

Martin van Bruinessen, 'Kurdish Nationalism and Competing Ethnic Loyalties'

published in French translation as:

'Nationalisme kurde et ethnicités intra-kurdes', *Peuples Méditerranéens*, no. 68-69 (1994), 11-37.

[A revised and updated version was later published as 'Kurdish Paths to Nation' in Faleh A. Jabar & Hosham Dawod (eds), *The Kurds: Nationalism and Politics*, London: Saqi, 2006, pp. 21-48.]

## **Kurdish Nationalism and Competing Ethnic Loyalties**

During the past decade and a half, Kurdish nationalism has scored some remarkable political successes — be it at a terrible cost. For most of our century, Kurdish nationalism remained the concern of a relatively small educated elite, that from time to time entered into ephemeral alliances with local chieftains or religious leaders, resulting in short-lived rebellions of limited geographical scope. In recent years, however, Kurdish nationalism has become a mass movement in all parts of Kurdistan, with an appeal that transcends state boundaries as well as regional differences.

While on the one hand Kurdish nationalism has consolidated itself and awakened a widespread awareness of common identity, differences within Kurdish society on the other hand have at the same time become more divisive than they were before. Iraqi Kurdistan in 1994 appears torn between its Kurmanci-speaking northern part and the Sorani-speaking south, roughly coinciding with the zones of influence of the two major Kurdish parties, KDP and PUK, with a neutral zone in the middle. In Iran, the nationalist parties, KDP-I and Komala, have always found their strongest support in the relatively urbanised, Sorani-speaking region from Mahabad to Sanandaj and they were during the 1980's actually fought by Kurmanci-speaking tribesmen from further north as well as Shi'i Kurds to their south. In Turkey, some of the speakers of the Zaza language, who had always been considered, and had considered themselves, as Kurds, have started speaking of themselves as a separate people whose distinct identity has been denied not only by the Turkish state but by the Kurdish movement as well. The dividing line separating orthodox Sunni Muslims from heterodox Alevis has also become more important recently, even for those segments of both communities that are thoroughly secularised. The remarkable resurgence of the Alevi identity that Turkey has witnessed since 1980 is perceived by Kurdish nationalists as a competitor of, and a threat to, the Kurdish national movement.

It is my contention that these intra-Kurdish divisions (which have become so serious that some of the people concerned would object to the term "intra-Kurdish") are not a remnant of the past that may gradually wither away if the wider political context allows the Kurdish nationalist movement to continue developing. To some extent the narrower identities of region, language and religious community have been strengthened by the same factors that stimulated the awareness of Kurdish identity. And at least some of the divisions mentioned have become sharper precisely because of and in reaction to the growth of the Kurdish movement.

## *Who is a Kurd?*

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

The 1965 census in Turkey was the last one that asked people for their native languages and other languages spoken; almost four million, or 12.7 per cent of the population, then identified themselves as speakers of Kurdish, of whom 7.1 per cent spoke it as their first language.<sup>1</sup> This gives only a very rough indication of the number of people identifying themselves as Kurds. Those mentioning Kurdish as a second language must have included ethnic Turks, Arabs, Armenians and other Christian groups living in ethnically mixed regions where Kurdish was the lingua franca. Others may have been persons of mixed parentage, or Kurds who were at least as fluent in Turkish as in Kurdish. The 7.1 per cent figure is clearly too low for an estimate of how many actually considered themselves as Kurds. Many people must have been reluctant to stigmatise themselves by proclaiming Kurdish identity, and some of the enumerators may have "corrected" their data in order to arrive at politically acceptable figures.<sup>2</sup>

Although we cannot really know how many people in Turkey considered themselves as Kurds in 1965, it is safe to say that the percentage of people who do so thirty years later has risen perceptibly. Only a small part of this increase is to be attributed to the higher birth rate of Turkey's eastern provinces as compared to the western part of the country. The rise is chiefly due to the fact that numerous people who thought of themselves as Turks in 1965 are presently defining themselves primarily as Kurds. This includes many young people whose parents or grandparents had assimilated to Turkish culture, voluntarily or under pressure. Partly overlapping with this group are the offspring of mixed marriages, whose ethnic identity is inherently ambiguous. Almost everyone in Turkey may find a distant Kurdish ancestor if he goes far enough back. Those with at least one Kurdish grandparent (whose numbers include the late presidents İsmet İnönü and Turgut Özal) constitute a vast reservoir of potential Kurds. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same is true of the Kurds in Iran and Iraq.

Put simply, among the Kurds (as among any ethnic group) we find a core whose ethnic identity

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<sup>1</sup> 2,219,547 people mentioned Kurdish (Kurmanci) as their mother tongue, another 1,753,161 as their second language. The latter number may include many Zaza speakers. 150,644 stated Zaza to be their first language, and 112,701 said they spoke it as a second language.

<sup>2</sup> In the province of Tunceli, for instance, which is predominantly Zaza-speaking, the 1965 census registered only 7 (seven!) native Zaza speakers among a total population of over 150,000.

is unambiguously Kurdish, and that is surrounded by a fluid mass of various degrees of "Kurdishness", people who are also something else besides Kurds and who may emphasise or play down their Kurdish identity, depending on the situation. This is, however, putting it too simply, for on closer inspection even the ethnic core appears not to be so unambiguously definable at all. Each member of the core has, just like the more peripheral "potential Kurds", a number of overlapping identities, some of which may exert a stronger appeal to his loyalties than the Kurdish identity. He or she belongs to a village and perhaps to a notable family of some renown, to a tribe, to a region, to a dialect group, and to a religious community. Within the core we moreover find so wide a range of cultural variety that it is impossible to define it by a number of common cultural traits.

Nevertheless, there is considerable agreement among oriental authors, at least from the early sixteenth century on, as to whom to call Kurds. The Ottoman historians of the incorporation of most of Kurdistan into the Ottoman Empire in the early 16th century; Sharaf Khan, the ruler of Bitlis who wrote a detailed history of all Kurdistan's ruling families towards the end of that century; Evliya Çelebi, the Turkish traveller who spent years in various parts of Kurdistan in the 17th century — all of them used the name Kurd in practically the same way and applied it to the same population. So did Ottoman and Persian administrators, down to the early 1930's, when mentioning Kurds became unacceptable in Turkey. Their Kurds consisted of those tribesmen of eastern Asia Minor and the Zagros, settled as well as nomadic, who were not Turkish, Arabic or Persian-speaking.<sup>3</sup> They included speakers of Kurdish proper as well as Zaza (in the Northwest) or Gurani (in the Southeast, with more isolated pockets throughout present Iraqi Kurdistan), Sunni Muslims as well as Shi'is and the adherents of the various heterodox sects in the region. There was only some ambiguity about the Lur and Bakhtiari, living to the Southeast of the Kurds proper, whom some authors called Kurds and others considered as separate groups. (The same ambiguity still persists in the self-definition of at least some of the Lur today.) It is important to note also whom they appeared *not* to include among the Kurds: the numerous non-tribal peasants and townsmen living in the same area, who included Muslims as well as Christians, and many of whom spoke Kurdish (or Gurani or Zaza) dialects as their first language. I shall return to the matter of these non-tribal groups below.

