

OF SOME ORIGIN: RECLAIMING KURDISH IDENTITY

by ADARA

What does it mean to belong to a community that demands you to exist in a particular way? For many Kurds in Türkiye, identity is not only inherited but constantly negotiated; every word, every gesture, every choice filtered through a lens of suspicion or denial. In this essay, I aim to explore the emotional and political terrain of Kurdish identity in Turkey with a focus on my generation. It draws on personal memory and broader social commentary to examine how state policies, cultural expectations, and intercommunal tensions create a layered, often painful, experience of belonging. Through the lens of language, memory, and self-naming, I seek to express this broken feeling of identity.

I have often found myself navigating the difficult terrain of identity in Türkiye, especially when I choose to use terms that challenge the dominant national discourse. When I describe myself as “from Türkiye (*Türkiyeli*)”¹ instead of “Turkish”, I am not making linguistic errors or dodging labels: I am asserting a deliberate political statement. These choices are frequently met with confusion, suspicion, or outright hostility. As many scholars in the field of ethnology have noted, the terms *Turkish* and *Turkic* carry different meanings. In fact, the 1982 constitutional law of the Republic of Türkiye declares in article 66 that “anyone who is connected with the Republic of Türkiye through citizenship is thereby Turkish”. The latter, by contrast, is an ethnic indicator, typically referring to one’s bloodline. Many central Asia countries, such as Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan identify with the term *Turkic* as well. The word root, *Türk*, which is the same word for both Turk and Turkish in Turkish language, is undeniably an ethnic marker. However, for years, legal and governmental system did not accept non-Sunni Muslims or other minorities as equally Turk. For instance, until the 50s, military schools declared that they are seeking “fully-Turk” students and were rejecting other ethnic identities. As a result, the identity of Turk is often used both as civic

and ethnic category, blurring the line between nationality and ethnicity. The use of *Kurdish* as a result used as a marker of identity, however, continues to be restricted as it is frequently reduced to a trait rather than acknowledged in its full political and cultural complexity.

With the emergence of a new age, non-Turkish minorities try to embrace a national-communal identity with the word *Türkiyeli*. This is a huge step, mind you, because until now these people have been accused of refusing to be part of this community. The word *Türkiyeli*, in my opinion, is a breaking point in our social discussions. *Türkiyeli* allows non-Turks to share a communal space, to actively participate. It does not erase any culture but states that national and ethnic identity are not necessarily the same to feel connected. Many people express that it hinders this long-wished nation-state of Türkiye, but they fail to see how others are now proposing a middle ground. The idea of a complete nation-state and the efforts to establish it hurt many, even the Turks, for decades. If one wishes for a Kurd to embrace the national symbols of Türkiye, this is a solid attempt to declare this belonging.

When you check Wikipedia for the most important politicians, artists, writers of the Kurdish heritage and culture in Türkiye, you will be seeing “of Kurdish origin” rather than “Kurdish”. The irony is this also applies to people who are highly vocal about their Kurdish identity. People using “of Kurdish-origin” is, for me, a reflection of lived complexity. It acknowledges one’s heritage while also recognizing that “being Kurdish” in Türkiye is not a simple identity, but a politicized and often dangerous one. In many settings, to openly object the general label Turkish when you are described and instead insisting on using Kurdish is to risk being seen as separatist, disloyal, or just overly dramatic. There are times when people ask me “Why does it bother you to identify as a Turkish?” I try to

¹ The Word is being used to emphasise one’s locality and citizenship rather than ethnicity, can be rephrased as “Turkeian”.

explain to them that it is not because it bothers me, but it is simply inaccurate. That stance does not root from hatred: I exist because it is what I am. When I refuse to conform, when I insist on speaking from the margins, I am subtly or overtly punished. I am questioned, dismissed, or accused of disloyalty. These linguistic choices may seem small, but they carry enormous weight. They are acts of resistance against a contract I never signed but am constantly held accountable to. As for using the term *Türkiyeli*, the distinction may seem trivial to some, but in a country where citizenship and ethnicity are tightly interwoven under the ideology of the nation-state, it is seen as a provocation. I do not say *Turkish* because the term has been historically racialized and politicized, used not just as a civic marker but as an ethnic ideal.

In Barış Ünlü's book the *Turkishness Contract* (2018), he describes the "contract of Turkishness" as a system of unspoken but powerful expectations that binds citizens into a hierarchy of legitimacy. According to this contract, to be fully accepted, one must act, speak, and even feel *Turkish* in a very particular way, one that erases difference and glorifies uniformity. "To refuse the label *Turkish* is to break this contract and thus to face its consequences" (Ünlü 177). Barış Ünlü's work reveals how the contract of Turkishness is not just an ideological structure but a social performance. Citizens who want to be recognized as *proper* subjects must distance themselves from identities deemed marginal or threatening. For Kurds, this often means either suppressing Kurdish identity or framing it in ways that are palatable to the dominant gaze.

