

"Medrese education in northern Kurdistan", by Zeynelabidîn Zinar, translated and annotated by Martin van Bruinessen. *Les Annales de l'Autre Islam* 5 (1998).

Medrese education in northern Kurdistan^[1]

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Kurdish medreses of the traditional type, which for many centuries had a prominent presence especially in northern Kurdistan and long were most important centres of education and cultural transmission, no longer exist. By the end of the 1960s, the last ones had disappeared. The present article addresses a growing interest in these institutions and attempts to answer questions as to what these medreses were, how they functioned and what method of education was followed in them. The history of the flourishing and demise of these medreses has so far not been presented clearly to the Kurdish public. Very few Kurdish intellectuals have been aware of the medrese tradition; even fewer have a more than superficial acquaintance with it. Interest in the medrese and the learned culture associated with this institution is increasing, however, and many members of the Kurdish educated and artistic elite wish to know more about this subject. So far, however, researchers have not given it much attention and not a single serious study has been produced. Although a few things have been written about the subject, most of them have grave shortcomings, are marred by mistakes and are based on hearsay. Those who did write about the medrese moreover frequently did so according to their own, different world views and convictions, judging the medrese to be a hotbed of backwardness and reaction. Therefore I thought it necessary to write this essay and present briefly to the readers those things that I have seen with my own eyes and personally experienced.

The intellectual life that used to exist in the medreses of Kurdistan has now been laid to rest in a silent cemetery, and in order to observe it one has to dig in the past. Even if one can these days still see the remnants of this tradition in some villages far from the cities, this does not mean that these medreses have survived and that their tradition of learning still is being carried on.

The medreses of the old days produced many scholars and intellectuals that are a source of pride and honour to the Kurdish nation. For it is due to the efforts of the likes of Elî Harîrî, Mele Ehmedê Cizîrî, Mele Ehmedê Bateyî, Feqiyê Teyran, and Ehmedê Xanî^[2] that through the ages Kurdish language and civilization have left their lasting marks in history and have shone as a bright light for all the world to see.

There have been medreses in many districts of Kurdistan

from the 11th or 12th century down, and they have provided education to tens of thousands, no, hundreds of thousands of students (called *feqî / feqe, suxte* or *•agird* in Kurdish).^[3] Besides Kurdish children, there were also Turks, Arabs and Persians who came to study there. A few of these numerous medreses have become well-known and have left their mark on the pages of history, such as the Sitrabas medrese of Diyarbakir, the Red Medrese (*Medreseya Sor*) of Cizre, the medrese of Bayezid and the medrese of Shemdinan. Bitlis alone had several famous medreses: the Ikhlasiye, Katibiye, Shukriye, Sherefiye and Shemsiye. Other influential medreses were those of Hizan, Müks, Bêdar, Findik, Akhtepe, Norshin, Karaköy (Gimgim in Varto), Farqîn (present Silvan), Hawêl, a number of medreses in Siirt, those of Hasankeyf, Palu, Okhin, Van, and dozens of others.

Apart from being centres of education in Kurdish, Arabic and to some extent also Persian, they were also the places where Kurdish cultural tradition and an awareness of Kurdish identity were kept alive. Kurdish custom and tradition (*adet*) was maintained in the medreses, and it was here that something of a Kurdish national character was forged.

After 1925, however, Mustafa Kemal issued his infamous education laws, the *Kanun-i Tevhid-i Tedris*, and had the medreses closed. The closure of those Kurdish medreses had, in fact, as its primary aim to assimilate the Kurds, to cut them off from all things of the past, and especially to make the Kurds forget their own past. This was also one of the major aims of Mustafa Kemal in issuing his dress legislation: the Kurds had to give up their distinctive dress so that they would also rapidly lose their other customs and traditions. The division of Kurdistan between the Ottoman Empire and Iran was finalised in 1639. But neither the Persians nor the Ottomans had ever denied the existence of the Kurds and Kurdistan, nor had they ever made assimilation of the Kurds through deliberate legislation their objective - not until 1923. Since northern Kurdistan became a part of the new Turkey, however, the leaders of the Turkish state have had recourse to all sort of shameful cruelty, oppression and bloodshed to wipe out the very names of Kurds and Kurdistan; and they continue to this day.

As said above, the medreses of Kurdistan produced many great men, who became renowned not only among the Kurds but through the entire Middle East as well as other parts of the world. Their valuable contributions to Kurdish culture and history, in the religious sciences proper and in mysticism, in general scholarship and literature, or in practical politics in the form of leading roles in Kurdish uprisings, deserve never to be forgotten. Let me, by way of examples, list here the names of just some of those medrese

graduates.

