

Martin van Bruinessen, 'Ehmedî Xanî's Mem û Zîn and its role in the emergence of Kurdish nationalism'

published in: Vali, Abbas (ed.), *Essays on the origins of Kurdish nationalism*, Costa Mesa, Cal.: Mazda Publishers, 2003, pp. 40-57.

Ehmedê Xanî's *Mem û Zîn*

and its role in the emergence of Kurdish national awareness¹

Martin van Bruinessen

Just over 300 years ago, the Kurdish poet and Muslim scholar Ehmedê Xanî completed his magnum opus *Mem û Zîn*, which nationalist Kurds have come to consider as their national epic. *Mem û Zîn* on one level is the story of a great and tragic love, on the pattern of such Middle Eastern classics as *Kalila and Dimna*, *Khosrow and Shirin* or *Yusuf and Zulaykha*; in fact, Xanî appears to have modeled his work on the version of *Yusuf and Zulaykha* composed by the great Persian poet Nizami of Ganja. On another level, this love story is an allegory through which the author conveys a Sufi message; certain parts of the work in fact explicitly expound Xanî's mystical views.² The work owes its fame among twentieth-century Kurds to yet another level that is explicitly there: it can be read as a forceful expression not only of pride in Kurdish ethnic identity but of the desire for a Kurdish state. Xanî wrote his work not in Persian, which then was the appropriate language for refined literary expression, but in Kurdish. He prefaced the work with a lament on the subjection of the Kurds by the neighbouring states, on the absence of unity among them, and on his wish for a Kurdish king to emerge who would unite his people and force their former conquerors into submission. Understandably, many twentieth-century Kurds have recognised their own feelings in Xanî's lines and concluded that their own nationalism had historical roots going back at least as far as Xanî. Xanî was declared a nationalist, so that the Kurdish movement could claim a history of three centuries of national struggle.³

Was Ehmedê Xanî a Kurdish nationalist and did he desire a Kurdish state?

There are good reasons, of course, to call Ehmedê Xanî a precursor of Kurdish nationalism - and below I shall show how his works, especially *Mem û Zîn*, have played an important part in crucial phases of the Kurdish national movement. But is it justified to call him a Kurdish nationalist himself? I believe that this is not appropriate, and that we cannot

¹ An earlier version of this article was presented as a lecture at the Conference to Commemorate the 300th Anniversary of Xanî's *Mem û Zîn*, organized by the Association of Kurdish Writers in Sweden (Komela Nivîskarên Kurd li Swêdê), Stockholm, May 27, 1995.

² The Sufi ideas in this work have been analysed by Muhammad Anwar `Alî in his dissertation *Ahmad al-Khânî: falsafat al-tasawwuf fi dîwânih "Mam û Zîn"* (Jâmi`at al-Qaddis Yusûf, Ma`had al-Adâb al-Sharqiyya, 1972). I wish to thank Malmîsanij M. Tayfun for showing me this study.

³ E.g., Ferhad Shakely, *Kurdish nationalism in Mem u Zin of Ehmed-i Xani* (Sweden [Uppsala], 1983; new edition Brussels: Koerdisch Instituut, 1993); Mûrad Ciwan, "Dewra Ahmedê Xanî û Kurdeperiya wî", *Çira* hejmar 2 (Hezîran 1995), 13-29; Medeni Ayhan, *Kürdistanlı filozof Ehmedê Xanî* (Ankara, 1996).

conclude from a few famous lines in *Mem û Zîn* that Xanî thought of a Kurdish state.

It is true that Ehmedê Xanî was very much aware, and proud, of his Kurdish identity, and that he saw his literary activity as a service to the Kurds. In earlier centuries, Kurdish poets and scholars had commonly expressed themselves in Persian or Arabic. Sharaf Khan of Bitlîs had written his celebrated history of the Kurdish chiefdoms and emirates, *Sharafname* (completed almost exactly a century before *Mem û Zîn*) in Persian. That other famous Kurdish scholar and statesman, Idris Bitlisi (late 15th - early 16th century), also expressed himself in Persian, both in his works of Ottoman historiography and in his official correspondence.⁴ The idea of writing in Kurdish probably had never occurred to these authors; not only was Persian considered as the most elegant language for literary purposes, it was also a language that guaranteed a wide potential audience because it could be read by most educated people in the Ottoman Empire and Muslim India as well as Iran.

Ehmedê Xanî must have been aware that his decision to write in Kurdish instead of Persian meant that he would never have such a wide audience, that his only readers would be Kurds, and that he would never acquire the fame of his great example, Nizâmî Ganjavî. He deliberately opted for the Kurdish language in order to raise the standing of Kurdish culture in the eyes of the Kurds' neighbours. In his own words,

*Da xelq-i nebêjîtin ku Ekrad
bê me`rifet in, bê esl û binyad.
Enwa`ê milel xwedan kitêb in
Kurmanc-i tenê di bê hesêb in*

"So that people won't say that the Kurds
have no knowledge and have no history;
that all sorts of peoples have their books
and only the Kurds are negligible."

