

Article

KURDS OR KURDISH PEOPLE: A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON KURDISH STUDIES

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Abstract: This article challenges the notion of a unified Kurdish identity and argues that Kurds are historically, culturally, and politically integral to the broader Iranian nation. Through a detailed examination of linguistic, historical, and anthropological evidence, the study reveals the profound diversity among Kurdish-speaking populations, where distinct languages and dialects often share closer affinities with Persian than with each other. The research underscores that what is commonly perceived as a singular “Kurdish language” is in reality a spectrum of linguistic variations, further complicating efforts to frame Kurds as a homogeneous ethnic group. Additionally, the article highlights the historical integration of Kurdish peoples into Iranian political and cultural life, focusing on shared mythologies, literary traditions, and customs that link Kurds closely to the Iranian cultural sphere. By critiquing oversimplified ethno-nationalist narratives, the study advocates for a more nuanced understanding of Kurdish identity as diverse and deeply intertwined with the Iranian nation. This perspective not only aligns with historical realities but also offers a more inclusive framework for addressing contemporary political and social issues in the region.

Keywords: Iranian identity, Kurdish identities, Iranian nation, Kurds, cultural integration, Kurdish studies

Although a significant portion of the inhabitants in western Iran, northern and eastern Iraq, and southern and eastern Turkey self-identify as “Kurdish” and refer to their place of residence as “Kurdistan”—a nomenclature that has been largely accepted by Western researchers, politicians, and regional governments—a closer examination of the historical background of these regions and ancient Iranian history reveals:

- (1) Historically, the term “Kurd” was less indicative of a specific “ethnicity” or “people with a distinct language,” but rather denoted a “particular mode of subsistence” for non-Arab, non-sedentary populations.

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Consequently, it encompassed many groups that are not considered “Kurdish” today. Historical texts frequently reference these nomadic peoples and their habitation zones in the aforementioned regions. This nuance has been either inadvertently or deliberately overlooked by many Kurdish ethnonationalist movements.

- (2) Many theoretical elements defining ethnicity—such as “the myth of common ancestry, shared memories, cultural elements, etc.”—are common between Kurds and other Iranians, while the commonalities with Arabs (Iraq) and Turks (Turkey) are significantly less pronounced (except for the religious factor). The mythical epic of Kaveh the Blacksmith, the tales of Rostam and Sohrab, the Median Empire, the Zand dynasty (particularly Karim Khan Zand), the celebration of Nowruz, adherence to Islam (and Shi’ism for Shi’ite Kurds), customs and traditions, a long shared history, and even the linguistic proximity between Kurdish and Persian are among the extensive list of commonalities between Kurds and other Iranians. Notably, the term “Kurd” (in both its general and specific connotations) has consistently been recorded in collective memory as part of the Iranian populace, and Kurdistan as a part of Iran. Until recent decades, Kurdish studies in Western research and cultural centers were considered a branch of Iranian studies.

- (3) The social and cultural differences among Kurds appear to be at least as significant as those between Kurds and other Iranians.

- (3.1) Anthropological studies fundamentally negate the existence of any pure race and categorically reject, based on scientific evidence, the assertion that “Kurds are a distinct race.” The evident variations in skin color, eye and hair color, head and facial structure, nose shape, etc., among different Kurdish groups are too conspicuous to be denied.

- (3.2) Kurds have never constituted a unified, independent, or even semi-independent “centralized” political entity. Even during the height of Kurdish emirate power, dozens of principalities existed from Ilam and Kermanshah to Ardalan and central Kurdistan, to Dersim and the Baban and Bitlis emirates (later in the Ottoman Empire). These principalities often engaged in fierce competition and bloody conflicts. The rivalry between the Baban and Ardalan houses during the Safavid era exemplifies this, as noted in the *Sharafnama*: “Kurdish tribes do not submit to or obey one another... each raises the banner of autocracy... they agree on nothing except the word of monotheism.” Inter-tribal and clan rivalries among Kurds were equally prevalent.

- (4) From a linguistic perspective, the language differences among Kurds are striking and prominent, presenting a spectrum of distinct languages in these regions.

- (4.1) All historical sources addressing Kurdish history, including those authored by Kurds themselves (such as the *Sharafnama*), were written in Persian. Persian remained the predominant literary language among all Kurds, both within Iran and elsewhere, until the early 20th century. Currently, the number of Kurdish poets composing in Persian (in Iran) far exceeds those

writing in Kurdish. The significant similarities between some Kurdish languages or dialects and Persian partly explain this phenomenon. The cultural proximity and Kurds' profound affection for Iranian symbols are other contributing factors.

- (5) Religious and sectarian diversity in Kurdish-inhabited areas is so pronounced that an Iranian author in the early current (solar) century likened these regions to a "miniature India." This diversity includes Sunni Kurds, Shi'ite Kurds, Armenians, Assyrians, Yazidis, Alevis, Ahl-e Haqq, and followers of Sufi orders such as Qadiriyya and Naqshbandiyya. These religious differences have played a crucial role in Kurdish political movements in Turkey and even Iran. While Sunni Kurds in Safavid Iran were inclined towards the Sunni Ottoman Empire, the uprisings of Alevis within Ottoman territory in favor of the Safavids represented the other side of the coin. In Iran's contemporary history, southern Kurds (from Kermanshah and Ilam) and some central or Ardalan Kurds (inhabitants of Gerrus and the Qorveh region) who are Shi'ite have never aligned with centrifugal Kurdish movements in the north (West Azerbaijan). Not only have they refrained from supporting these movements, but they have also staunchly resisted them. (The emergence of fervent Iranian nationalists like Dr. Karim Sanjabi, a Kurd from Kermanshah who dedicated his life to strengthening nationalism within the framework of the National Front and in collaboration with Dr. Mohammad Mosaddegh, exemplifies countless individuals of this nature.)

