

Martin van Bruinessen,

‘Kurdish Paths to Nation’,

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Kurdish Paths to Nation¹

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In this chapter, I shall be using terms like ‘Kurdish society’ and ‘Kurdish culture’ in a rather loose sense, and include in it groups and individuals who may not in all contexts identify themselves as Kurds. Kurdish society is highly heterogeneous; there are not only a vast cultural differences between one region and another, but within any single region there are populations that differ in language, religion or way of life from the majority and that may consider themselves — or may be considered by the majority — as less Kurdish or not Kurdish at all. Christian and Jewish minorities have generally not been considered as Kurds, although culturally they may have much in common with their Muslim neighbours and although they may even have Kurdish as their mother tongue. Heterodox communities living among the Kurds, such as the Alevi, the Ahl-i Haqq or Kaka’is and the Yezidis, tend to have an ambivalent relation with Kurdish identity, especially when they also differ from their more orthodox Muslim neighbours in spoken language.

Ethnicity is not the expression of objective cultural traits, however; it is produced in social interaction, and it is susceptible to change as a consequence of political action. The states between which Kurdistan was divided for the last three quarters of the twentieth century all had policies designed to change the ethnic map, most clearly so Turkey, which has attempted to deny the existence of the Kurds and to destroy Kurdish ethnicity. Iran and Iraq, though less radical, have also engaged in efforts at ethnocide, with various degrees of success.² On the other hand, the emergence of a mass-based Kurdish national movement since the 1960s has also had a great impact on people’s self-identification. It has sought to foster a sense of shared destiny among all those who might loosely be called Kurds, including the religious and linguistic minorities as well as those who had effectively been assimilated to the dominant ethnic group associated with the state. The 1980s and 1990s were a period in which the ethnic identity of minority communities was intensely contested by Kurdish nationalists, thinkers identifying with the Turkish, Iranian or Iraqi state nations, and propagandists for smaller ethnic entities. Separatist nationalist tendencies emerged among the speakers of Zaza (a language closely related to Kurdish proper), the Yezidis and the Kurdish Alevi, and narrow regional solidarities appeared to be strengthening at the expense of a more inclusive sense of ethnic identity. The latter phenomenon is most clearly visible in Iraqi Kurdistan, where the fierce

¹ An earlier version of this chapter appeared in French as "Nationalisme kurde et ethnicités intra-kurdes", *Peuples Méditerranéens* no. 68-69 (1994), 11-37.

² Martin van Bruinessen, "Genocide of Kurds", in: Israel W. Charny (ed.), *The widening circle of genocide [= Genocide: A Critical Bibliographic Review*, vol 3] (New Brunswick, NY: Transaction Publishers, 1994), pp. 165-191.

rivalry between the two major political parties has reinforced the division of the region into two ecologically, socially and culturally different zones that are increasingly feeling distinct from one another.

Who is a Kurd?

There are no reliable estimates of the number of Kurds in any of the countries where they live. This is for a number of reasons. One is a matter of government policy: for reasons of national integration, the governments concerned do not usually enumerate the various linguistic and religious groups within their borders separately, or when they do they are reluctant to publish the results. Another reason is that it may depend on the political and social context whether a person will identify himself or herself as a Kurd or not.

The 1965 census in Turkey was the last one that asked people for their native languages and other languages spoken; almost four million, or 12.7 per cent of the population, then identified themselves as speakers of Kurdish, of whom 7.1 per cent spoke it as their first language.³ This gives only a very rough indication of the number of people identifying themselves as Kurds. Those mentioning Kurdish as a second language must have included ethnic Turks, Arabs, Armenians and other Christian groups living in ethnically mixed regions where Kurdish was the lingua franca. Others may have been persons of mixed parentage, or Kurds who were at least as fluent in Turkish as in Kurdish. The 7.1 per cent figure is clearly too low for an estimate of how many actually considered themselves as Kurds. Many people must have been reluctant to stigmatise themselves by proclaiming Kurdish identity, and some of the enumerators may have “corrected” their data in order to arrive at politically acceptable figures.⁴

Although we cannot really know how many people in Turkey considered themselves as Kurds in 1965, it is safe to say that the percentage of people who do so thirty years later has risen perceptibly. Only a small part of this increase is to be attributed to the higher birth rate of Turkey’s eastern provinces as compared to the western part of the country. The rise is chiefly due to the fact that numerous people who thought of themselves as Turks in 1965 are presently defining themselves primarily as Kurds. This includes many young people whose parents or grandparents had assimilated to Turkish culture, voluntarily or under pressure. Partly overlapping with this group are the offspring of mixed marriages, whose ethnic identity

³ 2,219,547 people mentioned Kurdish (Kurmanji) as their mother tongue, another 1,753,161 as their second language. The latter number may include many Zaza speakers. 150,644 stated Zaza to be their first language, and 112,701 said they spoke it as a second language. For a sophisticated analysis of the ethnic data contained in the censuses from 1935 to 1965 and an extrapolation to 1990, see: Servet Mutlu, “Ethnic Kurds in Turkey: a demographic study”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 28 (1996), 517-541.

⁴ In the province of Tunceli (former Dersim), for instance, which is predominantly Zaza-speaking, the 1965 census registered only seven native Zaza speakers among a total population of over 150,000; around half said their mother tongue was Kurdish.

is inherently ambiguous. Almost everyone in Turkey may find a distant Kurdish ancestor if he or she goes far enough back. Those with at least one Kurdish grandparent (whose numbers include the late presidents İsmet İnönü and Turgut Özal) constitute a vast reservoir of potential Kurds. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same is true of the Kurds in Iran and Iraq.

Put simply, among the Kurds (as among any ethnic group) we find a core whose ethnic identity is unambiguously Kurdish, and that is surrounded by more peripheral groups whose identification with Kurdish ethnicity is more ambivalent and for whom Kurdish identity is only one of several options. This is, however, putting it too simply, for on closer inspection even the ethnic core appears not to be so unambiguously definable at all. Each member of the core has, just like the more peripheral “potential Kurds,” a number of overlapping identities, some of which may exert a stronger appeal to his or her loyalties than the Kurdish identity. He or she belongs to a village and perhaps to a notable family of some renown, to a tribe, to a region, to a dialect group, and to a religious community. Within the core we moreover find so wide a range of cultural variety that it is impossible to define it by a number of common cultural traits.⁵

Nevertheless, there is considerable agreement among oriental authors, at least from the early sixteenth century on, as to whom to call Kurds. The Ottoman historians describing the incorporation of Kurdistan into the Ottoman Empire in the early 16th century; the late 16th-century ruler of Bitlis, Sharaf Khan, who wrote a detailed history of all Kurdistan’s ruling families towards the end of that century; Evliya Çelebi, the Turkish traveller who spent years in various parts of Kurdistan in the mid-17th century — all of them used the name Kurd in practically the same way and applied it to the same population. So did Ottoman and Persian administrators, down to the early 1930’s, when mentioning Kurds became unacceptable in Turkey. Their Kurds consisted of those tribesmen of eastern Asia Minor and the Zagros, settled as well as nomadic, who were not Turkish, Arabic or Persian-speaking.⁶ They included speakers of Kurdish proper as well as Zaza (in the Northwest) or Gurani (in the Southeast, with more isolated pockets throughout present Iraqi Kurdistan), Sunni Muslims as well as Shi’is and the adherents of the various heterodox sects in the region. There was only some ambiguity about the Lor and Bakhtiari, living to the Southeast of the Kurds proper, whom some authors called Kurds and others considered as separate groups. (The same ambiguity still persists in the self-definition of at least some of the Lor today.) It is important to note also whom they appeared *not* to include among the Kurds: the numerous non-tribal peasants and townsmen living in the same area, who included Muslims as well as Christians, and many of whom spoke Kurdish (or Gurani or Zaza) dialects as their first language. I shall return to the

⁵ Martin van Bruinessen, “Kurdish society, ethnicity, nationalism and refugee problems”, in: Philip G. Kreyenbroek & Stefan Sperl (eds.), *The Kurds, a contemporary overview* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 33-67.

⁶ We also find Kurdish tribes mentioned as far away from this region as western Anatolia and eastern and north-eastern Iran, but all of these tribes retained memories of their ancestors migrating there from the said region. A good overview of the tribes included among the Kurds a century ago is: Mark Sykes, “The Kurdish tribes of the Ottoman Empire”, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 38 (1908), 451-486.

matter of these non-tribal groups below.

