



Deposited via The University of Leeds.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/173714/>

Version: Accepted Version

---

**Book Section:**

Demir, I (2021) Kurdish Transnational Indigeneity. In: Bozarslan, H, Gunes, C and Yadirgi, V, (eds.) The Cambridge History of Kurds. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 829-847. ISBN: 978-1108473354.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108623711.034>

---

This material has been published in revised form in The Cambridge History of the Kurds edited by BHamit Bozarslan, Cengiz Gunes and Veli Yadirgi, <http://doi.org/10.1017/9781108623711>. This version is free to view and download for private research and study only. Not for re-distribution or re-use. © Hamit Bozarslan, Cengiz Gunes and Veli Yadirgi 2021

**Reuse**

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

**Takedown**

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing [eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk) including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.

## REFERENCING INFO:

Demir, Ipek (2021) 'Kurdish Transnational Indigeneity' in *Cambridge History of Kurds*, Bozarslan, Hamit, Gunes, Cengiz and Yadirgi, Veli (eds.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (p. 829-847).

## KURDISH TRANSNATIONAL INDIGENEITY

This chapter argues that Kurds are an interesting example of how indigenous groups can gain influence via *transnational* routes. Over the last thirty years, the Kurdish issue has developed into a fully-fledged transnational one. In line with this transformation, the explanations and perspectives we, as analysts, provide should take into consideration the further transnationalization of the Kurdish issue in the last two decades. In other words it demands we shift and reorder our analyst categories and thinking in many spheres and areas, rather than simply acknowledge the impact and activities of the Kurdish diaspora. Epistemological shifts should follow the shift on the ground. In this chapter, I not only attempt to highlight the transnationalization of the Kurdish issue, but do so through this conceptualization being an indigenous one. I will argue that the Kurdish issue should no longer be understood as 'minority rights within a state (or regional) system' but one which centres on the issue of Kurdish transnational indigeneity. As such, I will show that Kurdish *roots* are being articulated through transnational *routes*.

Transnational indigeneity is at first sight an oxymoron. Transnationalism is associated with uprootedness, crossing boundaries, flows, routes and hybridity. It describes the steady ties of 'migrants' across countries. It refers 'not only [to] communities, but all sorts of social formations, such as transnationally active networks, groups and organisations' (Faist 2010:9). Indigeneity, on the other hand, is typically associated with rootedness, authenticity and connection with a particular land, strong identity, cultural and linguistic bonds. This polarized juxtaposition has been challenged to some extent by the notion of rooted cosmopolitanism (Appiah 1997), and by Sampson and Gigoux (2015), Malreddy (2015), Clifford (2013) and Forte (2010). This juxtaposition also begins to unravel when we recognize that transnationalism can lead to or support stronger identities (e.g. diasporic groups pursuing identity battles at a distance); and indigeneity discourse and claims have in fact been influenced by indigenous groups learning from each other across different parts of the world, and also their rights being protected by international institutions and law. For example, indigenous rights were codified by the United Nations General Assembly through the collective campaigning of the Indigenous Peoples Movement (IPM). The assembly adopted the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in 2007.<sup>1</sup> Indigenous rights come under those rights which have been referred to as 'third-generation' rights (first being 'individual rights' and the second being 'social and economic rights' both of which are also protected by UN Declarations). Third-generation rights are based on the idea that vulnerable cultures and groups need protection against the dominant culture by virtue of their minoritized position

---

<sup>1</sup> In 2007 only four countries voted against the UNDRIP. These countries were settler colonies with indigenous populations: Australia, Canada, New Zealand, United States. These four have now all endorsed the declaration (Rudd, Trudeau, Key and Obama overturned their respective predecessors' decisions). Interestingly, none of the countries where there is a substantial Kurdish population voted against the UNDRIP.

(Kymlicka 1989). Indigenous rights and UNDRIP are seen as correctives to the international order and law which, it is argued, has distributed sovereignty unjustly (Macklem 2015). Even though it is not a document with legal force or sanctions, the 'UNDRIP has elevated Indigenous peoples' understanding of their local rights and their global connectedness. That Indigenous peoples around the world have come to share knowledge about their common experience; the shared reality that they have suffered comparable dislocations, injustices, and hardships is proving to be remarkably empowering' (Coates and Mitchell 2013). In fact, through the deployment of the concept of transnational indigeneity, we can escape some of the possible limited understandings of both by going beyond an essentialist understanding of indigeneity, and rejecting the naïve uprooted and boundary-free construction of transnationalism.

This transnational indigenous perspective can also contribute to a better conceptualization of the Kurdish issue. Many indigenous groups of the Middle East have found themselves as victims of various regional and national conflicts throughout the twentieth century. As Bozarslan (2014) has highlighted, Kurds, amongst others such as Assyrians and Armenians, were one of the major victims of regional conflicts and state violence. 'More than 200,000 Kurds were killed between 1979 and 1991 as a consequence of state coercion in Iran, Iraq and Turkey; thousands of [Kurdish] villages have also been destroyed in these two latter countries' (Bozarslan 2014: 7). Consequently, much of the understanding of the Kurdish issue in the literature has revolved around a discussion of the regional and state politics in Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey. For example ethnic cleansing of the Kurds in Iraq, the Arabization of Kirkuk, the politics of the Kurdistan Regional Government, the guerrilla war of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the fate of the pro-Kurdish political parties in Turkey, as well as the state suppression and violence against the Kurdish movement and leaders in Iran were understood as regional conflicts, at times using the language of think tanks, policy-advisors and policy-makers. The focus has typically been issues of security. This focus developed also because Kurdish studies as a field developed 'in those countries that have had an imperial interest in Kurdistan: Russia, Great Britain and France' (van Bruinessen 2016: 1). In other words, if the trans-border aspect of the Kurdish issue was acknowledged and discussed, it was still examined from a traditional inter-national relations<sup>2</sup> perspective rather than thinking about it transnationally. There are of course plenty of studies which examine the Kurdish issue from sociological, historical, linguistic, transnational and diasporic perspectives (e.g. Allison 2016; Ayata 2011; Baser 2015; Demir 2015; Gunes 2012; Hamelink 2016; Ozok-Gundogan 2014; Yadirgi 2017; Zeydanlioğlu 2008; 2012). However this does not do away with the fact that a state-based, security-dominated inter-national relations perspective rather than a transnational one had come to dominate the field of Kurdish studies until recently.

