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The *Filiative* and *Affiliative* in the Epic of *Kurroglu*:

Shifting the Principles of Epic Poetry

Introduction

In *Beginnings*, Said discusses the relationship between modernism and the concepts of *filiation* and *affiliation*. He explains:

[M]odernism was an aesthetic and ideological phenomenon that was a response to the crisis of what could be called *filiation*—linear, biologically grounded process, that which ties children to their parents—which produced the counter-crisis within modernism of *affiliation*, that is, those creeds, philosophies, and visions re-assembling the world in new non-familial ways. (Said, *Beginnings*, xiii)

He later discusses how modernism came to be defined by attempts to redefine the world based on social, political, and professional organizations that relied upon constructed or “adopted” relationships, not biological connections. However, in his discussion of *filiation* and *affiliation*, Said primarily focuses on modernism. The purpose of this paper is to examine these concepts as they can be applied to epic poetry. More specifically, this paper will examine the roles of *filiation* and *affiliation* in the epic of *Kurroglu*. It will demonstrate how, relative to other Near Eastern epic, *Kurroglu* further shifts the organizing principles of epic poetry from the *filiative* to the *affiliative*. In demonstrating *Kurroglu*'s effect upon the shifting the organizing principles of

epic poetry, this paper will help explain why the epic of *Kurroglu* has been so easily “adopted” by other cultures.

This paper will use Said’s definitions of the *affiliative* and *filiative*. The *filiative*, then, will be defined as a “linear, biologically grounded process, that which ties children to their parents.” The word comes to English via Latin, *filius*, *filia*, meaning “son, daughter.” These relationships are linear and familial, grounded biologically and generationally. In contrast to this concept is the *affiliative*. Although today the word simply describes something being attached or connected to another, its connotations are more complex. The word also comes to English via Latin *filius*, but with the prefix *ad*, meaning “to, toward.” Literally, the word means “to adopt as a son,” which is how it was used in the Middle Ages. Unlike *filiative* relationships, *affiliative* relationships may be constructed or “adopted.”

Epic poetry is an art form that is strongly associated with *filiative* relationships. The stories of epic poetry, for instance, are often tied to the national mythology of a people: the *Odyssey* being tied to Greek mythology, the *Gilgamesh* to that of Mesopotamia, the *Aeneid* to that of Rome. The heroes they describe are also defined ethnically or biologically, and often these heroes must somehow deal with an ethnically or biologically defined “other.” In the *Aeneid*, Aeneas must flee Greek armies, tempt the Carthaginian queen, and defeat the Latins—all ethnically defined others—before he builds his own nation, the precursor to Rome. In the Armenian epic, *Daredevils of Sassoun*, the line of Armenian heroes must constantly defend Armenian settlements from aggressive Egyptians. In the *Shahnameh*, the hero Rostam must defend Persians from the warring Turanians across the Oxus. In all of these cases, a hero belonging to the epic poem’s home culture defends or founds a nation after defeating ethnically defined others. These examples and others demonstrate the many *filiative* assumptions that

underlie epic poetry. Family and ethnicity define relationships, and the enemy is defined by his ethnic “otherness.” Note that the “other” makes no choice to affiliate with the “others”; he is defined as such by his birth. This is one reason that epic poems are often associated with a single nation. Although other cultures may enjoy the stories, the poems typically glorify one people over others.

Interestingly, the epic of *Kurroglu* breaks from this pattern. The poem tells the tale of Roushan, the son of a blind stable-master (“Kurroglu” literally means “son of the blind man”). The king wrongly blinds the stable-master in a fit of anger. The blinded stable-master helps his son acquire a magical steed, Kyrat, and become a powerful warrior. With his steed and strength, Kurroglu becomes a famous warrior bard, attracting a following of fellow outlaws. With his band, he preys upon the merchant caravans of eastern Anatolia and lives the life of a brigand and adventurer. Unlike other epic poetry, Kurroglu is not himself tied to a specific nation or people. Rather, he is a vagabond, drifting on the roads and borders between many peoples. Likewise, the epic itself drifts among different cultures. Often designated as a “Turkic” epic, *Kurroglu* is spread throughout the Turkic world: Azeris, Turkmen, and other Turks all have their own versions of this tale. In addition, non-Turkic people have adopted the epic as their own. Alexander Chodzko’s 1842 *Specimens of the Popular Poetry of Persia*, is a version of the epic popular among Iranian Persians. In addition, Armenians who were settled in eastern Anatolia also have versions of the story. Some scholars even contend the epic may have its origins in Armenia.¹

Locating the precise origins of the *Kurroglu* epic is beyond the scope of this paper.

