Kurdish Poetry: A Guide to Resources in Arabic, English, and French

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POETRY


In this paper, Blau discusses the origins of the Kurds and their oral tradition and the impact of religion and the arts, Kurdish dynasties, and Mongol invasions on such oral tradition. Blau then discusses Kurdish literary traditions and provides two early examples: “The Wine-Selling Sons of the Magi” and “Mam O Zin.” She finally discusses the situation of Kurdish oral and written traditions since the early 1920s.


The second part of this work (pp. 71-143) contains an introduction to, and translations of, Kurdish poetry arranged in four sections: chants d’amour; chants épiques; chansons; and Meme Alan, epoope nationale des Kurdes.


The author resumes here the extracts of the Kurdish poetry presented in his *Poesie populaire des Turcs et des Kurdes* adding to it the Roger Lescot’s translation of *Mame Alan*, a scholarly version of the Kurdish epic of Mem and Zin. The work is a very useful collection and good introduction to the Kurdish popular literature.


This work brings together eleven living poets from Kurdistan. These poets’ main concern has to do with the politics of dispossession and a history of “appalling persecution.” To write about this history without fear of persecution, the Kurds, including the eleven represented in the book, had first to go into exile in Europe, North America, or Australia. But there they soon came to realize that exile, itself a form of dispossession, exacts its own toll. Naturally, this double sense of dispossession has resulted in a poetry of profound pain. For Azad Dilzar, it is the pain of remembering the horrors of growing up in a city where everyone was afraid of everyone else. For Sherko Bekas, it is the pain of seeing the city of his boyhood, Halabja, being attacked by Saddam Hussein with poison gas in 1988. For M. Omar Gul, it is the pain of not being able to do anything for a Kurdistan robbed of its freedom. This narrative of pain becomes even more intense as it moves swiftly from a prison where Kurds are being tortured, to a village under bombardment, and then to a mother turned insane over the execution of a teenage son. From these individual scenes the focus suddenly shifts to all of Kurdistan, where Ferhad Shakeli laments, there is no escape from pain. But pain does not prevent these poets from seeing the Kurdish situation in a global context. Shahin B. Sorekli, having witnessed the reunification of Germany, the end of the Cold War, the attainment of independence by several former Soviet republics, finds no cause for celebration as far as his people are concerned; for the Kurds, unlike the Geor-
gians, the Ukrainians, the Armenians, and the Slovaks, have no big powers campaigning on their behalf. So, while these peoples become recognized, receive foreign dignitaries, and raise their own flags, the Kurds continue to yearn for a flag of their own. (Sabah A. Salih/World Literature Today 70, no. 3, 1996: 753-754)


Although this paper concentrates on the qasidas of Malaye Jaziri, it also deals with the question of the Kurdish qasida generally. Subjects of discussion therefore include the emergence, development and topics of the Kurdish qasida, and the way that Kurdish poets used this poetic form in their own language. This is no easy task, since Kurdish poetry has rarely been studied either by Kurdish scholars or by non-Kurds. The few existing works on Kurdish poetics are mostly in Kurdish, and they are far from comprehensive.


Poet Ferhad Shakely reflects on his craft and the nature and status of Kurdish literature. Some of the questions asked in the interview include: How are your poems born? What are your criteria for originality? What makes a good poem? Which poet has been a model and inspiration for your writing? How do you see the present and future of Kurdish culture, and particularly of literature in Kurdistan? How has your life experience influenced your poetic experience and writing? What is the role of modern poetry in Kurdistan? What are the cardinal rules of modern Kurdish poetry? What is your opinion of the poetry of resistance? What is the essence of epic poetry? What do you see as the role of stories in Kurdistan today? What has been the development of children’s literature in Kurdistan? What is the role of woman in your life and your poetry? How do you view the activity of translation in Kurdish literature?


POETS AND OTHER LITERARY FIGURES


Provides a brief account on the life and works of Abdulla Goran, “the outstanding Kurdish poet of the 20th century.


This paper includes short biographies of Kurdish writers Abdullah Goran, Hazhar, Ahmade Khani, Haji Qadir Koyi, Sheikh Ahmad Malaye Jizri, Tawfiq Piramerd, and Ereb Shamo.


