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‘From Adela Khanun to Leyla Zana: Women as Political Leaders in Kurdish History’

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From Adela Khanum to Leyla Zana: Women as Political Leaders in Kurdish History

Kurdish society is highly male-dominated and it has been for all of its known history. Throughout Kurdish history we find, however, instances of women reaching high positions and becoming the political, in some cases even military, leaders of their communities. It is hard to find comparable cases among the Kurds' most important neighbours, the Turks, Arabs and Persians. Such cases may of course be under-reported in the literature because of an anti-female bias in historiography, but then one would expect the same bias to militate against the reporting of Kurdish women chieftains as well.[1] Most of the authors who wrote about these remarkable women leaders during their lifetime appear, in fact, to have considered them as a typically Kurdish phenomenon.

These recurrent instances of rule by women are interesting enough in their own right but they also raise a number of questions about the nature of Kurdish society and the position of women in it. Several male Kurdish authors have wished to read these cases as proof of the respected position enjoyed by women in their society, or even as the remnants of an old tradition of gender equality. The best known of these women appear to be developing into national symbols, exemplifying the moral superiority of the Kurds over their neighbours. Feminists may be equally fascinated by these Kurdish women rulers and chieftains but be less inclined to conclude that women enjoy equal rights in Kurdistan because some women reached the top. Various conflicting interpretations of the phenomenon of rule by women will briefly be discussed in the following pages. The primary aim of this article, however, is the modest one of simply describing the best documented cases of women becoming rulers or playing other "manly" roles in Kurdistan.

Adela Khanum of Halabja

At the beginning of this century, the Jaf were probably the most important tribe of southern Kurdistan. Like other large tribes, the Jaf constituted a rigidly stratified society, consisting of a number of subtribes that were considered as Jaf proper besides others, of lower status, that were client tribes. Together, these tribesmen dominated a non-tribal peasant stratum and they were in turn subservient to a ruling lineage called Begzade.[2] The person occupying the pinnacle of this social pyramid was, somewhat surprisingly, not a man but a woman, Adela

[1] Bahriye Üçok and more recently Fatima Mernissi have published studies on women rulers in Muslim history, see Mernissi's *The forgotten queens of Islam* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993; original title *Sultanes oubliées,* Paris: Albin Michel, 1990) and Üçok's *Islâm devletlerinde kadın hükümdarlar* (Ankara, 1965).

[2] A detailed description of the social structure of this tribe several decades later is given in Fredrik Barth, *Principles of Social Organization in Southern Kurdistan* (Oslo, 1953).

Khanum. She was the wife of Usman Pasha, the Begzade chieftain whom the Ottoman government had appointed as the governor (*qa'immaqam*) of the entire district of Shahrizur.[3] Even when her husband was still alive, it was Adela Khanum who gradually assumed effective authority. Upon Usman Pasha's death in 1909, she remained firmly in control, and her authority went unchallenged until her death in 1924. Adela Khanum was by all accounts a most remarkable woman and the authors of two classical books on southern Kurdistan, E.B. Soane and C.J. Edmonds, both of whom knew her well, write about her in the most admiring terms.[4]

Adela Khanum was not born into the Jaf tribe herself but hailed from the leading Kurdish family of the former principality of Ardalan in neighbouring Iran. Ardalan, with its capital at Sine (Sanandaj), had long been the major centre of Kurdish court culture, arts and literature in Iran. By the mid-nineteenth century, the principality had lost the last remnants of independence and the Kurdish family that had long ruled it had been deposed by the shah and replaced by a centrally appointed governor. Another noble Kurdish family, however, that of the *wazir*s or ministers of the rulers of Ardalan, had been able to maintain its position. Adela Khanum belonged to this family of *wazir*s; her father was a high official in Tehran. The Jaf tribe and the Ardalan principality had long been the most significant local powers on the Ottoman and Persian sides of the border, and several political marriages had been concluded between the leading families.

Usman Pasha was already the *qa'immaqam* of Shahrizur, and a widower, when he married Adela Khanum. She joined her husband at Halabja, the central village of the Jaf territory, and set up her household in the Persian aristocratic style, quite a change from the unsophisticated way of life to which Halabja had been used. Inviting craftsmen from Sine, she built two fine mansions in the village, the likes of which could not even be found in the proud town of Sulaimaniya. She had Persian-style wooded gardens laid out and transformed Halabja from a dreary dusty place into a pretty, green little town. She also had a bazaar built after her own design in Halabja, and she attracted merchants to the town (many of them Jewish), seeing to it that Halabja developed into a significant centre of trade. Due to Adela Khanum's efforts, the fame of Halabja spread far afield. She further changed the style of daily life of her environment by taking only Persian Kurds as servants and welcoming any visitors from across the border. Halabja came to mirror, on a more modest scale, the former splendours of Sine.

Soane, to whom we owe much of our information on Adela Khanum, first visited Halabja in the last years of Ottoman rule, in 1909. After having worked for a British bank in Iran for

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[3] Shahrizur is a district in present Iraqi Kurdistan, adjoining the city of Sulaimaniya to the south and east; Halabja is its chief town. Until the First World War it was, like the rest of Iraq, part of the Ottoman Empire and administered by a governor at Baghdad, who delegated authority to local chieftains. In the war it came under British occupation, which practically lasted until 1932 (from 1920 to 1932 Iraq was under British mandate).

