Kurdish Autobiography, Memoir and Novel: ‘Ereb ¥emo and His successors

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INTRODUCTION

The first draft of this article was presented at a conference in Yerevan,[1] home of ‘Ereb ¥emo (better known under his Russified name, Shamilov[2]), author of a pioneering autobiographical Kurdish novel. It was also the home of the first (and perhaps the only) modern Kurmanji-speaking intelligentsia for whom the mother tongue was not a despised minority dialect, but a viable instrument of academic discourse and mass communication (via books, newspapers and radio) with a literate public. Although it seemed appropriate to speak briefly about ‘Ereb ¥emo in his home city, where many of his personal acquaintances still live, and where a plaque on the wall of his house commemorates him, the choice of this subject raises much wider questions about the relationship between ‘Ereb ¥emo and other Kurdish authors elsewhere, about the written genres of memoir and autobiography and their place in Kurdish discourse, and about the place of Kurdish self-narratives amid the plethora of similar writings currently being published in Turkey and Iran. This paper will touch on these wider issues, but addressing them satisfactorily is inevitably beyond the scope of a single article.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND SELF-NARRATIVE IN CONTEXT

A contrast is often drawn between autobiography proper and memoir, which has been defined thus: real autobiography is a weave in which self-consciousness is delicately threaded throughout interrelated experiences. It may have such varied functions as self-explication, self-discovery, self-clarification, self-formation, self-presentation, self-justification. All these functions interpenetrate easily, but all are centered

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[1] The Second ASPS Biennial Convention, April 2-5, 2004. I am particularly grateful to Ibrahim Seydo Aydoğan and Timur Muheddine for suggestions made on the theme since then.

[2] ¥emo’s books, listed below under References, are often catalogued under Shamilov.

upon a self that is aware of its relation to its experience (Weintraub, p. 824).

Memoirs, on the other hand, are primarily chronicles of events experienced, although the degree to which the personality and evolution of the narrator is revealed can vary considerably, and it is in some cases difficult to fix a point differentiating the two.

Autobiography, with its emphasis on understanding the individual through a focus on the lived life, is often considered to be typically "an invention that has its roots in Western culture but has characteristics that have been articulated and theorized within, say the last hundred years," to quote Elie Kedourie (p. 90). Such a notion of autobiography is, according to some scholars, not part of the Middle Eastern cultural make-up. Although this opinion seems unduly hard on that great North African autobiographer St. Augustine of Hippo, it is true that in the pre-modern Middle East one often finds memoirs, accounts of 'things I have done' (by kings and other influential figures), 'things I have seen' (e.g., the ever-entertaining Evliya Çelebi), and 'things I have thought' (including the summaries by scholars of their thoughts and narratives found in biographical dictionaries, mostly in Arabic, but also in Persian and Turkish). Many Middle Eastern genres of the pre-modern period that narrate lives tend to be edifying and formalized (in many cases, the same can be said of early European ones). The private life is never mentioned, and women, whether mothers, wives or sisters, are in general conspicuous by their absence.

The apparent absence of true autobiographical tradition in Islamic culture has not only been accepted as a given by some, but has also been used as a basis for further sweeping statements. As late as 1991, Kedourie went so far as to say ". . . this absence is significant in itself as a pointer to a lack of interest, within traditional Muslim culture, in individuals, with their own specific characteristics and peculiar quirks" (pp. 89-90).

This statement is apt to evoke puzzlement amongst those Western researchers who have lived in conservative Middle Eastern societies, who have observed that, while people are officially commemorated and described in conventional terms, in everyday life people are in fact extremely interested in individuals who have their own characteristics and quirks. However, rather than being announced to the world at large, these quirks are more likely to be described in informal contexts, during relaxed discussions at the home of friends, or during a shared task, or at a cafe with fellow-students. Among the Kurds, as among their neighbors, it is difficult to believe that there is no interest in the individual, when centuries of oral tradition bear witness to the pain that individuals feel when their wishes are overruled by those of the family or community

(especially in matters of love and marriage). Rather, the popularity of such traditions would seem to indicate a general fascination with the private life of the individual.

What may be said aloud in human society in general is driven by rules of genre and context. In European society (in most families at any rate) family members will speak only eulogies of their elderly relation during the funeral oration; afterwards, in the more relaxed context of the funeral breakfast, they might willingly admit amongst themselves that the deceased was in fact a difficult old curmudgeon. In the more conservative societies of the "Islamic world" (for want of a better phrase), even within those groups (such as young women) who have little public opportunity to make narratives and express feelings about themselves, genres nevertheless exist which, if not narrating a life, interweave an awareness of the self with interrelated experiences.[3] Perhaps one should not minimize the complexity of the life of the individual in "traditional" Middle Eastern societies without considering other, perhaps non-literary, ways in which such ideas or feelings might be articulated. Moreover, since the use of oral and written genres in Middle Eastern societies is very different from that in the West, one should be wary of extrapolating too far what is simply an absence of evidence.

It is a great relief, then, to see that the view that autobiography is absent in Islamic cultures is convincingly discredited by Reynolds (ed., pp. 17-36), who traces the origins of this strand of thought and shows that, as far as the Arabic literary tradition is concerned, much of this reasoning was based on insufficient data (in fact, many more autobiographical texts had been produced than those which were available to scholars) and on a misunderstanding of the uses of certain literary genres. Many of Reynolds' arguments could possibly also be applied to Iranian cultural contexts, and the work now being undertaken by Iranist historians interested in the subaltern, such as Afsaneh Najmabadi and Oliver Bast, will no doubt improve our understanding in this area. These earlier forms of self-narrative are not the focus of this article, but the "fallacy of Western origins" as Reynolds calls it, is highly relevant, as it evokes the issue of European and Middle Eastern views of genre and the relationship between them. The issue of genre, and its implications for authorial intent and readers' expectations, is crucial.

