



## UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

### Elî Teremaxî and the vernacularization of medrese learning in Kurdistan

Leezenberg, M.

**DOI**

[10.1080/00210862.2014.934150](https://doi.org/10.1080/00210862.2014.934150)

**Publication date**

2014

**Document Version**

Final published version

**Published in**

Iranian Studies

[Link to publication](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

Leezenberg, M. (2014). Elî Teremaxî and the vernacularization of medrese learning in Kurdistan. *Iranian Studies*, 47(5), 713-734. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00210862.2014.934150>

**General rights**

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

**Disclaimer/Complaints regulations**

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

Michiel Leezenberg

## Eli Teremaxî and the Vernacularization of Medrese Learning in Kurdistan

*Eli Teremaxî's Serfa Kurmancî has not yet received the critical attention it deserves. It was dismissed by Auguste Jaba as a text of "minor interest," but in fact it is of paramount importance both for the study of the Kurdish language and for the history of Kurdish learning. Not only does it contain the oldest extant detailed remarks on Kurdish grammar, in all likelihood preceding even Garzoni's 1787 Grammatica; it is also among the first examples of Kurdish-language prose writing. The rise of prose texts of learning in Kurdish in the eighteenth century is an aspect of so-called "vernacularization," i.e. the use of a vernacular language for new purposes of written literature and learning. Vernacularization is, this article argues, a crucial prerequisite for the rise of a national language. The article also briefly discusses traces of a similar development in some of Teremaxî's near-contemporaries.*

### Introduction

The Italian missionary Maurizio Garzoni is often described as the "father of Kurdology," and with good reason: after all, he was the first to produce a full-fledged grammar of a Kurdish dialect, that of the town of Amadiye.<sup>1</sup> It is far less widely known, however, that Garzoni's book, published in 1787, was not in fact the first grammatical description of Kurdish. Rather, Garzoni's work was preceded by a grammar written by a local scholar who in all likelihood lived in the late seventeenth or eighteenth century; moreover, it was not only *about* Kurdish, but also written *in* Kurdish. This grammar is a work by Eli Teremaxî, variously known as *Serfa*

---

Michiel Leezenberg, Department of Philosophy/MA Program Islam in the Modern World, University of Amsterdam, Netherlands. Initial research for this paper was conducted while the author was a fellow at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study (NIAS) in Wassenaar, the Netherlands; it also profited from funding by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO), as part of the project *The Sacred and the Secular: Genealogies of Self, State, and Society in the Modernizing Muslim World*. The support from both institutions is gratefully acknowledged. The author is also indebted to various persons for their help with this undertaking, in particular to Zeynelabidin Zinar who kindly shared a copy of his edition, and to Muhammad Ali Qaradaghi, who showed the author a Xerox copy of a manuscript preserved in Iraq. The author further owes a debt of gratitude to Ismael Saeed, Kadri Yıldırım, Selim Temo, Khaled al-Rouayheb, Jelle Verheij, the late Marouf Khaznadar, an anonymous reader and a number of local Kurdish informants who may not wish to see their names in print, but who supplied him with invaluable information on medrese life in northern Kurdistan.

<sup>1</sup>Maurizio Garzoni, *Grammatica e vocabulario della lingua kurda* (Rome, 1787).

*Kurmancî* (Kurmanji morphology), *Tesrîfa Kurdî* (Kurdish morphology), or simply *Tesrîf*, which provides a brief description not only of Kurdish but also of Arabic and Persian *sarf*. The *Tesrîf* is a text of great inherent interest: it is not only the oldest attempt at a grammatical description of Kurdish in existence; it is also the first specimen of Kurdish prose.<sup>2</sup> For these reasons alone, it is a work of major importance. Yet it has hardly received the scholarly attention it deserves, even though it has been, or could have been, known to the scholarly community since the mid-nineteenth century. A manuscript copy was made in 1857 or 1858 by Mela Mahmud Bayazîdî (or Bazîdî) for the Russian consul Auguste Jaba, and subsequently brought to St. Petersburg, together with a number of other manuscripts: among others, a summary of Ehmedê Xânî's *Mem û Zîn* (in fact written by Mela Mahmûdê Bayazîdî); a vocabulary of the Hakkari and Rawandi varieties of Kurmanji; Elî Teremaxî's grammar, written in Kurmanji Kurdish; and a short preliminary note by Bayazîdî "on the science of grammar and on some principles necessary for studying it," likewise in Kurmanji.<sup>3</sup> The commission established by the Russian Imperial Academy of Sciences and put in charge of the publication of the materials gathered by Jaba, however, decided against the publication of Teremaxî's *tasrîf* text. In the records of its 18 May 1859 session, it states:

In the committee's opinion, the Kurdish vocabulary and Ali Teremaxî's grammar are of secondary interest; besides, these writings will probably play their role in the redaction of the complete dictionary and of the grammar of the Kurdish language currently being prepared by Mr. Jaba.<sup>4</sup>

This summary dismissal may be indicative of an orientalist bias that tends to see native informants as sources of raw material rather than serious scholarship.<sup>5</sup> As a result of the committee's decision, Teremaxî's text was not published until 1971, in an edition prepared by Ma'rif Khaznadar and based on Bayazîdî's Petersburg manuscript,<sup>6</sup> under the title *Destûra erebî bi zimanê kurdî* (Arabic grammar in the Kurdish language); but this edition is rather difficult to find.<sup>7</sup> In 1997, Khaznadar's edition was reprinted in Stockholm by Zeynelabidîn Zinar, with a Latin transcription of Khaznadar's modern Kurdish rendering added to it. Reshîd Findî published part of the text in Baghdad in 1985; and in 2005 Mamoste Qedrî published fragments of the *Serfa Kurmancî* dealing with Kurdish in the journal *Bîr*, apparently based on Zinar's

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Reshîd Findî, *Elî Teremaxî yekemîn Rêzimannivîs û pexshannivîsê Kurde* (Baghdad, 1985), 5ff.

<sup>3</sup>Alexandre Jaba, *Recueil de notices et de récits kourdes* (St. Petersburg, 1860), VI–VII.

<sup>4</sup>In *ibid.*, vii.

<sup>5</sup>Incidentally, the commission also recommended against the publication of Bayazîdî's summary of the *Mem û Zîn* tale. Bayazîdî's summary was published in Latin transcription as Mele Mahmudê Bazîdî, *Mem û Zîn* (Diyarbakir, 2007); although clearly based on the written version rather than on any of the numerous oral versions sung by Kurdish bards, it omits the mystical dimension of Xânî's text.

<sup>6</sup>Cat.nr. C 1958, Petersburg Oriental Institute.

<sup>7</sup>M. Khaznadar, ed., *Destûra erebî bi zimanê kurdî* (Baghdad, 1971); reprinted with Latin transcription as Mele Elî Teremaxî, *Serfa Kurmancî*, ed. M. Khaznadar and Z. Zinar (Stockholm, 1997).

edition.<sup>8</sup> Apart from the brief introductory comments in these different editions of the *Tesrîf*, I am not aware of any detailed study of Teremaxî's work: it appears not to be seen as part of the Kurdish literary heritage even by Kurdish authors. Thus, Amir Hassanpour qualifies the works of Teremaxî (whom he dates to the seventeenth century) and the eighteenth-century Mulla Yûnus as "non-literary prose"; but the journalistic Kurdish prose appearing in periodicals of the late nineteenth century hardly had any greater literary pretensions. Likewise, in his introduction to Kurdish literature, Mehmet Uzun passes over Teremaxî's and Mulla Yûnus's works in silence, and locates the origins of Kurdish prose literature in the last few years of the nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup> Clearly, the older prose works under discussion do not have any literary pretensions, being primarily didactic in nature; but, in any case, no modern generic category of literature covering both prose and poetry had yet emerged in this period.

