



Survival of a culture

Kurds in Australia



Kine em: We, the Kurds

Kurdish people in Australia trace their origins back to an ancient culture that flourished more than 10,000 years ago in Kurdistan, a wide arc of mountains and plateaus in the northern regions of the Middle East. Many waves of invasion, occupation and displacement have built upon the original culture, but echoes of it can still be found in the traditions and practices of Kurdish people today.

At the conclusion of World War I, the Allied powers and Turkey divided Kurdistan among Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey. We Kurds have never accepted the partition of our traditional land, and ever since there has been much conflict and violence.

Australia's first Kurdish migrants arrived in the 1960s and were mostly from Turkey. In the 1980s and 1990s, Kurdish refugees arrived to escape the Iran–Iraq War and the Gulf War. In recent years, Kurdish migrants have also come as refugees from countries such as Armenia and Georgia, to which they had initially fled. The largest communities are in Sydney and Melbourne, and in 2006 around 2000 Victorians claimed Kurdish ancestry. However, those of us within the Kurdish community believe this number is much higher.

As Kurd-Australians we are free to celebrate our ancient culture in a new home, and we enjoy the peace and harmony that we have found in Australia.



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«1» A community elder demonstrates techniques for making *dow*, a traditional yoghurt drink, 1993.

Source: KAV Archives

«2» The cultural tent of the Kurdistan Women's League of Australia with a display of artefacts, including weaving, 2009.

Source: KAV Archives
Photograph: Mehmet Akgun

«3» Fidan Sengul demonstrates breadmaking techniques at a local community event, 1993.

Source: KAV Archives

«4» The Kurdish Association of Victoria dance group performs at a Kurdish wedding in Melbourne, 1990.

Source: KAV Archives

«5» Young Kurds proudly express their cultural heritage through dance, Melbourne, 2009.

Source: KAV Archives
Photograph: Mehmet Akgun

«6» A children's dance team at a community event, Reservoir, 2009.

Source: KAV Archives
Photograph: Dilek Giyik

Murat and Ilknur at a multicultural performance in Melbourne, 1993.

Source: KAV Archives

Symbols of survival

One of the most powerful ways that Kurdish culture is maintained is through the language of symbols embodied in tattoos and handcrafts. Some of these symbols reach back to the very beginning of our history. The symbols are our ancient written language, and every design carries meaning.

The symbols have changed very little over time. Some are tribal and have been handed down from community elders. Many are intended to ward off bad luck, or else to attract happiness and prosperity. Many of them are taken from nature and are stylised versions of animals, trees and stars. Symbols have also historically held special significance in Kurdish religions.

Most of the designs are simple forms, easy to reproduce, but they carry complex meanings that have survived for thousands of years. They are the oldest source of our history, a history that otherwise would have been lost.



«1» Framing this carpet is a line of birds representing love and happiness. The 'evil eye' on the upper right corner wards off misfortune.

«2» The diamond shape featured in this carpet represents courage and strength.

«3» Hand-knitted socks mainly use the symbols of protection from snake bites and represent fertility.
Photographs: David Loram

The main pattern on this carpet represents the 'tree of life', which is framed by a comb symbolising protection of marriage and birth. The star represents protection against wolves.

Photograph: David Loram

Deq, the art of tattoos

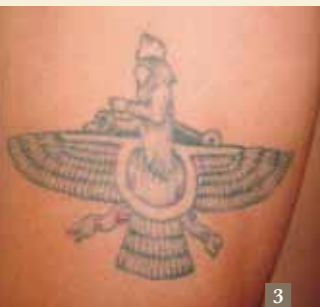


The art of adorning the face and body with tattoos has a very long history in Kurdish culture. Tattooing carries symbolism from old belief systems, such as paganism, shamanism and Zoroastrianism, overlaid with many other influences.

Traditionally, tattoos are made by mixing soot with the breast milk of a woman who has given birth to a girl and the poisonous liquid from the gall bladder of an animal. The design is drawn on the skin using a thin twig and is, with the help of a sewing needle, penetrated under the skin. Tattoos last a lifetime.