Xanî was not the first poet to write classical poetry in Kurdish; he mentions himself his predecessors Feqiyê Teyran, `Elî Harîrî and Melayê Cezîrî, but there appear to have been many other Kurdish poets who are now forgotten because their works have not been conserved. The famous Turkish traveller Evliya Çelebi noted during a visit to Amadiye around 1660 that there were dozens of competent poets living at the emir's court, who wrote impressive poems in the Kurmanci language. Evliya quotes an elegant *qasîda* by one of these poets, Ramazan Efendi, indicating that there was a lively Kurdish literary activity in that period.⁵

⁴ Idris Bitlisi, the descendant of a famous religious scholar and Sufi in Bitlis, was a senior scribe at the Ottoman court. It was he who persuaded the most important Kurdish local rulers to take the Ottoman side in the Ottoman-Safavid conflict, resulting in the incorporation of most of Kurdistan into the Ottoman Empire. His *Hasht Bihisht* and *Salîmnâme* belong to the most important chronicles of the period.

⁵ Evliya Çelebi's notes on Amadiye and southern Kurdistan do not appear in the printed editions of his *Seyahatname*, which are based on defective manuscripts. They are to be found in the autograph of the fourth volume, in Istanbul's Topkapi Library. I am preparing an annotated edition of these notes.

What caused this flourishing of Kurdish literature during the 17th century? There are no simple answers to this question, but I would suggest that it may have been due precisely to the Ottoman domination of which Ehmedê Xanî complained. We see that in Istanbul from the 16th century on Persian was being gradually replaced by Ottoman Turkish as the language of the court and of learned discourse. This example may have stimulated Kurdish poets like Melayê Cezîrî and Ehmedê Xanî to develop a literary form of their own language too. More importantly, the first centuries of Ottoman rule brought a period of relative quiet and stability. The Kurdish ruling families that had subjected themselves to the Ottomans enjoyed the autonomy, security and prosperity that enabled them to act as patrons of the arts and sciences. The emirs, and Ottoman governors (*beylerbeys* and *sancakbeys*) as well, also sponsored *medreses* where young Kurdish men studied religious sciences and literature. The court (*dîwan*) and the *medrese* were environments where the arts, especially literature, were appreciated, and naturally the Kurdish poets of the period were associated with one or the other, or with both.

This brings us to the question of Xanî's alleged nationalism. Certain passages in the *dîbaçe* (introduction) of *Mem û Zîn* certainly have a modern ring to them, as if they were spoken by nationalists of the early 20th century instead of three centuries ago. It is as if Xanî was calling for a Kurdish national state. In fact, I myself have for a while suspected that these words were not by Xanî but were inserted into his work by a much later copyist, so modern they sounded to me. But these words also occur in the critical edition by M.A. Rudenko, which is based on nine different manuscripts, the oldest of which was written in 1731-32, i.e. well before the appearance of modern nationalism in the Middle East.⁶ So it must have been Ehmedê Xanî himself who wrote them:

Ger dê hebuwa me padişahêk

.....

xalib nedibû li ser me ev Rom

"If only we had a king [and a throne, and a crown, and all the other symbols of power,...], then the Ottomans would not dominate us." And again:

Ger dê hebuwa me îttîfaqek

vêk ra bikira me înqiyadêk

Rom û `Ereb û `Ecem temamî

hem'yan ji me ra dikir xulamî

tekmîl-i dikir me dîn û dewlet

tehsîl-i dikir me `ilm û hikmet

"If only there were unity among us, and we would obey one another, then all of the Ottomans and Arabs and Iranians would become our servants, we would reach perfection

⁶ See Axmed Xani, *Mam i Zin*. Kriticeskiy tekst, perevod, predislovie i ukazateli M.B. Rudenko (Moskva: NAUK, 1962), p. 13-16.

in religion and politics,⁷ and we would become productive in knowledge and wisdom."

