Martin van Bruinessen,

'Kurds and the City',

in: Hamit Bozarslan and Clémence Scalbert-Yücel (eds),

Joyce Blau, l'éternelle chez les Kurdes,

Paris: Institut Kurde de Paris, 2013, pp. 273-95.

Kurds and the City

Martin van Bruinessen

In September 1996, Joyce Blau, Bernard Hourcade and I convened a conference on the place of the city in Kurdish history and society. With over thirty participants from more than fifteen different countries, including speakers from the former Soviet republics in Transcaucasia and Central Asia, this was an exciting and memorable event. Unfortunately, we were during the subsequent years all but overwhelmed by other obligations that demanded our attention, so that we never managed to publish proceedings of the conference.[1] I am aware that Joyce has always regretted this, and in compensation I am offering here some further reflections on the subject.

My personal interest in questioning the relationship between Kurds and cities was caused by some uneasiness with my own previous work on the Kurds. I had written my dissertation about tribes and Sufi orders as major patterns of social organization of Kurdish society, and about the interaction between these social formations and the state.[2] My focus had been entirely on rural society, and I had privileged nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes as representative of Kurdish society in general. In my Dutch summary of the dissertation, I had initially described the Kurds as 'a pastoral nomadic people' and had corrected myself by

[1] For a brief overview of the conference, see Michiel Leezenberg, 'The Kurds and the City', *The Journal of Kurdish Studies* II, 1996-1997, 57-62, which is followed by a summary of Tanja Dunker's contribution, 'La ville dans la littérature kurmanji moderne', ibid., 63-64. For a complete list of the presented papers, see 'Konferanseke navnetweyî Kurd û Bajar (The Kurds and the City)', *Çira* 7, 1996, 91-2. This issue also contains the text of Rohat Alakom's conference paper on the Kurdish porters (*hammal*) of Istanbul: 'Yên ku qehir û barê dinê kişandine: cimaeta hemalên Kurd li Constantînopelê', *Çira* 7, 3-21.

[2] Maarten Martinus van Bruinessen, 'Agha, shaikh and state. On the social and political organization of Kurdistan', Utrecht: Ph.D. dissertation, 1978 (online at www.hum.uu.nl/medewerkers/m.vanbruinessen/publications/Bruinessen_Agha_Shaikh_and_State_1978.htm. An abridged and updated version was later published as *Agha, shaikh and state: the social and political structures of Kurdistan*, London: Zed Books, 1992 (online at bnk.institutkurde.org/catalogue/detail.php?pirtuk=680.)

calling them ‘a Muslim people consisting largely of peasants.’ It is true that I had looked for, and found, Kurdish nomads and peasants, but most of my Kurdish friends were in fact neither nomads nor peasants but educated townsmen. My first conscious encounter with a Kurd had been in the city of Baghdad in 1967 (the man had impressed me by casually remarking ‘I am a Kurd, and my relatives are in the mountain, fighting the government’), and much later I realized that there were many Kurds living in that city. My interest in Kurdish culture and history was awakened through a stay in Mahabad in 1970, and a schoolteacher whom I befriended there then, Aziz Mawarani, was to help me later when I began my anthropological research in Kurdistan. It was Kurdish schoolteachers and students, rather than peasants, who helped me as research assistants during my fieldwork. Like me, they also envisioned Kurdish society as existing of villages and mountain pastures, though they spent a considerable part of their lives in towns and cities. I spent, in fact, a fair amount of time in towns and cities during my first two years of fieldwork in Kurdistan, but the urban dimension of Kurdish society remained under-analysed in my dissertation.

I was aware, of course, that modern Kurdish nationalism was not born among nomads and villagers but among educated Kurds in such places as Istanbul, where the first formal Kurdish associations were established in the early twentieth century. I also knew that in the uprisings of Shaykh Mahmud Barzinji and Shaykh Sa`id in the 1920s, parts of the urban populations of Sulaymani and Diyarbekir had been involved, and that these cities have remained intellectual centres of the Kurdish movement throughout the century. Yet it did not occur to me to discuss the city as an important structural element of Kurdish society.

Having heard that the seventeenth-century Turkish traveller Evliya Çelebi wrote extensively about the Kurds, and wishing to put my anthropological work in a more historical perspective, I learned Ottoman Turkish and began reading his Book of Travels, the *Seyahatname*. Together with a small group of friends, I published a book about Evliya’s stay in Diyarbekir, in which I tried to review what Evliya and other sources of his time taught us about the various ethnic groups of the city and province of Diyarbekir. Evliya and other Ottoman sources, as well as Western travellers, do distinguish various non-Muslim communities but usually lump Muslim ethnic groups together as ‘Muslims’ or ‘the townspeople’ (*şehir halkı*). I found very few clear references to Kurdish inhabitants of the city, and could only assume, but not prove, that at

least some of the Muslims whom Evliya met in Diyarbekir may have been Kurds.[3] None of the other travellers passing through the city before the twentieth century referred to its population as Kurdish.

In Ottoman studies and in Orientalism in general, it has been usual to describe society as consisting of three distinctly different elements, each with its own internal organization and dynamics: (nomadic) tribe, village and city. From the point of view of rural society, the city is an alien element that usurps its surplus in the form of taxes and trade. It is the seat of a military garrison and administrative bureaucracy, a centre of trade and crafts, where agricultural products are exchanged for other goods or money, as well as a centre of religious orthodoxy. The citadel, the bazaar and the *medrese* and *shari`a* court as institutions in cities such as Diyarbekir were external to the communities of Kurdish nomads and peasants in the countryside, although there were some interactions and although individual Kurds may have come to play a role in them.

