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OBITUARY

In memoriam: Izzaddin Mustafa Rasul (1934-2019), Iraqi Kurdish man of letters and Soviet-trained scholar

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Abstract

*The literary scholar Izzaddin Mustafa Rasul (1934-2019) was one of the greatest Iraqi Kurdish scholars trained in the Soviet Union. He was one of a cohort of Iraqi students who received scholarships for study in the USSR in the wake of the 1958 coup that overthrew the Iraqi monarchy, and his time in the USSR coincided with the period of flourishing of Kurdish studies there. Rasul's PhD dissertation analyzed the development of Kurdish literature within a schematic Marxist-Leninist developmental framework. In his major work, however, which focused on Ahmed Khani and his *Mem û Zîn*, he went well beyond the standard Soviet treatment of literary works and focused especially on the dimensions of Sufi theosophy and other Islamic content in the work. In this respect, Rasul's work stands out as a rare exception in Soviet Oriental studies. It remains one of the most ambitious studies of the early modern Kurdish poet Khani.*

Keywords: *Ahmed Khani; Kurdish literature; Mem û Zîn; Soviet Kurdology*

Professor Izzaddin Mustafa Rasul (Izzedîn Mustefa Resûl), the famous scholar of Kurdish literature and folklore, passed away in Sulaymaniyah on October 3, 2019. Rasul held a PhD and a postdoctoral degree (*Doktor nauk*) from the Soviet Academy of Sciences, and for several decades in the second half of the twentieth century he played a seminal role in the study, translation, and publication of Kurdish literature. His research interests concerned a wide range of issues in Kurdish literature and folklore. However, he will probably be remembered best for his path-breaking work on Ahmed Khani (Rasul 1979), which is based on his postdoctoral (*Doktor nauk*) dissertation defended in 1977 in Moscow, at the Institute of Oriental Studies (IOS) of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR.² One cannot but agree with Kamal Mirawdeli (2012: 13) that this “massive encyclopedic study of *Mem û Zîn*” is certainly “the best-ever study of Ahmadi Khani’s work.” However, Kurdish studies scholars have yet to undertake the painstaking work of analysing his rich legacy. Even though it has been acknowledged that Rasul provided the “first full-length monographic study of *MZ* [*Mem û*

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² The *Doktor nauk* (“Doctor of Sciences”) degree in the USSR and the post-Soviet countries roughly corresponds with the Habilitation (Dr. habil.) degree adopted in Germany and some other countries. It is a precondition for promotion to a professorship. The Soviet equivalent of the PhD degree is the *Kandidat nauk* (“Candidate of Sciences”) degree.



Zînl]" (Leezenberg, 2018: 86; see also Leezenberg 2019), the analysis put forward in this work has not received the attention it deserves on the part of specialists of Khani (Mirawdeli, 2012: 31). This is most likely due to the fact that Rasul's book was published in Arabic only, while his dissertation in Russian never appeared in print.³

In this article, I would like to dwell briefly on some aspects of the Soviet stage of Izzaddin Mustafa Rasul's biography, which played a major role in his formation as a scholar. Given existing limitations associated with the lack of direct access to most Russian-language material, it remains a critical task for the study of Rasul's scholarly legacy to acquaint the wider English-speaking audience with his publications and the materials written about him from the Soviet Union.

Izzaddin Mustafa Rasul was born in 1934 in Sulaymaniyah into the family of Mullah Mustafa Sefwet Deleja, who in turn descended from a well-known Kurdish family of Muslim clerics and acted as imam and Friday preacher in the local mosque.⁴ In Sulaymaniyah, there is still a mosque named after Rasul's grandfather, Hajji Mala Rasul (Hacî Mela Resûl). His father taught Izzaddin to read and write even before he entered elementary school at the age of five. He combined daytime learning in school with traditional Islamic education at his father's *hujra* in the evenings. In middle school, in 1947, he became a young sympathiser of the newly founded KDP (*Partî Demokratî Kurd*, in 1952 renamed *Partî Demokratî Kurdistan*). In 1948, his father sent him to study Islamic law in Baghdad, where he soon came under the influence of a Communist Party cell at his Shariah college. He joined the Iraqi Communist Party in 1949, which may be the reason why he was forced to leave college and returned to Sulaimaniyah. After completing high school there in 1951, he enrolled in Baghdad's Higher Teachers' College.⁵ In his second year, in March 1953, he was expelled from college for taking part in political demonstrations.⁶ Once again returning to Kurdistan, Rasul became a schoolteacher in Qeladize, about 75 kilometres north of Sulaimaniyah, where he conducted political activities as a Communist Party member. Due to his underground political activities, he was forced to leave Iraq in 1956 for Syria, where he studied Arabic literature for two years at the University of Damascus. Syria was then known to be a haven for young Kurdish activists from Iraq because of its greater freedom for cultural and political activities. In 1957, Rasul was among the Kurdish students from Syria and Iraq who established the Society of Kurdish Students (*Komela Xwendekarên Kurd*) in Damascus. In Syria, Rasul improved his Kurmanji, which in turn led to his deep interest in the classical Kurdish literature written in this dialect.