It is tempting to read this as the complaint of a Kurd who wonders why his people have no state while other peoples, the Turks, Arabs and Persians do. There are two problems with this interpretation, however. From other sources of this period we gather that in general people did not identify themselves as ethnic groups or nations in the way that people nowadays do. Ehmedê Xanî's Rom, `Ereb and `Ecem are not so much ethnic groups as states. Rom was originally the Roman Empire and later its eastern part, Byzantium; then the name was used for its successors, the Seljuqs and the Ottoman state, and now it sometimes used for the Republic of Turkey - but never for ordinary Turks.⁸ The term `Ecem was used by Arabs for all non-Arabic speakers, and in Ottoman Turkish it was used especially for all sorts of Iranians, including the Turkish speakers. `Ereb and Kurd (or Kurmanc; Xanî uses both names) are not states but human groups, but I doubt whether they referred to exactly the same people whom we nowadays mean when we speak of the Arab or the Kurdish nation. As I have written elsewhere, the term Kurd in that period appears to refer only to the Kurdish tribes and a part of the urban aristocratic elite, but not to the non-tribal peasantry.⁹

The second problem is that of the nature of the states: the idea of national states had not yet emerged, neither in Asia nor in Europe. There were no Turkish, Arab or Persian states, nor had there been attempts to establish them. The existing states were based on religious identity or on loyalty to a royal family, such as the Ottoman dynasty and the Safavids, both of which were Turkish speaking but neither of which appealed to ethnic Turkish solidarity. These states were multi-ethnic, and if Ehmedê Xanî was thinking of a state form when he longed for a Kurdish king, his state definitely was not a national state either but another multi-ethnic state, in which *Rom û `Ereb û `Ecem tamamê, hem'yan ji me ra dikir xulamê*, "all of the Ottomans and Arabs and Persians would be subservient to us".

If by nationalism we mean, with Ernest Gellner, the "political principle that the political and the national unit should be congruent",¹⁰ then Xanî was not a nationalist. He deplored the division of the Kurds, their inability to agree amongst themselves, and he saw that this division had caused them to live as subjects to a neighbouring state which, had they had been united, they might have conquered themselves.

For whom did Ehmedê Xanî write, and who read him?

⁷ In modern usage, *dewlet* is the most common word for state, but its original meaning was more amorphous. The expression *dîn û dewlet* does not refer to a specific religion and state but juxtaposes, like the similar expression *dîn û dunya*, spiritual and worldly affairs.

⁸ The well-known expression *Romê reş* also refers to the Ottoman (or Turkish) state, especially the military. They are called *reş* (black) because that was the colour of the uniform jackets of late 19th-century Ottoman troops (I thank Naci Kutlay for this bit of information).

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and nationalism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), p. 1.

Xanî's *Mem û Zîn* is based on the well-known and popular folk legend *Memê Alan* (also sometimes known as *Mem û Zîn*), but it is very different from it both in form and content.¹¹ Xanî made numerous changes in the basic narrative, overlaid the story with layer upon layer of symbolic meaning, enriched it with mystical and metaphysical ideas and his views on politics, and wrote it in the poetic form of the Persian *masnavi*. This suggests that the audience for whom he intended it in the first place was not the same as that reached by the traditional story-tellers, who went on handing down *Memê Alan* from generation to generation, but a more sophisticated public, capable of understanding the more symbolic and metaphysical levels of his work and aware of Persian literary forms so that they could appreciate Xanî's achievement. This audience must have been quite limited, and probably only existed at the courts of the emirate and in the better *medreses*.

The number of manuscripts of *Mem û Zîn* that exist in the great manuscript collections is quite limited. Rudenko, as said, found and used nine different manuscripts (three of which are from the collection of Alexandre Jaba). There exist only a handful in the west. It is hard to make an estimate of the number of manuscripts present in Kurdish society before the first printed edition of this work appeared, but I doubt whether there were more than a few hundred. If we assume that each copy was read by some twenty people, the total number of people who had ever read *Mem û Zîn* cannot have been more than a few thousand. Perhaps even these estimates are still too high.¹² It is only after the arrival of the printing press that Xanî acquired something of a mass audience.

Xanî's readers did appreciate his literary gifts but we can only guess whether they read the same political message in his work that later generations have found there. Mela Mehmûdê Bayazîdî, who in the 1850s wrote the first brief overview of Kurdish literature at the request of the Russian consul in Erzerum, Alexandre Jaba, calls *Mem û Zîn* simply 'a love tale' (*kitêbekî `aşiq ma şûqan*). He praises Xanî's literary skills and says that he is the most famous and most widely praised of all Kurdish poets — but he says nothing of Xanî's non-literary merits.¹³

¹¹ For an analysis of the differences between the oral tale of Memê Alan and Xanî's literary version, see: Michael L. Chyet, "*And a thornbush sprang up between them*": *Studies on "Mem û Zîn", a Kurdish romance* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1991), pp. 52-62. Chyet's thesis, the best study of Kurdish oral tradition to date, analyses eighteen different versions of Memê Alan.

¹² When I first publicly made this estimate, several Kurdish friends vehemently disagreed with me. One person from Diyarbakır made the important comment that in his family alone there were several manuscripts of *Mem û Zîn*, and that his neighbours also owned copies; in his view, the total number therefore had to be much higher than I claimed. In defence of my estimate, however, it may be said that many of the manuscripts existing today are in fact copied from the first *printed* edition (thus for instance the manuscript Mehmet Emin Bozarslan used for his edition and translation). Printing, as I shall say below, makes a big difference, because it allows mass production and creates a mass audience. I still believe that *Mem û Zîn* did not become really popular until it was printed.

