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**On the Role of Eyth in Kurdish Literature**

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## ON THE ROLE OF MYTH IN KURDISH LITERATURE

by M. Emin Bozarslan

### Society and literature.

When studying or analyzing the role of myth in any literature one must first of all examine the role of myth in the society which has created the literature in question, since it is impossible to isolate neither literature in general nor any type or form of literature from the actual situation dominating that society or the social events which that society has lived through or is still experiencing. In other words: literature in all its forms and types and its important elements are mirrors reflecting the political, economic, social, cultural and psychological situation of society. No literature is isolated from the environment and conditions of society.

### Prehistoric man and the unknown forces.

We know that prehistoric man was unable to master nature and natural events. Nor could he understand or analyze the cause of natural events. Therefore he believed that there were different forces dominating life, nature, natural conditions and events. He believed that there existed two kinds of forces: good ones and evil ones. Prehistoric man felt the need of asking the good forces for help and support against the evil forces. This help was to be used as means of defense against the evil forces and the evil events emanating from them. It is possible to say that this belief and this need have become the basis of the role of myth in society as well as the role of myth in literature. Naturally, the Kurdish people, like all other peoples in the world, has experienced such stages in its long life from prehistoric time and onward.

To be able to know exactly how Kurdish society and consequently Kurdish literature was influenced by myth one must know a few things about the land of the Kurds and its natural conditions.

### The natural conditions of Kurdistan.

Kurdistan is mainly a mountainous country with many high chains, deep valleys and long, wide rivers and streams. It has a severe climate. In such a country many natural events will of course afflict man: deluges, earth-quakes, blizzards, thunderstorms, thunderbolts, attacks by wild animals and diseases of all kinds, to mention a few. In order to survive the Kurdish people had to fight against nature and its threatening events. In this fight the prehistoric Kurd created the idea of good and evil forces and began believing in them and arrange his life according to his belief. He had to get help from the good forces and thus had to appease them.

### Ehremen and Hurmuz.

During one period before Islam the Kurds believed in two gods. One was Ehremen who represented the evil forces, the other was Hurmuz representing the good ones.

The Kurds believed that the two gods were in a state of constant war. At the beginning of spring Hurmuz was the winner; the weather was warmer, the sun shone longer and earth gave out all the good things she had in her belly, the trees bore fruit, the water was abundant in the springs and streams, nature gave everything she had to man and animal. At the beginning of autumn Ehremen gathered his soldiers, made a counterattack and won the war **against** Hurmuz. The weather got colder, the sun disappeared and seldom shone, earth became hard and hid everything she had in her belly again. Water became ice, the leaves fell, it was snowy and stormy. This went on until spring, when Hurmuz won the war again. Every year this war continues and victory alternates between the two gods twice a year.

#### The Periyen - the "invisible spirits".

Before Islam came the Kurds also believed in another evil force, called peri (plural perian). According to this belief, the periyen exist all over the world; in the house and outside it, around villages and towns, near springs and streams, in forests etc. The "invisible spirits" are man's most dangerous enemy. They will strike, hurt and kill people. Sometimes a female spirit will fall in love with a human male, or a male spirit with a human female. Then they will take away reason from their beloved and marry him or her. Thus these human beings become insane. Because of this enmity of the periyen towards man and because of their unlimited power people were very frightened of them; too frightened to call them by name. They would call them "the invisible spirits" or "those who are better than us". Many Kurds, especially those who live in the country or in villages, still call them by those names. This belief which dominated the Kurdish society before Islam has been preserved long after Islam's arrival. This proves that the religions could not eradicate all traditions and beliefs in man's brain or in society.

#### Islam.

After the introduction of the Islamic religion there was a change in the concept of myths. The belief in the two gods Ehremen and Hurmuz was obliterated and man believes in one single god, Allah. Allah is the creator of all things, he makes everything, always well, he is the benefactor of man, especially of the Moslem. What about evil? Who created evil things? In order to answer that question Islam created Satan. There is on the one hand Allah who is the benefactor and on the other Satan, the malefactor of man. Man must obey Allah and follow his directions to be able to defend himself against Satan and escape his traps. This belief is an anonymous thought among all Moslem peoples. Thus this thought has influenced not only the Kurdish society but also the Arabic, Persian and Turkish societies. Islam is also widespread in Africa and Asia.

After this introduction of the role of myth in the Kurdish society we shall examine its role in Kurdish literature, a mirror of the Kurdish society and its situation.

### The dominating myths in Kurdish literature.

The use of the Kurdish language is strictly forbidden in Kurdistan and consequently also Kurdish literature and cultural activity, so it has been impossible to study scientifically any part of the Kurdish literature such as its myths; all scientific research into Kurdish matters is absolutely prohibited. But we can still say something about the role of myth in this literature. There exist two kinds; traditional myth which is prehistoric, and religious myth which came with Islam. Although the Kurds have accepted Islam and its ideas and beliefs, they have not lost their older traditions. Therefore traditional myth in its original forms dominates the anonymous Kurdish literature. This is the myth of the *periyan*. "the invisible spirits", "those who are better than us". They are everywhere, can do everything, good and evil, will steal anything, can take away a person's reason, make him or her insane and then marry him or her. They will change children with human beings if their own is ill. They can assume the form of a snake, a hare, a bird or a human being.

One example of the role of this myth can be seen in the short story "The invisible spirits" (by M. Emin Bozarslan, the Kurdish original published in 1981, by Invandrarförlaget, Borås, Sweden.) Here the people believe that the child is a changeling when it catches cold and develops tuberculosis. It is easy to understand the function of this myth as explanation for illnesses in a primitive society where people have never even heard of doctors and medicine. These conditions exist today in the villages of Kurdistan and the myth and the fear of the *periyan* are very much alive.

