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Nation, kingship, and language: The ambiguous politics of Ehmedê Xanî's

Mem û Zîn

Michiel Leezenberg [±]

Abstract

In this article, I argue that discussions of whether any Kurdish nationalism may be found in Xanî's *Mem û Zîn* proceed from rather anachronistic assumptions. Through an exploration of the language ideology found in this work, I demonstrate that the work's mystical meaning interacts in rather complex ways with its political views. In particular, the king or prince plays a crucial, if ambiguous, political, linguistic, and eschatological role in the poem. Thus, *Mem û Zîn* may be read as a specimen of vernacularisation rather than romantic nationalism.

Keywords: *Mem û Zîn*; Kurdish literature; Kurdish nationalism; language.

ABSTRACT IN KURMANJÎ

Netewe, Padişahî, û Ziman: Siyaseta xumam di Mem û Zîna Ehmedê Xanî de

Di vê gotarê de, îddiaya min ew e ku niqaşa li ser pirsra hebûna netewegeriya kurdî di Mem û Zîna Xanî de ji pêşferzên pir anakronîstîk têne pêş. Bi rêya veçirandina îdeolojiya zimanî ya di vê berhemê de, ez nişan didim ku wateya sofigerane ya berhemê bi çendin awayan di bîr û boçûnên siyasî de rengê xwe vedibîne. Bi taybetî, padişah an jî mir roleke -herçend xumam ji be- bingehîn a siyasî, zimanî, û axretî digêre di berhemê de. Wisa jî, Mem û Zîn dibê wek nimûneyeke edebî ya bikaranîn û berbelavkirina zimanê xwemalî (vernacularisation) bê dîtîn, ne ya netewegeriyeke romantîk.

ABSTRACT IN SORANI

Netewe, paşayeti û ziman: Siyasetî narrûnî Mem û Zînekey Ehmedî Xanî

Lem babeteda, min argumêntî ewe dekem ke giftugoy ewey ke aya hiç core nasyûnalîzmêkî kurdî lenaw Mem û Zînî Xanîda heye le grîmaney enekronîstî (mufareqey zemenîyewe) serçawe degrêt. Le miyaney kinekirdinî aydiyolojiyay zimanî naw ew berhemey Xanî, min ewe pişan dedem ke manay mitolojiyayî berhemeye be şewazêkî alloz karlêk legell cihanbîniye siyasiyekeyda deken. Betaybetî, padşa yan mir, eger be narrûniş bêt, rollêkî serekîy siyasî, zimanewanî we axiretî

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(isketoloji) le şî'rekanî da debînêt. Bemcore, Mem û Zîn dekrêt wek nimûneye 'ewamgerayîy zimani (vernacularisation) nek wek nasyûnalîzmî romansî bibînêt.

ABSTRACT IN ZAZAKI

Netewe, Mîreyîye û Ziwan: Polîtîkayê zafmanîdarî yê Mem û Zîna Ehmedê Xanî

Na meqale de ez îdîa kena ke munaqêşeyê “Tirê m eserê Xanî Mem û Zîne de rêçê neteweperwerîye yenê diyene yan ney?” hîna zaf hîpotezanê anakronîkan ra yenê pêra. Pê keşkerdîşê îdeolojiya ziwani ya nê eserî, ez nişan dana ke manaya eserî ya mistîke hîna zaf bi hewayêko kompleks tesîr kena fikranê ey ê siyasîyan ser o. Bitaybetî qiral yan ki mire şîre de rolêko siyasîyo ziwannaskîyo eskatolojîko muhîm la nedîyar kay kenê. Coka merdim şeno Mem û Zîne sey neteweperwerîya romantîke ney, la hîna zaf sey nimûneyê pêroyikerdîşê ziwani biwano.

Introduction

Mem û Zîn, the *mathnavî* or courtly romance about two ill-fated lovers, written in Kurmanji Kurdish and completed in 1695 by Ehmedê Xanî (1650-1707), has a well-deserved place of honour in Kurdish literature. From early on, manuscripts circulated in relatively large numbers in the medreses of Northern Kurdistan. Since the late nineteenth century, it has been recognised as the Kurdish national epic; and despite some efforts in 1930s Soviet Armenia to promote oral epics like *Zembîlfroş* to this status, the prominence of Xanî's poem has never been seriously challenged.¹ Unfortunately, this position has hardly been matched by sustained critical attention. In Arabic, Turkish, and Kurdish, numerous works have been published, but few of these have much analytical rigor; the most significant of these being Resûl (2007[1979]), Khaznadar (2010); and the *şîrove*, or line-by-line commentaries, by Cihanî (2007), Dost (2010), and Yıldırım (2013).² In Western languages, studies of Xanî's epic are still few and far between; earlier discussions (Shakely, 1992; Hassanpour, 1992: 52-7, 83-90 and 2004; van Bruinessen, 2004) largely focus on the question of the presence or absence of Kurdish nationalism in the work, but this preoccupation with nationalism is rather anachronistic.

Instead, I will argue that *Mem û Zîn* forms a clear example of *vernacularisation*, i.e., the new literate and literary use of spoken vernaculars. To substantiate this argument, I propose to focus on the beliefs concerning language and government that may be found in the text. Thus far, the political content of *Mem û Zîn* has often been approached from a historical-materialist perspective, most famously by Izeddîn Resûl (2007) and Amir Hassanpour (1992). Here, I would like to proceed from a slightly different angle, focusing on so-called *language ideologies*, i.e., the largely implicit and unsystematic assumptions about

¹ On the consecration of *Mem û Zîn* as the Kurdish national epic cf. Leezenberg (2018).

