



# The TUQAY

ESSAYS FROM BEYOND THE WELL-PROTECTED DOMAINS.

## “Except in Kurdish Class”

by Frederike Geerdink - 29.12.2012

“Yes, they do, they do!” says 11 year old Nagihan. She is reacting to her mother, Aynur Kusca, who says elective Kurdish class isn’t offered at her daughter’s school. They discuss the topic but keep disagreeing. But anyway, Aynur explains, even if her daughter is right she wouldn’t enroll her in Kurdish class. “It is not relevant for your school career,” Aynur explains. “To pass exams, to get to good schools, and maybe even university, it’s wiser to choose other elective classes. Nagihan’s math is not so good so we chose an extra math class for her, and a reading skills class.”

State schools in Turkey offer Kurdish classes (as well as other non-Turkish “native” languages spoken in Turkey like Adyghabze, better known as Circassian) starting this school year. Every child can choose it starting from 5th grade (age eleven) onwards, and classes start if there are at least ten kids at school interested.

According to the Ministry of Education, though, there is no great interest at the moment. Where 25,000 parents chose a “living language” for their child (of which the biggest are Kurmanci and Zazaki - Kurdish languages - as well as Adyghabze), some 593,000 chose mathematics, 495,000 chose Foreign Languages (mostly English), 305,000 Life of the Prophet Muhammad, 300,000 Sports, 101,000 fine Arts and 57,000 Drama.

It seems natural that the Living Languages have been chosen less often. All the other classes are chosen by any parent in Turkey for their sons and daughters, while only Kurds choose Kurdish, only Circassians choose Adyghabze. But that’s not the whole story.

### Zazaki

In Diyarbakir, the biggest city in the predominantly Kurdish southeast of Turkey, it seems that many parents are not even aware it is possible to choose Kurdish lessons in school. There has been no campaign to inform parents, and both Turkish and Kurdish media don’t give

the lessons too much attention. People like Aynur Kusca seem to be very traditional in their choices. Her daughter Nagihan goes to a religious school, where children can choose two elective classes. At other state schools, four elective classes can be chosen.

Nazli, 11 years old and also from Diyarbakir, enrolled in: Mathematics, English, Life of the Prophet Muhammad, and Basic Religious Knowledge. Her mother Gülhan didn’t know that Kurdish was an option at school. At first she doesn’t even understand the question. Why did she not choose to enroll her child in a class where her daughter could learn her mother tongue?

Kurdish class? At school? That doesn’t exist, does it?

Once she is convinced it does, she is surprised, but nevertheless not very much interested. “Would there be enough children to start an Zazaki class? We are from the region of Bingöl, we speak Zazaki at home, the second Kurdish language in Turkey. Our children learn it well enough at home. Classes about religion and English and mathematics are more important. By the way, in general, we speak Turkish. That is

the common language here, the language that everybody knows.”

### Education in Kurdish

The KCK, the Union of Communities in Kurdistan (an umbrella organization of Kurdish groups in Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria), has called for a boycott of the Turkish education system. The KCK, of which PKK

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leader Öcalan is the nominal leader, has called on every student from elementary school to university, to boycott class and has called on teachers to not “contribute to the assimilation system” of the Turkish state. The boycott is not widely followed, but the idea behind it is part of the low number of kids enrolling in elective Kurdish class. Kurdish, according to the boycotters, is the mother tongue for Kurdish children and should not be degraded to an ‘elective’ course. The Kurdish political movement wants education in Kurdish rather than simply a single Kurdish language course.

A father of four who wants to remain anonymous because he works for the state supports that idea. “Now, it’s not possible yet to really make a living yet when you speak mainly Kurdish, because assimilation has made Turkish our common language. But I think once we really support the language and Kurdish culture, this will change. Then, Kurdish will be the main language again, like it still is now in Hakkari province.”

Recep Armagan doesn’t agree with that philosophy. He walks from school to home with his two sons, Azad (10) and Rezan (8). Azad is going to 4th grade now, and he will definitely be enrolled in Kurdish class next year. Recep says “I don’t believe in full Kurdish education. We live in Turkey and I want my children to be prepared as good enough to live in this country. What if they want to move outside the Kurdish region when they grow up, and their Turkish is not good enough to make it in western cities like Izmir, Bursa or Istanbul?”

But he does think education in Kurdish is important. “They do learn Kurdish at home, but I want them to learn it as well as possible. I can speak and read Kurdish, but I never had any education in my mother tongue so I cannot write it.” His children have Turkish names too. Azad’s official name is Furkan, Rezan’s official name is Süleyman. “When they were born, their Kurdish names were not allowed. Now they are. But at school, it is still forbidden to use Kurdish. Except in Kurdish class.”