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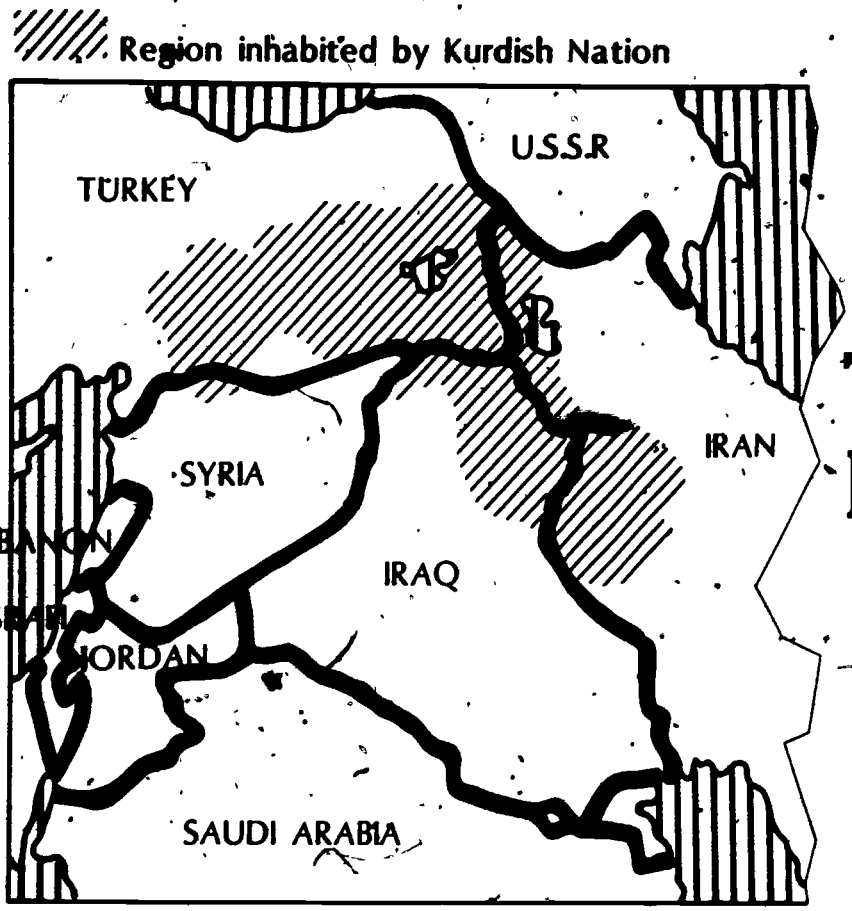
ABSTRACT

Unlike refugees from Indochina and entrants from the Caribbean, Kurdish refugees (from the border area of Turkey, Iran, and Iraq) have arrived in the United States in small numbers. However, they still face many of the same problems with language, education, employment, and cultural adjustment. This report provides information on both the physical, cultural, and educational background of the Kurds. Included is information concerning history, geography, language, religion, art, food and dress, values, customs, and social structure. After tracing these background issues, the report discusses implications for learning English as a second language and implications for orientation. This discussion of ESL education focuses on a comparison of English and Kurdish consonants and vowels, and on Kurdish stress and grammatical patterns. (JK)

Fact Sheet Series #4



The Kurds

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Refugee Fact Sheet Series #4: The Kurds

The purpose of the Refugee Fact Sheet Series is to provide background information on certain refugee groups that have recently arrived, and are still arriving, in the United States. Unlike the refugees from Indochina and the entrants from the Caribbean, these refugees have arrived in much smaller numbers. However, they still face many of the same problems with language, education, employment, and cultural adjustment.

Each Fact Sheet is divided into approximately five sections:

1. General Introduction
2. Cultural Background
3. Educational Background
4. Implications for Learning English as a Second Language (ESL)
5. Implications for Orientation.

The cultural background section of each Fact Sheet is the most inclusive; it contains information on the history, geography, language, religion, food, values and customs of the specific refugee group.

We wish to thank all of those without whose research and assistance we would not have been able to put this Fact Sheet on the Kurds together. We are especially indebted to Aly Mahmood and Cherie Mitchell for their help.

HIGHLIGHTS

Refugees The largest group of Kurdish refugees fled to Iran after the 1975 collapse of their fourteen-year resistance to the government of Iraq.