Unity and variety among the Kurds

The great orientalist and expert on the Kurds, Vladimir Minorsky, once claimed that the various Kurdish dialects (from which he excluded Zaza and Gurani) showed underneath their obvious differences a remarkable unity, that was especially remarkable when compared with the great variety of very dissimilar Iranian languages spoken by the inhabitants of another mountainous area, the Pamirs. He concluded that this basic unity of the Kurdish language derived from a single language spoken by a large and important people, and suggested that these might have been the Medes (whom Kurdish nationalists in fact like to see as their ancestors).⁷

This view was criticised by the linguist D.N. MacKenzie, according to whom there are but few linguistic features that all Kurdish dialects have in common and that at the same time distinguish them from other Iranian languages. MacKenzie argued that Kurdish proper differs in a number of major aspects significantly from what is known about Median. Kurdish has a strong south-western Iranian element, whereas Median presumably was a north-western Iranian language. Both Zaza and Gurani, however, belong to the north-western Iranian group, and MacKenzie believed that many of the differences between the northern (“Kurmanji”) and southern (“Sorani”) dialects of Kurdish proper could be explained by the profound influence of Gurani on the latter.⁸ MacKenzie’s message, which he appeared to direct at Kurdish nationalist ideologues as much as at Minorsky, was that the Kurds had neither common origins nor basic cultural unity.

There is wide agreement in recent studies of ethnicity and national identity that cultural unity or diversity in themselves are not decisive factors — although appeals to an (alleged) common history and common culture are of course of tremendous importance in mobilising ethnic or national sentiment. The first European nation-states in the age of nationalism were not at all culturally homogeneous. In 1789 only half of the Frenchmen spoke any French at all and only 12-13 per cent spoke it correctly; the others only spoke various *patois*. At the time of Italy’s unification in 1860, only 2.5 per cent of its population used Italian for everyday purposes; even some of the leading nationalists were less than fluent in the “national” language.⁹ In the case of

⁷ V. Minorsky, “Les origines des Kurdes”, *Actes du XXe congrès international des orientalistes* (Louvain, 1940), pp. 143-152.

⁸ D.N. MacKenzie, “The Origins of Kurdish”, *Transactions of the Philological Society*, 1961, 68-86. MacKenzie is a trained linguist (Minorsky was not), but his conclusions are based on his determination of a small number of isoglosses, and it is not impossible that another selection of isoglosses might have yielded different results.

⁹ These examples are taken from E.J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and nationalism since 1780* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp 60-1.

the Kurds, it is remarkable that long before the age of nationalism there already was a sense of common identity among tribes whose cultures were “objectively” quite diverse.

It is not difficult to point out considerable cultural differences within what nationalists claim to be the Kurdish nation. The more extreme claims of some nationalists include the Lor and Bakhtiari, who speak closely related languages. These groups now do not generally consider themselves as Kurds, although this name was occasionally applied to them in the past. The speakers of Gurani and Zaza, on the other hand, have for centuries been considered as Kurds by themselves and by their Kurdish-speaking neighbours as well as by such outsiders as Turkish and Arabic authors. This was in spite of the fact that their languages cannot be understood by native speakers of Kurdish proper (apart from the few who have expended considerable effort to learn them).¹⁰

Even Kurmanji and Sorani, the major dialect groups of Kurdish, are not mutually understandable either, although speakers of one may learn the other relatively easily. In fact, within these dialect groups too there is so much variation that people from different regions may prefer communicating in Turkish, Persian or Arabic because they only imperfectly understand each other’s Kurdish. In each of the countries in which the Kurds live, moreover, the various Kurdish dialects have during the present century undergone a considerable influence of the official language, most clearly in vocabulary but also to some extent in syntax. Closely related dialects spoken on either side of an inter-state boundary have thus begun drifting apart.

Religion, the other central element of culture, also appears to divide rather than unite the Kurds. The majority are Sunni Muslims, adhering to the Shafi`i school (*madhhab*) in the details of their religious obligations, but large numbers in southern and south-eastern Kurdistan (in Iraq as well as Iran) are Twelver Shi`i Muslims like the majority of the populations of Iran and southern Iraq. These Shi`i Kurds should not be confused with the Alevi Kurds of north-western Kurdistan. Although the Alevis also venerate Ali and the other eleven Imams of the Shi`a, they do not in general accept the canonical obligations of orthodox Islam and they have their own religious rituals, different from those of the Shi`is as well as those of the Sunnis. Alevi Kurds constitute only a minority among the Alevis of Turkey, and they often feel closer to their Turkish-speaking co-religionists than to the Sunni Kurds. A somewhat similar religion is that of the Ahl-i Haqq or, as they are called in Iraq, the Kaka`i. Many Ahl-i Haqq claim that their religion is an esoteric sect within Shi`i Islam, but some wish to place themselves outside Islam altogether. Even further removed from Islamic orthodoxy is the Yezidi religion, once widespread in central and north-western Kurdistan but now restricted to a few small areas in Iraq and the Armenian Republic and smaller pockets in Syria and

¹⁰ It is sometimes claimed by speakers of Kurmanji that they understand Zaza without effort. They probably mean that they recognize single words, which is not surprising. Asking such persons to translate even a single line from an oral or written Zaza text usually results in great embarrassment.

Turkey.¹¹ The now dwindling Christian and Jewish communities of the region are not commonly considered as Kurds, although some of them have Kurdish as their first language.

Among the Sunni speakers of Kurdish proper we find groups with quite different material cultures. The sociologist Rudolph, noting that in a relatively small area in south-eastern Turkey there were communities that differed considerably in the degree of their dependence on agriculture or animal husbandry as well as in other aspects of material culture such as house type, ventured the hypothesis that these represented two originally quite distinct ethnic groups. The geographer Hütteroth, however, who did fieldwork in the same area, suggested that the differences in material culture were simply due to different ecological circumstances.¹² Hütteroth's explanation is basically the same as the one we find a few years later, further worked out theoretically, in an article by Fredrik Barth on Pathan tribesmen, among whom he had observed even wider cultural diversity. In spite of their cultural differences, these groups were acutely aware of their common Pathan identity.¹³

In the Kurdish case, however, some of the cultural differences correlate with a distinction between tribesmen and a non-tribal subordinated peasantry. In many parts of Kurdistan we find such groups existing beside each other. The tribesmen tend to consider themselves as the only "real" Kurds, and the non-tribal peasants used to be designated by various ethnic or "caste" terms (*ra`yat*, *guran*, *miskên*, *kelawspî*, *kurmanc*) distinguishing them from the tribes (*ashiret*, *kurd*). The history of the region suggests that the *ra`yat* must be of quite heterogeneous origins and include descendants of various older populations as well as impoverished Kurdish tribesmen.¹⁴

The cultural differences mentioned above have been losing much of their importance due to the massive migration and urbanisation that have taken place during the past few decades. In the large cities it does not matter much whether one's grandparents were nomads or small peasants, or what language they spoke at home. For most public purposes one did not use the

¹¹ On the various religions in Kurdistan see: Martin van Bruinessen, "Religion in Kurdistan", *Kurdish Times* (Brooklyn, NY), vol. 4 no. 1-2, 1991, 5-27 and "Introduction: The Kurds and Islam", *Les Annales de l'autre islam*, no. 5 (1998), 13-35, both reprinted in *Mullas, Sufis and heretics: the role of religion in Kurdish society. Collected articles* (Istanbul: The Isis Press, 2000); Philip G. Kreyenbroek, "Religion and religions in Kurdistan", in: Christine Allison and Philip G. Kreyenbroek (eds.), *Kurdish culture and identity* (London: Zed Books, 1996), pp. 85-110; idem, "On the study of some heterodox sects in Kurdistan", *Les annales de l'autre Islam* 5 (1998), 163-184.

¹² Wolfgang Rudolph, "Einige hypothetische Ausführungen zur Kultur der Kurden", *Sociologus* 9 (1959), 150-62; Wolfgang Hütteroth, "Beobachtungen zur Sozialstruktur kurdischer Stämme im östlichen Taurus", *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 86 (1961), 23-42.

¹³ Fredrik Barth, "Pathan identity and its maintenance", in: Fredrik Barth (ed.), *Ethnic groups and boundaries* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1969), pp. 117-134. Barth's view, based on these and similar observations, that the identities of ethnic groups are not determined by their cultures but by the boundaries separating them from others will be considered at greater length below.

¹⁴ See the discussion of these non-tribal groups in: Martin van Bruinessen, *Agha, shaikh and state: the social and political structures of Kurdistan* (London: Zed Books, 1992), 105-121.

language of the village but the official language of the state — Turkish, Arabic or Persian. This fostered on the one hand an increasing awareness of common Kurdishness among people of different regional origins in the same country, but on the other hand caused a widening cultural gap between the Kurds of Turkey, Iraq and Iran. Compulsory education and military service, various forms of political mobilisation (elections, mass demonstrations), economic development and the ensuing internal migration, and especially “national” radio and television have integrated even the most distant villages into the “national” life of their states. Separate histories for at least the past seventy-five years, and different processes of socialisation have made the Kurds of each country rather different from those in the neighbouring states.

