

The Kurds in Canada: A Question of Ethnic Identity

by

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ABSTRACT

Kurdish ethnic identity in Canada has been shaped by a complex process. Some of the factors included in this process are the history of Kurds in Kurdistan, subsequent immigration experiences in Canada, and Kurdish politics and demographics, which all play a significant role. Kurdistan as a region has never existed as a formal nation-state, and is now divided into five states. Factors which mitigated against the development of a Kurdish nation-state influence attempts by Kurdish refugees in Canada to create and maintain a shared sense of Kurdish identity.

Identity among many Kurds is politicized. There exist external factors which are central issues for Kurds in their countries of origin. These external factors in turn have become important aspects of the Kurdish communities' discourse on what it means to be a Kurdish Canadian. The object of this thesis is to examine the construction of Kurdish ethnic identity in an immigrant context. The main purpose of this thesis is to provide an emic perspective through Kurdish narratives. However, since ethnic identity is the result of both in-group definitions as well as definitions imposed by outsiders, I will examine how Kurdish identity is also a response to categorization by, and power conflicts with outsiders. This reflects a dialogue between divisions which were externally imposed in their countries of origin, and those which are produced by internal divisions in Kurdish Canadian communities.

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Table of Contents

Title page

Acceptance sheet

Abstract

Acknowledgments

Table of Contents

Chapter 1 Methodology	1
Chapter 2 A Brief Review of Kurdish History	24
Chapter 3 From Kurdistan to Canada: Relevant Issues Discussed by My Informants	45
Chapter 4 Resettlement and Adaptation in Canada	63
Chapter 5 Conclusion	88
Appendix	95
Bibliography	97

CHAPTER 1 METHODOLOGY

There have been refugees since time immemorial. In the twentieth century, the shift of many countries from former colonies to independent nation-states has all too often resulted in the expulsion of ethnic minorities, those who were perceived as different from the dominant groups in power. For example, the birth of the modern nation-state of India in 1947 also resulted in the partitioning of an independent Pakistan, as irreconcilable differences between Muslims and Hindus, exacerbated by colonial British 'divide and rule' policies, escalated into one of the bloodier inter-ethnic conflicts of this century. Indeed, Samuel (1984:45) argues that the twentieth century should be called the 'Century of the Refugee', since to date it has seen the uprooting and displacement of over 60 million refugees, the greatest forced migration in the history of mankind.

As countries continue to receive refugees and immigrants, the literature on migration in many disciplines expands correspondingly, particularly in North America. For example, Caroli (1983:49) claims that in the United States, during the 1950s and early 1960s, immigration received relatively little attention, but this was to change in the mid-1960s. Within Canada, Altfest (1983:74) notes how policy makers were obligated to reconsider immigration policies in 1967 and amend the qualifications for accepting immigrants. Further revisions resulted in the Immigration Act of 1976, promulgated in 1978 (Adelman 1991:173). And since the 1980s, Canada and the United States have seen rapid increases in the number of refugee claimants requesting protection from return to their countries (Adelman 1991:ix).

Since the 1980s scholars in refugee-receiving countries, from anthropologists to policy analysts, have been compelled to address the ever growing question of refugees.

In the Canadian context, former Minister of External Affairs Barbara McDougall reminded us of the problematic nature of the word 'refugee' itself (McDougall 1991:2-10). How refugees are to be defined is one of issues she discusses. Furthermore, Martin (1991:30) contends that contemporary commentary on refugee law tends to be critical of the reigning refugee definition. For many people the definition, derived from the 1951 U.N. Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, is outdated and insensitive (Martin 1991:30).

McDougall (1991:2-10) discussed Canada's moral responsibilities and the financial implications for Canada as a refugee-receiving country. For example, she estimates that Canada spends roughly 375 million dollars per annum on refugees (McDougall 1991:9). One of the issues she raised was the balance between the amount of resources committed to refugees and the amount of resources allocated to Canada's own disadvantaged communities (IBID). Dr. Howard Adelman (1991), a professor of Philosophy at York University, analyzed Canadian refugee policies. He argues that refugee policies can be problematic in that they must occupy the middle ground between the rights of refugees and the rights of "communities to determine their own destinies by deciding who can and who cannot become members" (Adelman 1991:173).

SOCIAL SCIENCE LITERATURE ON IMMIGRATION

The arrival of newcomers has given anthropologists and sociologists the opportunity to study 'the other' within their communities. The shifts in source countries of refugees and immigrants, and the implications regarding ethnic relations, is reflected in the anthropological and sociological literature. Adelman (1991:186) notes that from 1933 - 1968 Canadian immigration policies were distinctly Euro-centered. Subsequently,

there were numerous studies on the Jewish refugees of World War II, and later refugees from communist states. So much so, in fact, that Eastern European ethnic groups in Canada have come to occupy a central place in Canadian ethnic studies (Anderson 1991:26).

This began to change in the 1970s. Adelman (1991:186) believes that Canada then became more “world-centered”. For example, with the fall of Saigon in 1975, “the Canadian public was directly involved in the largest-ever intake of refugees into Canada: the Indochinese” (IBID:173). This generated a number of studies on the new Indochinese Canadians, such as Taylor’s (1991) “Vietnamese Refugee Adaptations in Three Contexts: a Life History Approach” and Fuch’s (1991) “Factors Affecting Levels of Happiness Among Southeast Asian Refugee Women in Saskatoon”. As Anderson (1991:27) writes, “interest in non-white ethnic minorities has been increasing commensurate with an increase in the immigration of these groups in recent years”.

In anthropology, there has been a notable emphasis on two particular areas of ethnic studies. The first is the settlement and adaptation of newcomers. Such studies often include the political or geopolitical reasons for the refugee’s departure as well as the process of relocation and resettlement in third countries. The second area concerns the construction of ethnic identity.

These two aspects of ethnic studies have always interested me, and it is because of this that I chose to write my thesis on an immigrant community. In fact, I have always been interested in the migration phenomenon. Part of this interest stems from being an immigrant myself. My family moved to Canada when I was seven, so I have spent most of my life here. Still, I do remember some initial difficulty in adjusting to a new

environment. Therefore, I wanted to examine how other Canadian newcomers adapt to Canadian society.

Research on new Canadians is more crucial than ever, considering the current state of the Canadian economy. While this is not a study on immigrant contributions to Canadian society, there are a few key issues which merit some discussion. Immigrants have consistently been the scapegoats for the economic and social ills of receiving countries. In Canada, Burnaby (1991:362) argues that in spite of the expected economic benefits of immigration, many citizens persist in the belief that immigrants are a drain on the Canadian economy. Unfortunately, blaming immigrants for society's ills is not just the pastime of the disgruntled unemployed but has reached the levels of political leadership. For example, Philpot (1995) discussed the outrage that Jacques Parizeau caused when he partially blamed the Quebec referendum's failure on the 'ethnic vote'. Philpot (1995) notes, however, that the same critics of Parizeau (i.e. Sheila Copps' government) also imposed a 'head tax' of \$975 on all new immigrants and refugees. In the U.S., Congress representatives have voiced complaints regarding immigrants and their supposed draining of resources meant for 'Americans' (Gutierrez 1995:58).

It is estimated that 16 percent of the total population of Canada is foreign-born (Akbari 1991:335). That's a significant number to come under attack for whatever troubles have beset the country. And the accusations, both on the street and government levels are the same: immigrants are a drain on the taxpayers and take away jobs. Interesting. Everyone is entitled to an opinion. Nevertheless, as Gutierrez (1995:60) points out, too many of the studies that opponents of immigration rely on look exclusively at the costs of the immigrants to the government, without considering

immigrants' contributions to the treasury. Gutierrez is speaking of the U.S., but the same can be said of Canada.

Much of the literature refutes the assumption that immigrants are a drain on the system. Taking into account a period of adjustment and factors such as language competence, several scholars contend that immigrants are an economic asset to Canada. For example, Akbari (1991:335) claims that an immigrant will benefit the native-born population through public fund transfers; immigrants in Canada pay as much in taxes as do the non-immigrants after they have stayed in the country for three years. After these three years they pay substantially more (Akbari 1991:343). Samuel's (1984) study compared the incomes of all foreign-born Canadians to native-born Canadians. The study concludes that after initial years of difficulties, the refugees and regular immigrants were able to earn more than the 'cradle Canadians' (Samuel 1984:54).

According to Berry and Kalin's (1995) study, Canadian attitudes toward multiculturalism are moderately positive, and tolerance moderately high. Nevertheless, they expressed the concern that many ethnic groups that are not of European background are less accepted than those of European origin (Berry and Kalin 1995:319). This is understandable since previously, immigrants to Canada were primarily European. However, with the increase of immigrants from non-traditional countries, it is important to add to the literature so that hopefully, an increase in the information available about newer Canadians will result in an increase in acceptance.

A final reason for my interest in the migration phenomenon is more abstract. The sheer inhumanity that our species is capable of always astounds me. The Holocaust. Cambodia's killing fields, Rwanda, Bosnia - these recent events of this century are a

blight on human history, and a very sad commentary on our inability to develop a higher level of tolerance. Nevertheless, in the midst of all this are the survivors. Refugees are a testament to the strength and resilience of the human species. Despite overwhelming odds, refugees survive. Driven from their familiar environment, they succeed in adapting to a new one. They also make valuable contributions to their new society. This was evident to me when I interviewed some of the Kurds in Ottawa.

The Kurdish community is interesting because they lack statehood, but are one of the largest ethnic groups in the Middle East. The fact that there has never been a nation-state of Kurdistan has several implications for the Kurdish people, not only politically but socio-culturally as well. I wanted to know what it was like for them to live in a society where they were likely to be victims of discrimination and forced migration. The Kurds have been denied what Barth (1969:13) describes as their "basic, most general identity". Since they are denied their ethnic identity, they are also denied basic human rights as well as the rights and privileges that accompany being members of a recognized minority within a state, including access to medical care, education and due process of law.

As a refugee group, the Kurds number in the millions. Yet the number of Kurdish newcomers in North America, while increasing, is still relatively small compared to other ethnic groups. Subsequently, the literature on Kurdish immigrants, particularly in Canada, is limited. Studies of Kurds by Chaliand (1993), Gunter (1990) Bulloch, and Morris (1992) and Nagel (1980), to cite a few, deal with the Kurdish issue in an international context with respect to the Kurdish diaspora; they neglect the Kurds in an immigrant setting as in North America. Studies on the Kurdish issues of settlement, adaptation, and ethnic identity are scant.

The general objective of this thesis is to contribute to the existing literature on small immigrant communities in Canada. The specific goal is to add to the literature on Kurdish refugee communities. The theoretical purpose of this paper is to explore Kurdish ethnic identity within an immigrant context. I shall begin with a brief historical review of Kurdistan. Then I will discuss the Kurds in Ottawa in an immigrant context, as new Canadians. This will include a review of the migration, settlement, and adaptation processes. Then I will discuss, from an 'emic' perspective, how Kurdish ethnic identity is constructed, and what criteria are salient to them when discussing their ethnic identity and culture.

I also want to explore to what degree Kurdish self-identification is central to them in the immigrant context. Given the risks of identifying oneself as a Kurd in their home country, I was curious as to whether the degree of 'Kurdishness' becomes particularly salient in a country which allows and even encourages ethnic identification. Furthermore, the Kurds are an interesting case study since they are refugees from a country (i.e. Kurdistan) which has never formally existed. There exist ideological as well as geographical divisions within Kurdistan due to the partitioning of the region in the early 20th century. One of the issues I wanted to explore in relation to examining Kurdish ethnic identity is whether these ideological divisions are transplanted to the immigrant setting. If so, I wanted to examine its effects on the construction of Kurdish identity.

Why I chose the Kurds and the Middle East as an area of study raises some theoretical issues which need to be dealt with. Admittedly, I have always been fascinated with the Middle East. Having been born in the Philippines and raised in Canada, to me, the Middle East represents the 'exotic other', a fascinating place rich in cultural

difference. I don't think this is a negative thing. We not only can learn about cultural difference, but learn from it. Furthermore, while Clifford's (1988:273) caution regarding dichotomies is certainly a worthy one, I doubt that all dichotomies are insidious. For example, Clifford (IBID) criticizes the prevalence of the "West-rest" (Third World) split or developed-underdeveloped dichotomy. In a colonial or neo-colonial context this has merit. But the dichotomy is only one component in the study of other cultures that the academic should consider.

Unfortunately, anthropology as a discipline has a checkered past. Anthropologists are a product of their time and zeitgeist. There exists a modicum of collective guilt for those anthropologists who were complicit in past hegemonic ethnic relations during the colonial era. Clifford (1988) discusses Said's Orientalism with respect to this issue. According to Clifford (1988:259), Said defines Orientalism as a "corporate institution for dealing with the Orient", which during the colonial period following roughly the late eighteenth century wields the power of "dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient". This is simplistic and extreme, of course, but it is difficult to deny that romanticism reflected western needs and fantasies as well as oriental realities.

I find this highly problematic. If the above two are the defining characteristics of Orientalism and Orientalists, does this automatically imply that anyone who researches or writes about the Orient is by implication party to some type of hegemonic struggle? While Clifford (1988:256) warns against viewing Said's work in terms of simple anti-imperialism, it certainly is one of the central issues taken up by the author, critically linked to Orientalism as a corporate institution as a means of asserting dominance.

This brings us to the most significant and didactic issue raised by Said: that of representation. As Clifford (1988:256) notes, it is true that Westerners had for centuries studied and spoken for the rest of the world; the reverse not being the case. Said's most critical contribution is that he raises the issue of representation in a world where 'the others' have asserted their independence from Western cultural and political hegemony and established a new multivocal field of intercultural discourse (IBID). This has significant implications, particularly in the field of anthropology, where historically some scholars often made sweeping generalizations about entire cultures.

What is confusing about Said, as Clifford (1988:275) points out, is that although he is a radical critic of major components of Western cultural tradition, he derives most of his standards from that tradition. Furthermore, Said discusses this current multivocal field of discourse, which supposedly includes a number of scholars with 'non-Western' perspectives. Yet he derives much of his style and is influenced greatly by French theorist Foucault. If his purpose is to fault anthropology for being dominated by western scholars, perhaps his argument would be more tenable had he incorporated scholars from the 'non-Western' tradition.

Said's most valuable contribution is that he raises the questions of representing other cultures and whether the notion of a distinct culture is a useful one (1988:274). This certainly is a crucial point, but much has shifted in the discipline of anthropology from when Said wrote Orientalism. For example, gone are the days when anthropologists were wont to make gross generalizations of entire cultures. The diversity that exists even within cultures can be so immense that representations of all the people within a particular culture is no longer justifiable.

This brings us to the second and I might add very significant question: just how useful is 'culture'? Neither Said nor Clifford appear to have much use for the concept. I suspect that the reason Said finds 'culture' so problematic is because, as Clifford (1988:273) notes, the concept was invented by **European** theorists to account for the collective articulations of human diversity (emphasis added). Clifford's (1988:273) contention is that the notion still has too many organicist assumptions. Although he suggests the replacement of the culture concept by "a vision of powerful discursive formations globally and strategically deployed" (1988:273), Clifford does not provide a viable alternative. Instead he limits his argument for an alternative to one that should avoid "human common denominators" (1988:275).

The concept of culture can be problematic, and has been so for a long time. However, I believe that the idea of culture as a means of describing human behaviour (Barth 1969) is still very much a useful one. Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) found over 150 definitions of 'culture' in the anthropological literature. Yet despite the numerous interpretations, Barkow (1989:139) maintains that three ideas seem common to most definitions of culture: it is socially transmitted, it consists of types of information (techniques, norms, etc.), and that it forms some kind of system or is at least structured in some way.

The problems arise when a scholar superimposes his or her ideas of culture on others. The etic definition of culture, that is, culture imposed from the 'outside', is a significant concern. When the scholar is aware of and tries to avoid some of the risks of using the concept inaccurately, then it becomes a very useful tool for social scientists. Thus, I chose to utilize narratives from my informants in an attempt to provide an emic

perspective of Kurdish culture. As such, I do not feel it necessary for me to resolve the long-standing debate over the precise meaning of the word.

Culture is a vital component of a group's identity. Li et al (1995) define identity as

how 'self' is defined and categorized in relation to other people.... Identity with reference to a group involves a sense of belonging to the group based on characteristics shared by its members. Fundamental to group identity is the division of people into 'Us' and 'Other'. When group identity is defined in terms of ethnic origin, it is referred to as 'ethnic identity' (Li et al. 1995:343).

The notion of categorization is important because, as Jenkins (1994:207) argues, there are few examples in the anthropological ethnicity literature of an explicit concern with social categorization. While Jenkins (1994) takes a different approach from Barth, focusing instead on external categorizations, it is nevertheless significant, in terms of examining power and authority. For example, Jenkins (1994:205-206) contends that an individual is identified in a particular way by significant others, who by virtue of their power or authority are in a position to make their definition of the person count.

This is of particular relevance to the Kurds, both in Kurdistan and in the diaspora. For example, in many parts of Kurdistan, Kurdish identity is defined for them by the state (as in the Turkish case, where their existence is denied and the Kurds are referred to as 'Mountain Turks'). Thus, there is the struggle between the Kurdish desire to define their ethnic identity in their own cultural terms versus a categorization forced on them by outsiders. This may explain the salience of politics in Kurdish discourse.

In addition, as Jenkins (1994:197) argues, acknowledging the necessary role of categorization in the social role of ethnic identity construction is also to recognize the

importance of power and authority relations in that process. For example, I argue further in the thesis that the salience of the Kurdish identity and the rise of Kurdish political parties are an outcome of the disadvantaged Kurdish position in social relations. These experiences are then carried over upon emigration. In the process, external categorizations become internal categories in the immigrant context. Therefore, while my objective is to present an emic perspective of Kurdish ethnic construction, external definitions of identity must also be included for any identity cannot exist without a contrastive 'other'.

Representation, ethnic identity and the culture concept are some of the issues which I must contend with. In my research, an important question is, to what extent am I trying to represent the Kurdish people in Ottawa? I am certainly not attempting to speak for the Kurdish population. My motives are, first of all, to contribute to the dearth of literature on the Kurdish community in Canada. Even then, due to restrictions on time, the contribution is limited to a small sample of people in the Kurdish community. I wanted to document the Kurdish experience of flight and resettlement. I also wanted to ask them how they construct Kurdish identity in Canada.

Secondly, since I am trying to portray a range of interpretations and to have the Kurds speak with their own voices, it is critical for me to realize that there are many issues and multiple voices. More importantly, although I refer to both Barkow's (1989) and Barth's (1969) 'etic' definitions of culture, I realize that the word 'culture' may have a different meaning for the people I interviewed. I was careful to ask what the word 'culture' meant to them, as well as what they felt its constituents were.