In the U.S. About a thousand of the former freedom fighters came to the United States in 1975-76 and settled in largest numbers near Nashville, Tennessee and Washington, D.C. Not many have entered since.

The Kurds The Kurds are a long-established mountain population who live in the border area of Turkey, Iran, and Iraq. They speak their own Kurdish language, although they are educated largely in Turkish, Persian, or Arabic. They are predominantly Muslims of the Sunni branch of Islam.

History From the earliest records, Kurds have been dominated by other peoples and often divided by national borders, yet they have preserved a high degree of unity in language and culture. After World War I the Kurdish population, divided for four centuries between the Turkish and Persian empires, was further partitioned among Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. In each of these countries, the regimes have in varying degrees attempted to assimilate the Kurds, who have resisted the process.

I. Introduction

The homeland of the Kurds includes the point where the boundaries of Turkey, Iran and Iraq meet. The largest number live in southeastern Turkey, and the next largest group is in Iran, but it is in Iraq that they form the greatest proportion of the national population. In addition to these three countries, a substantial number live in Syria, and smaller concentrations are found in the Soviet Caucasus and Central Asia, in Lebanon, and in Afghanistan. The three governments controlling the major tracts of Kurdish territory have tended to underestimate their Kurdish populations--perhaps from wishful thinking, since governments for centuries have found their Kurdish populations a disequilibrating element. National elites have been apprehensive of the independent and warlike stance of Kurdish tribesmen, as typified by the most famous Kurd of history, Saladdin, who made himself master of Egypt in 1171, captured Jerusalem, and stalemated the Crusade of Richard the Lion-Hearted. In earlier centuries the semi-nomadic Kurds generally remained free from interference in their border crossings or from much law enforcement in their Kurdish territories.

It is abundantly clear that Kurds constitute the second largest ethnic group in Turkey, Iraq and Syria and are third (after the Azerbaijanis) in Iran. Their approximate numbers are difficult to calculate. Figures given by those championing Kurdish causes often differ from those given by or deducible from statistics reported by governments. Even in the Soviet Union, where Kurds are a clearly recognized group in Armenia and Georgia, Kurdish nationalist writers have shown plausible evidence that in Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan Kurds have apparently been re-classified as being of the majority "nationality" (the fundamental criterion for classifying people in the U.S.S.R.). Being of Muslim background, they do blend in fairly well there, often intermarry, and are probably mostly bilingual, but many of them reputedly do maintain Kurdish customs and sense of identity.

Promoters of Kurdish causes have routinely run afoul of the governments they live under, even when no open rebellion was involved. This has produced a steady trickle of political refugees from Kurdish groups over the past few decades, most of them going to western Europe.

The major recent Kurdish uprising in Iraq was heavily underwritten by the Iranian government until Iran reached a (momentary) understanding with Iraq and withdrew support for the rebels in 1975. There then came a mass exodus of Kurds, many of whom gave up their struggle and crossed the border into Iran. A few of these, about a thousand, were admitted to the U.S. as "Middle East refugees" from late 1975 through 1976--the only appreciable group of Kurds ever to enter

this country. The largest concentration is around Nashville, Tennessee, and quite a few are in northern Virginia near Washington, D.C.; others live in North Dakota and California.

It seems inevitable that there will be more Kurdish political refugees, and that in the future they will be most likely to seek a home in the United States, now that there are recognizable pockets of Kurds already here. Whether any sizeable groups might be able to escape their predicaments in the countries with large Kurdish populations must remain a matter for speculation.

II. Cultural Background

A. History

The Kurds are widely believed to be the descendants of the Medes of antiquity. The principal support for this theory is that Kurds occupy some of the ancient Median territories; but any firm evidence of a direct line of descent is yet to be discovered. What does appear certain is that the ancestors of the Kurds must have been among the horse breeding Aryan tribes that appeared on the Iranian plateau around 900 B.C.

612 B.C. - A.D. 641

After the conquest of Nineveh in 612 by the Median king Uvakhshatra (known through the Greeks as Cyaxeres), the Kurds were a part of the Median and then the Persian empires. In general, they were thereafter subject to whoever ruled Iran, although their homelands were, then as now, often part of a border area, so that some of them--as boundaries shifted--must have come at times within the Roman Empire or within an independent Armenian kingdom.

