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Kurdish Vernacular Learning as Indigenous Knowledge: Decolonizing Ottoman Cultural and Intellectual History

Decolonization, it has been argued in recent years, involves not only political and economic liberation but also an epistemic emancipation from forms of knowledge that have been produced by colonizers, reproduce colonial relations and assumptions, and/or justify colonial rule. The Kurdish experience constitutes an interesting testing ground for such matters of epistemic decolonization. It is distinct and challenging, first, in that it involves multiple forms of colonization, some of which are arguably ongoing even in the twenty-first century: indeed, it has been confronted not only with the overseas colonialism of imperialist powers like England and France but also with the "internal colonization" of postcolonial nation-states like Kemalist Turkey and Baathist Iraq. Second, one may legitimately ask whether and to what extent the Ottoman, Safavid, Qajar, and Russian empires imposed a form of colonial rule over Kurds and other groups. And third, one may even ask whether the early Soviet Union, although it was based on an explicitly anti-imperialist ideology, and although it strongly encouraged the national emancipation of the Kurds, may also be said to have been a colonial power of sorts.

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For these reasons, decolonizing Kurdish studies is a rather more complex affair than in more straightforward cases of peoples (formerly) colonized by Western capitalist powers alone. A focus on the Kurdish experience may therefore enrich not only Middle East studies or Ottoman historiography but postcolonial and decolonial studies as well. However, in part owing to their very statelessness and marginalized political status, the academic study of the Kurds has remained a relatively marginal and underdeveloped field. In turn, within Kurdish studies itself, pre-twentieth-century history, and in particular intellectual history, occupies a relatively marginal place. It is precisely the field of intellectual history, however, that appears most relevant for the discussions about epistemic decolonization in contemporary decolonial theory. Hence, after some discussion of theoretical questions concerning coloniality, power, and knowledge, my argument will zoom in on the Kurdish vernacular learning and literature that emerged in early modern times, that is, the period right before the appearance of European colonial and imperialist influence. First, I will argue that the very development of this vernacular learning may itself be interpreted in terms of resistance to linguistic and literary domination in the Ottoman Empire. Second, I will discuss how nineteenth-century European Orientalists (primarily associated with the Russian empire) have benefited from this learning while systematically downplaying its significance. Third, I will discuss what challenges this vernacular learning poses for the decolonial concept of indigenous knowledge.

The Multiple Colonialisms Affecting the Kurds

In a number of important respects, Kurdish perspectives on colonialism differ significantly from more familiar narratives; compared with, say, studies by Arab authors, one finds surprisingly little sustained attention to, for example, the British role in Iraq or the French role in Syria even in the most recent reference works like *The Cambridge History of the Kurds* (Bozarslan, Yadirgi, and Gunes 2021). Intriguingly, this one-thousand-page edited volume, despite aspiring to be comprehensive, has no chapter specifically devoted to colonialism, only briefly discussing British and French mandate rule in, respectively, Iraq and Syria; nor does its index feature an entry on colonialism.

This is no accidental oversight. Present-day Kurdish scholars are by no means blind to the long-term effects of, in particular, British, French, and Russian imperialism in the wider region; but generally, they have been focused on more pressing realities of the present, and in particular on the continuing practices of assimilation, marginalization, and othering by

post-imperial and post-mandate nation-states, most of which represent themselves as anti-colonial, anti-imperialist, and/or anti-capitalist.

Arguably, in most if not all countries where Kurds live, practices of oppression and marginalization that may qualify as colonial have been pursued until the present day. In its early years, the Turkish republic that emerged out of the Ottoman Empire not only denied the very existence of Kurds but also carried out policies of forced resettlement of Kurds and other population groups. In particular in the context of the 1934 Iskan Kanunu or resettlement law, rural and/or tribal Kurds were subjected to deportations to other parts of the country, and the spoken—let alone written—use of Kurdish was banned for decades.[1] These assimilationist policies were carried out in the name of the modernization—and Turkification—of the population. It was only toward the end of the twentieth century that these assimilationist policies were slightly (and, as it would turn out, haltingly) relaxed, but different forms of state violence targeting Kurds, generally in the guise of counterinsurgency and counterterrorism, continued virtually without interruption.

Likewise, both the Pahlavi state that was created in the early twentieth century and its successor, the Islamic Republic of Iran, have pursued assimilationist policies toward Kurds and other population groups. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, which explicitly rejected the secular nationalist Iranian regime of shah Reza Pahlavi and its links with the "imperialist" United States, ethnic groups like the Kurds are recognized on paper but continue to face marginalization and assimilation in practice; these attempts at imposing a single unitary Iranian identity, it has been argued, simultaneously invoke the production of an internal colonized other (Soleimani and Mohammadpour 2019).

