

Kurdish Culture



Researched by:

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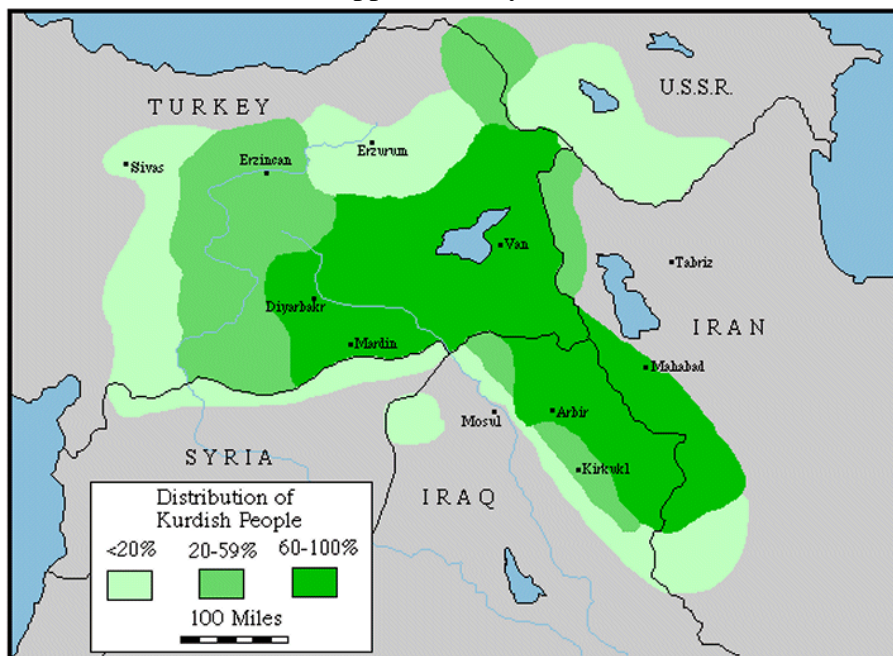
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I. Description of Culture

A. Demographics

- There are between 30-35 million Kurds living in various countries around the world.
- Fourth largest ethnic group in the Middle East and the largest ethnic minority without a homeland in the world.
- Many Kurdish people are of Indo-European descent.
- 52% of the Kurdish population lives in **Turkey**.
- 25.5% of the Kurdish population lives in **Iran**.
- 16% of the Kurdish population lives in **Iraq**.
- 5% of the Kurdish population lives in **Syria**.
- 1.5% of the Kurdish population lives in the **Commonwealth of Independent States**. (These countries include Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan.)
- There are smaller Kurdish communities located in **Israel**.
- In the United States there are large Kurdish communities in Tennessee, California, Texas, and New York.
- In Maine there are approximately seven Kurdish families.



B. Brief History

- The roots of the Kurdish culture can be traced back 8,000 years to the region known as Mesopotamia.
- Archaeologists have traced the development of agriculture, domestication of animals, metallurgy, weaving, fired pottery, and development of a record keeping system to the Kurdish who inhabited this region.

- During medieval times the Kurdish people established independent Kurdish principalities, often times based on clans or tribes.
- When the Ottoman Empire came to power in the 16th century, the Kurds were deported and the principalities were broken up.
- At the end of WWI the Ottoman Empire was dissolved and promises were made in the Treaty of Sevres (1921) to create an independent Kurdish state, but this was not to be.
- France and Britain further divided up the former Ottoman Kurdistan between Turkey, Syria, and Iraq with the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) and the hope for an independent Kurdish state was lost.
- The Kurds in the Persian/Iranian part of the former Ottoman Empire were kept by Tehran.
- In the early 1920's "Red Kurdistan" was created in Azerbaijan, but was broken up in 1929.
- Between 1992 and 1994 Kurds in Armenia were the victims of genocide, which resulted in their complete annihilation within that country.
- It is estimated that 100,000 to 300,000 Kurds were killed by Saddam Hussein beginning in 1988 in an operation he called *Anfal* (Arabic for spoils). The most infamous of Saddam's campaigns took place in the town of Halabja where bombs containing mustard and nerve gases killed an estimated 5,000 civilian Kurds.
- At the end of the first Gulf War there was once again talk about the establishment of an independent Kurdish state, but the Kurdish leaders were again fooled.
- Currently in Iraq the Kurdish population has established the Kurdistan Regional Government, Kurdish leaders have been involved in the Iraqi government in Baghdad, and Arabic and Kurdish are the two official languages in Iraq.
- The Turkish government kept the mountainous region in which most of the Kurdish population in Turkey lives underdeveloped.
- Beginning in 1987 the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) began a war of liberation in Turkey that resulted in a civil war climaxing in 1995.
- In Turkey the Kurdish language could not legally be used until 1991.
- Currently in Turkey Kurds are still seeking equality and recognition from the Turkish government.

C. Food

- Stews are cooked with fresh and dried fruit.
- Lamb is very popular.
- The food is very bland, but Kurds like pepper and onion with their food.
- Meat and vegetable pies
- White rice alone or with meat or vegetable
- Variety of salads, pastries, and drinks

D. Dress

- Women are unveiled
- Women wear long, colorful, loose-fitting dresses, with headdresses.
- Gold jewelry is a very popular accessory among women.
- Men wear baggy trousers.

