

Mobilizing the Kurds in Turkey through Newroz Myth

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This presentation analyses the role of Newroz, which the Kurds accept as their traditional New Year festival, in the process of mobilization of the Kurds with the claim of separate identity in Turkey. It is argued that Newroz is utilized as an ideological tool in order to construct/create Kurdish cultural or national unity. This function of Newroz is examined through two theoretical perspectives which are related to each other. On the one hand, Newroz is taken as a myth which has been used in the construction of Kurdish national identity, and on the other hand, Newroz is considered as a tool for counter-hegemony against the hegemonic culture to create cultural unity among the Kurds. In what follows, first I will try to introduce Newroz and Kawa Legend for a better understanding the invention process of the myth. Then I will elaborate the construction process of the myth and its role in creating a cultural/national unity of Kurdish population in respect to different periods of Kurdish movement. Lastly, I will briefly mention the state's response to this counter hegemonic process.

Newroz is accepted by all Kurdish movements (including those in Iran, Iraq and Syria) as a common national festival today. However, its origin goes back to antiquity. It is known that, 21st of March, which is the symbol of arrival of spring, is a widely celebrated festival in agrarian societies of ancient Mesopotamia. On the other hand, with its Persian characteristics, which are also the origin of Kurdish version of Newroz, it is deeply rooted in the rituals and traditions of Zoroastrian belief system. After the advent of Islam to Iran, Newroz continued to exist by fusing with Islamic beliefs, among the people and in the palace. The Ottoman Palace, which has been largely affected by Persian Culture, has continued the Newroz tradition until its late times. Today, still, in Iranian calendar, the year starts with Newroz festival on March 21st and is divided into months according to the sun calendar. Newroz is also the beginning of the year for the peoples of former Iranian places like Afghanistan, Republic of Azerbaijan and Central Asian Republics.

Kawa legend represents the common founding myth as regards the entirety of Kurdish movements today. Kurdish nationalists took the Kawa legend especially from *Shahnama* of Firdausi. Firdausi tells the story of the snakes coming out of the shoulders of Dahhak because of the Devil's kiss. Dahhak cuts the snakes but they grow again from the place he cut. Hereupon, devil disguises as a doctor and advises Dahhak to let snakes eat human brain. Dahhak lets youths killed in order to feed the snakes on his shoulders with their brains. Meanwhile, two kind people start to work in the palace as cooks. When they see two youths brought to be killed, they feel pity for them, they kill only one of them, because they have to do, but mix the killed one's brain with sheep brain and give the other one his freedom. Those freed people go to mountains and plains to hide there and Kurdish tribes spring up from them. A blacksmith named Kawa comes to the palace and asks Dahhak to spare the life of his last son, who will be killed to let the snakes eat his brain. Dahhak accepts Kawa's wish but orders Kawa sign a document which tells Dahhak is an honest and fair man. However, after reading the document, Kawa refuses to sign, shouts the notables of the country signed it and quits the palace. After leaving there, Kawa starts an uprising against Dahhak, by making his blacksmith coat a flag. People in the market square support him and Kawa and his fellows go to Feridun, the prospected king. After a long fight, Feridun beats Dahhak and locks him up in Demavend Mountain, and he himself becomes king.

Today, the Kawa legend was united with Newroz, contrary to the fact that, according to *Shahnama*, the day that Feridun took over the throne celebrated as "Mihrgan" festival like in Zoroastrian belief, not on the day of Newroz. Also, some elements, including Feridun, were eliminated from the narrative and Kawa appeared as a Kurdish hero. Thereby, an antique festival has transformed into a modern and an influential ideological tool through integrating with the impressive story of blacksmith Kawa. With its legend of blacksmith Kawa, Newroz days connote "revolt against tyranny" for the Kurds.

Now, I will try to analyze approximately a hundred year lasting process of the construction of Newroz myth. It can be claimed that each specific phase of the construction process coincides with a specific moment in the Kurdish nationalist movement. In this regard, basically four moments of Kurdish nationalism can be

discussed. In the early phase, at the late-Ottoman period, Kurdish nationalism unfolded itself as an intellectual movement. One of the most important representatives of it was *Association for the Elevation of Kurdistan* published the journal *Jin* (Life, published between 1918 and 1919) and advocated a modern view of nationalism. They aimed at creating a modern nation, like in Europe, out of the traditional Kurdish society. The authors called on the Kurds to undertake the duty of “knowing themselves” and “making it known to others”, hitherto neglected by them. Beginning from the first issue of the journal, Kawa legend was attributed with a special significance as conceiving it as a myth of descent and resistance. The efforts of *Jin* writers regarding the Kawa legend was a fairly classical example of the construction of myths to be utilized as a tool during the process of nation building. What is striking here is that, they accepted the date of triumph of Kawa (not Feridun) over Dahhak as 31 August, which is date of another celebration from Demavend region of Iran called Iyd-i Kurd (Kurd’s fest). On the other hand, the day 21 March remained as a “New Year’s Day” in the *Jin* journal.

