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Leezenberg, M.

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EHMEDÊ XANÎ'S *MEM Û ZÎN*
The consecration of a Kurdish national epic

Michiel Leezenberg

More than any other work, Ehmedê Xanî's *Mem û Zîn* (henceforth *MZ*), a mystical romance or *mathnawî* poem in 2,655 bayts, or distichs, written in Kurmancî or Northern Kurdish, symbolizes and reflects the Kurds' aspirations toward liberation and national independence. This story of two tragic lovers who are not allowed to marry in life, and who – despite being buried together – remain separated by a thornbush, even in death, is usually seen as an allegory of the division of Kurdish society by outside forces and of the Kurds' inability to unite among themselves. The manuscript evidence and the oldest available sources suggest that from early on, Xanî and his poem have held a place of prominence, if not dominance, in Kurdish letters; initially, however, the poem was generally read, like other mathnawî poems, as a work of mystical love (*mahabba*). It was only in the late nineteenth century that Xanî was gradually elevated to the status of Kurdish national poet and his poem to the Kurdish national epic; accordingly, the work was increasingly interpreted as carrying a secular nationalist message. This chapter will attempt to trace the shifting reception of Xanî's romance and briefly discuss how it acquired a central place in Kurdish national consciousness over the course of the twentieth century.

About Xanî's life, we know little with any confidence. In *MZ*, he states that he was born in 1061 AH/1650 CE (b. 2653) and that he finished his epic when he was 44 years old, that is, in 1095 AH/1695 CE.[1] He is known to have died in 1706 or 1707 CE in Beyazîd, where he was also buried; his tomb, near the famous Ishak Pasha Palace, can still be visited. Apart from this, he writes nothing about himself beyond conventional, and hyperbolical, statements about how sinful he is, calling himself 'the commander of sinners' (*pêshirewê gunahikaran*, b. 2651). He is also known to have written two short didactic works in verse: the *Eqîdeyê êmanê* ('Profession of the Faith') and the *Nûbihara piçûkan* ('First-Fruits for the Little Ones'), a rhymed Arabic-Kurdish vocabulary, both of which, it is said, were among the first works rural Kurdish medrese pupils had to read and memorize after the Qur'an.[2] Another profession of faith, the *Eqîdeya Islamê*, partly written in prose, is also ascribed to Xanî, but large parts of this text are identical to a late-nineteenth-century eqîde by one shaykh Abdullah of Nehri which is known to have originated in Khalidî-Naqshbandî circles and hence can hardly have been written by Xanî.[3] Xanî's fame and standing among the Kurds are due primarily, if not exclusively, to his story of two tragic lovers; his other works, though significant

in their own right, have hardly become known outside the medrese environment from which they originate and for which they were composed.

The story of *MZ* concerns the tragic fate of the beautiful youths Mem and Zîn, who first meet during a celebration of Newroz, the New Year's celebration on March 21, and fall in love at first sight. The local prince, however, egged on by his evil counselor Bekir, refuses to grant permission for the youths' marriage; as a result, both lovers slowly wither away. Then, during a game of chess with the prince, Mem publicly confesses his love for Zîn, upon which the prince has him imprisoned. After a final visit from his beloved in prison, Mem dies; shortly thereafter, Zîn passes away too.

There are numerous oral versions of the story, which often, but by no means always, circulate under the title *Memê Alan*. A few short versions had been published in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, but the first book-length rendering (in fact, a composite version blending recitations of several bards) was published by Roger Lescot in 1942. In 1991, Michael Chyet published a study of a much larger number of versions, most of which had previously been published. Often, Xanî is described as having found the inspiration for his tale from these local oral traditions, but it cannot strictly be proven that these actually antedate Xanî's literate version. Moreover, the oral tradition from which his is claimed to have drawn inspiration is generally tacitly assumed, or explicitly claimed, to have been 'purely Kurdish,' but Kurdish oral practices clearly form part of a wider Persianate or Iranian cultural space which is known to have been a rather more cosmopolitan affair and to have involved a complex interaction between written and oral forms of cultural expression. Finally, not only are both Armenian *ashugs* and Jewish bards known to have sung tales in Kurdish, but there are also varieties of *Memê Alan* in languages other than Kurdish in existence.[4] Whatever its character, Xanî was probably inspired by this local tradition, but his version of the story differs considerably from the oral versions that have come down to us. Most significantly, Mem is a rather nobler character in Xanî's version, while *perîs* (fairies) and, more generally, various forms of folk religion, including sorcery and magic, which are quite prominent in most oral renderings, are almost completely absent in Xanî's work.[5]