[3] For the expression of personal feelings among Bedouin women, see Abu Lughod, esp. pp. 171-260. For Paxtun women's narratives, see Grima. For Kurdish women's self-expression through lamentation, see Amy de la Breteque.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND NOVEL

It is interesting to note that for the modern period, one of the problems highlighted by Reynolds in the treatment of autobiography is its identification as a "roman manqué." In fact, it is often difficult to draw a clear line between autobiography and novel in Kurdish (and, indeed, Turkish) contexts. For the Kurdish context the usefulness of attempting a clear distinction between both seems limited; boundaries between autobiography and novel, like those between autobiography and memoir, are apt to be blurred. There is no a priori assumption by Kurdish novelists that the novel ought to be a work of fiction (rather, the opposite seems to be the case), and many draw on "true" stories.

If one accepts the modern novel as originally a European genre that was adopted by writers in the Middle East, it is possible to observe how it took root in its new terrain and how it then developed. This is a complex process; one might say that the writer is in constant negotiation between "local" and "Western" elements and modes of expression. Formally, as an extended narrative, the novel is very much a "modern Western" form, but even a cursory analysis may reveal much: for instance, the structuring of episodes is according to patterns of folkloric narrative or the descriptions of love that recall those of classical poetry. In the Kurdish context, it seems that self-narrative is very important in the development of the novel.

Nedim Gürsel, himself a Turkish writer and autobiographer, discusses the "autobiographical space" in the novels of Yachar Kemal (Gürsel, 1997). He refers to modern European views on autobiography, such as that of Lejeune (p. 26), whose view of the "autobiographical pact" involves an identification between narrator and protagonist. Indeed as an author Gürsel seeks to extend "the autobiographical space" from the limits of the autobiography proper into the novel by considering what kind of truth is expressed in the novels, and comparing it to what Yachar Kemal says about his own life.

Here the issue of autobiography and novel must be left aside for a moment, and attention be turned to what is a very real and pertinent problem in Kurdish literature. To use the example of Yachar Kemal in a discussion of Kurdish literature is to take a position with which many specialists of Turkish and Kurdish would disagree. Yachar Kemal writes in Turkish, but defines himself as a person of Kurdish origin; he writes about his own family, which came to the Çukurova plain from the East, and its place in the village where he grew up. His writing is suffused with the sights, sounds and scents of this region. Turks are justifiably proud of his writing, which has achieved international success. Kurds are also proud of him and see him as a model, though the fact that his work

is rarely cited in detail in Kurdish anthologies and histories of literature indicates some discomfort with the idea of Yachar Kemal as a "Kurdish" author, as he writes in Turkish. According to Scalbert-Yücel, "Kurdish authors like to stress the Kurdishness of this author. However, they continually question his Kurdish identity as an author, and whether he belongs to Kurdish literature" (Scalbert-Yücel, p. 370). There are other Kurdish authors, such as Selim Barakat in Syria, who use the language of the state in which they grew up rather than Kurdish, and their place in the canon of Kurdish literature is also discussed.[4]

It would clearly be ridiculous to attempt to deny that Yachar Kemal is a great Turkish writer; but in a very real sense he is a Kurdish writer too. It is the view of a literary heritage as monolingual and, often, belonging to one nation, which is inadequate here. To do justice to the cultural complexities at work, we need to find a way to see Yachar Kemal as both a Turkish and Kurdish writer, and of course there are models that provide precedents. Scalbert-Yücel's sensitive discussion (p. 372) mentions not only the possibility of using a "step-mother language" in addition to the mother tongue but also the "rhizome" model developed by Édouard Glissant, which uses the idea not of a single "root" greedily sucking all its nourishment from one patch of soil, but of a "rhizome" that is more of a network taking nourishment from many points, under or also above ground, all these points related to one another. Thus, a writer such as Yachar Kemal can express himself in Turkish as a citizen of Turkey and, at the same time, draw on his Kurdish identity. In her discussion of Kurdish languages (p. 171), Maria O'Shea prefers to use mathematics, describing the model of language use among the populations of Kurdistan as a Venn diagram with degrees of overlap amongst various groups but without uniformity. This could also be applied to literary examples. For instance, in Yachar Kemal's case, Turkish and Kurdish identities overlap. One could argue that, in addition to the experience of growing up in an Anatolia that has now disappeared due to modern technology and economic reform, an experience which is highly resonant for Turks, Yachar Kemal expresses the same attention to the land and feeling for the landscape which thoroughly permeates Kurdish folklore. Moreover, his story in the autobiographical *Kimsecik* trilogy, for instance, is overshadowed by the silent looming presence of the massacres in eastern Turkey, which deprived Salman of his own

[4] It is my personal impression that amongst the Kurds of Iraq who have had more access to education in Kurdish, creative writing in Arabic is often seen as unpatriotic. This was exemplified during a conference in Krakow in May 2004, where a presentation on a Kurdish poet who wrote in Arabic was very poorly received by professors from Iraqi Kurdish universities, who expressed the view that the subject could not be considered a Kurdish writer.

family and sent Ismail Ağa to Çukurova (see below). My own oral history interviews with Kurds from Turkey have also shown a strong preoccupation with these bloody events, which until recently have been little discussed at the public level in Turkey.

