

BETWEEN BELONGING AND OTHERNESS:
THE REMAKING OF VANLI IDENTITY THROUGH MIGRATION



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Between Belonging and Otherness:
The Remaking of Vanlı Identity Through Migration

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DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

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- I am the sole author of this thesis and that I have fully acknowledged and documented in my thesis all sources of ideas and words, including digital resources, which have been produced or published by another person or institution;
- this thesis contains no material that has been submitted or accepted for a degree or diploma in any other educational institution;
- this is a true copy of the thesis approved by my advisor and thesis committee at Boğaziçi University, including final revisions required by them.

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ABSTRACT

Between Belonging and Otherness:

The Remaking of Vanlı Identity Through Migration

This thesis examines how the Vanlı identity is shaped and constructed through various encounters, with a particular focus on the impact of migrations from Hakkari and Iran, and explores how these encounters continually reshape the collective image of belonging. This work aims to critically engage with the existing literature on identity and boundary-making in borderlands, as well as to analyze previous research on the region and Türkiye. Additionally, this work contributes to the existing literature by analyzing migration from one predominantly Kurdish city to another. The fieldwork conducted in Van, which consists of eight semi-structured interviews and one focus group discussion, will be analyzed using the Post-Marxist Discourse Theory developed by Ernest Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. This thesis explores how Van is situated between modernity and conservatism, and investigates the transformation in the performance of Kurdish identity following the arrival of migrants from Hakkari and Iran, as well as the impact of these encounters on the construction of Vanlı identity. This study emphasizes that encounters with people from Hakkari particularly impact Kurdish identity of Van Kurds, while encounters with Iranians lead to a rearticulation of Vanlı identity through the lens of conservatism.

ÖZET

Aidiyet ile Ötekilik Arasında:

Vanlı Kimliğinin Göç ile Yeniden İnşası

Bu tez, Vanlı kimliğinin farklı karşılaşmalarla nasıl şekillendiğini ve inşa edildiğini incelemektedir; özellikle Hakkari ve İran'dan gelen göçlerin etkisine odaklanarak, bu karşılaşmaların aidiyete dair kolektif imgeyi nasıl şekillendirdiğini araştırmaktadır. Bu çalışma, sınır bölgelerinde kimlik inşasına dair mevcut literatürle eleştirel analiz sağlayarak, ve hem bölgeye hem de Türkiye'ye dair daha önce yapılmış çalışmaları analiz edecektir. Ayrıca, bu çalışma Kürt nüfusunun yoğunlukta olduğu bir şehre gerçekleşen Kürt göçünü ve bu göç üzerinden kimliğin nasıl şekillendiğini inceleyerek literatüre katkıda bulunacaktır. Van'da yürütülen saha çalışması kapsamında sekiz yarı yapılandırılmış görüşme ve bir odak grup, Ernest Laclau ve Chantal Mouffe tarafından geliştirilen Post-Marksist Söylem Teorisi kullanılarak analiz edilecektir. Bu tez, Van'ın modernlik ile muhafazakârlık arasında konumlanışını incelemektedir. Bu çalışma, Hakkari'lilerle yaşanan karşılaşmaların özellikle Kürt kimliği üzerinde etkili olduğunu, İranlılarla yaşanan karşılaşmaların ise Vanlı kimliğinin muhafazakârlık ekseninde yeniden kurgulanmasına yol açtığını vurgulamaktadır.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The construction of Kurdish identity has long been a widely debated issue, ever since the foundation of the Turkish Republic. Although in recent years the state has acknowledged the existence of a Kurdish identity, since the beginning of the Republic, it had denied it altogether under the state ideology (Kirişçi & Winrow, 1997). I vividly remember being told by my teachers that the word “Kurd” supposedly originated from the sound of footsteps—“kart kurt”—echoing in the mountains, implying that Kurds were merely “Mountain Turks.”¹ As my political consciousness developed over the years, I found myself questioning the roots of this denial. What does it mean to construct an identity that has been persistently denied? This personal curiosity gradually evolved into an academic interest: how is Kurdish identity constructed under conditions of systematic erasure?

When I first heard the term “*Hakkarization of Van*”, which is used by Vanlı people to refer to the massive migration from Hakkari to Van, the topic and field I wanted to study became clear to me. Van emerged as a suitable site to explore how Kurdish identity is shaped through different encounters. I was particularly intrigued by how the identity of Van Kurds, shaped by both internal and external migration, is performed and redefined in these interactions.

Upon reviewing the existing literature, I realized that there is an important gap in the literature on Kurdish migration and the establishment of identity. Most of

¹ For the history of categorization of Kurds as Mountain Turks, see: van Bruinessen, M. (1997, April). *Race, culture, nation and identity politics in Turkey: Some comments*. Paper presented at the Mica Ertegün Annual Turkish Studies Workshop, "Continuity and Change: Shifting State Ideologies from Late Ottoman to Early Republican Turkey, 1890–1930", Department of Near Eastern Studies, Princeton University.

the studies on Kurdish migration and the construction of identity have focused on migration from Kurdish cities to Turkish cities (Saraçoğlu, 2010; Üstündağ, 2010). However, internal migration within the Kurdish region has received relatively little scholarly attention. Therefore, this gap intrigued me as a researcher; I was interested in how the migration of another Kurdish group, people from Hakkari, is affecting the construction of Vanlılık, how the intersection of different groups that share a common ethnic identity affects the formation of Kurdish identity, and how shifting conditions have impacted intergroup power balances. In addition to migration from Hakkari, my preliminary research revealed that Van has also become a frequent destination for Iranian tourists and serves as either a transit point or a place of settlement for Iranian migrants. So, how did the Van Kurds position themselves within these encounters?

All these questions have led me to the research question of my graduate thesis: How do Van Kurds construct the identity of Vanlılık in their encounters with Hakkari Kurds and Iranians? This thesis explores the identity construction of Van Kurds under changing conditions, with a specific focus on the vagueness of the boundaries of this identity and the politicization of the city. By conducting fieldwork in Van for one week in February 2025, I interviewed eight Van Kurds, five men and three women between the ages of 25-65, and conducted a focus group with six individuals, between the ages of 25 to 70. Detailed analysis of the interlocutors will be provided in the appendix.

The fieldwork revealed that *Vanlılık* as an identity is shaped through different questions and positionalities. The encounter with Hakkari Kurds or Iranians reveals different forms and faces of Vanlılık, and these faces sometimes contradict one another. Also, the construction of *Vanlılık* is closely connected to an underlying

concern with maintaining a powerful position after the arrival of other groups. Therefore, I will also examine how *Vanlı* identity is constructed and narrated, and how discourse reveals the vagueness of its boundaries through their perceptions of Hakkari Kurds and Iranian migrants. This thesis also shows that while state-led displacement policies aimed to suppress Kurdish identity, they have often led to its unintended re-politicization in new urban settings. In this case, the arrival of Hakkari Kurds has not only redefined Vanlılık but has also contributed to the diversification and rearticulation of Kurdishness itself.

As the methodological framework, I will adopt Post-Marxist Discourse Theory as introduced by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. I believe that this theory is relevant to my thesis because it emphasizes how discourse produces social antagonism and defines identity formation as a constant becoming process. Alongside this framework, I will also draw on the work of Norbert Elias and John L. Scotson and Zygmunt Bauman. Elias and Scotson's (1965) analysis of exclusion among migrants of the same ethnic group and Bauman's (2016) reflections on strangerhood and the construction of the "we-image" provide complementary insights that deepen my analysis of Vanlı identity and its shifting boundaries.

The following chapter provides an overview of the existing literature to understand the studies that have been conducted within the region and how Kurdish identity has been analyzed by different sociologists and anthropologists. Since the theory proposed by Laclau and Mouffe also emphasizes the importance of historical context within discourses, including both the history of migration in the region and the Kurdish identity in my analysis has helped me deepen the scope of my research. I will also engage with studies of identity, forced displacement, and encounters in borderlands to understand the formation of Kurdish identity and the concept of

Vanlılık. At the same time, I will also outline the theoretical and methodological framework of the thesis, offering a critical engagement with the main concepts and approaches.

The third chapter will be the first chapter where I begin my fieldwork analysis and will present the migration process of Hakkari people and its impact on the construction of Vanlı identity, based on the interviews conducted with Vanlı participants. While conveying how the interviewees narrate the migration from Hakkari to Van and how they construct Vanlılık as a liminal space within the city, I will also analyze the influence of these historical narratives on Vanlı identity. Furthermore, I will examine how the perspectives of Van Kurds have changed due to shifting conditions, particularly the increasing influence of Hakkari migrants in the city and the political sphere, by analyzing how changing power dynamics have affected perceptions of the self and the other.

In the fourth chapter, I will analyze one of the most pressing issues that has emerged from this encounter, namely the construction of Kurdishness, by examining how the shared ethnic identity of Kurdishness both unifies and differentiates the Hakkari and Van Kurds. By identifying how the debates around modernity and conservatism manifest within the discussions on Vanlı identity, I will articulate the points of intersection and difference within Kurdish identity. Additionally, drawing from historical experiences, I will analyze how Van Kurds position themselves within narratives of competitive victimhood and competitive deservedness.

In the fifth chapter, I will explore how Van Kurds construct their own identity in encounters with Iranians, particularly through the urban space, engaging with debates on the right to the city. I will also expand on the concept of the right to the city, not as a demand for participatory urban governance, but as a symbolic and

discursive claim over urban legitimacy and moral order. I will examine how Van Kurds position Iranians both as migrants and as tourists, and how they construct their identities, particularly in encounters within the public sphere. Moreover, I will discuss how the experiences of encountering Hakkari and Iranian groups differ, how Van Kurds position themselves as “modern” when speaking about both groups simultaneously, and how they feel a sense of affinity toward Hakkari Kurds due to their shared Kurdish identity.

Finally, the concluding chapter presents a comprehensive analysis of Vanlı identity and its boundaries, highlighting how the fieldwork findings speak back to the theoretical and methodological frameworks of the study. It offers insights into how Vanlıs construct their identities under shifting socio-political and economic conditions.

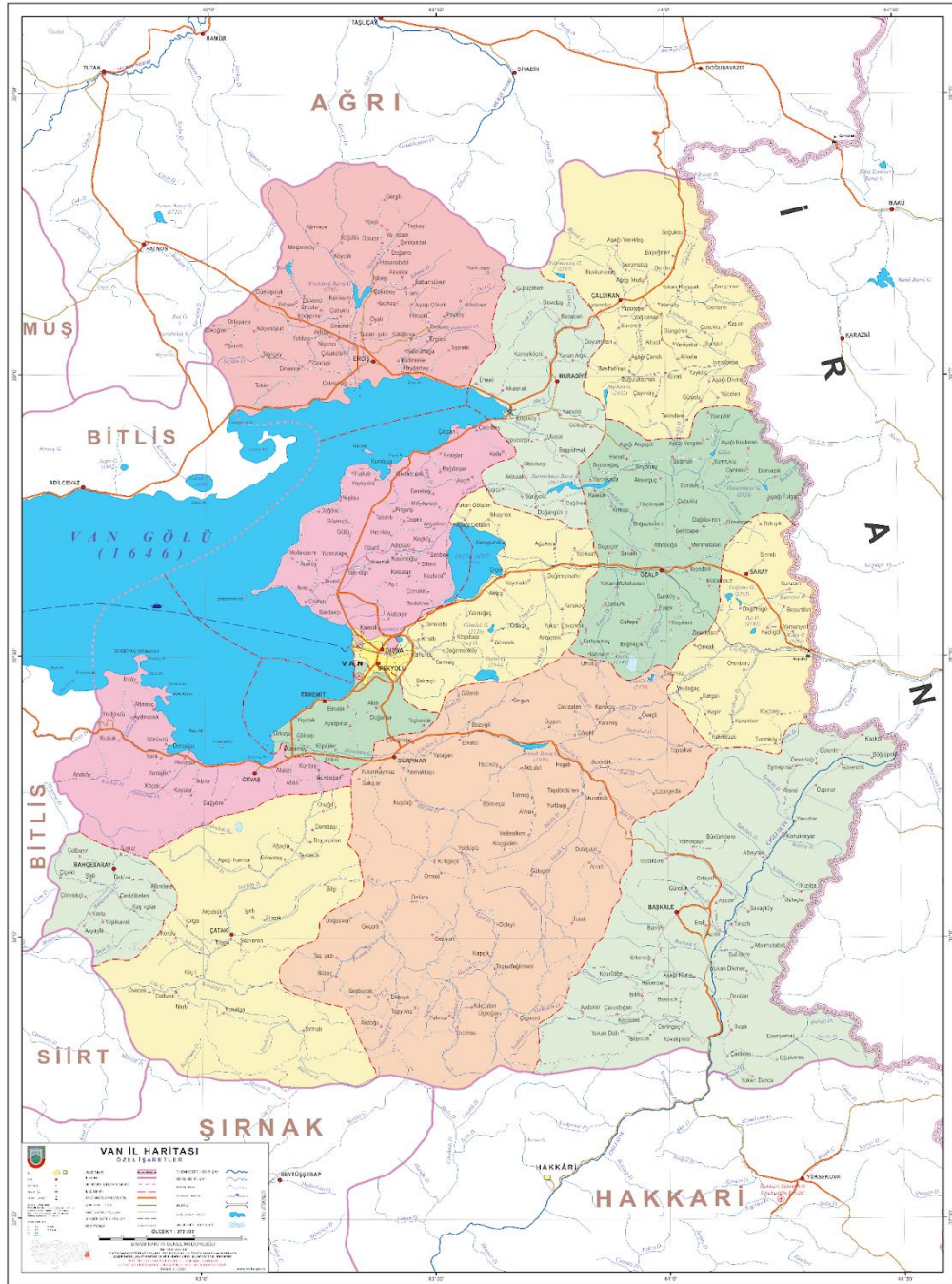


Figure 1. Harita Genel Müdürlüğü. (n.d.). *Administrative Map of Van Province*
<https://www.harita.gov.tr/urun/van-mulk-idare-il-haritasi/317>

CHAPTER 2

HISTORY OF VAN AND STUDIES ON KURDISHNESS

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will first present a historical overview of the Kurds in Türkiye, followed by an explanation of the migration from Hakkari to Van. Then, I will briefly discuss the literature relevant to my study and critically engage with it. After that, to establish a theoretical framework, I will briefly mention existing migration theories in the literature and elaborate on *Zygmunt Bauman's Strangers at Our Door*, which will be one of the main theoretical references in my thesis. After that, I will introduce *Norbert Elias and John L. Scotson's The Established and the Outsiders*, a study that has greatly influenced my work due to its thematic similarity, and I will explain how it relates to my research. Finally, I will outline the methodology I use in this study, along with my pre-field data, and explain the academic contribution of the research. Given that this constructed notion of Kurdishness frequently appeared in my fieldwork, I find it necessary to start my discussion by addressing the history of the Kurds and their encounters with Turkish statehood.

2.2 History of Türkiye Kurds

The concept of Kurdishness and how it has been shaped under varying conditions frequently emerged as a theme throughout my fieldwork. Therefore, it is important to briefly analyze this concept to reflect on the current conjuncture. My intention in presenting the historical narrative is not to legitimize or justify a particular version of Kurdish identity, but to demonstrate how it has been historically constructed. At the same time, the main reason for addressing the Turkish/Kurdish tension is to explore

how oppressed groups often come to internalize their subjugation and construct their identities with stigmatized subject positions. Therefore, it is important for my thesis to understand how the historical narrative of Kurds in Turkey has influenced the identity of Van Kurds, and to analyze how this influence recurs.

The history of Türkiye Kurds, especially after the establishment of the Republic of Türkiye, has been narrated alongside the history of Türkiye and therefore has been conveyed through the information produced by those in political power. The Kurdish region is a large area with parts in Türkiye, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, and it is an important region not only for the countries that encompass it but also globally, as it has been home to many different civilizations for centuries. Geopolitically, the fact that it includes commercial migration routes between the Middle East and the West, and its proximity to oil resources, has attracted the attention of many countries on a global scale. States in the Kurdish region mostly had multiethnic structures; most of the time, more than one ethnic group lived together in a certain piece of land (van Bruinessen, 1992; Altuğ, 2021). Before the rise of nation-state policies, people with common ethnic origins generally lived close to each other and in similar regions. Since Kurds have long been living in different nations, many Kurds have adapted different identities and formed different kinship ties, which have been influenced by shifting borders and state policies over time. In the Ottoman Empire, the Kurds, who maintained a tribal structure, were extensively utilized by the state, particularly in border policies and the conquest of new cities (Kasaba, 2009). However, after the establishment of the Turkish Republic, the autonomy associated with the tribal structure was targeted for dismantlement, and state discourses began to label it as a "disease" and a sign of being "unmodern" (Kasaba, 2009).

After World War I, just like in Iran and Iraq, under the influence of the principle of national self-determination that had emerged within the world, there were also Kurdish rebellions in Türkiye. In 1924, with a new principle of Populism (Halkçılık), some decisions regarding the Kurds were also made: the prohibition of speaking Kurdish in public places, the elimination of references to the Kurdistan region as a geographical entity, and the abolition of the Caliphate that had unified Kurds and Turks (van Bruinessen, 1992). However, it would be inaccurate to claim that Kurdish autonomy began to dismantle only during the Republican era; it had already started to erode with the centralist reforms introduced by Mahmud II in the 19th century (Yadırgı, 2017). These changes led to a search for autonomy among the Kurds (van Bruinessen, 1992; van Bruinessen, 2024). The Sheikh Said Rebellion of 1925 and the subsequent Eastern Reform Plan (*Şark Islahat Planı*) were the first causes of forced Kurdish migration in the Turkish Republic (Kurban, 2012). The Eastern Reform Plan aimed to settle Turks in the Kurdish region to increase the Turkish population and to disperse Kurds into Turkish regions to break Kurdish cohesion (Kurban, 2012). During this period, the state discourse also rejected Kurdish ethnic identity and remained largely silent on the Kurdish issue (Yeğen, 1999). Especially after the establishment of the Republic of Türkiye, to suppress national uprisings, it was claimed that Kurds did not exist or were not communities with their own history and culture (van Bruinessen, 2016).

Within the centralized structure of the newly established Turkish Republic, the Kurdish tribal organization was perceived as "civically indigestible," and efforts were made to suppress and deconstruct the tribal structure (Kasaba, 2009). The Settlement Law (*İskan Kanunu*) of 1934 aimed to Turkify the Kurds and resulted in the forced settlement of semi-nomadic communities in particular (Kurban et

al.,2008). During this period, Kurdish organizations and uprisings continued in Iran, Iraq, and Syria, and forced migration policies were also followed in these countries; especially after 1975, it can be observed that Kurds were dispersed to different regions in large numbers (van Bruinessen, 1992). This dispersion has led Kurds to migrate not only to those regions but also to various parts of the world (Başer, 2013). Forced migration for the Kurds is not a phenomenon that has emerged only in the last 25 years, but rather, Kurds have always been subject to forced migration and have become mobile communities, especially after World War I (van Bruinessen, 1992).

It is important to emphasize that in Türkiye, Kurds have long been subjected to Turkification policies and treated by the state as a second-class race (Beşikçi,1991). After being subjected to the policies of the state, the struggle for national liberation also began to emerge in the Kurdish region in Türkiye. In 1984, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*, PKK), a Kurdish nationalist movement, launched its first attack in Şemdinli, Hakkari, marking the beginning of the modern Kurdish–Turkish conflict and the so-called “Kurdish Problem” in Türkiye (van Bruinessen, 1992). The State of Emergency (OHAL) was declared in 1987 for the eastern and southeastern regions of Türkiye, officially starting the war between the PKK and the Turkish state (Üstündağ, 2010). Guerrilla warfare on the one hand, and state military oppression on the other, created an unsafe environment for Kurds in the region. By the late 1980s, the PKK had become entrenched in the region and began descending into villages to recruit members, collect supplies, and carry out propaganda (Kurban, 2012).

At that time, the Turkish state initiated the Village Guard System (*Koruculuk Sistemi*) as part of its counterterrorism efforts, encouraging local citizens to fight alongside the state against the PKK (Kurban, 2012). Kurdish people who refused to

become village guards were subjected to state oppression and violence and were often forced to migrate due to this pressure or because of village evacuations carried out under the state of emergency (Yücesahin & Özgür, 2006; Jongerden, 2018). On the other hand, villagers who did not support the PKK were labeled as village guards by the PKK and subjected to violence by them as well (Kurban et al., 2008). Both parties have been accused of using violence to compel people to take sides, labeling those who remained neutral as traitors—this created significant physical and psychological pressure on local populations. Under the state of emergency, local authorities had the power to evacuate villages, resulting in the forced displacement of many Kurds (Kurban, 2012).

Many studies have examined the reasons, scale, and consequences of this migration from eastern and southeastern Anatolia after 1984 (Kurban et al., 2008; Ökde & Özer, 2023; Çağlayan, Özar & Doğan, 2011; Tekin, 2011; Yıldırım & Şahin, 2001; Yücesahin & Özgür, 2006). In the official state discourse, the Kurdish issue has not been framed as an ethno-political problem or defined in political terms. Instead, it has been portrayed as a 'problematic region' due to reasons such as tribal structures and underdevelopment.² Since forced migration did not result solely from direct village evacuations but also from people fleeing unsafe environments or being unable to sustain their economic activities, exact figures based on cause are hard to determine. A report by the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TBMM) in 1998 categorized migration reasons as follows: 1) the collapse of agriculture and livestock due to government bans and conflict, PKK pressure on villages with guards, and intensified military operations in unguarded villages; 2) PKK evacuations of guarded

² For an analysis of how the Kurdish issue has been addressed in the state discourse, see: Yeğen, M. (1999). *Devlet Söyleminde Kürt Sorunu*. İletişim Yayınları.

villages; and 3) state evacuations of villages that refused to join the guard system and were considered unsafe or sympathetic to the PKK (TBMM,1998). While the TBMM estimated that 378,335 people were displaced, the Association for Migrant Rights and Social Cohesion (GÖÇ-DER) reported the number to be 4 million (Kurban et al., 2008). The higher number in the GÖÇ-DER report is due to the inclusion of those who migrated because of general insecurity, even if not forcibly displaced by the state.

After migrating, Kurds experienced various difficulties depending on their destinations and migration experiences. While most Kurds migrated to large cities in western Türkiye, some moved to nearby provinces (Tekin, 2011). Kurds moving from villages to cities faced challenges in abandoning traditional practices, adapting to urban life, and overcoming language barriers (Ökde & Özer, 2023). Migrants faced economic hardship, a lack of job opportunities, and insecurity, which made it difficult for them to adapt to life in cities. Many maintained their village lifestyle and social ties in the city, settling in slum areas and remaining on the periphery (Kurban et al., 2008).

Although many Kurds eventually adapted to life in larger cities, those who migrated to nearby provinces tended to express a stronger desire to return home (Kurban et al., 2008). Over the years, Turkish state policy shifted. Türkiye's EU accession process led to efforts to meet the Copenhagen Criteria, prompting attention to the issue of forced migration. For this reason, the Turkish Government launched the Village Return and Rehabilitation Project (KDRP) to assist return migration, but most Kurds could not return due to continued insecurity or having established new lives elsewhere (Kurban et al., 2008). In 2003, a Compensation Law (*Tazminat Yasası*) was enacted, and payments were made to migrants who were found eligible

under the law.³ With the enactment of the Compensation Law, some displaced individuals returned to their hometowns after receiving compensation, while others continued to live in the cities (Kurban, 2012). Overall, since returning is often difficult for communities that have experienced displacement, the majority have remained in the places to which they migrated.

2.3 Migration process in Van: Hakkari Kurds and Iranian migrants

As mentioned in the previous section, there has been a significant wave of migration in Türkiye's eastern region since the 1980s; this migration has also affected provinces like Van and Hakkari, since both are neighboring provinces located along Türkiye's eastern borders. Van, bordering Iran, is one of the largest provinces in terms of land area and has urbanized more rapidly than its regional counterparts due to its relatively higher level of trade and economic development. Between 1980 and 2000, Van Province experienced a 20% rise in its urban population, growing from 30% to 50% over two decades—a rapid demographic shift largely driven by migration (Yılmaz, 2012). Since the city is established on a key migration route between the Middle East and the West, Van has historically served as a stopover for migrants—some of whom settled permanently, while others did so temporarily. While migration from the East to the West is widely observed in Türkiye, Van has experienced both outmigration and significant inward migration. Compared to other border provinces, Van has been less affected by violence from non-state actors, making it more attractive for migrants, particularly due to perceived safety and better economic opportunities (Tekin, 2011). City draws migrants from nearby provinces

³ For more detailed analysis on *Şark Islahat Kanunu*, see: Kurban, D. (2012). *Adaletin kıyısında: “Zorunlu” göç sonrasında devlet ve Kürtler – 5233 sayılı tazminat yasasının bir değerlendirmesi: Van örneği*. İstanbul: TESEV Yayınları.

(Hakkari, Muş, Bitlis, Ağrı) as a result of its accessibility and higher level of socio-economic development (Tekin, 2011). It is also a commercial hub due to its border with Iran, receiving regular visits from nearby provinces and countries.

Hakkari is a mountainous province bordering both Iran and Iraq. Difficult transportation has contributed to its cultural insularity, and it has been described as “the fortress of unspoiled Kurds and Kurdish tribes” (Yalçın-Heckmann, 2002). As noted earlier, Hakkari was the site of the first attack carried out by the PKK and has experienced high levels of violence from non-state actors. According to the Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK), 28,000 people from Hakkari migrated to Van by 2010 (TÜİK, 2010). A primary reason for choosing Van is geographical proximity, which facilitates movement. Another is cultural familiarity, as both are predominantly Kurdish provinces with shared linguistic and cultural features (Arıcı, 2021). Field research shows that 75% of migration from Hakkari to the Van city center was due to security concerns, 21% for economic reasons, and 4% for socio-cultural factors (Deniz & Etlan, 2009).

Migrants from Hakkari typically settled in the peripheral neighborhoods of Van, leading to the creation of new urban areas such as Altıntepe, Esenler, Süphan, Yalı, Şafak, and Yalım Erez (Deniz & Etlan, 2009). This wave of migration gave rise to the phrase “Hakkarization of Van,” in the area, reflecting local perception towards the newcomers’ growing presence and the formation of new neighborhoods.

Van also lies on the route of broader transnational migration from the Middle East to Western countries. Kapıköy Border Gate, Van’s official crossing with Iran, serves as a major entry point for hundreds of migrants and tourists (Deniz, 2022). Migrants from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran frequently use the Iran–Van route for migration. Van serves as a critical transit point—migrants arrive by direct flights from Tehran, through the border gate, or via illegal routes through rural areas (Karadağ, 2021). While some migrants continue westward, others settle permanently in Van (Saraçoğlu, 2023). Although Van does not directly border Syria, it has nevertheless been a destination for Syrian migrants, hosting approximately 0.05% of the 2,801,855 Syrians under temporary protection in Türkiye (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Interior Presidency of Migration Management, 2025).



Figure 3. [Photograph] Kapıköy Border Gate.
Photo taken by: Hakan Sarı / AA (2023)

At the same time, the shifting borders over the years have led to different strategies of economic adaptation across neighboring countries. In the broader Kurdish region, redrawn borders and inter-regional kinship ties have supported the development of cross-border trade. As it has been highlighted in my fieldwork, such trades—especially in border cities—are carried out by residents through both legal and illegal means. Smuggling is a common livelihood in the absence of formal employment opportunities, ranking alongside agriculture and livestock (Bruinessen, 1992). Field studies in Hakkari reveal that diesel smuggling, in particular, is a key source of income for many residents, and smuggling has become a widespread means of livelihood in the absence of formal employment opportunities, ranking alongside agriculture and livestock (Kurban et al., 2008; Oğuz, 2024). During my field interviews, it was often noted that many of those who migrated from Hakkari to Van continued to be involved in such activities.

Additionally, one of the commonalities shared by Iran, Türkiye, and the Kurdish region has been the qualifier *kaçak*⁴, which defines their interrelations through the border (Yıldız, 2024). *Kaçak*, which could be translated as contraband, has been used by researchers to explain border politics and the economy in Eastern Türkiye by revealing the links between the formal economy and politics (Yıldız, 2024; Bozçalı, 2024; Oğuz, 2024). As Van is a border province with Iran, various goods and services have been circulated as contraband, leading the state to monitor the region and develop policies against smuggling (Oğuz, 2024). Nevertheless,

⁴ *Kaçak*, in Kurdish *qacax*, means to run away and to be a fugitive in Turkish, and both meanings refer to the constitutive logics of border politics. For a more detailed analysis of *kaçak*, please see: Yıldız, E. (2024). *Kaçak | qaçax | قاچاق: Fugitive forms of bureaucracy and economy across Southwest Asia. Journal of Cultural Economy*, 17(2), 147–153. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17530350.2024.2323685>

smuggling between Iran and Van continues and constitutes a significant part of the local economy (Yıldız, 2024; Oğuz, 2024).

The case of Iranian migrants and tourists is different from the case of Hakkari Kurds. As noted earlier, historical border shifts in the middle east region have created familial and social ties across present-day national boundaries. Today, Van is a major destination for Iranian tourists due to proximity and kinship. Research shows that 99.6% of tourists in Van are Iranian, citing reasons such as entertainment, travel, shopping, visiting relatives, proximity, convenience, and affordability (Ayhan Kaya & Gülcan, 2021). Iranians often feel a sense of familiarity with Van's Kurdish residents, having established trade relations and shared social spaces. As a result, Van has become a key node for Iranian mobility—both for short-term tourism and long-term migration.

At the same time, in order to understand the migration of Iranians, it is important to situate this migration historically. At the end of World War I and during the early years of the Republic, there was a significant wave of migration from Iran to eastern Türkiye, particularly to the Van region (Özmeral, 2023). Among the groups that migrated during this period were the Küresünnis (Azerbaijani Turks) and the Acems (Iranian Turks) (Özmeral, 2023). These migrants were settled in Van and the surrounding provinces as part of Türkiye's resettlement policies at the time (Kurban et al., 2008). Until the period of the Iranian Islamic Revolution, many Iranian families continued to migrate to Van, often with the support of previously settled communities and kinship ties (Özmeral, 2023). Over time, the Küresünnis and Acems who migrated to Van in the early Republican period became settled and began to be regarded as part of the local population (Levendoğlu, 2016; Ateş, 2023). Moreover, the fact that the Acems and Küresünnis in the region spoke a Turkic

language facilitated, from the perspective of the Turkish state, their relatively smoother adaptation compared to the Kurdish populations who were also long settled in the region (Levendoğlu, 2016).

Due to a bilateral agreement signed between Iran and Türkiye in 1960, which allowed Iranians to stay in Türkiye without a visa for up to three months, Türkiye became one of the most favorable destinations for Iranians seeking asylum (Danış, 2004). In addition, the presence of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office in Van became one of the key factors influencing not only Iranians but many other migrants to choose Van as their initial point of entry and residence (Danış, 2004; Deniz & Etlan, 2009). Beginning in 1979, there was a substantial wave of migration from Iran to Türkiye (İçduygu & Keyman, 2000). Among those who crossed the Iranian border into Van, some migrants stayed in the city temporarily, while others began to reside there for extended periods. Starting from the 1980s, migration from Iran and Afghanistan continued steadily, largely due to ongoing crises and instability in the Middle East (İçduygu & Keyman, 2000).

As it has been explained above, Van, as a borderland, has been a place where different groups have migrated, sometimes stayed for a certain period, and sometimes resided for a long time; it has been significantly affected by both internal and external migration. This multicultural aspect of Van also brings issues such as identity, border, migration, and encounter into the analysis of the city, which will be discussed in the following section.

2.4 Identity in Borderlands: Questions of ‘self and the other’ in displacement and borders

Identity has been studied from various perspectives, including how it is formed, recognized, and shaped through different times and spaces (Erikson, 1959; Mead, 1954; Berger, 1966). Since my thesis focuses on how the Vanlı identity is being formed through different encounters, identity emerges as a central analytical focus in this thesis. As Berger (1966) emphasizes, identity is not fixed but rather a construct shaped through social encounters within the broader social sphere. Similarly, Mead(1954) argued that identity formation is inherently relational; it emerges through processes of mutual recognition and adaptation. From this perspective, identity is central to one’s positionality, as the image of the self develops only through encounters with others (Mead, 1954). Since identity is continually reshaped in borderlands—where encounters between different identities are most pronounced—the border emerges as a key site for exclusionary practices and their influence on identity formation.

