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# Current status of Kurdish culture in Turkey. Ethnical and national identity of Kurdish people in Istanbul and Diyarbakir – study field research

## Abstract

In his text the author showed the results of his fieldwork in Turkey, in the western Kurdistan. In his research, conducted on the border of the perspectives of anthropology and political science, he decided to compare the situation of the Kurdish people, the largest stateless ethnic group in Istanbul and Diyarbakir and the way in which they build their ethnic and national identity living in different places and in different environments. The author investigated how the Kurds preserve their ethnic customs and how they define their contemporary ethnic condition.

**Keywords:** Kurds, ethnical identity, national identity, Istanbul, Diyarbakir

## Introduction

The aim of my research study was to find out the current status of Kurdish culture in Turkey by comparing the actual situation of Kurdish people in Turkey based on ethnical and national identity in one particular country but in completely different environments. That is why my idea was to get to Istanbul and Van, explore Kurdish minority there and find out how they had preserve their culture and traditional habits. What does “Kurdish culture” mean nowadays? Does it still exist? How and where can we find it? These were the main questions I asked the people in Turkey. Due to having InterRail Global Pass, I traveled exclusively by train, what gave a specific atmosphere to my research and helped me make a number of observations. The collected material will be used to develop a thesis on the cultural identity of Turkish Kurds.

Before the research, I thought it would be unique to compare two slightly different cities, environments; now I am quite sure about it – it is difficult. It is different not only because Istanbul and Van lay on different ends of Turkey. First one is one of the biggest metropolises in the world, “cultural melting pot” where big history meets modernity, where Europe meets Asia and finally: where people hope to meet the new future. Between two and four million residents of Istanbul are Kurdish, which makes them the biggest minority in the city. Also, it means this is the most populated Kurdish city in the world.

However, Turkish railways did not give me a chance to get to Van. Due to the nature of travelling by railway, I assumed that the next city would be Van, bordering the lake of the same name, near the border with Iran, geographically lying in northern Kurdistan. Unfortunately, after arriving in Istanbul, it turned out that the train which runs only twice a week is already fully booked. This forced me to make a quick decision to change my next stop. I chose Diyarbakir, one of the largest cities in the south-east of Turkey/Western Kurdistan, some people call it the “non-official capital” of Turkish Kurdistan. Statistics show that Kurds are majority here. The city is governed by the Kurdish mayor and is considered to be fully Kurdish, where people can speak freely on the street in their dialect, may attend courses related to Kurdish culture (dance, singing, music, instruments), express their opinions, and even – despite strong militarization in the city – protests. That is why it is called one of the cultural centers of the Kurdish areas, or – what one of my interviewers told me – the capital of Kurdistan.

## The issue

The Kurdish case in Turkey shows that nowadays it is the biggest ethnic group without its own country and which was harassed in the past because of that culture. The use of the Kurdish language, dress, folklore, and names were banned and the Kurdish-inhabited areas remained under martial law until 1946. Today it has changed, Kurds have even their representation in Parliament but still we cannot say that minorities are free and have same rights.

Firstly, let's define the problem and questions which were the basis of the study. Nowadays, Kurds are the largest ethnic group without their own state, who were persecuted over the centuries just because of their culture.

Until 1996, the use of the Kurdish language, traditional Kurdish dresses, colors and cultivating folklore were banned in Turkey. Turkish Constitution emphasizes “the unity of the Turkish nation” which means in other words the legal system does not provide in that Turkey were any ethnic or religious minorities except Jews and the Armenian Church. Since the year 1996, on a small scale, there have been repeated violations of the fundamental rights of the Kurdish minority. Moreover, in the south-east of Turkey, on the border with Iraq an open conflict between military and Turkish outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) takes place. This all adds to the commonly called the “Kurdish issue” which still has not been solved.

During the preparation phase, I used mostly the English-language literature. It must be emphasized that the Polish-language literature on Kurds also exist, mainly thanks to prof. Leszek Dzięgiel, who explored Kurdish villages during his studies in Iraq<sup>1</sup>. Today, there is Kurdish Department at the Institute of Oriental Studies at Jagiellonian University in Krakow. The Department employs a vibrant team of researchers focused on the “Kurdish issue”. One of the members of the team is Dr. Joanna Bocheńska whose work *Między ciemnością a światłem. O kurdyjskiej tożsamości i literaturze* (2011) has helped me to understand the fundamental processes currently taking place in Turkish Kurdistan.