The most common tattoo symbols are those that protect against evil forces; maintain good health or cure illnesses; show tribal affiliations; and enhance beauty, sexuality and fertility. Tattoos are placed on the most significant parts of the body, such as near the mouth and nostrils, between the eyebrows and close to the breasts and genitals. Today, a decreasing number of Kurds are choosing permanent tattoos. More commonly, temporary markings are drawn on the face for special occasions and as a gesture of respect for this traditional cultural practice.

Kurds in Australia use ancient symbols for their tattoos, but they have also developed new designs. For young people, the art of tattooing is an expression of their cultural identity and a mark of respect for their elders.



«1» The 'tree of life', which in ancient times is said to have reached the skies, is one of the most common symbols used in Kurdish tattoos. It represents immortality. This tattoo starts between the breast and climbs upwards towards the chin like a vine. Photograph: Ilhan Bakir

«2» The tattoo on this elder's forehead represents the sun to Yezidi followers, to which they pray every morning. The stars and crosses on the chin are remnants of the times when they worshipped the skies. The circle symbolises the womb. Photograph: Ilhan Bakir

«3» A male Kurd wears a tattoo of Faravahar. The symbol depicts a figure surrounded by the light of glory that represents the human soul. Photograph: Cigdem Guler

«4» A Kurdish elder bears traditional tattoos on his hand. The two semi-circles over the wrist symbolise testicles and men's reproductive powers. The comb at the base of the circles represents the strong muscles required to work the land successfully. The cross protects against evil. Photograph: Ilhan Bakir

«5» This 'tree of life' tattoo features a row of circles bisected by a vertical line, symbolising mating and reproduction. Photograph: Ilhan Bakir, 2004



«MAIN IMAGE AND RIGHT» Kurdish girls often decorate their cheeks with temporary tattoos for community events, 2004. Source: KAV Archives Photograph: Anna Bagdas



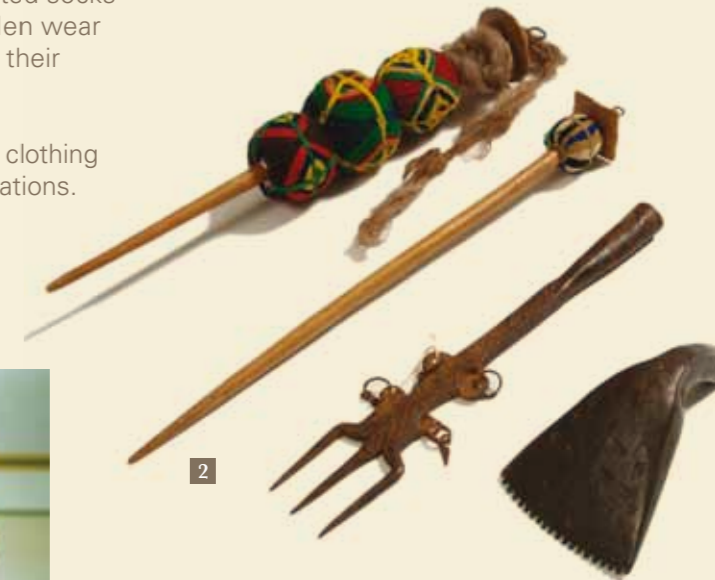
«LEFT» Tattoos continue to be an acceptable form of cultural expression in the community. Symbols like the *zulfiqar*, a sword, are significant for Kurds of the Alevi faith. Photograph: Perihan Gel, Dilek Giyik, 2009

Traditional handcrafts are an important part of the lives of Kurds in Australia because they keep us connected with our past.

For the Victorian Kurdish community, the most important textile is the carpet, or *cil*. Carpets are still made in the traditional manner, in which wool is carded, spun, dyed and woven, all by hand. A Kurdish *cil* is a flat-woven rug, also known as a *kilim*. The technique is also used to produce smaller household items such as bags, cushions and runners. Geometric symbols are either woven into the rug during its production or embroidered on later. Many of the designs are the same as those used in traditional tattoos.