### Kurdish folk tales

During its long and hard life the Kurdish people has created many tales. All of these are anonymous and the myth of the *periyan* is reflected in them, since they are not religious legends. The role of the *periyan* is one of the most important common features in Kurdish tales. The hero usually owns a magic tinderbox or a little magic box. When he needs something or is in some kind of trouble he lights his tinderbox or opens his little box. Then two black *periyan* appear. One lies on the ground, the other reaches the sky; one arm reaches the west, the other the east. Their eyes glow and sparkle. They stand in front of the hero, demanding him: "Command us! Shall we precipitate the world or rebuild it?" - "No, you shall neither precipitate it nor rebuild it. Get me some food!" or "Solve this problem for me!" They do what he commands them to and then disappear. Sometimes the hero needs to enter the earth in order to pursue and kill his enemy or in order to find a remedy against the king's desire to marry his daughter or in order to liberate his beloved from his enemy or a *peri*. Then he will order his *periyan* to open the earth and make way for him there. Again they obey.

There are also many tales about the *periyan* who steal flour, bread, butter and meat from people's homes. These *periyan* are most active on Wednesdays. Therefore children must not be washed on Wednesdays. They might be seen by the *periyan* and

exchanged for their sick ones. Nor should clothes be washed in streams or lakes, since one might disturb the periyan who live there. They will then do evil things to people. The periyan like to wash themselves in calm waters and there one must not throw stones or anything smelling or tasting bad. A black snake must not be killed unless it attacks one, since it might be a peri. If one tries to kill it one might get killed oneself by the snake or another peri.

#### Iron - the best defence against the periyan

The Kurdish people who has created the myth of the periyan has also created a means of defence against them; iron. Since all periyan are very much afraid of iron they will not come near a place where there is iron. Thus one can defend oneself with a piece of iron. It is necessary to keep a piece of iron at home, especially in the room where food is stored. When bringing home flour from the mill one must place a piece of iron on top of the sack, or the periyan will steal it. To keep them away from the baby one must put a pin in its swaddling-clothes or place a piece of iron under its pillow. The baby's mother should also safeguard herself with a pin in her dress.

This means of defence is an interesting one. Why should the periyan be frightened by iron and not by any other material? Is there a connection between power and iron? Is power and force the only way to keep away the enemy? It is difficult to find an answer to these and similar questions. If the Turkish racist state had not put a ban on everything Kurdish, one could do very interesting sociological and ethnographical research in Kurdistan about the role of myth in society and literature. Perhaps one could find some answers to the questions then. Unfortunately no such research is allowed yet.

I have collected many Kurdish mythological beliefs and traditions. Just now I am writing short stories that reflect these. Because of the persecution and the oppression by the Turkish state I have not been able to do research about their sources. These short stories might be the starting point for some sociological research, once they are finished. As I have already pointed out, this hinges on whether the Kurdish people will be able to liberate itself or if there will finally be a democratic regime in Turkey who can change the state's traditional enmity against everything Kurdish. As for now in Turkey under the Fascist military junta, it is a penal offence even to pronounce the word "Kurdish".

#### Not only periyan

There are many other beliefs among the Kurds beside the belief in the periyan. Here are a few examples:

The house must not be cleaned in the afternoon or evening. If it is, one will be poor.

If one gives a piece of bread to a dog early in the morning, one will be wise.

If one opens the door of the house early in the morning, throws out a little water and leaves the door open, one will have luck.

Females who have brothers must not wear clothes with burnt holes in them. If

they should do so, something evil might befall the brother.

When a divorced person or a widow or a widower remarries, the neighbours must put pieces of onion under their own pillows during the wedding-night so as not to be divorced themselves.

To marry in the month of May brings bad luck, since May says: "I am the only bride, I will not accept another bride beside me."

These are just a few examples of the many Kurdish mythological beliefs whose roots are impossible to trace.

#### Religious myths in Kurdish literature

The religious myths were created by Islam and they were created and accepted because of hard living conditions and ignorance. They appear as demands for help from God, the Koran and holy relics. The help is asked for via the Moslem priest, the "mela". He represents Islam and can transmit the help from holy sources. He can read and understand the Koran for instance. This is still a very important task in the primitive Kurdish village where people still believe in the power of religion and in myth. Two examples can be seen in the short stories I have written about the role of religious myth in Kurdish society, "The jaws of the wolf" and "The malaria amulet" (in "Meyro", Kurdish original, by M. Emin Bozarslan, Invandrar-förlaget, Borås, Sweden, 1981). They reflect the hard economic and cultural conditions of the Kurdish farmer. In "The malaria amulet" he has got tuberculosis but no one understands this. People believe he has malaria and they know of one remedy only, to see the "mela". When a man comes from a town and tells them that it is a case of tuberculosis, they use phrases from the Koran to protect themselves from it.

In "The jaws of the wolf" the situation is a similar one. The old woman who is the owner of a lost cow has only one way out, to go to the "mela" in order to tie up the jaws of the wolf, but the attempt is without success. In these two stories religious myth shows. In the third short story, "The invisible spirits", on the other hand, traditional myth appears. When the baby falls ill, the ignorant mother only knows one thing to do, namely to see the old woman and follow her instructions. The periyen have exchanged children with her.

#### Kurdish fables

When studying the role of myth in literature one cannot overlook the fables. They have a prominent place in Kurdish literature. Some of them are similar to European ones, but the majority are original, created by the Kurdish people and anonymous like all the world's fables. They have a moral ending concerning man's social, economic or psychological problems; a feature common with all other fables in the world.

There are also some Kurdish fables where those who do wrong to others are punished, such as this one:

Once upon a time, a long, long time ago, there was a tradesman. He bought wheat, measuring it with a big, deep, wide scoop and sold wheat, using a small, shallow, narrow scoop. He was asked several times to use the same scoop when selling as he did when buying, but he would not listen. Finally God got angry with him and changed him into a turtle. God changed the big scoop into a top shell and the small one into

a bottom shell and put him in between the two. That is how the turtle was created.

Another fable of the same type is this:

There was a very rich nobleman who had lots of wheat. One winter a widow came to him asking him to sell her some. Her children cried from hunger. She had no money, but in the summer she would work and then pay him the money she would owe him or else she would work for him on his fields. The nobleman then offered her some wheat for free, if she would only take off her pants and climb a ladder to his roof while he stood below and looked. She refused and went back home. There her children cried for bread, so finally she could not stand it any longer. She went back to the nobleman and accepted his conditions. When she climbed up the ladder, sad and crying, he looked at her from below, laughing loudly. When she climbed down, he looked and laughed again. God got angry with the nobleman and turned him into a stork. That is why the stork is always looking upwards, saying "lak-lak-lak-lak".