If one needs to understand why indigeneity was approached with caution, one must also examine the role of the Kurdish movement, including the PKK, the pro-Kurdish political parties, as well as Kurdish intellectuals, artists and writers who have contributed to the creation of Kurdish identity and struggle. For most of the twentieth century, Europeanization and Westernization were the driving forces not only in Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey, but also

---

<sup>2</sup> I use inter-national relations (with a hyphen) to refer to perspectives which see states as primary actors and which focus analysis on an examination of the relationship between states. This distinguishes it from international (without a hyphen) relations, a discipline which incorporates inter-national as well as transnational perspectives.

of the Kurdish movement. Kurdish activism was itself formed and shaped by discourses of modernity and by a Eurocentric worldview. Whilst one should not create a homogenous vision of Kurdish activists and of movements, it goes without question that indigeneity and indigenous practices such as folklore, tradition and oral literature were typically seen as being too close to the backwards, tribal, primitive construction of Kurds. This is the image which the Kurdish movement wanted to shed. As such, the modern aspirations of the Kurdish movement, and their resultant ambivalent relationship with indigenous traditions and practices have been identified. For example, many indigenous practices and traditions such as the *dengbêj* were seen as backward, relegated to the past by Kurdish political activists. The *dengbêj* are part of a Kurdish oral tradition of singer-poets. They perform publicly, at weddings and other social gatherings. They are a perfect example of Kurdish indigenous culture, but on the road to national unity and future liberation they were consigned to the past. Scalbert-Yücel's work, for example, identified that 'people interested in folkloric and oral literature were considered 'reactionary' [*gerici*]' (2009: 23), and also that the PKK 'had a share in marginalizing *dengbêj*' (2009: 8).

Hamelink and Baris (2014: 41) reinforce this point:

Thus, it is not surprising that the PKK did not only challenge Turkey's political system in general, but it also took a critical stance against Kurdish landlords, political figures, religious leaders and petit sovereigns, and all cultural elements and social values that were considered to be part of that world.

This modernization discourse no doubt helped question the upper hand that Kurdish religious landlords and traditional elites held. However it is also important to notice that the tension between indigenous traditions and the Kurdish movement did not last long. In fact, Kurdish traditions and practices began to take central stage, and regain importance from the mid-late 1990s onwards. Kurdish political parties and associations some of whom were associated with the PKK sanctioned and monitored Kurdish culture and heritage (Allison 2016). Traditions such as Newroz, as I will highlight below, became a central vehicle for mobilizing Kurds and reinforcing a Kurdish ethno-political identity. A *dengbêj* house was opened in 2007 in Diyarbakır, supported by the local government and the European Union's grant scheme. *Koms* (Kurdish music groups) contributed to the construction and shaping of Kurdish identity in the 1990s (Saritaş 2010). Watts (2010) also notes that Kurdish parties and local government put aside plenty of money for Kurdish cultural activities – so much so that they even got criticized by the local population for doing so given the poverty of their constituencies. Nevertheless, Kurds were able to open up new cultural and political spaces through their control of the municipality (Gambetti 2009). In summary, after the initial disdain shown to indigeneity and cultural practices, especially as they were seen as being in opposition to modernist ideas of progress and civilization, the Kurdish movement claimed Kurdish indigeneity and culture through ascertaining and cherishing certain Kurdish customs, traditions, language and practices. Kurdish folkloric dancing (*govend*), Newroz, oral literature and *dengbêj* art, as well as claims to Kurdish language and land have now found their place as part and parcel of Kurds' indigeneity claims. Consequently, Kurdish studies has to shift from a discussion of Kurds as 'ethnic minorities within a state-centric worldview' to a 'transnational indigenous' one. Such a perspective would allow us to examine the Kurdish issue in a new light and develop perspectives which are more adequate for understanding the nature of the Kurdish issue in

today's world. Below I will elaborate further on how, and why, we could conceive Kurdish transnational indigeneity.

### **Transnationality via Diaspora**

Firstly, there is the well-known fact that Kurds are divided across four countries, namely Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey. The Middle East was carved up and divided into spheres of control at the beginning of twentieth century by Western powers. Today's borders in the Middle East are an outcome of such colonial interventions. At the beginning of twentieth century, what we today call Iraq, Jordan and Palestine went under British rule, and Syria and Lebanon went under French control, paying little attention to ethnic and other traits in the region. The Ottoman Empire (later Turkey) and Iran held on to, and continued to dominate, the lands populated by Kurds. In other words Kurds remained 'divided' within multiple spheres of control and nation-states. However, wars and unrest in these regions in the twentieth century, including similar social, ethnic and economic exclusions Kurds faced in their respective countries, fostered ethnic awareness and allowed Kurds to remain interconnected. As such, the transnational origin of Kurdish politics is not new. However, it is the movement of Kurds to the metropolises of Europe which has inevitably turbocharged the transnationalization of the Kurdish issue.

