

ART & MEDIA FILES **Zaré and Kurds-Yezids** **The representation of the Kurds in two Soviet Armenian films¹**

The history of the Armenian-Kurdish cultural relations showcases a variety of interesting facts. The history between the Kurdish and Armenian cultures goes back to the Ottoman Empire and soviet Armenia, till recent years with the formation of the Republic of Armenia. In the Ottoman Empire era, the Armenian-Kurdish relations were characterized by continuous conflict. However, in Armenia such relations had a peaceful nature. Kurdish people always consider Armenia a country with best ground for the protection of their national identity. For more than seventy years, Armenians have had the possibility to have a state structure within the borders of a large Soviet empire and to promote the culture of one of its ethnic minorities: the Kurds. The Armenian Kurds have a dedicated radio program in Kurdish, a newspaper in Kurdish language called *Rya Taza* [New Way]; a Kurdish group within the Armenian Writers Union was in charge of reviewing contents in Kurdish language in a yearly almanac. The Kurdish of Armenia have their national organizations as well (“Kurdistan” committee, “Armenia’s Kurdish Community”). Several Armenian artists and intellectuals played a central role in the cultural development of an imaginary Kurdish nation in fields such as literature², translation³, music⁴ and theater⁵. Such intellectual turmoil created a fictional form of Kurdish folk, which outbursted in several artistic expressions, and generated Kurdish heroes well presented in literature⁶, theatre, paintings, as well as in cinema.

The first films that represented Armenian Kurds were produced in Russia in the 10s. The first feature film that focused on Armenian Kurds was entitled *Under the Kurdish Yoke* (*Pod vlyasyu kurdiv*) – also known in Europe as *The Tragedy of Turkish Armenia* – and was shot by the Russian director A.I. Minervin in 1915. Unfortunately, in spite of its historical relevance, this film is now lost. However, some production documents and stills have survived. This movie was produced in October 1915. The protagonist was played by Armenian actor Bayatov. The plot of this film narrates the fate of an Armenian girl, who was apprehended by the Kurds and confined within a harem. Her fiancée liberates her from the harem and they both join a group of Armenian militia⁷. Such film presents the Kurds as rivals of the Armenians. The title *Under the Yoke of Kurds* itself presents some inconsistency: Armenia, in fact, after being defeated by the Ottomans, lived under their yoke (and not the Kurds’) for six centuries. However, as recorded by history, Armenian-Kurdish relationships have been marked by critical and obscure events. The Kurdish beks (princes) submitted Armenian peasants with cruel oppression; many Kurdish lined up with Turk rulers in the process of Armenian genocide, between 1915-1923⁸.

Zaré

The depiction of the Kurdish culture has been pivotal in Armenian cinema from its very origins (during the 20s), being at the same time an artistic choice and a social and historical responsibility. The first Armenian feature film dedicated to Kurdish culture was entitled *Zaré*, directed by Hamo Beknazaryn in 1926⁹. The story was inspired by the text *Zaré* written by the Armenian author Abé Lazo.¹⁰ In the plot, a romantic love story is intertwined with social issues. The actions of the film evolve on the background of the First World War, and narrates the oppression of the Kurds as well as the conflicts of classes. According to film critic Suren Hasmikyan, *Zaré* – as well as the subsequent film entitled *Khaspush*, directed by Beknazaryn in 1927 – proved that Armenian filmmakers were not only interested in recounting their national problems, but were also compassionate towards other ethnic groups undergoing similar cruelties. Suren Hasmikyan wrote that:

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These films were perceived as conceptual films, which represented an “*unvarnished east*”. In contrast to the oriental films, which depict Asia as a land of exotic wonders and horrors, early Armenian films reflect the reality of life and reveal the east as a knot of contradictions, in which the chains of slavery and stagnant customs are slowly beginning to break.¹¹

Zaré was based on a new ideology and esthetics. As Beknazaryan has written in his memoirs, the German films about the Orient helped him to understand how the films with Oriental plots actually should not be made:

The Minaret of Death [*Minaret smerti*],¹² *Abrek Zaur*,¹³ my *Nataela*¹⁴ did not go beyond the foreign exotic “samples.” They were longing for the external beauty: velvet, brocade, *sherbet*, *rahat lakoum* and *hookah*, concubines dressed in veils and babbling of fountains. We should deny all that. The Soviet audience had grown so much that people could not tolerate such “eastern marmalade” anymore. The pre-Soviet Orient was obscure and unattractive in its brutal reality. Rags instead of brocade, poor cabins instead of palaces and harems, working women instead of concubines [...], despotism of mighty rulers and disfranchised state of poor people instead of enjoyments of love and longing for adventures, polygamy in order to gain cheap labor force. This was the truth about life in Orient.¹⁵

Beknazaryan was aware about such generalization when he decided to realize his film. According to his memoirs, the Kurdish were:

A nation that did not possess its own alphabet at that time, and about whom we have known very little. I had to study the customs and habits of different Kurdish tribes (*bruks*, *zukris*, *hasanis*, *jelalis*, *jhangiris* and others). In order to know their beliefs, social relations, engagements in comprehensive way, I had to investigate the following topics:

1. Beliefs – God, Satan, saints, prophets.
2. Social roles – el-bek, bek, sheikh, servants, witch-doctor, sorcerer.
3. Professions – shoemaker, barber, minstrel, shepherd, farmer, horseman.
4. Family, clan – husband and wife, polygamy, harem, groom, fiancée, daughter, relatives, matchmaker, widow, bride-money.
5. Public contacts – fatherland, foreign country, friendship, guest, neighbor, relationship, enemy, revenge.
6. Religion and morality – faith, heaven and hell, prayer, good and evil, hospitality, lawsuit, shame, pity, envy, honor.
7. Rites – birth, circumcision, wedding, death, funeral repast, grief, illness.
8. Relationship with nature, water.
9. Understandings about the world.
10. Costumes.¹⁶

This list shows the extent to which Beknazaryan was sophisticated and thoughtful while working on his new project. First of all, Beknazaryan and his group studied a variety of folkloric materials in the public library of Yerevan; however, he failed to find much information. Later Beknazaryan and his team organized three expeditions to explore the diverse locations of Kurdish nomads. In his memoirs Beknazaryan described the “extreme” hospitality of the Kurdish people, who always offered to wash their guests’ feet and wanted to feed them with rich sheep barbecue even though they were not hungry.

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The Kurds were enthusiastic to know the purpose that brought Beknazaryan to follow their journeys. As recorded by Beknazaryan himself, the Kurds used to say: "People think that we are bandits.... please show in cinema that we are poor nomad people, working the whole day."¹⁷ Beknazaryan studied the everyday life of Kurdish people, he purchased several Kurdish costumes and objects, and began to prepare for the shooting of the film.

The Kurdish peasants were involved in the shooting as extras. As Beknazaryan wrote: "It came out they were rather capable actors. They proved to be particularly good when they had to show their hate towards the beks and sheikhs (at that time they were not sent away yet, but they felt that their rule was coming to an end)." According to his memoirs, sometimes these Kurdish extras reacted badly to the realness of some scenes, as for instance the scene depicting the bride's exposure to public shame. At that time, in fact, the Kurds still had the habit of publicly dishonoring non-virgin brides painting their face black and taking them back to the paternal home sitting backwards on a donkey. During the shooting of this scene, a "zealous" Kurdish woman did not understand that the scene was actually staged and started to yell: "What you are waiting for? Spit on the face of this prostitute!" and spat on the actress's face. The crew really had a hard time calming her down and explaining the situation¹⁸.

Other similar incidents took place during the filming. Some Kurdish mothers, watching a scene in which wounded and invalid Kurdish soldiers were welcomed back by their own people, began to cry, as many of them lost their sons during the First World War. Some scenes required the crew, guided by some Kurds, to walk for 50 kilometers, and even to climb the Aragats mountain.