Nationalism, nationhood and national rights

Kurdish nationalists have always been apprehensive about these cultural divisions. Their aim has been self-determination in one form or another; and that aim obviously required unity. Kurdish nationalists have frequently suspected the Turkish, Iraqi and Iranian governments of deliberately reinforcing the existing intra-Kurdish differences - and not without justification. For instance, the governments of the Shah’s Iran and Republican Iraq, both of which broadcast radio programmes in Kurdish, had parallel programmes in a number of different dialects, while their Persian- and Arabic-languages programmes obviously only used the standard language. This was generally perceived as an attempt to keep the Kurds divided and prevent the emergence of a standard Kurdish.¹⁵

In the dominant political discourse of the 20th century, self-determination has been associated with *nations*: American President Woodrow Wilson’s “Fourteen Points” and other wartime speeches, Joseph Stalin’s influential writings on the national question and the Charter of the United Nations all refer to the *right of self-determination of nations*. Kurdish nationalists have therefore often spent much effort to prove that the Kurds constitute a nation. Neither Wilson nor the United Nations provided a definition of what was meant by this term.¹⁶ The Kurds might have qualified for Wilson, but by the end of the First World War the Kurdish nationalists were too weak to effectively press their claims. The UN Charter (1948) implicitly referred to the colonised peoples of Asia and Africa only, or more precisely those peoples that were colonised by western powers. Stalin, however, did provide a definition, which has had great importance to the Kurdish movement. Kurdish nationalists, claiming to represent a nation by this definition, have attempted to receive Soviet support for their cause. The definition also loomed large over the debates between Kurdish nationalists and the left movements of their countries; most of the left-wing parties denied the Kurds’ status as a nation and told them to

¹⁵ See on this subject the excellent study by Amir Hassanpour, *Nationalism and language in Kurdistan, 1918-1985* (San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1989).

¹⁶ Interesting observations on President Wilson’s reckless use of the concept of self-determination are made in Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s *Pandaemonium: ethnicity in international politics* (Oxford University Press, 1993), Chapter 2 (titled ‘On the “self-determination of peoples”’).

content themselves with that of a *national minority* (which in Stalinist theory does not have the right of self-determination and cannot establish its separate communist party).

Stalin defined the nation by five characteristic features: common history, language, territory, economic life and culture, expressing a common “national character.” Only when all of these are present does a group of people constitute a nation in Stalin’s sense (and, by implication, deserve socialist solidarity in its struggle for self-determination).¹⁷ Kurdish nationalists could convincingly claim a common history and a large piece of territory associated with their people, but their opponents in the debates denied the existence of a common economic life. The unity of language and culture too were sensitive issues, although they were less frequently contested by the non-Kurdish left.

It was in debates within Turkey’s Kurdish movement itself that the language question assumed grave importance: Zaza had to be declared a Kurdish *dialect*, not a related but different *language*, for the second alternative would by Stalin’s definition exclude the Zaza-speakers from the Kurdish nation. Later some of the Zaza-speakers were to perceive in this attitude of the Kurdish movement towards Zaza a precise parallel to the way the Turkish authorities had declared Kurdish to be a Turkish dialect. The rigid insistence on linguistic unity as a criterion for nationhood in Stalin’s definition thus indirectly became one of the factors contributing to the recent emergence of a separatist Zaza nationalism.

Although most Kurdish nationalists nurture the dream of a united and independent Kurdistan, the leaders of the Iranian and Iraqi Kurds have for pragmatic reasons usually restricted their demands to self-determination within the framework of the existing states, i.e. political autonomy and cultural rights. They refrained from openly embracing pan-Kurdish ideals.¹⁸ When in Turkey the Kurdish movement re-emerged in the 1960s, initially as a part of the reborn left movement, its first demands were for recognition of the existence of Kurds, cultural rights, and economic development. As Lenin’s and Stalin’s thought gradually became more widely known in Turkey, the concept of self-determination came to dominate political discourse, and by the late 1970s it had become the professed aim of virtually all Kurdish parties and organisations in Turkey. The party that was most successful in waging a guerrilla against the Turkish state and building up a mass following among Turkey’s Kurds, the PKK, long proclaimed that the independence of all of Kurdistan was its ultimate objective. It made in fact efforts to draw Iraqi and Iranian Kurds into its orbit, becoming a significant factor in both

¹⁷ In his first and best-known article on the subject (“Marxism and the national question”, written in 1912-13), Stalin defined the nation as “*a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture.*” In his later writings on the subject (collected in: Joseph Stalin, *Marxism and the national-colonial question*. San Francisco: Proletarian Publishers, 1975), he never endeavoured to formulate a more sophisticated definition.

¹⁸ In the 1960s and 1970s, however, Kurdish activists from neighbouring Iran, Turkey and Syria regularly visited, or came to stay in, the “liberated areas” of Iraqi Kurdistan. In the 1970s, both the Barzanis and the Talabani group, moreover, established special relationships with Kurdish sister organisations in Turkey and Iran, thereby also exporting their rivalries. The aim of this co-operation was to support the struggle of the Iraqi Kurds, not to organise pan-Kurdish activities.

the Iraqi and Iranian parts of Kurdistan and competing notably with the Iraqi KDP. By the early 1990s, however, it became clear that its leader, Abdullah Öcalan, had moderated his ambitions and was hoping for a negotiated settlement with the Turkish government alone. Many years before his ultimate capture and trial it had become clear that he envisaged a solution within the framework of the Republic of Turkey.¹⁹

All significant Kurdish leaders thus appear to have reconciled themselves with the prospect of their people remaining a divided nation or, perhaps, constituting three closely related but separate nations.

Ethnic boundaries and the Kurdish *ethnie*

Since the anthropologist Fredrik Barth's influential work on ethnic boundaries, it has become widely accepted that ethnicity is not simply determined by objective cultural traits but that boundary maintenance is the major constituent factor.²⁰ The culture of an ethnic group may show quite wide internal variation due to differing ecological circumstances and it may undergo considerable change over time, but neither of these factors affects its ethnic identity as long as the group remains capable of maintaining a clear boundary between itself and its environment. Ethnic groups, in this view, are primarily defined by the boundaries that mark them off from other ethnic groups. Effective boundary maintenance requires of course the use of clear boundary markers, symbols of group identity. It is often cultural traits that are used as boundary markers, but there is no a priori reason why certain traits become boundary markers and others not; moreover traits that were once important may lose their significance and give way to others.

It may be helpful to apply this approach to the Kurdish case, and investigate which social boundaries were and are most carefully maintained among the Kurds and their neighbours. Prior to the First World War, the most conspicuous of all boundaries was that between Muslims and Christians or Jews. Turkish and Arabic-speaking Sunni Muslims were much less alien to the Sunni Kurds, and the boundaries separating them were fuzzy. In the 15th century, Turkish and Kurdish nomadic tribesmen merged in a single large tribal confederacy, the Boz Ulus.²¹ In later centuries, Ottoman documents contain references to tribes described as 'Turcoman Kurds' or 'Kurdish Turcomans', terms that are not well understood but that

¹⁹ Martin van Bruinessen, "Turkey, Europe and the Kurds after the capture of Abdullah Öcalan", in: idem, *Kurdish ethno-nationalism versus nation-building states. Collected articles* (Istanbul: The Isis Press, 2000), pp. 277-288.

²⁰ Fredrik Barth, "Introduction", in: Fredrik Barth (ed.), *Ethnic groups and boundaries* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1969), pp. 9-38.

²¹ Faruk Demirtas, "Bozulus hakkında", *Ankara Üniversitesi Dil ve Tarih-Cografya Fakültesi Dergisi* 7 (1949), 29-60; Tufan Gündüz, *Anadolu'da Türkmen asiretleri: Bozulus Türkmenleri (1540-1640)*. Ankara: Bilge Yayinlari, 1997.

suggest a degree of cultural merger between Turkish and Kurdish elements and the absence of a clear ethnic boundary between them.²² At least one Arabic-speaking tribe, the Mahallami (in the Tor Abdin, east of Mardin), considered itself as Kurdish and was considered as such by other Kurds.²³ Zaza-speaking tribesmen were never even mentioned as a distinct group but always considered as Kurds.