Yet the *Serfa Kurmancî* merits our attention, not only for its inherent interest as probably the oldest prose text in Kurdish dealing with a learned subject, but also because of the subsequent impact it has had on Kurdish culture. Both as the first work of didactic prose written in Kurdish and as the first attempt at a grammatical description of Kurdish, I will argue below, Teremaxî's *Tesrîf* embodies a wider process of *vernacularization*, i.e. the novel use of a spoken language for literate uses of learning and high literature; moreover, it also reflects or embodies a changing ideology of language that elevates spoken vernaculars without an extensive literary past, like Kurdish, with respect to prestigious written languages like Arabic and Persian. Thus, after a brief description of the contents of the *Tesrîf* and of the linguistic ideology it assumes, I will discuss how Teremaxî's work fits in with the broader picture of medrese learning in early modern Kurdistan. Finally, I will discuss the enduring importance of this vernacularization process, focusing on the Kurdish medrese curriculum established (or redefined) in its wake. Thus, this paper will also address more general questions concerning the role of early modern forms of locally developed knowledge in the formation of modern national identities.<sup>10</sup>

### *Teremaxî's Sarf: Background and Contents*

About Teremaxî's life we know little, and even less with any degree of certainty. The earliest and most important source is Bayazîdî's brief sketch dating from the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>11</sup> In Jaba's 1860 collection, Bayazîdî's "preliminary notes" are preceded by another, equally important statement on the earliest authors writing in Kurdish,

<sup>8</sup>Findî, *Elî Teremaxî yekemîn Rêzîmannivîs û pexshannivîsê Kurde*; Mamoste Qedrî, "Eliyê Teremaxî û Dîtinên wî yên li ser Rêçikên Rêzîmana Kurdî li Gor Pirtûka wî ya bi Navê Destûra Zimanê Erebi bi Kurdî Digel Hinde Nimûneyêd Farisî û Kurdî," *Bîr*, Hejmar 1 (Bihar 2005): 192–8.

<sup>9</sup>Amir Hassanpour, *Nationalism and Language in Kurdistan, 1918–1985* (San Francisco, 1992), esp. 81; Mehmed Uzun, *Destpêka edebiyeta kurdî* (Ankara, 1992), esp. 15–16.

<sup>10</sup>Below, I will indicate quotations from or references to Khaznadar's and Zinar's editions of the *Tesrîf* by, respectively, "Kh" and "Z" followed by a page number.

<sup>11</sup>Sagniç's brief sketch of Teremaxî's life and works, included in Feqî Huseyn Sagniç, *Dîroka wêjeya kurdî* (Istanbul, 2002), 387–90, appears to be largely based on Bayazîdî's account.

including the likes of Eli Hariri, Melayê Cezîrî and Ehmedê Xanî. This makes both texts, tantalizingly brief as they are, the oldest sources for the history of, respectively, Kurdish-language scholarship and Kurdish literature. According to Bayazîdî's account, Teremaxî was born in the village of Teremax, i.e., present-day Taramak or Yaylakonak in the district (*kaza*) of Müküs (Kurdish: Muks or Miks) or present-day Bahçesaray in Van province. Prior to 1915, this village had a substantial Armenian population, and, according to local informants, it has a number of (crypto-)Armenian inhabitants even today.<sup>12</sup> Teremaxî pursued his studies in Baghdad, Mosul and in the Bahdinan and Soran regions of Kurdistan. His fame soon spread over all of Kurdistan; but he eventually returned to his native village, where he founded a mosque and a medrese, and where he eventually was also buried.

Bayazîdî writes that Teremaxî lived around 1000AH (1591CE), but this seems little more than a conventional date: he gives the same year for Ehmedê Xanî, quoting no source for this year, even though he must have been familiar with the latter's *Mem û Zîn*, as his own rendering of that tale is clearly based on Xanî's version. In the conclusion to *Mem û Zîn*, Xanî himself explicitly indicates 1061/1651 as his year of birth, and adds that he is forty-four years old at the time of finishing his poem, yielding a rather precise date of 1105/1695 for his flourishing (bayt 2652–53). The date provided by Bayazîdî for the year of Xanî's death, 1063/1653, however, is erroneous even by his own standards, as he continues with the remark that Isma'îlê Bayazîdî, who, he notes, was a student of Xanî's, was born in 1065/1654. This suggests that also in the case of Teremaxî, the year 1000/1591 may be no more than a rough approximation.

Modern scholars do not appear to move beyond Bayazîdî's remarks. Thus, in her description of the 1858 manuscript, Margaret Rudenko dates Teremaxî in the "first half of the eleventh century AH," i.e. the first half of the seventeenth century CE, giving no sources or arguments, but presumably basing the date on Bayazîdî.<sup>13</sup> We may, however, tentatively suggest that Teremaxî's *Tesrif* dates from the later seventeenth or the early eighteenth century, by comparing it with another work (or, strictly speaking, two works generally taken together) of a comparable character, the *Zurûf* and *Tarkîb* by Mulla Yûnus Khalqatînî or Harqatînî, likewise written in Kurdish and dealing with Arabic syntax or *nahw*. The Petersburg manuscript of this—hitherto unpublished—work refers to 1200/1785 as the year of Khalqatînî's death, while the Marburg/Berlin version dates it as 1205/1791.<sup>14</sup> Thus, Mulla Yûnus can be solidly dated to the eighteenth century, and it does not seem unreasonable to situate

<sup>12</sup>R.H. Kevorkian and P.B. Paboudjian, *Les Arméniens dans l'Empire Ottoman à la veille du Génocide* (Paris, 1992), 550; J. Verheij (personal communication, Skype message, May 12, 2014.6). The Russian orientalist Hovsep Orbeli (1887–1961) conducted ethnographic research in pre-war Muks, posthumously published as *Folklor i byt Moksa* (Moscow, 1982), translated into Kurdish as *Li Muksê folklore û jiyana rojane* (Istanbul, 2011).

<sup>13</sup>M.B. Rudenko, *Opisanie kurdsikh rykopisei leningradskikh sobranii* (Moscow, 1961), 101–2.

<sup>14</sup>Cat no. Kurd 18, State Library, Petersburg; Ms. Or. Quart. 1057, SB Marburg/Berlin. Cf. Rudenko (*Opisanie kurdsikh rykopisei leningradskikh sobranii*, 102–3); and K. Fuad, *Kurdische Handschriften* (Berlin, 1970), 114–15.

Teremaxî in the same period, or perhaps in the late seventeenth century: as will appear below, his work fits within a broader pattern that can be situated in this period on independent grounds.

Now let us have a closer look at Teremaxî's text.<sup>15</sup> As indicated by its title, this work belongs to the traditional genre of *sarf* or *tasrif* ("morphology" or, more correctly, "conjugation"); this term indicates both the grammatical phenomenon and the branch of linguistic science dealing with it. In the early Islamic centuries, *sarf* was developed as part of the linguistic sciences of the Arabic languages as developed in places like Basra and Kûfa. A related traditional linguistic topic or subdiscipline is that of *nahw* or syntax.<sup>16</sup> These two fields are conventionally characterized as dealing with, respectively, the changes taking place within words and the inflectional endings of words; or, alternatively, with the structure of words and the place of words within a sentence.<sup>17</sup> The early history of *sarf* need not concern us here; for the present paper, the more important point is that, by the twelfth century at the latest, *sarf* had become a well-established part of the medrese curriculum, and was taught from a relatively small number of canonical textbooks, such as Sa'd al-Taftazânî's *Sa'dîni*. Possibly, *sarf* texts were also written for other languages, most importantly Persian and Turkish. These works applied an Arabic technical vocabulary to entirely unrelated languages, and also modeled their descriptions of these languages on Arabic. One of the most influential *sarf* textbooks in Persian was the *Sarf-i mîr* by Isma'îl b. al-Husayn al-Jurjânî, also named mîr Sayyid (d. 531/1137). It should be noted, however, that the history both of the later Arabic linguistic sciences and of their application to other languages remains a relatively unexplored field of inquiry.

Although its first half discusses Arabic *sarf*, Teremaxî's text also features a brief sketch of *sarf* for languages other than Arabic. It is clearly intended as an introductory text; although it relies on the long-standing tradition of *sarf* studies in Arabic (and, possibly, Persian), only Taftazânî's *Sa'dîni* is explicitly mentioned (Kh44; Z46). After a brief introduction stating the importance of *sarf* in general and the need for a Kurdish *sarf* in particular (Kh29–30; Z13–15), Teremaxî in the first section of his work describes the basics of Arabic *sarf* (Kh30–45; Z16–48), and then proceeds to a slightly shorter second section on Persian *sarf* which also includes a substantial

<sup>15</sup>The undated manuscript of the *Tesrif* shown to me by Muhammad Ali Qaradaghî is written in a fully vocalized script and features extensive marginal comments. This version appears to display a number of significant deviations from the text as edited by Khaznadar and transcribed by Zinar; but as I do not have any manuscript copies of the entire work at my disposal, I cannot discuss these matters here.

