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English summary

Martyrdom between Nation and Religion: Political Love, Poetry and Self-sacrifice in Kurdish Nationalism

This study analyses the Islamic notion of *shahada*, martyrdom, and how this notion has been deployed by the Kurdish nationalist discourse, in particular in Iraq. It traces the transformation of this notion from a mystical religious concept to a nationalist one, resulting from the interaction with British rule during the Mandate period. This study also explores the changing status of religion and the emergence of new national identity, which has led to transform the notion of martyrdom from a mystical-religious form of passive suffering into a more revolutionary activist way of sacrificing for the nation and homeland. The study emphasises on that transformation which has not been a gradual process of secularisation ala Schmitt, but shows the interweaving of changing religious and secular meanings of martyrdom and constantly rearticulating the religion.

Martyrdom is usually regarded as a heritage of the past, and as a non-secular way of self-sacrifice. However, this study shows that modern martyrdom is an important aspect of the modern ideologies of nationalist political movements in both the West and the East. The notion of martyrdom has been appealed to in the modern Europe, e.g., during the Falklands War, in former Yugoslavia and in Ireland. Furthermore, 'Love of the fatherland and dying for it' was also the language of mobilising the American soldiers in the Iraq war in 2003. Hence, nations, just like religions, impose self-sacrificing love. Nationalism is a modern ideology that connects love for the nation (patriotism) with death and self-sacrifice. This suggests that contemporary martyrdom should be seen in the first place as a modern phenomenon, in which religion is individualised and, in a sense, secularised.

This study also examines the transformation of martyrdom as gendered. In the 19th century's Kurdish literature, the prototypical martyr is a man suffering from an impossible love for a woman. Thus, men were the victims of women, rather than the heroic defenders of a nation that cannot defend itself. With the rise of nationalist discourse, martyrdom came to primarily signify the actions of courageous men sacrificing themselves for a Kurdish nation, portrayed in literature as a beloved woman or a sick mother.

The political discourse of Kurdish nationalist martyrdom did not exist during the Ottoman period in the nineteenth century. However, the notion of martyrdom still played an important role in Kurdistan in the first half of the nineteenth century. Additionally, it did not concern people who died in wars and political battles, but concerned martyrs of love who died symbolically in literary texts. The love in literary texts of that period was not only paired with pain and suffering, but also with the willingness to die for the individual's beloved: to become the martyr of love. The literary space in which this specific form of martyrdom has emerged was the love poetry, called *ghazl*. Thus, martyrdom belonged in the first half of the nineteenth century to the domain of personal love and not to the domain of politics. It was part of a literary rather than a political game.

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, against the background of emerging new notions of language and the spread of the modern notions of the nation state, nationalism and progress in the Ottoman Empire, the concept of love, martyrdom and religion underwent a rapid rearticulation. Love in Kurdish poetry became political, with a profoundly self-sacrificing character. The beloved becomes *watan,* the fatherland, and the martyr was no longer simply a literary figure, but a political activist who risked real pain and death.

The real appearance of the political and nationalist form of martyrdom began in Kurdish texts during the British Mandate, starting around 1920. In the colonial newspaper Têgeîshtnî Rastî, 'Understanding the Truth', which was published in Kurdish in Baghdad in 1918, this trend began. Later the Kurdish secular intellectuals, especially avant-garde poets like Caf, Selam, Bêkes, Salih en Pîremêrd, reconceptualised the classical religious and mystical concept into a nationalistic one. In this new discourse the notion of martyr was reconceptualised as the active, revolutionary and politically engaged individual who scarifies his/her life for the Kurdish nation and fatherland. Dying for secular national political aims determine the identity of the victims as martyrs.

Not only martyrdom and poetry are strongly linked in Kurdish nationalism but also Kurdish nationalism has a unique relationship with poetry. This uniqueness has to do with the Kurds being unsuccessful in creating their own nation-state; leading to their strong sense of being reduced to an oppressed minority. Armed national struggle has been the outstanding reaction of the Kurds to these negative developments. This called for people who were prepared to sacrifice their lives for the nation and to continue the struggle. The discourse of political martyrdom therefore belongs to the central discourses of Kurdish nationalism. The fact that the Kurds have not succeeded in creating their own state also meant that they did not possess the state power needed to impose the demands of the discourses of nationalism. Kurdish nationalism therefore is

strongly dependent on the contents of its patriotic, moral and emotional discourses. Consequently, these discourses penetrate the individual and collective lives and shaping their national conscience through poetry. In Kurdish nationalism the discourses should not only be able to facilitate the mobilisation of the Kurdish masses, but it should also transform these masses into national active political subjects. Historically, poetry has been the most important tool in achieving this goal. The writers, content and language of this poetry in Kurdish nationalism were basically secular.

Interpretations of Middle Eastern martyrdom as a pre-secular phenomenon efface the historical development of this notion and its strong presence in the discourses of secular political movements. For example, the Iraqi Communist Party, which is also called the *Hizb al Shahada,* 'the party of martyrdom' and it derives a great deal of its identity from the discourse of martyrdom. Likewise, the two influential Kurdish political parties, Kurdistan Democratic Part and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, have systematically invoked martyrdom for their political legitimacy. They consider the blood of their martyrs as granting them the right to rule. The first appearance of suicide bombing in Kurdistan has been appeared by Kurdistan Workers Party, as a Marxists secular movement.