After the revolution of July 14, 1958, which overthrew the monarchy and established republican rule in Iraq under Abd al-Karim Qasim, Rasul returned to Baghdad. In October of the same year, he was reinstated at the University of Baghdad's Teachers' College and

³ Rasul's book was published in Turkish translation only almost 30 years after its publication in Arabic, in 2007, making it available to many Kurdish readers in Turkey and Europe. The only authors who seriously engaged with Rasul's study are Kamal Mirawdeli, who also translated parts of it, including Rasul's conclusions, in his own book (2012: 37-52), and Rasul's Turkish translator, Kadri Yıldırım. The Sufi aspects of *Mem û Zîn* to which Rasul paid much attention were more recently also studied by Yıldırım (2011: 57-87).

⁴ In some interviews, however, Rasul gave not 1934 but 1935 as the year of his birth. Biographical information has been culled from the obituary on Basnews (2019) and various published interviews with him (Keskin, 2015; Kurdsat, 2007a; Kurdsat, 2007b; Kurdistan24, 2019).

⁵ This was one of several colleges then operating in Baghdad, which were to merge into the University of Baghdad in 1958. The Higher Teachers' College was then incorporated as the College of Education.

⁶ As stated in the University of Baghdad's Certificate No. 2067 of June 4, 1977, which we found in Izzaddin Mustafa Rasul's Habilitation file, he was expelled from the college under Order No. 698 of March 15, 1953, for "political activities." The certificate also indicates the subjects he was studying and the grades he received.

enrolled for another year in the department of Arabic literature. In November 1959, he was awarded the BA degree, after which he started working at the Ministry of Education.

Soviet scholarships for Iraqi Kurds and Kurdish studies in the Soviet Union

After the revolution of 1958, the USSR – with which the new leadership of Iraq had established bilateral relations – began to allocate places for students from Iraq at its universities. By early 1961, one in eight of all Iraqi students and trainees studying abroad did so in the Soviet Union.⁷ They no doubt studied a wide range of subjects, but it was significant that a number of them were invited to pursue Kurdish studies. No other country stimulated Kurdish studies, for fear of antagonising the Arab, Persian and Turkish governments.

In 1960, Rasul was one of a small group of Kurdish students who were given the opportunity to carry out doctoral research on Kurdish history and culture in the USSR. Other members of this group were Ma'ruf Khaznadar, Kamal Mazhar Ahmad (M.A. Kamal') and Nasrin Fakhri. They were soon to be joined by Kawis (Kaykaus) Kaftan. By 1965, they had all obtained their doctorates (Rasul, 1963a; Khaznadar, 1963; Kamal', 1963; Nasrin 1965; Kaftan, 1963), and both Rasul and Kamal' later also obtained their *Doktor nauk* degrees, which very few other students from Asia and Africa did. They and Khaznadar contributed much to Soviet Kurdology and were to establish themselves as prominent Kurdish scholars in Iraq.

For a year, Rasul studied Russian in Moscow, after which he was given the choice of continuing graduate studies in Leningrad or Baku. In the former, there was the recently established "Kurdish Cabinet" (*Kurdskeij kabinet*) of the Leningrad branch of the Institute of the Peoples of Asia.⁸ Baku had a more modest academic establishment, but it was where emigrants from Iranian Kurdistan had settled after the collapse of the Republic of Mahabad (January-December 1946). These included Rahim Ghazi (Russian transliteration: Ragim Gazi) and Ali Gelawêj (Kalavesh), both of whom had already received PhD degrees in Baku (Gazi in 1954, Kalavesh in 1955). Gazi and Kalavesh persuaded Izzaddin Mustafa Rasul, Kamal Mazhar Ahmad and Nasrin Fakhri to choose the Azerbaijani capital, assuring them that, given an increase in the number of graduate students at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan, it would be possible to open a department of Kurdish studies there. Ma'ruf Khaznadar and Kawis Kaftan, on the other hand, opted for Leningrad, pursuing their research and obtaining their doctorates in the framework of the "Kurdish cabinet."⁹

From the early 1960s onwards, Baku became an important centre of Soviet Oriental studies, with a small group of Kurdish specialists working in different departments. Besides Ragim Gazi and Ali Kalavesh, there were three other Kurdish scholars here: Gusejn Gasanogly Alyshanov, a specialist of the poetry of Abdullah Goran, Zumrud Shafieva, who studied the

⁷ The news bulletin *Kurdish Facts and West-Asian Affairs* in its March 1961 issue (Nr. 4, p. 13) cited statistics according to which 6415 Iraqis were students or trainees abroad on January 1, 1961. Almost two thirds of them studied in four countries: Britain (1851), USA (928), USSR (779) and West Germany (544). In the following issue, it reported that 99% of the Iraqi students in the USSR studied in Moscow, Baku and Leningrad (*Kurdish Facts and West-Asian Affairs*, Nr. 5, April 1961, p. 13).

⁸ In the 1960s, this was the name of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the USSR Academy of Sciences. On its "Kurdish Cabinet", see Kurdoev, 1972: 392-399.

⁹ Ma'ruf Khaznadar prepared his PhD thesis under the supervision of Kanat Kurdoev (Khaznadar, 1963), after which he worked as a researcher in the "Kurdish cabinet" until 1968 and published his PhD thesis as a book (Khaznadar, 1967), which is briefly summarised by Landau, 1975: 196-197. Khaznadar published a Russian translation of a collection of short stories by Kurdish writers including Fadil Nizam ad-Din, Ibrahim Ahmad, Hussein Huzni Mukryani, Kawis Kaftan, Shakir Fattah, Alaaddin Sujadi, Ma'ruf Khaznadar, and Piramerud (1968).

different genres of Kurdish poetry, and Shamil Askerov, who subsequently defended a PhD thesis on the work of Cegerxwîn. Rasul carried out his doctoral research and in June 1963 he obtained a PhD in philology from the Department of Literature of the Middle East, Faculty of Oriental Studies, Azerbaijan State University (ASU, now Baku State University). His dissertation was published a few years later in Arabic in Lebanon (Rasul, 1966), in what he later described as a poor translation. It was nonetheless reissued without major changes in Erbil in 2010.