a) The following persons were `ulama and sufis as well as authors of literature: Mawlana Khalid al-Kurdi (1773-1826), the reformer of the Naqshbandi order is the most internationally famous of them. Shaikh Elî Harîrî (1010-1089), Mele Ehmed Huseyn Bateyî (1417-1491), Shaikh Mele Ehmed Cizîrî (1570-1640) and Feqiyê Teyran (1590-1660) are widely considered as the founders of the Kurdish literary tradition. They were followed by Feqî Re`îdê Hakkarî, •erefxanê Colemergî (1693-1748), Selîm Suleyman (16th/17th cent.), Mele Xelîlê Sêrtî (Khalil Si`irti, 1753-1843), Kharis Bidlîsî (18th cent.), Mele Yunus Herqetêni (18th-19th cent.), Pertew Begê Hakkarî (d. 1806), Siyaposh, Bekir Begê Erzî, Mensûr Girga•î, Shaikh Ebdurrehmanê Akhtepî (1850-1910), Mele Elî Findikî, Xelîfe Ûsiv (Khalifa Yusuf), Shaikh Diyaeddîn (known as the Hazret of Norshin), Mele Mihemmed Emîn Heyderî, etc.

b) Among the Kurdish medrese graduates we find from an early period on some authors who expressed a strong awareness of Kurdish national identity and a deep concern with the interests of the Kurdish people. The work of Ehmedê Xanî (1651-1707) still moves nationalists. In the 19th century, we find Murad Khan Bayezîdî (1772-1832) and Mele Mehmûd Bayezîdî,[\[4\]](#) in the 20th century Mele Se`îdê Kurdî (Sa'id-i Nursi)[\[5\]](#) and Mele •eyxmus Hesarî, who under the pen-name of Cigerxwîn became a famous nationalist poet.

c) The medreses produced also some men who became active in (nationalist) politics and took leading part in Kurdish uprisings: Shaikh Ubaydullah of Nehri (whose 1880 uprising is commonly considered as the first uprising with a nationalist dimension); Shaikh Ubaydullah's son, Shaikh Abdulqadir (a founder of the first Kurdish association in Istanbul in 1908), Sayyid Taha of Nehri (active in nationalist politics in Iranian and Iraqi Kurdistan), Shakh Sa'id of Piran (who led the first great rebellion in Republican Turkey in 1925), Mele Selîm of Hizan, Sayyid Shaikh Elî and Shaikh •ihabeddîn, who also were involved in uprisings.

Medreses were the only institutions where people learned to read and write Kurdish. The secular schools that were established by the new states that succeeded to the Ottoman Empire in this century used the state languages as the medium of instruction. The medreses were at least bilingual. Arabic, the language of the Qur'an, had priority of course, but Kurdish was also used and some Persian was taught as well. Most of the books studied were in Arabic, but the teachers explained them in Kurdish. Besides these, a number of textbooks had to be read that were originally

written in Kurdish, in the Kurmanci dialect. Surprisingly, many of the authors of Arabic-language books studied in the Kurdish medreses were also Kurds, or were believed to be so.

First religious education

Religious education among the Kurds does not begin in the medrese but almost at birth. Children of Muslim parents -- boys as well as girls -- are on the seventh day taken to a man of pious reputation, usually a shaikh or a *mele* (village imam), to be given a "propitious" name. The pious person then recites the first call to prayer (*ezan*) into the child's right ear and the second call (*qamet*) into its left ear, after which he gives the child its name. When the child learns to speak, its father or mother teaches it the names of God and the prophets, the five pillars of Islam and the six pillars of proper belief, the names of the Companions of the Prophet and of the saints. Next they teach it the *Fatiha* and the prayer *al-tahiyyat* and the correct way of performing Muslim prayer.

When the child is six or seven years old, it is sent to the *mele* or another villager who has some medrese training, to be taught the Arabic alphabet. In villages where there was a medrese, it was often the students, the *feqî*, who would teach younger children the alphabet. When the child had mastered the first textbook on the principles of Arabic reading and writing, the family presented its teacher with a valuable gift (named *mefûtûhane* in Kurdish).

For every following book that the child completed, another *mefûtûhane* would be presented. The *mefûtûhane* upon completing reading the entire Qur'an used to be an especially valuable present. Some families would give the teacher a cow or a calf, a sheep, a goat or at the least a lamb. Once a child no longer studied in its own village but had become a *feqî* in a medrese elsewhere, the *mefûtûhane* took another form. When they had completed a book, they did not give a present to their teacher but held a banquet for their fellow students. People attached much importance to *mefûtûhane* in either form; popular belief had it that the student who did not give a *mefûtûhane* after finishing a book would become stupid and would never make progress.

As soon as the child had mastered the Arabic alphabet, it would start reading the Qur'an. Little by little it would work its way through all thirty *juz'* (sections), learning large parts by heart. After the Qur'an, the children would read the vastly popular devotional text in Kurdish, the *Mewlûd* of Mele Ehmed (Huseyn) Bateyî, to be followed by another Kurdish text, Mele Xelîl Sêrtû's *Nehcu'l-enam* (an introduction to Muslim doctrine). The following books to be studied were *Nûbihar*, a Kurdish-Arabic primer by the

great poet Ehmedê Xanî, and the Arabic *Ghâyat al-ikhtisâr*, a simple text on the canonical obligations.

For most children, this would be all they would ever read. They would from then on stay at home and on be occupied with work. The few who continued their studies would leave their villages and study in a medrese elsewhere. For this, they should at least have reached the age of twelve. Which children would become *feqî*, depended much on the circumstances of their families. In certain large families with four, five or more children, all children would study as far as the *Ghâyat al-ikhtisâr*, and the one who had shown himself most quick-witted would be sent elsewhere to become a *feqî*. Other families sent especially children with physical defects, or who were inept at ordinary work, to study in the medrese. Families eager to improve their social status would send more than one child to the medrese, in the expectation that the respect due to a *feqî* would reflect upon the whole family. Finally there were families that had for generations specialised in religious learning, and that were referred to by such honorific names as *Mala Melan* ("family of imams"), *Mala Welijan* ("family of saints") or as *xwedî ocax* ("scions of a charismatic lineage").