Borders, rather than being fixed geographical peripheries, are arbitrary constructions that shape the distinction between ‘self’ and ‘other’ through subjective interiorization and the localization of power (Balibar & Williams, 2002; Cunningham & Heyman, 2004). Borders, once seen as the physical manifestation of sovereignty, have transformed—under modernity and increasing border mobility—into spaces where identities are negotiated and reproduced (Donnan & Wilson, 2010). Borderlands, in particular, are spaces of diverse encounters as in these regions, identities are consolidated and challenged. They are sites where discourses and securitization practices shaping identity emerge (Rajaram & Grundy-Warr, 2007). Thus, the border is symbolically produced and becomes a construction that

marks the frontier of the nation-state. Due to their histories and the shifting nature of borders, individuals living in borderlands do not merely reflect allegiance to a single national identity; rather, the borderland itself becomes a performative space (Donnan & Wilson, 2010). Especially in borderlands, national identity turns into a politicized ethnicity; due to constant encounters, identities emerge in a hyper-performative manner and delineate their own boundaries (Wilson & Donnan, 1998).

Since Kurdishness has repeatedly emerged as a theme during my fieldwork, it is important to analyze the role of ethnic boundaries in borderland contexts. Frederik Barth (1969) emphasized the importance of borders in the formation of ethnic boundaries and was one of the first anthropologists to highlight the relationship between borders and identity, as well as the significance of borderlands. He argues that ethnic identity is not solely linked to biological heritage but is instead rooted in a shared culture—such as language and history—which is crucial for understanding the arbitrary nature of borders and analyzing identity in relation to shifting boundaries of nation-state territories (Barth, 1969). Barth (1969) states that individuals, while constructing their ethnic boundaries, establish their own rules through encounters with those they define as ‘other,’ and thereby construct their identity in response.

Simultaneously, Agier (2016) argues that this encounter in the borderlands creates ‘we-images’, which serve as an identity. This ‘we-image’ is no longer grounded solely in race; it now incorporates evolving forms of national identity, which raises new questions about locality and belonging. This construction of the self and the other results in the subjective interiorization of the border; people define themselves and their place in the world by the impassibility of the imagined border (Balibar & Williams, 2002). Agier (2016) argues that the history of identities is

intertwined with the history of successful migrations, meaning that every identity is, in some way, connected to migration—either because individuals themselves have migrated or because they have encountered other migrants, through which identity becomes formulated. Notably, he adds that no one can ever be truly called ‘indigenous’, as borders are always unstable and constructed (Agier, 2016). For the first arrivals, what the migrant initially perceives as ‘already there’ is gradually transformed into a sense of ‘always there’, and this is how the history of the local is produced (Agier, 2016). While Barth (1969) emphasizes the construction of ethnic boundaries as a means of producing a “we-image,” Agier extends this logic by situating such boundaries within the historical context of migration—suggesting that even the notion of being ‘local’ is itself constructed through migratory processes.

Identity formations are not only shaped by these encounters, but they are also deeply entangled with the everyday economic practices of borderlands. Border cities are spaces where clandestine and legitimate economic activities coexist. While they contribute to the region through tourism and importation, they also produce various coping mechanisms as well as social and financial relations. In borderlands, this legal/informal dichotomy is often blurred, as social norms and the ways in which activities are structured and regulated are closely tied to the nature of exchange itself (Hart, 1985). Therefore, economic practices in borderlands are embedded in local moral frameworks (Parry & Bloch, 1989). In Van, such moral negotiations around economic activity have been observed in both tourism and smuggling practices.

Similarly, borderlands are not only spaces where identities are performed, but also where a governmental set of rules is enacted; therefore, smuggling and cross-border shopping reveal both the strength and fragility of the state in terms of power (Wilson & Donnan, 1998). Sidaway (2007) argues that smuggling and borders are

mutually constitutive; the moment border regulation begins, smuggling emerges as an economic strategy. Similarly, Ruben Andersson (2014) maintains that increases in border control correlate with the intensification of smuggling; he claims that the very system which aims to manage movement through legality is also the one that generates the conditions for illegality. Furthermore, Andersson (2014) conceptualizes smuggling as a "clandestine industry" — a largely unspoken yet highly profitable dimension of the migration process. These circulations of both bodies and commodities, not only subvert state regulations but also actively shape senses of belonging and identity in borderlands, thereby illustrating how borders are not merely lines of division but generative sites of social relations and everyday life.

As explained above, borderlands are spaces where identity is constantly produced and reshaped; these encounters, in particular, lead to the performance of identity and the manifestation of the symbolism of the border. From a theoretical perspective, analyzing identity involves not only understanding how it is formed but also recognizing what it excludes, as this reveals the boundaries of identity itself. Within the identity theories, it has also been argued that speaking about the 'Other' is inherently linked to understanding and forming the 'Self' (Bakhtin, 1981; Xu, 2013). Analyzing discourses on the Other then becomes crucial to understanding how the Self is formed, as these encounters reveal that identity is socially constructed (Xu, 2013). It is also important to emphasize that the formation of the Other does not occur through a fixed dualistic structure. Since identity itself is a dynamic construct that shifts in relation to encounters, both the Self and the Other are constantly undergoing transformation (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2004). For this reason, studies focusing on encounters should adopt a situational approach rather than attempting to draw general conclusions (Agier, 2016). However, since differences are often

constructed in discourse through oppositions like “they” and “we,” such dichotomous categories have continued to be used in the literature. These encounters — specifically, the formation of “they” — become more pronounced in confrontations with the stranger, as such encounters are often perceived as a threat to identity (Golino, 2018). Similarly, questions about who constitutes a “they” and who constitutes a “we” also point to processes of othering and stigmatization, revealing what can be theorized as ‘aversive racism’(Dovidio & Gaertner, 2004).

The term aversive racism, coined by Dovidio & Gaertner (1986), represents the form of othering practiced by individuals with egalitarian values when they cannot engage in overt, ethnically based discrimination or directly discriminate. Rather than explicit, race-based discrimination, it refers to the tendency of individuals to (sometimes unintentionally) label the other side as "the other" based on negative feelings or personal experiences (Dovidio & Gaertner,1986). Originally, aversive racism was used to describe a type of racism commonly exhibited by white individuals who espoused egalitarian values (Dovidio & Gaertner,1986). However, today, the concept is also used to describe discriminatory behaviors that occur within minority groups themselves, where the out-groups are often defined along lines such as gender, age, national origin, or social class—categories that typically do not hold dominant positions in society (Rodenborg & Boisen,2013). These stereotypes often lead to the creation of a generalized "they-image" by overgeneralizing individual experiences. However, because individuals are aware that stereotyping constitutes a form of racism, they tend to emphasize that there are exceptions—individuals who do not conform to the stereotype and who possess "positive traits"—thus denying that they are overgeneralizing (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000). Individuals who exhibit aversive racism typically attribute negative characteristics of a group not to their race

per se, but to other factors such as the group's culture or everyday practices (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000). Since identity formation and identity conflict are also constructed through racial otherization (Xu, 2013), it is important to discuss the concept of aversive racism and understanding the different dimensions of racism in modern societies to make sense of the layered dynamics of exclusion.

As can be seen above, the theories generally emphasize that identity is continually reproduced through different encounters and within different conjunctures. In fact, migration is significant in identity formation, as it raises the question of locality and reinforces otherization through the notion of 'aversive racism' that has emerged in the contemporary world; it also leads to a reconsideration of the concepts of 'us' and 'them'. Especially in borderlands, as sites of encounters between different ethnic groups, symbolic boundaries are produced and identities become performative.

2.5 From integration to encounter: Revisiting the studies of migration in Van, Kurds, and Türkiye

As discussed in the previous sections, although studies on Kurdish populations in Türkiye and other migration waves to Van are not extensive in scope, they nonetheless provide valuable historical and field-based insights. These studies have primarily focused on migrants' methods and reasons for arrival, their integration processes, and the emergence of migrant-dominated neighborhoods after settlement (Ayhan Kaya & Gülcan, 2021; Bayram, 2024; Deniz & Etlan, 2009; Elmastaş, 2015; Gürbüz & Karabulut, 2007; Kurban et al., 2008; Saraçoğlu, 2023; Şeker & İlhan Tunç, 2010; Türközü, 2019; Yılmaz & Gerçeker, 2023; Yıldız & Alaeddinoğlu, 2011). At the same time, most studies on migration in the region have centered the

migrant as the primary subject, focusing on their reasons for migrating, the migration process itself, their adaptation experiences, and the neighborhoods they settled in after arrival. However, few of these studies have concentrated on the local population in the cities receiving migrants.

For instance, in his study in 2008, Orhan Deniz examined the reasons behind migration to Van's urban center, revealing through his fieldwork that 75% of migrants came due to security concerns, while 21% cited economic reasons (Deniz, 2008). Similarly, the study by Deniz and Etlan, as well as others, identified neighborhoods formed by both internal and external migrants, indicating where migrants settled in high numbers and which urban zones emerged as new spaces of residence (Deniz, 2008; Deniz & Etlan, 2009; Şeker & İlhan Tunç, 2010). These studies were valuable for my research because they point to migration motivations and the locations where migrants settled and how new neighborhoods were formed.

In a way that supports these academic resources, various studies have explored the reasons behind Van becoming a migration-receiving city, often defining Van as a “secondary migration attraction center” and analyzing the waves of migration it receives from surrounding provinces by focusing on the reasons behind the migration to Van and the problems that migrants face upon arrival (Deniz & Etlan, 2009; Tekin, 2011; Arıcı, 2021). Migration from Hakkari to Van, in particular, has been analyzed in these studies and provides a valuable foundation for my own historical overview and analysis of migration dynamics in Van. Orhan Deniz's work, in particular, has been a valuable resource for understanding the migrant profile, migration processes, and the transformation of the urban space in the Van region. While his research is especially significant due to the empirical depth of his analysis, it primarily focuses on the transformation of the city itself rather than the

transformation of Vanlı identity through migrant encounters. For this reason, it has been used as a secondary source in this study.

The doctoral dissertation written by Burcu Ateş (2023) is one of the most important works in the literature on Van province that highlights the multi-ethnic character of Van and incorporates narratives of Kurdish residents of Van on migration and the city. As part of her dissertation, Ateş stayed in Van between 2020 and 2022 in four parts, conducting interviews with various migrants and developing a study grounded in body-space relations (Ateş, 2023). Ateş, in particular, focuses on the urban memory of Van and the city's transformation over time, revealing how this transformation has unfolded across the years. By examining the encounters among different ethnic groups, she illustrates the role Van plays in these dynamics, offering a significant contribution to the literature. Although her primary interviews were conducted with migrants, the inclusion of interviews with Van-based Kurds makes her work an important resource for understanding the formation of the "Vanlı" identity and analyzing how these encounters affect the local population.

Van is one of the most diverse cities in Türkiye, not because its demography is characterised by multiple transnational migrants of different national and racial identities, but mostly because of the diversification in migrants' migration patterns, educational backgrounds, legal statuses, lengths of residence, socio-economic backgrounds, and ways of engaging with the city. (Ateş, 2023, p. 59)

As this quote illustrates, Ateş's (2023) dissertation approaches Van as a city shaped by encounters among individuals from various backgrounds. Her work contributes to both a historical analysis and an understanding of everyday life practices in a super diverse urban setting. Notably, hers is the only study I have encountered that identifies how Van Kurds themselves define Acems as the city's true locals, rather than seeing themselves in that role. Furthermore, the dissertation highlights the importance of kinship and tribal affiliations in the settlement process of Hakkari

migrants and also touches upon their everyday practices and interactions with Van Kurds(Ateş,2023). It also offers a detailed account of Iranian visits to Van during Nowruz, portraying their complex positioning as both tourists and migrants.

Although Ateş's dissertation is an important guide for my own work, especially in terms of methodology and scope, it adopts an urban planning framework that focuses on the city's formation, its neighborhoods, and the spatial distribution and daily interactions of migrants. While this interdisciplinary angle provides a useful foundation, her thesis does not focus on the formation of local identity in Van, nor does it thoroughly analyze how Vanlı identity is shaped and transformed through different encounters. Since her primary subjects were migrants rather than locals, and her aim was not to examine identity construction among Van-based Kurds, her dissertation remains a valuable but complementary source for my thesis, which is situated within a different disciplinary and analytical framework.

One of the most significant studies on the analysis of forced migration in the region is *Zorunlu Göç ile Yüzleşmek: Türkiye'de Yerinden Edilme Sonrası Vatandaşlığın İnşası*, edited by Dilek Kurban and Deniz Yüksek. Focusing particularly on Kurdish displacement after the 1990s, the report has become one of the most important sources for my thesis due to its comprehensive historical analysis, its examination of legal developments, and its exploration of the broader social transformations caused by forced migration (Kurban et al., 2008). Written by multiple authors from various disciplinary perspectives, the report not only documents the history of displacement but also analyzes the roles played by the state and the PKK, and discusses settlement patterns in the aftermath of migration—making it a highly valuable contribution to the literature (Kurban et al., 2008).

This study is important for the literature on the region because it provides a strong historical and political framework for understanding Kurdish displacement in Türkiye. While it offers valuable insights and data, particularly by emphasizing state policies and historical narratives, its primary focus on macro-level dynamics differs from the scope of this thesis. My research, which centers on the city of Van, instead explores how identity is reshaped through everyday encounters and localized power relations, rather than through formal processes of citizenship reconstruction. Therefore, although the report was not directly utilized in the fieldwork analysis, it remains a key reference for understanding the field and the historical and political context of the region.

At the same time, numerous studies have been conducted in the literature on the construction of Kurdish identity and Kurdish history from various perspectives (van Bruinessen, 1992; Yeğen, 1999; Jongerden, 2018; Şur & Çakmak, 2022; van Bruinessen, 2024). As an example of region-specific research, one of the most comprehensive studies on the Kurds of Hakkari is *Kürtlerde Aşiret ve Akrabalık İlişkileri*, conducted in the early 1980s by Lale Yalçın-Heckmann. This work provides an in-depth analysis of the culture and everyday practices of Kurds from Hakkari, and it has served as a valuable resource for understanding tribal relations and the formation of internal group solidarity (Yalçın-Heckmann, 2002). However, since the study does not cover the post-1980 period or address the forced migration of Hakkari Kurds and the experiences they have gone through over time, it has not been used as a core reference in this thesis but rather as a supporting source to understand the dynamics of tribal structure, Kurdishness and Hakkari Kurds.

Also, Nazan Üstündağ's work titled "*Esenyurt'ta Türk ve Kürt Cemaatleri: Gündelik Yaşamda Hasımlık ve Konukseverlik*" stands out as a significant

contribution to the literature. This academic study which focuses on movements from Kurdish-majority cities to Turkish-majority urban centers and the encounters that take place in these contexts, which focuses on İstanbul, Esenyurt. The study is particularly valuable for analyzing not only the process of forced migration, but also how Kurds construct their identities through various encounters in the aftermath of displacement. By centering everyday life and daily practices, Üstündağ examines how both conflictual and inclusive relationships can coexist, offering an in-depth look into the multifaceted interactions between Turkish and Kurdish residents in Esenyurt.

Moreover, the study reveals how Kurds, compared to other migrants from different regions, are positioned at the bottom of the local hierarchy of exclusion in Esenyurt, highlighting the unique mechanisms through which they are othered. In this sense, Üstündağ's analysis contributes meaningfully to the literature by exploring intergroup encounters, the internal hierarchy of exclusion among migrants, and the transformation of Kurdish identity under conditions of forced migration (Üstündağ, 2010). However, as noted earlier, this study differs from the focus of my thesis both in terms of its geographical scope—centering on İstanbul—and its primary emphasis on the encounter between Kurds and Turks, although it has been a guiding source for my thesis, it is a study conducted in a different field.

As previously mentioned, Türkiye is located on a major migration route and has become a region where numerous international migrants have either passed through or settled. Accordingly, there are several studies that focus on different migrant groups and various types of encounters (Danış, 2004; İçduygu & Sert, 2014; Karadağ, 2021; Türközü, 2019). Among these, the study “Yabancı ve Marjinal Olarak Öteki: Yerleşik ve Yabancı İlişkisi Bağlamında Suriyeli Sığınmacılar” by

Ekinci, Hülür, and Deniz (2017) stands out as one of the notable works in the literature for my purposes. The study is particularly striking because it explores encounters between groups perceived as “others,” while also employing the concept of “strangeness” and drawing on Elias as part of its theoretical framework, which I will also use in my analysis. Through the lens of the host–stranger relationship, the study analyzes interviews conducted with Syrian refugees who had settled in cities, and investigates how Kurdish and migrant groups encounter one another and construct mutual perceptions of otherness. Although the study was not included in the core analysis of this thesis due to its limited empirical detail and broader focus on intergroup encounters, it remains noteworthy as the only piece of literature that specifically addresses interactions between migrants and Kurdish groups who are themselves considered a minority.

Additionally, multiple studies are focusing on border cities and their influence on identity formation (Agier, 2016; Boehm, 2012; De León, 2015; Stokes, 1998; Wilson & Donnan, 1998). The article “*Imagining the South: Hybridity, Heterotopias and Arabesk on the Turkish–Syrian Border*” written by Martin Stokes holds a significant place in the literature, as it examines a border city in Türkiye, focuses on Kurdish identity, and discusses a borderland identity situated between two different ethnic groups. Stokes (1998) particularly notes that, following the foundation of the Republic of Türkiye, the Turkish state, which positioned itself through a discourse of masculinity, attributed significant importance to the Türkiye–Syria border and the border city of Hatay. Within this context, Stokes describes Hatay as a “symbolically gendered” area and explains that Arabesk music, which is widely listened to and performed in the region, serves a symbolic role between the Arab culture — which is subjectified as feminine — and the Turkish culture, which defines itself through a

masculine imagery (Stokes, 1998). Rather than merely emphasizing the direct adoption of the national identity by those living in border regions, the article highlights that, due to the arbitrary and continually shifting nature of borders, individuals in these areas also embody influences from neighboring cultures. By systematically rejecting or negotiating these influences, they engage in the ongoing reconstruction of their own identities (Stokes, 1998).

This study has also been particularly valuable for my thesis, as Van, being a border city, emerges as a space where different identity features are articulated through various encounters. In encounters with Hakkari Kurds or Iranians, the Van identity adopts different positionalities, and, as Stokes (1998) emphasizes, it is deeply intertwined with the broader project of the newly established Turkish state; borders also function to exclude historical practices and cultural elements that are deemed outdated or incompatible with the new national project. Although the subjects discussed in Stokes's article are not identical to those in my thesis, it has served as a valuable reference point in where relevant.

2.6 Academic contribution of the study

As can be seen from the analysis of the literature review above, even though there are many studies analyzing Kurdish migration and identity formation, most studies have focused on movement from Kurdish regions to Turkish-majority regions or migration to other countries. Encounters and identity formation were often examined in terms of coexistence between two different or similar ethnic groups. However, there is a significant gap in the literature regarding migration from one Kurdish region to another. Although there are some studies conducted in this field and specifically on Van, no research has been found in the literature that aims to describe

this particular encounter. Therefore, since this encounter involves shared ethnic identities, a common history, and migration from outside Türkiye, it gives rise to distinct dynamics, shifting senses of identity, and diverse migration experiences compared to other cases in the literature. This realization made the prospect of conducting fieldwork in this area even more exciting for me. For this reason, I came to see this thesis as a meaningful contribution to an understudied area within the academic literature.

2.7 Theoretical framework

As the main theoretical framework, I will use Zygmunt Bauman's *Strangers at Our Door* and Norbert Elias and John L. Scotson's *The Established and the Outsiders*. I will first engage critically with Bauman's arguments and then introduce Elias's approach, outlining both the aspects I intend to use in my analysis and the points at which my thesis diverges from his framework. Both of these sources are key for understanding migrant/host encounters and how these encounters produce and redefine identity. While Bauman focuses on migrant/host encounters as a dichotomy between two distinct groups and the identity formation within this structure, Elias examines encounters between groups with the same ethnic background who migrated at different times. Since my thesis focuses on identity formation through both encounters between different groups and the interaction of two Kurdish groups, both works are essential for my analysis.

2.7.1 Migrant as a stranger

Zygmund Bauman's analysis in *Strangers at Our Door* will be taken as my main source, particularly in understanding the causes and consequences of migration.

Before delving into a more detailed analysis of Bauman's book, I will first review the existing literature on the concept of the migrant as a stranger to summarize how the definition has been formed and how Bauman uses the concept. The concept of the stranger serves as an umbrella framework to analyze different formations; rather than representing a fixed identity, it functions as a relational and context-dependent position that may apply to different individuals or groups, and is shaped by the dynamics of specific encounters. In that sense, many studies have been conducted on the positioning of the stranger as a migrant and on the questions of the self and hospitality (Wood, 1934; Tiryakian, 1973; Simmel, 1950; Derrida, 2000; Agier, 2021).

Tiryakian (1973) argues that the stranger has become a mainstream topic for sociological literature after urbanization. In ancient societies, strangers had no civil status; since they were not part of the familiar community, they were perceived as alien and intruders (Tiryakian, 1973). The civil status acquired by the 'stranger' after urbanization led to increased concern in the studies. High levels of migration from rural areas and other cities to urban centers intensified encounters between strangers and hosts (Tiryakian, 1973). Simmel (1950) argues that there is both closeness and distance in this relationship between the stranger and the host; the stranger's position inside the place that they come is affected by how and what they bring from the outside (Wood, 1934). Since 'stranger' is not a fixed category but a dynamic emerging from relational encounters, it should be understood as a position assigned by the host, as the stranger trespassing a border (personal or urban) affects the moral or cultural features of the host group (Wood, 1934). Depending on the reasons behind the stranger's arrival, the host community always has an answer for them (Levine, 1977).

In *Strangers at Our Door*, Zygmunt Bauman (2016) examines the position of the migrant as a stranger in the postmodern structure. As explored in several theories, the willingness to host a stranger is shaped by constructions of hospitality—sometimes rooted in cultural tradition, other times in sacred or moral obligations (Agier, 2021; Derrida, 2000). But what happens when the one who comes to the door is perceived as the most threatening stranger—the one who stands at the very bottom of the host's moral hierarchy? Bauman (2016) argues that the migrant is positioned as a distant other, allowing the host to evade moral or cultural responsibility. This horizon is not inherent but discursively and institutionally constructed. Political regimes often portray migrants as disruptors of public order, and when the host internalizes state-led security discourses, their sense of responsibility diminishes.

Building on this, Bauman (1997) explains that migrants are seen as those who never truly belong—mobile communities that resist spatial containment. Their mobility threatens the stability of the social order. As newly arrived groups are perceived as socially inferior, they are portrayed as disrupting harmony and as morally impure. Cleanliness, for Bauman, is symbolic of order; when everything is in its proper place, cleanliness—and thus order—is restored. Urban sociology has long shown that those labeled as 'other' are pushed to the city's margins. As Bauman (2016) notes, ghettos have a history of segregation that speaks for itself. Migrants face invisible spatial rules: where they can go, where they are tolerated, and where they are allowed to settle. One modern form of territorial marginalization is the establishment of immigrant camps—often on city borders—meant to prevent integration. Most undocumented migrants are only tolerated within these camps; if they move beyond, they are accused of disturbing the social order.

I find Bauman's theorization highly significant for understanding migration to Van from Hakkari and Iran, as it offers a contemporary lens on the positionality of the host. His focus on how already marginalized social groups perceive migrants as strangers strongly resonates with my fieldwork, especially in the context of Van residents' attitudes toward Hakkari Kurds in the construction of *Vanlılık*. Many of the dynamics he describes were echoed in the interviews I conducted; hence, his theory will be referenced throughout this thesis to analyze hierarchical relationships and the formation of the "other."

However, Bauman's framework operates through a dichotomous understanding of the host-stranger relationship, which limits its applicability to more complex and multi-layered encounters. Identity formation, as revealed in my fieldwork, is not a fixed binary framework between self and other, but rather a fluid and shifting process, continuously renegotiated through multiple interactions. Bauman primarily centers the encounter between the host and the migrant, but this binary lens fails to account for the multiplicity of strangers and the overlapping positionalities that emerged in my research. In contrast, my analysis emphasizes the fluidity of boundaries and the continuous processes of becoming, rather than static categories.

While Bauman (2016) explains how the migrant is perceived as a stranger and marginalized as the "other," he does not address how the local population constructs its own identity in relation to this figure. As such, his framework remains insufficient for the type of analysis developed in this thesis. In contrast, Norbert Elias's theory—which highlights the transformation of identities under shifting conditions, evolving power relations, and hierarchical processes of otherization—offers a more comprehensive conceptual lens. His work thus constitutes a central

theoretical foundation for this research, and will be analyzed in greater detail in the following section.

2.7.2 Looking at Elias's theory: Who is established and who is an outsider?

In *The Established and the Outsiders*, Norbert Elias and John L. Scotson theorized how earlier migrant communities position themselves higher within the “hierarchy of otherness” in relation to newcomers, and how the dynamics of exclusion are reshaped with the arrival of a third group. Elias and Scotson (1965) conducted fieldwork in a suburb in England, for three years (1958–1961), examining the dynamics and changing power balance between groups of the same ethnic background who had migrated at different times.

In his fieldwork, Elias identifies three distinct groups: the host population, former migrants, and later migrants. The first group to arrive in Winston Parva had acquaintances from Zone 1—the local population—and, through the support of local intermediaries, they adapted more easily. While they remained strangers, they gradually became ‘familiar strangers.’ The arrival of the third group, characterized as a case of ‘mass immigration,’ generated discomfort for both the host population and the earlier migrant group. Since the new group has the potential to shake up this old order, the established group fears losing its identity and its monopolized power resources (Elias & Scotson, 1965).

As the former outsiders became more integrated, familiar with local norms, and accustomed to coexisting with the host group, they gained a certain degree of symbolic power. This allowed them to influence both the host population and the newcomers, positioning themselves as the ‘minority of the best’ while casting the latest arrivals as the ‘minority of the worst’ (Elias & Scotson, 1965). Having arrived

much earlier, the established group also shared a common history and culture with the host. Elias and Scotson(1965) argue that oldness in association is important in the integration of migrants; it refers to the social order and relationships (Elias & Scotson, 1965). There is group cohesion and collective identification within the established group, as it is composed of families who have known each other for generations and are accustomed to sharing common spaces, through which the stranger has become familiar (Elias & Scotson, 1965). However, the newcomers were unfamiliar strangers, not only to the old residents but also to each other; they lacked group cohesion and a shared cultural background (Elias & Scotson, 1965).

The newly arrived group often perceives earlier migrants as similar to themselves, assuming a shared outsider status due to their mutual distance from the host society. However, the established group—now more integrated into local institutions and dominant norms—seeks to maintain its privileged position and thus marginalizes the newcomers, whom they view as inferior (Elias & Scotson, 1965). Elias and Scotson describe how ‘we-images’ are formed, how power is monopolized to exclude others, and how earlier migrants come to align themselves more closely with the host population after the arrival of new outsiders. At the same time, Elias and Scotson (1965) argue that gossip played a crucial role in the marginalization process, as it produced and reproduced the ‘they-image’ of the new group. This image, in turn, reinforced the ‘we-image’ by emphasizing differences and boundaries, thereby consolidating the group’s own norms and definitions. However, as Elias and Scotson (1965) note, the distinction between ‘we’ and ‘they’ was not based on racial or physical differences; the most visible difference between the groups was their accent. Nonetheless, the boundary was drawn in terms of power potential.

The Established and the Outsiders offers a valuable theoretical framework for this thesis for several reasons. Most notably, their analysis of shifting power relations between different migrant groups is particularly relevant to the case of Van. Although Van Kurds have come to be perceived—and to perceive themselves—as the local population, they too are descendants of earlier waves of migration. Despite sharing the same ethnic background with Hakkari Kurds, they engage in processes of exclusion that mirror the dynamics observed in Winston Parva. Similar to the established group in Elias and Scotson's study, Van Kurds attribute negative characteristics to the newcomer group, thereby reinforcing their group boundaries and sustaining a hierarchical 'they-image.' Practices such as gossip, which play a central role in the reproduction of social divisions in Elias's framework, also emerged in my fieldwork and significantly contributed to my findings.

Even though Elias and Scotson's theoretical framework is important for understanding how long-settled groups in Van try to maintain their dominant position, it falls short in explaining how distinctions of locality and identity are constantly negotiated through different trajectories and overlapping migrations. At the same time, the zones and themes discussed in *The Established and the Outsiders* cannot be directly mapped onto the case of Van; therefore, it would be inaccurate to draw a one-to-one comparison between the groups identified in Elias's study and those in Van. Rather, I aim to highlight both the similarities and the differences between the groups mentioned in Elias's book and those observed in the field.

While Elias and Scotson (1965) primarily focus on how the established group maintains its position through exclusionary practices, they do not directly engage with the concept of "strangeness" as Bauman does. This renders Elias and Scotson's framework limited in addressing the complexities of postmodern migration and

multi-layered encounters between migrant groups—issues more directly addressed in Bauman’s (2016) analysis. Bauman’s focus on border and security politics, along with transnational migration, makes his work particularly relevant for understanding Van as a border city. Additionally, while Elias tends to conceptualize migrant groups and spatial zones as relatively cohesive units, my fieldwork demonstrates that *Vanlılık* is fluid and continuously negotiated—not merely based on migration history but through ongoing processes of self-identification and cultural integration.

In Elias’s book, Zone 1 is referred to as the locals who have been living there for several generations, but since there is no information on whether they were also migrants at some point, we take it for granted that they are locals and represent the established population. In the case of Van, the definition of the locals is rather vague. When I ask interviewees about the locals of Van, they often refer to the Acems (Iranian Turks); however, they also identify themselves as *Vanlı*. This discourse creates a certain ambiguity, since the Acems and the Küresünni Turks are communities that migrated during the Republican era. Although they might be considered the first settled groups in Van, they are still migrants. Moreover, the Acems do not exhibit the characteristics of Zone 1 as described by Elias—such as establishing dominance in the power balance or holding local authority. Therefore, interpreting the features attributed to Zone 1 through the lens of the Acem community would be misleading. On the other hand, some characteristics of Zone 1 can be observed in the dynamics between established forms of Turkishness and Kurdishness. A detailed analysis of this aspect will be provided in Chapter 3.

If we analyze the Van Kurds as a group that embodies certain features of both Zone 1 and Zone 2, we still fall short in capturing the full complexity of the case. For instance, in *Winston Parva*, Zone 1 maintains strong social cohesion and does not

allow most of the individuals from Zone 2 or Zone 3 to enter socially powerful positions (Elias & Scotson, 1965). However, in the case of Van, the high level of political participation among Hakkari Kurds—even to the extent of becoming mayors—suggests that this aspect of the model does not fully apply here. At the same time, it also indicates how the power balance has shifted over time. Also, while Elias and Scotson (1965) argue that the established group maintains strong internal cohesion—both within itself and in its relations with local actors—the newly arrived group is said to have weaker ties, both internally and in relation to others. However, as revealed during fieldwork, Van Kurds, whom I interviewed, stated that Hakkari Kurds, despite being a newly migrated group, exhibit strong internal cohesion, which is primarily attributed to tribal (*aşiret*) affiliations.

In conclusion, as explained above, Elias and Scotson's framework serves as a valuable guide for this thesis, even though it cannot be applied to the case of Van in its entirety. Their focus on shifting power dynamics, the transformation of the ties established by earlier migrant groups with the local population and among themselves upon the arrival of new migrants, and the tendency of long-settled groups to perceive newcomers as outsiders—despite their shared ethnic heritage—are all theoretical insights that strongly resonate with the findings of my fieldwork and will be actively used in my analysis. However, since Elias does not focus on encounters between individuals from different nation-states, his framework remains limited in addressing postmodern migration, the dynamics of border cities, and interethnic encounters. Therefore, Bauman's (2016) analysis will be employed to examine how the concept of the stranger plays a role in interactions with the local population and contributes to identity formation in contexts shaped by global mobility. In this sense,

both theoretical frameworks are complementary and together offer a more comprehensive lens for analyzing the fieldwork.

2.8 Methodological framework

In analyzing my fieldwork, I employ discourse analysis as the primary methodological approach, with a specific focus on Post-Marxist Discourse Theory. I find this theoretical framework particularly useful for understanding processes of identity formation, especially in contexts of encounter, where identities shift, reconfigure, and certain dimensions become foregrounded depending on the discursive situation. Since Post-Marxist Discourse Theory emphasizes the complexity and partiality of identity construction, I believe it is a valuable conceptual tool for analyzing my fieldwork.

Discourse analysis in general examines the relationship between language use and social practices; it focuses on how actors and language are involved in the production of meaning systems and how discourse is connected to the formation of the social (Keller, 2013). It aims to analyze a broader discursive structure based on individuals' statements and interpretations, analyzing both how discourse produces power and how it becomes institutionalized through various social organizations (Keller, 2013). This approach encompasses various techniques and approaches, including top-down and bottom-up discourse analysis, critical discourse analysis (CDA), analyses of gesture meanings and symbolic usage, media discourse analysis, and studies of community communication; additionally, conversational analysis and cognitively oriented frame approaches contribute to the methodological diversity within discourse research (van Dijk, 2002; Wodak, 1996; Phillips & Hardy, 2002; Fairclough, 1989; Foucault, 1972; Jäger, 2001).

