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Foreword

'Kurdish Studies' is a relatively new subject that is managing, slowly but surely, to establish itself and to develop in an academic climate that is generally none too welcoming to the Humanities. It would be good, though perhaps utopian, to think that this gradual acceptance of Kurdish Studies is due to a public awareness of the invaluable services rendered to Western culture and politics by the academic study of other non-Western cultures. If governments, diplomats, journalists, businesspeople or academics need information about—or a better understanding of—the culture and history of Morocco, Thailand or Iran, that knowledge is readily available, largely because of the unremitting work of regional specialists. How valuable this is can be illustrated by comparing the wealth of our information on many non-Western cultures to the little that is currently known about the Kurds and the impulses and channels determining the politics of the (geopolitically vital) regions where they live. In other words, a glaring and perilous lacuna exists in the study of Near and Middle Eastern cultures as long as the Kurds are not recognized as deserving as much academic attention as other major ethnic groups of the region.

Admittedly, progress has been made in the field of Kurdish Studies since the final decades of the 20th century. In many Universities there is now at least an awareness of the subject, and academic output has increased in both quantity and quality. A few aspects of Kurdish cultural identity can now perhaps be said to be adequately covered.

Nevertheless, an enormous amount of factual information still needs to be collected before the next stages—the development of adequate theoretical approaches and the growth of a reliable body of knowledge—can prosper, and the general public will be able to acquire a realistic understanding of the Kurds and their view(s) of the world.

The current status of Kurdish Studies as a young academic pursuit with a firm toehold in Academia offers both challenges and opportunities. Whilst older and more established branches of non-Western Studies are currently grappling with the paradigm-change that was initiated by the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), Kurdish Studies can, so to speak, start with a clean slate. By the same token, however, it must find its own methodological approaches without the benefit of a tried and tested academic tradition.

A branch of Kurdish Studies that is perhaps particularly affected by the problem of finding new and appropriate methods, is the study of Kurdish Literature.

The study of comparative literature, as taught in Western Universities, tends to be remarkably Eurocentric in its focus and offers little support to students of Kurdish literature. Earlier ‘Orientalist’ approaches, moreover, are of little help. These generally assumed (perhaps unconsciously) the existence of an ‘essential’, unified and unchanging ‘culture’ (not unlike a Platonic ideal) underlying the various actual expressions of a given civilization. This essence was often implicitly taken to be directly reflected by literature, so that literary works could be studied without further query in order to elucidate the culture in question. The quest for ‘essences’ has largely fallen by the wayside in modern academia. While few would deny that literature can indeed provide information about common perceptions and historical realities at a given point of time, no overarching theory appears to exist today that would facilitate the process of interpretation of Kurdish literature. Add to this the scarcity of Kurdologists in University posts, and the fact that most students of other non-Western literatures focus on written texts whereas the literary traditions of the Kurds were predominantly oral—and one can see the difficulties faced by those who seek to build a structure of knowledge that can help us to interpret and evaluate Kurdish literary works in their proper context.

The present work, *Kurdish Art and Identity: Verbal Art, Self-definition and Recent History*, seeks to do just that, by bringing together a series of essays representing a range of subjects and methodological approaches. In doing this, it illustrates both the range of possible subjects of ‘Kurdish Literary Studies’ (Lakki Poetry and Zazaki folktales, the Kurdish great epics and *Dengbêjî*), and some of its methodological approaches (Orality and Folklore, the Oral-Formulaic Theory, Jungian Psychology applied to the Kurdish stepmother, the impact of *Dengbêjî* on Kurdish Theater). Perhaps to stress the fact that literature always exists in a particular political and cultural environment, the work’s valuable study on ethnicity and politics in early Ottoman Kurdistan is a welcome contribution.

Dr. Korangy is to be commended for publishing this addition to the growing, but still limited number of academic works on Kurdish literary theory and practice. May the book give rise to debate and development, leading to a better theoretical understanding of a fascinating literature, and an increased awareness of the emerging discipline of ‘Kurdish Studies’.

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