The PhD dissertation showed the clear marks not only of Rasul's own wide reading of Kurdish literature but of the general literary training he received in the Soviet Union. Long after his return to Iraq, he remained highly appreciative of the Russian tradition of literary criticism. He translated a volume of Russian theoretical studies of Oriental literatures into Arabic (Rasul, 1991), and as late as 2007 he proudly showed an interviewer some of the Russian books from his personal library—including both fiction and literary criticism—that he valued highly (Kurdsat, 2007b).

While Rasul's thesis, entitled "Realism in Kurdish Literature after World War II (based on Iraqi Kurdistan)," was specifically dedicated to Kurdish realism, it also included an analysis of various genres and aspects. It should be noted that by this time, only two major overviews of Kurdish literature were in existence, both published in Baghdad and focusing mainly on Sorani literature: Alaaddin Sajjadi's *History of Kurdish Literature* (1952) and Rafiq Hilmi's *Kurdish Poetry and Literature* (1941, 1956). Rasul's study differed from those of his predecessors in that he adopted a theoretical framework and more systematically distinguished between various genres. The value of Rasul's work was enhanced by the fact that he had access to many unpublished manuscripts by Kurdish authors with whom he was personally acquainted and which he thus first made known to the scholarly world (Rasul, 1963a: 3). The work also demonstrated his vast knowledge of folk literature; he quoted many passages of oral epics from memory (Rasul, 1963a: 6).

Having a religious background, yet being a communist, Rasul adopted a balanced view of the role of Islam in the Kurdish movements in Turkey and Iraq. Without disavowing the communist struggle against religion, he duly noted the absence of anti-religious themes in modern Kurdish literature. Rasul believed that it would have been a mistake for the Kurdish communists to use anti-religious slogans. That would only have elicited the "dissatisfaction of the people, especially the peasants, and would have alienated them from the revolutionary movement" (Rasul, 1963a: 16). In this sense, Rasul's work was not only literary but also had political undertones, discussing the peculiarities of the religious and feudal situation among the Kurds of that time as departing from the standard framework of materialism.

The early 1960s were the heyday of Kurdish research in the USSR. As observed quite early by the Soviet orientalist Naftula Khalfin, the presence of Kurds from abroad, especially from Iraq, in the Soviet Orientalist departments stimulated their Soviet colleagues (Khalfin, 1966: 157). Another consequence of their presence was that the Kurdish national struggle became a primary subject on the Kurdological research agenda, not only for the Iranian and Iraqi Kurds but also for established Soviet scholars including Khalfin himself, who wrote a major

study on nineteenth-century imperial rivalry over Kurdistan and its impact on Kurdish uprisings (Khalfin, 1963).¹⁰

Diplomatic and political relations with the countries that controlled parts of Kurdistan were no doubt a factor that hampered the development of Kurdish studies, in the Soviet Union as well as elsewhere. Moscow's special relationship with Iraq, however, encouraged the USSR not only to welcome Kurdish students in its academic institutions but also to bestow academic respectability on the study of the Kurdish national movement, as the Soviet leadership wished to draw on the dissent between the Kurds and central authorities to further promote the USSR's goals in the region, especially after the fall of Qasim's left-leaning regime in 1963. The academic achievements of the Iraqi Kurdish students were hailed in Soviet media for propaganda abroad. Thus, the widely circulated Soviet journal *Aziya i Afrilka segodnya* (Asia and Africa Today), one of the most important channels of Soviet propaganda in Asia and Africa (Kirasirova, 2015: 30–31; Kitrinis, 1984: 63), printed a report on Rasul's thesis that is worth quoting in full:

The young Iraqi scholar and Kurd Izzaddin Mustafa Rasul successfully defended his PhD thesis in philology at the Azerbaijan State University [...] The topic of the thesis is "Realism in the Modern Kurdish Literature of Iraq." The author emphasizes that the young literature of Iraqi Kurdistan reflects the life of the common people, their struggle for their national rights, and is actively involved in the movement of the peoples for peace. Kurdish writers strive to create socialist realism literature (Anon., 1963).

The journal did not limit itself to this note and soon after published a letter by Rasul that was very critical of Iraq. In the editorial section, he was introduced as "a young Iraqi scholar and philologist of Kurdish nationality, and the author of the first scholarly work on the literature of Iraqi Kurdistan." According to the author, his letter is "a voice of protest against military operations in Iraqi Kurdistan." Rasul condemned the "shameful and dirty war of the Iraqi government," led by the Ba'ath party and the "agents of colonialism from the countries of the aggressive CENTO block," suppressing "by fire and sword" the "free and peaceful people" and carrying out "fascist scorched earth tactics in Kurdistan."¹¹ In the letter, Rasul wrote that "the Kurds of Iraq are deeply grateful to the Soviet Union (...) for its strong support of the just struggle of the people of Iraqi Kurdistan for their essential rights and their right to national self-determination" (Rasul, 1963b). Next to Rasul's letter, a letter of a similar nature by Kanat Kurdoev was published (Kurdoev 1963).