One of the primary indicators of ethnic challenges in the region and many parts of the world is the emphasis placed by ethnic parties and movements on linguistic demands. Although, as de Saussure, the linguist, states, "linguistic commonality and consanguinity have no obligatory relationship, and one cannot be inferred from the other" (de Saussure 1999, 331), there exists a reciprocal relationship between ethnic unity and language. The social bond that forms a linguistic community also contributes, to some extent, to ethnic unity. Generally, it can be said that ethnic unity is sufficient to justify a linguistic community (332). Consequently, "issues such as language status, which are highly contentious in almost all fragmented societies, constitute the most prominent symbol of conflict. This issue is often perceived by marginalized groups as a complete symbol of domination." Horowitz refers to ethnic groups' claims on issues like "language" as "inappropriate goods" that groups are reluctant to compromise on or resolve (Sisk 2000, 45, 139).

During the political movements of the 1940s in Kurdish-inhabited regions of Iran and subsequent developments, one of the primary demands of emerging political movements in the area was the official recognition of the Kurdish language. This language, whose written history spans less than 150 years, had not been used in written form until relatively recently (a century ago). Even the first book written by a Kurd about Kurds, the "Sharafnama," was composed in Persian during the Safavid era and presented to the Ottoman Sultan. The author, Sharaf Khan Bidlisi, was a Kurdish emir from Bidlis, a city then under Ottoman rule and now within Turkey's borders. Although

the Ottomans spoke Turkish and Sharaf Khan was fluent in Turkish, Arabic, and Kurdish, he chose to write in Persian due to his fondness for the language and its widespread use in the region. In the introduction to his book, he even praised Ottoman Sultan Mehmed III in Persian.

During the political movements of the 1940 in Kurdish-inhabited regions of Iran and subsequent developments in this sphere, one of the demands of opposing political movements that emerged in the region was related to the Kurdish “language” and the official recognition of it in Kurdish-populated areas. This language, whose written history dates back to less than a century and a half ago, had never been used in writing until recently (a century ago). Even the first book written by a Kurd about Kurds during the Safavid era and presented to the Ottoman Sultan, namely the “Sharafnama,” was composed in Persian. “The author of the book, Sharaf Khan Bidlisi, was himself a Kurdish emir who lived in the Kurdish city of Bidlis, which was then under Ottoman rule and is now within the territory of Turkey. Although the Ottomans spoke Turkish and Sharaf Khan was fluent in Turkish, Arabic, and Kurdish, he chose to write in Persian due to his fondness for the language and its widespread use in the region. In the introduction to his book, he even praised Ottoman Sultan Mehmed III in Persian. Could there be a clearer indication? Not only Sharaf Khan Bidlisi, but one can confidently say that almost all Kurdish poets who lived outside the realm of Iranian sovereignty were as fond of Persian as their mother tongue, Kurdish” (Masoud 1994, 63-66).

The diligent Kurdish researcher from Sanandaj, Seyyed Abdul Hamid Heyrat Sajjadi (1996), has introduced more than 1,250 Kurdish poets who composed Persian poetry and, in the author’s words, were “Kurdish poets who wrote in Persian” in his 900-page work. These poets cover all Kurdish-inhabited areas, including poets from Sanandaj, Kermanshah, Oraman, Mahabad, Khorasan, Kurdish areas in the north, Lorestan, and Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari, and their poetry encompasses mystical, romantic, social, and political themes. These poets chose to write in Persian freely, without coercion or pressure from rulers, demonstrating their embrace of Iranian national culture. Their contributions to Persian literature illustrate the prevalent cultural affinity for Persian in Kurdish-inhabited regions. This widespread cultural integration and the poets’ voluntary participation in Persian literary traditions underscore the deep-rooted cultural ties between Kurdish poets and Persian language and culture.

In any case, the first Kurdish grammar book was published in Italian in Rome in 1787. Its author was a Catholic missionary priest named Maurizio Garzoni, who had spent eighteen years of his life in the remote region of Amadiya (Nikitine 1998, 567). Nikitin calls him the “father of Kurdish studies” (576).

A. Jaba, a Russian orientalist who served as the Russian Consul General in the Ottoman city of Erzurum from 1848 to 1866, played a significant role in the advancement of the Kurdish language. In this city, he invited some educated Kurds and, with their help, compiled a collection of classical Kurdish poetry. Among Jaba’s other activities regarding the Kurdish language were writing a Kurdish-French dictionary and

a large Kurdish-French-Russian dictionary. Saane, a British orientalist, made a very important contribution to the study of the Kurdish language. In 1913, he wrote the first Kurdish grammar in English (Ahmadi 1999, 363-364). Meanwhile, the Bible was printed in Kurdish in Istanbul, and Reverend Samuel published a Kurdish grammar and dictionary in 1872 (Abdulwahid 1999, 31). The printing and publishing in Kurdish began with the publication of the Kurdistan newspaper in 1892 by members of the “Badirkhan” family in Cairo (Kinnane 1997, 39).

One of the remaining documents from the U.S. Embassy in Tehran on this matter states: “The Kurdish language is the most important inherited cultural factor of the Kurds [sic]. The Kurds’ demand for making Kurdish official in Kurdish-inhabited areas has always led to conflicts with various governments” (Muslim Students Following the Imam's Line n.d., 39), and these ideological and rhetorical confrontations by Kurdish ethnonationalists have been consistently emphasized in the twentieth century. For instance, an author, criticizing the approach of some Kurdish politicians, writes that they “...in many cases, by downplaying the importance of language, focus only on their political objectives, unaware that language itself is a unifying factor. They have forgotten that every nation is recognized by its language. A Kurd is called by this name because they are born to Kurdish parents and speak the Kurdish language” (Khoshhali 1999, 23).

The same author continues: “For a nation like the Kurdish nation [sic], safeguarding the language, purifying the national language, collecting words and expressions, and teaching the Kurdish language are the only means of keeping the Kurdish nation alive. It should not be forgotten that a living nation will only remain alive through its national language” (23). O’Ballance also emphasizes in his book on the Kurdish movement that the only characteristics distinguishing Kurds from other ethnicities are their language and dress (O’Ballance 1998, 1, 36).