[4] Ely Bannister Soane, *To Mesopotamia and Kurdistan in Disguise* (London: John Murray, 1912, 1926); C.J. Edmonds, *Kurds, Turks and Arabs. Politics, Travel and Research in North-Eastern Iraq, 1919-1925* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957).

several years, he set out on an adventurous journey through Kurdistan, disguised as a Persian.[5] Travelling overland from Constantinople, he chose Halabja as his final destination, attracted by Adela Khanum's fame and reputation. He was not disappointed. Thanks to his command of Persian and other useful skills, Adela Khanum requested him to stay and enter her service as her scribe. Thus he came to know both the situation at Halabja and the first lady quite well. He makes clear that Adela Khanum's ambitions did not end with her reshaping the physical and human environment; she also resolutely assumed the leading political role:

> Gradually the official power came into her hands. Uthman Pasha was often called away to attend to affairs, and occasionally had to perform journeys to Sulaimania, Kirkuk, and Mosul on matters of government. So Lady Adela, governing for him in his absence, built a new prison, and *instituted a court of justice of which she was president,* and so consolidated her own power, that *the Pasha, when he was at Halabja, spent his time smoking a water pipe, building new baths, and carrying out local improvements, while his wife ruled.* (Soane 1926: 219; emphasis added)

Lady Adela's husband, Usman Pasha, appears to have quite happily consented to her assertiveness; his subjects must have been fascinated by this strong-willed and urbane personality in their midst. The Ottoman authorities, perceiving an increase of Persian influence in their domains, were not amused but there was little they could do about it. They put up a telegraph line to Halabja, in order to improve their control of the place, but the Jaf objected and cut down the line. Adela Khanum told the Ottoman officials not to repair it, threatening that the wires would again be cut, and thus she managed to keep those improved communications and Ottoman control at a distance (Soane 1926: 220).

Another Englishman who came to know Lady Adela well, a decade later, was Cecil J. Edmonds, a political officer during the British occupation of Iraq. By that time she was a widow but remained, as Edmonds has it, "the uncrowned queen of Shahrizur".[6] She was one of those chieftains whom the British called "loyal". In 1919, when Shaikh Mahmud of Sulaimaniya rebelled and declared himself king of Kurdistan, Adela Khanum and her Jaf sided with the British — no love was lost between the Jaf and Shaikh Mahmud. The British administration later decorated her with an Indian title, "Khan Bahadur", but it is not clear whether she attached as much value to it as the British authors who refer to it.

The British appointed her son, Ahmad Beg, as the *qa'immaqam*, and it was through him that she continued to exercise her influence. That influence was drastically curtailed, however, for the British left the Kurdish rulers little autonomy. All local officials received their orders

[5] It remains unclear whether he undertook this journey merely out of private curiosity or in some semi-official capacity. In 1915, when Britain prepared to invade Ottoman Iraq, the expeditionary force recruited Soane for his excellent knowledge of Kurdish affairs, and in 1919 he was put in charge of the Sulaimaniya district. See the memoir on Soane by Sir Arnold T. Wilson in the 1926 edition of *To Mesopotamia and Kurdistan in Disguise*.

[6] Adela Khanum's royal bearing comes clearly across in the photographs of her in the 1926 edition of Soane's book and in Susan Meiselas' *Kurdistan in the shadow of history* (New York: Random House, 1997), pp. 75-77.

not from the *qa'immaqam* but directly from the (British) Assistant Political Officer who was stationed at Halabja. In calling Lady Adela an uncrowned queen, Edmonds must have thought of the constitutional and largely ceremonial royalty of his own country. Adela Khanum obviously did not take kindly to this curtailment of her powers, and the relations with the British were in the end rather strained. In 1924 she died, but even today she is still vividly remembered by the people of Shahrizur.

Earlier great women rulers

Adela Khanum's remarkable power and authority in this otherwise male-dominated society was of course to a large extent due to the prestige of her family, the *wazir*s of Ardalan. Without such a family background, and without a tolerant husband, it would be extremely hard if not impossible for a woman to achieve a position like hers. However, the anomaly of female leadership appears to be much more acceptable among the Kurds than in most other Middle Eastern societies. It is not hard to find other instances of women assuming the leadership of entire tribes. The first European to mention such a powerful Kurdish woman was probably the Italian traveller Pietro della Valle. Around 1620 della Valle and his Syrian Christian wife, having to flee from Baghdad, crossed into Persia near Qasr-i Shirin and were received hospitably on the other side of the border by a Kurdish female ruler, whom della Valle only names by her title, Khanum Sultan.[7]

In certain districts of Kurdistan, rule by women was in fact so common that it was explicitly referred to in the records of customary law (*qanunname*) compiled by the Ottomans. The great seventeenth-century Turkish traveller Evliya Chelebi, whose *Book of Travels* is one of our major sources on daily life in the Ottoman Empire in his time, noted this with some astonishment.[8] Such *qanunname*s were compiled for each Ottoman province upon conquest and underwent relatively minor revisions in the course of time. They contained all sorts of regulations on administrative and financial matters; in the case of the Kurdish provinces they also specified the nature and degree of autonomy of traditional Kurdish rulers vis--vis the Ottoman administration. Certain districts were administered directly by centrally appointed governors, whereas in others traditional Kurdish rulers continued to hold sway. In such autonomous principalities, succession to rulership remained within the family, even when for some reason the incumbent ruler was deposed by the central government. Government interference in such principalities took the form of recognizing one member of the ruling

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[7] Pietro della Valle, *De Voortreffelyke Reizen van de deurluchtige Reiziger Pietro della Valle, Edelman van Romen, in veel voorname gewesten des Werelts, sedert het jaar 1615, gedaan...* (Dutch translation, Amsterdam, 1664-65), vol. II, p. 76. It is not clear from della Valle's account where exactly this Khanum Sultan ruled. One cannot help thinking of the house of Ardalan, which boasted several powerful women prior to Adela Khanum, but Sine is too far from the border. She may have been a locally powerful person in the region west of Kermanshah, perhaps of the Guran confederacy.