Costumes also carry many symbolic designs. The women's robes in particular are beautifully embroidered with motifs in rich materials, set off by elaborate headwear and gold jewellery. Hand-knitted socks in brilliant colours also carry important symbolic patterns. Men wear these colourful socks and patterned vests, while the rest of their clothing is plain.

Most people in Victoria's Kurdish community wear traditional clothing for special occasions such as, cultural events or family celebrations. Older people continue to wear them as everyday clothes.



«1» Community volunteers demonstrate Kurdish carpet-making techniques at a community festival, 1993.

Source: KAV Archives

«2» Carpet making tools (from left to right); *Teshi*, two different spindles used for spinning wool; *chifle*, an implement for combing the weave; and *sarne farsh*, used to compress each line of weave.

Photograph: David Loram

«3» A community elder demonstrates wool-spinning at the Kurdistan Women's League exhibition celebrating International Women's Day, 2002.

Source: KAV Archives
Photograph: Anna Bagdas

«4» A community elder making a flat weave *cil* during a carpet-making class, 1996.

Source: KAV Archives

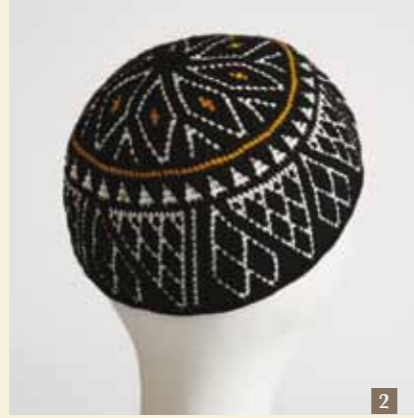
Twana Nwri wears a Kurdish suit hand woven from goat's wool made in the mountain area of Hawraman, 1999.

Source: Melbourne Kurdish Foundation





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<1> A *mishki*, a male headscarf.

<2> A *claw*, hand-knitted men's cap.

Photographs: David Loram

<3> Community members in traditional dress at a function at All Nations Park, Melbourne, 2007.

Source: Melbourne Kurdish Foundation

<4> Dilek and Nebih modelling traditional dress at a Kurdish community fashion parade for International Women's Day, 2004.

Source: KAV Archives
Photograph: Anna Bagdas

<5> Women's dress of the Riha region.

<6> Women's Mahabad-style dress.

<7> Women's Sulaimany or Babani-style dress.

Photographs: David Loram

Music and dance

Kurdish music and folk dance have played a vital role in the survival of Kurdish culture and its preservation within the Kurdish community in Australia.

There are three types of Kurdish classical performers: storytellers (*çîrokbêj*), minstrels (*stranbêj*) and bards (*dengbêj*). Many songs are epic ballads, recounting the tales of Kurdish heroes or the sorrow of separation and unfulfilled love. Music is also closely tied to religious ceremonies and the transitions of life.

Traditional instruments found in all parts of Kurdistan are the *tembûr*, *bilûr*, *zirne*, *dahol* and *daf*, and these are also used by Kurdish musicians in Australia. The last decade has seen Kurdish music greatly influenced by Western music, creating Kurdish pop and Kurdish hip-hop.

In contrast to the evolution and diversification of Kurdish music, Kurdish folk dance in Australia has remained true to its roots. It is a form of line dancing, with one or two figure dancers often added to the centre of the dancing circle. The dances tell of the customs, traditions and everyday life of Kurdish people, enacting work, the marriage ceremony and notable battles and wars. The dances are always performed to live music played on traditional instruments.



«ABOVE» The *bilur* and the *mey* are the main woodwind instruments used in Kurdish music of all regions.

«RIGHT» The *daf*, an important musical instrument, is strongly associated with Kurdish struggle to preserve their culture. Made of goat's skin, its tones are enhanced with metal hoops attached to the rim.