The Yezidis were in a different position. On the one hand, they were not considered as Muslims and they emphasised their distinct identity by various external signs; on the other hand, as tribespeople and Kurdish speakers they were much closer to the Muslim Kurds than most Christians were. There was a clear boundary between Sunni Kurds and Yezidis but its importance varied from time to time. By the beginning of the 20th century several tribes in the provinces of Urfa and Mardin, in present Turkey, appear to have had Yezidi as well as Muslim segments (which probably was due to gradual conversion of Yezidi tribes to Islam).²⁴

It is not entirely clear how sharply defined the boundary between Alevi and Sunni Kurds was. The difference between Alevism and Sunni Islam may not have mattered much among nomads, who have been notoriously lax in orthodox religious practice, but have gained significance among settled populations, that were more susceptible to orthodox teachings. Several 19th-century sources speak of the Kizilbash (Alevi) as if these constituted a distinct ethnic community besides Sunni Kurds and Ottoman Muslims. The fact that there were speakers of Turkish, Kurdish and Zaza among these Kizilbash does not appear to have been considered as significant.²⁵

Language, in other words, did not play an important part as a boundary marker, but religion did; and the boundaries separating Christians from Muslims were much more unambiguous than those between heterodox and orthodox.

Perhaps the most important boundary of all, however, was the aforementioned one between tribal and non-tribal populations. The Muslim-Christian boundary was especially sharp where it coincided with that separating tribesmen and non-tribal peasants or craftsmen. Where

²² Numerous tribes referred to as “Türkman Ekradi” or “Ekrad Yörükani” are listed in: Cevdet Türkey, *Basbakanlik arsivi belgeleri'ne göre Osmanli Imparatorlugu'nda oymak, asiret ve cemaatlar* (Istanbul: Tercüman, 1979).

²³ Mark Sykes, “The Kurdish tribes of the Ottoman Empire”, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 38 (1908), p. 473. The situation has changed, however: most Mahallami still living in the region consider themselves as Arabs rather than Kurds, but many of those who migrated to Lebanon in the mid-20th century still tend to identify themselves as Kurds vis à vis their Arab neighbours.

²⁴ See e.g., Sykes, “The Kurdish tribes”, pp. 469, 473-4.

²⁵ Thus the population statistics for the province of Ma'muret el-`Aziz (which included Dersim, Harput and Malatya), compiled from Ottoman yearbooks (*salname*) by Cuinet, list “Muslims”, “Kizilbash” and “Kurds” as the major categories, besides various Christian denominations. The “Muslims” probably include non-tribal peasants as well as most of the urban population, irrespective of language. See Vital Cuinet, *La Turquie d'Asie. Géographie administrative*, tome II (Paris: Leroux, 1892), pp. 322ff.

Christians were tribally organised and militarily strong, as the Nestorians of Hakkari and the Jacobites of the Tor Abdin still were for most of the 19th century, they were treated as equals by Kurdish tribesmen. There were even Kurdish tribes that incorporated Christians as members.²⁶ The non-tribal populations of the region included speakers of Kurdish, Zaza and Gurani as well as Armenian, Aramaic, Arabic and perhaps Turkish, and there were Sunni and Alevi Muslims among them as well as Christians. The tribesmen made no sharp ethnic distinctions among these non-tribal groups, referring to them by the blanket term of *ra`yat* (“subjects”), by slightly more precise terms such as *feleh* (for Christian peasants, especially Armenians) and *kurmanç* (for Muslim peasants in northern Kurdistan), or by terms of local scope that differed from region to region. The tribesmen referred to themselves simply as *`ashiret* (“tribe”) or as *kurd*.²⁷

There was yet another significant boundary in the region: that between the representatives of Ottoman high culture — military-bureaucratic officials, higher religious functionaries, urban notables — and the various local populations. The former were a quite distinct group that kept a distance from the common people by their use of Ottoman Turkish and an elaborate etiquette. The urban populations of major cities in Kurdistan had a similar, Turkicised culture. The *shehri* (urbanites) constituted a distinct social category that was not associated with any of the vernacular rural groups — although some of the *shehri* in the region would become leading Turkish nationalists and others opt for Kurdish nationalism.

Given this complex of cross-cutting ethnic boundaries — some sharp, some fuzzy — one concludes that the Kurdish *ethnie* had a core consisting, by the early 20th century, of the Kurdish-speaking Muslim tribes. The Zaza and Gurani-speaking tribes, or at least the Sunnis among them, that lived in similar ecological environments and shared a common history with their Kurdish-speaking neighbours, were to most purposes also part of the core.²⁸ The Alevi, Yezidi, Shi`i and Ahl-i Haqq tribes were more peripheral; and the non-tribal peasantry, whatever their language or religion, were not considered, and did not consider themselves, as part of the *ethnie*. Christians and Jews were also excluded from it, but many individuals and even entire groups crossed the boundary by formally converting to Islam; they were accepted as Kurds.

The most ambivalent group were the *shehri*, the townspeople of Kurdistan. As one of them, Ziya Gökalp, wrote around 1915, *‘shehrinin milliyeti yoktur’*, “the urbanite has no ethnic

²⁶ For examples see my *Agha, shaikh and state*, pp. 107, 117-8.

²⁷ The name *kurd* in fact may originally have referred to nomadic tribalism rather than a linguistically defined “ethnic” identity. Medieval Arabic authors occasionally apply such labels as “Arab Kurds” to nomadic groups that appear to have no relation to the present, ethnically defined Kurds.

²⁸ It is significant that Ziya Gökalp, in his study of Kurdish tribes (written between 1920 and his death in 1924, but not published until 1975) includes the Zaza speakers among the Kurds. Ziya Gökalp, *Kürt asiretleri hakkında sosyolojik tetkikler* (Istanbul: Sosyal Yayınlar, 1992).

identity,”²⁹ and soon there would be a debate in a Kurdish journal as to whether the *shehri* of towns like Bitlis, who were turcophone, were Kurds or Turks. Those urban notables who were related to tribes of the region, understandably, tended to identify themselves with the Kurds, but most of the *shehri* long remained ambivalent. The same is true of the non-tribal peasantry, who only after the 1960s gradually became accepted as Kurds.

This composition of the Kurdish *ethnie* was reflected in the membership of the first Kurdish nationalist associations, established in Istanbul between 1908 and 1920.³⁰ These were mostly educated members of the tribal or religious elite, and overwhelmingly Sunnis. We find speakers of the northern and southern Kurdish dialects as well as a few Zaza speakers among them, but very few Alevis and no Yezidis.³¹ Not surprisingly, there were no members of peasant or urban craftsman backgrounds, and in the Kurdish rebellions of the 1920s and 1930s these social strata remained aloof. One of the prominent *shehri* members of several Kurdish associations was the medical doctor Abdullah Cevdet, who had earlier been one of the founders of the Young Turk *Committee of Union and Progress*. Cevdet was the mentor of another famous *shehri*, Ziya Gökalp, who had a lifelong ambivalent relation with the Kurds, but who opted for Turkish ethnicity and became one of the chief ideologues of Turkish nationalism.³²

Paths to nationhood

The British sociologist Anthony D. Smith, who is one of the foremost scholars of nationalism, has made a distinction between two radically different roads to nationhood, that take their origins in two different ideal types of ethnic community or *ethnie*.³³ His discussion of these

²⁹ Ziya Gökalp, *Türklesmek, Islamlasmak, Mu`asirlasmak* (‘Turkicisation, Islamisation, Modernisation’). This text was published as a book in 1918 but it contains materials first published in the journal *Türk Yurdu* from 1913 on.

³⁰ Martin van Bruinessen, *Agha, shaikh and state*, pp. 275-81; Ismail Göldas, *Kürdistan Teali Cemiyeti* (Istanbul: Doz, 1991); Janet Klein, *Claiming the nation: the origins and nature of Kurdish nationalist discourse: a study of the Kurdish press in the Ottoman Empire* (MA thesis, Near Eastern Studies, Princeton University, 1996); Hakan Özoğlu, “‘Nationalism’ and Kurdish notables in the late Ottoman - early Republican era”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 33 (2001), 383-409.

³¹ Later, in the 1930s, the Kurdish nationalist association in exile, Khoybun, idealised Yezidism as the one truly Kurdish religion, but it did not have prominent Yezidi members either. (Some of my informants claim that Haco, the chieftain of the Hevêrkan tribe and a Khoybun member, was a Yezidi, but he was not openly so, and his descendants vehemently deny it).

³² Kurdish nationalists have always claimed that Gökalp was really a Kurd. More recently it has been claimed that he was a Zaza, see: Zilfi Selcan, *Zaza milli meselesi hakkında* (Ankara: Zaza Kültürü Yayinlari, 1994), p. 3. Both claims are based on the fact that Gökalp’s family originated from the district of Çermük. For Gökalp’s ambivalent relation with his possible Kurdish roots, see: Rohat, *Ziya Gökalp’in büyük çilesi Kürtler* (Istanbul: Firat yayinlari, 1992).