The lovers first meet during Newroz, the New Year's celebration during the spring solstice. This festival forms a carnival during which people are allowed to do things that are not normally condoned. Specifically, local boys and girls are allowed to intermingle and to dance together, with the aim of choosing a partner to marry. Both Mem and his male companion, Tajdîn, and Zîn and her sister, Sitî, are cross-dressed, and they are initially bewildered by their love. Intriguingly, there is an asymmetry in this cross-dressing and seemingly homoerotic love; however, whereas the girls are scolded by their wet-nurse for falling in love with what they think are females, nobody reproaches the boys for falling in love with beardless males. Clearly, the image of the (human or divine) beloved as a beardless boy, so widespread in the classical Arabic, Persian, and Ottoman Turkish traditions, had also reached Kurdish letters. But human love and sexuality is not what *MZ* is primarily about.[6] In line with the Persianate mathnawî tradition from which it derives, *MZ*'s tale of the unconsummated love between two humans is given an allegorical mystical significance: precisely because the love is not consummated and remains pure, it can be transmuted into a divine love. The great model for this kind of poetry is, of course, Nizamî Genjewî's (d. 1209 CE) *Layli va Majnûn*, which is frequently alluded to by Xanî.

Xanî shows himself to be well aware of the fact that he stands in a wider Persianate literary tradition. Clearly, the imagery used in *MZ*, of roses and nightingales, of moths and flames, and of famous lovers like Layla and Majnun and Farhad and Shirin, is very much

based on the tradition of Persianate mystical love poetry; in fact, Xanî explicitly alludes to classical Persian poets like Nizâmî and Abdulrahmân Jâmî (d. 1492 CE):

> Kes nakite meyterê xwe Camî
> Ranagiritin kesek Nizamî.
> No one would make Jami his groom/
> No one would employ Nizamî.
>
> *(b. 257)*

Apart from these explicit references, however, it is difficult, if not impossible, to say with any degree of confidence that Xanî was actually familiar with the works of such classical Persian poets as, most importantly, Firdawsî, Rumî, and Hafez. Indeed, there are indications that he knew at least part of these poets through later oral versions rather than from their own written texts. Thus, he repeatedly refers or alludes to characters and episodes from Firdawsî's *Shahname*, like the hero Rostam, and the unhappy lovers Bizhan and Manizha, but – surprisingly, if not astonishingly – he nowhere mentions the story of Kaveh the blacksmith, which occurs early in Firdawsî's epic, and which is explicitly linked to the origin of the Kurds. Either Xanî was unaware of this episode, which occurs quite early in the *Shahname*, and by extension, possibly, of the *Shahname* as a whole, or he *did* know it but may have concluded that this tale of a people rising against its ruler did not fit his own literary, religious, or political objectives.

Obviously, Xanî knows that other poets have composed works in Kurdish before him; in fact, he mentions several of these predecessors by name:

> Bîna ve rûha Melê Cizîrî
> Pê hey bikira 'Elî Herîrî
> Keyfek we bida Feqiyê Teyran.
>
> *(b. 251–252)*

> I would have resurrected Melayê Cezîrî's soul/And would have returned Elî Herîrî back to life/I would have brought joy to Feqiyê Teyran.

At first blush, this awareness seems to contradict Xanî's boast that his writing his verse in Kurdish is a novelty, indeed, a heretic innovation (*bid'et*, b. 237). This apparent contradiction, however, disappears when one realizes that Xanî is not talking about Kurdish-language poetry *tout court* but specifically about the learned verse of the mathnawî genre. This eagerness to develop a learned Kurdish poetry also helps to explain Xanî's famous comment that he has written his poem in order to present the Kurds as a people of learning and (mystical) love:

> Da xelq-i nebêjitin ko Ekrad
> Bê me'rifet in, bê esl û binyad.
>
> *(b. 240)*

> So that people will not say that the Kurds/Are without learning, without principles or foundations.