¹³ "[Ehmedê Xanî] *zehf ji xezeliyat û eş`aran û beyt bi zimanê Kurmancî gotiye û di zimanê `Erebî û Farsî û Tirkî ji dîsan xezeliyat û eş`aran û ebyatê zehf gotiye, û di `ulûmê funûnan ji qewî mahir û sahibê `îrfan e û ji şu`erayêd Kurdistanê hemûyan ji meşhûr û fayiq e. Belkî ji hemû şu`eran meqbûl û memdûh e.*" See Alexandre Jaba, *Recueil de notices et de récits kourdes* (St.-Petersbourg, 1860), p. 15 of the Kurdish text.

Xanî's ideas spread to the south: Hacî Qadrî Koyî

Perhaps the first person to recognize a nationalist message in *Mem û Zîn* was the southern Kurdish author, Hacî Qadrî Koyî (1817-1897). As we shall see, Hacî Qadrî Koyî was a key figure who had a great influence on Kurdish national awareness in both northern and southern Kurdistan. He was a *faqih*, educated in medreses in various parts of Kurdistan.¹⁴ He lived at a time of great changes in Kurdistan; he was a young adult when the last Kurdish emirates were abolished by the Ottoman government. He must have known from personal experience the government of the last great ruler of Soran, the famous Mîr Muhammad of Rowanduz (known as Mîrî Kor, 1814-1835), who at one time controlled a large part of central and southern Kurdistan. He must also have heard travellers tell stories of the power and justice of Bedir Khan Beg of Botan, who in the 1840s made himself almost independent of the Ottoman government and brought most of western and central Kurdistan under his control. These last great Kurdish rulers, whose deeds are still narrated by storytellers and whose praises still are sung by bards, must have made a strong impression on the young Qadir. Their ultimate defeat at the hands of the reorganized Ottoman army, and the disorder and insecurity of the following period, in which the tribes appeared to be continually in conflict with each other, gave rise to a romantic nationalism in Hacî Qadir, and to a nostalgic idealization of the feudal past.¹⁵

Later in life, he went to Istanbul, where he was in contact with prominent Kurdish families. Because he was by then a learned mulla and a man of letters, the Bedirkhan family employed him as a tutor for the children. Himself of humble origins, Hacî Qadir appears to have been proud to serve this noble family. The nationalist dimension of his poetry probably owes much to this association with the Bedirxans; on the other hand, the younger generation of Bedirxans appears to have been influenced by Hacî Qadir's nationalism. According to Qanatê Kurdo, it was through the Bedirxans that Hacî Qadir Koyî for the first time became acquainted with Ehmedê Xanî.¹⁶ His own poetry clearly shows Ehmedê Xanî's influence, and in fact Hacî Qadir became for Sorani literature what Ehmedê Xanî was for Kurmanci, a predecessor to whom later generations of nationalists could always turn for inspiration, and whose poems they could quote to give expression to their own nationalist sentiments. As for Xanî, writing in Kurdish was for Koyî a political choice; without respect for the Kurdish language, he implies, the Kurdish nation is practically non-existent because

¹⁴ Qanatê Kurdo mentions medreses in Koy Sanjaq, Khoshnaw, Sardasht, Erbil, Kirkuk, Sulaymaniya, Mahabad and Ushnuviya. See his *Tarîxa edebyeta Kurdi -2* (Stockholm: Weşanên Roja Nû, 1985), p. 18.

¹⁵ On these last two great Kurdish rulers and their efforts to unite large parts of Kurdistan under their rule, see: Dr. Celîlê Celîl, *XIX. yûzyîl Osmanlî İmparatorluğunda Kürtler* (Ankara: Öz-Ge, 1992). In my *Agha, Shaikh and State* (London: Zed Books, 1992), pp. 175-82 and 224-34, I attempt to explain the consequences of the disappearance of the Kurdish emirates and the chain of developments that led to the emergence of modern Kurdish nationalism.

¹⁶ *Tarîxa edebyeta Kurdi* 2, p. 18. I have not found any indication that Koyî had read *Mem û Zîn* during his study in the *medrese*; most probably it was then only known in the Kurmanci-speaking parts of Kurdistan.

Kurdish society has no recollection of its past:

*Kitêb û defter û tarîx û kaxez
be Kurdî ger binûsraye zubanî
mela w zana w mîr û padşaman
heta mehşer dema naw û nişanî.¹⁷*

Books and records and chronicles and other documents,
if they were written in the Kurdish language,
then our mullas and scholars, our mîrs and kings
would remain famous until the Day of Judgement.

