

(selected essay from the book "Shepherds and the Slaughterhouse" by Simon Chang)

The nation's genes coiling around ancient flames / The Kurdish telling of *One Thousand and One Nights*



Akre, Kurdistan, Iraq 2019 © Simon Chang

"Anytime you have an extreme experience, you feel a certain kind of solidarity with other people who have that same experience. "

- Susan Sontag (American writer, 1933-2004)

On March 20, 2019, I was preparing to attend the annual Kurdish celebration of Nowruz, the Kurdish New Year¹, in the mountainous city of Akre which is located 60 kilometers from the Iraqi Kurdistan capital of Erbil. Every Nowruz, this small city with a population of less than 20,000 inhabitants, attracts tens of thousands of Kurds either living in Iraq or elsewhere, and also tourists who gather to experience the most important Kurdish traditional holiday. When the sun sank low in the sky, a group of young men bearing torches started their trek from the foot of the mountain to the peak where a large, unfurled Kurdish flag waited. A kaleidoscope of bright fireworks followed later that night, transforming the small hillside city, usually only inhabited by shepherds and their flock, into the capital of Nowruz. Starting from three in the afternoon, crowds of people making their way to the mountaintop began to converge. In the distance, past the hills, wave after wave of motor vehicles flooded into the old city. At the top of the mountain, Kurdish families garbed in new clothing and young men in small groups of three or five filled a grass plain that expanded far as the eye could see. There must have been at least thousands of people gathered there, each group clustered into circles. Music speakers lugged all the way from the bottom of the mountain blared festive Kurdish New Year music at such a high volume that the distortion was obvious. A bold yet

¹ In Kurdish, *now* means new, *ruz* means now.

poignant singing voice, accompanied by the rich melody of a qernête, an instrument of ancient origin, and a fervent drumbeat reverberated around the mountaintop. Among the scattered boulders, the crowds joined hands to dance in merriment on the grassy field. As though executing a prearranged plan from thousands of years ago from the mountaintop, the densely packed crowds, like a swarm of ants, imparted their thunderous New Year's voices and energy, to not only beyond the borders of the autonomous region, but also to those living in the disputed territories of Kirkuk and under Iraqi jurisdiction, or even to their fellow tribesmen and tribeswomen in Iran, Syria, or Turkey who are suffering under the oppression of their local regimes. That willful and untamed festive cacophony desired to connect with something even further; it wanted to make its way into every city and onto every single street on which dwelled the Kurds on this planet.

That heated energy, originating from deep within their genetic inheritance, felt rather familiar to me. The rhythm of the Kurdish New Year music accelerated, passionate cries rang out from the dancing crowds and like a snippet of transition music, it transported me back to the autumn and winter months of 2015-16, to a scene where refugees lined the borders of Austria, Croatia, and Slovenia for countless kilometers. Standing in the middle of the pell-mell, I bore testament to the heart-wrenching picture before me—thousands upon thousands of refugees and immigrants from Syria, Iraq, and Iran were locked in a stalemate with their destiny and the unknown, right there in the freezing cold. They had made the long journey, all in earnest anticipation of their objective of “staying alive,” and when the sun rose again, there would be miracles... Amidst the exhausted travelers, the melody composed by hope and the unique voice woven from audacity and melancholy, immediately captured my curiosity. Towards the end of the meandering queue that waited into the night, I would always come across groups of Kurds hailing from different countries who insisted on using song and campfires to invigorate and to refresh their battered souls. Despite the treacherous journey ahead of them, family members—regardless of age or gender—joined hands around the fire and, under the watchful eye of the military police, to fervidly declare yearning for their homeland. Or, in a ritual-like manner, they used lyrics and music to chant about the tears and heartbreak that could not be expressed to any outsider. Releasing their unwavering aspirations into the flickering embers and flames, they watched as it dissipated into the freezing European night alongside wisps of smoke, in hopes it would form a connection with something faraway and ancient...

These flames are buried deep within the Kurdish heredity.