### *Unity and variety among the Kurds*

The great orientalist and expert on the Kurds, Vladimir Minorsky, once claimed that the various Kurdish dialects (from which he excluded Zaza and Gurani) showed underneath their obvious differences a remarkable unity, especially remarkable when compared with the great variety of very dissimilar Iranian languages spoken by the inhabitants of another mountainous area, the

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<sup>3</sup> We also find Kurdish tribes mentioned as far away from this region as western Anatolia, eastern and north-eastern Iran, but all of these tribes retained memories of their ancestors migrating there from the said region.

Pamirs. He concluded that this basic unity of the Kurdish language derived from a single language spoken by a large and important people, and suggested that these might have been the Medes (whom Kurdish nationalists in fact like to see as their ancestors).<sup>4</sup>

This view was criticised by the linguist D.N. MacKenzie, according to whom there are but few linguistic features that all Kurdish dialects have in common and that are not at the same time found in other Iranian languages. Systematic comparison of significant features of Kurdish with other Iranian languages moreover showed, according to MacKenzie, that Kurdish proper differs on a number of important points from what is known about Median. Kurdish has a strong south-western Iranian element, whereas Median presumably was a northwestern Iranian language. Zaza and Gurani, two related Iranian languages spoken in the north-western and south-eastern extremes of Kurdistan, do belong to the north-west Iranian group, and many of the differences between the northern ("Kurmanci") and southern ("Sorani") dialects of Kurdish proper are due to the profound influence of Gurani on the latter.<sup>5</sup> MacKenzie's message, which he appeared to direct at Kurdish nationalist ideologues at least as much as at Minorsky, was that the Kurds have neither common origins nor basic cultural unity.

There is a general agreement, in recent scholarly work on ethnicity and national identity, that cultural unity or diversity in themselves are not decisive factors - although appeals to an (alleged) common history and common culture are of course of tremendous importance in mobilising ethnic or national sentiment. The first European nation-states in the age of nationalism were not at all culturally homogeneous. In 1789 only half of the Frenchmen spoke any French at all and only 12-13 per cent spoke it correctly; the others only spoke various *patois*. At the time of Italy's unification in 1860, only 2.5 per cent of its population used Italian for everyday purposes; even some of the leading nationalists were less than fluent in the "national" language.<sup>6</sup> In the case of the Kurds, it is remarkable that long before the age of nationalism there already was a sense of common identity among tribes whose cultures were "objectively" quite diverse.

It is not difficult to point to considerable cultural differences within what nationalists claim to be the Kurdish nation. The more extreme claims of some nationalists include the Lur and Bakhtiari, who speak closely related languages. These groups now do not generally consider themselves as Kurds, although this name was occasionally applied to them in the past. The

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<sup>4</sup> V. Minorsky, "Les origines des Kurdes", *Actes du XXe congrès international des orientalistes* (Louvain, 1940), pp. 143-152.

<sup>5</sup> D.N. MacKenzie, "The Origins of Kurdish", *Transactions of the Philological Society*, 1961, 68-86. MacKenzie is a trained linguist (which Minorsky was not), but his conclusions are based on his determination of a small number of isoglosses, and it is not impossible that another selection of isoglosses might have yielded different results.

<sup>6</sup> These examples are taken from E.J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp 60-1.

speakers of Gurani and Zaza, on the other hand, have for centuries been considered as Kurds by themselves and by their Kurdish-speaking neighbours as well as by such outsiders as Turkish and Arabic authors. This was in spite of the fact that their languages cannot be understood by native speakers of Kurdish proper (apart from the few who have expended considerable effort to learn them).<sup>7</sup>

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

Religion, another central element of culture, also appears to divide rather than unite the Kurds. The majority are Sunni Muslims, adhering to the Shafî'i school (*madhhab*) in the details of their religious obligations, but large numbers in southern and south-eastern Kurdistan (in Iraq as well as Iran) are Twelver Shi'i Muslims like the majority of the populations of Iran and southern Iraq. These Shi'i Kurds should not be confused with the Alevi Kurds of north-western Kurdistan. Although the Alevis also venerate Ali and the other eleven Imams of the Shi'is, they do not in general accept the canonical obligations of orthodox Islam and they have their own religious rituals, different from those of the Shi'is as well as the Sunnis. Alevi Kurds are only a minority among the Alevis of Turkey, and they often feel closer to their Turkish-speaking co-religionists than to the Sunni Kurds. A somewhat similar religion is that of the Ahl-i Haqq or (as they are called in Iraq) Kaka'i. Most Ahl-i Haqq claim to be an esoteric sect within Shi'i Islam, but some consider theirs to be an entirely separate religion. Even further removed from Islamic orthodoxy is the Yezidi religion, once widespread in central and north-western Kurdistan but now restricted to a few small areas in Iraq and the Armenian Republic and smaller pockets in Syria and Turkey.<sup>8</sup> The now dwindling Christian and Jewish communities of the region are not commonly considered as Kurds, although some of them have Kurdish as their first language.

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<sup>7</sup> It is sometimes claimed by speakers of Kurmanci that they understand Zaza without effort. They probably mean that they recognize single words, which is not surprising. Asking such persons to translate even a single line from an oral or written Zaza text usually results in great embarrassment.

<sup>8</sup> On the various religions in Kurdistan see: Martin van Bruinessen, "Religion in Kurdistan", *Kurdish Times* (Brooklyn, NY), vol. 4 no. 1-2, 1991, 5-27; Mehrdad Izady, *The Kurds: A Concise Handbook* (Washington: Taylor & Francis International Publishers, 1992), chapter 5; Philip G. Kreyenbroek, "Religion and Religions in Kurdistan", in: Christine Allison and Philip G. Kreyenbroek (eds), *Kurdish Culture and Identity* (London: Zed Books, 1996), pp. 85-110.

Among the Sunni speakers of Kurdish proper we find groups of quite different material cultures. The sociologist Rudolph, noting that in a relatively small area in south-eastern Turkey there were groups that differed considerably in the degree of their dependence on agriculture or animal husbandry as well as in other aspects of material culture such as house types, ventured the hypothesis that these groups represented two originally quite distinct ethnic groups. The geographer Hütteroth, however, who did fieldwork in the same area, suggested that the differences in material culture were simply due to different ecological circumstances.<sup>9</sup> Hütteroth's explanation is basically the same as the one we find a few years later, further worked out theoretically, in an article by Fredrik Barth on Pathan tribesmen, among whom he had observed even wider cultural diversity. In spite of their cultural differences, these groups were acutely aware of their common Pathan identity.<sup>10</sup>

In the Kurdish case, however, some of the cultural differences correlate with a distinction between tribesmen and non-tribal, subordinated peasants. In many parts of Kurdistan we find such groups existing besides each other. The tribesmen tend to consider themselves as the only "real" Kurds, and the non-tribal peasants used to be designated by various ethnic or "caste" terms (*ra`yat*, *guran*, *miskên*, *kelawspî*, *kurmanc*) distinguishing them from the tribes (*`ashiret*, *kurd*). The history of the region suggests that the *ra`yat* must be of quite heterogeneous origins, and include descendants of various older populations as well as impoverished Kurdish tribesmen.<sup>11</sup>

Some of the cultural differences mentioned above have been losing much of their importance due to the massive migration and urbanisation that have taken place during the past few decades. In the large cities it does not matter much whether one's grandparents were nomads or small peasants, or what language they spoke at home. For most public purposes one did not use the language of the village but the official language of the state - Turkish, Arabic or Persian. This fostered on the one hand an increasing awareness of common Kurdishness among people of different regional origins in the same country, but on the other hand caused a widening cultural gap between the Kurds of Turkey, Iraq and Iran. Compulsory education and military service, various forms of political mobilisation (elections, mass demonstrations), economic development and the ensuing internal migration, and especially "national" radio and television have integrated

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

<sup>10</sup> Fredrik Barth, "Pathan Identity and its Maintenance", in: Fredrik Barth (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1969), pp. 117-134. Barth's view, based on these and similar observations, that the identities of ethnic groups are not determined by their cultures but by the boundaries separating them from others will be considered at greater length below.