Koyî idealized the past and looked back to the emirates as the golden age of Kurdish history:

*Hakim û mîrekanî Kurdistan,
her le Botanewe heta Baban
yek be yek hefîzî şerî`et bûn
seyd û şêxî qewm û millet bûn.
Seyd û şêxekan le tirsî ewan
munzewî bûn û zakirî Rehman.
Ew ke fewtan riyay ewan derkewt
seyrî çon bûne pûş û agir û newt.
Yekî lem lawe rû dekate `Ecem,
dûş lew lawe debne dujminî hem.
[.....]
Kwa valîy Senenduc, begzadey Rewandiz?
Kwa hakimî Baban, mîrî Cezîr û Botan?
[.....]
Kwa ew demî ke Kurdan azad û serbexo bûn,
Sultanî mulk û millet, xawendî ceşş û `irfan?¹⁸*

"The rulers and princes of Kurdistan,
from Botan all the way to Baban,
were guardians of the Divine Law, each single one of them;
they were the true sayyids and shaikhs of the people.
Sayyids and shaikhs, for fear of them,
stayed in their dervish convents, reciting the name of the Merciful.
Once they [the old rulers] died, hypocrisy appeared;

¹⁷ Quoted in Amir Hassanpour, *Nationalism and language in Kurdistan, 1918-1985* (San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1992), p. 93.

¹⁸ *Dîwanî Hacî Qadrî Koyî*, edited by Gîw Mukriyanî (Hewlêr: Çapxaney Kurdistan, 1953), 48, 51.

see how they became like straw and fire and oil.

One on this side takes side with Persia,
and those on that side become each other's enemies.

[.....]

Where is now the vali of Sanandaj, the prince of Rawanduz?

Where the rulers of Baban, the emir of Jazira Botan?

[.....]

Where is the time that the Kurds were free and independent,
were lords of the land and the people, possessing armies and esoteric knowledge?"

It appears most likely that this poem was written after Hacî Qadrî Koyî had read *Mem û Zîn*, and it is as if one feels Ehmedê Xanî's influence: there is the same complaint of the Kurdish tribes' eternal feuding, the same longing for a Kurdish ruler. There is one difference, however: Ehmedê Xanî did not believe that his ideal Kurdish *padişah*, who could unite all the tribes, had never existed, but Hacî Qadir appears to believe that Mîrî Kor and Bedir Khan Beg (although he does not mention their names) were such *padişah*. Whereas it is possible to read *Mem û Zîn* as a critique of feudal society — the mîr of Cezîre Botan, after all, plays a cruel role in it — Koyî is only full of praise for the Kurdish mîrs. I am very hesitant to speak of nationalism in the case of Ehmedê Xanî, but with Hacî Qadrî Koyî we definitely witness the arrival of romantic and idealistic nationalism. Koyî allegedly considered *Mem û Zîn* as "the book of our nation" (*kitêba milletê me*); we shall see that at various important moments in the development of the Kurdish movement *Mem û Zîn* came to play an important role as a national symbol.

Mem û Zîn in print

The appearance of the first Kurdish journal, *Kurdistan*, was such an important moment. Miqdad Midhat Bedirkhan, who published the first issues in Cairo in 1898, had been one of the children tutored by Koyî. In the second and following issues of *Kurdistan* he published sections from *Mem û Zîn* to show that literature of high quality can be written in Kurdish. "I have read and translated parts of this work to Turkish and Arab *ulema*," he wrote, "and they all agreed that they had never seen anything of this sort that was superior to this book!"¹⁹ It is interesting to note that the manuscript of *Mem û Zîn* that was used by Miqdad Midhat had belonged to Hacî Qadrî Koyî. As a tribute to his teacher, he published in issue 3 of *Kurdistan* the Sorani poem that Koyî had written in his own hand on the last page of the manuscript. Koyî here calls himself the only one besides Xanî to lay the foundations of Kurdish poetry.²⁰ That claim is obviously exaggerated, but we see that he did play an

¹⁹ "Min ev kitêb carna hin ulemayên Tirk û Ereba re xwendiyê û tercume kiriye, hemiya jî gotiye ku 'vê rê de je vê kitêbê çêtir me nediyê.'" See M.E. Bozarslan's re-edition of *Kurdistan*, vol. 1, p. 127.

²⁰ The final two strophes of this poem (p. 135-6 in Bozarslan's edition of *Kurdistan*) proclaim that "it is due to this book that [the Kurdish emirates of] Soran and Botan have become known among the other states // Among the Kurds none but Hacî and Shaykh Xanî have laid the foundations of poetry" (*Le mecmû'î duwel Soran û Botan / le sayey em kitêbe nasrawe // Le Kurdan xeyrî Hacî w Şêx Xanî / esasî nezmî Kurdî danenawê*).

essential role in the dissemination of Xanî's work. Would *Mem û Zîn* have been printed in *Kurdistan* if Miqdad Midhat had not been Koyî's student?