Kurds, Islam, city

A good starting point for rethinking the relation of Kurds and cities is perhaps the seemingly naïve question that was asked during the conference by someone in the audience: what are the characteristic traits of the Kurdish city? The questioner was Yalçın Küçük, not a naïve man in such matters,[4] and I assumed what he really wanted to ask was, whether it makes sense at all

[3] Martin van Bruinessen & Hendrik Boeschoten (eds), *Evliya Çelebi in Diyarbekir*, Leiden: Brill, 1988. The introductory essays of this book, on the city and population of Diyarbekir, are available online at: www.hum.uu.nl/medewerkers/m.vanbruinessen/publications/Bruinessen_Boeschoten_Evliya_in_Diyarbekir.htm . The American turcologist Robert Dankoff later published in the same series Evliya's rich narrative of his stay in Bitlis: Robert Dankoff (ed.), *Evliya Çelebi in Bitlis*, Leiden: Brill, 1990. In Bitlis, Evliya speaks more explicitly of Kurds in the city, the Rojiki tribe, leading an earlier scholar to speak of 'the Kurdish city of Bitlis': Wilhelm Köhler, 'Die Kurdenstadt Bitlîs nach dem türkischen Reisewerk des Ewlijâ Tschelebî (17. Jahrhundert)', Dissertation, München: 1928. See also Martin van Bruinessen, 'Kurdistan in the 16th and 17th centuries, as reflected in Evliya Çelebi's Seyahatname', *Journal of Kurdish Studies* 3, 2000, 1-11 (online at: www.hum.uu.nl/medewerkers/m.vanbruinessen/publications/Evliya_Celebi_Kurdistan.htm).

[4] Yalçın Küçük is a well-known maverick intellectual on the Turkish left, the author of fascinating multi-volume collections of essays titled *Aydın üzerine tezler, 1830-1980* [Theses on intellectuals, from 1830 to 1980] and *Türkiye üzerine tezler, 1908-1978* [Theses on Turkey], who had since 1990 been writing especially on the Kurdish question, starting with his *Kürtler üzerine tezler* [Theses on the Kurds] (Ankara: Dönem, 1990) and

to speak of the 'Kurdish city.' We had deliberately avoided that expression and been speaking of 'Kurds and the city' or 'Kurds in the city,' and of 'cities in Kurdistan,' but Küçük's question provoked a brief discussion on the issue of what could make a city Kurdish. The attempt to define the Kurdish city was inevitably due to give rise to similar essentialist responses as had earlier emerged in debates about the 'Islamic city.'[5] And sure enough, another person in the audience (representing the Islamic movement of Kurdistan) suggested that the Kurdish city is characterized by the ordering of space in response to the needs of Islamic worship, ritual purity and charity. Because Kurds are Muslims, he argued, Kurdish cities are structured by Islamic prescriptions.

No doubt the presence of a centrally located Friday mosque, surrounded by a large market (*suq*), as well as secondary mosques in residential neighbourhoods, makes for a certain recognizability of cities throughout the Middle East and perhaps the Muslim world at large, but this obviously does not distinguish Kurdish cities from other cities in the region. Moreover, there is no significant structural difference with predominantly Christian cities in the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern region, where churches perform much the same function.

One area where Islam has had (and continues to have) a distinctive impact on the physical and social structure of the city is that of gender segregation. Women were usually absent from the business and administrative centre of the city, and the (Muslim) residential neighbourhoods were based on a clear separation of public and private spheres. Visiting Diyarbekir in 1655, Evliya Çelebi noted that its people were staunch Muslims and their womenfolk chaste and

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continuing with two books of interviews with Öcalan. In later years, Küçük was to move away from his sympathies with the Kurdish movement and adopt increasingly nationalistic and xenophobic positions.

[5] The Orientalist idea that Islam imposed a specific structure (or rather, lack of structure) on Muslim cities found its most highly developed expression in Gustav von Grunebaum's well-known article 'The structure of the Muslim town', in his book *Islam: essays in the nature and growth of a cultural tradition*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961, pp. 141-58. The first serious debates and criticism of the idea of the Islamic city are found in: Albert H. Hourani and Samuel M. Stern (eds), *The Islamic city*, Oxford: Cassirer, 1970. For critical surveys of the debate see: Dale F. Eickelman, 'Is there an Islamic city? The making of a quarter in a Moroccan town', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 5, 1974, 274-294; Janet L. Abu-Lughod, 'The Islamic city: historic myth, Islamic essence, and contemporary relevance', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 19(2), 1987, 155-76; and André Raymond, 'Islamic city, Arab city: Orientalist myths and recent views', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 21(1), 1994, 3-18.

devout; not even old women would come out to the bazaar, and if a young girl would show herself in public she would likely be killed or her father punished.[6] Furthermore, certain urban institutions such as the position of the *muhtasib*, the inspector in charge of *hisba*, the maintenance of moral order, were based on Islamic prescriptions. But Middle Eastern cities are shaped by numerous environmental, economic, social and cultural factors; Islam is only one among those factors and by no means the defining one.

Would it nonetheless make sense to speak of a Kurdish city in more than the very loose sense in which we can say, for instance, 'Kermanshah is the largest Kurdish city of Iran,' or list Arbil, Bitlis, Diyarbekir and, more controversially, Kirkuk as Kurdish cities? In this loose sense, cities are called Kurdish because Kurds live there (besides various other ethnic groups) and perhaps also because these cities have played a part in Kurdish history. But are these cities also Kurdish in the sense that they embody a Kurdish urban culture and show up, for instance, a distinctive Kurdish architecture?

City and civilization

A directly related question concerns the existence of a Kurdish civilization, a concept that is at least etymologically connected to the city and civility.[7] Ziya Gökalp, the sociologist and ideologist of Turkish nationalism, famously distinguished between *hars* (culture), the vernacular cultures of ethnic groups, and *medeniyet* (civilization), the more sophisticated, urban-based system of concepts, rules and institutions through which the various vernacular groups could communicate with each other. Gökalp associated *hars* with positive values and feelings, such as social solidarity as well as ethno-national identity but deplored that the Ottoman *medeniyet* and its bearers, the urban elite, were morally weak and lacking in ethno-national (*millî*) values. His ideal was a new fusion of vigorous Turkish culture with modern European, rather than the decadent Ottoman civilization.

