

General cultural differences and stereotypes: Kurdish family culture and customs

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Introduction

Estimations of the number of the Kurds vary. According to one estimation, there would be about 30–40 million Kurds. According to another estimation, there might be even 55–70 million Kurds. There is no specific data about the number of the Kurds living in different countries because they do not count the minorities, for example, in Turkey.

The Kurds live mainly in the area of Kurdistan, which is situated in the areas of Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria. There are some Kurds living in the areas of the former Soviet Union in Middle Asia. According to estimations, there are about 700 000 Kurds living in Europe. The biggest Kurd community in Europe lives in Germany. According to the statistics of 2011, there are 8032 Kurds living in Finland.

The area of Kurdistan, located in four different countries, is all together 406 650 square kilometres. The area of Kurdistan is an ethnic area, not a country, and the Kurds live among the other nationalities. In the current situation, the Kurds are the biggest nation in the world without their own country.

The Kurdish language

The Kurdish language is part of the Iranian branch of the Indo-Iranian group of Indo-European languages. It is not related to Arabic or Turkish, but it is related to the official language of Iran, which is Persian (*Farsi*). Also Pashto and Dari spoken in Afghanistan belong to the same language group.

There are four different main dialects in the Kurdish language: Kurmanji, Luri, Sorani and Zaza. Each of them has several subdialects. The dialects differ from each other so much that the speakers of different dialects do not necessarily understand each other. For example, differences between the vocabularies of Kurmanji and Soran have been described by comparing them with those of German and Dutch. There are clear differences both in vocabulary and grammar.

Kurmanji and Soran have written forms, and they have been written both in Arabic and Latin alphabet. Nowadays Kurmanji is mostly written with the Latin alphabet.

The Kurds can not necessarily read or write their own mother tongue, because it has not always been possible to study it everywhere. Most of the Kurds have gone to a school in which the language has been some other than their mother tongue. For example, in Turkey schools are Turkish. For a long time, the official statement of Turkey was that the Kurdish language is not a separate language, but merely a dialect of Turkish spoken near the border. In public and in working life, the Kurds usually speak Turkish. Also in Iran and Syria, teaching the Kurdish language and other public use of the language has been prohibited from time to time.

The Kurdish language is very challenging to learn. For example, there are more exceptions than rules in conjugation of words. In Indo-European languages verbs are usually conjugated by adding an ending that shows the tense. In the Kurdish language the ending that shows the tense and person is added to the beginning of a word. For example, finding out the meaning of a word by using a dictionary is difficult unless you know the body of the word.

History of the Kurds

History of the Kurds is tinged with violence. Many have wanted to govern their land, which is rocky, but fertile in valleys. Kurdistan is clearly an important area both in strategic and economic terms. The origin of the rivers Euphrates and Tigris are in the area of Kurdistan, and there is oil in the soil of Kurdistan.

Mesopotamia has been an area of migration of peoples for thousands of years, and there have been battles. Civilisations have existed and disappeared, and part of the former inhabitants has blended in with the new arrivals. Archaeological findings show that there has been high culture in the area of Kurdistan already before the arrival of the Turkish. The Turkish are a soldier nation that came to the area from the Middle Asia about 1000 years ago.

The Osmani people ruled most of the Kurdistan area until the First World War. According to the treaty of 1920, Turkey should have founded an autonomous area of Kurdistan, but it was never done. The treaty was replaced in 1923 with the treaty of Lausanne. According to the treaty of Lausanne, the Northern part of Kurdistan still belongs to Turkey, the Southern part to Syria and Iraq, which were handed over by the League of Nations as mandated territories to France and Britain. Syria and Iraq became independent later on. The Eastern part of Kurdistan still belongs to Iran, which was known as Persia at the time.

The Kurds have rebelled several times against the ruling countries in Turkey, Iraq and Iran. During the Second World War, the Kurds tried to establish their own country, like many other nations. On the 22nd of January 1946, the republic of Kurdistan was established. At the end of the year, there was an attack to the republic and the resistance of Kurds wasn't able to stop the army of Iran.

The Kurds have a minority position and, for example, in Turkey their existence was not recognised. Using the Kurdish language was prohibited with a penalty of imprisonment in Turkey until 1991, and they tried to make Kurds become Turkish. Kurdish people have been moved away from the areas where they live in, and been killed.

After the Second World War, a great number of Kurds has moved to West. In Turkey, they have been moved to the Western parts whenever they have rebelled in the Eastern parts of the country. In 1965, about 65 % of the Kurds in Turkey lived in traditional areas, nowadays only about half of them. There are 3 million Kurds living in Istanbul. Other areas with high population of Kurds are wealthy towns in the coast of the North-East of Turkey, the Aegean region of West Turkey and the Southern Mediterranean coast.

Independence tendencies of the Kurds

Kurdish people are in a minority position everywhere. For example, Turkey does not allow the expression of minority identities. Turkey applies for membership of the EU, and it has somewhat changed the situation. The EU demands more respect for human rights and re-evaluation of the position of the Kurds as a prerequisite for the membership. Teaching the Kurdish language is nowadays allowed in private schools. Also some radio and TV programmes are broadcast in the Kurdish language in Turkey.