Kurds arrived in Europe, Canada, the US and Australia as refugees, ex-guerrilla fighters, working class Kurds, agricultural workers from rural areas, as well as artists, singers and authors. They first found themselves in poor subaltern neighbourhoods, whether in Berlin, Paris, Brussels, Toronto, London or Sydney. As most first generation immigrants do, Kurds initially formed their own community organizations, spoke to their own peoples and tried to re-establish their lives, looking for economic security and stability. Despite the daily struggles of existence in the subaltern neighbourhoods of Europe, many Kurds remained politicized and many others in fact became political over time in the diaspora (Leggewie 1996; Demir 2017a). As Kurds learnt to speak the languages of their new host countries, they began to be involved in local, national or European politics, organizing rallies, dynamic campaigns and institutions. They also brought up a highly politicized Kurdish 'second and third generation' who were capable of not just translating Kurdish grievances to Western publics, but also making these translations better understood and more palatable to the Western populations than their first generation parents had been able to do.

In the UK, for example, Kurds mobilized and elected many local councillors of Kurdish descent in London. One of them (Ali Gul Ozbek) was elected mayor of Haringey Council in London. Kurds in London also established the Centre for Kurdish Progress which lobbies and holds high-level Newroz events at the British Parliament. Currently, in Sweden there are six MPs of Kurdish descent, whilst in the UK there is one (Nadhim Zahawi). Zahawi, a Conservative MP, also holds a junior cabinet position, Under Secretary of State at the Department of Education, and has supported the Kurdish independence referendum in September 2017 (Zahawi 2017). There are also other British MPs, including Jeremy Corbyn, former leader of the Labour Party in the UK, who are seen as Kurdish allies. In fact Corbyn's support for Kurdish claims and demands is not a recent phenomenon. He has been a regular attendee and speaker at Kurdish events, such as during Newroz celebrations in London, long before his rise to power in the

Labour Party. There are Kurdish MPs in other European countries besides Sweden and the UK. Gökay Akbulut and Zuhail Demir are well-known MPs (of Kurdish origin) in German and Belgian parliaments respectively. Demir was also appointed as minister in February 2017. In addition, Europe has been, and continues to be, home to Kurdish artists in Germany (e.g. Şivan Perwer, Rapper Azad), France (e.g. Yılmaz Güney, Ahmet Kaya), Sweden (e.g. Özz Nûjen; Darin Zanyar) and the UK (e.g. Tara Jaff, Kae Kurd).

As Anantram, Chase-Dunn and Reese (2009: 612) highlight the '[c]oordination beyond the nation does not make a movement transnational; only regular, frequent, long-term interaction across nations, coupled with similar framing issues, and mass mobilizations, make movements transnational.' Through these political positions and involvements, artistic interventions but also through ordinary Kurds' translation of the Kurdish issue to Europeans which differs from the presentation of the Kurdish issue provided by their country of origins, the Kurdish issue has increasingly become a transnational one. Moreover it has been consolidated through translations. As a result of diaspora activism, the Western public's approach to the Kurdish issue has shifted significantly in the last decades. The strategic positions and policies of European states on the Kurdish issue are also called into question more often - though have not yet reversed significantly. Hence it is not only the arrival of many more Kurds from Iraq, Turkey and Syria to Europe in the last few decades, but also the interconnections they have built and fostered through their activism in the diaspora which has brought about this shift (e.g. Ayata 2011; Başer 2015; Demir 2015; Eccarius-Kelly 2002; Eliassi 2013; Keles 2015; Lyon and Ucarer 2001; Østergaard-Nielsen 2001; Wahlbeck, 1999). Kurds over time have become transnational actors, and the Kurdish issue a transnational one.

### **Kurdish Indigeneity Re-visited**

According to Samson (2008: 4), the former Special Rapporteur Jose Martinez Cobo's definition of indigenous peoples in his 'Study of the Problem of Discrimination against Indigenous Populations' is widely accepted:

'Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing on those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal system.'<sup>3</sup>

The Kurds are increasingly framing their demands in the language of indigeneity; for example, by referring to their colonization and to their demands for autonomy and linguistic and cultural rights, akin to indigeneity claims pursued by other indigenous groups, such as in Latin America (Demir 2017b; Gambetti 2009; Gellman 2017, Withers 2016).

---

<sup>3</sup> Vol. 5. UN doc. E/CN.4/Sub. 2/1986-7/Add. 4 1987

Conceptualizations of Kurds as an indigenous group are, of course, not new. The Council of Foreign Relations (2015) report identified that ‘The Kurds are one of the indigenous peoples of the Middle East and the region's fourth-largest ethnic group.’ The fact that Kurds make indigeneity claims has also been noted by the mass media, such as by the BBC (2019): “The Kurds are one of the indigenous peoples of the Mesopotamian plains and the highlands in what are now south-eastern Turkey, north-eastern Syria, northern Iraq, north-western Iran and south-western Armenia.’ Kurds, amongst others (e.g. the Turcoman), are conceived as indigenous populations of the region in the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG)’s cabinet document Article V dating from 2007. In fact indigeneity claims of Kurds can be identified even earlier. In Turkey, for example, Navenda Çanda Mezopotamya (NÇM), an organization which was opened in 1991 in Istanbul, promotes Kurdish culture and has often deployed themes of indigeneity in its mission statements and themes. It ‘aims to “protect the culture, art, history and language of the colonized peoples of Mesopotamia” meaning, the Kurdish people’ (cited in Scalbert-Yücel 2009: para 20).