Beknazaryan wrote that *Zaré* was screened in 1926, a year after Eisenstein's famous *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925). In his diary, the director praises Eisenstein's method:

In his wonderful movie Eisenstein boldly used not only actors, but also people previously not connected to theatre or cinema, but whose appearances meet his artistic vision in certain scenes... In *Zaré* I was forced to do the same. Being far from the city, in the mountains, it was often very difficult for us to hire famous actors. In those cases, in order not to stop the shooting, we had to involve local people or "occasional" actors. Thus, the character of a Kurdish sheikh was successfully played by photographer Melik-Aghamalyan, who was already part of our crew. Filming the life of the Kurds had a fundamental significance to me. As I have already said, many of them turned to be good actors. However, this is not entirely correct. Undeniably, we did not require artistic "reincarnation" from the Kurdish shepherds. My aim was to portray them as naturalistic as possible. In order to do that, we had to recreate the conditions in which these "performers" could really be themselves. It is clear that they were not "acting": the women who spat on the actress's face, as well as the two mothers who went into hysterics in front of the wounded soldiers, were simply living their real emotions. This was true not only for Kurdish characters. For instance, even Z. Guramishvili, the tsarist police officer responsible of Kurdish affairs, participated in the film playing himself. Who else, if not him, was able to accurately present the full range of relations between the Tsarist police and the Kurds? I remember, when I still was in Yerevan, I saw a handsome man so very proud of his large mustaches [...] I attempted to convince him to act in the film. He finally agreed with difficulty. I did not require him anything except to portray himself in a natural way. And that succeeded completely.¹⁹

The experience of working with non-professional actors in *Zaré* has proved to be useful for Beknazaryan. The director, in fact, made similar cast choices for his following films, *Khaspush* (which represented the struggle of the poor in Iran against the oppressors) and *Igdenbu* (shot in 1930, about the shamanist nanay tribe in Russian Far East).

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Zaré represented an important experience for the actors involved as well. For the main role (*Zaré*), Beknazaryan chose Maria Tenazi (Mariam Tadevosyan), an Armenian actress who had only previously starred in a small role in a Georgian film. She gained popularity after the film, but unfortunately she died of tuberculosis a few years after its release, having starred only in three movies. Hrachya Nersisyan, famous Armenian theatre actor, who had already starred in *Namus* – the first Armenian feature film directed by Beknazaryan in 1925 – again proved himself in *Zaré* as a capable cinema actor.

Zaré was filmed in a month and eighteen days, a record for those times. The film was screened for the first time on January 31, 1927. According to Beknazaryan's memoirs: "When we were screening the film for the Kurds, the poor people were exclaiming *tau!* [good!] with admiration. While the representatives of wealthy groups, particularly the beks, were turning back from the screen, thus expressing their disapproval"²⁰. It was also screened in Moscow and in other big cities of the Soviet Union. After watching *Zaré*, Joseph Stalin declared: "From now on, only the Armenians should produce films about the life of Eastern people, as they are unparalleled in that field."²¹ The film was screened also outside the Soviet Union. In February 1931, it was screened in the film hall of Soviet cinema in New York City. The ticket price was 1,75 dollars²². The Armenian press in USA mentioned that:

In *Zaré Armenkino* [Armenian cinema] has moved toward perfection. The everyday life of naïve, simple [...] Kurds-Yezids of Soviet Armenia is presented in such beautiful and charming colours. The characters are so well rounded, the scenes are so natural and the whole plot is so well developed, that you feel as you are mingling with the crowd you see in the film. You wish to be a part of it, to live the everyday life of those naïve shepherds [...]. The spectators watch *Zaré* with particular pleasure because the evil and crime are defeated, the villains are beaten, and the loving couple, beautiful *Zaré* and shepherd Saydo, achieve their aim after various adventures... Everything ends like in a beautiful fairytale, and the spectators go home with a calm heart, envying Saydo, who is much happier than the immortals of heaven.²³

It is hard to overestimate the historical significance of *Zaré*. It is in fact not only an ethnographic document, since the representation of Kurds-Yezids' ethnic identity and everyday life is not an end in itself. As film critic Karen Kalantar has noted, the depiction of the way of life of the Kurdish people was used by Beknazaryan to try and solve the ideological issues that the film itself raises, such as those related to "orientalist" representations²⁴.