I was born in a small town in east, with a population consisting mainly of Kurds. It was not an unusual thing for me to see political conflicts, especially between different political views or supporters of different political parties, or believers of different religious confessions. In my town, as majority of the people were Kurdish, we

know that our neighbors, friends were Turkish. Whatever political parties people choose to vote for, they also knew that their friend, me, is a Kurd. However, when I was visiting my grandparents living in a western city in Türkiye, I was faced with a crucial difference. People used the word *Kurd* as a slur. I was at the playground of my grandparents' street and little children around my age was calling each other Kurd to ridicule and swear. My name became a derogatory term for them to just scream. An offensive word. Or when a person acts rude they ask, "Are you Kurdish", when you have an Eastern accent while speaking Turkish, people take you less seriously.

While I was surrounded by the culture, history, and presence of my identity, I could still never fully access it. My language, Kurmanji, a branch of Kurdish language, was never taught to me. Even though my parents do speak it, it was not spoken in our home more than just the basics to keep the guilt away. It was not welcomed in our schools. While politicians debated on accessing education in one's native language, we didn't even have education about our own. We were taught English as a foreign language starting from elementary school, then the high schools generally offer German as well. However, even though Kurdish is the second most spoken language in the country, demanding education in native languages is often used to profile one's ideology as a separationist. Our names are in Kurdish, we knew some of our teachers were also Kurdish, especially in eastern regions, but they could not even speak it for the kids to make them understand the class better as it is most probably would have cost them their jobs. Many people overlook the harsh reality, many Kurdish children learned Turkish when they are in elementary school, just one generation ago. These rates were much higher before, as now less and less children experience this with the raising urbanization policies. But this unfortunately resulted in their alienation of their mother tongue.

Over time, absence of my mother tongue turned into a quiet grief, a persistent

feeling of being disconnected from something. Language is more than a tool for communication; it is a vessel for memory, culture, and belonging. Without Kurdish, I often felt like a guest in my own heritage. Family gatherings were filled with words I couldn't understand. Stories, and expressions that carried generations of wisdom and emotion were lost on me. I could only observe from a distance, never fully participating. It was like looking at a beautiful painting behind glass, close, yet untouchable. This sense of loss was not just personal, but political. It is true that in Türkiye, the Kurdish identity has long been marginalized. For many families, choosing not to speak Kurdish was an act of survival, a way to protect their children from discrimination or state pressure. People try to erase their accents, hide their original tones of their voices to be taken seriously while speaking. My grandfather remembers his time, filled with bloody conflicts, murders, massacres and torture. A past in which Kurdish people were automatically classified as enemies, terrorists as some of them actually chose that path. A past where mothers went to see their imprisoned sons but not being able to speak to them, as speaking Kurdish was forbidden. "Kamber Ateş, how are you" is the most heart piercing line for me while trying to educate myself about language restrictions. This line was memorized by the mother of Kamber Ateş's, who was a prisoner in the 80s after the military coup. His mother, who did not speak even a single Turkish word desperately wanted to hear his son's voice during visiting time, and she would repeat the same line she has managed to memorize, over and over as she would be beaten by the guards if she spoke Kurdish. "It was in the 80s!" they say, to argue that those times belong to a post-military-coup era and these pains were supposedly *inevitable*. Yes, and it was in 1920s when the state released certain propaganda, such as "Citizen! Speak Turkish! Exhort those who do not!" because state allegedly did not have any other choice to

impose an identity to secure the community. However, it wasn't that long ago when the courts had declared that the subjects that spoke Kurdish during the trials are to be recorded in the court records as "speaking in an unidentifiable language". It was this day when theatre artists got detained because they put a Kurdish play on the scene. It was now a guy got stabbed because he was playing a Kurdish song. People always say it is the *Kurdish terrorists'* fault that people got this intolerant. The thing is, this started way before the PKK² was founded.

These people grow up, assimilated, persecuted and the result is a generation like mine, caught between worlds, searching for a voice we were not allowed to have. As I grow older, I feel a deep desire to reclaim what was denied to me. Currently, some schools, especially in Eastern regions with a higher Kurdish population, offer their students elective classes in Kurdish language. It is not as bad as it was in the past, but this is a dangerous narrative as well. Kurdish is the second-most spoken language in Türkiye. Many people would say, "You are allowed to be Kurds now, so what else do you want?" While we are allowed to speak Kurdish, it is limited to private areas as the governmental institutions lack multi-language services. Presidency of Religious Affairs offers their *khutbah's*³ in English, Arabic, German and six other languages, none of those are spoken by Türkiye minorities. Until 2013, every single primary school was obligated to make the students recite *Andımız* (Turkish Student Oath) in the mornings which is about being virtuous, compassionate and respectful pupils. This oath starts with the lines "I am Turkish and I am truthful...". and ending with "May my existence be a gift to the Turkish existence!" Declaring your Turkishness and pledging to sacrifice yourself while being non-Turk is a very weird feeling. But stating that is seen as

² PKK is the armed Kurdish organization founded in 1978, who is responsible for many terrorist attacks in Türkiye ever since.