<sup>16</sup>For brief introductory remarks, see the lemmata "Nahw," "Sarf," and "Tasrif," all by C. Versteegh, in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2nd ed., Leiden, 1960ff.). For more on the origins and basic vocabulary of the Arabic linguistic sciences including *sarf* or *tasrif*, see Jonathan Owens, *The Foundations of Grammar: An Introduction to Medieval Arabic Grammatical Theory*, Studies in the History of the Language Sciences, no. 45 (Amsterdam, 1988). See also Michael Carter, "Sarf et khilâf: Contribution à la grammaire arabe," *Arabica* 20 (1973): 292–304; Michael Carter, "When did the Arabic word *nahw* first come to denote grammar?," *Language and Communication* 5 (1985): 265–72. These and similar works generally focus on the early phase of Arabic language studies up to the establishment of a grammatical "orthodoxy" by the so-called Basra school.

<sup>17</sup>Cf. Owens, *The Foundations of Grammar*, 99.



number of observations on Kurdish (Kh46–53; Z49–66), and concludes by briefly restating both the difficulty of this science and the importance of knowing its basics (*qawâ'id*).

In his introduction, Teremaxî quotes an Arabic-language definition of sarf as *tahwîl al-asl al-wâbid ilâ amthila mukhtalifa* (“the translation of a single principle into similar but distinct ones”), which he then translates into Kurdish without any further explanation of the terms involved (Kh29; Z14); more generally, technical Arabic-language terms are not so much explained in detail as translated into Kurdish, clearly a language more familiar to his students, and illustrated with concrete examples. Following this general definition, Teremaxî makes the traditional distinction between noun (*ism*), verb (*fi'l*) and particle (*harf*); he makes this distinction, however, in primarily semantic rather than morphological terms, apparently following a later, non-Basran trend in Arabic-language sarf studies.<sup>18</sup> Thus, he characterizes nouns as individual expressions having a singular or determinate meaning on their own; verbs as terms from which several distinct meanings (*çend me'ânî cuda cuda*) may appear, and particles as not independently having a meaning of their own (Kh30; Z15). In the first part of the *Sarfa Kurmançî*, which deals exclusively with Arabic, Teremaxî then proceeds to discuss the different varieties of each of these categories, first describing six kinds of *ism*, then devoting eight paragraphs (*fusûl*) to verbal morphology, and concluding with one long *fasl* listing a number of Arabic particles.

The second section (Kh46–53; Z49–66) is mostly devoted to Persian and Kurdish sarf. Even a cursory glance immediately reveals that its discussion of these two languages does not slavishly or mechanically follow the Arabic model. Thus, unlike the section on Arabic, it does not start with a discussion of *ism* and then proceed to verbs and particles; rather, it first discusses the verb, starting with the preterite tense (*fi'la mazî*) which only appears as a subordinate element in the discussion of Arabic verbal morphology. This paragraph is followed by nine *fusûl* discussing different aspects of verbal inflection, such as the present tense (*fi'la muzarî*), active and passive participles, imperatives and prohibitives, in Persian and Kurdish. More importantly, from this section it appears that Teremaxî models Kurdish directly on Persian, and only indirectly on Arabic: Kurdish sarf categories are usually introduced alongside the discussion of the same categories in Persian (probably based on existing textbooks of Persian sarf), and typically introduced by phrases like *lâkin* or *ema*, “however,” as if to indicate the contrast with Persian. Thus, Teremaxî implicitly indicates that he is well aware of the major structural differences between Kurdish and Arabic, and of the major structural similarities between Kurdish and Persian.

Remarkably, however, Teremaxî discusses the past tense of the intransitive verb *raftan*, “to go,” in Persian only, and entirely omits past tense conjugation in Kurdish (Kh46–7; Z49–50); had he included the latter (and had he discussed transitive verbs), we might have found here the first description of the ergative construction for which Kurmanji is famous among linguists. There seems to be no plausible

<sup>18</sup>Cf. Bernard Weiss, “A Theory of the Parts of Speech in Arabic (Noun, Verb, Particle): A Study of ‘ilm al-wad’,” *Arabica* XXXII (1976): 23–36.

explanation for Teremaxî's omission, other than oversight. Equally remarkable for its absence, in the discussion of the personal pronoun (*zamîr*), is the third person singular pronoun *ew/wî/wê*, which is only discussed in the context of demonstrative pronouns (*asmâ' al-ishâra*) rather than personal pronouns (Kh51–52; Z61). Even more intriguing is the absence of all discussion of the Kurdish case system, possibly because Persian lacks case, or possibly because case endings, in Kurdish as in Arabic, were seen as falling under *nahw* rather than *sarf*.

In his conclusion, Teremaxî once again reaffirms the importance of studying the principles of *sarf*, as that science is “harder (*çetintir*) than all the other sciences” (Z66; Kh54). He concludes the second part of his *Sarf* with a *bayt*, or distich, in Turkish, presumably from some rhymed Turkish-language work on grammar, which emphasizes the importance and difficulty of *sarf*:

Serfin i'lâlî çokdur bir demirden baş gerek  
Okuyan darrâk gerek, ya okutan qardaş gerek. (Kh54; Z67)<sup>19</sup>

*Sarf* has many modifications, and requires an iron head  
You need an intelligent reader, or you need a brother who makes you read.

This quotation suggests that Teremaxî had at least a basic command of Turkish, and expected the same from his readership. The Kurdish poet Ehmedê Xanî displays a similar knowledge of Turkish in the form of isolated stock phrases, ending chapter 39 of his *Mem û Zîn* with the Turkish phrase *bilmez ki ne söyleye zebânim* (bayt 1577). By this use of stock phrases in Turkish, both Xanî and Teremaxî appear to suggest or signify that they possess at least a rudimentary command of Turkish and some knowledge of scholarly works written in that language.

Teremaxî's conception or ideology of language in general, and of the Kurdish language in particular, is not very explicit or elaborate, but one feature that immediately springs to mind is that he nowhere treats Arabic as in any respect superior or privileged as a language of revelation or religious learning, or even talks of Arabic and Persian as languages with a more venerable tradition of written high literature. For his account, the only practically important difference between Arabic on the one hand and Persian and Kurdish on the other is the fact that the science of *sarf* was originally formulated in and for the Arabic language: “in its origin and beginnings, the science of *sarf* was in Arabic, and the terms that are necessary for these sciences are Arabic expressions” (Kh29; Z14). He treats Kurdish and Persian as involving largely the same grammatical categories (both differing significantly from Arabic in this respect), but realizing them in different ways. Thus, he appears to assume some sort of grammatical affinity or similarity between Persian and Kurdish, and a much greater grammatical contrast with Arabic. Obviously, these affinities and differences

<sup>19</sup>I have not been able to trace this quotation; most likely, it comes from a (rhymed) Turkish-language *sarf* text. With Khaznadar, I read the second line as *okuyan darrâk gerek*, rather than *okuyandır onu gören*, as does Zinar.



are not characterized in genetic terms, as the conceptual apparatus of historical-comparative linguistics did not become available either in Europe or elsewhere until the nineteenth century. Although the *Serfa Kurmanci* does not explicitly address the question of either the character of the relations between distinct but similar languages or the universality of grammatical categories, Teremaxî's way of formulating does raise the question of whether and to what extent the vocabulary of sarf as developed for Arabic can be applied to or used for languages like Kurdish and Persian, which display substantial structural differences with Arabic.

Thus, the *Tesrif* appears to speak about these three languages in purely descriptive linguistic rather than normative or religiously inspired terms. Clearly, for Teremaxî, Arabic, being the language of revelation, is his first object of analysis. Likewise, the learned vocabulary he employs is mostly Arabic in origin, and he uses Arabic not only as an object of grammatical study, but also as a model for the description of both Persian and Kurdish; other than that, however, the *Serfa Kurmanci* nowhere hints that Arabic is in any way superior to, or more prestigious or sacred than, either Kurdish or Persian; further, despite appearing to notice the close relation between Kurdish and Persian, he nowhere indicates that he considers Kurdish merely a Persian dialect, nor does he see Kurdish as a form of Persian corrupted by a substantial admixture of Arabic and/or other languages, as does, for example, Bayazîdî in his *Adat û rusûmatname*.<sup>20</sup> Instead, he treats all three languages on a virtually equal footing, referring to all of them alike with terms like *lughet*, *lîsân*, or *zîmân*.

### *The Vernacularization of Kurdish Medrese Learning*

The cultural significance of Teremaxî's *Tesrif* is far greater than would be suggested by its initial appearance of an elementary textbook that is as modest in size as it seems derivative in content. Both as the first didactic prose work written in Kurdish and as the first attempt at a grammatical description of Kurdish, it embodies, and has arguably contributed to, the so-called *vernacularization* of Kurdish, i.e. the emergence of new literate uses of this language for purposes of learning and high literature, which can be seen in the later eighteenth and especially the eighteenth century. This process, I would like to suggest, marks an early stage in the rise of a language-based modern Kurdish national identity. Teremaxî's work, if indeed belonging to the later seventeenth or earlier eighteenth century, would be but one indication of this process; other texts, which can be more securely dated, point in the same direction. If this hypothesis of a Kurdish vernacularization most clearly visible in the eighteenth century is correct, the roots of Kurdish nationalism not only lie further in the past than is often assumed; it may also be argued to have its origins in changing local linguistic practices rather than in newly imported ideologies.