Further, postcolonial, anti-imperialist Arab regimes like the Baathist states in Syria and Iraq have pursued Kurdish policies that may be, and have been, qualified as a form of (settler) colonialism. In the 1960s the Syrian Baathist regime created an "Arab belt" (*al-hizâm al-'arabî*) in the Jazîra region along the border with Turkey, creating Arab-inhabited villages in order to dilute the Kurdish presence there; and in the 1970s and 1980s, Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime in Iraq tried to change the ethnic balance in the oil-rich Kirkuk Province by deporting Kurds and replacing them with Arabs from both southern Iraq and Egypt. Both Syria and Iraq explicitly defined themselves as Arab states, thus automatically marginalizing Kurds living in their territories; this situation continued at least until, and to some extent even after, the establishment of different forms of self-rule in northern Iraq (currently recognized as the autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq) and northeastern Syria (at present better known as Rojava).[2]

Finally, it seems reasonable enough to suggest that the Russian empire, even though not possessing overseas colonies, was engaged in a colonial exploitation and marginalization of peoples living on its periphery; but can we call its successor, the Soviet Union, colonial in any meaningful way? To many readers such a suggestion may sound absurd. Obviously, the Soviet Union presented itself as anti-imperialist from the start, and after World War II, it supported anti-colonial struggles all over the world; but can its radical political and cultural restructuring of the Russian empire, not to mention its decades-long hegemony in various Eastern Bloc states, be called colonial anyway?

Given Vladimir Lenin's famous definition of imperialism as the highest stage of capitalism and the concomitant assumption—whether tacit or overt—that colonialism is, by definition, a capitalist enterprise, calling the Soviet Union "colonial" would seem to be a contradiction in terms. Already in the mid-1970s, however, Stalin's Soviet Union was analyzed as involving a form of internal colonialism because of its creation of peripheral republics that were economically dependent on Moscow, and of its divide-and-rule policies of nationality and territory in, especially, Central Asia and the Caucasus (Gouldner 1977). Such analyses, however, do not appear to have received much attention either from scholars working on the Kurds or from contemporary decolonial theorists.

Questions of colonialism and coloniality also seem relevant at the level of knowledge both in imperial Russia and in Soviet times. It has been argued that Soviet Orientalism, or the knowledge of Muslim people living in the Soviet Union and elsewhere, reproduces categories and assumptions from imperial or bourgeois Russian Orientalism and, as such, reproduces its coloniality.[3]

Given these apparent anomalies, I would suggest characterizing colonialism and coloniality in genealogical terms of different modern forms of government and knowledge rather than in political-economic terms of capitalism. This conceptualization is not only (and obviously) in line with Michel Foucault's 1970s analyses of the internal link between forms of knowledge and modalities of power; it also seems to dovetail well, to some extent, with Aníbal Quijano's ([1989] 2007: 170) suggestion that colonial-*ity* is a still-ongoing general form of power, as distinct from colonial-*ism* as a specific political order during a particular and bygone period of history.[4]

Early Discussions of Colonialism among the Kurds

Before we turn to theoretical matters, however, it should be noted that the colonialism of postcolonial nation-states has long been a dominant theme

among Kurdish activists. From the 1970s on, Kurdish political actors have argued that the Kurdish predicament in different countries has colonial features. As far as I have been able to trace, the first discussions of such "internal colonialism" appeared in the mid-1970s. These discussions were driven by emancipatory and political rather than scholarly concerns; specifically, they helped legitimate a separate Kurdish struggle as distinct from a generic class struggle regardless of workers' ethnicity. Most famously, the 1977 PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) manifesto stated that the Kurds were colonized both as members of the working class and as Kurds; but such ideas were not specific to the PKK. Also, authors associated with other parties and/or writing on Iraq, Iran, or Syria analyzed the condition of the Kurds in terms of an internal or "poor man's" colonialism.[5] It seems these discussions were inspired by writings coming from late 1960s South America, where authors like Pablo Gonzalez Casanova (1965) and others had argued that the ongoing expropriation and marginalization of Indigenous peoples amounted to an internal colonialism; at present, however, it is unclear exactly how and when these ideas reached the Middle East and the Kurdish parties active there.

Having arisen from activist circles, the internal colonization thesis has never been properly theorized for the Kurds, but in the 1980s the Turkish sociologist Ismail Beşikçi ([1990] 2015) further developed it. Generalizing from the idea of northern Kurdistan as an internal colony of Turkey, he analyzed Kurdistan as an "international colony" engaged in a struggle against not one but four states: Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran—significantly, leaving the Soviet Union out of the discussion. As a result, he argued, Kurdistan did not even possess the territorial unity of a proper colony. Further, he called attention to the racist ideologies of post-Ottoman and postcolonial successor states that explicitly define themselves as anti-imperialist and/or anti-racist. Thus, the official Turkish ideology has for a long time denied the very existence of Kurds; and later, even when acknowledging "Kurdish origins," it has simultaneously represented such ethnic origins as a thing of the past, implying that they had no place in a modern state.

In more recent years, a much more influential view of decolonial practice is to be found, of course, in the writings of the imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan on democratic confederalism, democratic autonomy from the state, and *jineolojî* (presented as a non-patriarchal, non-positivist "science of woman"). These works, however, betray no particular affinity with earlier Latin American authors or experiences; rather, they are inspired primarily by anarchist authors like Murray Bookchin (1982) and feminist critics like Evelyn Fox Keller (1985) and, possibly, Silvia Federici (2004).[6] They also mark a significant shift in their conception of colonialism.

