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## NEW MIDDLE EASTERN REVIEWS

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### **Rediscovering Kurdistan's Cultures and Identities: The Call of the Cricket**

Joanna Bocheńska (ed.)

London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, 343 pp., €103,99 (Hardcover)

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The academic field of Kurdish studies has experienced considerable growth in recent years. Compared to the later decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that were characterized by the scarcity and scattering of resources and researches on Kurdish subjects, today one can find an ever-growing variety of studies in international languages to satisfy his/her own curiosity on this matter. Recent political developments in the region (i.e. the involvement of Kurdish groups in the resistance against the ISIS, the relative self-determination of the Kurds in Syria, the resurgence of armed conflict in Turkey since 2015 after the failure of the so-called “peace process”, and the referendum on the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan in 2017) have raised academic interest and increasingly put the Kurds on the world agenda. By itself, this can be heralded as a positive development in Middle Eastern studies at large; however – and this is the main argument and the foundational stance of the book here reviewed – this recent attention has been predominantly structured along narratives of “conflict and resistance” that often prevent us from seeing other aspects of Kurdish culture and society. Indeed, the amount of academic production related to the Kurdish culture at large is significantly, and perhaps disproportionately, lower than that regarding geopolitical, political and military aspects. Nevertheless, now – in the nick of the time – the volume entitled *Rediscovering Kurdistan's Cultures and Identities: The Call of the Cricket* has emerged with the aim of counterbalancing the above disproportion. The incessant noise of the “wars” that surrounds the Kurds prevent the external observer from listening to the Kurds’ own voice and this book self-admittedly contribute in raising the volume and strive towards making them audible.

The volume edited by Joanna Bocheńska has a genuinely Polish origin, as funds for research were provided by the Polish National Science Centre and all the contributors are based at Polish universities (in fact, all but one of them are based at the Jagiellonian University). The book is comprised of six research chapters and one introduction that, while providing information on the socio-political contexts of the four parts of Kurdistan in Turkey, Syrian, Iran, Iraq and in the diaspora, also discloses the main theoretical pillars that inspired the research and sustain the organization of the book. Chapters 2 and 3, respectively by Joanna Bocheńska and Renata Kurpiewaska-Korbut, focus on the Kurdish cultural production and organisation of cultural institutions. Chapter 4 by Karol Kaczorowski, deals with Kurds’ practices to respond to social “othering” experienced in Istanbul, Turkey. Chapter 5 by

Marcin Rzepka is a fascinating account of the translations of the Bible to Kurdish language and the (mis)perceptions of the Kurds in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by European missionaries, whilst Chapters 6 and 7, respectively by Krzysztof Lalik and Artur Rodziewicz, analyse Kurdistan's "others", namely the Chaldo-Assyrian and the Yazidi communities and their processes of identity construction in relation with the Kurds.

The chapter authored by Bocheńska takes on the role of explaining in further details the theoretical foundations of the book and its aim to move beyond categorizations of conflict and oppression, heroism and victimhood. Moreover, the author/editor is convinced that developing the ability to focus on beauty (hence cultural production at large) may help prevent further violence and conflict. Her analysis revolves around concepts of honour vis-à-vis dignity, as she tries to highlight the ethical transformations that have occurred in Kurdish society and reflected in literary and cinematic imaginations. Bocheńska retraces the phases of the evolution of the Kurdish ethical worldview from an honour-based mind-set to a dignity-based one, studying the main historical literary sources of the Kurdish tradition (Şerefxanê Bedlîsî, Ehmedê Xanî, the legends of Memê Alan and Dimdim, just to mention a few) and comparing them with literary works produced in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, particularly under the influence of the ideology of nationalism, and the 21<sup>st</sup> century (key writers here are Mehmed Uzun, Hesenê Metê, Firat Cewerî, Jan Dost, Bachtyar Ali, Mehmet Dicle), when what the author calls "a new moral imagination" (61) began to manifest. It could also be that such a general perception has become common as Bocheńska is convinced that the imagination of new ethical codes in aesthetic works foreruns moral transformations. These authors produce the aesthetic transformations that go beyond the honour based mind-set, but also further away from the nationalist moral framework which "regurgitates the traditional vision of the world" (65), namely the old moral dichotomy of "us" (dignified humans) against a de-humanized "them".

If Bocheńska is concerned with the moral imagination emerging from the little known Kurdish cultural production, Kurpiewska-Korbut focuses on the "organizational field" (107) of Kurdish cultural institutions in Iraqi and Turkish Kurdistan. In fact, the autonomy of the Kurdish region in Iraq and the firm control of the municipalities by pro-Kurdish parties in the south east of Turkey, between 1999 and 2016, have created an unprecedented opportunity space for an institutional support of Kurdish culture. These first two chapters are linked by their focus on Kurdish cultural production, but with Chapter 3, the direction of the book changes. Kaczorowski provides us an ethnography of Kurdish youth in Istanbul and their cultural practices implemented to counter the "othering" experienced in urban spaces heavily charged with Turkish nationalist supremacy. The article recognizes different waves of Kurdish migration to Istanbul and deliberately concentrates on the movements occurred between 2002 and 2015 – a period characterized by voluntary migration. Through extensive interviews, the author discusses behaviours, use of symbols and practices of representation of space implemented by the Kurdish youth in Istanbul in order to counter the perceived stigmas.

The following chapter by Rzepka is the only one in the volume that does not have a contemporary focus and instead deals with a particular historical period – specifically examining the period when missionaries became interested in the Kurdish speaking Christian community and planned Kurdish translations of the Bible. The interesting point here is that

what might be accurately read as a proper colonial endeavour turns out to be the start of a textual tradition in Kurdish language, later becoming a stimulus for the development of native literature.

More often than not, Kurds are described as a minority group in all the four main countries in which they live. Their political actions and cultural behaviour are generally understood in relation with dominant cultures (i.e. Turkish, Persian, Arab). Nonetheless, there are contexts in which the Kurds are an overwhelming majority. As such, various different groups behave and adjust their stance in relation with the Kurdish dominant culture. This issue is precisely the focus of the last two chapters of the volume – which focus on the Chaldo-Assyrian and Yezidi groups living in Iraqi Kurdistan.

The book entitled *Rediscovering Kurdistan's Cultures and Identities* is of great interest to anyone identifying with the academic field of Kurdish studies and in particular to those interested in the cultural aspects of Kurdishness, or in overcoming the established socio-political characterizations of the Kurds. Despite offering a well-written historical introduction to the subject, the present volume requires a certain amount of knowledge in Kurdish history and society by the reader, therefore it may not be considered an entrance book to the field. Nonetheless, it provides a novel approach to the Kurds and their cultural expressions – which is not at all easy to find in academic publications in our times. In itself, this book reaches a number of important objectives, most of all that of shifting the mainstream perspectives about the Kurds, but we may hope that it can be considered an inception for further and deeper analysis on contemporary aspects of Kurdish humanities. As such, the contributions of this volume need to be supported with many more works in the near future in order to have a more comprehensive understanding of how Kurds are interpreting the challenges of the present time, not only in political and military terms but also in cultural terms.