Kurdistan and the Crafting of National Selves

Introduction

Many writings about the Kurds, most often but not only by Kurds themselves, begin in a commonsensical manner by compiling references to Kurds in various older manuscripts or even by reviewing archaeological remains of their past activities. Such textual and archaeological research is the invariable prelude to a more pressing endeavour: not merely to demonstrate the age-old existence and vitality of the Kurds but more ambitiously to construct a connection, however conceived, between Kurds in the past and Kurds in the present. In general these historical references are tendered as proofs of Kurds’ legitimate and contemporary presence and, like all good signs, they possess an ambiguity of meaning – thus allowing multiple use to be made of them in identifying the Kurds’ enduring essence.

Kendal Nezan’s introductory essay to the book *Kurdish Culture and Identity* is no exception: after briefly reviewing population estimates for Kurds in various countries, he proceeds by asserting the feelings of Kurdishness that they share. To prove how long-standing this sense of Kurdish identity is he quotes the sixteenth-century poet Melaye Jeziri (1993: 10):

I am the rose of Eden of Botan,
I am the torch of the knights of Kurdistan.

By contrast, Müfit Yüksel is more specifically concerned to demonstrate the Muslim character of this historic Kurdish identity, noting its loyal allegiance to Islam:

It is undeniable that the Kurds are one of the foundational communities of the Islamic Middle East. History shows that after Hz. Omer conquered Iran and Mesopotamia the Kurds like the Persians were introduced to Islam and in a short space of time became Muslims. During my research in the Bitlis area on grave inscriptions I have happened upon Muslim graves that date from 60, 70 or 80 years after the Hegira (1993: 29) (my translation).

Somewhat differently Rohat Alakom, explaining the reasons for his book *Eski Istanbul Kürtleri* (Kurds of Old Istanbul, 1453-1925) writes that,

Up until now, Kurdish society has usually been analyzed from a political viewpoint. However Kurds in Istanbul have rarely been examined from an ‘Istanbul perspective’, that is to say from the perspective of an important urban centre like Istanbul. ... This work, prepared on Kurds in Istanbul [during the Ottoman Empire] has been written in the hope that it will contribute to a greater understanding of the Kurds today, for whom migration has become almost a way of life (1998a: 7-8) (my translation).
Yet why do so many writings about Kurds or on the Kurdish situation demonstrate the urgent necessity of recollecting and affirming a historic continuity? The answer is clearly linked to the foundational practices of nation-building and state formation in the Middle East after the First World War, as well as to their constant re-enactment by elites thereafter as key political resources in the present. This book brings these two processes together, the production of knowledge about Kurds and the ceaseless instituting of the nation by the regional states of Iraq, Iran and Turkey.

To do so the book is divided into two roughly equal parts. Its first half aims to elucidate some of the important ways in which, since the establishment of those states, individuals, groups and political associations have imagined Kurdistan and Kurds. They have not imagined them existing in splendid isolation: one important interlocutor of this emergent knowledge is the Ottoman Empire, or more precisely its historiography and its often nationalized accounts of Ottoman origins, conquests and legacy. The book’s second half puts this discourse on Kurds in its proper context, the emergence of new centres of power concentrated in Ankara, Tehran and Baghdad. As with disputes concerning the distinguishing features of the Ottoman Empire, so too have the political projects of these nation-states, particularly in reference to their Kurdish provinces, been interpreted and evaluated in radically different ways.

More precisely then, Chapters One and Two explore recent discourses on Kurdish identity that delineate and attribute particular interpretive importance to a number of key historical developments. These might be thought of as the standard highlights of a self-conscious Kurdish historiography. The first of these is the incorporation of much of the Kurdish regions into the Ottoman Empire in the years 1514-18, or the loss of their Kurdish territories by the newly-founded Safavid state in present-day Iran. This ‘first division’ of the Kurdish areas also involved the institution of the Ottoman provinces of Diyarbakır and Kurdistan. A second historical moment is the modernization heralded by the Ottoman tanzimat reforms in the long nineteenth century, in which new processes of centralizing authority transformed relationships between the imperial centre and its provincial peripheries. Similar impulses to modernization invigorated the Qajar dynasty in Persia. A third is obviously the institution after the First World War of the nation-states of Turkey and Iran and then of Iraq in the territories where Kurds and other minorities lived, resulting in what Kurdish nationalists describe as the second division of the Kurdish region.