Since Laclau and Mouffe also emphasize the importance of context in these moments of becoming (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002), all definitions become meaningful only when considered within the conjuncture in which they are produced. This conjuncture should not be understood merely as historical background or time, but also as the position of the discourse in relation to others (Keller, 2013). In this sense, situational thinking is also important for this theory. The order and context of the discursive elements and how they interact with each other can be analyzed through situational thinking (Keller, 2013). In line with this conceptualization, what is emphasized after which element plays a crucial role in the discursive construction of meaning, and the order in which elements appear within discourse holds significant importance (Keller, 2013). Therefore, the production of a discourse should be evaluated not only within the dialogue itself, but also through its interaction with other discourses.

Another important aspect of this theory is that it highlights the importance of the formation of differences—of the object and the other; more broadly, of what is said and what is not (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). First of all, since discourses are also systems of difference-making, the definition of something simultaneously entails what it is not or what it excludes; in other words, any definition inherently involves exclusion (Keller, 2013). At the same time, these definitions are only temporarily stabilized at the social and institutional levels; thus, rather than being fixed, they are always in motion (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002).

Laclau and Mouffe's theory is particularly significant for analyzing the formation of identity, as it conceptualizes identity not as a fixed or stable category but as a product of relational and contested discursive processes (Keller, 2013). Identities are accepted, negotiated, and rejected within discourse, and are constantly

in flux rather than ever becoming fully self-contained (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). For Laclau and Mouffe (1985), identity is always in a state of becoming, and its incompleteness reflects the impossibility of total closure in discourse. However, encounters produce temporary fixations that allow communication to occur, while simultaneously generating social antagonisms that demarcate boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Laclau, 1990). These fixations play a crucial role in shaping how identities are perceived and represented. In this context, my research does not attempt to define a fixed notion of Vanlılık, but rather investigates how this identity is constructed, contested, and transformed through discursive encounters and shifting conjunctures.

Also, considering that discourse functions to define things—keeping some things inside and some outside—Laclau and Mouffe argue that analyzing “the other” is always connected to the formation of “us” (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). In this sense, while analyzing encounters with Hakkari and Iranian migrants, I am also researching the formation of an “us” and the emerging notion of “Vanlılık.” As such, this research will not reveal an ‘identity-based cultural truth’. Rather, following Agier (2016), I adopt a situational approach to understand the social and political contexts in which identity is formed.

Regarding the element and moment applied to my fieldwork, Vanlılık can be understood as an element that holds no inherent power or meaning by itself. It becomes articulated—and thereby acquires discursive force—only through comparison and interaction with other identity categories, such as being from Hakkari, being Iranian, or being Kurdish. These moments of comparison establish symbolic boundaries by defining what is included and excluded in the identity. Also, when individuals repeat and reproduce these definitions across different actors and

contexts, a discourse coalition may emerge. Through shared narratives and similar articulations, the social facts produced by discourse are made visible (Keller, 2013).

Since Post-Marxist discourse theory is directly related to hermeneutics—it analyzes meaning within context (Howarth & Torfing, 2005), especially the conditions under which something is said—I consider narrative framing a vital analytical strategy. Instead of framing the interviews around predefined facts, I asked participants to reflect on their own stories of migration and everyday encounters. This method provides insight into where and under what conditions ideas surrounding identity are produced. Accordingly, the questions I posed were largely oriented around narrative elicitation.

Since discourse theory is based on the in-depth interpretation and analysis of a problematized phenomenon (Howarth & Torfing, 2005), I composed my dataset by focusing solely on one group—Van-based Kurds. Discourse theory also requires attention to detail and close examination; it necessitates the analysis of recurring patterns and the understanding of how context is constructed (Howarth & Torfing, 2005). Furthermore, research has shown that empirical data—particularly from in-depth interviews—is the most efficient way to conduct such analysis (Howarth & Torfing, 2005). In addition, qualitative interviews are crucial not only because they allow for the exploration of emotions, contextual constructions, and in-depth analysis, but also because they incorporate non-linguistic data such as the researcher's observations alongside linguistic data (Cruickshank, 2012).

Jørgensen and Phillips (2002) suggest focusing on only a few texts—such as fewer than ten interviewees—because this type of analysis prioritizes in-depth examination. From this perspective, I deliberately limited my dataset. I conducted in-depth interviews with eight participants, which allowed me to examine their

discourses in greater depth. This was a strategic choice to analyze each discourse in detail and understand how they are constructed situationally. To expand on the findings from the in-depth interviews and to observe how discourse is produced during interaction, I conducted a focus group with a six-member family. Focus group discussion revealed how discourses were produced during social interaction and how these productions were shaped and by whom (Cruickshank, 2012). Additionally, the focus group allowed for the discursive production to occur in a natural flow—rather than a dichotomous construction between the researcher and the interviewee, as in a question-and-answer format (Cruickshank, 2012). It helped me follow the participants' interactions within different concepts and conjunctures.

Echoing Derrida, Howarth and Torfing (2005) suggest that all data should be treated as a text and analyzed accordingly. To do so, I recorded and transcribed the interviews, which allowed me to observe key points and recurring patterns. One critique here is that approaching interviews as text may reconstruct them in a hegemonic way (Marcus & Cushman, 1982). However, since Laclau and Mouffe's theory analyzes definitions within a conjunctural context rather than treating them as fixed or universal truths, transforming my data into text was not an act of imposing a hegemonic reading, but rather a necessary step to identify moments of meaning fixation. Moreover, according to Laclau and Mouffe's framework, any research always reflects the researcher's perspective and the conjuncture of the period; therefore, the aim is never to construct a single, fixed notion of identity. For this reason, I was able to conduct my analysis without falling into this epistemological trap.

In conclusion, by using the Post-Marxist Discourse Theory introduced by Laclau and Mouffe, I will analyze my fieldwork data and the formation of Vanh

identity through different encounters. I will examine the fluidity of identity rather than treating it as a fixed structure, and how it transforms through different encounters. Based on the in-depth interviews and the focus group that was conducted as part of the fieldwork, I will analyze how discursive structures are constructed through situational thinking, in what order, and within what context. At the same time, by focusing on how the concept of the ‘other’ is constructed, I will analyze how ‘Vanlılık’ is represented as an identity through the themes of being Iranian, being from Hakkari, and being Kurdish, and I will focus on how the notions of ‘us’ and ‘them’ are produced.

2.9 Scope of the fieldwork

In order to keep my focus within a specific scope, my aim during the research was to speak exclusively with Kurdish residents of Van. Therefore, the starting point of each interview was based on the presumption—or confirmation—that the participants identified as Kurdish and as being from Van. However, throughout the interviews—either in passing or sometimes explicitly at the end—I discovered that several participants were, in fact, migrants themselves. Many had originally come from other provinces, such as Siirt, yet they strongly identified as *Vanlı*. This tension between origin and identification opened up an important space for exploring the complexity of belonging. In this context, the notion of being *Vanlı* has, much like being "from Istanbul" (Öncü, 2009; Konuk, 2013; Aslan & Pérouse, 2003), become a kind of "myth." This alludes to what Agier (2016) argues, as identity and humanity as a whole is a succession of migrations; so no person can be essentially indigenous in such a case. The first arrivals, in that sense, were already there when others arrive, and they transform into an ‘always here’ as a strategic point (Appadurai, 1996;

Agier, 2016). The question of who is included within this Van identity, and at what point one becomes a *Vanlı*, is complex. However, this thesis will not attempt a genealogical inquiry into the original or "authentic" Van identity; rather, it will focus on how the interviewees construct this identity after identifying themselves as *Vanlı*.

As part of my fieldwork, I spent approximately a week in the region in February 2025 and conducted in-depth interviews with a total of eight individuals. In addition to the interviews, I had the opportunity to carry out a focus group with a Kurdish family of six. With the help of three interlocutors I contacted before entering the field, I was able to identify participants through snowball sampling, therefore, many of the interviewees were connected. However, since my interlocutors themselves were not connected, this allowed me to achieve a certain level of diversity in my sample. Among the participants I conducted in-depth interviews with, three were women and five were men. The women were between the ages of 25 and 35, while the men's ages ranged from 35 to 65 years old. Among them, one woman and four men were municipal employees. Among the women I interviewed, one was a 25-year-old and an urban and regional planner, another was a 30-year-old self-employed small business owner, and the other was an environmental engineer. One male participant, aged 65, was a retired worker; another male participant was 42 years old and working as a journalist; two of them were working as municipality officers, aged 40 and 56; and one was working as a mountain guide, aged 35. The focus group interview was conducted with members of the same extended family that the mountain guide introduced me to, including siblings, parents, and their adult children. Participants' ages in the focus group ranged from 25 to 70. The group was selected as it represented an intersection of different age groups and genders, and, based on my observations, participants felt more comfortable engaging in these

discussions in the presence of their family members. Demographic information regarding the focus group participants and interviewees will also be provided in the appendix. At the same time, to protect their anonymity, I assigned pseudonyms to the participants and indicated their age after each quote to facilitate the reader's understanding and help identify the speaker.

2.10 Limitations of the research

Since this study focuses solely on the perceptions of Van Kurds and how their identity is constructed under changing conditions, I conducted interviews only with *Vanlı* individuals, rather than including other subjects such as Hakkari Kurds or Iranians. Given that the research explores how identity is shaped through encounters with the “other,” I found it important to concentrate on one group in order to gain a more in-depth and focused understanding, rather than collecting a wide range of fragmented experiences. Even though it was methodologically useful, I emphasize the importance of the views of Hakkari Kurds and Iranians in shaping the concept of *Vanlılık* as well. At the same time, increasing the number of interviewees could have been important for generating different analyses and themes such as intergroup marriages; however, it was not within the scope of the thesis. At the same time, Chronaki and Kollosche's (2019) paper, in which they conduct their analysis using Laclau and Mouffe's theory based on interviews with only one student, has helped me affirm that my number of interviewees is sufficient for analysis and for understanding how these concepts also reflect broader discursive hegemonies. Also, in line with Keller (2013), I believe that fieldwork material is not just information about the field, but also a discursive document that reveals the reconstruction of the symbolic dimensions of meaning-making. Therefore, I need to highlight that the

entire analysis only contains situational meaning and that I am not tracing what Vanlılık is. In this context, my analysis is only valid within the context and when different social and political actors are taken into account.

2.11 Positionality of the researcher

Before conducting my fieldwork, I wanted to gain a deeper understanding of the region and trace the term "the Hakkarization of Van" more thoroughly. To do so, I reached out via email to the journalist who had previously mentioned the term "Hakkarization of Van" during a live broadcast, explaining my research and why I wanted to speak with him. In this way, I started my pre-fieldwork process and detailed research on Van. He agreed to meet with me, and we conducted a preliminary interview before I arrived in the field. This conversation helped me realize how limited my knowledge of Van actually was. In particular, it allowed me to see a multiethnic aspect of Van that I had not previously considered. At the same time, this interview led me to another interlocutor. He offered to assist me with my interviews once I arrived in Van and also provided guidance on where I could stay, how I could feel comfortable, and what I should be mindful of—all of which helped prepare me for fieldwork.

This was my first time conducting fieldwork entirely on my own, as the lead researcher rather than being an assistant or student under supervision. As such, I inevitably encountered certain challenges in navigating my role in the field. One of the most striking dynamics was how eager people were to share their stories—often with great enthusiasm and emotional depth. This was invaluable not only because it allowed participants to express themselves freely, but also because it encouraged me to ask more questions, to follow narrative threads I hadn't initially considered, and to

witness the emotional weight that shaped their experiences. At times, however, the conversation would drift far from the initial question, and I occasionally found myself gently trying to steer the discussion back, even when I hadn't fully grasped how the narrative connected to my research focus.

At the same time, I found myself emotionally drawn into many of the stories I was told. This sometimes led me to ask more questions about aspects that were not directly related to my research scope. My identity as a researcher often intensified my curiosity, but this curiosity occasionally pulled me into conversations, particularly those centered on Kurdish history, that extended beyond the core objectives of my study. And after all, I was an outsider: a Turkish researcher conducting fieldwork in the Kurdish region. Before the focus group interview, I was invited to the family's home for dinner. While we were eating, the familiar question emerged—why was I interested in this topic? As I explained the scope of my research, one of the participants who would soon join the group turned to me and said: *"Of course, it's good that you're interested. But even the best white man doesn't want to be black."*

In that moment, the boundary between us was made visible. I was marked as a white Turk—an outsider—and perhaps, in the context of historical power relations, it was a reminder that I should be conscious of where I stood. At that moment, Merton's (1972) insider–outsider dilemma in fieldwork came to my mind, where he suggests that the researcher often inhabits both roles simultaneously—being "in" by way of shared experiences or affinities, and "out" due to structural or cultural differences. In this encounter, my position as an outsider was clearly delineated through a moment of tension, which was shaped by social distance. Of course, they continued to welcome me warmly and answered my questions with generosity. Yet,

many of their jokes and informal conversations outside the interview were conducted in Kurdish, and I could only understand their meaning after the interview ended and someone translated them for me.

The same participant who had made that comment on my outsidership later invited me to his own home as a gesture of hospitality. This time, our conversation flowed with greater ease. We spoke about shared interests, ideas, and reflections. If the earlier moment had situated me firmly as an outsider, this later invitation signaled a partial shift—an invitation into more intimate, informal spaces of dialogue. While chatting at his home, Merton (1972) once again came to my mind; this invitation to his house had granted me a “temporary insidership”, where shared trust and personal rapport allowed me to ask questions more comfortably, and to engage in discussions beyond formal interview scripts.. The conversations that took place there revolved largely around Kurdish history and were not directly included in the thesis material. However, having spent some time living in the city allowed me to make a number of observations beyond the formal scope of the study. Where appropriate, I intend to incorporate these personal experiences into my research as supplementary reflections.

I was aware that many Turkish researchers before me had conducted studies on the Kurdish region; thus, such encounters were not unfamiliar or unprecedented (Acar & Uluğ, 2019; Orhan, 2020; Türkmen, 2023; Baser & Toivanen, 2017). For instance, as Acar and Uluğ (2019) stated in their research, there are multiple reasons why Kurdish participants may remain distant toward Turkish researchers—one of which is the uncertainty over whether they share a common ideological perspective on the Kurdish–Turkish conflict. Trust between members of the two groups tends to be low, and this lack of intergroup trust has been identified as a major obstacle in

building rapport between researchers and participants (Türkmen, 2023). Although I did not personally experience significant difficulties in establishing a connection, an interviewee reflected on the importance of understanding their language:

You read a book and feel moved by it—moved enough to think, “*I want to learn this language.*” And so you try. You could have spent those three or four months learning something else, especially if you have a knack for languages. But instead, you become curious about Kurdish and start learning it. Now take this man—he’s lived here for fifty years. He’s constantly surrounded by people speaking Kurdish. And yet, he doesn’t speak it. What’s more, he hasn’t even made the slightest effort to learn. (Ahmet, 35)

I believe that my limited ability to speak Kurdish—even if it was just one or two sentences—played an important role in easing this tension. The interlocutor was referring to the Acem (Iranian Turks); and this quote reveals the importance of knowing the language—even just a few words—and how this reflects my acknowledgment and acceptance of the language and culture. Before most interviews, this interlocutor would introduce me to people by mentioning that I knew *some* Kurdish, which helped create an immediate bond between me and the person I interviewed. Even though my knowledge of Kurdish was limited to a few sentences—sometimes just a handful of words—he continuously taught me new terms throughout my fieldwork. He encouraged me to practice shopping in Kurdish at the market, and he translated conversations for me when I struggled to follow. In many ways, he became the person who has helped me to easily conduct my research in Van.

The moment I began recording for the focus group in the field, the participant—albeit jokingly—felt the need to praise people from Hakkari and mention that he was currently under investigation:

Researcher: I’ve started the audio recording, by the way.

Ahmet, Age 35: People from Hakkari are very blessed individuals.

Osman, Age 38: Both of our mayors are from Hakkari, so the people from Hakkari are very sacred individuals. (Laughing) For instance, I am currently

undergoing an investigation; and also, I might consider this interview as part of that investigation.

Researcher: Let me show you my card, my student ID.

Ahmet, Age 35: One of the locals from Van recounted a story. He said: “As I was driving from Hakkari to Van, a man flagged me down on the road. I picked him up. He got in the car and said, ‘Merheba, çawa yî?’⁵—greeting me in Kurdish and continuing the conversation entirely in Kurdish. I responded in Kurdish too, just a few sentences. But he just kept speaking in Kurdish, without even asking whether I was Kurdish or not. Eventually, I couldn’t keep up—my Kurdish wasn’t enough anymore. So I leaned in toward his ear and quietly said, ‘There’s a device in the car, we’re being listened to.’ As soon as I said that, he instantly switched to Turkish and said, ‘Ee nasılsın?’⁶”

This was one example among many jokes I encountered during fieldwork; such remarks often served as subtle ways to signal mistrust or uncertainty, even when participants agreed to be interviewed. I used pseudonyms to refer to interviewees, and I will explain them in detail in Chapter 3. As Kuipers (2016), echoing Marcus, put it, “*I followed the joke*”—and through this act of following, the joking itself became a site where the boundaries of Kurdish identity were subtly articulated. Of course, it would be insufficient to describe the anecdote mentioned here merely as a joke; there is also an element of irony⁷, which shaped not only the interviewee’s stance on their identity⁸ but also the positionality of the researcher. This irony further underscored my identity as a Turkish researcher conducting research in the Kurdish field. As noted during the pre-fieldwork phase, my position as a Turkish researcher was at times perceived as that of an ally, while at other times it served as a marker that positioned me as the Other in the field. Although I did not experience this dichotomy intensely, I believe it is important to consider both the researcher’s

⁵ In Kurdish, meaning “Hello, how are you?”

⁶ In Turkish, meaning “So how are you?”

⁷ For discussions on the role of irony in ethnographic fieldwork, see: Fernandez, J. W., & Huber, M. T. (Eds.). (2001). *Irony in action: Anthropology, practice, and the moral imagination*. University of Chicago Press.

⁸ For an example on how joke shapes the identity, see: Oring, E. (1981). *Israeli Humor: The Content and Structure of the Chizbat of the Palmah*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

positionality and how identity is constructed in the field for both the interviewees and the researcher. Apart from my position as an 'external researcher', I did not encounter any problems in the field related to being a woman or a young researcher.

As I have outlined above, my experiences as a Turkish researcher in the field greatly contributed to my understanding of Kurdish identity; providing me with a different perspective and, in fact, helping me deepen my research. At the same time, my positioning as both an insider and an outsider supported my analysis of the findings. In the following chapter, I will analyze my fieldwork data using the Post-Marxist Discourse Theory introduced by Laclau and Mouffe, and I will present the interviews in detail.

CHAPTER 3

ENCOUNTERS BETWEEN VAN KURDS AND HAKARI KURDS

3.1 The first encounter: Entering the city as a stranger

When I first landed in Van, I dropped all my belongings in the hotel and rushed to meet the first participant that I would interview. He was a 35-year-old mountain guide that I met through a mountaineering club, and I will refer to as Ahmet. He was very welcoming to me for my visit, and he invited me to his home to have breakfast together. During breakfast, he told me the question I would encounter frequently throughout my fieldwork: *"So, why are you studying this topic?"* I knew I wanted to study this subject, but I found it difficult to articulate exactly why I was drawn to it. In many ways, my interest was not the result of a single moment of realization, but rather an accumulation of encounters, readings, and personal reflections that gradually shaped my curiosity. I explained how my interest in Kurdish politics initially emerged after reading Gültan Kışanak⁹, particularly through her discussions on the active role of women in Kurdish political movements, and how this interest gradually expanded into a broader curiosity about Kurdish identity. I also mentioned that I had taken Kurdish language courses for a while. At that moment, when I mentioned that I knew a little bit of Kurdish, I felt as though I had been invited not only into the city, but also into a network of social and cultural relations that would shape the course of my fieldwork. From then on, my dynamic with him evolved into a relationship where my appreciation of his culture made him feel a sense of responsibility to help me. Almost all of my interviewees were introduced to me by

⁹ The book I refer to is *Kürt Siyasetinin Mor Rengi* by Gültan Kışanak, written during her imprisonment. It is a collection in which different authors reflect on the women's struggle and Kurdish politics. For further details, see: Kışanak, G. (2018). *Kürt siyasetinin mor rengi*. Dipnot Yayınları.

him; he took me to cultural places such as Van Castle, introduced me to local dishes, and showed me around the streets. He even took me to see a play at the Van City Theatre. In this context, he was the first person to introduce me to both the field and the local environment, and the one who welcomed me to the field.

3.2 Moving to the city: Stories on migration from Hakkari

All of my interviews started with the same question: “Can you tell me about how the Hakkari Kurds’ migration happened?”. The main reason I began with this question was to observe how they construct the historical narrative and, rather than introducing identity-defining descriptions at the very beginning of the interview, to see how they narrate and position the Hakkari Kurds within that story. I asked them to simply recount things they had observed or heard, in order to trace what they say after what, and how they weave a web of meaning. From the very beginning of the interview, Ahmet was able to grasp the structural causes in the arrival of the Hakkari Kurds:

In this region, villages were evacuated due to terrorism, and some were even burned down. In light of this situation, what’s the nearest province? Van. It’s also a more livable city—especially compared to Ağrı or Bitlis. This is the main reason why they come here in such large numbers. (Ahmet, 35)

From the beginning of the interviews, almost all interviewees described Van as “a livable city”. The construction of Van in that sense was built by this main comparison with other cities by referring to its sources and modernity; even when he was discussing the migration process, he highlighted the construction of Van from the start. At the same time, through different interviews, I observed that nearly everyone I interviewed recounts the migration experience of those who moved from Hakkari to Van in a very similar way; how violence from the state and non-state actors had led to village evacuation, how they were ‘forced to migrate’ and lived in

peripheral neighbourhoods, collectively residing in tents. Based on my field observations, this emphasis on force was generally used by interviewees to describe migrations that were sudden and undertaken without a choice. One of my interviewees, a 40-year-old municipality officer, whom I will refer to as Ali, had witnessed the migration process from a young age and lived in a neighborhood close to the Hakkari Kurds. When I asked him about the migration process, he emphasized that he is from Van and narrated the process from his perspective:

I'm from Van. In my memories, the migration happened when I was about 3 or 4 years old. There was a massive wave of migration due to the problems in Hakkari. Hakkari families were living in tents in our neighborhoods. As children, we used to bring them food. They also had a connection to my father and his peers, who were imams—they would go into the villages to teach Qur'an, so there was a relationship through that. I had a connection with the migrants through this. (Ali, 40)

Just like Ahmet, Ali also stated that the migration was a result of certain problems experienced in Hakkari, although he did not specifically address what those problems were. Ali also underlines that his family members had a relationship with Hakkari Kurds from the very beginning; by emphasizing that his father and his father's friends were imams, he constructs a positioning based on a shared religious identity. As he also explained, stories that the interviewees discuss about the migration from Hakkari are often childhood memories or recollections passed down from their parents. For the people of Van, Hakkari Kurds never had a distant or abstract presence; they were part of everyday life and were encountered from the very beginning.

The description and the storytelling about how they used to live in tents and how *Vanlı* people brought them food also serve as an elaboration of the “in-need” position of the Hakkari Kurds after their arrival. This “in-need” position was associated not only with economic deprivation, but also with other experiences of

victimhood—such as being forced to migrate overnight, having to leave behind their homes and jobs, and being subjected to violence by state and non-state actors.

The state, whether it was in the name of fighting terrorism or for other reasons, gave the villagers a deadline. Something like, “By March 1st, you have ten days to evacuate.” So the villagers, selling most of what they had—their livestock, their homes—migrated to Van in a hurry, almost overnight. (Ali, 40)

By contemplating how sudden migration was, Ali associated this in-need position with this sudden migration. At the same time, although I had already asked him whether he was from Van before the interview and we had started the conversation accordingly, it still caught my attention that he highlighted that he was from Van in the very first sentence. At first, I interpreted this as a way of positioning himself while recounting the story of the Hakkari Kurds—a way to underline that he was not the main subject of that narrative. However, as the interview progressed and the conversation shifted to different migration movements and their causes in the city, I came to understand the reason more clearly:

For example, our family came from Siirt too, but we ourselves were born in Van. That’s a reality as well. People from Siirt used to come here for trade, way back in the 70s and 80s. There were still security concerns back then. But the issue is this: we don’t identify ourselves as being from Siirt, we identify as being from Van. But with the Hakkari Kurds, there’s a bit of a different situation. (Ali, 40)

This was one of my very first encounters with *Vanlılık* as a multiethnic identity; seeing that someone who had identified himself as *Vanlı* even before the interview—and had strongly emphasized it—actually came from a migrant family, became an important starting point for me in understanding how *Vanlılık* is constructed. Even though the interviewee was explaining that his family were also migrants, he immediately underlined that he was born in Van and that he identifies as *Vanlı*. Also, the fact that he did not provide this information from the beginning of the interview and instead strongly emphasized that he is from Van may indicate a hesitation to be

associated with the migrant identity. When analyzed through situational meaning, by drawing a distinction between those from Siirt and those from Hakkari, he implicitly indicated that he did not want to be positioned in the same place as the Hakkari Kurds. This is an example of the tension between one's origin and the desire to claim local identity.

While we were conducting the interview, the interlocutor, Mehmet, which I had spoken to just before this conversation, was also in the same room. While continuing with his own work, he was also listening to us on the side. Although he hadn't intervened in the interview before—and despite my polite remark that I preferred he didn't—Mehmet made an addition and stated that after one or two generations; all people are Vanlı since they are all born together and grew up together.

Mehmet, just like Ali, also works at the municipality, but he is older than the other employees and was addressed as “abi” (big brother). When I reached out to shake his hand upon introduction, he placed his hand on his chest and said, “Thank you, I'm fasting,” which led me to initially perceive him as a conservative person. Although his refusal to shake hands caught me off guard for a moment, as a female interviewer, I was still able to conduct the interview without any issues. He, just like Ali, also came from a migrant family; he mentioned that one side of his family was from Ankara, and the other side was from Elazığ. As can be understood from the quote above, he also considers himself *Vanlı* because he was born and raised in Van. By including others who had migrated earlier, such as Ali from Siirt, he constructed a “we” image that grouped them together.

Vanlılık, in that sense, can be understood as an intersectional cluster of identifications—one that is never complete and constantly repositioned through

encounters with different groups. There is no fixed notion of *Vanlılık*; it does not refer to a specific group that has lived in the area for a certain period of time. This notion of *Vanlılık* aligns with Laclau and Mouffe's conceptualization of identity as discursively constituted, where groups are not only shaped by discourse but also actively contribute to its formation (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). The fact that two individuals originally from Siirt and Elazığ identified themselves—and each other—as *Vanlı* illustrates how, in terms of claims of belonging, they are articulated into the chain of equivalence that constitutes the discourse of *Vanlılık* (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985).

At the same time, this notion of *Vanlılık* also aligns with Elias and Scotson's (1965) conceptualization of "oldness in association." Referring to their fieldwork, Elias and Scotson (1965) emphasize that having migrated earlier is associated with perceiving oneself as part of the local group and with a stronger sense of belonging to a group of higher value. From this perspective, the fact that people from Siirt migrated earlier than the Hakkari Kurds has allowed them to develop stronger social ties and integrate more easily into the group, and construct their right to claim locality. In this context, their "oldness" facilitated their claim of belonging.

Ali, in response to Mehmet's statement "We are all *Vanlı* now," brought the conversation back to the Hakkari Kurds and made a discursive distinction, explaining why, in his view, Hakkari Kurds cannot truly be considered *Vanlı*:

The reality is, for example, that in Hakkari, there are many individuals who have experienced the painful aspects of urbanization and the migration process quite intensely. So, their sense of being from Hakkari might be much stronger. You know, what we call trauma—trauma is what urbanizes them. I don't have any kind of trauma related to Siirt. (Ali, 40)

By defining the forced migration and the experiences that preceded it as a form of trauma, Ali also indicates that this very trauma, which he also refers to as painful

aspects, is what urbanized the Hakkari Kurds. This relation between trauma and intergroup boundaries has also been discussed in several studies (Kaplan, 1987; Malkki, 1995; Said, 2000). Nationalistic tendencies have been frequently observed among groups subjected to forced migration and exile; this tendency stems from a desire to eliminate the sense of non-belonging by establishing a connection—not with a “home” they cannot currently relate to and perhaps never will—but with other displaced individuals in their new urban setting (Said, 2000). Ali, by emphasizing trauma, indicated that the bond among Hakkari people is, in fact, rooted in forced migration, and he points out that the Hakkari Kurds are attached to one another and to their Hakkari identity, which is why they cannot be included under the umbrella of Vanlılık.

At the same time, the relation of trauma and solidarity of Hakkari Kurds was also brought up by one of the participants in the focus group. Osman, who is a 38-year-old IT Technician and the eldest son in the group, stated:

In my opinion, people who have been subjected to forced migration tend to be more connected to one another. They become stronger as a community—because they go through incredibly difficult times together. They experience deeply traumatic periods side by side. (Osman, 38)

He, just like Ali, describes the migration of the Hakkari people as forced and traumatic, emphasizing that this shared memory is what actually binds them closely together. While many other interviewees also discussed the trauma that Hakkari people experienced and how they associate this with ‘paying the price’, at first, I want to focus on the urbanization process and the historical description of the migration itself; and how Van and Vanlıs are positioned within this context.

Additionally, some interviewees also highlighted that the physical and cultural proximity played a significant role in its selection as a destination for

migration. For example, A 32-year-old female environmental engineer, whom I will refer to as Fatma, responded to the question as follows:

Migration from Hakkari happened because the villages were burned down. They were displaced due to reasons such as terrorism. Job opportunities, healthcare, and similar services were very limited there. Van became a life for them in the Southeast. Those who had more resources settled in Istanbul, while the others stayed there. Since there is no industry here anyway, there aren't many job opportunities. The fact that they were close both physically and culturally also served as an advantage. (Fatma, 32)

Unlike the other interviewees, although she stated that Hakkari is a city that struggles even to meet basic needs, she immediately added that Van is not in a much better condition either, therefore does not attribute migration to Van with its level of development. The pain of forced migration, as expressed in participants' narratives, emerges not only as a physical displacement but also as a deeply embodied collective trauma. This shared suffering not only strengthens intra-group solidarity among Hakkari Kurds but also serves as a marker of distinction. In this sense, trauma functions as a discursive boundary that both connects and separates.

During our interview, she mentioned several times that she had lived closely with Hakkari Kurds since childhood and had many friends from Hakkari. Because of this long-standing coexistence and her strong identification with the broader category of Kurdishness, it became quite difficult for me to receive direct answers to my questions, and she was reluctant to construct a 'we-image' that excluded Hakkari Kurds. Throughout the interview, she repeatedly stated that she sees migration as a form of freedom and does not believe in borders, offering a distinct perspective compared to other interviewees. Even when she hesitates to make a comparison of the conditions between Van and Hakkari, she also adds:

[referring to Van] It's not a place with many job opportunities. This might be due to Hakkari Kurds' own circumstances, but in terms of transportation (to other places), it was better. For a long time, Hakkari didn't even have proper

transportation, there were no schools, no job opportunities. We can make the comparison based on these conditions. (Fatma, 32)

In general, the people I interviewed tend to approach migration to Van from similar perspectives; they are able to make sense of the migration of the Hakkari Kurds— by both referring to the push factors in Hakkari and emphasizing the pull factors of Van, describing it as a meaningful destination. At the same time, by pointing out that Van itself has limited job opportunities, they also acknowledge that Van is, in its own way, a city where meeting basic needs can be challenging. Fatma, in this excerpt, positions the city as "somewhere in between"—a place that is still evolving, perceiving it not as developed as the cities in the west, but still more developed than other cities in the region.

Bauman (2016), emphasizing this point, also highlights that one of the main motivations behind migration is the potential to access areas rich in opportunities. However, in host populations that are particularly vulnerable, such migrations often signal increased competition in the labor market and a perceived decline in the likelihood of upward economic mobility. As highlighted in other studies, the economic situation of a country significantly shapes attitudes toward migrants; they are often perceived as competing with members of the host society over limited resources (Esses et al., 2002; Blumer, 1958; Palmer, 1996). This scarcity—reflected in the lack of economic and social resources—can lead to migrants being seen as direct competitors, and to concerns over rising unemployment (Scheve & Slaughter, 2001), or fears that public services will be unable to meet the needs of an increasing population (Cavaille & Ferwerda, 2017).

In a way, the lack of economic resources generates a discourse that suggests these resources are not being fairly shared. However, Ali also pointed out Van's high unemployment rates and emphasized that the migration from Hakkari to Van was

primarily driven by security concerns rather than job opportunities. Ali, while comparing Hakkari and Van, described Van as a poor city, specifically in contrast to Hakkari. Although he did not elaborate on this comparison in detail, Mehmet, from another perspective, stated that these migration movements played a significant role in the discursive economic decline of Van.