² Ayhan Tek's study of the absence of royal patronage in *Mem û Zîn* (2018) comes to a number of conclusions similar to my own; this work appeared too late, however, for a fuller inclusion of its findings here.

what language is and how it functions socially and politically.³ Such an approach seems particularly promising when studying the phenomenon of modern nationalism, which makes a central connection between language and polity. I will argue that the language ideology emerging from *Mem û Zîn* is qualitatively different from those of romantic nationalism. Thus, these tools of analysis also allow us to explore assumptions concerning the apparent “modernity” of the national sentiment expressed in *Mem û Zîn*. The articulation of a Kurdish identity and of Kurdish aspirations has baffled many a scholar who supposes that national identities and nationalist sentiments are modern by definition. In fact, there is an obvious model in classical Persian literature for such a premodern sense of “national” identity. I am referring, of course, to Firdawsî’s famous *Shâhnâme*, where much of the action is triggered by a near-timeless confrontation between Iran and Turan, or between Persians and Turks, that according to the book goes back to the troubled relation between the two mythical brothers Irâj and Tûr. However, this article will also highlight some significant differences between Ehmedê Xanî and his medieval Persian predecessors.⁴

Nationalism in *Mem û Zîn*?

The storyline of *Mem û Zîn* is probably familiar enough, but merits a brief summary nonetheless. At a Newroz celebration, Mem and his friend Tacdîn, disguised as girls, run into Sitî and Zîn, the sisters of Zeyneddîn, the prince (*mîr*) of Jezîra Botan, who have in turn dressed up as boys. Mem and Zîn instantly fall in love, as do Tacdîn and Sitî. But whereas the latter two soon get married, the former are forbidden to marry due to the scheming of Beko, an evil counsellor to the prince. Following Tacdîn and Sitî’s wedding (which gives Xanî the occasion to describe both the festivities and the bridal night with obvious relish), Mem and Zîn gradually waste away as a result of their unfulfilled love. When, in the wake of a game of chess with the prince, Mem is provoked by Beko to publicly profess his love for Zîn, the prince has him imprisoned in a dark pit. Eventually, faced by the threat of rebellion, the prince relents and allows for the two lovers to meet. After a final encounter, Mem dies, soon

³ Language ideologies were (re-) introduced as a topic of linguistic and anthropological relevance by Michael Silverstein (1979); see also Bauman & Briggs (2003).

⁴ A word on the text(s) I have used. The best available printed version of the epic, and in fact the sole genuine critical edition, is still Margaret Rudenko’s (1962); next to textual variants, it also gives a Russian translation. In the twenty-first century, new editions and translations have proliferated, but a full discussion of these would take up too much time here. Since Rudenko’s edition is no longer in print, I have mostly relied on Jan Dost’s more easily available edition (2010), which presents the text in Latin transcription with *bayt* numbering, a modern Kurdish translation and a running commentary (*şîrove*); where necessary, I have used the variant readings provided by Rudenko’s edition, and by a 1750 manuscript which was reprinted photographically by Spîrêz publishing house (2009). For the English translations, I have relied on Saadalla’s translation (2008), which generally manages to capture the spirit of technical and religious vocabulary quite well. Where I have disagreed with Saadalla, I have supplied an English rendering of my own.

followed by Zîn. Tacdîn subsequently kills Beko. The latter then grows into a thorny juniper tree between the cypresses growing over the two lovers' tombs, preventing them from uniting even in death.

Mem û Zîn has an immediate appeal as a tragic love story, which is enriched and deepened by the counterpoint provided by the Newroz celebrations, Sitî and Tacdîn's wedding party and bridal night, and by stories of hunting, fighting, and bravery. On another level, explicitly indicated by Xanî himself, the narrative may be read as an allegory of human and divine love, or as he calls it, "metaphorical" and "literal" love (*bayt* 2). On such a mystical-allegorical reading, all talk of love between humans may be read as really referring to the stages in the human love for God. Moreover, precisely in remaining unfulfilled and unconsummated, Xanî suggests, the love between humans can be purified and transmuted into love for God.

From the late nineteenth century onwards, however, a secular-nationalist reading gained prominence, and indeed seems to have become the predominant interpretation of the epic. This reading interprets the tragic fate of the two lovers as an allegory of the Kurds' inability to unite and liberate themselves.⁵ In academic literature too, the secular-nationalist reading seems to have received most attention. The numerous discussions of the alleged nationalism in *Mem û Zîn* overshadow attention to its mystical dimensions, even though the latter appear throughout the work; indeed, rather more prominently so than any political allusions (cf. Shakely, 1992; Hassanpour, 1992 and 2004; van Bruinessen, 2004). With the significant exception of Resûl (2007[1979]: ch. 20-25), it is only in more recent studies (Mirawdeli, 2010; Bochenska, 2016) that more systematic attention is paid to the work's mystical dimensions. Yet, even when studying the work's politics, one should avoid solely examining the famous introduction or *dîbaçe* (in particular chapters 5 and 6), and endeavour to explore what the other chapters have to say about the Kurds and their legitimate rulers, and about government more generally. A more thorough analysis reveals the relation between the seemingly modern nationalist sentiment and the apparently medieval mysticism expressed in the work to be rather more complex than one might initially imagine. I will argue that in many instances, a mystical reading of the poem problematises or even contradicts its political message.

Oral and literate traditions in the Persianate world

I would like to begin by questioning the widely-held assumption that *Mem û Zîn* derives from an allegedly pure and uncontaminated Kurdish folkloric tradition. Not only has this tradition itself arguably been shaped by a wider, Persian-

⁵ On this changing reception, see Leezenberg (2018).

inspired or “Persianate” cosmopolitan culture, Xani’s work is also explicitly indebted to the Persian *written* tradition. Xani mentions not only several of his predecessors in Kurdish poetry, like Melayê Cizîrî and Feqiyê Teyran, he also alludes to several of the classical Persian poets, most notably, Nizâmî Gandjavî and Abdallah Jâmî:

Kes nakete mîterê xwe Camî/ Ra na giritin kesek Nizâmî

No one would take Jâmî as a groom/No one would take Nizâmî as
a servant (*bayt* 257)⁶

