

Rethinking Kurdishness in an Everyday Context: A Case Study of the Kurmanji Kurds in Urmia City, Iran

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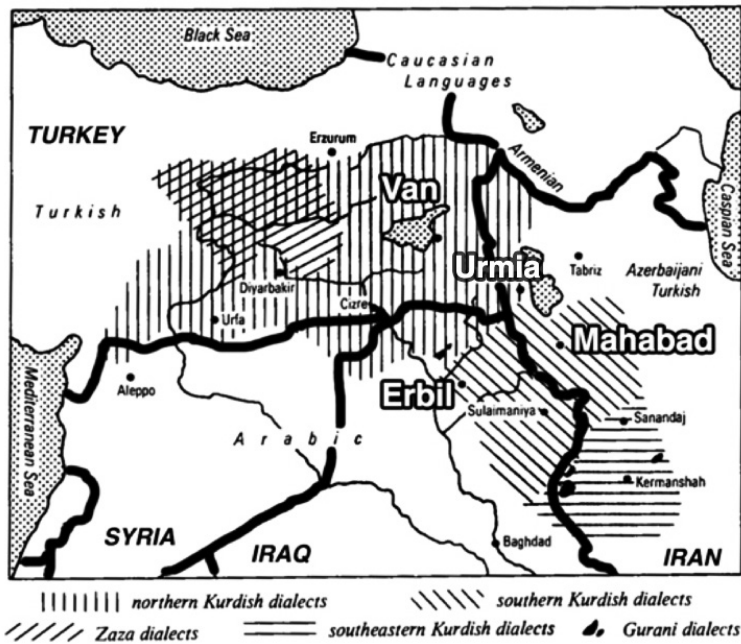
I. Introduction

This research is an attempt to study Kurdishness (*Kurdayeti*), from an ethnographical perspective, among the comparatively understudied Kurmanji-speaking Kurds who recently urbanized in the multi-ethnic city of Urmia, in the northwest of Iran. The main motivation behind choosing this specific case study and methodology lies in its potential to pose a challenge to the reified image of the Kurds which is presently dominant in political and academic circles. Urmia city is an area of co-habitation of ethnic Kurds and Azeris, and so adds more variables to the study of the Kurds in Iran, who are usually studied in relation to Persians and analyzed within center-periphery frameworks.¹ Accordingly, dynamics of Kurdishness shall be revealed in a more complex setting, adding a new vantage point to the field of Kurdish studies which presently is filled with analyses of the reification and politicization of Kurdishness. The main research questions of this article are: *what is it like to be a Kurd* and *when does Kurdishness matter for the Kurds?*

As the Middle East is experiencing one of its most historic, yet painful, episodes, the fate of the Kurdish people has attracted unprecedented global interest. Despite this huge interest, the study of Kurds is overwhelmingly focused on political events and conflicts within the countries in which they reside. The dominance of the political perspective and the eventful interpretation of history among both scholars and Kurdish nationalists and states has limited Kurdish studies to moments of political mobilization, turmoil, or conflict. This eventful understanding of history would be relevant if it were limited to the political realm or applied to specific branches of political science, security studies or a research tradition. But it raises a red flag when it tends to

be the only image portrayed of Kurds. Today, in much of the existing literature on Kurdish studies, researchers use the terms *Kurdayeti* (Kurdishness) and Kurdish nationalism interchangeably.² This problematic conflating of ethnic belonging and ethnic nationalism resulted in shaping of the dominant discourse of Kurdish studies to deal with the origin and nature of Kurdish nationalism and its verities of formation in diverse parts of Kurdistan, while highly neglecting the Kurds in their daily lives.

Urmia county had long been the center of political activism, from the time of the Ottoman-Safavid empire conflicts until the rise of Isma'il Agha Simko (1918-1925), a charismatic chieftain in the region whose revolt is highly controversial as to whether it should be considered to be a Kurdish nationalistic movement.³ After Simko, and specifically by the establishment of the short-lived Republic of Mahabad in 1946 in Sorani-speaking regions, the focus of literature on Iranian Kurds has shifted away from the Kurmanji-speaking areas to the Sorani parts influenced by the political changes. As the majority of Kurds in Iran live in Sorani-dominated Kurdistan Province, Kurmanji-speaking regions, which include



Map 1. Distribution of the Kurds and their languages.

Source: Martin van Bruinessen, Agha, Shaikh, and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan (Zed books, 1992), 21 (modified by the author).

parts of the West Azerbaijan Province administrative divisions, have been neglected in most studies of Iranian Kurds.⁴ Moreover, this research focuses on the study of the shaping of Kurdish ethnic identity as city dwellers with an anthropologic approach, which according to Bruinessen is scarce within Kurdish studies.⁵

Studying nations and nationalism from the perspective of ordinary people is an emerging trend; but still, most researchers have looked at the Kurdish issues from the viewpoints of the state or political actors. The constructivist approach claims that ethnicity is *constructed* through a process of collaboration between two or more ethnic groups. Therefore, ethnicity is the product of a social process, not a cultural given.⁶ Scholars with constructivist perspectives mainly have criticized the existing classification in various ways. Henry Hale, for instance, finds definitive categories unhelpful, and calls for producing “micro-level” explanations for why and how people tend to think and act in terms of “macro-level” identities.⁷ Another example would clarify what a micro-level analysis would mean. Eric Hobsbawm, who is one of the defenders of the study of ethnicity and nationalism “from below”, believes it is not enough that we study the spread of ethnic identity from above—the process through which it has been imposed on people—but also from below, because for most people, national identification—when it exists—is more a “reminder of the set of identification which constitutes the social being”⁸ (such as religion and language).