Religious education: on becoming a feqî

Most of the larger villages of Kurdistan, and most urban districts, had one or more mosques. Mosques did necessarily have a medrese attached to them, but the reverse was not true: a medrese without a mosque was unthinkable. Most places that had a mosque had a medrese as well, but the size of the medrese varied widely. In some large medreses there could be as many as 50 to 200 students. Other medreses were smaller and were attended by 10 to 50 *feqîs*. The smaller medreses were commonly called *hicre* (Ar. *hujra*, "cell"). Medrese and mosque were usually parts of the same building but had separate entrances, on opposite sides. The mosque usually consisted of one large hall and a smaller room, the medrese also of one large and one or two small spaces. The *feqîs* studied and slept in the large room and would eat in one of the small rooms, which were also used to store their clothes and bedding. In summer, they would spend more time on the roof of the medrese, where they would also sleep.

Although prayer in the mosque is considered as more meritorious, the *feqîs* would only rarely take part in the communal prayers in the mosque and instead perform their prayers individually and quickly in the medrese. They would also at most times refrain from the *sunna* (recommended) prayers preceding or following the obligatory ones. In fact, there were many *feqî* who

would miss the (obligatory) morning prayer, and some neglected even the other prayers -- even though they would later be punished for this. The people in general as well as most of the teachers would not show great concern for the *feqîs'* strictness in prayer. According to a widespread popular belief, even if the *feqîs* only slept this was in itself a form of worship; the *feqîs* were seen as birds of Paradise.

Mosques and medreses had their independent financial resources in the form of land and property attached to them as pious endowments (*waqf*). In the villages this was mostly agricultural land, that was rented out to peasants; in towns, mosques used to own shops and houses, as many still do today. The income derived from these resources was usually administered by the local *mele*; in some places it was controlled by shaikhs or sayyids.

Each mosque and medrese was maintained by a sexton, known as the *micewrê mizgeftê*. He kept the mosque and medrese clean, cut firewood for the stoves in winter, prevented the flat earthen roofs leaking by pressing them with a heavy stone roller, kept the water containers (for ritual ablution and drinking water) filled, etc. Most of the sextons were godfearing old men, who performed this work as a pious deed. If the sexton was a poor man was he given a salary, either from the mosques' own budget or from contributions collected by the community around the mosque.

The mele and meletî

The most glorious and prestigious employment in Kurdistan always was *meletî*, the office of a *mele*. *Meles* were always highly respected by the people, and for this reason many people aspired to the position. But becoming a *mele* was not just a matter of studying religious texts. A *mele* just as much needed intelligence and understanding of custom and tradition; his position gave him great social responsibilities that he should live up to.

Meletî, the institution of the *mele*, existed in towns as well as in the villages, but there was a difference between village and town *meles*. Most town *meles* received a salary, in most cases from the state. This is still the case, and even more so than in the past. Even those few urban *meles* who received their incomes from a *waqf* or from contributions from the people of the neighbourhood were in fact under surveillance by the Turkish state. The role they played in society bears no comparison with that played by the *meles* in the villages. In what follows, I shall restrict myself to the village *meles*.

Until the 1940s it was generally the case that a *mele* who took up *meletî* in a village did so on the orders of a shaikh or at the

request of an *agha* (tribal chieftain) who had authority over the village. There were some villages that were not under the control of an *agha* or *shaikh*; most of the *meles* who did not depend on an *agha* or *shaikh* themselves held positions in such independent villages. Almost every Muslim village in Kurdistan appointed a *mele*. Large or rich villages could afford to recruit a well-known *mele* but the smaller and poorer villages had to content themselves with whoever was ready to serve there.

When a *shaikh* or an *agha* recruited a *mele* for one of their villages, they also negotiated about the salary to be paid. Having agreed upon a sum, they then took the *mele* to the village to introduce him to the villagers, and they told the latter how high the salary was to be. Independent villagers negotiated themselves with the *mele* they chose, agreeing upon a set percentage of *zekat*,^[6] etc. Where villagers were reluctant to pay the full amount of *zekat*, they would give at least the part agreed upon as the *mele's* share; and where the *zekat* of a village was not sufficient to pay for the *mele's* living, the villagers would add voluntary contributions. Pious villagers would select the best of their sheep or goats to give to the *mele* as *zekat*; for it was widely believed that this would bring luck in proportion to the quality of the animal given.

In most villages the *mele* and his family lived in a house provided for them by the villagers, who also took care of its maintenance. Before winter set in, every household in the village sent the *mele* a donkeyload of firewood. Economically the *mele* was usually well off. Besides his share of the *zekat*, he also received one to two thirds of the other special offerings, such as *fitir* (at the end of Ramadan) and *îsqat* (after a death). Each morning most families would send the *mele* a bowl of yoghurt, some butter or a piece of cheese. When an animal was ritually slaughtered in the village, because of a vow or at a life cycle ceremony, the best cut was always for the *mele's* family, before the rest of the meat was divided among the other villagers. Two days a year, in late spring and in autumn, the entire village gave all its milk to the *mele*; women of the village made it into cheese and butter.

