



EDUCATION VI. THE MADRASA IN SUNNI KURDISTAN

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Preparation for the madrasa. Until the mid-20th century the pursuit of education in Kurdistan was possible only through mosques, as only mullas were literate. Concomitant with their function as places of worship, mosques served as social centers and as rest houses for travelers and itinerant mendicants. Every mosque also contained a chamber called a *hojra*, where the mulla offered lessons in religion and theology free of charge to Muslim boys. Boys, though very seldom girls, began their studies at the age of seven years. Instructors would be hired for girls at home, or they would memorize the Qur'ān under barely literate widows or blind women (also called mullas) who held mixed classes for boys and girls in their homes. Such schools were called *qotāb-kānas* (*kottāb-kānas*), and the pupils were known as *qotābīs* (*kottābīs*). At this stage education consisted of learning the alphabet and the expressions *Yā Allāh*, *Yā razzāq*, and *Yā fattāḥ* (O God! O Provider! O Conqueror!). Thereafter they learned *al-Ḥamd* (sura 1) and 'Ammā joz' (suras 78-114) of the Qur'ān, together with spelling. Beside the Qur'ān they studied books in Persian like *Esmā'īl-nāma* and *Nāgahān*, as well as the Kurdish *Rol'abzānī* (My child, you must know), about the fundamentals of religion. The mulla received small payments in cash or kind from parents. Students who successfully completed



their education as *qotābīs*, between the ages of twelve and fifteen years, could either enter the service of local khans as secretaries or scribes (*mīrzās*) or enroll in the *madrasa* or *faqyatī* (seminary).

The madrasa. The student at the *madrasa* was engaged solely in Arabic language and theological studies, in preparation for becoming a mulla. *Madrasa* education was divided into two basic stages: In the first students were known as *soḳtas*, in the second as *mosta'edds*. *Soḳtas* studied under the *mosta'edds* and were obedient to them. They performed all their own daily chores, as well as those of the *mosta'edds* and the *hojra*.

In this traditional educational system the student was considered a *soḳta* until he had completed 'Abd-al-Raḥmān Jāmī's *Naḥw* (see below); he was then promoted to the level of *mosta'edd*. This sequence was neither defined nor universal, however. It was the teacher's level of knowledge and mastery of his subject matter that largely determined the student's preparedness. It was possible, for example, for a student who had completed the study of Jāmī and been promoted to *mosta'edd* under one instructor to find himself in the ranks of the *soḳtas* under another.

Soḳtas studied Arabic conjugation and syntax (*ṣarf wa naḥw*), logic, rules of disputation and rhetoric, theology (*kalām*), rhetoric (*balāḡa*), exposition (*bayān*), style (*badī' wa ma'ānī*), methods of deriving religious rulings (*oṣūl-e feqh*), astronomy and astrology (*falakīyāt*), prosody (*'arūḏ*), Shafī'ite canon law (*šar'*), Qur'ān commentary (*tafsīr*), and Hadith. Among the books they were expected to study were Ebrāhīm Zanjānī's *Taṣrīf* (conjugation of verbs); Mollā 'Alī Ašnawī Šayḳānī's *Taṣrīf* (conjugation of verbs), the commentary *Šarḥ-e neẓām* by Sayyed 'Abd-Allāh (conjugation), Mīr Sayyed Šarīf Jorjānī's *'Awāmel* (syntax), *Onmūdaj* (syntax) by Maḥmūd b. 'Omar Zamaḳšarī and the commentary on it by Jamāl-al-Dīn 'Abd-al-Ġanī Ardabilī, Jāmī's *Naḥw* (syntax), Aristotle's *Īsāḡūjī* (logic), 'Abd-Allāh b. Ḥosayn Yazdī's commentary on *Tahḏīb al-manṭeq wa'l-kalām* by Sa'd-al-Dīn Mas'ūd Taftāzānī (logic), Mollā Esmā'īl Galanbavī's *Borhān* (logic), his *Ādāb* (disputation), 'Abd-al-Waḥḥāb Tāj-al-Dīn Sobkī's *Jam' al-jawāme' fi'l-oṣūl* (jurisprudence), Abū Zakarīyā Yaḥyā Nawawī's *Menḥāj al-ṭālebīn* or *Faṭḥ al-mo'īn* (canon law), and 'Abd-Allāh 'Omar Bayzāwī's *Anwār al-tanzīl wa asrār al-ta'wīl*, known as *Tafsīr* (commentary on the Qur'ān). The more intelligent and motivated students could also study history, mathematics, natural sciences, and other subjects.

Although the textbooks and their annotations were generally in Arabic, the



language of the classroom was Kurdish. *Soḳtas* had to learn the texts by rote, and no student studied more than two subjects on a single day. Classes did not meet on Tuesdays and Fridays or in the month of Ramaḏān. Students had no extracurricular pursuits. Teachers had the additional duties of settling religious questions and matters that touched the lives of ordinary people, as well as fulfilling, in the absence of a government bureaucracy, the functions of the judiciary and the registry (births, deaths, marriages, and divorces). Each locality provided for its mulla and students from its own resources, sometimes from religious endowments (*waqf*). Every Friday evening the *soḳtas* scattered through the various urban neighborhoods or village streets, visiting each home and asking for money, bread, and other food, a practice known in Kurdish as *rātba*. They also visited farmers and tent dwellers at harvest time, in order to obtain grains, legumes, and dairy products for the winter (*daqna*). Their visits were generally welcomed, and they were offered what was available, for most people believed that it was pleasing to God to supply students with the pick of the crops. During Ramaḏān each seminarian visited a village that had no mulla or prayer leader and assumed religious responsibilities for the month, being known as Malā Ramaḏānē (mollā-ye Ramaḏān). At the end of this period he received obligatory alms (*feṭrīya* and *zakāt*), which provided him with means to acquire such necessities as books, pens, sugar, and tea.

Mosta'eds studied directly under a mulla. Instruction was through questions and answers. They were free to choose their teachers; a student displeased with a particular teacher's competence could leave him and study with someone else. Seminarians were not allowed to marry; they did much to propagate knowledge of Islam and culture in remote areas and to promote the homogeneity of customs and traditions in the various Kurdish territories. Their lives were fraught with hardship, and they spent a great deal of time hungry and in poverty.

After completing his education and mastering the so-called "twelve sciences" (Arabic grammar; logic; Hadith; rhetoric; law; Shafi'ite jurisprudence; theology; argumentation; Persian and Arabic literature; history and geography; and mathematics, astronomy, and the natural sciences) the student would request from his teacher an authorization to issue legal opinions (*fatwās*) and to practice independent judgment (*ejteḥād*). The authorization letter typically began as follows: "The rank of learning is a lofty one, a beam among the rays of divine light. He who attains unto it shall be saved and



honored in both worlds.” The writer would add that the student “has asked me to grant him an authorization to teach, which I have done, provided he guards it dutifully, just as it was given me.” At this point he would list the chain of his authorities, going all the way back to the Prophet Moḥammad and to the angel Gabriel. After reading aloud the letter of authorization, the teacher would invest the student with clerical robes.

In Kurdistan education was formerly in the hands of a few learned families, like the Barzanjīs, the Čūrīs, the Ḥaydarīs, the Dakīs, and the Mardūkīs. The important educational centers were the Dār al-Eḥsān mosque in Sanandaj; the mosque at Solaymānīya in Iraq; Mahābād; Torjān, a village near Būkān; and Abā ‘Obayda, a village in Iraqī Kurdistan.

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