[8] On Evliya Chelebi and his travels in Kurdistan see the introduction to Martin van Bruinessen & Hendrik Boeschoten, *Evliya Çelebi in Diyarbekir* (Leiden: Brill, 1988).

family rather than another. Evliya relates that the *qanunname* for Shahrizur contained provisions allowing succession by a daughter, and he observes that such succession was common enough and apparently quite accepted by the Kurds.[9]

Evliya heard tales of one particularly militant lady who had ruled over the dual principality of Harir and Soran (comprising the districts to the east and northeast of Arbil), not long before his visit. He may have embellished the narrative a little, as travellers are wont to do, but the lady was no doubt a real person:

> In the time of Sultan Murad IV [1623-40], the districts of Harir and Soran were ruled by a venerable lady named Khanzade Sultan. She commanded an army consisting of twelve thousand foot soldiers with firearms and ten thousand mounted archers. On the battlefield, her face hidden by a veil and her body covered with a black cloak, she resembled [the legendary Iranian hero] Sam, the son of Nariman, as she rode her Arabian thoroughbred and performed courageous feats of swordsmanship. At the head of a forty to fifty thousand strong army, she several times carried out raids into Iran, plundering Hamadan, Dargazin, Jamjanab and other considerable cities and returning to Soran victorious, loaded with booty.[10]

Two centuries later, in the 1850s, another combative Kurdish lady captured the European imagination. Newspaper reports on the Crimean war not only mention the famous nursing activities of Florence Nightingale but also the more warlike exploits of Kara Fatima Khanum ("Black Lady Fatima"), the female chieftain of a Kurdish tribe from Marash (present Kahramanmaraş in southeastern Turkey). Lady Fatima personally commanded a Kurdish contingent in this war, to prove her loyalty to the Ottoman state. She features prominently in *The Illustrated London News* of 22 April 1854, which devotes a long article and a full-page illustration to her arrival, with a large retinue of mounted warriors of her tribe, in Constantinople.[11]

According to this article, by the magazine's Constantinople correspondent, Kara Fatima Khanum's tribe (its name is unfortunately not mentioned) was one of the larger ones of Eastern Anatolia, capable of fielding four thousand horsemen. The original chieftain of this tribe, Lady Fatima's husband, had run into trouble with the Ottoman government and had been put in jail for reasons that remained unclear — the correspondent speaks of "sundry misdemeanours". From the day of her husband's arrest, Lady Fatima had acted as the chieftain of the tribe. It was in order to conciliate the Sultan and achieve the release of her husband that she had offered to join the Ottoman forces against Russia with three hundred of her best fighting

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[9] Evliya Chelebi, *Seyahatname (Book of Travels)*, vol IV, manuscript Bagdat Köshkü 308 (Topkapi library, Istanbul), fol. 372b. The description of Evliya's trip from Baghdad through southern Kurdistan, where these observations are made, is lacking in the printed editions of the *Seyahatname*.

[10] Evliya Chelebi, ibid.

[11] My attention was first drawn to this report by an article in a Kurdish journal published in Sweden, which summarizes the *London Illustrated News*: N. Medyalı, "Kürt aşiret lideri Kara Fatma Hanım İstanbul'da Osmanlı sultanı ile görüşüyor", *Berhem* no 5 (June 1989), pp. 25-27.

men.[12] Interestingly, Kara Fatima Khanum was chaperoned by her brother during this campaign, as the *Illustrated London News* also noted. It was not the brother, however, but Lady Fatima herself who clearly was in command.

An indication of women's equal rights among the Kurds?

Some Kurdish authors point to the existence of such women tribal chieftains and rulers as proof of the more equal position of women among the Kurds, at least in comparison with other Middle Eastern peoples. Several Kurdish nationalists have claimed that women originally had equal rights in Kurdish tribal society and only lost them due to domination by Islam or by the centralized imperial states of Iran and the Ottoman Empire. Ziya Gökalp, one of the founding fathers of Turkish nationalism (although he was of Kurdish extraction himself), made similar claims on behalf of the original Turkish tribes. More recently, the well-known Kurdish nationalist author Musa Anter published a short article titled "The Place of Women in Kurdish History", in which he asserted that traditionally there had always been a high degree of gender equality in Kurdish society.[13]

Anter's first sentence sets the tone: "From old books we gather that among the Kurds women were socially the equals of men." In the Islamic period, he continues, Kurdish women were not, like those of other Muslim peoples, forced to wear veils, nor were they socially separated from the men.[14] With the exception of a few feudal lords and aristocrats, moreover, Kurdish men were not polygamous. In the case of war between two tribes or two rulers, the women of both sides could quite openly bring ammunition, weapons and provisions to the warring men; no one would think of stopping them, let alone attack them.

The strongest proof of woman's equal position that Anter can think of is again the existence of female tribal chieftains. He mentions several, beginning with the famous Adela Khanum of Halabja and continuing with famous women from his own environment, the Mardin region in present Turkey. The most renowned of these was perhaps Perikhan Khatun, who led the Raman tribe until her sons were old enough to take over. The fact that her son Emin, who became a famous chieftain in his own right, continued to be known as Eminê

[12] I have not been able to discover whether the husband was actually released, but Lady Fatima allegedly did take her men into battle.

[13] In the Turkish-language weekly *Yeni Ülke* (published in Istanbul) no 33, 9-15 June 1991. There are more observations in the same vein in Anter's memoirs: *Hatiralarım* (Istanbul: Doz, 1990), especially pp. 31-6.

[14] This is another favourite claim made by many Kurdish authors. They seem to be supported by the observations of numerous foreign travellers. Pietro della Valle, for instance, reported in the early seventeenth century: "Their women go about in town with uncovered heads, and converse freely with all sorts of people, strangers and others" (*op. cit.* II, p. 72). In some parts of Kurdistan, however, strict segregation and veiling appears to have been the rule. Evliya Chelebi reports on Diyarbakir, which he visited in 1655, that apart from a few heavily veiled old women, no female would venture into the streets.

Perikhan rather than by his father's name, shows that Perikhan Khatun was perceived as more than just a caretaker for her deceased husband.[15]

Another powerful lady was Shemsî Khatun of the Omeryan tribe. She assumed chieftainship when her husband Mihemmed was murdered, and she remained in charge until her son, also named Mihemmed, had come of age. This son too, was named Mihemmedê Shemsê rather than Mihemmedê Mihemed.[16] Anter's last example is his own mother, Fasla Khatun, who led the Temika tribe for about forty years until her death in 1963. She was also, he believes, the first woman ever to become a *muhtar* (elected village head) in Turkey, for the simple reason that there was no trustworthy man left to whom she could delegate the job.