When I was in my country Kurdistan I collected many Kurdish fables. Since Kurdish books are forbidden there I could not publish them. In Sweden I have written down three collections of fables and I am working on two more. The first collection is being printed now and the other two will appear in the autumn. I am also planning some short stories dealing with the belief in myth in Kurdistan.

#### Melayê Cizîrî and the myth of him

The first author who comes to people's minds when one speaks of Kurdish literature in Kurdistan is Melayê Cizîrî. He is the greatest Kurdish poet and thinker and a myth has been created around his person, life, poems and love. His name was Enmed, but because he was a "mela" in the famous old Kurdish city Cizîr, he is called Melayê Cizîrî (meaning The Mela of Cizîr). Cizîr is situated near the present borders of Iraq and Syria, in northern Kurdistan, that is, that part of Kurdistan which has been a Turkish colony since 1925. During the feudal period Cizîr was the capital of the principality of Botan and an important centre for Kurdish culture and science. Melayê Cizîrî lived and died there. His grave is there, in a school called "The red school". It is not known when he was born or when he died or how he lived, but because of the names of poets and princes and some events mentioned in his poems we know that he lived in the 16th century. Since his poems are the most wonderful ones in Kurdish poetry, there soon arose a great myth around his person. In Kurdistan the tale goes that he saw a heavenly light between the eyebrows of the prince's bride one day. He fell in love with her and began to write poems about her and the light between her eyebrows. He is said to have gone close to the palace every day. There he sat down outside the bride's room, leaned his back against a big stone and recited his poems. Because of his ardent love his back was so hot that the stone became as glowing as the stone used for baking bread. A woman in the neighbourhood discovered this and put her dough nearby. When the poet had finished reciting and left, she baked her bread on that stone. This happened every day. Another tale says that the prince lost his patience with the poet when it became generally known that he courted the prince's bride. The prince had him even-



cuted. With a sword the executioner severed the poet's head from his body. But the poet took his head in his hand and went on reciting his poems. After some time, however, he realized that it is impossible to escape one's fate and he lay down and died.

These tales about Melayê Cizîrî are still told in Kurdistan, so one can say that he became a myth himself. His collected poems, all of them in Kurdish, have been printed in Arabic characters in Germany (1904), in Russia, in Istanbul (1919) and in Syria (1958). I transcribed this collection of poems into Latin characters and translated it into Turkish in order to publish the Kurdish original and the Turkish translation side by side. After the military coup in Turkey in 1971, Turkish police occupied my home, searched it and arrested me. My books and manuscripts were confiscated, among them this manuscript ready for print. I believe it was burnt, since that military junta, like the present junta, had a policy of burning books objectionable to them. I am planning to do the work all over again in Sweden, although it will take long time.

#### The myth of Feqiyê Teyran

Another current myth has been created around the Kurdish poet Feqiyê Teyran who also lived in the 16th century. He was from Muks, a village in northern Kurdistan. He wrote religious poems and a famous epic poem called "Şêxê Sananîan" (The priest from Sanan). But most of his poems are about nature - water, plants, flowers and birds. Therefore people in Kurdistan believe that he could talk with water, plants and birds. The Kurds still say that his poem "Listen, o water!" was written for the water of the stream. The poet asks the water: "Where dost thou come from and whither dost thou go? Whose command dost thou obey? Wherefore dost thou run so quickly and always without pausing?" The water replies: "Though many prophets came to this world no one ever asked me such questions. Wherefore dost thou ask?" "Because those prophets had wisdom and needed not to ask. But I have none and therefore I ask", says the poet.

Feqiyê Teyran also wrote "Qewlê Hespê Reş" (The speech of the black horse), a book of poems which has vanished.

#### The role of myth in "Mem and Zin"

We now come to the best-known epic tale, "Mem and Zin" or "Memê Alan" and the role of myth in that tale. It is an anonymous Kurdish popular tale created on the name "Memê Alan". No one knows when it originated or began to be told. It starts with one myth, continues with another and ends with a third. The city of Mikhurzemin where the epic starts is also a mythic one.

Near Mikhurzemin there lives a maiden. One day three riders come on gray horses riding across the sea towards her. They say that they are the messengers of happiness and longing and they take her with them on a gray horse back over the sea. Halfway across the maiden feels thirsty. The riders lower her down to the water's surface. She drinks three handfuls and the foam of the sea fecundates her. The riders bring her back and leave. After nine months she bears a son through her

mouth. She leaves her son by the sea out of fear for her good name. One day the ruler of the city, Alan, walks by the sea and he finds the boy. Since he is childless he is delighted. He regards the boy as a gift from God, takes him to his palace and makes the boy heir to the throne. The boy, who is called Mem, grows up to be a handsome young man.

In the city of Cizîra Botan there is a very beautiful girl named Zin. She is the daughter of Prince Zeydin, the ruler of the city. One day when she is walking in the garden she feels tired, lies down and falls asleep. Then three doves come flying. They are in reality three "periyan"; a mother with her two daughters. They decide to take Zin to Mem to see which one of the two is the more beautiful. Zin is taken to Mikhurzemin and placed in Mem's bed. Zin and Mem fall in love and exchange rings. Then the doves bring Zin back to her father's palace. Mem rides to Cizîra Botan to find Zin. Near the city he meets another girl named Zin, who is the daughter of one of the Prince's men. She has divined Mem's arrival by auguring in a handful of sand. When he comes riding, she stands on the road waiting for him. She says she is Zin who is waiting for him. Mem is not sure, but his horse tells him this is not the right Zin. Mem rides on and finally meets the right Zin. The other girl's father, Bekir, prevents their marriage and makes the Prince imprison the lovers. Mem dies in prison, and Zin, too. But before Zin dies she asks her father to bury her dead body in Mem's grave, with her back against Mem's. Her father does as she has requested. Mem's friends who have arrived after his death open his grave to see if he is really dead. There they find Mem and Zin resting breast to breast. Mem and Zin have turned to each other after death and now everyone realizes that their love was a holy one. On the grave there grow two roses. One of Mem's friends takes revenge on Bekir and beheads him near the grave. One drop of his blood falls on the grave between Mem and Zin. Out of this drop of blood there comes an ever-growing thorn which prevents the two roses from intertwining.

