

The Ethnic Identity of the Kurds in Turkey¹

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Most Kurds in Turkey have a strong awareness of belonging to a separate ethnic group, distinct, especially, from the Turks and from the Christian minorities living in their midst. There is, however, by no means unanimity among them as to what constitutes this ethnic identity and what the boundaries of their ethnic group are. This makes it necessary for me to state at the outset precisely whom I mean when in this article I use the ethnic label "Kurds". For pragmatic reasons I use a rather loose and wide definition, including all native speakers of dialects belonging to the Iranian languages Kurmanji or Zaza, as well as those Turkish speaking persons who claim descent from Kurmanji or Zaza speakers and who still (or again) consider themselves as Kurds. Most Kurdish nationalists would agree with this definition (a minority would find it too narrow still); in practice, many Kurds implicitly use much narrower definitions, as will be shown below. Even this simple definition invites some obvious questions: should, for instance, persons who grew up as Kurds, but were in later life voluntarily assimilated to the Turkish majority, be called Kurds or not? Or those members of the Christian minority groups who have formally embraced Islam and have become kurdophone but still retain a memory of their previous identity? My definition would exclude the former and include the latter. Both processes of assimilation will however be considered below. When asked to specify what constitutes their identity, most Kurds would mention language and religion first. Kurmanji and Zaza are both Iranian languages, grammatically quite different from Turkish, although their vocabularies contain many loan-words from Arabic and Turkish. Few, if any, Kurmanji speakers understand Zaza, but most Zaza speakers know at least some Kurmanji. Virtually all Zaza speakers consider themselves, and are considered by the Kurmanji speakers, as Kurds. They do

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however constitute a distinct subgroup (or rather a number of distinct sub-groups) that still tends to endogamy and differs from the Kurmanji speakers in several other cultural features. For instance, their agricultural and horticultural techniques are on the average more developed, and where they are tribally organised their tribes tend to be smaller than those of the Kurmanji speakers. These differences are however not perceived as significant. The second criterion, religion, is even less apt than language to set all Kurds (as defined by me) apart from other ethnic groups. Most Kurds, it is true, are Sunni Muslims following the Shafi'i *mezhep*. This neatly distinguishes them from the Shi'i Azeris and Persians as well as from the Hanefi Turkish and Arab Sunnis (and, of course, from their Christian neighbours). A stranger is frequently asked what his *mezhep* is, as a cautious way of finding out whether he is a Turk or a Kurd. Many Alevis, however, speak Kurmanji or Zaza dialects and consider themselves as Kurds, and there are still pockets of (Kurmanji speaking) Yezidis, a non-Muslim sect living among the Sunni Kurds. In Iran and Iraq, moreover, a considerable number of Kurds belong to the orthodox Shi'a, and a smaller number to the heterodox Ahl-i Haqq sect. Many Shafi'i Kurds, in fact, refuse to consider the Alevis and Yezidis as Kurds. Intermarriage between these religious groups is extremely rare, much rarer than between Turkish and Kurdish Alevis or even Turkish and Kurdish Sunnis. It might, in fact, be more apt to consider the Kurds not as one, but as a set of ethnic groups (for instance, Sunni, Alevi, Yezidi), although even then the definition of boundaries would not be easy. The Kurdish rebellions of the early years of the Republic showed how little unity there was: Şeyh Sa'id's rebellion (1925) remained largely restricted to the Zaza speaking tribes along the Murad Suyu, and in the Dersim revolt of 1937 only Alevis (both Kurmanji and Zaza speaking) participated. Nationalist leaders tried in vain to exhort others to join in. During the 1970s, the Kurdish nationalist movement became quite influential, even in the villages, and it seemed to create a stronger sense of oneness among the Kurds. The economic and political developments of that decade, however, tended to exacerbate rather than alleviate the long-standing tensions between Sunnis and Alevis, and to revive the importance of religion as a symbol of identity. The difference between Shafi'is and Hanefis is insignificant when compared with that between these Sunnis and the Alevis.