As noted above, early PKK discourse was dominated by the internal colonization thesis, with an obvious focus on Kemalist Turkey; but in Öcalan's more recent writings, in particular those written after his 1999 capture and subsequent imprisonment, a very different view of colonialism appears. Here the internal colonization thesis disappears; and Öcalan radically moves away from the earlier PKK struggle for an independent, Marxist-Leninist Kurdistan, redefining national liberation as women's liberation, and colonialism as coextensive with the nation and with the "original enslavement of women."

This argument appears inspired by, among others, Friedrich Engels's ([1884] 2021) famous work on the origin of private property and the family; but it replaces the latter's historical-materialist analyses of oppression and patriarchy in terms of production by sweeping—and surprisingly idealist—claims about Mesopotamian civilization or the timeless qualities of Kurdish women. Thus, Öcalan (2017) claims that "the 5,000-year history of civilization is essentially the history of the enslavement of women" (57); that patriarchy was established around 2,000 BCE, that is, during the third dynasty of Ur (64); that class-based society is five thousand years old (68, 73); and that women are the "oldest colonized group" (93). Such claims, however, lead to complete dehistoricized notions of patriarchy, class, and colonialism. They also have the remarkable side effect of replacing earlier critiques of internal colonialism in modern states like Turkey and Iraq with generic calls for civilizational change.[7] Moreover, they lead to a completely speculative and remarkably essentialist view of the Kurds (and "proto-Kurds") as an essentially unchanging nation or society—a view typical of precisely the nationalist ideologies Öcalan claims to be rejecting (80–82). Thus, Öcalan's more recent theories, although they have undoubtedly had real emancipatory effects in Rojava and Bakur or southeastern Turkey since 2012, and possibly elsewhere, appear not precise enough as analytical tools for studying specific forms of colonialism.

With the partial exception of Beşikçi's important writings, then, most interventions on the internal colonization of Kurds were of a party-political rather than scholarly character. Conversely, in academic writings on the Kurds, the theme of colonialism received relatively little attention, barring a few significant exceptions like Janet Klein's *Margins of Empire* (2011). In short, while different notions of colonialism have arguably played a major formative role in Kurdish politics from the 1970s on, there remains room for a theoretical rethinking of coloniality concerning the Kurds. More specifically, there still seems room for a notion of colonialism, or coloniality, that is less essentialist and more aware of the geographic contingency and historical variability of different processes of colonization to which Kurds have been subjected.

Theoretical Considerations: Coloniality, Power, Knowledge

Rethinking Kurdish coloniality is not a merely academic matter, especially in light of recent calls for *epistemic disobedience*, that is, a liberation from colonial forms of knowledge as decolonial theorists like Quijano and Walter Mignolo have argued. Specifically, Quijano ([1989] 2007: 177) argues that colonial power has produced "distorted paradigms of knowledge," and that hence the destruction of the coloniality of world power requires an *epistemological* decolonization before all else. Thus, the coloniality of knowledge is linked to a European paradigm of rationality, which fundamentally presupposes knowledge in ultimately Cartesian terms as a relation between an isolated individual subject and an external object (172). This association of Cartesian epistemology with colonial domination has been criticized as not convincingly established (Chambers 2020); but here I would like to raise a different, more methodologically oriented, issue.

Note, to begin with, that authors like Quijano and Mignolo refer to both coloniality and rationality in the singular. Thus, Quijano appears to presume a single coloniality linked to a single (Western) capitalist modernity and to a single rationality or epistemology.[8] Second, their use of *Indigenous knowledge* in the singular belies the historical and geographic complexities of precolonial societies and their intellectual cultures. Such notions of Indigenous, however, carry a tacit and at times an explicit assumption of a pure and pristine tradition that is untouched by foreign influence and not contaminated or distorted by relations of power. With the partial exception of Mignolo's (2003) important study on Renaissance humanism, however, such views are rarely backed by any detailed analysis of precolonial Indigenous knowledge. This becomes especially, and indeed painfully, clear from Mignolo's praise for a 2021 study by J. Sai Deepak, *India, That Is Bharat: Coloniality, Civilisation, Constitution*, which argues for the Hindu nationalist thesis that there is a pristine "Bharat" civilization that has been colonized by Muslim rulers like the Mughals.[9]

The assumption of pure and pristine traditions not only flies in the face of historical insights that there have almost always been contacts between cultures; it also fails to ask whether these traditions themselves have a history—and more specifically a history of power. Hence, I would like to suggest here a genealogical perspective building on Foucault's writings, which treats coloniality in terms of power and knowledge rather than political economy. Unlike critical theory and decolonial theory, a genealogical approach explores rationalities and knowledges (*savoirs*) in the plural. Already in his early, pre-genealogical works, Foucault argues that there are major historical discontinuities in

Western knowledge, implying (and in subsequent writings explicitly stating) that they are not governed or constituted by an overarching anthropological universal of (European or Western) rationality; rather, historically specific rationalities are constituted in and by historically specific forms of knowledge (or discursive practices) and relations of power. Further, a genealogical approach does not attempt to unmask apparent truth as ideological falsity; rather, it explores precisely how knowledge (or truth) and relations of power are mutually constitutive of each other. Critical theories see power, whether colonial or other, as distortive of knowledge; Foucauldian genealogy, by contrast, sees power as productive—both of knowledges and of subjectivities.