This epic is famous in all Kurdistan. People listen with joy to the professional story-tellers or to the many professional ballad-singers who sing it as a love-song.

Practically every Kurd knows this tale, all old men and women do. This means that the Kurdish people who has created it has also kept it alive, generation after generation. This epic has been printed in the Soviet Union, in the Lebanon, in Sweden in Finland and in Turkey. In Turkey the book is banned by the authorities.

#### "Mem and Zin" by Ehmedê Xanî

Ehmedê Xanî (Ahmed Khanî) is one of the greatest Kurdish poets and thinkers. He is regarded as the father of the idea of a Kurdish national state. He resisted the Ottoman and Persian empires and their fight for the hegemony over Kurdistan. This fight went on for many years, but since neither part could come off victorious they made a deal and Kurdistan was divided between the two empires in 1639. Although Kurdish princes ruled Kurdistan autonomously, Xanî resisted the empires and urged the Kurdish people to liberate their country and found an independent,

national Kurdish state. He writes that there is only one way to achieve this, namely struggle, and to be able to struggle the Kurdish people must unite and collect their strength. Xani lived in the 17th century. We know that the idea of national states did not begin to spread in the world until one century later with the French Revolution in 1789. From that one can understand how advanced Xani's thinking was.

Xani has written a very important book of poems about Mem and Zin, also called "Mem and Zin". This book was completed in 1695. It consists of 60 parts and 2654 couplets. Since three parts in the beginning of the book (parts 5, 6 and 7) deal with the national idea, saying that the Kurdish people must liberate itself and create a state for itself in Kurdistan, this book is regarded as the Kurdish national epic. It has been published in its whole in Istanbul (1919), in Syria (1947), in the Soviet Union (1962) and parts of it have also been published in Germany. In 1966 it was republished in Istanbul. I had transcribed the book from Arabic into Latin characters and also given a Turkish translation parallel with the Kurdish original. Half of the edition of 6000 copies had been distributed when police stormed into the printing office and confiscated the remaining 3000 copies. These were burnt. In 1975 I managed to have the book published again in Istanbul, but under the emergency powers act of 1976 the book was banned, and so it still is.

This is Xani's relation of Mem's and Zin's love and their dramatic adventures. In the old time there lived two young men in the Kurdish capital Cizîra Botan. Tacdin was the son of the prince's counsellor and Mem was the son of the prince's secretary. They were intimate friends and almost always together. Mem, Tacdin and Tacdin's two brothers, Arif and Çeko, were the prince's men. The name of the prince was Mîr Zeydin. They were strong, fearless warriors and everybody feared them. No one dared to resist them.

Mîr Zeydin had two sisters who were the most beautiful young women anyone had ever seen. The elder of them was called Sîtî and the younger Zin.

The Kurdish New Year, "Newroz" (new day), came and all people went out of the city to gather in gardens and celebrate in the traditional way. Tacdin and Mem dressed in women's clothes and went out to mix with the girls to be able to choose brides without being noticed. Sîtî and Zin happened to get the same idea. They disguised themselves as young men and went to mix with the men. On their way out of the city the four young people met and they looked at each other. Tacdin and Sîtî fell in love at first sight and so did Mem and Zin. Tacdin and Mem were so agitated that they lost consciousness and fell to the ground. Sîtî changed her ring for Tacdin's, Zin changed hers for Mem's. Then the girls went back to the palace, not feeling well. Their governess was very surprised and asked the reason why they returned so early. They told her that they had fallen in love with two girls and were heart-broken. The governess said that it was impossible for girls to fall in love with girls, but they insisted and

showed her Tacdin's and Mem's rings. She took the rings and went to see a sorcerer who looked in sand and saw Tacdin with Siti and Mem with Zin. He told the governess that the strange girls were two young men. The governess then disguised herself as a doctor and went out in the city to see if she could get a chance to offer her services to two unknown, sick young men. She was soon taken to Tacdin and Mem by some of their friends. She talked to them in private, telling them that the two young men they had fallen in love with were Siti and Zin who had also fallen in love. The governess returned their rings and took Siti's and Zin's rings with her when she left, so as to avoid a scandal.

Tacdin sent some high dignitaries as wooer's proxies to Mir Zeydin. He asked for Siti's hand and that was granted by the prince. Tacdin and Siti were married. Then Mem and Zin waited for their turn. But troubles came. Their secret love became known. Bekir, the prince's chief steward, hated both Tacdin and Mem. He was a very cunning man. He told the prince that Tacdin had begun to be too independent after marrying the prince's sister and had promised Mem to give away Zin himself. Mir Zeydin got very angry but there was no proof of infidelity.

One day the prince went hunting outside the city, accompanied by all his men. But Mem said that he was too ill to go with them and went into the palace garden. There he met Zin. Oblivious of time they talked and entered the palace and sat in the prince's reception-room. In the evening Mir Zeydin returned. He and all his men entered the room. Mem hurried to hide Zin in his cloak and did not rise when the prince approached him. He claimed that he was ill and could not recall how he had come there. The prince asked him jokingly if he had hunted something in the garden. Mem replied that he had hunted the most beautiful gazelle in the world. From that Tacdin understood that he had met Zin, and he explained that Mem was too ill to know what he was saying. He went close to Mem who showed him Zin's braids through the sleeve of his cloak. Tacsin ran home, set fire to his house and cried for help. When the prince and all his men ran to put out the fire Zin had free passage back to her room.