[6] In Evliya's words: '*Çarşu-yı bazarda bir fertute pirezen dahi yokdur. Suk-ı sultanide bir bint-i sağire görseler katl ederler yahud pederini te'dib ederler*' (Bruinessen & Boeschoten, *Evliya Çelebi in Diyarbekir*, pp. 182-3).

[7] This became a hotly debated issue in February 2012, when Turkey's deputy prime minister Bülent Arınç, one of the three most powerful politicians of the ruling AK Party, remarked that there was no good reason to make Kurdish a language of instruction in school because it was not a 'civilization language' (*medeniyet dili*).

Gökalp also made some pertinent observations on the relationship between the Kurds and the cities of the region. In his sociological studies of the tribes around his native Diyarbekir, he observed that Kurds who migrated to the city adopted Turkish as their language, whereas many Turkmen tribes in the region had become Kurdicized under the influence of their more numerous Kurdish neighbours, and he coined a new term to describe this process, *istimlal* (glossed as 'dénationalisation' or assimilation).[8] The cities of a vast region (which he calls Cenup, 'South,' and which more or less coincides with Kurdistan) are all Turkish-speaking, he insists, and the countryside is overwhelmingly Kurdish.[9]

Gökalp thus appears to deny that there was in his day a Kurdish urban culture, although there were city-dwellers (*şehrî*) of Kurdish origin. He does not say explicitly whether he considers that these people have all lost their Kurdish identity, although in an earlier work, writing on Istanbul, he came close to such a claim. People of the most diverse regional and ethnic origins in the Ottoman capital, he wrote, have erased their identities and are no longer Turk or Kurd or Laz or Arab or Arnavut: 'the city dweller has no nationality' (*şehrî'nin milliyeti yoktur*).[10]

But couldn't a case be made for the existence of a distinctive Kurdish urban architecture? The architecturally most remarkable cities of the region, Diyarbekir and Mardin, owe their beauty to the patronage of foreign overlords such as the Artukids and later the Ottomans.[11] But towns and cities that were the centres of Kurdish emirates, such as Bitlis, Hasankeyf, Khoshab, Amadiya, Cizre, and Palu, can boast a striking architecture that was built under the patronage of Kurdish rulers, and that arguably may be called 'Kurdish architecture,' although the architects and builders most probably were Armenians, Syrians or Jews. Stylistically, this

[8] Gökalp's studies on Kurdish tribes and assimilation, written in 1922-24, are brought together in: Ziya Gökalp, *Kürt aşiretleri hakkında sosyolojik tetkikler* [Sociological studies on Kurdish tribes] (ed. Şevket Beysanoğlu), Istanbul: Sosyal yayınlar, 1992.

[9] Ziya Gökalp, 'Şehir medeniyeti, köy medeniyeti' [Urban civilization and village civilization], in: Gökalp, *Kürt aşiretleri*, pp. 136-9.

[10] Ziya Gökalp, *Türkleşmek, İslâmlaşmak, muasırlaşmak* [Turkicizing, Islamicizing, modernizing], Ankara: Kültür Bakanlığı, 1976 (originally published as a book in 1918 and containing journal articles of 1913 and later).

[11] Mete Sözen, *Diyarbakır'da Türk mimarisi* [Turkish architecture in Diyarbakır], Istanbul, 1971; Josef Strzygowski, *Amida*, Heidelberg: 1910; Machiel Kiel, 'The physical aspects of the city', in Bruinessen & Boeschoten, *Evliya Çelebi in Diyarbekir*, pp. 53-61.

monumental architecture (fortresses, mosques, *medrese*s, bath houses, family mansions) shows a wide range of variety and few common traits that might distinguish it from 'non-Kurdish' architecture, but insofar as these buildings were constructed under Kurdish overlordship, it makes sense to speak of Kurdish architecture and, by extension, speak of a Kurdish urban culture or civilization.[12]

As long as the vast majority of the Kurds remained rural, however, the most typically Kurdish architecture obviously was that of Kurdish villages and tent camps.[13] But since many Kurds live in villages that were originally Armenian or Syrian, the characterization of Kurdish rural architecture also remains fraught with problems.

Different types of 'Kurdish' cities

The examples mentioned so far suggest that there were at least three types of towns and cities that had distinctly different relations with Kurdish tribal and village society. The first type consisted of cities like Diyarbekir and Kermanshah, surrounded by a largely Kurdish-inhabited countryside but directly controlled by the large states that incorporated parts of Kurdistan. These centres of military and bureaucratic domination were at the same time important centres of international and regional trade, centres of craft production and of learning and the arts. These cities probably constituted a major interface between vernacular Kurdish culture and the 'high' cultures of the neighbouring states. Kurdish influences on

[12] I was persuaded by Birgül Açıkyıldız, in a discussion after a talk at Mardin Artuklu University in April 2012, that the fact of patronage by Kurdish rulers, rather than a priori stylistic features or the ethnic identity of the craftsmen, is good reason to speak of Kurdish architecture – especially since Turkish scholars have long denied the Kurdish element and claimed the architecture of the region to be Turkish, see for instance the otherwise excellent study by M. Oluş Arık, *Bitlis yapılarında Selçuklu rönesansı* [The Saljuk renaissance in the buildings of Bitlis], Ankara: Selçuklu Tarih ve Medeniyeti Enstitüsü, 1971. On Hasankeyf and Palu, see: Burhan Zengin, *Kaybolmakte olan şehir: Hasankeyf tarihi ve tarihi eserleri* [The disappearing city: history and historical buildings of Hasankeyf], Ankara, 1994; Süleyman Yapıcı, *Palu. Tarih-Kültür-İdari ve sosyal yapı* [Palu: history, culture, administrative and social structure], Elazığ, 2004. For an attempt to define Kurdish urban architecture in Iraqi Kurdistan by some general regional features, see: Hassan Mohammed Khalis, 'Notes on urban and domestic architecture of Central Kurdistan, Iraq', *The International Journal of Kurdish Studies* 9, 1996, 79-94.