The emphasis placed by Orientalists and Kurdish ethnonationalist political activists on the use of language as an ethnic demand of the Kurds has sometimes led to unscientific assertions about the roots of the Kurdish language for political reasons. Origins are invented for the Kurdish language without presenting any evidence or proof, which are inconsistent with the documentation of linguistic studies and even the opinions of Kurdish researchers. For instance, one of these individuals writes: “Today’s Kurdish language is a combination of the languages of the original inhabitants of Kurdistan, including: ‘Medes’, ‘Mitannis’, ‘Manta’, ‘Guti’, etc., which have merged throughout history and then at some point in time were called ‘Kurmanji’” (Khoshhali 1999, 42). However, he does not specify on what sociological, historical, and linguistic grounds he has reached this conclusion, and whether this judgment can be applied to all Kurdish dialects (some researchers speak of separate Kurdish languages). It is not at all clear whether the author himself has arrived at these conclusions through field research or a linguistic-archaeological study, or if others have reached these conclusions based on their studies.

The Kurdish historian Sheikh Mohammad Mardukh, contrary to the above opinion, presents a different view. He cites Strabo's statement that: "Persians and Medes knew each other's languages well, so it is evident that the languages (Persian and Median) were very close to each other" (Mardukh Kurdistan 1972, 41). The late Kurdish sociologist Heshmatollah Tabibi, in the article "Language" included in the introduction to the book "Tuhfah-yi Nasiri" and quoting Jean de Morgan, writes that the Kurdish language belongs to the Indo-Iranian branch of languages and is from the Persian branch, and grammatically, except for some dialects such as the dialect of the people of Paveh, it does not differ much from Persian (Tabibi 1996, 19). One Western researcher also writes: "The Kurdish language belongs to the Aryan branch of Indo-European languages and is very close to the Persian language" (Randal 1999, 31).

Some Western historians, in examining the racial nature and language of the Kurds, have biasedly denied the connection of the Kurdish language with ancient Iranian languages, Avestan, Middle Persian or Parthian Pahlavi, and Sassanid Pahlavi Persian. "... They consider the Kurdish language closer to Sanskrit and regard Kurds as being of the same race as Indians rather than Persians, thus indirectly presenting the history and culture of Iran as belonging only to Persians and ignoring the role of Kurdish people in shaping Iranian history and culture and their participation in these matters" (Barzuyi 1999, 14).

Nikitin, referring to new discoveries about ancient civilizations of the ancient East and the reading of works and writings found in Kurdistan, writes: "The question of the origins and lineage of the Kurds and their language was raised again in science, and the great linguists of the era, including E. Rodiger and A.F. Pott, using the principles and rules of comparative linguistics or establishing its relationship with today's Persian language with the Zand language, which is the common root of both, categorically rejected the possibility of a 'Chaldean' origin for the Kurdish language, and thus the hypothesis of the Iranian characteristics of the Kurdish language was definitively confirmed in science" (Nikitine 1998, 41).

Diakonoff, a Russian Iranologist, believes that from the 9th to the 7th century BC, the Iranian linguistic element had a noticeable progress from east to west. Considering the relationship between the Median language and the languages of Central Asia, there can be no doubt that the ethnic origin of the "Aryans" was from Central Asia. In other words, the language of the current regions of Azerbaijan and Kurdistan of Iran from the 9th to the 7th century BC was non-Iranian, and the inhabitants of those areas spoke languages such as Lullubi and Kassite and the like (Diakonoff 1992, 145-146)." From the above statement, it appears that the language of the current inhabitants of Kurdistan has an Aryan origin, but he continues, "What is certain is that the Kurdish language has been formed from a combination of Iranian, Afghan, and Balochi languages, and the Kurdish language is not Persian that has been transformed into Kurdish, but it is an independent language that has its own rules, laws, and specific dialects. The Kurdish language also has an explicit connection with the Avestan language, and the book

‘Avesta’, the sacred book of Zoroastrians, is also written in this language” (Minorsky 2000, 43).

In the same vein, Yahya Modarresi, in his book “An Introduction to the Sociology of Language”, also confirms the views of Diakonoff and Minorsky. “Kurdish, Balochi, etc., have not historically branched off from Persian, but have evolved alongside Persian and in parallel with it, and in fact, all of them (including Persian) are ‘Iranian languages’” (Modarresi 1989, 138).

Iranian languages (of the Iranian plateau) are divided into two categories: Eastern Iranian languages and Western Iranian languages, “the first group being prevalent in Central Asian regions including Afghanistan and neighboring areas, and the second group in Iran and some other regions. Western Iranian languages are further divided into Northwestern and Southwestern groups, with the Laki language belonging to the Northwestern group and the Lori language falling under the Southwestern group. Oranski discusses the nature of this classification and writes: Northwestern Iranian languages (with Northwestern dialects) are rooted in ancient dialects that were prevalent in the lands of Media and Parthia, i.e., northwestern Iran. These include: 1- Kurdish language and dialects of Kurdish tribes (Gorani, Zaza, etc.), 2- Balochi, 3- Talysh language, 4- Gilaki and Tabari dialects, 5- Central Iranian dialects (two sections of Persian dialects [such as Sivandi-Kelani]), 6- Ormuri, 7- Parachi.

Southwestern Iranian languages (and dialects) are rooted in ancient dialects of the southwestern part of the plateau (the land of Parsa). The Persian language (Tajik) is the most important among the current Southwestern Iranian languages... Modern Persian and Tajik are two branches of the Persian language” (Randal 2000, 330-331). Although Amanollahi, quoting Oranski, introduces Kurdish as part of the Northwestern Iranian language family (Amanollahi Baharvand 1995, 51-53), Bruinessen, quoting MacKenzie, evaluates Kurdish as part of the Southwestern Iranian languages, “Previously, the Kurdish language was considered to be from the Northwestern language family. MacKenzie opposed this view and proved that the Kurdish language has more commonalities with Southwestern Iranian languages” (van Bruinessen 1999, 61).