Party work, travel, and academic employment in Iraq

After having obtained his PhD degree, Rasul lived for another year in Moscow, studying party work, philosophy, and economics, after which he was sent by the Iraqi Communist Party to

¹⁰ See the following works by foreign and Soviet Kurds writing on aspects of the Kurdish national movement: Gazi, 1954; Kaftan, 1963; Kamal', 1967; 1969; Mgoyan, 1963. An Arabic translation of Khalfin's 1963 study was serialised in the KDP's Arabic journal *al-Ta'akhi* in Baghdad and became the first Soviet work to be translated into Turkish and influence debates in Kurdish circles in Turkey (1976).

¹¹ CENTO (Central Treaty Organization), also known as the Baghdad Pact, was a Cold War military alliance formed in 1955 by Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Turkey and the United Kingdom. Many Kurds perceived that fear of Kurdish claims was a driving factor of the alliance. Under Qasim's revolutionary regime, Iraq withdrew from CENTO in 1959. It was finally dissolved in 1979. (Editors' note.)

Sofia to work on a radio broadcast to Iraq.¹² In 1965, Rasul returned to Iraqi Kurdistan, becoming a *peshmerga* of the Iraqi Communist Party, and spent a year in the village of Dilman (near Haji Omran), at the base of KDP leader Mustafa Barzani.

Towards the end of 1966 he left Kurdistan for Baghdad, where a more accommodating regime had taken over, and where he took up a teaching position in the Kurdish Department at the University of Baghdad which was founded in 1959. As he later claimed, it had been Barzani himself who recommended him for this position.¹³ He lived in Baghdad for about fifteen years, during which he published a monograph on Kurdish folk literature (Rasul, 1970, 1987) and numerous shorter articles on classical Kurdish authors in the Kurdish and Arabic-language press in Baghdad. These included a series of articles on Ahmed Khani on which he was to build in his postdoctoral work. In addition, Rasul authored school textbooks on Kurdish literature published by the Iraqi Ministry of Education, as well as editing *divan* of Kurdish poets. He also gave a series of talks about Kurdish literature on Baghdad radio (Rasul, 1977a: 13).

Return to the USSR for postdoctoral studies

In 1976, Rasul returned to the Soviet Union to continue his studies, this time not in Baku, which was not equipped for advanced Kurdish studies, but in Moscow, at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR. The archive of the institute holds Rasul's personnel file, which consists of four documents assembled in 1976. The file includes basic biographical information, such as his surname, name and patronym, date of birth, place of birth (the city of Sulaymaniyah, Iraq), nationality (Kurd), social background (religious family), language skills (Kurdish, Arabic, Persian, Russian, English), academic degree and academic title (*Kandidat nauk*, *Dotsent* [PhD, Associate professor]), and the address of his residence in Moscow. In a letter dated 16 September 1976, the Ministry of Higher Education of the USSR informs the IOS that Rasul had been granted a state-funded scholarship for a period of one year, to be trained in the field of Kurdish literature at the Institute. The amount of the scholarship was 200 rubles per month, which constituted a significant sum in the USSR at that time, exceeding the average wage in the country.

Rasul began his stint as a trainee (Russian *stazhior*) at the IOS on 30 September 1976. A year later, he obtained the academic degree of *Doktor nauk* (Dr. habil.) with a dissertation about the intellectual and spiritual dimension of Ahmed Khani's work (Rasul, 1977), which soon also was published in Arabic in Baghdad (Rasul, 1979). As the IOS archives show, this was not the subject he had initially agreed to write about. According to his case files, he was supposed to write a thesis on the subject of "Socialist realism and its influence on Kurdish literature." In other words, he was expected to continue the research that had yielded his PhD thesis in Baku. Given the limited time available, such a drastic change of topic is unusual. The high quality of the work he submitted as his *Doktor nauk* thesis suggests that much of the work had in fact already been prepared in advance before he arrived in Moscow, so that he only needed to resolve minor technical aspects of the Russian text during the allotted period. He provides several indications that this was the case. In the summary (*avtoreferat*) of his dissertation, he lists the articles in Kurdish and Arabic on the work of Ahmed Khani that he

¹² In this interview, Rasul does not mention in which specific institution he studied these subjects; this was most likely one of the Soviet Communist Party schools.

¹³ Rasul claimed this in his interviews (Keskin, 2015; Kurdistan24, 2019).

had published in Iraq in the early 1970s.¹⁴ He also states in the thesis that his Arabic book on Ahmed Khani had already been accepted for publication at the University of Baghdad (Rasul, 1977: 15), and in a later interview he claims that he had already had the book ready before his trip to Moscow (Kurdistan24, 2019).