We do know that the Parthian empire which ruled most of Iran from 114 B.C. to A.D. 226 had a vassal state, Gordyene, whose name suggests that it was Kurdish. It was located west of Lake Urmia and south of Lake Van.

645 - 954

After the Arab conquest of the Iranian Sassanid empire and the conversion of the Kurdish areas to Islam, a major concern of the Caliphate was securing its frontier with the Byzantine Empire. Military colonies of Kurds were established near the border. Before this time there had probably been no Kurds in the upper Euphrates watershed, particularly the valley of the Murut River.

951 - 1096

In a period of fragmented authority, we begin to meet principalities with Kurdish rulers. There are numerous instances of a Kurdish leader leaving home to make good elsewhere and using his tribal supporters to establish his dominion

in other regions--even as Saladdin did later on. Two dynasties, however, were founded in areas that included considerable Kurdish populations. These were the Merwanids, whose capital was Diyarbekir in the upper Tigris valley, and the Hassanweihids, with a realm reaching from Kirkuk in Iraq to Hammadan in Iran. None of the Kurdish-ruled states had a particularly Kurdish flavor: they were all nominally loyal to the Baghdad Caliph, but not necessarily to the "Buwayhid" Sultans (Persians ruling from Shiraz) who actually controlled the Caliph's administration; the rule of the largely Kurdish principalities was modeled on that of the Caliphate court, and they fostered Arabic rather than Kurdish poetry.

1096 - 1502

This period is marked by three major incursions by invaders from central Asia who washed over everything in their way and established strong imperial regimes. However, each time centralized control was relaxed in more remote areas, semi-independent feudal Kurdish states reappeared.

1514 - 1914

For the next 400 years the Kurdish population was divided (approximately three parts to one) between Ottoman Turkey and Shiite Persia--roughly along the present western border of Iran. Kurdish allies of the Ottoman Sultan were set up as vassals of the Ottoman Empire, ruling internally autonomous districts. At least five of these were presumably to be considered as sovereign states.

In Persia, also, Kurdish feudal rulers enjoyed a great deal of freedom from central government interference.

Both empires made extensive use of Kurdish troops--often against each other. The present-day Kurds in and near Soviet Turkmenistan and those in Afghanistan were settled as military colonies to protect border areas of the Persian empire. The regiments of Kurdish cavalry organized in 1890 in Turkey as an instrument of the Sultan's personal power were the final instance of such reliance.

The Kurdish principalities cultivated literature and the arts to a considerable extent and developed a sense of Kurdish destiny. In 1596, Sharaf Khan, the Emir of Bitlis, composed--in Persian--a history of the Kurds, the Sharafnama. The great national epic in Kurdish, the Memozin by Ahmed Khani, appeared in 1695.

In the nineteenth century the Turkish government's desire to extend control came in conflict with apparently heightening aspirations of Kurds, and the result was a series of Kurdish "rebellions" put down only with considerable difficulty. During the 1840's direct Turkish rule was imposed on the Kurdish emirates, of which Bitlis was last to be suppressed. Similarly, the autonomy of Ardelan in Persia was eliminated in 1865.

1920 to Present

The 1920 Treaty of Sevres provided for an independent Kurdistan; however, the rise of Mustafa Kemal (the Ataturk), in conjunction with the Lausanne treaty of 1923 which left most of the Ottoman Empire's Kurds inside the Turkish Republic, made this an unfulfilled dream on the part of the Kurds. A 1925 League of Nations decision finally added almost all of the largely Kurdish province of Mosul to the new nation of Iraq. Syria also included a Kurdish population living along the border with Turkey.

In earlier days the turbulent Kurds of their frontier regions had been at times an irritant to both Sultan and Shah, but to the nation-building Kemalist Turkey, Pahlavi Iran and independent Iraq, the divisiveness of their Kurdish populations was well-nigh intolerable.

In Turkey, various areas of Kurdistan flared into revolts that were put down with stern measures, including the deportation of restive populations to central Turkey. After 1938 a firm lid was kept on all manifestations of Kurdish identity, not without frequent periods of active repression, even as late as 1973. Until 1965 the Kurdish regions were off-limits to all foreigners. Any specifically Kurdish cultural activity is still firmly discouraged by the government.