A genealogical approach is also decidedly nonutopian. One might be tempted to think that by *decolonization* decolonial thinkers mean a return to precolonial Indigenous learning. Authors like Quijano ([1989] 2007) and Mignolo (2007), however, emphasize that epistemic disobedience, delinking, or decolonization does not simply amount to a return to a premodern tradition, but rather involves alternative conceptions and practices of modernity. Accordingly, Quijano ([1989] 2007: 178) links the decolonial critique of the European paradigm of rationality/modernity to an explicitly utopian project of "social liberation from all power;" and Mignolo's project of epistemic disobedience is similarly utopian. A genealogical critique, by contrast, suggests that *all* knowledge is internally linked to power; that does not mean, however, that knowledge is *reducible* to mere power or being false for being power saturated. Foucault, so to speak, delinks knowledge from epistemological questions of justification and truth, instead treating power and knowledge as mutually constitutive.[10] More importantly for the present article, his approach implies that *all* forms of knowledge, whether modern or premodern; whether Western, colonial, and capitalist or non-Western; and whether Indigenous, precolonial, or decolonial, come with historically and geographically specific modalities of power. Hence a genealogical approach rejects as illusory the utopian hope, or project, of liberating knowledge from power altogether.

This would invite us to look at the forms of power, and resistance, in the forms of knowledge produced about and by Kurds in different historical periods. Thus, even though Foucault's work can be—and has been—criticized for its residual Eurocentrism and lack of attention for the specifics of colonial rule, a genealogical attention to historically specific modalities of power as involved in premodern and early modern forms of knowledge developed in different parts of the world seems promising also for decolonial theorists. Put differently: there is room for a genealogical approach to premodern, non-Western, and/or non-capitalist forms of knowledge as much as to modern Western rationality.

The Kurds and Early Modern Colonialisms

With these theoretical notions in mind, let us explore the Kurdish experience in confrontation with the early modern Ottoman Empire, imperial Russia, and the Soviet Union. Doing so will not only provide us with a greater historical depth; it may also help us make a number of assumptions in decolonial theory visible and hence accessible to criticism. Discussions of coloniality and decoloniality tend to identify colonialism with Western European forms of overseas rule, like the Spanish and Portuguese presence in Central and South America, and English and French rule in much of Africa and Asia. Rather less systematic attention has been paid to comparative questions, for example whether the Russian empire's expansion into the Caucasus and Central Asia or the Qing empire's expansion into Tibet, Taiwan, and Xinjiang (both occurring in the eighteenth century) may be said to have involved a kind of colonization. Likewise, the question of whether the radical transformation of the Ottoman state in the nineteenth century, let alone early Ottoman expansion between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries can be qualified as colonial in any meaningful sense remains open.

Within Ottoman studies, there have been some hesitant initial discussions of colonialism, but these have been empirically restricted and theoretically inadequate. Empirically, in these studies, discussions of the Kurdish provinces are generally, and surprisingly, absent; theoretically, they have been marred by the assumption that colonialism proper is by definition modern, Western, and capitalist. Thus Selim Deringil (2003) has famously argued that the late nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire developed a "borrowed colonialism," in imitation of, and in a defensive reaction against, encroaching European colonialism; likewise, Ussama Makdisi (2002) argues that the radical othering of Arabs as uncivilized and primitive in the Tanzimat period amounts to an "Ottoman Orientalism," which, he claims, is an essentially reactive or defensive development. I am not concerned here with the Eurocentric and apologetic assumptions in both authors.[11] More directly relevant to our purposes, they focus too exclusively on Ottoman attitudes toward the Arab provinces.

Despite various paradigm shifts (for example, from center-periphery relations to provincial histories, and from economic to cultural history), the Kurdish provinces have consistently remained underrepresented in Ottoman historiography. Nilay Özok-Gündogan (2020: 99) has argued—rightly, I think—that the recent discussions on Ottoman Orientalism and colonialism have largely ignored Kurdistan. Likewise, discussions in the wake of the more recent "imperial turn" (e.g., Mikhail and Philliou 2012) have tended to

focus on the Arab and Balkan provinces and have consistently ignored the distinct developments in the Kurdish-inhabited regions.

My argument here, however, does not primarily concern Ottoman historiography or Kurdish studies, but rather post- and decolonial theorizing. Can we meaningfully call the early modern expansion of the Ottoman Empire a form of colonization? Here a comparison with the expansion of the early modern Habsburg and Mughal empires seems most relevant.[12] About the coloniality of the Spanish Habsburg empire with respect to Central and South America in particular, there can be no doubt. Thus Quijano ([1989] 2007: 170), with considerable justification, qualifies the Spanish conquest of Central and South America as "the most extreme case of cultural colonization by Europe." The coloniality of the early modern Mughal empire is already a much more contentious issue: it has indeed been defined as such by contemporary Hindu nationalist historians—as said, a definition that was endorsed by Mignolo. Obviously, however, this view is part and parcel of a political project aimed at denying the legitimacy of any Muslim presence in the subcontinent altogether, in the name of a presumed pristine and purely Indian Hindu civilization.[13] Likewise, attempts to characterize Ottoman rule as a kind of foreign or colonial domination are not exactly a novel postcolonial or decolonial insight but a well-worn nationalist trope that has long been part and parcel of national identities among Greeks, Bulgarians, and other post-Ottoman nation-states and national movements (Kechriotis 2013: 43).