As a discipline, anthropology has evolved such that the anthropologist realizes that he or she is part of his or her culture, and that any subsequent research and analysis will reflect cultural biases. Harding (1986), from her concept of “standpoint epistemology”, argues that men see the world in one way, and women in another way. While this concept appears more to address the ‘tradition’ of ‘male-centred’ science, the idea of differing perceptions based on gender is certainly worth keeping in mind, since research is “influenced by the identity of both parties” (Spradley 1979:45).

Awareness of biases is critical for any research. This is what scholars such as Clifford and Said are concerned with. However, as scientists, we inevitably tend to focus on some aspects, and not on others. This I believe is a result of specific interests and an inescapable outcome stemming from limitations on time and resources. It is impossible to be 100 percent objective, especially when dealing with a subject as variegated and unpredictable as human beings. The important point to remember is that people have their own experiences to articulate, and in the field of anthropology, this can be accomplished by several means, to be discussed below.

GETTING TO KNOW YOU

As any researcher knows, undertaking an ethnographic project is worthwhile and exciting. But it can also be a frustrating experience often requiring superhuman patience, a fact few are willing to admit on paper. Fieldwork is the hallmark of anthropology. As Clifford (1988:26) writes, the close of the 19th century saw the creation of fieldwork as a particular form of authority, an authority both scientifically validated and based on a unique personal experience. Furthermore, the professional ethnographer was trained in the latest analytic techniques and modes of scientific explanation (1988:30). More

importantly, as Spradley (1979:17) notes, ethnographers must discover how natives categorize experience.

Before I could undertake fieldwork though, I had to find the field. My quest to locate Kurdish Canadians in Ottawa began with a phone call to Multiculturalism and Citizenship Canada. Explaining my objective to study Kurdish Canadian settlement and adaptation for a Master's thesis, a gentleman I spoke with contacted a Kurdish family and arranged for me to meet with them. They were my first Kurdish informants. Unlike Toronto or Montreal, Ottawa has a small Kurdish Canadian population. Unfortunately, given the time as well as financial constraints, I was unable to go to either city to interview people. However, I did manage to attend both Kurdish New Year's celebrations in Toronto and Montreal, as a participant observer.

My next step was to call the Canadian Kurdish Community of Canada Association, only to discover that they no longer existed. The superseding association was called the Canadian Kurdish Information Network (CKIN). This marked the beginning of my research as well as my volunteer work. I feel that volunteering is crucial for two reasons. First and most importantly, volunteering allowed me to contribute to the Kurdish community in whatever capacity I could. It is no longer acceptable for anthropologists to simply go into the field, conduct research and then leave without making any type of contribution.

Secondly, volunteering allowed me to expand my informant network, with the crucial assistance by my administrator and friend Dara. It also became a rewarding research experience in itself. Dietz et al (1994:20) assert that participant-observation generates opportunities to gain insight into the viewpoints and practices of the other

through ongoing commentary and other interactions. I gained a wealth of information just 'hanging around', in informal conversations, and listening to discussions, whether political or social at the Canadian Kurdish Information Network.

My tasks at CKIN included editing and typing the Canadian Kurdish Information Network Newsletter, and composing and editing letters to various members of Parliament. In addition, I was able to organize a meeting for an Internet workshop at a training systems company, so that CKIN could initiate a Homepage on the World Wide Web. The managing director also offered to donate space on his system to the Canadian Kurdish Information Network.

Before discussing research methods, I should note at this point that I met almost all of my informants through the Canadian Kurdish Information Network. I was concerned since my initial five informants were men between the ages of 27 and 35 years old. I wanted to talk to a broad cross-section of the Kurdish Canadian community, and to ensure a reasonable gender balance. In their quest to help me find informants and assist in my research, the friends I made at the Canadian Kurdish Information Network contacted a number of women and requested permission for me to conduct interviews. As it turned out, about half of the people I interviewed are women.

Meeting my informants through CKIN also has some implications for the research. First of all, the people I interviewed represent a fraction of the Canadian Kurdish community. Their stories and opinions are valuable, but I cannot generalize these opinions to the entire Kurdish Canadian community. They represent a segment of the community that associated with the social and/or political orientation of the Canadian Kurdish Information Network.

One of my professors suggested finding some non-partisan Kurds to gain their perspectives. This was difficult, since I spent most of my time at the Canadian Kurdish Information Network and virtually all of my informants had very strong political views. My only informant whom I did not meet at the Canadian Kurdish Information Network explained to me that he was not interested in the organization because he felt that it was very political. Yet much of his own discourse centred on the political. Perhaps because of the nature of Kurdistan and the oppression the Kurds have experienced, it would be difficult to find Kurds who have not been affected one way or another by politics, which in turn is reflected in their discourse.

Furthermore, the average age of my informants was 33 years old. None had lived in Canada for over 10 years, and all are refugees. As such, all of them came here under political circumstances, which of course is going to affect how they structure their reality and categorize their experiences. It would be interesting to conduct a study with Kurdish Canadians who have been here for one or two generations to determine whether political discourse is still prevalent or has decreased significantly.

METHODS

In order to determine how “natives categorize their experience” (Spradley 1979:17), my ethnography employed semi-structured interviews. The interview has become a staple of ethnography, and its significance cannot be underestimated. As Somers (1994:606) maintains, “it is through narrativity that we come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world, and it is through narrativity that we constitute our social identities”. Furthermore, Somers (1994:613-614) contends that recently, “scholars are postulating something much more substantive about narrative:

namely, that social life itself is storied and that narrative is an *ontological condition of social life*.” Thus, the interview process allows the informants not only to construct their social identities but to explicate those identities to others.

The questions were patterned after Dr. Brian Given’s “Tibetan Canadians: Twenty-five Years in the West study” (Given 1994:personal communication). I chose to do so because Given’s study utilizes numerous questions crucial to both culture and identity. While by no means as exhaustive as Given’s interview protocol or questionnaire, I was able to condense and modify a number of questions, which I asked through interviews. I also sent ten written questionnaires to Kurds living outside Ottawa, but only 2 responded, and not in the detail I would have preferred.

The interviews were structured in terms of a “focused life-history” approach (Given 1994:personal communication). I used the “focused life-history” approach so that I could ask the necessary questions on the immigration experience as well as culture. However, the method also has enough flexibility for my informants to generate and discuss their priorities. I interviewed twenty people between the ages of 18 and 84. My administrator at the Canadian Kurdish Information Network asked people he knew if they would volunteer to be interviewed. Two thirds of the interviews were conducted in my informants’ homes, and the remainder at the Canadian Kurdish Information Network office.

INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

I met the requirements of the ethics committee. Before proceeding with the interviews, I submitted an brief synopsis of myself and my research objectives to my

informants so that they were fully aware of my academic intentions. I was careful to specify that I was in no way connected with immigration or the government, and that my research was strictly academic. I was also mindful in asking for permission to tape the interviews, which posed no problem to my informants. The interviews lasted between one to three hours. Finally, to protect the privacy of my informants, pseudonyms have been used in the thesis.

Regarding the questions (see appendix), I first asked specifics such as age, country of birth and length of residence in Canada. I then asked questions with respect to life in Kurdistan. The next set of questions were in relation to the immigration experience, from forced migration to settlement and adaptation in Canada. For example, I asked my informants reasons for flight, what their impressions of Canada were before and after they came, and some of their experiences in interactions with other Canadians. The final set of questions pertained to the preservation of Kurdish culture within the Kurdish Canadian community.

The purpose of the questions was to obtain Kurdish narratives pre-exodus, exodus and after settlement in Canada. Having read the literature, I had suspected that geopolitics played a significant role in Kurdish identity, but was unsure of the extent. I was also mindful to specify that the word 'culture' meant different things to different people, thereby allowing my informants to articulate their cultural criteria. Due to the geopolitical nature of Kurdistan, certain criteria such as religion would have undoubtedly been affected. Finally, the questions were such that although I was looking for constituents of ethnic identity, the responses I received from my informants allowed me

to determine shifts in cultural criteria (i.e. external factors in Kurdistan mutating into internal criteria in the immigrant context).

At this point I wish to discuss the nature of the interviews, specifically regarding the women. The fact that Kurdish society has been slightly more egalitarian than others was reflected in the nature of the interviews I conducted with the Kurdish women. For example, when I went to a household and said that I wished to interview the women in order to get their experiences, many of them responded readily. In the case where the husbands were present, they remained quiet and supported their partners as they answered my questions. In a few instances, the husbands did finish off the interviews but I think it was more out of feeling left out as opposed to a question of their wives' competence. Only in the case of the two teenage girls I interviewed was it different. Once in a while they would look to their parents to confirm certain points with them, but were nevertheless articulate and extremely helpful.

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

In addition to volunteer work, I was also provided with the opportunity to attend several cultural events which allowed me to conduct additional participant observation. The first two events were the Kurdish New Year's festivals, or Newroz. One was held in Toronto, and the second in Montreal. I had to travel to both cities as Ottawa did not have a Newroz festival. As a volunteer at the Canadian Kurdish Information Network, I also attended a Kurdish barbeque organized by CKIN.

In addition, I was invited on numerous occasions to participate in traditional Kurdish dinners at my informants' homes. Kurdish Canadians are very warm and

hospitable people, and they did everything they could to accommodate me, answer my barrage of questions, and never failed to serve me tea and fruit and pastries.

Over the course of the summer as my research progressed, I became known throughout much of the Kurdish Canadian community as the university student researching Kurds, as well a volunteer at the Canadian Kurdish Information Network. I became friends with many of the people I met, and had the privilege of attending a Kurdish wedding. It was of particular significance in that I was able to observe a unique wedding. The groom was Kurdish, and the bride was Persian, of the Quash 'qai tribe. It was exciting to observe a ceremony reflecting both cultures.

SUNDRY QUANDARIES

I experienced a few setbacks, which is not uncommon to any research. There were also some events which may have become seriously problematic. The first incident occurred when I was volunteering at CKIN. Federal agents from the Canadian Security Intelligence Service decided to pay a visit to the office. At the time I was not there, but they did ask my administrator questions regarding the association, and who else worked there. He gave the agents my name, and told them that I was a university student researching Kurdish Canadians. He suggested that they contact me, to ask questions. Fortunately, they did not. Still, I had to prepare to safeguard my informants interests. Spradley (1979:34-39) provides specific procedures to protect the privacy of informants.

This particular event confronted me with some issues which I seriously had to consider as an ethnographer. The Canadian Kurdish Information Network has a mandate which specifically outlines its objectives regarding assisting new Kurdish Canadians, the preservation of Kurdish culture through social events, and the dissemination of

information concerning Kurdistan in terms of human rights violations. CKIN consistently receives faxes from Europe, where the ERNK (Kurdistan Democratic Party) has its headquarters.

Internationally, the Kurdish crisis is a sensitive one. Initially, I had not considered the implications of volunteering, because I felt that the organization was more cultural than political. After the visit of the two government agents, I had a discussion with my administrator, who claimed that our phone and fax lines might be monitored. In addition, the conflict between the Kurds and their host countries, particularly Turkey, is no secret. So the possibility of friction with the Turkish embassy was also something to consider. As a volunteer I was privy to various types of confidential information. Therefore, I had to take the necessary precautions in order to protect my informants, and incidents such as the above were conferred about with my supervisor.

The interviews I conducted lasted between one to three hours. While three hours would have been ideal, sometimes my informants felt that they had nothing else to say, which I respected of course. However, in a couple of instances when I tried to query a little bit further, I was told by my translator that it was not acceptable in their culture to be too insistent, another point I respected, although it did shorten my interviews. In addition, often I would start one interview, get the bulk of it done by my informant, and then his or her spouse would finish off the interview. In one case, I interviewed one man, his sister, daughter, and daughter's friend over several hours, in a 'focus group' style. The sister did not speak any English, and my translator said she wasn't familiar with the concept of culture to the extent that westerners were. This was quite interesting, and

rather than asking questions using the word 'culture', I modified my questions to those relating to 'Kurdishness'.

Finally, there is the emotional involvement. Working with a group such as refugees can be mentally exhausting. In addition to forced migration and the trauma that accompanies displacement, many of my informants had undergone intense personal tragedies, such as losing family and friends in war. In addition, a significant number of them were directly involved in independence and resistance movements, and experienced firsthand the horrors of war. One woman I interviewed was imprisoned with her son, who at the time was only an infant. My informant explained that while her son was now healthy and active in grade school, he recently began to manifest symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder, and was currently undergoing therapy. Most distressing of all, many of my informants still had family members in Kurdistan.

Very few human beings can listen to such experiences without being affected. Many times I experienced acute frustration over the current political situation in Kurdistan. I was also saddened by the injustices and indignities suffered by my informants. Furthermore, I often wondered whether my research was simply an exercise in futility, or whether it would make some sort of impact. Finally, like many graduate students out there (though few seem willing to admit it), there were plenty of days when it seemed like nothing was falling into place and the best recourse was to flee the university and engage in an active career as a trapeze artist.

I still am unsure what kind of impact this thesis will make. But my administrator always expresses gratitude on behalf of the Kurds for the time I've spent as a volunteer. He teases that once Kurdistan is liberated, they are going to name a village after me. I

have also been given a Kurdish name. As for the times when I wanted to pack it all in and become a trapeze artist, two things have stopped me from doing so. First, I felt that I owed it to my informants to document their stories so as to inform other Canadians. Secondly, I'm afraid of heights.

CHAPTER 2 A BRIEF REVIEW OF KURDISH HISTORY

“The present situation of the Kurdish people can only be understood in its historical context, notably in the light of the events of the last hundred years” (Kendal 1993:11).

This chapter makes no pretense of providing an exhaustive historical overview of Kurdish history. Nevertheless, some historical background must be provided in order to understand the position of today’s Kurdish immigrants in Canada. The following outline extrapolates from both Western and Kurdish writers and historians.

Long before the creation of the modern states of Turkey, Iran and Iraq, the Kurds occupied the region which overlaps these three countries. The Kurds are indigenous to this area, and may have been one of the earlier cultures involved in the development of agriculture. For example, Izady (1992:23) asserts that “the archaeological and zoological-botanical evidence of Kurdistan’s crucial importance to the development of civilization is bountiful and well document”. He further claims that the remains of some of the first domesticated goats, sheep, dogs, and pigs have been found at three major archeological sites in Kurdistan and that by the early 8th millennium BC many agricultural communities in Kurdistan had domesticated animals (Izady 1992:24). As such, the Kurdish claims to their homeland cannot be construed as spurious; the evidence exists of their occupation of the region dating back thousands of years.

From the advent of agriculture and the domestication of animals, the Kurdish people progressed steadily. The ethnic designator *Kurd* was first applied in the 6th century AD (Izady 1992:34). According to Kurdish historians, the 10th through 12th century is seen as the “golden age of Kurdish culture, during which Kurds excelled in the

fields of history, philosophy, music and musicology, architecture and civil engineering, mathematics, and astronomy, among others” (Izady 1992:41).

According to Izady (1992:227) Kurdistan’s wealth of high-grade pasture lands has long made it suitable for a pastoralist economy. Furthermore, it is equally suitable in many areas for intensive agriculture. Throughout their history, the Kurds have practiced one form of subsistence or another, depending on the time period. Until the end of the 15th century, the Kurds were heavily involved in trade since the Silk Road, the trade route which connected the Occident to the Orient, ran through Kurdistan.

The Kurds had several native religions, the main one known as Yazdanism, or the Cult of Angels; three of its sects which survived to present day are Yezidism, Alevism and Yarsanism (Izady 1992:137). Izady (1992:143) points out that “the Cult is fundamentally a non-Semitic religion, with an Aryan superstructure overlaying a religious foundation indigenous to the Zagros that pre-dates Islam by a millennia”. While the majority of the Kurds today are Muslim, the conversion of the Kurds to Islam appears to have occurred relatively late. Although the Muslims moved into Kurdistan around the 7th century AD, Islam did not fully take root until the 12th to 15th century (IBID:135). Alevism is practiced by Kurds today, possibly existing as an amalgamation of past indigenous elements along with Islamic influences.

It was near the end of the 15th century, when “an energetic, industrious, and reasonably worldly Kurdish society... turned into one of the most backward and devastated societies in the Middle East” (Izady 1992:49). One of the main contributing factors of the Kurdish decline was the warring Ottoman and Persian Empires. This paper cannot address the complex history of the Ottoman-Persian War. Suffice it to say that the

Kurds, caught in the middle, suffered grievously. Izady (1992:51) documents how the Persians pursued a scorched earth policy to counter the Ottomans and how “it just happened that Kurdistan was the earth that needed to be scorched for them to succeed”. In 1639, the Treaty of Zohab established the border between the two empires roughly near the western borders of modern Iran. This left three-quarters of Kurdistan under the Ottoman suzerainty, which lasted until that empire’s breakup at the end of World War I (IBID).

By the 19th century, the Ottoman Empire began to collapse, with severe and far-reaching implications for its inhabitants. In financial ruin, Europe, notably Britain, swiftly moved in. According to Kendal (1993:11), “the exploitation of minerals, railways and external trade passed entirely into European hands (and) foreign advisers were imposed on the Army and administration”. By the end of the first World War, Europe had carved out pieces of the decrepit empire and consolidated its power.

There were some significant Kurdish uprisings prior to the beginning of the 20th century. For example, Sheikh Obeidullah’s revolt in 1880 is considered by some as the first rise of Kurdish patriotism. However, several scholars argue that Kurdish nationalism was intensified by the creation of the modern states of Turkey, Iran and Iraq. As the history of Kurdish ethnonationalism clearly demonstrates, politicization of Kurdish ethnicity coincided with the formation of the modern nation-state system in the Middle East (Entessar 1992:1). Thus, I will examine the genesis of some of the main Kurdish political parties struggling for autonomy or independence, in the three respective countries. For the sake of brevity, I will focus only on Turkey, Iran and Iraq. This is not

to do injustice to the Kurds from Syria, or Russia, but all Kurds I interviewed were from the three aforementioned countries, where the bulk of the Kurdish population lives.

THE KURDS IN TURKEY

The majority of the Kurds live in Turkey. Unfortunately, their numbers can only be estimated, as there are no relevant census figures. The lack of an approximate number regarding the Kurdish population is a result of two things. It is either grounded in the policy of the states in question, which are not willing to officially recognize the Kurds (Bucak, ed. 1993:2), and therefore minimize the numbers. Or the numbers have been increased, depending on the parties involved. Bucak (1993:2) estimate that between 15 - 20 million Kurds live in Turkey. This appears to be a reasonable estimate between numbers that run as high as 40 million to as low as 6 million. In any event, the Kurds of Turkey have suffered tremendously.