This exploration is not intended to provide a short version of the history of the Kurds. Rather it identifies the most commonly repeated landmarks of Kurdish historical experience, and puts this historiography in its proper context – the social and cultural revolutions spearheaded by what I argue should be denoted as the Kemalist states of Turkey, Iraq and Iran after that War. Chapters Four and Five expand upon an idea of Bobby Sayyid, who labels as Kemalist the ideology and social programmes of all the secularizing, modernizing and nationalizing Ottoman successor states that mediated independence in Muslim-majority areas following decolonization in the Middle East. For Sayyid, Kemalist regimes are unified by

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1 The term ‘first division’ is used by Abbas Vali (2002), and implies a prior regional and ethnic unity. Yet from the point of view of its inhabitants, Kurdistan was divided in numerous ways already, tribal sections facilitating and restricting access and usage to particular areas of territory, and ethnic and/or religious communities living in their own villages (Armenian, Alevi etc.) or in their own homogeneous quarters of towns (Greek, Jewish etc.). Further, space was divided on gender lines. Given the porousness of the imperial borders between the Ottomans and Safavids, these ‘micro’ spatial divisions were no doubt more significant for their inhabitants and users.
their common rejection of “the use of Islam as the master signifier of their political discourse” (Sayyid 1997: 70). This does not establish an ‘atheistic’ politics. Kemalism politicizes and instrumentalizes Islam neither by benign indifference, strict separation or implacable hostility, but in a Hobbesian fashion: that is, the Kemalist state arrogates to itself the right to command the religious institution what doctrine it must preach.

Yet I also argue that Sayyid’s definition of Kemalism is insufficient. In prioritizing its disenfranchising of Islam as its core component he minimizes its equally important homogenizing nationalist project and its constructing of new sovereign ethnic identities, Turkish, Persian and Arabic, in the three countries under consideration. He also posits a strong distinction between Kemalist and Islamist political orders, presenting them as binary opposites. It is typical of the political capital invested in the Kemalist project that not only Sayyid, but other scholars too present either Kemalism or Khomeinism (Sayyid’s paradigmatic example of Islamism) as the diametrically opposed and sole choice for the Muslim world. This binary is false: not only does it grossly simplify Islamism and conflate it with theocracy but it also takes the Kemalists’ own self-representation at its word, assimilating their reforms to what is presented as a universal political development initiated in Europe and thereafter adopted by progressive elites worldwide. Obscured in this are important similarities – of course there are differences too – between Kemalism and Khomeinism. Most strikingly, both Kemalist (Pahlavi) and Islamist Iran have insisted on the “denial of Kurdish national identity as a prerequisite of their national sovereignty” (Vali 1998: 91). Significantly, both Reza Shah in 1921 and the Islamist regime in 1979 began their rule with military campaigns designed to crush autonomist movements in the Iranian province of Kurdistan.

Sayyid’s fault is not his alone. Many analyses of Kurdish society focus on Kurds in one country, or fragment their treatment by devoting separate chapters to the ‘Kurdish issue’ in different countries. At best, Kurds are studied in interrelation with that country’s specific state. Few studies provide a proper comparative perspective able to connect the dominant political project (Kemalism) of the states of the region with the emergence at the same time of a non-unified but transnational pro-Kurdish discourse and its self-description of Kurdish difference. By contrast, the core chapter in this book (Chapter Four) elucidates a multitude of governmental strategies in Iraq, Iran and Turkey all informed by the Kemalist political paradigm, reforms made not only in what Kandiyoti calls the “juridico-political and institutional realms” (Kandiyoti 1997: 13) but just as influentially in their explicit making of a cultural revolution. Here we examine the Kemalists’ creation of a range of practices, including their revolutions in language or alphabets, their amplification or muting of selected musical forms, their programmes for women’s education, their new festivals, folklore and theatrical performance (including radio theatre), their innovations in maternal training and even in sciences of household management.