- Traditional headdress for men is limited to rural areas and very traditional older men.
- In the United States Kurdish individuals dress in "western" or "American" style clothing. In some Kurdish communities in the United States individuals will wear traditional dress for special holidays, events, or religious ceremonies.

Traditional and Modern Dress
for Kurdish men in Iraq



Traditional dress for Kurdish
women in Turkey.

E. Language/Communication

- The Kurdish language is very different from Arabic and Turkish Languages.
- It has its roots in the Indo-European group of languages.
- There are two major dialects in the Kurdish language, Kurmanji and Dimili-Gurani.
- Traditionally, much of the Kurdish culture and history has been passed down orally. This is due, until recently, to the suppression of the Kurdish language by ruling governments.
- Story-telling is a highly valued form of communication within the Kurdish culture.

F. Holidays

- On March 21st, the first day of spring, the Kurds celebrate *Noruz*. This is a celebration of the new year. It lasts 13 days. The celebration consists of food, flowers, bonfires, and fireworks. This has been celebrated for the past 3,000 years.
- Depending on their religion, Kurds celebrate holidays that may include Ramadan, Christmas, or Hanukah.

G. Religion

- A majority (three fifths) of all Kurds are Sunni Muslim.
- Five to seven percent of Kurds are Shi'ite Muslim.
- The Five Pillars of the Islamic Faith are:
 1. Testimony of Faith - *Kalima*
 2. Prayer - *Salat*
 3. Fasting - *Bukhari*

- Ramadan takes place in the ninth month of the Muslim calendar and lasts for one month.
 - During the month of Ramadan Muslims fast during the daylight hours and eat in the evening while visiting with family and friends.
 - There are special rules around children, pregnant women, the sick, and elderly that allows them to eat during this time.
4. Almsgiving - *Zakat*
 5. Pilgrimage to Mecca - *Hajj*
 - Every Muslim (male and female) who is in good health and can afford to travel to Mecca must do so at least once in their lifetime.
- The Muslim faith also prohibits the consumption of pork.
 - Many Kurds are followers of native Kurdish religions commonly called the *Cult of Angels*.
 - The cults include Yezidism, Yarsanism, Ahl-i Haqq, Kizil Nash, and Alevism.
 - A small minority of Kurds are Christian or Jewish

II. Family Relationships and Roles

- Men and women are treated equally.
- Extended family is extremely important and the Kurdish people are group oriented.
- Kurds believe in marriage and practice monogamy.
- Muslim Kurds do not believe in Islamic fundamentalism. Men and women are not separated for meals, holidays, or special events.
- Children and the elderly are highly valued within the family.
- The elderly often help take care of the children.

III. Concept of Work, Play, and Time

- Kurdish men are mainly farmers.
- Kurdish women weave rugs, kilims and baskets.
- There is a lot of socializing and visiting in a Kurdish community.
- Storytelling is a big part of Kurdish culture.
- Kurds love to sing and dance.
- Soccer is a favorite past time.

IV. Health and Wellness

A. General Information

- The village medicine man is very important in the Kurdish culture.
- Alternative medicines are highly valued.
- Western medicine is new to many Kurdish populations in Kurdistan.
- In recent years there has been an increase in Kurdish refugees moving to the United States.
- The refugees are more apt to be skeptical of western medicine.

B. Challenges to Health Care

- Language difference may cause mis-communications.
- Interactions between alternative and western medicines may be dangerous.

- Western medical treatment may be delayed if the individual or family seeks out a medicine man first.
- The Kurdish people do not segregate their women and men. However, men and women may be more comfortable if a practitioner of the same gender treats them.

C. **Suggestions for Health Care Providers**

- Healthcare providers should be aware the some Kurds have special dietary needs based on their religion.
- Healthcare providers should be aware that not all Kurds are Muslim.
- Healthcare providers need to recognize and acknowledge the importance of family within the Kurdish culture.
- Healthcare providers should use a qualified interpreter when needed.
- Healthcare providers should respect Muslim Kurds need to pray five times a day.
- Healthcare providers should be aware of the Muslim Holiday of Ramadan and the rules regarding those who are sick during this time.
- Ramadan requires that an individuals fast during the daylight hours. However, is the person is ill they are not required to fast, but they should make the time up when they are healthy.
- Some Kurdish Muslims may feel that by fasting *Allah* (God) will heal them. If it is possible their wishes should be respected.
- Health care providers should seek to use a combination of alternative and modern medicines in treatment.
- Kurdish Muslims who are planning to make the pilgrimage to Mecca (*Hajj*) should receive the following vaccinations or medications before leaving:
 - Meningitis
 - Hepatitis A
 - Hepatitis B
 - Typhoid
 - Polio
 - Rabies
 - Malaria
 - Tetanus-diphtheria
 - Measles
- Kurdish refugees who come to the United States from the Middle East may need to be screened for the following if they present symptoms:
 - Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (Many Kurdish refugees immigrate from countries affected by war and/or violence.)
 - Hepatitis A and B
 - Malaria
 - Meningitis
 - Stomach or Intestinal Parasites (Schistosomiasis, hookworm, etc)
 - Tuberculosis
 - Thalassemia (disorder of red blood cells)
 - Malnutrition

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