The Republic of Turkey was established in 1923 with the Treaty of Lausanne. The Allied Powers' partitioning of the region had disastrous repercussions for the Kurds. The emergence of modern Turkey ushered in an era of intense Turkish nationalism, at the expense of other ethnic minorities in the country (Entessar 1992:81). Kemal Mustafa Ataturk, known and revered by the Turks as the father of the modern state of Turkey, implemented and pursued a ruthless policy, later to become known as 'Kemalism', whereby there was one nation, and only one people, the Turks. According to Entessar (1992:81) the suppression of other ethnic minorities can be attributed to Turkey's fear of further dismemberment. This intensified the desire of the country's leadership to suppress all non-Turkish ethnic identities. One of the state's first strategies was forced assimilation and denial: "The Kurds were encouraged by all practical means to identify

as Turks” (Harris 1977:115). When the proud and recalcitrant Kurds refused to do so, the government claimed that the Kurds didn’t exist, that they were “mountain Turks” (Bulloch and Morris 1992:51).

The government also implemented laws which made it illegal to identify oneself as a Kurd, and any outward manifestations of Kurdishness, from language to clothing, was punishable by imprisonment. For example, “articles 13, 14, 26, 27, 28, and 29 of the Turkish Constitution set limits on the freedom of opinion and expression” (Bucak, ed. 1993:28). The instruction of children in Kurdish in the school system was outlawed, and until very recently, to simply state that one was a Kurd landed a person in jail. Finally, in one very ludicrous case, in 1992 some of the traffic lights in the city of Batman were switched from red, yellow and green to red, yellow and blue (IBID:49). Red, yellow and green are the colors of the Kurdish flag.

The Kurdish position has been deteriorating since the Treaty of Lausanne. Historically, the Kurds were known as a nomadic people, but they are no longer so. Nomadism has disappeared and even semi-nomadism is practiced by only a few thousand people (Kendal 1993:79). Furthermore, the agricultural Kurds have been marginalized. Agriculture gradually mechanized, resulting in the displacement of thousands of farmers and the depopulation of the rural areas. Thousands migrated to the larger Turkish cities in search of work. There, they suffered severe economic privations as unemployment ran rampant.

Furthermore, until recently the majority of the Kurds in Turkey were concentrated in the southeastern region of Anatolia, the most underdeveloped region of Turkey, which also happens to be the only oil-producing area. The discrimination against the Kurds is

evident when examining the Turkish state's allocation of oil revenues. "In 1971, petroleum production generated \$2.5 million, and the following year it generated \$10 million. Less than 5 percent of revenues generated, however, were spent for the development of the Kurdish region" (Entessar 1992:91).

For the entire decade of the 1970s until the military coup on September 12, 1980, Turkey was deteriorating rapidly politically, economically and socially. The institutional and sociological causes (reviewed by Gunter 1990:26-28) which had Turkey on the brink of anarchy were keenly felt by its Kurdish population. Those who were forced to or voluntarily migrated to the larger Turkish cities were becoming more educated, sophisticated, and cognizant of the injustices to their people. They witnessed "the great disparities that existed between the western region of the country and their own eastern region—in living standards, economic development, educational opportunities, access to health care facilities, and overall quality of life" (Entessar 1992:91). The cultural oppression, mass deportations, summary executions and torture, as well as the severe economic conditions culminating over the years had taken its toll on the Kurds. The time had come for the formation of one of the most powerful Kurdish political parties, the PKK.

Created in 1974 and formally established in 1978, the *Partia Karkaren Kurdistan* (PKK) or the Kurdish Workers Party is "the most violent, radical, and successful Kurdish movement to emerge in Turkey in many years" (Gunter 1990:57). The party is a combination of Marxism-Leninism and Kurdish nationalism. It advocated the establishment of a Kurdish Marxist republic in southeastern Turkey, with the ultimate aim of creating an independent Kurdistan that unites Kurdish regions throughout the

Middle East” (Entessar 1999 p.94). Since its inception, the party has been led by the renowned Abdullah Ocalan, who along with his colleagues, proposed a “two-tiered revolution to solve the Kurdish problem—national, then democratic” (IBID).

Radical in its outlook, the PKK felt that the only means of achieving Kurdish independence was through armed struggle. From its inception, the party initiated a guerrilla war. In the early years, the PKK quickly gained notoriety, and the censure of many of the Kurds in Turkey with their indiscriminate terrorist tactics. However, “after a few years of fighting, the group slowly realized that some of its actions were alienating Kurds” (Marcus 1993:241). Thus, they changed their strategies and by 1991, according to their sources, “the number of young men and women who wanted to join had grown so large there was no longer enough room to train them” (Marcus 1993:242). And despite their awkward and controversial start, “many Kurds saw the PKK as the only force interested in their plight” (IBID).

While there are several other political parties in Turkish Kurdistan, none have gained the size nor stature of the PKK. Nevertheless, one additional group is worth mentioning briefly. The Socialist Party of Turkish Kurdistan (SPTK), established in 1974, “had a small urban following of workers and intellectuals who advocated moderate socialist and nationalist goals” (Gunter 1990:64). The SPTK has never formally sought an independent nation of Kurdistan and like other political parties such as the National Liberation of Kurdistan (KUK), is staunchly opposed to the PKK.

THE KURDS IN IRAN

Like Turkey, the nation state of Iran is a product of 20th century conflict. At the turn of the century, Britain’s need for safe territories to protect her interests in India was

threatened by Soviet expansionism (Pelletiere 1984:74). In 1907 Britain and Russia, competing over ascendancy of the region, signed the Anglo-Russian Agreement which divided Iran into spheres of interest (IBID). However in 1920, the Soviet abortive invasion led to the complete withdrawal of both countries from the region, which allowed for Reza Shah to begin consolidating power in the central government (Pelletiere 1984:75).

Just shortly after World War I, there were numerous uprisings in Iran, as the Kurds there fared no better than their counterparts in Turkey. While the Iranian Kurds did have a few moments of achievement, such as the establishment of the Mahabad Republic in 1945, these were short-lived. Indeed, the Mahabad Republic was, to a significant extent, constituted with the involvement of the Soviet Union, and lasted all of one year. The Iranian government was quick to shut down the little republic as independence, autonomy and sustained development for the Kurds were never on the agenda of that state.

Socio-culturally, the conditions of the Kurds in Iran echoes that of the Kurds in Turkey. At roughly 7 million people, the Kurds constitute some 15 percent of Iran's population (Chaliand 1994:81), yet the Kurdish language has been banned in Iran since the 1940s. All teaching is in Persian, which is written in Arabic script (Ghassemlou 1993:98). Furthermore, as recently as 1975, "more than 70% of the total population and more than 80% of women were illiterate" (Ghassemlou 1993:99). Health care for the population is negligible. In the late 1960s, medical care was inadequate in the towns and practically non-existent in the countryside and despite a favorable climate and a relatively good supply of drinking water, trachoma, malaria and tuberculosis were all widespread in

Iranian Kurdistan (IBID:100). As Chaliand (1994:81) asserts, “there has never been a programme of public investment in the Kurdish regions”.

Prior to the 1970s, Iran was primarily an agricultural economy with a modest national income. The development of the oil industry resulted in an unprecedented escalation of the national income, yet Iranian Kurdistan’s share of this multi-billion dollar influx of oil revenue was minimal (Ghassemlou 1993:101). The only sector of Kurdistan to benefit significantly from the oil industry is Kermanshah province (Chaliand 1994:82). In fact, Kurdistan’s economy is still largely based on agriculture: more than half of the population lives off the land. Furthermore, income levels in Kurdistan are significantly lower than the national average (IBID).

The main Kurdish political parties in Iran are the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP-I) and Komala. The stronger of the two, the KDP-I was established in December 1945 in Mahabad by Qazi Muhammed (Izady 1992:209). The KDP-I was well organized, unlike the previous Kurdish movements in Iran. According to Ghassemlou (1993:106), the KDP-I presented a program which contained eight key points, rapidly winning the support of most of the Kurdish population.

At the time of its formation, the KDP-I was joined by the eminent Mullah Mustafa Barzani, leader of the Iraqi Kurdish movement. However, with the fall of the Mahabad Republic, the KDP-I was forced to go underground. Mullah Mustafa Barzani returned to Iraq in 1957. He took the title KDP and applied it to an Iraqi political party. Subsequently, the KDP in Iran changed their name to KDP-I (for Iran) (Izady 1992:210). During its repeated resurfacing from the underground, the KDP-I maintained an alliance with Barzani’s KDP, until the early 1970s, after which the two parties grew apart.

According to Izady (1992:210) the KDP-I then reoriented itself to the problems of the Kurds in Iran as opposed to focusing on the Kurdish struggle in an international context. This reorientation included a move for armed struggle as the only means to attain its goals in the Shah's dictatorial regime (Ghassemlou 1993:120).

The second political party in Kurdistan Iran predates the KDP-I by several years. The *Komala-e Zhian-e Kurdistan* (Committee for the Resurrection of Kurdistan), or Komala, was established in 1942 to further the cause of Kurdish self-determination (Entessar 1992:17). With its Marxist and leftist rhetoric, Komala's objective was establishing an autonomous region in all of Iranian Kurdistan (IBID). However, as Entessar (1992:17) notes, because of its selectivity and narrow base of support outside Mahabad, the Komala was unable to extend its appeal to all the Kurds in greater Kurdistan. Subsequently, many of Komala's original members later joined the newly formed KDP-I. Nevertheless, Komala continues to be active present day. Like Turkey's PKK and STPK, the rivalry between KDP-I and Komala is intense. According to Izady (1992:21), in 1985 the two parties engaged in bloody combat with one another.

THE KURDS IN IRAQ

It is possible that the Kurds in Iraqi Kurdistan have suffered the most in recent years. Saddam Hussein and his regime has had a calamitous impact on the Kurdish population. On several occasions he blatantly violated the 1925 Geneva Protocol on Chemical Weapons. The most destructive and infamous incident occurred in the town of Halabja. In March 1988, Iraqi planes appeared over the town to drop their bomb-loads of mustard gas, nerve gas and cyanide (Bulloch and Morris 1992:142). It is estimated that 5,000 Kurdish men, women and children died within a matter of hours. Furthermore, the

recent events (which will be discussed further on) in Iraq demonstrate that the Kurds are still in danger in a regime with no respect for either its Kurdish minority or human rights.

From the start, it was oil that drove the British to create the Republic of Iraq. In order to appropriate the oil fields of Southern Kurdistan, they set up a client state which brought together the three oil-rich provinces of Basra, Baghdad and Mosul, naming the state Iraq (Vanly 1993:145). In 1921 they instated Emir Faisal as King of Iraq (IBID:146). In 1925, the League of Nations promised national rights and autonomy for Iraq's ethnic minorities. Nevertheless the Iraqi regime has consistently reneged on its agreement, and the Kurds have been fighting for their rights since the Republic was created. The Kurds in Iraq are 3 or 4 million strong and they constitute roughly 25 percent of Iraq's population (Chaliand 1994:66). The Kurds are a sizable minority.

Although Iraq is the only state of the three which legally recognized Kurdish cultural rights and their separate identity (Entessar 1992:53), the Kurds of Iraq have undergone experiences similar to the Turkish and Iranian Kurds. Treaty after treaty was signed in which Kurdish rights were neglected. In 1937 Turkey, Persia and Iraq signed the Saadabad Treaty. As Vanly (1993:149) illustrates, Article 7 of this document was aimed against 'the formation and activity of associations, organizations, or armed bands seeking to overthrow established institutions'. This was essentially an international collaboration against the Kurds. Several years later, legendary Kurdish leader Mullah Mustafa Barzani revolted. Barzani created the KPD and was without dispute the most illustrious Kurdish leader of the 20th century. For over 30 decades after his first uprising, Barzani was the most prominent champion of the Kurdish cause.

Like Turkey, Iraq was extremely tumultuous during the 1960s and 1970s. Conditions for the Kurds were dismal. According to Chaliand (1994:58), the Ba'ath party's rise to power in the early 1960s led to a massive military strike against the Kurdish rebels. If the Kurds weren't exterminated, they were forcibly moved to other regions of Iraq. The oil-rich area of Kirkuk was particularly affected. Kirkuk had always had a Kurdish majority, but many of the Kurds found themselves forcibly evicted and their land given to Arabs. This was an attempt to increase the Arab population and thereby legitimate the Iraqi regime's claim to the disputed region. The Ba'ath Party also implemented a policy for the Arabization of Kurdish regions (IBID).

The situation in virtually all of Kurdistan Iraq was deplorable. According to Vanly (1993:159), the transition period marking the Ba'athist Party's consolidation of power resulted in political discrimination and economic exploitation for the Kurds. The Ba'aths embarked on a policy of terror resulting in 35 cases of Iraqi Army attacks on the civilian population from 1963 to 1974 (Vanly 1993:159). Systematic atrocities were carried out against the Kurds. Chaliand (1994:58) cites that in 1963, hundreds of people were massacred in Sulaymaniya and their bodies thrown into a communal grave. In another particularly gruesome case, 67 Kurdish women, children and old men were incinerated in a cave in 1969 by the Iraqi army (Vanly 1993:159). Attacks on the Kurdish population continue to this day.

The Kurds were severely discriminated against in terms of education. In the early 1970s the proportion of Kurdish students in school was disproportionately low. For example, the Kurdish province of Arbil only had 70 schoolchildren per 1000 inhabitants (IBID). Vanly (1993:159) further writes that the amount of Kurdish students in

university during this time was less than 7%, and only 3 to 4% of student grants went to Kurdish students. Furthermore, despite the regime's stated policy to allow the Kurdish language to be taught, Kurdish schools were either shut down, or the Kurds were pressured to transfer their children from Kurdish to Arabic schools.

Economically, the Kurds in Iraq are servants in a system dubbed by Vanly (1993:189) as "poor people's colonialism". According to Chaliand (1994:66), Baghdad's economic policy towards Kurdistan has been to marginalize the region. The Iraqi government maintains a tight grip on the agricultural areas of Iraqi Kurdistan, which is roughly fifty percent. For example, tobacco production is subject to a national state monopoly, which imposes tight restrictions on production and prices, although it is only cultivated in Kurdistan (Chaliand 1994:66). In addition, many Kurds have been driven from the rural areas due to agricultural mechanization. Like the Kurds in Turkey, the Kurds in Iraq migrate to the cities in search of employment. Unfortunately, three-quarters of the Kurdish population are unemployed in the urban areas (Chaliand 1994:113).

The Kurds see very little of the revenues generated by Iraq's biggest export, oil, despite the fact that three-quarters of the oil is produced in the Kurdish regions. For example, according to the Financial Times, in the mid-1970s the Kirkuk oil fields alone accounted for 70% of Iraqi oil production (Vanly 1993:161). The increase in the state's national income led to development projects which was directed solely at Arab Iraqis, and even then it was negligible. Vanly (1993:161) claims that less than 30% of Iraqi oil revenues is allocated to the regular state budget, and speculates that the bulk of the remainder of revenues finances armament purchases. This argument is corroborated by

Pelletiere (1984:166) who claims that in the early 1970s, the Iraqi government purchased weapons from Russia such as bombers, ground attack fighters and MiG-23s.

Until recently, the Kurdish movements in Iraq sought Kurdish autonomy as their primary objective, as opposed to complete independence. This was Mullah Mustafa Barzani's struggle from the start, when he formed the KDP. According to Vanly (1993:149) the party, inspired by Marxist-Leninist ideology, recognized the existence of an oppressed and splintered Kurdish nation and struggled for that nation's right to self-determination. Time and again Barzani would approach the Iraqi state in an attempt to negotiate provisions for Kurdish autonomy. For example, in 1958 when Abdul Karim Qasim overthrew the monarchy, Barzani was invited by the future dictator to discuss Kurdish self-determination (Vanly 1993:151). In the early 1970s, an ever optimistic Barzani met with the Ba'athist regime to discuss the terms of the March 11 Agreement, whose provisions centered on Kurdish autonomy (IBID). This détente was not to last. Several years later, Barzani survived two assassination attempts on his life.

Much like the other political parties in the rest of Kurdistan, intra-party fighting within the KDP resulted in its splintering. In 1975, a group of radical KDP members accused Barzani of betraying the Kurdish cause with his dealings with the U.S., Israel and Iran (Entessar 1992:78). Breaking away from the KDP, this group, under the leadership of Jalal Talabani, formed the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). The party has an ideology of pluralism designed to accommodate almost every group of Kurds (Izady 1992:212). Like the KDP, autonomy is the PUK's objective. Nevertheless, there was no love lost between the two groups. Indeed, antagonism between the two was so intense that in 1978 a bloody clash between the KDP and PUK armed forces left nearly 800 of

the PUK's top military leaders and guerrillas dead, or captured and turned over to the Turkish or Iraqi government for later execution (Izady 1992:214).

There are several other political parties in Kurdistan Iraq, such as the Iraqi branch of Komala, the Democratic People's Party of Kurdistan (DPPK), and the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP). The Socialist Party of Kurdistan (SPK) is a splinter group which broke away from the PUK after its brutal defeat in the clash against the KDP in 1978. According to Izady (1992:214), the Socialist Movement of Kurdistan was disgruntled with Talabani's military misjudgment and left to form the SPK. These other political parties, however, are generally smaller with a much weaker support base than the KDP and the PUK. If anything, Izady (1992:214) mentions an unexpected new threat, the rise in popularity of the Turkey-based PKK, and of Abdullah Ocalan. Apparently Ocalan is fast gaining the pan-Kurdish prestige once enjoyed by Mullah Mustafa Barzani (IBID).

CONFLICT AND REFUGEES

With the creation of the three modern nation-states and the ensuing ethnic conflicts between the Kurds and the dominant groups in power, millions of Kurds have been expelled from Kurdistan. The majority of Kurdish refugees come from Iraq, where they have been treated the most brutally. At this point I will discuss the three most significant events which generated large-scale refugee flows.

The fifth war in Kurdistan which began in 1974 was the first such incident. In 1974 negotiations between the Kurds and the Iraqi government over Kurdish autonomy and national rights had ground to a halt. The Iraqi Ba'athist regime mounted an all out attack on Mullah Mustafa Barzani's peshmerga ('those who face death', or freedom

fighter) forces. According to Vanly (1993:165), police brutality and military violence created an exodus of Kurds so large that many of them had to be evacuated into Iranian territory, marking the beginning of the refugee problem in Iran. Indeed, it is estimated that civilians were crossing the Iraq-Iran border at a rate of 30,000 a day; by the end of the revolt half a million Kurdish refugees were housed in Red Lion and Sun refugee camps (Pelletiere 1984:169,177).