Likewise Chapter Five extends our transregional understanding of Kemalism by describing its founding or re-modelling of cities, or its creation of what I provisionally name the ‘Kemalist City.’ The constructing of Ankara, the demolition of Tehran, the monumentalizing of Baghdad: all were or are transnational strategies of Kemalist urbanism and architecture through which Islam is controlled and re-ordered, and nationalism engendered and expressed. In the process, any equivalent crafting of a Kurdish national self is disallowed. Le Corbusier’s famous quote summarizing the modernist architectural ethic – the ‘house is a machine for living in’ – applies equally well to the animating of cities as Kemalist by their statesmen and architects. The city, too, is a machine for living in and as we will see, the spatial organization of the ‘Kemalist City’ is calculated to “enforc[e] a particular direction of
action by virtue of the particular intention built into its construction” (Humphrey 2005: 43). The final section of Chapter Five returns to the discourse and experience of Kurds and what it means for self-conscious Kurdish actors to live in a Kemalist built environment.

Chapter Three presents the reader with a vital detour, an examination of some of the exemplary anthropological literature in English (and Turkish) on Kurdish society. Here the perspective switches from analysis of historical accounts of state power and its relations with Kurdistan to Kurdish society and the various ways in which ethnographers have represented it and the actions of those ‘external’ influences upon it. Examining ethnographic accounts also allows us to see how in their cultural revolutions, the Kemalist States of Iraq, Iran and Turkey themselves have been influential producers of ethnographic knowledge, as they collect and formalize an official folklore, music and material culture for their respective national ethnic group.

Kemalism therefore is a key influence in Kurdistan and the Crafting of National Selves. By Kurdistan I mean in the first and uncontroversial instance the region denoted thus in the Ottoman administrative system, before its disappearance and renaming, along with much else in the Middle East, by those same Kemalist-states. The term Crafting draws attention to the social and cultural policies of these states that were designed to transform Kurdistan, while simultaneously seducing and mobilizing its population. National refers to the logic of social and political practice that these states require of their citizens, and Selves focuses on the personalized aspect of those practices, because State initiatives are null and void without individuals’ subscription to them, in a process of self-institution. Appeals to Turkish, Persian, Arab and Kurdish national identities carry with them an ethical dimension, a claim and an orientation to virtue, and it is in their projection of potential new ways of acting that their affective power lies.

If Kemalism is a key influence, there is still an unresolved question over the efficacy of the assimilationist drive of these political projects. For example, emphasis on the programmatic or semiotic power of architecture and urban planning needs to be complemented by examining how cities are reckoned with in this instance by their Kurdish inhabitants, in order to act in and upon them differently. One of the book’s main presumptions therefore is the self-generation of individuals and groups as Kurds through these very processes of imagining and practising Kurdistan, and in response to Kemalism’s struggle against such self-conscious ‘Kurdishness.’ This Kemalist struggle involves the proffering of alternative self-understandings to the populations of these nation-states. As the first half of the book shows, one vital dimension of crafting a national self is the plotting and interpreting of historical events. Narrating the past enables subjects to become political actors of particular hue in the present. In her new book on the Ottoman Empire, Caroline Finkel writes that the task of the historian is to “show how the past led up to the present, or to a present that is now past” (Finkel 2005: xiii). The emphasis of the anthropologist is somewhat different: more to show how people’s interpretation of the past – made partly through their re-fashioning of the labour of the historians – is a vital aspect of their present. Needless to say, although remembering the past, whether by reflecting critically upon it or by appropriating dominant understandings of it, is a primal act of human agency, it does not lead on to unconstrained self-creation. Personal and collective projects of change or stasis involve the constructing and narrating of history: but the agency of individuals and people is generated and suppressed through other social relations as well.

