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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.1 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

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1Maurizio Garzoni, Grammatica e vocabulario della lingua curda (Rome, 1787).
Kurmancî (Kurmanjî morphology), Tesrîfa Kurdî (Kurdish morphology), or simply Tesrif, which provides a brief description not only of Kurdish but also of Arabic and Persian sarf. The Tesrif 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. 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 Kurmanjî; Eli Teremaxî’s grammar, written in Kurmanjî Kurdish; and a short preliminary note by Bayazîdî “on the science of grammar and on some principles necessary for studying it,” likewise in Kurmanjî. 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 tasrif 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.

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. As a result of the committee’s decision, Teremaxî’s text was not published until 1971, in an edition prepared by Ma’ruf Khaznadar and based on Bayazîdî’s Petersburg manuscript, under the title Destûra erêbi bi zimanê kurdi (Arabic grammar in the Kurdish language); but this edition is rather difficult to find. 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. Reshid 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 Bir, apparently based on Zinar’s

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2Cf. Reshid Findî, Eli Teremaxî yekeînî Rêzîmanîvîs û pexbannîvîsê Kurde (Baghdad, 1985), 5ff.
3Alexandre Jaba, Recueil de notices et de récits kourdes (St. Petersburg, 1860), VI–VII.
4In ibid., vii.
5Incidentally, 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 Mahmuðê 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.
7M. Khaznadar, ed., Destûra erêbi bi zimanê kurdi (Baghdad, 1971); reprinted with Latin transcription as Mele Eli Teremaxî, Serfa Kurmancî, ed. M. Khaznadar and Z. Zinar (Stockholm, 1997).
edition. Apart from the brief introductory comments in these different editions of the Tesrif, 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. 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 Tesrif 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 Tesrif 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.

Teremaxî’s Serf: 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 Bayazîdi’s brief sketch dating from the mid-nineteenth century. In Jaba’s 1860 collection, Bayazîdi’s “preliminary notes” are preceded by another, equally important statement on the earliest authors writing in Kurdish, Findî, Eli Teremaxî yekemîn Rêzimannivîs û pezhannivîsê Kurde; Mamoste Qedrî, “Eliyê Teremaxî û Ditinên wi yên li ser Rêçîkên Rêzimana Kurdî li Gor Pirtûka wi ya bi Navê Destûra Zimanê Erebi bi Kurdi Digel Hinde Nimûneyêd Farisi û Kurdi,” Bîr, Hejmar 1 (Bihar 2005): 192–8.


10Below, I will indicate quotations from or references to Khaznadar’s and Zinar’s editions of the Tesrif by, respectively, “Kh” and “Z” followed by a page number.

11Sagnî’s brief sketch of Teremaxî’s life and works, included in Feqî Huseyn Sagnî, Dîroka wîjeya kurdî (Istanbul, 2002), 387–90, appears to be largely based on Bayazîdi’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 Mükses (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.  

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’ilê
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.  

We may, however, tentatively suggest that Teremaxî’s Tesrîf dates from the later seven-
teenth or the early eighteenth century, by comparing it with another work (or, strictly
speaking, two works generally taken together) of a comparable character, the Zurîf
and Tarkîb by Mulla Yûnus Khalqatînî or Harqatînî, likewise written in Kurdish
and dealing with Arabic syntax or nahu. 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.  

Thus, Mulla Yûnus can be solidly
dated to the eighteenth century, and it does not seem unreasonable to situate

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13 M.B. Rudenko, Opisanie kurdskikh rykopisei leningradskikh sobranii (Moscow, 1961), 101–2.

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. As indicated by its title, this work belongs to the traditional genre of sarf or tasrîf (“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. 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. 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-Taftazâni’s Sa’dînî. 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 Taftazâni’s Sa’dînî 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

15The 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.


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 (qawā'id).