This is why Hobsbawm heavily criticizes Gellner’s classic work on nations and nationalism,⁹ accusing it of looking at the phenomenon as constructed only from above. He calls for the need for some alternative research from below in order to understand how these notions are being practiced or internalized.¹⁰ Analyzing the view from below, which is seeing nationalism neither from the governmental discourse nor from the point of view of nationalist (or non-nationalist) groups, however, is methodologically “exceedingly difficult” to research, in his view. But, as he notes, “this is the area of national studies in which thinking and research are most urgently needed today.”¹¹

Following Hobsbawm’s call, I took the challenge to approach Kurdish nationalism and the self-perception of the Kurds towards their ethnic identity as “dual phenomena”, constructed both from above and below. The aim is to depict an image portraying “how it is to be an ordinary Kurmanji-speaking Kurd in

Urmia city". Not surprisingly, the process of data collection was the most challenging part of this research. The main fieldwork was done from September 2018 to March 2019, relying on several unstructured and semi-structured interviews and analyzing daily conversations. Then, I returned back to the region in August and September 2019 again to complete the data collection process. Trying to keep distance from the substantialist approach, I was very concerned not to influence what I was intending to investigate among ordinary people by not asking directly about their ethnic and nationalistic sentiments. As Michael Moerman indicates, it is too easy to find ethnicity or nationalistic sentiments if one looks for them.¹² The discussions were general—asking about the interviewees' life stories, family backgrounds and daily struggles. In some cases, I tried to lead the conversation indirectly towards their personal standing during the armed conflict years, but avoided introducing Kurdishness or Kurdish nationalism as my theme of research.

II. Kurmanji speaking Kurds: from de-tribalization into urbanization

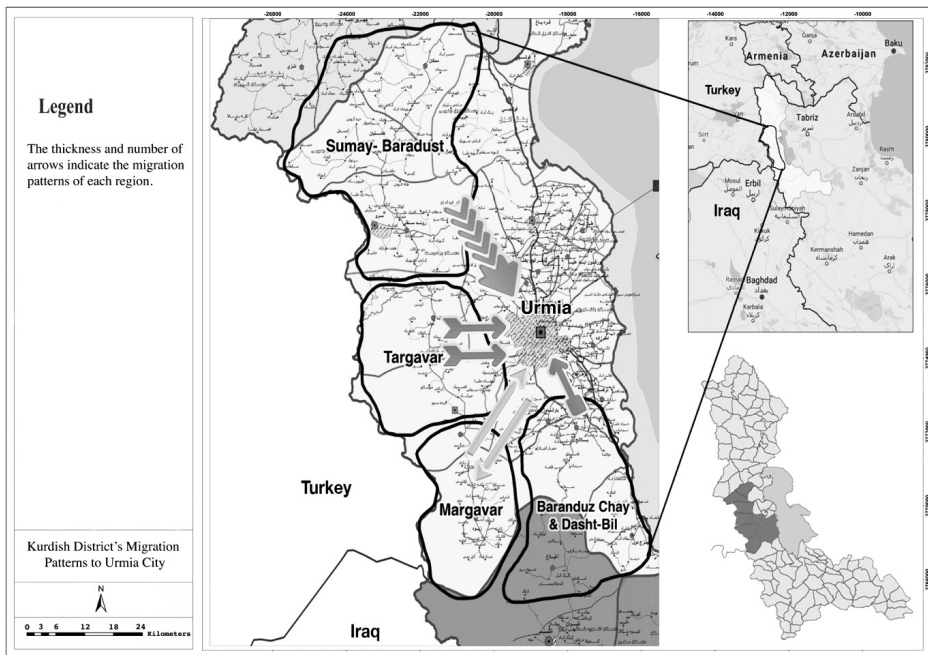
1. Dynamics of the transition in Kurdish society

Over the last few decades, Kurdish tribal organizations in Iran have undergone dramatic changes. Transformation of the pastoral economy to a semi-pastoral, semi-agricultural one occurred during the reign of Reza Shah (1925-41), when he tried to settle many of the Kurds moving between the borders of three neighboring countries.¹³ Though his policy was successful in reducing cross-border mobilities, the tribal chieftains still hold a comparatively large share of symbolic power in the villages. It was the land-reform policy launched from 1963 during the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah (1962-66) that disturbed the social organization of Kurdish residing regions to a great extent. Though in its execution level, many of the initial goals were not met, the power hegemony of chieftains and heads of villages were reduced to a great extent, and caused an increase in migration to the bigger cities.¹⁴ If we consider the urbanization process and transition of the local economy towards capitalism as the main reasons behind detribalization of the Kurds, it happened gradually but relatively late among the Kurmanji-speaking Kurds.¹⁵

The Iranian Revolution of 1979, however, changed the local political order in

the region dramatically. A few years after the revolution, the Kurdish nationalistic movement, which originated in the Sorani-speaking regions, turned to an armed conflict with the newly established government.¹⁶ The armed conflict spread to the Kurmanji-speaking areas and took different forms in each region depending on the region's tribal composition and geopolitical situation.

Increased insecurity started from the late 1980 and lasted until the end of the decade in the form of guerrilla wars in the rural areas, which caused a mass migration of Kurds to Urmia city. The city area and population were nearly doubled in the first decade after the revolution.¹⁷ Most of the migrant Kurds who were victims of the conflicts used to be landless commoners in the pre-revolutionary years. Therefore, they did not have an incentive to go back to their places of origin after peace came to the region. A reverse migration happened only among the peasants of fertile plains like Margavar, who had economic incentives to go back to their villages. Most of the migrants from



Map 2. Kurdish Districts Migration Patterns to Urmia City.

Source: Made by the author in consultation with numerous Kurds in the city coming from distinct regions. (The map was extracted and modified by the author from the map of the data center of the Management and Planning Organization (MPO) of West Azerbaijan Province, Iran. <https://azgharbi.mporg.ir/>)

Targavar and specifically Sumay, however, who used to live in rocky mountainous villages and dry lands, preferred to stay in the city. On the other hand, infrastructure development in the Kurdish residing borderlands was comparatively slow in the post-conflict years, which was another discouraging element for the Kurds not to choose reverse migration.¹⁸

All in all, the migration process to the city took place rapidly; however, the sense of belonging to the place of origin still remained. Even today, the peasants who did not own agricultural lands commute to their villages quite frequently at least in order to attend funerals, as the city still does not have a graveyard specific to Sunni Muslims. Though there is no legal obstacle to burying Sunnis in Shi'a cemeteries, the majority of Kurds prefer to bury the deceased members of their family in their ancestral village.

