exploration of the history and voices of those involved in creating theatre can highlight hidden, marginalized or suppressed narratives; furthermore, it can also highlight moments that indicate the critical importance of the theatre as a charged political space that cultivated Kurdish nationalism. This will hopefully contribute to a revisionist historiography of the Kurdish national struggle that takes into account performative and oral genres, by locating and retrieving experiences and voices of those engaged in powerful acts of theatrical resistance.

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

With a background in English and having previously researched the politics of English Romantic drama, I was drawn to explore Kurdish theatre's engagement with politics for my doctoral thesis in Kurdish Studies at the University of Exeter. Due to the lack of any such study in the Kurdish context, particularly Iraqi Kurdistan where the environment has been more favourable for the development of a theatre in Kurdish, I became interested in an integrated study of Kurdish theatre and politics in Iraq during the 1970s and 1980s, the

height of the Kurdish nationalist struggle against the Baath regime. A review of Iraqi-Kurdish theatre history in the preliminary stages of my research immediately validated my interest by revealing a serious committed theatre that not only promoted national Kurdish identity, solidarity and consciousness but also encouraged resistance against the tyranny of the Iraqi regime. The Iraqi-Kurdish theatre of that era, as I discovered, consistently participated in providing possibilities for resistance through the use of Kurdish mythology and folklore, re-enactment of oppressed histories and revival of Kurdish historical stories. This not only promoted national consciousness and identity but also brought the public together and aroused a spirit of resistance by portraying legendary and heroic national characters from their past.

The Baath regime's response to such theatrical productions demonstrates the impact of theatre in Iraqi Kurdistan during perhaps one of its most difficult times. In the presence of theatre as a powerful cultural force, Iraqi authorities resorted to keeping theatre under control not only by censoring the texts of the plays but also by observing the rehearsals and performances of those playtexts which had been previously approved, banning those which were deemed subversive and punishing those involved in them. The state response to theatre in the form of banning orders, censorship and imprisonment reflects the regime's anxiety and fear of the power of theatre to influence and mobilize the masses. Therefore, while the distinctive features of drama as a nationalist tool informs this study, the Iraqi government's attention to theatre and its regulation and censorship of it, invite further emphasis on the genre.

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

also as a vehicle for commenting on the political scene and even disseminating resistance within the community.[3]

Despite its important role in the Kurdish cultural and political nationalism, Kurdish theatre has received no attention from Western scholars whose primary focus has been on the dominant languages and literatures in the region, at the expense of the Kurds who have been left in the shadows produced by four powerful nation-states that each rule over a distinctive corner of their lands. Even the studies of Kurdish literature and culture have almost all ignored the existence of theatre in Kurdistan.[4] Within this small scholarship, theatre is doubly ignored as a repository of culture and also as a social space utilized by Kurdish artists to reflect and comment on the turbulent political history of their nation.[5] The lack of attention to Kurdish theatre in academic texts is understandable given the historical marginalization of the Kurds in the Middle East, theatre scholars' unfamiliarity with Kurdish language and literary texts, and Kurdologists' general lack of interest in exploring the Western-style theatre tradition in Kurdistan. Theatre in the Arab world has itself only recently received attention from Western scholars with Egypt dominating most studies (see Badawi 1987, 1988, 1992; Sadgrove 1996).[6]

An examination of the scholarship on Kurdish culture and nationalism shows that the emergence and development of Kurdish identity is usually analysed mainly within the genre of poetry, from Ahmadi Khani (in Kurdish, Ehmedî Xanî) to Haji Qadiri Koyi who inspired early Kurdish nationalists in their struggle, to the nationalist twentieth-century poets, Pîremêrd, Cegerxwîn and

[3] On theatre's positive political and social interventions in a range of cultures around the world, see Boon and Plastow (1998).

[4] For instance, Kreyenbroek and Allison's edition of *Kurdish Culture and Identity* (1996) deals with Kurds' written and oral literature, publishing, media, religious beliefs, material culture but not theatre. Also, in its chapter on Kurdish written literature, the growing interest in and publication of plays in Iraqi Kurdistan, especially since the 1970s, have been ignored (Blau 2010).