However, the capable linguist MacKenzie, utilizing linguistic documents and evidence and reorganizing them, asserts that the Kurdish language does not belong to the northwestern branch of Iranian languages (as the Median language does), but rather belongs to the southwestern branch. Nevertheless, the people who spoke these dialects had a social structure similar to that of the Medes (187). The familial relationship between Persian and Kurdish languages is still evident today, and the proximity of these languages is palpable. Tabibi, a Kurdish sociologist, in his article “Language,” quotes Chodzko as saying, “The Kurdish alphabet is the same as the Persian alphabet, and the consonants in both languages are identical. The usage of nouns in Kurdish follows the same pattern as in Persian, and the vocative particle and conjunctions are also similar in both languages” (Tabibi 1996, 19). The Kurdish scholar and poet Seyyed Sa’deddin Sotoudeh, in an article titled “Commonalities between Kurdish and Persian Languages,” writes: “In Kurdish and Persian sentences, the verb

and subject agree in number... Even when the subject is a collective noun, both languages share the commonality of using the verb in singular form... In counting, both Persian and Kurdish use singular classifiers for numbers; for example, 'hezar toman': 'he zar te me n'. In adjectival phrases, even if the noun is plural, the adjective remains singular in both languages, such as 'marde dana': 'piavani zana'. In disjunctive pronouns, the similarity is more apparent than in pronouns attached to verbs or nouns, as we say:

من (من) تو (تو) او (تو و) ما (ئیمه) شما (ئیه) ایشان (ئه وان)...

Another aspect of commonality between Kurdish and Persian languages that we can mention is shared vocabulary, which is also very extensive and broad" (Sotoudeh 1994, 74-76).

These documentations indicate the inseparable connections between Iranian languages, of which Kurdish is considered one of the main and fundamental components. Can this ancient linguistic and ultimately identity connection between Kurds and other Iranians be denied? Can one, despite these historical and linguistic evidences, deny the Iranian identity of the Kurds?

Centuries ago, Masudi wrote that "each of the Kurdish tribes has a specific Kurdish language" (Masoudi 1991, 482). After Masudi, in the *Sharafnama*, the first history book about Kurds written during the Safavid period, and gradually in other sources, "Kurdish languages" have been mentioned. Do Kurds really have fundamental linguistic differences among themselves? Can one speak of a "Kurdish languages," or can one only speak of "Kurdish dialects".

The resolution to the aforementioned inquiries becomes feasible only when the distinctions between concepts such as language and dialect are elucidated. "Some propose that all varieties sharing a common writing system should be considered dialects of a single language, while varieties employing different scripts should be regarded as separate languages" (Modarresi 1989, 138). This criterion, however, yields a clear assessment in the case of the Kurdish language. Given the Kurds' utilization of the Latin script in Turkey, Arabic in Iraq, or the Cyrillic script in Russia, it follows that Kurds possess at least three distinct languages. Nevertheless, additional criteria have been proposed for differentiating between languages and dialects. "To distinguish between language and dialect, two sets of criteria are generally employed: linguistic and non-linguistic (political, cultural, geographical, etc.). The challenge lies in the fact that these criteria are neither absolute nor congruent, and in some instances, they may even be in conflict. Two specific linguistic varieties may be considered dialects of a single language based on linguistic criteria, yet be regarded as separate languages according to, for example, political criteria. Therefore, the segregation and definition of these concepts, if not impossible, is at least extremely challenging.

The most significant and prevalent linguistic criterion for distinguishing between language and dialect is mutual intelligibility. According to this criterion, if speakers of two linguistic varieties can communicate with each other without any conscious

training, those two varieties can be considered dialects of a single language. However, if comprehension and understanding between their speakers are not possible, they should be regarded as two separate languages. This criterion is not absolute, as mutual intelligibility itself has degrees that may fluctuate between zero and one hundred percent” (133-134). However, “in general, it can be said that when two varieties are mutually intelligible for their speakers without conscious training, to the extent of establishing normal communication, those two varieties are considered different dialects of a single language; otherwise, they should be regarded as two separate languages” (134-135). The differences between Sorani Kurdish, Gorani, and Northern Kurdish (Zazaki) are so clear and evident that they have been emphasized by numerous authors, including Kurdish, Persian-speaking, and Western researchers, and would not require argumentation, explanation, or discussion for the inhabitants of these regions. However, since the point of departure and strategic demand of Kurdish ethnonationalist parties and forces, which is evaluated as a “non-negotiable demand,” revolves around the “Kurdish language,” it is necessary to discuss this topic from the perspective of Kurdish and non-Kurdish authors.

Sharaf Khan ibn Shams al-Din Bidlisi, the first historian of Kurdish history, writes in the *Sharafnama*: “The Kurdish tribe [*tayifa*] is of four types, and their languages and customs differ from one another: first Kurmanji, second Luri, third Kalhor, fourth Guran” (Bidlisi 1998, 13). Sheikh Mohammad Mardukh, another Kurdish historian and writer, also writes on this matter: “In any case, today’s Kurds are divided into four branches in terms of language: 1) Kurmanji 2) Gurani 3) Luri 4) Kalhor. Each of these four branches has also split into several other branches that have undergone language changes” (Mardukh n.d., 41). The late Kurdish researcher Rashid Yasemi also writes in this regard: “In terms of language, Kurds have been divided into four groups: Guran, Kurmanji, Lur, Kalhor, and the differences between these languages are apparent” (Yasemi n.d., 136).

Mohammad Moin, in the introduction to his Persian dictionary, writes: “Kurdish is the general name for a group of languages and dialects that are prevalent in Kurdish-inhabited areas of Turkey, Iran, and Iraq. Some of these languages should be considered independent, as their differences from Kurdish (Kurmanji) are too great to consider them related to Kurdish. Two independent languages of this type are ‘Zazaki’ or ‘Dimli’, which belongs to the western Kurdish-inhabited areas, and ‘Gurani’, which is prevalent in southern Kurdish-inhabited areas and has its own various dialects. Gurani is the dialect in which the works of the ‘Ahl-e Haqq’ religion have been written, and like Zaza, it belongs to the northern branch of the western group” (Moin 1997, xxviii, 1559).