2. Settlement in the city

The mass migration of the Kurds to the city in early 1980s resulted in the shaping of semi-ghettos in the western parts of the city. Poor neighborhoods like *Islam Abad* in the northwestern suburbs of the city grew fast starting in the early 1980s. Some Kurdish residing villages on the western side of the city like *Alvaj*, *Dizaj Siyavash* and *Tarzlu*, were integrated into the city by its rapid expansion.

Map 3 illustrates the expansion pattern of Urmia city over time; it indicates that the western parts of city are mostly spontaneous settlements expanded after the 1980s and 1990s, with inadequate provision of facilities. These areas are mostly populated by Kurds from various backgrounds.¹⁹ Another wave of migration happened as a result of increased border control in the Kurdish residing suburbs. Informal border trade, especially gasoline to Turkey and Iraq, was the main source of non-sustainable income for the Kurds by the late 2010s. A strict border control policy caused another mass migration of Kurds from the northern parts of Urmia and Salmas, as labor forces.

Today, the spontaneous settlements and increasing crime rate have shaped the typical image of the Kurds among Azeris. However, such an image neglects the internal complexity and the dynamics of Kurdish society over time. Although the cultural backwardness in the semi-ghettos has led to a reproduction of poverty and illiteracy among the second generation of many migrant Kurds, the situation of the Kurds who live in mixed neighborhoods with

Azeris, or among Kurdish families with higher cultural capital, is different. This group depicts a different progressive picture of the Kurd and Kurdishness in the city.

Based on the strategic urban development plan of Urmia city, some newly constructed settlements, near Kurdish neighborhoods which were initially designed for predominantly Azeri governmental staff like teachers, (*Shahrak-e Farhangiyan*) or members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (*Shahrak-e Sepah*), now are taken by migrant Kurds. This was mainly due to the dramatic change in the ethnic balance of the town in favor of Kurds. Many of the emerging Kurdish middle class preferred these Kurdish residing neighborhoods to downtown. A 35-year-old Kurdish bank clerk explained his reason to settle in the newly established *Isar town* as:

My first incentive was to stay close to my family members who live close by. Second, these newly established regions are cheaper than the downtown. We Kurds like to have a big house with a yard, which is difficult to afford in the downtown.²⁰

Depending on the neighborhoods in which the Kurds live, the rural lifestyle is in transition at different paces. Naturally, there are considerable differences among the middle-class and semi-ghetto Kurdish residing neighborhoods in changing traditional ways of life. A vivid sign of this difference can be seen in the way women dress. While in poor neighborhoods and among less educated women wearing traditional Kurdish clothing is common, educated and middle-class women see it as a sign of backwardness and a symbol of the rural lifestyle. Thus, we observe different urbanization patterns depending on the class and neighborhood.

The same can be said about how tribal ties are blurring among urban Kurds. Similar to how Koohi-Kamali describes the urbanization process of Sorani-speaking Kurds after the Land Reform, tribal affiliations among the Kurmanji Kurds in Urmia are gradually fading away.²¹ Intra-Kurdish distinctions, which used to be mainly hierarchical, have slowly transformed into regional identities based on the place of origin, e.g. Kurd of Margavar vs. Kurd of Sumay. Today, except among the most prominent families who struggle to maintain their perceived nobility in various ways, such as by marriages of convenience, class



Map 3. The expansion map of Urmia city from 1921 to 2004.

Source: Mohandesan-e moshaver-e *Tarh va amayesh, Tarh-e tajdid nazar-e tarh-e jame' e Shahr-e Urmia: Barrasi va shenakht-e shahr*, (Urmia, Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, National Organization of Land and Housing, 2010/1389), Vol.1, 3 (Ethnic distribution has been modified by the author based on ethnographic fieldwork).

distinctions have eclipsed tribal or regional differences. For example, marriages of young Kurds of Urmia city, today, no longer necessarily follow hierarchical ties or tribal traditions. However, the legitimacy of the chieftainship still varies based on the place of origin.²²

Among the Kurds of the Sumay Baradust region, who have mostly settled in the poor neighborhoods of Urmia, tribal identity has been maintained more than in other regions.²³ Moreover, during the last two decades, it has been the state's policy to revive the chieftainship and strengthen tribal identity in order to control and mobilize the Kurdish population against the armed oppositional groups through chieftains. While such re-tribalization attempts have been successful among some sub-tribes, specifically in the rural context, the majority of urban Kurds have abandoned their tribal identity. Therefore, as Bruinessen indicates, we no longer can explain the urban Kurdish life using the elements of traditional tribal life.²⁴ A 29-year-old shopkeeper who was born in Urmia, but originally hails from the Sumay region, explains:

Nowadays, everyone is his own Arbab [head of village]. We no longer need to listen to the chieftain or ask for his permission for any of our personal issues. We used to get permission from the chieftain for any marriage inside the tribe. For my eldest sister's marriage, my father insisted upon the same tradition. But for the younger siblings, we convinced him not to follow such a backward tradition.²⁵

Nonetheless, Kurds as city dwellers—even the younger generation—have preserved a sense of belonging to their ancestral lands as a part of their identity.

III. Mixing: How ethnicity works in everyday life

1. Grounds for the construction of ethnicity

Though Urmia has been a multi-ethnic city famous for the high level of tolerance among its various ethnic groups, the abrupt change in its ethnic composition in the post-Iranian Revolutionary years (after 1979) was not without consequences. While the first generation of migrants were more tolerant of being treated as lower status citizens by both the state and Azeris, many

educated youths in the second generation did not find the same situation comfortable enough to live with. Growing ethnic dissatisfaction is evident among the young educated members of the emerging Kurdish middle class. Today, this group, even the ones who were born in the peripheries, no longer identify themselves by their place of origin, but by calling themselves “Kurds of Urmia”. Such a new form of identification suggests that they claim equal citizenship rights as the Azeris. This perceived discrimination has its roots in an informal policy of the Islamic Republic that excludes the Sunnis and Kurds from the political and governmental structure. As one high-ranking Azeri city governmental employee remarked:

The regime no longer trusts the Kurds or other Sunnis after their betrayal of the territorial integrity of the country in the post-revolutionary years when we needed to maintain internal integrity being at war with Iraq.²⁶

The stigmatic citizenship of the Kurds does not come only from the state. It has also been rooted among most Azeris, who have stereotyped the Kurd image in a dichotomic way: either as poor uneducated laborers living in poor neighborhoods who are stigmatized as nomadic mountain dwellers, or wealthy up-start drug smugglers lacking cultural capital. During my ethnographic data collection, I rarely faced an Azeri having a clear and fair image of the Kurds and their internal factions. Though this constructed image is mostly invisible in daily interactions in public, its impact could be traced in the private sphere, such as with the scarcity of inter-ethnic marriages or in the crossing of ethnic boundaries in friendship circles.