The local tradesmen in Van—the wealthier, more elite segments—migrated to the western parts of the country. Their place was taken by people from Hakkari and surrounding districts[referring to Van’s surrounding districts] moved into Van, and those in Van moved out. To be honest, the wealthy abandoned this place. It was the rural population that came and settled here. (Mehmet, 56)

Mehmet, while attributing the poverty in the city to the migration of people from Hakkari, also referred to the demographic changes caused by this migration; the influx from Hakkari led to the outmigration of those he defined as wealthy, turning Van into a place ‘abandoned by wealthy people’. Similarly, as mentioned earlier, Fatma (32) also indicated that those who migrated to Van were economically less advantaged by stating that people with more resources tend to migrate to cities like Istanbul. Based on these excerpts, it can be said that some interviewees associate Van’s poverty with the migration from Hakkari.

3.3 Van as a transformative city: Negotiating urban belonging and rural origins

Despite its low per capita income and high unemployment rates, many interviewees described Van not only as the first stage of urbanization for Hakkari Kurds, but also for many others in the region. Van was framed as a space of urban performance—where the city affects migrants and where they are expected to enact urbanization practices. Moreover, Van was perceived by the interviewees not only as

transformative, but also as a stepping-stone city¹⁰; it was referred to neither as a final destination nor as a place to migrate from, but rather as something in between:

They begin the urbanization¹¹ process from Van. Not only people from Hakkari, but also Iranians. They come here-they stay here for four or five years, and then they move on. It's the same with people from our village. They come to Van for education; almost all of them have a house here. After adapting a bit to the urbanization process, they migrate elsewhere...And the primary reason for those leaving is also a better life. They use this place as a stepping stone. And I think that's quite reasonable. (Ali, 40)

According to Ali, the process of urbanization does not apply solely to village communities; during the interview, he also noted that people migrating from the center of Hakkari or from urban areas in Iran undergo a process of urbanization in Van. Therefore, the distinction made here goes beyond a simple village/city dichotomy; Van Kurds position Van as a site of adaptation, where urbanization is redefined and intensified. There is also an implicit form of aversive racism in this excerpt; Van positions itself as a place where those who have not yet urbanized transform and become capable of integrating into society and the outside world. This, in turn, positions Vanlıs as those who assist non-urbanized and 'in need' communities, reinforcing a hierarchical dynamic.

This hierarchical positioning echoes what Elias and Scotson (1965) describe as group charisma; old-established groups tend to perceive themselves as 'better' people and claim that some specific virtues are something they possess while others lack. In a way, framing the beginning of the Hakkari Kurds' urbanization with their migration to Van implies that they had not been urbanized before from interlocutors perspective; this also implicitly suggests that *Vanlılık* characterize itself as an urban society. At the same time, by associating the experiences and reasons for migration

¹⁰ in Turkish, 'basamak olarak kullanmak'

¹¹ in Turkish, 'kentleşme'

of the Hakkari Kurds with those who migrated from Van's own villages, Ali also establishes a deeper discursive connection between the Hakkari Kurds and villagers.

Sometimes we talk about the village/city distinction. When you come from a village—say, you don't have a salary, you're not a public employee, you have no stable income—you can still live in Van with the small income you had in the village. Rent, language, culture, even clothing—villagers who migrate seem to feel comfortable in this city. (Ali, 40)

As a continuation of the previous quote, Ali highlights Van's position as a space in between—a place where both urbanization and village practices coexist. While explaining how one can continue their 'village' practices in Van, he also emphasizes the aspect of urbanization that the city offers: a place that is both welcoming and transformative. Emphasizing the importance of migrants' agency and willingness to contribute, he refers to the migrants from Siirt and points out that they have contributed to Van:

[Referring to migration from Siirt] That migration is a bit different. For example, there are people from other cities who came to Van, became wealthy, engaged in trade, and made major investments across Türkiye. But since Hakkari is a city based on agriculture and animal husbandry, they couldn't adapt to things like commerce or small business ownership. (Ali, 40)

From Ali's perspective, as someone from Siirt, actions such as engaging in trade and making investments play an important role in underlining their claim to be considered as *Vanlılar*. Following this description, Ali presents the lack of urban background and discursive framing of the continuation of village based practices as the primary reason why the Hakkari Kurds have not fully become *Vanlı*. Ahmet also refers to this positionality and identification of 'rurality' in relation:

[referring to Van] The city has a certain structure: those who are marginalized or come from villages usually migrate to the outskirts rather than the city center. They tend to maintain their rural habits—many keep poultry, and a lot of them even have small livestock. Because they continue these village practices, they're often perceived not so much as "from Hakkari," but more broadly as peasants. That's how people see them. (Ahmet, 35)

As Ahmet underlines, being from a city such as Hakkari is one thing, but being rural is another. He draws a discursive connection between the continuation of village practices—such as keeping small livestock—and the perception of migrants as peasants. Alongside the discussions on aversive racism, when the interlocutors do not want to be perceived as the ones engaging in othering, they tend to frame their statements using expressions like “they say...,” as if distancing themselves from the discourse and placing it outside their own web of thoughts. In this excerpt, the continuation of village practices leads to the association of Hakkari people with peasant identity from Van Kurds perspective.

Also, defining the structure of the city, Ahmet refers to the spatial segregation and how most of the Hakkari Kurds were situated in the peripheries of the city and how Van Kurds are usually positioned in the center. This distinction corresponds to Bauman’s (1998) analysis: the city, from the very beginning, is built for the sake of security, aiming to familiarize and homogenize its inhabitants. This sense of security and we-feeling is maintained through the absence of differently thinking and differently looking neighborhoods (Bauman, 1998). Therefore, as Ahmet also stated, those who are marginalized are pushed to the periphery, while those who remain in the city center are individuals who have adopted urbanism as a way of life and are able to act accordingly. In this sense, *Vanlılık* aligns itself with urbanism.

Although the interviewees described Hakkari Kurds as not yet urbanized and as continuing rural practices, they also conveyed how people from Hakkari had become quite powerful in the city, noting that many had become landlords, real estate agents, and even mayors. According to their accounts, within less than two decades, Hakkari migrants had transformed from individuals struggling to adapt to

urban life into actors who now hold significant influence over the city's social and economic landscape.

3.4 Tribe, kinship, and symbolic power: Reconfiguring belonging through Hakkari networks

Based on interviews, from the moment Hakkari Kurds arrived, the ease with which Hakkari people found jobs, built houses, and rose economically was consistently associated with their ability to act collectively. Especially in stories about the early days of migration, Van residents often described how Hakkari people lived together in large numbers—sometimes ten people sharing one house—and how they climbed the economic ladder together.

The narratives on upward mobility of Hakkari Kurds reflect what Dafuleya (2023) describes as collective economic strategy; he argues that certain forms of accumulation, which would be unattainable for individuals acting alone, become possible through the pooling of resources and incomes. Through such ethnic enclaves and collective strategies; some migrants experience economic upward mobility (Portes & Zhou, 1992). Therefore, collectiveness has become not only a coping mechanism but also a valuable resource.

At the same time, in studies conducted on the Hakkari population, Hakkari Kurds are described as acting in alignment with their affiliated tribe, in a tightly knit and cohesive manner (Yalçın-Heckmann, 2002)¹². As reflected in the narratives of Van residents, this strong cohesion is often attributed to the Hakkari people's deep

¹² For a more detailed continuation of the research conducted in Hakkari, see: Yalçın-Heckmann, L. (2002). *Kürtlerde aşiret ve akrabalık ilişkileri*. İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları.

attachment to their tribal structures(*aşiret*). For example, Ahmet's portrayal of Hakkari Kurds aligns with this perception:

There's also a strong tribal culture among them. I'm Kurdish too, but we don't have tribalism where I come from. Among Hakkari Kurds, though, it's very present. Being from Hakkari is one thing, but belonging to a tribe is something else entirely. (Ahmet, 35)

By saying "I'm Kurdish too, but we're not like them," Ahmet establishes a boundary between himself and Hakkari Kurds; and distances himself from the tribal affiliations. Also, distinguishing tribalism from Hakkari-ness, Ahmet also frames tribal identity and being from Hakkari as two separate categories. This distinction, however, invites a further question: is the tribalism in question an essential part of Kurdishness, or a marker of cultural backwardness within a modern/traditional binary? To better understand the connection between Vanlılık and tribal culture, I probe further by asking: "Don't Vanlıs have tribal ties as well?"

Tribal structures are almost the same everywhere, but in Hakkari, it's a bit more intense. Being from Hakkari has something additional to it. For example, I personally identify as Kurdish—I say I'm Kurdish. But when I talk to a friend from Hakkari, he says, "I'm from Hakkari." (Ahmet, 35)

Ahmet's response opens the way for a deeper analysis; he emphasizes that tribal structures hold a much more central role in the self-identification of Hakkari Kurds. In the interviews, tribal bonds were often associated with tradition and Kurdishness, whereas Vanlılık was framed as something that had transcended tribalism, and thus was implicitly associated with modernity. In this sense, Kurdishness acquired a shifting meaning in the narratives of the interviewees; although tribalism is historically rooted in Kurdish identity, Vanlıs are discursively positioned themselves as having moved beyond it through urbanization and modernization, while Hakkari Kurds are associated with a more traditional form of Kurdishness by continuing such practices. This distinction between a transformed Kurdishness and a traditional

Kurdishness has contributed to a discursive tension between the two groups in terms of identity.

At the same time, Ahmet points out that while he introduces himself through his Kurdish identity as someone from Van, Hakkari Kurds tend to identify themselves primarily as being from Hakkari. In doing so, he frames Hakkari as a localized identity, whereas Kurdishness in his definition is more associated with a nationalistic understanding. Therefore, in encounters with Hakkari Kurds, Vanlılık positions itself as having transcended these rural ties and as an identity shaped through urbanization.

But of course, this does not mean that Van Kurds have no tribal ties; as Ahmet also explained, tribal ties do exist in the Van region, even if the strength of those ties may vary. Ayşe, a 25 year old woman who had recently graduated in urban and regional planning, had also touched upon this topic. She identified herself as both Kurdish and Vanlı, throughout the interview she prioritized her Vanlı identity over her Kurdish identity, and particularly reflected on her experiences as a young person. When I asked her about the tribal connections of Van, she answered as this:

Okay, I am a Kurd, but I don't think I reflect most things associated with Kurdishness. I don't think this is because of the geography I live in—it's more about my way of thinking. I don't believe geography has shaped my thoughts. For example, when you enter a social setting—let's say you meet someone outside—you just say your name, and that's usually it. But when you sit down at a table, if there are two or three others around, the first question is, "So hey, what's your tribe?" And depending on whether your tribe is close to or different from theirs, they start treating you very differently. Personally, I don't want to accept this. *Vanlılar* do this a lot (pause).

I actually haven't seen this as much among the Hakkari Kurds. What I've noticed more with them is a kind of aspiration toward Westernization. They say, "Yes, I'm Kurdish," they acknowledge that, but they want their lifestyle, the way they dress, the way they carry themselves, to be more Western. (Ayşe, 25)

In this interview, I found the way the answers were woven together particularly interesting; the structure of her responses often contradicted the way she constructed both the identity of the “other” and her own, yet the conclusion of each answer still settled into a clear “we-image” or “they-image.” As seen above, in response to a question I asked about tribal ties among the Hakkari Kurds, while recounting a personal experience shaped by the depth of those ties, the first thing she instinctively said was that “*Vanlılar* do this a lot”. Then, pausing—and perhaps to return to the topic—she noted that she hadn’t observed this much among the Hakkari Kurds.

This reflective pause was particularly important for understanding the internal conflicts the interviewee experiences while articulating her own identity, and the dimensions through which a ‘we-image’ is constructed. This tension between claiming a Kurdish identity and disassociating herself from its traditional traits provides a significant ethnographic insight into how *Vanlılık* is discursively constructed as a more modern and distinct form of Kurdishness. At the same time, unlike Ahmet, Ayşe noted that Hakkari people introduce themselves as Kurdish; however, Kurdishness carries different meanings for Ahmet and Ayşe. While Ahmet interprets Kurdishness through a more modern lens, Ayşe, although identifying as Kurdish, does not position herself within a space that reflects the traditional attributes associated with Kurdishness. In this sense, both interviewees construct a ‘we-image’ that does not include Hakkari Kurds.

Throughout the interview, Ayşe associated Hakkari with ‘traditional Kurdishness,’ emphasizing that Hakkari Kurds are strongly attached to their traditions, wear traditional clothes, and speak a traditional form of Kurdish. However, in this excerpt, she also constructed Hakkari people as a community that aspires to Westernization; but this aspiration that she refers to seems to be more

about appearance than lifestyle. As such, Hakkarianness was portrayed not as Westernized, but rather as a position of mere aspiration—adopting Western elements only on a surface level, without a deeper transformation. Although Vanlılık is not explicitly defined as Westernized, it is portrayed in the interviews as more urbanized and, in a sense, more individualized. In this context, the continuation of tribal structures and communal way of living within increasingly individualized urban settings is perceived as contradictory by Ayşe. Fatma also associated the tribal structure with Kurdishness; however, from her perspective, this association carried a more positive connotation:

What makes me even happier is that they stay connected to their culture. We, on the other hand, became quite assimilated over time. The fact that they preserve their own culture, their traditional clothing, their language... They're not trying to resemble anyone else—they're holding on to who they are.
(Fatma, 32)

The preservation of cultural practices among Hakkari Kurds was something frequently emphasized by Fatma, as also highlighted in other quotes. Unlike Ahmet and Ayşe, Fatma stated that this uncorrupted form of Kurdishness should not be interpreted as backwardness, but rather as a form of unassimilated Kurdish identity.

Since the three interviewees mentioned above construct tribalism from different perspectives, it is necessary to briefly summarize their views. While Ahmet stated that Hakkari Kurds construct their identity through a local sense of belonging and a strong tribal structure, Ayşe emphasized that rather than Hakkari Kurds, actually Vanlis define themselves through their tribal affiliations. Moreover, while Ayşe claimed that Hakkari Kurds aspire to the West, Fatma argued that they firmly hold on to their own identity.

These differing perspectives also reflect how each interviewee defines the Kurdishness through distinct lived experiences. Both Ahmet and Fatma mention that

their common ground with Hakkari Kurds is a shared Kurdishness; however, Ahmet argues that Hakkari Kurds do not embrace this identity, while Ayşe claims that Vanlıs position themselves differently. Discursively, although both interviewees aim to come together under the umbrella of Kurdishness, one prefers to do so under the 'modern' Kurdishness constructed by Vanlıs, while the other aligns with the 'traditional' Kurdishness carried by Hakkari Kurds. This is because while Ahmet interprets the transformation of Kurdishness as modernization, Fatma presents it as assimilation.

Compared to the other interviewees, although Ayşe acknowledges her Kurdish identity, she does not adopt it as a core element of her self-identification. Therefore, while noting that Hakkari Kurds identify themselves as Kurdish, she draws the boundaries of the 'we-image' and 'they-image' from a different angle. Her discursive tension with Fatma also stems from the fact that Fatma has lived closely with Hakkari Kurds since childhood and identifies herself with a shared identity with them.

3.5 Criminalized and politicized: The moral economy of illicitness

Discussions on urbanization and tribal structures often brought along conversations about drug trafficking during the interviews. Almost all of the interviewees stated that the Hakkari Kurds were heavily involved in drug trafficking, and this drug trade was also frequently described as generating a significant amount of informal or unregistered income:

There is also no strong urban culture in Hakkari. The places people migrate from are towns like Şemdinli and Yüksekova. When they first came here, they were involved in smuggling and drug trafficking. But eventually, they had to legalize all that massive amount of money—so they started opening businesses. They poured the money they made from smuggling, drugs, or fuel into buildings to register it. Those buildings gained value, and they sold them.

They rented out the shops. The people from Hakkari are still doing these things today. When we look around, we see that all our contractors are Hakkari people. In this city, if there's any unregistered money, it always ends up turning into land or buildings. We're only just now entering the phase where people are learning how to move unregistered money into crypto and all that. Even now, Hakkari money doesn't turn into hotels, investments, factories, or stores. (Ali, 40)

Ali repeatedly emphasizes that the Hakkari Kurds are not urbanized; within this quote and throughout the whole interview. In fact, while investments are portrayed as a significant component of Siirt migrants' claims to Vanlılık, similar actions by Hakkari Kurds—such as opening businesses or owning property—are not discursively framed as investments. Since the urbanization that he describes as lacking among Hakkari Kurds is associated with civilization, modernization, and individualization, making such investments through a collective identity prevents these investments from being perceived as part of an urbanized lifestyle. While the investments made by Siirt migrants are perceived as contributions to a shared identity that embraces Vanlılık, the investments of Hakkari Kurds are viewed as serving the interests of Hakkari Kurds as a distinct group.

At the same time, since these investments are perceived as involving illegality, they are regarded by Van Kurds as ill-gotten gains and therefore are not seen as justifiable. Since economic transactions are deeply embedded in moral and social frameworks, the ways in which money is earned inevitably raise moral questions (Parry & Bloch, 1989). Contributing to this discourse, Ahmet argues that Hakkari Kurds may undergo transformation under certain conditions.

They also go through certain changes. For example, someone from Başkale who got involved in drug trafficking and became wealthy might return as a completely changed person after traveling the world. Or someone from Gevaş gets introduced to social media—they're not like villagers anymore. (Ahmet, 35)

By setting up a temporal horizon for their belonging, he suggests that Hakkari Kurds may be considered urbanized if they go through certain changes. However, based on

this excerpt from Ahmet and others, it can be understood that this acceptance of urbanization is always on the horizon and never fully realized; even when they travel the world or change their clothing, as Ayşe underlines, they are never included in the “we-image.” Also, like Ali, Ahmet still associates this process of becoming wealthy with drug trafficking, portraying it as if one travels the world through ill-gotten gains; therefore, it remains stigmatized and subject to social censure, even if the practices themselves change. Ali, by emphasizing the aspect of criminality, contributes to this narrative by presenting it as an obstacle to the inclusion of Hakkari Kurds in the 'we-image'.

In the end, they are, in one way or another, crossing the line—breaking the rules. For example, let's say there's a serious drug trade operating like a full-blown sector. And it's not just about producing drugs. One person produces it, another transports it, someone else keeps watch, and another sells it separately. It's a large, organized sector. (Ali, 40)

Ali associates drug trafficking not with Hakkariness itself, but with tribalism—highlighting how it is carried out collectively. According to interlocutors, the strength of this sector lies in the network ties and the strong connections Hakkari people have with one another, which are also seen as enabling their involvement in such activities.

Throughout my fieldwork, the sentence I heard most frequently about Hakkari people was: “*They are very connected to one another.*”. This connection is mentioned throughout the fieldwork in relation to drug trafficking, migration processes, and participation in social life in Van. At the same time, this emphasis on the connection and tribal ties leads Van Kurds to see the Hakkari Kurds as dependent on one another.

Simultaneously, it could be analyzed that there is a strong rejection of the economic rise of the Hakkari people. When Hakkari Kurds engage in behavior that

does not align with what is stigmatically associated with them, the 'they-image' that is constructed within the encounter with Van Kurds is destabilized. In order to reject this shared identity, the actions of migrants are redefined and rejected in an aversive manner. This actually reveals a contradiction: while Van positions itself as welcoming and transformative, it embraces migrants from Siirt as Vanlı, yet resists forming a 'we-image' with Hakkari Kurds. In the interviews, Vanlı participants framed this as a reciprocal dynamic; they claimed that Hakkari Kurds also define themselves as transformative without merging into a shared identity with Van Kurds.

This rejection of the newly empowered group resonates with Elias and Scotson's (1965) analysis of the power dynamics between the established and the outsiders. In the interviews, Hakkari people are portrayed as "too strong"—due to their political participation, control over economic resources, and possession of social capital through strong solidarity networks. In response to the destabilization of the power balance between the established and the outsider groups, Vanlıs tend to associate Hakkari Kurds with criminal activities.

Criminalization was also discussed during the focus group I conducted as part of the fieldwork. The focus group consisted of a six-person family, with members ranging in age from 25 to 70, which gave me the opportunity to listen to an insightful intergenerational discussion. One of the interviewees in particular—the eldest son of the family, a 38-year-old working as an IT Technician at the municipality (which I refer to as Osman)—was especially insightful and provided many helpful contributions. Since he often acted as the spokesperson during the focus group, I will be using many quotes from him in particular. Osman responded to the question of whether Hakkari people identify themselves as Vanlı as follows:

Osman, Age 38: None of the men over the age of 30 or 35 accept this. They directly say, "We are from Hakkari." None of them see themselves as *Vanlı*.

In fact, my branch manager is from Hakkari. We're driving in traffic, and when someone helps out on the road, he says, "He must be from Hakkari." I ask, "How do you know?" He says, "Because he's civilized. We brought civilization¹³ to you." Sometimes when we talk about politics, he says, "You have been ruined in the hands of the right-wingers—we came and saved you."

Barış, Age 67: Let him go to hell. I'm a taxi driver. In Van—drugs, prostitution, gambling, illegal business—it's all exploding, it's limitless, like paradise. In Istanbul, for example, you can't find a place that sells alcohol after 11 p.m. Here, it's all night, unlimited. Whatever you want to drink or use, it's freely sold. Tekirdağ, Afyon, Çorum, Amasya, Antalya—you name it, all these young people come to Van for nightlife. Huge amounts of money are being made.

Zeynep, Age 65: They're just laundering money in the easiest way possible.

Barış, Age 67: There's a lot of illegal business going on here.

Researcher: But who creates the demand? Who's using all of this?

Barış, Age 67: *Vanlılar*.

Yasemin, 27: Hakkari Kurds too. I think it's the tribal part again.

As a researcher, I can say that this dialogue offers a multi-layered analysis in many ways. Particularly in terms of how the topic is introduced, its symbolic expression, situational meaning, and power dynamics, it presents multiple perspectives.

When the father of Osman, Barış becomes angry and starts swearing, he shifts the conversation to the massive drug trade in the city. This is the same connection that Ayşe does: association of any criminal activity with migrants. His emotional reaction, followed by the mention of widespread drug trafficking and use, contributes to the perception of drug-related activity as "uncivilized," and reinforces its association with the Hakkari Kurds. In order to explore the topic further, I probe and ask who is actually using these substances; yet the response I receive is unexpected: "*Vanlılar*."

As I understood from this dialogue, the interviewees are reacting to what they perceive as condescension from the Hakkari Kurds, because they see themselves as having a more civilized way of life. They feel negatively affected by people they

¹³ in Turkish: 'medeniyet'

consider “below” them, and they challenge the idea that Hakkari Kurds have brought any kind of positive influence, despite the way some Hakkari Kurds present themselves.

At the same time, Elias and Scotson (1965) argues that the established group is always trying to find evidence to reveal that the outsider group is ‘bad’.

Established group always stigmatize the other group for breaking the rules, not knowing their place, so that the ‘they-image’ that they built will continue (Elias & Scotson, 1965). As a reflection of this, throughout the interviews, I observed that Hakkari people are labeled as ‘agressive’ and ‘always ready to fight:

They’re argumentative, always looking for a fight. And if someone’s from Hakkari—especially if they’re from a tribe there—they’ll stand by them no matter what, without even questioning whether they’re right or wrong. (Ahmet, 35)

The quotation above also highlights the discursive production of *crimmigration*—how their mere presence is perceived as a threat to the order of the city, and how they are labeled as “aggressive” or “always ready to fight.” As Kleinpenning and Hagendoorn (1993) argue, the deviant behaviors of outgroup members are often interpreted as danger signals, reinforcing stereotypes. Additionally, the emphasis on their willingness to engage in conflict under any circumstance—for example, standing by someone in a fight simply because they belong to the same tribe—reflects the strength of their tribal ties. This unconditional solidarity; the way Hakkari Kurds stand by each other under any circumstance is perceived by Ahmet as a form of moral suspicion and interpreted as an indication of threatening group behavior.

The study conducted by Lale Yalçın-Heckmann in Hakkari in the early 1980s examines Kurdish tribal structures and kinship relations, highlighting the strength of tribal ties and their significance in individual decision-making processes. At the same time, these decision-making mechanisms have also influenced the Hakkari migrants

in choosing where to settle; after migrating, they have generally continued to live together and have settled in neighborhoods collectively (Ateş, 2023).

3.6 From stranger to host: Transformation of Hakkari Kurds

Almost all interviewees emphasized that real estate—particularly property ownership and acting as landlords—is among the most common occupations taken up by Hakkari migrants. Ceren, a 30-year-old small business owner, expressed her thoughts on this matter more directly. Ceren is married to Ali, another interlocutor that I mentioned above, and her family also migrated from Siirt. As someone who had previously completed a master's degree, she showed a genuine interest in my thesis. During our interview, which took place at her workplace, she welcomed me warmly and asked highly detailed questions about my research, and she provided me with highly elaborate and insightful responses.

I don't remember those times very clearly, since I was just a child back then. There's also a perception about the Hakkari Kurds—there's serious drug trafficking associated with them, and because of that, they are very wealthy. Of course, this doesn't apply to all of them. Someone who's involved in animal husbandry over there might come to Van and, let's say, sell their livestock. Then they go and buy an apartment flat right in the city center—sometimes not just one, but all of them. And then someone from Van ends up becoming their tenant. So someone who came later ends up being the one who enjoys the comfort of this place. That's why there's a reaction from the people of Van—it's rooted in capital. (Ceren, 30)

Actually, just like Ahmet, she begins by reflecting on the idea of “they see them” indicating that there is a perception circulating in society, without including herself in it. After that, she explains her view, again similar to Ahmet's, stating that such generalizations cannot be applied to all Hakkari Kurds. She emphasizes that this perception is a form of stigmatization and cannot be understood as a defining characteristic of the entire group. Once again, the topic of money is brought up, but she states that the source of this money is the livestock they sold in the past.

She makes another comment that is highly significant for analyzing the perceived hierarchy in her view: “How does someone who came here later end up becoming a landlord?” This statement reflects the economic empowerment of Hakkari migrants—how acquiring property and, “shamelessly,” renting these homes to Van locals, who are seen as the rightful inhabitants of the city, generates a deep sense of resentment. In her eyes, “enjoying the place” is something that should belong to the Van locals. However, it has now become something possessed by those who arrived later. This indicates a shift in meaning structures: Hakkari Kurds are no longer positioned as strangers or mere residents; they are transitioning into the role of hosts. At the same time, there is a transformation in symbolic power. From the perspective of the host, Hakkari Kurds are seen as exploiting the locals by unjustly benefiting from resources that are symbolically understood to belong to the local population.

They probably have houses they’ve invested in around here. Most of the homeowners are Hakkari Kurds, of course. You’ll likely notice that too—there are many Hakkari Kurds working in real estate, and most of the property owners are from Hakkari. Because they have money, and they invest it here. (Ayşe, 25)

Here, the interviewee similarly pointed out that most of the property owners are from Hakkari, which she sees as an investment in Van, other than Ali, who argued that they do not invest in Van at all. Additionally, she mentioned that she perceived Hakkari Kurds as vulgar or lacking manners:

They have a certain desire for wealth and showing off. And Van is the closest place where they can easily display this desire for ostentation. Of course, the wealthier ones move to bigger cities, but those who want to live that lifestyle on a smaller scale come to Van. (Ayşe, 25)

As seen in the quotes above, she draws a clear connection between money, vulgarity, and property ownership among Hakkari Kurds. She also claimed, which I mentioned in the previous section, that a significant portion of them are involved in drug

trafficking. From her perspective, Hakkari Kurds have access to a certain amount of money, and their actions are interpreted either as attempts to launder illicit wealth or as efforts to use this wealth for investing, which is, from her perspective, seen as a self-serving purpose. What stands out here is that Ayşe immediately associates this money and wealth with “showing off.” Furthermore, she defines Van as the closest location where this display of wealth can be performed.

From this angle, her statements are directly related to a discourse of class struggle. Van is perceived to have a certain potential, but it is not a city with the economic infrastructure to sustain such displays of wealth. While the wealthier typically move to larger cities, those who cannot afford to relocate elsewhere—but still want to engage in conspicuous consumption—choose Van over staying in Hakkari. This raises an important question about who this display is intended for. In this case, Ayşe positions herself as someone directly affected by this performance of wealth and vulgarity.

In fact, there aren't many places in their hometowns where they can spend that money—whether it be cafés, people to show off their style to, or even luxury homes. For them, Van is the closest option. Since Van is often referred to as the “Paris of the East,” it appears more developed in their eyes.
(Ayşe,25)

Ayşe, like many other interviewees, makes sense on the arrival of Hakkari migrants. This quote reveals that migrants' presence and their ability to benefit from the city appear reasonable and legitimate from the perspective of Van's Kurdish residents. While the term “Paris of the East” did not initially catch my attention when I first heard it, it became one of the phrases I reflected on the most during the transcription process. I began to ask myself: Why is Van called the Paris of the East? What are the similarities with Paris?

Paris is a city known for being a capital, for its wealth, and for its fashion. Especially when considering its wealth, shopping opportunities, and style, the act of spending money and even the notion of “vulgarism” can easily be accommodated in Van. At the same time, the reference also subtly emphasizes Van’s symbolic centrality—its imagined capital-like status in the region, which is highly associated with Kurdishness.

In conclusion, this chapter Van functions as a transformative site where urban belonging, rural origins, and intergroup boundaries are constantly negotiated.

Through narratives of forced migration, collective adaptation, and symbolic struggles over identity, Van emerges not simply as a city but as a contested social space where meanings of Kurdishness, urbanity, and legitimacy are reconfigured. The arrival of Hakkari Kurds—initially positioned as “in-need” outsiders—has prompted a rearticulation of who belongs and under what terms. Their economic mobility, strong kinship networks, and perceived tribal cohesion have led to both admiration and moral suspicion among Vanlıs, revealing a deeper discomfort around shifting power dynamics. While Vanlılık is discursively constructed as modern, urban, and assimilated, Hakkarililik is marked by associations with traditionalism, rurality, and even illicitness. These oppositions, however, are not fixed but reflect a broader process of identity formation in which both groups continuously reposition themselves in relation to one another. Ultimately, Van is revealed as a liminal space—neither entirely urban nor entirely rural—where competing imaginaries of belonging are enacted, challenged, and redefined.

CHAPTER 4

CONSTRUCTION OF KURDISHNESS

4.1 Kurdishness among Van Kurds and Hakkari Kurds

Kurdishness, as articulated by Van Kurds, is a contested signifier. Although Kurdishness is a shared identity that brings together both Van and Hakkari Kurds under a broader ethnic category, it is also the terrain where symbolic boundaries such as culture, language, and daily practices are drawn. While many Van Kurds that I interviewed emphasized their Kurdish identity, they also drew significant boundaries between their own understanding of Kurdishness and the cultural characteristics of Hakkari Kurds. In this context, Kurdishness operates simultaneously as a point of unity and a site of differentiation.

It is then important to understand how Van Kurds define their Kurdishness. For instance, Ahmet would often describe himself as a “Kurd who has seen the world,” and noted that people around him also perceived him in that way. Simultaneously, although he consistently identified himself as Kurdish throughout the interview, when recounting another encounter with Turkish people, he described himself not as Kurdish, but as someone of Kurdish origin:

He asked me, “Are you Kurdish?”
I said, “No, I’m of Kurdish origin.”
He asked, “Why?”
I said, “Because I’ve been educated.”
He was confused and asked, “What do you mean?”

I explained, “For example, if a proper individual moves to Antalya and becomes an academic, then they’re considered of Kurdish origin. But if someone becomes a greengrocer in Antalya, then they’re considered Kurdish. There’s a difference between the two.” (Ahmet, 35)

Here, Ahmet’s use of the term “of Kurdish origin” is rhetorical, employed in the context of recounting an encounter with a Turk and reflecting the broader historical

and ongoing racialization of Kurds. Through this phrase, he conveys how his Kurdish identity is constructed from the perspective of the Turkish majority. The distinction he draws—where becoming an academic allows one to be perceived as “of Kurdish origin” while becoming a greengrocer leads to being labeled simply as “Kurdish”—reveals an implicit commentary on the construction of an ethno-class hierarchy. This hierarchy is not only internal to Kurdish identity but is also relationally defined against Turkishness. The use of “Kurdish origin” presumes Turkishness as the normative national category, implying an assimilated or de-ethnicized form of Kurdishness in which collective rights are denied or erased. Simultaneously, this discursive distinction has long been produced and contested both in official state narratives and within the broader public sphere.