Anter somewhat deflates his own claims by observing that these women only became chieftains after their husbands' deaths, thereby implying that they owed their positions to their husbands alone. In other cases, such as those mentioned by Evliya Chelebi, ruling women ultimately owed their position to their fathers. There was always at least one powerful male in the background. I am not aware of any Kurdish woman of humble origins rising to high position by her own effort, whereas there are numerous examples of men who did. This having been said, however, we should not overlook the fact that all women rulers mentioned were known by their own names, not by those of their husbands or fathers. Usman Pasha of Halabja, in fact, was referred to as "Adela Khanum's husband". Another clear indication that these ladies overshadowed their husbands is the fact that their sons, as we have seen, were referred to by the mothers' rather than the fathers' names.

We may perhaps conclude that once a woman had reached high status — which was only possible by birth or marriage, and usually necessitated a combination of both — her gender was apparently not much of a handicap anymore. Even when there were men of equal status around, a woman of high status could by sheer force of character acquire a position of dominance. Kurdish men apparently did not deem it beneath their dignity to obey such a woman (and in this respect the Kurds may have been different from many other Muslim peoples). This only means, of course, that high birth may compensate for the disadvantages of female gender, and it is a fallacy to conclude, as some Kurdish authors do, that gender equality (or society's "colour blindness" to gender) extends beyond these special cases. Women of high status can commit with impunity what would be considered a grave offense in the case of ordinary women. This may be illustrated by the following two cases, one of which is historical, the other probably fictional.

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[15] See also the brief article (in French) on Emin and his parents by "Diya Ferzo" (a pseudonym of Celadet Bedirkhan?) in the Kurdish journal *Hawar* no. 40 (28 February 1942), p. 11. This article introduces a lament on the death of Emin's father, "Bavê Emîn," sung by the famous singer Meryem Khanum.

[16] More cases of Kurdish chieftains named after their mothers are listed in Rohat Alakom, *Li Kurdistanê hêzeke nûh: jinên Kurd* (Stockholm: Apec, 1995), p. 19.

Woman as the enterprising lover

The Yezidis constitute a non-Muslim religious community, living dispersed over large parts of Kurdistan and encompassing many different tribes. The Yezidis have a complicated caste-like system of religious specialists, the highest position in which is held by the descendants of a certain Chol Beg. Supreme authority over the entire Yezidi community is vested in a person with the title of *mîr*, who should belong to this family.[17] From 1913 to 1957 this position was de facto held by a woman, Mayan Khatun; it has often been said that she was the most powerful leader the Yezidis had in recent times. She rose to this position in spite of highly damaging rumours about her involvement in her husband's death.

Mayan Khatun replaced her much older husband Ali Beg, the previous *mîr*, who died an unnatural death under mysterious circumstances in 1913. There are various accounts of the causes of his death, and one of them involves an illicit love affair between Mayan Khatun and a chieftain of the Muslim Doski tribe, Safr Agha. The latter apparently was present in the house on the night when Ali Beg was murdered, and some malicious gossip had it that Mayan Khatun herself had at least connived in the act.[18] It is irrelevant for us to know what is true of the rumours; the important thing is that in spite of them, the Yezidi community accepted the widow, Mayan Khatun, as her son's guardian and the *de facto* ruler of the community.[19] When her son, Sa'id Beg, came of age she did not relinquish control; Sa'id was a weak man and she openly despised him. She continued as the guardian for her grandson Tahsin Beg, who is the present *mîr*. Until her death in 1957 Mayan Khatun remained firmly in control, and she won the admiration of all who met her. Sadiq Damluji, an Iraqi Arab and former Ottoman official, who had been been in regular contact with the Yezidi community for forty years, wrote about her in 1949:

> "She is wise, intelligent and far-sighted and is feared and respected by her people. Her power over them is such that none dare oppose her; everyone is awed by her presence and nervous when she is away. She is arrogant, proud and vain, but when one meets her the grandeur and nobility of her character shine through. (...)
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> She dislikes and despises the men in the princely family. Sly, deceitful and perfidious, she is capable of murderous cruelty to her adversaries.

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[17] The various "castes" are summarily described in C.J. Edmonds, *A pilgrimage to Lalish* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1967), pp. 27-37.

[18] Edmonds, *A pilgrimage*, p. 30. Other hypotheses on the perpetrators of the murder are mentioned in John S. Guest, *The Yezidis, a study in survival* (London: KPI, 1987), pp. 166-8.

[19] In fact, the rumours of Mayan Khatun's connivance in her husband's death are mentioned by various British authors (and may ultimately be derived from Yezidi informants), but not in any oriental source, including later Yezidi informants. (Cf Guest, *The Yezidis*, p. 167 and note 24 on p. 245). This suggests that the rumours, although initially circulating at least in certain circles, soon died out among the Yezidis. Mayan Khatun's son Sa'id Beg, incidentally, killed two of his five wives, apparently without any damage to his position as the nominal *mîr* (Guest, *op.cit.*, p. 180, after Sadiq Damaluji).

> At this time she is the effective ruler who gives and takes away, rewards and withholds, allows and forbids as she deems best. It is hard to imagine how things will be when she is dead, considering that she is approaching the end of her life and everything about her is old except her mind."[20]

A woman in Mayan Khatun's position and with her strength of character obviously is beyond ordinary categories of judgement. As said above, some contemporary British authors hint at her having an extramarital affair, in which the initiative appears to have been hers.

Powerful ruling ladies occur also in Kurdish folklore — a clear indication of their acceptance as a fact of life — and in the well-known tale of Zambilfirosh the lady makes very explicit sexual advances towards a good-looking married man.

