

Rooted in the Body, Growing in Community: Jineolojî as an Embodied Epistemology for a Society-Transforming Pedagogy

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Abstract: Within the methodological framework of *Grounded Theory*, at the intersection of decolonial theories, intersectional feminism, and freedom pedagogy, this paper aims to explore Jineolojî, the "science of women and life" developed within the women's liberation movement of Rojava (northeastern Syria) as an embodied epistemology that grounds a transformative pedagogy by anchoring knowledge in the lived experiences of bodies and territories, to rethink both science and education beyond patriarchal, statist and extractivist paradigms. Drawing on the paradigm of embodied cognition, as well as feminist epistemologies and the pedagogical visions of Abdullah Öcalan, the paper articulates a vision of education not as transmission, but as relational transformation, of the self, community and society as a whole. Using the tools of qualitative research applied in the field in Western Kurdistan (the Rojava) in September and October 2024, an attempt was made to incorporate, in the research practices themselves, the multisensoriality, spatiality, and temporality that characterize the experience of any war, including and especially that acted out (and still ongoing) on the bodies of Kurdish girls and women. Based on this approach, the paper identifies in the Jinwar women-only village, where part of the participant observation took place, an effective embodied pedagogical device for the co-construction of an educating society starting with the liberation of each individual from all hegemony and oppression, social, cultural, epistemic.

Keywords: jineolojî; embodied cognition; freedom pedagogy; transformative pedagogy; ecofeminism



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1. Introduction

The present paper reports the findings of a stage within a broader transdisciplinary research between sociology and pedagogy that aims to investigate Italian ecofeminism as a pedagogical and social reproduction method within which to identify the "communities of practice" (Wenger, 1998, 2002, 2009) in which to find the dynamic relationships with pedagogical valence mapped in the methodological framework of *Grounded Theory* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) of feminist approach as suggested by Adele Clarke (2015).

Following suggestions coming from Italian ecofeminist activists, and from social groups founded on ecofeminist-inspired "communities of practice", I encountered *Jineolojî*, the "Science of Women and Life", a recently woven epistemological framework that places at the center of its pedagogical method the dialogic and maieutic action of the individual and the community for the elaboration of acted prac-

tices anchored in the experience of bodies and social bodies seen as an inseparable part of a Nature-Individual ecosystem.

Theorized by *Abdullah Öcalan* beginning in 2004 in *Liberating Life: The Women's Revolution*, *Jineoloji* is attributed a central role in the construction of "democratic Confederalism" (Öcalan, 2008), the political project of self-determination and self-government of the Kurdish people, designed on a pluricultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious basis and thus mutable from any context and potentially extendable to the entire Middle East.

Öcalan proposes an historical, economic, and sociological reading of the evolution of natural matrilineal societies by theorizing a "Science of Women and life", a new social science based on three axioms: *Jin*, *Jiyan*, *Azadî*, which in the *Kurmancî* language, spoken in Rojava, northeastern Syria, means "Woman, Life, Freedom". *Jineoloji* is a word composed of two words, *Jin* and *lojî*, which in the *Kurmancî* language mean "woman" and "speech," "science," "thought," but also "word" and "reason". The word *Jin*, "woman", shares its root with the word *jiyan*, meaning "life", while the word *azadî* has in it the word *za*, meaning "to give birth". The words "woman", "life" and "freedom" are related to each other through "nature" and "peace", which we find in the root of the same words in other minority languages of Mesopotamia, which coincides with Kurdistan.

Central to understanding the deeper meaning of *Jineoloji* is the word *amargî*, which in Sumerian means "freedom" but also "return to the mother", i.e., to the matrilineal culture that preceded the patriarchal one related to property (of the house, things, and people), to which the capitalist system as a product of the patriarchal system must be traced.¹

What is reported in this paper is the result of fieldwork in Western Kurdistan, the northeastern region of Syria called Rojava, where an experience of democratic self-government independent of any totalitarian regime, based on embodied collective pedagogical action, founded on *Jineoloji*, has been taking place since 2014.