A third criterion, rarely explicitly mentioned but often implicitly used, is that of affiliation with a Kurdish tribe or one of the Kurdish "great families". A person descending from a well-known Kurdish family or tribe is always considered a Kurd, whatever he claims himself to be. This criterion, however, does not define an ethnic boundary: many persons who consider themselves, and are generally considered, as Kurds do not belong to a tribe or great family. Other, secondary symbols are even less apt to define a boundary: "Kurdish" dress, music, folklore, cooking, etc. show great regional variations, while the similarities with those of other ethnic groups in the same region are sometimes striking. These symbols of separateness have since the late 1920s been suppressed by the republican Government, which paradoxically made it possible for the nationalist movement of the 1970s to promote a re-invented, more unified Kurdish tradition, that appeared to be strongly influenced by that of the Kurds of Iraq. This does, however, not seem to have had a lasting impact.

Some other symbols of identity, stressed by Kurds themselves as well as by non-Kurds consist of differences in degree rather than in kind: the (Sunni) Kurds have on the whole maintained more of the traditional Islam than the other Muslim ethnic groups: the *medrese* did not entirely disappear as elsewhere in Turkey but (clandestinely) survived into the 1960s, and there are still many *şeyhs* (associated with the Nakşibendi or Kadiri *tarikât*) who wield great influence. The concept of honour (*namus*) and the institution of blood revenge associated with it still play a quite central role in social life. Another traditional institution (although not an Islamic one), the payment of a high bride-price, is still widely adhered to, and the modern one of birth-control is widely disapproved of. The position of women is, on the whole, a more subjected one than among other ethnic groups. None of these cultural features, however, nor a combination of them, defines an ethnic boundary between Kurds and non-Kurds. They are at least to some extent a corollary of the economic backwardness of the region, and each of them may be encountered among different ethnic groups in other backward areas as well. Several of these features sharply distinguish the Sunni from the Alevi Kurds: among the latter, *medreses* and *şeyhs* (apart from a single Bektaşî *şeyh*) are conspicuously absent, as are, in most Alevi villages, mosques. Most of the specific Alevi religious traditions have virtually died out as well, so that it is rather the absence of visible religious

symbols that seems to characterize the Alevi. Many, though by no means all, Alevi occasionally drink alcohol, and the relations between the sexes are freer than among most Sunni Kurds — two features that the latter disapprovingly stress and perceive as major differences. There is a lower incidence of blood feuds among Alevi, and if there is a bride-price, it tends to be much lower than among the Sunnis; women have a relatively more important role in social life. While differentiating the Alevi from the Sunni Kurds, these features unite them with the Turkish Alevi. Apart from the language, the Kurdish and Turkish Alevi are culturally very similar, and intermarriage among them is relatively frequent (although there is still a tendency to local and tribal endogamy). They may be considered as one ethnic group, the cultural variations being regional rather than between the linguistic sub-groups. Although many young Kurdish Alevi became active participants in the Kurdish nationalist movement of the 1970s, this did not lead them to stress their differences with the Turkish Alevi; rather, the latter were perceived as a sort of Kurds who happened to speak Turkish but were very different from the dominant Sunni Turkish majority. And, in fact, some Turkish Alevi themselves started claiming that they were really Kurds, who had in the past been turkicised.

There is, then, no unambiguous ethnic boundary separating Kurds from non-Kurds, and in the course of even recent history the boundaries as perceived by various groups have shifted. Large numbers of people have moreover purposively crossed what they perceived as the major ethnic boundary, not only individually, as is wont to happen virtually everywhere, but in many cases collectively. A short historical sketch may be appropriate here to highlight some of the changes in ethnic (self-)definition.