The prominent Armenian Orientalist of the Soviet period, academician Iosif (Hovsep) Orbeli (1887-1961), became interested in the Kurds as far back as 1911 when, having just graduated from the University of St-Petersburg and having been recommended by academician Nicolai Marr, he was sent on an expedition, by the Academy of Sciences, to Western Armenia, Van and Moks to collect dialectological materials (study of the Moks vernacular of Armenian). It was here, while studying the Moks dialect of Kurdish, he wrote a Kurdish-Russian dictionary, listening to and writing down the vivid and picturesque Kurdish folklore; he evidently made much of the spiritual culture of the Kurds.


**GENERAL WORKS THAT DISCUSS KURDISH POETRY**


This study is divided into three parts: 1) 1820-1860, a period during which central Kurdish is revealed to be a literary language: the pioneers; 2) 1860-1908, the expansion of this literary language, the great names in literature; 3) 1908-1920, the development of the press and modernization of central Kurdish.


Discusses Kurdish oral traditions in the Kurmanji dialect, with particular reference to Bahdinan, the northern province of Iraqi Kurdistan. Many of the observations made in this chapter may also apply to other parts of Kurdistan, but the establishment of Kurdish authority in the Bahdinan region made it possible to study traditions there within their social
context. The chapter outlines the status of the Kurdish language, before moving on to a
discussion of some key features of oral, as opposed to written literature. A brief description
of the political situation and the effect on Kurdish society of recent social changes, espe-
cially collectivization, is given also. Two oral genres are highlighted: one using old mate-
rial and the other using modern material in traditional form, namely oral history as per-
formed by Yezidis and laments as sung by Muslim women of the Barzani tribe. Each of the
two groups and their social situation are described before examples of their songs are con-
sidered.

43. Allison, Christine. *Views of History and Society in Yezidi Oral Tradition*. Ph.D., Lon-
don School of Oriental and African Studies, 1996.

The Yezidis are a Kurdish-speaking religious minority living mainly in Northern Iraq. In
the past their religion forbade literacy. Thus their accounts of their history and their de-
scriptions of their society have been preserved orally. This thesis considers how the Yezidis
use oral literature, or verbal art, to represent themselves and their past. It is based largely on
fieldwork carried out in Northern Iraq. The theoretical perspective of this work combines
elements of both literary and social studies by considering both text and social context. The
genre of a tradition has major implications for its content; three genres considered in detail
are lyrical song, prose narrative and extemporized lament. Yezidi discourse about the past
stresses their distinctive identity and their endurance against adversity and persecution.
This is reflected in the oral traditions, especially in the lyrical song, which is performed at
festivals and is extremely popular; prose narratives of events predating the immediate past,
on the other hand, are in decline. Most love songs and stories feature historical figures; the
performance of lyrical love songs, many of which depict conflict between the wishes of the
individual and the rules of a society where marriage is arranged, provides an outlet for the
audience’s own emotions. Laments are performed by women. Using traditional imagery,
they are a vehicle for the expression of a variety of emotions by the performer. Their per-
formance is a social duty and is likely to remain so. The texts included in this work com-
prise variants of two historical themes, Ferîq Pasa and Dawûdê Dawûd; variants of a theme
of love, Derwêse Evdî, and examples of women’s lament, both semi-professional and per-
sonal. Some of these were transcribed from material collected during fieldwork; all were
translated for this thesis. An appendix lists performers and informants. (A)


Like other histories, Kurdish history is a construct of the past. However, Kurdish history
differs from the history of most other peoples in being unsupported either by coherent
propagation systems such as state education and media, or by international affirmation.
Kurds must fashion their own history, to meet their own needs, in opposition to many of the ideologies prevalent in the Middle East, some of which have sought to deny the very existence of “Kurdish” history, and even of the Kurds themselves. Staking a claim to the past, by having one’s own account of history, is a perfectly ordinary need of most communities; for the Kurds it has become a key element of self-determination. Thus to make sense of Kurdish history, we must not only isolate the truth of past events, but also study the accounts the Kurds give, and attempt to determine why particular accounts have become dominant; for a satisfactory understanding, it is not enough to know what happened, but we must also discover what people believe to have happened, and try to determine why they believe this. The study of Kurdish history becomes an exercise in discourse analysis. The term “discourse” is used here in the sense of all kinds of active verbal communication, in other words the sum of what the Kurds say about events in the past. The Kurdish historical discourse receives much of its inspiration from the publications of Kurds in the diaspora, and some material published locally, but most of what is exchanged remains oral, partly because of the political climate in Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria, and also because many literate Kurds, educated in the official State language, are not sufficiently literate in Kurdish. In contemporary nation-states, the dominant discourse is usually expressed by written media and broadcast. Most histories are still written about those who rule. Oral history tends to chronicle the experience of those who have no input into “official” histories, and represents a perspective which is not that of the ruling group; thus by its very nature it is subversive to some extent. (A)