Clearly, Xanî himself saw his tale as a mystical allegory of worldly and divine love. Already in the very opening lines of his poem, he speaks of this theme, calling God the literal and

metaphorical beloved (*mehbûbê heqîqî û mecazî*, b. 2). Yet this is not the way, or at least the primary way, in which his poem has been read by modern-day readers. Nowadays, *MZ* is generally seen as an allegory of the political fragmentation of Kurdistan and of the Kurds' seeming inability to overcome their divisions, to unite, and to gain their liberty in a state of their own. This reading started gaining ground in the late 19th century, but it has a basis in Xanî's own text, notably in Chapters 5 and 6 of the introduction (*dîbaçe*). These two chapters have received a disproportionate amount of attention from readers because they seem to express a distinctly modern desire for Kurdish national independence. In particular, Xanî writes,

> Gerd ê hebuwa me serfirazek… Neqdê me dibû bi sikke meskûk… Zahir vedibû ji bo me bextek.
> If we had a leader… Our currency would be minted coinage… Our fortune would have brightened.[7]
>
> *(b. 199–203)*

He adds that, because the Kurds are divided, others, like the (Ottoman) Turks, the Arabs, and the Persians, have been able to rule over the Kurds (b. 216–234). For Kurdish nationalists, such and similar lines prove that the Kurds are a distinct nation with a long-standing claim to statehood. Foreign scholars, however, have been puzzled by the seemingly anachronistic character of Xanî's verses. How is it possible, they ask, that a late 17th-century text from the periphery of the Ottoman empire appears to express the romantic nationalist sentiments that would not appear in Western Europe until the turn of the 19th century? Many modern commentators have been at a loss to adequately explain this passage, with one even confessing that he initially suspected it was an interpolation by a modern nationalist.[8] The lines under scrutiny, however, appear in all known manuscripts of the work, including the oldest ones, which date back to the 1730s.

On closer inspection, however, this seeming anachronism disappears: whatever sentiment Xanî is expressing here, it is not a romantic nationalist call to a revolutionary struggle for national liberation or independence. First, and significantly, the toponym *Kurdistan* nowhere appears in this work. Xanî only rarely uses the substantive *Kurd* or the adjective *kurdî*; more often, he uses the plural noun *Ekrad*, 'the Kurds,' and the term *Kurmanc* or the adjective *Kurmancî* for their language. Second, Xanî calls not for a territorial nation-state based on political liberty or popular sovereignty, but rather for a land ruled by a Kurdish prince instead of a Turkish, Persian, or Arab one. It is only in Koyî that we will first encounter the romantic nationalism of liberty and independence, and the term Kurdistan as a political rather than a geographical sense. More precisely, Xanî wants a local Kurdish sovereign not just to rule the Kurds, but also to, in a sense, redeem them. For Xanî, it is the ruler who can give currency to the poet's vernacular words and who by the same token can transmute the base metal of the poet's verbal coinage into gold. In this vision, the ruler has not only a political but also an eschatological role to play. It is not by chance that Xanî says of the local prince Mîrza that his 'mere look is alchemy' (*nezera wî kimya ye*, b. 275). Thus, in the story, it is the seemingly evil prince Zeyneddîn who, by his refusal to allow Mem and Zîn to marry, enables them to transmute their human, or metaphorical, love into a divine, that is, literal, one. Moreover, in the end, both Mem and Zîn recognize this role of their prince and praise him for it.

Mem and Zîn in its medrese setting

Originally, then, *MZ* was not a nationalist tale of a people's liberation, but a mystical allegory of love. This feeling is strengthened by the fact that it was originally written for a religious audience. The manuscript evidence suggests that relatively large numbers of copies were made from early in the eighteenth century; unlike the manuscripts of works for local princely patrons, like Sheref al-Dîn Bidlîsî's *Sherefname*, let alone works for royal customers like Firdawsî's *Shahname*, all of these copies are simple and unadorned, and lack lavish illustrations. This fact alone suggests that, unlike many another mathnawî work, *MZ* was never primarily intended for, or directed to, a courtly audience. Unlike most other Persianate poems, *MZ* also lacks a chapter of elaborate and hyperbolical praise for a local patron. There is a brief passage on prince Mirza (b. 274–285), but this ruler is exhorted in an almost reproachful tone.