The *mele's* life thus was a privileged one, and his privileges were often resented by the poor of the village. They sometimes expressed this resentment openly, badmouthing him and cursing him for taking away their livelihood instead of letting the better-off villagers give their alms to the poor.

Functions of the village mele

The *mele's* first duties were to lead the daily prayers in the mosque and other religious rites, and to teach the young the fundamentals

of Islam. He pronounced the Friday sermon (*xutbe*) and homilies (*we`z*) on various occasions, gave moral counsel and admonished people to perform their religious duties, presided over marriage ceremonies, wrote amulets for protection or healing.

Besides his religious functions, the *mele* also had an important role to fulfill in the social and political life of the village community. It was always the *mele* and the *rîspî* (elders) of the village who were called upon to make peace in case of a conflict. Whenever people were fighting, the intervention of a *mele* would make them stop. Even when an oppressive landlord or tribal chieftain beat up someone, a resolute *mele* could tell him not to, and he would stop. It also often happened that quarrelling parties would by themselves come to the *mele* to have him resolve their disagreement according to the *shari`a*.

His standing in the village depended, however, on the number of older students (*feqî*) he had; if he had none or only a few, the villagers were not likely to show him much respect, nor would he have much self-respect. Most *meles* therefore did their utmost to get at least a number of *feqî*, even those who did not have much learning themselves (these took care, of course, not to recruit students that were too bright). A *mele* with whom many *feqî* studied was addressed by the honorific title of *seyda* as a sign of respect. Only the most respected *meles* were known as *seyda*.

Some *mele* gained wide renown because of their devotion to teaching and to their disciples. Thus, in the 1950s and 1960s there still were some teachers whose names were known all over Kurdistan, such as Mele Hiseynê Kiçik in Farqîn (Silvan), Mele Mihyedînê Hawêlî in Garzan, Shaikh Cuneydê Zoqeydî, Mele Evdilsemedê Comanî in the Reshkotan district, Mele Fexredînê Torî in Beshiri, etc. They attracted not only Kurdish students but also Turkish youth, mostly from Central Anatolia and the Black Sea coast.

Feqî and feqetî

Once a boy or young man left his home to study religion in another village, he was called *feqî*. He would present himself at a *hicre* or *medrese* and ask the teacher to give him a place to stay. If he was accepted, he stayed on and studied there; if not, he had to try his luck elsewhere. Most teachers preferred only intelligent students; they let their students test the knowledge and intelligence of the new candidate, and only then decided whether they would accept him. No *feqî* would even think of contesting a teacher's decision; respect for the teacher was absolute, and people often quoted the saying attributed to Ali: "Whoever teaches me even

one letter, I shall be his servant". When a *feqî* had completed his studies and became a *mele* himself, the veneration for his teacher would continue, and the same relationship of respect would exist between the relatives of the *feqî* and those of his teacher.

In each *hicre* and *medrese* in Kurdistan, one of the students was made responsible for the others. Usually this was the eldest or the most advanced of the students. Known as *mîrê hicrê* or *mîrê medresê*, he was in charge of all affairs concerning the students and could demand their obedience. If a problem arose between the students and the teacher, or between the students and the villagers, it was the task of the *mîr* to settle it. Twenty-four hours a day, the *mîr* would tell the students when to do what, telling them when it was time for memorizing their texts (*metn*), for bringing food from the village, for eating, for evening study, for a rest or for going to sleep.

Feeding the feqîs

The *feqîs* were fed by the villagers; most households set one or two portions aside for them. Each *feqî* would daily go to the household allotted to him to collect his food (known as *ratib* or *tayîn*, "allotment"). He would knock on the door with his food bowl; someone from inside would take the bowl, hand it back to him filled with a stew and put a fresh piece of flat bread on top. The *feqî* would come at a fixed time, and the household was expected to have food ready then. (If the food was repeatedly too late, the teacher or the village elders, warned by the *mîrê feqiyan*, would give the defaulting household a warning.) Many households gave "their" *feqî* better food than they would eat themselves. Usually they would also wash his clothes, give him soap and some pocket money, and on occasion buy him new clothes.

In many villages it was usual for the better-off families to invite the *mele* and all his *feqîs* once or twice a year to a special meal. These banquets were the topic of much conversation among the *feqî*, who would loudly praise the family whose invitation they had found most sumptuous. Banquet could follow upon banquet as the households competed with each other to please the *feqîs*. More modest treats were even more frequent. Someone's having a bad dream could be a reason to slaughter a lamb to ward off bad luck, and to send the cooked meat to the medrese. A man's returning from military service or from a long journey was usually an occasion for sending the *feqîs* a good meal as thanksgiving.

Thus the village took good care of its *feqîs*; they had no lack of food, so that they did not have to depend on their parents. They led a pleasant and easy life. Conflicts among them or between them and the villagers were rare. The *feqîs* were treated

much better than the pupils at the primary schools established by the state, that gradually replaced the medreses, and to whom the villagers never showed the same degree of respect.