[13] Eckart W. Peters, 'Kurdenhäuser in Ostanatolien', *Zeitschrift der TU Hannover* 3(1), 1976, 8-14; Peter Alford Andrews, *Nomad tent types in the Middle East*, Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1997.

'high' Ottoman and Persian culture (notably in music) were mediated through these cities.[14] Other administrative centres appear to have been of much lesser influence because they were bypassed by the major trade routes, but nevertheless were in most cases also major nodes in the regional economy.

The centres of the semi-independent Kurdish emirates may have been less cosmopolitan, but the difference with the centres of Ottoman and Persian administration must have been gradual. Some of the larger ones, such as Bitlis, Sine (Sanandaj), Cizre and Amadiya, must have resembled the cities of the first type, but with a strongest Kurdish element in their population and general culture. Others, such as Palu, Çermük, Shemdinan and Khoshab, probably were little more than fortresses housing the lord and his retinue, surrounded by a market and a few houses of craftsmen and servants. The first four, belonging to the more illustrious emirates, were from the sixteenth century onwards major centres of Kurdish culture, literature and learning, which were patronized by the ruling families.[15]

Finally Kurdish society was also in contact with the large cities and metropolises in the wider environment, far from Kurdistan: Tabriz, Esfahan, Damascus, Baghdad, Istanbul. Several cities in the Arab Mashriq (Damascus, Aleppo, Baghdad) had from an early period on distinct

[14] On the influence of Kurdish musicians from Kermanshah on Persian classical music of the Qajar period, see Ella Zonis, *Classical Persian music: an introduction*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973. Sufi musicians from Diyarbekir (though not necessarily Kurds) had an influence on 18th -century Ottoman court music, see Martin van Bruinessen, 'The Naqshbandi order in 17th century Kurdistan', in: Marc Gaborieau, Alexandre Popovic and Thierry Zarcone (eds), *Naqshbandis: cheminements et situation actuelle d'un ordre mystique musulman*, Istanbul-Paris: Éditions Isis, 1990, pp. 337-360.

[15] The emirs of Cizre (Jazira Botan) and Amadiya patronized Kurmanci literature. The relations of Melayê Cezîrî and Ehmedê Xanî with the court of Jazira Botan are well-known; Evliya Çelebi writes on the occasion of his stay in Amadiya that there were dozens of excellent Kurmanci poets there, and quotes an entire *qasida* in Kurdish (Bruinessen, 'Kurdistan in the 16th and 17th centuries' , p.9). In Sine, the lords of Ardalan patronized Gorani poetry (E. B. Soane, 'A short anthology of Guran poetry', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 1921, No.1, 1921, 57-81). The case of Bitlis is somewhat surprising. Evliya, who spent a long time there, part of it as an involuntary guest of the ruler, Abdal Khan, notes that the elite of the emirate belonged to the Rojiki tribe, and cites a poem in what he calls Rojiki Kurdish but what on closer inspection proves to be a Turkish dialect with a heavily Armenian vocabulary (Martin van Bruinessen, 'Les Kurdes et leur langue au XVIIème siècle: notes d'Evliya Çelebi sur les dialectes kurdes', *Studia Kurdica* No. I-5, 1988, 13-34, at p. 20).

Kurdish quarters with considerable populations.[16] At the turn of the twentieth century, Istanbul also had a large Kurdish population, consisting of on the one hand members of the Kurdish aristocracy, who had been exiled and/or given bureaucratic positions there, and on the other a poor Kurdish proletariat, mostly porters (*hammal*). Rohat Alakom has painstakingly compiled references to the earlier presence of Kurds in the Ottoman capital.[17]

The number of large cities with Kurdish quarters increased rapidly in the twentieth century as a result of labour migration, the search for education, and political conflict. Beirut, Adana and Izmir have distinctly Kurdish neighbourhoods; and Berlin, Stockholm, Paris and Athens have large Kurdish populations and have become centres of Kurdish cultural activities.

The city and Kurdish identity

There is some evidence supporting Gökalp's claim that upon moving to the city, people erase their previous ethnic identity ('*şehrî'nin milleti yok*'), but also quite a bit that contradicts it. In the first place, Gökalp was probably speaking specifically of the elite. The Ottoman bureaucracy and the learned classes had men of all possible ethnic backgrounds in their ranks, and their privileges and the Ottoman (Osmanlı) identity were narrowly intertwined. Careers and influence in the Ottoman system did not depend on ethnicity, and there were no ethnic niches within the elite.

It is interesting to note that in bibliographical dictionaries of prominent people, the earliest persons with a Kurdish background whom we find mentioned in the Islamic period, living in the 2nd and 3rd centuries of Islam (8th and 9th centuries C.E.), were both known as, and nicknamed 'son of Kurd' (*ibn al-Kurd*).[18] This seems to suggest that their Kurdish descent

[16] See, e.g., Issam al-Khafaji, *Tormented births: passages to modernity in Europe and the Middle East*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2004, p. 102.

[17] Rohat Alakom, *Eski İstanbul Kürtleri (1453-1925)* [The Kurds of old Istanbul, 1453-1925], Istanbul: Avesta, 1998. This book incorporates Rohat's conference paper mentioned above.

[18] These were Mahdi b. Maymun, who lived in Basra in the 2nd/8th century, and Abu Nasr Muhammad, known as 'Ibn al-Kurd', living in Baghdad in the 3rd/9th. I owe information about the former to the historian John Nawas, who worked extensively on early Muslim scholars; the latter is mentioned by Baba Mardukh-Ruhani, *Tarikh-i mashahir-i Kurd*, jild I (Tehran 1364/1985), p. 6.

was acknowledged but that they themselves, as urban and educated men, no longer were considered as Kurds. In later centuries, we find numerous scholars and bureaucrats known as 'al-Kurdi', but these men expressed themselves in writing exclusively in Arabic, Persian or Ottoman Turkish, the learned languages, and there are no indications, in most cases, as to whether they actually knew Kurdish.