The second incident occurred during the eight year war between Iraq and Iran. from 1980 to 1988. In March 1988 the Iraqi regime attacked the Kurdish city of Halabja using internationally outlawed chemical weapons, killing 5,000 civilians within a matter of hours (Entessar 1992:138). Approximately 60,000 fled to Turkey. According to Karadaghi (1993:225) half of the refugees remained in camps in Turkey in 1992. Although it was not the first time Iraq had used chemical weapons against the Kurds, Halabja received world-wide attention and is now a Kurdish symbol of their fragile position.

The final incident, which generated the most refugees, was the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990. According to Entessar (1992:146), the Kurds were drawn into the Gulf War because the U.S. led them to believe that they would receive outside assistance if they revolted against the Iraqi government. Apparently a CIA-run radio station operating from Jedda, Saudi Arabia encouraged the Kurdish revolt (Entessar 1992:146). In any event, the uprising was not successful and did not receive the promised outside support. The Iraqi regime retaliated swiftly. It is estimated that 500,000 Kurds fled to Turkey and 1.5 million to Iran when they realized they were defenseless (Entessar 1992:146).

Conditions for Kurdish refugees in Iran and Turkey were grievous, especially in Turkey. For example, in 1988 the Turkish authorities refused to grant refugee status to over 55,000 Iraqi Kurds fleeing the Iran-Iraq War (Chaliand 1994:2). This is not surprising, as it is within Turkey's right as a sovereign state to do so, no matter how outdated their perspective. According to Frelick (1993:234), while most other European states have dropped the U.N. Convention's European-specific limitations, Turkey has steadfastly limited its definition of refugees to persons fleeing Europe. This gives them the right to refuse entry of Kurdish refugees, which is what they did after the first wave arrived in the aftermath of the Gulf War. Their main motive was to avoid the creation of permanent or semi-permanent refugee camps which would become breeding grounds for Kurdish guerrillas who would fight alongside PKK peshmergas against the state ((Entessar 1992:150).

ANALYSIS

The above is a brief overview of Kurdish history since the end of World War I. With the creation of Turkey, Iran, and Iraq, the complexity of the Kurdish situation goes well beyond the scope of this thesis. The alliances formed and then broken between the various Kurdish movements are too numerous to discuss in this paper. However, there is one more critical subject which need to be addressed: tribalism.

Kurdistan is not only divided by 20th century borders but by their own internal mindset. Scholars generally agree that in the past, tribalism was one of the main stumbling blocks to any unified Kurdish movement. According to Bulloch and Morris (1992:75), traditional Kurdish society was divided into members of tribes, and that the first duty of the tribesman was to his tribe and its chief. Furthermore, Bulloch and Morris

(1992:75) tell us that if a chief decreed that it was in the interests of the tribe to fight on the side of the non-Kurdish state authorities against other Kurds, then his followers would obey. Izady (1992:193) writes that even today, most Kurds, even the highly educated ones, still reserve their strongest loyalties for their family-clan leaders.

The obstacle of tribalism is still acute in contemporary Kurdish society. As Chaliand (1994:21) states, even in the 20th century, Kurdish nationalist movements have been systematically opposed, not only by governments, but also by government-allied Kurdish militias who have sought thereby to weaken a rival. Prominent Kurdish leader Mullah Mustafa Barzani himself can be faulted for this. In the late 1960s, Barzani's forces in Iraq helped to strangle a Kurdish peasant rebellion in Iran on behalf of the shah (Bulloch and Morris 1992:220). After his death in 1979, his sons established the KDP-Provisional Leadership. According to Entessar (1992:78), the KDP-Provisional Leadership were allied with Iran during the eight-year Iran-Iraq War, and their forces fought with the KDPI and Komala. Another example is provided by Bulloch and Morris (1992:220): in the 1990s the Kurds of Iraq sought to improve their relations with Turkey, at the same time as their fellow Kurds in the PKK were waging a violent guerrilla war against the Ankara government.

The events of last summer indicate that Kurdish factionalism is far from declining. In Iraq, the intense competition between its two main Kurdish parties, the KDP and the PUK, have drawn in all types of international players: Iran, the U.S. and other western powers, and of course, the notorious Saddam Hussein. In a brief summary of a very complex situation, after the Gulf War the U.S. and their allies established a 'no-fly' zone, an enclave where roughly 4 million Kurds were to be protected from Hussein

(Taber 1996:48). For the last several years the two aforementioned Kurdish parties have been engaged in a struggle over control of the region. Both have different visions for Kurdistan. Jalal Talabani, leader of the PUK, wants complete Kurdish independence. KDP leader Massoud Barzani, of the renowned Barzani tribe, along with his followers are strong in tribal tradition and would accept autonomy within Iraq (McGeary 1996:21).

According to Taber (1996:49), Iran is alleged to support the PUK, and on August 17, 1996 the PUK began a serious assault on the KDP. Apparently, out of desperation the KDP appealed to Saddam Hussein to intervene, when it was obvious that the U.S. would not. However, the U.S. was of course aware of developments in the region and sent several warning to the Iraqi regime. On August 31, 1996 Hussein responded to the Kurdish invitation by sending 40,000 troops to the town of Erbil (McGeary 1996:19). Within hours, the PUK was routed and the town handed over to Iraq's new Kurd allies, the KDP. Several weeks later, the Turkish government followed suit and launched airstrikes against its own rebel Kurdish separatists who had been fighting from bases in northern Iraq (Fineman and Sonenshine 1996:41).

Surrounded by hostile neighbours and plagued with internal divisions, it appears that the Kurds shall remain in a vulnerable position for some time. One can only speculate as to what could happen should the Kurds unite. Unfortunately, judging by last summer's events, unification is not forthcoming and factionalism will most likely continue. Kurdish factionalism manifests also itself within the immigrant context, which will be discussed further on.

The Kurdish people have been the victims of history. Scholars claim that the earliest references to the Kurds are always to tribes or principalities, never to the Kurds as

a nation or an ethnic group (Bulloch and Morris 1992:218). Although tribalism has been their main impediment to unification, that shortcoming is partly a result of geographical isolation, and domination by hostile neighbours (Bulloch and Morris 1992:218). Bulloch and Morris further state that Kurdish history is a long record of exploitation by occupiers.

The events of the past several decades have served to convince the Kurds themselves (as well as many scholars and the media) that they are a distinct ethnic group. Indeed, they have the dubious status of being one of the largest ethnic groups in the world to lack statehood. De Vos (1995:16) writes that ethnically plural societies have occurred throughout human history, most often involuntarily as a result of imperial conquest. This has been the Kurdish case for quite some time. The area known as Kurdistan has been heterogeneous since ancient times. For example, Izady (1992:28-29) discusses surrounding peoples such as the Babylonians, Assyrians and Hittites.

Unfortunately, in contemporary times the Kurds were frequently at the disadvantaged end of ethnic pluralism. In fact, the disadvantages accompanying their minority status may be one of the reasons why the formation and promotion of their identity is so critical. Eriksen (1993:68) maintains that social identity becomes most important the moment it seems threatened. After the first world war, particularly with the birth of modern Turkey and its resultant Kemalist policies, Kurdish ethnic identity consolidated under the threat of dissipation.

Furthermore, Li et al. (1995:344) argue that inequality, intergroup conflicts and competition can enhance group identity. One example is the pan-Turanian Empire which the Turkish nationalists sought at the beginning of World War I. Since the region between Turkey and Turania was not ethnically homogeneous, the Turkish nationalists

used the war as an excuse to destroy other national entities, such as the Christian Armenians and the Kurds (Kendal 1993:13-14). The Turkish nationalists thereby eliminated competition against their rival ethnic groups and enhanced their group identity, which was critical in preserving the last remnants of the Ottoman Empire. The ensuing Kemalist policies ensured the status and power of the dominant Turkish ethnic group.

As De Vos (1995:16) notes, today's ethnic minorities are not content to remain mute; they, too, seek to be heard. The political, economic and social oppression the Kurds have suffered as an ethnic group is both a result of their particular ethnic identity and also helps to shape that identity. Part of this identity follows them when they are forced to flee Kurdistan and resettle in another country. However, since ethnic identity is a continually evolving social process (De Vos 1995:17), there are inevitable mutations when the Kurds emigrate. How they construct their ethnicity in an immigrant setting, based on their past and present experiences, is the main focus of this thesis.

CHAPTER 3 FROM KURDISTAN TO CANADA: RELEVANT ISSUES DISCUSSED BY MY INFORMANTS

Before proceeding to a discussion of relevant issues, I will provide a brief description of my informants. I interviewed eleven women between the ages of 18 and 32, and ten men between the ages of 27 to 84 years old. I did not ask specific questions regarding annual income, since I felt that they were inappropriate in an interview setting and not crucial for my research. I did ask what their current employment status was, whether they were students or otherwise. Five of the men interviewed have full-time jobs in retail sales or working for a restaurant. One of the five owns and operates his own pizza store. One is a musician, and travels extensively at home and abroad entertaining the Kurds in diaspora. Two of the men are university students with part-time employment. Only one is on social assistance as he completes his English as a Second Language course. One man is retired and one works part-time.

Of the women interviewed, one lives with her brother and his family as she speaks only Kurdish. Two of the girls are in high school. Six of the women are homemakers. Out of the six, five have husbands who are employed full-time. The sixth woman's husband is a full-time student completing his degree in computer engineering. He also works part-time at high tech firm. The remaining two women are on social assistance, one is completing her ESL courses and recently gave birth, and the second is a single mother of two.

The purpose of the interviews was to determine what issues are important to my Kurdish informants. Nineteen out of twenty-one persons I interviewed discussed the political situation in Kurdistan. I also asked questions regarding adaptation in Canada

and Kurdish culture and identity. In order to provide a thorough description of the Kurdish situation, I have divided this chapter into segments on life in Kurdistan and then a discussion of my informants' exodus. I will discuss Kurdish settlement in Canada and the construction of their ethnic identity in the next chapter, and will examine the factionalism existing in the Kurdish community, and the contested territory of Kurdish identity.

LIFE IN KURDISTAN

My informants provided some very poignant descriptions of what it was like to live in Kurdistan. Their situation is highly politicized for several reasons. First of all, Kurdistan as a nation-state has never existed. Secondly, because of its strategic position and wealth in natural resources, notably oil, the partitioning of what the Kurds see as their homeland has had some disastrous consequences. As one of the largest ethnic groups in the region, the Kurds have been systematically marginalized by any ensuing governments and the policies thereof. As such, politics is a salient factor for Kurdish identity. In constructing semantic domains, politics must be broken down into sub-categories since it is the most notable category.

Geopolitics

A significant number of my informants discussed the contemporary division of Kurdistan, and the occupation of their homeland. They are also very much aware of the implications of this division. The Kurds are caught in the middle of any conflicts that occur between the three larger nation states of Turkey, Iran and Iraq. For example, Sipan explained:

“I was born in a small town right at the place where Iran, Iraq and Turkey separate. My being born (there) makes it special because if there is a war in Turkish Kurdistan, it affected us. If there was a war in Iraqi Kurdistan, it affected us. If there was a war in Iranian Kurdistan it also affected us so there was no peace in that little spot”. (Sipan, July 7, 1996.)

Janfiraz is from a town in Iranian Kurdistan, and he also narrated how his town was affected by geopolitics:

“The city I was born in, I can say it was almost in the middle, like the Kurdish crisis was over there. It was close to the border of Iraqi Kurdistan; it’s only a thirty minute drive from our city to Iraq. Before, there were always armed struggles in Iraqi Kurdistan, and there were many Iraqi Kurds that lived in our cities in the refugee camps, because the Iranian government was supporting the Iraqi Kurdish cause at that moment”. (Janfiraz, August 20, 1996.)

One of my informants is twenty-nine year old Hejar, from the city of Dohuk in Iraqi Kurdistan. I had the opportunity to interview both him and his wife, as they invited me to their home for dinner. They were gracious hosts, and we ate a traditional Kurdish meal seated on the floor, as is their custom:

“We Kurds are not like other people. We are coming from a different place. Many people who come here, they have their own country, they can speak their own language, they could keep their culture, and there was no fighting in their country. But for us, it’s different. We have our land, and our land has been divided”. (Hejar, May 2, 1996.)

Politics in Turkey, Iran and Iraq

Several of my informants discussed the influence of the political parties (both the dominant groups’ and the Kurdish) in Turkey, Iran and Iraq. The Turkish Kemalist policies were mentioned by the two Kurds from Turkey whom I interviewed. For example, twenty-seven year old Kamiran was a journalist in Kurdistan, with a degree in civil engineering from a university in Istanbul:

“Maybe in appearance there is a lot of universities in Kurdistan. But there is one professor in the university. One university is being run by only one assistant.

Now if you look on paper, you are saying 'Oh, in Kurdistan there is universities'. But it doesn't make sense. It is only show. There is no education, there is no anything. Now a lot of schools are closing down. Not because of PKK. This is state policy.... Every time my teachers in high school, they say 'The Kurdish people are 'mountain Turks' and they don't have any language, they don't speak an understandable language. Their origins is Turkish'.... We don't speak Kurdish in school, and we don't have any Kurdish cassettes or Kurdish music, because we don't have any radio broadcasting in Kurdish". (Kamiran, March 1, 1996.)

Azad is thirty-two years old, and has a Bachelor's Degree in Sociology from a Turkish university. He currently works part-time at a restaurant, and has been in Canada for 8 years. Azad came to Canada alone; the rest of his family live in Europe:

"Kemalism is a strict ideology in Turkey. Kemal Ataturk is the founder of the Turkish state. He had some ideas, and today it's called 'Kemalism'. So they try to rule Turkey according to what he said. But it's very racist, anti-democratic, and authoritarian.... Since the 1950s there was a one-party system, but after it went to a multi-party system. But in the multi-party system, the Kurdish people were not represented". (Azad, March 12, 1996.)

Language

De Vos (1995:23) maintains that language is often cited as a major component in the preservation of a separate ethnic identity, and that it undoubtedly constitutes the single most characteristic feature of ethnic identity. The subject of language was brought up by thirteen of my informants. There are two main dialects of the Kurdish language, Kurmanji and Sorani. Kurmanji is spoken by the majority of the Kurds. Nevertheless, the Kurdish language is either sanctioned legally or socially, depending on what part of Kurdistan one happened to reside in. In Turkey, the Kurdish language is outlawed by the government. In other parts of Kurdistan, the Kurds are able to speak their own language but often face derision from the dominant society.

"When I was in Kurdistan (Turkey), even my family was under the influence of my Turkish teacher. Even my family forced me to speak Turkish, not Kurdish. And every time, my teacher said I should speak Turkish, not Kurdish because it's not

proper.... I had to take my education in Turkish because it's what's spoken. I usually engaged in Turkish". (Kamiran, March 1, 1996.)

Eznar is from Iranian Kurdistan. He is an exceptional Kurdish musician and travels throughout Canada and abroad entertaining Kurds in the diaspora:

"The language, the culture wasn't mine because we weren't allowed to speak our language or do our culture. Whatever the government said (the Shah monarchy), we should act by their rules". (Eznar, April 30, 1996.)

Navnar is married to Hejar. A nineteen year old newlywed from Iraqi Kurdistan, she recently gave birth to their first child:

"Because we are Kurdish, we are in Iraq but we didn't have our own country. We couldn't feel that much freedom to talk in our language, or to do what we need as Kurds". (Navnar, May 2, 1996.)

Devan is a twenty-nine year old martial arts expert from Iranian Kurdistan. He is currently attending one of the universities in Ottawa and works part-time as a doorman in a night club:

"Sometimes some people, if you go out and you talk and you're Kurdish, you talk and they listen. My heritage, they laugh at us.... Put on the music, you can't do your own music". (Devan, July 2, 1996.)

Thirty-five year old Lavyar is from Iraqi Kurdistan. He currently works in a men's clothing store. A talented musician, he often plays the keyboards and sings at various Kurdish parties:

"I found some barrier with the Arabic language, because I studied my language, Kurdish language, for twelve years. When I went to university, I found difficulty with the language in university because they teach in Arabic. So for different reasons, that's why I went to Bulgaria, and I studied there for two years.... Language is more important for nationality, identity. When you lose your language, there is nothing to prove that you are a different nationality. That's why I'm trying to care about my language, to progress my language, and to show that we have a language. Music and language for me is very important. Especially now. These governments around us, they are stealing our songs and the way we are singing.

They sing them in their languages and they say 'this is our culture, our music'. They make some changes, but the original belongs to us". (Lavyar, July 7, 1996.)

Religion

As mentioned in the preceding chapter, the Kurds had their own indigenous belief system. Islam was a foreign religion entering Kurdistan in the 7th century A.D. While today the majority of Kurds are Muslim, there exists sectarian differences. Some of the Kurds also have difficulty with Muslim practices such as veiling, or hejab, which was not an indigenous Kurdish custom. Pelletiere (1984:17) notes that traditionally, Kurdish women did not wear a veil. Several of my informants from Iranian Kurdistan discussed life before and after the Islamic revolution. Herken has been in Canada for almost five years. She is a thirty-two year old home maker from Iranian Kurdistan:

"After the revolution, the freedom wasn't the same because of the government.... We had to have scarves after the revolution, because it was a religious revolution. We're supposed to have scarves, we're supposed to cover ourselves under something. That's why the freedom wasn't the same as before.... We lost so many women because they didn't want to cover up, because they didn't believe this is the right way. They went to jail; they were even killed by the government. Or the women ran away to mountains, they try to be with some groups that were against the government. I felt the same way as those women. The government says 'This is the religion, you're supposed to be covered up'. And it became part of the problem". (Herken, July 3, 1996.)

"In my country, the government says you have to dress up, you have to be a Muslim and if you don't, you're not a Muslim. It's not true! I'm hot! I'm burning under this! And I am a Muslim". (Hana, July 7, 1996.)

Dilan, is a thirty-four year old mother of two boys from Iranian Kurdistan:

"Religion in my country is not a private thing. I think if you do believe in religion or not, it's your business. It's not political business. But in my country, politics and religion is mixed together, and that's bad for people. The government say the people must pray and the woman must be covered". (Dilan, May 23, 1996.)

Sectarian differences between the predominantly Sunni Kurds and their Shi'a neighbours also poses some serious difficulties in other aspects of life. For example, Devan sought to become an air force pilot in the Iranian military, but was denied the opportunity:

"I wanted to be a pilot. I passed the test, but in the interview, they didn't accept me. They didn't exactly tell me why, but I could read between the lines. They asked me questions like 'Are you a good Muslim? Do you pray so many times a day?'.... If you want to be a prime minister (of Iran), you have to be a Shi'a Muslim. The Kurds in Iran are mostly Sunni. Iran country is a Shi'a country, and the power is Shi'a". (Devan, July 2, 1996.)