Unlike Habsburg overseas expansion (or even the attempts to crush the revolt in the Low Countries), Ottoman rule did not involve any attempts at cultural colonization in the form of either forced religious conversion or linguistic assimilation. It did, however, involve an important form of cultural domination, which I will describe in more detail below; but I hesitate to qualify this domination as colonial. The characteristic features of Ottoman cultural domination, and of local resistance against it, do not fit easily with decolonial theory, which is generally informed by binary oppositions between Western colonial power and non-Western colonized peoples, and between epistemic coloniality and Indigenous traditions. These binaries may be didactically useful, but they mask some rather more complex historical realities. As will appear below, Kurdish vernacular learning has a long history of domination and resistance starting as early as the seventeenth century, but there are no good reasons for reducing this history to master narratives of any coloniality (whether Ottoman or European) confronting any purely local and pristine traditions of learning. Instead, I suspect, it may be more fruitful to explore the specific links between learning and power in the early modern Ottoman empire than to debate Ottoman coloniality in general terms.

Premodern Linguistic Domination: Kurdish Vernacularization as Resistance

This becomes clear when we look at the specific forms of learning and letters in the early modern Ottoman Empire, prior to any major Western European influence. Since the early Islamic conquests, Arabic had gradually established itself as the dominant language of (religious) learning among Muslims, and to a lesser extent also among Christians and Jews. From the eleventh century onward, however, modern Persian became the dominant medium of (versified) literary expression in the non-Arabic-speaking parts of the Islamic world, including much of the Ottoman Empire. Thanks to the powerful models provided by books like Firdowsi's *Shahnameh* and Nizami's *Layli and Majnun*, Muslim poets from the Balkans to South Asia would for centuries compose their verse either in Persian or in a local language embellished, or made more literary, by Persian literary vocabulary, phrases, and imagery. Until the sixteenth century, when it was replaced by Ottoman Turkish, Persian was also the court language and the language of administration of the Ottoman rulers; and even the Ottoman Turkish language was not simply a spoken Turkish vernacular but a "language of art" shot through with Persian and Arabic terms and turns of phrase. By its use in writing and speaking, its practitioners could distinguish themselves from the uneducated masses (Leezenberg 2016). Thus, the command of these highly elaborate and refined written languages was a mark of social distinction among the empire's Muslim elites. Among the non-Muslim population groups, there were similarly transregional languages of (religious) learning, like Koine Greek and to a lesser extent Church Slavonic for orthodox Christians, and the "sacred language" (*lashon hakodesh*) and, possibly, classical Judaeo-Spanish among Jews.

Thus, the early modern Ottoman linguistic constellation is comparable to—though rather more complex than—the Latin and Sanskrit cosmopolitan orders identified and discussed by Sheldon Pollock (2000). It makes sense, however, to treat the prestige of Arabic in religious learning and of Persian in refined letters as premodern forms of *linguistic domination*, as the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has called it. This domination, Bourdieu (1991: chap. 1) argues, cannot be reduced to political or economic dominance; it has its own modality of power, which functions only to the extent that it is misrecognized. It is not immediately clear, however, to what extent Bourdieu's conceptual apparatus can be applied to premodern and non-Western settings.[14] Hence, at the level of theory, the following discussion is only a first sketch (cf. Leezenberg 2020b).

During the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, that is, in the period right before European expansion, the cosmopolitan Ottoman constellation, or multifaceted literary domination, witnessed a linguistic shift that was so broad as to amount to a genuine *vernacular revolution*: suddenly and almost simultaneously, vernaculars spoken by Christians (like colloquial Greek and Armenian, Serbian, Bulgarian, and Romanian), Muslims (like Bosnian, Albanian, Kurdish, and colloquial Turkish), and Jews (Ladino) started being used for written purposes of religious learning and refined letters (Leezenberg 2016). Importantly, these shifts as often as not took place in rural or otherwise peripheral areas; as a result, they resist explanation in terms of either transforming state power or developing mercantile capitalism. Among the Kurds, authors like Melayê Cezîrî (d. 1646) and Ehmedê Xanî (d. 1707) started writing learned poetry, in a gesture self-consciously described by the latter as *bid'et* or heretic innovation; not much later, Elî Teremaxî composed the *Tesrîfa Kurmancî*, a prose work containing the first-ever Kurdish grammar. Teremaxî, too, was well aware of the innovative if not heretic character of his work: he emphatically argues for the need to codify the rules of Kurdish grammar, at a time when spoken vernaculars were generally seen as, by definition, violations of or deviations from the rules of classical languages rather than as proper self-contained languages with rules of their own (Leezenberg 2014).