Sekandar Amanolahi Baharvand, a renowned professor of cultural anthropology, also writes: “... A point that needs to be mentioned is the issue of the Kurdish language and its classification. Although much has been written about the Kurdish language, a complete classification of the dialects of this language is not yet visible. Moreover, when talking about the Kurdish language, it refers to a set of languages that, rightly or wrongly, have been classified in one group and under the title of Kurdish. However,

some researchers consider some languages such as Gurani and Zazaki, which have been counted among Kurdish languages, as separate languages” (Amanollahi Baharvand 1995, 40).

As the Russian linguist Oranski emphasizes, some Kurdish dialects are so different from each other that they resemble independent languages (Oranski 1979, 341). Mohammad Baqer Najafi also states in the introduction to the book *Kurds, Guran, and the Kurdish Issue in Turkey*: “The Kurdish language, which is one of the major parts of the Iranian language, has dialects whose differences are greater than the difference between each of them and Persian, and greater than the difference between Persian dialects of Semnan or Sangsar with each other” (Akopov 1997, 29).

In his treatise “Kurdish Life,” which has undergone translation from French to Arabic and subsequently to Kurdish, Tomabua posits: “The Kurds employ a linguistic mode akin to the Indo-European language family, bearing similarities to Modern Persian... Two primary dialectal variants exist within the language: Upper Kurmanji and Lower Kurmanji (also referred to as Sorani). A significant portion of the Kurdish population, such as the Zazas, communicate in a distinct linguistic variety known as ‘Gorani.’ These dialectal variations exhibit profound divergences, to the extent that one could posit that each geographical region and locality possesses its own unique linguistic form and idiom” (Tomabua 1980, 238-239). The author of “Kurdish Societal Studies” similarly emphasizes these fundamental linguistic disparities (van Bruinessen 1999, 35-37).

Dana Adams Schmidt, who spent a considerable period in northern Iraq among Kurdish insurgents during Mullah Mustafa Barzani’s rebellion in the 1960s, observes: “The cultural and literary landscape of the Kurds has been rendered intricate and problematic due to dialectal variations... An individual conversant in the Sorani dialect encounters significant difficulty comprehending the discourse of one who employs the Kurmanji dialect... The Sorani dialect, predominant in the Sulaymaniyah region, appears more apt for articulating primary expressions. Certain Kurdish language pedagogues consider the Kurmanji dialect to be more linguistically pure from an evolutionary standpoint... They have initiated an interminable debate regarding the relative merits of lexical items from each dialect, as well as which phonological structure is more aesthetically pleasing and euphonious in oral communication” (Schmidt 1994, 30).

The linguistic divergences among Kurdish speakers have, at times, profoundly influenced political equations, manifesting in bloody conflicts and interminable rivalries between Kurdish factions—a phenomenon that has not escaped the notice of even non-Kurdish observers. As one Iranian leftist activist, who spent time in Iraqi Kurdistan during the 1960s and post-revolutionary period, remarked in a dialogue with Hamid Shokat:

Kurdistan [of Iraq] is largely divided between two linguistic currents: Sorani and Badinani, each with distinct Kurdish dialects. The Sorani dialect, under Talabani’s influence, encompasses Qaladze, Mount Sinjab, Erbil, and Sulaymaniyah, extending to Khanaqin.

The Badinani dialect, centered in Zakho, is prevalent in Barzani's territory and extends towards Turkey. Both factions strive to expand their influence into each other's regions, often resulting in military confrontations. Throughout these areas, young Kurds are compelled to become Peshmerga, with a form of conscription in place (Shokat 2001, 131).

This linguistic schism may explain why some Kurdish residents of northern Iraq perceive the conflict between the two major Iraqi Kurdish factions as stemming more from ethnic and tribal differences between the Barzani and Talabani movements than from ideological or political disparities. The linguistic variations among the inhabitants of their respective spheres of influence were also emphasized. In 1996, a northern Iraqi resident elucidated to me, in the context of the conflict between the two Kurdish factions, that "both parties [Barzani and Talabani] were ethnically and tribally oriented, although ideologically they were similar (Hushmand 1996, 63, 125)."

Kendal, in his book *the Kurds and Kurdistan*, while acknowledging the two primary Kurdish dialects—Kurmanji and Kurdi—also discusses a third dialect, Macho (known as Zaza in Turkey and Gorani in Iran). He writes: "A group of linguists contend that this language is not Kurdish." (Kendal 1997, 34) Nikitin, quoting Saane, adds regarding Zaza: "...although their language is an Aryan dialect belonging to the Persian-Kurdish language group, it bears no resemblance to either of these languages (Nikitine 1998, 334)."

David McDowall, the author of "A Modern History of the Kurds," also writes: Another factor that points to the diversity of Kurdish origins and lineage is the linguistic variations. Currently, there exist two primary languages or dialects in Kurdistan: 'Kurmanji,' predominantly spoken by the people of northern Kurdistan, and 'Sorani,' which is the primary language of the southern populace. These two languages differ in syntax and grammar to an extent comparable to the differences between English and German, although lexically, the disparity might be more akin to that between Dutch and German vocabularies. In addition to these, there are three other languages spoken by significant minority groups. In the southeast—from Sanandaj to Kermanshah—most Kurds speak a dialect that bears closer resemblance to Modern Persian than to Sorani. The other two languages are Gorani and Zaza: Gorani is spoken in some regions of southern Kurdistan, while Zaza is the language of Alevi Kurds in northwestern Kurdistan, encompassing both Turkish and Kurdish speakers. Zaza and Gorani are related and belong to the northwestern group of Iranian languages, whereas Kurmanji and Sorani are classified within the southwestern group. This linguistic distribution suggests that the people who speak Zaza and Gorani may share a common ancestry, potentially originating from Daylam or Gilan, located on the southwestern shore of the Caspian Sea. Indeed, until this very century, some of the agrarian subjects in the Sulaymaniyah region were referred to as Goran, and locally, they were considered to be of a lineage distinct from that of the tribal Kurds (2001, 52).