Photographs: David Loram





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«1» The women's dance group of the Kurdish Association of Victoria performs a dance from the city of Agri at the Alevi Festival, Coburg, 2008.
Photograph: Rojhilat Bagdas

«2» The Kurdish Women's Society of Victoria participates in Refugee Week, Epping TAFE, 2008.

«3» Sydney's Koma Roj music group performs during the community's August celebrations, 2009.
Photograph: Anna Bagdas

«4» The Kurdish Association of Victoria dance group performs *Kimil*, from the region of Urfa, depicting working in the fields, at a local function, 2005.

«5» Local singer Dursun Acar performing with the tembur at a community *Newroz* concert, 1996.

«6» The Kurdish Association of Victoria men's dance group performs at the Australia Day celebrations held at Rupertswood Mansion in Sunbury, 1994.

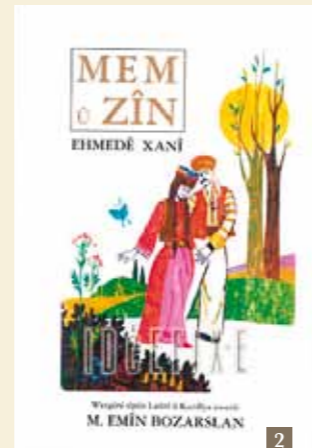
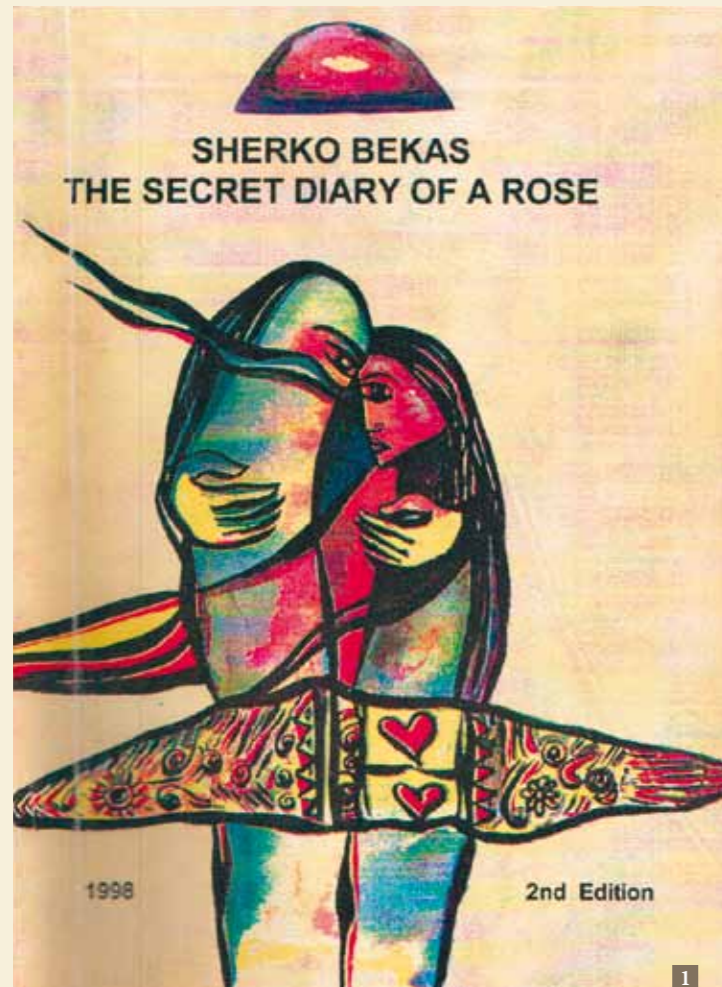
Source: KAV Archives

Poetic justice

The harsh geography and the political history of Kurdistan have left a distinctive mark on Kurdish culture. The Kurdish language has five distinct dialects, spoken in different areas of Kurdistan, and speakers of one dialect may not be able to understand speakers of another. In Australia, Kurds from different regions often use a third language, such as English, to communicate with each other.