Instead, both the available textual evidence and the – scanty – testimony we have from medrese alumni point to its having been primarily written for, and appreciated by, an audience of medrese pupils in, specifically, Northern Kurdistan. As such, it may be seen as part of a wider process of vernacularization, or shift toward new literate uses of the spoken vernacular, in the Kurmancî-speaking areas during the late 17th and 18th centuries: in this period, a number of introductory Kurmancî-language works on Arabic lexicon and grammar, and religious learning were written, and soon became a regular part of the *rêz* or medrese curriculum in rural medreses all over Northern Kurdistan.[9] No such vernacularization took place, however, among Kurds further south. In the area where Central Kurdish (later called 'Sorani') was spoken, the hujras and medreses continued to employ Arabic and Persian as the exclusive languages of instruction. Thus, it may be no coincidence that neither the Kurmancî textbooks nor Xanî's mathnawî poem gained a wider circulation in Southern Kurdistan. There are also remarkably few, if any, oral versions of the Memê Alan tale from Sorani-speaking areas that have come down to us. The question of long-term cultural differences between the Kurmancî – and the Sorani-speaking areas, however, is best left for another occasion.

Transformation into a national epic

An important later stage in the Kurdish reception of Xanî is marked by Mela Mahmûdê Bayazîdî (d. 1860). Although unknown by his contemporaries, Bayazîdî is an important source in his own right. In his brief sketch of the major classical Kurdish poets (in Jaba 1860), he writes of Xanî that, 'of all the Kurdish poets, he is the most famous, and perhaps the most esteemed and praised of all poets' (*ji sha'riyêd Kurdistanê hemûyan jî meshhur û fayiq e, belko ji hemû she'iran meqbul û memduh e*) (Jaba 1860: 15 Ar.); he adds that *MZ* is a 'book on lovers and beloveds' (*kitêbek 'ashiq û ma'shuqan*), giving no hint that he considers the nationalist-sounding passages of central importance to the work. Even more intriguingly, he gives a prose summary which strips Xanî's tale of all its mystical elements, thus paving the way for a more secularized notion of a (national) literature. Bayazîdî's version is clearly based on Xanî's poem rather than on any oral version; in fact, Bayazîdî expresses no familiarity with oral versions of the story in any of his writings.[10] He does not even mention it in his discussion of Kurdish songs in his ethnographical work, the *Adet û rusumatnameê Ekradiyye* (cf. Dost 2010).

For two centuries, *MZ* only circulated in manuscript form. It was not until the final years of the 19th century that the first fragments of the epic were printed, and the first complete edition would only appear in 1919. The first locally printed fragment appeared in *Kurdistan*

periodical, which had started in 1315/1898, edited by Miqdad Mîdhat Bedir Xan, one of Bedirxan Beg's sons. In the second issue, dated 14 zulhicce 1315 (May 6, 1898), Miqdad introduces *MZ* to his readers, promising that he will print a fragment of the poem in every issue of the journal and expressing his desire to print the work as a whole in book form. He praises the poem abundantly as containing 'many meanings and much wisdom' (*gelek meqsed û hisse û hikmet*). Although he falls short of calling it a national epic, or of labeling Xanî a 'national poet,' he unmistakably sees literature in specifically national terms; hence, Berdixan's comment that he had 'showed the work to Turkish and Arab scholars (*ulemayên Tirk û Ereb*),' who were impressed with it. *MZ*, in this line of reasoning, is not only a work of a national literature and a source of national pride for the Kurds, but it also makes them worthy as a nation.

It was also in *Kurdistan* that a famous poem on Xanî by Soranî poet Hajî Qadir Koyî (1815 or 1817–1898) was first printed. Reportedly written down in Koyî's copy of *MZ*, it states that

> Le kurdan xeyrî Hacî û Shêxî Xanî
> Esasî nezmî kurdî danenawe[11]
> Among the Kurds, apart from Hajî [Qader Koyî] and shaykh [Ehmedê] Xanî/
> None has laid the foundations of Kurdish poetry.