To return to the question of the autobiographical element in Yachar Kemal's novels, Nedim Gürsel points out the resemblances between the *Kimsecik* trilogy which begins with *Yağmurcuk Kuşu* (Salman the Solitary) and his life. This first volume recounts a tragic tale where the outsider Salman, adopted as a child by the honorable Ismail Ağa and ever resentful of Ismail's love for his own son Mustafa, eventually kills his adoptive father. These are true events; Yachar Kemal was the child Mustafa, and he has explained in interviews the role these real events play in his novels. Gürsel makes it clear that there are many truths that may be more easily explored in the novelistic form than in the simple narration of the "true" story, limited by the structure of the life. Perhaps, he implies, as André Gide thought, one gets closest to the truth in the novel (Gürsel, 1997, p. 105). Certainly, he adds, the novel permits Yachar Kemal to explore a whole universe, not only of his own childhood, but that of the other children, and the alienation and pain of Salman himself, who in personal terms is Yachar Kemal's own enemy (ibid., pp. 109-16).

Thus Gürsel extends the autobiographical space from the simple narratives given by Yachar Kemal in response to interviewers' questions into the novels. Could one extend "autobiographical space" any further, into other types of novels? Various Kurdish novelists have based their novels not on the story of their own lives, but on the history of their families or tribes, or of their villages. One such example is the trilogy beginning with *Sê ¥ev û Sê Roj* (Three Nights and Three Days) by Lale Qaso (written in his local dialect). This tendency is one of several important strands in the development of the Kurdish novel. Such work can hardly be called a self-narrative, but it is a narration of a personalized past that has close links with identity. Like the self-narrative, it is a work of memory.[5] Other novels which are works of memory are more biographical than autobiographical, such as those of Mehmet Uzun, who has written fictionalized biographies of noted Kurdish figures, including the pioneering nationalists Celadet Bedir Khan and Memduh Selim Beg and the bard Evdalê Zeynikê.[6] These certainly do show an interweave between a historical individual as an aware self and the events of his

[5] I am not using this in the sense of Ricoeur's "travail de mémoire," but rather in the dual sense of "enterprise" and "product" of memory.

[6] These are: *Siya Evînê* ["The Shadow of Love"] (1989) and *Rojeke ji Rojên Evdalê Zeynikê* ["A Day in the Life of Evdalê Zeynikê"] (1991), and *Bira Qederê* ["The Well of Destiny"] (1995).

time. His portrayal of Memduh Selim Beg plays on the conflict between his own wishes and the exigencies of his position in Kurdish politics. For all that they are written in the third person, they resemble Weintraub's definition of autobiography quite closely. However, they are fiction. Yet another type of "work of memory" novel are those that "novelize" episodes of history, either those preserved in folklore such as Eyüp Kiran's *Dewrêşê 'Evdî*, a story of heroism and love from the Kurdish tribes of the 19th century, or more recent events such as the Ararat uprising, commemorated in 'Elî Evdilrehman's *Ser Çiya da* ["On the Mountain"]. It is useful to consider Kurdish autobiography as part of this wider literary work of memory.

KURDISH BOOK PRODUCTION

The Kurds began to produce written self-narratives in the 20th century, especially over the last fifteen years or so, as there has been an upsurge in the publication of Kurdish books in general. In the Kurdish-controlled area of Iraq, a number of publishing houses have been founded in the centres of Sulaymaniya, Erbil and Dihok. In Iranian Kurdistan, publishing houses have been active in Sanandaj, Bāna, Seqqez and Mahābād. In the years since the publication in Kurdish was legalized in Turkey, a number of publishing houses have sprung up, which produce books in Kurdish (Scalbert-Yücel, pp. 315-40) in addition to the Turkish translation of titles concerning the Kurds. The Kurdish diaspora has been active since the 1970s, with a number of publishing houses in Sweden, producing printed editions and many titles available on the internet (Scalbert-Yücel, pp. 282-310). Many of the titles produced in all of these places are textbooks and factual reports. Some are novels. Hashem Ahmadzadeh (p. 177) notes that whilst in the late 1980s it was hard to list more than a dozen, a decade later at least a hundred titles could be easily found.

As in other Iranian languages, the Kurdish novel, compared with other genres, arrived relatively late. Its development follows a pattern similar to that of the Persian novel (Ahmadzadeh, *passim*). Prose writing started with journalism and short story and followed at least three centuries of learned poetry (in various dialects) and many hundred years of oral literature. Compared to Persian literature the development of Kurdish literature, is somewhat complicated by two facts. Firstly, in the pre-modern period many Kurds used the major literary languages, especially Arabic and Persian, for their literary compositions. Secondly, in the 20th century, the lack of a Kurdish state and the partition of Kurdistan between nation-states, where the dominant language and culture differed and the political élites were hostile to the use of Kurdish,

meant that the standard literary forms of the two major dialects, Kurmanji and Sorani, would develop much more slowly than those of modern Turkish and Persian.

It is important to note that, although reliable statistics on book sales and reading habits are not available. The printed book in Kurdish is probably not a dominant form in Kurdish discourse, where the media (especially satellite broadcast and to some extent printed newspapers and magazines) enjoy a much greater following. In fact, many people still receive and exchange information through face to face contact and clandestine political networks. However, whether fiction or non-fiction, the printed book is a high-status genre with a symbolic importance out of all proportion to the numbers of its readership.