In Iran, after a 1946 uprising, the Shah's regime attempted to keep the Kurds settled, superficially modernized, and as much as possible homogenized with other Iranians. There were periodic round-ups of Kurdish activists and military operations against guerilla movements. From 1959 on, the Tehran government did, however, allow publication of a weekly paper in Kurdish, and it used the language regularly in radio broadcasts, thus giving some recognition to the Kurds as a distinct cultural entity. With the overthrow of the Shah's government, Kurds looked for more benevolent treatment, but soon found that that was not to be forthcoming except for some improvements in rural education. To the militant Shiite leadership of the Iranian revolution, the adherence of most Kurds to Sunni Islam raised an additional barrier to accomodation of their aspirations, one that had been of only minor significance before.

In Iraq, the rights of the Kurds to autonomy had received international recognition in 1922. The initial Iraqi local-language law of 1926 provided for the teaching of Kurdish in the schools. These were only the first of numerous promises which, on paper, gave the Kurds almost everything that could be reasonably expected. Repeatedly, however, concessions were not implemented, or were limited to part of the Kurdish-speaking areas, or were otherwise restrained (as by allowing Kurdish instruction only in the primary grades). This tantalizing

treatment engendered continual dissidence. Kurds were in rebellion a great deal between 1922 and 1975. The last rebellion (1974-75) produced a flow of refugees into Iran during hostilities, and also when most of the Kurdish army gave up the struggle following the withdrawal of Iranian support after the Algiers agreement of March 5, 1975. At its height, this exodus may have totalled 300,000, of whom about three-quarters returned after things quieted down. Small-scale guerilla operations against the Iraqi forces resumed the following year. (Until 1979 they received some support from Syria.) The government of Iraq, for its part, deported Kurdish populations from strategic and frontier areas.

The Kurds of Iraq are allowed a degree of national life beyond that permitted in neighboring countries, but still of a very limited sort.

B. Geography

The territory inhabited by Kurds is largely convoluted mountain ranges, and much of it is inaccessible. It is composed principally of parts of the Armenian Plateau and eastern Taurus mountains in Turkey and the northern Zagros mountains of the Iran-Iraq border. A great deal of the terrain consists of rather barren hillsides with scattered and fairly scrubby oak forests. River valleys in contrast are quite fertile, growing many fruit trees and large quantities of grapes.

The climate is severe. In northern parts of Kurdistan and even rather far south in the Zagros range, temperatures fall to -20°F in the winter and exceed 100°F in the summer. Much of Iraqi Kurdistan is less elevated, and although summers are hot, it has less climatic variation, supports a denser population, and near the Tigris River is much easier for travel and communication.

Precipitation comes mainly in the winter, largely as snow, mostly at high altitudes. The Kurdish mountain areas are better watered than adjacent parts of the Middle East, but the extent of their fertile land is too meager to make them a major agricultural region.

C. Livelihood

Kurds are predominantly a peasant population, depending primarily on wheat and barley for their subsistence. In some areas rice will grow well. The principal cash crop of the region is tobacco. Chickens are commonly raised, and of course as in other Muslim areas, pigs are not. Their flocks of sheep and goats provide the cheese and yogurt that are their main protein sources, and of course wool and goat hair for cloth. Kurdistan is drastically overgrazed--but so is most of the rest of the Middle East and North Africa. At the beginning of this century a large proportion of the Kurds were nomadic or semi-nomadic pastoralists, but the number of these has sharply declined. Flocks are still

moved up to summer pastures, but their circulation is much more restricted than it used to be. Before 1914 herds were moved to land that was considered common tribal property, and even back and forth between Turkish and Persian territory. Governmental restrictions on pastoral mobility have tended to worsen the ecological balance.

In recent years there has been heavy migration from the rural Kurdish areas. In Turkey as well as Iraq, the oil fields have attracted many Kurdish workers. The unskilled labor force in large Turkish cities includes a major proportion of Kurds. A similar situation occurs in Baghdad (Iraq), Mosul (Iraq), Tehran (Iran). Some urban Kurds have specialized as bricklayers, butchers, cattle dealers and small traders.