³³ Anthony D. Smith, *The ethnic origins of nations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986); idem, “The origins of nations”, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 12 (1989), 340-67; idem, *National identity* (London: Penguin Books,

types and their evolution, although not immediately applicable, is useful to an understanding of the Kurdish situation. Smith uses the French term *ethnie* to indicate communities that not only share certain myths of origin and descent, the association with a certain territory and at least some common elements of culture, but also a sense of solidarity among (most of) their members. It is the awareness of belonging together that distinguishes the *ethnie* from the *ethnic category*, people with a common culture and common myths of origin but lacking solidarity and deliberate boundary maintenance mechanisms. The *nation* represents a higher degree of integration than the *ethnie*, being characterised by a mass, public culture and by a certain degree of economic and political integration.³⁴

The first of Smith's ideal types is what he calls the "lateral-aristocratic" *ethnie*, whose members constitute a military-aristocratic stratum, which has little social depth but may be widely extended in geographical space. The other is what he calls the "vertical-demotic" type, in which different social strata share in (more or less) the same culture and are held together by a belief in common origins and a strong commitment to a common religion. Lateral-aristocratic *ethnies* may grow into nations if they succeed in culturally integrating the various communities that they dominate. Smith speaks of "bureaucratic incorporation", for the state usually plays a key role in the process. This is the process by which such European nation-states as France, England and Spain were formed. Vertical-demotic *ethnies* may (but do not necessarily) develop into nations through a process of internal mobilisation by a nationalist intelligentsia, which usually involves a reinvention of the ethnic past and the claim of sacred ties to a homeland. Such "demotic" nations may emerge beside the earlier "nation-states" but also inside and against them, among the subject populations of an aristocratic *ethnie*.

Spain constitutes an especially instructive example for comparison with the Kurdish case: the "aristocratic-lateral" Castilians succeeded in incorporating most of the population of the Iberian peninsula (excluding Portugal) into the Spanish nation, but the Catalans, Basques and Galicians never entirely gave up their distinct ethnic identities, which later became the basis for "demotic" nationalisms. The Spanish and Catalan identities are not mutually exclusive; even the most fervent Catalan nationalist is, at least in some ways, also a Spaniard. It is also important to notice that Catalan nationalism emerged well after the successful incorporation of the Catalans into the Spanish nation.

The case of the Kurds, however, is a little more complex. Until the beginnings of the present century, the Kurds and the other peoples of the region were the subjects of the Ottoman military and bureaucratic elite, who constituted a sort of aristocratic-lateral *ethnie* (united by the Ottoman language, the state variety of Sunni Islam, and a particular Ottoman *ethos*),

1991). These works are clearly indebted to the seminal work by Ernest Gellner, *Nations and nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), but much richer in concrete historical description.

³⁴ In his *National identity* (p. 14), Smith gives the following definition of the nation: "a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members."

although many of its members originated from various demotic *ethnies*. The Kemalist elite of Turkey was in most relevant respects the successor of this Ottoman elite; in spite of its Turkish nationalist and populist ideology it remained just as distant from the tribes and the peasantry.³⁵ This elite fostered a reinvented Turkish culture, with which Turkish villagers, let alone the Kurds, initially had little affinity. Its deliberate efforts at nation-building, however, through the forced assimilation of especially the Kurds and the suppression of traditional religious styles, as well as by the more benign means of mass education, general conscription into the army and the use of modern mass media, were largely successful. The gentler methods of “bureaucratic incorporation” practised in Iraq during the mandate and under Hashemite rule also resulted in a distinct Iraqi national identity, and the same was true, *mutatis mutandis*, of Iran under the Pahlavi shahs.³⁶

By the beginning of the 20th century, as was shown in the preceding section, the Kurds too were rather like an aristocratic-lateral *ethnie*, consisting of (mostly Sunni Muslim) tribesmen dominating a peasantry and various other population groups considered as less or not at all Kurdish. Following the Armenian deportations and massacres of 1915 and the final expulsion of Armenians from north-eastern Turkey in the immediate post-war years, there remained very few Christians in eastern Turkey. The Muslim-Christian boundary thus became irrelevant. The Kemalist policy of secularisation, from 1924 onward, affected other ethnic boundaries as well. Common religion had united Kurds and Turks in the resistance against Armenian territorial claims, but the disestablishment of Islam and its replacement by Turkish nationalism as the state ideology inevitably loosened the bond between the Kurds and their Turkish neighbours. It decreased, on the other hand, the distance between Sunnis and Alevis. Social mobility and urbanisation moreover began to blur the distinction between tribal and non-tribal people. By the 1960s, the Kurdish nationalist intelligentsia, although of elite backgrounds, had decided that the non-tribal peasantry were real Kurds and directed their nationalist propaganda at them. The subject peasantry were gradually incorporated into the dominant *ethnie*. (A similar incorporation of minorities had in fact begun earlier, with the conversion of Armenians and other Christians to Islam.³⁷)

Two processes of incorporation, involving the same peasant, lower-class urban and marginal tribal populations, thus have been at work simultaneously: incorporation into the emerging Turkish (or Iraqi, or Iranian) nation-state and incorporation into the Kurdish *ethnie*. The peasantry was late in actively opting for an identity, but among the Alevi tribes of Turkey

³⁵ Insightful observations on this subject in: Serif Mardin, “Center-periphery relations: A key to Turkish politics?”, *Daedalus* 102 (1973), 169-190.

³⁶ Abbas Kelidar (ed.), *The integration of modern Iraq* (London: Croom Helm, 1979); Philip C. Salzman, “National integration of the tribes in modern Iran”, *Middle East Journal* 25 (1971), 325-336.

³⁷ In various parts of Kurdistan there are communities that retain a memory of having been Armenian or Nestorian. Some of these already converted before the 1915 massacres, others converted thereafter apparently in order to save themselves from genocide or expulsion. These communities speak Kurdish, and some may have had Kurdish as their mother tongue even before conversion.

there was in the 1920s a lively debate on which identity to choose, Kurdish or Turkish. Some of their chieftains threw in their lot with the Kurdish nationalists,³⁸ some opted for the secular state against their long-time hostile Sunni Kurdish neighbours and declared themselves to be “real Turks”,³⁹ and many others went on considering Alevism as their only relevant identity. The Yezidis, Kaka’is and other similar communities in Iraq, as well as the Christians of Kurdistan faced analogous choices, although they were not subject to great pressure to declare themselves Arabs until the Ba`ath party came to power.⁴⁰

For several decades, the process of nation-building in Turkey, Iraq and Iran continued quite successfully, without however being capable of preventing the gradual incorporation of peripheral groups into the Kurdish *ethnie*. Kurdish identity, however, especially in Turkey, remained subordinate to the state-based national identity until the late 1960s and 1970s, when we see the emergence of Kurdish nationalist mass movements. This resurgence of Kurdish nationalism resembled the “ethnic revival” in Europe’s nation-states; it had more than a few things in common with the Basque and Catalan movements in Spain (although the latter movements emerged in relatively privileged parts of Spain, whereas Kurdistan was a disadvantaged region). The new Kurdish movement, most clearly so in Turkey, was spawned by the twin processes of mass education and urbanisation. It was born in the large cities, where Kurdish students and intellectuals, and later labour migrants, became more aware of being different from the dominant *ethnie* and of a certain discrimination against them.

The Kurdish movement of the 1960s and 1970s gives the impression that successful ethnic incorporation had taken place: among the leaders and the rank-and-file we find in Turkey Sunnis and Alevis, Kurdish and Zaza speakers as well as monolingual Turkish speakers of Kurdish descent. In the Iraqi Kurdish movement we find not only speakers of all Kurdish and

³⁸ Thus some chieftains of the large Alevi tribe Koçgiri of western Dersim (presently the Zara district of Sivas province), in 1920 and 1921 wrote letters to the Kemalist National Assembly demanding autonomy on the ground that they were Kurds. This led to the first Kurdish rebellion against the Kemalist movement. See M. Nuri Dersimi, *Kürdistan tarihinde Dersim* (Halep: Ani Matbaası, 1952), p. 129; Hans-Lukas Kieser, "Les Kurdes alévis et la question identitaire: le soulèvement du Koçgiri-Dersim (1919-1921)", *Les annales de l'autre Islam* 5 (1998), 279-316, esp. 299-303.