<sup>11</sup> See the discussion of these non-tribal groups in: Martin van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan* (London: Zed Books, 1992), 105-121.

even the most distant villages into the "national" life of their states. Separate histories for at least the past seventy-five years, and different processes of socialisation have made the Kurds of each country rather different from those in the neighbouring states.

### *Nationalism, nationhood and national rights*

Kurdish nationalists have always been apprehensive about these cultural divisions. Their aim has been self-determination in one form or another, and that aim obviously required unity. Kurdish nationalists have frequently suspected the Turkish, Iraqi and Iranian governments of deliberately reinforcing the existing intra-Kurdish differences - and not without justification. For instance, the governments of the shah's Iran and Republican Iraq, both of which broadcast radio programmes in Kurdish, had parallel programmes in a number of different dialects, while their Persian- and Arabic-languages programmes obviously only used the standard language. This was generally perceived as an attempt to keep the Kurds divided and prevent the emergence of a standard Kurdish.<sup>12</sup>

In the dominant political discourse of the 20th century, self-determination has been associated with *nations*: American President Woodrow Wilson's "Fourteen Points" and other wartime speeches, Joseph Stalin's influential writings on the national question and the Charter of the United Nations all refer to the *right of self-determination of nations*. Kurdish nationalists have therefore often spent much effort to prove that the Kurds constitute a nation. Neither Wilson nor the United Nations provided a definition of what was meant by this term.<sup>13</sup> The Kurds might have qualified for Wilson, but by the end of the First World War the Kurdish nationalists were too weak to effectively press their claims. The UN Charter (1948) implicitly referred to the colonised peoples of Asia and Africa only, or more precisely those peoples that were colonised by western powers. Stalin, however, did provide a definition, which has had great importance to the Kurdish movement. Kurdish nationalists, claiming to represent a nation by this definition, have attempted to receive Soviet support for their cause. The definition also loomed large over the debates between Kurdish nationalists and the left movements of their countries; most of the left-wing parties denied the Kurds' status as a nation and told them to content themselves with that of a *national minority* (which in Stalinist theory does not have the right of self-determination and cannot establish its separate communist party).

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<sup>12</sup> See on this subject the excellent study by Amir Hassanpour, *Nationalism and Language in Kurdistan, 1918-1985* (San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1989).

<sup>13</sup> Interesting observations on President Wilson's reckless use of the concept of self-determination are made in Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan's recent book, *Pandaemonium: Ethnicity in International Politics* (Oxford University Press, 1993), Chapter 2 (titled 'On the "self-determination of peoples"').



Stalin defined the nation by five characteristic features: common history, language, territory, economic life and culture, expressing a common "national character." Only when all of these are present does a group of people constitute a nation in Stalin's sense (and, by implication, deserve socialist solidarity in its struggle for self-determination).<sup>14</sup> Kurdish nationalists could convincingly claim a common history and a large piece of territory associated with their people, but their opponents in the debates denied the existence of a common economic life. The unity of language and culture too were sensitive issues, although they were less frequently contested by the non-Kurdish left.

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

Although most Kurdish nationalists nurture the dream of a united and independent Kurdistan, the leaders of the Iranian and Iraqi Kurds have for pragmatic reasons usually restricted their demands to self-determination within the framework of the existing states, i.e. political autonomy and cultural rights. They refrained from openly embracing pan-Kurdish ideals.<sup>15</sup> When in Turkey the Kurdish movement re-emerged in the 1960s, initially as a part of the reborn left movement, its first demands were for recognition of the existence of Kurds, cultural rights, and economic development. As Lenin's and Stalin's thought gradually became more widely known in Turkey, the concept of self-determination came to dominate political discourse, and by the late 1970s it had become the professed aim of virtually all Kurdish parties and organisations in Turkey. The only large and effective party that presently survives among Turkey's Kurds, the PKK, still sees the independence of all of Kurdistan as its ultimate objective - a legacy of its origins in the left-wing student movement. Its leader, Abdullah Öcalan, may still nurture hopes of becoming the leader of

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<sup>14</sup> In his first and best-known article on the subject ("Marxism and the national question", written in 1912-13), Stalin defined the nation as "*a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture.*" In his later writings on the subject (collected in: Joseph Stalin, *Marxism and the National-Colonial Question*. San Francisco: Proletarian Publishers, 1975), he never endeavoured to formulate a more sophisticated definition.

<sup>15</sup> In the 1960s and 1970s, however, Kurdish activists from neighbouring Iran, Turkey and Syria regularly visited, or came to stay in, the "liberated areas" of Iraqi Kurdistan. In the 1970s, both the Barzanis and the Talabani group, moreover, established special relationships with Kurdish "sister" organisations in Turkey and Iran, thereby also "exporting" their rivalries. The aim of this co-operation was to support the struggle of the Iraqi Kurds, not to organise pan-Kurdish activities.

the Iraqi and Iranian Kurds as well, but he has in practice moderated his demands and would probably be happy to negotiate a settlement with Turkey's government alone. All the Kurdish leaders thus appear to have reconciled themselves with the prospect of their people remaining a divided nation, or constituting three closely related but separate nations.

### *Ethnic boundaries and the Kurdish ethnics*

The emergence of secessionist movements both in Europe's oldest "nation-states" (such as the Basque, Catalan, Breton, Scottish movements) and in the new post-colonial states of Asia and Africa has stimulated a renewed scholarly interest in the nature and causes of nationalism. I shall have recourse to some of these recent theoretical writings to see whether they help us explain the matter of "intra-Kurdish" ethnicity.

One influential contribution to the debate was by the anthropologist Fredrik Barth, who argued that the maintenance of a group boundary is a key element in ethnicity.<sup>16</sup> The culture of an ethnic group may show quite wide internal variation due to differing ecological circumstances, and it may undergo considerable change over time, but neither of these factors affects its ethnic identity as long as the group remains capable of maintaining a clear boundary between itself and its environment. In Barth's view, it is the maintenance of a boundary rather than a specific cultural content that makes a certain collection of people into an ethnic group.

It is instructive to apply this approach to the Kurdish case, and ask which social boundaries involving the Kurds were and are most carefully maintained. Prior to the First World War, the most conspicuous of all boundaries was that between Muslims and Christians (or Jews), which in northern Kurdistan practically meant a boundary between Kurds and Armenians. Turkish and Arabic-speaking Sunni Muslims were much less alien to the (Sunni) Kurds, and the boundaries between were fuzzy. In fact, Ottoman documents contain numerous references to mixed nomadic tribes, consisting of Kurdish and Turkish-speaking sections, which indicates that there was hardly an ethnic boundary separating Turkish and Kurdish tribesmen.<sup>17</sup> At least one Arabic-speaking tribe, the Mahallami, considered itself as Kurdish and was considered as such by other Kurds.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Fredrik Barth, "Introduction", in: Fredrik Barth (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1969), pp. 9-38.