After some time this adventure became generally known and Bekir told the prince about it. When he asked Bekir for advice, Bekir told him to play chess with Mem. If Mem lost, he must tell the prince the name of his beloved. The prince sent for Mem and said he wanted to play chess with him. If Mem should lose, he would have to do what the prince requested him to; if he should win, then the prince would do whatever Mem requested. Mem won three times. Bekir saw that Zin was watching the game through the window behind Mem and said that the players must change places after three games. When Mem saw Zin he lost six times in a row. The prince then requested to know the name of Mem's beloved. Bekir provoked Mem by saying that he knew her; she was a pitch-black girl. Mem denied this vehemently, called Bekir a liar and revealed that Zin was his beloved.

After one year Tacdin sent a message to the prince, asking him to release Mem or to send Bekir to Tacdin. When Bekir heard of this he asked the prince to let Mem marry Zin. Their love was true love and Mem was so ill that he was sure to die anyway. That would be the solution of the problem.

Mir Zeydin went to see Zin. He pitied her and said that she was free to go and release Mem and marry him. Zin went to the prison and saw Mem. But he was very weak and died there. Before he was buried Tacdin killed Bekir. Their two graves were close to each other.

Zin asked the prince to be buried in Mem's grave when she died. Three days later she was also dead. Mem's grave was opened and Zin was placed beside Mem. "Mem, you have got Zin now", said the prince. Mem's corpse replied: "Hail, hail, hail!"

There were two trees on their grave growing towards each other. People believed they would soon reach each other. But on Bekir's grave there grew up a high tree that bent and grew impenetrable between the two trees on Mem's and Zin's grave, preventing them from ever uniting.

That is Elmedê Xani's "Mem and Zin". The difference between that and the popular epic "Memê Alan" is quite great. The role of myth is less prominent in Xani's work.

With "Mem and Zin" I shall end my presentation of the role of myth in Kurdish literature. I thank you very much for your interest and attention.

M. Emin Bozarslan

Kurdish writer

The invisible spirits<sup>+</sup>

M. Emin Bezarslan

It was summer. The heat of the July-sun melted the human brain. Not a living soul could be seen outdoors, not even chickens or cats. In this heat Zelxê<sup>^</sup> washed clothes by the stream. The warmth of the sun and from the fire under the washing tub made her sweat. She had already been sweating profusiously so that she now was thoroughly wet, as if she had been soaked in water. The sweat was still pouring from her body. Although there was a tree in the immediate vicinity, under which Zelxê<sup>^</sup> could have made a fire, it was still a bit too far from the water. In order to avoid the inconvenience of carrying water she had made a fire near the stream.

Zelxê<sup>1</sup> had lain her three months old baby in the shade of a willow-tree. The tree and the running water were rather refreshing. The baby was wrapped in swaddling-clothes. It began to cry in the afternoon. Zelxê<sup>^</sup> left the wash and rushed to the infant. She took it to her breast while unbuttoning the blouse and cooed soothingly to the child as she fed it.

- Oh, oh .....are you hungry, my heart bleeds for you.

As soon as the child felt her nipple in its<sup>1</sup> mouth it stopped crying, and it suckled the mother's breast with robust appetite.

When Zelxê<sup>^</sup> had fed her child, she opened the wraps and cleansed it. Without wrapping the infant she left it on the outspread cloth. The child now satisfied fell asleep immediately in the cool shade. Afraid of wakening it she did not bother with the wraps again. Zelxê<sup>^</sup> left the infant and returned to the wash.

■ In Kurdistan people believe in trolls, the names of which they dare not mention. The literal meaning of the title above from Kurdish would be "those, which are better than us".

Some days later the child became ill. Each day it languished more and more, as if it was melting away and perspired as well. The mother thought that this was the effect of the warmth. Eventually it developed a cough and started to vomit. Even the facial colour darkened for each passing day. Finally it began spitting up blood. Traces of blood showed up in it's excrement.

In the village there lived a wise woman, who was called "Aunt Xecê" by the villagers. She was midwife and people believed that she had a real knowledge of medical treatment. Zelxê brought her child to Aunt Xecê, who after examining it was perplexed and asked Zelxê:

- Why has the baby turned so dark ?

Zelxê answered with a sad and troubled voice:

- I swear in God's name that I don't know, Aunt Xecê ! I also became confused when the child changed colour.

- Yes, the languishing is a result of the illness, but I don't know why the baby has become dark. It actually looks roasted.

- Oh, oh, my child who was like a gold nugget. I can't understand what has happened to it.

Aunt Xecê looked at the child again and pondered. Then she asked the mother:

- Have you ever left your baby alone ?

Zelxe tried to remember.

- No, I swear by the head of Şêx<sup>x</sup>. The child has always been with me.

- You left it perhaps while baking or washing ?

Zelxê tried again to remember.

x Şêx = islamic, religious leader for a special sect

- Aha! You're right. Some time ago I was down by the stream and washed. I put the baby in the shade of a willow-tree, but it was not far away.

- How long was it left there ?

- From morning till afternoon, until I had finished washing. The baby woke up once, I fed it and let it sleep again.

Aunt Xecê took a posture which implied that she knew:

- Hmm! The invisible spirits have exchanged your child. You, idiot, you donkey! Didn't you know that the spirits are always to be found by the streams during the summer ? I've said at least a hundred times that you shouldn't go away from your children. But, what's the use! It's like you haven't any brains. On top of that you bring the child down to the stream and place it in the shade of a tree. Then you calmly do the wash. I don't know what I should say to you.

Zelxê gave the child an icy glance.



Aunt Xecê continued:

- The invisible spirits look out for children, who are well looked after and healthy. When they see, that the children are alone, they exchange them for their own sickly, undernourished, ugly ones and disappear.

Zelxê tried to recall what the child looked like before. Without wanting her eyes clouded and she began to weep. With a tearful voice she begged:

- Isn't it possible for me to be able to see and rescue my child from the hands of the invisibles ?



Aunt Xecê thought and thought. Once more she took a posture of complete knowledge. She then said:

- There's one possibility, but I'm not sure if it's feasible. You take the child down to the stream and leave it where you had placed it earlier. Then you hide somewhere in the vicinity and wait a while. If the invisible spirits, who have exchanged your child happen to be there and see their own baby alone and abandoned and if they have longed for it and feel compassion, they might exchange the children again.