Lower class people moving to a city, on the other hand, were more likely to start their urban life in an ethnic or regional enclave, like the Kurdish *hammal* of early twentieth-century Istanbul. In such an environment the retention of the language of origin is more likely, and assimilation takes a longer time, although even the most menial work probably demanded a certain command of Turkish. Similarly, the inhabitants of the large Kurdish neighbourhoods in the large Arab cities maintained Kurdish ethnic identity, although most of them became Arabic speakers and gradually lost Kurdish.

This all makes good sense and is, to a large extent, almost self-evident. There is, however, an issue that is more difficult to explain, and that has exercised the minds of many Kurdish intellectuals: why is it that the language spoken in many of the cities and towns in Kurdistan is Turkish (and usually not Ottoman Turkish but a variety of the Azerbayjani dialect)? In the garrison towns of the Turcoman belt to the South of Kurdistan proper (Tel `Afer, Altun Kupri, Kirkuk, Tuz Khurmatu, Kifri, Mandali), the dominant element of the population was Turcoman and had been so well before the region was incorporated into the Ottoman Empire. The use of Turkish as the main language in these towns needs no explanation.

In Arbil, which had a Turkish as well as a significant Kurdish population, Turkish was the common language. A British observer noted in the early twentieth century that one neighbourhood of Arbil was purely Kurdish, 'and in the rest the lower classes resemble the Kurds in appearance and dress. All can speak Kurdish fluently, but the language of their homes is Turkish.'[19] Townspeople, also if they were of Kurdish origin, wanted to distinguish themselves from rural folk: 'The Arbilli looks down upon the Kurd as rough and uneducated, while the latter considers the townsman effeminate, immoral, and corrupt.'[20]

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[19] W. R. Hay, *Two years in Kurdistan. Experiences of a political officer 1918-1920*, London: Sidgwick & Jackson Ltd, 1921, p. 82. Hay's observations, especially in his Chapter V, 'The population of the towns, and other races', are pertinent to our discussion here.

[20] Hay, *Two years in Kurdistan*, p. 86.

But what about the predominance of the Turkish language in cities and towns like Diyarbekir and Bitlis, which in the eyes of many Kurdish nationalists hold a central place in the idea of Kurdish identity and Kurdish history? Were their inhabitants Turkish, or were they Kurds who had deliberately erased their Kurdish identity in order to distinguish themselves from the unsophisticated rustic Kurds of the surroundings? This was an issue that became important to political thinkers in the early twentieth century. As mentioned above, Ziya Gökalp formulated his theory of assimilation in order to explain this phenomenon. Kurds moving to the city adopted the Turkish language and became, at least to some extent, Turkish. For Gökalp, Turkish civilization was superior to the vernacular cultures (including the Kurdish one), and he became a propagandist for voluntary assimilation. Others – and this was to become the dominant line of thought in Republican Turkey – claimed that these townspeople were not only Turkish in language but also in ethnic ('racial') origin. This claim was challenged by Kurdish intellectuals, who called upon the townsmen to recognize their Kurdish identity.

The sixth issue of the Kurdish journal *Jîn* ('Life'), which was published in Istanbul during the relatively liberal period following Turkey's defeat in the First World War, opened with an article questioning the ethnic identity of the urban population of Kurdistan: 'Are the inhabitants of the cities in Kurdistan Turks?'[21] The author, Khalil Khayali, limited his discussion to the cities of Diyarbekir and Bitlis, but it can easily be generalized to other cities, such as Arbil and Kirkuk. He took issue with the claim, made by many contemporaries, that the people of Diyarbekir were Turkish not only in language but also in origin and argued that there must have been Kurds living in the city since well before the first Turks arrived in the region. Diyarbekir had been one of the main cities ruled by the Kurdish Marwanid dynasty, in the 10^{th}-11^{th} century C.E., and part of the population must have been Kurdish since that time. In the case of Bitlis, he could make a stronger claim, for most of the prominent families of that town could be shown to have ancestors who belonged to known Kurdish tribes of the

[21] Kurdiyê Bitlîsî, "Kürdistan'daki şehirler sekenesi Türk müdür?" [Are the inhabitants of the cities in Kurdistan Turks?], *Jîn*, aded 6, 25 Kanun-i Evvel 1334 (7 January 1919), pp. 1-9; M.E. Bozarslan (ed.), *Jîn – Kovara Kurdî-Tirkî / Kürdçe-Türkçe dergi*, Cild II, Uppsala: Weşanxana Deng, 1985, pp. 333-9. Kurdiyê Bitlîsî ('the Kurd of Bitlis) was the pseudonym adopted by Khalil Khayali (Xelîl Xiyalî), as Bozarslan noted in the introduction to his annotated reprint of the journal. Khayali was from the district of Motkî, to the West of Bitlis.

region. For Khalil Khayali, the people of Bitlis were Kurds (and Armenians, of course, though by the time he wrote there were few if any Armenians left in the city).[22]

The city and Kurdish nationalism

The more important question was, of course, what the people of Bitlis, Diyarbekir, etc. thought they were themselves. And although many of them no doubt thought of themselves as *şehrî* and civilized people (and probably as Osmanlı, Ottomans, with its connotation of a supra-ethnic elite identity) and looked down on nomads and villagers, there were in the early twentieth century also townspeople, of all ranks and classes, who had started thinking of themselves as Kurds and of the Kurds as a distinct people with its own collective interests. The first Kurdish association, Kürd Te`avün ve Terakki Cemiyeti, was founded by Kurdish aristocrats in Istanbul in 1908. A decade later, in the post-war years, its successor, Kürd Te`ali Cemiyeti, addressed not only the elite but also carried out some activities among the Kurdish proletariat of the capital. (Seyyid Abdulkadir and Sa`id Nursi, the two most prominent religious personalities who were active in both associations, and who both represented the non-separatist, 'de-centralist' (*`adem-i merkeziyetçi*) tendency in the Kurdish movement, were reportedly the only ones who could bridge the class gap.)