The stigmatized citizenship attributed to the Kurds in the city together with the institutional discriminations they face in their everyday lives has motivated some educated Kurds to fashion different sorts of resistance. In this regard, the former tribal or regional identities which have been abandoned by some as a sign of the rural, regain a new status to represent Kurdish ethnic identity in their interactions with Azeris.²⁷

The creation of Kurdishness as an ethnicity, here, can be traced distinctly at institutionalized and personal levels. At the institutionalized level, politicized Kurdishness has been constructed not only in contention with Azeris, but also with Sorani Kurds. As there is a historical contest between Soranis and

Kurmanjis, the political actors have attempted to engage in constructing a distinct form of Kurmanji Kurdish activism in response to the perceived deprivation in relation to both Azeris and Soranis. Due to the lack of freedom for established political Kurdish groups, it is difficult to categorize different tendencies of those who engage in a sort of political resistance. The ideologies of ethnic activists vary from supporting the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) as a Kurmanji militia group, to engaging in local politics or Kurdish cultural activities in the city, taking a lower security risk.²⁸

Construction of Kurdishness among ordinary Kurds who do not directly engage at the institutionalized level happens differently. Kurdish satellite TV channels and social media consumption have brought a sense of trans-state solidarity for many Kurds. The common sense of deprivation and suppression have contributed to the formation of a transnational solidarity rooted in Kurdishness. This emerging sense of ethnicity is not necessarily in line with the political parties' path towards Kurdish nationalism. While imagined Kurdish identity of the ordinary people is constructed based on territorial nationalism, organized or institutionalized activism, in most cases, is limited to opposing the state or other Kurdish groups.

2. Blurred ethnic lines in daily occupations

As discussed earlier, the emerging forms of *Kurdayeti* (Kurdishness) are being produced and reproduced in the urban context. However, this does not necessarily mean that the distinctions based on ethnicity are always or frequently present in the daily of the Kurds or Azeris. In this section, I will try to illustrate how ethnic lines in an everyday context in Urmia city are getting blurred, whether intentionally or un-intentionally, from both sides.

The salience and appearance of ethnicity in the Kurdish-dominant neighborhoods highly differ from those of the mixed neighborhoods with Azeris. Naturally, the Kurdish language, culture and women's traditional dress is dominant in the Kurdish enclaves. While women, who rarely commute to the city center, barely speak Azeri, the majority of men are bilingual. Unlike in the mixed neighborhoods, they learn the language in their adulthood when they engage in different economic activities in the city center. In other parts of the city, the dominant language and *lingua franca* is Azeri. Most of the Kurds learn the language starting in their childhood, from their Azeri friends or through

daily communication at school.²⁹ In daily interactions in the city, when two Kurds encounter, most of the time they start to communicate in Azeri until they realize that they both are Kurds. A Kurdish restaurant owner explained the role of language usage in his daily life:

We Kurds can speak many languages. I see this as an advantage compared to the Azeris who do not know our language. For me, language is a tool for communication. Therefore, I learned Azeri and can speak it without an accent.³⁰

When I asked how he learned to improve his Azeri speaking without having any accent, he replied:

I practiced a lot. When I was a teenager, I practiced Azeri at home every day to speak it without an accent. I did not want to be distinguished from Azeris in the city.

As the conversation indicates, most of the Kurds engaged in business in downtown speak almost native Azeri without an accent. This tendency might have been developed as a response to the linguistic stigma. Another strategy which is used mostly by the ethnic activists is to speak in Persian, as the national language, rather than learning Azeri. Claiming that the city is multi-ethnic, they try to show their resistance against the symbolic violence that they have undergone from Azeris.

Religion, on the other hand, barely is considered as a distinctive identity pillar in daily life for the Kurds in Urmia. This high level of religious tolerance in the city could be interpreted as the result of the co-existence of different ethno-religious groups in Urmia on the one hand, and the residing of a considerable number of Sunni Azeris in the city, on the other.³¹ Having in-between identities, Sunni Azeris play a vital role in blurring ethnic identities between the Kurds and Azeris. In the *Imam Shafe'i* mosque, a Sunni mosque located in the city center, for instance, the Kurdish clergyman of the mosque gives one sermon in Kurdish and another in Azeri for Sunni Azeris. Marriages between these two groups are also common, which shows that ethnicity alone cannot explain divergence, or convergence, between the Azeris and Kurds.

Similarly, my ethnography in a traditional bazaar illustrated that, in most economic and daily interactions, both Kurds and Azeris prioritize their economic incentives over ethnic affiliation in their daily lives. There are many Azeri shopkeepers, for instance, who have hired Kurdish salesmen in order to make communications easier with their Kurdish customers. The same applies to the Kurds, as a Kurdish jewelry shop owner noted:

I really do not care whom to hire in my shop as a salesman, Azeri or Kurd. The only concern I have is the network through which I found them and the level of trust I can have in them. Nowadays, who can consider ethnicity as a source of trust?³²

However, the blurred ethnic lines in everyday life should not persuade us to neglect that this tolerance might be a result of some coping strategies developed over time among both groups. People seem to be consciously avoiding the discussion of sensitive topics related to the politics of ethnicity, especially during moments in which the city becomes highly polarized, such as during local elections.