The vernacularization of Kurdish and other languages, that is, also involved the development of vernacular forms of learning. These hardly amounted to Indigenous knowledge in the sense of a pure tradition not polluted by foreign elements and not tainted by relations of power: in fact, they suggest that such a notion of pristine and power-free knowledge is an illusion. Clearly, Kurdish learning employed the grammatical categories of the sciences of *Arabiyya* (the Arabic language) and relied on the traditional institutions and ideals of Islamic learning.

Thus, one may perhaps speak of a dominant "Ottoman philology," which—in the non-Arabic-speaking provinces at least—reproduced the dominant categories of grammatical and other learning of *Arabiyya*, the norms and models of literariness supplied by Persian *adab,* or refined letters, and the madrassa curriculum that was to some extent imposed by Ottoman state power (Ahmed and Filipovic 2004). Among the Christian and Jewish population groups, similarly dominant philologies held sway, primarily articulated in the grammatical and religious categories of, respectively, Koine Greek and the sacred language.

At the epistemic level, then, one may interpret the massive vernacularizing wave of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as an act (or rather, a

series or chain of acts) of resistance against this dominant Ottoman philology, or more generically against a complex linguistic, literary, and/or curricular domination. Put in these terms, one might call Kurdish vernacular learning a form of Indigenous knowledge only in the sense of its standing in the tradition of Arabic-language religious and philological learning and Persian-language poetry; but it marks a quite self-conscious revolt against the linguistic domination of both, albeit not against the (Islamic) religious belief system they involve.

Again, one may debate whether Ottoman rule and—more relevantly here—the different forms of epistemic, linguistic, and literary domination described above qualify as colonial; but it may be more fruitful to explore these phenomena genealogically *as* domination rather than as a "cosmopolitanism" of a purely cultural (that is, power-free) character (Pollock 2000) or as a benign and secular premodern "literary humanism" (Dabashi 2012: 7, 13); by extension, one may explore Ottoman and other patterns of vernacularization as involving a form of resistance. Decolonization in this sense would invite us to pay greater attention to the role and, even more importantly, the history of marginalized, subaltern vernaculars like Kurdish, and of the forms of learning developed in them. If the above argument holds water, it would seem to imply that *all* Indigenous learning arguably has a history of power and resistance—that is, a genealogy.

The Modern Marginalization of Kurdish Vernacular Learning

Over a century later, Kurdish vernacular learning further developed under another, rather different encounter that may perhaps be defined as colonial, this time in confrontation with the modern Orientalist learning of the nineteenth-century Russian empire. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Orientalist knowledge about things Kurdish made great progress. Much of this early Kurdological knowledge was produced by Western missionaries and by representatives of, most importantly, the British and especially Russian empires. Thus, authors like Claudius James Rich, August Jaba, Vladimir Minorsky, and Basile Nikitine were active as diplomatic representatives of their empires while conducting their pioneering work in Kurdish-inhabited lands. Another colonial aspect of their work is their tendency to reduce local scholars to the status of merely anonymous oral native informants. As a result, the activities and importance of local Kurdish scholars like Mullah Mahmûdê Bayazîdî, who collaborated with Jaba in collecting manuscripts and ethnographic and linguistic materials, and Mullah Sa'îd,

who provided Nikitine with large numbers of written texts, have systematically been downplayed or marginalized. Here I will focus on Bayazîdî as perhaps the most instructive example of Kurdish vernacular learning in the context of both the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire and of developing Russian Orientalism.[15]

Earlier, the Russian empire had expanded into the Caucasus; later it further encroached on Ottoman lands, briefly occupying the towns of Kars and Bayazîd in the 1828–29 war. Russia subsequently established a consulate in Erzurum; it was here that the consul August Jaba met and started working with the local scholar Mullah Mahmûdê Bayazîdî in 1856, that is, shortly after the Crimean War. Bayazîdî was born around 1800 and died either in 1858 or 1868; he had received a traditional madrassa education, partly in Ottoman and partly in Qajar centers of (Sunni) Islamic learning. In the mid-nineteenth century, he appears to have played a mediating role between the centralizing Ottoman Empire and the remaining local rulers still resisting the abolition of the Kurdish emirates, notably Bedirxan of Botan, Nûrullâh of Hakkarî, and Khan Mahmûd of Muks. This position was ambiguous and dangerous; his contacts with the consul of a hostile empire may have made him even more suspect in Ottoman eyes. He even appears to have been imprisoned for a short while.

Because of these links with the last autonomous Kurdish rulers, and because of his writings for Jaba, Bayazîdî is of both intellectual and political importance for this period. Although Bayazîdî's works were clearly written at Jaba's request, they cannot be reduced to a European Orientalist hegemony or epistemic coloniality. Bayazîdî does not simply presuppose or reproduce the categories and assumptions of either traditional Islamic learning or modern Western Orientalist philological knowledge. Thus, his conception of language and grammar is shaped by the traditional Arabic sciences rather than modern European philology; but he rejects the assumption that languages other than Arabic have no grammar worth mentioning. Likewise, he has no concepts equivalent to the romantic-nationalist and Orientalist categories of literature, folklore, or even culture (Leezenberg 2020a: 450–60). Thus Bayazîdî's philological and ethnographic categories are not those of modern European romantic-nationalist and colonial learning but those of the classical Islamic traditional sciences (*al-'ulûm al-naqliyya*) of Arabic grammar and Koranic exegesis, and even with respect to the latter, he marks some significant departures.