The indigenous nature of Kurdish demands and movement has also been identified in academic publications (e.g. Bingol and Benjamin 2014, Houston 2009, Gambetti 2009, Gellman 2017, Yadirgi 2017). Bingol and Benjamin (2014), for example, present the Kurdish political movement in Turkey as a revival of Mesopotamia’s indigeneity whilst Gellman provides a comparative analysis of indigenous groups in Mexico, Turkey and El Salvador. That Kurds position ‘themselves as the indigenous peoples of the region and Turks as colonial invaders’ has been identified (Withers 2016: 6). Kurdish diaspora’s positioning as a voice of the Global South, in the Global North, making claims on the Global North has been discussed whereby Kurds in Europe have been conceptualized as forming a transnational indigenous movement (Demir 2017b). In other words, there is increasing self-presentation and reception of Kurdish rights along indigenous lines rather than purely in terms of minority rights within a state or region. The former focuses on territory, history, autonomy, language and cultural rights and also on colonization. It is a collective claim, challenging the sovereignty of the nation-state. More importantly for my argument is that such claims are part and parcel of Kurdish diasporic claims.

Newroz and *govend* are two important expressions of Kurdish indigeneity and culture in diaspora. The Newroz festival is celebrated on 21 March in the Middle East and by the Kurdish diaspora. For the Kurdish movement, the Newroz myth has been instrumental in creating an awareness that Kurds constitute one people. Discussed in Firdausi’s *Shahnama*, the myth of Newroz originates from the seventh century BC when a blacksmith called Kawa is said to have liberated the Medes by leading an uprising against Dahhak, a ruler who was deemed to be an Assyrian tyrant. Newroz extends the origins of the Kurds temporally and also connects them spatially. Temporally, it links them to an ancient civilization, the Medes. But the myth of Newroz provides Kurds not just with a history, but one which is linked to liberation, resistance and thus hope. Spatially it links Kurds as it crosses national borders and is celebrated by Kurds in many countries. It has helped to strengthen the spatial and temporal dimensions of Kurdish indigeneity.

Whilst other groups in the Middle East also celebrate this ‘spring’ festival’, for the Kurds the Kawa legend and uprising are central to Kurds’ understanding of Newroz and for their Kurdishness. It is no surprise that Newroz was ‘used as an ideological tool to create a counter-

hegemonic order' (Aydin 2014: 77) and was deployed by the PKK (Gunes 2012). It has become a pivotal Kurdish celebration and event also in diaspora. Whilst Newroz was banned and under state surveillance in Turkey, in the European capitals it became a day of Kurdish political resistance, activism and recognition as some of my interviewees<sup>4</sup> claimed:

Best Newroz is in Diyarbakir, and then it is in Berlin. (Male, 58)

It pains me that I never celebrated Newroz in Kurdistan. But Iraqi Kurds and us [Kurds of Turkey] get together and celebrate Newroz together in London. (Female, 24)

On Newroz [day], I love seeing Kurdish women put on traditional dresses, yes. But most of all I love their dignity when wearing those Kurdish dresses. (Female, 35)

The European left has usually supported, and attended Newroz celebrations of the Kurdish diaspora. In the last decade, the transnational aspects of Newroz were enhanced through the UN. The proclamation of 21 March as the International Nowruz Day by the UN General Assembly resolution in 2010 presents this festival as an ancient custom of various civilizations, and invites UN member states, agencies and organizations to celebrate it. It was nominated to UNESCO in 2009 by the member countries of Afghanistan, Albania, Azerbaijan, Macedonia, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkey and Turkmenistan. The resolution does not associate Newroz with any ethnicity. In fact, on the UN website regarding this proclamation, there is no mention of Kurds (or of any other ethnic groups who celebrate it), but only a list of certain member states, echoing the state-centric understanding of heritage in UNESCO.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, it is interesting to note that the UN logo includes a variety of spellings of this day, but the one used by Kurds is never present. It is conspicuously missing. Having examined the application form submitted to UNESCO, Aykan (2014: para 32, 33) notes that the form does not mention the fact that the festival was celebrated by Kurds. That the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) of Iraq recognizes it as a national holiday was also missing. The conspicuous absence of Kurds should not come as a surprise. According to Aykan, (2014: para 23) Turkey was unable to curb Newroz celebration by Kurds in Turkey. As such it began to promote the idea that Nevruz (spelt in Turkish) was 'a Turkish spring holiday in order to dissociate the festival from the Kurdish identity and national movement'. Turkey, it is claimed, did this domestically but also internationally via UNESCO in order to offset Kurdish nationalism's adoption of Newroz as a mobilizing force.

Nevertheless, this recognition of the Newroz festival by the UN has opened up its take-up around the world. The UNESCO proclamation has legitimized Newroz celebrations in European spaces such as the UK Parliament, Hôtel de Ville, Paris, and by European leaders such as the German president.<sup>6</sup> In other words, even though the UNESCO resolution avoided

---

<sup>4</sup> Research for this study involved interviews with sixty-seven diasporic Kurds living in Europe. Sampling for the interviews sought to maximize variation in gender, age, social and economic background, political affiliation and country of origin. I also examined news pieces from diasporic media, documents and Kurdish community association publications as part of 'grey literature'.

<sup>5</sup> [www.un.org/en/events/nowruzday/index.shtml](http://www.un.org/en/events/nowruzday/index.shtml)

<sup>6</sup> For example, in March 2018 the German President Joachim Gauck formally visited a Newroz celebration in Berlin. In his talk he acknowledged its Kurdish roots.

and erased Kurds, Kurds in diaspora have inadvertently benefited from the international recognition of Newroz by UNESCO.