This work is the first real anthology of Kurdish literature compiled outside the Middle East, and the first to be published in a European language. With a preface by Maxime Rodinson, it contains translations into French of popular tales, poems, songs, proverbs, stories, etc., collected from Iraq, Iran, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon and the Soviet Union. The translations are by several Kurds and Kurdo-ologists writing in French, those unsigned being presumably by the compiler herself. Unlike the rare works on the topic, it has the merit of not being limited to the traditional oral literature; it includes as well a large part of the written Kurdish literature—the second half of the book—where a selection of Kurdish literature from the 18th and 19th centuries and a larger collection of literary works from the modern period are presented. This is a work that is indispensable for any person interested in Kurdish literature.


During their long turbulent history, the Kurds have tirelessly fought for the preservation of their cultural identity. In modern time, first in the midst of large pluralistic ethnic empires, then in nation-states among which their country—Kurdistan—found itself split after the first world war, the difficult struggle of the Kurds to gain recognition of their national rights is closely linked to the flourishment of their language and literature. The emergence of poets, writers, Kurdish intellectuals in Iraq and in the U.S.S.R. first, then in Iran and today in Turkey, illustrates in a striking way the parallels between national development and cultural development.


Blau tackles the troubled topic of Kurdish written literature. She explains that a central problem for the history and development of Kurdish language literature has been that the language itself never took on one unified form. Instead, it has settled down as a number of regionally-defined dialects and sub-dialects, not all of which have evolved a written form. Unable to form a viable nation-state of their own, the Kurds have been unable to develop a proliferating written culture until the last two or three decades. Blau plots the difficult course charted by Kurdish intellectuals, in their attempts to emerge freely and openly into the light of day as cultural exponents. A Kurdish intellectual elite has always existed, Blau reports, expressing itself in Persian, Arabic or Turkish, more often than they did in Kurdish. In the sixteenth century, however, master poets such as Melay Jeziri and Ahmed Khani emerged, who penned their epics in Kurdish dialects. The progress of Kurdish literature this century is epitomized by the extreme difficulties faced by Kurds wishing to mass produce their writings. None of the ruling authorities in all host countries containing segments of Kurdistan have ever looked dispassionately upon Kurdish cultural endeavors this century. Blau shows the considerable difficulties faced by Kurdish intellectuals and their publishers, indicating however that Kurdish literature—especially poetry—has flourished whenever circumstances permitted this. She notes the promising explosion of Kurdish publishing from the onset of the 1980s up till the present day, especially in the Kurdish diaspora in Europe, which has also erupted in size during the same period. The development of a lively range of cultural, social and political publications in Kurdish dialects in the diaspora
has itself been a factor in helping to force more openings for Kurdish publishing in the Kurds’ host countries. Blau does a good job in summarizing the convoluted history of the fight for a Kurdish written culture in such an unavoidably brief but readable essay (Paul White).


Contains a comprehensive survey of Kurdish literature and periodicals throughout the Middle East, which include translations of characteristic literary selections and remarkably detailed bibliographical data of both Kurdish language and literature.


A comprehensive annotated bibliography of works dealing with Kurdish history, society, literature, and folklore. Also covered are Kurdish periodicals and previously published bibliographies.


The French version was translated into Arabic by Muhammad Sharif ‘Uthman (Najaf, Iraq: Matba’at al-Nu’man, 1973) under the title: *Lamhah ‘an al-Akrad* and the English version was translated into Arabic as well by Araz Zangi (Baghdad: Matba’at al-Jahiz, 1975) under the title: *Ma’a al-Akrad*. Father Thomas walks arm-in-arm not only with the Kurds but also with their history and aspirations. A Dominican monk, Bois has studied Arabic and Kurdish, has lived many years in the Middle East and has written extensively about the Kurds. Opening his book with a striking reference to Kurdistan as “land without frontiers,” Father Thomas proceeds with unfailing skill and intellectual mobility to describe the socio-economic and religio-cultural aspects of Kurdish life. Although there is frequent obeisance to the “fathers” of modern Kurdology, Minorsky, Nikitine, and Rondot, there is a great deal of original observation and what may be construed as empathy even with some of the Kurdish ancestral superstitions. Fact and myth, nevertheless, are differentiated and assessed; not easy tasks with a mythogenic group like the Kurds. The reader gets a corporate image of the people: their social system, family, villages, homes, education, occupations, art, skills,
folklore, weddings, feasts, religious observances, magic rites, leisure hours, joys and sorrows—all following a thematic sequence. Perhaps the best and the most edifying chapter in the book is the one that deals with the language and the literature of the Kurds. The author indicates familiarity with the cultural heritage of the people and a hopeful awareness of their intellectual ferment. Also covered are the Kurds and their relations with the Christians.