There are several studies that explore the definitional distinction between "Kurd" and "of Kurdish origin." Bora (2019) particularly emphasizes that this expression, frequently used by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, signals both a denial of ethnic identity and an appeal to an inclusive notion of citizenship—one that promotes being “Turkish regardless of one’s origin.” In this context, the term functions as part of a broader assimilationist agenda while simultaneously evoking the idea of civic nationalism, which frames ethnic difference as secondary or irrelevant. Bora (2019) also notes that within the Turkish state discourse, Kurds within the borders of Türkiye are referred to as “of Kurdish origin,” whereas Kurds outside the country are simply called “Kurds.” Therefore, this can also be seen as an attempt at Turkification. It is a term used not only by right-wing Turkish nationalists but also by Kurdish leftists and intellectuals; it is frequently employed by upper-class Kurds, especially as a way of integrating into the Turkish state system (Duruiz, 2020). Here, the emphasis on “origin” is significant, as it refers both to the inerasable

nature of Kurdishness—that it cannot be excluded from identity formation—and to a past rooted in Kurdish culture and ideas, but also temporally displaces Kurdish identity to the realm of the past. (Duruiz, 2020). In this sense, becoming “of Kurdish origin” can also be understood as a mode of becoming Turkish, in which Kurdishness is acknowledged only as a background or heritage, rather than as a lived and present identity (Duruiz, 2020).

To understand how Kurdishness is constructed among Van Kurds, it is important to first look at how people describe Hakkari, because many interviewees drew a connection between Hakkari’s geographical structure and the idea of an “unspoiled” Kurdishness. One of the interviewees, a journalist and a 42-year-old man from Van, who I will refer to as Burak, also emphasized this point by describing Hakkari’s geographical features and stating that the region has managed to remain relatively autonomous:

Until the 1950s, no state institutions had been able to reach Hakkari; it was always governed through a feudal system. Tribal structures were very strong, and since the state had no visible presence there, the region functioned almost autonomously until the 1970s and 1980s. As a result, people developed their own self-sustaining system. Later on, state institutions gradually began to appear in the region, and that’s when the existing form started to break down. (Burak, 42)

Burak argues that the state's inability to penetrate that region has been one of the main reasons why the feudal structure and tribal affiliations have persisted among the Kurds there. Similarly, during the focus group, Osman also pointed to this issue, stating, that since Hakkari has a fortress like structure, it hasn’t changed hands throughout history and Kurds have remained relatively united there.

Every sentence that has been built around the Hakkari’s structure has sparked my curiosity about what makes Van different from Hakkari. When I probed further,

Burak also explained that, due to state policies, Van has become a place where different cultures coexist:

At that time[referring to the early years of the Republic], the resettlement plan was part of the Eastern Reform Law (*Şark Islahat Kanunu*). There are specific records showing that Van was deliberately removed from being recognized as a Kurdish homeland. People from the Black Sea region were relocated to Erciş, and later, Turkmens from Kyrgyzstan were also settled in the area. (Burak, 42)

Burak states that Van's demographic structure changed with the implementation of the Eastern Reform Law. He mentions that Van was removed from being recognized as a Kurdish land—in other words, it is suggested that the city was subject to Turkification policies. While there weren't many detailed accounts regarding the Kurds living in the region before the Republican era, many interviewees mentioned that, following the foundation of the Republic, people from different backgrounds were resettled in the area.

Another key issue here is the concept of locality in Van. In all the interviews, when I asked about the "locals of Van," the responses did not focus on the interviewees themselves but rather centered on the Acems (Iranian Turks). Since I had already asked whether they identified as Vanlı and received affirmative responses, I assumed they would also see themselves as part of the local population. However, right at the outset of my fieldwork, I encountered a group whose position I had not expected to be questioned—or othered.

These are also people who identify themselves as the locals of Van. The word "local" itself is a concept we could really unpack. If you think about it, the Kurds who have lived here for centuries are technically locals too. But generally, when I refer to someone as a "local of Van," and when someone describes themselves that way, it's usually Turks—Turkish people who have lived here for a long time. They are typically nationalist and tend to support right-wing political parties. (Ceren, 30)

Ceren establishes a certain positionality by saying "they define themselves," implying that there is "a lot to unpack" when it comes to the way Acems are

identified as locals. However, both she and the other interviewees consistently answered all my questions about the “locals of Van” with the Acems in mind. This suggests that, in their minds, a strong association between the concept of locality and the Acems clearly exists.

At this point, it is necessary to briefly interrupt the flow of the chapter to note that, although the term *Acemler* refers to Iranian Turks, none of the interviewees made any connection between the *Acemler* and the Iranians who have migrated to or visited the city as tourists. Therefore, the migration of Iranians will not be analyzed in this section, but will instead be discussed in the following parts of the chapter.

As Bauman(2016) argues, the power position, strangerhood, and the notion of locality are not static but rather fluid; they shift dynamically with changing migration patterns. Especially with the migration of people from Hakkari, the Van Kurds have themselves become the ‘Vanlı’ and the established group, as they have ascended the hierarchy of otherness and assumed the position of the host. One of my interviewees, a 65-year-old retired worker, whom I will refer to as Suat and who currently serves as a manager at a migrant association, shared his own experience as follows:

Van used to be like Siirt, it was in the hands of the Acems, who were considered the locals back then. When *they* (the Hakkari Kurds) came, they changed the city’s entire demography — it became a Kurdish city. My father used to tell me: the Acems wouldn’t even give us a cracker. Things changed after the Hakkari people arrived. (Suat, 65)

As Suat also noted, with the arrival of the Hakkari Kurds, Van’s demography and the positionality of Van Kurds began to shift: according to their perception, Acems were still seen as the locals, but with the migration, Kurds were no longer in a minority position in the city. Many emphasized that Van became a Kurdish city after the arrival of the Hakkari Kurds. However, this transformation is viewed both positively

and negatively. Some interviewees also expressed concern about demographic problems associated with the arrival of the Hakkari population; for example Ahmet states that there is a demographic problem in the city and the reason for that problem is the Hakkari Kurds.

This statement by Ahmet should be understood not as an objective condition, but as a perception shaped by those who feel that power dynamics are changing with the migration and their established position in the city is being destabilized. However, as Suat also pointed out, this shift is interpreted positively in some respects, as it has led to the formation of a Kurdish majority in the city. Almost all of the interviewees expressed ambivalent feelings about this migration. What matters here is understanding the reason for affective and symbolic reactions to this change.

This idea of the ‘we-image’ and the changing demographic dimensions resonates with Ahmed (2000)’s analysis on multiculturalism and national identity. Ahmed (2000), by giving reference to the multicultural structure of Australia and how the identity and the we-image are formed within the country, states that within the discourse, it is suggested that anyone can be a true Australian if they are estranged from the identity that they previously had and are willing to participate in the we-image. Ahmed (2000) argues that production of nationality involves self-identification, and the acceptable other is the one who assimilates, who transforms their habits and daily practices. This does not mean complete sameness; even the differences between groups continue to be represented as “our differences,” since they have already entered under the same identification (Ahmed, 2000). However, if the stranger does not will to give up certain habits, has visible signs of difference, and does not self-identify as an insider, they are not included in the we-image (Ahmed, 2000).

In the case of Van, the fact that migrants from Siirt chose to transform and define themselves as Vanlı led to the abandonment of differences and their convergence under a common we-image of Vanlılık. For Hakkari migrants, however, the situation is different; since they foregrounded their Hakkarili identity instead of a Kurdish image, they have remained strangers in certain respects for the Vanlıs.

From another perspective, Van Kurds have gradually erased their cultural differences and repositioned themselves under the broader identity of being ‘from Turkey.’ In order to be included within this national identity, they suppressed many of their traditional practices and contributed to the production of a shared we-image. Especially following the laws enacted during the Republican era, Kurdish residents of Van became accustomed to living as a minority in the city. Many of the Vanlıs I interviewed reported that they only learned Kurdish later in life, even though it was spoken at home by their parents. The arrival of Hakkari migrants, however, unsettled this carefully constructed we-image:

Actually, this place[referring to Van] is scattered because it’s cosmopolitan. Among Vanlıs, you can find Turks, Kurds, Azeris, and various other groups. There’s no strong sense of exclusion—Van has the capacity to accommodate them all. In Van, the distinction between Kurd and Turk has largely faded. Hakkari people, on the other hand, still carry a deeper affection for their Kurdish identity in their hearts. (Mehmet, 56)

As Mehmet also pointed out, distinctions and encounters based on Kurdish and Turkish identities had largely faded in the city over time. It is important to note that differences and forms of othering have not entirely disappeared; however, much like in the debates surrounding the notion of being “of Kurdish origin,” they have been relegated to the realm of the past. However, with the arrival of the Hakkari Kurds—who brought with them many elements of Kurdishness—these once-erased differences began to resurface. Vanlıs began to view Hakkari Kurds both as a group

that reminded them of their own cultural roots, and as a group that disrupted the established order of the city.

In his fieldwork, Elias & Scotson (1965) observed that the arrival of a new group and the possibility of being associated with them may be perceived as a threat to one's own status, which leads the established group to try to distinguish themselves from the newcomers. Aligning with this, Bauman (2016) notes that the established group becomes anxious because they believe that long-cherished and already established orders and agreements might be disrupted by the newcomers. Therefore, being a Kurd in the way Hakkari Kurds represent, and being categorized under the same Kurdish identity with them, creates uneasiness as it signals a potential change in the established order.

4.2 Intersection and indifference in Kurdish identity

The distinction between Van Kurds and Hakkari Kurds is also constructed through moral positioning, whereby Van Kurds align themselves with a conservative identity and cast Hakkari Kurds as lacking conservatism.

But one of the biggest differences that I observed when the Hakkari Kurds arrived here was that they were not conservative. For example, their family structures were very relaxed. Once they entered the city, a portion of them became more conservative. (Ali, 40)

Here, it is important to examine how the interviewees construct the notion of conservatism. When they describe Hakkari Kurds as "not conservative," they often refer specifically to family structures and the role of women in society. For example, the same interviewee made the following comment about men and women eating together, stating, that they don't eat together as men and women, and when their Hakkari neighbors eat together; he didn't feel like a higher culture but a lower one.

In fact, in his statement above, the conservative “we” is constructed in direct contrast to a perceived “they” who are seen as not adhering to local moral codes—such as engaging in mixed-gender social practices like eating together. By explicitly stating that he does not view this as a “higher culture,” Ali also emphasizes that he does not perceive these practices as signs of modernity but rather as traditional. This moral boundary does not merely reflect cultural difference; it is also a way of negotiating gender relations and the use of social space. In these narratives, conservatism is not simply about gender separation or moral codes—it also becomes a criterion for defining what constitutes being “modern.” While Van Kurds frame their conservatism as a mark of cultural integrity and urban refinement, they simultaneously interpret the more relaxed gender relations of Hakkari Kurds not as progressive but as lacking discipline or refinement.

It is necessary here to analyze the moral conservatism developed by Van Kurds in relation to urban life, as well as the relatively relaxed family structures they attribute to village life. Cities, as Abu-Lughod (1990) argues, are spaces marked by the presence of strangers and unfamiliar others, where women's mobility is often restricted. In the village context, most people are either kin or belong to the same tribal structure, which renders them “halal” or morally legitimate in everyday interaction; hence, mutual trust is more prevalent (Him, 2010).

In rural-to-urban migration studies, the intensification of patriarchal norms is frequently linked to securing moral legitimacy (Kandiyoti, 1988). This heightened patriarchy is not only observed in public spaces but also reproduced within the private domain. As Bourdieu (1970) suggests, the spatial organization of the home reflects a gendered logic in which the positions of men and women are pre-structured—private space itself becomes a reflection of patriarchal relations.

Moreover, village houses are typically shared by large extended families, and dining areas are often communal and informal. In contrast, urban homes—particularly larger ones—enable greater spatial separation, making gender segregation more feasible. This also reveals the class dimension of such gendered arrangements. Additionally, many women who moved from villages to cities and became disconnected from wage labor have found themselves confined to separate rooms or made to eat at separate tables from men. In my own fieldwork, since I conducted only one focus group and did not observe this spatial division extensively, further research is needed to explore the underlying reasons for this practice in more depth.

As I mentioned earlier, the Van Kurds I interviewed often described themselves as more urbanized compared to the Hakkari Kurds. Yet, paradoxically, this urbanity is expressed through a cultural conservatism that emphasizes gender separation and resists the enactment of gender equality. However, some interviewees approached gender equality from different angles; alongside this conservatism, when reflecting on Kurdish identity, they often claimed that Kurds are a matriarchal society and that women in Kurdish communities supposedly lead much freer lives.¹⁴

In Kurdish culture, there is not a deeply rooted patriarchal system—it's actually more matrilineal. Historically, Kurds have always been like this. Perhaps this has to do with that natural fortress-like geography, or maybe with the fact that they have preserved Kurdish identity more strongly than others. For example, one thing you'll notice in Hakkari is the absence of typical masculine curse words—people don't insult women. If they swear at all, it's usually directed at the father. (Osman, 38)

In fact, the fortress-like structure he describes when talking about Hakkari also emerges in his discussion of Kurdishness. In a sense, Hakkari identity and

¹⁴ For a detailed analysis of the patriarchal structures within Kurdish society and the emergence of the women's movement, see: Dirik, D. (2022). *The Kurdish women's movement: History, theory, practice*. Pluto Press.

Kurdishness become intertwined in his narrative. When I probed further on this narrative and asked about the kinds of swear words used by people from Van, he responded that it is a more patriarchal place since it has been influenced by Iranians. This interview reveals that due to Van's cosmopolitan structure, Kurdish identity in Van has undergone a transformation, and when evaluated through this specific case, it is believed that Iranians have played a role in this transformation. At the same time, by noting the influence of Iranian migrants, Osman implies that the Kurdish identity in Van has been reshaped through exposure to a different set of cultural norms. This reconfigured form of Kurdishness stands in contrast to the more traditional or rooted vision brought by the Hakkari Kurds. As I mentioned earlier, although the Kurdish residents of Van identified themselves as Kurds, they also emphasized that their everyday practices did not reflect a strong attachment to Kurdishness. Yet with the arrival of Hakkari Kurds, this dormant Kurdish identity began to re-emerge—they both admired and longed for it, but also reacted to it, as it introduced a new source of tension.

Go ask someone from Hakkari, for example—when talking about a carpet, they'll explain the meaning behind the motifs. For instance, they'll say that a certain pattern was woven because someone was in love; that's how they tell the story. When you ask a Hakkari local, they really know their culture deeply. We don't. That's why I genuinely admire them in that regard. Whether it's about socks, kilims, or even halay (traditional Kurdish dance), they'll say things like, "At a certain time there was a war, and when we danced this halay, we were resisting that war through it." They have a completely unique cultural narrative around halay, and they explain it all so beautifully. But we—those of us who are natives of Van—don't know our own culture that well. We don't research, we don't read. They have a much deeper connection. (Zeynep, 65)

As this quote reveals, there is a sense of admiration among Van Kurds toward the Hakkari Kurds for their deep knowledge of a culture that is, in fact, a shared one—Kurdishness. At the same time, interviewees often articulate this sense of difference through specific practices, sometimes positioning themselves as close to, and at other

times as distant from, the Hakkari Kurds. Especially their emphasis on weddings is highly connected with their ‘Hakkariness’. In the literature, it is argued that Kurdish weddings also serve as displays of power; families organize lavish ceremonies to demonstrate their strength and deep-rooted lineage. Additionally, weddings are seen as important spaces for preserving Kurdish culture and for engaging in forms of sub-political expression (Goyi, 2020)¹⁵. While they do not associate Hakkari Kurds' wedding practices with Kurdishness directly, weddings are often mentioned alongside tribal customs and other cultural practices. Most interviewees noted that weddings are particularly important among the Hakkari Kurds, often framing this in terms of economic extravagance or a lack of refinement:

They really emphasize weddings. It's like the gold market gets activated during weddings—this is especially true in Hakkari-style weddings. While education remains in the background, I've personally chosen to protest these weddings, even my own brother's. In a single wedding, people spend millions just on gold, money, jewelry, and so on. Yet the groom's own brother might be told there's no money to send him to a prep school. They say it's cultural, that it's backward and outdated. (Ahmet, 35)

Although Ahmet did not necessarily align his own practices with those of the broader Van population, he expressed discomfort with these wedding practices and emphasized that Hakkari Kurds attach great importance to them. While criticizing the immense financial investment in weddings, he also criticizes the collective display of wealth and tradition, thereby expressing his disapproval of where the money is being spent. By highlighting that “they say it's cultural,” Ahmet also exoticizes and distances himself from that culture; and he reveals how some practices can become symbolic battlegrounds for articulating class aspirations and moral distinctions. In continue, he stated that even though his family wants him to perform

¹⁵ For a more detailed analysis of Kurdish weddings, see: Goyi, Z. (2020). *Kolektif kültürel eğlencenin antropolojisi: Kürdistan'da kolektif kültürel eğlence, modernizm ve İslamla çatışmalar*. Kürt Araştırmaları, 5(1), 45–68.

namaz, he doesn't even do that. From our conversation and the interview, I already knew that he identified as conservative, that he was fasting, and that he was a practicing Muslim. Therefore, what Ahmet wanted to highlight here was that by not fully adhering to a belief, he considered himself freer and more questioning. At the same time, his criticism of such excessive spending at weddings resonates with Islamic practices regarding excessive consumption; therefore, his explanation of his practices right after addressing excessive consumption can also be seen as an example of his conservative identity. Ayşe, who also agreed with the idea that weddings are a cultural practice, commented on the topic as follows:

They place great importance on weddings. A wedding is symbolic for them. Even here, when they hold weddings, they tend to choose the most expensive wedding halls or venues—there's a place called Altın Palas near the İskele area, which is considered very luxurious by Van standards. A lot of weddings are held there. They also tend to have media coverage that emphasizes gold and money. You wake up one day, and suddenly you see a headline like, "X kilograms of gold were gifted at the wedding of this Hakkari family." And when you click the article, you realize the wedding was held in Van. In the Hakkari weddings that I know of and have witnessed, they're usually held outdoors—in front of their homes or in their villages—and people wear *fistan* (traditional Kurdish dresses). There, the cultural aspects are more prominent. (Ayşe, 25)

The symbol referred to here is, in fact, a symbol of wealth and power. The emphasis on the gold gifted during weddings and the use of expensive wedding halls points to how such wealth-related activities are made visible within the city. When I probed further on this quote and asked how Van Kurds conduct their weddings, she responded as follows:

Van weddings are not as lavish as those of the Hakkari people. Middle-class families usually have a regular wedding. You go to an ordinary wedding hall—everything is much simpler. The gold gifts aren't that exaggerated either. But some of the wealthier families in Van seem to imitate the Hakkari style; they even try to get their names mentioned on news websites. (Ayşe, 25)

As she underlines, she draws a parallel between wealthy Van families and Hakkari people, using the words "regular" and "ordinary" to describe middle-class family

weddings. What stands out here is that she does not interpret the large amounts of gold given at Hakkari weddings as a sign of wealth. In other words, by disconnecting the symbolic act of gifting gold from economic status, she tends to classify Hakkari Kurds as middle- or even lower-class. This also exemplifies a form of economic stigmatization: although their wedding practices may resemble those of Van's wealthy families, these practices are often perceived as vulgar.

4.3 Kurdish language and Kurdishness

Although Kurdish was the native language of most of the interviewees, and their families spoke Kurdish, many of them learned the language at a relatively late age. In particular, most interviewees stated that they could understand Kurdish when they heard it but were unable to speak or write it, noting that they formally learned and began using the language later in life. Throughout the interviews, participants frequently emphasized differences in their relationship to the Kurdish language, particularly when comparing themselves to Hakkari Kurds. For example, Ayşe offered the following narrative about this encounter:

For example, the Kurdish spoken by Vanlıs is often the subject of jokes—expressions like *gelmişke*, *gitmişke*¹⁶ are commonly used. When Hakkari Kurds speak, it's almost impossible to understand them; their dialect is much closer to "pure" or original Kurdish. In contrast, the Kurdish spoken by Vanlıs has been significantly influenced by Turkish—it's more Turkified. (Ayşe, 25)

There is, in fact, a sense of "pure" Kurdishness, which the Hakkari Kurds represent. As mentioned earlier, this perception is tied to Hakkari's geographical isolation, which is believed to have helped preserve this "authentic" Kurdishness. When I probed further and asked, "What do Van people think about this?", she responded:

¹⁶ An example of mocking involves adding the suffix "-ke" to a Turkish word in order to imitate a Kurdish accent.

Vanlıs usually say “oh come on” and make fun of it. People say things like “you came and took our place, and now you look down on us.” This kind of conversation also came up recently among my friends. Someone said: “You Vanlıs don’t protect your own culture; we care about Van more than you do.” My friend asked, “Why do you think that?” and the person replied, “This is a Kurdish region, and because it’s Kurdish, we care more about our values. Since you don’t care as much as we do, we adopt the city more.” (Ayşe, 25)

This response actually explains the source of the tension: the Van residents I interviewed feel that the Hakkari Kurds accuse them of not preserving their own culture. The way Hakkari Kurds represent Kurdishness ends up reshaping the city's demographic composition. At the same time, the interviewees equated the culture of Van primarily with urbanity; throughout the interviews, Vanlı culture was constructed either through points of distinction from Hakkari Kurds or through references to a shared Kurdish cultural framework. While Vanlıs tend to describe Van as a more cosmopolitan city, Hakkari Kurds frame it as a Kurdish city. This cosmopolitan framing allows Vanlı Kurds to align themselves with urban modernity and distance themselves from more ethnic or rural representations of Kurdishness. In doing so, they reclaim a form of symbolic capital shaped by earlier Turkification and urbanization policies that valued assimilation into dominant norms of national modernity. Additionally, this excerpt reveals an extra claim to authenticity and the right to the city by Hakkari Kurds, as they position themselves as defending the city and its culture more actively than the Van Kurds. This act of claiming the city—this shift from being strangers to becoming hosts—creates a sense of discomfort among Vanlıs, as they feel they are losing their positionality, leading to a power imbalance.

Before delving further into the field analysis, it is necessary to briefly trace the historical usage of the concept of the “right to the city” and discuss its specific function within the scope of this thesis. Originally coined by Henri Lefebvre (1996), the concept refers to the right to inhabit, use, and participate in the transformation of

urban spaces. David Harvey (2008) later expanded this definition, framing the right to the city not only as a matter of access and participation but also as a collective right that should be claimed by urban inhabitants in opposition to neoliberal urban policies. Within urban sociology, this concept has been widely debated—particularly in relation to the structure of cities, spatial segregation, and the degree to which residents can exert influence over urban governance (Harvey, 2008; Lefebvre, 1996; Zukin, 1995). However, the way I employ the concept in this thesis differs from its classical formulation. Rather than focusing on urban governance or participatory planning, I use the right to the city to interrogate who claims legitimacy and authority over urban space. In this sense, my usage diverges from the original meaning and takes on a more discursive and symbolic orientation. Moreover, my usage of the term diverges from its classical formulation not by centering claims of equality, but by analyzing how groups that perceive themselves as native—particularly those identifying as Vanlı Kurds—invoke a superior right to the city. In this context, the emergence of migrants and other disadvantaged groups in the urban landscape does not lead to a universal claim for urban inclusion. Instead, it triggers a discursive reaction in which the right to the city is asserted primarily by established groups, who frame themselves as more entitled to urban space and resources than the newcomers.

In the context of Van, the “right to the city” is closely tied to questions of urban belonging, symbolic ownership, and the contested claims over public space. It reflects who is perceived to hold power, who asserts themselves as rightful dwellers, and who is positioned as an outsider. Thus, the concept becomes not only about access, but also about who is imagined as the heir of the city—that is, who narrates the city as theirs.

Ahmet also underlines the claim for ‘Real Kurdish’, he states that the Hakkari Kurds claim to speak the “real” Kurdish, and that the Kurdish spoken by people like himself is seen as closer to Turkish:

They also make claims about language. For instance, just like some say *hasil*¹⁷ is Arabic, claiming that they speak the “real” Arabic—we see a similar thing with the Hakkari Kurds. They assert that they speak the real Kurdish, and that what others speak is basically Turkish. (Ahmet,35)

Even though Ahmet asserts that Hakkari Kurds claim to speak the real Kurdish, he refers only to their reaction toward Van Kurds, not to other variations of the Kurdish language. In this context, the debate over “real Kurdish” should not be understood as a broader discussion of different Kurdish dialects, but rather as a binary opposition between the Turkified Kurdish spoken by Van Kurds and the Kurdish spoken by Hakkari Kurds. This process of Turkification also becomes evident in debates around the mother tongue. As I stated before, almost all of the Van Kurds I interviewed reported that they learned Kurdish later in life.

Kurds have a problem of forgetting Kurdish. Because families keep speaking Turkish, the new generation is growing up without knowing Kurdish. Now, thanks to language courses, they go and learn it on their own after the age of 18. They learn their own mother tongue as if it were a second language—but actually, this is a crime; it counts as assimilation. (Suat, 65)

As Suat also stated, Van Kurds learn Turkish instead of speaking their mother tongue, and they learned to speak and write in Kurdish in later ages. This state of forgetting Kurdish also has a political dimension; as he asserts, it is a form of assimilation. In one of the interviewees’ homes, although both the mother and father spoke Kurdish, their 7-year-old child, even though she understood Kurdish, would only respond in Turkish. They told me to speak in English, and when I did, the child responded to me in English, but he answered his father's Kurdish sentences in Turkish. Although the family said they had tried to raise her by teaching Kurdish

¹⁷ meaning ‘real,original’ in Arabic.

from a young age, they explained that the reason for this was the use of Turkish at school, the dominance of Turkish content on television, and the widespread use of Turkish in the city. Even if they tried to teach their own language, the children were first learning Turkish.

As the interviewee underlines, most of the Van locals I interviewed with perceive not learning Kurdish as a form of assimilation. For example, the father of this child, despite growing up in a household where Kurdish was spoken, did not learn to communicate in Kurdish until a much later age. In the group interview, this issue came up as a reaction to the fact that the Acems did not learn Kurdish. The reason, he said, was:

Speaking Turkish was seen as a higher identity, it was like that here too at some point. For example, I learned to speak Kurdish when I was 18. I could understand it, but I couldn't speak it, and it became a frequent subject of mockery. (Osman, 38)

By stating that speaking Turkish is associated with greater prestige, he implies that Kurdish has become a devalued and otherized language. He also describes the general prejudice held by the Acems regarding language as a process of otherization. He, along with almost all the participants in the focus group, agreed that the Acems did not learn the language because they do not even recognize it as one—and this prejudice has also affected the Van Kurds:

Actually, there is a prejudice, a refusal to learn the language that comes from humiliation. Otherwise, when you are exposed to it, you inevitably learn it. But when you look down on it, when you other it, even the brain no longer accepts it. Because it doesn't recognize your language as a language. It's not seen as a language. And this is done with a more political mindset—like, if someone speaks Kurdish, they must be a terrorist. We mentioned the 90s—back then, it was much more clear. (Osman, 38)

According to the interviews, another aspect of the arrival of Hakkari Kurds that disturbed Van Kurds was that, while they had previously held prestige as Kurds who spoke Turkish, the arrival of Hakkari Kurds “Kurdified” the city and its residents,

leading to fears of being othered. This fear is also rooted in the historical criminalization of the Kurdish language. Although none of the interviewees stated that they are currently marginalized in the city for speaking Kurdish, the perception of Turkish as a language of higher prestige—combined with policies such as the Settlement Law and the lack of mother-tongue education—is seen as a key factor underlying this concern. At the same time, the Van Kurds I interviewed interpreted their loss of the Kurdish language as a form of otherization—an assimilation process—and associated it with a broader sense of victimhood.

Especially Ahmet, both during and outside the interview, shared his experience of how his mother's inability to speak Turkish and his own delayed learning of Kurdish shaped his sense of self, and he referred to the fear of humiliation that stemmed from this.

I've also been to Northern Iraq—when I went there to run the Erbil marathon, I saw that everyone was speaking Kurdish. But here, the way my mother speaks Turkish becomes a subject of ridicule. You can even see it in comedy shows, like in sketch programs on TV. This isn't seen as an accent—it becomes a joke. That creates an unavoidable sense of inferiority. Whenever my mother talks to someone, there's this worry—"Will they laugh at her?". (Ahmet 35)

Ahmet's statement does not merely reflect a single moment of personal encounter; rather, it represents the long-standing discursive practices of mocking Kurdish identity in Turkish media. As Grabolle-Çeliker (2009) notes, the imitation of Kurdish accents on television and the comedic framing of these portrayals contribute to an affective economy in which Kurdishness is rendered laughable and positioned as "other." This mockery legitimizes racism and reinforces stereotypical representations of the 'other.' Even when Kurdish speakers learn the Turkish language, their accent marks them as different and prevents them from being fully included in the "we-image" of Turkishness (Grabolle-Çeliker, 2009).

I, too, sensed this fear of “Will they laugh at her?” when I met the Ahmet’s mother. While we were having breakfast, his mother was expected to stop by the house, and before she arrived, he warned me several times that she didn’t speak Turkish. We exchanged a brief greeting in simple Kurdish; however, Ahmet’s own experience was shaped by how Turks on television mocked the way his mother spoke Kurdish. He repeatedly said, “Now, Kurdish mothers who don’t speak Turkish are raising children who don’t speak Kurdish.” He portrayed this language barrier as a profound form of victimhood.

4.4 Paying the price: Victimhood and deservedness

As it has been explained at the beginning of the chapter, most of the narratives about the experiences of Hakkari Kurds before migration were conveyed in a similar manner. Especially considering the events of the 1990s, it was frequently emphasized that Hakkari Kurds were subjected to violence by both state and non-state actors, positioning them as victims in the overall narrative. For example, Osman narrated this migration process as this:

During the 1990s, before the large-scale migration to the city, the people had already paid a price. Those who “went to the mountains” were their own children—the sons and daughters of their friends, neighbors, and kin. In helping each other, they were, in a sense, helping their own. When the state displaced them and relocated them here, they experienced a period of profound hardship. (Osman, 38)

The concept of *bedel* (paying the price) frequently emerged in narratives about the Hakkari Kurds throughout my fieldwork. According to Van Kurds that I interviewed, this price primarily refers to having to simultaneously endure both PKK and state violence, as well as to experiences related to the village guard (*korucu*) system. At times, it also refers to the experience of forced migration. For this reason, many Van residents acknowledge that the Hakkari Kurds have indeed paid a price.

At this point in the analysis, it is necessary to pause the field-based discussion and reflect on the concept of paying the price. Appadurai (1996) argues that indebtedness is a crucial concept in contemporary societies; younger generations often feel a sense of responsibility and moral debt toward the historical burdens and achievements of those who came before them. Similarly, in Kurdish political and identity history, *bedel* occupies a central place—particularly in reference to what the Kurdish community sacrificed during the conflict between the PKK and the Turkish military in the 1980s and 1990s (Neyzi & Darıcı, 2015). This historical background has led many Kurds to feel indebted to the Kurdish movement. However, there are differing perspectives on what this *bedel* entails and to whom it is owed—whether to the Turkish state, to the Kurdish movement, or to those who have died (Neyzi & Darıcı, 2015).

The notion of *bedel* is often associated with violent experiences, loss of life, and collective suffering. In return, what is imagined to be gained through this sacrifice includes political and cultural recognition, identity formation, and certain rights (Bal, 2020). Through this framework, personal losses are imbued with meaning and understood as part of a moral debt tied to collective liberation (Bal, 2020).

Although the methods of repayment remain contested, the concept of *bedel* is often linked to kinship structures. For younger generations, this repayment is commonly expressed through political participation or the transmission of historical narratives (Neyzi & Darıcı, 2015). The *bedel* paid by those who have died imposes a moral responsibility on the living (D’Orsi, 2023). This moral responsibility also functions as a form of intergenerational moral economy, whereby the living are obligated to remember the dead and continue the struggle as an ethical practice

rooted in political commitment (D’Orsi, 2023). Especially among the younger members of families that have lost relatives, this sense of indebtedness can serve as a motivation for political action (Neyzi & Darıcı, 2015). At the same time, this act of remembrance brings with it an ongoing mourning process; giving up mourning is perceived as a betrayal of the dead and a surrender to the state (D’Orsi, 2023).

Umut Yıldırım (2022), in his article portraying trauma and continuous grief (*gêj*¹⁸), describes this affective state as a form of political critique that emerges in response to colonial violence. Thus, remembrance itself becomes a moral responsibility. Yıldırım (2022) also notes that these families can be categorized as “militant families” and may acquire symbolic and political authority within the community, even if they were not directly involved in armed conflict. Families who have paid a *bedel* often gain a specific form of social status and recognition within the Kurdish movement as families of value, which can also grant them symbolic and political authority in the community (Özsoy, 2020). From another perspective, however, some individuals consider their own trauma to be secondary and do not identify themselves as “victims of forced migration”; instead, they argue that only those whose villages were burned down should be regarded as truly displaced (Yıldırım, 2022). This indicates that trauma narratives within the Kurdish region are themselves diverse and differentiated.