> The chief protagonist of the tale is the man called Zambilfirosh, "Basket-seller", ostensibly a poor travelling craftsman selling baskets made by himself and his faithful wife. In reality, Zambilfirosh is the son of a powerful ruler, but had left the court and its luxuries after his first confrontation with death and misery, and had deliberately opted for a life of wandering without possessions.[21] After long peregrinations, Zambilfirosh and his wife arrive in the capital of a Kurdish principality. When the *khatun*, the leading lady of the town,[22] sees Zambilfirosh she at once falls in love. She sends for him to come to the castle and show his baskets; she at once declares him her love and proposes consummation on the spot. Zambilfirosh politely refuses: he is doing penitence and has moreover a family to look after. She offers him all her riches but he remains adamant. She holds him imprisoned in her castle but he escapes by jumping down from a tower. This loss of the beloved causes the *khatun* profound suffering. She cannot banish the image of Zambilfirosh from her mind, nothing else in the world holds value for her. She roams the town in disguise, finds at last Zambilfirosh' house and speaks with his wife. With deceit and generous gifts of jewels and money, the *khatun* persuades the wife to be absent for one night and to lend her her clothes. Zambilfirosh returns after dark, and the *khatun*, who has donned the wife's clothes, welcomes him lovingly and takes him to bed. Noticing a silver anklet on the woman's leg, Zambilfirosh suddenly realizes that this is not his wife. Recognizing the khatun, he jumps up and runs away, immediately followed by the *khatun*. Seeing that he cannot save himself from the *khatun*'s advances, he calls out to God and asks for his soul to be taken away from this world of

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[20] Quoted in Guest, *The Yezidis*, p. 185.

[21] The beginning of this tale is strongly reminiscent of Siddharta Gautama's discovery of suffering that set him on the path to Buddhahood. This theme has also been adopted in popular legends about the 8th century Muslim mystic from Khurasan, Ibrahim bin Adham, which in turn may have been the source for this element of the tale of Zambilfirosh.

[22] The title *khatun* is the female equivalent to the male feudal title *khan*. In some versions of the tale the *khatun* herself appears to be the ruler, in others she is the ruler's wife; but in none does the husband play any part.

> suffering. His request is heard, and he gives up the ghost. The *khatun*, upon reaching his body, is so grieved that she too dies on the spot. People buried them side by side.[23]

One remarkable aspect of this tale is the sympathy it shows for the *khatun*, although she is obviously a threat to the chastity of the male protagonist. Her burning passion for Zambilfirosh is described in terms with a distinct Sufi flavour, which emphasize a similarity to Zambilfirosh' spiritual quest. Both leave the palaces where they used to live, and both exchange their royal dress for humble garb in order to pursue their search of the Beloved. In the final scene, moreover, both in a way achieve the desired union.[24] Significantly, it is the *khatun* who is said to lie buried beside Zambilfirosh, not his wife. She deserves thus to be united with him, popular tradition seems to say, because of her disinterested surrender to passionate love.

Ordinary moral judgements, as applied by traditional society to common mortals, appear to have been suspended in the cases of these two high-placed and powerful ladies. The popular legend of Zambilfirosh is particularly telling in that the khatun's behaviour is not condemned as evil or immoral nor even presented as extraordinary. As well, in the case of Mayan Khatun, whatever rumours there were about improprieties on her part were apparently just disregarded by her followers. We should be mistaken, however, if we were to conclude from the Kurds' apparent tolerance in these cases that Kurdish society is equally broad-minded towards women in general.

What equality?

The insistence with which many nationalist Kurdish men claim that women already enjoy equal rights in Kurdish society often hardly veils what they really wish to say, namely that there is no need for women's liberation or emancipation. It is true that some women have achieved extraordinary influence in Kurdish society, but the vast majority of them have none. It is true that in some parts of Kurdistan women have a certain freedom of movement, perhaps more than in many other parts of the Middle East, but this is certainly not characteristic of all Kurdistan, and the nature and degree of this freedom moreover depend much on their families' social status. In a classic book on Kurdish women in southern Kurdistan, the Danish

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[23] After the synopsis given in A. Gernas, "Zembilfiroş", *Roja Nû* 33, 1992, pp. 10-14. Students of Kurdish oral tradition have recorded various versions of this tale in different parts of northern and eastern Kurdistan. The most complete versions were published by Oskar Mann (*Die Mundart der Mukri-Kurden*, vol. I, Berlin, 1906, pp. 275-284; German translation in vol. 2, Berlin, 1909, pp. 429-443) and by the brothers Ordîxan and Celîlê Celîl in their *Zargotina Kurda*, vol. I (Moscow, 1978), pp. 189-197. There exists a German translation of yet another version, in: Luise-Charlotte Wentzel (ed.), *Kurdische Märchen* (Düsseldorf: Eugen Diederichs, 1978), pp. 207-9. Zambilfirosh' grave is still pointed out in at least two places, near the town of Silvan (Farqin) in Turkey and near Batufa (east of Zakho) in northern Iraq, which indicates that both districts claim the tale as their own.

[24] In this respect the tale resembles certain Islamic variants of the tale of Joseph and Potifar's wife, *Yusuf and Zulaikha*. In these Muslim versions, too, Yusuf remains innocent, but Zulaikha's passion is raised to a spiritual level, which makes her a tragic and even heroic figure rather than an evil woman.

anthropologist, Henny Harald Hansen, observed that in aristocratic circles woman were subjected to an "elastically-practised seclusion" but were otherwise almost the equals of, or even dominated, their spouses. In more humble social circles and the rural environment, women had a greater freedom of movement but were much less the equals of their husbands.[25]

The leading women who were discussed so far all belonged to those aristocratic circles, and each of them owed her authority initially to her father or husband. Women from other social strata are not so easily accepted in leading roles. It happened in a few cases, such as that of Rabi'a Khan, the woman who became the head of the bakers of Sulaimaniya in the early 1920s, and who had a remarkable degree of authority over her colleagues, on whose behalf she dealt confidently with the local and British authorities.[26] Among the middle and lower strata of Kurdish society, women like Rabi'a were an exception rather than the rule however.