<sup>17</sup> Numerous such tribes, referred to as "Türkman Ekradı" or "Ekrad Yörükani", are listed in: Cevdet Türkay, *Başbakanlık arşivi belgeleri'ne göre Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda oymak, aşiret ve cemaatlar* (Istanbul: Tercüman, 1979). Most appear to be remnants of the large (Turcoman and Kurdish) Boz Ulus confederacy.

<sup>18</sup> Mark Sykes, "The Kurdish Tribes of the Ottoman Empire", *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 38 (1908), p. 473. The situation has not changed: the Mahallami are still Arabic speakers and self-professed Kurds. The latter may well be due to the fact that they are not desert- but mountain-dwellers.

(Zaza-speaking tribesmen were never even mentioned as a distinct group but always considered as Kurds).

The Yezidis were in a different position. On the one hand, they were not considered as Muslims and they emphasised their different identity by various external signs; on the other hand, being tribespeople and Kurdish speakers they were much closer to the Muslim Kurds than most Christians were. There was a clear boundary between Sunni Kurds and Yezidis but its importance varied from time to time. By the beginning of the present century several tribes in the Tur Abdin, the mountains stretching east from Mardin in present Turkey, appear to have had Yezidi as well as Muslim segments (which probably was due to gradual conversion of Yezidi tribes to Islam).<sup>19</sup> It is not entirely clear how sharply defined the boundary between Alevi and Sunni Kurds was. Several 19th-century sources speak of the Kizilbash (Alevi) as if they are a separate ethnic community, irrespective of language.<sup>20</sup> Language, in other words, did not play an important part as a boundary marker, but religion did; and the boundaries separating Christians from Muslims were much more unambiguous than those between heterodox and orthodox.

Perhaps the most important boundary of all, however, was the aforementioned one between tribal and non-tribal populations. The Muslim-Christian boundary was especially sharp where it coincided with that separating tribesmen and non-tribal peasants or craftsmen. Where Christians were tribally organized and militarily strong, as the Nestorians of Hakkari and the Jacobites of the Tur Abdin still were for most of the 19th century, they were treated as equals by Kurdish tribesmen. There were even Kurdish tribes that incorporated Christians as members.<sup>21</sup> The non-tribal populations of the region included speakers of Kurdish, Zaza and Gurani as well as Armenian, Aramaic, Arabic and perhaps Turkish, and there were Sunni and Alevi Muslims among them as well as Christians. The tribesmen made no sharp ethnic distinctions among these non-tribal groups, referring to them by the blanket term of *ra`yat* ("subjects"), by slightly more precise terms such as *feleh* (for Christian peasants, especially Armenians) and *kurmanc* (for Muslim peasants in northern Kurdistan), or by terms of local scope that differed from region to region. The tribesmen referred to themselves simply as *ashiret* ("tribe") or as *kurd*.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> See e.g., Sykes, "The Kurdish Tribes", pp. 469, 473-4.

<sup>20</sup> Thus the population statistics for the province of Ma'muret el-`Aziz (which included Dersim, Harput and Malatya), compiled from Ottoman yearbooks (*salname*) by Cuinet, list "Muslims", "Kizilbash" and "Kurds" as the major categories, besides various Christian denominations. The "Muslims" probably include non-tribal peasants as well as most of the urban population, irrespective of language. See Vital Cuinet, *La Turquie d'Asie. Géographie administrative*, tome II (Paris: Leroux, 1892), pp. 322ff.

<sup>21</sup> For examples see my *Agha, Shaikh and State*, pp. 107, 117-8.

<sup>22</sup> The name *kurd* in fact may originally have referred to nomadic tribalism rather than a linguistically defined "ethnic" identity. Medieval Arabic authors occasionally apply such labels as "Arab Kurds" to nomadic groups that appear to have no relation to the present, ethnically defined Kurds.

One other relevant boundary should be mentioned: that between the representatives of high Ottoman culture (military-bureaucratic officials, the higher religious functionaries, part of the urban notables) and the various local populations. The former were a quite distinct group, maintaining its distance from the *vulgus* by its use of an artificial language, Ottoman Turkish, and an elaborate etiquette.

By taking these boundaries as the primary criterion of ethnicity, we gather that, by the early 20th century, the core of the Kurdish *ethnie* consisted of the Kurdish-speaking Muslim tribes. To them one should add the small but important group of urban notables, who often acted as the tribal chieftains' partners, representatives and brokers. The Zaza and Gurani-speaking tribes, or at least the Sunnis among them, living in similar ecological environments and sharing a common history with their Kurdish-speaking neighbours, were to most purposes also part of the core. Alevi, Yezidi, Shi'i and Ahl-i Haqq tribes were more peripheral, and the non-tribal peasantry, whatever their language or religion, were not considered, and did not consider themselves, as part of the *ethnie*.

This composition of the Kurdish *ethnie* was reflected in the membership of the first Kurdish nationalist associations in Istanbul. These were mostly educated members of the tribal or religious elite, and overwhelmingly Sunnis. We find speakers of the northern and southern Kurdish dialects as well as a few Zazas among them, very few Alevis and no Yezidis.<sup>23</sup> Not surprisingly, there were no members of peasant or urban craftsman backgrounds, and in the Kurdish rebellions of the 1920s and 1930s these social strata remained aloof.

As said, there was no strict boundary separating Kurdish from Turkish Muslims. In the First World War and the following war of "national liberation", Kurds and Turks jointly fought local and foreign Christians; attempts to make Kurdish tribes turn against the Ottomans and later against the kemalist movement on the basis of a common Kurdish interest failed. During the postwar years, the southern Kurdish religious and political leader, Shaikh Mahmud Barzinji, repeatedly attempted to carve out a semi-independent Kurdistan under his command, but at the same time maintained intensive communication with the Kemalist military commander in Central Kurdistan, Özdemiş. The idea of a reconstituted Ottoman Empire appears to have appealed more to him than that of incorporation into a British-controlled Iraq. Some Kurds in fact felt attracted to Turkish nationalism. The Kurd Abdullah Cevdet was one of the founders of the Young Turk Committee of Union and Progress (but after the Great War also active in a Kurdish association). The most influential Turkish nationalist ideologist Ziya Gökalp (born in Diyarbakir in 1876) probably was of Kurdish extraction or maybe, as has recently been claimed, a Zaza.<sup>24</sup> (It is

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<sup>23</sup> Later, in the 1930s, the Kurdish nationalist association in exile, Khoybun, idealised Yezidism as the one truly Kurdish religion, but it did not have prominent Yezidi members either. (Some of my informants claim that Haco, the chieftain of the Hevêkan tribe and a Khoybun member, was a Yezidi, but he was not openly so).

<sup>24</sup> Turkish sources of course call Gökalp a Turk, but later Kurdish sources commonly claim he was a Kurd. For the assertion that he was a Zaza see: Zilfi Selcan, *Zaza milli meselesi hakkında* (Ankara: Zaza Kültürü Yayınları,

perhaps significant that in his lifetimes the question of whether he was a Turk or a Kurd appears not to have been publicly raised).