Subheadings include: (A) Popular and Folk Literature; (B) Written or Learned Literature: 1) Origins and the classical period, and 2) The modern age; and (C) The Kurdish Press.


An excellent collection of papers that discuss Kurdish history, economy and literature.


Provides a brief but excellent overview on the history and development of Kurdish literature, including newspapers and books, poetry, and prose. A number of poets along with some of their works and impact on Kurdish literature are discussed in brief.


According to Ivanow, the materials for the study of the dialect that is spoken by the Kurdish tribes inhabiting Northern Khurasan consisted, at that time, only of a number of words that were collected by A. Houtum-Schindler, and which were published by him in his “Beitrag zum kurdischen Wortchatze,” Z.D.M.G., vol. 38 (1884), pp. 43-116. In 1918-1920, during Ivanow’s residence in that part of Persia, he collected about 400 specimens of Kurdish poetry and tales which give a more definite idea of the language which the Kurds of Khurasan speak. As the subject is one of considerable interest to students of Kurdish language, a brief outline of the main features of this dialect is here given, to which is added a vocabulary,
and a number of typical specimens of popular poetry and prose. Historical information concerning Kurdish migrations to Khurasan were briefly summarized by Houtum-Schindler in his referred to and a short note on their present distribution in the province was given in a paper by Ivanow, "Notes on the ethology of Khorasan," which was published in the Geographical Journal, Vol. LXVII, 1926, pp. 143-158. For the convenience of the reader the most essential points are here repeated.


This study contains two parts, the first is a study of a number of manuscripts archived in the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Soviet Science Academy of Leningrad, these were written by A. Jaba, M. Hartmann, V. Minorsky, and others about Kurdish language, literature, and culture. The second part of the study contains a translation (into Arabic) or A. Chodzko's work on the Kurdish dialect of Sulaymania pertaining Kurdish literature. The second part also includes a study that deals with what Jaba wrote in the 1850s on Kurdish classical poets. This collection is of special importance because much of it is based on materials recorded from conversations with educated Kurds.


Discusses the development of Kurdish prose and its different forms, including, short fiction, short stories, novels, and allegories. A short biography of prose writers Muhammad Mustafa Kurdi, Ibrahim Ahmad, Shakir Fattah, Marouf Barzinji, and Muharram Muhammad Amin is presented. Also presented is a discussion of their works and their impact on Kurdish literature.

There are more ways than one of winning a war and, after spending time living with freedom fighters, the peshmergas, the famous Kurdish nationalist poet, Sherko Bekas, still believes the pen and the poem can be as mighty as the sword. Here, he talks to Pat Lancaster.


Kurdish literature is a popular literature. Very few are those who know the existence of Kurdish written literature and fewer are those who appreciate its importance. Many written texts have disappeared during the decades- and centuries-old conflicts erupted in Kurdistan, and others are still unpublished. This is a brief survey on Kurdish literature.


Russian version was published in 1915. Includes discussion on Kurdish social life and customs, religion, language, literature, and women, and a brief account on the Kurds in Russia.


Topics discussed include: social life and customs, sedentarization, marriage, the history and development of Kurdish studies in the former Soviet Union, folklore, magic rites, music, religion, Ahl-i Haqq, poetry, mythology, and legends.