Miqdad Midhat announced his intention to publish the entire text of *Mem û Zîn* as a book, but he never got the opportunity to do this. The first complete edition is associated with the next phase in the Kurdish movement, the years following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in World War I, when for a brief period the establishment of a Kurdish state appeared feasible. Following the ceasefire of 1918 and the occupation of Istanbul by the British and French, Kurdish aristocrats and intellectuals established the nationalist association, *Kürdistan Te'ali Cemiyeti*. This association had several affiliated organizations, one of which was the *Kürd Ta'mim-i Ma'arif ve Neşriyat Cemiyeti*, which took care of educational and publishing activities. The first book published by this association, in 1919, was Ehmedê Xanî's *Mem û Zîn*. This was in fact the only book ever published by the KTMNC, and its publication probably was the association's single most important activity.²¹ It is widely believed that most copies of this edition were later burnt but at least a few were saved,²² and many handwritten copies were made. It probably was only after this edition that *Mem û Zîn* became really well-known throughout northern Kurdistan.

One member of the *Kürd Ta'mim-i Ma'arif ve Neşriyat Cemiyeti* deserves special mention in this connection, if only because he became the most original and influential Muslim thinker of Turkey in the 20th century. Sa'id-i Nursi represented the medrese tradition among the Kurds of Istanbul. He was learned, open-minded and tolerant, and much concerned with the education of his fellow Kurds. Sa'id's biography notes an early connection with Ehmedê Xanî. After studying in various medreses in Bitlis and Van, he spent three months in a medrese in Bayazid, the town near which Ehmedê Xanî lies buried. During these three months in Bayazid, he spent most of his time, day and night, in the *türbe* of Ehmedê Xanî. Seeing this, local people believed that Ehmedê Xanî's spirit manifested itself in Sa'id ("*Ahmed Hani Hazretlerinin feyzine mazhar oldu!*").²³ Much later, he still considered this period as the most important phase of his education. He probably still identified himself strongly with Ehmedê Xanî long after he had formally broken with the Kurdish movement.²⁴

Following the victory of the Kemalist movement in Turkey, the *Kürdistan Te'ali Cemiyeti* had to suspend its activities. We hear no more of it after 1922.²⁵ The Bedirkhans,

²¹ On the *Kürd Ta'mim-i Ma'arif ve Neşriyat Cemiyeti*, its members and activities see: Ismail Göldaş, *Kürdistan Te'ali Cemiyeti* (Istanbul: Doz, 1991), 77-81.

²² See Shakely, *Kurdish nationalism...*, p. 2.

²³ This is reported in Sa'id's authorised biography, *Bediüzzaman Said Nursi hayatı: mesleki tercüme-i hali* (Istanbul: Sözlür Yayınevi, 1976), p. 35, and recounted in: Necmeddin Şahiner, *Bilinmeyen taraflarıyla Bediüzzaman Said Nursi* (Istanbul: Yeni Asya Yayınları, 1974), pp. 34-5.

²⁴ The official biography keeps almost silent about Sa'id-i Nursi's role in the Kurdish movement. This aspect gets more attention in: Rohat, *Unutulmuşluğun bir öyküsü: Said-i Kürdi* (Istanbul: Fırat Yayınları, 1991) and in Malmîsanij, *Said-i Nursi ve Kürt sorunu* (Istanbul: Doz Yayınları, 1991); and more generally in the monthly journal *Dava*, published by a pro-Kurdish group split off from the main *nurcu* movement.

²⁵ Göldaş notes that the *Kürdistan Te'ali Cemiyeti* was formally banned by the (Ottoman) Istanbul government in July 1920, but apparently continued some activities into 1922, after which it simply ceased to

who had too clearly taken sides against the Kemalists, left the country; most of those who stayed behind ran into problems with the Kemalist authorities. Seyyid Abdulqadir was hanged after the Shaikh Sa`id rebellion; Sa`id-i Nursi spent most of his life in internal exile. In 1927, Celadet and Kamran Bedirkhan together with some other Kurdish intellectuals, then living in Syria, established a new Kurdish association, Xoybûn. In 1932 the Bedirkhan brothers began publishing the important journal *Hawar*, the first serious product of the Kurmanci literary revival. *Hawar* set the standard for written Kurmanci; both the form of the latinised alphabet that it introduced and the variety of the Cezûrî dialect in which contributions were written became the Kurmanci literary standard.