These comments, of course, solidify not only the position of Xanî, but also, and in the same breath, that of Koyî himself. As far as I know, Koyî is the first Kurdish poet to employ the romantic nationalist discourse of liberty (Arabic *hurriyah*, Kurdish *azadî*) and love of the fatherland (Ar. *hubb al-watan*, Kd. *hubbî weten*). Thus, he writes that 'love of fatherland is a sign of faith' (*hubbî weten e delîlî êman*), and in his famous poem, *Xakî Cizîr û Botan*, he laments,

> Kiwa ew demey ke kurdan azad û serbixo bûn
> Where is the time that the Kurds were free and independent?
>
> *(Dîwan: 84).*

Thus, Koyî's is a backward-looking nationalism in the sense that it glorifies a past of alleged Kurdish liberty; it is also rather more unambiguous in its praise of the Kurdish mîrs than Xanî's poem. One would like to know in greater detail exactly when and how Koyî became acquainted with Xanî's epic and exactly what role the Bedir Xan family played in this process. Given that we have no evidence of either the oral or written versions of the tale circulating in Southern Kurdistan, Koyî is unlikely to have heard or read it before arriving in Istanbul in or around 1840. It is also unclear whether he was told of the epic's significance by members of the Bedir Xan family or, conversely, whether it was Koyî who impressed upon the Bedir Xans the poem's national importance. Given the lack of reliable sources, we may never know. According to Bedir Xan, Hajî Qadri Koyî had called *MZ* 'the book of our nation' (*kitêba milleta me*), but this quote comes from a relatively late source and cannot be found in any of Koyî's extant writings.

The early 20th century saw an increasingly antagonistic rivalry between different national movements in the Ottoman empire. Among Kurdish activists and intellectuals too, the sense grew that the Kurds were a nation in part precisely because they had a national literature. The culmination of this process was the first printed edition, edited by Hemze Muksî, which appeared in Istanbul in 1919, on the initiative of the Kürdistan Ta'mîmî Ma'arif ve Neshriyat Cemiyeti, the cultural section of the nationalist *Kurdistan Te'ali Cemiyeti* (KTC), the 'Society for the Rise of Kurdistan.' Even more strongly than Bedir Xan, Hemze implies that any

nation worthy of the name should have a national poet, and a national literature, of its own: 'Each people or nation that wants to create its national existence and sovereignty must first give strong care to its literature and literary works' (*her qewm û millet ku arzûya mewcûdiyet û selteneta xwe ya millî bikin, lazim e ji ewwel emir ve îhtîmamekê qewî bidine edebîyat û asarê xwe yê edebî*). He adds that, like Firdawsî, Xanî 'worked for his nation' (*Xanî wek Firdewsî jibo milliyeta xwe xebitîye*), but unlike the former, he did not completely succeed in reviving his nation since his age, unlike Firdawsî's, was 'evil and hard' (*berbad û çetin bû*).

Around the same time, the first dramatic rendering of the story was published. In 1918–1919, Rehmî Hekarî published a theatrical version, *Memê Alan*, in which Mem sets out to fight for the fatherland, much to the chagrin of both his mother and his beloved Zîn. Published in an era of unprecedented national, and military, mobilization, this work owes rather more to plays like Namik Kemal's *Vatan yahut Silistre* (1873) than any oral or written version of the story of Mem and Zîn as we know it.

Mem û Zîn in the modern nation-state

By a cruel irony, the publication of Hemze's printed edition was also an end point, at least for the Northern Kurds. The KTC was banned in 1920, and in the new Republic of Turkey, all spoken, written, and printed uses of Kurdish were outlawed. It would be almost 50 years until the next printed edition of *MZ* appeared on Turkish soil. In 1968, Mehmet Emin Bozarslan published a new edition of Hemze's text in Latin transcription, supplemented with a Turkish translation and an extensive vocabulary. As noted, he left out the passages on the division of the Kurds and the call for a strong leader; yet the very language in which the book was printed caused uproar. An order banning the book and summoning the author to court was issued; Bozarslan writes that half of the first print run of 6,000 copies was seized by the Turkish police and burned (1995: 97/101). After Bozarslan's acquittal in 1973, however, a second edition, identical to the first printing, appeared in 1975. A third edition, likewise a photographic reprint, was published in 1990. On the whole, however, any literary activity in Kurdish, and Kurdish cultural activities more generally, remained out of bounds in Turkey well into the 1990s. Clandestine Kurdish-language medrese activities continued, however, despite the official ban on both the Kurdish language and religious education. As but one example of this, I once found a printed copy of an undated (but visibly 20th-century) manuscript entitled *Mîzan al-adab* ('Balance of Literature') in a religious bookshop in Diyarbakir, which on closer inspection turned out to be a handwritten copy of Xanî's epic. Oral versions of *Memê Alan* also continued to be recited, especially in the more remote rural areas, where a large part of the population remained illiterate.