In the previous chapter, I also noted that the residents of Van described their own experiences—such as forgetting their language and being detached from their culture—as a form of wrongdoing and assimilation. In fact, the *bedel* paid by the people of Hakkari also generates, in a sense, a form of competitive victimhood. While most studies on competitive victimhood focus on the rivalry between two

¹⁸ a term in Kurdish meaning “mentally distant, emotionally detached, or frozen in affect”

distinct ethnic or national groups over the recognition of their suffering (Noor et al., 2012; Sullivan et al., 2012; Kaval, 2021; Bagci et al., 2021; Uluğ et al., 2021), such competition can also take place between subgroups within the same ethnic identity. In the case of Van, the distinction drawn between Van-based Kurds and Hakkari Kurds, despite their shared Kurdishness, reveals a symbolic contest over who has suffered more, who has paid the greater price, and who is thus more entitled to political and social recognition.

In the narratives surrounding the suffering of the Hakkari Kurds, the emphasis is placed not on a shared Kurdish experience of pain, but rather on the fact that it was *they* who endured it. In this sense, the phrase “they paid the price” carries a particular weight on the pronoun *they*. Van Kurds do not refer to this price when defining themselves. They also note that Hakkari Kurds themselves tend to emphasize this expression, particularly in the context of political participation and upward social mobility—often distinguishing themselves by asserting “we paid the price.”

They’ve come to dominate the city’s administration. For example, when there’s a hiring process—say, for 800 positions—600 of them end up going to people from Hakkari. In one family, you might see three or four people hired. Of course, many of them were deeply affected by political processes, particularly those related to the PKK. Their children went to the mountains, they were forced to migrate, some were imprisoned. So when they gained control of the municipality, they justified it by saying, ‘We paid the price.’ That’s what we kept hearing from the Hakkari Kurds: ‘We paid the price, we paid the price.’ And that’s how it went—they hired the brother of the one who paid the price, the relative of the one who paid the price. (Ali, 40)

As seen in the quote above, the fact that Hakkari Kurds refer to having “paid the price” and use this notion to justify their current power and rights has triggered a reaction among Van residents; because this “price paid” has led to a change in power dynamics. Although, discursively, they frame the loss of their language or culture as

assimilation—and even see it as a kind of injustice—they do not interpret their own experiences as a form of “paying the price.”

However, since they also describe their own experiences and identities as victimized in certain respects, it can be said that they establish a differentiation between themselves and the Hakkari Kurds through this framing. This differentiation simultaneously generates a form of intra-group competitive victimhood. In the case of Van, the distinction drawn between Van Kurds and Hakkari Kurds, despite their shared Kurdishness, reveals a symbolic contest over who has suffered more, who has paid the greater price, and who is thus more entitled to political and social recognition.

At the same time, this emphasis on political participation is tied not only to a sense of competitive victimhood but also to a notion of competitive deservedness. The high level of political participation among migrants from Hakkari provokes a reaction from Van Kurds. One interviewee expressed this sentiment by asking, *“Have all the people from Van disappeared that you had to bring someone from Hakkari?”*¹⁹—a statement that reflects the perception that access to a limited political space has been granted to Hakkari migrants at the expense of the native Van population. In terms of “deservingness,” locals view themselves as the rightful owners of the city and therefore believe that key political positions—such as the mayor’s office—should be held by someone from Van. The fact that someone they consider a “guest,” whose boundaries and status they have already demarcated, now occupies what they perceive as their rightful political seat has led to strong reactions and resentment.

¹⁹ original quote in Turkish: “Vanlılar bitti de Hakkari’den mi insan getirdiniz?”

Their political participation is also high. According to them—and I’m not sure how appropriate it is for me to make this statement, but this is how they expressed it—there is a prevailing belief that the gendarmes, soldiers, and police officers who were sent to the region often raped local women. This is a constant theme in their discourse; the police are never defended. The narrative is that the police destroyed them, forced them out of their homes, and that security forces raped their women. (Ayşe, 25)

The fact that Ayşe refers to the experiences and discourse of Hakkari Kurds immediately after mentioning their political participation indicates that, in her view, Hakkari Kurds justify their high level of political engagement through their own narratives, particularly those rooted in experiences of violence that are shaped by both gendered and generational dynamics.

From a political-historical perspective, the Van Metropolitan Municipality has witnessed multiple state-appointed trustees (kayyum) in the past²⁰. According to statements made by municipal employees and local residents that I interviewed, the presence of these trustees has had a significant impact on the public and has been widely interpreted as a blow to the democratic will of the people. In the most recent municipal elections, Abdullah Zeydan and Neslihan Şedal, candidates from the DEM (Peoples’ Equality and Democracy Party), were elected co-mayors with 55.51% of the vote²¹. What has been particularly emphasized by Van residents is the fact that both of these candidates are originally from Hakkari—a point that has drawn

²⁰ For a detailed news report on the trustee appointments in Van, see: Medyascope. (2025, 15 Şubat). *Van’a kayyum atandı: Geçmişten bugüne Van Büyükşehir Belediyesi’nde kayyum süreci*. <https://medyascope.tv/2025/02/15/vana-kayyum-atandi-gecmisten-bugune-van-buyuksehir-belediyesinde-kayyum-sureci/>

²¹ Shortly after the completion of my fieldwork, Abdullah Zeydan was removed from office and replaced by a state-appointed trustee. During the interviews, many participants expressed concerns about this possibility while discussing political participation. However, since the appointment took place after the fieldwork period, it is not included in the scope of this study. For the news report on the trustee appointed to the Van Metropolitan Municipality, see: BBC Türkçe. (2025, 15 Şubat). *Van Büyükşehir Belediye Başkanı Abdullah Zeydan görevden alındı, yerine kayyum atandı*. BBC. <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-51400000>

criticism from segments of the Kurdish population in Van. During the most recent post-election period, the nine-month delay in granting Abdullah Zeydan his certificate of election and the appointment of the AKP (Justice and Development Party) candidate as trustee mayor triggered strong reactions from both Van locals and Hakkari Kurds. Ayşe described this process as follows:

What really stood out to me during that period was how strongly the Hakkari Kurds and Van locals united. Their sentiment was: *“If we are here, the only party that can defend our rights is the HDP.”* Whether the HDP would truly protect them or not, I don’t know—but the energy was overwhelming: people banging pots, blowing whistles. That atmosphere really moves you. Even if you’re not an HDP supporter, you’re like “wow”—they are standing up for themselves. (Ayşe, 25)

HDP that is mentioned above (People’s Democratic Party) is a leftist political party that typically receives the majority of the vote in the eastern regions of Türkiye and has a predominantly Kurdish voter base. In this quote, even though there is generally some resentment toward the political participation of Hakkari Kurds, Ayşe described this particular process in a very positive way—which was somewhat surprising to me. It showed that, when faced with a common form of oppression, people with different views—whether from Hakkari or Van—could unite under a shared Kurdish identity, and she herself emphasized this point. In fact, she even justified some of the acts of civil disobedience that occurred during this time, presenting them in a positive light:

Until now, Kurds have often felt suppressed. So when they finally got a chance, they tried to make the most of it. Their goal wasn’t to burn down stores or smash billboards; it was just that they finally had leverage, and they were determined to use it. During this time, many people—both from Hakkari and Van—stood side by side in solidarity. (Ayşe, 25)

As can be seen, she highlights the solidarity between Hakkari and Van Kurds by linking it to the general feeling of suppression experienced by Kurds. Ahmet also highlights these 9 months:

In the recent events, when Abdullah Zeydan's certificate of election was denied and protests broke out—entire cities were set on fire. But people weren't just reacting because of Zeydan; they were simply fed up with the appointed trustees. People started to question: who has actually harmed this region more—the trustee, or the youth who took to the streets and destroyed things? (Ahmet, 35)

Even though they address the cultural and social differences, they demonstrate shared political interests and are able to react in the same way and come together in solidarity. However, although a sense of unity was mentioned during the trustee (kayyum) process, most of the people I interviewed expressed criticism toward Abdullah Zeydan's mayoral position. For example, he also touched upon the political participation of Hakkari Kurds:

Our current mayor and co-mayor are from Hakkari, and nearly all of the core administrative staff are also Hakkari Kurds. There have been some new hirings recently—of course, I didn't witness it directly—but after the most recent 9-month change in the municipality, when HDP regained control following the trustee (kayyum) period, people say that most of those hired were from Hakkari. What I have observed—not necessarily about the mayor personally, but more generally among Hakkari Kurds—is that they tend to stand by each other as a group (Ahmet, 35)

In this quote, Ahmet states that many Hakkari people were hired during this time because they support one another. This group solidarity, as also discussed earlier in the context of tribal affiliations, drug trade, and real estate, has contributed to the perception of Hakkari people as a unified and cohesive group. Therefore, this brings the discussions on competitive deservedness.

Competitive deservedness have long been argued by many theorists; the perception that minority groups have obtained more than they deserve also contributes to this reaction (Kinder & Sears, 1981; McConahay, 1982; Sears, 1988). Particularly among middle-class groups, arguments built on the axis of *deservingness* and *undeservingness* serve to reinforce their existing positions by justifying their own sense of worthiness (Szöke, 2015). The limited nature of local government resources contributes to the perception that these scarce resources

rightfully belong to the local population (Szöke, 2015). Debates around “deservingness” often operate in connection with *historical consciousness*: a group is seen as entitled to certain rights because it has endured particular past experiences, and this past is invoked to justify present-day claims (Hilmar, 2019). When a group’s meaningful past actions align symmetrically with its current or future claims, this alignment is perceived as *just* (Miller, 1999). In the absence of such preconditions, the benefits gained by the group or its members are framed as *injustices* (Hegtvædt, 2005).

As can be seen from the quote below by Ali, he connects this high political participation to an injustice:

The perception is that Hakkaris are the ones running the city now, and many of the city's problems are attributed to their rule. In the eyes of longtime Van residents—who see themselves as the original owners of the city—there’s a belief that, ‘we accepted them as guests, but they should know their place as guests.’ There’s a refusal to accept Hakkaris as legitimate authorities over the city. And to be fair, there’s a sense that Hakkaris don’t really have the perspective of city dwellers—they’re not tradespeople, they’re not urban. So there’s also this perception that they don’t know how to manage the city properly. Van has a serious ‘Hakkari issue’ in that regard. (Ali, 40)

In the discourse of Van locals that I interviewed, the emphasis on the idea that “they paid the price” can be read as a recognition that Hakkari Kurds are entitled to certain rights due to their historical experiences. Yet, this acknowledgment is accompanied by a competing discourse structured around the idea: “They may deserve something, but this belongs to us.” What distinguishes the Van locals’ perspective is that they perceive Hakkari Kurds not only as claimants to rights but also as those who have now attained a position from which they can govern Van. This political participation, however, is articulated within *registers of deservedness*—a layered structure through which Van locals construct what is considered legitimately earned and what is perceived as excessive or undeserved. According to their discourse, Hakkari Kurds

have acquired this right without being the rightful heirs to the city. Hence, their governance is perceived as a form of injustice. There is also a widespread perception that Hakkari Kurds have not spent as much time in the city as Van locals and therefore do not know it as intimately. Because they are not seen as fully knowledgeable about Van, it is believed that they are not yet deserving of the right to govern it.

At the same time, Ali expressed this reaction in terms of the city's memory and the right to the city. He made several comments specifically on political participation and the presence of Hakkari Kurds, as their personal experiences were largely shaped by their work within the municipality. For example, emphasized that while they themselves claimed ownership of Van's urban memory, the Hakkari Kurds, in his view, were more attached to the 'memory of Hakkari':

In the past, people used to say that 'a city has a memory.' But rather than embracing that, the Hakkari migrants chose to hold on to their own memory—they spoke of a 'Hakkari memory.' That's what they preferred. They didn't choose the memory of the city itself. And that, in fact, is the main issue Van locals have: the Hakkari people still can't say, 'We are from Van.' They continue to say, 'We are from Hakkari,' and carry a Hakkari memory. They serve to Hakkari people. (Ali, 40)

The political empowerment and administrative ascension of Hakkari Kurds can be interpreted as the actualization of the fear of change in power-positions.

Consequently, Van locals respond with resistance. Elias and Scotson(1965) similarly explains this fear observed in his fieldwork as stemming from the local group's fear of losing their privileged position—the association of identity with those privileges. As Elias and Scotson(1965) demonstrates, earlier-arriving groups tend to claim greater rights on the basis that they have lived in the city longer and know its social norms and rules more intimately—thereby positioning themselves as more “native” than those who arrived later. The local group, to some extent, has monopolized its

own resources and uses them as power resources; however, when a new group arrives, the possibility of a shift in these balances—and the potential transformation of the power they hold—generates a sense of fear for the local group (Elias & Scotson, 1965).

However, the intensity of this reaction is tempered by a significant factor: many Van locals themselves voted for Abdullah Zeydan. This ambivalence can be explained by the fact that Hakkari Kurds' political participation has also enabled the Kurds of Van to gain power over other out-groups—such as Iranian Turks(Acem)—thus consolidating their position under a shared Kurdish identity. In this broader identification, Van Kurds find themselves in the majority once again. As mentioned earlier, one interviewee expressed the view that Van was in the hands of the Acems before the arrival of the Hakkari Kurds. Another interviewee made the following remark:

I think they have made a more positive contribution in terms of Kurdish unity rather than a conflict. They have a strong command of their mother tongue and want to preserve it, and they seem more persistent in their political views. I also think they are a bit braver. This bravery has an influence on the people of Van as well. (Fatma, 32)

Fatma, who had previously described Hakkari Kurds as brave, also stated that they contributed significantly to the city in terms of Kurdish unity, particularly political unity. From this perspective, they reactivated Kurdishness as a broader identity and influenced the positionality and identity of Van residents in the city. Although I did not directly ask the interviewees about the political parties they voted for, I was able to get some idea based on what they mentioned during our conversations. The most important observation I made here was that most interviewees criticized HDP in some respects. In general, they tended to associate HDP with Hakkari Kurds and Kurdishness. Ali states that the voting pattern of Hakkari Kurds is clear, with nearly

90% voting for the HDP; however, he emphasizes that Van's representation within this is limited. He states that Hakkari Kurds political activism is very high, but Vanlis have a little representation within the party and they tend to be more questioning.

As can be seen from the statement above, while the interviewee emphasizes the strong political participation of Hakkari Kurds, he also points out that Van Kurds have very limited representation within the HDP. I believe the reason he makes this statement is due to the fact that the candidates nominated by HDP in Van are often from Hakkari.

However, what stood out to me even more was his emphasis on how people from Van tend to be more critical and questioning. Before delving deeper into this point, it is important to consider the perspective of Ahmet, whose comments on this issue offer a valuable parallel.

There is a deep gap between the leadership and the grassroots within the HDP. The Kurdish grassroots are religious. They believe the leadership is religious as well, but in fact, the leadership identifies as socialist. For example, in Eskişehir you can nominate an LGBT individual as a candidate, but someone living in Hakkari wouldn't even be aware of such a candidate. People think that way, and many of them are illiterate. They memorize the symbol or shape and vote based on that. (Ahmet, 35)

This quote actually points out that the lack of representation within the party is not only about the absence of Van-based candidates but also about a lack of ideological representation. As previously discussed, Van residents often describe themselves as conservative and position themselves on a more conservative ground. However, here a different kind of association is made: conservatism is attributed to the Kurdish grassroots, and it is suggested that Hakkari residents vote for the HDP due to a lack of knowledge, without critically questioning the party. By positioning themselves as the ones who question, Van residents take on a more modern stance; being literate

urbanites, they are portrayed as people who make their political choices by analyzing the HDP's actions across the country, whereas Hakkari residents are depicted as a group that votes merely by recognizing the party's symbol.

It is also important to note that the conservatism that Van Kurds identify in themselves is not a fixed category; rather, it is shaped through various encounters and events. For instance, while they may adopt a more conservative stance in matters such as gender norms—like men and women dining together—or in religious issues, they tend to position themselves as more modern when it comes to political actions such as voting, emphasizing their capacity for critical thinking and questioning. Therefore, Van Kurds draw a distinction between cultural and political conservatism; the political sphere, in which they identify themselves as progressive, is at times in tension with their cultural conservatism.

In conclusion, this chapter has examined how Kurdishness is constructed, negotiated, and differentiated through the lens of intra-ethnic encounters between Van and Hakkari Kurds. While Kurdishness is invoked as a shared identity, it also becomes the discursive ground upon which symbolic boundaries—such as language, morality, and political legitimacy—are drawn. Vanlı Kurds often frame themselves as urbanized, conservative, and assimilated into national modernity, whereas Hakkari Kurds are portrayed as culturally authentic yet politically dominant and socially disruptive. Rather than indicating a unified ethnic identity, these articulations expose the fragmented, contested, and stratified nature of Kurdishness itself—shaped by historical trajectories, moral hierarchies, and claims to urban belonging.

CHAPTER 5

IRANIANS IN VAN

5.1 Migrants and tourists

Regarding Iranian migration, the interviewees discussed various aspects of its origins and the nature of the encounters it generated. As mentioned in the earlier quote, Osman had emphasized that Van was significantly influenced by Iran in terms of language, noting that the language had become more masculinized. Immediately following this statement, he began to elaborate on the waves of migration from Iran:

Van is a very interesting place. It has been heavily influenced by Iran and has received significant migration from there. Right after World War I, both intentional and unintentional migrations from Iran took place. By "unintentional," I mean migrations that happened naturally from one side to the other, but there were also forced relocations that were consciously carried out—essentially as a form of population engineering to disrupt the existing social fabric of the area. This is also mentioned in İsmet İnönü's *Şark Raporları*, where he states that Van had a demographic and geographic structure well-suited for Turkification. He suggested that, due to the characteristics of the land and the people, Turkification policies could be more effectively implemented in Van and Bitlis. Following these reports, Van underwent significant transformation. (Osman, 38)

The migration story described here closely mirrors the migration of the Acems (Iranian Turks); for this interviewee, the arrival of Iranian Turks in the past is considered the beginning of Iranian migration. However, in other interviews, no such connection was made between the Acems and the more recent Iranian arrivals—these two groups were treated as entirely distinct from one another. At the same time, this quote also points to the fact that Van has been subjected to Turkification policies and has therefore been transformed through encounters with different cultures. In contrast to the Hakkari Kurds, this suggests that Van has lost its fortress-like structure and, as a result, reflects a transformed form of Kurdishness.

Although Van Kurds associate their conservative disposition with the multiethnic structure of the city, they have also noted that Iranians challenge this conservative fabric in various ways.

As a society, regardless of cultural background, we are all somewhat conservative here. Everyone carries a bit of conservatism. Even someone who votes for the CHP may both drink alcohol and perform prayers. But now, when you go to the main street—you wouldn't see this in the past—girls with bare midriffs, all the time. This started with the Iranians. And as a society, we do not approve of the place where this started. (Mehmet, 56)

The Van residents I interviewed not only adopted a conservative identity positioning in contrast to the Hakkari Kurds, but also did so in relation to the Iranian migrants.

Mehmet had already identified himself as conservative at the beginning of our interview. He also emphasized that Van residents carry a certain form of conservatism within them—even if it manifests in different ways or to varying degrees, from his perspective, conservatism is a significant aspect of being *Vanlı*. The Iranian migration and encounters with Iranians seem to have further triggered this sense of conservatism, particularly among male participants, who expressed disapproval of the changes they perceived in women's clothing styles, which will be elaborated in the chapter.

When I asked about the demographics of migrants arriving from outside the country, almost all interviewees mentioned Iranians first. Similarly, as noted earlier in the quote provided in the section on the urbanization process, Ali pointed out that Vanlıs perceive the urbanization of Iranians as having started in Van. So, just like Hakkari Kurds; Van acts as a city of liberation for both groups; but in different senses. The primary reason cited for Iranian migration to Van was the oppressive regime in Iran and the migrants' desire for greater personal freedom:

There is a regime in Iran, and it is very restrictive—an oppressive and dogmatic system. Here, there's nothing like that. But Iranians come here, and

they go to nightclubs, bars—places like that. They even have their own bars and clubs where only Iranians are allowed to enter. (Ahmet, 35)

This quote, in contrast to Mehmet's perspective, reflects Van's character as a welcoming city; it emphasizes that, as a metropolitan center, Van does not oppressively impose its rules. At the same time, while Ahmet talks about bars that only Iranians can enter, I did not hear the same from any other interviewees. Still, as a matter of perception, it becomes clear that Van—seen as a place rightfully belonging to the Vanlıs—is perceived as being selectively used by Iranians as a private or exclusive space. Although Ahmet positions Van as an inclusive and non-oppressive city, the underlying discourse still operates within certain registers of deservedness, as with the case of Hakkari Kurds. Ceren also touches on this point regarding the privatization of public spaces:

To be honest, it feels a bit off to us... that they come here and do everything they couldn't do in their own country—especially doing these things in public spaces. I can't say it's good or bad, it's their business, and of course, I respect that. But still, it feels a bit unsettling. (Ceren, 30)

The perception that Iranians are “doing everything they couldn't do in their own country” and engaging with public spaces in ways that feel unsettling to locals points to an implicit hierarchy of deservedness regarding access to urban freedoms. When I probed further about what specifically Iranians were perceived to be doing in these spaces, Ceren mentioned activities associated with the entertainment sector and New Year's celebrations. She immediately added that “there are no Van locals in Türkü bars,” and that “celebrating New Year's is not part of our culture,” thereby framing these practices as culturally inappropriate and not aligned with local norms.

At the same time, by attaching a negative connotation to these activities, she emphasized that they were perceived as unsettling. However, the main emphasis here is not on the activities themselves, but on where these practices are performed—namely, in public spaces. Therefore, this quotation also speaks to the registers of

deservedness regarding access to and use of public space. This reflection was also echoed in other interviews, where public spaces were described as being “occupied” by Iranians.

They have a long holiday during Newruz, and they come here in March. In fact, there’s this kind of feeling—like, we’re the only ones who are actually Turkish citizens, but somehow we feel like the tourists. (Ahmet, 35)

By stating that he feels like a tourist, Ahmet reinforces his claim to the right to the city, implicitly asserting that he should not be made to feel alienated in his own urban environment. Furthermore, in a way he had not done before, Ahmet identifies himself explicitly as a “Turkish citizen,” thereby positioning Iranians as foreigners who have arrived in the region from outside the national boundaries. This framing resonates with Sara Ahmed’s (2000) discussion of national identity, in which encounters with the stranger not only reinforce the boundaries of belonging but also involve a process of exclusion through the construction of a collective “we-image.” In this sense, while difference may be acknowledged, it is simultaneously used to demarcate who does—and does not—belong. The notion of borders also becomes central here: unlike the internal migration from Hakkari, which did not involve crossing a national boundary and thus did not trigger this kind of exclusionary discourse, the presence of Iranians reactivates questions of national identity and symbolic border-making.

It is necessary to evaluate Iranian migration within its own context. When locals in Van are asked which groups of migrants have arrived in the city from abroad, their first response is often “Iranians.” However, most of the people they refer to as migrants are actually tourists—that is, individuals who come for short-term visits rather than to settle permanently. Yet, since these visits occur frequently, they are perceived by the public as migrants. This perception, however, reflects not

only the frequency of their visits, but also a deeper concern about the potential for these tourists to become long-term residents—a presence that may exceed the duration or scope that is socially acceptable. In this sense, framing Iranian tourists as migrants becomes a form of categorization that anticipates and contains a possible future scenario.

5.2 Encounter with Iranians in the public sphere

Through the narratives of Van Kurds, there is a certain stigma attached to Iranian visitors—one that reflects not only the frequency and duration of their stays, but also the kinds of activities they engage in while they are in the city. Even though the arrival of Iranians is typically short-term—but frequent—the Van residents find themselves unable to occupy the powerful host position they would prefer in these encounters.

The dynamic between hosts and tourists has been examined from various perspectives in multiple studies (Diaz & Jover, 2020; Cheer, Milano, & Novelli, 2019). Particularly in city centers, the overwhelming presence of tourists and the design of urban infrastructure primarily catering to them have led locals to feel like tourists in their own country. This situation has sparked debates surrounding the “right to the city” (Diaz & Jover, 2020). Although the phenomenon referred to as overtourism brings economic benefits to the country, it often provokes negative reactions from hosts toward tourists (Diaz & Jover, 2020).

The interviewees’ accounts of tourists in Van highlight not only the density of tourism in the city, but also the presence and behaviors of tourists in public spaces. Ceren notes that when Iranians come to her workplace, they insist on speaking

Persian even if some of them know Turkish, and interprets this insistence as a reflection of a perceived sense of superiority:

You know, there's this idea of a 'higher culture,' a kind of perceived superiority... Honestly, the Iranians see this place like Iran, but with more freedoms. They see it as a free space where they can do whatever they want. (Ceren, 30)

While Ceren does not elaborate on the roots of this perceived superiority, her subsequent comments suggest that it is linked to how Iranians experience Van as a space of freedom—"a place where they can do whatever they want." This perception reveals a misalignment between the expectations of Iranian visitors and the social norms articulated by Van Kurds. Although participants in the focus group acknowledged that the city's public spaces are shared by diverse groups and even described Van as a cosmopolitan city where foreigners are generally welcomed, Iranians are nonetheless accused of not knowing their place. By stating that Iranians perceive the area as an extension of Iran, she is, in fact, referring to the right to the city: while they are expected to position themselves as strangers, they instead act as if they are the locals and rightful owners of the space.

At the same time, while defining themselves as conservative, Van residents also emphasize the practices carried out by Iranians that they themselves choose not to engage in. This reveals a form of identity construction; by excluding and even morally condemning Iranian secular practices, they reconstruct a notion of "conservative Vanlılık." This distinction is not only made through references to foam parties, but as Ceren stated, also through mentions of New Year celebrations, the establishment of folk music bars, and nightclubs in the city, which are perceived as moral threats to the conservative identity of Van residents. In this framing, freedom is not celebrated but rather coded as a moral disorder.

They make very active use of the entertainment sector. For instance, you won't see many locals in a türkü bar—it's usually Iranians. Foam parties, New Year's celebrations—those are times when migration from Iran increases significantly. New Year's isn't really part of this region's culture, but Iranians have gotten used to that kind of entertainment culture. (Ceren, 30)

The interviews reveal another tension: while Van is frequently described as a space of freedom, the arrival of Iranians has led to this notion of freedom being reframed as a form of moral disorder. This shift can be understood not only through the lens of the right to the city, but also in relation to Islamic conservatism. While Iranian visitors are perceived to adhere to conservative practices, such as fulfilling religious obligations, wearing the hijab, and abstaining from alcohol in their home country, their apparent abandonment of these practices upon arriving in Van has been unsettling for local residents. Rather than continuing these conservative behaviors, their more “liberated” conduct in Van is seen as transgressive, thereby disturbing the moral and cultural boundaries that constitute the conservative identity of Van Kurds.

From this perspective, what is at stake is not merely spatial belonging, but the moral order of the city itself. By asserting that such venues are not frequented by locals—that no one from Van would go to a türkü bar—they construct a totalizing notion of what it means to be from Van, clearly drawing a boundary between “them” and “us.”

They come here, they benefit from the freedoms, and yet they also try to impose their own culture. That's the disturbing part. Their culture is actually very beautiful—I love the Persian language, their music, their poetry. But they're not bringing that here. They're not bringing their literature. For example, I would love to learn Persian, but they don't come to Van for its history or natural beauty; they come here just to have fun. Their presence being limited to the entertainment sector, and then returning to their country—it creates a kind of schizophrenic situation. (Ceren, 30)

This perceived imposition that Ceren describes reflects the expression of freedom in public spaces; as such events take place in public, they inevitably become part of the

shared everyday life for Van residents as well. This pattern of reciprocal relationship has also been observed in other studies, where local populations express frustration toward migrants and refugees due to the perception that they “have nothing to give in return,” which reinforces a sense of being used or taken advantage of (Moulin, 2012; Buxton & Gibney, 2024). This sentiment arises from the normative expectation that migrants are obliged to show gratitude toward the host society—either by expressing thankfulness or by offering something in return for the hospitality they receive (Buxton & Gibney, 2024). In the case of Van, interviewees state that Iranians do not show this gratitude; and they don't participate in this reciprocal relationship by giving something; whether it is their culture to share or participation to the public norms in the society.

According to Ceren, Iranians neither show gratitude nor share their culture with the local population. This absence of mutual exchange is framed by the interviewee as a failure to offer a ‘returnable gift,’ a particularly salient point given her stated appreciation for Persian culture.

(referring to Iranians) To be honest, they already see this place as a kind of salvation, which is why they come here. In fact, they seem to have embraced this place even more strongly than we have—even more than the people from Hakkari. You walk on the pavement, and they're standing around in groups, blocking the way. They pull clothes out of your hands while shopping. This kind of lack of manners, this uncivilized behavior, really disturbs me. (Ayşe, 25)

Ayşe's portrayal of Iranians as vulgar and uncivilized also stands in contrast to Van's self-image as a modernized city. The fact that, in her view, Iranians do not know how to behave “properly” in an urban setting yet still act as though they own the city highlights a tension that reflects both a critique of their spatial entitlement and a moral judgment that frames their presence as a form of moral disorder.

The labeling of newly arrived migrant groups by hosts as "vulgar" or "lacking manners" also serves as a mechanism of othering (Bauman, 1997). Bauman(2016) argues that, when a migrant arrives in a city, they are confronted with the city's unwritten rules: there are places they can go and places they cannot, places that will tolerate them, and places where they may eventually settle. The occupation of the public sphere mentioned here can actually be linked to individuals' lack of knowledge about certain rules and their inappropriate behavior in a space that is otherwise tolerated.

In parallel, Elias and Scotson(1965) emphasizes that established groups continuously marginalize outsiders by highlighting their so-called "negative" traits. This stigmatization, in fact, creates a collective fantasy towards the other(Elias & Scotson, 1965). At the same time, the fact that they are seen as "lacking manners" refers to the collective norms of the society, and how these individuals come to occupy a position in which they disregard—or even violate—those norms. The local population typically defines the boundaries of acceptable behavior; how one is expected to act within the public sphere constitutes an important set of social norms. Those who do not adhere to these established norms are often labeled as "vulgar" or lacking manners.

Ayşe also draws a connection between Hakkari Kurds and Iranians through what she perceives as excessive spending. Having previously made a similar association in the context of Hakkari weddings, she characterizes such expenditures in the city as vulgar, further suggesting that this difference is not only cultural but also indicative of underlying class distinctions. In addition, Ayşe critiques the urban practices of both Hakkari Kurds and Iranians through the lens of the right to the city, questioning their modes of presence and participation in Van's public life:

In terms of a lack of manner, there isn't much difference between them—in fact, they even resemble one another. Both groups act selfishly in public spaces. What's unsettling is that they behave as if they completely own the city. For example, when you're walking through your own city, feeling at ease in familiar places—like Maraş Street—someone suddenly stops right in the middle of the road, disrupting that flow. (Ayşe, 25)

Although the spending habits of Iranians in the city are often perceived as unsettling, some interviewees also interpret them in a more positive light. Since these expenditures are seen as contributing to the local economy, their presence and consumption within public spaces cannot be entirely dismissed. Mehmet explained this distinction, saying that even though the tourists from Iran is good for the shopkeepers, ordinary people don't like Iranians at all because they believe that they disrupt the society and corrupt the moral fabric.

Even when Mehmet praises the economic contributions of Iranians, he immediately qualifies this by stating that they disrupt the city's moral fabric—suggesting that their financial input is not sufficient for them to relinquish their position as strangers. While Ceren previously emphasized the lack of reciprocity between the two groups, Mehmet's acknowledgment of their economic contribution points to a form of exchange. However, since this exchange takes place in different domains—economic versus moral or cultural—it fails to establish a sense of balance or mutual recognition in the eyes of the interviewees. At the same time, the frequent mention of this ordinariness—especially in terms of shopping and spending habits—reveals an underlying discomfort that may be tied to class-related tensions or class struggle.

Fatma also points out this economic aspect:

It has become a serious source of income for local shopkeepers. You see the same thing in places like Antalya—when you go shopping, they don't really take you seriously. The same dynamic has started to happen in Van. If the customer is Iranian, they're more attentive, they chat for a long time, and they might brush you off a little. So there's a duality here: people are both disturbed by the arrival of Iranians, but at the same time, they also see it as something extremely beneficial. (Fatma, 32)

Fatma's response provides further insight into how the idea of a reciprocal relationship is negotiated. While these financial exchanges may produce a tourist–host dynamic on the surface, what unsettles Van residents is the fact that Iranians do not behave as temporary visitors, but rather act as though they are rightful owners of the city. By likening Van to Antalya, interviewees conveyed a shift from being hosts to feeling like tourists in their own city, thus framing the city through a tourist–host dynamic. One point consistently emphasized by all interviewees regarding Iranians is that they are perceived as matter out of place.