No less curious is another circumstance of his defence. The official opponents of his defence were Gazanfar Yusifogly Aliyev, a well-known expert on the work of Nizami Ganjavi and the Persian-language literature of India, the Kurdish scholar and linguist Cherkes Khudoevich Bakaev, author of a Kurdish-Russian dictionary and specialist of the dialects of the Kurds living in the USSR, and Halyk Huseynovich Korogly, a scholar of Persian literature and the literature of the Turkic peoples. This means that only one of the opponents had a background in Kurdish studies though not in Kurdish literature. Undoubtedly, a scholar of Persian literature, especially one with expertise in Nizami, whom Khani consciously emulated, was well placed to evaluate Rasul's research. Still, it is worth recalling that there were also two highly qualified and well-known specialists of Kurdish classical literature in the Soviet Union in those years, both working in Leningrad. Margareta Rudenko, the most authoritative scholar on Ahmed Khani's work, died a year before Rasul submitted his thesis, but the luminary of Kurdish literature Kanat Kurdoev was then the head of the Kurdish section in the Leningrad branch of the IOS. It is unknown why Kurdoev did not participate as an official opponent in Rasul's defence. However, according to Zara Yusupova, Rasul regularly came to Leningrad and worked with Kurdoev on his thesis.¹⁵

Studying Ahmed Khani in the USSR

Rasul's Habilitation thesis was only published in Arabic. Although some years ago a Turkish translation by Kadri Yıldırım was published (Rasul, 2007) and parts of the conclusions are quoted in English by Kamal Mirawdali (2012), the substance of the work remains inaccessible to many scholars interested in Khani's work. I will therefore present a brief overview of the main points developed in the study. In order to situate this work in its proper context, I will first very briefly point out some trends in Soviet Kurdish studies.¹⁶

Kurdology was not just an academic enterprise but also an instrument of Soviet ethnic policy, a tool for shaping a Kurdish culture and, in a broader sense, a Kurdish nationality in the USSR. The institutionalisation of Kurdish studies as a field of research separate from Iranian studies was akin to a "secession" of the Kurds, even if only within the framework of Soviet Oriental studies, and this conditioned the demarcation of valid subjects of research as well as the recruitment of research personnel. Attaining status as a full-fledged specialisation, Soviet Kurdology was supposed to ensure a systematic, and more importantly, a politically "correct" (i.e., patriotic) study of the Kurds. In this regard, large-scale work was launched in the field of Kurdish linguistics, the study and critical description of manuscripts and literary works, various issues in medieval history and folklore, as well as questions on the recent history of the Kurds, especially the emergence of a national movement and liberation struggle.

The outstanding achievements of Soviet Kurdish studies notwithstanding, it is important to note that this process was accompanied by research that understated the extent to which

¹⁴ These are listed among his publications in the bibliography at the end of this article.

¹⁵ Author's interview with Russian Kurdologist Zare Yusupova, December 25, 2015.

¹⁶ Obviously, this is a multifaceted topic worthy of its own investigation. Peculiarities of Soviet Kurdish studies were considered by Leezenberg (2011, 2015). Here, I will limit myself to stating those aspects that are most relevant.

Kurdish culture was shaped by its interaction with Persian, Arabic, and Turkish culture and the pervasive influence of Islam.

While some early contributions to Soviet Kurdology indicate that research might have developed in a direction that took more explicit account of the Islamic aspect of Kurdish culture, the academic climate of the later period did not favour attention to the Kurdish contributions to Islamic literature and culture.¹⁷ Yet, the overall atheistic tone of Soviet Kurdish studies was dictated not only by the ideology of the state, as the separation of the Kurds from Arabic, Persian, and Turkish culture also represented an important means to create an independent Kurdish history. In this regard, as noted by Michiel Leezenberg, Kurds were described “as a primarily oral and folkloric nation—isolated from the wider cosmopolitan Islamicate... culture” (Leezenberg, 2015: 748).

It is therefore not surprising that Soviet scholars studied Khani’s *Mem û Zîn* primarily as Kurdish national epic – rather than, for instance, an allegory with strong religious overtones. This was the approach of the influential Joseph Orbeli, who administered the Hermitage Museum in Leningrad from 1934 to 1951 and was to establish and lead the Kurdish cabinet in Leningrad in the late 1950s and 1960s. In his view, *Mem û Zîn* was “a creation of the Kurdish community, done many centuries before Ahmed Khani” (Orbeli, 1938: 5).¹⁸ It is noteworthy that in the same year, a great expert in Persian literature, Oleg Vil’chevskij, published a translation of selected parts of *Mem û Zîn* in Russian (Vil’chevskij, 1938).

However, the first Soviet scholar to extensively study Ahmed Khani was Margareta Rudenko, who defended her PhD thesis on *Mem û Zîn* in 1954 and later published several articles on the subject. She later published a critical edition of *Mem û Zîn*, based on her comparison of nine different manuscripts, with a Russian translation and an extensive preface (Rudenko, 1962). In her studies, Ahmed Khani is represented first and foremost as a Kurdish national poet, without discussion of his place in the Islamic literary tradition. While deeming the Moscow edition of *Mem û Zîn* to be the best, Rasul has been critical of Rudenko’s failure to understand the various Islamic aspects of the poem (Kursat, 2007b). It is also worth noting that in 1976, the year before Rasul defended his thesis, a translation of *Mem û Zîn* into Azerbaijani by Shamil Askerov was published in Baku in a large print run (Askerov, 1976). However, as Rasul noted in the long summary of his thesis, “the first chapter, in which Ahmed Khani addresses God and the prophet Muhammad and expresses his world view with its Sufi interpretation, is missing [from this translation].”