3. Momentary ethnic mobilizations

The mobilization of Urmia's citizens over ethnicity has happened easily on some occasions. In this section, I will discuss two occasions as instances of a momentary mobilization of the Kurds in Urmia: the ethnic riots that happened in Urmia in 1999 following the arrest of Abdullah Ocalan—the charismatic leader of the Kurds in Turkey—by Turkey's intelligence service, and the ethnic polarization of the city during local elections in recent years.

In the late 1990s, a Kurdish middle class which would actively engage in political activism was in its nascent stage. However, after Ocalan's arrest in Nairobi by the Turkish intelligence service, the PKK—which had an official office in Tehran and Urmia at the time—held a demonstration in front of the Turkish consulate in Urmia.³³ According to several interviewees, few Kurds in Turkey at the time knew about the PKK and its leader; however, within a few days, the demonstration turned violent. The angry demonstrators set fire to the Turkish consulate. While there were few Kurmanji ethnic activists in the city at that time, this incident had a strong impact on the mobilization of the Kurds,

and increased their solidarity with their co-ethnics in Turkey. A 36-year-old Kurdish author reflected on those days:

I was a teenager by that time, and I remember that I was walking in the street when I noticed a demonstration was going on. At the time, I had not heard about Ocalan or the PKK, and had no idea about them. However, the ethnic sentiments were so high that I found myself, a couple of days later, in the front line of the demonstrators attacking the Turkish consulate.³⁴

After this incident, the ethnic awareness in the city dramatically increased both among the Kurds and Azeris. Later, with the strengthening of Azeri activism starting in 2006, its Kurdish counterpart in Urmia gradually became more widespread.³⁵ The local elections did not have much symbolic importance either for the Kurds or for the Azeris in the previous decade. With increasing ethnic sentiments on both sides, however, ethnicity vividly entered into political contests starting with the city council elections of 2002, when a Kurdish woman of Beygzade tribal origin used Kurdish clothing in her political campaign. Playing the ethnic card, she was successfully elected as both the first Kurdish and first female member of city council.

Starting with the next city council and parliamentary elections, the electoral campaigns gradually were drawn on ethnic lines. *Nader Ghazi Pour*, an Azeri conservative representative of Urmia electoral district in the parliament since 2008, was a key figure in intensifying the Azeri-Kurdish contests by bringing a radical ethnic discourse into his campaigns. During the last parliamentary election, in 2016, the city witnessed a deep ethnic division, with both sides intensively engaged in manipulating ethnicity to mobilize the masses in order to achieve their political goals. *Hakem Mamakan*, a well-known young Kurdish candidate, for instance, freed four pigeons during one of his speeches in Margavar as a symbolic action to show his concern for freeing the four parts of divided Kurdistan. On many other occasions, he wore the traditional Kurdish clothing of the Harki tribe; however, in Sumay, his place of origin, such clothing is not popular. His Azeri counterparts, too, engaged in similar actions in order to mobilize the masses by manipulating their ethnic affiliation. *Hadi Bahadori*, the elected parliament member of Urmia, appeared in traditional Azeri clothing in an open house parliament session, repeating the demands of Azeri ethnic

activists.

Such heated debates over local elections do not take place in Azeri- or Kurdish-dominant cities. This shows how in the mixed city of Urmia, political activists on either side engage in politicizing ethnicity and playing on the ethnic fault lines. An Azeri 52-year-old interviewee explained his views on the ethnicization of local elections as follows:

Starting from a few years ago, our city started to experience ethnic division during the election campaigns. Before that, we did not care much about politics and parliamentary elections. But nowadays, it seems that we have to support our co-ethnic during the election time. Every two years, during electoral campaigns, we all become aware of our ethnic affiliation.³⁶

The local elections, in general, have more symbolic importance for the Kurds than for the Azeris. Being deprived of having a share in the local political order, the Kurds see the elections as their only chance in taking some share of power. This common sense of deprivation, which is shared among the Kurds, helps them to overcome their internal divisions and mobilize based on ethnic affiliation during the local elections. A Sorani Kurdish 30-year-old director, who was born and lived in Urmia, described his own stance on the elections as follows:

Since I finished high school, almost all my close friends have been Azeris. The Kurmanji community here is not very active in the cultural field; therefore, I do not have many friends among them. Furthermore, I feel culturally closer to the Azeris than to the Kurmanji Kurds; the same applies to my other family members ... However, during local elections, we indeed support the Kurmanji candidates. My family members run campaigns for them. We believe that if any sort of ethnic conflict were to happen in the city in the near future, it would be the Kurmanji Kurds who would support us, not the Azeris.³⁷

Though mobilization based on ethnic lines is a common phenomenon in the city, other interests cut across ethnic affiliation on some occasions. For instance, *Seyyed Salman Zaker*, the former judge of Urmia's central prison, gained

considerable support from the Kurds despite being Azeri. The reason lies behind his promise to make efforts to reduce the death penalty of several drug smugglers to lifetime imprisonment. As several Kurdish families had some friends or family members in prison, they supported his candidacy despite his political affiliation and ethnic origin.

IV. Acknowledging Multiple Identities of the Kurds

Looking for Kurdishness through an ethnographic lens, as presented in the previous part, helps us to acknowledge that the Kurds, as ordinary people living in society, do not necessarily define themselves with an ethnic identity in all circumstances. They have distinct, multiple social identities and forms of appearance and absence of ethnicized moments, depending on the needs of their struggle for recognition. Therefore, naturally, they may even undermine ethnicity in favor of other interests on some occasions, and vice versa in ethnically mobilized moments.

Considering the variety of social occasions in which ethnicity becomes salient or blurred for the Kurds under study, it would be a simplification and reification of Kurdishness if we generalize it to all aspects of the Kurds' lives. At this point, one may ask what would be the implication of seeing Kurdishness as a category appearing and disappearing in daily life. It may seem to some readers that with such an argument, I am trying to imply that Kurds are not political and that they will not become effectively politicized because ethnicity does not play an essential role in their everyday life. That would be a misunderstanding of the aim of this paper. On the contrary, the fieldwork demonstrates that the Kurdish society under study has a high potential for mobilization. History has shown the great potential of the Kurds for mobilization in each of the four countries in which they reside. But the problem occurs when the occasions of such mobilizations are being seen as the only occasions explicitly showing Kurdishness. The complexity of the situations cannot be reduced or explained through events only. From what I have observed, we cannot reduce the Kurds of Urmia to one aspect they may from time to time exhibit, or limit all Azeri-Kurdish daily relations to occasional tensions, and all Kurds as political actors.

