

The Doubly Bound World of Kurdish Women

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The original caption of this picture, which appeared in the 2000 Amnesty International wall calendar, tells us that it is of “Kurdish refugees” as they “collect wood for heating, village of Doganli, Turkish Kurdistan 1997.” While other women trudge through the snow behind her, a woman has taken a moment out of her task of burden-carrying to pose for the camera. Most likely at the behest of the photographer, she affects a needy, helpless person reaching out for assistance.

By the most commonly - accepted definition, a refugee is a person who has been granted protection from violence after crossing a state border. Such people rarely live in villages; they are usually housed in cities or in camps. The women in the picture are residents of a village built by the Turkish army after it



Photograph courtesy © of Sebastiao Salgado (Amazonas Images/Contact Press Images), All Rights Reserved. “Kurds in Doganli, Turkish Kurdistan, 1997.”

destroyed their homes in its conflict with Kurdish separatists. The image shows them gathering wood, most likely for use as fuel. This suggests the agrarian lifestyle that Kurds, and other people in the region's villages, have lived for centuries. While not materially rich, this life is nevertheless one in which people meet their own needs through cash-cropping, subsistence agriculture, and gathering, as the women are doing in the picture.

If a careful reading of this photograph and its caption thus suggests self-sufficiency to a greater degree than it suggests flight and dependency, and that the women are not "refugees" in the conventional sense of the term, no doubt there is a reason Amnesty International chose this image for its wall calendar, which is distributed annually all over the world: a list of the world's most famously battered ethnic groups would surely include the Kurds somewhere near the top. A disproportionate number of Kurds have become refugees and asylum seekers or displaced within their own countries. Around 25 million Kurds (perhaps more, perhaps fewer, since reliable census data does not exist) live mainly in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. As many as one million may now live in the West, mainly in Western Europe. Most went to the West in search of refuge.

This essay is about situatedness: the situatedness of the Kurds in global and regional context, of Kurdish girls and women within the larger body politic of Kurdish communities. Kurdish girls and women live in a double bind. As Kurds, they suffer the effects of political instability and repression. The sources of these are multiple, and implicate everyone from consumers of oil to Western governments. Until very recently, one source, Saddam Hussein and his government, loomed largest over the Kurds I know. Fear, displacement, and violence have been a way of life for many Kurdish girls and women. Hundreds of thousands were victimized on Saddam's orders. Secondly, Kurdish girls and women suffer the effects of being females in a heavily male-dominated society in which their movements and achievements are restricted, sometimes violently such as in the case of honor killings.

I have chosen to tell their story through the lens of my own situatedness as a female Western anthropologist studying the Kurds and living in the Arab world. As I show, the lines between the Kurds' experience and that of my own have become blurred, and this has recently made for some rich moral dilemmas. As I have spent time with the

Kurds I too have experienced the binds of working under political repression and a restrictive gender system.

My entrée into the world of the Kurds began in the mid-1990s in California when I was searching for a research topic in cultural anthropology. I was interested in social change in traditional societies when the local population of Kurds caught my attention. The Kurds I met in California were mainly from Iraq, and it seemed all of them reported having suffered and fled, in most cases from the Iraqi government. When I learned that their traditional homeland had enjoyed relative political stability and openness to the outside world since the 1991 Gulf War, I decided to try to carry out my research there.

At the time, the Kurdish part of northern Iraq was not under the control of the Baghdad government; a Kurdish administration governed behind an internal border enforced in the air by the U.S., Britain, France and Turkey. People who were not of Iraqi origin, such as myself, were only allowed out of Turkey and into the region in conjunction with the relief and development efforts there. After lobbying several NGOs by fax, phone, and email, I eventually found one that would allow me to visit northern Iraq under its auspices. In return for pledging to generate data that would benefit the local population served by the NGO, I received border-crossing authorization.

On my first trip in 1995, I stayed for five weeks during which I secured permission from the Kurdish authorities to conduct research, and learned as much as I could about the social environment so as to design a research project that I would start the following year. I remember very well the day I first crossed from Turkey to Iraq at the Habur border-crossing. I hired a driver to take me from Diyarbakir, the main city in Turkey's Kurdish area, to the border a few hours away. At the border my luggage was copiously searched by gruff border guards as we waited in the scorching heat. Finally I crossed the bridge, where I was met by a representative from the NGO, an American man who worked as a veterinarian.