If no, there's no hope.

Zelxê, her eyes brimming with tears, took her child and returned to the stream. She did exactly as Aunt Xecê had told her to do. She waited till the evening. Finally she went to the child and saw, that it was cold as if it had been dead for ages. She screamed a lament and began wailing, not because the child was dead as much as the utter hopelessness of the tragic turn of events. The invisible spirits would never return her child now that their baby was dead!

Zelxe walked straight home to Aunt Xecê and laid the body before her.

Aunt Xecê said after a moment's reflection:

- The invisible spirits have taken the life of the child. The enemies of the child's mother must certainly have been there.

There exists hostility among spirits as well as among people. Some of the spirits saw their enemy's child alone there and probably didn't know about the exchange. They smothered it by putting their hand over it's mouth.

Zelxê exclaimed:

- My child is lost, lost ! I'm blind with tears. I wish my feet had been broken so that I hadn't been able to walk down to the stream that unfortunate day.

Aunt Xecê tried to console her.

- Yes, your baby is lost, but don't be anxious. You are young and fertile. God will fill the emptiness caused by the loss of your child.

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## The jaws of the wolf

M. Emin Bozarslan

Aunt Zero's cow had disappeared. She had searched for it in the whole village and in the surroundings, but in vain. She had neither found the hide nor the carcass of the cow. The village shepherd swore that "the cow had neither been left behind in the fields, nor had it strayed from the herd".

Aunt Zero however did not believe a word of what the shepherd said. She was certain that if the cow had followed the herd to the village, it should have found it's way home. Every evening when the herd returned the cow used to come directly to the house with it's calf bellowing. But since yesterday evening the cow had vanished.

Aunt Zero was afraid that something had happened to her cow. She told herself that "the cow has surely been left in the fields. It has probably become a spoil for the wolves or been stolen".

The calf also longed for it's mother. It behaved sullenly with it's head hanging. It bellowed in vain in the stable.

Aunt Zero was distressed about the cow's disappearance and suffered with the calf. Each time the calf bellowed, it made her heart ache.

For Aunt Zero there was only one hope left: to tie the jaws of the wolf through the <sup>x</sup>Mela's extensive spiritual capacity.

Encouraged by this prospect she walked straight home to the Mela and at the same time she imagined how the cow had fallen from a precipice and broken a leg and could not raise itself again. If a wolf would find it in that state it was bound to be torn into pieces, she feared. If however the Mela would bind the jaws of the wolf, the cow would not be injured by the wolf.

The woman contemplated this while walking with swift steps to the Mela's house. She was barefoot like all the other women in the village, but she did not care about it. She did not even think of getting a splinter in the foot or that she could tread on a serpent. Her only concern was her cow. It dominated all her thoughts.

x Mela = Kurdish word for an islamic priest.

The Melâ had recently returned home from the evening prayers in the mosque. He had prepared himself for bed. He had taken off his turban and put on his nightcap. He sat in repose and smoked the last cigarette of the day. His wife sat near the cradle and fed the child before putting to sleep. The other children were asleep near the wall behind the door, two boys in one bed and two girls in the other.

Aunt Zero entered through the halfopen door. The Melâ's wife saw her, but under the dusky lamplight she could barely recognize Aunt Zero. She immediately noticed the distressed look on Aunt Zero's face. Without standing up she uttered:

- Aunt Zero, welcome! Please sit down!

Aunt Zero answered with a sad and weary voice:

- Thank you, sister.

The Melâ heard their voices and turned to the door. He looked sharply at Aunt Zero with wrinkled forehead. It was obvious that the arrival of Aunt Zero at bedtime irritated him. He thought that she had come to spend the evening with them. Therefore he said with some reticence:

- Welcome, Zero. How are you?

Aunt Zero let down the apron which was wrapped around her waist. She walked up to the Melâ's wife and stood beside her and answered:

- Thank you, Seyda<sup>x</sup>. It's as usual. We drag ourselves along!

You know about our situation. Never ending worries, worries and now my cow has gone astray. Since the daybreak I've searched through the whole village and in the fields, but in vain, no cow to be seen. You could almost think that the ground has swallowed it. I don't know, whether the wolves have eaten it or thieves have taken it or if it has fallen down a steep slope.

Both the Melâ and his wife looked at her, their eyes brimmed with compassion and said:

- Oh! We hope that nothing has happened to the cow. Why should you suffer this misfortune, you of all people?

Aunt Zero sighed deeply and said:

- The bird flies around and around, but finally it always settles in the poor man's cornfield.

x= Seyda: a person who has a great knowledge of religion.

The Melâ took a deep puff on his cigarette and asked:

- What does the shepherd say then?
- God will take care of him. That devil swears a hundred times that the cow wasn't left behind in the fields and that it joined the herd returning to the village. But I'm absolutely sure that he is lying. If the cow had followed the herd it would have come straight home.
- God help you, Zero! What else can we do but pray for you!

The Melâ's wife saw that the child had fallen asleep. She slowly drew away her breast from the baby's mouth and then turned to Aunt Zero.

- Aunt Zero, please sit down! Why are you still standing?

Zero glanced at the Melâ and sat timidly down. After that she said to the Melâ:

- I have come to ask you to bind the jaws of the wolf. If the thieves have stolen the cow, then it's probably lost. But you don't give up hope in God. Maybe the cow has fallen somewhere and finds itself in distress. If so it will at least not become food for the wolves.

Aunt Zero's words made the Melâ glad. But he did not show his satisfaction.

- Do you mean that we shall bind the jaws of the wolf?
- Yes, that's what I wanted to ask you. But I cannot pay you now. God knows, you know too, that I have nothing in my hands. The hard times after a long winter are here. With the help of God I'll pay you as soon as I can start selling my butter.

The Melâ did not show his satisfaction this time either.

- The fee doesn't matter! The most important thing is that God saves your cow from a calamity.
- But indeed, the fee is important! The old people don't say without cause that "unpaid nivist<sup>x</sup> doesn't bring luck to the owner". I accept your fee "over my head and eyes"<sup>x</sup>.

