



A Mother Tongue and the Daughter Teacher

by Jodi Hilton - 22.10.2012

In the jumpy YouTube video, tiny eleven year-old Medya Ormek, dressed in baggy green pants and a black-checked scarf stands at a podium with her microphone in hand. In front of her are nearly a million people gathered for Newroz festival, an ancient Kurdish celebration of spring refashioned into a celebration of ethnicity and rebellion.

As she begins, her determined voice reverberates through the stadium. Medya is a hero in the movement for Kurdish identity and a criminal in Turkey. Her crime: teaching the Kurdish language, her mother tongue and a banned language in Turkey.

"If all the people of Diyarbakir spoke Kurdish, there wouldn't be a trial for me!" she proclaims. The sound of applause roars through the stadium. Crowds wave the yellow, green and red flags of Kurdish separatism.

From a young age, Medya has experienced the war. Her family, along with hundreds of thousands of others, fled destroyed villages for the slums of Diyarbakir, the ancient walled city and the heart of the Kurdish region. During height of the violence, in the 1990s, two of Medya's uncles were killed. One died in prison, the other after an arrest and 57 days of disappearance. Her eldest brother hasn't been seen in years, since he joined the PKK guerillas.

The Ormek family, including some of Medya's seven siblings, parents, grandmother and cousins, live in a compound built around a courtyard, where meals are shared around a communal plate. Sitting cross-legged on a carpeted floor, her father Kazim, sporting neatly pressed olive pants and trimmed mustache, explains that, "at home, we don't speak any language but Kurdish." A former teacher himself, Kazim is 55. His friendly demeanor has survived years in prison, but when he speaks about the Kurdish struggle, his tone is serious and scholarly.

Medya's older brother, Mazlum, a soft-spoken university student, explains, "in this house you are not allowed to speak Turkish."

In the background, a Kurdish television station broadcasts images of PKK guerillas training in the mountains and news of the ongoing conflict.

The years of unspeakable violence are the collective experience of the Kurds in Turkey. Twenty-six year-old Mahmut, who is now studying at a university in Istanbul, says, "as soon as I knew myself, there was always war." A strict policy of assimilation—and what many see as a denial of ethnicity—has created shame and anger among many Kurds. All public education in Turkey is in Turkish and, for many years, the existence of the Kurdish people was denied altogether. Officially, they did not exist. Instead they were called "Mountain Turks".

Mahmut remembers that "most of my friends and I were ashamed to speak Kurdish." He sees no solution to what seems like an endless conflict. Though a top student at a private university, Mahmut, like many other young Kurds, complains of frequent police checks and discrimination. This spring, Mahmut learned that he was among the hundreds of young people facing terrorism charges related to political activism. According to the Turkish Justice Ministry, 609 students are currently imprisoned accused of belonging to an armed terrorist group and another 178 face similar charges.

And it's not only young people facing charges. Nine women imprisoned in Diyarbakir have begun a hunger strike demanding, among other things, a right to use Kurdish in the public sphere, according to London-based blogger Memed Boran.

A case against him and other student activists accused of a failed bomb plot has been reopened, though it was closed years ago due to lack of evidence. Mahmut insists the students were not involved.

Even at his elite university in Istanbul, he is a Kurd who is both proud and fearful. But Medya and her family claim they are not afraid.

"Having a language is being human," says Medya's mother Durre. At 50, she wakes before dawn to bake bread to sell, providing extra income for the large family. Dressed in baggy cotton pants and a tie-dyed headscarf, she is affectionate and sweet, but at the same time, strongly determined like her daughter. She suffers from injuries she sustained during a pro-Kurdish demonstration in 2008 she was thrown to the ground by police.

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"Everybody has their own language. We are Kurds and Kurdish is our language."

In Turkey, Turkish is the only official language. Beginning with Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the founder of the modern Turkish Republic, the central government has operated with the idea of suppressing ethnic identity in favor of a national identity. The idea that all citizens are Turks was imposed with heavy-handed prohibitions against expressions of ethnic identity and language. After decades of civil war, the government seems positioned to make some concessions in order to benefit the Kurdish minority, who now make up nearly 18% of the population of Turkey and have significant populations in neighboring Syria, Iraq and Iran. Kurds are the world's largest stateless minority with a total population of about 30 million.

In public schools, all teaching is in Turkish (putting second-language students at an educational disadvantage) and a mandatory morning pledge has every student "thank God for being born a Turk".

Medya refuses to participate in the morning pledge. "I don't sing. I don't stand. I don't want to lie," she says. When she began attending school in Diyarbakir, at the age of eight, she found it difficult to communicate with her peers, many of whom were Kurds who never learned Kurdish.

In her pink bedroom on a backstreet of Diyarbakir, she began teaching four friends to speak Kurdish as they played with dolls. "I learned it at home, so I wanted to teach them," says Medya. Her classes quickly grew to include over 20 students.

Disregarding the language ban, pro-Kurdish mayor and human-rights lawyer Osman Baydemir created a program to encourage the teaching of Kurdish language. Over the last ten years, the mayor himself faced more than 100 investigations and 200 charges regarding his political activities. In 2007, he was prosecuted for violating a Turkish law prohibiting the use of letters not in the Turkish alphabet. The case was eventually dropped.

The Ormeks built a classroom in their home. Local dignitaries and journalists attended an inauguration party. When it was completed issued Medya an award of

recognition. Her brother helped her by making course certificates that Medya offered to her students.