However, it is interesting to note that this story, relative to its peers in Near Eastern epic, has

¹ See lecture by Professor James Russell, “From Parthia to Robin Hood: The Armenian Version of the Epic of the Blind Man's Son (Köroghlu),” delivered on September 17, 2009 at the National Association for Armenian Studies and Research

been so easily appropriated by so many different peoples. This paper asserts that one reason for *Kurroglu's* flexibility among different cultures is that *Kurroglu* largely shifts the *filiative* organizing principles of epic to a more *affiliative* paradigm. By shifting these organizing principles to a more *affiliative* paradigm, the poem becomes a prime target for “adoption” by other cultures. This paper will focus on three examples of this shifting paradigm: Kurroglu’s independence from traditional political power centers, his ethnically flexible identity and cultural affiliations, and also his large number of “adopted” familial relationships.

Kurroglu's Independence from Traditional Cultural and Political Relationships

One way in which the epic of *Kurroglu* shifts these organizing principles of epic poetry to a more *affiliative* paradigm is Kurroglu’s independence from traditional cultural and political relationships. Throughout the poem, Kurroglu lives as a bandit in *Chamly-Bill*, where his fortress and gang of bandits resides. His lifestyle itself is defined by being outside of the borders of traditional cultural and political borders. He and his bandits roam the borders of kingdoms and along the unguarded roads, where they can prey on unprotected merchant caravans. Kurroglu himself was divorced of political allegiance from a young age. After the Shah wrongly blinds his father Mizra-Serraf, Kurroglu meets the unjust Perisan king. Seeing the gravity of his mistake, the Shah offers Kurroglu the impressive post of *Sirdar*, commander-in-chief of the Shah’s armed forces. However, Kurroglu refuses the post and runs away from the Shah’s realm with his father (Chodzko 26). This refusal demonstrates Kurroglu’s divorce from the political system. The heroes of other Near Eastern epics are often at least somehow integrated into and beholden to a traditional political system. For instance, in the *Shahnameh*, Rostam lives his life in service of the Persian king and defending the Persian people. Even the heroes in *David of Sassoun* were in a way tied to the Armenian political system. Despite their reputation of being “daredevils” and

“madmen,” these warriors often defended Armenian cities and villages as *de facto* commanders. In this way, they were defenders of the Armenian village as a political unit. Such a post was important to these heroes. Kurroglu’s refusal, then, represents both Kurroglu’s personal departure from the political system as well as the poem’s departure from the epic tradition of heroes beholden to a political system.

Later, Mirza-Serraf reinforces his son’s political independence with his dying wishes. After they have escaped from the Shah’s realm Mirza-Serraf falls ill. As he is dying, he leaves Kurroglu with advice to remain politically independent: “[The Shah of Persia] will summon thee to his court. Thou shalt not go thither, my son; but, on the other hand, thou must not revolt against the shah” (29). Mirza-Serraf advises his son to refuse any summons to go serve the Shah but also points out that his son ought not actively work against the Shah. The implication in his words is that Kurroglu should remain politically neutral; Kurroglu should not go out of his way to help the Shah, nor should he go out of his way to expedite the Shah’s downfall. It is interesting that a man who met his ruin because of the Shah’s injustice would so strongly advise neutrality to his powerful son. Mirza-Serraf’s dying wish seems to have affected Kurroglu, who goes on to lead a largely apolitical life. Kurroglu’s adventures are mainly driven by his own desires. He robs caravans for food and wealth; he kidnaps his adopted son Ayvaz because he is handsome; he seeks out many wives and mistresses to fill his harem because they are beautiful. These goals are not those of a hero beholden to a nation or a king but of a hero who lives outside the traditional borders of any single nation or political structure.

In addition, Kurroglu’s sense of justice is not tied to a single nation or tradition. Rather, Kurroglu follows his own desires and sense of justice. For example, just before leading his newly acquired band of warrior bandits to raid a merchant caravan in the valley of *Gazly-gull*,

Kurroglu explains, “My brave soldiers,—my friends! I am not a king, and therefore have no treasures. But as I have engaged you in my service, I must find you enough to eat, and I must furnish you with something to drink occasionally.” (37) In his statement, Kurroglu points out specifically that his is not a king. This is important because the hero clearly disavows himself of any political authority that his strength and his position leading the band might imply. In this way, he follows through with his father’s wishes that he avoid becoming beholden to any political power or that he himself become a political power. Also, it is important to note Kurroglu’s explanation of why he must supply his men. Rather than supplying them for political or some political obligation, he does so because the band has been engaged in his “service.” That is, Kurroglu asserts that his obligation to provide for the men is purely a matter of *quid pro quo*, not the political obligation of a king or leader.