The Melâ stood up at once to interrupt the dialogue and took out his pocket-knife. He knelt down in a position of prayer, he turned to Mecca and opened his knife. Then he began to rattle off prayers. He rattled silently. After a few words he blew on the knife and continued praying. The Melâ's wife and Aunt Zero had also knelt down and looked at him.

x= nivist: A talisman which contains quotations from the Koran. It is supposed to protect the bearer against misfortune etc.

x= a Kurdish expression which is used to show satisfaction with something.

After having finished the chant the Mela blew three times on the knife and closed it. He thrust it back into his pocket and turned to Aunt Zero:

- God protects your cow in the glory of the Koran. Henceforth the wolf cannot harm your cow without God willing it.

Aunt Zero replied contented:

- May God protect your children! God will reward you!

Thereafter she said farewell.

- With your permission I'll leave you now. Good night!

- Good night! the Mela and his wife saluted.

x

After the talk with the Mela Aunt Zero was assured of that even if the wolf should catch sight of the cow, it could not hurt it.

In the security of that belief she fell asleep.

The day after she rose at dawn. She made her morning prayer and then walked into the fields. When she passed a little hill, which was situated in front of the village, she saw some vultures hovering behind the next hill. As soon as she saw them her heart began to pound heavily. But the next moment she recalled that the Mela had tied the jaws of the wolf. She told herself:

- Oh, God, forgive me! I nearly committed a sin. I was there when the Mela tied the jaws of the wolf. I had almost forgotten what the Mela had done to protect my cow. Then it's of course impossible for the wolf to harm the cow. It's probably some other animal which has died and the vultures are now circling over it.

In spite of herself the woman could not drive away the fear completely. She walked hesitantly towards the hill and climbed it. When she descended her blood ran cold as if someone had poured a jug of icecold water over her.



The cow's carcass lay in the grass. It's eyes were wide open. It seemed to say to it's owner; "look what has happened to me!" Everything except the head was torn apart and devoured. Only a pile of bones, the tail and hide and blood were left in the blood-soaked grass.

When Aunt Zero saw the ghastly sight she heaved a deep sigh. Everything went black before her eyes. All the strength left her legs and she sagged. Reluctantly she sank in the thick grass which was wet with morning dew.

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The malaria amulet.

M. Emin Bezarslan

Ferho turned around and looked, when he heard the sound of his wife's steps. Ase carried the water-jug on her right shoulder and held the ladle in her left hand. She came from the direction of the spring, walking towards the oak-tree in the middle of the corn-field. Ferho put the bunch of cut straws in his hand on top of another and walked towards the shade of the tree. He got there before Ase. He laid down his tar<sup>1</sup> and his reaping-hook. With the back of his hand he brushed off the perspiration on his forehead. The beads of perspiration poured down on the ground. He unbuttoned his shirt and blew down his chest in order to cool it a little. Then he took off his peaked cap and laid it on the ground. New beads of perspiration had already formed on his forehead. With his hand he wiped those away, too. He had perspired so much that his clothes were soaked through and clung to his body.

Now Ase also came in under the tree. She took down the water-jug from her shoulder, looked at her husband and with a smile she said: "Strength to you, Ferho!" Without looking at his wife Ferho answered: "Thank you." Then he looked angrily at her and said: "Wherever have you been until now, you daughter of a dog?"

Ase did not mind his words. Ferho often used nasty words to her. Not only Ferho, but all the men in the village used to say abusive words to their wives. And so they did not only when they were angry. With a loving smile the men would sometimes say to their wives either "you daughter of an ox" or "you daughter of an ass". The women were used to words of that kind. It even happened that they were delighted at it. Therefore Ase was not annoyed. She smiled and answered her husband in a low voice: "Ferho, you king of my heart! Forgive me! I know that you have become very thirsty and I am late. But what was I to do? I had to finish shaking the dew<sup>2</sup> and then take care of the butter and put the boy to sleep." When Ferho heard her mention the boy he softened. He liked his son very much. He smiled: "You innocent victim of my son, give me some water!" Ase rinsed the ladle with a little water, filled it to the brim and handed it to Ferho. He emptied it at one gulp. The ice-cold water cooled his whole body.

"Oohh! Give me one more!"

Ase looked at her husband, lovingly. "You are tired, Ferho! You have been perspiring, too! Do not drink so much water! You may get ill."

"Look at this daughter of an ass!" smiled Ferho. "She is acting adviser!"

Notes: 1) Tar: curved, wooden tool, fastened to the left hand by leather straps, used to collect the cut-off straws in when reaping the corn.

2) Dew: buttermilk, produced when yoghurt is churned. A common drink.



"Take a little rest at least, before I fill it up again! Do not drink one ladleful after another!"

Ferho got angry. "I said fill it up again! You are still acting adviser. Hurr/ up now, or you'll get it!"

Submissively Ase filled up the ladle and gave it to him. He gulped down this one, too. Perspiration showed again on his forehead and his chest. Ase put the water-jug beside a small mound of earth and placed the ladle upside down over its mouth. Then she wiped the beads of perspiration from her husband's forehead with the seamy side of her apron-hem and said: "Oh dear, how you perspire! One would think it was water running from the spring."

Ferho showed her his chest. It was completely wet as if a ladleful of water had been poured over it. The hairs on his chest were pasted on to the skin. Ase leaned forward and wiped away the perspiration on his chest with her hem.

Lovingly Ferho put his arms around Ase's neck and pulled her towards him. But she withdrew at once and smiled, embarrassed:

"What are you doing? Think of people who might see us from a distance!"

Ferho kept his arms stretched out for an embrace. He smiled: "If someone should see us, then let him do so, what does it matter?"

"Very well! Other people shall see us, we shall be laughed at and our names shall be on everybody's lips!"

The two of them laughed. Then Ferho said: "My thirst will not pass off after all. Give me another ladleful!"

"You have drunk too much! You are sure to get ill! Look, how you perspire! You have had two ladlefuls, one after the other, and you still want more!"