This led me to recognize how the notion of *multiple identities*, discussed by Stuart Hall, is relevant to the study of Kurdishness.³⁸ By recognizing multiple

identities, I do not intend to undermine the importance of the times when groupness happens for the Kurds. Nor do I want to deny the structural and institutional factors that play a significant role in motivating them to mobilize. The point is, that being exposed “only” to the political discourses of “above” at the state or Kurdish nationalistic party level results in reification of “the Kurd” as a political actor, and prevents the researcher from seeing the Kurds’ multiple identities. As Hall says, we oscillate between the different social identities that we possess, consciously or unconsciously; they are contingent and cross-cut one another. In a micro-analysis like this study, the tribal identities which are the primary identity in the rural area convert to regional identities, contrasting with those of other regions, or turn to ethnic or class differentiations.

Recognizing such multiple identities, of course, is not limited to the Kurds and could be generalized for all ethnic groups. Then the point that needs to be focused on is to comprehend the reasons that make the momentary ethnicization of the Kurds more frequent and powerful than that of the Azeris. As the ethnographic fieldwork illustrated, the structural symbolic violence that Kurds are subject to, both in the form of suppressive policies of the state and a stigmatic citizenship imposed on them in daily life by Azeris, contribute to this situation. Therefore, the high potential of the Kurds to become ethnicized depends on to what extent their citizenship rights are protected.

The dominant approach in the study of Kurds, today, is to initiate the research from the Kurdish nationalism as a concept, instead of the Kurds as agents of this concept. This has confined the study of Kurdishness to Kurdish nationalism and reduced the debates in looking for its origin and historical development.³⁹ Abbas Vali attempted to go beyond the historicist approach by portraying Kurdish nationalism as a necessary result of an “othering” process which was needed to construct the national identity of Iranian, Turkish and Iraqi. While his work is a valuable contribution to counterargue the primordial and constructivist’s discourse, he treats Kurdish nationalism as if it is a necessary element of being a Kurd, which has failed to happen. He, thus, tries to theorize reasons behinds its failure.

This paper, however, by bringing the ordinary Kurds in everyday life into attention, argues that the Kurds have multiple social identities. When they are subject to being discriminated against and their citizenship rights are being neglected, whether by the state or another dominant ethnic group, they have a

high potential for mobilization based on ethnic demands. Vali appropriately initiates his discussion on the conditions of the formation of Kurdish nationalism in each of the states the Kurds resided in during the early decades of the 20th century.⁴⁰ However, for him, all dynamics are happening at the state policy-making level and in its negotiations and contentions with the Kurdish elites.

I argue that Vali's approach, while explaining the structural problems in the realm of politics, ignores the realm of everyday life. Therefore, he treats Kurdish nationalism as if it has certain shared characteristics among all Kurds living in different states. Avoiding transcending Kurdish nationalism and looking for its failure or success was exactly the departure point of this study. Taking Kurdish nationalism as a moment of groupness shaped around ethnicity, I tried to find the root causes of the ethnicization of their identities on some occasions. In this regard, I consider both voting for a Kurdish candidate in a local election in Urmia and the solidarity of the Kurds in support of Ocalan as the struggle for recognition in the local political realm, but in different forms.

V. Conclusion

Arguing that the predominant shaped image of the Kurds is a highly political one, the aim of my ethnographic fieldwork in Urmia city was to break with the reified image of "the Kurds", a predominant trend in media and even within academic works, and seek to identify Kurdishness not only in politicized situations, but also in the daily lives of the Kurds.

Investigation of everyday contacts, and the roles of language, religion, political institutions and the media, can give us a broader view of what it is like to be "a Kurd". Through the ethnography of daily life, I came to realize how ethnicity is contingent, appearing and disappearing depending on the circumstances. While the role of religion, as an identity pillar for the Kurds, is in a significant decline, language, manifesting itself in the use of various linguistic strategies, could play a major role in preventing or allowing ethnicized interactions. While boundary-making between the Kurds and Azeris is not tangible in the everyday public sphere, in the private sphere they seem to be effectively separated.

The political realm, however, is highly ethnicized, revealing itself on occasions such as local elections and in transnational Kurdish solidarities. But this should not mislead us into ignoring the many other occasions in daily life in which

ethnicity does not appear. Therefore, this paper illustrated the complex configuration of Kurdishness in Urmia city by not only focusing on the political field and politicized moments, as most Kurdish studies do. The ethnographic approach gave me a powerful tool to argue that, unlike how it is portrayed in the political realm, Kurdishness in its highly-politicized form is not ever-present and does not naturally appear in the everyday lives of the Kurmanji Kurds. Even in the highly polarized political field of Urmia, ethnicity can be invisible in most daily interactions. Kurds in the bazaar, for instance, do not seem to care much about the ethnicity of their customers or their coworkers, as long as their economic interest is secured. The same applies to the settlement patterns in Urmia city. A non-ethnographic study of ethnicity in the city may result in reducing the ethnic distribution pattern in Urmia city to a high level ethnicized political realm. However, as an ethnographer, I give far less value to that argument compared to the social and economic interests of individuals.

Thus, by acknowledging multiple identities of the Kurds in their daily lives, this paper argues that Kurdishness should not be conflated with Kurdish nationalism. It is not necessarily politicized in all aspects of the lives of ordinary people. On occasions that it manifests itself in political form, it may follow different incentives depending on the local political fields. Such a worldview can be a way out of reproduction of Kurdish identity solely based on Kurdish nationalism, which is highly reductionist.