The research questions that I put out combine cultural value and identity. What is the culture of the Kurds for their own self? Can we still talk about the Kurdish culture, or has it been “nationalized” by the state organization in Turkey? How and where can we find it? What builds a sense of belonging to a social group for the Kurds? In this instance, the big cities you keep ethnicity/national/group?

Each research expedition is limited in time and financially. It also brings unexpected situations. This also happened in this situation. I planned to spend a month on visiting two cities separated by hundreds of miles. Rail infrastructure in Turkey is still under-invested, that is why traveling from Istanbul to Diyarbakir took a total of 39 hours. Research in Istanbul took in total 11 days. During this time has been conducted 22 in-depth interviews based on the questionnaires filled out by the respondents interviewed. Some of them, with the consent of the respondents, were recorded on a mobile phone. This material has been cataloged and stored.

During six-day stay in Diyarbakir, I managed to collect 14 completed questionnaires and conduct three in-depth interviews, which go beyond the questionnaire the politician, a Kurdish activist and teacher at the center of Kurdish culture. These calls are not recorded in any way, or written off as not expressed its consent, but the information gained from these individuals gave the researcher a new outlook on many things. An additional advantage of this visit was an opportunity to live with the young students of the local conservatory, who not only offered accommodation in the “couchsurfing”, but also lead to the visits in interesting places, and acquainting with many people.

As I mentioned, the questionnaire was the main tool of methodology. With the help of a Turkish friend (who had been told about my project, and trained about my idea how to conduct further analysis), the questionnaire was translated into Turkish. Often, during analyzing answers it turned out that the respondents misunderstood a question or on the other hand – sometimes their answers would require from the researcher more detailed questions.

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<sup>1</sup> His work *Kurdish node. Culture, history, the struggle for survival* is a pioneering work in the history of Polish kurdology, which gives a reader a basic understanding of the community, mainly in northern Iraq.

## Analysis and conclusions

Study results will be presented on the basis of the questionnaire results. 36 questionnaires filled in by 27 men and 9 women. The average age of the respondents is 30 years of age. For each city statistics looks as follows:

Table 1

	Istanbul	Diyarbakir	Total
Male	15	12	27
Female	7	2	9
Av. age	28	33.5	30.1
Questionnaires	22	14	36