Of necessity, many Kurdish intellectuals who had fled the republic of Turkey continued their work in diaspora. A first wave of refugees settled in mandate Syria, including Celadet Bedir Xan (see the following); another wave emigrated to Western Europe in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and resumed Kurdish cultural activities in countries like Sweden, France, and Western Germany. Diaspora publishing houses like Roja nû in Sweden and Komkar in Germany published versions like the Kurdish text of Lescot's *Memê Alan* and Armenian-Kurdish playwright Eskerê Boyik's theatrical adaptation (1989). Likewise, in 1989, the Kurdish Institute in Paris published a Hejar's Sorani version and commentary of Xanî's epic.

In mandate Syria, the French authorities tolerated, and to some extent encouraged, Kurdish cultural activism, as part of a divide and conquer strategy to prevent a strong and unified Syrian nationalist opposition from emerging. In this climate, Celadet Bedir Xan fled from

Istanbul in 1923. Among others, he developed a Latin alphabet for Kurdish and started publishing a periodical, *Hawar*, in 1932. In this publication, he continued the consecration of Ehmedê Xanî and his romance that had been started in journals like *Kurdistan* and *Jîn*. Writing under the pseudonym of Herekol Ezîzan, Celadet Bedir Xan praised Xanî as 'the prophet of our national faith, and the prophet of our race's religion' (*pêxemberê diyaneta me a millî, pêxemberê ola me a nijadîn*).[12]

Also, after the end of the French mandate in 1946, Kurdish activities could continue, until the rise of a more assertive, and more repressive, Arab nationalism in the late 1950s and the 1960s. Thus, in 1947, a reprint of Hamza's *editio princeps* was published in Aleppo. It was also here that the famous religious scholar, Muhammad Sa'id Ramadan al-Bûtî (1929–2014), the future mufti of Syria, composed and published his Arabic prose rendering of Xanî's tale (1957). Although al-Bûtî closely follows Xanî's narrative, he omits not only the poem's Kurdish nationalist-sounding dîbaçe, but also its mystical elements. In doing so, he radically lifts the work out of its Kurdish and Sûfî setting, and makes it palatable for an international (or, more specifically, Arab) audience with a preference for straightforward narratives of pure and tragic love, and more conventional Islamic piety. As such, it has become quite popular in the Arab world and has seen numerous reprints, not only in Syria but also in other Arab countries.[13]

In monarchical and republican Iraq, the reception of the tale of Mem and Zîn, and of Xanî's epic, followed a rather different trajectory. In the Sorani-speaking areas, as noted earlier, neither the oral tales of Memê Alan nor Xanî's literary elaboration had gained a wider circulation in premodern and early modern times. Starting with an adaptation by Pîremerd published in 1928, the story became known to a larger – and partly illiterate – audience primarily through theatrical adaptations, mostly, if not exclusively, in the Sorani dialect of Sulaimaniya and with increasingly nationalist and revolutionary overtones. It seems to have been during this period that the reading of Xanî's epic started gaining a definitive foothold.[14] Although Gîw Mukriyani published an edition of the Kurmancî text in 1954, which was reprinted in 1967, it was not until 1960 that a full Sorani translation, by Iranian-born Hejar, was published, by coincidence in the same year that an armed Iraqi Kurdish movement emerged.