Acknowledgment

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Notes

- 1 See, for example: Alam Saleh, *Ethnic Identity and the State in Iran* (Springer, 2013); Rasmus Elling, *Minorities in Iran: Nationalism and Ethnicity after Khomeini* (Springer, 2013).
- 2 Huseyin Tunc, "Kurdayeti and Kurdish Nationalism: The Need for Distinction." *Zanj: The Journal of Critical Global South Studies* 2, no. 1 (2018): 43-64.
- 3 Isma'el Agha Simko's role as a Kurdish nationalist leader is highly controversial. While most Kurdish historians depict him as a charismatic nationalist leader, Azeri writers interpret his movements as that of a brigand of both Kurds and Azeris. See, Ahmad Sharifi, *Ashayer-e Shekak va Sharh-e Zendigi-ye An-ha be Rahbari-yi Ismaeel Agha Simko (Shikak Nomads and History of Their Life under the Leadership of Isma'el Agha Simko)*, (Mahabad: Sayyedani, 1969); Tohid Malekzadeh-ye Dilmaqani, *Azerbaijan dar Jang-e Jahani-e Avval ya Fajaye-e Jiloluq. (Azerbaijan in WWI and the Jiloluq Disaster)*, (Hashemi, 2007).
- 4 Most of the studies on Iranian Kurds treat Iranian Kurdistan merely as the Sorani-speaking parts. For a comprehensive review of the studies on Iranian Kurds see: Ahmad Mohammadpur and Mehdi Rezaei. "Kurdish Studies in Iran Revisited: An Overview of the Theoretical and Methodological Approaches," *Iran Namag* 1, no. 4 (2017): 172-208.
- 5 Martin van Bruinessen, "Kurds and the City," Joyce Blau, *l'Éternelle Chez Les Kurdes*, Paris: Institut Kurde de Paris (2013): 273-95.
- 6 Joane Nagel, "Constructing ethnicity: Creating and recreating ethnic identity and culture." *Social problems* 41, no. 1 (1994): 152-176.
- 7 Henry E. Hale, "Explaining Ethnicity." *Comparative Political Studies* 37, no. 4 (2004): 459.
- 8 Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 11.
- 9 Ernest Gellner and John Breuilly. *Nations and Nationalism* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1983), 48-49.
- 10 Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism*, 9-11.
- 11 Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism*, 11.
- 12 Michael Moerman, "Accomplishing Ethnicity" in *Ethnomethodology: Selected Readings*, ed. Roy Turner (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974), 54-68.
- 13 Reza Shah's plan to settle various tribes in villages is called the policy of "Takhte Qapu". For a detailed study, see: Ann K.S. Lambton, *Landlord and Peasant in Persia: A Study of Land Tenure and Land Revenue Administration*. (IB Tauris, 1991), 151-177.
- 14 See: Shahin Ra'nayi, *Eslahat-e arzi dar Kurdistan 1341-1353: Manteq-e esteqrar, Payamad-ha-ye ejtemayi va Tab'a'te siyasi (Land Reform in Kurdistan: 1962-1974: Its Logic and Political Consequences)*, (Tehran: Shirazeh, 2018).
- 15 Economic incentives, reliance on animal husbandry and the distances from the bigger cities may explain the endurance of the traditional lifestyle. Today, some tribes lead a semi-nomadic life, continually moving between the village and high-altitude areas. In the Sorani-speaking regions, however, this process was much faster, such that we barely see the existing of tribal ties today. See: Omid Irandust and Seyed Fahim Qaderzadeh. "Motale'e-ye Keyfi-e Senkh Shenasi-e Sabk-ha-ye Zendegi: Motale'e-ye Javanan-e Shahr-e Mahabad" (Qualitative Study of Typology of Lifestyles: A Study of the Youth of Mahabad City) *Jame'e Shenasi-ye Karbordi* 25, no. 3 (2014): 135-161.

- 16 For detailed studies on the roots and consequences of the Kurdish movement in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution, see: Hamidreza Jalayipour, *Faraz va forud-e Jonbesh-e Kurdi 1367-1357*. (Ups and Downs of the Kurdish Movement: 1979-1988), (Tehran: Lohe no, 2006); Nader Entessar, "The Kurds in Post-revolutionary Iran and Iraq," *Third World Quarterly* 6, no. 4 (1984): 911-933; Abbas Vali, "Reflections on Kurdish Society and Politics in Rojhelat: An Overview." *Kurdish Issues: Essays in Honor of Robert W. Olson*, (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 2016).
- 17 See: Asghar Nazarian and Elnaz Hampanezhad. "Tahlil-e Farayand-e Roshd va Takvin-e Shahr-e Urmia ba Bahregiri az Hampushani-ye Aks-ha-ye Havayi dar Sistem-e Etelaat-e Joghrafiyayi (GIS)" (Cultural Analysis of Development of Urmia Using Overlapped Aerial Photos of GIS). *Joghrafiyaye Sarzamin* 10, (2013): 47.
- 18 The Kurdish residing regions of West Azerbaijan province in general and Urmia county in particular are among the less developed regions of the country. For an educational assessment, see: M. Mousavi et al., "Sanjesh-e daraje-ye tose'e yaftegi va mahrumiyat-e manateq-e amuzesh va parvaresh-e Ostone Azerbaijan-e Gharbi," (Assessing the development and depravation degrees of the educational districts in West Azerbaijan Province), *Journal of Motaleat-e barnameh rizi-ye Amuzeshi* 4, no.7 (2014): 83-103; For a health care indices assessment, see: Pejman Hamouzadeh et al., "Ranking West Azerbaijan districts regarding utilization of structural indices of health care". *JQUMS* 17, no. 2 (2013): 41-49.
- 19 Though there is no official census in Iran indicating ethnicity, I specified the Kurdish residing parts of the map based on my ethnographic data collection as well as consulting with ten real state agencies from each of the Kurds and Azeris to shape the map.
- 20 Interviewed on October 13, 2018 in Urmia city.
- 21 Farideh Koohi-Kamali, *The Political Development of the Kurds in Iran: Pastoral Nationalism*. Springer, 2003.
- 22 For a comprehensive study on the traditional forms of marriage among the Kurds in Hakkari province of Turkey, see: Lale Yalçın-Heckmann, *Tribe and Kinship among the Kurds* (Peter Lang, 1991), 211-256. The traditional marriage patterns for the understudied Kurmanji Kurds of Urmia is similar to their co-ethnics in Hakkari.
- 23 In this regard, the head of the Pesagha-Abdoyi branch of the Shikak tribe, *Gargarin Simitko*, still maintains a considerable power hegemony. His legitimacy mostly comes from his familial lineage, as he is a descendent of the nationalistic figure of the Kurmanji Kurds in the region, Simko Shikak, who rebelled against the central government from 1918 to 1922.
- 24 Martin van Bruinessen, "Kurdish Identities and Kurdish Nationalisms in the Early Twenty-First Century." *21 Yüzyлда Milliyetçilik: Teori Ve Siyaset* (2016): 349-373.
- 25 Interviewed on November 2, 2018 in Urmia city.
- 26 Interviewed on September 21, 2018 in Urmia city.
- 27 This phenomenon is similar to what Azad Barmaki and Hasani argue about in the case of Qashgayi tribe in southern Iran. See: Taghi Azad Barmaki and Seyyed Qasem Hasani. "Analysis of the Historical Transformation of Tribe to Ethnicity in Qashqai". *People and Culture* 1, no.2 (2015): 107-133.
- 28 The most prominent and influential institution was *Andisheh-ye Ahmad-e Khani* cultural institute. Established in 2001, the institute was a pioneer in cultural activities, including Kurmanji Kurdish language classes, theatre and poetry circles. It was closed by the government in 2014, accused of engaging in illegal political activities. Today, cultural activities are held in the institution of Islamic guidance and advertisement in