For obvious political reasons, imperial Russian scholars like Jaba were particularly interested in the distinct characters of the peoples living in the

Ottoman Russian frontier area, like Armenians, Kurds, and Yezidis (the latter two, despite speaking the same language, generally being seen as distinct groups in Russian writings of the time). In different parts of the empire and in neighboring lands inhabited by Muslims, they were engaged in acquiring vernacular texts, either by buying manuscripts or by commissioning local Muslim scholars to produce vernacular translations of classical Persian-language texts like Saadi's *Golestan* (*Rose Garden*). Collections of such early philological and ethnographic work, however, were generally published under the names of Russian scholars rather than their Muslim counterparts. In fact, the latter were rarely, if ever, mentioned by name. Thus, a collection of historical sketches and short anecdotal texts in Kurdish, clearly collected, written, and/or transcribed by Bayazîdî, was published under Jaba's name in 1860, with Bayazîdî mentioned only in passing in the preface, and rather disparagingly qualified as "a man of Kurdish origins who, as Mr. Jaba's collaborator and as his first guide in the study of the Kurdish language, has also contributed to the merits of this volume" (Jaba 1860: viii). Bayazîdî's description of Kurdish customs and habits, the *Adat û rusûmatnameê ekradiyye* (cf. Dost 2010), is a document of singular importance; but it would not be published until a century later, by Soviet scholar Margaret Rudenko (1963). The fact that this important text, the first detailed ethnographic description of Kurdish customs, lay hidden in an archive for a century, speaks volumes about the attitudes of Russian imperial and early Soviet Orientalists. Jaba also commissioned a Kurdish translation of Şerefxan Bidlîsî's Persian-language chronicle of Kurdish principalities, the *Şerefname*; but this work, too, was published only in the twentieth century (cf. Dêreşî 2007).

The work of authors like Bayazîdî, and more generally the tradition of Kurdish vernacular or Indigenous learning, has long been downplayed or denied, if not physically destroyed by late Ottoman and republican Turkish authorities as well as by imperial Russian and early Soviet ones, and subsequently by Arab nationalist elites and British mandate rulers in Iraq. Thus, Bayazîdî's writings, which elaborated the vernacular tradition of learning that had emerged out of, and in part in reaction against, Ottoman philology, were reduced to the status of raw materials, to be translated not only linguistically (in this case, from Kurdish to French) but also conceptually (from the categories of vernacular Islamic philology to those of modern European Orientalism). Simultaneously, his own status as a scholar was reduced to that of a near-anonymous "native informant." In this sense, the encounter of Kurdish scholars with imperial Russia may qualify as a form of epistemic coloniality, even if it did not involve direct colonial rule.

As noted, the 1860 *Recueil*, a collection of short texts drafted by Bayazîdî for Jaba, was published under the latter's name only; even worse, the preface to this book, written by a member of the imperial Academy of Sciences in Petersburg, dismisses Bayazîdî's work and other writings by native Kurdish scholars as unimportant. Thus, it mentions that a committee of the Russian Academy of Sciences had decided that Elî Teremaxî's *Tesrîfa Kurmancî*, probably the first-ever grammar of Kurdish, was a work of "secondary interest" and did not merit publication. Jaba's contemporary Peter Lerch, too, casually brushes aside Bayazîdî's contribution to what he describes as, in essence, Jaba's work (Leezenberg 2020a: 470). Russian imperial authors have thus systematically downplayed the importance and even extent of Bayazîdî's work, reflecting a more general tendency among nineteenth-century European Orientalists to treat native scholars as, at best, sources of raw information that remained to be properly analyzed and treated, and at worst as sources of error and confusion to be corrected by Western Orientalist methods assumed to be superior.

Hence, in this case as in others, the unmistakable contribution of Kurdish scholars to early Kurdological knowledge has been systematically erased, marginalized, and dismissed. A decolonization of Kurdish—and by extension Ottoman—intellectual and linguistic history would, among others, involve the recuperation of these and other works of vernacular learning by local scholars.

Much of this imperial Russian coloniality disappeared in Soviet times. As noted above, however, Soviet Oriental studies display a number of significant continuities with Russian imperial or bourgeois Orientalism, and some of these continuities are also visible in early Soviet knowledge of the Kurds.[16] Arguably this knowledge was crucial in the constitution of the Kurds as a "folkloric nation," that is, as a people defined by their spoken vernacular and by their oral traditions rather than by literate and literary culture or by the religious learning typical of early modern philologies. Partly, this neglect was predicated on the assumption that religious learning was generically Islamic rather than specifically Kurdish; but even more importantly, it was conditioned by the overt atheism of Bolshevist policies. As a result, even though materials of this written tradition, like the writings of Xanî, Teremaxî, and Bayazîdî, had been collected by or for imperial Russian scholars, and were available in Russian and Soviet academic libraries, they were generally ignored until well after World War II.