The organization of time in the medrese

Studying time was five days and a half each week, from Saturday morning until Thursday afternoon. On those days, the *feqîs* would be permanently busy: when they were not receiving instruction from the teacher, they would be studying their lessons, tutoring or examining one another, memorizing the declination of Arabic verbs or putting other major texts to memory.

The teacher would get up well before sunrise and perform the morning prayer in the mosque, after which he would start teaching the *feqîs*. He would instruct them individually every day, beginning with the most advanced and continuing in order of seniority until he reached the youngest. In a medrese or a *hicre* with many students, the elder students would assist by teaching the younger ones. The *feqî* whose turn it was would sit on his knees beside his teacher, who would read a text with him. Letter by letter, word by word, sentence by sentence was read and explained. Most of the books studied were in Arabic, but the explanations by the teacher and word-by-word translations were always in Kurdish. This style of teaching was, incidentally, what made the medreses and *hicres* a stronghold of the Kurdish language, even during the years when it had difficulty surviving elsewhere. In their sermons and homilies too, the *meles* continued using Kurdish.

The students had to study their texts in little bits at a time, which they then had to read out aloud (or recite, in the case of texts to be memorized) to the teacher, answering his questions about the meaning. When the teacher was satisfied with the *feqî*'s progress, he told him to study the next bit; if he was not, the student had to return the next day with the same task.

Peer learning had an important place in the medrese, most commonly in the form known as *muzakere*, in which one student would question or examine another about a book he studied. There were various types of *muzakere*, but it always involved a discussion between two students on a book they studied. After a *feqî* had received his instruction from the teacher, he could go and sit with a student who had already mastered the same book and discuss the recent lesson in order to understand it better. Or having studied some text by himself, he could ask an older student to go over the text with him before he was examined by the teacher. *Muzakere* was not restricted to the texts of the medrese curriculum; the *feqî* read other books in this way too.

The evenings, from the evening prayer (*`isha*) until late at night, were the time for *mitale* (Ar. *mutala`a*), silent individual study. The *feqîs* would lie on the floor in a few circular groups and each would silently study his own book in preparation for the next day's lesson.

The standard curriculum (*rêz*) included around twenty books that the *feqîs* had to learn entirely by heart. Rote learning took place in the beginning stages of the study; more advanced students (*talib*) did not have to do much of it. They studied commentaries (*sherh*) and glosses (*hashiye*) on basic texts (*metn*); it was only the *metn* that had to be memorized. Special hours each day were reserved for memorizing *metn*: about an hour in the early morning, before breakfast, another hour after the noon prayer, and some time after the evening meal. On dry days the students would do their memorizing outside, strolling around the medrese and the mosque or walking up and down a flat stretch of land outside the village. On rainy days and in winter, the *feqîs* would seek out stables and sheds in the village to memorize their lessons in.

Kurdish nationalism in the medrese

The medreses of Kurdistan could roughly be divided into two categories: those where Kurdish identity was strongly emphasized and the apolitical ones where Sufism was dominant. Sufi shaikhs too had their political ambitions, if only to spread their own Sufi order all over Kurdistan and thereby to establish adherence to the *shari`a*. For all their dislike of the secularist Turkish army, such shaikhs usually did not make a distinction between Muslim Kurds and Turkish, Arab or Persian Muslims. There were also some shaikhs who collaborated with the state authorities, but they had to do so covertly because this conflicted with the independence that the people expected of their spiritual leaders.

In most medreses there were *feqîs* hailing from many different regions, who often were well-informed about the Kurdish movement. Thus there was an awareness of conditions in various parts of Kurdistan. Young *feqîs* heard from the older ones about the Kurdish uprisings in the past, about state repression, about the execution of Kurdish national leaders. There were also certain nationalist *meles* who spoke of the "oppression and unbelief" (*zulm û kufr*) of the Turkish authorities and who could cite verses from the Qur'an and Traditions of the Prophet to the effect that these oppressors and unbelievers had to be expelled. The fact that most Turks are Hanefis and the Kurds Shafiis made the fusion of religious and ethnic sentiment easier.

The medrese curriculum (rêz)

Below are listed the texts studied in the medrese, in the order in which they were commonly studied.

1. *Elîfbêtik*: exercises for the Arabic alphabet. As soon as the 29 letters and their various forms (initial, medial and final) are mastered, the *feqî* begins reading the Qur'an.
2. The *Qur'an* is the first book that has to be read, even before the *feqî* understands sufficient Arabic.
3. The next book is in Kurdish; it is the *Mewlûd* (narrative of Muhammad's birth) by Mele Ehmedê Bateyî (d. 1491?).
4. *Nûbihara biçûkan* ["First fruits of spring for the young"] is an Arabic-Kurdish dictionary in verse, written by the great Kurdish poet Ehmedê Khanî (1651-1707).
5. *Nehcul Enam* [*Nahj al-anâm*]: a brief text in Kurmanci verse on Muslim doctrine, written by Mele Xelîlê Sêrtî (1754-1843).[\[7\]](#)
6. Another Kurdish text on doctrine, Ehmedê Xanî's *Eqîde*. A commentary on this text by Mele Ehmedê Qoxî, also in Kurmanci, was published in 1984 under the title *Rêberê sanî •erha Ehmedê Xanî*.
7. *Xayetul Îqtisar* [*Ghâyat al-ikhtisâr*, also known as *al-Taqrîb fî'l-fiqh*]: a text on Shafii *fiqh* in simple Arabic, that is easy to understand.[\[8\]](#)
8. *Îbnû Qasim* [*Fath al-qarîb al-mujîb*] is a more substantial commentary on the preceding text. It is believed that the author, after whose name it is known, was a Kurd.[\[9\]](#)
9. *Bacûrî*: another Arabic text on Shafii *fiqh*, written by Ibrâhîm al-Bâjûrî. It is a supercommentary on *Îbnû Qasim*, explaining the same matters in greater detail.[\[10\]](#)