My first discussions with the American NGO personnel involved where I would stay, and this was determined by the local gender conventions. I had made it clear in correspondence that I wanted to be as immersed as possible in the local social environment, and I therefore insisted on living with Kurds. As a young unmarried female, however, there were few households

The future is uncertain, but one important thing is certain: that Saddam and his regime is out ... nothing worse than that could happen to us in the future.

Testimonials and Interviews

that qualified. If I lived in a household that included one or more men, I would be the object of sexual gossip by the watching community. This would cause social problems not only for me, but for the host family. Households without men were few and far between.

One such household existed of which the NGO personnel were aware, and they had arranged for me to live there during my stay. A woman around the age of fifty who had been widowed several years earlier lived with five of her twelve children, daughters who ranged in age from early teens to early twenties. I was not the first outsider to live with them; they hosted another American, a woman who worked as a nurse for an NGO. Over the following five weeks the seven of them gave me a crash course in local mores. I hired one of the daughters as a translator and assistant. She and I made numerous visits to homes, NGOs, and the offices of local officials as I worked out the details of my research topic and settled on a plan that I would implement beginning the following summer. I returned to the US with plans to begin the following year with six months of language study followed by a year of residence in a village examining how villagers interacted with and understood the presence of international NGOs.

From the start, my introduction to Kurds and Kurdishness centered around the world of Kurdish girls and women. For me, the most striking feature of life for the girls and women I lived among was its restrictiveness. During the initial weeks I struggled to learn the rules. I learned that it was considered uncouth to be seen eating in public, to walk alone anywhere, to chew gum in the presence of a man, or to drive a car. My research assistant and I took taxis and rode the bus around town, but she was very careful about where we went, and we reported all of our movements to her mother when we returned. Whenever possible, we stopped by her brother's shop near the main souq. A chat of a few minutes sufficed, and showed him and the watching community that we were not engaging in any unsanctioned behavior. As I got to know more people, I began to see this family as relatively liberal in its ways. In other households, the female members were even more restricted, and it is likely that in many families, the older members, both male and female, would have prevented any female members of the household from working with me.

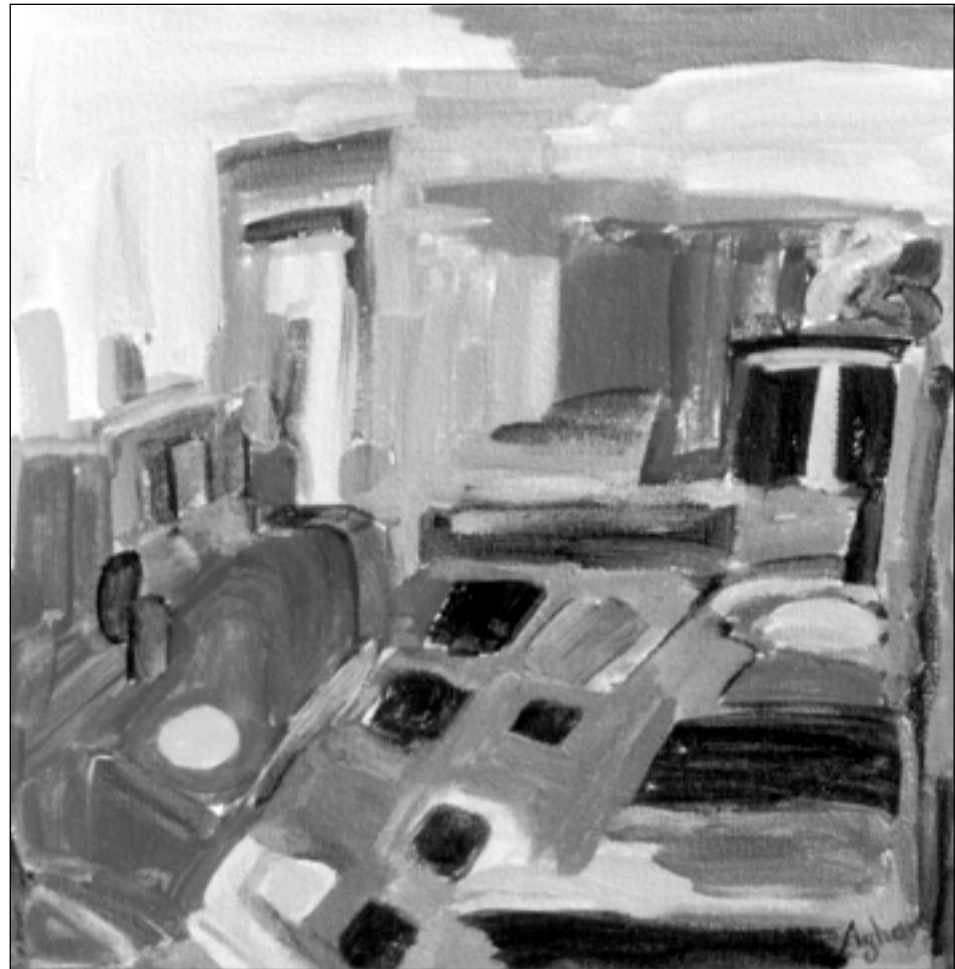
... Even though Iraqi Kurdistan has been free from Saddam for the past 12 years, we were not free from the fear of him.