Traditionally, Kurdish literature is a rich oral tradition of poetry, epics and love stories. Only as recently as the 19th century has it been written down and published, and even today there is no standard script. The use of Kurdish languages in our homeland – in either written or spoken form – has often been accompanied by severe punishment by authorities, and at times the language has been forced underground. In Turkey it is illegal to give a child a Kurdish name; in Australia our children freely and openly attend Kurdish language classes every week.

What unites us is not a single language or a published literature, but a common culture. Kurdish poetry, storytelling, music, dance, body decoration and handcrafts all preserve and promote our identity, heritage and experiences. All of these traditions have survived centuries of oppression and are now strong in Australia.



«1» The Kurdish language was forbidden by successive invaders. Although secretly spoken, many generations have never seen it written. Sherko Bekas, a famous poet, is renowned for writing poems using the pure ancient Kurdish language, now being discovered by younger generations.

«2» One of the most popular Kurdish novels is based on a love tale, similar to *Romeo and Juliet*. It is written by respected author Ahmede Xani, who became famous for documenting the Kurdish spoken language into written form.

«3» Kurdish language classes held at the Kurdish Association of Victoria were strongly supported in order to keep the ancient language alive, 2004.
Source: KAV Archives

«4» Teaching *Kurmangi*, a Kurdish dialect, reintroduces the ancient language to community members who have not spoken Kurdish because it has been forbidden for generations, 2004.
Source: KAV Archives

«5» Famous Kurdish poets and writers are memorialised with an avenue of statues at the Sulaimany city park in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, 2009.
Photograph: Twana Nwri

Newroz: The new day



Newroz is the major festival for Kurdish people, and it has been celebrated for at least 5000 years. Held annually on 21 March, it marks the first day of spring in the northern hemisphere and is the Kurdish New Year.

Newroz celebrates the revival of nature after a harsh winter, and for Kurds it also symbolises victory over oppression. Legend has it that more than 2500 years ago King Dehak ruled with an iron fist. Two snakes grew on his shoulders, and every day two young children were sacrificed to feed them. Under the leadership of Kawa, the Kurdish blacksmith, the people rose up against Dehak and defeated him. The celebration of this victory became what we now know as *Newroz*.

For some Kurds *Newroz* has become a symbol of resistance against current oppression. *Newroz* observances have been banned in Turkey and Syria, but each year Kurds in those countries use this time to stage protests and demand their rights.

For the Kurdish community in Australia, *Newroz* is the most important occasion of the year. We commemorate an old struggle, but we also celebrate the freedom we have found in Australia to practise our traditions without fear of repression or punishment.



«1» Fire symbolises renewal in Kurdish culture and is the most important part of the *Newroz* legend. Here community elders light the fire to commemorate *Newroz* at the Kurdish Association of Victoria, 2006.

Source: KAV Archives

«2» As part of the *Newroz* celebrations in 1993, community members enacted a traditional Kurdish wedding ritual, which involves taking the bride on horse to her husband's family.

Source: KAV Archives

«3» A combined Kurdish community celebration for *Newroz*, Reservoir, 2006.

Source: KAV Archives

«4» Members of the Melbourne Kurdish Foundation dance in traditional dress to celebrate *Newroz* at Greenvale Park, 2005.

Source: KAV Archives

«5» Community members dance around the *Newroz* fire, celebrating the Kurdish New Year at a local park in Pascoe Vale, 2005.

Source: KAV Archives

Kurds in Australia

Kurds from different countries and backgrounds come together in Australia through a common history and culture.

Our identity as Kurds is both a strength and an ongoing challenge. Moving to Australia has given us the freedom to express an identity that is repressed in the countries from which we come, but it has also created new tensions. Some young people born overseas have already experienced conflict between their Kurdish heritage and other national cultures following Kurdistan's division. In Turkey, for instance, Kurds are called 'mountain Turks' and are encouraged to reject their background. In Australia this tension is further complicated by the experiences of migration.

Some of our young people strongly identify with Kurdish culture and consciously promote our heritage, while others prefer to integrate into the broader Australian society.