It is against the backdrop of these studies that Rasul conducted his research on *Mem û Zîn*, placing this work for the first time within a broader literary, religious, and cultural context, which to some extent made up for the lack of attention given to religious subjects in Soviet Kurdish studies.¹⁹ Without minimising *Mem û Zîn* as a classic of Kurdish literature, Rasul

¹⁷ In 1930, Arab Shamilov (Erebê Şemo), who was at that time a promising young scholar and would soon go on to write the very first Kurmanji Kurdish novel (*Şivanê Kurmanca*, Yerevan, 1935), published an article describing Kurdish religious practices (Shamilov, 1930). The article focused on the life of Sunni dervishes in Kurdistan and described their *zîker* ritual. Shamilov was not himself a Muslim; he belonged to a Yezidi Sheikh family, who had migrated to Armenia from the Kars region, which had become a part of Turkey after World War I. Almost the entire Kurdish intelligentsia of the former USSR, especially in Kurdish studies (as a branch of Oriental studies) and in Kurdish culture, art, and literature, consisted of Yezidis who were primarily from Armenia or, less often, from Georgia.

¹⁸ The fact that Khani adopted a widely known folk tale as the basis for his literary work is well known. The relationship of Khani’s work and the various oral versions of *Mem û Zîn* is studied by Chyet (1991: 52–63).

¹⁹ See Leezenberg (2011: 98). It should nonetheless be noted that lack of interest in the Islamic aspects of Kurdish culture is characteristic of the entire field of Kurdish studies, and not only those produced in the USSR.

analyses the poem from the point of view of the philosophical conception of the Kurdish Sufi poet and as one of the greatest monuments of Sufi poetry. In his first (PhD) thesis Rasul had only attempted to reconcile the nationalism of the Kurds with their religiosity, appealing to a Lenin quote about “granting freedom of religion” to overcome possible objections (Rasul, 1963: 16). In his second work, he further reflects on the relationship of Kurdish nationalism with the Islamic tradition. In that sense, both the strong religious training he received from his Sufi father and his scholarly training in the USSR contributed to the creation of this foundational work.

Khani and his Sufism in Rasul’s analysis

The thesis has a standard structure, with an introduction, five chapters, a conclusion, bibliography, and appendix. Rudenko’s translation of *Mem û Zîn*, with Rasul’s corrections, is appended to the thesis. In terms of content, the thesis can be roughly divided into two parts. The first part deals with the social and political situation in Kurdistan at the time of the poem’s composition. The author analyses the depiction of the Kurdish people’s life in *Mem û Zîn*, comparing it with historical sources. The analysis moves away from the Soviet historiographical tradition in which Kurds are presented as a backwards and predominantly rural people (Rudenko 1954: 8). This part also includes sections in which Rasul indulges in a detailed examination of Ahmed Khani’s use of literary imagery, rhyming schemes, and determines the originality of the text and literary life in Kurdistan.

The second part of Rasul’s dissertation focuses on Kurdish ethnography as reflected in *Mem û Zîn*, including an analysis of wedding ceremonies, funerals, hunting parties, food, weapons, kinship relationships, music, the festival of Newroz as well as Ahmed Khani’s relationship with the rulers and the poor, his philosophy, and Sufi literature. These aspects are considered exclusively through an analysis of the poet’s Sufi ideas.

In the introduction, Rasul indicates that he presents “the first attempt to explain Sufism in Kurdish poetry from the perspective of Marxist philosophy” (Rasul, 1977: 13). However, the thesis lacks the promised Marxist analysis. In general, the work can hardly be considered a worthy example of the Soviet Marxist historiography of that period. Rasul’s approach to the question of classes was quite shallow and remained essentially limited to the quotation of a few passages from the poem and their comparison with statements by Karl Marx. Very originally, though, Rasul attempts to demonstrate that Kurdish society had attained a high level of social and economic development, which he characterised as feudalism with the beginnings of capitalist relations and bourgeois society. Analysing the term *muxlim* (from the Arabic root *ghalima*, ‘to be excited by lust’) found in Khani’s description of the wedding of Siti and Tajdin, Rasul notes that Bozarslan in his Turkish translation correctly connects it with prostitution.²⁰ This, he argues, points to the presence of capitalist relations in the region, since “feudal tribal traditions threaten with death those who engage in prostitution, and socialist society destroys the causes of its emergence, that is, this phenomenon is characteristic only of a capitalist society” (26). He also finds evidence of capitalist thinking in various allegories and plots, and describes the social groups present at that time in Kurdistan.

²⁰ Rasul takes Rudenko’s translation as a basis for his analysis, but specifies that Rudenko did not always manage to convey the meaning correctly. At the same time, he considers Mehmed Emin Bozarslan (1968) to be the “most knowledgeable translator” and the “most accurate in understanding the essence of the text and its meaning,” despite his imperfect knowledge of the Persian language (Rasul, 1977: 9).

Rasul begins his discussion of literary life in Kurdistan with the claim that the literature in the Avestan and Pahlavi languages can be considered as “Kurdish literature of the pre-Islamic period,” because the Kurdish language supposedly shares the same connection with these two languages as does modern Persian. Yet, he suggests that this is not an argument for “affirming this [Avestan and Pahlavi] literature as the source of written Kurdish literature (in the period after the establishment of Islam) for both Kurds and others, since this connection has been broken for centuries” (34-35). Highlighting the significant contributions of the Kurds to the Arabic literature of the Abbasid period and to the Persian literature of the Samanid period, and, to a slightly lesser extent, to the Turkish literature of the Ottoman Empire, Rasul discusses what can be considered the beginnings of Kurdish literature in the Kurdish language itself, pointing to the Luri quatrains of Baba Tahir Hamadani (11th century), as well as to literature in the Gorani dialect, beginning with Mala Pareshan in the 14th century.²¹ Rasul concedes that these dialects are not always considered as Kurdish by linguists, but argues that most of the tribes that speak these dialects identify themselves as Kurds, regardless of the degree of linguistic proximity to Kurdish. For this reason, it is appropriate to consider their oral and written literature as “part of the Kurdish literature, because both Luri and Gorani have influenced and are influencing the development of Kurdish literature and its dissemination in [Iranian and Iraqi] Kurdistan” (35-37). With regards to Kurmanji literature, Rasul notes that Luri and Gorani did not influence Kurmanji and that, accordingly, the development of literature in that dialect should be considered separately.