### *Paths to nationhood*

In a number of recent books and articles, the British sociologist Anthony D. Smith makes a distinction between two radically different roads to nationhood, that take their origins in two different ideal types of ethnic community or *ethnie*.<sup>25</sup> His discussion of these types and their evolution, although not immediately applicable, is useful to an understanding of the Kurdish situation. Smith uses the French term *ethnie* to indicate communities that not only share certain myths of origin and descent, the association with a certain territory and at least some common elements of culture, but also a sense of solidarity among (most of) their members. People who share in a common culture and have the same myths of origin but have no awareness of belonging together do not constitute an *ethnie* but may be called an *ethnic category*. The nation is more integrated than the *ethnie*, being characterised by a mass, public culture and by a certain degree of economic and political integration.<sup>26</sup>

The first of Smith's ideal types is what he calls the "lateral-aristocratic" *ethnie*, whose members constitute a military-aristocratic stratum, which therefore has little social depth but may be widely extended in geographical space. The other is what he calls the "vertical-demotic" type, in which the different social strata share in (more or less) the same culture, and often are held together by a belief in common origins and a strong commitment to a common religion. It is perhaps necessary to add that not all collectivities sharing a common culture constitute such demotic *ethnies*. The term *ethnie* is only used for those characterised by an awareness of common identity and a sense of group belonging; in many peasant communities throughout the world these are entirely absent.

Lateral-aristocratic *ethnies* may grow into nations if they succeed in culturally integrating the various communities they dominate. Smith speaks of "bureaucratic incorporation", for the state usually plays a key role in the process. This is the process by which such European nation-states

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1994), p. 3.

<sup>25</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986); idem, "The Origins of Nations", *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 12 (1989), 340-67; idem, *National identity* (London: Penguin Books, 1991). These works are clearly indebted to the seminal work by Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), but much richer in concrete historical description.

<sup>26</sup> In his *National Identity* (Penguin Books, 1991, p. 14), Smith gives the following definition of the nation (which he claims represents a consensus among scholars): "a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members."

as France, England and Spain were formed. Vertical-demotic *ethnies* may (but do not necessarily) grow into nations through a process of internal mobilisation by a nationalist intelligentsia, usually involving a reinvention of the ethnic past, with sacred ties to a homeland. Such "demotic" nations may emerge beside the earlier "nation-states" but also inside and against them, among the subject populations of an aristocratic *ethnie*.

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

The case of the Kurds, however, is a little more complex. Until the beginnings of the present century, the Kurds and the other peoples of the region were the subjects of the Ottoman military and bureaucratic elite, who constituted a sort of aristocratic-lateral *ethnie* (characterized by the Ottoman language, the state variety of Sunni Islam, and a particular Ottoman *ethos*), although many of its members originated from various demotic *ethnies*. The Kemalist elite of Turkey was in most relevant respects the successor of this Ottoman elite; in spite of its Turkish nationalist and populist ideology it remained just as distant from the tribes and the peasantry.<sup>27</sup> This elite fostered a reinvented Turkish culture, with which the Turks of the villages, let alone the Kurds, initially had little affinity. Its deliberate efforts at nation-building, however, through the forced assimilation of especially the Kurds and the suppression of traditional religious styles, as well as by the more benign means of mass education, general conscription into the army and the use of modern mass media, were largely successful. The gentler methods of "bureaucratic incorporation" practised in Iraq during the mandate and under Hashemite rule also resulted in a distinct Iraqi national identity, and the same was true, *mutatis mutandis*, of Iran under the Pahlavi shahs.

By the beginning of this century, the Kurds themselves, as was seen in the preceding section, were more like an aristocratic-lateral *ethnie* than a demotic-vertical one. After the Armenian deportations and massacres of 1915, and the final expulsion of Armenians from north-eastern Turkey in the immediate postwar years, there remained very few Christians in eastern Turkey. The Muslim-Christian boundary thus became irrelevant; the Kemalist policy of secularisation affected other ethnic boundaries as well. It loosened the bond between Turks and Kurds, which had been based on their common religion, and it decreased the distance between Sunnis and Alevites. Social mobility and urbanisation also began to blur the distinction between tribal and non-tribal people.

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<sup>27</sup> Many insightful observations on this subject are to be found in Serif Mardin, "Center-Periphery Relations: A Key to Turkish Politics?", *Daedalus* 102 (1973), 169-190.

The Kurdish nationalist intelligentsia, although of elite backgrounds, began idealising the Kurdish peasantry and adopted the term for non-tribal Muslims, *kurmanç*, as an ethnic name. We thus see a process of gradual incorporation of the subject peasantry into the dominant *ethnie*. Another aspect of this process, the conversion of Armenians and other Christians to Islam and their adoption of Kurdish or Zaza language and culture, had in fact begun much earlier.

Two processes of incorporation, involving the same peasant, lower-class urban and marginal tribal populations, were at work simultaneously: incorporation into the emerging Turkish (or Iraqi, or Iranian) nation-state and incorporation into the Kurdish *ethnie* (which by the 1920s and 1930s cannot yet be called a nation because it lacked integrating structures). The peasantry was late in actively opting for an identity, but among the Alevi tribes of Turkey there was in the 1920s a lively debate on which identity to choose, Kurdish or Turkish. Some of their chieftains threw in their lot with the Kurdish nationalists,<sup>28</sup> some opted for the secular state against their long-time hostile Sunni Kurdish neighbours and declared themselves to be "real Turks",<sup>29</sup> and many others went on considering Alevism as their only relevant identity. The Yezidis, Kaka'is and other similar communities in Iraq faced analogous choices, although they were not subject to great pressure to declare themselves Arabs before the Ba`th party came to power.<sup>30</sup>

For several decades, the process of nation-building in Turkey, Iraq and Iran continued quite successfully, without however being capable of preventing the gradual incorporation of peripheral groups into the Kurdish *ethnie*. Kurdish identity, however, especially in Turkey, remained subordinate to the state-based national identity until the late 1960s and 1970s, when we see the emergence of Kurdish nationalist mass movements. This resurgence of Kurdish nationalism resembled the "ethnic revival" in Europe's nation-states; it had more than a few things in common

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<sup>28</sup> Thus some chieftains of the large Alevi tribe Koçgiri of western Dersim (presently the Zara district of Sivas province), in 1920 and 1921 wrote letters to the Kemalist National Assembly demanding autonomy on the ground that they were Kurds. This ended in the first Kurdish rebellion against the new regime. See M. Nuri Dersimi, *Kürdistan tarihinde Dersim* (Halep: Ani Matbaasi, 1952), p. 129; Hans-Lukas Kieser, *Les Kurdes alévis face au nationalisme turc kémaliste. L'alévité du Dersim et son rôle dans le premier soulèvement kurde contre Mustafa Kemal (Koçgiri, 1919-1921)* (Amsterdam: MERA, 1993), p. 5.

<sup>29</sup> For instance the Alevi tribes Khormek and Lolan of the Varto district, which actively fought against Shaikh Sa`id's Kurdish (and Sunni Muslim) rebellion in 1925. The Khormek chieftains' view of the events, with their assertion of having real Turkish origins, are given in: M. Şerif Fırat, *Doğu illeri ve Varto tarihi* (Ankara, 1945 and numerous reprints).