In the post-war period, there was also a Kurdish Club in Diyarbekir, consisting of members of prominent local families – the first sign that Kurdish national awareness had been spreading among these, presumably Turkish-speaking townspeople. Most of these people renounced on their nationalist aspirations once the Kemalists had established themselves as the new rulers, but two members of the Cemilpaşazade family remained active as Kurdish nationalists and we find them later in Syrian exile, where they played a role in the association Khoybun. In the underground association Azadi, which was founded in 1923 and which allegedly played a role in the preparations for a Kurdish uprising, we find Kurdish military officers and civil servants,

[22] He gave more arguments for the Kurdishness of Bitlis' population: some of the city wards were named after villages and tribes of the neighbourhood, indicating that these were the origins of the inhabitants. Nowhere in the entire region was there a single Turkish village (with the exception of Ahlat, at a distance of two days' travel to the Northeast). The language of education in medreses in the region moreover was Kurdish. He believed that the dominance of Turkish was a recent phenomenon, due to a Turkish school established a generation before and pressure from centrally appointed civil servants.

some of them urban men such as Yusuf Ziya Bey of Bitlis, but none of the notables of Diyarbekir's Kurdish Club.

Shaykh Sa`id's rebellion, however, which had been planned to take place in support of Azadi's uprising but erupted prematurely and was perhaps more instigated by tribal and religious resentment of the measures imposed by the new Kemalist regime than by an explicit nationalist agenda, did find some support from a specific segment of the population of Diyarbekir. In the first week of March 1925, the insurgents laid siege to the city, which was almost impenetrable due to its strong walls. Zaza inhabitants of the city, possibly fellow tribesmen of the besieging forces, helped a small group to scale the walls and enter the city.[23] This is one of the earliest instances of solidarity between city-dwellers and a rural-based political movement that, if it was not nationalist, at least had an ethnic dimension. The vast majority of the urban population, however, would not have anything to do with the rebellion and did not identify with Kurdish nationalist claims. Whatever the ethnic origins of its inhabitants, politically Diyarbekir was not a Kurdish city in the 1920s.[24]

Rural-urban migration: urbanization of the Kurds, Kurdicization of the cities

The character of the cities was changed dramatically by the mass migration from the countryside, which took on significant dimensions in the 1960s as young people left villages and small towns in search of education and employment. These developments are seen most clearly in Turkey, where Kurdish identity was long denied and its cultural and political expressions banned. The series of mass meetings organized in the late 1960s by the DDKO (Revolutionary Cultural Hearths of 'the East') in Ankara and Istanbul, as well as Diyarbakır

[23] These invaders were soon overpowered and killed, however. This incident was reported by a foreign resident of Diyarbekir, whose narrative of the siege of Diyarbekir ended up in the British Foreign Office archives; see Bruinessen, *Agha, shaikh and state*, p. 287. Unfortunately, we know nothing about these Zaza supporters of the uprising, but the fact that the source identified them as Zaza suggests that they lived in a neighbourhood of relatively recent immigrants from the Zaza-speaking districts North of Diyarbekir.

[24] Nonetheless, Atatürk felt the need to further stress the city's Turkish character. In 1932, he told the people of the city that they all were descendants of the Oghuz Turks and that the Arabic name Diyar Bekir was a misnomer (*Diyarbekir* 6 September 1932, quoted in *Atatürk yılında Diyarbakır*, Diyarbakır, 1981, p.8). Later he personally renamed the city Diyarbakır, after the Turkish word for copper, *bakır*.

and other cities of Eastern Turkey, showed that there was by then a considerable urban population that defined itself as Kurdish and was committed to the struggle for Kurdish national rights. These meetings focussed on the problems of the region, which were analyzed as resulting from unequal development, deliberate discrimination, and denial of cultural rights.[25] Following a few years of severe repression in the wake of the coup of 12 March 1971, Kurdish nationalist associations rapidly grew in number and influence, spreading from the university cities Ankara and Istanbul to cities in Kurdistan.[26] An important milestone was the election of a well-known Kurdish nationalist, Mehdi Zana, as mayor of Diyarbakır in 1978. This showed that by then the majority of the city's inhabitants identified to some extent with a Kurdish nationalist platform.

The process of gradual urbanization, driven by economic factors, was speeded up enormously by the forcible evacuations and destruction of villages that were carried out systematically in Iraq in the 1980s and in Turkey in the mid-1990s. In these two countries, traditional rural Kurdish society has largely disappeared, and the vast majority of the Kurds have become urban dwellers, though not necessarily culturally integrated in the life of the cities. In less dramatic fashion, Kurdish society in Iran and Syria has also become highly urbanized. The transition to urban life appears to be irreversible. Even though current political conditions might allow involuntary migrants to return to their villages, few are actually doing so. The Kurds have become an urban people. The Kurds have, within a few decades, become an urban people. In the Kurdish imaginary, however, the village and the mountain pasture rather than the city remain icons of Kurdish identity.

A corollary of this rapid urbanization of the Kurds has been the Kurdicization of the cities. Whereas in the past, Kurdish migrants to the city, especially those belonging to the more

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[25] İsmail Beşikçi was the first to draw attention to the significance of these meetings and analyze the discourse of the speeches given there in a paper later published as *Doğu Mitingleri'nin analizi (1967)* [Analysis of the 'Meetings of the East'], Ankara: Yurt Kitap-Yayin, 1992. He later accorded these meetings a central place in his ambitious attempt to write a comprehensive sociology of Kurdish society, *Doğu Anadolu'nun düzeni: sosyo-ekonomik ve etnik temeller* [The social order of East Anatolia: socio-economic and ethnic foundations], Istanbul: e yayınları, 1969.

[26] On the developments in Turkish Kurdistan during the 1960s, see Martin van Bruinessen, 'The Kurds in Turkey', *MERIP Reports* no. 121, 1984, 6-12 (online at: www.hum.uu.nl/medewerkers/m.vanbruinessen/publications/Bruinessen_Kurds_in_Turkey_1984.pdf).

privileged classes, tended to identify primarily with the sophisticated *şehrî* culture of their new environment rather than with the Kurdish culture of their village of origin, the sheer volume of Kurdish migration has given rise to a very different dynamic. Large new urban neighbourhoods have emerged where Kurds constitute the majority of inhabitants, and social networks based on the region of origin (*hemşehri* networks), often cutting across tribal boundaries, became major elements of urban social structure.