Works like Nizâmî’s *Laylî and Majnûn* (and to a lesser extent the *Haft paykar*), and Jâmî’s *Yûsuf and Zulaykha*, have undoubtedly served as models for Xani’s work. The very composition of *Mem û Zîn*, most particularly its lengthy introduction (opening with a praise of and appeal to God, followed by a chapter in praise of the Prophet and some more autobiographical remarks in which the poet speaks of his motives for writing his work), reflects that of works like Nizâmî’s *Laylî and Majnûn*. Stylistically, the influence of Nizâmî in particular is noticeable on virtually every page of *Mem û Zîn*, especially in the complex imagery and extensive wordplay. This indebtedness to the Persian literary tradition is by no means unique to *Mem û Zîn*. Written Medieval Armenian and Georgian literature, and oral traditions in various regional languages, have equally been shaped by it.⁷ This wider Persianate tradition, undoubtedly one of the great cosmopolitan cultural formations in the literary history of the world, comparable to Latinity in Medieval Western Europe and to the Sanskrit cosmopolitan order on the Indian subcontinent, is only gradually starting to receive the attention it deserves.⁸

It is obvious that Persian culture is far more visible in Xani’s work than anything politically or culturally Ottoman, despite a few allusions to Ottoman policies (notably, the confrontation between Ottomans and Safavids, *bayt* 207, and the Ottoman slaughter of Qizilbash in which Tacdîn and Mem are said to have participated, *bayt* 1165), and despite a few phrases in Ottoman Turkish, most importantly *bilmezê kê ne sôyleye zebanîm*, “my tongue does not know what to say”

⁶ In fact, Bozarslan’s 1968 edition transcribes these proper names as *camê* and *nizamê*, and translates them as, respectively, “glass” and “order”, thus rendering the pun on the names of the poets at the price of not mentioning their names themselves.

⁷ Thus, to mention but a few examples: Rustaveli’s *Vepkhistqaosani* (“The Man in the Panther Skin”) explicitly expresses its indebtedness to the New Persian literary tradition; and the Armenian national epic, the oral poem *Sasuntsi Dzurer* (“Daredevils of Sasun”), shows various Persian- or Persianate-inspired characters and motifs. I hope to return to these subjects on another occasion.

⁸ Cf. Dabashi (2012); Ahmad (2016: ch. 1, esp. 32-38). The latter aptly calls this cosmological order the “Balkans-to-Bengal complex”; the former mistakenly assumes that in this order, only Persian was used for literate purposes, while vernacular languages like Kurdish, Pashto, Balochi and Ossetic were used in exclusively oral traditions (2012: 331).

(*bayt* 1577). Given the much more extensive use of Arabic and Persian borrowings in the work, it is clear that the world in which Xanî lived was shaped by Arabic religious learning and Persian literature rather than Ottoman rule or the Turkish language. Hence, it may make more sense to study Xanî's text against a Persianate background (to which he explicitly refers) than in relation to the Ottoman Turkish *mesnevi* tradition, of which no similar traces can be seen in *Mem û Zîn*.

It is not clear whether Xanî was familiar with the written text of Firdawsî's *Shâhnâme*, as opposed to oral versions of the same legends. Although *Mem û Zîn* refers or alludes to characters and events from the *Shâhnâme* on various occasions, these allusions are mostly made in passing, and are rarely elaborated. Thus, brave and valiant warriors are claimed to be superior to Rostam, perhaps the *Shâhnâme*'s most famous hero (*bayts* 219, 374, 1887 and 1958); and the two tragic lovers are compared to, among others, Khosrow and Shirîn, and Bîzhan and Manîzha (*bayts* 58, 1161 and 1373). These references may equally well stem from the oral traditions of the wider Persian cultural area, to which large parts of the Ottoman empire, the Caucasus and parts of South and Central Asia also belonged, as from the text of the *Shâhnâme* or any of the classical *mathnavî* poems by Nizâmî, Jâmî, and others.

In fact, two major figures from the *Shâhnâme* are conspicuously absent in Xanî's poem: Zakhkân the tyrant (who is explicitly identified as an Arab here) and Kâveh the blacksmith, who leads a revolt against the latter. The story of Zakhkân and Kâveh, moreover, is explicitly linked by Ferdowsî to the origin of the Kurds as a distinct people. For obvious reasons, this story would seem highly relevant to Xanî's concern with Kurdish aspirations; the narrative of Kâveh's revolt against Zakhkân would seem to be even more directly relevant to the politics of *Mem û Zîn*. Given that it occurs quite early in the *Shâhnâme*, it is rather unlikely that a Kurdish reader would have overlooked it. Instead, however, Xanî repeats a long-standing self-image of the Kurdish nobles as of pure Arab stock (*bayt* 365). This may be an indication that Xanî was not familiar with the written text of the *Shâhnâme*, or at least, not with the text in its entirety; or if he was, that this revolutionary (if such is the correct word) account of the origins and identity of the Kurds was not what he was interested in. We will return to this point below.

I think this rootedness in a wider, cosmopolitan Persianate literary culture, which was both literate and orally transmitted, has not received due attention in the recent literature on *Mem û Zîn*. Although Ala'uddîn Sajjâdî (1952: 189-213) briefly discusses Ehmedê Xanî's background in Persian literature, later studies tend to emphasise its roots in oral Kurdish traditions. Thus, Michael Chyet presents Ehmedê Xanî's epic as derived from an oral tradition which he tacitly assumes to be primordially and purely Kurdish (1991, esp. ch. 2). Likewise, Ferhad Shakely (1992: 49-51) emphasises the poem's assumed oral

background in a purely Kurdish tradition, despite acknowledging some Persian literary influences. Most importantly, perhaps, Kurdish literary historian Marouf Khaznadar rejects the importance of any Persian influences, arguing instead that any Kurdish reference to *Laylî and Majnûn* can and should be traced directly to the Arabic poetic tradition on which Nizâmî's work is also based.⁹ The Persianate character of *Mem û Zîn*, however, should be apparent from the large number of Persian lexical borrowings alone, even if one disregards the explicit references to specifically Persian or Persianate mythological figures and literary motifs. Against any reduction to a national Kurdish oral tradition, and against any overstatement of Persian literate influence, I would like to suggest here that the written Persian and the oral local traditions were not autonomous from one another, but have had a long and complex process of interaction. *Mem û Zîn*, in other words, is a prototypical element of the wider cosmopolitan Persianate tradition, which also included works written in vernacular languages with a heavy infusion of Persian loans.