‘EREB ¥EMO

The novels of ‘Ereb ¥emo include all three types of “works of memory” mentioned above. There is the autobiography (*¥ivanê Kurmanca* “The Kurmanj Shepherd” and *Berbang* “Daybreak”), the family history found in *Jiyîna Bextewar* “The Fortunate Life” and *Hopo* (a proper name) and *Dimdim*, the retelling in novelistic form of a historical episode transmitted by oral tradition. This discussion will focus mainly on *¥ivanê Kurmanca*, which was published in Yerevan in 1935, shortly before Kamuran Bedir Khan’s “The Eagle of Kurdistan” (published in Germany in 1937), and usually called the first Kurdish novel (though the status of Bedir Khan’s publication is open to debate as it was written in German).[7] There has (inevitably) been some debate as to exactly which is the first Kurdish novel.[8] Personally I am inclined to accept ‘Ereb ¥emo’s claim. He began to publish almost two decades before Yachar Kemal (though, unlike the latter, he had a gap of more than two decades in his publications) and roughly half a century before the “Swedish generation” of Kurdish writers such as Mehmed Uzun.

Of the new régimes that were in place in the years following the First World War, the only one which regarded the Kurdish language as something which could be positively harnessed to the national development was the Soviet Union.[9] Of course, much Kurdish nationalist

[7] Bedir Khan must have known about *¥ivanê Kurmanca*; it is interesting that, like ‘Ereb ¥emo, he chooses to have an interlude where he recounts a version of the folkloric tale *Siyabendo* (though Bedir Khan’s version is substantially altered to serve his own purposes). See Strohmeier, pp. 157-73 for a fascinating discussion of this novel.

[8] For a discussion of this see Ahmadzadeh, pp. 167-77.

[9] A good summary of the situation in Turkey is given in Haig. For Iraq, where British policy on language as a vehicle of Kurdish nationalism changed over the mandatory period, see Hassanpour, pp. 102-25.

discourse was not acceptable, but the language itself was seen as a vehicle of the Revolution, especially in the early years when schools were founded and programs of literacy begun. The situation varied between different Republics, but it was in Armenia where much of the important literary and academic work took place. In Yerevan, a Congress was held in 1934, which assessed the extent of progress so far and voted in favour of adopting the dialect of Kurmanji spoken in Armenia as the official form of literary Kurdish in the USSR. As Basile Nikitine puts it, "these Kurds [of the USSR] turned themselves into the avant-garde of Kurdish culture; . . . the congress itself was a striking proof of this, for Kurdish shepherds and peasants, who were previously illiterate, were here discussing the future of their language and culture, and a former agricultural worker, now armed with a University qualification, could speak as a delegate" (Nikitine, p. 290). Perhaps the most prominent of these newly-qualified Kurds of humble origins was 'Ereb ¥emo, who began his working life as a boy shepherd, became a participant in the class struggle during the War, and worked for the Bolsheviks with *nom de guerre* "Misto." He discussed the education of Kurdish cadres with Stalin himself in 1927, the same year that he participated in the development of a writing system for Kurmanji. He also worked on the organization of these cadres in Georgia and in Armenia and became head of a school for Kurds in Yerevan. He was close to the founders of the newspaper *Riya T'eze* (New Road), which was started in 1931, the year he left Yerevan for Leningrad, where he received his doctorate in 1934. In 1932 he published a novella, *Kurdê Elegezê* "The Kurds of Mt. Aragats," a socialist parable drawing on his experience of political work among the tribes, where he talks of himself as "Misto" in the third person. He was one of the most prominent figures in Kurdish cultural life in his time, as well as a formative influence on other Kurdish scholars and writers, such as Qanatê Kurdo (Kurdoyev). His presentation to the 1934 Congress in Yerevan, on the socio-economic structure of Kurdish society, provoked animated discussion (Nikitine, p. 292). The following year in Yerevan he published *¥ivanê Kurmanca*, which is traditionally cited as the first Kurdish novel. It is an interesting point that he had already published a Russian version of it in Leningrad in 1931.[10] Shortly afterwards, however, he was exiled to Siberia, where he remained until 1957. After his return, he began to write again; all his later novels were produced after this date.

¥IVANÊ KURMANCA

[10] I am following Japharova's listing of publications and dates (p. 252), though, as Ahmadzadeh notes (p. 171), Rasul mentions a publication in 1927 (p. 70).

The few comments which have so far been made on *¥ivanê Kurmanca* in Europe have been bedevilled by the problem of access to the original text. In 1989 the Institut Kurde de Paris published a bilingual text under the title *¥ivanê Kurd*, containing Basile Nikitine's French translation of ¥emo's first Russian publication and Nureddine Zaza's translation of Nikitine's version into Kurmanji. In fact, many people doubted that an original Kurdish text even existed.[11] There are various problems with *¥ivanê Kurd*. Nureddine Zaza was originally from Turkey, and his style, which is self-consciously literary, is very different from the conversational, everyday language of ¥emo. Dialectal differences are also considerable. Another problem is that (possibly due to the original Russian edition, which is also rarely if ever seen in Europe) the narrative (despite the dramatic events it recounts) is very flat and impersonal. The narrator witnesses and experiences remarkable things, but they do not seem to touch him. Admittedly the work was written at the time of the development of "socialist realism," a term coined in 1932, officially by Stalin in a widely-reported "secret meeting" with writers in October, but actually published in the press earlier that year. It was the outcome of years of debates and conflicts over appropriate forms of art, including literature, in the revolutionary state. The exigencies of socialist realism did not favour an excessive focus on the inner life and conflicts of the narrator, but, even allowing for this, *¥ivanê Kurd* remains unengaging. Fortunately, the Kurdish novelist and researcher Ibrahim Seydo Aydoğan has rediscovered the Kurdish original, thanks to which we now know that *¥ivanê Kurmanca* is a much more engaging and craftsman-like work than *¥ivanê Kurd* would have us suspect. Unfortunately some comments of Japharova and Jamo, for instance, are based on an inauthentic text.[12]

The book is narrated in the first person, in a linear fashion, without flashbacks, though there are some references to the present situation, that is, to the time when the author was writing. There are a very small number of interludes where he retells folkloric material, notably the well-known Kurdish story of Siyabend and Xecê. The book recounts the terrible poverty of the author's childhood as a shepherd boy, son of a shepherd and casual worker who struggled to keep his family. Though

[11] I am indebted to Ibrahim Seydo Aydoğan for bringing this problem to my attention in 2004. These doubts were not confined to those in Europe. In 2005, Emerîkê Serdar, editor of *R'ya Teze*, told me that as far as he knew the original Kurdish text was in fact the much later redrafted version of *Berbang*.