Using the tools of qualitative research (participant observation, back talks, uncovered shadowing, in-depth interviews, focus groups) applied in the field in Western Kurdistan (the Rojava) in September and October 2024, I constructed the data set among female activists, students, researchers, residents of Jinwar, the "women's village" scholars from the Academy of *Jineoloji* at the University of Rojava in Quamishlo, the soldiers of the YGJ (the all-female Kurdish military corps), the shelter homes for women victims of violence, the components of Kongra-Star (the Union of all associations and collectives that identify with *Jineoloji*), identifying within the practices of the "Science of Women and Life", the seeds of a nascent "pedagogy of liberation" as an embodied, and therefore radical and disruptive, backbone in every individually and socially organized action.

2. Methods and materials: The *Women Renaissance* or the meeting of theory and practice

Extracting theoretical horizons from a qualitative dataset constructed in the field, following the dictates of Grounded theory, was far from easy, not least in view of the

¹ Sept. 24, 2024, Heseke: conversation with some "internationalists" (this is what non-Kurdish *Jineoloji* activists and scholars are called) at the Akademiya Ragihandinê ya şehid Fayid, a protected and secret center for the international press.

constant attacks advanced by Turkish mercenaries using guerrilla techniques, including drone strikes, which forced constant changes of schedule and nighttime travel to reach protected and secret quarters where activists could meet.

For *Jineoloji*, pedagogical action is rooted in every moment of social, family and public life, but it takes its starting point in what Freire would call "conscientization" and which for *Jineoloji* is *Xwebûn*, "becoming yourself".

"In Kurdish *xwe* means "self" and *bûn* corresponds to the verb "to be". And, in fact, from women's point of view, to be oneself, to belong to oneself, has a profound meaning of undoing all that one has learned by heart. The woman, who always has an "owner", in the father-brother-partner triangle, and who is thus objectified, being herself here and belonging to herself, becomes the signifying "subject". This means that on the basis of her own strength, her own consciousness, her own will, her own self-esteem, she contributes in all areas of life, with her own will. And this was the social revolution. *Xwebûn* is a concept based on gender awareness, love and women's struggle born out of the liberation struggle of Kurdish women".²

Transformative pedagogy is referred to by Öcalan (2004/2023) as the foundation of the democratic society implemented as a result of the revolution and women's liberation (cit. p. 184). The Education System cannot neglect sports and the arts, in an holistic conception of Science, which values learning through experiences that stimulate emotions and empathy (ibid., p. 185). This type of transformative pedagogy puts back at the center not only learning through the body and emotions and intercultural and interreligious dialogue aimed at peaceful coexistence between peoples and cultures, but also intergenerational dialogue, within which millennial knowledge of "mothers," elders, and "martins"³ and their practices find "citizenship" (Ibid., 200).

In the autonomous government of northeastern Syria, *Jineoloji* is fully integrated into the public education system: starting with the Secondary School cycle, it is included among the subjects of the school curriculum and in every Degree Course of the Universities of the Rojava Autonomous Government Administration, it constitutes a compulsory examination for the purpose of obtaining the degree, with compulsory attendance. The *Jineoloji* Academy organizes lifelong learning courses for women and men, within which the cult of the resistance martyrs is also cultivated through moments of artistic performativity with music, songs, traditional dances. *Jineoloji* is recognized in its epistemological value emerging from a continuous dialogue between praxis and theory:

«The main future goals for *Jineoloji* will be to bring together theory and practice, science and practice, now divided; to lower science into reality, to transform women's profound knowledge into the new "Women Renaissance". Knowledge of truth will

² Navenda Lêkolîn, Arşiv u Pirtûkxaneya Jinên Kurd, Kurdish women's Library, Archive also research Center, 2022. Translated by the *Jineoloji* Germany Committee.

³ The "mother" for *Jineoloji* is "any woman who has kept intact her connection with nature, with the millennia-old knowledge of other mothers; knowledge that is the result of shared practices, affecting every aspect of private, family and social life and every branch of knowledge, including economics": from the research diary, dialogue with the inhabitants of *Jinwar*, Rojava, Sept. 23, 2024.

have to be achieved, but how to achieve it, since women's history has never been written (*undertaken*)?»⁴.