The next series of books all deal with aspects of Arabic grammar:

10. *Tesrîfa Kurmancî*: a simple work in Kurdish on *sarf*, the declination of the Arabic verb, written by Mele Elî Teremaxî. Students have to learn this text by heart.
11. *Emsîle*: an Arabic text on *sarf*, giving the declinations of various types of verbs. Also to be learnt by heart.
12. *Izzî*: another Arabic text on *sarf*, that is also memorized.[\[11\]](#)
13. *Ewamila Curcanî* [*al-`Awâmil*, by `Abd al-Qâdir b. `Abd al-Rahmân al-Jurjânî]: a simple text (in Arabic) on syntax (*nahw*). Memorized by the students.[\[12\]](#)
14. *Zurûf*: a Kurdish text on Arabic syntax, written by Mele Ênisê Erqetênî (who died, according to Minorsky, in 1785). Memorized by the students.
15. *Terkîb*: another Kurdish text on *nahw*, also by Mele Ênisê Erqetênî. To be memorized.
16. *S'edullaha Sexîr*: an Arabic commentary on Jurjânî's *al-`Awâmil* (no 13), written by a certain Sa`dullâh al-Saghîr ("the

Small Sa`dullâh").[\[13\]](#) Entirely learnt by heart.

17. •*erhil Muxnî*: a commentary on an Arabic text on *nahw*, known as the *Mughnî*. The *metn*, but not the commentary, is memorized.[\[14\]](#)

18. *S'edînî*: an Arabic text on *nahw*, consisting of a commentary on the *Izzî* (item 12). Written by Sa`d Taftazânî, nicknamed *al-`allâma al-thânî*, "the second scholar", whom many people believe to have been a Kurd.[\[15\]](#)

19. *Hell*: a text on *nahw*, written in a very difficult Arabic.[\[16\]](#)

20. *S'edullaha Gewre*: another Arabic text on *nahw*, written by the Kurdish scholar Sa`dullah Gewre ("the Big").

21. *Netaic*: yet another Arabic work on *nahw*, a commentary on Birkawî's *Izhâr*.[\[17\]](#)

22. *Siyûtî*: a text on *nahw* in Arabic verse by Jalâl al-dîn al-Suyûtî. It is a commentary on Ibn Mâlik's *Alfiyya*.[\[18\]](#)

23. *Camî*: a book on *nahw* in difficult and terse Arabic, written by Mawlânâ Jâmî. It is a commentary on the *Kâfiyya*.[\[19\]](#)

In medrese education, completion of Jâmî's book is considered to be on the same level as the completion of secondary school. The books that are studied from here on are of university level. *Feqîs* who have reached this stage are called *talib*. They may also act as *mele*, but they are still considered as apprentice *meles*.

24. *Muxnît Tulab*: a text on logic (*mantiq*) in difficult Arabic.[\[20\]](#)

25. *Îsaxûcî*: a commentary on Abharî's *Îsâghûjî* by the Kurdish scholar Mele Xelîlê Sêrtî (1754-1843).[\[21\]](#)

26. *Qewlehmed*: another text on logic, consisting of an extensive commentary on *Muxnît Tulab* in learned Arabic. As suggested by the title, the author was named Ahmad.

27. *'Usama Wedd'ê*: a difficult Arabic text on composition and semantics. As the title shows, the author is a certain 'Usam ('Isâm al-dîn).

28. *'Usama Îstî'arê*: a work on the nature of metaphor (*isti`âra, majâz*) by the same 'Usam.

29. •*erha Welîd*: an advanced work on disputation (*munâqasha, munâzara*), obviously by a certain Welîd.

30. *Ha•iya Ebdulwehab*: glosses by a certain `Abd al-Wahhâb, said to be a student of Jâmî's, on the latter's work on *nahw* (item 23).

31. *Ha•iya 'Usam*: glosses on Jâmî's work on *nahw* by a certain 'Usam, also said to be Jâmî's disciple.[\[22\]](#)

32. *Ha•iya Ebdulhekîm*: superglosses on `Abd al-Wahhâb's text (item 30).[\[23\]](#)

33. •*erha •emsî*: an advanced work on logic (*mantiq*), by Sa`d

Taftazânî (cf. item 18).[\[24\]](#)

34. *Muxteser*: a work on philosophy by Sa`d Taftazânî.