[12] In fact, many of Jamo's pertinent comments on the differences between *¥ivanê Kurd* and *Berbang* actually deal with differences between *¥ivanê Kurd* and *¥ivanê Kurmanca*, as *Berbang* is substantially the same text.

often disadvantaged and thwarted, the family tries to be resourceful, finding work wherever possible, with all members making the contributions they can. They seem to be an atypical Kurdish family, as they spend years living in a Molokan village (near Kars). Through the kindness of a teacher, ‘Ereb manages to acquire literacy in Russian at the village school, and when he grows up finds first translation work with the Cossacks during the war, and then political work for the Bolshevik underground, eventually serving with the Red Army. At the end of the War, the Revolution begins to penetrate the countryside, though the *aghas* and *begs* (the propertied classes) hold on to their privileges as much as possible. Having been separated from his family, the author discovers that his parents are dead, like many other poor non-combatants in the War.

The style of *¥ivanê Kurmanca* is in keeping with the prescription of the 1934 Yerevan Congress on the literary language. The vocabulary and sentence structure are conversational, and the whole work is reminiscent of someone recalling their past orally (very consistent with the structuring and narratives in my own recordings of oral history interviews with Kurdish speakers from the Caucasus, Turkey, and Iraq). References are frequently made to what happened later, giving a direct, intimate note, such as in: “Spring came, I became the village cowherd. My sister Gogê, the one who is still alive now working in the tobacco factory in Tbilisi, used to help me out” (*¥ivanê Kurmanca*, p. 33).

Or the mention (still in the period of ‘Ereb’s childhood) of his father’s friend Pîr Cewo, which is followed by an account of their conversation years later when Pîr Cewo had grown old and was living in Axbaran (Aparan, Armenia): he and ‘Ereb spent some happy moments sharing memories of the difficult times, and Pîr Cewo opines that things are much better now that the propertied classes are no longer oppressing the poor (*¥ivanê Kurmanca*, pp. 21-22). There is a great deal of direct speech and the political message is leavened with human interest.

Although ‘Ereb ¥emo is very strongly motivated by class struggle, he does not portray all members of the propertied classes negatively. He says of the Molokan in general that they did not live up to the high ideals of their religion in the way that they treated those who worked for them (*¥ivanê Kurmanca*, pp. 19-20). The prosperous Molokan village near Kars, where modern farming methods were used, is inhabited by a variety of figures, some violent, such as the priest who beats ‘Ereb savagely when he is unable to prevent a sheep from being eaten by a wolf (p. 29). Others, however, are kind and thoughtful, such as the school teacher who engages him as school janitor and teaches him to read. She and her equally kind daughter Marusiya (on whom ‘Ereb develops a crush) give him a book; ‘Ereb’s mother finds it so hard to

believe the book could be a gift that she goes to the teacher herself to make sure (pp. 4-45).

'Ereb's acquaintance with the schoolteacher begins with his taking a letter from her to her husband in Kars. While he is at the house with her husband and the other children, he is given a meal before his journey, which he eats alone. Cutlery is put by his plate. He has never seen a little fork before; he has no idea that it is for eating with and thinks that it is a toy, a present for him. He puts it in his pocket, and a painful scene arises when he is about to leave, as the husband sees it and thinks he has tried to steal it. The house gets filled with inquisitive neighbors and it is some time before the misunderstanding is revealed (*¥ivanê Kurmanca*, pp. 37-39). 'Ereb's shame at his social ignorance and his anger are vividly described. Some of the Armenian women neighbors say: "All Kurmanj are like that, they're thieves and smugglers" (p. 38). This mistrust of Kurmanj (a term which for ¥emo seems to denote tribal speakers of Northern Kurdish)[13] is a recurrent theme in the book. It is the reason why 'Ereb's family eventually leaves the Molokan village, the father being under suspicion of having stolen cattle, which were in fact stolen by Mirza Temoyê Kero, another Kurmanj (pp. 48-49). Although members of the different communities live side by side, it seems that residual suspicion always lurks below the surface.

'Ereb ¥emo does not always speak of the Kurmanj themselves in laudatory tones. Many of the ordinary people are described as *pak* (morally) good, but the *aghas* and *begs* are another matter. In the *zozan* or high pastures, the poorer members of the tribe are expected to work hard for the richer ones, or they risk losing their right to pasture alongside them the next year; the *begs* and *aghas* "drink the blood" of the poor (pp. 56-57). Usib Beg and Cehangir Agha (now in the independent Republic of Armenia, heroes of the community for their role in turning back the Turks during the First World War) are particularly characterized as class enemies. When 'Ereb's father approached Usib Beg for help, he was made to pay the "beg's gift" for all the years he had been living away from the tribe among the Molokan before the chief would help him (p. 64).