The following day, police arrived and arrested her parents, Kazim and Durre. "The police came and explained that it was illegal," explains Medya. Kazim added, "They were very serious about punishing us."

The Ormeks were charged with "slandering the Turkish state". The trial ended without a conviction. Kazim and Durre recall being told by the prosecutor, "If you don't do this again, then you can go free, [otherwise] you can be re-arrested."

Now Medya is 13, and though the case is still opened, nothing more has happened. Despite the overhanging threat, neighborhood children continue to flock to her class, now held in a nearby community center.

"A Historic Step"

In June, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan took what he called "a historic step" to begin the process of allowing limited Kurdish language education. He announced that if "enough students come together, Kurdish can be taken as an elective lesson, it will be taught and it will be learned".

In a confusing state of affairs, the language is both banned and tolerated.

Beginning in 2011, Kurdish has been taught at two universities, in Kurdish-majority areas of Mardin and Diyarbakir. Kurdish language book and record stores have opened in Istanbul and Diyarbakir and several theaters put on Kurdish-language performances.

At the same time, prosecutions against the use of Kurdish have continued. In 2011, prosecutors opened a case against the local municipality after bilingual street signs were erected in Diyarbakir. In an official statement, the Governor's office said, "Turkey is an indivisible country and nation, it's language is Turkish."

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Support from a Hip-Hop Activist

Medya leads a game of hangman with her students, who call out letters trying to guess a Kurdish word. Then she goes over a grammar exercise, followed by an anatomy lesson. Hand drawn posters are used to teach words for weather, including an incongruous drawing of a snowman—surely a rare sight in sunny Diyarbakir.

Now 13, Medya has big round eyes, a slim frame and a confident smile. Standing in front of two dozen children, she is both in charge and respected. Sitting quietly near the back, Serhado, a Kurdish hip-hop idol in town for a visit, follows along with the lesson, occasionally nodding his approval.

“We don’t want a nation state anymore,” says Serhado, who counts himself as a close friend of Medya’s family. “We want all political prisoners to be released” and for our leader, Abdullah Ocalan, (“Apo”) to be moved (from prison) to house arrest.” Ocalan, who founded the PKK, was the most wanted man in Turkey until his arrest in 1999, when he was extradited to Turkey.

From prison, where he is serving a life-term, the PKK leader remains an influential voice in the Kurdish movement. His widely read books express his Marxist philosophy and arguments for Kurdish separatism.

Serhado performs his latest hit, Lo Dilo (My Heart) at political rallies and Kurdish music festivals. The lyrics lament the endless cycle of violence and oppression:

*We have been captured by our enemies,
Oh, my heart
We lived behind the walls; oh, my heart.
We were imprisoned, oh, my heart.
Many of us were killed, oh, my heart.
Who betrayed us?*

In a grainy music video, an old woman wearing a white headscarf peers out her window, a worried expression on her face. A boy runs through the ghetto jumping over decaying walls and past corrugated metal. He is carrying a music tape labeled “Serhado”. Spied by men carrying cameras, the boy is followed by a white Renault.

A tough-looking youth (Serhado) is imprisoned in a tiny cell. The small boy is also arrested, his round face pressed against a metal fence. A news report on television shows real footage of Kurdish demonstrators being fired on by tanks with water cannons and tear gas, while boys retaliate by throwing rocks at the tanks.

The video is dramatic, but it’s also familiar. In Diyarbakir and other cities, demonstrations often end in violence, and many thousands of youth remain behind bars. While politicians speak about human rights and fair elections, boys cover their faces, burn tires in the streets and throw rocks at police. Meanwhile, Kurdish politicians argue for a peaceful solution to a crisis that seems to only worsen. Almost every week, Turkish soldiers and police are killed, and then report killing insurgents, who in turn, kill police. Since June 2011, as violence flared, more than 500 PKK militants and 200 Turkish security personnel were killed.

The Other Medya

When Medya’s case went to court, there was a lot of publicity about it, especially in the Kurdish press. She received countless letters, most of which voice support for her brave endeavor. “They celebrate me,” Medya says with a proud smile.

Holding a red envelope with a return address from Mardin Prison, Medya says, “This is the most important letter to me. Another girl named Medya, a guerrilla was arrested in our house.”

“Dear and Respected Teacher Medya,” she reads. “I received your letter four months late because it was written in Kurdish. The prison has to translate it and then sent it on. I will continue to write you in Kurdish anyway....”

It was 1993 when the Ormeks agreed to take in an ailing guerilla fighter. That same night, police came to their house and detained the girl, later sentencing her to 36 years in prison. Medya’s father was arrested too and was sentenced to four years in prison.

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When Kazim returned, his wife says they were told he would no longer be able to have children due to the punishments he endured. “We proved them wrong,” said Durre. When she gave birth to their eighth child, they named her Medya.

Medya’s father shines with pride when he talks about his daughter. “I respect that she hasn’t become assimilated and that she wants to teach her friends.”

At the public school that Medya attends, nearly all of the teachers gathered in a common office admitted that they speak with her in Kurdish, even though if the Ministry of Education found out, there would be problems.

“Even though she’s a child, what she’s doing is so important,” says one teacher named Semar, who is also Kurdish. In the 1990s, Semar says, “People were very afraid, but now things have changed.” The Turkish government is beginning to accept the situation. Still, she believes, “it’s very primitive that, in the 21st century, people still cannot be educated in their mother tongue.”