<sup>30</sup> In 1987, on the eve of the genocidal *Anfal* campaign, the Iraqi Ba`th regime carried out a national census in which everyone had to indicate whether he/she was a Kurd or an Arab, the only two self-definitions permitted. The Yezidis and many Assyrian Christians chose to be Kurds; Middle East Watch believes that this "betrayal of the Arab nation" was the reason for the mass extermination of Yezidis and Assyrians who gave themselves up to the Iraqi army in the aftermath of the *Anfal* campaign. See Middle East Watch, *Genocide in Iraq: The Anfal Campaign against the Kurds* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1994), pp. 312-7.

with the Basque and Catalan movements in Spain (although the latter movements emerged in relatively privileged parts of Spain, whereas Kurdistan was a disadvantaged region). The new Kurdish movement, most clearly so in Turkey, was spawned by the twin processes of mass education and urbanisation. It was born in the large cities, where Kurdish students and intellectuals, and later labour migrants, became more aware of being different from the dominant *ethnie* and of a certain discrimination against them.

The Kurdish movement of the 1960s and 1970s gives the impression that successful ethnic incorporation had taken place: among the leaders and the rank-and-file we find in Turkey both Sunnis and Alevis, Kurdish and Zaza speakers as well as monolingual Turkish speakers of Kurdish descent. In the Iraqi Kurdish movement we find not only speakers of all Kurdish and various Gurani dialects, Yezidis and Shi`is as well as Sunni Muslims, but also Assyrians (sometimes called "Kurdish Christians", a concept that would have been unthinkable a few decades earlier), and even some Arabic-speaking Faylis.<sup>31</sup> This does not mean that support for the movement or even for the idea of a Kurdish nation was general. In Iraq, the number of so-called *jahsh*, Kurds who could be mobilised by the central government to fight against the Kurdish movement, remained in the same order of magnitude as that of the *peshmerge*, the guerrilla fighters. Certain tribes became *jahsh* because their chieftains distrusted the Kurdish politicians, others because their long-time rivals had become *peshmerge*, and many others worked for the government out of fear or greed. However, the division between supporters and opponents of the Kurdish movement did not follow any of the aforementioned linguistic and religious dividing lines.

### *The resurgence of intra-Kurdish ethnicity*

In the course of the 1980s, as said before, the processes of incorporation into one large Kurdish *ethnie* began to be countered by the resurgence of less inclusive ethnic identities. Again a comparison with the emergence of Catalan nationalism in Spain may be enlightening, with the difference that the Kurdish *ethnie* this time around found itself in the position of the Spanish. The emergence of these centrifugal forces was to some extent due to the very successes of the Kurdish nationalist movement in fostering a national awareness and building up the infrastructure of a

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<sup>31</sup> The Faylis are a large and prosperous Shi`i community of west Iranian descent, most of whom lived in Baghdad and other major cities of western central Iraq. There is a Fayli dialect, related to southern Kurdish and Luri, but many Faylis only know Arabic. Most Faylis have no Iraqi citizenship, although they have lived in Iraq for generations. In the 1970s and 1980s, over a 100,000 Faylis were expelled to Iran. See Monir Morad, "Kurdish Ethnic Identity in Iraq", in: Turaj Atabaki and Margreet Dorleijn (eds), *Kurdistan in Search of Ethnic Identity* (Utrecht: Houtsma Foundation, 1990), 70-8; and Ali Babakhan, *Les Kurdes d'Irak: Leur histoire et leur déportation par le régime de Saddam Hussein* (N.p., 1994). By the mid-1970s, several Faylis held leading positions in the Iraqi Kurdish movement, and rich Faylis made significant contributions to financing the movement.



Kurdish nation. At least two different forms of this "ethnic resurgence" may be observed: a regional-linguistic particularism ("Badinan" versus "Sorani") in Iraqi Kurdistan, and separatist tendencies among the minority language and religious communities (Zaza and Alevi) in Turkey.

An awareness of the vast economic and cultural differences between the Kurmanci-speaking northern part of Iraqi Kurdistan ("Badinan") and the Sorani-speaking south is in itself nothing new. It has been a major cause of frictions within the Iraqi Kurdish movement at least from the early 1960s on. Badinan is economically backward and strongly dominated by tribes, the southern districts are more urbanised and score much higher in education and economic development, which makes the role of the tribes less prominent. It was the Sorani Kurdish dialect that acquired official status in Iraq and was fostered as a literary language and a medium of education, while Kurmanci was neglected and the teaching language in Badinan was Arabic or Sorani.

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

The movement that re-emerged in the following years has been characterised by fierce rivalry between leaders with localised power bases. Chief among them were Jalal Talabani, who found his strongest support in the Sulaimania region, and Barzani's sons Idris and Mas'ud, whose primary power base, like their father's, consisted of the tribes of Badinan. Talabani, himself born in Koi Sanjaq, had been a member of the old KDP politburo and in 1975 founded the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), whereas the Barzani brothers reconstituted their father's KDP. The other Kurdish leaders most of the time allied themselves with one or the other of these two, sometimes shifting their allegiances. Whatever else changed during the 1980s, the polarisation of the movement between Talabani and the Barzanis remained a constant. This was perhaps in part precisely because these leaders more than others exemplified "Sorani" and "Badinan", and the stereotyped conceptions that those regions had of themselves and of one another.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> This does not mean that these leaders enjoyed the support of the entire population, or even a majority, in their respective regions. The Sulaimania region, from which most PUK leaders hail, and where this party has its strongest support, is but a part of the Sorani-speaking zone. Even in this region, support for the KDP is not negligible. The region of Erbil, which also is Sorani-speaking, long constituted a buffer zone between Sulaimania and Badinan, where both parties had influence but which neither could control. The PUK used to have some support in Badinan too but this appears to have dwindled recently.

The continuing power struggle between these leaders, culminating in an almost suicidal war in the spring and summer of 1994, did much to exacerbate the relations between the two regions. There were primordial reactions on both sides, although it is hard to ascertain how widespread these feelings are. Political leaders in the Sulaimania region are known to have agitated against the alleged danger of domination by the Badinanis (who in the present geopolitical constellation control the supply lines of the southern region). In Badinan, on the other hand, political resentment against Talabani and the PUK tends to be translated into a negative attitude towards all of Sulaimania or even "the Soran" in general. There is a feeling among some people in Badinan — again, it is not clear by how many it is shared — that the region had better take care of its own interests rather than make sacrifices for the whole Kurdish region.

The recently emerging Zaza and Alevi nationalisms in Turkey are part of a different dialectical relationship with the development of Kurdish nationalism. The same process of urbanisation and migration that gave rise to a modern Kurdish awareness in the large cities also brought Alevi villagers (Turkish as well as Kurdish or Zaza speakers) to the Sunni towns of the region and into direct competition for scarce resources with their new Sunni neighbours. The political polarization of the 1970s aggravated Sunni-Alevi antagonism as rightist and leftist radicals chose these communities as their recruiting grounds and contributed much to the mutual denomination ("fascist" Sunnis versus "communist" Alevis). A series of bloody Sunni-Alevi clashes, perhaps better called anti-Alevi pogroms, did much to strengthen a common Alevi awareness.<sup>33</sup> In the region where these clashes took place, it did not matter much whether one was a Kurd or a Turk, one's primary identity was the religious one. There were Turks and Kurds on both sides of this divide - which gave rise to such surprising phenomena as Sunni Kurds supporting the pan-Turkist Nationalist Action Party and young Turkish-speaking Alevis declaring themselves to be Kurds.