It was also in Iraq that the first full-length monographic study of *MZ* appeared, authored by Bulgarian- and Soviet-educated Izzeddîn Resul. The author's educational background becomes clear from chapter titles like 'Xanî and Dialectics' and from occasional references to Marx, but it also features an extensive discussion of the poem's Sûfî backgrounds and dimensions. Resul appears to take Xanî's consecration for granted, writing that he does not know of any other Kurdish poet whose significance is recognized and valued as universally as Xanî's (2007: 26).

Among the Kurds in Iran, the majority of whom speak a variety of Southern Kurdish rather than Kurmancî, the story of Mem and Zîn does not appear to have circulated widely before the 20th century; but here too both the oral and the literate versions have steadily gained popularity since then.

Developments in the Soviet Union, in particular the Soviet Republic of Armenia, deserve particular attention. The 1930s were a time when all Soviet peoples were hastily granted national poets and national epics as a matter of state policy. In the Caucasus, the jubilee of *Vepxistqaosani* (The Man in the Panther Skin) by Shoto Rustaveli and the millenary of the Armenian *Sasuntsi David* were celebrated, while in Central Asia, the *Manas* was promoted to the Kyrgyz national epic. Likewise, in 1938, the famous Soviet orientalist Orbeli ranked Xanî alongside such acknowledged national poets as Firdawsî and Rustaveli; in his preface to Rudenko's 1962 edition, Qanatê Kurdoev openly stated that *MZ* is 'the national epic of the Kurds.'[15]

On the whole, however, the early Soviet Union, with its atheist state policies, had little interest in promoting works of classical Islamic learning or literature, even if they had been written in vernacular languages. Instead, they lifted the oral traditions of the Kurds and other Soviet peoples into national traditions. Thus, in 1930s folklore collections, one encounters scholars like Heciyê Cindî and Emînê Evdal talking of oral epics like *Zembilfrosh* or *Dimdim* as the 'Kurdish national epic' (*eposa millî a kurdan*). The story of how these Soviet conceptions shaped later Kurdish self-perceptions, especially in Iraqi Kurdistan, remains to be told.

It was only during the 1960s that Soviet academic interest in classical Kurdish literature increased. In 1962, Margaret Rudenko published a text edition with a Russian translation, which is the sole genuine critical edition to date. With the numbers of manuscripts relatively easily available in places like London, Oxford, Petersburg, and so forth, it should by now be possible to prepare a new critical edition based on a larger – and possibly geographically broader – range of manuscripts than Rudenko was able to.

Mem û Zîn today

For long, Rudenko's 1962 Russian rendering remained the sole translation of Xanî's epic into a Western language. Early in the 21st century, however, several translations into Western European languages appeared. Unfortunately, both Saadalla's (2008) and Gerdi's (2009) English translations appeared with publishing houses in the region, as a result of which they have hardly reached an English-speaking audience elsewhere. There is also a French translation, at times rather liberal, by Alexie and Hasan (2002). At the time of writing, German and Dutch translations are in preparation.

In the late 20th and early 21st century, Xanî's standing among the Kurdish public is uncontroversial; however, one wonders how many Kurds have access to the poet in his own words. Most Kurds in Turkey have little if any knowledge even of present-day spoken Kurmancî, let alone of the classical written language as used by Xanî; even in places where Kurdish is taught at elementary and high school level, like Iraqi Kurdistan, pupils hardly if at all actually read anything from Xanî's poem itself.[16]

Clearly, the language of the 17th-century original, shot through with Arabic and Persian loan words and reproducing the complex conventional imagery of the Persianate tradition of mystical mathnawî poetry, forms a major stumbling block for present-day readers, even those with a solid command of Kurmancî. Hence, it should come as no surprise that numerous translations in other regional languages have appeared, even into modern Kurmancî or *Kurdiya xwerû*.[17]