³⁹ This was the option apparently chosen by the Alevi tribes Khormek and Lolan of the Varto district, which actively fought against Shaikh Sa'id's Kurdish (and Sunni Muslim) rebellion in 1925. The Khormek chieftains' view of the events, with their assertion of having real Turkish origins, are given in: M. Serif Firat, *Doğu illeri ve Varto tarihi* (Ankara, 1945 and numerous reprints). The self-view of the Lolan elite as “real Turks” is expressed in: Burhan Kocadag, *Lolan oymağı ve yakın çevre tarihi* (Yalova, privately published, 1987).

⁴⁰ The Iraqi Constitution recognises two nationalities, Kurds and Arabs, as well as unspecified minorities. In practice, however, the government considers all minorities as Arabs. In 1987, on the eve of the genocidal *Anfal* campaign, the Iraqi Ba`th regime carried out a national census in which everyone had to indicate whether he/she was a Kurd or an Arab, the only two self-definitions permitted. The Yezidis and many Assyrian Christians chose to be Kurds; Middle East Watch believes that this “betrayal of the Arab nation” was the reason for the mass extermination of Yezidis and Assyrians who gave themselves up to the Iraqi army in the aftermath of the *Anfal* campaign. See Middle East Watch, *Genocide in Iraq: The Anfal campaign against the Kurds* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1994), pp. 312-7.

various Gurani dialects, Yezidis and Shi`is as well as Sunni Muslims, but also Assyrians (sometimes called “Kurdish Christians”, a concept that would have been unthinkable a few decades earlier), and even some Arabic-speaking Faylis.⁴¹ This does not mean that support for the movement or even for the idea of a Kurdish nation was general. In Iraq, the number of so-called *jash*, Kurds who could be mobilised by the central government to fight against the Kurdish movement, remained in the same order of magnitude as that of the *peshmerge*, the guerrilla fighters. Certain tribes became *jash* because their chieftains distrusted the Kurdish politicians, others because their long-time rivals had become *peshmerge*, and many others worked for the government out of fear or greed. However, the division between supporters and opponents of the Kurdish movement did not follow any of the aforementioned linguistic and religious dividing lines.

The resurgence of intra-Kurdish ethnicity

In the course of the 1980s, as said before, the processes of incorporation into one large Kurdish *ethnie* began to be countered by the resurgence of less inclusive ethnic identities. Again a comparison with the emergence of Catalan nationalism in Spain may be enlightening, with the difference that the Kurdish *ethnie* this time around found itself in the position of the Spanish. The emergence of these centrifugal forces was to some extent due to the very successes of the Kurdish nationalist movement in fostering a national awareness and building up the infrastructure of a Kurdish nation. At least two different forms of this ethnic resurgence can be observed: regional-linguistic particularism (“Badinan” versus “Soran”) in Iraqi Kurdistan, and separatist tendencies among the minority language and religious communities (Zaza and Alevi) in Turkey.

An awareness of the vast social, economic and cultural differences between the Kurmanji-speaking northern part of Iraqi Kurdistan (“Badinan”) and the Sorani-speaking south is in itself nothing new. It has been a major cause of frictions within the Iraqi Kurdish movement at least from the early 1960s on. Badinan used to be economically backward and strongly dominated by tribes, the southern districts long were more urbanised and scored much higher in education and economic development, which made the role of the tribes there less prominent. It was the Sorani Kurdish dialect that acquired official status in Iraq and was fostered as a literary language and a medium of education, while Kurmanji was neglected. The medium of

⁴¹ The Faylis were until the 1970s a large and prosperous Shi`i community of west Iranian descent, most of whom lived in Baghdad and other large cities in eastern central Iraq. There is a Fayli dialect, related to southern Kurdish and Lori, but many Faylis speak only Arabic. Most Faylis had no Iraqi citizenship, although they had lived in Iraq for generations. In the 1970s and 1980s, over a 100,000 Faylis were expelled to Iran. See Monir Morad, “Kurdish ethnic identity in Iraq”, in: Turaj Atabaki and Margreet Dorleijn (eds), *Kurdistan in search of ethnic identity* (Utrecht: Houtsma Foundation, 1990), 70-8; and Ali Babakhan, *Les Kurdes d'Irak: Leur histoire et leur déportation par le régime de Saddam Hussein* (Paris: privately published, 1994). In the mid-1970s, several Faylis held leading positions in the Iraqi Kurdish movement and rich Faylis made significant contributions to financing the movement.

instruction in schools in Badinan was not Kurmanji but Arabic or Sorani.

In the early 1960s, there was a fierce struggle for leadership of the Kurdish movement between Barzani and his tribal allies on the one hand and the urban, university-educated, Sorani-speaking members of the political bureau of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) on the other. These rivals represented not only different social strata with sometimes conflicting class interests and contrasting views of the political struggle, but also the two major regions of Iraqi Kurdistan. Barzani won the struggle, first militarily, soon also politically. Co-opting some of his former rivals, along with other southern politicians, he succeeded in uniting Kurds from all districts under his leadership. By the end of the 1960s, linguistic and religious differences no longer divided the movement, which remained firmly united until its sudden collapse in March 1975.

The movement that re-emerged in the following years has been characterised by fierce rivalry between leaders with localised power bases. Chief among them were Jalal Talabani, who found his strongest support in the Sulaymaniya (Silemani) region, and Barzani's sons Idris and Mas`ud, whose primary power base, like their father's, consisted of the tribes of Badinan. Talabani, himself born in Koi Sanjaq, had been a member of the old KDP politburo and in 1975 founded the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), whereas the Barzani brothers reconstituted their father's KDP. The other Kurdish leaders most of the time allied themselves with one or the other of these two, sometimes shifting their allegiances. Whatever else changed during the 1980s, the polarisation of the movement between Talabani and the Barzanis remained a constant. This was in part precisely because these leaders, more than others, exemplified "Soran" and "Badinan", and the stereotyped conceptions that those regions had of themselves and of one another.⁴²

Neither the repressive policies of Saddam Hussein, culminating in a genocidal offensive against Kurdish positions in 1988, nor the opportunities offered by the establishment of a safe haven under international protection in 1991 had the effect of persuading the Kurdish leaders to place common interests first. Their rivalries not only continued but were exacerbated by the economic and political conditions of the 1990s. Following relatively free elections, in which the PUK and KDP received almost equal numbers of votes, they formed a coalition government — without, however, giving it real power. Differential access to economic resources and foreign political patronage — the KDP, which controlled the Turkish border, earned vast sums from customs duties and fees besides engaging in smuggling on its own account, and simply refused to share this income with its coalition partner — was a cause of increasing tension. This culminated in a fratricidal war that broke out in 1994 and continued,

⁴² This does not mean that these leaders enjoyed the support of the entire population, or even a majority, in their respective regions. The Sulaimania region, from which most PUK leaders hail, and where this party has its strongest support, is but a part of the Sorani-speaking zone. Even in this region, support for the KDP is not negligible. The region of Erbil, which also is Sorani-speaking, long constituted a buffer zone between Sulaimania and Badinan, where both parties had influence but which neither could control. Since 1996, Erbil has been incorporated into the KDP territory.

with interruptions due to international intervention, until 1998. In 1996, the KDP called in the support of Saddam's troops to dislodge the PUK, which it accused of collusion with Iran, from the regional capital of Erbil. Since then, there have de facto been two regional governments, based in Erbil and Sulaymaniya.⁴³

The conflict between the PUK and the KDP has deepened the gulf between "Soran" and "Badinan" (even though the KDP even now controls more than just Badinan). On both sides a resurgence of primordialism and negative prejudices about the other has been noted — although it is difficult to gauge how widespread these responses are. Political leaders in the Sulaymaniya region are known to have agitated against the alleged danger of domination by the Badinanis (who in the present geopolitical constellation control the supply lines of the southern region). In Badinan, on the other hand, political resentment against Talabani and the PUK tends to be translated into a negative attitude towards all of Sulaymaniya or even "the Soran" in general. There is a feeling among some people in Badinan — again, it is not clear by how many it is shared — that the region had better take care of its own interests rather than make sacrifices for the whole Kurdish region.

The recently emerging Zaza and Alevi nationalisms in Turkey are part of a different dialectical relationship with the development of Kurdish nationalism. The same process of urbanisation and migration that gave rise to a modern Kurdish awareness in the large cities also brought Alevi villagers (among them Turkish as well as Kurdish or Zaza speakers) to the Sunni towns of the region and into direct competition for scarce resources with their new Sunni neighbours. The political polarisation of the 1970s aggravated Sunni-Alevi antagonism as radicals of the right and left chose these communities as their recruiting grounds and provoked mutual scapegoating ("fascist" Sunnis versus "communist" Alevis). A series of bloody Sunni-Alevi clashes, perhaps better called anti-Alevi pogroms, did much to strengthen a common Alevi awareness.⁴⁴ In the region where these clashes took place, it did not matter much whether one was a Kurd or a Turk, one's primary identity was the religious one. There were Turks and Kurds on both sides of this divide — which gave rise to such surprising phenomena as Sunni Kurds supporting the pan-Turkist Nationalist Action Party and young Turkish-speaking Alevis declaring themselves to be Kurds.