<sup>20</sup>Mulla Mahmûdê Bayazîdî, *Adat û Rusûmetnameê Ekradiye*. MS 1858/1274, cat.nr. Kurd 34, published by Margaret Rudenko as *Nravy i obyçai kurdov* in the Gosydarstvennaya pyblitsnaya biblioteka (Leningrad (Petersburg), 1963); Latin transcription edited by Jan Dost, *Adat û Rusûmetnameê Ekradiye* (Istanbul, 2010), 36–38.

As Sheldon Pollock has argued, vernacularization is not a uniquely modern or European phenomenon.<sup>21</sup> For most readers, the most familiar example of vernacularization is undoubtedly the emergence of the Romance languages as media of high literature in the tenth/eleventh century CE; but, Pollock argues, a broadly comparable process also occurred around the same time on the Indian subcontinent, where local languages like Kannada, Tamil and Telugu came to be used alongside, or instead of, the Sanskrit of classical learning and literature. Thus, vernacularization often—though not always—involves the outright replacement of a cosmopolitan and transregional language like Latin or Sanskrit by a local spoken one. In the eighteenth century, however, a new phase of vernacularization may be observed, not only in the Ottoman Empire, but almost on a global scale. In the Ottoman territories, written varieties of Greek and Turkish emerged that were much closer to the spoken vernaculars than, respectively, the Koinè Greek used in the Orthodox church and the complex and flowery and highly complex Ottoman Turkish employed in the state bureaucracy.

One important dimension of this process of vernacularization that is not addressed as such by Pollock is the role of so-called language ideologies, i.e. folk theories about language and its functioning in the (social) world. Over the past decades, language ideologies have gained much ground in linguistic anthropology as a powerful explanatory tool. Thus, to take one simple example: the distinction between French *tu* and *vous* as, respectively, the familiar and the polite form of the second-person singular pronoun has been claimed to have been shaped by ideologies of polite language behavior.<sup>22</sup> For present purposes, a central question to be addressed is whether and in what ways the process of Kurdish vernacularization was accompanied by any significant changes in linguistic ideology, especially as concerning the character and status of Kurdish. Are the practical changes involved in the new literate uses of Kurdish and the structural changes embodied in the new trend towards the normalization (and, possibly, unification) of the language matched by any ideological change, in particular concerning the relation of Kurdish to Arabic and Persian, the two prestigious cosmopolitan languages of religious learning and high literature among the empire's Muslim population groups? One of the main general claims to be defended below is that new linguistic ideologies that elevate spoken vernaculars with respect to written cosmopolitan languages are one of the key innovations of the eighteenth century, and by extension one of the central preconditions of language-based nationalism. Here, however, I will only be able to discuss this general claim for a small number of authors writing in one single variety of Kurdish.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup>For a brief comparative statement, see S. Pollock, "Cosmopolitan and Vernacular in History," *Public Culture* 12 (2000): 591–625; for a more detailed description, see Pollock's breathtaking *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men* (Berkeley, CA, 2006).

<sup>22</sup>See especially M. Silverstein, "Language Structure and Linguistic Ideology," in *The Elements*, P. Cline et al., eds. (Chicago, IL, 1979), 193–247. For a discussion more directly relevant to the present paper, see R. Bauman and Ch. Briggs, *Voices of Modernity* (Cambridge, 2003).

<sup>23</sup>The present paper forms part of a larger work, *From Coffee House to Nation State: The Emergence of National Languages in the Modernizing Ottoman Empire*, currently in progress. For an initial statement of its general argument, focusing on religious dimensions and philosophical implications rather than

With these more general questions in mind, let us now look at the status of Kurdish medrese learning in seventeenth-century Kurdistan. Arabic and Persian were widely respected as languages of, respectively, religious learning and poetry. The Arabic language was obviously one of the main topics studied in medreses; Persian, however, despite its prestige, did not enjoy any comparable official sanctioning: thus Halil İnalcık states that the Ottoman 'ulamâ had forbidden the study of Persian in the medreses, and that therefore the tekkes or Sufi lodges became centers for learning that language.<sup>24</sup> Written Turkish, by contrast, appears to have made few inroads other than as the language of the state bureaucracy in the empire's Kurdish provinces (and, it should be noted, even the replacement of Persian by Turkish as the Ottoman court language had been a relatively recent innovation). Turkish may have been important as the written language of government, and as the spoken language of some of the tribal confederations in the region; but as a medium for learning and literature, it was no match for, respectively, Arabic and Persian. Significantly, several sources, starting with Bayazîdî, suggest that Kurdish medrese students typically proceeded to pursue their further studies in predominantly Arab (and generally Sunni-dominated) cities like Mosul, Baghdad and Basra, Damascus and, of course Mecca and Medina, rather than in areas closer to the Turkish, and turcophone, centers of the Ottoman Empire.

Early authors already note the distinctive character of learning in the Kurdish region; thus, in his *Mizân ul-haqq*, Kâtib Çelebi argues that the rational sciences had declined everywhere in the Ottoman Empire except in Kurdistan.<sup>25</sup> More recently, Khaled al-Rouayheb has argued that the rational sciences, most importantly logic, continued to be studied intensively in the Ottoman empire, and especially in its Kurdish-inhabited provinces, for much longer than has hitherto been thought. Thus, against the widespread view that religious fanaticism triumphed over philosophical learning in the seventeenth century, he advances persuasive evidence that the study of the rational sciences actually increased during the seventeenth century. He further notes a significant number of Kurdish scholars working on logic during this period, both in Kurdish-inhabited areas and elsewhere in the empire, and suggests this predominance may be due to an influx of Kurdish Sunni scholars fleeing Safavid Iran and its attempts to forcibly convert Sunnis.<sup>26</sup>

---

linguistic particulars, see my "The Structural Transformation of the Coffeehouse: Language, Religion, and the Public Sphere in the Modernizing Muslim World," in *Things: Religion and the Question of Materiality*, ed. D. Houtman and B. Meyer (New York, 2012), 267–81.

<sup>24</sup>Halil İnalcık, *The Ottoman Empire: The Classical Age* (London, 1973), 201. Teremaxî remarks that "in every language, this science of sarf exists and is practiced" (Kh29; Z14), implying that a Persian sarf already exists, and that it, like Arabic sarf, can provide the vocabulary and examples for the grammatical description of Kurdish (ibid.). It does not become clear from the text if Teremaxî is basing his argument on any existing descriptions of Persian, as neither he nor later authors like Bayazîdî, Zînar or Öztoprak (to be discussed below) lists any work dealing specifically with Persian sarf as part of the Northern Kurdish medrese curriculum.

<sup>25</sup>Kâtib Çelebi, *The Balance of Truth*, trans. G. Lewis (London, 1957), 26. In *La science chez les turcs ottomans* (Paris, 1938), esp. 92, 106, Adnan Adivar, apparently based on Çelebi, makes similar claims.

<sup>26</sup>Khalid al-Rouayheb, "The Myth of the 'Triumph of Fanaticism' in the Seventeenth-Century Ottoman Empire," *Die Welt des Islams* 48 (2008): 196–21, esp. 210ff.