[5] The only book written on this subject in a European language is the German *Theater als Form des Widerstands in Kurdistan* (2002) by Hawre Zangana. I have made several references to this book in my discussion of guerrilla theatre.

[6] Within the growing field of Middle Eastern theatre, there have been a few studies on the relationship between theatre and politics in the Middle East. Some examples of these studies are Stone's *Popular Culture and Nationalism in Lebanon* (2007), Shiva Balaghi's chapter on 'Theatre and Nationalism in the Nineteenth-Century' (Balaghi 2002), Hammond's *Popular Culture in the Arab World* (2007) and Khalid Amine and Marvin Carlson's *The Theatres of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia* (2011). All these studies place the development of theatre into a wider sociopolitical context of the region by showing the use of theatre by artists to propagate nationalism (Balaghi 2002), states' sponsorship of theatre as a propaganda tool (Hammond 2007, p. 365) and the relation of theatre to the production of national identity (see Stone 2007; Amine and Carlson 2011, pp. 131–216).

others. Studies of Kurdish identity and nationalism in literature have referred to the works of poets, essayists and, more recently, novelists (see Hassanpour 1992; Strohmeier 2003; Vali 2003; Galip 2015). Oral and popular culture, which has played an important role in the preservation of Kurdish cultural identity, had until recently remained largely understudied.[7] In recent years, the field of Kurdish studies has witnessed a growing interest in Kurdish oral and popular culture, this vital component of Kurdish identity. The tradition of *dengbêj* (Kurdish storyteller), in particular, has been the subject of a few academic studies which all contribute to a better understanding of how power relations and everyday politics are articulated through and played out in cultural productions (see Yüksel 2010; Aras 2013; Hamelink 2014). *Dengbêj* tradition has also been studied in relation to Kurdish theatre in Turkey in Duygu Çelik's doctoral thesis *Dengbêjî Tradition and its Effects on Kurdish Theatre in Turkey* (2017).[8]

This book affirms that Kurdish theatre, like storytelling, its traditional predecessor, participated in the preservation of Kurdish culture and history and their promotion in the public sphere. Not only that, theatre promoted resistance and called for revolution against the oppressive Iraqi regimes. By its engagement with Kurdish history through the history of its theatre, this study challenges the predominant focus on the Kurds from within the framework of politics and from the viewpoint of the political elite. Instead it places particular emphasis on Kurdish culture as an important terrain for retrieving marginalized voices of dissent.

Theatre is usually defined as a live performance for live audiences which may or may not take place in purpose-built buildings. In the *Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Historiography*, Thomas Postlewait explains that by theatre he means 'the comprehensive field of the performing arts, including theatre, dance, opera, folk theatre, puppetry, parades, processions, spectacles, festivals, circuses,

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

[8] For an overview of Kurdish theatre in Turkey between 1991 and 2013, see Mîrza Metîn's encyclopedic *Jêrzemîn* (Underground, 2014).

public conventions, and related performance events' (Postlewait 2009, p. 2). It is therefore clear that theatrical productions in purpose-built buildings are only one of several different types of cultural performance.

This form of theatre emerged in the Middle East only in the nineteenth century. It was introduced to the region mainly by non-Muslim minorities, some of whom had travelled to Europe where they had developed a liking for theatre. In the Ottoman Turkey, Armenian theatre companies were among the first groups to stage plays which were mainly adaptations of European classics. During the latter half of the nineteenth century, as part of the modernization projects by Middle Eastern rulers, first Opera Houses and theatres were built throughout the region and the first local productions were introduced to stage.

Pirbal notes that, within Kurdish literary discourse, the word 'theatre' first appeared in a late nineteenth-century poem by Mahwi:

> *Dinya tiyatroye, meweste tiya biro*
> The world is a theatre (stage), do not pause in it, keep going
> *Kê mayewe ke nebûbê tiya tiro*
> No one has stayed on this stage forever. (Pirbal 2001, p. 11)

In the early twentieth century, a number of European words, such as *pièce* (play) and drama, began to appear in Kurdish journals and papers. In 1919, when *Memê Alan*, the first play in the Kurdish language, was published in Istanbul, its author, Abdurrahim Rahmi Hakkari (1890–1958), described it as both a Kurdish *pièce* and *teatro*. The influence of French and Italian can be attributed to the fact that French and Italian theatre troupes were frequent visitors to Istanbul during the course of the nineteenth century (Faroqhi 2005, p. 260).