[referring to Iranians] By the way, they smell really bad—they really do smell bad. Because of them, for instance, people don't even want to go outside anymore. When you walk, you feel as if you're walking among strangers. (Ayşe, 25)

By stating that she no longer wants to go outside, Ayşe expresses her discomfort with the fact that public spaces are now shared with other groups. At the same time, emphasizing that these spaces are increasingly occupied by Iranians, she conveys a sense of disruption—and even disgust. The emotion expressed here—disgust—can be directly linked to culturally constructed notions of cleanliness and purity, with Iranians perceived as matter out of place. As individuals who fail to conform to expected norms, they are seen not only as disruptors of social order but also as agents of symbolic pollution.

Elias and Scotson(1965) argues that established groups not only accuse newcomers of breaking the rules, they also accuse them of being dirty. Dirt is often associated with a sense of "out-of-placeness"; the perception of cleanliness and purity is locally constructed, and what is considered dirty is, in essence, that which disrupts order (Douglas 1966). Ahmed (2004) underlines that disgust is not merely about objects the subject fears to incorporate; rather, it is linked to the perceived badness of the object as an inherent quality. Olfaction and body odour have long

been associated with different racial groups throughout history and have been employed as a means of othering (Tulett, 2016). By echoing Miller (1997), Ahmed (2004) also argues that disgust, in fact, signifies a violation of the subject's boundary, and that the subject perceives the object as being inferior to itself.

In my fieldwork, one of the most frequently emphasized points when speaking about Iranians was the foam parties; several participants stated that Iranians come to Van and organize foam parties. This was not something that had caught my attention prior to entering the field, but after returning, I noticed that there were numerous news reports on the topic. For example, Mehmet stated that he sees foam parties in Van, and naked Iranians in the boats. Just as Mehmet had previously interrupted my interview with Ali, Ali similarly joined the conversation upon hearing about the foam parties and asked, 'Where did you see that—did a neighbor tell you?' The elderly man quickly corrected himself by saying that it was a recurring subject in the news.²²

The foam party, rather than being something directly observed, has evolved into a circulating narrative sustained through hearsay and mediated rumor. This form of mediated talk functions as a discursive mechanism that reinforces the identity dichotomy between 'us' and 'them,' delineating symbolic boundaries. In the case of Van, the circulation of secular practices—particularly niche ones such as foam parties—through rumor reveals how collective imaginaries are constructed in the absence of direct experience.

Elias and Scotson (1965), in their observations from Winston Parva, emphasizes the significance of blame-gossip in the production of a 'they-image.'

²² Example of a news report: Vansesi Gazetesi. (2023, August 9). Van'da İranlılardan köpük partisi. *Vansesi Gazetesi*. <https://www.vansesigazetesi.com/van-da-iranlilardan-kopuk-partisi/108704/>

Through the practice of ‘I heard that,’ the local group effectively positions the outsider as outside; by associating certain practices with them, they stigmatize the outsider and in turn reshape the ‘we-image.’ In the case of Van, the circulation of secular practices—particularly niche ones such as the foam party—through rumor can be interpreted through this lens.

5.3 Gender and emancipation in the public sphere

The practices that Iranians display in public spaces are not described by the interviewees as being limited to specific venues; the clothes they wear also emerge as a particularly striking element in the narratives of Van residents. Yet, when it comes to clothing, the focus of concern is not directed primarily at the Iranians themselves, but rather at local women and the possibility that they might be “influenced” by such practices. This anxiety—that such behaviors may eventually infiltrate and normalize within local society—contributes to a deepening moral and social division between “us” and “them.”

Research on the association between migration and women's emancipation generally focuses not on the host societies but on migrant women. However, it has also been studied that the migration has social effects in the country that they migrated to (Wood, 1994). Being connected to migration in some way and interacting with different societies prompts reflection on gender roles, which, in turn, can lead to a transformation in women's positions within society and can also reshape their social roles (Kıray, 1999; Abadan-Unat, 1976; Abadan-Unat & Mirdal, 2015).

Specifically, female interviewees noted that Van had become more liberated after the arrival of Iranians. They attributed this liberation primarily to the fact that Iranians wore more revealing clothes, which the local population gradually became

accustomed to. As a result, Van women, who began to feel more at ease with this clothing style, reported experiencing less harassment. Ayşe's experience and perception of Iranian women's clothing shifts depending on the identity she foregrounds: while she expresses discomfort when speaking from the position of a 'Vanlı,' she offers more positive reflections when identifying as a 'Van woman.'

Six or seven years ago in Van, if you wore a skirt, people would stare at you like you were an animal. You'd be subjected to harassment, and you'd feel like you had done something wrong. Iranians came and pushed that boundary a bit. This process has actually been good for Van—especially for young girls. My cousins who come from outside say things like, 'I went downtown today and saw girls dressed like this and that, and no one even looked.' And I told them, 'Yes, Iranians broke that.' Because when Iranians come here, since they can't experience that kind of freedom in their own country, they're inclined to express that freedom here. So when they started wearing mini skirts, shorts and all that here, people in Van slowly got used to it. (Ayşe, 25)

As Ayşe explains, the arrival of Iranians "broke something" within the society and its public sphere—particularly in the dynamics of encounters between men and women. This disruption is perceived more positively by women. What she emphasizes most in Iranians' practice of dressing revealingly is its expression of freedom. Here, it is also important to recognize the interviewee's own internal shift in position; when these practices align with their own identity and are perceived as beneficial, they tend to view them more positively. Similarly, Fatma also reflects on the gazes they experience during these public encounters:

According to Van's standards, the arrival of Iranians changed perceptions. In the past, there were more uncomfortable gazes regarding clothing, but this has started to become more normalized. In this sense, I think Iranians have been somewhat beneficial. (Fatma, 32)

From the very beginning, I was struck by how discussions around "women being able to dress freely in the city" were framed not as part of Van women's own struggle, but rather as a right granted by migrants. Fatma's comment helped me better understand this process: foreigners, as those who are systematically subjected

to the “uncomfortable gaze,” in fact facilitate the city’s acclimatization to such visibility—thus, they come to serve as a kind of frontier.

Sara Ahmed (2000) argues that strange bodies are not only over-represented but also crucial in the establishment of the “impossible border,” which plays a key role in the formation of identities. This border is constructed through, and upon, the bodies of strangers. In this context, by being constantly exposed to the gaze and by transgressing the boundaries of the border, Iranian women have disrupted the normative codes of dress in public space. This disruption, in turn, has enabled Van women to adopt similar styles of dress. Therefore, the migrant woman acts as a catalyst in transforming gender norms within the city.

However, male interviewees tend to interpret this as a more negative transformation; as it will change the conservative practices of women; and at the same time, as it does not belong to Van culture. As Ahmed(2000) describes, the strange bodies are also represented as threaten to leak to the culture; to contemplate the host. For instance, Mehmet, who defined himself as conservative, states that as a society, they do not approve this kind of change:

When you walk down the street now, you see something that didn’t exist before—young women with bare midriffs. It’s constant. This started with the Iranians. And as a society, we do not approve of the place where it all began. (Mehmet, 56)

Stokes’s (1998) analysis of the masculinized positioning of Hatay—a border region between Syria and Turkey—and of how the border itself is gendered is particularly relevant in this context. The arrival of Arabs and their activities within the city are perceived by local residents as incompatible with the ideals of Turkist republicanism and Sunni Islam, which in turn reinforces masculinist discourses at the border(Stokes, 1998). Similarly, the clothing styles of Iranian women in Van prompt a redefinition of local masculinity; in response to the perceived risk that these styles

might influence Van women, a symbolic masculine boundary is drawn to prevent such transformation. Also, Osman framed it as such by stating that “people of Van are prone to degeneration,” suggesting that this shift represents a change in societal values:

In terms of temperament, they’re somewhat softer—more inclined toward change and transformation. But they’re also quite susceptible to deterioration. Don’t think of it only in a positive sense—they’re very open to change in both positive and negative ways. I remember this was probably around ten years ago; I had a female friend who found this place extremely rigid—closed-off and conservative. She was always careful about what she wore. I used to tell her, “Relax,” but she’d say, “People here aren’t relaxed. I can’t feel that ease.” She visited again recently, though we didn’t get the chance to meet. When I came back, I realized she had changed a lot. She told me, “What I saw on Cumhuriyet Street, we don’t even see on Bağdat Avenue.” We can change very quickly. And in that sense, Iranians can change us very quickly too. The way Iranian women dress has had a strong influence here, especially on how young girls in Van dress. (Osman, 38)

In one of the quotes I provided above, there was also a comparison made with Istanbul—for instance, Mehmet had stated: “Even in Istanbul, alcohol sales stop at 11 p.m., but here it continues all night.” Similarly, Osman drew attention to a comment made by his friend: “You don’t even see this on Bağdat Avenue²³,” again comparing the practices observed in Van to the highly specific, upper-middle-class and liberal part of Istanbul. By suggesting that such behaviors are not even seen there, the statement functions as a form of exaggeration intended to emphasize the perceived intensity of these practices in Van. Ali, on the other hand, stated that this encounter had no impact on him.

When women come here and dress more openly, I don’t think people go, “Oh, how nice, look how openly she’s dressed,” as if it’s a culture to be taken as an example. Most of the time, it doesn’t really have an effect. (Ali, 40)

In the quote above, the interviewee is highlighting two main points: first, by stating that the way Iranian women dress in Van does not influence the local population, he

²³ a major shopping street in Istanbul known for its luxury stores and high consumer traffic.

both downplays their impact and denies them any perceived cultural authority.

Second, by stating that local women do not perceive this behavior as exemplary, he implies that he, too, does not see it as culturally desirable. In this way, he distances both himself and Van's moral-cultural sphere from Iranian public behaviors. This framing also reflects what Bauman (2016) calls *adiaphorization*—the process by which certain actions are placed outside the scope of moral judgment. Although Iranian secular practices may be disapproved of, they are also perceived as irrelevant or external to the Van Kurds' moral universe; it is only relevant when it transforms Van women.

5.4 Different encounters and different others

Encounters with both Hakkari Kurds and Iranians have revealed different facets of Vanlı identity. While Vanlılık was defined as conservative in both cases, narratives surrounding Hakkari Kurds were often framed through a shared sense of Kurdishness. In comparisons between Hakkari Kurds and Iranians, most interviewees included the former within the “we-image,” with the positioning of Iranians as the other prompting a sense of unity between the two Kurdish groups:

Hakkari people have become Vanlı now; we don't see them as the 'other' anymore. The reason for this is that they're Kurdish. For example, if people had come from Ardahan, with a Black Sea cultural background, maybe we would have had more difficulty integrating. But Hakkari is just an hour and a half away from Van. (Ceren, 30)

As I have mentioned in earlier sections, Van Kurds and Hakkari Kurds are more likely to unite under a shared identity when facing a common difference. However, in this case, the interviewee frames both groups not through a shared Kurdish identity, but rather under the identity of being Vanlı. This distinction becomes particularly significant in light of the narratives surrounding Iranians, where the

dominant discourse centers on the right to the city. When compared with Iranian migrants, Hakkari Kurds are often acknowledged as having legitimate claims to the city and are viewed as locals. This is largely attributed to their longer history of cohabitation with Van residents, which has fostered deeper social integration through tribal affiliations and intermarriage.

We've also taken brides from Hakkari. After my mother passed away, we found a wife for my father from Hakkari. My sibling is also married to someone from Hakkari. We've become much more integrated with the Hakkari people now. (Mehmet, 56)

Marital ties serve to reduce the perceived differences between the two groups, facilitating a process of integration. However, it is important to note that these discussions about integration with Hakkari Kurds, and the narratives built around a shared “we,” almost always emerged after Iranians had been discussed. In other words, the construction of a “we-image” that includes both Vanlis and Hakkari Kurds often takes shape in encounters with the Iranians. During the fieldwork, when the conversation shifted from Iranians to Hakkari Kurds, the participants often noted that the difference between them felt smaller; in encounters with Iranians, they tended to perceive the Hakkari Kurds as somewhat closer to themselves. Ahmet, referring to this, states that the difference is a conservative one—it's like parting your headscarf from the left instead of the right.

By emphasizing that “both sides wear headscarves,” the speaker highlights that the perceived difference—such as tying the scarf from the left instead of the right—is still rooted within a shared conservative framework. The distinction is acknowledged, but it is presented as symbolic rather than substantial. Similarly, after discussing the Iranians, Ceren also pointed out that the difference with Hakkari Kurds is relatively minor, by stating that they turn to the right in halay, Van Kurds turn to the left; there are small differences, but nothing major.

At the same time, even when a shared identity is articulated, there remains a signal of distinction between Van Kurds and Hakkari Kurds—indicating that difference is still noted, recognized, and retains a certain level of significance. This also implies that full assimilation has not occurred. Sara Ahmed (2000) argues that, particularly in multicultural nations, moments of encounter with the “other” often transform group differences into “our difference,” incorporating alterity into a shared collective identity. In this context, the presence of Iranians gives rise to a more unified image of identity among Kurds in Van.

Also, the references to “left” and “right” were not made in relation to political ideologies; in fact, the two interviewees associated these directions with different groups. However, after returning from the field, I came across news²⁴ in which some Hakkari residents, following Boran Mir’s defeat, declared that they would never again turn right during the halay, and since then, they have begun to lead the dance to the left. But I didn’t heard anything related to the differentiation of halay in any of the interviews. Additionally, when interviewees compare Iranians and Hakkari Kurds, they tend to regard the Hakkari Kurds as part of their own group; they feel closer to them:

Language, culture... They have tribes over there too, just like we do in Van. If someone is part of a tribe, it means their roots are known—there’s this belief that they won’t do wrong. That’s why they feel closer to Hakkari people... Because you think like this: if someone comes from outside, they might trick me. But someone from Hakkari is one of us—they speak our language, they understand us. Even if they do something wrong, I can hold them accountable.” (Ayşe, 25)

In fact, the tribal ties that they often criticize in Hakkari people actually help Van residents understand who they are; these ties make them a familiar kind of “other.” This familiarity also aligns with Van’s morally conservative character, which allows

²⁴ Hakkari Objektif Haber. (2021, Aralık 5). *Hakkari halayda neden sola gider?* <https://www.hakkariobjektifhaber.com/hakkari-halayda-neden-sola-gider-9689h.htm>

them to be perceived as part of “us.” When someone’s background is known, they can be held accountable—and, in a way, they become integrable into the system. The same interviewee, Ayşe, in response to another question where they compared Iranians to another group of migrants, said that at least the Iranians are a unified group, and since there are so many of them here, they’ve formed a community. In terms of legitimization and recognizability, tribal identity is placed at the top of the hierarchy, followed by the notion of community integration and shared nationhood. In this sense, compared to other foreign migrants, Iranians are perceived as more recognizable. This, in fact, illustrates the transformation of both identity and otherness; different encounters produce different levels of familiarity, and therefore, different forms of ‘others’.

The discourse on recognizability can further be argued through Bauman’s concept of the stranger, as Bauman (2016) argues that the concept of the stranger generates anxiety, particularly when the stranger is unpredictable and untraceable. From this perspective, having a tribal affiliation or a known ethnic background makes the individual more “knowable,” and this knowledge tends to reduce the anxiety directed toward the stranger. Furthermore, considering Elias and Scotson’s (1965) work, newcomers are often othered precisely because they are strangers to everyone. Kinship ties or having cohabited in the same place for a certain period of time are factors that may help to reduce this othering.

Given Van’s status as a border city, one might expect kinship ties and tribal connections to exist between Vanlis and Iranians as well. However, such connections were rarely mentioned in the interviews. In fact, a degree of confusion could even be observed; while it was occasionally noted that some Iranians came to visit relatives, the dominant narrative framed their visits as being centered on tourism or shopping.

When I asked participants to compare Iranians and Hakkari Kurds, only one interviewee made the following remark:

There are many differences. The Iranians who come here are from nearby Iranian villages—some from the same tribe. They're connected to places like Özalp, Çaldıran, Saray... They are quite different from the Hakkari Kurds; it's a different culture. But between Iranians and Vanlıs, especially within that border area, there are significant similarities because of kinship ties. (Ali, 40)

Although they mention kinship ties due to Van being a border city, as I noted above, Ali does not frame these ties as particularly close. Given that Ali is originally from Siirt, it is understandable that he does not emphasize this connection. However, it is also notable that none of the interviewees mentioned any kinship ties between Iranians and the people of Van. The absence of any commentary on the Kurdishness of the incoming migrants may be attributed to the fact that some of my interviewees themselves had migrated from other cities.

In conclusion, this chapter has explored how Iranian presence in Van is negotiated, perceived, and contested through symbolic boundaries of morality, public space, and identity. While Iranian visitors are often framed as secular and culturally disruptive, they simultaneously serve as catalysts for transformations in gender norms and urban visibility, particularly for Van women. The discourse of Van Kurds reveals not only anxieties around cultural change but also registers of deservedness and moral order tied to national and local identity. Crucially, the Iranian presence reactivates questions of strangerhood and symbolic pollution, positioning them as a more distant and unassimilable “other” in comparison to Hakkari Kurds. As such, Iranian encounters sharpen internal boundaries and prompt new articulations of Vanlılık through contrast, rejection, and occasional admiration.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

This sociological exploration of Vanlılık and the “Hakkarization” of Van pursued two interrelated aims: first, to understand how the encounters between Van Kurds, Hakkari Kurds, and Iranians have shaped the identity of Vanlılık; and second, to contribute to the broader literature on identity formation through intra-ethnic and cross-border migration. Shaped by waves of migration and sustained encounters among diverse ethnic groups, Van has gradually evolved into a multiethnic and politically charged space. Due to both its geographical position as a borderland and its function as a transit point in migration flows, Vanlılık has emerged as a site of discursive negotiation—an identity category in flux, defined not by fixity but by its very in-betweenness.

Guided by Post-Marxist Discourse Theory, and through the theoretical lenses of Zygmunt Bauman and Norbert Elias and John L. Scotson, I aimed to show that identities are not merely reflected through encounter, but rather produced by them. Following an instrumentalist use of these frameworks, I approached Bauman and Elias not as prescriptive theorists but as conceptual tools to unravel how Vanlılık is continually articulated in shifting contexts. While Elias’s work on the established and outsiders helped identify how social hierarchies are constructed even among intra-ethnic groups, Bauman’s theorization of the “stranger” was helpful but limited in addressing how strangers are sometimes desired, resisted, or selectively incorporated in everyday life, particularly for his overly dichotomous portrayal of host–migrant relations.

From a historical perspective, Van, a city that has undergone assimilation, became increasingly politicized after the migration from Hakkari, particularly due to the political consciousness that Hakkari Kurds brought with them. This politicization occurred both at the discursive and spatial level, transforming Van not only in terms of demography but also through its public sphere and everyday urban encounters. This thesis has shown how Van residents, in their encounter with these changes, have simultaneously exhibited resistance, negotiation, and ambivalence—both defending and redefining Vanlılık in relation to Hakkari Kurds and Iranians.

The encounter with Hakkari Kurds raised questions not only about regional belonging but also about what constitutes Kurdishness itself—an identity that is shared but divergently narrated. This divergence becomes particularly visible through spatial dynamics of migration, in which proximity does not necessarily lead to inclusion. Drawing on Elias, I have demonstrated how temporal hierarchies of migration create new “established–outsider” configurations, even among those who share ethnic or linguistic commonalities. What emerged is not a unified Kurdish identity, but a field of contestation in which Vanlıs position themselves as more modern, more local, and more deserving.

On the other hand, the arrival of Iranians has triggered a different form of boundary-making. Vanlılık, when articulated in relation to Iranians, often turns into a discourse of moral superiority, where notions of conservatism, decency, and urban public life are central. Vanlıs define themselves not only by who they are, but also by how they occupy and regulate public space, which is often portrayed as being “disrupted” by the presence of Iranian visitors. This study thus foregrounds public space as a critical site in the performative construction of identity, where boundaries are enacted, contested, and spatialized. Moreover, the politicization of both the Van

Kurdish subject and the urban space itself emerges not from overt activism alone, but through everyday encounters, affective discomfort, and discursive distancing.

These dynamics have revealed how *Vanlılık* is both shaped by and productive of the encounter. In these encounters, identity is not passively tested but actively made. *Vanlılık*, in this context, becomes a floating signifier, filled and emptied through different narratives of locality, modernity, and morality. Rather than offering a unified “we,” the identity of *Vanlılık* reveals an ambiguous relationship with otherness—at times inclusive, at times exclusionary, and often marked by symbolic ambivalence. This ambiguity, I argue, is not a flaw but a structural feature of the identity itself—reflecting the unstable social and political terrain in which it is produced.

From the start of my fieldwork, I was aware that I could not fully capture the multilayered structure of *Vanlılık*. Yet one of the most significant insights that emerged was not only the construction of *Vanlılık* itself, but also the shifting meanings of *Kurdishness*—long subjected to erasure—which became visible through these encounters. Rather than serving as a static or background identity, *Kurdishness* emerged as a dynamic field of discursive struggle, situated among notions such as conservatism, modernity, traditionalism, and secularism.

This realization brought a second aim into focus: to explore how *Kurdishness* is redefined in and through space, particularly under conditions of forced migration, proximity, and difference. As Kurdish groups from Hakkari moved northward into Van, a new set of meanings around politicization and belonging began to surface. Paradoxically, while state-led policies of forced migration aimed to suppress and assimilate Kurdish identity, they often produced the opposite effect—leading to the dissemination and politicization of *Kurdishness* in new regions. This unexpected

outcome aligns with the findings of Nazan Üstündağ's work on Esenyurt, where displacement catalyzed the expansion rather than the erasure of Kurdish identity. Importantly, this process did not result in a singular or harmonious Kurdish identity. Instead, it generated internal differentiations and hierarchies—producing a multiplicity of Kurdish subjectivities shaped by distinct relations to modernity, piety, and political engagement. In this sense, Kurdishness emerges not as a unified category but as a contested and evolving terrain of struggle.

Thus, rather than aiming to define Vanlılık, this thesis has attempted to map its unstable coordinates—to trace how it is stretched and re-signified through discursive and spatial encounters. I argue that Vanlılık is not a fixed identity, but a relational and performative category marked by ambivalence, temporality, and ongoing negotiation. As such, it is better understood not as a noun but as a practice—an identity that is constantly being done and undone in interaction with others. The ambiguous politicization of Vanlı Kurds and the partial politicization of space itself are thus central to understanding how locality, ethnicity, and morality become entangled in everyday life.

I hope that this thesis, by posing the question of how such encounters shape Vanlılık, has been able to offer a meaningful starting point. If there are gaps in the narrative, they reflect not only the limits of the research but also the ontological vagueness of the identity itself. These silences, too, are part of the story. I hope that this study serves as a foundation for future research into the encounter-driven construction of identities, particularly in contexts marked by border, migration, and moral politics.

6.1 Limitations and future work

The most significant shortcomings of this work were the limited number of people I interviewed and the fact that I spent only one week in the field. Although this short period allowed me to conduct eight interviews and organize a focus group with six participants, the limited time spent in the city posed a major shortcoming, particularly in terms of experiencing different parts of the city and analyzing sites of encounter. Moreover, although I was able to achieve a small degree of diversity, most of the people I interviewed were municipal employees who already knew one another. In this sense, I was able to capture only a minimal level of differentiation, and the analyses and themes presented in my thesis were, to a certain extent, interconnected.

Another shortcoming was the limited analysis of how *Vanlılık* constructs itself by distinguishing itself from or highlighting similarities with Kurdishness, Hakkari origins, Turkishness, and Iranianness. Although I analyzed encounters with Hakkari Kurds and Iranians, the themes of Kurdishness and Turkishness and their effects on *Vanlılık* were addressed only indirectly. This complex sociological analysis has posed a limitation for my thesis while also opening space for future research.

At the same time, I believe that it would have been necessary to further analyze how these encounters differ—particularly by focusing more on intergroup and intragroup relations and exploring how these different encounters have shaped this identity. For instance, analyses concerning *Acemler* (Iranians) and Afghans, who were occasionally mentioned in the interviews, were not included in the thesis, both because they were beyond the scope of the study and because there was insufficient data to support them. However, since these encounters are also important for

understanding *Vanlı* identity, the concept of locality, and Kurdishness, I hope they will be addressed and analyzed more thoroughly in future research.



APPENDIX A

LONG QUOTES IN TURKISH

1. Sen mesela Gültan Kışanak'ın kitabını okuduktan sonra bir etkileniyorsun, "Bu dili bir öğreneyim" diyorsun. 3-4 ay başka bir şey de öğrenebilirdin. Kürtçeye bir merak salıp öğreniyorsun. Adam burada yaşıyor, yani elli yıldır burada. Sürekli etrafında Kürtçe konuşan insanlar var; ama kürtçe konuşamıyor adam, bunun için bir çaba da sarf etmiyor.

2.Ahmet(35): Hakkarililer çok mübarek insanlardır.

Osman(38): Bizim belediye başkanlarımızın ikisi de Hakkarili, bu nedenle Hakkarililer çok kutsal insanlardır. (Gülerek) Ben şu anda bir soruşturmadan geçiyorum, bunun soruşturmaya dahil olduğunu düşünebilirim mesela.

Deniz: Kartımı göstereyim, öğrenci kartımı.

Ahmet(35):Van'ın yerlilerinden biri var. Adam anlatıyor; "Ben Hakkari'den Van'a gelirken biri diyor el kaldırdı, ben amca'yı aldım. Amca diyor 'Merhaba, Çawa yi?' birkaç Kürtçe cümleyle giriş yaptı, ben de cevap verdim Kürtçe. Lan diyor bu hep Kürtçe konuyormuş, sen Kürt müsün değil misin diye sormadan. Benim Kürtçem de yetmedi artık, cevap da veremedim. En son yavaşça kulağına yaklaşıp şey dedim 'Arabada cihaz var dinleniyoruz.' 'Ee nasılsın?' diyerek Türkçeye döndü."

3.Bu bölgede terörle birlikte köyler boşaltılmış, yakılan köyler olmuş. Biraz da bu durumdan hareketle, en yakın il neresi? Van. Daha yaşanılabilir bir şehir bir de, Ağrı'ya ya da Bitlis'e göre. Bu kadar yoğun gelmelerinin temel sebebi bu.

4.Ben Vanlıyım. Benim hatıralarımda göç ben 3-4 yaşındayken oldu. Hakkari'deki problemlerden dolayı muazzam bir göç vardı. Hakkarililer bizim mahallelerimizde çadırlar içinde yaşıyordu. Çocukken biz onlara yemek götürüyorduk. Onlar da, babamlardan, –İmamdılar babamlar–köye girip Kuran Kursu alıyorlardı. Göç edenlerle oradan ilişkim vardı.

5.Devlet, terörle mücadele olsun, ya da başka bir konu olsun, köylülere belirli bir müddet vermiş. Mesela '1 Mart'ta, 10 gün içerisinde buraları boşaltın' gibi. Köylüler de sahip oldukları hayvanları, evleri, çoğunluğunu satarak çok hızlı bir şekilde Van'a göç etmişlerdir.

6.Mesela biz de Siirt'ten gelmişiz, ama biz kendimiz Van'da doğduk. Böyle bir realite de var. Siirtliler ticaret için geliyorlardı eskiden, çok daha 80-70 lerde. Yine güvenlik de çoktu. Fakat şeyin sıkıntısı var, biz kendimizi Siirtli olarak tanımlamıyoruz, Vanlı olarak tanımlıyoruz. Ama Hakkarililerde birazcık şey var.

7.Hakkari'de bu kentleşme, göç sürecinin ciddi acılarını çeken bireyler çok fazla. Dolayısıyla Hakkarili bilinci onlarda yüksek olabilir. Travma dediğimiz şey var ya; travma onları kentleştiriyor. Benim Siirtle ilgili bir travmam yok.

8.Göçe maruz kalan insanlar birliktelik açısından daha birbirlerine bağlı oluyorlar, daha güçlü oluyorlar. Çünkü çok zor zamanlarda birlikte yaşıyorlar, çok travmatik dönemleri birbiriyle birlikte yaşıyorlar.

9.Hakkari'den göç köyleri yakıldığı için oluyor. Terör gibi nedenlerle yerlerinden göç ettiriyorlar. Orada iş imkanı, sağlık falan çok kısıtlıydı. Van Güneydoğu'da onlar için bir hayat oldu. Daha imkanı olanlar İstanbul'a yerleşti, diğerleri orada kaldı. Zaten burada endüstri olmadığı için çok fazla iş imkanı yok. Hem fiziksel, hem kültürel olarak yakın olmaları da artı sağladı.

10.İş imkanı yüksek bir yer değil. Kendi bulundukları durum nedeniyle olabilir, ulaşım konusunda, başka yerlere göre daha iyiydi. Hakkari'de uzun bir süre ulaşım da doğru düzgün yoktu, okul yoktu, iş imkanı yoktu. Bu imkanlarla kıyaslayabiliriz.

11.Van'daki yerliler çoğalınca etrafta, Van'daki yerli esnaf, biraz daha zengin/elit kesim batıya göç etti; yerini Hakkarililer ve çevre ilçeler aldı. Hakkari Van'a göç etti, Van'dakiler dışarıya göç etti. Zenginler burayı terk etti işin doğrusu. Bu kırsal kesim de buraya geldi.

12.Kentleşme sürecine Van'dan başlıyorlar. Sadece Hakkarililer değil, İranlılar da öyle. Burada 4-5 yıl kalıyorlar, sonra buradan gidiyorlar. Bizim köylülerimiz de öyle ama. Eğitim için gelirler Van'a, hepsinin bir evi vardır. Burada birazcık o kentleşme sürecine adapte olduktan sonra, buradan göçerler. Gidenlerin de birinci sebebi daha iyi bir yaşam. Burayı bir basamak olarak kullanıyorlar. Bence de çok makul.

13.Burası işte bazen, köy/kent şeyi tartışıyoruz biz. Köyden geliyorsun, mesela maaşın yok, memur değilsin gelirin yok, köydeki o az bir gelirinle Van'da yaşayabilirsin. Kirasıdır, dilidir, kültürüdür; kıyafetine kadar köyden göç edenlerin bu şehirde rahat ettiğini düşünüyorum.

14.O göç biraz farklı. Mesela diyelim ki gelip Van'da zenginleşen, ticaret yapan, Türkiye'de büyük yatırımlar yapan başka kentler var. Fakat Hakkari tarım, hayvancılık kenti olduğu için, esnafıktır, bu tür şeylere adapte olamadılar.

15.Şehrin şöyle bir yapısı var; kenarda olanlar köyden gelenlerdir; direkt böyle şehir merkezine değil de genelde kenar mahalleye göç eder. Köydeki alışkanlıklarını hala devam ettirirler. Kumes hayvanları olur, Çoğunun küçükbaş hayvanı da var. o alışkanlıklarını devam ettirdikleri için ilk dönem şey oluyorlar, Hakkariliden ziyade köylü gibi. İnsanlar öyle bakıyor.

16.Bir de onlarda aşiretçilik var. ben de Kürdüm ama, bizde aşiretçilik yok. Hakkarililerde çok var. Hakkarili olmak ayrı bir şey, bir de aşiretli olmak ayrı bir konu.

17.Aşiret neredeyse her yerde aynı, ama Hakkaride bu biraz daha yoğun. Hakkarili olmanın ayrıca bir şeyi var. kişi kendini, mesela ben kendimi kürt olarak hissediyorum, "Ben kürdüm." diyorum. Ama Hakkariden bir arkadaşımla konuştuğumuzda "Ben Hakkariliyim." diyor.

18.Tamam ben bir Kürdüm ama Kürtlerin çoğu şeyini yansıtmadığımı düşünüyorum. Bunun sebebi yaşadığım coğrafya değil bence; coğrafya bu düşüncelerimi etkilemedi. Mesela bir ortama gidiyorsun, dışarıda tanışınca ben Deniz, ben Ayşe, bu

kadardır belki. Bu masaya oturduğumda, 2-3 kişi daha varsa, ee deniz senin aşiret ne diye soruyor. Senin aşiretle onun aşiret yakınsa veya farklıysa, bu sefer sana çok daha farklı davranmaya başlıyor. Ben mesela bunu kabul etmek istemiyorum. Vanlılar bunu çok yapıyor. Aslında Hakkarililerden bunu çok fazla görmedim, Hakkarililerde ben şunu daha çok farkettim, biraz batılılaşmaya özeniyorlar gibi. Evet “Kürdüm.” diyor, kabul ediyor, ama işte yaşam tarzım, giyim tarzım, hareketlerim batılılaşsın istiyorlar.

19. Beni daha da mutlu ediyor onların kültürlerine bağlı kalmaları. Çok fazla asimile olduk süreçte. Kendi kültürünü koruyor olması, geleneksel kıyafetlerini koruyor olmaları, dillerini koruyor olmaları. Bir şeye benzemeye çalışmıyorlar, kendilerini koruyorlar.