Musa Anter, whose article on women tribal chieftains and women's rights was quoted above, put his claims in another perspective, perhaps deliberately, by an ironic comment. Having pontificated on the respected position of women in Kurdish society, he adds that what brings women most respect is carrying out the sacred duty of bearing (numerous) children. "Just like a military officer is honoured for his insignia, so the Kurdish woman receives praise for the number of her children."

In a less humorous and far more angry voice, the Kurdish woman author, F. Karahan, took issue with the idle talk about woman's respected position.[27] In Kurdish society, like in many other traditional societies, Karahan argues, women are respected as mothers and wives but never as persons in their own right. The respect society grants them does not prevent women frequently being beaten up by their own male relatives (husbands, fathers, brothers, in-laws or even sons). The all-important concept of honour imposes many more restrictions on women's freedom than on men's.

The films of the late Kurdish filmmaker Yilmaz Güney, especially *Sürü* ("The Flock") and the prize-winning *Yol* ("The Road"), also paint a very grim portrait of women's position in northern Kurdistan. Silent, subjected and suffering, the women in these films, who do not belong to the privileged elite, have precious little control over their own lives. The fate of one married woman in *Yol* forms a sobering contrast to the liberated *khatun* in the tale of

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[25] Henny Harald Hansen, *The Kurdish Woman's Life: Field Research in a Muslim Society, Iraq* (Kobenhavn: Nationalmuseet, 1961).

[26] Edmonds, *Kurds, Turks and Arabs*, p. 86. Rabi'a sided with the British against Shaikh Mahmud and she ensured that there was a constant supply of bread in the town during the latter's uprising. In her case, the title Khan following her personal name does not indicate noble birth. She must have been a commoner, and the title was given her as a sign of respect only.

[27] F. Karahan, "Kürt kadını olmak: sosyo-ekonomik yapı içinde Kürt kadınının statüsü" (To be a Kurdish woman: the Kurdish woman's status within the socio-economic structure), *Deng* no 13 (Istanbul, July 1991). This writer is one of the pioneers of a recently emerging Kurdish feminist movement in Turkey. Under her own name, Fatma Kayhan, she has since the spring of 1996 published the bi-monthly Kurdish feminist journal *Roza*.

Zambilfirosh. Suspected of adultery during her husband's long imprisonment, she is locked up like an animal by her relatives, and upon the husband's return surrendered to him to be killed. In one of the most dramatic scenes of the film, the husband after long wavering decides against her death. Significantly, however, the director sees no way of letting her live, and he has her perish of other causes.

Women in the Kurdish national movement

The Kurdish national movement and the upheavals of the past decade and a half — the Iranian revolution, the Gulf Wars, the deliberate destruction of thousands of Kurdish villages, deportations, and terror — have had a dramatic impact on Kurdish society, and no doubt also on the position of women within it. To my knowledge, no one has yet attempted to chart the complex and perhaps paradoxical ways in which these events have affected women. Such a study will be fascinating, but it is well beyond the scope of this article. In the present context it deserves to be noticed, however, that we also find a few remarkable women playing leading roles in the nationalist movement. Just as in traditional Kurdish society, these women have remained exceptions, remarkable precisely because of the contrast with the powerless many.

One woman who was a significant force behind the scene in Iraqi Kurdistan during the 1960s was Mulla Mustafa Barzani's second wife Hamayl (the mother of Mas'ud Barzani). Hamayl Khanum owed her influence not only to her husband but also to the fact that she was the daughter of a chieftain of the powerful Zibari tribe. The Zibaris were traditional enemies of the Barzanis, and Mulla Mustafa had married Hamayl when a truce was concluded with these neighbours following a period of hostilities. The status of her family of birth gave her a certain leverage even towards her husband. In this respect she therefore stood in the tradition of the powerful ladies discussed above.

There was also a woman of a different type who played a highly visible part during the same decade. Her name was Margaret, and she became very popular as the first woman *peshmerga* (guerrilla fighter) of Kurdistan. She became a cult figure; photographs of her in *peshmerga* dress were for sale all over Kurdistan. People often referred to her proudly as proof of (once again) the equal position of Kurdish women. They usually neglected mentioning that Margaret was not Kurdish but belonged to one of the Christian minorities. Kurdish husbands and fathers did not allow their womenfolk to follow in Margaret's tracks.[28]

Regarding attitudes towards women, as in many other respects, the radical populist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) of Turkey may prove to represent a more significant break with the past than earlier nationalist organizations. The armed branch of the PKK, the ARGK, can boast a large number of young female guerrilla fighters and appears to be taking equality

[28] During the late 1970s and early 1980s there were for the first time a few Kurdish women *peshmergas*. In 1985 I met one of them, who had fought side by side with her husband for several years. She never acquired the fame and glamour associated with Margaret.

between the sexes seriously at least at this level. Party propaganda celebrates a number of women among its martyrs — some of them were killed in battle, others immolated themselves as a form of political protest, and most recently there have been a few suicide bombings of military targets by PKK women. Women's liberation has begun to figure prominently in the party's public discourse. The PKK chairman, Abdullah Öcalan, has repeatedly compared the oppression of women in Kurdish society to the national oppression of the Kurds and called for a double liberation.[29] The chairman's rather schematic, but apparently sincere, views on the women's question are undeniably having an impact among the rank and file of the party, though this shows more clearly in words than in practice.[30] Both men and women in the PKK have become more aware of traditional gender inequalities and frequently speak of women's liberation and equal rights, but the actual role patterns do not change that easily. There are as yet very few if any women in commanding positions in the ARGK. Joining the guerrilla represents for young women an alternative to marriage and the traditional serving and subjected role, but at the same time she enters a new set of unequal relations and a new stereotyped role.[31]