It is hardly surprising that *Hawar* too paid attention to Ehmedê Xanî. In issue 33 (1 October 1941), Celadet Bey, writing under the pen-name of Herekol Ezîzan, published an article titled "Klasîkên me" ("Our classics"), in which he gave Xanî and *Mem û Zîn* relatively much attention. He compared Xanî to Rûmî, of whom Mulla Abdurrahman Jamî allegedly had said, "he may not be a prophet, but he has written a (holy) book" (*ne pêxember e, lê kitêba wî heye*). Of Xanî, Celadet Bey claimed, something even better could be said: "He has not only written a book, but he is also a prophet: the prophet of our national belief, the prophet of the doctrines of our race" (*Belê Xanî jî xudan kitêb e. Lê Xanî pêxember e jî. Pêxemberê diyaneta me a milî, pêxemberê ola me a nijadîn*). Only a brief section of *Mem û Zîn* was published in *Hawar*, but a few years later a reprint of the Istanbul edition was made in Aleppo (1947).

The Mahabad Republic is one of the few important events in the history of the Kurdish movement in which Xanî's *Mem û Zîn* did not play a part. But it was the poet Hejar, who had been active in the Republic and who had settled in Iraq after the fall of the Republic, who later made Xanî known in southern and eastern Kurdistan.²⁶ His Sorani translation of *Mem û Zîn* was published in Baghdad in 1960. This was a significant date, for it almost coincides with the birth of the Kurdish movement as a mass movement in Iraq, following the overthrow of the monarchy by Abdulkarim Qasim. Several people have told me of the enormous impact Xanî's work had on them when they read it in Hejar's translation.

The re-emergence of the Kurdish movement in Turkey in the 1960s was also marked by the publication of a translation of *Mem û Zîn*. Mehmed Emin Bozarslan published it in latinised Kurdish, together with a Turkish translation.²⁷ It was not the first, but definitely the most important Kurdish book published in Turkey in those years, and it had a great impact. Few Kurds then were able to understand Xanî's difficult Kurdish; it was probably because of Bozarslan's Turkish translation that this edition reached a much wider audience than any earlier edition. Even though Bozarslan had left out the most politically sensitive passages, the book was soon banned, and the authorities destroyed all copies they could find. Those who owned a copy had to hide it, and many in fact destroyed theirs out of fear after the

exist (Göldaş, op.cit., p. 227-8).

²⁶ Before Hejar's translation appeared, Gîw Mukriyanî had published a reprint of *Mem û Zîn* (Erbil 1954 and again 1968), but since this was in Kurmanci it cannot have been widely read in Iraqi Kurdistan.

²⁷ Ehmedê Xanî, *Mem û Zîn*. Türkçesi: M.E. Bozarslan (Istanbul: Gün Yayinlari, 1968).

military intervention of March 1971.²⁸

Xanî and the Kurdish nation

Is there a meaningful sense in which one can speak of a Kurdish nation in Xanî's time? I do not think so, but opinions may differ. Among European historians we also find vastly different opinions regarding the emergence of the first European nations. Some of the older historians, for example Marc Bloch, claimed that the French and the Germans had become nations by 1100, while others, such as Johan Huizinga, believed this did not happen before the 14th century. A more recent historian, Eugene Weber, has shown that even by 1900 the French were not yet one nation strictly speaking: most French peasants then did not think of themselves as Frenchmen but only identified themselves with their village or region. It was only through mass education, general conscription into the army, and national radio broadcasts, i.e. through great efforts by the state, that the peasantry were incorporated into the nation.²⁹

Some modern authors on nationalism, especially Anderson and Gellner, have emphasised that nationalism and the emergence of modern nations are relatively recent phenomena. Gellner relates them to the beginnings of industrialisation and to migration from villages to towns, Anderson to the emergence of book printing and what he calls 'print capitalism'.³⁰ For both, it is the breaking down of the traditional barriers between village communities and regions that makes nationalism possible.

Before the invention of book printing, Anderson argues, only a small elite could read and write, and in Europe they communicated in the international intellectual language, Latin. Of each book that was written, only a few copies were ever made. The technique of printing suddenly made it possible to produce as many copies of a book as could be sold. Because many more people knew German or French than Latin, printers produced books in those languages in order to reach wider audiences (and sell more books). Latin decreased in importance; written communication no longer was the privilege of a thin highly educated and international elite; instead it involved more strata of society, but only insofar as they could understand the same written language. Among people who could read the same books, and later newspapers and journals, the awareness grew that they had something in common that distinguished them from readers of other languages, that they constituted a new sort of community, a nation. (Anderson speaks of '*imagined communities*' because they exist as communities in people's minds only; unlike traditional communities, where most people know each other, the members of nations only know a few other members and have to imagine the rest as people like themselves.) The emergence of nationalism in the

²⁸ The trial against Bozarslan ended, years later, with his acquittal, implying that the ban of the book was also lifted. It was reprinted in 1975.