³ Public preaching of Imam's in Islam which carries the admonitions, good-wills or messages after holy days or Fridays. The Presidency of Religious Affairs is the highest authority in Türkiye in terms of religious matters.

being hateful towards this great big message: love your country and be a decent citizen! But what was I supposed to feel if this citizenship does not include me?

Many people believe that the Parliament is the place to solve all these problems. One of the most memorable spectacles was the ceremonial acceptance for the Grand National Assembly of Türkiye taking place in 1991 when Leyla Zana, one of the first Kurdish activists to be a member of the parliament read the Parliamentary Oath, which every single deputy member must say out loud to serve in the parliament, but she added a small Kurdish sentence after she finished with the oath. One might think after seeing how others reacted - a crowd of angry, swearing men almost lynching the woman - that she must have threatened or degraded the Republic. In fact, what she said was "I am making this promise for the solidarity and fellowship of Kurdish and Turkish people". Now, people from other parties also deeply condemn this display of violence towards her, although not fully accepting her act. But, as I discussed before, the attempts to erase the other continuing. A deputy member from the minority-dominated Dem Party, George Aslan was giving a speech in the parliament in December 2024, he wished, as an Assyrian Christian, a "Happy Christmas" to all of the Christian communities in Türkiye. When he wanted to repeat his wishes of a happy Christmas in his native language, which is an endangered language in Türkiye, his microphone was turned off by the moderator. The question was simple, as Aslan said, why do the people who recite the Qur'an in original Arabic in the parliament do not get the same treatment? If it is about the so called "holiness" of a message for a religious community, he claims that Jesus Christ himself spoke his language. The argument is not only limited to the Kurdish people in Türkiye, it is about all the minorities who try to exist and fight against erasure and hegemony.

But there is also another side of the medallion. "You are not fighting enough", argue some Kurdish people. The majority would obviously not be trying to suggest participating in armed resistance while saying this, but there are other ways to shame people who are trying to find a middle ground, such as using Türkiyeli while introducing themselves. I once spoke to a Kurdish person who is from another country, and he claimed that unless we reject everything that the state dictates us to do, we will never reclaim our identities as free Kurdish people, and willing to use Türkiyeli is complicity to him. While we cannot and should not deny being Kurdish, we also do not have to reject the multicultural heritage that has shaped us. Growing up in Türkiye made me a different person than him or others. Everyone has their own experiences with what they are surrounded with. There is no doubt that the state caused pain for minorities for centuries, but there are so many names that honors the Kurdish heritage in Türkiye. Probably the most known one is the singer Ahmet Kaya. He was an unprecedented singer for the music industry in Türkiye and a proud Kurdish person. I remember an instance when a friend and I played a song by him, one of our Kurdish friends claimed that him using the Turkish language and belonging in the Turkish traditional music is complicity. I feel that there is no acceptable way to exist outside the dominant framework. You are either too complicit, surrendering to the cultural hegemony or you have to fully distance yourself from everything that belongs to the dominant culture. But people forget that a way must be there, that honors your heritage and establishes an equal life. Whenever I see another diaspora Kurd, I feel anxious to have a conversation with them. I am afraid of being shamed for not being a proficient Kurdish speaker or for still trying to establish an identity in Türkiye. I am afraid of not being accepted or respected by them.

In a society where inclusion often requires the erasure of difference, asserting personal or communal identities becomes a radical act. I do not expect everyone to

understand this instinctively. But I hope that in time, the space will widen for identities that do not fit neatly within the nation's narrow definitions, identities like mine that speak from the fault lines rather than the center. Many people claim if we were to allow people to exist in their own different identities, it would make them go further away from the majority. They argue that it is only going to separate the minorities from society. However, embracing my connections with Turkish culture and heritage would be much easier if I could still exist as me, a Kurd, who is a citizen of the Republic of Türkiye. The thought of "being the same, walking the same and speaking the same" is not the only basis for a strong community.

For me, learning Kurdish now feels like an act of healing and resistance, but also sometimes makes me feel ashamed. My grandmother is 85, I have never fully conversed with her aside from few sentences she could understand or fewer ones that I can form. I always needed someone else to translate for us. The jokes that made everyone laugh but me have shown me the silent pain of shame, erasure, but also the power of rediscovery. Every word I learn brings me closer to home. And I wish that people could see how being multicultural is a treasure that we ought to cherish. I wish a time will come when we celebrate Ramadan together and have water fights in Vartavar with our Armenian neighbours.

It is not too late to embrace each other and exist with our own uniqueness. I am longing for a time in which I can declare that I, a Kurd, am a citizen of Türkiye and cherish my heritage.

WORKS CITED

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