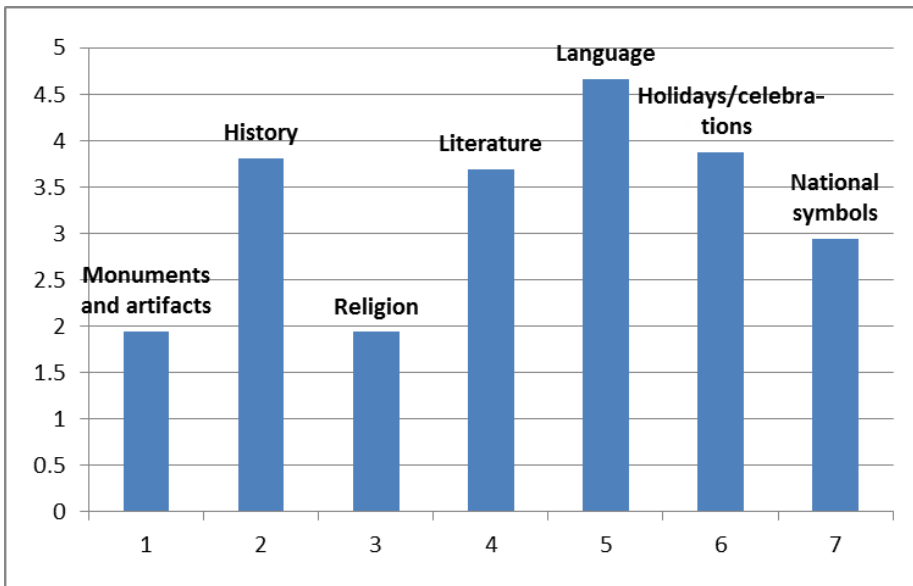
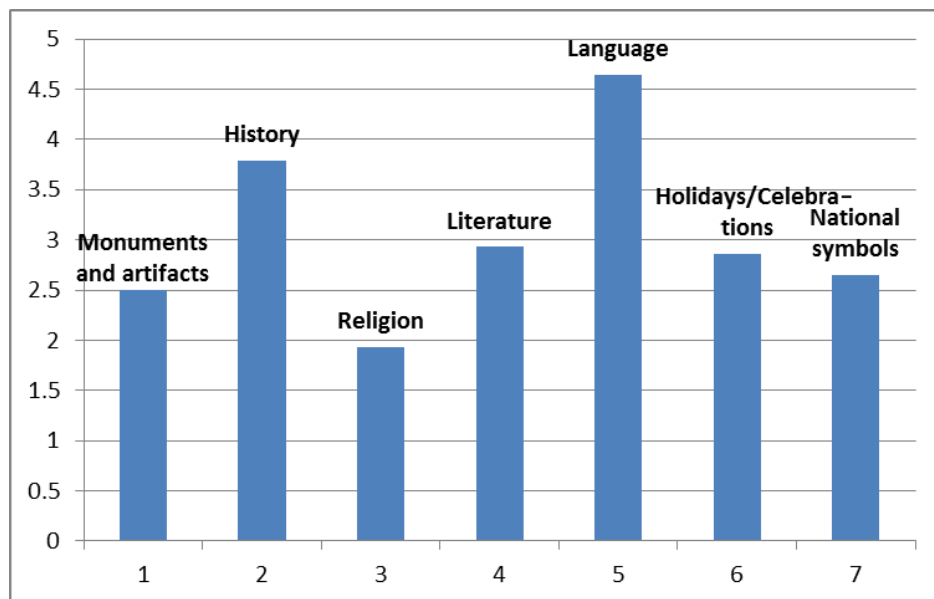


Diagram 1. Most frequent answers to question “What is the main factor of Your Kurdish identity?” in Istanbul



**Diagram 2.** Most frequent answers to question: “What is the main factor of Your Kurdish identity?” in Diyarbakir

Although, the two studied cities are completely different from each other in terms of population and economic, social, and access to resources and wealth Kurdish population expresses similar views about their identity.

Being a Kurd among the respondents primarily means to speak their own language, have national pride, awareness of history. Similar statements appear in Diyarbakir. The respondents emphasize the complexity of this definition, it is a struggle of their people, the language, but also pride, “everything”. All answers given by the respondents point out the great importance of being attached to their “kurdishness”, regardless of place of residence. They also emphasize the aspect of suffering and hardship, which they are subjected on all sides. Interestingly, no one mentioned the territorial affiliation, so it is the first sign that the land or – going further – own state, is not needed in this case. Of course, the “Kurdistan” as the concept of a very powerful identity factor, while the boundaries function as a kind of barrier between nations, is no longer so important.

Turning to the analysis of charts to confirm the highest role of language in matters of self-determination. Many people in Istanbul cannot speak Kurdish, but steadily increasing ease of learning makes more and more people enrolling in language courses. Among the responses, the following factors were stressed: the importance of learning the language, clinging to him, the theme of education, and, on the other hand the problems that still exist: restricted access to language courses, harassment, stigmatization, punishment for using it. On the contrary, in

Diyarbakir, where most of the inhabitants speak Kurdish, there are information boards in this language and Kurdish media broadcast. Many people have complained that all official institutions require Turkish without respecting minority common languages, the same in schools. The language has been identified as the most important element sustaining “kurdishness” in family relationships.

Then pointed to the history and holidays, such as Newroz festival<sup>2</sup>. The differences in approach to the festival Newroz show again – in Istanbul the celebration of the event was strictly forbidden until 2010 – it is a symbol of the unity and integrity of the Kurds, hence the greater yearning for this celebration and careful attention. Somewhat surprising is the low score of Religion, some (especially young ones) simply marked “0” at the response. This shows how little importance Kurds attached to the religion in a country (in default – Muslim) where Islam still plays a big role.