Kurds-Yezids

The second Armenian film based on the representation of Kurdish people was *Kurds-Yezids*, directed by Amasi Martirosyan in 1932. Even if Martirosyan was not as talented as Beknazaryan, *Kurds-Yezids* has a unique form. To represent the way of life of Kurds-Yezids people, in fact, the movie combines fiction and documentary. The film takes place during the early days of the Soviet Union, and tells the story of the establishment of collective farming in a Kurdish village in Armenia, focusing on the changes brought by such an event to the life of this nomadic population.

The first scenes of the movie represent the life of the Kurds-Yezids before the establishment of the Soviet Union's rules. Time seems to be "stationary" in this remote mountainous region. People are poor and illiterate, milking their sheep, and constantly exploited by the rich class. The sheikhs rule over the peasants, deceiving them by making them sign with their fingerprints documents they are not even able to read. The same sheikhs are also in charge of healthcare in the village, but they often let people die due to their incompetence and indifference.

After the Soviet Union's rules are established in the region, a female teacher (the first in Armenia) and a doctor arrive at the village. Two different and contrasting realities are thus represented on screen: a

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traditional world of backwardness, ignorance and poverty as opposed to a world of literacy, emancipation, culture, enlightenment and rationalism. The adult Yezidi peasants begin to attend schools and to read. Their women begin to take off their *yashmaks* and gradually become emancipated. The movie also shows the resistance of the old people in the village, who doubt whether their religion allows Kurds to be literate.

The film characters, though, lack any psychological depth, and the plot itself is not original or very well structured: for instance, the narration does not succeed in clearly explaining the relation between the campaigning against illiteracy and the solution to all the peasants' social problems. Yet all these aspects seem to be of secondary importance, as the originality of the film relies on its expressive qualities. The camera describes in detail the life of Kurd-Yezidis, juxtaposing faces, actions, and objects in close-up. Being filmed mainly en plein air, the movie also relies on the inner dramatic qualities of natural phenomena (for instance, fast running clouds) to create strong emotional effects. The film is also remarkable for its casting choices. Though the cast is composed by famous and easily recognizable actors from Armenian theater and cinema of the time, in *Kurds-Yezids* their acting style is completely different from what the average Armenian spectator was used to. In fact, the identification of the actors with their characters was so strong that they did not even seem to be acting.

British-Armenian director, author and critic Hovhanness I. Pilikian maintains that Martirosyan's film has the power of a documentary:

While the Kurdish question, like the Armenian, is one of those international thorny problems still un-solved and potentially dangerous to world-peace, it comes as a surprise to find out that the Armenians have contributed to its humanitarian context. Themselves hardly out of genocide and civil war, while licking their own wounds, Armenians do not forget their fellow-sufferers. [...] The film has the great merit of documenting the life and times of the Kurdish people at a crucial moment of history, when its fate of surviving among the cultural family of nations was in the process of being decided.²⁵

The film was screened for the first time in Yerevan, on January 3, 1933. The Moscow premiere took place on September 29, 1934. According to the film critic Sabir Rizayev, quoted by Pilikian:

The conflicts shown on the screen did exist then among real people, in the very midst of the spectators themselves. It has happened often during the first showing of the film that the audiences have reacted passionately, and vocally, shaking fists against this or that episode. The film is straightforward, and, with an amazing calm, presents the destruction of the old, and seemingly permanent.²⁶

Kurds-Yezids represents a very interesting and important movie, not only for its unquestionable documentary value (as a representation of the everyday life of this nomadic culture), but most of all for its technical mastery and expressive qualities: its fast tempo, its narrative economy and its editing style (directly linked to the principles of Soviet avant-garde of the 20s and 30s), make this film quite enjoyable even for today's audiences.

