

Shadows of Kurdistan. A Photographic Research of a Cultural Identity

We are all born somewhere in this world. The nature around us is the first element to shape us, with all of the unique characteristics of that particular place. Then we give names to these characteristics and meanings to these places – names that come from within ourselves and are part of our culture.

This project is part of my life story, which I have tried to tell through photography. It was a way for me to discover my culture as I turned back to myself and my identity. I was searching for the stories behind the lives of the Kurdish people with images. At times, it was difficult to truly see and document people in my home region because the political situation and the civil war had closed them off. People became afraid to share their lives and ideas and their identity. And so it took time for me to be allowed to enter their lives. But when I did, it was truly rewarding to see and understand them. As the walls between us fell, I realized how close I was – and yet, still so far from my culture and to the people who enrich it.

I was born in a small village near the Euphrates River. The language we spoke was Kurdish. I learned to name what was around me in my life with my mother's native tongue. My vocabulary grew in my native language until I started school.

On the very first day of school, there was a man in the classroom who was speaking a language which I did not understand. A classmate whispered to me that this man was our teacher and that he was telling us that speaking Kurdish was forbidden in schools. From now on, we were only allowed to speak Turkish.

So my life was split into two languages. At school, I was trying to learn Turkish so I could receive an education. And outside of the school, I was speaking Kurdish with my family and community. Time passed, and Turkish has become the main language in my life. I have even forgotten some of my first language.

When I started school and over the next few years, I saw how our culture and daily life had been affected by assimilation and civil war. It was very sad to see this. For some Kurds, this was so deeply ingrained

that there was even shame around speaking Kurdish. I remember some families that would only speak with their children in Turkish because they were afraid that their child could have problems in Turkey if they did not know Turkish well. They were afraid that their children could be pushed out of society when speaking their native language. At the time, this seemed to be the goal that Turkey had for the Kurds: to shame us into assimilation.

For me, photography has been the key to discovering my identity and culture and making it visible.

My project covers four parts of Kurdistan. I wanted to bring them together in a single book, together and without borders. Our lands were separated in 1916, when the Sykes-Picot agreement divided Kurdistan into four parts, each placed across the international borders of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. Today the population of almost 35 million Kurds are still divided along these border lines.

In this book, I try to show my culture in all its colors. And so I traveled across the borders that divide Kurdistan. I was in cities, villages and in the countryside. My camera was my canvas and brush, my culture was the colors and the views were my composition. The people were my storytellers. The daily life in cities and villages, along roads and up mountains, at weddings, funerals, protests, even war – the faces of people with all their histories and traditions are in my story.

In many places in Kurdistan it is still forbidden for us to live in our traditional ways or to study our language. This is why I call my project *Shadows of Kurdistan*. We live in our land like shadows.

There is one part of Kurdistan where I could not go: Rojava, Syria. Because of the war, it was not possible for me to cross the border to be with my people there, but I have images of Kurds at the Turkey-Syria border escaping the violence. The absence of Rojava leaves the project incomplete. So I wait and hope that one day peace will come to my land and I can finish the story.

We have the words for ourselves and others. Our words shape our life, which is reflected back to us in a mirror. My hope is that we will see peace and all the beautiful colors of this life together in our mirrors.

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