Nowadays, the story of Mem and Zîn is increasingly transmitted and reproduced with the aid of technological media like film and television, cassette tapes and CDs, and most recently the internet. In 1991, a film adaptation, directed by Ümit Elçi and shot on location in, among others, Hoshap castle and Hasankeyf, though not in Cizre, where the original story is set, appeared. Although the Turkish ban on the use of Kurdish had been officially lifted in the same year, the taboo on that language remained very much in place. Hence, the film was spoken entirely in Turkish, although it featured fragments of the poem's dîbaçe, recited in the original language by Kurdish poet Musa Anter (who himself would be murdered by unknown assailants in the following year). The movie's soundtrack, composed by Mazlum Çimen and featuring a number of well-known Kurdish artists alongside Anter's recitation, seems to have known a substantial circulation of its own. In 2002, moreover, the Iraqi Kurdish satellite channel Kurdistan TV produced *Memî Alan*, an adaptation of the folk epic, as a miniseries directed by Nasir Hasan; apparently, this version had a rather larger cast, and larger budget,

than Elçi's adaptation. The figures of Mem and Zîn continue to inspire ever new generations of Kurdish musicians as well: in the songs of numerous younger generations of artists, the story of Mem and Zîn manages to harmoniously blend the love lyrics characteristic of the pop song with Kurdish national sentiment.

All of these reproductions and adaptations reassert and solidify the story of Mem and Zîn as a piece of Kurdish national heritage par excellence and, to a lesser extent, cement Xanî's status, or stature, as the Kurdish national poet. Thus, it can be asserted with confidence that no other work of Kurdish literature has anywhere near as wide a circulation, whether as an oral folk tale or a medrese manuscript' whether in Kurdish or in other regional languages; or whether as a mathnawî poem, a theater play, or a television miniseries, or in popular music. Nowadays, Mem and Zîn are seen as not only tragic lovers, but also as Kurdish national heroes.

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Notes

1. Seccadi (1971: 190) doubts the accuracy of Xanî's statement; but there seem to be no good reasons, let alone authoritative sources, to sustain such doubts.
2. Thus, for example, Mahmûdê Bayazidi in Jaba (1860: 16 Ar.); Zinar (1993: 78–80); Öztoprak (2003: 165).
3. Cf. MacKenzie (1962). Hassanpour (2003: 124) appears to conflate both eqîde texts ascribed to Xanî into a single work. Moreover, he wrongly asserts that this work was a lexicon and that it did not become part of the medrese curriculum.
4. On some of the complexities of this Iranian oral tradition, see, for example, Yamamoto (2003). Chyet (1991) includes two versions of the oral epic in Aramaic and one in Armenian.
5. For a more detailed confrontation of Xanî's version with the oral tradition, see in particular Chyet (1991: ch. 2).
6. *MZ* displays a number of interesting views on gender and sexuality, but these would take us too far afield here. For a more detailed discussion, see Leezenberg (forthcoming).
7. In fact, when Bozarslan published his transcription and Turkish translation of the text in 1968, he left out much of these chapters, thus hoping to escape the Turkish censors. To no avail: the book was banned, and Bozarslan had to face charges in court.
8. Van Bruinessen (2003: 43). These comments led to a lengthy rejoinder, presented as a 'friendly discussion,' by the prominent Kurdish literary scholar, Kerîm (1998).
9. Leezenberg (2014); cf. Zinar (1993); Öztoprak (2003).
10. For the Kurdish text of Bayazîdî's summary, see Duhokî (ed.) (2008); for a French translation, see Hakim (1989).
11. Hajî Qadir Koyî, *Diwan*, p. 21.
12. *Hawar*, no. 33 (1 October 1941), pp. 9–10; cf. no. 45 (1945). See also Van Bruinessen (2003: 53).
13. One Kurdish friend (p.c.) reported having found a copy in Saudi Arabia, the colofon of which stated that there had been several local reprints. For a more detailed discussion of al-Bûtî's rendering, see Christmann (2008).
14. The rise of this revolutionary Kurdish nationalism has yet to be traced as a cultural phenomenon. For a fascinating study of Kurdish theater during a slightly later period, see Rashidi (2015).
15. See Orbeli's preface to *Gosudarstnevvyj Ermitazh* (1938); for Kurdoev's comment, see Rudenko (1962: 9).
16. Interviews, undergraduate students, Salahuddin University, Erbil, May 2009; Soran University, April 2014; school teachers, Mergasor, April 2014; interview, Duhok, August 2015.
17. The most important translations into Turkish are Bozarslan (1968), Tek & Açikgöz (2010), Yildirim (2010), Temo (2016); into Persian: Barzani (2012); into Soranî Kurdish: Hejar (1960); into modern Kurmancî Kurdish: Bozarslan (1995), Dost (2009).