

## Visual ethnography of Pilgrimage, Life and Road in Kurdistan

Three ethnographic projects on Kurdistan, published on BBC online

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Kurdistan is a land that does not exist on any maps, but remains important in the lives of many nonetheless. The Kurds are regarded as the world's largest people without their own homeland, the contours of history having betrayed their ambitions for self-determination endlessly. Kurdish culture and language have been suppressed, as Kurds were often seen as a threat to the national autonomy of ruling powers.

In the face of this, they have managed in many instances to maintain their traditions, beliefs and identity; and because the Kurds are one of the region's most numerous groups, theirs is a rich and diverse heritage. Lack of unity and traditional divisions and political rivalries have impeded any efforts for the Kurds to achieve autonomy. But Kurdistan today is not only about traditional culture, as Iraqi Kurdistan rests on the brink of massive development, Turkey's EU membership is bound to change the place of minorities in the republic, and Iran is currently at the centre of world debate. These realities behind such complex developments, and the dignity in the lives of a people who have faced denial of their identity by those in power as well as many cultural changes the Kurds themselves face with.



Spirituality and worship which have been traditionally practiced by some Kurds some times comes through religious dance called Jazeme Darvishi

The BBC online is currently featuring a series of stories focussing on East Kurdistan (Iran), which will represent these realities through photographs and text. Viewers will be offered a rare glimpse of a forgotten region of a country much in the media at present; life in Kurdistan, underdevelopment of the predominately Kurdish north-west of Iran. This series of news reports is the work of visual ethnographer Kameel Ahmady, himself a Kurd hailing from Iran.

### 1. Pilgrimage in Kurdistan:

[In Farsi language on BBC](#)

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/interactivity/yourphotos/story/2006/08/060816\\_h\\_ahmadi3.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/interactivity/yourphotos/story/2006/08/060816_h_ahmadi3.shtml)

The majority of Kurds in this area are Sunni Muslims, although they have a secular social structure, which nonetheless remains very traditional in many respects. In the first series of images at BBC Persian, viewers will be taken on a journey into the sectarian groups and places of spirituality and worship which have been traditionally practiced by the Kurds. Through images, viewers will be introduced to the significance of the personages of Shaihks, Sayids and Amazadas, also referred to in Kurdish as Chak (good person). One of the most famous of these Chaks, Budaq Sultan, lies in a tomb in Mahabad.

This was once a small village in the region of Deryazz, until the leader of the Kurdish Mukrian Tribe, Budaq Sultan made it the capital of his regional government, with the permission of the Safavid king. His tomb is a very popular place of pilgrimage among Kurdish women – a commonly held idea is that visiting Budaq Sultan’s tomb and setting prayer and placing stones in its ancient brick walls will increase chances of fertility. Young girls go there to play chil dana (‘40’), a traditional game in which players spread stones in groups of five and seven, and the last odd stone will hold their wish come true.

Also, in the mixed Kurdish/Turkish town of Meyandwab, the local Shi’ia Azeri Turks practice prayers in much the same way as the Kurdish Sunnis, apart from the significance of Moharam (‘the month of moaning’), and Ashora, where the Amamzads play a very important roll. In one of the regional villages in Hawraman, on the border of Kermanshahan, Kurdistan province is a village of Hajj, where the shrine of Kuce-e Hajj is laid at the village entrance. Kuce-e Hajj (‘man with no facial hair’), believed to be the son of the Shi’ia twelve Imams, who died at the age of twenty eight. His presence in Kurdistan Hawraman brings very large numbers of pilgrims from all over Iran and Kurdistan. On Friday nights, it is common to hear the sound of daf (the traditional drum), and singing by both men and women in divided groups, in jubilation for the birth of Mohammad (Molud Xani) and to ask for God’s blessings (Nazer Karden) in other months of the year.

## 2. A day in the life a pastoralist family in Mohabad:

[In Farsi on BBC](#)

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/interactivity/yourphotos/story/2006/08/060816\\_h\\_ahmadi2.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/interactivity/yourphotos/story/2006/08/060816_h_ahmadi2.shtml)

The second Visual ethnography work, deals with a day in the life a pastoralist family, will take viewers to the outskirts of the town of Mahabad, not far from the village of Shilan Awi, which was the birthplace of Hemin Mukriyani, (Mamosta Hemin), a famous poet. Kak Hussein’s family and three of his sisters have more than one thousand sheep and goats; they are already divided between the sisters and brothers and marked by different colours to their owners. One of Hussein’s sisters, Gohar says she once had lot of admirers (xozbin), but she only ever loved one man. She said ‘my brother Kak Hussein didn’t agree, since then none of us talked about me getting married and I have been living with my anger and promised that I will never get married with anyone’. While an extreme case, this sort of practice has occurred in traditional Kurdistan, though views are slowly changing.



Kak Hussein’s family and three of his sisters

### 3. Road Life:

[In Farsi language on BBC](#)

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/interactivity/yourphotos/story/2006/08/060817\\_ahmadi4.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/interactivity/yourphotos/story/2006/08/060817_ahmadi4.shtml)

The third Visual ethnography work, highlights the situation of road traffic in Iran, from a human perspective. Iran is believed to have the highest automobile accident records in the Middle East, and in this reportage the lens captures everyday life on the roads of the mainly Kurdish areas where people take any moving vehicle available to leave the towns on Fridays, the Iranian weekend. The practice of going to the fields and mountains for days outside the city is still very much alive among the Kurds. This is the landscape of their birth and where they have grown up, and the idyllic mountain scenery is the perfect respite from the crowded roads and streets of the urban areas. Young men and women wear their best clothes, taking the opportunity to meet with one another.



Practice of going to the fields and mountains for days outside the city