Such *hemşehri* networks are not a new phenomenon, and they are not unique to the Kurds.[27] Since the early twentieth century, there have been formal and informal associations of people from the same town or province, for which perhaps the associations of immigrants from the Caucasus and the Balkans provided the models. The process of chain migration – in which people follow relatives or acquaintances from their village or district who have settled in the city before and expect their help in finding work and a place to live – was facilitated by the existence of *hemşehri* associations and has in turn reinforced this pattern of organization. The DDKO's meetings in the late 1960s, mentioned above, had the character of *hemşehri* events, and *hemşehri* networks have at least since that time played a part in strengthening Kurdish ethnic awareness, even though most of the *hemşehri* associations are emphatically non-political.[28]

The emergence, in Istanbul and many other major cities, of enormous new neighbourhoods largely peopled by Kurds who were forced to leave their villages in the 1990s meant a strong boost for Kurdish identity.[29] Even if these recent migrants had wanted to give up their

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[27] Alexandre Toumarkine and Jeanne Hersant, 'Hometown organisations in Turkey: an overview', *European Journal of Turkish Studies* 2, 2005; online at ejts.revues.org/index397.html.

[28] On *hemşehri* organizations and networks in Istanbul during the 1990s, see Ayşe Betül Çelik, 'Migrating onto identity: Kurdish mobilization through associations in Istanbul', Ph.D. thesis, Binghamton: State University of New York, 2002; idem, '"I miss my village": forced Kurdish migrants in Istanbul and their representation in associations', *New Perspectives on Turkey* 32, 2005, 137-163; and idem, 'Alevis, Kurds and hemşehris: Alevi Kurdish revival in the nineties', in: Paul J. White and Joost Jongerden (eds), *Turkey's Alevi enigma. A comprehensive overview*, Leiden: Brill, 2003.

[29] These forced migrants included people who had been physically coerced by the military to evacuate their villages as well as much larger numbers who left because the guerrilla war and counter-insurgence operations made life in the village hazardous. Cities with large Kurdish neighbourhoods include Bursa, Izmir, Adana and Mersin. In Kurdistan, especially Diyarbakır and Van have huge neighbourhoods of recent forced immigrants,

Kurdish identity and become anonymous *şehri* upon arrival in the city, this was no longer an option for most of them. They were recognized as Kurds and treated accordingly; Kurds complain of widespread and systematic discrimination against them. The official policy of denial of Kurdish ethnic identity was gradually phased out in the 1990s, enabling the use of Kurdish in public; but this also justified increasing discrimination against Kurds. Even more than before, Kurdish identity became a social stigma. Villagers who arrived in the city in the 1990s became more rather than less aware of their Kurdish identity.[30]

In Turkey, as earlier in Iraq, the government and armed forces had perceived the village as the mainstay of Kurdish identity and the major source of societal support for Kurdish insurgent movements. The effort to deny the Kurdish guerrilla popular support by banning the nomads from the summer pastures and destroying the villages caused much social and economic disruption but resulted in large urban Kurdish population concentrations with a strengthened sense of ethnic identity. It has moreover proved more easy to politically mobilize these urban populations than villagers, and they have come to rely on various social services provided by the civilian wing of the Kurdish movement. As a counter-insurgency policy, the forced evacuation of Kurdish villages has proved counter-effective.

A Kurdish underclass

The social problems caused by this rapid urbanization without adequate facilities for jobs and education, however, are enormous. A large proportion of these newly urban Kurds are economically and socially marginalized and have little prospect for improving their situation. They live in the cities but have only very limited access to the facilities and openings for

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which are significantly different (in terms of class and culture) from the quarters where the older urban population lives.

[30] Heidi Wedel, 'KurdInnen in türkischen Metropolen: Migration, Flucht und politische Partizipation', in: Carsten Borck, Eva Savelsberg and Siamend Hajo (eds), *Ethnizität, Nationalismus, Religion und Politik in Kurdistan*, Münster: Lit Verlag, 1997, pp. 155-184; Çelik, 'Migrating onto identity'; Miriam Geerse, 'The everyday violence of forced displacement: Community, memory and identity politics among Kurdish internal forced migrants in Turkey', PhD dissertation, Utrecht: Utrecht University, 2011 (online at http://igitur-archive.library.uu.nl/dissertations/2011-0112-200325/UUindex.html); Rojda Alaç, 'Stratégies de vie et recréation de 'foyer': le cas de la population kurde déplacée dans les espaces urbains de sa propre région en Turquie (1987-2010)', PhD thesis, Paris: École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 2012.

social mobility that used to make the city attractive to enterprising migrants. In cities such as Istanbul and Mersin, many if not most of the recent Kurdish immigrants have joined a vast underclass from which it is almost impossible to move on. The underclass has become ethnicized, in the sense that there is a strong correlation between belonging to the underclass and Kurdish ethnicity; class oppression is compounded by ethnic prejudice. Kurdish ethnicity has, in the eyes of the urban middle class, come to bear the additional stigma of all the ills associated with the lumpen proletariat: crime, violence, drug abuse.