20. Hakkari’de ciddi bir kent kültürü de yoktur. Göç eden/edilen yerler Şemdinli, Yüksekova. Buraya geldikleri zaman kaçakçılık yaptılar, uyuşturucu ticareti yaptılar. Fakat bu muazzam parayı kayıt altına almaları gerektiği için, bu sefer de iş yerleri yaptılar. Mesela pasaj kültürü Van’da çok yüksekti, şu an yeni yeni yıkılıyorlar eskidikleri için. Fakat herhalde Türkiye’de olmadığı kadar Van’da bir pasaj vardı. Kaçakçılıktan, uyuşturucudan, ya da yakıttan kazandıkları parayı, kayıt altına almak için binaya döktüler. O binalar değerlendirildi, sattılar. Dükkanları kiraya verdiler. Hakkarililer şu anda o işleri yapıyor yine. Bakıyoruz, yine hepsi bizim müteahhitlerimiz. Bu şehirde kayıt dışı para varsa, mutlaka arsaya dönüşüyor, binaya dönüşüyor. Şey sürecine yeni yeni geçiyoruz, kayıt dışı parayı kriptoya aktarma süreci falan filan yeni yeni öğreniyorlar. Hali hazırda bile para Hakkarililerin parası şeye dönüşmüyor, otele, yatırıma, fabrikaya, dükkana dönüşmüyor.

21. Onların da şöyle değişiklikleri oluyor. mesela uyuşturucu ticaretine girmiş ve zengin olmuş bir Başkaleli, dünyayı gezip görüp çok değişmiş gelebiliyor, ya da Gevaş’ta bir insan sosyal medyayla tanışıyor, köylü gibi değil.

22. Sonuçta bir kuralları aşıyor, mesela diyelim ki uyuşturucu ticareti yapan ciddi bir sektör var. Şöyle bir sektör, sadece uyuşturucu üretmiyor. Biri uyuşturucu üretiyor, biri taşıyor, biri nöbet tutuyor, biri onu ayrı pazarlıyor. büyük bir sektör.

23. Osman, 38: Aslında aksine 30-35’in üzerinde olan erkeklerin hiçbiri bunu kabul etmiyorlar, onlar direkt biz Hakkariliyiz diyorlar, hiçbiri kendini Vanlı olarak görmüyor. Hatta benim şube müdürüm, Hakkarilidir. Trafikte gidiyoruz, biri trafikte yardım etse Hakkarilidir diyor. Diyorum nereden biliyorsun? Çünkü diyor o medenidir, size medeniyeti biz getirdik. Bazen böyle siyaset konuşunca diyor ki, ya siz diyor sağcıların elinde perişan olmuştunuz, biz geldik, sizi kurtardık.

Barış, 67: Defolup gitsin. Ben taksiciyim. Van’da uyuşturucu fuhuş, kumar, gayrimeşru iş öyle bir patlak ki, öyle bir sınırsız ki cennet. İstanbul’da atıyorum alkol satan yerler saat 11’den sonra yok, burada sabaha kadar, sınırsız. Ne içersen ne kullanırsan serbest satılıyor. Tekirdağ, Afyon, Çorum, Amasya, Antalya, say sayabildiğin kadar; bu genç insanlar Van’a gelir çalışır gece hayatı. Korkunç paralar.

Yasemin, 27: Parayı çok kolay yoldan kaçırıyorlar işte.

Kerim, 85: Gayri meşru işler burada çok dönüyor.

Deniz: Talep eden kim? bunları kullanan kim?

Barış, 67: Vanlılar.

Zeynep, 65: Hakkarililer de var, bence aşiret kısmı yine ya.

24.Kavgacı, dövüşçüler. Hakkariliye, Hakkari'den bir aşiretse, haklı olup olmadığına bakmadan yanında duruyorlar.

25.Ben o dönemleri çok net hatırlamıyorum çocuk olduğum için. Hakkarililer, şöyle bir algı da var, ciddi bir uyuşturucu ticareti de var. Bundan dolayı çok zenginler, tabi ki hepsini kapsamıyor bu. Bir de orada hayvancılık yapan biri mesela, Van'a geliyor söz gelimi hayvanlarını satıyor. Burada işte Van'ın en merkezi yerinde söz gelimi bir apartman dairesi alıyor, hepsini alıyor. Vanlı da gidip onun kiracısı oluyor. Sonradan gelen bir insan, aslında buranın rahatını ele geçiren insan oluyor. Dolayısıyla kapitalden kaynaklı Vanlıların bir tepkisi var.

26.Onların buralarda büyük ihtimalle yatırım yaptıkları ever var. Çoğu ev sahibi Hakkarili tabi. Büyük ihtimalle onları da görürsün, emlakçılarda da çok fazla hakkarili var, çoğu ev sahibi Hakkarili. Çünkü paraları var ve burada yatırım yapıyorlar.Onlarda çünkü birazcık zenginlik, gösteriş merakı var. bu gösteriş merakını en rahat gösterebilecekleri yer de Van, en yakın olarak Van. Tabi çok daha zenginleri başka şehirlere gidiyor ama bir tık daha böyle yaşamak isteyenler Van'a geliyor. Bu yüzden aslında o paraları harcayacakları yerler bulunmuyor kendi şehirlerinde. Kafe anlamında olsun, ne bileyim giyim kuşamını göstereceklerini kişiler olsun, evleri bile oralarda lüks değil. en yakın yer onlar için Van. Van, bir tık daha doğunun Paris'i denildiği için onlara gelişmiş geliyor.

27.Dedi ki, "siz Kürt müsünüz?" "Yok." dedim, "Ben Kürt kökenliyim." "Niye?" dedi. "Çünkü okul okumuşum." dedim. "Nasıl yani?" dedi. Mesela doğru bir birey Antalya'ya gidip akademisyen olmuşsa Kürt kökenlidir, ama Antalyada manavsa kürttür. İkisinin arasında bir fark var.

28.Hakkari'ye 1950'lere kadar devletin hiçbir kurumunu gidememiş, hep feodal sistemde yönetilmiş. Aşiretçilik çok yüksek ve devlet kendini orada hissettirmedeği için 70-80'lere kadar özerk gibi durmuş, o nedenle kendi kendilerine bir sistem oluşturmuşlar. Daha sonra devlet kurumları yavaş yavaş oraya gelmeye başlıyor, oranın formu biraz bozulmaya başlıyor.

29.O dönem iskan planı var, Şark Islahat Kanunu. Özellikle Van'ın Kürt yurdu olmasından çıkarılmasına dair bilgiler var. Karadeniz'den, Erciş ya da Kırğızistan'dan Türkmenler yerleştirilmeye başlıyor.

30.Bunlar da Vanın yerlileri olarak kendilerini tanımlayan.... Yerli kelimesi de çok üstüne konuşabileceğimiz bir mevzu. Baksanız burada yüzyıllardır yaşayan kürtler de aslında buranın yerlisi, ama genelde Vanın yerlisi olarak tabir ettiğim ve kendini o şekilde tanımlayan insanlar Türkler oluyor, eskiden beri burada yaşayan Türkler; milliyetçi, daha çok sağ tarafta duran partileri destekleyen insanlar.

31.Van eskiden Siirt'ti, Arap dediğimiz ve yerli dediğimiz Acemlerin elindeydi. Bunlar Van'a gelince şehrin demografisini de değiştirdiler, artık Kürt şehri oldu.

Babam anlatırdı, bize kraker bile vermezdi acemler. Hakkarililer geldikten sonra değışti.

32.Aslında burası kozmopolit olduđu için dađınıktır. Vanlılarda Türk Kürt, Azeri ya da değışik gruplar var. Dışlama şeyi yoktur, hepsini barındırabiliyor. Vanda Kürt müdür Türk müdür kalmamış. Hakkarililerde biraz daha, kalplerinin derinliklerinde bir kürt sevgisi var.

33.Ama benim Hakkarililer gelince gördüğüm en büyük farklılıklar, mesela muhafazakar değillerdi. Mesela aile yapıları çok rahattı. Kente girince bir kesimi muhafazakarlaştı.

34.Kürt kültüründe de ataerkil bir yapı yoktur, daha anaerkildir yapı. kürtler tarihte hep böylelerdir. Belki de bu yapıdan, doğal kale oluşundan. Belki de kürt kimliğini en iyi şekilde devam ettirmiş olmalarından kaynaklıdır bu eril küfürlerin olmayışı. Hakkaride babaya küfür ederler. Vanlıların çok daha erildir. biz de İranlılardan çok etkilenmişiz. Van çok ilginç bir yer. İran'dan çok fazla etkilenmiş ve göç almış.

35.Git bir Hakkariliye sor, mesela şu halı üzerinden şu motifi, mesela halı ile anlatır. Mesela biri birini sevdiği için o şekilde anlatır. Hakkarinin yerlisine sorduğın zaman gerçekten kültürünü çok iyi biliyor, bizler bilmiyoruz. Ben o yüzden o konuda onları takdir ediyorum. Bir çorap olsun, kilim olsun ya da halayla ilgili mesela o diyor ki “Belli bir zaman öyle bir savaş olmuştur, o halayı oynadığımız zaman bu savaşı onunla def etmişizdir.” Halayla ilgili ayrı bir kültürleri var ve bunu sana çok güzel bir şekilde de anlatıyorlar. Bunu kitap haline de getirmişler. Ama biz mesela Van'ın yerlisiyiz, biz onlar kadar bilmiyoruz, araştırmıyoruz okumuyoruz. Onlarda daha çok var.

36.Düğünleri çok ön plana almışlar. Düğünlerde çok fazla altın piyasası değışiyor, Hakkarinin düğünlerinde bu çok var. Eğitim böyle yerlerdeyken, ben düğünlere gitmeyi protesto ediyorum, kendi abimin düğünü dahil. Bir düğünde milyonluk altın gidiyor işte para olarak, takılar, vesaireler. Aynı damadın kardeşi, para yok deyip dershaneye gönderilmeyebiliyor. Bunu kültürel olarak düşündüğünü, geri kaldığını falan iddia ediyorlar.Benim ailem namaz kılmamı istiyor ama ben namaz da kılmıyorum. Sırf annem istiyor diye düğün yapmak bana mantıklı gelmiyor.

37.Düğünlerine çok önem verirler, düğün onlar için bir semboldür. Burada da yaparken işte en pahalı düğün otelleri, düğün mekanlarını seçiyorlar, genellikle Altın Palas var iskelenin orada, orası Van için çok lüks. Orada çok fazla yapılıyor. Çok fazla altın ve para üzerinden haber yaptırıyorlar. Kalkıyorsun, bir gün bakıyorsun, Hakkarili şu ailenin düğününe şu kadar kilo altın geldi. Habere giriyorsun, Van'da o düğün. Hakkaride düğünlerinde de benim bildiğim ve şahit olduğum, dışarıda yapıyorlar. Kendi evlerinin önünde ya da köylerinde yapılıyor, ve fistan giyiyorlar. daha kültürel şeyleri daha fazla. Vanlıların düğünleri hakkarililer kadar gösterişli olmasa da, orta halli aileler normal bir düğün yaparlar. Normal düğün salonuna gidersin, çok daha sade, takılar da öyle o kadar abartılı değildir. Van'ın çok zengin aileleri de, aslında Hakkarililerden görüp özenerek şey yapıyorlar, haber sitelerine isimlerini falan çıkarttırabiliyorlar.

38.Mesela Vanlıların Kürtçesi, biraz daha dalga geçenler oluyor ya, “Gelmişke, gitmişke.” gibi. Onlar gerçekten konuştuğunda hiçbir şey anlaşılmıyor. Onların dili

has Kürtçe'ye daha yakın, çok daha yakın. Vanlıların biraz daha Türkçeleşmiş bir Kürtçe.

39. Vanlılar da, "Hadi lan oradan." diyor, genelde dalga geçiliyor. "Gelmişsiniz bizim yerimize, bizi beğenmiyorsunuz" gibi çok fazla şey konuşuluyor. Özellikle yakın zamanda arkadaşlarımla arasında da bu konuşma geçti. Birileri diyor ki: "Siz Vanlılar kendi kültürünüze sahip çıkmıyorsunuz, biz sizden daha çok Van'a sahip çıkıyoruz" falan. Arkadaşım da sordu "Niye böyle düşünüyorsun?" diye. O da demiş ki "Burası Kürt bölgesi, Kürt bölgesi olduğu için biz de değerlerimize daha çok sahip çıkıyoruz. Siz bizim kadar sahip çıkamadığınız için biz burayı benimsiyoruz" gibi bir cümle kullandılar.

40. Dil olarak da yapıyorlar. Mesela hasil Arapça deniyor ya, asıl Arapçayı biz konuşuyoruz diye. Hakkarililer bunu da iddia ediyorlar. "Asıl Kürtçeyi biz konuşuyoruz, sizin konuştuğunuz Türkçe." diyorlar.

41. Kürtlerin Kürtçeyi unutma gibi bir sorunu var. Çünkü aileler artık Türkçe konuşa konuşa, yetişen yeni nasıl Kürtçe bilmeden öğreniyor. Artık dil kursları sayesinde 18 yaşından sonra kendi kendine gidip öğreniyor. Kendi ana dilini, kendi ikinci dili gibi öğreniyor, ama aslında suçtur, asimilasyona girer.

42. Türkçe konuşmak bir üst kimlik gibi, bizim burada da bir dönem öyleydi. Mesela ben 18 yaşında Kürtçe konuşmayı öğrendim. Ben, Kürtçeyi anlayabiliyordum ama konuşamıyordum, çok fazla da dalga konusu oluyordu.

43. Aslında bir önyargı var, bir aşağılamaktan kaynaklı dili öğrenmeme hali var. Yoksa maruz kaldığında ister istemez öğreniyorsun. Ama aşağıladığın zaman, ötekileştirdiğin zaman beyin bile kabul etmiyor artık, çünkü senin dilini dil olarak kabul etmiyor. O bir dil değil. Ve bunu biraz daha politik düşünerek yapıyor, hani Kürtçe konuşan teröristtir. Hatta 90'lardan bahsetmiştik ya, 90'larda çok daha nettir.

44. Ben de Kuzey Irak'a da gittim, Erbil Maratonu'nu koşmak için gittiğim zaman herkesin Kürtçe konuştuğunu gördüm. Benim annemin bu ülkede konuştuğu Türkçe alay konusu. Televizyonlarda, Güldür Güldür gibi skeç programlarında da görürsünüz. Bu bir şive değil, bu bir alay konusu. İster istemez o eziklik var, annem biriyle konuştuğu zaman acaba gülecek mi diye bir şey oluyor.

45. 90'lı dönemler, kente göç etmeden önceki dönemlerde halk bir bedel ödedi. Dağa çıkan çocuklar onların çocuklarıydı. Kendi çocuklarına, kendi arkadaşlarının çocuklarına yardım ediyorlardı aslında. Devlet onları buraya sürünce, burada bir dönem ciddi zorluklar yaşadılar.

46. Kent yönetimini domine etmişler. mesela personel alınacak, 800 kişi alınacak mesela, 600'ü Hakkarilidir. mesela bir ailede 3-4 kişi var, tabi bunlar politik süreçlerde, PKK'yla ilgili süreçte oldukça zarar gördüler. Çocukları dağa çıktı, göç etmek zorunda kaldılar. Hapse girdiler. Belediyeleri de alınca biz bir bedel ödedik dediler. 'Biz bir bedel ödedik' dedi hep Hakkarililer. 'Bedel ödedik, bedel ödedik' diye diye, bedel ödeyenin kardeşini aldılar, bedel ödeyenin yakınına aldılar.

47. Onların politik katılımı da yüksek. Onlara göre, bunu söylemem ne kadar doğru olur bilmiyorum ama, onlara göre buraya giden jandarmalar, askerler, polisler

bilmem ne, genelde oradaki kadınlara tecavüz ediyor. Sürekli dillerinde bu var, hiçbir şekilde polis savunulmuyor. Polisler bizi mahvetti, bizi evlerimizden etti. “Jandarmalar, kuvvetler kadınlarımıza tecavüz ettiler.” gibi bir düşünce içerisinde.

48. Bu arada o süreçte şu çok dikkatimi çekti, Hakkari’liler ve Vanlılar birbirleriyle çok iyi bir şekilde kenetlendiler. “Biz buradaysak bizim hakkımızı koruyacak parti HDP.” Belki korur korumaz bilemiyorum. İnanılmaz bir tencere vurma, ısıklık çalma. O ortam insanı gerçekten çok etkiliyor. HDP’li olmasan bile ‘wow’ oluyorsun. Nasıl hakkını savunuyor. Çünkü genelde bu güne kadar Kürtler biraz bastırılmış gibi hissediyorlardı kendini. İlk defa böyle bir fırsat geçtiğinde ellerine, ellerinden geldiği kadar bu fırsatı büyütmek istiyorlar. Aslında istedikleri şey değildi, mağazaları yakmak, reklam panolarını kırmak değildi. Ellerine ilk defa böyle bir koz geçtiği için sonuna kadar kullandılar. Bu süreçte de dışarıda da Hakkari’li, Vanlı çok kişi birbirleriyle kenetlendi.

49. Bu son Abdullah Zeydan’ın son mazbatasını verilmedi, olaylar oldu, baya şehirler yakıldı. İnsanlar orada sırf Abdullah Zeydan’dan değil ama kayyumdan bıkmışlardı. İnsanlar şeyi düşünür yani bu bölgeye zararı kim verdi, kayyum mu yoksa o yakıp yıkan çocuklar mı?

50. Yani mesela bizim şu anki mevcut belediye başkanımız ve eş başkanımız Hakkari’lilerden oluşuyor, çekirdek kadronun neredeyse çoğu Hakkari’li. Son dönemlerde işe alınan personeller olmuş, tabii ben buna şahit olmadım ama. 9 aylık bir belediye değişimi oldu, HDP aldı kayyum sürecinden sonra. İşe girenlerin çoğunun hakkari’li olduğunu söylüyorlar. Ama şey yani, şahit olduğum, belediye başkanı özelinde değil de genel Hakkari’lilerden gördüğüm, birbirlerini tutuyorlar taraf olarak.

51. Hakkari’lilere karşı öyle bir şey var, ciddi anlamda bir tepki var. Şehri Hakkari’liler yönetiyor. Şehrin de bir çok sıkıntısını Hakkari’lilerin yönetmesine bağlıyor. Çünkü Vanlıların gözünde Hakkari’lileri, yani Van’ın ana sahibi olduğu için Vanlılar, yani “Biz onları kabul ettik, misafirleri kabul ettik ama, yani misafirliğinizi bilin.” Onların kenti yönetmelerini kabullenmediler. Ama gerçekten de Hakkari bakış açısı; esnaf değiller, kentli değiller. Kenti de yönetemiyorlar, öyle de bir sıkıntıları var. Kentin o konuda ciddi hakkari’li problemi var.

52. Derlerdi ki “Kent’in bir hafızası var.” Ondan ziyade kendi hafızalarını seçti Hakkari’liler, “Hakkari’lilerin hafızası” dediler, onu tercih ettiler. Kenti tercih etmediler. Zaten Vanlıların en büyük sorunu da o, Hakkari’liler hala biz Vanlıyız diyemedikleri için kenti yönetemiyorlar. “Biz Hakkari’liyiz.” diyorlar, Hakkari hafızası var. Hakkari’lilere hizmet ediyorlar.

53. Çatışmadan ziyade daha pozitif bir katkı sağladıklarını düşünüyorum Kürt birliği açısından. Ana dillerine hakimler ve bunu korumak istiyorlar, ya da siyasi görüşlerine daha bir inatçılar. Biraz daha cesur olduklarını düşünüyorum. Bu cesaret Vanlıları da etkiliyor.

54. HDP’de tavanla taban arasında bir uçurum var. Kürt tabanı şeydir, tabanı dindardır. Yukarıyı da öyle düşünüyorlar ama yukarıyı sosyalist olduğunu söylüyor. Eskişehir’de LGBT bir bireyi aday olarak gösterebiliyorsunuz, ama Hakkari’de

yaşayan adam böyle bir aday olduğunu bilmiyorlar. İnsanlar şöyle düşünüyorlar, çoğunun okuma yazması da yok. Şekli vesaire ezberleyip ona basalım şeklinde.

55. Van çok ilginç bir yer. İran'dan çok fazla etkilenmiş ve göç almış. 1. Dünya Savaşı'ndan hemen sonra, İran'dan bilinçli göçler ve bilinçsiz göçler olmuş. Yani bilinçsiz derken, o taraftan bu tarafa göçler de olmuş, bilinçli bir şekilde buraya tehcirler de yapılmış, buradaki o yapıyı kırabilmek adına. İsmet İnönü'nün, şark raporlarında da geçer, Van'ın Türkleştirilmeye uygun bir yapısı olduğu; arazinin, halkın buna çok uygun bir yapısı olduğu, ve bu sebeple Türkleştirme politikalarının Van'da ve Bitlis'te çok daha yaygın olabileceğini raporlamıştır. Bu raporlardan sonra da, Van çok ciddi değişmiştir.

56. Biz toplum olarak kültür fark etmiyor, burada hepimiz muhafazakarız biraz. Herkeste biraz muhafazakarlık var. CHP'lisi de içki de içer, namaz da kılar. Şimdi caddeye gittiğin zaman, eskiden yoktu bu, göbeği açık kızlar. Sürekli. İranlılar'la başladı bu, yani başlattığı yeri biz toplum olarak hoş görmüyoruz.

57. Açıkcası biraz şey geliyor bize, kendi ülkelerinde yapamadıkları her şeyi Van'da yapmaları, özellikle kamusal alanda yapmış olmaları biraz eğreti duruyor. Ben şey diyemem iyi doğru, o insanlara kalmış bir şey, saygı da duyarım ama biraz eğreti duruyor.

58. Bir üst kültür dediğimiz şey var ya, bir üstünlük algısı var açıkçası. Afganlar daha mütevazî. İranlılar burayı İran gibi görüp, hatta özgürlükler daha fazla, özgür bir alanda yaşıyoruz, istediğimiz herşeyi yapabiliriz gibi bakıyorlar.

59. Mesela eğlence sektörünü çok aktif bir şekilde kullanıyorlar, mesela bir türkü barda Vanlılar çok yoktur mesela, genellikle İranlıları görürsünüz. Köpük partileri olsun, yılbaşı kutlamalarında aktif bir şekilde buraya göç yaşanır. Yılbaşı kutlamaları, buranın kültüründe çok yoktur ama, İranlılar için bu eğlence kültürüne alışmış oldular.

60. Hem geliyorlar, hem özgürlüklerden faydalanıyorlar, hem de kendi kültürlerini dikte ediyorlar, bu rahatsız eden şey. Kendi kültürleri aslında çok güzel, fars dilini, müziklerini, şiirlerini çok seviyorum. Onlar bunları getirmiyor buraya, edebiyatı getirmiyor. Mesela ben Fars dilini öğrenmeyi çok isterim. Buranın tarihi veya doğal güzellikleri için Van'a gelmiyorlar, eğlenmek için geliyorlar. Sadece eğlence sektörü için bulunup sonra kendi ülkelerine geri gitmeleri, biraz şizofrenik bir durum oluşturuyor.

61. Açıkcası İranlılar zaten burayı bir kurtuluş olarak gördükleri için geliyorlar. Burayı gerçekten bizden de, Hakkârililerden de daha fazla benimsemiş durumdalar. Kaldırımda yürüyorsun, sıra sıra grup grup dikiliyorlar geçemiyorsun. Elbiseyi elinden çekiyorlar. Öyle bir görmemişlik, medeniyetsizlik, bunlar beni çok rahatsız ediyor.

62. Aslında görmemişlik açısından pek bir fark yok, hatta birbirlerine bile benziyorlar. Onlar da dışarıdayken bencil davranıyor, İranlılar da, onlar da burayı tamamen benimsedikleri için bir tık insanı rahatsız ediyor. Mesela sen sokakta yürürken biliyorsun memleketin, rahat bir şekilde oraya gidiyorsun, buraya gidiyorsun, Maraş Caddesine gidiyorsun. yolun ortasında bir anda duruyor adam.

63.Esnaf için ciddi bir geçim kaynağı oldu. Antalya’da falan da rastlarsınız; gidip alışveriş yaptığınızda sizi çok ciddiye almazlar. Van’da da bu olaya döndü. İranlıysa daha özenli uzun uzun sohbet ediyor, seni biraz daha es geçebiliyor. Hem rahatsızlar bundan, İranlıların gelmesinden, hem de son derece faydalı bir şey olarak da görüyorlar.

64.Bu arada çok pis kokuyorlar, gerçekten çok pis kokuyorlar. Mesela onlar yüzünden insan artık dışarı çıkmak istemiyor, kendini yürüdüğünde yabancıların yanında yürüyormuşsun gibi hissediyorsun.

65.Van’da 6-7 yıl önce etek giydiğinde hayvan gibi bakılırdı, tacize maruz kalırdın, kendini kötü bir şey yapmış gibi hissederdin. İranlılar gelip bunu tıktı bir tık. Bu süreç Van için, genç kızlar için iyi oldu. dışarıdan gelen kuzenlerim “Aa bugün çarşıya çıktım böyle böyle giyinen kızlar vardı, kimse bakmadı.” “Evet.” dedim, “İranlılar bunu kırmış.” Çünkü İranlılar buraya geldiğinde, kendi ülkelerindeki özgürlükleri yaşayamadıklarından o özgürlüğü gösterme eğilimdeler. O yüzden burada mini etek, şort falan giymeye başlayınca Van halkı alıştı.

66.Van’a göre İranlıların gelmesi algıları değiştirdi. Daha önceden giyimde biraz daha rahatsız edici bakışlar vardı, biraz daha normalleşmeye başladı. Bu anlamda İranlıların biraz daha fayda sağladığını düşünüyorum.

67.Yani biraz daha mizaç olarak yumuşaklar, biraz daha eğilimlidirler değişmeye, dönüşmeye, bozulmaya da çok eğilimlidirler. Sadece bunu pozitif olarak düşünme, negatif olarak da değişime çok açıklar.10 yıl önceydi herhalde, kadın bir arkadaşım vardı. burayı çok bağınaz bulmuştu; kapalı, tutucu. Giyimine falan da dikkat ediyordu. “Rahat ol.” diyordum, “Ya insanlar rahat değiller, ben o rahatlığı hissedemiyorum.” diyordu. Geçenlerde bir yine geldi, konuştuk. Geldi ama görüşemedik. Geri döndüğümde çok değişmiş. Dedi ki “Cumhuriyet Caddesinde gördüklerimi biz Bağdat Caddesinde görmüyoruz.” Çok hızlı değişebiliyoruz. İranlılar da bizi bu anlamda çok hızlı değiştirebiliyorlar. İranlı kadınların giyimleri bu anlamda buradaki kadınların giyimlerini çok etkiliyor, özellikle genç kızların giyimlerini çok etkiliyor.

68.Kadınlar buraya gelip açıldıkları zaman ben milletin “Aa ne güzel açılmış.” dediklerini, hani örnek alınacak bir kültür olarak gördüklerini düşünmüyorum. Çoğu zaman etkilemiyor.

69.Hakkarililer artık Vanlı oldu, onlara öteki olarak bakmıyoruz artık. Bunun sebebi onların Kürt olmaları. Mesela Ardahan’dan Karadeniz kültürüne mensup insanlar gelseydi belki yine entegre olmakta problem yaşırdık biz. Ama Hakkari dediğimiz Van’a 1.5 saat uzakta bir şehir.

70. Biz de hakkariden kız almışız. Annem vefat etmiş, Hakkari’den evlendirmişiz babamızı, kardeşim Hakkarililerle evlidir. artık Hakkarililerle daha bütün olduk.

71.Dil, kültür. Orada da aşiret konusu var, Vanlılarda da var. bunlar aşiretse soy soppu bellidir, yanlış yapmaz gibi bir düşünce var. O yüzden Hakkarililere daha yakın hissediyor. Çünkü şöyle düşünüyorsun. “Dışarıdan biri gelirse beni kazıklayabilir ama Hakkari benim adamım, benim dilimden anlıyor, o beni kazıklayamaz. Kazıklasa da hesabını sorabilirim.”

72.Çok farklar var. buraya gelen İranlılar, buraya yakın İran'da köyler var aynı aşiretten. Onlar da Özal, Çaldıran, Saray...Hakkarililerden önemli oranda ayrılıyorlar, ama İranlılarla Vanlılar arasında, özellikle o sınır içerisinde oldukları için ciddi benzerlik var çünkü akrabalık var.



APPENDIX B

BACKGROUND OF THE INTERLOCUTORS

Ahmet: 35 years old. He works as a sports instructor at the municipality. He is also a mountain guide in the region and is very familiar with the local mountains. He lives in a two-story house—his mother lives on the ground floor, and he lives upstairs. Although his mother's native language is Kurdish and he could understand Kurdish as a child, he learned to speak Kurdish in his twenties. He holds a master's degree. He participates in trail running races and practices sport climbing.

Ali: 40 years old. Married to Ceren, one of the interviewees. He works as a municipality officer, specializing in language studies and the urban memory of Van. He is a university graduate. His family is originally from Siirt, but he was born and raised in Van and identifies as Vanlı.

Mehmet: 56 years old. Married. His maternal side is from Ankara, and his paternal side is from Elazığ. He was born and raised in Van and identifies as Vanlı. He describes himself as a conservative person. He has family ties with Hakkari; after his mother passed away, his father married someone from Hakkari.

Ayşe: 25 years old. A university graduate. She works as an urban planner and therefore has knowledge of the city's structure and demographics. Born and raised in Van, she identifies as Vanlı. She lives with her family and, although she is Kurdish, she feels that she does not reflect many aspects of Kurdishness.

Fatma: 32 years old. She works in the administrative staff of the municipality. She is a university graduate and an environmental engineer, and she organizes seminars in this field within the municipality. Since she has lived with people from Hakkari from a young age, she feels close to them and believes that they better reflect Kurdishness.

Ceren: 30 years old. Married to Ali, one of the interviewees. Her family is originally from Siirt; she was born and raised in Van and identifies as Vanlı. She owns a small shop where she sells handmade crafts and home decorations. She holds a master's degree and, having studied Kurdish identity, has knowledge and interest in the topic.

Burak: 42 years old. A university graduate. He works as a journalist in the region. Due to his familiarity with both the region and the border, he possesses detailed knowledge about Kurdish issues and migration processes. As an independent journalist, he provides information on regional events to various media outlets.

Suat: 65 years old. He previously worked as a director in a migrant association. He identifies as a Marxist and believes that borders should be abolished. He currently works as a consultant in his own office.

Focus Group Participants:

Osman: 38 years old. Married with two children. University graduate. He works as an IT technician in the municipality's information technology department. Although his native language is Kurdish, he learned to speak it in his twenties by taking

courses. He has a strong interest in the history of the region and of the Kurds and enjoys reading and researching about it. In the focus group, he acts as the spokesperson for the family, summarizing all the thoughts and discussions.

Yasemin: Osman's sister. 27 years old, the youngest in the family. She studied at university in Istanbul and later returned to live with her family.

Barış: Osman's father. 67 years old. He works as a taxi driver in the region.

Zeynep: Osman's mother. 65 years old. A housewife.

Kerim: Osman's grandfather. 85 years old. Due to his age, he speaks less but remembers the migration processes more clearly than others.

Ahmet: 35 years old. Osman's cousin.



APPENDIX C

APPROVAL OF THE ETHICS COMMITTEE²⁵



T.C.
BOĞAZİÇİ ÜNİVERSİTESİ REKTÖRLÜĞÜ
Sosyal ve Beşeri Bilimler İnsan Araştırmaları Etik Kurulu (Sbinarek)



Sayı : E-84391427-050.04-221959
Konu : 2025-02T Numaralı Başvurunuz Hakkında

25.02.2025

Sayın Doç. Dr. Bülent KÜÇÜK

Tez danışmanlığımı yürüttüğünüz öğrenciniz Deniz Özyurt'un "Perception of Van Kurds Against Hakkari Kurds and Migrants in Van: Van as a Multiethnic City" başlıklı projesi ile Boğaziçi Üniversitesi Sosyal ve Beşeri Bilimler İnsan Araştırmaları Etik Kurulu (SBİNAREK)'e yaptığımız 2025-02T kayıt numaralı başvuru 17.02.2025 tarih ve 2025/02 sayılı kurul toplantısında incelenmiş ve projeye etik onay verilmesi uygun bulunmuştur.

Bu karar tüm üyelerin toplantıya on-line olarak katılımıyla ve oybirliği ile alınmıştır. Onay mektubu tüm üyeler adına Komisyon Başkanı tarafından e-imzalanmıştır. Bilgilerinizi rica ederiz.

Saygılarımızla,

Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Işıl ERDUYAN
Kurul Başkanı

Bu belge, güvenli elektronik imza ile imzalanmıştır.

Belge Doğrulama Kodu : 0B32-H2DA-0670

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²⁵ The title of the thesis has been finalized after the approval of the ethics committee.

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