In his introduction, Teremaxî quotes an Arabic-language definition of sarf as 
\[\text{tahwil al-asl al-wâhid ilâ amthila mukhbalifa} \] 
(“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 (fîl) and particle (barf); he makes this distinction, however, in primarily semantic rather than morphological terms, apparently following a later, non-Basran trend in Arabic-language sarf studies. Thus, he characterizes nouns as individual expressions having a singular or determinate meaning on their own; verbs as terms from which several distinct meanings (šend meîni cuda cuda) may appear, and particles as not independently having a meaning of their own (Kh30; Z15). In the first part of the Sarfa Kurmancî, 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 fasîl 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 (fîla 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 (fîla 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

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/wi/wê, which is only discussed in the context of demonstrative pronouns (asma’ al-îshâra) 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 nakhw 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:

Serfîn ilâhi çokdur bir demirden baş gerek
Okuyan darrâk gerek, ya okutan qardaş gerek. (Kh54; Z67)¹⁹

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 Memû Zîn with the Turkish phrase bilmez ki ne şöyleye zebânîm (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 this 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

¹⁹I 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, Bayazidi in his Adat û rusûmatname.20 Instead, he treats all three languages on a virtually equal footing, referring to all of them alike with terms like lughet, lîsân, or zimân.

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.

As Sheldon Pollock has argued, vernacularization is not a uniquely modern or European phenomenon. 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. 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.

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23 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. 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. 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.


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, Zinar or Öztoprak (to be discussed below) lists any work dealing specifically with Persian sarf as part of the Northern Kurdish medrese curriculum.


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.  

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. 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’îs ... 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)

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 Gûlîstan 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)

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27 Hassanpour, Nationalism and Language in Kurdistan, 73.
30 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 Idrîs Bidlisi’s Hesbt behesbt, were written in Persian rather than Kurdish. Although Kurmanjî 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 Mawlu’dâ Kurmanjî (conventionally dated to the fifteenth century), there is no indication that these were specifically directed towards a medrese audience.31 Versified mawlûd texts, and to a lesser extents aqîdas or “professions of faith,” exist in many vernacular languages from a relatively early stage, like, most famously, Stîleyman 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 Mawlu’d 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.32 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 Xani, 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 Xani’s rhymed Arabic–Kurdish dictionary, the Nûbihara piçûkan (“First-fruit for the young ones”).

31Bateyî’s Mawlu’d was recently republished as 173–234 of Xalîd Sâdînî, Mela Huseynê Bateyî: Jiyan, berhem û helbestên wi (Istanbul, 2010); a recent bilingual Kurdish–Turkish edition of Cizîrî is Melayê Cizîrî, Dîwan, ed. Osman Tunç (Istanbul, 2010).
Slightly later, and also for an early stage of medrese education, Xanî wrote the *Eqideya 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 mathnawi poem, *Mem û Zîn* (esp. chapters 2–4). These introductory works were followed by another relatively short rhymed text, the *Nebc ul-enâm* by Mulla Khelîlê Sêrtî (1754–1843), also dealing with the basics of faith (aqîda). 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 *İsâgbûjî*; more plausibly, this is a short commentary on al-Abhari’s work of that title, which was widely used in the Ottoman empire.

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 *Tesrîf*, are two short texts, the *Zurûf* and the *Tarkîb*, by mulla Yûnus Khalqatînî (d. 1791), both dealing with Arabic syntax or *nabûw*; at times, these two are treated as one single work. Khalqatînî’s work, although preserved in manuscript form in two European libraries, has not yet been published or studied; apparently, unlike Teremaxî’s *Tesrîf*, the *Tarkîb* and *Zurûf* deal with Arabic grammar only. More advanced works on both the Arabic language and religious learning were generally in Arabic.