Particularly in the northern and eastern parts of Kurdistan, as well as in the retinues of feudal leaders, horse raising and horsemanship were tremendously important Kurdish activities. In some places, on a much reduced scale, this still continues as a focus of cultural interest. In most parts of this area, however, donkeys have been a much more prevalent means of transportation.

D. Language

The Kurdish language is a relative of Persian (Farsi). Both belong to the western half of the Iranian branch of the Indo-European family of languages (and in fact probably to the same subset of Western Iranian languages). While the recognition of many related words is easy, the two languages are not close enough to allow immediate understanding.

English and Kurdish, as fellow members of the Indo-European family, are remotely related, and some common words are still recognizable as cognates:

bra	'brother'	moder	'mother'	dot	'daughter'
min	'me, my'	to	'thou'	du	'two'
der	'door'	dem	'time'	naw	'name'
mishk	'mouse'	new	'new'		

Both Persian and Kurdish have borrowed a great many words from Arabic. Many religious, legal, and economic terms are from this source, but Arabic vocabulary extends to all aspects of life.

There are two major dialect areas of Kurdish speech, a northwestern and a southeastern. The more widely-used northwestern dialect prevails in Turkey, Syria, and the Soviet Caucasus, while the majority of Kurds in Iraq and Iran are speakers of the southeastern type. Writers disagree as to the degree of difference between the two types of Kurdish--some feeling these should be considered

as separate languages, with others maintaining that Kurds from either side of the line can readily communicate with the other group. (The two areas show numerous differences in pronunciation, vocabulary, and even grammar. One characteristic difference is that speakers of northwestern Kurdish distinguish az 'I' from min 'me', but in the southeastern area min is used for both.) The northwestern dialects, as would be expected, are more influenced by Turkish languages. The resemblances to Azerbaijani seem to be greater than those to Turkish where the two are different, indicating that most of the influence was premodern. Less expectedly, the northwestern dialects have borrowed some Arabic sounds that are not used in the southeastern speech.

The southeastern dialect, essentially as spoken in Sulaimaniyah (Kurdish Silêmani) has become the standard for public use among Kurds in Iraq. Its written form of writing has also been utilized in radio and publications in Iran--curtailed though these may be.

In Syria, where there was no repression of Kurdish life until 1959, a moderate amount of literature appeared using a generalized northwestern dialect in a Latin alphabet, with sound values closely following the modern spelling system for Turkish. Whatever written use of Kurdish exists in Turkey is clandestine, but it also utilizes this alphabet. It is very easy for Kurds with any degree of literacy in Turkish to read their native language in this form. Kurdish nationalists have reported that, since the permitted reopening of Koranic schools in Turkey in 1955, the religious teachers in Kurdish villages--in addition to instruction in Arabic and the reading of the Koran--often teach surreptitiously the reading of selections from the major authors of traditional Kurdish poetry.

In the Soviet Union a standard language was developed based on the northern western dialect of the Kurds near Erevan (the capital of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic). After some earlier experimentation in Arabic and Armenian alphabets, and the use of a Latin alphabet from 1929 to 1945, a modified Russian (Cyrillic) alphabet was established. The government has promoted extensive publication of books and periodicals at a press in Erevan.

Among Kurds, skillful use of language is highly valued. Witty repartee is reckoned a significant social asset. The Armenian writer Abovian remarked that: "Every Kurd, man or woman, is a poet."

E. Religion

The mainstream of the development of Islam has been the Sunni tradition, to which most Kurds adhere. The other great branch, the Shiites, arose originally as political claimants of the right of the descendants of Ali and Fatima (the

daughter of Muhammad) to be the leaders of Islam. Over the centuries theological, legal, and devotional differences developed between the two divisions, and the Shiites were further split into several sects. When Persia became officially Shiite at the beginning of the sixteenth century, Kurds remained staunchly Sunni. In Iran this sets them off sharply from the Persians, Azerbaijanis, and Lurs.

In orthodox Sunni circles, four separate traditions developed involving differences in legal principles and ritual practices (especially purification). The Kurds follow the Shafi'i school--originally taught in legal circles in Damascus. In the Ottoman Empire the Hanafi interpretation--originating in Baghdad--was official; by this fact Kurds were somewhat marked off from the Turks and from their Sunni Arab neighbors of Northern Iraq. (Arabs of southern Iraq are largely Shiites.)