In 1996 I attempted to return to Iraq to begin my language study and fieldwork as planned, but arrived just as the Habur border was closed due to an incursion by the Iraqi army into the Kurdish area. I waited in Turkey for the political situation to stabilize and for the border to reopen, but neither happened as I waited for two months. Carrying out my research in Turkey was impossible due to the political repression of Kurds there, which was much in evidence. As an outsider associated with Kurds, I was also considered suspect. I was followed regularly by the secret police, interrogated in a threatening manner, and heard many testimonies from local Kurds of Turkey's violent repression. Faced with all of this, I made an unplanned trip back to the US. Determined to continue my trajectory of learning the Kurdish language and culture even if I was displaced, I visited a refugee English course for women and asked for their help. One woman told me that her husband was away working in another city, that she was living alone with her six children, and that I was welcome to come and live with her. I thus took up residence in my second Kurdish household, this time in California. Again, gender conventions dictated where I lived and among whom I associated. My host made it clear that I was able to stay only because her husband was away for an extended period. She guarded her movements and those of her teenage daughter in a manner similar to what I had observed in Iraq.

A few months later I was hired by a refugee resettlement agency as a counselor for Kurds evacuated from Iraq as a result of the same events that had prevented me from crossing the border from Turkey. The group I counseled had been employees of the NGO that had initially invited me to northern Iraq. We marveled at the unanticipated turn of events that led to our being together again, this time on the other side of the world.

In 1997 I tried again to return to Iraq. After waiting for two more months for border-crossing permission through Syria, I was finally successful. The moment I actually crossed the border is etched in my memory as a kind of homecoming. My involuntary displacement from

the Kurdish region the year before, and attempts to reconstruct a Kurdish experience elsewhere, had rendered this "authentic" Kurdish locale highly desirable to me. I understood the longings for homeland that I had heard from diaspora Kurds with a new potency, one rooted in similar experiences.



"Interiors"
by Azhar Shemdin.
Winner of the Alice Peck
Art Award, a juried
exhibit in Burlington,
Ontario, Canada

know of no female Kurdish colleagues in my field of anthropology.) I want more Kurdish artists like my friend Azhar Shemdin, who recently wrote to me, "I, as a person and artist, cherish my free spirit and individualism and detach my judgment on things from the influence of relatives and groups whatever they are. I paint what I see and experience, or read about. I try to look at the posi-

tive things that come out of misery, and try to heal life's wounds by taking refuge in nature." Azhar paints Kurdish subjects, yes, but more importantly she paints human subjects. She paints life and death. She paints tolerance. She paints pain. She paints beauty. You can see her art on the web. There are so many ways to tell the story.

End Notes

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