There is even betrayal from 'Ereb's own uncle. During the War, having worked with the Cossacks and deserted them, the young man finds work with the Russians, lodging with his (paternal) uncle. He falls in love with his cousin, Karê. They plan to marry so the young man

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[13] The meaning of *Kurmanj* is open to some discussion. It is probably not a synonym for "Kurd," but a regional name for this part of the population. Although it can mean "non-tribal peasant," the people that ¥emo describes as *Kurmanj* are tribal. The language that we know as Kurmanji was known as Kurdish for most of the duration of the former Soviet Union.

saves up the money he earns and pays it in instalments to his uncle for the bride-price. When he pays the final instalment, the uncle denies having received the earlier instalments. They begin to quarrel and then fight, and the young man accidentally kills the uncle. In the ensuing confusion, he has to run away and leave behind the young girl (pp. 83-85). This incident, witnessed by the neighbors, is described vividly, like the other moments of action in the book, with a rhetorical tone reminiscent of Kurdish folkloric narrative. ‘Ereb is at a disadvantage because his own family were not on hand to negotiate for Karê, and is thus vulnerable to his uncle’s lies. Although he does not comment on the tribal value-system here, he does make it clear that he was obliged to flee because of the blood-feud he had started, and remarks bitterly that the uncle, Sefo, managed to prevent the young couple’s dearest wish from being realized after all (p. 85).

¥IVANÊ KURMANCA AND BERBANG

In any consideration of *¥ivanê Kurmanca* and its place in Kurdish literature, and of ‘Ereb ¥emo himself, one must consider *Berbang* and why he wrote it. It was published in 1958 (not long after the author’s return from exile) and later in 1969 in a collection called *Berevok* (Collection) alongside *Jiyîna Bextewar* and *Hopo.*[14] It is a reprise of *¥ivanê Kurmanca* and many passages are word for word the same. There are, however, some new episodes, including more reminiscences of the Molokans, and a whole new section on the myth of American wealth, which recounts the story of a Molokan family who emigrated to America full of hope, only to fall into poverty much worse than anything experienced in their village (1988, pp. 35-43). Some small differences can be explained by the political context of the two dates of publication, for example:

“The village we went to, it had another name before.…They used to call it Komesor, but when they arrived, the Russians, the Molokans, called it Aleksandrovsk, they called the village they built after their king” (*¥ivanê Kurmanca*, p. 18). This is replaced by: “The Molokans had been exiled from Russia because of their religion, which according to the Armenians was heretical…” (*Berbang*, p. 12).

Also the description of Cossack atrocities (*¥ivanê Kurmanca*, p. 86) does not occur in *Berbang*, which has a description of Turkish brutality (pp. 72-74), interestingly, recounted by a Kurd rather than by an Armenian. Despite these politically correct alterations, most of the

[14] Also reprinted in Latin script by a Kurdish publishing house in Stockholm in 1988.

changes seem to be made for literary reasons. *Berbang* uses a wider range of vocabulary and contains more characterization, mostly done through small touches. For instance, ‘Ereb returns to his parents’ house after a long absence:

When I saw my father, I looked at him; his clothes were torn, he had nothing left, he had already grown old, his eyes dim and his mouth almost toothless. I burst into tears, and I wept. (*¥ivanê Kurmanca*, p. 95)

When I saw my father, I looked at him; his clothes were torn, he had nothing left, he had already grown old. I had (gone away and) left my father, and he had grown old, his eyes dim and his mouth almost toothless, nothing left of him but skin and bone. I burst into tears, embraced my father and wept. I was ashamed to tell them about falling in love with Karê, but I guessed that they had heard about it. They didn’t bring it up with me either. (*Berbang*, p. 79)

This detail is absent in *¥ivanê Kurmanca.* Such small nuances do give some added depth of characterization, but ¥emo stays within the bounds of socialist realism, subordinating his own emotional development to larger political and social considerations. There are other silences and absences in both novels, which are entirely consistent with the aims of socialist realism. For instance, despite his interest in folklore as shown in his retelling of Siyabend and Xecê and his account of the customs of such people as the Kurdish nomads and the Molokan, ¥emo says little about his Yezidi religion, which must have influenced many aspects of his family’s life. Religion is limited to passing references to such objects as the *stêr*, the sacred place in Caucasian Yezidi homes where ‘Ereb’s father keeps his important documents and money (*¥ivanê Kurmanca*, p. 46), and they are rarely explained. Although the readership of a book published in Kurmanji in Armenia would have been substantially Yezidi and thus well aware of Yezidi customs, there were also Muslim Kurds, and ‘Ereb ¥emo probably hoped for a wider Kurdish readership. It seems more likely that he intentionally avoids discussion of religion, which was considered outmoded by many intellectuals and of course would not have been favourably viewed by the Soviet autho-rities.

Berbang, then, is a later draft of *¥ivanê Kurmanca* rather than a separate work. It seems that ‘Ereb ¥emo wished it to be his definitive version, probably for literary rather than political reasons. So far I have been unable to find any evidence that the text of *¥ivanê Kurmanca* was considered problematic by the authorities, or that it was a major reason for his exile. This question remains open, however.

¥EMO’S SUCCESSORS: LATER WRITERS OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND MEMOIR

Since *¥ivanê Kurmanca*, a number of Kurdish self-narratives have been published. Though a full analysis of them is beyond the scope of a single article, it is worth considering a few types and examples and noticing what resemblances (if any) they have with the pioneering work of 'Ereb ¥emo. Just as ¥emo must be seen in the Soviet as well as the Kurdish context, other Kurdish writers also need to be placed not only in the Kurdish context, but also in those of the States in which they live. After all, since the early twentieth century it has been quite common for prominent figures throughout the Middle East to write memoirs chronicling their careers or their role in major events. Figures such as Said Pasha, the grand vizier of Sultan 'Abd al-Hamid, did this, and the practice also became well known in the Kurdish context. The memoirs of Ihsan Nuri Pasha, a former Ottoman officer who led the Kurdish fighters in the Ararat revolt (1927-30), are compiled from his own notes, and focus on the great events rather than on the "lived life."