The language of *Mem û Zîn* and its intended audience

This leads us to the question of the significance of Xanî's self-conscious writing in Kurdish against this wider, cosmopolitan cultural background. Xanî himself describes his use of Kurdish in religious terms, as a kind of *bid'a* or heretic innovation (*bayt* 237), adding that:

Înaye nîzam û întîzamê/ Kêşaye cefa jiboyê amê

I have established order and regularity [in the language]/ And have suffered for the masses' sake (*bayt* 239)

Does this mean that Xanî actually wrote his work *for* the masses (*'amma*), intending it to serve as a genuinely national epic or piece of popular literature? Or did he merely indicate that the very act of writing in the language *of* the local *'amma* was in itself a form of heresy? If we take the *bayt* to state the former, then Xanî's attitude is a modern one indeed: but there are good reasons to think he is actually making the more modest claim.

My main thesis here is that the writing of an epic in Kurdish may be seen as a case of *vernacularisation*, i.e., a new literary use of a local language hitherto only used in oral communication, and, in that sense, a language of the illiterate *'amma*. Famously, American Sanskrit scholar Sheldon Pollock (2000: 606-7) has argued that vernacularisation involves new uses of written literary texts in a stay-at-home, or local, language, emphasising that these new uses of language are written rather than oral, and literary rather than documentary. He then proceeds

⁹ Khaznadar (2010: 367-450); interview with the author, Erbil, July 2010.

to a comparative discussion of the vernacularisations that occurred, on the one hand, in Medieval and early modern Europe developing out of a cosmopolitan Latinity between 1000 and 1500 CE, and, on the other, in South Asia out of a cosmopolitan Sanskrit-based culture, in virtually the same period.

Pushing this analogy slightly further, one might argue that *Mem û Zîn* is itself an example of an early modern Near-Eastern vernacularisation shaped by a cosmopolitan Persianate literary tradition as much as by local oral traditions. This tradition may be more complex than the Latin and Sanskrit ones, in that in the Ottoman empire, at least, it involved not one but three literate languages: Ottoman Turkish for bureaucracy, Arabic for religious learning, and Persian for poetry; if one includes the languages of the empire's Christian and Jewish population groups, the picture becomes even more complex.¹⁰

There are indeed indications that such a process of vernacularisation occurred in the rural medreses of Northern Kurdistan during the later seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, that Xanî himself was one of the pioneers of this process, and that both Xanî and other actors were well aware of this innovation. Evliya Çelebi, a keen observer of both vernacular languages and provincial cultural life, visited the Kurdish provinces of the Ottoman empire in the 1650s, noting that in the local medreses only works in Arabic and Persian were used.¹¹ Starting in the late seventeenth century, however, a number of introductory Kurdish-language textbooks were written, and came to have a wide circulation in manuscript form among the rural medreses of the region. In addition to Xanî's *Nûbihara piçûkan* and *Eqîdeya êmanê* (respectively, a rhymed Arabic-Kurdish vocabulary and a rhymed introduction to the principles of the Islamic faith), these textbooks also included works like Elî Teremaxî's *Serfa Kurmançê* or *Tesrîfa Kurmançê*, a prose introduction to *sarf*, or Arabic morphology, which also includes the grammatical basics of Persian and Kurdish; Mela Yûnus Xelqetîni's *Terkîb û Zurûf*, which discusses the basics of Arabic syntax; and Mela Xelîlê Sêrtî's *Nebe ul-enâm*, which discusses the foundations of religion.¹² Like Xanî, these authors were generally aware that they were doing something new. Thus

¹⁰ On this wider wave of vernacularisations, see Leezenberg (2016). Analogously to the Latin and Sanskrit cases, then, one might argue that in the wider Near-Eastern area, from the tenth century CE onward, New Persian had become something like a cosmopolitan language for literary expression, and Arabic a cosmopolitan language for religious learning.

¹¹ Evliya Çelebi, *Seyâhatnâme* IV/88, 235a13-16.

¹² On this vernacularisation process, with a focus on Teremaxî, see Leezenberg (2014). Cf. the short sketch by Mela Mehmûd Bayezîdî, written in 1858 and published in Jaba (1860); see also Zinar (1993). Elî Teremaxî's Kurdish grammar, the *Serfa Kurmançê*, was published in a Latin transcription, based on Marouf Khaznadar's 1971 Arabic-script edition, by Zeynelabidin Zinar (1997). A new edition of Teremaxî's work was recently published by Merdan Newayî (2018).

Teremaxî writes that “in all languages, the science of *sarf* exists and is practiced; but what is now necessary for us is *sarf* in the Kurdish language.”¹³

Pollock (2000: 607) adds that vernacularisation marks a profound historical transformation, not only in literary-cultural practices, but also in practices of political power. If this is correct, it is worth exploring in more detail exactly what happens linguistically and politically in *Mem û Zîn*, rather than discussing to what extent its supposedly nationalist statements match the features of modern romantic nationalism. In fact, Ehmedê Xani’s use of Kurdish rather than Persian, which we have noted he himself characterises in religious terms as *bid’a*, may be more fruitfully characterised as a case of vernacularisation rather than nationalism; it then remains to be explored what role and status the Kurdish language has in this process.

Although it does not directly address the vast topic of nationalism, Pollock’s account also implies that the early modern rise of vernaculars, and their subsequent rearticulation as national languages, cannot be explained in the functionalist and modernist terms of prominent theories of nationalism like Gellner’s and Anderson’s. Gellner (1983) argues that the development of modern industrialised economies necessitated a shared language as an efficient means of communication; Anderson (1991) suggests that it was particularly through “print capitalism” that vernacular languages became fully-fledged national languages. These theories do not fit the historical realities of the Ottoman Empire, where neither a fully developed industrial economy nor any widespread form of print capitalism emerged early enough to explain the rise of the new vernacular languages, and subsequently of local nationalisms. But quite apart from that, these theories also face conceptual problems: national languages first emerged primarily in the “non-functional” sphere of literary expression and religious learning rather than in the more strictly functional usages that primarily serve to convey factual information, like news reporting and economic communication.