But Ferho persisted. Resignedly Ase poured out yet another ladleful and handed it to him. Then Ferho rolled himself a cigarette out of the tobacco box. He lit his cigarette, put his cap on a small mound of earth, lay down and put his head on the cap. The cold water and the shade of the tree had made him drowsy. He was tired. It was his first reaping-day of the year and he was out of practice. His eyes closed by themselves and he fell asleep. Ase sat down beside his head, took away the lighted cigarette from his fingers and put it out with her foot. Then she fanned him with her skirt.

In the autumn Ferho fell ill. Every day he grew worse. He was so ill that he could not even get up from his bed of sickness. He coughed, too. In the evening he would first be cold and then he would perspire. The more he perspired, the happier both Ferho and Ase would be. They believed that a sick person was recovering when he perspired. But Ferho did not get any better. He got worse and worse for every day that passed.

Ferho did not know what illness it was he suffered from. Neither did he. The old men and women in the village used to come and see him. But no one knew what illness he had or what medicine could cure it. Then someone said: "malaria". From that moment on Ferho, he and the people in the village accepted this as the only possible explanation. Ferho's illness certainly looked like malaria. Every evening he was cold, then his temperature rose, he perspired and his skin grew yellower every day just like that of the malaria-stricken. Although no one could understand why he perspired, the one who had mentioned malaria soon found the reason: "He perspires under the malaria's compulsion."

Against malaria there exists only one remedy; to "break off" the malaria. A mela<sup>3</sup> must make a malaria amulet, a "malaria-breaker". Then the malaria will let go. But they had not just one worry! Since the village was small and the villagers were poor, there was no mela in the village. The people there could not support one. And so they had to take Ferho to the mela of another village. This was the only way.

The morning two young men mounted Ferho on a donkey and set off for the neighbouring village. The mela of that village was a powerful one. His name and his fame had spread all over those parts. Even people from far-away villages would come to him, asking him to make them different kinds of amulets, among them "malaria-breakers". For that reason his home looked like the destination for pilgrimages. The mela had earned a considerable amount of money making amulets and "malaria-breakers".

Ferho knelt in front of the mela. The mela took out a piece of thread, two handbreadths long. He knelt down in the direction of Mecca and began rattling away in a mumbling voice. After saying a few words he blew on the thread and tied a knot on it. He made eight knots in this manner. Then he tied the piece of thread around Ferho's right wrist and told him: "With the help of God you shall be completely cured in three or four days."

Ferho kissed the mela's hand and said: "I shall be your servant and the earth under your feet. May God keep such men as you over our heads!" He paid the fee for the mela's "malaria-breaker". Then the two young men mounted him on the donkey and returned to their village.

That evening Ferho perspired again. But he was not afraid as he had been on other evenings. He believed that the mela's "malaria-breaker" would cure him completely and bring back his health. This could not happen overnight, however. The illness that had come gradually would also leave very slowly.

Notes: 3) Mela: Islamic priest

Towards morning he coughed again. It was a dry cough, immensely trying, as if it had stuck in the throat and would not let go. Then, suddenly, mucus came in his throat and darted out of his mouth with the cough, landing on his pillow. The mucus was not of the usual kind this time, it was red, bloody. In the light of the petroleum-lamp both he and Ase looked at the lump of mucus. So, they were not mistaken. The mucus was specked with blood. They were both delighted at it, and looked at each other in happiness.

"Praise God!" said Ase with a smile. "You are getting well! So this blood is it that has been clogging in your chest! Perhaps there has been a boil or something of that kind growing on the inside of your chest. Now it has burst and begun to bleed. I am sure this blood comes from that. After this there will be nothing left inside you. Tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, with God's help, you will get up from your bed of sickness and get back on your feet!"

Ferho also believed this: "This has come about thanks to the mela's malaria-breaker, Ase! God be with him! It is he who has saved me from my illness. God...."

The cough overtook him before he had time to finish the sentence. He coughed incessantly. Ase brought a tray and placed it in front of him. Ferho kept coughing up mucus on the tray. It was still bloody.

After that morning Ferho grew only worse each day. He vomitted blood and coughed up bloody mucus. His complexion had turned as pale as a wax-candle. He had pined away completely. Each one of his ribs could be counted. But the mela's "malaria-breaker" was still tied around his wrist. Neither he nor Ase gave up their trust in God. They believed that the effect of the "malaria-breaker" was sure to show one day.

"What malaria is this to last for so long time?" said Ase all the time. "No one ever had such misfortune before!"

One day a pedlar came to the village. He was a middle-aged, experienced and clever man. The villagers told him about Ferho's illness. The man came to see Ferho. He noticed Ferho's complexion. The man asked him how he was. Ferho was unable to say much. It was Ase who answered the pedlar's questions. Then the pedlar wished Ferho a speedy recovery and left. He told the villagers:

"Listen, this is not the malaria. It is very obviously consumption."

These words frightened the people like the thunder of guns. They all mumbled in chorus; "Bismillah - God is the mightiest", and began to blow around themselves. They mumbled to themselves: "Away, away! Get away from our houses!" "God, keep this illness away from the followers of Mohammed!" "This must not happen even to my enemy!"

"If this illness strikes one when the water of the streams is warm", the pedlar continued, "then the sick one will die when the water cools off. But if one is struck while the water of the streams is cold, one dies when the water gets warmer. There is no salvation from this illness. May God keep us all from such misfortune!"

5

"Amen,amen,amen!" cried the villagers with one voice.

After some time,one night towards morning,Ferho went from bad to worse. Ase realized that her husband was to pass away. She hurried to fetch some of the village elders. They came and also saw that Ferho was at the point of death. One of the elders was able to read and recite the Koran.He hurried to wash before he began reciting the Yasin<sup>4)</sup> from the Koran. Before he had time to recite half of it,Ferho breathed his last and passed away.

Ase sat down beside her husband's head. With her two-year-old son in her arms she tuned up a dirge,crying.

Notes: 4) Yasin: a chapter from the Koran, recited at a deathbed among other occasions.

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