Mystically-oriented Moslems developed practices designed to make them aware of a closeness to God. In the twelfth century such practitioners crystallized into organized groups, usually under an authoritarian leader (whom we might today, on the Indian model, term a "guru").

The participants are called "sufis" or "dervishes," and the groups are usually referred to in English as "orders" or "brotherhoods," although the Arabic term for them literally means "path." These brotherhoods, usually named for their founders, have been influential in the religious life of almost all Islamic countries, and they have provided a focus for much of religious life in Kurdistan as well. A great many Kurdish men participated at least occasionally in their observances. The "path" referred to as Naqishbendi is most widespread here, even though its practices were not introduced among Kurds until 1808--not without opposition from the earlier-established Qadiri "path," which remains next in importance. In Turkey there are some Kurdish followers of the somewhat more modern-oriented Tijani "path" (whose founder lived until 1815 in North Africa).

Sufi teachers who are also descendants of Muhammad (seyid) are considered the most authoritative. The local religious leader (mela), often the only literate individual in the community, was traditionally the only principal provider of education and a main link with the outside world.

Kurds differ from other Middle Eastern Muslims most sharply in regard to the status of women. Kurdish women were never veiled except during parts of the marriage ceremonies; they freely associated with men in most social interactions; if there were no obvious qualified male heir, a woman often assumed tribal leadership.

Although Kurds consider themselves loyal followers of Islam, their neighbors have often taken a dim view of their practices and looked on them as "Moslem" in name only.

A considerable number of Kurds belong to the Yezidi sect (Daseni in Kurdish), referred to by their enemies as "devil worshipers." They represent a development within Islam which acquired elements from numerous other sources, including a belief in the reincarnation of souls. There remain around 50,000 of this often persecuted group in northern Iraq near the Turkish border and some in Syria. The Kurds of Soviet Armenia and Georgia are (or were) almost entirely Yezidi, presumably having moved to the fringe of Kurdish settelment to escape the persecutions of the seventeenth century.

F. Art

The rug weaving of the Kurds has been the principal art that has attracted outside recognition. Other crafts practiced include embroidery, leather working, and metal ornamentation, particularly inlaying on copper.

G. Food and Dress

Boiled wheat (bulghur) is the traditional staple although rice now tends to be preferred where it is available. A type of wafer bread is eaten mostly for breakfast; any kind of grain cooked in whey is considered a Kurdish specialty. Cheese is made from the whole milk of sheep and goats and also from buttermilk. The slaughter of stock for meat is limited to special occasions. A wide variety of vegetables is grown, with cucumbers being particularly common. Melons and orchard fruits are both fairly plentiful. From the extensive vineyards an abundance of raisins and a sort of grape jam are produced. Tea is the usual beverage.

There is no single type of Kurdish national costume; rather, considerable variation is reported from different areas. Men often wear a blue silk turban, a red sash around the waist, and on important occasions, an embroidered vest. There is a Kurdish proclivity for wearing daggers. At least in towns, both Turkey and Iran have tried to prevent the Kurds from wearing ethnically identifiable garb. Many a male villager keeps a Western-style hat to use only when about to enter a market town.

Three generations ago the typical Kurdish headgear was a white, conical, felt hat. In recent times these have been noted as being worn mostly by children.

H. Festivities

Marriages are the greatest occasion for celebrations in traditional Kurdish life. Weddings are usually scheduled to take place in either spring or fall.

The highlight of the observance is a public procession with much fanfare from the home of the bride to the home of the groom. After her entrance into the groom's residence, she sits quietly veiled in a corner of a room while the guests are feasted outside and engage in many of the wide variety of Kurdish folk dances accompanied by their traditional music--found "haunting" by most western listeners. Where the equestrian tradition is kept up, there will be exhibits of horsemanship. (The signing of the legally binding Islamic marriage contract occupies only an inconspicuous part in the proceedings.)

The birth of a child is the occasion for a feast given by the parents and their relatives. The birth of a first son receives the greatest recognition.

Nowadays, males are generally circumcised during the first week after birth by the local religious leader. In some places a more traditional practice of circumcising boys around the age of ten continues. Where this takes place, it also calls for a major festivity.