A tangible manifestation of this linguistic divergence among Kurds emerged in the spring of 2001 in Sanandaj. During the campaign for the Iranian presidential election, a representative from the sixth parliamentary term of Urumia, who is of northern Kurdish descent, began his speech at the University of Kurdistan in the Badini Kurdish dialect to support Mr. Khatami's candidacy. The attendees, predominantly Kurdish

students from Sanandaj and its environs, reacted due to their inability to comprehend the content of the Urumia representative's speech. Consequently, he was compelled to continue his address in Persian to establish communication with the audience and facilitate a conducive environment for elucidating his perspectives.

Minorsky also articulates: "The Kurds inhabiting the southeast (Kermanshah and Ilam) differ in language and customs from their ethnic kin, and consider themselves distinct" (Minorsky 2000, 22). Yasemi further posits: "Twentieth-century research has led scholars to conclude that among the Kurds, there exists another Iranian stratum known as Goran-Zaza, who are distinct from Kurds" (Yasemi n.d., 98).

The author of *Sociology of the Kurdish People* adds, "The first linguist to emphasize and assert that these dialects [Gorani variants such as Hawrami, Paveh'i, Amrani, etc.] belong to a language other than Kurdish was Oskar Mann" (van Bruinessen 1999, 184-185). The same author continues, "The inhabitants of Hawraman, who still speak one of the Gorani dialects and who, at the beginning of the current century, still considered themselves a separate ethnicity from the Kurdish people, had a prevalent narrative among them claiming their origin from the southwestern regions of the Caspian Sea... Now they are gradually identifying as Kurds, but this process remains incomplete" (156).

Today, this Kurdish-Hawrami distinction becomes prominent during certain political-social events. For instance, during parliamentary or council elections in Marivan, discussions about Kurdish-Hawrami candidates and competition for the victory of linguistically aligned candidates with either Hawramis or Kurds are notably conspicuous, constituting one of the salient variables in the voting patterns of the local populace. This phenomenon manifests differently in Paveh, Javanrud, and Nosud.

The author of *Kurdish Sociology* emphasizes: "Linguistic evidence and written sources unequivocally prove that the Gorani language was brought here by people who originally dwelt in the southern Caspian region and were linked to or were part of the Daylamite groups" (157). He further adds: "The Zaza dialects of northern Kurdistan also apparently indicate a connection with the Daylamites. Most Zaza speakers call themselves 'Dimili', and experts unanimously agree that Dimili is a corruption of Daylami. The Daylamites are Iranians who live in the southern Caspian region and have apparently moved westward" (158).

Nikitin corroborates this theory regarding the Hawramis. He writes that the inhabitants of Hawraman "claimed to be descendants of Rostam, the national hero of Iran. They speak a distinctive language and refer to themselves as 'Hawrami' rather than 'Kurd'. Indeed, based on their other characteristics, it appears they may not be pure Kurds. Instead, like the Gorans, they might belong to the remnants of another Iranian people... According to a legend prevalent among them, King Darius expelled their ancestor, named Awram, from his homeland near Damavand in northern Iran. Awram and his brother Kandoul fled to the land of Media, found refuge in these remote mountains, settled there, and established the Hawrami tribe" (Nikitine 1998, 346).

In the book *the Goran Kurds*, we read: "The Gorans, along with all the people of Kurdistan, indeed possess numerous linguistic features and other characteristics that create dissimilarities between them and the Kurdish-Kurmanji people, a fact acknowledged by Kurdish historians. For instance, Amin Zaki, recalling the characteristics of Gorans, Zazas (Zazanis), and other non-Kurmanji Kurds, refers to them as 'non-Iranian Kurdish Iranian elements??' who, contrary to others' perceptions, have not yet fully assimilated into the Kurdish realm and continue to maintain certain distinctive features" (Akopov 1997, 41-42).

One of the salient points that demands attention in Kurdish studies is the connection or relationship between Kurdish languages and the Luri language. Some posit that Luri is a subset of Kurdish. However, Western researchers and even Luri-speaking scholars refute this notion. Amanollahi Baharvand states, "According to a Greek author named Eratosthenes, until the 3rd century BCE, there was no significant difference between the prevalent languages in the Persian territory (southwestern languages) and Media (northwestern). Thus, one can easily deduce that various languages such as Luri, Kurdish, Balochi, Gilaki, and others currently common among ethnic groups have gradually emerged over the past two millennia. With these explanations, it is evident that Kurdish and Luri share a common root; however, it must not be forgotten that these two languages are now considered separate. Although authors such as Rawlinson, Minorsky, Mann, and others have long since noted the difference between Luri and Kurdish languages, some individuals still consider Lurs a branch of Kurds" (Amanollahi Baharvand 1995, 36).

This researcher, drawing upon the perspectives of Zhukovskii, Mann, Minorsky, Diakonoff, Oranski, Yarshater, Windfuhr, MacKinnon, and others, emphasizing the distinction between Kurdish and Luri languages (39-41), writes, "Among the southwestern Iranian languages, Luri has the closest relationship with Persian, both being continuations of Middle Persian (from the 3rd century BCE to the 8th and 9th centuries CE). As we know, Middle Persian was the language of the Parthians and Sassanians, which gradually transformed into Persian, Luri, and other languages. Luri is so close to Persian that some believe it diverged from Persian in the not-too-distant past" (51-53).

Nikitin also confirms the view that Kurdish is separate from Luri: "In the south are the Gorans [and] Kalhurs, and further south, the Lurs. The latter branch [Lurs] speaks its own particular dialect, and Orientalists do not regard them as Kurds" (Nikitine 1998, 326-327).

However, extreme ethnonationalists, adopting an unscientific perspective and disregarding linguistic studies, present a different narrative and offer this false ideological image: "We Kurds, from Sivas province (Qoçgiri) to Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari and Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad, are a people who have reached our current situation through thousands of years of colonialist policies, led by imperialism. Our people became a unified nation for the first time in history during the Median Empire... After the overthrow of the Median Empire by the Persians, over time, all factors of

language, culture, history, economy, national unity, etc., of our people have been diluted (in some areas completely absorbed into other peoples) and our land has also been divided by colonizers. Due to the existence and veracity of all the aforementioned factors regarding our people, even after the advent of Islam and during the Safavid era, all Islamic and non-Islamic writers and historians used the term 'Kurmanj' for people residing in areas previously under Median rule. Later, after the division of this land by foreigners and the implementation of oppressive policies against Kurds, this land and its people were fragmented and given different names (for example, Kurd, Lur, ...)" (National Liberation Front 1920, 210).