Kurds have worked through various associations to address these issues. Organisations such as the Kurdish Association of Victoria and the Melbourne Kurdish Foundation orchestrate social and cultural activities for the survival of Kurdish arts and culture, and to support the ongoing struggle for freedom in our homeland. Our community here is working to balance the traditions and obligations of our heritage with the freedoms of our new home in Australia.



«1» Young Australian-born Kurds join in community festivities at the Kurdish Association of Victoria, Pascoe Vale, 2001.

Source: KAV Archives

«2» Members of the Kurdish community interviewed by Channel Ten after the Iraqi high court verdict against Saddam Hussein's genocide campaign against the Kurds in Iraq, 2005.

Source: Melbourne Kurdish Foundation

«3» The Kurdish community promotes its culture through a range of activities, including operating this Kurdish kebab and food caravan during Moomba, 1992.

Source: KAV Archives

«4» Kurdish community members involved with the Australia Day celebrations, Melbourne, 2009.

Source: KAV Archives

«5» The official opening of the Kurdish community's premises in 2001 was a widely celebrated achievement, marked with a large community event attended by community leaders and government officials.

Source: KAV Archives

«6» Silent demonstration at Federation Square against the terrorist attack by Islamic extremists on the Kurdish Parliament in Iraq, 2004.

Source: Melbourne Kurdish Foundation
Photograph: Twana Nwri

«7» The Kurdish community's donations for the Victorian bushfire appeal at the Spectrum Migrant Resource Centre, Preston, 2009.

Source: Melbourne Kurdish Foundation
Photograph: Twana Nwri



«THIS PAGE» Tin-plated copper dishes with floral designs that symbolise happiness, fertility and bountiful harvest.

Photograph: David Loram

Survival of a culture: Kurds in Australia was inaugurated at the Immigration Museum at Old Customs House, Melbourne, Australia. The museum explores the stories and experiences of people from all over the world who have migrated to Victoria.

The Immigration Museum is part of Museum Victoria, which is Australia's largest museum organisation. It is the state museum for Victoria, responsible for the care of Victoria's collections, conducting research and providing cultural and science programs. It also operates Melbourne Museum, Scienceworks and the Royal Exhibition Building.

Through its Community Exhibition Program, the Immigration Museum explores the different communities that have contributed to the making of modern Australia. *Survival of a culture: Kurds in Australia* was developed by Immigration Museum in collaboration with the Kurdish Association of Victoria and the Melbourne Kurdish Foundation.

Community Exhibition Committee

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Thank You

We gratefully acknowledge those who have provided support for this exhibition, the individuals and families who have contributed their personal stories, artefacts and memorabilia. This exhibition is an achievement that will record the valuable contribution of the Kurdish community to making Australia a rich and diverse society.

Kurdistan Women's League of Australia
Kurdish Women's Society of Victoria
Kurdish Youth of Australia
Mahmut Kahraman
Fadil Suna
Sabire Guner
Dursun Acar
Bedriye Giyik
Bayram Kusman
Fatma Yildiz
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Spectrum MRC
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Dr Naser Aziz
Nuray Akgun

«COVER IMAGE» *The door*
'This photograph was taken in the city of Halabja, the city of my birth and childhood. In 1988 it was attacked and destroyed by chemical weapons and was turned into wasteland. The image represents the political situation of my birthplace, Kurdistan. The sealed door represents the history of my people.'
Photograph: Rushdi Anwar



Survival of a culture: Kurds in Australia 16 March – 12 September 2010

Community Exhibition Program
at the Immigration Museum,
Melbourne, Australia

The Community Gallery presents exhibitions created by Victoria's culturally, linguistically and religiously diverse communities. By working in collaboration with the Immigration Museum, these communities share their culture and heritage through their immigration stories.

The histories and experiences of many groups have contributed to the making of modern Australia. The museum has collaborated with many of Victoria's communities to develop and present exhibitions.

For further information please visit our website.
museumvictoria.com.au/immigrationmuseum/
or the Immigration Discovery Centre on the ground floor.



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