The 1980s witnessed a veritable cultural and religious revival of Alevism, beginning among the Turkish and Kurdish immigrant communities in western Europe. Activists of various persuasions - leftist, Sunni Muslim, fascist, Kurdish nationalist - had earlier made some attempts to organize these communities, but the 1980 military coup in Turkey represents a real watershed. Unprecedented numbers of experienced organisers came as refugees to western Europe. The most successful among them were radical Sunni Muslim groups and Kurdish nationalists, among whom the PKK gradually became dominant. The Turkish regime meanwhile attempted to regain some control of the immigrant communities by taking over the major mosque federations and sponsoring an ultra-conservative and nationalist brand of Sunni Islam known as the "Turkish-Islamic synthesis".

It was probably as a reaction to, and in part in imitation of, increased Sunni religious activities

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<sup>33</sup> On the clashes, see: Ömer Laçiner, "Der Konflikt zwischen Sunniten und Aleviten in der Türkei", in: Jochen Blaschke & Martin van Bruinessen (eds), *Islam und Politik in der Türkei* (Berlin: Parabolis, 1989), pp. 233-54.

in Germany that Alevi also began organising, after long having kept a low profile or even hidden their religious affiliation. For the first time, large Alevi religious ceremonies were held in public (in republican Turkey these ceremonies were officially banned and could at best be held semi-clandestinely). Alevi associations were established, and these attracted many young Alevi who previously had been prominent in various leftist or Kurdish organisations. A few of the smaller leftist organisations were entirely Alevi in membership; these too now tended to emphasise their Alevi identity in combination with their marxism-leninism, and to think of the Alevi as a sort of nation, to the extent of speaking of Alevistan as their homeland.<sup>34</sup> These activities abroad stimulated an Alevi revival in Turkey too, where the gradual political liberalisation made the establishment of religious and social Alevi associations possible.

In the late 1980s, the Turkish government began making conciliatory gestures towards the Alevi, and granting Alevism a certain formal recognition, in a transparent effort to neutralise the community's alienation from the state and to prevent the radical Kurdish movement PKK from making further inroads among the Kurdish (and Zaza) Alevi. In fact, the one region where the PKK has had great difficulties in establishing itself, and where it always has had to compete with other radical political movements, was Dersim (i.e., the present province of Tunceli and neighbouring districts), which is largely Zaza-speaking and Alevi. The people of Dersim had, at least since the 1960s, always been more inclined towards left radicalism than Kurdish nationalism. The PKK, which initially had been militantly anti-religious, had in the late 1980s moreover adopted a conciliatory attitude towards Sunni Islam, in a successful attempt to gain more grassroots support in the Sunni region. This obviously did not contribute to its popularity among the Alevi, and it may even have strengthened Alevi particularism. A wave of purges in PKK ranks in the early 1990s, in which a popular Dersim Alevi disappeared, gave further food to Alevi suspicions of the PKK's intentions (although most of those purged were not Alevi!). The renewed emphasis on Alevism as one's primary identity, with an increasing awareness of the religious dimension of that identity, is largely a reaction to the emergence of Sunni fundamentalism and inclusive Kurdish nationalism. In the perception of the PKK, on the other hand, the entire Alevi revival was directly engineered by the state in order to sow division among the Kurds, and its protagonists were all agents.

There has always existed a distinct Alevi awareness, although sometimes submerged under other ethnic loyalties. The present Zaza nationalism, however, is something entirely new, and it is still

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<sup>34</sup> I first encountered the name Alevistan in the Turkish newspaper *Hürriyet* in 1976, in a report on subversive activities in Germany. Maoist enemies of the state allegedly conspired to divide Turkey into Kurdistan in the east, Alevistan in the centre, and a Sunni Turkish remnant in the west. In the 1980s there was an ephemeral ultra-left organisation in Germany, *Kızıl Yol*, that similarly proclaimed its intention to liberate Alevistan. Many Kurdish nationalists and leftists of other persuasions suspected that these were machinations by the Turkish intelligence services, designed to provoke a Sunni and Turkish nationalist reaction.

forcefully opposed by numerous Zaza-speakers who stick to their self-definition as Kurds. For the conditions of its emergence we shall again have to look to the migrant communities in Western Europe rather than to Turkey (unless one subscribes to the popular conspiracy theory that blames it all on the Turkish intelligence services).

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

A related issue that contained the seeds of conflict was the language to be used in Kurdish journals published in Turkey and especially in European exile. Several journals appeared during the 1960s and 1970s, and most of them were exclusively in Turkish, with at the most an occasional poem in Kurdish.<sup>35</sup> The first periodical that completely avoided Turkish was the short-lived cultural magazine *Tirêj*, published in Izmir. This was also the first significant modern Kurdish journal to have a small section in Zaza.<sup>36</sup> After the 1980 military coup, Kurdish publishing activities no longer were possible in Turkey, but writers and journalist carried on in European exile, especially in Sweden. A true revival of Kurmanci literature took place here. Children's books, collections of folk tales, and the first novels were published, and a whole range of journals appeared.

The Iranian revolution and the Iraq-Iran war also brought large numbers of intellectuals from the other parts of Kurdistan as refugees to Europe. For the first time since the early twentieth century, there were common Kurdish cultural activities on a significant scale. In Paris a Kurdish Institute was established, the first significant all-Kurdish institution, with an important library and various periodical publications. The old dream of a common standard language resurfaced, but

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<sup>35</sup> The most complete survey of periodicals published by and for Kurds in Turkey is: Malmîsanij & Mahmûd Lewendî, *Li Kurdistana Bakûr û li Tirkiyê rojnamegeriya Kurdî (1908-1992)* (Ankara: Öz-Ge, 1992). It lists 65 periodicals published between 1960 and 1980, many of them appearing semi- or illegally.

<sup>36</sup> Only three issues of *Tirêj* could appear in Turkey in 1979 and 1980. A fourth and final issue was published in Sweden. There was in fact one earlier journal that published a few brief pieces - a song text, a folktale and a word-list - in Zaza. This was the short-lived *Roja Newê*, the first and only issue of which appeared in Istanbul in 1963 (see Malmîsanij & Lewendî, *Rojnamegeriya Kurdî*, pp. 159-61).

since neither Kurmanci nor Sorani-speakers were likely to make concessions to the other, journals targeting readers from all parts of Kurdistan had sections in both Kurmanci and Sorani. The literary magazine published by the Kurdish Institute then decided to add a section in Zaza, as the third relevant Kurdish language.<sup>37</sup> This led to strong negative reactions from certain nationalist intellectual circles, which for political reasons fiercely opposed linguistic fragmentation. Some of them strove for a synthetic unified Kurdish language, others believed they could put up with two written Kurdish languages, but agreed that developing Zaza, which previously hardly had any written tradition, as another written language amounted to sowing division among the Kurdish nation.