In the yearly cycle, the most significant event is the observance of the Persian New Year (Kurdish nwerroz) at the time of the spring equinox (March 21). It is a period for special foods, fireworks, dancing, singing, poetry recitation, and an emphasis on Kurdish ethnicity. (It is also associated with superstitious observances to insure a fortunate ensuing year.) Nwerroz far outshines any of the purely Islamic festivals such as the "breaking up of fasting: after the end of the month of Ramadan (during which no nourishment is to be taken during daylight), or the celebration of the birth of Muhammad (on the twelfth day of the third month of the seasonally-shifting Islamic lunar year). The latter is the most religiously-oriented holiday for Kurds. A great many Kurdish poems have been written for recitation at that time to honor the Prophet and evoke the Islamic heritage of Kurdistan.

Among pastoralists, celebrations were traditional at lambing time, before the move of the herds to summer pasture, in the mountains at shearing time, and preeminently, at the time of return to village living in the fall. No longer does life revolve around these activities, but they still mark the seasons in rural areas, and provide an opportunity for entertaining.

I. Names

Kurdish names are largely of Arabic origin, having a religious significance or belonging to prominent figures in the early history of Islam. There are Persian names, too, mostly those of the heroes of Persian history and legend. Uniquely Kurdish names are relatively few. It is usually the mother who decides what name to give the child.

Family names are not a longstanding tradition among Kurds. Those living in Turkey, like the rest of their fellow-countrymen, were obliged to acquire surnames under Ataturk. There and elsewhere the family names most used were originally designations of tribes or segments of tribes or of geographic locations.

J. Social Structure

The tribal organization of the Kurds was traditionally of overwhelming importance, and in rural areas still continues to be a major element of social stability. Each tribe normally had several sub-tribes made up of a number of local lineages whose households were set up not far from one another. Depending on the area and the strength of certain feudal leaders, federations of tribes existed and there were even larger groupings with a rather vague sense of alliance.

The mutually reinforcing feudal relationship of an agha and his adherents tended to become more exploitative in modern times. It has been the traditional prerogative of tribal leaders to assign the use of lands considered as communal property, which was later often recognized by the government as outright ownership.

They also continued to receive payments for services they had ceased providing to those under them. They no longer realistically furnished a military force, nor did they any longer have to maintain a continual open house and feed any of their followers who appeared on the scene--probably once a significant redistributional mechanism.

Each nuclear family unit still maintains a close bond to the husband's lineage, but not of the pervasive nature often found in patrilineal societies. Arrangements for marriage are usually commenced by an informal engagement between the couple themselves. Parents can veto a marriage, and an elopement would create a complete social rift, but usually parents go along with their offspring's wishes. Even when the new couple lives in the husband's father's house, they quite often set up separate housekeeping and cooking facilities.

III. Educational Background

In contrast to the prevailing low level of literacy among Kurds, those who have settled in this country are said to possess, in general, a high school education. Whatever education Kurds have obtained has in most cases been achieved with great effort. Educational facilities are nowhere plentiful in the Kurdish territories. Where they do exist, classes have been conducted in

foreign languages--Turkish, Persian, or Arabic--languages associated with oppressors. Even the elementary education in Kurdish in Iraq in recent years has not been without the shadow of attempts at Arabization.

IV. Implications for Learning English as a Second Language

A. Pronunciation of Consonants

Kurdish has several types of consonant sounds not used in English, and pronunciation presents a formidable hurdle to an American attempting to master it. Fortunately, though, there are sounds in Kurdish similar to most of the English consonants.

Kurdish does lack sounds like those spelled with th in English--voiceless as in thin, voiced as in then. In fact, sounds like these are regarded as peculiarly un-Kurdish. Such sounds are, however, used in Iraqi Arabic and in the Classical Arabic of Koran reading, and almost all Kurds from Iraq and the nearer parts of other countries have learned to pronounce them. Kurdish r is quite similar to the r used in pronouncing very in England, although quite unlike American r.

B. Vowels

The Kurdish vowel system is much simpler than that of English, and American vowel sounds are likely to prove a substantial problem in pronunciation.

There are five of the vowels in Kurdish--at an earlier time long vowels--which are quite stable in pronunciation and are to some extent available as models for English pronunciation:

u as in du	"two"	not unlike English do
i as in si	"thirty"	not unlike English see
a as in la	"side"	not unlike English la
e as in se	"three"	requires a final y sound like English say
o as in no	"nine"	requires a final w sound like English know

(In some dialects of northwestern Kurdish o has become u, and u has shifted to a sound like French u.)