Conclusions

As a conclusion it could be stressed that Kurdish culture is presented in a positive way in the two films we have analysed. Among Armenian people the image of Kurds was generally negative, given that they were tools in the hands of Ottoman authorities and co-executors of Armenian genocide. Yet, the attitude was different toward Armenia's biggest Kurdish ethnic group, Yezidis, who actually supported

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Armenians' self-defence in 1910s. On the other hand, this positive depiction could be explained by the Soviet ideology of internationalism, one of the basis of socialistic realism. It is also important to note that the existence of Kurdish subjects in Armenian cinema is also a prove of the openness and tolerance of Armenian people toward a neighboring nation with whom they have had century-long unfriendly relations²⁷. In fact, although having a dominant position toward the Kurds – the Armenians possessed a national statehood and Kurds, once persecutors and oppressors of the Armenians, became national minority in Soviet and independent Armenia –, the Armenian filmmakers never ignored this culture or presented them in negative ways.

Artsvi Bakhchinyan

Notes

1. A version of this essay has been published in Müjde Arslan (ed.), *Kürt Sineması: Yurtsuzluk, Sınır ve Ölüm*, Agora Kitaplığı, İstanbul, 2009, pp. 40-55.
2. Already in 1872 Soghomon Yeghiazaryan, a student from Yerevan in Tiflis, has elaborated the grammar of Kurdish and the Armenian alphabet fitted to Kurdish language (see *Mshak* newspaper, 14.09.1872), a fact which remained unknown. It is also important to acknowledge the cultural activity of Armenian writer and translator Armenak Genjetsyan (1904–1945). He was the first editor-in-chief of *Rya Taza*, the Kurdish language newspaper in Armenia. He has written short stories in Kurdish under the penname Jardoye Genjo, made translations from Armenian and Russian into Kurdish. Genjetsyan was also the director of the Kurdish theater in Alagyaz.
3. An orientalist from Iran of Armenian-English extraction, Dr. James Grienfield (1873–1939) has translated several parts of the Bible into Kurdish.
4. Armenian composer Komitas (1869–1935) has studied Kurdish music and wrote widely about it. In 1903 he has published *K'rdakan yeghanakner* [Kurdish Melodies] in Moscow, including an a capella song in Kurdish along with Armenian and Latin transcriptions. Another Armenian composer, Allan Hovhannes (1911–2000) made elaborations of Kurdish songs.
5. In 1937-1947 there was a Kurdish theater in Aparan. In 1975 a Kurdish amateur theatre was organized in Alagyaz. On this subject see H. Hovakimyan, *Ejer Hayastani adrbejanakan yev qrdakan tatronneri patmutyunic* [Pages from the History of Azeri and Kurdish Theaters in Armenia], Erevan, Yerevan, 1976.
6. Many Armenian writers (Khachatur Abovyan, Raffi, Vrtanes Papazyan, Hovhannes Tumanyan, Avetik Isahakyan, Stepan Zoryan, Hovhannes Shiraz, Vakhtang Ananyan, Mkrtich Armen, etc.) had written various works with Kurdish heroes.
7. AA.VV., *Kinematografija Armenii* [The Cinema of Armenia], Moscow, 1962, p. 6-8 (in Russian).
8. On this subject see Karo Sasuni, *Kürt Ulusal Hareketleri ve Ermeni-Kürt İlişkileri (15 y. y. dan günümüze)*, Orfeus, Stockholm, 1986.
9. Beknazaryn is considered the pioneer of Armenian Cinema. Before *Zaré*, he filmed three feature films in Georgia, and one in Armenia entitled *Namus*. The latter was the first Armenian feature film successfully screened in the Soviet Union and abroad. Some Kurdish scholars suggest that Hamo Beknazaryan was Kurdish, motivating the name Hamo and the root “bek” in his family name. Actually the Beknazaryans were Armenians: the name Hamo is the shortened version of the Armenian name Hambardzum (Ascension) and the root “bek” exists in other Armenian family names as well.
10. Abé Lazo was the penname of Hakob Ghazaryan (1864–1926), who was an active cultural figure among Kurds and Yezidis in Caucasus. He was born in Gavar or Nor Bayazet town in Armenia, and died in Yerevan. A specialist of Caucasian languages, he was the founder of the first Kurdish boarding school in Tiflis. He organized public lectures on Kurds, and has staged theatrical performances