The 1980s witnessed a remarkable cultural and religious revival of Alevism, an indirect and unintended consequence of the repressive measures taken by the military in the wake of the coup of 1980. Political radicalism — Islamist as well as Marxist or Kurdish nationalist — was severely repressed, but instead of reverting to the strict laicism of the Kemalist period, the military fostered a mix of conservative Sunni Islam and Turkish nationalism, in the hope of

⁴³ Michiel Leezenberg, "Irakisch-Kurdistan seit dem Zweiten Golfkrieg", in: Carsten Borck, et al. (ed.), *Ethnizität, Nationalismus, Religion und Politik in Kurdistan* (Münster: Lit, 1997), pp. 45-78; David McDowall, *A modern history of the Kurds*, revised ed. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000), pp. 387-91.

⁴⁴ On the clashes, see: Ömer Laçiner, "Der Konflikt zwischen Sunniten und Aleviten in der Türkei", in: Jochen Blaschke & Martin van Bruinessen (eds), *Islam und Politik in der Türkei* (Berlin: Parabolis, 1989), pp. 233-54.

thus pre-empting more radical Islamic currents and combating Marxist thought. Religious education became an obligatory subject in all schools; the state built mosques in villages where there was none. This imposition of Sunni Islam could only make the Alevis more aware of their distinctly non-Sunni identity. Whereas numerous young Alevis had in the 1970s become leftists and thought of Alevism as a political identity, the new situation obliged them to look at it as a cultural and religious movement.

The Turkish and Kurdish immigrant communities in western Europe played a major role in this reorientation. Efforts to organise these communities had been begun in the 1960s and 1970s by activists of various political persuasions, but here too the 1980 coup was a watershed. Large numbers of highly politicised and experienced organisers came to western Europe as refugees. The most successful were radical Sunni Muslim groups and Kurdish nationalists, among whom the PKK gradually became dominant. The Turkish regime meanwhile attempted to regain control of the migrant communities by bringing the major mosque federations under the control of the *Diyanet* organisation. It was in response to these increased Sunni activities in Turkey that Alevis also began organising themselves, after long having kept a low profile or even hidden their religious affiliation. Alevi associations were established, attracting many young Alevis who previously had been prominent in various leftist or Kurdish organisations. A few of the smaller leftist organisations were entirely Alevi in membership; these too now tended to emphasise their Alevi identity in combination with their marxism-leninism, and to think of the Alevis as a sort of nation, to the extent of speaking of Alevistan as their homeland.⁴⁵

These activities abroad stimulated an Alevi revival in Turkey too, where the gradual political liberalisation of the late 1980s made the establishment of religious and social Alevi associations possible. This was supported by those elements in the government that were anxious about the progress of the Islamist Welfare Party and the increasing popularity of the PKK among the Kurds. Various conciliatory gestures were made towards the Alevis, in a transparent effort to neutralise the community's alienation from the state and to prevent the PKK from making further inroads among the Kurdish (and Zaza) Alevis.⁴⁶

In fact, the one region where the PKK has had great difficulties in establishing itself, and where it always has had to compete with other radical political movements, was the heartland of Kurdish Alevism, Dersim (which comprises the present province of Tunceli and its neighbouring districts). The population of Dersim is almost exclusively Alevi and largely Zaza-

⁴⁵ I first encountered the name Alevistan in the Turkish newspaper *Hürriyet* in 1976, in a report on subversive activities in Germany. Maoist enemies of the state allegedly conspired to divide Turkey into Kurdistan in the east, Alevistan in the centre, and a Sunni Turkish remnant in the west. In the 1980s there was an ephemeral ultra-left organisation in Germany, *Kizil Yol*, that similarly proclaimed its intention to liberate Alevistan. Many Kurdish nationalists and leftists of other persuasions suspected that these were machinations by the Turkish intelligence services, designed to provoke a Sunni and Turkish nationalist reaction.

⁴⁶ Martin van Bruinessen, "Kurds, Turks and the Alevi revival in Turkey", *Middle East Report* 200 (1996), 7-10 (reprinted in *Kurdish ethno-nationalism versus nation-building states*, pp. 31-42).

speaking. Since at least the 1960s, Dersim had always been more inclined towards the radical left than to Kurdish nationalism. The PKK, which had its origins in the Turkish left, was initially Marxist and militantly anti-religious but had in the late 1980s adopted a conciliatory attitude towards Sunni Islam, in a successful attempt to gain more grassroots support in the Sunni regions. This obviously did not help to make the party more popular among the Alevis, and it may even have strengthened Alevi particularism. A wave of purges in PKK ranks in the early 1990s, in which a popular Dersimi disappeared, gave further food to Alevi suspicions of the PKK's intentions (although most of those purged were not Alevis!).

In the perception of the PKK, on the other hand, the entire Alevi revival was directly engineered by the state in order to sow division among the Kurds, and its protagonists were all considered as government agents. By the mid-1990s, the PKK had established its own Alevi association and was successfully promoting the view that Kurdish Alevism was different from Turkish Alevism because it was rooted in old Iranian rather than old Turkish religion and because it had always been in opposition to the state. The Kurdish Alevis remain torn between various claims to their identity, by Turkish and Kurdish nationalists, Alevi particularists, and spokesmen for even narrower loyalties.⁴⁷

The strengthening of Alevi distinctness under the influence of political developments is perhaps not so surprising; after all, Alevi communities have long — at least for the past few centuries — maintained a strict boundary with their Sunni neighbours of whatever language or tribal affiliation. What is relatively new is the emergence of a wider Alevi identity transcending the various Alevi communities, the efforts to reconstruct Alevi belief and ritual at the supra-local level, and a discourse on Alevism as a type of ethnicity. The emergence of Zaza nationalism, however, is something entirely new, and it is still forcefully opposed by numerous Zaza-speakers who stick to their self-definition as Kurds. To understand why it emerged, I believe we have to look again at the migrant communities in Western Europe rather than at the situation in Turkey (unless one subscribes to the popular conspiracy theory that blames it all on the Turkish intelligence services).

In Turkey, where all local languages besides Turkish were banned (until 1991), it did not appear to matter much whether one originally was a Kurmanji or a Zaza-speaker. In Europe however, one of the issues with which Kurdish activists attempted to mobilise Kurdish migrant workers was the demand for mother tongue education, i.e. for official recognition of the fact that Turkish is not the native language of every immigrant from Turkey, and for the acceptance of Kurdish as one of the mother tongues taught to immigrants' children in school. This placed the Zaza-speakers before an awkward dilemma: should they also demand that their children in German schools be taught Kurmanji instead of Turkish as their "mother tongue"? Some in fact did, like generations before them had always learned Kurmanji as the *lingua franca* in their region, but a certain uneasiness remained. This was clearly an issue on which

⁴⁷ Martin van Bruinessen, " 'Aslini inkar eden haramzadedir!': the debate on the ethnic identity of the Kurdish Alevis", in: Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi, et al. (ed.), *Syncretistic religious communities in the Near East*. Leiden: Brill, 1997, pp. 1-23.

the interests of Zaza-speakers and Kurmanji-speakers were not identical.

A related issue that contained the seeds of conflict was the language to be used in Kurdish journals published in Turkey and especially in European exile. Several journals appeared during the 1960s and 1970s, and most of them were exclusively in Turkish, with at the most an occasional poem in Kurdish.⁴⁸ In the late 1970s, a few periodicals ventured to publish entirely or largely in Kurdish — which usually meant that each issue was confiscated and the editors prosecuted. One of these publications, the short-lived cultural magazine *Tirêj*, was also the first significant modern Kurdish journal to have a small section in Zaza.⁴⁹ After the 1980 military coup, Kurdish publishing activities no longer were possible in Turkey, but writers and journalists carried on in European exile, especially in Sweden. Various Kurdish cultural institutes were established, and from the mid-1980s on, there was a true revival of Kurdish literature in Europe.⁵⁰

The first serious Kurdish literary journal in Europe, published by the Kurdish Institute in Paris, had sections in the major dialects Kurmanji and Sorani (written in Latin and Arabic script, respectively). It was recognised by the entire Kurdish intelligentsia that there is not a single standard Kurdish dialect and that the geopolitical division of the Kurds could only be overcome by using both major dialects. The journal had moreover a third section in Zaza, which proved more controversial.⁵¹ Certain influential Kurdish nationalists were fiercely critical of the effort to develop Zaza as a written language. The arguments they used — for the sake of unity and progress, and to prevent enemies from breaking up the nation — were not unlike those with which Turkey has opposed the use of Kurdish.