Though some Kurdish intellectuals claim that their people is descended from the Medes, there is not enough evidence to permit such a connection across the considerable gap in time between the political dominance of the Medes, and the first attestation of the Kurds (as *Cyrtii*).² This is not to deny that there may have been some continuity in the population of the area as a whole. Although politically dominant for some time, the Medes may not have constituted a numerical majority in the area at any one time. Cultural variations between the various regions of Kurdistan, as well as the

² Minorsky (1940) and MacKenzie (1961).

existence of two culturally distinct social strata in several regions, seem to indicate that the present Kurds have incorporated quite heterogeneous ethnic elements. It is not clear when precisely a distinct Kurdish identity emerged. The ethnic label "Kurd" is first encountered in Arabic sources from the first centuries of the Islamic era; it seemed to refer to a specific variety of pastoral nomadism, and possibly to a set of political units, rather than to a linguistic group: once or twice, "Arabic Kurds" are mentioned. By the 10th century, the term appears to denote nomadic and/or transhumant groups speaking an Iranian language and mainly inhabiting the mountainous areas to the South of Lake Van and Lake Urmia, with some offshoots in the Caucasus. If there was a Kurdish speaking subjected peasantry at that time, the term was not yet used to include them. The arrival of sizeable groups of Turkic nomads, from the 11th century on, had a considerable impact on the Kurdish tribes of those days. In the western parts of the Kurdish-inhabited zone, Turkish and Kurdish nomads joined forces to establish huge tribal confederacies, and a new brand of pastoral nomadism emerged, with long-distance seasonal migrations between the Armenian highlands and the Syrian plains.³ The cultures of the two nomadic peoples mutually influenced each other. Membership of a tribe is, in spite of the genealogical ideology, ultimately a matter of political allegiance. Many Kurdish speakers joined Turkish chieftains and vice versa, and it is highly likely that members of other ethnic groups (Christians as well as subjected Muslim peasants) were occasionally recruited into these tribes. Conversely, tribesmen, because of impoverishment or conflicts, may have settled and gradually merged with the subject peasantry.

A sharp distinction between the Sunni and Alevi varieties of Islam did not yet exist among these tribes. Even if nominally Sunni, their beliefs were strongly coloured by veneration for the Shi'i imams and for Muslim saints, and by messianistic expectations. The popular mysticism brought from Central Asia and Iran by the Turks found acceptance among the Kurds too, and the many Christians who were assimilated and islamised maintained, and even disseminated, many of their previous beliefs and practices of popular worship. It was only when the Ottoman and Safavid empires were competing for control of the area and attempted to impose orthodox Sunni and

³ De Planhol (1968).

(initially) heterodox Shi'i Islam respectively, in order to strengthen political loyalties, that distinct Sunni and Alevi groups emerged and gradually came to perceive themselves as ethnically distinct. This process, however, took a long time. During the 16th century, major tribal groups switched their political loyalties and accordingly their religious affiliation -which is reflected in the fact that chieftains gave their sons typically Sunni or Shi'i names according to their political allegiance of the day.⁴ Around 1600 A.D., too, we encounter the first written expressions of a Kurdish ethnic awareness. The poet Ahmed-i Khani (Ehmedê Xanî) lamented in the prologue to his famous epic *Mem û Zîn* (1105/1694) the dividedness of the Kurds, which had caused them to be dominated and ruled by Turks and Persians (ʿAjam, which referred to both Persians proper and to the Safavids, and the speakers of Azeri dialects in general). He contrasted the Kurds with Arabs, Turks and ʿAjam, apparently using a combination of linguistic and political criteria. The ruler of the autonomous Kurdish emirate of Bitlis, Sharaf al-Din Khan, composed a history of the Kurds, *Sharafnama* (1005/1596), in which he compiled detailed information on Kurdish dynasties of the past and all tribes of his day. He included Sunnis and Yezidis as well as Alevi Kurds, and the speakers of Zaza as well as of Kurmanji dialects, and even such groups that would not be considered as Kurds today, such as the Lor and Bahtiyari in Iran. Both authors paid little attention to the lower strata of society; where they spoke of Kurds they seemed to mean the ruling families and their tribal followers only. Not all tribesmen, it should be stressed, were pastoral nomads or transhumants. There were also sedentary tribesmen, who were free cultivators or had become townsmen. In many places the tribesmen dominated a subject stratum of peasants and craftsmen, whose position was often not better than that of serfs. Many of these were Christians (Armenians, Jacobites, Nestorians) but there were also many Kurdish speaking Muslims among them. It is not clear whether the two authors mentioned included the latter among the Kurds; half a century later, the great Turkish traveller, Evliya Çelebi, definitely did. For him, everyone who spoke Kurdish was a Kurd, irrespective of class or religion. Evliya explicitly included Zaza among the Kurdish dialects; Kurdish Alevis, however, he often