If this argument holds, we can raise the question why the vernacularisation of Kurdish (or more specifically, of one Northern Kurdish dialect variety) occurred when it did. Thus far, only few authors have addressed this question. Martin van Bruinessen attributes the large number of Kurdish poets in the seventeenth century to the replacement of Persian by Ottoman Turkish; Amir Hassanpour argues, in the opposite direction, that the rise of a Kurdish literature reflects the rise of Kurdish political power, in particular the emergence of Kurdish emirates in the fifteenth and sixteenth century CE.¹⁴ Both authors have a point, but their explanations seem incomplete. Ottoman Turkish initially

¹³ “Ev ‘ilmê serfê li hemû kafiyêd lisanan da heye û icra dibe. Ema ê ku niha ji bo me lâzîm e zimanê kurmancî ye” (Zinar, 1997: 14).

¹⁴ Van Bruinessen (2004); Hassanpour (2004); cf. Hassanpour (1992).

served exclusively as the language of administration, and only much later became a major language of poetry and learning; and, as we shall see below, Kurdish *mîrs* were not necessarily patrons of the Kurdish language either.

Ehmedê Xani's categories of the national, the religious, the literary and the political differ from our modern-day concepts and it is important to keep this in mind for a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of the kind of nationalism expressed in *Mem û Zîn*. I will try to highlight these differences by focusing on the language ideology emerging from its pages and contrasting it with the readings that were imposed onto the text from the late nineteenth century onward. Generally speaking, romantic nationalism is a nineteenth-century intellectual and political phenomenon that rests on a political ideology of popular sovereignty and national liberation from foreign and/or monarchical rule, and on a linguistic ideology that may be called *expressivist*, in that it sees each nation as endowed with a distinct and indeed unique national spirit (*Volksgeist*); the national language, and national culture more generally, are but the expression of this unique collective inner self.¹⁵

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, various aspiring national groups in the Ottoman Empire consciously set out to create a national culture and a national literary heritage. The Ottoman Greeks had been the first to do so; their work was to some extent made easier by the work of European classical philologists during the preceding centuries, but does not seem to have essentially depended on it.¹⁶ Pioneered by the efforts of Adamantios Korais, the modern Greeks created a secular and even pagan literary tradition for modern national education in a modern form of Greek closer to the spoken dialects, as opposed to the scholastic educational program hitherto dominated by the Church and taught in Koinè Greek. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Arabic-language authors in Egypt and the Levant associated with the literary Renaissance or *nahda*, created an Arabic national literary heritage or *turâth*, to some extent modelled on the Greek case.

Significant in this development is the creation of an entirely new category of "literature" (Arabic *adabiyya*, Turkish *edebiyat*) as embodying a specifically national heritage. This modern concept implies a romantic ideology of literature, as not so much a form of elite communication but an expression of the soul of a people or *Volk*.¹⁷ This explains the new attention for, and value attached to, folklore and oral literary traditions in the late nineteenth century, even (or especially) in languages that had a long-standing tradition of high literature, such as Armenian. In 1874, the Armenian Karekin Servantsdiant announced the "discovery" of an oral epic, alternatively entitled *Sasuntsi David*

¹⁵ For a cultural-historical overview of romantic nationalism in Europe, see Leerssen (2006).

¹⁶ See, in particular, Kitromilides (1992).

¹⁷ Cf. Leerssen (2006: 109-12).

and *Sasuntsi Džurer*, originating from the Mush area; it was soon promoted to the status of a national epic, to the horror of educated urban Armenians who disliked the promotion of a folk epic in a rural dialect to something like a new linguistic and literary standard. Not much later, in the 1890s, authors associated with the *Kurdistan* journal, including Miqdad Midhat Bedir Xan and Hajî Qadir Koyî, promoted *Mem û Zîn* to the status of Kurdish national epic, even though it had only circulated in medrese circles in the Kurmanji-speaking regions of Northern Kurdistan, and had hardly if at all been distributed in the Sorani-speaking regions further South (cf. Leezenberg, 2018). Around the same time, the *Book of Dede Korcut* was reconceptualised as the Turkish national epic. Thus, around the turn of the twentieth century, as is explicitly indicated in Hemzeyê Muksî's 1919 introduction to the first book printing of *Mem û Zîn*, the possession of a literary tradition and a national epic had come to be seen as virtually a *criterion* for nationhood: "every people and nation that wants to preserve its national existence and life must from the start devote a vigorous effort and interest to its literature and to its literary works."¹⁸

The attitudes to and ideologies of language and literature expressed in *Mem û Zîn* are very different indeed: Xanî's ideology of the societal and political functioning of language that emerges from *Mem û Zîn* hardly, if at all, revolves around the romantic-nationalist notion of *Volk*. Thus, Xanî shows no sense of language as expressing a people's soul or a national character, or of literature as embodying a national heritage. His imagery surrounding the use of Kurdish is not expressivist and psychological (i.e., describing language as the outer form of inner national spirit or character), let alone biological (describing language in organicist terms, for example representing the "mother tongue" as an object of the speaker's love or affection, as living or dead, or as healthy or sick), but rather economic, and articulated in terms of money and markets:

Ev pûl-i eger çî bê buhane/Yekrûne û saf û bêbuhane

Even if these coins are without worth/ They are pure, unmixed and
priceless (*bayt* 265)

Kurmançîye sirfe, bê gumane/Zêr nîne, bi bêne "sipîde mane"

It is pure Kurdish without doubt/ It is no gold of which they say
"it's pale" (*bayt* 267)

¹⁸ "Her gel û neteweyê ku daxwaza hebûn û jiyana xwe ya neteweyî bike, divê ku ji destpêka kar ve giringiyeka xurt bide edebiyata xwe û eserên xwe yên edebî" (Muksî 1919: 32).