Analysing the legacy of Ahmed Khani’s predecessors (Ali Hariri, Faqi Tayran, Malaye Jaziri), Rasul tries to define their role in Oriental literature by drawing parallels and underscoring elements borrowed from classical Sufi literature by Kurdish poets, while also showing the preservation of the folk poetic metre typical of Kurdish songs and Kurdish oral literature. In that sense, he defines the poetry of Faqi Tayran as an “intermediate link” between Oriental classical literature and Kurdish oral literature, considering it a step “towards the classical literary perfection observed in Malaye Jaziri” (45). As for Malaye Jaziri, he played a unique role in the formation of Kurdish poetry, putting it on par with the master pieces of Oriental literature and disproving the “claims of underdevelopment” levelled at the Kurds (47). Rasul notes that he created the first Kurdish *divan* modelled on the Persian classics. Moreover, Jaziri not only adapted Persian metres to the Kurdish language, but he also introduced elements (for example, the “additional” form or *mustazad*) that influenced the development of the Oriental *divan* (47). In general, while demonstrating the similarities between the philosophical subjects, allegories, and poetic forms used by these poets as well as by Khani, Rasul notes that the author of *Mem û Zîn* was mostly influenced by Faqi Tayran’s Sufi-inspired poetry.

Rasul also paid special attention to the author’s motives, seeing the nationalistic aspects of Khani’s work less in the specific verses where he calls for a Kurdish king than in the fact that composing the poem in Kurdish instead of Persian or Turkish constituted an act that demonstrated the author’s “very close connection with his people” (61). Khani took upon himself the task, Rasul argues, to present his people as capable of earthly and divine love. In this sense, Khani acted as “a politician and agitator, defending his nation from the accusations of enemies that the Kurds know only war and bloodshed. Khani showed his people to be capable of experiencing love and tenderness, remarking that the weapons in their hands are only a means to fight against backwardness and grief” (61).

²¹ Mala Pareshan Dinawari, one of the first Kurdish poets, wrote in Gorani and was a Sufi.

Rasul also finds an analogy of Kurdistan's division between the Ottoman and Persian empires in Khani's metaphor of language as a coin. Rasul recalls that Kurdish emirates had in the past minted their own coinage but that this symbol of sovereignty was suppressed by the powers that conquered them.²² He points to Khani's desire to see the Emir of Botan as a Sultan minting his own coins that will have worldwide currency, and to his juxtaposition of the copper of Kurdish and the gold and silver of Persian, Arabic and Turkish:

Speaking of Kurdish literature and his own work, Khani compares his poem with a copper coin and says that money faithfully represents the power of the sovereign who minted it. If the Emir [of Botan] follows wise policies, these Kurdish coins will cease to be local and will be accepted in all markets for conversion into gold coinage. [...] Khani wrote his poem in the Kurdish language, which is the language of ordinary people. It is not a gold or silver coin but one of simple copper, which large merchants may refuse to accept but which is widely used by the common people (30).

Addressing the question of *Mem û Zîn*'s originality, Rasul brushes aside the presence of folkloric plots and tales in the poem (to which his Soviet colleagues gave much importance) as a peripheral issue and asserts that Khani's achievement consisted of the sophisticated literary form he imparted on the story of Mem and Zin and other pre-existing stories (67). Rasul also examines Khani's poetical style in detail, showing that although he followed the rules of classical Oriental literature in terms of rhyming schemes, length of *qasidas*, *beyts*, and rhetorical techniques, he developed his own original style within these constraints. Comparing Khani's work with other examples of Oriental classical literature (notably Nizami and Fuzulî), Rasul for example shows how many rhetorical techniques appear in a single *beyt* (distich) and points out structural differences between Khani and his fellow poets (73-74). He also pays special attention to the musical sound of *beyts* and analyses the use of paronomasia (wordplay).

The chapters devoted to ethnography and Sufi philosophy, in the second part of Rasul's thesis, are the most significant. This part begins with an analysis of Ahmed Khani's attitude to rulers in general. Rasul notes that Khani's attitude towards the ruler is more critical than that found in other Oriental classics, explaining this not only through Khani's position as a national poet who holds the emir responsible for the fate of his native people, but also with respect to the author's position as a Sufi, whose philosophy is based on "total denial and total condemnation," and the understanding that it is impossible to establish a just peace on earth (129-130). Although Rasul writes in detail about Khani's desire to have a wise sovereign for his people, for Khani, the Emir of Botan represents all rulers: this is the "Sufi ending" of the poem. Khani's contemptuous Sufi stance towards the ruling class becomes clear in the last parts of his poem, when his hero Mem refuses to visit the Emir, in order to show that "only in God does he see the eternal sovereign" (136).