Women as modern political leaders

In the context of the present article, the PKK is not so much of interest for its possible contribution to the emancipation of Kurdish women in general as for the role played in it by one particular woman. Over the years, Abdullah Öcalan has had to face several challenges to his leadership, usually ending with the death or disappearance of the contenders. One of the most serious challenges to his position came from a woman, his own (ex-)wife Kesire Yıldırım. Kesire was one of the founding members of the PKK — she was the only woman in the group — and until 1988 remained a member of the Politburo. What exactly happened in the Politburo remains obscure, but by Öcalan's own admission, Kesire attempted to dump him as the chairman and to take his place. She only just failed. Then she escaped to Europe and in alliance with other dissidents attempted to establish an alternative Politbureau abroad.[32]

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[29] A collection of Öcalan's writings and/or speeches on position of women and women's liberation in Kurdish society was published as: Abdullah Öcalan, *Kadın ve aile sorunu* ("The question of woman and the family"), ed. by Selahettin Erdem (Istanbul: Melsa, 1992).

[30] See the interesting report by German femininist author Hella Schlumberger in her *Der brennende Dornbusch: Im verbotenen Land der Kurden* (Frankfurt am Main: Eichborn Verlag, 1991), pp. 240-320. Schlumberger interviewed Öcalan in Lebanon and travelled with a group of male and female PKK supporters, recording their ambivalent responses to her questioning.

[31] This is shown clearly in a book by a European woman who spent about a year with a PKK guerrilla unit and who gives a straightforward account of her experiences: Carla Solina, *Der Weg in die Berge: Eine Frau bei der kurdischen Befreiungsbewegung* (Hamburg: Nautilus, 1997). Although Solina appears to take party propaganda at face value, her notes on discussions with men and women in the guerrilla and her observations of daily life in the mountains are fascinating.

[32] Öcalan refers to these events in several interviews, rather explicitly in Schlumberger, op.cit., p. 250. The most informative, though biased, reports about this conflict and other PKK affairs are in a series of articles by

In this version of the conflict between Abdullah Öcalan and Kesire Yıldırım, the latter appears as a modern variant of the Adela Khanums, or rather the Maya Khatuns, of the past. Like most of the other women mentioned in this article, she may initially have owed her position of influence in the party, at least to some extent, to her husband but at one stage she appears to have become a credible alternative for him.[33] There are some differences, though: unlike those grand ladies of the past, Kesire did not have the benefit of a prestigious family background.[34] She started her political career as a student activist, like her male colleagues, all of whom were also of commoner background. Kesire also went further than her predecessors in openly attempting to oust her husband and to take over his position. She failed, but in the attempt she showed that the idea of a woman becoming a political leader by her own force has become conceivable.

The most remarkable story in this respect is that of Leyla Zana, who also started out as the wife of a Kurdish political leader but who outgrew her husband and became one of the most prominent Kurdish personalities in her own right. Of humble background, she was at the age of 14 married out to a distant relative almost twenty years her senior. Her husband, Mehdi Zana, was actively involved in Kurdish politics. In 1977, two years after their wedding, he was elected as the mayor of Diyarbakır, the first Kurdish nationalist ever to hold such an official position in Turkey. Immediately after the military coup of 1980 he was discharged from his office and put on trial for "separatism;" he spent the following eleven years in prison.

Leyla was 19 years old and had two young children when Mehdi was arrested; she spoke as yet little Turkish. She fought courageously for her husband, working with the lawyers in court, visiting him in jail, representing him to the press and foreign observers, speaking at public rallies. She learned good Turkish, became acquainted with the legal system and with politics, and learned how to handle publicity. The experience politicized and radicalized her, and she became very articulate on the Kurdish national question. By the time her husband was released, she had already become more of a public figure in Turkey than he had been. She had joined the first legal Kurdish party, HEP, soon after it was established in 1990 and she became one its primary vote attractions. In 1991, she was elected into parliament, and during the swearing-in ceremony she made many Turkish colleagues furious by adding to her oath a

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Ismet G. Imset in the Ankara English-language weekly *Briefing* during 1988 and 1989. The same author's later book, *The PKK: A Report on Separatist Violence in Turkey (1973-1992)* (Ankara: Turkish Daily News Press, 1992), appears to depend heavily on Turkish intelligence sources and should be used with great caution.

[33] Kesire lost out in the end, but not without making many people wonder to what extent Abdullah Öcalan's own rise to leadership had been due to her pushing, stimulating and assisting him.

[34] Her father, Ali Yıldırım, was a commoner, who had gained some power and economic benefits by siding with the Turkish state against the Kurdish movement in the 1930s.

phrase in Kurdish: "I have sworn this oath for the sake of brotherhood between the Turkish and the Kurdish peoples."[35]

Leyla Zana proved herself to be as outspoken in parliament as she had been in other forums before. In 1994, her immunity and that of five of her Kurdish colleagues was lifted, and they were taken from parliament straight to prison.[36] In a political trial in which she conducted her own defence, Leyla Zana was sentenced to 15 years imprisonment for alleged contacts with the PKK. Of all Kurdish political prisoners in Turkey, she is the one with the greatest moral prestige and she is probably the one who is best known internationally. In 1995 she was awarded the Sakharov prize. Newspapers sometimes refer to her as "the uncrowned queen of Kurdistan," and to Mehdi Zana as "Leyla Zana's husband." She has become a symbol world-wide of the Kurds' struggle for their national rights. Her growing popularity and moral standing make it likely that she may yet have a major part to play if there is to be a peaceful solution to the Kurdish question. Many of the Kurds who believe in armed struggle look to the ANC as an example of a movement that once was called "terrorist" but gained international legitimacy. The closest to Nelson Mandela that the Kurds have is not, of course, Abdullah Öcalan but Leyla Zana.

Conclusion

This paper has presented brief descriptions of women who have, throughout Kurdish history, attained high positions and have become the political, in some cases even military, leaders of their communities. Some Kurdish authors have asserted that these women rulers are evidence of gender equality throughout Kurdish society. While this assertion cannot be sustained, the achievements of these women must be recognized. The historical precedent for accepting women in leadership roles in Kurdish society can pave the way for women, like Leyla Zana, to work effectively today in those leadership positions.