The author served as Russian Consul (1915-18) in Urmia where he gained first-hand knowledge and experience in Kurdish affairs. He has since sustained a scientific interest in every
phase of this comparatively little known and frequently misrepresented ethnic minority. The volume is devoted to the diverse aspects of the Kurdish problem that stems from the desire of the politically fragmented Kurds to preserve their national culture and character and to attain an independent state. Though the author realizes that no solutions are yet in sight for most of the questions posed by the complexity of the Kurdish situation, he sets himself the exacting task of critical analysis and summary of the scientific researches of leading Kudrologists on the sociology and history of the Kurds. One of the contributions of the present study is that it alerts the free world to the sustained and purposeful interest of Soviet Russia in the Kurdish problem. Not only the views of Western scholars, but also those of the Kurds themselves, past and present, are taken into consideration and presented critically yet objectively to the reader. The scope of the work is indicated by the themes of its twelve chapters: racial origins, geography, way of life, character and psychology, family life and the role of women, tribal organization both social and economic, history and distribution of the various tribes, national aspirations pre- and post-fifteenth century, steps in the modern nationalistic movement, religious life, and Kurdish literature. The sociology of the Kurd is treated at greater length than is his history, partly for lack of adequate historical materials and partly because of the author’s predominantly sociological interest and method. The fifteen maps, placed to good advantage throughout the work, clarify the shifting geographical distribution of the tribes, indicate natural resources, political boundaries, areas of revolt, religious distribution, and the Kurdish nationalist’s conception of a viable Kurdish state as presented to the San Francisco Conference of 1945. The twelve plates placed at the end of the volume convey a realistic idea of the land and its people. (abridged, Nabia Abbot/Journal of Near Eastern Studies 18, January-October 1959: 96-98)


Originated from a larger version of the author’s doctoral dissertation submitted to the Oriental Institute in Azerbaijan, former Soviet Union. Provides a comprehensive historical overview of Kurdish literature and its various literary forms, including but not limited to Kurdish short story; prose; oral histories; epic literature; types of epics; proverbs, maxims, and popular sayings; songs; and allegories. Focusses discussion on realism in Kurdish literature. Includes many samples of Kurdish poetry.


Topics discussed include: Kurdish short story; oral histories; epic literature; types of epics; proverbs, maxims, and popular sayings; songs; allegories, anecdotes, jokes, and puzzles.


The introductory notice gives a short account of the chief Kurdish poets, together with remarks on the main dialects of the Kurdish tongue, which the author derives from that of the ancient Medes, as distinct from that of the Persians. In the first part of the book, the grammar of the language is simply and clearly taught, in the second part the "Idiomatic Uses" of verbs, nouns, pronouns, conjunctions, prepositions, etc., are explained. Particular value must be attached to the comparatively large selection of specimens of prose and poetry, with notes, and to the English-Kurdish vocabulary, the third part of the book.


About the Author

I was born in 1968 in Beirut, Lebanon, the son of Ibrahim, a house painter, and Leyla. My grandparents fled to Lebanon from Kurdistan (Mardin) in the 1920s. For societal, legal, political, and economic reasons, my parents, who have lived in Lebanon since they were born, never attended school. However, they made every effort to make sure that all of their children (two brothers and six sisters) should have a formal education. Our parents also raised us in a highly nationalistic and patriotic environment, with great respect for our
Kurdish and Lebanese identities. I entered the American University of Beirut in October 1986 with a scholarship from the Hariri Foundation. I graduated with a bachelor’s degree in political studies in 1991 and a master’s degree in the same field in December 1995. Since my early school years, I have had an interest in reading books on history, politics, geography, and biography. This interest, and the need to work to support myself in college, encouraged me to work in Jafet, the university’s main library.

My work in Jafet Library and the pursuit of a master’s degree in Political Science were a turning point in my life. Both provided me with exceptional experience and skills in retrieving, filtering, and organizing information. Recognizing the significance of access to information in research, I decided to invest my information searching skills in compiling annotated bibliographies on the Kurds and Kurdistan.

Owing to economic hardships and difficulty in finding a job in Lebanon, I decided to pursue a Master’s degree in Library Science in the United States. For this degree, I attended North Carolina Central University, starting in January 1996. After completing the degree in only two semesters, I felt I needed to learn more before I returned to Lebanon. Completely out of money, I asked the Dean at NCCU if I could take more courses and receive a stipend in return for teaching. Luckily, he agreed. Excelling in teaching, I was encouraged by the Dean and other faculty members at NCCU to pursue a doctoral degree at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Following my acceptance into the PhD program, I continued to teach and do research. Prior to receiving my degree, I accepted a faculty position at the Albany campus of the State University of New York in the School of Information Science and Policy. In December 2001, I defended my dissertation and graduated. Currently, I am an Assistant Professor at SUNY-Albany.