Similarly, *govend*, Kurdish dancing, is part and parcel of Kurdish mobilization not just in the Kurdish regions but also in diaspora. No Kurdish protest or Newroz celebration in Europe takes place without *govend*. Many second or third generation Kurds whose English, German and French are better than their Kurdish (or Turkish or Arabic or Farsi) are able to connect and express common heritage through the language of *govend*. In fact *govend* is a central expression of Kurdishness and of belonging in diaspora for newer generations. Most start learning it at the age of five or six at weddings or political gatherings. It glues identity across different generations and spaces. In diaspora it connects Kurds of Europe who are from different generations together. It also brings Kurds from disparate parts of the Kurdish regions together, and bonds Kurds from across their new homes in Europe. *Govend* is an expression and celebration of Kurdish indigeneity, tradition and culture:

My cousins [who live in Brussels] and I speak in broken Kurdish and Turkish. They don't speak English well; I don't speak French. But we excel at Kurdish dancing [*halayda dökürürüz*] [comment followed by laughter]. (Female, 32)

I feel most Kurdish when I dance [*halaydayken*]. (Male, 35)

Yes, Kurds of Turkey dance differently to us. But so do Kurds in Dohuk and Kirkuk. Different ones [mean] we end up learning. It is our richness. (Female, 41)

*Govend*, as can be seen, is common language for Kurds living in disparate parts of Europe; it is also part and parcel of continued struggle, of empowerment, resistance and solidarity (see also Bilgen 2018). In addition to the embodiment of Kurdishness through music which Gunes (2012: 112-115) has identified, it is an embodiment of Kurdish indigeneity.

### **The Impact of Rojava**

A third central way in which transnational Kurdish indigeneity has been empowered is through the recent events and transformations occurring in Syria. The 'Arab uprisings have given momentum to the movements and struggles of the non-Arab indigenous peoples by holding out the hope of socioeconomic and political change via toppling or severely weakening oppressive regimes reviled by Kurds, as evidenced in the case of Syria's Kurds' (Yadirgi 2017: 21). The violence and the existential threat brought about by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in the region has further mobilized Kurds to come together and form a local political structure under the leadership of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) (Leezenberg 2016). The Syrian Kurds also formed the People's Protection Units (YPG) and the Women's Protection Unit (YPJ) which inflicted a series of defeats on ISIL. The PYD and the YPG are regarded as being linked to the PKK and thus categorized as terrorist organizations by Turkey. Despite this, they have been in cooperation with the US and the EU in their fight against ISIL.<sup>7</sup> Syrian Kurds established 'autonomous administrations' in the three cantons of Rojava: Kobane, Jazira and Afrin; the latter was captured by Turkey in early 2018,

---

<sup>7</sup> This chapter was completed before the Turkish offensive in 2019.

and can be seen as part of Turkey's continuing 'policy of containment vis-à-vis the Syrian Kurds' (Bozarslan 2014: 8). What is important for my argument is that the fight against ISIL has empowered Kurds and allowed them across different countries in the Middle East and diaspora to nurture their connections as part of a transnational indigenous movement seeking autonomy. Despite the political fragmentation and diversity of languages and political actors, Rojava represents an indigenous uprising for Kurds. Some of the diasporic actors in France and the UK clearly acknowledged this in interviews. For example:

We Kurds did not suddenly discover there were Kurds on the other side of the border. We knew this. But Rojava brought us together. It made us see an indigenous uprising was possible. (Male, 29)

Kobane [war] was very important for us. It was as if the indigenous voices [of the Middle East] could now be heard in Europe. I felt connected with my brothers [Syrian Kurds]. (Male, 51)

Europe has now got to know Kurdish women. We could fight ISIS in [YPJ] uniforms but also wear our cultural clothing. [Referring to the H&M clothing range]<sup>8</sup> Europe even copied our women's fashion. ... Kurdish women are pushing this indigenous freedom movement. (Female, 38)

The enthusiasm for political change, and the success against ISIL in Rojava strengthened the emotional links and connections between Kurds, as well as extending the spatial and temporal boundaries of Kurdish indigeneity. Driven by the idea of democratic autonomy and anti-capitalist ideals, it fostered national awareness amongst Kurds in diaspora and transnationalized it further. It also strengthened a Kurdish sense of indigeneity – reminding Kurds of the borders that divided them across national states and through colonialism. The border was of course an imposition on Kurds well before diasporic activism or the war in Syria. Kurds perceived borders and political geography as something they had to work with, as part of everyday struggles of being colonized and ruled. As my interviews showed, Rojava made it possible for Kurds to see intra-Kurdish borders more vividly. Today it continues to shape diasporic Kurds' understanding of their history and their transnational connections across borders, thus their sense of space and time.

### **Consequences of Kurdish Transnational Indigeneity for Indigeneity and Transnationality**

Conceptualization of Kurds as a transnational indigenous group has consequences for wider understandings of indigeneity. Firstly, we know from transnationalism studies that the term transnational requires us not to ignore states, but to revisit conceptualizations of the state 'not as a "thing" but as a specific social relation inserted into larger social structures (Robinson 1998: 565). In other words it helps to go beyond reifications of the state. Similarly, we need to re-examine and trace the specific social relationships which indigeneity creates within and across borders, and explore its relationship to globalization (Samson and Gigoux 2015). This is because the Kurdish example shows that it is a case of *when* indigeneity and transnationalism meet; not *whether*. Transnationality brings new cultural forms as migrant

---

<sup>8</sup> H&M, a high-street clothing company developed a range of clothing based on Kurdish women's uniforms (see Gupta 2016)

indigenous groups create new hybrid cultures and practices and forces us to rethink the relationship between 'roots and routes' (Clifford 1997). It provides scope for thinking and speaking from more than one system of knowledge (Mignolo 2002).