⁴ This becomes abundantly clear in the history of Kurdish tribes and emirates, *Sharafnama*, completed in 1597 A. D., by the Kurdish emir of Bitlis, Sharaf al-Din Bidlisi. For a more detailed discussion, see Bruinessen (1981).

brought together with their Turkish co-religionists and the Safavids under the label of "Kızılbaş". This inclusive, democratic definition of Kurdish ethnicity was, however, an outsider's. Until the beginning of this century, Kurdish leaders themselves seem not to have thought of the subject peasantry as Kurds proper.

From the 17th century on, then, there existed a clear awareness of Kurdish ethnic identity; the political stability brought by Ottoman supremacy tended to consolidate the ethnic boundaries. There continued, however, to be cases of entire tribes crossing these boundaries within a time span of a few generations. This usually coincided with a crossing of political boundaries. The Dumbuli (Dumbeli), for instance, are mentioned in the *Sharafnama* as a Kurmanji-speaking tribe, originally Yezidis but later converted to Sunni Islam. Part of the tribe having moved from the mountains south of Lake Van to the area of Khoy, their chieftains allied themselves with the Safavids, and were rewarded with high positions. In Sharaf al-Din Khan's time, at least a part of the tribe had become (heterodox) Shi'i. During the following centuries, the Dumbuli continued to play a prominent role in regional politics, gradually Turkicising. At present, all Dumbuli are turcophone Twelver (*ithna `ashari*) Shi'is.

An example of the reverse development is the Karakeçili tribe, semi-nomads living on the slopes of the Karacadağ mountain to the southwest of Diyarbakır. They are kurdophone, but according to local tradition they were originally Türkmen from Western Anatolia, who had been settled in this region by Sultan Selim I after the Ottoman conquest. Sections of the Karakeçili who stayed behind in Western Anatolia retained their Türkmen identity; the ones settled on Karacadağ gradually Kurdicised, as a result of intermarriage and the incorporation of Kurdish allies into the tribe. This process must have been completed before the middle of the 18th century, for the descendants of a section of these Karakeçili who moved to Haymana (South of Ankara) around that time also continue to speak Kurdish.⁵

From the last decades of the 19th century on, increasing numbers of Armenians, whose position was becoming more precarious, adopted Islam (especially in its Alevi variety)

⁵ "Notes on Kurdish tribes (on and beyond the borders of the Mosul vilayet and westward to the Euphrates)", Baghdad: Government Press, 1919. Probably compiled by Major Noel. Enclosed in Public Records Office file 1919: 44A/149523/3050; C. Türkay (1979), pp. 32, 99, 476; and G. Perrot (1865), pp. 607-631.

and the Kurdish language, and gradually merged with their Kurdish neighbours.⁶ After the Armenian deportations and massacres this process was speeded up, and minor groups of the other Christian minorities followed suit. In the provinces Siirt, Van and Hakkari there are small pockets of people who claim to be Kurds and Muslims but retain a clear memory of their previous identity as Armenians or Jacobites. They still tend to marry amongst themselves, and are distinguishable by their superior agricultural techniques and crafts, but are generally recognised as Kurds by their neighbours. Soon after the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, its government embarked upon a radical programme of nation-building. Ethnic diversity was perceived as a danger to the integrity of the state, and the Kurds, as the largest non-Turkish ethnic group, obviously constituted the most serious threat. They were decreed to be Turks, and their language and culture were to be Turkish. All external symbols of their ethnic identity were suppressed. Use of the Kurdish language was forbidden in cities and towns. Turkish teachers were despatched to Kurdish villages with the teaching of Turkish as their chief objective. Distinctive Kurdish dress was forbidden. Personal and family names had to be Turkish; later, village names, too, were Turkicised. The closing down of *medreses* and the ban on the Sufi orders (*tarikats*), though not exclusively directed against the Kurds, were felt as major blows to Kurdish culture, in which these traditional institutions had a prominent place. In the 1930s, after the first Kurdish rebellions, large numbers of Kurds were deported to Turkey's western provinces, while other ethnic groups (Circassians, Laz, and *muhacirs* from the Balkans) were settled in the Kurdish districts: all attempts to speed up the Turkicisation of the Kurds. These assimilation policies were backed up by a new historical doctrine according to which the Kurds were really Turks originally, but had by historical accident lost their language.