²⁹ Eugene Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: the modernization of rural France, 1870-1914* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1979).

³⁰ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London: Verso Editions, 1983); Ernest Gellner, *Nations and nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983).

Middle East did not follow the same pattern as in Europe, but Anderson's work helps us to realise how important the role of the printing press has also been in the emergence of Kurdish nationalism.

Several historians have emphasised that it is only useful to speak of nations and nationalism when the various social classes are more or less integrated with each other. A 'national' awareness may first emerge among the upper classes of a society, but as long as the middle and lower strata of that society do not share that awareness, it does not make much sense to speak of a 'nation'. In the beginning of this century, there was a small group of Kurdish nationalists, most of them members of aristocratic families who had been educated in Istanbul or even abroad and were influenced by European ideas. As one of them, Qadrî Cemîl Paşa, writes in his memoirs, during the World War they attempted to find support for their nationalist ideals among Kurdish tribal chieftains, but they were disappointed because the idea of a Kurdish nation meant nothing to the aghas, let alone the common tribesmen or peasantry.³¹ Qadrî Bey and his friends, incidentally, had not even thought of talking to the peasants, and I doubt whether they themselves thought of the peasants as Kurds. Under those circumstances, it does not make much sense to call the Kurds a nation at that time. Elsewhere I have attempted to show how the Kurds later gradually developed into a nation in the modern sense by the incorporation especially of the peasantry.³²

Going back a few centuries, we may similarly ask what and who Ehmedê Xanî thought of when he spoke of 'Kurd' and 'Kurmanç', and whether he thought of them as a nation. I believe that he did not use these names in the same way as we do today; I am almost certain that he did not include the non-tribal peasants among the Kurds). Moreover, as said before, the political terms used by Xanî, such as '*mîl*' (the plural of '*millet*', which presently has the meaning of 'nation') in his time had another denotation. By interpreting the names and terms in *Mem û Zîn* as if they have always had the same meaning as today we probably misunderstand what exactly Ehmedê Xanî was saying. On the other hand, it is inherent in great literature that each generation of readers can discover new meanings in it, meanings of which the author himself may never have been aware.

Conclusion

It has often been observed that it is not nations that generate nationalism, but nationalism that creates the nation. If the Kurds constitute a nation now, that is one of the successes of the Kurdish nationalist movement. I have argued above that Ehmedê Xanî was not really a nationalist, at least not in the modern sense of that term. On the other hand, I have attempted to show that his work, especially *Mem û Zîn*, has played a role in all phases of

³¹ Zinnar Silopi [Qadrî Bey Cemîl Paşa], *Doza Kürdüstan: Kürt milletinin 60 senedenberi esaretten kurtuluş savaşı hatıratı* (Beyrut: Stewr Basımevi, 1969), p. 38-39.

³² Martin van Bruinessen, "Kurdish society, ethnicity, nationalism and refugee problems", in: Philip G. Kreyenbroek and Stefan Sperl (ed.) *The Kurds: a contemporary overview* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 33-67; idem, "Nationalisme kurde et ethnicités intra-kurdes", *Peuples Méditerranéens* no. 68-69 (1994), 11-37.

the development of the Kurdish movement, so that he may be properly called the 'father of Kurdish nationalism'. Later generations of nationalists have been able to discover their own ideas in Ehmedê Xanî's work. It is not accidental that each time when a new start was made with publishing in Kurdish, publishers and editors took up *Mem û Zîn*. Thus, indirectly, Xanî has contributed much to the rebirth of Kurdish as a living written language.

The Turkish state, in its own way, has also contributed to the rebirth of Kurmanci literature. By banning Bozarslan's edition of *Mem û Zîn*, it made that work even more into a symbol of Kurdish culture. Following the 12 September 1980 coup, the repression of Kurdish cultural expression in Turkey turned many Kurdish intellectuals into political refugees, who sought political asylum in countries like Germany and especially Sweden. Here they found conditions that enabled them to write and publish in Kurdish. People who had only written in Turkish when still in Turkey, gradually took up writing in Kurdish. In the past 15 years, Kurmanci has developed into a modern written language; and the quality of writing has improved noticeably over that period. There is now a steadily growing body of Kurmanci literature and the number of people who read Kurmanci has increased. It is significant that when Mehmet Emin Bozarslan published a new edition of *Mem û Zîn* this year, he replaced the Turkish translation of the earlier editions by a translation in contemporary Kurmanci! All of this would probably never have happened if all Kurdish writers had stayed in Turkey. As happens so often, state repression has contributed to the strength of what it tried to destroy, Kurdish culture in this case. Ever more Kurds from Turkey are making efforts to develop Kurmanci as a modern literary language, in emulation of Ehmedê Xanî's ambition, *da xelq-i nebêjîtin ku Ekrad // bê me`rifet in, bê esl û binyad*.