On a more caustic note, the spouse of one of my informants from Iranian Kurdistan openly criticized the Islamic religion:

"Religion makes our people poor, makes our people stay at one point. Muslim is like a dome for our rights, like a cage.... We were not Muslim before. They forced us to be Muslim, and our people right now are Muslim but they don't realize how Muslim destroyed our nation. Religion doesn't make us Kurdish". (Lezger, May 27, 1996.)

Janfiraz is from Iranian Kurdistan. A former freedom fighter, he currently owns and operates his own pizza business:

"Since the Islamic government came to power, the women's situation became worse because of religious rules. They don't want women to be involved in sports or social activities. So I don't want to preserve this cultural part, this religion. Because I know what religion has done to my people. That's why I don't want to advertise things for the Islam religion here". (Janfiraz, August 20, 1996.)

Education

Education was a final topic discussed by the majority of my informants. Education is valued highly by the Kurds, but for many of my informants, they were either denied the opportunity to study, or their studies were disrupted for various reasons.

"For post-secondary education, aside from the university entrance examination test, which includes questions from four years of high school, you have

to be qualified, ideologically, to be able to go to university. This means that you will be evaluated by the government to see if you pray, if you follow strict Islamic rule, and if you are with the government and accept government policies. So if in the process somebody says that this person doesn't go to the mosque and pray, or shaves his beard and mustache, or is speaking against government policies in any part of Kurdistan or the world, they are not allowed to go to university". (Sipan, July 7, 1996.)

"I finished high school. When I was 16 or 17 years old, it was my parents' wish that I be a doctor in the future. This was my goal, just go to the university and be a doctor, before all those political ideas comes through our society. I tried to attend university in one of the biggest universities in Tehran, but because the revolution started when the Islamic government took over, they found out my reputation for my (earlier) political activities. Me and my brother were rejected to go to university. So I tried to go to India, to continue my education, but all of a sudden the armed struggle started, and the situation in Kurdistan became more difficult, and I got more involved in those political parties". (Janfiraz, August 20, 1996.)

"There for example, if you want to go to university you write the general test. Your marks depend, and what you want to study and where you want to study. According to your mark, you can reach this. After you finish, you can apply to universities (according to ranking). If you are accepted, after that you can go. In my case they said 'no'. I got the results, but I didn't go all the way there (to the university) because I knew I'd be rejected anyway.... Especially when you're Kurdish, they don't give you too much space. Eighty percent of the Kurds being the best students... but it's their country, and they think they should be first. They fight, they get, they make revolution, they have the land, and they have the country, and they should rule. It's a big discrimination". (Devan, July 2, 1996.)

Due to her circumstances, Dilawaz never attended primary school. Her family, originally from Iranian Kurdistan, moved to Iraqi Kurdistan when she was seven years old:

"We left everything in Iran. We had farm, house. My father just bought a house in the city, so we moved to the city so we could go to school, because in the village, there is no school. So he said, 'For the girls, we have to move to city, then they could go to school'. Then we were ready, in a month, to move to the house. Then after that, because of the Iranian government, we left. So it was very hard for us, especially for my dad, to leave everything behind.... I never went to school in Iraq. Never. English is the first language for me to write and read. My first school was when I came here. I was sixteen when I went to school in Canada. In Iraq, they didn't have school because we were refugees in a camp. I spent most of my life in camp". (Dilawaz, August 28, 1996.)

Azad described what academic life can be like for some of the Kurdish students in Turkey:

"In 1982 I graduated from high school and it was very bad time. Every morning when you got to school police would be there checking I.D.s. Because we were writing slogans, propaganda, things on the wall, on the street of the school. We were putting up posters like 'the government is a fascist', and about Kurdish rights and workers' rights. Being a leftist is very difficult (laughs). They were coming to find out who were putting the posters and distributing the flyers and who is writing the paint on the walls. Some of the students were collaborating with the police.... We didn't have the right to establish a student association, so there was an illegal association, and they were trying to find out the illegal students' association.... In Turkey, you will find lots of books in Turkish, published by Turkish institutes supported by the Turkish government, saying that Kurdish people are part of the Turkish nation, they are called 'Mountain Turks'". (Azad, March 12, 1996.)

It is not only the Kurdish students but also teachers who often experience problems. Take the case of Dilan, thirty-four year old single mother of two:

"I was teacher in secondary school. Grades 6, 7 and 8. In Iran, I was teacher of biology. Every day I teach different class. I went to college.... I taught for about 8 years, then they let me go; I couldn't teach. The principal of the school let me go. You see, until the revolution, for me everything was okay, because I went to school and I was student. But during the revolution, I learned a lot of things and I was active in a party (Komala).... I couldn't teach something wrong to the students. Something that is not connected to your subject. Especially biology - it's science, and there is no changing science. For example, math, if you say two times two is four, it's four. That's it. But we couldn't. We had to teach another thing that the government wants. Like, we have to teach religion... and I couldn't because it wasn't my mentality, my thinking, my idea. I didn't like that I teach something to the children that is wrong.... For some reason, they didn't like me and they let me go out from the school". (Dilan, May 23, 1996.)

EXODUS

An oppressed minority within their own homeland, the Kurds suffer attacks not only on their culture, but oftentimes on their own physical well being. All of my informants are refugees according to the U.N. Convention's definition of the word 'refugee'. They have all proven well-founded fears of persecution for reasons of

nationality, membership in a particular social group and/or political opinion. In one informant's case (Sipan's), the policy of nonrefoulement was egregiously violated, which is detailed below. My informants had several reasons for flight. To begin, five of the people I interviewed specifically claimed to have left Kurdistan to avoid conscription in government armies. They left for reasons of self-preservation as well as political and ideological.

Eznar described to me why he left Kurdistan and what it was like for him to flee:

"In 1987, at that time there was a war, and they took me to the army. I didn't like that war; it wasn't a good war. I escaped so many times from the war and they arrested me again and again. The last time I escaped because I was sure they were going to come and arrest me again. So I escaped and went to Turkey. In Turkey when I went there, the U.N. had a branch over there to interview refugees and they interviewed me. They gave my name to the Canadian embassy, they interviewed me and so I was able to come here..."

"One of the moments that I will never forget is the night I left my village. When I left, there are mountains at the borders. We were about 15 people but not all of them were planning to stay in other countries - they had something to do in Turkey. We were crossing the border in the mountains and I looked at my village and I asked myself 'Why are we leaving? Why do we have to be in this situation?' It was very hard. Also, there were soldiers at the border. There were many soldiers, and mines they put in the ground. That was the most dangerous place, and we went to the first village in Turkish Kurdistan. We passed the border illegally; we didn't have passports because in Iran, when you don't serve in the army, they don't give you a passport. We went there and one of the men in the village were talking to us about taking us to the nearest city. He said 'It's very dangerous. I cannot take you by horses in the mountains, so we have to give corruption (bribe) to the Turkish soldiers'. At that time we gave them 30,000 in Turkish money, which was just about 35 dollars. The soldier took the money and took us to a safer place. Then after that, we were in the mountains for six days. It was very cold. I'd never been in that situation before, we were close to dying. Finally we went to the nearest city and we took the truck. We were all in the back of the truck and they said 'These are apples we are carrying' and they put some apple boxes to hide us. We went 23 hours to Ankara and when the police stopped us, the driver paid corruption to them. It was very new to me; it was something very strange". (Eznar, April 30, 1996.)

"I didn't want to do military service because it means killing people, especially Kurdish people. It was very hard. In Turkey, you have two choices. One, you have to fight - or run.... According to a recent survey in Turkey, one third of the

people who are to go to military service, they didn't go. Because if they go, 60 or even 70 percent will be killed. Everywhere. Now in Kurdistan, in every province they have two or three killed, because of military service.... And even if you go and you were in military service, every time they extended the military service, by three months, by six months, sometimes maybe officially it was one and a half years. But sometimes if you go there, because of the situation, you will stay there two years or maybe sometimes three years. Because if you have experience, they say that you have experience up to one a half years, and they say they do not want to let you go. Because you have experience, they can use you as a killer because you have experience about killing people, and you will stay in the army maybe more, like one year more, maybe six months more...".

"Even if you finish your military service sometimes, some neofascist people, they want to go to war again, because the government maybe give them a lot of money for, like special war. They can do anything, but they are not responsible for their action. They kill people, they burn villages, you know. Like these killing squads in Cambodia. It is very possible in Turkey. They have special things for making more bad things, like guerrilla war, because they are wearing the same clothes like our village men. Nobody understands that this is different war". (Kamiran, March 1, 1996.)

Devan also left Kurdistan because of the military:

"After high school, you have no choice. You're expected to do two years compulsory military service. I am Kurdish and I had no business in the war. I didn't want to kill anybody, and I didn't want to get killed". (Devan, July 2, 1996.)

Twenty-four year old Dilawaz is a home maker. She, her husband and children have been in Canada for eight years, and her husband is finishing his honours degree in computer engineering at one of the universities in Ottawa. She described to me how her family was moved to a "death camp" with primitive facilities since her father and brothers refused to fight for the Iraqi army:

"The Iraqi government asked my dad and brothers to go fight for them against Iran. My dad didn't want to do that. He said, 'If I do it, I do it for Kurdistan. my country. Not for the Iraqi government. Even if I do it for Iraq, it's not for me'. So he didn't do it, and that's why they moved us to camp.... One of my sisters, they beat up her husband in the jail. After he came out, he became paralyzed. And nobody could fix him up, there was no doctor. Maybe there was but it was too expensive. In the camp, you don't see anything there. It's just a desert, they put people inside and there is a fence. And there is security guards. Even if people have to go to work, they beat them up. They have to get papers.... We had to build houses

ourselves, with mud. If the rain would come, hard rain, all the houses were destroyed and you had to start again. It was very hard. And sometimes the wind comes. All the mud comes on the food, everything. I don't want to really think about that time; it's just because you asked me, I say 'okay'". (Dilawaz, August 28, 1996.)

Peshmergas ('Those Who Face Death')

Many Kurds are politically active in Kurdistan. They join parties, and many times have taken up arms to fight for the independence of their homeland. Life in the resistance movement is dangerous, and can have broad ramifications. Nine of the people I interviewed were involved with Kurdish resistance movements, either directly as a soldier involved in active combat, or indirectly by providing food and other supplies. For example, Roeber, an 84 year old farmer from Kurdistan Iraq, was an agricultural expert and advisor to 400 farmers in his village. He recalls the time of renowned Kurdish leader Mullah Mustafa Barzani and explained:

"I wasn't peshmerga, but I was in party. I helped them a lot. I donated anything, food, flour, we gave that free. It was dangerous, but we supported our party to become powerful, to save us from the Iraqi government". (Roeber, July 7, 1996.)

Hana is a twenty-nine year old homemaker. She, her husband and two children have lived in Canada for six years. During our interview, it was difficult to believe that the articulate, attractive mother had undergone the trials that she did. Painful as it was for her, she described to me the training and life of a peshmerga, and narrated the consequences of being a freedom fighter:

"I had training for three months for things about Kurdistan. Then (another) 40 days is weapons training completely - bombs, guns. When I finished my training, the government tried to get the city, and we were fighting for that. The first time, I saw so many friends beside me get killed. I got sick, and they sent me back to the hospital.... But I guess because you see so much blood and so many people get killed fighting, the next time you're not going to be that scared, and it even doesn't bother

you that much.... I never, never, never shoot anybody if he is (directly) in front of me. We were fighting through the mountains, so you don't see them. So this is the way it worked. Five feet was the closest. We have a team, and every month, they take the strongest people for the front, and the people who doesn't have the ability to run or fight, they're going to go farther. So it depends on your ability, if they're going to put you on the first fight, or farther...".

"The Iranian government gave some amnesty. They said, 'The people who were peshmerga, if they come back, we're going to forgive them'. So we fell for that, and we went back. When we got back (they had previously been living in Iraq), my husband went to jail for such a long time, and I was in jail with my son too.... But my son wasn't always in jail with me. They bring him, I breast feed him, and they take him away from me. And every time they bring him for breast feed, they call him some ugly word. He was only six months old! So after 40 days they let me go, but my husband was still in jail. He was in jail for six months. They didn't hurt him physically, but they didn't let me visit him, or his family. And he was only in one room. But they always tried to emotionally bother him; the light was off and on, off and on. Stuff like that".

"When he was released, when my mom died, she was rich because of my step-father, and my step-father, when I came back, he was passed away too, and he left me some wealth. I had so much money, I couldn't believe it. And we had so much money, we buy a house, we buy everything, and also we had money to open a store, so we were comfortable. But the only reason it wasn't so comfortable was because of the government. Everyday we had to sign that we are living in the city, we're not living anywhere. Every day, every single day, me and my husband had to go separately to sign. And every month they called my husband, they take him for two days, and I guess they couldn't bother him anyway so they decided to take me as a hostage to do something. To work with them, to help them. Because my husband was a commander in the peshmerga, they knew he had so (much) stuff".

"One day they called me and they said they want to ask me some questions, to come over at 4:00 p.m. So I went over at 4 o'clock, and it turned to 5, 6, 7 and they take me overnight. They let me visit my husband, and they said 'Tell him he has to help us, or we're not going to let you go'. I told them, 'No matter what, he's not going to help you. He doesn't know anything to help you. Because every peshmerga, when they go back to the city, the whole peshmerga is going to change'. They're not stupid. I was the person holding the radio (communicator), and they know when I go back, I have those stuff, and I translated. We don't speak up because maybe the government has the same style, and they're going to hear us. We have a book to translate everything. We speak in numbers or some password we use. When I went back, they changed the whole booklet. Because they knew.... My husband said 'I don't have anything to say to them'. Actually, we didn't have anything to say to them. We didn't want to put our friends in danger.... They tried to force us to say something, but they couldn't. So they let me go, and my husband said, 'We're going to sell everything and go somewhere where they're not going to find us. So we sell everything and we came to Turkey. We were there I guess a year, a year and a half, until we been accepted by the U.N.'. (Hana, July 7, 1996.)

Bana, a twenty-eight year old homemaker, is from Iranian Kurdistan. She has a lovely voice and often entertains at Kurdish functions, singing traditional Kurdish songs. She and her husband were also active in the resistance, which was why they left Kurdistan:

“When we went to Turkey, we went to the U.N. in Turkey. I told them we were partisan, and they made a case for my husband, and they said, ‘Okay, wait until the answer comes from Canada’. That took two years. It was very hard for us. When we went to Turkey, we didn’t have nothing, no money. My son was 2 months old. He got very, very sick. He almost died because we didn’t have no milk, no food, no nothing to give him. We took him to the hospital and they said ‘I think he’s dead. We can do nothing’. But one nurse took him and gave him serum. After 3 or 4 hours, we found him alive. It was very bad because he was so hungry.... We were in the camp for six months and we didn’t have nothing around, so we sent someone from Turkey to Iran to get money from our family for us. So they sent us money. That was a little bit of help to us. But everyday, everyday the government of Turkey sent two or three people with guns. They would say, ‘We want to send you back to Iran’. It was very, very terrible”. (Bana, July 3, 1996.)

Other Reasons for Flight

Sipan, from Iranian Kurdistan, was studying at one of the universities in Iran when the Islamic government discovered his family’s background. Forced to flee, Sipan is currently in his honours year as a biotechnology student at a university in Ottawa. Sipan’s case is noteworthy because he was able to prove that he qualified for refugee status, but the Turkish officials denied him the opportunity, and worse, sent him back to Iran:

“When I was 12 years old, the Islamic revolution took place, and we had to deal with the war for 2 years because the Kurds in Iran revolted against the government. So because of that I missed one year of school and it was a terrible ordeal. I lost one of my sisters. She was killed. Basically we were running away because the army was advancing and we were running to the mountains. There was an exchange of fire between the Kurdish rebels and the government forces and my sister was killed. Then I lived in a cave for six months. The most vivid thing I remember is those 6 months I had to live in caves with my parents, starving.

basically. There was no food, and nobody could get food because all the hills were taken over by the government. We had no choice. A lot of people died, especially youngsters....”.

“When I was older, I fled to Turkey. Liberal country - at that time I thought. I went to the police and I told them I was a Kurd and how much I suffered. I did not know that even to say ‘I am a Kurd’ was against the law. So I remember we were 15 people and they lined us up and the police were asking one by one ‘What is your name, what is your nationality, where did you come from and why did you leave your country?’ Each of them were explaining and when it came to me I said ‘I am a Kurd (I didn’t know at that time), I don’t have a country, and I’m being prosecuted by the Islamic state; I was in university’. They took the other 14 people to a hotel and they put me in jail for three nights with a Palestinian guy. On the first day they asked for some money from me, they said they would pay for a car and transfer me to another city. I asked why me alone, and they said ‘We have to process your file, we think you have a legitimate claim and we’ll send you to Ankara’. Well, they sent me to a border town, to another jail for two weeks to get my papers prepared to deport me. So after two weeks, one day a police officer came and said in Turkish ‘Listen, we have decided to deport you back, but we aren’t going to give you to the hands of the Iranian police or army. We’ll just leave you free right at the mountains. You have to go back to Iran. You don’t have a choice. If you come back, we will shoot you’. They gave me some dried bread, and threatened me that if I came back they would shoot me. How I came back from that border - it’s a long story. When I came back, basically I had to go to a Turkish village and I was lucky to get somebody to open their door, just to give me some food. After three days at his place I told him to take me to a little town in southeast Turkey where I had some relatives. And he promised me because I was miserable, and he did. When I got to the town, I didn’t have any money, but because there was trade at that time between Iranian Kurdistan and Turkish Kurdistan, I started the same thing. I had to do trade because I didn’t have any money and I had to pay for a smuggler to take me to Ankara. I did it for four or five months, then I was able to pay the smuggler to take me to Ankara. But when I got to Ankara I went straight to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, and I told them my whole story. So they kept me for four months in Ankara and then they transferred me to another city and I was there for 8 months and then the U.N. accepted my case and the Canadian embassy sent a fax. So I went to Ankara for an interview with the Canadian embassy and it didn’t take long for them to accept me. So that’s it, basically”. (Sipan, July 7, 1996.)