The method of *Jineoloji* as a transformative pedagogy of society is being fine-tuned through continuous comparison among various women's organizations:

«The main purpose of *Jineoloji* must be how to change society in depth. We need to analyze the various sectors of society to figure out how to act with *Jineoloji*. Today, the academic system is not as we would like it to be: for example, the Academy must give the method, but women must explore it themselves»⁵.

«Changing society»⁶ i.e., liberating women from the «oppressive mentality instilled by patriarchy»⁷ must be the ultimate goal of *Jineoloji*, a «holistic science»⁸ that everyone can embrace, all people of all ethnicities, from all continents. «Armenians, Syrians, Arabs, Kurds, Circassians, *Jineoloji* is for all and liberates all»⁹. The transformative pedagogy of "Women's Science" is a pedagogy for multiculturalism and peace, «an umbrella that can accommodate all feminisms»:¹⁰

«It is a "new science capable of reconstructing a new relationship between men and women, capable of reconnecting every branch of knowledge, economics, politics, social sciences, to the knowledge of women. *Jineoloji* is a "big idea». ¹¹.

3. Results: aesthetics and beauty as a result of embodied pedagogical action

Jineoloji's theorization finds its origin in praxis: this is one of the six "topics" through which to achieve what *Öcalan* calls the «women's revolution» (ibid.).

The six steps toward revolution were discussed during the 2. *Konferansa Jineoloji ya Bakur û Rojhilatê Suriyê* :¹²

1. «It is necessary to have an ecological approach to ensure democracy at all levels. We need to break the subject/object binarism and the man/woman/nature subjugation relationship. Nature and women are oppressed as the property of man.

⁴ Keynote speaker, in the 2. *Konferansa Jineoloji ya Bakur û Rojhilatê Suriyê*, entitled *Zanatiya Jinan Bi Jineolojiyê Nûjen Dibe*, "Women's knowledge reborn in (with, thanks to) *Jineoloji*," Heseke September 25 and 26, 2024. Speech in *Kurmancî* language, simultaneous translation into English, translation from English by me.

⁵ Intervention by a participant in the 2nd *Konferansa Jineoloji ya Bakur û Rojhilatê Suriyê*. Intervention given in *Kurmancî* language, simultaneous translation into English, translation from English by me.

⁶ See. Note 5

⁷ Cit.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ See. Note 5

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Held on September 25 and 26, 2024 in Heseke, Rojava (Syria).

2. The crisis within science between theory and practice must be overcome.
3. We need to recover scientific relativism: all approaches are valid, but sexism and nationalism are different manifestations of the same approach.
4. It is necessary to rediscover the unity present in the origin of Nature, according to Eastern philosophies (including those of Greek origin) but not in a negative dialectic of opposites that cancel each other out, but in balance.
5. The epistemological value of intangible values, such as empathy and relationships, should be rediscovered.
6. Education is the basis of the process of destroying the "war mentality" that oppresses women. In many cultures women are oppressed starting with their mothers. *Jineoloji* is the "science of mothers" or "knowledge of mothers," which we must recover today¹³. The theorization of the six points for the women's revolution is the result of an ongoing dialogue between theory and practice within the different groups and assemblies of women who identify with the *Jineoloji* and who coordinate in *Kongra-Star*, the Rojava Women's Coordination. The constant dialogue between theory and practice must be aimed at achieving "total divorce (...) from the five-thousand-year-old culture of male domination." (*Öcalan, 2004/2013, p. 52*):

«moreover, women as the primary moral and political component of society have a critical role to play in shaping an ethics and aesthetics of life that reflect freedom equality and democratization. Ethical science and aesthetics are an integral part of Jineoloji» (ibid.,p.56-57).