What left an indelible impression on me were not the bonfires scattered across the field, lighting up the dark path of escape; instead, it was the stubborn and steadfast conviction that coursed through the Kurdish genes. The men cleared out a warm spot for me in front of the fire. And in front of that narrow border gate carefully surveilled by the Austrian military police, I observed each and every face around the fire, their features made more distinct and determined by the experiences they've endured. I was genuinely intrigued—what cultural background and environment could make this desolate yet dancing group of Kurds seem so unique despite all their hardships and suffering? That was a wish I silently made to myself, when I was along the border in 2015. Ever since then, I had been planning a reverse sojourn, one that would take me back to the Kurdish homeland. A Slovenian military helicopter hovered above our heads, and even though the forceful spotlight obstructed all view of plummeting meteors, the falling stars in the night sky seemed to have heard my wish. I made two trips to northern Iraq's Kurdistan, first in the summer of 2018 and then in the spring of 2019. During every day of my stay there, everything I saw seemed like it was lifted directly out of a movie; plotlines that seemed improbable even in fiction novels transpired right in front of me. Turkish fighter jets carried out routine attacks on the Kurdistan Workers' Party's militia which hid out in the mountains of northern Iraq². Yet, the dancing and celebration of a Yazidi refugee wedding held at a

² The Kurdistan Workers' Party, also known as the PKK, is a Kurdish political and militant organization formed in Turkey in 1970 and has been designated as a terrorist organization by Western countries.

small suburban banquet hall, with the music at full-blast and lasting into the early hours of the morning, seemed like an excuse. The real reason for such blatant celebration was the safe weathering of yet another day. No one could predict that faraway tomorrow, no one knew what changes lay ahead...

At that moment, hundreds of young men were in the middle of their slow ascent from the old city center towards the peak, each with a flaming torch in hand. They were dressed in traditional Kurdish garments which consisted of loose pants, an earth-toned plain-woven shirt, and a wide sash that secured a dagger to their waist. This is one of the most splendid images of the Kurdish New Year in Iraq. Like a massive serpent rising from the flickering ashes, the group snaked its way along the narrow path up to the mountaintop. After reaching the peak, the young men fed their torches, in an orderly fashion, to the bonfire standing before a large boulder, the flames grew taller and more intense. The men standing on top of the boulder continued to wave a large Kurdistan flag, their shirts soaked through with sweat. It was as if there was no tomorrow, and all that remained was tonight. Around the fire, I studied the many faces that were illuminated by the bright embers, each in the midst of celebrating the New Year yet also mired in deep thought. And only that ancient ball of fire, whose chromosomes were tightly bound by Kurdish genes, seemed to understand.

The majority of the friends I made during my two trips to Kurdistan had either lost their home or loved ones to the persecution of Saddam Hussein's authoritarian regime in the 80's and 90's. More than 500,000 Yazidis in Iraqi Kurdistan still waited for their mothers or sisters to return from remote towns in Syria, where Islamic State radicals had kidnapped and then hidden them... This was the Kurdish telling of One Thousand and One Nights; and in this version, the state of mind, outlook on life, and lofty aspirations for reality of our heroes had long surpassed the boundaries of their imagination. Our understanding of such a mysterious people, the history of Kurdistan— "the land of the Kurds"—and their present situation, is skin-deep at best. What appears to be a free Internet is actually rife with Western-centric opinions (or even prejudices). These perspectives strive to assemble some form of selective "truth"—an image of what the world should look like in the eyes of the victors.

If you ever have the opportunity to hear these stories for yourself, to shake hands with the main characters, to know their names, and to learn that their surnames are inherited from both the first names of their father and grandfathers, your connection with the world will suddenly grow very intimate. You will ask, "If it were I, would I possess the same courage in such circumstances?" Dr. Yusuf, an Assyrian Christian neurologist at the Duhok Azadi Teaching Hospital, told me that when Iraq descended into chaos after the Saddam Hussein regime collapsed, he felt the need to flee from Arab persecution levied in the form of death threats targeted towards his family. At 6:30 AM on January 4, 2006, his parents put him, a twelve-year-old at the time, and his older brother, and a few family possessions in a car, and drove from their hometown of Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, to Kurdistan. "The only thing I had with me at the time was a large box of my favorite cassette tapes. The road to Kurdistan was rough and bumpy. That box of tapes stuffed under my seat made it a very uncomfortable journey for me," he clearly recalled the dates and all the details of his family's flight. Duhok and Mosul are a mere 90 kilometers apart, yet the doctor and his family are unwilling to return to the home they once had to flee from, and in the blink of an eye, 12 years passed by.

In 2015, more than one million immigrants and refugees swarmed into Europe. Under the intentional maneuvering of right-wing parties and politicians, Western countries have trended towards a cautious conservatism. And society, as a whole, seems to have adopted a less friendly attitude towards outsiders. Politicians encourage people to distance themselves from those of a different skin color, ethnicity, or religious faith, and especially before an election, they employ fear or suspicion to provoke and tear apart an already fractured public opinion. Four years ago, when the

refugee influx was at its peak, the barbed wire fence set up at the border by the Slovenian military, engulfed by overgrown bushes, served as a silent warning to those who came upon it. A towering wall, almost impossible to overcome, was also slowly being erected in people's hearts, growing among the thickets of dying compassion...