Such debates on the status of the Zaza language and the desirability of its development or demise had a strong impact in the small circle of Zaza intellectuals in exile and caused a parting of the minds. Many continued perceiving themselves as Kurds but demanded recognition of their distinct identity within the wider Kurdish nation. Others distanced

⁴⁸ The most complete survey of periodicals published by and for Kurds in Turkey is: Malmîsanij & Mahmûd Lewendî, *Li Kurdistana Bakûr û li Tirkîyê rojnamegeriya Kurdî (1908-1992)* (Ankara: Öz-Ge, 1992). It lists 65 periodicals published between 1960 and 1980, many of them appearing semi- or illegally.

⁴⁹ Only three issues of *Tirêj* could appear in Turkey in 1979 and 1980. The fourth and final issue was published in Sweden. There was in fact one earlier journal that published a few brief pieces — a song text, a folktale and a word-list — in Zaza. This was the short-lived *Roja Newê*, the first and only issue of which appeared in Istanbul in 1963 (see Malmîsanij & Lewendî, *Rojnamegeriya Kurdî*, pp. 159-61).

⁵⁰ Discussed more extensively in: Martin van Bruinessen, "Transnational aspects of the Kurdish question" (Working paper, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, European University Institute, Florence, 2000).

⁵¹ This magazine, *Hêvî / Hîwa*, began publication in 1983. Its Zaza section appeared under the responsibility of Malmîsanij, who had also written the Zaza contributions in *Tirêj*, and was later also to contribute Zaza material to various other journals. While continuing his efforts to preserve Zaza oral tradition and to win more respect for Zaza culture, Malmisanij was to firmly oppose Zaza separatism when this emerged.

themselves from Kurdish nationalism altogether and gradually began speaking not only of Zaza as a different language but of the Zaza speakers as a distinct people. In the late 1980s, the first Zaza journal was published, and it was emphatically non-Kurdish. It carried articles in Zaza, Turkish and English but not in Kurdish, it spoke of the Zazas as a separate people, whose identity had too long been denied not only by the Turkish state but by the Kurds as well, and it coined the new name of Zazaistan for the ancient homeland of this nation.⁵²

This journal appears to have had only a very small circle of readers initially, but precisely because it met with very angry Kurdish reactions, its thesis that the Zazas are a doubly oppressed people gained credibility, and gradually growing numbers of Zazas were won over to its views. There appears not to be an organised Zaza nationalist movement yet, but publishing activities, both political and scholarly, have gone on increasing.⁵³ More recently, however, the debate as to whether the Zazas are a distinct people or not has abated. There is now a vigorous literary production in Zaza, most of it published in Europe, which by and large simply avoids the question of Zaza versus Kurdish ethnicity. Several of the leading authors have maintained their affiliation with Kurdish political and cultural associations. The recognition of Zaza as a distinct subculture — or rather, set of subcultures — appears to have been won.⁵⁴

Conclusion

During the 20th century, Kurdish ethnicity has been affected by a variety of social, economic and political factors: nation-building policies of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria, improved communications, mass education and mass literacy (at least in the language of the state), increased geographical and social mobility, four decades of political and military struggle by Kurdish nationalist parties, the destruction of much of traditional village life, and the emergence of a significant, highly educated and vocal Kurdish diaspora. Most of the Kurds have become more integrated socially and economically into the states in which they live, but

⁵² The Zaza journal *Ayre* and its successor *Piya* were published monthly in Sweden from 1986 to 1991 by Ebubekir Pamukçu. The editor's own most substantial contribution to the journal was an analysis of the Dersim rebellion from a Zaza nationalist point of view, which later appeared as a book in Turkey: *Dersim Zaza ayaklanmasının tarihsel kökenleri* (Istanbul: Yön, 1992).

⁵³ The most substantial of these booklets is Zilfi Selcan, *Zaza milli meselesi hakkında* (Ankara: Zaza Kültürü Yayınları, 1994). The same author also wrote a Ph.D. thesis on Zaza grammar: *Grammatik der Zaza-Sprache. Nord-Dialekt (Dersim-Dialekt)* (Berlin: Wissenschaft & Technik Verlag, 1998). The most important Zaza nationalist journals of the 1990s are *Desmala Sure* and *Ware* (both published in Germany, and both no longer appearing).

⁵⁴ There are now several cultural journals in Zaza, the leading one being *Vate* (published in Sweden and Germany since 1997), which has contributions from the three major Zaza subcultures of Dersim (Alevi), Palu and Siverek (both Sunni). Other publications are primarily associated with one of them. Several scholarly grammars and good dictionaries (of Dersim, Palu and Siverek Zaza) have been published, and there is now a modest book production in Zaza.

this has not had the effect of weakening Kurdish ethnicity.

It is true that ethnicity became to some extent a matter of personal choice. Some early 20th century personalities, like Ziya Gökalp and Şükri Sekban, were aware of this possibility of choosing one's ethnic identity and advocated opting for Turkish identity, which they believed offered greater possibilities for progress.⁵⁵ The government of Turkey, and to a lesser extent those Iraq and Iran, later exerted various forms of pressure to persuade Kurds and other minority groups to align with the dominant ethnicity of the state. To some extent these efforts were successful; many Kurds were assimilated, and the Kurds of Iraq, Iran and Turkey who did not assimilate are nevertheless more different from one another than their great-grandparents were.

It was precisely this process of integration into non-Kurdish states, however, that also strengthened an awareness of an overarching, common identity among Kurds from different regions, dialects and creeds — without however wiping out the boundaries between these subgroups. A significant “vertical” integration into the Kurdish *ethnie* has taken place: non-tribal peasant communities that in the past were not considered as Kurds proper are now to all purposes parts of the Kurdish *ethnie*, and even some formerly Christian communities have become assimilated. There is a large educated middle class and a public sphere that partly overlaps with the Turkish, Persian and Iraqi-Arabic public spheres. Kurdish intellectuals have produced the symbolic markers of Kurdish ethnicity: works of historiography, linguistics, folklore studies and, most of all, poetry and prose literature. Political movements have had the effect of sharpening the ethnic boundaries separating the Kurds from the dominant ethnic groups in their states.⁵⁶

At the same time, however, internal divisions among the Kurds have not disappeared and some internal ethnic boundaries appear in fact to have become more significant during the past decades. Improved communications and increased contacts between Kurds from different regions and of different subcultures have certainly not led to a more homogeneous Kurdish culture. Not only have the Kurds in general become more aware of being Kurds, but the same is true of distinct subgroups among the Kurds as well as those that have an even more ambivalent relationship with Kurdish ethnicity. The tolerance of pluralism in Kurdish society

⁵⁵ Gökalp developed this idea in a series of articles published in the journal *Küçük Mecmu'a* in 1922, which were reprinted as an appendix to his *Kürt asiretleri hakkında sosyolojik tetkikler* (Istanbul: Sosyal Yayınlar, 1992). Sekban had been a Kurdish nationalist before publishing his call for assimilation: Dr. Chukru Mehmed Sekban, *La question kurde: des problèmes des minorités*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1933. Turkish translations of this brochure, that were published for obvious political reasons, are not faithful to the original but constitute interesting material for a history of attempts to claim the Kurds as a Turkic people.

⁵⁶ In an interesting paper, Daniele Conversi has attempted to show how ethno-national movements have deliberately used political violence as a boundary mechanism. He argues that recourse to violence is more likely where few cultural boundary markers such as language are available, and he presents the PKK, in which many leading activists did not speak Kurdish well, as an example: Daniele Conversi, "Violence as an ethnic border. The consequences of a lack of distinctive elements in Croatian, Kurdish and Basque nationalism", in: Justo G. Beramendi, et al. (ed.), *Nationalism in Europe past and present* (Santiago de Compostela: Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, 1994), pp. 167-198.

has increased however, also among Kurdish nationalist politicians. Even so centralist and authoritarian a party as the PKK has never propagated a unified Kurdish culture but has to the contrary celebrated diversity, establishing separate daughter organisations for each significant subgroup or minority and giving all space in its print and electronic media. The awareness has grown that Kurdish society represents a mosaic, of which not all components identify equally strongly with the whole, and of which the outer boundaries may occasionally shift — but which will always remain a mosaic.