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in Kurdish language in 1921–1922. Hardly a year after joining the Soviet Union, the Armenian government opened eight Kurdish schools, and commissioned Lazo to invent the new Kurdish alphabet. Abé Lazo had written studies about Yezidis (*Yezidi People and His Epic*), short stories in Kurdish and in Armenian on Kurdish themes (*The Charge of the Girl, Jebri, Aso and Haso, Sayran*), as well as plays (*Gostil, Ghalan, Javharé Aghli*). He composed a Kurdish-Armenian dictionary. Lazo has written down and elaborated works from Yezidi folklore (*Malaki Tauz, Khazu*), composed and published the Kurdish ABC book *Shams* in 1921 and the handbook for adults *Sor Usder*. Lazo's alphabet and manuals erased the illiteracy of Soviet Kurds and produced the first Kurdish intellectuals. His archive is now preserved at the State Museum of Literature and Art in Yerevan.

11. Suren Hasmikyan, "Armenian Cinema: A Biographical Sketch", in Susanna Harutyunyan, Mikayel Stamboltsyan (eds), *Armenian Cinema Catalogue 1924–1999*, Erevan, Yerevan, 2001, p. 4.

12. Soviet film by Viacheslav Viskovsky, shot in 1925.

13. Soviet film by Boris Mikhin, shot in 1926.

14. Hamo Beknazaryan's film made in Georgia in 1925. The director is very critical about this movie, writing that it "obviously had the taste of *sherbet* and *rahat lakoum*" (see Hamo Beknazaryan, *Husher derasani yev kinorezhisyori* [Memoirs of an Artist and a Film Director], Yerevan, 1968, p. 135). Actually the "exotic" part is not prevailing in this film; exoticism functions here just as a slight stylization in order to represent the contrast between two opposite worlds (the rich and the poor). Even if the plot of *Nataela* was naïve and artificial, the importance of social analysis in the film is undeniable.

15. Hamo Beknazaryan, *op. cit.*, p. 150-151.

16. *Ivi*, p. 151.

17. *Ivi*, p. 152.

18. *Ivi*, p. 153.

19. *Ivi*, p. 154.

20. *Ivi*, p. 156.

21. Anon., "Zaré", *Baikar Daily*, Boston, 13/02/1931.

22. See the advertisement in *Baikar Daily*, 14/02/1931.

23. Anon. "Zaré", *cit.*

24. Karen Kalantar, *A. Bek-Nazarov*, Erevan, Yerevan, 1973, p. 44.

25. Hovhanness I. Pilikian, *Armenian Cinema*, Counter-Point Publications, London, 1982, p. 46.

26. *Ivi*, p. 47.

27. The interest of Armenian filmmakers toward the Kurdish culture (and vice-versa) is also testified by other more recent films. For instance, two films by Armenian director Frunze Dovlatyan – *Hello, That's Me (Barev, yes em, 1965)* and *Yerkunq [Delivery] (1976)* – present two minor (though rather impressive) characters of Kurdish women. It is also important to note that the first Kurdish language film, *A Song for Beko (Klamek ji bo Beko, Nizamettin Ariç, 1992)* was an Armenian-German joint project, produced by Margarita Voskanjan (Voskanyan), an Armenian film producer living in Germany. Armenian actors like Ashot Abrahamyan, Galya Novents (as Galina Novenz) and Ashot Yedigaryan have acted in this film. Moreover, contemporary Kurdish filmmaker from France, Hiner Saleem, has filmed three of his movies in Armenia – *Vive la mariée... et la libération du Kurdistan (1997)*, *Passeurs de rêves (2000)* and *Vodka Lemon (2003)* – widely using a local crew and some Armenian actors. Finally, Georgi Parajanov directed in 2007 the documentary *Children of Adam (Zarên Adem)*. This film portrays fragments of the life of Yezidis in contemporary Armenia, who still manage to preserve their ancient traditions and culture within the globalized world of the 21st century.