Next to this apparent flourishing of learning in seventeenth-century Kurdistan, however, there is evidence of another early modern development in Kurdish medrese culture, not noted by either Inalcik or al-Rouayheb, which may be of equal if not greater significance: a broader shift towards using Kurdish as a medium of both spoken and written medrese instruction. As argued above, Tere-maxî may perhaps be dated to this period; but there are other indications as well. What little evidence there is for earlier times suggests that until the late seventeenth century, Kurdish was used, if at all, at most for the oral elucidation of texts written in Arabic. Amir Hassanpour states that Kurdish was always used orally to elucidate Arabic-language textbooks, and sees the introduction of Kurdish textbooks as a “response to a real practical need”; but it is not clear exactly what he bases this—*prima facie* plausible—claim on.<sup>27</sup> There is, in fact, evidence that, at least in the more important urban or court-related medreses, Arabic and Persian rather than Kurdish were the main languages being taught (and possibly the main languages of instruction) from early on. Thus, in his travel account of the Kurdish provinces, seventeenth-century author Evliya Çelebi mentions local ‘ulamâ writing poems in Kurdish, but makes no mention of Kurdish prose works, nor does he otherwise elaborate on literate uses of Kurdish in the towns he has visited.<sup>28</sup> Instead, in his description of the town of Bitlis, at that time ruled by a local Kurdish amir, Abdal Khan, he emphasizes the local elite’s skills in Arabic and Persian. Of the ruler, he writes:

as a poet he is the unique of the age, rivalling Azmizade Haleti and Cami and Hafiz and Saib in composing odes and ruba’is ... if he takes an Arabic book in his hands, he can translate it immediately into Persian and read it faultlessly and elegantly; while Turkish chronicles (*tarihleri*) he can recite in fluent Arabic or Persian. (228a14–18)<sup>29</sup>

But it is not only the amir whose skills in Persian and Arabic are thus emphasized. Talking of local schools, Çelebi observes:

The schoolchildren [in Bitlis] are sharp and quick-witted, noble-born and mature beyond their years, having memorized the *Divan* of Hafiz, the *Gülîstan* and *Bûstân* (of Sa’dî), and the Divans of Fuzuli and Saib; though of course they are not as advanced as children in the Arab countries in the subjects of Arabic letters (*kitâb-i ‘arabiyyâtde*) and memorizing the Koran. (235a13–16)<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup>Hassanpour, *Nationalism and Language in Kurdistan*, 73.

<sup>28</sup>Cf. M. van Bruinessen, “Les Kurdes et leur langue au XVIIe siècle: notes d’Evliya Çelebi sur les dialectes kurdes,” *Studia Kurdica* no. 1–5 (1988): 13–34, <http://www.let.uu.nl/~martin.vanbruinessen/personal/publicaties.html> (accessed March 23, 2012).

<sup>29</sup>English trans. Dankoff (Leiden, 1990: 97).

<sup>30</sup>English trans. *ibid.*, 153.

Thus, Evliya Çelebi appears to suggest that, even for pupils in the very first stages of religious education, the Bitlis schools involved featured Arabic and Persian language and literature as both objects of study and media of instruction. Kurdish may or may not have been used for elucidation and commentary on the written texts; but there is no concrete evidence that it was actually used either in oral or in written form at this time. Likewise, the earliest historical works on the Kurds, like Sheref Xan's *Sherefnameh* and Idris Bidlisi's *Hesht behesht*, were written in Persian rather than Kurdish. Although Kurmanji texts of a poetic style and religious content had already been written in earlier centuries by authors like Elî Harîrî, Feqiyê Teyran and Melayê Cezîrî, and—most relevant in this context—Mulla Bateyî's *Mawlûda Kurmancî* (conventionally dated to the fifteenth century), there is no indication that these were specifically directed towards a medrese audience.<sup>31</sup> Versified mawlûd texts, and to a lesser extent aqîdas or “professions of faith,” exist in many vernacular languages from a relatively early stage, like, most famously, Süleyman Çelebi's fourteenth-century Mawlûd in Turkish. It does not seem, however, that these texts were exclusively addressed to a literate medrese audience. Given the 'ulama strictures against Persian in medreses mentioned above, it may in fact be more likely that Persianate and Turkish works were read in Sufi lodges as much as in medreses; this would include Kurdish-language works that were didactic as much as they were poetic in character, like Bateyî's Mawlûd and Cizîrî's Diwân. In short, the available evidence suggests that Persian was the predominant language for local literary practices, as Arabic was the predominant language for local religious learning.

This was to change towards the end of the seventeenth century; but this change appears to have occurred primarily in the rural medreses rather than in the greater urban centers. Next to the urban medreses more closely linked to Ottoman officialdom, and next to schools under the patronage of local rulers, there were various rural medreses and smaller hujras in the Kurdish region, typically attached to village mosques, where pupils were educated primarily to become village mullas themselves. According to Martin van Bruinessen, these rural medreses played a major role in the emergence of Kurdish national awareness.<sup>32</sup> Because they drew students of diverse backgrounds, he argues, they tended to downplay possible differences in regional, social and tribal background and were instrumental in the cultivation of a common Kurdish language. Indeed, important Kurdish authors like Xanî, Teremaxî and Xalqatînî all seem both to have originated from such a small village medrese environment and to have made significant contributions to its flourishing, either by founding medreses in their native villages or by writing works that came to be widely used in village schools.

Thus, it was during this period that the oldest known Kurdish-language text specifically intended for use by medrese students was composed: Ehmedê Xanî's rhymed Arabic–Kurdish dictionary, the *Nûbihara piçûkan* (“First-fruit for the young ones”).

<sup>31</sup>Bateyî's *Mawlûd* was recently republished as 173–234 of Xalid Sadîni, *Mela Huseynê Bateyî: Jiyan, berhem û helbestên wî* (Istanbul, 2010); a recent bilingual Kurdish–Turkish edition of Cizîrî is Melayê Cizîrî, *Dîwan*, ed. Osman Tunç (Istanbul, 2010).

<sup>32</sup>Van Bruinessen, “Les Kurdes et leur langue au XVIIe siècle,” 24.



Slightly later, and also for an early stage of medrese education, Xanî wrote the *Eqîdeya êmanê*, a rhymed aqîda text which was not so much a personal profession of faith as a simple text to instruct others in religious orthodoxy. Like the *Nûbihar*, this text is rhymed in order to facilitate memorization; substantial parts of it, or at least similar-sounding verses, reappear in Xanî's later mathnawî poem, *Mem û Zîn* (esp. chapters 2–4).<sup>33</sup> These introductory works were followed by another relatively short rhymed text, the *Nehc ul-enâm* by Mulla Khelilê Sêrtî (1754–1843), also dealing with the basics of faith (aqîda).<sup>34</sup> Apparently no other writings by Sêrtî have come down to us, but according to Zinar, Sêrtî wrote a total of twenty-five books, eight of which were in Kurdish; more specifically, he also claims that Sêrtî is the author of an Arabic-language work on logic, the *Îsaghûjî*; more plausibly, this is a short commentary on al-Abharî's work of that title, which was widely used in the Ottoman empire.<sup>35</sup>

Next to these rhymed textbooks, several short prose works dealing with Arabic—and to a lesser extent Kurdish—grammar, written specifically for use in Kurdish medreses. The most important of these, apart from Teremaxî's *Tesrif*, are two short texts, the *Zurûf* and the *Tarkîb*, by mulla Yûnus Khalqatîni (d. 1791), both dealing with Arabic syntax or *nahw*; at times, these two are treated as one single work. Khalqatîni's work, although preserved in manuscript form in two European libraries, has not yet been published or studied; apparently, unlike Teremaxî's *Tesrif*, the *Tarkîb* and *Zurûf* deal with Arabic grammar only.<sup>36</sup> More advanced works on both the Arabic language and religious learning were generally in Arabic.

<sup>33</sup>Recently, Kadri Yıldırım has republished both the *Nûbihara piçûkan* and the *Eqîdeya îmanê* in book form, both with extensive commentaries (*Ehmedê Xanî külliyyati*, vols. I and II, Istanbul, 2008). Another aqîda text, the *Eqîdeya islami*, is conventionally ascribed to Xanî as well (e.g. by Hassanpour, *Nationalism and Language in Kurdistan*, 54, who in fact thinks this text is identical to the *Eqîdeya êmanê*); it is also included in a recent edition of Xanî's works (*Hemû Berhem*, Diyarbakir, 2007, 349–65). There are good reasons, however, to doubt this identification. First, it is partly written in prose, unlike any other work by Xanî; second, it displays substantial doctrinal differences with the *Eqîdeya îmanê*, but is virtually identical in doctrine—and, at times, wording—to two nineteenth-century aqîda texts from Khalidiyya Naqshbandî circles, namely Mawlana Khalid's *Aqîdetnamey kurdî*, originally written around 1800 in Sorani Kurdish, and a short aqîda text in the Hakkarî dialect (for the former, see the edition by Muhammad Mala Karim, *Aqîday kurdîy Mawlânâ Khâlîdî Naqshbandî*, in *Govârî korî zanyârî 'îraq-dastay kurde* 8 (1981): 199–222, reprinted in Kemal Re'ûf Muhammad, *Eqîdey 'îmân—'eqîdey kurdî* (Arbil 2004); for the latter, see D.N. MacKenzie, "A Kurdish Creed," in *A Locust's Leg*, ed. W.B. Henning and E. Yarshater (London, 1962), 162–70.

<sup>34</sup>The *Nehc ul Enâm* was published in Latin transcription by Zeynelabidin Zinar (Stockholm); another transcription was published by the Mezopotamya Institute of Istanbul in 2002.