Women and children suffer disproportionately under these conditions. For women, urbanization was not associated with a liberation from traditional forms of oppression but the reverse: 'traditional' concepts of honour were strengthened or reinvented because men who felt humiliated every day grasped to their honour as the sole source of self-respect, while the new environment seemed to contain numerous threats to family honour. Many women's freedom of movement was severely curtailed; honour related violence or threats of violence increased. In various places, this led to epidemics of women's suicides.[31]

In spite of the increased emphasis on honour and the permanent threat of violence against women who violate the severe code of honourable behaviour, poverty has led Kurdish women and girls into prostitution, making them the most marginalized of the marginalized.[32] The subject is too painful for most Kurds to even acknowledge, but anecdotal evidence indicates that this is a major problem not only in Turkey, but also in Iraqi Kurdistan. In both cases, there may be a connection with the counter-insurgency operations of the recent past, during

[31] The ('honour'-related) violence against women and its relations with forced urbanization are not well-documented. One wave of young women's suicides (or murders disguised as suicides), in Batman, came to nation-wide attention and was documented in a book: Müjgân Halis, *Batman'da kadınlar ölüyor* [Women are dying in Batman], Istanbul: Metis, 2001. On honour crimes in contemporary Turkey, one of the best reports is: Filiz Kardam et al., *The dynamics of honor killings in Turkey. Prospects for action*, Ankara: United Nations Development Programme / Population Association / United Nations Population Fund, 2005. Iraqi Kurdistan has also witnessed an enormous rise in (recorded) honour killings since 1991, which can at least in part be attributed to the process of urbanization and marginalization; see Nazand Begikhani, 'Honour-based violence among the Kurds: the case of Iraqi Kurdistan', in Lynn Welchman and Sara Hossein (eds), *'Honour': crimes, paradigms and violence against women*, London: Zed Books, 2005.

[32] The only published report of which I am aware is: Ahmet Sümbül, *Güneydoğu'da fuhuş. Olaylar-belgeler-röportajlar – 1* [Prostitution in Southeast Turkey: events, documents, interviews], Istanbul: Elma, 2004. This book suggests that the number of poor prostitutes in Diyarbakır has dramatically increased.

which many Kurdish women were raped (and thereby their family's honour violated). Some of these women were killed by their relatives to restore family honour; others killed themselves. Probably larger numbers were disowned by their families and had to carve out an existence by themselves, anonymous and without any support, with few if any possibilities of earning an honourable living.[33]

The children of this Kurdish underclass learn early in life that society offers them little hope for a better future. They are unlikely to get a school education beyond the obligatory eight years – if indeed they can afford to go to school for that long – or to find a better job than that of a street vendor. (The Kurdish boy selling paper tissue for a few cents in the streets of Istanbul has become an icon of this situation.) They have learned to distrust the state and other institutions, and there are frequent clashes with the police; large numbers of children have already spent time in prison, where they have suffered various forms of harassment (including rape and sexual abuse). These conditions have brought about a certain politicization of the children; and Intifadah-style incidents in which large groups of stone-throwing children fight pitched battles with the police and army have become a regular feature of life in the more suppressed neighbourhoods.[34]

A deep social gap separates the underclass from the more successful Kurdish middle classes, even though members of the latter may be involved in NGOs that attempt to reach out to the underclass. Traditional tribe- or family-based networks of trust, as well as the looser *hemşehri* networks, may provide some degree of support but tend to break down among the desperately poor and marginalized.

Conclusion

[33] On responses to sexual violence in the 'dirty war' in Turkey, see Geerse, 'The everyday violence of forced displacement', pp. 115-119.

[34] Haydar Darıcı, 'Şiddet ve özgürlük: Kürt çocuklarının siyaseti' [Violence and freedom: the politics of Kurdish children], *Toplum ve Kuram* 2, 2009, 17-41; Müge Tuzcuoğlu, *Ben bir taşım* [I am a stone], Istanbul: Evrensel Basım Yayın, 2011; Rojin Canan Akın & Funda Danışman, *Bildiğin gibi değil : 90'larda Güneydoğu'da çocuk olmak* [Not as you knew it: being a child in Southeast Turkey in the 1990s], Istanbul: Metis / Siyahbeyaz, 2011. English translations of excerpts of the last-named book, as well as other newspaper commentaries on the maltreatment of Kurdish children, can be found online at: istanbuldespatch.com/2012/03/12/do-you-get-it-now-why-kurdish-kids-throw-stones/.

As a result of the de facto destruction of rural life during the years of guerrilla war, the cities in (Turkish) Kurdistan, and significant parts of cities elsewhere in the region, have become Kurdish, in population as well as in language. Due to the huge volume of the influx of Kurdish immigrants, the cities no longer could assimilate them into the, largely Turkish-speaking, existing urban culture. The downside of this development has been the growth of a large Kurdish underclass that remains isolated from mainstream society.

The massive urbanization of Kurdish society might be thought to hold prospects for a renaissance of a Kurdish literate culture, such as once existed under the patronage of Kurdish semi-independent rulers. That culture had gone into decline with the abolishment of the emirates in the nineteenth century, surviving only in the *medrese* environment, which itself was increasingly marginalized after the establishment of Republican Turkey.[35] From the Kürd Te`ali Cemiyeti onwards, Kurdish associations have made efforts to revivify a literate culture, but these efforts were systematically repressed, until a turnabout in policy in the 1990s allowed printed publications, and more recently television broadcasts, in Kurdish. The combination of a large Kurdish-speaking urban population with the existence of a wide range of Kurdish print and electronic media would ideally make a new flourishing of Kurdish arts and literature possible.

However, the large Kurdish underclass does not constitute a Kurdish reading public (but it is reached by Kurdish television). The members of the Kurdish middle classes who are, for ideological reasons, committed to the cultivation of Kurdish culture find to their chagrin that their own children in many cases do not share that interest in Kurdish and prefer Turkish or English, as windows onto a wider world. This is why the demand of school education in Kurdish has become such an important issue to those committed to Kurdish culture. The upgrading of Kurdish to a language of instruction in primary education may boost its usage in other contexts as well. Unless this comes to pass, however, we are likely to witness a linguistic bifurcation, in which an unpolished Kurdish remains the language of the underclass, and Turkish the language that for the middle classes holds the keys to social advancement.

[35] Zeynelabidin Zinar, 'Medrese education in Kurdistan', *Les annales de l'autre Islam* 5, 1998, 39-58. The literary Kurdish *medrese* tradition has found a new expression in the monthly *Nûbihar*, which has appeared regularly since 1992 and the book series of Kurdish classics and modern literary works published by the same group (nubiharyayinlari.com/).