In Iraqi Kurdistan, *namāyesh* (a Persian word) and *tamsīl* (an Arabic word) were used, in addition to European terms, to describe theatrical performances in the late 1920s. It seems that these borrowed words continued to be used until the mid-twentieth century, when the word *şano* appeared in Kurdish. Pirbal suggests that the word *şano*, which has come to replace non-Kurdish words to denote theatre, had first been introduced to the Kurdish language by the poet Goran in 1950 (Pirbal 2001, p. 13); Pirbal suggests that Goran's use of the word in *Cîlwey Şano* (The Splendor of Stage) appealed to Kurdish writers, who then continued to use it in their publications (Pirbal 2001, p. 14). He suggests that the term itself derives from the Italian *scena* (p. 14). While *şano* has been

used to denote both drama and theatre (see Subhan 2012), the addition of the suffixes *name* and *gerî* produces *şanoname*, which refers to the text of the play, and *şanogerî*, which refers to the play and the act of performing it.

Tanya (1985), who wrote the first book on Kurdish theatre history in Iraq, presents Greek drama as the beginning of world drama and proceeds to trace the history of Kurdish drama mainly in Sulaymaniyah, but also in Baghdad, Qaladiza, Koya, Erbil, Kirkuk, Khanaqin, Duhok and Halabja. He argues that Middle Eastern nations have not had an indigenous dramatic tradition and that the Kurds were first introduced to drama through their Arab and Turkish neighbours, who had themselves adopted it from the Europeans. Although he extends a cursory acknowledgement to old games and rituals such as *bûke-barane* (rain bride) and seasonal festivals of *semenî* (a pudding-like dish made from wheat), *sawerkutan* (making burghul), *diroyne* (harvest) and *seyrekanî behar* (spring excursions), he rejects the proposition that they provide clear evidence for the existence of a native theatre tradition in Iraq, citing the fact that they fail to conform to Aristotle's definition of drama as justification. He also refers to Claudius James Rich (1787–1821) and the narrative of his residence in Kurdistan in 1820 in which he makes no reference to theatre in the region (Tanya 1985, p. 44). Tanya maintains that the lack of theatre in Kurdistan was attributable to several factors including: the feudal governing system – which, in his view, opposed any intellectual endeavour – wars and occupation by foreign powers.

In other Kurdish theatre histories, which have drawn heavily upon Tanya's accounts of the early years of Kurdish theatre and the archives of old Kurdish periodicals, the names of certain actors, directors and performances are repeated. This has constructed the canon of an early Kurdish theatre that could trace its origins to the 1920s when Western-style, text-based theatre emerged in Iraqi Kurdistan. These works, like Tanya's, are conservative histories of theatre that consider Greek drama to be the starting point of Western theatre and contend that Kurdish drama began in 1919 with the publication of Hakkari's *Memê Alan* in Istanbul (Pirbal 2001, pp. 47–56).[9] This book will engage with

[9] Hawrami traces the birth of Kurdish drama in Iraq back to 1952. This was the first time that a Kurdish play was printed and published in Iraqi Kurdistan (Hawrami 2001, p. 305). Prior to that, in 1932, Pîremêrd had printed his *Mem û Zin* in sequential parts in his *Jiyan* newspaper. Having his own printing house, he later printed *Mem û Zin* as a play in 1934 and *Mehmûd Aqay Şêwekel* in 1942 (Pirbal 2001, p. 109).

the history of *şano* (or theatre in the Western use of the term) which first appeared in Iraqi Kurdistan in the 1920s.

Due to a lack of sources on Kurdish theatre in other languages, I have relied almost exclusively on Kurdish sources in order to explore how theatre emerged and developed within the sociopolitical context in which it was produced and performed. Kurdish researchers have made a vital contribution to this project, most notably Yasin Barzanji, Hasan Tanya, Kawa Ahmadmirza, Farhad Pirbal, Hawre Zangana, Hama Karim Hawrami, Ibrahim Ahmad Simo and Salam Faraj Karim. Their theatre histories and studies of Kurdish dramatic texts and performances paved the way for and significantly contributed to my own research.