“From Iran we moved to Iraq, but the situation was becoming worse and worse everyday. We had no cause to stay there. There’s no life in Iraq, and that’s what made us to make another move. When we decided to leave Iraq, we walked through the Iraqi border in about seven days. We were about 15 in our family. We had two babies, both two months old, and my sister was pregnant. I was familiar with the area, how to get to the Turkish border because by the time I was freedom fighter, I was moving a lot from borders. When we went to Turkey, the first border town, we had information from people who told us how to act and what to say in

front of the Turkish police, because who you are is very important. So we made our identity as Turkish. At that time my father was speaking Turkish. At that time you could never say you were Kurdish. They sent us from the border town to another city called Hakkari. Over there we were promised that we're going to stay only about 15 days and then we're going to the capital city of Turkey and we would be interviewed by the U.N., and we'd be accepted as refugees. Unfortunately, we stayed in this town for about 6 months, because there were Kurdish people collaborating with the Turkish government, the MIT (Turkish Secret Service). They did not have complete information, but they realized that we are Kurdish. We denied it up to the moment we left Turkey, because it was a matter of life and death. It was a very difficult moment for adults like me to deny my own identity, my own nationality. They would say, 'Are you Kurdish?' I would say 'No! I'm not Kurdish. What is Kurdish? Kurdish is stupid!' In order to save the lives of our children. I was sitting at the table in front of the Turkish security agents denying my nation. It was a terrible confession for me at the time, but I had to do it to save the life of our 15 people". (Janfiraz, August 20, 1996.)

Dilan, the Kurdish teacher mentioned above, like other Kurds was forced to leave because of political activities. She recounts her reason for flight, and the uncertain fate of her husband:

"I couldn't stay because I was active, and they follow me, the government, the soldiers, and I couldn't stay. My husband was political man, and in Iran, if your man or your husband is political, it's connected to you. They think you are political woman too. My husband, they put him in jail, and I don't know what happened. There's no way I could find out. It's very hard to find not just my husband, but many, many people who were active in a party. If they put you in jail, they can't find you.... It depends on your action or your activity. If you were person who was very active in a party for Kurds, they (government) keep very serious. If not, you can meet the people (in jail). But me, I couldn't and I didn't want because if I went to the jail, maybe somebody they know (recognize) me". (Dilan, May 23, 1996.)

For the a number of Kurds in Iraqi Kurdistan, the major threat was and continues to be the Ba'athist regime and Saddam Hussein. For example, Aweza, a thirty year old home maker, narrated her and her family's experience of flight, just shortly after the end of the Iran-Iraq War:

"The government, they made war. We don't know where to go, just to run. When we ran, we went walking for 3 or 4 days. No food, no nothing.... My daughter, I carried her and my husband went to fight. He said 'I can't leave. Just

you, you run. I go to fight'. I left with my father, mother, big sister and I have one daughter with me. My sister had three kids. We run away. We don't have nothing. It was at night, so I had my nightgown. We don't bring anything with us, just the important paper - identification. I didn't take anything from home". (Aweza, May 27, 1996.)

Another woman I interviewed, Navnar was one of the victims of the Kuwaiti invasion:

"Iraq and Kuwait, they fought, and the Kurdish people were fighting with the Iraqis. Saddam Hussein went to Kurdistan and they fought each other, and we left Kurdistan and went to the mountains". (Navnar, May 2, 1996.)

Roeber was only twenty years old when Mullah Mustafa Barzani's forces rose up against the Iraqi regime. He narrated some of his recollections, as well as his family's reasons for flight:

"After I got to 20 years old, Kurdish people applied for self-government. Uprising started in Iraqi Kurdistan. Our leader was Mullah Mustafa Barzani. He's very smart and he has about 45,000 fighters who fight with the Iraqi government. For at least five or six years, the Iraqi government couldn't kick them out from north of Iraq. After, they got powerful - the Iraqi Ba'ath Party.... Their airplanes, their rockets, their weapons, they destroyed most of Kurdistan's villages. We build a small house among the mountains, we hide ourselves with our kids inside those houses. And this fight - Iraqi weapons, the military attacking. I still remember they killed so many friends and relatives, and wounded so many.... It's very difficult to grow up in those times, because I hide here, there, everywhere. Because there was no money at that time, no food, no medicine".

"In 1988, they have a cease-fire between Iran and Iraq. They gassed Halabja, and most Kurdish main towns they gassed with chemical weapons. We flee to Turkey; they destroyed our houses, farms, everywhere. And we had no choice. I can't forget those people who lived there, that night. I remember every minute. There's a reason I can't live there. It's not safe now. Still, we have protection of the U.N., but maybe tomorrow, or day after tomorrow, Saddam Hussein is going to attack us again". (Roeber, July 7, 1996.)

The preceding genre of narratives is, unfortunately, familiar to many Kurdish refugees. As Sipan so movingly states:

"I didn't see any freedom, I didn't see any peace, I didn't see anything. All what I have seen is agony, all what I have seen is pain. I really don't remember

seeing a nice moment in that place. I'm talking about long term things; I'm not talking about a short term joy that happens to you in your life. On the long term basis, everything was just so sad. I don't know how I dealt with it. And this is not my story alone. This is the story of many people, millions of people. They have gone through it more or less". (Sipan, July 7, 1996.)

Thus, many Kurds experience a painful and tenuous existence in their homeland, and then are forced to flee for various reasons. The next chapter addresses how the Kurds in Ottawa construct an ethnic identity. Due to competing themes, Kurdish identity is a contested one.

CHAPTER 4 RESETTLEMENT AND ADAPTATION IN CANADA

This chapter is divided into several sections. The first section discusses how my informants feel about life in Canada. The Kurds generally have a positive attitude as new Canadians, which has implications for Canadian immigration studies and Canadian society as a whole. Then I will examine the internal processes of Kurdish identity construction, through symbols such as language and rituals. I will also examine the external processes which shape Kurdish identity. Finally, I will discuss both how Kurdish identity is contested as a result of divisions in institutions such as language, and the polarization in the community. Several themes emerged through my discussions.

FREEDOM AND SECURITY

Richmond (1984:527) claims that in the case of refugees, when contrasted with the persecution they had formerly experienced, freedom of cultural expression becomes a principal source of gratification and the basis on which loyalty to a new country is forged. This is certainly the case with the Kurds I interviewed. However, I would extend Richmond's argument to include freedom in terms of mobility and security. Thirteen of the people I interviewed mentioned freedom as one of the most significant aspects of living in Canada. This is hardly surprising since the Kurds come from a country where security is tenuous at best. For example, five of the people I spoke with discussed the insecurity of living in Kurdistan, as well as the need to carry identification at all times. Ferat, from Iraqi Kurdistan, is thirty and has been in Canada for five years:

“In Canada, you have more freedom. In Iraq, around 10 or 11 o'clock you have to keep your identification with you, always. Without identification, you cannot go outside. Here, nobody asks. In Iraq, there are special people who work for the government, so you should have the identification for the government, always. Freedom is the biggest point for me. When I sleep, I don't think about maybe after

five minutes someone will knock on the door. I am more free here". (Ferat, May 22, 1996.)

"We miss our country, but here we are free, and we could do whatever we want, and our children are safe. We are safe.... I don't have to cover myself.... Here, if we go to the street, I tell my son, 'Remember in Kurdistan, they bother us?' I tell him, 'See, Canada has more freedom. They are not doing anything to us'. He himself realizes it, because he spent time with me in jail". (Hana, July 7, 1996.)

"In Canada, one thing, you're not scared. You're not scared of anything, that they will take you away, or your husband, and put him in jail or other things. You never know what will happen in those countries. So I sleep well at night.... You're free to go anywhere you like. Anything you want to do, nobody can tell you 'Don't do it'. Over there, if you want to go to a city, you have to get permission, like papers. Here, you go all over Canada and nobody tells you 'Don't go'. As long as you have the money, and the car, so I like that". (Dilawaz, August 28, 1996.)

"Canada is a safe country. They treat us equally. We go everywhere without identification. Canada is very, very good". (Roeber, July 7, 1996.)

"What I like about Canada is all this freedom. No one bothers you and says 'Okay, tomorrow, come to the military station". (Devan, July 2, 1996.)

"I like Canada. The freedom, democracy, the many opportunities for children, the human rights. In my country, you don't see any rights.... It was too hard to stay in a country that you don't have any freedom, any democracy. It's very important. If they suppress your mind, you can't say anything and you have to all the time close your mouth. That's not easy.... The police in my country is a symbol for a wild system, you know. Very dictatorial system. The first time I was in Holland, if I saw a policeman, I was so afraid that they come to me and ask questions. Because in Iran, if you are on the street, they ask you 'Where are you going? Where is your passport? Where is your certificate?' Every time they ask, during your walk, if you are traveling. Every time. I come to the airport in Ottawa, it was so simple. They didn't ask me anything. They handled me very good in Canada. And I didn't expect it, because of the imagination in my country". (Dilan, May 23, 1996.)

"The difference from Iraq and here, I can see more freedom in different ways in the life. What I mean about freedom is for everything. You can express how you feel, you can write, you can talk, and you can also go to get your education, as much as you want.... Because of our country and our background in Kurdistan, Canada is the country that accepts us so we are very happy for that. And we think that Canada is really our second country because when we needed help, they help us. And as I told you before, it's a very free country, and all what you need for life you can do". (Navnar, May 2, 1996.)

Havin is a twenty-nine year old homemaker. Her husband was a former peshmerga, and they, along with their outgoing seven year old son, have been in Canada for two years. During our interview, she proudly showed me her wedding pictures from Kurdistan. Present at her wedding was the eminent Dr. Abdul R. Ghassemlou, noted Kurdish scholar and advocate of Kurdish rights.

“The feeling of being free and freedom is very important. Yesterday I was walking with my son... nobody bothered me, nobody intervened in my affairs. And the same time, I was not stopped by the police to ask what I was doing there. That is the case in Iran”. (Havin, May 7, 1996.)

OPPORTUNITIES FOR EDUCATION

For many of my informants, the opportunity for education was a significant advantage of life in Canada. It is especially important for their children. Although they did not discussed it in depth, a number of my informants were remitting part of their incomes to families still in Kurdistan. Therefore, it is difficult for some of them to continue their education if they are working to assist families in Kurdistan. It is particularly difficult if they have children. Several of my informants, such as Sipan and Devan, are currently studying at universities in Ottawa. However, they are unmarried with no dependents, so are more likely able to send money home and continue their education. Thus, for a number of my informants who had their own studies disrupted in Kurdistan, opportunities for their children's education is an important aspect of life in Canada.

Aweza, mother of two:

“In Canada, when you come they give you work to speak, to understand, to go to school. They help you with the children. They help you with everything. Here, many things good.... In my country, fifteen years (ago) they have kindergarten.

but just to play, and come back. But here, they make them ready for elementary. Different system, different things - good things.... For my daughter, for my son, for my love, I can see many things better". (Aweza, May 27, 1996.)

Bana, who has two children:

"I like here. Nice country, for the children, it's nice. The things I see, especially for my children. They can go to school. If they want to finish the school, they can. That's the most that I like". (Bana, July 3, 1996.)

"You know, I think everybody has some positive, some negative. It's not perfect, but generally I think Canada is good; I like. If you are in freedom in a place, if you speak, if you feel comfortable. I think I like this place. Maybe for some things I am not comfortable, but in general, it's good, I think. You have many opportunities here to find a good job and to continue your education". (Dilan, May 23, 1996.)

"There is so many things here different, that's not the same where I lived, but I like so many things here. If you want to reach something, you can. If you want to study, you can do it. There is no matter of age. If you like to just stay home, it's up to you. You can just stay home. If you want to go to university, you can be there. It's not as easy in our culture". (Herken, July 3, 1996.)

IMPLICATIONS FOR IMMIGRATION STUDIES AND CANADIAN SOCIETY

The Kurds are a relatively recent immigrant group, and their numbers in Canada are small compared to other ethnic groups. In 1991, there were less than 2,000 Kurds in the country, with all of them concentrated in Ontario and Quebec (Statistics Canada 1991:18). Despite their small numbers they, like so many other immigrant groups, are an asset to Canadian society. Unlike other Canadians who tend to take freedom and democracy for granted, Kurdish Canadians cherish these institutions. They have experienced oppression firsthand in dictatorial regimes, as well as personal horrors which to other Canadians would be inconceivable. Virtually all of them, aside from the

understandable homesickness, are grateful to live in Canada and are aware of the opportunities which exist in this country.

In addition, contrary to misconceptions regarding immigrants as being a drain on resources, my informants have an excellent track record. Out of the twenty-one, only three were on social assistance. The remainder are employed full-time, or students working part-time. In the case of the female homemakers, their husbands were either employed full-time, or students who also worked part-time. Akbari (1991:335) states that

Young adults are likely to contribute more in terms of taxes.... Immigrants are generally young at the time of arrival as compared to the resident native-born population. Thus it is expected that, over his/her lifetime in the host country, an immigrant will benefit the native-born population through public fund transfers.

Since the average age of my informants is 33 years old, their current and future contributions to Canadian society are enough to discount prevailing anti-immigrant sentiments.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF A KURDISH ETHNIC IDENTITY

In constructing a Kurdish identity in an immigrant context, there were three significant themes that my informants brought up: language, Newroz and social relations among the Kurds. Before discussing these themes, I would like to examine the institution of religion, since it is frequently a major factor in maintaining a separate ethnic identity (De Vos 1995:21). As the literature suggests, for many Muslims religion is critical to group identity and cohesion. For example, da Costa's (1994) study on a Muslim community in Greater Cape Town, South Africa, suggests that religious identity within this particular group may override all other forms of identity. The study was based on questions regarding religion. According to the findings, 79.0 percent of the respondents

considered being Muslim as the most important classification and placed it as the first option (da Costa 1994:240). Furthermore, 93.6 percent of the respondents had Arabic names, and 94.9 percent had objects in their homes showing that such homes were Muslim ones (da Costa 1994:241). The objects were religious, such as framed quotations from the Quran.

Shadid's (1991) article on Muslims in the Netherlands also discusses religion and its role in the Muslim community. He contends that Muslims in Holland organize themselves along religiopolitical movements and primarily around mosques (Shadid 1991:360). The mosque as a symbol for the Islamic community has considerable significance. There are approximately 300 mosques; one built in Eindhoven in 1989 cost Fl. 3 million and half of the amount was raised by the local Turkish community, which consists of no more than 900 households (Shadid 1991:360-361). The community also feels that Islamic schools will help to maintain the ethnic and cultural identities of their children (IBID:366).

Almost half of my informants felt that religion was not a prominent factor for Kurdish identity. And no one brought up religion in relation to questions about the preservation of Kurdish culture. Several of my informants provided me with very brief responses when asked about religion:

"Yeah, I am Muslim, but it doesn't really matter for me". (Bana, July 3, 1996.)

"A lot of Kurdish people are Sunni Muslim, but in my region, also a lot of people are Alevi Muslim. They are Muslim also, but they are different from Sunni Muslim. We are Alevi. Actually, I don't follow that religion. In our community, we are not under the influence of religion". (Kamiran, March 1, 1996.)

“My parents are traditional Sunni, but me, my brothers and sisters. no”. (Azad, March 12, 1996.)

“I’m not sure if I’m Muslim. It’s not a big issue for me”. (Herken, July 3, 1996.)

There are several explanations as to why religion is not a significant institution to the Kurds. First of all, the Kurds are distinct from other Muslim groups in that there were already several indigenous religions prior to the advent of Islam, and even these religions were often contested. For example, the Yazidi sect, exclusively Kurdish, deny the existence of evil and believe in the dualism of God and Malak Taus, or Satan, whom they believe to be the agent of divine will (Bulloch and Morris 1992:224-225). Subsequently, followers of this sect were persecuted as devil worshippers. So there was never a single religion unifying the Kurds.

Secondly, the Kurdish conversion to Islam was less than zealous. For example, Bulloch and Morris (1992:226) write that:

the eclectic nature of much of Kurdish religion may be a historical reflection of the resistance to conversion during the early Islamic period.... The Kurds were not only slow to adopt the new faith, they also adapted it to fit in with the old pagan and Zoroastrian beliefs.

Furthermore, some of the practices, such as veiling, was foreign to the Kurds so this became problematic.

Third, the Kurds have suffered due to sectarian differences with their predominantly Shi’a neighbours. Bulloch and Morris (1992) contend that religious difference is less important now than in the past, but I would argue to the contrary. These differences are part of the reason why the Kurds are so disadvantaged. Particularly in

Iran after the Islamic revolution, the Kurds have been discriminated against sociopolitically and economically. Some examples were provided by my informants, such as being 'ideologically fit' to attend university or gain government positions.

INTERNAL VARIABLES CONSTRUCTING KURDISH ETHNIC IDENTITY

Eriksen (1993:4) writes that in social anthropology the term **ethnicity** refers to aspects of relationships between groups which consider themselves, and are regarded by others, as being culturally distinct. Furthermore, ethnic identity is the result of a dialectical process involving internal and external opinions and processes, as well as the individual's self-identification and outsiders' ethnic designations (Nagel 1994:154). Much of the current literature uses Barth's (1969) landmark study on ethnic groups and the construction and maintenance of ethnic boundaries. Implicit in this model is that ethnic identity cannot exist without an out-group, or 'others' to contrast oneself to.

LANGUAGE

Language is often considered a major criterion for defining an ethnic group. Cohen (1994:199) writes that one of the markers which divide in- from out-groups is language. The Turkish government under Mustafa Kemal Ataturk understood this all too well by outlawing any expression of Kurdish culture, specifically the language. Chaliand (1994:7) writes that until recently, the great fear of the Turkish authorities was that the use of the Kurdish language, and the political ends to which it might be put, would break up the cohesion of the national state. In his analysis of accommodation and adjustment to ethnic demands, Kliot (1989:55) writes that in 1924 all Kurdish schools, associations and publications were banned. There was a short respite whereby bilingual Kurdish-Turkish journals appeared but in 1980 the ban on Kurdish language and culture was implemented

more strictly than ever (Kliot 1989:55). The difficulty the Kurds experienced regarding their language was discussed in the preceding chapter.

Therefore, many of the Kurds see language as a vital component to the preservation of their culture. For example, one woman I interviewed also felt that there should be a formal Kurdish language course:

“I think there must be a classroom for Kurdish language, there must be a class like other communities. There is a Somalian class! There is a Spanish class, a Persian class, but the Kurds here, they don’t have a class. We are going to lose our language here”. (Herken, July 3, 1996.)

For many of the Kurds I interviewed, it was important that the children speak both Kurdish as well as English. However, some of my informants said that it was important to also give their children a choice as well as flexibility in terms of learning the Kurdish language, especially those with young children:

“We decided that the first language is English, for the children. And I don’t press the children ‘You must speak Kurdish’. I think that’s not fair for the children. But I think when they grow up, they can learn. Other people, they say ‘it’s our culture, it’s our tradition, it’s our language, you must speak Kurdish’. But I can’t: it’s not fair. You do not press the children”. (Dilan, May 23, 1996.)

“I can’t control her (my daughter’s) language. I like her to speak English as nice as she can. Besides that, I’m trying to teach her Kurdish, and I don’t speak English at home. Even if she asks me some questions in English, I try to answer her in Kurdish”. (Herken, July 3, 1996.)