Ihsan Nuri later lived in exile in Iran and, interestingly, after the Iran-Iraq Treaty of Algiers (1975) put an end to the revolt of Mollā Mostafā Bārzāni in Iraq, Ihsan Nuri visited Mollā Mostafā in exile in Iran. He urged Mollā Mostafā to write his memoirs for future generations of Kurds, but Mollā Mostafā refused at the time, though his son Mas'ud has written a lengthy narrative (in Arabic, with an abridged form published in English), which includes a great deal of unpublished material relating to Mollā Mostafā. Other Kurds such as the poet and translator 'Abd al-Rahmān Sharafkandi (pen name Hajar), who was closely involved in the so-called Republic of Mahābād, have also written memoirs for a Kurdish audience (Hajar wrote in Sorani Kurdish).

It is understandable that prominent Kurds should feel moved to record their life experiences, as, in the absence of a Kurdish state, the preservation of a communal memory of events is unstructured and often problematic. Without a state, there is unlikely to be a national archive, or a steady production of history books for use in schools and universities. The propensity for the nation-states of the area, especially Turkey, to practise "organized forgetting" as the anthropologist Paul Connerton calls it, clearly leads to an impetus among Kurds to recount history from their point of view as much as possible. This type of work of memory, the anti-*oubli* "lest we forget," or rather "lest nobody else hear about it" type, is found in several forms. Kurdish satellite stations feature documentaries about history and especially about atrocities, and many web pages contain sections in European languages about such events, for instance, the Kurdistan Regional Government's substantial Halabja section. Magazines exist, such as the Swedish-based *Bîrnebûn* (Not forgetting), which is focused on the memory of Kurds from central Anatolia (Scalbert-Yücel, 2005: pp. 146-47).

Self-narratives are by no means confined to Kurds, however. Musa Anter's *Hatîralarîm* (My memoirs) is a very good example of Turkish as much as Kurdish self-narrative; accounts of childhood (usually a childhood lost through exile or destruction of the home place, as recounted by Mehmud Baksi and Hiner Saleem, are by no means peculiar to Kurds, and the prison narratives of Mehdi Zana should be set in the context not only of Turkish prison literature, but also of the prison literature of the whole region. It is normal, however, for the "lest we forget" memoirs produced by Kurds to have a strong focus on the narrator's Kurdish identity.[15]

Many memoirs focus on atrocities. Hüseyin Yildirim's *Ema lenge* is a curious example of this, which turns out to say rather more than the reader expects about its subject, moving further along the scale from memoir to autobiography. According to the author, it was transcribed faithfully from an account by a woman who survived the Dersim massacres (1936-38), though she was permanently lamed and lost the use of one arm through injuries. Hence her name (Ema the lame). The description of the period of the massacres is vivid, and gives some fascinating insights into local culture, but what is perhaps surprising is that Ema has more to say, or Hüseyin Yildirim lets her say more, than her account of the massacres. She goes on at some length to describe how the massacres blighted her life. Not only did she experience the terrible pain of losing her immediate family, but her injuries also rendered her virtually unmarriageable. She felt different from those around her and wanted to be independent. She had come from a village background and had had no formal education. As a sop to traditional views that she could not live alone, she married a man who was lame like herself, but the marriage was loveless, so she publicly divorced him. Later she had an affair and brought up a child alone, an achievement of which she was very proud. This latter part of the book is an attack on traditional views of women's honour. Of course, we have only Hüseyin Yildirim's word that these are Ema's own words, yet he may have omitted and/or rearranged the material. If he has not completely invented this part of the book (which seems unlikely), the examination by Ema of her feelings and her place in society seems to indicate the kind of reflection on the self that we would associate with autobiography, rather than memoir. Like 'Ereb ¥emo, she is motivated by anger at a social system that discriminated against her, but she says more about her personal progress than he does.

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[15] This is also true of the novels, which almost all, up to the present day, deal with Kurdishness and Kurdistan. An exception is Ibrahim Seydo Aydoğan's *Leyla Figaro*, a love story for which the identity of the protagonists is not terribly important.

Some Kurdish "autobiographies," which are more often memoirs, are directly aimed at the non-Kurdish audience. One such is Nureddin Zaza's *Ma vie de Kurde* (My life as a Kurd). Its title implies a Westernized autobiography, though it is in fact more of a memoir recounting episodes from his childhood in Turkey, his political work in Syria and Iraq, and his eventual exile in Europe, where he married a European. It does, however, give an insight into his emotional life, and its slightly disjointed nature is due to the fact that it was compiled from material dictated from his hospital bed during his final illness.

Similarly, the memoir of Ahmad Bamarni, an Iraqi Kurd active in the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), is in many ways typical of the statements of many Kurds who have been working for the political parties in Europe for years: it is engaging, interesting, vivid, and aimed at the European market. It recounts his the author's role in the events of Kurdish history, giving a vivid description of the horror of many Kurds at Mollā Mostafā Bārzāni's cessation of the rebellion following the Treaty of Algiers in 1975. It was at that point that the PUK was founded, to which Bamarni belongs. So it is hardly surprising that he is particularly passionate about this. The book was written with the help of a journalist, and its style is consistent with this fact, in the way it ranges widely, setting scenes, for instance recounting the experience of the first proto-PUK guerrilla groups (the fighters all called by their first names) in the mountains. This is done in some detail, though Bamarni was not, and does not claim to have been, there. Bamarni's own self-narrative is, typically, closely interwoven with that of the Kurdish struggle. The great events of Kurdish political history are also the great turning points in his life, according to the book. In my experience of oral history interviews with Kurds, people who are very politically aware tend to do the same thing: their own life and history is viewed through the prism of Kurdish nationalism.[16]

CONCLUSION: 'EREB ¥EMO: AN ISOLATED EXAMPLE?