Western society's fear towards people living outside of their ivory tower was a stark contrast to what I experienced in Kurdistan.

As I strolled along in the town's marketplace, a small boy across the street saw me coming from afar. He ran up to me and said in his stiff English, "Welcome to Kurdistan!" Just as I was about to ask him for his name, the shy smile melted away into the market crowds. In the small city, there is a restaurant I visit daily, usually after an exhausting day of shooting. One day, the young lead waiter jotted something down on the back of the menu I had just submitted my order with. He had written, "Don't worry, it's your restaurant." Another morning, a bread baker stood in front of his oven as he wiped away the sweat on his brow. He yelled at me as I passed by, "Kurdistan is your country!" It was perhaps a greeting not commonly heard in a bakery, but it was inexplicably moving. Tears gathered in the corner of my eye and a hot ball of emotions welled up in my chest. The baker did not let me pay for my samoon, the corners of his mouth curving upwards in a smile. I was deeply grateful for the extraordinary opportunity to come to know such an exceptional group of people.

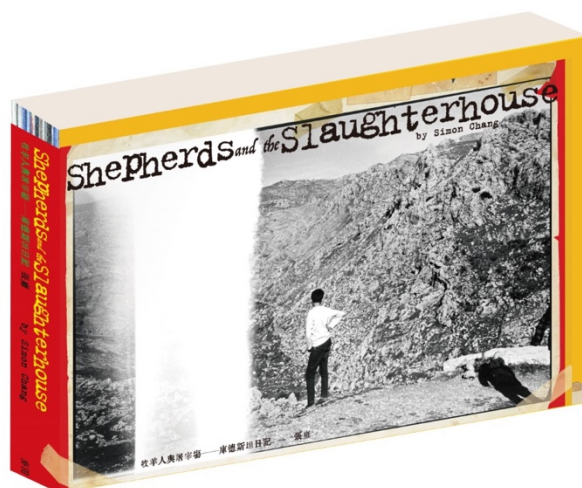
If you've personally experienced the warmth of the Kurdish people, it is a sentiment you will not only have for the rest of your life, that heartfelt passion will also quietly become a part of you. The Kurds are a people who've never had a country to call their own. A population of almost 35 million scattered across the Middle East, they are known as the world's most famous yet most unknown ethnic minority. Multiple generations have sacrificed their youth, their freedom, and even their lives, but the insistence on legacy is something on which the Kurdish people always pride themselves. Even through all the hardships and obstacles they have endured, it is with an abundant enthusiasm that they share, with outsiders, their dreams and its beauty, all of which they are proud to wear on their sleeves. Their only desire is to share that Kurdish sun with you, the sun that has protected and shone brightly upon the Kurdish tradition, and hope that all travelers to Kurdistan can feel a sense of belonging...

Every scene documented in *Shepherds and Slaughterhouse* are my humble contributions.

I have always believed that a keen curiosity can lead you to faraway places. My trip to northern Iraq revealed to me stories that even locals might not have the chance to witness: the maze-like honeycomb layout of stores in the bazaar; the animal market flooded with shepherds and their flocks at 5 in the morning; the refugee camps as big as entire towns and home to tens of thousands; the pigeon market always crowded at peak hours, filled to capacity with people clutching cages and their livestock and game purchases which were acquired at a bargain price; the heavily guarded psychiatric hospital situated just across the street from a downtown shopping mall; or the ancient monastery that Islamic State soldiers were once precariously close to; and the weekly dhikr, or Sufi/Dervish devotional gatherings, in the mosque where believers whip their long, wavy hair back and forth in ritualistic dance to invoke the prophets... Everything I witnessed during my waking moments in Kurdistan defied the boundaries of logic, even more so than the most fantastical of dreams.

In an era in which people busy themselves by drawing the line between "us" and "them," and in a modern society rampant with misunderstanding and prejudices, I am a guest who is interested in stories, and my only endeavors are to draw close and witness the genuine nature of people as the way they are. Even though the language barrier separates us, I was able to use the Kurds' unique

way of conversing with destiny at an intimate distance; there were too many profound stories, stories I could have never fathomed prior to my arrival here. This made me more certain than ever, that no matter how prevalent and far-reaching the Internet becomes, inquisitive eyes must personally visit the scene of stories for himself. These eyes must experience that indubitable realness when they are face-to-face with a story which will unequivocally alter your opinion of the world. Your vision will no longer be limited to simply the differences between you and others. Instead, you will be amazed, that far beyond the boundaries of language, skin color, nationality, or even religion, humanity lives under the same sun and share the same imagination and aspirations.



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