Bana has three sons, and her husband commented that

“When my sons choose different nationality (to marry), he has to give right to his wife. In my opinion, his children should learn the mother’s language and the father’s language”. (July 3, 1996.)

Several of my informants expressed concern that the children were losing the Kurdish language, especially those who came to Canada at a young age or were born here.

Ferat discussed his teenage sister-in-law and her friend:

“Behar and Lolan, they are changing. The music. In the car, when I put on Kurdish music, they listen because I am with them. But they prefer the English music.... If you watched them when they came in, with us, they speak Kurdish, but when they move together, they speak English. When they look to us, they speak Kurdish but when they are together, they speak English. Always they speak English”. (Ferat, May 22, 1996.)

“I have some friends, they have kids, when they came here they were 5 or 6 years old. Now the kids are 18. The kids know the English language very well, but do not know the mother tongue. So when they go to the doctor’s appointment, the kids help them. The kids talk to the doctor in English; they understand everything. But when it comes time to tell the father, it’s difficult”. (Azad, March 12, 1996.)

“Most of the kids don’t know anything about the Kurdish culture, and they don’t speak Kurdish. Most of them don’t want to get bothered. Most of them are just learning English”. (Devan, July 2, 1996.)

In the Kurdish case, however, language is problematic in that although several of my informants mentioned language as vital to the preservation of their culture, there is no pan-Kurdish language. Their language is distinct from other languages in the region. Kurdish vernaculars are members of the northwestern subdivision of the Iranic branch of the Indo-European family of languages (Izady 1992:167). The fact that there exists several dialects does not help the Kurdish cause. Indeed, scholars such Izady (1992) and Harris (1977) argue that one of the main stumbling blocks to Kurdish unity is the lack of a unified tongue. As Entessar (1992:4) contends, the failure to adopt a lingua franca has not only hindered inter-Kurdish communication but has also reduced the importance of language as a symbol of ethnic identity for the Kurds.

The lack of a unified tongue is exacerbated by the fact there is also no unified Kurdish script. Izady (1992:178) claims that in Iran and Iraq a modified version of the Perso-Arabic alphabet has been used, and in Turkey a version of the Latin alphabet.

Extending this to other parts of Kurdistan, the Kurds of the former Soviet Union began writing in the Armenian alphabet, followed by Latin and then a combination of Cyrillic and Latin (IBID), which further illustrates the magnitude of this problem.

One of my informants mentioned the problems with language and possible divisions in the community:

“We have a lot of differences, even with language. Say that we decided to have a local newspaper. In what language would it be? In what dialogue?”. (Janfiraz, August 20, 1996.)

Furthermore, I was told by a Kurdish friend who spoke the Kurmanji dialect that he had to speak English to his Sorani-speaking friend, since the differences in the dialogues sometimes made it difficult to communicate. So the problem remains of adopting a standard language and selecting which “Kurdish” is to be used.

Nevertheless, I would argue that judging from my informants’ experiences and narratives, the Kurdish languages still maintain the boundaries of Kurdish identity from ‘the other’. I would speculate that in the Kurdish case, the language divisions have come to reflect the repeated divisions of Kurdistan, both past and present. This in turn, is the reason why it is so salient in Kurdish factionalism today.

Linguistic differences in immigrant societies is certainly not unique to the Kurds. For example, Blejwas (1991) documents the polarization in a Polish American community. He describes a linguistic difference between the first wave of Polish emigres comprised mostly of peasants, and the second wave of political and educated urbanites. Blejwas (1991:79) writes that very little united the two immigrations; they spoke different languages, one a rural dialect and the other the literary tongue of Warsaw, Lwow, Krakow, Wilno or Poznan. The divisions in the Polish American immigrant

community in Blejwas's study were mainly a result of politics, notably concerning what was to be their stance on the Polish question during World War II (IBID).

NEWROZ

Another topic frequently discussed by my informants is the Kurdish New Year, or Newroz. According to the Toronto Kurdish Community (Press Release March 1996), the celebration of Newroz (meaning 'New Day' in Kurdish), can be traced back to 612 B.C. The leaders of the Toronto Kurdish Community recounted that "in 612 B.C. a Kurdish blacksmith killed an Assyrian tyrant, liberating the Kurdish people, and that ever since then, Newroz has remained part of the Kurdish national consciousness" (IBID). Myths, however, are not without ambiguity. For example, Izady (1992:242-243) argues that in western and northern Kurdistan, the Newroz ceremony is known as Tuldan, and the origins are contested by scholars and writers. Nevertheless, according to Izady (1992:243) the ritual is pan-Kurdish; celebrated in all parts of Kurdistan.

For the Kurds, the symbol of Newroz is requisite to their ethnic identity. As De Vos and Romanucci-Ross (1995:357) contend, ethnicity can most readily be symbolically represented contrastively. For the Kurds, the ritual of Newroz is theirs, and they lay claim to the ritual as indigenous to their ethnic group. While there are Arab Alevis who celebrate Newroz (Izady 1992:243), it is essentially a Kurdish practice. Thus, by engaging in this ritual, the Kurds demarcate themselves from their neighbours, the majority of whom do not celebrate Newroz. Roughly half of the people interviewed referred to the Newroz festival as an opportunity to practice Kurdish culture.

"Newroz is a very important point for the Kurds, because it is an example for gathering Kurds together and to continue to have their identity". (Navnar, May 2, 1996.)

“When we see each other each year at the Newroz festival, it means that we remember that we are Kurds. When we see each other, we introduce ourselves to each other, because it’s difficult to see each other every day. But if you have limited time for a festival, New Year’s Party, we’re going to see each other and we wear our Kurdish clothes. It’s good to keep culture”. (Roeber, July 7, 1996.)

“We always try in national parties that we have, like Newroz. We try to bring nice clothes for the children, to wear them on this national day, and we try to explain to them how important this day is in Kurdish history”. (Janfiraz, August 20, 1996.)

“Most Kurdish people, we have a big celebration, Newroz. We have a special celebration for Kurdish people, we celebrate together. Newroz, this one is especially for us. We visit our friends, our families. Here, we make the party. Over there, (in Kurdistan) in every town, you go outside, they make big party, they burn fires. It’s a symbol for this day, to make fires. It’s New Year’s Day for the Kurdish people. You hear the Kurdish music and people are dancing. It’s in Kurdish story (the story alluding to the blacksmith) so it’s a symbol for freedom”. (Aweza, May 27, 1996.)

SOCIAL RELATIONS AMONG THE KURDS

Many of the Kurds I interviewed discussed intergroup relations, in a manner indicative of a collectivist culture. According to Triandis (1992:72), one of the characteristics of collectivist cultures is a great readiness to cooperate with ingroup members. This type of cooperation was brought up by twelve of my twenty-one informants. In addition, this form of behaviour was, for them, a significant boundary which distinguished Kurds from ‘outsiders’. For example, Dilan explained that:

“Our nation has more contact together. The society, the communication is more stronger than here.... I miss the society, the communication; you can talk to people. For example, if you are sick, somebody takes care of you - even your neighbours. Very simply, you trust your neighbour”. (Dilan, May 23, 1996.)

“I miss the kind of relations I had between myself and my friends which I had. Here, you have everything and life is very easy here. But still we feel lonely. We feel that we are missing something that was really important to us, the atmosphere of relations”. (Hejar, May 2, 1996.)

“I miss the people (in Kurdistan). The people are friendly, full of cultural activity, full of togetherness. They share each other’s happiness and sadness.... You

have family, you have relatives and you have friends, anytime you give a call". (Devan, July 2, 1996.)

This closeness of the community manifests itself specifically in the hospitality shown towards guests. For example Havin's husband said

"If guests arrive somewhere in a Kurdish family or atmosphere, all the house members will take all the cares and attention to the guest". (May 7, 1996.)

"Kurdish people have been known, recognized as a very hospitable people. I think this is a very positive thing that we need to preserve everywhere; it has to stay in our soul. We raise our children in this way, and we think it's a very positive thing.... Respect, you can consider it in so many ways. Let's say when you go to a Kurdish family, this is tradition (that) whoever comes to your place, whenever you're sitting, you try to stand up (to greet the person entering) in order to respect the person visiting". (Janfiraz, August 20, 1996.)

"With us Kurds, if you have a guest, it doesn't matter if you have a lot of studying or a test tomorrow. You must stay with the guest until he or she goes home. You have to respect that guest". (Dilawaz, August 28, 1996.)

"Kurdish people care about what happens to the neighbour, what happens to the family.... When you lose someone, everybody's with you. When you're happy, everybody's with you. They can help you in many difficult situations. Like with the revolution, it was war in Kurdistan. The doors of everybody was open for other people who were in difficulties, who had problems with the government, who had run away". (Herken, July 3, 1996.)

Several of my informants had mentioned that this sense of community is lacking in Canadian culture. If we are to assume that Kurdish culture is one of collectivism, then there are several possible explanations. According to Triandis (1992:76), studies indicate that individualism (defined as a belief that the individual is an end to himself/herself) is strongly linked to high GNP, or by extension, industrialized countries albeit with exceptions such as Japan. For example, some of the observations made by my informants alluded to this:

"Our nation has more contact together. The society, the communication is more stronger than here. Maybe in Canada, the people are hard-working, and they

don't have time to have contact together, neighbour with neighbour. The life here is more modernized than in Kurdistan.... The people are busy with all things". (Dilan, May 23, 1996.)

When asked what he liked the least about Canada, Janfiraz responded:

"The sense about 'me first'. There is not so many sense of giving in this society by the people, that's the way they've been raised - 'first me, second, public'. But I have been raised different - first public, second, me. That's how the sense of giving goes by all the time. I really don't like the way people thinks the most about him or herself. Always they consider 'me first'.... I really don't like this kind of lifestyle, but it's not the fault of the people, it's the way they have been raised - individualism, just think of 'me'". (Janfiraz, August 20, 1996.)

"I thought the people are not very friendly here with each other. And I think the reason is because they are very busy with jobs and because the education is very different. And also the history and culture is very different from over there and I didn't know anything about that". (Eznar, April 30, 1996.)

Another possible explanation as to why my informants feel that the sense of community is lacking in Canadian culture is that they have had their social networks disrupted. Although they didn't discuss that possibility, many of my informants came here alone, or with immediate versus extended families. If Canada is the individualistic society they perceive it to be, then the sense of isolation would be more conspicuous since the Kurds lack their familiar social networks. Thus, they may observe this omission in their new country more readily and subsequently utilize it as a means of differentiating themselves from 'others'.

FACTIONALISM IN THE KURDISH CANADIAN COMMUNITY

Considering the nature of the Kurdish people and their emphasis on affinity, it came as a surprise that there appears to be a strong polarization within the community. In response to the question of preserving Kurdish culture, many of my informants noted the politicization of the community and the divisions within. Ten of my respondents

expressed concern over the rift, and that these divisions appear to manifest themselves predominantly at social events:

“We are people from four different countries, with thousands of political ideologies. That’s why for the past ten years, the Kurdish community had difficulty to have a community like the other nations, because of the political crisis. People say ‘If I belong to the KDP, I don’t like the other person who belongs to the other party, because they’ve been fighting in Kurdistan, killing each other so I don’t want the success of such and such side. If I smell one political scent in one social activity, I don’t go’.... I’ll give you the public idea of the Kurdish community. We try to have just a small concert here. We try to invite one singer from Europe to sing, to have a concert, to have people at a party and be happy. But the first thing they ask you is ‘Who invited him? Oh, the PKK? No way then, I’m not going’. So we have difficulty to get unity. We’ve been trying very hard, very hard and still we cannot get so many things out of this, because of the political crisis we have been through”. (Janfiraz, August 20, 1996.)

“We have some celebrations, like Newroz.... (But) when you say ‘Our party in Turkey Kurdistan, PKK, Abdullah Ocalan’, people think ‘Ah, maybe this celebration is financed by this party’. Then the people say ‘We will have another Newroz’. The next day, they go celebrate in another place”. (Lavyar, July 7, 1996.)

“The Kurdish people were active in different parts, with different mentality and different plan and different thinking. For example, I was active in Komala, and another person was active in KDP-Iran. We had different mentality and different plan and different program and we say ‘Oh, I don’t accept you because you were active in another party. This is one problem. We don’t accept each other because of different party.... We have this problem in our nation. We don’t accept each other because of some political reason. That’s a big problem”. (Dilan, May 23, 1996.)

“There is this polarization from Kurdistan with different political views. Like Iraqi Kurdistan, for example, you see them with different political parties. Iranian Kurdistan. You see, we have been divided, and in each part of Kurdistan there is one political party that is active. And this political affiliation among Kurds doesn’t really prevent them from getting together but it influences it”. (Sipan, July 7, 1996.)

“The other parties fight with another party, and all the people here, I can say ten percent do not belong to parties. All the other people belong to the parties. When a fight goes on there (Kurdistan), fight here. Same thing, you know”. (Bana, July 3, 1996.)

“The mentality is not united, really. They make parties, they make youth nights, and they put a different political name on it. People see the political name and they say ‘Okay, this event is according to this political party, so we’re not

going'. Or 'this person has a background like this, so we're not going. He's from Iraq, he's from Turkey'. They go by the political party, so this classification is like a big obstacle, barrier for the Kurdish people". (Devan, July 2, 1996.)

"Unfortunately, still the Kurds are missing one great point which is finding association for all the Kurds, because the Kurdish people have been divided between three or four countries and each one is thinking like belonging to this country or that country and in the meantime, they are Kurd". (Hejar, May 2, 1996.)

"I think our people have to work out our differences if they want to save Kurdistan. I see so many differences, even the parties. The parties, there's going to be a very big fight, because of their differences that Iraq has with Iran, or Iran has with Turkey. We are all Kurds, and we all want the same things, but some don't seem to understand that". (Hana, July 7, 1996.)

I had the opportunity to participate in two Newroz festivals held in March of 1996. The first one was in Toronto and was attended by roughly 500 to 700 people. Outside the auditorium were displays of colourful Kurdish art, cassettes of Kurdish music, and tables with literature on Kurdistan. On the walls of the auditorium hung the Kurdish flag and a large picture of Abdullah Ocalan, the leader of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK). The program consisted of Kurdish singing and folk dancing, and a traditional Kurdish meal was served during the intermission. Also, messages from the Kurdish Parliament in Exile as well as from Canadian members of parliament conveying best wishes were read. Some of the men at the festival wore military style clothing with armbands. Throughout the course of the evening, between the singing and folk dancing and speeches, some of the people would chant "Biji Kurdistan, biji Serok Apo". A Kurdish friend told me that the word 'biji' meant something akin to 'long live', and that 'Serok Apo' was another name for PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan.

The second Newroz festival in Montreal was on a smaller scale, but was virtually a duplicate of the festival in Toronto. I could not understand the speeches in Kurdish, but

did understand the words 'anti-imperialism' and 'fascism' in the speeches. Also, there was more shouting of "Biji Kurdistan, biji Serok Apo".

Both festivals were indeed celebrations of the Kurdish New Year and cultural events, but were also very politicized. They were sponsored by the Kurdish Canadian communities, but there was no doubt as to whom they were sympathetic to. In both events the PKK influence was manifest. Considering what almost half of my informants said, it would be easy to see why a number of Kurds would refrain from attending these festivals. Kurds who opposed the PKK or who support parties from other areas of Kurdistan would want to avoid an event where the PKK sway was apparent.

As Werbner (1991:345) maintains, public events articulate moods, emotions, and hopes as well as setting practical and political agendas. The Kurdish Newroz festivals I attended served as a reminder of the Kurdish history, culture and Kurdish oppression. It articulated the hope of autonomy or independence by reference to a past communal myth and linking it to present nationalistic aims. By this, the political agenda was set whereby in both festivals, the PKK was promoted as the movement best able to fulfill the objective of independence, and thus freedom for the Kurdish people, like the Kurdish blacksmith of their shared historical stories.

An examination of factionalism, Kurdish history and the current circumstances of the Kurds I interviewed can shed insight as to why divisions exist within the immigrant community. Nicholas (1977:55) defines factions as a special form of political organization, having several distinct characteristics. As Nicholas (1977:66) asserts, factions are groups that appear only during conflict, and that they are political groups, politics being referred to as the public use of power. Factionalism then, consists in

partisan groups working on behalf of their own self-interest. Nicholas (1977) provides examples of factionalism in societies from the Ndembu to Japanese political parties. De Wet's (1987) study examines factionalism within a village in South Africa, and Hilal (1995) examines factionalism within the PLO.

Existing literature on Kurdish factionalism in an immigrant setting is scant. Since the Kurds are both new as a Canadian immigrant group and small compared to earlier ethnic groups such as the Italian Canadians or even the Indochinese Canadians who arrived in large numbers, studies on polarization within the Kurdish community are few. Most of the literature on Kurdish factionalism addresses the issue at the tribal and political levels in Kurdistan. For example, tribalism and the factionalism between tribes were discussed earlier in the thesis. Historically Kurdish society has been organized along tribal lines. As a result, as Bulloch and Morris (1992:75) note, the concept of a national duty towards fellow Kurds was practically non-existent. In fact, the first major Kurdish revolt with nationalistic, as opposed to feudalistic and tribal, overtones did not occur until 1880 with Sheikh Ubaydollah (Entessar 1991:271).

Several scholars argue that factionalism has transcended the tribal level to the level of national and international politics. In the past, outside powers used the Kurdish tribes as pawns and played them off against each other for successful divide and rule. As Nagel (1980:286) writes, nearly all Kurdish uprisings against local governments from the late 1800s to 1975 were met with the combined resistance of the government in question and the rebels' traditional tribal enemies. The current literature suggests that this applies today in the political arena. Kurdish history is rife with examples whereby fighting between different Kurdish political parties was used to benefit the prevailing dominant

hegemony. One example is the 1960s suppression of the Kurdish peasant revolt in Iran. Iraqi Kurds, under the guidance of Mullah Mustafa Barzani, helped to strangle the rebellion on behalf of the Shah of Iran (Bulloch and Morris 1992:220).

The invasion of northern Iraq last summer is another example. According to Time Magazine, the KDP sent an invitation to Saddam Hussein, asking for much needed assistance in their fight against the PUK (McGeary 1996:18-28). The fighting between the two Kurdish parties provided the opportunity for Hussein to send troops and weapons into the prohibited region, thereby consolidating his power. Although the troops and hardware have been withdrawn, Hussein left behind spies to assert his authority (McGeary 1996:20). Whether wittingly or unwittingly, Kurdish factionalism allowed Hussein to move into a region established for their own protection.