35. •*erhul Eqâid*: another work by Taftazânî, that discusses the various schools of Muslim doctrine.[\[25\]](#)

36. *Cem'il Cewami'*: a key work on the foundations of Muslim jurisprudence (*usûl al-fiqh*).[\[26\]](#)

When the student had finished reading *Cem'il Cewami'* he had completed the entire *rêz*, the standard curriculum. He received a diploma (*îcaze*) from his teacher and was considered fully qualified to be a *mele*.

Besides the 36 books of the core curriculum, there were numerous other books that the *feqîs* might read to deepen their understanding.

Works on Arabic grammar that were often used include:

Ibn al-Hâjib's *al-Shâfiyya*, `Abdallâh ibn `Aqîl's commentary on the *Alfiyya*, a book on *sarf* by the Kurdish author Mele Elî and two on *nahw* by other Kurdish scholars, Qizilcî and Qeredaxî. Kurdish literary works much read in the medreses are the *Dîwan* of Melayê Cizîrî and Ehmedê Xanî's *Mem û Zîn*.

On Shafî'i fiqh, the above works were complemented by:

- *Silêmanê Kurdî* [Muhammad b. Sulaymân al-Kurdî's *al-Hawâshî 'l-madaniyya*];
- Muhammad Amîn al-Kurdî's *Tanwîr al-qulûb*;
- Zayn al-dîn al-Malîbârî's *Irshâd al-`ibâd*;
- Ibn Hajar's *Fatâwâ*;
- Nawawî's *Minhâj al-tâlibîn* and the commentary by Sharbînî, *Mughnî 'l-muhtâj*;
- Malîbârî's *Fath al-mu`în* and Sayyid Bakrî's commentary, *I`ânat al-tâlibîn*;
- Bujayrimî's *Tuhfat al-habîb*, a commentary on Isfâhânî's *Ghâyat al-taqrîb*;
- *al-Taqrîr*, a commentary on *Nihâyat al-tadbîr*;
- a work in Kurdish by Xelîfe `Usiv (Yûsuf), *Îradul `Îbad*.[\[27\]](#)

A wide range of Qur'anic exegeses (*tafsîr*) was in use in Kurdish medreses, including:

- the *Tafsîr al-Jalâlayn* and the more elaborate commentaries on it by al-Sâwî, by al-Jamal and by the Qâdî al-Baydâwî;
- Ibn al-Kathîr's *tafsîr*;
- al-Zamakhsharî's 12-volume *Tafsîr al-Kashshâf*;
- the *Tafsîr al-Manâr* by Muhammad `Abduh and Rashîd Ridâ;
- Fakhr al-dîn al-Râzî's *tafsîr*;
- *tafsîr al-Ghâzî*;
- *tafsîr al-Ramal*;
- *tafsîr al-Muhmal*.

Numerous collections of *hadîth* were read in the medreses of Kurdistan. The following are only a selection:

- *Durrat al-wâ`izîn*;
- Nawawî's *Riyâd al-sâlihîn* and the 8-volume commentary *Dalîl-al-fâlihîn*;[28]
- Muslim's collection of "authentic" (*sahîh*) traditions;
- Bukhârî's *sahîh* collection;
- *Ibn al-mukhtasar*;
- *Tâj al-rasûl*;
- *Nihâyat al-bidâya*;
- *Tadhkirat al-Qurtubî*;[29]
- *al-Fatâwâ al-hadîthiyya* (by Ibn Hajar);
- *Nûr al-absâr*;[30]
- two collections by Kurdish scholars: Xerpûtî and Qersî.

Many books on the life of the Prophet were studied, the most famous of which are titled *Siyar al-nabî*, *Qisas al-anbiyâ* and *Muhammad rasûl*.

A person who had read all of these books was considered a consummate scholar; the common people would refer to him as *melê heft 'ilmî* or *melê dozdeh 'ilmî*, "a mele of the seven (or twelve) sciences".

[1] This article is an abbreviated version of the author's *Xwendina medresê* [Medrese education] (Stockholm: Pencînar, 1993). It was translated from Kurdish and edited by Martin van Bruinessen, who also added the footnotes.

[2] These are the earliest great poets remembered as the founders of classical Kurdish literature. See for instance Mahmud Bayezidi's remarks in A. Jaba, *Receuil de notices et de récits kourdes* (St-Pétersbourg, 1860), pp. 8-11. Xanî, the most recent of them, wrote in the late 17th century. All of them emerged from the medrese; the works of Cizîrî and Xanî, especially, show a considerable knowledge of the religious sciences and are pervaded with sufi ideas.

[3] Kurdish *feqî* is derived from Arabic *faqîh*, "scholar of Muslim law" but has the more modest meaning of "student of the religious sciences." *Suxte* is the common Ottoman term for such students. The term *agird* has a more general meaning and can be used for anyone studying or learning a trade.

[4] Mahmud Bayezîdî was the teacher and chief informant of the Russian consul in Erzurum, Alexandre Jaba, at whose request he wrote a number of highly interesting books in Kurdish. Some of these were published by Jaba in 1860 in his *Recueil de notices et de récits kourdes*, others were published later by Soviet Kurdologists; especially his book on Kurdish custom and tradition (*Adat û rusûmname-i Ekradiye*, edited by M. B. Rudenko in *Nravy i obyčaj Kurdov*, Moscow 1963) is still of great interest.