Another issue related to the Kurdish language, or more precisely, Kurdish languages, is the matter of a standard literary or official Kurdish language. Hussein Khalighi states: "For various reasons, this language [Kurdish] has not yet developed a standard literary dialect or accent. Currently, there are two prominent dialects: Kurmanji and Sorani, apart from Zaza... Until World War I, the Kurmanji dialect was the literary dialect of Kurdish... and following the liberation movements of the inhabitants of Iraqi and Iranian Kurdistan, the Sorani dialect has been proposed as the Kurdish literary dialect. In Iraq and Iran, this language is written in Arabic alphabet... in Turkey and Syria (if permitted) in Latin script, and in the Soviet Union in Russian" (Khaleghi 1992, 259-260).

As observed, besides linguistic differences, the lack of consensus regarding a standard Kurdish language has itself become the source of numerous disputes among Kurds. On one hand, the northern Kurds (Badini speakers) claim that given the larger population of Badini-speaking Kurds compared to other branches, this language should be used as the official, literary, or standard Kurdish language. On the other hand, after the commencement of the political movement of northern Iraqi Kurds, the Sorani Kurdish dialect or language was adopted as the literary language, and now some declare Sorani (with a strong Sulaymaniyah accent) as the standard Kurdish language, considering any deviation from it as a "betrayal" of the Kurdish political movement. This is while even in northern Iraq, the difference in dialects and languages used by people is not something that can be easily disregarded. A Western journalist comments on this matter, stating that Iraqi Kurds, who speak three different dialects, lack the cultural cohesion that stems from having a common language

The legitimization of a single dialect among Sorani dialects as the standard language has been contentious from the outset and continues to be debated to this day. Around the mid-twentieth century, one author wrote on this matter:

The Kurdish language lacks a corpus of poetry, prose, printed and manuscript books, and historical works from which one could derive the origins and roots of words. Moreover, the difficulty of travel in western Iran and the harsh demeanor of Kurdish tribes have impeded the movement of both Eastern and Western scholars to the habitations of these peoples. Only a few German Orientalists have managed to compile the lexicon used among the Kurds of Sulaymaniyah and formulate some grammatical rules for the Kurdish language of Sulaymaniyah based on linguistic principles. This very issue—the particular attention of European researchers to the language of Sulaymaniyah Kurds and their lack of

access to other Kurdish tribes—has led some Eastern scholars, following their European counterparts, to consider the language of Sulaymaniyah Kurds as the most eloquent Kurdish dialect. To support their view, they have cited the publication of some Kurdish newspapers and magazines in Mosul and Sulaymaniyah as evidence. In any case, the investigations of Orientalists and Eastern writers regarding the Kurdish language are quite incomplete, and the completion of this task requires thorough and continuous research into the dialects of Kurdish tribes and clans." (Shamim 1991)

The literary use of other Kurdish dialects (or languages) is a debate that has persisted to this day, even in Kurdish publications. Among these discussions are articles published in the Sirwan weekly following the publication of a piece defending the prevalent standard language titled "Let's Preserve the Kurdish Language" (زمانی کوردی) (پیاریزین) and a response to it titled "What About Our Language," (زوانه که مان تیانه چی) which continued for more than 12 issues of the aforementioned publication. (Sirwan Weekly 1998) The most recent debates of this kind began after the publication of the children's poetry book "Mrs. Fish" in the Sanandaj dialect, which sold 30,000 copies and was reprinted seven times in less than six months (Mohammadian 2001), followed by the publication of a second children's poetry book of this kind, "Mrs. Fish and Aunt Elephant," (ماسی خانم و ئابجی فیل) by the same author. Iraj Gilasi, in an article titled "Mrs. Fish: a Rebellion against a Dead Language" in Sirwan weekly, analyzes the reception of the "Mrs. Fish" book as follows:

Undoubtedly, one of the main factors in the success of Mrs. Fish is its prominent linguistic aspect. Mr. Alireza Mohammadian narrates the poetry book Mrs. Fish in the spoken language of Sanandaj city and its surrounding areas, which is a common dialect in the Kurdish language. It is a delicate and sweet narration, with all its shortcomings, which is clearly an effort to bring Kurdish writing closer to its spoken form. It is one of the rare instances where we see a Kurdish author speaking to us in his own language, which is not borrowed, and is beautiful and pleasing. Mrs. Fish has a 'correct' language, meaning a language that achieves the desired result for both the speaker and the audience with minimal friction and effort. This should be of interest to all those who have strived and continue to strive to write the Sorani Kurdish dialect in a pure form and as a standard language, and of course... every language has its own geographical territory. Why should I, as a citizen in Saqqez, write and read in the way that, for example, the people of Sulaymaniyah [in Iraq] dictate? And what does this have to do with my language geography? If that dialect has become widespread, the reason should be sought in places other than the realm of language geography. In places such as access to mass media facilities (radio and prolific printing and publishing) or even political and social supremacy... (Gilasi 2001, 15)

Apart from linguistic differences and the debate over standard language, the next issue at hand is the multiplicity of orthographies. If the linguistic differences are not sufficient obstacles for selecting a standard or universal language for education, there is still the issue of multiple orthographies that separates Kurds from one another. Gorani in Iran uses the Persian script; Sorani in Iran and Iraq uses a modified Persian and Arabic script. Badini in Iraq follows the same pattern, but Kurds in Turkey use a Latin script and Kurds in the former Soviet Union use the Cyrillic script. Le Monde

Diplomatique writes: "The alphabet is another obstacle to this unity. The Kurds of Iraq and Iran... use the Arabic-Persian alphabet. While the Kurds of Turkey write in Latin and the Kurds of the Soviet Union write in Russian." (More 1986)