In reality the endeavours of the historian and the anthropologist are inseparable, though not easily brought together. So Balkan historian Maria Todorova notes how perception of the past
in this case the perception of the Ottoman period in Bulgarian historiography – is best understood as

a process of interaction between an ever-evolving and accumulating past, and ever-evolving and accumulating perceptions of generations of people who are redefining their evaluations of the past. Whether in literary or historiographical works, this is a question not of reconstructing, but of constructing the past, with more or less allegorical motives (Todorova 1995: 108).

She goes on to note the key actors in this process, in addition to the nation state and its ‘Establishment’: historians, poets, writers, journalists, intellectuals and politicians. In the Kurdish context we might add to these: pro-Kurdish social movements, although the writers of their pamphlets and the strategists of their tactics should also be classed as intellectuals. Conspicuously missing from this list of shapers of perceptions of the past are the narratives or testimonies of less educated people who do not print or broadcast their experiences or memories. Somewhat shamefully for an anthropologist, I must admit that on the whole their voices are missing from this book as well, given the focus in the first three chapters on textual representations of Kurdish identity, history and society. Nevertheless, regardless of whether individuals are highly literate or otherwise, like all of us their creation of self-identity through narrative imbibes something of this wider literary production. Even more influential, the vast majority of the younger generations of Turks, Iranians and Iraqis have been taught in nationalistic education systems that seek to stamp their embodied and gendered versions of ethical practice upon them. The young men have done long months of compulsory military service as well. Invariably today popular histories, and even personal narratives and memories, are constructed in intimate relationship with the nationalist discourse of States.

Somewhat timidly, I do not usually seek – indeed am not able to – to assess the veracity of these variable constructions of the past. This seeming agnosticism vis-à-vis agents’ appropriation and reordering of historical traces might disappoint those who stress the essential ‘fact’ of people’s Kurdish inheritance, regardless of whether this heritage is significant for these individuals themselves. It may also gain the disapproval of those who continue to doubt whether this self-identification is genuine or important. In both cases my agnosticism is not meant to consent by default to the practical and ideological efficacy of Turkish, Persian or Arab Kemalism and its endeavour to assimilate Kurds. On the contrary, it is to take a position against metaphors of ethnicity that are basically genealogical, as if ethnic identity is genetically inherited on the one hand, or inexorably diluted over time on the other. By contrast, ethnic and nationalist identities are understood in this book as enlivened in specific social-historical situations by the cultural and political relationships of the period.

In other words, the different ways of imagining Kurds and Kurdistan that are discussed indicate that Kurdish ethnicity is a relational and creative act, something made by – not given to – every ethnic. The genesis, context and content of Kurdish ethnic or nationalist discourse may be historically explicable, but its assertion is not inevitable. In brief, because of the relationality of ethnic or national identity, this book is as much about the imagining and producing of Turkish, Persian and Arab identities as it is about those of Kurds. Consequently the authors of the multiform discourse on Kurdish identity explored in the study are not all Kurds, as these very Turkish, Persian and Arab identities constitute themselves through the censoring or despising of any Kurdish self-description of difference. Despite this, readers will find that I have devoted more space to Turkey. This bias might partially be justified by the
brutality of numbers: approximately two-thirds of the Kurdish population live there (Özoğlu 2004: 14). The Turco-centric focus also reflects my own experience and limitations.

Nevertheless, I hope to have explored in part some of the ways in which Kurds in Iran and Iraq too have been participants in the crafting of Kurdish selves. Events in Iraq make that country even more important in the present, as the Kurdish parties in the north appear to be establishing the first Kurdish – and dare we also add – Kemalist Kurdish state in history. The ‘netherworld’ (Stansfield 2003: 181) in which Iraqi Kurdistan has existed since the withdrawal of the military and administrative forces of the Government of Iraq in 1991 is slowly dissolving. But at the time of writing, the constitutional arrangements of a fractured Iraq are still unclear, as are the responses of the Turkish and Iranian states. For this reason, I have not extended the book to consider the new crafting of national selves in Iraqi Kurdistan currently underway. The importance of that topic requires a study of its own.

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