Another example of Kurroglu’s personal sense of justice appears when the hero is attempting to elope with Princess Nighara of Istanbul. Having snuck into the palace disguised as a holy *chavush* (a conductor of pilgrims to Mecca), the hero sends the princesses maids to fetch her. Meanwhile, he changes his costume into that of minstrel (Chodzko 117). Nighara, furious to find a minstrel instead of a holy man, begins flogging one of her servant girls. Kurroglu, however, flinches at this injustice, guilty that his trickery has led to the girl’s punishment: “Kurroglu was moved with compassion when he saw the poor girl thus unjustly whipped” (117). He ponders whether or not to intervene. At first, he consoles himself with religious and political justifications for the flogging, but eventually decides that indeed the flogging is unjust and must be stopped. He intervenes, declaring that, “the poor girl is innocent” (118). This episode is another example of Kurroglu acting out of his personal concept of morals, not one linked to a cultural or political system. Even though the hero reflects on possible religious, political, and

cultural justifications for him to allow the flogging to continue, and even though doing so would be in his best interests to keep intact the integrity of his disguise, the hero yields to his personal sense of justice and intervenes on behalf of the maid. In doing so, Kurroglu demonstrates his independence from a particular culture's moral standards. Instead, he follows a more adaptable personal code. In doing so, his character becomes one that many different cultures may easily relate to. Thus, the hero's personal code of ethics helps shift the organizing principles of the epic from those ethnically bound *filiative* relationships to an sense of justice that is easy to adopt by other cultures in an *affiliative* fashion.

Kurroglu's independence from traditional power structures stands in contrast to other epics, wherein the heroes oftentimes are beholden to political and cultural relationships of a certain nation that is opposed to another. As mentioned before, the heroes in the Persian *Shahnameh* and Armenian *Daredevils of Sassoun* are at least in some way part of the political and cultural centers, and in most cases even defending these structures. Other epic poems focus on a hero's attempt to found a nation, such as Virgil's *Aeneid*. With their stories focused on heroes who are somehow tied to the political and cultural institutions of a specific nation or people, these other epics demonstrate the importance of *filiative* relationships in their organizing principles. These *filiative* organizing principles make these other epics much less adaptable for other cultures. For example, the Egyptians would have to undertake massive revisions of the epic of Sassoun if they were to appropriate it for their own use; the Egyptian king Misra Melik and the Muslim Egyptians are one of among the great evils threatening the Armenians. In contrast, Kurroglu is a character much less bound by the *filiative* ties to a culture or people. As a result, the epic of *Kurroglu* is a poem with organizing principles that are somewhat more *affiliative*, based on ties that are created. Kurroglu associates himself not with a people to whom he is

biologically and linearly linked, but to a band of bandits with whom he has consciously decided to “affiliate.” As a result, the poem’s shifted organizing principles relative to other epic poems, the story of *Kurroglu* is one much more easily appropriated by other cultures. Although many assign the poem’s origin to Turkic central Asia, the story exists in Persian and Armenian epic tradition. Given the hero’s independence from traditional power structures, his flexibility for a number of cultures seems only natural.

Kurroglu’s Many Adopted Identities

In addition to his relative independence from traditional political and cultural power centers, Kurroglu as a hero is also quite flexible in adapting his identity to his needs. Throughout the poem, Kurroglu uses disguises to achieve his goals. As he seeks his adopted son Ayvaz, his wife the Princess Nighara, and his second wife Parizadda in Kars, Kurroglu uses disguises to infiltrate cultures outside of his own. The hero’s ability to adapt his identity to other cultures demonstrates another way in which the epic of *Kurroglu* shifts the organizing principles of epic from the *filiative* to the *affiliative*. As the hero’s flexible identity allows him to “affiliate” with cultures outside of his own, so too does the poem’s flexible hero allow the poem to become “affiliated” by a number of different cultures.