Obviously, the purity of the language to which Ehmedê Xanî alludes here is not of a linguistic order. In fact, the language of *Mem û Zîn* is not at all “pure Kurdish” in any present-day sense of the word, but closer to what modern-day scholars would call a “macaronic” if not a “mixed” language, as it is shot through with lexical borrowings and, to a lesser extent, morphological and syntactic calques from Arabic and Persian.¹⁹ Not surprisingly, a large part of its technical vocabulary of religious and natural-philosophical learning, and of sciences like logic, astronomy, and alchemy, is borrowed from Arabic; but also a good many Persian terms are employed to refer to more everyday objects, for which Kurdish equivalents are readily available. Poetically, of course, this vocabulary expansion by borrowing enhances the richness of the language of the work, allowing the poet to indicate the same thing with an array of synonyms or near-synonyms from Kurdish, Persian and Arabic; but linguistically, it is very significant that romantic-nationalistic ideologies of language purity, which regard only words originating in the vernacular language itself as legitimate, are entirely absent in *Mem û Zîn*.

Hence, what Xanî calls the “purity” of the Kurdish language does not simply exist in the absence, or relative scarcity, of foreign loan words. Instead, the purity of Kurdish he alludes to is of two orders: economic (or if one likes metallurgical) and alchemical. On the one hand, he compares the purity of the language to the purity of the metals used in coins; clearly, what he more specifically means here is that his poem is free of base metals that detract from its value. That is, he imagines the Kurdish language as a kind of currency that is not yet recognised as valuable, unlike the great literate and literary languages of his day; but this kind of recognition is not because the poet’s words are made out of worthless material. On the other hand, by writing in Kurdish, Xanî wishes to purify impure matter, as well as his own impure heart. Here, on closer inspection, the imagery turns out to be not so much monetary or economic as alchemical. For him, the precious character of the metals of his words is not a naturally given value, but the result of a purification process out of base materials.

Now the crucial point for Xanî, which is also of political significance, is that both economic and alchemical purity can be brought about only by a ruler: it is the king whose engraved name ensures that a coin is not counterfeit:

Qirtasîyeya me bê penahan/Bê derbê qebûlê padişahan

Our pages, without support/ Minted without the consent of
princes (*bayt* 272)²⁰

¹⁹ On the the use of macaronic language in early modern European literatures, see Burke (2004: 133-8).

²⁰ Saadalla’s translation is not quite precise here.

Likewise, Xanî continues, it is king Mîrza, described as endowed with alchemical powers, whose very look cleanses both hearts and coins:

Mîrê ku bi nave Mîrîza ye/ Mehza nezera wî kîmîya ye
Qelbêd-i zexel diket belorî/ Pûlêd-i dexel diket filorî

The prince named Mîrza/Whose mere look is alchemy
He cleanses troubled hearts/ He refines impure coins (*bayt* 275-6)²¹

We are remote from any language of popular sovereignty here: it is not the will of the people but the words and deeds of the ruler by which a national currency (whether linguistic or monetary) is validated, and by which the hearts of the subjects are cleansed. In other words, Xanî sees government as a matter of alchemy as much as politics. It involves the quasi-magical acts that ensure, and indeed performatively create, both material or monetary value and spiritual purity.

Thus, in Xanî's vision, the king's rule has not only a political but also an eschatological function: his justice consists in the very act of governing, in so far as this act is conducive to the individual soul's salvation. This is unmistakably a crucial part of the narrative of *Mem û Zîn* at large. It is the *mîr* of Botan himself who forbids the two lovers coming together in this world; and by doing so, he ensures that their love remains pure and can be transmuted from a human into a divine one. Mem and Zîn's love, it is emphatically stated in the chapter describing their secret visit to the prince's garden (chapter 39), becomes all unconsummated; and precisely because of this, it is like Layla and Majnûn's. The love between the two tragic pairs of lovers remains the purer for remaining strictly platonic. Likewise, both Mem and Zîn affirm that their harsh treatment at the hands of the king *is*, in fact, just (respectively, *bayts* 1806-1814; 2086-2087). Thus, the imprisoned Mem acknowledges:

Heqqê mine, adle, zilm-i nine/ Xasiyyetê agirê evîne

It is what I deserve, it's just and not oppression/ It is specific to the fire of love (*bayt* 1814)

²¹ Rudenko omits *bayt* 276, but it appears in the 1750 Baghdad MS, and I can see no good reason for leaving it out.

This royal role in the mystical purification of love would seem to suggest that the king's words and deeds are by definition just, or rather, that the king's words and deeds *define* what is to count as just, valid, or legitimate. This is very much in line with the monetary imagery or ideology of language discussed above, where it is the king's name that validates coinage, and in doing so, distinguishes real and counterfeit currency.

The political implications of this are clear: when looked at from a broader cosmic and eschatological perspective, it turns out that all apparent royal injustice in the world may in fact be part of a divine plan, and as such is part of an ultimately just order. In this mystical vision of things, even the story's villain, Bekir, turns out to have a legitimate eschatological role after all: shortly before her death, Zîn praises him as part of the divine plan to keep the love between herself and Mem pure, by his successful efforts to prevent the two lovers from coming together in this life. At a more mundane level, Bekir is characterised as an unpleasant but inevitable feature of government. Repeatedly, Taccîn warns the prince against using the services of this "unreliable dog" as he calls him, but the *mîr* answers that rulers are like mills, alternatively acting just and tyrannical, and in fact have a need for nasty fellows like Bekir; it is even explicitly stated that the king's appointing Bekir is in accordance with divine requirements (*bi iqtizayê xilqet*) (*bayt* 1127-1128). This suggestion that political injustice is part of a just cosmic order is reflected in the familiar mystical view of the devil, or "the poor and guiltless Iblîs" (*Iblîsê faqîrê bê cinayet*, *bayt* 86), as in reality the most loyal of all God's creatures for refusing to worship anybody but God Himself (cf. Bocheńska, 2016).