<sup>35</sup>Z. Zinar, *Xwendina medresê* (Stockholm, 1993), 79; an English-language summary of this work was published as Z. Zinar, "Medrese education in Kurdistan," *Les annales de l'autre Islam*, no. 5 (1998): Islam des Kurdes, 39–58. The Milli Kütüphanesi in Ankara has an Arabic-language manuscript of a short introductory text by Sêrtî in its possession (cat.no. 9572, fols. 25–37); I am indebted to Khaled al-Rouayheb for this information. That library also lists one other work by Sêrtî: the *Manzûme-i aqâ'id*, which may or may not be identical to the *Nehc ul Enâm* (cat no. 5752). Manuscripts of other works by Sêrtî may yet emerge from state libraries or state collections.

<sup>36</sup>Rudenko, *Opisanie kurdsikhikh rykopisei leningradskikh sobranii*, 102–3; Fuad, *Kurdische Handschriften*, 114–15. The Marburg/Berlin manuscript of the *Zurûf* opens with a discussion of the two distinct



There is some evidence suggesting that local authors themselves saw this shift towards writing Kurdish for learned (as distinct from poetic) purposes as a significant development. Thus, Mulla Mahmud Bayazîdî, writing in the mid-nineteenth century, clearly sees the introduction of Kurdish-language grammar textbooks as an innovation, which he dates around the year 1000 AH/1591CE: “until the year 1000AH [i.e. 1591CE],” he writes, “Kurdish students and teachers learned the discipline of sarf from Arabic textbooks, such as Sa’d al-Dîn’s book called the *Sa’dîni*, and from Çarperdî and *Sa’dullah gewre*,” a task he describes as “very hard” for students. Realizing this, he continues, Teremaxî wrote an *ibâret* or *tasrif* in the language of the Kurds, which was “important and indispensable” (*ehemm û lazim*) as a propaedeutic both to Arabic-language learning and to the other sciences (Kh26; Z10).<sup>37</sup>

Although (as seen above) there is reason to doubt Bayazîdî’s particular dates, other authors from the period under consideration also testify to the new written use of Kurdish for purposes of instruction. In fact, Kurdish authors are well aware that their use of their mother tongue for purposes of high literature is something novel. Thus, most famously, Ehmedê Xanî, in chapter 6 of his *Mem û Zîn*, writes that he has written his learned poem in Kurdish for the sake of the illiterate masses (*ji boyê ‘ammê*), and explicitly qualifies this literate use of his language as a heretic innovation or *bid’a* (bâyt 237–9).

Likewise, Teremaxî sees his own Kurdish sarf as an innovation, for which he believes there is an urgent need: he explicitly states that, although grammatical learning originated from Arabic and is primarily concerned with the Arabic language, there is an urgent need for it also to be formulated in and for Kurdish:

Reader, know that it is also necessary for the Kurdish people (*tayifa*) that they know the science of Sarf in the Kurdish language; for the basis and foundation of all sciences is the science of Sarf ... In all languages, this science exists and is practised; but what is now necessary for us is [sarf in] the Kurdish language.

(Tu bizan! Ey mufredê muzekker ê muxatteb ku ji boyî tayifa Ekradan ra jî lazim e ku bi zimanê Kurmançî ew jî ‘ilmê serfê bizanin. Lewra bina û asasa hemû ‘ilman, li ser ‘ilmê serfê ye ... Ev ‘ilmê serfê li hemû kafiyêd lisanan da heye û icra dibe. Ema ê ku niha ji bo me lâzim e zimanê kurmançî ye.) (Kh29; Z14)

That is, not only does he want the “Kurdish people” (*tayifa Ekradan*) to acquire learning; he also insists that Kurdish rather than Arabic should be the language in which this knowledge is formulated. Although it is unlikely that Teremaxî, any more than Xanî, uses terms like *tayifa* in anything remotely resembling the modern sense of nation or ethnic group, this statement is remarkable in that, like the *dibaçe* of *Mem û Zîn*, the *Serfa Kurmançî* both calls for and embodies the Kurdish vernacularization: both texts stress the importance of a literate and learned culture formulated in

---

grammatical schools (*madhâhib*) of Basra and Kufa, thus showing a basic familiarity with early theoretical debates on *nahw*.

<sup>37</sup>Jaba, *Recueil de notices et de récits kourdes*, 12–13.

the Kurdish language, and, at the same time, they are among the first exercises in such a literate vernacular culture.

One important aspect of this vernacularization is the significant normative dimension of the practice of sarf itself. The Kurdish people (*tayfa*) should know the science of sarf, Teremaxî argues, “for the science of sarf is the basis and foundation of all the sciences (*bina û asasa hemu ‘ilman*)” (Kh29; Z13). Sarf, he continues, is a balance (*mêzîn*) for weighing, and judging the correctness of, the other sciences, which may help us to ensure that their statements are correct; he even sees sarf as indispensable for that purpose: “without this science, there can be no correct speech (*kelamî rast*)” (Kh29; Z13). Likewise, Bayazîdî states that “the science of sarf is a balance (*mêzîn*); assuredly, all things stand in need of a balance so that what is correct and what is incorrect may become apparent (*kifş bibe*)” (Kh27; Z10).<sup>38</sup> Thus, sarf is clearly perceived as a normative science that, alongside logic, can help students in distinguishing correct and incorrect uses of language. More specifically, however, sarf is concerned with the grammatical correctness of utterances; as such, it may well have had a normalizing effect on the use of Kurdish in learned contexts like medreses. Put differently, the study of Kurdish sarf may be said to have helped in performatively bringing about a sense of a normative standard and of the normalized use of Kurdish it purports to describe.

Thus, Teremaxî’s *Sarf* points to a significant wider development of vernacularization: apparently, during the eighteenth century, Kurdish became the language of both written and spoken instruction, at least for the initial stages of education, among the medreses of northern Kurdistan. The very fact that it describes its specific grammatical as normatively correct may have helped in bringing about a sense of a linguistic standard for the Kurdish language. Importantly, however, neither Teremaxî nor Xanî conceives of Kurdish as a “national language” in the romantic nationalistic sense of the word; instead, they implicitly or explicitly treat it as a language of illiterate commoners with no learned tradition of its own.

### *The Kurdish Medrese Curriculum in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*

This brings us to the question of the influence of the *Serfa Kurmancî*. Both Mulla Mahmud Bayazîdî and Zeynelabidîn Zinar state that this work was among the first texts that medrese pupils had to study, and, indeed, learn by heart; and also the famous Said Ramazan al-Bûtî, in his book about his father Molla Ramazan al-Bûtî, mentions the *Tasrîf* as a self-evident part of the curriculum.<sup>39</sup> It is next to impossible, however, to make any reliable quantitative estimate of how widely Teremaxî’s *Serf* (or Xanî’s work, for that matter) was used in Kurdish medreses, and whether there were any significant differences between urban and rural schools on this point; but there are indications that it must have been, and may still be, considerable. Studies like Zinar’s

<sup>38</sup>Cf. *ibid.*, 12.

<sup>39</sup>M. Said Ramazan al-Buti, *Babam Molla Ramazan el-Buti: Hayatı, Düşünceleri, Mücadelesi* (Istanbul, 2011), 23.

suggest that works like Xanî's and Teremaxî's appear to have kept their prominent place in the Kurdish medrese curriculum ever since. This suggestion, I have found, is corroborated by remarks of different local former medrese pupils, who independently and consistently claim that the *Tesrîf*, along with Kurdish-language works on Arabic grammar like Xelqetîni's *Tarkîb* and *Zurûf*, have continued to circulate in manuscript (and more recently perhaps also in mimeographed form) in northern Kurdish medreses, thus providing the pupils not only with their first introduction to Arabic grammar but also with something like a norm for a written and more or less standardized form of Kurmanji. It will appear that Teremaxî's work has occupied, and to all appearances continues to occupy, a special position in this curriculum. This development, however, only seems to have taken place in north Kurdistan.<sup>40</sup> Local informants have told me that further to the south, medrese or hujra education has always continued to rely on Arabic as the primary language of instruction. Here, I will briefly look at the core texts of the curriculum, in particular the works written in Kurdish or concerning the Kurdish language; the part of the curriculum dealing with fiqh and sharî'a need not concern us here, as most if not all of its textbooks were written in Arabic.<sup>41</sup> Unsurprisingly, many of the authors from the Kurdish medrese curriculum were shafi'ites, or were at least believed to be so.<sup>42</sup>

Kurdish medrese education, and medrese education in general, received a massive, though not a decisive, blow with the promulgation of the *Kanûn-i tevhid-i tedrisat* or Law on the Unification of Education in March 1924. This law not only implied the complete secularization of the school system and the closure of all medreses; it also dovetailed with and reinforced the ban on the Kurdish language. As a result, many medreses (as well as their libraries) were physically destroyed; in the Kurdish region, as elsewhere, many of them went underground, and thus continued teaching. According to authors like Zinar, medrese education continued until the 1960s; but several local informants have claimed that this kind of education continues, even if only on a small scale, until the present day. Whatever the truth of these latter claims, the clandestine medrese activity ensured a continuation of Kurdish vernacular learning, and through it an awareness of a normalized or standardized written variety of the

<sup>40</sup>Zinar (*Xwendina medresê*, 48) states that in the medrese he attended, although the works studied were mostly written in Arabic, the teachers would translate and explain them in Kurdish.