Rasul argues that Khani's formal allegiance to Sunni Islam did not prevent him from seeking inspiration from beyond the legalistic learning of the Shafi'i school of law, in Sufism as well as philosophy and even in the pre-Islamic religious traditions of Kurdistan. He discusses at length Khani's Sufi views on money, justice, equality, distribution of wealth, and luxury. The concept of friendship and brotherhood as it appears among the poem's protagonists is also given a Sufi emphasis: Tajdin prefers his friend Mem over all of his relatives (139). Man's

²² Sharafkhan Bidlisi's *Sharafnama* mentions the minting of coins (*sikke*) and the mentioning of the emir in the Friday sermon (*khutba*) as the signs of the degree of independence held by some of the early emirates. (Editors' note.)

dependence on the sun appears in Khani as a symbol for the Sufi's love for God: Rasul digresses on the cult of the Sun and its sacred place in Sufism, adding that "Khani's Sufi views show traces of the influence of Zoroastrianism and Yezidism," without further elaborating on this question (161). Rasul shows a progression in Khani's references to God, beginning with verses from the Quran, then proceeding to the views of other Sufis and poets, and at the end offering his most personal views (164). *Mem û Zîn* opens with an invocation in which Khani addresses God directly. Analysing this invocation, Rasul finds common ground with the Sufis Ahmad al-Ghazali and Ibn Arabi as well as the philosophers Ibn Sina, al-Farabi, Ibn Rushd, al-Kindi, Aristotle, the Alexandrian philosophers, Plotinus and the Mu'tazilis (167-180).

The question of Satan in Khani's work is of particular importance to Rasul in understanding the poet's worldview. Satan and the forces of darkness appear in *Mem û Zîn* in the person of Mem's rival, Bakr, who in Khani's account is an ambivalent figure: evil and yet rewarded by God. Rasul places his analysis of Khani's Bakr against the background of the early Sufis al-Hallaj, al-Maqdisi and Ahmad al-Ghazali, who also made Satan an ambiguous force.²³ He shows that Khani's view of Satan is different than that of these authors. He suggests that for Khani the good can only exist due to the presence of evil. Satan therefore has an essential role to play. In *Mem û Zîn*, the villain Bakr, who is the cause of Mem's death, is ultimately defeated by Mem's loyal friend Tajdin. Khani writes that Bakr, although he personifies evil, goes to heaven, for through his actions he played a part in carrying out God's design for Mem and Zin. Nor did Tajdin commit a sin in killing Bakr, for he was ignorant of this divine mystery. Both Bakr and Tajdin were, in fact, manifestations of specific divine attributes (186).

Rasul perceives here an influence of Zoroastrianism, which he believes to have as one of its core concepts "the harmony of opposite spirits—the spirit of good and the spirit of evil" (198). Khani's world view, he asserts, borrows eclectically from classical Sufism, Zoroastrianism, and various schools of Muslim doctrine. In questions of free will versus predestination, Khani appears in most passages close to the radically fatalist Jabriyah but elsewhere closer to the more moderate Ash'ariyah.²⁴

Khani interprets everything people do as predestined. Moreover, he expresses a similar point of view on natural phenomena, even those in plants and minerals. (203)

Rasul tries to unravel the controversy of Khani's position as an absolute fatalist in the question about the situation of the disintegrated and divided Kurdish people, who find themselves clutched in the grip of the Ottoman Empire and Iran. Rasul shows that Khani wants a different future for his people, but as a fatalist, he understands that any future, like the present, is predetermined (207-208).

The thesis examiners were in unanimous agreement that none of the famous Persian Sufi poets had ever been honoured with such an analysis in Soviet literature.²⁵ The analysis of the poem's text and its comparison with other classic examples of Oriental literature was particularly appreciated by the jury. At the same time, it should be noted that none of the examiners dissected the second part of the thesis, and some even admitted lacking the

²³ An excellent overview of Sufi interpretations of Satan's ambivalent cosmological position is given by Peter J. Awn (1983). (Editors' note.)

²⁴ The Jabriyah was a school of Muslim theology that affirmed predestination in its most radical form. The Ash'ariyah (which nowadays represents the majority of traditional Muslims) formulated a compromise between free will and predestination.

²⁵ Gazanfar Aliyev's comments to this effect are preserved in Rasul's files at the IOS.

necessary qualifications. Some comments were made on Rasul's Marxist method and his approach of the class question, which were criticised as simplified and confusing.

Conclusion

Izzaddin Mustafa Rasul's work remains the only research in Soviet and Russian Kurdish studies in which Ahmed Khani's *Mem û Zîn*, a monument of Kurdish literature which has played such a significant role in the development of Kurdish nationalism, was studied in connection with Sufi theosophy and Islam. It should be noted that Rasul could not wholly ignore the ideological reality of the Soviet state, which explains why the title of his dissertation does not in any way hint at a discussion of the religious aspects of Ahmed Khani's work. By contrast, the title of the Arabic book published on the basis of this thesis directly ties the Kurdish poet to Sufism (Rasul 1979).

After defending his Habilitation thesis in Moscow, Rasul returned to teach at the University of Baghdad but was dismissed in the early 1980s. He then taught at Salahaddin University in Erbil and, in 1992 was elected to the Parliament of Kurdistan as an independent candidate appearing on the list of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (*Yekêtiya Nîştîmanî Kurdistan*, YNK). However, Rasul's political career was brief, and he then entirely focused on teaching at the University of Sulaimaniyah from the mid-1990s onwards.

The world of Kurdish science, arts and letters has suffered a major loss with the passing of Izzaddin Mustafa Rasul. We say goodbye to a great scholar and patriot of Kurdistan and one of the brightest intellectuals of the vibrant era of Kurdish studies in the USSR.

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