This redefinition may be said to amount to a "folklorization of the Kurds"; it was not until much later, in the 1960s, that Soviet scholars started

publishing critical editions of written Kurdish works. Imperial Russian and Bolshevist forms of knowledge, that is, did not so much suppress a Kurdish identity as *constitute* a Kurdish nationality of a particular kind, thus once more showing the internal, and productive, connection between different forms of knowledge and modalities of power.

Conclusions

In the above I have suggested a genealogical approach that is alive to the historical variability of, and the different modalities of power involved in, different forms of knowledge. Early modern Kurdish vernacular learning may share much of the epistemic and normative assumptions of what I have called Ottoman philology, but it also marks a revolt against the linguistic domination of Arabic, the literary domination of modern Persian, and—to coin a term of art—the curricular domination of Ottoman Turkish.

The historical importance of this vernacular tradition has been overlooked, if not actively downplayed or marginalized, by Ottoman officials, foreign Orientalists, and secular Kurdish nationalists alike. Hence a greater attention to the historical and epistemic complexities of vernacular learning and literature would do more justice to the Kurdish experience in early modern and modern history than generic notions of Islamic tradition or Indigenous knowledge. Accordingly, scholars interested in epistemic decolonization may, in the case of the Ottoman Empire and the modernizing Middle East if not in others, benefit from studying such vernacular writings by local scholars, and from giving them a more prominent and systematic place in their narratives and analyses. In different historical periods and geographic regions, Kurdish scholars have played a rather more active role, not just in producing philological and ethnographic knowledge about Kurds but also in creating and redefining a Kurdish identity. The Kurdish case, and in particular the vernacularization of Kurdish religious learning and the fate of the works of authors like Mullah Mahmûdê Bayazîdî, suggest that Indigenous learning, too, has a history; not only an intellectual history or what is nowadays called a history of knowledge, but also a history of power. The effects of the different forms of power—epistemic, literary, or other—that have been exercised over Kurds may still be seen today, and they should be actively exposed and countered in any Kurdish studies of the future; and much the same may be said for other traditions of Indigenous knowledge and for decolonial theory more generally.

Notes

1 It should be noted, though, that these policies fell short of what we would call settler colonialism.

2 For a relatively well-informed and balanced account of the Rojava experiment, see Schmidinger 2018.

3 For a more detailed discussion see, e.g., Kemper 2009 and Kemper and Conermann 2011.

4 Foucault himself has had surprisingly little to say specifically on colonialism, apart from various—characteristically suggestive if not provocative—stray remarks in works like *Discipline and Punish* (1979: 279), *Security, Territory, Population* (2009: 291–92), and *"Society Must Be Defended"* (2004: 102–3).

5 Thus, the contributors of the famous volume *People without a Country* qualify the condition of the Kurds in early Turkey as the "colonialism of an underdeveloped state" and of the Kurds in Iraq as a "poor man's colonialism" (Chaliand 1980: 54, 82, 204–6).

6 For a brief statement and a representative sample of these writings, see Öcalan 2017.

7 In fact, Öcalan (2017: 81) appears to replace the notion of internal colonialism with an unanalyzed and unexplained notion of "internal feudalism." Likewise, the Kurdish experiment in self-rule in Rojava, although explicitly presenting itself as decolonial, is remarkably mild in its criticisms of the Baathist Syrian state.

8 Decolonial theory appears to share the assumption of a singular, "modern Western" rationality with earlier critical theory; but this is a question to be pursued on another occasion.

9 For a critical discussion, see Prasad 2021.

10 For the most radical early formulation of these ideas, see the 1971 lectures at the Collège de France (Foucault 2013). Later works, like Foucault's 1975 *Discipline and Punish* and the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (1976), zoomed in on the internal and mutually constitutive relation between knowledge and power.

11 Türesay (2013) rejects the very notion of Ottoman Orientalism as a "fiction"; Kechriotis (2013) resists qualifying Ottoman condescension toward its non-Muslim population groups as "colonial" and criticizes Deringil's and Makdisi's studies for being "Arabocentric."

12 For a suggestive comparative discussion of the Ottoman, Habsburg, and Mughal empires in light of the imperial turn, see Subrahmanyam 2006.

13 See Subrahmanyam 2013 for a brief critique. Ironically, the very concept of Hinduism as a distinct civilization or world religion is itself the product of coloniality, the term having been coined by the British in the 1820s.

14 Even Bourdieu's writings on Kabyle society in northern Africa have been criticized for overlooking or misrepresenting the effects of colonization and of the then ongoing civil war on the population groups he was studying (cf., e.g., Silverstein 2011).

15 For more details on Bayazîdî see Leezenberg 2020a; for a more detailed discussion of Mullah Sa'îd's life and work with Nikitine, which includes transcriptions of the texts he wrote for the latter, see Öpengin 2021.

16 Considerations of space preclude a fuller discussion, but see Leezenberg 2011 and 2015 for more details.

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