<sup>41</sup>Recently, a Kurdish-language rendering of the contents of three Arabic-language works on shafi'ite aqîda and fiqh (the *Hashiyet al-jamal*, on shaykh Sulayman al-Jamal's *Sharh al-manhajî*; Yûsuf al-Ardabili's *al-anwâr li a'mal al-ebrara*; and shaykh Muhammad Shirbîni al-Khatîb's *Mughni'l-muhtaja*) was published by M. Burhan Hedbî as *Eqîde û Fiqha Zelal* (Istanbul, 2011).

<sup>42</sup>For more information and further literature on al-Kâtîbî and al-Taftazânî, see the brief descriptions in EI2, by respectively, M. Mohaghegh and W. Madelung; see also Brockelmann's *Geschichte der arabischen Literatur* (Weimar, 1897–1902), I: 466 and S.I: 845 on the former and II.278–80 and S.II: 301–4 on the latter. For an Arabic text edition and English translation of the *Shamsiyya*, see A. Sprengers, *First Appendix to the "Dictionary of the technical terms used in the sciences of the Mussulmans" [by Mohammad 'Alî al Tabânawî], containing the Logic of the Arabians in the original Arabic, with an English translation* (Calcutta, 1854); the *Shamsiyya* is discussed in somewhat greater detail by Tony Street in *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, ed. Peter Adamson (Cambridge, 2005), 247–65.

language. The continued activity of the Kurdish medreses becomes evident from two recent books: Zeynelabidin Zinar's 1993 *Xwendina medresê* (Medrese learning) and Sadreddin Öztoprak's 2003 *Şark medreselerinde bir ömür* (A life in the medreses of the east).<sup>43</sup> Both authors, respectively born in 1953 and 1919/1920, describe their own experience in local medreses after the implementation of the 1924 law. They also supply important information on the medrese curriculum of this period; this appears to show important continuities with the novel curriculum described by Mulla Mahmudê Bayazîdî. Moreover, as Bayazîdî, Zinar and Öztoprak originate from different parts of northern Kurdistan (respectively, Dogubeyazıt, Batman and Mardin), their observations not only span a period of some 150 years, but also a geographically wide part of northern Kurdistan.

The oldest source is, once again, Bayazîdî. His brief text does not supply a complete listing of the texts used in the Kurdish medreses, but he does give a detailed list of language-related works Kurdish medrese students had to study, which is worth quoting in full:

Initially, Kurdish novices learned to read and studied the Qur'an; next, they studied the *Mawlûda Kurmanjî*, then the *Nûbihar* and *Pendê attarî* [according to Kh27n, a part of Farîd al-Dîn al-Attâr's Divan; possibly Attâr's *Pandnâma* or *Book of Counsels*]. Next, for the sharî'a, they read [imam Muhammad's] *Icaz*, [al-Nawawî's] *Muharrir* and [Yûsuf Ardabilî's] *Anwâr*. Next, they study Mulla Yûnus Halqatîni's textbooks *Tesrîf*, *Zurûf*, and *Tarkîb*, all three of which are in the Kurdish language.<sup>44</sup> After this, on sarf, they read the *Sa'dîni* and the *Sa'dullah kûçûk* [*sic*], and on logic the *Hisamkatî* [i.e. Husâm al-Dîn Hasan al-Kâtî's *Sharh al-isaghujî*], the *Qawl Ehmed*, and the *Sharh shamsiyya* [presumably by Sa'd al-Dîn al-Taftazânî]. In short, they have to read twelve sciences before they can graduate. (Kh26–27; Z11).<sup>45</sup>

Remarkably, the *Çarperdî*, identified by Khaznadar (Kh25n2) as a commentary on Ibn al-Hâjib's (d. 1248) *Shâfiyya*, is a Persian title; *Sa'dullah geure* is a (southern) Kurdish rendering of a widely used work on nahw also known as *Sa'dullah kabîr*; and the shorter *Sa'dullah saghîr*, also dealing with nahw, is referred to under its Turkish title, *Sa'dullah kûçûk*. This may indicate that at least part of the curriculum studied in Bayazîdî's age consisted of textbooks not only in Kurdish, but also in Persian and even Turkish; but the mere mention of these titles is, of course, insufficient evidence to draw any firm conclusions on these matters. In any case, Bayazîdî's

<sup>43</sup>Istanbul, 2003. For a full list of the textbooks used in the Kurdish medrese curriculum, see Zinar, *Xwendina medresê*, esp. 63–100.

<sup>44</sup>Oddly, Teremaxî's *Sarf* is absent from this list; Bayazîdî must either accidentally have left it out, or erroneously ascribed this *Tasrîf* to Mulla Yûnus. The latter explanation may be the more plausible one, as no *tasrîf* text by Mulla Yûnus is known from other sources.

<sup>45</sup>The French translation in Jaba (*Recueil de notices et de récits kourdes*, 13–14) erroneously lists the *Hisamkatî* as a work on rhetoric, the *Qawl Ahmad* as the Qur'an and the *Sharh shamsiyya* as "a commentary on the religious laws" rather than as a logic textbook.

description remains tantalizingly incomplete, and is not supplemented by any detailed remarks on Kurdish medrese life in his *Adat û Rusûmatname*.<sup>46</sup>

A rather more detailed list of medrese readings is supplied by Zeynelabîdîn Zinar.<sup>47</sup> In total, he lists eighty-nine titles; of these, at least nine are in Kurdish; twenty-two concern matters of Arabic grammar (including, most importantly, *tasrîf* and *nahw*). The first thirty-six items on his list, he adds, formed the core curriculum (*xwendina rêzê*) of the Kurdish medreses. Of these, seven are in Kurdish; they mostly concern grammar, but also include logic (witness the *Mughni al-Tullâb*, Sêrtî's (commentary on al-Abharî's) *Isaghuji*, the *Qawl Ahmad* and Taftazânî's *Sharh shamsiyya*), and even philosophy (witness Tûsî's commentary on the *Ishârât* and Taftazânî's *Mukhtasar*).<sup>48</sup> Some twenty books from the core curriculum, he adds, had to be memorized.

Öztoprak is less specific than Zinar as to which if any books constituted the core curriculum, nor does he describe in any great detail which languages were used and studied in his education; but from his remarks it becomes clear that a substantial number of Kurdish-language works mentioned by Bayazîdî and Zinar were also among the books he had to study or learn by heart. Thus, he mentions Xanî's *Nûbihar* as among the first books he had to memorize.<sup>49</sup> Further, he, too, lists a *Tasrîf*, "a work on the discipline of sarf written in Kurdish," together with Mulla Yûnus Erkatîni's (i.e. Khalqatîni's) *Zurûf* and *Tarkîb* on, respectively, *nahw* and "Arabic grammar"; presumably, the *Tasrîf* is Elî Teremaxî's work.<sup>50</sup> Like Xanî's *Nûbihar*, these four works had to be learned by heart. Of the thirty-five works listed by Öztoprak, five are in Kurdish; no fewer than eighteen concern (Arabic) grammar, including eight on *nahw*; further, they include four works on logic and two on rhetoric and argumentation. The logical works include a commentary on al-Qazwîni's *Shamsiyya*, as well as a work on philosophy more generally, namely Nasîr al-Dîn al-Tûsî's *Hall mushkîlât al-ishârât*, a commentary on Ibn Sîna's *Kitâb al-ishârât wa'l-tanbîhât*. Öztoprak also mentions two other commentaries on the *Ishârât*, Muhammad al-Amîdî's *Kashf al-tanwîhât* and Fakhr al-Dîn al-Râzî's *Lubâb*

<sup>46</sup>See Dost, *Adat û Rusûmetnameê Ekradiye*, 156, for a few very brief general observations on nineteenth-century Kurdish medrese life. Intriguingly, Bayazîdî, writing in 1857, observes that both the number of medreses in Kurdistan and the use of Kurdish there has significantly decreased in comparison with Teremaxî's times. We have few if any means of independently verifying this remark, which appears to reflect a belief that the end of days is imminent.