The three historically short vowels, u, i, e, vary a good deal in pronunciation according to which syllable of a word they occur in, and what sounds come before and after them. Their pronunciation also changes from region to region more than that of the set described above.

u as in gu "flower" much as in English full

(In Kurdish Kurd has a vowel sound suggesting its older spelling in English,

Koord, rather than the word eurd.)

i as in min "me" — may be somewhat like English Min, but commonly more like Englishmen.

e as in esp "horse" — commonly similar to English asp, but may wander towards the vowels of English cusp or chest

Kurds may be expected to have problems pronouncing and distinguishing the English "short" vowels of bit, bet, bat, but, as well as the vowel of bought, since there is not a good Kurdish analog for it.

C. Stress Patterns

Kurdish words are normally stressed on the last syllable unless the last syllable is an inflectional suffix among which is included the indefinite marker -ek 'a'. There are exceptions, but probably not sufficient variants to prepare learners for the diverse stress patterns found in English words.

D. Grammar

We will mention here only a few of the outstanding instances where producing English according to Kurdish models may cause difficulties:

1. Kurdish has a multi-purpose connector -i (after a vowel, -y) that serves for of, or other English prepositions, and in certain instances for that (who, which):

tishk-i rooz	the rays of the sun
gewre-y ek	the leader of the tribe
em ishe-y to	this deed of yours
kichek-i chwarde sa	a girl of fourteen years
tewqek-i a tun	a collar of gold
sebeb-i'em ishe	the reason for this deed
ew sheweke-y Serjo	that night in Serjo
henjir-i Zengar	figs from Sinjar
pyaweke-y hat	the man that arrived

In Kurdish this connector is also used with an adjective (which follows the nouns):

minal-i pickuk	small children
tire-y rresh	black grapes
pyawek-i aza	a brave man
bayek-i tung	a fierce wind

By taking of to be the equivalent of i, Kurds may be led to say "grapes of black" or "a man of brave" or the like.

2. Pronoun subjects are used only for emphasis in Kurdish, since the inflectional suffixes serve to indicate the meaning:

Nustim.	I slept.	Min nustim.	I slept.
Kird.	He did it.	Aw kird.	He did it.

3. The normal order in a full Kurdish sentence is: Subject--Object--Verb, unlike the Subject--Verb--Object order of English.

Pyaweke segeke ekuze.	The man is killing the dog.
To chi ekey?	What are you doing?

4. The most extraordinary facet of Kurdish grammar is the fact that the suffixes which indicate the actor associated with a transitive verb in past tenses do not normally appear on the verb, but on the first major constituent after the subject. Most typically this is the direct object.

Du helke m khward.	I ate two eggs.
Sewek i der hena.	He brought an apple.
Ma m yan weran kird.	They ruined my house.

It may also be connected to various other sentence parts:

Chon tan zani?	How did you (all) know?
Wa man kird.	We did it that way.
Yekek le derga y da.	Someone knocked at the door.
Kurr ne y hesht.	The boy didn't allow it.

(Other patterns of shifting also occur. Note the example:

Pe yan bakhshi m λ	They presented it to me.

The Kurdish patterns may make for some uncertainty in the use of the sole English suffix showing subject-verb agreement, the third person s, or in the appearance of redundant subject pronouns; on the other hand, it might serve as the basis for some insight into the mobility of the English possessive 's, as in: The Mayor of Dublin's hat.

V. Implications for Orientation

While the Kurds are by and large a peasant population, those who reach the western world as refugees are likely to be educated, somewhat aware of western ideas, and braced for the fact that almost everyone in a country such as the

United States habitually does many things considered outrageous in the traditional Islamic world.

Approaches to Kurdish refugees would seem to need to be based on two complementary sets of understandings: first, that they are Moslems and in general deeply committed to their religion; but, second, that they are not Arab, and not everything one may have read about the customs of Islam can be applied to them without further refinement.

It is also helpful to remember that Kurds are deeply conscious of the repression that has been directed against them in most places where they have lived, and feel that the attitude of western countries towards their plight has alternated between neglect and betrayal.

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