During my time researching at the University of Rojava and doing field research in Northeast Syria, I shared daily life with the residents of *Jinwar* (from *Jin*, meaning "woman" and *war*, meaning "village") for 10 days. I lived a few days in the shelter houses of the Academy *Diyariya desteya jin li cizîrê* following the *lifelong learning* courses they organized for Kurdish and Arab women, during which the issue of aesthetics was raised several times, always in relation to "emotional intelligence" which for *Jineoloji* has equal dignity to any other kind of intelligence, and to the concept of "care."

«Woman's connection with life, which is more comprehensive than that of man, has guaranteed(to woman, ed.) the development of her emotional intelligence. Therefore, aesthetics, in the sense of making life more beautiful, is a vital factor for woman. Ethically, woman is much more responsible than man. (...) She is therefore particularly suited to analyze, determine and decide on the good and bad aspects education, the importance of life and peace, malignity and horror of war, and on measures of ap-

¹³ See. Note 5.

propriateness and justice. So it would be fair to include economics in Jineoloj as well» (Öcalan 2004/2013. p.56-57).

Aesthetics, for *Jineolojî*, is the "beautiful" as a result of the process of care in liberating every aspect of individual and social life from the domination of patriarchy:

«These three women (...) had decided to dedicate their lives to the struggle for freedom. They were beautiful, beautiful because they were free, beautiful because they loved peoples and people, beautiful because they believed in revolution» (in Milan Network, 2023).

The transformative pedagogy of *Jineolojî*, is thus the result not only of a continuous dialogue between theory and practice, but also of a "collective path" that makes people and different branches of knowledge hold hands. We could say that if Öcalan laid the philosophical foundations of this new science, in which echoes of ecofeminists such as Maria Mies, Silvia Federici, and Vandana Shiva resonate as seen so far, the collective work of the women of *Jineolojî* is building its pillars, is building the environments that women around the world are inhabiting or, better yet, planting trees that are already bearing fruit, tending seeds that are already sprouting.¹⁴ The originality of *Jineolojî* is to be ascribed precisely to the new epistemology and methodology that "embodies" and "situates," as Haraway (1989) puts it, the Science of *Jineolojî* in the living flesh of women, not only in their "never written" history¹⁵, in the history, knowledge and praxis of "mothers," but also in the new methodology dialoguing with epistemology. When the exponents of *the Jineolojî Academy*, they expound the six points for women's revolution through *Jineolojî*, and in point number 1 they state that:

«It is necessary to have an ecological approach to ensure democracy at all levels. We need to break the subject/object binarism and the man/woman/nature subjugation relationship. Nature and women are oppressed as the property of man»¹⁶,

are looking to Mies when he says that positivism is based on the separation of subject and object, observer and observed, science and practice, fraying the bonds between living beings:

¹⁴ "There are numerous Jineolojî Committees in Europe that, together with the Jineolojî Adacemy of Rojava, weave relationships with ecofeminist and feminist groups on other continents, especially South America and Africa. In *Jimvar* in the "assembly room" are collected the many gifts from the feminist delegations that have come to visit from various parts of the world.": from the research diary, Sept. 20, 2024.

¹⁵ See. Note 5.

¹⁶ See. Note 5

«Ideas about a different science should be based on different ethical and methodological principles. I think that a lot of my criticisms with regard to the feminist critique of social sciences as mentioned earlier should also apply to the natural sciences. Central to a new science would be the principle of subject-subject reciprocity. This presupposes that the research object is again regarded as living and endowed with its own dignity/ soul/ subjectivity. A new science should never lose sight of the fact that we ourselves are part of Nature, that we have a body, that we are dependent on Mother Earth, that we are born by women, and that we die. It should never lead to the abdication of our senses as a source of knowledge, as modern natural science does, particularly since Kant» (Mies & Shiva, 1993/2014, p.52).