In order to abduct his adopted son Ayvaz, Kurroglu assumes the identity of a shepherd in order to trick Ayvaz’s father Mir Ibrahim and carry Ayvaz away. This episode demonstrates Kurroglu’s flexible identity, as he is able to infiltrate the city of Orfah, even though he is an outsider to the culture and people. Soon after establishing himself as bandit leader, Kurroglu’s close friend and adopted brother Khoja Yakub tells the hero of a boy whom he should adopt: the “handsome and manly” Ayvaz (Chodzko 43). Kurroglu is immediately interested in the idea, and sets off toward Orfah. However, along the way he learns from a shepherd that the Pasha is quite

protective of the beautiful Ayvaz, and even suspects Kurroglu may try to run off with him. In order to enter the city undetected, Kurroglu trades the shepherd for his garments and leaves his steed Kyrat with the shepherd. He enters Orfah in a shepherd's garb and proceeds to dupe Mir Ibrahim and his son into thinking that he is a shepherd and that Kurroglu is dead. After luring the father and son away from the city, he is able to separate Ayvaz from his father and ride away with the boy (51-72). In this episode, Kurroglu demonstrates his flexible identity by successfully transforming himself from being a larger-than-life warrior with a magical steed to a humble and clever shepherd. Although he may have been powerful enough at nearly any point in his plan to forcefully wrest Ayvaz from the city, instead he opts to use a clever disguise and adaptable identity to kidnap the boy, not having to rely on his strength.

Similarly, Kurroglu uses another disguise to sneak into the Turkish sultan's palace and elope with Nighara, a Turkish princess. He hears of Nighara's beauty from afar. The two correspond for some time before Kurroglu decides to travel to Istanbul and elope with the princess. Before approaching the sultan's palace, Kurroglu readies a disguise to get into the gates. He dresses as a *chavush*, a conductor of pilgrims to Mecca, and has an order forged giving him permission to see the princess. The hero walks to the main gate in his disguise, presents the note, and proceeds to the harem. Chodzko writes: "Having cleared the gates of all the seven walls, he reached Nighara's apartments" (114). Rather than gaining entry by force, the hero casually walks in through the front gate. Interestingly, the text describes the "seven walls," a description that emphasizes the power of Kurroglu's adaptable identity; it would have been quite difficult it for any hero to forcefully penetrate the seven well-guarded walls of a sultan's harem. But, with the ability to assume a different identity, Kurroglu easily slips into the forbidden area.

Another example of Kurroglu's flexible identity is his use of disguise to sneak into Kars and elope with Parizadda, the daughter of Ahmed-Pasha. Having heard about her beauty, Kurroglu becomes interested in Parizadda and proceeds to Kars to elope with her. In order to gain entry to her apartments, Kurroglu takes on the identity of a *falchi*, a fortuneteller. Once again, he easily gains entry (198). Eventually reveals himself, woos the beautiful maiden, and makes love with her in her apartments (201-202).

Kurroglu's many successes in using of disguise demonstrate his ability to assume different identities. His adaptable identity allows him to infiltrate Orfah, Istanbul, and Kars. In this way, Kurroglu's adaptability also contributes to the poem's adaptability for many cultures. Interestingly, the cities Kurroglu infiltrates are spread throughout the region: Orfah is a city in northwestern Iran; Istanbul is the administrative capital of the Ottoman Empire; Kars was a largely Armenian city. Kurroglu's ability to penetrate each of the cultures of these different cities further demonstrates the adaptability of his identity. In addition, Kurroglu takes on a number of different professions, from a shepherd to a soothsayer. Thus, Kurroglu is able to adopt different roles within a number of different societies.

As Kurroglu's disguises demonstrate his ability to adapt to a number of different cultures and a number of different roles within those cultures, they also demonstrate one way in which the poem shifts the epic's organizing principles from *filiative* to *affiliative*. The hero's identity is not fixed. Rather his identity is flexible and changes based on his needs. Just as Kurroglu is able to easily "affiliate" himself with these different cultures, so are these other cultures are able to "affiliate" with the epic of Kurroglu more easily. In this way, one sees how the constantly shifting identity of the poem's hero helps shift the epic's basis away from traditional *filiative* relationships to that of the *affiliative*.

Kurroglu's Many Adopted Relationships

Throughout the poem, Kurroglu forms a few important adoptive relationships. Rather than taking a wife and having his own family, Kurroglu instead adopts relatives throughout the poem. These adoptive relationships demonstrate the *affiliative* nature of Kurroglu himself. Rather than being bound by rigid structure of familial relationships, he consciously chooses his associations, “affiliating” with the people of his choosing. In the poem, Kurroglu adopts a brother, a mother, and a son. Just as Kurroglu’s flexible identity shifts the *filiative* organizing principles of the epic poetry to a more *affiliative* paradigm.