The works mentioned above are all in Sorani Kurdish which, along with Kurmanji, constitutes one of the two major speech varieties spoken by the Kurds in Iraq. Kurmanji is mainly spoken in the Duhok governorate and its speakers account for about 20–25 per cent of Iraqi Kurds, with Sorani accounting for almost all of the remainder. In large part due to sociopolitical circumstances, these two speech varieties have not developed equally in Iraqi Kurdistan. When the Babans established the city of Sulaymaniyah in 1784, the speech of the city gained prestige, becoming the language of poetry and the basis of standard Sorani in the twentieth century. At the time of the British occupation (1918–20) and mandate (1920–32), Sorani was used in local administration, education and print media. Despite increasing demands by Kurmanji speakers that education and administrative services be offered in Kurmanji, Sorani has retained its dominant position in the cultural milieu. It should be noted that the choice of Sorani as the dialect of administration and education was based on political considerations. In Iraq, speakers of Sorani were more urbanized and more active in the emerging Kurdish nationalist politics. By contrast, the Kurmanji speech area was more tribal-rural, and numerically smaller than the rest of the Kurdish-speech community (Hassanpour 2012, p. 56). It cannot be denied that the two important Kurdish cities of Erbil and Sulaymaniyah are located in the Sorani-speaking zone, and that most intellectual discourse amongst Iraqi Kurds has been conducted in Sorani.

In writing this book, I have chosen to focus upon Sorani for three main reasons. First, the centrality of the cities of Erbil and Sulaymaniyah within any discussion of theatre; second, the widespread availability of materials

on theatre in these cities; finally, my own familiarity with the Sorani speech variety. These three considerations were foremost when I took the decision to focus upon the history of Kurdish theatre in Sorani and to only analyse plays that have been written and performed in Sorani. It should be clarified from the outset that this decision was not intended to denigrate the existence of Kurmanji-language theatre in Kurdistan. By virtue of the fact that it does not engage with this output, this book should not be understood as an authoritative account of theatre that encompasses the entirety of Iraqi Kurdistan.

While surveys of Kurdish theatre, such as Barzanji's, Tanya's, Ahmadmirza's and Pirbal's, provide invaluable insight into the history of theatre in Iraqi Kurdistan, most remain silent on the conditions of the production of the plays at the time of their performance. Also, apart from occasional plot summaries, they do not provide detailed analysis of performances or dramatic texts or provide an extensive in-depth exploration of the relationship between Kurdish theatre and resistance.[10] Tanya claimed that the lack of resources curtailed his ability to write about all theatrical performances from early years of Kurdish theatre history. This explains why he relied heavily upon interviews with past participants in theatre activities and, to a lesser extent, upon the *Birayetî* (Brotherhood) and *Jiyan* (Life) newspapers. Hawrami and Simo instead offer a general discussion of drama and playwriting, and only discuss particular Kurdish texts with reference to their dramatic characteristics. Of all these sources, Dr. Salam Faraj Karim's study provided this research with a general understanding of the relationship between the different phases of theatre in Iraqi Kurdistan and the wider political developments in the region between 1975 and 1995. His five phases of development engage with political events which include the defeat of the Kurdish struggle in 1975, its revival in 1977, the eruption of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980, the genocidal *Anfal* campaign and the Kurdish uprising of 1991. However, the bulk of his analysis is focused upon

[10] Hawre Zangana is one important exception in this respect – his German book on theatre and resistance in Iraqi Kurdistan in the 1980s significantly contributes to the understanding of Kurdish resistance theatre under Saddam Hussein. However, he strongly relies upon the personal archives of a small number of Iraqi Kurdish artists who include Kamal Hanjira, Nigar Hasib and Shamal Omar. This is why he commits a relatively large part of his book to their Experimental Theatre and the analysis of *Xec û Siyamend* (Khaj and Siyamand), one of their productions. While my study of Kurdish theatre under the Baath is more extensive, my discussion of guerrilla theatre in Chapter 3 draws heavily upon Zangana's work.

the stylistic analysis of individual dramatic texts and not theatre's engagement with the nationalist struggle.