The "new science" that Mies looks to in *Ecofeminism* in 1993, theorized before Öcalan was arrested in 1999 and surely read by him, must also reject the *«double standards»* (Mies & Shiva, 2014, p.52) and prove responsible to society, both in methods, theories, and application of results, because the earth and its resources are finite, our lives are finite, and time is finite. Overcoming the positivist paradigm for Mies (1996) means looking for *«a new praxis nexus»* (ibid., p.12), within the historical context in which that "new praxis" began, i.e., looking for the reason for that praxis within the situation (Haraway, 1989, would say) in which it was born, without ever objectifying it or claiming to make it universal, but "embodying" it within the social movements in which it was elaborated. Mies (1993/2014) organizes the methodology for feminist research into seven points (ibid., p.38), where *Jineoloji* Academy¹⁷ indicates six. Point number five is devoted to Freire: according to researchers from the Department of *Jineoloji* at the University of Rojava, it is plausible, therefore, to think that Öcalan came to Freire through Meis, translated into Turkish¹⁸. For Meis¹⁹ who refers avowedly to Freire (1968/2022), the social science research process must become a process of "conscientization" involving both the researchers and the subjects of their research:

«The research process must become a process of 'conscientization,' both for the so-called 'research subjects' (social scientists) and for the 'research objects' (women as target groups). The methodology of 'conscientizaaao' (conscientization) was first developed and applied by Paulo Freire in his problem-formulating method» (ibid., p.41).

However, for Meis, as for Freire, it must be the "oppressed subjects" who initiate the process of "conscientization," also having the responsibility to "liberate" their oppressors as well:

¹⁷ See. Note 5

¹⁸ Conversation with Zilan Mohamad, coordinator of the Research Center Kurdish women's Library, Sulaymaniyya, Iraqi Kurdistan, Iraq, Sept. 26, 2024

¹⁹ there

«The decisive characteristic of the approach is that the study of an oppressive reality is carried out not by experts but by the objects of the oppression. People who were previously objects of research become subjects of their own research and action» (ibid., p.41).

Mies, however, proposes to go beyond Freire in the direction of a rewriting of individual and collective history by the oppressed:

«I would like to go a step further than Paulo Freire, however. The collective conscientization of women through a problem-formulating methodology must be accompanied by the study of women's individual and social history» (ibid., p.42).

We find here a convergence between the methodology indicated by Mies and that which emerges from the practice of the *Jineoloji* Academy, which «writes by re-discovering the history of women, which has never been written»²⁰. Central to the rewriting of women's individual and collective history is the method of autobiographical writing. Sara Sakine Cansiz (2014/2015), a martyr of the women's revolution²¹, with her monumental three-volume work, *All My Life Has Been a Struggle*, is a shining example of the pedagogical reach of the autobiographical method.

The writings of the Academy of *Jineoloji*²² centered on the stories of martyrs are based on a collective methodology of writing, and the very attribution of editorial products is often collectively signed. In this way, starting with the method of written production of knowledge, it is intended to challenge the androcentric and anthropocentric paradigm of positivist scientific knowledge of European origin. This collective exploration of all knowledge and all individual experiences, but dropped into collective knowledge, causes to be created, to grow and to consolidate, that "conscientization" theorized by Freire (cit.) on the basis of being objects of the same oppression, beyond any ethnicity, language, religion, culture:

«If we see colonialism not only in terms of nation and country, but also in terms of groups of people, we can define women as the oldest colonized group» Öcalan (2004/2013, p. 56).

Acknowledging each other on the basis of being victims of the same colonization and oppression enhances the feeling of "friendship," *bevaltî* in the *Kurmançî* language, a relationship based on free consent in common commitment:

²⁰ Vd. note 29.

²¹ Killed in Paris on January 9, 2013, along with *Rojbîn* Fidan Doğan and Ronahî Leyla Şaylemez. Speaking of rewriting women's history, we can now call their deaths a political femicide.

²² Published in Kurmançî, Syrian, Arabic, and Turkish languages, *Jineoloji*'s international committees then work to translate them into various languages.

«In this *bevalti* relationship, the researcher who wants to immerse herself in the Kurdish reality by approaching *Jineoloji* not with an "extractive" approach typical of positivist science, but by designing research together and producing collective knowledge that is made available to the community must also place herself»²³.

For Mies (1993/2014), this scientific "new paradigm" which Öcalan theorizes to be the *Jineoloji*, must also concern technology and be designed in a participatory manner (*ibid.*, p.320) through the feminist method to overcome the paralysis of knowledge engendered by positivist science:

«Feminist, particularly ecofeminist action-research, is a method to overcome this paralysis of knowledge and to liberate women (and men), as well as knowledge» (cit, 1996, p.22).