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[35] The best study of the legal Kurdish parties in Turkey is: A. Osman Ölmez, *Türkiye siyasetinde DEP depremi* ("The DEP earthquake in Turkey's politics", Ankara: Doruk, 1995). The swearing-in incident, its background and implications, are discussed there at pp. 163-5.

[36] The best source on these developments is again Ölmez, *Türkiye siyasetinde DEP depremi*. See also the contributions by Gülistan Gürbey and Mark Muller in Robert Olson (ed), *The Kurdish question in the 1990s* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996).

Appendix

KARA FATIMA AT CONSTANTINOPLE
[The Illustrated London News, April 22, 1854]

Within the last month the forces of the Sultan have received an accession which has excited very great interest at the great focus of enthusiasm at Constantinople. The new ally is Kara Fatima Hanoum, whom our Artist has sketched as he witnessed her procession through the streets of Stamboul, accompanied by her 300 Kurdish horsemen. To understand fully their importance, it may be well to glance at the country whence they have been recruited. The eastern and southern parts of Asia Minor are the patrimony of wandering tribes, who to a fierce Musulman spirit unite a strong feeling of independence, and who are always ready to contest the authority of the Sultan, except when it is in real danger. A line drawn from
Sinope to Smyrna will mark the boundary of the regions which, totally subjected to the authority of the Pachas, furnish their contingent of Bashi-bozouks according to a regular militia law of great antiquity. To the south-east of this line the peninsula contributes no certain supply of men; and it is only on occasions like the present that the name of the Prophet or the love of plunder induces them to quit their plains and mountains, and venture into contact with civilised men. One of these tribes, said to be capable of furnishing 4000 horsemen, is under the guidance of the above woman, whose name, or rank, is expressed by the word "Fatima." Their home is in the mountains of Cilicia, and whether or not they are of kin to the ancient pirates, they certainly bear a strong moral resemblance. Three hundred of them set out from their stronghold; and their appearance at Scutari gave rise to the excitement which our Artist has depicted. The Queen, or Prophetess -- for she is endowed with supernatural attributes -- is a little dark old woman of about sixty, with nothing of the amazon in her appearance, although she wears what seems to be intended for male attire, and bestrides her steed like the warriors of her train. She is attended by two handmaids, like herself in masculine costume, and was brought across the Bosphorus, with a select band of followers, to a species of barrack in Stamboul. The Bashi-bozouks are beings of refined intelligence in comparison with these nomad of the Karamanian wilds, whose condition and numbers are unknown even to the Pachas of the province. Their arms are various, and seem to indicate a mode of warfare in which each man keeps the spoils he has won. Some carry the pistols and yatashan of the Albanian; here and there is a rifle that may have come from Birmingham, and a carved scimitar from the forges of Syria. One will carry a wooden club or mace, which he swings round his head, chattering his teeth, and gesticulating violently, as if to make up for the poverty of his armament by a display of ferocity. The long matchlock of the Affghan is not wanting, and individuals of the tribe are said to retain the bows and arrows of their remote forefathers. One account declares that conjugal affection has impelled the heroine to her perilous enterprise. Her husband is expiating sundry misdemeanours in a Candian prison, and Fatima, fearful that her entreaties would have little effect on the Sultan without some proof of her loyalty, has brought 300 of her best warriors to fight the

Muscovite, on the reasonable terms of eighty piatres a month, with tooth and stirrup money in every village they may traverse.
We understand that Fatima comes from Marash, a town of Kurdistan; on her arrival in Scutari, she was presented to the Sultan; and her appearance in the streets, followed by the Kurd cavalcade, and a large number of mules and camels bearing bags said to contain money for the pay of the troops, attracted immense crowds of people, especially women, at every point where she was expected to appear. Our Artist met her escort near the Seraskeriat, where her cavalry had been reviewed by the Minister of War. In the View is shown the outside of the Seraskeriat, with the pagoda gate. This wide space leads to the widest thoroughfare in Stamboul, and is a sort of Regent street for the Turkish ladies; the pathway is covered, and the shops are gaily painted. On the right lies the Mosque of Sultan Bajazet, better known by Europeans as the Mosque of the Pigeons; and myriads of these birds, which the Mahomedans hold sacred, are to be seen in the yard of the Mosque. Our Artist has shown Fatima and her cortège emerging from the grand Seraskeriat gates, and above the wall is een a portion of the great tower; the wall is painted blue, so that it sets off admirably the amphitheatre of Turkish women. Fatima's costume is described as a very dirty pelisee, with broad sleeves; dirty white trousers, and yellow boots; long pistols and a yataghan in her girdle; and in her hand, a lance, bearing as a pennant a darkish rag. Her head-dress was a long piece of white linen, wrapped all over and round the neck, but leaving the entire face visible. She wore no jewellery. Her charger, like those of her attendant cavalcade, was a sort of lean and ungroomed animal, of little blood, but with long, flowing mane and tail, and the bony head and inverted curved neck, which is characteristic of the Kurdistan steeds. By Fatima's side rode her brother, wearing an immense fez over his rolled turban, and covered, like every one of the suite, with a ragged cloak. Preceding them, a little on the left, and behind two gendarmes that opened the march, rode a very droll-looking fellow, playing on a little drum, stuck on the fore part of his saddle; with the accompaniment obligato of nasal singing and grimaces. His conical cap was identical with that we see on the head of the King's fools, upon our stage; it was made of fur, with something like a small fox's tail hanging from the top. This personage, our Artist afterwards learned, is the fool of Fatima, and serves, also, for her first musician. Around, before, and behind the cortège were persons to keep the road clear. Everywhere, Turkish women stood by hundreds. Such is Fatima and her cortège, who have recently laid their services at the feet of the Sultan.