Another attempt of constructing Newroz, or better to say Kawa myth, came from a former Ottoman pasha, Ihsan Nuri. After the foundation of the Turkish Republic as a nation-state in 1923, he led two rebellions (the Beytussebab, 1924 and Agri, 1930) as response to the Turkifying projects of Kemalism. After the defeat of great Agri revolt, he wrote his book *The Origin of the Kurds* during his presence in Iran. In his book, Ihsan Nuri strove to prove the existence of a separate Kurdish nation. The effort to find the origins of Kurds led Ihsan Nuri towards the Kawa legend as well and he claimed that the origins of the Kurds were narrated in the Kawa legend. However, he associated this legend with not Newroz, but the “Tol Hildan” (literary means taking revenge) festival. There were some other reasons for Ihsan Nuri for choosing Tol Hildan as the date of Kawa legend apart from the meaning of its name. As for Newroz, as a sophisticated intellectual, Ihsan Nuri was aware that it occupied a wide place in Iranian literature and it was a narrative not concerning Kawa legend.

After the suppression of the revolts, Kurdish nationalism entered a long term silence years under strict pressure of the state. During these silence years in Turkey the Kawa legend was united with the Newroz festival in the discourse of the Kurdish

movements in Iran and Iraq. However, the things had started to change by the 1960s, while Turkey was passing through a great transformation in terms of modernization. The expansion of national education and urbanization made the rise of socialist worker and student movements possible as in the case of other countries' experiences. The leftist organizations became an attracting political channel for the Kurdish migrated workers and students who faced poverty and discrimination in big industrial cities. As McDowall states, "it was only with the Left that Kurds felt they were treated more or less as equals". In the second half of 1970s, the Kurdish movement separated itself from the Turkish leftist movement and began to organize around Marxist Kurdish organizations. Following to Turkish left, they tried to reconstruct a Kurdish history and culture on the basis of class antagonism. Parallel to this, during this period, the Kawa legend was worked on with a new spirit. They elaborated the legend as a "progressive value" coming from the past. Again, the Feridun element of the legend was removed from the narrative. Kawa was not just a national leader, in the way it was stressed by the *Jin* journal writers or Ihsan Nuri; from now on, he was the proletarian vanguard who resisted by raising his smock as a flag for the "oppressed Kurdish people". For instance, a journal named itself *Kawa* described blacksmith Kawa as the "Spartacus of Kurdistan". Therefore, Newroz that was given meaning as such started to be appropriated as a tool, for creating counter hegemony in the current struggle against the hegemonic culture which was articulated by the Turkish state.

The period during which Kurdish nationalism was transformed into a people's movement around the axis of socialist ideas ended with the military coup at 12 September 1980. However, the military coup accelerated Kurdish nationalism with its extremely severe policy towards the Kurds. Diyarbakir military prison, where the leading members of Kurdish movements were put, was a pilot place of the policy of daunting and intimidating of the Kurds, as interpreted by the prisoners. An individual action, the suicide of the PKK (Kurdish Worker's Party) captive Mazlum Dogan at 21 March, Newroz day, in 1982 became a turning point since it was considered as a spark of resistance. The PKK, placing Mazlum Dogan's suicide in the Diyarbakir Prison as a political action at the centre of its discourse, proclaimed Newroz as the "symbol of the ideology of resistance" and Mazlum Dogan was

named as the “Contemporary Kawa”. Moreover, when the PKK started the armed struggle in 1984, it gained a considerable mass support.

For the official state discourse that accepts the citizens by definition as Turk, Newroz discourse of the PKK constituted a serious danger as well as the armed power of the party. Since they conceived this issue as a threat for the existence and the unity of the state rather than a political problem, the state officials developed the ideological policy of *Nevruz* (the Turkish version of the word) as a Turkish Festival. By this way, Newroz was tried to be presented as an element of the category of Turkishness. The ideological apparatuses of the state, including the publications and activities of Ministry of Culture, sermons (religious speeches) in mosques, books of primary, elementary and high schools, conferences of universities, training programs at the army, were all used for this discourse to be adopted. Thereafter, the struggle in order to fix the meaning of Newroz appeared as a struggle on the spelling of the name of the festival, Newroz vs. *Nevruz*.

To conclude, in this presentation, a story of construction of a myth is told and a hegemonic process over/through this myth is tried to be revealed. Kawa legend, constituting the central ingredient of Newroz, has the function of being a myth of origin or revival which enables the imagination of a Kurdish national unity. Through its role in creating homogeneous identity, Newroz becomes an instrument of “identity transfer” (Armstrong, 1982: 130); it enables a new identity to be superimposed on an older one. On the other hand, Newroz is an element of the common-sense neglected or excluded by the hegemonic culture, it is an “alternative story” (Williams, 1977). This aspect of Newroz enabled it to be a tool for the building of a counter-hegemonic discourse, by the help of blacksmith Kawa legend, again, which allows emphasis on “resistance”. The utilization of Newroz in mobilizing the Kurds resulted in a remarkable success, which gave rise to its turning out to be an ideological battlefield between Kurdish nationalism and the state. The state tried to absorb this counter-hegemonic element in its official discourse by adopting Newroz as an official festival and declaring it as an element of the category of Turkishness.