By the time Mies wrote *Ecofeminism*, the method of action-research even of a feminist bent had already been tried out for at least thirty years around the world: through reading his work, it inspired Öcalan and the *Jineoloji* theorists and practitioners who are now theorizing and practicing the "women's revolution" in Rojava in what I was able to call "transformative pedagogy of society" with them during the many interviews conducted during my research period in northeastern Syria.

4. Discussion and conclusion: Jinwar, the women's village as a teaching device of *Jineoloji*

The *Jinwar* women's village project represents a great source of inspiration within the "Women's Liberation Movement": an eco-village built with millenary techniques²⁴ on a triangular plan, because it recalls the symbol of the Mother Goddess, consisting of 40 houses where as many women with children find hospitality²⁵. The villagers are women with children who have been victims of domestic violence, or of rape as a weapon of war, even underage girls who fled from forced marriages tightened in childhood, widows of resistance martyrs, women who have devoted their lives to the liberation of other women. The village has a school for the six Primary classes²⁶ and for preschoolers²⁷; an assembly hall and common spaces for play activities. In the hospital, *Sifa Jin*, women and children are treated with more than a hundred herbs, the secrets of which are guarded by the "herb doctor", who also produces medicinal products for sale. A professional nurse, who is not a villager, provides daily service at the hospital, which also ensures the 24 presence of an ambulance. *Jinwar* villagers define the social and economic roles and organization of the community to ensure

²³ From the research journal, October 10, 2024.

²⁴ The bricks are mixed with raw earth and the plaster is straw and earth: these are cool houses in summer and warm in winter

²⁵ After Dec. 8, 2024, with the ouster of Assad by HDS jihadist troops supported by Turkish mercenaries, the village is home to 71 women with children, or nearly double the available capacity.

²⁶ The first cycle of elementary school in the Northeastern Syria Autonomous Administration includes six years.

²⁷ Children attending high schools are taken to public schools in the neighboring city every morning.

their livelihoods, through cultivating fields and raising sheep for self-consumption and sale. Electricity is 95% supplied by photovoltaic systems that also power the well pump that distributes water to the village. The spokeswoman is a charismatic leader (Weber, 1922) careful that the village's guiding principles of freedom and self-determination for women are respected. She is also a political and ideological reference point, as well as the link with all women's organizations, united in the *Kongra star*.

I believe that it can be a privileged vantage point for experimenting with dialogic practices with an inclusive "Women's Science" of all branches of knowledge, for a transformative pedagogy of a society because «The twenty-first century will be the century of women's liberation» (Öcalan, 2004/2013, p.61).

By immersing myself in the everyday life in *Jinwar* village, Quamishlo towns, and Heseke, I was able to see *Jineoloji* emerge from the dataset as a response to the epistemic and ontological violence of modernity, with its questioning of the fragmentation between mind and body, individual and collectivity, nature and culture, knowledge and life, characteristic of dominant Western paradigms. Claiming the body as a site of knowledge, memory and resistance, *Jineoloji* posits the lived experiences of women, and more generally the embodied experiences of all marginalized and colonized subjects, as generative sources of knowledge. She challenges the colonial universalism of modern epistemologies and instead reaffirms the plurality of knowledge, rooted in locality, culture, ecology and the body itself.

Central to this vision is a radical pedagogy: not an education in the service of institutional reproduction, but an education that emerges from below, from the grassroots, from everyday life and struggle. In this sense, *Jineoloji* functions as a pedagogical device, a dynamic tool for reorienting the goals, methods, and ethics of education. Rather than focusing on hierarchical instruction, it emphasizes collective learning, dialogic processes, and the relationality between knowledge and action. Learning is not disembodied cognition, but a transformative process of becoming, occurring through encounters, caring, collective memory and co-construction of meaning, for a multicultural, multiethnic, multilingual and multireligious, fair and self-determined society, for a peaceful future.

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