It should be clear that this political-mystical vision is profoundly quietist, not to say apolitical. On the one hand, it depicts apparent political injustice as in reality part of a just cosmic and eschatological order; on the other, it presents the king as the main warrant, if not the efficient cause, of his subjects' salvation, whose rule is legitimate almost as a matter of definition. We are far removed here from the seemingly revolutionary character of Kâveh the blacksmith in the *Shâhnâmeh*, who revolts against the tyrannical king Zahhâk. It is also profoundly at odds with the apparent nationalism and the lament at the Kurds' unjust fate expressed in the *dîbaçe*, which explicitly questions the divine justice of the Kurds being subjugated by Ottomans and Safavids (*bayts* 208, 216).

In the most pessimistic reading, then, Xanî might be read as implying that there is no more legitimacy to Kurdish aspirations than the ultimately arbitrary decision of a king to endorse and support it. But despite this apparent political quietism, *Mem û Zîn* displays a far more ambiguous picture of kingship, and displays a rather more critical view of the ruler than this mystical language might suggest. In spite of its superficial message that the king's decisions are wise and just, and in so far as they seem unjust are really part of a just cosmic and eschatological order, Xanî describes the *mîr* of Botan, and rulers in general, in

far from uniformly flattering terms. As Roger Lescot (1942: vii) has noted, this makes it rather ironic that it was the Bedir Khan family, descendants of the former *mîrs* of Botan, who started promoting *Mem û Zîn* as the national epic in the 1890s. Despite the initial praise of his rule in chapter 8, prince Zeyneddîn is described as jealous, capricious, and all too easily offended (*bayts* 1684-1685; 1706-1707); and at various points in the poem, his behaviour towards Mem appears impulsive and irrational, not to say profoundly unjust. In fact, the king himself admits as much, even though he thinks Zîn is the one really responsible for Mem's suffering. When telling Zîn that he has decided to end Mem's imprisonment, he tells her:

Cewr û sîtema ku min li wî kir/ Ew cewr-i te kir, sîtem ewî kir

Although I treated him with oppression and injustice/ You were
the one who oppressed, and it was he who was unjust (2001)

Likewise, even though Tacdîn falls short of calling the king unjust or a tyrant, he still describes his revolt against the king, or more precisely his plan for armed struggle to liberate Mem, as a *jihâd* (*bayt* 1895), and calls his death in the fight on Mem's behalf a sacred duty (*farz*) (*bayt* 1921). But such mention, let alone positive appraisal, of open rebellion is as rare in *Mem û Zîn* as in other premodern works of *adab*.

In this respect, two important differences between *Mem û Zîn* and the *Shâbnâme* demand our attention. To begin with, one of the main themes in the latter work is *farr* or royal glory: just and virtuous rulers possess this glory, which warrants their authority and legitimacy to rule. Tyrants and usurpers, by contrast, have no *farr*, and because of this they are eventually overthrown (and indeed, *must* be overthrown). Finally, kings who are about to die, like Jamshîd, are said to lose their *farr*, which thus turns out to be the warrant not merely of the king's rule, but of his very life. In *Mem û Zîn*, the theme of royal glory is almost entirely absent. Apart from the usual praise of rulers, which is as formulaic as it is hyperbolic (and, in the case of the *mîr* of Botan, blatantly false), neither Zeyneddîn, the fictitious prince of Botan, nor Mîrza, the real-life ruler of Hakkârî in Xanî's time, is consistently credited with possessing this *ferr*. Although the term does occur in the poem (e.g., *ferr û ferheng*, *bayt* 1162; *ferrê padişahî*, *bayt* 2073), it is not systematically or even primarily applied to worldly rulers. At one point, it is even stated that Zeyneddîn derives his glory (significantly, not *ferr* but *şubret û şan*) from Tacdîn (*bayt* 1955-1956).

The easy reply to this is that, unlike the *Shâbnâme*, *Mem û Zîn* is simply not about kingship and its legitimation; but this leaves the various remarks about the ruler of Botan, and about rulers in general, unaccounted for. Another, equally facile answer is that *farr* is so to speak an imperial prerogative, and as

such applies only to the king or *shâh* of an empire, and not to petty princes or *mîrs* of local fiefdoms; but the problem with this is that in *Mem û Zîn*, neither Ottoman nor Safavid rulers, nor indeed the various mythical rulers from the *Shâhnâme*, are credited with *farr*, either. In fact, rather more seems to be at stake here: the text of *Mem û Zîn* does, after all, appear to raise questions about the justice (and perhaps even legitimacy) of the ruler's power.

A second difference is the apparent absence of the theme, prominent in the *Shâhnâme*, of the unjust ruler, and the dilemma of what the right course of action is for the just man serving under such an unjust king.²² But although this dilemma is not very prominent in *Mem û Zîn*, the work does feature repeated warnings against the whims of princes. Thus, the conclusion to chapter 49 states that even princes may err, especially because they tend to be arrogant, unwilling to listen to good advice, and prone to seek bad counsel (*bayt* 1981-1996); and the chapter introducing Bekir ends with a warning in even stronger language against kings, who are "like fire":

Zînhare, bi wan ne kî tu bawer/ Ger bab û pisî û ger birader
Xasma ku miqerrebêd-i bedxwah/ nêzîkî bibin, ne'ûzu billah

Beware, do not trust them, ever/Even if they were a father, a
cousin, or a brother

Particularly if bad associates/ Come near them, may God protect
us (*bayt* 1193-1194)

Politically, this shift in tone is significant indeed. In fact, compared to earlier courtly romances or *mathnavî* poems like, most importantly, *Laylî and Majnûn* and also to the genre of *nasîbat al-mulûk* or mirrors for princes, a not very emphatic but crucial change of attitude occurs in *Mem û Zîn*: it does not address itself to the ruler with the advice to be wise, just, and virtuous, but rather warns others against associating too much with kings who are stupid, unjust, or vile. But exactly who are these readers warned against bad kings? This question brings us back to the question of *Mem û Zîn's* intended audience.