Despite what has been said about the problems of the Kurdish language (standard language or languages, Kurdish orthography), many Kurdish ethno-nationalist activists, intellectuals and political parties have focused their political and cultural movement on "linguistic demands." From the perspective of these individuals, as well as Western Orientalists, journalists, international organizations, and Western countries, it appears that the Kurdish language is the main candidate for expressing the ethnic differences of Kurds against their neighbors. (Blau and Soleimani 2000, 157) Unfortunately, this pervasive approach has rarely been scientifically (linguistically and sociologically) examined, and apart from the heavy material, human, and moral damages resulting from the dispute over it, by emphasizing the unity of the Kurdish language and ignoring linguistic realities regarding Kurdish languages, it has gradually alienated the people of these regions from the ancient and roaring stream of their culture. If this type of demand persists, it will result in the death of multiple Kurdish cultures. However, if Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the Kurdish rebels in Turkey, emphatically states that by destroying language, one can also destroy the potential and power of thought, he himself, by falling into the trap of opponents of cultural pluralism, insists on the singularity of the Kurdish language. In his party manifesto titled "The Path of the Kurdistan Revolution," he writes:

If a society's language is not unified, communication is not possible... As social patterns progressed, language became richer and advanced. To destroy a society or colonize it, one must first dismantle the language factor in that society. It is a reality that by destroying language, one can also destroy the potential and power of thought. Thought is not born without language, and language is the agent and means of thought's existence. (Öcalan n.d.)

Now, with such premises, can Öcalan's emphasis on a unified language and the denial of other Kurdish languages be considered as the destruction and colonization of other inhabitants of Kurdish-populated areas who have a language different from the unified language he envisions?

In this perspective, the emphasis on a unified language is not derived from linguistic studies about different Kurdish languages or dialects, but rather stems from party and ideological necessities aimed at instrumental use of this issue in strengthening Kurdish ethno-nationalism.

However, it seems that reality is more eloquent than party ideologues can distort. According to McDowall: "Linguists tend to view different forms of Kurdish not as dialects of one language but as related languages—which itself casts doubt on the notion of Kurdish unity." (McDowall 2001, 42) Perhaps for this reason, Abdullah Abrishami in his book *The Kurdish Issue in the Middle East* and Abdullah Öcalan, accepting that Kurds do not have complete linguistic and religious unity, emphasize the "common oppression of Kurds." He writes:

The ancient transnational states that transformed into nation-states after World War I constitute the main external factors of the Kurdish problem. The most prominent feature of this factor is the establishment of a colonial relationship with Kurds within countries that have taken control of their ancestral homeland. This peripheral factor, which causes their common oppression, is imposed on them by others! Linguistic and religious ties have created emotional bonds between them, but language and religion have less in common compared to shared oppression! Because Kurds do not have complete linguistic and religious unity, but the emotional unity of Kurds in oppression is that for hundreds of years they have been subjected to aggression and plunder by the agents of world conquerors. In such a way that he has been forced to continue his life through plunder and theft (on a local scale)." (Abrishami 1999, 35)

The differences in Kurdish languages—Sorani, Badini, Gorani—have always been noted by impartial researchers. On one hand, a complete classification of Kurdish languages and dialects of each of these languages has not yet been made, and on the other hand, there has always been disagreement among Kurdish ethno-nationalist movements over the selection of a standard and normative language. The scope of this disagreement over standard and normative language has gone beyond the existing differences between Kurdish ethno-nationalist movements and has found prominent manifestation in multilingual regions and among ordinary people. The alphabet and multiple orthographies among Kurds are also issues that should be realistically considered.

Despite these linguistic differences between Kurdish languages, it might be acknowledged that the similarity of multiple Kurdish languages is as much as the similarity of these languages to Persian. Although, despite this apparent linguistic difference among Kurds, it is unclear "how Kurdish language is the main candidate for expressing the ethnic differences of Kurds against their neighbors" and what the consequences of such insistence are for Kurdish people and culture. Apart from potential conflicts and bloodshed, the insistence on the unity of Kurdish languages can also be interpreted as depriving Kurds of a part of their rich and abundant culture.

This complex cultural plurality in regions where residents identify themselves by the "name" Kurd is so deep and extensive that drawing a "model personality or basic personality of Kurds" does not seem to be a simple task.

Sociologists say, from the common social experiences among all members of a certain society, a specific personality configuration emerges that is characteristic and representative of most members of that society, and is technically called Model Personality or social character. These concepts refer to the common cultural characteristics shared by all members of a society. (Alagheband 1995, 89; Sarukhani 1996, 50) If there is an insistence on showing a Model Personality for Kurds, even in its minimal form (i.e., the minimum common characteristics to be able to depict the commonalities of Kurds), it seems to be a very difficult, if not impossible, task. If one were to settle for choosing minimal patterns of Kurdish Model Personality and introduce things like hospitality and the like as indicators of this basic personality, this indicator could be applied to Lurs, Baluchis, and other Iranians and even non-Iranians.

Although it is possible to draw personality patterns on a smaller scale for "Ahl-e Haqq Kurds," "Sunni Kurds," "Shia Kurds," "Kermanshahis," "Mahabadis," "Saqqezis," "Garrus," etc., and introduce the symbolic personalities of Kermanshahis, Ahl-e Haqq, Sanandajis, and Mahabadis separately, as emphasized, using sociological tools to draw a basic personality for all Kurds seems almost impossible. This is a dilemma that has never been adequately addressed by ethno-nationalists, governments, or the scientific, political, and cultural elites of the country and region. So, isn't it more desirable and possible to speak of "Kurds" rather than "Kurd"? Doesn't the emphasis and insistence without theoretical and research backing on a concept called "Kurd" itself bring about a kind of ideological despotism and political homogenization? Isn't speaking of "Kurds" more realistic than speaking of "Kurd"? Which concept do historical backgrounds, anthropological studies, linguistics, and sociology find more consistent with existing realities based on specific, clear, and falsifiable criteria and indicators?

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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