Kurroglu’s adoption of Ayvaz is clearest example of the *affiliative* in the poem. Given the word “affiliation” and its root meaning, “to adopt a son,” Kurroglu’s own adoption of the son is both literally and conceptual aligned with the idea of the *affiliation*. Kurroglu discovers Ayvaz via Khoja Yakub, his adopted brother. Khoja Yakub discovers the boy in Orfah. When he hears about the beautiful son of the Pasha’s butcher, Khoja carries the news back to Kurroglu and suggests the hero adopt the boy. Kurroglu is struck by the Ayvaz’s beauty, and travels to Orfah in order to take him as a son. The hero succeeds, and Ayvaz becomes his adopted son. In this episode, Kurroglu literally and metaphorically challenges the “filiative” relationship linking Ayvaz to his father, breaking that link and forcing a new “affiliation” on the boy.

Compared to other epic poetry, Ayvaz’s adoption is a represents a powerful shift in epic poetry toward more *affiliative* organizing principles. In most other poems, the patrilinear line of heroes is crucial. In the *Daredevils of Sassoun*, there is a crisis when Little Meherr has no heir and descends into Raven Rock because the direct line of filial relationships has been ruptured. In both the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*, father-son relationships are of extreme importance. Of course, Kurroglu’s adoption of Ayvaz is not without peer in other epic poems. For example, in

Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* King Kavus' son Seyavash becomes the de facto adopted son of Rostam. However, even this son is somehow rooted in the patrilinear line of the Shah, and the adoption does not wholly violate this line. Although the relationship between Rostam and Seyavash is *affiliative*, the boy maintains a *filiative* link as a direct descendant of the king. Ayvaz maintains no such link. Moreover, Rostam asks Kay Kavus for permission to raise the boy for training, respecting the importance of the father-son bond. On the other hand, Kurroglu dupes Ayvaz's father and kidnaps the boy.

Kurroglu's adoption of a mother and brother are both minor but also worth mention. En route to seek out the Turkish Princess Nighara, Kurroglu runs into an old woman whom he presumes is a witch. He immediately calls the woman "mother." The woman provides Kurroglu with a place to stay and a few meals while he tries to woo Princess Nighara. Although Kurroglu does not formally adopt the old woman, their relationship develops surprisingly quickly. She is the closest woman to a mother that Kurroglu has in the poem. Interestingly, the closest relationship that the hero has to a mother is a brief episode with an old witch whom he meets. Such a relationship is hardly traditional. Rather, it is the result of the two characters' needs: the woman needed help from a strong warrior, and Kurroglu needed a roof and warm meal. The two outcasts found themselves on the fringe of the city and consciously associated with each other. Thus, Kurroglu's adoption of the old woman as his mother represents an important act of "affiliation." Similarly, just after establishing himself as leader of *Chamly-bill*, Kurroglu adopts the merchant Khoja Yakub a brother. It is Khoja who then goes to Orfah, learns about Ayvaz, and interests Kurroglu in adopting the boy as his son (41-42). Both of these cases are worth note because they demonstrate the breadth of Kurroglu's adoptions, showing that the adoption of Ayvaz was not merely an anomaly but a trend throughout the poem.

Kurroglu's numerous adoptive relationships demonstrate another way in which the poem shifts the organizing principles of epic from the *filiative* to the *affiliative*. Kurroglu's ability to adopt multiple familial relationships reflects in the poem reflects his character's adaptability. Just as the character is flexible enough to embrace strangers as family, the epic itself is flexible enough to embrace other cultures within its story. As a result, Turks, Azeris, Persians, Armenians, and others have been able to more easily mold the epic to fit their cultures.

Conclusion

These three examples—Kurroglu's independence from traditional power structures, his many adopted identities, and his many adoptive relationships—demonstrate three important aspects of the poem that differentiate it from other epic poetry. More specifically, these and other examples demonstrate how the epic of *Kurroglu* was part of a shift within epic toward a more *affiliative* paradigm. It is this *affiliative* paradigm that has greatly contributed to the epics' adaptability to other cultures. Kurroglu is an epic that challenges the linear, biologically grounded *filiative* organizing principles of its predecessors and invites cultures to affiliate with its narrative and characters. Of course, with many different versions of the same epic in many different cultures, it is only natural that some scholars may dispute the specific origins of the poem. However, it is also helpful to explain why such a debate is so prone to take place: because the epic itself is one prone to such affiliation because the epic itself is organized along *affiliative* principles.

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