Secondly, Kurdish transnational indigeneity can push us to rethink indigenous politics, especially the way they regain influence transnationally, even if they have not held power nationally. As has been identified (Samson 2008), indigenous peoples, except perhaps for in Bolivia and Mexico (parts of Chiapas) are at the receiving end of policies and interventions directed at limiting their freedoms. They, on the whole, continue to be governed by institutions and states that curb their rights and restrict their freedoms. Kurds are an interesting example of indigenous peoples who are re-emerging transnationally in diaspora, despite their voice and power being curtailed by national interventions in their homelands. In other words, '[e]ven though indigenous peoples have virtually no influence in national politics' (Samson 2008: 4), Kurds are an interesting example of the fact that indigenous groups can gain influence via *transnational* routes.

Thirdly, Kurdish transnational indigeneity can challenge us to rethink the close relationship between indigeneity and land. Historically, the link between indigeneity and territory has been a close one. Given the movement of indigenous peoples within nation states and also across national borders, how should we rethink this relationship? Can peoples be indigenous or be seen to be doing indigenous politics if they no longer live on that land or if the connection between them and the 'original land' is no longer immediate, practical or possible? For example, is indigeneity diminished for a Zapatista who has been displaced or is now part of the diaspora living in the US? A default position on indigeneity might agree with this as the link between territory, colonization and indigeneity is tightly conceived. It is no surprise that the struggle to occupy and claim American Indian lands by English Puritan colonizers in North America through the deployment of the dogma of *terra nullius* was of central importance (Samson 2008). *Terra nullius* (land that belongs to no one but the colonizers) was Christian Puritan dogma. It was taken up through the works of, for example the English philosopher John Locke and used for justifying occupation. Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Emmerich de Vattel and many other thinkers and legal theorists also drew a distinction between soil which was cultivated, and that which was not cultivated, and deemed the latter *terra nullius* in order to justify the West's occupation of the land. *Terra nullius* policies were also justified if indigenous groups fell short of 'civilization', 'modernization' or 'development' (Samson 2008: 5-6). Contemporary struggles of indigenous peoples, thus involve invoking a close relationship between rights to land, and rights to language, culture, religion and so on. Given the transnationalization of indigeneity (e.g. the Kurdish issue and the migrations of Kurds), how do we conceptualize the relationship between territory and indigeneity? As I showed in this chapter, transnationality brings to the table a new category of indigeneity, a transnational and deterritorialized indigeneity, and forces us to think through indigenous identity in new ways.

Last but not least, this conceptualization of Kurdish transnational indigeneity can help challenge the immutable and static understandings of indigeneity. Indigeneity is historically constituted, socially specific and should be understood in relation to wider economic and social structures, in a dynamic and flexible way, similar to the identification which has been

made with regard to tribalism, landlords and emirs (e.g. Ozok-Gundogan 2014). Rethinking it via transnationalism helps avoid essentialist constructions of indigeneity.

### **Consequences of Kurdish Transnational Indigeneity for Kurdish Studies**

As scholars of Kurdish studies we should not miss the subtle but vital shift taking place in Kurdish mobilization, especially in diaspora and vis-à-vis the discourse of ‘autonomy’ and indigeneity. This is because there are various consequences, including unintended ones, of the Kurdish issue being increasingly framed and understood as a transnational indigenous one. Below I outline some of these future possibilities:

- It can drive the Kurdish issue to be framed less as a regional issue, and more as a global one.
- It can drive a closer relationship between Kurds and the Kurdish diaspora; and between Kurdish diaspora and other associations and organizations in the West, and expand North South alliances and transnational campaigns.
- It can shape Kurdish demands for recognition, autonomy and social justice in line with, and similar to, the language of other indigenous demands around the world. It can thus shift and reshape discourses which have dominated Kurdish mobilization in the last thirty years.
- It can create new relationships between Kurds and other indigenous groups from disparate parts of the world. Such new relationships can enhance ‘South to South’ conversations which have already begun to develop (Demir 2017b). These can lead to Kurdish demands becoming connected to other indigenous groups and thus present new opportunities for global collective action.
- As indigenous rights have already been codified in international documents such as the UNDRIP which contain a number of articles protecting indigenous peoples from the arbitrary acts of states, the increasing presentation of the Kurdish peoples as an indigenous group might lead to Kurdish rights being recognized and classified as part of international law, and provide a new form of legitimacy to their claims. The rights ensured in the UNDRIP articles already overlap with many of the demands of the pro-Kurdish political party (HDP) in Turkey. For example: UNDRIP **Article 4** ‘Indigenous peoples, in exercising their right to self-determination, have the right to autonomy or self-government in matters relating to their internal and local affairs, as well as ways and means for financing their autonomous functions’; **Article 5** ‘Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and strengthen their distinct political, legal, economic, social and cultural institutions, while retaining their right to participate fully, if they so choose, in the political, economic, social and cultural life of the State’; **Article 8** ‘Indigenous peoples and individuals have the right not to be subjected to forced assimilation or destruction of their culture’; **Article 10** ‘Indigenous peoples shall not be forcibly removed from their lands or territories’; **Article 14** ‘Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning’; **Article 36** ‘Indigenous peoples, in particular those divided by international borders, have the right to maintain and develop contacts, relations and cooperation, including activities for spiritual, cultural, political, economic

and social purposes, with their own members as well as other peoples across borders' (United Nations 2007). **Article 46** limits indigenous rights by stating that the rights accorded through the UNDRIP cannot challenge the integrity of the political unity of a state.