The debate on the development of, or ban on, written Zaza made a strong impact in the small circle of Zaza intellectuals in exile, causing a parting of the minds among them. In the late 1980s, the first Zaza journal was published, and it was emphatically non-Kurdish. It carried articles in Zaza, Turkish and English but not in Kurdish, it spoke of the Zazas as a separate people, whose identity had too long been denied not only by the Turkish state but by the Kurds as well, and it coined the new name of Zazaistan for the ancient homeland of these Zazas, indicating its rejection of the term Kurdistan as a geographical name.<sup>38</sup> The journal at first had only a very small circle of readers, but the many angry Kurdish reactions suggested that the journal did have a point after all, and gradually growing numbers of Zazas were won over to its views. There appears not to be an organised Zaza nationalist movement yet, but the publishing activities go on increasing, with two new journals appearing in Europe and recently a series of booklets in Turkey, all of them proclaiming the Zazas to be different from the Kurds.<sup>39</sup>

### *Which identity next?*

It will be clear by now that in my view the questions whether the Kurds constitute a nation and who is included in that nation cannot be answered objectively. Every possible answer to these

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<sup>37</sup> This magazine, *Hêvî / Hîwa*, began publication in 1983. Its Zaza section appeared under the responsibility of Malmîsanij, who had also written the Zaza contributions in *Tirêj*, and was later also to contribute Zaza material to various other journals. While continuing his efforts to preserve Zaza oral tradition and to win more respect for Zaza culture, Malmisanij was to firmly oppose Zaza separatism when this emerged.

<sup>38</sup> *Ayre*, and its successor *Piya*, was published as a monthly in Sweden from 1987 on. The editor, Ebubekir Pamukçu, had not previously been involved in Kurdish cultural or political activities. His most substantial contribution to the journal, an analysis of the Dersim rebellion from a Zaza nationalist point of view, later appeared as a book in Turkey: *Dersim Zaza ayaklanmasının tarihsel kökenleri* (Istanbul: Yön, 1992).

<sup>39</sup> The most substantial of these booklets is Zilfi Selcan, *Zaza milli meselesi hakkında* (Ankara: Zaza Kültürü Yayınları, 1994). Presently the most important Zaza journals are *Desmala Sure* and *Ware* (both published in Germany).

questions constitutes a political program. There is no inevitable and irreversible evolution to nationhood; economic integration and improved communications do not necessarily lead to the fading away of ethnic differences but may well have the reverse effect.<sup>40</sup> This observation is true of states attempting to weld their citizens into a single nation, it is equally true of non-state nationalist movements.

Unprecedented geographical and social mobility have made each person's identity a matter over which he has a certain freedom of choice. In extraordinary circumstances, one may make efforts to change one's ethnic identity altogether, as did those Armenians who converted to Islam and became Kurds in the late 19th or early 20th centuries. More commonly, a person may, out of his various overlapping identities, stress now one, then another. Which identity, among the alternatives available, a person chooses to emphasise will depend much on political and economic circumstances. In the present century large numbers of Kurds have, under political or economic pressure, assimilated themselves to the dominant ethnic groups of their countries, but this process too has proved not to be irreversible. Many of their children or grandchildren have "rediscovered" their Kurdish origins. Presently, there is some economic pressure on Iraqi Kurds to formally declare themselves Turcomans in order to qualify for relief aid supplied by Turkey.<sup>41</sup>

Perhaps the most fascinating example of overlapping and shifting identities is provided by Dersim, on whose inhabitants (mostly Zaza-speaking Alevi) various "nationalisms" are simultaneously exerting their pull. As citizens of Turkey, the Dersimis are considered as Turks and expected to adhere to the Kemalist nationalist ideology; according to official doctrine, they are real Turks of Central Asian origins.<sup>42</sup> To Kurdish nationalists, Dersim is a part of Kurdistan and the Dersim rebellion was the last of the great Kurdish rebellions. Many Dersimis identify themselves in the first place as Alevi, although the call for an independent or autonomous Alevistan appears unlikely to find many active supporters. The newly imagined homeland of Zazaistan, too, is unlikely to exert a strong attraction except among romantic intellectuals in exile, but the Zaza cultural revival, and a certain irritation with Kurmanci cultural arrogance, appear to be causing a growing insistence on Zaza identity. Finally there is a strong Dersimi particularism, based on an awareness of Dersim's distinct history and cultural identity. It is expressed in an

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<sup>40</sup> See Walker Connor's devastating critique of the notion of nation-building that was long current among American political scientists writing on the Third World: "Nation-building or Nation-destroying?", *World Politics* 24 (1972), 319-55.

<sup>41</sup> A Turkish-sponsored organisation, the IMTP, claiming to represent "two-and-a-half million Iraqi Turks" is making efforts to convince especially culturally marginal groups such as the Kaka'i and other heterodox sects of their Turkish identity and offers liberal support to those who make a formal pledge of Turkishness. I owe this information to Michiel Leezenberg.

<sup>42</sup> This thesis is put forward in numerous books, most "authoritatively" in: Edip Yavuz, *Tarih boyunca Türk kavimleri* (Ankara: Kurtulus Matbaasi, 1968), which has become the standard reference for later Turkish authors.

unwillingness to belong to any larger entity, and since the 1980s in a growing distrust also of the various political movements in which Dersimis in the past had played such leading roles.

Every individual from Dersim feels the pull of these various nationalisms; there is not one among them that is more "natural" and therefore more likely to succeed in the long run than the others. The list of possible identities is not exhausted yet. There have recently been efforts to draw the Alevi into the mainstream of Turkish Islam, and the Islamic Refah (Welfare) Party has courted Alevi voters with promises of equal recognition. In the 1994 municipal elections, it even fielded a local Alevi as its candidate in Tunceli (the candidate stepped down before the elections, however).

The Kurdish political organisation that has shown the greatest sensitivity to ethnic subdivisions among the Kurds, if only in order to forestall potential separatist tendencies within the Kurdish movement, is the PKK. At the time when the other Kurdish organisations gradually switched from Turkish to Kurdish in their publications and internal communications, the PKK went on expressing itself almost exclusively in Turkish. This probably was a deliberate policy, in order to minimise the distance between Kurmanci-speakers, Zaza-speakers and assimilated Kurds. By the mid-1980s the party recognised that Islam still exerts a strong grip on rural Kurdish society, and it adopted a more respectful attitude towards Sunni Islam. The party also addressed Zaza-speakers and Alevi, recognising and even sponsoring their distinct cultures but telling them in no uncertain terms that they too were Kurds and were expected to act accordingly.<sup>43</sup>

For years, as said before, the PKK failed to gain a firm foothold in Dersim. It had a fair number of Dersimis in its ranks, but most of the population remained rather lukewarm towards Kurdish nationalism. The PKK's flirt with Sunni Islam made many Dersimis doubly suspicious of this party. The general Alevi revival also affected Dersim, although many Dersimis remained suspicious of the government's overtures towards the Alevi community. It appears that the PKK decided to force Dersim to choose whether it would be Kurdish or not by further alienating it from the state, in the way it had earlier imposed this choice on regions further east. In the late summer and autumn of 1994, the party dramatically intensified its guerrilla activities in Dersim, thereby deliberately provoking a new wave of Turkish military repression, which proved to be of unprecedented severity.<sup>44</sup> The population of entire districts fled in panic, the army set fire to the forests and burned dozens of villages down. Both the PKK and the Turkish authorities appear to operate on the realistic assumption that ethnic identities are adopted or discarded in response to

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<sup>43</sup> A PKK periodical addressed to Alevi, *Zülfikar* (after the name of Ali's fabled sword), has as its motto "who denies his origins is a bastard" (*aslini inkar eden haramzadedir*).

<sup>44</sup> Netherlands Society Kurdistan, *Forced Evictions and Destruction of Villages in Dersim (Tunceli) and the Western Part of Bingöl, Turkish Kurdistan, September-November 1994* (Amsterdam: SNK, 1995).

strong pressures. It seems unlikely, however, that even this amount of pressure will result in a less ambivalent identity of the Dersimis.