Clearly, *Mem û Zîn* is not dependent on either imperial or local patronage, and does not address itself primarily to kings. Unlike the *Shâhnâme* and the various works of Nizâmî, it seems not to have been written at royal behest, nor does it extensively sing the praise of any princely patron, apart from a brief mention of the otherwise unknown ruler Mîrza (*bayt* 273-284). And unlike contemporary writings, such as the work described as the first modern Greek novel, Nicholas

²² Cf. Davis (1992: ch. 2).

Mavrocordatos's 1718 *Parerga Philotheou* (*The Leisure of Philotheos*), it does not even pay lip service to the justice and splendor of Ottoman rule.

There is, of course, the brief passage in chapter 6 of the *dîbaçe*, which sings the praise of, and directly addresses itself to, Prince Mîrza; but this passage is significant for the contrast it displays with works like *Laylî and Majnûn*, rather than for any similarities with works written under royal patronage. First, Xanî's appeal to the prince sounds more like reproach than praise. It is not the conventional chapter of hyperbolic praise for some petty local ruler, but only a brief, twelve-*bayt* passage, which, moreover, starts with the reproachful words that Mîrza "has never listened with understanding" (*mesmû'î nekîr bi sem'ê idrak, bayt 274*). Secondly, and unlike the poets of medieval courtly romances, Xanî does not ask the king for financial support here, but rather for the support of the Kurdish language. His very look or gaze, Xanî asserts, would legitimate and validate the poet's words (*bayt 281-282*). And here, too, Xanî's tone is one of reproach; the king's look is "overly general, and has not given us a special look" (*nezêra wî zêde 'âm el lew xas-i nezêr ji dil neda me, bayt 284*). There is a pun here that is almost impossible to translate: the *'amma* or *ewam* are the illiterate masses, whereas Xanî clearly sees himself as part of the *xâssa* or literate elite that needs the prince's support in its innovative literate and learned use of Kurdish. Ironically, Xanî himself claims to work on behalf of the masses (*ji boyê 'âmê, bayt 239*) even as he reproaches Mîrza for doing the same thing.

Does Xanî, then, address himself to the Kurdish people at large, that is, to the *'amma* in whose language, or for whose sake, he wrote his work? That seems rather unlikely: the often quite complex imagery and wordplay, the numerous allusions to the written Persianate literary tradition, and even more importantly the elaborate use of technical vocabulary from Sufism and the religious, philosophical and magical sciences, suggest that *Mem û Zîn* was never really intended for the uneducated *'amma*, *kbalq*, or *Volk*, at all, but presupposed a level of education in its audience. Not surprisingly, this education was supplied primarily if not exclusively by the local medreses; and as argued above, there is evidence that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, these medreses were not only increasing in number, but also elaborating Kurdish as a language of instruction, or even of learning. As noted, Xanî's own *Nûbihara piçûkan*, and *Eqîdeya êmanê*, which, respectively, explain Arabic vocabulary and the basics of the faith to an audience of young Kurdish-speaking medrese pupils, are among the most directly relevant pieces of evidence for this vernacularisation.

But even *Mem û Zîn* itself may be seen as part of this vernacularisation process, enriching as it does the Kurdish language with its first-ever full-length learned *mathnavî* poem. Undoubtedly, it is against the background of this vernacularisation that one should read Xanî's famous proclaimed reason for writing his epic in Kurdish:

Da xelq-i nabêjîtin ko Ekrad/ Bê me'rifet in, bê esl û binyad

So that the people will not say that the Kurds are without learning,
without principle or foundation (*bayt* 240).

Here, Xanî explicitly states that his aim for writing in Kurdish is to provide the Kurds with learning in their own vernacular.

In short, it would be misleading and anachronistic to study *Mem û Zîn* for a romantic nationalism based on a political ideology of popular sovereignty and a linguistic ideology of vernacular language as the expression of a people's national soul or identity. What we do find explicitly, however, is a self-conscious vernacularisation of Kurdish that is the promotion of a vernacular language to a medium of literacy, letters, and learning. We also find a mystical-alchemical view of both government and language: it sees both subjects as saved, and coinages and languages as validated, by the king. Thus, the ruler's is not so much a sovereign power that binds his subjects to his laws and decrees, but rather, so to speak, a power of salvation, which, by the mere fact of being exercised, may performatively purify or transmute both souls and languages.

From all this, I would like to draw the tentative conclusion that the audience Ehmedê Xanî had in mind when writing his epic was neither courts or princes, nor the Kurdish *'amma* or population at large, but rather the advanced medrese students, who could be assumed to be familiar with the learned vocabulary and the literary allusions of the work. Its author intended *Mem û Zîn* to be neither a national epic expressing the aspirations of the commoners nor a piece of courtly literature for the edification or entertainment of kings, but rather, if one may coin a term of art, a specimen of "medrese literature," which addresses itself primarily to an audience of medrese pupils and teachers. It is also my suspicion that the relatively large number of manuscripts of *Mem û Zîn* that have come down to us mostly originate in medreses, rather than in local courts or private libraries. Although this claim may be difficult to verify conclusively, most if not all manuscripts I have seen, or read about, are relatively simple, without elaborate or expensive ornaments or miniatures, unlike, for example, the Bodleian manuscript of Şeref Xan Bidlîsî's *Şerefname* and the various copies of Firdawsî's *Shâhnâme* made for local and imperial rulers throughout the Persianate world.

There is also a positive hypothesis emerging from all this: it was the medreses, and not the princely courts, which were the prime location of the Kurdish vernacularisation of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and this may to some extent explain their ambivalent attitude to princely power, an ambivalence that appears in *Mem û Zîn*. Although these medreses were generally neither nationalist nor politically active, they did lay the groundwork for later politicised forms of nationalism through their cultivation of Kurdish as a language of education and literature. In short, trying to recover the original context within

which *Mem û Zîn* was written may lead us to reappraise the role of both religious education and poetic writing in the development of Kurdish nationalism, and of nationalism more generally.

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