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33 Recently, Kadî Yûldîrm has republished both the Nûbihara piçûkan and the ‘Eqideya îmanê in book form, both with extensive commentaries (*Ehmedê Xani külliyati*, vols. I and II, Istanbul, 2008). Another aqîda text, the *Eqideya 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 *Eqideya êmanê*); it is also included in a recent edition of Xanî’s works (*Hemî Berhem*, Diyarbakîr, 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 *Eqideya êmanê*, but is virtually identical in doctrine—and, at times, wording—to two nineteenth-century aqîda texts from Khalidiyya Naqshbandi circles, namely Mawlana Khalid’s *Aqidetnamey 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, *Aqiday kurdî Mawlâna Khalîdî Naqshbandî*, in *Govârî korî zanyûrî ‘irâq-dastay kurde* 8 (1981): 199–222, reprinted in Kemal Re’ûf Muhammad, *Eqidey ‘îmân—‘eqidey 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.

34 The *Nebçul Enâm* was published in Latin transcription by Zeynelabidin Zinar (Stockholm); another transcription was published by the Mezopotamya Institute of Istanbul in 2002. Z. Zinar, *Xwendîna 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 Millî Kütûphane 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-Rouayah for this information. That library also lists one other work by Sêrtî: the *Manzûme-i aşâî’d*, which may or may not be identical to the *Nebçul Enâm* (cat no. 5752). Manuscripts of other works by Sêrtî may yet emerge from state libraries or state collections.

36 Rudenko, *Opisanie kurdskikh 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/1591 CE: “until the year 1000 AH [i.e. 1591 CE],” 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’dînî, and from Çarperdi and Sa’duleh 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).

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 (bayt 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 mufrêdê muzekeker ê muxatteteb ku ji boyi thyafay Ekradan ra ji lazim e ku bi zimanê Kurmancê ew ji ‘ilmê serfê bizanin. Lewra bina û asasa hemû ‘ilmên, 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 kurmancê 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 dîbaçe of Mem û Zîn, the Serfa Kurmancê both calls for and embodies the Kurdish vernacularization: both texts stress the importance of a literate and learned culture formulated in grammatical schools (madhâbih) of Basra and Kufâ, thus showing a basic familiarity with early theoretical debates on nahw.

37Jaba, 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 (bîna û asasa hemu ‘ilmân)” (Kh29; Z13). Sarf, he continues, is a balance (mêzin) 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 (mêzin); 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). 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 Xani 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 Zeynelabidin 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-Bûti, in his book about his father Molla Ramazan al-Bûti, mentions the Tasrîf as a self-evident part of the curriculum. It is next to impossible, however, to make any reliable quantitative estimate of how widely Teremaxî’s Serf (or Xani’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

38Cf. ibid., 12.
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 Xelqetînî’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.40 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 shari’a need not concern us here, as most if not all of its textbooks were written in Arabic.41 Unsurprisingly, many of the authors from the Kurdish medrese curriculum were shaﬁ’ites, or were at least believed to be so.42

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

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40 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.

41 Recently, a Kurdish-language rendering of the contents of three Arabic-language works on shafi’ite aqidâ and fiqh (the Hashiyet al-jamal, on shaykh Sulayman al-Jamal’s Sharh al-manhajî; Yûsuf al-Ardabili’s al-anwîr li ’im al-ebrara; and shaykh Muhammad Shirbînî al-Khatîb’s Mughni l-muhtaja) was published by M. Burhan Hedbî as Eqîde û Fiqha Zelal (Istanbul, 2011).

42 For more information and further literature on al-Kâtibî 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 Ali al Tahânawi], 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: Zeynelabidîn Zinar’s 1993 *Xwendina medresê* (Medrese learning) and Sadreddin Öztöprak’s 2003 *Şêrk medreselerinde bir ömîr* (A life in the medreses of the east). 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 Öztöprak 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 Farid al-Dîn al-Attâr’s Divan; possibly Attâr’s Pandnâma or Book of Counsels]. Next, for the shari’a, they read [imam Muhammad’s] Icaz, [al-Nawawi’s] Muharrîr and [Yûsuf Ardabili’s] Anwâr. Next, they study Mulla Yûnus Halqatînî’s textbooks *Tesrîf*, *Zurûf*, and *Tarkîb*, all three of which are in the Kurdish language. After this, on sarf, they read the *Sa’dînî and the Sa’dullah küçük* [sic], and on logic the *Hisamkatî* [i.e. Husâm al-Dîn Hasan al-Kâtî’s *Sharh al-isaghujî*], the *Qawl Ehmed*, and the *Sharh shamsîyya* [presumably by Sa’d al-Dîn al-Taftazânî]. In short, they have to read twelve sciences before they can graduate.* (Kh26–27; Z11).