[5] On Se'îdê Kurdî, see Rohat's paper in this volume.

[6] Everything that the villagers produced -- grain, fruits, sheep -- was subject to *zekat*, the Islamic tax. Of wheat, lentils and similar crops, one tenth was to be set apart as *zekat*; of sheep, one in forty. The *mele* was only one of various categories of lawful recipients of *zekat*.

[7] This brief text was printed, in the Arabic script with a Latinized transcription by the present author, by the publishing house Kurdistan in Stockholm in 1988.

[8] Written by Abû Shujâ' al-Isfâhânî (d. after 500/1106) and widely used wherever the Shafii school of Muslim law predominates. See Carl Brockelmann, *Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur*, Band I (henceforth: GAL I), 392; idem, *Supplementsband I* (henceforth S I), 676.

[9] Muhammad b. Qâsim al-Ghazzî was born in Gaza, Palestine, and died 918/1512 (GAL I, 392).

[10] Ibrâhîm al-Bâjûrî (d. 1277/1860) taught at Egypt's al-Azhar.

[11] Named after the author, `Izzaddîn Ibrâhîm al-Zanjânî (GAL I, 283). Used throughout the Muslim world.

[12] Also universally used; it has been elaborated upon in numerous commentaries (GAL I, 287; S I, 503-4).

[13] This commentary is mentioned in GAL S I, 304 but the author is not identified.

[14] *Al-Mughnî fi'l-nahw* was written by Ahmad al-Jârabardî, d. 746/1346 in Tabriz (GAL II, 193; S II, 257-8).

[15] Sa`d al-dîn Mas`ûd al-Taftazânî (d. 791/1389), *Sharh tasrîf al-Zanjânî* (GAL II, 215).

[16] Possibly this was the commentary on Birkawî's *Izhâr* (cf. item 21) by Zaynizâde Husayn, titled *Hall asrâr al-akhyâr ilâ i`râb izhâr al-asrâr* (GAL II, 441).

[17] Muhammad b. Pîr `Abdallâh Muhyî al-dîn al-Birkawî (d. 981/1573) was a famous Ottoman scholar. His *Izhâr al-asrâr* was widely used in Ottoman medreses. The commentary *Natâ'ij al-afkâr* was written by Mustafa b. Hamza Adali in 1085/1674 (GAL II, 441).

[18] Ibn Mâlik's *Alfiyya* is a famous and widely used text that explains the intricacies of Arabic grammar in thousand (*alf*) distichs. Suyûtî's commentary is titled *al-Bahja al-mardiyya* (GAL I, 299; S I, 524).

[19] *Al-Kâfiyya* by Jalâl al-dîn b. al-Hâjib. Jâmî's commentary, *al-Fawâ'id al-Diyâ'iyya* (written for his son Diyâ' al-dîn) was widely used, and numerous scholars wrote supercommentaries on it (GAL I, 304; S I, 533-4). Items 30, 31 and 32 in the list are such supercommentaries.

[20] *Mughnî 'l-tullâb*, written by Mahmûd al-Maghnisî (i.e., from Manisa in western Anatolia) is a commentary on the famous textbook of Aritotelian logic, *al-Isâghûjî* by Athîr al-dîn al-Abharî (d. 663/1265). See GAL S I, 543.

[21] Cf. item 5. This commentary is not listed in Brockelmann's GAL.

[22] A commentary by `Isâm al-dîn al-Isfarâ'inî is listed in GAL I, 304; S I, 533-4. The preceding work by `Abd al-Wahhâb is not listed.

[23] This must be the work by `Abd al-Hakîm al-Siyâlkûtî, which exists in print. According to GAL (S I, 533) it consists of superglosses to `Abd al-Ghafûr Lârî's glosses on Jâmî. Another `Abd al-Hakîm, al-Lahorî, also wrote glosses on Jâmî's work but these are relatively unknown (S I, 534).

[24] GAL II, 216. This is a commentary on the *Risâlat al-shamsiyya fî'l-qawâ'id al-mantiqiyya* by Najm al-dîn al-Kâtibî (GAL I, 466).

[25] *Sharh `aqâ'id al-Nasafî* (GAL II, 216), itself a commentary on the more basic work by al-Nasafî.

[26] *Jam` al-jawâmi`*, by Tâj al-dîn al-Subkî (GAL II, 89).

[27] With exception of the last-named two, all these works are well-known and widely used in other regions of the world where the Shafi'i school is dominant, such as Indonesia. A study of the medrese curriculum in Indonesia shows up great similarities with the one discussed here. (See M. van Bruinessen, "Kitab kuning: books in Arabic script used in the pesantren milieu", *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 146, 1990, 226-269, especially the discussion of the fiqh texts at 244-50.)

[28] The commentary is by Muhammad b. Muhammad `Allân al-Bakrî al-Siddîqî (GAL S I, 684; S II, 533-4).

[29] *al-Tadhkira bi ahwâl al-mawt wa ahwâl al-âkhira*, on death and eschatology by Shams al-dîn al-Ansârî al-Qurtubî (GAL I, 415).

[30] A collection of traditions concerning the Prophet's birth, by `Abdallâh al-Damlîjî (GAL II, 485).