- The framing of the Kurdish peoples as indigenous could mean that international pressure on states with a significant Kurdish population (e.g. Turkey and Iran) could continue through different routes, e.g. through the introduction of new programmes which monitor and maintain their rights under UNDRIP.

## Conclusion

This chapter traced the transformation of the Kurdish issue into a transnational indigenous one, and argued for the parallel shift which needs to take place in our understanding of the Kurdish issue, namely, that the Kurdish issue should no longer be understood as 'minority rights within a state/regional system' but one which centres on the issue of Kurdish transnational indigeneity. I examined the way in which this transformation occurred by considering the impact of diaspora, the impact of Rojava and indigeneity. By taking Kurdish transnational indigeneity as a case study, we are also able to see that transnationality and indigeneity should not be seen as opposites or in conflict. On the contrary, Kurdish transnational indigeneity allows one to go beyond the straitjacket of essentialist and utopian understandings of both indigeneity and transnationalism, and weaves them across space and time.

This chapter also examined Kurds are an interesting example of how indigenous groups can gain influence via *transnational* routes. In the near future, it is expected that demands for recognition, autonomy and social justice with respect to Kurdish indigeneity will be elevated to the global stage, transnationalizing it not just by crossing spatial borders, but temporally by further seeking to upset the nineteenth century arrangements. I suspect that Kurdish *roots* will continue to be articulated through transnational *routes*.

**Acknowledgements:** The work for this chapter was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Fellowship Programme and subsequent research.

## REFERENCES

Allison, Christine F. (2016) 'The Shifting Borders of Conflict, Difference, and Oppression: Kurdish Folklore Revisited' in Gareth Stansfield and Mohammed Shareef (eds.), *Kurdish Studies Revisited*, London: Hurst. 115-133

Anantram, Kadambari and Chase-Dunn, Christopher and Reese, Ellen (2009) 'Global Civil Society and the World Social Forum' in Bryan S. Turner (ed.), *Routledge International Handbook of Globalization Studies*, Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 589-604.

Ayata, Bilgin (2008) 'Mapping Euro-Kurdistan', *Middle Eastern Report*, 38 (247): 18-24.

Ayata, Bilgin (2011) 'Kurdish Transnational Politics and Turkey's Changing Kurdish Policy: The Journey of Kurdish Broadcasting from Europe to Turkey', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 19 (4): 523-33.

Aydın, Delal (2014) 'Mobilizing the Kurds in Turkey: Newroz as a Myth' in Cengiz Gunes and Welat Zeydanlioğlu (eds.), *The Kurdish Question in Turkey*, Abingdon: Routledge, 68-88.

Aykan, Bahar (2014) 'Whose Tradition, Whose Identity? The Politics of Constructing "Nevruz" as Intangible Heritage in Turkey', *European Journal of Turkish Studies*, 19, 1-24.

Başer, Bahar (2015) *Diasporas and Homeland Conflicts: A Comparative Perspective*, Aldershot: Ashgate.

BBC (2019) 'Who are the Kurds'. Last accessed 15 October 2018:  
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-29702440>

Bingol, Haluk Baran and Jesse Benjamin (2014) 'Mesopotamia's Indigenous Revival: Political Discourse, Imagined Sovereignty, and Contemporary Kurdish Representations of Identity' in Akanmu G. Adebayo, Jesse J. Benjamin, Brandon D. Lundy (eds.), *Indigenous Conflict Management Strategies: Global Perspectives*, Lanham (MD): Lexington, pp217-238.

Bilgen, Benjamin Haluk (2018) *Kurdish Group Dance as Resistance in Turkey*, Master's Thesis, York University, Canada.

Bozarslan, Hamit (2014) 'The Kurds and Middle Eastern "State of Violence": the 1980s and 2010s', *Kurdish Studies*, 2 (1): 4-13.

Van Bruinessen (2016) 'Kurdish Studies Editorial' *Kurdish Studies*, 4 (1), 1-4.

Coates, Ken and Mitchell, Terry (2013) 'UNDRIP Changes Indigenous Peoples Articulation of Both Problems and Solutions' Last accessed: 15 October 2018:  
<https://www.cigionline.org/articles/undrip-changes-indigenous-peoples-articulation-both-problems-and-solutions>

Council of Foreign Relations (2015) 'The Time of the Kurds'. Last accessed 15 October 2018:  
<https://www.cfr.org/interactives/time-kurds#!/#who-are-the-kurds>

Demir, Ipek (2015) 'Battlespace Diaspora: How the Kurds of Turkey Revive, Construct and Translate the Kurdish Struggle in London', in Anastasia Christou and Elizabeth Mavroudi (eds.), *Dismantling Diasporas: Rethinking the Geographies of Diasporic Identity, Connection and Development*, Farnham: Ashgate, 71-84.

Demir, Ipek (2017a) 'Shedding an Ethnic Identity in Diaspora: De-Turkification and the Transnational Discursive Struggles of the Kurdish Diaspora', *Critical Discourse Studies*, 14 (3): 276-91.

Demir, Ipek (2017b) 'The Global South as Foreignization: The Case of Kurdish Diaspora in Europe' *The Global South*, 11 (2): 54-70.

Eccarius-Kelly, Vera (2002) 'Political Movements and Leverage Points: Kurdish Activism in the European Diaspora', *The Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 22 (1): 91-118.

Eliassi, Barzoo (2013) *Contesting Kurdish identities in Sweden: Quest for Belonging Among Middle Eastern Youth*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Faist, Thomas (2010) 'Diaspora and Transnationalism: What Kind of Dance Partners?' in Rainer Baubock & Thomas Faist (eds.), *Diaspora and Transnationalism*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 9-34.