There was no official discrimination against those Kurds who agreed to be assimilated: they could reach the highest positions in the state apparatus. Those who refused, however, often met with severe repression. Publicly proclaiming oneself to be a Kurd has often (though not always) been treated as a major offence, an act of separatism. The

⁶ Probably the first to mention this process was Molyneux-Seel (1914), who noticed that many of the Kurdish Alevi he met in Dersim had not so long ago been Armenians.

assimilation policies were not without effect. Many individuals have for all practical purposes been Turkicised and do not consider themselves as Kurds any more. Most of the Kurds who migrated to the big cities up to the 1960s were rapidly assimilated, and their children do not know Kurdish any more (during the past decades, Kurdish migrants have been too numerous to be assimilated). In several rural areas, too, Turkish has to a considerable extent replaced Kurdish, at least outside the family situation. In much wider areas, Kurds began calling themselves Turks, and it has long been hard to see how serious they were about it. In the relatively liberal atmosphere of the 1970s, when Kurdish nationalism flourished, it became apparent that this Turkicisation was only skin-deep.

From the late 1960s on, Kurdish nationalism, which in Turkey had until then remained restricted to a limited circle of intellectuals only, suddenly found itself a mass base. The military and political successes of the Iraqi Kurds under Barzani constituted one of the major influencing factors; large-scale migration to the cities, the increasing number of Kurdish students, and the weakness and division of the central government combined to make the emergence and growth of a nationalist movement possible. This is not the place to discuss the history of that movement;⁷ the relevant fact is that it revived or created symbols of Kurdish ethnic identity that affected the way many Kurds saw themselves. Books on Kurdish history were published, and a large number of Kurdish literary, cultural and political magazines appeared. Due to the ban on the Kurdish language, it had long not been able to develop in accordance with the needs of the day. For political discourse, for instance, it was quite inadequate, and most discussions were still held in Turkish. Moreover, the differences between the various dialects were so great that communication was often difficult. Nationalists set out to remedy this situation: there were attempts to create a unified Kurdish (Kurmanji) language, and many neologisms were coined. This modernised Kurdish was disseminated through a variety of journals and many (clandestine) Kurdish literacy courses. A Kurdish national music was re-invented, and became rapidly well-known and popular through the cassette recorder. People started wearing Kurdish clothes again in many cases a fancy dress, based on that worn by the Iraqi Kurds. Kurdish folklore was also re-invented,

⁷ Cf. Bruinessen, 1984.

including the celebration of *Newroz*, Kurdish New Year, which few remembered as ever having existed in Turkey, but which was the Iraqi Kurds' national holiday. The nationalists stressed the ethnic unity of Sunni and Alevi Kurds; and in fact, Sunnis and Alevi Kurds worked together in all Kurdish organisations without much friction.

Towards the end of the 1970s, it seemed that this nationalist movement was changing the self-perception of a considerable section of the Kurds. People who had long called themselves Turks started re-defining themselves as Kurds; youngsters in the cities, who knew only Turkish, began to learn Kurdish again.

These developments were cut short by the military take-over of September 1980. The military authorities have taken tough measures against the Kurdish nationalist movement and have reverted to a rigorous policy of forced assimilation. The successes of the Kurdish nationalist movement may well prove to have been ephemeral only. It remains to be seen, however, whether the present government's efforts will be more successful in changing the ethnic map of Eastern Turkey.

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