You can also see a difference in the approach to literature. In Istanbul, the result is lower. This may prove still little access to literature in the Kurdish language in this city, in Diyarbakir, where the trade books in Kurdish is more common, people are more aware of the importance that is associated with the literature (respondents emphasized the special role of literature and mentions his favorite authors).

In both cities (especially in Istanbul) the respondents had to accept discrimination, assimilation, bullying. In particular, they stressed repressions of the police against them. Over 70% of the respondents answered affirmatively to the question of whether as a Kurd they met with a situation in which you were insulted or discriminated. These people are afraid to use Kurdish in public transportation and university. Although in Diyarbakir people feel more free to express their thoughts, still – police and armored cars (which can be observed almost on every block) does not let you forget that they are still under control.

Some people came to Istanbul only because of the education and declares get back to their homeland, “There is a difference in the quality of life. Now I live in Istanbul, but if I could just be in my home city, I would be much happier than in Istanbul”. Economic issues came up again in Diyarbakir: “There is no economic development” said one man. “That is why so many people are leaving”, notes one of the women. Another shows the need for more teachers. A very significant role is played by the police and the military forces – people feel under control. 70% feel well here. One interviewee underlines in his response the economic reason of his arrival to Diyarbakir, although he is more closely related to his village in Kurdistan.

The question of institutions (governmental and cultural) has been asked to reach a large number of them, but answers in Istanbul were a big surprise. Four-million-Kurdish minority in Istanbul have only two organizations that support cultural and social activity. Mezopotamya Kültür Merkezi deals with the former,

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<sup>2</sup> Refers to the celebration of the traditional new year holiday celebrated on March 21<sup>st</sup>. At that time, whole Kurds families go out of town, into nature where they arrange picnics with music and dances around traditional bonfire.

Kurdish Institute – the latter, along with language learning. Such a small number of organizations (respondents pointed out repressions by the authorities against those institutions) will not make this community fully integrate. The situation is a bit different in Diyarbakir, as the city where government policy seeks to open such institutions. Buildings of Kültür ve Sanat Merkezi (Culture and the Arts City Center), and Cigerxwin Kültür Merkezi are brand new cultural centers with many assemblies, concert halls and rooms for classes and meetings. Most importantly – they are financed from the city budget. Organizations in Istanbul show a completely different picture. Due to fears of repression, they must be literally “hidden” from the world. Nearly 70% of the respondents in both cities know or have heard of non-governmental institutions which act for Kurds. It was mainly NGOs, however, many people pointed to the BDP, which is a legal political party, acting in the Turkish parliament, and the PKK, the outlawed organization whose military wing functions as a partisan in the Turkish-Iraqi border. If the respondent knows any social organizations often could also include those cultural ones, often pointing out that they are working there, or trying to support them.

The attitude of the respondents to the government is another interesting aspect. Although all of them strongly and negatively relate to government policy, the vast majority, when answering the question of how they see the situation of the Kurds in 15 years, express high hopes for a positive change. What are their dreams? “The equal status of life”, “a better life”, “liberty”, “estimate”, “independence”, “right”.

The period during which I was able to visit Turkey (early January) was very special because of secret talks of government representatives with the imprisoned leader of the PKK who is serving a sentence for terrorism has begun. This event is extremely important because, as it was commented, it could be a breakthrough in the “Kurdish issue”. The respondents also believed that this event could be a turning point and emphasized their hopes associated with it. “If you came and asked me these questions two weeks before I would know what to answer. Now I don’t know what to think. I am waiting”.

The purpose of the visit was to gather research material for the thesis. Apart from the above survey, I talked to the people who have helped me clarify a lot of complicated issues related to the Kurds – A board member of *KURDIDERE*, an organization which support families of arrested Kurds; a journalist whose newspaper *Azediya Welat*, publishing in Kurdish, in most popular. I also visited a center helping women affected by violence in Diyarbakir, where I gained a lot of valuable information on honor killings and domestic violence against women. It was a time of trial. I attempted to find a researcher in myself, an inquiring seeker, pointing out relevant questions. I already know that I make mistakes, I know what to improve to get to the point. I am just beginning to discover the full picture of this community, but now I know that this subject fascinates me and I will keep up my research activities.

*Many thanks to my Turkish friends who helped me discover my fascination of Kurdish people.*

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