Forte, Maxmillian C. (ed). (2010) *Indigenous Cosmopolitans*, New York: Peter Lang.

Gambetti, Zeynep (2009) 'Politics of Place/Space: The Spatial Dynamics of the Kurdish and Zapatista Movements', *New Perspectives on Turkey*, 41 (Fall), 43-87.

Gellman, Mneesha (2017) *Democratisation and Memories of Violence: Ethnic Minority Rights Movements in Mexico, Turkey and El Salvador*, Abingdon: Routledge.

Gunes, Cengiz (2012) *The Kurdish National Movement in Turkey: From Protest to Resistance*, Abingdon: Routledge.

Gupta, Rahila (2016) 'Military Fatigues and Floral Scarves', *New Internationalist*.  
Last accessed 15 October 2018:  
<https://newint.org/features/2016/05/01/rojawa-women-syria/>

Clifford, James (1997) *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press.

Clifford, James (2013) *Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the Twenty-First Century*, Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press.

Hamelink, Wendelmoet (2016) *The Sung Home. Narrative, Morality, and the Kurdish Nation*, Leiden: Brill.

Hamelink, Wendelmoet and Baris, Hanifi (2014) 'Dengbêjs on the Borderlands: Borders and the State as seen through the Eyes of Kurdish Singer-Poets', *Kurdish Studies*, 2 (1): 34-60.

Houston, Christopher (2009) 'An Anti-History of a Non-People: Kurds, Colonialism, and Nationalism in the History of Anthropology', *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 15 (1), 19-35.

Keles, Janroj (2015) *Media, Diaspora and Conflict: Nationalism and Identity amongst Kurdish and Turkish Migrants in Europe*, London: I.B.Tauris.

- Kymlicka, Will (1989) *Liberalism, Community, and Culture*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Leezenberg, Michiel (2016) 'The Ambiguities of Democratic Autonomy: the Kurdish Movement in Turkey and Rojava', *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 16 (4): 671-690.
- Leggewie, Claus (1996) 'How Turks became Kurds, not Germans', *Dissent*, 43 (3): 79-83.
- Lyon, Alynna, & Uçarer, Emek (2001). Mobilizing Ethnic Conflict: Kurdish Separatism in Germany and the PKK, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 24 (6), 925-948.
- Macklem, Patrick (2015) *The Sovereignty of Human Rights*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Malreddy, Pavan Kumar (2015) *Orientalism, Terrorism, Indigeneity*, New Delhi: Sage.
- Mignolo, Walter D. 2002 'The Many Faces of Cosmo-politics: Border Thinking and Critical Cosmopolitanism' in Carol A. Brenckendridge et al. (eds.), *Cosmopolitanism*, Duke: Duke University Press, 157-187.
- Østergaard-Nielsen, E.K., (2001). Transnational Political Practices and the Receiving State: Turks and Kurds in Germany and the Netherlands. *Global Networks*, 1 (3), 261-281.
- Ozok-Gundogan, Nilay (2014) 'Ruling the Periphery, Governing the Land: The Making of the Modern Ottoman State in Kurdistan, 1840–70' *Comparative Studies of South Asia Africa and the Middle East* 34 (1): 160-175.
- Robinson, William I. (1998) 'Beyond Nation-State Paradigms: Globalization, Sociology, and the Challenge of Transnational Studies', *Sociological Forum*, 13 (4), 561-594.
- Samson, Collin (2008) 'The Rule of Terra Nullius and the Impotence of International Human Rights for Indigenous Peoples' *Essex Human Rights Review* 5 (1): 1-12.
- Samson, Colin and Gigoux, Carlos (2015) 'Globalization and Indigenous Peoples: New Old Patterns' in Bryan S. Turner and Robert J. Holton (eds.), *Routledge International Handbook of Globalization Studies* (Second edition), Abingdon: Routledge, 287-311.
- Sarıtaş, B. Siyem Ezgi (2010) *Articulation of Kurdish Identity Through Politicized Music of Koms* Master's Thesis, METU, Ankara. Last accessed 15 October 2018:  
<https://etd.lib.metu.edu.tr/upload/12611651/index.pdf>
- Scalbert-Yücel, Clémence (2009) 'The Invention of a Tradition: Diyarbakir's Dengbêj Project' *European Journal of Turkish Studies* 10: 1-25.
- United Nations (2007) 'United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples'. Last accessed 15 October 2018:  
[https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS\\_en.pdf](https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf)

Wahlbeck, Östen (1999) *Kurdish Diasporas: A Comparative Study of Kurdish Refugee Communities*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Watts, Nicole F. (2010) *Activists in Office: Kurdish Politics and Protest in Turkey*, Washington: University of Washington Press.

Withers, Jonathan Sanjeev (2016) 'Kurdish Music-Making in Istanbul: Music, Sentiment, and Ideology in a Changing Urban Context' PhD Thesis – Harvard, USA.

<http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:33493329>

Yadirgi, Veli (2017) *The Political Economy of the Kurds of Turkey*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Zahawi, Nadhim (2017) 'Kurdish Independence Referendum is a Win-Win for Britain and the Kurds' *Telegraph*. Last accessed 15 October 2018:

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/world/kurdistan-independence-referendum/win-win-for-britain-and-kurds/>

Zeydanlıoğlu, Welat (2008) 'The White Turkish Man's Burden: Orientalism, Kemalism and the Kurds in Turkey' in Guido Rings and Anne Ife (eds.), *Neo-colonial Mentalities in Contemporary Europe? Language and Discourse in the Construction of Identities*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 155-74.

Zeydanlıoğlu, Welat (2012) 'Turkey's Kurdish Language Policy', *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, (217), 99-125.