Remarkably, the *Çarperdî*, identified by Khaznadar (Kh25n2) as a commentary on Ibn al-Hâjib’s (d. 1248) *Shâfiyya*, is a Persian title; *Sa’dullah gewre* 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 küçük*. 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

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

44Oddly, 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.

45The French translation in Jaba (*Receuil 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 shamsîyya* as “a commentary on the religious laws” rather than as a logic textbook.
A rather more detailed list of medrese readings is supplied by Zeynelabîdîn Zinar. 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, tsarîf 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, Sèrtî’s (commentary on al-Abhari’s) Isaghuji, the Qawl Ahmad and Taftazâni’s Sharh shamsiyya), and even philosophy (witness Tûsî’s commentary on the Ishârât and Taftazâni’s Mukhtasar). 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. Further, he, too, lists a Tsarîf, “a work on the discipline of sarf written in Kurdish,” together with Mulla Yûnus Erkatini’s (i.e. Khalqatînî’s) Zûrîf and Tarkîb on, respectively, nahw and “Arabic grammar”; presumably, the Tsarîf is Eli Teremaxî’s work. 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-Qazwînî’s Shamsiyya, as well as a work on philosophy more generally, namely Nasîr al-Dîn al-Tûsî’s Hall mushkilât al-ishârât, a commentary on Ibn Sînà’s Kitâb al-ishârât wa’l-tanbîhât. Öztoprak also mentions two other commentaries on the Ishârât, Muhammad al-Amidi’s Kashf al-tanwîhât and Fakhr al-Dîn al-Râzî’s Lubâb.

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46 See Dost, Adat û Rusûmetnameê Ekradiye, 156, for a few very brief general observations on nineteenth-century Kurdish medrese life. Intriguingly, Bayazidi, 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.

47 Zinar, Xwendina medresê, 63–100.

48 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 Taftazâni’s Mukhtasar is not listed in Brockelmann’s Geschichte der arabischen Literatur. The Millî Kütüphane in Ankara, however, contains two manuscripts by Taftazâni 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-ma‘âni, dated 988AH; it is also preserved in Ankara (01 Hk 90) and in the University of Leiden.

49 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).

50 Ibid., 185–6. Item no. 41 on Zinar’s list is a Tesrif cebû ("Arabic tsarîf"), written by one Mele Eli; it is not clear whether this text is not identical to no. 10, the Tesrif kûrmancû, also ascribed to a Mele Eli (by whom, undoubtedly, Eli Teremaxî is meant).
al-īshārāt; but he does not say whether these works were actually studied. His listing of Tūsī’s work is especially significant, however, as there is otherwise little if any evidence of Ibn Sīnā’s Ishārāt being studied to any great extent in (post-)Ottoman medreses.51

There are slight discrepancies between these lists, but these may be due to oversight. Thus, Zinar and Bayazīdī also list a number of Kurdish works not mentioned by Öztoprak, in particular Melayē Bâteyî’s Mewluda kurmancî and Xani’s Egideya emanê. More remarkable perhaps is the fact that, judging from these three authors, neither Persian literary texts, like the Diwan of Hafez or Sa’dī’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 Farīd al-Dīn 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?52 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 Bayazīdī, 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.53 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

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


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 Teremáxî’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 Teremáxî 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, Teremáxî’s and Khalqatînî’s works were used for the first level of feqi 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 Teremáxî 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, Eli Teremáxî 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
'āmma; 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 Xani’s, but the remarks by Bayazidi, 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.