<sup>47</sup>Zinar, *Xwendina medresê*, 63–100.

<sup>48</sup>In a footnote to his summary of Zinar's book, Van Bruinessen ("Les Kurdes et leur langue au XVIIe siècle," 55n28) notes that the philosophical text named by Zinar as Sa'd Taftazânî's *Mukhtasar* is not listed in Brockelmann's *Geschichte der arabischen Literatur*. The Milli Kütüphanesi in Ankara, however, contains two manuscripts by Taftazânî bearing this title, both dated 989AH (respectively, cat 26 Hk 801 and 26 Hk 1088). This work may be the same as the *Mukhtasar al-mâ'ânî*, dated 988AH; it is also preserved in Ankara (01 Hk 90) and in the University of Leiden.

<sup>49</sup>Öztoprak (2003, 185–9); in the list of curriculum text added as an appendix to his work, the *Nûbihar* is erroneously referred to as an Arabic–Turkish dictionary (ibid., 185).

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 185–6. Item no. 41 on Zinar's list is a *Tesrîfa erebî* ("Arabic *tasrîf*"), written by one Mele Elî; it is not clear whether this text is not identical to no. 10, the *Tesrîfa kurmançî*, also ascribed to a Mele Elî (by whom, undoubtedly, Elî Teremaxî is meant).



*al-ishârât*; but he does not say whether these works were actually studied. His listing of Tûsî's work is especially significant, however, as there is otherwise little if any evidence of Ibn Sîna's *Ishârât* being studied to any great extent in (post-)Ottoman medreses.<sup>51</sup>

There are slight discrepancies between these lists, but these may be due to oversight. Thus, Zinar and Bayazîdî also list a number of Kurdish works not mentioned by Öztoprak, in particular Melayê Bâteyî's *Mewluda kurmançî* and Xanî's *Eqîdeya emanê*. More remarkable perhaps is the fact that, judging from these three authors, neither Persian literary texts, like the Diwan of Hafez or Sa'dî's *Golestan* and *Bostan*, nor textbooks on Persian grammar, nor famous Persian-languages works on Arabic sarf like the *Sarf-i mîr*, appear to have formed part of the Kurdish medrese curriculum, perhaps with the exception of Farîd al-Dîn al-Attâr. This makes it all the more remarkable that until well into the twentieth century a knowledge of classical Persian language and literature was widespread among Kurds with a medrese background. Is this proficiency in Persian an enduring feature of Kurdish learning, or is it an early modern innovation, resulting from, for example, the influx of Sunni Persian scholars fleeing the Safavid policy of forced conversions to Shi'ite Islam, as suggested by al-Rouayheb?<sup>52</sup> It may be impossible to answer this question, given that next to nothing is known with any reasonable degree of certainty about Kurdish medrese life prior to the seventeenth century.

The pattern emerging from these divergent sources is relatively clear and consistent. The titles listed by Bayazîdî, Zinar and Öztoprak suggest that, after the eighteenth-century vernacularization, the core curriculum of the northern Kurdish medreses remained remarkably stable until well into the twentieth century. Thus, a substantial number of Kurdish textbooks came to be widely studied; moreover, all three authors state several works of logic as belonging to the core curriculum, while the latter two also mention books on philosophy. Further, Mustafa Dehqan has pointed out a substantial number of Kurdish-language manuscripts on logic dating from the nineteenth century, which contain detailed glosses in Kurdish on the technical logical vocabulary in Arabic. He suggests that although Aristotelian logic had been studied in Kurdish schools from the fifteenth century onwards, the study of logic received a new boost in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He then lists a number of such Arabic logical manuscripts with Kurdish glosses, partly based on discoveries made by Ahmad Sardari, providing suggestive evidence for the claim that Kurdish medrese students were actively pursuing the study of Aristotelian logic during this period.<sup>53</sup> Thus, in support of al-Rouayheb's suggestion mentioned above, evidence both from preserved manuscripts and from the curricula supplied by the three authors discussed

<sup>51</sup>Thus, Jan-Just Witkam (personal communication, conversation, January 16, 2012) informs me that the number of manuscripts of the *Ishârât* to be found in former Ottoman lands is negligibly small, which belies the widespread view that it was through this work that Ibn Sîna's philosophy remained in circulation among later Islamic mystics and religious scholars.

<sup>52</sup>Al-Rouayheb, "The Myth of the 'Triumph of Fanaticism'," 210ff.

<sup>53</sup>Mustafa Dehqan, "Kurdish Glosses on Aristotelian Logical Texts," *Philosophical Quarterly* 60 (2009): 692–7.



points to a virtually unbroken interest and activity in the study of logic (and, to a lesser extent, *falsafa*) in Kurdish medreses during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Both written sources and testimony from informants from different parts of northern Kurdistan indicate that Teremaxî's *Sarf* was very widely, if not universally, known and used among northern Kurdish medreses. The very pervasiveness of this work suggests that it filled a real need; its apparently canonical status in the Kurdish medrese curriculum, however, leaves one wondering why no other Kurdish-language works on *sarf* and *nahw* appear to have been written, let alone widely used, apart from Mulla Yûnus's *Tarkîb* and *Zurûf* already referred to above. Equally intriguing is the fact that no extensive literature of exegesis and commentary appears to have emerged around these texts. Is the absence of a further grammatical literature in Kurdish an indication that the elementary textbooks by Teremaxî and Mulla Yûnus were seen as practically indispensable but theoretically derivative? The available evidence would seem to answer the latter question in the affirmative: after all, Teremaxî's and Khalqatîni's works were used for the first level of *feqî* education only, and served only as a propaedeutic to the study of more substantial works which were primarily written in and on Arabic.

To sum up: the available evidence points to a process of vernacularization of Kurdish learning in the eighteenth century, the institutionalized effects of which lasted until well into the twentieth century. Moreover, this shift towards Kurdish-language textbooks was seen as culturally significant by the early modern authors describing this development. Thus, both Teremaxî and Bayazîdî point out the difficulty of *sarf* and the concomitant importance of studying it in one's native language as a prerequisite for both the study of Arabic *sarf* and of the correct use of language in general. Further, there are indications that *sarf* as a normative discipline has had a normalizing effect on the use of the Kurdish language in a medrese context, and quite possibly further afield.

### *Conclusion*

The writings of Ehmedê Xanî, Elî Teremaxî and others discussed above make two things abundantly clear: first, the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century witnessed the vernacularization of Kurdish: although poetry had already been written in Kurmanjî in earlier times, it was during this period that Kurdish came to be used for the first time for learned purposes, and specifically for medrese use, in texts written both in prose and in poetic form. Because of this, I would propose the hypothesis that these written texts have made an important contribution to both a sense of language-based Kurdish identity and the articulation and preservation of a grammatical norm for written (and spoken) northern Kurdish, at least among Kurdish medrese pupils if not among wider circles.

Second, early modern Kurdish authors express or imply language ideologies that are, on the one hand, relatively new in a context of traditional Islamic learning because of their emphasis on the need to write in Kurdish, the language of the uneducated

*‘amma*; on the other hand, their language ideologies differ significantly from romantic nationalist ideologies to which they at first blush seem comparable. Because of this, one can tentatively put forward the suggestion that the roots of Kurdish nationalism do not lie in the late nineteenth century, let alone in foreign ideologies associated with, for example, German romanticism or British imperialism. Rather, they lie in new learned and written usages of Kurdish and in new ideologies of Kurdish as a language worthy of being used for learned purposes, which emerged in northern Kurdistan as a result of primarily local processes during the eighteenth century. Teremaxî’s text has become far less famous among secular Kurdish nationalists than Xanî’s, but the remarks by Bayazîdî, Zinar and Öztoprak and the observations by local informants alike suggest that it passed on from generation to generation among literate Kurds, and has been studied in medreses in the Kurdish north until today. It would be worth exploring whether and to what extent these works have contributed not only to the survival of Kurdish, but also both to its standardization as well as its cultivation as a language of high literate culture, not to say to a sense of a language-based Kurdish identity.

Two more general conclusions can also be drawn from the above. First, against orientalist and modernist assumptions, it appears that pre-modern and early modern non-western traditions of learning not only are of interest for their own sake, but have also contributed to the shaping of the modern experience. Second, the Kurdish case seems indicative of a rather wider pattern of vernacularization that may also be observed among other subject peoples, both Christians and Muslims, of the Ottoman Empire. A detailed statement and defense of this broader claim, however, awaits another occasion.