- Urmia city as well as in several non-organized circles.
- 29 The national and educational language in Iran is Persian, and all other regional languages are considered only as spoken languages, including both Azeri and Kurdish.
 - 30 Interviewed on February 8, 2019 in Urmia city.
 - 31 Only a small population of *Sunni* Azeris reside in West Azerbaijan Province, locally called *Kuresunni*. Historically, *Kuresunni* is the name of a tribe located in the north of Salmas district, mostly following the *Hanafi* school of Sunni Islam. They are Turkish migrants to the region from the 16th century. See: Pierre Oberling, "Kora-Sunni". *encyclopedia, Iranica*. 2005. <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/kora-sonni>. Accessed on February 14, 2018.
 - 32 Interviewed on February 17, 2018 in Urmia city.
 - 33 "Ba tajammo dar barabare Sefarate Torkiye va daftar-e sazman-e melal: Kord-haye Iran be dastgiri-ye Ocalan eteraz kardand (By demonstrating in front of the Turkish Embassy, Iranian Kurds showed their objection toward Ocalan's arrest)" *Hamshahri Newspaper*, May 20, 1999, no. 1771.
 - 34 Interviewed on December 15, 2018 in Urmia city.
 - 35 For more information about the rise of Iranian Azerbaijani activism in the post Iranian Revolutionary years, see: Gilles Riaux, "The Origins of the Protest Movement Against Ethnic Hierarchy." in *Identity, Conflict and Politics in Turkey, Iran And Pakistan*, eds. Gilles Dorransoro and Oliver Grojean, (Oxford University Press, 2018), 111-128; Fereydoun Safizadeh, "The Dynamics of Ethnic Identity in Iranian Azerbaijan." *The Journal of Pedagogy, Pluralism and Practice* 5, no. 1 (2013): 55-73.
 - 36 Interviewed on December 9, 2018 in Urmia city.
 - 37 Interviewed on December 11, 2018 in Urmia city.
 - 38 Stuart Hall, "Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities," in *Culture, Globalization and the World-System*, ed. Anthony D. King. (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 59.
 - 39 Abbas Vali's valuable edited volume "Essays on the Origins of Kurdish Nationalism," brings together some contributions from the best-known figures of the field who represent different viewpoints towards Kurdish nationalism. While the book is an important contribution to the study of Kurds, the contributors' theoretical engagements are traditional, unlike Vali who presents his new conceptualization of Kurdish nationalism by claiming that it goes beyond constructivism. See: Abbas Vali, ed. *Essays on the Origins of Kurdish Nationalism*. No. 4. (Mazda Pub, 2003), 64-75.
 - 40 Vali, *Essays*, 103-111; Abbas Vali, "The Kurds and their 'others': fragmented identity and fragmented politics." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 18, no. 2 (1998): 82-95.

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Abstract

Rethinking Kurdishness in an Everyday Context: A Case Study of the Kurmanji Kurds in Urmia city, Iran

Mostafa Khalili

Kurds are among the most studied ethnic groups in the world today. However, Kurdish studies are overwhelmingly focused on political events and conflicts in the countries in which Kurds reside. This research is an attempt to demonstrate how the study of less-politicized Kurds, with a focus on their everyday lives, could identify contradictions within the Kurdish reified image presently dominant in political and academic circles. The focus group of this research are the Kurmanji-speaking Kurds in Urmia city of Iran.

Following Hobsbawm's call to study the notions of nation and nationalism not only from "above", in state or political group discourses, but also from "below", in the way in which they are practiced or internalized among the people, this study utilized ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation to seek an answer to the question of what it is like to be a Kurd in daily life in a multi-ethnic context.

The findings illustrate that while traces of ethnicity are barely visible in everyday interactions, we cannot neglect their importance and potential for polarization within the city. Individuals' strategic choices to deal with their Kurdishness highly differ depending on factors such as generational gap, class, educational level, tribal background and gender. This shows how ethnicity is contingent upon the subjects of this study, appearing and disappearing depending on the circumstances.

By acknowledging multiple identities of the Kurds in their daily lives, this paper argues that Kurdishness should not be conflated with Kurdish nationalism. Kurdishness is not necessarily politicized in all aspects of the lives of ordinary people. On occasions in which it manifests itself in a political form, it may follow different incentives depending on the local political fields. Such a

worldview can be a way out of reproduction of Kurdish identity solely based on Kurdish nationalism, which is highly reductionist.

Keywords

Kurdishness, Kurdayeti, Kurdish nationalism, Kurmanji Kurds, Iranian Kurds, Everyday ethnicity.