The theoretical component of my work follows a different path from (the scant) past research by drawing heavily upon cultural nationalism, which is strongly rooted within folklore, history, legends, myths and symbols. Each one is an attribute of cultural uniqueness and an essential means through which national consciousness is stimulated. This book confirms the cultural nationalist approach to the study of nationalism by highlighting the role of intellectuals and the intelligentsia in introducing and promoting Kurdish theatre since its inception. They utilized theatre as a modernizing tool which helped promote education, literacy and women's rights and also retrieve national cultural heritage. I will suggest that, over the course of its history, Kurdish theatre often acted as a site for staging national history, folklore and myths and for formulating nationalist ideology, and thus played an important role in constructing and promoting Kurdish nationalist identity, particularly during the rule of the Baath regime.

However, a culturally imagined unification in Kurdish drama worked alongside mass mobilization as myths of Kurdish nationalism were used to encourage resistance to the central authority by representing historical legends of Kurdish heroes and their self-sacrifice in the face of foreign invasion. It is therefore noticeable that Kurdish theatre under the dictatorial rule of the Baath Party was not merely concerned with preserving and promoting culture; to the same extent, it also sought to promote political liberation and incite rebellion. While this study draws heavily upon theories of cultural nationalism in order to emphasize the role of theatre and theatre artists in promoting nationalist myths and symbols, it also acknowledges that the ultimate goal of Kurdish dramatists, especially during the 1970s and the 1980s, has been a political one; namely, independence for Kurdistan.

In engaging with the relationship between nationalism and theatre, I have been guided by contextual studies of theatre and nationalism which include *Theatre Matters: Performance and Culture on the World Stage* (Boon and Plastow 1998), *Writing and Rewriting National Theatre Histories* (Wilmer 2004), *Staging Nationalism: Essays on Theatre and National Identity* (Gounaridou 2005), *National Theatres in a Changing Europe* (Wilmer 2008), *Theatre and Performance in Small Nations* (Blandford 2013) and *Theatre and*

National Identity: Re-Imagining Conceptions of Nation (Holdsworth 2014). The contributors to each of these volumes confirm the close relationship between performance and national identity and explore how theatrical performance can, in the context of specific countries, construct or contest notions of national identity.[11]

When it comes to Kurdish theatre, the lack of national institutions to safeguard Kurdish culture and heritage makes a reliable reconstruction of Kurdish theatre history a challenging task. Many theatre events in Iraqi Kurdistan have gone unrecorded and therefore much of the history of Kurdish theatre has been lost and is unrecoverable or remains hidden. Although since 1991, with the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government, attempts have been made to rectify this problem by publishing books and journals on Kurdish theatre and its history, these publications are not widely circulated and easily accessible. I was personally not able to find any books on Kurdish theatre in Erbil bookstores and the materials that I was able to obtain were either provided to me by individuals or were printed and distributed on the occasion of the third annual Erbil Theatre Festival.[12]

In order to redress the inadequate documentation of past theatrical events, I have drawn upon several sources. My research relied mainly on Salahaddin University library, the Central Library of Erbil and the personal libraries of theatre artists Ahmad Salar, Talat Saman and Muhsin Muhammad. These sources enabled me to obtain histories and studies of Kurdish theatre, along with the texts of plays. Historical documents and journalistic accounts also helped me reconstruct the links between Kurdish theatre and history. I have consulted all issues of *Beyan* and *Karwan* periodicals that were published during the 1980s and which are preserved in the Erbil Central Library. These periodicals not only contain the texts of several plays and occasional photographs of certain performances but also provide accounts of past performances and offer valuable insights into the history of Kurdish theatre. Other materials that have been used include biographies of persons associated with theatre, critical

[11] In addition to Kurdish studies, theatre studies and studies of cultural nationalism, this research also draws upon feminist studies of female representation in nationalist discourse by Afsaneh Najmabadi (1997) and Diana Taylor (1997).

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