The Kurdistan Labour Party (KLP) demands autonomous position to the Kurds in Turkey. The KLP has armed wings which have made guerrilla strikes against the Turkish army. Tens of thousands of people have been killed in the conflicts between the KLP and the Turkish army, both guerrillas and soldiers. It has to be noted that all Kurds are not supporters of the KLP. However, also those Kurds in Turkey, who are not supporting the KLP, have made a demand on being acknowledged as a nation who has its own culture and language.

Religion and culture

The area of Kurdistan, especially its most South-Eastern part of Turkey, is a conservative area. Its social life is based on an old clan system. The Kurds of the area are farmers and, according to some views, one of the essential characteristics of Kurd culture is the relationship with the ground.

Most Kurds profess Islam. About 75 % of the Kurds are Sunni Muslims. It is good to notice that there are different kinds of views about devotion and religious practices among the Kurds. Some Kurds are Shia Muslims, and some are Christians, Jews or Alevi Kurds. A small minority of the Kurds are Yazidis that blends elements of the ancient religion of Persia, Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

In general, the Kurds are moderate and religiously tolerant. For example, fasting, which belongs to Islam, connects the Kurds, but the length of it varies according to the religious conviction.

Kurdish culture is a communal culture, in which the interest of a community is more important than that of an individual. Disagreements between people may give reason to exclude an individual from the community. However, traditional communality is threatened by urbanisation. The children of families who have moved to cities have grown up without the support of the community, and often in poverty, which is shown in cultural changes. Those children have grown up without the skills and upbringing of a traditional town community and have not adopted its values.

Family culture and customs

Traditional family values are important to Kurdish people, and relationships between family members close. Families are usually large and Kurds live alone only in exceptional situations. Family usually consists of more people than the so called nuclear family, and often many generations belong to the family. Connection to relatives, who live far away, is tight. They keep in touch with them, for example, by phone or computer.

According to the traditional view, sex belongs only to marriage and the Kurds don't have pre-marital sex, and couples don't live together before marriage. The mutual love of a married couple is important, but in family hierarchy a man is the head of a family. In a traditional community, woman's position and living is completely dependent on her marriage, and unmarried women are not regarded as adults. Also according to Islam, getting married is an ideal situation.

Marriage is the only way for a woman to support herself, because there are no jobs for women outside the home and women don't own land or livestock in Kurd areas. A woman, who has divorced or is a widow, doesn't have other possibilities than try to get remarried, perhaps as a second or a third wife of someone. According to Islam, polygamy is allowed. However, in practice, providing for two or more families is possible only for few wealthy men. Marriage markets for widows are limited, because men don't usually want to raise someone else's children. That's why a dead man's brother has to take care of his brother's family. This often means that the brother marries the widow. If the man didn't have single brothers, the widow becomes a second, third or fourth wife of some of the brothers.

Family life is important to the Kurds, and families have a lot of children. Infertility is the worst that can happen to a Kurd woman. Only few inhabitants of a poor remote village have the money or the possibility for infertility treatments. Thus, infertility often causes a divorce or the husband may take another wife.

Marriage isn't usually just a two-way street in Kurd culture. A couple in love can decide for the marriage themselves, but only if both of the families agree on it. In a patrilineal system, a woman's social, economic and sexual potential are transferred from her family to the family of the husband by a marital contract. The groom pays bride price to the father of the girl. The sum is bigger than normally if the groom is an old widow, or the girl becomes a second wife. Sometimes families switch brides and no one has to pay the bride price.

Muslim marriages are often fixed up marriages, but it has to be noticed that it doesn't mean people are forced to marry someone. It is not allowed to force anyone in a relationship, but the decision has to be mutual.

Respecting older people and hospitality are central to Kurd culture. Kurds tend to be hospitable, which is one of the basic principles of every self-respecting Kurd. Kurds like to entertain guests and gather together to celebrate traditional festivals. The most important festival is the New Year's Festival (*newroz*). It is celebrated on the 21st of March in all parts of Kurdistan. Also Kurds living outside the area of Kurdistan celebrate it.

Honourable behaviour is also central to Kurd culture. Girls don't usually walk alone outside the home, only when they go to school. Women dress modestly, which means that hands and legs are covered at least all the way to elbows and knees, preferably completely. In Kurd areas, people don't walk around in revealing clothing, even though women usually don't wear a headscarf. People have to act so that the family's honour isn't lost. The significance of a family and relatives as part of an individual's world image and identity is shown with numerous words for different relatives in the Kurdish language. It is a duty of the young to keep up the image of a loyal family and earn their living in decent ways.

As a Kurd in Europe

Many Kurds have been forced to move out from their birth country. They live in a minority position in most countries of Europe. The young, who live in West, have gotten influences from school and the main cultures of the country they live in. This has caused contradictions between different Kurd generations. Transition from a traditional Kurd community, in which the interest of the family is a priority, is significant when they move, for example, to modern Nordic countries. Many young people have started to put their own interest before that of their family, because already the school system raises them to be independent.

Kurd families, which have moved to Western countries, have faced great pressures to change. Nordic society and culture has had a lot of time to adapt to changes. It is clear that a human being cannot perform the same adaptation process in a short period of time. Immigrants, for example Kurds, need continuous interpretation of their culture and support for assessing different kinds of demands and expectations. This helps Kurd families to reorganise their life in a new situation while maintaining their own culture.

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