The reasons for the difficulty of Kurdish unification as well as obtaining desired goals are as complex as the people themselves. Probably the most significant reason is the geographical layout of the region. For example, it is tempting to draw a parallel between the Kurds and Palestinians, another ethnic group who suffered from outside forces and who were also propelled into diaspora. However, the Palestinians faced a single enemy and were backed by powerful regional states (Bulloch and Morris 1992:230). The Kurds are dead-centre amidst hostile neighbours, all intent on keeping them subjugated. They also have been manipulated rather than aided by outside powers.

As a result of the fragmentation of Kurdistan and the subsequent governments in power, various Kurdish political parties have formed with differing ideologies and methods for addressing their conditions. The goals of these parties also differ. For example, Iranian Kurdish political parties seek autonomy. Until recently, the Kurds of

Turkey, notably the PKK, were the only ones agitating for complete independence. Currently however, Iraqi Kurdistan's PUK are fighting for Kurdish independence; they rival the Iraqi KDP who would settle for Kurdish autonomy. These differing perspectives and goals have created conflict between the Iranian, Iraqi and Turkish Kurdish political groups. This in turn has been used by their respective governments to create further division.

Based on my informants' experiences and the earlier discussion of factions, I would argue that among the Kurds in Ottawa, factionalism is manifest to a certain degree. There are several reasons for this. First of all, Kurdish associations, cultural or otherwise, often have access to information regarding the current events in Kurdistan. For example, an incident involving a Kurdish member of the Turkish parliament, working for the Turks against the Kurds (Lyons 1996), was electronically mailed to me by the American Kurdish Information Network. The article described the Kurdish parliamentarian as the head of a specific tribe in Turkish controlled Kurdistan, who employed 8,000 mercenaries, all of them Kurds, in a war on the rebel Kurds. Incidents such as this serve to strengthen existing divisions among the Kurdish diaspora. The control of the dissemination of information also contributes to factionalism as a self-reproducing attribute of the immigrant context.

Secondly, since a number of my informants were politically active in Kurdistan, it is not surprising that their contrasting political ideologies are transplanted in the immigrant setting. For example, some of my informants were members of the party Komala, others were supportive of the KDP-I, while still others felt that the PKK was the only party capable of championing the Kurdish cause. In any case, a number of my

informants were always up to date on the current developments in Kurdistan. I was told 'off the record' that there were a number of Kurds who avoided Kurdish associations because these promoted certain political ideologies which they disagreed with.

EXTERNAL VARIABLES AFFECTING KURDISH ETHNIC IDENTITY

One could argue that since the partitioning of Kurdistan, the Kurds have always had a large part of their identity defined for them. For example, in Turkish Kurdistan the state had legally delimited their identity. When attempts at assimilation failed, the Turkish government simply outlawed any expressions of Kurdish identity such as language, rituals, and dress, and redefined them as 'Mountain Turks'. Upon emigrating to a new country, part of their identity is subject to whatever classifications exist in the new country's immigration laws. Ng (1981:100) writes that

in the law and regulations of the Department of Employment and Immigration and the Citizenship Branch of the Secretary of State, there are clear stipulations on who an immigrant is, and at what point an immigrant becomes a citizen. Thus, prior to a person's arrival in Canada, her/his legal status, as an immigrant, is different from people who are Canadians, is already determined for her/him.

This has interesting implications for Kurds as new Canadians in that part of their criteria for identity is imposed on them by virtue of emigrating to Canada.

Skinner and Hendricks (1979:25), in their study of Indochinese refugees, write that the refugees' experience reveals how outsiders shape the definition of a people's ethnic self-identity. With the Kurds, it appears that another external variable is a little more subtle, and on a social as opposed to a legal sphere. Several of my informants described how most people they encountered lacked knowledge about Kurdistan and the Kurdish question. Due to the fact that Kurdistan has never existed as a formal nation-

state, they often had to refer to Iran, Iraq or Turkey. This, of course, is inaccurate because it implies that they are Iranian, Iraqi or Turkish, when they are not. What occurs then is a shift from their internal definition of being a culturally distinct Kurd to a definition by outsiders that they are 'others', whether Arab, Persian or Turkish. For example, Azad stated that:

"Although Kurdistan is divided between international borders, we still call that region with the one name.... It's hard to explain that I'm a stateless person; that I'm a Kurd. People say 'I've never heard of that'". (Azad, March 12, 1996.)

"If you say 'I'm Kurdish... the kids in school never hear anything about the Kurdish people. So you say 'I'm Kurdish' and they say 'What? What's that?' So you have to explain to them.... And then they say 'Where is it? Show me something, a flag, a map'. So you say to yourself 'Okay, tomorrow, if another asks me where I'm from, better to say nothing. I'm going to say I'm from Iran or Iraq'". (Devan, July 2, 1996.)

UNIFYING VERSUS DIVISIVE THEMES: KURDISH IDENTITY AS CONTESTED TERRITORY

Spradley (1978:186-187) defines a theme as a larger unit of thought, and claims that when a single idea recurs in more than one domain, it suggests the possibility of a cultural theme. There appears to be two sets of themes within Kurdish discourses on cultural identity, one set political and the other apolitical. The distinctions between political parties, divisions within the Kurdish Canadian community and discussions of life in Kurdistan constitute the 'political' theme. As a result of their circumstances in Kurdistan and their response, politics is a recurrent theme for the Kurds. However, it also acts as a divisive theme in terms of Kurdish identity.

The second theme is apolitical. Under this falls the dimensions of positive social relations among the Kurds, freedom and security in Canada, language and Newroz. In general, language was discussed by a number of my informants as a criteria which serves to demarcate them from other groups. In spite of the differences in dialect, as a whole the Kurdish language is distinct from others in Kurdistan and outside. The development of a pan-Kurdish language would further strengthen their identity and possibly aid their nationalist movements at home. For example, Izady (1992:179) discusses the creation of modern standard Arabic based on the classical language of the Koran, which allows Arabs in all Islamic states, from the Middle East to North Africa to communicate with one another. Prior to this development, Arabs from different corners of the Arabia and North Africa had at least as much difficulty communicating with each other as the Kurds do today (IBID).

The Kurdish New Year, Newroz, has become the one uncontested symbol for Kurdish identity. While the celebrations can be politicized, Newroz as a symbol of the Kurdish culture creates a sense of unity. The story of Newroz acts as a frame of reference which allows the Kurds to construct their history, a history separate from those around them. As Friedman (1992:837) writes, the construction of a history is the construction of a meaningful universe of events and narratives for an individual or a collectively defined subject. Whatever its origins, the myth of Newroz is a symbol of the Kurdish liberation; it is also a symbol for the Kurdish struggle in the 20th century.

Newroz takes on more significance in the present day given the current status of the Kurds. Their country has been divided into five states and those states have exerted their own cultural influence on the Kurdish people, whether subtly or by force. Nagel

(1994:164-165) points out that cultural construction is also a method for revitalizing ethnic boundaries and redefining the meaning of ethnicity. Thus, Newroz and other symbols are particularly important in Kurdistan where the Kurds have suffered the gamut from policies of forced Arabization to the denial of their very cultural existence. Symbols such as Newroz and the Kurdish language, often sanctioned in Kurdistan, are transplanted in the immigrant context. These symbols take on a new significance in that they remind the Kurds of their shared past, but also allow the Kurds to redefine their ethnicity in an immigrant context. The Kurds are separate from not only other Canadians but also other ethnic groups from the Middle East.

Finally, I would argue that a shared history of oppression is another factor which unifies the Kurds. As Bulloch and Morris (1992:221) point out, the persistence of Kurdish struggles against central authority in Kurdistan appear to show that there is a sense of common purpose in the Kurdish consciousness. Several of my informants discussed the difficulty of living in, what is to them, an occupied Kurdistan. All of them have suffered firsthand the problem of being an oppressed ethnic minority in their own home. And many of them discussed the possibilities of an independent Kurdistan. In spite of the existing factionalism, the hope of what appears to be an insurmountable obstacle of achieving independence is collective in their consciousness:

“We are all Kurds, and we all want the same things”. (Hana, July 7, 1996.)

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

Although identity is often imposed by outsiders, an ethnic group will usually refer to their identity based on their own criteria. Due to their circumstances, it appears that for the Kurds in Ottawa, there are few internal variables which they can draw from to indicate a unified collective. The existing push/pull factors are a result of their past. The Kurds are dispersed over a strategic region rich in natural resources. Their homeland, which never existed formally as a nation-state, was divided into five states after repeated conquests. The external categorizations forced upon the Kurds, and the ensuing adversities suffered as minorities within their own land has resulted in the creation of refugees. Therefore it is hardly surprising that Kurdish identity is politicized. Whether they were victims of invasions or former freedom fighters, politics is reflected in their discourse.

In the case of my informants, a consequence of this politicization is a strong sense of factionalism in the Kurdish community. Prior affinities with various political parties and ideologies, coupled with access to information regarding current developments in Kurdistan has resulted in a polarization within the community. As such, what once was an external variable has transformed into an internal constituent of Kurdish ethnic identity, represented in their narratives. If the situation in Kurdistan remains constant, such as the cultural oppression, lack of economic opportunities, the attacks on villages, then the various Kurdish political parties shall continue to agitate for autonomy or independence. Should these political parties in Kurdistan remain divided, I would surmise that the Kurds in diaspora, notably the first generation who have experienced

forced migration, may also remain polarized. However, later studies may indicate otherwise.

Despite the existing divisions in the community, my Kurdish informants have constructed an ethnic identity based on several themes. Since ethnic identity is never static, it is presumable that there will be metastasis in Kurdish identity, more specifically in the criteria they utilize to construct this identity. By examining language, the ritual of Newroz, and social relations, we can see how these themes have been both retained and transformed in the immigrant context.

Several of my informants discussed how their language was often under threat in Kurdistan. In many instances, particularly in Turkey, they were not allowed to speak Kurdish. Therefore, from the start the Kurdish language was a distinct boundary for group identity. Eriksen (1993:68) contends that conspicuous forms of boundary maintenance become important when the boundaries are under pressure. In Kurdistan, the pressures exerted were either social derision when speaking Kurdish, or attempts at coerced assimilation through the state's (Turkey's) sanctioning of the Kurdish language. As a result, the Kurdish language has become a prominent marker which differentiates them from outsiders, particularly between Kurds and other groups competing for power.

Freedom of cultural expression in Canada eliminates the political and legal threat to the survival language, which was the case in Kurdistan. But it is replaced by a demographic one. There exists the potential threat of losing the Kurdish language as a result of their moderate numbers in Canada. Subsequently, differences in dialect are overlooked in favour of the Kurdish language in general as cultural criteria. Language serves to demarcate the Kurds not only from other Canadians, but other ethnic groups.

especially those from the same region. For those who would assume by their appearance that the Kurds are Arabs, Persian, or otherwise, the Kurds have their language to distinguish them from other ethnic groups. This is especially important since the Kurds have limited tangible criteria to indicate Kurdishness. As one of my informants pointed out, “there is no flag, and Kurdistan cannot be pointed out on the map”. (Devan, July 2, 1996.)

The ritual of Newroz also undergoes slight transformations. A narrative to their communal origins, the celebration of Newroz in Turkey, like so many other manifestations of the Kurdish culture, is outlawed. In Syria, the government has also banned the festival (Chaliand 1992:87). Thus, in Canada the Kurds celebrate Newroz since they have the freedom to do so, and it serves as a reminder that they are Kurdish. It is particularly relevant in that it reminds the children of their past and their identity. Newroz celebrations involve wearing traditional dress, speaking the language and eating traditional Kurdish foods, all essential cultural criteria.

However, in Canada it appears that Newroz can act as a platform for political agendas. My informants’ discussions of Newroz generally centered on the stories, and the cultural symbols. References to past celebrations of Newroz in Kurdistan included the cultural symbols such as food, the significance of the bonfires, and the liberation of the Kurdish people as a whole. However, a few had mentioned that in Canada, there are Kurds in the community who avoid the festivals as they tended to promote certain political ideologies which they disagreed with. Having attended two Newroz festivals, from my observations (discussed earlier in the thesis) they can be politicized. Nevertheless, Newroz still functions as Kurdish cultural criteria, symbolizing a past

liberation and articulating hopes for future ones, in spite of disputes over which political party is able to fulfill this hope. More importantly, the celebration is not borrowed but indigenous to the Kurds.

A final theme, central for my informants, was social relations in the Kurdish culture. They discussed how in Kurdistan, there was a greater sense of community and cooperation in their culture. Whether the sense of community was particularly manifest to them in Kurdistan is a matter of speculation. Elements of ethnic identity, prominent in one context may be less conspicuous in another, and vice versa. As immigrants originating from a collectivist culture, the move to an individualistic one may make discrepancies in intergroup behaviour more distinct. Considering that their social networks have been disrupted due to forced migration, the idea that Canadian society has less social interaction may be enforced by the fact that compared to the interactions at home, they themselves are generally isolated. Subsequently, in an immigrant context such disparities in patterns of behaviour are employed to define themselves from others.

Despite modifications, the above themes were discussed by my informants as relevant to the construction of their ethnic identity. The Kurdish language, specific rituals and behaviour have been retained and with some alteration, have been grafted in an immigrant context. They take on added significance since other institutions such as religion, are not important to Kurdish cultural identity. For other Muslims, religion can be synonymous with ethnicity. In the case of my informants, the historical introduction of a foreign religion and the resulting sectarian differences have made Islam problematic, and certainly an insignificant criteria for boundary construction.

Finally, De Vos (1995:15) writes that a sense of common origin, of common beliefs and values, and of a common feeling of survival has been important in uniting people into self-defining in-groups. The common feeling of survival is especially significant to my informants. They all have shared experiences of persecution due to their minority status. Their culture and often their very existence has come under repeated attacks by 'others'. As an outcome, they have been forced to flee their homeland, and resettle in another country, one quite foreign to their native Kurdistan. Finally, they collectively undergo adaptation to Canadian society, and must reconstruct their identity in a new environment. All of these experiences, along with the hope of an independent Kurdistan, unite the Kurds and defines who they are.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

As asserted earlier, this thesis is not representative of the entire Kurdish Canadian community. It is merely a sample, particularly of Kurdish refugees as new Canadians. As refugees, their experiences and identity is politicized to a considerable extent. This politicization has also resulted in a certain degree of factionalism within the community. It would be interesting to conduct a study with first generation Kurdish Canadians to determine whether politics are still as salient in their identity and discourse. The first generation Kurdish Canadians are very young (infants to grade school). Obviously those born here would have no recollection of experiences in Kurdistan, and may choose alternate criteria for their identity. As Nagel (1994:153) points out, culture is not only formed, it is transformed. The Kurdish culture is no exception.

Furthermore, similar to other new refugee and immigrants groups, the first wave of Kurds must attend to the immediate task of establishing themselves, in that

employment, housing and security must be met. Therefore, they are oftentimes very occupied with the task at hand. Subsequently, it is possible that the next generation, their children, may be more receptive to non-Kurdish influences and ideas. For example, one of my informants commented:

“They (Kurdish kids) don’t know anything about the Kurdish culture; they don’t speak, most of them. Because they don’t see Kurdish people that often. ‘Dad’ is in pizza twenty-four hours a day, ‘mom’ is somewhere else. They come home, they just play Nintendo. Summertime the kids go out. They have no connection. There is nothing in common.... There is a big gap, which is really scaring me about the Kurdish community.... I see my friend, he has three kids. And there is so different a gap between them. The dad, he talks about something that his grandfather does, and it doesn’t make sense to the kids who’ve been in school in Canada. They say, ‘Daddy, what are you talking about?’ Then the dad tries to explain the story. And then the dad works pizza, he comes home tired, and he doesn’t know about computers, he has no idea of that (kind) information, or nothing about this society. That’s why there’s no connection”. (Devan, July 2, 1996.)

One possible abstract involving second and third generation Kurdish Canadians is not a loss of culture or ethnic identity, but a re-definition of identity. For example, Gans (1991) documents cases of several third generation ethnic groups, such as Jews and European Catholics in the U.S. He (1991) argues that oftentimes, for third generation immigrants, what happens is not a loss of ethnic identity but a transformation, whereby the third generation opts for what he calls ‘symbolic ethnicity’. ‘Symbolic ethnicity’ is characterized by a nostalgic allegiance to the culture of the immigrant generation (Gans 1991:9). The advantage to this is that cultural patterns which are transformed into symbols are visible and clear in meaning, but are easily expressed and felt, without requiring undue interference in other aspects of life (Gans 1991:75). For example, language maintenance may be difficult and for those trying to gain competence in the

dominant language, but a religious or secular observance, which happens once a year, may be more pragmatic.

That culture is never static is represented in the modifications in Kurdish identity construction. In the process of emigration, factors once external in Kurdistan have become internal components for group identity. Changes occurring between generations among numerous ethnic groups are well-documented in the ethnic studies literature, and the Kurds should be no exception.

APPENDIX

Research Questions

1. Age
2. How long have you lived in Canada?
3. In what country were you born?
4. Have you tried bringing relatives to Canada? Yes No.
If so, were you successful? Yes No.
5. If you were successful in bringing relatives to Canada, why do you think that is?
6. If you were unsuccessful in bringing relatives to Canada, why do you think that is?
7. Can you please tell me what it was like to grow up in Turkish Kurdistan?
8. When did you decide to leave Turkish Kurdistan and move to Canada?
9. How did you come to move to Canada? For example, what were some of your reasons for moving?
10. Can you tell me some of your experiences of moving to Canada? For example, what was it like?
11. What was your impression of Canada before you came?
12. What was your impression of Canada after you came?
13. Do you feel Canada is your home?
14. Do you ever have the sense that other Canadians treat you differently because you are from a different culture or race? Why do you think that is?
15. If you are sometimes treated differently because of your culture or race, in what ways are you treated differently from other Canadians?
16. Do you think that other Canadians have been helpful or unhelpful towards you?

THE WORD 'CULTURE' MEANS DIFFERENT THINGS TO DIFFERENT PEOPLE. I WISH TO ASK YOU ABOUT THE ASPECTS OF YOUR EXPERIENCE IN CANADA WHICH FEEL MOST UNFAMILIAR TO YOU, OR WHICH MADE YOU FEEL DISTINCTLY KURDISH. YOU ARE ALSO ASKED TO THINK ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS TO YOU TO BE KURDISH CANADIAN. THESE ARE VERY GENERAL QUESTIONS.

1. What aspects of life in Turkish Kurdistan do you miss the most?
2. What aspects of life in Canada do you like the most?
3. What aspects of life in Canada do you like the least?
4. How would you know that a Kurdish community in Canada is successfully preserving their culture? That is, what sorts of things would you look for in order to know that Kurdish culture was being preserved?
5. How would you know if a community was losing its Kurdish culture? What sorts of thing would tell you that Kurdish culture was not being preserved?

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