'Ereb ¥emo wrote *¥ivanê Kurmanca*, the first flagship novel of the newly emancipated Kurdish intelligentsia, within the context of the literary activities of the new Soviet Union. He could have made it a symbolic or allegorical tale of stereotypical characters, a sort of full-length *Kurdê Elegezê*, which is more or less what Bedir Khan did in Germany, or what Ibrahim Ahmad did with *Janî gel* (The people's suffering), the first

[16] This was particularly evident in an interview with a senior member of the family of Hajo Agha, from Syria, in Berlin, summer 1998.

Sorani novel (written 1956, pub. 1972). Instead he chose to use his own life and to embark on a work of memory.

After an event or a period of rupture in historical terms, it is a normal response to reflect on the past, and there is no doubt that the period of the end of the Ottoman Empire and the Great War saw maps redrawn and entire populations wiped out in Eastern Anatolia and the Caucasus. By the 1920s, everything had changed; the area bore very little resemblance to what it had been in the 1890s. It is very common for autobiographies in general to look back on a lost world, as do many novels, such as those of Yachar Kemal. Perhaps it is not fanciful here to recall that the half-English, half-German poet Robert Graves published his autobiography (not a memoir) *Goodbye to All That* in 1929, in his early thirties, largely because the Great War had ended the world order he had known and utterly changed his expectations of the life he would lead. For 'Ereb ¥emo, the Revolution was supposed to offer a more certain future, though it must have been hard for anyone who had lived through the Great War in the Caucasus to feel truly secure (in the event, the course of ¥emo's life did not run smooth). He looks back on the pre-war period with anger rather than nostalgia, and despite his lack of focus on his inner life he does not hide the fact that these terrible events marked him. His personal life history, as a poor boy made good in the new order, sits well with the socialist message.

Moreover, in many ways a memoir is a very natural early prose genre for Kurdish speakers to develop, because of its resemblance to normal speech genres. 'Ereb ¥emo's conversational style, with the anecdotes and the references to what became of the individual characters, is highly reminiscent of ordinary speech patterns. It is only a short step from, say, a respected uncle sitting amongst his family recalling episodes from his life (a scenario many of my Kurdish oral history interviewees remember very well as one of the most important ways they learned their own family history), to a highly conversational and anecdotal written account like *¥ivanê Kurmanca*. This is a rather different way of producing a novel than that of Mehmet Uzun, for instance, who writes a very literary Kurdish, very different from the way people speak. This is not to deny that there is artistry in *¥ivanê Kurmanca*, in the organization of episodes, in the expansion of narrative to novelistic length, and in the choice of folkloric and didactic details.

Although its main theme is that of social justice, *¥ivanê Kurmanca* is also an exploration of what it means to be Kurdish. 'Ereb ¥emo depicts the interplay between the various groups living in the Kars area with some care, showing non-Kurdish attitudes to Kurds (Kurmanj) and also the interrelations between the richer and poorer Kurmanj. He was very much interested in the Kurds as a community and nation. His

presentation at the 1934 Yerevan Congress was on the socio-economic structure of Kurdish society, which, says Nikitine, "gave rise to a lively discussion demonstrating the historical existence in the past of Kurdish national culture" (1956, p. 292). His later work *Dimdim* has a strong nationalist theme (Japharova, pp. 120-22). *¥ivanê Kurmanca*, like his other works, forms part of the Kurdish discourse of identity. Finally, 'Ereb ¥emo is also fired by the "lest we forget," anti-*oubli* principle. He does not want the terrible injustices of the past to be forgotten, either by the *agha* and *beg* families or by the proletariat.

It would not be correct to see the proliferation of autobiographies and memoirs among Kurds, especially in recent years, as due to the influence of 'Ereb ¥emo, who could hardly have found a mass readership among the non-Soviet Kurds. It would be more accurate to see published self-narrative and the work of memory of which it forms a part, as inspired by much wider factors that were at work at the time of 'Ereb ¥emo in the Caucasus, and which are now at work in Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria. The traumatic upheavals of twentieth-century history, the rise of the nation-state and its accompanying nationalisms, and even the forces of modernity (and latterly, globalization) have all led to the re-evaluations of the past and an obsession with reclaiming it. As Pierre Nora says of the resurgence of memory in general, we have witnessed the development, not only of heritage in a world where history seems to be accelerating and we no longer feel sure of what the future holds from, but also of memory as a collective item belonging to groups, often downtrodden minorities who seek to reclaim their own history. Identity has also become a group attribute, intimately linked to memory (Nora, passim), and reclaiming memory is part of the process of emancipation for minority groups worldwide.

It is possible to say, that if one draws a rough distinction between memoir and autobiography, that the self-narratives the Kurds are now producing are more memoir than autobiography. Nevertheless, to see this as in any way symptomatic of a lack of interest in the individual would be to miss the point. Interest in the individual and his path through life is shown in other genres, such as the biographical novels. Kurdish contemporary self-narratives are, for the most part, currently focused on chronicling events as a struggle against *oubli*, as a way of informing non-Kurds, and, in many cases, as a part of a wider national work of memory aimed at reclaiming national history. Whether produced in the Turkish, Iraqi, Syrian or Iranian context, they are works of memory that tend to explore Kurdish identity, often with a view to achieving liberation. Within its early Soviet context, *¥ivanê Kurmanca* was just such a work.

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